

A Meeting At Corvallis

Dies the Fire

Book III

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Dedication

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All mistakes, infelicities and errors are of course my own.

Chapter One

Portland, Oregon

December 10, 2007/Change Year 9

Norman Arminger—he rarely thought of himself as anything but the Lord Protector these days—stared at the great map that showed his domains, and those of his stubbornly independent neighbors, it covered the whole of the former Oregon and Washington, with bits of the old states of Idaho and northern California thrown in.

Winds racing out of the Columbia gorge howled amongst the empty skyscrapers, and drove rain that splattered audibly against windows hidden by tapestries shimmering with gold and silver thread. The map covered one wall of what had been the main hall of the city's old public library, built in Edwardian times with a splendor of gray-veined white marble and brass inlay. That and the easily adapted heating system were why he'd picked it as his city palace, back right after the Change, and he'd had workmen busy with it ever since.

Then he turned on his heel and walked to the larger of the two thrones that stood on the new dais at the foot of the staircase; his left foot automatically knocked the scabbard of his longsword out of the way as he sat. This hall was the place he'd first unsheathed it in earnest nine years ago, and where he'd first spilled a man's life with the steel. The chairs were massive gothic fantasies in jewels and precious metals, gold for his and silver for his consort's; the materials had been salvaged from luxury stores and worked up by Society-trained artisans. The long stair behind them was black marble carved in vinework, rising to a landing and then splitting in two, curling up to the second story and the gallery that overlooked the throne room.

Outside, day's gray light was fading into blackness under clouded heavens, but the great room was brilliantly lit, by gasoline lanterns of silver fretwork hanging from the galleries around it, and by a huge chandelier salvaged from a magnate's mansion in the center of the ceiling thirty feet above. That burned a spendthrift plenitude of fine candles; their wax-and-lavender scent filled the chamber, overlaying metal polish and cloth and the sweat of fear from the crowd of well-dressed courtiers, clerics, advisors and officials. It was silent except for the occasional creak of shoe-leather or crisp ripple of stiff embroidered cloth from the tapestries, quiet enough that the faint whisper of flame from the lights was audible; the shifting glitter of flame shone on the thrones, on the jewelry and bright clothes of the courtiers, and on naked steel ...

Spearman stood like statues about the walls, their mail hauberks gleaming gray and the heads of seven-foot spears bright; their big kite-shaped shields were flat matte black, bearing the same sigil of a red, cat-pupiled eye wreathed in flame as stood on the great banner hanging from the ceiling to the landing behind him. Three household knights stood in a line before each throne. They wore black-enameled mail; the golden spurs on their boots and the bright steel-sheen of their swords were the

only color about them, besides the Eye on their shields. The weapons rested ready with the long blades on their shoulders; their eyes moved ceaselessly behind the splayed nasal bars of their conical helmets. There were discreet crossbowmen along the second-story galleries as well.

After a moment the woman seated in the other throne reached out and touched his arm. Arminger nodded—Sandra and he had played good cop/bad cop very effectively for years—and spoke:

"You may rise, Lord Molalla, and approach the throne."

The three kneeling figures stood: a man, a woman and a boy of about nine. The trumpeter beside the throne raised his long brass instrument and blew a simple tune, two rising and one falling note. The herald cried:

"The Lord Jabar Jones, Baron Molalla! The Lady Phillipa! Their son, Lord Chaka! You are bidden to approach the Presence!"

The knights before Arminger's throne stepped aside in perfect unison as the three approached, swinging like a door. Then they swung back and turned, which put them—and their ready swords—within three feet of the petitioners. Sandra's guardians remained facing outward, like iron statues with living, hungry eyes.

Jabar Jones—Baron Molalla—was a big man, an inch or two over Arminger's six-one, and similarly broad-shouldered, though unlike his overlord he'd added the beginnings of a paunch, despite being a little younger than the Lord Protector's mid-forties. His cannonball head was shaved and the color of eggplant save for a few dusty-white scars. He'd been a gang leader before the Change; Lady Phillipa was a Junoesque redhead of a little over thirty, and came from the other major element among the Protector's original cadre of supporters, the SCA ... these days known as *the Society*.

The Society's notion of clothing, or "garb" as they called it, had prevailed over the years, at least for the Portland Protective Association's upper classes, as had many of their notions. Phillipa wore an elaborate wrapped and pinned headdress of white silk that surrounded her face and fell to the shoulders of her long blue gown. The dress was what they called a *cotte-hardi*; jeweled buttons ran up from a belt of gold chain links to the lace at her throat, and down the long sleeves. For men garb had worked out to loose trousers, boots, linen shirt, belted thigh-length t-tunic and flat hats with a roll of fabric around the edge and dangling cloth tails; the only exceptions in the room were servants, clergy of the Orthodox Catholic Church in their long monastic robes or colorful dalmatics, and some foreign guests.

Arming's clothes were the same, but in black silk, and he added silver plates to his sword belt, a gold chain around his neck that supported a pendant of the Lidless Eye on his chest, and a niello headband to confine his shoulder-length brown hair. That was receding a little from his high forehead; the features below were harshly aquiline, lines graven from nose to mouth, and the eyes were an amber hazel.

Molalla wore no sword belt. That was a political statement just now, as was his willingness to promptly obey the summons to court—some would have thought raising the drawbridges in his barony more prudent, though that was a counsel of desperation. The way his wife's eyes occasionally darted to Sandra Arminger's face was probably political appraisal by Phillipa, too. The women had been friends. She evidently didn't find the stony calm on the face of Arminger's consort very reassuring.

The way the guardian knights stood within arm's reach behind them wasn't reassuring either. It wasn't meant to be.

"You may speak," Arminger growled to the man.

"My lord, I have petitioned to be allowed to explain my error before this—"

"You're lucky I didn't let you come near me until now, Jabar," he said. "I was waiting until I could be sure I could control my temper. I'm not a forgiving man by nature. My confessor and His Holiness Leo tell me it's my greatest fault."

A ripple of chuckles ran through the court, except for a few of the clerics. Arminger grinned inwardly, behind an impassive mask

Actually, I was wondering what Strongbow or the Conqueror would have done, he thought.

The Norman duchy and its offshoots from Ireland to Sicily and the Crusader principalities had been his area of study, back when he'd been a scholar, before the Change. Playing at knights had been his recreation, a way to live a little of the life those civilized Vikings knew. But the contacts that had given

him had proved crucially useful in his rise to power. Society people—at least the less squeamish of them—had been very handy as a training cadre in pre-gunpowder combat and a dozen other skills, but there were problems ... what had been their slogan?

Silently, he mused to himself: *"Recreating the Middle Ages as they should have been."*

They were perhaps the only people in all the world who'd felt *vindicated* when the Change killed all high-energy-density technologies between the earth's surface and the Van Allens in a single instant of white light and blinding pain.

I'm more interested in the reality. With some refinements, of course. Showers and flush toilets are technologies I approve of. At least for me.

"My lord Protector," Molalla plowed on, sweating as he trudged through a speech obviously memorized in advance and probably written by his wife. "I sent the Princess Mathilda back on a well-guarded train as soon as the outposts reported a Mackenzie raid out of the Table Rock wilderness, thinking they'd be safe in Portland before the enemy could penetrate the lowlands—and I sent my own son along. My own younger brother commanded the escort, and was killed in the ambush on the railroad. I admit error, and I beg your mercy for it, but I claim innocence of any malice or disloyalty. Would I have done either if I hadn't thought it the safest course for the princess?"

Sandra spoke, her voice soft and careful: "But it wasn't as safe, lord baron, as guarding them in your keep would have been. Raiders could ambush a train— which they did. They could not storm a castle, which they didn't even try to do. And while the Mackenzies released your son at once, they did *not* release my daughter! For more than half a year, she has been captive among the Satan-worshippers."

A heavy silence fell. The burly black nobleman opened his mouth, and then closed it.

Wise, Arminger thought.

The whole past spring and summer had been a series of disasters. The Mackenzie raid, the failure of his attempt to salvage something useful from the old chemical-warfare dump up the Columbia at Umatilla—those damned Englishmen who'd come in on the Tasmanian ship had been responsible for that, suckering him completely—and then the rescue mission for Mathilda had crashed and burned spectacularly. If it hadn't been for the way the Umatilla expedition had extended the Association's influence into the Pendleton country, it could have been a dangerous blow to his prestige. As it was, land for new fiefs would keep discontent to a minimum.

When he spoke it was to his steward. "Why is Baron Molalla unarmed? Bring his sword at once; it isn't fitting that a trusted vassal should appear without a weapon."

A man came up with the long blade, the belt wrapped around the scabbard and showing a buckle bearing the barony's sigil, a rampant lion grasping a broad-bladed assegai. Molalla donned it, his face stayed impassive, but sheer relief suddenly put a beading of sweat on his forehead, glittering in the candlelight. Servants handed sheathed daggers to his wife and son.

"Use it well in my service, and in the interests of the Association," Arminger said.

He noted how Phillipa's eyes sought Sandra's again, and how her face relaxed slightly at the consort's smile and nod.

Easy enough to see who's got the political brains in that family, though Jabar's a good fighting man, Arminger thought.

Chaka was looking at the Association's overlord worshipfully, too. Arminger suppressed a sudden wave of murderous fury at the thought of Mathilda lost among the fanatics; they wouldn't harm her directly, but every moment she was exposed to that poisonous brew of superstition and make-believe was one too many.

And if you screw up again, Jabar, all three of you are going to spend your final hours hanging from iron hooks on the wall outside!

He smiled instead of snarling the threat. It wasn't necessary; the baron and his family bowed and backed six paces away, among a crowd that didn't avoid them like plague carriers anymore, but Phillipa was looking extremely thoughtful. With an effort of will Arminger thrust gnawing worry aside; he couldn't afford distraction, and could do his daughter no good if he was crippled. Instead he made a gesture. Another trumpet blast echoed.

"Lord Emiliano Gutierrez, Baron Dayton!" the herald called. "You are bidden to approach the Presence!"

Emiliano was in his thirties as well, a stocky brown-faced man in fine white linen and gleaming satin. He grinned as he bowed, and met the Lord Protector's eyes, ignoring the naked blades ready behind him.

Men who can be intimidated easily aren't very effective servants, not as fighting men, Arminger reminded himself, irksome, *since intimidation is so much fun, but there you are.*

"Lord Emiliano, I'm hereby appointing you Marchwarden of the South, to replace the late Lord Edward Liu, Baron Gervais." He waved aside thanks. "Just see the damned Bearkillers and kilties keep to their side of the border."

Another trumpet blast. "Lady Mary Liu, dowager Baroness Gervais! You are bidden to approach the Presence!"

A slim blonde came forward, sinking in a low curtsey; she wore mourning ribbons around her headdress. The knights did their deadly pavane.

"Lady Mary, I'm taking the barony of Gervais into personal wardship pending the majority of your heir, but I'm making you my steward for it until your son comes of age," he said. "You may appoint a garrison commander from Baron Edward's following. Please inform me before you make a public announcement of exactly who."

"Thank you, my lord Protector," she said, in a high, reedy voice.

Liu's widow didn't have a prescriptive right to rule her husband's personal holding until the heir reached twenty-one. In strict form the land reverted to the Association, and the Protector could have given her a manor as dower house, or apartments at court, installed his own administrator and commander and collected the mesne tithes from the barony and its subordinate knights-fee manors for himself. That would have given him the income for more than a decade; Liu's eldest was only eight. But Eddie had been one of his personal hatchetmen, and a good one, until his final failure. Besides which, Mary would probably do a pretty good job of it; she knew the place firsthand, and in the long run it would help to have Eddie's kids grow up there.

Though she's not going to appoint her brother garrison commander. Sir Jason's too much of a hothead. A pity, since he's intelligent otherwise.

As a gesture, giving her the chatelaine's job would help keep the rest of his baronage sweet, if he had to take action against Molalla. They were developing an irritating attachment to the minutiae of the law, and an even more irritating sense of collective solidarity about their privileges. Step on one, and the others all squalled like scalded cats. He was stronger than any individual noble, but not more powerful than all of them put together.

Less formally, he went on: "Mary, Eddie was a good man, and a friend of mine. I won't forget that he died trying to rescue my daughter from captivity. And you can take it as a promise that I'll see those who killed him pay for it. I'll see that they pay in full—*and to the inch!*"

Mary Liu's blue eyes flared for a moment; she'd grown up in a Society household before the Change, and was only twenty-eight now. He'd noticed that the younger generation took certain things very seriously, particularly those with that background. What their parents had dreamed, they lived.

"I'll rely on that promise, lord Protector," she said. Her fingers curled into claws. "If you take the Satan-worshippers alive, I'd appreciate your turning them over to *my* court for sentencing and execution rather than the

Church and the Holy Office. We ... *I have some experts as good as any of His Holiness'.*"

Sandra Arminger chuckled, and Arminger laughed aloud. "That's the spirit!" he said as the crowd applauded. He rose, and caught the eye of two at the rear of the crowd: the merchants from Corvallis. A flick of the head said *later*.

"And now, dinner," he said. Sandra's fingers came down to rest on his arm, and he turned to lead her up the great curving stair.

December 12th, 2007/Change Year 9

The girl drew carefully, using the shoulders and body as much as the arms. The yew bow bent . . .

"Bull's-eye!" Mathilda Arminger whooped as the shaft thumped home in the circle behind the wooden deer's shoulder.

"Not bad, Matti," Rudi Mackenzie said. "Not bad!"

It was late afternoon going on for evening, and overcast. The sudden chill and wet mealy smell in the fir-scented air meant snow coming soon, rolling down the heights from the wall of mountains eastward. Rudi finished another round of practice and then looked up and stuck out his tongue; sure enough, the first big flakes came drifting down, landing with a gentle bite and a somehow dusty taste. Snow was rare in the Willamette, where winter was the season of rain and mud, but Dun Juniper was just high enough in the foothills that it could get heavy falls sometimes, though they rarely lay for long. This would be a big one, by the way the air tasted and felt.

The two children were the youngest in the crowd at the butts; they'd both been born in the first Change Year, and were shooting up with a long-limbed, gangly grace. Rudi was the taller by an inch or two; the hair that spilled out from under his flat bonnet was a brilliant gold tinted with red to her dark auburn-brown, and his eyes somewhere between blue and green and gray to her hazel, but otherwise their sharp straight-featured faces were much alike as they began to shed their puppy fat.

"Willow!" one of the assistants called to a round-faced girl of ten. "Don't hop and squint after you shoot. It won't help."

The girl flushed as classmates snickered and giggled; she shot again, then did the same up-and-down-in-place hop as before, squinting with her tongue between her teeth and the wet turf squelching under her feet. Today Chuck Barstow Mackenzie, the Clan's Second Armsman, had dropped in to observe.

Which made everyone a little nervous despite the fact that he lived here, even if it wasn't as momentous as it might be at some other dun. Now he silently reached over and rapped her lightly on the head with the end of his bow; she flushed more deeply, hanging her head.

The rest of the crowd at the butts ranged from nine or so to thirteen, children of Dun Juniper's smiths, stockmen, carpenters, clerks, schoolteachers and weavers, and of the Clan's small cadre of full-time warriors. Their work was overseen by a dozen or so elder students in their later teens, walking up and down the line offering advice and helping adjust hands and stances, and four Armsmen oversaw them; archery was very much part of the Mackenzie school syllabus, and much more popular than arithmetic or geography or even herblore.

"And Otter, Finn, don't laugh at Willow," Chuck added. "She shoots better than you do most of the time. Someday you'll have to stand beside her in a fight, remember." He cocked an eye at the darkening clouds. "All right, it's time to knock off for the day anyway; everyone unstring. Carefully!" he added, keeping a close watch on the process, as did the teachers and their helpers, lest cold-stiffened fingers slip.

There were a couple of quick corrections to those doing it wrong. Rudi braced the lower tip of his bow against the top of his left foot, stepped through between the string and the riser, and pushed down against the bow with his thigh while his right hand held the upper part of the stave steady. That let him slide the string out of the grooves in the polished antler tip—carefully!—with his left hand. There were the inevitable throttled yelps and a few tears from those who'd let go too early or put their stave hands too far up, and so pinched their hands between string and wood even through their gloves, but no real accidents. Even a light child's stave could be dangerous if the wielder let it get away from them, and the tip of a grown-up's war bow would rip through flesh and bone like a spear when it slipped just wrong. That was why you always kept it pointed away from your face when stringing or unstringing, something he'd learned years ago.

"You're getting pretty good, Matti," he said.

"I always had a bow," she said. "Not just here."

"Not a bow like that, I bet," Rudi said, grinning.

"Yeah!" she said enthusiastically. "It's great. We heard about Sam's bows, even, you know,

ummm"—she didn't say *Portland*—"up north."

The longbow was one of Sam Aylward's; the First Armsman made Juniper's son a new one every Yule as he grew, and last year's was about the right weight for Mathilda. It was his bowyer's skill as much as his shooting that made him known as Aylward the Archer.

It's funny, he thought. She learned some things up there—she can shoot pretty good. But not how to look after her own gear. Weird.

They both wiped their bows down with hanks of shearling wool, slipped them into protective sheaths of soft, oiled leather, laced those tight-closed and slid them home in the carrying loops beside their quivers. By the time they'd put on the quiver-caps—getting wet didn't do the arrows' fletching any good—the snow was thick enough to make objects in the middle distance blurry, turning the faint light of the moon above the clouds into a ghostly glow. The thick turf of the meadow gave good footing, but the earth beneath was mucky, with a squishy, slippery feel.

Most of the mile-long benchland that held the Mackenzie clachan was invisible now from here at the eastern edge; the mountain-slope northward was just a hint of looming darkness. They could hear the little waterfall that fell down it to the pool at the base that fed Artemis Creek and turned the wheel of the gristmill, but only a hint of the white water was visible. Rudi cocked an ear at it, humming along with the deep-toned voice of the river spirit in her endless song, and enjoying the way the snow muffled other sounds: the wind in the firs, the sobbing howl of a coyote—or possibly Coyote Himself—somewhere in the great wilderness that surrounded them, creaks and snaps and rustles under the slow wet wind's heavy passage.

The teachers and their helpers chivvied everyone into order on the gravel roadway, counting twice to make sure nobody had wandered off into the woods and fields. Aoife Barstow hung a lantern on her spear and led the way; she was Uncle Chuck's fostern-daughter, a tall young woman of about twenty with dark red braids, and a figure of tremendous prestige with the younger children. She and her brothers Sanjay and Daniel had been on Lady Juniper's great raid against the Protectorate just after last Beltane, when Mathilda had been captured; Sanjay had died on a northern knight's lance point. Aoife had not only killed the knight who did it; she'd cut off his head and waved it in the faces of his comrades, shrieking and possessed by the Dark Goddess the while. Gruesomely fascinating rumor had it that she'd wanted to bring the head home pickled in cedar oil and nail it over the Hall's front door, the way warriors did in the old stories, but that Rudi's mother had talked her out of it.

Chuck mounted his horse and trotted along, quartering behind them and to either side to make sure nobody straggled.

"School's over until after Yule!" a boy named Liam shouted as they walked, which got him a round of cheers.

"I wouldn't mind school, if it were all like this," someone else said.

"Yup," Rudi said. "Even arithmetic and plants aren't so bad. It's that classwork about things before the Change. Boring!"

"Yeah." Liam nodded; he was several years older than Rudi, but far too young to really remember the lost world. "Presidents and atoms and rockets and all that hooley."

Chuck Barstow caught that, and reined in beside them. The other children grew a little silent, but Rudi grinned up at the middle-aged sandy-blond rider; Uncle Chuck had been as much a father to him as any man.

But Lord Bear's your real body-father, he thought, then let his mind shy away from the knowledge. He wasn't sure what he thought of that at all, and he'd only learned it for sure last year at the Horse Fair.

"What about King Arthur and Robin Hood and Niall of the Nine Hostages and Thor's trip to Jotunheim and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?" Chuck asked.

"Oh, that's different," Rudi said confidently; there were nods of agreement from those within earshot. "That's more like real life, you know? Those are the *cool* stories. They mean something. They're not just weird names like Liam said."

For some reason Uncle Chuck gave a snort of laughter at that, and rode away shaking his head.

"People that old are *weird*," Liam said.

Rudi nodded thoughtfully. Of course, there weren't all that many *really, really* old people around at all. They'd mostly all died the year he was born. Uncle Dennis was fifty-eight, and the oldest person in Dun Juniper by a decade. There were only six or seven people here older than Mom, who was forty.

Then he called out to the leader of the little column. "Aoife," he said. "Do you think all the old folks are weird? I mean, you're grown up but you're not old—not *real* old."

"Thanks!" the woman who'd turn twenty-one in a few months said.

The lantern wavered a little as she looked over her shoulder, and paused to brush snow from her plaid. "Not really, sprout," she went on. "I was ... just a little older than you are now, at the Change. I remember riding in cars, you know? And TV and lights going on when I pushed a switch ... sort of. We were in a school bus when the Change happened, Dan and Sanjay and me; I can remember *that*. But I'm not really sure if I'm remembering all the rest of it, or just remembering remembering or remembering what the oldsters told me."

That got a chuckle; but then he thought her face went uncertain and a little sad in the white-flecked dimness. "And it gets more that way all the time; more like remembering a dream." More cheerfully: "But they do go on about it a lot, don't they? Even Dad."

There were more nods and mutters of agreement.

"Hey, I heard that!"

Chuck's voice came out of the snow-shot darkness. Rolling eyes and sighs were the younger generation's only defense against tales of the days before the Change. There wasn't much point in talking about it among themselves.

"Let's have a song!" Rudi said instead.

That brought enthusiastic agreement; it usually would, among a group of Mackenzies. They passed a few moments arguing over what tune, which was also to be expected. At last, exasperated, Rudi simply began himself and waited for the others to join in:

*"The greenwood sighs and shudders
The westwind wails and mutters—"*

There were a few complaints, but the song matched the weather, and most of the youngsters took it up with bloodthirsty enthusiasm:

*"Gray clouds crawl across the sky
The moon hides her face as the sunlight dies!
And mankind soon shall realize
The Bringer of Storms walks tonight!
No mortal dare to meet the glare
Of the Eye of the Stormbringer
For he is the lightning slinger
The glory singer, The gallows reaper!"*

The road wound along between the muddy, reaped potato fields and truck gardens covered in mulch of wheat-straw and sawdust and spoiled hay; a whiff of manure came from beneath. A rime of ice was forming in the puddles along the water-furrow from the pond that watered them in the summer; they tramped on over the plank bridge, then past fenced and hedged pastures, and other fields where the stems of the winter oats bowed beneath the wet snowflakes. The stock was mostly huddled in the shelter of board sheds, and the herd-wards forked down hay for them from the stacks or walked their rounds. They had thick cloaks and jackets and knit vests and leggings, and booths to take shelter from the worst of the weather; they and hunters in the woods and unlucky travelers were the only ones who'd sleep outside walls this night.

The song wasn't one he'd have picked if he were going to be rolling in a sleeping bag beneath a tree. Not out where wolves and bears and tigers and woods-fey roamed—the fey could be friendly or unfriendly, and were usually tricksey—and where a stranger met might be anything from an outlaw to a wood-sprite or godling in disguise.

But it was a fine tune when you were heading back to stout gates and bright fires and a good supper.

Rudi filled his lungs with the wet chill air and bellowed out:

*"Upon his shoulder, ravens
His face like stone, engraven
Astride a six-hoofed stygian beast
He gathers the fruit of the gallows trees!
Driving legions to victory
The hunger of war walks tonight!"*

The kilted children poured up the sloping road to the dun in a chattering mass, eager for home and supper. It took a bit longer than usual for the wall to loom ahead of them out of the swirling white; the rough surface of the light-colored stucco was catching the snow now, obscuring the curving flower-patterns painted beneath the crenellations of the battlements. The great gates were three-quarters shut, and the snow had caught on their green-painted steel surfaces too, making little white teardrops where the patterns of copper rivets showed the Triple Moon above—waxing, full, and waning—and the wild bearded face of the Horned Man beneath.

One of the gate guards yelled down: "What were you trying to do, Chuck, feed the little twerps to the Wild Hunt? It's as dark as a yard up a hog's arse out there!"

Chuck Barstow put a hand on his hip and looked up as his horse's hooves struck sparks from the concrete and fieldstone of the square before the gate. "They're not going to catch their deaths from a wee bit of snow," he called back. "They might from missing when someone's coming at them with a blade."

The tunnel-like entrance was flanked on either side by god-posts of carved and painted wood hewn from whole Douglas fir trunks thicker than his body; the Lady as Brigid with her wheat sheaf and crown of flames on one side, and the Lord as Lugh of the Long Spear on the other. Rudi made a reverence with palms pressed together and thumbs on his chin as he passed, a gesture as automatic as breath, feeling the warm comfort of their regard, like his mother's smile. Everyone else made the gesture as well, except Mathilda and a few other Christians, mostly the children of foreign guests. The schoolroom crowd broke up, waving and yelling and promising to get up early to build snow forts on the open ground below the north wall, where the wind usually piled deep drifts. As the last of them passed, a dozen adults on guard duty hauled in grunting unison, and the gates shut with a hollow boom and a long rattling, thunking sound as the bars slid home. In the same instant great Lambeg drums sounded from the tops of the four towers of the gatehouse, a deep rumbling thunder; the dunting of horns went through it, and the screech of pipers hailing the departing Sun.

Then they were through into the familiar interior of Dun Juniper, their hobnailed brogans crunching on the gravel roadways. The walls enclosed a smooth oval of several acres, originally a low plateau in the rolling benchland. Lanterns shone from the towers along the wall, and from the windows of the log-built homes that lined the inner surface of the fortification; their light gleamed on the carved and painted wood of the little houses; most were done in themes from myth or fancy, a few left defiantly plain as if to tell the neighbors so *there*. Smoke rose from chimneys to mingle with the white mist of the snow, as the resin scent of burning fir mixed with the homey smells of cooking and livestock; the clachan had six hundred souls within the walls, more than any other Mackenzie settlement save Sutterdown.

Folk walked briskly about the final tasks of the day, from penning the chickens to visiting the communal bathhouse. Voices human and animal rang, and hooves, the buzz of a woodworker's lathe, the last blows of a smith's hammer, the hum of a treadle-driven sewing machine, the rhythmic tock ... tock ... of an ax splitting wood.

It had all been the background of his life, as were the dogs that came and butted their heads under his hands. The two armed Mackenzies who unobtrusively followed weren't.

"Oh, Aoife, Dan, do you *have* to?" he asked; at least today it was friends of his. "Can't I even go pee by myself? It's like being a little kid again!"

"Yup, we do have to follow you around, sprout," Daniel said unsympathetically; he was tall and lean like his sister and only a year younger, with shaggy tow-colored hair and a mustache on his upper lip that stayed wispy despite cultivation and spells. "I've got better things to do myself, you know, and Aoife

would *certainly* rather be somewhere else with someone else since she's in luuu-uuuuuve *again*—"

His sister snorted and made as if to clout him with the buckler in her left hand; the movement was slow and symbolic. A real strike with a two-pound steel disk was no joke.

"—but it's Sam's orders, and Dad's, and Lady Juniper's. You and the princess here get a guard, every hour of the night and day."

Mathilda pouted a little at the title—she'd tried to insist on it when she first arrived at Dun Juniper after her capture last spring, and found that to be a mistake, like talking about the splendors of the palace in Portland or Castle Todenangst. That reminded him of how she'd arrived, and what had followed from that. His fingers rubbed at his side through his jacket, where the giant's sword had wounded him that August night. Mathilda's voice was small as she leaned close and said: "Does it still hurt?"

"Nah," he said, smiling, remembering how she'd sat by his bedside through the long days of pain, reading out loud or playing checkers or just being there. "I heal quick."

"I'm sorry, Rudi."

"Well, *you* didn't do it, Matti," he replied cheerfully.

"Eddie was always nice before . . . well, nice to me. And Mack, I thought he was just sort of big and, well, stupid. Dad just sent them to rescue me. He and Mom are scared for me. They didn't mean to hurt you."

"Mack was big and stupid," Rudi said. "And he was a bad man, Matti. He did mean to hurt me." He put an arm around her shoulders. "I know *you* didn't."

"You want to go and visit Epona?" Mathilda said hopefully.

He hesitated; Epona was the *good* thing that had happened last summer, the horse that nobody but he could ride . . . Rudi sighed. There wasn't time, and he didn't have the excuse anymore that the mare would only let him groom or feed her—she'd relaxed a bit about that.

"Oh, come on, let's go get dinner. I'm clemmed," he said instead.

The center of Dun Juniper held the larger, communal buildings; school, bad-weather covenstead, bathhouse, armory, library, stables and workshops, granaries and dairy, brew-house and storehouses. The heart of it was the great Hall. It loomed bright through the thick-falling snow, firelight and lantern light red and yellow through the windows and on the painted designs graven into the logs. The ends of the rafters that supported the second-story galleries were carved into the heads of the Mackenzie totems, Wolf and Bear, Dragon and Tiger and Raven and more; their grinning mouths held chains that ended in lanterns of wrought brass and iron and glass. The high-peaked roof of moss-grown shingles reared above like the back of a green, scaly dragon, and the rafters at each end of it crossed like an X, carved into facing spirals, deasil and widdershins to balance the energies. The two children and their escorts paused on the veranda to stamp and kick the mud and sticky wet snow off their brogans and brush it off their plaids and jackets and caps.

Through the big double doors, and into a blast of light and sound, warmth and smells; woodsmoke, damp wool clothes drying, leather, meat and cabbage cooking, fir and polish and soap, bright paint and carving seeming to move on the walls. The great stone hearth across the room on the north face of the Hall was booming and roaring, and a group around it were laughing and finishing a song as they threw in chunks of timber:

*"Oak logs will warm you well, that are old and dry;
Logs of pine will sweetly smell, but the sparks will fly,
Surely you will find
There's none compare with the hardwood logs
That are cut in winter-time, sir!
Holly logs will burn like wax—you can burn them green
Elm logs burn like smoldering flax, with no flames to be seen
Beech logs for wintertime, and Yule logs as well, sir—"*

He genuflected to the altar on the mantel and signed the air with the Horns for the Hall's tutelary guardians, and his bodyguards did the same. The long tables were up as well, set in a T this day with the upper bar on the dais at the east end of the Hall, and people were bustling in and out of the doors on

either side of the fireplace that led to the kitchens. The western end of the Hall held the great Yule Tree, not yet decorated, but fragrant with promise and Douglas fir sap. Rudi waved to friends as he took off his coat and flat Scots bonnet and plaid, hanging them on pegs; by now Mathilda attracted fewer glares and more smiles than she had right after he got hurt, but she was still a little subdued and stuck close to him. Few dared to be unfriendly when he was around, or when his mother was watching.

One of the glares was unfortunately from Aunt Judy, who hadn't forgotten how her fostern-son Sanjay died last summer.

Well, neither have I, Rudi thought. Everyone had liked Sanjay, who was smart and funny and brave. *But it wasn't Matti's fault! And that was a whole year ago, or nearly! Aoife and Dan aren't mean to her! And Uncle Chuck doesn't look at her like that either.*

They hung up their bows and quivers and knives in the children's section. Rudi sighed as he watched Dan and Aoife stow their weapons with those of the other grown warriors. Shortswords and dirks and bucklers swung on their belts from oak pegs; spears were racked in gleaming rows with their bright, rune-graven heads high. In pride of place were the great six-foot war bows of orange-hued yew, the terror of the Clan's enemies and the guardians of Mackenzie freedom and honor, each flanked by its well-filled quiver of shafts fletched with the gray goose feathers.

He knew that the time to wield one would come for him, just as his voice would break someday and he'd start being interested in girls as more than friends. But while that was just knowledge without much impact, the yearning for a war bow of his own was a burning need.

Lady of the Ravens, please don't make me wait forever! he thought.

There was some foreign gear there as well, from Lord Bear's territories on the western side of the Willamette Valley; long basket-hiked backswords and short, thick recurve horseman's bows hung up in harp-shaped saddle scabbards. Rudi looked up at the top table; yes, a big, blond young man in his late twenties and a woman a little younger, brown-skinned and frizzy-haired. There were others at the lower tables who must be their escorts, all in pants, and jackets with the red bear's head on the shoulder.

"Hi, Unc' Eric, Auntie Luanne!" he called to the pair, and they waved back over the gathering crowd.

His mother was talking with the Bearkiller couple when he hopped up on the dais and walked over to make his respects and greet her. She stopped to give him a grin and a hug, then pulled back a little.

"Well, it's sopping you are, *mo chroi!*" she said, green eyes twinkling.

"Just a little snow, Mom," he replied. He saw Mathilda out of the corner of his eye, a plaintive look on her face, and whispered in his mother's ear.

"And would you like a bit of a hug too, my fostern girl?" Juniper Mackenzie said.

"Ummm ... yeah. Thanks."

She got one, and a kiss on the forehead; the Lady of the Mackenzies ruffled both their heads before she sent them off to their end of the high table. Nigel Loring was there at his mother's right hand; he nodded solemnly to Rudi as he passed, then winked. Rudi grinned back at the English guest; besides saving his life last year, and becoming his main tutor in the sword and horsemanship, Sir Nigel was just plain fun. He knew a lot of stories, too.

Those Hall-dwellers on kitchen duty brought out bowls and platters and set them out, then sat themselves. Most families in Dun Juniper had their own hearths, but there were always a fair number eating in the Hall, besides the Barstows, Trethars and others who lived there; guests like the Bearkillers, or people from elsewhere in the Clan's territories come to learn craft skills or to share the holy mysteries or do a hundred types of business. Even a wandering gangrel could find a meal in the Chief's Hall in return for a little wood-chopping or other chores; after all, any such could be the Lord or Lady in disguise. Though it was hard to believe a lot of the time, since they were always smelly and often mad.

"We start to decorate the tree tomorrow," Rudi said. "Nine more days of the Twelve, and then it's Yule."

"Christmas," Mathilda said, nodding. "But the twelve days come *after* Christmas."

Rudi grinned; he liked explaining things, and the grown-ups had been really careful not to say anything at all against Mathilda's religion, or even tell her much about the Craft. That didn't apply to him, of course; it was one of the few advantages of being a kid.

"No, this is *Yule*, Matti. That's the shortest day, the twenty-first this year. On the First Day we go out and find the tree and cut it, on the Second Day we bring it here, and Third Day we put it up; for the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone, you know? And the Tree is the Holly King's ... well, you know. Then we've got nine days for the rest, cooking and making presents and getting ready for the Solstice Vigil. Mom says we stole the Twelve Days and changed them round 'cause the Christians stole Yule and messed it up."

"We did not!" Mathilda said, then hesitated. "At least, I don't think so. What do you decorate it with?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Old-time stuff, and strings of popcorn, and little carved sprites, and, oh, lots of stuff. It's fun."

"We didn't decorate our own Christmas tree at home, but it was very pretty," Mathilda said. "We always had Christmas at Castle Todenangst. I'd come down in the morning, and open the presents with Mom and Dad."

Rudi frowned. "But decorating it yourself is half the fun!"

They loaded their plates from the platters and baskets as they spoke: corned beef, chunks of grilled venison with a sauce of garlic-laced yogurt, mashed potatoes with bits of onion, fresh steamed kale, boiled cabbage and glazed carrots and fresh brown bread and hot cheddar biscuits and butter. Mathilda slipped a sliver of the beef to a big black tomcat crouched under her chair; he bolted it and then went back to glaring around with mad yellow eyes. Saladin had come as part of the ill-fated diplomatic mission from Portland last Lughnasadh, and the other Hall cats hadn't accepted him yet ... or vice versa.

Juniper Mackenzie stood, and the hum of conversation stilled. She raised both her hands in the gesture of power and blessing before she spoke, her strong soprano filling the Hall, half song and half chant:

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

Most of the crowd joined in the final *Blessed be*; then they waited politely while the Christians said their grace. The two Bearkillers at the top table crossed themselves and murmured words: *Bless us, O Lord* ... So did Mathilda, in another fashion—Catholics who followed Abbot-Bishop Dmwoski at Mount Angel used a slightly different rite from the Orthodox Catholic Church of the Protectorate's Pope Leo.

Juniper went on: "And special thanks to Andy and Diana and everyone working the kitchens, who managed to produce what looks like a great dinner right in the middle of preparing for the Yule feast."

The Trethars stood and bowed as everyone clapped. Rudi's mother took from its rest a silver-rimmed horn of wine—that had started its life as one of a pair of longhorns over a Western-themed bar in Bend—and poured a small libation in a bowl. Then she raised the horn high over her head and cried:

"To the Lord, to the Lady, to the Luck of the Clan—*Wassail!*"

"*Drink hail!*" fifty voices replied, raising their cups and drinking with her.

Rudi dutifully sipped at a tiny glass of mead, watered for a youngster's strength; he preferred the cream-rich milk in the waiting jug, but the proprieties had to be observed. The hum of conversation began again, along with the clatter of cutlery. Rudi poured himself milk and a glass for Mathilda, spread his napkin on his lap and ate with the thoughtless, innocent greed of a healthy nine-year-old after a day's hard work in cold weather and with a holiday in prospect.

"Blueberry tarts for dessert!" he said happily. "With whipped cream and honey."

"So that's Arminger's kid," Luanne Larsson said, meditatively mixing some melted butter into her mashed potatoes with her fork as she glanced down the table; one advantage of the white noise that filled

the Hall was that conversations could be private, if you spoke softly and leaned a little close.

"No," Juniper Mackenzie said, using a spoon to put some horseradish beside her corned beef.

She did it cautiously; the crock was a gift from Sam's wife, and though nuclear weapons didn't work post-Change, Melissa Aylward's horseradish sauce was an acceptable substitute.

"No," she went on. "She's Mathilda, a girl whose parents are Norman and Sandra Arminger, through no fault of her own, so. And who for the now lives with me and my son."

Eric Larsson grinned in his dense, short-cropped yellow beard and raised a glass of red wine in salute. He was a broad-shouldered, long-limbed man who stood two inches over six feet; his features were sharply cut on a long, narrow head, eyes a bright blue, golden hair falling to his shoulders beneath a headband of leather tooled and stamped. The face it framed was a Viking skipper's born out of time and place, down to the kink a sword had put in his nose and thin white scars that made him look a little older than his twenty-eight years. "Gotcha, honey," he said to his wife. "It's touchdown to Juney, point and match."

"OK, enough with the mixed metaphors," Luanne said. "OK, OK, I get it. No sins of the fathers and all that."

"And she's ... what's the word, Juney?" Eric replied.

"My fostern," Juniper supplied. *He's grown into himself*, she thought to herself. She'd met Eric Larsson in the fall of the first Change Year, and known him fairly well since as he developed into Mike Havel's right-hand man as well as just his brother-in-law.

Back then he was eighteen and just trying on a man's life, like someone with a new coat that's a little too big for him. Now he's like a big golden cat—good company to his friends, and very dangerous to something he decides might be good to eat. Vain as a cat, too, though with reason. And more at home in the Changed world than we who were full-grown can ever be, though not so much as his children will be.

He also added flamboyant touches to the long jacket and pants most Bear-killers wore: embroidered cuffs on a coat left open to show more embroidery on his linen shirt and neckerchief, a gold hoop earring, silver buttons on his jacket worked into wolf heads, rings on the fingers of his large but curiously graceful hands.

"Arming's still going to come at us," Eric said. "Kid or no kid." "Sure, and you're right about that," Juniper said. "He's a bastard of a man with the soul of a mad weasel, and no mistake. And that was obvious even before the Change."

The two Bearkillers looked at her. "You knew him then?" Eric said in astonishment.

"No, but I knew *of* him. Under his Society name—Blackthorn of Malmsey— so it was years after the Change before I realized who it was; I haven't *seen* him since, and knew nothing of him beyond his Society persona, you see. He was the one who brought an ox to a tournament. *That* I had from an eyewitness." "He brought an ox? He's into bestiality, on top of everything else?" Eric laughed. "Not as a date," Juniper said in quelling tones. "He had a taste for sweet young things even then. No, he wanted to demonstrate how out of touch with reality the Society fighters were, bashing each other with rattan blades and relying on the honor system."

She grinned and quoted: "*Come back here, you coward, and I'll bite you to death!*" At their blank looks she went on: "Classical reference. Anyway, he killed the ox with a real sword, the same one he carries now. With one blow, actually; it was supposedly impressive, in a sick sort of way."

Nigel Loring raised his brows; he knew how difficult it was to kill a large animal that quickly. "What did they do with the ox? The Society chappies, that is."

"Grilled it whole and ate it, but the other Society—the Humane Society— got on his case."

Luanne snorted laughter, and then returned to business. "Arminger knows you won't hurt his daughter, no matter what he does. And I'm not sure he'd care if you did. Not enough to stop him, anyway."

"Oh, I think he cares for the girl," Juniper said. "She wouldn't have been as ... healthy as she was, otherwise. Even a bad man often loves his children; and he's invested a good deal of his ego in having one of his blood follow him, to be sure."

The scowl left Luanne's face, on which a smile looked more natural. She was a year or two younger than her husband, her skin coffee-dark, blunt features a comely full-lipped melange of her Texan father's African-Anglo heritage and her Tejano mother's mestizo blood. Faded and dusky blue, a small scar between her brows marked her as one of the Brotherhood, the A-listers of the Bearkiller Outfit; her husband had an identical brand from the same red-hot iron. Mauve silk ribbons fluttered along the outer seams of her jacket, making her a little careful when she reached across one of the laden platters.

"It's just hard not to see Arminger, looking at his kid," she went on a little defensively.

"Well, it's important that we don't see only that," Juniper said, pouring her more dark, frothy beer from a pitcher. "Since the Lord and Lady saw fit to put her in our hands . . . wait a moment."

She thought, looking inside herself, and then she sighed. "There's something I should have done some time ago, but I hoped it wouldn't be necessary to get formal about it. I hate throwing my weight around . . . oh, well, if it has to be done, it has to be done."

She sighed again, then rose to her feet and waited until the buzz of conversation died. A little way to her left Chuck Barstow was looking at her quizzically; beside him was his wife Judy, with dawning understanding in her dark eyes and handsome proud-nosed face. They'd been friends since they were teenagers, and they'd discovered the Craft together.

Of course she'd know, Juniper thought. *Well, my old friend, that's why I'm doing it, you being so stubborn and all, and others taking their cue from you.*

Aloud, she said: "You all know we've had a guest among us, a girl by the name of Mathilda."

Rudi was staring at her, delight in his dancing blue-green eyes. Mathilda was too, puzzled and a little apprehensive.

"Mathilda was captured through no fault of her own, in fighting against her folk that we of the Clan took on ourselves for reasons we thought good, and still do. And later her folk tried to take her back, and in that fight some were killed, and some were hurt—my own son Rudi among them. Now, some here have held that against her, and I was waiting for that to vanish through its own lack of sense and unkindliness, but it hasn't altogether. And that diminishes my honor, and the honor of Clan Mackenzie. So here and now, I say that while this girl is with us, she is *fostern* of mine, and is to be treated as if she were a child of my blood, necessary precautions aside, until I unsay this word, or she leaves us and so breaks it."

Juniper took a deep breath, and raised her hands in the V of power, palms out, closing her eyes and feeling the current of it running through her, like a fire in the blood until the little hairs along her arms and up her spine struggled to rise. When her green gaze flared open again her voice rolled high and clear through the great space of the Hall, linking her to every soul like chains of fine silver light:

"And this I bind on every man and woman and child of this Clan, and I make it geasa to break it. I bind you all, by the Dagda and Angus Og and Lugh of the Long Spear; by Macha and Edain and the Threefold Morrighu; by the Maiden, the Mother and the Hag, and if any break it by word or deed may the Mother's Earth open and swallow you ... the Mother's ocean rise up and drown you ... and the heaven of stars which are the dust of Her feet fall and crush you and all that is yours. This is my geasa, which I, Juniper Mackenzie, Her priestess, and Chief of the Clan by the Clan's choice, lay upon you! So mote it be!"

An echoing silence fell, and lasted until she put her hands on her hips and spoke in a normal tone: "And that is that!"

She sat again and drank, conscious of eyes rolling white as they looked at her, and mouths gaping. It took a moment for the others to follow suit, but when the roar of conversation started up it was louder than ever.

"Whoa," Luanne said quietly.

Her husband had blanched and was clutching at a crucifix beneath his shirt; sweat darkened the fine linen a little, and gleamed on his forehead.

"Remind me never to piss you off that much, Juney!"

"I doubt you'll ever do it, so," Juniper said. "Now, where were we? Ah, yes, Mathilda, and her being Arminger's only heir."

"Ah," Luanne said. "Yes, we've talked that over a bit at Larssalen, with Signe and Mike and Eric's dad and my folks."

"And what did Ken have to say about it? And Will?" Juniper asked; she had a lively respect for Kenneth Larsson's brains, and for those of Luanne's father.

"That we shouldn't build too much on the foundation of one little girl," Eric said. Then, elaborately casual: "You know, this dried-tomato-and-onion thing in vinegar is *good*."

"Ken has a good heart," Juniper said. *Although he and Will have the advantage of being a ruler's advisors, not the ruler himself.* "And a keen mind."

"Yup," Eric Larsson said, obviously glad to change the subject for a moment. "But Dad's also got a mind full of weird shit. The latest—" He rolled his eyes.

"What is it?" Juniper asked with interest.

Kenneth Larsson had been in his fifties before the Change, an engineer by training and an industrialist on a large scale by avocation; both had proved surprisingly useful since. Mike Havel did ordinary civil administration when he had to, but he hated it and was self-confessedly not very good at it, either. On the other hand, Ken was also given to what he called long-term thinking and others dubbed eccentricity. In someone of lower rank, the word *cracked* would probably have been used.

"Asteroids," Luanne said. "He's worrying about *asteroids*."

Juniper looked at her as blankly as the younger couple had at the reference to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Eric and his wife both laughed, and he took up the tale.

"You know how an asteroid was supposed to have killed off the dinosaurs?"

Juniper frowned. It had been so long ...

"I think I read about it in a *National Geographic* once. Wouldn't it be better to worry about Mount Saint Helens blowing up? It started smoking again a few years ago, after all. Does Ken have some reason to believe we'll be hit by a big rock from above?"

Eric's grin grew wider. "No, but he says we're overdue for one, give or take a few million years. He gets worried about it because there's nothing we could do about it now."

Juniper blinked. *Even for Ken, that's a bit eccentric.* "Well, what could we have done about it before the Change?"

Luanne crossed herself and put her hands together in the gesture of prayer, before giggling. She was pious in her way, but not too solemn about it.

"I know every coven in the world would have been on the hilltops, spell-casting to beat the band," Juniper said. "But apart from that ..."

"Dad says they could at least have detected it," Eric explained. "And possibly have launched, ah, nuclear-tipped missiles"—he spoke the phrase as if he was repeating it verbatim, almost from another language—"or something. With another few decades or generations of technical progress, intercepting 'em would have been easy, he says. But now that's impossible."

Luanne giggled again. "Oh, I dunno. We could build some really big catapults on top of really tall towers. Or we could build, oh, some gigantic hot-air balloons and mount the catapults on top of them and float them up—"

"God, did Dad get furious when she sprang that one on him," Eric chuckled. "On the one hand, I sympathize. On the other, it was sort of funny."

And here we have a whole slew of generational gaps, Juniper thought. *Not to mention social ones.*

Eric had been eighteen when the old world ended; and a rich man's son, attending high-priced private schools, interested in the sciences when he wasn't playing football or chasing girls or drinking beer with his friends and being resentfully angry at his father in the usual testosterone-poisoned head-butting of male adolescence.

But a third of his life—everything beyond that last tag end of childhood—had been spent in the Changed world. That was where he'd become a man and a lord of men, a husband and a father, not to mention a warrior of fearsome repute. Things like rockets, asteroids and nuclear weapons were real to him, in a detached and intellectual fashion, instead of not-particularly-interesting myths the way they were

to those a bit younger, but they didn't really *matter*. Not the way a horse with splints did, or an attack of brucellosis in the cattle, or getting a good clear shot at a deer with his bow, or how well a line of pike-men kept alignment while advancing over rough ground. Luanne had the same detachment, only more so; she was a bit younger, and she'd been brought up deep-country-rural on her family's Texas horse ranch or traveling around the country to deliver stock. To both of them it was natural to exist in this world, where the Willamette Valley and a few days' travel about it were all that really counted.

The thought ran through her mind in an instant; she turned and met Nigel Loring's eyes, and knew that the thought was shared.

"We adapted," he murmured. Unspoken was: *Those who couldn't are dead*. "But never completely."

"No, never completely," she replied in the same undertone. "Although *dean cronan cupla barrai agus cuirfidh me breagriocht air ...* "

His involuntary chuckle helped her shake the gloom off; in Erse, she'd just said *if you hum a few bars, I can fake it*. Looking into his eyes, she knew she'd lifted his mood as well, and that was a pleasure in itself.

Glancing around her Hall, she made it come real again with a mental effort. The younger Larssons had finished chuckling over their own joke.

"Well, whatever or Whoever caused the Change, I doubt they did it so we would be done in by celestial debris," Juniper said.

"They could certainly have finished us off without doing anything so elaborate," Nigel confirmed.

"Moving back to practicalities, what did your father say about our ... guest, Luanne?" Juniper asked.

Will Hutton was at least as intelligent as Kenneth Larsson; he had much less formal education, but he made up for it with a good deal more focus.

"Pretty much the same thing as my honorable father-in-law, for once," Luanne said. "Not to sweat it, basically. And believe me, after Reuben got killed by the Protector's men last year"—that was her foster-brother, adopted after the Change—"Dad was as angry at Armingier as anyone."

"I don't know precisely what we can make of Matti's being here. Still, the Lord and Lady wouldn't send us an opportunity if there weren't some way to use it."

She reached for the horn again. The wine was made by Tom Brannigan over in Sutterdown, the Clan Mackenzie's only real town, further west in the Valley; Tom owned a vineyard, and was a brewmaster and vintner besides being mayor and High Priest of the coven there. The drink had a pleasant scent like cherries and violets, and a smooth, earthy taste just tart enough to accompany the rich savor of the grilled venison. There was an art to drinking from a horn without spilling half the contents on your face, as well.

"But," she went on, after she'd rolled a sip around her mouth, "do consider what happens if he doesn't manage to beat us. Say that *we* beat *him*. Are we going to destroy the Portland Protective Association utterly, root and branch?"

"Nope," Luanne said. "Signe and Mike've thought about that. Even if we beat them in the field, we could only wreck ourselves trying to dig em out. Too many of those damn castles; too many knights and men-at-arms. And it's just too damned *big*. Portland rules more people than there are in all the rest of the northwest outfits put together."

From her other side Sir Nigel Loring nodded and spoke. "And while the man is a tyrant of tyrants, I saw last year that his obsession with feudalism means that you can't destroy that kingdom of his by chopping off the head. It's decentralized, and he built that into its bones. If it split up, the parts would be nearly as troublesome."

"Yeah," Luanne said. "Plus the way he recruited his lords. All those gangers; and the Society types who stuck with him may have been the roughnecks, but they're tough ones, not to mention the men who've worked their way up out of the ruck. Now they all have families and want to keep what they've gained for their children. Winkling every one of them out of his manor ... "

"And there are limits to what we can do by encouraging the common folk to snipe at his barons," Juniper said regretfully. "Especially now that things there have had a chance to settle down. I have hopes for that, sure, and contacts there—but the farmers can't hope to rise up against his new-made knights

unless they have more help than it seems likely we can offer. We have a network of informants and sympathizers there, but I can't ask them to take up arms if all it gets them is dead, so."

"Guns are great equalizers," Loring agreed. "Guerilla warfare isn't impossible without firearms and explosives, but it's ... much harder to pull off."

"Not as many force multipliers, Mike says," Eric added. "Plus it's harder and takes longer to learn to use the weapons we've got."

"So," Juniper said. "Let's be optimistic. Say that Norman and Sandra Armingier are sent off to the Summerlands to make accounting for what they've done and select an appropriate reincarnation."

"I'd prefer a nice, fiery, eternal hell for 'em, Juney," Eric said, more than a trace of grimness in his voice.

"I confess the thought is tempting but that's not my mythos. So then, hy-pothetically speaking, they're off to choose their reward or punishment ... "

They all shot a glance at Mathilda; she was laughing, with a forkful of beets halfway to her mouth, as one of the other children told a story; Chuck and Judy's Tamsin, born three years before the Change.

"I don't think they'll wait ten years, and then take back a Princess Mathilda who's a Mackenzie in all but name to rule them," Loring said. "The thought is tempting, my dear, but I fear it's not likely."

"Not exactly that, no," Juniper said. "And trying to deliberately shape her outright, that would be ... futile, as well as unkind. She's a proud little thing, and no fool—I've known her for half a year, which is quite a while for a child that age. Best to just ... leave her be, and treat her like any other, and wait to see what opportunity offers."

Chapter Two

Portland, Oregon

December 12th, 2007/Change Year 9

The presence room had been built for intimate conferences when the library was remodeled into the Lord Protector's city palace. It was small and comfortable, with a new fireplace flickering, Oriental rugs glowing on the floor, and walls lined with well-filled bookshelves and good pictures—mostly old masters, including a couple of Maxfield Parrish originals scavenged from as far away as the ruins of San Francisco, plus a fine modern carving of *Christ Crucified* done half life-size. Rain beat against the night-dark windows, but within was warmth and the light of gasoline lanterns; those were a rarity these days, but brighter than the natural oils or alcohol that were the alternative. The maids in their uniforms—a white tabard over a black t-tunic and a long, loose undertunic down to the ankles, and silver-chain collars around their necks—set out trays of small pastries with the unthinkable luxury of real coffee as well, in a Sevres pot suspended over a spirit lantern on the mahogany table.

"Leave us," Armingier said, leaning back in the leather-upholstered chair.

They bobbed curtseys and scuttled out. The guards followed at his nod, with a stamp of boots and crash of metal.

Armingier grinned to himself as he watched the two Corvallans, a tall, horse-faced blond woman and a short, thickset brunet man, twitch their noses at the scent from the coffeepot. Master Turner was a fixer and backer of budding enterprises, a sort of neo-medieval equivalent of a venture capitalist and the closest thing Corvallis had to a banker; closer every year as trade and handicraft flourished. Mistress Kowalski had made handlooms and spinning wheels before the Change for the handicraft market and still did—in a large workshop with dozens of employees—renting the equipment out to poor families, supplying the raw materials, and taking payment in thread and cloth. In Europe in the old days they'd called it the *putting-out* system; evidently she'd reinvented it on her own initiative. The two had joint interests in flocks of sheep out on shares with farmers, and in mills for breaking flax and finishing cloth.

Both had influence in the city's Faculty Senate through their clients and debtors, and through business connections with other budding magnates. Those still called their get-together and steering committee the Faculty of Economics, but it might as well have been the Guild Merchant.

"You've met Conrad Renfrew?" Armingier said to the two visitors from the city-state. "Grand

Constable of the Portland Protective Association, Count of Odell, and Marchwarden of the East, as well."

They murmured *my lord Count* together. "Mistress Kowalski, Master Turner," the Constable replied, in a voice like gravel and sand shaken together in a bucket.

Kowalski frowned suddenly, and looked at Arminger's commander more closely. "Lord Count, didn't we meet before the Change? At a tournament . . . Was Renfrew your Society name?"

The Grand Constable was a thickset man built like a barrel, with a shaved head and bright blue eyes in the midst of a face hideously scarred. The two from Corvallis looked at him a little uneasily, but they didn't show much fear despite his reputation. Arminger nodded to himself; they'd be useless to him if they did. Although if they were going to be afraid of anyone in the room it ought to be *him*, with Sandra a close second.

"No it wasn't, Mistress Kowalski," Renfrew rumbled. "Yes, I think I remember the occasion. But I've put all that behind me. The time for playing at things is past. We don't have the luxury of make-believe anymore."

Arming cut in; pre-Change connections in the Society could be a sore issue these days, considering how badly its survivors had split between his followers and the rest. Not to mention that if he remembered correctly that particular tournament had been the Day of the Ox, about which memory he had mixed emotions himself.

"You know Lady Sandra, of course."

She gave each of them a nod as she sat, adjusting the skirts of her cotte-hardi and smoothing back her headdress. Both were in fabrics rich but subdued, in shades of dove gray and off-white, the jewels silver and diamond with a few opals.

"And this is Father McKinley."

McKinley was a lean young man in his early twenties in a coarse, black Dominican robe with a steel crucifix and rosary at his belt. He also had a quill pen and blank paper, and took unobtrusive notes; the priest-monk was Pope Leo's man, of course, but he and the Holy Office of the Inquisition also reported directly to the Lord Protector.

It was best to remember that Leo's Dominicans took their nickname—the *Domini Canes*, the Hounds of God—quite seriously.

Sandra poured coffee with a smile of gracious hospitality. "Sugar? Cream?" she asked.

Arming added a small dollop of brandy to his; it was the genuine product of Eauze, the crop of 1988, and aged in black oak, recovered from a warehouse in desolate Seattle by his salvagers in '05. From what he'd learned from the Englishmen who'd arrived last spring, and the crew of the Tasmanian ship that brought them, there wouldn't be any more even if traders crossed the waters again. France was a howling wilderness, without even the tiny band of survivors that King Charles the Mad and his junta of Guards colonels had brought through in the British Isles. The English and Irish would resettle France in due course and prune the abandoned vines, but he doubted they'd ever rival the French as vintners and distillers.

"There's more coffee where that came from; it's fresh-roasted bean imported by sea, not pre-Change leftovers," he went on. *And our own brandy's passable, and will get better as we master the knack. In the meantime . . .*

He poured small glasses of the amber liquor. "Do have some of this as well. Genuine Armagnac, Larressingle, nearly twenty years old and quite marvelous."

Carefully he did not sneer at the way the pair's ears pricked in trader's reflex when he mentioned the coffee. There was no more point in despising a merchant for being a merchant than a dog for being a dog.

Not that you don't kick a dog if it gets out of place, he thought. *How did the poem go? Ah, yes, something like:*

*Gold for the merchant, silver for the maid.
Copper for the craftsmen, cunning at their trade.*

*Good! Laughed the baron, sitting in his hall;
But iron—cold iron—shall be master of them all.*

"The coffee's from Hawaii," he amplified. "Kona Gold, and none better in all the world."

"Hawaii survived?" Turner said in amazement. Then, hastily: "Lord Protector."

"Not Oahu, that was toast, but the Big Island did; not too many people, a lot of farms and ranches, and they didn't get too chaotic so they made the best of what they had. And Ni'ihau."

Or so those Tasmanians told me, he thought. I suspect their folk at home will be a bit peeved with me when they find out what happened to the Pride of St. Helens; and they and the Kiwis on South Island came through amazingly well. It's a good thing they haven't anything I want to trade for.

Those Antipodean islands were among the few places where there hadn't been a collapse or mass dieback in the aftermath of the Change; he supposed it was having scores of sheep per person, and *not* having any unmanageably large cities.

Taking the ship was a just payment for them bringing the Lorings and their pet gorilla to Oregon, and the trouble they caused me.

"And the Hawaiians are ready to trade sugar and coffee and citrus fruit and macadamias for ... oh, any number of things. Wheat and wine, for instance. Dried fruit. And timber; they don't have much suitable for shipbuilding themselves. Smoked fish too, perhaps ... but all that would be more your line of work than mine. We rulers keep things stable and safe for the traders and makers."

Or the smart ones do, he thought. Some of my new-made nobility apparently can't grasp the parable of the goose that laid the golden eggs.

He had the Tasmanian ship, the *Pride of St. Helens*, safely docked at Astoria, and he was training his own crew from fishermen and surviving yachtsmen. There were still enough people who remembered coffee fondly for it to be a valuable trade. The two merchants looked at each other; Corvallis had its own outlet on the sea at Newport, and a railroad and highway link across the Coast Range that the city-state had kept up. They were probably wondering if they could find a hull big enough for a Pacific voyage themselves.

"Salvage goods?" Turner asked hopefully. "Since there weren't any large cities on the Big Island."

"No, I don't think so. They have enough sailing craft of their own to mine the ruins of Honolulu and that had all the usual assets." Arminger stopped to consider. "On second thought, there might possibly be a few things; medical supplies, perhaps. Definitely cloth. It's getting hard to find any pre-Change cloth in useful condition here, and it would rot faster down there in the tropics."

"*That's* the sort of thing we should be exploring," Kowalski said. "Instead of wasting our slender substance on fighting each other."

"My sentiments exactly." Arminger beamed.

Everyone nodded and murmured agreement. Arminger grinned like a shark behind his smoothly noncommittal face. He'd spent the previous decade snapping up every surviving community too weak to stand him off, and claiming all the intervening wilderness.

Perhaps I was a little too enthusiastic reducing the surplus population back in the first Change Year, he thought. More labor would be very handy now, and dead bones are useful only for glue and fertilizer. On the other hand, I needed to ride the wave of chaos.

"Did you have anything more concrete to discuss, my lord?" Turner said.

"Oh, very much so," Arminger said. "As you know, I've been having ... difficulties ... with the cultists and bandits that lie between Portland and Corvallis. Why, they've even kidnapped my daughter!"

"Terrible," Kowalski said; she even seemed sincere. "I have children of my own, and I can imagine how you feel, my lord Protector, Lady Sandra. Those people been very uncooperative with us, as well."

Sandra smiled, very slightly, under an ironically crooked eyebrow. She'd found out the way the Mackenzies had forced the pair into something like a fair deal for mill work—water-powered machinery to full and scutch and slub wool and flax—and markets for Mackenzie produce in their territory. The Clan and the Bearkillers had also gotten together to preserve the bridges in Salem, the old state capital,

which gave a route across the Willamette that wasn't controlled by Corvallis.

"Ah ... my lord ... you do understand that there are plenty of people in Corvallis who feel that having, ah, buffers between us is a good idea. Particularly people on the Agriculture and Engineering Faculties."

"But of course," Arming said.

That translated as *the farmers* and *the craftsmen*, more or less. Oregon State University had been the core that organized survival in the little city, and its Faculty Senate still governed the place—as much as anyone did. Everyone there affiliated with the Faculty closest to their daily occupation, though the town had gone to great lengths to keep the teaching functions active as well.

"Still," the lord of Portland went on, "I'm sure you can see that disunity—and especially the anarchy that bandit gangs like the Bearkillers and the so-called Clan Mackenzie spread—are bad for everyone. We're all Americans, after all! The Association has been the main core of survival and order on the West Coast—the only large one between Baja and Alaska. Its expansion throughout the central and southern Willamette could only benefit everyone, and then it would soon include the Bend country as well."

He smiled slightly at their hunted expressions; that was more than they'd bargained for. And while they were influential in Corvallis, they didn't rule it. A rumor that they'd sold the city out to him would be disastrous for their reputations.

His wife took up the tale: "But of course the Association is a decentralized organization. We've incorporated a number of independent communities through agreements with their own leadership."

Which translates as made deals with and gave titles to local warlords and strongmen, my love, Arming thought.

She went on: "We realize that Corvallis has developed its own system, and a very successful one too. We don't want to incorporate the city directly, or even the lands it holds beyond the city walls."

"You don't?" Kowalski blurted in surprise. Turner glared at her and made a placating gesture to his hosts.

"Not directly," the Grand Constable said. "No fiefs, no castles, no bond-tenants. Besides, frankly, your militia is too well equipped and too numerous for us to be comfortable about fighting it head-on. Not while the Free Cities League in the Yakima is hostile, and we have the Pendleton area to pacify."

"Plus," Arming said, "and quite commendably, you in Corvallis came through the bad years with much less damage than most areas. That means, however, that, ummm, the old habits of mind are still entrenched in your city's territories. It would be difficult to introduce new ones as we did up here during the chaos."

He made a spare gesture with one long-fingered hand. "As you know, I've drawn a good many precedents from my pre-Change studies in medieval European history; they suit our times, and they've generally worked well. Let me explain another medieval idea, the concept of the autonomous, self-governing chartered *free city*, that was a way of accommodating urban life within a rural world. You'd have a, as it were, constitution, guaranteed by the Association, confirming your autonomy and your own laws, but—"

When the Corvallans had left, Renfrew poured himself more of the brandy. The three of them lifted glasses in salute.

"Do you think they'll buy it?" the commander of Portland's armies said.

"Why not, Conrad?" Sandra replied, nibbling a flaky pastry centered on hazelnuts and honey and sweetened cream. "We actually mean it, for a wonder, this once."

"More or less," Arming said. "More or less."

A maid came in to clear the table; she smiled at their laughter, glad to find the overlords in so merry a mood.

*Larsdalen, Willamette Valley, Oregon
December 12th, 2007/Change Year 9*

"Hold them!" Michael Havel shouted. "Hold them!"

The long pikes bristled out, a sixteen-foot barrier in front of the line. Horses reared and bugled as the charge stalled before that hedgehog menace, giant shapes in the gray misty light of the winter afternoon. Breath snorted white into the fog from the great red pits of the destriers' nostrils, and eyes rolled wild in the faces concealed by the spiked steel chamfrons. Mud flew from under their hooves, and squelched beneath the infantry's boots. Pikes stabbed for the horses' unprotected bellies; the peytrals of their barding only shielded the chests. There was a hard, sharp crack as a hoof shattered the ashwood haft of a pike, and curses as splinters flew and the foot-long spearhead pinwheeled away. Clods of earth flew into the air; riders leaned far over in the saddles, hacking at the points or thrusting with the lance. Wet, oiled chain mail gleamed with a liquid ripple.

"Now forward!" Havel shouted, when he saw that the charge was thoroughly stalled, and the lancers at their most vulnerable, tangled and unable to maneuver. "Push of pike! *Hakkaa Paalle!*"

"Hakkaa Paalle!"

Trumpets blared and drums thudded in the wake of that huge, crashing shout. The line of pikes advanced, jabbing with two-handed thrusts at the mounts and riders; the wielders' faces were set and grim under the wide brims of their kettle helmets. A horse slipped on the treacherous footing and crashed over as it tried to turn, adding its high, enormous scream to the racket of voices and the scrap-metal-on-concrete din. The formation grew uneven as it surged forward, leaving wedges of open space between the files; Havel cursed as two riders pushed their mounts through a gap in the wall of weapons, striking down left and right at helmets and shoulders.

The fifth and sixth ranks had glaives rather than pikes; seven-foot shafts topped with heavy, pointed blades for stabbing and chopping, and a cruel hook on the reverse. Havel held one himself. He dodged a slash, and his weapon darted out. The hook caught on mail beneath an armpit; he braced his feet and hauled, and the rider came off with something halfway between a screech and a squawk, and then an almighty thump as armored body met sodden, muddy turf.

He reversed the glaive with a quick, expert flick and drove the point down to menace the rider's face. The fallen lancer wheezed and raised one fist, middle finger extended.

"OK!" he shouted. *"Time out! Time out!"*

It took a minute or two for flags and trumpets to pass the message. The huge noise died down, leaving only the bellows panting of humans and horses, and a few moans or screams from the injured. Havel grounded his glaive and reached a hand down.

"You all right, honey?" he said as he hauled her erect.

Signe Havel grinned up at him, unbuckling her helmet and shaking back long, wheat-colored braids. Her cornflower blue eyes sparkled in a long, oval, straight-featured face; it would have been Nordic perfection except for the slight white line a sword had nicked across the bridge of her nose.

"You mean, apart from the bruises and contusions? You betcha." The last was in a parody of Havel's flat Upper Midwestern accent.

"Wimp," he said, deliberately exaggerating his U.P. rasp. "Real women wear contusions like they were a corsage." Then, louder: "All right, everyone gather round!"

The infantry company did, and the forty A-lister cavalry. Stretcher parties carried off half a dozen with injuries bad enough to need the medicos; that was a pity, but sweat shed in training saved blood, and to be useful it had to be at least a little dangerous. The occasional broken bone or concussion was well worth it. At that, it was easier to practice realistically with pre-gunpowder weapons than it had been with firearms, in his first incarnation as a fighting man, which had been as a Marine; Force Recon, to be precise ...

Fortunately none of the valuable and exhaustively trained warhorses had been seriously hurt; destriers were *expensive*, harder to train than humans and a lot less likely to recover from a broken limb.

The hale survivors of the exercise gathered around—bloody noses, sprains, bruises and incipient shiners didn't count as serious these days—panting as they cooled off in the rain-swept pasture, legs and bodies thickly plastered with mud. It wasn't raining, not quite, but it had been fairly recently; what they were getting now was weather that couldn't quite make up its mind between fog and drizzle and a possibility of snow.

The infantry were farmers and artisans and laborers, militia who drilled in the slow parts of the agricultural year and fought when he called them out. Their equipment was a little varied and a lot of it homemade, though everyone had some sort of metal helmet, and at least a brigandine or chain-mail shirt for armor; some of the more affluent had breastplates hammered out of sheet steel, and plate protection on their shins and forearms, and long, metal-plated leather gauntlets. Good steel was abundant in the Changed world, salvaged from the ruins; it was the time of the scarce, skilled craftsmen that made armor expensive.

The cavalry were A-listers, full-time warriors and the elite of the Outfit, uniformly kitted out in knee-length chain hauberks, greaves and vambraces of plate or steel splints on leather, round helmets with nasal bars, hinged cheek-pieces and mail-covered neck-flaps, and two-foot circular shields. Their weapons were lances, recurved bows made of laminated horn and wood and sinew, and long, single-edged swords with basket hilts; the shields were dark brown, with the stylized outline of a bears head in crimson. His own helmet had the tanned, snarling head of a bear mounted on it; he'd killed the beast himself, shortly after the Change, with an improvised spear. From that, a great deal had followed.

A great deal including the Outfit's name, though that was Astrid's idea, as usual. Aloud: "All right, Bearkillers. What would have been different if this was for real?"

"We'd have crossbows on our flanks, Lord Bear," one of the infantry said, a stocky, freckled young man with shoulders like a blacksmith—which was what he was—leaning on a glaive. "When the charge stalled in front of the pikes, we'd have shot the shit out of them, killed a bucketful and made the others easy meat. Armor's not much help at close range like that."

Havel nodded. A hard-driven arrow or crossbow bolt was just too damned dangerous to use in a practice match, even with a padded, blunt head, and having people standing around shouting *Twang! Twang!* as they pretended to shoot was sort of silly. Instead the referees had tapped on a certain percentage of the mounted troops with their batons, often starting furious arguments, while the missile troops were off shooting at targets.

"Hey," one of the A-listers said. "If this were for real, we'd have been using *our* bows and that line of pikes would have been a lot more ragged before we hit it."

Havel nodded again, but added: "Yeah, Astrid, that's true. But we're practicing to fight the Portland Protective Association, and the Protector's men-at-arms don't use saddle bows. Sword and lance only, and they rely on their own infantry for missile weapons. OK, we'll say that cancels out."

He didn't add: *And there aren't many who can use a horse-bow like you, either.* It was true—everyone on the A-list was a good, competent shot, but Astrid was a wonder. *Your ego doesn't need any stroking, however.*

Astrid Larsson pouted a little as she leaned her hands on the horn of her saddle. "I suppose so."

She was twenty-three to her sister Signe's twenty-eight, with white-blond hair and huge blue eyes rimmed and veined with silver. They gave her face an odd, nearly inhuman quality despite its fine-boned good looks. She was intensely capable when it came to anything involving horses or bows, a fine swordswoman and in Michael Havel's view just one hair short of utter-raving-loon status. Unlike many, she'd been that way at fourteen, *before* the Change and its aftermath.

"Lord Bear," she added, confirming his thought.

And she stuck me with that moniker and this damned taxidermist's nightmare on my helmet, he thought. *Plus that shield ...*

Hers wasn't the standard outline of a snarling bear's head that was the blazon of the Outfit. It had a silver tree instead, and seven stars above it, around a crown. Her helmet was even stranger-looking, with a raven of black-lacquered aluminum on the steel, wings extending down the cheek-pieces and ruby-eyed head looking out over the nasal bar.

It's all those books she reads, those giant doorstopper things with dragons and quests and Magical Identity Bracelets of the Apocalypse.

She'd been obsessed with them when he first met her, and the ensuing decade had made her worse, if anything. He wished, very much, that she'd only been weird about archery and horses, but no such luck.

Not to mention she's become so popular and influential among the younger and loopier element. I can't really clamp down on it because that Ranger outfit she and Eilir put together are too fucking useful, dammit! OK, so she can be the Elf-Queen of the goddamned woods if that's the way she wants to play it.

Aloud he went on to the audience: "Here's the important thing. As long as that line of pikes stayed solid, the lancers couldn't get anywhere near you infantry types. And when they got crowded and stalled, they got tangled up bad. A lot of them would have died before they could disengage—which, incidentally, they'll have to practice more. Charging's easy; retreating without getting your ass reamed is a lot more difficult. So—it's official. The infantry wins today!"

Everyone cheered. The younger A-listers looked a bit sullen as they did, but *their* fighting morale didn't need bolstering; if anything, they tended to be a little reckless and cocky. It took serious effort and native talent to get onto the A-list, and the fact that their families were usually the ruling class of the Outfit, more or less, didn't hurt in the self-esteem sweepstakes either. An occasional ass-whopping by the horny-handed sons and daughters of toil did them good, in his opinion; that was one reason he'd been fighting on foot in today's match. "Certainly, Lord Bear," Astrid said again. "But once some gaps opened up, we could get in past the pikepoints."

Havel nodded vigorously, then removed his helmet and handed it to a military apprentice—a teenaged aspirant to A-Lister status—and ran his hands over his bowl-cut hair. That was straight and coarse and still crow black in his late thirties, a legacy of his Anishinabe-Ojibwa grandmother. The high cheekbones and slanted set to his gray eyes might have been from her, or from the Karelian Finns who made up most of the rest of his ancestry; the sharp-cut features were startlingly handsome in a harsh, masculine way, emphasized by the long white scar that ran from the corner of his left eye and across his forehead. He stood just under six feet, and his lean frame moved with a leopard's easy grace under fifty pounds of armor and padding.

"Yeah, good point," he said to his sister-in-law.

He gave the militia a glare, and they shuffled uneasily—which produced an alarming volume of clanks and clicks among two hundred people in metal protective gear.

"This field's pretty level; if you can't advance over it without breaking front, what's going to happen on a battlefield, maybe with grapevines or fences, and people shooting at you? Or if you have to do something more complicated than pushing straight ahead? You let a pike wall get ragged, and the Protector's knights will be all over you like flies on cowshit. One-on-one, they'll slaughter you. Keep drilling until the formation's always tight, and you slaughter *them*. It's as simple as that. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord Bear!"

"I can't hear you."

"*Yes, Lord Bear!*"

"All right, that's enough for today. Fall in, and we'll see if the barbeque's ready."

That brought more cheers, and more cheerful ones; the padding around the blades of weapons was stripped off and tossed into a light cart, and everyone wiped their faces, scraped off the worst of the mud and straightened their gear. The apprentice brought him his horse, Gustav; he swung into the saddle easily enough, despite the weight of hauberk and weapons. The infantry company formed up on the roadway that led westward from this stretch of pasture; an officer gave a shouted *pikepoints ... up! and fall in!* and the long shafts rose, like an ordered bare forest. The footmen went first, as the victors of the contest, swinging off with a good marching step; the A-listers followed along, looking fairly glum at first.

Except for Astrid, and the young man riding by her side. Alleyne Loring wore different gear, a complete set of jointed steel plate topped by a visored sallet helm, what Havel had thought of as King Arthur armor when he was a kid, the type beloved of Victorian illustrators. The Pre-Raphaelite look was emphasized by the fog that clung to hollows and treetops round about, making a fantasy of the rolling fields and woodlots. The armor was actually late-medieval in inspiration, fifteenth-century or so, but manufactured post-Change out of high-strength alloy steel stock by jury-rigged hydraulic presses in southern England.

Havel grinned like a happy wolf. Alleyne was also young, only a few years older than Astrid, and six

feet tall, blondly handsome, dashing, charming, from a far-off foreign place and in the process of saying—

"*Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar, vanimalion noastari ...*"

"*Onen i-Estel Edain*—" Astrid replied in the same liquidly pretty tongue, which sounded Celtic but wasn't; Havel understood not a word of it.

My languages being limited to English, a bit of Ojibwa, rudimentary Finnish and some Arabic cusswords I picked up in the Gulf, he thought. None of the Tongues of Middle-earth included in the package.

"You're looking like the coyote that met the rabbit coming 'round the rock," Signe said.

"Thanks to those Tasmanians—poor bastards—and their world survey voyage I think we may finally have gotten your little sister hooked up," Havel said. "And out of our hair."

"Hey!" She punched him on the shoulder. Since he was wearing a hauberk with padded gambeson beneath, that was mostly symbolic, but her voice was only a little defensive as she went on: "Astrid's been ... useful."

"And a lot less trouble since she started up that Ranger outfit out in the woods. But she's still trying to trick us all out in costumes from those books she likes. She makes Norman Arminge sound as everyday as a dental hygienist."

"Granted she's a flapping wingnut, but a handy wingnut to have around. A lot of stuff we've done wouldn't have been nearly as popular if we hadn't had her to slap some cool, antique name on it and give it some style. It kept those Society types we recruited happy too, they love fancy titles and playing dress-up. Useful ... and if they're here being useful to us they're not up north being useful to Lord Protector Arminge, who was one of their own after all. Besides, this lords-and-ladies stuff ... once it stops sounding so silly it sort of grows on you."

"And fungus grows on your toenails if you aren't careful. Yeah, she's useful, and also a goddamned pain in the ass. For a while I thought she'd probably settle down with Eilir, who's sensible, sort of—"

His wife shot him a look; the sisters had quarreled all their lives, but he liked the way they closed ranks. "Astrid isn't gay."

"Nothing so convenient or conventional. She's an elf instead," he said dryly.

Signe grinned. "I think she's settled on being a, what's the word, *Numenorean* instead of an elf."

"I thought it was *Dunadan* ... or is it *Dunedain*? I forget which."

"*Dunedain* is the plural ... " She smiled wickedly as he mimed clutching at his head. "*Dunadan* is the word for *Numenorean* ... in another language."

"Another invented language? Christ Jesus, didn't the man have anything else to do with his time? Trimming the shrubbery, visiting the pub? How many of them *are* there?"

"Let's see ... the Common Speech, the Black Speech, the tongue of the Ro-hirrim, Halfling dialects, Quenya elvish, Sindarin elvish ... "

"Stop! Stop! Anyway, why ... whatever ... instead of an elf? Hell, I've got to admit, she looks like one."

"But elves don't get cooties on campaign, or smell. Or have monthly cramps, which she does, bad. Anyway, Eilir's just her best friend."

"Alleyne there will do even better, nothing like kids to calm you down. Someone who shares her interests—"

"Is nutbar about the same stuff?" Signe clarified helpfully.

"Nah, he just likes the books; he's not goofy over living it all out. He's a pretty regular guy, once you get past that Jeeves-old-chap-fetch-me-a-biscuit accent. But liking the books'll help him keep her from doing a swan dive into the deep end. Christ Jesus knows nobody else ever had much luck at that! Foreign prince—well, son of a baronet—exotic, great warrior. It's a natural! And I get a first-rate fighting man on my side, too; he can king it off in the woods with her in between wars. Win-win situation."

"You haven't said anything about it to her."

"Christ, no! That'd be the best way to spoil things."

"Well, maybe you're learning after all," Signe said, and touched an ear when he started to reply.

They were leaning together and speaking quietly, and the rumbling clatter of hooves, the crash of

boots and the *thrrrrrip-thrrrrrip-thrrrrrip* of the marching drum covered it. Still, she was right. Another time would be better for chewing over family matters.

Not that there's much difference between family stuff and politics anymore, he thought. Or between either and the military side of things.

"Aaron wants to visit Corvallis and see if he can get more medical supplies," Signe went on.

"Aaron just wants to find a cute young thing," Havel answered. Aaron Rothman was chief physician of Larsdalen; he was very competent, but had his quirks. "He's been itching for some social life since his last boyfriend left him."

"That's because you're the unrequited love of his life, darling. You *did* save him from the cannibals."

Havel laughed. "Saved all of him but his left foot," he said, which was literally true; that band of Eaters had gone in for slow-motion butchery to keep the meat from spoiling.

The road curved westward towards the distant Coast Range, dark green slopes whose tops were covered in gray mist that merged into the low clouds. The broad, shallow valley on either side was a patchwork of dormant bare-fingered orchards, peach and apple and cherry, with fleecy white sheep grazing beneath the trees, grainfields showing wet red-brown dirt between the blue-green shoots of the winter wheat, and pasture dotted with Garry oaks and grazing cattle. Workers and herdsman waved at the troops as they passed, but this close to Larsdalen there weren't any of the usual walled hamlets or fortified A-Lister steadings that dotted the other settled parts of the Outfit's lands; the folk who tilled these lands dwelt inside the Bearkiller citadel. Horsemen and plodding wagons and bicyclists swerved to the side of the road to let the troops pass, and gave cheerful greetings to their friends and relatives as they did.

He took a deep, satisfied breath; he was fairly happy with the way the exercise had gone, and happier still with the way the half-dormant farmlands promised good crops next year. And the way that his folk all looked well fed and warmly clad in new homespun, drab wadmal, or wool and linen and linsey-woolsey colored in yellows and browns, greens and blues, by the dyes they'd learned to make from bark and herbs and leaves. The air was heavy with the musty smell of damp earth and vegetable decay; this season in the Willamette Valley was more like a prolonged autumn with an occasional cold snap than the brutal Siberian winters of the Lake Superior country where he'd been raised. He'd always liked autumn best of the four seasons, although he missed the dry, cold, white snow-months that followed. Sometimes he'd gone on week-long trips then, cutting school and setting off through the birch woods on skis, with a bedroll and rifle on his back ...

The valley narrowed as it rose towards the crest of the Eola Hills, where they broke in a steep slope towards the lowlands around the little town of Rickreall. Orchards gave way to vineyards spindly and bare, with a few red-gold leaves still clinging, and more littering the ground. The vines had been there before the Change, when this area was the Larsson family's country estate; great-grandpa Larsson had bought it back a century ago, when he made his pile out of wheat and timber. The big pillared brick house beyond would have been visible then ...

Now the narrowing V was blocked by a steep-sided earthwork bank covered in turf, with a moat at its base full of sharpened angle iron. They'd started on that late in the first Change Year, right after the core of the Bearkillers arrived on their long trek from Idaho; he'd been flying the Larssons to their ranch in Idaho on that memorable March seventeenth, and ended up crash-landing in a half-frozen mountain creek in the Selway-Bitterroot National Wilderness. Which had been a stroke of luck, nerve-wracking though it had been at the time to have the engine cut out over those granite steeps.

"What's that saying Juney uses?" Havel asked. With a grin: "Pardon me, Lady Juniper, herself herself."

"Something pretentiously Gaelic which boils down to saying a man's home is his castle," Signe said, a very slight waspish note in her voice.

"Yeah, but it's true in English too," Havel pointed out, looking pridefully ahead. "We've got a hell of a lot done in a decade, considering we can't use powered machinery."

A wall topped the mound, thirty feet high and built like a hydro dam; rocks the size of a man's head and bigger in a concrete matrix, around a hidden framework of welded steel I-beams salvaged from

construction sites in Salem, the old state capital thirty miles northeastward. Round towers half as high again studded it at hundred-yard intervals as it curved away on either side to encompass the whole of the little plateau that held Larsdalen.

Gotta get the inner keep finished before spring, he reminded himself. Work on fortifications was another thing that they did in wintertime ... *Although there's always fifteen different things we should be doing with every spare moment*. Everything done meant something else nearly as urgent sidelined; one thing that seemed universally true in the Changed world was that all work took a lot longer or cost more or both.

The gate where road met wall was four towers grouped together on the corners of a blockhouse, with his flag flying high above each. The drawbridge was down, but the outer gates were closed. They were steel as well, a solid mass of welded beams faced on either side with quarter-inch plate and probably impossible to duplicate now that the hoarded oxyacetylene tanks were empty. The surface was dark brown paint, but this year for swank they'd added a great snarling bear's head in ruddy copper covered in clear varnish, face-on to the roadway with half on either leaf. The Mackenzies had something similar on the gates of Dun Juniper, though they used the Triple Moon and the head of the Horned Man.

Trumpets blared from above. Astrid brought her Arab forward on dancing hooves, throwing up one hand in greeting.

"Who comes to Larsdalen gate?" the officer of the guard called down formally.

"The Bear Lord returns to the citadel of the Bearkillers! Open!"

"Open for Lord Bear!"

"Oh, Christ Jesus, how did we let her get away with this bad-movie crap?" Havel said—but under his breath. "And now everyone's used to it and they'd be upset if we insisted on a plain countersign."

"She's the only theatrical impresario in the family," Signe said, also sotto voce. "Every time we did something new, she was there to tell us how to manage the PR. Don't sweat it. After all, she's not home much anymore."

"Ah, well, names are funny things," he said with resignation. "Someone has an impulse and then you're stuck with them. That's why I've got a Karelian pedigree and a Bohunk moniker."

They both chuckled at the old family joke; back in the 1890s one Arvo Myllyharju had arrived in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, fresh off an Aland Island square-rigger and looking for a job in the Iron Range. The Czech pay-clerk at the mine had taken one look at the string of Finnish consonants and said: *From now on, your name is Havel!*

His great-grandson remembered. *Though will it make any sense to our kids?* he wondered. *Finland might as well be Barsoom, to them, and Michigan about the same.*

There was a solid *chunk ... chunk ...* sound as the heavy beams that secured the gates were pulled back, and a squeal of steel on steel as the great metal portals swung out, salvaged wheels from railcars running along track set into the concrete of the roadway. Winches grated as the portcullis was raised, and the dark tunnel behind suddenly showed gray light at the other end as the identical inner portals went through the same procedure, to reveal a cheering crowd lining the way. The gates were normally kept open anyway in daylight, during peacetime; this was for show. Signe and Havel reined in beside the gate, saluting as the infantry company went by, followed by the lancers. Feet and hooves boomed drumlike on the boards of the drawbridge and echoed through the passage.

Havel looked up as he followed; there were flickers of lantern light through the gratings in the murder-holes above, and a scent of hot oil bubbling in great pivot-mounted tubs.

"Always thought we could save some effort with those," he said. "Sort of wasteful, all that cooking oil, and burning all that fuel, when all it does is sit there and simmer."

"They've got to be kept hot," Signe said.

"Yeah, but we could do French-fries in 'em. Maybe onion rings too ... "

Dun Juniper, Willamette Valley, Oregon
December 15th, 2007/Change Year 9

There was a chorus of giggles from the sixteen-year-olds preparing their choir at the other end of the

great Hall. One of them sang in a high, clear tenor:

"It's the end of the world as we know it!

"It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine!"

The rest of them took it up for a moment. Sir Nigel Loring put down his book and looked up with mild interest from his armchair beside the big fireplace on the north wall, sipping at the last of his honey-sweetened chamomile tea. It wasn't quite as vile when you got used to it, and the dried-blueberry muffins that stood on the side table were quite good. Flames played over the glowing coals, red and gold flickering in an endless dance.

I quite liked that little tune the first time around, for some reason, he thought, relaxing in the grateful warmth and the scent of burning fir as firelight and lamplight played on the colored, carven walls. But that changed with the Change. And these ... infants! They were six-year-olds then. All they know is that it scandalizes their elders.

Juniper Mackenzie—since the Change the Lady Juniper, Chief of the Clan Mackenzie, which nowadays meant ruler secular and sacred through most of the southeastern Willamette—hopped up onto the dais to put her head above the youngsters. Loring smiled at the sight. There was a crackling energy to the slight figure; she was a short, slim woman just turned forty, with a little gray starting in her vivid fox red hair, pale-skinned and freckled with bright, leaf green eyes; the fine lines around them were mostly from laughter. Besides the tartan kilt and saffron-dyed shirt of homespun linsey-woolsey she wore a belted plaid pinned at the shoulder with a gilt knotwork brooch, a flat Scots bonnet with three raven feathers in the silver clasp, and a little *sgian dubh* knife tucked into one kneesock. She gave a mock-sowl as she stared at the youngsters with her hands on her hips, and they shuffled their feet and looked abashed.

Behind her loomed the Chief's chair, a thronelike affair carved from oak and maple and walnut, the pillars behind ending in stylized ravens heads for Thought and Memory, and arching to support a Triple Moon. Juniper went on to her crowd of kilted adolescents:

"Perhaps you'd rather not do a Choosing at all, then? Or is it that you don't want it to go perfectly?" That got her appalled looks and a babble of apologies. *"Maireann na daoine ar scail a cheile, remember. People live in one another's shadows. This comes only once in your life; don't spoil it for your sept-siblings or your friends. Now, we'll be starting with the opening song."*

The man in the chair beside Loring's chuckled quietly. "That got their attention, the little bastards," Dennis Martin Mackenzie said. "At sixteen you're wild to stop being a kid, which is one thing that *hasn't* changed since the Change."

"This is practice for some rite of passage?" Loring guessed.

"Yeah, choosing a sept. We divvied up the Clan into septs when it got too big for just a bunch of us hanging out at Dun Juniper here, and it's become sort of important. You figure out what your totem animal is, and that means you're in one of the septs. Fox, Wolf, Raven, Tiger, Bear, Eagle, whatever."

He chuckled again. "We had this guy *insisted* his totem was the Tyrannosaurus rex. Saw it in his dream-quest, he said. Took quite a while to talk him out of it."

Nigel choked off a snort of laughter; he didn't want to be caught mocking the customs or religion of his hosts. Dennis cocked an eyebrow nonetheless, and there was a dry note to his voice:

"Yeah, I thought the whole thing was sort of loopy myself. It's not part of the Craft, strictly speaking. Andy Trethar came up with the idea; he and Diana always did like that shamanistic stuff and they were part of Juney's original Singing Moon coven before the Change. The rest of us just went along, mostly, but these days the youngsters ... well, they take it real serious."

"Far be it from me to object," Nigel said. "Just before I left England—"

"Escaped from Mad King Charles, you mean," Dennis said.

Loring shrugged; that was a fair enough description. "By then King Charles was doing some rather eccentric things ... making Morris dancing, thatched roofs and smock frocks compulsory, for example."

Juniper signaled to the musicians; a bodhran and a flute, a set of uilleann pipes and a fiddle. The tune

began softly, a rhythmic stutter with the wild sweetness of the pipes in the background. Then the music swelled and she raised her voice in an effortless soprano that filled the Hall without straining; she'd been a professional singer before the Change, of course. One hand went up as she sang, and the teenagers followed suit, first with the fingers spread and then held together.

*"What is the difference 'tween feathers and hair?
The handprint of a human or the paw of a bear?
We all roar with laughter, we all howl with tears,
Show our teeth if we're angry, and lay back our ears!"*

The youngsters came in on the chorus:

*"A passion within you
Whispering what you want to be
Take a look in the mirror
What animal do you wish to see?"*

Then louder, as they all joined in:

*"We each meet our animal ... in its time and place
And gazing into those eyes ... we see our own face
It'll teach us and guide us if we but call its name
For under the Lady's sky we're animals all the same—"*

"Here, try this instead of that lousy tea," Dennis went on, pouring from a pot that rested on a ledge in the hearth. "You were out in the cold and wet most of the day, and it's getting dark. And since I brewed the stuff ... What's that old saying about the time for the first drink?"

"*The sun's over the yardarm* is the phrase," Nigel said aside to Dennis, keeping his eyes on the Mackenzie chieftain as he sipped at the hot honey-wine.

The contents were mead, dry and smooth and fragrant with herbs. He worked the muscles of his left arm, his shield-arm, as he drank. The break where the greatsword had cracked the bone of his upper arm still hurt a little; he suspected it always would on damp winter days like this. It would take work to get full strength back, but the bone had knit and it could take the strain of a heavy shield and hard blows once more. He'd spent the morning sparring and beating at a pell-post with his practice sword along with some other adults in the open space under the northern wall. During occasional rests he'd watched while the children built their two snowmen and adorned them with antlers and feathers, and constructed two snow forts and named them *oak* and *holly* before fighting a ferocious snowball battle-to-the-death.

"And ... ah, yes, I remember now."

"Remember what?" Dennis asked.

He was a big man, probably fat before the Change and burly now. Hands showed the scars and callus of a wood-carver and leatherworker; besides that, he ran the Dun Juniper brewery and distillery. His face was wreathed in brown hair and beard, except for the bald spot on the crown of his head, and he was going gray in his late fifties. That made him half a decade older than the slight, trim figure of the Englishman sitting across from him, smoothing his silver-shot mustache and blinking blue eyes that were just a trifle watery from an old injury. They'd spent a fair amount of time talking since Loring had arrived at Dun Juniper seven months before.

"Why I liked that little ditty the youngsters were singing a moment ago," Nigel said. "About the end of the world. I was convalescing then, too. In a hospital ... a rather, ah, private one ... and someone kept playing that tune. It was the sort of place where you had armed guards outside the sickroom door."

"That made you like the song?"

"Well, I didn't die, you see," the Englishman said, with a charming smile. "And after having a Provo shoot me with an ArmaLite and blow me up to boot, that put me in rather a good mood. The tune brings back that feeling of sweet relief."

"What happened to the Provo?" Martin asked curiously.

"Nothing good, I'm afraid, poor fellow," Nigel replied.

His accent was English, in an old-fashioned upper-class manner shaped by Winchester College, the Blues and Royals, and the Edwardian-gentry tones of the grandmother who'd raised him. His mother had broken her neck when her horse balked at a hedge, not long after his father had vanished leading a jungle patrol against Communist guerillas in Malaya.

Just now the smooth, mellow voice had a sardonic note as well.

"You killed him, I suppose? Or what do the SAS call it, slotting?"

It wasn't a question Dennis Martin would have asked before the Change, when he was a pub manager in Corvallis and Juniper was a musician who sang Celtic and folk on gigs there, and on the RenFaire circuit and at Pagan gatherings. It seemed natural enough to Dennis Martin Mackenzie of Dun Juniper, a man who had survived the death of a world, and now lived in another where you took a bow or ax along whenever you went beyond the walls.

"Killed him? I wouldn't go that far. I simply stabbed him in the spine and kicked him out through the window. It was either the knife, the broken glass or the fifteen-foot fall headfirst onto concrete which actually *killed* him, I should think."

Most of the time Nigel Loring's face bore an expression of mild, polite amiability. Just then something different showed for an instant, in the closed curve of his slight smile. It reminded you that this was a good friend, but a very bad—as in "lethally dangerous"—enemy, who'd been a fighting man long before the world was broken and remade that March afternoon in 1998.

Since Dennis was a Mackenzie now, and hence a friend of the Lorings, he went on slyly: "Does Juney know you picked up Erse because it was so useful to the SAS in South Armagh?"

"*Nach brea an la e?*" Nigel replied.

"I suppose that means 'I deny everything'?" Dennis said.

"More on the order of: *Isn't it a lovely day?*"

"And aren't the walls vertical," Dennis laughed. "Unless *snowy and cold* counts as lovely in the Emerald Isle."

Nigel chuckled. "Though in fact Ms. Mackenzie still despises the Provos with a passion, despite her Irish mother. Or because of her. It's Ireland's misfortune that the sensible people never quite manage to dispose of all the different varieties of lunatic. Even the Change hasn't changed that, I'm afraid; it must be something in the water, and it affects the English too, when they travel there. Celts do much better here—appearances sometimes to the contrary."

He touched his knee as he spoke. He'd arrived last spring as a refugee with the armor on his back and one change of clothing in his saddlebags. These days he dressed in a kilt like nearly everyone else in the Mackenzie territories—the knee-length pleated *feile-beag*, the Little Kilt, not the ancient wraparound blanket style—and a homespun shirt of linsey-woolsey. The tartan was like nothing that the Highlands had ever seen, mostly dark green and brown with occasional slivers of a very dull orange. Handsome enough, if subdued, and excellent camouflage in this lush, wet land of forest and field; quite comfortable as well, but you had to remember to keep it arranged properly. His legs were well proportioned and muscled, particularly for a man his age, but he didn't think his graying shins were the most aesthetically pleasing part of him, not to mention the scars.

"You could at least have used the real Mackenzie tartan, if you were going to put everyone in pleated skirts," Nigel grumbled.

The other man grinned. "Hell, I only came up with the idea 'cause we'd found a warehouse load of these tartan blankets, and because I knew it would torque Juney off when she got back from the scouting thing she was doing, and found it was a done deal—pardon me, torque off Lady Juniper," he said, nodding towards the eastern end of the Hall where the dais stood. "I started the Lady Juniper bit, too, and it drove her crazy."

"Why would the kilts annoy her?" Nigel asked. "They're very easy to make, and quite practical in this climate, which I can assure you from much dismal training-maneuver experience is far milder than the Highlands of Scotland. She looks quite convincing in that getup as well, and she has a suitable accent, when she wishes—though Irish rather than Scots, to be sure. Still, the Scotti came from there, originally."

And there's the religious aspect, of course."

"Yeah, but I was always teasing her about the Celtic stuff she put on to go with her music before the Change," Dennis said. "Sort of a running joke, you know? And the way her coveners—I was a cowan back then, didn't believe in anything much—were always making like Cuchulain or Deirdre of the Sorrows or whatever and raiding the Irish myths for symbols the way the old Erse stole each other's cows. So when the first bunch of us got here right after the Change, and she said we'd have to live like a clan to survive, I was the one who pushed for all this stuff 'cause I knew she hadn't meant that literally. There wasn't much to laugh at back then, and it was fun."

He looked around. "I didn't expect it to catch on this ... emphatically."

"It certainly has," Nigel observed, matching his glance.

The Englishman had heard the building's story from Juniper. Her great-uncle the banker had been the single wealthy exception to the modest middle-class rule of the Mackenzies, and he'd bought the site of the ancestral homestead and the forest around it as a country hunting-lodge; her parents had visited every July as far back as she could remember and, later, more than once she'd spent a whole summer here, just she and the old man, walking the woods and learning the plants and the beasts. It had been the last of the childless bachelor's many eccentricities to leave the house and land to the teenage single mother she'd been, more than a decade before the Change.

The lodge had been built in the 1920s of immense Douglas fir logs on a knee-high foundation of mortared fieldstone; originally it had been plain on the interior, and divided into several rooms as well. The budding Clan Mackenzie had ripped out the partitions when they put on a second story late in the first Change Year, leaving a great wooden box a hundred feet by forty; on the north side a huge stone hearth was flanked by two doors leading to the new lean-to kitchens, and on the other three walls windows looked out onto verandas roofed by the second-story balconies.

And it certainly isn't plain anymore, he thought.

Over the years since, the great logs that made up the walls had been smoothed and carved, stained and inlaid and painted, until they were a sinuous riot of colored running knot-work that reminded him of the Book of Kells, crossed with Viking-era animal-style and a strong dash of Art Nouveau. Faces peered out of that foliage, the multitude of Aspects borne by the twin deities of Juniper Mackenzie's faith; the Green Man, stag-antlered Cernunnos, goat-horned Pan; flame-crowned Brigid with her sheaf of wheat and Lugh of the Long Hand with his spear, Cerridwen, Arianrhod and silver-tongued Ogma, Apollo and Athena, Zeus and Hera, Freya and one-eyed Odin, blond Sif and almighty red-bearded Thor.

Beneath the high ceiling were carved the symbols of the Quarters; over the hearth comfrey and ivy and sheaves of grain for North and the Earth; vervain and yarrow for Air and the East; red poppies and nettles for the South and Fire; ferns and rushes and water lilies for West and the Waters.

A few people were doing touch-up work on it all, on ladders propped against the wall. Winter was the slack season for farmers, and so time for maintenance work, and for leisure and crafts and ceremony. There were others here, reading or playing at board games, three in animated discussion over the plans for a new sawmill at another dun and a circle of younger children listening raptly to a storyteller in a corner.

"I'm off," Dennis said to the Englishman as the practice group around the dais broke up, rising and giving a nod to Juniper Mackenzie as she approached—and a wink to Nigel. "I've got apprentices doing practice-pieces to check on and then Sally'll have dinner ready. 'Night, Juney."

"Tell Sally we need to talk about the Moon School schedule tomorrow, Den-nie," Juniper said, then: "And how are you today, Nigel?" She sat and stretched out in a leather armchair, feet towards the fire on a settee.

Sir Nigel Loring picked up his thick, white ceramic mug with his left hand. His fingers tightened on it until the knuckles whitened and cords stood out in his forearm, and then relaxed.

"Your healer seems to be correct," he said. "Full function is returning."

Slowly and painfully, he added silently to himself; he'd never been a whiner. Old bones didn't mend as fast as young, and that was all there was to it. And he was fifty-three now, even if a very fit fifty-three.

"Judy Barstow knows her business," Juniper said, and nodded. Then she smiled: "Or Judy Barstow Mackenzie, to use the modern form."

He could see sympathy in the bright green eyes; her voice held a hint of her mother's birthplace, Achill Island off the west coast of Eire, running like a burbling stream beneath her usual General American. Her father's heritage had been mostly what Americans called Scots-Irish, and it showed in the straight nose, pointed chin and high cheekbones; so did the very slight trace of Cherokee that side of her family had picked up in the mountains of Carolina and Tennessee before they made the long trek over the Oregon Trail.

"And the headaches?" she went on.

"Fewer as the weeks go by, and not as bad; the herbal infusion works wonders. Ye gods, but that man was strong! What was his name?"

In two strokes the greatsword had buckled the tough alloy steel of his helm, ripped the chin-protecting bevoir right off his breastplate, and cut through the sheet metal and strong laminated wood of his shield to break his arm while he lay semiconscious on the ground, trying to protect Rudi Mackenzie from a death as unstoppable as a falling boulder.

"Mack," she said. "Although I've heard that was a nickname—for the truck."

Juniper Mackenzie's usual expression was friendly; more sincerely so than his own, he thought. Just then it changed for an instant, and you could see the fangs of the she-fox behind her smile. She glanced over to another corner, where a nine-year-old with copper-gold locks to his shoulders was playing chess with a black-haired young woman in her early twenties. They looked up for an instant from their game and waved at their mother and the Englishman. He felt himself give an answering grin; young Rudi was irresistible, and his sister Eilir charming in her slightly eerie way.

"Mack wasn't so strong as you and your son Alleyne and John Hordle put together," Juniper said. "Since he was trying to kill my son, I would consider that a fortunate thing, so. I won't forget whose shield it was covered Rudi."

Her hand tightened on his shoulder for an instant, and he covered it with his as briefly before she leaned back, arranging her kilt and plaid gracefully and then taking one of the muffins from the plate beside Nigel's chair. They were made from stone-ground flour, rich with eggs and thick with dried blueberries and hazelnuts; one steamed gently as she broke it open and buttered it.

"And if one has to convalesce from a broken arm and a cracked head, this is as good a spot as any," he went on with a smile, waving his mug. "And as good a season of the year."

With the summer's wealth stored and the next year's wheat and barley in the ground, supporting a guest too weak to work or fight was no hardship. The Great Hall of Dun Juniper was comfortably warm in the chill, rainy gloom of the west-Oregon winter, too, not something you could count on in a large building after the Change in a place like the Cascade foothills.

Or in a large British building even before the Change, he thought mordantly. But the Yanks always were better at heating. Snow beat at the windows with feathery paws amid December's early dark, but the great room was bright with firelight and the lanterns that hung from the carved rafters.

"The winters weren't the Willamette's strongest selling points," Juniper said. "Though with my complexion, I find them soothing. At least I don't turn into a giant freckle!"

"I like your climate. The tropics wear after a while"—she knew he'd had plenty of hot-country experience in his years with the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment before the Change—"but this is homelike enough for comfort and just the right bit milder."

Juniper laughed, and waved a hand around the great room and its flamboyant decoration. "Now, *this* I don't think you'll find homelike."

He found himself laughing with her, although he'd been a rather solemn person most of his life. "I grant it isn't what you'd find in Hampshire, even after the Change."

He recognized the symbolism of her faith and he could interpret most of it, partly from his readings in ancient history, partly from occasional contact with practitioners of the Craft—some had been on the Isle of Wight, the main enclave of British survivors, and a few had even managed to hide out in the New Forest to be discovered by his scouts in the second Change Year. And his son Alleyne had been a

re-creationist before the Change, one of those who played at medieval combat, and the odd Wiccan had overlapped with that set.

Extremely odd, some of them, he thought with a smile.

Then he raised his gaze to the brooding, feral face of Pan, and the smile died. The heavy-lidded eyes were shadowed as they stared into his, given life by the flickering firelight. They brought with them a hint of green growth and damp, moldering leaves; the dark scented breath of the wildwood, and the fear that waits to take the souls of men who wander too far beyond the edge of the tilled, tamed fields.

That isn't just good carving, he thought.

It reminded him of medieval art in ancient churches; not the style or the imagery, but the raw power of bone-deep belief. The Wiccans he'd known in England before the Change had mostly seemed at least slightly barmy to him, when they weren't playacting. He didn't know what Juniper and her friends had been like before the modern world perished, but they weren't putting it on now. Not in the slightest.

Juniper's green eyes twinkled, following his thoughts with disconcerting ease; she linked her fingers around one knee and considered him with her head tilted to one side.

"It wasn't like this when I inherited it from my great-uncle, that good gray Methodist," she said, her tone mock-defensive. "We didn't have much to do but carve, those first winters after the Change, and it was useful with so many new Dedicants, sort of a visual training aid. At first it was just me and my coveners and a few friends like Dennie. Then we had to help other people, get the farms started again and make tools and save the livestock, fight off the bandits and Eaters and ... It all just sort of ... snowballed."

"I had the same feeling of riding the tiger in directions unpredictable over in England, my dear," Nigel said. "I've seen it elsewhere. While things were in flux, one strong personality with luck and, hmmm, *baraka*, could set the tone for a whole region, like a seed-crystal in a saturated solution. As Charles and I did in England, until I fell out with His Majesty."

Juniper shivered very slightly as she looked around. "And as I appear to have done hereabouts."

"I should think you'd be glad to see more come around to your way of thinking?" he probed gently.

"The Craft never did hunt for converts the way the religions of the Book do; we waited for those who were interested to seek us out. When the student is ready, the teacher appears. Then suddenly there were so many ... "

"Are you sorry?" Nigel asked.

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No ... no, I'm not really sorry. The old world was dead the instant the machines stopped working. The new one needs a strong belief, a hearth-faith to strengthen folk through hard times. That's helped us make as good a life here as humankind can live nowadays, I think. Or it would be if there weren't robbers and hostile neighbors, sure."

"It's certainly taken on your, ah, coloration, your Clan Mackenzie." He nodded at her pleated kilt and the plaid pinned at her shoulder with a silver brooch. "Symbols become important at a time like that."

"That was Dennis!" Juniper protested, laughing; then she grew grave. "Do you remember that flash of light and the spike of pain, when the Change came?"

"Indeed I do," he said. "It was the middle of the night in England and I was asleep, but—"

Inwardly, he shivered a little at the memory. He'd woken shouting, with Maude's scream in his ears. The pain had been over in an instant, but it was as intense as anything he'd ever felt, even when the RPG drove grit into his eyes in the wadi back in Oman, and he'd thought he was blind for life.

Every human being on Earth—and every other creature with a spinal cord— had felt the pain and seen the wash of silver fire. Half London had been screaming. The sound had come clearly though the window, in a place where the throb of machines was absent for the first time in centuries. Then the beginning of the city-consuming fires had broken the utter darkness ... The failure of everything electrical and of all combustion motors had been obvious within an hour. It hadn't been until troops under his command tried to put down rioters and looters next day that it had become apparent that explosives didn't work either, starting with CS gas and baton rounds and moving up to live ammunition.

Juniper shook herself, casting off dark memories of her own; anyone who'd survived had them. "I've wondered whether that moment, the white light and the pain, didn't do something to us. To our minds,

you see."

"Hmmm," he said. "That's an interesting thought, though. My wife— Maude—said something similar to me once . . . "

Her fingers touched the back of his hand, lightly, for an instant. "I wish I could have met her," Juniper said gently. "From the shape of her man and her son, she must have been a very special lady."

He drank the last of the mead to cover his flush. "She wouldn't want me to brood."

Juniper made a *tsk!* sound. "Nigel, grief's nothing to be ashamed of. It's the tribute we pay our dead, but they don't ask more than we can give."

He looked up and met her eyes, and felt an unwilling thaw at the concern he saw there. "That sounds . . . familiar somehow. Is it a quote?"

She smiled. "Something Mother said to me once." A shake of the head. "I do think that moment at the Change may have changed us, too, though. There was so much madness afterwards, and so swiftly."

"I'm afraid there's no way to test it. And while Johnson did say that the prospect of being hanged concentrates a man's mind, the prospect of imminent inescapable death can certainly drive people mad, especially if the laws of nature are mucked about with at the same time."

They were both somber for a moment; nine in ten of humankind had perished in the year that followed. Then they shook it off; those who couldn't had joined that majority long years ago. Despair could kill you just as surely as hunger or plague.

Instead they chatted of small, recent things, the new artificial-swamp waste system he'd help install here at Dun Juniper, Rudi's progress with the sword— which Nigel privately thought was alarmingly swift for a boy his age—and then fell into a companionable silence until the trestle tables were set up for dinner.

There aren't many women I've felt comfortable just sitting by, except Maude, of course, he thought; then he caught that disconcerting twinkle again. Or ones who could read me that quickly.

Chapter Three

*Dun Fairfax, Willamette Valley, Oregon
December 15th, 2007/Change Year 9*

"There," Sam Aylward—Sam Aylward Mackenzie, these days—said, as he finished smoothing the spot where he'd tooled his maker's initials into the deer-hide covering of the bow's riser.

He wiped down the length of the longbow with an oiled linen rag and held it up to the lantern slung from the roof of his workshop before tossing it to the man on the other stool.

"Ah, now there's a proper job of work," John Hordle said, putting down his beer mug to slide the weapon between great spade-shaped hands whose backs were dense with reddish furze. "You could do a bit of shooting with this!"

The workshop had been a two-car garage and storage area attached to the farmhouse of the Fairfax family before the Change; they hadn't survived it long, being elderly and extremely diabetic. Now Aylward's wife Melissa had her loom over by the rear wall with a big new window cut for light, and the forward end held a bowyer's needs. There was a pleasant smell of seasoning cut wood from the lengths of yew and Port Orford cedar lying on the roof-joists overhead, and of paint and glue, leather and varnish and oiled metal from the benches with their vises, clamps and rows of tools. Everything was painstakingly neat, even the shavings carefully swept up into a box—that chore was mostly done by his son Edain and stepdaughter Tamar, who accounted it a privilege to wield a broom after he let them watch and occasionally hand him a tool.

They weren't here at the moment, since their mother had them corralled to help with dinner; Aylward was alone with Hordle and Chuck Barstow. Aylward was a stocky man going on fifty, with thick, curly brown hair a little grizzled at the temples, no more than medium height but thick-armed and broad-shouldered and even stronger than he looked; Barstow was a decade younger, lean and wiry and near six feet, with a sandy beard trimmed to a point and thinning hair of the same color. Hordle was the youngest in his late twenties, towering over both the others at six-foot-seven, three hundred and ten

pounds of bone and muscle with a ruddy face like a cured ham and a thatch of dark red-brown hair and little hazel eyes, built massively enough that you didn't realize his full height until he stood close. When he strung the heavy longbow, it was with an effortless flex of arm and hip.

Aylward and Hordle had the same accent, a slow thick south-English yokel drawl out of deepest rural Hampshire; Barstow's was General American, what you'd expect from someone born in Eugene in 1967 and raised there. But they all had something in common, something beyond the Mackenzie kilt and the weathered skin of men who spent much time out of doors in all weathers, an indefinable quality of coiled wariness even at rest, a readiness for sudden violent action that only another practitioner of their deadly trade might have caught.

"There's a few improvements over the old plain crooked stick, y'might say," Aylward said. "The reflex out at the tips makes it throw faster, and the deflex in on either side of the riser keeps it stable. More accurate, less hand-shock. A strip of raw deerhide glued on the back, to keep splinters from starting."

He grinned with mock modesty as his giant countryman examined the bow. It had a central grip of rigid black walnut root, carved to fit the hand and covered in suede-finished leather that would drink sweat and prevent slipping; just above that was a ledge for the arrow-rest, cut in so that it ran through the centerline of the bow and lined with two tufts of rabbit-skin. The tapering limbs with their subtle double curve were Pacific yew, mountain-grown for a dense hard grain, the orange heartwood on the belly of the bow and the paler sap-wood on the back. He'd made it the traditional length, as tall as the user when unstrung plus a bit, and it took a hundred and fifty pounds to draw it the full thirty-two inches. Few men could manage a draw-weight that heavy; Aylward's own war bow took a hundred and ten, and Chuck's was a hundred. Hordle managed this one easily enough ...

"What's this then?" Hordle said, flicking a sausage-thick finger at the inside of the stave just above the riser. "I thought you didn't hold wi' laminations?"

"I don't," Aylward said, using the rag to wipe his hands clean of the linseed oil he'd used on the yew; it rasped a little as threads caught on the heavy callus on his hands. "Those fillets of horn are pegged into the riser and working free against strips of hardwood glued on the stave, ten inches either way of the grip. It gives it just that extra bit of"—he snapped his fingers out and back—"flick."

Chuck Barstow grinned. "And you'll be the envy of the whole Willamette, with a bow from the hands of Aylward the Archer, himself himself," he said.

Aylward snorted. "Bollocks," he said. "There's many I've trained who make bows as good as mine, and plenty more who're good as needs be, and I weren't the only bowyer around here to start with. Bowmaking isn't a master-craftsman's trade, you can learn it well enough in a few months if you're handy and have the knack, and God knows we've plenty of good yew in this part of the world. For that matter there's better shots than me among the Mackenzies, and no doubt more elsewhere."

"You could still make a good living selling your bows," Barstow said. "Those two you taught do it in Sutterdown, full-time. They've had clients come from as far away as Idaho."

"I like getting my hands into the dirt, when I'm not off on Lady Juniper's business," Aylward said stoutly. "And growing what I eat. Reminds me of growing up on the farm with Mum and Dad back in the old country." He jerked a thumb at Hordle. "Not far from where this great gallybagger idled his youth away."

John Hordle gave a theatrical shudder. "Now, *my* dad owned a pub," he said to Chuck. "That's a man's life, I tell you. Chatting up the totty and tossing back the Real Ale, and none of that shoveling muck into the spreader on a cold winter's day."

"Then why didn't you stay on at the Pied Merlin instead of going for a soldier?" Aylward asked.

"Because of all the ruddy lies you told me about being in the SAS while I was still a nipper," Hordle said good-humoredly. "Ended up humping a full pack over every sodding mountain in Wales doing the regimental selection, I did. Which probably saved me life come the Change. Otherwise I'd have starved or got et, like most, instead of getting out to the Isle of Wight with the colonel."

"Oh, I don't know," Aylward replied. "Sir Nigel always looked after 'is own. You told me he got my sisters and their kids out, didn't you? And he'd not seen hair nor hide o' me in years. From what you said,

he had them set up with their men on their own farms afterwards, too, when things settled down a bit. He'd have seen you right."

Hordle nodded. "Might be, though things were just a bit hairy right then. Want to go and have a try with this?" he asked, flourishing the bow.

"Always a pleasure to watch you overshoot and miss, mate. You still pluck on the release, after all these years."

The men already wore their homespun wool jackets; the workshop wasn't exactly cold, but it wasn't shirtsleeve-comfortable either. Over those the two clansmen draped and pinned their plaids, and they all put on hooded winter cloaks, woven of undyed gray wool with the grease still in it to shed water. They also slung quivers over their backs, took their own bows from where they hung on pegs, and buckled on sword belts; Barstow and Aylward wore Clan-style shortswords, twenty-inch cut-and-thrust blades modeled on the old Roman gladius, with bone-hilted dirks on the right for balance. Hordle's was more suited to his height, though not quite a full-fledged greatsword: a broad forty-two-inch blade with a long ring-and-bar crossguard and a hilt that could be used in one hand or both, what the Middle Ages had called a bastard longsword. Aylward whistled sharply as they left.

"Heel, Garm, Grip," he said, and two big shaggy dogs rose from curled-up sleep to follow them.

Dun Fairfax was busy outside, in a relaxed winter way. There were a dozen homes inside the earth berm and log palisade, besides the century-old original Fairfax farmhouse and barn, along with a fair collection of lesser buildings: henhouses and storage and pens. A chanting came from the Dun's covenstead, where the coven and the year's crop of Dedicants practiced a Yule ritual; a half dozen more stood and admired the big, carved wooden mask of the Green Man they'd just fastened over the doorway. From homes and sheds there was a clatter of tools: the rising-falling moan of spinning wheels, less commonly the rhythmic thump of a loom, a cracking as a sharp steel froe split cedar shingles from a log under the tapping of a wooden mallet. The air held farmyard smells, though nothing too rank, and woodsmoke, the smells of baking bread and cooking meat as kitchens prepared for the evening meal.

A hammer rang on steel as well in a brick-built smithy with the face of Goibniu painted on the door, and Sam Aylward grunted satisfaction.

"Glad we finally got our own smith," he said. "Pain in the arse, it was, always going up to Dun Juniper or sending for someone when something needed fixing. I tried me hand at it, but it's fair tricky."

Melissa Aylward stuck her head out of a second-story window before the three were out of hailing distance: "Sam!"

"Yes, love?" he said, pausing and looking upward.

Melissa was a comfortable-looking woman in her late thirties, with a frizz of yellow hair surrounding a round blue-eyed face; she held their youngest in the crook of one arm, and Fand kicked her arms and legs with a determination that had increased notably as she neared ten months. Her other hand held toddler Richard Aylward back from the windowsill with practiced ease. Melissa's first husband had been on the East Coast at the time of the Change, and Aylward had met her in the summer of the first Change Year.

"If you're off to shoot, remember the chicken stew will be ready by dark, and the dumplings won't keep," she warned. "If you want to eat them, not shoot them at a castle with a catapult."

"We'll be there," Sam said, waving.

"Not me, sorry, Melissa," Chuck called up. "Judy's expecting me back at Dun Juniper."

He waved northward up the slope of the low mountain that overhung Dun Fairfax; the Mackenzie headquarters was a mile in that direction, on a broad ledge that nature had cut back into the hillside.

"The two of you, then," she said. "Full dark and not later!"

"I should say we will be there," Hordle said, smacking his lips as they turned away. "Your missus can cook a treat, Samkin."

He winked at Barstow. "Sam, he could burn water, himself, unless he's changed over here."

Chuck shuddered. "Tell me. I've been on hunting trips with him these ten years past, not to mention campaigning. We learned to put him on woodchopping detail fast enough."

Hordle shook his head. "Hard to remember Sam's had a life since the Change. Back in England we

thought he'd be dead somewhere, and then seeing him here, a father three times over no less—gave me a turn, it did."

"Which is why you've been hanging about down here at Dun Fairfax, catching up with your old mate," Aylward said with heavy sarcasm. "And not doing your best to chat up Lady Juniper's daughter, eh?"

"And studying Sign until the brains ran out of his ears to do it," Chuck Barstow added. "Eilir's charmed. Though not as charmed as she was with young Alleyne."

"Don't know what the 'ell you grizzled old farts are talking about," Hordle said. "I was just being friendly, like."

"Hullo, Sam." A woman nodded to the men as she drove half a dozen Jersey milkers towards the old Fairfax barn, which held the cream separator and barrel-churn and the precious galvanized milk-tins all the households used.

"Kate," he replied.

A man did likewise as he pushed a wheelbarrow of straw and manure, steaming slightly in the damp chill, in the other direction. More greetings came from children who played whooping running games until their parents collared them for chores, and a couple called from where they made repairs to a roof, tapping home nails to hold on fresh shingles.

"Quite the squire, eh, Samkin?" Hordle asked, a teasing note in his voice, and Barstow laughed.

"No, I'm not," Aylward said shortly. "I've got a good farm and some help with it, like more than one here. If you want squires, you'll have to go and apply at the Bearkillers. Bad enough I ended up running the ruddy army, after swearing I'd die a sergeant."

"Running the ruddy war-levy of the Clan Mackenzie," Chuck said, and smiled at Sam's snort.

Men and dogs walked in companionable silence out through the blockhouse and narrow gate, waving answer to the sentry's hail, then down the farm road that ran southward from Dun Fairfax; Aylward and Chuck made a gesture of reverence at the grave of the Fairfaxes not far distant, and Hordle nodded respectfully. A pair of ravens flew up from the gravestone, probably attracted by the offerings of milk and bread that some left there—which was ironic, since the old farmer and his wife had been Mormons, who'd bought the farm not long before the Change as a retirement place.

The settlement was in a valley that thrust into the foothills of the mountains and opened out westward towards the plain of the southern Willamette. The snowpeaks of the High Cascades were hidden by cloud, but the lower slopes rose north and south and east, shaggy with Douglas fir and western hemlock and the odd broadleaf oak or maple; drifts of mist trailed from the tops of the tall trees. There was a scent of damp earth as they walked past rolling fields, plowland and pasture and orchard, until they reached the road that followed Artemis Creek west out towards the plain.

That was blocked by a flood of off-white sheep for a moment, parting around the men like river water around rocks; the heavy, slightly greasy scent of them was strong, and their breath steamed in the damp, chill air. The man who watched the combined flocks of the Dun Fairfax families waved to Aylward, who made an exasperated sound and then waited as he came up, his collie at his heels. He wore sword and dirk as well, had his bow in the loops beside his quiver and a heavy ashwood shepherd's crook in his hands.

"Anything, Larry?" Aylward said to the man who'd once owned a bookstore.

"Took a shot at a coyote skulking around, but I missed," he said. His face was irregular and shrewd, with a tuft of chin-beard, what people meant when they said *full of character*.

Then the crook darted out and fell around the neck of a ewe who'd decided to head down towards Artemis Creek.

"*Back* there, unless you want to hit the stewpot early, you brainless lump of fuzzy suet!" he said wearily, then went on to the men: "Otherwise, just another day with the damned sheep. Lord and Lady, but they're boring! It could be worse; I could be herding turkeys. Anyway, I wanted to talk about the Yule rites, if you had a minute, Sam."

"I'm a bit busy just now, Larry," Aylward said. "Later. And I'm only a Dedi-cant, any rate."

As they walked on past the sheep Chuck grinned. "And there's a sore point," he said to Hordle.

Aylward snorted as the lean man went on: "Melissa's High Priestess of the coven here. She thinks Samkin should be an Initiate—High Priest eventually, too. Everyone else in the dun does, too; he's their landfather."

"Larry does a perfectly good job of it," Aylward said stolidly. "Better than I could, any rate."

"And you can't see yourself with antlers on your head dancing beneath the moon, eh, Samkin?" Hordle teased.

"Chuck's High Priest at Dun Juniper when he's not Lord of the Harvest and Second Armsman," Aylward pointed out with satisfaction. "Antlers, robe, dancing and all."

"Ooops! Sorry, mate, I forgot—no offense."

"None taken," Chuck Barstow said, laughing aloud. "I just like getting a rise out of Sam about it now and then."

"It's being raised Church of England," Hordle said, entering into the spirit. "Actually believing in anything isn't allowed."

Aylward chuckled himself, then shook his head. "When you're around Lady Juniper for a while, you can believe anything, straight up. I just embarrass easily ... well, I'm still English, so it's only natural, innit? But when you think about it, how likely was it I'd be in the Cascades in March, back in ninety-eight? Or get trapped in a gully and have Herself find me before I died?"

Chuck Barstow nodded. "Juney's right about you being a gift from Cernunnos, Sam. Having you around may or may not have saved us; I think it did, starting with seeing off those foragers from Salem. We certainly wouldn't be nearly as strong without you."

He elbowed the tall form of John Hordle. "And figure the odds on you and Sir Nigel and Alleyne ending up here, too, nine years later, you scoffing cowan. The Lord and Lady look after Their own."

"He's got a point there, John," Aylward said. "It's turned into Old Boys Day here for the 'ampshire 'ogs. Must be the Gods, mucking about with the numbers."

Hordle snorted. "Mate, everyone still alive is lucky enough to have won the bloody National Lottery twice over back before the Change. For that matter, the sodding Change burned out my habit of asking why things turn out the way they do. If that can happen, what's impossible?"

They came to the pasture Dun Fairfax was using for target practice and vaulted the gate. It was ten acres, surrounded by decaying board and wire fences that were lined with young hawthorn plants in the process of becoming hedges, and studded with a dozen huge Oregon oaks. They checked carefully—they didn't want someone's cow, or worse still a child, wandering about—and threw back their cloaks to free their right arms.

"Dropping shots over the third oak suit you two for a start?" Aylward said, indicating a tree a hundred and fifty yards off.

When the others nodded he brought up his bow and shot three times in eight seconds, the flat snap of the string on his bracer like a crackle of fingers; two more shafts were in the air when the first one went *thunk* into the board outline of a man with a shield. All three struck; the first two within a handspan of each other in the target's chest, but the last was pushed a little aside and down at the last instant by a gust of wind.

"Well, even if you didn't kill him outright, foe's not going to breed again," Hordle said, drawing the new bow to the ear and raising it at a fifty-degree angle towards the sky. Then: "Bugger!"

His shaft cleared the crown of the oak, and the target as well, by about twenty yards.

"Told you you'd overshoot with that, Little John," Aylward said smugly. "You're getting another dozen feet per second with the same draw."

"First try with a new bow," Hordle said defensively. "Only natural I'm off the once." The second landed a little short; the third ...

"Did he miss?" Chuck Barstow asked, peering.

"Not from the sound," Aylward replied. "Punched right through. Extra point."

"It does have that little extra flick. I'll get used to it."

"Over by the tree, this time," Chuck said.

Those targets were rigged to resemble men leaning out from behind the trunk, and they were hung on

hinges so that they swung in and out of sight when there was any wind. Barstow shot three times with the smooth action of a metronome, and the shafts flicked hissing through the gray gloaming to land with a hard, swift *tock-tock-tock* rhythm.

Hordle looked at the chewed-up surface of the targets. "Does everyone here practice like your kilties, Sam? It's the law back in Blighty these days everyone has to keep a bow and use it, but most just put in an hour or two on Sunday and take the odd rabbit."

Chuck Barstow grinned. "That's one of my jobs as Second Armsman, going around from dun to dun and checking that they do practice every day. I threaten them with Sam if I find out they've been goofing off. And testing to see who meets the levy standards, of course."

"Which are?"

"Fifty-pound draw at least, twelve aimed shafts a minute, and able to hit a man-sized target at a hundred yards eight times in ten."

"Fifty's a bit light for a war bow," Hordle said.

Sam Aylward shrugged. "A heavier draw's a better draw, but fifty's useful enough—I've seen a bow that weight put an arrow all the way through a bull elk at a hundred paces, and break ribs going in and going out. Which wouldn't do a man any good, eh?"

Chuck nodded. "And that's the minimum, of course; the average is around eighty. Nearly everyone hunts for the pot these days, what with the way deer and wild pigs have gotten to be pests, and absolutely everyone knows there's times your life is going to depend on shooting fast and straight."

Hordle grunted, drawing and loosing. The arrow whacked home, and a chunk of the fir target weakened by multiple impacts broke off and went out of sight.

"Well, you've more fighting to do here than folk back in England," he said. "There's the Brushwood men, but they're not much more than a bloody nuisance unless you're up on the edge of cultivation north of London."

Aylward sighed and shook his head; he'd been here in Oregon at the time of the Change, and there hadn't been any news from the Old World until the Lorings and Hordle arrived on a Tasmanian ship before this last Beltane. It was still a wrench, visualizing southern England as a pioneer zone, a frontier wilderness where a bare six hundred thousand survivors fought encroaching brambles, hippo roamed the Fens, wolves howled in the streets of Manchester, and tigers gone feral from safari parks took sheep even on the outskirts of Winchester, the new capital.

"And of course there's the odd dust-up with the Moors, or the wild Irish when we have to help out Ian's Rump over in Ulster," Hordle said slyly, in the next interval in their shooting. "There's a joke for you—the Change and all, and we're *still* having problems with the Provos."

"Better not mention that too often among Mackenzies," Aylward said. "Half the folk in our territory here have hypnotized themselves into believing they're cousins of Finn Mac Cool. For all that they're Ulstermen by descent as much as anything, a lot of them. Scots-Irish, they call it here."

"Not me," Chuck Barstow said. "English and German in my family tree, plus a couple of Bohunks, a trace of Canadian French and a little Indian way back. And Judy's Jewish—or Jewitch, as she likes to put it."

"At least you don't try putting on a brogue, Chuck. Every second kiltie these days does, or tries to rrrrrroll their r's as if they were from Ayrrrrshire."

He went on to Hordle: "We still get a fair count of plain old-fashioned bandits now and then, too, which keeps everyone on their toes. Plenty of places aren't doing as well as us, just scraping by, and east of the mountains there's always fighting, all of which gets us a yearly crop of broken men too angry to beg but hungry enough to steal."

"And you've got Arminger waiting up in Portland," Hordle said. "After Sir Nigel and I had the pleasure of his hospitality for weeks, I'd have to agree you've got a roit nasty old piece of work there."

Chuck Barstow nodded grimly. He'd lost an adopted son in a skirmish with the Protector's men only the summer past. Then his face lightened.

"Look!"

The dogs had strayed off a little while the men moved around the pasture shooting; the beasts were

far too well trained to get in front of an archer without permission. Now the three archers could hear a frenzy of barking from across the road to the south, down in the alder and fir woods that lined Artemis Creek. An explosion of wings came seconds later, and a gabbling, honking sound as a quartet of Canada geese came out of the willows, thrashing themselves into the air on their broad wings with long necks stretched out in terror. The birds had bred beyond belief in recent years; they were a standing menace to the crops . . . and very tasty, done right.

"You first, Chuck!" Aylward called jovially.

The Armsman held the draw for an instant, still as a statue except for the minute movement of his left arm, then let the string roll off the gloved fingers of his right hand. *Snap* as it struck the bracer, and then one of the geese seemed to stagger in midair, folding around itself and dropping like a rock.

That only took an instant, but the birds were rising fast. Aylward shot twice, the arrows disappearing in the murk as they rose, and another two of the big birds fell as if the air beneath their wings had turned to vacuum.

"Too late, Little John," Aylward taunted; the last was nearly out of sight. "Too late!"

Hordle made a wordless sound, then shot. The dusk was falling, but they could see that the goose stumbled as if it had hit a bump in the air, before circling down with a broken-winged flutter.

"Not so late as all that, Samkin," Hordle said smugly.

"Tsk, Little John. Nobody taught you to finish 'em off?" He shot as he spoke, and the bird fell limp the last hundred feet to hit the grass with an audible thump.

"Aylward the Archer!" Chuck Barstow said with good-natured mockery. "Showoff!"

A dog ran up, wagging its tail and dropping a goose at Aylward's feet. Collecting the others took a few minutes, and finding all the arrows they could.

"Sorry, little brothers," Chuck said, making a sign over the birds when they had the bodies laid out in a row. "But we need to keep our gardens and grain safe, and we have to eat. Cernunnos, Lord of all wildwood dwellers, witness that we take in need, not wantonness, knowing that for us too the hour of the Hunter shall come. Guide them flying on winds of golden light to the Sum-merlands. Mother-of-All, let them be reborn through You."

Aylward murmured polite assent, and then they trimmed a sapling from the hedgerow and headed back towards the walls of Dun Fairfax with the stick thrust between the birds' trussed feet; four big geese came to a considerable weight.

"Good eating, these," Hordle said, smacking his lips. "Hang them for a bit, roast them with bread-and-nut stuffing, some mushrooms in it, and some bacon grease on the outside—"

"Andy and Diana would like a couple for the celebration dinner up at Dun Juniper," Chuck said. "We're having a competition next week—bagpipers from half a dozen duns."

At Aylward's shudder, he went on: "Come on, Sam, that many pipers . . . it'll be a sight and sound to behold!"

"So's a pig with its arse on fire," the older man said dourly, and Hordle's laughter boomed out like artillery.

Chapter Four

Mithrilwood, Willamette Valley, Oregon

December 17th, 2007/Change Year 9

Perfect, Eilir Mackenzie said in Sign.

There were a dozen others here in the woods with Juniper Mackenzie's daughter; her *anamchara*—soul-sister—Astrid Larsson, and half a score of their Dunedain Rangers. Those were youngsters who'd joined them in what was first more than half play, a chance to ramble and hunt, and then turned serious over the years. She and Astrid were the eldest of those at twenty-three; the youngest here was sixteen-year-old Crystal, a refugee from the Protectorate. They'd saved her and her family from a baron's hunters and hounds this last spring, just as their original oath demanded, the one they'd sworn back at the beginning, to protect the helpless and succor the weak. It had seemed like a great idea when they were

fourteen; since then it had turned out to be a lot of work, though satisfying.

The other two with them were Alleyne Loring and Little John Hordle, both a few years older than the Dunedain leaders, but still young men.

This will make a perfect Yule Log, Eilir went on. If we can get it through the door.

The log had been bigleaf maple, growing on the side of the canyon; it had fallen whole as it came down, pulled out of the rocky soil by its own weight and falling across a basalt boulder a few feet above the root-ball. Bigleaf maple was like stone itself, useful for furniture or tool handles or fancy carving and yielding a pleasant, sweet sap in spring. This one had fallen about a year ago, to judge by the state of the wood; it was grown with moss and shelflike fungi and the bark had peeled away, but the feel was still solid when she stamped her boot on it. That meant it would be hard to kindle but would burn long and slow, unlike the fierce, swift heat of Douglas fir or hemlock or the spark-spitting enthusiasm of Ponderosa pine.

Astrid nodded solemnly, setting her long white-blond braids bobbing in the shadowed gloom, the overcast winter sky shedding only a silvery-gray shadowed light through the branches and needles above them. Then she looked up at Eilir, a twinkle in her strange silver-shot eyes; not many could have seen it there, but they'd been inseparable since they'd met in the fall of the first Change Year, when the Bearkillers came west over the High Cascades. Eilir's hair was raven black and her eyes green, nose shorter and mouth fuller, cheekbones not so chiseled; apart from that they were similar in looks as well, both tall at five-eight or so, moving with whipcord grace.

"It'd be hard work cutting this to a useful length," Lord Bear's sister-in-law said casually in the Sindarin her Dunedain used among themselves, as if addressing the air. "We need about, oh, ten feet." The thick bottom section of the trunk was fifty feet long before it frayed out into a tangle of crown, lying half on the old state park trail and half off it. "We'll have to break out a whipsaw . . . too tough for ax-work."

"Hordle and I can handle it," Alleyne said. "Shouldn't take long if we spell each other."

Eilir cocked one leaf-colored eye at Hordle, whose great hamlike countenance assumed a woebegone grimace; that turned into a grin at her as she giggled silently.

I'm glad Astrid finally found a fella, she thought, and pushed down wistful thoughts about Alleyne's handsome countenance. Though it must be sort of frustrating for the poor guy, stuck on first base while he's courting a skittish virgin. I'm pretty sure she still is, too, from the signs. I love you dearly, anamchara, but that's sort of slow off the mark and he won't wait forever! Get your legs locked around him before he escapes!

The two men stripped to the waist; it was cold, just around freezing with the ground a mixture of melting snow and mud, but working hard in jacket and shirt just got you sweaty and then chilled. They were down at the bottom of a cleft in the basalt rock, anyway, and well out of the wind; you could see the banded layers in the steep slope to the north, and the creek ran behind them with clumps of ice around the rocks in it. Streamside and slope and the rolling hills higher up were densely grown with big trees; fir and hemlock on the upland, maple and cottonwood and alder lower, yew and chinquapin, with the blackened stems of ferns sticking up out of the leaf litter and duff. The smell of decaying leaves and needles was pungent as boots disturbed them, suddenly intensely aromatic as someone crushed the branch of an incense-cedar sapling.

Eilir smiled at her friend as they moved the two-horse team they'd brought along and wrapped a chain around the thicker base of the tree.

Got Alleyne to show off, hey? she signed.

You betcha, Astrid replied, with a smile of smug satisfaction. *He's a wonderful guy but he's still a guy, you know? Which means he's sort of stupid at times. Besides, he looks good with his shirt off.*

Little John's smarter, Eilir signed. *He saw through it.*

He is not! Astrid's hands moved emphatically. *Alleyne just has too noble a nature to suspect anyone!*

Yeah, blond, beautiful and dumb, like someone else I could name but won't—like for example you, Eilir taunted. Astrid stuck her tongue out in reply.

The friends finished their task, jumped free, checked that nobody else was in the way and waved to Crystal, who stood at the horses' heads. The girl urged them forward, and the beasts leaned into their harness. The big log swiveled across rocks, then came down onto the bike path with a thud that echoed up through the soles of her feet. It was far too heavy for the team to drag back while it remained whole, even though they had a two-wheeled lift to put under the forward end to ease the work. There was a good ton of weight involved.

We'll save the upper part, there's some useful wood there, Eilir signed.

The tree being dead already, they didn't have to do more than sketch a sign over it; you had to apologize and explain the need when you cut living wood, the way you did when you killed a beast. They were all children of the Mother and part of Lord Cernunnos' domain, after all.

The men got busy, standing on either side of the log and chopping, while a few of the Dunedain trimmed the branches further up with hatchets and saws. Eilir cradled her longbow in her arms and watched appreciatively. Alleyne was a bit over six feet, and built like an Apollo in one of Mom's books, broad-shouldered and narrow in the waist, long in the arms and legs; the muscle moved like living metal under his winter-pale skin as he swung the felling ax and chips of the rock-hard maple flew, startling yellow-white against the dark ground. Beside him Hordle looked like a related but distinct species, arms like the tree trunk itself, and a thick pelt of dark auburn hair running down his chest onto a belly corded like ship's cable; the log shook under the impact of the heavy double-bitted ax he used.

It was still seasoned hardwood, and the work went slowly. Eilir grinned.

Ah, hard honest work, she signed. *It does me good just to watch it.*

Alleyne's ears burned a little redder. The wood yielded, but slowly; it took only a little more to finish trimming the branches and roll the upper section of the trunk off the path for later attention.

Eilir had been deaf from birth; before it, in fact, when a teenaged Juniper Mackenzie contracted German measles in the fourth month of her pregnancy. That didn't make her other senses more acute, the way many believed; what it did do was encourage her to use and pay attention to them. She'd also spent much of her life in the countryside and amongst its wildlife, around Dun Juniper when it was just her and her mother before the Change; and in mountains and woods, hills and fields all over western Oregon in the years since, hunting, Rangering, or wandering and observing for their own sake. And she had been trained by experts, Sam Aylward not least.

All that told her that *something* was not quite right ...

Mithrilwood had been a state park before the Change, and since then the area all about it had been mostly unpeopled, young forests and abandoned fields growing lush fodder for beast and bird. It normally swarmed with life, even in winter when many of the birds went south; upland game migrated down here from the High Cascades in this season, and everything from beaver and rabbits to deer, elk, coyote, wild boar, bear, cougar and feral tiger were common. The bigger animals would avoid the noise and clatter of humans, though not as widely as they did before the Change. The smaller would be cautious, but ...

She turned and clicked her tongue at Astrid. The other woman was already frowning.

"Hssst!" Astrid Larsson said as she turned, to attract everyone's eyes, and moved her hands in Sign as well: *Someone's near. Watching. Don't let them know they've been seen, but be ready.*

Nobody froze; the dozen Dunedain continued to muscle the big log towards the waiting horses and the two-wheeled drag that would support its forward end. The forest floor was mostly clear of undergrowth, and the trees had closed their canopy long ago.

Then they casually reached for their bows; you had to know Sign as well as Sindarin to be a Ranger. Astrid's silver-veined eyes flicked about. They were in a canyon, one of the many that laced the old state park. Rock stretched up on either hand, layers of basalt cut through by millennia of rushing water. Much of that was frozen this day, on the stone and on the moss-grown limbs of the great trees. In the middle distance a waterfall toned, out of sight around the dogleg to the west, but rumbling through the cold, wet air. That white noise covered conversation, and many of the ordinary sounds of movement.

"Who?" Alleyne Loring said quietly as he donned his mail shirt and buttoned the jacket over it again.

Six heads were close together as they bent to lift the end of the long timber into the clamp and fasten the chain across it. Astrid spoke smiling, as if chatting casually among friends out to find a Yule Log.

"*Yrch*," she said; to the Dunedain that meant *enemies*. "Could be bandits, could be servants of the Lidless Eye. I saw only two that I'm sure of, so they've got some woodcraft."

Eilir Mackenzie nodded and casually stretched with her arms above her head, which gave her an excuse to look about.

I spotted him—the fir over from the boulder with the point, snow knocked off the branch, she signed. The other's behind the boulder?

Astrid nodded as she mentally tallied their strength here. Herself and Eilir, her *anamchara*. Alleyne Loring and John Hordle; first-class warriors, though not exactly Dunedain themselves, not quite. Young Crystal, but she didn't really count for a fight. Only sixteen, and not fully trained; brave, but the weak link, the more so as she was slight-built. Another ten Dunedain, in their late teens or early twenties, six of them Mackenzies and the other four Bearkillers. Everyone had bow and quiver, sword and knife and targe or buckler; you didn't go outdoors without, any more than you'd walk out naked. The two Englishmen had light mail shirts under their jackets; under her own she wore a black leather tunic lined with mesh-mail and nylon; Eilir had on a Clan-style brigandine, a double-ply canvas affair with small metal plates riveted between the layers. Most of the others had something similar, but none was wearing a helmet.

"We don't know how many or why," Astrid said. "So we'll all just walk around the corner of the trail up ahead, and then wait for them—double linear ambush upslope. That way we can shoot without hitting each other. They won't follow close."

Send Crystal on to the Lodge with the horses from there? Eilir signed.

Crystal's face was a little pale, but she glared at Eilir; besides being offended at the implication that she couldn't hold her own with the rest, she also had a furious crush on Astrid at the moment . . . which was *so* embarrassing. Though she was beginning to show signs of transferring it to Alleyne, which would be *infuriating*.

Astrid signed back: No. *Too risky—they might have an ambush along the trail already. We'll go around the corner, drop the log, and . . . wait a minute!*

The word *drop* triggered something in her mind. "Here's what we'll do," she began. "Remember that trick we practiced? Like the old story about how the little furry Halfling men fought the wicked Emperor's troopers?"

Eilir's eyes went from the log to the coils of rope draped around it. Her smile grew, and the faces of her companions went from grave to grinning. They were all young.

We'll have to hurry, she signed.

Twenty minutes later Astrid waited behind a tree, wishing for a war cloak, what Sam Aylward called a ghillie suit, of camouflage cloth sewn all over with loops for twigs and leaves. The wool of her jacket would do, it was woven from natural beige fiber; she breathed shallowly and slowly, lest the puff of vapor give her away, and ignored the drip of melting snow from the branches of the big hemlock. She couldn't see any of her Dunedain, though, except for Alleyne, and that was from the rear where he crouched behind a big basalt rock.

If I can't see them, when I know where they are, the yrch certainly won't. Raven, totem of my sept, watch over us! Queen of Battles, Lady of the Crows, be with us now! To you, Dread lord, we dedicate the harvest of this field!

The canyon widened out a little here, the slopes not quite so steep until they ran into cliff-faces north and south. The old park trail was down fifteen yards below her hiding place, visible between the wide-spaced trunks of the great trees in a twisting line of trodden mud; the horses waited patiently a hundred yards further east, nearer the waterfall—you could see the mist lifting above the icy curve of it from here. The noise would be good cover . . .

There was an arrow on the shelf of her bow, cord to the knock, the whole held in her left hand, and forty-four more in her quiver. Her sword was leaned up against the deep-fissured trunk, a single-edged weapon with a basket hilt of brass and a yard-long blade, and her two-foot circular shield was slung over her back on its carrying strap. Everything ready . . .

A flight of birds rose from the eastward, spooked by movement: the yellow undersides showed clearly as they flitted overhead in long, swooping curves, and the buff-brown-black markings as they sped away. *Meadowlarks*, she thought; they were just getting to be common again. *Which was why—*

The distinctive fluting trill of the birds sounded from above her, close enough to the genuine article to fool most.

"—which is why we picked that call for signaling," she murmured to herself.

It was modulated, though, with stuttering intervals that the living bird wouldn't have used. They spoke to her: *they're coming*, and *thirty of them*.

"Thirty. Ouch. Still, nothing for it."

The first came into view, close enough for her to see the snarl of tension on his thin face. He was dressed in rags and patches, but he carried a good crossbow, and there was a sword worn slantwise across his back with the hilt jutting above his left shoulder, a heavy, single-edged chopping blade. The lone figure stood tense, looking about, then turned and beckoned the unseen band behind him.

Astrid's throat grew tight. She forced a deep breath down into her diaphragm, then let it out, with the tension following it, repeating until her body felt loose and ready. She hated bandits with a passion, even more than she loathed the Protector's men; outlaws had killed her mother, right after the Change, and she'd had to watch. The memory was like meat gone off on a hot summer's day.

Soon now. Don't be too eager. Love not the arrow for its swiftness, or the sword for its bright blade, but the things that these guard.

More men followed, until a dozen stood behind the scout, adding their eyes to his. They weren't in any hurry; they must mean to follow the Dunedain back to the lodge and ring it in, probably for an attack under cover of darkness. More and more, until there were over a score of ragged-gaudy figures. She waited until one looked in precisely the right direction, and until the puzzled cock of his head showed that he'd seen something unnatural.

"Now!" she shouted, snatching up her sword in her right hand.

In the same instant she cut upward, where the stay-rope was secured around the stub of a thick branch. The keen steel went through the hemp and into the tree trunk with a solid thunk; she left the blade embedded in the living wood as she stepped around the trunk for a clear shot. The long arrow came back as she flung the strength of arms and shoulders and gut and hips against the tension of yew and horn and sinew. The double curve of the saddle-bow turned into a pure C as the kiss-ring clamped on the string touched the corner of her mouth.

Eye on the target, not the arrow. There!

Even in the diamond focus of concentration, she saw the mouths below gaping as the log swung down towards them, tumbling free of the loops halfway through its trajectory. The five-hundred-pound balk of maple did a slow spin around its own center before it struck. In a piece of cosmic injustice an end came down right on top of one of the few who'd had the presence of mind to drop to the earth, like a maul in the hands of an angry god or a hammer on a soft-boiled egg. Then the log bounced up and bowled over several more. She could hear the crackle of bone beneath the screams and the heavy, thick *boonnnnk-bonk-bonk* as the log hammered itself to a stop on the rocky ground.

Pick a target, track along until an uninjured man stood gaping with his spear wavering in his hand ...

Snap.

The string of her recurved bow slapped against the bracer on her left wrist. The arrow flashed out in a smooth, shallow curve, the razor edges of the broad-head twirling as the fletching spun the shaft. It struck with a wet smacking sound audible even fifty yards away; the man goggled at the feathers that bloomed against his breastbone and collapsed, kicking and coughing out blood and probably pieces of lung. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Alleyne stand and draw his longbow to the ear, sighting as calmly as if this was a day's practice at the butts; he was a swordsman rather than an archer by avocation, but he was still a better-than-average shot. On both slopes the Dunedain were up, and a shower of long cedarwood arrows rained down on the advance party of the enemy force, hissing as they flew, and another flight, and another.

Not all struck. The strangers looked like bandits, and they reacted with the feral swiftness needed to

survive in that profession. All but the dead or wounded dove for cover, and a flurry of crossbow bolts and arrows came back at the ambushers; one bolt went by overhead with an unpleasant *vvvvwhhppt* sound of cloven air and hammered into a chinquapin to stand buzzing like an angry wasp. Astrid ignored it and shot again, again, then dropped her bow and reached up for the next rope as the remainder of the gang ran shouting around the curve and into sight. It wound tight around her left forearm, and a quick snatch and wrench of her right hand put the cord-wound hilt of her long sword in her grip.

"*A Elbereth Gilthoniel!*" she shouted, from the bottom of her lungs.

She took three steps forward and launched herself into the air. The weight wrenched at her left arm, and she felt the strong pull of the rope and the springy branch it was lashed to bending beneath her solid hundred and sixty pounds of body and gear. Momentum swept her forward with blurring speed, higher above the surface as she fell towards the trail, skimming in a great arch that left her barreling down the trail towards the enemy at head-height.

"*A Elbereth Gilthoniel!*" she shouted again, a great, high-soaring silver trumpet-call as she flew.

"*Fuck me!*" a snaggle-toothed man screamed, as much in astonishment as fear, just before her boot heels struck him in the face.

Crack.

The bandit was flung half a dozen feet backward at the collision, his face a red pulp of flesh and bone fragments. Something heavy and strong seemed to flow up from her feet through her body, cracking it like a whip and snapping her teeth together with a painful click, but she dropped to the ground and let the rope fall away, twitching her shoulder to slide the shield around to where she could run her forearms through the loop. Eilir dropped beside her, jack-knifing in the air, her sword and buckler flicking into her hands even as she landed. A spearman gaped at her, then thrust overarm. Eilir ducked under it in a smooth continuation of her fall, whirling as she crouched to snap her short-sword at the back of his knee in a hocking stroke. There was a grisly popping sound like a taut cable parting and he went over backward, screaming and clutching at the injury as if he could squeeze the hamstring back to wholeness.

Astrid brought targe and blade up as another bandit ran at her *anamchara*, stepped forward with a raking stride of her long legs. Her backsword came up and around and down with a looping cut as her right foot squelched into the mud, flashing down in a blurring arc with the weight and the flexing snap of her whole body behind it.

Crack! as the edge cut, and a billman was left staring at the ashwood stub of his weapon's haft as the business end pinwheeled away; she recovered and killed him with a snapping lunge to the neck, fast as a frog's tongue. He dropped with blood spraying from his severed carotids, the red unearthly bright against the dun colors of winter. The enemy were trying to rally, but their heads whipped about as Dunedain ran down the hills to either side, looking to be twice their actual numbers as they leapt and shouted, their blades out and bright. The outlaw gang froze for crucial seconds as the Dunedain war cry rang out from a dozen throats:

"*Lacho calad! Dredo morn!*"

Then the rest were beside the two leaders, Alleyne to her left with his heater-shaped shield blazoned with five roses up and his blade ready.

"*St. George for England! A Loring! A Loring!*" he called, handsome face set and grim.

Little John Hordle came thundering up beyond Eilir with his great sword gripped in the two-handed style.

"*Sod this for a game of soldiers!*" he shouted.

The great blade spun in a horizontal circle. It sliced through a wooden shield and gouged bone-deep into the arm beneath, and took off half the man's face on the upstroke, like a knife topping a boiled egg. A spray of droplets hung in the air for an instant, a red curve splaying out like a ripple in a pond.

"*You bints are fucking mad!*" he went on in a roar like a foghorn in a fit, as he kicked a spearman in the stomach and crushed his skull with the ball pommel of his heavy blade. "*Who do you think you are, Errol sodding Flynn?*"

The enemy wavered, then as one man turned and ran. A dozen paces were enough to put them around the bend in the trail, and the ground to its left was near-vertical cliff. Astrid swung sword and

shield up.

"*Hold!*" she shouted. "Rally, Dunedain! No pursuit, it could be a trick. Miniel, get back up the tree and tell me what's happening! Everyone else, get your bows and recover arrows."

Her head twisted back and forth, skimming, and she was suddenly conscious of the sweat running down her flanks. One of her own was down, a black-braided girl named Sadb, clutching at a crossbow bolt in her thigh and struggling not to scream; a boy knelt and vomited, a pressure-cut on his scalp showing where he'd been clouted with something hard; a few others had hurts that ranged from slight to one that would need a few stitches. There were none of the sucking chest-wounds or gut-stabs or pulped bones or depressed-fracture blows to the skull that meant a good chance of death.

About what you'd expect from a good ambush, she thought with relief. *Always a lot cheaper than a stand-up fight, and we caught them flat-footed. Not had for something improvised on the spot!*

Eilir jerked her head, and red-headed Kevin sheathed his blade and ran to Sadb; he was their best medico. Astrid pulled a horn from a sling at her waist. It was ivory, cream-colored with age—originally part of a tusk at Larsdalen, brought back from a safari her great-grandfather had made with Teddy Roosevelt—and set with silver bands at the mouthpiece. She set it to her lips and blew, a long *huuuuuuuu*, then three shorter blasts. That would let the rest of the Dunedain force at the lodge know what was going on; it meant *enemy* and *come quickly*; an answering call came echoing down the canyon walls almost immediately. That would give them enough blades to run the bandit gang to earth and wipe them out.

The rest of her band went about the after-battle chores, retrieving arrows and giving the enemy wounded the mercy-stroke. Whimpers and screams died away to silence.

"Astrid!" a voice called. "Astrid!"

That was Crystal, back with the horses. She had her bow in her hand, though it shook like an aspen leaf.

"I ... I ... he came at me and then turned back, and I ..." she said, lapsing into English.

A bandit was on the trackway not far in front of her, trying to pull himself off it with his hands; an arrow stood jerking in his spine, and his legs were limp.

"Well done, Crystal!" Astrid called, pleased. A memory of some satisfaction teased at her for a moment. "That's good work for your first fight! *Algareb cu!* Now finish him."

The girl stared at her, eyes wide, her mouth opening and closing.

"Don't let him suffer, Crystal," she said impatiently; the bandit collapsed and lay motionless save for the heaving of his chest, eyes blank as his fingers scrabbled feebly in the mud. "Everyone's busy. Put your dirk in under the breastbone and push up and a little to the left, that will do it clean."

"Sloppy-looking lot," Alleyne went on thoughtfully as she turned back.

Astrid nodded agreement. The dead men were mostly skinny, scarred, hairy, and had stunk badly even before edged metal ripped into body cavities; lips drawn back in the death-grimace showed teeth as much yellow or brown as white, though none were older than herself and some as young as Crystal. They'd probably grown up half-feral in communities barely surviving without the tools or skills or stock to make a success of farming, or in bands that had been preying on passersby and neighbors since the dying times just after the Change, or some might be runaway peons from the Protectorate by origin. Lice danced in one sparse beard that jutted skyward from a body arched back in a semicircle; that made her itch by reflex, and make sure nobody was standing too long near a body while they yanked out arrows. Lice carried typhus; they'd have to leave the bodies a full ten days, or burn them, and scrub everyone and do a clothes wash.

The bandits were clad in a patchwork of pre-Change scraps, badly tanned leather, or the crudest and cheapest sort of modern homespun. One or two wore better clothes, doubtless taken from the body of some victim, though they were just as filthy and on their way to being ragged.

Banditry wasn't a very well-paying profession for most practitioners, particularly in winter.

"Well armed, though," she said thoughtfully.

Their crossbows were good, smoothly finished with rifle-style wood stocks and leaf-spring steel bows, and spanning cranks at their belts; the others had competently shaped yew bows; all of them had

some sort of sword, most often the heavy machete-like choppers known as falchions ... or as machetes, outside the Valley. Several had boiled-leather jerkins strapped with pieces of sheet metal, and a couple had bowl or kettle helmets.

"Yes, suspiciously well armed," Alleyne agreed. "And the weapons are far too uniform."

"Now that you mention it—" Astrid began, and then whirled at a sound of distress.

Crystal was kneeling beside the dead bandit, being noisily sick into a growing pool of blood. Eilir made a *tsk* sound with her lips.

Sometimes, soul-sister, you are sort of insensitive, she signed, and went over to put an arm around the girls shoulders and urge her away from the body.

Astrid blinked. *Well, I said she'd done well,* she thought, then dismissed it.

The horses were restive, tossing their heads; then they pricked their ears and snorted. More hooves pounded on the trail, and then another dozen mounted Dunedain came up, as many again running on foot beside them gripping the stirrup-leathers for support, all well spattered with muck and woods-duff thrown up by busy hooves. Astrid waved them forward, and turned back to Alleyne.

"—now that you mention it, yes, they are well armed," she said. "Normally bandits just have odds and ends, no two alike. The ones we ran out of the lodge here a couple of years back, they were using it for a base, they were certainly like that ... and these all have shoes, see? Fairly new shoes, too."

The robbers' footwear was modern, tanned leather uppers with laces, and either hobnail-studded alder wood or pieces of rubber tire for soles. Not expensive: village cobblers and workshops in a dozen towns from the Protectorate to Corvallis turned out the like. A Mackenzie crofter might have worn them, or a Bearkiller tenant-farmer. But oddly uniform, again; not identical, nothing was these days when handmade was the rule, but as if they'd all come from the same place. She frowned, absently taking her bow as someone handed it to her, and a handful of arrows with bloody points and shafts. Her hands moved automatically, wiping blood off the steel, checking the fletching and slipping them back into her quiver.

"Now, if I was trying to make a gang of bandits more effective, what would I give them?" she mused aloud.

Eilir was back. She and John Hordle began to speak simultaneously, in Sign and aloud, then looked at each other and grinned. Alleyne answered instead.

"Weapons, and in this season, shoes. A man with chilblains can't fight very well."

The lookout she'd posted called down from his perch high in a Douglas fir. "They're coming back! More of them!" Then, after an instant: "I think someone's after them. They look like they're running! Running hard!"

"Positions!" Astrid said. "Kevin, you stay with Sadb."

She joined Alleyne behind his boulder this time; there weren't as many good positions, with their numbers more than doubled. He was chuckling as she settled in. At her arched brow, he leaned his head towards the trail.

"Eilir is reusing the rope," he said. "I like that girl's spirit, damn me if I don't."

Astrid chuckled herself as she saw the trip-rope deployed; covered in mud, it would be nearly invisible while lying slack. There wasn't time for anything fancy, just a knot around one tree and a half hitch around another.

"Eilir's *lawar*," she agreed happily.

The first of the bandits came around the bend again, running hard. The rope snapped up, and three went down like puppets with their strings cut. A clash of metal and war cries sounded from behind them; somebody *was* chasing them. And then she noticed another figure with the outlaws; this one had a white-and-brown camouflage surcoat over his mail hauberk; both were knee-length. Similar cloth masked his kite-shaped shield, and a conical nose-guarded helmet, his blade was a double-edged longsword.

The rest of the Dunedain stood as she did, and the outlaws screamed in despair at the sight of better than thirty bows drawn to the ear. A few tried to run on the Dunedain bows snapped, and nearly every one of the slashing volley struck.

"Surrender!" Astrid called, carefully not adding any promise of quarter. "Throw down and kneel!"

Most of the survivors threw down their weapons and knelt in the mud, hands clasped on top of their heads, silent amid the moans and screams of the wounded.

The man in the knight's hauberk didn't; he just shouted wordlessly and charged, blade up and shield covering his body from knees to nose. Hordle's bow snapped; the bodkin point slammed into the shield and the shaft punched through the metal and wood, stripping its feathers to flutter to the ground as it did. The man pivoted as if he'd been hit in the shoulder with a sledgehammer, and it must have felt much like that. At close range, a heavy bow could smash a bodkin point right through even the best armor. This went through shield and arm and hauberk, snapping the links of the riveted mail like cloth, then through the shoulder bone and out the other side of the hauberk as well. He pitched over backwards and lay writhing.

The pursuers behind them came into view, and stumbled to a halt at the sight. There were two dozen of them, armed with broad-bladed spears and crossbows or pre-Change compound hunting bows, short swords and daggers and bucklers. All were clad with rough practicality for a foray in the winter woods, but the leader drew her eye. He was a stocky man in a black robe over mail-and-lamellar armor, with a poleax in his hands and a heavy broadsword belted at his waist. He wore a helmet with a neck flare and an eyeslit visor, now pushed up; on the brow of it was a black cross in a white disk, and the face below it was covered in a close-cropped brown beard. When he handed the long-hafted ax-spear-warhammer to a follower and pulled off the helm, it showed bowl-cut hair and a tonsure in the center of it, the artificial bald spot gleaming with sweat. He passed a gauntleted hand over it.

"Bind them," he snapped to his followers, and then waved at the Dunedain as the arrows were returned to their quivers.

"Hello, Lady Astrid," he went on genially, climbing towards her, puffing like someone who'd come hard and fast for miles with fifty pounds of steel strapped to his body.

The men behind him worked in pairs, one holding a spearpoint to a bandit's neck, the other pulling cords from his belt to bind the robbers' arms behind them, tight-cinched at elbow and wrist. Those badly wounded were given the mercy-stroke. There was no point in letting them suffer until their inevitable execution.

"*Mae govannen*, Brother ... ?" Astrid said.

"Father Andrew," the man said, smiling broadly; he was about her own age. "Ordained priest, and also a humble brother monk of the Benedictine order. I don't think you noticed me, my child, but you were with Lord Bear when he visited the abbey two years ago, for the treaty talks."

That meant he was one of Abbot-Bishop Dmwoski's men, from Mount Angel. The abbey had organized survival around the town and governed its own small state there now; it was a thumb thrust into the Protectorate. There was absolutely no love lost between Dmwoski and the Protector, either, or between the abbot and what he called the blasphemous Antipope Leo, the prelate Armingier sponsored in Portland. Anathemas as well as arrows had flown over *that* border.

"I'm with the border guards," he went on. "We had a report of livestock missing from a farmer with an outlying steading, and tracked them well past our usual patrol range. We spotted these scum crossing the creek south of Scott's Mills."

Astrid's brows went up. That was about twenty miles north; deserted country, which made boundaries a bit theoretical.

"We thought they might be trying to slip down over the Santiam and into the Mackenzie country," the soldier-monk said. "So I called out some militia and gave chase. We lost their tracks for a day. But when we found them again, they came straight south and into your territory. I hope you don't mind our pursuing onto your land, but it seemed a shame to give up. Particularly when they hadn't spotted us."

"Thank you very much, Father Andrew," she said. "We appreciate the help. They'd have scattered if you weren't behind to corral them. Chasing them down might have cost us lives—probably would have. An ambush is one thing, but a running fight is something else again."

He shrugged robed and armored shoulders. "Just doing our job, my daughter, looking after the flock. And there were a few too many for us to tackle comfortably ourselves. It's a comfort to have you

Dunedain taking up residence in this stretch of forest. They're too cursed convenient for woods-running swine like these otherwise."

Alleyne called to her. "This one's no bandit," he said, as he stripped off a man's sword belt and tossed it aside.

It was the man Hordle had shot. Blood welled out around the broken arrow-shaft, but he clutched it and glared hatred at her. Another young face, a little younger than her own, but neatly shaved; when Alleyne pulled off the coif—a mail-covered, tight-fitting leather hood—his light-brown hair was moderately long in front, cropped like a crew cut behind the ears. A blunt face with an old scar on one cheek, and gray-blue eyes. Beneath the armor he was broad-shouldered and thick-armed, not skinny-scrawny like most of the outlaw gang. It was the body of a man who ate well but worked sweating-hard with sword and shield and lance while wearing full armor.

"False priest and devil-worshipping whore," he rasped, and tried to spit at her. "Kill me now!"

The sword that lay a little distance away was a broad double-edged slashing type, though with a respectable point, the classic Norman sword that most of the Portland Protective Association's men used. She looked down at his feet. Good boots, but no golden spurs. Still ...

"Protectorate knight," she said. "A man-at-arms wouldn't be so bold."

She looked up at the priest. "Shall we dispose of them, or do you claim the privilege, Father Andrew? You saw them first, after all, and on abbey soil."

He shrugged. "The abbot and Lord Bear and the Lady Juniper all agreed this forest of Mithrilwood was Dunedain land, and that you have the right to dispense justice here, my lady. High, middle and low."

"Only as custodian for the Dunedain Rangers," she corrected, not wanting to claim more than her due.

Another shrug. John Hordle had been talking in Sign with Eilir. He nodded and went over to the fallen knight; a muffled scream broke past clenched teeth as Hordle gripped the stub of the arrow between thumb and forefinger and casually drew it out, then stripped off the mail hauberk. That was normally a complex business, but the big man handled the other as if he had been a doll, despite respectable height and solid weight. When the armor had been tossed aside he ripped open the man's gambeson and shirt over the uninjured right shoulder.

"Ahh," Astrid said.

There was a symbol tattooed there, a circle with a Chinese ideograph in it. She'd learned that Eddie Liu had adopted that as his blazon in mockery; it was the glyph for *Poland*, which was where his maternal ancestors had come from. Liu was very dead, Eilir had killed him last summer, but ...

"You're a liege-man of his," she said grimly.

The captive spat at her again, making a worse job of it; his mouth must be dry with pain and shock. "I'm brother to Lady Mary, the dowager Baroness Ger-vais. My name is Sir Jason Mortimer of Loiston manor," he said. "Baron Gervais was my liege lord and my kin by marriage. His handfast men will never rest until we've avenged him!"

Eilir made a clicking sound with her tongue, and Astrid looked over at her. *He probably hired the bandits*, she signed. *What's the old phrase, plausible deniability?*

As if on cue, one of the bound men spoke: "You motherfucker!" he swore at the knight. "You said there'd be food and women and a place of our own for the winter!"

"We'll keep you for ransom, then, Sir Jason," Astrid said; nobody paid any attention to the outlaw's outburst. "And it'll be a heavy one." She grinned. "You can explain back home how a pair of girls captured you. The same ones who killed your liege-lord, by the way."

She turned to the priest and away from the knight's incoherent curses. "Why don't you and your patrol stay with us tonight at Mithrilwood Lodge, Father Andrew? It's no trouble, we've plenty of space, and it'll spare you a winter bivouac." At his slight hesitation and frown: "And not all of us are of the Old Religion. I'm sure there are some who'd be grateful to make confession, if you wished, and receive communion if you've the Bread and Wine with you."

That seemed to tip the balance. "Most generous of you, my child."

"We've some of Brannigan's Special Ale, too," Astrid said impishly, and just a bit louder. "We traded

venison and boar for it, but that's not all gone either. Roast yearling boar tonight, and scalloped potatoes, and cauliflower with cheese, and dried-blueberry tarts with whipped cream to follow."

The warrior-monk's company of militiamen suppressed a cheer, and let grins run free. Mount Angel had a winery of note and fine maltsters, but Brannigan's brew was famous all over the Valley. Juniper Mackenzie had made a song about it years ago, and it was sung in taverns from Ashland to Boise. Hot food and dry beds were a great deal more attractive than damp sleeping bags and trail rations, as well.

"Let's finish up here, then," Astrid said.

The monk addressed the half-dozen other captives who waited on their knees. "Do any of you wish to confess your sins and save your miserable sin-stained souls from Hell? No?"

Astrid's face was calmly lovely as she looked at the row of men, kneeling in the mud with elbows and wrists lashed behind them. A few wept or babbled; most were silent and shocked, a few bleeding from wounds.

"Does anyone think there's any doubt these are outlaws, bandits and wolf-heads, the enemies general of human kind?" she said formally, looking from face to face of the Dunedain, and then to Alleyne and Little John Hordle.

"That's bugging obvious, if you ask me," Hordle said.

Nobody else bothered to do more than nod assent. Hordle hefted the long, heavy sword he carried, checking for nicks, and Father Andrew took back his poleax, running an experienced thumb down the edge. Two of his men unlimbered their axes. Eilir nodded herself, and then sighed in silent regret; Astrid smiled at her.

You always were tender-hearted, soul-sister, she signed. *Do you want to ask mercy for any of them?*

No, I'm afraid not. Though they might have been decent enough men, with different luck, Eilir replied.

"But they are as they are," Astrid said. Then she raised her voice slightly, in a tone of calm command: "Behead them every one, and that instantly."

Chapter Five

North Corvallis, Oregon

January 10th, 2008/Change Year 9

The lands claimed by the Faculty Senate of Oregon State University—in effect, by the city-state of Corvallis—began where the village of Adair had been, before the Change. The steep crest of Hospital Hill to the west overlooked Highway 99 from less than a quarter mile away; on it beetled a small but squat-strong fortress of stone and concrete and steel with a round tower rearing on its eastern edge. The snouts of engines showed, ready to throw yard-long darts, steel roundshot and glass globes of clinging fire four times that distance.

As Michael Havel watched a light blinked from it, as bright as burning lime and mirrors could make it, flashing on the news of their arrival southward to the posts that would relay the message to the city. Most of the village east of the highway was brush-grown rubble; a few houses had been linked by cinderblock and angle iron and barbed wire into an enclosed farmstead, with barns and outbuildings about, and a sign—"Lador's Fine Liquor and Provisions"—showing that it sold to passersby as well. The dwellers had heard the fort's bell and turned out from field and barn with bill and spear and crossbow, then relaxed when they saw it was friendly Bearkillers, remaining to stare and comment at the size of the party and its members.

He'd brought a dozen armored A-listers along for swank—he had to keep up the Outfit's credit with the Corvallans, who were overbearing enough as it was. Their lances swayed slightly as the standing horses shifted their weight from hoof to hoof, and the whetted steel of the heads glittered in the pale sun of a winter's noon. It was one of the rare clear January days, only a few high wisps of cloud in a sky pale blue from the Coast Range on his right—he could see the four-thousand-foot treeclad summit of Mary's Peak, a rarity in winter—to the High Cascades in the far distance on his left, hints of dreaming

snowfields at the edge of sight. Overhead a red-tailed hawk floated, the spread feathers of its wings sculpting the air, then stooped on a rabbit. The air was crisp and colder than usual, cold enough that the frost still rimed grass and twig and brush with white even at noon; the breaths of men and horses steamed, a light fog strong with the mounts' grassy scent. A four-horse wagon brought up the rear with their gear, a few household staff walking beside it and the Bearkiller's chief physician riding atop; he'd lost a foot to some Eaters soon after the Change, and loathed riding as well.

Havel and Signe were mounted and armed but in civilian garb; tooled-leather boots, broad-brimmed hats, brown serge jackets and precious intact pre-Change bluejeans, almost new, and cunningly reinforced on the inner thighs with soft-tanned deerskin. Their eldest children were with them, eight-year-old twin girls identical down to the silver rings on the ends of their long, tow-colored braids and the slant to their cornflower-blue eyes; he'd left young Mike Jr. behind at Larsdalen, with the staff and nannies and indulgent grandfather and step-grandmother, since he was at the stage where he could move pretty quickly but still had a toddler's suicidal lack of common sense. Mary and Ritva were excited enough to bounce up and down in their silver-studded charro-style saddles, or would have been if they hadn't ridden nearly as long as they'd been walking. They pointed and exclaimed as the drawbridge on the fort came down and the gates swung open.

Eric Larsson commanded the Bearkiller escort; he had a crest of scarlet-dyed horsehair nodding from front to rear of his round bowl helm, gold on the rivets that held the nasal bar at the front of it and the mail aventail at the rear and the hinged cheek-pieces, and more on his belt buckle and the hilt of his backsword. The metalwork of his war-saddle was polished bright, and the animal he rode was eighteen hands at the shoulder and groomed to glossy black perfection, an agile giant of Hanoverian warmblood descent. The man made a hand signal to the rider beside him; Luanne took up the trumpet slung on a bandolier across her chest and blew a complex measure. The column of lancers reined their mounts about as one *to* face westward, turning their formation into a double line; then they brought their lances down in salute until the points almost touched the patched asphalt of the roadway, and back up again in a flutter of long, narrow pennants.

A small party came down from the fort, four mounted figures, the metal of their armor colored an inconspicuous greenish-brown that barely showed against the thick woods of the hills behind; the McDonald Forest had been University property even before the Change, and well cared for. Havel recognized the one who led them, a medium-tall man with brown hair and brown eyes behind the three-bar visor of his helmet and a pair of sports glasses.

"Major Jones," he said.

"Lord Bear," the other man replied; he was in his early thirties, of medium height but deep-chested and broad-armed; he'd been a Society fighter and teaching assistant in the Faculty of Agriculture before the Change.

He saluted; Havel returned the gesture, turning in the saddle to make it towards the banner one of the Corvallans carried, its pole resting in a ring on his right stirrup. The flag was orange, with the brown-and-black head of a beaver on it, attempting a ferocious rodentine scowl; privately Havel thought it was dorky beyond words, but it had been the University's symbol for a long time and they were devoted to it.

"Welcome, Lord Bear, in the name of the people and the Faculty Senate of Corvallis," Jones said formally.

Then he stripped off his metal-backed gauntlet and shook hands, a dry, firm grip: "Good to see you again, Mike. And you, Signe, Eric, Luanne."

Eric had been looking at the weapons his escort carried. "Finally got that quick-loading crossbow working, Pete?" he said.

"Yeah," the officer said. "Gear, ratchet and bicycle chain in the butt and fore-stock, crank inset underneath. Turn it six times, and the weapon's cocked and ready to go as soon as you pull the trigger. Double the rate of fire of the old type and you can do it lying down, or in the saddle."

Havel's crooked smile quirked. "Easy to build and repair?" he said.

"Well ... we're still working on some problems with production and maintenance," Jones said

reluctantly. "How's that car-jack thing your father-in-law is working on?"

"Classified," Havel said.

Jones smirked, which meant he thought *classified* translated as *haven't got it working yet*. Usually that was true, but in this case it was precisely the opposite. He wanted to spring it on the city-state as a done deal in a month or two when they reequipped everyone, to take their pretensions of technological superiority down a peg. Nobody denied they'd come through the Change unusually well, but the way they acted as if they were the last island of civilization in a world of bare-assed savages got a bit old after a while.

The Corvallon looked at their party. "Astrid and Eilir aren't along?"

"They're coming separately," Signe said. "They've got ... a bit of a present to show around, you might say."

"And the Rangers are independents themselves, these days," Havel said.

"Since we all agreed to give them that stretch of woods. Sort of prickly about it, too."

Damned if I'm going to call them the Dunedain Rangers, he added to himself. *Bad enough I have to do the Mad Max on Horseback thing myself.*

One thing he *did* like about Corvallis was that it was a bit less given to weird names than the rest of the present-day Valley.

"Ken's not coming?" the Corvallon officer *went* on, looking surprised as Havel shook his head. "Your father-in-law usually doesn't pass up an opportunity to haunt our bookstores and the Library."

"Tell me," Havel said, thinking of the bills the Outfit had paid in grain and wool, tuns of wine and barrels of salt pork; they'd had words on the matter.

I'd have gotten even madder if the stuff he dug up weren't so helpful sometimes.

Books were expensive these days, unless you were talking salvaged paperback copies of Tom Clancy or the like, and even those were getting rare and fragile in this damp climate. Real books on something useful were pricey, either because they were irreplaceable—books made good kindling and a lot of libraries had burned after the Change—or because they'd been new-printed with hand-operated presses on dwindling stores of pre-Change paper. Or on the even more expensive rag-pulp type Corvallis had started making recently. The city-state had a biweekly newsletter, all of four pages, and copies cost more than a day's wages for a laboring man.

Luanne chuckled. "We unloaded the grandkids on Ken—Mike's youngest, and both of ours. And since he and honorable step-mom-in-law Pam had the bad taste to produce two more at their decrepit ages, he's up to his distinguished wizardly white beard in rugrats. Labor-intensive work."

Jones nodded. "Tell me," he said, and touched the rein to the neck of his horse to fall in beside them. "Between the kids and the farm and the weaving, I don't know how the hell Nancy stays sane when I'm out on patrol, even with Mom and the hired help."

"We do have our doc along," Signe said. "He needs some supplies."

Jones nodded proudly; Corvallis was the best place in Oregon to buy such. Havel shot a glance at his brother-in-law, and Eric's hand chopped forward. The column rumbled into motion southward.

*"OSU our hats are off to you,
Beavers, Beavers, fighters through and through
We'll cheer thru-out the land,
We'll root for every stand,*

That's made for old OSU!

*Watch our pikes go tearing down the field;
Those of iron, their strength will never yield
Hail! Hail! Hail! Hail! Hail to old OSU!"*

Christ Jesus, what an abortion of a national anthem! Mike Havel thought, behind a gravely respectful face. *Just as well we don't have one. Though we use "March of Cambreadth" a lot, at least the lyrics aren't outright stupid and it's got a great tune.*

Then again, at least the city-state wasn't pretending to be something it wasn't. There were half a dozen governments in this general part of the continent that claimed to be the United States, from single small towns to one that covered most of southwestern Idaho. All of them were rather nasty dictatorships. *They* used "The Star-Spangled Banner," which was not only presumptuous of them but to Mike Havel's way of thinking in extremely bad taste.

The Corvallans weren't just singing. Pompom-wielding cheerleaders led the crowd through the fight song, their short-skirted orange-and-black costumes swinging as they kicked and leapt. That was fairly ludicrous too, but then, he'd thought cheerleading was dumb even back in the eighties when he'd been on the bench and the local maidens were egging on the audience for the Hancock High Wolverines. As a teenager he'd considered football the chosen sport of idiots; track and field had been what he liked, and cross-country skiing, and by choice he'd hunt or ride his Harley or tinker with its engine or even work chores at home instead of doing head-butts with behemoths. The little Upper Peninsula high school hadn't had talent to waste, though, and he'd been effectively conscripted as the fastest running back they'd had for years.

And wasn't that a complete waste of time, he thought.

Which didn't prevent him observing with interest when a pretty girl shook it hard, then or now, and there was some righteous booty here; he caught Signe raising an eyebrow at him, and smiled back at her.

"Monogamous, alskling, not blind," he murmured.

The cheerleaders looked even odder doing their leaps and pyramids in front of ranks of armored troops standing to attention. The sixteen-foot pikes made a steel-tipped forest above them, points catching the red light of sundown in a manifold glitter as the sun set over the low hills to the west; the rest stood with crossbows held at present arms. He supposed the folk of the city had gotten used to it, cheerleaders and all.

Corvallis proper had about eight or nine thousand people inside its walls, and besides the militia battalion a quarter of them were out to see the visitors, singing along heartily and then cheering, plus people from the countryside round about. They made a huge dun mass in the open space between Highway 99, the railway, and the old Hewlett-Packard plant to the east and the Willamette River beyond, trampling up to the edge of the mulched, harvested truck gardens. The low-slung campus-style buildings of the high-tech factory had been taken over for noxious trades not allowed in the city proper; he could smell the whiff of leather curing in the tanning pits, and see acrid charcoal smoke from the squat brick chimney of a foundry.

Mary and Ritva were quiet behind him; they were well-mannered kids. He'd been brought up that way himself, in a straightlaced rural-Lutheran tradition enforced with love, discipline and an occasional swat on the butt when necessary. He could sense their excitement at the huge crowd, though; they'd never seen any place larger than Larsdalen. And their awe at the city wall, a little to the south. It wasn't higher or thicker than the one around their home; in fact, it was pretty similar, down to the girder-reinforced boulder-and-concrete construction.

But a hell of a lot longer, he thought.

Nearly eight miles in circuit, an immense feat of labor. Two major bandit attacks and a large raid out of the Protectorate had bounced off it like buckshot off a tank in years past, but he thought the Corvallans tended to overestimate the security it gave them.

After the anthem, a delegation walked up to him. He swung down from the saddle and waited courteously; there were about two dozen of them, and they took a fair bit of hand-shaking and honored-to-see-you-sir-or-ma'ams. That was the problem: the President, the Provost, the representatives of the Faculty Senate ... back right around the Change, they'd gotten a lot done here because it was obvious what needed doing, and they'd have died if they didn't do it. And the mechanisms they'd set up went on working well enough, as long as the rest of the world cooperated by not changing much either. But try to get a policy change ... right now, just getting them all in the same spot at the same time was like pushing rocks uphill.

They're tired of fighting and want to relax and enjoy life, he thought. *Pity the world won't cooperate.*

When the formalities were over and the troops and spectators had marched off, the Bearkiller party and Major Jones walked their horses through the entry complex. That was a little more difficult than it would have been at Larsdalen; here they'd overlapped two sections of the city wall, so that the entrance was at right angles to it. You had to turn sharp left to get through the outer portal, go a hundred yards with walls on either side, then abruptly right again to enter the city through the inner gate. That meant that nothing longer than a wagon could come straight at the leaves of either entryway, even if someone filled in the perimeter ditch.

Eric looked up at the complex of tower and wall and sighed as the iron clatter of hoofbeats on pavement echoed back from the concrete and stone of their heights.

"Getting fortification envy?" Havel asked quietly. "Theirs is bigger and harder than ours?"

"Well ... yeah, bossman. It'd be harder to get a shot at the weak point where the leaves of the gate meet with this setup."

"Nah, it wouldn't. 'Cause the gate ain't the weak spot back home. They made their gates of timber here, with sheet steel bolted onto the surface."

Eric thumped himself on the forehead, a fairly loud process when you were wearing a metal-backed gauntlet and a helmet. "And ours are solid welded steel. Probably stronger than the wall."

"It'd be quicker to dig the concrete and stone out from around," Havel agreed. He made a gesture up and around. "What happened here is that someone got a bright idea out of a history book. Your esteemed father tends to do that too. Sometimes it's brilliant. Sometimes it's a waste of time."

Behind him Ritva giggled. "Dad's right, Uncle Eric, and you're wrong." Her sister chimed in, and they chanted: "*So he gets to sing the 'I was right song.'*"

"Silence, peanut," Havel said affectionately, turning and winking at her. There was one more formality as they came out of the gatehouse: having their swords peace-bonded, as all edged weapons over ten inches had to be within the wall. That meant a thin wrapper of copper wire, sealed with a lead disk crimped in something that looked like a heavy-duty paper punch; that stamped the beaver-head symbol of the University into the soft metal. The wire didn't make it impossible to draw the sword, or even difficult; it just meant that it was obvious if you'd done so, and so simplified police-work.

Law here said every family had to keep its militia weapons at home and always ready, but most people walking the streets didn't bother to carry a long blade, which looked a bit unnatural to him now. Back in Bearkiller territory, a farmer plowing did it with sword slung at the hip, and a spear or crossbow or whatever across the handles. These days you didn't need them all that often, but when you did you needed them very badly indeed, and the occasions came without warning. You put on your weapons when you went outdoors, like your hat.

They turned their horses right along Monroe at the red-brick Julian Hotel—now a barracks for militia doing their wall-duty—and continued west past the white-plastered Italianate pile of the old courthouse with its central clock-tower, which provoked more rubbernecking. Mary spoke up; he flattered himself he could tell her voice from Ritva's, and was right about three-quarters of the time. Except when they were trying to fool him, which happened every so often.

"Dad, how can they have all these people in one place? Thousands of them!"

"About eight thousand, punkin. Ten times what we have at Larsdalen and a little more."

"What do they all *eat*? They couldn't walk out to their fields! It's too far!"

He smiled; one thing he liked about the Changed world was that nobody assumed food and goods magically appeared in shops shrink-wrapped in plastic, not even kids, and not even the kids of the big boss. Not even the people who really *did* believe in magic; they were farmers too. He pointed to the railway that ran across their path, along NW Sixth Street.

"That runs along out into the farmlands south of here. Corvallan farmers don't make as much of their own tools and cloth as ours do—they buy it from the city-folk instead with the food they don't eat. And there's another railroad that goes west all the way to the ocean, at Newport, so they can bring in fish from there. The rails were laid before the Change, but the Corvallans keep them up. It's easy to haul wagons on rails, easier than on the roads; and they have boats on the river, and they buy from us and the Mackenzies and some of the people further south—the McClintocks, a couple of others. And some

things come from even further away, like cattle from all the way over the Cascades."

And let's not go into taxes and such, he thought, as the two girls nodded gravely. Sufficient unto the day. I didn't know shit about economics until experience and Ken Larsson showed me I had to.

Just then the streetlamps began to go on. They were gaslights, fed by methane from the town's sewage works, sparse and not very bright to anyone who remembered electricity. The girls and a couple of the younger house-staff near the wagon still gasped in delight as the lamplighters held their long rods up, nudged open the glass shutters at the tops of the metal standards and snapped sparks that turned into yellow flame. Near the river the buildings they showed were mostly warehouses or small factories of frame and brick; fire had gone through the riverfront on the night of the Change, when an airliner out of Portland crashed, and more later in the riots and fighting. The streets were clean, but there was a yeasty smell in the air, the sort you got from bulk storage of farm produce. Signs hung creaking above doors, advertising millers and maltsters, dealers in hops and cloth and salvaged bulk metals, leather and glassware, makers of disk-plows and reapers and sewing machines, purveyors of fine sewing thread—or as fine as you could get without cotton—and custom gear-trains, hydraulic power systems, livery stables that rented the teams for railroads, blacksmiths . . .

"Did you see that?" Signe asked, turning her head so abruptly that her tired horse tossed its own in protest at the shift in balance.

"What?" he said abstractedly; one of the great things about horses was that they had autopilots when it came to ambling straight ahead, so you could think about something else.

"The graffiti," she replied.

"No," he answered, surprised. Corvallis was a very tightly run ship these days; he supposed it came with all the civic spirit. "What did it say?"

"Help, I've fallen into the RenFaire and I can't get out!"

She giggled and her brother and sister-in-law smiled; Mike Havel gave a full-throated laugh. Mary and Ritva turned puzzled eyes on their elders.

"I bet that was written by someone over forty," Havel chortled.

They turned right again and into a district where most houses were a century old or more; this part of Corvallis was laid out along a grid, and the streets were broad and tree-lined. Traffic was thick as the sunlight died, another strangeness in a world that mostly went home with the sun. Bicycles and pedi-cabs were numerous, and oxcarts and horse-drawn wagons, people on foot still more so as men and women walked home from work. The sound of human voices and feet was louder than wheels or hooves; most ground floors were workshops or small stores, with the proprietors living over them. Street vendors pushed barrows and cried out their toasted nuts and hot dogs in buns or toffee apples or hot cider; children ran home from school with their slates slung over their shoulders, and housekeepers came back from daily markets in chattering clumps with their full baskets; once a splendid red fire engine pulled by six glossy Belgians trotted past. That looked like a museum piece and probably had been until ten years ago, and it was pursued by still more children.

Feels more crowded than American cities this size ever did before the Change, Havel thought. Even in rush hour. They've built up most of the old open space and there are a lot more people per house. Well, you have to jam em in, when you've got a wall around them. Every extra foot of defensive perimeter means spreading your forces that bit thinner. But they aren't poor, crowded or no. Even the smelly types sweeping up the ox dung and horseshit into those little pushcarts look reasonably well fed.

Lamplight from most windows shone on the sidewalks, adding to the streetlights to make the night nearly bright enough to read by. The Havel children goggled at cobblers, tailors, bakers and saddlers, shops selling books and bicycle repairs, lanterns and eggbeaters, swords and knives and crossbows, candles and vegetables, eggs and jams and hams and bacon, taverns lively with raucous singing or even more raucous student arguments that spilled noise out into the chilly air along with the odors of frying onions, French fries, hamburgers and wine and beer, at churches of half a dozen varieties besides the two styles of Catholic, a miniature Buddhist temple and a couple of covensteads. There were doctors' offices, architects' . . . and once even a law firm's shingle.

Civilization, Havel thought, grinning to himself and shaking his head. *Christ Jesus, we've got lawyers again. Ten years ago we were fighting off cannibals.*

"Penny for 'em, honey," his wife said.

"I was just thinking that I'm starting to gawk like a hayseed," he said. "And this place is smaller now than the town where I went to high school!"

"You *are* a hayseed, darling."

"I am?" he said, making his eyes go round in mock surprise.

Signe laughed. "You were born on a farm and lived on it until you enlisted in the Marine Corps. You thought Parris Island was the big time."

"My dad worked the mines, mostly. We were close to town. The farm was just our homeplace."

"Where your family raised spuds and pigs and cooked on a woodstove. And your idea of a good time was hunting deer."

"Chasing girls and running my motorcycle were right up there. Besides, you like hunting deer too."

"I do *now*. Back then I was a vegetarian. And when you got out of the Corps, you went and became a bush pilot in *Idaho*. You, my darling, are a hayseed of hayseeds and a hick of hicks. It's why you've done so well!"

The smile died a little as she looked around at the busy brightness and rubbed an index finger on the little white scar that nicked the bridge of her straight nose. "You know, it's scary, but *I'm* sort of impressed myself, and I grew up in the big city."

"Portland's still bigger than this," he said grimly.

"Portland isn't a city anymore," she said shortly. "It's a labor camp and a mine. The city's dead. This is alive, at least."

He nodded, then cast off gloom as they turned into a residential street overshadowed by huge oriental sycamores and lined by old homes, on Harrison near Twenty-third; it was less crowded, and some of the traffic was closed carriages with glazed windows, the CY9 equivalent of a stretch limo. Most of the homes belonged to the well-to-do, merchants and high officials of the Faculty Senate, with a sprinkling of the sororities and fraternities where the scions of Corvallis' elite did their bonding. A pair of the big brick houses were owned by the Bearkillers, for times like this when a delegation was in town; the arrangement was more or less like an embassy, though less formal. It would be undignified for the Outfit's leaders to stay at an ordinary inn. Staying with friends in town would be an imposition, and besides that give political ammunition to the friends' rivals.

Corvallis had what was officially described as "vigorous participatory democracy"; Havel tended to think of it as more along the lines of "backstabbing chaos."

Staff from Larsdalen had gone on several days ahead to prepare the Bearkiller consulate for them, and the windows were bright and welcoming, with woodsmoke drifting pungent from the brick chimneys. Hugo Zeppelt crowded out onto the veranda and bellowed greetings as he windmilled his arms: "It's the tall poppies! G'day, sport—good to see yer! And the little sheilas; Uncle Hugo's got a lollie for the both of you."

He was the sort who could be a crowd all on his own, a short, stocky balding man with a glossy brown beard going gray. He'd been winery manager at Larsdalen from the mid-nineties until the fifth Change Year, and had taken over as steward of the Bearkiller properties here partly because it ministered to his second passion, food.

"It's the Unspeakable Antipodean," Signe said with a mixture of sarcasm and goodwill. Zeppelt's Australian drawl was as rasping as ever. "Hi, Zeppo."

"Still a bit of a figjam, eh?" he laughed back at her. "And grinning like a big blond shot fox, my Lady Signe is."

"Dinner's ready, I hope?"

"Fair dinkum, no fear," Zeppelt said. "On the bloody table, and it's grouse tucker."

"Did you ever talk like that in Oz?" Havel said curiously, dismounting and tossing the reins to a groom.

"Why, that would have been superfluous considering the cultural context, would it not?" Zeppelt answered in dulcet tones.

Bathed, fed and sitting around the table as the children were sent yawning to their bedroom, the adults relaxed over nuts, cheese, fruitcake and wine. A low blaze in the small fireplace made the room comfortable by Change Year nine standards, which meant in the mid-sixties.

"Great job, Hugo, but Christ Jesus, I may grow gills," Havel said. "I liked the smoked salmon cooked in cream and dill. And I always was partial to a good Dungeness crab. Can't get them in our territory; I wish *we* had a railway to the coast. Or a port at all."

"Why do you think I asked to get sent down here?" the Australian said, belching contentedly. "Chance to get a bog in with something besides roast and spuds. Those crabs're bonzer when you stir-fry them with scallions and ginger, aren't they? Got to get them fresh, though. They ship them in from Newport on the railway in saltwater tanks with little fans worked by the wheels to keep it circulating. The sea's full of them these days, so they're cheap even so."

"What about the rest of your job?" Signe asked, a little sharply; Havel could feel her putting on her CIA hat.

"Oh, everyone here thinks old Hugo's just a harmless larrikin who doesn't know Christmas from Bourke Street," Zeppelt said, giving her a thumbs-up. "They talk around me like I was cactus. I'll give you the drum, all right; the good oil, deadset."

"And?" she said.

"Someone's spreading money. Someone who doesn't like the Bearkillers, *or* our kiltie friends eastward," he said, his face going serious. "They're no galahs, either. Going at it subtle, about how we're blocking trade, that sort of thing. How much everyone would make, if they had the railway through to Portland back up and running."

Peter Jones grunted. "I didn't know that," he said. "I'm not surprised, though. You think it's Portland putting a spoon in our stewpot?"

"Nar," the Australian said. "I'd be gobsmacked if it were. Someone local, I'd say, but with an eye cocked north."

Signe nibbled at a cracker covered in blue-veined cheese, and sipped at a Rogue River zinfandel. "According to my sources—"

My spies, Havel thought affectionately.

"—Kowalski and Turner were in Portland last month. Officially they were looking into getting their wool shipments from Pendleton going again now that the war there's over. Which I'd be more ready to believe if half the sheep out that way weren't dead."

Havel grinned mirthlessly. That four-sided civil war had let the Protector's men in, which gave him the Columbia valley as far east as the old Idaho border and cut the remaining independents in eastern Washington off from the Association's enemies in Oregon unless they went around by way of Boise. It would take years for Arminger's people to get the area subdued and producing, not least because they were at daggers drawn—literally—over who would get what, but when he did it would be a nasty accession of strength. And in the short run, it gave the Protector some experienced light cavalry from the victorious faction he'd backed.

"But Turner and Kowalski had several meetings with Arminger," she went on. "And his wife, and Grand Constable Renfrew, and a couple of priestly bureaucratic types. From the Chancery, officially, but I smell Holy Office. Not exactly what you'd expect for trade talks. Arminger usually hands those off. This had the scent of something political."

She wrinkled her nose to show what sort of scent. Jones winced. "Hell, that's a pretty serious accusation," he said. "I don't like either of them, but that doesn't make them traitors, necessarily."

Havel tossed a couple of nutmeats into his mouth. "It doesn't mean they aren't, either," he said. "Signe's reading of both of them is that they'd do anything for enough money. I trust her judgment; that type're a closed book to me. Arminger I can understand—he's sort of like me, only with megalomania and bloodlust where his ethics ought to be. Businessmen I never did grok, and that means I can't really tell a good one from a bad one."

"They wouldn't want Arminger taking over," Jones said. "In his territory he and his bullyboys squeeze people like them a lot harder than the Faculty Senate, with tolls and whatnot. And I can't see either of them getting a title or setting up as barons."

"Yeah, that's bugging me, too," Havel said. "Money means more here than in Portland territory, the way the Association is set up. Land and castles and men-at-arms count for more up there, at seventh and last. So you'd expect your budding Rockefellers to keep arm's length from the Lord Protector. But something doesn't smell right. You know anything else they've been up to?"

When Jones hesitated, he went on: "Come on, Pete, this is Mike Havel talking. You know I've got nothing against Corvallis. You and I've worked together for years."

"Well ... they've been active in this 'select militia' proposal," the Corvallis man said slowly. "You heard about that?"

"Yup. Paying volunteers to drill more often and do things like garrison and patrol work. It makes a certain amount of sense, from Corvallis' point of view. Calling out *our* militia is a royal pain in the ass too, what with the lost work, but we need everyone who can walk and carry a crossbow. You've got what, thirty-two thousand people? To our twenty thousand. That gives you more of a margin. Especially since we and the Mackenzies are between you and the main threat."

"That's what they're saying," Jones agreed. "What I *hear* is that they'd like the select militia to *replace* the present setup eventually. And have individual Faculties sponsor battalions, or possibly individuals do it. It's got some appeal. Drill isn't popular; we've had peace—more or less—for the past couple of years. And there are people who'd like the extra money, too, particularly ones whose work isn't steady year-round, so they're selling it as a sort of income-spreading measure as well. I don't like it, though. It smells to me like those Economics Faculty types trying to put one over on the rest of us, somehow."

Havel grunted again, turning an eye on Signe. She shook her head. "This is where Dad would come in useful," she said. "There's probably some historical analogy ... he and Arminger have read a lot of the same books, you know?"

Jones hesitated. "What exactly did you want to talk to the Senate about?" he said, and then went on: "And to quote you, this is Pete Jones, you know I've got nothing against the Bearkillers, and we've worked together for years."

"OK, couple of things. First, we want the informal alliance made formal—we want to be able to count on Corvallis when Arminger goes for us and the Mackenzies and Mount Angel. A straightforward promise to treat an attack on us as an attack on you, the way the three northern Outfits have agreed. That might actually scare him off and we could avoid the war altogether. I could use those seven thousand militia of yours *real* bad."

"Ouch," Jones said, shaking his head. "You know me, Mike, *I'm* all for it. But a lot of people would rather pretend it's your fight and not ours."

Havel's fist hit the table, and a bottle of Chardonnay wavered. "Well, Christ Jesus, that's the problem! For years now he's been needling and probing and pushing, and we've been bleeding to keep you guys safe!"

Jones spread his hands. "You don't have to convince *me*, Mike! He blames it all on his barons, or on bandits, or on you for fighting back when you get attacked." A hesitation. "You might have a better chance if you'd agree to let us refurbish the railway through your territory to McMinnville."

"Not a chance, in the present situation," Havel said.

"The trade would do the Bearkillers good, as well as Corvallis and Portland," Jones argued. "That's not a zero-sum game."

"It would strengthen him more than us. The bastard squeezes his farmers as hard as he can, and he uses it to keep what amounts to a standing army. If I call out every booger and ass-wipe, I can put twenty-five hundred in the field, but only three hundred and fifty of them are A-listers; the Mackenzies can raise about the same, all infantry, and Dmowski has about fifteen hundred, a tenth of them mounted. Say five hundred more from here and there, and some people from the Bend country. Arminger can field *ten thousand* full-time fighting men, a quarter of them knights and men-at-arms, and he's had enough

time and cadre to train them properly by now. That means he outnumbered all three of the northern outfits put together by three to two, and a *lot* more than that in cavalry, eight or nine to one. Those heavy lancers are hanging over us like a sledgehammer and his logistics problems are the only thing that's keeping us from being squashed—"

He picked up a walnut between the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand, his sword hand, and pressed. The shell cracked and fragments scattered across the white linen tablecloth.

"—like that. So no way am I going to give him a rail net to take over and support his men with when he invades us."

The Corvallis militia officer winced. "All right, that's the first item. What's the rest?"

"Different view of a similar problem. The Valley's getting to have bandits the way a dead rabbit has blowfly maggots. It's worse than it was a couple of years ago, if anything."

"More to steal," Eric put in, contemplating another slice of fruitcake; he'd been mostly silent until now. "Coyotes go up and down with the rabbits. Same-same with bandits and honest folk."

Havel nodded. "OK, the problem there is that they hang out in places where there aren't too many people, which these days is most places. We've got millions of acres of forest in the mountains on both sides of the Valley, and lots of swamp and new brush country right in it, not to mention places like the ruins of Salem or Eugene. The roads are still pretty good, so they can get around, hit and run and get away. And I'd swear Arminger's giving help to some of the gangs on the sly to keep us distracted, but leave that aside for now. The problem is catching them so we can hang or chop them."

Luanne nodded. "They keep running over a border when they're chased," she said. "We and the Mackenzies and Mount Angel, we're all pretty good about hot pursuit, but that's limited. And—no offense, Pete—Corvallis is almost as bad as the Protectorate about letting us follow up across your frontiers. By the time we've notified your people and waited for you to take over, the bad guys have disappeared."

Havel leaned forward. "Ideally, what we need is to all get together, burn out pestholes like the ruins of Eugene, and then sweep the whole Valley, every little island in every marsh, every patch of woods, and the Coast Range and the Cascades too, hang or gut every outlaw, and patrol to keep things clean."

Jones laughed unwillingly. "Good luck, Mike," he said. "You and a couple of divisions, hey?"

"Yeah, that's not going to happen anytime soon. So what we need is a force that can go anywhere—bandit chasers, caravan guards, road patrollers. And we've got one. The Rangers."

Jones laughed again, this time at the statement. "You mean Astrid and Eilir's little pointy-eared Elvish Scout troop?" he said. "I mean, Christ, Mike, I know Astrid's your sister-in-law, but have you ever *listened* to her? She makes the Mackenzie herself herself sound like the Spirit of Pure Reason."

"They're all grown up now, Pete. You know I don't bullshit about stuff like this. They're good, playing dress-up or not. They've already handled a couple of gangs that were giving us real trouble, and we—me and Juney Mackenzie and Dmwoski—have handed them that forest around the old Silver Falls State Park. What they've got in mind is places like that up and down the edges of the Valley; not good farmland, but livable, sort of a disconnected nation of, oh, call it crime-fighters and who-do-you-call types. And we've all three agreed to pay 'em, food and weapons and cloth and a little cash. You know I'm pretty tight with a dollar—or a sack of wheat. So's Dmwoski, and Juney's bunch don't like voting taxes *on* themselves any more than your Senate does."

Jones' eyebrows went up. "That's going to take some selling if you want Corvallis in on it," he said. "Extraterritoriality, didn't they call it? I can hear the lawyers now, screaming about how we've only just got the rule of law back and this would mean foreigners with the right of high justice on our own soil, and what if they decide some farmer out hunting is an outlaw and chop him? Hell, these days the goddamned shysters complain when *we* string a bandit up, out on patrol; I hoped they'd die out with the Change, but no luck, they're like cockroaches. And the Faculty Senate squeezes the pennies like they came out of their own pockets ... which they do, a lot of the time."

Signe leaned forward. "Some traders from here are already hiring the Dunedain," she said. "For escort work as far south as Reading, and east over the Cascades into the Bend country and as far as Boise, as escorts. They can be sure they won't get robbed by their own guards that way, and that the

Rangers know their business, even if they keep name-dropping in Sindarin and striking poses like a Hildebrandt cover illustration. Being reliable means they get top dollar."

"Which merchants, exactly?" Jones asked.

She gave names; the Corvallen's eyebrows went higher still.

"Well," he said, "maybe we can do something along those lines. It might be a good idea to start with that. It's not likely to put backs up the way the railroad and Arminger will."

Havel rose and nodded. "Talk to you again later, then. Give our regards to Nancy and the kids."

One of the house staff they'd brought down from Larsdalen came in after the Corvallen had left. "Luanne, Signe, the rooms are ready. And the juniors are asleep." She smiled. "They claim they're keeping count of the stories they've missed and they'll want them all, with interest, when we're back home."

"Thanks, Jolene," Signe said, and patted her mouth to hide a delicate yawn. "I'm bushed. Time to turn in."

"I'm sure," Luanne said, and made a rude noise; her sister-in-law returned it with a gesture.

Mike Havel snaffled a three-quarters-full bottle of pinot gris and two glasses off the dinner table, getting a glare from a kitchen worker who didn't like the perquisites being infringed. Their bedroom was on the third floor; Signe went first, and Havel laughed softly as he admired the view. At twenty-eight and after two pregnancies she was a bit fuller-figured than she had been when they met the day of the Change, but it was just as firm in the skirt of fine dress wool.

Riding and sword work do wonders for a woman's figure, he mused happily. *Who'da thunk it?*

"What's that in aid of?" Signe asked, looking over her shoulder.

"I was remembering the first time I really noticed your ass," he said. "When you were climbing into my Piper Chieftain, Change Day, remember? Those hip-hugger jeans you had on ... man!"

She snorted in mock indignation, sky blue eyes alight. "I remember thinking you were a rude, crude jerk and were probably looking at my butt," she said. "And I was right, wasn't—hey!"

She yelped and jumped. Havel waggled eyebrows and fingers, leering. "I've got a license now, *alskling*. And the bedroom's that way."

"I *was* right!" she said, and put an arm around his waist as they came up to the landing. "On all three counts."

South Corvallis, Finney Farm, Oregon

January 11th, 2008/Change Year 9

"I miss Luther," Juniper Mackenzie said quietly as she walked with the farm's master, looking to where her wagon stood beneath an oak.

It was nearly sunset under a sky the color of wet concrete, with spatters of rain now and then, feeling cold—as if it wanted to be snow, but didn't quite have the nerve. She wore a hooded gray winter cloak of wool woven with the grease still in, and her host had a rain-slicker over a homemade parka. The damp chill made her tuck her hands under her plaid; the air held the earthy smell of wet soil from a field of winter wheat beyond the pasture, and woodsmoke from the houses. Drops spattered on the puddles the wind ruffled, and gravel crunched under their shoes.

"Seeing it there takes me back. Before the Change I'd come every year just before the County Fair started up Corvallis way, and pick up the wagon and horses, and they were always spotless and shining. I think he kept Cagney and Lacey more for the fun of it than for what I could afford to pay to board them."

Her wagon was the classic barrel-shaped Gypsy home on wheels with two small windows in the sides and a stovepipe chimney through the curved roof, meant to be drawn by a pair of draught-beasts. It was still very useful for traveling, although the bright orange-red triangle for "slow vehicle" on the back was no longer very relevant ... Two big Percherons had hauled it here across the Valley from the Clan's territory to just south of Corvallis; they were the offspring of her old mares, and right now they were in one of the Finney barns, enjoying a well-earned oat-mash.

Edward Finney nodded. "I miss Dad too. He was one in a million."

And this was the first place Dennis and Eilir and I stopped after we got out of Corvallis, that terrible night, Juniper thought.

"He was a friend," she replied simply, remembering the weathered smiling face, tough as an old root. She brushed at an eye with the back of her hand; that might have been a drop from the slow, light drizzle, or it might not.

The approach to the Finney farm was much the same as she remembered from that night, even the tin mailbox on its post. Juniper nodded towards it.

"I remember when I showed up on Luther's doorstep the night of the Change. I was still trying to get my mind around the concept—I knew what had happened, but my gut didn't want to believe it, you see—and I wondered if anyone would ever deliver mail to that again," she said.

Edward Finney snorted. "Local delivery only, these days! And I was in Salem, wondering what the hell was going on and trying to keep the children from panicking," he replied. "I'd just begun to suspect the truth around dawn on the eighteenth, but I didn't want to believe it. I might not have if Dad hadn't shown up. Not really believed it, not in time to do any good."

He was in his early fifties now, a middle-sized man with iron gray hair and weathered skin and hazel eyes, his build a compromise between his father's lean height and his mother's stocky body; he'd left the farm out of high school, spent twenty years in the Air Force, and never wanted to go back except for visits. Old Luther had thought he'd be the last farmer in the Finney line . . . until the day when farming became the difference between starvation and life.

"The old man came in that very next day, wobbling along on some kid's bicycle, and got me and Gert and the kids, and Susan and her husband and her daughter, and herded us back out here, wouldn't take no for an answer and drove us until we nearly dropped. We'd all be dead if he hadn't."

Juniper nodded, shivering slightly. Salem had attracted refugees beyond count, certainly beyond the ability of the hapless state government to feed, and it was in those camps that unstoppable disease had broken out a few months after the Change—cholera, typhus and in the end plague, the Black Death itself. The swift oblivion brought by the pneumonic form had been a mercy for those doomed to starve, but then it had spread through all that remained of the Pacific Northwest, save for areas like hers where rigid quarantine, hoarded streptomycin and the Luck of the Lady had kept it out. Corvallis itself had suffered gruesomely despite its best efforts.

She shrugged. "I told him what I thought the Change was when we showed up that first night. He believed us, but he never said a word about me leaving with my wagon and horses, useful as they'd have been. Just gave me breakfast and Godspeed."

The avenue of big maples leading to the farmhouse was the same as well, though winter-bare now rather than budding into spring; Ted's great-great-grandfather had planted them in the 1850s, to remind him of New England, after coming in over the Oregon Trail. So was the big, rambling white-painted frame house that first pioneer Finney had built later to replace the initial log cabin, and the additions his son and grandson had made as they prospered, down to the wooden scrollwork over the veranda and the rosebushes and lilacs their womenfolk had tended around the big parlor bow window.

Much else had changed. A ditch and bank surrounded the steading, and on top of it was a fence of thick posts and barbed wire; not a real fortification like a Mackenzie dun, as this part of the Corvallis lands had been spared outright war, but it was enough to help deter hit-and-run bandits and sneak thieves who'd know there were ready weapons behind it. One of the silos had a watch-post on top, as well as fodder within. Off to one side rectangular beehives stood on little wheeled carts, dreaming the winter away in their coats of woven straw.

New barns and sheds had been built, and four smaller houses behind the main dwelling. Like most surviving farmers the Finneys had taken in town-dwellers without work or hope or food, to help do by hand the endless tasks machines could do no longer. Some had left to set up on their own once they learned the many skills needed; there was abandoned land in plenty, after the first terrible years were past. Seed and stock and tools weren't to be had for the asking, though. Encroaching brush made clearance more difficult every year; country life was hard for a family alone, full of deadly danger on the outlying fringes where land was open for homesteading. Some remained here and others joined them,

working for food and clothes, a roof over their heads and a share in the profits that grew with more settled times and hard-won experience.

At last the Finney place could be called a thorp, its owner a wealthy yeoman who tilled several hundred acres of plowland and pasture, orchard and vineyard and woodlot, fed his folk well, paid his taxes without difficulty, and sold a healthy surplus in Corvallis. Smaller households for miles around looked to him and his like for leadership in the Popular Assembly and militia muster. He could well afford hospitality, even when the Chief of the Mackenzies arrived with a score of her clansfolk.

Tonight windows were bright with lamplight and voices spilled out of the farmhouse, and more showed where the eastern guests were bedded down in barns. One had been cleared for dancing. Corvallen country-folk weren't quite as isolated as rustics elsewhere, since they had a real city within a day's travel. Still, a visit on this scale was a welcome excuse for sociability, and the Mackenzies were old friends here. A violin tuning up made Juniper's fingers itch for the feel of her own fiddle, and a snatch of song came clear through the slow southing of the wet wind, as a dozen voices joined in the chorus:

*"—I'll ride all night and seek all day,
till I catch the Black Jack Davy!"*

"I thought Dad would go on forever," Edward said. "He wouldn't take it easy, no matter how often Gert and I told him to."

"It happened during harvest, didn't it?" Juniper said.

"The tail of it, end of July, the last of the wheat. We were watering a team, and he scraped the sweat off his forehead with his thumb and said, *Got us a hot one this year*, then stopped and said *Oh, shit!* and dropped down dead. At least it was quick, not like Mom."

Juniper made a sign and smiled. "He was well over eighty this year, wasn't he? He told me once that after making it back alive from Frozen Chosin he swore he wanted to die on his own land, and on the hottest day of the year with sweat dripping into his eyes. There's always Someone listening when you make a wish, you know."

The farmer laughed ruefully. "Yeah, he told me that story too when I was a kid—showed me where he'd frozen a couple of his toes off, too. I think his Korea stories made me decide on the Air Force—anything but the Marines! 'Course, if I hadn't, I'd never have met Gert. Speaking of which, let's get back before she gets dinner on the table."

Juniper nodded and they turned to walk back down the row of maples; a pair of well-trained Alsatians fell in behind them. Gertrud Finney had been born Gertrud Feuchtwanger, in a small Bavarian town near a USAF base. She'd met a young airman there in 1975 ...

"Reminds me of my own mother, a little, she does, but don't tell her that. I wouldn't risk that dinner for anything."

Edward Finney rolled his eyes. "We've earned every mouthful. The minute she heard you folks were coming Gert started working overtime, and conscripting everyone, worse than Christmas and New Year together. Pretzel soup with smoked pork and caramelized onions. Sauerbraten *Bofflamott*-style in red-wine-and-vinegar marinade with spices, over dumplings; spaetzle, kaiser-schmarn—"

"Stop, stop, before I drool down my plaid, for Her sweet sake! I had way-bread and hard cheese for lunch, eaten damp!"

"How come Eilir isn't with you?" Finney said. "Hans and Simon asked," he added, and grinned; those were his two sons, just turned twenty and eighteen, who had a lively and absolutely unrequited admiration for Juniper's daughter.

"She's with Astrid, on Dunedain business." She winked at him. "To be sure, she's also with John Hordle."

"Little John Hordle? I've heard of him. He's the one put down Mack, Baron Liu's mad dog, isn't he?"

"With help. And with him is Alleyne Loring, who's a good friend of Astrid now."

Finney cocked an enquiring eye at her. "And where's Sir Nigel Loring? I've heard of him, too."

Juniper frowned for a second, then shrugged. "He stayed in Dun Juniper, said he had something to do

there."

Then she shook off whatever was troubling her and went on: "And then tomorrow we can talk seriously about the Faculty Senate."

"Damn right," Edward Finney said, looking every inch his father's son, despite the stocky frame and the beginnings of a kettle belly. "Damn right. I really don't like that proposal they've got that the city should lease out the vacant lands in big lots to the highest bidder. Sure, it would cut taxes, and sure, it's just supposed to be for temporary grazing to keep the brush down, but—"

Mathilda Armingher bobbed her head enthusiastically with the beat and tapped her hands on her knees, perched on a truss of hay. The floor of the big barn had been cleared, except for the loose-boxes behind her that held the farm's draught-horses and some of the visitors' riding mounts; lanterns made it bright, in a flickery way that shifted as draughts swung them from the rafters. Juniper Mackenzie was perched on a bale she'd spread with her plaid not far away, her legs tucked beneath her, grinning and fiddling in perfect improvised accord with a scrawny middle-aged accordion player in bib overalls and a billowy young woman wielding a tuba. The *oom-pa-pa-oom-pa-pa* beat of the polka filled the big timber-frame building, and the feet of a dozen couples thumped on the boards of the floor; fragments of straw glistened gold as they floated around the dance floor amid the scuffing shoes, and she sneezed at the dusty smell.

Not much like home, Mathilda thought; neither the tinkle and buzz of Society-style music, nor the a capella rap and norteno which were the alternatives, nor the hoarded classical vinyl that her mother adored, even played on a wind-up gramophone. *But I like it. Makes you want to jump!* Home seemed more and more distant now anyway, most of the time. It had been a while since she cried quietly into her pillow for her mother.

The tune built to a conclusion and died away. The dance broke up in laughter and talk, and people headed over to the rough trestle table of planks spread with drinks and nibblements, with hot cider in a big, bubbling pot suspended over a metal brazier, and root beer and soda water as well. Edward Finney's sons Hans and Simon attended to the beer kegs they'd brought in on their shoulders a careful forty-eight hours before, and left in their U-shaped wooden rests to settle and chill; they were big young men, bullock-muscular from hard work, much alike except that one had dark brown curly hair and the others was straw-colored and straight. They handled the beer barrels with casual expertise, adroitly whipping out the spile bungs on top, and knocking the taps into the corks with a few sharp blows.

Hans shouldered his slightly younger and slightly lighter brother aside and drew a frothing mug, holding it up to the light, sniffing it to make sure no secondary fermentation had spoiled it, and then taking a long draught.

Then he grinned broadly and shouted: "*Das Bier schmeck gut!*" in German with an execrable American accent.

"Lots of practice there!" someone yelled, and there was more laughter as three sisters ranging in age from seventeen to six set out mugs.

Mathilda belched gently while she considered heading towards the table herself. There were some *very* good-looking things there, and good-smelling; *Honigkuchen* honey cakes, *Elisen* gingerbread made with powdered hazelnuts, *Pfefferkuchen* fragrant with a hoarded package of spices whose like nobody was likely to see for a long time, fluffy *Springerle* with anise ...

No, she thought. *I'm real full from dinner. I'm really full. I'd better not.*

One thing she remembered well about her father was that he always looked down on people who couldn't discipline themselves. She clutched harder at memories as they faded.

Rudi came back with a slice of cake and sat and nibbled beside her. "This is great!" he said. "I always like visiting the Finneys."

Epona came over to the edge of the box behind them, drawn by the sound of his voice; the great wedge-shaped black head bent above the wooden railing, and started to gently lip his tumbled red-gold hair. Rudi laughed, and fed her a bit of the cake; she took it from his palm with a delicate twitch of her lips. Mathilda nodded. "And ... well, nobody's being mean to me anymore," she said.

