

# THE SUNRISE LANDS

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## CHAPTER ONE:

Near Sutterdown, Willamette Valley, Oregon  
Samhain Eve—October 30th, CY22/2020 AD

Ingolf Vogeler slapped his horse affectionately on the neck; he felt a little better now that the rain had stopped, even though it was the tag-end of a chilly October day with a ragged sky the color of damp raw wool rolling in from the west. His gloved hand made a wet smack on his mount's mud-spattered coat; its breath smoked in the harsh wet air, and so did his. The hooves beat with a slow clop-crunch on the good crushed rock of the road, sending up little spurts of muddy water whitish-gray with limestone dust.

He summoned up a little of the old excitement at heading into fresh country as he looked about at the Willamette Valley, inhaling the musky-silty smell of fallen leaves and turned earth, and the faint tang of woodsmoke drifting on the wind.

Riding damp and cold was nothing new to him for all that he'd only turned twenty-six last summer, but the struggle to get over the High Cascades had been brutal. He'd barely crossed the Santiam Pass alive; the last blizzard would have killed him for sure, if he hadn't had two warm horses, a good sleeping bag covered in oiled bison-leather and lined with fleece and stuffed with down, and a lot of experience with cold weather. He hadn't been really dry or warm in the days since either, and he could still feel the storm's white death in his bones, though down here five thousand feet lower things were just uncomfortable.

Look on the bright side, he told himself. If any of the Prophet's cutters were still on my trail by then, they're surely dead, dead and frozen under twenty feet of snow until spring.

"Hang in there, Boy."

Boy smelled powerfully of wet horse; but then, Ingolf smelled of the wet wool of his jacket and pants, and wet leather and oiled metal from his gear and the harness. It had been a good long while since his last bath, too. You didn't, not out alone in the wilds in the cold season; you didn't take off your clothes at all if you could help it.

"That town should be coming up soon, Boy. Good warm stable and oats for you, if it's as fine as those yokels said it was."

The horse snorted and shook its head in what he could have sworn was doubtfulness; the big gelding and he had come a long way together, a lot farther than the remount-cum-packhorse on the end of the leading rein, which looked nearly ready to keel over and die. He'd seen that happen often enough; you could usually follow an army by the bodies of the horses. Past a certain point their hearts broke and they just lay down and gave up.

"You too, Billy."

He stopped to lean over and give the packhorse some hoarded honeycomb; it barely had the energy to lip it off his glove, and Boy didn't even protest.

"Just one hoof ahead of another, that'll do it."

They passed the odd wagon or ox-cart, once a flock of sheep whose wet wool smelled a lot worse than his clothes; that had both horses crow-hopping a bit even tired as they were. And plenty of other riders and passers-by on foot, now and then a bicyclist; most of the folk wore the funny pleated skirts he'd started seeing as soon as he got down into the valley, men and women both. Ingolf touched a finger to the floppy brim of his leather hat whenever he passed someone, and usually got a wave and a smile back, despite the foul weather; most people seemed to be cheerful and friendly here west of the Cascades, which made sense since they also seemed unusually well-fed and clothed.

Wonder just how far it is to Sutterdown? he thought.

Traffic had died down as the sun sank, except for a few hurrying in the same direction he was,

probably hoping to get inside before the gates closed. That gave him a good idea of when they were likely to shut... and that it would be soon.

"Uff da," he swore mildly.

Most places wouldn't let you in once they'd buttoned up, and the ones that did usually charged a fine for opening a postern after curfew. He touched Boy up with a pressure of his legs. That was hard on him, and even more on Billy... but he didn't think Billy would survive a night in the open right now.

There were tall hills to his right—the last stubs of the mountains he'd crossed. The rolling floor of the valley opening westward was divided into small farms, their fields bordered by hedges and rows of trees. Within the enclosures were the green of pasture or new-sown winter wheat just beginning to mist the soil, dark brown of plowland with wind-ruffled puddles between the furrows or the rather messy look of a well-dug potato field, the bare spindly branches of orchards, cherry and apple, pear and peach. Now and then there was a clump of woodlot, oaks and firs, and more thickets along the river. He recognized the crooked stump-like plants on a south-facing hillside as grapevines, still with their spindly branches unpruned, though he hadn't seen their like often before.

I have drunk wine, though, and I wouldn't mind some at all he thought, and smacked his lips absently. Though right now something hot would be very good.

Days like this, as the shadows grew darker and the wind blew colder, even a young man felt how the years would tell on him in another two decades. He coughed to clear his throat and spat aside.

There weren't any buildings in the fields apart from the odd byre and shed. The land was all worked from walled hamlets like the one he'd passed not long ago—they called them duns, here. The Sutter River gurgled and chuckled to his left, flowing westward into the Valley; the steep hills just north were densely forested, dark-green and brooding with tall firs.

Then a scatter of sheds and workshops loomed up to either side of the road out of the misty dimness, showing lamps or furnace-light—mostly strong-smelling tan-yards and pottery-kilns, the sort of trades smart towns didn't leave inside the wall. He heard the splashing and grinding sound of water turning millwheels to his right, and saw the occasional yellow glitter of flame through the branches of thick-planted trees.

His lips shaped a silent whistle when he came through the last fringe of bare-limbed oaks into a clear space and saw the town walls.

"Wouldn't like to have to storm those," he muttered. Even allowing for how the darkness made them seem to loom... "No, sir."

Must be thirty feet high, and pretty damned thick, he thought. And towers every hundred yards, half bowshot apart, and I'd say they're half again as tall. You don't see many things built after the Change that height.

He'd seen walls that had a bigger circuit—the town couldn't have more than three or four thousand people; Des Moines had thirty times that—but few that looked stronger.

And never any painted like that.

The surface looked like pale stucco; along the top below the crenellations was a running design of vines and flowers with... he peered through the murk.

Faces. I think. That's a woman's face, isn't it? With vines for hair. And that's a fox or a coyote. And that's...

The towers along the wall had pointed conical roofs sheathed in green copper and shaped like a witches' hat, which was appropriate if the wilder rumors he'd heard were true. There were two hills showing above the ramparts, off west to the other side of the town. One was crowned by a huge circular building without walls, just pillars supporting a roof; he could see the outline of it because a great bonfire blazed there, and even at this distance catch a hint of eerie music and dancing figures. He crossed himself by conditioned reflex at the sight, but without real fear—he'd never been excessively pious, even before he became a wandering freelance.

Maybe the rumors are true, but nobody said they set on visitors here.

And it didn't smell as bad as some towns did; just woodsmoke and barnyard, mostly. They probably had working sewers.

Four more towers around the gatehouse there... right, that's where the bridge leads in.

The town was built in a U formed by the river, which meant a natural moat on three sides; an old but well-kept pre-Change bridge ran to the edge of the gate. A carved and painted statue twice

life-size was set into the wall on either side, a beautiful woman with long golden hair standing on a seashell on the left, a naked man holding a bow and crowned with the sun on the right.

As his horse set a hoof on the pavement he heard a thunder of drums from the gatehouse towers, and a screeching, skirling drone that sent Boy to tossing his head and snorting, and made the hair rise along the back of Ingolf's neck. His eyes were still flicking up to the source of that catamount wail when he halted before the gate-guard.

"Never heard bagpipers before, eh?" one of them said with a chuckle. "It's not someone biting a cat's tail, honest. We're bidding farewell to the Sun, you see."

Ingolf smiled back and nodded. "Just startled me a bit."

It was always sound common sense to be friendly with armed strangers and anyway, the one who'd spoken was a good-looking woman about his own age, with a freckled snub-nosed face and lively brown eyes. Which was a little odd, but while fighting women weren't numerous, they weren't so rare that he'd never met one before either. He'd campaigned with a couple who were pretty good, in fact, and one of them had been notably better than that.

He took off the hat, slapping it against his knee to shed the water, and incidentally to let them see his face in the circle of light cast by the big lamps. Looking him over was their job, and he didn't have anything... well, not much... to hide.

They'd see a big man, a little over six feet and broad-shouldered, with a pleasant enough face despite a scar on his forehead and a nose that had been broken and healed very slightly crooked; his close-cropped beard and bowl-cut hair were light brown, his eyes dark blue, and his skin had the ruddy weathered look of someone who spent his time out-of-doors in all weathers.

His gear was likewise plain and serviceable; a thigh-length shirt of chain mail under his long leather duster, a yard of point-heavy curved shete hung from his belt, and a ten-inch knife balancing it on the other side. A horseman's short horn-and-sinew bow was cased at his left knee; his kettle helmet hung by the right, and a quiver was slung over his back, covered right now with a round shield painted dark brown with an orange wedge; a tomahawk had its three-foot handle through a loop at the back of his belt.

There was no glitter of gold or gems on hilt and buckle; unlike some fighting-men he didn't boast by wearing his portable wealth.

While he let them look he studied them in turn. Two of the six guards were women, in fact. They were dressed like the others, in a pleated knee-length skirt of wool tartan-checked in brown and dark green divided by slivers of dull orange, with boots and knee-socks and an odd blanket-like stretch of the same material wrapped diagonally across their torsos and pinned over one shoulder with a brooch. Everyone here seemed to wear their hair shoulder-length or better, braided or loose, and the men sported mustaches; one example dangled down below the chin on either side. Shortswords and bucklers and long daggers rode at their waists. Four had yew longbows in their hands and quivers over their backs, and two held polearms; a seven-foot spear and an ugly thing like a great axe on a six-foot shaft whose blade tapered upward into a point, with a spike-hook on the rear. The man who held it was taller than Ingolf, and broader, and wore a beard the color of rust halfway down his chest. The spear and ax-thing slanted crosswise to bar his way; behind them were the open leaves of massive metal-clad gates, and a raised portcullis. There were murder-holes in the arched ceiling of the gate-passage, and another set of gates on the inner side.

"Who are you, stranger? Where from, and what business would you be doing in Sutterdown?" the young woman asked, with her thumb hooked in her swordbelt.

Now that she was closer he could see she wore a ring of twisted gold around her neck, the open end over her throat ending in two knobs. She had the same accent he'd noticed in the village—the dun—where he'd stopped to buy bread and cheese and ask a few questions this morning, but stronger. Sort of a rolling lilt, and sometimes a strange choice or order of words; it sounded exotic and musical but not unpleasant, and easier to understand than some dialects that had grown up in out-of-the-way places.

"The name's Ingolf Vogeler," he said, conscious of how his flat hard Badger vowels would sound strange here. "Out of the east—"

"Not Pendleton, I hope," one of the others said.

"Christ, no, and I didn't like what I saw of the place when I passed through," he said honestly.

Several of them laughed, nodding, and Ingolf went on: "I'm from a lot further east than that. East of the Rockies and the plains."

Best establish that I'm respectable, he thought, and went on:

"My father is... was... Sheriff of Readstown in the Kickapoo country, in the Free Republic of Richland."

At their blank looks he called up the memory of old maps and books from his brief schooldays and added: "Southern Wisconsin, if that means anything to you."

"East of the Mississippi!" the woman who seemed to be in charge blurted, her eyes growing wide in surprise. "From the sunrise lands! Stranger, you have come a long way!"

They all looked impressed. Natural enough. People would get excited back to home if someone from here showed up. I'm a little impressed they all know where Wisconsin is. A lot of ordinary folks back home couldn't name Oregon to save their lives.

"Yup," he said. "I wander and do this and that—caravan guard, peace officer, some cowboying, or any honest work—I'm a passable carpenter and blacksmith, and I can handle horses."

He touched the side of his duster, where it covered an inner pocket. "I can pay an entry-tax, if you have one."

"No need," the woman said. "All honest travelers and traders are welcome here, but we have a short way with thieves or outland bandits—scourge for the back or Lochaber ax for the neck, as needed—so take warning."

The hulking redhead with the gruesome bladed weapon grinned through his thatch of beard and hefted it, so that must be a Lochaber ax; he looked cheerful rather than menacing, though.

"Fair enough," Ingolf nodded. It was what he'd heard about these Mackenzies along the way. "I'm a peaceable man, when I'm let be."

Her voice took on a formal note as she continued: "Enter then and be welcome, guest within our walls, with the blessing of the Lady and the Lord, who hold dominion here in Sutterdown as the Foam-born Aphrodite and Apollo of the Unconquered Sun."

Wow, he thought. The names were vaguely familiar, but... They are strange here!

Aloud: "Anywhere I can get food and lodging for myself and my beasts? And I could use a hot bath, by God! I was in Bend four days ago."

The big man with the ax whistled; that was a hundred miles, a lot of it very cold this time of year and very steep in any season.

"You've good horses, then, Ingolf the Wanderer! And weather-luck in plenty."

"Take my word for it and don't try going back east that way until spring, unless you've got skis."

Just then a voice shouted down from above, where the wild music had been. "Hey, will you be talking through 'till dawn, then? We can't go home until you close the gate!"

The woman turned and shouted back: "Would you leave a stranger out in the cold, and on the holy eve of—"

He didn't catch the next part; the word wasn't one he'd ever heard before.

"—at that?"

She turned back to him. "I'm Saba Brannigan Mackenzie, Mr. Vogeler; my sept's totem is Elk. And my father keeps an inn here, and you'll be very welcome. I'll show you the way; we're being relieved by the night-guard now."

She shook his hand as he dismounted; her brow went up as she felt the heavy swordsman's callus around the inner edge of his thumb and forefinger, and his at the strength of her grip.

They walked through the gatehouse and into streets laid out in a grid, mark of a pre-Change settlement. This one was better kept up and better lit than most and free of sewage-stink, the houses neatly repaired and big lanterns on posts where the streets met, the folk looking well-fed and prosperous if oddly dressed. But though it was fairly dark—nothing was so dark as a town at night, unless it was a windowless basement—he caught glimpses of things that did look strange.

A terracotta of a bearded face over a door with horns growing from its brow; the wood of a shutter carved into leafy tendrils that seemed to be looking at him somehow; a stone post with a head on top and a phallus jutting from its middle, wrought in knotwork; a set of running and laughing children wearing costumes fantastically shaped and painted...

He snapped his fingers. "It's Halloween, or nearly!" he said. "Kids wear masks and things back home too, on Halloween."

"Samhain, we call it," she said, and spelled it out for him: she pronounced it soween.

He nodded and made a mental note of it; that was the word he'd heard her shout up to the tower.

Then she smiled and winked at him and added:

"You'll find we take it, oh, a wee bit more seriously than your basic trick-or-treat."

Just then a snatch of song came from another group making its way down the middle of the street, youngsters nearly full-grown dancing amid a cold trilling of panpipes. And singing:

"As the sun bleeds through the murk  
'tis the last day we shall work  
For the Veil is thin and the spirit wild  
And the Crone is carrying Harvest's child!"

A girl led them, with a half-mask shaped like a raven's head covering most of her face. Her black-feathered cloak flared in the darkness as she danced a twirling measure and beat a little drum with snake-quick taps of her fingers. Saba made a sign with her forefinger and joined in the chorus:

"Samhain!  
Turn away  
Run ye back to the light of day  
Samhain!  
Hope and pray  
All ye meet are the gentle Fae."

Then the raven-masked woman stopped in front of Ingolf, and he had to check to avoid running into her. The dancer's eyes were wide and fixed behind the slits of the mask, holding his locked for a long moment; they were alight with a combination of fear and ecstasy and forgetfulness of self that was not quite like anything he'd ever met before. It made him shiver a little and suppress an impulse to cross himself.

The rest of her group surrounded him, masked as horse and boar, dragon and wolf and elk. She sang again, swaying and beating counterpoint to the words:

"Stranger, do you have a name?  
Tell us all from whence you came!  
You seem more like god than man—  
Has curse or blessing come to this clan?"

Ingolf wondered for a moment whether he was supposed to answer, and then she danced away again, leading her band with their leaping shadows huge against a wall:

"Samhain!  
Turn away  
Run ye back to the light of day  
Samhain!  
Hope and pray  
All ye meet are the gentle Fae."

When the band had vanished around a corner Ingolf swore quietly and shook himself. Saba smiled at him.

"Told you," she said merrily.

He asked a few questions; in his experience, that got you further than talking about yourself, at least to start with, and it never hurt to learn. He found that the odd pleated skirts were kilts and over-the-shoulder blanket-things were called plaids; that the ring around her neck was called a torc and that couples exchanged them when they married; that she was a widow with two children, her man killed on the western coast by Haida raiders a year ago; that she took turns with wall and gate duty and practiced with arms, above all with the longbow, as all fit adults did here; and that she was the eldest of three sisters, worked at her father's inn, and kept his books on that and a vineyard and fulling-mill the family owned.

She asked in turn: "What brought you so far from home? We don't hear anything but fourth-hand rumors from that far east."

"I didn't get on well with my elder brother," he said; which covered a good deal of bitterness. "My

father died and my brother became Sheriff of Readstown, and we quarreled. So I joined the Bossman's army, when we Richlanders sent men west to help Marshall against the Sioux." For a moment he fell silent amid a wash of memory: the shusssh of arrows over the tilts of the wagons in the dark amid the stale smell of dying campfires, a sudden roaring brabble, thunder of hooves and screams of surprise and pain. The panic-stricken tightness of his grip on the rawhide-wound hilt of his shete as he ran half-naked through the night away from his fallen tent, slashing at figures that seemed to spring out of the ground before him, fighting his way towards the horse-lines.

The ugly shock up his arm as the edge cut muscle and cracked bone, the first time and so different from a practice-post. Glaring eyes and barred teeth, painted faces and horned headdresses and the long knives in their hands glinting ruddy with the lights of sudden fires.

Voices shrieking:

"Hoo'hay! Hoo'hay! It's a good day to die, Lakota! Kye—eeee—Kye!Hoo'hay!"

Then the guttural: "Hoon! Hoon!" of the blood call as the blades went in, the sick-making butcher's-cleaver sound of metal hammering home in flesh, the frenzied screaming of a man scalped alive.

"That war took longer than anyone thought it would," he said carefully.

"They usually do," Saba said, with a grim smile.

"And afterwards I couldn't seem to settle down, somehow. Went east and west, north and south—to the dead cities, often, doing salvage."

By then they were in the stables attached to her father's inn; the tavern was a rambling two-story affair seemingly knocked together from several pre-Change buildings, but the stables were newer, made of beam and plank with brick floors. He liked what he saw of the accommodation for the beasts, and he was pickier about that than about where he slept himself. Boy and Billy went into stalls, and he rubbed them down carefully, put on dry blankets and saw to the fodder—good timothy-clover hay without any musty smell, a hot cooked mash of oats and beans, and fresh water.

It looked like the muck was shoveled out regularly, with fresh sawdust and straw laid down; he checked their feet, and made a note to have Bill reshod—the one on his left rear had looked good enough in Bend, but it was a little loose now and definitely getting thin. Pavement wasn't kind to hooves, especially when years of frost and storm had roughened it.

"You boys rest up. You can take it easy for a while," he said, rubbing Boy's forehead as the horse butted at him. "You both earned it."

"You know how to look after horses," Saba said with approval, as she and a teenage boy helped him with the tack and the loads from the packsaddle.

Ingolf grinned. "You have to, if you want the horses to look after you. I had to push these two fellahs a lot harder than I liked, but it was that or get stuck in Bend or Sisters for the winter. I got Boy in the Nebraska country and he's the best all-round horse I've ever had."

She nodded, handed him a room-key with a number on the wooden tag that dangled from it, and pointed to a door:

"Bathhouse is through there. Bran here will show you the manner of it hereabouts; the stairs on the right past there go to the rooms. Come down those and turn left to get to the main room. See you there—you'll want to wash up before you eat."

He nodded, though in fact he was so hungry that it was a tossup. But they seemed a cleanly lot here; so was he, when he had a choice, which sometimes you didn't if you were a wandering man. By the time he stowed his gear in the room and finished his bath—they soaped down and scrubbed with buckets of steaming-hot water poured over the head first here, before getting into the tub to soak—and dressed in his good suit of blue denim jacket and pants and roll-necked sweater from the pack-saddle, he felt a lot more human and ready to face the Sheaf and Sickle's common room.

And I'm hungry enough to eat an ox, live.

Luckily he'd managed to keep clear of nits despite being on the road for weeks, and didn't need to use the special and very smelly soap provided. That did make him hope the beds would be free of biting company, another thing you had to get used to on the road.

He settled in a booth and Saba brought him a big mug of hot cider, to get the last of the chill out. Her father came with her; he looked formidable still despite the broad streaks of white in his dark beard and the kettle belly under his leather bib-apron. His grin showed a full set of teeth and the

hairy legs beneath his kilt were like grizzled tree trunks even though he must have been a man grown and then some at the Change, which was a thing you saw less with every passing year. The stories said that in those days people had commonly lived to eighty or a hundred or even more... but then, those stories said a lot of wild things; flying to the moon, talking-machine servants, sword-blades made of fiery light, and islands filled with dinosaurs. Nowadays sixty was old, most places he'd seen, and few reached the Bible's threescore-and-ten.

"I hear you're from Wisconsin, Mr. Vogeler," Brannigan said, his voice a deep rumble.

Ingolf noted that he had less of the lilting local accent than his daughter, but there was wonder in his tone as he went on:

"Wisconsin! Haven't seen anyone from that far east since before the Change—wait, no, there was one, came all the way from upstate New York on a bicycle, that first year. Big guy, went up north and became a knight or something. None since, though."

"We haven't seen many from the west coast, either, Mr. Mackenzie," Ingolf said.

Brannigan chuckled; he seemed to be one of the jolly plump innkeepers of song and story. Which was lucky; in Ingolf's broad experience they were just as likely to be skinny po-faced tightwads soured on humanity in general and their customers in particular.

"Mackenzie is the Clan name, Mr. Vogeler, and there are going on for sixty thousand others! Just Tom will do, anyway."

"How much do I owe you, Mr. Brannigan... Tom?"

"Normally, half a silver dollar a day for a man and two horses, not counting drinks. Today and tomorrow, nothing."

At his puzzlement: "It's Samhain Eve. We set an empty place for a stranger at sunset tonight and tomorrow. A stranger from far away means double luck."

Brannigan's grin got wider. "You could be a god in disguise, after all!"

"I thank you kindly." He sipped the cider, and his brows went up. "And I thank you kindly! This is the best cider I've had since I left the Kickapoo country!"

He smacked his lips meditatively. There were herbs in it, and the scent had a deep fruitiness that was like a memory of September afternoons in the hills of home when the maples blazed. For a moment homesickness seized him, and he was back amid the bee-murmurous orchards in April, looking down from a bluff across fields like rolling snow, with petals blowing on in drifts over his father's house and onto the stark blue water of the river...

"Thank you for a taste of home," he said sincerely. "Join me in one? And that I will pay for."

He'd directed the invitation to both of them. Brannigan shook his head. "Maybe later. Business to attend to," he said.

A little to Ingolf's surprise, Saba nodded. "I will... if we're not too busy, Dad?"

"Nope, it's a slow night, everyone's getting ready for tomorrow," Brannigan said.

Then he made a gesture, index and little finger outstretched, the middle two folded down under the thumb: "Or out defying the fae, the young idiots. See you later, Mr. Vogeler."

She returned with the platters and some cider of her own, and sat across from him. He grinned and clinked his glass mug against hers, happier still when he saw she meant to eat with him. The odd grace she said over the food didn't put him off; you expected to meet strange customs far from home, and nothing here was as weird—or as nasty—as what he'd seen in the Valley of Paradise among the Prophet's folk.

"Your health, Saba," he said.

"And yours, Ingolf. To the Lord, to the Lady, to the Luck of the Clan!"

He was hungry enough that even with a pretty woman smiling at him the plate was the first priority. Everything that went into the food was something he might have had at his family's board—roast pork with crackling, gravy, potatoes, carrots and cauliflower and broccoli, applesauce on the side, brown bread and butter. The details were different; the outer cuts of the pork were crusted with herbs, chopped dried cherries in the gravy, potatoes whipped creamy with dill and garlic and chives, the vegetables steamed rather than boiled, and a fruity red wine to go with it all when his cider was drained.

Wholly homelike was the wedge of apple pie with whipped cream, and a piece of yellow cheese beside it, sharp and dry and crumbly, just right to cut the rich sweetness of the pie-filling and the buttery taste of the crust.

"Now, that's real cheddar," he said, sighing with contentment. "We Richlanders make good cheese, it was famous even before the Change, and this matches it. Is it yours?"

"No," she said. "It's from Tillamook—on the coast northwest of here, in Portland Protective Association country. That's where my man Raen was, trading for it, when the raiders landed."

"Sorry," he said awkwardly.

She smiled and sighed and patted his hand. "It's a year ago now, and he's in the Summerlands, waiting to come back... and he helped burn their ships at the water's edge. The Haida carry people off for slaves and steal and burn everything if they get a foothold, the raids are worse every year... Battle-luck comes from the Morigú; a dozen others of our folk were there that day..."

She shook off the thought: "That's an interesting name, Ingolf. It sounds like one of ours."

"It's not usual back on the Kickapoo, either; it's after my grandfather's uncle," Ingolf said. "People used to tease me about it, when I was a kid. What are your children's names, if I may ask? You do have unusual ones here, except for a few like Tom."

"Ioruath's my boy; he's three," she said; her smile grew broader. "And Emer, my girl, she's just one; never saw her father, poor thing."

"Pretty names," he said. "But I haven't heard them before."

"We used to have the same names as most people—some of the older people still do; you know, Tom and John and Mary and David, that kind, like Dad. But a lot of people took other ones after the Change, when we turned back to the Old Religion. Names from the ancient stories that teach us about the Gods. Or they gave names like that to their children—my mother changed to Moira, and she changed me from Sally to Saba."

"I like Saba better," he said.

"So do I," she said, and wrinkled her nose at him. "I like Ingolf... and nobody will tease you about it here. It isn't silly, like some of the ones they use up in the Protectorate. Odard and Raoul, I ask you!"

He took a moment to admire the sight of her. She'd switched to just her kilt and shirt and shoes, and everything he could see was just as he liked it; she was broad in the hips and shoulders and narrow in the waist, long-legged, with strong round arms and the full bosom of a woman who'd born and nursed children. Ingolf liked her frank eyes too, and the way she returned his interest without being coy about it.

He learned that she wove, and embroidered, and played the guitar, liked to hunt and fish in season. There was a small tattoo above the upper curve of her bosom and below the finals of her torc, a miniature strung bow that also suggested the crescent moon.

"What's that?" he asked, indicating it with his eyes.

She grinned at him. "Never seen a woman's breasts before, you poor man?" she teased, and laughed with him. Then she touched the tattoo. "That's the Warrior's Mark. I got that when I turned eighteen and passed the tests for the First Levy... the militia, you'd probably call it."

When she gathered up the empty plates and took them back to the kitchen he watched the sway of her kilt with unfeigned pleasure.

I could stay here a while, he thought. I'm not broke by a long shot, and this is where the Voice and the dreams pointed. His mind tried to turn aside, but he forced it back. I'll need a base while I look around for... whoever it is I'm supposed to find.

The door to the vestibule opened as he mused, and he looked up with the wariness his wandering years had bred. A group came in, three women and two men, all younger than him but not by all that much; they all wore longswords and daggers, which they racked by the door. They all moved as if they knew how to use them, too.

He noticed the twin girls first, since they were identicals and dressed so alike he guessed they worked at it. Both were tall, five-nine or so, with yellow-blond braids down their backs, dressed in dark trousers and boots rather than kilts; when they took off their jackets, they revealed sleeveless jerkins of black leather over their shirts, blazoned with a white tree and seven stars and surmounted by a crown.

The other girl was a year or two older and an inch or so shorter, with brown hair cut shoulder-length and brown eyes and features a little too bold for beauty. She was in pants and a short-sleeved thigh-length tunic of fine-woven wool, forest-green, over a full-sleeved shirt of indigo-dyed linen. The tunic had a slit-pupiled eye wreathed in flame on a black shield woven over her chest, and the same device showed on the buckle of her silver-chain belt; it carried a rosary of worked coral and crucifix opposite a dagger.

Saba returned with two small glasses of applejack. Ingolf smiled at her, lifted his and sipped cautiously. It was potent but made from good mash, light-crushed and well strained, and aged a



couple of years, just right for sipping liquor.

"Who are those?" he said quietly, nodding to the group as her father bustled over to them. VIPs, he decided by himself.

Tom Brannigan wasn't in the least servile, but there was an indefinable air of respect. Ingolf's eyes narrowed slightly in professional appraisal.

"The big fellah with the bright hair particularly," he said.

One of the men was in a kilt and was about Ingolf's own height, six-one or a little more; a bit lighter than his own one-ninety, he estimated, but not much. Broad-shouldered and long-limbed, well-muscled but moving like a racehorse, looking like he was about to leap even when completely still. And strikingly handsome in a way that was almost beautiful without being in the least pretty, down to a cleft in the square chin.

"Oh, that's Rudi Mackenzie," Saba said, with the tolerant tone of a woman towards a younger man she'd known when he was just hitting his teens. "The Chief's kid."

Ingolf's eyes flicked to look at hands and wrists, the way the young man held himself and moved. And at the scars that showed when a sleeve of his saffron-yellow shirt of linsey-woolsey fell back from a muscular forearm; there was another along the angle of his jaw. He looked young—probably looked younger than he was, the well-to-do didn't age as fast as ordinary folk—but formidable.

"That's not just a kid," he said. "That's a fighting-man. And a very dangerous one, or I miss my bet."

"Well, yes. He fought with Raen... and very well, by all accounts. Took that cut on his face pulling my man out of the water with a Haida trying to spear him, but it was too late."

"He's your bossman's son? The heir?"

"Our Chief's a woman," Saba said. "Juniper Mackenzie, herself herself. But he's her son, right enough—and her tanist."

At his enquiring glance: "A tanist is... sort of an understudy. His father was Mike Havel—Lord Bear, some called him, the head of the Bearkiller Outfit, over west of the River. The twins are Havel's kids too, Rudi's half-sisters; their mother's Signe Havel... He fathered Rudi with the Chief before he married Signe."

"Yeah, there's a family resemblance," Ingolf noted.

High cheekbones and slanted eyes; a trace of Injun there, he thought. The man's eyes were a light changeable gray-blue-green, the girls' the bright blue of cornflowers; his hair was worn shoulder-length and there was a strong tinge of copper-red in its yellow curls. He looked as if he laughed a lot; right now he was grinning at the innkeeper.

"Greetings to the Mackenzie!" Brannigan said grandly, then winked and made a sweeping bow.

"You honor our humble establishment."

"Hey, Tom, I'm not the Mackenzie," the young man—Rudi—said, shaking his hand; that lilting accent of Saba's was stronger still with him. "My mother is the Mackenzie. I'm just a Mackenzie, like you and the rest, to be sure."

"You're just a clansman, and I'm the Horned Lord come in the flesh," Brannigan said.

"Well, you are," Rudi pointed out.

"Only in the Circle," Brannigan said.

Ingolf looked a question over at the innkeeper's daughter. "Dad's High Priest of the Sunhill Coven here," she said casually. "So when he Calls, the God comes to him. Mom's the High Priestess. Lady Juniper is High Priestess of the whole Clan, of course—she's the Goddess-on-Earth. The living vessel of the Mother."

"Oh," Ingolf said. And I'm not going to ask more about that until I know my way around! he thought.

"You're not staying at Raven House?" Brannigan went on to... Rudi, Ingolf thought. Rudi Mackenzie.

"Nah, Mom and Sir Nigel and the infants are in, and some guests from overseas, and a whole lot of other people from Dun Juniper, so we just dumped the hunting gear there, said hello, and came on over. You mind putting us all up? The girls can share a room if it's tight, and you can put me and Odard in another."

"You snore, Rudi," the other man in the party said; that must be Odard.

He was dressed like the brown-haired woman in t-tunic, shirt and pants; his were of beautifully woven dark-blue cloth embroidered around the neck and hem with gold, but there was a circle on his chest with what looked like a Chinese symbol in it—Ingolf knew enough to recognize them. He

went on with the air of a man making a concession:

"You could chivalrously sleep here on the floor by the hearth and give your room to the Princess. It would be more suitable to her state to have one all to herself."

"I'm not sharing with you, Odard," the brown-haired woman said, pointing a finger.

"Oh, of course not, Your Highness," the man said smoothly. "I said all to yourself, didn't I?"

"Then you'd have to sleep on the floor too, Odard," Rudi grinned. "Which isn't like you. Chivalry or not."

"No, no, you sleep in front of the hearth, Rudi, and I'll share with the twins."

"And then you wake up, Odard," one of the siblings said.

Her sister just snorted; they both looked down their noses at him—about half-serious, Ingolf thought.

"No, plenty for you and the Princess and your friends to have one each," Brannigan said, laughing at the byplay. "Business gets slow after the Horse Fair, and slower after Mabon. Highway 20 won't be open much longer—it may be closed now. They've already had snow up there, though we got one in from over the Santiam Pass just a little while ago—that's him. He's from far back east, 'way far. East of the Mississippi!"

He nodded towards the booth in a corner; Ingolf raised his glass politely as they nodded at him; they looked in frank curiosity, then gave him what he recognized as the same expert's once-over he'd given Rudi. There was a little more than that in the way the three young women looked at him; they put their heads together and said something in a language he didn't recognize, and giggled for a moment.

Then they went off to their own table, still bickering amiably. Like pups in a litter, he thought tolerantly, from the lofty height of twenty-eight, and asked:

"Princess?"

"Oh, that's Mathilda Armingar," Saba said. "She comes from up north; her father was the Lord Protector of Portland, and she's his heir, so they call her the Princess. Mike Havel and he killed each other in the War of the Eye, eleven years ago—no, sure and I'm lying, it's twelve years the now. By the Sun Lord and the Foam-Born, but the Wheel turns faster each time!"

Ingolf felt his brows go up. "Their kids seem awful friendly," he said.

And meant it. He recognized the playful banter, of a style you only used with those you knew well, and it brought a pang of loneliness. He hadn't had the like since the Villains were wiped out last year.

"Long story," Saba said. "Part of the peace agreement was that she'd come here for part of the year, and Rudi... Artos... would go north."

He nodded thoughtfully; that sort of mutual exchange of hostages was common enough. The Bossmen of Richland and Ellsworth had a similar arrangement back home, which was a big improvement on calling out your Farmers and their following of Refugees to burn down barns and chop each other up.

"And the other guy is Sir Odard Liu; he's a knight of the Association—the Portland Protective Association, that's what their top people call themselves—who comes down with her. His father was a nasty piece of work, too; Lady Eilir and Lady Astrid killed him—

At his enquiring look she amplified: "Lady Eilir is the Chief's eldest child; Lady Astrid is the twin's aunt, their mother's sister and Mike Havel's sister-in-law, she's the Hiril of the Dúnedain Rangers. They're anamchara, soul-sisters. Astrid's married to Lord Alleyne, the son of the Chief's husband, Sir Nigel. His son by his first wife back in England, that is... he and the Chief have two daughters. Sorry to dump all this on you!"

He filed away the unfamiliar names and relationships; family was usually the key to understanding politics, which could mean life and death.

"And Odard?"

"Odard's not bad... except that he thinks he's the Lady's own gift to women."

"That's a delusion I've never had," Ingolf said. "I always thought it was more that women are God's gift to an undeserving mankind."

That got him a laugh. He went on: "You've got a mixed lot in here."

"We do," she said proudly. "The Sheaf and Sickle is famous all through the Valley."

She pointed out a few. "Those two are Bearkillers, from over to the west of here; Mike Havel founded their Outfit."

A tough-looking pair, with bold challenging eyes.

"See those little blue scars between their brows? That means they're Initiates of the A-list—sort of like being knights, but they're a lot less likely to be assholes than the ones from the Protectorate, sure. And that's a monk from Mt. Angel. Father Ignatius—if there were more like him, I'd think better of Christians. No offense."

"None taken," Ingolf said, sincerely enough

The cleric was a spare muscular young man in a black hooded robe; Catholic clergy were still thin on the ground back east, but Ingolf would have pegged him for a fighting-man, except for the dress. He read from a small book and told a rosary with his left hand, occasionally taking a sip of wine or a bite of a frugal dinner of bread and cheese and smoked fish.

Ingolf listened as Saba spoke, but found his eyes straying to her more and more often, until she laughed at him and finished her brandy.

"See you around, Ingolf Wanderer."

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He'd barely turned out the lamp in the small tidy sleeping-room when the door opened again. He reached for the belt with his weapons where it hung from the bedstead, and heard her quiet chuckle in the dark as the scabbard knocked against the wood.

"I'm not that fearsome, am I, Ingolf?" she teased.

"Let's find out," he suggested.

The whiteness of her skin was half-glimpsed in the darkness as she slipped out of her robe and under the quilt. Some hours later they lay in a happy tangle, warm while the rain tapped at the west-facing window.

Wow, he thought again. They're not shy around here, either!

Suddenly a thought occurred to him. It should have been earlier, but he'd been lulled by the friendly reception. Still, you could never tell—

"Your father isn't going to mind, is he?"

Then he yelped as she tweaked his chest-hair, hard. "That's for waiting until now to ask! No, of course not. I'm a grown woman; it's my business who I worship the Goddess with."

He rubbed at his chest and then settled her back on the curve of his shoulder. "Worship is what you call it here? Beats fasting and prayer, I can tell you that!"

"All acts of love and pleasure are My rituals," she said; it had the sound of someone quoting. Then she chuckled: "And She is well and truly worshipped!"

He smiled himself; that was the oddest complement a woman had ever given him, but far from the worst.

"And I haven't been with anyone for a year, since Raen died. Time to let him go. You're a strong man, and I think a good one. If you leave, I've had the night and maybe a child—I always wanted more than two. And if you don't leave... well, we'll see, shall we?"

She yawned and stretched and settled herself, with a thigh flung across his; he could feel her breathing slowing down to the deep regular rhythm of sleep, and his own followed.

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Ingolf's dream was the same as always; the screams of his comrades, the terror of the blinding light that pierced hand and eyelid, and the sword, the sword hanging impossibly in the blaze, the Voice tolling in his mind.

When he woke, he thought himself still asleep for an instant, his chest heaving and sweat running down his neck. In a moment more he'd wake to the warm stuffy darkness of the room and find Saba beside him, and they'd go down to breakfast. He'd find what jobs he could do around the inn, or for neighbors, and get to know people before he started asking around. Maybe the Voice would leave him alone for a while.

Then he realized that the long curved dagger raised above him was very real, and threw himself aside with a great hoarse shout. Saba screamed as well, as the razor edge kissed her flank and left a trail of red as it plunged into the quilt and let free a blizzard of goose-down.

Thought too swift to notice with his waking mind made him ignore his shete; the long weapon would be deadly awkward in these cramped quarters. Instead he stripped the Bowie and tomahawk out of his belt and rolled to the floor, bounding erect with a shoulder-roll. There were a

full Triad of them, three knives glimpsed in the dark, hooded faces covered to the eyes by black half-masks. His stones tried to draw up into his belly as the faint light from the window glinted on the sharp metal in their gloved hands. A knife fight was bad enough at any time; knives moved too fast to really see or block well.

A knife fight naked in the dark against three opponents who didn't care if they lived or died...

"The Ascended Masters have called your name, apostate," one of them hissed. "Did you think mountains and ice could save you from the Prophet's judgment?"

Then to Saba, as they spread out and approached: "Silence, pagan whore!"

The speaker tried to backhand her out of the way as she struggled free of the tangled sheets. She caught the arm, heaved and twisted to lock it with a speed and skill that would have been a pleasure to see in better circumstances, and swung the elbow wrong-end forward against the bedstead with all the strength of her arms and weight of her body. The joint broke with an ugly crackling crunch of tendon and bone, like a green branch giving way across your knee. Her hawk-shriek overrode the Cutter's scream of outraged pain:

"Scathach! Scathach!"

The knifeman's ululation at the ruin of his arm was cut off as her foot raked up and kicked him under the jaw with explosive power, toes neatly rolled back to present the ball of her foot. She snatched at the knife as it fell from his nerveless hand.

Ingolf roared and lunged himself; the thrust of the bowie in his left hand rammed into a jacket lined with mail—

## CHAPTER TWO:

Sheaf and Sickle Inn, Sutterdown, Willamette Valley, Oregon

Samhain Eve, CY22/2020 AD

Rudi Mackenzie dreamed.

He saw mountains, but not the mountains of home, green and steep where the Cascades rose above Dun Juniper's walls. These were bare save for a scattering of silvery-gray scrub, up great walls of rock and scree to the glaciers floating far above, and he was all alone except for Epona. His senses were sharp; the smell of cold rock and aromatic herbs and old sweat soaked into wool and leather, the rattle of stone under shod hooves, far and faint a baying like wolves, but he knew it was men. The horse's breath came sharp, and there was a sense of overwhelming grief and dread...

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A hoarse shout kicked him into wakefulness. He'd always been one of those who came alert easily; an inner clock told him it was the third hour past midnight, the hour when the Hunter came to lead away the old and sick, the time when sleep guttered closest to death. He swung his feet down and grabbed up sword and buckler and opened the door in the same motion, and went down on one knee to peer out first. Nothing in this short length of corridor—he had good night vision, even in the velvet darkness. The rain was back, and the drumming on the strakes of the roof made a white noise that drowned everything but the sharpest sound.

In the room across a lantern flared as a door cracked open; that was Odard, always cautious. His head came out at the same level as Rudi's. The twins were on this side and down one; as he watched their door opened too, and Ritva—or Mary—rolled out, coming up in a crouch with longsword in one hand and dirk in the other.

No, it's Mary. She has that little scar over her hipbone. The twins tried to look as similar as they could, which was why he was careful about it.

Mathilda was the last door down, and a mirror showed there stuck in the wax on the end of a candle-stub. She checked the ground before coming out in her knee-length nightshift, blades ready; the embroidered garment looked a little odd with a swordbelt buckled around it.

A faint clash, the sound of metal on metal, and more voices. Their eyes met, and she nodded.

The scream had come from around the corner to his left; how far down was hard to tell. The new noise came from the same direction. None of them had their body armor with them, or missile

weapons, or any shields beside his buckler. They only all had sword and fighting-knife because they'd been reared to put them on as automatically as shoes whenever they went outside their own home-hearth doors.

Not worth taking time to get dressed, he decided. It would be if we had our war harness, but all clothes do in a fight is comfort you.

Ritva dashed down to the corner in four deer-swift bounds, then dropped flat to peer around the edge, landing on her fisted hands with the blades still in them.

Rudi called up his knowledge of the Sheaf and Sickle's layout as the rest of them followed. It was chaotic—Brannigan's steading had grown over the years from the original core of the pre-Change tavern and microbrewery, knocking together half a dozen old buildings and modifying them as the business and the number of children and grandchildren and employees and their families grew. New doorways and corridors and staircases, and new chimneys for woodstoves and fireplaces... The five of them gathered at the intersection, naturally keeping back where they couldn't be seen from the next stretch of corridor. Odard had brought his bedside lantern, but with his shirt wrapped around it so the light it threw was muffled. The fruity smell of burning alcohol and hot wick melded with the acrid sweat of tension.

Eyes gleamed in the darkness, and teeth showed as bright as the steel; none of them was what you'd call timid, or complete virgins when it came to a fight, but sudden death in a friendly inn wasn't something that happened every day. And they were all of them children of field and farm, river and hill and forest; a town was an alien environment to them, much less fighting in a warren like this building. He could tell they all felt as cramped and out-of-place as he did.

He had his buckler, a little foot-wide roundel of steel shaped like a soup-plate, with a hand-grip in the hollow boss. As it happened, they also all favored double-edged longswords with cross-guarded hilts. The others were carrying their daggers as parrying-weapons; Mathilda tossed strips of woolen blanket to each of the shieldless ones, and they quickly wound them around their left forearms. That wasn't much protection, but it was a lot better than nothing. Always thinking ahead, that girl, Rudi thought, with a taut grin. Let's see, half a minute since I heard that first scream...

"Follow me!"

Left down the corridor, bare feet nearly noiseless on the wooden floorboards. More light leaking out from under doors as people woke; one Corvallen merchant opened his, saw warriors naked as the swords in their hands padding by and prudently slammed the door shut again, with a thumping to show he was bracing a chair against it. The sound of fighting was louder now; an unearthly shriek of astonished agony, and a Mackenzie battle-shout in a woman's voice:

"Scathach! Scathach!"

Someone calling on the Dark Goddess in Her most terrible form. Scathach: She Who Brings Fear. The red work of killing was being done within earshot. You didn't invoke the Devouring Shadow unless you really meant it.

The corridor ended at the door to the kitchens. To their left was a staircase that went through a ninety-degree turn as it rose to the second floor and a row of guest-rooms. Mathilda slipped in front of him; she'd brought along her candlestick-and-mirror arrangement, and he nodded as she went up the stairs two at a time. The rest followed in a silent rush that froze for a moment as she reached the top and extended the mirror just up over the lip; they poised ready to attack if someone peered over the edge. Light spilled from above; someone had lit a lantern, and their dark-adjusted eyes saw the dim flame as brightness.

Then she put down the mirror and spoke in Sign: Six with shetes and shields. Three facing this way, three the other. One door open between them, the fighting's coming from there.

Decision flashed through him, and his hands moved, quick and fluent: Matti, Ritva, Mary, you go back down, through the kitchen and up the other stairs—that's how they're planning on getting away.

They turned and raced down and around the stairs, leaping recklessly despite the razor-edged steel in both hands, as sure-footed as wildcats. Rudi looked over and met Odard's slanted blue eyes. The other man smiled and shrugged ruefully. Rudi filled his lungs and called on the Crow Goddess in an enormous shout as he leapt:

"Morrigú! Morrigú!"

"Haro, Portland! Face Gervais, face death!" Odard yelled, the battle-shouts of his nation and his House.

You screamed at a time like that to freeze your enemy for a moment. This time the freezing bit didn't work. The men facing him and Odard attacked immediately, the forward pair moving with smooth precision and the one behind alert on the balls of his feet, ready to step in if one of his comrades went down. They were wearing loose mottled gray-brown jackets with hoods and cloth masks that covered all but the eyes, trousers of the same material, and stout boots. It made him feel a little conspicuous in his underdrawers and bare feet, but not nearly so much as did the yard of sharp curved steel slamming towards his face.

Tunnggg!

His buckler shed it with an unmusical crash and a jarring shock to his left hand and arm. His own cut-and-thrust blade darted out, and was deflected in turn by the two-foot circular shield blazoned with a sun-disk and three letters—C-U-T.

That was all too appropriate; he jumped as the shete hissed beneath his feet, aimed in a looping, hocking strike at the side of his leg. The man was as good a master of the slashing style as he had ever met, and his shete was a whirling blur like a power-driven saw, but the cramped quarters worked against him—once it nearly caught on the ceiling overhead.

Just then another man dressed like his opponent staggered back out of the door where the first shouts had come from; he had a tomahawk planted in his forehead, the blade sunk deep enough that the shaft was jammed against the bone. The outlander bounced off the opposite wall and fell in a tangle of limbs that twitched like a pithed frog.

A naked man was in the doorway; Ingolf, the stranger from the sunrise lands. He clutched a knife in his left hand, but the limb hung limp and he had a nasty cut down the shoulder and upper arm on that side, with blood that looked black in the poor light glistening in a sheet down his side and dripping on the floor.

"Saba's hurt!" he cried. "Hurt bad!"

"Then get back inside there and look to her!" Rudi shouted.

That seemed to cut through the haze of pain and shock; the big man looked around, saw what was going on, and slammed the door in the face of one of the hooded men. An instant later the blade of the bowie appeared beneath it; the easterner had driven it in as a wedge with a blow of heel to hilt, and the only way to get the door open would be to batter it off its hinges. Two of the hooded killers started trying to do just that, kicking at the stout brown planks and then chopping white splinters out when that didn't work.

As he spoke Rudi cut downward, a savage chopping blow from the wrist, too fast for the movement of the shield to block. It struck, and hard, but the glint of chain mail appeared through the ripped cloth. The armor kept the blade from cutting, but his opponent grunted in pain and the shield dipped lower; Rudi could feel the muffled snap of something giving way up the steel and into the hilt.

"We are the point—"

He chanted the line as he whipped his sword across and caught another shete-chop on his own steel; the weapons slid together with a tinging crash and locked at the hilts, and he smashed the buckler into the man's injured shoulder, putting all the power of his hundred and seventy-five pounds into it.

"We are the edge—"

This time bone crumbled audibly, and the power went out of the grip holding his sword locked. The man wailed through his mask, blue eyes flaring open with agony and the despair of imminent death above the dark knit cloth.

"We are the wolves that Hecate fed!"

Rudi threw him backward with a flexing push of both arms and then killed him with a snapping thrust to one eye, a gruesome crunch as the long point of his sword smashed through the thin bone behind the socket and into his brain. Blood and matter splattered the walls as he freed it with a sharp jerk of his arm.

There was motion on the stairs behind him. It had to be friendlies...

"Healer! Get a healer up here, now!" he called crisply. "And some more weapons, bows, spears!"

The rear man of the three guarding this end of the corridor stepped into place before Rudi could turn on Odard's opponent. Odard and his man were fully engaged, a flurry of steel moving in blurring arcs, gasping breath, shuffling stamp of feet on the floorboards. The hooded man fought silently, but the knight shouted again:

"Face Gervais, face death!"

His opponent had to be good to keep the young knight off, even with the advantage of a proper shield and a mail-lined coat. He was good, and so was the one who'd replaced the first casualty to face Rudi...

What's going on here? There aren't that many folk around who're that good with a blade. It takes too much time away from working to feed your family. These aren't some gang of bandits. They're trained. They're someone's armsmen. Someone with a deep well to pick from.

Two blond heads appeared at the stairs on the other end of this stretch of corridor. The hooded man left on sentry-go there called sharply, and one of the ones hacking at the door left off and raced to join him. The first had to give back a half-dozen paces before his comrade was at his side. If they were disconcerted at finding themselves fighting two identical stark-naked amazons, it didn't show. Mathilda followed behind perforce—there wasn't room for more than two with swords to deploy in the strait confines of the corridor.

"Mail under the jackets!" Rudi called.

Steel rang on steel. Even fighting for his life, Rudi grinned at the surprise they were about to get. The twins had been doing everything together all their lives, and a lot of that involved swords. Fighting Mary and Ritva together was like taking on a single organism with four hands, and they'd been trained by Astrid Larsson and Alleyne Loring—who were two of the three sparring-partners Rudi had left who still beat him as often as not. He could usually take either of the twins in a straight up-fight, but they'd never lost a pair-against-pair match with anyone since they got their full growth.

"Lacho calad! Drego morn!" the two screamed as one.

The Dúnedain war cry, known throughout the Valley: Flame light! Flee night!

"Duck!" Mathilda shouted from behind them, as she wound up.

They both did. The cast-brass candlestick flew over Mary—or Ritva's—head. It arched over the two hooded men facing the Larsson twins as well, bringing their shields up in reflex. But it blurred past, to go thunk into the shoulder-blade of the one hacking at the door. He collapsed, sinking to his knees in a scrabbling fall, dropping his weapon and clutching at the battered panels. After an instant he struggled to his feet again and began hacking once more, but his blows were feeble and he held the weapon in his left hand.

Goddess gentle and strong! This bunch are determined! Rudi thought.

Aloud, between panting breaths and the deadly flickering and belling of edged metal:

"Surrender! You're got no way out!"

They didn't even bother to reply. Rudi raised his voice and shouted to the others. "We'll want one alive!"

That did bring a reaction, probably because there wasn't any way for them to escape now that the cry was raised; there were shouts and noise all over the Sheaf and Sickle. One of the hooded men barked a single order—Rudi couldn't make out the word, or even if it was in English.

Suddenly the pair facing him and Odard leapt backwards, a simultaneous panther bound; then they turned and drove their shetes into each other's throats. The broad points slashed to the spine almost instantaneously.

Rudi was left gaping for an instant as blood fountained out, splashing to the ceiling before the bodies convulsed and went limp. Ritva and Mary were frozen in shock on the other side; their opponents had done the same.

"Get the other one!" Mathilda called, trying to push between them. "Quick!"

Cursing, all five of them did. Rudi managed to grab his right shoulder just as the left arm drove a dagger up under his own breastbone; the body kicked and died. The young Mackenzie forced down an impulse to stand panting and bewildered amid the bodies and the blood that filled the corridor with its copper-iron stink beneath the sickly smell of pierced body-cavities.

Instead he and Odard moved as if they'd rehearsed for days; they set their swords point-down in the floor, put their backs against the wall of the corridor across from the wedged door, jumped up and lashed out with their feet.

The planks hit his soles with a hard drumming thump that shocked up through his whole body, leaving him feeling as if he'd been folded too far at the hips. There was a tearing, crunching sound as the upper hinge came half-free of the wood. Both young men dropped crouching to the blood-slick flooring, sprang upward as if driven by springs, and struck again. This time the upper hinge came completely free and the lower twisted three-quarters out. The door fell inward, resting on a body there. Rudi snatched up his sword and jumped through.

The inside was darker than the corridor. It took an instant for his eyes to make sense of what he saw. Two dead men. One half-under the door, with an arm-joint bent back in a way not suited to the nature or construction of elbows, a jaw smashed so completely it dangled free within a sack of cloth, and his head back between his shoulderblades. Another was hacked and slashed around the neck and face as if by a bear in a frenzy.

On the bed a woman's body, naked but looking like a glistening black statue with the blood. It couldn't all be hers, but a lot of it was; a long curved knife had been driven into her stomach just above the pubic bone and ripped upwards.

The stranger was trying to hold the obscene wound closed, despite the steady flow of blood from his own gash; his shoulders shook with the harsh sobbing of a man unaccustomed to tears. Astonishingly, the woman still breathed a little. As Rudi watched she seemed to speak—he thought he heard Raen in the echoing silence—and went limp. Seconds later the man who held her collapsed.

"Sweet Mother-of-All," Rudi whispered, darting forward.

Saba was beyond help, but the stranger wasn't. And if he lived, he could talk.

### CHAPTER THREE:

Raven House, Sutterdown, Willamette Valley, Oregon  
Samhain Eve, CY22/2020 AD

Nigel Loring looked around the great Hall of Raven House and arched a wry white brow as Rudi and his friends trooped out to head for the Sheaf and Sickle; people were setting up tables in a long rectangle, leaving a broad patch clear in the center.

"I think my stepson knew more about those visiting diplomats than he said. Otherwise, why dodge dinner here, after a cold day's hunting?"

"Oh, it'll be Saba Brannigan he's thinking of hunting the now," Juniper Mackenzie said. "That she might be out of mourning, you see, and more inclined to look favorably on him now that he's handsome and full-grown. Not that the poor boy has a prayer of getting between her knees; she'll always remember him as the spotty lustful sweaty-palmed fourteen-year-old she looked down on from the lofty height of seventeen. It's a woman's mystery and I know."

They shared a chuckle. Children do make life more interesting, he thought.

Juniper had born a daughter named Eilir long ago, when she was a teenager herself, before the Change. Rudi Mackenzie had been conceived in the first Change Year; and now she had two daughters with Nigel as well, the fruit of their middle-aged marriage. His own son Alleyne Loring had accompanied him to Oregon twelve years ago, and had supplied three grandchildren since with Astrid...

Juniper sighed, looking around. "Though I can't blame the boy for not wanting to sit through a formal dinner at Raven House, when he could be carousing with friends his own age. I have doubts about this place myself, sure and I do."

In theory Raven House was for the use of the local Raven sept's ceremonies. In practice the house was part of Sutterdown's generation-long campaign to get the Chief to spend more time there; they were convinced they could eventually wear her down and-or tempt her enough to get her out of Dun Juniper and into what they considered the Mackenzies' natural capital. Whatever else the Change had wrought in Sutterdown, it hadn't put an end to small-town boosterism.

"I swear, they've gone and made it fancier still," Juniper murmured.

It had been a rich man's house once, a timber baron who'd wrung his wealth out of the Cascade forests around the end of the nineteenth century. The townsfolk had added stables to the rear, and built closed passages to the houses on either hand, and cleared out most of the ground and first floors in the central block to make a single great rectangular room, with galleries overlooking it on two sides. One end held a low dais, with a pair of tall chairs whose backs were worked like the wings of ravens, with the heads looking down as hoods.

Behind it the wall was paneled in lustrous black walnut, polished until it shone with a dark gloss; inlaid in pale birchwood was the Triple Moon, waxing and full and waning, a circle flanked by outward-pointing crescents, the sign of the Threefold Goddess—the Maiden, the Mother and the Hag. If you looked closer you saw what was subtly drawn behind that, barely a suggestion in slivers of rosewood and yew, pear and rowan, a face that might be young or old or ageless...



Down at the other end was the big fireplace where they stood now, crackling with six-foot fir-logs and sweet-smelling incense cedar. Above the hearth was another great image inlaid into the wall and towering up to the high ceiling, this time in copper and gold and silver. It showed a wild bearded face with curving horns springing from its brow, forever looking towards the Ever-Changing One.

"I can't really resent it, though," Juniper said, shaking her head. "It's all done from love; and They never turn that away."

"And Sutterdown does have some splendid artists now," Nigel said meditatively, taking a sip from a glass of red wine. "As good as any at home in Dun Juniper. As good as any I've ever seen all my life long."

The image of the Horned God stared down at him, golden locks surrounding it like the rayed Sun, the full sensual lips slightly parted over white teeth. The eyes swallowed the flames until they were like windows into a moonlit forest at night, infinitely deep with rustling mystery, glinting with silvery flickers. Here in the warm well-lit room, within the strong walled town bowered among tilled fields tamed by the hands of human kind... here they still brought the breath of the wildwood, and the lonely sound of pipes heard over hills by moonlight.

"That too," Juniper sighed.

He looked up at the image and murmured a quotation. "The face of Power that says: O man, make peace with your mortality—for this, too, is God."

Her mouth quirked; she knew he wasn't easily impressed. "Skilled indeed! And who'd have thought we'd breed so many fine makers, with only as many folk as one small city in the old days?"

"Perhaps it's because they don't have great cities full of professionals and critics and academics telling them what to like, or television and books to bring it to them. It's like music, in these latter days; if you want it, you have to make your own. Athens itself in its time of greatness was a small place, after all."

"But it all makes me feel guilty," Juniper said, looking around. "We're doing well the now, but not so well that we can afford to make all this for an occasional visit by a middle-aged couple and their children."

She gestured helplessly at the rest of the room. It had been done with some cunning and by people who knew Juniper fairly well; the lower parts of the walls held books and pictures and musical instruments on shelves of wood delicately carved with running vines and flowers; above were the brackets that held four great multi-branched lamps at the Quarters, and weavings showing the ancient tales—Niall of the Nine Hostages and the Lady of Tara, Ishtar's descent into the Underworld to free her lover, Odin grasping the runes of wisdom below the branches of the World Tree.

Despite the splendor it wasn't a forbidding room; just right for music and dancing, or a ritual gathering, or for children to play in on a winter day and listen to a story, or for simply sitting by the fire reading in the comfortable chairs and sofas that surrounded the hearth, a bowl of hazelnuts and apples at your elbow and a cat curled up on your lap.

"They do use it when we're not here, my dear; it's a civic center and doesn't sit empty and sorrowing. And making you feel guilty so you'd come and use it more often was a large part of the intent!"

Just then a sound came from the vestibule that gave on the street door. An apprentice bard named Mabor—he was living with a family at Dun Juniper and studying with Juniper herself, and several others—came in. He was a young man with black hair and eyes and olive-brown skin; his father had been Mexican. Now he cleared his throat and straightened his plaid, face shining with excitement.

"Lady Juniper!" he said.

He was young, just seventeen, but his voice already had a trained singer's resonance.

Mackenzies thought highly of bards, not least because Juniper herself had followed that trade before the Change, busking and playing the RenFaire circuit. Every dun wanted one trained at her hearth, and they served as heralds and messengers as well, and their songs nurtured the Craft. A little self-importantly he went on in the formal cadence that for some reason always made Juniper sigh and roll her eyes a little:

"Emissaries from abroad, bringing the word of their king. They ask audience and guesing of the Mackenzie."

"Well, they're welcome," Juniper said. Her brows rose. "Not another Cardinal, I hope?" Nigel hid a grin. The Papal nuncio had visited when he came to reestablish contact with Oregon's Catholics, and not so incidentally put an end to the schism of the Portland Protective Association's home-grown anti-Pope. Despite being an American by birth himself, the good Cardinal had found it a bit of a strain, since while Juniper was polite to a fault she was as sincere in her fashion as the ecclesiastic was in his...

"No, not a Cardinal, Lady." Mabor drew another breath, delighted. "I am to herald the right honorable the Count of Azay, ambassador of His Britannic Majesty, William V, called The Great, Defender of the Faith, King of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, King of France and Spain and his dominions beyond the seas, Hammer of the Moors, Rex Britanniae Maioris et Imperator Occidentalis!"

Nigel's eyebrows shot up. "Good God," he said quietly.

They'd heard some news from Europe since he arrived here on a Tasmanian ship, fleeing Mad King Charles and dropping all unknowing into the War of the Eye. But no direct contact...

There were two guards in full fig by the entranceway, longbow and quiver over their backs, sword and buckler at belt, and spears with the long heads polished bright in their hands—a mistake by Sutterdown, for while Juniper loved ceremony she hated swank. Now the two snapped to attention and rapped their spearbutts on the ground.

Six of the party that entered were guardsmen, one in the full plate of a man-at-arms and the others longbowmen in chain-mail shirts and open-faced sallets. Nigel knew the gear; he'd designed the green-enameled armor himself on the Isle of Wight, that first winter while they were fighting off the hordes of starving refugees and wondering if they'd survive to the next harvest.

A tall man with a limp came through behind the soldiers; he was in riding breeches and a coat of Harris Tweed, with a plain sword-belt around it and an equally plain longsword whose hilt had sweat-stained rawhide bindings. The man was near Nigel's own mid-sixties, countenance scored by years and turned ruddy by a youth spent under the unmerciful sun of the hot countries. He still had a full thatch of hair, white with some gray, and his hard scarred face was dominated by a great beak of a nose above a wide thin-lipped gash of mouth and a knobby chin; the little finger on his left hand was missing. His eyes were dark-green, level and watchful, marksman's eyes.

"Good God," Nigel said, still quietly. "Tony Knolles!"

The last time they'd seen each other had been more than a decade ago, over lowered lances. Charles had still been King then, and Knolles still a strong supporter...

"Nigel!"

The aquiline face split in a smile—not much of one, but a great ear-to-ear grin if you knew the man, who made Nigel Loring look like an excitable Latin. Nigel stepped forward, hand outstretched; they gripped with sword-callused strength and each searched the other man's face. Nigel was suddenly conscious of how he'd gone egg-bald himself except for a fringe and his mustache, and white-haired except for a few fading streaks of yellow. For the rest he was still trim and upright, even if things creaked and moved more slowly nowadays.

"Good God, Tony!" After a moment of struggling to find words: "And a Count, no less!"

"His Majesty was badly advised enough to do me that honor."

Nigel shook his head again, hauling his wits together by main force. "My dear, an old friend and comrade in arms, Tony Knolles, who saved my life many times."

"And only tried to kill him once," Knolles said, bowing over her hand. "Lady Juniper."

"My husband has told me a good deal of you, Lord Anthony," she said. With an impish smile:

"Both the good and the bad of it, sure."

Two small figures came through the crowd. Nigel went on:

"Our eldest daughter, Maude."

At twelve Maude was already nearly as tall as her mother's five-foot-and-a-bit, slender and all limbs and hands and feet, her hair a darker red, her eyes blue as Nigel's. She curtsied, solemn in her green shirt, silver-buckled shoes, kilt and plaid and feathered Scots bonnet. Knolles winced slightly; Maude had been the name of Nigel's first wife, Alleyne's mother. She'd been killed by the Icelandic mercenaries holding the Lorings prisoner on Charles' orders, during the rescue and escape.

"And Fiorbhinn, our youngest," he said.

"Hello, Lord Anthony." The eight-year-old had her mother's leaf-green eyes; her long hair was the yellow-white color of ripe wheat. She gave the English emissary's hand a confident shake.

"Fiorbhinn means Truesweet," she went on, with a wide white smile. "It's the name of a famous harp. I can play the harp already! And Mom says I have perfect pitch. She knows 'cause she does too."

Nigel smiled, watching Knolles blink, and knowing that that hard-souled man of war was instantly made a slave for life.

The visitor cleared his throat. "And this is my son Robert, Lady Juniper. Robert, your godfather."

The guard commander in the suit of plate slid the visor of his sallet up. The face within was Knolles' own, minus forty-odd years and with the nose shrunk to more human proportions, though paler and freckled and with a lock of raven hair hanging down on the forehead.

Nigel shook his hand after he made his bow to Juniper—carefully, which you had to do when the other man was wearing an articulated steel gauntlet; he marveled a little, remembering the gangly child he'd known... where did the years go?

Down into the West without returning, he thought, and added aloud: "I hope your mother's well? She was expecting when I... ah... left England."

"Mother is very well, thank you, Sir Nigel," he said, with a charming smile of his own. "And I have two younger sisters and a brother now. My brother's name is Nigel, by the way."

"Ah..." Knolles senior pulled himself together. "My credentials?"

Nigel saved him from embarrassment with a quick flick of the eyes, and he presented the ribbon-bound documents to Juniper.

She took them gravely. "Be welcome here as my guests and the guests of Clan Mackenzie, Lord Count, Lord Robert. Welcome as the voice of your king, and still more for yourself."

Then, raising her voice slightly to take in the whole party and the lookers-on: "Well, if you good people would like to share dinner, there's just time to get freshened up."

She clapped her hands as the watching crowd buzzed. "The Clan has guests from afar, bringing luck beneath our roof on Samhain's holy eve! Rooms for them! Hot water and soap! See to their horses! And tell the cooks dinner is going to be very welcome!"

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Nigel saw Knolles blink as the bagpipers paced around the inner side of the tables, the wild skirling sound filling the great room. Below knives flashed as a roast pig—a yearling, with an apple in its mouth—and a smoking side of beef were reduced to manageable proportions. The other dishes came in with a proud procession of polished salvers.

When the musicians had marched out of the room—to shed their instruments and scurry back in for the meal—Juniper Mackenzie rose to her feet and lifted the silver-mouthed horn from its rest before her to make the Invocation and libation:

"Harvest Lord who dies for the ripened grain—  
Corn Mother who births the fertile field—  
Blesséd be those who share this bounty;  
And blessed the mortals who toiled with You  
Their hands helping Earth to bring forth life.

Then she poured out a portion into a bowl and raised the horn high: "To the Lord, to the Lady, to the Luck of the Clan—drink hail!"

"Wassail!"

Fifty voices roared reply as she drank; Nigel took a sip of his wine. Knolles senior and junior did the same, and then looked down at their glasses with identical surprised respect.

"And to the Clan's guests, come across the sea from the lands of our ancestors—may there always be peace and friendship between us—drink hail!"

"Wassail!"

As she sat, Knolles leaned close to whisper in Nigel's ear: "Whatever else I expected, it wasn't to find you playing at King of the Picts, old boy."

Nigel looked down at his ruffled shirt, jacket, kilt, plaid pinned at his shoulder with a brooch of silver knotwork and turquoise.

"More the Prince Consort of the pseudo-Celts, I'm afraid. Make no mistake, Tony, Juniper is the Chief, not I. I'm one of her military advisors—armsmen, we say—in my official capacity, and that's

all."

Juniper leaned forward to look around him at the Count of Azay, mock-indignation in her tone. "Pseudo-Celts, is it? I'll have you know my mother was born on Achill Island in the Gaeltacht, no less. And my father was an American of Scots descent... mostly Scots. So... nil anon scéal eile agam."

Nigel knew that his old friend could understand the Gaelic: there's no other story, translated literally. He also knew that Knolles had learned the language for the same reason he had; the Provos had used it as a sort of code.

Both the Englishmen had commanded small and extremely clandestine SAS teams in Ulster during the Troubles, mostly in South Armagh—and occasionally, highly illegally and unofficially, across the Irish border. By her sly grin Juniper was recalling exactly the same thing, and by his snort Knolles had realized that she knew, and knew that he knew.

She went on: "And you're probably wondering—"

Then she dropped impishly into a creditable imitation of the upper-class public-school-cum-officer's-mess drawl that was the native dialect of Nigel and his friend both:

"Are all these people utterly barking mad?"

"Not in the least," Knolles said, obviously lying stoutly.

"The kilts weren't my idea," she said. "Honest. And the rest of it... sort of grew, like Topsy."

Nigel saw the other man's reserve crack a little; Juniper had that effect on people. There was a creak of dry amusement in Knolles' voice when he spoke:

"I did have thoughts along those lines in Portland... those bizarre castles! The titles, and way they dress and speak! Were they all struck on the head at birth by copies of Ivanhoe? Although the Regent, Lady Sandra... she was disconcerting, to say the least, and impressive, in a rather terrifying way. Still, how did all that happen?"

Knolles' voice was a little plaintive by the end. Nigel chuckled.

"The man who founded the Association was a history professor, you see—a medieval specialist—and one of those re-creationist Johnnies, like Alleyne. The most charitable explanation is that the Change sent him mad."

"Or that he was always an evil weasel of a man and the Change gave him the opportunity to show it," Juniper said. "It caused no end of trouble, and it didn't die with him."

"Ah, re-creationists," Knolles said. "Very useful some of them were in England as instructors, as you'll recall, Nigel. Where is young Alleyne?"

"Uncle Alleyne is married to Aunt Astrid," Maude Loring said from the other side of her mother.

Juniper amplified: "Astrid is Signe Havel's younger sister, the widow of the Bearkiller lord... the people over on the western side of the Willamette, between the Association and Corvallis. Astrid is Lady of the Dúnedain Rangers, with my daughter Eilir."

Maude's grave face suddenly broke out in a smile as she abandoned the struggle to be adult for a moment:

"If you think we're weird, Lord Count, you should meet them. They live in the woods, and they speak Elvish to each other. All the time."

Knolles blinked, obviously wondering if his leg was being pulled. Nigel gave him a grave shake of the head: It's quite true, old chap. Aloud he added:

"Although Alleyne acts as a moderating influence and so does my stepdaughter Eilir. She's married to John Hordle now. You'll remember Hordle—SAS just before the Change, promoted to battalion sergeant-major just before we... left... England."

"Ah, yes. Big chappie, carried a bastard longsword," Knolles said.

Then he harrumphed diplomatically before going on; Hordle had also put an arrow through one of Knolles' men during Nigel's escape.

"Ah, well, considering all that's gone on back Home, we're not in a position to judge. Have you been following events out there at all, Nigel?"

"In outline; news does travel, if slowly, and Abbot Dmwoski forwards some of the Church's reports to us. I know Charles died—"

"Hallgerda killed him when he finally refused to disinherit his older sons in favor of her brood, though it was never proved," Knolles said flatly.

His knobby fist clenched. "And then tried to seize power herself. Colonel Buttethorn and I and a few others put a stop to that. And put William on the throne."

"We heard that he'd beaten the Moors. Good show, that."

Though to most here, it didn't matter much more than hearing how Prince Piotr of Belgorod and Hetman Bohdan of the All-Great Kuban Cossack Host defeated the Tartars outside Astrakhan last year, Loring thought. How one's horizons shrink...

Knolles nodded. "We and a coalition beat them—the Norlanders, the Umbrian League, the Kingdom of Sicily, the Republic of Shannon—we even had ships and men from the Cypriot Greeks. Defeated them at sea off the Canaries, then burned out the nests they'd established along the coast of Morocco, then chased them south and gave them a damned good drubbing at home. There's been the odd dust-up with Berber raiders from the Atlas since, but nothing significant."

The fierce hawk-like green eyes kindled. "Mind you, about six years ago I was with a party exploring the ruins of Marrakech, and—"

"And we heard that William called a new Parliament," Nigel said dryly.

Knolles flushed; it was for advocating that move that Nigel and his wife Maude had been put under arrest by Charles the Mad and his Icelandic ice-queen in the first place, while Knolles had still been satisfied with the Emergency Regulations.

"Yes, yes, yes, you were right, you were right, you were bloody well right, Nigel. And we've set up a new House of Lords along the old lines," Knolles went on. "Quite old..."

"Not altogether the way our ancestors did it, I hope!" Nigel said.

"Very much in the manner our grandfathers would recognize. Things have worked out quite nicely since. The capital's still in Winchester, the Icelanders and Faeroese are settling in and marrying out, their grandchildren will be English to the bone—"

His son grinned and made a gesture towards his own chest; his mother's name was Dagmar, and she'd come from Torshavn along with a flood of others from the northern isles in the earliest Change Years.

"—and we've resettled Britain—thinly—as far as the Midlands, and made a good start on the Continent."

"That's quick work!" Nigel said.

"Well, you can't move for tripping over the next generation, that's true; everyone's breeding like damned rabbits. And we've been getting a steady trickle of immigrants from the east Baltic, and from Ireland, too—easier since we're all bloody beadsqueezers again. No offense," he said hastily to Juniper.

"None taken," she said, laughing. "I was raised Catholic myself, of course, but—"she waved a hand around. "You might say it didn't entirely take."

"There's understatement of positively English proportions," Nigel said.

"You've corrupted me with your Sassenach ways, my love. Sure, and I can feel my upper lip stiffening the now."

Knolles went on: "And we've agreed to divide things with the Norlanders along the old German border, and with the Umbrian League along the old Italian one... that's a trifle theoretical, when all we've got is a few outposts along the coasts and rivers. It'll be centuries before we're back to even the medieval era's numbers."

Nigel nodded. He'd helped develop the initial appraisal and plans, and had led expeditions to feel out that vast eerie wilderness.

"That's where the King of Greater Britain and Emperor of the West comes in?"

"The Imperial title was the late Pope Benedict's idea," Knolles said. "He and the Archbishop sprang it on William at the coronation, after the Moorish War, in 2010."

"Rather the way his predecessor did with Charlemagne?" Nigel mused.

"Precisely. Benedict was there for the Church reunion talks, you see. They both preached a Crusade..."

"And the coronation was with your connivance, Father," Robert Knolles said.

Knolles senior harrumphed and poked his fork at a slice of roast beef, cut a piece, administered horseradish and took a bite. He coughed slightly after that—the sauce was nuclear-strength. Then he continued:

"Ah... well, that brings us to the reason for the visit, Nigel. We didn't know your situation here in any detail, you see, except that you and Alleyne had landed on your feet as might be expected of Lornings, and His Majesty is deeply grateful for your saving his life—"

"Several times," Robert Knolles put in, unabashed when his father gave him a quelling glance.

"And setting up the contacts that put him on the throne instead of his late unlamented stepmother

when the time came."

"Late unlamented?" Loring asked, with an arched brow.

The elder Knolles continued: "She shuffled off eight months ago, from the effects of house arrest, idleness, curdled venom and lashings of strong drink. And His Majesty has asked me to inform you that it pleases him to offer you... well, he's made you an Earl, you see. Earl of Bristol. With the estates appertaining thereunto, as well as your family land at Tilford, of course."

Nigel felt his jaw drop, and closed it with an effort of will. "Good God."

"He'd like you to return; earnestly requests it, in fact, and sent a ship we really can't spare all the way here to fetch you. Confidentially, he'd also like you to have ministerial rank with a roving commission, and both Houses concur."

"Father is one of the top-nobs of the Tories, these days," Robert added. "And note that His Majesty hasn't given you a continental title, godfather, nor the proverbial 'estate in France'. Good English farms, fully tenanted."

At Nigel's raised brow, the young man amplified: "In England an estate in France is a synonym for 'dubious gift', or 'white elephant', these days, sir—land that gives you a position in society and then prevents you from keeping it up. Father repented and came over to the side of the righteous, but rather late."

Knolles snorted. "Nonsense. The land at Azay is first-rate; better climate than anywhere in England proper, and there are the vineyards—"

"Bushy, overgrown vineyards, half-dead..."

"—And the Chateau—"

"The ruins of the Chateau."

"Ruins? Nonsense; it never really caught on fire... not completely... and half the roof was still intact. It just... well, it needed a spot of work."

"And still does, I rather think, Father... work for my grandchildren."

"Silence, whelp. In any case, Nigel, I've got a belt, a sword and an ermine cloak for you, and a bally great parchment to go with it. Thing's festooned with enough seals and ribbons for a publican's license, too."

Nigel began to laugh, quietly at first, then whole-heartedly. Mopping at an eye with his napkin, he replied: "I'm truly sorry to disappoint King William, and you, Tony, but my life is here now. Not to mention my wife, and my daughters; and my son, and his children—a grandson and two granddaughters, so far. This is where we'll leave our bones. Give His Majesty my regrets and my best wishes for a long and prosperous reign. I thought the lad would turn out well."

He turned his head to meet Juniper's bright-green eyes for an instant; they crinkled in the face that loved his line for line, and their hands linked fingers beneath the covering tablecloth.

"Not tempted by the prospect of being Countess Juniper, my dear?"

"Chief's bad enough. I'd scandalize your William's court, that's beyond doubting."

Knolles sighed. "I thought that was the reply I'd get, as soon as I walked in. Your stepson warned me; we met outside the gates. Remarkable young fellow, even on brief acquaintance. Usually one feels an impulse to kick a man with good looks of that order, but I didn't this time."

"Remarkable young scamp," Juniper said. "He didn't warn us you were here, the creature."

Knolles hesitated. "There is one thing more, Nigel. And Lady Juniper. You haven't had much contact with the Atlantic coast of North America, have you?"

"None at all; we know more about East Asia, or even the Indian Ocean countries," Juniper said.

"Scarcely even rumors from east of the Mississippi." She winced slightly. "Just enough to know that it was... very bad there. As bad as California, or what Nigel tells of Europe, or mainland Britain."

Knolles nodded somberly. Nobody who had lived through the Change as an adult would ever be quite free of those memories. It had been worst of all in the hyperdeveloped zones.

"On the American mainland, yes, it was very bad. But some islands did much better. Prince Edward Island best of all; rather as the Isle of Wight or Orkney did in relation to Britain. After the, ah, after King William came to the throne, they established close ties with the old country—in fact, they've MPs in Parliament at Winchester now, and seats in the Lords."

"William isn't repeating George III's mistakes, eh?" Nigel said, savoring the joke.

Though it wasn't like Anthony Knolles to waffle around a subject. The other Englishman cleared his throat.

"Among the places they've landed... or tried to... is Nantucket."

He shot a glance at them from under shaggy brows to see if the name of the island off southern New England meant anything to them. They both looked back soberly.

"Then the rumors were true?" Juniper asked softly. "I've talked to those who were listening or watching the news services, right at the time of the Change. To some who were listening while they flew a plane over mountains, sure! The reports were of something extraordinary going on there on Nantucket, just before—"

All three nodded. The flash of light that wasn't really light—even the blind had seen it—and the intolerable spike of pain felt by every creature on Earth advanced enough to have a spinal cord. And then the world was Changed; explosives no longer exploded, electricity wouldn't flow in metal wires, combustion engines silently died, nuclear reactors sat and glowed below their melt-down temperatures until the isotopes decayed and became inert. A civilization built on high-energy technologies writhed and died as well. There had been little time then for anything but sheer survival, but in all the years since no slightest hint had been found to account for the why of it. Eventually a few scientists had measured the effects with what crude equipment could be cobbled together within the new limits; all they'd found was how eerily the Change was tailored, to make a generator impossible but leave nerves functioning as they always had... and that beyond the immediate vicinity of Earth everything seemed to be proceeding as normal. You couldn't even prove that the Change hadn't happened before. Prior to gunpowder, who would have known? Most of humanity put it down to the will of God, or Gods, or the devil; a stubborn minority held out for inscrutably powerful aliens from outer space or another dimension.

"A dome of lights miles high and miles across, and the water boiling around the edge of it, yes," Knolles said in a flat matter-of-fact tone. "Multicolored lights, crawling over it like lightning... that's quite definite. We've collected hundreds of testimonies, and found some eyewitness records written down right afterwards, even a photograph or two. I do not believe it is a coincidence such a thing happened just seconds before the Change."

"So what did they find, there, your Bluenose explorers?" Juniper asked.

Nigel could feel the pulse beat faster in the hand he held, and his own matching it. This wasn't just a rumor, that was proof... though of what, only the Powers could say.

Juniper went on: "Not the dome of lights, still there—that we would have heard of. They'd have heard of that in Tibet, sure!"

Knolles turned to his son. The young officer was in the red-coated dress uniform into which he'd changed when he shed his armor, but he'd also brought a small rectangular box pierced with holes from the diplomatic party's baggage. Nigel had assumed it was a gift of some sort.

Now he brought it up from the floor, and folded back the covers around it. A soft crooo-cruuuu came from it, and behind wire mesh strutted a bird, cocking its head at the light and looking with interest at a piece of bread nearby.

Juniper's breath was the first to catch. She'd been a student of the wilds all her life, long before the Change, and had read widely then and since about the life of other lands and times.

It was an unremarkable bird at first glance; a long-tailed pigeon with a bluish-gray head, the back and wings mottled gray with black patches, paler underparts bluish-red at the throat and fading to rosy cream. The only thing startling about it were the bright-red eyes...

Juniper made a small choked sound, putting her hand to her throat as if the twisted gold was throttling her. Her eyes went wide as she turned to Nigel.

"Do... do you..." she stuttered, something he'd never heard before, her eyes so wide the white showed all around the pale-green iris.

"Yes, my dear," he said quietly, and pushed a crust into the cage.

Then he began to smile, joy and awe struggling with natural reserve as the bird pecked. "It's a passenger pigeon."

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"What is it, my dear?" Nigel asked sleepily.

"I don't know," Juniper Mackenzie said, sitting up in the bed and reaching for her robe. "But—"

A fist knocked on the door; she turned up the bedside lamp and hurried over. Nigel was on his feet, hand resting inconspicuously on the hilt of the longsword. When she threw open the door a man stood there, white-faced and stuttering.

Nigel's hand closed on the rawhide-and-wire binding of the sword-hilt. He knew the signs of raw

terror.

"Lady Juniper! Sir Nigel! There's been a fight at the Sheaf and Sickle, terrible bad. Folk hurt and killed!"

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Sheaf and Sickle Inn, Sutterdown, Willamette Valley, Oregon  
Samhain Eve, CY22/2020 AD

Juniper Mackenzie pushed through the door into the familiar taproom of the Sheaf and Sickle, the armsmen at her heels; Nigel was outside, seeing to the circuit of the town walls lest any killers still at large try to escape. She let out a quiet breath of relief at the sight of Rudi standing beside a table where a healer worked; the twins and Mathilda and Odard were nearby, and all five were unhurt. The smells of blood and violent death were there, mingling horribly with the familiar homey scent of the place.

"Well?" she said. "It's a slaughter this is, of my people on my land, and I'd know the meaning of it! It's the Morigú and the Wild Huntsman we're dealing with tonight, and no mistake."

Rudi nodded and gave her an account, succinct and neat as his tutors in the arts of war had taught him; she gasped at his account of Saba's death. His mouth tightened as anger drove the grue of horror out of him. Upstairs Tom and Moira and their close kin were keening their daughter; the muffled sound of the shrieks rose to a crescendo, then died away into rhythmic moans, laden with unutterable grief, before rising again.

"I'm a warrior by trade," Rudi said bitterly. "Saba wasn't. She shouldn't have had to fight her last fight alone. First I couldn't save her husband, and then this... May she forgive me, and speak kindly of me to the Guardians."

"She's with her Raen in the Summerlands, and with all her beloveds," Juniper said quietly, putting an arm around him for a moment.

"I know, mother. It doesn't make me feel any better, much less her children."

"It isn't meant to," Juniper said, a little sternness in her voice. "That's why we keen over the dead; grief is for the living."

He nodded; they couldn't even do that, not being close enough in blood.

"I'm glad we came here, though," he said. "It would have been worse if we'd stayed at Raven House. These dirt were already here, waiting to strike; they might have gotten away over the town wall."

They glanced aside. The healer's lips were pursed in disapproval as she worked at the big dining table; far too many of the inn's guests were milling about and babbling nearby, despite it still being hours to dawn. A stranger was helping her, a monastic in a black Benedictine robe, with the loose sleeves pinned back up to his shoulders.

Most of the rest weren't making themselves useful. Some of the outlanders had even had the nerve to try and demand service from the staff. Rudi looked at Juniper, and she nodded slightly; he made a chopping gesture to his friends.

The twins pushed the crowd back—once by the simple expedient of seizing a man by the elbows and pitching him four feet into the air, to land mostly on his head—and then drew their swords and stood like slender black-and-silver statues with the points resting on an invisible line across the room, and Odard and Mathilda beside them. Nobody stepped over it; after a moment a few neighbors came to stand around them, glowering at the strangers. Some of the wiser foreigners headed back to their rooms.

That gave them space and time to go view the bodies of the assassins, laid out on tarpaulins. Juniper had never become entirely inured to the sight of violent death, but she could make herself ignore the wounds and the tumbled diminished look of a corpse when she must.

"This is a strange thing, and you're right, my darling one; these weren't bandits; they're too well-fed and they've the look of trained men."

"They were," he said grimly. "Well trained, at that."

"Nor was this any random killing, despite the wealth yonder stranger has in his baggage. Some ruler is behind this—and not one we're familiar with."

"The Association?" he said reluctantly.

Mathilda was standing out of earshot, her face still white as a sheet beneath her tan.



She handled the fight well, from what Rudi says, Juniper thought. But she's not as hard-bitten yet as she'd like to pretend, the which is all to the good. Lord and Lady preserve us from rulers who kill without regret or look on it without being shaken. Of which her mother is a horrible example... Rudi sighed in relief when his mother shook her head.

"Not... not quite their style, and those men—" she nodded towards the bodies "—are strangers to this land."

"Lady Sandra's ruthless enough," Rudi said quietly.

"More than ruthless enough, but she has far more sense, and so do Grand Constable Tiphaine, and the Count of Odell who's Chancellor now. None of them would risk anything while Mathilda is with us. No, this is... I feel something moving here. We've had the rest we were promised, after the war with Arminger. Perhaps it's coming to an end, and the Powers sing a new song, with us as instrument and melody both."

Her gaze grew wholly human once more, but harder now and shrewd: she was Chief as well as High Priestess, the woman who'd pulled her friends and kin through the time of madness and the death of a world, and built the Clan from refugees and shards.

"It's best you know. It wasn't just an old friend of Nigel who was calling after you left Raven House and came here, and I don't think it's entirely coincidence. We'll have to learn how the threads knit."

#### CHAPTER FOUR:

Sutterdown, Willamette Valley, Oregon  
November 15th, CY22/2020 AD

Father Ignatius, priest, monk and knight-brother of the Order of the Shield of St. Benedict, stopped and looked around casually as he wiped his quill pen and sharpened it with the little razor built into the writing-set that was part of his travel-kit. The writing was a combination of letters and numbers that would make no sense to anyone who didn't know the running key—it was based on a medieval Latin version of the Gospel of Mark preserved in the Mt. Angel library, and using letters based on their position in the Greek alphabet for numbers under twenty-six—but he didn't want anyone to know it was in code.

A balance of risks, he thought. If I were to write in my room, everyone would assume it was a secret message, since the light and space are so much better here.

Nobody paid much attention to him, which he'd counted on. Mt. Angel, the town and fortress-monastery that held the Mother House of his Order, was only fifty miles north of here, and the Clan and the Benedictines had been allies since the early days after the Change. They'd fought the greatest battle of the War of the Eye together, not far from his parent's little farm. He didn't remember that well—he'd been ten—but relations had stayed friendly, and a traveling cleric wasn't rare enough to be noteworthy in Sutterdown.

And he was nothing remarkable to look at himself, a dark man of middling height, slender save for the broad shoulders and thick wrists of a swordsman.

There weren't many people in the Sheaf and Sickle's common room today in any case; this was the slow season for inns, as well as being a house of grief. He'd offered to move out, but the Brannigans insisted that he stay as long as he wished—and he suspected that they welcomed the prospect of work, as a distraction.

A round dozen guests didn't begin to crowd it, even when half of them were playing darts and the rest sitting, and occasionally singing, over their mugs of cider. A low fire crackled in the big stone hearth, giving off a pleasant smell of fir-wood. One of the younger Brannigan daughters came out with a tray bearing his lunch; she looked a little haggard, but the smile was genuine as she set the bowl of stew and platter of cut bread, butter, cheese and radishes down before him.

"Thank you, my child; that smells delicious."

"Sure, and you're welcome, Father," she replied. "Call out if there's anything more you're wanting. We're serving roast beef tonight, and there's dried-cherry pie for after."

If she noticed him moving his arm so that the broad sleeve of his robe covered most of the writing, she didn't give any indication of it.

I like Mackenzies, he thought, not for the first time.

They were a mannerly folk, if less stiff and solemn about it than some would prefer, and for all their free and easy ways they didn't have the magpie inquisitiveness you'd find in one of the

Association's towns, or the single-minded pursuit of either Mammon or some academic fad that grated on the nerves in Corvallis. Granted their absurd religion was silly at best and conducive to sin at worst...

If only they could be brought to the Truth, what an ornament to the Faith they would be. O Lord, may it be soon! Do not keep Your light from these good folk! Mary pierced with sorrows, intercede for them.

Still, evangelization was not his task, particularly not now; and Mackenzies were a difficult target anyway. Their cheerful eclecticism made ordinary argument about as effective as trying to wrestle with a sheepskin blanket. He signed himself with the Cross and murmured a grace over the meal, then began to eat. The stew was mutton with barley and carrots and onions, tangy with herbs—what 'savory' really meant, rather than the 'dark and salty' which often had to substitute for it. It went down well on a cold winter day, with rain that was half-slush beating against the roof and windows.

As he ate he read: The assailants were definitely Corwinites and, to a high probability, of the personal troops of the false Prophet, who are often used for special operations. Why the CUT was willing to risk provoking the hostility of the Mackenzies to kill Ingolf Vogeler I have been unable to determine; nor, I believe, do the Mackenzie leaders themselves know. Vogeler has been on the verge of death for many days but is now expected to recover.

Mackenzie physicians were excellent, and those at Dun Juniper best of all. They added magic and pagan prayers to the drugs and instruments, but that apparently did no harm.

I will attempt to gather further information when he does. My preliminary hypothesis is that he carries information that Corwin is desperately anxious the Western powers should not obtain. He looked down, wondering if that was a little obvious. The Mother House of his order at Mt. Angel had been worried about the Church Universal and Triumphant for some time; they had missions and chapter houses throughout what had once been the Pacific Northwest apart from New Deseret, and of course the Catholic Church as a whole was also concerned. Abbot-Bishop Dmwoski had hoped that as the Prophet sank further into madness the menace would subside, but instead it had grown as his adopted son Sethaz took over more and more of the reins.

The Cardinal-Archbishop of Portland had been concerned enough to forward their reports to the New Vatican in Badia. Not that the Holy See could do much more than offer advice and comfort and prayer; it was many months sailing away, across stormy, pirate-ridden oceans and lands often hostile when they weren't empty.

Still, prayer is more powerful than armies, in the end, he thought. The sword is useless without the heart and will.

His eyes traveled on through the neat letter-combinations:

With respect to my original mission, the Princess Mathilda is still at Dun Juniper, with her retinue. She and they take the Sacraments regularly from her chaplain-confessor. No apparent change has taken place in her relationship to the Mackenzie tanist. I will—

He finished the report and the stew at about the same time, mopped the bowl with a heel of the bread, then folded the pages into the envelope, sealed it, and heated a wafer over the tabletop lantern. That he pressed across the flap—with a cunning hair plucked from his tonsured head concealed beneath it in a certain pattern—and stamped his signet ring into the soft crimson wax. There were ways to lift a wax seal and replace it, but the hair trick hadn't been discovered by anyone yet.

Or at least not that the Order knows of, he thought dryly. Paranoia was an occupational hazard of intelligence work. Many are the marvels of God's Creation, but none so marvelous as man. Or so cunning, for good and ill.

"Would you be wanting me to send that down to the station, Father?" the Brannigan girl asked, as she came back to collect the dishes.

He smiled at the musical lilt. The Benedictines still encouraged scholarship, even if their main concerns were more immediately practical these days. One of his courses in the Seminary had been on the post-Change evolution of variant forms of English, and the Mackenzies' speech was a fascinating case of the semi-deliberate formation of a new dialect. The process was continuing in the second generation, and even picking up speed.

"No, thank you, my child," he said, tucking the letter into his sleeve and picking up his sword-belt. "I'll take it down myself, and get in some practice."

Outside the dark afternoon was chilly, and the slush had turned to wet snow; even the bright

colored carvings that Mackenzies loved so seemed a little dimmed in the gloom of the Black Months. The warrior-cleric pulled up the hood of his robe and walked briskly, absently telling his rosary with his left hand as he walked and keeping his footing on the slippery sidewalk. Even before he'd joined the Order he'd been no stranger to cold and hard work; his family had a farm not far from Mt. Angel, and he'd grown up with chores year-round.

Not many people were out—this was the school season for the Clan's children, and most of the adults in Sutterdown had work indoors, being craftsfolk or artists or merchants. The sounds of labor came through the walls, or opened windows that spilled yellow lamplight; the thump and rattle of looms, the whining hum of treadle-worked machinery, the quick delicate tap-tap-tap the hammer of a silversmith made, the clank of a printing-press.

Those who passed him were bundled up against the weather; most gave him cheerful greeting. There were a fair number of carts on the streets, loaded with country produce and weaver timber and hides and wool and linen thread and metalwork from the mills and foundry outside the walls. Father Ignatius took the west gate, nodding to the guards who looked cold and miserable and bored as they stood beneath the portals, then walked down to the railroad.

The old Southern Pacific tracks were bare right now; the horse-drawn trains came through only often enough to keep a strip down the center of each metal rail free of rust. The little red-brick train station still stood, though, and several new warehouses near it—full of flax and woolen cloth and huge kegs of Brannigan's famous ale, and Clan handicrafts that were almost as well-known. The letter in his sleeve would go north more swiftly, on one of the pedal-driven railcars that carried mail and high-value goods more swiftly than anything else in the Changed world.

One of the warehouses was empty save for a few long bundles of steel rebar against one wall, wired together and waiting to be delivered to some smithy or forge, and an assortment of battered practice weapons hung on hooks. Even here the support columns and rafters had been surface-carved in a design of stylized leaves and branches, with whimsical faces peering out here and there. An elephant-headed godlet sat on a flower in a niche by the door, some protective spirit of commerce.

The dry dirt floor was broad and empty, and a dozen Mackenzies were using it for sparring; this weather was a bit much for even the Clan's longbowmen to practice their archery outside. Eight men and four women were at work, leaping and shouting in the active, foining Mackenzie blade-style as they thrust and cut with shortswords of padded wood or battle spears with rubber blades and butt-caps. Dull thunk sounds echoed as metal bucklers stopped blows, and occasionally a louder thwack and a yelp as one went home.

Ignatius hung up his sword-belt, pulled off his robe and drew his longsword. Beneath the monastic garment he was dressed in plain pants and tunic of undyed hodden-gray wool, a bit chilly in this weather, but good for soaking up sweat.

Then he began a series of forms, slowly at first to stretch and warm muscle and tendon, then faster and faster—singlehand, the two-handed style derived from old Japanese models, and then with a shield on his left arm. Soon the cloven air was hissing beneath the sharp steel as it swung in glittering arcs, his sharp barking hai! cutting through the clamor.

"Come for a rest from prayer, Father?" a big Mackenzie with a dark beard said, as the cleric stopped to shake out his arm and take a drink of water from the bucket on one of the wooden pillars.

Ignatius laughed. "It's my duty to keep my skills sharp, Cethern," he said; he knew the man, a wagoner by trade. "Prayer is a monk's rest, our joy."

For a moment he was pierced by longing for the beautiful ancient discipline of the hours behind Mt. Angel's walls, the sound of chant and bells and silence that was like a singing itself as the mind and heart turned wholly towards God.

Take up your cross, he told himself. Each of us must. Give me strength, O Lord, that I may carry mine to Heaven's gate.

"Still, any skill can be an offering to God," he said to the clansman. "Care for a bout?"

And physical activity helped the mind relax. It would be some time before he could probe deeper into the dangerous mystery of the stranger from out of the east.

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Dun Juniper, Willamette Valley, Oregon

December 1st, CY22/2020 AD

I'm dreaming, Ingolf Vogeler knew. By moonlight.

Three women in dark hooded robes stood at the foot of his bed. The one in the center threw back her cowl; cool light fell across her and touched the silver crescent on her brow, and the red hair that tumbled across the shoulders of her robe. She raised her hands, palms open as if to cup the opalescent glow, her lips curved in a smile of infinite compassion. Her voice was soft as she sang; somewhere a bell chimed quietly in time to the tune:

"Come to me, Lord and Lady  
Heal this spirit, heal this soul  
Come to me, Lord and Lady  
Mind and body shall be whole!"

Beast of the burning sunlight  
Sear this wound that pain may cease  
Mistress of the silver moonlight  
Hold us fast and bring us peace—

Come to me, Lord and Lady  
Mind and body shall be whole!"

"Mom?" he murmured weakly, though he knew she wasn't.  
A hand touched his forehead. "Always, my darling one. Sleep now, and heal."  
Darkness.

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Dun Juniper, Willamette Valley, Oregon  
December 6th, CY22/2020 AD

"Where am I?" Ingolf asked, as his eyes blinked open.

It's been a while, he knew.

There were vague memories of heat and pain and movement, of struggling for each breath as if his lungs were full of hot sticky syrup, of voices and faces and things half-seen in dreams. His head being raised and something salty spooned into his mouth, of voices chanting and more pain, a deep stabbing ache on his left side.

Everything seemed to be very distant and remote, and he was exhausted as if he'd worked all day rather than just woken up, but he was more himself this time. He looked at his right hand; it was resting on a clean sheet of beige linen, with a checked blanket of soft wool beneath that and a pillow under his head. His arm was thin, thinner than he could ever remember it being, and his whole body felt heavy, as if his skin had been taken off and replaced by lead.

A face leaned over him. A woman's face, with a thick braid of grizzled black hair and a bold beak of a nose in a strong-boned face that had aged well; there was no resemblance in looks, but she reminded him of his mother. Her hair smelled of some herbal wash; the room of soap and warm fir-wood and sweet cedar-like incense.

"You're in Dun Juniper," she said. "I'm a healer, my name is Judy Barstow Mackenzie, and I'm looking after you. You've been very sick; your wound became infected when you were moved, and you developed pneumonia as well and nearly died. We've saved the arm and you will heal. Now drink this."

Her hand came behind his head, and he put his lips to the cup she held. It was chicken broth, hot and good but not too hot to swallow, and as he did he could feel how empty he was within.

"I have to..." he stopped, embarrassed, conscious of his full bladder, and even more of the implications of the heavy cloth pad around his hips like a giant diaper.

She smiled then. "I'm a mother and a healer and fifty-two years old; there's nothing that'll surprise me, my lad. Here."

She helped him use a bedpan, and then pulled the blankets back up. "Rest now."

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He woke and ate and slept, woke and ate and slept, conscious only of the body's needs. When he came fully to himself again it was daylight, though dim, and his head was altogether clear although he still felt no impulse to move. He was in a room not much bigger than the bed; it had a small brick hearth with a little iron door to close on the flame, and a wicker basket of split wood beside it, and a table with jugs and a basin and bottles. Aromatic steam smelling of pine and herbs jetted softly from a kettle on the hearth; a window with four panes of glass let in some light—snow was falling against it, but he was comfortably warm, and streaks of moisture trickled down the fogged glass. Bands of carving ran horizontally across walls of smooth-fitted plank, leaves and sinuous elongated gripping beasts; the floor was brown tile.

There was a consciousness of potential pain in his left arm, but no actual hurt; he spread and closed his hands several times. The hush of snowfall was in the air, but he could hear faint noises—the familiar thock... thock of an ax splitting wood, the thump of looms, the voices of children playing, the ting...ting...ting... of someone beating iron in a smithy. By the noise he judged he was in the second story of a building with thick log walls, and one in a settlement of some size but not a city or even a town.

Right across from him on the wall was a picture, made by carving a slab of wood and then painting to bring out the low relief. It was of a woman robed and mantled in blue, but he didn't think it was the Virgin Mary; for one thing she carried a flame in one hand and a sheaf of wheat in the other, and she was standing on stars and wearing the crescent moon as a crown. The carving was very fine; he could see the tenderness in her smile...

More importantly, his shete and dagger and tomahawk were standing in a bundle beside the door, wrapped about with his weapons belt, although he couldn't have lifted them to save his life right now. His own rosary and crucifix hung from the bedpost. Whatever he was he wasn't a prisoner here. There was water on the table, but he couldn't reach it. He croaked out a call, and the door opened and a head came in.

"Hi!"

Another woman, much younger than the one he'd seen, but with a look of her as if she were close kin. Around thirty, he thought; but paler and longer-faced, her abundant braided hair a light brown, with a stocky-strong build but not much spare flesh. She was dressed in a kilt and indigo-blue shirt, knee-socks and low buckled shoes, with a stethoscope around her neck; there was the same matter-of-fact competence in the way she helped him drink, listened to his chest, gave him some sharp-tasting medicine in a spoon, then took his temperature with a glass thermometer and compared it to notes on a clipboard at the foot of the bed.

"Perfectly normal, Mr. Vogeler," she said. "For three days now, and the wound's been fully closed for a while. Mother will be pleased; she had to go back in to clean it out, you see. I'm Tamsin Barstow Mackenzie—call me Tamsin. You'll be able to stand a little in a couple of days."

She grinned at him. "And walk as far as the bathroom, with help. Won't that be nice, sure and it will?"

"It will! Could I have something to eat now, Miss Tamsin?" he asked. "Lord, I'm hungry!"

"You are getting better the now!"

Then he frowned; the lilting accent reminded him: "Ah... there was a lady, her name was Saba..." She put a hand on his shoulder. "Saba Brannigan? I'm afraid... You fought very well, but she was killed. I'm sorry."

Humiliatingly, he felt tears coursing down his cheeks and couldn't stop them, which told him how weak he still was. Tamsin handed him a square of linen handkerchief and left, long enough for him to compose himself.

When she returned her mother was with her, and she carried a tray with a bowl of soup and pieces of fine white wheat-bread and butter. The soup was chicken again, but this time with pieces of the meat in it, and carrots and noodles; there were herbs he'd never tasted before for seasoning, and he couldn't remember having anything as good—though that was probably partly because it had been so long. He ate it all, expected to want more, and found that it exactly matched what he could take. While they propped him up by turning a crank under the bed he had a chance to look at his left arm again, knowing what he'd been told.

His eyebrows went up as he really looked at the thick purple scar. Men rarely recovered from

such a serious wound if it mortified. He raised the limb and worked it carefully, wincing slightly. There was a tug and pull when he stretched it, and he'd have trouble lifting a feather, but the range of motion seemed good.

I'm not crippled, he thought, with a rush of relief. Aloud he went on:

"That did turn real nasty, ma'am. I'm surprised I lived."

"So am I, with the pneumonia. You'd been pushing beyond what your body could bear, but it wasn't your time," the older woman said; this time he was alert enough that he noticed a reserve in her tone. The younger looked at her and smiled.

"Mother stayed up with you for days," she said.

Judy shrugged. "It wasn't your time to make accounting to the Guardians," she repeated. "You'll be on light solids from now on and your recovery ought to be very rapid. We'll start a physiotherapy program immediately."

When she saw he didn't know the word, she amplified: "Special exercises for the injured arm.

There's scar tissue—you'll have to be careful to get full strength back."

"I'm most grateful, ma'am," he said. "To you and your folks. I hope I can do something in return."

Her gaze thawed a little. "Well, Mr. Vogeler, we would like you to answer some questions. And I think you're about strong enough to do that, soon, if not much else."

A yell came from somewhere not too far away. Ingolf started and paled; that was a woman crying out in pain. Judy Barstow shook her head. "Right on time," she said, and walked out.

Tamsin smiled at him before she followed, seeing the alarm on his face. "Childbirth," she said, and snorted. "It's Dechtire Smith. This is her third, she's strong as a plow-horse with hips like one too, but she always insists on the clinic and pretends she's dying."

"Well... it hurts," he said, relieved it was something so natural. "And it is dangerous."

Back home the men all went out and drank applejack when the midwife came, and pretended not to jump every time a shriek rang out. If it was bad enough for a real doctor, they drank more.

Tamsin nodded. "With two of my own, don't I know it hurts! But it doesn't hurt like that, when it goes well. We don't lose many mothers here, Mr. Vogeler—not one in a thousand. Believe me: that woman's not happy unless she's getting sympathy."

The brief flare of emotion had tired him, and the soup and bread were making him sleepy. He let his head fall back and slept once more.

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Rudi Mackenzie bent and lifted the end of the Douglas fir onto the sledge, getting some of the sticky aromatic sap on his gloves as he heaved it up. Shouting and laughing, their breaths puffing in the cold damp air amid the drifting snowflakes and the mealy scent of them, the others bent and heaved and the whole length was on it, and it was the work of a moment to lash it down.

He turned and bowed his head a last time to the stump while he rubbed the sap off the leather of his gauntlets; they'd made the usual apology and explanation when they cut it yesterday, which should satisfy Cernunnos. The tree was to represent His member, after all. Then he whistled.

A tall glossy-black horse brought her head up sharply not far away, where she'd been nosing the snow, more for something to do than from hope of finding anything edible; he could tell she was bored by the whole business. Despite the winter her midnight coat shone, and when she trotted over she seemed to float, barely tapping the earth with her hooves.

The reins leading to her light hackamore bridle were looped up over the saddlebow. Nobody had used a bit on Epona since they met; Rudi didn't need one and it would be futile for anyone else to try. He'd had the horse since she was just under four and he was ten—that made her sixteen now, middle-aged in horse years, but even experienced wranglers usually put her at seven or eight at first sight.

"Well, you asked to come along," he said, scolding affectionately as he stroked her neck and she lipped at his hair. "You get all pissy about me taking someone else out, even your own get, and then I bring you and you sulk because it's boring."

She'd never liked seeing him working with other horses, not even her own daughters Macha Mongruad and Rhiannon. Rudi put a hand on her withers and vaulted into the saddle. He still remembered how proud he'd been the first time he could do that—she was just a hair under seventeen hands. Now it was as easy as climbing stairs... but he'd been able to ride her from the first, when nobody else could.

"We bring the Yule Tree!" he called. "On to the Hall!"

That got him a cheer; everyone here was young, from his age down to six-year-olds running around pretending to help and pelting each other with snowballs; Mary and Ritva were doing that too, and giggling like the kids they'd been not too long ago. He smiled tolerantly—until one of theirs took him on the back of the head and knocked his bonnet off into a drift. They weren't kids any more and they threw hard.

"Hey, watch that!" he called. "Not while I'm riding Epona!"

It wasn't that the big mare wasn't well trained. She'd spun under him in response to his shift of balance, moving as lightly as a deer. The problem was that she was trained for war, and fiercely protective of him besides, and didn't know the difference between a snowball and a rock meant to kill. He had to check-rein her then, and she snorted and shook her head and showed her teeth. Epona was a genius of horse-kind, but their intelligence was of a different kind and order. You had to understand how they saw the world. He grinned at the thought; he was pretty sure that there were times when she thought he was a bumbling idiot who needed constant protection.

"Well, you were the one who was pining because I didn't take you out enough," he scolded her.

"Be good!"

He kicked his right foot free of the stirrup, bent down and retrieved the bonnet. To calm her, he let Epona drop behind the rest of them; Odard and Matti were mounted too, and they all watched the shouting mob lead the two ponies pulling the sled through the snowy woods. A scramble and a push to help the team, and they were on a well-kept trail that ran east to Dun Juniper.

This forest had been Mackenzie land before the Mackenzies were a Clan, back before the Change; way back, since the family came out from East Tennessee in his mother's great-great-grandfather's time. Generations ago her great-uncle had started to tend and plant here—that was why there were so many oaks, and exotics like black walnuts, though nowadays every dun on this side of the Valley spread them from the nuts and acorns. He halted under one walnut that reared a hundred feet above the trail and made a reverence to a small shrine there; it had a stone arch and two rosebushes trained to twine together.

"This is where they died," Mathilda said quietly. "Nearly twelve years ago now."

Rudi nodded; that had been in the March of the last year of the War of the Eye, when Mathilda had been captive here. Her parents had sent a team of warriors to get her back; they had, and taken Rudi too, and killed the two Clan fighters guarding him, Aoife Barstow and Liath Dunling. He made an offering here every year on the anniversary of it, a handful of salt and wheat and a little of his own blood, to their spirits and the spirit of the tree; it had become a symbol to him that he'd be heading north soon, as part of the agreement that had ended the War.

She crossed herself and brought out her crucifix to kiss. "They fought very bravely, I remember that," she said gravely. "Holy Mary, Queen of Heaven, intercede for them, and for us all, now and at the hour of our deaths."

Odard repeated the gesture; they all sat silent for a moment in respect, then touched their horses into a canter and followed the sled.

It was already out of the trees, out onto the long lens-shaped stretch of benchland meadow that held Dun Juniper on the south-facing slope of the mountain. The snow was knee-deep, with more coming as the weather thickened. Mathilda tilted her head back and stuck out her tongue to catch the flakes on it. Laughing, Rudi did the same; even Odard joined in after a moment. They passed the tannery and bark-mill and soap-boiling sheds, not in use in this season but still giving off a strong whiff of curing leather and boiled fat. The sled had gotten ahead of them, and they leg-signaled their horses to pick up the pace, until plumes of white flew up from their forefeet.

Dun Juniper lay at the middle of the oval, hard up against the flank of the mountain, halfway between the tannery at one end and the little waterfall and gristmill at the other. It had been a low plateau once, where his mother's kin had built a hunting-lodge of great squared logs.

Rudi chuckled under his breath as he looked up at the walls looming through the snow; they were as high and strong as Sutterdown's, albeit the circuit of them was a lot less. Snow stuck in patches to the rough stucco, hiding the swirling designs of vine and leaf and flowers under the battlements.

And whenever he saw them, something deep within him said home, wherever he'd been.

"What's the joke, Rudi?" Odard asked.

"I was just remembering something my mother said. She showed up here right after the Change, and met her coven—she'd been in Corvallis, they were in Eugene. And she gave them this little

speech, you know, to buck them up because they were all at sea and scared witless with it." The other two nodded; they were all the children of rulers, in one way or another, and they'd grown up with the necessities of leadership. Rudi went on:

"And she said, It's a clan we'll have to be, as it was in the old days..."

Odard frowned. "What's funny about that? That's what happened, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, laughing outright now. "But she didn't actually mean it, not really. She thought it was, what are they after calling it, a figure of speech. She just meant they'd have to pull together to get through. It was the others who decided to really do that, and she says she pretty well just had to go along with it whenever they came up with something, like calling her Chief or Uncle Denni making the kilts when they found that load of tartan blankets. She says it shows how 'leading' means running fast enough to keep ahead of your people."

Mathilda joined in the laughter. "Well, my Dad did something like that too," she said.

Rudi raised an eyebrow, intrigued. She didn't usually talk about her father much, naturally enough since everyone outside Protectorate territory hated his memory. And a fair number within, too, for all that his tyranny had still saved their lives, or these days more often their parents' lives.

"Mom says he got a bunch of people he'd known in the Society together, that first day, Conrad Renfrew and the others—"

Odard and Rudi both nodded; a surprisingly large proportion of survivors had been members of the Society for Creative Anachronism and similar groups, and an even larger share of those had ended up in leadership positions. Enough so that in these latter days social climbers tended to invent Society parents if they didn't actually have them. Not just in the Protectorate, though that was where they'd been most influential, because of the Armingers.

For a while they'd been the only ones with weapons that worked, and who knew how to use them.

In a world where you had to fight to take food and fight to keep it a desperate man with hauberk and helm and shield, a sword and some faint beginning idea of what to do with it, had a big advantage over desperate suburbanites with kitchen knives and shovels. Mathilda went on:

"—and after they'd talked about what was happening, and Dad had convinced them things weren't going to Change back and they had to do what he wanted or they'd all die, he said: What if a man were to take it upon himself to be King?"

Odard grinned, catching the reference; or maybe he'd heard the story before. Even when Rudi was visiting in Association territory, people tended to avoid certain subjects—after all, his blood-father Mike Havel and Norman Armingers had fought like bulldogs with a grip for ten years and then killed each other in a spectacular duel between the two armies they led, and his mother Juniper hadn't exactly been friendly with the Armingers either, to put it mildly.

He racked his brains; he'd read a lot of history, particularly of periods well back before the twentieth century—it was fun, and useful, and his teachers had encouraged him, starting with Juniper. Then the fact jiggled into place, along with a memory of his mother and himself curled up on a couch reading a heavy book with a leather cover.

Ah. That was what Oliver Cromwell said, when he was thinking of taking the throne of England, after he'd killed Charles the First. He never did, though. He just called himself the Lord Prot... well, Annwyn take it, was that where that bastard Armingers got the idea?

Matti went on: "And Count Conrad... well, he wasn't a count then, of course... said:

"Oh, hell, Norman, we'll just call you the Lord Protector. You can enter an insanity plea if the lights come back on, and we'll blame everything on you.

And Dad laughed and said: "Lord Protector? I like it. We'll call ourselves the Portland Protective Association, it'll sound more familiar to the non-Society people I want to bring in. And if the lights come back on, Conrad, I promise to take the fall."

"Odd to think of important things starting by chance, like that," Odard said meditatively. "Though... when you're reading history, have you noticed how the older stuff seems more real, somehow?

The people and the things they say and do, I mean. The closer you get to the Change, the more... weird... things seem. Except things like the Society; my mother's always on about that and how her father was King of some territory by right of combat. That sounds more like real life. It's all the stuff around it that doesn't. Opinion polls, and computers, and Star Trek..."

"The RenFairs, where my mother sang as a bard, they seem to have been pretty normal," Rudi agreed. "She'll be talking about them, and it's perfectly sensible, and then all of a sudden it's... the other stuff around it, like you said. Thinking about it is like trying to grab a live fish with your fingers; it's not impossible, exactly, but it's not worth the effort most of the time. And she sees it on my



face, and calls me a Changeling."

They both gave chuckles of agreement as they followed the sledge through the four-towered gatehouse; they were Changelings, which was the slang term for people born after the world was remade.

The gates were wide open—it was the middle of the afternoon and peacetime—but Rudi made a reverence with steepled hands and thumbs on chin to the posts on either side; Lugh with his spear, Brigid with her sheaf and flame. There was a pleasant smell of woodsmoke, cooking, animals, infinitely familiar and welcoming.

Inside the walls didn't look as tall, since the bottom twelve feet were built into what had been the sides of the plateau, leaving the inner surface level. The ramparts were lined with small log houses, carved and painted with themes from myth or simple fancy, and in the central area were the buildings that served the dwellers here and the Clan at large; bathhouse, smithy, stables, workshops where every craft from glassblowing to hand-printing was practiced and taught, granary, infirmary, bad-weather Covenstead, library and schools and more, divided by graveled lanes.

Just right, he thought affectionately. Not too big like Sutterdown or, Mother-of-All help us, Corvallis; but big enough to be interesting, and the woods and fields right there outside.

A crowd gathered around the sled with the big fir; most of the households had their own Yule Tree, but this was one for the whole dun and all Mackenzies too. Rudi waved to them all and swung down from Epona's saddle; half a dozen youngsters sprang forward to take the bridle, and he picked one the mare had shown some liking—or a least tolerance—for. Another proudly bore off his swordbelt and quiver and cased longbow.

The Hall itself was the largest building, its shingled roof rearing over the rest like a dragon's scaly back, green in patches with moss beneath the thickening coat of snow. The foundation had been that hunting-lodge, a big log box on knee-high fieldstone. Late in the first Change Year the early Mackenzies had doubled its size by the simple expedient of taking off the roof, adding more squared logs, and then putting the roof back, to give two tall stories and a big loft. A verandah and balcony ran around three sides, supported by pillars made from whole tree-trunks.

Of course, there had been other modifications... The pillars were carved in running knotwork and elongated stylized animals, then stained and painted with browns and golds and greens—anyone these days would recognize it as Mackenzie work; this was the original that other duns had copied. At either end the roof-rafter crossed each other and rose to face inward in gilded spirals, sunwise and widdershins to balance the energies.

Where the horizontal beams of the balcony jutted out through the pillars they were carved in the shapes of the Clan's sept totems, the heads of Wolf and Coyote, Raven and Bear and Tiger; the grinning jaws held chains that supported big lanterns wrought of glass and brass and iron. The wicks within were already lit against winter's gloom, though it was only a little past noon, and they cast pools of warm yellow across painted wood and trampled snow. There was a reason these were called the Black Months.

The crowd was already freeing the tree from the sledge; they waited for Rudi, though, as he stepped forward to shoulder the heaviest load at the base.

"The Holly King grows old!" he shouted gaily. "Soon he will fall to the Oak King, and the Sun will be reborn!"

One of the twins was back at the other end—it had to be a woman there, of course, and an Initiate.

"The Crone is carrying Winter's child," she called. "But He will be born to marry the Maiden!"

A dozen shoulders took up the tree between them. Someone swung open the big double doors and they dashed up the stairs and into the Hall itself. Inside was a great open space the length and breadth of the building, the walls carved and painted into a fantasy of leaf and flower and faces out of tales. A tub of water waited at the western end, with a screw-and-collar arrangement for holding the Yule Tree upright. He knelt with a grunt—the sapling was as thick as his thigh at the base, and this was going to be tricky. He guided the cut end into the circle with casual strength, then called:

"Now!"

All the hands on the trunk and the forked poles laid ready for the moment were teenaged at least; it was a privilege to help with this. He put his shoulder to it, boughs scraping past his face, buried in softly aromatic green needles, and pushed, taking the strain carefully as he felt the weight

come onto the muscles of his back and belly—that you were very strong didn't mean you couldn't put your back out, he'd seen it happen. Rudi had been around heavy weights and their handling all his life; he could sense when it began to tilt as the others pushed...

"Easy there—Imrim! Get behind it, man!"

At last the tree was upright in the bath of water, a perfectly symmetrical shape of glossy dark green, the tip between two rafters and just six inches below the floorboards of the second story. Its scent filled the Hall as the warmer air coaxed it out, bringing a breath of the spring woods. He knelt again and swiftly spun the screws until they bit into the thick dark furrowed bark and the wood below, then put on the board cover to keep over-curious kittens or puppies or toddlers from falling in or drinking the water. When he stood again, everyone who'd helped raise it stood in a circle around the tree and joined hands, throwing them up three times and whooping.

"Well, there it is," Rudi said to the crowd. "Jack-in-the-Green's little green Jack."

Groans and hoots, and people snatched up twigs and bits of bark that had fallen and pelted him with them. He retreated with his arms over his face, begging for mercy in a falsetto voice; then he sprang forward and grabbed two fourteen-year olds and caught one under each arm, whirling them around with a back-cracking effort.

When the horseplay was finished he brushed down his jacket and plaid and went to hang them up, checking that his sword and dirk and bow had been placed properly. They had, of course; he touched the long orange-yellow stave of yew with its subtle double curve and black-walnut riser in the middle, there among the others. He remembered how he'd longed for a proper war-bow of his own when he was a kid, practicing at the butts in the meadows below with the rest of his class—Mackenzie education gave the longbow a high priority.

Well, now he had it, from the hands of Aylward the Archer himself; his own height and a handspan more, a hundred and twenty pounds of draw, throwing a thirty-two inch shaft at four to the ounce. And it's just as much fun as I thought it would be!

He turned and saw his mother over by the hearth on the north wall, where the house-altar rested over the great fieldstone fireplace and a low blaze of split wood burned down to embers. She waved to him: come.

Sir Nigel rose as he watched, and intercepted Sir Odard and Matti. "Come, and I shall thrash you at chess, young man," he said.

Rudi caught Mathilda's eye and gave a slight shake of the head, with an apologetic shrug added to it.

"I'll kibitz while Nigel beats Odard," she said, taking it with good enough grace; it wasn't as if she were a stranger to the concept of a state secret, or ever had been. "And then I shall thrash you, Sir Nigel. If you spot me your bishops."

That left only Juniper Mackenzie and Ingolf Vogeler in chairs by the hearth set into the northern wall of the Hall. He was looking a lot better than he had; the shadow of the Hunter's wing wasn't on his brow any more, but he was still painfully thin, the skin fallen in on the heavy bones. She tucked up the soft blanket of beige wool that was around him and poured a little more of the hot mead that stayed warm in a nook in the wall of the fireplace. He thanked her with a shy smile that sat oddly on the battered warrior's face.

Mom's like that, Rudi thought proudly. She's everyone's mother, if they have a good heart and need it.

He'd complained about that once, when he was young, and she'd told him...

What was it she said? Yes: "Love isn't like money—the more you give away the more you get back, and the more you have to give."

And then she'd laughed and told him she loved him best of all, and he'd been all right again. He came over to the hearth and drew up a chair to sit, sinking into the leather cushions and enjoying the warmth of the flickering blaze.

"Glad to meet you when I'm in my right mind, more or less," Vogeler said, offering a hand. After the shake he looked thoughtfully at Rudi's long form. "Maybe we could spar a bit, when I'm back on my pins... I'd like to take the measure of a man who can take down two of the Prophet's cutters fighting in his underwear, and not get a scratch."

Rudi smiled broadly: "I'd like that, Ingolf. They say it'll be a while, though."

Sparring with the same people all the time could get boring—and dangerous. If you fell into a rut and stopped being surprised now and then you stopped learning.

The Hall was returning to normal for a winter afternoon near Yule, which meant people sitting

around talking or reading or telling stories, having a beer together or making plans and arguing... but nobody would disturb the Chief and her son at a conversation, and the buzz in the background actually made them more private.

There was a plate of sandwiches on the table beside Ingolf, some honey-cured ham with cheese, some roast venison; he'd eaten only one, and one of the dried-cherry scones.

Ingolf grinned as Rudi picked up a sandwich and raised an eyebrow. "Sure. I keep thinking I'm going to wolf down half a cow, and then I get full. You know how it is when you're getting over something."

He nodded, chewing and savoring the rich strong taste of the deer-meat; he did know how it was when you were recovering from a fever or a wound. He'd had one about as bad, and on his gut, before he turned eleven.

After a moment Juniper spoke softly. "If you're well enough now, Ingolf Vogeler, it's your story I would have. Of your own will you're not to blame for what happened, but still one of my people is dead, and I must explain to an old friend why his daughter was killed in her own home. Also I am the Mackenzie, and the welfare of land and folk is something the Chief must account for at the last."

The easterner licked his lips slightly, took a drink of the mead, and spoke:

"I'm willing to tell you my story," he said, his eyes fixed on the distance. "Christ be my witness, I owe you folks my life and more. But it's... just so damned strange."

His mouth quirked. "Always told myself I was a practical type. But this has got weird stuff in it... would you believe a voice I heard in dreams sent me here?"

Juniper Mackenzie laughed, a clear peal. "Oh, Ingolf, you've come to the one place in all the world for that to be believed—though in truth, I might have thought you wandering in your wits if I hadn't had independent confirmation of some of it."

"And I haven't had the dream since I arrived. And by God, I'm thankful for that!"

Juniper nodded. "The Powers are at work here, but it isn't the first time they've touched my life, so... or Rudi's."

He gave a shy duck of the head. "Well, it's like this... the start's ordinary enough. After the war with the Sioux, I didn't want to end up a hired soldier, but there didn't seem to be much else I could do except get work as a farmhand. Not that I'm above any honest work, Sheriffs from the Free Republic of Richland aren't so high and mighty that we never touch a pitchfork or a plow-handle, not like some folk I could name but won't, like those arrogant bastards over to Marshall."

"Not welcome back home?" Rudi asked sympathetically. That would be a terrible thing.

"Not without more crawling than I could stomach," Ingolf said grimly. Then his tone became matter-of-fact.

"So some friends and I who'd fought together in the war, we got into the salvage business. Not steel and glass and stuff like everyone gets from the nearest ruins; that's low-value, and it's pretty tightly tied up most places too, you can't just go in and start mining. Not anywhere close enough to market that the cost of hauling wouldn't kill you."

"Yes, we have agreements on who can claim what here, as well," Juniper said encouragingly.

"And there's more than enough steel and brass and aluminum and so forth, and will be for many an age. So as you say, it's cheap in most places."

Ingolf went on, his voice growing a bit more animated as he relived his great idea:

"What we went after was really valuable things—gold and silver, jewels, artwork that was famous before the Change, watches, machine tools that can be rerigged to run off water-power, telescopes and binoculars... the sort of thing that's been worked out of places near to areas that still have people. Well, out east where I come from, that means going further east, if you want to get somewhere unclaimed. East and south, down into the dead lands, past Chicago. I hear there are villages and farms up in parts of the Appalachians, but in the lowlands from the old Illinois line to the Atlantic it's... it's still real bad."

Rudi and his mother nodded. They'd heard the same from California, where a few explorers had gone lately, and similar things about Europe from Nigel and others. Nearly everywhere in thick-settled lands the streams of refugees from the great cities had overlapped each other; they'd eaten the land bare and then died. Except those who took to living off man's-flesh, but that was a losing game in the long run, with the fate of the Kilkenny cats at the end of it. A few of the luckiest lived until the rabbits bred back.

Some of those little groups of grisly predators barely had speech or fire, since they'd started with

feral children run wild during the chaos. They were primitive in a way no human savages had ever been before, without the great store of knowledge and skill real wilderness-dwellers had. And they still ate men, when they could.

"So... we'd gotten a few good hauls, better as we went further east, but the problem was that money... well, you can rent a room and buy your beer with cash, but if you want to make a life, you need to have a place where you're welcome to settle as something more than a laborer, and that's not so easy. Most places aren't too open to outsiders buying land, and without you're protected by law all you've got is what you can carry in your saddlebags while you fight off all comers, and a man has to sleep sometime."

True enough, Rudi thought.

The Mackenzies took in anyone honest, peaceable and willing to work, and they had little in the way of internal division of rank or wealth, but that was very much an exception.

"After a couple of years, all the people left in my bunch, they were those who didn't have a home they could go to and use what they'd got. Even young as we were we were getting tired of knocking around, risking our lives and then blowing it all on a bender before some bigshot could tax it off us. Then we got this offer from a bunch of Sheriffs near Des Moines, and the new Bossman too, he'd just succeeded his father and wanted to make a splash..."

An aside: "Iowa's the biggest place going out east; the land's good, and they carried a lot of people through the dying time, there are going on two million there now."

Rudi whistled slightly, and Juniper nodded as well; that was as much as the whole Pacific Northwest, according to the best estimates they'd been able to get, and on only one-fifth the area.

Ingolf continued:

"So you can go for days and days, and it's all tilled land and settlements, or at least pasture, and big towns now and then, cities even, hardly any real wilderness except right along the Mississippi and in the northwestern border counties. The Iowa farmers—ranchers, they say further west, I don't know what you call them here—and the Sheriffs, they're rich as rich."

Both the Mackenzies followed the tale easily enough; being familiar with what went on east of the Cascades they mentally translated farmer/rancher and Sheriff as landed knights and barons. Usually deputy or cowboy did duty for what most in the Willamette would call a man-at-arms. The descendants of starving townsmen were generally on the bottom of the social heap, sometimes bound to the soil, outright slaves in a few of the worst places.

"We don't have lords here," Rudi said proudly. "But I know what you mean."

"We were lucky, too, with it," his mother whispered in his ear, and then pinched it in mild reproof.

Rudi jumped a little. Vogeler plodded on, his big wasted hands knotted together, his voice and mind in a different time and place. But trapped there, knowing what was to happen and unable to warn his earlier self, watching it unfold again:

"So they made a deal with us. I had a reputation for getting the goods, and they offered to let us settle, give us land and rank, if we'd go where nobody had gone before—all the way east to the sea, and the museums and art galleries and such. They still care for such stuff in Iowa, you see, more than most places. And the new Bossman of Des Moines... they call him the Governor when they're being formal... sent along this little rat of a guy to check it all. And that would be the price of our new homes. We could all be Deputies at least. I don't much like the way they treat ordinary people there, but beggars can't be choosers."

Vogeler smiled grimly. "There was even talk of a Sheriff's daughter for me, and plenty of talk about how I was a Sheriff by blood... not that they really think any cheesehead's anything but a bear from the backwoods, that bunch. I thought they'd keep the deal, though, or at least most of it, so we signed up."

The hesitation left Ingolf's voice as he went on. "Well, it was a good deal, and like I said, we were all young. For a prize like that, we'd go to hellmouth and back, we thought. What I didn't know was who the little ratty guy, Joseph Kuttner his name was, was really working for. Neither did the Bossman who paid his wages. So we crossed the Mississippi south of Clinton, all my bunch—we called ourselves Vogeler's Villains, same as my troop back in the Sioux War—"

## CHAPTER FIVE:

Cape Cod, near Innsmouth, Massachusetts

August 14th, CY 21/2019 AD

Ingolf cursed as sweat ran down into his eyes from the lining of his helmet—it was made from old kitchen sponges—and soaked the padding under his mail shirt. It was fiercely hot, with only a slight high haze, and wet as a soaked blanket with it, and the air buzzed with mosquitoes even a little past noon. If you went into the shade they ate you alive. At least he wore what they called a kettle helmet, with a wide sloping brim like a droopy canvas hat. He'd always preferred that to a close helm; the extra visibility and better hearing more than made up for any lesser protection, and it kept the sun off your face and neck. Plus in weather like this it let you breathe.

All he could smell right now was his own sweat and Boy's, and forest-green from the scrubby sandy woods of oak and pine around, but his nose still tingled with trouble coming. Birds sang and insects buzzed; a swath of monarch butterflies swirled up from a patch of milkweed growing in cracks in the pavement. They passed another dead car, a heap of rust and shattered glass, amid a scorch-mark that showed where it had burned.

There were bones in the ditches, under rampant weed and brush. Every time he rode Boy off into the endless woods they crumbled beneath the shod hooves; leached by twenty years of rains and frost, by acid soil and scavengers, but still so many to start with they were everywhere, the skulls popping like eggshells.

The woods were also full of wet stagnant pits where basements had been; the houses had all been wooden frame, and they'd all burnt at one time or another. There must have been tens of thousands of them once all through this wasteland, and the thought made his skin crawl a little even now. All those little houses, in this place where no crops grew and you couldn't even find any decent water without digging and pumping, nothing but short twisty pines...

He found he hated this part of the lost lands even more than the dead cities. At least they were honestly alien; this never-a-city reverting to forest was neither one thing nor another. A sudden intense longing filled him, to see a herd of black-and-white cows grazing in green meadow, or smell bread baking, or to ride by a farmhouse in the snow and hear the rising-falling hum of a spinning wheel and a girl singing by it as she worked and smoke drifted low from the chimney. Anything that meant real life.

I thought I'd grown up free of the Change, not hag-ridden by it the way the old folks are, the way Dad was, so he'd drink too much and cry whenever he couldn't keep himself from thinking about it. I can't even remember it, not even the flash and the pain, nor the years right after when things were worst. I was too young. But here there's nothing but death and ghosts, and it's as if you can hear them all screaming and sobbing, hear it drifting on the wind. It'll be a thousand years before they stop.

He flung up his clenched right fist in its steerhide glove and barked: "Halt!"

The whole train stopped in a slow clatter of hooves and squeal of brake-levers, five big rubber-tired steel-frame wagons drawn by six horses each, and the two-score of guards and ostlers and salvage experts who made up Vogeler's Villains—not that every single one couldn't fight at need, including the four women. They all looked around; there was a wide meadow right ahead, and more of the scrub-forest to their right and left, with sand showing through the sparse grass beneath. The meadow had the broken asphalt of the roadway looping around it in an oval and two roads leading south, so it had probably been a roundabout once. Nothing much grew there but some low green brush, and a couple of dead trees poking up through them.

Kaur stood in the stirrups and sniffed. "I think that's salt water," she said. "The maps say the ocean should be close, here, unless everything's silted up. Innsmouth's that way."

She pointed right south, the steel bangle on her wrist twisting. Her brother Singh nodded.

Dark-skinned and hawk-faced in a way different from Injuns, they were both from a little village founded in the farming country west of Marshall by refugees from Minneapolis right after the Change, and both were three or four years younger than Ingolf's twenty-five. They wore mail shirts like his; she had a plain bowl helmet and he covered his blue-black hair under a dark turban with a steel cap underneath, and the ends of his beard tucked up into the cloth on either side. They were Sikhs—he still wasn't sure exactly what that entailed even after six years together, since they didn't talk about it much. Apparently they were the only ones of their kind left in the world, as far as they knew.

The Lakota had burned out their people's settlement, and they'd found everyone dead when they came back from a hunting trip. He'd taken them into his troop during the Sioux war, and they'd

been together ever since. During the war they'd fought with a cold ferocity that made even the wild raiders from the high plains afraid. What they'd done to prisoners to make them talk made him wince a little to recall... and he wasn't a squeamish man.

"Do a flit forward," he told them. "Mounted—quick and dirty. Don't take any chances, and get back before dark."

He did know they were both first-class scouts, the best in the Villains apart from him and Jose, and they could move quietly while wearing a mail shirt, which most folk couldn't. The band was short-handed since Boston. Boston had been very bad...

They nodded. Singh grinned in the thickness of his black beard; he was a big burly man, nearly as big as Ingolf, and the muscles bunched in his brown forearms as he picked the reins off his saddlebow. Sometimes when he'd had a drink or two he'd straighten horseshoes with his hands for a joke.

"We shall be like lions, Captain Ingolf," he said, and his sister nodded, a rare smile on her face.

"Like a lioness," she added.

They always say that, and they never say why it's funny, Ingolf thought, as they heeled their horses into a walk; Kaur dropped a little behind, covering her brother with an arrow on the string of her saddle-bow.

I know what lions are. He had seen pictures in old books, and once a trader had brought a skin through, just before he left home. They've got 'em down in Texas.

One of his best men came from there, having wandered up the way people did every now and then and joined the Bossman's army when Ingolf did; he'd told stories about them, how they'd bred up in the bush country until they were a major nuisance along the Rio Grande, the way tigers were further north.

Sort of tiger-sized but colored like a cougar, and the males have a big black ruff around the neck, and they hunt together in packs like wolves. OK, a lion's big and fierce and sneaky, and so's Singh... well, his sister is medium-sized and fierce and sneaky. But why's it funny?

"All right, we'll camp here," he called loudly. Then he squinted at the sun; they still had eight hours to dark, this time of year. "Jump to it!"

Everyone knew what to do; some cleared the brush, others drove the wagons into a circle and linked them with chains and knock-down barriers of timber, shoved and fastened coils of razor wire under the vehicles, saw to the rest of the defenses, built fires, scavenged firewood, got the cooking-gear ready. They had plenty of food, besides hoarded dried fruits and such to keep them from scurvy; this area swarmed with deer and duck, rabbit and bear, and some of the rivers were thick with fish, where the old-time poisons weren't still leaking from rusting storage tanks or lingering in the mud.

The natives were too thin on the ground nowadays to keep the game down, and they weren't really very good hunters, most of them...

Not of animals, at least, he thought grimly as he swung down and handed over Boy's reins.

The stock were watered from buckets, and the wood teams also collected any green fodder around and piled it up for them to stretch the remnants of the parched corn. The Villains were cheerful enough, more so than he'd expected; there was even some laughing and horseplay, and after the main work was done someone got out a guitar.

I'm going to see every one of you gets a home out of this, if I can; so help me God and His mother.

He smiled to himself; homes for the ones who didn't just want to blow every penny on booze, whores and fancy duds, at least.

And me, I'm going to be rich, if I can, with a fort and land to the horizon. None of my kids are going to have to earn a living like this when I have 'em. And God knows I've earned it... And as for you, my dear brother Edward, you can shit sideways, fold yourself in half and go blind back there in the old homestead. Maybe I'll come visit my nieces and nephews, with gifts fit for a Bossman's heirs. Kuttner came over, and Ingolf hid a grimace. Although the little man had turned out to be a lot tougher and less of a complainer than he'd expected back in Des Moines, and a hell of a lot better in a fight. That hadn't made him any more agreeable, just less disgusting. He was about thirty, a bit below average height—five-six or so—thin and wiry, with close-cropped brown hair and an unremarkable face that looked distorted, somehow, without being in any way abnormal if you considered it feature by feature.

"We should push on to Innsmouth, see if we can find a useable boat," Kuttner said; his voice

always sounded as if he was in a hurry... which he generally was.

"Mr. Kuttner, you know I'm the best in this business, don't you?" he said, swatting at a mosquito. It went squit and left a smear of blood on his cheek. He had bites under his armor, too.

"Yes, Mr. Vogeler, but—"

"Kuttner," he said, getting a little less polite, "did you ever wonder why the best man in this business is only twenty-six years old?"

Kuttner stopped—which was a wonder, because he liked to talk better than listen—and looked at him out of his ordinary brown eyes. "No, Mr. Vogeler, I can't say that I have. Why?"

"Well, two reasons. First, it's a pretty new business, the way my Villains do it, because there hasn't been enough call for it 'till now. Second, those that take it up don't usually live very long, if they come anywhere near this far east. I am alive and I aim to get back to Iowa still alive, and collect what was promised. Are you sure we have to do this? The Bossman didn't mention Nantucket when we talked—we've got the stuff he wanted from Boston and that was the last on our list."

And I lost four good men doing it, he thought but didn't say.

That was a cost of doing business and everyone in the Villains knew they took the most dangerous jobs. That didn't make watching an old friend die by inches of a punctured gut much better, or make it easier to make yourself give them an end to pain as the last gift.

"I have written instructions and the Bossman's authority," Kuttner said, running a hand over his close-cropped hair.

"Yeah—" Ingolf began.

The sound of drumming hoof-beats interrupted them. They could see a fair way down the roads to the south, littered with the rusting vine-grown heaps that had been cars and trucks. Kaur and Singh were coming along at a gallop, riding on the sandy median strip. The hard drumbeat of the hooves echoed through the woods, setting birds to avalanche-loud flight; it wasn't a sound anyone around here had heard for a long time.

Just when they'd broken free of the narrowest section something flashed in the sunlight, and Singh's horse stumbled, then went down by the stern with a short thick throwing-spear in its back near the spine just behind the saddle. It began to shriek, enormous sounds that sounded like a woman except for the volume.

"Shit," Ingolf said, and looked around. "We're getting short of horses."

Jose had the section on guard, and he was already on it, leading his five riders towards the pair at a round trot. Kaur stopped, shooting over her brother's head into the woods; something screamed there. Singh crouched with his shield up and another javelin went bang off the surface, and a third hit the horse again. When Jose's men joined in the shooting he came erect and gave the wounded beast the mercy-stroke, then started salvaging his gear; that meant that there weren't any more of the natives close enough to see.

"Everyone keep an eye out all 'round," he snapped.

A few started guiltily; everyone had picked up their weapons at the alarm, pikes and broadaxes, crossbows or bows, but a few had been staring at the action rather than their assigned sectors.

Kuttner had his shete out and was looking around without more than a tightening of the lips.

Singh dropped to the ground from where one of the rescue squad had taken him up behind.

"Ranjeet was a good horse," he complained to the air.

Then to Ingolf: "Captain, the woods are thick with them already. More coming from the direction of Innsmouth. I saw no bows... but we did not stay to be sure."

"About what I expected," Ingolf said, and looked at the circling woods; all beyond throwing range.

"Good work. Cut a horse out of the remount herd."

Kuttner had the grace to look a little abashed. The Captain of the Villains went on to him: "There were bound to be a bunch of them in Innsmouth; they like to lair up in ruins when they can, and it's a good place for them—water, fishing, hunting here in the brush. This is the best spot to take them on. Without we give 'em a good hiding right away, we'll have little ambushes every second hour."

"They'll attack?" Kuttner said, peering at the woods.

Nothing was visible, though they both knew that red hating eyes were studying them. These were the ones who'd lived, or more likely their children, by now.

"They usually do. But they'll come at night. Couple of hours past midnight. That's how they remember doing it, or how their daddies told 'em to do it."

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Kaur woke him by cautiously nudging his booted feet with her shete and stepping back as he uncoiled with steel in his hand. It was very dark, moonless, with the stars hard and white above; the walls of low forest around them were inky-black, and only a faint red glow came from the campfires. The night had a dense green smell to it; the air was a little cooler, coming from the south. Lightning bugs blinked on and off, giving the illusion of little lamps as they drifted through the scrub.

"They come now," Kaur whispered, squatting and leaning on the sheathed weapon. "Many, Captain. They took the dead horse a little while ago, and now they come for us."

"How many?"

She shrugged; the brother and sister were good scouts, not magicians or witches. "Twice our numbers at least. Not more than ten times."

"Get everyone up—but quiet."

Her smile showed white in the darkness, and she ghosted away. He shrugged into his padded jacket, wriggling to get the mail shirt down and into place, and slid the carrying strap of his round shield over his head. He heard the howl of a coyote now and then, and the occasional whit-whit-whit of an owl; the preparations of his own folk were a little rustling and chinking only. He'd come a long way from that hulking clumsy nineteen-year-old who'd ridden off to make a name in the short glorious war against the Injuns.

God, I was useless. We all were. Everyone here now knows their jobs, though. Even the new ones hired for this trip.

The night was loud; wind in the trees, bullfrogs, cicadas, creak and rustle and groan, now and then the call of some foraging beast, once a distant squall of triumph as a catamount made a kill. Ingolf reached his commander's battle-station, in front of one of the loop-holed board barricades between two wagons. Jose the Tejano was there too, cradling a crossbow. He was a good few years older than Ingolf, old enough to have some strands of white in his black moustache, and he'd fought in most mix-ups between the Llano Estacado and the Red River of the North over the past ten years.

They looked out into the darkness, not straining their eyes, just waiting; he counted down internally, timing his breath to it and using that to calm himself. More mosquitoes bit, but he couldn't slap at them; the chance of the natives noticing it and learning their prey was on to their attack... was small but not zero. One thing he'd learned long ago was that mistakes could kill you, even little ones.

Of course, just being in the wrong place at the wrong time could kill you, even if you were an expert and careful as Hell. A sudden high-pitched shriek of surprised pain came from out in the darkness.

"Now!" he shouted.

A deep tunning sounded from the center of the encampment, where a man pulled the lanyard on a small heavy machine of springs and levers. It threw the dart-shaped projectile upward nearly a thousand feet; there was a sizzling pop sound, and the magnesium flare burned with explosive brightness—as close to an explosion as you could get in the Changed world, that was. He didn't look up; the spot of fire would kill his night-vision, and hopefully a lot of the attackers who weren't expecting it would look, by reflex. From overhead it lit the clearing with a pitiless blue-white radiance, the huge shadows jerking and twisting; the flare swung and twisted beneath the parachute as it drifted down.

The crink-crink-crink of the winch's gearing sounded as the crew wound the thrower again, ready to launch another flare before the first hit the ground. The Bossman of Des Moines really had laid out for the very best on this trip, including choice items from his own armory. For some reason Kuttner seemed to find the sound disagreeable.

Out in the clearing the light showed a carpet of dark ragged furtive crawling movement, studded with gleams from eyes and teeth and ancient knives. His mouth went dry; there were a lot more of them than he'd thought there would be, at least a hundred and maybe twice that, eeling towards the circle of wagons on their bellies. A half-dozen bands must have gotten together for this, a rare degree of cooperation among the wild-men, who invariably hated each other with the malignant loathing born of a generation of stalking and eating the unwary, often starting the process of eating



before death.

But then, an intrusion by outsiders was rare too. Apart from the meat of men and horses, their well-made gear and weapons would be a prize beyond price. None of them could let their rivals gain such strength.

A massed squealing arose, an endless: AtAitAitAitAitAitAit –

Some part of him realized that it was a word, or had been once: Eat.

The natives rose and rushed forward in a wave, like rats exploding out of a neglected grain-bin when you opened the lid and shone a lantern inside. Seconds later about half of them started hopping and screaming, where they'd run into the mesh matting his people had spread around right after they camped. Lying flat and artfully camouflaged with soot and sand and pine-duff, the nets were studded with upright razor-edged three-inch spikes.

Some of the enemy fell onto the points, and slashed themselves open as they tried to roll away. Others just kept coming, hitting the bare patches by luck or in a frenzy great enough to ignore the pain.

A couple of the squad-leaders shouted fire! Ingolf didn't bother, since everyone knew what to do and he personally had always disliked someone bawling at him in situations like that. He just drew to the ear and shot into the mass of them and reached for another arrow; there were boxes of them on the inside of the prefab barricade. The snap of bowstrings and the tung! of crossbows sounded, and shouts and curses of the salvagers, and the unearthly throbbing squeal of the wild-men. Even as he drew and loosed, he realized...

"They aren't stopping for shit! Ready for it, you Villains!" he roared.

A whistling, and he ducked as a shower of little throwing-spears came down out of the night, driving into the sandy ground with a dry crunch, or into wood with hard cracks; the ones that hit the triple-ply canvas of the wagon tilts made a drumhead sound and hung there like porcupine quills. One went into the barricade next to his eyes, and he could see that the head was a ground-down table-knife. He used the moment to slide the shield from his back and run his left arm through the loops, and then the luckiest or fastest of the natives were at the barricade. This was the south-facing edge of the wagon-fort, and they were thickest here.

"Richland!" he shouted as he surged up.

He wore his shete over his back when he was on foot, the hilt jutting up by his left shoulder. He swept it out and cut with the same motion. A snarling face with a shock of greasy blond hair and a human finger-bone thrust through the septum of its nose fell back in a splash of red. An ancient shovel crashed down on his shield, bang, and a kitchen-knife probed at his armor. He jerked the shield downward and broke both the savage's arms; then he thrust across the thrashing body with his shete, the blade skidding on wood of the shovel handle and taking off the fingers of the wielder...

A long snarling scrimmage around the edge of the wagons, steel glittering in the light of the second flare, gasping breaths, banging and rattling and shrieks. The horses in their paddock snorted and reared against the ropes; the half-dozen spearmen of the reserve came pelting up in a line where some of the savages had gotten onto the top of a wagon's cover, and thrust them back with their long weapons. A few more minutes, and the attackers realized what the odds were of storming what amounted to a fortress held by men with real weapons and good armor, trained in fighting as a team.

Then they ran; Ingolf stuck his shete point-down in the sand and snatched up his bow again to shoot at their running backs, and so did everyone else except the wounded.

Kill enough and the rest would hide safely far away.

Silence fell as they waited to be sure the enemy would keep running, deep silence except for the pop of another parachute flare going off, panting breath, and the moaning of wounded savages. Then the night-sounds slowly began to return, which meant that there weren't any humans running through the woods.

Men went around outside the wagon-circle with spears and crossbows and lanterns, making sure of any enemy still moving; their two medics switched weapons for kit and went around inside, bandaging and cleaning—nobody seemed to be dead, or to have a crippling injury, but a couple had nasty bites that would fester if not swabbed out carefully. That included himself; he hadn't noticed it at the time, and swore mildly at the sharp hard sting when the doctor irrigated the little wound on his neck with disinfectant.

A few wild-men had been caught in the razor wire under the wagons and had to be finished there.

Ingolf sprang up to the bed of a wagon and looked out carefully.

"They won't try again tonight, or anytime soon," he said.

"You think, Capitan?" Jose said. "They were pretty fierce, this bunch."

"We probably killed off half the swinging dicks in three or four bands—and all the stronger ones. They'll be fighting each other for weeks, settling who eats who."

"Si. Good thing we were ready for them, though."

The commander of the Villains nodded; if they'd gotten right up to the wagons where they could use their numbers, everybody in the Villains would have died. Quickly, if they were lucky.

"Hey, maybe you better look at this, though," Jose went on.

Ingolf turned and waved to the thrower crew so they would stand down; they didn't have so many flares that they could keep lobbing them indefinitely. Then he vaulted over the barricade and followed his second-in-command a short way into the dark.

A wild-man lay there; there was a bolt through his thigh, his feet had been slashed to ribbons by crossing the spikes, and he was trying to crawl away around them. As they approach he turned, glaring. He had a finger-bone through his nose too, and one through each earlobe; on his body was an ancient threadbare pair of jeans, loose on his skinny shanks and patched with rabbit-skin. A cloak of the same had been about his shoulders, and from the smell roughly piss-tanned. There was a big gold necklace around his neck, lying on the bare chest and glittering with diamonds. It was all pretty fancy, by local standards.

What really caught Vogeler's eye was what Jose had noticed, the weapon near the man's hand.

"Probably their jefe, their bossman," Jose said. "That's funny, that he has a shete, isn't it, Capitan?"

"Damned odd," Ingolf agreed, his eyes narrowing. "It's not a machete—that's new work."

The modern weapon was longer and thicker at the back of the blade than the pre-Change tool which had inspired it.

"Want to try and get the story out of him?"

The wild-man snarled at them and barked, an ough-ough-ough sound, snapping with little lunges of his brown-yellow teeth, his hands scrabbling for something to throw.

"No, I don't think this one's a great talker."

"Si, he doesn't look like it, does he?"

Jose shrugged and brought the crossbow to his shoulder and aimed carefully. Tunngg, a flash through the dark, and right beneath it a meaty whack. The scrawny body jerked and went slack; Jose bent, set the spanning hook on the string, and cranked the crossbow taut again.

"You've got the watch until dawn," Ingolf said to his second-in-command, kicking the mysterious shete further away from the body before picking it up.

He didn't want to go near the dead man; the lice and fleas jumped ship when a man died, and these probably carried disease. Safer to leave the burial detail for a day or so. Which reminded him...

"If they try to drag the bodies away, let them."

"Capitan?"

"Don't want them stinking the place up." Any worse than it is now, he thought.

Smell was inevitable when you cut men's bodies open. At least the sandy soil would sop up the liquids; it would be safer to bury any remaining tomorrow.

"This is the most defensible campsite we're going to find around here, I think, so you'll be stuck in this location for a while."

He took the captured shete back under the lamps—not much point in trying to sleep more tonight—and as he cleansed his hands and arms with sand and then water, he studied the weapon.

It was a fairly typical example of what horsemen used everywhere he knew of, from the Big Muddy to the Rockies and south to the Rio Grande; a yard-long piece of slightly curved steel, three fingers broad at the widest spot near the tip, sharpened all along one edge and four inches down the other from the point for a backhander. The hilt had a simple cross-guard and a full-length tang, with fillets of wood on the grip and a wrapping of braided rawhide that was coming loose in one or two spots; the pommel was a plain brass oval.

This one was better-made than most, forged by a real smith and not simply ground and filed out of old-time stock. He tapped it against a wagon's frame, and the almost bell-like sound was right, and so was the elastic way it sprang back when he bent it against a treestump by sticking the

point in and leaning on it.

Still sharp, he thought, feeling cautiously with his thumb. Shame the way it's been let rust. Looks like it hasn't been cleaned or oiled in a month... maybe a bit less, with the air here.

He rotated his wrist, whipping the steel through a blurring figure-eight; the air hissed behind it. It was lighter than he preferred, but it felt alive in his hand.

Over at the fire he got out his cleaning kit and went to work. When he'd finished and held it out at arm's length towards the flames his brows went up. There was a rash of rust-pits, no way around that the way it had been neglected, but the surface of the metal rippled in the firelight under the thin coating of linseed oil he'd applied, full of wavy lines—not just forged, but layer-forged from a mixture of spring and mild steel, and then hardened on the edge.

There was a very slight roughness in the steel along the working part, the point and about a foot back from there; that was blood etching, the way the salt and acid of blood attacked the softer layers even if you cleaned it immediately.

This beauty would set you back fifty, sixty dollars in Des Moines. More in Richland or Marshall, since the lowan capital attracted the best craftsmen. That was the price of a good ordinary horse, or two months wages for a laborer, but it was a working tool that had been used hard, not a dress weapon—no fancies like inlay.

Wait, I lie, he thought.

Symbols had been graven in the surface in the same spot on both sides, not far from the hilt; a stylized rayed sun, and within it three letters—C and U and T.

"Well, that's what it's for," he said. Then he called out: "Hey, Kaur, Singh!"

The scouts came over; Singh was still rubbing a cloth on the serrated head of the mace he used for close-and-personal work. It smelled if you left the results in the grooves. There were spatters on his turban, as well.

"Ranjeet is well avenged, Captain," he said, his dark eyes sparkling.

Ingolf felt a little uneasy about these two on occasion. Revenge was all very well, but there were times when he thought the pair of them were a bit monomaniacal on the subject.

"Take a look at this," Ingolf said. "One of the wild-men had it."

They both looked surprised; they hadn't seen anything more complex than tying a knife into a stick since they got east of the Illinois valley.

"It's modern work," Singh said, turning it over in his big hands. "Well done, too."

He been a blacksmith's apprentice before his village was wiped out, and still dabbled usefully in it. Now he flicked a fingernail against the edge of the weapon to test the sound, and tilted it so that the firelight would pick out surface features.

"See the wavy line along the cutting edge, just a finger's-width in? I have heard of that. It is done by coating all the blade except the edge with clay, then packing it in red-hot charcoal, letting it cool, and then re-tempering. It makes the cutting edge very hard, glass hard, without turning the whole blade brittle, but it requires great skill. The heat-treatment has been well done, too!"

He was waxing enthusiastic. His sister leaned forward, a frown on her dark comely face.

"What is that doing here, Captain?" she said, toying with the long single braid of her hair. "These wild-men, they can't even take apart a pair of old garden shears to make knives. Make shetes?"

She made a complex dismissive sound that involved gargling and spitting.

"Yeah, that's the question," Ingolf said. "So they must have stolen it off the body of someone in from the Midwest like us. I don't think I know of more than three or four other expeditions that've gotten east of the Ohio."

"There could be more that we don't know of, more so if they were small and done quietly," Singh said. "If they died here, who would hear anything?"

Ingolf grunted skeptically. "News travels slowly, but it does get around," he said. "And it would take a big outfit, well-found, to get this far."

He took the shete back, reversed the blade and held it out to Kaur. "This is a little light for my arm, but it should be about right for you."

Her eyes lit as she took the blade and ran through a series of cuts and thrusts, feet moving like a dancer's as she whirled and lunged. "Yes! Thank you, Captain. This is a very fine weapon, better than mine or my spare."

"And see if anyone else knows what those marks on the blade are," he said.

Kuttner was standing by his bedroll. Ingolf got out his pipe and fixings and lit it with an ember held in a green twig as he sat and leaned back against his saddle. He didn't smoke much. If nothing

else, tobacco was too hard to find outside the Republic of Richland, or too bad if you did—good leaf and fine cheeses and apple-brandy were his home country's main exports. But sometimes it was an aid to thought.

And hopefully it might discourage the mosquitoes, or at least Kuttner, who he'd noticed hated the smell. He dragged the smoke across his tongue and blew a ring into the darkness, watching it catch faint light from the lanterns and coals of the fire and enjoying the mellow scent.

"Why did you give the shete to the woman?" Kuttner asked at last.

Noticed he doesn't like Kaur. Doesn't like Singh either, but he really doesn't like Kaur. Doesn't seem to like women in general much, at least none of the ones with us, but I don't think he's queer, either.

"It's the right weight and length for her. You've seen her fight." Ingolf said reasonably, then described the etchings. "You ever seen anything like those marks?"

Firelight was good for playing poker; the shadows cast on a man's face made it harder to lie. He could see the slight hesitation in Kuttner's response, and the way his eyes flicked aside for a moment.

"Not really. I think I've heard that someone uses those symbols in the far West, but no details—there isn't much trade that way."

Ingolf nodded; it was true enough. Iowa had plenty of cattle and wheat from its own fields, and the metals trade mostly went up and down the Mississippi and its right-bank tributaries. But there was something...

He's not telling all he knows, that's for sure.

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A dozen of them rode into Innsmouth the next morning, as soon as the sun was high enough—too many shadows were convenient for ambushers. They came out of the forest, and into what had been the town proper; their hoofbeats echoed off the walls that flanked the broken pavement. This part didn't have many tall buildings; most of them had burned out at one time or another, their soot-charred windows like eyes in a skull. Bare black frames occupied half a street where the vacant spots weren't covered in second growth of saplings and sumac and brambles. Then they were back among brick structures that still stood.

It looked like the final collapse here hadn't come at once the way it had in Boston; there had been an effort to get the streets clear by pushing the vehicles off, and peeling, faded paint on a big warehouse-looking building read Emergency Food Distribution Center.

That one had been inhabited more recently; you could tell by the stink, stronger than the silt-salt of the nearby sea, and the flies. And the crude wooden rack outside with the rows of skulls was a give-away.

Dead give-away, he thought mordantly. But it feels dead now, uninhabited.

"Check it out," he said.

They waited, bows ready, eyes traveling to the roofs on either side; the horses shifted nervously under them. Singh and Kaur swung to earth with their shetes in their hands; when they came back out they both looked disgusted, but relaxed and with the steel sheathed.

"Nothing, Captain," the man called. "They were here, but they cleared out last night. I think you were right—they fought among themselves a little when they got back from rushing us."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing living, and nothing I wish to remember having seen," Singh said, and spat.

Considering some of the things he'd seen Singh do himself in the war, he decided he really didn't want to look inside—no point in putting things like that in your head unless you had to. Instead they cantered down to the water's edge. There they found what they wanted; an old-time warehouse for boats, where they were stacked up several layers high in metal racks. He'd seen that before in the ruined cities on the Lakes, and the guidebooks listed several here.

The ground floor was smashed remnants where small animals scurried amid the tendrils of shade-loving vines, hiding as the humans dismounted and looked the place over; storm-surges had come up the town's narrow central harbor several times in the past decades. Beams of sunlight lanced down from holes in the rippled plastic of the roofing, catching on a chain, turning the bulks of cabin cruisers and catamarans into shadowy vastness. Birds flew in and out, tending to their nests.

Ingolf sighed and did some climbing—not easy in armor, but he certainly wasn't going to take it off. His limbs felt heavy after little sleep and a bad fight last night, but he was used to working while he was exhausted; it was a requirement in both the trades he'd followed since he left home. A lot of the boats were made of the old-time material called fiberglass. He was familiar with it; some bowmakers used it instead of horn on the belly of a saddle-bow, though it was getting rare back in civilized country. It had the advantage of not rotting if kept out of the sun, and at last he found a good sailboat with a folding aluminum mast.

"This one'll do," he called down.

More birds flew up at the echoes. Everyone in the Villains was used to working with pre-Change machinery, and more than one of this group had dealt with boats before, on the Lakes. It was still long hours of nightmare work to get the rusted slideway working, with only the spells of watch-duty to break the hot monotony. He had barked knuckles and a sweat-bath worse than the usual summer-in-armor by the time the boat was in the wheeled cradle on the ground.

Scavenging had found them enough Dacron and cord to rig the simple lug-sail.

As the others were stowing the supplies, Jose drew him aside and spoke softly, with a glance at the Bossman's agent.

"Capitan, this cabroncito wants to go to that Nantucket place really bad, let him go. So he's close to the Bossman, close enough his farts don't make no sound any more, but that don't make him no friend of ours."

Ingolf smiled at the other man's worry: "And which friend of ours would I pick to send with him, to do something I'm afraid of, Jose?"

The Tejano blew out his lips in a gesture of frustration. "OK, I know what you mean. I still don't like it."

"I don't like it. Doesn't mean it doesn't have to be done."

Then Jose grinned, a quick white flash. "So now I complain how you take Kaur and Singh both. I'd feel better here with them to spot for us if the wild-men sniff around. They're the best sneakers we got."

"That's why I'm taking them! And you know they don't work apart. It's the smallest number that'll do the job—me, the Sikhs, Kuttner."

Unspoken went: And the least loss if we don't come back. Losing three more wouldn't fatally weaken the Villains for the trek back to the living lands. He clapped his second-in-command on the shoulder and nodded back towards the wagon camp:

"Just keep it together for ten days. If we're not back by then, then break camp and head west on the eleventh day. That's an order. We've already got all the stuff the Sheriffs and the Bossman wanted, apart from this, and enough gold to start a mint. We'll catch you up, but you move. You hear me, trooper?"

"Si. Doesn't mean I have to like it either."

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The harbor mouth hadn't silted up quite enough to catch the sailboat's keel, possibly because it was protected by the half-sunken hulk of a great ship whose bow reared out of the water like a dull-red hill. There was a little lurch of contact as the four of them labored at the sweeps they'd found, and then they were over the bar and out into Long Island Sound.

Ingolf found himself relaxing as the green-brown shoreline faded. That wasn't very logical—drowning killed you just as dead as a sharpened shovel in the brain, and if they were shipwrecked anywhere around here it was right back into the stewpot. The fresh breeze and clean salt air and bright sunlight must have something to do with it, and the fact that he was finally out of his armor; it was bound up with a couple of cork life vests, like all their gear. They had enough smoked venison and biscuit to last them for a few days, fishing line and hooks, map and compass, and their weapons.

Birds went by overhead, gulls and some sort of pigeon moving in a big flock. Not far away a whale broached; he couldn't tell what kind, except that it blew its spout forward in twin jets.

The wind was from the northwest, just off the starboard quarter. He looked at the map again, at his compass, and then up at the sun. Spray came in over the rail and flew backward, stinging his eyes with the salt, and he squinted into the brightness over the blue water and its white-topped waves.

"Should be there just before sunset, unless it moved," Ingolf said, lolling back with the tiller under his arm.

Neither Kaur nor Singh spoke, which was fairly typical. They were ready at the lines, with the care of people who liked to do things right but weren't entirely sure they could; their experience in boats was more limited than his, and he was no expert, just competent enough to set a straight course in not-too-bad weather. Kuttner didn't speak either, which wasn't like him. He usually had some order or observation or complaint. Now he was tensely silent.

Ingolf shrugged. I like him better this way, except that he looks like he's about to snap like a lift-beam under too much weight. I suppose it was too much to hope he'd get sea-sick and call the whole thing off.

Instead he concentrated on his sailing. As they passed out of sight of land, the Sikhs' silence grew a little tense too. After an hour or so Ingolf spoke:

"Hell, you two, we don't even have to tack for a while. I've been out on Michigan in rougher weather than this."

And nearly died, he didn't add.

For all his cheerfulness—you had to show willing and look confident if you were the leader, which necessity made it easier—he also let out a whuff! of relief when a low line of beach showed on the southern horizon. The sun was only a handspan over the horizon to their right, and it was starting to cast a glitter-path on the water, tinging it with red. As they came closer Ingolf began to frown.

"Singh!" he said. "Take the tiller!"

When the other man had, he moved cautiously to the bows and stood with one hand on the stayline that ran from there to the mast, peering ahead. Then he unshipped his binoculars, careful to settle the loop around his neck—they were big military-grade field-glasses, an heirloom from his father, irreplaceable if dropped over the side—and took another look.

A long shore, sandy beach backed by fifty-foot bluffs, interrupted here and there with lower parts. And...

"What's wrong?" Kuttner said.

"The books said Nantucket was covered with scrub and thicket, with a few trees here and there, and lots of those houses like back on the Cape," he said.

"Well?"

"It isn't. That's forest there, dense forest. Oak, I think. Maybe hickory, and some pine, but lots of oak."

"That could have grown up since."

The three Villains looked at him; surely nobody could be that ignorant?

"Not in twenty-two years it couldn't," Ingolf said. "And it's sandy there, and there's the salt wind. That's old forest. Not very tall, yeah, but it's old. Take a look."

He handed over the binoculars reluctantly and kept a hand ready to grab; as far as he knew, Kuttner had never been afloat on anything but the Mississippi before this trip.

The smaller man's lips went tight. "We must land," he said, but it was if he had to force himself to say it.

"Yeah," Ingolf said, equally unhappily. "It's getting too close to dark to head back."

"I do not know," Kaur said. Ingolf looked at her in surprise, and she went on: "It is as if something tells me go away."

She shivered. "Perhaps this place is cursed."

Her brother nodded. Ingolf was surprised; usually the two of them had the steadiest nerves of anyone in the company—sometimes he suspected they really didn't care much if they lived or died.

"We don't have much choice. Let's go for it."

An opening in the straight line of the coast showed. It wasn't where the maps said it should be, but it did break the surf-bound ramparts.

"And see that?" he said, pointing to a faint trickle of smoke rising there. "That means men. We'd better be cautious."

The three Villains kept the boat's head into the wind as they all put on their fighting gear; the choppy up-and-down motion made it awkward, but they managed. Ingolf and the others wolfed down rabbit cooked that morning and some biscuit, grimacing at the sawdust taste of the thrice-baked bread. It hadn't been very warm out on the water and it was cooling now, enough that

the padding and armor didn't make you sweat much. Kuttner wore his usual odd cuirass of overlapping plates of leather boiled in wax, with metal buckles and trim, its color a russet brown contrast to the oiled gray of the others' mail shirts; his helmet was round-topped, with a spike in the center of its dome and hinged cheek-guards.

Ingolf settled his shete over his shoulder, made sure that his bow was protected in its waterproof oiled canvas case by his feet—moisture could play hell with the laminations of a horn-and-sinew recurve—and then turned the boat into the sheltered waters.

Those were shallow; the keel gave a nasty tick that made the rigging groan and everyone lurch as they crossed in from the sea.

"What was that, Captain?" Singh said, pointing west.

"I didn't see anything," Ingolf answered, concentrating on avoiding the green patches as he wended his way towards the shore.

"I saw a flash of light to the west, further up this coast. Like sun on glass, I thought."

Kaur nodded. Ingolf sighed: "There weren't supposed to be any tall glass buildings here, either. We'll see."

Ingolf had been right; the land around the low spot was mostly forest where it wasn't reed-rustling salt marsh. The trees weren't very tall, forty or fifty feet at most, but the trunks thick and gnarled, with a dense understory of bushes. He recognized white and black oaks, chestnut, beech, maple, pine and hickory; the broadleaf trees predominated, lush in their summer foliage. The smell reached him, strong even compared to the sea-salt and the marshes, earthy and wild, familiar from the wooded hills of home and yet a little strange.

Compared to it, the habitations looked small. Six boats were drawn up, wooden twenty-footers; he got the binoculars out and looked. They were open undecked craft made of planks that looked hand-sawn, with oarlocks and unstepped masts and furled gaff-sails. Behind them was a little hamlet of six long rectangular houses, built low with a mud-and-stick chimney coming out of the shingle roofs and earth heaped up against the sides. The chimneys were idle, and the smoke came from a central open hearth in a cleared space.

He switched the view; there were fish-drying racks with the catch on them, and more fires—very low smoldering ones, giving off a low dense haze.

That must be to smoke 'em, he thought.

Ten or twelve acres around the hamlet were planted, amid haggled-off stumps that showed how the land had been cleared. Lush growth hid the soil; there were cornstalks wound with beans, pumpkin-vines, tomatoes, the tops of potatoes, turnips and more. A buzzing midden a thousand yards away looked to be mostly oyster-shell; when the wind backed and shifted they got a powerful whiff from it. Otherwise the community seemed pretty tidy; there was even a paddock fenced with split rails, though no stock in it he could see.

"I don't think this bunch are wild-men," he said. "Not the usual kind at least. How many do you think, Singh?"

"Forty. Sixty if they pack close in those houses," Singh said. "Perhaps twenty fighting men at most, counting boys."

His sister gave him a look, and he cleared his throat and went on: "And perhaps some strong women. That would be as many as could row those boats, as well. You are right, Captain. That is not a wild-man den. Those are people."

Ingolf nodded. "Doesn't mean they're friendly people, necessarily."

He focused on the edge of the woods. "Looks to me like they cleared out when they saw us coming in, but they're watching from there."

Decision firmed. "We'll go in, but cautious. Get one of the anchors and some line."

Two hundred yards from shore they dropped it; it splashed in and sank away to the bottom twenty feet below, and he could see the puff of sand as it struck through the clear water. Then they jerked the heavy rope to see that the flukes had set, and paid out line as they sculled the sailboat closer to shore. He halted them when the bow just touched bottom; that way they could snatch themselves out fast if they had to, pulling up the line. They dropped another anchor and secured it with a slipknot; he took a deep breath.

"Let's go."

The water was cold on his skin as he jumped in and waded ashore, filling his boots. The long shadows of twilight went ahead of them. The others followed, holding their bows above their heads to keep the wet off; then the Sikhs went on ahead, while Kuttner and he covered them as

they looked in each of the long huts in turn.

When they came back Singh handed him a leather pouch. The deerskin was well-tanned, butter-supple, and worked with a design of porcupine quills and shell beads, with bits of plastic and old glass added.

"That's good tanning," he said, sniffing at it; the rich mellow scent of leather was strong, along with smoke and some herb it had held once. "Brain and bark, I think."

Singh nodded. "There are three or four families in each of the houses, Captain, from the bedrolls. The tools are mostly from before the Change, but look at this."

It was a hoe, with a skillfully shaped handle; the head was a large shell, probably adequate in this light sandy soil.

"Right." Another deep breath. "Let's talk to them."

He walked beyond the buildings. They all held up open hands, yelling about their peaceableness and waving come on. Eventually people did, moving out of the thick brush along the forest edge with a skill that made him blink. A dozen men in hide breechclouts led, aged from early teens to their forties; their hair was shaved on either side of the head and gathered up into a standing roach, with a pigtail behind, and they held light javelins settled in the groove of a yard-long throwing stick ending in a hook. They had steel knives, too, and hatchets.

Behind them came an older man in similar dress, and a woman in a buckskin tunic that reached to her knees; as they got closer he saw that her braided hair was gray-streaked yellow, and she was the man's age or nearly, looking a bit older because she'd lost most of her teeth. He was Injun, though of no tribe Ingolf knew, with ruddy light-brown skin and flattish features, stocky and looking very strong for his size, with thick scarred forearms.

Hmmm, he thought, looking at the younger men again. A couple looked like white men, a couple like Injuns, and the rest mixed. Nothing odd there; I've seen enough blue-eyed Sioux out west, and red-headed Anishinabe up north. People had shifted around a lot, right after the Change, and settled where they could.

The woman looked at him steadily. When she spoke, it was as if the English language came haltingly to her, the sound a little rusty; and there was a trace of an accent he didn't recognize, one that turned out to be aaah.

"You are... not..."

The man beside her was probably her husband; he spoke himself, in a complex-sounding language full of quick-rising, slow-falling sounds, then made a crook-fingered grabbing gesture with his right hand.

"The Eaters of Men," she said, probably translating; it sounded that way, not quite English phrasing.

The other locals lowered their weapons, a few smiling at the strangers.

"No, we're not, ma'am. We're from the Midwest—Wisconsin, me. We're... explorers."

Suddenly tears were running down her face. "Oh, it's been so long!"

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"... came out here from Innsmouth three weeks after the Day," said the woman who'd been Juanita Johnson once, and now thought of herself as Sun Hair. "The Emergency Committee had cut the ration to just one little bowl a day at the Distribution Center and there was fighting every day with the refugees..."

The Day? She must mean the Change, Ingolf thought, nodding.

"My father and mother, my uncle John and Aunt Sally and Mr. Granger and Lindy, the Smiths, and us kids... I was fifteen. Things were already very bad, and the rumors..."

She licked her lips again, then took Ingolf's bowl and reached out to spoon more fish stew into it with a wooden ladle; the cauldron was made from the bottom half of an aluminum trash barrel. It was good stew, full of chunks of white cod-meat and scallops and vegetables. The firelight shone on the faces—the warriors closest, and the two-score of women and children behind. He caught glimpses, of a naked toddler huddled up against her mother, of another younger one at the breast. They murmured among themselves; mostly the odd-sounding language, but in it were English words he caught or half-caught.

It was cooler now that the sun was down, not chilly but close enough to it that the fire's warmth was grateful on his skin. A couple of the older people had cloaks or blankets around their



shoulders, made of glossy pelts.

"Later we realized they must be true. A few times in the years after that, boats came here... hunting... and we had to run or fight. Dad and Uncle John loaded everything we could find, the tools and seed and the three goats from Uncle John's place we'd hidden from the Committee, and we headed out. I don't know where Dad was really hoping for—he talked about going north to Maine. But there was a storm, and we were cast ashore here, we managed to get most of our stuff out but the boat was wrecked."

She frowned. "I haven't thought about it for a long time... I knew about Nantucket. I'd been there. This isn't Nantucket. It looks a little like it, but the trees... and the people. They're the, we're the —" Another word in that language; she smiled and thumped her forehead with the heel of her hand. "The People. Or the Sea-Land People. They're Indians, and they'd never heard of white men. Or metal, or growing corn, or... or anything. They said nobody had—they used to visit the mainland before the Day, only they say it was all forest too, and relatives of theirs lived there, not cities and things. Then there was a dome of fire, colored fire, and when it went away they were here. When my family got here they were sick, someone had already come here and left, I think it was chickenpox. Most of The People died of it. There'd been about a hundred, but only two dozen lived."

All the watchers shuddered at the word chickenpox; some of them made signs that were probably for protection against evil magic.

"But they're good people... and they had food, they knew how to fish and hunt. We stayed, and we helped with the sick, and learned to talk to them, and showed them things, and they showed us... My Dad died six years later, drowned while he was out fishing. Mom got sick with something a year after that, I don't know what, it was awful; she had this pain in her stomach... Uncle John built boats for a hobby, so he knew how—"

Ingolf finished the food and set the plastic bowl aside as Sun Hair rambled through her tale of years, of children born and folk dying, of learning and forgetting.

I don't think she's really wandered in her wits, he thought. Just a little strange, like a lot who had a hard time in those years. Hers wasn't as hard as some. But Christ, this is weird!

He knew the history of America before the Change, at least in outline; he was a Sheriff's son, after all, an educated man who could both read and write fluently and cipher well. He'd read through an entire book on it, the Time-Life one, and another bound together from several carefully preserved National Geographics with wonderful pictures. This island was near where the first English had settled, four hundred years ago. And the Injuns they met had been farmers, albeit without iron or cattle or horses. How long since Nantucket had been covered in oak trees, peopled by folk who'd never seen corn?

His mind quailed at the gap of years. Of course, it must be possible. It's here, isn't it? And if God made the Change, why not this?

Kaur and Singh were looking bewildered. Kuttner looked like he was three sheets to the wind, and had been smoking something strong along with it. His eyes glittered, a look like lust. He leaned forward and cut in:

"And Nantucket town? There?" he said, pointing east.

Sun Hair began to cry; her husband put an arm around her. "That's where my boy Frank went!" she sobbed. "And he never came back! He never came back to me!"

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"I don't like doing this to them," Ingolf said, looking back at the Sea-Land People.

This was as close as they came to the great fish-hook harbor where the maps said Nantucket town should stand. So far all they'd seen was forest and game-trails, weaving to avoid patches of marsh and a few open old-field meadows. They were lamenting, weeping and throwing their hands rhythmically into the air at this act of suicide by their guests.

Morning sunlight speared through gaps in the forest canopy, thinner here right near the sea, and seemed to surround the locals with a nimbus of light as they wept and swayed.

Good people, he thought.

They'd had plentiful reason to fear and suspect outsiders from the mainland, but they'd taken the travelers in without hesitation once they saw they weren't wild-men. One girl in particular had been very friendly later that night... though he suspected part of it was that they had a real limited

selection of mates here if they wanted to avoid inbreeding. Singh was looking sort of sleek, too. They moved forward; the trail was overgrown, and Singh and Kaur unlimbered their shetes and cut at ferns and blueberry brushes. Then they were in open country; on a neatly trimmed stretch of green, though that might be the angora goats the Sea-Land people kept, descendants of the original nanny and her two kids.

Light flashed, through his eyes, through his upraised hands, through his mind as he shouted in protest. The moment of pain was endless, and over instantly. And—

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Sheriff Ingolf Vogeler sat in his chair of judgment, looking down at the bound thief. It was a formal room, with a shelf of books, and black-bordered pictures of his father and brother Edward on the wall behind...

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"Christ!" he wheezed.

For an instant, two complete lives warred for possession of his mind, and he realized he didn't even like the pompous self-righteous bastard he might have been.

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Troop-lieutenant Ingolf Vogeler looked down at the Sioux arrow that sprouted in his chest; he toppled slowly forward in the flame-shot night, dropping his shete as the choking salt invaded his lungs, dead on the day of his nineteenth birthday...

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Ingolf Vogeler looked at the slowly rotating hologram model of the molecule and knew he wasn't going to get the parasmallpox to do what he wanted...

"Save, store and restart from 1C," he growled, reaching for the can of Mango cola.

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Somewhere his body took another step forward. Images of the land ahead of him strobed through his eyes—or perhaps not through his eyes. A quiet cobbled street lined with brick buildings.

Ruins. The same cobbled street, with people in weird clothes or nothing, and vehicles that floated on turning silvery balls that seemed liquid somehow.

Planes of crystal light turning through spaces that hurt his mind like razors slicing at his flesh, too big, too big. Something stretched, gave way, like a guitar-string stretched around the universe, shivering with a note that vibrated from fire to darkness and back to fire.

And Ingolf Vogeler was stumbling forward. He walked, there were stones beneath his feet, but someone else was walking just a second to the side of him, like standing between two mirrors and watching yourself recede into infinite distance. The building ahead of him was square, with five windows across the upper story, four and a door flanked by white pillars below, comely in an antique fashion like some of the older buildings back home, what an old man had told him once was called the Federal Style. A flag hung from a pole over the white-painted door, the old US flag of stars and stripes.

The door opened. His hands and feet moved at normal speed, but somehow it took an endless effort of will to keep them in motion, a harder struggle than freeing a bogged horse once, when he stood in the muck and strained until the muscles of his stomach started to tear loose. Blurred after-images floated behind every movement.

A hallway, with strange magnificent pictures—one of a blond woman in a skirt made of strings. And a voice, a voice that spoke within him, a roar of white noise that he struggled to understand. He felt like a tiny spout, with a torrent vaster than a waterfall trying to force its way through. He could not, and he must.

You are not the one. You must find him. Travel from sunrise to the sunset, and seek the Son of

the Bear Who Rules. Tell the Sword of the Lady what awaits him.

A door swung open, slowly. The light behind it was terrible, and more than anything in all the world he wanted to turn away, turn aside, but he knew it would shine wherever he turned his head.

Blood dribbled from his bitten lips, and the sting was sweetness.

The sword hung there. He craved it, and dropped to his knees, beating his fists on the floor, wailing the anguish of denial.

## CHAPTER SIX:

Dun Juniper, Willamette Valley, Oregon

December 17th, CY22/2020 AD

"You poor man," Juniper said, leaning forward and putting her hand on Ingolf's.

The easterner looked wasted again as he stopped. Rudi frowned; he wanted to know about the sword.

First and foremost if it's real, he thought. That was a wild tale!

A glance at his mother's face brought him back to a host's obligations. She frowned at Ingolf's silence, then leaned forward and tapped him on either cheek.

"Uh!"

His eyes were wild and blank for a moment. Then he licked dry lips and took the cup of hot borage tea she pressed on him, drinking with a trembling hand and spilling a little.

"Sorry," he said huskily. "Haven't... I tried to keep from thinking about that." He swallowed again.

"So, I'm crazy, right?"

"This sword," Juniper said. She met his eyes and held them with her own. "It was a longsword, double-edged, with a guard like a crescent moon, and a pommel of moon-opal held in antlers. Is that it?"

Rudi's breath caught. She had shared that vision with him, but as far as he knew with no other. A great relaxation came to Ingolf's face, as if some tension were unwound at last.

"Christ, I'm not crazy, then?"

"No, my poor Ingolf, you're not. It's far worse than that."

Just then Aunt Judy walked into the Hall. She gave an angry hiss as she saw Ingolf's face, came up and took his pulse. Then she examined his eyes; he moved his face obediently to her prodding, passive as a child.

"Juney, are you trying to kill my patient? I said he could talk, not be wrung out like a dishrag!"

"I'm sorry, Judy," Juniper said meekly. "We can stop now."

"We certainly can! I want this man in bed, now. I'll get some green oat milk in wine to calm him."

"I want—" Ingolf began.

"You want a good night's sleep, so you can tell us the rest tomorrow," Juniper said. "We've a guest room ready for you here in the Hall. And Judy's word is final on matters of health!"

Unprompted, Rudi came forward and helped the other man rise, then took an arm around his shoulder. When they'd put Ingolf to bed he stopped in the corridor outside the guest room, and looked at his mother.

"Who's the sword for?" he asked bluntly.

Juniper looked at him, and he was shocked to see that the leaf-green eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, my son," she whispered. "You know as well as I. What did they call Mike, your blood-father?"  
The Bear Lord.

"And what did the Powers speak through me, when I held you over the altar in the nemed?"

He didn't need to speak that, either. That was when she'd named him Artos, in the Craft. And... to himself, he whispered what she'd said:

"Sad winter's child, in this leafless shaw—  
Yet be Son, and Lover, and Hornéd Lord!  
Guardian of my sacred Wood, and Law—  
His people's strength—and the Lady's sword!"

"I don't want to go," he said softly. "I thought... not yet." His eyes went out past the walls of his home. "I'm not a boy any more, mother."

They both knew what he meant; that he was old enough to know how easily and quickly a man could die. Ingolf's tale had rammed that home anew. He went on:

"And I don't want to leave you and father and Maude and Fiorbhinn," he said. "Or the Clan, and home. Someday, yes, but... not yet."

Love and sorrow warred in Juniper's eyes. "I don't want you to go either, my darling. I just don't think you've much choice."

Rudi's temper flared for a moment: "I thought we were the Lord and Lady's children, not their slaves!"

Her palm reached up to cup his cheek. She was a full nine inches shorter than he, but he felt like a child again at the gesture. Then she tweaked his ear sharply and he jumped.

"Yes, we are Their children," she said. "So are cockroaches... and crocodiles... and crocuses.

We are not the sum whole of the scheme of things! So don't be thinking that They'll necessarily favor you, any more than I'd put you before your sisters."

"Sorry, Mom," he said after a moment. A grin. "I've been hanging around with Christians too much, sure and I have. Nice people, a lot of them, but they've got a strange way of looking at things."

"Oh, my dearest one," she said.

Her voice choked a little. Suddenly he noticed how many gray threads there were in the mane that had always been so fiery fox-red.

When did that happen? he asked himself, and put an arm around her shoulders. She turned into it and rested her forehead on his chest. Her quiet voice went slowly on:

"And They can be as harsh as sleet and iron, as the wolf in winter and Death itself. They have given you so many of Their gifts for a reason. And a man who refuses a duty They lay on him is... not punished... but... forsaken. And he will never know love or honor or happiness again."

He shivered at the look in those infinitely familiar green eyes; they were looking beyond.

Then they squeezed shut, and tears leaked out, sparkling in the lamplight; she grabbed him by the plaid.

"But how I wish you didn't have to go to that dreadful place! I am so frightened for you, and it will only get worse!"

"There, and I was just grouching," he said, holding her close and remembering her rocking his troubles away. "I'll come back with a shining sword and fine tale, since the Powers would have it so. It's just that I would have them be a bit more open about the reasons for it all!"

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Rudi Mackenzie dreamed. The air was sweet and mildly warm, smelling of earth and growing things; some crop that grew in leafy blue-green clumps stretched to the edge of sight in neat rows separated by dark, damp turned earth. A well-made road ran through it, neatly cambered with crushed rock, and a milepost stood nearby. It was granite, hard and smooth, and the rayed sun on it was cut deeply, but time had still worn it down until the shape was only visible because of the slanting rays of the real sun setting in the west.

A crack and a wretched gobbling sound came from behind him. He turned, or at least his disembodied viewpoint did. A score of... creatures... were working their way down the rows of the crop.

They look like men, he thought absently.

A little; they stood on two legs, and their hands held tools, digging-sticks of polished wood set with blades of smooth stone. But their legs were too short and the arms that hung from their broad flat shoulders too long, and the heads sloped backward above their eyes. Those eyes were big and round, on either side of a blob of nose and set above big chinless thin-lipped mouths; it made them look like children, somehow, and the more horrible for that. The naked bodies were brown, sparsely covered in hair.

A nondescript-looking man with a loose headcloth covering half his face rode a horse behind them, a long coiled whip in his hand. He swung it again, seemingly to relieve his boredom; the creatures were working steadily and well, jabbing the sticks downward in unison every time they took a step forward. Another worker jerked and moaned as the lash laid a line across his shoulders, then turned his too-big eyes down and drove the stone-headed tool into the earth again.

No. They're not men, but their ancestors were, Rudi's bodiless presence thought.

Then he woke. Shudders ran through him, and he could feel sweat running off him to soak the coarse brown linen of the sheets. That turned chilly quickly in the damp cold air of winter. The girl who was sharing his bed had awoken too; she snapped a lighter on the bedside table and touched it to the candle in its holder.

"What a dream," he gasped, clutching at the blanket as if it would help him keep the shattered, fragmented images clear. "My oath, what a dream!"

"It must have been, Rudi!" Niamh said.

Her blue eyes were wide as she tossed back tousled straw-blond hair. Like half the people in Dun Juniper she was an apprentice from somewhere else, in her case studying under Judy Barstow. They'd been friends and not-very-serious occasional lovers for years; she didn't want anyone long-term here, since she planned to go back home to Dun Laurel when she was consecrated as a healer.

"You clouted me a bit, thrashing around the now, and I couldn't wake you."

"Sorry, Niamh," he said contritely, shaking head and shoulders and letting the dream go. "Maybe it was just a sending from the fae."

Who weren't all kindly, he knew, particularly those from the wildwood. Looking around grounded him; he'd slept in this room ever since he stopped using a pallet in his mother's. It had a cluttered look and a lot of souvenirs; there was his baseball bat and glove—he'd been first batsman for the Dun Juniper Ravens Little League team as a kid—and the images of the Lord and Lady over the hearth he'd carved when he wasn't much older. A shelf was stuffed with his books and ones he had out from the Dun's library. A stand in the corner held his armor and weapons.

The blanket was of his mother's weaving, done while he was a captive of the Association in the War of the Eye, a bit worn now but still beautiful with its subtle pattern of undyed wool in shades of white and brown and gray. He smoothed it and lay back.

"What was it, then?" she said, yawning and laying her head on his shoulder. "A sending? Or just a dream?"

"It's never just a dream," he said. "But... you know how it is."

She nodded. There were dreams, and then again there were dreams, and deciding which meant what was as important as it was difficult.

"On the whole, I think it was the Powers telling me to get my shoulder to the wheel and my arse in gear," he sighed.

"Oh," she said. Then: "Something to do with that cowan Ingolf?"

His mouth quirked in the candlelit dimness; cowan was a term for those who didn't follow the Old Religion... and not an altogether polite one, either.

"So much for secrecy. Yes, but don't ask me anything more about it... yeeep!"

"Anatomy. I'm just studying anatomy."

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Castle Todenangst, Willamette Valley near Newburg, Oregon  
January 14th, CY 22/2021 AD

"Yes, I gave them hospitality in Gervais," the dowager Baroness of that holding said, glaring at the three faces across the broad malachite table from her. "Why shouldn't I?"

She was a gaunt woman with gray streaks in her blond hair; Sandra thought the green silk of her long cote-hardi dress went badly with her rather sallow complexion.

The Lady Regent of the Portland Protective Association answered calmly:

"Why? Because it would have made me look very bad if it came out that a noblewoman of the Protectorate had done that, particularly if this man they attacked had been killed... and our own children were there. Questions raised in the Lords. Questions raised in Corvallis at the next Meeting. Embarrassment, fines laid on the whole Association... I do not like being embarrassed, Mary. Do you understand?"

Sandra was an unexceptional woman in her fifties, petite and round-faced. Her stare could still make others flinch; it did now.

"I understand, my lady Regent."

"Good. Then don't let it happen again. You have my leave to go. In proper form, Mary," she said.

The baroness halted, made a sardonically precise curtsey that bowed her head just a hair more

than manners required, and stalked out.

Sandra steepled her small elegant fingers and cocked her head a little, looking at the door through which Mary Liu had just gone in high dudgeon. It was massive, of light-colored oak over a steel core, and Liu hadn't been able to slam it, which must have annoyed her no end.

"Do you know the problem with the Dowager Baroness Gervais?" the Lady Regent asked.

Conrad Renfrew, Count of Odell, took a walnut out of the bowl on the table between them and cracked it between finger and thumb, tossed the nutmeat into his mouth and thought for a moment while he chewed.

"Is the problem that she's an evil, murderous, spiteful bitch who's conspiring with these assassins from the cow-country?" he replied meditatively.

He was a thickset man in his fifties who'd always been built like a fireplug and had put on a little solid flesh lately. He wore casual-formal dress, a wide-sleeved shirt of snowy linen beneath a brown t-tunic cinched with a studded swordbelt, and loose breeches tucked into half-boots; a heraldic shield on the tunic's chest held his arms—sable, a snow-topped mountain argent and vert. His face was hideous with old white keloid scars, his eyes blue under grizzled brows, and his head as bare as an egg with less need of the razor he'd used in his youth.

"No, that's not the problem," Sandra said, toying with one of the trails of her silk wimple.

"She's a stupid, evil, murderous, spiteful woman who can't even speak a simple English sentence without translating it into High Formal Bitch?"

"No, she's bright enough. What she lacks is self-knowledge. I, for example, am fully aware of the fact that I'm an evil, murderous, spiteful bitch. And that I like it that way. Mary Liu just thinks she's hard-done-by and never given her due and has to stand up for her rights in a hostile, unfeeling world. And her habit of self-delusion leads her to do things that are quite unwise. Attempting to deceive me about helping this Prophet fellow, for example. If I said Mary, darling, as one evil bitch to another—don't... Why, she'd be quite insulted."

All three of the nobles sitting about the table in the presence chamber chuckled. It was in the Silver Tower, sheathed outside with pearly granite originally stripped from banks in Portland and Vancouver when Castle Todenangst was built by the Lord Protector's architects and labor gangs in the second and third Change Years.

That color scheme continued within; white marble floors, light silk hangings, elegantly spindly furniture of pale natural woods or antiques salvaged from mansions and museums in the dead cities, only the rugs providing a blaze of hot color. A workshop in Newburg had spent two decades rediscovering the secrets of Isfahan and Tabriz carpets, but with modern themes; local wildflowers, hawks among trees and tigers creeping through reed-beds beside the Willamette. The air smelled slightly of jasmine and sandalwood; the closed windows kept the noise of the great fortress-palace and the cold bright January day at bay, leaving only the slight hissing of the gaslights and an occasional gurgle from the recessed hot-water radiators behind their screens carved with scenes from the Morte d'Arthur.

Conrad of Odell cracked another nut, dropping the shells into a Venetian-glass bowl.

"Stop showing off, Conrad," the third person said. "So you can still crack walnuts with your fingers. So what?"

She put one on a ceramic coaster and tapped it open with the plain brass pommel of her dagger; the two halves of the shell fell neatly apart. Then she continued:

"Big fat hairy... hairless... deal. You're Lord Chancellor now, and I'm the new Grand Constable. Breaking things is my job, and the method doesn't matter as long as the job gets done."

Tiphaine d'Ath—Baroness d'Ath in her own right, very unusually for a woman in the territories of the Portland Protective Association—was the youngest present by fifteen years, which put her in her mid-thirties.

In contrast to Lady Sandra's headdress and long-skirted cotte-hardi of pale silk and dazzling white linen she wore male garb; in her case, black silk and velvet, with arms of sable, a delta or over a V argent in the heraldic shield on her chest. Her face was calm, as it usually was; strong-boned, with pale gray eyes and hair so fair it would take a long while for the first gray strands to show, worn in what another age would have called a pageboy bob. She was tall for a woman, just under five-ten, built with compact long-limbed grace. Some people called the Regent the spider. They called her henchwoman Lady Death, in a pun on her title.

Nobody laughed. It wasn't that sort of joke.

"I'm not spiteful, in any case. Murderous, evil and a bitch, yes; spiteful, no," Tiphaine added, taking

a sip at her glass of wine after eating the nut.

"Some would say a duel a month for six months shows a certain amount of spite," Renfrew said, smiling; she'd been his protégé too, if not for so long as she had been Sandra's. "Particularly since you cut them to ribbons and they died by inches, screaming. Quite a performance; you couldn't have done better with a dungeon and its entire staff. Fulk De Wasco looked like he was naked and nailed to the floor even while he still had his sword."

"No, that was policy, not just fun. If Lady Sandra wanted me as Grand Constable, since I'm a woman I had to kill some of the more inveterate assholes, and in a way that would intimidate the others. A sword through the throat doesn't scare them enough; they're mostly too stupid to be cowards. Doing a little preliminary carving and trimming around the edges does give them pause for reflection at the closed-casket funeral, for some reason."

"Everyone knew you were good with a blade," Renfrew said. "Even Norman realized that, and he wasn't what you'd call the equal-opportunity type."

"He was smart enough to believe his eyes, when he didn't let his obsessions get in the way. With some people you need to use visual aids to make a point. I'm still a freak of nature, but I'm a freak they don't dare to diss."

A long-haired Persian cat jumped up on the table. Tiphaine dumped it unceremoniously down; Sandra smiled slightly.

She wouldn't have dared to do that once, she thought, tucking a lock of her graying brown hair back under her headdress; the silver-and-platinum band around it chinked softly.

Aloud: "Isn't it interesting that this Prophet fellow was prepared to send assassins all the way to Mackenzie country? And isn't it even more interesting that they knew this Vogeler was heading there? What do we know about these people? Refresh my memory; I've had more pressing business lately."

"It's a father-son team running a cult," Tiphaine said, speaking without consulting the notes in the folders before her. "Our sources aren't certain if the son is natural, or adoptive and the natural son of the woman who ran the cult before the Change."

"The Church Universal and Triumphant, yes?"

"Yes, my lady. Generally known as the cutters, or at least their musclemen are, or the Corwinites, from their headquarters. It's in the country just north of the old Yellowstone National Park. They were there before the Change, and already had a couple of rungs missing from their ladders if you ask me, but the Prophet moved in and took them over with a group of followers in late '98 and added a lot of new stuff."

"He's not native there?"

"Rumor has it he was in California on the day of the Change itself. He'd been blowing up scientists in the 80's and 90's—had a major hate-on for technology—and he was in jail in Sacramento. He escaped in the confusion, felt that God had personally answered his requests with the Change, and headed for Montana. That he got there does say something about his survival skills."

They all nodded thoughtfully; California had been a charnel house as bad as anywhere on the globe, that day when the lights went out... and the water stopped coming through the pipes that kept nearly two-score million alive in a natural desert. Not one in a thousand had lived through it, the ones who'd run early and fast; reports said there were places where the desiccated corpses still lay three-deep on the edges of the Mohave, despite a generation of sun and wind and crows and coyotes.

Dead as LA, went the proverb.

Tiphaine went on: "The new management of the C.U.T. started small just after the Change, but they've been expanding recently, both by straightforward conquest and by conversion; they cover most of what was Montana by now, and chunks elsewhere. If they take over you convert or die, so it snowballs. I've looked into the theology. They're..."

Her tone remained flatly unemotional as she paused for a moment to search for the appropriate phrase and then resumed: "... mad as Tom O'Bedlam. Living on a different planet. Fucking bughouse nuts."

"Yes, I've perused it a bit, too," Sandra said. "Even stranger than the late unlamented Pope Leo here. Sort of a mishmash of Christianity and Buddhism and every lunatic and charlatan from Madame Blavatsky on, with an explanation of why God sent the Change, too—floods having been tried before, as it were. And they're getting uncomfortably close, if they win this war with New

Deseret. I wish we had access to this easterner Vogeler who was involved. The Mackenzies didn't exactly brief Mathilda on it."

Conrad's brows went up; when the scars on his face moved, he looked more like a gargoyle than ever. "The CUT are a bit far away to worry about, surely?"

"That's the time to worry. Knowledge is power. And now that we've absorbed the Palouse—"

"The western half of it," Tiphaine said, with pedantic accuracy.

"—there's only Boise and Deseret between us and them."

Conrad shrugged massive shoulders. "You're the sovereign. They're basically a bunch of sheep-shaggers, though. And they think anything with gears in it is sacrilegious, don't they?"

"Yes, but you should read more widely in history, dear Conrad. There are any number of cults which've caused no end of trouble, though their first followers were few and poor. Especially when they preach salvation at the sword's edge. In the event of trouble, how are we placed?"

She knew most of the answer, but it never hurt to go over the facts again. Conrad's blue eyes took on a slightly abstracted look. He'd been an accountant by trade before the Change, as well as a fellow-member of the Society for Creative Anachronism and a close friend of Norman and Sandra Arminger.

"The Treasury's got a full year's revenue on hand in cash, our paper is trading at par and we can borrow at excellent rates if we have to—the customs and excise taxes are blossoming nicely with the way trade's picked up. It would be even better if it weren't for the Haida raiders and plain-and-simple pirate scum all over the Pacific basin."

"The pirates we'll have to leave to the naval powers like Tasmania, but for the Haida we need a Warden of the Coast. But who to appoint Marchwarden? Piotr has the most lands in that direction, but..."

"But I wouldn't appoint him to supervise an orgy at the Slut and Brew," Conrad said.

Tiphaine nodded. "There's Juhel Strangeways, Lord de Netarts. He's competent, and even fairly honest. And he already has County Tillamook in ward, for Lady Anne. It'll be..."

"Five years until she reaches her majority," the Regent said.

"By then, he could have the place organized. He already dealt with that Haida raid, October before last."

"A matter in which our Rudi had a hand," Sandra said thoughtfully, stroking the cat in her lap. "He attracts trouble as sparks fly upward, that boy."

"Coincidence?" Conrad rumbled.

"I'm far too paranoid to believe in coincidence, Count Odell."

The other two smiled. "Neither do I," the man said, and Tiphaine nodded. "De Netarts, for Marchwarden of the West, then?"

Sandra nodded, and he went on: "The basic mesne tithes are coming in without too much trouble as well; it's easier now that we don't have to split them with the Church."

Sandra smiled like a cat. That had been one of the many reasons she'd unobtrusively arranged for Pope Leo to shuffle off his mortal coil, and for Portland's Church to be reunited with Rome—or rather with the Umbrian hill-town of Badia, which was where the Swiss Guard had escorted the remnant of the Vatican when Rome went under.

Poor Norman, he did so want a Pope of his own in true medieval style, and Bishop Rule was just the sort of madman to suit the role, once he'd decided that God considered everything since about June 15th, 1297 a mistake. Of course, the Change was some evidence for that... on the whole, though, Pope Log is preferable to Pope Stork.

Despite the occasional tussle with Benedict and his successor Pius XIII over things like the nomination of Bishops, and despite how useful a tame Inquisition had been. One sane Pope six months away was far easier to deal with than an all-too-active lunatic in Portland, and it had made reconciliation of a sort possible with Mt. Angel and the other so-called Free Catholic bishoprics. Mt. Angel's mutant order of warrior Benedictines was becoming uncomfortably influential, through its budding university and with its daughter-settlements helping the more badly battered areas get on their feet again.

Stalin had meant mockery when he asked how many divisions the Pope had, but in the end his bewildered successors had found it didn't matter; and men-at-arms and castles could come into the same category. At seventh and last men were ruled from within their heads by ideas as much as by clubs from without, and a careful ruler kept it in mind. The Church of Rome had outlasted any number of systems that looked stronger than iron at the time, and had ridden out many



storms that claimed to be the wave of the future; she was wise with years, and infinitely patient, and bided her time.

Best to take advantage of that, for herself and her daughter and her daughter's children to come, rather than trying to build dams against it.

Conrad nodded, as if reading her mind. "We're making a mint off the salt-works on the coast and the Columbia tolls, too. Basic population has more than recovered from all those laborers who left after the Protector's war."

They both scowled slightly; of all the conditions imposed after the Portland Protective Association's qualified sort-of-defeat in what everyone else called the War of the Eye, the one allowing peons to leave without paying their unpayable debts had hurt hardest. Everyone had a lot more land than farmers to till it, even now. People were wealth in the most fundamental sense, strong hands and backs to work and fight.

"Between natural increase and immigration from the more chaotic areas like Pendleton, which unfortunately goes to the other realms as well as to us, and the fifty thousand left in the Palouse when we annexed it—"

Sandra smiled her cat-smile, and Tiphaine d'Ath nodded, and Renfrew grinned. It had even been voluntary.

At least, it was voluntary on the part of the collection of Sheriffs and strong-arm types who took over there after the Change, she thought. And their sons.

They'd been unable to compose their own feuds—not least because of the Association's subtle pot-stirring—and had been left in the end with a choice between the neo-feudalism of the PPA and the iron-fisted centralized autocracy of the United States of Boise under General-President Thurston. Now the Free Cities of the Yakima League were surrounded by Protectorate territory on three sides, too, and could be squeezed, as long as she was subtle and indirect about it.

Conrad went on as she mused: "—we're up to about four hundred thousand people all told. Portland-the-city's nearly as big as Corvallis now."

Sandra shifted her gaze to Tiphaine; the military was her responsibility. She'd been Conrad's deputy there for years, before getting the top command last year when the Count of Odell decided to concentrate on his Chancellor hat.

"The sons of the knights we lost in the war are grown now, or mostly," the Grand Constable said. Which was fortunate. It took years to train a mounted lancer; the best had to be virtually born at it.

"What with that and new creations, when we call out the ban and the select militia, we can field twenty thousand men and keep them in the field as long as we need. A thousand knights, four thousand men-at-arms, a couple of thousand good light cavalry—horse-archers, mainly—and the rest infantry. Half crossbowmen, who finally all have modern rapid-fire models, and the rest spearmen. I think we should raise some pike units like the Bearkillers and Corvallans, but that would take a lot of retraining time."

Tiphaine and Conrad started an argument about the relative merits of eighteen-foot pikes versus spear-and-shield; Sandra ignored it while she thought. She'd never pretended to be a soldier of any sort, any more than she was an engineer. You found people who knew what they were doing and left them to do it... provided you also found ones you could trust.

"— admit the phalanx has an advantage on open ground but pikemen are too specialized for my taste. Spearmen are more flexible, and—"Conrad said.

Sandra cleared her throat. "The big picture, please. Proceed, Tiphaine. And if we're pressed?"

"In an emergency? Forty thousand if we call the arrière-ban for a defensive war, though of course those won't all be as well trained and it would be awkward during the harvest. The castles in our core territories are all in good shape, the armories and emergency food-stores are full, we've got reserves of trained destriers to replace horses lost in the field, the river fleet on the Columbia is fully ready, and we've finally got the field artillery up to spec as well as the siege train."

"Problems?"

"The Palouse. We haven't had time to get it castellated properly yet, so it's vulnerable in a way the rest of our territory isn't. The strongholds there are mostly earthwork-and-timber, motte-and-bailey at best. The local lords can't afford to rebuild right away. Also the roads there are lousy—the fools haven't even been filling in the potholes or keeping bridges from washing out, and the railroads are a wreck. But if we try to make them repair twenty-two years of neglect overnight, they'd be bankrupt. Except that they'd revolt first, of course."

"I presume we have the necessary plans ready to fix the situation?"

"Of course, my liege; we started on that before the annexation. It's simply a matter of money... a very great deal of money."

"How much?"

Tiphaine named a figure, and Sandra winced slightly. Then she held up a finger:

"Conrad. Do you think you can get the Lords to approve a special subsidy for infrastructure improvements in the Palouse, along the new eastern border at least?"

The stocky man winced in turn. The Association's landholders didn't like paying even the standard assessments, and an extra one would cost him political capital—which was to say soft-soaping, bribing and threatening.

"Yes, if you think it's worth the trouble. And it will cause trouble," he warned.

"Twist the necessary arms—I have some files you'll find useful. It'll keep the new lordships in the east sweet if we loan them the money and supply engineers and materials. I could pay it out of the Privy Purse, but I prefer to keep that for unforeseen emergencies."

Renfrew gathered up his papers. "I'd best get on to it; young Lord Chaka will see sense, I think. His mother will help. Stavarov will cause problems but I can talk him 'round if I offer some of his people land..." He raised an eyebrow at her.

"By all means, but bargain hard. I want to keep as much of the vacant areas of the Palouse in the Throne's demesne as I can. Granting land is a lot easier than getting it back, unless there's a convenient case of escheat for treason."

He nodded and made a formal bow, kissing her extended hand and grinning like something carved on a waterspout: "Farewell for the nonce, Sandra, you evil bitch."

"That's my sovereign liege-lady and Regent of the Association evil bitch to you, Conrad."

Laughing, he bowed again and turned to go. Sandra pulled at a tasseled cord; the door opened smoothly and showed the corridor outside, with the guards standing to attention; their mail gleamed with a gray oiled sheen as they brought their spears to the salute.

When the door closed again, Sandra stood, gently stirring a cat out of her lap. "Come," she said to Tiphaine.

The warrior-woman helped her into a long robe of white ermine, and they walked out onto a balcony, closing the sliding glass doors behind them. The day was bright and sunny for January in the Willamette, with only a few drifts of high cloud; you could just see Mt. Hood's white cone to the east, over the battlements. Above it a glider swooped, its long slim wings dark against the aching blue of the sky.

The two women's' breath smoked as they looked down, into a flagged hexagonal courtyard twenty feet below. It was overlooked by two stories of barracks and store-rooms on all sides as well as the Silver Tower. Todenangst was full of things like that, unexpected crannies and vantage-points. She'd put most of them into the plans herself; Norman had been much more... straightforward... and not nearly as fond of Peake's work as she.

"They say this castle had a man's bones in it for every ton of concrete poured," she said, with a nostalgic smile for the grand adventure of those early years.

Sometimes I think we only got away with it because nobody could believe how crazy we were.

Tiphaine nodded; she'd been newly come to the Household then, and barely fourteen. "I remember a bit of it; they used to throw the bodies into the mix, sometimes. You kept telling the Lord Protector it could wait until we had the farms fully up and running again, and he said it could wait, but he just didn't want to, he wanted his castle and he wanted it now."

"Poor Norman, that was his great fault. He was in too much of a hurry to realize his dreams; it killed him in the end, as much as Havel did. If only he'd known how to wait, he'd be alive today... and we'd have it all. I miss him."

The courtyard below was one where her private guard exercised. Rudi and Mathilda were there now, in Protectorate-style armor, based on early-medieval models; she was resting for a moment, watching him take on three knights of the Household. Odard called the start with a flourish of his white-painted wand:

"Kumite!"

The knights spread out; Rudi waited for a moment, smiling faintly. Then he leapt, so quickly that it wasn't even a blur, more as if he stretched out impossibly for a second. A flat crack sounded as he slammed into the closest of them, one big kite-shaped shield slapping into another, Rudi's tucked close into his left shoulder in perfect form. The knight was knocked flying with both feet off the ground, to land flat on his back with seventy pounds of armor and gear to drive the wind out of

him. His sword pinwheeled through the air to land with a dull clang.

Rudi whirled before knight or blade landed, caught a sword on his own shield and cut backhanded into the side of the second's helmet with a crashing bonnnngg, and met the third blade-to-blade before he could strike himself. The knight was good—the Household took only the best, and trained rigorously—but he seemed to be moving like a slo-mo scene in the movies in the old days, while Rudi wasn't.

Or he moves like that tiger we had at the baiting, the one they matched against the bison bull. So much power, and so fast...

After a flurry impossible for an untrained eye to follow the Portlander stopped and looked down at the rounded point of the blunt practice sword just inside the split skirt of his mail hauberk and prodding at the leather of his breeches. In a real fight it would have hamstrung him and opened the femoral artery.

He swore admiringly and stepped back, letting the point of his own blade drop to the earth and his shield dangle from the guise, the diagonal strap around his neck. He and the young Mackenzie high-fived each other as the other two clambered groaning to their feet, grinning ruefully.

"He's very good indeed, isn't he?" Sandra asked.

"Yes, my lady," Tiphaine replied, without taking her cold grey eyes from the scene below. "When my team took him back in the War, he was ten—and he cut a grown man badly with his knife and would have killed another if he hadn't had a mail-lined jacket on. Now... You know what the pagans say of him?"

Sandra nodded, smiling. "That his secret name is Artos, and that he's the chosen Sword of the Lady? Yes? There was the prophecy at his birth, and that thing with the raven right after the war, at his mother's wedding. That was a wonderful touch, if Juniper stage-managed it."

Tiphaine shuddered slightly at the memory. She had been there, although not in the front rank, and she tried not to remember it... because when she did the all-sufficient cynicism her mentor had taught her was shaken. The rumors hadn't lost in the telling over the years, either. Instead she hung on to her clinical detachment as she went on:

"Well, he's so far up the bell curve that I'm tempted to believe it myself, sometimes. It's not natural—and I helped train him these past twelve years, on his visits."

"I do believe in his legend," Sandra said, then chuckled quietly at Tiphaine's raised brow. "Oh, not the pagan gods; they're as much a myth as Jehovah or the Risen Christ, whatever dear Juniper thinks. Myths are lies; but I believe in the power of myths the way I believe in rocks... rulers have had the various pantheons carrying water for them since the first con-man met the first sucker, and priest-craft was born. That was long enough ago that they were probably both walking on their knuckles."

Mathilda took up her shield and walked out to face Rudi. The mail hauberk she wore rippled in smooth gray-white, a treasure that had taken a team of experts more than a year to make from double coils of titanium wire.

"And my daughter?" Sandra asked.

Tiphaine pursed her lips; her duties had included the warlike part of the Princess' education since the girl turned nine. She also knew that Sandra Arminger hated inaccurate information with a passion.

"It's a disadvantage being a woman, of course, even if it's not as much of a one as our macho idiots think. The Princess is... very good, enough to hold her own on most battlefields. About as good as Odard, say. That means she's better than him in natural talent, since he has an extra twenty-odd pounds of muscle on his upper body. And she really works at it. But she's not in the same class as Rudi. Not in mine, either, frankly. She's fast, far faster than average, and very strong for her weight... but Rudi's faster than that."

Sir Odard was standing ready again with the referee's white baton. He waited until they faced off, then brought it down sharply and shouted:

"Kumite!"

Tiphaine hesitated for a moment, then went on: "He's faster than me—and I've only lost a hair off my best speed so far."

Tiphaine was a little past thirty-five, and she'd been an up-and-coming junior gymnast before the Change, only out of the running for future Olympics because she was too tall. Sandra had rescued her and seen the possibilities...

"And he's strong even for his size; he can lift and toss twice his own body-weight, even in a full

hauberk. I've got a lot more experience, which makes up for it... so far."

"Interesting," Sandra said, narrowing her eyes. "Of course, Mathilda will be ruling, not fighting with her own hands. She only has to be good enough to win respect among, as you so accurately put it, our macho idiots. Iron on their shirts, iron between the ears."

Tiphaine chuckled slightly, which was the equivalent of a belly-laugh for her.

"And the joke is?" Sandra Armingier said; normally the remark would have won only a slight narrowing of the eyes in amusement.

"Here we are in the Land of the Iron-Shirted Machos, and the people making the decisions at the top are nearly all women. You, my lady, me... Mary Liu, the Dowager Baronesses of Dayton and Molalla. And Juniper Mackenzie and Signe Havel, down south."

Sandra's own laughter was warm and genuine. "Well, not so surprising, Lady d'Ath, Grand Constable of the Association. So many of first generation of the male upper nobility got themselves killed, one way or another."

"That happens in this business," Tiphaine replied, tapping at the long hilt of her own blade. "You have to be smart and lucky to die old—which our distinguished Chancellor looks to be doing. I probably won't," she added clinically. "Too many people hate me and more will before it's over. You should start grooming possible replacements."

Mathilda and Rudi were circling, the big round-topped kite-shaped shields up under their eyes, longswords held over their heads hilt-forward. Mathilda attacked first, boring in with a fixed snarl visible even from above and through the bars of the practice helmet.

"Haro, Portland! Holy Mary for Portland!"

"Morrigú! Morrigú! Blackwing!"

Blades clashed, banged on shields, rattled on mail, thrust and cut and parry in arcs that glittered silvery-cold in the winter sunlight, striking at head, hip, thigh, neck without pattern or warning. The supple young bodies moved with a beautiful minimalism despite the weight of the metal confining them.

"Mathilda seems very determined," her mother said.

The heir to Portland moved aside from a shield-up rush by letting one bent knee relax and swing her out of the way, cutting at the back of Rudi's leg with a viciously economical swipe. He caught the blow aimed at his hamstring on the long tail of the shield, whirled...

"Oh, she is. She's got the anger, the fire in the belly; most of the best fighters do. She hates being taken lightly or coming in second in anything, which I can sympathize with, and it drives her hard. It's like fuel, once you learn to ride it rather than be ridden."

"Rudi, on the other hand, always struck me as a very sunny-spirited boy," Mathilda's mother observed.

Tiphaine's long fingers tapped at the vines carved into the marble of the balustrade. "True... and he kills without fear, or anger, or hate, with regret even, simply because it's necessary. That's rare, and it's rarer still among the really first-rate. God help the enemy that finally frightens him or makes him mad."

When they went back into the chambers, Tiphaine sank to one knee and formally kissed Sandra's hand.

"My lady liege," she said. "I'd better start getting things ready, if you scent a war."

"My dear, as one evil bitch to another... it's beginning to smell very much like that."

Alone, Sandra sat again and toyed with the cat that leapt into her lap, teasing it with the ends of her wimple. She had always found that an aid to thought.

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"Hello? Mother?" Mathilda said, as the guards thumped the door shut behind her.

"Ah!"

The slight figure in the chair started, and the cat gave a silent meow and jumped down. Mathilda turned and called:

"Agnes! The lights, please."

A silent maid-cum-secretary in double tunic and tabard came out and turned up the gaslights and returned to wait against the wall at the far end of the chamber, hands folded.

"I was deep in thought, love," her mother said. "Is it dinner-time already?"

The early January sun had set; Oregon was further north than you might think from the climate,

and the winter days were short. Soon the yellow flame made the mantles glow bright, and Mathilda sank down on the rug near her Sandra's feet, taking off her hat; it was the usual round flat type with a roll of cloth around the edge, and a broad silk tail at one side.

"Not quite. I thought I'd sit with you a while, if that's OK and you're not too busy. I always enjoy sparring with Rudi, it makes me better even though he wins. But I don't like it as much as he does."

"Likes to fight, does he?" Sandra said thoughtfully.

"Oh, yeah. He says there are only two reasons to fight."

"Which are?"

"Joy and death."

Her mother's brows went up. "Joy in death?"

"No, no... For joy, to stretch yourself with a friend; or death, to kill as quickly as you can. Nothing in between."

She frowned. "I can see what he means, but it isn't that way for me, not most of the time. I mean, I like practicing with arms, but you put a sword in Rudi's hand and he's... transported."

"And waxes poetic about it. He's a young man of some depth, our Rudi... but if it's going on for dinnertime, you should change to a cote-hardi for the meal," Sandra said gently. "We'll have important company. You have to wear skirts occasionally, you know, or... ah... people will talk."

"Or people will think I'm Lady Tiphaine's girlfriend?" Mathilda said dryly. "Or vice versa, accent on the vice."

Sandra gurgled laughter. Her face was still smooth in her fifties, and the wimple was kind to it, but that made the laughter-lines stand out around her brown eyes. Mathilda joined in the chuckle; in fact, Tiphaine's lover was and had been for twelve years a miller's daughter from Barony d'Ath by the name of Delia. Who was in theory a lady-in-waiting to the Baroness and who'd been ennobled by an equally theoretical marriage to a knight who had no more interest in women than the current Grand Constable had in men. Her children had been the result of intervention by a pre-Change turkey baster. The two of them were quite ridiculously devoted to each other and completely monogamous.

The cream of the jest was, of course, that Lady Delia de Stafford was delicately beautiful in an entirely feminine way and a complete clothes-horse and never wore anything less than the height of fashion—female fashion. Since she was cheerfully ready to lie truth out of Creation about it (being a secret witch, as well, and therefore not in awe of Christian sacraments), her naively sincere confessor was among the few at court who didn't at least unofficially know or guess. Tiphaine's own chaplain had been carefully chosen for complaisance, guaranteed by the files Sandra had on him.

I suppose that's sinful, what they do, Mathilda thought.

She certainly liked boys herself; she'd enjoyed kissing a couple, Odard and Rudi among them.

But she was also fairly proud of the fact that she was still a virgin, and intended firmly to remain so until her wedding-night. And she fully confessed everything she could think of in meticulous detail, tried her best to repent, and dutifully did every penance set. Sometimes the thought of her mother's files made her a little queasy; even more so the thought of reading and using them herself, even on priests. Better than chopping off heads or burning people at the stake, but...

A ruler has to kill sometimes, for the good of the realm and the people. Blackmail, that makes you feel... dirty. Mom has to live like the spider they call her, at the center of a web of paper and secrets.

"Rumors aren't a joke, though. They can hurt; they can kill," Sandra said. "As a ruler, you can protect someone like Tiphaine... which helps ensure they're loyal... but if people believed rumors like that about you, it could threaten your position. Which means threatening your life. Don't ever doubt that."

Mathilda nodded. And it's a sin even if it doesn't hurt anyone else. But it's not as bad as a lot of things some people do, like bullying peasants or waging blood-feuds over some piece of nothing. We have to kill to live sometimes, but it's not something you should ever do lightly. Besides, I like Delia. It's lucky I don't have to confess other people's sins. Father Donnelly is sort of strict... I wonder why Mom picked him for me, and not someone she could control?

That reminded her of her worries. "Mother... I've been thinking."

"Something I heartily recommend," Sandra said, her eyes shrewd as always.

It was a bit daunting, sometimes, to realize that she was always thinking, and always had been.

Even more daunting to think of living like that, never saying or doing anything without having a dozen possible consequences dart through your mind.

"Mother... when I'm Protector..." She'd come of age for that in five years; you had to be older than the heir to a lesser title. "Will I really be Protector?"

"Ah," Sandra said; she sounded satisfied somehow. "I was wondering when you'd ask that."

"Well, will I be? Like Father?"

Sandra smiled again. "There will never be another Norman Armingier," she said. "What you mean is—will you really hold the power, as I do?"

Mathilda nodded, and her mother went on:

"That depends entirely on you, my dear. It won't be easy. Half the nobles will want to marry you, or have their sons marry you, and rule through you; and you must marry, and fairly soon—a ruler's first responsibility is to have an heir, to keep the peace after you're gone. It would really be best if you married and had a child before you come to the throne; a ruler should have an adult heir, and at least one spare, and it's better if they have an heir in turn before coming to the throne. Your father and I would have had more children, if we could have."

Unspoken was what would have happened if one of those had been a son. Mathilda went on:

"But if I married anyone here, or their heir, wouldn't that turn the others against me? As long as I'm single, I can sort of keep them guessing and trying to court my favor. The way Elizabeth did."

Sandra silently clapped her hands. "Bravo! But you don't want to die childless the way she did, do you, my dear?"

"Well... no. I want kids, someday. But not whole litters, like Victoria; just four, that would be perfect—two boys and two girls. A small family's better, I think... what's funny?"

"Nothing, my dear. Just reflecting on how perspectives change."

"Like you said, I can't not have any. I mean, we don't have a lot of relatives; nobody like James Stuart was to Elizabeth the First. It's my kid or they fight over the throne 'til the last one standing takes it. And they might rip the Protectorate apart doing it."

She made a moue. "James wasn't any great prize, but he was better than a civil war."

"Smart Stuarts were few and far between," Sandra agreed. "Charles the Second, maybe, though he was lazy."

"And... there's Rudi. He wouldn't be, you know, here a lot; he'd never want to live here all year 'round. And the Mackenzies are definitely going to hail him Chief after his mother, now that the Assembly's made him her tanist. And the fighting-men here all respect him. A lot. If it didn't turn everyone against me, those who were against me would really think three times about revolt—I could call on the Mackenzies for help. And I like him muchly, and God knows, he's cute as hell."

Sandra nodded. "You know his mother and I have talked about that. But it would be chancy. He's a witch, he'd never take the Faith even in form, and the Church isn't as much under our control as it was in your father's day. Plus there'd be the question of what religion your children followed—no witch could ever rule here, and no Christian in Dun Juniper. A lot of our believers and priests would be angry enough at a pagan consort. That could mean trouble; assassination attempts, say."

"If I died without an heir, who would succeed? The Grand Constable?"

Sandra looked at her and smiled again, this time slow and fond. "That's my girl! No, Tiphaine couldn't lead a big enough faction. It would be Conrad, probably. Though only after a fight. He doesn't actually want to be Lord Protector, but he'd take it rather than let some of the others in."

"And the Stavarovs and the Joneses and the others know that, and that helps keep me alive," Mathilda said.

"Bravo! And he does have an heir already—three—and very able lads they are, too, with very good matches already lined up. But your father built all this for you, my dear. You have a duty to his blood."

Mathilda nodded slowly. Her mother went on:

"And some of the rest of the lords will try to rule through you whether you're single or not, and some will be ready to bring the whole Association down in wreck as they jockey for power, if they're not restrained... or occasionally, killed. I'll advise you as long as I'm around, of course, but the decisions will be yours. You'll have Conrad and Tiphaine and a few others you can trust but ultimately it's your wits that the realm will depend upon."

"I think... I think the common people will support me. And the town guilds. If I offered charters..."

Sandra nodded; Mathilda could see she was pleased.

"Yes, for what that's worth, they would support you; they know what a cabal headed by someone like Count Piotr Stavarov would be like, and they want a strong Protector to keep the barons in line. But remember, this isn't the Clan Mackenzie or Corvallis or even the Bearkillers. What counts here in the end is the great tenants-in-chief, and their vassals and men-at-arms and their strong walls, and if you do anything that unites all of them or nearly all of them against you, they'll destroy you. Your father knew that—it's a balancing act. They have to be afraid of you, but not too afraid, or for the wrong reasons. You'll be stronger than any one or two or three of them, but not all of them. They've tolerated me because I leave them alone beyond enforcing their dues and keeping them from killing each other too often. And because we got hurt badly in the War and the uprisings, which left a lot of widows ruling for underage sons—you won't have that advantage." "A lot of them would like to make the peasants serfs again," Mathilda said with sudden bitterness. "The older ones, they give me the chills, sometimes. I know... I know that Dad did a lot of hard things, but he had to."

Or did he? a small voice within her wondered.

She lashed back at it:

He did save all sorts of people! Portland is the only big city we know about that didn't have everyone die! And the whole country around here has more people than almost anywhere else that was near a town before the Change. If it weren't for Dad there wouldn't be anything human left between Seattle and here and Eugene except bones boiled for stew.

"But the Change is a long time ago. We don't have to be like that any more. I want to be a good ruler," she said, the words tripping over each other. "I want my people to love me."

She managed to throttle back the next part: I don't want to rule like Dad... or even like you, Mom. Sandra looked at her, and there was no fathoming her expression, except that there was love in it. "Those are two things that don't always go together, my darling," she said.

## CHAPTER SEVEN:

Mt. Angel Monastery,  
Mother House—Order of the Shield of St. Benedict  
Queen of Angels Commonwealth, Willamette Valley, Oregon  
January 10th, CY 22/2021 AD

Abbot-Bishop Dmowski rose from his knees before the image, feeling them creak and pop as he signed himself and turned back to his desk and sank into the swivel chair. He was a broad-shouldered man who had been thick-muscled most of his life, but going a little gaunt now as white and gray replaced the blue-black of tonsured hair and short-cropped beard. Pale blue eyes showed beneath his shaggy brows, in a square pug-nosed face graver than the smile-lines said was natural. He put his palms on the silky polished wood of his desk and sighed.

It was not the one of plain pre-Change metal he'd used for so many years; on this last Christmas he'd come in to find that the brothers had replaced it with one they'd been working on in secret for years. This one was mostly burl-grained walnut, and the panels on the sides and front were carved with Biblical scenes, and the top shone with the intricate patterns of the dark grain.

He sighed again. He hadn't had the heart to demand that they replace his old desk and turn this one over to the town mayor down in town, as had been his first impulse.

I still miss that old monstrosity, he thought. I have seen so much change in my life—the Change most of all—that I find myself craving stability more and more. Perhaps not the worst of yearnings in a monk, but I must be cautious that it does not cloud my judgment as head of the Order. Even God knew mortality and change when He became flesh in this fallen world, and we must remain supple before time's gales.

The top of the desk was painfully neat with its piles of paper, inkwell, seal, pens and typewriter for very private correspondence; he had been a soldier before he found his vocation, and then again after the Change when Mt. Angel became the core of survival in this corner of the Willamette, and he was a precise and methodical man by nature and training. The office walls held a crucifix, a Madonna and Child done in a spare style that looked—and was—both Eastern and very old, and abundant book-cases, stocked with works on everything from agriculture and medicine to theology, tactics and engineering.

There were few personal items. A framed photograph of a middle-aged woman with a square

face, tired and lined and resembling the Abbot's own more with every year. Also framed was the Rule of the Order of the Shield that Pope Benedict had returned with his approval when contact was reestablished, together with an addendum in his own hand: Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

He opened several files and arranged them before him, pulled the plug out of the speaking-tube and called: "Send in Father Ignatius, please, brother."

The young soldier-monk came in, bowed and kissed the bishop's extended ring, then stood at the Order's equivalent of parade rest—feet at shoulder width apart, head slightly bowed above braced shoulders, hands clamped together beneath the concealing sleeves of the robe. Behind an immobile face, Dmwoski smiled at the earnest discipline of the young man. It reminded him of himself, once—though there were aspects of the younger generation he would never understand, short of Heaven.

We are separated by the death of a world and the birth of another. Perhaps never since Noah and his grandchildren has there been such a division.

"Your reports on the Vogeler affair have been excellent, my son," he said. "Be seated."

Ignatius perched uneasily on the edge of the chair. "Thank you, Father," he said.

"You have familiarized yourself with this?" the bishop went on, tapping another folder.

The younger cleric drew a deep breath. "Yes. Extraordinary! Nantucket is the center of some disturbance of space and time, possibly the epicenter of the Change itself."

"That is apparently so. The Holy See's information and the... evidence... that the British visitors brought make it plain."

"I wish they had stayed longer, Father."

Dmwoski shrugged. "They had told all they knew. What is also plain—not least from your work, my son—is that the Mackenzies have other information from this Vogeler with respect to Nantucket. Information that they have not shared with us."

Ignatius frowned, though his hands rested motionless on his thighs, one sandaled foot flat on the ground and the other bend back slightly beneath him. Dmwoski's lips quirked slightly—the young man was in the First Position For Swift Drawing, quite unconsciously ready to leap, whirl and strike. Mt. Angel's martial training bit deep. There were times when the Order of the Shield reminded him a little of tales about Shaolin monks from the old days.

"Father, I think that... they would only do so in a religious context. The Mackenzie herself does not keep secrets for the pleasure of it, and the Clan, frankly, usually leaks like a sieve. I would ordinarily say that while capable of many wonderful things, they cannot keep their mouths shut for any reason whatsoever. But in this case..."

Dmwoski nodded. "Yes. In their view of the world, the Change must necessarily be of supernatural agency."

Ignatius looked up, startled into showing his surprise: "You do not think so, Father?"

Dmwoski allowed himself a smile. "All things are accomplished according to the will of God, but He usually acts through mortals and through the natural world. Miracles would not be miracles if they happened every day, would they? Their purpose is to show us a possibility."

The Abbott's face grew somber: "And while even evil is made to serve His purposes in the end, those purposes are beyond our comprehension. If it serves His purpose to deliver the world to a catastrophe such as the Change, He may well have done it by allowing... oh, the aliens that the Corvallans postulate... or wicked or heedless men misusing or misunderstanding the laws of nature. Or it may have been God allowing the Adversary to exert his power."

"Or, with respect, Father, it might have been a veritable miracle, as when He stayed the sun above Joshua."

Dmwoski nodded. "All things are possible to Him, Brother. If that was the cause of the Change, then of course no probe of its source can do further harm. If however mortal hands and minds were the agency... who knows what might result? Even to the destruction of the world."

"Pray God and the Saints that may not happen!" Ignatius said, eyes wide in shock.

"Pray indeed; but God imposes on us a duty to act in this world. I would be much more comfortable if one of our own were involved in any expedition to Nantucket. The more so as the followers of the false Prophet seem to have an interest in this—and perhaps know things which we do not."

Ignatius looked down in thought. "You mean to give me this task, Father? I will of course obey, but would not an older and wiser man..."



He is frightened, Dmwoski thought. But not for himself; he fears failure only. Good! God deliver us from recklessness and arrogance masquerading as courage!

"Such a journey will require a young man in his full strength," Dmwoski said. "Also you have already successfully completed several difficult missions, both military and diplomatic; your teachers give you excellent reports."

"Thank you, Father. But how exactly am I to gain access to any mission the Mackenzies launch? I am reasonably well-liked there, for a Christian cleric and an outsider, but I am a Christian cleric and an outsider and the Clan are... clannish. I presume that is your intention, rather than the Order sending an expedition of its own?"

Dmwoski nodded. "Needs are infinite, resources always limited, my son," he said. "With the threat of the CUT, the Order will need all its strength. One man—one man of unusual abilities—we can spare. More we cannot."

His blue eyes grew shrewd. "And if the Mackenzies send their tanist—"

"They will, Father. Given the legends which surround his birth and early life, it would appear inescapable to them. And he is a... a most formidable man. As a warrior I have not met his match, save possibly the Grand Constable d'Ath; and he has equal intelligence. And much more charm as well."

Dmwoski nodded. "Just so."

He supposed there must be some people who liked her, but even putting her private life to one side, personally he'd met snakes who had more charm than Tiphaine d'Ath. He knew the Cardinal-Archbishop had contemplated excommunication, and had only refrained when a tacit agreement was reached that she would abstain from the sacraments most of the time.

Aloud he continued: "But consider also the relationships which Rudi Mackenzie... Artos Mackenzie... has acquired in that storied and adventurous young life of his."

"Ah," Ignatius said, and bowed his head in respect. "The Princess. She and Rudi Mackenzie—"

"Have been raised together and took the oath of anamchara. Which requires the sharing of secrets. If Rudi is to investigate these matters for his mother, he will tell her. She will not allow him not to."

"What do you think she will do, Father?" Ignatius said. "I have little knowledge of her beyond matters of public record and a few meetings."

"She will, I think, find some way to accompany him."

"With respect... I cannot see her mother allowing that!"

"Neither can I," Dmwoski said dryly.

The unspoken: and teach your grandmother to suck eggs made the young man flush, but the Abbott smiled to lessen the sting and went on:

"Nevertheless, she will try. She may or may not succeed. We cannot in good conscience abet her possible defiance of the Regent; it would be politically suicidal as well. But we can..."

"... help her if she succeeds in it," Ignatius said.

"Just so. She is a most loyal daughter of Holy Mother Church, in an independent and occasionally self-willed manner," Dmwoski said.

"Well, she is a princess, born to rule, not an apprentice dairymaid," Ignatius said.

Dmwoski nodded. Wryly, to himself: And to you, my son, a princess born to rule is the most natural thing in the world, whereas I must every now and then remind myself that such things do again walk the world... the Changed world... even if gryphons and unicorns do not.

Aloud he went on: "Considering her parentage, we have been blessed indeed that she earnestly seeks the good. Hence she is likely to accept our help, if events take the turn that I expect."

"But her contacts are primarily with her confessor, and the hierarchy in the Association dioceses, are they not, Father? I assume we are keeping this hypothesis secret from them?"

"Yes. It is necessary. Working through the regular hierarchy in the Association territories is an unacceptable security risk in this matter. They are too intimately involved with the Protectorate's secular governance. Frankly, I would be afraid of the Lady Regent learning too much if we consulted in that direction. Nor do they have any man of your particular abilities."

"And the Princess does not share the prejudice so many Association nobles have against our Order," Ignatius said, nodding thoughtfully.

"Precisely, Brother. If anything, she favors us—from appreciation of our work, and also from reasons of policy as a counterbalance to the Dominicans. Many of whom regret the ending of the schism and the disbanding of Antipope Leo's Inquisition."

Ignatius had lost his doubts; his mind was working quickly behind an impassive face. Dmwoski nodded.

"We must consult others of our brothers, speak at length, and pray for guidance. But I think, my son, that your first step on this journey will be towards Portland."

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Flying M Baronial Hunting Preserve, Coast Range foothills  
Portland Protective Association, Oregon  
January 30th, CY22/2021 AD

This is a bit different from our last hunting party, back last Samhain, Rudi thought. He inhaled deeply. All he could smell was the damp snow, and the deep sweet pungency of conifer forest. The sun was a little west of noon and well south, which made him squint as he watched the edge of the woods ahead, where the snowy natural meadow narrowed down to a point between two steep hills.

The twins weren't with them; they didn't like visiting Association territory, for which he couldn't blame them, and they'd gone off to stay with Hiril Astrid at Stardell Hall. Mathilda was the only woman in the half-dozen actual hunters, though there were a few young ladies-in-waiting and a middle-aged chaperone back at the lodge. Everyone else was a young male Associate, a nobleman; then there were the beaters ahead of them on the other side of this stretch of forest. Rudi held up his right hand. The others came to a halt, spread out across the field where sun-cured grass stuck through the snow in beige-upon-white. Especially after Mathilda hissed at them about hunt-discipline.

The Flying M was in a valley that wound up from the Willamette near Yamhill into the Coast Range ahead and to the west. They'd come further where the tall forest of Douglas fir and hemlocks closed in with a tangle of steep forested ridges, rippling around them in tall dark green ranks. The branches were heavy with the white of the recent snowfall and the Alaskan air-mass was still over the Valley, keeping the air well below freezing.

The wind was cold in his face, and the sound of the hounds was a musical belling at least a half a mile further on—though sound was tricky among woods and hills, particularly after snow. A hundred yards behind them the horses were starting to snort and plunge in the hands of the grooms. Epona bugled her challenge to the scent of predator drifting in from the westward. "He's coming," he said, softly but clearly.

Grins of excitement to match his own ran up the line, breath coming heavier and puffing white in the chill air. The villagers in the first manor east of here said the tiger was a big male, and it had taken several sheep and a cow; they were terrified that it would be a child next.

That might be simply fear talking. The old man-eaters who'd escaped or been released right after the Change had died out by now, though the memory of them remained vivid. As humans grew scarce and better-armed, stalking natural prey like deer and elk and feral cattle and swine in the burgeoning wilderness became a wiser strategy for their descendants. Those who learned, lived. Still, nobody wanted to take chances. To a tiger a human looked temptingly edible, just about the size of a deer, and winter was their hungry season too. You had to teach them to avoid men and their homes...

There was a deep stillness, the snow-hush drinking sound, with their own breath as loud as the quiet creaking of boughs under their white burden. He was in Portlander outdoor dress, quilted jacket and stout wool breeches and fur-lined leather boots, his feet only a little cold, but he'd kept his own yew longbow rather than the crossbow they favored.

The shaft on the string had a hunting broadhead, a razor-edged triangle whose ultimate origin had been a stainless-steel spoon. Mathilda was armed Clan-style too—she'd grown up using longbows part of the year—and the rest carried hunting crossbows with spring-steel prods, the wicked four-bladed heads of the bolts glittering when the intermittent sun broke through the clouds. Everyone had a hunting spear too, with a broad razor-edged head and a crosspiece below that, standing upright with the buttspikes driven into the ground.

Crack-crack-crackle...

He caught that, and Odard, and Mathilda, then the others. That was the sound of frozen snow-laden brush breaking under heavy paws as the great cat moved quickly; Rudi's

consciousness focused down to a diamond point, everything growing crisp and clear and slow. Then a call, as the king predator realized there were men in front of it as well as behind. A moaning mhgh... mhgh... mhgh, building to what wasn't quite a roar, then a deep guttural snarling sound of anger and fear: ouuurrrh... ouuurrrh...

Mathilda spoke: "He's going to break cover! Rudi and I have first shot!"

The tiger eeled through the brush at the edge of the clearing with a delicacy astonishing in an animal that weighed as much as a pony, and stood looking at them from two hundred yards away.

"Big 'un," Lord Chaka Jones said exultantly, his chocolate-brown face alight with pleasure.

"Damned big. Siberian, and pure or nearly."

He was right; it was a six-year-old male in its prime, with its shaggy winter coat a pale yellow-white between the black stripes.

"Ten feet without the tail," Rudi agreed. "Six hundred pounds, easy, maybe seven hundred."

Seeing them it snarled, a sharp racking sound, barring teeth like ivory dirks, ears laid back and golden eyes blazing, tail held stiff and low, twitching slightly at the end. A white puff of breath obscured its head for an instant. It half-turned as if to go back in the woods, but the sound and scent of the hounds brought it around again. The great head went back and forth, looking at the six humans, and then it began to pace forward in a half-crouch, belly almost touching the snow.

"Remember, these things can jump thirty paces in a single bound," Odard Liu said.

"Yes, teacher," one of the others grumbled.

At first the tiger moved step-by-step, placing each foot carefully, just like a housecat stalking a ball of yarn. Then it began a rocking trot... and suddenly it was coming at a flat-out gallop, a series of amazing bounds with a puff of snow shooting from under its rear feet every time it took off and then again when it landed, seeming to float in long gravity-defying arcs.

"You first, Matti," Rudi called.

He bent his bow nonetheless, the yew limbs flexing back into a shallow curve as he drew Mackenzie-style past the angle of his jaw, eyes locked on the white patch on the big cat's chest. Snap.

The sound of the string hitting Mathilda's bracer was sharp and crisp. The arrow blurred out in a smooth shallow arc, and it met the tiger's latest leap at its peak. The elastic grace turned to a squalling tumble; the tiger landed whirling, trying to bite the thing that had hurt it, and he could see the peacock-feather fletching of her shaft against its rear flank. That would kill it... but not quickly. Then it screamed and charged, belly to the ground now, broad paws churning a mist of snow that glittered in the sunlight.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

He shot twice, Matti once, in the next six seconds. All three arrows struck; her last buried itself to the fletching right in the V at the base of the beast's throat. And still it came on with a roaring coughing growl, blood smearing the snow now as it tensed for the last leap.

Then it collapsed, the fierce grace turning to tumbling limpness, flopping not five feet from Mathilda's boots.

"Streak, 'ware streak!" Odard shouted frantically, trying to get into position to take a shot without chancing hitting a human.

Rudi pivoted automatically. He saw blurred yellow-and-black, a second tiger just taking off for the final killing bound, its huge paws spread with the claws ready to grip and the mouth gaping for the bite to the neck. He shot once and threw himself forward under the leap, snatching his spear as he went by. That meant landing in an ungainly heap, and the ashwood shaft cracked him painfully on the knee. Rudi forced himself into a shoulder-spring, coming to his feet and whirling at the same time.

The tiger landed where he'd been, then turned in a whirling spray of snow and blood and slaver, screaming its challenge. It came up on its hind-feet; his arrow had struck it low in the belly, but the wound wasn't crippling or a quick kill. Now it hunched and drove for him. Massive paws slapped forward with the claws out like giant fishhooks in a left-right-left-right that melded into a single slamming blur of movement, each blow strong enough to crack bone or disembowel.

He screamed a snarl back at it, giving ground but jabbing fiercely at its face, short quick stabs to keep it distracted and make it rear and expose the vulnerable underside. One blow landed on the broad spearhead, numbing his hands but splitting the paw against the razor edge as well. The cat screamed again, recoiling from the pain.

"Haro!"

Mathilda drove her spear into the beast's side with a meaty thump, the blade sinking between two ribs until the crossbar stopped it. A second later, Chaka's hit it a little further back, with all the burly black nobleman's two hundred pounds lunging behind it.

Rudi poised for a stroke of his own, but the blaze in the animal's sun-colored eyes went out. It moaned, dropped to the snow and bit savagely at the whiteness with red pouring out between its fangs, then went limp.

Rudi paused, panting and grinning. The three who'd made the kill spent a minute thumping each other on the back and asking if anyone had been hurt.

"Not a scratch," Rudi boasted.

"No?" Chaka said, wiping sweat off his face. "Then how come you're bleeding?"

"I am?" Rudi said, then felt the sting.

A probing finger found a tiny patch of skin gone from the outermost tip of his nose, flicked off by a claw. Three inches closer and his whole face would have gone the same way...

He shrugged off a complex shudder and cleaned his spear by jabbing it repeatedly into the snow and the wet earth beneath it, then wiping it down. The air was full of the smell of blood and the rank tomcat musk of the tigers, and their own sweat. His longbow's string had snapped, probably cut by the spearhead, but it was fine otherwise and he slid it back into the carrying loops beside his quiver; there were arrows to retrieve as well.

Then he stooped, leaning on the spear, and touched a finger to the blood, mingling it with his own on thumb and forefinger and touching it to his forehead.

"Go in peace to the Summerlands and hunt beneath the forever trees, brave warriors," he said quietly. "We honor the fight you made; speak well of us to the Guardians, and be reborn through the Cauldron of She who is Mother to us all."

Then to the woods: "Lord Cernunnos, Horned Master of the Beasts, witness that we kill from need and not from wantonness, to protect our farms and our folk; knowing that for us also the hour of the Hunter comes at last. And to Your black-wing host, Lady Morrighú, I dedicate the harvest of this field."

A few of the Protectorate nobles crossed themselves or touched their crucifixes in alarm as he invoked the Powers—though this time not, he noted, Mathilda or Odard. Rudi suspected some of them were giving thanks that Matti hadn't been hurt for reasons other than love of their Princess; he wouldn't have liked to have to account for an injury to the Lady Regent himself. Then everyone was smiling and exclaiming over the size of the tigers and the rareness of finding a streak—a group—of young males together. Usually one would drive all others out of his territory, even his siblings.

"They might as well be our nobles," Matti said dryly.

Everyone laughed at that. Chaka unstopped a chased silver flask and they all took a sip of the brandy as the foresters and varlets came up to skin the kills. Odard took out a tape measure and sized them both.

"Nine feet six inches and nine feet eleven inches, nose-tip to base of the spine," he said, and stood back to let the servants do their work.

"Not a record, but close," Chaka added. "That's a day not wasted!"

One of the foresters grinned up at Rudi as they turned the animals on their backs to begin the flaying; he was an older man in his thirties, a little gray in the close-cropped yellow hair.

"I've never seen a man move so fast, my lord," he said. "That was a good piece of work, keeping the tabby in play with the spear. You saved yourself a bad mauling there, maybe your life, and perhaps saved a couple of others as well."

Rudi nodded thanks and handed him the flask; he'd never liked being called lord or having people wait on him hand and foot—Juniper Mackenzie had always done her share of the chores, and seen that he was raised the same way. The forester looked surprised, then took a quick swallow and handed it back, with a gasp of thanks; it was good brandy. Rudi drank again and returned the flask to Chaka, then puffed out a cloud of white breath.

"I was just barely fast enough," he said.

"That tiger had reflexes like a cat!" Odard said.

Rudi groaned. "Too close for comfort!"

"Let's get back to the lodge," Mathilda said. "It looks like more snow, to me."

Rudi cocked an eye skyward. It had been cold all day; now the temperature was falling again, and the wind was from the north. The tall firs swayed with it, sending showers of fine white crystals

from the last day's fall down, and whipping up a ground mist. Snow rarely lay more than a few days in the Valley flats, but this was a little higher; it might stick as long as a week here, in a cold winter. He swung into the saddle with the others and they headed back along their own trail; everyone started an old hunting song with a fierce bouncy tune, The Eye of the Tiger.

"A good hunt," Chaka said again when they'd finished. "Nothing like it on a winter's day."

Rudi nodded agreement: "It is one way to liven up the Black Months, and it needs doing. Though it's more fun still if you stalk them alone or with one or two others. The best way is to use a blind over a waterhole or a game trail."

Mathilda smiled quietly; a couple of the others probably thought he was putting it on.

"Oh, come on," one of Odard's friends, a knight named Drogo de Gaston. "I know you Mackenzies are supposed to be hardy and all that, but that's going a bit far, isn't it?"

Rudi grinned. "Well, we don't have as many tigers down in our part of the Valley," he said. "Also all our crofters have longbows, and know how to use them."

That brought more good-natured chaffing, for all that some of these young men had lost fathers under the Mackenzie arrowstorm in the War of the Eye.

Soon the hills swung back, and they were at the Lodge. The Flying M had been a place for country pleasures long before the Change, and it was built in rustic style of notched logs. Smoke whipped almost horizontally from fieldstone chimneys as they pulled up before the verandah of a long low main building; there were some detached cabins for the staff, plus stables and paddocks, and an airstrip with a ramp-and-catapult arrangement that was used to launch gliders in the summertime.

Rudi found it homelike, and flying was one of life's great pleasures, right up there with sex—his blood-father had been a pilot by trade, and had been aloft on the day the engines stopped.

Dinner was roast venison they'd killed two days earlier, and a lot of fun—though he suspected it would have been a good deal rowdier if Matti wasn't present, and the making of assignations with the servant-girls was reasonably discreet under her eye. Rudi refrained entirely.

Though why she minds when she doesn't want to sleep with me herself, I don't understand, he thought. Strange folk, Christians.

When the cake had been demolished, they had the luxury of real coffee. That was still rare and very expensive since it had to be shipped in from Hawaii or South America, through seas that were often stormy and which held more pirates every year—his mother refused to serve it, except at feasts where everyone could have some. He was cautious about it, because he wanted to be able to sleep tonight. The same trade had brought in the oranges and dates and figs that went around with the sweet desert wine. The liqueur was from the Valley's own vineyards but also an import to the Protectorate, from Mt. Angel and done Trockenbeerenauslese-style.

When he and Mathilda were alone by the fire she sipped from the golden-colored stuff in her glass and looked at him levelly before she said:

"All right, Rudi, spill it."

He shrugged. "All my secrets I will share," he quoted, from the anamchara oath they'd sworn as children. "But these aren't all my secrets. They're the Clan's secrets. And you're the one who has to tell your mother no when she asks... which isn't something I'd want to have to do."

She winced slightly, then sighed. "I've done it before and I'll do it this time. Now spill it."

"OK, you remember that guy from the east, Ingolf Vogeler?"

"Yeah," she said dryly. "Seeing as we all nearly got killed saving him. You and he and Juniper were spending an awful lot of time talking."

"It was a story worth hearing," he said, and told it.

"What?" she said, when he was finished, sitting up and putting her empty glass down, impatiently waving away one of the servants who came up to refill it. When they were alone:

"Are you bullshitting me again, Rudi?" Her eyes narrowed. "Because if you are, this is no time for one of your jokes—"

"No, no, I swear it by Brigid and Ogma, may they curse me with stutters all my life if I lie, and that's how we had it from him."

Mathilda's mouth dropped open slightly. "And you all believed it? Juniper believed it?"

"We had reason," he said, going a little grim; and he noted that she thought he was more likely to be credulous than his mother.

Well, fair enough... Juniper had once told him there was nobody more skeptical of charlatans than those who'd been genuinely touched by the Divine. And I've seen a few try to fool her over the years. Anyone stupid enough to try came away sorry and sore; nobody tried twice.

"I'm not all that happy about it, you know, Matti. Things are... awkward. Mother went to the nemed."  
"The sacred wood? Why, what happened?" Mathilda said, startled and alarmed.  
She had never been there except as a spectator for public rites like Juniper's wedding to Sir Nigel at the end of the War of the Eye; even that was pushing the limits of what her faith permitted. She knew what Rudi was talking about, though: a Circle-casting and questions asked of the Powers. That was dangerous at the best of times, and when Juniper Mackenzie called, They were all too likely to answer.

I love the Lord and Lady, but They can be dangerous, he thought, remembering her white-faced exhaustion afterwards.

And They show us the Aspect that is in our hearts. Whether the pot hits the kettle or the kettle hits the pot... I think that's why They move so indirectly in this world. They are... too real... for it to be safe for us to meet Them face-to-face on this side of the Veil. So we see Them in dream and vision and prophecy, and through Their world itself instead. Even for people like Mom, meeting them face-to-face isn't something that can be done too often.

He looked up at her. "What is that bit in your Christian bible? About asking for bread, and getting a stone? They told her something about me—have been saying it since I was just born. And it frightens her. Frightens her for me, and also for all of us."

Matti bit her lip, then shook her head as if clearing it. After an instant she burst out: "How can you think They're good, if They do things like that?"

Rudi found himself chuckling ruefully: "You can't tell everything to a two-year-old, can you?" Then he quoted, with malice aforethought: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, eh?"

Mathilda winced and smiled at the same time, started to say something, then decided not to—they'd learned a long time ago that religious arguments were pointless. Particularly when, as she said, arguing doctrine with a witch was like trying to cut fog with an ax. Then she shook her head, as if trying to bring it back to the world of men:

"Well, what happened after he saw this so-called Sword of the Lady? Wait a minute—aren't you supposed to be the Sword of the Lady?"

"Yeah. It's a Mystery."

Mathilda sighed; there was no answer to that. "What happened next?"

Rudi paused for a long moment, staring into the low blue-and-crimson flames that danced over the coals in the hearth. He shivered a little, remembering the haunted look in Vogeler's eyes whenever he forced himself to think of what had happened on the island.

"Then he came out of that place on Nantucket..."

## CHAPTER EIGHT:

Nantucket, Massachusetts  
September 1st, CY 21/2019 AD

Ingolf Vogeler could hear screaming. After a moment he realized that his own voice was one of the chorus. He staggered backward, and turned his back. His face was slack; before him burned the sword, and the Voice, the Voice...

Travel from sunrise to the sunset, and seek the Son of the Bear Who Rules. The Sword of the Lady waits for him.

He quieted himself, his throat raw. Singh was trembling and gray; his sister's face was wet with tears, the first time Ingolf had ever seen her weep, even when they'd taken a barbed arrow out of her back with nothing for the pain but a slug of whiskey and a leather strap to clench between her teeth. Kuttner lay on the ground, his wide unseeing eyes staring up into the sky, making little mewling sounds where froth and blood mingled on his lips and bubbles blew to his short panting breaths.

And a fourth, a teenager in the dress of the Sea-Land people. He was visibly the chief's son, but light-skinned and his features sharper than his father's, his eyes hazel-green.

Ingolf tried to speak, but it was as if his mouth had forgotten the trick of it. He started to stumble forward, then stopped and grabbed at each of his companions in turn, shoving them towards the forest. Kuttner was the hardest; at first he tried to wiggle on his belly, then crawl forward on all fours like a beast, and in the end Ingolf had to stagger along with one of the smaller man's arms held across his shoulder.

The burden grew less as they walked into the shadow of the gnarled forest, keeping their backs to...

Ingolf felt himself shudder again. I couldn't describe it to save my life. When I try to think about it I hear the Voice again. And the presence of a hundred un-lived lives jostled in his head. Who is Ingolf, then?

That pressure faded with every step; the world itself grew more solid around them, and the memories that weren't died away into a jumble of alien images. They were on a narrow trail through oakwood and smooth-barked beeches, panting and shuddering and looking at each other.

"Mother," Kaur mumbled. "Father. Kalil. Goolab—"

"Chub'rao!" Singh mumbled; it was the language he'd heard the two using between themselves occasionally, mingled with English. "Be silent! That was lies, lies, they are dead, they are dead these six years! Daghbazil! Treachery!"

The young man in the Sea-Land costume was looking around with growing excitement, but it was tinged with fear. He spoke unexpectedly in halting English:

"Time... time is summer?"

Ingolf nodded.

"I go... Place of Dreams... get man-dream... snow on ground. Winter."

Ingolf grunted, scarcely taking it in. They went further, and Kuttner could walk on his own, in a shambling sort of way. Ingolf thought of asking what he'd seen, then looked into his eyes and decided not to. His own brain was starting to work again, and he wondered why the tribe weren't still standing there watching. Had there been something that they could see 'way back there? He found the place they'd stood... and the tracks were old and faded.

It's rained since then, he thought.

He looked at the faint dimpled impressions of bare feet and moccasins among the leaves and litter, and the marks of his own folk's bootheels, and his mind began to whirl again. A beetle walked down into the mark, crumbling a little more sand into it. The outline was soft, not crisp and sharp and recent. Then he looked up at the leaves; they weren't as full and lush as they'd been; in fact, they were starting to look tattered. Sweat prickled him under his armor.

"Let's get going," he said roughly.

They strode down the forest trail. He inhaled deeply to savor the musty scent of leaf-mould, the weight of his shete and quiver on his back, anything real. A squirrel ran up the rough bark of a pine and chattered at him. A deer had gone across the trail not too long ago, mark of the cloven hooves still sharp and distinct.

Finally they came across one of the people from the village, a girl about the age of the young man who'd unexpectedly turned up. She was clothed in a deerskin wrap around her waist, with long reddish hair falling past her shoulders, and carried a reed basket full of wild blueberries. She stopped as she saw them, gave a small shriek, dropped the basket and fled with a twinkle of heels, screaming rhythmically as she sprinted. By the time they'd reached the little inlet and the garden fields around the houses, everyone was lined up. They looked frightened...

Ah, Ingolf thought, flogging his brain into action. They're afraid we're back from the dead.

"We're not ghosts!" he called—despite a momentary uncertainty; what if they were?

The young man with them suddenly cried out and dashed forward. Sun Hair pushed past her husband and caught him fiercely to her.

"Frank! Frank!"

The tense silence broke in joyful shouts.

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"You should stay," Sun Hair said a day later.

"Can't do that, ma'am," Ingolf said, shaking her hand.

They were at the water's edge, and the tide was in; it was barely dawn, and the water further out looked like purple streaked with cream as the sun broke over the eastern horizon. Kuttner had recovered enough to be looking visibly impatient. Even the gulls' sharp skreek-skreek-skreek overhead seemed to be urging him on—though he knew that was probably his own fear. Singh and Kaur were already on board and hauling up the anchor, which was a hint too.

Her husband was there to see them off, along with most of his folk, and his son Frank. The older man spoke to his wife, but his eyes were on Ingolf. She translated the sonorous words:

"My man says you have brought back his son who he thought was dead for half a year. You have good luck with your spirit that turns aside evil magic, and you are a strong man who can hunt and fight and make strong sons and daughters. If you stay, we'll give you our daughter for a first wife, and build you a house and a boat for fishing and whale-catching, and help you clear planting land. The... the... family—"

She waved around at all the people present; the word she was looking for was probably tribe or clan.

"—will be glad to welcome you. Your friends too."

Touched, Ingolf held out his hand to the older man; they shook, a firm hard grip.

"Tell him I'm honored," he said, which he found was true. "But I have my own people, who are depending on me. I am promised to them."

The chief of the Sea-Land tribe nodded; then he held up one hand with the palm out in a gesture of farewell. Ingolf returned it, then waded out into the chill water and vaulted over the side of the sailboat.

And it's nearly two weeks since I landed here, though I only lived two days of that. And young Frank was there six months, and he thought it was only an eyeblink too. I'm getting as far away from here as I can!

He shuddered as the Voice murmured at the back of his mind. It had been loud in his dreams last night. Would he ever be free of it?

"Let's see how getting really far away works," he muttered to himself. The others didn't notice, lost in their own thoughts. "It wants me to go west, anyway. That sounds fine right now."

Even half a continent empty of everything but ruins and vicious savages didn't sound too bad compared to staying close to that place.

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"It's a while after the date I told Jose to clear out," he said as they neared Innsmouth. More than two weeks, in fact, he thought with a slight shudder.

"Then why are we heading back there?" Kuttner asked.

He squinted across the bright water; the wind had been strong and favorable, and it was mid-afternoon. Nothing moved but birds, and leaf and branch waving in the stiff onshore breeze. Further out all you could see was green; now they were close enough to see the buildings staring at them with empty eye-sockets, and smell the faintest tinge of rot and ancient smoke under the greenness of the returning forest.

I will not be back east, even if I lose everything I made on this trip, Ingolf knew suddenly. I'll hoe spuds for a living and sleep in a barn for the rest of my life, before I come east again. This country is poisoned.

"Why?" Kuttner said again, more sharply.

"Because I told Jose to go, but I'm not sure he did; he could have stayed a bit, and rely on talking me around if I show up. If he did go, he'll have left a message. It's not going to be easy, getting out of here alive on foot. Not easy to catch a mounted caravan on foot, either, but we'll be a lot less likely to go into the stewpot if we can."

With fifty men and a train of wagons, you could just bull your way through. Four alone would have to spend a lot of time dodging and hiding. Even on horseback, they'd have trouble catching up. On foot... that would be hard. Everyone was perking up; Singh and Kaur nodded soberly.

Of course, Ingolf thought, If we can get out of here alive, it'll be a lot easier with those two along. They stopped outside the harbor bar to suit up. The tension was almost welcome as they sprang ashore, weapons ready, but the silence remained. Hot sun baked smells out of earth and sea—some familiar, some oddly alien, sharp metallic pungencies and oily half-sweetness. They waited tensely, but nothing moved.

"Wait a minute," he said, and jumped back into the boat.

There was a satisfaction in chopping through the bottom, even though the springy material resisted his tomahawk and then he nearly lost it when it did punch through a weakened patch at last and the splintered fibers gripped it. Water came bubbling through as he wrenched it free; then he slid the handle back into the loop at his back and drew his shete to slash the rigging and the furled sail to ribbons. When that was finished he bent the mast against the joint by hauling on a rope fastened to its top. That took a moment of straining effort, but he was rewarded with a



grating rip of metal, and the aluminum pole tipped over.

"Why are you wasting time?" Kuttner said, when he jumped back to the dock; the sailboat was already listing.

"Because someone might have been watching and getting ideas," Ingolf said, as he sheathed the yard of steel in the scabbard across his back and took up his bow again. "I don't want any of the wild-men going sailing for their meat; that would be poor thanks for the folks who helped us. They're less likely to try it if they don't have an intact boat. Now let's get going."

There was a message, left in a hide bag fastened to a tree with a dagger. That was a message in itself—none of the wild-men had come back, for they would certainly have taken both. He reached inside and unfolded the papers.

One was a letter on thick cream-colored modern paper; some of the fibers in its coarse surface scratched on his calluses. The other was a piece of crumbling pre-Change glossy, with a tourist map of Innsmouth on it. The note was short and to the point:

Capitan, stuff at the X. Killed more wild-men second attack 17th August; lost Smith, Alterman and Montoya. We left 20th; see you in Des Moines if not before. Go with God.

X turned out to be a warehouse, a blank windowless building of rusty pressed metal. On the ground in front of it was a circle of fresh scorchmarks, where a dozen of the magnesium flares had been set off. He looked more closely, and saw the tripwires of a deadfall setup; there was a wild-man, too, dead with a crossbow bolt through the chest. From the looks of the swollen, blackened body and the oily-sweet stink and the maggots, the man had been there for at least three or four days, in weather like this. Kuttner had his shete out and was glaring around.

"Relax... relax a bit," Ingolf said.

The lowan indicated the body. Ingolf nodded. "And nobody came back to eat it," he pointed out.

"Jose set this up. Let's see what he left us."

They approached the doors warily, which proved to be wise: Singh pointed out another tripwire, grinning as he stood aside and triggered it with a long stick. A tuning sounded from within the warehouse, and a bolt flashed through the air, landing with a crunch sound in the body of a rusted FedEx delivery van across the road.

"That Jose, he is a clever man!" the big Sikh said, looking more natural than Ingolf had seen him since they landed on Nantucket.

"And inside is what'll save our lives."

He'd been pretty sure of what was inside, from the barnyard smell; their horses, plus a remount each and a couple for bearing pack-saddles. There was just enough water left in the buckets and containers set up to last them another day, and the food was about gone. The animals were frantic-glad to see them; Boy came and nuzzled him carefully, making extra-sure it was really him, and incidentally checking him over for anything edible. He gave the horse some dried apples he carried, pushing off the others and trying to decide whether he was angry or grateful.

Some of both, he decided. Sure, they would have died of thirst soon or the wild-men would have eaten 'em, and I really like Boy. On 'tother hand, in the end people matter more than critters. He didn't weaken the Villains much by leaving these, and he probably saved our lives. And Jose isn't sentimental about animals.

That was true even by the standards of a farm-boy, or a horse-soldier who'd seen the trail of equine carcasses a hard-pressed pursuit left. Their tack was there too, plus some extra supplies—jerky and dried berries, spare arrows, pre-sized horseshoes so their mounts could be cold-shod, tools, and basic camping gear. And a substantial share of the melted-down gold and selected jewelry, neatly lashed into bundles of convenient size—convenient for a pack-horse, and convenient to grab and run if you had to leave the beast behind.

Ingolf swore admiringly and shook his head; Jose did think ahead. But then, the Tejano had been a wandering paid soldier for a long time, nearly as long as the profession had existed post-Change. He'd told a lot of stories, including some where the hired soldiers robbed the ones who hired them. And others where the employers were suddenly struck with the thought—after the fighting was over—that dead men didn't draw pay.

Jose's loyal to his friends, he thought. That's for damned sure.

"Let's get going," he said, lifting his saddle and blanket off a crate stenciled to proclaim that it was full of TV remote controls, whatever those were, from South Korea, wherever the hell that was. "I want to be a long way from here by dark."

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Central Illinois  
October 30th, CY21/2019 AD

The prairie's just so goddamned huge, Ingolf thought.

That was the biggest thing about it; the sheer size, and around here it was nearly flat, with a roll you had to concentrate to see over an hour or so of jogging along at walk-trot-canter-trot-walk. In a generation the grasses had conquered anew the empire that the settlers' steel plows had ripped away, and the wildfires had burned out most of the remnants of house and barn and fence.

Tall grass rippled in endless green-bronze surging waves under the mild dry breeze, to a horizon infinitely distant in every direction. The sound of it was an endless sssssSSSSSSsssss, growing and then fading again as each wave went by, over and over, like ocean foam on a sandy beach. Even the noonday sun seemed to hang unchanging for a while overhead.

The scent it baked out of the grass was like lying in a haymow, but wilder and with a spicy tang to it. And there was the first hint of winter to come; it was just cool enough to be comfortable in a mail shirt with a padded gambeson beneath, but the crisp air held a hint that told you a blizzard could hit any time from now on and leave you hip-deep in snow.

The land wasn't much like the forested hills and tilled river-valleys of Ingolf's home, but the weather gave him a pang of nostalgia for the long cool days of Indian Summer along the Kickapoo. Homelike too were the geese and ducks who made ragged V's in the afternoon sky above, their honking a lonely chorus to accompany the beat of hooves and creak of saddle leather.

He'd spent a lot of time in country like this, in Iowa and Nebraska and southern Minnesota. The only trees were clumps marking old windbreaks around farmsteads, and many of those were dead and burnt. A few maple and burr-oak saplings that had taken root in breaks in the asphalt—it protected them from the fires and competition from the grasses. This wasn't his kind of country, but it was a kind he'd ridden often enough, and that was a kind of homecoming.

"Don't get overconfident," he said, sensing the growing cheer of his companions. "We're not home until we cross the Mississippi—or catch up to Jose and the guys."

Singh grunted. "If we ever do, after the way we've had to go back and forth," he said.

Which was fair enough. The last delay had been when they tried to take a shortcut and got stranded in thousands of square miles of renascent wetland the maps didn't show, before finding the trail again—you couldn't just barrel down the old Interstates, not these days. This road was a guess at Jose's probable choices. Too many bridges and overpasses were out. He couldn't even rely on his second-in-command taking exactly the same route back as they'd used coming out, since the local wild-men would be on the lookout for that.

He could have gone further south, to cross the Illinois where it runs north and south instead of east and west, Ingolf fretted.

This had been a secondary road in the old days, two-lane blacktop, and it lay on natural high ground, running northward to cross the Illinois River and connected with old US 80, which would give a good run west to cross the Mississippi at Muscatine. The grass alongside the cracked remnants of pavement was mostly big bluestem, seven or eight feet tall in this season, where it hadn't been flattened by the weather; you had to stand in the stirrups to see over it. The heads branched out into three lobed "turkey feet" over long reddish-blue stems thick as a man's little finger.

Now and then they passed the tilted, rust-tattered remains of a silo or barn; a drumlike booming came from one where the breeze buckled a stretch of sheet metal like a saw flexing between two hands, echoing with lonely persistence over the empty land.

It's just as dangerous here as the east coast, even if it isn't as spooky, he reminded himself. More so, perhaps.

The hordes from the Chicago metroplex had met those from Peoria and even East St. Louis here, and the dieoff had been bad; many had been so ignorant of country life that they'd perished fighting for scraps in the shadow of grain elevators and silos still mostly full.

The children of the survivors were perhaps a bit less like two-legged rats than the ones further east; for one thing they'd been joined over the years by desperate outlaws and broken men drifting in from Iowa and North Missouri over the Mississippi. A few had taken to trading across the river in

hides and furs, and most of them didn't eat human flesh any more. That didn't mean they wouldn't rob and kill—and they had horses and bows and shetes to do it with, many of them.

A stir in the long grass brought his bow up, but it was only a mob of feral cattle. There was no point in shooting, since they had the better part of a yearling elk across one of the pack-horses. The herd crossed the old roadway eastward in a bawling, surging mass as they became aware of the humans, their heads up in fear. Several hundred went by; animals had crossed the river too, and bred back swiftly in these rich empty lands.

They'd seen plenty of deer and elk and beaver as well, and sign of catamounts and wolves, bears and tigers, even a few buffalo. These cow-beasts were lean and rangy and long of horn, but their smell was nostalgic. His father had been a great cattle breeder, and had made Readstown famous throughout the Kickapoo Valley for his Angus and Holstein studs bred up from stock... acquired... right after the Change.

Kaur came trotting back across the fields from the northwest, riding bent over so that she was invisible until she was in earshot except as a ripple in the grass. She shouted their cry—The Villains!—to alert them and reined in, throwing him a casual salute as she came within speaking distance. The brother and sister were ragged and filthy; everyone in the little group was, after two months of flight and occasional fight winning their way west. She and Singh still managed to look as if they were about to be inspected, somehow.

"I saw their campsite, Captain," she said.

"Good! Whereabouts are they headed?"

"The bridge is still up at Spring Valley," she said, pointing back with her bow-hand. "Just go one road over, it's US 89 on the map, straight north on that. But once you're up out of the river flats and the old townsite on the north bank the land is black for a couple of miles—that was as far as I went—prairie fire. Still smoking. Jose left the proceeding as normal sign at the bridge."

"Thought there'd been a fire," Ingolf said—they'd seen the smoke passing from east to west ahead of them earlier that day. "Well, we'll get through the burn fast as we can."

Not having any grain for feed cut how hard and long you could push horses, even switching off with your other mount several times a day; particularly if you wanted them to have any reserve for an emergency, when losing a horse meant losing your life. They stopped to let them graze for an hour or so. He ate some of the elk they'd cooked that morning with notable lack of enthusiasm.

"What I'd give for fresh bread and French fries and catsup," he said.

"Or some vegetables," Singh agreed. "Or an apple."

He looked around at the ground where they squatted, then dug at it with his bowie for a moment, pulling up a clump of bluestem. He had to lean back to do it, with all the strength of his body behind it before the main stem cracked audibly. Some of the roots were as thick as a pencil, and the ground that clung to it was a fine dark-gray whose clods would be coal-black when they were wet.

"This is good land," the Sikh said. "It seems a pity it isn't farmed."

Ingolf nodded; the thought had occurred to him and Jose. "Yeah," he said. "But you'd need at least a thousand people to make a settlement here in the wild lands—and a fort, windmills, all sorts of stuff besides stock and tools and enough to keep you for a year or two until you had a big enough crop in. Not safe otherwise."

Kaur snorted and picked a piece of gristle out from between her teeth. "I will not farm again," she said quietly.

Ingolf tossed a gnawed rib aside and wiped the back of one big hand across his mouth before taking a swig from his canteen. "Let's get to it."

There was the usual short delay as a horse decided it wanted to stop for the night right here, but they were all hobbled and easy to catch. The short route to the bridge lay off the slightly raised roadbed; as they turned into the grass visibility shrank to less than the length of a lance, but that worked both ways—they were no longer visible themselves. Pushing through the tall coarse growth slowed the horses, and you had to watch out for pits and traps; old basements and foundations, pieces of farm machinery that had lain out for better than twenty years, and tangles of elderly barbed wire. Posts burned but the wire endured until rust broke it, unless someone harvested it to make chain mail or a new fence.

The iron-shod hooves crushed a path, and trampled nodding yellow-petaled black-eyed Susans like giant daisies, clusters of purple-blue Ironweed with flocks of silver-spotted skippers hovering about them, and blue gentian. Quail burst out from under their hooves occasionally; Kaur nailed

one to the ground with an arrow before it could flog itself into the air, bent in the saddle and scooped it up, then dropped back to the packhorse that held their meat.

"Bit of a change," Ingolf nodded.

They came up onto another road. He grunted in satisfaction at the sight of saplings crushed down where they'd taken root in broken spaces in the pavement; that and a neat circular space trampled flat in the long grass meant that Jose and the others had come through here with the wagons. He looked at the campfires and over at Kaur.

"Last night?"

"Last night," she nodded with satisfaction.

"By God, if we're lucky we may actually catch them by first dark!"

The river ran through a depression in the flat land with scalloped sides, an irregular ribbon of woods through the grasslands, bare-branched gray except where faded yellow and dark-red tatters told of autumn's blaze and burn. The road-bridge was a metal truss on concrete piers; a fresh gash in the railing on the western side showed where someone, almost certainly the Villains, had pushed an ancient truck over the side. It stood like a new island downstream, the water rippling around it, shedding the rust of a generation to join the Mississippi.

Ingolf sniffed. The scent of burning was strong now, and there was still a little gritty ash drifting in, making him blink watering eyes. They all wet down their bandanas from their canteens and tied them across their mouths before they left the ruins of the little city of Spring Valley.

Out on the flatlands north of town the grassland was burned down to stubble, leaving an empty plain of blackness. Smoke drifted over it from patches still smoldering; nothing stood above ground level save the charred stumps of trees and an occasional snag of wall. The desolate appearance was deceptive; in a single season this would be lush prairie again, growing all the stronger for the layer of ash. The tall grasses kept much of their bulk down below-ground, and however hot the flame didn't kill out the roots. The seeds of some of the other plants needed fire to germinate. Every season's fire gnawed away a little more of the works of men, though.

He coughed into the damp cloth. "I hope our folks got out in time," he said, worry in his voice.

They all nodded, familiar with the dangers of a prairie-fire. In old dry grass like this the wall of flame could be twenty or thirty feet high, traveling faster than a galloping horse and ready to scorch out the lungs of anything it caught. He stood in the stirrups where the road turned west and peered under a sheltering hand, squinting against the midafternoon sun.

"Doesn't look like the fire's still going," he said. "Not enough smoke."

Singh nodded. "The wind's shifted," he pointed out. It was in their faces now, carrying gusts of smoke and ash. "It's usually westerly around here anyway. That would push the fire back onto the burned ground."

Ingolf jerked his head in anxious agreement. "Think the wild-men could have set it?" Kaur said, jogging along a little ahead.

"Could be. Could be they did it to drive game—it's time for their big fall hunts."

Or they could have done it to cover an attack, Ingolf thought. Or even if they didn't, they'd take the chance to kill and rob anyone caught in it.

By unspoken common consent they legged their horses up into a canter on the shoulder of the road. Out in the burned-over fields small explosions of crows and buzzards took off from the blackened corpses of animals caught in the fire. After a half-mile Ingolf swore and got out his binoculars for an instant.

"That's the wagons, all right. Hup!"

They rocked up into a hand gallop. The five big vehicles were strung out on the road in marching order. One was burning, the stores-wagon, with little bitter goutts of flame when the flames hit something like linseed-oil or the varnish on a spare bow. The four with the loot weren't; someone had taken the trouble to lash down the spare tilts over the everyday ones and lace everything tight, which gave sparks few places to light on vehicles mostly made of pre-Change metal. For the rest, from the signs they'd just taken all the horses and bolted when it became clear the fire was going to hit, which was sensible.

He and Kaur and Singh threw their lassoes over bits of the burning wagon, snubbed the lariats to the horns of their saddles and backed the animals, pulling it lurching and smoking a safe distance from the others. The horses snorted and protested, but they were too well-disciplined to really balk. Then they turned west again, riding hard.

"Shit," Ingolf swore; it was far too serious for uff da.

The first body was an ostler named Sauer they'd hired east of Kalona; he'd quarreled with his Farmer and been turned out of his cottage and job, but he'd always pulled his weight on the trip. Sauer had burned, and died of it. The rest of the bodies were hidden by a heaving carpet of buzzards and crows and ravens, but they were just off the scorched zone, where streaky fingers of black stretched into the bronze-brown of untouched prairie. The bluestem was trampled flat for several hundred square yards. Carrion-birds took wing in a black cloud as the riders came up, revealing the arrow-stubs.

"Hit them as they came out of the smoke," Singh said grimly, pointing to where a ragged line lay, along with several dead horses.

Ingolf nodded, his throat too tight to speak. A straggling trail of bodies showed where the pursuit had gone.

"These took one with them each," he said with angry pride, reading the signs on the ground.

A circle of bodies marked where Jose and about a dozen had made a last stand. The suddenness of it winded him, like someone starting a fight with an unexpected punch in the gut; half an hour ago he'd been looking forward to seeing the man again, and now there he lay on his back with the stubs of two arrows through his mail-shirt and most of his face gone from the birds. There was blood on the broken shete that lay near his hand; he'd gotten that much at least. Six years I knew you, he thought. Battle and hunt and camp and bar-room. We saved each other's lives more times than I can count. You taught me better than half of what I know. Go with God, brother.

He dismounted and knelt for a second with head bowed over clasped hands, asking that there be mercy for the soul of Jose Menendez, one-time sergeant in the Lomas Altas Emergency Guard, of late troop-leader in Vogeler's Villains. Then he covered the ravaged face with a broken shield. And for you, Greg, Tommy, Dave, Will, he thought, fury building. You all deserved better than this. Singh was gray-faced and shaking. "The wild-men will suffer for this, their tents will burn and their women will weep," he said thickly. "We will avenge them, we will—"

"Wait!" Kaur said. "Would the wild-men leave their armor? Harness on the horses?"

Ingolf took a deep breath and then another, scrubbing a hand across his face, the rough leather of his glove scratching and pulling at the hairs of his cropped beard.

"Think, you cheese-head hayseed, goddammit," he whispered savagely to himself.

His eyes darted about. "Yeah, and the arrowheads, and everything else... cloth, tools, shoes... they'd have stripped the bodies bare and dug out all the broken arrows. And scalped them. And butchered the dead horses for their meat and hides. All that this bunch took was the live horses and the shetes and knives and bows."

"You are right, sister," Singh said.

He pulled a broken lance-shaft out of a horse's torso with a grunt, then stabbed it into the ground to clean it off. The three of them stood around it and looked, with Kuttner still mounted and keeping an eye out.

Ingolf grunted again. The lancehead was about eight inches long, fastened to the mountain-ash shaft with a skillfully forged tubular socket heat-shrunk onto the wood. It wasn't quite the style of any he was familiar with, but it was far too well-made for a wild-man troop, even this far west.

And...

He took it from the Sikh and held it so the westering sun caught the surface and showed irregularities, especially where dried blood stuck. A rayed sun was etched into the steel.

"Kaur!" he said. "Your shete!"

She drew and held it out beside the broken lance; the design on the sun-figure was identical.

"Something stinks here," Ingolf said grimly.

A sound from Kuttner interrupted him, and then Kaur's cry of alarm an instant later. Ingolf vaulted into the saddle and got out his binoculars. The sun was winking on more lanceheads, and beneath them the distant dots of riders. He rough-counted...

"At least thirty," he said. His head twisted around. The ground here was flat as a tabletop and devoid of cover, no place to make a stand. "We'll head south for the river—there's rough country there."

"Wait!" Kuttner said. "Give me two more horses and I'll lead a drag."

The three Villains looked at him, surprised. Leading a drag was a standard trick of plains-country warfare, to raise a plume of dust and deceive watchers. Volunteering for it here was also suicide...

"Better me than all of us. You can escape and tell the Bossman in Des Moines what happened to his expedition."

Nodding in grudging respect for the man's loyalty, Ingolf started to help. It took only a few seconds to rig some gear on the end of a rope; Kuttner took the leading reins of the two packhorses and spurred his mouth straight east. He didn't even bother to take his remount. Ingolf felt a slight pang—one of those horses was carrying the bundled proceeds that Jose had left for them back in Innsmouth—but living through this and finding out who was responsible for the massacre was more important.

The three of them paused only to sling spare quivers to their saddlebows and then turned south at a gallop, each leading a single remount. Grass whipped at his thighs and the horse's face; Boy ran with his head lifted, and the sound was a constant shhhssh beneath the drumbeat of hooves. Distantly behind them a bugle blew; the enemy, whoever they were, had spotted them. Now everything depended on how fresh the killers' horses were and how their luck went.

They went flat-out for two miles, just outside the line of burned ground, then reined in to a canter; the horses were beginning to blow, fruits of two thousand miles of hard work. Luckily they'd all been reshod recently, so they'd be less likely to go lame unexpectedly. They all looked over their shoulders as well. Kuttner's dust-plume was clear, where his drag scratched the ashy soil of the burn. And behind him...

"A bunch of them split off after Kuttner," Kaur said. "At least a dozen are still after us, though, Captain."

"A dozen's better odds than thirty," Ingolf grunted thoughtfully.

It puzzled him; the stunt Kuttner had pulled was the sort of thing you did for comrades-in-arms or close friends, and the man had never even tried to be that, despite their going all the way to the Atlantic and back together. He'd always been a disagreeable bossy son-of-a-bitch; they'd come to grudgingly respect him, but no more.

They turned onto the burnt ground—trying for the river would be impossible otherwise, but it made their dust-plume a lot worse. As they switched horses Singh and Ingolf exchanged glances; they both rode a lot heavier in the saddle than Kaur, by at least thirty or forty pounds. Her horses were less tired to start with and would last longer in a stern chase. Useless to try and get her to bug out, though.

Ingolf's next glance was over at the sun. Three hours to dark, he thought. Just low enough to get in our eyes, not enough to do us any good.

A few instants after that the extra plume of gray ash told him their pursuers had crossed onto the burned ground too. Canter-trot-canter-walk... the dust grew closer; the enemy were pushing their horses hard, or they had lots of fresh remounts, or both. Probably both.

"Uff da," Ingolf swore.

That they couldn't hope to win an arrow duel was so obvious none of them had to say anything about it. There weren't any good options when you were outnumbered by five to one, but riding over an open plain and shooting was about the worst possible choice. If you had any choices.

"Which we don't," Ingolf muttered to himself.

"They think they can pin us against the river before we can cross," Kaur said clinically.

It turned out they were right; the riders were in close sight before the fingers of lower land stretching down to the Illinois river came in reach, no more than three or four hundred yards behind. Ingolf peered over his shoulder again; there were fifteen of them and all had helmets on, and of the same variety—low rounded domes with a central spike and cheek-flaps. He made a hissing sound between his teeth. Even most full-time paid soldiers didn't usually wear uniform equipment. That was the sort of thing you saw only on a bossman's guards.

And not the bossman of Des Moines. His folk's gear is different, shaped more like the old Army helmet.

He couldn't see for sure what they were wearing for armor, but he could be certain it wasn't the bright-polished chain mail favored by the household troops of Iowa's ruler.

They carried lances, little upright threads tipped with an eyeblink of metal. The bottom four feet or so of each was probably resting in a scabbard—a tube of boiled leather slung at the right rear of the saddle, which kept it out of the way when you were doing something else. Right now the something else was drawing their bows...

"Incoming!" Kaur shouted and ducked, hunching in the saddle so that the shield slung across her back covered the largest possible share of her body.

A dozen arrows fell in a hissing sleet, mostly five or ten yards short but uncomfortably well-aimed and bunched. A single exception slammed into the back of a remount with a hard wet thmack sound, and the animal collapsed behind them, its hind legs limp, screaming like an off-key bugle as it struggled and jerked and the shaft in its spine waggled.

As one, they all signaled their horses up to a gallop and turned in the saddle to shoot back, rising in the stirrups and clamping their thighs hard against the leather in the moment they loosed. The surviving pair of remounts galloped ahead as their reins were dropped, herd instinct keeping them from doing the sensible thing and scattering. Ingolf exhaled as he drew, the thick muscles of his right arm bunching against the sinew and Osage-orange wood and horn of the recurve.

Thousands of hours of practice starting when he was seven guided the angle to which he raised the bow before letting the string roll off the fingers.

Snap of bowstring against the scarred steel surface of his bracer, and the recoil slammed him back against the high cantle of his saddle. Snap—snap, and the brother and sister fired as well. The arrows slapped out, seeming to slow as they arched towards the distant dot-sized figures of the pursuers. More came back, and those seemed to go faster as they approached. Two went by with unpleasant vvvvptttt sounds before burying themselves in the ash-black ground, shunk-shunk.

This wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. It was just as unpleasant as he remembered, and would have been worse if he hadn't been so caught up in surviving moment to moment. That sound of arrows going by was the sort you remembered years later, leaving you depressed and sweating just when you were about to kiss a girl or bite into an apple.

Assuming I ever get to do either again, he thought, hearing Boy's valiant laboring beneath him as he shot and shot again.

Then the lip of the ravine leading down to the river was close. Another flight of arrows came in just as they urged their mounts over the edge. The animals went down it fast, sometimes squatting on their haunches, then hit the old path at the base running until they were around a corner two hundred yards eastward, with tall oak and maple all around and thick brush between the trees, the steep bank close to the water's edge.

Kaur's gasp of pain was bitten off. Ingolf didn't look over until they'd stopped. When he did his stomach lurched. Not that the wound was mortal in itself; the chain-mail and the padded canvas underneath had absorbed most of the force of the arrow, leaving only a few inches of it sticking into her hip. Red was leaking out through the mail already, and running down her leg, though not the arterial pumping that spelled a swift end. With nursing and care she could recover. But with the arrowhead lodged in bone, it would be impossible for her to ride fast, or to run and fight. Right now, that meant death. He saw her accept it, biting her lip until the blood flowed; then her brother did as well.

"We will see pitaji again," she said. "I knew when we saw their faces again in the place of magic that we were fated. Karman."

Singh nodded, then turned his face to Ingolf: "This is as good a place as any. We'll hold them as long as we can. Ride hard, my friend."

They leaned over to clasp hands for an instant: "It has been an honor, Captain. Avenge our blood." Ingolf nodded, not wasting time on saying what they both knew. Singh swung down and handed him the reins of his horse.

His teeth were bared as he turned and got Boy back to a gallop, and clods of earth flew up from the hammering hooves. No point in holding back now; he had to try and break contact before the enemy caught up with him, and he ignored the low branches and brush that flogged at his face or rang off his helmet as he ducked and wove. The Illinois River was to his right, flowing from east to west here as he rode upstream, a long bowshot across—call it three hundred yards. It flowed quietly, with only a little gurgling chuckle at the edge. His own harsh breathing sounded louder in his ears.

A yell came from behind him, faint and far now. Then another, a man screaming in astonished pain, and then a clash of steel on steel. That followed him for perhaps a hundred of Boy's long strides; then it stopped, and he knew the two Sikhs were dead. He glanced behind as he went down a long straight stretch, and caught the first glitter of steel.

"Shit!" he snarled, and reached over his shoulder for an arrow. "They must have sent men around Singh."

The pursuers dropped back as he shot again, dropped out of sight though that wouldn't last for

more than seconds. The path twisted around and split. He made an instant decision and turned right, throwing aside the leading reins of Singh's horse and slapping it on the rump with his bow as it went by. Then he took the right-hand branch, down to the edge of the water.

It was nearly under the piers of the Spring Valley bridge; Boy gave a single are-you-sure-Boss snort and jumped into the water, striking out strongly for the opposite shore. Ingolf let himself slip out of the saddle, holding his bow above the surface with one hand and clinging to the saddle-horn with the other. Water sloshed into his clothing with a cold shock, and he could feel the dragging weight as the padding under his mail shirt soaked it up. You could swim in war-gear... but not for long.

He was three-quarters of the way across and in the shadow of the bridge when the first of the enemy went pelting past the spot he'd left, galloping flat-out. That meant the men in the lead were either very brave or completely reckless; there were any number of nasty tricks you could play on a narrow trail.

One... two... three...

The total had gone up to nine before one of them reined in, bringing his horse up on its hind legs. That took skill; so did avoiding a tangled collision by the two behind him, who split around the rearing horse. The too-alert one pointed to the ground, then across the river. Yelling, the three horsemen spurred down to the water's edge, and into it.

"Shit!"

That had been a long-shot, and it hadn't panned out. But three-to-one was a lot better odds than twelve-to-one. As Boy came out of the water he thought quickly while hooves went clattering on rock and making wet sucking sounds in the muck. The horse shook himself, spattering more water around; Ingolf got into the saddle and headed east again, on the south side of the river this time, urging the most out of his mount. The trees grew thicker as they blurred past; this path had been graveled once, but it had seen only the hooves of deer and elk, mustangs and feral cattle for the past generation.

One hour to sunset now, he thought. Only an hour.

Rock grew higher south of the river, layers of banded sandstone that caught the dying sun blood-red. They made sound echo, and sometimes treacherously die off or seem more distant than it was. The more so as he bore south and high walls closed around him on both sides, dark where the rock blocked the sun. Hooves clattered on stones and thudded on sand, where the ancient floods had carved this passage.

There.

The right spot, where a bulge of rock narrowed the passage through the canyon. His bow went into the saddle scabbard, and he brought his shield around from his back and slid his left forearm into the loops.

He reined in and slid from Boy's saddle while the animal was still moving; it carried on around a curve in the canyon wall, slowing down and looking back. The man plastered himself flat against the rock; in the same motion he drew his shete, holding it high with the point back, suddenly conscious of his own panting breath, and how paper-dry his mouth was, while the rest of him streamed water. The pursuers' gallop hammered at his ears, bouncing off the stony walls around him, making it hard to judge just where they were.

He could hear their barking, yelping cry, too: "Cut! Cut! Cut!"

"I'll give you a cut, you son of a bitch," he snarled to himself.

A lancepoint flashed as it came around the corner, giving him a fractional second's warning and showing where the man's arm must be—poised to thrust it into his back as he fled.

"Richland!" he bellowed.

As he shouted Ingolf pivoted with tiger precision and swung, whipping the long cutting blade forward with every ounce of strength his shoulders and back could muster. Combined with the speed of the galloping horse the sharp metal cut through a mail-shod gauntlet, through flesh and bone and flesh and then through the tough shaft of the lance itself. The mounted warrior rode on for a dozen paces, screaming in shock and staring at the stump where his hand had been, the blood spurting out with fire-hose speed, then toppled and lay flopping and twitching.

The one following him slugged his mount back on its haunches with desperate brutality, dropping his lance and going for his shete. Ingolf ignored it, dropping his own weapon and darting in to grab one booted foot and heave with all his strength. The rider flew out of his saddle and into the rock wall of the canyon as if springs had pulled him. The helmeted head went bonnnngggg on the rock



and the neck snapped beneath it. That horse went past too, riderless, buffeting Ingolf back with a force that brought a grunt as he was slammed into the canyon wall.

The third rider had an arrow on his bowstring. He drew and shot, in the same instant that Ingolf's hand whipped up across the small of his back and forward in a throw. Tomahawk and arrow crossed each other in flight. The arrow banged painfully off Ingolf's mail-clad shoulder, and the head of the tomahawk sank with a meaty smack and crunch into the rider's jaw. He toppled backward over his horse's crupper trying to scream and succeeding only in gobbling. Gauntlets beat at the ground in futile agony as Ingolf pounced. The back of the wounded man's neck was protected by an aventail of steel splints fixed to rings on the helmet-brim, but they bent and snapped as he drove his boot heel down again and again.

Silence fell, except for the sound of the wind hooting through the rock, and the horses stamping and moving restlessly. Ingolf limped back to his shete—where had that small cut on his left thigh just below the mail shirt come from?—and sheathed it. That gave him a chance to examine his opponents for the first time. They were young men, younger than he was, of middling height but with the broad shoulders of bowmen and dressed alike in coarse blue woolen pants and tunics and high horseman's boots. They'd all been armed with dagger, shete, bow and lance, and all wore the same equipment, not just the helmets; back-and-breasts of overlapping leather plates, chaps of the same protecting their legs, mail sleeves. In fact...

That's like the gear Kuttner was wearing!

Things went click behind Ingolf's eyes. He'd been furious before. Now the rage went coldly murderous. For certainty's sake he examined one of the shetes; it was a twin to the one he'd taken from the wild-man chief near Innsmouth, though not quite as good.

"Time to get out," he muttered to himself.

Boy had stopped a hundred yards down the canyon, and the other horses were milling around, unable to get past him. He didn't bother to investigate the gear; time enough for that later. Instead he simply looped the stirrups of each up over the saddlehorn and improvised a leading rein.

Taking them in hand he looked up at the sky; it was turning dark-blue in the east, nearly nightfall.

There was just enough sunlight to gild the arrowheads, when he came out of the eastern mouth of the canyon and found a semicircle of the enemy waiting for him, their stiff horn-and-sinew recurve bows drawn to the ear.

Kuttner sat his horse behind them, grinning...

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Flying M Baronial Hunting Preserve, near Yamhill  
Portland Protective Association, Oregon  
January 30th, CY22/2021 AD

The fire had died down to coals while he told Ingolf's story. When Matti spoke her voice was as quiet as the blue-and-yellow flickering over the embers.

"That would be hard, to lose your best friends all on the same day, and then be betrayed like that."

"Yes," Rudi said somberly. Then he smiled. "But you know what Mom said to him?"

"What?"

"She told him what his friends' names meant—the Sikhs. He hadn't known... She said—"

His gaze went beyond the wall, recalling that night in Dun Juniper:

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"Lion," the Mackenzie chieftain said softly. And Lioness."

Ingolf looked up, startled out of memory. "Ma'am?"

"That's what Singh means: Lion. And Kaur means lioness. Your friends died faithful to their ancestors, Ingolf."

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"We'll have to get by the... Cutters? The Cutters, yes... when we go east," Mathilda said thoughtfully.

She picked up the poker and stirred the embers; they crackled and let a few dull-red sparks drift upwards. The hall was silent now; they were alone, though there were servants within calling distance.

Rudi sat up. "Wait a minute!" he said sharply. "What's this we?"

Mathilda looked at him, her brown eyes hurt. He'd seen it done better... and they'd spent a lot of time together since they were children.

"We're anamchara."

"Yes, we are," Rudi said.

They'd been children when they went through that rite, back during the War of the Eye, when she was held prisoner by his people and before he'd been taken captive by hers; they'd done it to make sure that they weren't caught up in the quarrels of their parents. That didn't make it any less real, or less binding.

"But that doesn't mean you can run off with me, soul-sister," he said. "You're heir to the Protectorate, for sweet Brigid's sake!"

"And you're heir to the Mackenzie," Mathilda shot back.

Her back had gone stiff, and she wasn't trying the puppy-eyes on him any more. Rudi ran a hand through his red-gold mane.

"I am not! It's not hereditary!"

She made a rubbing gesture between thumb and forefinger. "That's the world's smallest violin playing for you 'cause you'll be tossed out to starve or go beg in the gutters of Corvallis, Rudi. The assembly made you tanist, didn't they?"

He flushed, which was unfortunately obvious with his complexion; not quite as milk-white as his mother's but pale enough to show the blood mounting to his cheeks, particularly in winter. There wasn't much doubt who the Clan would hail as chief... but he didn't want to think about his mother taking the voyage to the Summerlands, not yet. That might be a long time, anyway; she was only in her fifties, strong and healthy.

"Look, Matti, I'd love to have you along. There's nobody in the world I'd rather have my back. But you can't go. Your mother would never let you do something that crazy."

She pounced. "If it's that crazy, why is your mother letting you do it?"

"I'm of age," he said, and instantly regretted it as her lips narrowed.

Ooops. Matti doesn't come of age until she's twenty-six. That had been part of the agreement at the end of the War.

"And besides, you heard about the dream Ingolf had. I'm supposed to be doing this. Mom doesn't like it, of a surety she doesn't, but she knows I have to."

"Pagan superstition," Mathilda spat.

"Hey!" Rudi replied, dismayed. I did get her angry, and no mistake!

Then she took a deep breath and relaxed. The problem was that she relaxed the way a lynx did, waiting on a branch for something edible to pass by. And he recognized that expression; it was too much like her mother's. She was thinking.

"Well, who is going with you?" she said reasonably.

"Ingolf, of course," Rudi said. Anamchara did have to share their secrets. "And one more—I think Edain, Sam Aylward's son. He showed very well in that dust-up with the Haida last year."

Mathilda nodded; they both knew the young man well. "And?" the young woman went on ruthlessly.

"And two Rangers."

Mathilda's eyes narrowed dangerously again. "Any particular Dúnedain?" she said.

"Well... my sisters." At her look: "Well, half-sisters."

She nodded quietly, got up and left. Rudi stayed and sat staring into the fire. Then his eyes turned, towards the staircase where his best friend had gone. They'd known each other half their lives...

"That was much too easy," he muttered to himself.

## CHAPTER NINE:

Stardell Hall, Mithrilwood,  
Willamette Valley, Oregon  
January 30th, CY22/2021 AD

"E-ndan Ingolf warn?" Astrid Larsson said, when Ritva finished the tale that Ingolf Vogeler had told. Mary and Ritva Havel halted on a footbridge. For privacy they and the commanders of the Dúnedain walked the Path of Silver Waters, past waterfalls frozen into arching shapes of glittering white, fantasies that shone with an almost metallic luster beneath the pale brightness of the winter sun. Likely they would melt in the next few days. Mithrilwood—what had once been Silver Falls State Park, and a good deal around it—was higher than the Willamette valley floor, and colder, but not as winter-frigid as the great mountain forests that ran eastward from here until they met the glaciers of the High Cascades.

"Then the man Ingolf surrendered?"

The language they were speaking was Sindarin, the tongue most often used in a Dúnedain steading. There was a slight tinge of distaste in her voice.

"Alae, duh! naneth-muinthelen Astrid," Ritva said, in the same language.

Her version used more loan-words than Astrid's book-learned variety; she had learned it as a living tongue.

"Well, duh, Aunt Astrid."

Light flickered bright through the boughs of the firs and hemlocks, and the bare branches of oak and maple; it was still three hours to sunset, though there were clouds gathering in the north and she thought it smelled like more snow tonight.

She went on: "E-ndan i guina." Which meant: The man lives.

"His friends asked him to avenge their blood," Astrid pointed out.

There was a persistent rumor that she was an elf, or at least half-Elven. Ritva had to admit that as far as looks went it might have been true; her mother's younger sister was tall and willowy-graceful, with white-blond hair that fell almost to her waist and features that had an eerie cast, eyes too large and rimmed and streaked with silver through their blue, chin a little too pointed. Which was the way elves were supposed to look, pretty well. Only the slight lines beside those disturbing eyes belied it; she was thirty-six this year.

"Apa rasad pilinidi terëaldamo mengiel?" Mary Havel scoffed. "Sort of hard to avenge anyone after he'd gotten a dozen arrows through his brisket. As it is, he escaped eventually—we didn't get the details on that—and he still has a chance to get vengeance, someday, maybe."

"You have a prosaic soul, Mary," Astrid said regretfully; she used the same tone she would have to diagnose a skin disease.

The Lady of the Dúnedain could tell Mary and her sister Ritva apart easily. How, nobody knew; their own mother had more difficulty. Her consort Alleyne was with them, and her anamchara Eilir and her man John Hordle, but the six of them were alone apart from that.

The thing that worries me most is this story about the sword, Eilir Mackenzie said in Sign.

Eilir was the same age as the Lady of the Dúnedain, the same five-foot-nine height, and had the same graceful sword-blade build; her features were a little blunter, her hair dense raven-black and her eyes green. She had been deaf since birth, as well.

John Hordle snorted, and spoke in a basso rumble: "Well, if there's a bloody magic sword involved, at least the sodding thing isn't stuck in a stone!"

Astrid scowled at him for a second; the big Englishman could make even the Elven-tongue sound as if it were being spoken in a country pub over a pint. Or possibly at the top of a beanstalk, since she barely came to his shoulder, and he was broad enough that he looked almost squat. Beside him Alleyne Loring walked like an Apollo, six feet of long-limbed blond handsomeness, with the first gray threads appearing in his mustache in his fortieth year.

Astrid nodded at her soul-sister, speaking with hands as well as voice, as had become second nature since they met in the first Change Year:

"It's the sword that bothers me, too. Obviously, it's important; obviously, this Prophet doesn't want us to get it. Or at least that's the way it looks to me. From what Ingolf said, he made at least two attempts to probe Nantucket—one that failed completely, and then by stealth with Ingolf's band, through the spy they had at the court of the Bossman of Iowa."

Alleyne spoke thoughtfully: "Or the Prophet could have planted it all as a story to get Rudi out of the Valley and where he could get at him. Plenty of people know that... ah..."

"Prophecy," Ritva said helpfully.

"Yes, that prophecy about Rudi."

Astrid smiled at him: "No, I don't think so," she said. "If they just wanted to kill him, there are a lot less complicated ways."

Which they seem to have tried at Sutterdown, Eilir pointed out.

"No... no," Astrid said. "Rudi only got involved with that by chance—if chance you call it. They were after Ingolf. Which means they didn't want us to hear the story; and it couldn't have been collusion to give credence to his story, he very nearly did die before he told us."

"They were trying to kill him, all right," Ritva said, recalling the night in the Sheaf and Sickle's upper corridor; her nostrils widened slightly, smelling again the iron-copper rankness of blood and fear-sweat.

Her sister Mary nodded: "That slash on his shoulder and arm must have let out half the blood in his body. From the look of it, the cutter was aiming at his neck."

She described it again, and they all nodded; everyone here was a warrior, and intimately familiar with the ways edged metal had with human flesh.

"We're both going," Mary added flatly, preempting her aunt as she drew breath to speak.

"Going where?" Alleyne said, arching one brow.

"On the quest, Uncle," Ritva said, feeling a great happiness bubbling up under her breastbone.

"The quest for the sword, with Rudi... with Artos. I mean, isn't it obvious?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Aunt Astrid opening her mouth. They moved to forestall her:

"You can't go! You're Hiril Dúnedain, the Lady of the Rangers, and there may be war here—you can't go off into the wilderness," Mary said.

"You're like Elrond or Theoden," Ritva added, using the clinching arguments. "You have a people and a place to ward. We're just ohtar."

The word meant warrior-squire, one rank down from Roquen, knight-commander.

"But there should be Dúnedain involved," Ritva added.

She did not go on to say that it was the best they could do in the absence of real hobbits, dwarves or elves, though the thought made her smile and exchange a glance with Mary. They loved the stories of the elder days—the two of them wouldn't be here if the tale didn't speak to their hearts—but Aunt Astrid took them with an appalling literal-mindedness sometimes. So did a lot of other people in the Dúnedain Rangers, for that matter.

But this is the Fifth Age of Middle Earth, or possibly the Sixth; the Third was who-knows-how-long ago, and things have changed.

Alleyne caught her eye, and one of his moved in the slightest hint of a wink:

"I think that would be wise, my lady," he said gravely to his spouse. "After all, Thranduil sent his son Legolas on the quest of the Ring, and Glóin sent Gimli likewise—they didn't go themselves."

Eilir and Hordle nodded vigorously. Astrid sighed deeply, and Mary hid her relief. Wild horses hitched up with triple-reduction gearing couldn't shift Aunt Astrid once she got her mind set on something; she was the only person the twins knew who could out-stubborn them, though their mother Signe came close.

Eilir went on, signing emphatically: I'm not leaving Beregond and Iorlas. They're too young. And I'm your anamchara not your nanny; you're most certainly not dumping your three on me and going off on an adventure!

"I suppose so. Though Thranduil was thousands of years old and I'm thirty-six. Oh, well, it's the Doom of Men."

"I suspect we're all going to get our fill of adventure much closer to home," Alleyne said grimly.

Then he shook off his mood: "But we'll have some time to get ready... and time to live in."

Astrid sighed again. "Yes, yes, Mary and Ritva have leave go on the..."

She hesitated, then brightened. "The Quest of the Sunrise Lands."

"Ring!" Mary said.

"Cool!" Ritva echoed.

You have to admit that Aunt Astrid has a way with words. She always comes up with a neat phrase.

Voices were singing as they turned and walked along the path beneath the cliff towards Stardell Hall, a party of hunters in from the woods with their dogs trotting at their heels, bows in their hands and a brace of elk over their pack-horses. But it might have been anyone here; a good singing voice wasn't exactly an essential qualification for membership in the Dúnedain Rangers, but it helped. This tune had a happy sound with a fast-tripping chorus:

Sing ho to the Greenwood!

Now let us go—

Sing hay and ho!  
And there shall we find both buck and doe  
Sing hay and ho!  
The hart the hind and the little pretty roe  
Sing hay and ho!

Stardell had been old when the Change came, originally built by the CCC as the headquarters for the park. There was some cleared land nearby for turn-out pasture and gardens, snow-covered now. But this steading got more from hunting, and more still in payment for the services of the Rangers. The core of it was tall forest with the high-pitched shingle roofs of the log buildings scattered beneath; homes and workshops, stables, barns and a granary built of rough stone, a Covenstead and a small chapel for the Catholic minority.

Ritva looked up. Several of the larger trees bore flets, round platforms cunningly camouflaged high above the ground, some with walls and roofs above; there were more of those further up in the mountains, and cave-redoubts as well. The flet on the big Douglas fir was where she and her sister stayed when they were in the steading; it had bunkbeds and a very pleasant little cast-iron stove.

There were people in plenty bustling about on the ground, near two hundred at this time of year. This was the largest of the Ranger stations, and their main work was as seasonal as farming: guarding caravans and running down bandits and evildoers, with a sideline in destroying man-eaters, carrying messages and small valuable parcels, rescuing the afflicted and defending the helpless. Evildoers liked camping out in the cold no more than respectable folk, bandits were no more able to cross snowed-in passes than merchants, and this was the time of year when messages could wait.

There were shouts of greeting as the Hiril Dúnedain and her kinfolk came back from their long stroll. A pair of tow-haired girls of not-quite-three came out of the Hall, stumping along in their snowsuits with the mittens dangling on strings. At the sight of Ritva and Mary they sent up a shout:

"Gwanûn! Gwanûn!"

"Yes, we are twins," Mary said, and took Fimalen up on her hip; Ritva took Hinluin.

"And so are you, little Yellow Hair," Ritva said.

"And you too, little Blue Eyes," Mary said.

They're so cute, they almost make you want some of your own, Ritva thought. Someday. Not yet! And it was a bit thoughtless of Astrid to give them interchangeable names like that.

The Larsson family ran to blonds, as did the Lorings. The Larssons also tended to produce twins, both fraternal and identicals, but Astrid's eldest—her son Diorn—was a singleton. He was also black-haired and gray-eyed and preternaturally serious for a ten-year-old.

"Mae govannen, gwenyr," he said gravely, putting hand to chest and bowing: Well-met, my kinswomen.

They replied with equal formality; Ritva remembered her struggles with the complex vocalic umlauts in the Elvish plural form and envied him being brought up with it from birth. Then everyone trooped into the Hall, after shaking out their cloaks. Stardell looked a little like the Hall in Dun Juniper, but there was no second floor, only a gallery around what had been the roofline before they raised it. And the carving on the pillars and vaulting rafters above was more restrained, the colors mostly greens and pastel blues and silver-grays, and the old gold shade of oak-leaves in the fall.

The style was what her mother Signe had once told her was more Art Nouveau and less Book of Kells than that the Mackenzies favored, eerily elongated dancing maidens and their lords, sinuous trees with blossoms of iridescent glass, and little gripping trolls grinning with bone teeth, peering from corners and holding up the stone finals of the hearth.

The sisters went over by the fire; there was a pleasant smell of pine-boughs and hemlock amid the grateful warmth, and a scatter of children's toys on the floor—a hobbyhorse, little elk on wheels, a stuffed tiger on a rug made from the hide of a real one. The black gold-embossed leather covers of the Histories stood above the hearth on the mantelpiece, flanking images of the Lord and Lady as Manwë and Varda. A Corvallen was waiting there, a small rather dumpy man in the four-pocket jacket and pants that people from the city-state favored when they were traveling. Ritva hadn't seen him here before, and he was looking around with the I'm seeing it but it can't be

real expression outsiders often got in Stardell, lost amid the pleasant liquid trilling of Sindarin conversation.

"Mae govannen," Astrid said curtly, and then dropped into English: "Well-met, if you prefer the Common Tongue."

"Lady Astrid, Lord Alleyne," he said, bowing courteously. "I'm here about that little problem you were concerned with."

Alleyne grinned to himself. Ritva caught the expression and suppressed an urge to giggle, and heard Mary snort as she did the same. It wasn't a good idea to diss Aunt Astrid at the best of times; right now she was feeling sore as a tiger with a nail in its paw because there was finally a real quest, for a sword of power... and she couldn't go.

I'd feel mangly bitter about that myself, in her position, Ritva thought. Mary gave her a little nod. Squared. This is going to be fun... to watch.

"It isn't a little problem," Astrid said, glaring at him with a cold fury that made him wilt visibly. "By the treaty which ended the War of the Eye, all the realms of the Meeting pay a subsidy to the Dúnedain Rangers for the work we do. By the same treaty, the People and Faculty Senate of Corvallis, as hosts of the Meeting, are responsible for collecting it and forwarding it to us. Quarterly."

"There have been problems—not everyone pays on time, and I'm sure you realize that means we have to take out short-term paper—"

"And I'm sure that is your problem and not mine!" Astrid roared, an astonishing husky sound.

Everyone in the Hall stopped and looked; Fimalen and Hinluin hid their faces in Mary and Ritva's necks, and Diorn stared with bristling suspicion at the man who'd angered his mother. Astrid went on:

"Spay snur khug! What do you think I am, some huckstering dog of a merchant like you, a banker, a debt-collector? I have my people to feed and my warriors to arm! You have a debt of honor for the blood we shed in the wilds to keep you fat!"

The Corvallen looked around, licking his lips. The eyes on him were not particularly friendly, and in unconscious reflex he searched for someone who wasn't glaring. Eilir tapped her ear with two fingers and shook her head at him with a look of pity that he found disquieting. John Hordle was smiling... but he was also leaning an elbow on the pommel of the four-foot sword he usually carried slung across his back, with his right hand on the long quillions of the guard. When their gaze met, his thumb jerked out to point to Alleyne Loring.

The envoy made a mute appeal to Alleyne, and the Englishman shrugged slightly and silently mouthed: Pay up!

The Corvallen sighed and reached inside his jacket. When it came out he held a rectangle of black leather; he opened it and pulled the fountain-pen out of its loops.

"Will you take a check drawn on the Faculty Senate's account with First National of Corvallis, Lady Astrid?"

"By all means," Astrid said, all graciousness again. "Make it payable to Dúnedain Enterprises, Ltd., if you prefer the Common Tongue. In Edhellen, that would be Gwaith-i-Dúnedain, Herth."

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Corwin, Valley of Paradise, Montana  
February 1st, CY22/2021 AD

The Church Universal and Triumphant had come to the high green pastures of Paradise Valley a decade before the Change. Their leaders had told them that the end of the world would come soon, in nuclear fire. The elaborate maze of underground shelters and stockpiled weapons hadn't been very useful when the end came instead with a soundless flash of light, but the massive stores of foodstuffs and tools and clothing most emphatically had. Still, they had been deep in quarrels with the local ranchers when the Prophet arrived with a few followers, fleeing the great dying of California. The Church had taken him in, and its leader proclaimed that his vision was from the Ascended Masters...

Sethaz felt himself sweat as he backed out of the Presence. It was getting worse, the darkness and the smell and the long ranting harangues. Thank the One that it had been fairly comprehensible this time. It was almost as bad as his mother had been, once the Alzheimer's

had progressed. The pillow had been a mercy. Perhaps...

No! he thought. Not yet.

The path outside was lined with his personal Cutters, Guardians of the House of the Ascended, the Sword of the Prophet; they went to one knee in the snow as the Son of the Prophet appeared, the sheathed tips of their shetes resting in the snow ahead of them, their heads bent over the hilts. The red-brown of their lacquered leather armor showed brilliantly against the pale carpet of winter, with the golden rayed sun on their breasts; if they'd been on a mission instead of guarding the House of the Prophet, they'd have worn white cloth over it.

The cold lay on his face as he looked up to the Absaroka Mountains to the east, so intense that it made the air seem liquid. Snow-peaks cradled the Valley of Paradise on both flanks, floating high and holy where the air thinned between the world of Man and the Beyond. Between him and the mountains loomed the unfinished bulk of the Temple of the Dictations, swarming with workmen even in winter. Smoke drifted high against Heaven, smelling of hot brick and scorched metal.

There was a long silence as he stood and watched the morning light tinge the jagged white horizon with a hint of pink, letting the clean wind blow the nausea out of him. He wasn't an imposing sight in himself, a man just short of thirty, a little on the tall side of medium, his cropped hair brown and his eyes an everyday hazel, slender and strong with a swordsman's thick wrists and an archer's broad shoulders. Yet the aura about him was enough to keep others at a deferential distance.

At last Councilor of the Way Charom came over, boldest of a knot of ecclesiastical bureaucrats. They had grown over the domains of the Church Universal and Triumphant like mold over bread this last ten years, but there was no way to do without them.

"What is the word of the Prophetic Channeler, your holiness?" he said.

"Wheel may turn wheel, and that wheel may turn a wheel or a shaft, but no more, lest the anger of the Ascended Masters be again turned on us, and mankind's pride be broken in the dust again."

The stout shaven-headed man in his wool and furs bowed over linked hands, but he couldn't hide a flicker of relief. Sethaz inclined his own head, very slightly, but a mark of acknowledgment all the same. It would have been very awkward if the gearing necessary to run windmills to pump water had been declared Abomination. The Guardian of the Way was what a secular state might have called an Interior Minister, and it would have been his responsibility to enforce the edict.

There was enough trouble making sure that all the women covered their hair.

"May I ask how the Prophet is?" he asked, greatly daring.

Sethaz thought, then decided to allow it. "His earthly, human shell of this Embodiment grows weak," he said, which everyone knew. "One day soon he will rejoin the Unseen Hierarchy and cast aside the envelope he wears. It is a burden and a torment to him, though one he bears willingly for us."

Charom nodded again and spoke with unctuous relish: "It is good that you will be here, his chosen Son and successor, trained through many Embodiments to receive the Dictations."

You mean it's good that you got in with the winning side early, Sethaz thought, and flicked a hand in dismissal. The minister withdrew.

Alone he paced between the compounds, with only the six Triads of Cutters that accompanied him everywhere. Little remained of pre-Change Corwin; most of that had burned in the fighting when the Church took full control of the valley. Now it was a complex of new buildings, most built in two-story blocks of gray stone and shingle roofs set around courtyards, a few of the older ones of timber; covered walkways connected them above the streets. In the summertime the gardens were very beautiful, but now they lay dormant, banked under earth and straw and mounded snow that glittered with ice-crystals.

The snow was colored brown with dirt where sleds carried loads through the tree-lined streets; grain in sacks, salvaged metal bound for the smithies or weapons and tools out of them, firewood, charcoal, frozen sides of beef and mutton, a thousand other things that came in as tribute from the regions that acknowledged the Dictations.

People swarmed as well, women in headscarves and long skirts and over-coats, men in pants and jackets and fur caps, officials of the Church in their heavy robes, expressionless slaves in thick rags carrying burdens or pulling sleds. All paused reverently when a priest climbed a podium set beside the street and read a brief passage from the Dictations. He caught a snatch of it.

"...Vigil of the Violet Flame, but the soulless minions of the Nephilim prevailed over the men of Camelot, and..."

"Amen! Amen! Amen!" the chorus thundered out when he'd finished, and then the folk turned back to their business.

Sethaz went in under an arch marked with the sun-disk; he liked to do unannounced inspections. If you relied too much on written reports or scheduled visits there was always the danger you'd end up in a puzzle-palace of deceptions stage managed by underlings. The guards there—trainees were strictly segregated—slapped left fist inside right hand and bowed low. This building was one of the Prophetic Guard's; the courtyard was roofed over, rising in a laminated timber barrel-vault with many skylights, with the cells of the students looking down from all around and open classrooms, offices and libraries and refectories below. The layout made it easier for a single observer in the courtyard to keep track of everything that occurred, as well: it was called the panopticon, and the Dictations attributed the method to the Ascended Master Plato. Several dozen of the youngest students knelt in one end of the court, resting from physical training and chanting:

"The beloved Maha Chohan gave Me a Grant  
Of many good and fine lifestreams  
Like a golden chain, girdling the Earth,  
Is the Unseen Hierarchy of the Ascended Lords.  
Without the Unseen Hierarchy,  
The Earth would long ago  
Have passed into oblivion,  
The electrons which compose it  
Returned to the universe, and the souls  
Depending upon it for existence  
Snuffed out like candles before the wind..."

A senior student prowled behind them with a rod of split ash, waiting for an error or hesitation. The faces of the novices were glazed with the effort of the endless repetitions; only so could the Truth be ground into the soul, with sleeplessness and hunger. Not an eye of the juniors flickered away from the Preceptor who lead the chant. The rattle and thud of weapons-practice came from the center of the courtyard; for a moment he and his personal guards watched.

The trainees were young, their faces smooth and hairless, scalps shaved, a mixture of levies from the newly conquered regions and the sons of ambitious families closer to the core territories. The Sword of the Prophet were like the priesthood, a pathway to office and power. The older classes were sparring, stripped to the waist, using wooden swords or staffs or hand-to-hand. There was a constant clatter of wood on wood, an occasional thump and grunt as a blow went home. Sweat ran down their shaven scalps and muscular torsos, giving the air a musky pungency under the scents of wood and soap and stone; the instructors here were in the armor of Guardians, often nearing middle-age, always scarred. Some lacked a hand or foot or were otherwise crippled.

The students bore scars as well, of the scourge and hot iron, from punishment or self-inflicted efforts to reach the trance state where you became one with the Masters. Pictures of those Ascended Lords graced the walls, above the mirrors and stretching-bars; Christ and Zoroaster, Muhammad and Gautama Buddha, Blavatsky and Mundy, his own mother and the current Prophet.

Sethaz watched the practice in silence for a few minutes. Then he snapped his fingers and the senior instructor came over. He had the chinbeard and close-cropped hair of a Warrior Elder, streaked with the first gray hairs. He'd been a fighting-man even before the Change, and joined the Church not long after.

"How do they progress, Commander Sean?" the Prophet's son asked.

"Son of the Prophet, they're doing fairly well," the man said. "But we haven't the training cadre to expand the program as quickly as I'd like."

Sethaz cocked an eye at the oldest class, the eighteen-year-olds. He was less than thirty himself, but he felt like one carved from the granite of the hills compared to them.

"They look to be shaping well."

Sean nodded. "Yes, Dispenser of the Word, and they can help with the basics for the new intakes. But their knowledge is still theoretical. They need combat experience before they're fit to



be instructors themselves."

Sethaz nodded. "Let's see how they do at second-level trials."

Then he stripped off his heavy winter coat, and the sweater and silk shirt beneath it. One of the students let that distract him, and went down under his opponent's staff. The instructor added a few hearty kicks before he rose.

"Those three," Sethaz said.

Staff scurried to bring practice-armor, much like the combat variety except that it was more battered and worn, and blunted blades—a step up from the lath-and-wood of everyday drill. After the suit had been strapped on he reached out his arms, and shield and shete were there. The rest of the students grouped themselves in files of three and went to one knee, watching silently and controlling their breathing with drilled ease.

Sean was grinning as he turned to the similarly-outfitted students. "The Son of the Prophet does you a great honor. Push hard on the word of command... fight!"

The students didn't waste any time on preliminaries; the center man of the Triad lunged with blade outstretched.

"Cut! Cut!"

Not bad, Sethaz thought, as he swayed aside and clubbed the trainee on the back of his helmet with the edge of the shield, a short chopping stroke. In the same instant he caught the second's stroke at the side of his leg on his own shete and kicked him in the belly, hard. The armor spread it; the steel-toed riding boot would have killed a man without the plates and padding, and even with he doubled up with an ooof.

That left the third. He came on gamely, shete flashing. It cracked hard on Sethaz' shield, then rang on the steel of his blade. After a moment he found the rhythm of it, and left an opening. The student's shete lunged and then it was caught between his right arm and his flank, clamped hard by the inside of his arm. The trainee foolishly tried to wrestle it clear rather than abandoning it and going for a dagger, and took a head-butt in the face. Sethaz pulled the blow; that was another one that could kill. It jarred him a little, even with the steel of the helmet and the padding between him and the impact. The youngster's nose broke with a crunching sound and he lurched back to the matting, lying dazed with blood pouring down his face.

Sethaz kept the grin off his face, standing and making the air whine as he whipped the blunt practice shete through figure-eights.

"What have you learned from this?" Sean barked at the kneeling spectators.

One of them raised a hand. At a curt nod, the youth said: "Sir, that a fighter should not think only of his shete, just because he has a shete in his hand. Everything is a weapon to the warrior's mind."

"Correct," Sethaz said. "And always use conditions and circumstances, which are unique to each fight. Remember that."

He let the servants strip off the armor, went through into the bathhouse, showered and took the cold plunge. Then he sighed and changed into a robe.

Back to business, he thought, crossing over a street in the enclosed walkway and into the building that housed his private offices and quarters and his Women's House.

The sanctum he used for most of his despised but could-not-be-avoided paperwork held only a mandala, desk and office furniture, but the broad windows looked out across a vista of river and cottonwoods and snowy pastures, up to the green of Ponderosa-pine forest and the glaciers above. A murmur and click of abacus beads came from the offices on the ground floor, but he felt private here—except for a Triad of the guards, of course, and his secretary Geraldine. It had been a refuge when he was younger, still uncertain and feeling his way as the Prophet withdrew into his visions and the generals and priest-bureaucrats jostled for power.

More servants brought him fresh bread and a bowl of lamb stew with onions and potatoes as he read through the most important dispatches. Things were going well down in the Powder River country; the last of the powerful ranchers there were asking for terms, ready to accept the Dictations. And the Sioux had finally yielded all the Hi-Line, retreating eastward into their strongholds in the Dakotas and agreeing to allow missionaries from the Church to preach in their camps.

Let's hope that works, he thought. They make poor slaves but they'd be very valuable subjects.

He clapped hands to have the tray taken out, and sat sipping borage tea. Which left another matter, one less easily solved with a few regiments or preachers.

"Bring him in," he said.

The secretary genuflected and went to the door, and a near-naked figure was thrust through to stumble to a halt and stand blinking. Kuttner was in his thin drawers, teeth still chattering from the cold of the unheated basement cell. His hands were bound before him, and the guards had thrust a pole between his elbows and his back, and were steering him by it. They pushed him down on his knees; Kuttner bent to touch his forehead to the tiles of the floor. There was a crusted slow-healing scar on his left cheek, ending in an empty socket.

"I beg for mercy, Son of the Prophet!" he wailed. "I have failed the Prophet and the Church Universal and Triumphant. Mercy!"

Then he sensibly fell silent. There was no excuse for failure; it showed a lack of proper openness to the Dictations.

"I am disappointed in you, Kuttner," Sethaz said, offering none of the usual titles or formulae of politeness. "We had great hopes... and the Prophet himself has said that the matter of Nantucket is important."

If that's not just his madness speaking, Sethaz thought, then pushed the deadly siren-song of doubt away. I must have faith.

Kuttner licked his lips. He was a capable spy, and they'd spent years infiltrating him into the household of the young Bossman of Iowa before he inherited from his father; his file indicated that he was cynical, but fundamentally loyal, ambitious, and highly intelligent. Brains were in far shorter supply than zeal. Now there was something in his single remaining eye that made Sethaz a little uneasy.

"Son of the Prophet, the Prophet's words were truer than my weak and doubting spirit could have imagined. There is something dangerous on the island. Something... I don't understand, something beyond the world of men. Our previous expedition disappeared without trace, until I found that shete with our mark. My attempt penetrated the mystery."

"Yes," Sethaz said, looking down at the report on his desk.

How much of it can I believe? he mused. Kuttner used to be a reliable man.

"And we'd have known more of it if you hadn't let this man Vogeler escape. To be precise, he penetrated the mystery; you were lost in visions."

Kuttner licked his lips again. "I was sure that he had made submission to the Church and was ready to learn the Dictations," he said.

"And you thought you had established a secure control link."

"I was not wrong, Son of the Prophet. I... just didn't have time to use it. I was careless."

"And lost an eye because of it," Sethaz said.

Though that is fortunate for you, he thought. If you had not been so badly wounded, we might have suspected collusion.

Kuttner went on in desperate haste: "But Son of the Prophet, he did tell me of his vision before I revealed myself. He had no reason not to, and no reason to lie while he still thought I served the Bossman of Des Moines. The vision of the sword, and the dreams that told him to take the news to the far west and seek this Sword of the Lady."

Sethaz came to a decision, and motioned. One of the guards drew his shete and flicked twice at the cords in the same blur of motion. Kuttner remained motionless while the knife-sharp weapon went tick against the wood of the pole. The staff clattered on the floor of the sanctum; another flicker of steel between his bound hands, and Kuttner grunted as he rubbed his wrists and felt the pain of circulation returning.

"However, the men I sent to the west didn't do too well with Vogeler either," Sethaz said. "A most obdurate apostate and traitor. In fact, the observation team saw him carried out of this Sutterdown place towards the lair of the Witch Queen herself... and that is precisely who we wanted to keep Vogeler's story from. You are pardoned, provisionally, and restored to your rank of High Seeker of the God-flame. You have until snowmelt to come up with a plan. Consult the archives and interview agents as you wish."

Kuttner rose to his feet, met Sethaz' eyes, gave a single bow of precisely the right depth, turned on his heel and left.

Sethaz smiled to himself and opened a drawer, taking out a box and resting it on his table. In it was a clock; not just a pre-Change model, but made new of steel and brass, its exposed interior a mass of gearing. If the pagan witchcraft of the far West wasn't enough to bring the attention of the Church Universal and Triumphant, such blasphemous meddling with forbidden things would be. He glanced at the agenda on his Rolodex. "All right, Geraldine. Generals Walker and Graham

next."

The war against New Deseret was necessarily on hold for most of the winter, but that didn't mean there weren't steps that had to be taken before the spring grass grew enough to support horse-soldiers.

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Barony Gervais, Portland Protective Association  
Willamette Valley, Oregon February 18th, CY22/2021 AD

"Welcome home, my lord Baron!"

Odard Liu caught the apple the shopkeeper tossed. It was still fairly crisp, and he bit into it as he rode through the gloomy drizzle of a February afternoon, waving thanks with his free hand as he enjoyed the rush of sweet juice.

The rain fell in a mist of steady silver-gray, flattening the smoke from the chimneys and dappling the puddles in the asphalt streets. Hooves—his palfrey, the chargers of the two men-at-arms and the rouceys of the half-dozen mounted crossbowmen who followed him—landed on it with an endless hollow wet clop-clop-clop-clop; he could catch glimpses of the streaked concrete of the castle's towers over the shingle roofs. The column of horsemen swerved now and then to avoid an open oxcart full of split firewood, or covered ones hauling bales and boxes and sacks. A priest signed the air as he went by in his one-horse, twin-wheeled carriage with its collapsible hood, and they all bowed their heads in respect.

Gervais wasn't very large, more of a big village than a town or city, and not much survived of the pre-Change settlement save the southwest-northeast grid of the layout and the roadside trees. Lamplight spilled out onto the street, amid a pleasant tap and tinkle and clang of folk at work, with the whirring moan of spinning wheels and the rattling thump of looms beneath it. A wave of doffed hats, respectful bows and curtsies and greetings followed him, often with umbrellas above. Odard liked being popular here. It wasn't very difficult; he didn't chase any girl who really didn't want to be caught, collected no more than his legal due and was ready to remit a bit when times were hard, made sure the baronial court was honest, and kept his vassal knights from fighting out their quarrels over the tenants' crops and homes. Most of that had been his mother's policy before him and he intended to continue it now that he was of age.

He sighed heavily. Unfortunately, his mother didn't seem to realize that he was of age, or that he wasn't always going to fall in with her idea of what the Baron of Gervais should do. He hoped Mathilda didn't have the same problem with the Regent when she turned twenty-six.

I'm not looking forward to this homecoming.

A wet moat separated the castle from the town, but the drawbridge was down and the portcullis up. Spearmen and crossbowmen snapped to attention to either side of the gate and on ramparts and towers above, and a trumpet rang.

Castle Gervais was built to one of the standard plans the Association had used back in the early days. A curtain-wall with towers had a gatehouse facing the town and another on the eastern wall. Within was the Outer Ward, an open paved space on all four sides. Within that was the Keep, a square block with tall round towers at all four corners, and two big U-shaped ones for the inner gatehouse, all built to overlook the outer works.

He rode through the inner gatehouse with more ceremony, and dismounted in the Inner Ward, ringed around with smithy, stables and the Great Hall and lord's apartments. Odard returned the salute of the watch and nodded to his escort. From the bustle and the lights a welcoming feast was in preparation; nobody was in the stocks in the center today, he noted.

"Gavin, Armand, go get dry, get something hot to drink and then report to the Seneschal. I'll be here some days, possibly weeks."

The men-at-arms had hooded cloaks of the same unfulled wool that Odard wore, but theirs were over helmet and hauberk, a gleam of oiled gray under the wet cloth. The pennants on their tall lances drooped likewise, the wet canvas clinging to the ashwood. Sergeant Gavin grinned at him, the smile white in his brown face; he was in his late thirties, old for his trade, and as a young man had served Odard's father, the first Baron.

"Yes, my lord. Good to be home, eh?"

"Better than being out in the rain."

The steward greeted him in the vestibule of the Hall, with a mug of priceless hot cocoa, along with the rest of the senior staff.

"Ah, Romarec, you're a lifesaver," he said.

He sipped at the hot sweetness as a servant took his cloak and another offered him a heated towel to dry his face. There was a slug of good brandy in it, too.

"Your lady mother waits to greet you in the solar after you've refreshed yourself, my lord," Romarec said.

Well, that's Mom, Odard thought wryly, nodding to several of the others and giving his old nanny a hug before heading for his private quarters.

His valet had come ahead by train from Todenangst with the baggage. Odard's own rooms were in the southeast tower of the keep, four stacked one above the other. All of them were brightly lit, with fires crackling on their hearths, and had been for long enough to take the curse off the winter's day—not easy, in a structure made of thick mass concrete and in this climate, even when all the walls were paneled and hung with tapestry.

Alex Vinton was a small foxy-faced man with red hair and freckles, about six years older than Odard, wearing a soberly rich tunic of russet-dyed linen, shoes with turned-up toes, and a gold-link belt. He did not wear the usual servant's tabard over it, and only a discrete livery badge clasped to the brim of his hat. He'd proved extremely useful in a number of ways.

"Hi, Alex," Odard said, lowering himself into the steaming lavender-scented water of the bath.

"Christ, that feels good... Been busy?"

"Yes, my lord," he said, folding the clothes Odard had discarded. "I've been back two days now and there's quite a bit of gossip."

"Oh, God and His merciful saints—" Odard steepled his hands in mock prayer and rolled his eyes upward—"tell me she didn't have those assassins here at the castle!"

"No, no, my lord," the valet said. "The hunting lodge over at Fairfax."

"Ten miles away and in a swamp, that's something," Odard said meditatively, scrubbing at his fingernails with a small brush; he was a fastidious man and bathed every day when he could.

"When did she meet them?"

"She didn't, my lord. She had her younger brother Sir Guelf do it."

"That's also something. Not much, but something."

Alex held the towel for him as he stepped out on the mat, then helped him dress with foppish care in the latest fashion, just below the court-appearance standard—dark trousers cut closer than had been the custom in his father's time, tooled-leather shoes with little golden bells on the upturned toes and ceremonial gold spurs on the heels, a knee-length tunic of heavy indigo-dyed silk with silver embroidery on the square-cut neck and elbow-length sleeves whose flared points extended halfway to his knees, and a white silk shirt beneath it. He added a ring or two and examined himself in the full-length mirror, smiling at what he saw.

"Not bad," he said taking a belt of leather covered in worked-silver plates and buckling it around his waist.

It had a purse and a ten-inch poignard; the hilt had patterned silver and gold wire inlaid in the black stag-horn grips, and a pommel in the shape of a silver cat's-head. You didn't usually wear a sword inside in time of peace, but a gentleman didn't go unarmed outside his own chambers, either. Alex added the round hat with the roll around its brim and flicked the long silk tail from the side to lie over Odard's right shoulder. The badge at the fore was the mon arms of the House of Liu in a turquoise that set off his eyes.

"You're the pattern of chivalry, my lord," the valet said unctuously, then spoiled the effect with a grin.

"All right, I admit it, I like looking well," Odard said.

"Tell the comptroller when he has to pay the bills, my lord," Alex said, grinning still wider.

There was something to that. Barony Gervais was rich in anything grown or made within its boundaries or available in local trade, but the silk came from Burma or New Singapore or Hinduraj, and it cost—regular trade with the portions of Asia not irretrievably wrecked by the Change was just getting started again. The price of fashion was one reason he was just as happy to get away from Court for a while.

"See if there are any details you could find," he said to the valet. "Talk to Guelf's men; maybe you can smoke out something."

Odard whistled a tune he liked as he walked through the corridors towards the solar, looking his

usual cheerful self. Hearing it, someone within earshot began to sing the words—a woman's voice:

"I forbid you maidens all  
That wear gold in your hair;  
To come or go by Carter Hall  
For young Tam Lin is there—"

Inside, he was on edge; a little like the time just before a fight when you wondered which bush hid a man with a crossbow bolt ready to punch through your armor, or a hunt for a tiger or boar. Usually politics was something he enjoyed, even the junior jostling-for-position that heirs did, and he'd been getting more and more involved in the real thing as he approached the magic age of twenty-one. Having to play the game with your own mother was another kettle altogether. It wouldn't do to let it all show. Instead he raised his own voice for a moment:

"None come or go by Carter Hall  
But they leave him a pledge—  
Either your rings or green mantle  
Or else your maidenhead..."

And then laughed as he took the spiral staircase.

The castle solar was in the south-facing upper turret of the southwestern tower, the one nearest the Hall; that height let it have real glazed windows all around the circumference of the big round room rather than arrow-slits, though today more light came from lanterns of brass and mirrored glass. It glowed on the tapestries, the pale tile of the floor, on polished metal and bright rugs, on a big rood-cross of black walnut inlaid with semiprecious stones.

The Dowager Baroness Liu was sitting there with her women—mostly sisters or daughters of knights who held land in fief from the barony—and his younger sister Yseult. Everyone stopped what they were doing and rose as he stood in the doorway, except his mother; as he turned to her the ladies-in-waiting curtsied, a wave of colored flowers in their cotte-hardis and headdresses. "Ladies," he said, taking hat in hand and bowing in return with a sweeping gesture. "I'm enchanted to see you all again. Would you excuse my mother and me? We've a good deal to discuss, and I'll see you all in the hall at dinner."

He smiled charmingly as he said it. Some of the younger and prettier women smiled back invitingly, but he wasn't going to make a fool of himself in that direction, beyond a little light flirtation. They were all of a rank that could expect marriage, and he was the sole heir to the barony and a notable catch. Almost all of them also had male relatives equipped to resent misbehavior with edged metal; people of their generation were a lot stricter about such matters than their parents had been. Odard fancied himself with a sword, but he also disliked real fighting without a very good reason.

Yseult squealed and ran towards him and then—being just turned fourteen—slowed her pace and curtsied gravely. He reached out and tweaked her nose, which made her squeak again and got their mother frowning.

"Greetings, my lord brother," she said, kissing his extended hand, and then both his cheeks.

"My lady Yseult," he said, bowing in turn. "You're looking good, sis."

She was; she'd gotten their mother's blond hair, worn loose to her shoulders under a simple headdress in maiden's fashion, but more of their father's face, high cheekbones, blue eyes sharply slanted and nose a graceful tip-tilted snub, complexion like pale honey. He suspected that in a few years she'd be making the young gentlemen of the district do some real suffering to win the right to carry her handkerchief to a tourney.

"My lady mother," he went on, with a deeper bow.

She nodded and stuck her needle in the half-finished tapestry in its frame by the hearth. The women were working on yet another something with warriors and dragons and a very large wolf, probably from the cover of some trashy book his mother had liked when she was young—it seemed that every woman who'd been in the Society before the Change had that weakness, even Lady Sandra, and the others had all caught it, like some chastely ideational form of the clap. Dried sachets scented the air, along with the fruity smell of the alcohol lanterns and faint

cedarwood from the hearth. A page in livery sat on a stool not far away, strumming a lute—his younger brother Huon. He frowned at that. The kid should be doing page service in someone else's household, to bind the families and get the best training as page and then squire, but his mother had been dragging her feet about it.

So... no time like the present to establish publicly who's boss now.

"Hello, Huon," he said, as the boy stopped playing and came forward to pour a cup of the mulled wine from the flagon heating on the tiled stove. "Lord Chaka says he could use a page, and then a squire, over in Barony Molalla."

The boy's dark eyes lit with eagerness. Odard went on: "Talk to me about it after dinner."

Several servant-women in their double tunics and tabards stood motionless on call, eyes cast down and hands folded before them. One glided forward to refill a teacup from a pot that rested over a little spirit-lamp; they all turned and tripped out of the room when he made a gesture.

When everyone was out of earshot he kissed his mother's hand and then her offered cheek, kicked a padded leather settle over close and sat. His mother's eyes were as blue as his own, and colder—nobody had ever said Mary Liu operated on charm—but he favored his father in his lithe build. His features were a compromise, which left his nose straight but short, unlike her slightly hawkish beak.

"Were you trying to wreck the family fortunes?" he demanded, preempting her complaint about Huon. "You and my precious hothead of an uncle?"

He could see her considering denying everything. Instead she stuck her needle in the fabric and shrugged.

"It was an opportunity to get some revenge for your father, and my older brother," she said flatly.

"With... plausible deniability."

"Plausible to the Spider?" Odard asked incredulously. "You expected to keep it secret from the Lady Regent?"

She frowned, lines appearing between her plucked fair eyebrows and touched her wimple.

"That was a risk," she admitted.

"Risk to my own precious personal hide, mother—I ended up in the middle of that cluster... heap in Sutterdown."

For a moment genuine distress showed in her eyes: "I didn't mean for that to happen, darling!"

"Mother, that doesn't mean those lunatics weren't trying to kill me."

"It... went wrong. You shouldn't have been there. That was unfortunate"

"That was stupidity!" he replied. "And what exactly do you think Lady Sandra would have done to our family if they'd killed the Princess? Besides which, do you know how many years of effort I've put into cultivating Mathilda?"

"Years spent hanging around with that Mackenzie brat as if you were his boon companion!" she spat suddenly.

"There are worse companions to have," Odard said, and held up his hand. "Don't explode, mother. I'm as aware of the debt I owe my family as you are. Unlike you, I'm also aware that a man can walk further than he can run."

"I made a policy decision."

"And one that ended putting me in a fight to the death with the men you let use my land as a base!" he repeated.

That made her look embarrassed; but her face also closed in like a fist, and he knew that it took something drastic to shift her when she started looking like that.

I suppose I'll have to be frank, Odard thought. Deplorable. Give me honeyed equivocation anytime.

"Mother, I came of age several months ago," he pointed out with gentle implacability, holding her eyes. "I am the Baron. If you wish, you can select one of the demesne manors as a dower house, and establish your own household there."

And sit and rot with the servants and some gossiping old biddies, he thought grimly.

"Or you could have apartments at Court."

And have Lady Sandra keeping a very close eye on you twenty-four-seven.

Shocked, she followed the thought. "I... darling, I just want to be of help to you!"

He smiled. She is my mother, after all. With all that that implies.

"I know, Mom. You do a great job of keeping the comptroller and the bailiffs in line and the mesne tithes coming in, which frankly makes my life a lot easier."

His face went stern. "But you will not interfere in matters of high policy again without consulting

me. Mine is the final word. Do—you—understand?"

Their eyes locked. After a moment hers turned aside, and she nodded.

"But... contacts with the new power in the East could be valuable..." she said. "I have assurances from them—passwords and signs—"

"Perhaps. But I will be the judge of that from now on," he said. "And not so incidentally, there's something very strange going on here. That man Ingolf the Cutters are so hot to ventilate saw something out there in the barbarian lands. Rudi and his mother are very interested. Mathilda's interested. Which means I am interested... and I want any information you get. Understood? And I will use it as the Princess requires. From now on, a double block-and-tackle and a team of oxen couldn't get me away from her."

She nodded again.

"Excellent. Let's go down, then."

He rose and extended an arm. She followed and laid her fingers on it, and together they paced down towards the Hall.

And someday, one way or another, I will be Lord Protector.

## CHAPTER TEN:

Dun Juniper, Willamette Valley, Oregon

April 14th, CY23/2021 AD

Everyone who could in Dun Juniper was out on one excuse or another, after the long confinement of the Black Months; the bright chill air booming down from the mountains smelled of fir-sap, sweet grass, apple-blossom, the faint cool scent of hawthorn blossom from the hedges

"We should start the quest soon," Ritva said

She was panting slightly after the sword-and-targe bout with her sister Mary. Ingolf and Rudi watched with professional appreciation for their quicksilver lightness of movement. The easterner also looked as if he appreciated their looks.

Hmmm, Ritva thought, looking at him. He is shaping up nicely. Possibly...

Mary took up the conversation seamlessly, leaving Ingolf looking a little nonplussed. It took a while to get used to their conversational style.

"The high passes will be open in a few weeks. Or there's the Columbia gorge, it's year-round."

They were all armored for practice; a blunt blade could still kill you. Rudi was in a Clan-style brigandine; the twins wore what the Dúnedain used for light armor on scouting trips, a mail shirt a lot like Ingolf's but riveted to a covering of soft dark-green leather to make it quieter and less conspicuous.

A crowd of excited six-year-olds went by, shepherded by a teacher in an arsaid—an ankle-length version of a wrapped kilt and plaid—showing them plants and telling them the names and uses. Usually they'd have ignored him, or waved; he'd grown up here, after all, Chief's son or no, and Dun Juniper wasn't all that populous. Now a number of them looked at him with awe, and some pointed and murmured.

"Now, by the Dagda's club, how do you start off on a secret quest when everyone knows your face and who and what you are and how that ancient prophecy about you seems to be coming to life?" Rudi said, mouth quirking.

"Hell with me if I know," Ingolf Vogeler said. Then he brightened: "But at least I haven't had any more of those damned dreams."

The pasture below the dun's gates and past the hillside orchards was thick grass starred with yellow dandelion and blue camas-flower; it stretched away on either hand beneath a bright blue sky, and the scent alone was enough to make a man feel as if he was sixteen and had just gotten his first kiss. It must be better for someone recovering from wounds and illness that took him close to death.

"Sure, and the regard of the Powers can be uncomfortable," Rudi said.

He began a pattern of cuts and thrusts, moving slowly at first and then speeding up, feeling muscles warm and stretch. The longsword moved easily in his hand.

"I doubt you'll have any more trouble with them, provided we go and see about this sword," he said.

"I thought you were the sword," Ingolf said dryly.

Rudi cocked an eyebrow at him and grinned. The eastern wanderer was a nice enough sort for a Christian, but he was obviously a bit disturbed to be fulfilling a prophecy made by the pagan gods. "Well, it's never simple when They are involved," he said cheerfully. "Both, neither, all at once. You can't bind Them with words... not even true ones."

"I suppose if I got the Villains in and out, I can get you there and back," Ingolf said. His face went bleak: "And I won't have a dirty little traitor along this time, either."

Rudi blinked, not letting his eyes narrow. "I'll be careful to listen to your advice," he said—carefully. "You having the local knowledge and the experience and such."

Ingolf was examining a practice shete he'd had made up—the long point-heavy slashing swords were what he'd trained with all his life, and it would be more trouble than it was worth to switch styles.

"Just a minute there," Ingolf he said, the flat rasp of his native accent strong. "I'm shepherding you to the east coast, right?"

Rudi shook his head, meeting the other man's eyes. Best keep things straight from the beginning.

"Indeed and you're not," he said quietly. "It's my quest, Ingolf. I'd rather it wasn't, but the Powers have marked me for this task all my life, and it's myself must lead. Not that I won't listen to you, for I can see you'll be a right-hand man to me, none better."

A smile. "I'm young, but not a young fool, sure."

"I'm the best salvage-boss in the business," Ingolf said, obviously not relishing the prospect of being right-hand man to someone half a decade younger and still only shaving every second day.

"I don't doubt it," Rudi acknowledged.

"Hell, I'm the only one who's ever gotten to Nantucket and back... and I don't think many have gotten out of Corwin alive, either, or crossed the continent. No offense, Rudi, but you haven't done any of it. Hell, you've never left home."

"You've done more than a little in the way of traveling," Rudi acknowledged. Though I've been most places in the Valley, and round about it from the ocean to Bend.

His voice was friendly but with a trace of iron in it as he went on: "But it doesn't alter the fact that this is my journey. I'd like your help with it, Ingolf... but if you can't accept that, then I'll go without you, and thank you for the message you brought."

The other man's heavy brows drew together. He grunted without speaking. They'd left unspoken the matter of whether the Powers would leave his rest alone if he dropped out of the matter. Ingolf thought for a moment, then brought the shete up in a salute.

Mary Havel was refereeing; she waited while they settled their helms. When Rudi flicked the visor of his sallet closed she chopped her hand down:

"Kumite!"

Fight!

His blade flicked into motion towards Rudi's neck—

Crack.

The shete smacked into the young Mackenzie's buckler. He knocked it away and thrust in riposte.

Ingolf jerked his body back from the waist without moving his feet; it wasn't a counter Rudi was familiar with, but it worked, leaving him extended and off-balance for an instant with the tip of his sword just touching the other man's mail shirt before his shield knocked it up.

The easterner used the motion to bring his shete round and down in a diagonal slash that would have beheaded an ox, or taken off a man's head and his shield-arm at the shoulder too. His shield stayed well up all the while, not thrown to one side and leaving an opening. Rudi swayed out of the way as far as he could, and brought buckler and blade both up to meet the blow.

Crack-clung!

The force of it drove him down on one knee and numbed his left hand so that he almost dropped his buckler.

Cenn Cruaich, this one is strong! he thought, eyes going a little wider.

Ingolf cut three times before Rudi could get back on his feet. The Mackenzie parried with his sword—not directly, which would have driven it down on his own head, but by slanting the metal to shed the blows, ting-ting-ting, a threefold shivering crash faster than heartbeats. The big easterner hit like a blacksmith with a forging hammer, but he didn't let the force of his own blows throw him off balance either, which was always likely to be a problem with a point-heavy weapon like the shete.

Rudi feinted a thrust at his opponent's knee to break the rhythm of the attack and then bounced



erect. Ingolf stepped backward and shook his head.

"That's enough for me today," he said. "Too much and you lose more than you gain. I'm still a little short-winded."

"You pushed me hard there," Rudi said, grinning. "Not bad, for an old man just up from a sickbed."

"Same back at you, youngster," Ingolf said in turn.

He smiled himself; he was doing that a little more often now.

"All right," he went on soberly. "I'm the guest here. I'll just have to hope you can listen as well as you fight, which is pretty damned good. But you're not going to cut your way across the continent, no matter how good you are with a blade."

Off to their right in the next field archers were practicing, ninety-nine of them and a bow captain, most of the dun's First Levy standing in the staggered three-deep harrow formation.

"Nock shaft!"

Right hands went back over the shoulders to the quivers, twitched out one of the arrows, set it to the string with the smooth economical motion of an action as familiar as walking.

"Draw!"

The varnished yellow-orange staves of the yew bows glistened in the bright spring sunlight as they rose and bent, drawing past the angle of the jaw.

"Let the grey geese fly—wholly together—loose!"

The strings of the longbows slapped the bracers all at once, like one great snap. The long arrows slashed upward with a multiple shsshshshsh sound like a distant whickering and came almost to a halt at the top of the trajectory. The pile-shaped heads glinted as they plunged downward towards the target, a line of shields propped near the hedge at the southern edge of the field, two hundred paces distant. The hammerfall of the arrows was still as sharp as heavy hail on a tile roof; they drove deep into the wood, and they would have punched through most armor. Three seconds later the second volley hit, and two more were in the air before they struck, and more followed in a steady nock-draw-loose rhythm.

"You're not going to be taking them with you, either," Ingolf said, nodding at the archers. "Much as I wish we could."

Mary and Ritva sighed with heavy patience. "If you two are through with playing little-boy games, what does Lady Juniper say about it?" one of them asked. "About the quest, not who can pee furthest."

"She's not happy about it, but there doesn't seem to be much choice," Rudi said. "If I didn't know her better, I'd say she was procrastinating. She has given me the go-ahead. The details are up to me; Mom's good that way."

"No there isn't any choice, Sword-of-the-Lady-Artos," the other twin said with malice aforethought. They unpacked the picnic basket. Rudi unstopped a jug of fresh milk, and took a long draught of the cool rich creaminess; it always tasted a bit better after the grass really got going again. Ingolf bit into a sandwich of sharp cheese and smoked pork loin and slivers of pickle while Mary and Ritva opened the crock of potato salad. None of them took off their gear, except the helmets; you had to keep yourself used to the weight and constriction.

"One thing that's bothering me," Ingolf said hesitantly. Then he went on: "Look that... voice... told me to go find the Sword of the Lady. But it showed me a sword. That's sort of..."

"Contradictory," Mary or Ritva said helpfully. "Is Rudi the Sword of the Lady, or is the sword the sword?"

Rudi nodded. "That had occurred to me. Well, it's an oracle—they're usually gnarly and hard to figure out. But it doesn't change what we have to do, the which is get to Nantucket, sure."

"Get you to Nantucket, like a bolt at a target," Ingolf said. Somberly: "I've already been there, and I wish to God I didn't have to go again. Even without the weirdness, it's not exactly a merry outing like sugaring-off in the spring."

"Let's break it down," Rudi said. "We need to make the preparations, then we need to go, and preferably we need to do it quietly so this Prophet doesn't get wind of it."

"How many people?" Mary or Ritva said. "Nine is traditional."

Rudi looked at them, unable to decide for an instant if they were putting him on. It was a very Rangerish thing to say, but... he decided they were; the bland butter-wouldn't-melt was the giveaway.

"As few as possible," he said in a quelling tone. "We have to sneak there and back—we couldn't take enough to cut our way through, not if we turned out all the troops of the Meeting."

"Right enough," Ingolf said, sounding a little reassured. "But not too small. Most of the country we'll be crossing isn't what you'd call easy. We'll want enough to discourage bandits and look out for each other. Nine sounds good—in fact, I'd be happier with a dozen or so."

"We've got one asset already," Rudi said thoughtfully. He pointed at the twins: "You two."

"That's true, but you're not usually so perceptive, Rudi."

He snorted and went on: "You're Dúnedain ohtar. Rangers go all sorts of places and deal with all sorts of people; I mean, yeah, you're my sisters and your dad was Bear Lord, but by now people are used to you showing up wherever without a lot of fuss. And the Prophet's men won't be looking for you specifically yet."

"And you're gir... women," Ingolf said. At their enquiring look: "The Cutters don't hold with women doing much besides keeping house and raising kids, or working the churn and loom," he said.

"Canuidhollin," Mary or Ritva replied crisply. Which meant roughly: What complete idiots.

"Yeah, but they'll be less likely to notice you."

"Notice us do what?"

"Here's my plan..." Rudi went on.

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Dun Fairfax, Willamette Valley, Oregon

April 16th, CY23/2021 AD

Edain Aylward Mackenzie stopped and took a deep breath at the entrance to his home. This part of it had been a two-car garage in the old days; someone had told him what that meant once, but he'd forgotten. He was nineteen... well, nearly nineteen. All his life it had been the place where his father made bows and fletched arrows, and his mother wove at the big loom, when they weren't out about the chores of house and farm.

Umm, Dad... he began mentally, rehearsing what he'd say, then wrung the flat Scots bonnet in his hands. Oh, Wild Hunt take it, I could never fool him!

If he stood here eventually someone would ask him what he was doing; the Aylward house was only one of twenty inside the log palisade that enclosed Dun Fairfax. He took a deep breath, said: "Stay, Garbh!" to the shaggy half-mastiff bitch at his heel, then opened the door and plunged in, blinking as he went from light to shadow.

There he stopped in alarm; his father was seated at his workbench, bent over with a hand pressed to his side.

"Are you all right, then, Dad?" he blurted sharply, his own burden forgotten.

His father grinned back at his seriousness and straightened. "No, I'm not all right," he said. "I'm old, boy, and there's no cure for it. Some bones I had broken on me when I was about your age caught up with me for a bit there."

Edain was worried still. He was young enough for his gut to think that his father and mother went on like the rocks and trees while he changed. Some of his first memories were of sitting like this, watching his father at his bowyers' craft. Often while his mother made the loom thump at the other end of the big room, amid the smell of glue and varnish, sawdust and linseed oil and wax, with his elder half-sister helping her and the youngsters in the cradle or crawling about with Grip and Garm, his father's hounds.

But I'm old enough to know different. Even trees don't live forever, he thought with a chill. Grip and Garm are dead.

And his younger brother Dick was fifteen and insufferable now, and his youngest sister Fand was twelve and worse.

Even rocks don't go on forever.

And his father was old; in his sixties. His hair was still thick and curly, but the brown had turned mostly gray or white, and the flesh had fallen in a bit on his strong square-jawed face. He still got about well enough and did most of a man's work, but he'd retired as First Armsman some years ago now.

"So, spit it out," the elder Aylward went on, leaning back with his elbow on the table with its clamps and vise.

"Ah—"

Edain shuffled his brogues on the well-swept concrete of the floor. But for the age he looked

much like his father, only a finger above average height but broad-chested and stocky-strong, with muscled arms and the thick wrists of a plowman or archer—both of which he was. His eyes were the same gray as the older man's; his hair was a little lighter, with a touch of yellow in the earth-brown, and he wore it shorter than most male Mackenzies of his generation, though longer than the short-back-and-sides his father had always kept to.

"Ah, it's a trip, Dad, one that Rudi was talking about," he said, feeling sweat breaking out on his forehead. "Talking about us doing it together."

He was too old now for a swat on the backside, but he'd learned early never to lie to his father. No matter what scrape he got into, honesty was the best policy with Samuel Aylward, late of the Special Air Service Regiment.

"A hunting trip?" his father prodded. "Or a jaunt for the sake of the thing, like that trip to Tillamook?" The beads of sweat grew and he suppressed an impulse to wipe them away.

"Quite a bit of a trip, a long 'un," he said. "Weeks, or more. We'd be going off right away." Horned lord and Mother-of-all, do you have to ask so many bloody questions? he thought desperately. And then: Oh, bugger, I let it slip.

Normally he spoke with nearly the same accent as any other Mackenzie his age, except that it was a bit stronger since he lived close to Dun Juniper. That musical lilt and its rolled r-sounds was natural to him, though he'd heard that it had started right after the Change when people tried to imitate Lady Juniper's manner of speech. His father always found it irritating or amusing, depending on his mood.

When he was in the irritated phase, Sam Aylward called it life imprisonment among the Stage Irish, whatever that meant.

But when he was under a strain more of his father's own voice came out in his, and Sam Aylward had been born in England—on a farm near Tilford in Hampshire, to be precise—and the soft burr clung to his tongue despite more than twenty years here in the Willamette.

Edain could see his father relent; he laughed then, and the younger man flushed.

"It's all right," Sam Aylward said. "Just that you're about as good at keeping something off your face as I was at your age. Still, you're a better than good shot and useful otherwise for a long trip." "You know?" Edain blurted.

His father grinned like a wolf. "I may not be the First Armsman any more, but Lady Juniper does still ask me for advice, I'll have you know. I was your age when I took the Queen's Shilling, pretty much, and ended up on a transport to the Falklands not long after. Your mother knows too, by the way."

That was no surprise. His mother was High Priestess of the oldest coven in Dun Fairfax, and she heard everything from this world and the Otherworld both.

"You want to go?" Sam Aylward asked.

He looked at his father in astonishment. "Well, of course I do, Dad!" he said.

"Ah, I should remember what nineteen's like," Aylward senior said. At Edain's affronted look:

"You'll understand in a while."

"It's the farm I was worried about, with the spring work, and all," the younger man said awkwardly. "I mean..."

"Lambing and shearing's over," Aylward said. "And besides, we've got Tamar, and her man's about the place now, and young Dickie is getting to be a real help, and your little sister with your mother. We'll manage."

Edain blew out his lips in relief. A huge excitement grew beneath his breastbone; it dimmed only a little when his mother came through the door from the main house with his siblings, including his elder half-sister Tamar—she'd been born a little before the Change that killed her father—and her handfasted man Eochu, and their firstborn in her arms.

Baby Forgall just gurgled quietly, but everyone else looked at him. His mother with worry; she had the upper section of her arsaoid over her head like a hood, which meant she'd just been at some rite before the house-altar. Dick was looking at him with naked envy. Young Fand was nearly as distressed as mother, her fair redhead's face flushed.

Then her expression changed and she spoke: "I guess we can't tell Eithne, sure?" and giggled, back to her usual hateful twelve-year-old self.

That made him feel better about it. For one thing, Eithne would be spitting mad that he was going and she wasn't when it all came out, so he wouldn't be sorry she didn't hear of it. And things had never been quite the same with them since that trip north last year. He felt even better when his

father snapped in a tone harder than his usual:

"No, and if you want your brother back alive, you'll keep your mouth bloody well shut, girl!"

She looked properly abashed. Then Sam Aylward went on to his eldest son:

"Rudi has the gear you'll need for the first part ready. But you'll need a spare war-bow."

There were dozens racked on the walls, finished or in the making. Edain's eyes went wide when he saw the one his father took down. It wasn't new—he'd gotten a new one as a gift at his birthday this spring, just after Ostara—but it was beautiful, from the darkly shining riser of black-walnut root to the carved horn tips at either end. The staves were yew, the whole weapon six feet long with a subtle double curve, out a little from the riser and then back again, what the old books called reflex-deflex.

His father was known as Aylward the Archer throughout the Willamette, and his marksmanship was only half the reason.

"That's your war-bow, Dad!"

"Too heavy for me, these days. I get a twinge in me shoulder at full draw with it. A hundred and fifteen pounds with a thirty-inch arrow... Give it a try."

Edain flushed again at doing it with everyone watching. The actions were automatic: he strung it Mackenzie-style, with the lower tip braced against his left foot and his right thigh over the riser.

Then he brought it up and drew, pushing out his left arm and pulling with the muscles of his torso and gut as much as the right arm. A little to his surprise it bent easily, and he held the draw without any betraying quiver.

"You'll do," his father said when he'd eased off from the draw, then pulled him into a quick rough hug. "You'll do me proud, boy."

His mother was crying a little; she was a decade and more younger than his father, but he suddenly realized with a shock that her yellow-brown hair had gone mostly gray too. When had that happened?

He knelt before her. She made the Invoking sign over his head—a pentagram, starting with the top star—and spoke with a catch in her voice:

"Through darkened wood and shadowed path

Hunter of the Forest, by your side

Lady of the Stars, fold you in Her wings:

So mote it be!"

The whole family joined in on the final line of the spell-prayer. It made him feel stronger; then his mother handed him a sack.

"Just a few extra things. There are some simples in the white box, they're all labeled in case you take a chill. Try—"her face worked. "Try to come back safe!"

He was glad to finally get out and on his way; goodbyes were all well and good, but he had to go. He strode down the graveled lane between the houses and sheds, the Covenstead and the big communal barn, and out through the gate, with Garbh padding at his heels. It was midmorning, and most of the folk were out in the fields; he passed a few younger children playing or watching still younger siblings, and the odd adult whose work kept them in the dun even now. Outside the gate he paused to leave a few crumbs by the grave of the Fairfaxes, the old couple who'd owned the farm around which the dun had grown, and then turned east.

He kept to the road, passing people busy in the garden-plots with their eternal battle against slugs and couch-grass and creeping shoots, their hoes flashing as they sang a working song:

"Remember what old granny said

These beetles are pretty—but better-off dead;

They can be compost—and we can be fed!"

Eithne gave him a look and went back to work; he winced a little. Her mother gave him a look that was even worse and called out:

"Care to try a spell at the hoe, if you can spare the time from a walk in the woods?"

He shrugged and kept walking. "No, no, these mysteries of the Earth Mother are too sacred for my eyes!" he called with mock solemnity.

That got him a chorus of good-natured hoots and jeers, particularly from the men and boys

working there, and he waved back as he went by. Nobody was too upset; they knew he wasn't one of Dun Fairfax' few shirkers. This was a solidly prosperous settlement and proud of it—prosperous by standards no older than Edain, which meant that everyone in it had plenty of food all year 'round, at least two spare sets of clothing and a clean bed of their own. But it stayed that way because everyone in it worked very hard indeed.

The fields narrowed as he went east towards the head of the valley. A quick skip from rock to rock at a ford put him over the river that flowed down from Dun Juniper's hillside bench. Then he was into the green gloom of tall forest, land that had been Mackenzie-owned in the old days, Lady Juniper's land; that meant a century of careful tending since it was last logged. Red alder grew tall along the stream, ten times his height, with its bark mottled white and the new leaves green and tender. Fir and hemlocks and redcedar stood taller still and candle-straight on the drier ground; beneath the forest floor bore a carpet of low-growing red-stemmed kinnikinnick, starred with pink flowers in this season.

Birds were many; away in the middle distance he heard the mating-season boom-boom of a Blue Grouse, and closer to hand a pair of hummingbirds hovered above a patch of iris. It was all nearly as familiar as his family's house, or the fields. He still smiled to see it...

But I'm leaving, he thought. I'm going far and far away, and I may never be back again!

He stopped for a moment to look back for a last glimpse through the trees and down at the valley's dappled spring quilt of plowland and pasture and young wheat. That was enough to sober him for a few minutes; with every pace away he could feel how his heart-strings were deep in this good brown earth. And it made him look at each tree and turn of the creek in a new light as it went past; but he was cheerful enough again in a few minutes. He was young, and strong, and the Chief's tanist had chosen him as his companion on the great journey.

When he came near the old overgrown logging trail above Dun Juniper he was grinning again. He decided to approach on the quiet—and was congratulating himself on how well he was managing, though only deer and elk and the odd hunter had kept fern and brush from totally closing the way. It was Garbh's low growl that alerted him; he wheeled with a sudden start of alarm.

"Not bad, kid," a voice said from behind him.

He knew from the flat harsh accent that it was the foreigner Ingolf. Very slowly he turned, cheeks blushing with embarrassment, biting down on anger.

He out-sneaked me! he thought indignantly. And on ground I've hunted over all my life!

Rudi stood grinning, leaning on a quarterstaff. Three big A-frame packs rested at his feet, and another of the walking sticks.

"Ready, Edain?" he said, tossing it.

Edain caught the length of ashwood and looked up, through the trees to the high white peaks eastward. Mackenzie Pass would still be cold this time of year...

"Ready, Chief!" he said, rearranging his quiver and shrugging one of the packs onto his back with a grunt of effort.

Usually Rudi didn't like being called that; and technically he wouldn't be, not until his mother died or stepped down and even then only if the Clan hailed him—though that was pretty well a foregone conclusion now that they'd made him tanist. This time he shrugged it off with a grin.

"Then let's get going!"

"After you, Chief," Ingolf said with a smile.

Rudi did scowl at him; then they set their faces eastward and walked into the forests and towards the peaks that walled the world.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN:

County Odell, Hood Valley, northern Oregon  
Portland Protective Association  
April 17th, CY23/2021 AD

"It really is worth coming here for the blossom-time," Mathilda Armingier said wistfully, taking a deep breath of the cool morning air. "Too bad we have to leave right away."

This had always been fruit country, and still was; neat orchards mantled the rolling floor of the valley on every side, apple and cherry and pear, a froth of cream and pink and white, the scent as intoxicating as cool wine. Petals fell in drifts from the trees on either side of the road to catch in

her hat and hair and the russet-brown suede leather of her jerkin, and there was a deep murmur of bees amid the blossoms.

The great white cone of Mount Hood hung in the sky to the south, looming over the valley that ran north to the Columbia Gorge. The cream of its summit was tinged with a little pink from the rising sun. It looked a bit odd to see the snowpeak there, even though this was far from her first visit to the Chancellor's home fief—in Portland and the Willamette you saw the mountain from the west. The ferroconcrete bulk of Castle Odell on Lenz Butte behind them was two years younger than Mathilda, but the bright white-stucco mass might have loomed there for generations, with banners flying from the high turrets and terraced gardens falling from the outer edge of the moat to the valley floor. Odell Town huddled at its base as if for protection, its churches and dwellings and workshops mostly red-tiled and built since the Change; a half-finished cathedral in the fashionable Cypriot Gothic style was already the tallest building in it.

Steep forested hills rose green and blue with distance on either side, and Middle Mountain a few miles south separated the lower valley from the upper. A few fleecy clouds floated overhead, and the air was busy with birds journeying north. The road their horses trod came out through the town's western gate and followed the old Union Pacific. Trains of ox-drawn cars went by northward on the steel rails, mostly with barrels of fruit brandies and cordials, apple vinegar and honey-mead; south the return cargoes were grain and wool from the Count's vassals in Grass and Tygh Valleys.

As the road and rail turned west and then south they passed manors and villages and even a few isolated farms—the latter very rare in Association territory, and a sign of long peace. Peasants cutting hay in riverside meadow paused to wave their straw hats; a friar on foot told his beads as he walked and raised a hand in blessing as they passed; once a raggedy-gaudy troubadour with a lute slung over his back doffed his cap and bowed as they rode by. A little later a half-dozen mounted crossbowmen on road patrol saluted smartly.

And now we have to figure out how to get rid of Lady Catherine, she thought as she returned the gesture with a wave of her riding crop.

As Princess she was exempt from most of the usual rules, but Catherine was young—daughter of one of the Countess of Odell's ladies-in-waiting—and took her duties as chaperone seriously, sitting primly on her palfrey in her modest divided skirt and leggings. Her lips were compressed; it had taken a direct order to stop her hauling along a round dozen mounted attendants and guards. Mathilda's own mouth quirked.

Chaperone, indeed! As if I couldn't kick up my heels anytime I wanted! And Odard would be happy to cooperate—he isn't a pest about it, but you can tell. There's no real guard against impurity but determination.

The hills closed in on either side as the way turned south and closed with the Hood River, brawling and leaping white over rocks with spring's snowmelt. A roadside shrine caught her eye, a miniature carved wooden shed above a saint's image. It was a naked man with one hand on his chest and the other holding a cross.

St. Dismas, she thought; the thief who'd been crucified at the side of Jesus. The one who repented, that is. Patron saint of criminals who've gone respectable.

Conrad Renfrew wasn't openly old-fashioned, but he had an odd sense of humor she'd noticed sometimes in those who'd been adults before the Change. It was just like him to find a special devotion to that particular member of the calendar.

"Let's stop and ask the Saint's help," Mathilda said.

That was always a safe thing to suggest, and in this case she really wanted it as well. They reined in and dismounted; Odard gallantly gave her a hand down, which was sort of superfluous—Catherine was the one who might actually need it. As he did he whispered:

"I'll fix her saddle to slip off when she remounts. She couldn't ride a rocking-horse bareback and she won't notice until it's too late. Then we can just gallop away and she'll have to walk back to the castle."

Mathilda nodded unhappily; the Count wasn't at home, but his lady and his eldest son were, and they'd smell a rat as soon as Catherine got back to town, and messengers would start galloping in every direction and heliograph messages would fly to the outposts all around. It would be touch and go whether she and Odard could make it south to the border before a conroi of lancers caught up to 'escort' her home... and there would be hell to pay from her mother.

The three young nobles tied their horses to the hitching-rail, dropped a few copper coins in the

box and lit the small tapers provided, planting them before the image. Then they knelt on the dense green turf, signing themselves, kissing their crucifixes and taking up their rosaries. Mathilda continued with silent intensity as they all bowed their heads in prayer:

Saint Dismas, patron of the repentant, I am not sure that what I plan to do is right, and I am torn between my duties. I know I should obey my mother, but God has called me to guard the folk. I can see no other way than this to best fulfill my oaths and help my friend in this task, and so do what is best for both our peoples. If I do wrong, misled by my rebellious heart, help me to repent. May God bless this quest and my companions on this road. St. Dismas, teach me the words to say to Our Lord to gain pardon and the grace of perseverance; and you who are so close to Him now in Heaven, as you were during His last moments on earth, pray to Him for me that I shall never again desert Him, but that at the close of my life I may hear from Him the words He addressed to you: "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise."

As Mathilda stood and brushed off her knees she heard a quick beat of hooves from the northward. She looked up in alarm, a hand going to her sword-hilt, but it was a single rider leading a pair of pack-horses.

As he came closer she could see that it was a monk with his dark robe kirted up over practical-looking deerskin pants and stout riding boots; a telltale chink and shift hinted at a short mail shirt beneath the coarse dark robe. A longsword and dagger hung from his belt, besides a steel crucifix and a rosary of maple-wood beads, and a bowcase and quiver rode at his saddlebow. One of the led horses had a four-foot shield strapped to its pack-saddle.

The canvas cover was still on that, but she suspected she knew what it would show; a raven over a cross. And his face was vaguely familiar...

"Knight-brother of the Order of the Shield of St. Benedict," Odard said quietly, agreeing with her unspoken thought. "Not the worst possible news. He won't be reporting to the Regent, or Cardinal-Archbishop Maxwell. But they're an independent-minded bunch."

Mathilda nodded. The Benedictine monastery at Mt. Angel had come through the Change on its own and had been a rallying-point for resistance to the Portland Protective Association and its then-schismatic Church. Mt. Angel and the Protectorate both sent delegates to the Meeting at Corvallis these days, but there was still a lingering suspicion. And she knew that her mother resented the influence of the Order's missions and daughter-houses in the interior and the far south.

"Wait a minute," she said as the man drew closer. "I recognize him. That's Father Ignatius—he's a priest as well as a brother—he was in Sutterdown when the Cutters attacked. He's been at court in Portland lately, too, some sort of diplomatic mission from Abbot-Bishop Dmwoski."

The hood of his robe was thrown back to show bowl-cut black hair and a tonsure. The face beneath was weathered like leather and had a scar along the right side of the square jaw, but it was only a few years older than hers, the eyes dark and watchful and slightly tilted, shaped a little like Odard's. He was of medium height, only a bit taller than she, but broad-shouldered. The hands on the reins were shapely but large, with thick corded wrists.

The warrior cleric drew rein and signed the air. "Bless you, my children," he said. "Dominus vobiscum."

"And with your spirit, Father," they replied. The priest went on to the young chaperone:

"Lady Catherine, it was thought that I would make a more suitable escort for Her Highness, since she plans to push on to the upper valley to see the scenery there, and may stay overnight at Castle Akers in Parkdale. The Chatelaine there can see to her needs."

Duty warred with sudden hope on the young noblewoman's round plump face. Mathilda gave her a smile and a nod, and she burst out happily:

"Thank you, your Highness, reverend Father!"

Mathilda fought down both relief and suspicion until the other young woman had heeled her placid gelding into a trot back towards the civilized comforts of the castle solar. Then she turned narrow-eyed inquiry to Ignatius.

"Who exactly did you mean when you said it was thought you'd make a better escort, Father?"

The priest's blue eyes were calm. "I suggested it to the Countess, my child," he said. "Without, I'm afraid, drawing attention to the fact that I did not say I would be returning from there. It allayed her worries about you, and you won't be missed until tomorrow evening at the earliest... You are planning to escape over the border and join Rudi Mackenzie on his journey to the east, aren't you?"

"Why, Father, why would you suspect any such thing?" she asked in turn, controlling a gasp of dismay.

Answer a question with a question when you don't want to answer, she thought, and then went on: "That would be a reckless thing to do!"

"Daughter, don't lie to me. For starters, you're rather bad at it."

He began to tick off points on his fingers. "Primus, you were with Rudi Mackenzie when the assassins attacked. Secundus, you were privy to his tale of the mysterious events on Nantucket—"

Her eyes went wide in shock. "How do you know about that?" she said.

He smiled grimly, showing teeth that were white but a little uneven.

"Holy Mother Church has many sources of information—and from well beyond this corner of the world. Tertius, you and Rudi Mackenzie and his half-sisters and Baron Odard here have all dropped out of sight... heading east. The inference is obvious. I might add that as soon as your mother hears of your disappearance, she will know what you have done."

"I left a letter for her with someone I trusted," Mathilda said sullenly.

"Clever clerics give me heartburn," Odard chuckled. "They tend to push in where they're not wanted. Shall I rid you of this troublesome priest, Princess?"

He laid his hand on the hilt of his sword and raised a brow at her.

"Oh, stop posturing, Odard," Mathilda said impatiently. "I know you'll bash whoever I tell you to bash, but that's ridiculous here."

At least, I hope he's posturing. Priest-murder is sacrilege! she thought. Aloud she went on:

"And in case you hadn't noticed, he's got a sword too."

"I did," Odard said, with the same lazy smile. "A man who wears a sword should expect to have to use it, tonsure and robe or no."

"I am willing to use it," Ignatius said. "Against the enemies of peace, and of the Faith, whom we've been given dispensation to fight by the Holy Father. Do you wish to join one of those two categories, my lord Odard?"

"A Knight-Brother knows how to use the sword too," Mathilda pointed out. "Let's hear what he has to say."

The priest turned his gaze to her. "Daughter, are you determined on this course? For as you said, it is reckless."

"You're not my confessor, Father!" she snapped.

Unexpectedly, Ignatius smiled. "For which, thanks be to God!"

Mathilda found herself chuckling for an instant, and abandoned the attempt to hold on to her anger.

"Then what are you questioning me for?" she asked. "Father," she added after a moment.

"My child, being who and what you are, your actions affect more than yourself. This is your responsibility; God gives us each a cross to carry, as heavy as we can bear—neither more nor less. My responsibility is to the Head of my Order... and he has ordered me to investigate the matter of Ingolf Vogeler, and the assassins who pursued him here. The Order of the Shield has been watching the growth of this dangerous cult in Montana for some time now. What we know does not please us; and we must know more."

Mathilda arched her brows. "You don't intend to try and stop me?" she said bluntly.

Ignatius shrugged. "The Regent is not my ruler; Abbot-Bishop Dmwoski is. Furthermore you will be Lady Protector in only a few more years, and it is my judgment that your displeasure then if I, ah, fink you out, would do more to endanger the interests of the Order than angering your mother now. Besides which, if we hurry we can probably cross the border well before anyone finds out what's going on. When... if... we return, things will be very different."

Mathilda stood for a moment, and then threw up her hands with a laugh. "Let's go, then. It'll be a comfort to have the sacraments available on the way. Not including Extreme Unction, I hope!"

When Ignatius grinned, she suddenly remembered he was a young man himself. He slapped his sword-hilt and replied:

"Perhaps I can help us avoid that one."

Odard bowed slightly. "As the Princess commands," he said. Then after a long considering look at the priest: "And perhaps it's just a good idea anyway, too."

They swung back into the saddle and headed south at a ground-covering pace, walk-trot-canter-trot-walk; she and Odard had chosen their horses carefully. Not the big destriers



that cost more than a knight's armor—those would be waiting for them in Bend, if all went well—but good-sized long-legged palfreys. The cleric's horses were fine stock as well, and not carrying too much weight; he was whipcord and sinew rather than bulk. Mt. Angel had rich lands, including stud farms with a growing reputation.

The narrow passage along the river opened up into broad fields and orchards again southward; the skin between Mathilda's shoulderblades crawled as they passed the last castle of the Upper Valley, where the railroad stopped and just before the valley floor rippled up into the ridges around the base of Mt. Hood. The tall square tower of the keep flew a banner with a saw-edge circle, sable on argent. Those were the arms of the Akers family, barons but not tenants-in-chief, vassals of the Counts of Odell rather than the Throne. She expected the garrison to be as alert as any of her mother's own Household forces, but they evidently didn't consider a monk and two gentlefolk heading out of the valley any of their business.

"Phew!" Mathilda said as the last field gave way to forest.

It was cooler under the shade of the great Douglas and Grand fir, and the ground was rising; they were more than a thousand feet higher than the Columbia gorge now. The faint smells of woodsmoke and habitation were gone, noticeable only by their absence. The tiny white and pink blooms of shade-loving sourgrass bloomed under the tall trees, and snowy-colored trillium; ferns were sprouting though the damp litter of leaf and needle, and a patch of Yellow Violet trembled gold beside a stream. After the first few miles they saw few traces of human hands except the road itself. Birds were noisy with their spring mating rituals, and once a small herd of elk crossed in front of them and went crashing eastward in alarm.

The area of the old Mount Hood Wilderness and much besides was Lord Protector's personal reserve, land under forest law where nobody could hunt or cut timber without special leave. Odard and the priest looked over at her as she snorted laughter.

"It's just that technically speaking, this is my land we're on. Yet I'm sneaking through it like a poacher afraid of a whipping from the verderers!"

The two men chuckled. Odard lifted his head. "And speaking of poachers, I think I smell venison cooking. Good man, Alex. And a dab hand with a crossbow."

Mathilda tested the air; there was woodsmoke and grilling meat, sure enough. A minute later the narrow road turned and revealed a small stretch of meadow, an ancient campground. Twenty-odd years and heavy rains had left nothing of picnic tables save green mounds, but the stone hearth was still useable. Odard's manservant Alex was there, with five hobbled horses, their pack-saddles... and yes, pieces of venison on skewers over glowing coals, giving off a smell that made her mouth water. The neatly butchered carcass of a yearling doe hung in sections from a branch; Alex had wrapped the chunks he was cooking in bacon from the supplies, since the meat would be lean this time of year.

It had been a long time since their breakfast at Castle Odell, and it would have looked suspicious to pack along supplies for what was supposed to be a short trip to look at the flowers.

"Your Highness," Alex said, bowing, not even a twitch to show he was surprised at seeing three riders instead of two. "My lord Odard. And most reverend Father in God. No sign of the foresters who ought to be patrolling. Even if the Princess was graciously pleased to give me a signed warrant, they should have checked, the idle bastards. It's not as if I'm hiding."

Odard grinned; he'd told her Alex could manage getting their gear ready and meeting them with it, and evidently he'd been right.

"No problem getting past the road patrols?" he said to his servant.

Alex shrugged. "I'm just another commoner, my lord. Nobody notices us—and there's no tax on goods leaving Association territory. It's not like the old days, when they were on the lookout for runaway peons."

Ouch, Mathilda thought. Well, those were hard times, hard measures were necessary. The thought was well-worn and increasingly unsatisfying.

She dismounted; they took a moment to unsaddle and hobble their horses, and pour out oats from the pack-saddles. Those contained a little food, but mostly the essentials of their gear, things you couldn't buy in a town market. Principally their armor, since a really first-class suit had to be fitted like fine clothing. Her battle harness included a set of titanium mesh-mail, the priceless work of half a dozen specialists laboring for years, stronger than even the best steel and only a third the weight, besides being rustproof.

Sneaking it out of the palace had been a major pain. She'd felt a quiet glow of accomplishment

when she managed it without—she very much hoped without—anyone important noticing. Right now the venison kebabs felt more important. Alex had fresh bread with them, and butter and soft cheese and pickled vegetables...

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Two days later Mathilda's horse drank, and then raised its dripping muzzle from a pool. The spring that made it flowed from a split in the dark basalt lava, and they'd paused to fill their canteens and let their mounts drink. Hers nosed towards a tall purple stalk of larkspur; she put her hand on its muzzle and pushed against the hairy weight to distract it—the plant was pretty, but its other name was poison delphinium.

"How did you beasts survive before we people came along to look after you?" she asked it with rhetorical indignation and fed it some dried apple.

Then the animal lost interest in water and feed both. Its ears cocked forward and it raised its head, snorting and staring westward. A crow launched itself from the boughs of a willow that stood a little downstream trailing its branches in the water, calling *gruk-gruk-gruk* as its wings flogged the cool air. A pair of pintail ducks swam away, then decided to follow it, skittering down the little creek with their feet splashing at the surface as they made their takeoff.

"Heads up, your Highness, Father," Odard said quietly. "Told you we were on Warm Springs land by now. The Three Tribes are touchy about their borders, too. There was a lot of raiding around here in the old days."

"Yeah," Mathilda said, tightening the girth. "Someone spotted us yesterday, I think. They probably high-tailed it for help."

She swung back into the saddle, and stopped her hand on its way to the bow cased at her knee with an effort of will; they weren't here to fight. Her warning hiss made Alex stop his hand reaching towards the light crossbow he kept hanging at his, and the four of them rode up out of the hollow onto a long open swelling. The grassland was green with spring and starred with white flowers and sage that gave a strong clean scent when hooves crushed it, and scattered with dwarf juniper. Mt. Hood loomed directly west, which meant they were on reservation land.

The rumble of hooves grew louder, and a dozen horsemen came out of the rise half a mile southward. They headed straight for the travelers at a gallop, and then split and surrounded them amid high yelps and *ki-yi!* yips and thundering hooves; that was good tactics, and it would give them a psychological advantage. All of them had bows, quivers over their backs, shetes at their waists and lariats hanging from their saddlebows. They had round painted shields as well and one or two carried light spears; their hair was in braids, and most wore feathers in it. More feathers and beads and shell-work picked out their gear and horse-harness and the leather vests they wore over colorful shirts or bare skin.

"Let's hope they're honest," Odard murmured as the noise and dust enveloped them.

Mathilda nodded, and her mouth went a little dry; their horses and gear were worth a good deal. The strangers' leader reined his own beautiful white-spotted Appaloosa in; he had a band of white paint across his upper face and black circles around his eyes and a tanned wolf-head on his steel cap, with the muzzle shading his face like the bill of a hat and a fall of hide covering his neck. He looked as if he were about thirty, with raven-black braids hanging past his shoulders and halfway down the steerhide vest sewn with stainless-steel washers he wore as display and armor. He also had the nearly beardless ruddy-brown skin, high cheekbones and narrow black eyes of a full-blood Indian; his followers were all younger, and they ranged from looks much like his to tow hair and blue eyes. People had moved around a lot right after the Change, even out here where the die-off hadn't been so bad, and then mostly copied the customs of whoever took them in. Or the customs those people put together out of half-memories and legends in a world gone mad...

"So," he said, after looking them over. "You folks are from the Protectorate, right? And maybe the priest, too?"

Mathilda felt herself flush at the tone. He could tell where she and Odard and the servant came from by their dress—boots, baggy pants, and belted t-tunics worn over full-sleeved linen shirts. She and Odard had left off the golden spurs of knighthood and avoided the distinctive roll-edged round hats with dangling side-tails that nobles wore, using broad-brim Stetsons instead. She flushed again as she realized that the man had seen her reaction.

The other Indians talked among themselves in a language she recognized—Chinook Jargon—but couldn't speak. She didn't think they were making compliments, though; and they were probably using the tongue to psych out the intruders, since she knew they spoke English at home most of the time. Her temper boiled over.

"The Charter of the Meeting at Corvallis says people from all member states can travel freely through the territories of the others on peaceful and lawful business," she snapped. "Last time I looked, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs were members of the Meeting."

The men circling them bristled at that. "I'm in charge of this section of the Council's border guards," their leader said sharply. "Foreigners have to give an account of themselves. You could be bandits or rustlers—we've lost some stock lately."

The priest raised a soothing hand.

"I'm Father Ignatius, from Mount Angel," he said. "We're peaceful travelers heading for Bend."

The narrow dark eyes of the Indian leader flicked from her to the priest, to Odard's politely watchful smile and to Alex's blankness.

I shouldn't have said anything, Mathilda told herself. I'm noticeable enough, in men's clothes.

That wasn't actually forbidden in the Association's territories anymore, but it was fairly rare.

"If you're heading for Bend, you're doing it 'way off the main road,'" the Indian said. "Except on the highway nobody travels our land without our leave."

"Yes, we are off the road," Ignatius replied in a friendly tone. "But just passing though none the less, and taking nothing but a little water and grass."

The other man thought for an instant and then gave a slight nod; his followers relaxed.

"Name's Winnemucca," he said, extending a hand.

The priest shook; there was a jostling and shifting of horses as the others of their party did. The Indian's eyes widened a little as he felt the sword-calluses on Mathilda's hand, and the strength of it. His own was like a rawhide glove over living metal.

"Thank you for giving me your name," Father Ignatius said.

Winnemucca laughed, and some of the others grinned in more friendly wise.

"We've got a scholar with a sense of humor here," he said. Then to Mathilda's obvious incomprehension: "That's what Winnemucca means, in Paiute. He Who Gives."

He leaned his hands on the horn of his saddle. "Maybe you'd like an escort south to CORA territory?"

Mathilda tried to hide her wince. Just what they needed; something to draw more attention!

I'm lucky photographs are so rare and expensive now, she thought despairingly. But it looks like I can't keep myself hidden for a single day. If only we could get further from home...

"But maybe not, eh?" He Who Gives said. After a moment's pause: "You can be on your way then. If you're not looking for company, head a little west as you go south—we haven't moved our herds up that far yet."

He gave a high shrill call and wheeled his horse, shaking his bow overhead. The others followed him like a torrent, until only the sound of their hooves was left, a faint fading rumble in the earth.

"Phew," Mathilda said, wiping her forehead.

"Your Highness, I thought for a moment there he'd made us," Odard said. "Or would have if the good Father hadn't intervened."

"I think maybe he did," Mathilda said. "But maybe he'll keep his mouth shut, too. Let's get going. It's another day's ride to Bend."

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Near Bend

Capital of the Central Oregon Ranchers Association

April 19th, CY23/2021 AD

"Well, that's a relief," Ritva Havel said.

She looked at the dusty white road ahead of them as they ambled along behind the horses they were driving, and at the irrigated fields of wheat and potatoes and pasture to either side, divided by rows of poplars, drowsing under the afternoon sun. Puddles and lines of water glistened between the young green of the spring crops.

Her sister nodded. The Santiam Pass had been cold. They hadn't been caught in a bad

snowstorm—you had to be really unlucky for that, towards the end of April, even over six thousand feet. But the ground beside the road had been wet and it had gone down to freezing every night they were up in the high country, often with sleet accompaniment. They were young and in hard condition and they had the equipment they needed, but that didn't make it fun the way it would be in July, or even the way a winter hunting trip on skis could be.

Bend was three thousand feet lower than the summit of the pass, and it was sunny and mildly warm and Lord-and-Lady-bless us dry this bright noonday, and the smells were of river-water and turned earth and woodsmoke as well as everlasting pine-sap as they came towards the city. The white fangs of the mountains—she could see Three-fingered Jack and the Sisters and Mt. Jefferson—were merely pretty from here. Up there at this time of year you soon started thinking they hated the tribe of men, like Caradhras in the histories of the War of the Ring. At least there weren't any orcs, or bandits either in this season.

"And I wish you wouldn't snore when we have to share the same little tent," Ritva went on to her sister.

"I do not snore!" Mary said indignantly. "Besides, our flet back at Mithrilwood isn't much bigger."

"Yes, you do snore, and at home there's a wall between our beds at least," Ritva said, and continued with ruthless logic: "Besides, I snore. And therefore you snore."

"How do you know you snore? I was never rude enough to tell you," Mary said.

A boyfriend had informed Ritva that she snored like a water-powered ripsaw and slept with her mouth open—something not easy to express in Elvish, and it was among the reasons she'd dropped him—but she wasn't going to say that right now.

"How do I know you've been eating beans?" she said snidely instead, and they both laughed.

Epona chose that moment to start a purposeful move towards a cart-full of baled alfalfa hay on the road before them. They both moved their mounts to cut her off, and the big black mare stood staring at them with one hind foot slightly raised, swishing her tail, ears just a bit back. For a horse, Epona was extremely intelligent, disturbingly so; you could see the thoughts moving in her great dark eyes as she looked at you.

"Remember what Uncle Will said about her when she's doing that?" Ritva said.

"Yeah," Mary chuckled, and dropped into Texan-accented English for a moment. "Girls, she ain't lookin' at us that way 'cause she loves us."

The other horses fell back into an obedient clump when Epona decided she wasn't going to make trouble, even her daughters Macha Mongruad and Rhiannon. Contrary to what a lot of people thought, it was the lead mare that ran a horse-herd... and there was absolutely no doubt about who was boss mare when Epona was around. The problem was that when she was away from Rudi she got less and less interested in what people wanted.

They had their own mounts and a spare each, dappled gray five-year-olds with a big dash of Arab blood; and besides Epona and her get there were six others, all big warmbloods and battle-trained—what Portlanders called destriers, bred and trained to carry armored lancers in battle.

Destriers weren't much seen this side of the mountains. Folk out here favored quarterhorse and other ranch-breeds, mostly; agile and tough and suited alike to working range cattle or to the quicksilver eastern style of mounted combat. Destriers of the quality they were bringing cost more than a knight's armor and weren't common anywhere, the Association's territories included.

They'd let the coats get rough and shaggy, and the light pack-saddles were an additional disguise, but there was only so much you could do to hide their quality from people who knew horses.

Epona wasn't carrying anything, of course. She never did, except to bear Rudi.

It was good to get the fortune-on-hooves they were driving to the paddock of the livery stable the Dúnedain used here, a bit outside the walls of Bend, over towards the forested slopes of Pilot Butte. The proprietor was busy when they came up, giving a worm-killing herbal drench to a blindfolded horse, a messy but essential task you had to do every couple of months at least, involving funnels and rubber hoses; they'd treated theirs before the trip started. A couple of his employees ran to open the log-frame gate. Part of the turnout had fine grass, watered from the Falls North canal, and a larger section a little higher bore gray-green sagebrush on good firm dry soil. There was a strong smell of manure from the heap beside the stables, and a smell of scorched metal and ting-ting-ting from the farrier's shop.

The owner himself came over when he'd finished the task, looking muddy and swearing under his breath. Horses didn't like having their mouths held open and things pushed down their throats;

despite steel-toed boots he limped a bit where it had stepped on his foot accidentally-on-purpose. "Mae govannen," he said, which sounded odd in a ranch-country twang. Then he dropped back into English, since that exhausted his Sindarin: "Pleased to see you ladies again."

"Good to see you again too, Mr. Denks," Ritva said, mentally pushing the lever that switched her thoughts to English likewise. "You don't look too busy."

"Still the quiet time of year," Denks said as she leaned over to shake his hand; he hitched at his suspenders and then ran a hand over his glistening bald scalp. "We get some traffic down from the Columbia in winter, and from out east, but you're early to come over Highway 20."

Then, cocking an eye at the horses and making a tsk sound: "Look rid hard and put away wet, these'uns."

Epona was doing a circuit of the five-acre field, tail and head high, followed by her progeny. The others headed straight for the water and feed. There wasn't much grazing in the high country this time of year, and anyway horses like these couldn't get by on grass alone.

"Nice-lookin' critters if you like 'em big," Denks went on.

"Well, we'll be here long enough for you to feed them up a bit," Mary said; they'd slung bags of milled oats over each horse's back to get them over the mountains. "And have them reshod. We'll be needing some more stock—nothing fancy, enough to pull a Conestoga, harness-broke mules would do. And we'll be having a good deal of stuff dropped off here."

The man nodded without asking questions, which was welcome but not unexpected; he'd done business with the Rangers for years. They stored most of their gear with him in a hay-loft as well, taking only their swords, some money and documents, and a change of clothes into the city proper.

That involved a half-hour walk through the outskirts—places where suburban tracts had lain, burned over or torn down for their materials. Now they housed everything from truck-gardens to warehouses full of raw hides to the tanyards that turned them into leather with a stink of lye and acrid bark-juice to plain weeds and sagebrush and greasewood and stubs of wreckage. The city walls were the usual type, concrete and rubble around a core of salvaged steel girders; they were thick and strong, but the inhabitants hadn't bothered to smooth the outside as much as some places did, leaving it rough and gray-brown with edges of rock sticking out.

Which was a good metaphor for Bend in general. The clotted knot of would-be entrants on the road outside the eastern gate wasn't very big, but it wasn't moving much either, besides yelling and waving their arms and making their horses rear and snort. Being on foot the twins could push forward until they saw the reason; a Rancher and his cowboy-retainers arguing with the gate-guard. Ritva smiled to herself as he grumbled and eventually paid over the entrance-tax the city charged.

The CORA—the Central Orgeon Ranchers Association—was as much of a government as this area had; its assembly met here in Bend, and its lariat-and-branding-iron flag flew over the gatehouse. But though the city of Bend had shrunk drastically, there were still fifteen thousand souls living within the circuit of the walls in a bend of the Deschutes River. Its town council was scrappily independent of the big herding spreads, and so were the small farmers of the irrigated areas north and south of town.

Just to add spice to life in these parts, the Ranchers all quarreled with each other regularly too, partly from things like strayed unbranded mavericks ending in the wrong roundup and partly from sheer bull-headed cussedness. They got the essentials like defense and keeping up the dams and canals done, somehow, but you always wondered how when you saw their usual barroom-brawl notion of governance.

"Not much like Corvallis," Mary observed.

"They're organized down to their boot-laces," Ritva agreed. "I'm glad Bend doesn't do that peace-bonding nonsense on your sword."

Inside the streets were more crowded, as was inevitable in a walled town; empty spaces had been built up, and some of the single-story buildings raised a story or two. More people were on horseback than in a town west of the mountains, but by way of compensation there were good if thronged brick or board sidewalks, and squads of dung-scoopers.

They walked past cobblers and harnessmaker's shops—Bend was famous for its leather goods—and bookstores, furniture-makers, stores selling pre-Change and modern cutlery and pottery, clothiers and tailors with a hum of pedal-driven sewing machines, a printshop,

cook-houses and taverns, and an entertainer strumming his guitar and singing with a bowl in front of him. They didn't drop any change in it; he used the whining nasal style of singing popular around here, and neither of them liked it.

"Mah horse is gone bad lame, mah dog done died, my woman don't love me no more and I ain't got no money for beeeeeerrr," Mary crooned, in the same fashion.

Ritva laughed. It sounded a lot funnier when you said it in the Noble Tongue.

"You've created a new style, sis," she said. "Country and Elvish."

For a moment Mary's face turned sad. "The reason I don't like that type of song is it reminds me of Dad," she said. "He liked it—or something a lot like it, I think."

"Yeah," Ritva said, putting an arm around her sister's shoulders for an instant. "I miss him too."

They'd been two years short of ten when he rode away to war and never came back, only his body in a box, and their mother was different after that. These days their recollections of him felt faded somehow, as if they were memories of the memories rather than the thing itself. But she could remember the effortless strength as he scooped the both of them up, one under each arm, and twirled them around until they were all breathless and laughing...

Then they passed a school where children sat on the steps eating from their lunchboxes.

"Meren aes," Mary said.

Ritva could feel she was making herself cheerful; she nodded agreement as she realized she was hungry too. Time dulled grief, which was a kindness of the Lord and Lady to human kind. The smells of grilling and roasting and frying from the cookshops and taverns and street-vendors were making her mouth water.

"E yaxë olgaren nubast gwasolch," Mary went on.

"Yeah, I could use a hamburger and fries," Ritva replied.

The phrase translated strictly as cut-up cow beneath bread with edible roots, but usage had made the modern meaning plain.

"I like that spicy ketchup they make here."

Macy's Travelers Rest was familiar too; it had been a motel before the Change, though now the courtyard parking spaces held a timber bunkhouse for those without the rather stiff charge required to rent a room for themselves. The same people owned the grill/bar next door, and beyond that was a public bathhouse with a good reputation and plenty of hot water; between them an alleyway had been turned into a bowling-alley-cum-shooting gallery. Voices and an occasional shout and hard thunk came from there as they came down from their room—the Traveler's Rest was safe enough to leave ordinary gear unattended.

A hopeful voice called out: "You girls new in town?"

The words were unexceptional, but the tone wasn't and neither was the low whistle; from his worn leather clothes, the man was from the outback, probably in town for a spree, and it was only too apparent he and his friends hadn't visited the bathhouse yet. He wasn't much older than they were. Ritva sighed internally; that wouldn't have happened back west over the mountains, but the Rangers weren't quite as familiar here. They both turned so the loungers could see the trees-stars-crown on the front of their jerkins and take in the left hands resting casually on the long hilts of their swords. Another of the men started whispering in the ear of the one who'd spoken, but the speaker pushed him aside.

"Anyone can sew stuff on their shirt," he said, then turned what was probably intended to be an ingratiating smile on them.

It would work better without that black tooth, she thought.

The hangers-on had been whiling away time throwing tomahawks at the target down at the other end of the closed-in alley; it was a baulk of seasoned oak, and they were throwing hard at a chalked-out human outline on it. You had to throw hard to make a hatchet stick in an oak target fifty feet away, as well as getting the rotation just right—several had hit without the blade striking and bounced back halfway to the thrower's bar. One or two of them had wooden mugs of beer; and throwing edged iron around while you were drinking was truly stupid.

"Toss me one of those," Ritva said with a smile.

"Hey, these are dangerous, the edges are sharp," one of the others said.

He tossed one anyway, slow and underhand. Ritva caught it and flipped it to Mary, who threw it back.

"A couple more."

The men looked at each other; a couple of them grinned. They started throwing more of the

hatchets, some of them harder and faster, but without hostile intent. The twins intercepted them and began flipping them back and forth to each other, a pair, then four, then six, then eight. Then they turned so that they were both facing towards the target and walked up to the throwing-line; the onlookers scattered as the whirling figure-eight of sharp iron approached.

"Hathyl hado!" Ritva cried, and suited action to the words: throw the axes!

Thunk! and the first tomahawk sank into the chest of the target, its handle quivering. Then they had to snatch the hatchets out of the juggle with one hand and throw with the other; that took concentration, but they'd been practicing tricks together a long time. Thunk—thunk—thunk—

"Thanks for the entertainment, boys," Mary said to the spectators politely, and they walked on towards the bar and grill, leaving an echoing silence behind them as the men contemplated the neat grouping in throat, midriff and crotch.

"Rym vin thûannem," Ritva said, feeling slightly guilty at her own enjoyment.

"Well, yes, we were blowing our own horns," her sister acknowledged. "But remember what Aunt Astrid said about spreading legends. That's a help to all the Dúnedain who ever come through here in times to come."

Ritva snorted. "Just a conjuring trick, anyway. Tomahawks are more trouble than they're worth." A couple of the customers scurried back from the windows to take their seats again as the twins pushed through the swinging doors of the bar and grill and into the dim interior, their feet scrutching in the sawdust on the plank floor. A plain middle-aged waitress in a yellow dress and white apron came over. They returned her smile as they pulled out chairs at a vacant table and hung their sword-belts over the backs.

"Hi, ladies," she said—they'd been promoted from girls the last time they visited. "Welcome back to town—what'll it be?"

"Two bacon-cheddar burgers, Sarah," Ritva said, and then sighed in exasperation as she realized she'd stopped thinking—and speaking—in English again, and her Sindarin had gotten an amused raised eyebrow.

She repeated it in the Common Tongue and added. "Mayonnaise, onions... got any tomatoes?"

"Dried or pickled."

"Pickled. Two mugs of root beer."

The twins passed the time waiting for their food by playing Mubledy Peg, resting their daggers' hilts on the backs of their hands and trying to set them point-down in the floor by flicking them off—they weren't the first by a long shot, to judge by the state of the boards. The hamburgers' smoky richness was a welcome change from venison jerky; hard work outside in cold weather made you crave fats. And they were only ten cents each for patrons of Macy's.

As they left, Mary looked down at the list she'd taken out of a pocket in her black Ranger's jerkin. Bend was a good place to pick up supplies for a trip; routes from north and east and west and south funneled trade and travel here, and sellers came where the buyers congregated. So did the best makers and artisans this side of the Cascades.

"One steel-axle twenty-foot Conestoga wagon with extra covers for the tilt, spare wheels and hubs and tire-rims," she began.

"Náyak!" Ritva said, wincing slightly and thinking of the price: "Painful!"

"It's not our money, sis. Hmmm... Shovels, picks, axes, hauling chains, grease bucket and keg of good-quality axle grease, heavy jack, caltrops, lariats, hemp twine and rope, canvas, extra shoes and boots, sweaters, hats, knit socks, underwear, needles and thread, soap, blankets, oilskins and tarpaulins, three tents, saddler's tools and leather, horseshoe blanks for cold-shoeing, small hollow anvil, farrier's tools, nails, lanterns, alcohol for lanterns, flints and wicks for lighters, water barrels and a keg of water purification powder, medicine chest, horse medicine chest..."

"Did you ever wonder how the Fellowship made do with only one pack pony?" Ritva said, looking over her shoulder.

That ordinary-looking man might have been following them. On the other hand, he went into a shop as she watched, so probably not.

"They probably didn't change their underwear or use soap," Mary said.

Aunt Astrid would have been appalled. They both had the thought at the same time, and giggled. Then: "And there's the food."

Buying first-quality in bulk would be expensive this time of year, before the crops started coming in.

"We shouldn't load too much," Ritva said.

They both knew you ended up foraging or buying locally eventually on a long trip; that was why modern trade routes tended to detour around deserts, unlike the pre-Change interstates. But... "I think Rudi's going to be taking us through out-of-the-way places where foraging takes real time. With a twenty-footer we can afford a little weight and Denks will help us with stowing the loads. Let's see... barreled salt pork, smoked hams, bacon, jerky, hard-tack in sealed boxes, dried beans, dried peas, dried fruit, shelled nuts, cornmeal, whole-meal wheat flour, yeast in sealed packets, milled oats with molasses for fodder, sea-salt..."

"Did you notice who got stuck with the chores on this glorious Quest?" Ritva added as they came out of a feed-store several hours later, squinting up at the afternoon sun over the Cascades.

"Admittedly we're the ones who can do it without attracting much attention, but... They'll have us fetching the tea, next."

"Well, if we're spending other people's money, let's blow some on plastic containers—in English perforce; nobody had come up with a Sindarin equivalent—for the bulk foodstuffs—less chance of weevils, if we're careful. Those old trash barrels are getting ragged, but the fifty-gallon kind are still good."

"Expensive, but they're worth it," Ritva nodded, then looked down at the list again. "Just the weapons, and we're done."

The proprietor of A. E. Isherman's Fine Arms and Armor knew them of old and greeted them beaming under the swinging sign—"The right to buy weapons is the right to be free"—not far from the old Town Hall. He was a short dark strong-featured man of about forty with shoulders like a blacksmith, two fingers missing from his left hand and a remarkable set of scars that ran from the angle of his jaw under the rolled top of his sweater. They looked very much like someone had tried to tear out his throat with their teeth once, and come quite close to succeeding.

"If it isn't my favorite elf-maidens," he said with a grin and a bow that showed the little knit skullcap on the back of his head. "On your own this time, eh? Still ohtar or have you been promoted to Roquen yet?"

Ritva smiled slightly and caught the let's play vibe from her sister. Ish was one of the ones who couldn't tell them apart when they were putting it on.

"Ohtar. But we're not elves," she said loftily.

"It's the Fifth Age," Mary continued. "The Age of Mortal Men. And Mortal Women. The Fourth Age ended with the Change."

"There haven't been any elves around for a long long time," Ritva continued.

"Not since the early Fourth Age, probably."

"The elves all departed into the Uttermost West long ago, everyone knows that."

"Which is even further west than Oregon."

"We just talk Elvish."

"Isn't it interesting, though: the kids at Stardell Hall are probably the first people in Middle Earth to speak it from the cradle for... well, nobody knows how long ago the Third Age was, really."

His head went back and forth like someone watching a tennis-ball, and then he shook his head and made a broad welcoming gesture.

"Only the best for the Rangers, mortals or not. Come on in."

They both made a respectful gesture to the little silver scroll beside the door as they entered. The big siding-clad frame building had been a fishing outfitter's store in the old days; despite the new skylights and a couple of good modern lanterns it was rather dim inside, and the new potbellied stove probably didn't keep it very warm in winter either.

There was an enticing smell to the weapon shop of Isherman, though: the sharp acrid scents of oiled steel and brass, the richer mellowness of leather and seasoned cedarwood, boxes of horn and sinew and wicker baskets full of gray goose flight-feathers. Spears and polearms gleamed in horizontal racks or rested with their butts in wire cages like sheaves of demonic pruning-hooks; bundles of arrows bristled from barrels, and arrowheads rested gleaming in little kegs. Armor stood on old store mannequins, looking like ghostly headless warriors in the gloom, and helmets hung like bunches of huge grapes from the ceiling.

Isherman didn't manufacture most of it, but he had contacts with plenty of the best craftsmen east of the mountains, and some west of them—Ritva recognized a set of Sam Aylward's bows.

"We'll be taking quite a bit," Mary said, looking at her list again, and began mentioning quantities.

"Going on a long trip, Ms. Havel and Ms. Havel?" Isherman asked when she'd finished. "The Rangers getting a big caravan together? Planning to start your own war?"



"Ish, what's the polite way to say if I wanted you to know, I'd tell you?"

He stroked his black chin-beard with the remaining digits on the mutilated hand and looked at the two young women.

"There is no polite way to say that, Ms. Havel... though it's usually men saying it to ladies."

"Shall I think of a more impolite way to say it?" Ritva enquired with a bright, cheerful smile.

Isherman shrugged and smiled himself as he waved a hand at two chairs in front of a table he used as a desk. It held ledgers, piles of paper, and several inkwells and sets of trimmed quills.

"Isaac!" he called to one of the teenaged sons who worked with him. "Some clover tea and honey and biscuits for our guests!"

"Aha, serious haggling is in store," Mary said, and rubbed her hands. "Gell!"

Ritva left her to it; her sister had more natural talent in that direction, though neither of them was really in Isherman's league. She drank some of the sharp-sweet tea and nibbled at a shortbread biscuit rich with pinion nuts while the samples were brought out and gravely considered.

Everyone on the expedition had their own personal armor and sword, custom-made and better than Isherman's best, but you always needed spare arrows and makings, and bits and pieces to maintain your war-harness in trim and repair damage, down to little bottles of fine linseed oil for keeping the straps supple. A few good bows were also advisable; bows were fragile. And while a first-rate sword could be passed down several generations with proper care, even the best shield was lucky to survive one hour of strong arms and heavy blows; they ended up buying a couple for each member of the party, adjusted to their height and heft, both ordinary round ones and the big kite-shaped Norman style Association nobles used.

"And twenty lances. Knight's lances, ashwood," Mary said.

The long poles were another thing that was unlikely to make it through more than one fight. So...

"And another twenty spare shafts," Ritva amplified.

Isherman's eyebrows went up, and he looked as if the urge to ask questions was about to make steam come out of his ears. Instead he shrugged and showed them what he had in stock. The weapons were ten feet of gently tapering wood, with a head like a narrow two-edged dagger a foot long heat-shrunk onto the end and a weighted butt-cap to make it balance two-thirds of the way back from the point. These were the very latest type, with a hand-guard like a small shallow steel bowl fastened just ahead of the grip.

"Good spring steel for the lanceheads, and properly retempered, not just ground down," he said.

"Ish, you never try to short anyone on quality," Mary said severely. "Prices the Gods couldn't afford, yes; quality problems, no. And don't tell me how it pains you to part with the lances. Out here, they're not real popular."

"I'll go down another twenty dollars, but no more." The man shrugged with a wry smile. "Inferior gear would get my customers killed, not to mention my reputation. So, is it a deal?"

"Deal."

Both the sisters shook with him to seal it; he added an omayan and they invoked the Lord and Lady and the spirits of the Uttermost West. The proprietor looked happy—sort of—as Ritva took out her checkbook; it would be insulting for him to look too happy, since that would mean he'd diddled them to an excessive degree. She dipped the quill pen in the inkpot on top of his desk and made one out to Isherman's Fine Arms and Armor, drawn on the Dúnedain Rangers' account at the First National and carefully noted the amount in the registration book at the back.

Uncle Alleyne pitched a fit if you weren't careful about accounts.

We might have gotten another five, ten percent off if we'd split up the purchases and gone all over town, Ritva thought. But that wouldn't be worth the time and trouble since we're in a hurry—and Ish is more reliable on quality than anyone else here.

"And you're not going to tell me a word about what this is all in aid of, are you?" he said as he waved the check in the air to dry the oak-gall-lampblack ink and slid it through a slot into his strongbox, then made out an invoice.

Ritva cleared her throat and looked at her sister; Mary had stepped over to the door even as one of the apprentices opened it in curiosity. There was a small open park across from the shop; locally it was called Free Speech Corner, and by convention everyone from wandering religious enthusiasts and local politicians to general wingnuts with a new theory about who, Who or what had caused the Change could address whoever would listen there. There were even a couple of conveniently-shaped rocks, so that you didn't have to bring a bucket, barrel or chair to stand on.

"What's that?" Ritva called; all she could see from here was people's backs, many of them

standing on wagons.

"Some new preacher who's been tearing up the scenery lately. The Ranchers don't like 'em, which means some here in town do."

They caught a few phrases through the rumble of the crowd: Ascended Master Jesus Christ... wrath of God on us again, like the Change... arrogance of the rich, who God will surely humble as He exalts His poor... soulless minions...

"Hey, who you calling a soulless minion?" a cowboy standing on one of the wagons shouted. "You bossless son of a Rover whore!"

Someone in the crowd below grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him down; he yelled twice, once in outrage and once in pain as he thumped against the hard ground. Two of his friends jumped down and started kicking and punching the man who'd grabbed their friend. Someone jumped on the back of one of the cowboys and began punching him...

"Uh-oh," Mary said.

"Uh-oh," Ritva agreed.

Then a knife glinted and they heard the distinctive wheep of a sword coming out of a sheath. Normally they would have to help the locals restore order—Rangers were supposed to do that. This time they couldn't.

"Ere!" Mary said. "Rudi will kill us if we get ourselves killed right now."

"Ere," Ritva agreed. Shit seemed appropriate.

"There's one of the pagans!" a scrawny man in well-worn clothes screeched, pointing at the tree-and-stars on her jerkin, visible in the doorway. He threw a rock at her.

Crash. The two-pound cobblestone went through an irreplaceable pre-Change window and knocked over a stand of arrows. A number of people in the crowd-turning-into-a-riot started their way.

Ritva and her sister looked at each other and picked up two of the round shields, slipped on their helmets, and each grabbed a yard-long axe-handle from a bin.

"Isaac! Reuben!" Isherman called.

His two sons were seventeen and eighteen; otherwise they looked almost as much alike as Mary and Ritva, and much like their father, down to the skullcaps. The young men scooped up helmets and shields and clubs. Half a dozen other shopkeepers from up and down the street were coming out as well, carrying everything from a sledgehammer to a blacksnake whip.

In Bend, most respectable citizens were sworn in as deputy peace officers in advance. You could riot here pretty freely, as long as you accepted that the local taxpayers were just as free to bash your head in for it.

Bang!

Another rock cracked off the two-foot circle of bullhide-covered plywood on her arm as she hopped down into the street off the board sidewalk. She took a dozen paces and made a long lunge of the sort she'd have used with her sword and poked the man in the belly with the end of the stick, hard. He went uffff! and folded over. Unlike someone stabbed in the gut with a longsword, he'd be getting up again; Mary rapped him behind the ear with carefully calculated force as they went by to make sure his resurrection didn't happen too soon or too comfortably.

"Adventure," Ritva said, as they moved in well-drilled unison and tried to watch all directions at once.

I really wouldn't like to get stabbed in the back here, or have my brains knocked out with a brick.

"Ere," her sister said, nodding.

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The High Cascades, Central Oregon  
April 20th, CY23/2021 AD

"We're not moving fast enough," Ingolf said, hitching his thumbs into the straps of his pack.

His teeth wanted to chatter. It was an effort of will not to be depressed—the sensations of being wet and cold were similar enough that it was easy to let the one slip into the other. And another not to snap at Rudi's indecent cheerfulness.

White flakes were falling out of the sky, drifting down silently between the tall dark-green firs and hemlocks, muffling sound, making even the smells of sap and wet earth seem faded. The flakes

that landed on him were big and fluffy and a little wet, the sort you got at the beginning and end of winter back home as well. So far they were sticking on the branches but not much on the ground, and the rocky dirt of the game-path was turning to rocks mixed with cold mud. But the temperature was falling with the sun, somewhere up above the gray ceiling that was coming closer and closer.

The breath of the three men steamed in the cold air, and Garbh was walking along with her head down and a white scruff starting to build up on her black-and-gray fur.

The clouds already hid the mountaintops, and now the thin air was wet at the same time. Luckily the pathway ran along the slope here rather than up and down the forty-degree mountainside. You could trust a couple of generations of deer to find the easiest way through.

"At least you two know how to handle cold weather in these mountains," Ingolf said. "Cold winters I'm at home with, but I was born a lowlander and I nearly got killed coming over the Cascades last year."

Something in the way Rudi's shoulders set ahead of him made him go on a little sharply: "You are experienced at handling winter weather here, right? It's only a couple of days walk from where you live."

Rudi stopped; behind Ingolf, Edain did as well. "No, I'm not," Rudi said shortly, turning to face him.

"Nobody comes up this high except in summer, usually. Not even bandits."

"No point," Edain said helpfully. "The big game all migrates down to the foothills or the valley in wintertime. And these are wet mountains, here on the western side, as wet as wet can be."

Rudi chimed in: "They get a lot of snow, twenty, thirty feet in a winter, sometimes more. And it can happen right up until June."

"Yeah, I can see that," Ingolf said dryly. "If we really didn't want anyone to notice us, this was the way to come, by God."

He looked up the boulder-strewn slope where the old granulated drifts were still waist-deep, the surface rapidly disappearing under the new fall. Off to the right a fair-sized river was rushing unseen in a deep cleft, hard enough with the first of the spring flood that sometimes it shook the rock under his feet. The temperature was dropping faster now, and the snow fell more thickly. But not in straight lines out of the sky; the tips of the tall pointed trees were beginning to move a little, and the snow slanted as it picked up speed.

A low moaning began as the wind strengthened, at first the sort of teasing almost-sound that you couldn't swear to, then louder and louder.

"Look, we have both lain out in the woods often enough in wintertime," Rudi said.

Ingolf nodded, but that was not the same thing. Down on the floor of the Willamette snow lasted a week at the outside, usually a lot less. He'd been told that some winters didn't have any at all.

There was nothing like the months of hurt-your-face freezing weather he was used to back home in the Kickapoo country on either side of Christmas. Or the blizzards that he'd experienced out on the high plains in the Dakotas, which could kill a man trying to get from the campfire to a tent fifteen feet away. Up here, six or seven thousand feet higher than the valley floor, it probably got just that bad—or possibly even worse. Judging from what he'd gone through last year in the Santiam Pass, which was lower and warmer than this area... it was worse.

The trouble was that every particular stretch of the world had its own way of killing you, and the counter-measures were usually highly specific too. What worked in the Kickapoo country wouldn't always in the north woods, and neither set of skills would map right onto the shortgrass plains of the Dakotas. He guessed that went double for mountains... which, to date, he'd mostly traveled in the summertime.

"OK, it looks like our luck has run out," he said, jerking a thumb upward.

Rudi and Edain looked up, took deep breaths to taste the weather, looked at the snow, blinking as flakes drove into their faces.

"You could be saying that," Rudi said with a wry smile, and the other Mackenzie added:

"Just a wee bit."

Rudi went on: "I'd say we're in for a really bad one—last of the season, perhaps, but bad. By tomorrow morning it could be twelve feet deep. Good day to stay home drinking mulled cider and roasting nuts by the fire and telling stories."

Ingolf joined in the laugh. They were experienced woods-runners and hunters, after all. Just not in as many environments as he'd seen. Rudi wrapped his knit scarf around his face, leaving only the eyes uncovered.

"And cold enough to freeze off your wedding tackle," Ingolf said. At Edain's grin: "I'm not joking, kid. I've seen it happen."

The young man looked stricken and visibly refrained from a reassuring clutch at himself. Rudi thumped him on the back.

"And are you glad you switched to trousers the now, eh?" he said.

Edain shuddered and nodded. They were all in thick wool pants over long-johns and fleece-lined boots of oiled leather, with bulky sheepskin coats worn hair-side-in and knitted caps and good gloves; that and the heavy packs made them look like fat white snowmen in the growing blizzard. They had their cased bows and quivers over their backs as well, and the two clansmen wore their plaids and carried six-foot quarterstaves of ashwood with iron butt-caps. The warm clothes weren't perfect protection against freezing to death, particularly if they got wet. And they would, if they kept walking too long, or they'd simply get buried, if the snow could come as deep as the other two said.

"OK, let's keep an eye peeled for someplace to fort up," he said; louder now, to override the sougning of the storm. "You guys have been up here in summertime, right?"

"That we have," Rudi said, and Edain nodded vigorously. "In the general area, as it were."

An hour later he was starting to get really worried. The wind was slashing at them like a Sioux raiding party off the high plains, coming from any direction or none without any warning; and it carried enough snow to feel like someone was socking you with a snowball every half-second or so. He could barely see ten yards, and that only when a gust cleared the way, and the snow was up past his knees. That meant even with the pants bloused out and tucked into the boots snow was working its way inside, then melting and running down into his socks; the burning in his calves and thighs was bad enough to distract him from the feet.

Ingolf thought Rudi was looking a little worried too—it was hard to tell when all you could see of a man was snow-covered eyebrows, what with the cap above and the scarf wrapped around his face below. And of course Rudi wouldn't show it. The best way to keep fear under control was to simply refuse to acknowledge it; not to others, and not to yourself if you could help it.

He scraped the wet clinging stuff off his face with one glove and peered ahead. "I think that overhang ahead is our best bet," he said, pointing. "Unless you know about a real cave around here?"

"No, I don't," Rudi said. He hesitated, then nodded. "Better than nothing."

The snow was starting to sting when it hit exposed skin, ice-crystals hard and sharp in the colder air. They fought through a gust like a punch in the stomach and into the shelter of the overhang, where the rock of the mountainside showed bare and leaned a little over the trail. It wasn't a cave by any means, but it did slope in six feet back from the trail proper, with a floor that was nearly horizontal. From the way dirt and needles had mounded up there it didn't flood. Ingolf looked around as best he could.

"We need some saplings!" he shouted into the other's faces. "These firs are too big!"

Edain was lost in a stolid misery, ready to keep going until he dropped but more likely to do that and die than think; Garbh nuzzled at him, whining. The elder Mackenzie shook Edain until some semblance of humanity returned to the gray eyes.

Then Rudi shouted back to Ingolf: "I think there's an old burn just down from here!"

They all threw their packs down in the back of the overhang, where the snow was thinnest, laid their swords over them, then took off the coils of rope tied to the outside of the horsehide haversacks. Those had metal clips swagged onto their ends, and snapped together.

"Work as if your life depended on it," Ingolf said. "Because it fucking does!"

Rudi turned out to have some old-time metal tent-pegs in his pack. Ingolf beat two of them into a crack in the rock with the back of his tomahawk.

"You've got to be ready to haul up!" Rudi yelled at Edain. "Are you ready, clansman?"

Edain whacked himself on both cheeks with the palm of his glove. "That I am, Chief!" he shouted back through the white noise of the wind.

The rope went through the notches in the steel pegs; Edain took a hitch across his back and wrapped it around his left arm, paying out with his right. That way he could walk backwards against the weight when he was hauling in. The two older men went down the rope swiftly, using it more to steady themselves than to bear their weight, through a screen of snow-heavy bush and into a patch of tall thin Douglas fir saplings, wrist-thick and fifteen feet long. He couldn't tell how big it was, not with the snow swirling thick about them, but it was more than enough.

"Perfect!" Ingolf said. "Get 'em!"

They both had hatchets—his own was his tomahawk. He cut a sapling off at knee height with two strokes, forehand and backhand, and pushed it over; it caught on half a dozen uncut ones as it started to slither downslope. The next time the round handle turned against the slippery surface of his glove; he wrenched himself aside, and it was the flat that bounced against his boot rather than the cutting edge... enough to hurt, but he broke a cold sweat at the thought of what a wound would mean here and now.

By the time they'd sent four bundles of saplings up to Edain, Ingolf was afraid that everything would blow away anyway. He and Rudi climbed back up to the trail to find that the younger Mackenzie had already started stacking the saplings in a half-moon, their butts braced with rock and the tops trimmed and jammed against the stone, each woven to the next with their branches. The other two men pitched in; by the time the little shelter was complete snow had already covered its sloping sides six inches deep.

When they crawled inside and pulled the small door of branches to behind them the—relative—quiet was more stunning than the noise outside had been. They all lay panting in the dense dark while their ears recovered enough to hear the muted wail outside. Cold got Ingolf moving again; it was actually better in here, and improving as the body-heat of three men and a dog warmed the still air, but not what you'd call comfortable... and between sweat and melted snow, he was wet at the skin.

Snick.

The flame of his lighter showed the rock of the overhang and the semicircle of trail the sapling shelter covered. When he began scraping a circle clear and piling tinder—of which they had plenty, since the ground was covered with fir-branches—Rudi and Edain looked at him in alarm. "You can't light a fire here, Ingolf," Rudi said. "We'll smother—the snow's making this as airtight as a kitchen breadbox. Our body-heat will keep us from freezing."

Ingolf grinned as he stripped off his gloves. It felt good to be able to smile without ice crackling from his face.

"Watch and learn, children," he said.

He'd brought in a fair amount of bark, as well as deadwood; the bark was from some fortunate Mountain larch trees, thick and furrowed and fairly fire-resistant. He tied sections into a rough hollow square tube, reinforced it with sticks, and thrust the completed article up along a crack in the rock at the edge, through the sloped saplings and the snow on top of them. More of it made a smoke-hood beneath the improvised chimney, and then he got a small fire going on the floor. Flickering reddish light opened out the little chamber they'd made, seeming to push back the noise of the storm a bit. The men stripped off their outer garments and hung them from the saplings, making added insulation and an opportunity for them to dry as well.

"Well, we're not the first here," Edain said grimly, as he spread the boughs across one corner of the overhang.

What had seemed like another brown rock was in fact a skull. The bone was clean and dry, long since picked bare by insects and decay; the gold in the teeth gleamed in the firelight.

Ingolf nodded. Edain reburied the remains, and Rudi made a sign over it and murmured a few words he didn't catch. None of them were much put out; you still found the like pretty well everywhere except places where people had lived since the Change to clean things up. A lot of people had died that year, and skulls lasted.

The fire cast a grateful warmth. The little shelter would have been habitable without it, given the depth of snow piling up outside to insulate it. But it certainly helped to have their own temporary hearth.

"This is a good trick," Rudi said, grinning at Ingolf. "Home away from home."

"Well, I wouldn't go quite as far as to call it homelike, if you take my meaning, Chief," Edain said.

"I'll remember the way of it though, if I'm ever caught out like this again."

"I learned it from an old Anishinabe named Pete—Pierre, actually—Pierre Walks Quiet. He worked for my father," Ingolf said. "Wandered in from the north woods a couple of years after the Change and ended up bossing the Readstown forests for us—timber runner, looking after the game, stuff like that. He helped teach me woodcraft when he took me and my brothers on hunting trips... and scared the bejesus out of us with stories about windigo. We get a lot of snow, and we get it every damned year."

Rudi stretched and yawned. The sun was probably barely down outside, but they were all ready

for rest.

"I'm part Anishinabe myself," he said. "One-eighth. My father's mother's mother was Ojibwa. My blood-father came from your part of the world—further north and east a bit, if I remember the old maps."

Ingolf nodded. You wouldn't have thought it from the way the young man looked, except maybe the high set of his cheekbones and the slightly tilted eyes.

"And I'm a member in good standing of the tribe called hungry," Edain said.

He mixed meal from a bag in his pack with melted snow and set the dough on a thin metal plate over the fire that he greased with a pat of butter. It rose and browned, filling the shelter with a mouth-watering smell that was not quite like baking bread but close enough; Ingolf felt his hunger return as warmth and the scent reminded him of just how much effort his body had put out today. The meal was premixed with baking soda and a little salt, a Mackenzie trick he admired; it gave you something a lot better than the usual travelers' ash-cake.

The rest of their supper was the last of the pork-chops and trail-food; after today they'd be down to leathery, salty smoked sausage for meat to go with the hard cheese and dried fruit. Oatmeal and some of the fruit went into a pot of water, to cook overnight in the ashes and be ready for breakfast.

"When you're hungry enough, this all tastes good," Rudi said.

"When you're hungry enough, your boot-laces taste good," Ingolf said tolerantly. "Hope we don't come to that on this trip."

Though we probably will, sooner or later, he thought, and went on aloud: "Now for another trick." He'd collected the saplings he needed along with the firewood, and he had plenty of leather thongs in his pack; a few minutes work gave him two teardrop-shaped snowshoes, a little crude but useable. The Mackenzies watched carefully as the shavings peeled away from the wood beneath his knife and he tied the ends together and knotted the webwork across. The only tricky part was the square opening in the middle and the loop to catch the toe of a boot.

"I've heard of those, but I've never actually used them," Rudi said, turning one over in his hands.

"Skis yes, sometimes, snowshoes no. Not much call for them, down in the Valley."

"There's nothing like them for deep snow in the woods," Ingolf said. "Especially when you don't know the ground; you've got better control than you do on skis, even if it's slower. Your turn."

It was his turn to watch, but the two younger men were both good with tools and used to handling wood and leather, and produced passable if not elegant results. Then they played paper-stone-scissors to see who'd take which night-watch. Nothing was likely to hit them from the outside in weather like this unless it was a particularly mean bear, but someone had to keep the fire carefully, given the combination of open flame and the tinderbox materials of their shelter. Then the two Mackenzies made their evening prayers; it made Ingolf feel a little self-conscious about the way he'd gotten lax over the years, so he said a rosary. It would have made old Father Matthew smile, anyway.

"Wish we were over the mountains already, though," Edain said, wrapping himself in his sleeping-bag and stretching out on the crackling, sweet-scented boughs. A smile: "Mom told me not to get my feet wet, you see."

Garbh curled up against his stomach; now that it wasn't so cold in here it smelled powerfully of wet dog, the wet leather of their boots and gear and the tallow that greased it, and the more pleasant scents of fir-sap and the sputtering coals and the slowly cooking oatmeal. Even the muted howling of the wind was comforting, with a full belly and a soft place to sleep.

"Wish we didn't have to leave at all," Rudi added. "Curse the Prophet and whatever-it-was you saw on Nantucket both, Ingolf. Nothing personal."

"Not much point in cursing it, any more than the weather," Ingolf said, twisting to find a comfortable position. "Mind you, times like this I wish I was settled down somewhere with a nice warm girl and a good farm, myself."

"No, it doesn't help... but cursing it makes me feel a little better," Rudi said, flashing him a grin.

"I'd settle for the nice warm girl, right now, meself," Edain said. "Not that you two aren't good companions for the trail, but you're a mite hairy and smelly for perfection."

"Bite your tongue," Rudi said. "You might be camping out with my half-sisters."

"No offense, Chief, but..." Edain said, and shuddered theatrically.

"You two done much traveling together?" Ingolf asked. In other words, 'why did you pick this kid'?

"Just a wee bit, you might say," Rudi said. "And he was with me up at Tillamook last year, when

the Haida hit us."

"So was Garbh," Edain said, and thumped the dog's ribs.

"Yeah, but she wasn't so useful," Rudi said. "Tell the man about it, Edain—we're all going to be together a long time, and we need to know each other."

"Chief—"

Modesty, Ingolf decided, listening to the protest in the tone. Whoda'thunkit?

"Wait a minute," he said. "Wasn't that the fight where Saba's husband got killed?"

"Sure and it was," Rudi said. "He was on a trading trip; the Brannigans and their kin are all good at that. Myself and Edain and a few friends had been traveling up north, seeing the sights you might say, and went along with Raen and his wagons for the last bit when they headed to Tillamook. I know the baron there, and could introduce them. Then..."

Edain stayed silent. Rudi snorted. "You tell him or I will, boyo!"

"Everything was fine until we got to the coast," Edain said at last, starting slowly, as if dragging things out of the well of memory that wanted to stay submerged. "This was... by the Wise Lord, more than a year ago now. We were riding along and singing—"

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County Tillamook, Portland Protective Association  
Coastal Oregon  
October 1, CY 21/2019 AD

"It was upon a Lammas night  
When corn rigs are bonny  
Beneath the Moon's unclouded light  
I lay a-while with Molly..."

The song died away, muffled in the clinging mist, and they rode on in silence; though usually you couldn't get four young Mackenzie clansfolk to shut up, riding abroad for adventure and strange sights. The air was too thick, and the way it drank sound made the song forlorn.

I feel like a ghost, Edain Aylward Mackenzie thought, peering through the fog.

Then he shivered a little at the thought, spitting leftward to avert the omen and signing the Horns. Thick morning mist off the sea puffed and billowed about them, and moisture dripped from the boughs of the roadside trees. Drifts wandered over the graveled way; the fetlocks of the horses stirred it like a man's breath in smoke. Slow wet wind souged through the Coast Range firs behind him, louder than the sounds of the little caravan's hooves and wheels; the Association baron and Rudi Mackenzie rode directly ahead.

"These clansfolk have come all the way from Sutterdown to see about your cheeses and smoked salmon," Rudi said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the wagons. "Not to mention that attar-of-roses stuff you wrote about. If trade's not below your notice, Juhel."

"Men with wheat-fields and vineyards in their demesne and Portland on their doorstep can afford to get picky about dérogeance," the young baron growled. "What I've got is trees, grass, cows, potatoes and fish. God has given this land and these people into my charge—and now that I'm Anne's guardian, the whole of God-damned County Tillamook's on my plate 'till she's come of age, not just Barony Netarts. It's up to me to see to it the people prosper. I'm sick of courtiers making jokes about Tillamookers in wooden shoes."

Edain listened and snorted quietly to himself. He'd seen enough in this visit to know that any Association aristo would say that sort of thing, and a lot of them were right bastards all the same. Evidently Rudi thought this one meant it, though—he'd gotten to know the man while he was up north in Protectorate territory on his yearly visits.

That was why Juniper Mackenzie's son and tanist had agreed to speak for the wagon-train's owners. Edain and his three friends had come along for the fun of the thing, this being after Mabon and slack time on their parents' crofts. There were casks of Brannigan's Special and carved horn cups from Bend and raw turquoise and such packed in the wagons, and blankets and cloaks woven on Mackenzie looms—his own mother and sister's among them.

He let the conversation blur into the background noise of hooves and wheels on gravel and looked around instead; he'd come along on this trip with Rudi to see new things.

That I have! he thought.

The ruins of Salem, the steel gates of Larisdalen, great empty-eyed skyscrapers in Portland staring like lost spirits of the past at the present-day pomp of tournament and court, the majesty of the Columbia gorge and hang-gliders dancing through it like autumn leaves, Astoria and its tall ships and crews from as far away as Chile and Hawaii, Tasmania and New Singapore and Hinduraj...

And the sea, the Mother's sea. And whales! And sea lions!

His eyes went left, towards the ocean about a mile away. The great gray vastness of the Pacific was out of sight now—fog still clung in drifts and banks over the flat green fields of the Tillamook plain.

It gave them glimpses as if curtains were drawn aside for an instant and then dropped back. They rode past drainage ditches and levees and rows of poplars with leaves gone brown-gold and the skeletal shape of a windmill that pumped water to dry out the soggy land. Cows with red and yellow and brown coats grazed between rose-hedges, mostly on the rich grass of the common pastures; now and then there were fields that looked like reaped oats, and potatoes; others bore ranks of rosebushes, an odd-looking thing to be grown like a crop, and he wished he could see them in summer's glory.

He could smell the sea, though, the wild deep salt of it, and the rich silty scent of the vast salt marshes on the seaward edge of the plain. They were full of wildfowl at this time of year too, and the gobbling and honking and thrashing of their wings came clear.

A village passed, stirring to the morning's work and giving off a mouth-watering scent of cooking and baking; there was a roadside calvary; then a manor's sprawling outbuildings, and ahead the gray concrete of a castle's tower on a hill, with the town walls of Tillamook glimpsed at the edge of sight when a gust parted the fog for a moment. A fisherman had told them there would likely be an onshore breeze most mornings. The view would be better from the castle where they'd be guesting...

And I'm sharp-set for breakfast.

They did an excellently good veal-and-potato pie here, and fine things with seafood you couldn't get in the Clan's home territory.

The baron's young son dropped his pony back from where the talk had turned boringly to trade. His father's men-at-arms and crossbowmen rode on the left side of the road, and the four Mackenzies who'd come with Rudi on the right, and behind it all the wagons and the clansfolk from Sutterdown who were wrangling them. He angled back towards the fascinating strangers and gave a would-be-regal nod.

"The best of the morning to you, young sir," Edain said.

That was polite enough, and Mackenzies didn't call anyone lord—even the Chief herself herself, the Mackenzie, much less some foreign kid in strange clothes. The boy was dressed in a miniature version of his father's green leather-and-wool hunting garb, down to the arms in the heraldic shield on the chest of his jerkin—a round cheese one-half sinister, with a holstein head dexter, a crossed sword and crossbow below. He also had a real if boy-sized sword; otherwise he looked like any tow-haired and freckled seven-year-old.

"You guys sure talk funny," the lad said seriously.

"And sure, we think you northerners are the ones that talk funny," Edain replied, exaggerating his lilt and winking.

The youngster laughed, but Edain did think that; the Portlanders' accent was flat and a little grating to an ear accustomed to the musical rise and fall the younger clansfolk put into English, and the nobles here sprinkled their talk with words from some foreign language in an absurd, affected fashion.

The boy threw a look at their kilts and plaids and bonnets; Rinn Smith and Otter Carson had painted up too, with designs on their faces in black and scarlet and green and gold—designs of Fox and Dragon, for their sept totems. Not from serious expectation of a fight, but to play to the Clan's image and look fierce for the outlanders. Rinn thought it impressed outlander girls no end, often onto their backs in a haystack to hear him tell it, but then he was a boaster who'd have worn himself away to a shadow in the past couple of weeks if everything he claimed was true.

And he's not traveling with his girlfriend.

"And you wear weird clothes, too," the nobleman's son went on. "Even weirder than Bearkillers or the people from Corvallis."



"They are strange there," Edain agreed gravely. Though not so strange as you Portlanders.

"You've been to all those places?"

"To most of them. The wagons have come direct from the Clan's land, but the young Mackenzie and we have been wandering with our feet free and our fancy our only master for weeks now, and only joined them these last days."

Pure sea-green envy informed the look he got. "Cool! I'm going to go to be a page at the Lady Regent's court in a couple of years, in Portland and Castle Todenangst and places. So I can learn to be a squire and then a knight and stuff. That'll be cool too."

Edain found himself grinning; he'd come into the wide world himself now and seen some of the wonders of it, but to the lad this little pocket of farm and forest by the sea was the world, just as Dun Fairfax had been to him at that age. More so, because he'd had Dun Juniper just an hour's walk away, with all its comings and goings, and the Mackenzie herself dropping by to talk with his father. This place was a backwater.

The boy drew himself up then, consciously remembering his manners:

"I'm Gaston Strangeways," he said, left hand on the pommel of his miniature sword. "Son and heir of Baron Juhel Strangeways—Lord Juhel de Netarts, guardian of County Tillamook, with the right of the high justice, the middle and the low."

"It's an impressive array of titles, that it is," Edain said, and they shook hands solemnly, leaning over in their saddles.

"And his father was a knight, too. Even before the Change. He died a year ago, the same time the Count did."

Edain had suffered through hour after hour of tedium in the Dun Fairfax school from his unwilling sixth summer to glad escape at twelve, and some of the pre-Change history lessons had rubbed off.

"I don't think they had knights or barons or counts before the Change, the old Americans," he said.

"They had Lobbyists and Presidents and Consultants instead."

"In the Society," young Gaston said. "Granddad told me about the tournaments and things." Then he cleared his throat and went on formally: "Welcome to our lands."

Edain grinned again; tophloftiness like that was irritating from a grown man, but funny when it was a kid.

"And I'm Edain Aylward Mackenzie," he said. "My sept's totem is Wolf."

The boy's eyes went a little wider. "You're Aylward the Archer?" he said breathlessly.

Then an accusation: "You're not old enough! The Archer fought in the Protector's War, and my dad wasn't old enough for that. Granddad fought in that war and he got his limp then."

"That's my dad you'd be thinking of," Edain said, a little sourly. "Sam Aylward, First Armsman of the Clan. Well, he was until a couple of years ago."

Hecate of the Crossroads and Him called the Wanderer, hear me; now wouldn't it be a braw thing to travel far enough that people think of me when I say my name's Aylward! I love my dad, but it's like being a mushroom growing on an old oak, sometimes.

"Oh. Well. That's cool too, you've got ancestors... Did the Archer make your bow? Can I see it?"

"He did that, and you can. Careful now! It's well-oiled with flaxseed, but I'd not want to drop it in this wet."

Edain reached over his shoulder and slid the long yew stave free of the carrying loops. It was strung, and the boy tried to draw it after he'd admired the patterned carving of the antler-horn nocks and the black walnut-root riser. The young Mackenzie let him struggle with it, and there were chuckles from the rest of the clansfolk as the youngster handed it back and said gravely:

"That's a pretty heavy draw." He looked at Edain as he returned it. "I've heard a lot about Mackenzie archers. Is it true you guys are witches and can make magic, too?"

"Well, I'm not much of a spell-caster myself, beyond the odd little thing to keep the sprites and the house-hob friendly, or for luck when I'm hunting—"

"I shot a rabbit with my crossbow just last week. It was eating the cabbages in Father Milton's garden."

"Sure, and if the little brothers won't mind your gardens, that's what you must do. Also a rabbit is good eating."

"Could you teach me a spell for luck when I'm hunting?"

"Mmmmm, I think your Father Milton might not like you making luck-spells, so you'd best ask him for a prayer to your saints, instead. We're followers of the Old Religion, which you are not," he

said, touching the Clan's moon-and-antlers sigil on his brigandine.

Then he glanced aside at his lover Eithne.

"Now, this one you'd better be careful of!" he said, teasingly solemn. "A priestess of the second degree! She can sing a bird out of the bough, and 'chant a cow's teats to give butter ready-churned, and blind a man's eyes with love by a rune cut on a finger-nail. The fey themselves give her a wide birth, hiding beneath root and rock unless she bids them fetch her tea and spin wool for her, the which they do in fear and trembling before her power, so."

The boy looked at her wide-eyed and crossed himself. "Is that why you've got a girl along?" he said, loading the descriptive word with scorn. "'cause she's a real witch?"

The mounted Mackenzies all laughed. The four of them were every one younger than Rudi; old enough to travel and fight but not solid householders weighed down with responsibilities like the group by the wagons. Eithne stuck out her tongue at the boy, or possibly at Edain. She was eighteen too, a tall lanky brown-eyed girl with skin one shade darker than olive and long black braids falling from beneath her Scots bonnet. The clasp on that held a spray of feathers from a red-tailed hawk, to show her sept totem, and she had a round yellow flower tucked behind one ear, late-blooming Coast Maida.

"It's because otherwise the boys wouldn't know what to do, the dear creatures, without a woman along," she said, her tone mock-lofty. "Pretty? They are that, but dim. Ná glac pioc comhairie gan comhairie ban, as the Chief would say. It's a female's guidance you need when advice is given."

"Very true! That's why I've got Garbh with me," Edain said guilelessly.

The big rawboned bitch walking at his horse's heels should have looked up at the sound of her name. Instead she made a sound halfway between a whine and growl, stopping stock-still and looking westward, the heavy matted fur over her shoulders rising and her ears cocked forward.

"Aire!" Edain shouted, loud as he could. "Beware!"

He blushed furiously as his voice broke despite the sudden sharp stab of alarm, but the clansfolk stiffened at the danger-call.

He had just enough time to flip off his bonnet and slap his sallet helm over his curls before he heard something. Something familiar as breathing; the wshhsst sound of arrows cleaving air, but this wasn't a practice-ground back home, or a riverside thicket with an elk in it. Someone was shooting at them, and doing it while he couldn't see three times arm's length.

"Down!" he yelled, conscious of eyes turning towards him. "Incoming!"

Young Gaston was still on his pony, gaping. Edain kicked his feet out of the stirrups and dove off his borrowed mount, grabbing the boy as he did and hugging him to his chest, turning his back to the deadly whistle. Black arrows with red-dyed fletching went smack into the mud around him.

There was a harder, wetter thwack as one struck flesh, and someone screamed, and a horse bugled pain and fear. Then a hard bang and something hit him between the shoulderblades, also hard. Pain lanced through him, but it was gone in a moment—the little steel plates riveted inside his brigandine had shed the point.

"Down and stay down," he shouted to Gaston, throwing the boy flat in the roadside ditch.

"Garbh—guard! Stay!"

Then he had his own bow out, slanting it to keep the lower tip off the ground as he knelt. As he whipped an arrow out of his quiver, he was suddenly and wildly certain that someone out there was trying to kill him, and felt an indignation he knew even then was absurd.

A high screaming rose from the misty field west of the road, and spears and axes glinted through the fog.

"Hiiiiii-DA!" they called, a rhythmic screeching. "Hiiiiii-DA!"

His father had told him that it was the waiting beforehand that was the time of fear, and you were too busy for it when the red work began. It turned out to be not quite that way for him; he was aware of being afraid, but he didn't have any attention to spare for the emotion.

Most of the strangers' arrows hit the Protectorate men on that side of the road, or whistled past into the fields and fog. Then there was a roaring onrush of half-seen figures, running in to strike in the confusion.

Edain drew and shot and drew shot and drew and shot again, the deadly fast ripple he'd been taught from infancy, something else he didn't have to think about, and the other Mackenzies were with him. His quiver was half-empty when a man in a helmet with a raven-beak covering half his face came at him no more than arm's-length away, spear drawn back for a thrust, a shield covered with blocky angular patterns in his other hand. Edain dropped his bow and snatched for

shortsword and buckler, feeling as if he was moving through thick honey...

The snarling tattooed face behind the mask's beak went slack with shocked surprise as a horse floated by behind him with a flash of steel.

"Morrigú!" Rudi Mackenzie shouted in a voice like brass and steel as he struck.

He swung the long blade in an arc that crunched into someone who staggered back in ruin on the other side. His black horse reared, its milling forefeet smashing heads and shoulders as he called again on the Crow Goddess.

"Morrigú! Morrigú!"

Edain had his own sword out now, and the buckler in his left fist. His friends were with him and they rushed across the road, shouting their totem warcries; somewhere he could feel part of his mind gaping in bewildered horror, but he was too busy for that, too busy howling and hitting, spinning and dodging and leaping over a hiss of steel and stabbing as he came down... Shapes loomed up out of the fog, a man swinging an axe at a fallen crossbowman. Edain punched him with the buckler before he could look up and felt a shivery sensation as a jaw broke beneath the steel.

There were shouts all around him. Haiiii-DA; calls of Haro! and St. Guthmund for Tillamook!

Further off a church-bell started to ring, and a hand-cranked siren wailed from the castle's tower.

Then suddenly there was nobody within sight standing up except the people he'd started with. A man sprawled in unlovely death at his feet, dark eyes wide in surprise at the arrow in his chest. A broad-built broad-faced man not much older than he was; very dark, with blood in his black hair, wearing a jacket of sealskin sewn with bracelet-sized steel rings. A short thick bow of yew and whalebone and sinew lay near his hand and a dented steel cap not far away.

Edain stood panting and glaring around; Eithne handed him his bow, and he checked it automatically before sliding it back into the loops. He still had half of his arrows left. The fight had been too brief and too brutally close-quarters to shoot them all away.

Rudi cantered up, the visor of his helm up, and the baron with him.

"They must have come in before dawn," Juhel Strangeways de Netarts said, and then swore lividly: "Satan's arsehole, with piles like fat acorns! They'll be all over the country between the bay and the hills by now, stealing and kidnapping—"

"So we'll cut them off from their boats, before they can get back with loot and prisoners," Rudi snapped. "Where will they have come ashore?"

"Over there," Juhel replied, pointing a little south of west with his red-running broadsword. "It's the best spot near here—where we pull up the boats—no water deep enough anywhere else short of Bay City. They'll have one of their schooners off the coast. They tow the landing boats down from the islands for longshore raids, damn them. It's a good idea to take their boats, but I have to rally my retainers and the militia! Otherwise we can't hit them hard enough to overrun them."

"Juhel, we Mackenzies will keep them busy. You get your people together and relieve us—get them ready, but for the sweet Lady's sake, don't take too long!"

He swung down from Epona's back and looped up the reins to the saddlebow; the horse followed him like a dog, but this wasn't the weather for playing at knights, nor were there many Mackenzies besides Rudi who could. Edain and the clansfolk fell in behind him, his friends and a round dozen from the wagons, led by a lanky man named Raen with the twisted gold torc of a married man around his neck; he was old Tom Brannigan's son-in-law.

"Who are we fighting, Chief?" Edain asked as their feet splashed through a slough.

Wish I'd painted up, now, he thought to himself. It'd be... comforting, like.

His father disapproved of the custom of painting your face for war, but few Mackenzies under thirty agreed.

"They're Haida," Rudi said absently.

Cold water sloshed into his shoes, and then they were on dry land again; he could sense a river to their left, and the loom of the low Coast Range beyond that, but their path was wet pasture. Fairly soon his knee-socks were as sodden as his feet. They moved at a steady jog-trot, as fast as was practical in unknown country with dense fog about them, spread out in a loose triangle.

"Haida, that's Indians, right, Chief? From somewhere up north?" Edain went on; he liked to get things tidy in his mind.

The Indians he'd met had all been folk much like anyone else, just with different customs; the Clan got along well with the Warm Springs tribes, who were allies of the CORA and had always been friendly to the Mackenzies. That wasn't always the case everywhere...

"A lot of them are Indians and that's where they got the name," Rudi agreed. "From the Queen Charlotte islands. Their ancestors used to raid like this in the old days, too, for plunder and slaves—long long ago, before white men came here. Great seafarers and boat-builders they were, back then. And things were... very bad... where they live, I hear, after the Change. So they probably remembered the old tales. Now quiet."

Traveling through a fog like this when there might be enemies at hand in any direction made your balls try to crawl up into your belly; sometimes he could see a hundred yards, sometimes barely well enough to place his feet, and it muffled sound and smell. He wished Garbh was still with them.

At first they found nothing; then a two-wheeled oxcart tumbled empty. The oxen had been speared, whatever was in the cart carried off. A child's body lay by one wheel, picked up by the heels and with its head beaten in against the steel. The child's mother lay dead beside it, her skirts rucked up around her neck, legs spread and a stab-wound low in her belly to show how she'd died.

The Mackenzies stopped as if halted by an invisible wall. Edain felt his stomach try to rise as his eyes went round in disbelief; all the parts of the picture were there, but he couldn't force his mind to take them in—and he didn't want to. Eithne was making a sound deep in her throat, a growl that would have done Garbh credit. Rinn did bend and spew. Otter backed away, making protective signs with his left hand and shaking so badly that he obviously didn't think they'd do much good. And maybe they won't, Edain thought, fighting blind panic and feeling the hair bristling on his neck. A curse, a curse, seven times a curse just to see it!

Rape was bad enough, a dirty profanation of the Mysteries, of the loving union between Lord and Lady that made all creation. But there were evil men in any people and such things happened sometimes, especially in war. To kill a woman's child and then force her and then kill her through the womb, though—he half-expected Earth Herself to open up and swallow him and everything else male and breathing within a mile, down to the hedgehogs, and at a gulp.

The thought made him look down uneasily and shudder, but at least it distracted him enough to let his stomach settle.

Rudi winced and looked aside and began to speak, to wave them all forward, but Eithne held up a hand and stopped him. Her face was white and set as well, but in fury rather than fear. She moved forward and bent quickly to rearrange the dead woman's clothes. When she straightened again there was blood on her hand; the woman's blood, and the child's.

"Stand still!" she snapped as he and the other men began to back away. "We don't have time for nonsense! You first, tanist of the Chief."

Rudi bent to receive the defiled blood with a face like iron. Edain shuddered again as she touched his forehead and cheeks, then repeated it quickly with the other men.

"You who bear the Lord's semblance—avenge this His Lady's blood, and make Earth clean of it," she said. Suddenly her lips skinned back over her teeth and white showed all around her eyes: "Kill!"

She was an Initiate and priestess; Edain was still simply a Dedicant, but he knew the voice of the Mother when he heard it... and She was angry. There was blood and death in that sound, and his skin rippled like a restive horse's at the midnight magic in it.

Rudi nodded grimly. "Let's go, Mackenzies!"

They did. Rinn and Otter dropped back a little to trot beside Edain.

"Your girl," Rinn muttered, tracing a sign. "The Night Face has her. The Dark Mother."

"That means we'll win this fight," Otter said, snarling eagerly. "Good!"

Edain shook his head. The Mackenzie herself had stood as Goddess-mother at his Wiccaning—and Dun Juniper was the center of the Mysteries. Also his mother was High Priestess of a coven. He knew more about it all than most young men his age.

"No, it means the other side's going to lose this fight," he said grimly. "That's not the same thing as us winning, boyos, and you'd better believe it. Nobody's safe when the Devouring Shadow shows up."

Rinn winced. "The manure's hit the winnowing fan for true."

Whether the kettle hits the pot, or the pot hits the kettle... Edain thought, but did not say.

"Lord Goibniu, shelter us with Your arm," Otter prayed; his family were smiths, and favored the Iron-Master. "Goddess Mother-of-All, gentle and strong, be gracious to Your warriors."

Fire showed through the murk. They stopped, fitted arrows to string, then moved forward at a

walk. Mud squelched beneath his brogans and the pleated wool of his kilt shed beads of wet as it swayed about his thighs. Edain took a deep breath and let it out, another and another; ground and center, ground and center.

Dad was right; waiting's hard. The fighting just past spun through his mind in a welter of foul images, like butchering-time but with people, and then there was the horror near the cart. Lugh Long-Spear, spare me to avenge that!

The mud-smell was starting to yield to that of burning timber, but the fog was thicker than ever close to where the river ran into the bay, like having wool pushed in your nose and ears. The firelight was like a candle seen through glass thick with frost.

"Good as a beacon," Raen said to Rudi, softly.

"Probably why they did it, to show their raiding-parties the way back. The fog works for them, but not if they get lost themselves."

The Haida had scouts out, but the fog that had helped them hindered now. One loomed out of the dimness, started to level his spear, started to yell, a high thin sound. Rudi killed him with a snapping lunge to the throat and it ended in a gurgle. More yells came out of the fog, from the direction of the burning light. The raiders there knew something was wrong.

Rudi turned and vaulted into Epona's saddle.

"Hit them hard and keep moving," he said to the Mackenzie warriors. "They won't know how many we are if we don't let them have time to think, and by the time they do the Tillamookers will be here."

Then he filled his lungs and called, a great brass cry like a chorus of trumpets given words:

"We are the point—"

Edain drew a deep breath and joined in as the others took it up:

"We are the edge—"

We are the wolves that Hecate fed!"

"At them, Mackenzies! Follow me!"

A knot of Haida warriors loomed out of the fog, standing guard over a clot of several dozen locals, men and women and children bound and sitting on the ground; bundles of tools lay beside them—adzes and broadaxes and two-man saws and drills and the rest of what you used for working wood.

The whole party dashed forward. A sudden banshee wail from beside him made Edain start; Eithne had been quiet since they left the dead woman. Now she wrenched a spear away from one of the Sutterdown men as she gave that appalling cry, a snatch so hard and swift he yelled in turn from the pain of his bruised fingers as she dashed past.

It was what the Clan called a battle spear, six feet of ashwood with a foot of double-edged blade on one end and a heavy steel butt-cap on the other. There was an art to using one...

Eithne charged into the knot of guards with the spear blurring over her head like the fan of a winnowing-mill, shrieking, face contorted into a gorgon mask of horror, striking with butt and blade-edge and point, leaping and using the torque of the spinning length to whirl herself around in mid-air. The guards were taken by surprise; one died in an instant splash of red as the blade whipped across his throat, and another as the butt crashed between his brows with a smack like a maul splitting oak and his eyes popped out of their sockets...

Too many of them for her to handle, Edain thought grimly, setting his feet and ignoring everything else. Got to—

The string of his longbow went snap on his bracer. A man about to swing a warhammer with a head of polished green stone into the back of Eithne's skull went down as the arrow tore through his throat in a double splash. Another, another...

Dimly he was conscious of shooting better than he ever had before, even at the Lughnasadh games at Sutterdown just past, when he'd carried away the silver arrow. Not much distance, but bad light and moving targets—and some of the arrows were passing close enough to Eithne to brush her with the fletching, a shaft for every two quick panting breaths.

Things burned behind them; sheds and houses and the ribs of a fair-sized ship on a slipway. Four big boats of cedar and fir were grounded bow-first on the mud nearby, shark-lean flat-bottomed things forty or fifty feet long, their prows carved in blocky angular depictions of ravens and orcas and hawks colored black and white and blood-red. Heads were spiked to the wood below their grinning jaws.

Edain was even more distantly aware that Rudi and the others were doing something... cutting the

bonds of the first set of prisoners, and the men were snatching up their tools—a maul or a broadaxe made a weapon, if you were strong and full of hate.

The freed captives swarmed over the last of the Haida guards. But more raiders were coming in, driving people before them, often laden with huge bundles of their own goods; and then armed Tillamookers started arriving themselves in dribs and drabs, hunting through fog for the flames and the sounds of battle. Village militia with hunting spears and crossbows and farming tools, the town guard with glaives and poleaxes, a snarling scrambling brabbling fight amid burning buildings and ankle-deep mud and shoreside rocks that shifted under foot as the fog began to lift. Some of the Haida tried to keep them off while others heaved to push the boats back into the water.

The core of them only broke when the baron came with his knights and their menies behind them, their fighting-tails of men whose trade was war; barded destriers, lances and men-at-arms and wet-gleaming gray chainmail hauberks.

He remembered seeing Rudi racing down the beach with gobbets of mud flying out from under Epona's hooves, throwing torches into the Haida boats. Three of them were burning, black choking smoke as the oiled cedarwood caught. Then the last started to slide free, and there was a savage scrimmage around its bow. A Haida chieftain with a raven's-wing on his helmet thrust a spear down at Rudi and Raen and Juhel de Netarts, and swords were scything up at men along the ship's side who clubbed back with oars and tried to row it out deeper. Raen fell back wounded and Rudi reached down to pull him out of the red-stained water, throwing him across his horse's crupper, and Edain put the last arrow in his quiver through the Haida as he thrust downward at Rudi's face.

A few raiders jumped into the water and swam into the bay, but the others threw down their weapons...

Edain staggered as silence fell, suddenly aware of his chest heaving against his brigandine as he struggled to suck in air, and the stink of his own sweat mixed with the tacky iron smell of blood. Or what felt like silence fell; there was still the crackle of fire—and the shouts of men trying to put it out, and others from the wounded, and a great crowd of people. A Catholic priest came up with a wagon, the Red Cross on its side and a load of bandages and salves within, and a brace of women in plain dark dresses and wimples—nuns, they called them. They began setting up a field hospital. The baron's lady and his mother and a round dozen of others in cotte-hardies and ordinary women in double tunics pitched in beside them.

The people cheered the Mackenzies, waving scythes and pitchforks and spades, some of them dripping red; people were pounding him on the back, harder than he'd been hit in the fight.

And they cheered Baron Juhel and his men as well, and harder, holding up their children to see the good lord who would not leave his people to the terror from the sea. Rudi looked around, visibly thought for a moment and then dropped back from where he'd been riding at the baron's side...

To leave the cheers for Juhel, Edain realized suddenly, blinking and feeling as if his mind was floating up from deep water into the sun. Well, that's the sort of thing a Chief has to think about, eh?

The sun was out now, burning away the last wisps of fog; he blinked against that, and the harsh smoke stung his eyes and made him cough, conscious of how dry his mouth was

Juhel de Netarts had his plumed helmet off, hanging from his saddlebow, and pushed the mail coif to fall back on his shoulders. The smile he'd worn as he waved to his people slid off his face, and though he was well short of thirty he looked a lot older.

"God's curse on them," he swore, looking up at the burned ribs of the ship on the slipway. "I put money I couldn't afford into this, and borrowed more against Lady Anne's inheritance, and so did a lot of her subjects, at my urging. We were going to send her far south—down the coast to the Latin countries, and deal for coffee and sugar and cochineal on our own, make Tillamook a real town again with its own traders, with jobs for craftsmen and cash markets for our farmers. Those bastards in Corvallis and Newport skin us on every deal and the Guild Merchant in Astoria and Portland aren't any better. Now... now I don't know what the hell I'm going to do."

"Petition the Lady Regent," Rudi said promptly, dabbing at a long shallow slash on the angle of his jaw and holding a swatch of bandage to it. "Get Lady Anne to deliver it. Say if you get three year's relief of the mesne tithes from your barony, you'll promise to put all of it into rebuilding. She wants people like you to do well. It's good for revenue, and it gives her more bargaining power with the Guild Merchant as well. That should let you repair the shipyard as well as the rest of the

damage—it's just wood that burned, mostly, and you didn't lose many of your skilled workmen or their tools."

"Thanks to you for that," Juhel said, and looked at him dubiously. "They'd have gotten away otherwise, and taken a lot with them. But the Spider's awful tight with a coin. Happier taking it in than giving it out. Usually bleating about the tithes just gets you what the sheep gets at shearing time."

"Yeah, she's not what you'd call open-handed. But she knows you have to spend to get, believe me... and I know the Princess Mathilda, and that her mother listens to her."

Juhel grinned delightedly and clapped the younger man on the shoulder.

Ah, Edain thought. And the taniest doesn't even have to come right out and say he'll urge the Princess to advise her mother. What a Chief he'll make for the Clan some day!

Rudi lowered his voice: "And if I were you, I'd be very careful. The Haida knew too much about just where and when to hit you. Something smells there, and not like attar of roses, either."

Juhel nodded, then walked his horse a few steps over to where the other Mackenzies were grouped. Raen's friends and kin from Sutterdown had laid out his body and those of three others; they weren't keening them, being among strangers, but they'd put the coins on their eyes and laid holly on their breasts, and were chanting softly:

"We all come from the Mother  
And to Her we shall return;  
Like a stalk of wheat  
Falling to the reaper's blade—"

Otter and Rinn were a little way off with nothing worse than nicks and bruises, accepting basins of water, soap and towels and bits of food and mugs of beer from an admiring crowd that seemed to include a lot of teenage girls, starting to grin as the relief of surviving their first hard fight sank in. Eithne leaned on her spear, still white and tense, sweat like teardrops making tracks through the blood on her face.

"Lord who holds this land," she broke in, her voice with an edge like sharpened silver. "What will you do with your captives?"

There were about a dozen of them, mostly wounded, bound and under guard. Juhel looked at her oddly, and shrugged.

"Take off their heads and send them to Portland, I suppose, mistress," he said. "Easier than sending all of them."

"No," she replied. She pointed with the spear.

The whole length of it still glistened dark-red as the blood grew tacky. Juhel looked at her... but over her head, rather than in the face.

I wouldn't like to meet her eyes right now, either, Edain thought as she went on, giving orders like a queen:

"Is it that there's an ash tree there, not far from your castle, tall and great?"

The nobleman nodded, and his look grew odder still and more sidelong.

"Put your men about it—about it in a circle, wearing iron and carrying spears and the emblems of your god. Bring your dead and lay them beneath a cairn with the blessings of your mass-priest. Then hang the evil-doers from the tree in sight of the dead and leave them for three days and nights. Do that, and you'll have... luck, luck for you and your land. Do that, or bury them living at a crossroads with a spear driven in the earth above."

"Ahhh..." Juhel swallowed, crossed himself and looked aside, shivering a little.

Rudi gave him a nod, short but sharp, and the baron drew a deep breath.

"I suppose we might as well hang them now. Sir Brandric! See to it! And the rest, as well."

"A pleasure, my lord. Very much a pleasure," the tall grizzled knight who commanded the garrison of Castle Tillamook said, and stalked off barking orders and grinning.

Eithne's knees buckled then, as if something—or Someone—withdrawed a hand that had worn her like a glove. She shook her head as Edain tried to help her, then almost fell. When he caught her in his arms the eyes rolled up in her head and she went limp; somehow he'd been expecting her to be heavier, but it was the familiar slender form he picked up, though her head rolled limp against his shoulder. Cold fear worse than any he'd felt in the fight clawed at his gut as he bore her over to the aid station the nuns had set up, letting the spear fall to lie in the wet trampled

grass.

One of them bent over the pallet he laid her on, pushed back an eyelid, felt her forehead and took her pulse with professional briskness. He showed her how to unbuckle the brigandine along the side and draw it off.

"Just stress and exhaustion, but a bad case of it," the nun said, clucking her tongue and drawing blankets over her. "A young girl's got no business doing this! She'll be fine with sleep and a good meal—just a few little cuts and scratches and some bruising here. Now, if you're not going to help, young man, get out! She won't be waking for a good many hours and I've got urgent cases to see to."

Edain blew out his cheeks in a whistle of relief and backed away; they were busy here, and he would be as useless as an udder on a bull.

Rudi and the local lord had dismounted, holding their horse's heads not far away as they spoke.

"Remind me never to piss your people off, Rudi," Juhel said with feeling.

He looked at the spray of dead where the Mackenzies had struck out of the fog with surprise and terror at their backs; bodies in the mud with gray-fletched arrows in them, or tumbling gashed and bloodless in the gray water. He shook his head.

"Dad fought at the Battle of Mt. Angel back in the Protector's War, and evidently he wasn't exaggerating."

While he spoke, a crossbowman with his arm in a sling came up leading a pony Edain recognized. Young Gaston was on it again, looking none the worse except for some dirt and bruises. Garbh trotted at his heel, then dashed over to Edain and gave a single bark as if to say the job's done.

The baron's heir gulped a little at some of the sights around him and went paler, but sat his pony proudly beside his father. Juhel looked down at him for a moment with a quiet and tender delight that went oddly with the blood-splashed armor and sword, and put his hand on his shoulder.

Then he looked at Edain and smiled. "I've thanked Rudi," he said. "But I haven't thanked you yet, master Aylward. I saw you save my son. That was bravely done, and done for strangers."

Edain felt himself blush to the roots of his hair, and shrugged awkwardly as they shook hands.

"It's a poor excuse for a man who won't fight for his host, or help out a little kid caught in a battle," he said shortly. "Besides, I didn't notice these Haida buggers telling me they wouldn't hurt me if I were to kindly stand aside."

Rudi grinned. "He's a good man to have your back," he said, and clapped Edain on his. "And that's a fact."

Juhel laughed. "I don't doubt it. Fought with you before, has he?"

"No," Rudi said. "This was your first real fight, eh, Edain?"

The younger Aylward nodded and the Chief's son went on: "But I thought he would be someone I wanted with me if it came to one. Now I know it."

Juhel's brows went up. "If that was your first fight, I'd hate to see what you'll be like in ten years! But you did save my son; you put your back between him and those arrows. Name a reward, and if it's mine, it's yours. In honor I can't do less."

Edain drew himself up despite the burning tiredness that made him want to crawl into the nearest haystack and sleep for a year.

"I didn't do it for that, sir," he said. "I'll take your thanks, and that's all that's needed—the Gods and the Three Spinners will see to any reward."

Juhel looked bewildered, and Edain cursed himself as he saw the beginnings of offense. For a fact, he didn't understand how an Association noble's mind worked. Outsiders didn't understand Mackenzies, and that was a fact too.

"There is a gift you could give him, Juhel, and one he'd value highly, though he'd never ask for it," Rudi said.

He was grinning again, like a fox for all that his totem was Raven.

"What's that?" Juhel said. "Horses? Weapons? Gold? Land, even?"

"Better than that. Write a letter to his father, telling what he did—and that he wouldn't take anything for it, either. I'll deliver it."

Edain stifled an impulse to shuffle his feet. His father wouldn't say much, just smile to himself and nod. He blushed again and fought not to grin.

"I will write, then," the baron said. He looked at the son of the Mackenzie chieftain, a long considering glance. "Your people don't have princes, Rudi, do they?"



Rudi looked a little impatient as he replied: "I'm not even really a lord, Juhel; just the Chief's tanist. My mother's Chief, and I may be after her—if the Clan wants me, and for as long as they want me. No, no princes."

"That may be a great pity," Juhel said thoughtfully, then looked around. "Now, I'd better get to work."

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Ingolf raised his brows as the story came to an end; silence fell, save for the low crackle of the fire and the howl of the blizzard outside.

Well, I guess there is a reason Rudi picked the kid. Though from the sound of it, maybe his girlfriend would have been just as good a choice... no, too spooky.

Edain yawned enormously, breaking the quiet that had followed his tale.

"Yeah, even if we can sleep in late tomorrow, we'd better get some rest," Rudi said.

Edain nodded, mumbled something, and slept with sudden finality. Ingolf drifted off next; his last sight was Rudi dropping a careful handful of sticks on the coals.

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Rudi Mackenzie knew that he dreamed. But the dream was different... this time he was a viewpoint, detached.

Same place, he thought.

The little overhang was still there. The trees weren't, though a few charred stumps still showed where they'd burned. Great gullies scarred the mountainside instead, the mark of torrential rains long-gone; the only other vegetation he could see was a few stems of some thorny brush, and those were dead. A white-gray light pervaded everything, but he couldn't see all that far. The air held no haze—it was painfully clear—but somehow he had a sense that it was thick with a crushing weight. Thick and hot, very hot, like a sauna just at the edge of your ability to bear, so that rocks and clods glimmered in the middle distance.

A body lay under the overhang, dressed in a seamless overall of some odd silvery stuff that merged into boots and gloves of the same, and into the base of a helmet like a glass bowl. The face within was a sunken-eyed mummy's, desiccated into the texture of leather and an eternal snarl of yellow teeth, gray-white hair still stubbly on the scalp.

The dream seemed to last for a very long time. The slow heavy wind blew; now and then a piece of rock would flake off the barren mountainside and skitter downwards. Nothing else happened. Nothing else ever would.

"Huh!" he woke with a start.

"Last up, Chief," Edain said cheerfully, and handed him a bowl full of the oatmeal.

Cold sweat prickled under his arms and at the back of his neck where his hair lay on the skin. The horrors of the dream faded, leaving only an overwhelming sorrow; it was as if he felt another's grief, and that too large for a human mind and spirit to contain. Then that lifted too, as he shook his head to clear it. The little shelter was dark, just a little red glow from the fire... and a trace of cold grayish light down the improvised bark chimney.

"Storm's passed," Ingolf said, wolfing down the thick fruit-studded gruel. "But it's four feet deep out there, I'd say."

"Higher with the drifts," Rudi agreed. "Best we make as much distance as we can. Snow's bad, but this time of year it could warm up and melt right up to the saddle of the pass—and that would be worse."

