

Woundhealer

by Walter Jon Williams

The horn echoed down the long valley, three bright rising notes, and it seemed to Derina-frozen like an animal in the bustle of the court-as if the universe halted for a long moment of dread. A cold hard fist clenched in her stomach.

Her father was home.

She went up the stone stair by the old gatehouse and watched as her father and his little army, back from the Princes' Wars, wound up the mountain spur toward her. The cold canyon wind howled along the old flint walls, tangled Derina's red-gold hair in its fingers. The knuckles on her small fists were white as she searched the distant column for sign other father and brothers.

Derina's mother and sister joined her above the gatehouse. Edlyn carried her child, the two of them wrapped in a coarse wool shawl against the wind.

"Pray they have all come home safe," said Derina's mother, Kendra.

Derina, considering this, thought she didn't know what to pray for, if anything, but Edlyn looked scorn at her mother, eyes hard in her expressionless face.

When Lord Landry rode beneath the gate he looked up at them, cold blue eyes gazing up out of the weatherbeaten moon face with its bristle of red hair and wide, fierce nostrils. As her father's eyes met hers, the knot in Derina's stomach tightened. Her gaze shifted uneasily to her brothers, Norward the eldest, gangly, myopic eyes blinking weakly, riding uneasily in the saddle as if he would rather be anywhere else; and Reeve, a miniature version of his father, red-haired and round-shouldered, looking up at the women above the gate as if sizing up the enemy.

Derina's mother and sister bustled down the lichen-scarred stair to make the welcome official. Derina stayed, watching the column of soldiers as it trudged up to the old flint-walled house, watched until she saw her father's woman, Nellda, riding with the other women in the wagons. Little dark-haired Nelly was sporting a black eye.

Mean amusement twisted Derina's mouth into a smile. She ran down the stair to join her family.

Nelly was halfway down the long banquet table and her eyes never left her plate. Before the campaign started she'd sat at Landry's arm, above his family.

Good, Derina thought. Let her go back to the mean little mountain cottage where Lord Landry had found her.

The loot had been shared out earlier, the common soldiers paid off. Now Landry hosted a dinner for his lieutenants, the veterans of his many descents onto the plains below, and the serjeants of his own household.

The choicest bit of booty was Lord Landry's new sword, won in the battle, a long magnificent patterned blade, straight and beautiful. Norward had found the thing, apparently, but his father had taken it for his own.

"In the hospital!" Landry called. His voice boomed out above the din in the long hall. "He found the sword in the hospital, when we were cutting our way through their camp! It must have belonged to one of their sick-well," bellowing a laugh, "we helped their shirkers and malingerers on to judgment, so we did!"

Derina gazed at her untouched meal and let her father's loud triumph roll past

unheeded. This war sounded like all the others, a loud recitation of cunning and twisting diplomacy and the slaughter of helpless men. Landry did not find glory in battle, but rather in plunder: he would show up late to the battlefield, after giving both sides assurances of his allegiance, and then be the first to sack the camp of the loser. Sometimes he would loot the camp without waiting for the battle to be decided.

"What does Norward need with a blade such as this?" he demanded. "His third campaign, and as yet unblooded."

"M-my beast fell," Norward stammered. He turned red and fought his disobedient tongue. "T-tripped among the, the tent lines."

"Ta-ta-tripped in the ta-ta-tents!" Landry mocked. "Your riding's as defective as your speech. As your blasted weak eyes. Can't kill a man?-I'll leave my land to a son who can." He gave a savage grin. "I was a younger son-but did it stop me?"

Reeve smirked into his cup. Lord Landry had been loud in the praise of his younger son's willingness to run down and slay the helpless boys and old men who'd guarded the enemy camp.

Reeve was strong, Derina thought, and Norward weak. What had her own feelings to do with it?

Landry put the sword in its sheath, then hung it behind his chair, above the great fireplace, in place of his old blade. He turned and looked over his shoulder at his family. "None of you touch it, now!"

As if anyone would dare.

The banquet was over. Lord Landry's soldiers dozing in their chairs or stumbling off into dark corners to sleep on pallets. Only the lord's family remained-they and Nellida-all frozen in their chairs by his glacier-blue eyes, eyes that darted suspiciously from one to the next-weighing, judging, finding everyone wanting.

Derina looked only at her plate.

Landry took a long drink of plundered brandy. He had been drinking all night but the effects were slight: a shining of the forehead, a slow deliberation of speech. "Where is the son I need?" he said.

Reeve looked up in surprise from his own cup-he had thought he was the favored one tonight. He swallowed, tried to think how to respond, decided to speak, and said the wrong thing.

Anything, Derina knew, would have been the wrong thing.

"I'll be the son you want, Father."

Landry swung toward his younger son, every bristle on his head erect. Slowly his tongue formed words to the song,

"See the little simpleton
He doesn't give a damn.
I wish I were a simpleton -
By God, perhaps I am!"

Reeve's face flushed; his lower lip stuck out like a child's. Landry went on: "Perhaps I am such a fool, begetting a child like you. You? D'you think killing a few camp followers makes you a man? D'you think you have the craft and cunning to hold on to anything I give you? Nay-you'll piss it away in a week, on drink

and gambling and girls from the Red Temple."

Reeve turned away, face blood-red. Landry's eyes roved the table, settled on his older son. "And you-what have you to say?"

Nothing, Derina knew. But the old man had him trapped, obliged him to speak.

"What d-d'you wish me to say?" Norward said.

Landry laughed. "Such an obedient boy! Bad eyes, bad tongue, no backbone. Other than that-" He laughed again. "The perfect heir!"

"Perhaps-" Kendra said, and made as if to rise.

Landry looked sidelong at his wife and feigned surprise. "Oh-are you still alive?" Laughing at his joke. "Damned if I can see why. I'd kill myself if I were as useless as you."

"Perhaps it's time to go to bed," Kendra said primly.

"With you?" Landry's eyes opened wide. "God save us. God save us from getting another son such as those you gave me."

"It isn't my fault," Kendra said.

She had been pregnant with a dozen children, Derina knew, miscarried five, and of the rest all but four had died young.

"Whose fault is it, then?" Landry demanded. The red bristle on his head stood erect. "Blame my seed, do you?" He beat his looted silver flagon on the table. "I am strong," he insisted, "as were my sires! If my children are milksops, it's because my blood is commingled with yours! You had your chance-" He gestured down the table, to where Nellida, unnoticed, had begun quietly weeping. "And so did yon Nelly! She could have given me a son, but she miscarried-damnation to her!" He shouted, half-rising from his seat, the powerful muscles in his neck standing out like cable. "Damnation to all women! They're all betrayers."

Edlyn's little girl, startled out other slumbers by Landry's shout, began to wail in Edlyn's lap. Landry sneered at the two.

"Betrayers," he said. "At least your worthless husband won't be siring any more girls, to eat out my substance and shame me with their snivelling." Edlyn, cradling her child, said nothing. Her face, as always, was a mask.

Landry lurched out of his chair, tripped over a sleeping dog, then staggered down the table toward Derina. Her heart cried out at his approach. "You haven't betrayed me yet," he mumbled. "You'll give me boys, will you not?" His powerful hands clutched at her breasts and groin. She closed her eyes at the painful violation, her head swimming with the odor of brandy fumes. "Ay," he confirmed, "you're grown enough- and you bleed regular, ay? We'll find you a husband this winter. One who won't betray me."

He swung away from her, back toward his brandy cup. Derina could feel her face burning. Landry seized the cup, drained it, looked defiantly down the table at his family- frozen like deer in the light of a bull's-eye lantern-looked at Nelly weeping, at his soldiers who, no doubt roused by his shouting, were dutifully feigning slumber.

"The night is young," he muttered, "are all feeble save myself?" Edlyn's child shrieked. Landry sneered, poured himself more brandy, and lurched away, toward the stair and his private chambers.

Kendra turned to Reeve. "I wish you hadn't provoked him," she said. Reeve turned

away mumbling, pushed back his chair, and stumbled for the door to the courtyard.

"What was that you said?" Kendra called. Her voice was shrill.

Reeve, still muttering, boomed out into the fresh air. Derina hadn't heard but knew well enough what her brother said. "No one provoked Father," she said. "It doesn't matter what we do. Not when he's in these moods."

"We should try to make his time here easy," Kendra insisted. "If we're all good to him-"

Derina could still feel the imprint other father's fingers on her breasts. She rose from the table.

"I'm going to bed," she said.

Her sister Edlyn rose as well. Her little girl's screams were beginning to fade. "Daryl should sleep," she said.

Edlyn and Derina made their way up the stairs to their quarters. They could smell Landry's brandy fumes and followed cautiously, but he was well gone, off to drink in his suite at the top of the stair.

Edlyn paused before Derina's door. Edlyn looked at her" eyes flat and emotionless. "Your turn now," she said. "To be his favorite."

Your turn, Derina knew, to be married off unknowing to some coarse stranger-to learn, perhaps, to love him, as Edlyn had-then to have his child, to have him die in one of Landry's wars and be left, scorned, at her father's house with an unwanted babe in her arms.

Derina, a lump in her throat, could only shrug.

"Good," Edlyn said, malice in her eyes. She turned and went to her own door.

You bleed regular, ay?

Numbly, Derina fumbled for the latch, entered her room, and locked the door behind.

The courting had already begun, and Landry home only three days. Any number of Landry's peers, soldiers, and retainers were happening by, all with oafish, sullen sons in tow.

Few of them bothered to acknowledge Derina. They knew who made the decisions.

Derina fled the sight of them, went for a long ride to the high uplands, the meadows where the summer pasture was, the close-cropped grass already turned autumn-brown.

She did not expect to find her brother there. But there he was, gangling body in saddle as he rode along the low dry-stone walls that separated one pasture from another. Nearsighted, Norward didn't see her until she hailed him.

"Inspecting the walls," he said.

"No point in doing that till spring."

"I wanted t-to get away."

"So did I."

He shrugged, pulled his cap down against the autumn highland wind. "Then r-ride the walls with me."

They rode along in cold silence. Derina looked at the splashes of lichen coloring the stone walls and wondered if Norward, with his poor vision, could see them at all.

"I'm caught," Norward said finally. He pulled his beast to a halt. "Reeve pushing from below, and F-father pushing from above. What can I d-do?"

She had no answer for him. Norward was weak, and that was that. It wasn't his fault, and it was sad that Landry despised him, but any sympathy on Derina's part was wasted effort.

Her father had taught her that only power mattered. Norward had none, and Derina could lend him none other own. And so she left his question unanswered, just rode on, and Norward could do nothing but follow.

His lips twisted, a knowing, self-hating smile. "Have you looked c-closely at f at our parent's new sword?" he asked.

"I'm not engrossed by swords," Derina said.

"Ah. Well. This one is interesting. I f-found it, you know- and got a look at it before Father took it away."

"What's so interesting about it?" Derina demanded.

That smile came again. "Perhaps nothing."

Derina rode on, Norward lagging behind, and wished she were alone.

The next morning Derina looked at the sword hanging above the mantel in the great hall, and wondered what it was that had attracted Norward's interest. The hilt was fine work, that was clear enough, possessing a handsome scalloped black pommel with the badge of a white hand on it. But there was little special about it, no exquisite workmanship, no gilt or jewels.

She did not dare defy her father by touching the sword, drawing it to look at the blade.

"Please, miss."

The voice startled her, and she jumped. Derina turned and saw Nellda, and a bolt of hatred lodged in her heart.

"Please, miss." Nellda pushed a packet into Derina's hands. "Give this to your father."

Derina looked at the packet, badly wrapped and tied with a bit of green ribbon. "Why should I?" she said.

There were tears in Nelly's eyes. "He won't see me! You can get to him, can't you?"

Derina fingered the ribbon. "What is it? Love tokens?"

"And a letter. I can write, you know! I'm not just a foolish girl."

"So you say." Coldly. Derina thought a moment, then shook her head. "Go home, Nellda. Go back to whatever little sty it was he found you in."

"I can't! He turned my father out! We had a bad year and-" Her voice broke. "He

said he'd take care of me!"

For a moment a little spark of sympathy rose in Derina's heart, but with an act of will she stamped it out. Power was all that mattered, and Derina's, such as it was, was only to hurt. "Go away," she said, and held out the packet.

Nellda, weeping, fled without taking it.

Derina turned and-she hesitated, and for some reason she glanced up at the great sword-she threw the packet into the fire.

Burning up, it scarcely made a flame.

So there was her future husband, pimples and round shoulders and hoggish eyes. His name was Burley, and his father was a gentleman of no great land or distinction who lived farther up the valley, a man of thin beard and cringing deference.

"His arm will be of use to you, sir," said the father, Edson, whose own arm was of little use at all.

"It's not his arm that's in question," Landry muttered. Derina caught Reeve's smirk out of the corner other eye and wanted to claw it off his face.

Derina looked at her family. Kendra looked as if she were trying to make the best of it. Norward was gazing at his feet and frowning. Edlyn was quietly triumphant, eyes glittering with malice.

I won't make your mistake, Derina thought fiercely; but she knew that Edlyn's mistakes hadn't been Edlyn's to make- and her own mistakes wouldn't be hers, either.

"We'll send to the temple for a priest to draw up the contract proper," Landry said. He looked at Derina, grinned at her.

"Kiss your future husband, girl."

All eyes were on Derina and she hated it. She stepped forward obediently, rose on tiptoe-Burley was taller than his posture made him-and kissed his cheek.

His breath smelt of mutton. His cheek was red with embarrassment. He didn't seem to be enjoying this any more than she was-which was, she supposed, a point in his favor.

She would never dare to love him, she knew. Most likely he wouldn't live long.

The wedding took place a few weeks later, in order to give all the poor relations a chance to swarm in from the countryside to get their free meal. The ceremony was at noon, the priest already drunk and thick-tongued, and the rest of the company was drunk soon after.

Nellda was seen, at the food of the long table, wolfing down food and drink. One of the servants, sensitive with long practice to Lord Landry's moods, pushed her away, and she was seen no more.

Derina looked down at her dowry, a small chest of coins and a modicum of old loot, silver cups and candlesticks polished brightly to make them seem more valuable than they were-the guard, standing by with his pike, seemed almost unnecessary. Described in the marriage agreement, signed and sealed with red ribbon, was another part of the dowry: a lease on some high pastureland.

"Nice to know what you're worth, eh?" Reeve said.

"More than you," Derina said.

Reeve sneered. "You don't think father favors me? You don't think I'll have all this in the end?" He gestured largely, swayed a bit, and leaned harder on the milkmaid under his arm.

He followed his father in this as in all things.

"If you live, perhaps," said Norward's mild voice. He had ghosted up without Reeve's noticing.

Reeve swung round. His compact, powerful body seemed to puff like a bullfrog's before his brother's gangling form. "And who'll kill me?" he demanded. "A blind man like you?"

Mildly Norward placed a hand on Reeve's chest. "Yourself," he said, "most like," and gave Reeve a gentle push. Reeve went down hard, the milkmaid on top of him in a flurry of skirts. The dowry's guard, stepping back with a grin, put out a hand to still a rocking candlestick. Reeve, sprawled on the flags, pushed the girl away and clapped a hand to his belt for a knife that wasn't there; and then he glanced for a moment at Landry's sword, hanging just a few feet away- but Norward just stood over him, looking down, and after a long, burning moment Reeve got to his feet and stalked away, the milkmaid fluttering after.

Some people laughed. Norward himself seemed faintly puzzled. He looked at his hand and flexed it.

"I must not know my own strength," he said.

"He was drunk, and off balance."

"That must be it," Norward agreed. He looked at the dowry on its table, then at Derina. "I like your Buriey," he said.

"He's not my Buriey," Derina said, "he's Father's Bur-ley."

Norward nodded, looked at his hand again. "Have you noticed?" he said. "My stammer's getting better."

The wedding bed, surrounded by curtains and screens, was set before the fire in the great hall and wrapped with symbols of fertility-ivy and pinecones and orange and yellow squash, the best that could be done in autumn.

The newlyweds would have the big bed in the main hall for a week, then move to Derina's room. They wouldn't be leaving Landry's halls till Yule, when their new rooms at Edson's house would be ready.

Derina endured the public "consummation," sitting upright in bed with Buriey while the guests cheered, filled their cups with wine, and made ribald jokes. Landry loomed over her, patted her, placed a wet kiss on her cheek. "You're my treasure," he said. "My truest daughter."

Something-wretched love, perhaps-churned in Derina's heart.

Edlyn watched with cold, hidden eyes-less than two years ago, she'd been put through the same business, received the same caresses and praise.

Next came the closing of the curtains and Landry's loud orders ending the festivities. Lights were doused. The dowry was packed and carried to Landry's strongroom-"just for the night," he said.

In the comers of the big room, drunken relations snored and mumbled.

Derina looked at Burley, profiled in the firelight. His wedding garments-black velvet jacket slashed with yellow, jaunty bonnet with feather-had shown him to advantage, far more presentable than in his country clothes the day they'd met. Now, in his shirt, he looked from Derina to his wine cup and back.

Derina felt the warmth of the big fire warming her shoulders. She tilted her head back and drank her wine, hoping it would bring oblivion. She put the cup away and lay on the bed and closed her eyes.

She hoped he would get it over with quickly.

She tasted wine on his breath as he kissed her. Derina lay still, not moving. His hands moved over her body. There was nowhere for them to go where her father hadn't already been.

Burley's hands stopped moving. There was a loud crack from the fireplace as a log threw up sparks.

"We don't have to do this," he said, "if you're not in the humor."

Faint surprise opened her eyes.

Burley rolled himself onto his stomach, propped himself on his elbows. Firelight reflected in his dark eyes. "Perhaps you had no mind to be married," he said.

She shrugged. Wine swam in her head. "I knew it would happen."

"But not to me."

Another shrug. "As well as another."

Burley gnawed a knuckle and stared at the fire. Derina propped herself up on her elbow and regarded him. Wine and relief made her giddy.

"I think my father was afraid to say no to this," Burley said. "I think it was Lord Landry's idea, not his."

Derina was not surprised. People in the dales treaded warily where Landry was concerned.

"My father says that the connection will be of advantage," Burley said. "And we need the grazing on the upland pastures."

"I hope you'll get it."

Burley gave her a sharp look. "What d'you mean?"

The wine made her laugh. "Edlyn's dowry gave the mowing on forty hectares of river pasture, but there wasn't much hay made there, for my father's beeves grazed the land all summer."

Burley nodded slowly. "I see."

"And Edlyn's dowry never left my father's strongboxes." The wine made her laugh again. "It was an autumn wedding, like ours, and father always had an excuse. Bad autumn weather, then winter snows, then muddy spring roads. And by summer, Barton was dead, and his father with him, and the beeves already in the pasture."

"And the little girl-"

"Daryl."

"Daryl. She's the heir to her father's estate, and Barton the eldest son."

"And my father has use of the estate through her minority, which will last forever. And that is why Edlyn will never be allowed to marry again, for fear that Daryl would have another protector."

And that is why Edlyn hates me. Derina left the concluding thought unspoken.

Burley frowned for a long moment, then spoke with hesitation. "How did Barton and his father die?"

Derina's head spun. Probably the wine.

"In battle," she said.

"And who killed them?"

For a moment Derina was aware of her father's looted sword, bright and powerful, hanging over the fireplace.

"I don't know," she said.

Burley didn't reply. Derina watched him frowning into the fire, eyes alight with thought, until wine and main weariness dragged her into sleep.

When she woke in the morning, her father-in-law had gone, and all his folk with him.

The conventions forced Edlyn to be sisterly, which included helping Derina make the bed. "No blood on the sheets," she observed. Her flat face regarded Derina. "Was he incapable? Or you no virgin?"

Derina felt color rise to her face. For all they never talked of it, Edlyn knew perfectly well who'd had Derina's virginity, two years before when Edlyn married and moved out of the room they shared.

At least it hadn't lasted long. Landry had found a girl he'd liked better another of his fleeting favorites.

"Whatever version you like best," Derina said. "When you talk to the old gossips in the kitchen hall, you'll say whatever you like anyway."

Edlyn's expressionless face turned back to her work. Derina fluffed a pillow. "Perhaps," said Derina, "he was merely gentle."

Edlyn's tone was scornful. "So much the worse for him."

There was a lump in Derina's throat. She put the pillow down. "Can we not be friends?" she asked.

Edlyn only gazed at her suspiciously.

"It's not my fault," Derina said. "I didn't ask to marry any more than you. It's not my fault that Barton died."

"But you profit by it."

"Where's my profit?" Derina demanded.

Edlyn didn't answer.

"Father's favor changes with the wind," Derina said. "He does it to divide us."

"And what good would combining do?" Scornfully. "D'you think we could beat him?"

"Probably not. But it would ease our hearts."

Stony, Edlyn looked at her.

Lord Landry's voice rose in the court. "Gone?" The doors boomed inward, and Landry stalked in, rage darkening his face. He swung accusingly to Derina. "D'you know what that brother of yours has done?"

"I-looked for you." Norward's voice. He came tumbling down the stair, having heard his father's bellow from his quarters. "Y-you weren't there."

"You gave away the dowry, damn you!" Landry rampaged up to his son, seemed to tower over him even though Norward was taller. "Edson's gone, with all his folk!"

"It-" Norward struggled for words through the stammer that had suddenly returned, bad as ever. "It was his. Edson's. He asked for it."

"You should have delayed! Sent for me!"

"I-I did. But Edson's relatives were all there-I couldn't refuse 'em all. But you weren't in your room, and hadn't slept there."

"Who are you to tell me where to sleep?" Landry roared.

"I didn't."

"Liar! Liar and thief." Landry seized his son by the neck, began wrenching him back and forth at the end of his powerful arms. Norward turned red and clutched hopelessly at his father's thick wrists. Derina desperately searched her mind for something she could do.

"Is it a matter of the dowry, then?"

Burley's voice cut over the sound of Landry's shouts. He had followed Norward down the stair, was watching narrowly as father and son staggered back and forth.

Landry froze, breath coming hard through wide nostrils. Then he released his son and forced a smile. "Not at all, lad," he said. "But Norward let your father leave without telling me of his going. I would have said my farewells." He glared at Norward, who clutched his throat and gasped for air. "Reeve would not have so forgotten."

"My father bade me thank your lordship for all your kindness," Burley said. "But he and our folk wanted to get an early start lest a storm break."

A storm, Derina thought. Apt enough analogy.

"I would have said goodbye," Landry mumbled, and turned to slouch away.

Derina, seeing Norward and Burley exchange cautious looks, knew then that this had been carefully arranged. For a moment anxiety churned in her belly, fear that Landry would discover she had talked too freely to Burley the night before.

There was a touch on Derina's shoulder, and she jumped. Edlyn clasped her arm, squeezed once, looked in her face, and then silently returned to her work.

Truce, Derina read in her look. If not quite peace, at least an end to war.

A real storm, snow and wind, coiled about the house the next two days, glazing windows with sleet, shrieking around the walls' flinty comers, banking up shoals

of sooty white in the courtyard. Landry's relations and dependents, unable to leave for their own homes, ate up his provender and patience at an equal rate. The huge fire in the great hall blazed night and day and almost cooked Derina and Burley in their bed.

The storm died down the third night after the wedding. Burley and Derina, next morning, hadn't yet risen when Norward brought in Nellda, who'd fallen in the storm the night before while trying to leave the house.

Nelly's flesh was turquoise blue and cold, and her breath was faint. There was snow and ice in her tangled hair. Norward put her in Derina's wedding bed, and called for a warming pan.

"I was at the north corner," Norward said, "checking the roof for storm damage. And there she was, past the Stone Eagle, halfway to the valley and lying in a drift."

"Who saw her?" Derina asked.

"I did."

Derina looked at him in surprise. "But your eyes-how could you see her?"

Norward shrugged. "My eyes seem to be better."

With warmth and warm broth brought by a servant, Nellda was brought around. Her eyes traveled from one member of the family to another.

"Where is he?" she asked faintly.

"He isn't here," Norward said.

Nellda's eyes trembled, then closed. "He's with Medora," she said. "You should have left me in the snow."

Burley frowned and took Derina aside. "Who is this person?" he asked. "Does she have a place here?"

"She's my father's whore," Derina said. "And apparently now my father has a new whore, this Medora."

"And who's she?"

"I don't know. Probably some crofter girl. That's the sort he likes."

Burley narrowed his eyes in thought. "Can't we find her a place here? We can't let her die in the snow."

Derina's spine turned rigid. "In our house?" She shook her head. "My mother lives here. I won't insult her by having Nelly around. Not when Father doesn't want her anymore."

Burley sighed. "I will try to think of something."

Derina caught at his sleeve as he turned. "It's not your task. This isn't your family."

His odd little smile stopped her. "But it is my family now," he said.

Burley returned to the bed, leaving Derina standing stiff with surprise.

He had his work cut out, she thought, if he thought himself a part of this family.

And, she reminded herself, he probably wouldn't survive it.

Nelly was hidden away in the servants' loft, and Norward ordered one of the older maidservants to nurse her. When her strength returned she'd have a job in the stables, where Ken-dra wouldn't encounter her.

Landry gave Reeve a ruby ring and a pair of silver spurs- "for his loyalty." Reeve preened as he strutted about wearing them, the spurs clanking on the flags or catching on the carpet. At dinner Landry sent his wife down the table, and sat with Reeve on one side and the girl Medora on the other. Landry had given her a gold chain belt. She was a frail little blonde thing, giggly when drunk. Derina didn't think she'd last. She didn't have brains enough to follow Landry's moods.

Kendra chatted away at dinner and pretended nothing was wrong, but next day, while Derina was helping her mother at carding wool, Kendra began to weep. Derina searched through her mother's basket for a strand of wool, pretending that she didn't see the fat tears rolling down Kendra's cheeks.

Sometimes, when Kendra was weak Derina hated her.

"If only I'd given him the sons he wanted," Kendra moaned. "Then everything would be all right."

"You gave him sons," Derina said.

"Not the sons he wished for," Kendra said. "I should have given him more."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," Derina said. "He'd have despised them, too. Unless they were stronger, and then he would have hated and feared them."

Kendra's eyes opened wide in anger. "How dare you say that about your father!"

Derina shrugged. Kendra's mouth closed in a firm line. "Is it Burley putting these notions in your head?"

Derina wanted to laugh. "I've lived here all my life," she said. "Do you expect me not to know how things are?"

"I expect you to show your father respect, and not to go tattling to Burley or his kin."

Derina threw down the wool. "They have eyes. Mother. They can see as well as anyone."

"Be careful." A touch of fear entered Kendra's face as Derina stood and moved toward the door. "Don't tell!"

Don't tell what? Derina wondered.

Everything. That's what Kendra meant.

"I'll say what I like," Derina said, and left the room.

But doubted if she'd ever say a word.

Derina and Burley had slept in the huge marriage bed for almost a week. After tonight the bed would be taken down, and Derina and Burley moved into her small room in the family quarters. The huge canopied feather bed was much too large for the room, and Derina and Burley would share Derina's old narrow bed, their breath frosting in the cold that the smoky fire never seemed to relieve.

Before sleep he turned to her. The dying firelight glinted in his pupils. "Derina," he said. "I hope you like marriage a little better than when we met."

"I never disliked it."

"But you didn't know me. Perhaps you know me a little better now."

"I hope so." Marriage, she considered, seemed to suit Burley at any rate. He stood straighter now, and seemed better-formed; his skin had cleared, his breath carried the scent of spiced wine. His warmth in the narrow bed would be welcome.

Burley fumbled under the covers, took her hand. "What I meant to say," he began, "is that I hope you like me a little. Because it will be powerful hard to lie here next to you in that narrow bed, night after night, and not want to touch you."

Derina's heart lurched, and she felt the blood rush to her face. "I never said you couldn't touch me," she said.

He hesitated for a moment, then began to kiss her. Pleasantly enough, she decided. After a while of this she felt some action on her part was necessary, and she put her arms around him.

What followed was not bad, she thought later, for all they both needed practice.

A few nights later Derina forgot the leather jack of wine she'd put by the fire to warm, and so she left Burley in their bed, put on a heavy wool cloak, and went down the main stair to fetch it. She heard angry voices booming up, and moved cautiously from stair to stair.

"Who has the spurs?" Reeve's voice. "Who has Father's eye?"

Norward's answer was cutting. "Medora, it would seem."

"Ha! She won't have the land and house when he dies! And neither will you, you useless gawk."

Derina slid silently down the stairs on bare feet, saw Norward moving close to Reeve in front of the fire. Norward seemed so much more impressive than he'd been, his once-lanky form filled with power. Reeve looked uneasy, took a step back.

"Are you planning on Father dying soon?" Norward asked. "I wouldn't wager that way, were I you."

"If he lives to a hundred, he won't favor you!" Reeve shouted "Never in life, blind man!"

"My eyes have improved," Norward said. "A pity yours\ have not."

"Fool! Go to the priesthood, and spend your days in prayer!" Reeve swung a fist, hitting Norward a surprise blow under the eye, and then Norward thrust out a longer arm and struck Reeve on the breast, just as he had at Derina's wedding, and Reeve lurched backward. One silver spur caught on a crack in the flags and he tumbled down. Norward gave a brief laugh. When Reeve rose, his neck had reddened and murder glowed in his eyes.

"I'll kill you!" he shouted, and leaped toward the fireplace, his hands reaching for Lord Landry's sword. Norward tried to seize him and hold him still, but Reeve was too fast-the long straight blade sang from the scabbard and Reeve hacked two-handed at Norward's head. Norward leaped back, the sword-point whirring scant inches from his face.

Derina cried in alarm and started to run back up the stair, hoping she could somehow fetch Burley and bring an end to it-but one other foot slipped on the flags and she fell on the stair with a stunning jolt.

Norward leaped to the woodpile to seize a piece of wood to use for a shield, and Reeve screamed and swung the sword again. There was the sound of a sigh, or sob, and Derina wanted to shriek, afraid it was Norward's last. Dazed on the stair, she couldn't be certain what happened-but somehow Norward must have dodged the blow, though to Derina's dazzled eyes it looked, impossibly enough, as if the sword passed clean through his body without doing any hurt. But then Norward lunged forward and smashed Reeve in the face with his log-Reeve shouted, dropped the sword, staggered back. Norward grabbed him by the collar, wrenched him off his feet, and ran him head-first into the fireplace.

Derina screamed and came running down the stairs. Norward was grinding the side of Reeve's head against the fire's dying embers. "Take my place, puppy?" he snarled. "Draw sword against me? Have a taste of the hell that awaits kin slayers, Reeve of the Silver Spurs!"

"Stop!" Derina cried, and seized Norward's arms. The scent of burning hair and flesh filled her nostrils. The strength of the knotted muscle in Norward's arms astonished her-she couldn't budge him. Reeve screamed in terror. "Don't kill him!" Derina begged.

Norward flung Reeve up and away from the fire, then down to the flags. Reeve wept and screamed as Norward took the long patterned blade and hacked off his spurs, then kicked him toward the stair. Reeve rose to his feet, his hands clutching his bums, and fled. Derina stared in amazement at the transformed Norward, the tall young man, half a stranger, standing in the hall with drawn blade... Tears unexpectedly filled her eyes and she sat down sobbing.

Norward put the sword away and was suddenly her brother again, his eyes mild, his expression a little embarrassed. He reached out a hand and helped her to her feet.

"Come now," he said, "it was a lesson Reeve had to learn."

She clung to him. "I don't understand," she said.

"Truthfully," her brother said, "I am a bit puzzled myself."

Next day Reeve kept to his room. At dinner, Lord Landry looked at the bruise on Norward's cheek and said nothing, but there was a pitiless, amused glint in his eye, as if he'd just watched a pleasing dogfight; and he sat Norward down at his left hand, where he'd had Reeve before.

Six weeks later, after Yule, Burley and Derina left for Burley's home, where a new wing had been built for them. To Derina, the three small rooms and their whitewashed stone walls seemed more space than she'd had ever in life. It was not until spring that she and Burley journeyed back to the great flint-walled house perched above the switchback mountain road, and then it was not on a mission that concerned pleasantries.

Derina rode the whole way with her insides tying themselves in knots. Burley marched a captive before them, a man bound with leather thongs, and Derina was terrified that the captive-or the news she herself bore-would mean Burley's death.

But Burley's family had decided this course between them, and brushed her objections aside. If they had known her father as well as she, they would have been much more afraid.

When she arrived the old flint-walled house seemed different, though she could see nothing overtly changed. But the people moved cheerily, not with the half furtive look they'd had before; and there was an atmosphere of gaiety unlike anything she remembered.

But Burley was not cheered: grim in his buff coat, he marched his captive into the hall and asked for Lord Landry. The servants caught Burley's mood, and edged warily about the room.

Landry, when he came, was half-drunk; and Norward was at his elbow, a tall man, deep-chested and powerful, that Derina barely recognized.

"Daughter!" Landry said, one of his cold smiles on his lips, and then he saw Burley's captive, the shivering shepherd, and he stopped dead, looking from the shepherd to Burley and back again. "What's this?" he growled. The shepherd fell to his knees.

"First," Burley said, "I bring proper and respectful greetings from my father and my family to Lord Landry. This other matter is secondary—we found this fool grazing his flock on the upland meadow that was ours by marriage contract, and he had the temerity to say he was there on your order, so we had him whipped and now we bring him to you, to punish as you will for this misuse of your name."

Landry turned red, his neck swelling; his hand half-drew the dagger at his belt. Norward put a restraining hand on Landry's arm. "Now's not the time to make new enemies," Norward said, and Landry forced down his rage, snicked the dagger back in its sheath, then strode briskly to where the captive cowered on his knees and kicked the shepherd savagely in the ribs. "That's for you, witless!" he said.

"My lord—" the shepherd gasped.

"Silence!" Landry shouted, before the man could say something all might regret. He looked up at Burley, staring blue eyes masking his calculation. "You've handled this matter well," he admitted grudgingly. "I thank you."

"I bring other news that will please you, I think," Burley said. He took Derina's hand. "Derina is with child, we believe, these two months."

For a moment Derina was petrified—with a child on the way, what more use was the father? But then an unfeigned smile wreathed Landry's features. He embraced Derina and kissed her cheek. "There, my pet," he said, "have I not always said you were my favorite?"

Even though she knew perfectly well it was Landry's style to play one family member off against another, still Derina's nerves twisted into a kind of sick happiness, the assurance of her father's favor.

"You'll give me the boy I need," Landry said. "These others—" He looked at Norward. "—they league and conspire against me, but I have the mastery of 'em."

He turned to the shepherd, drew his knife again, and sliced the captive's bonds. "In celebration, we'll give this simpleton his freedom."

The shepherd rose, bowed, and fled.

Nicely done, Derina thought. Not a single regrettable word spilled.

Norward advanced to clasp Burley's hand. "Welcome to our house," he said. "Your advice, and that of your family, will be valued in the days to come."

Burley smiled, but his eyes glanced to Derina, who looked back in purest misery. There was something happening here, and it was nothing good.

Dinner found Landry at the head of the table, with his wife on one side and Norward at the other. The big sword still hung in its sheath behind her father's head. Reeve-burlier than ever, and full of smiling good humor despite the bum scars on the side of his head, sat beside his brother, and Edlyn played happily with her daughter at his elbow. There was no sign of Medora or any other plaything.

Derina watched it all in silent, wide-eyed surprise. Her father was smiling and complimentary, and praised her in front of the others. She found herself casting looks at Edlyn to see how her older sister reacted; but Edlyn's attention was all on her daughter, and the anticipated looks of hatred never came.

They all looked so well. Happy, strong, their skins glowing with health. Derina felt like a shambling dwarf by comparison.

Then, offhand, Landry changed the subject. "There's an army marching in the lowlands," he said, "one of the Princes. He's got three thousand men, and his proclaimed ambition is to invade the highlands and tame our mountain folk." He barked a laugh. "If so, he'll find us a hard piece of flint to break his teeth on."

"There is not enough wealth in the highlands to pay a Prince's army," Norward said. "If he comes, he will find the pickings poor indeed."

"Likely he intends somewhere else, and the story is a mere diversion," Landry said, "but there's no reason in taking it lightly. I'm bringing in supplies, and preparing the place for a siege. They can't drag any engines up the mountains big enough to hurt our walls." His eyes flicked to Burley. "I'll trust your kin to support us, and raise up their strength against any invaders."

"We have no love for lowland princes," Burley said.

Landry laughed. "Let 'em lie outside our walls till the cold eats their bones!"

Landry snatched up a cup and offered a toast to the defeat of the Prince-and his sons and Burley drank with him. They were mountain men pledging against their ancestral enemies of the lowlands, and in a matter as fundamental as this their views were united.

Derina felt cold as ice as she saw Burley pledge himself to Landry's war, and remembered Edlyn's husband doing likewise, three years ago.

The Prince's messenger came the next day with a small party and blew his trumpet from the path below the gatehouse. Lord Landry knew of their presence-he'd had scouts out, which showed he took the threat of invasion seriously. Perhaps he'd even known they were coming before he'd brought up the matter, so casually, at dinner. When the trumpet was blown Landry was ready, standing above the gatehouse with his family-all but Reeve, who had particular business elsewhere.

Derina wrapped herself in a cloak to hide her trembling. She had seen the preparations Landry made, and knew what he intended.

"His Highness bids you return that which you took last summer, when you attacked his camp," the messenger said. "If not, there will be war between you that will not end until your hold is burnt up, your valleys laid waste, and your children scattered over the hills with stones their only playthings. His Highness offers you this, if you heed not our command- or, if you choose wisely, he offers his hand in friendship."

A vast grin broke across Landry's face at the sound of the messenger's words-but Derina, who knew the smile, felt herself shudder. "What's mine is mine!" Landry

called. "If this Prince wants what is his, let him look for it in a place closer to home."

"The Prince's friendship is not so lightly to be brushed aside," the messenger said.

"When was the friendship of a lowland man ever worth a pinch of salt?" Landry asked. He plucked up a crossbow from where it sat waiting, aimed briefly, and planted the missile a foot deep in the messenger's heart. Other missiles whirred down from Landry's soldiers. Then the gates swung open to let a group of riders under Reeve sally out. The Prince's party were killed to the last man, so that none could return to their prince with any of the intelligence they'd doubtless gathered.

Burley watched the massacre from the gatehouse, fists clenched on his belt. He turned to Landry. "Let me head homeward, and tell my kinfolk to prepare," he said. "And let me take Derina to where she'll be safe."

Landry shook his head, and seeing it Derina felt a cold chill of fear. "Send a letter instead," he said.

"Sir-"

"No," Landry said. "A letter. Your father will be more likely to help us if his son and grandson-" A nod to Derina. "-are guests here with us."

Derina's head swam under Landry's cold blue gaze. She was in her father's house again, under his power, and her husband was a pawn in her father's war—a pawn set ready for sacrifice.

The burning arrow was sent from door to door along the valleys, and as men armed the great house was readied for siege. The spring lambs were killed, and their flesh salted for the cellars or dried in the pure mountain air. The herds and flocks were driven up to the highland pastures by secret ways, where an enemy would never find them unless he first knew where to look. The people of the valleys were prepared for evacuation, either to the great houses or to the high meadows with the flocks.

The Prince's army paused in the lowlands for a week or so, perhaps awaiting the messenger's return, and then began its toilsome march into the hills. Lord Landry arranged for the heads of the messenger's party to await them on stakes, one every few kilometers along the road.

Lord Landry was in his element—boasting, boozing, swaggering among his old veterans or the country gentlefolk. Parties of warriors arrived under their local chiefs, were added to the defense of the great house or sent out to harry the enemy column with ambushes and raids.

The guards Landry posted were as polite as their duties allowed, but it was clear that neither Burley nor Derina were allowed to leave the house. Derina was almost thankful: Burley was safe as long as he remained here, held genteel hostage. If Landry should send him to war, Derina knew, he very well might not return.

But the blackmail served its purpose. Word came that Burley's father Edson had brought his men into the war, and was already harassing enemy scouts and foragers.

"What a fool this Prince is!" Landry shouted down the length of the dinner table. It was crowded with soldiers, and Landry's family were packed in at the top. "Come to fight us over booty worth less than what he's paying his men to take it—and last year's loot already shared out among our men as soon as we

returned home! We could not return if it we would!"

"A fool and his army," Reeve smiled, "are soon parted."

Derina caught Norward's look, a quick glance to the head of the table-as if he would say something, but chose not to.

The meal ended in singing, boasting, and boisterous talk of swordplay and the prospect of large ransoms. Derina, ears ringing, withdrew early, and went to bed. A few hours later Burley joined her, swaying slightly with wine as he undressed.

"Reeve and I are to leave tomorrow," he said. "We'll set an ambush above Honing Pass."

Fear snapped Derina awake. She sprang from the bed and clung to him.

"Don't go!" she cried.

Burley was bemused by her vehemence. "Don't be silly. I must."

"Father-" she gulped. "Father will kill you."

Burley's look softened. He touched her hair. "Your father won't be coming."

"His soldiers will be there. And-" She hesitated. "Reeve. If Reeve has not changed."

Burley shook his head. "Landry still needs my father. I'm not without value yet."

Derina buried her head in the curve of his neck. "Your father is mortal. So are you. And the lord my father will take your land in the name of our child."

He put his arms around her, swayed gently back and forth. "I have no choice," he said.

Derina blinked back hot tears. When had they ever had a choice? she thought.

Hoping desperately, she said, "I'll speak to Reeve."

Reeve listened carefully as Derina stammered out her fears the next morning. Unconsciously he rubbed the scars on his forehead. "No, father has not asked any such service of me," he said. "Nor would he-Norward and I are strong enough to stand against him now, and Edlyn and mother support us. When we refuse to let him play us each against the other, he calls it 'conspiracy.'"

"But his other men? His old veterans?"

Reeve looked thoughtful. "Perhaps. I'll speak to them myself, let them know that I look to them to keep Burley safe."

Derina kissed her brother on both cheeks. "Bless you, Reeve!"

Reeve smiled and hugged her with bearlike arms. "I'll look to him. Don't worry yourself-it's an ambush we'll be setting, not a pitched battle. All the danger's to the other side."

Reeve and Burley made a brave sight the next day, riding out in buff coats and polished armor, their troopers following. Derina, standing above the gatehouse, waved and forced the brightest smile she could, all to balance her sinking heart.

In a driving rain, five days later, the remnants of the party returned. The tale was of the ambushers ambushed, the Prince's spearmen on the ridge above, advancing under cover of arrows. Reeve wounded to the point of death, run through with a lance, and Burley taken.

"His beast threw Master Burley, miss," said an old ser-jeant, himself wounded in the jaw and barely able to speak. With dull eyes, Derina listened to the serjeant's tale as she saw Reeve carried into the house on his litter. "The enemy ran him down. He surrendered at the last-and they didn't kill him then, I saw them taking him away. He survived the surrender-that's the most dangerous moment. So he'll be held for ransom, most like, and you'll see him ere autumn."

And then Lord Landry came howling among the survivors, Norward following white faced behind. Landry lashed at the nearest with a riding whip, calling them fools and cowards for letting his son fall victim. Then, snarling, hands trembling with the violence of his passion, he stood for a moment in the cold rain that poured in streams off his big shoulders, and then he turned on his heel and marched back to the main house. Derina ran after, feet sliding in the mud of the court.

"Burley was captured!" she said. "We must send his ransom!"

Landry turned to her as he walked, face twisting in a snarl. "Ransom? That's his father's business."

"His father's poor!" Derina cried.

Landry laughed bitterly. "And I'm rich? I've given away enough sustenance with your dowry. Don't expect me to deliver your fool of a husband, not when you're carrying his fortune in your belly."

Derina seized his sleeve, but he shook her off savagely, and she slipped in the mud and fell. Strong arms helped her rise. She looked up at Norward's grim face.

"I'll speak with him," Norward said, "and do what I can."

When Norward and Derina caught him, Landry had barged into the house and stood shouting in the great hall.

"Arm!" he bellowed. "A sally! When this rain ends, I'll have revenge for my son!"

Servants and soldiers bustled to their work. Norward spoke cautiously amid the melee. "You need your every son in this," he said. "Burley's your son now, and could be a good one to you."

Landry swung around, derision contorting his features. "That country clod! Whip my servant, will he? Steal my valuables? Is that a son of mine?" He shook his whip in Norward's face. "Let him rot in chains!"

Tears dimmed Derina's eyes and her head whirled. She heard Norward's protest, Landry's dismissal, then Norward's raised voice. Suddenly there was a violent whirl of action, and Derina looked up to see Landry holding Norward by the throat, his dagger out and pricking Norward beneath the ear.

"Think to replace Reeve, whey-face?" Landry demanded. "You'll never be a true son to me!" Derina cried out as the dagger drew a line of red along Norward's neck; and then Landry dropped his son to the floor and strode off, calling for his armor. Derina rushed to Norward's side, held her shawl to the wound. Norward pushed it aside.

"A scratch," he said. His face was grim and pale as death. He stood, then helped Derina to a chair. "Wait here-I know how to get Burley back. But promise me

you'll say nothing- I trust me in this."

He walked to the fireplace. He stood looking for a moment at Landry's long battle sword, then took it from its place and walked toward the stairs.

Derina was terrified to follow but more terrified to stay, alone and not knowing. She followed.

"Out!" Norward cried. "Out!" He was driving Edlyn and Kendra from Reeve's room. The two left in a bewildered flutter; but Derina, grimly biting her lip, pushed past them and into the room.

Norward had his back to her. He stared grimly down at Reeve, who lay unconscious, pale as death, his midsection bulky with bandages.

Derina could not say if she screamed as, in one easy gesture, Norward drew the blade from its scabbard and plunged it into Reeve's belly.

Landry had come down to the great hall, wearing his breastplate and chain skirts. He scowled as he saw Norward with his sword.

"Father," Norward said. "I suspect I know why the enemy have invaded." He held out the sword. "The Prince wants this back. It's one of the Swords of Power."

No! Derina thought. Don't tell him!

Then was a silence in which Derina heard only the beating of blood in her ears. Landry stood stock-still, then came forward. He took the sword from Norward and looked at it carefully. Then a savage smile crossed his features, and he drew the blade from the scabbard and whirled it over his head. "Maybe you're a son to me after all!" he said. "A Sword of Power-ay, that makes sense! But which one?"

To stifle any cry of surprise, Derina put her hand to her throat at Norward's answer.

"Farslayer would kill the Prince for you," Norward said. "And you wouldn't have to leave the room."

"And I'd have it right back again, through my heart!" Landry scorned. He stopped, looked at the sword. Then, deliberately, he spoke the words, the simple rhyme, known to all children, that would unleash Farslayer, and named as its target one of his own men, the wounded serieant who had brought the news of the ambush to him.

A target so near would make the job of retrieval easy enough.

As Derina knew it would, nothing happened. Her creeping astonishment was turning to knowledge.

She knew what Norward was trying to do, and she wondered if she dared-if she wanted to-put a stop to it.

Landry looked at the hilt. "The white hand," he said. "Which sword is that?"

Norward shrugged. "The white hand of death, most like. What does it matter? What matters is that the war is won the moment you use the blade."

A grin crossed Landry's features. "The men are all to mount," he said. "We'll empty the place. You'll ride with me, and have pick of the Prince's loot!"

Derina, wide-eyed, stood and said nothing. Decided to say nothing.

A few hours later, as the last raindrops fell, Lord Landry and his army rode

from his flint-walled house on his mission to crush the Prince and his army with their own weapon.

A few moments later Derina watched her mother's astonishment as she saw Reeve strolling casually down the stair, a crooked grin on his face. Even his bum scars had vanished.

"I seem to have improved," he said.

Four days later Norward was back with the body of Lord Landry, who had been killed leading a reckless charge on the enemy army. "The Prince has his sword back," he said. "The war is over."

Derina, standing in the courtyard, looked numbly at the body of her father, lying cold on his litter hacked by a dozen armor-crushing blows. Her brother Reeve put an arm around her.

She looked at her mother Kendra, who stared at Landry as if she didn't believe her eyes, and at Edlyn, who looked as if she were just beginning to dare to hope.

"Buriey?" she asked.

"Alive," Norward said, "and his ransom well within our means. We'll pay his release as soon as the Prince's army reaches the lowlands again, and then you'll have your husband back."

Derina cried out in joy and threw her arms around him. He-Lord Norward now stood stiffly for a moment, then gently took her arms and released himself from her embrace.

"Our father always wanted me to kill someone," he said. "Who'd have thought he would himself have been the victim?"

Landry would never have understood, Derina thought, a man such as the Prince, who would fight a war for a talisman not of destruction, but of healing.

"You didn't strike the blow yourself," Derina said.

"I misled him. I knew what would happen."

She took his hand. "So did I."

He looked at Landry and tears shimmered in his eyes. "Woundhealer would not kill, not even for our father," he said. "I wish I could have thought of another way, but there are some so maimed they are beyond the help even of a Sword of Power."