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AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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THE COMPLETE TRILOGY

WITH A BRAND-NEW BINTI STORY

The Farseer Trilogy

Assassin's Apprentice Book One
Royal Assassin Book Two
Assassin's Quest Book Three

Robin Hobb



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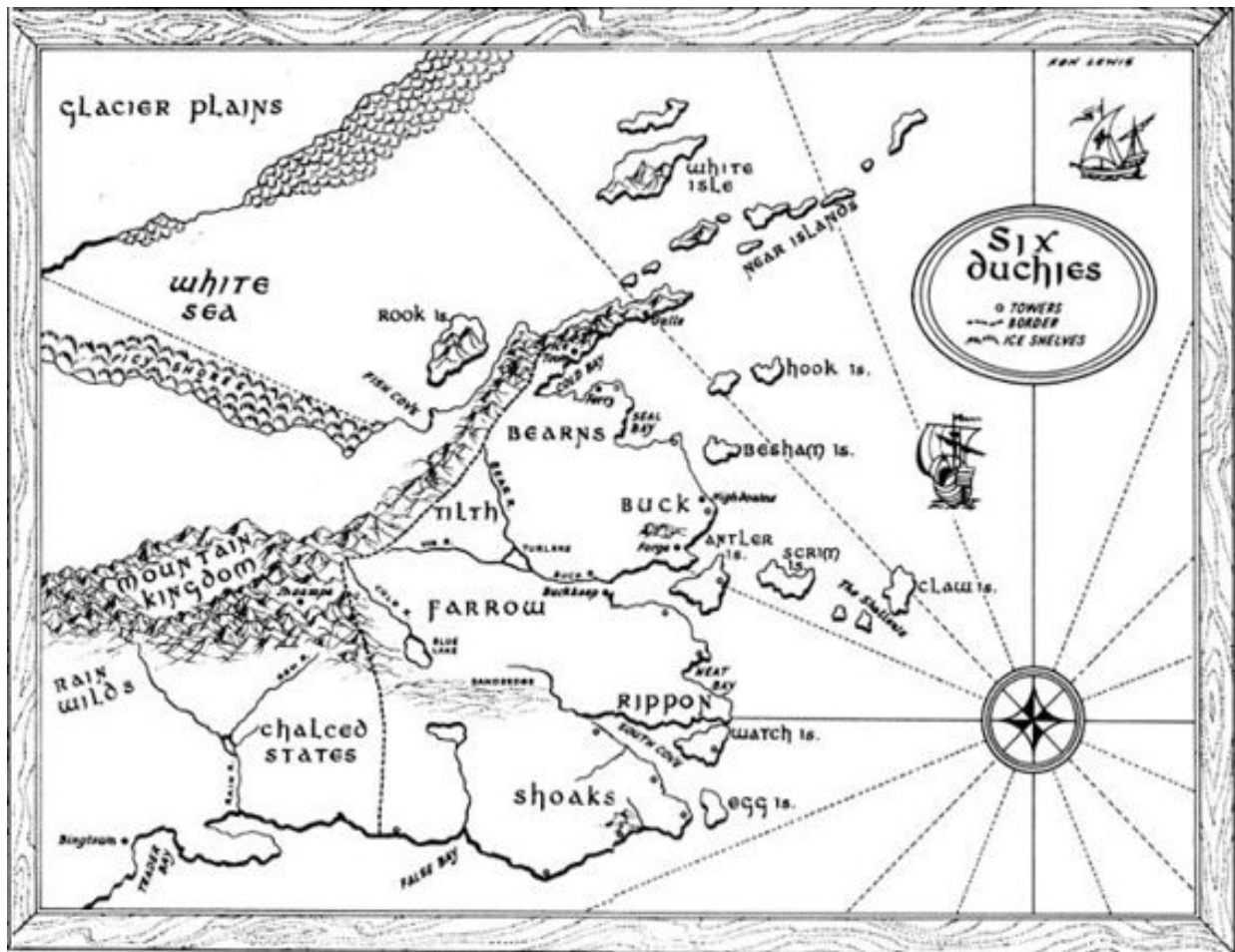
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Guardian



ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE

Book One of *The Farseer Trilogy*

Assassin's Apprentice

Book One of the Farseer Trilogy

Robin Hobb



Dedication

For Giles
And for Raphael and Freddy,
the Princes of Assassins.

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ONE

The Earliest History

A history of the Six Duchies is of necessity a history of its ruling family, the Farseers. A complete telling would reach back beyond the founding of the First Duchy, and if such names were remembered, would tell us of Outislanders raiding from the Sea, visiting as pirates a shore more temperate and gentler than the icy beaches of the Out Islands. But we do not know the names of these earliest forebears.

And of the first real king, little more than his name and some extravagant legends remain. Taker his name was, quite simply, and perhaps with that naming began the tradition that daughters and sons of his lineage would be given names that would shape their lives and beings. Folk beliefs claim that such names were sealed to the newborn babes by magic, and that these royal offspring were incapable of betraying the virtues whose names they bore. Passed through fire and plunged through salt water and offered to the winds of the air; thus were names sealed to these chosen children. So we are told. A pretty fancy, and perhaps once there was such a ritual, but history shows us this was not always sufficient to bind a child to the virtue that named it ...

My pen falters, then falls from my knuckly grip, leaving a worm's trail of ink across Fedwren's paper. I have spoiled another leaf of the fine stuff, in what I suspect is a futile endeavour. I wonder if I can write this history, or if on every page there will be some sneaking show of a bitterness I thought long dead. I think myself cured of all spite, but when I touch pen to paper, the hurt of a boy bleeds out with the sea-spawned ink, until I suspect each carefully formed black letter scabs over some ancient scarlet wound.

Both Fedwren and Patience were so filled with enthusiasm whenever a written account of the history of the Six Duchies was discussed that I persuaded myself the writing of it was a worthwhile effort. I convinced myself that the exercise would turn my thoughts aside from my pain and

help the time to pass. But each historical event I consider only awakens my own personal shades of loneliness and loss. I fear I will have to set this work aside entirely, or else give in to reconsidering all that has shaped what I have become. And so I begin again, and again, but always find that I am writing of my own beginnings rather than the beginnings of this land. I do not even know to whom I try to explain myself. My life has been a web of secrets, secrets that even now are unsafe to share. Shall I set them all down on fine paper, only to create from them flame and ash? Perhaps.

My memories reach back to when I was six years old. Before that, there is nothing, only a blank gulf no exercise of my mind has ever been able to pierce. Prior to that day at Moonseye, there is nothing. But on that day they suddenly begin, with a brightness and detail that overwhelms me. Sometimes it seems too complete, and I wonder if it is truly mine. Am I recalling it from my own mind, or from dozens of retellings by legions of kitchen maids and ranks of scullions and herds of stable-boys as they explained my presence to each other? Perhaps I have heard the story so many times, from so many sources, that I now recall it as an actual memory of my own. Is the detail the result of a six-year-old's open absorption of all that goes on around him? Or could the completeness of the memory be the bright overlay of the Skill, and the later drugs a man takes to control his addiction to it, the drugs that bring on pains and cravings of their own? The last is most possible. Perhaps it is even probable. One hopes it is not the case.

The remembrance is almost physical; the chill greyness of the fading day, the remorseless rain that soaked me, the icy cobbles of the strange town's streets, even the callused roughness of the huge hand that gripped my small one. Sometimes I wonder about that grip. The hand was hard and rough, trapping mine within it. And yet it was warm, and not unkind, as it held mine. Only firm. It did not let me slip on the icy streets, but it did not let me escape my fate, either. It was as implacable as the freezing grey rain that glazed the trampled snow and ice of the gravelled pathway outside the huge wooden doors of the fortified building that stood like a fortress within the town itself.

The doors were tall, not just to a six-year-old boy, but tall enough to admit giants, to dwarf even the rangy old man who towered over me. And they looked strange to me, although I cannot summon up what type of door or dwelling would have looked familiar. Only that these, carved and bound with black iron hinges, decorated with a buck's head and knocker of

gleaming brass, were beyond my experience. I recall that slush had soaked through my clothes, so that my feet and legs were wet and cold. And yet, again, I cannot recall that I had walked far through winter's last curses, nor that I had been carried. No, it all starts there, right outside the doors of the stronghouse, with my small hand trapped inside the tall man's.

Almost, it is like a puppet show beginning. Yes, I can see it thus. The curtains parted, and there we stood before that great door. The old man lifted the brass knocker and banged it down, once, twice, thrice, on the plate that resounded to his pounding. And then, from off-stage, a voice sounded. Not from within the doors, but from behind us, back the way we had come. 'Father, please,' the woman's voice begged. I turned to look at her, but it had begun to snow again, a lacy veil that clung to eyelashes and coatsleeves. I can't recall that I saw anyone. Certainly, I did not struggle to break free of the old man's grip on my hand, nor did I call out, 'Mother, Mother!' Instead I stood, a spectator, and heard the sound of boots within the keep, and the unfastening of the door hasp within.

One last time she called. I can still hear the words perfectly, the desperation in a voice that now would sound young to my ears. 'Father, please, I beg you!' A tremor shook the hand that gripped mine, but whether of anger or some other emotion, I shall never know. As swift as a black crow seizes a bit of dropped bread, the old man stooped and snatched up a frozen chunk of dirty ice. Wordlessly he flung it, with great force and fury, and I cowered where I stood. I do not recall a cry, nor the sound of struck flesh. What I do remember is how the doors swung outward, so that the old man had to step hastily back, dragging me with him.

And there is this: the man who opened the door was no house-servant, as I might imagine if I had only heard this story. No, memory shows me a man-at-arms, a warrior, gone a bit to grey and with a belly more of hard suet than muscle, but not some mannered house-servant. He looked both the old man and me up and down with a soldier's practised suspicion, and then stood there silently, waiting for us to state our business.

I think it rattled the old man a bit, and stimulated him, not to fear, but to anger. For he suddenly dropped my hand and instead gripped me by the back of my coat and swung me forward, like a whelp offered to a prospective new owner. 'I've brought the boy to you,' he said in a rusty voice.

And when the house-guard continued to stare at him, without judgement or even curiosity, he elaborated. 'I've fed him at my table for six

years, and never a word from his father, never a coin, never a visit, though my daughter gives me to understand he knows he fathered a bastard on her. I'll not feed him any longer, nor break my back at a plough to keep clothes on his back. Let him be fed by him what got him. I've enough to tend to of my own, what with my woman getting on in years, and this one's mother to keep and feed. For not a man will have her now, not a man, not with this pup running at her heels. So you take him, and give him to his father.' And he let go of me so suddenly that I sprawled to the stone doorstep at the guard's feet. I scrabbled to a sitting position, not much hurt that I recall, and looked up to see what would happen next between the two men.

The guard looked down at me, lips pursed slightly, not in judgement but merely considering how to classify me. 'Whose get?' he asked, and his tone was not one of curiosity, but only that of a man who asks for more specific information on a situation, in order to report well to a superior.

'Chivalry's,' the old man said, and he was already turning his back on me, taking his measured steps down the flagstoned pathway. 'Prince Chivalry,' he said, not turning back as he added the qualifier. 'Him what's King-in-Waiting. That's who got him. So let him do for him, and be glad he managed to father one child, somewhere.'

For a moment the guard watched the old man walking away. Then he wordlessly stooped to seize me by the collar and drag me out of the way so that he could close the door. He let go of me for the brief time it took him to secure the door. That done, he stood looking down on me. No real surprise, only a soldier's stoic acceptance of the odder bits of his duty. 'Up, boy, and walk,' he said.

So I followed him, down a dim corridor, past rooms spartanly furnished, with windows still shuttered against winter's chill, and finally to another set of closed doors, these of rich, mellow wood embellished with carvings. There he paused, and straightened his own garments briefly. I remember quite clearly how he went down on one knee, to tug my shirt straight and smooth my hair with a rough pat or two, but whether this was from some kind-hearted impulse that I make a good impression, or merely a concern that his package look well-tended, I will never know. He stood again, and knocked once at the double doors. Having knocked, he did not wait for a reply, or at least I never heard one. He pushed the doors open, herded me in before him, and shut the doors behind him.

This room was as warm as the corridor had been chill, and alive as the other chambers had been deserted. I recall a quantity of furniture in it, rugs and hangings, and shelves of tablets and scrolls overlain with the scattering of clutter that any well-used and comfortable chamber takes on. There was a fire burning in a massive fireplace, filling the room with heat and a pleasantly rosinous scent. An immense table was placed at an angle to the fire, and behind it sat a stocky man, his brows knit as he bent over a sheaf of papers in front of him. He did not look up immediately, and so I was able to study his rather bushy disarray of dark hair for some moments.

When he did look up, he seemed to take in both myself and the guard in one quick glance of his black eyes. ‘Well, Jason?’ he asked, and even at that age I could sense his resignation to a messy interruption. ‘What’s this?’

The guard gave me a gentle nudge on the shoulder that propelled me a foot or so closer to the man. ‘An old ploughman left him, Prince Verity, sir. Says it’s Prince Chivalry’s bastid, sir.’

For a few moments the harried man behind the desk continued to regard me with some confusion. Then something very like an amused smile lightened his features and he rose and came around the desk to stand with his fists on his hips, looking down on me. I did not feel threatened by his scrutiny; rather it was as if something about my appearance pleased him inordinately. I looked up at him curiously. He wore a short dark beard, as bushy and disorderly as his hair, and his cheeks were weathered above it. Heavy brows were raised above his dark eyes. He had a barrel of a chest, and shoulders that strained the fabric of his shirt. His fists were square and work-scarred, yet ink stained the fingers of his right hand. As he stared at me, his grin gradually widened, until finally he gave a snort of laughter.

‘Be damned,’ he finally said. ‘Boy does have Chiv’s look to him, doesn’t he? Fruitful Eda. Who’d have believed it of my illustrious and virtuous brother?’

The guard made no response at all, nor was one expected from him. He continued to stand alertly, awaiting the next command. A soldier’s soldier.

The other man continued to regard me curiously. ‘How old?’ he asked the guard.

‘Ploughman says six.’ The guard raised a hand to scratch at his cheek, then suddenly seemed to recall he was reporting. He dropped his hand. ‘Sir,’ he added.

The other didn't seem to notice the guard's lapse in discipline. The dark eyes roved over me, and the amusement in his smile grew broader. 'So make it seven years or so, to allow for her belly to swell. Damn. Yes. That was the first year the Chyurda tried to close the pass. Chivalry was up this way for three, four months, chivvying them into opening it to us. Looks like it wasn't the only thing he chivvied open. Damn. Who'd have thought it of him?' He paused, then, 'Who's the mother?' he demanded suddenly.

The guardsman shifted uncomfortably. 'Don't know, sir. There was only the old ploughman on the doorstep, and all him said was that this was Prince Chivalry's bastid, and he wasn't going to feed him ner put clothes on his back no more. Said him what got him could care for him now.'

The man shrugged as if the matter were of no great importance. 'The boy looks well tended. I give it a week, a fortnight at most before she's whimpering at the kitchen door because she misses her pup. I'll find out then if not before. Here, boy, what do they call you?'

His jerkin was closed with an intricate buckle shaped like a buck's head. It was brass, then gold, then red as the flames in the fireplace moved. 'Boy,' I said. I do not know if I were merely repeating what he and the guardsman had called me, or if I truly had no name besides the word. For a moment the man looked surprised and a look of what might have been pity crossed his face. But it disappeared as swiftly, leaving him looking only discomfited, or mildly annoyed. He glanced back at the map that still awaited him on the table.

'Well,' he said into the silence. 'Something's got to be done with him, at least until Chiv gets back. Jason, see the boy's fed and bedded somewhere, at least for tonight. I'll give some thought to what's to be done with him tomorrow. Can't have royal bastards cluttering up the countryside.'

'Sir,' said Jason, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, but merely accepting the order. He put a heavy hand on my shoulder and turned me back toward the door. I went somewhat reluctantly, for the room was bright and pleasant and warm. My cold feet had started to tingle, and I knew if I could stay a little longer, I would be warmed through. But the guardsman's hand was inexorable, and I was steered out of the warm chamber and back into the chill dimness of the drear corridors.

They seemed all the darker after the warmth and light, and endless as I tried to match the guard's stride as he wound through them. Perhaps I whimpered, or perhaps he grew tired of my slower pace, for he spun

suddenly, seized me, and tossed me up to sit on his shoulder as casually as if I weighed nothing at all. ‘Soggy little pup, you,’ he observed, without rancour, and then bore me down corridors and around turns and up and down steps and finally into the yellow light and space of a large kitchen.

There half a dozen other guards lounged on benches and ate and drank at a big scarred table before a fire fully twice as large as the one in the study. The room smelled of food, of beer and men’s sweat, of wet wool garments and the smoke of the wood and drip of grease into flames. Hogsheads and small casks ranged against the wall, and smoked joints of meats were dark shapes hung from the rafters. The table bore a clutter of food and dishes. A chunk of meat on a spit was swung back from the flames and dripped fat onto the stone hearth. My stomach clutched my ribs suddenly at the rich smell. Jason set me rather firmly on the corner of the table closest to the fire’s warmth, jogging the elbow of a man whose face was hidden by a mug.

‘Here, Burrich,’ Jason said matter-of-factly. ‘This pup’s for you, now.’ He turned away from me. I watched with interest as he broke a corner as big as his fist off a dark loaf, and then drew his belt knife to take a wedge of cheese off a wheel. He pushed these into my hands, and then stepping to the fire, began sawing a man-sized portion of meat off the joint. I wasted no time in filling my mouth with bread and cheese. Beside me, the man called Burrich set down his mug and glared around at Jason.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, sounding very much like the man in the warm chamber. He had the same unruly blackness to his hair and beard, but his face was angular and narrow. His face had the colour of a man much outdoors. His eyes were brown rather than black, and his hands were long-fingered and clever. He smelled of horses and dogs and blood and leathers.

‘He’s yours to watch over, Burrich. Prince Verity says so.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re Chivalry’s man, ain’t you? Care for his horse, his hounds, and his hawks?’

‘So?’

‘So, you got his little bastid, at least until Chivalry gets back and does otherwise with him.’ Jason offered me the slab of dripping meat. I looked from the bread to the cheese I gripped, loth to surrender either, but longing for the hot meat, too. He shrugged at seeing my dilemma, and with a fighting man’s practicality, flipped the meat casually onto the table beside my hip. I

stuffed as much bread into my mouth as I could, and shifted to where I could watch the meat.

‘Chivalry’s bastard?’

Jason shrugged, busy with getting himself bread and meat and cheese of his own. ‘So said the old ploughman what left him here.’ He layered the meat and cheese onto a slab of bread, took an immense bite, and then spoke through it. ‘Said Chivalry ought to be glad he’d seeded one child, somewhere, and should feed and care for him himself now.’

An unusual quiet bloomed suddenly in the kitchen. Men paused in their eating, gripping bread or mugs or trenchers, and turned eyes to the man called Burrich. He himself set his mug carefully away from the edge of the table. His voice was quiet and even, his words precise. ‘If my master has no heir, ’tis Eda’s will, and no fault of his manhood. The Lady Patience has always been delicate, and ...’

‘Even so, even so,’ Jason was quickly agreeing. ‘And there sits the very proof that there’s nowt wrong with him as a man, is all I was saying, that’s all.’ He wiped his mouth hastily on his sleeve. ‘As like to Prince Chivalry as can be, as even his brother said but a while ago. Not the Crown Prince’s fault if his Lady Patience can’t carry his seed to term ...’

But Burrich had stood suddenly. Jason backed a hasty step or two before he realized I was Burrich’s target, not him. Burrich gripped my shoulders and turned me to the fire. When he firmly took my jaw in his hand and lifted my face to his, he startled me so that I dropped both bread and cheese. Yet he paid no mind to this as he turned my face toward the fire and studied me as if I were a map. His eyes met mine, and there was a sort of wildness in them, as if what he saw in my face were an injury I’d done him. I started to draw away from that look, but his grip wouldn’t let me. So I stared back at him with as much defiance as I could muster, and saw his upset masked suddenly with a sort of reluctant wonder. And lastly he closed his eyes for a second, hooding them against some pain. ‘It’s a thing that will try her lady’s will to the edge of her very name,’ Burrich said softly.

He released my jaw, and stooped awkwardly to pick up the bread and cheese I’d dropped. He brushed them off and handed them back to me. I stared at the thick bandaging on his right calf and over his knee that had kept him from bending his leg. He reseated himself and refilled his mug from a pitcher on the table. He drank again, studying me over the rim of his mug.

‘Who’d Chivalry get him on?’ a man at the other end of the table asked incautiously.

Burrich swung his gaze to the man as he set his mug down. For a moment he didn’t speak, and I sensed that silence hovering again. ‘I’d say it was Prince Chivalry’s business who the mother was, and not for kitchen talk,’ Burrich said mildly.

‘Even so, even so,’ the guard agreed abruptly, and Jason nodded like a courting bird in agreement. Young as I was, I still wondered what kind of man this was who, with one leg bandaged, could quell a room full of rough men with a look or a word.

‘Boy don’t have a name,’ Jason volunteered into the silence. ‘Just goes by “boy”.’

This statement seemed to put everyone, even Burrich, at a loss for words. The silence lingered as I finished bread and cheese and meat, and washed it down with a swallow or two of beer that Burrich offered me. The other men left the room gradually, in twos and threes, and still he sat there, drinking and looking at me. ‘Well,’ he said at long last. ‘If I know your father, he’ll face up to it square and do what’s right. But Eda only knows what he’ll think is the right thing to do. Probably whatever hurts the most.’ He watched me silently a moment longer. ‘Had enough to eat?’ he asked at last.

I nodded, and he stood stiffly, to swing me off the table and onto the floor. ‘Come on, then, fitz,’ he said, and moved out of the kitchen and down a different corridor. His stiff leg made his gait ungainly, and perhaps the beer had something to do with it as well. Certainly I had no trouble in keeping up. We came at last to a heavy door, and a guard who nodded us through with a devouring stare at me.

Outside, a chill wind was blowing. All the ice and snow that had softened during the day had gone back to sharpness with the coming of night. The path cracked under my feet, and the wind seemed to find every crack and gap in my garments. My feet and leggings had been warmed by the kitchen’s fire, but not quite dried, so the cold seized on them. I remember darkness, and the sudden tiredness that came over me, a terrible weepy sleepiness that dragged at me as I followed the strange man with the bandaged leg through the chill, dark courtyard. There were tall walls around us, and guards moved intermittently on top of them, dark shadows visible only as they blotted the stars occasionally from the sky. The cold bit at me,

and I stumbled and slipped on the icy pathway. But something about Burrich did not permit me to whimper or beg quarter from him. Instead I followed him doggedly. We reached a building and he dragged open a heavy door.

Warmth and animal smells and a dim yellow light spilled out. A sleepy stable-boy sat up in his nest of straw, blinking like a rumped fledgling. At a word from Burrich he lay down again, curling up small in the straw and closing his eyes. We moved past him, Burrich dragging the door to behind us. He took the lantern that burned dimly by the door and led me on.

I entered a different world then, a night world where animals shifted and breathed in stalls, where hounds lifted their heads from their crossed forepaws to regard me with lambent eyes green or yellow in the lantern's glow. Horses stirred as we passed their stalls. 'Hawks are down at the far end,' Burrich said as we passed stall after stall. I accepted it as something he thought I should know.

'Here,' he said finally. 'This'll do. For now, anyway. I'm jiggered if I know what else to do with you. If it weren't for the Lady Patience, I'd be thinking this a fine god's jest on the master. Here, Nosy, you just move over and make this boy a place in the straw. That's right, you cuddle up to Vixen, there. She'll take you in, and give a good slash to any that think to bother you.'

I found myself facing an ample box-stall, populated with three hounds. They had roused and lay, stick tails thumping in the straw at Burrich's voice. I moved uncertainly in amongst them, and finally lay down next to an old bitch with a whitened muzzle and one torn ear. The older male regarded me with a certain suspicion, but the third was a half-grown pup, and Nosy welcomed me with ear lickings, nose nipping and much pawing. I put an arm around him to settle him, and then cuddled in amongst them as Burrich had advised. He threw a thick blanket that smelled much of horse down over me. A very large grey beast in the next stall stirred suddenly, thumping a heavy hoof against the partition, and then hanging his head over to see what the night excitement was about. Burrich calmed him absently with a touch.

'It's rough quarters here for all of us at this outpost. You'll find Buckkeep a more hospitable place. But for tonight, you'll be warm here, and safe.' He stood a moment longer, looking down at us. 'Horse, hound, and hawk, Chivalry. I've minded them all for you for many a year, and minded them well. But this by-blow of yours; well, what to do with him is beyond me.'

I knew he wasn't speaking to me. I watched him over the edge of the blanket as he took the lantern from its hook and wandered off, muttering to himself. I remember that first night well, the warmth of the hounds, the prickling straw, and even the sleep that finally came as the pup cuddled close beside me. I drifted into his mind and shared his dim dreams of an endless chase, pursuing a quarry I never saw, but whose hot scent dragged me onward through nettle, bramble and scree.

And with the hound's dream, the precision of the memory wavers like the bright colours and sharp edges of a drug dream. Certainly the days that follow that first night have no such clarity in my mind.

I recall the spitting wet days of winter's end as I learned the route from my stall to the kitchen. I was free to come and go there as I pleased. Sometimes there was a cook in attendance, setting meat onto the hearth-hooks or pummelling bread dough or breaching a cask of drink. More often, there was not, and I helped myself to whatever had been left out on the table, and shared generously with the pup that swiftly became my constant companion. Men came and went, eating and drinking, and regarding me with a speculative curiosity that I came to accept as normal. The men had a sameness about them, with their rough wool cloaks and leggings, their hard bodies and easy movements, and the crest of a leaping buck that each bore over his heart. My presence made some of them uncomfortable. I grew accustomed to the mutter of voices that began whenever I left the kitchen.

Burrich was a constant in those days, giving me the same care he gave to Chivalry's beasts; I was fed, watered, groomed and exercised, said exercise usually coming in the form of trotting at his heels as he performed his other duties. But those memories are blurry and details, such as those of washing or changing garments, have probably faded with a six-year-old's calm assumptions of such things as normal. Certainly I remember the hound pup, Nosy. His coat was red and slick and short, and bristly in a way that prickled me through my clothes when we shared the horse blanket at night. His eyes were green as copper ore, his nose the colour of cooked liver, and the insides of his mouth and tongue were mottled pink and black. When we were not eating in the kitchen, we wrestled in the courtyard or in the straw of the box-stall. Such was my world for however long it was I was there. Not too long, I think, for I do not recall the weather changing. All my memories of that time are of raw days and blustery wind, and snow and ice that partially melted each day but were restored by night's freezes.

One other memory I have of that time, but it is not sharp-edged. Rather it is warm and softly tinted, like a rich old tapestry seen in a dim room. I recall being roused from sleep by the pup's wriggling and the yellow light of a lantern being held over me. Two men bent over me, but Burrich stood stiffly behind them and I was not afraid.

'Now you've wakened him,' warned the one, and he was Prince Verity, the man from the warmly-lit chamber of my first evening.

'So? He'll go back to sleep as soon as we leave. Damn him, he has his father's eyes as well. I swear, I'd have known his blood no matter where I saw him. There'll be no denying it to any that see him. But have neither you nor Burrich the sense of a flea? Bastard or not, you don't stable a child among beasts. Was there no where else you could put him?'

The man who spoke was like Verity around the jaw and eyes, but there the resemblance ended. This man was younger by far. His cheeks were beardless, and his scented and smoothed hair was finer and brown. His cheeks and forehead had been stung to redness by the night's chill, but it was a new thing, not Verity's weathered ruddiness. And Verity dressed as his men dressed, in practical woollens of sturdy weave and subdued colours. Only the crest on his breast showed brighter, in gold and silver thread. But the younger man with him gleamed in scarlets and primrose, and his cloak drooped with twice the width of cloth needed to cover a man. The doublet that showed beneath it was a rich cream, and laden with lace. The scarf at his throat was secured with a leaping stag done in gold, its single eye a winking green gem. And the careful turn of his words were like a twisted chain of gold compared to the simple links of Verity's speech.

'Regal, I had given it no thought. What do I know of children? I turned him over to Burrich. He is Chivalry's man, and as such he's cared for ...'

'I meant no disrespect to the blood, sir,' Burrich said in honest confusion. 'I am Chivalry's man, and I saw to the boy as I thought best. I could make him up a pallet in the guardroom, but he seems small to be in the company of such men, with their comings and goings at all hours, their fights and drinking and noise.' The tone of his words made his own distaste for their company obvious. 'Bedded here, he has quiet, and the pup has taken to him. And with my Vixen to watch over him at night, no one could do him harm without her teeth taking a toll. My lords, I know little of children myself, and it seemed to me ...'

‘It’s fine, Burrich, it’s fine,’ Verity said quietly, cutting him off. ‘If it had to be thought about, I should have done the thinking. I left it to you, and I don’t find fault with it. It’s better than a lot of children have in this village, Eda knows. For here, for now, it’s fine.’

‘It will have to be different when he comes back to Buckkeep.’ Regal did not sound pleased.

‘Then our father wishes him to return with us to Buckkeep?’ The question came from Verity.

‘Our father does. My mother does not.’

‘Oh.’ Verity’s tone indicated he had no interest in further discussing that. But Regal frowned and continued.

‘My mother the Queen is not at all pleased about any of this. She has counselled the King long, but in vain. Mother and I were for putting the boy ... aside. It is only good sense. We scarcely need more confusion in the line of succession.’

‘I see no confusion in it now, Regal,’ Verity spoke evenly. ‘Chivalry, me, and then you. Then our cousin August. This bastard would be a far fifth.’

‘I am well aware that you precede me; you need not flaunt it at me at every opportunity,’ Regal said coldly. He glared down at me. ‘I still think it would be better not to have him about. What if Chivalry never does get a legal heir on Patience? What if he chooses to recognize this ... boy? It could be very divisive to the nobles. Why should we tempt trouble? So say my mother and I. But our father the King is not a hasty man, as well we know. Shrewd is as Shrewd does, as the common folk say. He forbade any settling of the matter. “Regal,” he said, in that way he has. “Don’t do what you can’t undo, until you’ve considered what you can’t do once you’ve done it.” Then he laughed.’ Regal himself gave a short, bitter laugh. ‘I weary so of his humour.’

‘Oh,’ said Verity again, and I lay still and wondered if he were trying to sort out the King’s words, or refraining from replying to his brother’s complaint.

‘You discern his real reason, of course,’ Regal informed him.

‘Which is?’

‘He still favours Chivalry.’ Regal sounded disgusted. ‘Despite everything. Despite his foolish marriage and his eccentric wife. Despite this mess. And now he thinks this will sway the people, make them warmer

toward him. Prove he's a man, that Chivalry can father a child. Or maybe prove he's a human, and can make mistakes like the rest of them.' Regal's tone betrayed that he agreed with none of this.

'And this will make the people like him more, support his future kingship more? That he fathered a child on some wild woman before he married his queen?' Verity sounded confused by the logic.

I heard the sourness in Regal's voice. 'So the King seems to think. Does he care nothing for the disgrace? But I suspect Chivalry will feel differently about using his bastard in such a way. Especially as it regards dear Patience. But the King has ordered that the bastard be brought to Buckkeep when you return.' Regal looked down on me as if ill satisfied.

Verity looked briefly troubled, but nodded. A shadow lay over Burrich's features that the yellow lamplight could not lift.

'Has my master no say in this?' Burrich ventured to protest. 'It seems to me that if he wants to settle a portion on the family of the boy's mother, and set him aside, then, why surely for the sake of my Lady Patience's sensibilities, he should be allowed that discretion ...'

Prince Regal broke in with a snort of disdain. 'The time for discretion was before he rolled the wench. The Lady Patience is not the first woman to have to face her husband's bastard. Everyone here knows of his existence; Verity's clumsiness saw to that. There's no point to trying to hide him. And as far as a royal bastard is concerned, none of us can afford to have such sensibilities, Burrich. To leave such a boy in a place like this is like leaving a weapon hovering over the King's throat. Surely even a houndsman can see that. And even if you can't, your master will.'

An icy harshness had come into Regal's voice, and I saw Burrich flinch from his voice as I had seen him cower from nothing else. It made me afraid, and I drew the blanket up over my head and burrowed deeper into the straw. Beside me, Vixen growled lightly in the back of her throat. I think it made Regal step back, but I cannot be sure. The men left soon after, and if they spoke any more than that, no memory of it lies within me.

Time passed, and I think it was two, or perhaps three weeks later that I found myself clinging to Burrich's belt and trying to wrap my short legs around a horse behind him as we left that chill village and began what seemed to me an endless journey down to warmer lands. I suppose at some point Chivalry must have come to see the bastard he had sired, and must have passed some sort of judgement on himself as regarded me. But I have

no memory of such a meeting with my father. The only image I carry of him in my mind is from his portrait on the wall in Buckkeep. Years later I was given to understand that his diplomacy had gone well indeed, securing a treaty and peace that lasted well into my teens and earning the respect and even fondness of the Chyurda.

In truth, I was his only failure that year, but I was a monumental one. He preceded us home to Buckkeep, where he abdicated his claim to the throne. By the time we arrived, he and Lady Patience were gone from court, to live as the Lord and Lady of Withywoods. I have been to Withywoods. Its name bears no relationship to its appearance. It is a warm valley, centred on a gently flowing river that carves a wide plain that nestles between gently rising and rolling foothills. A place to grow grapes and grain and plump children. It is a soft holding, far from the borders, far from the politics of court, far from anything that had been Chivalry's life up to then. It was a pasturing out, a gentle and genteel exile for a man who would have been king. A velvet smothering for a warrior and a silencing of a rare and skilled diplomat.

And so I came to Buckkeep, sole child and bastard of a man I'd never know. Prince Verity became King-in-Waiting and Prince Regal moved up a notch in the line of succession. If all I had ever done was to be born and discovered, I would have left a mark across all the land for all time. I grew up fatherless and motherless in a court where all recognized me as a catalyst. And a catalyst I became.

TWO

Newboy

There are many legends about Taker, the first Outislander to claim Buckkeep as the First Duchy and the founder of the royal line. One is that the raiding voyage he was on was his first and only foray out from whatever cold harsh island bore him. It is said that upon seeing the timbered fortifications of Buckkeep, he had announced, 'If there's a fire and a meal there, I shan't be leaving again.' And there was, and he didn't.

But family rumour says that he was a poor sailor, made sick by the heaving water and salt-fish rations that other Outislanders thrived upon. He and his crew had been lost for days upon the water, and if he had not managed to seize Buckkeep and make it his own, his crew would have drowned him. Nevertheless, the old tapestry in the Great Hall shows him as a well-thewed stalwart grinning fiercely over the prow of his vessel as his oarsmen propel him toward an ancient Buckkeep of logs and poorly dressed stone.

Buckkeep had begun its existence as a defensible position on a navigable river at the mouth of a bay with excellent anchorage. Some petty landchief, whose name has been lost in the mists of history, saw the potential for controlling trade on the river and built the first stronghold there. Ostensibly, he had built it to defend both river and bay from the Outislander raiders who came every summer to plunder up and down the river. What he had not reckoned on were the raiders that infiltrated his fortifications by treachery. The towers and walls became their toehold. They moved their occupations and domination up the river, and, rebuilding his timber fort into towers and walls of dressed stone, finally made Buckkeep the heart of the First Duchy, and eventually the capital of the kingdom of the Six Duchies.

The ruling house of the Six Duchies, the Farseers, were descended from those Outislanders. They had, for several generations, kept up their ties with the Outislanders, making courting voyages and returning home with plump

dark brides of their own folk. And so the blood of the Outislanders still ran strong in the royal lines and the noble houses, producing children with black hair and dark eyes and muscled, stocky limbs. And with those attributes went a predilection for the Skill, and all the dangers and weaknesses inherent in such blood. I had my share of that heritage, too.

But my first experience of Buckkeep held nothing of history or heritage. I knew it only as an end place for a journey, a panorama of noise and people, carts and dogs and buildings and twisting streets that led finally to an immense stone stronghold on the cliffs that overlooked the city sheltered below it. Burrich's horse was weary, and his hooves slipped on the often slimy cobbles of the city streets. I held on grimly to his belt, too weary and aching even to complain. I craned my head up once to stare at the tall grey towers and walls of the keep above us. Even in the unfamiliar warmth of the sea breeze, it looked chill and forbidding. I leaned my forehead against his back and felt ill in the brackish iodine smell of the immense water. And that was how I came to Buckkeep.

Burrich had quarters over the stables, not far from the mews. It was there he took me, along with the hounds and Chivalry's hawk. He saw to the hawk first, for it was sadly bedraggled from the trip. The dogs were overjoyed to be home, and were suffused with a boundless energy that was very annoying to anyone as weary as I. Nosy bowled me over half a dozen times before I could convey to his thick-skulled hound's mind that I was weary and half-sick and in no mood for play. He responded as any pup would, by seeking out his former litter-mates and immediately getting himself into a semi-serious fight with one of them that was quelled by a shout from Burrich. Chivalry's man he might be, but when he was at Buckkeep, he was the Master for hounds, hawks, and horses.

His own beasts seen to, he proceeded to walk through the stables, surveying all that had been done, or left undone, in his absence. Stable-boys, grooms, and falconers appeared as if by magic to defend their charges from any criticisms. I trotted at his heels for as long as I could keep up. It was only when I finally surrendered, and sank wearily onto a pile of straw, that he appeared to notice me. A look of irritation, and then great weariness passed across his face.

'Here, you, Cob. Take young fitz there to the kitchens and see that he's fed, and then bring him back up to my quarters.'

Cob was a short, dark dog-boy, perhaps ten years old, who had just been praised over the health of a litter that had been whelped in Burrich's absence. Moments before he had been basking in Burrich's approval. Now his grin faltered, and he looked at me dubiously. We regarded one another as Burrich moved off down the line of stalls with his entourage of nervous caretakers. Then the boy shrugged, and went into a half-crouch to face me. 'Are you hungry, then, fitz? Shall we go find you a bite?' he asked invitingly, in exactly the same tone as he had used to coax his puppies out where Burrich could see them. I nodded, relieved that he expected no more from me than from a puppy, and followed him.

He looked back often to see if I were keeping up. No sooner were we outside the stables than Nosy came frolicking up to join me. The hound's evident affection for me raised me in Cob's estimation, and he continued to speak to both of us in short encouraging phrases, telling us there was food just ahead, come along now, no, don't go off sniffing after that cat, come along now, there's some good fellows.

The stables had been bustling, with Verity's men putting up their horses and gear and Burrich finding fault with all that had not been done up to his standards in his absence. But as we drew closer to the inner keep, the foot traffic increased. Folk brushed by us on all manner of errands: a boy carrying an immense slab of bacon on his shoulder, a giggling cluster of girls, arms heavy with stewing reeds and heather, a scowling old man with a basket of flopping fish, and three young women in motley and bells, their voices ringing as merrily as their chimes.

My nose informed me that we were getting closer to the kitchens, but the traffic increased proportionately until we drew near a door with a veritable crush of people going in and out. Cob stopped, and Nosy and I paused behind him, noses working appreciatively. He regarded the press of folk at the door, and frowned to himself. 'Place is packed. Everyone's getting ready for the welcoming feast tonight, for Verity and Regal. Anyone who's anyone has come into Buckkeep for it; word spread fast about Chivalry ducking out on the kingship. All the dukes have come or sent a man to counsel about it. I hear even the Chyurda sent someone, to be sure Chivalry's treaties will be honoured if Chivalry is no longer about ...'

He halted, suddenly embarrassed, but whether it was because he was speaking of my father to the cause of his abdication, or because he was addressing a puppy and a six-year-old as if they had intelligence, I am not

sure. He glanced about, reassessing the situation. 'Wait here,' he told us finally. 'I'll slip in and bring something out for you. Less chance of me getting stepped on ... or caught. Now stay.' And he reinforced his command with a firm gesture of his hand. I backed up to a wall and crouched down there, out of traffic's way, and Nosy sat obediently beside me. I watched admiringly as Cob approached the door, and slipped between the clustered folk, eeling smoothly into the kitchens.

With Cob out of sight, the more general populace claimed my attention. Largely the folk that passed us were serving people and cooks, with a scattering of minstrels and merchants and delivery folk. I watched them come and go with a weary curiosity. I had already seen too much that day to find them of great interest. Almost more than food I desired a quiet place away from all this activity. I sat flat on the ground, my back against the sun-warmed wall of the keep, and put my forehead on my knees. Nosy leaned against me.

Nosy's stick tail beating against the earth roused me. I lifted my face from my knees, to perceive a tall pair of brown boots before me. My eyes travelled up rough leather pants and over a coarse wool shirt to a shaggy, bearded face thatched with pepper-grey hair. The man staring down at me balanced a small keg on one shoulder.

'You the bastid, hey?'

I had heard the word often enough to know it meant me, without grasping the fullness of its meaning. I nodded slowly. The man's face brightened with interest.

'Hey,' he said loudly, no longer speaking to me but to the folk coming and going. 'Here's the bastid. Stiff-as-a-stick Chivalry's by-blow. Looks a fair bit like him, don't you say? Who's your mother, boy?'

To their credit, most of the passing people continued to come and go, with no more than a curious stare at the six-year-old sitting by the wall. But the cask-man's question was evidently of great interest, for more than a few heads turned, and several tradesmen who had just exited from the kitchen drew nearer to hear the answer.

But I did not have an answer. Mother had been mother, and whatever I had known of her was already fading. So I made no reply, but only stared up at him.

'Hey. What's your name then, boy?' And turning to his audience, he confided, 'I heard he ain't got no name. No high-flown royal name to shape

him, nor even a cottage name to scold him by. That right, boy? You got a name?’

The group of onlookers was growing. A few showed pity in their eyes, but none interfered. Some of what I was feeling passed to Nosy, who dropped over onto his side and showed his belly in supplication while thumping his tail in that ancient canine signal that always means, ‘I’m only a puppy. I cannot defend myself. Have mercy.’ Had they been dogs they would have sniffed me over and then drawn back. But humans have no such inbred courtesies. So when I didn’t answer, the man drew a step nearer, and repeated, ‘You got a name, boy?’

I stood slowly, and the wall that had been warm against my back a moment ago was now a chill barrier to retreat. At my feet, Nosy squirmed in the dust on his back and let out a pleading whine. ‘No,’ I said softly, and when the man made as if to lean closer to hear my words, ‘NO!’ I shouted, and *repelled* at him, while crabbing sideways along the wall. I saw him stagger a step backwards, losing his grip on his cask so that it fell to the cobbled path and cracked open. No one in the crowd could have understood what had happened. I certainly didn’t. For the most part, folk laughed to see a grown man cower back from a child. In that moment my reputation for both temper and spirit were made, for before nightfall the tale of the bastard standing up to his tormentor was all over the town. Nosy scrambled to his feet and fled with me. I had one glimpse of Cob’s face, taut with confusion as he emerged from the kitchen, pies in hands, and saw Nosy and me flee. Had he been Burrich, I probably would have halted and trusted my safety to him. But he was not, and so I ran, letting Nosy take the lead.

We fled through the trooping servants, just one more small boy and his dog racing about in the courtyard, and Nosy took me to what he obviously regarded as the safest place in the world. Far from the kitchen and the inner keep was a hollow Vixen had scraped out under a corner of a rickety outbuilding where sacks of peas and beans were stored. Here Nosy had been whelped, in total defiance of Burrich and here she had managed to keep her pups hidden for almost three days. Burrich himself had found her there. His smell was the first human smell Nosy could recall. It was a tight squeeze to get under the building, but once within, the den was warm and dry and semi-dark. Nosy huddled close to me and I put my arm around him. Hidden there, our hearts soon eased down from their wild thumpings, and from calmness

we passed into the deep, dreamless sleep reserved for warm spring afternoons and puppies.

I came awake shivering, hours later. It was full dark and the tenuous warmth of the early spring day had fled. Nosy was awake as soon as I was, and together we scraped and slithered out of the den.

There was a high night sky over Buckkeep, with stars shining bright and cold. The smell of the bay was stronger as if the day-smells of men and horses and cooking were temporary things that had to surrender each night to the ocean's power. We walked down deserted pathways, through exercise yards and past granaries and the winepress. All was still and silent. As we drew closer to the inner keep, I saw torches still burning, and heard voices still raised in talk. But it all seemed tired somehow, the last vestiges of revelry winding down before dawn came to lighten the skies. Still, we skirted the inner keep by a wide margin, having had enough of people.

I found myself following Nosy back to the stables. As we drew near the heavy doors, I wondered how we would get in. But Nosy's tail began to wag wildly as we got closer, and then even my poor nose picked up Burrich's scent in the dark. He rose from the wooden crate he'd been seated on by the door. 'There you are,' he said soothingly. 'Come along then. Come on.' And he stood and opened the heavy doors for us and led us in.

We followed him through darkness, between rows of stalls, past grooms and handlers put up for the night in the stables, and then past our own horses and dogs and the stable-boys who slept amongst them, and then to a staircase that climbed the wall which separated the stables from the mews. We followed Burrich up its creaking wooden treads, and then he opened another door. Dim yellow light from a guttering candle on a table blinded me temporarily. We followed Burrich into a slant-roofed chamber that smelled of Burrich and leather and the oils and salves and herbs that were part of his trade. He shut the door firmly behind us, and as he came past us to kindle a fresh candle from the nearly spent one on the table, I smelled the sweetness of wine on him.

The light spread, and Burrich seated himself on a wooden chair by the table. He looked different, dressed in fine thin cloth of brown and yellow, with a bit of silver chain across his jerkin. He put his hand out, palm up, on his knee and Nosy went to him immediately. Burrich scratched his hanging ears, and then thumped his ribs affectionately, grimacing at the dust that rose from his coat. 'You're a fine pair, the two of you,' he said, speaking more to

the pup than to me. ‘Look at you. Filthy as beggars. I lied to my king today for you. First time ever in my life I’ve done that. Appears as if Chivalry’s fall from grace will take me down as well. Told him you were washed up and sound asleep, exhausted from your journey. He was not pleased he would have to wait to see you, but luckily for us, he had weightier things to handle. Chivalry’s abdication has upset a lot of lords. Some are seeing it as a chance to push for an advantage, and others are disgruntled to be cheated of a king they admired. Shrewd’s trying to calm them all. He’s letting it be noised about that Verity was the one who negotiated with the Chyurda this time. Those as will believe that shouldn’t be allowed to walk about on their own. But they came, to look at Verity anew, and wonder if and when he’d be their next king, and what kind of a king he would be. Chivalry’s throwing it over and leaving for Withywood has stirred all the Duchies as if he’d poked a stick in a hive.’

Burrich lifted his eyes from Nosy’s eager face. ‘Well, fitz. Guess you got a taste of it today. Fair scared poor Cob to death, your running off like that. Now, are you hurt? Did anyone rough you up? I should have known there would be those would blame all the stir on you. Come here, then. Come on.’

When I hesitated, he moved over to a pallet of blankets made up near the fire and patted it invitingly. ‘See. There’s a place here for you, all ready. And there’s bread and meat on the table for both of you.’

His words made me aware of the covered platter on the table. *Flesh*, Nosy’s senses confirmed, and I was suddenly full of the smell of the meat. Burrich laughed at our rush to the table, and silently approved how I shared a portion out to Nosy before filling my own jaws. We ate to repletion, for Burrich had not under-estimated how hungry a pup and a boy would be after the day’s misadventures. And then, despite our long nap earlier, the blankets so close to the fire were suddenly immensely inviting. Bellies full, we curled up with the flames baking our backs and slept.

When we awoke the next day, the sun was well risen and Burrich already gone. Nosy and I ate the heel of last night’s loaf and gnawed the leftover bones clean before we descended from Burrich’s quarters. No one challenged us or appeared to take any notice of us.

Outside, another day of chaos and revelry had begun. The keep was, if anything, more swollen with people. Their passage stirred the dust and their mixing voices were an overlay to the shushing of the wind and the more

distant muttering of the waves. Nosy drank it all in, every scent, every sight, every sound. The doubled sensory impact dizzied me. As I walked, I gathered from snatches of conversation that our arrival had coincided with some spring rite of merriment and gathering. Chivalry's abdication was still the main topic, but it did not prevent the puppet shows and jugglers from making every corner a stage for their antics. At least one puppet show had already incorporated Chivalry's fall from grace into its bawdy comedy, and I stood anonymous in the crowd and puzzled over dialogue about sowing the neighbour's fields that had the adults roaring with laughter.

But very soon the crowds and the noise became oppressive to both of us, and I let Nosy know I wished to escape it all. We left the keep, passing out of the thick-walled gate past guards intent upon flirting with the merrymakers as they came and went. One more boy and dog leaving on the heels of a fish-mongering family were nothing to notice. And with no better distraction in sight, we followed the family as they wound their way down the streets away from the keep and towards the town of Buckkeep. We dropped further and further behind them as new scents demanded that Nosy investigate and then urinate at every corner, until it was just him and me wandering in the city.

Buckkeep then was a windy, raw place. The streets were steep and crooked, with paving stones that rocked and shifted out of place under the weight of passing carts. The wind blasted my inland nostrils with the scent of beached kelp and fish guts while the keening of the gulls and sea-birds were an eerie melody above the rhythmic shushing of the waves. The town clings to the rocky black cliffs much like limpets and barnacles cling to the pilings and quays that venture out into the bay. The houses were of stone and wood, with the more elaborate wooden ones built higher up the rocky face and cut more deeply into it.

Buckkeep Town was relatively quiet compared to the festivity and crowds up in the keep. Neither of us had the sense or experience to know the waterfront town was not the best place for a six-year-old and a puppy to wander. Nosy and I explored eagerly, sniffing our way down Baker's Street and through a near-deserted market and then along the warehouses and boat-sheds that were the lowest level of the town. Here the water was close, and we walked on wooden piers as often as we did on sand and stone. Business here was going on as usual with little allowance for the carnival atmosphere up in the keep. Ships must dock and unload as the rising and falling of the

tides allow, and those who fish for a living must follow the schedules of the finned creatures, not those of men.

We soon encountered children, some busy at the lesser tasks of their parents' crafts, but some idlers like ourselves. I fell in easily with them, with little need for introductions or any of the adult pleasantries. Most of them were older than I, but several were as young or younger. None of them seemed to think it odd I should be out and about on my own. I was introduced to all the important sights of the city, including the swollen body of a cow that had washed up at the last tide. We visited a new fishing boat under construction at a dock littered with curling shavings and strong-smelling pitch spills. A fish-smoking rack left carelessly untended furnished a mid-day repast for a half-dozen of us. If the children I was with were more ragged and boisterous than those who passed at their chores, I did not notice. And had anyone told me I was passing the day with a pack of beggar brats denied entrance to the keep because of their light-fingered ways, I would have been shocked. At the time, I knew only that it was suddenly a lively and pleasant day, full of places to go and things to do.

There were a few youngsters, larger and more rambunctious, who would have taken the opportunity to set the newcomer on his ear had Nosy not been with me and showing his teeth at the first aggressive shove. But as I did not show any signs of wanting to challenge their leadership, I was allowed to follow. I was suitably impressed by all their secrets, and I would venture that by the end of the long afternoon, I knew the poorer quarter of town better than many who had grown up above it.

I was not asked for a name, but simply was called Newboy. The others had names as simple as Dick or Kerry, or as descriptive as Netpicker and Nosebleed. The last might have been a pretty little thing in better circumstances. She was a year or two older than I, but very outspoken and quick-witted. She got into one dispute with a big boy of twelve, but she showed no fear of his fists, and her sharp-tongued taunts soon had everyone laughing at him. She took her victory calmly and left me awed by her toughness. But the bruises on her face and thin arms were layered in shades of purple, blue and yellow, while a crust of dried blood below one ear belied her name. Even so, Nosebleed was a lively one, her voice shriller than the gulls that wheeled above us. Late afternoon found Kerry, Nosebleed and me on a rocky shore beyond the net-menders' racks, with Nosebleed teaching me to scour the rocks for tight-clinging sheels. These she levered off

expertly with a sharpened stick. She was showing me how to use a nail to pry the chewy inmates out of their shells when another girl hailed us with a shout.

The neat blue cloak that blew around her and the leather shoes on her feet set her apart from my companions. Nor did she come to join our harvesting, but only came close enough to call, 'Molly, Molly, he's looking for you, high and low. He waked up near sober an hour ago, and took to calling you names as soon as he found you gone and the fire out.'

A look mixed of defiance and fear passed over Nosebleed's face. 'Run away, Kittne, but take my thanks with you. I'll remember you next time the tides bare the kelpcrabs' beds.'

Kittne ducked her head in a brief acknowledgement and immediately turned and hastened back the way she had come.

'Are you in trouble?' I asked Nosebleed when she did not go back to turning over stones for sheels.

'Trouble?' She gave a snort of disdain. 'That depends. If my father can stay sober long enough to find me, I might be in for a bit of it. More than likely he'll be drunk enough tonight that not a one of whatever he hurls at me will hit. More than likely!' she repeated firmly when Kerry opened his mouth to object to this. And with that she turned back to the rocky beach and our search for sheel.

We were crouched over a many-legged grey creature that we found stranded in a tide pool when the crunch of a heavy boot on the barnacled rocks brought all our heads up. With a shout Kerry fled down the beach, never pausing to look back. Nosy and I sprang back, Nosy crowding against me, teeth bared bravely as his tail tickled his cowardly little belly. Molly Nosebleed was either not so fast to react, or resigned to what was to come. A gangly man caught her a smack on the side of the head. He was a skinny man, red-nosed and raw-boned, so that his fist was like a knot at the end of his bony arm, but the blow was still enough to send Molly sprawling. Barnacles cut into her wind-reddened knees, and when she crabbed aside to avoid the clumsy kick he aimed at her, I winced at the salty sand that packed the new cuts.

'Faithless little musk-cat! Didn't I tell you to stay and tend to the dipping! And here I find you mucking about on the beach, with the tallow gone hard in the pot. They'll be wanting more tapers up at the keep this night, and what am I to sell them?'

‘The three dozen I set this morning. That was all you left me wicking for, you drunken old sot!’ Molly got to her feet and stood bravely despite her brimming eyes. ‘What was I to do? Burn up all the fuel to keep the tallow soft so that when you finally gave me wicking we’d have no way to heat the kettle?’

The wind gusted and the man swayed shallowly against it. It brought us a whiff of him. Sweat and beer, Nosy informed me sagely. For a moment the man looked regretful, but then the pain of his sour belly and aching head hardened him. He stooped suddenly and seized a whitened branch of driftwood. ‘You won’t talk to me like that, you wild brat! Down here with the beggar boys, doing El knows what! Stealing from the smoke racks again, I’ll wager, and bringing more shame to me! Dare to run, and you’ll have it twice when I catch you.’

She must have believed him, for she only cowered as he advanced on her, putting up her thin arms to shield her head and then seeming to think better of it, and hiding only her face with her hands. I stood transfixed in horror while Nosy yelped with my terror and wet himself at my feet. I heard the swish of the driftwood knob as the club descended. My heart leaped sideways in my chest and I *pushed* at the man, the force jerking out oddly from my belly.

He fell, as had the keg-man the day before. But this man fell clutching at his chest, his driftwood weapon spinning harmlessly away. He dropped to the sand, gave a twitch that spasmed his whole body, and then was still.

An instant later Molly unscrewed her eyes, shrinking from the blow she still expected. She saw her father collapsed on the rocky beach, and amazement emptied her face. She leaped toward him crying, ‘Papa, Papa, are you all right? Please, don’t die, I’m sorry I’m such a wicked girl! Don’t die, I’ll be good, I promise I’ll be good.’ Heedless of her bleeding knees, she knelt beside him, turning his face so he wouldn’t breathe in sand, and then vainly trying to sit him up.

‘He was going to kill you,’ I told her, trying to make sense of the whole situation.

‘No. He hits me, a bit, when I am bad, but he’d never kill me. And when he is sober and not sick, he cries about it and begs me not to be bad and make him angry. I should take more care not to anger him. Oh, Newboy, I think he’s dead.’

I wasn't sure myself, but in a moment he gave an awful groan and opened his eyes a bit. Whatever fit had felled him seemed to have passed. Dazedly he accepted Molly's self-accusations and anxious help, and even my reluctant aid. He leaned on the two of us as we wove our way down the rocky beach over the uneven footing. Nosy followed us, by turns barking and racing in circles around us.

The few folk who saw us pass paid no attention to us. I guessed that the sight of Molly helping her papa home was not strange to any of them. I helped them as far as the door of a small chandlery, Molly sniffing apologies every step of the way. I left them there, and Nosy and I found our way back up the winding streets and hilly road to the keep, wondering every step at the ways of folk.

Having found the town and the beggar children once, I was drawn like a magnet to them every day afterwards. Burrich's days were taken up with his duties, and his evenings with the drink and merriment of the Springfest. He paid little mind to my comings and goings, as long as each evening found me on my pallet before his hearth. In truth, I think he had little idea of what to do with me, other than to see that I was fed well enough to grow heartily and that I slept safe within doors at night. It could not have been a good time for him. He had been Chivalry's man, and now that Chivalry had cast himself down, what was to become of him? That must have been much on his mind. And there was the matter of his leg. Despite his knowledge of poultices and bandaging, he could not seem to work the healing on himself that he so routinely served to his beasts. Once or twice I saw the injury unwrapped and winced at the ragged tear that refused to heal smoothly but remained swollen and oozing. Burrich cursed it roundly at first, and set his teeth grimly each night as he cleaned and re-dressed it, but as the days passed he regarded it with more of a sick despair than anything else. Eventually he did get it to close, but the ropy scar twisted his leg and disfigured his walk. Small wonder he had little mind to give to a young bastard deposited in his care.

So I ran free in the way that only small children can, unnoticed for the most part. By the time Springfest was over, the guards at the keep's gate had become accustomed to my daily wanderings. They probably thought me an errand boy, for the keep had many of those, only slightly older than I. I learned to pilfer early from the keep's kitchen enough for both Nosy and myself to breakfast heartily. Scavenging other food – burnt crusts from the

baker's, sheel and seaweed from the beach, smoked fish from untended racks – was a regular part of my day's activities. Molly Nosebleed was my most frequent companion. I seldom saw her father strike her after that day; for the most part he was too drunk to find her, or to make good his threats when he did. To what I had done that day, I gave little thought, other than to be grateful that Molly had not realized I was responsible.

The town became the world to me, with the keep a place I went to sleep. It was summer, a wonderful time in a port town. No matter where I went, Buckkeep Town was alive with comings and goings. Goods came down the Buck River from the Inland Duchies, on flat river barges manned by sweating bargemen. They spoke learnedly about shoals and bars and landmarks and the rising and falling of the river waters. Their freight was hauled up into the town shops or warehouses, and then down again to the docks and into the holds of the sea ships. Those were manned by swearing sailors who sneered at the rivermen and their inland ways. They spoke of tides and storms and nights when not even the stars would show their faces to guide them. And fishermen tied up to Buckkeep docks as well, and were the most genial of the group. At least, so they were when the fish were running well.

Kerry taught me the docks and the taverns, and how a quick-footed boy might earn three or even five pence a day, running messages up the steep streets of the town. We thought ourselves sharp and daring, to thus undercut the bigger boys who asked two pence or even more for just one errand. I don't think I have ever been as brave since as I was then. If I close my eyes, I can smell those glorious days. Oakum and tar and fresh wood shavings from the dry-docks where the shipwrights wielded their drawknives and mallets. The sweet smell of very fresh fish, and the poisonous odour of a catch held too long on a hot day. Bales of wool in the sun added their own note to the scent of oak kegs of mellow Sandsedge brandy. Sheaves of fevergone hay waiting to sweeten a forepeak mingled scents with crates of hard melons. And all of these smells were swirled by a wind off the bay, seasoned with salt and iodine. Nosy brought all he scented to my attention as his keener senses overrode my duller ones.

Kerry and I would be sent to fetch a navigator gone to say goodbye to his wife, or to bear a sampling of spices to a buyer at a shop. The harbourmaster might send us running to let a crew know some fool had tied the lines wrong and the tide was about to abandon their ship. But I liked best

the errands that took us into the taverns. There the storytellers and gossips plied their trades. The storytellers told the classic tales, of voyages of discovery and crews who braved terrible storms and of foolish captains who took down their ships with all hands. I learned many of the traditional ones by heart, but the tales I loved best came not from the professional storytellers but from the sailors themselves. These were not the tales told at the hearths for all to hear, but the warnings and tidings passed from crew to crew as the men shared a bottle of brandy or a loaf of yellow pollen-bread.

They spoke of catches they'd made, nets full to sinking the boat, or of marvellous fish and beasts glimpsed only in the path of a full moon as it cut a ship's wake. There were stories of villages raided by Outislanders, both on the coast and on the outlying islands of our duchy, the tales of pirates and battles at sea and ships taken by treachery from within. Most gripping were the tales of the Red Ship Raiders, Outislanders who both raided and pirated, and attacked not only our ships and towns but even other Outislander ships. Some scoffed at the notion of the red-keeled ships, and mocked those who told of Outislander pirates turning against others like themselves.

But Kerry and I and Nosy would sit under the tables with our backs braced against the legs, nibbling penny sweet-loaves, and listen wide-eyed to tales of red-keeled ships with a dozen bodies swinging from their yardarms, not dead, no, but bound men who jerked and shrieked when the gulls came down to peck at them. We would listen to deliciously scary tales until even the stuffy taverns seemed chilling cold, and then we would race down to the docks again, to earn another penny.

Once Kerry, Molly and I built a raft of driftwood logs and poled it about under the docks. We left it tied up there, and when the tide came up, it battered loose a whole section of dock and damaged two skiffs. For days we dreaded that someone would discover we were the culprits. And one time a tavern-keeper boxed Kerry's ears and accused us both of stealing. Our revenge was the stinking herring we wedged up under the supports of his table-tops. It rotted and stank and made flies for days before he found it.

I learned a smattering of trades in my travels: fish-buying, net-mending, boat-building and idling. I learned even more of human nature. I became a quick judge of who would actually pay the promised penny for a message delivered, and who would just laugh at me when I came to collect. I knew which baker could be begged from, and which shops were easiest to thief from. And through it all, Nosy was at my side, so bonded to me now that I

seldom separated my mind completely from his. I used his nose, his eyes and his jaws as freely as my own, and never thought it the least bit strange.

So the better part of the summer passed. But one fine day, with the sun riding a sky bluer than the sea, my good fortune came at last to an end. Molly, Kerry and I had pilfered a fine string of liver sausages from a smoke-house and were fleeing down the street with the rightful owner in pursuit. Nosy was with us, as always. The other children had come to accept him as a part of me. I don't think it ever occurred to them to wonder at our singleness of mind. Newboy and Nosy we were, and they probably thought it but a clever trick that Nosy would know before I threw where to be to catch our shared bounty. Thus there were actually four of us, racing down the cluttered street, passing the sausages from grubby hand to damp jaws and back to hand again while behind us the owner bellowed and chased us in vain.

Then Burrich stepped out of a shop.

I was running toward him. We recognized one another in a moment of mutual dismay. The blackness of the look that appeared on his face left me no doubts about my conduct. Flee, I decided in a breath, and dodged away from his reaching hands, only to discover in sudden befuddlement that I had somehow run right into him.

I do not like to dwell on what happened next. I was soundly cuffed, not only by Burrich but by the enraged owner of the sausages. All my fellow culprits save Nosy evaporated into the nooks and crannies of the street. Nosy came bellying up to Burrich, to be cuffed and scolded. I watched in agony as Burrich took coins from his pouch to pay the sausage man. He kept a grip on the back of my shirt that nearly lifted me off my feet. When the sausage man had departed and the little crowd who had gathered to watch my discomfiture were dispersing, he finally released me. I wondered at the look of disgust he gave me. With one more backhanded cuff on the back of my head, he commanded, 'Get home. Now.'

We did, more speedily than ever we had before. We found our pallet before the hearth, and waited in trepidation. And waited, and waited, through the long afternoon and into early evening. Both of us got hungry, but knew better than to leave. There had been something in Burrich's face more frightening than even the anger of Molly's papa.

When Burrich did come, full night was in place. We heard his step on the stair, and I did not need Nosy's keener senses to know that Burrich had been drinking. We shrank in on ourselves as he let himself into the dimmed

room. His breathing was heavy, and it took him longer than usual to kindle several tapers from the single one I had set out. That done, he dropped onto a bench and regarded the two of us. Nosy whined, and then fell over on his side in puppy supplication. I longed to do the same, but contented myself with looking up at him fearfully. After a moment, he spoke.

‘Fitz. What’s to come of you? What’s to come of us both? Running with beggar-thieves in the streets, with the blood of kings in your veins. Packing up like animals.’

I didn’t speak.

‘And me as much to blame as you, I suppose. Come here, then. Come here, boy.’

I ventured a step or two closer. I didn’t like coming too close.

Burrich frowned at my caution. ‘Are you hurt, boy?’

I shook my head.

‘Then come here.’

I hesitated, and Nosy whined in an agony of indecision.

Burrich glanced down at him in puzzlement. I could see his mind working through a wine-induced haze. His eyes went from the pup to me and back again, and a sickened look spread across his face. He shook his head. Slowly he stood and walked away from the table and the pup, favouring his damaged leg. In the corner of the chamber there was a small rack, supporting an assortment of dusty tools and objects. Slowly Burrich reached up and took one down. It was made of wood and leather, stiff with disuse. He swung it, and the short leather lash smacked smartly against his leg. ‘Know what this is, boy?’ he asked gently, in a kind voice.

I shook my head mutely.

‘Dog whip.’

I looked at him blankly. There was nothing in my experience or Nosy’s to tell me how to react to this. He must have seen my confusion. He smiled genially and his voice remained friendly, but I sensed something hidden in his manner, something waiting.

‘It’s a tool, fitz. A teaching device. When you get a pup that won’t mind – when you say to a pup, “come here”, and the pup refuses to come – well, a few sharp lashes from this and the pup learns to listen and obey the first time. Just a few sharp cuts is all it takes to make a pup learn to mind.’ He spoke casually as he lowered the whip and let the short lash dance lightly over the floor. Neither Nosy nor I could take our eyes off it, and when he

suddenly flipped the whole object at Nosy, the pup gave a yelp of terror and leaped back from it, and then rushed to cower behind me.

And Burrich sank down slowly, covering his eyes as he folded himself onto a bench by the fireplace. 'Oh, Eda,' he breathed, between a curse and a prayer. 'I guessed, I suspected, when I saw you running together like that, but damn El's eyes, I didn't want to be right. I didn't want to be right. I've never hit a pup with that damn thing in my life. Nosy had no reason to fear it. Not unless you'd been sharing minds with him.'

Whatever the danger had been, I sensed that it had passed. I sank down to sit beside Nosy, who crawled up into my lap and nosed at my face anxiously. I quieted him, suggesting we wait to see what happened next. Boy and pup, we sat, watching Burrich's stillness. When he finally raised his face, I was astounded to see that he looked as if he had been crying. 'Like my mother,' I remember thinking, but oddly I cannot now recall an image of her weeping. Only of Burrich's grieved face.

'Fitz. Boy. Come here,' he said softly, and this time there was something in his voice that could not be disobeyed. I rose and went to him, Nosy at my heels. 'No,' he said to the pup, and pointed to a place by his boot, but me he lifted onto the bench beside him.

'Fitz,' he began, and then paused. He took a deep breath and started again. 'Fitz, this is wrong. It's bad, very bad, what you've been doing with this pup. It's unnatural. It's worse than stealing or lying. It makes a man less than a man. Do you understand me?'

I looked at him blankly. He sighed, and tried again.

'Boy, you're of the royal blood. Bastard or not, you're Chivalry's own son, of the old line. And this thing you're doing, it's wrong. It's not worthy of you. Do you understand?'

I shook my head mutely.

'There, you see. You're not talking any more. Now talk to me. Who taught you to do this?'

I tried. 'Do what?' My voice felt creaky and rough.

Burrich's eyes grew rounder. I sensed his effort at control. 'You know what I mean. Who taught you to be with the dog, in his mind, seeing things with him, letting him see with you, telling each other things?'

I mulled this over for a moment. Yes, that was what had been happening. 'No one,' I answered at last. 'It just happened. We were together a lot,' I added, thinking that might explain it.

Burrich regarded me gravely. ‘You don’t speak like a child,’ he observed suddenly. ‘But I’ve heard that was the way of it, with those who had the old Wit. That from the beginning, they were never truly children. They always knew too much, and as they got older, they knew even more. That was why it was never accounted a crime, in the old days, to hunt them down and burn them. Do you understand what I’m telling you, fitz?’

I shook my head, and when he frowned at my silence, I forced myself to add, ‘But I’m trying. What is the old Wit?’

Burrich looked incredulous, then suspicious. ‘Boy!’ he threatened me, but I only looked at him. After a moment, he conceded my ignorance.

‘The Wit,’ he began slowly. His face darkened, and he looked down at his hands as if remembering an ancient sin. ‘It’s the power of the beast blood, just as the Skill comes from the line of kings. It starts out like a blessing, giving you the tongues of the animals. But then it seizes you and draws you down, makes you a beast like the rest of them. Until finally there’s not a shred of humanity in you, and you run and give tongue and taste blood, as if the pack were all you had ever known. Until no man could look on you and think you had ever been a man.’ His voice had become lower and lower as he spoke, and he had not looked at me, but had turned to the fire and stared into the failing flames there. ‘There’s some as say a man takes on the shape of a beast then, but he kills with a man’s passion rather than a beast’s simple hunger. Kills for the killing ...’

‘Is that what you want, fitz? To take the blood of kings that’s in you, and drown it in the blood of the wild hunt? To be as a beast among beasts, simply for the sake of the knowledge it brings you? Worse yet, think on what comes before. Will the scent of fresh blood touch off your temper, will the sight of prey shut down your thoughts?’ His voice grew softer still, and I heard the sickness he felt as he asked me, ‘Will you wake fevered and asweat because somewhere a bitch is in season and your companion scents it? Will that be the knowledge you take to your lady’s bed?’

I sat small beside him. ‘I do not know,’ I said in a little voice.

He turned to face me, outraged. ‘You don’t know?’ he growled. ‘I tell you where it will lead, and you say you don’t know?’

My tongue was dry in my mouth and Nosy cowered at my feet. ‘But I don’t know,’ I protested. ‘How can I know what I’ll do, until I’ve done it? How can I say?’

‘Well, if you can’t say, I can!’ he roared, and I sensed then in full how he had banked the fires of his temper, and also how much he’d drunk that night. ‘The pup goes and you stay. You stay here, in my care, where I can keep an eye on you. If Chivalry will not have me with him, it’s the least I can do for him. I’ll see that his son grows up a man, and not a wolf. I’ll do it if it kills both of us!’

He lurched from the bench to seize Nosy by the scruff of the neck. At least, such was his intention. But the pup and I sprang clear of him. Together we rushed for the door, but the latch was fastened and before I could work it, Burrich was upon us. Nosy he shoved aside with his boot; me he seized by a shoulder and propelled me away. ‘Come here, pup,’ he commanded, but Nosy fled to my side. Burrich stood panting and glaring by the door, and I caught the growling undercurrent of his thoughts, the fury that taunted him to smash us both and be done with it. Control overlay it, but that brief glimpse was enough to terrify me. And when he suddenly sprang at us, I *repelled* at him with all the force of my fear.

He dropped as suddenly as a bird stoned in flight, and sat for a moment on the floor. I stooped and clutched Nosy to me. Burrich slowly shook his head as if shaking raindrops from his hair. He stood, towering over us. ‘It’s in his blood,’ I heard him mutter to himself. ‘From his damned mother’s blood, and I shouldn’t be surprised. But the boy has to be taught.’ And then, as he looked me full in the eye, he warned me, ‘Fitz. Never do that to me again. Never. Now, give me that pup.’

He advanced on us again, and as I felt the lap of his hidden wrath, I could not contain myself. I *repelled* at him again. But this time my defence was met by a wall that hurled it back at me, so that I stumbled and sank down, almost fainting, my mind pressed down by blackness. Burrich stooped over me. ‘I warned you,’ he said softly, and his voice was like the growling of a wolf. Then, for the last time, I felt his fingers grip Nosy’s scruff. He lifted the pup bodily, and carried him, not roughly, to the door. The latch that had eluded me he worked swiftly, and in moments I heard the heavy tromp of his boots down the stair.

In a moment I had recovered and was up, flinging myself against the door. But Burrich had locked it somehow, for I scrabbled vainly at the catch. My sense of Nosy receded as he was carried farther and farther from me, leaving in its place a desperate loneliness. I whimpered, then howled, clawing at the door, and seeking after my contact with him. There was a

sudden flash of red pain, and Nosy was gone. As his canine senses deserted me completely, I screamed and cried as any six-year-old might, and hammered vainly at the thick wood planks.

It seemed hours before Burrich returned. I heard his step, and lifted my head from where I lay panting and exhausted on the doorstep. He opened the door, and then caught me deftly by the back of my shirt as I tried to dart past him. He jerked me back into the room, and then slammed the door and fastened it again. I flung myself wordlessly against it, and a whimpering rose in my throat. Burrich sat down wearily.

‘Don’t even think it, boy,’ he cautioned me, as if he could hear my wild plans for the next time he let me out. ‘He’s gone. The pup’s gone, and a damn shame, for he was good blood. His line was nearly as long as yours. But I’d rather waste a hound than a man.’ When I did not move, he added, almost kindly, ‘Let go of longing after him. It hurts less, that way.’

But I did not, and I could hear in his voice that he hadn’t really expected me to. He sighed, and moved slowly as he readied himself for bed. He didn’t speak to me again, just extinguished the lamp and settled himself on his bed. But he did not sleep, and it was still hours short of morning when he rose and lifted me from the floor and placed me in the warm place his body had left in the blankets. He went out again, and did not return for some hours.

As for me, I was heartsick and feverish for days. Burrich, I believe, let it be known that I had some childish ailment, and so I was left in peace. It was days before I was allowed out again, and then it was not on my own.

Afterward, Burrich was at pains to see that I was given no chance to bond with any beast. I am sure he thought he’d succeeded, and to some extent he did, in that I did not form an exclusive bond with any hound or horse. I know he meant well. But I did not feel protected by him, but confined. He was the warden that ensured my isolation with fanatical fervour. Utter loneliness was planted in me then, and sent its deep roots down into me.

THREE

Covenant

The original source of the Skill will probably remain forever shrouded in mystery. Certainly a penchant for it runs remarkably strong within the royal family, and yet it is not solely confined to the King's household. There does seem to be some truth to the folk saying, 'When the sea blood flows with the blood of the plains, the Skill will blossom'. It is interesting to note that the Outislanders seem to have no predilection for the Skill, nor the folk descended solely from the original inhabitants of the Six Duchies.

Is it the nature of the world that all things seek a rhythm, and in that rhythm a sort of peace? Certainly it has always seemed so to me. All events, no matter how earth-shaking or bizarre, are diluted within moments of their occurrence by the continuance of the necessary routines of day-to-day living. Men walking a battlefield to search for wounded among the dead will still stop to cough, to blow their noses, still lift their eyes to watch a V of geese in flight. I have seen farmers continue their ploughing and planting, heedless of armies clashing but a few miles away.

So it proved for me. I look back on myself and wonder. Separated from my mother, dragged off to a new city and clime, abandoned by my father to the care of his man, and then bereft of my puppy companion, I still rose from my bed one day and resumed a small boy's life. For me, that meant rising when Burrich awoke me, and following him to the kitchens, where I ate beside him. After that, I was Burrich's shadow. He seldom allowed me out of his sight. I'd dog his heels, watching him at his tasks, and eventually assisting him in many small ways. Evening brought a meal during which I sat at his side on a bench and ate, my manners supervised by his sharp eyes. Then it was up to his quarters, where I might spend the rest of the evening watching the fire in silence while he drank, or watching the fire in silence awaiting his return. He worked while he drank, mending or making harness, compounding a salve, or rendering down a physic for a horse. He worked,

and I learned, watching him, though few words passed between us that I recall. Odd to think of two years, and most of another one passed in such a way.

I learned to do as Molly did, stealing bits of time for myself on the days when Burrich was called away to assist in a hunt or help a mare birth. Once in a great while I dared to slip out when he had drunk more than he could manage, but those were dangerous outings. When I was free, I would hastily seek out my young companions in the city and run with them for as long as I dared. I missed Nosy with a keenness as great as if Burrich had severed a limb from my body. But neither of us ever spoke of that.

Looking back, I suppose he was as lonely as I. Chivalry had not allowed Burrich to follow him into his exile. Instead, he had been left to care for a nameless bastard, and found that the bastard had a penchant for what he regarded as a perversion. And even after his leg healed he discovered he would never ride nor hunt nor even walk as well as he once had; all that had to be hard, hard for a man such as Burrich. He never whined about it to anyone, that I heard. But again, in looking back, I cannot imagine to whom he could have made complaint. Locked into loneliness were we two, and looking at one another every evening, we each saw the one we blamed for it.

Yet all things must pass, but especially time, and with the months and then the years, I came slowly to have a place in the scheme of things. I fetched for Burrich, bringing before he had thought to ask for it, and tidied up after his ministrations to the beasts, and saw to clean water for the hawks and picked ticks off dogs come home from the hunt. Folk got used to seeing me, and no longer stared. Some seemed not to see me at all. Gradually Burrich relaxed his watch on me. I came and went more freely, but still took care that he should not know of my sojourns into town.

There were other children within the keep, many about my own age. Some were even related to me, second cousins or third. Yet I never formed any real bonds with any of them. The younger ones were kept by their mothers or caretakers, the older ones had their own tasks and chores to occupy them. Most were not cruel to me; I was simply outside their circles. So, although I might not see Dick or Kerry or Molly for months, they remained my closest friends. In my explorations of the keep, and on winter evenings when all gathered in the Great Hall for minstrels, or puppet shows or indoor games, I swiftly learned where I was welcome and where I was not.

I kept myself out of the Queen's view, for whenever she saw me, she would always find some fault with my behaviour and have Burrich reproached with it. Regal, too, was a source of danger. He had most of his man's growth, but did not scruple to shove me out of his path or walk casually through whatever I had found to play with. He was capable of a pettiness and vindictiveness that I never encountered in Verity. Not that Verity ever took time with me, but our chance encounters were never unpleasant. If he noticed me, he would tousle my hair, or offer me a penny. Once a servant brought to Burrich's quarters some little wooden toys, soldiers and horses and a cart, their paint much worn, with a message that Verity had found them in a corner of his clothing chest and thought I might enjoy them. I cannot think of any other possession I ever valued more.

Cob in the stables was another danger zone. If Burrich were about, he spoke me fair and treated me evenly, but had small use for me at other times. He gave me to understand he did not want me about and underfoot where he was working. I found out eventually that he was jealous of me, and felt my care had replaced the interest Burrich had once taken in him. He was never overtly cruel, never struck me or scolded me unfairly; but I could sense his distaste for me, and avoided him.

All the men-at-arms showed a great tolerance for me. After the street children of Buckkeep Town, they were probably the closest I had to friends. But no matter how tolerant men may be of a boy of nine or ten, there is precious little in common. I watched their bone games and listened to their stories, but for every hour I spent among their company, there were days when I did not go amongst them at all. And while Burrich never forbade me the guardroom, he did not conceal that he disapproved of the time I spent there.

So I was and was not a member of the keep community. I avoided some and I observed some and I obeyed some. But with none did I feel a bond.

Then one morning, when I was still a bit shy of my tenth year I was at play under the tables in the Great Hall, tumbling and teasing with the puppies. It was quite early in the day. There had been an occasion of some sort the day before, and the feasting had lasted the whole day and well into the night. Burrich had drunk himself senseless. Almost everyone, noble or servants, was still abed, and the kitchen had not yielded up much to my hungry venturing that morning. But the tables in the Great Hall were a trove of broken pastries and dishes of meat. There were bowls of apples as well,

slabs of cheese; in short, all a boy could wish for plundering. The great dogs had taken the best bones and retreated to their own corners of the hall, leaving various pups to scabble for the smaller bits. I had taken a rather large meat pasty under the table and was sharing it out with my chosen favourites among the pups. Ever since Nosy, I had taken care that Burrich should not see me to have too great an affinity with any one puppy. I still did not understand why he objected to my closeness to a hound, but I would not risk the life of a puppy to dispute it with him. So I was alternating bites with three whelps when I heard slow footsteps threshing across the reed-strewn floor. Two men were speaking, discussing something in low tones.

I thought it was the kitchen servants, come to clear away. I scabbled from beneath the table to snare a few more choice leavings before they were gone.

But it was no servant who startled at my sudden appearance but the old King, my grandfather, himself. A scant step behind him, at his elbow, was Regal. His bleary eyes and rumpled doublet attested to his participation in last night's revelries. The King's new Fool, but recently acquired, pattered after them, pale eyes agog in an eggshell face. He was so strange a creature, with his pasty skin and motley all of blacks and whites, that I scarce dared to look at him. In contrast, King Shrewd was clear of eye, his beard and hair freshly groomed and his clothing immaculate. For an instant he was surprised, and then remarked, 'You see, Regal, it is as I was telling you. An opportunity presents itself, and someone seizes it; often someone young, or someone driven by the energies and hungers of youth. Royalty has no leisure to ignore such opportunities, or to let them be created for others.'

The King continued his stroll past me, expounding on his theme while Regal gave me a baleful look from bloodshot eyes. A flap of his hand indicated that I should disappear myself. I indicated my understanding with a quick nod, but darted first to the table. I stuffed two apples into my jerkin, and took up a mostly whole gooseberry tart when the King suddenly rounded and gestured at me. His Fool mimed an imitation. I froze where I stood.

'Look at him,' the old King commanded.

Regal glared at me, but I dared not move.

'What will you make of him?'

Regal looked perplexed. 'Him? It's the fitz. Chivalry's bastard. Sneaking and thieving as always.'

‘Fool.’ King Shrewd smiled, but his eyes remained flinty. The Fool, thinking himself addressed, smiled sweetly. ‘Are your ears stopped with wax? Do you hear nothing I say? I asked you, not “what do you make of him?” but “what will you make of him?”. There he stands, young, strong, and resourceful. His lines are every bit as royal as yours, for all that he was born on the wrong side of the sheets. So, what will you make of him? A tool? A weapon? A comrade? An enemy? Or will you leave him lying about, for someone else to take up and use against you?’

Regal squinted at me, then glanced past me and, finding no one else in the hall, returned his puzzled gaze to me. At my ankle, a pup whined a reminder that earlier we had been sharing. I warned him to hush.

‘The bastard? He’s only a child.’

The old King sighed. ‘Today. This morning and now, he is a child. When next you turn around he will be a youth, or worse, a man, and then it will be too late for you to make anything of him. But take him now, Regal, and shape him, and a decade hence you will command his loyalty. Instead of a discontented bastard who may be persuaded to become a pretender to the throne, he will be a henchman, united to the family by spirit as well as blood. A bastard, Regal, is a unique thing. Put a signet ring on his hand and send him forth, and you have created a diplomat no foreign ruler will dare to turn away. He may safely be sent where a prince of the blood may not be risked. Imagine the uses for one who is and yet is not of the royal bloodline. Hostage exchanges. Marital alliances. Quiet work. The diplomacy of the knife.’

Regal’s eyes grew round at the King’s last words. For a pause, we all breathed in silence, regarding one another. When Regal spoke, he sounded as if he had dry bread caught in his throat. ‘You speak of these things in front of the boy. Of using him, as a tool, a weapon. You think he will not remember your words when he is grown?’

King Shrewd laughed, and the sound rang against the stone walls of the Great Hall. ‘Remember them? Of course he will. I count on it. Look at his eyes, Regal. There is intelligence there, and possibly potential Skill. I’d be a fool to lie to him. More stupid still simply to begin his training and education with no explanation, for that would leave his mind fallow for whatever seeds others might plant there. Isn’t it so, boy?’

He was regarding me steadily and I suddenly realized I was returning his look. For all of his speech our gazes had been locked as we read one

another. In the eyes of the man who was my grandfather was honesty, of a rocky, bony sort. There was no comfort in it, but I knew I could always count on it to be there. I nodded slowly.

‘Come here.’

I walked to him slowly. When I reached him, he got down on one knee, to be eye-to-eye with me. The Fool knelt solemnly beside us, looking earnestly from face to face. Regal glared down at all of us. At the time I never grasped the irony of the old King genuflecting to his bastard grandson. So I was solemn as he took the tart from my hands and tossed it to the puppies who had trailed after me. He drew a pin from the folds of silk at his throat and solemnly pushed it through the simple wool of my shirt.

‘Now you are mine,’ he said, and made that claiming of me more important than any blood we shared. ‘You need not eat any man’s leavings. I will keep you, and I will keep you well. If any man or woman ever seeks to turn you against me by offering you more than I do, then, come to me, and tell me of the offer, and I shall meet it. You will never find me a stingy man, nor be able to cite ill-use as a reason for treason against me. Do you believe me, boy?’

I nodded, in the mute way that was still my habit, but his steady brown eyes demanded more.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. I will be issuing some commands regarding you. See that you comply with them. If any seem strange to you, speak to Burrich. Or to myself. Simply come to the door of my chamber, and show that pin. You’ll be admitted.’

I glanced down at the red stone that winked in a nest of silver. ‘Yes, sir,’ I managed again.

‘Ah,’ he said softly, and I sensed a trace of regret in his voice, and wondered what it was for. His eyes released me, and suddenly I was once more aware of my surroundings, of the puppies and the Great Hall and Regal watching me with fresh distaste on his face, and the Fool nodding enthusiastically in his vacant way. Then the King stood. When he turned away a chill went over me, as if I had suddenly shed a cloak. It was my first experience of the Skill at the hands of a master.

‘You don’t approve, do you, Regal?’ The King’s tone was conversational.

‘My King may do whatever he wishes.’ Sulky.

King Shrewd sighed. 'That is not what I asked you.'

'My mother and Queen will certainly not approve. Favouring the boy will only make it appear that you recognize him. It will give him ideas, and others.'

'Faugh!' The King chuckled as if amused.

Regal was instantly incensed. 'My mother the Queen will not agree with you, nor will she be pleased. My mother –'

'Has not agreed with me, nor been pleased with me for some years. I scarcely notice it any more, Regal. She will flap and squawk and tell me again that she would return to Farrow, to be Duchess there, and you Duke after her. And if very angry, she will threaten that if she did, Tilth and Farrow would rise up in rebellion, and become a separate kingdom, with her as the Queen.'

'And I as King after her!' Regal added defiantly.

Shrewd nodded to himself. 'Yes, I thought she had planted such festering treason in your mind. Listen, boy. She may scold and fling crockery at the servants, but she will never do more than that. Because she knows it is better to be queen of a peaceful kingdom than duchess of a duchy in rebellion. And Farrow has no reason to rise up against me, save the ones she invents in her head. Her ambitions have always exceeded her abilities.' He paused, and looked directly at Regal. 'In royalty, that is a most lamentable failing.'

I could feel the waves of anger Regal suppressed as he looked at the floor.

'Come along,' the King said, and Regal heeled after him, obedient as any hound. But the parting glance he cast me was venomous.

I stood and watched as the old King departed the hall. I felt an echoing loss. Strange man. Bastard though I was, he could have declared himself my grandfather, and had for the asking what he instead chose to buy. At the door, the pale Fool paused. For an instant he looked back at me, and made an incomprehensible gesture with his narrow hands. It could have been an insult or a blessing. Or simply the fluttering of a Fool's hands. Then he smiled, wagged his tongue at me, and turned to hurry after the King.

Despite the King's promises, I stuffed my jerkin front with sweet cakes. The pups and I shared them all in the shade behind the stables. It was a bigger breakfast than any of us were accustomed to, and my stomach murmured unhappily for hours afterward. The pups curled up and slept, but I

wavered between dread and anticipation. Almost I hoped that nothing would come of it, that the King would forget his words to me. But he did not.

Late that evening I finally wandered up the steps and let myself into Burrich's chamber. I had spent the day pondering what the morning's words might mean for me. I could have saved myself the trouble. For as I entered, Burrich set aside the bit of harness he was mending and focused all his attention on me. He considered me in silence for a bit, and I returned his stare. Something had changed, and I feared. Ever since he had disappeared Nosy, I had believed that Burrich had the power of life and death over me as well; that a fitz could be disposed of as easily as a pup. That hadn't stopped me from developing a feeling of closeness for him; one needn't love in order to depend. That sense of being able to rely on Burrich was the only real stability I had in my life, and now I felt it trembling under me.

'So.' He spoke at last, and put a finality into the word. 'So. You had to put yourself before his eyes, did you? Had to call attention to yourself. Well. He's decided what to do with you.' He sighed, and his silence changed. For a brief time, I almost felt he pitied me. But after a bit, he spoke.

'I'm to choose a horse for you tomorrow. He suggested that it be a young one, that I train you up together. But I talked him into starting you with an older, steadier beast. One student at a time, I told him. But I've my own reasons for putting you with an animal that's ... less impressionable. See that you behave; I'll know if you're playing about. Do we understand one another?'

I gave him a quick nod.

'Answer, fitz. You'll have to use your tongue if you'll be dealing with tutors and masters.'

'Yes, sir.'

It was so like Burrich. Entrusting a horse to me had been uppermost in his mind. With his own concern attended to, he announced the rest quite casually.

'You'll be up with the sun from now on, boy. You'll learn from me in the morning. Caring for a horse, and mastering it. And how to hunt your hounds properly, and have them mind you. A man's way of controlling beasts is what I'll teach you.' The last he emphasized heavily, and paused to be sure I understood. My heart sank, but I began a nod, then amended it to, 'Yes, sir.'

‘Afternoons, they’ve got you. For weapons and such. Probably the Skill, eventually. In winter months, there will be indoor learning. Languages and signs. Writing and reading and numbers, I don’t doubt. Histories, too. What you’ll do with it all I’ve no idea, but mind you learn it well to please the King. He’s not a man to displease, let alone cross. Wisest course of all is not to have him notice you. But I didn’t warn you about that, and now it’s too late.’

He cleared his throat suddenly and took a breath. ‘Oh, and there’s another thing that’s to change.’ He took up the bit of leather he’d been working on and bent over it again. He seemed to speak to his fingers. ‘You’ll have a proper room of your own, now. Up in the keep where all those of noble blood sleep. You’d be sleeping there right now, if you’d bothered to come in on time.’

‘What? I don’t understand. A room?’

‘Oh, so you can be swift spoken, when you’ve a mind? You heard me, boy. You’ll have a room of your own, up at the keep.’ He paused, then went on heartily. ‘I’ll finally get my privacy back. Oh, and you’re to be measured for clothes tomorrow as well. And boots. Though what’s the sense of putting a boot on a foot that’s still growing, I don’t ...’

‘I don’t want a room up there.’ As oppressive as living with Burrich had become, I suddenly found it preferable to the unknown. I imagined a large, cold, stone room, with shadows lurking in the corners.

‘Well, you’re to have one,’ Burrich announced relentlessly. ‘And it’s time and past time for it. You’re Chivalry’s get, even if you’re not a proper-born son, and to put you down here in the stable, like a stray pup, well, it’s just not fitting.’

‘I don’t mind it,’ I ventured desperately.

Burrich lifted his eyes and regarded me sternly. ‘My, my. Positively chatty tonight, aren’t we?’

I lowered my eyes from his. ‘You live down here,’ I pointed out sullenly. ‘You aren’t a stray pup.’

‘I’m not a prince’s bastard, either,’ he said tersely. ‘You’ll live in the keep now, fitz, and that’s all.’

I dared to look at him. He was speaking to his fingers again.

‘I’d rather I was a stray pup,’ I made bold to say. And then all my fears broke my voice as I added, ‘You wouldn’t let them do this to a stray pup, changing everything all at once. When they gave the bloodhound puppy to

Lord Grimsby, you sent your old shirt with it, so it would have something that smelled of home until it settled in.'

'Well,' he said, 'I didn't ... come here, fitz. Come here, boy.'

And puppy-like, I went to him, the only master I had, and he thumped me lightly on the back and ruffled up my hair, very much as if I had been a hound.

'Don't be scared, now. There's nothing to be afraid of. And, anyway,' he said, and I heard him relenting, 'they've only told us that you're to have a room up at the keep. No one's said that you've got to sleep in it every night. Some nights, if things are a bit too quiet for you, you can find your way down here. Eh, fitz? Does that sound right to you?'

'I suppose so,' I muttered.

Change rained fast and furious on me for the next fortnight. Burrich had me up at dawn, and I was tubbed and scrubbed, the hair cut back from my eyes and the rest bound down my back in a tail such as I had seen on the older men of the keep. He told me to dress in the best clothing I had, then clicked his tongue over how small it had become on me. With a shrug he said it would have to do.

Then it was into the stables, where he showed me the mare that now was mine. She was grey, with a hint of dapple in her coat. Her mane and tail, nose and stockings were blackened as if she'd got into soot. And that, too, was her name. She was a placid beast, well shaped and well cared for. A less challenging mount would be hard to imagine. Boyish, I had hoped for at least a spirited gelding. But Sooty was my mount instead. I tried to conceal my disappointment, but Burrich must have sensed it. 'You don't think she's much, do you? Well, how much of a horse did you have yesterday, fitz, that you'd turn up your nose at a willing, healthy beast like Sooty? She's with foal by that nasty bay stallion of Lord Temperance, so see you treat her gently. Cob's had her training until now; he'd hoped to make a chase horse out of her. But I decided she'd suit you better. He's a bit put out over it, but I've promised him he can start again with the foal.'

Burrich had adapted an old saddle for me, vowing that regardless of what the King might say, I'd have to show myself a horseman before he'd let a new one be made for me. Sooty stepped out smoothly and answered the reins and my knees promptly. Cob had done wonderfully with her. Her temperament and mind reminded me of a quiet pond. If she had thoughts, they were not about what we were doing, and Burrich was watching me too

closely for me to risk trying to know her mind. So I rode her blind, talking to her only through my knees and the reins and the shifting of my weight. The physical effort of it exhausted me long before my first lesson was over, and Burrich knew it. But that did not mean he excused me from cleaning and feeding her, and then cleaning my saddle and tack. Every tangle was out of her mane, and the old leather shone with oil before I was allowed to go to the kitchens and eat.

But as I darted away to the kitchen's back door, Burrich's hand fell on my shoulder.

'No more of that for you,' he told me firmly. 'That's fine for men-at-arms and gardeners and such. But there's a hall where the high folk and their special servants eat. And that is where you eat now.'

And so saying, he propelled me into a dim room dominated by a long table, with another, higher table at the head of it. There were all manner of foods set out upon it, and folk busy at various stages of their meals. For when the King and Queen and Princes were absent from the high table, as was the case today, no one stood upon formalities.

Burrich nudged me to a place on the left side of the table, above the mid-point but not by much. He himself ate on the same side, but lower. I was hungry, and no one was staring hard enough to unnerve me, so I made short work of a largish meal. Food pilfered directly from the kitchen had been hotter and fresher. But such matters do not count to a growing boy, and I ate well after my empty morning.

My stomach full, I was thinking of a certain sandy embankment, warmed by the afternoon sun and replete with rabbit holes, where the hound pups and I often spent sleepy afternoons. I started to rise from the table, but immediately there was a boy behind me, saying, 'Master?'

I looked around to see who he was speaking to, but everyone else was busy at trenchers. He was taller than I was, and older by several summers, so I stared up at him in amazement when he looked me in the eye and repeated, 'Master? Have you finished eating?'

I bobbed my head in a nod, too surprised to speak.

'Then you're to come with me. Hod's sent me. You're expected for weapons practice on the court this afternoon. If Burrich is finished with you, that is.'

Burrich suddenly appeared by my side and astonished me by going down on one knee beside me. He tugged my jerkin straight and smoothed

my hair back as he spoke.

‘As finished as I’m likely to be for a while. Well, don’t look so startled, fitz. Did you think the King was not a man of his word? Wipe your mouth and be on your way. Hod is a sterner master than I am; tardiness will not be tolerated on the weapons court. Hurry along with Brant, now.’

I obeyed him with a sinking heart. As I followed the boy from the hall, I tried to imagine a master stricter than Burrich. It was a frightening idea.

Once outside the hall, the boy quickly dropped his fine manners. ‘What’s your name?’ he demanded as he led me down the gravelled pathway to the armoury and the practice courts that fronted it.

I shrugged and glanced aside, pretending a sudden interest in the shrubbery that bordered the path.

Brant snorted knowingly. ‘Well, they got to call you something. What’s old game-leg Burrich call you?’

The boy’s obvious disdain for Burrich so surprised me that I blurted out, ‘Fitz. He calls me fitz.’

‘Fitz?’ He snickered. ‘Yeah, he would. Direct spoken is the old gimper.’

‘A boar savaged his leg,’ I explained. This boy spoke as if Burrich’s limp were something foolish he did for show. For some reason, I felt stung by his mockery.

‘I know that!’ He snorted disdainfully. ‘Ripped him right down to the bone. Big old tusker, was going to take Chiv down, until Burrich got in the way. Got Burrich instead, and half a dozen of the hounds, is what I hear.’ We went through an opening in an ivy-covered wall, and the exercise courts suddenly spread out before us. ‘Chiv had gone in thinking he just had to finish the pig, when up it jumped and came after him. Snapped the Prince’s lance turning on him, too, is what I hear.’

I’d been following at the boy’s heels, hanging on his words when he suddenly rounded on me. I was so startled I all but fell, scrambling backwards. The older boy laughed at me. ‘Guess it must have been Burrich’s year for taking on Chivalry’s fortunes, hey? That’s what I hear the men saying. That Burrich took Chivalry’s death and changed it into a lame leg for himself, and that he took on Chiv’s bastard, and made a pet of him. What I’d like to know is, how come you’re to have arms training all of a sudden? Yes, and a horse too, from what I hear?’

There was something more than jealousy in his tone. I have since come to know that many men always see another’s good fortune as a slight to

themselves. I felt his rising hostility as if I'd entered a dog's territory unannounced. But a dog I could have touched minds with and reassured of my intentions. With Brant there was only the hostility, like a storm rising. I wondered if he were going to hit me, and if he expected me to fight back or retreat. I had nearly decided to run when a portly figure dressed all in grey appeared behind Brant and took a firm grip on the back of his neck.

'I hear the King said he was to have training, yes, and a horse to learn horsemanship on. And that is enough for me, and it should be more than enough for you, Brant. And, from what I hear, you were told to fetch him here, and then to report to Master Tullume, who has errands for you. Isn't that what you heard?'

'Yes, ma'am.' Brant's pugnaciousness was suddenly transformed into bobbing agreement.

'And while you're "hearing" all this vital gossip, I might point out to you that no wise man tells all he knows. And that he who carries tales has little else in his head. Do you understand me, Brant?'

'I think so, ma'am.'

'You think so? Then I shall be plainer. Stop being a nosy little gossip and attend to your chores. Be diligent and willing, and perhaps folk will start gossiping that you are my "pet". I could see that you are kept too busy for gossip.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'You, boy.' Brant was already hurrying up the path as she rounded on me. 'Follow me.'

The old woman didn't wait to see if I obeyed or not. She simply set out at a businesslike walk across the open practice fields that had me trotting to keep up. The packed earth of the field was baked hard and the sun beat down on my shoulders. Almost instantly, I was sweating. But the woman appeared to find no discomfort in her rapid pace.

She was dressed all in grey: a long, dark grey over-tunic, lighter grey leggings, and over all a grey apron of leather that came nearly to her knees. A gardener of some sort, I surmised, though I wondered at the soft grey boots she wore.

'I've been sent for lessons ... with Hod,' I managed to pant out.

She nodded curtly. We reached the shade of the armoury and my eyes widened gratefully after the glare of the open courts.

‘I’m to be taught arms and weaponry,’ I told her, just in case she had mistaken my original words.

She nodded again and pushed open a door in the barn-like structure that was the outer armoury. Here, I knew, the practice weapons were kept. The good iron and steel were up in the keep itself. Within the armoury was a gentle half-light, and a slight coolness, along with a smell of wood and sweat and fresh strewn reeds. She did not hesitate, and I followed her to a rack that supported a supply of peeled poles.

‘Choose one,’ she told me, the first words she’d spoken since directing me to follow her.

‘Hadn’t I better wait for Hod?’ I asked timidly.

‘I am Hod,’ she replied impatiently. ‘Now pick yourself a stave, boy. I want a bit of time alone with you, before the others come. To see what you’re made of and what you know.’

It did not take her long to establish that I knew next to nothing, and was easily daunted. After but a few knocks and parries with her own brown rod, she easily caught mine a clip that sent it spinning from my stung hands.

‘Hm,’ she said, not harshly nor kindly. The same sort of noise a gardener might make over a seed potato that had a bit of blight on it. I quested out toward her, and found the same sort of quietness I’d encountered in the mare. She had none of Burrich’s guardedness toward me. I think it was the first time I realized that some people, like some animals, were totally unaware of my reaching out toward them. I might have quested further into her mind, except that I was so relieved at not finding any hostility that I feared to stir any. So I stood small and still before her inspection.

‘Boy, what are you called?’ she demanded suddenly.

Again. ‘Fitz.’

She frowned at my soft words. I drew myself up straighter and spoke louder. ‘Fitz is what Burrich calls me.’

She flinched slightly. ‘He would. Calls a bitch a bitch, and a bastard a bastard, does Burrich. Well ... I suppose I see his reasons. Fitz you are, and Fitz you’ll be called by me as well. Now. I shall show you why the pole you selected was too long for you, and too thick. And then you shall select another.’

And she did, and I did, and she took me slowly through an exercise that seemed infinitely complex then, but by the end of the week was no more difficult than braiding my horse’s mane. We finished just as the rest of her

students came trooping in. There were four of them, all within a year or two of my age, but all more experienced than I. It made for an awkwardness, as there were now an odd number of students, and no one particularly wanted the new one as a sparring partner.

Somehow I survived the day, though the memory of how fades into a blessedly vague haze. I remember how sore I was when she finally dismissed us; how the others raced up the path and back to the keep while I trailed dismally behind them, berating myself for ever coming to the King's attention. It was a long climb to the keep, and the hall was crowded and noisy. I was too weary to eat much. Stew and bread, I think, were all I had, and I had left the table and was limping toward the door, thinking only of the warmth and quiet of the stables, when Brant again accosted me.

'Your chamber is ready,' was all he said.

I shot a desperate look at Burrich, but he was engaged in conversation with the man next to him. He didn't notice my plea at all. So once more I found myself following Brant, this time up a wide flight of stone steps, into a part of the keep I had never explored.

We paused on a landing, and he took up a candelabrum from a table there and kindled its tapers. 'Royal family lives down this wing,' he casually informed me. 'The King has a bedroom big as the stable down at the end of this hallway.'

I nodded, blindly believing all he told me, though I later discovered that an errand boy such as Brant would never have penetrated the royal wing. That would be for more important lackeys. Up another flight he took me, and again paused. 'Visitors get rooms here,' he said, gesturing with the light so that the wind of his motion set the flames to streaming. 'Important ones, that is.'

And up another flight we went, the steps perceptibly narrowing from the first two. At the next landing we paused again, and I looked with dread up an even narrower and steeper flight of steps. But Brant did not take me that way. Instead we went down this new wing, three doors down, and then he slid a latch on a plank door and shouldered it open. It swung heavily and not smoothly. 'Room hasn't been used in a while,' he observed cheerily. 'But now it's yours and you're welcome to it.' And with that he set the candelabrum down on a chest, plucked one candle from it and left. He pulled the heavy door closed behind him as he went, leaving me in the semi-darkness of a large and unfamiliar room.

Somehow I refrained from running after him or opening the door. Instead, I took up the candelabrum and lit the wall sconces. Two other sets of candles set the shadows writhing back into the corners. There was a fireplace with a pitiful effort at a fire in it. I poked it up a bit, more for light than for heat, and set to exploring my new quarters.

They consisted of a simple square room with a single window. Stone walls, of the same stone as that under my feet, were softened only by a tapestry hung on one wall. I held my candle high to study it, but could not illuminate much. I could make out a gleaming and winged creature of some sort, and a kingly personage in supplication before it. I was later informed it was King Wisdom being befriended by the Elderling. At the time it seemed menacing to me. I turned aside from it.

Someone had made a perfunctory effort at freshening the room. There was a scattering of clean reeds and herbs on the floor, and the feather bed had a fat, freshly shaken look to it. The two blankets on it were of good wool. The bed curtains had been pulled back and the chest and bench that were the other furnishings had been dusted. To my inexperienced eyes, it was a rich room indeed. A real bed, with coverings and hangings about it, and a bench with a cushion, and a chest to put things in were more furniture than I could recall having to myself before. There was also the fireplace, that I boldly added another piece of wood to, and the window, with an oak seat before it, shuttered now against the night air, but probably looking out over the sea.

The chest was a simple one, cornered with brass fittings. The outside of it was dark, but when I opened it, the interior was light-coloured and fragrant. Inside I found my limited wardrobe, brought up from the stables. Two nightshirts had been added to it, and a woollen blanket was rolled up in the corner of the chest. That was all. I took out a nightshirt and closed the chest.

I set the nightshirt down on the bed, and then clambered up myself. It was early to be thinking of sleep, but my body ached and there seemed nothing else for me to do. Down in the stable room by now Burrich would be sitting and drinking and mending harness or whatever. There would be a fire in the hearth, and the muffled sounds of horses as they shifted in their stalls below. The room would smell of leather and oil and Burrich himself, not dank stone and dust. I pulled the nightshirt over my head and nudged my clothes to the foot of the bed. I nestled into the feather bed; it was cool and

my skin stood up in goosebumps. Slowly my body heat warmed it and I began to relax. It had been a full and strenuous day. Every muscle I possessed seemed to be both aching and tired. I knew I should rise once more, to put the candles out, but I could not summon the energy. Nor the will-power to blow them out and let a deeper darkness flood the chamber. So I drowsed, half-lidded eyes watching the struggling flames of the small hearthfire. I wished idly for something else, for any situation that was neither this forsaken chamber nor the tenseness of Burrich's room. For a restfulness that perhaps I had once known somewhere else but could no longer recall. And so I drowsed into an oblivion.

FOUR

Apprenticeship

A story is told of King Victor, he who conquered the inland territories that became eventually the Duchy of Farrow. Very shortly after adding the lands of Sand-sedge to his rulings, he sent for the woman who would, had Victor not conquered her land, have been the Queen of Sandsedge. She travelled to Buckkeep in much trepidation, fearing to go, but fearing more the consequences to her people if she appealed to them to hide her. When she arrived, she was both amazed and somewhat chagrined that Victor intended to use her, not as a servant, but as a tutor to his children, that they might learn both the language and customs of her folk. When she asked him why he chose to have them learn of her folk's ways, he replied, 'A ruler must be ruler of all his people, for one can only rule what one knows.' Later, she became the willing wife of his eldest son, and took the name Queen Graciousness at her coronation.

I awoke to sunlight in my face. Someone had entered my chamber and opened the window shutters to the day. A basin, cloth and jug of water had been left on top of the chest. I was grateful for them, but not even washing my face refreshed me. Sleep had left me sodden and I recall feeling uneasy that someone could enter my chamber and move freely about without awakening me.

As I had guessed, the window looked out over the sea, but I didn't have much time to devote to the view. A glance at the sun told me that I had overslept. I flung on my clothes and hastened down to the stables without pausing for breakfast.

But Burrich had little time for me that morning. 'Get back up to the keep,' he advised me. 'Mistress Hasty already sent Brant down here to look for you. She's to measure you for clothing. Best go find her quickly; she lives up to her name, and won't appreciate your upsetting her morning routine.'

My trot back up to the keep reawakened all my aches of the day before. Much as I dreaded seeking out this Mistress Hasty and being measured for clothing I was certain I didn't need, I was relieved not to be on horseback again this morning.

After querying my way up from the kitchens, I finally found Mistress Hasty in a room several doors down from my bedchamber. I paused shyly at the door and peered in. Three tall windows were flooding the room with sunlight and a mild salt breeze. Baskets of yarn and dyed wool were stacked against one wall, while a tall shelf on another wall held a rainbow of cloth goods. Two young women were talking over a loom, and in the far corner a lad not much older than I was rocking to the gentle pace of a spinning-wheel. I had no doubt that the woman with her broad back to me was Mistress Hasty.

The two young women noticed me and paused in their conversation. Mistress Hasty turned to see where they stared, and a moment later I was in her clutches. She didn't bother with names or explaining what she was about. I found myself up on a stool, being turned and measured and hummed over, with no regard for my dignity or indeed my humanity. She disparaged my clothes to the young women, remarked very calmly that I quite reminded her of young Chivalry, and that my measurements and colouring were much the same as his had been when he was my age. She then demanded their opinions as she held up bolts of different goods against me.

'That one,' said one of the loom-women. 'That blue quite flatters his darkness. It would have looked well on his father. Quite a mercy that Patience never has to see the boy. Chivalry's stamp is much too plain on his face to leave her any pride at all.'

And as I stood there, draped in woolgoods, I heard for the first time what every other person in Buckkeep knew full well. The weaving-women discussed in detail how the word of my existence reached Buckkeep and Patience long before my father could tell her himself, and of the deep anguish it caused her. For Patience was barren, and though Chivalry had never spoken a word against her, all guessed how difficult it must be for an heir such as he to have no child eventually to assume his title. Patience took my existence as the ultimate rebuke, and her health, never sound after so many miscarriages, completely broke along with her spirit. It was for her sake as well as for propriety that Chivalry had given up his throne, and taken his invalid wife back to the warm and gentle lands that were her home

province. Word was that they lived well and comfortably there, that Patience's health was slowly mending, and that Chivalry, substantially quieter a man than he had been before, was gradually learning stewardship of his vineyard-rich valley. A pity that Patience blamed Burrich as well for Chivalry's lapse in morals, and had declared she could no longer abide the sight of him. For between the injury to his leg and Chivalry's abandonment of him, old Burrich just wasn't the man he had been. Was a time when no woman of the keep walked quickly past him; to catch his eye was to make yourself the envy of nearly anyone old enough to wear skirts. And now? Old Burrich, they called him, and him still in his prime – so unfair, as if any manservant had any say over what his master did. But it was all to the good anyway, they supposed. And didn't Verity, after all, make a much better King-in-Waiting than had Chivalry? So rigorously noble was Chivalry that he made all others feel slatternly and stingy in his presence; he'd never allowed himself a moment's respite from what was right, and while he was too chivalrous to sneer at those who did, one always had the feeling that his perfect behaviour was a silent reproach to those with less self-discipline. Ah, but then here was the bastard, now, though, after all those years, and well, here was the proof that he hadn't been the man he'd pretended to be. Verity, now there was a man among men, a king folk could look to and see as royalty. He rode hard, and soldiered alongside his men, and if he was occasionally drunk or had at times been less than discreet, well, he owned up to it, honest as his name. Folk could understand a man like that, and follow him.

To all this I listened avidly, if mutely, while several fabrics were held against me, debated and selected. I gained a much deeper understanding of why the keep children left me to play alone. If the women considered that I might have thoughts or feelings about their conversation, they showed no sign of it. The only remark I remember Mistress Hasty making to me specifically was that I should take greater care in washing my neck. Then Mistress Hasty shooed me from the room as if I were an annoying chicken, and I found myself finally heading to the kitchens for some food.

That afternoon I was back with Hod, practising until I was sure my stave had mysteriously doubled its weight. Then food, and bed, and up again in the morning and back to Burrich's tutelage. My learning filled my days, and any spare time I found was swallowed up with the chores associated with my learning, whether it was tack-care for Burrich, or sweeping the

armoury and putting it back in order for Hod. In due time I found not one, or even two, but three entire sets of clothing, including stockings, set out one afternoon on my bed. Two were of fairly ordinary stuff, in a familiar brown that most of the children my age seemed to wear, but one was of thin blue cloth, and on the breast was a buck's head, done in silver thread. Burrich and the other men-at-arms wore a leaping buck as their emblem. I had only seen the buck's head on the jerkins of Regal and Royal. So I looked at it and wondered, but wondered too, at the slash of red stitching that cut it diagonally, marching right over the design.

'It means you're a bastard,' Burrich told me bluntly when I asked him about it. 'Of acknowledged royal blood, but a bastard all the same. That's all. It's just a quick way of showing you've royal blood, but aren't of the true line. If you don't like it, you can change it. I am sure the King would grant it. A name and a crest of your own.'

'A name?'

'Certainly. It's a simple enough request. Bastards are rare in the noble houses, especially so in the King's own. But they aren't unheard of.' Under the guise of teaching me the proper care of a saddle, we were going through the tack room, looking over all the old and unused tack. Maintaining and salvaging old tack was one of Burrich's odder fixations. 'Devise a name and a crest for yourself, and then ask the King ...'

'What name?'

'Why, any name you like. This looks as if it's ruined; someone put it away damp and it mildewed. But we'll see what we can do with it.'

'It wouldn't feel real.'

'What?'

He held an armload of smelly leather out toward me. I took it.

'A name I just put to myself. It wouldn't feel as if it was really mine.'

'Well, what do you intend to do, then?'

I took a breath. 'The King should name me. Or you should.' I steeled myself. 'Or my father. Don't you think?'

Burrich frowned. 'You get the most peculiar notions. Just think about it yourself for a while. You'll come up with a name that fits.'

'Fitz,' I said sarcastically, and I saw Burrich clamp his jaw.

'Let's just mend this leather,' he suggested quietly.

We carried it to his workbench and started wiping it down. 'Bastards aren't that rare,' I observed. 'And in town, their parents name them.'

‘In town, bastards aren’t so rare,’ Burrich agreed after a moment. ‘Soldiers and sailors whore around. It’s a common way for common folk. But not for royalty. Or for anyone with a bit of pride. What would you have thought of me, when you were younger, if I’d gone out whoring at night, or brought women up to the room? How would you see women now? Or men? It’s fine to fall in love, Fitz, and no one begrudges a young woman or man a kiss or two. But I’ve seen what it’s like down to Bingtown. Traders bring pretty girls or well-made youths to the market like so many chickens or potatoes. And the children they end up bearing may have names, but they don’t have much else. And even when they marry, they don’t stop their ... habits. If ever I find the right woman, I’ll want her to know I won’t be looking at another. And I’ll want to know all my children are mine.’ Burrich was almost impassioned.

I looked at him miserably. ‘So what happened with my father?’

He looked suddenly weary. ‘I don’t know, boy. I don’t know. He was young, just twenty or so. And far from home, and trying to shoulder a heavy burden. Those are neither reasons nor excuses. But it’s as much as either of us will ever know.’

And that was that.

My life went round in its settled routine. There were evenings that I spent in the stables, in Burrich’s company, and more rarely, evenings that I spent in the Great Hall when some travelling minstrel or puppet show arrived. Once in a great while, I could slip out for an evening down in town, but that meant paying the next day for missed sleep. Afternoons were inevitably spent with some tutor or instructor. I came to understand that these were my summer lessons, and that in winter I would be introduced to the kind of learning that came with pens and letters. I was kept busier than I had ever been in my young life. But despite my schedule, I found myself mostly alone.

Loneliness.

It found me every night as I vainly tried to find a small and cosy spot in my big bed. When I had slept above the stables in Burrich’s rooms, my nights had been muzzy, my dreams heathery with the warm and weary contentment of the well-used animals that slept and shifted and thudded in the night below me. Horses and dogs dream, as anyone who has ever watched a hound yipping and twitching in dream pursuit knows. Their dreams had been like the sweet-rising waft from a baking of good bread. But

now, isolated in a room walled with stone, I finally had time for all those devouring, aching dreams that are the portion of humans. I had no warm dam to cosy against, no sense of siblings or kin stabled nearby. Instead I would lie awake and wonder about my father and my mother, and how both could have dismissed me from their lives so easily. I heard the talk that others exchanged so carelessly over my head, and interpreted their comments in my own terrifying way. I wondered what would become of me when I was grown and old King Shrewd dead and gone. I wondered, occasionally, if Molly Nosebleed and Kerry missed me, or if they accepted my sudden disappearance as easily as they had accepted my coming. But mostly I ached with loneliness, for in all that great keep, there were none I sensed as friend. None save the beasts, and Burrich had forbidden me to have any closeness with them.

One evening I had gone wearily to bed, only to torment myself with my fears until sleep grudgingly pulled me under. Light in my face awoke me, but I came awake knowing something was wrong. I hadn't slept long enough, and this light was yellow and wavering, unlike the whiteness of the sunlight that usually spilled in my window. I stirred unwillingly and opened my eyes.

He stood at the foot of my bed, holding aloft a lamp. This in itself was a rarity at Buckkeep, but more than the buttery light from the lamp held my eyes. The man himself was strange. His robe was the colour of undyed sheep's wool that had been washed, but only intermittently and not recently. His hair and beard were about the same hue and their untidiness gave the same impression. Despite the colour of his hair, I could not decide how old he was. There are some poxes that will scar a man's face with their passage. But I had never seen a man marked as he was, with scores of tiny pox scars, angry pinks and reds like small burns, and livid even in the lamp's yellow light. His hands were all bones and tendons wrapped in papery white skin. He was peering at me, and even in the lamplight his eyes were the most piercing green I had ever seen. They reminded me of a cat's eyes when it is hunting; the same combination of joy and fierceness. I pulled my quilt up higher under my chin.

'You're awake,' he said. 'Good. Get up and follow me.'

He turned abruptly from my bedside and walked away from the door, to a shadowed corner of my room between the hearth and the wall. I didn't

move. He glanced back at me, held the lamp higher. ‘Hurry up, boy,’ he said irritably and rapped the stick he leaned on against my bed post.

I got out of bed, wincing as my bare feet hit the cold floor. I reached for my clothes and shoes, but he wasn’t waiting for me. He glanced back once, to see what was delaying me, and the piercing look was enough to make me drop my clothes and quake.

I followed, wordlessly, in my nightshirt, for no reason I could explain to myself, except that he had suggested it. I followed him to a door that had never been there, and up a narrow flight of winding steps that were lit only by the lamp he held above his head. His shadow fell behind him and over me, so that I walked in a shifting darkness, feeling each step with my feet. The stairs were cold stone, worn and smooth and remarkably even. And they went up, and up, and up, until it seemed to me that we had climbed past the height of any tower the keep possessed. A chill breeze flowed up those steps and up my nightshirt, shrivelling me with more than mere cold. And we went up, and then finally he was pushing open a substantial door that nonetheless moved silently and easily. We entered a chamber.

It was lit warmly by several lamps, suspended from an unseen ceiling on fine chains. The chamber was large, certainly three times the size of my own. One end of it beckoned me. It was dominated by a massive wooden bed-frame fat with feather mattresses and cushions. There were carpets on the floor, overlapping one another with their scarlets and verdant greens and blues both deep and pale. There was a table made of wood the colour of wild honey, and on it sat a bowl of fruits so perfectly ripe that I could smell their fragrances. Parchment books and scrolls were scattered about carelessly as if their rarity were of no concern. All three walls were draped with tapestries that depicted open, rolling country with wooded foothills in the distance. I started toward it.

‘This way,’ said my guide, and relentlessly led me to the other end of the chamber.

Here was a different spectacle. A stone slab of a table dominated it, its surface much stained and scorched. Upon it were various tools, containers and implements, a scale, a mortar and pestle, and many things I couldn’t name. A fine layer of dust overlay much of it, as if projects had been abandoned in mid-course, months or even years ago. Beyond the table was a rack which held an untidy collection of scrolls, some edged in blue or gilt. The scent of the room was at once pungent and aromatic; bundles of herbs

were drying on another rack. I heard a rustling and caught a glimpse of movement in a far corner, but the man gave me no time to investigate. The fireplace that should have warmed this end of the room gaped black and cold. The old embers in it looked damp and settled. I lifted my eyes from my perusal to look at my guide. The dismay on my face seemed to surprise him. He turned from me and slowly surveyed the room himself. He considered it for a bit, and then I sensed an embarrassed disgruntlement from him.

‘It is a mess. More than a mess, I suppose. But, well. It’s been a while, I suppose. And longer than a while. Well. It’s soon put to rights. But first, introductions are in order. And I suppose it is a bit nippy to be standing about in just a nightshirt. This way, boy.’

I followed him to the comfortable end of the room. He seated himself in a battered wooden chair that was over-draped with blankets. My bare toes dug gratefully into the nap of a woollen rug. I stood before him, waiting, as those green eyes prowled over me. For some minutes the silence held. Then he spoke.

‘First, let me introduce you to yourself. Your pedigree is written all over you. Shrewd chose to acknowledge it, for all his denials wouldn’t have sufficed to convince anyone otherwise.’ He paused for an instant, and smiled as if something amused him. ‘A shame Galen refuses to teach you the Skill; but years ago, it was restricted, for fear it would become too common a tool. I’ll wager if old Galen were to try to teach you, he’d find you apt. But we have no time to worry about what won’t happen.’ He sighed meditatively, and was silent for a moment. Abruptly he went on, ‘Burrich’s shown you how to work, and how to obey. Two things that Burrich himself excels at. You’re not especially strong, or fast, or bright. Don’t think you are. But you’ll have the stubbornness to wear down anyone stronger, or faster or brighter than yourself. And that’s more of a danger to you than to anyone else. But that is not what is now most important about you.

‘You are the King’s man now. And you must begin to understand, now, right now, that that is the most important thing about you. He feeds you, he clothes you, he sees you are educated. And all he asks in return, for now, is your loyalty. Later he will ask your service. Those are the conditions under which I will teach you. That you are the King’s man, and loyal to him completely. For if you are otherwise, it would be too dangerous to educate you in my art.’ He paused and for a long moment we simply looked at one

another. 'Do you agree?' he asked, and it was not a simple question but the sealing of a bargain.

'I do,' I said, and then, as he waited, 'I give you my word.'

'Good.' He spoke the word heartily. 'Now. On to other things. Have you ever seen me before?'

'No.' I realized for an instant how strange that was. For, though there were often strangers in the keep, this man had obviously been a resident for a long, long time. And almost all those who lived there I knew by sight if not by name.

'Do you know who I am, boy? Or why you're here?'

I shook my head a quick negative to each question. 'Well, no one else does either. So you mind it stays that way. Make yourself clear on that: you speak to no one of what we do here, nor of anything you learn. Understand that?'

My nod must have satisfied him, for he seemed to relax in the chair. His bony hands gripped the knobs of his knees through his woollen robe. 'Good. Good. Now. You can call me Chade. And I shall call you?' He paused and waited, but when I did not offer a name, he filled in, 'Boy. Those are not names for either of us, but they'll do, for the time we'll have together. So. I'm Chade, and I'm yet another teacher that Shrewd has found for you. It took him a while to remember I was here, and then it took him a space to nerve himself to ask me. And it took me even longer to agree to teach you. But all that's done now. As to what I'm to teach you ... well.'

He rose and moved to the fire. He cocked his head as he stared into it, then stooped to take a poker and stir the embers to fresh flames. 'It's murder, more or less. Killing people. The fine art of diplomatic assassination. Or blinding, or deafening. Or a weakening of the limbs, or a paralysis or a debilitating cough or impotency. Or early senility, or insanity or ... but it doesn't matter. It's all been my trade. And it will be yours, if you agree. Just know, from the beginning, that I'm going to be teaching you how to kill people. For your king. Not in the showy way Hod is teaching you, not on the battlefield where others see and cheer you on. No. I'll be teaching you the nasty, furtive, polite ways to kill people. You'll either develop a taste for it, or not. That isn't something I'm in charge of. But I'll make sure you know how. And I'll make sure of one other thing, for that was the stipulation I made with King Shrewd: that you know what you are learning, as I never did

when I was your age. So. I'm to teach you to be an assassin. Is that all right with you, boy?'

I nodded again, uncertain, but not knowing what else to do.

He peered at me. 'You can speak, can't you? You're not a mute as well as a bastard, are you?'

I swallowed. 'No, sir. I can speak.'

'Well, then, do speak. Don't just nod. Tell me what you think of all this. Of who I am and what I just proposed that we do.'

Invited to speak, I yet stood dumb. I stared at the pocked face, the papery skin of his hands, and felt the gleam of his green eyes on me. I moved my tongue inside my mouth, but found only silence. His manner invited words, but his visage was still more terrifying than anything I had ever imagined.

'Boy,' he said, and the gentleness in his voice startled me into meeting his eyes. 'I can teach you even if you hate me, or if you despise the lessons. I can teach you if you are bored, or lazy or stupid. But I can't teach you if you're afraid to speak to me. At least, not the way I want to teach you. And I can't teach you if you decide this is something you'd rather not learn. But you have to tell me. You've learned to guard your thoughts so well, you're almost afraid to let yourself know what they are. But try speaking them aloud, now, to me. You won't be punished.'

'I don't much like it,' I blurted suddenly. 'The idea of killing people.'

'Ah.' He paused. 'Neither did I, when it came down to it. Nor do I, still.' He sighed suddenly, deeply. 'As each time comes, you'll decide. The first time will be hardest. But know, for now, that that decision is many years away. And in the meantime, you have much to learn.' He hesitated. 'There is this, boy – and you should remember it in every situation, not just this one – learning is never wrong. Even learning how to kill isn't wrong. Or right. It's just a thing to learn, a thing I can teach you. That's all. For now, do you think you could learn how to do it, and later decide if you wanted to do it?'

Such a question to put to a boy. Even then, something in me raised its hackles and sniffed at the idea, but child that I was, I could find no objection to raise. And curiosity was nibbling at me.

'I can learn it.'

'Good.' He smiled, but there was a tiredness to his face and he didn't seem as pleased as he might have. 'That's well enough, then. Well enough.' He looked around the room. 'We may as well begin tonight. Let's start by tidying up. There's a broom over there. Oh, but first, change out of your

nightshirt into something ... ah, there's a ragged old robe over there. That'll do for now. Can't have the washer-folk wondering why your nightshirts smell of camphor and pain's ease, can we? Now, you sweep up the floor a bit while I put away a few things.'

And so passed the next few hours. I swept, then mopped the stone floor. He directed me as I cleared the paraphernalia from the great table. I turned the herbs on their drying rack. I fed the three lizards he had caged in the corner, chopping up some sticky old meat into chunks that they gulped whole. I wiped clean a number of pots and bowls and stored them. And he worked alongside me, seeming grateful for the company, and chatted to me as if we were both old men. Or both young boys.

'No letters as yet? No ciphering. Bagrash! What's the old man thinking? Well, I shall see that remedied swiftly. You've your father's brow, boy, and just his way of wrinkling it. Has anyone ever told you that before? Ah, there you are, Slink, you rascal! What mischief have you been up to now?'

A brown weasel appeared from behind a tapestry, and we were introduced to one another. Chade let me feed Slink quails' eggs from a bowl on the table, and laughed when the little beast followed me about begging for more. He gave me a copper bracelet that I found under the table, warning that it might make my wrist green, and cautioning that if anyone asked me about it, I should say I had found it behind the stables.

At some time we stopped for honey cakes and hot, spiced wine. We sat together at a low table on some rugs before the fireplace, and I watched the firelight dancing over his scarred face and wondered why it had seemed so frightening. He noticed me watching him, and his face contorted in a smile. 'Seems familiar, doesn't it, boy? My face, I mean.'

It didn't. I had been staring at the grotesque scars on the pasty white skin. I had no idea what he meant. I stared at him questioningly, trying to figure it out.

'Don't trouble yourself about it, boy. It leaves its tracks on all of us, and sooner or later, you'll get the tumble of it. But now, well ...' He rose, stretching so that his cassock bared his skinny white calves. 'Now it's mostly later. Or earlier, depending on which end of the day you fancy most. Time you headed back to your bed. Now. You'll remember that this is all a very dark secret, won't you? Not just me and this room, but the whole thing, waking up at night and lessons in how to kill people, and all of it.'

‘I’ll remember,’ I told him, and then, sensing that it would mean something to him, I added, ‘You have my word.’

He chuckled, and then nodded almost sadly. I changed back into my nightshirt, and he saw me down the steps. He held his glowing light by my bed as I clambered in, and then smoothed the blankets over me as no one had done since I’d left Burrich’s chambers. I think I was asleep before he had even departed my bedside.

Brant was sent to wake me the next morning, so late was I in arising. I came awake groggy, my head pounding painfully. But as soon as he left the room, I sprang from my bed and raced to the corner of my room. Cold stone met my hands as I pushed against the wall there, and no crack in mortar or stone gave any sign of the secret door I felt sure must be there. Never for one instant did I think Chade had been a dream, and even if I had, there remained the simple copper bracelet on my wrist to prove he wasn’t.

I dressed hurriedly and passed through the kitchens for a slab of bread and cheese that I was still eating when I got to the stables. Burrich was out of sorts with my tardiness, and found fault with every aspect of my horsemanship and stable tasks. I remember well how he berated me: ‘Don’t think that because you’ve a room up in the castle, and a crest on your jerkin, you can turn into some sprawlabout rogue who snores in his bed until all hours and then only rises to fluff at his hair. I’ll not have it. Bastard you may be, but you’re Chivalry’s bastard, and I’ll make you a man he’ll be proud of.’

I paused, the grooming brushes still in my hands. ‘You mean Regal, don’t you?’

My unwonted question startled him. ‘What?’

‘When you talk about rogues who stay in bed all morning and do nothing except fuss about hair and garments, you mean how Regal is.’

Burrich opened his mouth and then shut it. His wind-reddened cheeks grew redder. ‘Neither you nor I,’ he muttered at last, ‘are in a position to criticize any of the princes. I meant only as a general rule, that sleeping the morning away ill befits a man, and even less so a boy.’

‘And never a prince.’ I said this, and then stopped, to wonder where the thought had come from.

‘And never a prince,’ Burrich agreed grimly. He was busy in the next stall with a gelding’s hot leg. The animal winced suddenly, and I heard Burrich grunt with the effort of holding him. ‘Your father never slept past the

sun's midpoint because he'd been drinking the night before. Of course, he had a head for wine such as I've never seen since, but there was discipline to it, too. Nor did he have some man standing by to rouse him. He got himself out of bed, and then expected those in his command to follow his example. It didn't always make him popular, but his soldiers respected him. Men like that in a leader, that he demands of himself the same thing he expects of them. And I'll tell you another thing: your father didn't waste coin on decking himself out like a peacock. When he was a younger man, before he was wed to Lady Patience, he was at dinner one evening, at one of the lesser keeps. They'd seated me not too far below him, a great honour to me, and I overheard some of his conversation with the daughter they'd seated so hopefully next to the King-in-Waiting. She'd asked him what he thought of the emeralds she wore, and he had complimented her on them. "I had wondered, sir, if you enjoyed jewels, for you wear none of them yourself tonight," she said flirtatiously. And he replied, quite seriously, that his jewels shone as brilliantly as hers, and much larger. "Oh, and where do you keep such gems, for I should dearly like to see them?" Well, he replied he'd be happy to show them to her later that evening, when it was darker. I saw her blush, expecting a tryst of some kind. And later he did invite her out onto the battlements with him, but he took with them half the dinner guests as well. And he pointed out the lights of the coast-watch towers, shining clearly in the dark, and told her that he considered those his best and dearest jewels, and that he spent the coin from her father's taxes to keep them shining so. And then he pointed out to the guests the winking lights of that lord's own watchmen in the fortifications of his keep, and told them that when they looked at their Duke, they should see those shining lights as the jewels on his brow. It was quite a compliment to the Duke and Duchess, and the other nobles there took note of it. The Outislanders had very few successful raids that summer. That was how Chivalry ruled. By example, and by the grace of his words. So should any real prince do.'

'I'm not a real prince. I'm a bastard.' It came oddly from my mouth, that word I heard so often and so seldom said.

Burrich sighed softly. 'Be your blood, boy, and ignore what anyone else thinks of you.'

'Sometimes I get tired of doing the hard things.'

'So do I.'

I absorbed this in silence for a while as I worked my way down Sooty's shoulder. Burrich, still kneeling by the grey, spoke suddenly. 'I don't ask any more of you than I ask of myself. You know that's true.'

'I know that,' I replied, surprised that he'd mentioned it further.

'I just want to do my best by you.'

This was a whole new idea to me. After a moment I asked, 'Because if you could make Chivalry proud of me, of what you'd made me into, then maybe he would come back?'

The rhythmic sound of Burrich's hands working liniment into the gelding's leg slowed, then ceased abruptly. But he remained crouched down by the horse, and spoke quietly through the wall of the stall. 'No. I don't think that. I don't suppose anything would make him come back. And even if he did,' and Burrich spoke more slowly, 'even if he did, he wouldn't be who he was. Before, I mean.'

'It's all my fault he went away, isn't it?' The words of the weaving-women echoed in my head. *But for the boy, he'd still be in line to be king.*

Burrich paused long. 'I don't suppose it's any man's fault that he's born ...' He sighed, and the words seemed to come more reluctantly. 'And there's certainly no way a babe can make itself not a bastard. No. Chivalry brought his downfall on himself, though that's a hard thing for me to say.' I heard his hands go back to work on the gelding's leg.

'And your downfall, too.' I said it to Sooty's shoulder, softly, never dreaming he'd hear.

But a moment or two later, I heard him mutter, 'I do well enough for myself, Fitz. I do well enough.'

He finished his task and came around into Sooty's stall. 'Your tongue's wagging like the town gossip today, Fitz. What's got into you?'

It was my turn to pause and wonder. Something about Chade, I decided. Something about someone who wanted me to understand and have a say in what I was learning had freed up my tongue finally to ask all the questions I'd been carrying about for years. But because I couldn't very well say so, I shrugged, and truthfully replied, 'They're just things I've wondered about for a long time.'

Burrich grunted his acceptance of the answer. 'Well. It's an improvement that you ask, though I won't always promise you an answer. It's good to hear you speak like a man. Makes me worry less about losing you to the beasts.' He glared at me over the last words, and then gimped

away. I watched him go, and remembered that first night I had seen him, and how a look from him had been enough to quell a whole room full of men. He wasn't the same man. And it wasn't just the limp that had changed the way he carried himself and how men looked at him. He was still the acknowledged master in the stables and no one questioned his authority there. But he was no longer the right hand of the King-in-Waiting. Other than watching over me, he wasn't Chivalry's man at all any more. No wonder he couldn't look at me without resentment. He hadn't sired the bastard that had been his downfall. For the first time since I had known him, my wariness of him was tinged with pity.

FIVE

Loyalties

In some kingdoms and lands, it is the custom that male children will have precedence over female in matters of inheritance. Such has never been the case in the Six Duchies. Titles are inherited solely by order of birth.

The one who inherits a title is supposed to view it as a stewardship. If a lord or lady were so foolish as to cut too much forest at once, or neglect vineyards or let the quality of the cattle become too inbred, the people of the duchy could rise up and come to ask the King's Justice. It has happened, and every noble is aware it can happen. The welfare of the people belongs to the people, and they have the right to object if their duke stewards it poorly.

When the title-holder weds, he is supposed to keep this in mind. The partner chosen must be willing to be a steward likewise. For this reason, the partner holding a lesser title must surrender it to the next younger sibling. One can only be a true steward of one holding. On occasion this has led to divisions. King Shrewd married Lady Desire, who would have been Duchess of Farrow, had she not chosen to accept his offer and become Queen instead. It is said she came to regret her decision, and convinced herself that, had she remained Duchess, her power would have been greater. She married Shrewd knowing well that she was his second queen, and that the first had already borne him two heirs. She never concealed her disdain for the two older princes, and often pointed out that as she was much higher born than King Shrewd's first queen, she considered her son Regal to be more royal than his two half-brothers. She attempted to instil this idea in others by her choice of name for her son. Unfortunately for her plans, most saw this ploy as being in poor taste. Some even mockingly referred to her as the Inland Queen, when, intoxicated, she would ruthlessly claim that she had the political influence to unite Farrow and Tilth into a new kingdom, one that would shrug off King Shrewd's rule at her behest. But most put her claims down to her fondness for intoxicants, both alcoholic and herbal. It is true, however, that before she

finally succumbed to her addictions, she was responsible for nurturing the rift between the Inland and Coastal Duchies.

I grew to look forward to my dark-time encounters with Chade. They never had a schedule, nor any pattern that I could discern. A week, even two, might go by between meetings, or he might summon me every night for a week straight, leaving me staggering about my day-time chores. Sometimes he summoned me as soon as the castle was abed; at other times, he called upon me in the wee hours of the morning. It was a strenuous schedule for a growing boy, yet I never thought of complaining to Chade or refusing one of his calls. Nor do I think it ever occurred to him that my night lessons presented a difficulty for me. Nocturnal himself, it must have seemed a perfectly natural time for him to be teaching me. And the lessons I learned were oddly suited to the darker hours of the world.

There was tremendous scope to his lessons. One evening might be spent in laborious study of the illustrations in a great herbal he kept, with the requirement that the next day I was to collect six samples that matched those illustrations. He never saw fit to hint as to whether I should look in the kitchen garden or the darker nooks of the forest for those herbs, but find them I did, and learned much of observation in the process.

There were games we played, too. For instance, he would tell me that I must go on the morrow to Sara the cook and ask her if this year's bacon were leaner than last year's. And then I must that evening report the entire conversation back to Chade, as close to word perfect as I could, and answer a dozen questions for him about how she stood, and was she left-handed and did she seem hard of hearing and what she was cooking at the time. My shyness and reticence were never accounted a good enough excuse for failing to execute such an assignment, and so I found myself meeting and coming to know a good many of the lesser folk of the keep. Even though my questions were inspired by Chade, every one of them welcomed my interest and was more than willing to share expertise. Without intending it, I began to garner a reputation as a 'sharp youngster' and a 'good lad'. Years later I realized that the lesson was not just a memory exercise but also instruction in how to befriend the commoner folk, and to learn their minds. Many's the time since then that a smile, a compliment on how well my horse had been cared for, and a quick question put to a stable-boy brought me information that all the coin in the kingdom couldn't have bribed out of him.

Other games built my nerve as well as my powers of observation. One day Chade showed me a skein of yarn, and told me that, without asking Mistress Hasty, I must find out exactly where she kept the supply of yarn that matched it, and what herbs had been used in the dyeing of it. Three days later I was told I must spirit away her best shears, conceal them behind a certain rack of wines in the wine cellar for three hours, and then return them to where they had been, all undetected by her or anyone else. Such exercises initially appealed to a boy's natural love of mischief, and I seldom failed at them. When I did, the consequences were my own look-out. Chade had warned me that he would not shield me from anybody's wrath, and suggested that I have a worthy tale ready to explain away being where I should not be, or possessing that which I had no business possessing.

I learned to lie very well. I do not think it was taught me accidentally.

These were the lessons in my assassin's primer. And more. Sleight of hand and the art of moving stealthily. Where to strike a man to render him unconscious. Where to strike a man so that he dies without crying out. Where to stab a man so that he dies without too much blood welling out. I learned it all rapidly and well, thriving under Chade's approval of my quick mind.

Soon he began to use me for small jobs about the keep. He never told me, ahead of time, if they were tests of my skill, or actual tasks he wished accomplished. To me it made no difference; I pursued them all with a single-minded devotion to Chade and anything he commanded. In spring of that year, I treated the wine cups of a visiting delegation from the Bingtown traders so that they became much more intoxicated than they had intended. Later that same month, I concealed one puppet from a visiting puppeteer's troupe, so that he had to present the Incidence of the Matching Cups, a light-hearted little folk tale instead of the lengthy historical drama he had planned for the evening. At the High-Summer Feast, I added a certain herb to a serving-girl's afternoon pot of tea, so that she and three of her friends were stricken with loose bowels and could not wait the tables that night. In the autumn I tied a thread around the fetlock of a visiting noble's horse, to give the animal a temporary limp that convinced the noble to remain at Buckkeep two days longer than he had planned. I never knew the underlying reasons for the tasks Chade set me. At that age, I set my mind to how I would do a thing, rather than why. And that, too, was a thing that I believe it was intended I learn: to obey without asking why an order was given.

There was one task that absolutely delighted me. Even at the time, I knew that the assignment was more than a whim of Chade's. He summoned me for it in the last bit of dark before dawn. 'Lord Jessup and his lady have been visiting this last two weeks. You know them by sight; he has a very long moustache, and she constantly fusses with her hair, even at the table. You know who I mean?'

I frowned. A number of nobles had gathered at Buckkeep, to form a council to discuss the increase in raids from the Outislanders. I gathered that the Coastal Duchies wanted more warships, but the Inland Duchies opposed sharing the taxes for what they saw as a purely coastal problem. Lord Jessup and Lady Dahlia were Inlanders. Jessup and his moustaches both seemed to have fitful temperaments and to be constantly impassioned. Lady Dahlia, on the other hand, seemed to take no interest at all in the council, but spent most of her time exploring Buckkeep.

'She wears flowers in her hair, all the time? They keep falling out?'

'That's the one,' Chade replied emphatically. 'Good. You know her. Now, here's your task, and I've no time to plan it with you. Some time today, at any moment today, she will send a page to Prince Regal's room. The page will deliver something; a note, a flower, an object of some kind. You will remove the object from Regal's room before he sees it. You understand?'

I nodded and opened my mouth to say something, but Chade stood abruptly and almost chased me from the room. 'No time; it is nearly dawn!' he declared.

I contrived to be in Regal's room, in hiding, when the page arrived. From the way the girl slipped in, I was convinced this was not her first mission. She set a tiny scroll and a flower bud on Regal's pillow, and slipped out of the room. In a moment both were in my jerkin, and later under my own pillow. I think the most difficult part of the task was refraining from opening the scroll. I turned scroll and flower over to Chade late that night.

Over the next few days, I waited, certain there would be some sort of furore, and hoping to see Regal thoroughly discomfited. But to my surprise, there was none. Regal remained his usual self, save that he was even sharper than usual, and seemed to flirt even more outrageously with every lady. As for Lady Dahlia, she suddenly took an interest in the council proceedings, and confounded her husband by becoming an ardent supporter of warship taxes. The Queen expressed her displeasure over this change of alliance by

excluding Lady Dahlia from a wine-tasting in her chambers. The whole thing mystified me, but when I at last mentioned it to Chade, he rebuked me.

‘Remember, you are the King’s man. A task is given you, and you do it. And you should be well satisfied with yourself that you completed the given task. That is all you need to know. Only Shrewd may plan the moves and plot his game. You and I, we are playing pieces, perhaps. But we are the best of his markers; be assured of that.’

But early on, Chade found the limits of my obedience. In laming the horse, he had suggested I cut the frog of the animal’s foot. I never even considered doing that. I informed him, with all the worldly wisdom of one who has grown up around horses, that there were many ways to make a horse limp without actually harming him, and that he should trust me to choose an appropriate one. To this day, I do not know how Chade felt about my refusal. He said nothing at the time to condemn it, or to suggest he approved my actions. In this as in many things, he kept his own counsel.

Once every three months or so, King Shrewd would summon me to his chambers. Usually the call for me came in the very early morning. I would stand before him, often-times while he was in his bath, or having his hair bound back in the gold-wired queue that only the King could wear, or while his man was laying out his clothes. Always the ritual was the same. He would look me over carefully, studying my growth and grooming as if I were a horse he was considering buying. He would ask a question or two, usually about my horsemanship or weapons study, and listen gravely to my brief answer. And then he would ask, almost formally, ‘And do you feel I am keeping my bargain with you?’

‘Sir, I do,’ I would always answer.

‘Then see that you keep your end of it as well,’ was always his reply and my dismissal. And whatever servant attending him or opening the door for me to enter or leave never appeared to take the slightest notice of me or of the King’s words at all.

Come late autumn of that year, on the very cusp of winter’s tooth, I was given my most difficult assignment. Chade had summoned me up to his chambers almost as soon as I had blown out my night candle. We were sharing sweetmeats and a bit of spiced wine, sitting in front of Chade’s hearth. He had been lavishly praising my latest escapade, one that required me turning inside out every shirt hung to dry on the laundry courtyard’s drying-lines without getting caught. It had been a difficult task, the hardest

part of which had been to refrain from laughing aloud and betraying my hiding place within a dyeing-vat when two of the younger laundry-lads had declared my prank the work of water sprites and refused to do any more washing that day. Chade, as usual, knew of the whole scenario even before I reported to him. He delighted me by letting me know that Master Lew of the launderers had decreed that Sinjon's Wort was to be hung at every corner of the courtyard and garlanded about every well to ward off sprites from tomorrow's work.

'You've a gift for this, boy,' Chade chuckled and tousled my hair. 'I almost think there's no task I could set you that you couldn't do.'

He was sitting in his straight-backed chair before the fire, and I was on the floor beside him, leaning my back against one of his legs. He patted me the way Burrich might pat a young bird dog that had done well, and then leaned forward to say softly, 'But I've a challenge for you.'

'What is it?' I demanded eagerly.

'It won't be easy, even for one with as light a touch as yours,' he warned me.

'Try me!' I challenged him in return.

'Oh, in another month or two, perhaps, when you've had a bit more teaching. I've a game to teach you tonight, one that will sharpen your eye and your memory.' He reached into a pouch and drew out a handful of something. He opened his hand briefly in front of me; coloured stones. The hand closed. 'Were there any yellow ones?'

'Yes. Chade, what is the challenge?'

'How many?'

'Two that I could see. Chade, I bet I could do it now.'

'Could there have been more than two?'

'Possibly, if some were concealed completely under the top layer. I don't think it likely. Chade, what is the challenge?'

He opened his bony old hand, stirred the stones with his long forefinger. 'Right you were. Only two yellow ones. Shall we go again?'

'Chade, I can do it.'

'You think so, do you? Look again, here's the stones. One, two, three, and gone again. Were there any red ones?'

'Yes. Chade, what is the task?'

'Were there more red ones than blue? To bring me something personal from the King's night-table.'

‘What?’

‘Were there more red stones than blue ones?’

‘No, I mean, what was the task?’

‘Wrong, boy!’ Chade announced it merrily. He opened his fist. ‘See, three red and three blue. Exactly the same. You’ll have to look quicker than that if you’re to meet my challenge.’

‘And seven green. I knew that, Chade. But ... you want me to steal from the King?’ I still couldn’t believe I had heard it.

‘Not steal, just borrow. As you did Mistress Hasty’s shears. There’s no harm in a prank like that, is there?’

‘None except that I’d be whipped if I were caught. Or worse.’

‘And you’re afraid you’d be caught. See, I told you it had best wait a month or two, until your skills are better.’

‘It’s not the punishment. It’s that if I were caught ... the King and I ... we made a bargain ...’ My words dwindled away. I stared at him in confusion. Chade’s instruction was a part of the bargain Shrewd and I had made. Each time we met, before he began instructing me, he formally reminded me of that bargain. I had given to Chade, as well as to the King, my word that I would be loyal. Surely he could see that if I acted against the King, I’d be breaking my part of the bargain.

‘It’s a game, boy,’ Chade said patiently. ‘That’s all. Just a bit of mischief. It’s not really as serious as you seem to think it. The only reason I’m choosing it as a task is that the King’s room and his things are so closely watched. Anyone can make off with a seamstress’s shears. We’re talking about a real bit of stealth now, to enter the King’s own chambers and take something that belongs to him. If you could do that, I’d believe I’d spent my time well in teaching you. I’d feel you appreciated what I’d taught you.’

‘You know I appreciate what you teach me,’ I said quickly. That wasn’t it at all. Chade seemed to be completely missing my point. ‘I’d feel ... disloyal. As if I was using what you’d taught me to trick the King. Almost as if I were laughing at him.’

‘Ah!’ Chade leaned back in his chair, a smile on his face. ‘Don’t let that bother you, boy. King Shrewd can appreciate a good jest when he’s shown one. Whatever you take, I’ll return myself to him. It will be a sign to him of how well I’ve taught you and how well you’ve learned. Take something simple if it worries you so; it needn’t be the crown off his head or the ring

from his finger! Just his hairbrush, or any bit of paper that's about – even his glove or belt would do. Nothing of any great value. Just a token.'

I thought I should pause to think, but I knew I didn't need to. 'I can't do it. I mean, I won't do it. Not from King Shrewd. Name any other, anyone else's room, and I'll do it. Remember when I took Regal's scroll? You'll see, I can creep in anywhere and ...'

'Boy?' Chade's voice came slowly, puzzled. 'Don't you trust me? I tell you it's all right. It's just a challenge we're talking about; not high treason. And this time, if you're caught, I promise I'll step right in and explain it all. You won't be punished.'

'That's not it,' I said frantically. I could sense Chade's growing puzzlement over my refusal. I scabbled frantically within myself to find a way to explain to him. 'I promised to be loyal to Shrewd. And this ...'

'There's nothing disloyal about this!' Chade snapped. I looked up to see angry glints in his eyes. Startled, I drew back from him. I'd never seen him glare so. 'What are you saying, boy? That I'm asking you to betray your king? Don't be an idiot. This is just a simple little test, my way of measuring you and showing Shrewd himself what you've learned, and you balk at it. And try to cover your cowardice by prattling about loyalty. Boy, you shame me. I thought you had more backbone than this, or I'd never have begun teaching you.'

'Chade!' I began in horror. His words had left me reeling. He pulled away from me, and I felt my small world rocking around me as his voice went on coldly.

'Best you get back to your bed, little boy. Think exactly how you've insulted me tonight. To insinuate I'd somehow be disloyal to our King. Crawl down the stairs, you little craven. And the next time I summon you ... Hah, if I summon you again, come prepared to obey me. Or don't come at all. Now go.'

Never had Chade spoken to me so. I could not recall that he had even raised his voice to me. I stared, almost without comprehension, at the thin pock-scarred arm that protruded from the sleeve of his robe, at the long finger that pointed so disdainfully toward the door and the stairs. As I rose, I felt physically sick. I reeled, and had to catch hold of a chair as I passed. But I went, doing as he told me, unable to think of anything else to do. Chade, who had become the central pillar of my world, who had made me believe I

was something of value, was taking it all away. Not just his approval, but our time together, my sense that I was going to be something in my lifetime.

I stumbled and staggered down the stairs. Never had they seemed so long or so cold. The bottom door grated shut behind me, and I was left in total darkness. I groped my way to my bed, but my blankets could not warm me, nor did I find any trace of sleep that night. I tossed in agony. The worst part was that I could find no indecision in myself. I could not do the thing Chade asked of me. Therefore, I would lose him. Without his instruction, I would be of no value to the King. But that was not the agony. The agony was simply the loss of Chade from my life. I could not remember how I had managed before when I had been so alone. To return to the drudgery of living day to day, going from task to task seemed impossible.

I tried desperately to think of something to do. But there seemed no solution. I could go to Shrewd himself, show my pin and be admitted, and tell him of my dilemma. But what would he say? Would he see me as a silly little boy? Would he say I should have obeyed Chade? Worse, would he say I was right to disobey Chade and be angry with Chade? These were very difficult questions for a boy's mind, and I found no answers that helped me.

When morning finally came, I dragged myself from my bed and reported to Burrich as usual. I went about my tasks in a grey listlessness that first brought me scoldings, and then an inquiry as to the state of my belly. I told him simply that I had not slept well, and he let me off without the threatened tonic. I did no better at weapons. My state of distraction was such that I let a much younger boy deliver a stout clout to my skull. Hod scolded us both for recklessness and told me to sit down for a bit.

My head was pounding and my legs were shaky when I returned to the keep. I went to my room, for I had no stomach for the noon meal or the loud conversations that went with it. I lay on my bed, intending to close my eyes for just a moment, but fell into a deep sleep. I awoke halfway through the afternoon, and thought of the scoldings I would face for missing my afternoon lessons. But it wasn't enough to rouse me and I dropped off, only to be awakened at supper time by a serving-girl who had come to inquire after me at Burrich's behest. I staved her off by telling her I had a sour gut and was going to fast until it cleared. After she left, I drowsed but did not sleep. I couldn't. Night deepened in my unlit room, and I heard the rest of the keep go off to rest. In darkness and stillness, I lay waiting for a summons I would not dare answer. What if the door opened? I could not go to Chade,

for I could not obey him. Which would be worse: if he did not summon me, or if he opened the door for me and I dared not go? I tormented myself from rock to stone, and in the grey creeping of morning I had the answer. He hadn't even bothered to call for me.

Even now, I do not like to recall the next few days. I hunched through them, so sick at heart that I could not properly eat or rest. I could not focus my mind on any task, and took the rebukes that my teachers gave me with bleak acceptance. I acquired a headache that never ceased, and my stomach stayed so clenched on itself that food held no interest for me. The very thought of eating made me weary. Burrich put up with it for two days before he cornered me, and forced down me both a worming draught and a blood tonic. The combination made me vomit up what little I'd eaten that day. He made me wash out my mouth with plum wine afterwards, and to this day I cannot drink plum wine without gagging. Then, to my weary amazement, he dragged me up the stairs to his loft and gruffly ordered me to rest there for the day. When evening came, he chivvied me up to the keep, and under his watchful eye I was forced to consume a watery bowl of soup and a hunk of bread. He would have taken me back to his loft again, had I not insisted that I wanted my own bed. In reality, I had to be in my room. I had to know whether Chade at least tried to call me, whether I could go or not. Through another sleepless night, I stared in blackness at a darker corner of my room.

But he didn't summon me.

Morning greyed my window. I rolled over and kept to my bed. The depth of bleakness that settled over me was too solid for me to fight. All of my possible choices led to grey ends. I could not face the futility of getting out of bed. A headachey sort of near-sleep claimed me. Any sound seemed too loud, and I was either too hot or too cold no matter how I fussed with my covers. I closed my eyes, but even my dreams were bright and annoying. Arguing voices, as loud as if they were in the bed with me, and all the more frustrating because it sounded like one man arguing with himself and taking both sides. 'Break him as you broke the other one!' he'd mutter angrily. 'You and your stupid tests!' and then, 'Can't be too careful. Can't put your trust in just anyone. Blood will tell. Test his mettle, that's all.' 'Metal! You want a brainless blade, go hammer it out yourself. Beat it flat.' And more quietly, 'I've got no heart for this. I'll not be used again. If you wanted to test my temper, you've done it.' Then, 'Don't talk to me about blood and

family. Remember who I am to you! It isn't his loyalty she's worrying about, or mine.'

The angry voice broke up, merged, became another argument, this one shriller. I cracked open my eyelids. My chamber had become the scene of a brief battle. I woke to a spirited disagreement between Burrich and Mistress Hasty as to whose jurisdiction I fell under. She had a wicker basket, from which protruded the necks of several bottles. The scents of mustard in a plaster and chamomile wafted over me so strongly that I wanted to retch. Burrich stood stoically between her and my bed. His arms were crossed on his chest and Vixen sat at his feet. Mistress Hasty's words rattled in my head like pebbles. 'In the keep', 'Those clean linens', 'Know about boys', 'That smelly dog'. I don't recall that Burrich said a word. He just stood there so solidly that I could feel him with my eyes closed.

Later, he was gone, but Vixen was on the bed, not at my feet, but beside me, panting heavily but refusing to abandon me for the cooler floor. I opened my eyes again, later, to early twilight. Burrich had tugged free my pillow, shook it a bit, and was awkwardly stuffing it back under my head, cool side up. He then sat down heavily on the bed.

He cleared his throat. 'Fitz, there's nothing the matter with you that I've ever seen before. At least, whatever's the matter with you isn't in your guts or your blood. If you were a bit older, I'd suspect you had woman problems. You act like a soldier on a three-day drunk, but without the wine. Boy, what's the matter with you?'

He looked down on me with sincere worry. It was the same look he wore when he was afraid a mare was going to miscarry, or when hunters brought back dogs that boars had gored. It reached me, and without meaning to, I quested out toward him. As always, the wall was there, but Vixen whined lightly and put her muzzle against my cheek. I tried to express what was inside me without betraying Chade. 'I'm just so alone now,' I heard myself say, and even to me it sounded like a feeble complaint.

'Alone?' Burrich's brows knit. 'Fitz, I'm right here. How can you say you're alone?'

And there the conversation ended, with both of us looking at one another and neither understanding at all. Later he brought me food, but didn't insist I eat it. And he left Vixen with me for the night. A part of me wondered how she would react if the door opened, but a larger part of me knew I didn't have to worry. That door would never open again.

Morning came again, and Vixen nosed at me and whined to go out. Too broken to care if Burrich caught me, I quested toward her. Hungry and thirsty and her bladder was about to burst. And her discomfort was suddenly my own. I dragged on a tunic and took her down the stairs and outside, and then back to the kitchen to eat. Cook was more pleased to see me than I had imagined anyone could be. Vixen was given a generous bowl of last night's stew, while Cook insisted on giving me six rashers of thick-cut bacon on the warm crust of the day's first baking of bread. Vixen's keen nose and sharp appetite sparked my own senses, and I found myself eating, not with my normal appetite, but with a young creature's sensory appreciation for food.

From there she led me to the stables, and though I pulled my mind back from her before we went inside, I felt somewhat rejuvenated from the contact. Burrich straightened up from some task as I came in, looked me over, glanced at Vixen, grunted wryly to himself, and then handed me a suckle bottle and wick. 'There isn't much in a man's head,' he told me, 'that can't be cured by working and taking care of something else. The rat-dog whelped a few days ago, and there's one pup too weak to compete with the others. See if you can keep him alive today.'

It was an ugly little pup, pink skin showing through his brindle fur. His eyes were shut tight still, and the extra skin he'd use up as he grew was piled on top of his muzzle. His skinny little tail looked just like a rat's, so that I wondered his mother didn't worry her own pups to death just for the resemblance's sake. He was weak and passive, but I bothered him with the warm milk and wicking until he sucked a little, and got enough all over him that his mother was inspired to lick and nuzzle him. I took one of his stronger sisters off her teat and plugged him into her place. Her little belly was round and full anyway; she had only been sucking for the sake of obstinacy. She was going to be white with a black spot over one eye. She caught my little finger and suckled at it, and already I could feel the immense strength those jaws would someday hold. Burrich had told me stories about rat-dogs that would latch onto a bull's nose and hang there no matter what the bull did. He had no use for men that would teach a dog to do so, but could not contain his respect for the courage of a dog that would take on a bull. Our rat-dogs were kept for ratting, and taken on regular patrols of the corn cribs and grain barns.

I spent the whole morning there, and left at noon with the gratification of seeing the pup's small belly round and tight with milk. The afternoon was

spent mucking out stalls. Burrich kept me at it, adding another chore as soon as I completed one, with no time for me to do anything but work. He didn't talk with me or ask me questions, but he always seemed to be working only a dozen paces away. It was as if he had taken my complaint about being alone quite literally, and was resolved to be where I could see him. I wound up my day back with my puppy who was substantially stronger than he had been that morning. I cradled him against my chest and he crept up under my chin, his blunt little muzzle questing there for milk. It tickled. I pulled him down and looked at him. He was going to have a pink nose. Men said the rat-dogs with the pink noses were the most savage ones when they fought. But his little mind now was only a muzzy warmth of security and milk-want and affection for my smell. I wrapped him in my protection of him, praised him for his new strength. He wiggled in my fingers. And Burrich leaned over the side of the stall and rapped me on the head with his knuckles, bringing twin yelps from the pup and me.

'Enough of that,' he warned sternly. 'That's not a thing for a man to do. And it won't solve whatever is chewing on your soul. Give the pup back to his mother, now.'

So I did, but reluctantly, and not at all sure that Burrich was right that bonding with a puppy wouldn't solve anything. I longed for his warm little world of straw and siblings and milk and mother. At that moment, I could imagine no better one.

Then Burrich and I went up to eat. He took me into the soldiers' mess, where manners were whatever you had and no one demanded talk. It was comforting to be casually ignored, to have food passed over my head with no one being solicitous of me. Burrich saw that I ate, though, and then afterwards we sat outside beside the kitchen's back door and drank. I'd had ale and beer and wine before, but I had never drunk in the purposeful way that Burrich now showed me. When Cook dared to come out and scold him for giving strong spirits to a mere boy, he gave her one of his quiet stares that reminded me of the first night I had met him, when he'd faced down a whole room of soldiers over Chivalry's good name. And she left.

He walked me up to my room, dragged my tunic off over my head as I stood unsteadily beside my bed, and then casually tumbled me into the bed and tossed a blanket over me. 'Now you'll sleep,' he informed me in a thick voice. 'And tomorrow we'll do the same again. And again. Until one day you get up and find out that whatever it was didn't kill you after all.'

He blew out my candle and left. My head reeled and my body ached from the day's work. But still I didn't sleep. What I found myself doing was crying. The drink had loosened whatever knot held my control, and I wept. Not quietly. I sobbed, and hiccuped and then wailed with my jaw shaking. My throat closed up, my nose ran, and I cried so hard I felt I couldn't breathe. I think I cried every tear I had never shed since the day my grandfather forced my mother to abandon me. 'Mere!' I heard myself call out, and suddenly there were arms around me, holding me tight.

Chade held me and rocked me as if I were a much younger child. Even in the darkness I knew those bony arms and the herb-and-dust smell of him. Disbelieving, I clung to him and cried until I was hoarse, and my mouth so dry no sound would come at all. 'You were right,' he said into my hair, quietly, calmingly. 'You were right. I was asking you to do something wrong, and you were right to refuse it. You won't be tested that way again. Not by me.' And when I was finally still, he left me for a time, and then brought back to me a drink, lukewarm and almost tasteless, but not water. He held the mug to my mouth and I drank it down without questions. Then I lay back so suddenly sleepy that I don't even remember Chade leaving my room.

I awoke near dawn and reported to Burrich after a hearty breakfast. I was quick at my chores and attentive to my charges and could not at all understand why he had awakened so headachey and grumpy. He muttered something once about 'his father's head for spirits', and then dismissed me early, telling me to take my whistling elsewhere.

Three days later, King Shrewd summoned me in the dawn. He was already dressed, and there was a tray and food for more than one person set out on it. As soon as I arrived, he sent away his man and told me to sit. I took a chair at the small table in his room, and without asking me if I were hungry, he served me food with his own hand and then sat down across from me to eat. The gesture was not lost on me, but even so I could not bring myself to eat much. He spoke only of the food, and said nothing of bargains or loyalty or keeping one's word. When he saw I had finished eating, he pushed his own plate away. He shifted uncomfortably.

'It was my idea,' he said suddenly, almost harshly. 'Not his. He never approved of it. I insisted. When you're older, you'll understand. I can take no chances, not on anyone. But I promised him that you'd know this right

from me. It was all my own idea, never his. And I will never ask him to try your mettle in such a way again. On that you have a king's word.'

He made a motion that dismissed me. And I rose, but as I did so, I took from his tray a little silver knife, all engraved, that he had been using to cut fruit with. I looked him in the eyes as I did so, and quite openly slipped it up my sleeve. King Shrewd's eyes widened, but he said not a word.

Two nights later, when Chade summoned me, our lessons resumed as if there had never been a pause. He talked, I listened, I played his stone game and never made an error. He gave me an assignment, and we made small jokes together. He showed me how Slink the weasel would dance for a sausage. All was well between us again. But before I left his chambers that night, I walked to his hearth. Without a word, I placed the knife on the centre of his mantel-shelf. Actually, I drove it, blade first, into the wood of the shelf. Then I left without speaking of it or meeting his eyes. In fact, we never spoke of it.

I believe that the knife is still there.

SIX

Chivalry's Shadow

There are two traditions about the custom of giving royal offspring names suggestive of virtues or abilities. The one that is most commonly held is that somehow these names are binding; that when such a name is attached to a child who will be trained in the Skill, somehow the Skill melds the name to the child, and the child cannot help but grow up to practise the virtue ascribed to him or her by name. This first tradition is most doggedly believed by those same ones most prone to doff their caps in the presence of minor nobility.

A more ancient tradition attributes such names to accident, at least initially. It is said that King Taker and King Ruler, the first two of the Outislanders to rule what would become the Six Duchies, had no such names at all. Rather that their names in their own foreign tongue were very similar to the sounds of such words in the duchies' tongue, and thus came to be known by their homonyms rather than by their true names. But for the purposes of royalty, it is better to have the common folk believe that a boy given a noble name must grow to have a noble nature.

'Boy!'

I lifted my head. Of the half-dozen or so other lads lounging about before the fire, no one else even flinched. The girls took even less notice as I moved up to take my place at the opposite side of the low table where Master Fedwren knelt. He had mastered some trick of inflection that let all know when Boy meant 'boy' and when it meant 'the bastard'.

I tucked my knees under the low table and sat on my feet, then presented Fedwren with my sheet of pith-paper. As he ran his eyes down my careful columns of letters, I let my attention wander.

Winter had harvested us and stored us here in the Great Hall. Outside, a sea storm lashed the walls of the keep while breakers pounded the cliffs with a force that occasionally sent a tremor through the stone floor beneath us.

The heavy overcast had stolen even the few hours of watery daylight that winter had left us. It seemed to me that a darkness lay over us like a fog, both outside and within. The dimness penetrated my eyes, so that I felt sleepy without feeling tired. For a brief moment, I let my senses expand, and felt the winter sluggishness of the hounds where they dozed and twitched in the corners. Not even there could I find a thought or image to interest me.

Fires burned in all three of the big hearths, and different groups had gathered before each. At one, fletchers busied themselves with their work, lest tomorrow be a clear enough day to allow for a hunt. I longed to be there, for Sherf's mellow voice was rising and falling in the telling of some tale, broken frequently with appreciative laughter from her listeners. At the end hearth, children's voices piped along in the chorus of a song. I recognized it as the Shepherd's Song, a counting tune. A few watchful mothers tapped toes as they tatted at their lacemaking while Jerdon's withered old fingers on the harp strings kept the young voices almost in tune.

Here, at our hearth, children old enough to sit still and learn letters, did. Fedwren saw to that. His sharp blue eyes missed nothing. 'Here,' he said to me, pointing. 'You've forgotten to cross their tails. Remember how I showed you? Justice, open your eyes and get back to your penwork. Doze off again and I'll let you bring us another log for the fire. Charity, you can help him if you smirk again. Other than that,' and his attention was suddenly back on my work again, 'your lettering is much improved, not only on these Duchian characters, but on the Outislander runes as well. Though those can't really be properly brushed onto such poor paper. The surface is too porous, and takes the ink too well. Good, pounded bark sheets are what you want for runes,' and he ran a finger appreciatively over the sheet he was working on. 'Continue to show this type of work, and before winter's out I'll let you make me a copy of Queen Bidewell's Remedies. What do you say to that?'

I tried to smile and be properly flattered. Copywork was not usually given to students; good paper was too rare, and one careless brushstroke could ruin a sheet. I knew the Remedies was a fairly simple set of herbal properties and prophecies but any copying was an honour to aspire to. Fedwren gave me a fresh sheet of pith-paper. As I rose to return to my place, he lifted a hand to stop me. 'Boy?'

I paused.

Fedwren looked uncomfortable. 'I don't know who to ask this of, except you. Properly, I'd ask your parents, but ...' Mercifully he let the

sentence die. He scratched his beard meditatively with his ink-stained fingers. 'Winter's soon over, and I'll be on my way again. Do you know what I do in summer, boy? I wander all the Six Duchies, getting herbs and berries and roots for my inks, and making provisions for the papers I need. It's a good life, walking free on the roads in summers and guesting at the keep here all winter. There's much to be said for scribing for a living.' He looked at me meditatively. I looked back, wondering what he was getting at.

'I take an apprentice, every few years. Some of them work out, and go on to do scribing for the lesser keeps. Some don't. Some don't have the patience for the detail, or the memory for the inks. I think you would. What would you think about becoming a scribe?'

The question caught me completely off-guard, and I stared at him mutely. It wasn't just the idea of becoming a scribe; it was the whole notion that Fedwren would want me to be his apprentice, to follow him about and learn the secrets of his trade. Several years had passed since I had begun my bargain with the old King. Other than the nights I spent in Chade's company or my stolen afternoons with Molly and Kerry, I had never thought of anyone finding me companionable, let alone good material for an apprentice. Fedwren's proposal left me speechless. He must have sensed my confusion, for he smiled his genial young-old smile.

'Well, think on it, boy. Scribing's a good trade, and what other prospects do you have? Between the two of us, I think that some time away from Buckkeep might do you good.'

'Away from Buckkeep?' I repeated in wonder. It was like someone opening a curtain. I had never considered the idea. Suddenly the roads leading away from Buckkeep gleamed in my mind, and the weary maps I had been forced to study became places I could go. It transfixed me.

'Yes,' Fedwren said softly. 'Leave Buckkeep. As you grow older, Chivalry's shadow will grow thinner. It will not always shelter you. Better you were your own man, with your own life and calling to content you before his protection is entirely gone. But you don't have to answer me now. Think about it. Discuss it with Burrich, perhaps.'

And he handed me my pith-paper and sent me back to my place. I thought about his words, but it was not Burrich I took them to. In the feeble hours of a new day, Chade and I were crouched, head to head, I picking up the red shards of a broken crock that Slink had upset while Chade salvaged

the fine black seeds that had scattered in all directions. Slink clung to the top of a sagging tapestry and chirred apologetically, but I sensed his amusement.

‘Come all the way from Kalibar, these seeds, you skinny little pelt!’ Chade scolded him.

‘Kalibar,’ I said, and dredged out, ‘A day’s travel past our border with Sandsedge.’

‘That’s right, my boy,’ Chade muttered approvingly.

‘Have you ever been there?’

‘Me? Oh, no. I meant that they came from that far. I had to send to Fircrest for them. They’ve a large market there, one that draws trade from all six duchies and many of our neighbours as well.’

‘Oh, Fircrest. Have you ever been there?’

Chade considered. ‘A time or two, when I was a younger man. I remember the noise, mostly, and the heat. Inland places are like that: too dry, too hot. I was glad to return to Buckkeep.’

‘Was there any other place you ever went that you liked better than Buckkeep?’

Chade straightened slowly, his pale hand cupped full of fine black seed. ‘Why don’t you just ask me your question instead of beating around the bush?’

So I told him of Fedwren’s offer, and also of my sudden realization that maps were more than lines and colours. They were places and possibilities, and I could leave here and be someone else, be a scribe, or ...

‘No.’ Chade spoke softly but abruptly. ‘No matter where you went, you would still be Chivalry’s bastard. Fedwren is more perspicacious than I believed him to be, but he still doesn’t understand. Not the whole picture. He sees that here at court you must always be a bastard, must always be something of a pariah. What he doesn’t realize is that here, partaking of King Shrewd’s bounty, learning your lessons, under his eye, you are not a threat to him. Certainly, you are under Chivalry’s shadow here. Certainly it does protect you. But were you away from here, far from being unneeded of such protection, you would become a danger to King Shrewd, and a greater danger to his heirs after him. You would have no simple life of freedom as a wandering scribe. Rather you would be found in your inn bed with your throat cut some morning, or with an arrow through you on the high road.’

A coldness shivered through me. ‘But why?’ I asked softly.

Chade sighed. He dumped the seeds into a dish, dusted his hands lightly to shake loose those that clung to his fingers. ‘Because you’re a royal bastard, and hostage to your own blood-lines. For now, as I say, you’re no threat to Shrewd. You’re too young, and besides, he has you right where he can watch you. But he’s looking down the road. And you should be, too. These are restless times. The Outislanders are getting braver about their raids. The coast folk are beginning to grumble, saying we need more patrol ships, and some say warships of our own, to raid as we are raided. But the Inland Duchies want no part of paying for ships of any kind, especially not warships that might precipitate us into a full-scale war. They complain the coast is all the king thinks of, with no care for their farming. And the mountain folk are becoming more chary about the use of their passes. The trade fees grow steeper every month. So the merchants mumble and complain to each other. To the south, in Sandsedge and beyond, there is drought, and times are hard. Everyone there curses, as if the King and Verity were to blame for that as well. Verity is a fine fellow to have a mug with, but he is neither the soldier nor the diplomat that Chivalry was. He would rather hunt winter buck, or listen to a minstrel by the fireside than travel winter roads in raw weather, just to stay in touch with the other duchies. Sooner or later, if things do not improve, people will look about and say, “Well, a bastard’s not so large a thing to make a fuss over. Chivalry should have come to power; he’d soon put a stop to all this. He might have been a bit stiff about protocol, but at least he got things done, and didn’t let foreigners trample all over us”.’

‘So Chivalry might yet become King?’ The question sent a queer thrill through me. Instantly I was imagining his triumphant return to Buckkeep, our eventual meeting, and ... What then?

Chade seemed to be reading my face. ‘No, boy. Not likely at all. Even if the folk all wanted him to, I doubt that he’d go against what he set upon himself, or against the King’s wishes. But it would cause mumblings and grumblings, and those could lead to riots and skirmishes, oh, and a generally bad climate for a bastard to be running around free in. You’d have to be settled one way or another. Either as a corpse, or as the King’s tool.’

‘The King’s tool. I see.’ An oppression settled over me. My brief glimpse of blue skies arching over yellow roads and me travelling down them astride Sooty suddenly vanished. I thought of the hounds in their

kennels instead, or of the hawk, hooded and strapped, that rode on the King's wrist and was loosed only to do the King's will.

'It doesn't have to be that bad,' Chade said quietly. 'Most prisons are of our own making. A man makes his own freedom, too.'

'I'm never going to get to go anywhere, am I?' Despite the newness of the idea, travelling suddenly seemed immensely important to me.

'I wouldn't say that.' Chade was rummaging about for something to use as a stopper on the dish full of seeds. He finally contented himself with putting a saucer on top of it. 'You'll go to many places. Quietly, and when the family interests require you to go there. But that's not all that different for any prince of the blood. Do you think Chivalry got to choose where he would go to work his diplomacy? Do you think Verity likes being sent off to view towns raided by Outislanders, to hear the complaints of folks who insist that if only they'd been better fortified or better manned, none of this would have happened? A true prince has very little freedom when it comes to where he will go or how he will spend his time. Chivalry has probably more of both now than he ever had before.'

'Except that he can't come back to Buckkeep?' The flash of insight made me freeze, my hands full of shards.

'Except he can't come back to Buckkeep. It doesn't do to stir folks up with visits from a former King-in-Waiting. Better he faded quietly away.'

I tossed the shards into the hearth. 'At least he gets to go somewhere,' I muttered. 'I can't even go to town ...'

'And it's that important to you? To go down to a grubby, greasy little port like Buckkeep Town?'

'There are other people there ...' I hesitated. Not even Chade knew of my town friends. I plunged ahead. 'They call me Newboy. And they don't think "the bastard" every time they look at me.' I had never put it into words before, but suddenly the attraction of town was quite clear to me.

'Ah,' said Chade, and his shoulders moved as if he sighed, but he was silent. And a moment later he was telling me how one could sicken a man just by feeding him rhubarb and spinach at the same sitting, sicken him even to death if the portions were sufficient, and never set a bit of poison on the table at all. I asked him how to keep others at the same table from also being sickened, and our discussion wandered from there. Only later did it seem to me that his words regarding Chivalry had been almost prophetic.

Two days later I was surprised to be told that Fedwren had requested my services for a day or so. I was surprised even more when he gave me a list of supplies he required from town, and enough silver to buy them, with two extra coppers for myself. I held my breath, expecting that Burrich or one of my other masters would forbid it, but instead I was told to hurry on my way. I went out of the gates with a basket on my arm and my brain giddy with sudden freedom. I counted up the months since I had last been able to slip away from Buckkeep, and was shocked to find it had been a year or better. Immediately I planned to renew my old familiarity with the town. No one had told me when I had to return, and I was confident I could snatch an hour or two to myself and no one the wiser.

The disparity of the items on Fedwren's list took me all over the town. I had no idea what use a scribe had for dried Sea-Maid's Hair, or for a peck of forester's nuts. Perhaps he used them to make his coloured inks, I decided, and when I could not find them in the usual shops, I took myself down to the harbour bazaar, where anyone with a blanket and something to sell could declare himself a merchant. The seaweed I found swiftly enough there, and learned it was a common ingredient in chowder. The nuts took longer, for those were something that would have come from inland rather than from the sea, and there were fewer traders who dealt in such things.

But find them I did, alongside baskets of porcupine quills and carved wooden beads and nutcones and pounded bark fabric. The woman who presided over the blanket was old, and her hair had gone silver rather than white or grey. She had a strong, straight nose and her eyes were on bony shelves over her cheeks. It was a racial heritage both strange and oddly familiar to me, and a shiver walked down my back when I suddenly knew she was from the mountains.

'Keppet,' said the woman at the next mat as I completed my purchase. I glanced at her, thinking she was addressing the woman I had just paid. But she was staring at me. 'Keppet,' she said, quite insistently, and I wondered what it meant in her language. It seemed a request for something, but the older woman only stared coldly out into the street, so I shrugged at her younger neighbour apologetically and turned away as I stowed the nuts in my basket.

I hadn't gone more than a dozen steps when I heard her shriek, 'Keppet!' yet again. I looked back to see the two women engaged in a struggle. The older one gripped the younger one's wrists and the younger

one thrashed and kicked to be free of her. Around her, other merchants were getting to their feet in alarm and snatching their own merchandise out of harm's way. I might have turned back to watch had not another more familiar face met my eyes.

'Nosebleed!' I exclaimed.

She turned to face me full-on, and for an instant I thought I had been mistaken. A year had passed since I'd last seen her. How could a person change so much? The dark hair that used to be in sensible braids behind her ears now fell free past her shoulders. And she was dressed not in a jerkin and loose trousers but in blouse and skirt. The adult garments put me at a loss for words. I might have turned aside and pretended I addressed someone else had her dark eyes not challenged me as she asked me coolly, 'Nosebleed?'

I stood my ground. 'Aren't you Molly Nosebleed?'

She lifted a hand to brush some hair back from her cheek. 'I'm Molly Chandler.' I saw recognition in her eyes, but her voice was chill as she added, 'I'm not sure that I know you. Your name, sir?'

Confused, I reacted without thinking. I quested toward her, found her nervousness, and was surprised by her fears. Thought and voice I sought to soothe it. 'I'm Newboy,' I said without hesitation.

Her eyes widened with surprise, and then she laughed at what she construed as a joke. The barrier she had erected between us burst like a soap bubble, and suddenly I knew her as I had before. There was the same warm kinship between us that reminded me of nothing so much as Nosy. All awkwardness disappeared. A crowd was forming about the struggling women, but we left it behind us as we strolled up the cobbled street. I admired her skirts, and she calmly informed that she had been wearing skirts for several months now and that she quite preferred them to trousers. This one had been her mother's; she was told that one simply couldn't get wool woven this fine any more, or a red as bright as it was dyed. She admired my clothes, and I suddenly realized that perhaps I appeared to her as different as she to me. I had my best shirt on, my trousers had been washed only a few days ago and I wore boots as fine as any man-at-arms, despite Burrich's objections about how rapidly I outgrew them. She asked my business and I told her I was on errands for the writing master at the keep. I told her too that he was in need of two beeswax tapers, a total fabrication on my part, but one that allowed me to remain by her side as we strolled up the winding street. Our elbows bumped companionably and she talked. She was carrying a

basket of her own on her arm. It had several packets and bundles of herbs in it, for scenting candles, she told me. Beeswax took the scent much better than tallow, in her opinion. She made the best scented candles in Buckkeep; even the two other chandlers in town admitted it. This, smell this, this was lavender, wasn't it lovely? Her mother's favourite, and hers, too. This was crushsweet, and this bee-balm. This was thresher's root, not her favourite, no, but some said it made a good candle to cure headaches and winter-glooms. Mavis Threadsnip had told her that Molly's mother had mixed it with other herbs and made a wonderful candle, one that would calm even a colicky baby. So Molly had decided to try, by experimenting, to see if she could find the right herbs to re-create her mother's recipe.

Her calm flaunting of her knowledge and skills left me burning to distinguish myself in her eyes. 'I know the thresher's root,' I told her. 'Some use it to make an ointment for sore shoulders and backs. That's where the name comes from. But if you distil a tincture from it and mix it well in wine it's never tasted, and it will make a grown man sleep a day and a night and a day again, or make a child die in his sleep.'

Her eyes widened as I spoke, and at my last words a look of horror came over her face. I fell silent and felt the sharp awkwardness again. 'How do you know such things?' she demanded breathlessly.

'I ... I heard an old travelling midwife talking to our midwife up at the keep,' I improvised. 'It was ... a sad story she told, of an injured man given some to help him rest, but his baby got into it as well. A very, very sad story.' Her face was softening and I felt her warming toward me again. 'I only tell it to be sure you are careful of the root. Don't leave it about where any child can get at it.'

'Thank you. I shan't. Are you interested in herbs and roots? I didn't know a scribe cared about such things.'

I suddenly realized that she thought I was the scribe's help-boy. I didn't see any reason to tell her otherwise. 'Oh, Fedwren uses many things for his dyes and inks. Some copies he makes quite plain, but others are fancy, all done with birds and cats and turtles and fish. He showed me a Herbal with the greens and flowers of each herb done as the border for the page.'

'That I should dearly love to see,' she said in a heartfelt way, and I instantly began thinking of ways to purloin it for a few days.

‘I might be able to get you a copy to read ... not to keep, but to study for a few days,’ I offered hesitantly.

She laughed, but there was a slight edge in it. ‘As if I could read! Oh, but I imagine you’ve picked up some letters, running about for the scribe’s errands.’

‘A few,’ I told her, and was surprised at the envy in her eyes when I showed her my list and confessed I could read all seven words on it.

A sudden shyness came over her. She walked more slowly, and I realized we were getting close to the chandlery. I wondered if her father still beat her, but dared not ask about it. Her face, at least, showed no sign of it. We reached the chandlery door and paused there. She made some sudden decision, for she put her hand on my sleeve, took a breath and then asked, ‘Do you think you could read something for me? Or even any part of it?’

‘I’ll try,’ I offered.

‘When I ... now that I wear skirts, my father has given me my mother’s things. She had been dress-help to a lady up at the keep when she was a girl, and had letters taught her. I have some tablets she wrote. I’d like to know what they say.’

‘I’ll try,’ I repeated.

‘My father’s in the shop.’ She said no more than that, but something in the way her consciousness rang against mine was sufficient.

‘I’m to get Scribe Fedwren two beeswax tapers,’ I reminded her. ‘I dare not go back to the keep without them.’

‘Be not too familiar with me,’ she cautioned me, and then opened the door.

I followed her, but slowly, as if coincidence brought us to the door together. I need not have been so circumspect. Her father slept quite soundly in a chair beside the hearth. I was shocked at the change in him. His skinniness had become skeletal, the flesh on his face reminding me of an undercooked pastry over a lumpy fruit pie. Chade had taught me well. I looked to the man’s fingernails and lips, and even from across the room, I knew he could not live much longer. Perhaps he no longer beat Molly because he no longer had the strength. Molly motioned me to be quiet. She vanished behind the hangings that divided their home from their shop, leaving me to explore the store.

It was a pleasant place, not large, but the ceiling was higher than in most of the shops and dwellings in Buckkeep Town. I suspected it was

Molly's diligence that kept it swept and tidy. The pleasant smells and soft light of her industry filled the room. Her wares hung in pairs by their joined wicks from long dowels on a rack. Fat sensible candles for ships' use filled another shelf. She even had three glazed, pottery lamps on display, for those able to afford such things. In addition to candles, I found she had pots of honey, a natural by-product of the beehives she tended behind the shop that furnished the wax for her finest products.

Then Molly reappeared and motioned to me to come and join her. She brought a branch of tapers and a set of tablets to a table and set them out on it. Then she stood back and pressed her lips together as if wondering if what she did were wise.

The tablets were done in the old style. Simple slabs of wood had been cut with the grain of the tree and sanded smooth. The letters had been brushed in carefully, and then sealed to the wood with a yellowing rosin layer. There were five, excellently lettered. Four were carefully precise accounts of herbal recipes for healing candles. As I read each one softly aloud to Molly, I could see her struggling to commit them to memory. At the fifth tablet, I hesitated. 'This isn't a recipe,' I told her.

'Well, what is it?' she demanded in a whisper.

I shrugged and began to read it to her. "'On this day was born my Molly Nosegay, sweet as any bunch of posies. For her birth labours, I burned two tapers of bayberry and two cup-candles scented with two handfuls of the small violets that grow near Dowell's Mill and one handful of redroot, chopped very fine. May she do likewise when her time comes to bear a child, and her labour will be as easy as mine, and the fruit of it as perfect. So I believe.'"

That was all, and when I had read it, the silence grew and blossomed. Molly took that last tablet from my hands and held it in her two hands and stared at it, as if reading things in the letters that I had not seen. I shifted my feet, and the scuffing recalled to her that I was there. Silently she gathered up all her tablets and disappeared with them once more.

When she came back, she walked swiftly to the shelf and took down two tall beeswax tapers, and then to another shelf whence she took two fat pink candles.

'I only need ...'

'Shush. There's no charge for any of these. The sweetberry blossom ones will give you calm dreams. I very much enjoy them, and I think you

will, too.’ Her voice was friendly, but as she put them into my basket, I knew she was waiting for me to leave. Still, she walked to the door with me, and opened it softly lest it wake her father. ‘Good-bye, Newboy,’ she said, and then gave me one real smile. ‘Nosegay. I never knew she called me that. Nosebleed, they called me on the streets. I suppose the older ones who knew what name she had given me thought it was funny. And after a while they probably forgot it had ever been anything else. Well. I don’t care. I have it now. A name from my mother.’

‘It suits you,’ I said in a sudden burst of gallantry, and then, as she stared and the heat rose in my cheeks, I hurried away from the door. I was surprised to find that it was late afternoon, nearly evening. I raced through the rest of my errands, begging the last item on my list, a weasel’s skin, through the shutters of the merchant’s window. Grudgingly he opened his door to me, complaining that he liked to eat his supper hot, but I thanked him so profusely he must have believed me a little daft.

I was hurrying up the steepest part of the road back to the keep when I heard the unexpected sound of horses behind me. They were coming up from the dock section of town, ridden hard. It was ridiculous. No one kept horses in town, for the roads were too steep and rocky to make them of much use. Also, the town was crowded into such a small area as to make riding a horse a vanity rather than a convenience. So these must be horses from the keep’s stables. I stepped to one side of the road and waited, curious to see who would risk Burrich’s wrath by riding horses at such speed on slick and uneven cobbles in poor light.

To my shock it was Regal and Verity on the matched blacks that were Burrich’s pride. Verity carried a plumed baton, such as messengers to the keep carried when the news they bore was of the utmost importance. At the sight of me standing quietly beside the road they both pulled in their horses so violently that Regal’s spun aside and nearly went down on his knees.

‘Burrich will have fits if you break that colt’s knees!’ I cried out in dismay and ran toward him.

Regal gave an inarticulate cry, and a half-instant later, Verity laughed at him shakily. ‘You thought he was a ghost, same as I. Whoah, lad, you gave us a turn, standing so quiet as that. And looking so much like him. Eh, Regal?’

‘Verity, you’re a fool. Hold your tongue.’ Regal gave his mount’s mouth a vindictive jerk, and then tugged his jerkin smooth again. ‘What are

you doing out on this road so late, bastard? Just what do you think you're up to, sneaking away from the keep and into town at this hour?'

I was used to Regal's disdain for me. This sharp rebuke was something new, however. Usually, he did little more than avoid me, or hold himself away from me as if I were fresh manure. The surprise made me answer quickly, 'I'm on my way back, not to, sir. I've been running errands for Fedwren.' And I held up my basket as proof.

'Of course you have,' he sneered. 'Such a likely tale. It's a bit too much of a coincidence, bastard.' Again he flung the word at me.

I must have looked both hurt and confused, for Verity snorted in his bluff way and said, 'Don't mind him, boy. You gave us both a bit of a turn. A river ship just came into town, flying the pennant for a special message. And when Verity and I rode down to get it, lo and behold, it's from Patience, to tell us Chivalry's dead. Then, as we come up the road, what do we see but the very image of him as a boy, standing silent before us and of course we were in that frame of mind and ...'

'You are such an idiot, Verity!' Regal spat. 'Trumpet it out for the whole town to hear before the King's even been told. And don't put ideas in the bastard's head that he looks like Chivalry. From what I hear, he has ideas enough, and we can thank our dear father for that. Come on. We've got a message to deliver.'

Regal jerked his mount's head up again, and then set spurs to him. I watched him go, and for an instant I swear all I thought was that I should go to the stable when I got back to the keep, to check on the poor beast and see how badly his mouth was bruised. But for some reason I looked up at Verity and said, 'My father's dead.'

He sat still on his horse. Bigger and bulkier than Regal, he still always sat a horse better. I think it was the soldier in him. He looked at me in silence for a moment. Then he said, 'Yes. My brother's dead.' He granted me that, my uncle, that instant of kinship, and I think that ever after it changed how I saw him. 'Up behind me, boy, and I'll take you back to the keep,' he offered.

'No, thank you. Burrich would take my hide off for riding a horse double on this road.'

'That he would, boy,' Verity agreed kindly. Then, 'I'm sorry you found out this way. I wasn't thinking. It does not seem it can be real.' I caught a glimpse of his true grief, and then he leaned forward and spoke to his horse and it sprang forward. In moments I was alone on the road again.

A fine misting rain began and the last natural light died, and still I stood there. I looked up at the keep, black against the stars, with here and there a bit of light spilling out. For a moment I thought of setting my basket down and running away, running off into the darkness and never coming back. Would anyone ever come looking for me? I wondered. But instead I shifted my basket to my other arm and began my slow trudge back up the hill.

SEVEN

An Assignment

There were rumours of poison when Queen Desire died. I choose to put in writing here what I absolutely know as truth. Queen Desire did die of poisoning, but it had been self-administered, over a long period of time, and was none of her king's doing. Often he had tried to dissuade her from using intoxicants as freely as she did. Physicians had been consulted, as well as herbalists, but no sooner had he persuaded her to desist from one than she discovered another to try.

Towards the end of the last summer of her life, she became even more reckless, using several kinds simultaneously and no longer making any attempts to conceal her habits. Her behaviours were a great trial for Shrewd, for when she was drunk with wine or incensed with smoke, she would make wild accusations and inflammatory statements with no heed at all as to who was present or what the occasion was. One would have thought that her excesses toward the end of her life would have disillusioned her followers. To the contrary, they declared either that Shrewd had driven her to self-destruction, or poisoned her himself. But I can say with complete knowledge that her death was not of the King's doing.

Burrich cut my hair for mourning. He left it only a finger's width long. He shaved his own head, even his beard and eyebrows for his grief. The pale parts of his head contrasted sharply with his ruddy cheeks and nose; it made him look very strange, stranger even than the forest men who came to town with their hair stuck down with pitch and their teeth dyed red and black. Children stared at those wild men and whispered to one another behind their hands as they passed, but they cringed silently from Burrich. I think it was his eyes. I've seen holes in a skull that had more life in them than Burrich's eyes had during those days.

Regal sent a man to rebuke Burrich for shaving his head and cutting my hair. That was mourning for a crowned king, not for a man who had

abdicated the throne. Burrich stared at the man until he left. Verity cut a hand's width from his hair and beard, as that was mourning for a brother. Some of the keep guards cut varying lengths from their braided queues of hair, as a fighting man does for a fallen comrade. But what Burrich had done to himself and to me was extreme. People stared. I wanted to ask him why I should mourn for a father I had never even seen; for a father who had never come to see me, but a look at his frozen eyes and mouth and I hadn't dared. No one mentioned to Regal the mourning lock he cut from each horse's mane, or the stinking fire that consumed all the sacrificial hair. I had a sketchy idea that meant Burrich was sending parts of our spirits along with Chivalry's; it was some custom he had from his grandmother's people.

It was as if Burrich had died. A cold force animated his body, performing all his tasks flawlessly but without warmth or satisfaction. Underlings who had formerly vied for the briefest nod of praise from him now turned aside from his glance, as if shamed for him. Only Vixen did not forsake him. The old bitch slunk after him wherever he went, unrewarded by any look or touch, but always there. I hugged her once, in sympathy, and even dared to quest toward her, but I encountered only a numbness frightening to touch minds with. She grieved with her master.

The winter storms cut and snarled around the cliffs. The days possessed a lifeless cold that denied any possibility of spring. Chivalry was buried at Withywoods. There was a Grieving Fast at the keep, but it was brief and subdued. It was more an observation of correct form than a true Grieving. Those who truly mourned him seemed to be judged guilty of poor taste. His public life should have ended with his abdication; how tactless of him to draw further attention to himself by actually dying.

A full week after my father died I awoke to the familiar draught from the secret staircase and the yellow light that beckoned me. I rose and hastened up the stairs to my refuge. It would be good to get away from all the strangeness, to mingle herbs and make strange smokes with Chade again. I needed no more of the odd suspension of self that I'd felt since I'd heard of Chivalry's death.

But the worktable end of his chamber was dark, its hearth was cold. Instead, Chade was seated before his own fire. He beckoned to me to sit beside his chair. I sat and looked up at him, but he was staring at the fire. He lifted his scarred hand and let it come to rest on my quillish hair. For a while we just sat like that, watching the fire together.

‘Well, here we are, my boy,’ he said at last, and then nothing more, as if he had said all he needed to. He ruffled my short hair.

‘Burrich cut my hair,’ I told him suddenly.

‘So I see.’

‘I hate it. It prickles against my pillow and I can’t sleep. My hood won’t stay up. And I look stupid.’

‘You look like a boy mourning his father.’

I was silent a moment. I had thought of my hair as being a longer version of Burrich’s extreme cut. But Chade was right. It was the length for a boy mourning his father, not a subject mourning a king. That only made me angrier.

‘But why should I mourn him?’ I asked Chade as I hadn’t dared to ask Burrich. ‘I didn’t even know him.’

‘He was your father.’

‘He got me on some woman. When he found out about me, he left. A father. He never cared about me.’ I felt defiant finally saying it out loud. It made me furious, Burrich’s deep wild mourning and now Chade’s quiet sorrow.

‘You don’t know that. You only hear what the gossips say. You aren’t old enough to understand some things. You’ve never seen a wild bird lure predators away from its young by pretending to be injured.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ I said, but I suddenly felt less confident saying it. ‘He never did anything to make me think he cared about me.’

Chade turned to look at me and his eyes were older, sunken and red. ‘If you had known he’d cared, so would others. When you are a man, maybe you’ll understand just how much that cost him. To not know you in order to keep you safe. To make his enemies ignore you.’

‘Well, I’ll “not know” him to the end of my days, now,’ I said sulkily.

Chade sighed. ‘And the end of your days will come a great deal later than they would have had he acknowledged you as an heir.’ He paused, then asked cautiously, ‘What do you want to know about him, my boy?’

‘Everything. But how would you know?’ The more tolerant Chade was, the more surly I felt.

‘I’ve known him all his life. I’ve ... worked with him. Many times. Hand in glove, as the saying goes.’

‘Were you the hand or the glove?’

No matter how rude I was, Chade refused to get angry. ‘The hand,’ he said after a brief consideration. ‘The hand that moves unseen, cloaked by the velvet glove of diplomacy.’

‘What do you mean?’ Despite myself, I was intrigued.

‘Things can be done.’ Chade cleared his throat. ‘Things can happen that make diplomacy easier. Or that make a party more willing to negotiate. Things can happen ...’

My world turned over. Reality burst on me as suddenly as a vision, the fullness of what Chade was and what I was to be. ‘You mean one man can die, and his successor can be easier to negotiate with because of it. More amenable to our cause, because of fear or because of ...’

‘Gratitude. Yes.’

A cold horror shook me as all the pieces suddenly fell into place. All the lessons and careful instructions and this is what they led to. I started to rise, but Chade’s hand suddenly gripped my shoulder.

‘Or a man can live, two years or five or a decade longer than any thought he could, and bring the wisdom and tolerance of age to the negotiations. Or a babe can be cured of a strangling cough, and the mother suddenly see with gratitude that what we offer can be beneficial to all involved. The hand doesn’t always deal death, my boy. Not always.’

‘Often enough.’

‘I never lied to you about that.’ I heard two things in Chade’s voice that I had never heard before. Defensiveness. And hurt. But youth is merciless.

‘I don’t think I want to learn any more from you. I think I’m going to go to Shrewd and tell him to find someone else to kill people for him.’

‘That is your decision to make. But I advise you against it, for now.’

His calmness caught me off-guard. ‘Why?’

‘Because it would negate all Chivalry tried to do for you. It would draw attention to you. And right now, that is not a good idea.’ His words came ponderously slow, freighted with truth.

‘Why?’ I found I was whispering.

‘Because some will be wanting to write *finis* to Chivalry’s story completely. And that would be best done by eliminating you. Those ones will be watching how you react to your father’s death. Does it give you ideas and make you restless? Will you become a problem now, the way he was?’

‘What?’

‘My boy,’ he said, and pulled me close against his side. For the first time I heard the possession in his words. ‘It is a time for you to be quiet and careful. I understand why Burrich cut your hair, but in truth I wish he had not. I wish no one had been reminded that Chivalry was your father. You are such a hatchling yet ... but listen to me. For now, change nothing that you do. Wait six months, or a year. Then decide. But for now ...’

‘How did my father die?’

Chade’s eyes searched my face. ‘Did you not hear that he fell from a horse?’

‘Yes. And I heard Burrich curse the man who told it, saying that Chivalry would not fall, nor would that horse throw him.’

‘Burrich needs to guard his tongue.’

‘Then how did my father die?’

‘I don’t know. But like Burrich, I do not believe he fell from a horse.’ Chade fell silent. I sank down to sit by his bony bare feet and stare into his fire.

‘Are they going to kill me, too?’

He was silent a long while. ‘I don’t know. Not if I can help it. I think they must first convince King Shrewd it is necessary. And if they do that, I shall know of it.’

‘Then you think it comes from within the keep.’

‘I do.’ Chade waited long but I was silent, refusing to ask. He answered anyway. ‘I knew nothing of it before it happened. I had no hand in it in any way. They didn’t even approach me about it. Probably because they know I would have done more than just refused. I would have seen to it that it never happened.’

‘Oh.’ I relaxed a little. But already he had trained me too well in the ways of court thinking. ‘Then they probably won’t come to you if they decide they want me done. They’d be afraid of your warning me as well.’

He took my chin in his hand and turned my face so that I looked into his eyes. ‘Your father’s death should be all the warning you need, now or ever. You’re a bastard, Fitz. We’re always a risk and a vulnerability. We’re always expendable. Except when we are an absolute necessity to their own security. I’ve taught you quite a bit, these last few years. But hold this lesson closest and keep it always before you. If ever you make it so they don’t need you, they will kill you.’

I looked at him wide-eyed. ‘They don’t need me now.’

‘Don’t they? I grow old. You are young, and tractable, with the face and bearing of the royal family. As long as you don’t show any inappropriate ambitions, you’ll be fine.’ He paused, then carefully emphasized, ‘We are the *King’s*, boy. His exclusively, in a way perhaps you have not thought about. No one knows what I do and most have forgotten who I am. Or was. If any know of us, it is from the King.’

I sat putting it cautiously together. ‘Then ... you said it came from within the keep. But if you were not used, then it was not from the King ... the Queen!’ I said it with sudden certainty.

Chade’s eyes guarded his thoughts. ‘That’s a dangerous assumption to make. Even more dangerous if you think you must act on it in some way.’

‘Why?’

Chade sighed. ‘When you spring to an idea, and decide it is truth, without evidence, you blind yourself to other possibilities. Consider them all, boy. Perhaps it was an accident. Perhaps Chivalry was killed by someone he had offended at Withywoods. Perhaps it had nothing to do with him being a prince. Or, perhaps the King has another assassin, one I know nothing about, and it was the King’s own hand against his son.’

‘You don’t believe any of those,’ I said with certainty.

‘No. I don’t. Because I have no evidence to declare them truth. Just as I have no evidence to say your father’s death was the Queen’s hand striking.’

That is all I remember of our conversation then. But I am sure that Chade had deliberately led me to consider who might have acted against my father, to instil in me a greater wariness of the Queen. I held the thought close to me, and not just in the days that immediately followed. I kept myself to my chores, and slowly my hair grew, and by the beginning of real summer all seemed to have returned to normal. Once every few weeks, I would find myself sent off to town on errands. I soon came to see that no matter who sent me, one or two items on the list wound up in Chade’s quarters, so I guessed who was behind my little bouts of freedom. I did not manage to spend time with Molly every time I went to town, but it was enough for me that I would stand outside the window of her shop until she noticed me, and at least exchanged a nod. Once I heard someone in the market talking about the quality of her scented candles, and how no one had made such a pleasant and healthful taper since her mother’s day, and I smiled for her and was glad.

Summer came, bringing warmer weather to our coasts, and with it the Outislanders. Some came as honest traders, with cold-land goods to trade –

furs and amber and ivory and kegs of oil – and tall tales to share, ones that still could prickle my neck just as they had when I was small. Our sailors did not trust them, and called them spies and worse. But their goods were rich, and the gold they brought to purchase our wines and grains was solid and heavy, and our merchants took it.

Other Outislanders also visited our shores, though not too close to Buckkeep Hold. They came with knives and torches, with bows and rams, to plunder and rape the same villages they had been plundering and raping for years. Sometimes it seemed an elaborate and bloody contest: for them to find villages unaware or underarmed and for us to lure them in with seemingly vulnerable targets and then to slaughter and plunder the pirates themselves. But if it were a contest, it went very badly for us that summer. My every visit to town was heavy with the news of destruction and the mutterings of the people.

Up at the keep, among the men-at-arms, there was a collective feeling of doltishness that I shared. The Outislanders eluded our warships with ease, and never fell into our traps. They struck where we were undermanned and least expecting it. Most discomfited of all was Verity, for to him had fallen the task of defending the kingdom once Chivalry had abdicated. I heard it muttered in the taverns that since he had lost his elder brother's good counsel, all had gone sour. No one spoke against Verity yet; but it was unsettling that no one spoke out strongly for him either.

Boyishly, I viewed the raids as a thing impersonal to me. Certainly they were bad things, and I felt sorry in a vague way for those villagers whose homes were torched or plundered. But secure at Buckkeep, I had very little feeling for the constant fear and vigilance that other seaports endured, or for the agonies of villagers who rebuilt each year, only to see their efforts torched the next. I was not to keep my ignorant innocence long.

I went down to Burrich for my 'lesson' one morning; though I spent as much time doctoring animals and teaching young colts and fillies as I did in being taught. I had very much taken over Cob's place in the stables, while he had gone on to being Regal's groom and dog man. But that day, to my surprise, Burrich took me upstairs to his room and sat me down at his table. I dreaded spending a tedious morning repairing tack.

'I'm going to teach you manners today,' Burrich announced suddenly. There was doubt in his voice, as if he were sceptical of my ability to learn such.

‘With horses?’ I asked incredulously.

‘No. You’ve those already. With people. At table, and afterwards, when folk sit and talk with one another. Those sorts of manners.’

‘Why?’

Burrich frowned. ‘Because, for reasons I don’t understand, you’re to accompany Verity when he goes to Neatbay to see Lord Kelvar of Rippon. Lord Kelvar has not been cooperating with Lord Shemshy in manning the coastal towers. Shemshy accuses him of leaving towers completely without watches, so that the Outislanders are able to sail past and even anchor outside Watch Island, and from there raid Shemshy’s villages in Shoaks Duchy. Prince Verity is going to consult with Kelvar about these allegations.’

I grasped the situation completely. It was common gossip around Buckkeep Town. Lord Kelvar of Rippon Duchy had three watch towers in his keeping. The two that bracketed the points of Neatbay were always well-manned, for they protected the best harbour in Rippon Duchy. But the tower on Watch Island protected little of Rippon that was worth much to Lord Kelvar; his high and rocky coastline sheltered few villages, and would-be raiders would have a hard time keeping their ships off the rocks while raiding. His southern coast was seldom bothered. Watch Island itself was home to little more than gulls, goats and a hefty population of clams. Yet the tower there was critical to the early defence of Southcove in Shoaks Duchy. It commanded views of both the inner and outer channels, and was placed on a natural summit that allowed its beacon fires to be easily seen from the mainland. Shemshy himself had a watch tower on Egg Island, but Egg was little more than a bit of sand that stuck up above the waves on high tide. It commanded no real view of the water, and was constantly in need of repair from the shifting of the sands and the occasional storm tide that overwhelmed it. But it could see a watch fire warning light from Watch Island and send the message on. As long as Watch Island tower lit such a fire.

Traditionally, the fishing grounds and clamming beaches of Watch Island were the territory of Rippon Duchy, and so the manning of the watch tower there had fallen to Rippon Duchy as well. But maintaining a garrison there meant bringing in men and their victuals, and also supplying wood and oil for the beacon fires, and maintaining the tower itself from the savage ocean storms that swept across the barren little island. It was an unpopular

duty station for men-at-arms, and rumour had it that to be stationed there was a subtle form of punishment for unruly or unpolitical garrisons. More than once when in his cups, Kelvar had declaimed that if manning the tower was so important to Shoaks Duchy, then Lord Shemshy should do it himself. Not that Rippon Duchy was interested in surrendering the fishing grounds off the island or the rich shellfish beds.

So when Shoaks villages were raided, without warning, in an early spring spree that destroyed all hopes of the fields being planted on time, as well as seeing most of the pregnant sheep either slaughtered, stolen or scattered, Lord Shemshy had protested loudly to the King that Kelvar had been lax in manning his towers. Kelvar denied it, and asserted that the small force he had installed there was suitable for a location that seldom needed to be defended. 'Watchers, not soldiers, are what Watch Island tower requires,' he had declared. And for that purpose, he had recruited a number of elderly men and women to man the tower. A handful of them had been soldiers, but most were refugees from Neatbay; debtors and pickpockets and ageing whores, some declared, while supporters of Kelvar asserted they were but elderly citizens in need of secure employment.

All this I knew better from tavern gossip and Chade's political lectures than Burrich could imagine. But I bit my tongue and sat through his detailed and strained explanation. Not for the first time, I realized he considered me slightly slow. My silences he mistook for a lack of wit rather than a lack of any need to speak.

So now, laboriously, Burrich began to instruct me in the manners that, he told me, most other boys picked up simply by being around their elders. I was to greet people when I first encountered them each day, or if I walked into a room and found it occupied; melting silently away was not polite. I should call folk by their names, and if they were older than me or of higher political station, as, he reminded me, almost anyone I met on this journey would be, I should address them by title as well. Then he inundated me with protocol; who could precede me out of a room, and under what circumstances (almost anyone, and under almost all conditions, had precedence over me). And on to the manners of the table. To pay attention to where I was seated; to pay attention to whoever occupied the high seat at that table and pace my dining accordingly; how to drink a toast, or a series of toasts without overindulging myself. And how to speak engagingly, or more likely, to listen attentively, to whoever might be seated near me at dinner.

And on. And on. Until I began to daydream wistfully of endlessly cleaning tack.

Burrich recalled my attention with a sharp poke. ‘And you’re not to do that, either. You look an imbecile, sitting there nodding with your mind elsewhere. Don’t fancy no one notices when you do that. And don’t glare like that when you’re corrected. Sit up straight, and put a pleasant expression on your face. Not a vacuous smile, you dolt. Ah, Fitz, what am I to do with you? How can I protect you when you invite troubles on yourself? And why do they want to take you off like this anyway?’

The last two questions, put to himself, betrayed his real concern. Perhaps I was a trifle stupid not to have seen it. He wasn’t going. I was. For no good reason that he could discern. Burrich had lived long enough near court to be very cautious. For the first time since he had been entrusted with my care, I was being removed from his watchfulness. It had not been so long since my father had been buried. And so he wondered, though he didn’t dare say, whether I would be coming back or if someone was making the opportunity to dispose of me quietly. I realized what a blow to his pride and reputation it would be if I were to be ‘vanished’. So I sighed, and then carefully commented that perhaps they wanted an extra hand with the horses and dogs. Verity went nowhere without Leon, his wolfhound. Only two days before he had complimented me on how well I managed him. This I repeated to Burrich, and it was gratifying to see how well this small subterfuge worked. Relief flooded his face, then pride that he had taught me well. The topic instantly shifted from manners to the correct care of the wolfhound. If the lectures on manners had wearied me, the repetition of hound lore was almost painfully tedious. When he released me to go to my other lessons, I left with winged feet.

I went through the rest of the day in a distracted haze that had Hod threatening me with a good whipping if I didn’t attend to what I was doing. Then she shook her head over me, sighed, and told me to run along and come back when I had a mind again. I was only too happy to obey her. The thought of actually leaving Buckkeep and journeying, journeying all the way to Neatbay was all I could fit inside my head. I knew I should wonder why I was going, but felt sure Chade would advise me soon. Would we go by land or by sea? I wished I had asked Burrich. The roads to Neatbay were not the best, I’d heard, but I wouldn’t mind. Sooty and I had never been on a long journey together. But a sea trip, on a real ship ...

I took the long way back to the keep, up a path that went through a lightly wooded bit of rocky hillside. Paper birches struggled there, and a few alder, but mostly it was nondescript brush. Sunlight and a light breeze were playing together in the higher branches, giving the day a fey and dappled air. I lifted my eyes to the dazzle of sun through the birch leaves, and when I looked down, the King's Fool stood before me.

I stopped in my tracks, astonished. Reflexively, I looked for the King, despite how ridiculous it would have been to find him here. But the Fool was alone. And outside, in the daylight! The thought made the hair on my arms and neck stand up in my tightened skin. It was common knowledge in the keep that the King's Fool could not abide the light of day. Common knowledge. Yet, despite what every page and kitchen maid nattered knowingly, there stood the Fool, pale hair floating in the light breeze. The blue and red silk of his motley jacket and trousers were startlingly bright against his paleness. But his eyes were not as colourless as they were in the dim passages of the keep. As I received their stare from only a few feet away in the light of day, I perceived there was a blueness to them, very pale, as if a single drop of pale blue wax had fallen onto a white platter. The whiteness of his skin was an illusion also, for out here in the dappling sunlight I could see a pinkness suffused him from within. 'Blood,' I realized with a sudden quailing. 'Red blood showing through layers of skin.'

The Fool took no notice of my whispered comment. Instead, a finger was held aloft, as if to pause not only my thoughts but the very day around us. But I could not have focused my attention more completely on anything, and when he was satisfied of this, the Fool smiled, showing small, white separate teeth, like a baby's new smile in a boy's mouth.

'Fitz!' he intoned in a piping voice. 'Fitz fitz fice fitz. Fatz sfitz.' He stopped abruptly, and again gave me that smile. I stared back uncertainly, without word or movement.

Again the finger soared aloft, and this time was shaken at me. 'Fitz! Fitz fix fice fitz. Fats sfitzes.' He cocked his head at me, and the movement sent the dandelion fluff of his hair wafting in a new direction.

I was beginning to lose my fear of him. 'Fitz,' I said carefully, and tapped my chest with my forefinger. 'Fitz, that's me. Yes. My name is Fitz. Are you lost?' I tried to make my voice gentle and reassuring so as not to alarm the poor creature. For surely he had somehow wandered off from the keep, and that was why he seemed so delighted to find a familiar face.

He took a breath through his nose, and then shook his head violently, until his hair stood out all around his skull like a flame around a wind-blown candle. ‘Fitz!’ he said emphatically, his voice cracking a little. ‘Fitz fitzes fyces fitz. Fatzafices.’

‘It’s all right,’ I said soothingly. I crouched a bit, though in reality I was not that much taller than the Fool. I made a soft beckoning motion with my open hand. ‘Come along, then. Come along. I’ll show you the way back home. All right? Don’t be afraid now.’

Abruptly the Fool dropped his hands to his sides. Then he lifted his face and rolled his eyes at the heavens. He looked back at me fixedly, and poked his mouth out as if he wanted to spit.

‘Come along, now.’ I beckoned to him again.

‘No,’ he said, quite plainly in an exasperated voice. ‘Listen to me, you idiot. Fitz fixes fyces fitz. Fatsafices.’

‘What?’ I asked, startled.

‘I said,’ he enunciated elaborately. ‘Fitz fixes fyce fits. Fat suffices.’ He bowed, turned, and began to walk away from me, up the trail.

‘Wait!’ I demanded. My ears were turning red with my embarrassment. How do you politely explain to someone that you had believed for years that he was a moron as well as a Fool? I couldn’t. So, ‘What does all that fitzy-fyceys stuff mean? Are you making fun of me?’

‘Hardly.’ He paused long enough to turn, and say, ‘Fitz fixes feists fits. Fat suffices. It’s a message, I believe. A calling for a significant act. As you are the only one I know who endures being called Fitz, I believe it’s for you. As for what it means, how should I know? I’m a Fool, not an interpreter of dreams. Good day.’ Again he turned away from me, but this time instead of continuing up the path, he stepped off it, into a clump of buckbrush. I hurried after him, but when I got to where he had left the path, he was gone. I stood still, peering into the open, sun-dappled woods, thinking I should see a bush still swaying from his passage, or catch a glimpse of his motley jacket. But there was no sign of him.

And no sense at all to his silly message. I mulled over the strange encounter all the way back to the keep, but in the end I set it aside as a strange but random occurrence.

Not that night, but the next, Chade called me. Burning with curiosity, I raced up the stairs. But when I reached the top I halted, knowing that my questions would have to wait. For there sat Chade at the stone table, Slink

perched on top of his shoulders, and a new scroll half unwound on the table before him. A glass of wine weighted one end as his crooked finger travelled slowly down some sort of listing. I glanced at it as I passed. It was a list of villages and dates. Beneath each village name was a tally: so many warriors, so many merchants, so many sheep or casks of ale or measures of grain, and so on. I sat down on the opposite side of the table and waited. I had learned not to interrupt Chade.

‘My boy,’ he said softly, without looking up from the scroll. ‘What would you do if some ruffian walked up behind you and rapped you on the head? But only when your back was turned. How would you handle it?’

I thought briefly. ‘I’d turn my back and pretend to be looking at something else. Only I’d have a long, thick stick in my hands. So when he rapped me, I’d spin around and break his head.’

‘Hmm. Yes. Well, we tried that. But no matter how nonchalant we are, the Outislanders always seem to know when we are baiting them and never attack. Well, actually, we’ve managed to fool one or two of the ordinary raiders. But never the Red Ship Raiders. And those are the ones we want to hurt.’

‘Why?’

‘Because they are the ones that are hurting us the worst. You see, boy, we are used to being raided. You could almost say that we’ve adapted to it. Plant an extra acre, weave another bolt of cloth, raise an extra steer. Our farmers and townsfolk always try to put a bit extra by, and when someone’s barn gets burned or a warehouse is torched in the confusion of a raid, everyone turns out to raise the beams again. But the Red Ship Raiders aren’t just stealing, and destroying in the process of stealing. They’re destroying, and what they actually carry off with them seems almost incidental.’ Chade paused and stared at a wall as if seeing through it.

‘It makes no sense,’ he continued bemusedly, more to himself than to me. ‘Or at least no sense that I can unravel. It’s like killing a cow that bears a good calf every year. Red Ship Raiders torch the grain and hay still standing in the fields. They slaughter the stock they can’t carry off. Three weeks ago, in Tornsby, they set fire to the mill and slashed open the sacks of grain and flour there. Where’s the profit in that for them? Why do they risk their lives simply to destroy? They’ve made no effort to take and hold territory; they have no grievance against us that they’ve ever uttered. A thief you can guard against, but these are random killers and destroyers. Tornsby won’t be

rebuilt; the folk that survived have neither the will nor the resources. They've moved on, some to family in other towns, others to be beggars in our cities. It's a pattern we're seeing too often.'

He sighed, and then shook his head to clear it. When he looked up, he focused on me totally. It was a knack Chade had. He could set aside a problem so completely you would swear he had forgotten it. Now he announced, as if it were his only care, 'You'll be accompanying Verity when he goes to reason with Lord Kelvar at Neatbay.'

'So Burrich told me. But he wondered, and so do I. Why?'

Chade looked perplexed. 'Didn't you complain a few months ago that you had wearied of Buckkeep and wished to see more of the Six Duchies?'

'Certainly. But I rather doubt that that is why Verity is taking me.'

Chade snorted. 'As if Verity paid any attention as to who makes up his retinue. He has no patience with the details; and hence none of Chivalry's genius for handling people. Yet Verity is a good soldier, and in the long run, perhaps that will be what we need. No, you are right. Verity has no inkling as to why you're going. But your King does. He and I have consulted together upon this. Are you ready to begin repaying all he has done for you? Are you ready to begin your service for the family?'

He said it so calmly and looked at me so openly that it was almost easy to be calm as I asked, 'Will I have to kill someone?'

'Perhaps.' He shifted in his chair. 'You'll have to decide that. Deciding and then doing it ... it's different from simply being told, "That is the man and it must be done." It's much harder, and I'm not all that sure you're ready.'

'Would I ever be ready?' I tried to smile, and grinned like a muscle spasm. I tried to wipe it away, and couldn't. A strange quiver passed through me.

'Probably not.' Chade fell silent, and then decided that I had accepted the mission. 'You'll go as an attendant for an elderly noblewoman who is also going along, to visit relatives in Neatbay. It will not be too heavy a task for you. She is very elderly and her health is not good. Lady Thyme travels in a closed litter. You will ride beside it, to see she is not jolted too much, to bring her water if she asks for it, and to see to any other such small requests.'

'It doesn't sound too different from caring for Verity's wolfhound.'

Chade paused, then smiled. 'Excellent. That will fall to you as well. Become indispensable to everyone on this journey. Then you will have

reasons to go everywhere and hear everything, and no one will question your presence.'

'And my real task?'

'To listen and learn. It seems to both Shrewd and me that these Red Ship Raiders are too well-acquainted with our strategies and strengths. Kelvar has recently begrudged the funds to staff the Watch Island tower properly. Twice he has neglected it, and twice have the coastal villages of Shoaks Duchy paid for his negligence. Has he gone beyond negligence to treachery? Does Kelvar confer with the enemy to his profit? We want you to sniff about and see what you can discover. If all you find is innocence, or if you have but strong suspicions, bring news back to us. But if you discover treachery, and you are certain of it, then we cannot be rid of him too soon.'

'And the means?' I was not sure that was my voice. It was so casual, so contained.

'I have prepared a powder, tasteless in a dish, colourless in a wine. We trust to your ingenuity and discretion in applying it.' He lifted a cover from an earthenware dish on the table. Within was a packet made of very fine paper, thinner and finer than anything Fedwren had ever shown me. Odd, how my first thought was how much my scribe master would love to work with paper like that. Inside the packet was the finest of white powders. It clung to the paper and floated in the air. Chade shielded his mouth and nose with a cloth as he tapped a careful measure of it into a twist of oiled paper. He held it out to me, and I took death upon my open palm.

'And how does it work?'

'Not too quickly. He will not fall dead at the table, if that is what you are asking. But if he lingers over his cup, he will feel ill. Knowing Kelvar, I suspect he will take his bubbling stomach to bed, and never awaken in the morning.'

I slipped it into my pocket. 'Does Verity know anything of this?'

Chade considered. 'Verity is as good as his name. He could not sit at table with a man he was poisoning and conceal it. No, in this endeavour, stealth will serve us better than truth.' He looked me directly in the eyes. 'You will work alone, with no counsel other than your own.'

'I see.' I shifted on my tall wooden stool. 'Chade?'

'Yes?'

'Is this how it was for you? Your first time?'

He looked down at his hands, and for a moment he fingered the angry red scars that dotted the back of his left hand. The silence grew long, but I waited.

‘I was a year older than you are,’ he said at last. ‘And it was simply the doing of it, not the deciding if it should be done. Is that enough for you?’

I was suddenly embarrassed without knowing why. ‘I suppose,’ I mumbled.

‘Good. I know you meant no harm by it, boy. But men don’t talk about times spent among the pillows with a lady. And assassins don’t talk about ... our business.’

‘Not even teacher to pupil?’

Chade looked away from me, to a dark corner of the ceiling. ‘No.’ After a moment more he added, ‘Two weeks from now, you’ll perhaps understand why.’

And that was all we ever said about it.

By my count, I was thirteen years old.

EIGHT

Lady Thyme

A history of the duchies is a study of their geography. The Court Scribe of King Shrewd, one Fedwren, was very fond of this saying. I cannot say I have ever found it wrong. Perhaps all histories are recountings of natural boundaries. The seas and ice that stood between us and the Outislanders made us separate peoples and the rich grasslands and fertile meadows of the duchies created the riches that made us enemies; perhaps that would be the first chapter of a history of the duchies. The Bear and the Vin rivers are what created the rich vineyards and orchards of Tilt, as surely as the Painted Edges Mountains rising above Sandsedge both sheltered and isolated the folk there and left them vulnerable to our organized armies.

I jerked awake before the moon had surrendered her reign over the sky, amazed that I had slept at all. Burrich had supervised my travel preparations so thoroughly the night before that, had it been left to me, I would have departed a minute after I had swallowed my morning porridge.

But such is not the way when a group of folk set out together to do anything. The sun was well over the horizon before we were all assembled and ready. 'Royalty,' Chade had warned me, 'never travels light. Verity goes on this journey with the weight of the King's sword behind him. All folk who see him pass know that without being told. The news must run ahead to Kelvar, and to Shemshy. The imperial hand is about to reconcile their differences. They must both be left wishing they had never had any differences at all. That is the trick of good government. To make folk desire to live in such a way that there is no need for its intervention.'

So Verity travelled with a pomp that clearly irritated the soldier in him. His picked troop of men wore his colours as well as the Farseer buck badges, and rode ahead of the regular troops. To my young eyes, that was impressive enough. But to keep the impact from being too martial, Verity brought with him noble companions to provide conversation and diversion at the end of

the day. Hawks and hounds with their handlers, musicians and bards, one puppeteer, those who fetched and carried for the lords and ladies, those who saw to their garments and hair and the cooking of favourite dishes; baggage beasts; all trailed behind the well-mounted nobles, and made the tail of our procession.

My place was about midway in the procession. I sat a restive Sooty beside an ornate litter borne between two sedate grey geldings. Hands, one of the brighter stable-boys, had been assigned a pony and given charge of the horses bearing the litter. I would manage our baggage mule, and see to the litter's occupant. This was the very elderly Lady Thyme whom I had never met before. When she at last appeared to mount her litter, she was so swathed in cloaks, veils and scarves that I received only the impression that she was elderly in a gaunt rather than plump way, and that her perfume caused Sooty to sneeze. She settled herself in the litter amidst a nest of cushions, blankets, furs and wraps, then immediately ordered that the curtains be drawn and fastened despite the fineness of the morning. The two little maids who had attended her darted happily away, and I was left, her sole servant. My heart sank. I had expected at least one of them to travel within the litter with her. Who was going to see to her personal needs when her pavilion was set up? I had no notion as to waiting on a woman, let alone a very elderly one. I resolved to follow Burrich's advice for a young man dealing with elderly women: be attentive and polite, cheerful and pleasant of mien. Old women were easily won over by a personable young man. Burrich said so. I approached the litter.

'Lady Thyme? Are you comfortable?' I inquired. A long interval passed with no response. Perhaps she was slightly deaf. 'Are you comfortable?' I asked more loudly.

'Stop bothering me, young man!' was the surprisingly vehement response. 'If I want you, I'll tell you.'

'I beg pardon,' I quickly apologized.

'Stop bothering me, I said!' she rasped indignantly. And added in an undertone, 'Stupid churl.'

At this, I had the sense to be quiet, though my dismay increased tenfold. So much for a merry and companionable ride. Eventually I heard the horns cry out and saw Verity's pennant lifted far ahead of us. Dust drifting back told me that our foreguard had begun the journey. Long minutes passed before the horses in front of us moved. Hands started the litter horses and I

chirruped to Sooty. She stepped out eagerly and the mule followed resignedly.

I well recall that day. I remember the dust hanging thick in the air from all those who preceded us, and how Hands and I conversed in lowered voices, for the first time we laughed aloud, Lady Thyme scolded, 'Stop that noise!' I also remember bright blue skies arching from hill to hill as we followed the gentle undulations of the coast road. There were breathtaking views of the sea from the hilltops, and flower-scented air thick and drowsy in the vales. There were also the shepherdesses, all in a row on top of a stone wall to giggle and point and blush at us while we passed. Their fleecy charges dotted the hillside behind them, and Hands and I exclaimed softly at the way they had bundled their bright skirts to one side and knotted them up, leaving their knees and legs bare to the sun and wind. Sooty was restive and bored with our slow pace, while poor Hands was constantly nudging his old pony in the ribs to make it keep up.

We stopped twice during the day, to allow riders to dismount and stretch, and to let the horses water. Lady Thyme did not emerge from her litter, but one time tartly reminded me that I should have brought her water by now. I bit my tongue and fetched her a drink. It was as close as we came to conversation.

We halted when the sun was still above the horizon. Hands and I erected Lady Thyme's small pavilion while she dined within her litter from a wicker basket of cold meat, cheese and wine that she had thoughtfully provided for herself. Hands and I fared more poorly, on soldier's rations of hard bread and harder cheese and dried meat. In the midst of my meal, Lady Thyme demanded that I escort her from the litter to her pavilion. She emerged draped and veiled as if for a blizzard. Her finery was of varying colours and degrees of age, but all had been both expensive and well cut at one time. Now, as she leaned heavily on me and tottered along, I smelled a repulsive cacophony of dust and mildew and perfume, with an underlying scent of urine. She tartly dismissed me at the door, and warned me that she had a knife and would use it if I attempted to enter and bother her in any way. 'And well do I know how to use it, young man!' she threatened me.

Our sleeping accommodations were also the same as the soldiers': the ground and our cloaks. But the night was fine and we made a small fire. Hands teased and giggled about my supposed lust for Lady Thyme and the knife that awaited me if I should attempt to satisfy it. That led to a wrestling

match between us, until Lady Thyme shrilled threats at us for keeping her awake. Then we spoke softly as Hands told me that no one had envied my assignment to her; that anyone who had ever journeyed with her avoided her ever after. He warned me also that my worst task was yet to come, but adamantly refused, though his eyes brimmed with tears of laughter, to let me know what it was. I fell asleep easily, for boy-like, I had put my true mission out of my head until I should have to face it.

I awoke at dawn to the twittering of birds and the over-whelming stench of a brimming chamberpot outside Lady Thyme's pavilion. Though my stomach had been hardened by cleaning stables and kennels, it was all I could force myself to do to dump it and cleanse it before returning it to her. By then she was harpying at me through the tent door that I had not yet brought her water, hot or cold, nor cooked her porridge whose ingredients she had set out. Hands had disappeared, to share the troop's fire and rations, leaving me to deal with my tyrant. By the time I had served her on a tray that she assured me was slovenly arranged, and cleaned the dishes and pot and returned all to her, the rest of the procession was almost ready to leave. But she would not allow her pavilion to be struck until she was safely within her litter. We accomplished that packing in a frantic haste and I found myself finally on my horse without a crumb of breakfast inside me.

I was ravenous after my morning's work. Hands regarded my glum face with some sympathy and motioned me to ride closer to him. He leaned over to speak to me.

'Everyone but us had heard of her before.' This with a furtive nod toward Lady Thyme's litter. 'The stench she makes every morning is a legend. Whitelock says she used to go along on a lot of Chivalry's trips ... She has relatives all over the Six Duchies, and not much to do except visit them. All the men in the troop say they learned a long time ago to stay out of her range or she puts them to a bunch of useless errands. Oh, and Whitelock sent you this. He says not to expect to sit down and eat as long as you're tending her. But he'll try to set aside a bit for you each morning.'

Hands passed me a wad of camp-bread with three rashers of bacon greasily cold inside it. It tasted wonderful. I wolfed down the first few bites greedily.

'Churl!' shrilled Lady Thyme from inside her pavilion. 'What are you doing up there? Discussing your betters, I've no doubt. Get back to your

position! How are you to see to my needs if you're gallivanting ahead like that?'

I quickly reined Sooty in and dropped back to a position alongside the litter. I swallowed a great lump of bread and bacon and managed to ask, 'Is there anything your ladyship requires?'

'Don't talk with your mouth full,' she snapped. 'And stop bothering me. Stupid clod.'

And so it went. The road followed the coastline, and at our laden pace it took us a full five days to reach Neatbay. Other than two small villages, our scenery consisted of windswept cliffs, gulls, meadows and occasional stands of twisted and stunted trees. Yet to me it seemed full of beauties and wonders, for every bend in the road brought me to a place I had never seen before.

As our journey wore on, Lady Thyme became more tyrannical. By the fourth day she had a constant stream of complaints, few of which I could do anything about. Her litter swayed too much; it was making her ill. The water I brought from a stream was too cold, that from my own water bags too warm. The men and horses ahead of us were raising too much dust; they were doing it on purpose, she was sure. And tell them to stop singing those rude songs. With her to deal with I had no time to think about killing or not killing Lord Kelvar, even if I had wanted to.

Early on the fifth day we saw the rising smoke of Neatbay. By noon we could pick out the larger buildings and the Neatbay watchtower on the cliffs above the town. Neatbay was a much gentler piece of land than Buckkeep. Our road wound down through a wide valley. The blue waters of Neatbay itself opened wide before us. The beaches were sandy, and their fishing fleet was all shallow draught vessels with flat bottoms, or spunky little dories that rode the waves like gulls. Neatbay didn't have the deep anchorage that Buckkeep did, so it was not the shipping and trading port that we were, but all the same it seemed to me it would have been a fine place to live.

Kelvar sent an honour guard to meet us, so there was a delay as they exchanged formalities with Verity's troops. 'Like two dogs sniffing each other's bung-holes,' Hands observed sourly. By standing in my stirrups, I was able to see far enough down the line to observe the official posturings, and grudgingly nodded my agreement. Eventually we got under way again, and were soon riding through the streets of Neatbay town itself.

Everyone else proceeded straight up to Kelvar's keep, but Hands and I were obliged to escort Lady Thyme's litter through several backstreets to reach the particular inn that she insisted on using. From the look on the chambermaid's face, she had guested there before. Hands took the litter horses and litter to the stables, but I had to endure her leaning heavily on my arm as I escorted her to her chamber. I wondered what she had eaten that had been so foully spiced as to make her every breath a trial to me. She dismissed me at the door, warning myriad punishments if I didn't return promptly in seven days. As I left, I felt sympathy for the chambermaid, for Lady Thyme's voice was lifted in a loud tirade about thieving maids she had encountered in the past, and exactly how she wanted the bed linens arranged on the bed.

With a light heart I mounted Sooty and called to Hands to make haste. We cantered through the streets of Neatbay, and managed to rejoin the tail of Verity's procession as they entered Kelvar's keep. Bayguard was built on flat land that offered little natural defence, but was fortified by a series of walls and ditches that an enemy would have had to surmount before facing the stout stone walls of the keep. Hands told me that raiders had never got past the second ditch and I believed him. Workmen were doing maintenance on the walls and ditches as we passed, but they halted and watched in wonder as the King-in-Waiting came to Bayguard.

Once keep gates closed behind us, there was another interminable welcoming ceremony. Men and horses and all, we were kept standing in the midday sun while Kelvar and Bayguard welcomed Verity. Horns sounded and then the mutter of official voicings muted by shifting horses and men. But at last it was over. This was signalled by a sudden general movement of men and beasts as the formations ahead of us broke up.

Men dismounted and Kelvar's stable-folk were suddenly among us, directing us where to water our mounts, where we might rest for the night, and most important to any soldier, where we might ourselves wash and eat. I fell in beside Hands as we led Sooty and his pony toward the stables. I heard my name called and turned to see Sig from Buckkeep pointing me out to someone in Kelvar's colours.

'There he be: that's the fitz. Ho, Fitz! Sitswell here says you're summoned. Verity wants you in his chamber; Leon's sick. Hands, you take Sooty for the fitz.'

I could almost feel the food being snatched from my jaws. But I took a breath and presented a cheerful countenance to Sitswell, as Burrich had counselled me. I doubt that dour man even noticed. To him I was just one more boy underfoot on a hectic day. He took me to Verity's chamber and left me, obviously relieved to return to his stables. I tapped softly and Verity's man opened the door at once.

'Ah! Thank Eda it's you. Come in, then, for the beast won't eat and Verity's sure it's serious. Hurry up, Fitz.'

The man wore Verity's badge, but was no one I remembered having met. Sometimes it was disconcerting how many folk knew who I was when I had no inkling who they were. In an adjoining chamber Verity was splashing and instructing someone loudly about what garments he wished for the evening. But he was not my concern. Leon was.

Leon was Verity's wolfhound. I groped toward him, for I had no qualms about it when Burrich wasn't about, Leon lifted his bony head and regarded me with martyred eyes. He was lying on Verity's sweaty shirt in a corner by a cold hearth. He was too hot, he was bored, and if we weren't going to hunt anything he wanted to go home.

I made a show of running my hands over him and lifting his lips to examine his gums and then pressing my hand down firmly on his belly. I finished all this by scratching behind his ears and then told Verity's man, 'There's nothing wrong with him, he just isn't hungry. Let's give him a bowl of cold water and wait. When he wants to eat, he'll let us know. And let's take away all this, before it spoils in this heat and he eats it anyway and becomes really sick.' I referred to a dish already overfilled with scraps of pastries from a tray that had been set for Verity. None of it was fit for the dog, but I was so hungry I wouldn't have minded dining off the scraps myself; in fact my stomach growled at the sight of it. 'I wonder if I found the kitchens, perhaps they would have a fresh, beef bone for him? Something that's more toy than food is what he would welcome most now ...'

'Fitz? Is that you? In here, boy! What's troubling my Leon?'

'I'll fetch the bone,' the man assured me, and I rose and stepped to the entrance of the adjoining room.

Verity rose dripping from his bath and took the proffered towel from his serving-man. He towelled his hair briskly and then again demanded as he dried himself, 'What's the matter with Leon?'

That was Verity's way. Months had passed since we had last spoken but he took no times for greetings. Chade said it was a lack in him, that he didn't make his men feel their importance to him. I think he believed that if anything significant had happened to me, someone would have told him. He had a bluff heartiness to him that I enjoyed, an attitude that things must be going well unless someone had told him otherwise.

'Not much is wrong with him, sir. He's a bit out of sorts from the heat and from travelling. A night's rest in a cool place will perk him up; but I'd not fill him full of pastry bits and suety things; not in this hot weather.'

'Well.' Verity bent down to dry his legs. 'Like as not, you're right, boy. Burrich says you've a way with the hounds, and I won't ignore what you say. It's just that he seemed so moony, and usually he has a good appetite for anything, but especially for anything from my plate.' He seemed abashed, as if caught cooing at an infant. I didn't know what to say.

'If that's all, sir, should I be returning to the stables?'

He glanced at me over his shoulder, puzzled. 'Seems a bit of a waste of time to me. Hands will see to your mount, won't he? You need to bathe and dress if you're to be on time for dinner. Charim? Have you water for him?'

The serving-man straightened from arranging Verity's garments on the bed. 'Right away, sir. And I'll lay out his clothes as well.'

In the space of the next hour, my place in the world seemed to shift topsy-turvy. I had known this was coming. Both Burrich and Chade had tried to prepare me for it. But to go suddenly from an insignificant hanger-on at Buckkeep to part of Verity's formal entourage was unnerving. Everyone else assumed I knew what was going on.

Verity was dressed and out of the room before I was into the tub. Charim informed me that he had gone to confer with his captain of guards. I was grateful that Charim was such a gossip. He did not consider my rank so lofty as to forbear from chatting and complaining in front of me.

'I'll make you up a pallet in here for the night. I doubt you'll be chill. Verity said he wanted you housed close by him, and not just to tend the hound. He has other chores for you as well?'

Charim paused hopefully. I covered my silence by ducking my head into the lukewarm water and soaping the sweat and dust from my hair. I came up for air.

He sighed. 'I'll lay out your clothes for you. Leave me those dirty ones. I'll wash them out for you.'

It seemed very strange to have someone waiting on me while I washed, and stranger still to have someone supervise my dressing. Charim insisted on straightening the seams on my jerkin and seeing the oversized sleeves on my new best shirt hung to their fullest and most annoying length. My hair had regrown long enough to have snarls in it and these he tugged out quickly and painfully. To a boy accustomed to dressing himself the primping and inspection seemed endless.

‘Blood will tell,’ said an awed voice from the entry. I turned to find Verity beholding me with a mixture of pain and amusement on his face.

‘He’s the image of Chivalry at that age, is he not, my lord?’ Charim sounded immensely pleased with himself.

‘He is.’ Verity paused to clear his throat. ‘No man can doubt who fathered you, Fitz. I wonder what my father was thinking when he told me to show you well? Shrewd he is called and shrewd he is; I wonder what he expects to gain. Ah, well.’ He sighed. ‘That is his kind of kingship, and I leave it to him. Mine is simply to ask a foppish old man why he cannot keep his watch towers properly manned. Come, boy. It’s time we went down.’

He turned and left without waiting for me. As I hastened after him, Charim caught at my arm. ‘Three steps behind him and on his left. Remember.’ And that is where I fell in behind him. As he moved down the hallway, others of our entourage stepped out from their chambers and followed their prince. All were decked in their most elaborate finery, to maximize this chance to be seen and envied outside Buckkeep. The fullness of my sleeves was quite reasonable compared to what some were sporting. At least my shoes were not hung with tiny chiming bells or gently rattling amber beads.

Verity paused at the top of a stairway, and a hush fell over the folk gathered below. I looked out over the faces turned up to their prince, and had time to read on them every emotion known to mankind. Some women simpered while others appeared to sneer. Some young men struck poses that displayed their clothes; others, dressed more simply, straightened as if to be on guard. I read envy and love, disdain, fear, and on a few faces, hatred. But Verity gave none of them more than a passing glance before he descended. The crowd parted before us, to reveal Lord Kelvar himself waiting to conduct us into the dining hall.

Kelvar was not what I expected. Verity had called him foppish, but what I saw was a rapidly ageing man, thin and harried, who wore his

extravagant clothes as if they were armour against time. His greying hair was pulled back in a thin tail as if he were still a man-at-arms, and he walked with that peculiar gait of the very good swordsman.

I saw him as Chade had taught me to see folk, and thought I understood him well enough even before we were seated. But it was after we had taken our places at table (and mine, to my surprise, was not so far down from the high folk) that I got my deepest glance into the man's soul. And this not by any act of his, but in the bearing of his lady as she arrived to join us.

I doubt if Kelvar's Lady Grace was much more than a hand of years older than I, and she was decked out like a magpie's nest. Never had I seen accoutrements before that spoke so garishly of expense and so little of taste. She took her seat in a flurry of flourishes and gestures that reminded me of a courting bird. Her scent rolled over me like a wave, and it too smelled of coin more than flowers. She had brought a little dog with her, a feist that was all silky hair and big eyes. She cooed over him as she settled him on her lap, and the little beast cuddled against her and set his chin on the edge of the table. And all the time, her eyes were on Prince Verity, trying to see if he marked her and was impressed. For my part, I watched Kelvar watch her perform her flirtations for the prince, and I thought to myself, there is more than half our problems with keeping Watch Island tower manned.

Dinner was a trial to me. I was ravenous, but manners forbade that I show it. I ate as I had been instructed, picking up my spoon when Verity did, and setting aside a course as soon as he showed disinterest in it. I longed for a good platter of hot meat with bread to sop up the juices, but what we were offered were tidbits of meat oddly spiced, exotic fruit compotes, pale breads, and vegetables cooked to pallor and then seasoned. It was an impressive display of good food abused in the name of fashionable cooking. I could see that Verity's appetite was as slack as mine, and wondered if all could see that the prince was not impressed.

Chade had taught me better than I had known. I was able to nod politely to my dinner companion, a freckled young woman, and follow her conversation about the difficulty of getting good linen fabric in Rippon these days, while letting my ears stray enough to pick up key bits of talk about the table. None of it was about the business that had brought us here. Verity and Lord Kelvar would closet themselves tomorrow for the discussion of that. But much of what I overheard touched on the manning of Watch Island's tower, and cast odd lights on it.

I overheard grumblings that the roads were not as well maintained as previously. Someone commented she was glad to see that repair on Bayguard's fortifications had been resumed. Another man complained that inland robbers were so common, he could scarcely count on two-thirds of his merchandise coming through from Farrow. This, too, seemed to be the basis of my dining companion's complaint about the lack of good fabric. I looked at Lord Kelvar, and how he doted upon his young wife's every gesture. As if Chade were whispering in my ear, I heard his judgement. 'There is a duke whose mind is not upon the governing of his duchy.' I suspected Lady Grace was wearing the required road repairs and the wages of those soldiers who would have kept his trade routes policed against brigands. Perhaps the jewels that dangled from her ears should have gone for pay to man Watch Island's towers.

Dinner finally ended. My stomach was full, but my hunger unabated, there had been so little substance to the meal. Afterwards, two minstrels and a poet entertained us, but I tuned my ears to the casual talk of folk rather than to the fine phrasings of the poet or the ballads of the musicians. Kelvar sat to the prince's right, while his lady sat to the left, her lap-dog sharing the chair.

Grace sat basking in the prince's presence. Her hands often strayed to touch first an earring, then a bracelet. She was not accustomed to wearing so much jewellery. My suspicion was that she had come of simple stock, and was awed by her own position. One minstrel sang 'Fair Rose amidst the Clover', his eyes on her face, and was rewarded with her flushed cheeks. But as the evening wore on and I grew weary, I could tell that Lady Grace was fading. She yawned once, lifting a hand too late to cover it. Her little dog had gone to sleep in her lap, and twitched and yipped occasionally in his small-brained dreams. As she grew sleepier, she reminded me of a child; she cuddled her dog as if it were a doll, and leaned her head back into the corner of her chair. Twice she started to nod off. I saw her surreptitiously pinching the skin on her wrists in an effort to wake herself up. She was visibly relieved when Kelvar summoned the minstrels and poet forward to reward them for their evening. She took her lord's arm to follow him off to their bedchamber while never relinquishing the dog she snuggled in her arm.

I was relieved to make my way up to Verity's antechamber. Charim had found me a featherbed and some blankets. My pallet was fully as comfortable as my own bed. I longed to sleep, but Charim gestured me into

Verity's bedchamber. Verity, ever the soldier, had no use for lackeys to stand about and tug his boots off for him. Charim and I alone attended him. Charim clucked and muttered as he followed Verity about, picking up and smoothing the garments the Prince so casually shed. Verity's boots he immediately took off into a corner and began working more wax into the leather. Verity dragged a nightshirt on over his head and then turned to me.

'Well? What have you to tell me?'

And so I reported to him as I did to Chade, recounting all I had overheard, in as close to the words as I could manage, and noting who had spoken and to whom. At the last I added my own suppositions about the significance of it all. 'Kelvar is a man who has taken a young wife, one who is easily impressed with wealth and gifts,' I summarized. 'She has no idea of the responsibilities of her own position, let alone his. Kelvar diverts money, time and thought from his duties to enthralling her. Were it not disrespectful to say so, I would imagine that his manhood is failing him, and he seeks to satisfy his young bride with gifts as a substitute.'

Verity sighed heavily. He had flung himself onto the bed during the latter half of my recitation. Now he prodded at a too-soft pillow, folding it to give more support to his head. 'Damn Chivalry,' he said absently. "This is his kind of a knot, not mine. Fitz, you sound like your father. And were he here, he'd find some subtle way to handle this whole situation. Chiv would have had it solved by now, with one of his smiles and a kiss on someone's hand. But that's not my way, and I won't pretend to it.' He shifted about in his bed uncomfortably, as if he expected me to raise some argument to him about his duty. 'Kelvar's a man and a duke. And he has a duty. He's to man that tower properly. It's simple enough, and I intend to tell him that bluntly. Put decent soldiers in that tower, keep them there, and keep them happy enough to do a job. It seems simple to me. And I'm not going to make it into a diplomatic dance.'

He shifted heavily in the bed, then abruptly turned his back to me. 'Put out the light, Charim.' And Charim did, so promptly that I was left standing in the dark and had to blunder my way out of the chamber and back to my own pallet. As I lay down, I pondered that Verity saw so little of the whole. He could force Kelvar to man the tower, yes. But he couldn't force him to man it well, or take pride in it. That was a matter for diplomacy. And had he no heed for the roadwork and maintenance on the fortifications and the highwaymen problem? All that needed to be remedied now, in such a way

that Kelvar's pride was kept intact, and that his position with Lord Shemshy was both corrected and affirmed. And someone had to undertake to teach Lady Grace her responsibilities. So many problems. But as soon as my head touched the pillow, I slept.

NINE

Fat Suffices

The Fool came to Buckkeep in the seventeenth year of King Shrewd's reign. This is one of the few facts that are known about the Fool. Said to be a gift from the Bingtown Traders, the origin of the Fool can only be surmised. Various stories have arisen. One is that the Fool was a captive of the Red Ship Raiders, and that the Bingtown Traders seized the Fool from them. Another is that the Fool was found as a babe, adrift in a small boat, shielded from the sun by a parasol of sharkskin and cushioned from the thwarts by a bed of heather and lavender. This can be dismissed as a creation of fancy. We have no real knowledge of the Fool's life before his arrival at King Shrewd's court.

The Fool was almost certainly born of the human race, though, not entirely of human parentage. Stories that he was born of the Other Folk are almost certainly false, for his fingers and toes are completely free of webbing and he has never shown the slightest fear of cats. The unusual physical characteristics of the Fool (lack of colouring, for instance) seem to be traits of his other parentage, rather than an individual aberration, though in this I well may be mistaken.

In the matter of the Fool, that which we do not know is almost more significant than that which we do. The age of the Fool at the time of his arrival at Buckkeep has been a matter for conjecture. From personal experience, I can vouch that the Fool appeared much younger, and in all ways more juvenile than at present. But as the Fool shows little sign of ageing it may be that he was not as young as he initially appeared, but rather was at the end of an extended childhood.

The gender of the Fool has been disputed. When directly questioned on this matter by a younger and more forward person than I am now, the Fool replied that it was no one's business but his own. So I concede.

In the matter of his prescience and the annoyingly vague forms that it takes, there is no consensus as to whether a racial or individual talent is being manifested. Some believe he knows all in advance, and even that he will always know if anyone, anywhere, speaks about him. Others say it is only his great love of saying, 'I warned you so!' and that he takes his most obscure sayings and twists them to have been prophecies. Perhaps sometimes this has been so, but in many well-witnessed cases, he has predicted, however obscurely, events that later came to pass.

Hunger woke me shortly after midnight. I lay awake, listening to my belly growl. I closed my eyes but my hunger was enough to make me nauseous. I got up and felt my way to the table where Verity's tray of pastries had been, but servants had cleared it away.

Easing open the chamber door, I stepped out into the dimly-lit hall. The two men Verity had posted there looked at me questioningly. 'Starving,' I told them. 'Did you notice where the kitchens were?'

I have never known a soldier who didn't know where the kitchens were. I thanked them, and promised to bring back some of whatever I found. I slipped off down the shadowy hall. As I descended the steps, it felt odd to have wood underfoot rather than stone. I walked as Chade had taught me, placing my feet silently, moving within the shadowiest parts of the passageways, walking to the sides where floorboards were less likely to creak. And it all felt natural.

The rest of the keep seemed well asleep. The few guards I passed were mostly dozing; none challenged me. At the time I put it down to my stealth; now I wonder if they considered a skinny, tousle-headed lad any threat worth bothering with.

I found the kitchens easily. It was a great open room, flagged and walled with stone as a defence against fires. There were three great hearths, fires well-banked for the night. Despite the lateness, or earliness, of the hour, the place was brightly lit. A keep's kitchen is never completely asleep.

I saw the covered pans and smelled the rising bread. A large pot of stew was being kept warm at the edge of one hearth. When I peeked under the lid, I saw it would not miss a bowl or two. I rummaged about and helped myself. Wrapped loaves on a shelf supplied me with an end crust and in another corner was a tub of butter kept cool inside a large keg of water. Not fancy, thank all, but the plain, simple food I had been craving all day.

I was halfway through my second bowl when I heard the light scuff of footsteps. I looked up with my most disarming smile, hoping that this cook would prove as soft-hearted as Buckkeep's. But it was a serving-girl, a blanket thrown about her shoulders over her nightrobe and her baby in her arms. She was weeping. I turned my eyes away in discomfort.

She scarcely gave me a glance anyway. She set her bundled baby down on top of the table, fetched a bowl and dipped it full of cool water, muttering all the time. She bent over the babe. 'Here, my sweet, my lamb. Here, my darling. This will help. Take a little. Oh, sweetie, can't you even lap? Open your mouth, then. Come now, open your mouth.'

I couldn't help but watch. She held the bowl awkwardly and tried to manoeuvre it to the baby's mouth. She was using her other hand to force the child's mouth open, and using a deal more force than I'd ever seen any other mother use on a child. She tipped the bowl, and the water slopped. I heard a strangled gurgle, and then a gagging sound. As I leapt up to protest, the head of a small dog emerged from the bundle.

'Oh, he's choking again! He's dying! My little Feisty is dying and no one but me cares. He just goes on snoring, and I don't know what to do and my darling is dying!'

She clutched the lap-dog to her as it gagged and strangled. It shook its little head wildly and then seemed to grow calmer. If I hadn't been able to hear its laboured breathing, I'd have sworn it had died in her arms. Its dark and bulgy eyes met mine, and I felt the force of the panic and pain in the little beast.

Easy. 'Here, now,' I heard myself saying. 'You're not helping him by holding him that tight. He can scarce breathe. Set him down. Unwrap him. Let him decide how he is most comfortable. All wrapped up like that, he's too hot, so he's trying to pant and choke all at once. Set him down.'

She was a head taller than I and for a moment I thought I was going to have to struggle with her. But she let me take the bundled dog from her arms, and unwrap him from several layers of cloth. I set him on the table.

The little beast was in total misery. He stood with his head drooping between his front legs. His muzzle and chest were slick with saliva, his belly distended and hard. He began to retch and gag again. His small jaws opened wide, his lips writhed back from his tiny, pointed teeth. The redness of his tongue attested to the violence of his efforts. The girl squeaked and sprang forward, trying to snatch him up again, but I pushed her roughly back.

‘Don’t grab him,’ I told her impatiently. ‘He’s trying to get something up, and he can’t do it with you squeezing his guts.’

She stopped. ‘Get something up?’

‘He looks and acts as if he’s got something lodged in his gullet, Could he have got into bones or feathers?’

She looked stricken. ‘There were bones in the fish. But only tiny ones.’

‘Fish? What idiot let him get into fish? Was it fresh or rotten?’ I’d seen how sick a dog could get when it got into rotten, spawned-out salmon on a river bank. If that was what this little beast had gobbled, he didn’t have a chance.

‘It was fresh, and well-cooked. The same trout I had at dinner.’

‘Well, at least it’s not likely to be poisonous to him. Right now, it’s just the bone. But if he gets it down, it’s still likely to kill him.’

She gasped. ‘No, it can’t! He mustn’t die. He’ll be fine. He just has an upset stomach. I just fed him too much. He’ll be fine! What do you know about it anyway, kitchen-boy?’

I watched the feist go through another round of convulsive retching. Nothing came up but yellow bile. ‘I’m not a kitchen-boy. I’m a dog-boy. Verity’s own dog-boy, if you must know. And if we don’t help this little pup, he’s going to die. Very soon.’

She watched, her face a mixture of awe and horror, as I gripped her little pet firmly. *I’m trying to help*. He didn’t believe me. I prised his jaws open and forced my two fingers down his gullet. The feist gagged even more fiercely, and pawed at me frantically. His claws needed cutting, too. With the tips of my fingers I could feel the bone. I twiddled my fingers against it, and felt it move, but it was wedged sideways in the little beast’s throat. The dog gave a strangled howl and struggled frantically in my arms. I let him go. ‘Well. He’s not going to get rid of that without some help,’ I observed.

I left her wailing and snivelling over him. At least she didn’t snatch him up and squeeze him. I got myself a handful of butter from the keg and plopped it into my stew bowl. Now, I needed something hooked, or sharply curved, but not too large ... I rattled through bins, and finally came up with a curved hook of metal with a handle on it. Possibly it was used to lift hot pots off the fire.

‘Sit down,’ I told the maid.

She gaped at me, and then sat obediently on the bench I’d pointed to.

‘Now hold him firmly, between your knees. And don’t let him go, no matter how he claws and wiggles or yelps. And hold onto his front feet, so he doesn’t claw me to ribbons while I’m doing this. Understand?’

She took a deep breath, then gulped and nodded. Tears were streaming down her face. I set the dog on her lap and put her hands on him.

‘Hold tight,’ I told her. I scooped up a gobbet of butter. ‘I’m going to use the fat to grease things up. Then I’ve got to force his jaws open, and hook the bone and jerk it out. Are you ready?’

She nodded. The tears had stopped flowing and her lips were set. I was glad to see she had some strength to her. I nodded back.

Getting the butter down was the easy part. It blocked his throat, though, and his panic increased, pounding at my self-control with his waves of terror. I had no time to be gentle as I forced his jaws open, and then put the hook down his throat. I hoped I wouldn’t snag his flesh. But if I did, well, he would die anyway. I turned the tool in his throat as he wiggled and yelped and pissed all over his mistress. The hook caught on the bone and I pulled, evenly and firmly.

It came up in a welter of froth and bile and blood. A nasty little bone, not a fish bone at all, but the partial breastbone of a small bird. I flipped it onto the table. ‘And he shouldn’t have poultry bones either,’ I told her severely.

I don’t think she even heard me. Doggie was wheezing gratefully on her lap. I picked up the dish of water and held it out to him. He sniffed it, lapped a bit, and then curled up, exhausted. She picked him up and cradled him in her arms, her head bent over his.

‘There’s something I want from you,’ I began.

‘Anything.’ She spoke into his fur. ‘Ask, and it’s yours.’

‘First, stop giving him your food. Give him only red meat and boiled grain for a while. And for a dog that size, no more than you can cup in your hand. And don’t carry him everywhere. Make him run about, to give him some muscle and wear down his nails. And wash him. He smells foul, coat and breath, from too-rich food, or he won’t live but another year or two.’

She looked up, stricken. Her hand went up to her mouth. And something in her motion, so like her self-conscious touching of her jewellery at dinner, suddenly made me realize who I was scolding. Lady Grace. And I had made her dog piss on her nightrobe.

Something in my face must have given me away. She smiled delightedly and held her fist closer. 'I'll do as you suggest, dog-boy. But for yourself? Is there nothing you'd ask as reward?'

She thought I'd ask for a coin or ring or even a position with her household. Instead, as steadily as I could, I looked at her and said, 'Please, Lady Grace. I ask that you ask your lord to man Watch Island's tower with the best of his men, to put an end to the strife between Rippon and Shoaks Duchies.'

'What?'

That single word question told me volumes about her. The accent and inflection hadn't been learned as Lady Grace.

'Ask your lord to man his towers well. Please.'

'Why does a dog-boy care about such things?'

Her question was too blunt. Wherever Kelvar had found her, she hadn't been high-born, or wealthy before this. Her delight when I recognized her, the way she had brought her dog down to the familiar comfort of a kitchen, by herself, wrapped in her blanket, told of a common girl elevated too quickly and too far above her previous station. She was lonely, and uncertain, and uneducated as to what was expected of her. Worse, she knew that she was ignorant, and that knowledge ate at her and soured her pleasures with fear. If she did not learn how to be a duchess before her youth and beauty faded, only years of loneliness and ridicule could await her. She needed a mentor, someone secret, like Chade. She needed the advice I could give her, right now. But I had to go carefully, for she would not accept advice from a dog-boy. Only a common girl might do that, and the only thing she knew about herself right now was that she was no longer a common girl, but a duchess.

'I had a dream,' I said, suddenly inspired. 'So clear. Like a vision. Or a warning. It woke me and I felt I must come to the kitchen.' I let my eyes unfocus. Her eyes went wide. I had her. 'I dreamed of a woman, who spoke wise words and turned three strong men into a united wall that the Red Ship Raiders could not breach. She stood before them, and jewels were in her hands, and she said, "Let the watchtowers shine brighter than the gems in these rings. Let the vigilant soldiers who man them encircle our coast as these pearls used to encircle my neck. Let the keeps be strengthened anew against those who threaten our people. For I would be glad to walk plain in the sight of both king and commoner, and let the defences that guard our

people become the jewels of our land". And the King and his dukes were astounded at her wise heart and noble ways. But her people loved her best of all, for they knew she loved them better than gold or silver.'

It was awkward, not near as cleverly spoken as I had hoped to make it. But it caught her fancy. I could see her imagining herself standing straight and noble before the King and astonishing him with her sacrifice. I sensed in her the burning desire to distinguish herself, to be spoken of admiringly by the people she had come from. This would show them she was now a duchess in more than name. Lord Shemshy and his entourage would carry word of her deed back to Shoaks Duchy. Minstrels would celebrate her words in song. And her husband for once would be surprised by her. Let him see her as someone who cared for the land and folk, rather than the pretty little thing he had snared with his title. I could almost see the thoughts parade through her mind. Her eyes had gone distant and she wore an abstracted smile.

'Good night, dog-boy,' she said softly, and glided from the kitchen, her dog cuddled against her breast. She wore the blanket around her shoulders as if it were a cloak of ermine. She would play her role tomorrow very well. I grinned suddenly, wondering if I had accomplished my mission without poison. Not that I had really investigated whether or not Kelvar was guilty of treason; but I had a feeling that I had chopped the root of the problem. I was willing to bet that Watch Island tower would be well-manned before the week was out.

I made my way back up to my bed. I had pilfered a loaf of fresh bread from the kitchen and this I offered to the guards who readmitted me to Verity's bedchamber. In some distant part of Baykeep someone brayed out the hour. I didn't pay much attention. I burrowed back into my bedding, my belly satisfied and my spirit anticipating the spectacle that Lady Grace would present tomorrow. As I dozed off, I was wagering with myself that she would wear something straight and simple and white, and that her hair would be unbound.

I never got to find out. It seemed but moments later that I was shaken awake. I opened my eyes to find Charim crouched over me. A dim light from a lit candle made elongated shadows on the chamber walls. 'Wake up, Fitz,' he whispered hoarsely. 'A runner's come to the keep, from Lady Thyme. She requires you immediately. Your horse is being made ready.'

'Me?' I asked stupidly.

‘Of course. I’ve laid out clothes for you. Dress quietly. Verity is still asleep.’

‘What does she need me for?’

‘Why, I don’t know. The message wasn’t specific. Perhaps she’s taken ill, Fitz. The runner said only that she required you immediately. I suppose you’ll find out when you get there.’

That was slim comfort. But it was enough to stir curiosity in me, and in any case, I had to go. I didn’t know exactly what relation Lady Thyme was to the King, but she was far above me in importance. I didn’t dare ignore her command. I dressed quickly by candlelight and left my room for the second time that night. Hands had Sooty saddled and ready, along with a ribald jest or two about my summons. I suggested how he might amuse himself the rest of the night and then left. I was waved out of the keep and through the fortifications by guards who had been advised of my coming.

I turned wrong twice in the town. It all appeared different by night, and I had not paid much attention to where I had been going earlier. At last I found the inn-yard. A worried innkeeper was awake and had a light in the window. ‘She’s been groaning and calling for you for most of an hour now, sirrah,’ she told me anxiously. ‘I fear it’s serious, but she will let no one in but you.’

I hurried down the hall to her door. I tapped cautiously, half-expecting her shrill voice to tell me to go away and stop bothering her. Instead, a quavering voice called out, ‘Oh, Fitz, is that finally you? Hurry in, boy. I need you.’

I took a deep breath and lifted the latch. I went into the semi-darkness of the stuffy room, holding my breath against the various smells that assaulted my nostrils. Death-stench could hardly be worse than this, I thought to myself.

Heavy hangings draped the bed. The only light in the room came from a single candle guttering in its holder. I picked it up and ventured closer to the bed. ‘Lady Thyme?’ I asked softly. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Boy.’ The voice came quietly from a dark corner of the room.

‘Chade,’ I said, and instantly felt more foolish than I care to remember.

‘There’s no time to explain all the reasons. Don’t feel bad, boy. Lady Thyme has fooled many folk in her time, and will continue to. At least I hope so. Now. Trust me and don’t ask questions. Just do what I tell you. First, go to the innkeeper. Tell her that Lady Thyme has had one of her

attacks and must rest quietly for a few days. Tell her on no account to disturb her. Her great-grand-daughter will be coming in to care for her –’

‘Who –’

‘It’s been arranged already. And her great-grand-daughter will be bringing in food for her and everything else she needs. Just emphasize that Lady Thyme needs quiet and to be left alone. Go and do that now.’

And I did, and I appeared jolted enough that I was very convincing. The innkeeper promised me that she would let no one so much as tap on a door, for she would be most reluctant to lose Lady Thyme’s good opinion of her inn and her trade. By which I surmised that Lady Thyme paid her generously indeed.

I re-entered the room quietly, shutting the door softly behind me. Chade shot the bolt and kindled a fresh candle from the glimmering stump. He spread a small map on the table beside it. I noticed he was dressed for travelling – cloak, boots, jerkin and trousers all of black. He looked a different man, suddenly, very fit and energetic. I wondered if the old man in the worn robe was also a pose. He glanced up at me and for a moment I would have sworn it was Verity the soldier I was facing. He gave me no time to muse.

‘Things will have to go here however they will go between Verity and Kelvar. You and I have business elsewhere. I received a message tonight. Red Ship Raiders have struck, here, at Forge. So close to Buckkeep that it’s more than just an insult; it’s a real threat. And done while Verity is at Neatbay. Don’t tell me they didn’t know he was here, away from Buckkeep. But that’s not all. They’ve taken hostages, dragged them back to their ships. And they’ve sent words to Buckkeep, to King Shrewd himself. They’re demanding gold, lots of it, or they’ll return the hostages to the village.’

‘Don’t you mean they’ll kill them if they don’t get the gold?’

‘No.’ Chade shook his head angrily, a bear bothered by bees. ‘No, the message was quite clear. If the gold is paid, they’ll kill them. If not, they’ll release them. The messenger was from Forge, a man whose wife and son had been taken. He insisted he had the threat correct.’

‘I don’t see that we have a problem,’ I snorted.

‘On the surface, neither do I. But the man who carried the message to Shrewd was still shaking, despite his long ride. He couldn’t explain it, not even say if he thought the gold should be paid or not. All he could do was repeat, over and over again, how the ship’s captain had smiled as he

delivered the ultimatum, and how the other raiders had laughed and laughed at his words.

‘So, we go to see, you and I. Now. Before the King makes any official response, before Verity even knows. Now attend. This is the road we came by. See how it follows the curve of the coast? And this is the trail we go by. Straighter, but much steeper and boggy in places, so that it has never been used by wagons. But faster for men on horseback. Here, a small boat awaits us; crossing the bay will cut a lot of miles and time from our journey. We’ll beach here, and then on up to Forge.’

I studied the map. Forge was north of Buckkeep; I wondered how long our messenger had taken to reach us, and if by the time we got there the Red Ship Raiders’ threat would already have been carried out. But it was no use wasting time on wondering.

‘What about a horse for you?’

‘That’s been arranged, by the one who brought this message. There’s a bay outside with three white feet. He’s for me. The messenger will also provide a great-grand-daughter for Lady Thyme, and the boat is waiting. Let’s go.’

‘One thing,’ I said, and ignored his scowl at the delay. ‘I have to ask this, Chade. Were you here because you didn’t trust me?’

‘A fair question, I suppose. No. I was here to listen in the town, to women’s talk, as you were to listen in the keep. Bonnet-makers and button-sellers may know more than a high king’s advisor, without even knowing they know it. Now. Do we ride?’

We did. We left by the side entrance, and the bay was tethered right outside. Sooty didn’t much care for him, but she minded her manners. I sensed Chade’s impatience, but he kept the horses to an easy pace until we had left the cobbled streets of Neatbay behind us. Once the lights of the houses were behind us, we put our horses to an easy canter. Chade led, and I wondered at how well he rode, and how effortlessly he selected paths in the dark. Sooty did not like this swift travelling by night. If it had not been for a moon nearly at the full, I don’t think I could have persuaded her to keep up with the bay.

I will never forget that night ride. Not because it was a wild gallop to the rescue, but because it was not. Chade guided us and used the horses as if they were game-pieces on a board. He did not play swiftly, but to win. And so there were times when we walked the horses to breathe them, and places

on the trail where we dismounted and led them to get them safely past treacherous places.

As morning greyed the sky, we stopped to eat provisions from Chade's saddlebags. We were on a hilltop so thickly treed that the sky was barely glimpsed overhead. I could hear the ocean, and smell it, but could catch no sight of it. Our trail had become a sinuous path, little more than a deer-run, through these woods. Now that we were still, I could hear and smell the life all around us. Birds called, and I heard the movement of small animals in the underbrush and in the branches overhead. Chade had stretched, then sunk down to sit on deep moss with his back against a tree. He drank deeply from a water-skin, and then more briefly from a brandy flask. He looked tired, and the daylight exposed his age more cruelly than lamplight ever had. I wondered if he would last through the ride or collapse.

'I'll be fine,' he said when he caught me watching him. 'I've had to do more arduous duty than this, and on less sleep. Besides, we'll have a good five or six hours of rest on the boat, if the crossing is smooth. So there's no need to be longing after sleep. Let's go, boy.'

About two hours later our path diverged, and again we took the more obscure branching. Before long I was all but lying on Sooty's neck to escape the low sweeps of the branches. It was muggy under the trees and we were blessed with multitudes of tiny stinging flies that tortured the horses and crept into my clothes to find flesh to feast on. So thick were they that when I finally mustered the courage to ask Chade if we had gone astray, I near choked on the ones that rushed into my mouth.

By midday we emerged onto a windswept hillside that was more open. Once more I saw the ocean. The wind cooled the sweating horses and swept the insects away. It was a great pleasure simply to sit upright in the saddle again. The trail was wide enough that I could ride abreast of Chade. The livid spots stood out starkly against his pale skin; he looked more bloodless than the Fool. Dark circles underscored his eyes. He caught me watching him and frowned.

'Report to me, instead of staring at me like a simpleton,' he ordered me tersely, and so I did.

It was hard to watch the trail and his face at the same time, but the second time he snorted, I glanced over at him to find wry amusement on his face. I finished my report and he shook his head.

‘Luck. Same luck your father had. Your kitchen-diplomacy may be enough to turn the situation around; if that is all there is to it. The little gossip I heard agreed. Well. Kelvar was a good duke before this, and it sounds as if all that happened was a young bride going to his head.’ He sighed suddenly. ‘Still, it’s bad, with Verity there to rebuke a man for not minding his towers, and Verity himself with a raid on a Buckkeep town. Damn! There’s so much we don’t know. How did the Raiders get past our towers without being spotted? How did they know that Verity was away from Buckkeep at Neatbay? Or did they know? Was it luck for them? And what does that strange ultimatum mean? Is it a threat, or a mockery?’ For a moment we rode silently.

‘I wish I knew what action Shrewd was taking. When he sent me the messenger, he had not yet decided. We may get to Forge to find that all’s been settled already. And I wish I knew exactly what message he Skilled to Verity. They say that in the old days, when more men trained in the Skill, a man could tell what his leader was thinking about just by being silent and listening for a while. But that may be no more than a legend. Not many are taught the Skill, any more. I think it was King Bounty who decided that. Keep the Skill more secret, more of an elite tool, and it becomes more valuable. That was the logic then. I never much understood it. What if they said that of good bowmen, or navigators? Still, I suppose the aura of mystery might give a leader more status with his men ... or for a man like Shrewd, now, he’d enjoy having his underlings wondering if he can actually pick up what they were thinking without their uttering a word. Yes, that would appeal to Shrewd, that would.’

At first I thought Chade was very worried, or even angry. I had never heard him ramble so on a topic. But when his horse shied over a squirrel crossing his path, Chade was very nearly unseated. I reached out and caught at his reins. ‘Are you all right? What’s the matter?’

He shook his head slowly. ‘Nothing. When we get to the boat, I’ll be all right. We just have to keep going. It’s not much farther now.’ His pale skin had become grey, and with every step his horse took, he swayed in his saddle.

‘Let’s rest a bit,’ I suggested.

‘Tides won’t wait. And rest wouldn’t help me, not the rest I’d get while I was worrying about our boat going on the rocks. No. We just have to keep

going.’ And he added, ‘Trust me, boy. I know what I can do, and I’m not so foolish as to attempt more than that.’

And so we went on. There was very little else we could do. But I rode beside his horse’s head, where I could take his reins if I needed to. The sound of the ocean grew louder, and the trail much steeper. Soon I was leading the way whether I would or no.

We broke clear of brush completely on a bluff overlooking a sandy beach.

‘Thank Eda, they’re here,’ Chade muttered behind me, and then I saw the shallow-draught boat that was all but grounded near the point. A man on watch halloed and waved his cap in the air. I lifted my arm in return greeting.

We made our way down, sliding more than riding, and then Chade boarded immediately. That left me with the horses. Neither was anxious to enter the waves, let alone heave themselves over the low rail and up onto deck. I tried to quest toward them, to let them know what I wanted. For the first time in my life, I found I was simply too tired. I could not find the focus I needed. So three deckhands, much cursing, and two duckings for me were required finally to get them loaded. Every bit of leather and every buckle on their harness had been doused with saltwater. How was I going to explain that to Burrich? That was the thought that was uppermost in my mind as I settled myself in the bow and watched the rowers in the dory bend their backs to the oars and tow us out to deeper water.

TEN

The Pocked Man

Time and tide wait for no man. There's an ageless adage. Sailors and fishermen mean it simply to say that a boat's schedule is determined by the ocean, not man's convenience. But sometimes I lie here, after the tea has calmed the worst of the pain, and wonder about it. Tides wait for no man, and that I know is true. But time? Did the times I was born into await my birth to be? Did the events rumble into place like the great wooden gears of the clock of Saytanns, meshing with my conception and pushing my life along? I make no claim to greatness. And yet, had I not been born, had not my parents fallen before a surge of lust, so much would be different. So much. Better? I think not. And then I blink and try to focus my eyes, and wonder if these thoughts come from me or from the drug in my blood. It would be nice to hold council with Chade, one last time.

The sun had moved round to late afternoon when someone nudged me awake. 'Your master wants you,' was all he said, and I roused with a start. Gulls wheeling overhead, fresh sea air and the dignified waddle of the boat recalled me to where I was. I scrambled to my feet, ashamed to have fallen asleep without even wondering if Chade were comfortable. I hurried aft to the ship's house.

There I found Chade had taken over the tiny galley table. He was poring over a map spread out on it, but a large tureen of fish chowder was what got my attention. He motioned me to it without taking his attention from the map, and I was glad to fall to. There were ship's biscuits to go with it, and a sour red wine. I had not realized how hungry I was until the food was before me. I was scraping my dish with a bit of biscuit when Chade asked me, 'Better?'

'Much,' I said. 'How about you?'

'Better,' he said, and looked at me with his familiar hawk's glance. To my relief, he seemed totally recovered. He pushed my dishes to one side and

slid the map before me. ‘By evening,’ he said, ‘we’ll be here. It’ll be a nastier landing than the loading was. If we’re lucky, we’ll get wind when we need it. If not, we’ll miss the best of the tide, and the current will be stronger. We may end up swimming the horses to shore while we ride in the dory. I hope not, but be prepared for it, just in case. Once we land ...’

‘You smell of carris seed.’ I said it, not believing my own words. But I had caught the unmistakable sweet taint of the seed and oil on his breath. I’d had carris seed cakes, at Springfest, when everyone does, and I knew the giddy energy that even a sprinkling of the seed on a cake’s top could bring. Everyone celebrated Spring’s Edge that way. Once a year, what could it hurt? But I knew, too, that Burrich had warned me never to buy a horse that smelled of carris seed at all. And warned me further that if anyone were ever caught putting carris seed oil on any of our horse’s grain, he’d kill him. With his bare hands.

‘Do I? Fancy that. Now, I suggest that if you have to swim the horses, you put your shirt and cloak into an oilskin bag and give it to me in the dory. That way you’ll have at least that much dry to put on when we reach the beach. From the beach, our road will ...’

‘Burrich says that once you’ve given it to an animal, it’s never the same. It does things to horses. He says you can use it to win one race, or run down one stag, but after that, the beast will never be what it was. He says dishonest horse-traders use it to make an animal show well at a sale; it gives them spirit and brightens their eyes, but that soon passes. Burrich says that it takes away all their sense of when they’re tired, so they go on, past the time when they should have dropped from exhaustion. Burrich told me that sometimes when the carris oil wears out, the horse just drops in its tracks.’ The words spilled out of me, cold water over stones.

Chade lifted his gaze from the map. He stared at me mildly. ‘Fancy Burrich knowing all that about carris seed. I’m glad you listened to him so closely. Now perhaps you’ll be so kind as to give me equal attention as we plan the next stage of our journey.’

‘But Chade ...’

He transfixed me with his eyes. ‘Burrich is a fine horse-master. Even as a boy he showed great promise. He is seldom wrong ... when speaking about horses. Now attend to what I am saying. We’ll need a lantern to get from the beach to the cliffs above. The path is very bad; we may need to bring one horse up at a time. But I am told it can be done. From there, we go overland

to Forge. There isn't a road that will take us there quickly enough to be of any use. It's hilly country, but not forested. And we'll be going by night, so the stars will have to be our map. I am hoping to reach Forge by mid-afternoon. We'll go in as travellers, you and I. That's all I've decided so far; the rest will have to be planned from hour to hour ...'

And the moment in which I could have asked him how he could use the seed and not die of it was gone, shouldered aside by his careful plans and precise details. For half an hour more he lectured me on details, and then he sent me from the cabin, saying he had other preparations to make and that I should check on the horses and get what rest I could.

The horses were forward, in a makeshift rope enclosure on deck. Straw cushioned the deck from their hooves and droppings. A sour-faced mate was mending a bit of railing that Sooty had kicked loose in the boarding. He didn't seem disposed to talk, and the horses were as calm and comfortable as could be expected. I roved the deck briefly. We were on a tidy little craft, an inter-island trader wider than she was deep. Her shallow draught let her go up rivers or right onto beaches without damage, but her passage over deeper water left a lot to be desired. She sidled along, with here a dip and there a curtsey, like a bundle-laden farm-wife making her way through a crowded market. We seemed to be the sole cargo. A deckhand gave me a couple of apples to share with the horses, but little talk. So after I had parcelled out the fruit, I settled myself near them on their straw and took Chade's advice about resting.

The winds were kind to us, and the captain took us in closer to the looming cliffs than I'd have thought possible, but unloading the horses from the vessel was still an unpleasant task. All of Chade's lecturing and warnings had not prepared me for the blackness of night on the water. The lanterns on the deck seemed pathetic efforts, confusing me more with the shadows they threw than aiding me with their feeble light. In the end, a deckhand rowed Chade to shore in the ship's dory. I went overboard with the reluctant horses, for I knew Sooty would fight a lead rope and probably swamp the dory. I clung to Sooty and encouraged her, trusting her common sense to take us toward the dim lantern on shore. I had a long line on Chade's horse, for I didn't want his thrashing too close to us in the water. The sea was cold, the night was black, and if I'd had any sense, I'd have wished myself elsewhere; but there is something in a boy that takes the mundanely difficult and unpleasant and turns it into a personal challenge and an adventure.

I came out of the water dripping, chilled and completely exhilarated. I kept Sooty's reins and coaxed Chade's horse in. By the time I had them both under control, Chade was beside me, lantern in hand, laughing exultantly. The dory man was already away and pulling for the ship. Chade gave me my dry things, but they did little good pulled on over my dripping clothes. 'Where's the path?' I asked, my voice shaking with my shivering.

Chade gave a derisive snort. 'Path? I had a quick look while you were pulling in my horse. It's no path, it's no more than the course the water takes when it runs off down the cliffs. But it will have to do.'

It was a little better than he had reported, but not much. It was narrow and steep and the gravel on it was loose underfoot. Chade went ahead with the lantern. I followed, with the horses in tandem. At one point Chade's bay acted up, tugging back, throwing me off-balance and nearly driving Sooty to her knees in her efforts to go the other direction. My heart was in my mouth until we reached the top of the cliffs.

Then the night and the open hillside spread out before us under the sailing moon and the stars scattered wide overhead, and the spirit of the challenge caught me up again. I suppose it could have been Chade's attitude. The carris seed made his eyes wide and bright, even by lantern light, and his energy, unnatural though it was, was infectious. Even the horses seemed affected, snorting and tossing their heads. Chade and I laughed dementedly as we adjusted harness and then mounted. Chade glanced up to the stars, and then around the hillside that sloped down before us. With careless disdain he tossed our lantern to one side.

'Away!' he announced to the night, and kicked the bay, who sprang forward. Sooty was not to be outdone, and so I did as I had never dared before, galloping down unfamiliar terrain by night. It is a wonder we did not all break our necks. But there it is; sometimes luck belongs to children and madmen. That night I felt we were both.

Chade led and I followed. That night, I grasped another piece of the puzzle that Burch had always been to me. For there is a very strange peace in giving over your judgement to someone else, to saying to them, 'You lead and I will follow, and I will trust entirely that you will not lead me to death or harm.' That night, as we pushed the horses hard, and Chade steered us solely by the night sky, I gave no thought to what might befall us if we went astray from our bearing, or if a horse were injured by an unexpected slip. I felt no sense of accountability for my actions. Suddenly, everything was easy

and clear. I simply did whatever Chade told me to do, and trusted to him to have it turn out right. My spirit rode high on the crest of that wave of faith, and sometime during the night it occurred to me: this was what Burrich had had from Chivalry, and what he missed so badly.

We rode the entire night. Chade breathed the horses, but not as often as Burrich would have. And he stopped more than once to scan the night sky and then the horizon to be sure our course was true. 'See that hill there, against the stars? You can't see it too well, but I know it. By light, it's shaped like a buttermonger's cap. Keeffashaw, it's called. We keep it to the west of us. Let's go.'

Another time he paused on a hilltop. I pulled in my horse beside his. Chade sat still, very tall and straight. He could have been carved of stone. Then he lifted an arm and pointed. His hand shook slightly. 'See that ravine down there? We've come a bit too far to the east. We'll have to correct as we go.'

The ravine was invisible to me, a darker slash in the dimness of the starlit landscape. I wondered how he could have known it was there. It was perhaps half an hour later that he gestured off to our left, where on a rise of land a single light twinkled. 'Someone's up tonight in Woolcot,' he observed. 'Probably the baker, putting early-morning rolls to rise.' He half-turned in his saddle and I felt more than saw his smile. 'I was born less than a mile from here. Come, boy, let's ride. I don't like to think of Raiders so close to Woolcot.'

And on we went, down a hillside so steep that I felt Sooty's muscles bunch as she leaned back on her haunches and more than half-slid her way down.

Dawn was greying the sky before I smelled the sea again. And it was still early when we crested a rise and looked down on the little village of Forge. It was a poor place in some ways; the anchorage was good only on certain tides. The rest of the time the ships had to anchor further out and let small craft ply back and forth between them and shore. About all that Forge had to keep it on the map was iron ore. I had not expected to see a bustling city. But neither was I prepared for the rising tendrils of smoke from blackened, open-roofed buildings. Somewhere an unmilked cow was lowing. A few scuttled boats were just off the shore, their masts sticking up like dead trees.

Morning looked down on empty streets. 'Where are the people?' I wondered aloud.

'Dead, taken hostage, or hiding in the woods still.' There was a tightness in Chade's voice that drew my eyes to his face. I was amazed at the pain I saw there. He saw me staring at him and shrugged mutely. 'The feeling that these folk belong to you, that their disaster is your failure ... it will come to you as you grow. It goes with the blood.' He left me to ponder that as he nudged his weary mount into a walk. We threaded our way down the hill and into the town.

Going more slowly seemed to be the only caution Chade was taking. There were two of us, weaponless, on tired horses, riding into a town where ...

'The ship's gone, boy. A raiding ship doesn't move without a full complement of rowers. Not in the current off this piece of coast. Which is another wonder. How did they know our tides and currents well enough to raid here? Why raid here at all? To carry off iron ore? Easier by far for them to pirate it off a trading-ship. It doesn't make sense, boy. No sense at all.'

Dew had settled heavily the night before. There was a rising stench in the town, of burned, wet homes. Here and there a few still smouldered. In front of some, possessions were strewn out into the street, but I did not know if the inhabitants had tried to save some of their goods, or if the Raiders had begun to carry things off and then changed their minds. A salt-box without a lid, several yards of green woollen goods, a shoe, a broken chair: the litter spoke mutely but eloquently of all that was homely and safe broken forever and trampled in the mud. A grim horror settled on me.

'We're too late,' Chade said softly. He reined his horse in and Sooty stopped beside him.

'What?' I asked stupidly, jolted from my thoughts.

'The hostages. They returned them.'

'Where?'

Chade looked at me incredulously, as if I were insane or very stupid. 'There. In the ruins of that building.'

It is difficult to explain what happened to me in the next moment of my life. So much occurred, all at once. I lifted my eyes to see a group of people, all ages and sexes, within the burned-out shell of some kind of store. They were muttering among themselves as they scavenged in it. They were bedraggled, but seemed unconcerned by it. As I watched, two women picked

up the same kettle at once, a large kettle, and then proceeded to slap at one another, each attempting to drive off the other and claim the loot. They reminded me of a couple of crows fighting over a cheese rind. They squawked and slapped and called one another vile names as they tugged at the opposing handles. The other folk paid them no mind, but went on with their own looting.

This was very strange behaviour for village folk. I had always heard of how after a raid, village folk banded together, cleaning out and making habitable what buildings were left standing, and then helping one another salvage cherished possessions, sharing and making do until cottages could be rebuilt, and store-buildings replaced. But these folk seemed completely careless that they had lost nearly everything and that family and friends had died in the raid. Instead, they had gathered to fight over what little was left.

This realization was horrifying enough to behold.

But I couldn't feel them either.

I hadn't seen or heard them until Chade pointed them out. I would have ridden right past them. And the other momentous thing that happened to me at that point was that I realized I was different from everyone else I knew. Imagine a seeing child growing up in a blind village, where no one else even suspects the possibility of such a sense. The child would have no words for colours, or for degrees of light. The others would have no conception of the way in which the child perceived the world. So it was in that moment, as we sat our horses and stared at the folk. For Chade wondered out loud, misery in his voice, 'What is wrong with them? What's got into them?'

I knew.

All the threads that run back and forth between folk, that twine from mother to child, from man to woman, all the kinships they extend to family and neighbour, to pets and stock, even to the fish of the sea and bird of the sky – all, all were gone.

All my life, without knowing it, I had depended on those threads of feelings to let me know when other live things were about. Dogs, horses, even chickens had them, as well as humans. And so I would look up at the door before Burrich entered it, or know there was one more new-born puppy in the stall, nearly buried under the straw. So I would wake when Chade opened the staircase. Because I could feel people. And that sense was the one that always alerted me first, that let me know to use my eyes and ears and nose as well, to see what they were about.

But these folk gave off no feelings at all.

Imagine water with no weight or wetness. That is how those folk were to me. Stripped of what made them not only human, but alive. To me, it was as if I watched stones rise up from the earth and quarrel and mutter at one another. A little girl found a pot of jam and stuck her fist in it and pulled out a handful to lick. A grown man turned from the scorched pile of fabric he had been rummaging through and crossed to her. He seized the pot and shoved the child aside, heedless of her angry shouts.

No one moved to interfere.

I leaned forward and seized Chade's reins as he moved to dismount. I shouted wordlessly at Sooty, and tired as she was, the fear in my voice energized her. She leaped forward, and my jerk on the reins brought Chade's bay with us. Chade was nearly unseated, but he clung to the saddle, and I took us out of the dead town as fast as we could go. I heard shouts behind us, colder than the howling of wolves, cold as storm wind down a chimney, but we were mounted and I was terrified. I didn't pull in or let Chade have his own reins back until the houses were well behind us. The road bent, and beside a small copse of trees, I pulled in at last. I don't think I even heard Chade's angry demands for an explanation until then.

He didn't get a very coherent one. I leaned forward on Sooty's neck and hugged her. I could feel her weariness, and the trembling of my own body. Dimly I felt that she shared my uneasiness. I thought of the empty folk back in Forge and nudged Sooty with my knees. She stepped out wearily and Chade kept pace, demanding to know what was wrong. My mouth was dry and my voice shook. I didn't look at him as I panted out my fear and a garbled explanation of what I had felt.

When I was silent, our horses continued to pace down the packed earth road. At length I got up my courage and looked at Chade. He was regarding me as if I had sprouted antlers. Once aware of this new sense, I couldn't ignore it. I sensed his scepticism. But I also felt Chade distance himself from me, just a little pulling-back, a little shielding of self from someone who had suddenly become a bit of a stranger. It hurt all the more because he had not pulled back that way from the folk in Forge. And they were a hundred times stranger than I was.

'They were like marionettes,' I told Chade. 'Like wooden things come to life and acting out some evil play. And if they had seen us, they would not have hesitated to kill us for our horses or our cloaks, or a piece of bread.'

They ...' I searched for words. 'They aren't even animals any more. There's nothing coming out of them. Nothing. They're like little separate things. Like a row of books, or rocks or ...'

'Boy,' Chade said, between gentleness and annoyance, 'you've got to get yourself in hand. It's been a long night of travel for us, and you're tired. Too long without a sleep, and the mind starts to play tricks, with waking dreams and ...'

'No.' I was desperate to convince him. 'It's not that. It's not going without sleep.'

'We'll go back there,' he said reasonably. The morning breeze swirled his dark cloak around him, in a way so ordinary that I felt my heart would break. How could there be folk like those in that village, and a simple morning breeze in the same world? And Chade, speaking in so calm and ordinary a voice? 'Those folk are just ordinary folk, boy, but they've gone through a very bad time, and so they're acting oddly. I knew a girl who saw her father killed by a bear. She was like that, just staring and grunting, hardly even moving to care for herself, for more than a month. Those folk will recover, when they go back to their ordinary lives.'

'Someone's ahead!' I warned him. I had heard nothing, seen nothing, felt only that tug at the cobweb of sense I'd discovered. But as we looked ahead down the road, we saw that we were approaching the tail-end of a rag-tag procession of people. Some led laden beasts, others pushed or dragged carts of bedraggled possessions. They looked over their shoulders at us on our horses as if we were demons risen from the earth to pursue them.

'The Pocked Man!' cried a man close to the end of the line, and he lifted a hand to point at us. His face was drawn with weariness and white with fear. His voice cracked on the words. 'It's the legends come to life,' he warned the others who halted fearfully to stare back at us. 'Heartless ghosts walk embodied through our village ruins, and the black-cloaked pocked man brings his disease upon us. We have lived too soft, and the old gods punish us. Our fat lives will be the death of us all.'

'Oh, damn it all. I didn't mean to be seen like this,' Chade breathed. I watched his pale hands gather his reins, turning his bay. 'Follow me, boy.' He did not look toward the man who still pointed a quavering finger at us. He moved slowly, almost languorously, as he guided his horse off the road and up a tussocky hillside. It was the same unchallenging way of moving that Burrich had when confronting a wary horse or dog. His tired horse left

the smooth trail reluctantly. Chade was headed up into a stand of birches on the hilltop. I stared at him uncomprehendingly. 'Follow me, boy,' he directed me over his shoulder when I hesitated. 'Do you want to be stoned in the road? It's not a pleasant experience.'

I moved carefully, swinging Sooty aside from the road as if I were totally unaware of the panicky folk ahead of us. They hovered there, between anger and fear. The feel of it was a black-red smear on the day's freshness. I saw a woman stoop, saw a man turn aside from his barrow.

'They're coming!' I warned Chade, even as they raced toward us. Some gripped stones, and others green staffs freshly taken from the forest. All had the bedraggled look of townsfolk forced to live in the open. Here were the rest of Forge's villagers, those not taken hostage by the Raiders. All of that I realized in the instant between digging in my heels and Sooty's weary plunge forward. Our horses were spent; their efforts at speed were grudging, despite the hail of rocks that thudded to the earth in our wake. Had the townsfolk been rested, or less fearful, they would have easily caught us. But I think they were relieved to see us flee. Their minds were more fixed on what walked the streets of their village than in fleeing strangers, no matter how ominous.

They stood in the road and shouted and waved their sticks until we were among the trees. Chade had taken the lead and I didn't question him as he took us on a parallel path that would keep us out of the sight of the folk leaving Forge. The horses had settled back into a grudging plod. I was grateful for the rolling hills and scattered trees that hid us from any pursuit. When I saw a stream glinting, I gestured to it without a word. Silently we watered the horses, and shook out for them some grain from Chade's supplies. I loosened harness, and wiped their draggled coats with handfuls of grass. For ourselves, there was cold streamwater and coarse travel-bread. I saw to the horses as best as I could. Chade seemed full of his own thoughts, and for a long time I respected their intensity. But finally I could contain my curiosity no longer and I asked the question.

'Are you really the Pocked Man?'

Chade startled, and then stared at me. There were equal parts amazement and ruefulness in that look. 'The Pocked Man? The legendary harbinger of disease and disaster? Oh, come, boy, you're not simple. That legend is hundreds of years old. Surely you can't believe I'm that ancient.'

I shrugged. I wanted to say, 'You are scarred, and you bring death', but I did not utter it. Chade did seem very old to me sometimes, and other times so full of energy that he seemed but a very young man in an old man's body.

'No, I am not the Pocked Man,' he went on, more to himself than to me. 'But after today, the rumours of him will be spread across the Six Duchies like pollen on the wind. There will be talk of disease and pestilence and divine punishments for imagined wrongdoing. I wish I had not been seen like this. The folk of the kingdom already have enough to fear. But there are sharper worries for us than superstitions. However you knew it, you were right. I have been thinking, most carefully, of everything I saw in Forge. And recalling the words of those villagers who tried to stone us. And the look of them all. I knew the Forge folk, in times past. They were doughty folk, not the type to flee in superstitious panic. But those folk we saw on the road, that was what they were doing. Leaving Forge, forever, or at least so they intend. Taking all that is left that they can carry. Leaving homes their grandfathers were born in. And leaving behind relatives who sift and scavenge in the ruins like witrings.

'The Raiders' threat was not an empty one. I think of those folk and I shiver. Something is sorely wrong, boy, and I fear what will come next. For if the Red Ships can capture our folk, and then demand that we pay them to kill them, for fear that they will otherwise return them to us like those ones were – what a bitter choice! And once more they have struck when we were least prepared to deal with it.' He turned to me as if to say more, then suddenly staggered. He sat down abruptly, his face greying. He bowed his head and covered his face with his hands.

'Chade!' I cried out in panic, and sprang to his side, but he turned aside from me.

'Carris seed,' he said through muffling hands. 'The worst part is that it abandons you so suddenly. Burrich was right to warn you about it, boy. But sometimes there are no choices but poor ones. Sometimes, in bad times like these.'

He lifted his head. His eyes were dull, his mouth almost slack. 'I need to rest now,' he said as piteously as a sick child. I caught him as he toppled and eased him to the ground. I pillowed his head on my saddlebags, and covered him with our cloaks. He lay still, his pulse slow and his breathing heavy, from that time until afternoon of the next day. I slept that night

against his back, hoping to keep him warm, and the next day used what was left of our supplies to feed him.

By that evening he was recovered enough to travel, and we began a dreary journey. We went slowly, going by night. Chade chose our paths, but I led, and often he was little more than a load upon his horse. It took us two days to cover the distance we had traversed in that one wild night. Food was sparse, and talk was even scarcer. Just thinking seemed to weary Chade, and whatever he thought about, he found too bleak for words.

He pointed out where I should kindle the signal fire that brought the boat back to us. They sent a dory ashore for him, and he got into it without a word. That showed how spent he was: he simply assumed I would be able to get our weary horses aboard the ship. So my pride forced me to manage that task, and once aboard, I slept as I had not for days. Then again we offloaded, and made a weary trek back to Neatbay. We came in during the small hours of the morning and Lady Thyme once more took up residence in the inn.

By afternoon of the next day, I was able to tell the innkeeper that she was doing much better and would enjoy a tray from her kitchens if she would send one round to the rooms. Chade did seem better, though he sweated profusely at times, and at such times smelled rancidly sweet of carris seed. He ate ravenously, and drank great quantities of water. But in two days he had me tell the innkeeper that Lady Thyme would be leaving on the morrow.

I recovered more readily, and had several afternoons of wandering Neatbay, gawking at the shops and vendors and keeping my ears wide for the gossip that Chade so treasured. In this way we learned much what we had expected to. Verity's diplomacy had gone well, and Lady Grace was now the darling of the town. Already I could see an increase in the work on the roads and fortifications. Watch Island's tower was now manned with Kelvar's best men, and folk referred to it as Grace Tower now. But they gossiped, too, of how the Red Ships had crept past Verity's own towers, and of the strange events at Forge. I heard more than once about sightings of the Pocked Man. And the tales they told about the inn fire of those who lived in Forge now gave me nightmares.

Those who had fled Forge told soul-cleaving tales of kinfolk gone cold and heartless. They lived there now, just as if they were still human, but those who had known them best were the least capable of being deceived. Those folk did by day what had never been known to happen at any time in

Buckkeep. The evils folk whispered were beyond my imaginings. Ships no longer stopped at Forge. Iron ore would have to be found elsewhere. It was said that no one even wanted to take in the folk that had fled, for who knew what taint they carried. After all, the Pocked Man had shown himself to them. Yet somehow it was harder still to hear ordinary folk say that soon it would be over, that the creatures of Forge would kill one another and thank all that was divine for that. The good folk of Neatbay wished death on those who had once been the good folk of Forge, and wished it as if it were the only good thing left that might befall them. As well it was.

On the night before Lady Thyme and I were to rejoin Verity's retinue to return to Buckkeep, I awoke to find a single candle burning and Chade sitting up, staring at the wall. Without my saying a word, he turned to me. 'You must be taught the Skill, boy,' he said as if it were a decision painfully come by. 'Evil times have come to us, and they will be with us for a long time. It is a time when good men must create whatever weapons they can. I will go to Shrewd yet again, and this time I will demand it. Hard times are here, boy. And I wonder if they will ever pass.'

In the years to come, I was to wonder that often.

ELEVEN

Forgings

The Pocked Man is a well-known figure in the folklore and drama of the Six Duchies. It is a poor troupe of puppeteers who does not possess a marionette of the Pocked Man, not only for his traditional roles, but also for his usefulness as an omen of disaster to come in original productions. Sometimes the Pocked Man puppet is merely displayed against the backdrop, to cast an ominous note to a scene. Among the Six Duchies, he is a universal symbol.

It is said the root of his legend reaches back to the first peopling of the duchies, not the conquering by the Farseer Outislanders, but the most ancient settling of the place by earlier immigrants. Even the Outislanders have a version of the most basic legend. It is a warning story, of the wrath of El the Sea God at being forsaken.

When the sea was young, El the first Elder believed in the people of the islands. To that folk he gave his sea, and with it all that swam within it, and all lands it touched for their own. For many years, the folk were grateful. They fished the sea, lived on its shores wherever they would, and raided any others who dared to take up abode where El had given them reign. Others who dared to sail their sea were the rightful prey of the folk as well. The folk prospered and grew tough and strong for El's sea winnowed them. Their lives were harsh and dangerous, but it made their boys grow to strong men and their maids fearless women at hearth or on deck. The folk respected El and to that Elder they offered their praises and only by him did they curse. And El took pride in his folk.

But in El's generosity, he blessed his folk too well. Not enough of them died in the harsh winters, and the storms he sent were too mild to conquer their seamanship. So the folk grew in number. So grew also their herds and flocks. In fat years, weak children did not die, but grew, and stayed at home, and put land to the plough to feed the swollen flocks and herds and other

weaklings like themselves. The soil-grubbers did not praise El for his strong winds and raiding currents. Instead, they praised and cursed only by Eda, who is the Elder of those who plough and plant and tend the beasts. So Eda blessed her weaklings with the increase of their plants and beasts. This did not please El, but he ignored them, for he still had the hardy folk of the ships and the waves. They blessed by him and they cursed by him, and to encourage their strength he sent them storms and cold winters.

But as time went on, those loyal to El dwindled. The soft folk of the soil seduced the sailors, and bore them children fit only for tending to the dirt. And the folk left the winter shores and ice-strewn pastures, and moved south, to the soft lands of grapes and grain. Fewer and fewer folk came each year to plough the waves and to reap the fish that El had decreed to them. Less and less often did El hear his name in a blessing or a curse. Until at last there was a day when there was only one left who only blessed or cursed in El's name. And he was a skinny old man, too old for the sea, swollen and aching in his joints with few teeth left in his head. His blessings and curses were weak things and insulted more than pleased El, who had little use for rickety old men.

At last there came a storm that should have ended the old man and his small boat. But when the cold waves closed over him, he clung to the wreckage of his craft, and dared to cry El for mercy, though all know mercy is not in him. So enraged was El by this blasphemy that he would not receive the old man in to his sea, but instead cast him up upon the shore, and cursed him that he could never more sail, but neither could he die. And when he crawled from the salt waves, his face and body were pocked as if barnacles had clung to him, and he staggered to his feet and went forth into the soft lands. And everywhere he went, he saw only soft soil-grubbers. And he warned them of their folly, and that El would raise up a new and hardier folk and give their heritage to them. But the folk would not listen, so soft and set had they become. Yet everywhere the old man went, disease followed in his wake. And it was all the pox diseases he spread, the ones that care not if a man is strong or weak, hard or soft, but take any and all that they touch. And this was fitting, for all know that the poxes come up from bad dust and are spread by the turning of the soil.

Thus is the tale told. And so the Pocked Man has become the harbinger of death and disease, and a rebuke to those who live soft and easily because their lands bear well.

Verity's return to Buckkeep was gravely marred by the events at Forge. Verity, pragmatic to a fault, had himself left Bayguard as soon as Dukes Kelvar and Shemshy had shown themselves in accord regarding Watch Island. Verity and his picked troops had actually left Bayguard before Chade and I returned to the inn. So the trek back had a hollow feel to it. During the days, and around the fires at night, folk spoke of Forge, and even within our caravan, the stories multiplied and embroidered themselves.

My journey home was spoiled by Chade's resumption of his noisome charade as the vile old lady. I had to fetch and wait upon her, right up to the time that her Buckkeep servants appeared to escort her back up to her chambers. 'She' lived in the women's wing, and though I devoted myself in the days to come to hear any and all gossip about her, I heard nothing except that she was reclusive and difficult. How Chade had created her and maintained her fictitious existence, I never completely discovered.

Buckkeep, in our absence, seemed to have undergone a tempest of new events, so that I felt as if we had been gone ten years rather than a matter of weeks. Not even Forge could completely eclipse Lady Grace's performance. The story was told and re-told, with minstrels vying to see whose recounting would become the standard. I heard that Duke Kelvar actually went down on one knee and kissed the tips of her fingers after she had spoken, very eloquently, about making the towers the grand jewels of their land. One source even told me that Lord Shemshy had personally thanked the lady and sought often to dance with her that evening, and thus nearly precipitated an entirely different disagreement between the neighbouring dukedoms.

I was glad of her success. I even heard it whispered, more than once, that Prince Verity should find himself a lady of like sentiments. As often as he was away, settling internal matters and chasing raiders, the people were beginning to feel the need of a strong ruler at home. The old King, Shrewd, was still nominally our sovereign. But, as Burrich observed, the people tended to look ahead. 'And', he added, 'folk like to know the King-in-Waiting has a warm bed to come home to. It gives them something to make their fancies about. Few enough of them can afford any romance in their lives, so they imagine all they can for their king. Or prince.'

But Verity himself, I knew, had no time to think about well-warmed beds, or any sort of bed at all. Forge had been both an example and a threat. Word of others followed, three in swift succession. Croft, up in the Near Islands, had apparently been 'Raider-Forged' as it came to be known, some

weeks earlier. Word was slow to come from icy shores, but when it came, it was grim. Croft folk, too, had been taken hostage. The council of the town had, like Shrewd, been mystified by the Red Ships' ultimatum that they pay tribute or their hostages would be returned. They had not paid. And like Forge, their hostages had been returned, mostly sound of body, but bereft of any of the kinder emotions of humanity. The whispered word was that Croft had been more direct in their solution. The harsh climates of the Near Islands bred a harsh people. Yet even they had deemed it kindness when they took the sword to their now-heartless kin.

Two other villages were raided after Forge. At Rockgate the folk had paid the ransom. Parts of bodies had washed up the next day, and the village had gathered to bury them. The news came to Buckkeep with no apologies; only with the unvoiced assumption that had the King been more vigilant, they would have had warning of the raid at least.

Sheepmire met the challenge squarely. They refused to pay the tribute, but with the rumours of Forge running hot through the land, they prepared themselves. They had met their returned hostages with halters and shackles. They took their own folk back, clubbing them senseless in some cases, before tying them and taking them back into their rightful homes. The village was united in attempting to bring them back to their former selves. The tales from Sheepmire were the most told ones; of a mother who snapped at a child brought to her for nursing, declaring as she cursed at it that she had no use for the whimpering, wet creature. Of the little child who cried and screamed at his bonds, only to fly at his own father with a toasting fork as soon as the heartbroken sire released him. Some cursed and fought and spat at their kin. Others settled into a life of bondage and idleness, eating the food and drinking the ale set before them, but offering no words of thanks or affection. Freed of restraints, those ones did not attack their own families, but neither did they work, nor even join with them in their evening pastimes. They stole without remorse, even from their own children, and squandered coin and gobbled food like gluttons. No joy they gave to anyone, not even a kind word. But the word from Sheepmire was that the folk there intended to persevere until the 'Red Ship sickness' passed. They gave the nobles at Buckkeep a bit of hope to cling to. They spoke of the courage of the villagers with admiration, and vowed that they, too, would do the same, if kin of theirs were Raider-Forged.

Sheepmire and its brave inhabitants became a rallying point for the Six Duchies. King Shrewd levied more taxes in their name. Some went to provide grain for those so occupied with caring for bound kin that they had no time to rebuild their ravaged flocks or replant their burned fields. And some went to build more ships and hire more men to patrol the coastlines.

At first folk took pride in what they would do. Those who lived on the sea-cliffs began to keep volunteer watch. Runners and messenger birds and signal fires were kept in place. Some villages sent sheep and supplies to Sheepmire, to be given to those who needed help most. But as the long weeks passed, and there was no sign that any of the returned hostages had recovered their sensibilities, those hopes and devotions began to seem pathetic rather than noble. Those who had most supported those efforts now declared that, were they taken hostage, they would choose to be hacked to pieces and thrown into the sea rather than returned to cause their families such hardship and heartbreak.

Worst, I think, was that in such a time the throne itself had no firm idea of what to do. Had a royal edict been issued, to say either that folk must or must not pay the demanded tribute for hostages, it would have gone better. No matter which, some folk would have disagreed. But at least the King would have taken a stand, and people would have had some sense that this threat was being faced. Instead, the increased patrols and watches only made it seem that the Buckkeep itself was in terror of this new threat, but had no strategy for facing it. In the absence of royal edict, the coastal villages took things into their own hands. The councils met, to decide what they would do if Forged. And some decided one way, and some the other.

‘But in every case,’ Chade told me wearily, ‘it matters not what they decide; it weakens their loyalty to the kingdom. Whether they pay the tribute or not, the Raiders may laugh over their blood-ale at us. For in deciding, our villagers are saying in their minds, not “if we are Forged” but “when we are Forged”. And thus they already have been raped in spirit if not in flesh. They look at their kin, mother at child, man at parents, and already they have given them up, to death or Forging. And the kingdom fails, for as each town must decide alone, so it is separated from the whole. We will shatter into a thousand little townships, each worrying only about what it will do for itself if it is raided. If Shrewd and Verity do not act quickly, the kingdom will become a thing that exists only in name, and in the minds of its former rulers.’

‘But what can they do?’ I demanded. ‘No matter what edict is passed, it will be wrong.’ I picked up the tongs and pushed the crucible I was tending a bit deeper into the flames.

‘Sometimes,’ grumbled Chade, ‘it is better to be defiantly wrong than silent. Look, boy, if you, a mere lad, can realize that either decision is wrong, so can all folk. But at least such an edict would give us a common response. It would not be as if each village were left to lick its own wounds. And in addition to such an edict, Shrewd and Verity should take other actions.’ He leaned closer to peer at the bubbling liquid. ‘More heat,’ he suggested.

I picked up a small bellows, plied it carefully. ‘Such as?’

‘Organize raids on the Outislanders in return. Provide vessels and supplies to any willing to undertake such a raid. Forbid that herds and flocks be grazed so temptingly on the coast pastures. Supply more arms to the villages if we cannot give each one men to protect it. By Eda’s plough, give them pellets of carris seed and nightshade, to carry in pouches about their wrists, so that if they are captured in a raid, they can take their own lives instead of being hostages. Anything, boy. Anything the King did at this point would be better than this damned indecisiveness.’

I sat staring at Chade. I had never heard him speak so forcefully, nor had I ever known him to criticize Shrewd so openly. It shocked me. I held my breath, hoping he’d say more but almost fearful of what I might hear. He seemed unaware of my stare. ‘Poke that a bit deeper. But be careful. If it explodes, King Shrewd may have himself two Pocked Men instead of one.’ He glanced at me. ‘Yes, that’s how I was marked. But it might have well and truly been a pox, for how Shrewd hears me lately. “Ill omens and warnings and cautions fill you,” he said to me. “But I think you want the boy trained in the Skill simply because you were not. It’s a bad ambition, Chade. Put it from you.” There speaks the Queen’s ghost with the King’s tongue.’

Chade’s bitterness filled me with stillness.

‘Chivalry. That’s who we need now,’ he went on after a moment. ‘Shrewd holds back, and Verity is a good soldier, but he listens to his father too much. Verity was raised to be second, not first. He does not take the initiative. We need Chivalry. He’d go into those towns, talk to the folk who have lost loved ones to Forging. Damn, he’d even talk to the Forged ones themselves ...’

‘Do you think it would do any good?’ I asked softly. I scarcely dared to move. I sensed that Chade was talking more to himself than to me.

‘It wouldn’t solve it, no. But our folk would have a sense of their ruler’s involvement. Sometimes that’s all it takes, boy. But all Verity does is march his toy soldiers about and weigh strategies. And Shrewd watches it happen, and thinks not of his people, but only of how to assure that Regal can be kept safe and yet readied in power should Verity manage to get himself killed.’

‘Regal?’ I blurted in amazement. Regal, with his pretty clothes and cockerel posturings? Always he was at Shrewd’s heels, but never had I thought of him as a real prince. To hear his name come up in such a discussion jolted me.

‘He has become his father’s favourite,’ Chade growled. ‘Shrewd has done nothing but spoil him since the Queen died. He tries to buy the boy’s heart with gifts, now that his mother is no longer around to claim his allegiance. And Regal takes full advantage. He speaks only what the old man loves to hear. And Shrewd gives him too much rein. He lets him wander about, squandering coin on useless visits to Farrow and Tilth, where his mother’s people fill Regal with ideas of his self-importance. The boy should be kept at home and made to give some account for how he spends his time. And the King’s money. What he spends gallivanting about would have outfitted a warship.’ And then, suddenly annoyed, ‘That’s too hot! You’ll lose it, fish it out quickly.’

But his words came too late, for the crucible cracked with a noise like breaking ice and its contents filled Chade’s tower room with an acrid smoke that brought all lessons and talk to an end for that night.

I was not soon summoned again. My other lessons went on, but I missed Chade as the weeks passed and he did not call for me. I knew he was not displeased with me, but only preoccupied. When, idle one day, I pushed my awareness towards him, I felt only secrecy and discordance. And a wallop to the back of my head when Burrich caught me at it.

‘Stop it,’ he hissed, and ignored my studied look of shocked innocence. He glanced about the stall I was mucking out as if he expected to find a dog or cat lurking.

‘There’s nothing here!’ he exclaimed.

‘Just manure and straw,’ I agreed, rubbing the back of my head.

‘Then what were you doing?’

‘Daydreaming,’ I muttered. ‘That was all.’

‘You can’t fool me, Fitz,’ he growled. ‘And I won’t have it. Not in my stables. You won’t pervert my beasts that way. Or degrade Chivalry’s blood.’

Mind what I've told you.'

I clenched my jaws and lowered my eyes and kept on working. After a time I heard him sigh and move away. I went on raking, inwardly seething and resolving never to let Burrich come up on me unawares again.

The rest of that summer was such a whirlpool of events that I find it hard to recall their progression. Overnight, the very feeling of the air seemed to change. When I went into town, all of the talk was of fortifications and readiness. Only two more towns were Forged that summer, but it seemed a hundred, for the stories of it were repeated and enlarged from lip to lip.

'Until it seems as if that is all folk talk about any more,' Molly complained to me.

We were walking on Long Beach, in the light of the summer evening sun. The wind off the water was a welcome bit of cool after a muggy day. Burrich had been called away to Springmouth to see if he could work out why all the cattle there were developing huge hide sores. It meant no morning lessons for me, but many, many more chores with the horses and hounds in his absence, especially as Cob had gone to Turlake with Regal, to manage his horses and hounds for a summer hunt.

But the opposite weight of the balance was that my evenings were less supervised, and I had more time to visit town.

My evening walks with Molly were almost a routine now. Her father's health was failing and he scarcely needed to drink to fall into an early and deep sleep each night. Molly would pack a bit of cheese and sausage for us, or a small loaf and some smoked fish, and we would take a basket and a bottle of cheap wine and walk out down the beach to the breakwater rocks. There we would sit on the rocks as they gave up the last heat of the day, and Molly would tell me about her day's work and the day's gossip and I would listen. Sometimes our elbows bumped as we walked.

'Sara, the butcher's daughter, told me that she positively yearns for winter to come. The winds and ice will beat the Red Ships back to their own shores for a bit, and give us a rest from fear, she says. But then Kelty up and says that maybe we'll be able to stop fearing more Forging, but that we'll still have to fear the Forged folk that are loose in our land. Rumour says that some from Forge have left there, now that there's nothing left for them to steal, and that they travel about as bandits, robbing travellers.'

'I doubt it. More than likely it's other folk doing the robbing, but trying to pass themselves off as Forged folk to send revenge looking elsewhere.

Forged folk don't have enough kinship left in them to be a band of anything,' I contradicted her lazily. I was looking out across the bay, my eyes almost closed against the glare of the sun on the water. I didn't have to look at Molly to feel her there beside me. It was an interesting tension, one I didn't fully understand. She was sixteen, and I about fourteen, and those two years loomed between us like an unsurmountable wall. Yet she always made time for me, and seemed to enjoy my company. She seemed as aware of me as I was of her. But if I quested toward her at all, she would draw back, halting to shake a pebble from her shoe or suddenly speaking of her father's illness and how much he needed her. Yet if I drew my sensings back from that tension, she became uncertain and shyer of speech, and would try to look at my face and the set of my mouth and eyes. I didn't understand it, but it was as if we held a string taut between us. But now I heard an edge of annoyance in her speech.

'Oh. I see. And you know so much of Forged folk, do you, more than those who have been robbed by them?'

Her tart words caught me off-balance and it was a moment or two before I could speak. Molly knew nothing of Chade and me, let alone of my side trip with him to Forge. To her, I was an errand-boy for the keep, working for the stablemaster when I wasn't fetching for the scribe, I couldn't betray my first-hand knowledge, let alone how I had sensed what Forging was.

'I've heard the talk of the guards, when they're around the stables and kitchens at night. Soldiers like them have seen much of all kinds of folk, and they're the ones who say that the Forged ones have no friendships, no family, no kinship ties at all left. Still, I suppose if one of them took to robbing travellers, others would copy him, and it would be almost the same as a band of robbers.'

'Perhaps.' She seemed mollified by my comments. 'Look, let's climb up there to eat.'

'Up there' was a shelf on the cliff's edge rather than the breakwater. But I assented with a nod, and the next handful of minutes were spent in getting ourselves and our basket up there. It required more arduous climbing than our earlier expeditions had. I caught myself watching to see how Molly would manage her skirts, and taking opportunities to catch at her arm to balance her, or take her hand to help her up a steep bit while she kept hold of the basket. In a flash of insight I knew that Molly's suggestion that we climb

had been her way of manipulating the situation to cause this. We finally gained the ledge and sat, looking out over the water with her basket between us, and I was savouring my awareness of her awareness of me. It reminded me of the clubs of the Springfest jugglers as they handed them back and forth, back and forth, more and more and faster and faster. The silence lasted until a time when one of us had to speak. I looked at her, but she looked aside. She looked into the basket and said, 'Oh, dandelion wine? I thought that wasn't any good until after midwinter.'

'It's last year's ... it's had a winter to age,' I told her, and took it from her to work the cork loose with my knife. She watched me worry at it for a while, and then took it from me and, drawing her own slender sheath-knife, speared and twisted it out with a practised knack that I envied.

She caught my look and shrugged. 'I've been pulling corks for my father for as long as I can remember. It used to be because he was too drunk. Now he doesn't have the strength in his hands any more, even when he's sober.' Pain and bitterness mingled in her words.

'Ah.' I floundered for a more pleasant topic. 'Look, the *Rainmaiden*.' I pointed out over the water to a sleek-hulled ship coming into the harbour under oars. 'I've always thought her the most beautiful ship in the harbour.'

'She's been on patrol: The cloth merchants took up a collection. Almost every merchant in town contributed. Even I, although all I could spare was candles for her lanterns. She's manned with fighters now, and escorts the ships between here and Highdowns. The *Greenspray* meets them there and takes them further up the coast.'

'I hadn't heard that.' And it surprised me that I had not heard such a thing up in the keep itself. My heart sank in me, that even Buckkeep Town was taking measures independent of the King's advice or consent. I said as much.

'Well, folk have to do whatever they can if all King Shrewd is going to do is click his tongue and frown about it. It's well enough for him to bid us to be strong, when he sits secure up in his castle. It isn't as if his son or brother or little girl will be Forged.'

It shamed me that I could think of nothing to say in my King's defence. And shame stung me to say, 'Well, you're almost as safe as the King himself, living here below in Buckkeep Town.'

Molly looked at me levelly. 'I had a cousin, apprenticed out in Forge Town.' She paused, then said carefully, 'Will you think me cold when I say

that we were relieved to hear he had only been killed? It was uncertain for a week or so, but finally we had word from one who had seen him die. And my father and I were both relieved. We could grieve, knowing that his life was simply over and we would miss him. We no longer had to wonder if he were still alive and behaving like a beast, causing misery to others and shame to himself.'

I was silent for a bit. Then, 'I'm sorry.' It seemed inadequate, and I reached out to pat her motionless hand. For a second it was almost as if I couldn't feel her there, as if her pain had shocked her into an emotional numbness the equal of a Forged one. But then she sighed and I felt her presence again beside me. 'You know,' I ventured, 'perhaps the King himself does not know what to do either. Perhaps he is at as great a loss for a solution as we are.'

'He is the King!' Molly protested. 'And named Shrewd to be shrewd. Folk are saying now he but holds back to keep the strings of his purse tight. Why should he pay out of his hoard, when desperate merchants will hire mercenaries of their own? But, enough of this ...' she held up a hand to stop my words. 'This is not why we came out here into the peace and coolness, to talk of politics and fears. Tell me instead of what you've been doing. Has the speckled bitch had her pups yet?'

And so we spoke of other things, of Motley's puppies and of the wrong stallion getting at a mare in season, and then she told me of gathering greencones to scent her candles and picking blackberries, and how busy she would be for the next week, trying to make blackberry preserves for the winter while still tending the shop and making candles.

We talked and ate and drank and watched the late sun of summer as it lingered low on the horizon, almost but not quite setting. I felt the tension as a pleasant thing between us, as both a suspension and a wonder. I viewed it as an extension of my strange new sense, and so I marvelled that Molly seemed to feel and react to it as well. I wanted to speak to her about it, to ask her if she was aware of other folk in a similar way. But I feared that if I asked her, I might reveal myself as I had to Chade, or that she might be disgusted by it as I knew Burrich would be. So I smiled, and we talked, and I kept my thoughts to myself.

I walked her home through the quiet streets and bid her good night at the door of the chandlery. She paused a moment, as if thinking of something

else she wanted to say, but then gave me only a quizzical look and a softly muttered, 'Good night, Newboy.'

I took myself home under a deeply blue sky pierced by bright stars, past the sentries at their eternal dice game and up to the stables. I made a quick round of the stalls, but all was calm and well there, even with the new puppies. I noticed two strange horses in one of the paddocks, and one lady's palfrey had been stabled. Some visiting noblewoman come to court, I decided. I wondered what had brought her here at the end of the summer, and admired the quality of her horses. Then I left the stables and headed up to the keep.

By habit my path took me through the kitchens. Cook was familiar with the appetites of stable-boys and men-at-arms, and knew that regular meals did not always suffice to keep one full. Especially lately I had found myself getting hungry at all hours, while Mistress Hasty had recently declared that if I didn't stop growing so rapidly, I should have to wrap myself in barkcloth like a wild man, for she had no idea how to keep me looking as if my clothes fitted. I was already thinking of the big earthenware bowl that Cook kept full of soft biscuits and covered with a cloth, and of a certain wheel of especially sharp cheese, and how well both would go with some ale, when I entered the kitchen door.

There was a woman at the table. She had been eating an apple and cheese, but at the sight of me coming in the door, she sprang up and put her hand over her heart as if she thought I were the Pocked Man himself. I paused. 'I did not mean to startle you, lady. I was merely hungry, and thought to get myself some food. Will it bother you if I stay?'

The lady slowly sank back into her seat. I wondered privately what someone of her rank was doing alone in the kitchen at night, for her high birth was something that could not be disguised by the simple cream robe she wore or the weariness in her face. This, undoubtedly, was the rider of the palfrey in the stable, and not some lady's maid. If she had awakened hungry at night, why hadn't she simply bestirred a servant to fetch something for her?

Her hand rose from clutching at her breast to pat at her lips, as if to steady her uneven breath. When she spoke, her voice was well-modulated, almost musical. 'I would not keep you from your food. I was simply a bit startled. You ... came in so suddenly.'

'My thanks, lady.'

I moved around the big kitchen, from ale cask to cheese to bread, but everywhere I went, her eyes followed me. Her food lay ignored on the table where she had dropped it when I came in. I turned from pouring myself a mug of ale to find her eyes wide upon me. Instantly she dropped them away. Her mouth worked, but she said nothing.

‘May I do something for you?’ I asked politely. ‘Help you find something? Would you care for some ale?’

‘If you would be so kind.’ She said the words softly. I brought her the mug I had just filled and set it on the table before her. She drew back when I came near her, as if I carried some contagion. I wondered if I smelled bad from my stable work earlier. I decided not, for Molly would have surely mentioned it. Molly was ever frank with me about such things.

I drew another mug for myself, and then, looking about, decided it would be better to carry my food up to my room. The lady’s whole attitude bespoke her uneasiness at my presence. But as I was struggling to balance biscuits and cheese and mug, she gestured at the bench opposite her. ‘Sit down,’ she told me, as if she had read my thoughts. ‘It is not right I should scare you away from your meal.’

Her tone was neither command nor invitation, but something in between. I took the seat she indicated, my ale slopping over a bit as I juggled food and mug into place. I felt her eyes on me as I sat. Her own food remained ignored before her. I ducked my head to avoid that gaze, and ate quickly, as furtively as a rat in a corner who suspects a cat is behind the door, waiting. She did not stare rudely, but openly watched me, with the sort of observation that made my hands clumsy, and led to my acute awareness that I had just unthinkingly wiped my mouth on the back of my sleeve.

I could think of nothing to say, and yet the silence jabbed at me. The biscuit seemed dry in my mouth, making me cough, and when I tried to wash it down with ale, I choked. Her eyebrows twitched, her mouth set more firmly. Even with my eyes lowered to my plate, I felt her gaze. I rushed through my food, wanting only to escape her hazel eyes and straight silent mouth. I pushed the last hunks of bread and cheese into my mouth and stood up quickly, bumping against the table and almost knocking the bench over in my haste. I headed toward the door, then remembered Burrich’s instructions about excusing oneself from a lady’s presence. I swallowed my half-chewed mouthful.

‘Good night to you, lady,’ I muttered, thinking the words not quite right, but unable to summon better. I crabbed toward the door.

‘Wait,’ she said, and when I paused, she asked, ‘Do you sleep upstairs, or out in the stables?’

‘Both. Sometimes. I mean, either. Ah, good night, then, lady.’ I turned and all but fled. I was halfway up the stairs before I wondered at the strangeness of her question. It was only when I went to undress for bed that I realized I still gripped my empty ale mug. I went to sleep, feeling a fool, and wondering why.

TWELVE

Patience

The Red Ship Raiders were a misery and an affliction to their own folk long before they troubled the shores of the Six Duchies. From obscure cult beginnings, they rose to both religious and political power by means of ruthless tactics. Chiefs and Headmen who refused to align themselves with their beliefs often found that their wives and children had become the victims of what we have come to call Forging in memory of the ill-fated town of Forge. Hard-hearted and cruel as we consider the Outislanders to be, they have in their tradition a strong vein of honour, and heinous penalties for those who break the kin-rules. Imagine the anguish of the Outislander father whose son has been Forged. He must either conceal his son's crimes when the boy lies to him, steals from him, and forces himself upon the household women, or see the boy flayed alive for his crimes and suffer both the loss of his heir and the respect of the other Houses. The threat of Forging was a powerful detriment to opposing the political power of the Red Ship Raiders.

By the time the Raiders began to harry our shores seriously, they had subdued most opposition in the Out Islands. Those who openly opposed them died or fled. Others grudgingly paid tribute and clenched their teeth against the outrages of those who controlled the cult. But many gladly joined the ranks, and painted the hulls of their raiding vessels red and never questioned the rightness of what they did. It seems likely that these converts were formed mostly from the lesser Houses, who had never before been offered the opportunity to rise in influence. But he who controlled the Red Ship Raiders cared nothing for who a man's forebears had been, so long as he had the man's unswerving loyalty.

I saw the lady twice more before I discovered who she was. The second time I saw her was the next night, at about the same hour. Molly had been busy with her berries, so I had gone out for an evening of tavern music with Kerry and Dirk. I had had perhaps one or at most two glasses more of ale

than I should have. I was neither dizzy nor sick, but I was placing my feet carefully for I had already taken one tumble in a pothole on the dusky road.

Separate but adjacent to the dusty kitchen courtyard with its cobbles and wagon docks is a hedged area. It is commonly referred to as the Women's Garden, not because it is exclusively their province but simply because they have the tending and the knowing of it. It is a pleasant place, with a pond in the middle, and many low beds of herbs set among flowering plantings, fruit-vines and green-stoned pathways. I knew better than to go straight to bed when I was in this condition. If I attempted to sleep now, the bed would begin to spin and sway, and within an hour, I would be puking sick. It had been a pleasant evening, and that seemed a wretched way to end it, so I took myself to the Women's Garden instead of to my room.

In one angle of the garden, between a sun-warmed wall and a smaller pond, there grew seven varieties of thyme. Their fragrances on a hot day can be giddy, but then, with evening verging on night, the mingling scents seemed to soothe my head. I splashed my face in the little pool, and then put my back to the rock wall that was still releasing the sun's heat back to the night. Frogs were chirruping to one another. I lowered my eyes and watched the pond's calm surface to keep myself from spinning.

Footsteps. Then a woman's voice asked tartly, 'Are you drunk?'

'Not quite,' I replied affably, thinking it was Tilly the orchard-girl. 'Not quite enough time or coin,' I added jokingly.

'I suppose you learned it from Burrich. The man is a sot and a lecher, and he has cultivated like traits in you. Ever he brings those around him down to his level.'

The bitterness in the woman's voice made me look up. I squinted through the dimming light to make out her features. It was the lady of the previous evening. Standing on the garden path, in a simple shift, she looked at first glance to be little more than a girl. She was slender, and less tall than I, though I was not overly tall for my fourteen years. But her face was a woman's, and right now her mouth was set in a condemning line echoed by the brows knit over her hazel eyes. Her hair was dark and curling, and though she had tried to restrain it, ringlets of it had escaped at her forehead and neck.

It was not that I felt compelled to defend Burrich; it was simply that my condition was no doing of his. So I made answer something to the effect that

as he was some miles distant in a different town, he could scarcely be responsible for what I put in my mouth and swallowed.

The lady came two steps closer. 'But he has never taught you better, has he? He has never counselled you against drunkenness, has he?'

There is a saying from the southlands that there is truth in wine. There must be a bit of it in ale, also. I spoke it that night. 'Actually, my lady, he would be greatly displeased with me right now. First, he would berate me for not rising when a lady spoke to me.' And here I lurched to my feet. 'And then, he would lecture me long and severely about the behaviour expected from one who carries a prince's blood if not his titles.' I managed a bow, and when I succeeded, I distinguished myself by straightening up with a flourish. 'So, good evening to you, fair Lady of the Garden. I bid you good night, and I shall remove my oafish self from your presence.'

I was all the way to the arched entryway in the wall when she called out, 'Wait!' But my stomach gave a quietly protesting grumble, and I pretended not to hear. She did not come after me, but I felt sure she watched me, and so I kept my head up and my stride even until I was out of the kitchen courtyard. I took myself down to the stables, where I vomited into the manure pile, and ended up sleeping in a clean empty stall because the steps up to Burrich's loft looked entirely too steep.

But youth is amazingly resilient, especially when feeling threatened. I was up at dawn the next day, for I knew Burrich was expected home by afternoon. I washed myself at the stables, and decided the tunic I had worn for the last three days needed to be replaced. I was doubly conscious of its condition when in the corridor outside my room the lady accosted me. She looked me up and down, and before I could speak, she addressed me.

'Change your shirt,' she told me. And then added, 'Those leggings make you look like a stork. Tell Mistress Hasty they need replacing.'

'Good morning, lady,' I said. It was not a reply, but those were the only words that came to me in my astonishment. I decided she was very eccentric, even more so than Lady Thyme. My best course was to humour her. I expected her to turn aside and go on her way. Instead she continued to hold me with her eyes.

'Do you play a musical instrument?' she demanded.

I shook my head mutely.

'You sing, then?'

'No, my lady.'

She looked troubled as she asked, ‘Then perhaps you have been taught to recite the Epics and the knowledge verses, of herbs and healings and navigation ... that sort of thing?’

‘Only the ones that pertain to the care of horses, hawks and dogs,’ I told her, almost honestly. Burrich had demanded I learn those. Chade had taught me a set about poisons and antidotes, but he had warned me they were not commonly known, and were not to be casually recited.

‘But you dance, of course? And you have been instructed in the making of verse?’

I was totally confused. ‘Lady, I think you have confused me with someone else. Perhaps you are thinking of August, the King’s nephew. He is but a year or two younger than I and ...’

‘I am not mistaken. Answer my question!’ she demanded, almost shrilly.

‘No, my lady. The teachings you speak of are for those who are ... well-born. I have not been taught them.’

At each of my denials, she had appeared more troubled. Her mouth grew straighter, and her hazel eyes clouded. ‘This is not to be tolerated,’ she declared, and turning in a flurry of skirts, she hastened off down the hallway. After a moment, I went into my room, changed my shirt, and put on the longest pair of leggings I owned. I dismissed the lady from my thoughts and threw myself into my chores and lessons for the day.

It was raining that afternoon when Burrich returned. I met him outside the stables, taking his horse’s head as he swung stiffly down from the saddle. ‘You’ve grown, Fitz,’ he observed and looked me over with a critical eye, as if I were a horse or hound that was showing unexpected potential. He opened his mouth as if to say something more, then shook his head and gave a half-snort. ‘Well?’ he asked, and I began my report.

He had been gone scarcely more than a month, but Burrich liked to know things down to the smallest detail. He walked beside me, listening, as I led his horse to her stall and proceeded to care for her.

Sometimes it surprised me how much like Chade he could be. They were very alike in the way they expected me to recall exact details, and to be able to relate the doings of last week or last month in correct order. Learning to report for Chade had not been that difficult; he had merely formalized the requirements that Burrich had long expected of me. Years later I was to realize how similar it was to the reporting of a man-at-arms to his superior.

Another man would have gone off to the kitchens or the baths after hearing my summarized version of everything that had gone on in his absence. But Burrich insisted on walking through his stables, stopping here to chat with a groom and there to speak softly to a horse. When he came to the lady's old palfrey, he stopped. He looked at the horse for a few minutes in silence.

'I trained this beast,' he said abruptly, and at his voice the horse turned in the stall to face him and whickered softly. 'Silk,' he said softly, and stroked the soft nose. He sighed suddenly. 'So the Lady Patience is here. Has she seen you yet?'

Now there was a question difficult to answer. A thousand thoughts collided in my head at once. The Lady Patience, my father's wife, and by many accounts, the one most responsible for my father's withdrawal from the court and from me. That was who I had been chatting with in the kitchen, and drunkenly saluting. That was who had quizzed me this morning on my education. To Burrich I muttered, 'Not formally. But we've met.'

He surprised me by laughing. 'Your face is a picture, Fitz. I can see she hasn't changed much, just by your reaction. The first time I met her was in her father's orchard. She was sitting up in a tree. She demanded that I remove a splinter from her foot, and took her shoe and stocking off right there so I could do it. Right there in front of me. And she had no idea at all of who I was. Nor I, her. I thought she was a lady's maid. That was years ago, of course, and even a few years before my prince met her. I suppose I wasn't much older than you are now.' He paused, and his face softened. 'And she had a wretched little dog she always carried about with her in a basket. It was always wheezing and retching up wads of its own fur. Its name was Featherduster.' He paused a moment, and smiled almost fondly. 'What a thing to remember, after all these years.'

'Did she like you when she first met you?' I asked tactlessly.

Burrich looked at me and his eyes became opaque, the man disappearing behind the gaze. 'Better than she does now,' he said abruptly. 'But that's of small import. Let's hear it, Fitz. What does she think of you?'

Now there was a question. I plunged into an accounting of our meetings, glossing over details as much as I dared. I was halfway through my garden encounter when Burrich held up a hand.

'Stop,' he said quietly.

I fell silent.

‘When you cut pieces out of the truth to avoid looking like a fool, you end up sounding like a moron instead. Let’s start again.’

So I did, and spared him nothing, of either my behaviour or the lady’s comments. When I was finished, I waited for his judgement. Instead, he reached out and stroked the palfrey’s nose. ‘Some things are changed by time,’ he said at last. ‘And others are not.’ He sighed. ‘Well, Fitz, you have a way of presenting yourself to the very people you should most ardently avoid. I am sure there will be consequences from this, but I have not the slightest idea what they will be. That being so, there’s no point to worrying. Let’s see the rat-dog’s pups. You say she had six?’

‘And all survived,’ I said proudly, for the bitch had a history of difficult whelping.

‘Let’s just hope we do as well for ourselves,’ Burrich muttered as we walked through the stables, but when I glanced up at him, surprised, he seemed not to have been talking to me at all.

‘I’d have thought you’d have the good sense to avoid her,’ Chade grumbled at me.

It was not the greeting I had looked for after more than two months’ absence from his chambers. ‘I didn’t know it was the Lady Patience. I’m surprised there was no gossip about her arrival.’

‘She strenuously objects to gossip,’ Chade informed me. He sat in his chair before the small fire in the fireplace. Chade’s chambers were chilly, and he was ever vulnerable to cold. He looked weary as well tonight, worn by whatever he had been doing in the weeks since I’d last seen him. His hands, especially, looked old, bony and lumpy about the knuckles. He took a sip of his wine and continued. ‘And she has her eccentric little ways of dealing with those who talk about her behind her back. She has always insisted on privacy for herself. It is one reason she would have made a very poor queen. Not that Chivalry cared. That was a marriage he made for himself rather than for politics. I think it was the first major disappointment he dealt his father. After that, nothing he did ever completely pleased Shrewd.’

I sat still as a mouse. Slink came and perched on my knee. It was rare to hear Chade so talkative, especially about matters relating to the royal family. I scarcely breathed for fear of interrupting him.

‘Sometimes I think there was something in Patience that Chivalry instinctively knew he needed. He was a thoughtful, orderly man, always

correct in his manners, always aware of precisely what was going on around him. He was chivalrous, boy, in the best sense of that word. He did not give in to ugly or petty impulses. That meant he exuded a certain air of restraint at all times – so those who did not know him well thought him cold or cavalier.

‘And then he met this girl ... and she was scarcely more than a girl. And there was no more substance to her than to cobwebs and sea-foam. Thoughts and tongue always flying from this to that, nitterdy-natterdy, with never a pause or connection I could see. It used to exhaust me just to listen to her. But Chivalry would smile, and marvel. Perhaps it was that she had absolutely no awe of him. Perhaps it was that she didn’t seem particularly eager to win him. But with a score of more eligible ladies, of better birth and brighter brains, pursuing him, he chose Patience. And it wasn’t even timely for him to wed; when he took her to wife, he shut the gate on a dozen possible alliances that a wife could have brought him. There was no good reason for him to get married at that time. Not one.’

‘Except that he wanted to,’ I said, and then I could have bitten out my tongue. For Chade nodded, and then gave himself a bit of a shake. He took his gaze off the fire and looked at me.

‘Well. Enough of that. I won’t ask you how you made such an impression on her, or what changed her heart toward you. But last week, she came to Shrewd and demanded that you be recognized as Chivalry’s son and heir and given an education appropriate to a prince.’

I was dizzied. Did the wall tapestries move before me, or was it a trick of my eyes?

‘Of course he refused,’ Chade continued mercilessly. ‘He tried to explain to her why such a thing is totally impossible. All she kept saying was, “But you are the King. How can it be impossible for you?” “The nobles would never accept him. It would mean civil war. And think what it would do to an unprepared boy, to plunge him suddenly into this.” So he told her.’

‘Oh,’ I said quietly. I couldn’t remember what I had felt for the one instant. Elation? Anger? Fear? I only knew that the feeling was gone now, and I felt oddly stripped and humiliated that I had felt anything at all.

‘Patience, of course, was not convinced at all. “Prepare the boy,” she told the King. “And when he is ready, judge for yourself.” Only Patience would ask such a thing, and in front of both Verity and Regal. Verity listened quietly, knowing how it must end, but Regal was livid. He becomes overwrought far too easily. Even an idiot should know Shrewd could not

accede to Patience's demand. But he knows when to compromise. In all else, he gave way to her, mostly I think to stop her tongue.'

'In all else?' I repeated stupidly.

'Some for our good, some for our detriment. Or at least, for our damned inconvenience.' Chade sounded both annoyed and elated. 'I hope you can find more hours in the day, boy, for I'm not willing to sacrifice any of my plans for hers. Patience has demanded that you be educated as befits your blood-lines. And she has vowed to undertake such educating herself. Music, poetry, dance, song, manners ... I hope you've a better tolerance for it than I did. Though it never seemed to hurt Chivalry. Sometimes he even put such knowledge to good use. But it will take up a good part of your day. You'll be acting as page for Patience as well. You're old for it, but she insisted. Personally, I think she regrets much and is trying to make up for lost time, something that never works. You'll have to cut back your weapons-training. And Burrich will have to find himself another stable-boy.'

I didn't give a peg about the weapons-training. As Chade had often pointed out to me, a really good assassin worked close and quietly. If I learned my trade well, I wouldn't be swinging a long blade at anyone. But my time with Burrich – again I had the odd sensation of not knowing how I felt. I hated Burrich. Sometimes. He was overbearing, dictatorial and insensitive. He expected me to be perfect, yet bluntly told me that I would never be rewarded for it. But he was also open, and blunt, and believed I could achieve what he demanded ...

'You're probably wondering what advantage she won us,' Chade went on obliviously. I heard suppressed excitement in his voice. 'It's something I've tried for twice for you, and been twice refused. But Patience nattered at Shrewd until he surrendered. It's the Skill, boy. You're to be trained in the Skill.'

'The Skill,' I repeated, without sense of what I was saying. It was all going too fast for me.

'Yes.'

I scabbled to find thoughts. 'Burrich spoke of it to me, once. A long time ago.' Abruptly I remembered the context of that conversation. After Nosy accidentally betrayed us. He had spoken of it as the opposite of whatever was the sense I shared with animals. The same sense had revealed to me the change in the folk of Forge. Would training in one free me of the other? Or would it be a deprivation? I thought of the sense that I had shared

with horses and dogs when I knew Burrich was not around. I remembered Nosy, in a mingling of warmth and grief. I had never been so close, before or since, to another living creature. Would this new training in the Skill take that away from me?

‘What’s the matter, boy?’ Chade’s voice was kindly, but concerned.

‘I don’t know.’ I hesitated. But not even to Chade could I dare to reveal my fear. Or my taint. ‘Nothing, I suppose.’

‘You’ve been listening to old tales about the training,’ he guessed, totally incorrectly. ‘Listen, boy, it can’t be that bad. Chivalry went through it. So did Verity. And with the threat of the Red Ships, Shrewd has decided to go back to the old ways, and extend the training to other likely candidates. He wants a coterie, or even two, to supplement what he and Verity can do with the Skill. Galen is not enthused, but I suspect it’s a very good idea. Though, being a bastard myself, I was never allowed the training. So I’ve no real idea how the Skill might be employed to defend the land.’

‘You’re a bastard?’ The words burst out of me. All my tangled thoughts were suddenly sliced through by this revelation. Chade stared at me, as shocked at my words as I by his.

‘Of course. I thought you’d worked that out long ago. Boy, for someone as perceptive as you are, you’ve got some very odd blindspots.’

I looked at Chade as if for the first time. His scars, perhaps, had hidden it from me. The resemblance was there. The brow, the way his ears were set, the line of his lower lip. ‘You’re Shrewd’s son,’ I guessed wildly, going only by his appearance. Even before he spoke, I realized how foolish my words were.

‘Son?’ Chade laughed grimly. ‘How he would scowl to hear you say that! But the truth makes him grimace even more. He is my younger half-brother, boy, though he was conceived in a wedded bed and I on a military campaign near Sandsedge.’ Softly he added, ‘My mother was a soldier when I was conceived. But she returned home to bear me, and later wedded a potter. When my mother died, her husband put me on a donkey, gave me a necklace she had worn, and told me to take it to the King at Buckkeep. I was ten. It was a long, hard road from Woolcot to Buckkeep, in those days.’

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘Enough of this.’ Chade straightened himself up sternly. ‘Galen will be instructing you in the Skill. Shrewd browbeat him into it. He finally acceded, but with reservations. No one is to interfere with any of his students during

the training. I wish it were otherwise, but there's nothing I can do about it. You'll just have to be careful. You know of Galen, don't you?

'A little,' I said. 'Only what other people say about him.'

'What do you know by yourself?' Chade quizzed me.

I took a breath and considered. 'He eats alone. I've never seen him at table, either with the men-at-arms, or in the dining-hall. I've never seen him just standing about and talking, not in the exercise yard or the washing-court or in any of the gardens. He's always going somewhere when I see him, and he's always in a hurry. He's bad with animals. The dogs don't like him, and he overcontrols the horses so much that he ruins their mouths and their temperaments. I imagine he's about Burrich's age. He dresses well, is almost as fancy as Regal. I've heard him called a Queen's man.'

'Why?' Chade asked quickly.

'Um, it was a long time ago. Gage. He's a man-at-arms. He came to Burrich one night, a bit drunk, a bit cut-up. He'd had a fight with Galen, and Galen had hit him in the face with a little whip or something. Gage asked Burrich to fix him up, because it was late, and he wasn't supposed to have been drinking that night. His watch was coming up, or something. Gage told Burrich that he'd overheard Galen say that Regal was twice as royal as Chivalry or Verity, and it was a stupid custom that kept him from the throne. Galen had said that Regal's mother was better-born than Shrewd's first queen. Which everyone knows is true. But what angered Gage enough to start the fight was that Galen said Queen Desire was more royal than Shrewd himself, for she'd Farseer blood from both her parents, and Shrewd's was just from his father. So Gage swung at him, but Galen sidestepped and struck him in the face with something.'

I paused.

'And?' Chade encouraged me.

'And so he favours Regal, over Verity or even the King. And Regal, well, accepts him. He's friendlier with him than he usually is with servants or soldiers. He seems to take counsel from him, the few times I've seen them together. It's almost funny to watch them together; you'd think Galen was aping Regal, from the way he dresses and walks as the prince does. Sometimes they almost look alike.'

'They do?' Chade leaned closer, waiting. 'What else have you noticed?'

I searched my memory for more first-hand knowledge of Galen. 'That's all, I think.'

‘Has he ever spoken to you?’

‘No.’

‘I see.’ Chade nodded as if to himself. ‘And what do you know of him by reputation? What do you suspect?’ He was trying to lead me to some conclusion, but I could not guess what.

‘He’s from Farrow. An Inlander. His family came to Buckkeep with King Shrewd’s second queen. I’ve heard it said that he’s afraid of the water, to sail or to swim. Burrich respects him, but doesn’t like him. He says he’s a man who knows his job and does it, but Burrich can’t get along with anyone who mistreats an animal, even if it’s out of ignorance. The kitchen folk don’t like him. He’s always making the younger ones cry. He accuses the girls of getting hair in his meals or having dirty hands, and he says the boys are too rowdy and don’t serve food correctly. So the cooks don’t like him either, because when the apprentices are upset they don’t do their work well.’ Chade was still looking at me expectantly, as if waiting for something very important. I racked my brains for other gossip.

‘He wears a chain with three gems set in it. Queen Desire gave it to him, for some special service he did. Um. The Fool hates him. He told me once that if no one else is around Galen calls him a freak and throws things at him.’

Chade’s brows went up. ‘The Fool talks to you?’

His tone was more than incredulous. He sat up in his chair so suddenly that his wine leaped out of his cup and splashed on his knee. He rubbed at it distractedly with his sleeve.

‘Sometimes,’ I admitted cautiously. ‘Not very often. Only when he feels like it. He just appears and tells me things.’

‘Things? What kind of things?’

I realized suddenly that I had never recounted to Chade the Fitz-fits-fats riddle. It seemed too complicated to go into just then. ‘Oh, just odd things. About two months ago, he stopped me and said the morrow was a poor day to hunt. But it was fine and clear. Burrich got that big buck that day. You remember. It was the same day that we came upon a wolverine. It tore up two of the dogs badly.’

‘As I recall, it nearly got you.’ Chade leaned forward, an oddly pleased look on his face.

I shrugged. ‘Burrich rode it down. And then he cursed me down as if it were my fault, and told me that he’d have knocked me silly if the beast had

hurt Sooty. As if I could have known it would turn on me.’ I hesitated. ‘Chade, I know the Fool is strange. But I like it when he comes to talk to me. He speaks in riddles, and he insults me, and makes fun of me, and gives himself leave to tell me things he thinks I should do, like wash my hair, or not wear yellow. But.’

‘Yes?’ Chade prodded as if what I was saying were very important.

‘I like him,’ I said lamely. ‘He mocks me, but from him, it seems a kindness. He makes me feel, well, important. That he could choose me to talk to.’

Chade leaned back. He put his hand up to his mouth to cover a smile, but it was a joke I didn’t understand. ‘Trust your instincts,’ he told me succinctly. ‘And keep any counsels the Fool gives you. And, as you have, keep it private that he comes and speaks to you. Some could take it amiss.’

‘Who?’ I demanded.

‘King Shrewd, perhaps. After all, the Fool is his. Bought and paid for.’

A dozen questions rose to my mind. Chade saw the expression on my face, for he held up a quelling hand. ‘Not now. That’s as much as you need to know right now. In fact, more than you need to know. But I was surprised by your revelation. It’s not like me to tell secrets not my own. If the Fool wants you to know more, he can speak for himself. But, I seem to recall we were discussing Galen.’

I sank back in my chair with a sigh. ‘Galen. So he is unpleasant to those who cannot challenge it, dresses well and eats alone. What else do I need to know, Chade? I’ve had strict teachers, and I’ve had unpleasant ones. I think I’ll learn to deal with him.’

‘You’d better.’ Chade was deadly earnest. ‘Because he hates you. He hates you more than he loved your father. The depth of emotion he felt for your father unnerved me. No man, not even a prince, merits such blind devotion, especially not so suddenly. And you he hates, with even more intensity. It frightens me.’

Something in Chade’s tone brought a sick chill stalking up from my stomach. I felt an uneasiness that almost made me sick. ‘How do you know?’ I demanded.

‘Because he told Shrewd so when Shrewd directed him to include you among his pupils. “Does not this bastard have to learn his place? Does he not have to be content with what you have decreed for him?” Then he refused to teach you.’

‘He refused?’

‘I told you. But Shrewd was adamant. And he is King, and Galen must obey him now, for all that he was a Queen’s man. So Galen relented and said he would attempt to teach you. You will meet with him each day. Beginning a month from now. You are Patience’s until then.’

‘Where?’

‘There is a tower top, called the Queen’s Garden. You will be admitted there.’ Chade paused, as if wanting to warn me, but not wishing to scare me. ‘Be careful,’ he said at last, ‘for within the walls of the Garden, I have no influence. I am blind there.’

It was a strange warning, and one I took to heart.

THIRTEEN

Smithy

The Lady Patience established her eccentricity at an early age. As a small child, her nursemaids found her stubbornly independent, and yet lacking the common sense to take care of herself. One remarked, 'She would go all day with her laces undone because she could not tie them herself, yet would suffer no one to tie them for her.' Before the age of ten, she had decided to eschew the traditional trainings befitting a girl of her rank, and instead interested herself in handicrafts that were very unlikely to prove useful: pottery, tattooing, the making of perfumes, and the growing and propagation of plants, especially foreign ones.

She did not scruple to absent herself for long hours from supervision. She preferred the woodlands and orchards to her mother's courtyards and gardens. One would have thought this would produce a hardy and practical child. Nothing could be further from the truth. She seemed to be constantly afflicted with rashes, scrapes and stings, was frequently lost, and never developed any sensible wariness toward man or beast.

Her education came largely from herself. She mastered reading and ciphering at an early age, and from that time studied any scroll, book or tablet that came her way with avaricious and indiscriminate interest. Tutors were frustrated by her distractable ways and frequent absences that seemed to affect not at all her ability to learn almost anything swiftly and well. Yet the application of such knowledge interested her not at all. Her head was full of fancies and imaginings, she substituted poetry and music for logic and manners, she expressed no interest at all in social introductions and coquettish skills.

And yet she married a prince, one who had courted her with a single-minded enthusiasm that was to be the first scandal to befall him.

'Stand up straight!'

I stiffened.

‘Not like that! You look like a turkey, drawn out and waiting for the axe. Relax more. No, put your shoulders back, don’t hunch them. Do you always stand with your feet thrown out so?’

‘Lady, he is only a boy. They are always so, all angles and bones. Let him come in and be at ease.’

‘Oh, very well. Come in, then.’

I nodded my gratitude to a round-faced serving-woman who dimpled a smile at me in return. She gestured me toward a pewbench so bedecked with pillows and shawls that there was scarcely room left to sit. I perched on the edge of it and surveyed Lady Patience’s chamber.

It was worse than Chade’s. I would have thought it the clutter of years if I had not known that she had only recently arrived. Even a complete inventory of the room could not have described it, for it was the juxtaposition of objects that made them remarkable. A feather fan, a fencing glove and a bundle of cattails were all vased in a well-worn boot. A small black terrier with two fat puppies slept in a basket lined with a fur hood and some woollen stockings. A family of carved-ivory walruses perched on a tablet about horse-shoeing. But the dominant elements were the plants. There were fat puffs of greenery overflowing clay pots, teacups and goblets, and buckets of cuttings and cut-flowers, and vines spilling out of handleless mugs and cracked cups. Failures were evident in bare sticks poking up out of pots of earth. The plants perched and huddled together in every location that would catch morning or afternoon sun from the windows. The effect was like a garden spilling in the windows and growing up around the clutter in the room.

‘He’s probably hungry, too, isn’t he, Lacey? I’ve heard that about boys. I think there’s some cheese and biscuits on the stand by my bed. Fetch them for him, would you, dear?’

Lady Patience stood slightly more than arm’s distance away from me as she spoke past me to her lady.

‘I’m not hungry, really, thank you,’ I blurted out before Lacey could lumber to her feet. ‘I’m here because I was told ... to make myself available to you, in the mornings, for as long as you wanted me.’

That was a careful rephrasing. What King Shrewd had actually said to me was, ‘Go to her chambers each morning, and do whatever it is she thinks you ought to be doing so that she leaves me alone. And keep doing it until she is as weary of you as I am of her.’ His bluntness had astounded me, for I

had never seen him so beleaguered as that day. Verity came in the door of the chamber as I was scuttling out, and he, too, looked much the worse for wear. Both men spoke and moved as if suffering from too much wine the night before, and yet I had seen them both at table last night, and there had been a marked lack of either merriness or wine. Verity tousled my head as I went past him. 'More like his father every day,' he remarked to a scowling Regal behind him. Regal glared at me as he entered the King's chamber and loudly closed the door behind him.

So here I was, in my lady's chamber, and she was skirting about me and talking past me as if I were an animal that might suddenly strike out at her or soil the carpets. I could tell that it afforded Lacey much amusement.

'Yes. I already knew that, you see, because I was the one who had asked the King that you be sent here,' Lady Patience explained carefully to me.

'Yes, ma'am.' I shifted on my bit of seat-space and tried to look intelligent and well-mannered. Recalling the earlier times we had met, I could scarcely blame her for treating me like a dolt.

A silence fell. I looked around at things in the room. Lady Patience looked toward a window. Lacey sat and smirked to herself and pretended to be tatting lace.

'Oh. Here.' Swift as a diving hawk, Lady Patience stooped down and seized the black terrier pup by the scruff of the neck. He yelped in surprise, and his mother looked up in annoyance as Lady Patience thrust him into my arms. 'This one's for you. He's yours now. Every boy should have a pet.'

I caught the squirming puppy and managed to support his body before she let go of him. 'Or maybe you'd rather have a bird? I have a cage of finches in my bedchamber. You could have one of them, if you'd rather.'

'Uh, no. A puppy's fine. A puppy is wonderful.' The second half of the statement was made to the pup. My instinctive response to his high-pitched yi-yi-yi had been to quest out to him with calm. His mother had sensed my contact with him, and approved. She settled back into her basket with the white pup with blithe unconcern. The puppy looked up at me and met my eyes directly. This, in my experience, was rather unusual. Most dogs avoided prolonged direct eye-contact. But also unusual was his awareness. I knew from surreptitious experiments in the stable that most puppies his age had little more than fuzzy self-awareness, and were mostly turned to mother and milk and immediate needs. This little fellow had a solidly-established

identity within himself, and a deep interest in all that was going on around him. He liked Lacey, who fed him bits of meat, and was wary of Patience, not because she was cruel, but because she stumbled over him and kept putting him back in the basket each time he laboriously clambered out. He thought I smelled very exciting, and the scents of horses and birds and other dogs were like colours in my mind, images of things that as yet had no shape or reality for him, but that he nonetheless found fascinating. I imaged the scents for him and he climbed my chest, wriggling, sniffing and licking me in his excitement. *Take me, show me, take me.*

‘... even listening?’

I winced, expecting a rap from Burrich, then came back to awareness of where I was and of the small woman standing before me with her hands on her hips.

‘I think something’s wrong with him,’ she observed abruptly to Lacey. ‘Did you see how he was sitting there, staring at the puppy? I thought he was about to go off into some sort of fit.’

Lacey smiled benignly and went on with her tatting. ‘Fair reminded me of you, my lady, when you start pottering about with your leaves and bits of plants and end up staring at the dirt.’

‘Well,’ said Patience, clearly displeased. ‘It is quite one thing for an adult to be pensive,’ she observed firmly. ‘And another for a boy to stand about looking daft.’

Later, I promised the pup. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, and tried to look repentant. ‘I was just distracted by the puppy.’ He had cuddled into the crook of my arm and was casually chewing the edge of my jerkin. It is difficult to explain what I felt. I needed to pay attention to Lady Patience, but this small being snuggled against me was radiating delight and contentment. It is a heady thing to be suddenly proclaimed the centre of someone’s world, even if that someone is an eight-week-old puppy. It made me realize how profoundly alone I had felt, and for how long. ‘Thank you,’ I said, and even I was surprised at the gratitude in my voice. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘It’s just a puppy,’ Lady Patience said, and to my surprise she looked almost ashamed. She turned aside and stared out the window. The puppy licked his nose and closed his eyes. *Warm. Sleep.* ‘Tell me about yourself,’ she demanded abruptly.

It took me aback. ‘What would you like to know, lady?’

She made a small, frustrated gesture. 'What do you do each day? What have you been taught?'

So I attempted to tell her, but I could see that it didn't satisfy her. She folded her lips tightly at each mention of Burrich's name. She wasn't impressed with any of my martial training. Of Chade, I could say nothing. She nodded in grudging approval of my study of languages, writing and ciphering.

'Well,' she interrupted suddenly. 'At least you're not totally ignorant. If you can read, you can learn anything. If you've a will to. Have you a will to learn?'

'I suppose so.' It was a lukewarm answer, but I was beginning to feel badgered. Not even the gift of the puppy could outweigh her belittlement of my learning.

'I suppose you will learn, then. For I have a will that you will, even if you do not yet.' She was suddenly stern, in a shifting of attitude that left me bewildered. 'And what do they call you, boy?'

The question again. 'Boy is fine,' I muttered. The sleeping puppy in my arms whimpered in agitation. I forced myself to be calm for him.

I had the satisfaction of seeing a stricken look flit briefly across Patience's face. 'I shall call you, oh, Thomas. Tom for everyday. Does that suit you?'

'I suppose so,' I said deliberately. Burrich gave more thought to naming a dog than that. We had no Blackies or Spots in the stables. Burrich named each beast as if they were royalty, with names that described them or traits he aspired to for them. Even Sooty's name masked a gentle fire I had come to respect. But this woman named me Tom after no more than an indrawn breath. I looked down so that she couldn't see my eyes.

'Fine, then,' she said, a trifle briskly. 'Come tomorrow at the same time. I shall have some things ready for you. I warn you, I shall expect willing effort from you. Good day, Tom.'

'Good day, lady.'

I turned and left. Lacey's eyes followed me, and then darted back to her mistress. I sensed her disappointment, but did not know what it was about.

It was still early in the day. This first audience had taken less than an hour. I wasn't expected anywhere; this time was my own. I headed for the kitchens, to wheedle scraps for my pup. It would have been easy to take him down to the stables, but then Burrich would have known about him. I had no

illusions about what would happen next. The pup would stay in the stables. He would be nominally mine, but Burrich would see that this new bond was severed. I had no intention of allowing that to happen.

I made my plans. A basket from the launderers, an old shirt over straw for his bed. His messes now would be small, and as he got older, my bond with him would make him easy to train. For now, he'd have to stay by himself for part of each day. But as he got older, he could go about with me. Eventually, Burrich would find out about him. I resolutely pushed that thought aside. I'd deal with that later. For now, he needed a name. I looked him over. He was not the curly-haired yappy type of terrier. He would have a short smooth coat, a thick neck and a mouth like a coal scuttle. But, grown, he'd be less than knee-high, so it couldn't be too weighty a name. I didn't want him to be a fighter. So no Ripper or Charger. He would be tenacious, and alert. Grip, maybe. Or Sentry.

'Or Anvil. Or Forge.'

I looked up. The Fool stepped out of an alcove and followed me down the hall.

'Why?' I asked. I no longer questioned the way the Fool could guess what I was thinking.

'Because your heart will be hammered against him, and your strength will be tempered in his fire.'

'Sounds a bit dramatic to me,' I objected. 'And Forge is a bad word now. I don't want to mark my pup with it. Just the other day, down in town, I heard a drunk yell at a cut-purse, "May your woman be Forged!" Everyone in the street stopped and stared.'

The Fool shrugged. 'Well they might.' He followed me into my room. 'Smith, then. Or Smithy. Let me see him?'

Reluctantly I gave over my puppy. He stirred, awakened and then wiggled in the Fool's hands. *No smell, no smell.* I was astonished to agree with the pup. Even with his little black nose working for me, the Fool had no detectable scent. 'Careful. Don't drop him.'

'I'm a Fool, not a dolt,' said the Fool, but he sat on my bed and put the pup beside him. Smithy instantly began snuffling and rucking my bed. I sat on the other side of him lest he venture too near the edge.

'So,' the Fool asked casually. 'Are you going to let her buy you with gifts?'

'Why not?' I tried to be disdainful.

‘It would be a mistake, for both of you.’ The Fool tweaked Smithy’s tiny tail, and he spun round with a puppy growl. ‘She’s going to want to give you things. You’ll have to take them, for there’s no polite way to refuse. But you’ll have to decide whether they’ll make a bridge between you, or a wall.’

‘Do you know Chade?’ I asked abruptly, for the Fool sounded so like him I suddenly had to know. I had never mentioned Chade to anyone else, save Shrewd, or heard talk of him from anyone around the keep.

‘Shade or sunlight, I know when to keep a grip on my tongue. It would be a good thing for you to learn as well.’ The Fool rose suddenly and went to the door. He lingered there a moment. ‘She only hated you for the first few months. And it wasn’t truly hate of you; it was blind jealousy of your mother, that she could bear a babe to Chivalry, but Patience could not. After that, her heart softened. She wanted to send for you, to raise you as her own. Some might say she merely wanted to possess anything that touched Chivalry. But I don’t think so.’

I was staring at the Fool.

‘You look like a fish, with your mouth open like that,’ he observed. ‘But of course, your father refused. He said it might appear he was formally acknowledging his bastard. But I don’t think that was it at all. I think it would have been dangerous for you.’ The Fool made an odd pass with his hand, and a stick of dried meat appeared in his fingers. I knew it had been up his sleeve, but I was unable to see how he accomplished his tricks. He flipped the meat onto my bed and the puppy sprang on it greedily.

‘You can hurt her, if you choose,’ he offered me. ‘She feels such guilt at how alone you have been. And you look so like Chivalry, anything you say will be as if it came from his lips. She’s like a gem with a flaw. One precise tap from you, and she will fly to pieces. She’s half-mad as she is, you know. They would never have been able to kill Chivalry if she hadn’t consented to his abdication. At least, not with such blithe dismissal of the consequences. She knows that.’

‘Who is “they”?’ I demanded.

‘Who “are” they?’ the Fool corrected me, and whisked out of sight. By the time I got to the door, he was gone. I quested after him, but got nothing. Almost as if he were Forged. I shivered at that thought, and went back to Smithy. He was chewing the meat to slimy bits all over my bed. I watched him. ‘The Fool’s gone,’ I told Smithy. He wagged a casual acknowledgement and went on worrying his meat.

He was mine, given to me. Not a stable-dog I cared for, but mine, and beyond Burrich's knowledge or authority. Other than my clothes and the copper bracelet that Chade had given me, I had few possessions. But he made up for all lack I might ever have had.

He was a sleek and healthy pup. His coat was smooth now, but would grow bristly as he matured. When I held him up to the window, I could see faint mottlings of colour in his coat. He'd be a dark brindle, then. I discovered one white spot on his chin, and another on his left hind foot. He clamped his little jaws on my shirt-sleeve and shook it violently, uttering savage puppy growls. I tussled him on the bed until he fell into a deep, limp sleep. Then I moved him to his straw cushion and went reluctantly to my afternoon lessons and chores.

That initial week with Patience was a trying time for both of us. I learned to keep a thread of my attention always with Smithy, so he never felt alone enough to howl when I left him. But that took practice, so I felt somewhat distracted. Burrich frowned about it, but I persuaded him it was due to my sessions with Patience. 'I have no idea what that woman wants from me,' I told him by the third day. 'Yesterday it was music. In the space of two hours, she attempted to teach me to play the harp, the sea-pipes, and then the flute. Every time I came close to working out a few notes on one or the other of them, she snatched it away and commanded that I try a different one. She ended that session by saying that I had no aptitude for music. This morning it was poetry. She set herself to teaching me the one about Queen Healsall and her garden. It has a long bit, about all the herbs she grew and what each was for. And she kept getting it bungled, and got angry at me when I repeated it back to her that way, saying that I must know that catmint is not for poultices and that I was mocking her. It was almost a relief when she said I had given her such a headache that we must stop. And when I offered to bring her buds from the ladyshand bush for her headache, she sat right up and said, "There! I knew you were mocking me." I don't know how to please her, Burrich.'

'Why would you want to?' he growled, and I let the subject drop.

That evening, Lacey came to my room. She tapped, then entered, wrinkling her nose. 'You'd better bring up some strewing herbs if you're going to keep that pup in here. And use some vinegar and water when you scrub up his messes. It smells like a stable in here.'

'I suppose it does,' I admitted. I looked at her curiously and waited.

‘I brought you this. You seemed to like it best.’ She held out the sea-pipes. I looked at the short, fat tubes bound together with strips of leather. I had liked it best of the three instruments. The harp had far too many strings, and the flute had seemed shrill to me even when Patience had played it.

‘Did Lady Patience send it to me?’ I asked, puzzled.

‘No. She doesn’t know I’ve taken it. She’ll assume it’s lost in her litter, as usual.’

‘Why did you bring it?’

‘For you to practise on. When you’ve a little skill with it, bring it back and show her.’

‘Why?’

Lacey sighed. ‘Because it would make her feel better. And that would make my life much easier. There’s nothing worse than being maid to someone as heartsick as Lady Patience. She longs desperately for you to be good at something. She keeps trying you out, hoping that you’ll manifest some sudden talent, so that she can flout you about and tell folk, “There, I told you he had it in him.” Now I’ve had boys of my own, and I know boys aren’t that way. They don’t learn, or grow, or have manners when you’re looking at them. But turn away, and turn back, and there they are, smarter, taller, and charming everyone but their own mothers.’

I was a little lost. ‘You want me to learn to play this, so that Patience will be happy?’

‘So that she can feel she’s given you something.’

‘She gave me Smithy. Nothing she can ever give me will be better than him.’

Lacey looked surprised at my sudden sincerity. So was I. ‘Well. You might tell her that. But you might also try to learn to play the sea-pipes or recite a ballad or sing one of the old prayers. That she might understand better.’

After Lacey left, I sat thinking, caught between anger and wistfulness. Patience wished me to be a success and felt she must discover something I could do. As if before her, I had never done or accomplished anything. But as I mulled over what I had done, and what she knew of me, I realized that her image of me must be a rather flat one. I could read and write, and take care of a horse or dog. I could also brew poisons, make sleeping-draughts, smuggle, lie and do sleight-of-hand; none of which would have pleased her

even if she had known. So, was there anything to me, other than a spy or assassin?

The next morning I arose early and sought Fedwren. He was pleased when I asked to borrow brushes and colours from him. The paper he gave me was better than practice sheets, and he made me promise to show him my efforts. As I made my way up the stairs, I wondered what it would be like to apprentice with him. Surely it could not be any harder than what I had been set to lately.

But the task I had set myself proved harder than any Patience had put me to. I could see Smithy asleep on his cushion. How could the curve of his back be different from the curve of a rune, the shades of his ears so different from the shading of the herbal illustrations I painstakingly copied from Fedwren's work? But they were, and I wasted sheet after sheet of paper until I suddenly saw that it was the shadows around the pup that made the curve of his back and the line of his haunch. I needed to paint less, not more, and put down what my eye saw rather than what my mind knew.

It was late when I washed out my brushes and set them aside. I had two that pleased, and a third that I liked, though it was soft and muzzy, more like a dream of a puppy than a real puppy. More like what I sensed than what I saw, I thought to myself.

But when I stood outside Lady Patience's door, I looked down at the papers in my hand and suddenly saw myself as a toddler presenting crushed and wilted dandelions to his mother. What fitting pastime was this for a youth? If I were truly Fedwren's apprentice, then exercises of this sort would be appropriate, for a good scribe must illustrate and illuminate as well as scribe. But the door opened and there I was, my fingers smudged still with paint and the pages damp in my hand.

I was wordless when Patience irritably told me to come inside, that I was late enough already. I perched on the edge of a chair with a crumpled cloak and some half-finished bit of stitchery. I set my paintings to one side of me, on top of a stack of tablets.

'I think you could learn to recite verse, if you chose to,' she remarked with some asperity. 'And therefore you could learn to compose verse, if you chose to. Rhythm and meter are no more than ... is that the puppy?'

'It's meant to be,' I muttered, and could not remember feeling more wretchedly embarrassed in my life.

She lifted the sheets carefully and examined each one in turn, holding them close and then at arm's length. She stared longest at the muzzy one. 'Who did these for you?' she asked at last. 'Not that it excuses your being late. But I could find good use for someone who can put on paper what the eye sees, with the colours so true. That is the trouble with all the herbals I have; all the herbs are painted the same green, no matter if they are grey or tinged pink as they grow. Such tablets are useless if you are trying to learn from them ...'

'I suspect he's painted the puppy himself, ma'am,' Lacey interrupted benignly.

'And the paper, this is better than what I've had to ...' Patience paused suddenly. 'You, Thomas?' (And I think that was the first time she remembered to use the name she had bestowed on me.) 'You paint like this?'

Before her incredulous look, I managed a quick nod. She held up the pictures again. 'Your father could not draw a curved line, save it was on a map. Did your mother draw?'

'I have no memories of her, lady.' My reply was stiff. I could not recall that anyone had ever been brave enough to ask me such a thing before.

'What, none? But you were five years old. You must remember something: the colour of her hair, her voice, what she called you ...' Was that a pained hunger in her voice, a curiosity she could not quite bear to satisfy?

Almost, for a moment, I did remember. A smell of mint, or was it ... it was gone. 'Nothing, lady. If she had wanted me to remember her, she would have kept me, I suppose.' I closed my heart. Surely I owed no remembrance to the mother who had not kept me, nor ever sought me since.

'Well.' For the first time, I think Patience realized she had taken our conversation into a difficult area. She stared out of the window at a grey day. 'Someone has taught you well,' she observed suddenly, too brightly.

'Fedwren.' When she said nothing, I added, 'The court scribe, you know. He would like me to apprentice to him. He is pleased with my letters, and works with me now on the copying of his images. When we have time, that is. I am often busy, and he is often out questing after new paper-reeds.'

'Paper-reeds?' she asked distractedly.

'He has a bit of paper. He had several measures of it, but little by little he has used it. He got it from a trader, who had it from another, and yet another before him, so he does not know where it first came from. But from

what he was told, it was made of pounded reeds. The paper is a much better quality than any we make; it is thin, flexible and does not crumble so readily with age; yet it takes ink well, not soaking it up so that the edges of runes blur. Fedwren says that if we could duplicate it, it would change much. With a good, sturdy paper, any man might have a copy of tabletlore from the keep. Were paper cheaper, more children could be taught to write and read, or so he says. I do not understand why he is so ...'

'I did not know any here shared my interest.' A sudden animation lit the lady's face. 'Has he tried paper made from pounded lily-root? I have had some success with that. And also with paper created by first weaving and then wet pressing sheets made with threads of bark from the kinue tree. It is strong and flexible, yet the surface leaves much to be desired. Unlike this paper ...'

She glanced again at the sheets in her hand and fell silent. Then she asked hesitantly, 'You like the puppy this much?'

'Yes,' I said simply, and our eyes suddenly met. She stared into me in the same distracted way that she often stared out of the window. Abruptly, her eyes brimmed with tears.

'Sometimes, you are so like him that ...' She choked. 'You should have been mine! It isn't fair, you should have been mine!'

She cried out the words so fiercely that I thought she would strike me. Instead, she leaped at me and caught me in a flying hug, at the same time treading upon her dog and overturning a vase of greenery. The dog sprang up with a yelp, the vase shattered on the floor, sending water and shards in all directions, while my lady's forehead caught me squarely under the chin, so that for a moment all I saw was sparks. Before I could react, she flung herself from me and fled into her bedchamber with a cry like a scalded cat. She slammed the door behind her.

And all the while Lacey kept on with her tatting.

'She gets like this, sometimes,' she observed benignly, and nodded me toward the door. 'Come again tomorrow,' she reminded me, and added, 'You know, Lady Patience has become quite fond of you.'

FOURTEEN

Galen

Galen, son of a weaver, came to Buckkeep as a boy. His father was one of Queen Desire's personal servants who followed her from Farrow. Solicity was then the Skillmaster at Buckkeep. She had instructed King Bounty and his son Shrewd in the Skill, so by the time Shrewd's sons were boys, she was ancient already. She petitioned King Bounty that she might take an apprentice, and he consented. Galen was greatly favoured by the Queen, and at Queen-in-Waiting Desire's energetic urging, Solicity chose the youth Galen as her apprentice. At that time, as now, the Skill was denied to bastards of the Farseer House, but when the talent bloomed, unexpected, among those not of royalty, it was cultivated and rewarded. No doubt Galen was such a one as this, a boy showing strange and unexpected talent that came abruptly to the attention of a Skillmaster.

By the time the Princes Chivalry and Verity were old enough to receive Skill instruction, Galen had advanced enough to assist in their instruction, though he was but a year or so older than they.

Once again, my life sought a balance and briefly found it. The awkwardness with Lady Patience gradually eroded into our acceptance that we would never become casual or overly familiar with one another. Neither of us felt a need to share feelings; instead we skirted one another at a formal distance, and nevertheless managed to gain a good understanding of one another. Yet in the formal dance of our relationship, there were occasional times of genuine merriment, and sometimes we even danced to the same piper.

Once she had given up the notion of teaching me everything that a Farseer prince should know, she was able to teach me a great deal. Very little of it was what she initially intended to teach me. I did gain a working knowledge of music, but this was by the loan of her instruments and many hours of private experimentation. I became more her runner than her page,

and from fetching for her, I learned much of the perfumer's arts, as well as greatly increasing my knowledge of plants. Even Chade became enthused when he discovered my new talents for root and leaf propagation, and he followed with interest the experiments, few of them successful, that Lady Patience and I made into coaxing the buds of one tree to open to leaf when spliced into another tree. This was a magic she had heard rumoured, but did not scruple to attempt. To this day, in the Women's Garden, there is an apple tree, one branch of which bears pears. When I expressed a curiosity about the tattooer's art, she refused to let me mark my own body, saying I was too young for such a decision. But without the least qualm, she let me observe, and finally assist with the slow pricking of dye into her own ankle and calf that became a coiled garland of flowers.

But all of that evolved over months and years, not days. We had settled into a blunt-spoken courtesy toward one another by the end of ten days. She met Fedwren and enlisted him in her root-paper project. The pup was growing well, and was a greater pleasure to me every day. Lady Patience's errands to town gave me ample opportunities to see my town friends, especially Molly. She was an invaluable guide to the fragrant stalls where I purchased Lady Patience's perfume supplies. Forging and Red Ship Raiders might still threaten from the horizon, but for those few weeks they seemed a remote terror, like the remembered chill of winter on a midsummer day. For a very brief period, I was happy, and, an even rarer gift, I knew I was happy.

And then my lessons with Galen began.

The night before my lessons were to start, Burrich sent for me. I went to him wondering what chore I had done poorly and would be rebuked for. I found him waiting for me outside the stables, shifting his feet as restlessly as a confined stallion. He immediately beckoned me to follow him, and took me up to his chambers.

'Tea?' he offered, and when I nodded, poured me a mug from a pot still warm on his hearth.

'What's the matter?' I asked as I took it from him. He was strung as tight as I had ever seen him. This was so unlike Burrich that I feared some terrible news – that Sooty was ill, or dead, or that he had discovered Smithy.

'Nothing,' he lied, and did it so poorly that he himself immediately recognized it. 'It's this, boy,' he confessed suddenly. 'Galen came to me today. He told me that you were to be instructed in the Skill. And he charged me that while he was teaching you, I could interfere in no way: not to

counsel, or ask chores of you, or even share a meal with you. He was most ... direct about it.' Burrich paused, and I wondered what better word he had rejected. He looked away from me. 'There was a time when I'd hoped this chance would be offered to you, but when it wasn't, I thought, well, perhaps it's for the best. Galen can be a hard teacher. A very hard teacher. I've heard talk of it before. He drives his pupils, but he claims he expects no more of them than he does of himself. And, boy, I've heard that gossiped about me, too, if you can credit it.'

I permitted myself a small smile, that brought an answering scowl from Burrich.

'Listen to what I'm telling you. Galen makes no secret that he has no fondness for you. Of course, he doesn't know you at all, so it's not your fault. It's based solely on ... what you are, and what you caused, and El knows that wasn't your fault. But if Galen admitted that, then he'd have to admit it was Chivalry's fault, and I've never known him to admit that Chivalry had any faults ... but you can love a man and know better than that about him.' Burrich took a brisk turn around the room, then came back to the fire.

'Just tell me what you want to say,' I suggested.

'I'm trying,' he snapped. 'It's not easy to know what to say. I'm not even sure if I should be speaking to you. Is this interference, or counsel? But your lessons haven't started yet. So I say this now. Do your best for him. Don't talk back to Galen. Be respectful and courteous. Listen to all he says and learn it as well and quickly as you can.' He paused again.

'I hadn't intended to do otherwise,' I pointed out a bit tartly, for I could tell that none of this was what Burrich was trying to say.

'I know that, Fitz!' He sighed suddenly, and threw himself down at the table opposite me. With the heels of both hands he pressed at his temples as if pained. I had never seen him so agitated. 'A long time ago, I talked to you about that other ... magic. The Wit. The being with the beasts, almost becoming one of them.' He paused and glanced about the room as if worried someone would hear. He leaned in closer to me and spoke softly but urgently. 'Stay clear of it. I've tried my best to get you to see it's shameful and wrong. But I've never really felt that you agreed. Oh, I know you've abided by my rule against it, most of the time. But a few times I've sensed, or suspected, that you were tinkering with things no good man touches. I tell you, Fitz, I'd sooner see ... I'd sooner see you Forged. Yes, don't look so

shocked, that's truly how I feel. And for Galen ... Look, Fitz, don't even mention it to him. Don't speak of it, don't even think of it near him. It's little that I know about the Skill and how it works. But sometimes ... oh, sometimes when your father touched me with it, it seemed he knew my heart before I did, and saw things that I kept buried even from myself.'

A sudden deep blush suffused Burrich's dark face, and almost I thought I saw tears stand in his dark eyes. He turned aside from me to the fire, and I sensed we were coming to the heart of what he needed to say. Needed, not wanted. There was a deep fear in him, one he denied himself. A lesser man, a man less stern with himself, would have trembled with it.

'... fear for you, boy.' He spoke to the stones above the mantelpiece, and his voice was so deep a rumble that I almost couldn't understand him.

'Why?' A simple question unlocks best, Chade had taught me.

'I don't know if he will see it in you. Or what he will do if he does. I've heard ... no. I know it's true. There was a woman, actually, little more than a girl. She had a way with birds. She lived in the hills to the west of here, and it was said she could call a wild hawk from the sky. Some folk admired her, and said it was a gift. They took sick poultry to her, or called her in when hens wouldn't set their eggs. She did aught but good, for all I heard. But Galen spoke out against her. Said she was an abomination, and that it would be the worse for the world if she lived to breed. And one morning she was found beaten to death.'

'Galen did it?'

Burrich shrugged, a gesture most unlike him. 'His horse had been out of the stable that night. That much I know. And his hands were bruised, and he had scratches on his face and neck. But not the scratches a woman would have dealt him, boy. Talon marks, as if a hawk had tried to strike him.'

'And you said nothing?' I asked incredulously.

He barked a bitter laugh. 'Another spoke before I could. Galen was accused, by the girl's cousin, who happened to work here in the stables. Galen would not deny it. They went out to the Witness Stones, and fought one another for El's justice, which always prevails there. Higher than the King's court is the answer to a question settled there, and no one may dispute it. The boy died. Everyone said it was El's justice, that the boy had accused Galen falsely. One said it to Galen. And he replied that El's justice was that the girl had died before she bred, and her tainted cousin, too.'

Burrich fell silent. I was queasy with what he had told me, and a cold fear snaked through me. A question once decided at the Witness Stones could not be raised again. That was more than law, it was the very will of the gods. So I was to be taught by a man who was a murderer, a man who would try to kill me if he suspected I had the Wit.

‘Yes,’ Burrich said as if I had spoken aloud. ‘Oh, Fitz, my son, be careful, be wise.’ And for a moment I wondered, for it sounded as if he feared for me. But then he added, ‘Don’t shame me, boy. Or your father. Don’t let Galen say that I’ve let my prince’s son grow up a half-beast. Show him that Chivalry’s blood runs true in you.’

‘I’ll try,’ I muttered. And I went to bed that night wretched and afraid.

The Queen’s Garden was nowhere near the Women’s Garden or the kitchen garden or any other garden in Buckkeep. It was, instead, on top of a circular tower. The garden walls were high on the sides that faced the sea, but to the south and west, the walls were low and had seats along them. The stone walls captured the warmth of the sun and fended off the salt winds from the sea. The air was still there, almost as if hands were cupped over my ears. Yet there was a strange wildness to the garden founded on stone. There were rock basins, perhaps bird-baths or water gardens at one time, and various tubs and pots and troughs of earth, intermingled with statuary. At one time, the tubs and pots had probably overflowed with greenery and flowers. Of the plants, only a few stalks and the mossy earth in the tubs remained. The skeleton of a vine crawled over a half-rotted trellis. It filled me with an old sadness colder than the first chill of winter that was also here. Patience should have had this, I thought. She would bring life here again.

I was the first to arrive. August came soon after. He had Verity’s broad build, much as I had Chivalry’s height, and the dark Farseer colouring. As always, he was distant but polite. He dealt me a nod and then strolled about, looking at the statuary.

Others appeared rapidly after him. I was surprised at how many – over a dozen. Other than August, son of the King’s sister, no one could boast as much Farseer blood as I could. There were cousins and second cousins, of both sexes and both younger and older than I. August was probably the youngest, at two years my junior, and Serene, a woman in her mid-twenties, was probably the oldest. It was an oddly subdued group. A few clustered, talking softly, but most drifted about, poking at the empty gardens or looking at the statues.

Then Galen came.

He let the door of the stairwell slam shut behind him. Several of the others jumped. He stood regarding us, and we in turn looked at him in silence.

There is something I have observed about skinny men. Some, like Chade, seem so preoccupied with their lives that they either forget to eat, or burn every bit of sustenance they take in the fires of their passionate fascination with life. But there is another type, one who goes about the world cadaverously, cheeks sunken, bones jutting, and one senses that he so disapproves of the whole of the world that he begrudges every bit of it that he takes inside himself. At that moment, I would have wagered that Galen had never truly enjoyed one bite of food or one swallow of drink in his life.

His dress puzzled me. It was opulently rich, with fur at his collar and neck, and amber beading so thick on his tunic it would have turned a sword. But the rich fabrics strained over him, the clothing tailored so snugly to him that one wondered if the maker had lacked sufficient fabric to finish the suit. At a time when full sleeves slashed with colours were the mark of a wealthy man, he wore his shirt as tight as a cat's skin. His boots were high and fitted to his calves, and he carried a little quirt, as if come straight from riding. His clothing looked uncomfortable and combined with his thinness to give an impression of stinginess.

His pale eyes swept the Queen's Garden dispassionately. He considered us, and immediately dismissed us as wanting. He breathed out through his hawk's nose, as does a man facing an unpleasant chore. 'Clear a space,' he directed us. 'Push all this rubbish to one side. Stack it there, against that wall. Quickly, now. I have no patience with sluggards.'

And so the last lines of the garden were destroyed. The arrangements of the pots and beds that had been shadows of the little walks and arbours that had once existed here were swept aside. The pots were moved to one side, the lovely little statues stacked crookedly on top of them. Galen spoke only once, to me. 'Hurry up, bastard,' he ordered me as I struggled with a heavy pot of earth, and he brought down his riding crop across my shoulders. It was not much of a blow, more a tap, but it seemed so contrived that I stopped in my efforts and looked at him. 'Didn't you hear me?' he demanded. I nodded, and went back to moving the pot. From the corner of my eye, I saw his odd look of satisfaction. The blow, I felt, had been a test, but I was not sure if I had passed or failed it.

The tower roof became a bare space, with only the green lines of moss and old runnels of dirt to indicate the garden that had been. He directed us to form ourselves into two lines. He ordered us by age and size, and then separated us by sex, putting the girls behind the boys and off to the right. 'I will tolerate no distractions or disruptive behaviour. You are here to learn, not dally,' he warned us. He then spaced us out, having us stretch our arms in all directions to show that there we could not touch one another, not even so much as a fingertip. From this, I expected physical exercises would follow, but instead he directed us to stand still, hands at our sides, and attend to him. So as we stood on the cold tower-top he lectured us.

'For seventeen years, I have been Skillmaster of this keep. Before this, my lessons were given to small groups, discreetly. Those who failed to show promise were turned away quietly. During that time the Six Duchies had no need for more than a handful to be trained. I trained only the most promising, wasting no time on those without talent or discipline. And, for the last fifteen years, I have not initiated any into the Skill.

'But evil times are upon us. The Outislanders ravage our shores and Forge our people. King Shrewd and Prince Verity turn their Skills to protecting us. Great are their efforts and many their successes, though the common folk never even guess at what they do. I assure you, against the minds I have trained, the Outislanders stand small chance. A few paltry victories they may have won, coming upon us unprepared, but the forces I have created to oppose them will prevail!'

His pale eyes burned and he lifted his hands to the heavens as he spoke. He held a long silence, staring upward, his arms stretched out above his head, as if he clawed down power from the sky itself. Then he let his arms slowly fall.

'This I know,' he went on in a calmer voice. 'This I know. The forces I have created will prevail. But our king, may all gods honour and bless him, doubts me. And as he is my king, I bow to his will. He requires that I seek amongst you of lesser blood, to see if there are any with the talent and will, the purity of purpose and sternness of soul, to be trained in the Skill. This I will do, for my king has commanded. Legends say in days of old there were many trained in the Skill, who worked alongside their kings to avert dangers from the land. Perhaps it was truly so; perhaps the old legends exaggerate. In any case, my king has commanded me to attempt to create such a surplus of Skilled ones, and so I will try.'

He totally ignored the five or so women of our group. Not once did his eyes turn toward them. The exclusion was so obvious that I wondered how they had offended him. I knew Serene slightly, for she also had been an apt pupil of Fedwren. I could almost feel the warmth of her displeasure. In the row beside me, one of the boys shifted. In a flash Galen had leaped in front of him.

‘Bored, are we? Restless with an old man’s talk?’

‘Just a cramp in my calf, sir,’ the boy rejoined, foolishly.

Galen slapped him, a backhand that rocked the boy’s head. ‘Be quiet, and stand still. Or leave. It’s all one to me. It’s already obvious that you lack the stamina to achieve the Skill. But the King has found you worthy to be here, and so I will attempt to teach you.’

I trembled inside. For when Galen spoke to the boy, it was me he stared at. As if the boy’s movement had been my fault, somehow. A strong distaste for Galen flooded through me. I had taken blows from Hod in the course of my instruction in staves and swords, and endured discomfort even from Chade as he demonstrated touch-spots and strangling techniques, and ways to silence a man without disabling him. I’d had my share of cuffs, boots and swats from Burrich, some justified, some the vented frustration of a busy man. But I’d never seen a man strike a boy with such apparent relish as Galen had. I strove to keep my face impassive, and to look at him without appearing to stare. For I knew that if I glanced away I’d be accused of not paying attention.

Satisfied, Galen nodded to himself, and then resumed his lecture. To master the Skill, he must first teach us to master ourselves. Physical deprivation was his key. Tomorrow, we were to arrive before the sun was over the horizon. We were not to wear shoes, socks, cloaks, nor any woollen garment. Heads were to be uncovered. The body must be scrupulously clean. He exhorted us to imitate him in his eating and living habits. We would avoid meat, sweet fruit, seasoned dishes, milk, and ‘frivolous foods’. He advocated porridges and cold water, plain breads and stewed root vegetables. We would avoid all unnecessary conversation, especially with those of the other sex. He counselled us long against any sort of ‘sensual’ longings, in which he included desiring food, sleep or warmth. And he advised us that he had arranged for a separate table to be set for us in the hall, where we might eat appropriate food and not be distracted by idle talk. Or questions. The last phrase he added almost like a threat.

He then put us through a series of exercises. Close the eyes and roll your eyeballs up as far as they would go. Strive to roll them all the way around to look into the back of one's own skull. Feel the pressure this created. Imagine what you might see if you could roll your eyes that far. Was what you saw worthy and correct? Eyes still closed, stand on one leg. Strive to remain perfectly still. Find a balance, not just of body, but of spirit. Drive from the mind all unworthy thoughts, and you could remain like this indefinitely.

As we stood, eyes always closed, going through these various exercises, he moved amongst us. I could track him by the sound of the riding crop. 'Concentrate!' he would command us, or 'Try, at least try!' I myself felt the crop at least four times that day. It was a trifling thing, little more than a tap, but it was unnerving to be touched with a lash, even without pain. Then the last time it fell, it was high on my shoulder, and the lash of it coiled against my bare neck while the tip caught me on the chin. I winced, but managed to keep my eyes closed and my precarious balance on one aching knee. As he walked away, I felt a slow drip of warm blood form on my chin.

He kept us all day, releasing us when the sun was a half-copper on the horizon and the winds of night were rising. Not once had he excused us for food, water, or any other necessity. He watched us file past him, a grim smile on his face, and only when we were through the door did we feel free to stagger and flee down the staircase.

I was famished, my hands swollen red with the chill, and my mouth so dry I couldn't have spoken if I had wished to. The others seemed much the same, though some had suffered more acutely than I. I at least was used to long hours, many of them outdoors. Merry, a year or so older than I, was accustomed to helping Mistress Hasty with the weaving. Her round face was more white than red with the cold, and I heard her whisper something to Serene, who took her hand as we went down the stairs. 'It wouldn't have been so bad, if he had paid any attention to us at all,' Serene whispered back. And then I had the unpleasant experience of seeing them both glance back fearfully, to see if Galen had seen them speak to one another.

Dinner that night was the most cheerless meal I had ever endured at Buckkeep. There was a cold porridge of boiled grain, bread, water and boiled, mashed turnips. Galen, uneating, presided over our meal. There was no conversation; I don't think we even looked at one another. I ate my allotted portions, and left the table almost as hungry as I had arrived.

Halfway up the stairs I remembered Smithy. I returned to the kitchen to get the bones and scraps Cook saved for me, and a pitcher of water to refill his dish. They seemed an awful weight as I climbed the stairs. It struck me as strange that a day of relative inactivity out in the cold had wearied me as much as a day of strenuous work.

Once inside my room, Smithy's warm greeting and eager consumption of the meat was like a healing balm. As soon as he had finished eating, we snuggled into bed. He wanted to bite and tussle, but soon gave up on me. I let sleep claim me.

And woke with a jolt to darkness, fearing that I had slept too long. A glance at the sky told me I could beat the sun to the rooftop, but just barely. No time to wash myself or eat or clean up after Smithy, and it was just as well Galen had forbidden shoes and socks, for I had no time to put mine on. I was too tired even to feel a fool as I raced through the keep and up the stairs of the tower. I could see others hurrying before me by wavering torchlight, and when I emerged from the stairwell, Galen's quirt fell on my back.

It bit unexpectedly sharp through my thin shirt. I cried out in surprise as much as pain. 'Stand like a man and master yourself, bastard,' Galen told me harshly, and the quirt fell again. Everyone else had resumed their places of the day before. They looked as weary as I, and most, too, looked as shocked as I felt by Galen's treatment of me. To this day I don't know why, but I went silently to my place and stood there facing Galen.

'Whoever comes last, is late, and will be treated so,' he warned us. It struck me as a cruel rule, for the only way to avoid his quirt tomorrow was to arrive early enough to see it fall on one of my fellows.

There followed another day of discomfort and random abuse. So I see it now. So I think I knew it then, in my heart of hearts. But ever he spoke of proving us worthy, of making us tough and strong. He made it an honour to be standing out in the cold, bare feet going numb against the chill stone. He roused in us a competition, not just against each other, but against his shabby images of us. 'Prove me wrong,' he said over and over again. 'I beg you, prove me wrong, that I may show the King at least one pupil worthy of my time.' And so we tried. How strange now to look back on it all and wonder at myself. But in the space of one day, he had succeeded in isolating us and plunging us into another reality, where all rules of courtesy and common sense were suspended. We stood silently in the cold, in various

uncomfortable positions, eyes closed, wearing little more than our undergarments. And he walked among us, dealing out cuts from his silly little whip, and insults from his nasty little tongue. He cuffed occasionally, or shoved, something that is much more painful when one is chilled to the bone.

Those who flinched or wavered were accused of weakness. During the day he berated us with our unworthiness and repeated that he had only consented to try to teach us at the King's behest. The women he ignored, and though he often spoke of past princes and kings who had wielded the Skill in defence of the realm, he never once mentioned the queens and princesses who had done likewise. Nor did he ever once give us an overview of what he was attempting to teach us. There was only the cold and the discomfort of his exercises, and the uncertainty of when we would be struck. Why we struggled to endure it, I don't know. So quickly were we all made accomplices in our own degradation.

The sun finally ventured once again toward the horizon. But Galen had saved two final surprises for us that day. He let us stand, open our eyes and stretch freely for a few moments. Then he gave us a final lecture, this one to warn us against those among us who would undermine the training of all by foolish self-indulgences. He walked slowly among us as he spoke, wending his way in and out of our rows, and I saw many a rolling eye and intake of breath as he passed. Then, for the first time that day, he ventured over to the women's corner of the court.

'Some,' he cautioned us as he strolled, 'think themselves above rules. They think themselves worthy of special attention and indulgences. Such illusions of superiority must be driven from you before you can learn anything. It is hardly worthy of my time for me to have to teach these lessons to such laggards and dolts as need them. It is a shame that they have even found their way into our gathering. But they are among us, and I will honour the will of my king, and attempt to teach them. Even though there is only one way I know to waken such lazy minds.'

To Merry he gave two quick cuts with the quirt. But Serene he shoved down onto one knee, and struck four times. To my shame, I stood there with the rest, as each cut fell, and hoped only that she would not cry out and bring more punishment on herself.

But Serene rose, swayed once, and then stood again, still, looking out over the heads of the girls before her. I breathed a sigh of relief. But then

Galen was back, circling like a shark around a fishing-boat, speaking now of those who thought themselves too good to share the discipline of the group, of ones who indulged in meat in plenty while the rest limited ourselves to wholesome grains and pure foods. I wondered uneasily who had been so foolish as to visit the kitchen after hours.

Then I felt the hot lick of the whip on my shoulders. If I had thought he was using the lash to his full capability before, he proved me wrong now.

‘You thought to deceive me. You thought I would never know if Cook saved her precious pet a plate of tidbits, didn’t you? But I know all that happens in Buckkeep. Don’t deceive yourself about that.’

It dawned on me that he was speaking of the meat scraps I’d taken up to Smithy.

‘That food wasn’t for me,’ I protested, and then could have bitten my tongue out.

His eyes glittered coldly. ‘You’d lie to save yourself a little just pain. You’ll never master the Skill. You’ll never be worthy of it. But the King has commanded that I try to teach, and so I will try. Despite you or your low birth.’

In humiliation I took the welts he dealt me. He berated me as each fell, telling the others that the old rules against teaching the Skill to a bastard had been to prevent just such a thing as this.

Afterwards, I stood, silent and shamed, as he went down the rows, dealing a perfunctory swat with the quirt to each of my fellows, explaining as he did so that we all must pay for the failures of the individuals. It did not matter that this statement made no sense, or that the whip fell lightly compared to what Galen had just inflicted on me. It was the idea that they were all paying for my transgression. I had never felt so shamed in my life.

Then he released us, to go down to another cheerless meal, much the same as yesterday’s. This time no one spoke on the stairs or at the meal. And afterwards, I went straight up to my room.

Meat soon, I promised the hungry pup that waited for me. Despite my aching back and muscles, I forced myself to clean up the room, scrubbing up Smithy’s messes, and then making a trip for fresh strewing reeds. Smithy was a bit sulky at being left alone all day, and I was troubled when I realized I had no idea how long this miserable training would last.

I waited until late, when all ordinary folk of the keep were in their beds, before venturing down to get Smithy’s food for him. I dreaded that Galen

would find out, but what else was I to do? I was halfway down the big staircase when I saw the glimmering of a single candle being borne toward me. I shrank against the wall, suddenly sure it was Galen. But it was the Fool who came toward me, glowing as white and pale as the wax candle he carried. In his other hand was a pail of food and a beaker of water balanced on top of it. Soundlessly he waved me back to my room.

Once inside, the door shut, he turned on me. 'I can take care of the pup for you,' he told me dryly. 'But I can't take care of you. Use your head, boy. What can you possibly learn from what he's doing to you?'

I shrugged, then winced. 'It's just to toughen us. I don't think it will go on much longer before he gets down to actually teaching us. I can take it.' Then, 'Wait,' I said, as he fed bits of meat to Smithy from the pail. 'How do you know what Galen's been putting us through?'

'Ah, that would be telling,' he said blithely. 'And I can't do that. Tell, that is.' He dumped the rest of the pail out for Smithy, replenished his water, and stood.

'I'll feed the puppy,' he told me. 'I'll even try to take him outside for a bit each day. But I won't clean up his messes.' He paused at the door. 'That's where I draw the line. You'd better decide where you will draw the line. And soon. Very soon. The danger is greater than you know.'

And then he was gone, taking his candle and warnings with him. I lay down and fell asleep to the sounds of Smithy worrying a bone and making puppy growls to himself.

FIFTEEN

The Witness Stones

The Skill, at its simplest, is the bridging of thought from person to person. It can be used a number of ways. During battle, for instance, a commander can relay simple information and commands directly to those officers under him, if those officers have been trained to receive it. One powerfully Skilled can use his talent to influence even untrained minds or the minds of his enemies, inspiring them with fear or confusion or doubt. Men so talented are rare. But, if incredibly gifted with the Skill, a man can aspire to speak directly to the Elderlings, those who are below only the gods themselves. Few have ever dared to do so, and of those who did, even fewer attained what they asked. For it is said, one may ask of the Elderlings, but the answer they give may not be to the question you ask, but to the one you should have asked. And the answer to that question may be one a man cannot hear and live. For when one speaks to the Elderlings, then is the sweetness of using the Skill strongest and most perilous. And this is the thing that every practitioner of the Skill, weak or strong, must always guard against. For in using the Skill, the user feels a keenness of life, an uplifting of being, that can distract a man from taking his next breath. Compelling is this feeling, even in the common uses of the Skill, and addictive to any not hardened of purpose. But the intensity of this exultation when speaking to the Elderlings is a thing for which we have no comparison. Both senses and sense may be blasted forever from a man who uses the Skill to speak to an Elderling. Such a man dies raving, but it is also true he dies raving of his joy.

The Fool was right. I had no idea of the peril I faced. I plunged on doggedly. I have no heart to detail the weeks that followed. Suffice to say that with each day Galen had us more under his sway, and that he also became more cruel and manipulative. Some few pupils disappeared early on. Merry was one. She stopped coming after the fourth day. I saw her only once

after that, creeping about the keep with a face both woebegone and shamed. I learned later that Serene and the other women had shunned her after she had dropped the training, and when they later spoke of her, it was not as if she had failed at a test, but rather had committed some low and loathsome act for which she could never be forgiven. I know not where she went, only that she left Buckkeep and never returned.

As the ocean sorts pebbles from sand on a beach and stratifies them at the tide mark, so did the poundings and caressings of Galen separate his students. Initially, all of us strove to be his best. It was not because we liked or admired him. I do not know what the others felt, but there was nothing in my heart but hate for him, a hatred so strong that it spawned a resolution not to be broken by such a man. After days of his abuse, to wring a single grudging word of acknowledgement from him was like a torrent of praise from any other master. Days of his belittling should have made me numb to his mockery. Instead, I came to believe much of what he said, and tried futilely to change.

We vied constantly with one another to come to his attention. Some emerged clearly as his favourites. August was one, and we were often urged to imitate him. I was clearly his most despised. And yet this did not stop me from burning to distinguish myself before him. After the first time, I was never last on the tower top. I never wavered from his blows. Nor did Serene, who shared my distinction of being despised. Serene became Galen's grovelling follower, never breathing a word of criticism about him after that first lashing. Yet he constantly found fault with her, berated and reviled her, and struck her far more often than he struck any of the other women. This, however, made her only more determined to prove she could withstand his abuse, and she, after Galen, was the most intolerant of any who wavered or doubted in our teaching.

Winter deepened. It was cold and dark on the tower top, save for what light came from the stairwell. It was the most isolated place in the world, and Galen was its god. He forged us into a unit. We believed ourselves élite, superior and privileged to be instructed in the Skill. Even I, who endured mockery and beatings, believed this to be so. Those of us he broke, we despised. We saw only one another for this time, we heard only Galen. At first I missed Chade. I wondered what Burrich and Lady Patience were doing. But as months went by, such lesser occupations no longer seemed interesting. Even the Fool and Smithy came to be almost annoyances to me,

so single-mindedly did I pursue Galen's approval. The Fool came and went silently then. There were times, though, when I was sorest and weariest, when the touch of Smithy's nose against my cheek was the only comfort I had, and times when I felt shamed by how little time I was giving to my growing puppy.

After three months of cold and cruelty, Galen had whittled us down to eight candidates. The real training finally began then, and also he returned to us a small measure of comfort and dignity. These seemed by then not only great luxuries, but gifts from Galen to be grateful for. A bit of dried fruit with our meals, permission to wear shoes, brief conversation allowed at the table – that was all, and yet we were grovellingly grateful for it. But the changes were only beginning.

It comes back in crystal glimpses. I remember the first time he touched me with the Skill. We were on the tower top, spaced even further now that there were fewer of us, and he went from one of us to the next, pausing a moment before each, while the rest of us waited in reverent silence. 'Ready your minds for the touch. Be open to it, but do not indulge in the pleasure of it. The purpose of the Skill is not pleasure.'

He wended his way among us, in no particular order. Spaced as we were, we could not see one another's faces, nor did it ever please Galen that our eyes follow his movements. And so we heard only his brief, stern words, then heard the in-drawn gasp of each touched one. To Serene he said in disgust, 'Be open to it, I said. Not cower like a beaten dog.'

And last he came to me. I listened to his words, and as he had counselled us earlier, I tried to let go of every sensory awareness I had, and be open only to him. I felt the brush of his mind against mine, like a soft tickle on my forehead. I stood firm before it. It grew stronger, a warmth, a light, but I refused to be drawn into it. I felt Galen stood within my mind, sternly regarding me, and using the focusing techniques he had taught us (imagine a pail of purest white wood, and pour yourself into it) I was able to stand before him, waiting, aware of the Skill's elation, but not giving in to it. Thrice the warmth rushed through me, and thrice I stood before it. And then he withdrew. He gave me a grudging nod, but in his eyes I saw not approval but a trace of fear.

That first touch was like the spark that finally kindles the tinder. I grasped what it was. I could not do it yet; I could not send my thoughts out from me, but I had a knowledge that would not fit into words. I would be

able to Skill. And with that knowing my resolve hardened, and there was nothing, nothing Galen could have done that would stop me learning it.

I think he knew it, for he turned on me in the days that followed with a cruelty that I now find incredible. Hard words and blows he dealt me, but none could turn me aside. He struck me once in the face with his quirt. It left a visible welt, and it chanced that when I was coming into the dining hall, Burrich was also there. I saw his eyes widen. He started up from his place at table, his jaw clenched in a way I knew too well. But I looked aside from him and down. He stood a moment, glaring at Galen, who returned his look with a supercilious stare. Then, fists clenched, Burrich turned his back and left the room. I relaxed, relieved there would be no confrontation. But then Galen looked at me, and the triumph in his face made my heart cold. I was his now, and he knew it.

Pain and victories mixed for me in the next week. He never lost an opportunity to belittle me. And yet, I knew I excelled at each exercise he gave us. I sensed the others groping after his touch of Skill, but for me it was as simple as opening my eyes. I knew one moment of intense fear. He had entered my mind with the Skill, and given me a sentence to repeat aloud. 'I am a bastard, and I shame my father's name,' I said aloud, calmly. And then he spoke again within my mind. *You draw strength from somewhere, bastard. This is not your Skill. Do you think I will not find the source?* And then I quailed before him, and drew back from his touch, hiding Smithy within my mind. His smile showed all his teeth to me.

In the days that followed, we played a game of hide and seek. I must let him into my mind, to learn the Skill. Once there, I danced on coals to keep my secrets from him. Not just Smithy, but Chade and the Fool did I hide, and Molly and Kerry and Dirk, and other, older secrets I would not reveal even to myself. He sought them all, and I juggled them desperately out of his reach. But despite all that, or perhaps because of it, I felt myself growing stronger in the Skill. 'Don't mock me!' he roared after one session, and then grew infuriated as the other students exchanged shocked glances. 'Attend to your own exercises!' he roared at them. He paced away from me, then spun suddenly and flung himself at me. Fist and boot, he attacked me and, as Molly once had, I had no more thought than to shield my face and belly. The blows he rained on me were more like a child's tantrum than a man's attack. I felt their ineffectiveness and then realized with a chill that I was *repelling* at him. Not so much that he would sense it, just enough that not one of his

blows fell exactly as he had intended. I knew, more, that he had no idea what I was doing. When at last he dropped his fists and I dared to lift my eyes, I felt momentarily that I had won, for all the others on the tower top were looking at him with gazes mingled of disgust and fear. He had gone too far for even Serene to stomach. White-faced, he turned aside from me. In that moment, I felt him reach a decision.

That evening in my room, I was horribly tired, but too enervated to sleep. The Fool had left food for Smithy, and I was teasing him with a large beef knuckle. He had set his teeth in my sleeve and was worrying it while I held the bone just out of his reach. It was the sort of game he loved, and he snarled with mock ferocity as he shook my arm. He was near as big as he would get, and I felt with pride the muscles in his thick little neck. With my free hand, I pinched his tail and he spun snarling to this new attack. From hand to hand I juggled his bone, and his eyes darted back and forth as he snapped after it. 'No brain,' I teased him. 'All you can think of is what you want. No brain, no brain.'

'Just like his owner.'

I startled, and in that second Smithy had his bone. He flopped down with it, giving the Fool no more than a perfunctory wag of his tail. I sat down, out of breath. 'I never even heard the door open. Or shut.'

He ignored that and went straight to his topic. 'Do you think Galen will allow you to succeed?'

I grinned smugly. 'Do you think he can prevent it?'

The Fool sat down beside me with a sigh. 'I know he can. So does he. What I cannot decide is if he is ruthless enough. But I suspect he is.'

'So let him try,' I said flippantly.

'I have no choice in that.' The Fool was adamantly serious. 'What I had hoped to do was dissuade you from trying.'

'You'd ask me to give up? Now?' I was incredulous.

'I would.'

'Why?' I demanded.

'Because,' he began, and then stopped in frustration. 'I don't know. Too many things converge. Perhaps if I pluck one thread loose, the knot will not form.'

I was suddenly tired, and the earlier elation of my triumph collapsed before his dour warnings. My irritability won and I snapped, 'If you cannot speak clearly, why do you speak at all?'

He was as silent as if I had struck him. 'That's another thing I don't know,' he said at last. He rose to go.

'Fool,' I began.

'Yes. I am that,' he said, and left.

And so I persevered, growing stronger. I grew impatient with our slow pace of instruction. We went over the same practices each day, and gradually the others began to master what seemed so natural to me. How could they have been so closed off from the rest of the world, I wondered? How could it be so hard for them to open their minds to Galen's Skill? My own task was not to open, but rather to keep closed to him what I did not wish to share. Often, as he gave me a perfunctory touch of the Skill, I sensed a tendril of seeking slinking into my mind. But I evaded it.

'You are ready,' he announced one chill day. It was afternoon, but the brightest stars were already showing in the blue darkness of the sky. I missed the clouds that had yesterday snowed upon us, but had at least kept this deeper cold at bay. I flexed my toes inside the leather shoes that Galen permitted us, trying to warm them to life again. 'Before I have touched you with the Skill, to accustom you to it. Now, today, we will attempt a full joining. You will each reach out to me as I reach out to you. But beware! Most of you have coped with resisting the distractions of the Skill touch, but the power of what you felt was the lightest brush. Today will be stronger. Resist it, but stay open to the Skill.'

And again he began his slow circuit amongst us. I waited, enervated but unafraid. I had looked forward to attempting this. I was ready.

Some clearly failed, and were rebuked for laziness or stupidity. August was praised. Serene was slapped for reaching forth too eagerly. And then he came to me.

I braced as if for a wrestling contest. I felt the brush of his mind against mine, and offered him a cautious reaching of thought. *Like this?*

Yes, bastard. Like this.

And for a moment we were in balance, hovering like children on a see-saw. I felt him steady our contact. Then, abruptly, he slammed into me. It felt exactly as if the air had been knocked out of me, but in a mental rather than physical way. Instead of being unable to get my breath, I was unable to master my thoughts. He rifled through my mind, ransacking my privacy, and I was powerless before him. He had won and he knew it. But in that moment of his careless triumph I found an opening. I grasped at him, trying to seize

his mind as he had mine. I gripped him and held him, and knew for a dizzying instant that I was stronger than he, that I could force into his mind any thought I chose to put there. 'No!' he shrieked, and dimly I knew that, at some former time, he had struggled like this with someone he had despised. Someone else who had also won as I intended to. 'Yes!' I insisted. 'Die!' he commanded me, but I knew I would not. I knew I would win, and I focused my will and bore down on my grip.

The Skill does not care who wins. It does not allow anyone to surrender to any one thought, even for a moment. But I did. And when I did, I forgot to guard against the ecstasy that is both the honey and the sting of the Skill. The euphoria rushed over me, drowning me, and Galen, too, sank below it, no longer exploring my mind, but seeking only to return to his.

I had never felt the like of that moment.

Galen had called it pleasure, and I had expected a pleasant sensation, like warmth in winter, or the fragrance of a rose or a sweet taste in my mouth. This was none of these. Pleasure is too physical a word to describe what I felt. It had nothing to do with the skin or body. It suffused me, it washed over me in a wave that I could not repulse. Elation filled me and flowed through me. I forgot Galen and all else. I felt him escape me, and knew it mattered, but could not care. I forgot all except exploring this sensation.

'Bastard!' Galen bellowed, and struck me with his fist on the side of my head. I fell, helpless, for the pain was not enough to jolt me from the entrancement of the Skill. I felt him kick me, I knew the cold of the stones under me that bruised and scraped me, and yet I felt I was held, smothered in a blanket of euphoria that would not let me pay attention to the beating. My mind assured me, despite the pain, that all was well, that there was no need to fight or flee.

Somewhere a tide was ebbing, leaving me beached and gasping. Galen stood over me, dishevelled and sweating. His breath smoked in the cold air as he leaned close over me. 'Die!' he said, but I did not hear the words. I felt them. He let go of my throat and I fell.

And in the wake of the devouring elation of the Skill came now a bleakness of failure and guilt that made my physical pain as nothing. My nose was bleeding, it was painful to breathe, and the force of the kicks he had dealt me had scraped skin from my body as I had slid across the tower stones. The different pains contradicted one another, each clamouring for

attention so that I couldn't assess what damage had been done to me. I could not even gather myself together to stand up. Looming over all was the knowledge that I had failed. I was defeated and unworthy and Galen had proven it.

As if from a distance, I heard him shouting at the others, telling them to beware, for this was how he would deal with those so undisciplined that they could not turn their minds from pleasure of the Skill. And he warned them all of what befell such a man, who strove to use the Skill and instead fell under the spell of the pleasure it bore with it. Such a man would become mindless, a great infant, speechless, sightless, soiling himself, forgetting thought, forgetting even food and drink, until he died. Such a one was beyond disgust.

And such a one was I. I sank into my shame. Helplessly, I began to sob. I merited such treatment as he had given me. I deserved worse. Only a misplaced pity had kept Galen from killing me. I had wasted his time, had taken his painstaking instruction and turned it all to selfish indulgence. I fled myself, going deeper and deeper within, but finding only disgust and hatred for myself layered throughout my thoughts. I would be better off dead. Were I to throw myself from the tower roof, it would still not be enough to destroy my shame, but at least I need no longer be aware of it. I lay still and wept.

The others left. As each one passed, they had a word, a gobbet of spittle, a kick or a blow for me. I scarcely noticed. I rejected myself more completely than they could. Then they were gone, and Galen alone stood over me. He nudged me with his foot, but I was incapable of response. Suddenly, he was everywhere, over, under, around and inside me, and I could not deny him. 'You see, bastard,' he said archly, calmly. 'I tried to tell them you were not worthy. I tried to tell them the training would kill you. But you would not listen. You strove to usurp that which had been given to another. Again, I am right. Well. This has not been time wasted if it has done away with you.'

I don't know when he left me. After a time, I was aware that it was the moon looking down on me, and not Galen. I rolled onto my belly. I could not stand, but I could crawl. Not quickly, not even lifting my stomach completely off the ground, but I could scuffle and scrape myself along. With a singleness of purpose, I began to make my way towards the low wall. I thought that I could drag myself up onto a bench, and from there to the top of the wall. And from there. Down. End it.

It was a long journey, in the cold and the dark. Somewhere I could hear a whimpering, and I despised myself for that, too. But as I scraped myself along, it grew, as a spark in the distance becomes a fire as one approaches. It refused to be ignored. It grew louder in my mind, a whining against my fate, a tiny voice of resistance that forbade that I should die, that denied my failure. It was warmth and light, too, and it grew stronger and stronger as I tried to find its source.

I stopped.

I lay still.

It was inside me. The more I sought it, the stronger it grew. It loved me. Loved me even if I couldn't, wouldn't, didn't love myself. Loved me even if I hated it. It set its tiny teeth in my soul and braced and held so that I couldn't crawl any further. And when I tried, a howl of despair burst from it, searing me, forbidding me to break so sacred a trust.

It was Smithy.

He cried with my pains, physical and mental. And when I stopped struggling toward the wall, he went into a paroxysm of joy, a celebration of triumph for us. And all I could do to reward him was to lie still and no longer attempt to destroy myself. And he assured me it was enough, it was a plenitude, it was a joy. I closed my eyes.

The moon was high when Burrich rolled me gently over. The Fool held the torch and Smithy capered and danced about his feet. Burrich gathered me up and stood, as if I were still a child just given into his care. I had a glimpse of his dark face, but read nothing there. He carried me down the long stone staircase, the Fool bearing the torch to light the way. And he took me out of the keep, back to the stables and up to his room. There the Fool left Burrich and Smithy and me, and I do not recall that there had been one word spoken. Burrich set me down on his own bed, and then dragged it, bedstead and all, closer to the fire. With returning warmth came great pain, and I gave my body over to Burrich, my soul to Smithy, and let go of my mind for a long while.

I opened my eyes to night. I knew not which one. Burrich sat next to me still, undozing, not even slumped in his chair. I felt the strictures of bandaging on my ribs. I lifted a hand to touch it, but was baffled by two splinted fingers. Burrich's eyes followed my motion. 'They were swollen with more than cold. Too swollen for me to tell if it were breaks, or just sprains. I splinted them in case. I suspect it's just a sprain. I think if they

were broken, the pain of my working on them would have wakened even you.'

He spoke calmly, as if telling me that he had purged a new dog for worms as a preventative against contagion. And just as his steady voice and calm touch had worked on a frantic animal, so it worked on me. I relaxed, thinking that if he were calm, not much could be wrong. He slipped a finger under the bandages supporting my ribs, checking the tightness. 'What happened?' he asked, and turned aside from me to pick up a cup of tea as he spoke, as if the question and my answer were of no great import.

I pushed my mind back over the last few weeks, tried to find a way to explain. Events danced in my mind, slipped away from me. I remembered only defeat. 'Galen tested me,' I said slowly. 'I failed. And he punished me for it.' And with my words, a wave of dejection, shame and guilt swept over me, washing away the brief comfort I had taken in the familiar surroundings. On the hearth, a sleeping Smithy abruptly waked and sat up. Reflexively, I quieted him before he could whine. *Lie down. Rest. It's all right.* To my relief, he did so. And to my greater relief, Burrich seemed unaware of what had passed between us. He offered me the cup.

'Drink this. You need water in you, and the herbs will deaden the pain and let you sleep. Drink it all, now.'

'It stinks,' I told him, and he nodded, and held the cup my hands were too bruised to curl around. I drank it all and then lay back.

'That was all?' he asked carefully, and I knew what he referred to. 'He tested you on a thing he had taught you, and you did not know it. So he did this to you?'

'I could not do it. I didn't have the ... self-discipline. So he punished me.' Details eluded me. Shame washed over me, drowning me in misery.

'No one is taught self-discipline by beating him half to death.' Burrich spoke carefully, stating the truth for an idiot. His movements were very precise as he set the cup back on the table.

'It was not to teach me ... I don't think he believes I can be taught. It was to show the others what would happen if they failed.'

'Very little worth knowing is taught by fear,' Burrich said stubbornly. And, more warmly, 'It's a poor teacher who tries to instruct by blows and threats. Imagine taming a horse that way. Or a dog. Even the most knot-headed dog learns better from an open hand than a stick.'

'You've struck me before, when trying to teach me something.'

‘Yes. Yes, I have. But to jolt, or warn, or awaken. Not to damage. Never to break a bone or blind an eye or cripple a hand. Never. Never say to anyone that I’ve struck you, or any creature in my care that way, for it’s not true.’ He was indignant that I could even have suggested it.

‘No. You’re right about that.’ I tried to think how I could make Burrich understand why I had been punished. ‘But this was different, Burrich. A different kind of learning, a different kind of teaching.’ I felt compelled to defend Galen’s justice. I tried to explain. ‘I deserved this, Burrich. The fault was not with his teaching. I failed to learn. I tried. I did try. But like Galen, I believe there is a reason the Skill is not taught to bastards. There is a taint in me, a fatal weakness.’

‘Horseshit.’

‘No. Think on it, Burrich. If you breed a scrub-mare to a fine stud, the colt you get is as likely to get the weakness of the mother as the fineness of the father.’

The silence was long. Then, ‘I doubt much that your father would have lain down beside a woman that was a “scrub”. Without some fineness, some sign of spirit or intelligence, he would not. He could not.’

‘I’ve heard it said he was tranced by a mountain witch-woman.’ For the first time I repeated a tale I’d heard whispered often.

‘Chivalry was not a man to fall for such magickry. And his son is not some snivelling, weak-spirited fool that lies about and whines that he deserved a beating.’ He leaned closer, gently prodded just below my temple. A blast of pain rocked my consciousness. ‘That’s how near you were to losing an eye to this “teaching”.’ His temper was rising, and I kept my mouth closed. He took a quick turn around the room, then spun to face me.

‘That puppy. He’s from Patience’s bitch, isn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you haven’t ... oh, Fitz, please tell me that it wasn’t your using the Wit that brought this on you. If he did this to you for that, there’s not a word I can say to anyone, or an eye I can meet anywhere in the keep or the whole kingdom.’

‘No, Burrich. I promise you, this had nothing to do with the pup. It was my failure to learn what I had been taught. My weakness.’

‘Quiet,’ he ordered me impatiently. ‘Your word is enough. I know you well enough to know your promise will always be true. But for the rest,

you're making no sense at all. Go back to sleep. I'm going out, but I'll be back soon enough. Get some rest. It's the real healer.'

A purpose had settled on Burrich. My words seemed to have satisfied him finally, settled something for him. He dressed quickly, pulling on boots, changing his shirt for a loose one, and putting only a leather jerkin over it. Smithy stood and whined anxiously as Burrich went out, but could not convey his worry to me. Instead, he came to the bedside and scrabbled up, to burrow into the covers beside me and comfort me with his trust. In the bleak despair that settled over me, he was my only light. I closed my eyes and Burrich's herbs sank me into a dreamless sleep.

I awoke later that afternoon. A gust of cold air preceded Burrich's entry into the room. He checked me over, casually prising open my eyes and then running competent hands down my ribs and over my other bruises. He grunted his satisfaction, then changed his torn and muddied shirt for a fresh one. He hummed as he did so, seeming in a fine mood much at odds with my bruises and depression. It was almost a relief when he left again. Below, I heard him whistling and calling orders to the stable-boys. It all sounded so normal and workaday and I longed for it with an intensity that surprised me. I wanted that back, the warm smell of the horses and dogs and straw, the simple tasks, done well and completely, and the good sleep of exhaustion at the end of a day. I longed for it, but the worthlessness that filled me now predicted that, even at that, I would fail. Galen had often sneered at those who worked such simple jobs about the keep. He had only contempt for the kitchen-maids and cooks, derision for the stable-boys, and the men-at-arms who guarded us with sword and bow, were, in his words, 'ruffians and dolts, doomed to flail away at the world, and control with a sword what they can't master with their minds'. So now I was strangely torn. I longed to return to being what Galen had convinced me was contemptible, yet doubt and despair filled me that I could even do so much as that.

I was abed for two days. A jovial Burrich tended me with banter and good nature that I could not fathom. There was a briskness to his step and a sureness to him that made him seem a much younger man. It added to my dispiritedness that my injuries put him in such fine fettle. But after two days of bed rest, Burrich informed me that only so much stillness was good for a man, and it was time I was up and moving if I wished to heal well. He proceeded to find me many minor chores to perform, none heavy enough to tax my strength, but more than enough to keep me busy, for I had to rest

often. I believe that the busyness was what he was after rather than any exercise for me, for all I had done was to lie in bed and look at the wall and despise myself. Faced with my unrelenting depression, even Smithy had begun to turn aside from his food. Despite this, he remained my only real source of comfort. Following me about the stable was the purest enjoyment he'd ever had. Every scent and sight he relayed to me with an intensity that, despite my bleakness, renewed in me the wonder I had first felt when I'd plunged into Burrich's world. Smithy was savagely possessive of me as well, challenging even Sooty's right to sniff me, and earning himself a snap from Vixen that sent him yipping and cowering to my heels.

I begged the next day free for myself, and went into Buckkeep Town. The walk took me longer than it had ever taken me before, but Smithy rejoiced in my slow pace, for it gave him time to snuff his way around every clump of grass and tree on the way. I had thought that seeing Molly would lift my spirits, and give me some sense of my own life again. But when I got to the chandlery she was busy, filling three large orders for outbound ships. I sat by the hearth in the shop. Her father sat opposite me, drinking and glaring at me. Although his illness had weakened him, it had not changed his temperament, and on days when he was well enough to sit up, he was well enough to drink. After a while, I gave up all pretence at conversation, and simply watched him drink and disparage his daughter as Molly bustled frantically about, trying to be both efficient and hospitable to her customers. The dreary pettiness of it all depressed me.

At noon she told her father she was closing the shop while she went to deliver an order. She gave me a rack of candles to carry, loaded her own arms, and we left, latching the door behind us. Her father's drunken imprecations followed us, but she ignored them. Once outside in the brisk winter wind, I followed Molly as she walked quickly to the back of the shop. Motioning for my silence, she opened the back door and set all that she carried inside. My rack of candles, too, were unloaded there, and then we left.

For a bit, we just wandered through the town, talking little. She commented on my bruised face; I said only that I had fallen. The wind was cold and relentless, so the market stalls were near-empty of both customers and vendors. She paid much attention to Smithy, and he revelled in it. On our walk back, we stopped at a tea shop, and she treated me to mulled wine and made so much of Smithy that he fell over on his back and all his

thoughts turned into wallowing in her affection. I was struck suddenly by how clearly Smithy was aware of her feelings, and yet she did not sense his at all, except on the shallowest level. I quested gently toward her, but found her elusive and drifting, like a perfume that comes strong and then faint on the same breath of wind. I knew that I could have pushed more insistently against her, but somehow it seemed pointless. An aloneness settled on me, a deadly melancholy that she never had been and never would be any more aware of me than she was of Smithy. So I took her brief words to me as a bird pecks at dry breadcrumbs, and let alone the silences she curtained between us. Soon she said that she could not tarry long, or it would be the worse for her, for if her father no longer had the strength to strike her, he was still capable of smashing his beer mug on the floor or knocking over racks of things to show his displeasure at being neglected. She smiled an odd little smile as she told me this, as if it would be less appalling if somehow we thought of his behaviour as amusing. I couldn't smile and she looked away from my face.

I helped her with her cloak and we left, walking uphill and into the wind. And that suddenly seemed a metaphor for my whole life. At her door, she shocked me with a hug and a kiss on the corner of my jaw, the embrace so brief that it was almost like being bumped in the market. 'Newboy ...' she said, and then, 'Thank you. For understanding.'

And then she whisked into her shop and shut the door behind her, leaving me chilled and bewildered. She thanked me for understanding her at a time when I had never felt more isolated from her, and everyone else. All the way up to the keep Smithy kept prattling to himself about all the perfumes he'd smelt on her and how she had scratched him just where he could never reach in front of his ears and of the sweet biscuit she'd fed him in the tea shop.

It was mid-afternoon when we got back to the stables. I did a few chores, and then went back up to Burrich's room, where Smithy and I fell asleep. I awoke to Burrich standing over me, a slight frown on his face.

'Up, and let's have a look at you,' he commanded, and I arose wearily and stood quiet while he went over my injuries with deft hands. He was pleased with the condition of my hand, and told me that it might go unbandaged now, but to keep the wrapping about my ribs and to come back to have it adjusted each evening. 'As for the rest of it, keep it clean and dry, and don't pick at the scabs. If any of it starts to fester, come and see me.' He

filled a little pot with an unguent that eased sore muscles and gave it to me, by which I deduced that he expected me to leave.

I stood holding the little pot of medicine. A terrible sadness welled up in me, and yet I could find no words to say. Burrich looked at me, scowled and turned away. 'Now stop that,' he commanded me angrily.

'What?' I asked.

'You look at me sometimes with my lord's eyes,' he said quietly, and then as sharply as before, 'Well, what did you think to do? Hide in the stables the rest of your life? No. You have to go back. You have to go back and hold up your head and eat your meals among the keep folk, and sleep in your own room, and live your own life. Yes, and go and finish those damn lessons in the Skill.'

His first commands had sounded difficult, but the last, I knew, was impossible.

'I can't,' I said, not believing how stupid he was. 'Galen wouldn't let me come back to the group. And even if he did, I'd never catch up on all I'd missed. I've already failed at it, Burrich. I failed and that's done, and I need to find something else to do with myself. I'd like to learn the hawks, please.' The last I heard myself say with some amazement, for in truth it had never crossed my mind before. Burrich's reply was at least as strange.

'You can't, for the hawks don't like you. You're too warm and you don't mind your own business enough. Now listen to me. You didn't fail, you fool. Galen tried to drive you away. If you don't go back, you'll have let him win. You have to go back and you have to learn it. But,' and here he turned on me, and the anger in his eyes was for me, 'You don't have to stand there like a carter's mule while he beats you. You've a birthright to his time and his knowledge. Make him give you what is yours. Don't run away. No one ever gained anything by running away.' He paused, started to say more, and then stopped.

'I've missed too many lessons. I'll never ...'

'You haven't missed anything,' Burrich said stubbornly. He turned away from me, and I couldn't read his tone as he added, 'There have been no lessons since you left. You should be able to pick up just where you left off.'

'I don't want to go back.'

'Don't waste my time by arguing with me,' he said tightly. 'Don't dare to try my patience that way. I've told you what you are to do. Do it.'

Suddenly I was five years old again, and a man in a kitchen backed up a crowd with a look. I shivered, cowed. Abruptly, it was easier to face Galen than to defy Burrich. Even when he added, 'And you'll leave that pup with me until your lessons are done. Being shut up inside your room all day is no life for a dog. His coat will go bad and his muscles won't grow properly. But you'd better be down here each evening to see to both him and Sooty or you'll answer to me. And I don't give a damn what Galen says about that, either.'

And so I was dismissed. I conveyed to Smithy that he was to stay with Burrich, and he accepted it with an equanimity that surprised me as much as it hurt my feelings. Dispirited, I took my pot of unguent and plodded back up to the keep. I took food from the kitchen, for I had no heart to face anyone at table and went up to my room. It was cold and dark; no fire in the hearth, no candles in the sticks and the fouled reeds underfoot stank. I fetched candles and wood, set a fire, and while I was waiting for it to take some of the chill off the stone walls and floors, I busied myself with taking up the floor rushes. Then, as Lacey had advised me, I scrubbed the room well with hot water and vinegar. Somehow I got the vinegar that had been flavoured with tarragon, and so when I was finished, the room smelt fragrant. Exhausted, I flung myself down on my bed, and fell asleep wondering why I'd never discovered how to open whatever hidden door it was that led to Chade's quarters. But I had no doubt that he would have simply dismissed me, for he was a man of his word and would not interfere until Galen had finished with me. Or until he discovered that I was finished with Galen.

The Fool's candles awoke me. I was completely disoriented, until he said, 'You've just time to wash and eat and still be first on the tower top.'

He'd brought warm water in an ewer, and warm rolls from the kitchen ovens.

'I'm not going.'

It was the first time I'd ever seen the Fool look surprised. 'Why not?'

'It's pointless. I can't succeed. I simply haven't the aptitude and I'm tired of beating my head against the wall.'

The Fool's eyes widened further. 'I thought you had been doing well, before ...'

It was my turn to be surprised. 'Well? Why do you think he mocked me and struck me? As a reward for my success? No. I haven't even been able to understand what it's about. All the others had already surpassed me. Why

should I go back? So Galen can prove even more thoroughly how right he was?’

‘Something,’ the Fool said carefully, ‘is not right here.’ He considered for a moment. ‘Before, I asked you to give up the lessons. You would not. Do you recall that?’

I cast my mind back. ‘I’m stubborn, sometimes,’ I admitted.

‘And if I asked you now, to continue? To go up to the tower top, and continue to try?’

‘Why have you changed your mind?’

‘Because that which I sought to prevent came to pass. But you survived it. So I seek now to ...’ His words trailed off. ‘It is as you said. Why should I speak at all, when I cannot speak plainly?’

‘If I said that, I regret it. It is not a thing one should say to a friend. I do not remember it.’

He smiled faintly. ‘If you do not remember it, then neither shall I.’ He reached and took both of my hands in his. His grip was oddly cool. A shiver passed over me at his touch. ‘Would you continue, if I asked it of you? As a friend?’

The word sounded so odd from his lips. He spoke it without mockery, carefully, as if the saying of it aloud could shatter the meaning. His colourless eyes held mine. I found I could not say no. So I nodded.

Even so, I rose reluctantly. He watched me with an impassive interest as I straightened the clothes I’d slept in, splashed my face, and then tore into the bread he’d brought. ‘I don’t want to go,’ I told him as I finished the first roll and took up the second. ‘I don’t see what it can accomplish.’

‘I don’t know why he bothers with you,’ the Fool agreed. The familiar cynicism was back.

‘Galen? He has to, the King ...’

‘Burrich.’

‘He just likes bossing me about,’ I complained, and it sounded childish, even to me.

The Fool shook his head. ‘You haven’t even a clue, have you?’

‘About what?’

‘About how the stablemaster dragged Galen from his bed, and from thence to the Witness Stones. I wasn’t there, of course, or I would be able to tell you how Galen cursed and struck at him at first, but the stablemaster paid no attention. He just hunched his shoulders to the man’s blows, and

kept silent. He gripped the Skillmaster by the collar, so the man was fair choked, and dragged him along. And the soldiers and guards and stable-boys followed in a stream that became a torrent of men. If I had been there, I could tell you how no man dared to interfere, for it was as if the stablemaster had become as Burrich once was, an iron-muscled man with a black temper that was like a madness when it came on him. No one, then, dared to brook that temper, and that day, it was as if Burrich was that man again. If he limped still, no one noticed it at all.

‘As for the Skillmaster, he flailed and cursed, and then he grew still, and all suspected that he turned what he knew upon his captor. But if he did, it had no effect, save that the stablemaster tightened his grip on the man’s neck. And if Galen strove to sway others to his cause, they did not react. Perhaps being choked and dragged was sufficient to break his concentration. Or perhaps his Skill is not as strong as it was rumoured. Or perhaps too many remember his mistreatment of them too well to be vulnerable to his wiles. Or perhaps ...’

‘Fool! Get on with it! What happened?’ A light sweat cloaked my body and I shivered, not knowing what I hoped for.

‘I wasn’t there, of course,’ the Fool asserted sweetly. ‘But I have heard it said that the dark man dragged the skinny man all the way up to the Witness Stones. And there, still gripping the Skillmaster so that he could not speak, he asserted his challenge. They would fight. No weapons, but hands only, just as the Skillmaster had assaulted a certain boy the day before. And the Stones would witness, if Burrich won, that Galen had had no call to strike the boy, nor had he the right to refuse to teach the boy. And Galen would have refused the challenge and gone to the King himself, except that the dark man had already called the Stones to witness. And so they fought, in much the same way that a bull fights a bale of straw when he tosses and stamps and gores it. And when he was done, the stablemaster bent and whispered something to the Skillmaster, before he and all others turned and left the man lying there, with the Stones witness to his whimpering and bleeding.’

‘What did he say?’ I demanded.

‘I wasn’t there. I saw and heard nothing of it.’ The Fool stood and stretched. ‘You’ll be late if you tarry,’ he pointed out to me, and left. And I left my room, wondering, and climbed the tall tower to the Queen’s stripped Garden and was still in time to be the first one there.

SIXTEEN

Lessons

According to ancient chronicles, Skillusers were organized in coterie of six. These groups did not usually include any of exceptional royal blood, but were limited to cousins and nephews of the direct line of ascension, or those who showed an aptitude and were judged worthy. One of the most famous, Crossfire's Coterie, provides a splendid example of how they functioned. Dedicated to Queen Vision, Crossfire and the others of her coterie had been trained by a Skillmaster called Tactic. The partners in this coterie were mutually chosen by one another, and then received special training from Tactic to bind them into a close unit. Whether scattered across the Six Duchies to collect or disseminate information, or when massed as a group for the purpose of confounding and demoralizing the enemy, their deeds became legendary. Their final heroism, detailed in the ballad Crossfire's Sacrifice, was the massing of their strength, which they channelled to Queen Vision during the Battle of Besham. Unbeknownst to the exhausted queen, they gave to her more than they could spare themselves, and in the midst of the victory celebration the coterie was discovered in their tower, drained and dying. Perhaps the people's love of Crossfire's Coterie stemmed in part from their all being cripples in one form or another: blind, lame, harelipped or disfigured by fire were all of the six, yet in the Skill their strength was greater than that of the largest warship, and more of a determinant in the defence of the Queen.

During the peaceful years of King Bounty's reign, the instruction of the Skill for the creation of coterie was abandoned. Existing coterie disbanded due to ageing, death or simply a lack of purpose. Instruction in the Skill began to be limited to princes only, and for a time it was seen as a rather archaic art. By the time of the Red Ship raids, only King Shrewd and his son Verity were active practitioners of the Skill. Shrewd made an effort to locate

and recruit former practitioners, but most were aged, or no longer proficient.

Galen, then Skillmaster for Shrewd, was assigned the task of creating new coterie for the defence of the kingdom. Galen chose to set aside tradition. Coterie memberships were assigned rather than mutually chosen. Galen's methods of teaching were harsh, his training goal that each member would be an unquestioning part of a unit, a tool for the King to use as he needed. This particular aspect was designed solely by Galen, and the first Skill coterie he created, he presented to King Shrewd as if it were his gift to give. At least one member of the royal family expressed his abhorrence of the idea. But times were desperate, and King Shrewd could not resist wielding the weapon that had been given into his hand.

Such hate. Oh, how they hated me. As each student emerged from the stairwell onto the tower roof to find me there and waiting, each spurned me. I felt their disdain, as palpably as if each had dashed cold water against me. By the time the seventh and final student appeared, the cold of their hatred was like a wall around me. But I stood, silent and contained, in my accustomed place, and met every eye that was lifted to mine. That, I think, was why no one spoke a word to me. They were forced to take their places around me. They did not speak to each other, either.

And we waited.

The sun came up, and even cleared the wall around the tower, and still Galen had not come. But they kept their places and waited and so I did likewise.

Finally, I heard his halting steps upon the stairs. When he emerged, he blinked in the sun's pale wash, glanced at me, and visibly startled. I stood my ground. We looked at one another. He could see the burden of hatred that the others had imposed on me and it pleased him, as did the bandages I still wore on my temple. But I met his eyes and did not flinch. I dared not.

And I became aware of the dismay the others were feeling. No one could look at him and not see how badly he had been beaten. The Witness Stones had found him lacking, and all who saw him would know. His gaunt face was a landscape of purples and greens washed over with yellows. His lower lip was split in the middle, and cut at the corner of his mouth. He wore a long-sleeved robe that covered his arms, but the flowing looseness of it contrasted so strongly with his usual tightly-laced shirts and tunics that it was like seeing the man in his nightshirt. His hands, too, were purple and

knobby, but I could not recall that I had seen bruises on Burrich's body. I concluded that he had used them in a vain attempt to shield his face. He still carried his little whip with him, but I doubted he had the capability to swing it effectively.

And so we inspected one another. I took no satisfaction in his bruises or his disgrace. I felt something akin to shame for them. I had believed so strongly in his invulnerability and superiority that this evidence of his mere humanity left me feeling foolish. That unbalanced his composure. Twice he opened his mouth to speak to me. The third time, he turned his back on the class and said, 'Begin your physical limbering. I will observe you to see if you are moving correctly.'

The ends of his words were soft, spoken through a painful mouth. And as we dutifully stretched and swayed and bowed in unison, he crabbed awkwardly about the tower garden. He tried not to lean on the wall, or to rest too often. Gone was the slap, slap, slap of the whip against his thigh that had formerly orchestrated our efforts. Instead, he gripped it as if afraid he might drop it. For my part, I was grateful that Burrich had made me get up and move. My bound ribs didn't permit me the full flexibility of motion that Galen had formerly commanded from us, but I made an honest attempt at it.

He offered us nothing new that day, only going over what we had already learned, and the lessons came to an early end, before the sun was even down. 'You have done well,' he offered lamely. 'You have earned these free hours, for I am pleased you have continued to study in my absence.' Before dismissing us, he called each of us before him, for a brief touch of the Skill. The others left reluctantly, with many a backward glance, curious as to how he would deal with me. As the numbers of my fellow students dwindled, I braced myself for a solitary confrontation.

But even that was a disappointment. He called me before him, and I came, as silent and outwardly respectful as the others. I stood before him as they had, and he made a few brief passes of his hands before my face and over my head. Then he said in a cold voice, 'You shield too well. You must learn to relax your guard over your thoughts if you are either to send them forth or receive those of others. Go.'

And I left, as the others had, but regretfully. Privately I wondered if he had made a real attempt to use the Skill on me. I had felt no brush of it. I descended the stairs, aching and bitter, wondering why I was trying.

I went to my room, and then to the stables. I gave Sooty a cursory brushing while Smithy watched. Still I felt restless and dissatisfied. I knew I should rest, that I would regret it if I did not. *Stone walk?* Smithy suggested, and I agreed to take him into town. He galloped and snuffled circles around me as I made my way down from the keep. It was a blustery afternoon after a calm morning; a storm was building offshore. But the wind was unseasonably warm, and I felt the fresh air clearing my head, and the steady rhythm of walking soothed and stretched the muscles that Galen's exercises had left bunched and aching. Smithy's sensory prattle grounded me firmly in the immediate world so that I could not dwell on my frustrations.

I told myself it was Smithy who led us so directly to Molly's shop. Puppylike, he had returned to where he had been welcomed before. Molly's father had kept his bed that day, and the shop was fairly quiet. A single customer lingered, talking to Molly. Molly introduced him to me as Jade. He was a mate off some Sealbay trading vessel, not quite twenty, and he spoke to me as if I were ten, smiling past me at Molly all the while. He was full of tales of Red Ships and sea storms. He had a red stone earring in one ear, and a new beard curled along his jaw. He took far too long to select candles and a new brass lamp, but finally he left.

'Close the store for a bit,' I urged Molly. 'Let's go down to the beach. The wind is lovely today.'

She shook her head regretfully. 'I'm behind in my work. I should dip tapers all this afternoon if I have no customers. And if I do have customers, I should be here.'

I felt unreasonably disappointed. I quested toward her, and discovered how much she actually wished to go. 'There's not that much daylight left,' I said persuasively. 'You can always dip tapers this evening. And your customers will come back tomorrow if they find you closed today.'

She cocked her head, looked thoughtful, and abruptly set aside the wicking she held. 'You're right, you know. The fresh air will do me good.' And she took up her cloak with an alacrity that delighted Smithy and surprised me. We closed up the shop and left.

Molly set her usual brisk pace. Smithy frolicked about her, delighted. We talked, in a cursory way. The wind put roses in her cheeks, and her eyes seemed brighter in the cold. And I thought she looked at me more often, and more pensively than she usually did.

The town was quiet, and the market all but deserted. We went to the beach, and walked sedately where we had raced and shrieked but a few years before. She asked me if I had learned to light a lantern before going down steps at night, and that mystified me, until I remembered that I had explained my injuries as a fall down a dark staircase. She asked me if the schoolteacher and the horsemaster were still at odds, and by this I discerned that Burrich and Galen's challenge at the Witness Stones had become something of a local legend already. I assured her that peace had been restored. We spent some little time gathering a certain kind of seaweed that she wanted to flavour her chowder with that evening. Then, because I was winded, we sat in the lee of some rocks and watched Smithy make numerous attempts to clear the beach of gulls.

'So. I hear Prince Verity is to wed,' she began conversationally.

'What?' I asked, amazed.

She laughed heartily. 'Newboy, I have never met anyone as immune to gossip as you seem to be. How can you live right up there in the keep and know nothing of that which is the common talk of the town? Verity has agreed to take a bride, to assure the succession. But the story in town is that he is too busy to do his courting himself, so Regal will find him a lady.'

'Oh, no.' My dismay was honest. I was picturing big bluff Verity paired with one of Regal's sugar-crystal women. Whenever there was a festival of any kind in the keep, Springsedge or Winterheart or Harvestday, here they came, from Chalced and Farrow and Bearn, in carriages or on richly-caparisoned palfreys or riding in litters. They wore gowns like butterflies' wings, ate as daintily as sparrows, and seemed to flutter about and perch always in Regal's vicinity. And he would sit in their midst, in his own silk and velvet hues, and preen while their musical voices tinkled around him and their fans and fancywork trembled in their fingers. 'Prince-catchers', I'd heard them called, noble women who displayed themselves like goods in a store window in the hopes of wedding one of the royals. Their behaviour was not improper, not quite. But to me it seemed desperate, and Regal cruel as he smiled first on this one and then danced all evening with that one, only to rise to a late breakfast and walk yet another through the gardens. They were Regal's worshippers. I tried to picture one on Verity's arm as he stood watching the dancers at a ball, or quietly weaving in his study while Verity pondered and sketched at the maps he so loved. No garden strolls – Verity took his walks along the docks and through the crops, stopping often to talk

to the seafolk and farmers behind their ploughs. Dainty slippers and embroidered skirts would surely not follow him there.

Molly slipped a penny into my hand.

‘What’s this for?’

‘To pay for whatever you’ve been thinking so hard that you’ve been sitting on the edge of my skirt while I’ve twice asked you to lift up. I don’t think you’ve heard a word I’ve said.’

I sighed. ‘Verity and Regal are so different, I cannot imagine one choosing a wife for the other.’

Molly looked puzzled.

‘Regal will choose someone who is beautiful and wealthy and of good blood. She’ll be able to dance and sing and play the chimes. She’ll dress beautifully and have jewels in her hair at the breakfast table, and always smell of the flowers that grow in the Rain Wilds.’

‘And Verity will not be glad of such a woman?’ The confusion on Molly’s face was as if I were insisting the sea was soup.

‘Verity deserves a companion, not an ornament to wear on his sleeve,’ I protested in disdain. ‘Were I Verity, I’d want a woman who could do things. Not just select her jewellery or plait her own hair. She should be able to sew a shirt, or tend her own garden, and have something special she can do that is all her own, like scrollwork or herbery.’

‘Newboy, the like of that is not for fine ladies,’ Molly chided me. ‘They are meant to be pretty and ornamental. And they are rich. It isn’t for them to have to do such work.’

‘Of course it is. Look at Lady Patience and her woman, Lacey. They are always about and doing things. Their apartments are a jungle of the lady’s plants, and the cuffs of her gowns are sometimes a bit sticky from her paper-making, or she will have bits of leaves in her hair from her herbery work, but she is still just as beautiful. And prettiness is not all that important in a woman. I’ve watched Lacey’s hands making one of the keep children a fish-net from a bit of jute string. Quick and clever as any webman’s fingers down on the dock are her fingers; now that’s a pretty thing that has nothing to do with her face. And Hod, who teaches weapons? She loves her silver-work and graving. She made a dagger for her father’s birthday, with a grip like a leaping stag, and yet done so cleverly that it’s a comfort in the hand, with not a jag or edge to catch on anything. Now that’s a bit of beauty that will live on long after her hair greys or her cheeks wrinkle. Someday her

grandchildren will look at that work and think what a clever woman she was.'

'Do you think so, really?'

'Certainly.' I shifted, suddenly aware of how close Molly was to me. I shifted, yet did not really move further away. Down the beach, Smithy made another foray into a flock of gulls. His tongue was hanging nearly to his knees, but he was still galloping.

'But if noble ladies do all those things, they'll ruin their hands with the work, and the wind will dry their hair and tan their faces. Surely Verity doesn't deserve a woman who looks like a deckhand?'

'Surely he does. Far more than he deserves a woman who looks like a fat red carp kept in a bowl.'

Molly giggled.

'Someone to ride beside him of a morning when he takes Hunter out for a gallop, or someone who can look at a section of map he's just finished and actually understand just how fine a piece of work it is. That's what Verity deserves.'

'I've never ridden a horse,' Molly objected suddenly. 'And I know few letters.'

I looked at her curiously, wondering why she seemed so suddenly downcast. 'What matter is that? You're clever enough to learn anything. Look at all you've taught yourself about candles and herbs. Don't tell me that came from your father. Sometimes when I come to the shop, your hair and dress smell of fresh herbs and I can tell you've been experimenting to get new perfumes for the candles. If you wanted to read or write more, you could learn. As for riding, you'd be a natural. You've balance and strength ... look at how you climb the rocks on the cliffs. And animals take to you. You've fair won Smithy's heart away from me ...'

'Fa!' She gave me a nudge with her shoulder. 'You talk as if some lord should come riding down from the keep and carry me off.'

I thought of August with his stuffy manners, or Regal simpering at her. 'Eda forbid. You'd be wasted on them. They wouldn't have the wit to understand you, or the heart to appreciate you.'

Molly looked down at her work-worn hands. 'Who would, then?' she asked softly.

Boys are fools. The conversation had grown and twined around us, my words coming as naturally as breathing to me. I had not intended any

flattery, or subtle courtship. The sun was beginning to dip into the water, and we sat close by one another and the beach before us was like the world at our feet. If I had said at that moment, 'I would,' I think her heart would have tumbled into my awkward hands like ripe fruit from a tree. I think she might have kissed me, and sealed herself to me of her own free will. But I couldn't grasp the immensity of what I suddenly knew I had come to feel for her. It drove the simple truth from my lips, and I sat dumb and half a moment later Smithy came, wet and sandy, barrelling into us so that Molly leaped to her feet to save her skirts, and the opportunity was lost forever, blown away like spray on the wind.

We stood and stretched, and Molly exclaimed about the time, and I felt all the sudden aches of my healing body. Sitting and letting myself cool down on a chill beach was a stupid thing I certainly wouldn't have done to any horse. I walked Molly home and there was an awkward moment at her door before she stooped and hugged Smithy goodbye. And then I was alone, save for a curious pup demanding to know why I went so slowly and insisting he was half-starved and wanting to run and tussle all the way up the hill to the keep.

I plodded up the hill, chilled within and without. I returned Smithy to the stables, and said good night to Sooty, and then went up to the keep. Galen and his fledglings had already finished their meagre meal and left. Most of the keep folk had eaten, and I found myself drifting back to my old haunts. There was always food in the kitchen, and company in the watch-room off the kitchen. Men-at-arms came and went there all hours of the day and night, so Cook kept a simmering kettle on the hook, adding water and meat and vegetables as the level went down. Wine and beer and cheese were also there, and the simple company of those who guarded the keep. They had accepted me as one of their own since the first day I'd been given into Burrich's care. So I made myself a simple meal, not near as scanty as Galen would have provided me, nor yet as ample and rich as I craved. That was Burrich's teaching; I fed myself as I would have an injured animal.

And I listened to the casual talk going on around me, focusing myself into the life of the keep as I hadn't for months. I was amazed at all that I had not known because of my total immersion in Galen's teaching. A bride for Verity was most of the talk. There was the usual crude soldiers' jesting one could expect about such things, as well as a lot of commiseration over his ill-luck in having Regal choose his future spouse. That the match would be

based on political alliances had never been in question; a prince's hand could not be wasted on something as foolish as his own choice. That had been a great part of the scandal surrounding Chivalry's stubborn courtship of Patience. She had come from within the realm, the daughter of one of our nobles, and one already very amicable to the royal family. No political advantage at all had come out of that marriage.

But Verity would not be squandered so. Especially with the Red Ships menacing us all along our straggling coastline. And so speculation ran rife. Who would she be? A woman from the Near Islands, to our north in the White Sea? The islands were little more than rocky bits of the earth's bones thrusting up out of the sea, but a series of towers set amongst them would give us earlier warning of the sea raiders' ventures into our waters. To the southwest of our borders, beyond the Rain Wilds where no one ruled were the Spice Coasts. A princess from there would offer few defensive advantages, but some argued for the rich trading agreements she might bring with her. Days to the south and east over the sea were the many big islands where grew the trees that the boat-builders yearned for. Could a king and his daughter be found there who would trade her warm winds and soft fruits for a keep in a rocky, ice-bounded land? What would they ask for a soft southern woman and her tall-timbered island trade? Furs said some, and grain said another. And there were the mountain kingdoms at our backs, with their jealous possession of the passes that led into the tundra lands beyond. A princess from there would command warriors of her folk, as well as trade links to the ivory workers and reindeer herders who lived beyond their borders. On their southern border was the pass that led to the headwaters of the great Rain River that meandered through the Rain Wilds. Every soldier among us had heard the old tales of the abandoned treasure-temples on the banks of that river, of the tall, carved gods who presided still over their holy springs, and of the flake gold that sparkled in the lesser streams. Perhaps a mountain princess, then?

Each possibility was debated with far more political sophistication than Galen would have believed these simple soldiers capable of commanding. I rose from their midst feeling ashamed of how I had dismissed them; in so short a time Galen had brought me to think of them as ignorant sword-wielders, men of brawn with no brain at all. I had lived among them all my life. I should have known better. No, I *had* known better. But my hunger to set myself higher, to prove beyond doubt my right to that royal magic, had

made me willing to accept any nonsense with which he might choose to present me. Something clicked within me, as if the key piece to a wood puzzle had suddenly slid into place. I had been bribed with the offer of knowledge as another man might have been bribed with coins.

I did not think very well of myself as I climbed the stairs to my room. I lay down to sleep with the resolve that I would not let Galen deceive me any longer, nor persuade me to deceive myself. I also resolved most firmly that I would learn the Skill, no matter how painful or difficult it might be.

And so dark and early the next morning, I plunged fully back into my lessons and routine. I attended Galen's every word, I pushed myself to do each exercise, physical or mental, to the extreme of my ability. But as the week, and then the month, wore painfully on, I felt like a dog with his meat suspended just beyond the reach of his jaws. For the others, something was obviously happening. A network of shared thought was building between them, a communication that had them turning to one another before they spoke, that let them perform the shared physical exercises as one being. Sullenly, resentfully, they took turns being partnered with me, but from them I felt nothing, and from me they shuddered and pulled back, complaining to Galen that the force I exerted towards them was either like a whisper or a battering ram.

I watched in near despair as they danced in pairs, sharing control of one another's muscles, or as one walked blindfolded the maze of the coals, guided by the eyes of his seated partner. Sometimes I knew I had the Skill. I could feel it building within me, unfolding like a growing seed, but it was a thing I could not seem to direct or control. One moment it was within me, booming like a tide against rock cliffs, and the next it was gone and all within me was dry, deserted sand. At its strength, I could compel August to stand, to bow, to walk. The next he would stand glaring at me, daring me to contact him at all.

And no one seemed able to reach inside me. 'Drop your guard, put down your walls!' Galen would angrily order me, as he stood before me, vainly trying to convey to me the simplest direction or suggestion. I felt the barest brush of his Skill against me; but I could no more allow him inside my mind than I could stand complacent while a man slid a sword between my ribs. Try as I might to compel myself, I shied from his touch, physical or mental, and the touches of my classmates I could not feel at all.

Daily they advanced, while I watched and struggled to master the barest basics. A day came when August looked at a page, and across the rooftop his partner read it aloud, while another set of two pairs played a chess game in which those who commanded the moves could not physically see the board at all. Galen was well pleased with all of them, save me. Each day he dismissed us after a touch, a touch I seldom felt. Each day I was the last free to go, and he coldly reminded me that he wasted his time on a bastard only because the King commanded him to do so.

Spring was coming on and Smithy grown from a puppy to a dog. Sooty dropped her foal while I was at my lessons, a fine filly sired by Verity's stallion. I saw Molly once, and we walked together almost wordlessly through the market. There was a new stall set up, with a rough man selling birds and animals, all captured wild and caged by him. He had crows and sparrows, a swallow, and one young fox so weak with worms he could scarcely stand. Death would free him sooner than any buyer, and even if I had had the coin for him, he had reached a state where the worm-medicines would only poison him as well as his parasites. It sickened me, and so I stood, questing toward the birds with suggestions of how picking at a certain bright bit of metal might unpin the doors of their cages. But Molly thought I stared at the poor beasts themselves, and I felt her grow cooler and further from me than ever she had been before. As we walked her home, Smithy whined beggingly for her attention, and so won from her a cuddle and a pat before we left. I envied him the ability to whine so well. My own seemed to go unheard.

With spring in the air, all in the seaport braced, for soon it would be raiding weather. I ate with the guards every night now, and listened well to all the rumours. Forged ones had become robbers all along our highways, and the stories of their depravities and depredations were all the tavern talk now. As predators, they were more devoid of decency and mercy than any wild animal could be. It was easy to forget they had ever been human, and to hate them with a venom like nothing else.

The fear of being Forged increased proportionately. Markets carried candy-dipped beads of poison for mothers to give their children in the event the family was captured by raiders. There were rumours that some sea-coast villagers had packed up all their belongings in carts and moved inland, forsaking their traditional occupations as fishers and traders to become farmers and hunters away from the threat of the sea. Certainly the population

of beggars within the city was swelling. A Forged one came into Buckkeep Town itself and walked the streets, as untouchable as a mad man as he helped himself to whatever he wanted from the market stalls. Before a second day had passed, he had disappeared, and dark whispers said to watch for his body to wash up on the beach. Other rumours said a wife had been found for Verity among the mountain folk. Some said it was to secure our access to the passes; others that we could not afford a potential enemy at our backs when all along our sea-coast we must fear the Red Ships. And there were yet other whispers that all was not well with Prince Verity. Tired and sick said some, and others sniggered about a nervous and weary bridegroom. A few sneered that he had taken to drink and was only seen by day when his headache was worst.

I found my concern over these last rumours to be deeper than I would have expected. None of the royals had ever paid much mind to me, at least not in a personal way. Shrewd saw to my education and comfort, and had long ago bought my loyalty, so that now I was his without even giving thought to any alternative. Regal despised me, and I had long learned to avoid his narrow glance, and the casual nudges or furtive shoves that had once been enough to send a smaller boy staggering. But Verity had been kind to me, in an absent-minded sort of way, and he loved his dogs and his horse and his hawks in a way I understood. I wanted to see him stand tall and proud at his wedding, and hoped someday to stand behind the throne he would occupy much as Chade stood behind Shrewd's. I hoped he was well, and yet there was nothing I could do about it if he were not, nor any way I could see him. Even if we had been keeping the same hours, the circles we moved in were seldom the same.

It was still not quite full spring when Galen made his announcement. The rest of the keep was making its preparations for Springfest. The stalls in the marketplace would be sanded clean and repainted in bright colours, and tree branches would be brought inside and gently forced so that their blossoms and tiny leaves could grace the banquet table on Springseve. But tender new greens and eggcake with carris seed toppings were not what Galen had in mind for us, nor puppet shows and hunt dances. Instead, with the coming of the new season, we would be tested, to be proven either worthy or discarded.

'Discarded,' he repeated, and if he had been condemning those unchosen to death, the attention of his other students could not have been

more intent. I tried numbly to understand what it would mean to me when I failed. I had no belief that he would test me fairly, or that I could pass such a test even if he did.

‘You shall be a coterie, those of you who prove yourselves. Such a coterie as has never been before, I would think. At the height of Springfest, I myself will present you to your king, and he shall see the wonder of what I have wrought. As you have come this far with me, you know I will not be shamed before him. So I myself will test you, and test you to your limits, to be sure that the weapon I place in my king’s hand holds an edge worthy of its purpose. One day from now, I will scatter you, like seeds in the wind, across the kingdom. I have arranged that you will be taken hence, by swift horse, to your destinations. And there each of you will be left, alone. Not one of you will know where any of the others are.’ He paused, I think to let each of us feel the tension thrumming through the room. I knew that all the others vibrated in tune, sharing a common emotion, almost a common mind, as they received their instruction. I suspected they heard far more than the simple words from Galen’s lips. I felt a foreigner there, listening to words in a language whose idiom I could not grasp. I would fail.

‘Within two days of being left, you will be summoned. By me. You will be directed whom to contact, and where. Each of you will receive the information you need to make your way back here. If you have learned, and learned well, my coterie will be here and present on Springseve, ready to be presented to the King.’ Again the pause. ‘Do not think, however, that all you must do is find your way back to Buckkeep by Springseve. You are to be a coterie, not homing-pigeons. How you come and in what company will prove to me that you have mastered your Skill. Be ready to leave by tomorrow morning.’

And then he released us, one by one, again with a touch for each, and a word of praise for each, save me. I stood before him, as open as I could make myself, as vulnerable as I dared to be, and yet the brush of the Skill against my mind was less than the touch of the wind. He stared down at me as I looked up at him, and I did not need the Skill to feel that he both loathed and despised me. He made a noise of contempt and looked aside, releasing me. I started to go.

‘Far better,’ he said in that cavernous voice of his, ‘if you had gone over the wall that night, bastard. Far better. Burrich thought I abused you. I was only offering you a way out, as close to an honourable way as you were

capable of finding. Go away and die, boy, or at least go away. You shame your father's name by existing. By Eda, I do not know how you came to exist. That a man such as your father could fall to such depth as lying with something and letting you become is beyond my mind to imagine.'

As always, there was that note of fanaticism in his voice as he spoke of Chivalry, and his eyes became almost blank with blind idolatry. Almost absent-mindedly, he turned away and walked off. He reached the top of the stairs, and then turned, very slowly. 'I must ask,' he said, and the venom in his voice was hungry with hatred. 'Are you his catamite, that he lets you suck strength from him? Is that why he is so possessive of you?'

'Catamite?' I repeated, not knowing the word.

He smiled. It made his cadaverous face even more skull-like. 'Did you think I hadn't discovered him? Did you think you'd be free to draw on his strength for this test? You won't. Be assured, bastard, you won't.'

He turned and went down the steps, leaving me standing there alone on the rooftop. I had no idea what his final words meant; but the strength of his hatred had left me sickened and weak as if it were a poison he'd put in my blood. I was reminded of the last time all had left me on the tower roof. I felt compelled to walk to the edge of the tower and look down. This corner of the keep did not face the sea, but there were still jagged rocks aplenty at the foot of it. No one would survive that fall. If I could make a second's firm decision, then I could put myself out of it all. And what Burrich or Chade or anyone else might think of it would not be able to trouble me.

A distant echo of a whimper.

'I'm coming, Smithy,' I muttered, and turned away from the edge.

SEVENTEEN

The Trial

The Man Ceremony is supposed to take place within the moon of a boy's fourteenth birthday. Not all are honoured with it. It requires a Man to sponsor and name the candidate, and he must find a dozen other Men who concede the boy is worthy and ready. Living among the men-at-arms, I was aware of the ceremony, and knew enough of its gravity and selectivity that I never expected to participate in it. For one thing, no one knew my birth date. For another, I had no knowledge of who was a Man, let alone if twelve Men existed who would find me worthy.

But on a certain night, months after I had endured Galen's test, I awoke to find my bed surrounded by robed and hooded figures. Within the dark hoods I glimpsed the masks of the Pillars.

No one may speak or write of the ceremony details. This, I think, I may say: as each life was put into my hands – fish, bird and beast – I chose to release it, not to death but back to its own free existence. So nothing died at my ceremony, and hence no one feasted. But even in my state of mind at that time, I felt there had been enough blood and death around me to last a lifetime, and I refused to kill with hands or teeth. My Man still chose to give me a name, so He could not have been totally displeased. The name is in the old tongue, which has no letters and cannot be written. Nor have I ever found any with which I chose to share the knowledge of my Man name. But its ancient meaning, I think, I can divulge here. Catalyst. The Changer.

I went straight to the stables, to Smithy and then to Sooty. The distress I felt at the thought of the morrow went from mental to physical, and I stood in Sooty's stall, leaned my head against her withers, and felt queasy. Burrich found me there. I recognized his presence and the steady cadence of his boots as he came down the stable walkway, and then he halted abruptly outside Sooty's stall. I felt him looking in at me.

‘Well. Now what?’ he demanded harshly, and I heard in his voice how weary he was both of me and my problems. Had I been any less miserable, my pride would have made me draw myself up and declare that nothing was wrong.

Instead, I muttered into Sooty’s coat, ‘Tomorrow Galen plans to test us.’

‘I know. He’s demanded quite abruptly that I furnish him horses for this idiotic scheme. I would have refused, had he not a wax signet from the King giving him authority. And no more do I know than that he wants the horses, so don’t ask it,’ he added gruffly as I looked up suddenly at him.

‘I wouldn’t,’ I told him sullenly. I would prove myself fairly to Galen, or not at all.

‘You’ve no chance of passing this trial he’s designed, have you?’ Burrich’s tone was casual, but I could hear how he braced himself to be disappointed by my answer.

‘None,’ I said flatly, and we were both silent a moment, listening to the finality of that word.

‘Well.’ He cleared his throat and gave his belt a hitch. ‘Then you’d best get it over with and get back here. It’s not as if you haven’t had good luck with your other schooling. A man can’t expect to succeed at everything he tries.’ He tried to make my failure at the Skill sound as if it were of no consequence.

‘I suppose not. Will you take care of Smithy for me while I’m gone?’

‘I will.’ He started to turn away, then turned back, almost reluctantly. ‘How much is that dog going to miss you?’

I heard his other question, but tried to avoid it. ‘I don’t know. I’ve had to leave him so much during these lessons, I’m afraid he won’t miss me at all.’

‘I doubt that,’ Burrich said ponderously. He turned away. ‘I doubt that a very great deal,’ he said as he walked off between the rows of stalls. And I knew that he knew, and was disgusted, not just that Smithy and I shared a bond, but that I refused to admit it.

‘As if admitting it were an option, with him,’ I muttered to Sooty. I bade my animals farewell, trying to convey to Smithy that several meals and nights would pass before he saw me again. He wriggled and fawned and protested that I must take him, that I would need him. He was too big to pick up and hug any more. I sat down and he came into my lap and I held him. He

was so warm and solid, so near and real. For a moment I felt how right he was, that I would need him to be able to survive this failure. But I reminded myself that he would be here, waiting for me when I returned, and I promised him several days of my time for his sole benefit when I returned. I would take him on a long hunt, such as we had never had time for before. (Now) he suggested, and (soon) I promised. Then I went back up to the keep to pack a change of clothes and some travelling food.

The next morning had much of pomp and drama to it and very little sense, to my way of thinking. The others to be tested seemed enervated and elated. Of the eight of us who were setting out, I was the only one who seemed unimpressed by the restless horses and the eight covered litters. Galen lined us up and blindfolded us as three-score or more people looked on. Most of them were related to the students, or friends, or the keep gossips. Galen made a brief speech, ostensibly to us, but telling us what we already knew: that we were to be taken to different locations and left; that we must cooperate, using the Skill, in order to make our ways back to the keep; that if we succeeded, we would become a coterie and serve our king magnificently and be essential to defeating the Red Ship Raiders. The last bit impressed our onlookers, for I heard muttering tongues as I was escorted to my litter and assisted inside.

There passed a miserable day and a half for me. The litter swayed, and with no fresh air on my face or scenery to distract me, I soon felt queasy. The man guiding the horses had been sworn to silence and kept his word. We paused briefly that night. I was given a meagre meal, bread and cheese and water, and then I was reloaded and the jolting and swaying resumed.

At about midday of the following day, the litter halted. Once more I was assisted in dismounting. Not a word was said, and I stood, stiff and headachy and blindfolded in a strong wind. When I heard the horses leaving, I decided I had reached my destination and reached up to untie my blindfold. Galen had knotted it tightly and it took me a moment to get it off.

I stood on a grassy hillside. My escort was well on his way to a road that wound past the base of the hill, moving swiftly. The grass was tall around my knees, sere from winter, but green at the base. I could see other grassy hills with rocks poking out of their sides, and strips of woodland sheltering at their feet. I shrugged and turned to get my bearings. It was hilly country, but I could scent the sea and a low tide to the east somewhere. I had a nagging sense that the countryside was familiar; not that I had been to this

particular spot before, but that the lie of the terrain was familiar somehow. I turned, and to the west saw the Sentinel. There was no mistaking the double-jag of its peak. I had copied a map for Fedwren less than a year ago, and the creator had chosen the Sentinel's distinctive peak as a motif for the decorative border. So. The sea over there, the Sentinel there, and, with a suddenly dipping stomach, I knew where I was. Not too far from Forge.

I found myself turning quickly in a circle to survey the surrounding hillside, woodlands and road. No sign of anyone. I quested out, almost frantically, but found only birds and small game and one buck, who lifted his head and snuffed, wondering what I was. For a moment I felt reassured, until I remembered that the Forged ones I had encountered before had been transparent to that sense.

I moved down the hill to where several boulders jutted out from its side, and sat in their shelter. It was not that the wind was cold, for the day promised spring soon. It was to have something firmly against my back, and to feel that I was not such an outstanding target as I had been on top of the hill. I tried to think coolly what to do next. Galen had suggested to us that we should stay quietly where we were deposited, meditating and remaining open in our senses. At sometime in the next two days, he would try to contact me.

Nothing takes the heart out of a man more than the expectation of failure. I had no belief that he would really try to contact me, let alone that I would receive any clear impressions if he did. Nor did I have faith that the drop-off he had chosen for me was a safe location. Without much more thought than that, I rose, again surveyed the area for anyone watching me, then struck out toward the sea-smell. If I were where I supposed myself to be, from the shore I should be able to see Antler Island, and, on a clear day, possibly Scrim Isle. Even one of those would be enough to tell me how far from Forge I was.

As I hiked, I told myself I only wanted to see how long a walk I would have back to Buckkeep. Only a fool would imagine that the Forged ones still represented any danger. Surely winter had put an end to them, or left them too starved and weakened to be a menace to anyone. I gave no credence to the tales of them banding together as cut-throats and thieves. I wasn't afraid. I merely wanted to see where I was. If Galen truly wanted to contact me, location should be no barrier. He had assured us innumerable times that it

was the person he reached for, not the place. He could find me as well on the beach as he could on the hilltop.

By late afternoon, I stood on top of rocky cliffs, looking out to sea. Antler Island, and a haze that would be Scrim beyond it. I was north of Forge. The coast-road home would go right through the ruins of that town. It was not a comforting thought.

So now what?

By evening, I was back on my hilltop, scrunched down between two of the boulders. I had decided it was as good a place to wait as any. Despite my doubts, I would stay where I had been left until the contact time was up. I ate bread and salt-fish, and drank sparingly of my water. My change of clothes included an extra cloak. I wrapped myself in this and sternly rejected all thoughts of making a fire. However small, it would have been a beacon to anyone on the dirt road that passed the hill.

I don't think there is anything more cruelly tedious than unremitting nervousness. I tried to meditate, to open myself up to Galen's Skill, all the while shivering with cold and refusing to admit that I was scared. The child in me kept imagining dark, ragged figures creeping soundlessly up the hillside around me, Forged folk who would beat and kill me for the cloak I wore and the food in my bag. I had cut myself a stick as I made my way back to my hillside, and I gripped it in both hands, but it seemed a poor weapon. Sometimes I dozed despite my fears, but my dreams were always of Galen gloating over my failure as Forged ones closed in on me, and I always woke with a start, to peer wildly about to see if my nightmares were true.

I watched the sunrise through the trees, and then dozed fitfully through morning. Afternoon brought me a weary sort of peace. I amused myself by questing out toward the wildlife on the hillside. Mice and songbirds were little more than bright sparks of hunger in my mind, and rabbits little more, but a fox was full of lust to find a mate and further off a buck battered the velvet off his antlers as purposefully as any smith at his anvil. Evening was very long. It was surprising just how hard it was for me to accept, as night fell, that I had felt nothing, not the slightest pressure of the Skill. Either he hadn't called or I hadn't heard him. I ate bread and fish in the dark and told myself it didn't matter. For a time, I tried to bolster myself with anger, but my despair was too clammy and dark a thing for anger's flames to overcome. I felt sure Galen had cheated me, but I would never be able to prove it, not even to myself. I would always have to wonder if his contempt

for me had been justified. In full darkness, I settled my back against a rock, my stick across my knees, and resolved to sleep.

My dreams were muddled and sour. Regal stood over me, and I was a child sleeping in straw again. He laughed and held a knife. Verity shrugged, and smiled apologetically at me. Chade turned aside from me, disappointed. Molly smiled at Jade, past me, forgetting I was there. Burrich held me by the shirt-front and shook me, telling me to behave like a man, not a beast. But I lay down on straw and an old shirt, chewing at a bone. The meat was very good, and I could think of nothing else.

I was very comfortable until someone opened a stable door and left it ajar. A nasty little wind came creeping across the stable floor to chill me, and I looked up with a growl. I smelled Burrich and ale. Burrich came slowly through the dark, with a muttered, 'It's all right, Smithy,' as he passed me. I put my head down as he began to climb his stairs.

Suddenly there was a shout and men falling down the stairs. They struggled as they fell. I leaped to my feet, growling and barking. They landed half on top of me. A boot kicked at me, and I seized the leg above it in my teeth and clamped my jaws. I caught more boot and trouser than flesh, but he hissed in anger and pain, and struck at me.

A knife went into my side.

I set my teeth harder and held on, snarling around my mouthful. Other dogs had awakened and were barking, the horses were stamping in their stalls. *Boy! Boy!* I called for help. I felt him with me, but he didn't come. The intruder kicked me, but I wouldn't let go. Burrich lay in the straw and I smelled his blood. He did not move. I heard old Vixen flinging herself against the door upstairs, trying vainly to get to her master. Again and then again the knife plunged into me. I cried out to my Boy a last time, and then I could no longer hold on. I was flung off the kicking leg, to strike the side of a stall. I was drowning, blood in my mouth and nostrils. Running feet. Pain in the dark. I hitched closer to Burrich. I pushed my nose under his hand. He did not move. Voices and light coming, coming, coming ...

I awoke on a dark hillside, gripping my stick so tightly my hands were numb. Not for a moment did I think it a dream. I couldn't stop feeling the knife between my ribs, and tasting the blood in my mouth. Like the refrain of a ghastly song, the memories came again and again, the draught of cold air, the knife, the boot, the taste of my enemy's blood in my mouth, and the taste of my own. I struggled to make sense of what Smithy had seen.

Someone had been at the top of Burrich's stairs, waiting for him. Someone with a knife. And Burrich had fallen, and Smithy had smelled blood ...

I stood and gathered my things. Thin and faint was Smithy's warm little presence in my mind. Weak, but there. I quested carefully, and then stopped when I felt how much it cost him to acknowledge me. *Still. Be still. I'm coming.* I was cold and my knees shook beneath me, but sweat was slick on my back. Not once did I question what I must do. I strode down the hill to the dirt road. It was a little trade road, a pedlars' track, and I knew that if I followed it, it must intersect eventually with the coast-road. I would follow it, I would find the coast-road, I would get myself home. And if Eda favoured me, I would be in time to help Smithy. And Burrich.

I strode, refusing to let myself run. A steady march would carry me further faster than a mad sprint through the dark. The night was clear, the trail straight. I considered, once, that I was putting an end to any chance of proving I could Skill. All I had put into it – time, effort, pain – all wasted. But there was no way I could have sat down and waited another full day for Galen to try and reach me. To open my mind to Galen's possible Skill touch, I would have had to clear it of Smithy's tenuous thread. I would not. When it was all put in the balances, the Skill was far outweighed by Smithy. And Burrich.

Why Burrich, I wondered. Who could hate him enough to ambush him? And right outside his own quarters. As clearly as if I were reporting to Chade, I began to assemble my facts. Someone who knew him well enough to know where he lived; that ruled out some chance offence committed in a Buckkeep town tavern. Someone who had brought a knife; that ruled out someone who just wanted to give him a beating. The knife had been sharp, and the wielder had known how to use it. I winced again from the memory.

Those were the facts. Cautiously, I began to build assumptions upon them. Someone who knew Burrich's habits and had a serious grievance against him, serious enough to kill over. My steps slowed suddenly. Why hadn't Smithy been aware of the man up there waiting? Why hadn't Vixen been barking through the door? Slipping past dogs in their own territory bespoke someone well practised at stealth.

Galen.

No. I only wanted it to be Galen. I refused to leap to the conclusion. Physically, Galen was no match for Burrich and he knew it. Not even with a

knife, in the dark, with Burrich half-drunk and surprised. No. Galen might want to, but he wouldn't do it. Not himself.

Would he send another? I pondered it, and decided I didn't know. Think some more. Burrich was not a patient man. Galen was the most recent enemy he'd made, but not the only one. Over and over I re-stacked my facts, trying to reach a solid conclusion. But there simply wasn't enough to build on.

Eventually I came to a stream, and drank sparingly. Then I walked again. The woods grew thicker, and the moon was mostly obscured by the trees lining the road. I didn't turn back. I pushed on, until my trail flowed into the coast-road like a stream feeding a river. I followed it south, and the wider highway gleamed like silver in the moonlight.

I walked and pondered the night away. As the first creeping tendrils of dawn began to put colour back into the landscape, I felt incredibly weary, but no less driven. My worry was a burden I couldn't put down. I clutched at the thin thread of warmth that told me Smithy was still alive, and wondered about Burrich. I had no way of knowing how badly he'd been injured. Smithy had smelled his blood, so the knife had scored at least once. And the fall down the staircase? I tried to set the worry aside. I had never considered that Burrich could be injured in such a way, let alone what I would feel about it. I could come up with no name for the feeling. Just hollow, I thought to myself. Hollow. And weary.

I ate a bit as I walked and refilled my waterskin from a stream. Midmorning clouded up and rained on me for a bit, only to clear as abruptly by early afternoon. I strode on. I had expected to find some sort of traffic on the coast-road, but saw nothing. By late afternoon, the road had veered close to the cliffs. I could look across a small cove and down onto what had been Forge. The peacefulness of it was chilling. No smoke rose from the cottages, no boats rode in the harbour. I knew my route would take me right through it. I did not relish the idea, but the warm thread of Smithy's life tugged me on.

I lifted my head to the scuff of feet against stone. Only the reflexes of Hod's long training saved me. I came about, staff at the ready, and swept around me in a defensive circle that cracked the jaw of the one that was behind me. The others fell back. Three others. All Forged, empty as stone. The one I had struck was rolling and yelling on the ground. No one paid him any mind except me. I dealt him another quick jolt to his back. He yelled

louder and thrashed about. Even in that situation, my action surprised me. I knew it was wise to make sure a disabled enemy stayed disabled, but I knew I could never have kicked at a howling dog as I did at that man. But fighting these Forged ones was like fighting ghosts: I felt no presence from any of them; I had no sense of the pain I'd dealt the injured man, no echoes of his anger or fear. It was like slamming a door, violence without a victim, as I cracked him again, to be sure he would not snatch at me as I leaped over him to a clear space in the road.

I danced my staff around me, keeping the others at bay. They looked ragged and hungry, but I still felt they could outrun me if I fled. I was already tired, and they were like starving wolves. They'd pursue me until I dropped. One reached too close and I struck him a glancing blow to the wrist. He dropped a rusty fish-knife and clutched his hand to his heart, shrieking over it. Again, the other two paid no attention to the injured one. I danced back.

'What do you want?' I demanded of them.

'What do you have,' one of them said. His voice was rusty and hesitant, as if long unused, and his words lacked any inflection. He moved slowly around me, in a wide circle that kept me turning. Dead men talking, I thought to myself, and couldn't stop the thought from echoing through my mind.

'Nothing,' I panted, jabbing to keep one from moving any closer. 'I don't have anything for you. No money, no food, nothing. I lost all my things, back down the road.'

'Nothing,' said the other, and for the first time I realized she had been a woman, once. Now she was this empty malevolent puppet, whose dull eyes suddenly lit with avarice as she said, 'Cloak. I want your cloak.'

She seemed pleased to have formulated this thought, and it made her careless enough to let me crack her on the shin. She glanced down at the injury as if puzzled, and then continued to limp after me.

'Cloak,' echoed the other. For a moment they glared at one another in dull realization of their rivalry. 'Me. Mine,' he added.

'No. Kill you,' she offered calmly. 'Kill you, too,' she reminded me, and came close again. I swung my staff at her, but she leaped back, and then made a snatch at it as it went by. I turned, just in time to whack the one whose wrist I had already damaged. Then I leaped past him and raced down the road. I ran awkwardly, holding onto my staff with one hand as I fought

the fastening of my cloak with the other. At last it came undone and I let it fall from me as I continued to run. The rubberiness in my legs warned me that this was my last gambit. But a few moments later, they must have reached it, for I heard angry cries and screams as they quarrelled over it. I prayed it would be enough to occupy all four of them and kept running. There was a bend in the road, not much but enough to take me out of their sight. I continued to run and then trotted for as long as I could before daring to look back. The road shone wide and empty behind me. I pushed myself on, and when I saw a likely spot, I left the road.

I found a savagely nasty thicket of brambles and forced my way into the heart of it. Shaking and exhausted, I crouched down on my heels in the thick of the spiny bushes and strained my ears for any sound of pursuit. I took short sips from my water-skin, and tried to calm myself. I had no time for this delay; I had to get back to Buckkeep; but I dared not emerge.

It is still inconceivable to me that I fell asleep there, but I did.

I came awake gradually. Groggy, I felt sure I was recovering from a severe injury or long illness. My eyes were gummy, my mouth thick and sour. I forced my eyelids open and looked around me in bewilderment. The light was ebbing, and an overcast defeated the moon.

My exhaustion had been such that I had leaned over into the thorn bushes and slept despite a multitude of jabbing prickles. I extricated myself with much difficulty, leaving bits of cloth, hair and skin behind. I emerged from my hiding-place as cautiously as any hunted animal, not only questing as far as my sense would reach, but also snuffing the air and peering all about me. I knew that my questing would not reveal to me any Forged ones, and hoped that if any were nearby, the forest animals would have seen them and reacted. But all was quiet.

I cautiously emerged onto the road. It was wide and empty. I looked once at the sky, and then set out for Forge, staying close to the edge of the road, where the shadows of the trees were thickest. I tried to move both swiftly and silently, and did neither as well as I wanted. I had stopped thinking of anything except vigilance and my need to get back to Buckkeep. Smithy's life was the barest tendril in my mind. I think the only emotion still active in me was the fear that kept me looking over my shoulder and scanning the woods to either side as I walked.

It was full dark when I arrived on the hillside overlooking Forge. For some time I stood looking down on it, seeking for any signs of life, then I

forced myself to walk on. The wind had come up, and fitfully granted me moonlight. It was a treacherous boon, as much deceiver as revealer. It made shadows move at the corners of abandoned houses, and cast sudden reflections that glinted like knives from puddles in the street. But no one walked in Forge. The normal inhabitants had abandoned it not long after that fateful raid, and evidently the Forged ones had as well, once there were no more sources of food or comfort there. The town had never really rebuilt itself after the raid, and a long season of winter storms and tides had nearly completed what the Red Ships had begun. Only the harbour looked almost normal, save for the empty slips. The sea-walls still curved out into the bay like protective hands cupping the docks. But there was nothing left to protect.

I threaded my way through the desolation that was Forge. My skin prickled as I crept past sagging doors on splintered frames in half-burnt buildings. It was a relief to get away from the mouldy smell of the empty cottages and to stand on the wharves overlooking the water. The road went right down to the docks and curved along the cove. A shoulder of roughly-worked stone had once protected the road from the greedy sea, but a winter of tides and storms without the intervention of man was breaking it down. Stones were working loose, and the sea's driftwood battering rams, abandoned now by the tide, cluttered the beach below. Once carts of iron ingots had been hauled down this road to waiting vessels. I walked along the sea-wall, and saw that what had appeared so permanent from the hill above would withstand perhaps one or two more winter seasons without maintenance before the sea reclaimed it.

Overhead, stars shone intermittently through scudding clouds. The evasive moon cloaked and revealed herself as well, occasionally granting me glimpses of the harbour. The shushing of the waves was like the breathing of a drugged giant. It was a night from a dream, and when I looked out over the water, the ghost of a Red Ship cut across the moonpath as it put into Forge harbour. Her hull was long and sleek, her masts bare of canvas as she came slipping into port. The red of her hull and prow was shiny as fresh-spilled blood, as if she cut through runnels of gore instead of saltwater. In the dead town behind me, no one raised a shout of warning.

I stood like a fool, limned on the sea-wall, shivering at the apparition, until the creak of oars and the silver of dripping water off an oar's edge made the Red Ship real.

I flung myself flat to the causeway, then slithered off the smooth road surface into the boulders and driftwood cluttered along the sea-wall. I could not breathe for terror. All my blood was in my head, pounding, and no air was in my lungs. I had to set my head down between my arms and close my eyes to regain control of myself. By then the small sounds even a stealthy vessel must make came faint but distinct across the water to me. A man cleared his throat, an oar rattled in its lock, something heavy thudded to the deck. I waited for a shout or command to betray that I had been seen. But there was nothing. I lifted my head cautiously, peering through the whitened roots of a driftwood log. All was still save the ship coming closer and closer as the rowers brought her into harbour. Her oars rose and fell in near-silent unison.

Soon I could hear them talking in a language like to ours, but so harshly spoken I could barely get the meaning of the words. A man sprang over the side with a line and floundered ashore. He made the ship fast no more than two shiplengths away from where I lay hidden among the boulders and logs. Two others sprang out, knives in hands, and scrambled up the sea-wall. They ran along the road in opposite directions, to take up positions as sentries. One was on the road almost directly above me. I made myself small and still. I held onto Smithy in my mind the way a child grips a beloved toy as protection against nightmares. I had to get home to him, therefore I must not be discovered. The knowledge that I must do the first somehow made the second seem more possible.

Men scabbled hastily from the ship. Everything about them bespoke familiarity. I could not fathom why they had put in here until I saw them unloading empty water casks. The casks were sent hollowly rolling down the causeway, and I remembered the well I had passed. The part of my mind that belonged to Chade noted how well they knew Forge, to put in almost exactly opposite that well. This was not the first time this ship had stopped here for water. 'Poison the well before you leave,' that corner of my mind suggested. But I had no supplies for anything like that, and no courage to do anything except remain hidden.

Others had emerged from the ship and were stretching their legs. I overheard an argument between a woman and a man. He wished permission to light a fire with some of the driftwood, to roast some meat. She forbade it, saying they had not come far enough, and that a fire would be too visible. So they had raided recently, to have fresh meat, and not too far from here. She

gave permission for something else that I did not quite understand, until I saw them unload two full kegs. Another man came ashore with a whole ham on his shoulder, which he dropped with a meaty slap onto one of the upright kegs. He drew a knife and began to carve off chunks of it while another man broached the other keg. They would not be leaving for some time. And if they did light a fire, or stay until dawn, my log's shadow would be no hiding-place at all. I had to get out of there.

Through nests of sandfleas and squiggling piles of seaweed, under and between logs and stones, I dragged my belly through sand and pebbled gravel. I swear that every root snag caught at me, and every shifted slab of stone blocked my way. The tide had changed. The waves broke noisily against the rocks, and the flying spray rode the wind. I was soon soaked. I tried to time my movement with the sound of the breaking waves, to hide my small sounds in theirs. The rocks were toothed with barnacles, and sand packed the gouges they made in my hands and knees. My staff became an incredible burden, but I would not abandon my only weapon. Long after I could no longer see or hear the raiders, I dared not stand, but crept and huddled still from stone to log. At last I ventured up onto the road and crawled across it. Once in the shadow of a sagging warehouse, I stood, hugging the wall, and peered about me.

All was silent. I dared to step out two paces onto the road, but even there I could see nothing of the ship or the sentries. Perhaps that meant they could not see me either. I took a calming breath. I quested after Smithy the way some men pat their pouches to be sure their coin is safe. I found him but faint and quiet, his mind like a still pool. 'I'm coming,' I breathed, fearful of stirring him to an effort. And I set forth again.

The wind was relentless, and my salt-wet clothing clung and chafed. I was hungry, cold, and tired. My wet shoes were a misery, but I had no thought of stopping. I trotted like a wolf, my eyes continually shifting, my ears keen for any sound behind me. One moment, the road was empty and black before me. In the next, the darkness had turned to men. Two before me, and when I spun about, another behind me. The slapping waves had covered the sound of their feet, and the dodging moon offered me only glimpses of them as they closed the distance around me. I set my back to the solid wall of a warehouse, readied my staff, and waited.

I watched them come, silent and skulking. I wondered at that, for why did they not raise a shout, why did not the whole crew come to watch me

taken? But these men watched one another as much as they watched me. They did not hunt as a pack, but each hoped the others would die killing me and leave the bounty for the picking. Forged ones, not raiders.

A terrible coldness welled up in me. The least sound of a scuffle would bring the raiders, I was sure. So if the Forged ones did not finish me, the raiders would. However, when all roads lead to death, there is no point in running down any of them. I would take things as they came. There were three of them. One had a knife. But I had a staff, and was trained to use it. They were thin, ragged, at least as hungry as I, and as cold. One, I think, was the woman from the night before. As they closed on me, so silently, I guessed they were aware of the raiders and feared them as much as I. It was not good to consider the desperation that would prompt them still to attack me. Then in the next breath, I wondered if Forged ones felt desperation or anything else. Perhaps they were too dulled to realize the danger.

All of the stealthy arcane knowledge Chade had given me, all of Hod's brutally elegant strategies for fighting two or more opponents, went to the wind. For as the first two stepped into my range, I felt the tiny warmth that was Smithy ebbing in my grasp. 'Smithy!' I whispered, a desperate plea that he somehow stay with me. I all but saw a tail tip stir in a last effort at a wag. Then the thread snapped and the spark blinked out. I was alone.

A black flood of strength surged through me like a madness. I stepped out, thrust the end of my staff deep into a man's face, drew it quickly back, and continued a swing that went through the woman's lower jaw. Plain wood sheared the lower half of her face away, so forceful was my blow. I whacked her again as she fell, and it was like hitting a netted shark with a fish-bat. The third drove into me solidly, thinking, I suppose, to be inside my staff's range. I didn't care. I dropped my stick and grappled with him. He was bony and he stank. I drove him onto his back, and his expelled breath in my face stank of carrion. Fingers and teeth, I tore at him, as far from human as he was. They had kept me from Smithy as he was dying. I did not care what I did to him so long as it hurt him. He reciprocated. I dragged his face along the cobbles, I pushed my thumb into an eye. He sank his teeth into my wrist, and clawed my cheek bloody. And when at last he ceased to fight against my strangling grip, I dragged him to the sea-wall and threw his body down onto the rocks.

I stood panting, my fists still clenched. I glared toward the raiders, daring them to come, but the night was still, save for the waves and wind

and the soft gargling of the woman as she died. Either the raiders had not heard, or they were too concerned with their own stealth to investigate sounds in the night. I waited in the wind for someone to care enough to come and kill me. Nothing stirred. An emptiness washed through me, supplanting my madness. So much death in one night, and so little significance save to me.

I left the other broken bodies on top of the crumbling sea-wall for the waves and the gulls to dispose of. I walked away from them. I had felt nothing from them when I killed them. No fear, no anger, no pain, not even despair. They had been things. And as I began my long walk back to Buckkeep, I finally felt nothing from within myself. Perhaps, I thought, Forging is a contagion and I have caught it now. I could not bring myself to care.

Little of that journey stands out in my mind now. I walked all the way, cold, tired and hungry. I encountered no more Forged ones, and the few other travellers I saw on that stretch of road were no more anxious than I to speak to a stranger. I thought only of getting back to Buckkeep. And Burrich. I reached Buckkeep two days into the Springfest celebration. The guards at the gate tried to stop me at first. I looked at them.

‘It’s the fitz,’ one gasped. ‘It was said you were dead.’

‘Shut up,’ barked the other. He was Gage, long known to me, and he said quickly, ‘Burrich’s been hurt. He’s up at the infirmary, boy.’

I nodded and walked past them.

In all my years at Buckkeep, I had never been to the infirmary. Burrich and no one else had always treated my childhood illnesses and mishaps. But I knew where it was. I walked unseeing through the knots and gatherings of merrymakers, and suddenly felt as if I were six years old and come to Buckkeep for the very first time. I had hung onto Burrich’s belt. All that long way from Moonseye, with his leg torn and bandaged. But not once had he put me on another’s horse, or entrusted my care to another. I pushed myself through the people with their bells and flowers and sweet cakes to reach the inner keep. Behind the barracks was a separate building of whitewashed stone. There was no one there, and I walked unchallenged through the antechamber and into the room beyond.

There were clean strewing-reeds on the floor, and the wide windows let in a flood of spring air and light, but the room still gave me a sense of confinement and illness. This was not a good place for Burrich to be. All the

beds were empty, save one. No soldier kept to bed in Springfest days, save that they had to. Burrich lay, eyes closed, in a splash of sunlight on a narrow cot. I had never seen him so still. He had pushed his blankets aside and his chest was swathed in bandages. I went forward quietly and sat down on the floor beside his bed. He was very still, but I could feel him, and the bandages moved with his slow breathing. I took his hand.

‘Fitz,’ he said, without opening his eyes. He gripped my hand hard.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re back. You’re alive.’

‘I am. I came straight here, as fast as I could. Oh, Burrich, I feared you were dead.’

‘I thought *you* were dead. The others all came back days ago.’ He took a ragged breath. ‘Of course, the bastard left horses with all the others.’

‘No,’ I reminded him, not letting go of his hand. ‘I’m the bastard, remember?’

‘Sorry.’ He opened his eyes. The white of his left eye was mazed with blood. He tried to smile at me. I could see then that the swelling on the left side of his face was still subsiding. ‘So. We look a fine pair. You should poultice that cheek. It’s festering. Looks like an animal scratch.’

‘Forged ones,’ I began, and could not bear to explain more. I only said, softly, ‘He set me down north of Forge, Burrich.’

Anger spasmed his face. ‘He wouldn’t tell me. Nor anyone else. I even sent a man to Verity, to ask my prince to make him say what he had done with you. I got no answer back. I should kill him.’

‘Let it go,’ I said, and meant it. ‘I’m back and alive. I failed his test, but it didn’t kill me. And as you told me, there are other things in my life.’

Burrich shifted slightly in his bed. I could tell it didn’t ease him. ‘Well. He’ll be disappointed over that.’ He let out a shuddering breath. ‘I got jumped. Someone with a knife. I don’t know who.’

‘How bad?’

‘Not good, at my age. A young buck like you would probably just give a shake and go on. Still, he only got the blade into me once. But I fell, and struck my head. I was fair senseless for two days. And, Fitz. Your dog. A stupid, senseless thing, but he killed your dog.’

‘I know.’

‘He died quickly,’ Burrich said, as if to be a comfort.

I stiffened at the lie. ‘He died well,’ I corrected him. ‘And if he hadn’t, you’d have had that knife in you more than once.’

Burrich grew very still. ‘You were there, weren’t you,’ he said at last. It was not a question, and there was no mistaking his meaning.

‘Yes,’ I heard myself saying, simply.

‘You were there, with the dog that night, instead of trying for the Skill?’ His voice rose in outrage.

‘Burrich, it wasn’t like ...’

He pulled his hand free of mine and turned as far away from me as he could. ‘Leave me.’

‘Burrich, it wasn’t Smithy. I just don’t have the Skill. So let me have what I do have, let me be what I am. I don’t use this in a bad way. Even without it, I’m good with animals. You’ve forced me to be. If I use it, I can ...’

‘Stay out of my stables. And stay away from me.’ He rolled back to face me, and to my amazement, a single tear tracked his dark cheek. ‘You failed? No, Fitz. I failed. I was too soft-hearted to beat it out of you at the first sign of it. “Raise him well,” Chivalry said to me. His last command to me. And I failed him. And you. If you hadn’t meddled with the Wit, Fitz, you’d have been able to learn the Skill. Galen would have been able to teach you. No wonder he sent you to Forge.’ He paused. ‘Bastard or no, you could have been a fit son to Chivalry. But you threw it all away. For what? A dog. I know what a dog can be to a man, but you don’t throw your life over for a ...’

‘Not just a dog,’ I cut in almost harshly. ‘Smithy. My friend. And it wasn’t only him. I gave up the wait and came back for you. Thinking you might need me. Smithy died days ago. I knew that. But I came back for you, thinking you might need me.’

He was silent so long I thought he wasn’t going to speak to me. ‘You needn’t have,’ he said quietly. ‘I take care of myself.’ And harsher, ‘You know that. I always have.’

‘And me,’ I admitted to him. ‘And you’ve always taken care of me.’

‘And small damn good that did either of us,’ he said slowly. ‘Look what I’ve let you become. Now you’re just ... Go away. Just go away.’ He turned away from me again, and I felt something go out of the man.

I stood slowly. ‘I’ll make you a wash from helena leaves for your eye. I’ll bring it this afternoon.’

‘Bring me nothing. Do me no favours. Go your own way, and be whatever you will. I’m done with you.’ He spoke to the wall. In his voice was no mercy for either of us.

I glanced back as I left the infirmary. He had not moved, but even his back looked older, and smaller.

That was my return to Buckkeep. I was a different creature from the naïf who had left. Little fanfare was made over my not being dead as supposed. I made no opportunity for anyone to do so. From Burrich’s bed, I went straight to my room. I washed and changed my garments. I slept, but not well. For the rest of Springfest, I ate at night, alone in the kitchens. I penned one note to King Shrewd, suggesting that raiders might regularly be using the wells at Forge. He made no reply to me about it, and I was glad of it. I sought no contact with anyone.

With much pomp and ceremony, Galen presented his finished coterie to the King. One other besides myself had failed to return. It shames me now that I cannot recall his name, and if I ever knew what became of him, I have forgotten it. Like Galen, I suppose I dismissed him as insignificant.

Galen spoke to me only once the rest of that summer, and that was indirectly. We passed one another in the courtyard, not long after Springfest. He was walking and talking with Regal. As they passed me, he looked at me over Regal’s head and said sneeringly, ‘More lives than a cat.’

I stopped and stared at them until both were forced to look at me. I made Galen meet my eyes; then I smiled and nodded. I never confronted Galen about his attempt to send me to my death. He never appeared to see me after that; his eyes would slide past me, or he would exit a room when I entered it.

It seemed to me that I had lost everything when I lost Smithy. Or perhaps in my bitterness I set out to destroy what little was left to me. I sulked about the keep for weeks, cleverly insulting anyone foolish enough to speak to me. The Fool avoided me. Chade didn’t summon me. I saw Patience thrice. The first two times I went to answer her summons, I made only the barest efforts to be civil. The third time, bored by her chatter about rose cuttings, I simply stood up and left. She did not summon me again.

But there came a time when I felt I had to reach out to someone. Smithy had left a great gap in my life. And I had not expected that my exile from the stables would be as devastating as it was. Chance encounters with Burrich

were incredibly awkward as we both learned painfully to pretend not to see each other.

I wanted, achingly, to go to Molly, to tell her everything that had befallen me, all that had happened to me since I first came to Buckkeep. I imagined in detail how we could sit on the beach while I talked, and that when I had finished, she would not judge me or try to offer advice, but would just take my hand and be still beside me. Finally, she would know everything, and I would not have to hide anything from her any more. I dared imagine no more beyond that. I longed desperately, and feared with the fear known only to a boy whose love is two years older than he is. If I took her all my woes, would she think me a hapless child and pity me? Would she hate me for all that I had never told her before? A dozen times that thought turned my feet away from Buckkeep Town.

But some two months later, when I did venture into town, my traitorous feet took me to the chandlery. I happened to have a basket with me, and a bottle of cherry wine in it, and four or five brambly little yellow roses, obtained at great loss of skin from the Women's Garden where their fragrance overpowered even the thyme beds. I told myself I had no plan. I did not have to tell her everything about myself. I did not even have to see her. I could decide as I went along. But in the end all decisions had already been made, and they had nothing to do with me.

I arrived just in time to see Molly leaving with Jade. Their heads were close together, and she leaned toward him as they spoke in soft voices. Outside the door of the chandlery, he stooped to look into her face. She lifted her eyes to his. When the man reached a hesitant hand to gently touch her cheek, Molly was suddenly a woman, one I did not know. The two years' age difference between us was a vast gulf I could never hope to bridge. I stepped around the corner before she could see me, and turned aside, my face down. They passed me as if I were a tree or a stone. Her head leaned on his shoulder, and they walked slowly. It took forever for them to be out of sight.

That night I got drunker than I had ever been, and awoke the next day in some bushes halfway up the keep road.

EIGHTEEN

Assassinations

Chade Fallstar, a personal adviser to King Shrewd, made an extensive study of Forging during the period just preceding the Red Ship wars. From his tablets, we have the following: 'Netta, the daughter of the fisherman Gill and the farmer Ryda, was taken alive from her village Goodwater on the seventeenth day after Springfest. She was Forged by the Red Ship Raiders and returned to her village three days later. Her father was killed in the same raid, and her mother, having five younger children, was little able to deal with Netta. She was, at the time of her Forging, fourteen summers old. She came into my possession some six months after her Forging.

'When first brought to me, she was dirty, ragged and greatly weakened owing to starvation and exposure. At my direction, she was washed, clothed and housed in chambers convenient to my own. I proceeded with her as I might have done with a wild animal. Each day I brought her food with my own hands, and stayed by her while she ate. I saw to it that her chambers were kept warm, her bedding clean, and that she was provided with the amenities a woman might expect; water for washing, brushes and combs, and all that is otherwise needful. In addition, I saw to it that she was furnished with sundry supplies for needlework, for I had discovered that prior to Forging, she had had a great fondness for doing such fancywork, and had created several artful pieces. My intention in all this was to see if, under gentle circumstances, a Forged one might not return to a semblance of the person she had formerly been.

'Even a wild animal might have become a little tamer under these circumstances. But to all things Netta reacted with indifference. She had lost not only the habits of a woman, but even the good sense of an animal. She would eat to satiation, with her hands, and then let fall to the floor whatever was excess, to be trodden underfoot. She did not wash, nor care for herself in any way. Even most animals soil only one area of their dens, but Netta

was like a mouse that lets her droppings fall everywhere, with no care for bedding.

'She was able to speak, in a sensible way, if she chose to or wanted some item badly enough. When she spoke by her own choice, it was usually to accuse me of stealing from her, or to utter threats against me if I did not immediately give her some item she wanted. Her habitual attitude toward me was suspicious and hateful. She ignored my attempts at normal conversation, but by withholding food from her, I was able to elicit answers in exchange for food. She had clear memory of her family, but had no interest in what had become of them. Rather, she answered those questions as if answering questions about yesterday's weather. Of her Forging time, she said only that they had been held in the belly of a ship, and that there had been little food and only enough water to go around. She had been fed nothing unusual that she recalled, nor had she been touched in any way that she remembered. Thus she could furnish to me no clue as to the mechanism of Forging itself. This was a great disappointment to me, for I had hoped that by learning how a thing was done, a man could discover how to undo it.

'I endeavoured to bring human behaviour back to her by reasoning with her, but to no avail. She appeared to understand my words, but would not act on them. Even when given two loaves of bread, and warned that she must save one for the morrow or go hungry, she would let her second loaf fall to the floor, tread upon it, and on the morrow eat her own dropped leavings careless of what dirt clung to them. She evinced no interest in her needlework or in any other pastime, not even the bright toys of a child. If not eating or sleeping, she was content merely to sit or lie, her mind as idle as her body. Offered sweets or pastries, she would indulge until she vomited, and then eat more.

'I treated her with sundry elixirs and herbal teas. I fasted her, I steamed her, I purged her body. Hot and cold dousings had no effect other than to make her angry. I caused her to sleep a full day and a night, to no change. I so charged her with elfbark that she could not sleep for two nights, but this only made her irritable. I spoiled her with kindnesses for a time, but as when I treated her with the harshest restrictions, it made no difference in how she regarded me. If hungry, she would make courtesies and smile pleasantly when commanded to, but as soon as food was furnished, all further commands and requests were ignored.

'She was viciously jealous of territory and possessions. More than once she attempted to attack me, for no more reason than that I had ventured too close to food she was eating, and once because she suddenly decided she wished to have a ring I was wearing. She regularly killed the mice her untidiness attracted, snatching them up with amazing swiftness and dashing them against the wall. A cat that once ventured into her chambers met with a similar fate.

'She seemed to have little sense of the time that had passed since her Forging. She could give good account of her earlier life, if commanded when hungry, but of the days since her Forging, all was as one long "yesterday" to her.

'From Netta, I could not learn if something had been added to her or taken away to Forge her. I did not know if it was a thing consumed or smelled or heard or seen. I did not know if it was even the work of a man's hand and art, or the work of a sea-demon such as some Farlanders claim to have power upon. From a long and weary experiment, I learned nothing.

'To Netta I gave a triple sleeping-draught one evening with her water. I had her body bathed, her hair groomed, and sent her back to her village to be decently buried. At least one family could put finis to a tale of Forging. Most others must wonder, for months and years, what has become of the one they once held dear. Most are better off not knowing.'

There were, at that time, over one thousand souls known to have been Forged.

Burrich had meant what he said. He had nothing more to do with me. I was no longer welcome down at the stables and kennels. Cob especially took savage pleasure in this. Although he was often gone with Regal, when he was about the stables he would often step to block my entry. 'Allow me to bring you your horse, Master,' he would say obsequiously. 'The stablemaster prefers that grooms handle animals within the stables.' And so I must stand, like some incompetent lordling, while Sooty was saddled and brought for me. Cob himself mucked out her stall, brought her feed and groomed her, and it ate at me like acid to see how quickly she welcomed him back. She was only a horse, I told myself, and not to be blamed. But it was one more abandonment.

I had too much time, suddenly. Mornings had always been spent working for Burrich. Now they were mine. Hod was busy training green men for defence. I was welcome to drill with them, but it was all lessons I had

learned long ago. Fedwren was gone for the summer, as he was every summer. I could not think of a way to apologize to Patience, and I did not even think about Molly. Even my forays to the taverns in Buckkeep had become solitary ones. Kerry had apprenticed to a puppeteer, and Dirk gone for a sailor. I was idle and alone.

It was a summer of misery, and not just for me. While I was lonely and bitter and out-growing all my clothes, while I snapped and snarled at any foolish enough to speak to me, and drank myself insensible several times a week, I was still aware of how the Six Duchies were racked. The Red Ship Raiders, bolder than ever before, harried our coastline. This summer, in addition to threats, they finally began to make demands. Grain, cattle, the right to take whatever they wished from our seaports, the right to beach their boats and live off our lands and people for the summer, their choice of our folk for slaves ... each demand was more intolerable than the last, and the only things more intolerable than the demands were the Forgings that followed each refusal by the King.

Common folk were abandoning the seaport and waterfront towns. One could not blame them, but it left our coastline even more vulnerable. More soldiers were hired, and more, and so the levies were raised to pay them, and folk grumbled under the burden of the taxes and their fear of the Red Ship Raiders. Even stranger were the Outislanders who came to our shore in their family ships, their raiding vessels left behind, to beg asylum of our people, and to tell wild tales of chaos and tyranny in the Out Islands where the Red Ships now ruled completely. They were a mixed blessing, perhaps. They were cheaply hired as soldiers, though few really trusted them. But at least their tales of the Out Islands under Red Ship domination were harrowing enough to keep anyone from thinking of giving in to the Raiders' demands.

About a month after my return, Chade opened his door to me. I was sullen over his neglect of me, and went more slowly up his stairs than ever I had before. But when I got there, he looked up from crushing seeds with a pestle with a face full of weariness. 'I am glad to see you,' he said, with nothing of gladness in his voice.

'That's why you were so swift to welcome me back,' I observed sourly.

He stopped his grinding. 'I'm sorry. I thought perhaps you would need time alone, to recover yourself.' He looked back to his seeds. 'It has not been an easy winter and spring for me, either. Shall we try to put the time behind us, and go on?'

It was a gentle, reasonable suggestion. I knew it was wise.

‘Have I any choice?’ I asked sarcastically.

Chade finished grinding his seed. He scraped it into a finely-woven sieve and put it over a cup to drip. ‘No,’ he said at last, as if he had considered it well. ‘No, you haven’t, and neither have I. In many things, we have no choice.’ He looked at me, his eyes running up and down me, and then poked at his seed again. ‘You,’ he said, ‘will stop drinking anything but water or tea for the rest of the summer. Your sweat stinks of wine. And for one so young, your muscles are lax. A winter of Galen’s meditations has done your body no good at all. See that you exercise it. Take it upon yourself, as of today, to climb to Verity’s tower four times a day. You will take him food, and the teas I will show you how to prepare. You will never show him a sullen face, but will always be cheerful and friendly. Perhaps a while of waiting on Verity will convince you that I have had reasons for my attention not being centred on you. That is what you will do each day you are at Buckkeep. There will be some days when you will be fulfilling other assignments for me.’

It had not taken many words from Chade to awaken shame in myself. My perception of my life crashed from high tragedy to juvenile self-pity in a matter of moments. ‘I have been idle,’ I admitted.

‘You have been stupid,’ Chade agreed. ‘You had a month in which to take charge of your own life. You behaved like ... a spoiled brat. I have no wonder that Burrich is disgusted with you.’

I had long ago stopped being surprised at what Chade knew. But this time, I was sure he did not know the real reason, and I had no desire to share it with him.

‘Have you discovered yet who tried to kill him?’

‘I haven’t ... tried, really.’

Now Chade looked disgusted, and then puzzled. ‘Boy, you are not yourself at all. Six months ago you would have torn the stables apart to know such a secret. Six months ago, given a month’s holiday, you would have filled each day. What troubles you?’

I looked down, feeling the truth of his words. I wanted to tell him everything that had befallen me; I wanted not to say a word of it to anyone. ‘I’ll tell you all I do know of the attack on Burrich.’ And I did.

‘And the one who saw all this,’ he asked when I had finished. ‘Did he know the man who attacked Burrich?’

‘He didn’t get a good look at him,’ I hedged. Useless to tell Chade that I knew exactly how he smelled, but had only a vague visual image.

Chade was quiet for a moment. ‘Well, as much as you can, keep an ear to the earth. I should like to know who has grown so brave as to try to kill the King’s stablemaster in his own stable.’

‘Then you do not think it was just some personal quarrel of Burrich’s?’ I asked carefully.

‘Perhaps it was. But we will not jump to conclusions. To me, it has the feel of a gambit. Someone is building up to something, but has missed their first block. To our advantage, I hope.’

‘Can you tell me why you think so?’

‘I could, but I will not. I want to leave your mind free to find its own assumptions, independent of mine. Now come. I will show you the teas.’

I was more than a bit hurt that he asked me nothing about my time with Galen or my test. He seemed to accept my failure as a thing expected. But as he showed me the ingredients he had chosen for Verity’s teas, I was horrified by the strength of the stimulants he was using.

I had seen little of Verity, though Regal had been in only too much evidence. He had spent the last month coming and going, always just returning, or just leaving, and each cavalcade seemed richer and more ornate than the one before. It seemed to me that he was using the excuse of his brother’s courting to feather himself more brightly than any peacock. Common opinion was that he must go so, to impress those with whom he negotiated. For myself, I saw it as a waste of coin that could have gone on defences. When Regal was gone, I felt relief, for his antagonism toward me had taken a recent bound, and he had found sundry small ways to express it.

The brief times when I had seen Verity or the King, they had both looked harassed and worn. But Verity especially had seemed almost stunned. Impassive and distracted, he had noticed me only once, and then smiled wearily and said I had grown. That had been the extent of our conversation. But I had noticed that he ate like an invalid, without appetite, eschewing meat and bread as if they were too great an effort to chew and swallow, instead subsisting on porridges and soups.

‘He is using the Skill too much. That much Shrewd has told me. But why it should drain him so, why it should burn the very flesh from his bones, he cannot explain to me. So I give him tonics and elixirs, and try to get him to rest. But he cannot. He dares not, he says. He tells me that all his efforts

are necessary to delude the Red Ship navigators, to send their ships onto the rocks, to discourage their captains. And so he rises from bed, and goes to his chair by a window, and there he sits, all the day.'

'And Galen's coterie? Are they of no use to him?' I asked the question almost jealously, almost hoping to hear they were of no consequence.

Chade sighed. 'I think he uses them as I would use carrierpigeons. He has sent them out to the towers, and he uses them to convey warnings to his soldiers, and to receive from them sightings of ships. But the task of defending the coast he trusts to no one else. Others, he tells me, would be too inexperienced; they might betray themselves to those they Skilled. I do not understand. But I know he cannot continue much longer. I pray for the end of summer, for winter storms to blow the Red Ships home. Would there were someone to spell him at this work. I fear it will consume him.'

I took that as a rebuke for my failure and subsided into a sulky silence. I drifted around his chambers, finding them both familiar and strange after my months of absence. The apparatus for his herbal work was, as always, cluttered about. Slink was very much in evidence, with his smelly bits of bones in corners. As always, there was an assortment of tablets and scrolls by various chairs. This crop seemed to deal mostly with Elderlings. I wandered about, intrigued by the coloured illustrations. One tablet, older and more elaborate than the rest, depicted an Elderling as a sort of gilded bird with a man-like head crowned with quillish hair. I began to piece out the words. It was in Piche, an ancient native tongue of Chalced, the southernmost duchy. Many of the painted symbols had faded, or flaked away from the old wood, and I had never been fluent in Piche. Chade came to stand at my elbow.

'You know,' he said gently. 'It was not easy for me, but I kept my word. Galen demanded complete control of his students. He expressly stipulated that no one might contact you or interfere in any way with your discipline and instruction. And, as I told you, in the Queen's Garden, I am blind and without influence.'

'I knew that,' I muttered.

'Yet I did not disagree with Burrich's actions. Only my word to my king kept me from contacting you.' He paused cautiously. 'It has been a difficult time, I know. I wish I could have helped you. And you should not feel too badly that you –'

‘Failed.’ I filled in the word while he searched for a gentler one. I sighed, and suddenly admitted my pain. ‘Let’s leave it, Chade. I can’t change it.’

‘I know.’ Then, even more carefully, ‘But perhaps we can use what you learned of the Skill. If you can help me understand it, perhaps I can devise better ways to spare Verity. For so many years, the knowledge has been kept too secret ... there is scarcely a mention of it in the old scrolls, save to say that such and such a battle was turned by the King’s Skill upon his soldiers, or such and such an enemy was confounded by the King’s Skill. Yet there is nothing of how it is done, or ...’

Despair closed its grip on me again. ‘Leave it. It is not for bastards to know. I think I’ve proved that.’

A silence fell between us. At last Chade sighed heavily. ‘Well. That’s as may be. I’ve been looking into Forging as well, over these last few months. But all I’ve learned of it is what it is not, and what does not work to change it. The only cure I’ve found for it is the oldest one known to work on anything.’

I rolled and fastened the scroll I had been looking at, feeling I knew what was coming. I was not mistaken.

‘The King has charged me with an assignment for you.’

That summer, over three months, I killed seventeen times for the King. Had I not already killed, out of my own volition and defence, it might have been harder.

The assignments might have seemed simple. Me, a horse, and panniers of poisoned bread. I rode roads where travellers had reported being attacked, and when the Forged ones attacked me, I fled, leaving a trail of spilled loaves. Perhaps if I had been an ordinary man-at-arms, I would have been less frightened. But all my life I had been accustomed to relying on my Wit to let me know when others were about. To me, it was tantamount to having to work without using my eyes. And I swiftly found out that not all Forged ones had been cobblers and weavers. The second little clan of them that I poisoned had several soldiers among them. I was fortunate that most of them were squabbling over loaves when I was dragged from my horse. I took a deep cut from a knife, and to this day I bear the scar on my left shoulder. They were strong and competent, and seemed to fight as a unit, perhaps because that was how they had been drilled, back when they were fully human. I would have died, except that I cried out to them that it was foolish

to struggle with me while the others were eating all the bread. They dropped me, I struggled to my horse, and escaped.

The poisons were no crueller than they had to be, but to be effective even in the smallest dosage, we had to use harsh ones. The Forged ones did not die gently, but it was as swift a death as Chade could concoct. They snatched their deaths from me eagerly, and I did not have to witness their frothing convulsions, or even see their bodies by the road. When news of the fallen Forged ones reached Buckkeep, Chade's tale that they had probably died from eating spoiled fish from spawning streams had already spread as a ubiquitous rumour. Relatives collected the bodies and gave them proper burial. I told myself that they were probably relieved, and that the Forged ones had met a quicker end than if they had starved to death over winter. And so I became accustomed to killing, and had nearly a score of deaths to my credit before I had to meet the eyes of a man, and then kill him.

That one, too, was not so difficult as it might have been. He was a minor lordling, holding lands outside Turlake. A story reached Buckkeep that he had, in a temper, struck the child of a servant, and left the girl a witling. That was sufficient to raise King Shrewd's lip. But the lordling had paid the full blood-debt, and by accepting it the servant had given up any form of the King's justice. But some months later there came to court a cousin of the girl's, and she petitioned for private audience with Shrewd.

I was sent to confirm her tale, and saw how the girl was kept like a dog at the foot of the lordling's chair, and more, how her belly had begun to swell with child. And so it was not too difficult, as he offered me wine in fine crystal and begged the latest news of the King's Court at Buckkeep, for me to find a time to lift his glass to the light and praise the quality of both vessel and wine. I left some days later, my errand completed, with the samples of paper I had promised Fedwren, and the conveyed wishes of the lordling for a good trip home. The lordling was indisposed that day. He died, in blood and madness and froth, a month or so later. The cousin took in both girl and child. To this day, I have no regrets, for the deed or for the choice of slow death for him.

And when I was not dealing death to Forged ones, I waited on my lord Prince Verity. I remember the first time I climbed all those stairs to his tower, balancing a tray as I went. I had expected a guard or sentry at the top. There was none. I tapped at the door, and receiving no answer, entered quietly. Verity was sitting in a chair by a window. A summer wind off the

ocean blew into the room. It could have been a pleasant chamber, full of light and air on a stuffy summer day. Instead it seemed to me a cell. There was the chair by the window, and a small table next to it. In the corners and around the edges of the room the floor was dusty and littered with bits of old strewing-reeds. And Verity, chin slumped to his chest as if dozing, except that to my senses the room thrummed with his effort. His hair was unkempt, his chin bewhiskered with a day's growth. His clothing hung on him.

I pushed the door shut with my foot and took the tray to the table. I set it down and stood beside it, quietly waiting. And in a few minutes he came back from wherever he had been. He looked up at me with a ghost of his old smile, and then down at his tray. 'What's this?'

'Breakfast, sir. Everyone else ate hours ago, save yourself.'

'I ate, boy. Early this morning. Some awful fish soup. The cooks should be hung for that. No one should face fish first thing in the morning.' He seemed uncertain, like some doddering gaffer trying to recall the days of his youth.

'That was yesterday, sir.' I uncovered the plates. Warm bread swirled with honey and raisins, cold meats, a dish of strawberries and a small pot of cream for them. All were small portions, almost a child's serving. I poured the steaming tea into a waiting mug. It was flavoured heavily with ginger and peppermint, to cover the ground elfbark's tang.

Verity glanced at it, and then up to me. 'Chade never relents, does he?' Spoken so casually, as if Chade's name were mentioned everyday about the keep.

'You need to eat, if you are to continue,' I said neutrally.

'I suppose so,' he said wearily, and turned to the tray as if the artfully-arranged food were yet another duty to attend to. He ate with no relish for the food, and drank the tea in a manful draught, as a medicine, undeceived by ginger or mint. Halfway through the meal he paused with a sigh, and gazed out of the window for a bit. Then, seeming to come back again, he forced himself to consume each item completely. He pushed the tray aside, and leaned back in the chair as if exhausted. I stared. I had prepared the tea myself. That much elfbark would have had Sooty leaping over the stall walls.

'My prince?' I said, and when he did not stir, I touched his shoulder lightly. 'Verity? Are you all right?'

‘Verity,’ he repeated as in a daze. ‘Yes. And I prefer that to “sir” or “my prince” or “my lord”. This is my father’s gambit, to send you. Well. I may surprise him yet. But, yes, call me Verity. And tell them I ate. Obedient as ever, I ate. Go on, now, boy. I have work to do.’

He seemed to roust himself with an effort, and once more his gaze went afar. I stacked the dishes as quietly as I could onto the tray and headed toward the door. But as I lifted the latch, he spoke again.

‘Boy?’

‘Sir?’

‘Ah-ah!’ he warned me.

‘Verity?’

‘Leon is in my rooms, boy. Take him out for me, will you? He pines. There is no sense in the both of us shrivelling like this.’

‘Yes, sir. Verity.’

And so the old hound, past his prime now, came to be in my care. Each day I took him from Verity’s room, and we hunted the back hills and cliffs and the beaches for wolves that had not run there in a score of years. As Chade had suspected, I was badly out of condition, and at first it was all I could do to keep up even with the old hound. But as the days went by, we regained our tone, and Leon even caught a rabbit or two for me. Now that I was exiled from Burrich’s domain, I did not scruple to use the Wit whenever I wished. But as I had discovered long ago, I could communicate with Leon, but there was no bond. He did not always heed me, nor even believe me all the time. Had he been but a pup, I am sure we could have bonded to one another. But he was old, and his heart given forever to Verity. The Wit was not dominion over beasts, but only a glimpse into their lives.

And thrice a day I climbed the steeply winding steps, to coax Verity to eat, and to a few words of conversation. Some days it was like speaking to a child or a doddering oldster. On others, he asked after Leon, and quizzed me about matters down in Buckkeep Town. Sometimes I was absent for days on my other assignments. Usually, he seemed not to have noticed, but once, after the foray in which I took my knife wound, he watched me awkwardly load his empty dishes onto the tray. ‘How they must laugh in their beards, if they knew we slay our own.’

I froze, wondering what answer to make to that, for as far as I knew, my tasks were known only to Shrewd and Chade. But Verity’s eyes had gone afar again, and I left silently.

Without intending to, I began to make changes around him. One day, while he was eating, I swept the room, and later that evening brought up a sackful of strewing-reeds and herbs. I had worried that I might be a distraction to him, but Chade had taught me to move quietly. I worked without speaking, and Verity acknowledged neither my coming nor going. But the room was freshened, and the ververia blossoms mixed in with the strewing herbs were an enlivening herb. Coming in once, I discovered him dozing in his hard-backed chair. I brought up cushions, which he ignored for several days, and then one day had arranged to his liking. The room remained bare, but I sensed he needed it so, to preserve his single-mindedness. So what I brought him were the barest items of comfort, no tapestries or wall hangings, no vases of flowers or tinkling wind chimes, but flowering thymes in pots to ease the headaches that plagued him, and on one stormy day, a blanket against the rain and chill from the open window.

On that day I found him sleeping in his chair, limp as a dead thing. I tucked the blanket around him as if he were an invalid, and set the tray before him, but left it covered, to keep the good heat in the food. I sat down on the floor next to his chair, propped against one of his discarded cushions, and listened to the silence of the room. It seemed almost peaceful today, despite the driving summer rain outside the open window, and the gale wind that gusted in from time to time. I must have dozed, for I woke to his hand on my hair.

‘Do they tell you to watch over me so, boy, even when I sleep? What do they fear, then?’

‘Naught that I know, Verity. They tell me only to bring you food, and see as best I can that you eat it. No more than that.’

‘And blankets and cushions, and pots of sweet flowers?’

‘My own doing, my prince. No man should live in such a desert as this.’ And in that moment, I realized we were not speaking aloud, and sat bolt upright and looked at him.

Verity, too, seemed to come to himself. He shifted in his comfortless chair. ‘I bless this storm, that lets me rest. I hid it from three of their ships, persuading those who looked to the sky that it was no more than a summer squall. Now they ply their oars and peer through the rain, trying to keep their courses. And I can snatch a few moments of honest sleep.’ He paused. ‘I ask your pardon, boy. Sometimes, now, the Skilling seems more natural than speaking. I did not mean to intrude on you.’

‘No matter, my prince. I was but startled. I cannot Skill myself, except weakly and erratically. I do not know how I opened to you.’

‘Verity, boy, not your prince. No one’s prince sits still in a sweaty shirt, with two days of beard. But what is this nonsense? Surely it was arranged for you to learn the Skill? I remember well how Patience’s tongue battered away my father’s resolve.’ He permitted himself a weary smile.

‘Galen tried to teach me, but I had not the aptitude. With bastards, I am told it is often ...’

‘Wait,’ he growled, and in an instant was within my mind. ‘This is faster,’ he offered, by way of apology, and then, muttering to himself, ‘What is this, that clouds you so? Ah!’ and was gone again from my mind, and all as deft and easy as Burrich taking a tick off a hound’s ear. He sat long, quiet, and so did I, wondering.

‘I am strong in it, as was your father. Galen is not.’

‘Then how did he become Skillmaster?’ I asked quietly. I wondered if Verity were saying this only to somehow make me feel my failure less.

Verity paused as if skirting a delicate subject. ‘Galen was Queen Desire’s ... pet. A favourite. The Queen emphatically suggested Galen as apprentice to Solicity. Often I think our old Skillmaster was desperate when she took him as apprentice. Solicity knew she was dying, you see. I believe she acted in haste, and towards the end, regretted her decision. And I do not think he had half the training he should have had before becoming “master”. But there he is; he is what we have.’

Verity cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. ‘I will speak as plainly as I can, boy, for I see that you know how to hold your tongue when it is wise. Galen was given that place as a plum, not because he merited it. I do not think he has ever fully grasped what it means to be the Skillmaster. Oh, he knows the position carries power, and he has not scrupled to wield it. But Solicity was more than someone who swaggered about secure in a high position. Solicity was advisor to Bounty, and a link between the King and all who Skilled for him. She made it her business to seek out and teach as many as manifested real talent and the judgement to use it well. This coterie is the first group Galen has trained since Chivalry and I were boys. And I do not find them well-taught. No, they are trained, as monkeys and parrots are taught to mimic men, with no understanding of what they do. But they are what I have.’ Verity looked out of the window and spoke softly. ‘Galen has no finesse. He is as coarse as his mother was, and just as presumptuous.’

Verity paused suddenly, and his cheeks flushed as if he had said something ill-considered. He resumed more quietly. 'The Skill is like language, boy. I need not shout at you to let you know what I want. I can ask politely, or hint, or let you know my wish with a nod and a smile. I can Skill a man, and leave him thinking it was all his own idea to please me. But all that eludes Galen, both in the use of the Skill and the teaching of it. Privation and pain are one way to lower a man's defences; it is the only way Galen believes in. But Solicity used guile. She would have me watch a kite, or a bit of dust floating in a sunbeam, focusing on it as if there were nothing else in the world. And suddenly, there she would be, inside my mind with me, smiling and praising me. She taught me that being open was simply not being closed. And going into another's mind is mostly done by being willing to go outside of your own. Do you see, boy?'

'Somewhat,' I hedged.

'Somewhat,' he sighed. 'I could teach you to Skill, had I but the time. I do not. But tell me this: were your lessons going well, before he tested you?'

'No. I never had any aptitude ... wait! That's not true! What am I saying, what have I been thinking?' Though I was sitting, I swayed suddenly, my head bounding off the arm of Verity's chair. He reached out a hand and steadied me.

'I was too swift, I suppose. Steady now, boy. Someone had misted you. Befuddled you, much as I do Red Ship navigators and steersmen. Convince them they've taken a sighting already and their course is true when really they are steering into a cross-current. Convince them they've passed a point they haven't sighted yet. Someone convinced you that you could not Skill.'

'Galen.' I spoke with certainty. I almost knew the moment. He had slammed into me that afternoon, and from that time, nothing had been the same. I had been living in a fog, all those months ...

'Probably. Though if you Skilled into him at all, I'm sure you've seen what Chivalry did to him. He hated your father with a passion, prior to Chiv turning him into a lapdog. We felt badly about it. We'd have undone it, if we could have worked out how to do it, and escape Solicity's detection. But Chiv was strong with the Skill, and we were all but boys then, and Chiv was angry when he did it. Over something Galen had done to me, ironically. Even when Chivalry was not angry, being Skilled by him was like being trampled by a horse. Or ducked in a fast-flowing river, more like. He'd get in a hurry, barge into you, dump his information and flee.' He paused again,

and reached to uncover a dish of soup on his tray. 'I suppose I've always assumed you knew all this. Though I'm damned if there's any way you could have. Who would have told you?'

I seized on one piece of information. 'You could teach me to Skill?'

'If I had time. A great deal of time. You're a lot like Chiv and I were, when we learned. Erratic. Strong, but with no idea of how to bring that strength to bear. And Galen has ... well, scarred you, I suppose. You've walls I can't begin to penetrate, and I am strong. You'd have to learn to drop them. That's a hard thing. But I could teach you, yes. If you and I had a year, and nothing else to do.' He pushed the soup aside. 'But we don't.'

My hopes crashed again. This second wave of disappointment engulfed me, grinding me against stones of frustration. My memories all re-ordered themselves, and in a surge of anger, I knew all that had been done to me. Were it not for Smithy, I'd have dashed my life out at the base of the tower that night. Galen had tried to kill me, just as surely as if he'd had a knife. No one would even have known of how he'd beaten me, save his loyal coterie. And while he'd failed at that, he had taken from me the chance to learn Skilling. He'd crippled me, and I would ... I leaped to my feet, furious.

'Whoa. Be slow and careful. You have a grievance, but we cannot have discord within the keep itself right now. Carry it with you until you can settle it quietly, for the King's sake.' I bowed my head to the wisdom of his counsel. He lifted the cover from a small roast fowl, dropped it again. 'Why would you want to learn this Skill anyway? It's a miserable thing. No fit occupation for a man.'

'To help you,' I said without thinking, and then found it true. Once it would have been to prove myself a true and fit son to Chivalry, to impress Burrich or Chade, to increase my standing in the keep. Now, after watching what Verity did, day after day, with no praise or acknowledgement from his subjects, I found I only wanted to help him.

'To help me,' he repeated. The storm winds were slackening. With exhausted resignation, he lifted his eyes to the window. Take the food away, boy. I've no time for it now.'

'But you need strength,' I protested. Guiltily, I knew he had taken time with me he should have taken for food and sleep.

'I know. But I have no time. Eating takes energy. Odd to realize that. I have none extra to give to that just now.' His eyes were questing afar now, staring through the sheeting rain that was just beginning to slacken.

‘I’d give you my strength, Verity. If I could.’

He looked at me oddly. ‘Are you sure? Very sure?’

I could not understand the intensity of his question, but I knew the answer. ‘Of course I would.’ And more quietly, ‘I am a King’s man.’

‘And of my own blood,’ he affirmed. He sighed. For a moment he looked sickened. He looked again at the food, and again out of the window. ‘There is just time,’ he whispered. ‘And it might be enough. Damnation to you, Father. Must you always win? Come here, then, boy.’

There was an intensity to his words that frightened me, but I obeyed. When I stood by his chair, he reached out a hand. He placed it on my shoulder, as if he needed assistance to rise.

I looked up at him from the floor. There was a pillow under my head, and the blanket I had brought up earlier had been tossed over me. Verity stood, leaning out of the window. He was shaking with effort, and the Skill he exerted was like battering waves I could almost feel. ‘Onto the rocks,’ he said with deep satisfaction, and whirled from the window. He grinned at me, an old, fierce grin that faded slowly as he looked down on me.

‘Like a calf to the slaughter,’ he said ruefully. ‘I should have known that you didn’t know what you were talking about.’

‘What happened to me?’ I managed to ask. My teeth chattered against each other, and my whole body shook as with a chill. I felt I would rattle my bones out of their joints.

‘You offered me your strength. I took it.’ He poured a cup of the tea, then knelt to hold it to my mouth. ‘Go slowly. I was in a hurry. Did I say earlier that Chivalry was a bull with his Skill? What must I say about myself then?’

He had his old bluff heartiness and good nature back. This was a Verity I had not seen for months. I managed a mouthful of the tea, and felt the elfbark sting my mouth and throat. My shivering eased. Verity took a casual gulp from the mug.

‘In the old days,’ he said conversationally, ‘a king would draw on his coterie. Half a dozen men or more, and all in tune with one another, able to pool strength and offer it as needed. That was their true purpose. To provide strength to their king, or to their own key man. I don’t think Galen quite grasps that. His coterie is a thing he has fashioned. They are like horses and bullocks and donkeys, all harnessed together. Not a true coterie at all. They lack the singleness of mind.’

‘You drew strength from me?’

‘Yes. Believe me, boy, I would not have, except that I had a sudden need, and I thought you knew what you offered. You yourself named yourself as a King’s man, the old term. And as close as we are in blood, I knew I could tap you.’ He set the mug down on the tray with a thump. Disgust deepened his voice. ‘Shrewd. He sets things in motion, wheels turning, pendulums swaying. It is no accident that you are the one to bring me my meals, boy. He was making you available to me.’ He took a swift turn about the room, then stopped, standing over me. ‘It will not happen again.’

‘It was not so bad,’ I said faintly.

‘No? Why don’t you try to stand then? Or even sit up? You’re just one boy, alone, not a coterie. Had I not realized your ignorance and drawn back, I could have killed you. Your heart and breath would just have stopped. I’ll not drain you like this, not for anyone. Here.’ He stopped and without effort lifted me and placed me in his chair. ‘Sit here a bit. And eat. I don’t need it now. And when you are better, go to Shrewd for me. Say that I say you are a distraction. I wish a kitchen-boy to bring my meals, from now on.’

‘Verity,’ I began.

‘No,’ he corrected me. ‘Say “my prince”. For in this, I am your prince, and I will not be questioned on it. Now eat.’

I bowed my head, miserable, but I did eat, and the elfbark in the tea worked to revive me faster than I had expected. Soon I could stand, to stack the dishes on the tray, and then to carry them to the door. I felt defeated. I lifted the latch.

‘FitzChivalry Farseer.’

I halted, frozen by the words. I turned slowly.

‘It’s your name, boy. I wrote it myself, in the military log, on the day you were brought to me. Another thing I had thought you knew. Stop thinking of yourself as the bastard, FitzChivalry Farseer. And be sure that you see Shrewd today.’

‘Goodbye,’ I said quietly, but he was already staring out of the window again.

And so high summer found us all. Chade at his tablets, Verity at his window, Regal courting a princess for his brother, and I, quietly killing for my king. The Inland and Coastal Dukes took sides at the council tables, hissing and spitting at one another like cats over fish. And over it all was

Shrewd, keeping each piece of web as taut as any spider, and alert to the least thrumming of a line. The Red Ships struck at us, like ratfish on beef bait, tearing away bits of our folk and Forging them. And the Forged folk became a torment to the land, beggars or predators or a burden to their families. Folk feared to fish, to trade, or to farm the rivermouth plains by the sea. And yet the taxes had to be raised to feed the soldiers and the watchers who seemed unable to defend the land despite their growing numbers. Shrewd had grudgingly released me from my service to Verity. My king had not called for me in over a month when one morning I was abruptly summoned to breakfast.

‘It’s a poor time to wed,’ Verity objected. ‘I have no time for it. Let us be but promised for a year or so. Surely that will be enough for you.’

I looked at the sallow, fleshless man who shared the King’s breakfast table and wondered if this were the bluff, hearty prince from my childhood. He had worsened so much in just a month. He toyed with a bit of bread, set it down again. The outdoors had gone from his cheeks and eyes; his hair was dull, his musculature slack. The whites of his eyes were yellowed. Burrich would have wormed him if he’d been a hound.

Unasked, I said, ‘I hunted with Leon two days ago. He took a rabbit for me.’

Verity turned to me, a ghost of his old smile playing on his face. ‘You took my wolfhound for rabbits?’

‘He enjoyed it. He misses you, though. He brought me the rabbit, and I praised him but it didn’t seem to satisfy him.’ I couldn’t tell him how the hound had looked at me, *not for you* as plain in his eyes as in his bearing.

Verity picked up his glass. His hand quivered ever so slightly. ‘I am glad he gets out with you, boy. It’s better than ...’

‘The wedding,’ Shrewd cut in, ‘will hearten the people. I am getting old, Verity, and the times are troubled. The people see no end to their troubles, and I do not dare promise them solutions we do not have. The Outislanders are right, Verity. We are not the warriors who once settled here. We have become a settled people – a settled people who can be threatened in ways that nomads and rovers have no care for. And we can be destroyed in those same ways. When settled people look for security, they look for continuity.’

Here I looked up sharply. Those were Chade’s words, I’d bet my blood on it. Did that mean that this wedding was something Chade was helping to

engineer? My interest became keener, and I wondered again why I had been summoned to this breakfast.

‘It’s a matter of reassuring our folk, Verity. You have not Regal’s charm, nor the bearing that let Chivalry convince anyone that he could take care of any matter. This is not to slight you; you have as much talent for the Skill as I have ever seen in our line, and in many eras your soldierly skills in tactics would have been more important than Chivalry’s diplomacy.’

This sounded suspiciously like a rehearsed speech to me. I watched Shrewd pause. He put cheese and preserves on some bread and bit into it thoughtfully. Verity sat silent, watching his father. He seemed both attentive and bemused, like a man trying desperately to stay awake and be alert when all he can think of is putting his head down and closing his eyes. My brief experiences of the Skill and the split concentration it demanded to resist its enticements while bending it to one’s will made me marvel at Verity’s ability to wield it every day.

Shrewd glanced from Verity to me and back to his son’s face. ‘Putting it simply, you need to marry. More, you need to beget a child. It would put heart into the people. They would say, “well, it cannot be as bad as all that, if our prince does not fear to marry and have a child. Surely he would not be doing that if the whole kingdom were on the verge of crumbling.”’

‘But you and I would still know better, wouldn’t we, Father?’ There was a hint of rust in Verity’s voice, and a bitterness I had never heard there before.

‘Verity,’ Shrewd began, but his son cut in.

‘My king,’ he said formally. ‘You and I do know that we are on the brink of disaster. And now, right now, there can be no slackening of our vigilance. I have no time for courting and wooing, and even less time for the more subtle negotiations of finding a royal bride. While the weather is fine, the Red Ships will raid. And when it turns poor, and the tempests blow their ships back to their own ports, then we must turn our minds and our energies to fortifying our coastlines, and training crews to manage raiding ships of our own. That is what I want to discuss with you. Let us build our own fleet, not fat merchant ships to waddle about tempting raiders, but sleek warships, such as we once had and our oldest shipwrights still know how to make. And let us take this battle to the Outislanders, yes, even through the storms of winter. We used to have such sailors and warriors amongst us. If we begin to

build and train now, by next spring we could at least hold them away from our coast, and possibly by winter we could ...'

'It will take money. And money does not flow fastest from terrified men. To raise the funds we need, we need to have our merchants confident enough to continue trading and farmers unafraid to pasture their flocks on the coast meadows and hills. It all comes back, Verity, to your taking a wife.'

Verity, so animated when speaking of warships, leaned back in his chair. He seemed to sag in on himself, as if some piece of structure inside him had given way. I almost expected to see him collapse. 'As you will, my king,' he said, but as he spoke he shook his head, denying the affirmation of his own words. 'I will do as you see wise. Such is the duty of a prince to his king and to his kingdom. But as a man, Father, it is a bitter and empty thing, this taking of a woman selected by my younger brother. I will wager that having looked on Regal first, when she stands beside me, she will not see me as any great prize.' Verity looked down at his hands, at the battle and work scars that now showed plainly against their paleness. I heard his name in his words when he said softly, 'Always I have been your second son. Behind Chivalry, with his beauty, strength and wisdom. And now behind Regal, with his cleverness and charm and airs. I know you think he would be a better king to follow after you than I. I do not always disagree with you. I was born second and raised to be second. I had always believed my place would be behind the throne, not upon it. And when I thought that Chivalry would follow you to that high seat, I did not mind it. He gave me great worth, my brother did. His confidence in me was like an honour; it made me a part of all he accomplished. To be the right hand of such a king was better than to be king of many a lesser land. I believed in him as he believed in me. But he is gone. And I tell you nothing surprising when I say to you that there is no such bond between Regal and me. Perhaps there are too many years; perhaps Chivalry and I were so close we left no room for a third. But I do not think he has been seeking for a woman who can love me. Or one who ...'

'He has been seeking a queen!' Shrewd interrupted harshly. I knew then that this was not the first time this had been argued, and sensed that Shrewd was most annoyed that I had been privy to these words. 'Regal has been seeking a woman, not for you, or himself, or any such silliness. He has been seeking a woman to be queen of this country, of these Six Duchies. A woman who can bring to us the wealth and the men and the trade agreements that we need now, if we are to survive these Red Ships. Soft hands and a

sweet scent will not build your warships, Verity. You must set aside this jealousy of your brother; you cannot fend off the enemy if you do not have confidence in those who stand behind you.'

'Exactly,' Verity said quietly. He pushed his chair back.

'Where do you go?' Shrewd demanded irritably.

'To my duties,' Verity said shortly. 'Where else have I to go?'

For a moment, even Shrewd looked taken aback. 'But you've scarcely eaten ...' he faltered.

'The Skill kills all other appetites. You know that.'

'Yes.' Shrewd paused. 'And I know, too, as you do, that when this happens, a man is close to the edge. The appetite for the Skill is one that devours a man, not one that nourishes him.'

They both seemed to have forgotten about me entirely. I made myself small and unobtrusive, nibbling on my biscuit as if I were a mouse in a corner.

'But what does the devouring of one man matter, if it saves a kingdom?' Verity did not bother to disguise the bitterness in his voice, and to me it was plain that it was not the Skill alone of which he spoke. He pushed his plate away. 'After all,' he added with ponderous sarcasm, 'it is not as if you do not have yet another son to step in and wear your crown. One unscarred by what the Skill does to men. One free to wed where he will, or will not.'

'It is not Regal's fault that he is unSkilled. He was a sickly child, too sickly for Galen to train. And who could have foreseen that two Skilled princes would not be enough?' Shrewd protested. He rose abruptly and paced the length of the chamber. He stood, leaning on the windowsill and peering out over the sea below. 'I do what I can, son,' he added in a lower voice. 'Do you think I do not care, that I do not see how you are being consumed?'

Verity sighed heavily. 'No. I know. It is the weariness of the Skill that speaks so, not I. One of us, at least, must keep a clear head and try to grasp the whole of what is happening. For me, there is nothing but the sensing out, and then the sorting, the trying to fix navigator out from oarsman, to scent out the secret fears that the Skill can magnify, to find the faint hearts in the crew and prey upon those first. When I sleep, I dream them, and when I try to eat, they are what sticks in my throat. You know I have never relished this, Father. It never seemed to me worthy of a warrior, to skulk and spy

about in men's minds. Give me a sword and I'll willingly explore their guts. I'd rather unman a man with a blade than turn the hounds of his own mind to nipping at his heels.'

'I know, I know,' Shrewd said gently, but I did not think he really did. I, at least, did understand Verity's distaste for his task. I had to admit I shared it, and felt him somehow dirtied by it. But when he glanced at me, my face and eyes were empty of any judgement. Deeper within me was the sneaking guilt that I had failed to learn the Skill, and was no use to my uncle at this time. I wondered if he looked at me, and thought of drawing on my strength again. It was a frightening thought, but I steeled myself to the request. But he only smiled at me kindly, if absently, as if no such thought had ever crossed his mind. And as he rose, and walked past my chair, he tousled my hair as if I were Leon.

'Take my dog out for me, even if it is only for rabbits. I hate to leave him in my rooms each day, but his poor dumb pleading was a distraction from what I must do.'

I nodded, surprised at what I felt emanating from him. A shadow of the same pain I had felt at being separated from my own dogs.

'Verity.'

He turned at Shrewd's call.

'Almost I forgot to tell you why I had called you here. It is, of course, the mountain princess. Ketkin, I think her name was ...'

'Kettricken. I at least remember that much. A skinny little child, the last time I saw her. So, she is the one you have selected?'

'Yes. For all the reasons we have already discussed. And a day has been set. Ten days before Harvestday. You will have to leave here during the first part of Reaptime in order to reach there in time. There will be a ceremony there, before her own people, binding the two of you and sealing all the agreements and a formal wedding later, when you arrive back here with her. Regal sends word that you must ...'

Verity had halted, and his face darkened with frustration. 'I cannot. You know I cannot. If I leave off my work here while it is still Reaptime, there will be nothing to bring a bride back to. Always, the Outislanders have been greediest and most reckless in the final month before the winter storms drive them back to their own wretched shore. Do you think it will be any different this year? Like as not I would bring Kettricken back here to find them feasting in our own Buckkeep, with your head on a pike to greet me!'

King Shrewd looked angered, but kept his temper as he asked, 'Do you really think they could press us that greatly if you left off your efforts for twenty days or so?'

'I know it,' Verity said wearily. 'I know it as surely as I know that I should be at my post right now, not arguing here with you. Father, tell them it must be put off. I'll go for her as soon as we've a good coat of snow on the ground, and a blessed gale lashing all ships into their ports.'

'It cannot be,' Shrewd said regretfully. 'They have beliefs of their own, up in the mountains. A wedding made in winter yields a barren harvest. You must take her in the autumn when the lands are yielding, or in late spring, when they till their little mountain fields.'

'I cannot. By the time spring comes to their mountains, it is fair weather here, with Raiders on our doorsills. Surely they must understand that!' Verity moved his head about, like a restless horse on a short lead. He did not want to be here. Distasteful as he found his Skill work, it called to him. He wanted to go to it, wanted it in a way that had nothing to do with protecting his kingdom. I wondered if Shrewd knew that. I wondered if Verity did.

'To understand something is one thing,' the King expounded. 'To insist they flaunt their traditions is another. Verity, this must be done, done now.' Shrewd rubbed his head as if it pained him. 'We need this joining. We need her soldiers, we need her marriage gifts, we need her father at our back. It cannot wait. Could not you perhaps go in a closed litter, unhampered by managing a horse, and continue your Skill work as you travel? It might even do you good, to get out and about a bit, to have a little fresh air and ...'

'NO!' Verity bellowed the word, and Shrewd turned where he stood, almost as if he were at bay against the windowsill. Verity advanced to the table, and pounded upon it, showing a temper I had never suspected in him. 'No and no and no! I cannot do the work I must do to keep the Raiders from our coast while being rocked and jolted in a horse litter. And no, I will not go to this bride you have chosen for me, to this woman I scarce recall, in a litter like an invalid or a witling. I will not have her see me so, nor would I have my men sniggering behind me, saying, "oh, this is what brave Verity has come to, riding like a palsied old man, pandered off to some woman as if he were an Outislander whore". Where are your wits that you can think such stupid plans? You've been among the mountain folk, you know their ways. Think you a woman of theirs would accept a man who came to her in such a sickly way? Even their royals expose a child if it is born less than whole.'

You'd spoil your own plan, and leave the Six Duchies to the Raiders while you did it.'

'Then perhaps ...'

'Then perhaps there is a Red Ship right now, not so far that they cannot see Egg Island, and already the captain of it is discounting the dream of ill omen he had last night, and the navigator is correcting his course, wondering how he could have so mistaken the landmarks of our coastline. Already all the work I did last night while you slept and Regal danced and drank with his courtiers is coming undone, while we stand here and yatter at one another. Father, arrange it. Arrange it any way you wish and can, so long as it does not involve me doing anything save the Skill while fair weather plagues our coast.' Verity had been moving as he spoke, and the slamming of the King's chamber door almost drowned out his final words.

Shrewd stood and stared at the door for some moments. Then he passed his hand across his eyes, rubbing them, but for weariness or tears or just a bit of dust, I could not tell. He looked about the room, frowning when his eyes encountered me, as if I were a thing puzzlingly out of place. Then, as if recalling why I were there, he observed dryly, 'Well, that went well, didn't it? Still, and all, a way must be found. And when Verity rides to claim his bride, you will go with him.'

'If you wish, my king,' I said quietly.

'I do.' He cleared his throat, then turned to look out of his window again. 'The princess has a single sibling, an older brother. He is not a healthy man. Oh, he was well and strong once, but on the Ice Fields he took an arrow through his chest. Passed clean through him, so Regal was told. And the wounds on his chest and back healed. But during the winters, he coughs blood, and in summer he cannot sit a horse nor drill his men for more than half the morning. Knowing the mountain folk, it is full surprising that he is their King-in-Waiting still. Usually they do not tolerate weaklings.'

I thought quietly for a moment. 'Among the mountain people the custom is the same as ours. Male or female, the offspring inherit by the order of their birth.'

'Yes. That is so,' Shrewd said quietly, and I knew that already he was thinking that seven duchies might be stronger than six. This was why I had been summoned to breakfast.

'And Princess Kettricken's father?' I asked. 'How is his health?'

‘As hale and hearty as one could wish, for a man of his years. I am sure he will reign long and well for at least another decade, keeping his kingdom whole and safe for his heir.’

‘Probably by then, our troubles with the Red Ships will long be over. Verity will be free to turn his mind to other things.’

‘Probably,’ King Shrewd agreed quietly. His eyes finally met mine. ‘When Verity goes to claim his bride, you will go with him. You understand what your duties will be? I trust to your discretion.’

I inclined my head to him. ‘As you wish, my king.’

NINETEEN

Journey

To speak of the Mountain Kingdom as a kingdom is to start out with a basic misunderstanding of the area and the folk who people it. It is equally inaccurate to refer to the region as Chyurda, although the Chyurda do make up the dominant folk there. Rather than one stretch of united countryside, the Mountain Kingdom consists of various hamlets clinging to the mountainsides, of small vales of arable land, of trading hamlets sprung up along the rough roads that lead to the passes, and clans of nomadic herders and hunters who range the inhospitable countryside in between. Such a diverse people are unlikely to unite, for their interests are often in conflict. Strangely, though, the only force more powerful than each group's independence and insular ways is the loyalty they bear to the 'King' of the mountain folk.

Traditions tell us that this line was begun by a prophet-judge, a woman who was not only wise, but also a philosopher who founded a theory of ruling the keystone which is that the leader is the ultimate servant of the people, and must be totally selfless in that regard. There was no definite time when the judge became the king; rather it was a gradual transition, as word of the fairness and wisdom of the holy one at Jhaampe spread. As more and more folk sought counsel there, willing to be bound by the decision of the judge, it was only natural that the laws of that settlement came to be respected throughout the mountains, and that more and more folk adopted Jhaampe laws as their own. And so judges became kings, but, amazingly, retained their self-imposed decree of servitude and self-sacrifice for their people. The Jhaampe tradition is rife with tales of kings and queens who sacrificed themselves for their folk, in every conceivable way, from fending wild animals off shepherd children to offering themselves as hostages in times of feud.

Tales have been told that make the mountain folk out to be harsh, almost savage. In truth, the land they dwell in is uncompromising, and their laws mirror this condition. It is true that badly-formed infants are exposed, or, more commonly, drowned or drugged to death. The elderly often choose Sequestering, a self-imposed exile in a family but where cold and starvation end all infirmities. A man who breaks his word may have his tongue notched as well as having to surrender double the value of his original bargain. Such customs may seem quaintly barbaric to those in the more settled of the Six Duchies, but they are peculiarly suited to the world of the Mountain Kingdom.

In the end, Verity had his way. There was no sweetness in the triumph for him, I am sure, for his own stubborn insistence was backed by a sudden increase in the frequency of the raids. In the space of a month, two villages were burned and had a total of thirty-two inhabitants taken for Forging. Nineteen of them apparently carried the now popular poison vials, and chose to commit suicide. A third town, a more populous one, was successfully defended, not by the royal troops, but by a mercenary militia the townsfolk had organized and hired themselves. Many of the fighters, ironically, were immigrant Outislanders, using one of the few skills they had. And the mutterings against the King's apparent inactivity increased.

It did little good to try to explain to them about Verity and the coterie's work. What the people needed and wanted were warships of their own, defending the coastline. But ships take time to build, and the converted merchant ships that were already in the water were tubby, wallowing things compared to the sleek Red Ships that harassed us. Promises of warships by spring were small comfort to farmers and herders trying to protect this year's crops and flocks. And the land-locked duchies were becoming more and more vociferous about paying heavier taxes to build warships to protect a coastline they didn't share. For their part, the leaders of the Coastal Duchies sarcastically wondered how well the inland folk would do without their seaports and trading vessels to outlet their goods. During at least one High Council meeting, there was a noisy altercation in which Duke Ram of Tilth suggested that it would be little loss to cede the Near Islands and Fur Point to the Red Ships if that would slacken their raiding, and Duke Brawndy of Bearn's retaliated by threatening to stop all trade traffic along the Bear River and see if Tilth found that as small a loss. King Shrewd managed to bring the council to adjournment before they came to blows, but not before the Farrow

Duke had made it clear that he sided with Tilth. The lines of division were being made more sharp with each passing month and each allotment of taxes. Clearly something was needed to rebuild the kingdom's unity, and Shrewd was convinced it was a royal marriage.

So Regal danced his diplomatic steps, and it was arranged that the Princess Kettricken would make her pledges to Regal in his brother's stead, with all of her own folk to witness, and Verity's word would be given by his brother. With a second ceremony to follow, of course, at Buckkeep, with suitable representatives from Kettricken's folk to witness it. And for the nonce, Regal remained in the Mountain Kingdom's capital at Jhaampe. His presence there created a regular flow of emissaries, gifts and supplies between Buckkeep and Jhaampe. Seldom did a week pass without a cavalcade either leaving or arriving. It kept Buckkeep in a constant stir.

It seemed to me an awkward and ungainly way to assemble a marriage. Each would be wed almost a month before glimpsing the other. But the political expedients were more important than the feelings of the principals, and the separate celebrations were planned.

I had long since recovered from Verity tapping my strength. It was taking me longer to grasp completely what Galen's misting of my mind had done to me. I believe I would have confronted him, despite Verity's counsel, except that he had left Buckkeep, in company of a cavalcade bound for Jhaampe, to ride with them as far as Farrow, where he had relatives he wished to visit. By the time he returned, I myself would be on my way to Jhaampe, so Galen remained out of my reach.

Again, I had too much time on my hands. I still tended Leon, but he did not take more than an hour or two of my time each day. I had been able to discover nothing more about the attack on Burrich, nor did Burrich show any signs of relenting on my ostracism. I had made one jaunt into Buckkeep Town, but when I chanced to wander by the chandlery, it was shuttered and silent. My inquiries at the shop next door brought me the information that the chandlery had been closed for ten days or more, and that unless I wished to buy some leather harness, I could go elsewhere and stop bothering him. I thought of the young man I had last seen with Molly, and bitterly wished them no good of each other.

For no other reason than that I was lonely, I decided to seek out the Fool. Never before had I tried to initiate a meeting with him. He proved more elusive than I had ever imagined.

After a few hours of randomly wandering the keep, hoping to encounter him, I made brave enough to go to his chamber. I had known for years where it was, but had never gone there before, and not simply because it was in an out of the way part of the keep. The Fool did not invite intimacy, except of the kind he chose to offer, and only when he chose to offer it. His chambers were a tower-top room. Fedwren had told me that it had once been a map room, and had offered an unobstructed view of the land surrounding Buckkeep, but later additions to Buckkeep had blocked the views, and higher towers supplanted it. It had outlived its usefulness for anything, save chambers for a Fool.

I climbed to it, that one day toward the beginning of harvest-time. It was already a hot and sticky day. The tower was a closed one, save for arrow slits that did little more than illuminate the dust motes my feet set to dancing in the still air. At first the darkness of the tower had seemed cooler than the stuffy day outside, but as I climbed, it seemed to get hotter and more close, so that by the time I reached the last landing, I felt as if there were no air left to breathe at all. I lifted a weary fist and pounded on the stout door. 'It's me, Fitz!' I called, but the still, hot air muffled my voice like a wet blanket smothering a flame.

Shall I use that as an excuse? Shall I say I thought perhaps he could not hear me, and so I went in to see if he was there? Or shall I say that I was so hot and thirsty that I entered to see if his chambers offered any hint of air or water? Why doesn't matter, I suppose. I put my hand to the door-latch, and it lifted and I went inside.

'Fool?' I called, but I could feel he wasn't there. Not as I usually felt folk's presence or absence, but by the stillness that met me. Yet I stood in the door and gawked at a soul laid bare.

Here was light, and flowers, and colours in profusion. There was a loom in the corner, and baskets of fine, thin thread in bright, bright hues. The woven coverlet on the bed, and the drapings on the open windows were unlike anything I had ever seen, woven in geometric patterns that somehow suggested fields of flowers beneath a blue sky. A wide pottery bowl held floating flowers and a slim silver fingerling swam about the stems and above the bright pebbles that floored it. I tried to imagine the pale cynical Fool in the midst of all this colour and art. I took a step further into the room, and saw something that moved my heart aside in my chest.

A baby. That was what I took it for at first, and without thinking, I took the next two steps and knelt beside the basket that cradled it. But it was not a living child, but a doll, crafted with such incredible art that almost I expected to see the small chest move with breath. I reached a hand to the pale, delicate face, but dared not touch it. The curve of the brow, the closed eyelids, the faint rose that suffused the tiny cheeks, even the small hand that rested on top of the coverlets were more perfect than I supposed a made thing could be. Of what delicate clay it had been crafted, I could not guess, nor what hand had inked the tiny eyelashes that curled on the infant's cheek. The tiny coverlet was embroidered all over with pansies, and the pillow was of satin. I don't know how long I knelt there, as silent as if it were truly a sleeping babe. But eventually I rose, and backed out of the Fool's room, and then drew the door silently closed behind me. I went slowly down the myriad steps, torn between dread that I might encounter the Fool coming up, and burdened with the knowledge that I had discovered one denizen of the keep who was at least as alone as I was.

Chade summoned me that night, but when I went to him, he seemed to have no more purpose in calling me than to see me. We sat almost silently before the black hearth, and I thought he looked older than he ever had. As Verity was devoured so Chade was consumed. His bony hands appeared almost desiccated, and the whites of his eyes were webbed with red. He needed to sleep, but instead had chosen to call me. Yet he sat, still and silent, scarce nibbling at the food he had placed before us. At length, I decided to help him.

'Are you afraid I won't be able to do it?' I asked him softly.

'Do what?' he asked absently.

'Kill the mountain prince. Rurisk.'

Chade turned to look at me full-face. The silence held for a long moment.

'You didn't know King Shrewd had given me this,' I faltered.

Slowly he turned back to the empty hearth, and studied it as carefully as if there were flames to read. 'I'm only the tool-maker,' he said at last, quietly. 'Another man uses what I make.'

'Do you think this is a bad ... task? Wrong?' I took a breath. 'From what I've been told, he has not that much longer to live anyway. It might almost be a mercy, if death were to come quietly in the night, instead of ...'

‘Boy,’ Chade remarked quietly. ‘Never pretend we are anything but what we are. Assassins. Not merciful agents of a wise king. Political assassins dealing death for the furtherance of our monarchy. That is what we are.’

It was my turn to study the ghosts of the flames. ‘You are making this very hard for me. Harder than it already was. Why? Why did you make me what I am, if you then try to weaken my resolve ...’ My question died away, half-formed.

‘I think ... never mind. Maybe it is a kind of jealousy in me, my boy. I wonder, I suppose, why Shrewd uses you instead of me. Maybe I fear I have outlived my usefulness to him. Maybe, now that I know you, I wish I had never set out to make you what ...’ And it was Chade’s turn to fall silent, his thoughts going where his words could not follow them.

We sat contemplating my assignment. This was not the serving of a king’s justice. This was not a death sentence for a crime. This was a simple removal of a man who was an obstacle to greater power. I sat still until I began to wonder if I would do it. Then I lifted my eyes to a silver fruit-knife driven deep into Chade’s mantelpiece, and I thought I knew the answer.

‘Verity had made complaint, on your behalf,’ Chade said suddenly.

‘Complaint?’ I asked weakly.

‘To Shrewd. First, that Galen had mistreated you and cheated you. This complaint he made formally, saying that he had deprived the kingdom of your Skill, at a time when it would have been most useful. He suggested to Shrewd, informally, that he settle it with Galen, before you took matters into your own hands.’

Looking at Chade’s face, I could see that the full content of my discussion with Verity had been revealed to him. I was not sure how I felt about that. ‘I would not do that, take my own revenge on Galen. Not after Verity asked me not to.’

Chade gave me a look of quiet approval. ‘So I told Shrewd. But he said to me that I must say to you, that he will settle this. This time the King works his own justice. You must wait and be satisfied.’

‘What will he do?’

‘That I do not know. I do not think Shrewd himself knows yet. The man must be rebuked. But we must keep in time that if other coteries are to be trained, Galen must not feel too badly treated.’ Chade cleared his throat, and said more quietly, ‘And Verity made another complaint to the King as well.’

He accused Shrewd and I, quite bluntly, of being willing to sacrifice you for the sake of the kingdom.'

This, I knew suddenly, was why Chade had called me tonight. I was silent.

Chade spoke more slowly. 'Shrewd claimed he had not even considered it. For my part, I had no idea such a thing was possible.' He sighed again, as if parting with these words cost him. 'Shrewd is a king, my boy. His first concern must always be for his kingdom.'

The silence between us stretched long. 'You are saying he would sacrifice me. Without a qualm.'

He did not take his eyes from the fireplace. 'You. Me. Even Verity, if he thought it necessary for the survival of the kingdom.' Then he did turn to look at me. 'Never forget that,' he said.

The night before the wedding caravan was to leave Buckkeep, Lacey came tapping on my door. It was late, and when she said Patience wished to see me, I foolishly asked, 'Now?'

'Well, you leave tomorrow,' Lacey pointed out, and I obediently followed her as if that made sense.

I found Patience sitting up in a cushioned chair, an extravagantly-embroidered robe on over her nightclothes. Her hair was down about her shoulders, and as I seated myself where she indicated, Lacey resumed the brushing of it.

'I have been waiting for you to come to apologize to me,' Patience observed.

I immediately opened my mouth to do so, but she irritably waved me to silence.

'But, in discussing it with Lacey tonight, I found I had already forgiven you. Boys, I decided, simply have a given amount of rudeness they must express. I decided you meant nothing by it, hence you do not need to apologize.'

'But I am sorry,' I protested. 'I just couldn't decide how to say ...'

'It's too late to apologize now, I've forgiven you,' she said briskly. 'Besides, there isn't time. I'm sure you should be asleep by now. But as this is your first real venture into court life, I wanted to give you something before you left.'

I opened my mouth, then shut it again. If she wanted to consider this my first real venture into court life, I wouldn't argue with her.

‘Sit here,’ she said imperiously, and pointed to a spot by her feet.

I went and sat obediently. For the first time, I noticed a small box in her lap. It was of dark wood, and a stag was carved into the lid in bas relief. As she opened it, I caught a whiff of the aromatic wood. She took out an ear stud and held it up to my ear. ‘Too small,’ she muttered. ‘What is the sense of wearing jewellery if no one else can see it?’ She held up and discarded several others, with similar comments. Finally she held up one that was like a silver bit of net with a blue stone caught in it. She made a face over it, then nodded reluctantly. ‘That man has taste. Whatever else he lacks, he has taste.’ She held it up to my ear again, and with absolutely no warning, thrust the pin of it through my earlobe.

I yelped and clapped a hand over my ear, but she slapped it away. ‘Don’t be such a baby. It only stings for a minute.’ There was a sort of clasp that held it behind, and she ruthlessly bent my ear in her fingers to fasten it. ‘There. That quite suits him, don’t you think, Lacey?’

‘Quite,’ Lacey agreed over her eternal tatting.

Patience dismissed me with a gesture. As I rose to go, she said, ‘Remember this, Fitz. Whether you can Skill or not, whether you wear his name or not, you are Chivalry’s son. See that you behave with honour. Now go and get some sleep.’

‘With this ear?’ I asked, showing her blood on my fingertips.

‘I hadn’t thought. I’m sorry ...’ she began, but I interrupted her.

‘Too late to apologize. I’ve already forgiven you. And thank you.’ Lacey was still giggling as I left.

I arose early the next morning, to take my place in the wedding cavalcade. Rich gifts must be taken as a token of the new bond between the families. There were gifts for the Princess Kettricken herself, a fine-blooded mare, jewellery, fabric for garments, servants, and rare perfumes. And there were the gifts to her family and people. Horses and hawks and worked gold for her father and brother of course, but the more important gifts were the ones offered to her kingdom, for in keeping with the Jhaampe traditions, she was of her people more than she was of her family. And so there was breeding stock, cattle, sheep, horses and fowl, and powerful yew bows such as the mountain folk did not have, and metalworking tools of good Forge iron, and other gifts judged likely to improve the lot of the mountain people. And there was knowledge, in the form of several of Fedwren’s best illustrated herbals, several tablets of cures, and a scroll on hawking that was

a careful copy of one created by Hawker himself. These last, ostensibly, were my purpose in accompanying the caravan.

They were given into my keeping, along with a generous supply of the herbs and roots mentioned in the herbal, and with seed for growing those that did not keep well. This was not a trivial gift, and I took my responsibility for seeing it well delivered as seriously as I took my other mission. All was carefully wrapped and then placed in a carved cedar chest. I was checking their wrappings a final time before taking the chest down to the courtyard when I heard the Fool behind me.

‘I brought you this.’

I turned to find him standing just inside the door of my room. I hadn’t even heard the door open. He was proffering a leather drawstring bag. ‘What is it?’ I asked, and tried not to let him hear either the flowers or the doll in my voice.

‘Seapurge.’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘A cathartic? As a marriage gift? I suppose some would find it appropriate, but the herbs I am taking can be planted and grown in the mountains. I do not think ...’

‘It is not a wedding gift. It is for you.’

I accepted the pouch with mixed feelings. It was an exceptionally powerful purge. ‘Thank you for thinking of me. But I am not usually prone to travellers’ ailments, and ...’

‘You are not usually, when you travel, in danger of being poisoned.’

‘Is there something you’d like to tell me?’ I tried to make my tone light and bantering. I missed the Fool’s usual wry faces and mockeries from this conversation.

‘Only that you’d be wise to eat lightly, or not at all, of any food you do not prepare yourself.’

‘At all the feasts and festivities that will be there?’

‘No. Only at the ones you wish to survive.’ He turned to go.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said hastily. ‘I didn’t mean to intrude. I was looking for you, and I was so hot, and the door wasn’t latched, so I went in. I didn’t mean to pry.’

His back was to me and he didn’t turn back as he asked, ‘And did you find it amusing?’

‘I –’ I could not think of anything to say, of any way to assure him that what I had seen there would stay only within my own mind. He took two

steps and was closing the door. I blurted, 'It made me wish there were a place as much me as that place is you. A place I would keep as secret.'

The door halted a handsbreadth short of closed. 'Take some advice, and you may survive this trip. When considering a man's motives, remember you must not measure his wheat with your bushel. He may not be using the same standard at all.'

And the door closed and the Fool was gone. But his last words had been cryptic and frustrating enough that I thought perhaps he had forgiven me my trespass.

I stuffed the seapurge into my jerkin, not wanting it, but afraid to leave it now. I glanced about my room, but as always it was a bare and practical place. Mistress Hasty had seen to my packing, not trusting me with my new garments. I had noticed that the barred buck on my crest had been replaced with a buck with his antlers lowered to charge. 'Verity ordered it,' was all she said when I asked about it. 'I like it better than the barred buck myself. Don't you?'

'I suppose so,' I replied, and that had been the end of it. A name and a crest. I nodded to myself, shouldered my chest of herbs and scrolls, and went down to join the caravan.

As I was going down the steps, I encountered Verity coming up. At first I scarcely knew him, for he was ascending like a crabbed old man. I stepped out of his way to let him pass, and then knew him as he glanced at me. It is a strange thing to see a once-familiar man like that, encountered as a stranger. I marked how his clothes hung on him now, and the bushy dark hair I remembered had a peppering of grey. He smiled absently at me, and then, as if it had suddenly occurred to him, he stopped me.

'You're leaving for the Mountain Kingdom? For the wedding ceremony?'

'Yes.'

'Do me a favour, boy?'

'Of course,' I said, taken aback by the rust in his voice.

'Speak well of me to her. Truthfully, mind you, I'm not asking for lies. But speak well of me. I've always thought that you thought well of me.'

'I do,' I said to his retreating back. 'I do, sir.' But he didn't turn or make a reply, and I felt much as I had when the Fool left me.

The courtyard was a milling of folk and animals. There were no carts this time; the roads into the mountains were notoriously bad, and it had been

decided that pack animals would have to suffice for the sake of swiftness. It would not do for the royal entourage to be late for the wedding; it was bad enough that the groom was not attending.

The flocks and herds had been sent on days before. It was expected that our trip would take two weeks, and three had been allowed for it. I saw to fastening the cedar chest onto a pack animal, and then stood beside Sooty and waited. Even in the cobbled courtyard, dust stirred thick in the hot summer air. Despite all the careful planning that had gone into it, the caravan seemed chaotic. I glimpsed Sevrens, Regal's favourite valet. Regal had sent him back to Buckkeep a month ago, with specific instructions about certain garments he wished created. Sevrens was following Hands, dithering and expostulating about something, and whatever it was, Hands was not looking patient about it. When Mistress Hasty had been giving me final instructions on the care of my new garments, she had divulged that Sevrens was taking enough new garments, hats and accoutrements for Regal that he had been allotted three pack animals to carry them. I imagined that caring for the three animals had fallen to Hands, for Sevrens was an excellent valet, but timid around the larger animals. Rowd, Regal's ready man, hulked after both of them, looking ill-tempered and impatient. On one wide shoulder he carried yet another trunk, and perhaps the loading of this additional item was what was fretting Sevrens. I soon lost sight of them in the crowd.

I was surprised to discover Burrich checking the lead-lines on the breeding horses and the Princess's gift mare. Surely whoever was in charge of them could do that, I thought. And then, as I saw him mount, I realized that he, too, would be part of this procession. I looked about to see who was accompanying him, but saw none of the stable-boys I knew, save Hands ... Cob was already in Jhaampe with Regal. So Burrich had taken this on himself. I was not surprised.

August was there, astride a fine grey mare, waiting with an impassivity that was almost inhuman. Already his time in the coterie had changed him. Once he had been a chubby youth, quiet but pleasant. He had the same black bushy hair as Verity, and I had heard it said that he resembled his cousin as a boy. I reflected that as his Skill duties increased, he would probably resemble Verity even more. He would be present at the wedding, as a sort of window for Verity as Regal uttered the vows on his brother's behalf. Regal's voice, August's eyes, I mused to myself. What did I go as? His poignard?

I mounted Sooty, as much to be up and away from the folk exchanging goodbyes and last-minute instructions as for any other reason. I wished to Eda we could be away and on the road. It seemed to take forever for the straggling line to form and for the tying and strapping of bundles to be accomplished. And then, almost abruptly, the standards were lifted, a horn was blown, and the line of horses, laden pack-animals and folk began to move. I looked up once, to see that Verity had actually come out to stand on top of the tower and watch us depart. I waved up at him, but doubted that he knew me amidst so many. And then we were out of the gates, and winding up the hilly path that led away from Buckkeep and to the west.

Our path would lead us up the banks of the Buck River, which we would ford at its wide shallows near where the borders of Buck and Farrow Duchies touched. From there we would journey across Farrow's wide plains, in baking heat I had never encountered before, until we reached Blue Lake. From Blue Lake, we would follow a river named simply Cold whose origins were in the Mountain Kingdom. From the Cold Ford the trading road began, that led between the mountains and through their shadows and up, ever up, to Storm Pass, and thence to the thick green forests of the Rain Wilds. We would not go as far as that, but would stop at Jhaampe, which was as close to a city as the Mountain Kingdom possessed.

In some ways, it was an unremarkable journey, if one discounts all that inevitably goes with such journeys. After the first three days or so, things settled into a remarkably monotonous routine, varied only by the different countryside we passed. Every little village or hamlet along our road turned out to greet us and delay us, with official best wishes and felicitations for the Crown Prince's wedding festivities.

But after we reached the wide plains of Farrow, such hamlets were few and far between. Farrow's rich farms and trading cities were far to the north of our path, along the Vin River. We travelled Farrow's plains, where people were mostly nomadic herders, creating towns only in the winter months when they settled along the trade routes for what they called 'the green season'. We passed herds of sheep, goats, or horses; or more rarely, the dangerous, rangy swine they called *haragars*, but our contact with the people of that region was usually limited to the sight of their conical tents in the distance, or some herder standing tall in his saddle, holding aloft his crook in greeting.

Hands and I became reacquainted. We would share food and a small cook-fire in the evenings, and he would regale me with tales of Sevren's nattering worries of dust getting into silk robes or bugs getting into fur collars and velvet getting chafed to pieces during the long trek. Grimmer were his complaints about Rowd. I myself had no fond memories of the man, and Hands found him an oppressive travelling companion, for he seemed to constantly suspect Hands of trying to steal from the packs of Regal's belongings. One evening Rowd even found his way to our fire, where he laboriously delivered a vague and indirect warning against any who might conspire to steal from his master.

The fair weather held, and if we sweated by day, it was pleasant enough by night. I slept on top of my blanket, and seldom bothered with any other shelter. Each night I checked the contents of my trunk, and did my best to keep the roots from becoming completely desiccated, and to keep the shifting from putting wear on the scrolls and tablets. One night I awoke to a loud whinnying from Sooty, and thought that the cedar chest had been moved slightly from where I placed it. But a brief check of its contents proved that all was in order, and when I mentioned it to Hands, he merely asked if I were catching Rowd's disease.

The hamlets and herds we passed frequently provided us with fresh foods, and were most generous in their allocation of it, so we had little hardship on the journey. Open water was not as plentiful as we could have wished as we crossed Farrow, but each day we found some spring or dusty well to water at, so even that was not as bad as it might have been.

I saw very little of Burrich. He arose earlier than the rest of us, and preceded the main caravan, that his charges might have the best grazing and the cleanest water. I knew he would want his horses in prime condition when they arrived at Jhaampe. August, too, was almost invisible. While he was technically in charge of our expedition, he left the running of it to the captain of his honour-guard. I could not decide if he did this out of wisdom, or laziness. In any event, he kept mostly to himself, although he did allow Sevrens to tend him and share his tent and meals.

For me, it was almost a return to a sort of childhood. My responsibilities were very limited. Hands was a genial companion, and it took very little encouragement to have him telling from his vast store of tales and gossip. I often went for almost the whole day before I would recall that, at the end of this journey, I would kill a prince.

Such thoughts usually came on me when I awoke in the dark part of the night. Farrow's sky seemed to be much thicker with stars than the night over Buckkeep, and I would stare up at them, and mentally rehearse ways to put an end to Rurisk. There was another chest, a tiny one, packed carefully within the bag that held my clothing and personal items. I had compiled it with much thought and anxiety for this assignment must be carried out perfectly. It must be done cleanly, with not even the tiniest suspicion raised. And timing was critical. The prince must not die while we were at Jhaampe. Nothing must cast the slightest shadow upon the nuptials. Nor must he die before the ceremonies were observed at Buckkeep and the wedding safely consummated, for that might be seen as an ill omen for the couple. It would not be an easy death to arrange.

Sometimes I wondered why it had been entrusted to me instead of to Chade. Was it a test of some sort, one that if I failed I would be put to death? Was Chade too old for this challenge, or too valuable to be risked for this? Could he simply not be spared from tending Verity's health? And when I reined my mind away from these questions, I was left wondering whether to use a powder that would irritate Rurisk's damaged lungs so he might cough himself to death. Perhaps I might treat his pillows and bedding with it. Should I offer him a pain remedy, one that would slowly addict him and lure him into a sleeping death? I had a blood-thinning tonic. If his lungs were chronically bleeding already, it might be enough to send him on his way. I had one poison, swift and deadly and tasteless as water, if I could devise a way to be sure he would encounter it at a safely distant time. None of these were thoughts conducive to sleep, and yet the fresh air and the exercise of riding all day were usually sufficient to counter them, and I often awoke eager for the next day of travel.

When we finally sighted Blue Lake, it was like a miracle in the distance. It had been years since I had been so far from the sea for so long, and I was surprised how welcome the sight of water was to me. Every animal in our baggage-train filled my thoughts with the clean scent of water. The country became greener and more forgiving as we approached the great lake, and we were hard put to keep the horses from overgrazing themselves at night.

Hordes of sailing-boats plied their merchant trade on Blue Lake, and their sails were coloured so as to tell not only what they sold but which family they sailed for. The settlements along Blue Lake were built out on

pilings into the water. We were well greeted there, and feasted with freshwater fish, which tasted odd to my sea-trained tongue. I felt myself quite the traveller, and Hands and I were nearly overwhelmed with our opinions of ourselves when some green-eyed girls from a grain-trading family came giggling to our fireside one night. They had brought with them small, brightly-coloured drums, each toned differently, and they played and sang for us until their mothers came scolding to find them and lead them home. It was a heady experience, and I did not think of Prince Rurisk at all that night.

West and north we travelled now, ferried across Blue Lake on some flat-bottomed barges I trusted not at all. On the far side, we found ourselves suddenly in forest lands, and the hot days of Farrow became a fond memory. Our path led us through immense stands of cedar, pricked here and there with groves of white paper-birch and seasoned in burned areas with alder and willow. Our horses' hooves thudded on the black earth of the forest trail, and the sweet smells of the autumn were all around us. We saw unfamiliar birds, and once I glimpsed a great stag of a colour and kind I had never seen before or since. Night grazing for the horses was not good, and we were glad of the grain we had bought from the lake people. We lit fires at night, and Hands and I shared a tent.

Our way led steadily uphill now. We wound our way between the steepest slopes, but we were unmistakably making our way up into the mountains. One afternoon we met a deputation from Jhaampe, sent to greet us and guide us on our way. After that, we seemed to travel faster, and every evening we were entertained with musicians, poets and jugglers, and feasted with their delicacies. Every effort was made to welcome us and to honour us. But I found them passing strange and almost frightening in their differences. Often I was forced to remind myself of what both Burrich and Chade had taught me about the courtesies, while poor Hands withdrew almost totally from these new companions.

Physically, most of them were Chyurda, and were as I had expected them to be; a tall, pale people, light of hair and eye, and some with hair as red as a fox. They were a brawny people, the women as well as the men. All seemed to carry a bow or a sling, and they were obviously more comfortable on foot than on horseback. They dressed in wool and leather, and even the humblest wore fine furs as if they were no more than homespun. They strode alongside us, mounted as we were, and seemed to have no difficulty keeping

up with the horses all day. They sang as they walked, long songs in an ancient tongue that sounded almost mournful, but were interspersed with shouts of victory or delight. I was later to learn they were singing us their history, that we might know better what kind of a people our prince was joining us to. I gathered that they were, for the most part, minstrels and poets, the 'hospitable' ones, as their language translated it, traditionally sent to greet guests and to make them glad they had come even before they arrived.

As the next two days passed, our trail widened, for other paths and roads fed into it the closer we came to Jhaampe. It became a broad tradeway, sometimes paved with a crushed white stone. And the closer we came to Jhaampe, the greater our procession became, for we were joined by contingents from villages and tribes, pouring in from the outer reaches of the Mountain Kingdom to see their princess pledge herself to the powerful prince from the lowlands. Soon, with dogs and horses and some sort of goat they used as pack-beasts, with wains of gifts and folk of every walk and degree trailing in families and knots behind us, we came to Jhaampe.

TWENTY

Jhaampe

‘– and so let them come, the people of who I am, and when they reach the city, let them always be able to say, “this is our city and our home, for however long we wish to stay”—Let there always be spaces left, let – (words obscured) – of the herds and flocks. Then there will be no strangers in Jhaampe, but only neighbours and friends, coming and going as they will.’ And the will of the Sacrifice was observed in this, as in all things.

So I read years later, in a fragment from a Chyurda holy tablet, and so finally came to understand Jhaampe. But that first time, as we rode up the hills toward Jhaampe, I was both disappointed and awed at what I saw.

The temples, palaces, and public buildings reminded me of the immense closed blossoms of tulips, both in colour and shape. The shape they owe to the once traditional stretched-hide shelters of the nomads who founded the city; the colour purely to the mountain folk’s love of colour in everything. Every building had been recently restrained in preparation for our coming and the Princess’s nuptials, and thus they were almost garishly bright. Shades of purple seemed to dominate, set off by yellows, but every colour was represented. It is best compared, perhaps, to chancing upon a patch of crocus, pushing up through snow and black earth, for the bare, black rocks of the mountains and the dark evergreens made the brightness of the buildings even more impressive. Additionally, the city itself is built on an area fully as steep as Buckkeep Town, so that when one beholds it from below, the colour and lines of it are presented in layers, like an artful arrangement of flowers in a basket.

But as we drew closer, we were able to see that between and among the great buildings were tents and temporary huts and tiny shelters of every kind. For at Jhaampe, only the public buildings and the royal houses are permanent. All else is the ebb and flow of folk coming to visit their capital city, to ask judgement of the Sacrifice, as they call the king or queen who

rules there, or to visit the repositories of their treasures and knowledge, or simply to trade with and visit other nomads. Tribes come and go, tents are pitched and inhabited for a month or two, and then one morning, all is bare, swept earth where they were, until another group moves in to claim the spot. Yet it is not a disorderly place, for the streets are well-defined, with stone stairs set into the steeper places. Wells and bath-houses and streams are located at intervals throughout the city, and the strictest rules are observed about rubbish and offal. It is also a green city, for the outskirts of it are pastures for those who bring their herds and horses with them, with tenting areas defined by the shade trees and wells there. Within the city are stretches of garden, flowers and sculpted trees, more artfully tended than anything I had ever seen in Buckkeep. The visiting folk leave their creations among these gardens, and they may take the form of stone sculptures or carvings of wood, or brightly-painted pottery creatures. In a way, it put me in mind of the Fool's room, for in both places were colour and shape set out simply for the pleasure of the eye.

Our guides halted us at a pasture outside the city, and indicated that it had been set aside for us. After a while it became obvious that they expected we would leave our horses and mules here, and proceed on foot. August, who was the nominal head of our caravan, did not handle this very diplomatically. I winced as he angrily explained that we had brought with us much more than we could be expected to carry into the city, and that many there were too weary from travelling to relish the idea of the uphill walk. I bit my lip and forced myself to stand quietly, to witness the polite confusion of our hosts. Surely Regal had known of these customs; why had he not warned us of them, so we would not begin our visit by appearing boorish and unaccommodating?

But the hospitable folk tending to us swiftly adapted to our strange ways. They bade us rest, and begged us to be patient with them. For a time we all stood about, vainly trying to appear comfortable. Rowd and Sevens joined Hands and me. Hands had a slosh or two of wine left in a skin, and this he shared, while Rowd grudgingly reciprocated with some smoked meat in strips. We talked, but I confess I paid little attention. I wished I had the courage to go to August, and entreat him to be more adaptable to the ways of this people. We were their guests, and it was already bad enough that the groom had not come in person to carry off his bride. I watched from a distance as August consulted with several elder lords who had come with us,

but from the motions of their hands and heads I deduced that they were only agreeing with him.

Moments later, a stream of sturdy Chyurda youths and maidens appeared on the road above us. Bearers had been summoned to help carry our goods into the city, and from somewhere bright tents were conjured for those servants who would stay here to tend the horses and mules. I much regretted to find that Hands would be one of those left behind. I entrusted Sooty to him. Then I shouldered the cedar herb-chest and slung my personal bag from my other shoulder. As I joined the procession of those walking into the city, I smelled meats sizzling and tubers cooking, and saw our hosts setting up an open-sided pavilion, and assembling tables within it. Hands, I decided, would not fare poorly, and almost I wished I had nothing more to do than tend the animals and explore this bright city.

We had not gone far up the winding street ascending into the city before we were met by a flock of litters carried by tall Chyurda women. We were earnestly invited to mount into these litters and be carried into the city, and many apologies were made that we had been wearied by our trip. August, Sevrens, the older lords and most of the ladies of our party seemed only too happy to take advantage of this offer, but for me, it seemed a humiliation to be carried into the city. However, it would have been even ruder to turn down their polite insistence, and so I surrendered my chest to a boy obviously younger than myself, and mounted into a litter borne by women old enough to be my grandmother. I blushed to see how curiously the folk on the streets regarded us, and how they stooped to talk quickly together as we passed. I saw few other litters, and they were inhabited by those obviously old and infirm. I set my teeth and tried not to think what Verity would have felt about this display of ignorance. I tried to look out pleasantly on those we passed, and to let my delight in their gardens and graceful buildings show on my face.

I must have succeeded in this, for presently my litter began to move more slowly, to allow me more time to see things, and the women to point to anything they thought I might have missed noticing. They spoke to me in Chyurda, and were delighted to find I had a crude understanding of their language. Chade had taught me the little he knew, but he had not prepared me for how musical the language was, and it soon became apparent to me that the note of word was as important as the pronunciation. Fortunately, I had a quick ear for languages, so I blundered manfully into conversation

with my bearers, resolved that by the time I spoke to my betters in the palace, I would no longer sound quite so much an outland fool. One woman undertook to give me a commentary on all we passed. Jonqui, her name was, and when I told her mine was FitzChivalry, she muttered it to herself several times as if to fix it in her mind.

With great difficulty, I persuaded my bearers to pause once and let me alight to examine a particular garden. It was not the bright flowers that attracted me, but what appeared to be a sort of willow that was growing in spirals and curls rather than the straight willow I was accustomed to. I ran my fingers along the supple bark of one limb and felt sure I could persuade a cutting to sprout, but dared not take a piece of it, lest it be construed as rude. One old woman stooped down beside me, grinned, and then ran her hand across the tops of a low-growing, tiny-leaved bed of herbs. The fragrance that arose from the stirred leaves was astounding, and she laughed aloud at the delight on my face. I would have liked to linger longer, but my bearers emphatically insisted that we must hurry to catch up with the others before they reached the palace. I gathered there was to be an official welcoming, one I must not miss.

Our procession wound up a terraced street, ever higher, until our litters were set down outside a palace that was a cluster of the bright, bud-like structures. The main buildings were purple tipped with white, putting me in mind of the roadside lupin and beach-pea flowers of Buck. I stood beside my litter, staring up at the palace, but when I turned to my bearers to indicate my pleasure in it, they were gone. They reappeared moments later, robed in saffron and azure, peach and rose, as did the other bearers, and walked among us, offering us basins of scented water and soft cloths to wash the dust and weariness from our faces and necks. Boys and young men in belted blue tunics brought a berry wine and tiny honey cakes. When every guest was washed and greeted with wine and honey, we then were bade to follow them into the palace.

The interior of the palace was as foreign to me as the rest of Jhaampe. A great central pillar supported the main structure, and closer examination showed it to be the immense trunk of a tree, with the swells of its roots still obvious beneath the paving stones around its base. The supports of the gracefully curving walls were likewise trees, and days later I was to find that the 'growing' of the palace had taken almost one hundred years. A central tree had been selected, the area cleared, and then the circle of supporting

trees planted and tended, and shaped during their growing by ropes and pruning, so that they all bowed toward the centre tree. At some point all other branches had been lopped away and the treetops interwoven to form a crown. Then the walls had been created, first with a layer of finely-woven fabric, that was then varnished to hardness, and then overlaid with lapping after lapping of sturdy cloth made from bark. The bark-cloth was daubed over with a peculiar local clay, and then coated with a bright layer of resinous paint. I never did discover if every building in the city had been created in this laborious fashion, but the 'growing' of the palace had enabled its creators to give it a living grace that stone could never mimic.

The immense interior was open, not unlike the great hall at Buckkeep, with a similar number of hearths. There were tables set out, and areas obviously for cooking and weaving and spinning and preserving, and all the other necessities of a great household. The private chambers seemed to be no more than curtained alcoves, or rooms like small tents set against the exterior wall. There were also some elevated chambers, reached by a network of open wooden stairs, reminding me of tents pitched on stilt platforms. The supporting legs of these chambers were natural tree-trunks. My heart sank as I realized how little privacy there would be for any 'quiet' work I needed to do.

I was shown quickly to a tent chamber. Inside I found my cedar chest and clothing bag awaiting me, as well as more warm and scented wash-water and a dish of fruit. I changed quickly from my dusty travelling clothes into an embroidered robe with slit sleeves and matching green leggings that Mistress Hasty had decreed as appropriate. I wondered once more at the threatening buck embroidered on it, then set it out of my mind. Perhaps Verity had thought this changed crest less humiliating than the one that so clearly proclaimed my illegitimacy. In any case, it would serve. I heard chimes and small drums from the great central room, and left my chamber hurriedly to find out what was afoot.

On a dais set before the great trunk and decorated with flowers and evergreen swags, August and Regal stood before an old man flanked by two servants in plain white robes. A crowd had gathered in a great circle around the dais, and I quickly joined them. One of my litter-bearers, now robed in rose drapings and crowned with a twining of ivy, soon appeared at my side. She smiled down at me.

'What is happening?' I made bold to ask.

‘Our Sacrifice, er, ah, you say, King Eyod will welcome you. And he will show to you all his daughter, to be your Sacrifice, hem, ah, queen. And his son, who will rule for her here.’ She stumbled through this explanation, with many a pause, and many encouraging nods from me.

With mutual difficulty, she explained that the woman standing beside King Eyod was her niece and I awkwardly managed a compliment to the effect that she looked both healthy and strong. At the moment it seemed the kindest thing I could find to say of the impressive woman standing so protectively by her king. She had an immense mass of the yellow hair that I was becoming accustomed to in Jhaampe, with some of it braided up and coiled about her head, and some flowing loose down her back. Her face was grave, her bare arms muscular. The man on the other side of King Eyod was older, but still as like to her as a twin, save that his hair was cut severely short at his collar. He had the same jade eyes, straight nose and solemn mouth. When I managed to ask the old woman if he, too, were a relative, she smiled as if I must be a bit dim, and replied that, of course, he was her nephew. She shushed me then, as if I were but a child, for King Eyod was speaking.

He spoke slowly and carefully, but even so, I was glad of my conversations with my litter-bearers, for I was able to make out most of his speech. He greeted us all formally, including Regal, for he said that previously he had greeted him only as the emissary of King Shrewd and now he greeted him as Prince Verity’s symbol of his presence. August was included in this greeting, and both were presented with several gifts, jewelled daggers, a precious fragrant oil, and rich fur stoles. When the stoles were placed about their shoulders, I thought with chagrin that both now looked more like decorations than princes, for in contrast to the simple garb of King Eyod and his attendants, Regal and August were decked in circlets and rings, and their garments were of opulently rich fabrics and cut with no regard for either thrift or service. To me, they both appeared foppish and vain, but I hoped that our hosts would merely think their outlandish appearance was part of our foreign customs.

And then, to my personal chagrin, the King summoned forward his male attendant, and introduced him to our assemblage as Prince Rurisk. The woman beside him was, of course, Princess Kettricken, and Verity’s betrothed.

And finally, I realized that those who had been our litter-bearers and greeted us with cakes and wine were not the servants, but the women of the royal household, the grand-mothers, aunts and cousins of Verity's betrothed, all following the Jhaampe tradition of serving their people. I quailed to think I had spoken to them so familiarly and casually, and again mentally cursed Regal that he had not foreseen to send us more word of their customs rather than the long list of clothing and jewellery he wished brought for himself. The elderly woman beside me, then, was the King's own sister. I think she must have sensed my confusion, for she patted my shoulder benignly and smiled at my blushes as I attempted to stutter an apology.

'For, you have done nothing to shame yourself,' she informed me, and then bade me call her not, 'My lady', but Jonqui.

I watched as August presented to the Princess the jewellery Verity had selected to send her. There was a net of finely-woven silver chain set with red gems to drape her hair, and a silver collar set with larger red stones. There was a silver hoop, wrought like a vine, full of jingling keys, that August explained were her household keys for when she joined her husband at Buckkeep, and eight plain silver rings for her hands. She stood still as Regal himself decked her. I thought to myself the silver with red stones would have looked better on a darker woman, but Kettricken's girlish delight was dazzlingly obvious in her smile, and around me people turned and murmured approvingly to one another to see their princess so adorned. Perhaps, I thought, she might enjoy our outlandish colours and accoutrements.

I was grateful for the briefness of King Eyod's speech that followed, for all he added was that he bade us welcome, and invited us to rest, relax and enjoy the city. If we had any needs, we had but to ask of anyone we encountered, and they would attempt to meet them. Tomorrow at noon would begin the three-day ceremony of the Joining, and he desired that we all be well-rested to enjoy it. Then he and his offspring descended, to mingle as freely with one and all as if we were all soldiers on the same watch.

Jonqui had obviously attached herself to me, and there was no gracious way to escape her company, so I resolved to learn as much as I could as quickly as I could about their customs. But one of her first acts was to present me to the Prince and Princess. They were standing with August, who appeared to be explaining how, through him, Verity would witness his ceremony. He was speaking loudly, as if this would somehow make it easier

for them to understand. Jonqui listened for a moment, then apparently decided that August had finished speaking. She spoke as if we were all children brought together for sweetcakes while our parents conversed. 'Rurisk, Kettricken, this young man is most interested in our gardens. Perhaps later we can arrange that he speak with those who tend them.' She seemed to speak especially to Kettricken as she added, 'His name is Fitz-Chivalry.'

August frowned suddenly and amended her introduction. 'Fitz. The bastard.'

Kettricken looked shocked at this soubriquet, but Rurisk's fair face darkened somewhat. Ever so slightly, he turned toward me, putting his shoulder to August. Even so, it was a gesture that needed no explaining in any language. 'Yes,' he said, switching to Chyurda and looking me full in the eye. 'Your father spoke of you to me, the last time I saw him. I was grieved to hear of his death. He did much to prepare the way for the forging of this bond between our folk.'

'You knew my father?' I asked stupidly.

He smiled down at me. 'Of course. He and I were treating together, regarding the use of Bluerock Pass, at Moonseye, north-east of here, when he first learned of you. When our time of talking of passes and trade as envoys were done, we sat down to meat together, and spoke, as men, of what he must next do. I confess, I still do not understand why he felt he must not rule as king. The customs of one folk are not those of another. Still, with this wedding, we shall be closer to making one folk of our peoples. Do you think that would please him?'

Rurisk was giving me his sole attention, and his use of Chyurda effectively excluded August from the conversation. Kettricken appeared fascinated. August's face past Rurisk's shoulder grew very still. Then, with a grim smile of purest hatred for me, he turned aside and rejoined the group around Regal, who was speaking with King Eyod. For whatever reason, I had the complete attention of Rurisk and Kettricken.

'I did not know my father well, but I think he would be pleased to see ...' I began, but at that moment, Princess Kettricken smiled brilliantly at me.

'Of course, how could I have been so stupid? You are the one they call Fitz. Do not you usually travel with Lady Thyme, King Shrewd's poisoner? And are you not training as her apprentice? Regal has spoken of you.'

‘How kind of him,’ I said inanely, and I have no idea what next was said to me, nor what I replied. I could only be thankful I did not reel where I stood. And inside me, for the first time, I acknowledged that what I felt for Regal went beyond distaste. Rurisk frowned a brother’s rebuke at Kettricken, and then turned to deal with a servant urgently asking his instructions about something. Around me people conversed genially amid summer colours and scents, but I felt as if my guts had turned to ice.

I came back to myself when Kettricken plucked at my sleeve. ‘They are this way,’ she informed me. ‘Or are you too weary to enjoy them now? If you wish to retire, it will offend no one. I understand that many of you were too weary even to walk into the city.’

‘But many of us were not, and would truly have enjoyed the chance to walk leisurely through Jhaampe. I have been told of the Blue Fountains, and look forward to seeing them.’ I only faltered slightly as I said this, and hoped it had some bearing on what she had been saying to me. At least it had nothing to do with poison.

‘I will be sure you are guided to them, perhaps this evening. But for now, come this way.’ And with no more ado or formality than that, she led me away from the gathering. August watched after us as we walked away, and I saw Regal turn and say something in an aside to Rowd. King Eyod had withdrawn from the crowd, and was looking benignly down on all from an elevated platform. I wondered why Rowd had not remained with the horses and other servants, but then Kettricken was drawing a painted screen aside from a door-opening and we were leaving the main room of the palace.

We were outside, in fact, walking on a stone pathway under an archway of trees. They were willows, and their living branches had been interlaced and woven overhead to form a green screen from the noon sun. ‘And they shed rain from the path, too. At least, most of it,’ Kettricken added as she noted my interest. ‘This path leads to the shade gardens. They are my favourites. But perhaps you would wish to see the herbery first?’

‘I shall enjoy seeing any and all of the gardens, my lady,’ I replied, and this at least was true. Out here, away from the crowd, I would have more chance to sort my thoughts and ponder what to do from my untenable position. It was occurring to me, belatedly, that Prince Rurisk had shown none of the signs of injury or illness that Regal had reported. I needed to withdraw from the situation and re-evaluate it. There was more, much more, going on than I had been prepared for.

But with an effort I pulled my thoughts away from my own dilemma and focused on what the Princess was telling me. She spoke her words clearly, and I found her conversation much easier to follow away from the background chatter of the great hall. She seemed to know much about the gardens, and gave me to understand that it was not a hobby but knowledge that was expected of her as a princess.

As we walked and talked, I constantly had to remind myself that she was a princess, and betrothed to Verity. I had never encountered a woman like her before. She wore a quiet dignity, quite unlike the awareness of station that I usually encountered in those better born than I. But she did not hesitate to smile, or become enthused, or stoop to dig in the soil around a plant to show me a particular type of root she was describing. She rubbed the root free of dirt, then sliced a bit with her belt knife from the heart of the tuber, to allow me to taste its tang. She showed me certain pungent herbs for seasoning meat, and insisted I taste a leaf of each of three varieties, for though the plants were very similar, the flavours were very different. In a way, she was like Patience, without her eccentricity. In another way, she was like Molly, but without the callousness that Molly had been forced to develop to survive. Like Molly, she spoke directly and frankly to me, as if we were equals. I found myself thinking that Verity might find this woman more to his liking than he expected.

And yet, another part of me worried what Verity would think of his bride. He was not a womanizer, but his taste in women was obvious to anyone who had been much around him. And those whom he smiled upon were usually small and round and dark, often with curly hair and girlish laughter and tiny soft hands. What would he think of this tall, pale woman, who dressed as simply as a servant and declared she took much pleasure in tending her own gardens? As our talk turned, I found she could speak as familiarly about falconry and horse-breeding as any stableman. And when I asked her what she did for pleasure, she told me of her small forge and tools for working metal, and lifted her hair to show me the earrings she had made for herself. The finely-hammered silver petals of a flower clasped a tiny gem like a drop of dew. I had once told Molly that Verity deserved a competent and active wife, but now I wondered if she would much beguile him. He would respect her, I knew. But was respect enough between a king and his queen?

I resolved not to borrow trouble, but to keep my word to Verity instead. I asked her if Regal had told her much of her husband, and she became suddenly quiet. I sensed her drawing on her strength as she replied that she knew he was a King-in-Waiting with many problems facing his realm. Regal had warned her that Verity was much older than she was, a plain and simple man, who might not take much interest in her. Regal had promised to be ever by her, helping her to adapt, and doing his best to see that the court was not a lonely place for her. So she was prepared ...

‘How old are you?’ I asked impulsively.

‘Eighteen,’ she replied, and then smiled to see the surprise on my face. ‘Because I am tall, your people seem to think I am much older than that,’ she confided to me.

‘Well, you are younger than Verity, then. But not so much more than between many wives and husbands. He will be thirty-three this spring.’

‘I had thought him much older than that,’ she said wonderingly. ‘Regal explained they share but a father.’

‘It is true that Chivalry and Verity were both sons of King Shrewd’s first queen, but there is not that great a span between them. And Verity, when he is not burdened with the problems of state, is not so dour and severe as you might imagine him. He is a man who knows how to laugh.’

She cast me a sideways glance, as if to see if I were trying to put a better face on Verity than he deserved.

‘It is true, princess. I have seen him laugh like a child at the puppet shows at Springfest. And when all join in for luck at the fruitpress to make autumn wine, he does not hold back. But his greatest pleasure has always been the hunt. He has a wolfhound, Leon, which he holds dearer than some men hold their sons.’

‘But,’ Ketricken ventured to interrupt. ‘Surely this is as he was, once. For Regal speaks of him as a man older than his years, bent down by the cares of his people.’

‘Bent down as a tree burdened by snow, that springs erect again with the coming of spring. His last words to me before I left, princess, were to desire me to speak well of him to you.’

She cast her eyes down quickly, as if to hide from me the sudden lift of her heart. ‘I see a different man, when you speak of him.’ She paused, and then closed her mouth firmly, forbidding herself the request I heard anyway.

‘I have always seen him as a kind man. As kind as one lifted to such a responsibility can be. He takes his duties very seriously, and will not spare himself from what his folk need of him. This it is that has made him unable to come here, to you. He engages in a battle with the Red Ship Raiders, one he couldn’t fight from here. He gives up the interests of a man to fulfil his duty as a prince. Not through a coldness of spirit, or a lack of life in himself.’

She gave me a sideways glance, fighting the smile from her face as if what I told her were sweetest flattery such as a princess must not believe.

‘He is taller than I am, but only by a bit. His hair is very dark, as is his beard, when he lets it grow. His eyes are blacker still, yet when he is enthused, they shine. It is true there is a scattering of grey in his hair now that you would not have found a year ago. True, also, that his work has kept him from the sun and the wind, so his shoulders no longer tear the seams of his shirts. But my uncle is still very much a man, and I believe that when the danger of the Red Ships has been driven from our shores, he will ride and shout and hunt with his hound once more.’

‘You give me heart,’ she muttered, and then straightened herself as if she had admitted some weakness. Looking at me gravely, she asked, ‘Why does Regal not speak of his brother so? I thought I went to an old man, shaking of hand, too burdened by his duties to see a wife as anything other than another duty.’

‘Perhaps he ...’ I began, and could think of no courtier’s way to say that Regal was frequently deceptive if it gained him his goal. For the life of me, I had no idea what goal might be served by making Kettricken so dread Verity.

‘Perhaps he has ... been ... unflattering about other things as well,’ Kettricken suddenly supposed aloud. Something seemed to alarm her. She took a breath, and became suddenly franker. ‘There was an evening, in my chamber, when we had dined, and Regal had, perhaps, drunk a bit too well. He told tales of you then, saying you had once been a sullen, spoiled child, too ambitious for your birth, but that since the King had made you his prisoner, you seemed content with your lot. He said it seemed to suit you, for even as a boy, you had enjoyed eavesdropping and skulking about and other secretive pursuits. Now, I do not tell you this to make a mischief, but only to let you know what I first believed of you. The next day Regal begged me to believe it had been the fancies of the wine rather than the facts he had

shared with me. But one thing he had said that night was too icy a fear for me entirely to lay aside. He said that if the King did send you or Lady Thyme, it would be to poison my brother, so that I might be the sole heir to the Mountain Kingdom.'

'You are speaking too quickly,' I chided her gently, and hoped my smile did not look as dizzy and sickly as I suddenly felt. 'I did not understand all you said.' Desperately I strove to think of what to say. Even as accomplished a liar as I found such a direct confrontation uncomfortable.

'I am sorry. But you speak our language so well, almost like a native. Almost as if you were recalling it, rather than learning it new. I will go more slowly. Some weeks, no, it was over a month ago, Regal came to my chambers. He had asked if he might dine alone with me, that we might get to know one another better, and ...'

'Kettricken!' It was Rurisk, calling down the path as he came seeking us. 'Regal is asking that you would come and meet the lords and ladies who have come so far to see your marriage.'

Jonqui was at his shoulder, hurrying after him, and as the second and unmistakable wave of dizziness hit me, I thought she looked too knowing. And, I asked myself, what step would Chade have taken if someone had sent a poisoner to Shrewd's court, to eliminate Verity? All too obvious.

'Perhaps,' Jonqui suddenly suggested, 'FitzChivalry would like to be shown the Blue Fountains now. Litress has said she would gladly take him.'

'Maybe later this afternoon,' I managed to say. 'I find myself suddenly wearied. I think I shall seek my chamber.'

None of them looked surprised. 'Shall I have some wine sent to you?' Jonqui asked graciously. 'Or perhaps some soup? The others will be summoned to a meal soon. But, if you are tired, it is no trouble to bring food to you.'

Years of training came to the fore. I kept my posture straight, despite the sudden fire in my belly. 'That would be most kind of you,' I managed to say. The brief bow I forced myself to make was sophisticated torture. 'I am sure I will rejoin you soon.'

And I excused myself, and I did not run, nor curl in a ball and whimper as I wished to. I walked, with obvious enjoyment of the plantings, back through the garden to the door of the great hall. And the three of them watched me go, and spoke softly together of what we all knew.

I had but one trick left to me, and small hope it would be effective. Back in my room, I dug out the seapurge the Fool had given me. How long, I wondered, had it been since I had eaten the honey cakes? For that was the venue I would have chosen. Fatalistically, I decided I would trust the ewer of water in my room. A tiny part of me said that was foolish, but as wave after wave of giddiness washed over me, I felt incapable of any further thought. With shaking hands I crumbled the seapurge into water. The dried herb absorbed the water and became a green sticky wad, which I managed to choke down. I knew it would empty my stomach and bowels. The only question was, would it be swift enough, or was the Chyurda poison too widespread in me?

I spent a miserable evening that I will not dwell on. No one came to my room with soup or wine. In my moments of lucidity, I decided they would not come until they were sure their poison had had its effect. Morning, I decided. They would send a servant to waken me, and he would discover my death. I had until morning.

It was past midnight when I was able to stand. I left my room as silently as my shaking legs would carry me and went out into the garden. I found a cistern of water there, and drank until I thought I would burst. I ventured further into the garden, walking slowly and carefully, for I ached as if I had been beaten and my head pounded painfully with each step I took. But eventually I stumbled into an area of fruit trees gracefully trained along a wall, and as I had hoped, they were heavy with the harvest. I helped myself, filling my jerkin with a supply. These I would conceal in my room, to give me food I could safely consume. Sometime tomorrow, I would make an excuse to go down and check on Sooty. My saddlebags still held some dried meat and hard bread. I hoped it would be enough to get me through this visit.

And as I made my way back to my room, I wondered what else they would try when they found the poison hadn't worked.

TWENTY-ONE

Princes

Of the Chyurdan herb Carryme, their saying is, 'A leaf to sleep, two to dull pain, three for a merciful grave.'

Towards dawn, I finally dozed, only to be awakened by Prince Rurisk flinging aside the screen that served as door to my chamber. He burst into the room, flourishing a sloshing decanter. The looseness of the garment that fluttered about him declared it a nightrobe. I rolled quickly from the bed and managed to stand, with the bedstead between us. I was cornered, sick and weaponless, save for my belt knife.

'You live still!' he exclaimed in amazement, then advanced on me with his flask. 'Quick, drink this.'

'I would sooner not,' I told him, retreating as he advanced.

Seeing my wariness, he paused. 'You have taken poison,' he told me carefully. 'It is fully a miracle of Chranzuli that you still live. This is a purge, that will flush it from your body. Take it, and you may still live.'

'There is nothing left in my body to purge,' I told him bluntly, and then caught at a table as I began to shake. 'I knew I had been poisoned when I left you last night.'

'And you said nothing to me?' He was incredulous. He turned back to the door, where Kettricken now peeked in timidly. Her hair was in tousled braids, and her eyes red with weeping. 'It is averted, small thanks to you,' her brother told her severely. 'Go and make him a salty broth from some of last night's meat. And bring a sweet pastry as well. Enough for both of us. And tea. Go on now, you foolish girl!'

Kettricken scampered off like a child. Rurisk gestured at the bed. 'Come. Trust me enough to sit down. Before you upset the table with your shaking. I am speaking plainly to you. You and I, FitzChivalry, we have no time for this distrust. There is much we must speak of, you and I.'

I sat down, not out of trust so much as for fear I would otherwise collapse. Without formality, Rurisk sat down on the end of the bed. 'My sister,' he said gravely, 'is impetuous. Poor Verity will find her more child than woman, I fear, and much of that is my fault; I have spoiled her so. But, although that explains her fondness for me, it does not excuse her poisoning of a guest. Especially not on the eve of her wedding to his uncle.'

'I think I would have felt much the same about it at any time,' I said, and Rurisk threw back his head and laughed.

'There is much of your father in you. So would he have said, I am sure. But I must explain. She came to me days ago, to tell me that you were coming to make an end of me. I told her then that it was not her concern, and I would take care of it. But, as I have said, she is impulsive. Yesterday she saw an opportunity and took it. With no regard as to how the death of a guest might affect a carefully-negotiated wedding. She thought only to do away with you before vows bound her to the Six Duchies and made such an act unthinkable. I should have suspected it when she took you so quickly to the gardens.'

'The herbs she gave me?'

He nodded, and I felt a fool. 'But after you had eaten them, you spoke so fair to her that she came to doubt you could be what it was said you were. So she asked you, but you turned the question aside by pretending to not understand. So again she doubted you. Still, it should not have taken her all night to come to me with her tale of what she had done, and her doubts of the wisdom of it. For that, I apologize.'

'Too late to apologize. I have already forgiven you,' I heard myself say.

Rurisk looked at me. 'That was your father's saying, as well.' He glanced at the door a moment before Kettricken came through it. Once she was within the room, he slid the screen shut and took the tray from her. 'Sit down,' he told her sternly. 'And see another way of dealing with an assassin.' He lifted a heavy mug from the tray and drank deeply of it before passing it to me. He shot Kettricken another glance. 'And if that was poisoned, you have just killed your brother as well.' He broke an apple pastry into three portions. 'Select one,' he told me, and then took that one for himself, and gave the next I chose to Kettricken. 'So you may see there is nothing amiss with this food.'

'I see small reason why you would give me poison this morning after coming to tell me I was poisoned last night,' I admitted. Still, my palate was

alive, questing for the slightest mistaste. But there was none. It was rich, flaky pastry stuffed with ripe apples and spices. Even if I had not been so empty, it would have been delicious.

‘Exactly,’ Rurisk said in a sticky voice, and then swallowed. ‘And, if you were an assassin,’ here he shot a warning to silence Kettricken, ‘you would find yourself in the same position. Some murders are profitable only if no one else knows they were murders. Such would be my death. Were you to slay me now, indeed, were I to die within the next six months, Kettricken and Jonqui both would be shrieking to the stars that I had been assassinated. Scarcely a good foundation for an alliance of peoples. Do you agree?’

I managed a nod. The warm broth in the mug had stilled most of my trembling, and the sweet pastry tasted fit for a god.

‘So. We agree that, were you an assassin, there would now be no profit to carrying out my murder. Indeed, there would be a very great loss to you if I died. For my father does not look on this alliance with the favour that I do. Oh, he knows it is wise, for now. But I see it as more than wise. I see it as necessary.

‘Tell this to King Shrewd. Our population grows, but there is a limit to our arable soil. Wild game will only feed so many. Comes a time when a country must open itself to trade, especially so rocky and mountainous a country as mine. You have heard, perhaps, that the Jhaampe way is that the ruler is the servant of his people? Well, I serve them in this wise. I marry my beloved younger sister away, in the hopes of winning grain and trade routes and lowland goods for my people, and grazing rights in the cold part of the year when our pastures are under snow. For this, too, I am willing to give you timbers, the great straight timbers that Verity will need to build his warships. Our mountains grow white oak such as you have never seen. This is a thing my father would refuse. He has the old feelings about the cutting of live trees. And like Regal, he sees your coast as a liability, your ocean as a great barrier. But I see it as your father did: a wide road that leads in all directions, and your coast as our access to it. And I see no offence in using trees uprooted by the annual floods and windstorms.’

I held my breath a moment. This was a momentous concession. I found myself nodding to his words.

‘So, will you carry my words to King Shrewd, and say to him that it is better to have a live friend in me?’

I could think of no reason not to agree.

‘Aren’t you going to ask him if he intended to poison you?’ Kettricken demanded.

‘If he answered yes, you would never trust him. If he answered no, you would probably not believe him, and think him a liar as well as an assassin. Besides, is not one admitted poisoner in this room enough?’

Kettricken ducked her head and a flush suffused her cheeks.

‘So come,’ Rurisk told her, and held out a conciliatory hand. ‘Our guest must get what little rest he can before the day’s festivities. And we must back to our chambers before the whole household wonders why we are dashing about in our night-clothes.’

And they left me, to lie back on my bed and wonder. What manner of folk were these that I dealt with? Could I believe their open honesty, or was it a magnificent sham for Eda knew what ends? I wished Chade were here. More and more, I felt nothing was as it seemed. I dared not doze, for I knew if I fell asleep, nothing would wake me before nightfall. Servants came soon with pitchers of warm water and cool, and fruit and cheese on a platter. Reminding myself that these ‘servants’ might be better born than myself, I treated them all with great courtesy, and later wondered if that might not be the secret of the harmonious household; that all, servants or royalty, be treated with the same courtesy.

It was a day of great festivity. The entries to the palace had been thrown wide open, and folk had come from every vale and dell of the Mountain Kingdom to witness this pledging. Poets and minstrels performed, and more gifts were exchanged, including my formal presentation of the herbals and herb starts. The breeding stock that had been sent from the Six Duchies was displayed, and then gifted forth again to those most in need of it, or most likely to be successful with it. A single ram or bull, with a female or two, might be sent out as a common gift to a whole village. All of the gifts, whether fowl or beast or grain or metal, were brought within the palace, so that all might admire them.

Burrich was there – the first time I had glimpsed him in days. He must have been up before dawn, to have his charges so glossy. Every hoof was freshly oiled, every mane and tail plaited with bright ribbons and bells. The mare to be given to Kettricken was saddled and bridled with harness of finest leather, and her mane and tail hung with so many tiny silver bells that each swish of her tail was a chorus of tinkling. Our horses were different creatures from the small and shaggy stock of the mountain folk, and

attracted quite a crowd. Burrich looked weary, yet proud, and his horses stood calmly amidst the clamour. Kettricken spent a deal of time admiring her mare, and I saw her courtesy and deference thawing Burrich's reserve. When I drew closer, I was surprised to hear him speaking in hesitant but clear Chyurda.

But a greater surprise was in store for me that afternoon. Food had been set out on long tables, and all, palace residents and visitors, dined freely. Much had come from the kitchens of the palace, but much more from the mountain folk themselves. They came forward, without hesitation, to set out wheels of cheese, loaves of dark bread, dried or smoked meats, or pickles and bowls of fruit. It would have been tempting, had not my stomach still been so touchy. But the way the food was given was what impressed me. It was unquestioning, this giving and taking between the royalty and their subjects. I noted, too, that there were no sentries or guards of any kind upon the doors. And all mingled and talked as they ate.

At noon precisely a silence fell over the crowd. The Princess Kettricken alone ascended the central dais. In simple language, she announced to all that she now belonged to the Six Duchies and hoped to serve that land well. She thanked her land for all it had ever done for her, for the food it had grown to feed her, the waters of its snows and rivers, the air of the mountain breezes. She reminded all that she did not change her allegiance due to any lack of love for her land, but rather in the hopes of it benefiting both the lands. All kept silent as she spoke, and as she descended from the dais. And then the merriment resumed.

Rurisk came, seeking me out, to see how I did. I assured him I was fully recovered, though in truth I longed to be sleeping. The clothing Mistress Hasty had decreed for me was of the latest court fashion and featured highly inconvenient sleeves and tassles that fell into anything I tried to do or eat, and an uncomfortably snug waist. I longed to be out of the press of people, where I could loosen some laces and get rid of the collar, but knew that if I left now, Chade would frown when I reported to him, and demand that I somehow know all that had happened while I was absent. Rurisk, I think, sensed my need for a bit of quiet, for he suddenly proposed a stroll out to his kennels. 'Let me show you what the addition of some Six Duchies blood a few years back did for my dogs,' he offered.

We left the palace, and walked down a short way to a long, low wooden building. The clean air cleared my head and lifted my spirits. Inside, he

showed me a pen where a bitch presided over a litter of red pups. They were healthy little creatures, glossy of coat, nipping and tumbling about in the straw. They came readily, totally unafraid of us. 'These are of Buckkeep lineage, and will hold to a scent even in a downpour,' he told me proudly. He showed me other breeds as well, including a tiny dog with wiry legs, which, he claimed, would clamber right up a tree after game.

We emerged from his kennels and out into the sun, where an older dog slept lazily on a pile of straw. 'Sleep on, old man. You've fathered enough pups that you never need hunt again, except you love it so,' Rurisk told him genially. At his master's voice, the old hound heaved himself to his feet and came to lean affectionately on Rurisk. He looked up at me, and it was Nosy.

I stared at him, and his copper ore eyes returned the look. I quested softly toward him, and for a moment received only puzzlement. And then a flood of warmth, of affection shared and remembered. There was no doubt that he was Rurisk's hound now; the intensity of the bond that had been between us was gone. But he offered me back great fondness and warm memories of when we were puppies together. I went down on one knee, and stroked the red coat gone all bristly with the years, and looked into the eyes that were beginning to show the clouding of age. For an instant, with the physical touch, the bond was as it had been. I knew he was enjoying dozing in the sun, but could be persuaded to go hunting with very little trouble. Especially if Rurisk came along. I patted his back, and drew away from him. I looked up to find Rurisk regarding me strangely. 'I knew him when he was just a puppy,' I told him.

'Burrich sent him to me, in care of a wandering scribe, many years ago,' Rurisk told me. 'He has brought me great pleasure, in company and in hunting.'

'You have done well by him,' I said. We left and strolled back to the palace, but as soon as Rurisk left my side, I went straight to Burrich. As I came up, he had just received permission to take the horses outside and into the open air, for even the calmest beast will grow restive in close quarters with many strangers. I could see his dilemma; while he was taking horses out, he would be leaving the others untended. He looked up warily as I approached.

'With your leave, I will help you move them,' I offered.

Burrich's face remained impassive and polite. But before he could open his mouth to speak, a voice behind me said, 'I am here to do that, master.'

You might soil your sleeves, or overly weary yourself working with beasts.’ I turned slowly, baffled by the venom in Cob’s voice. I glanced from him to Burrich, but Burrich did not speak. I looked squarely at Burrich.

‘Then I will walk alongside you, if I may, for I have something important we must speak of.’ My words were deliberately formal. For a moment longer Burrich gazed at me. ‘Bring the Princess’s mare,’ he said at last, ‘and that bay filly. I will take the greys. Cob, mind the rest for me. I shan’t be long.’

And so I took the mare’s head and the filly’s lead-rope, and followed Burrich as he edged the horses through the crowd and out of doors. ‘There is a paddock, this way,’ he said, and no more. We walked for a bit in silence. The crowd thinned rapidly once we were away from the palace. The horses’ hooves thudded pleasantly against the earth. We came to the paddock, which fronted on a small barn with a tack room. For a moment or two, it almost seemed normal to be working alongside Burrich again. I unsaddled the mare, and wiped the nervous sweat from her while he shook out grain into a grain box for them. He came to stand beside me as I finished with the mare. ‘She’s a beauty,’ I said admiringly. ‘From Lord Ranger’s stock?’

‘Yes.’ His word cut off the conversation. ‘You wished to speak to me.’

I took a great breath, then said it simply. ‘I just saw Nosy. He’s fine. Older now, but he’s had a happy life. All these years, Burrich, I always believed you killed him that night. Dashed out his brains, cut his throat, strangled him – I imagined it a dozen different ways, a thousand times. All those years.’

He looked at me incredulously. ‘You believed I would kill a dog for something you did?’

‘I only knew he was gone. I could imagine nothing else. I thought it was my punishment.’

For a long time he was still. When he looked back up at me, I could see his torment. ‘How you must have hated me.’

‘And feared you.’

‘All those years? And you never learned better of me, never thought to yourself, “He would not do such a thing”?’

I shook my head slowly.

‘Oh, Fitz,’ he said sadly. One of the horses came to nudge at him, and he petted it absently. ‘I thought you were stubborn and sullen. You thought

you had been grievously wronged. No wonder we have been so much at odds.'

'It can be undone,' I offered quietly. 'I have missed you, you know. Missed you sorely, despite all our differences.'

I watched him thinking, and for a moment or two, I thought he would smile and clap me on the shoulder and tell me to go fetch the other horses. But his face grew still, and then stern. 'But for all that, it did not stop you. You believed I had it in me to kill any animal you used the Wit on. But it did not stop you from doing it.'

'I don't see it the way you do,' I began, but he shook his head.

'We are better parted, boy. Better for both of us. There can be no misunderstandings if there are no understandings at all. I can never approve, or ignore, what you do. Never. Come to me when you can say you will do it no more. I will take your word on it, for you've never broken your word to me. But until then, we are better parted.'

He left me standing by the paddock and went back for his other horses. I stood a long time, feeling sick and weary, and not just from Kettricken's poison. But I went back into the palace, walked about, spoke to people and ate, and even endured with silence the mocking, triumphant smiles Cob gave me.

The day seemed longer than any two days in my previous experience. Had not it been for my burning and gurgling stomach, I would have found it exciting and absorbing. The afternoon and early evening were given over to congenial contests of archery, wrestling and foot-races. Young and old, male and female, joined in these contests, and there seemed to be some mountain tradition that whoever won on such an auspicious occasion would enjoy luck for a full turn of a year. Then there was more food, and singing, and dancing of dancers, and an entertainment, like a puppet show, but done all with shadows on a screen of silk. By the time folk began to retire, I was more than ready for my bed. It was a relief to close my chamber screen and be alone. I was just pulling off my annoying shirt, and reflecting on what a strange day it had been when there was a tap at my door.

Before I could speak, Sevrens slid open the screen and slipped in. 'Regal commands your presence,' he told me.

'Now?' I asked owlshly.

'Why else would he send me now?' Sevrens demanded.

Wearily I pulled my shirt back on and followed him out of the room. Regal's chambers were in an upper level of the palace, not really a second floor, but more like a wooden terrace built to one side of the great hall. The walls were screens, and there was a sort of balcony where he might stand and look down before descending. These rooms were much more richly decorated. Some of the work was obviously Chyurda, bright birds brushed onto silk panels and figurines carved of amber. But many of the tapestries and statues and hangings looked to me like things Regal had acquired for his own pleasure and comfort. I stood waiting in his antechamber while he finished his bath. By the time he ambled out in his nightshirt, it was all I could do to keep my eyes open.

'Well?' he demanded of me.

I looked at him blankly. 'You summoned me,' I reminded him.

'Yes. I did. I should like to know why it was necessary. I thought you had received some sort of training in this sort of thing. How long were you going to wait before you reported to me?'

I could think of nothing to say. I had never remotely considered reporting to Regal. To Shrewd or Chade, definitely, and to Verity. But to Regal?

'Need I remind you of your duty? Report.'

I hastily gathered my wits. 'Would you hear my observations on the Chyurda as a people? Or information on the herbs they grow? Or ...'

'I want to know what you are doing about your ... assignment. Have you acted yet? Have you made a plan? When can we expect results, and of what kind? I scarcely want the Prince dropping dead at my feet, and me unprepared for it.'

I could scarcely credit what I was hearing. Never had Shrewd spoken so bluntly or so openly of my work. Even when our privacy was assured, he circled and danced and left me to draw my own conclusions. I had seen Sevrens go into his other chamber, but had no idea where the man was now or how sound carried in this chamber. And Regal was speaking as if we were discussing shoeing a horse.

'Are you being insolent, or stupid?' Regal demanded.

'Neither,' I rejoined as politely as I was able. 'I am being cautious. My prince.' I added the last in the hopes of putting the conversation on a more formal level.

‘You are being foolishly cautious. I trust my valet, and there is no one else here. So report. My bastard assassin.’ He said the last words as if he thought them cleverly sarcastic.

I took a breath and reminded myself I was a King’s man. And in this time and place, this was as close to a king as I was going to get. I chose my phrases carefully. ‘Yesterday, in the garden, Princess Kettricken told me you had told her I was a poisoner and that her brother Rurisk was my target.’

‘A lie,’ Regal said decisively. ‘I told her nothing of the kind. Either you had clumsily betrayed yourself, or she was merely fishing for information. I hope you have not spoiled all by revealing yourself to her.’

I could have lied much better than he did. I let his remarks slide by, and went on. I gave him a full report, of my poisoning, and of Rurisk and Kettricken’s early-morning visit. I repeated our conversation verbatim. And when I was finished, Regal spent a number of minutes looking at his nails before he spoke to me. ‘And have you decided on a method and time yet?’

I tried not to show my surprise. ‘Under the circumstances, I thought it better to abandon the assignment.’

‘No nerve,’ Regal observed with disgust. ‘I asked Father to send that old whore Lady Thyme. She’d have had him in his grave by now.’

‘Sir?’ I asked questioningly. That he referred to Chade as Lady Thyme made me nearly certain that he knew nothing at all.

‘Sir?’ Regal mimicked back at me, and for the first time I realized the man was drunk. Physically, he carried it well. He did not stink of it, but it brought all his pettiness to the surface. He sighed heavily, as if too disgusted for words, then flung himself down on a couch draped with blankets and cushions. ‘Nothing has changed,’ he informed me. ‘You’ve been given your task. Do it. If you are clever, you can make it appear an accident. Having been so naively open with Kettricken and Rurisk, neither will expect it. But I want it done. Before tomorrow evening.’

‘Before the wedding?’ I asked incredulously. ‘Don’t you think the death of the bride’s brother might lead her to cancel it?’

‘It would be no more than temporary if she did. I have her well in hand, boy. She is easily dazzled. That end of this thing is my concern. Yours is getting rid of her brother. Now. How will you do it?’

‘I’ve no idea.’ That seemed a better answer than saying I had no intention. I would return to Buckkeep and report back to Shrewd and Chade. If they said I had chosen wrongly, then they might do with me as they

wished. But I remembered Regal's own voice, from so long ago, quoting Shrewd. 'Don't do what you can't undo, until you've considered what you can't do once you've done it.'

'When will you know?' he demanded sarcastically.

'I don't know,' I hedged. 'These things cannot be done recklessly or sloppily. I need to study the man and his habits, explore his chambers, and learn the habits of his servants. I must find a way to ...'

'The wedding is two days hence,' Regal interrupted. The focus of his eyes softened. 'I already know all the things you say you must discover. Easiest, then, for me to plan it for you. Come to me tomorrow night, and I will give you your orders. Mind this well, bastard. I do not want you to act before you have informed me. I would find any surprise unpleasant. You would find it deadly.' He lifted his eyes to mine but I kept my face a careful blank.

'You are dismissed,' he told me regally. 'Report to me here, tomorrow night, at the same time. Do not make me send Sevrens to fetch you. He has more important tasks. And do not think my father will not hear of your laxity. He will. He will regret not sending Bitch Thyme to do this little deed.' He leaned back heavily and yawned, and I caught a whiff of wine, and a subtle smoke. I wondered if he were learning his mother's habits.

I returned to my chambers, intending to ponder carefully all my options and formulate a plan. But so weary was I and half-sick still, that I was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

TWENTY-TWO

Dilemmas

In the dream, the Fool stood by my bed. He looked down at me and shook his head. 'Why cannot I speak clearly? Because you make it all a muddle. I see a crossroads through the fog, and who always stands within it? You. Do you think I keep you alive because I am so entranced with you? No. It is because you create so many possibilities. While you live, you give us more choices. The more choices, the more chances to steer for calmer water. So it is not for your benefit, but for the Six Duchies that I preserve your life. And your duty is the same. To live, so that you may continue to present possibilities.'

I awoke in precisely the same quandary I had gone to sleep in. I had no idea of what I was going to do. I lay in my bed, listening to the random sounds of the palace awakening. I needed to talk to Chade. That was not possible. So I lightly closed my eyes and tried to think as he had taught me. 'What do you know?' he would have asked me, and 'What do you suspect?' So.

Regal had lied to King Shrewd about Rurisk's health, and his attitude toward the Six Duchies. Or, possibly, King Shrewd had lied to me about what Regal had said. Or Rurisk had lied about his inclinations toward us. I pondered a moment, and decided to follow my first assumption. Shrewd had never lied to me, that I knew, and Rurisk could have simply let me die instead of rushing to my room. So.

So Regal wanted Rurisk dead. Or did he? If he wanted Rurisk dead, why did he betray me to Kettricken? Unless she had lied about that. I considered. Not likely. She might wonder if Shrewd would send an assassin, but why would she immediately decide to accuse me? No. She had recognized my name. And known of Lady Thyme. So.

And Regal had said, twice last night, that he had asked his father to send Lady Thyme. But he had likewise betrayed her name to Kettricken.

Who did Regal really want dead? Prince Rurisk? Or Lady Thyme, or I, after an assassination attempt was discovered? And how did any of it benefit him, and this marriage he had engineered? And why was he insisting I kill Rurisk, when all the political advantages were to his living?

I needed to talk to Chade. I couldn't. I had to somehow decide this, myself. Unless.

Servants again brought water and fruit. I arose and dressed in my annoying clothes, and ate, and left my chambers. This day was much the same as yesterday. The holiday atmosphere was beginning to wear on me. I attempted to employ my time to advantage, enlarging my knowledge of the palace, its routines and layout. I found Eyod's, Kettricken's, and Rurisk's chambers. I also carefully studied the staircase and support structures to Regal's. I discovered that Cob slept in the stables, as did Burrich. I expected that of Burrich; he would not surrender the care of Buckkeep horses until he left Jhaampe; but why was Cob sleeping there? To impress Burrich, or to watch him? Sevren and Rowd both slept in the antechamber of Regal's apartments, despite a plenitude of rooms in the palace. I tried to study the distribution and schedules of the guards and sentries, but couldn't find any. And all the while I watched for August. It took me the better part of the morning before I could find him in quiet circumstance. 'I need to talk to you. Privately,' I told him.

He looked annoyed, and glanced about to see if anyone were watching us. 'Not here, Fitz. Maybe when we get back to Buckkeep. I've official duties, and ...'

I had been prepared for that. I opened my hand, to show him the pin the King had given me so many years ago. 'Do you see this? I had it from King Shrewd, a long time ago. And with it, his promise that if I ever needed to speak to him, I need only show it and I would be admitted to his chambers.'

'How touching,' August observed cynically. 'And had you some reason for telling me this story? To impress me with your importance, perhaps?'

'I need to speak to the King. Now.'

'He isn't here,' August pointed out. He turned to walk away.

I took hold of his arm, turned him back to me.

'You can Skill to him.'

He shook me off angrily, and glanced about us again. 'I most certainly cannot. And would not, if I could. Do you think every man who can Skill is allowed to interrupt the King?'

‘I have shown you the pin. I promise you, he would not regard this as an interruption.’

‘I cannot.’

‘Verity, then.’

‘I do not Skill to Verity until he Skills to me first. Bastard, you don’t understand. You took the training and you failed at it, and you really have not the slightest comprehension of what the Skill is about. It is not like hallooming to a friend across a valley. It is a serious thing, not to be used except for serious purposes.’ Again he turned away from me.

‘Turn back, August, or regret it long.’ I put every ounce of menace I could into my voice. It was an empty threat; I had no real way to make him regret it, other than threatening to tattle to the King. ‘Shrewd will not be pleased that you ignored his token.’

August turned slowly back. He glared at me. ‘Well. I will do this thing, then, but you must promise to take all blame for it.’

‘I will. Will you come to my chambers, then, and Skill for me now?’

‘Is there no other place?’

‘Your chambers?’ I suggested.

‘No, that is even worse. Do not take it amiss, bastard, but I do not wish to seem to associate with you.’

‘Take it not amiss, lordling, that I feel the same about you.’

In the end, on a stone bench, in a quiet part of Kettricken’s herb-garden, August sat down and closed his eyes. ‘What message am I to Skill to Shrewd?’

I considered. This would be a game of riddles, if I were to keep August unaware of my true problem. ‘Tell him Prince Rurisk’s health is excellent, and we may all hope to see him live to old age. Regal still wishes to give him the gift, but I do not think it appropriate.’

August opened his eyes. ‘The Skill is an important ...’

‘I know. Tell him.’

So August sat and took several breaths, and closed his eyes. After a few moments, he opened his eyes. ‘He says to listen to Regal.’

‘That’s all?’

‘He was busy. And very irritated. Now leave me alone. I fear you’ve made me a fool before my king.’

There were a dozen witty replies I could have made to that. But I let him walk away. I wondered if he had Skilled to King Shrewd at all. I sat

down on the stone bench and reflected that I had gained nothing at all, and wasted much time. The temptation came and I tried it. I closed my own eyes, breathed, focused, opened myself. *Shrewd, my king.*

Nothing. No reply. I doubt that I Skilled at all. I rose and went back into the palace.

Again that day, at noon, Kettricken ascended the dais alone. Her words today were just as simple, as she announced that she was binding herself to the people of the Six Duchies. From this moment hence, she was their Sacrifice, in all things, for any reason that they commanded of her. And then she thanked her own people, blood of her blood, who had raised her and treated her well, and reminded them she did not change her allegiance out of any lack of affection for them, but only in the hopes that it would benefit both peoples. Again the silence held as she descended the steps. Tomorrow would be her day to pledge herself to Verity as a woman to a man. From what I understood, Regal and August would stand beside her tomorrow in Verity's stead, and August would Skill that Verity might see his bride make her pledge to him.

The day dragged for me. Jonqui came and took me to visit the Blue Fountains. I did my best to be interested and pleasant. We returned to the palace for more minstrels and feasting and that evening's displays of arts by the mountain people. Jugglers and acrobats performed, and dogs did tricks and swordsmen displayed their prowess in staged bouts. Bluesmoke was very much in evidence, and many were indulging, swinging their tiny censers before them as they milled about and talked to one another. I understood that for them, it was like a carris seed cake, a holiday indulgement, but I avoided the trailing smoke of the burn-pots. I had to keep a clear head. Chade had supplied me with a potion to clear the head of wine fumes, but I had and knew of none for smoke. And I was unused to smoke. I found a clearer corner and stood apparently enraptured by a minstrel's song, but watching Regal over his shoulder.

Regal sat at a table, flanked by two brass burners. A very reserved August sat a slight way away from him. From time to time they spoke, August seriously, the prince dismissively. I was not close enough to hear the words, but I saw my name and Skill from August's lips. I saw Kettricken approach Regal, and noted that she avoided being in the direct draught of the smoke. Regal spoke long to her, smiling and languid, and reached once to tap her hand and the silver rings she wore. He seemed to be one of those that

the smoke made talkative and boastful. She seemed to teeter like a bird on a branch, now drawing closer to him and smiling, now drawing back and becoming more formal. Then Rurisk came, to stand behind his sister. He spoke to Regal briefly, and then took Kettricken's arm and drew her away. Sevrens appeared and replenished Regal's burners. Regal gave a foolish smile of thanks and said something, indicating the whole hall with a wave of his hand. Sevrens laughed, and left. Shortly afterward, Cob and Rowd arrived to speak to Regal. August rose and stalked indignantly off. Regal glared, and sent Cob to fetch him back. August came, but not graciously. Regal rebuked, and August glowered, then lowered his eyes and conceded. I wished desperately that I were close enough to hear what was said. Something, I felt, was definitely afoot. It might be nothing to do with me and my task. But somehow I doubted it.

I went over my meagre store of facts, feeling sure I was missing the significance of something. But I also wondered if I were not deceiving myself. Perhaps I was over-reacting to everything. Perhaps the safest course was simply to do as Regal told me and let him accept the responsibility. Perhaps I should save time and cut my own throat.

I could, of course, go directly to Rurisk, tell him that, despite my best efforts, Regal still wanted him dead, and beg asylum of him. After all, who would not find attractive a trained assassin who had already turned on one master?

I could tell Regal I was going to kill Rurisk and then simply not do it. I thought carefully about that.

I could tell Regal I was going to kill Rurisk, and then kill Regal instead. The smoke, I told myself. Only the smoke made that sound so wise.

I could go to Burrich and tell him I was really an assassin, and ask his advice about my situation.

I could take the Princess's mare and ride off into the mountains.

'So, are you enjoying yourself?' Jonqui asked as she came up and took my arm.

I realized I was staring at a man juggling knives and torches. 'I shall long remember this experience,' I told her. And then suggested a stroll through the cool of the gardens.

Late that night, I reported to Regal's chamber. Rowd admitted me this time, smiling pleasantly. 'Good evening,' he greeted me, and I walked in as if into a wolverine's den. But the air within the chamber was blue with

smoke, and this seemed the source of Rowd's cheerfulness. Regal kept me waiting again, and though I tucked my chin to my chest and breathed shallowly, I knew the smoke was affecting me. Control, I reminded myself, and tried not to feel the giddiness. I shifted in my seat several times, and finally resorted to covering my mouth and nose openly with a hand. It had small effect on screening the smoke.

I looked up as the screen to the inner chamber slid aside, but it was only Sevrens. He glanced at Rowd, then came to sit beside me. After a moment of his silence, I asked, 'Will Regal see me now?'

Sevrens shook his head. 'He is with a ... companion. But he has trusted me with all you need to know.' He opened his hand on the bench between us, to show me a tiny white pouch. 'He has obtained this for you. He trusts you will approve. A little of this, mixed with wine, will cause death, but not soon. There will not even be symptom of death for several weeks, and then it comes as a lethargy that gradually increases. The man does not suffer,' he added, as if this were my primary concern.

I racked my brains. 'Is this Kex gum?' I had heard of such a poison, but never seen it. If Regal had a source, Chade would want to know.

'I do not know its name, nor does it matter. Only this. Prince Regal says you will have a use for it tonight. You will make an opportunity.'

'What does he expect of me? That I will go to his chambers, knock, and enter with poisoned wine for him? Isn't that a bit obvious?'

'Done that way, of course it is. But surely your training has given you more finesse than that?'

'My training tells me that things like this are not discussed with a valet. I must hear this from Regal, or I do not act.'

Sevrens sighed. 'My master foresaw this. This is his message. By the pin you carry and the crest on your breast, he commands this. Refuse it, and you refuse your king. You will be committing treason, and he will see you hang for it.'

'But I ...'

'Take it and go. The longer you wait, the later it is, and the more contrived will seem your visit to his chambers.'

Sevrens rose abruptly and left me. Rowd sat like a toad in the corner, eyeing me and smiling. I would have to kill both of them before we returned to Buckkeep, if I were to preserve my usefulness as an assassin. I wondered

if they knew that. I smiled back at Rowd, tasting smoke in the back of my throat. I took my poison and left.

Once at the base of Regal's staircase, I retreated to the wall where it was most shadowed, and clambered as swiftly as I could up one of the supports of Regal's chamber. Clinging like a cat, I snugged myself up to the supports of the chamber floor and waited. And waited. Until between the smoke whirling in my head and my own weariness and the lingering effects of Kettricken's herbs, I wondered if I were dreaming all of it. I wondered if my clumsy trap would yield me nothing. I considered, finally, that Regal had told me he had specifically requested Lady Thyme. But Shrewd had sent me instead. I recalled how Chade had puzzled over that. And finally, I recalled his words to me. Had my king given me up to Regal? And if he had, what did I owe to any of them? Eventually, I saw Rowd depart, and after what seemed a very long time, return with Cob.

I could hear little through the floor, but enough to know Regal's voice. My evening's plans were being divulged to Cob. When I was certain of it, I wriggled out of my hiding-place, clambered down and retreated to my own room. There I made certain of some specialized supplies. I reminded myself, firmly, that I was a King's man. I had told Verity so. I left my chamber and walked softly through the palace. In the great hall, the common folk slept on mats on the floor, in concentric circles around the dais, to have reserved the best viewing of their princess's pledging tomorrow. I walked among them and they did not stir. So much trust, so ill-placed.

The chambers of the royals were at the extreme rear of the palace, farthest from the main entry. There were no guards. I walked past the door that led to the bedroom of the reclusive King, past Rurisk's door, and to Kettricken's. Her door was decorated with hummingbirds and honeysuckle. I thought how much the Fool would have liked it. I tapped lightly and waited. Slow moments passed. I tapped again.

I heard the scuff of bare feet on wood, and the painted screen slid open. Kettricken's hair had been freshly braided, but fine strands had already pulled free around her face. Her long white nightrobe accented her fairness, so that she seemed as pale as the Fool. 'Did you need something?' she asked sleepily.

'Only the answer to a question.' The smoke still twined through my thoughts. I wanted to smile, to be witty and clever before her. Pale beauty, I

thought. I pushed the impulse aside. She was waiting. ‘If I killed your brother tonight,’ I said carefully, ‘what would you do?’

She did not even draw back from me. ‘I would kill you, of course. At least, I would demand it done, in justice. As I am pledged to your family now, I could not take your blood myself.’

‘But would you go on with the wedding? Would you still marry Verity?’

‘Would you like to come in?’

‘I haven’t time. Would you marry Verity?’

‘I am pledged to the Six Duchies, to be their queen. I am pledged to their people. Tomorrow, I pledge to the King-in-Waiting. Not to a man named Verity. But even were it otherwise, ask yourself, which is the most binding? I am bound already. It is not just my word, but my father’s. And my brother’s. I would not want to marry a man who had ordered my brother’s death. But it is not the man I am pledged to. It is the Six Duchies. I am given there, in the hopes of it benefiting my people. There I must go.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you, my lady. Forgive my disturbing your rest.’

‘Where do you go now?’

‘To your brother.’

She remained standing in her door as I turned and walked to her brother’s chamber. I tapped and waited. Rurisk must have been restive, for he opened the door much more quickly.

‘May I come in?’

‘Certainly.’ Gracious, as I had expected. The edge of a giggle teased at my resolve. Chade would not be proud of you just now, I counselled myself, and refused to smile.

I entered and he closed the door behind me. ‘Shall we have wine?’ I asked him.

‘If you wish it,’ he said, puzzled but polite. I seated myself on a chair while he unstoppered a carafe and poured for us. There was a censer on his table, too, still warm. I had not seen him indulge earlier. He probably had thought it more safe to wait until he was alone in his chamber. But you never can tell when an assassin will come calling with a pocket full of death. I pushed down a silly smile. He filled two glasses. I leaned forward, and showed him my twist of paper. Painstakingly, I tipped it into his wine, picked up the glass and swirled it to see it well dissolved. I handed it to him.

‘I’ve come to poison you, you see. You die. Then Kettricken kills me. Then she marries Verity.’ I lifted my glass and sipped from it. Apple wine. From Farrow, I guessed. Probably part of the wedding gifts. ‘So what does Regal gain?’

Rurisk eyed his wine with distaste, and set it aside. He took my glass from my hand. He drank from it. There was no shock in his voice as he said, ‘He’s rid of you. I gather he does not value your company. He has been very gracious to me, extending many gifts to me as well as to my kingdom. But if I were dead, Kettricken would be left sole heir to the Mountain Kingdom. That would benefit the Six Duchies, would it not?’

‘We cannot protect the land we already have. And I think Regal would see it as benefiting Verity, not the kingdom.’ I heard a noise outside the door. ‘That will be Cob, coming to catch me in the act of poisoning you,’ I surmised. I rose, went to the door, and opened it. Kettricken pushed past me into the room. I closed the screen quickly behind her.

‘He’s come to poison you,’ she warned Rurisk.

‘I know,’ he said gravely. ‘He put it in my wine. That’s why I’m drinking his.’ He refilled the glass from the carafe, and offered it to her. ‘It’s apple,’ he jajoled when she shook her head.

‘I don’t see any humour in this,’ she snapped. Rurisk and I looked at one another and grinned foolishly. Smoke.

Her brother smiled benignly. ‘It’s like this. FitzChivalry realized tonight he is a dead man. Too many people have been told he is an assassin. If he kills me, you kill him. If he doesn’t kill me, how can he go home and face his king? Even if his king forgives him, half the court will know he’s an assassin: that makes him useless. Useless bastards are a liability to royalty.’ Rurisk finished his lecture by draining the rest of the glass.

‘Kettricken told me that even if I killed you tonight, she would still pledge to Verity tomorrow.’

Again, he was not surprised. ‘What would she gain by refusing? Only the enmity of the Six Duchies. She would be forsworn to your people, a great shame to our people. She would become outcast, to the good of no one. It would not bring me back.’

‘And would not your people rise up at the thought of giving her to such a man?’

‘We would protect them from such knowledge. Eyod and my sister would, anyway. Shall a whole kingdom rise to war over the death of one

man? Remember, I am Sacrifice here.'

For the first time, I dimly understood what that meant.

'I may soon be an embarrassment to you,' I warned him. 'I was told it was a slow poison. But I looked at it. It is not. It is a simple extract of deadroot, and actually rather swift, if given in sufficient quantity. First, it gives a man tremors.' Rurisk extended his hands on the table, and they trembled. Kettricken looked furious with both of us. 'Death follows swiftly. And I expect I am supposed to be caught in the act and disposed of along with you.'

Rurisk clutched at his throat, then let his head loll forward on his chest. 'I am poisoned!' he intoned theatrically.

'I've had enough of this,' Kettricken spat, just as Cob tore the door open.

'Ware treachery!' he cried. He went white at the sight of Kettricken. 'My lady princess, tell me you have not drunk of the wine! This traitorous bastard has poisoned it!'

I think his drama was rather spoiled by the lack of response. Kettricken and I exchanged looks. Rurisk rolled from his chair onto the floor. 'Oh, stop it,' she hissed at him.

'I put the poison in the wine,' I told Cob genially. 'Just as I was charged to do.'

And then Rurisk's back arched in his first convulsion.

The blinding realization of how I had been duped took but an instant. Poison in the wine. A gift of Farrow apple wine, probably given this very evening. Regal had not trusted me to put it there, but it was easy enough to accomplish, in this trusting place. I watched Rurisk arch again, knowing there was nothing I could do. Already, there was the spreading numbness in my own mouth. I wondered, almost idly, how strong the dose had been. I had only had a sip. Would I die here, or on a scaffold?

Kettricken herself understood, a moment later, that her brother was truly dying. 'You soulless filth!' she spat at me, and then sank down at Rurisk's side. 'To lull him with jests and smoke, to smile with him as he dies!' Her eyes flashed to Cob. 'I demand his death. Tell Regal to come here, now!'

I was moving for the door, but Cob was faster. Of course. No smoke for Cob this night. He was faster and more muscular than I, clearer of head. His arms closed around me and he bore me down to the floor. His face was close

to mine as he drove his fist into my belly. I knew this breath, this scent of sweat. Smithy had scented this, before he died. But this time the knife was in my sleeve and very sharp and treated with the swiftest poison Chade knew. After I put it into him, he managed to hit me twice, good solid punches, before he fell back, dying. Goodbye, Cob. As he fell I suddenly saw a freckly stable-boy saying, 'Come along now, there's some good fellows.' It could have gone so many different ways. I had known this man; killing him killed a part of my own life.

Burrich was going to be very upset with me.

All those thoughts had taken but a fraction of a second. Cob's outflung hand had not struck the floor before I was moving for the door.

Kettricken was even faster. I think it was a brass water-ewer. I saw it as a white burst of light.

When I came to myself, everything hurt. The most immediate pain was in my wrists, for the cords that knotted them together behind my back were unbearably tight. I was being carried. Sort of. Neither Rowd nor Sevrens seemed to care much if parts of me dragged. Regal was there, with a torch, and a Chyurda I didn't know leading the way with another. I didn't know where I was, either, except that we were outdoors.

'Is there nowhere else we can put him? No place especially secure?' Regal was demanding. There was a muttered reply, and Regal said, 'No, you are right. We do not want to raise a great outcry right now. Tomorrow is soon enough. Not that I think he will live that long.'

A door was opened and I was flung headlong to an earthen floor barely cushioned by straw. I breathed dust and chaff. I could not cough. Regal gestured with his torch. 'Go to the Princess,' he instructed Sevrens. 'Tell her I will be there shortly. See if there is anything we can do to make the Prince more comfortable. You, Rowd, summon August from his chambers. We will need his Skill, so that King Shrewd may know how he has succoured a scorpion. I will need his approval before the bastard dies. If he lives long enough to be condemned. Go on, now. Go.'

And they left, the Chyurda lighting their way for them. Regal remained, looking down on me. He waited until their footfalls were distant before he kicked me savagely in the ribs. I cried out wordlessly, for my mouth and throat were numb. 'It seems to me we have been here before, have we not? You wallowing in straw, and me looking down on you, wondering what

misfortune had brought you into my life? Odd, how so many things end as they begin.

‘And so much of justice is a circle, also. Consider how you fall to poison and treachery. Just as my mother did. Ah, you start. Did you think I did not know? I knew. I know much you do not think I know. Everything from the stench of Lady Thyme to how you lost your Skill when Burrich would no longer let you tap his strength. He was swift enough to abandon you, when he saw it might otherwise cost him his life.’

A tremor shook me. Regal threw back his head and laughed. Then he gave a sigh and turned. ‘A pity I cannot stay and watch. But I have a princess to console. Poor thing, pledged to a man she already hates.’

Either Regal left then, or I did. I am not clear. It was as if the sky opened up and I flowed out into it. ‘Being open,’ Verity told me, ‘is simply not being closed.’ Then I dreamed, I think, of the Fool. And of Verity, sleeping with his arms wrapped around his head, as if to keep his thoughts in. And of Galen’s voice, echoing in a dark, cold chamber. ‘Tomorrow is better. When he Skills now, he scarce has any sense of the room he sits in. We do not have enough bond for me to do this from a distance. A touch will be required.’

There was a squeaking in the dark, a disagreeable mouse of a mind that I did not know. ‘Do it now,’ it insisted.

‘Do not be foolish,’ Galen rebuked it. ‘Shall we lose it all now, for the sake of haste? Tomorrow is soon enough. Let me worry about that part. You must tidy things there. Rowd and Sevrens know too much. And the stablemaster has annoyed us too long.’

‘You leave me standing in a bloodbath,’ the mouse squeaked angrily.

‘Wade through it to a throne,’ Galen suggested.

‘And Cob is dead. Who will see to my horses on the way home?’

‘Leave the stablemaster, then,’ Galen said in disgust. And then, considering, ‘I will do him myself, when you get home. I shall not mind. But the others were better done quickly. Perhaps the bastard poisoned other wine, in your quarters. A pity your servants got into it.’

‘I suppose. You must find me a new valet.’

‘We will have your wife do that for you. You should be with her now. She has just lost her brother. You must be horrified at what has come to pass. Try to blame the bastard rather than Verity. But not too convincingly. And

tomorrow, when you are as bereaved as she, well, we shall see what mutual sympathy leads to.'

'She is big as a cow and pale as a fish.'

'But with the mountain lands, you will have a defensible inland kingdom. You know the Coastal Duchies will not stand for you, and Farrow and Tilth cannot stand alone between the mountains and the Coastal Duchies. Besides, she need not live longer than her first child's birth.'

'FitzChivalry Farseer,' Verity said in his sleep. King Shrewd and Chade played at dice-bones together. Patience stirred in her sleep. 'Chivalry?' she asked softly. 'Is that you?'

'No,' I said. 'It's no one. No one at all.'

She nodded and slept on.

When my eyes focused again, it was dark and I was alone. My jaws trembled, and my chin and shirt-front were wet with my own saliva. The numbness seemed less. I wondered if that meant the poison wouldn't kill me. I doubted that it mattered; I would have small chance to speak on my own behalf. My hands had gone numb. At least they didn't hurt any more. I was horribly thirsty. I wondered if Rurisk was dead yet. He had taken a lot more of the wine than I had. And Chade had said it was quick.

As if in answer to my question, a cry of purest pain rose to the moon. The ululation seemed to hang there, and to pull my heart out with it as it rose. Nosy's master was dead.

I flung myself toward him, wrapped the Wit around him. *I know, I know*, and we shivered together as one he had loved passed beyond reach. The great aloneness wrapped us together.

Boy? Faint, but true. A paw and a nose, and a door edged open. He padded toward me, his nose telling me how bad I smelled. Smoke and blood and fear sweat. When he reached me, he lay down beside me, and put his head on my back. With the touch came the bond again. Stronger now that Rurisk was gone.

He left me. It hurts.

I know. A long time passed. *Free me?* The old dog lifted his head. Men cannot grieve as dogs do. We should be grateful for that. But from the depths of his anguish, he still rose, and set worn teeth to my bonds. I felt them loosen, a strand at a time, but had not even the strength to pull them apart. Nosy turned his head to set his back teeth to them.

At last the thongs parted. I pulled my arms forward. That made everything hurt differently. I still could not feel my hands, but I could roll over and get my face out of the straw. Nosy and I sighed together. He put his head on my chest and I wrapped a stiff arm around him. Another tremor shook me. My muscles clenched and unclenched themselves so violently that I saw dots of light. But it passed, and I still breathed.

I opened my eyes again. Light blinded me, but I did not know if it was real. Beside me, Nosy's tail thumped the straw. Burrich slowly sank down beside us. He put a gentle hand on Nosy's back. As my eyes adjusted to his lantern, I could see the grief in his face. 'Are you dying?' he asked me. His voice was so neutral, it was like hearing a stone speak.

'I'm not sure.' That was what I tried to say. My mouth still wasn't working very well. He rose and walked away. He took the lantern with him. I lay alone in the dark.

Then the light came back and Burrich with a bucket of water. He lifted my head and sloshed some into my mouth. 'Don't swallow it,' he cautioned me, but I couldn't have made those muscles work anyway. He washed out my mouth twice more, and then half-drowned me trying to get me to drink some. I fended off the bucket with a wooden hand. 'No,' I managed.

After a bit, my head seemed to clear. I moved my tongue against my teeth, and could feel them. 'I killed Cob,' I told him.

'I know. They brought his body out to the stables. No one wanted to tell me anything.'

'How did you know to find me?'

He sighed. 'I just had a feeling.'

'You heard Nosy.'

'Yes. The howling.'

'That isn't what I meant.'

He was quiet a long time. 'Sensing a thing isn't the same as using a thing.'

I couldn't think of anything to say back to that. After a while I said, 'Cob is the one who knifed you on the stairs.'

'Was he?' Burrich considered. 'I had wondered why the dogs barked so little. They knew him. Only Smithy reacted.'

My hands screamed suddenly to life. I folded them to my chest and rocked over them. Nosy whined.

'Stop it,' Burrich hissed.

‘Just now, I can’t help it,’ I replied. ‘It all hurts so badly, I’m spilling out all over.’

Burrich was silent.

‘Are you going to help me?’ I asked finally.

‘I don’t know,’ he said softly, and then, almost pleadingly, ‘Fitz, what are you? What have you become?’

‘I am what you are, I told him honestly. ‘A King’s man. Burrich, they’re going to kill Verity. If they do, Regal will become King.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘If we stay here while I explain it all, it will happen. Help me get out of here.’

He seemed to take a very long time to think about it. But in the end, he helped me to stand and I held onto his sleeve as I staggered out of the stables and into the night.

TWENTY-THREE

The Wedding

The art of diplomacy is the luck of knowing more of your rival's secrets than he knows of yours. Always deal from a position of power. These were Shrewd's maxims. And Verity abided by them.

'You have to get August. He's the only hope Verity has.'

We were sitting in the greyness before dawn on a hillside above the palace. We had not gone far. The terrain was steep, and I was in no condition for hiking. I was beginning to suspect that Regal's kick had renewed Galen's old damage to my ribs. Every deep breath stabbed me. Regal's poison still sent tremors through me, and my legs buckled often and unpredictably. Alone, I could not stand, for my legs would not support me. I could not even cling to a tree-trunk and hold myself upright: there was no strength in my arms. Around us in the dawn forest birds called, squirrels were gathering stores for the winter and insects chirred. It was hard, in the midst of all that life, to wonder how much of this damage was permanent. Were the days and strength of my youth already spent, and nothing left to me but trembling and weakness? I tried to push the question from my mind, to concentrate on the greater problems facing the Six Duchies. I stilled myself, as Chade had taught me. Around us, the trees were immense, with a presence like peace. I understood why Eyod would not cut them for timber. Their needles were soft beneath us, the fragrance soothing. I wished I could just lie back and sleep, like Nosy at my side. Our pains still mingled together, but at least Nosy could escape his in sleep.

'What makes you think August would help us?' Burrich asked. 'If I could get him out here.'

I pulled my thoughts back to our dilemma. 'I don't think he's involved with the rest of it. I think he is still loyal to the King.' I had presented my information to Burrich as my own careful conclusions. He was not a man likely to be convinced by phantom voices overheard in my head. So I could

not tell him that Galen had not suggested killing August, and therefore he was probably ignorant of the plot. I was still not sure myself of what I had experienced. Regal could not Skill. Even if he could, how could I have overheard Skilling between two others? No, it had to be something else, some other magic. Of Galen's devising? Was he capable of a magic that strong? I did not know. So much I did not know. I forced myself to set it all aside. For now, it fitted the facts I had, better than any other supposition I could imagine.

'If he's loyal to the King, and has no suspicions of Regal, then he is loyal to Regal as well,' Burrich pointed out as if I were a witling.

'Then we'll have to force him, somehow. Verity must be warned.'

'Of course. I'll just walk in, put a knife to August's back, and march him out of there. No one will bother us.'

I floundered for ideas. 'Bribe someone to lure him out here. Then jump him.'

'Even if I knew someone bribable, what would we use?'

'I have this.' I touched the earring in my ear.

Burrich looked at it and almost jumped. 'Where did you get that?'

'Patience gave it to me. Just before I left.'

'She had no right!' And then, more quietly, 'I thought it went to his grave with him.'

I was silent, waiting.

Burrich looked aside. 'It was your father's. I gave it to him.' He spoke quietly.

'Why?'

'Because I wanted to, obviously.' He closed the topic.

I reached up and began to unfasten it.

'No,' he said gruffly. 'Keep it where it is. But it is not a thing to be spent in a bribe. These Chyurda can't be bribed anyway.'

I knew he was right about that. I tried to think of other plans. The sun was coming up. Morning, when Galen would act. Perhaps had already acted. I wished I knew what was going on in the palace below. Did they know I was missing? Was Kettricken preparing to pledge herself to a man she would hate? Were Sevrens and Rowd dead yet? If not, could I turn them against Regal by warning them?

'Someone's coming!' Burrich flattened himself. I lay back, resigned to whatever happened. I had no physical fight left in me. 'Do you know her?'

Burrich breathed.

I turned my head. Jonqui, preceded by a little dog that would never climb a tree for Rurisk again. ‘The King’s sister.’ I didn’t bother whispering. She was carrying one of my nightshirts, and an instant later the tiny dog was leaping joyously around us. He romped invitingly at Nosy, but Nosy just looked at him mournfully. An instant later, Jonqui strode up to us.

‘You must come back,’ she said to me without preamble. ‘And you must hurry.’

‘Hard enough to come back,’ I told her, ‘without hurrying to my death.’ I was watching behind her for other trackers. Burrich had risen and taken a defensive posture over me.

‘No death,’ she promised me calmly. ‘Kettricken has forgiven you. I have been counselling her since last night, but only lately convinced her. She has invoked her kin-right to forgive kin for injury to kin. By our law, if kin forgive kin, no other can do otherwise. Your Regal sought to dissuade her, but only made her angry. “Here, while I am in this palace, I can still invoke the law of the Mountain People,” she told him. King Eyod agreed. Not because he does not mourn Rurisk, but because the strength and wisdom of Jhaampe law must be respected, by all. So, you must come back.’

I considered. ‘And have you forgiven me?’

‘No,’ she snorted. ‘I do not forgive my nephew’s murderer. But I cannot forgive you for what you did not do. I do not believe you would drink wine you had poisoned. Not even a little. Those of us who know best the dangers of poisons tempt them least. You would have just pretended to drink, and never spoken of poison at all. No. This was done by someone who believes himself very clever, and believes others are very stupid.’

I felt rather than saw Burrich lower his guard. But I couldn’t completely relax. ‘Why can’t Kettricken just forgive me and let me go away? Why must I come back?’

‘There is no time for this!’ Jonqui hissed, and it was the closest I had seen to an angry Chyurda. ‘Shall I take months and years to teach you all I know about balances? For a pull, a push, for a breath, a sigh? Do you think no one can feel how power slews and tilts just now? A princess must endure being bartered away like a cow. But my niece is not a playing-piece to be won in a dice game. Whoever killed my nephew clearly wished you to die also. Shall I let him win that toss? I think not. I do not know whom I wish to win; until I do, I will let no player be eliminated.’

‘That’s logic I understand,’ Burrich said approvingly. He stooped and hauled me suddenly to my feet. The world rocked alarmingly. Jonqui came to put her shoulder under my other arm. They walked and my feet marionetted across the ground between them. Nosy heaved himself to his feet and followed. And so we returned to the palace at Jhaampe.

Burrich and Jonqui took me right through the people gathered throughout the grounds and palace to my room. Actually, I excited little interest. I was just an outlander who had had too much wine and smoke last night. People were too absorbed in finding good places from which to view the dais to worry about me. There was no air of mourning, so I assumed the word of Rurisk’s death had not been released. When we finally entered my room, Jonqui’s placid face darkened.

‘I did not do this! I only took a nightshirt, to give Ruta a scent.’

‘This’ was the disassembly of my room. It had been thoroughly if not discreetly done. Jonqui immediately set to putting things right, and after a moment Burrich helped her. I sat in a chair and tried to make sense of the situation. Nosy, unnoticed, curled up in a corner. Unthinkingly, I extended comfort to him. Burrich immediately glanced at me, then at the woebegone dog. He looked away. When Jonqui left to fetch wash-water and food for me, I asked Burrich, ‘Have you found a tiny wooden chest? Carved with acorns?’

He shook his head. So they had taken my poison-cache. I would have liked to prepare another dagger, or even a powder to fling. Burrich could not always be beside me to protect me, and I certainly couldn’t fend off an attacker, or run away in my present condition. But my trade-tools were gone. I would have to hope I wouldn’t need them. I suspected Rowd was the one who had been here, and wondered if this had been his last act. Jonqui returned with water and food, and then excused herself. Burrich and I shared wash-water, and with some help I managed to change into clean, if simple, clothes. Burrich ate an apple. My stomach quailed at the mere thought of food, but I drank the water, cold from the well, that Jonqui had brought me. Getting my throat muscles to swallow still took conscious effort, and I felt as if the water sloshed unpleasantly inside me. But I suspected it was good for me.

I felt each moment ticking by, and wondered when Galen would make his move.

The screen slid aside. I looked up, expecting Jonqui again, but August entered on a wave of contempt. He spoke immediately, anxious to do his errand and depart. 'I do not come here of my own volition. I come at the bidding of the King-in-Waiting, Verity, to speak his words for him. This is his message, exactly. He is grieved beyond telling by ...'

'You Skilled to him? Today? Was he well?'

August seethed at my question. 'He was scarcely well. He is grieved beyond telling at Rurisk's death, and at your betrayal. He bids you draw strength from those around you loyal to you, for you will need it to face him.'

'Is that all?' I asked.

'From the King-in-Waiting, Verity, it is. Prince Regal bids you attend upon him, and swiftly, for the time of the ceremony is only hours away, and he must be attired for it. And your cowardly poison, no doubt meant for Regal, has found poor Sevrens and Rowd. Now Regal must do with an untrained valet. It will take him longer to dress. So do not keep him waiting. He is in the steams, to try to restore himself. You may find him there.'

'How tragic for him. An untrained valet,' Burrich said acidly.

August puffed up like a toad. 'It is scarcely humorous. Have not you lost Cob as well to this scoundrel? How can you bear to aid him?'

'If your ignorance were not protecting you, August, I might dispel it.' Burrich stood, looking dangerous.

'You, too, will face charges,' August warned him as he retreated. 'I am to say to you, Burrich, that King-in-Waiting Verity is not unaware of how you attempted to help the bastard escape, serving him as if he were your king instead of Verity. You will be judged.'

'Did Verity say so?' Burrich asked curiously.

'He did. He said you were once the best of King's men to Chivalry, but apparently you had forgotten how to aid those who truly serve the King. Recall it, he bids you, and assures you of his great wrath if you do not return to stand before him and receive what your deeds merit.'

'I recall it only too well. I will bring Fitz to Regal.'

'Now?'

'As soon as he has eaten.'

August glowered at him and left. Screens cannot be effectively slammed, but he tried.

'I have no stomach to eat, Burrich,' I protested.

‘I know that. But we need time for this. I marked Verity’s choice of words, and found more in them than August did. Did you?’

I nodded, feeling defeated. ‘I understood also. But it is beyond me.’

‘Are you sure? Verity does not think so, and he knows of such things. And you told me that was why Cob tried to kill me, because they suspected you of drawing on my strength. So Galen believes you can do it, too.’ Burrich crossed to me, and went down stiffly on one knee. His bad leg stretched awkwardly behind him. He took my lax hand and placed it on his shoulder. ‘I was King’s man to Chivalry,’ he told me quietly. ‘Verity knew it. I have no Skill myself, you understand. But Chivalry gave me to understand that for such a taking, it was not as important as the friendship between us. I have strength, and there were some few times that he needed it, and I gave it willingly. So I have withstood this before, in worse circumstances. Try, boy. If we fail, we fail, but at least we will have tried.’

‘I don’t know how. I don’t know how to Skill, and I certainly don’t know how to tap someone else’s strength to do it. And even if I did, if I succeeded, I might kill you.’

‘If you succeed, our king may live. That is what I am sworn to. And you?’ He made it all seem so simple.

So I tried. I opened my mind, I reached for Verity. I tried, with no idea how, to draw strength from Burrich. But all I heard was the twittering of birds outside the palace walls, and Burrich’s shoulder was only a place to rest my hand. I opened my eyes. I didn’t have to tell him I’d failed; he knew. He sighed heavily.

‘Well. I suppose I take you to Regal,’ he said.

‘If we did not go, we would be forever curious as to what he wanted,’ I added.

Burrich did not smile. ‘You have a fey mood on you,’ he said. ‘You sound more like the Fool than yourself.’

‘Does the Fool talk to you?’ I asked curiously.

‘Sometimes,’ he said, and took my arm to help me up.

‘It seems as if the closer I walk to death,’ I told him, ‘the funnier everything seems.’

‘To you, perhaps,’ he said crossly. ‘I wonder what he wants.’

‘To bargain. There can be nothing else. And if he wants to bargain, we may be able to gain something.’

‘You speak as if Regal follows the same rules of common sense as the rest of us. I’ve never known him to do that. And I’ve always hated court intrigue,’ Burrich complained. ‘I’d rather clean stalls.’ He pulled me again to my feet.

If I had ever wondered how deadroot felt to its victim, I knew it now. I did not think I would die of it. But I did not know how much of a life it would leave me either. My legs trembled under me, and my grip was uncertain. I could feel random muscle-twitches throughout my body. Neither my breath, nor the beating of my heart was predictable. I longed to be still, where I could listen to my own body and decide what had been done to it. But Burrich guided my steps patiently, and Nosy drooped along behind us.

I had not been to the steams before, but Burrich had. A separate tulip bud enclosed a bubbling hot spring, tamed to use as a bath. A Chyurda stood outside it; I recognized him as the torch-bearer from the night before. If he thought anything odd about my reappearance, he did not show it. He stepped aside as if expecting us, and Burrich dragged me up the steps to enter.

Clouds of steam fogged the air, carrying a mineral scent with them. We passed a stone bench or two; Burrich walked carefully on the smooth tile floor as we approached the source of the steam. The water rose in a central spring, with bricked sides built up around it to contain it. From there it was channelled in troughs to other, smaller baths, varying the heat by the length of the trough and the depth of the pond. The steam and the noise of the falling water filled the air. I did not find it pleasant; I laboured just to breathe already. My eyes adjusted to the dimness, and I saw Regal soaking in one of the larger baths. He looked up at our approach.

‘Ah,’ he said, as if well-pleased. ‘August told me Burrich would bring you. Well. I suppose you know the Princess has forgiven your murder of her brother? And in this place, at least, by doing so she preserves you from justice. I think it a waste of time, but local customs must be honoured. She says she considers you part of her kin-group now, and so I must treat you as kin. She fails to understand you were not born of a lawful union, and hence have no kin-rights at all. Ah, well. Will you dismiss Burrich and join me in the springs? It might ease you. You look very uncomfortable, held up like a shirt on the washing-line.’ He spoke so genially, so affably, as if unaware of my hatred.

‘What do you wish to tell me, Regal?’ I kept my voice flat.

‘Will not you send Burrich away?’ he asked again.

‘I am not a fool.’

‘One could argue that, but very well. I suppose I must send him away, then.’

The steam and the noise of the waters had cloaked the Chyurda well. He was taller than Burrich, and his cudgel was already in motion as Burrich turned. If he hadn’t been supporting my weight, he could have avoided it. Burrich turned his head, but the cudgel hit his skull with a terrible, sharp sound, like an axe biting wood. Burrich fell, and I with him. I landed half in one of the smaller ponds. It was not scalding, but nearly so. I managed to roll out of it, but could not regain my feet. My legs would not obey me. Burrich beside me lay very still. I reached a hand toward him, but could not touch him.

Regal stood up, and motioned to the Chyurda. ‘Dead?’

The Chyurda stirred Burrich with a foot, gave a curt nod.

‘Good.’ Regal was briefly pleased. ‘Drag him back behind that deep tank in the corner. Then you may go.’ To me, he said, ‘It’s unlikely anyone will be coming in here until after the ceremony. They’re too busy jostling for positions. And back in that corner ... well, I doubt if he’ll be found before you are.’

I could make no response. The Chyurda stooped and seized Burrich by the ankles. As he dragged him away, the dark brush of his hair feathered a trail of blood on the tiles. A dizzying mixture of hatred and despair rolled with the poison through my blood. A cold purpose rose and set in me. I could not hope to live now, but it did not seem important. Warning Verity did. And avenging Burrich. I had no plans, no weapons, no possibilities. So play for time, Chade’s counsels advised me. The more time you create for yourself, the better the chance that something will present itself. Delay him. Perhaps someone will come to see why the Prince is not dressing for the wedding. Perhaps someone else will want to use the steams before the ceremony. Engage him somehow.

‘The Princess ...’ I began.

‘Is not a problem,’ Regal finished for me. ‘The Princess did not forgive Burrich. Only you. What I have done to him is well within my rights. He is a traitor. He must pay. And the man disposing of him was most fond of his Prince Rurisk. He has no objections to any of this.’

The Chyurda left the steams without a glance back. My hands scrabbled weakly on the smooth tile floor but found no purchase. Regal busily dried

himself all the while. When the man was gone, he came to stand over me. 'Aren't you going to call for help?' he asked brightly.

I took a breath, pushed down my fear. I mustered as much contempt for Regal as I could find. 'To whom? Who would hear me over the water?'

'So you save your strength. Wise. Pointless, but wise.'

'Do you think Ketricken will not know what happened?'

'She will know you went to the steams, unwisely in your condition. You slipped beneath the hot, hot water. Such a shame.'

'Regal, this is madness. How many bodies do you think you can leave in your wake? How will you explain Burrich's death?'

'To your first question, quite a few, as long as they are not people of consequence.' He stooped over me, and gripped my shirt. He dragged me while I thrashed weakly, a fish out of water. 'And to your second, well, the same. How much fuss do you think anyone will raise over a dead stableman? You are so obsessed with your plebeian self-importance that you extend it to your servants.' He dumped me carelessly half on top of Burrich. His still-warm body sprawled face-down on the floor. Blood was congealing on the tiles around his face, and still dripping from his nose. A slow bubble of blood formed on his lips, broke with his faint exhalation. He lived yet. I shifted to conceal it from Regal. If I could survive, Burrich might have a chance also.

Regal noticed nothing. He tugged my boots off and set them aside. 'You see, bastard,' he said as he paused to catch his breath. 'Ruthlessness creates its own rules. So my mother taught me. People are intimidated by a man who acts with no apparent regard for consequences. Behave as if you cannot be touched and no one will dare to touch you. Look at the whole situation. Your death will anger some people, yes. But enough to make them take actions that would affect the security of the whole Six Duchies? I think not. Besides, your death will be eclipsed by other things. I'd be a fool not to take this opportunity to remove you.' Regal was so damnably calm, and superior. I fought him, but he was surprisingly strong for the indulgent life he led. I felt like a kitten as he shook me out of my shirt. He folded my clothes neatly and set them aside. 'Minimal alibis will work. If I made too much effort to appear guiltless, people might think I cared. They might start then to pay attention themselves. So, I simply know nothing. My man saw you enter with Burrich after I had left. And I go now to complain to August that you never came to talk with me so that I might forgive you, as I had promised

Princess Kettricken. I will reprimand August most severely for not bringing you himself.' He looked around. 'Let's see. A nice deep hot one. Right here.' I clutched at his throat as he levered me up to the edge, but he shook me off easily.

'Goodbye, bastard,' he said calmly. 'Pardon my haste, but you have quite delayed me. I must rush to dress myself. Or I shall be late for the wedding.'

And he tumbled me in.

The pool was deeper than I was tall, designed to be neck-high on a tall Chyurda. It was painfully hot to my unprepared body. It drove the air from my lungs and I sank. I pushed feebly off the bottom and managed to get my face above water. 'Burrich!' I wasted my breath on a shout to someone who could not aid me. The water closed on me again. My arms and legs would not work together. I blundered into a wall and pushed myself under before I could once again surface and gasp in some air. The hot water was loosening my already flaccid muscles. I think I would still have been drowning even if the water had been only knee-deep.

I lost count of how many times I floundered to the surface, to gasp a breath. The smooth, worked stone of the walls eluded my palsied grip, and my ribs stabbed with pain each time I tried for a deep breath. My strength was flowing out of me, lassitude flowing in. So warm, so deep. Drowned like a puppy, I thought to myself as I felt the darkness closing. *Boy?* someone queried, but all was black.

So much water, so hot and so deep. I could not find a bottom any more, let alone a side. I struggled feebly against the water, but there was no resistance. No up, no down. No use fighting to stay alive inside my body. Nothing left to protect, so drop the walls, and see if there is one last service you can render your king. The walls of my world fell away from me, and I sped forth like an arrow finally released. Galen had been right. There was no distance in Skilling, no distance at all. Buckkeep was right here, and *Shrewd!* I shrieked in desperation. But my king was intent upon other things. He was closed and walled to me, no matter how I stormed around him. No help there.

My body was failing, my thread to it was tenuous. One last chance. *Verity, Verity!* I cried. I found him, flailed at him, but could find no purchase, no grip. He was elsewhere, open to someone else, closed to me. *Verity!* I wailed, drowning in despair. And suddenly it was as if strong hands gripped

mine as I scabbled up a slippery cliff, gripped and held tight and drew me in when I would have slipped away.

Chivalry! No, it can't be, it's the boy! Fitz?

You imagine things, my prince. There is no one there. Attend to what we do now. Galen, calm and insidious as poison as he pushed me aside. I could not withstand him; he was too strong.

Fitz? Verity, unsure now as I grew weaker.

From I knew not where, I found strength. Something gave way before me, and I was strong. I clung to Verity like a hawk on his wrist. I was there with him. I saw with Verity's eyes: the freshly-decked throne room, the Book of Events on the great table before him, laid open to receive the recording of Verity's marriage. Around him, in their best finery and most costly jewels, the few honoured ones who had been invited to witness Verity witnessing his bride's pledge through August's eyes. And Galen, who was supposed to be offering his strength as a King's man, was poised beside and slightly behind Verity, waiting to drain him dry. Shrewd, in crown and robe upon his throne, was all unknowing, his Skill burned and dulled away years ago by misuse, and him too proud to admit it.

Like an echo, I saw through August's eyes as Kettricken stood pale as a wax candle on a dais before all her people. She was telling them, simply and kindly, that last night Rurisk had finally succumbed to the arrow-wound he had taken on the Ice Fields. She hoped to please his memory by pledging herself as he had helped arrange, to the King-in-Waiting of the Six Duchies. She turned to face Regal.

In Buckkeep, Galen's claw of a hand settled on Verity's shoulder.

I broke into his link with Verity, pushed him aside. *Beware Galen, Verity. Beware a traitor, come to drain you dry. Touch him not.*

Galen's hand tightened on Verity's shoulder. Suddenly all was a sucking vortex, draining, trying to pull everything out of Verity. And there was not much left to take. His Skill was so strong because he let it take so much from him so fast. Self-preservation would have made another man hold back some of his strength. But Verity had been spending his recklessly, every day, to keep the Red Ships from his shores. So little left now for this ceremony, and Galen was absorbing it. And growing stronger as he did so. I clung to Verity, fighting desperately to reduce the loss. *Verity!* I cried to him. *My prince.* I sensed a brief rallying in him, but all was growing dim before his eyes. I heard a stirring of alarm as he sagged and caught at the table. Faithless

Galen kept his grip on him, bent over him as he went to one knee, murmuring solicitously, 'My prince? Are you quite all right?'

I flung my strength to Verity, reserves I had not suspected in myself. I opened up and let go of them, just as Verity did when he Skilled. 'Take it all. I would die anyway. And you were always good to me when I was young.' I heard the words as clearly as if I had spoken them, and felt the breaking of a mortal bond as strength flowed into Verity through me. He waxed suddenly strong, beast-strong, and angry.

Verity's hand rose to grip Galen's. He opened his eyes. 'I shall be fine,' he said to Galen, aloud. He looked around the room as he rose to his feet again. 'I but worried about you. You seemed to tremble. Are you sure you are strong enough for this? You must not attempt a challenge that is beyond you. Think what might happen.' And as a gardener pulls a weed from the earth, Verity smiled, and pulled from the traitor all that was in him. Galen fell, clutching his chest, an empty man-shaped thing. The onlookers rushed to attend him, but Verity, replete now, lifted his eyes to the window and focused his mind afar.

August. Attend me well. Warn Regal his half-brother is dead. Verity boomed like the sea, and I felt August quail at the strength of the Skilling. Galen was too ambitious. He attempted that which was beyond his skill. A pity the Queen's bastard could not be content with the position she gave him. A pity my younger brother could not dissuade his half-brother from his misplaced ambitions. Galen overstepped his position. My younger brother should take heed of what comes of such recklessness. And August. Be sure you tell Regal privately. Not many knew Galen was the Queen's bastard and his half-brother. I am sure he would not want scandal to soil his mother's name, or his. Such family secrets should be well-guarded.

And then, with a force that put August on his knees, Verity pushed through him to stand before Kettricken in her mind. I sensed his effort to be gentle. *I await you, my Queen-in-Waiting. And by my name, I swear to you I had naught to do with your brother's death. I knew nothing of it, and I grieve with you. I would not want you to come to me, thinking his blood on my hands.* Like a jewel opening was the light in Verity's heart as he exposed it to her that she might know she had not been given to a murderer. Selflessly, he made himself vulnerable to her, giving trust to build trust. She swayed, but stood. August fainted. That contact was gone.

And then Verity was shoving at me. *Back, get back, Fitz. That's too much, you'll die. Back, let go!* And he cuffed me like a bear, and I slammed back into my silent, sightless body.

TWENTY-FOUR

The Aftermath

In the Great Library at Jhaampe there is a tapestry that is rumoured to contain a map through the mountains to the Rain Wilds. Like many Jhaampe maps and books, the information contained was considered so valuable that it was encoded in the form of riddles and visual puzzles. Figured on the tapestry, among many images, are the forms of a dark-haired, dark man, stout and muscular and bearing a red shield, and, in the opposite corner, a golden-skinned being. The golden-skinned creature had been the victim of moths and fraying, but it is still possible to see that in the scale of the tapestry, it is much larger than a human, and possibly winged. Buckkeep legend has it that King Wisdom sought and found the Elderlings' homeland by a secret path through the Mountain Kingdom. Could these figures represent an Elderling and King Wisdom? Does this tapestry record the path through the Mountain Kingdom to the Elderlings' homeland in the Rain Wilds?

Much later I learned how I had been found, leaning against Burrich's body on the tile floor of the steams. I was shaking as with an ague, and could not be roused. Jonqui found us, though how she knew to look in the steams I will never know. I will always suspect that she was to Eyod as Chade was to Shrewd, not as assassin perhaps, but as one who had ways of knowing or finding out almost anything that happened within the palace. However it was, she took command of the situation. Burrich and I were isolated in a chamber separate from the palace, and I suspect that for a while no one from Buckkeep knew where we were or if we lived. She tended us herself with the aid of one old manservant.

I awoke some two days after the wedding. Four of the most miserable days of my life were spent lying in bed, limbs atwilt but not at my command. I dozed often, in a deadened way that was not pleasant, and either dreamed vividly of Verity, or sensed him trying to Skill to me. The Skill

dreams conveyed no sense to me, other than that he was concerned for me. I grasped only isolated bits of knowledge from them, such as the colour of the curtains in the room he Skilled from, or the feel of a ring on his finger that he absently twisted as he tried to reach me. Some more violent jerk of my muscles would shake me from my dreams, and my spasming would torment me until, exhausted, I dozed again.

My periods of alertness were as bad, for Burrich lay on a pallet in the same room, breathing hoarsely, but doing little more than that. His features were swollen and discoloured such that he was barely recognizable. From the beginning, Jonqui gave me little hope for him, either that he would live, or that he would be himself if he did survive.

But Burrich had cheated death before. The swelling gradually subsided, the purpling faded, and when he did awaken, he proceeded to recover himself swiftly. He had no memories of anything that occurred after he took me from the stable. I told him only what he needed to know. It was more than it was safe for him to know, but I owed it to him. He was up and about before I was, though at first he had times of dizziness and headaches. But before long Burrich was getting to know the Jhaampe stables and exploring the town at his leisure. In the evenings he would return, and we had many long, quiet conversations. We both avoided topics where we knew we would disagree, and there were areas, such as Chade's teachings, where I could not be open with him. Mostly, though, we talked about dogs he had known and horses he'd trained, and sometimes he spoke, a little, of his early days with Chivalry. One evening I told him about Molly. He was quiet for a time, and then told me that he'd heard the owner of the Beebalm Chandlery had died in debt, and that his daughter who had expected to inherit it had gone to live with relatives in a village instead. He did not remember which village, but knew someone who would know. He did not mock me, but told me seriously that I should know my own mind before I saw her again.

August never Skilled again. He was carried from the dais that day, but as soon as he recovered from his faint, he demanded to see Regal immediately. I trust he delivered Verity's message. For while Regal did not come to visit either Burrich or me during our convalescence, Kettricken did, and she mentioned that Regal was most concerned that we recover quickly and completely from our accidents, for as he had promised her, he had forgiven me completely. She told me how Burrich had slipped and struck his head trying to pull me from the pool when I went into a seizure. I do not

know who concocted that tale. Jonqui herself, perhaps. I doubt if even Chade could have come up with a better one. But Verity's message was the end of August's leadership of the coterie, and all Skilling as far as I know. I do not know if he was too afraid after that day, or if the talent was blasted out of him by that force. He left court, and went to Withywoods, where Chivalry and Patience had once ruled. I believe he became wise.

Following her wedding, Kettricken joined with all of Jhaampe in a month of mourning for her brother. From my sickbed, I was aware of it mostly as chimes, chantings, and great burnings of incense. All Rurisk's possessions were given away. To me Eyod himself came, and brought a simple silver ring his son had worn. And the head of the arrow that had pierced his chest. He did not say much to me, except to tell me what the objects were, and that I should cherish these reminders of an exceptional man. He left me to wonder why these items had been selected for me.

At the end of a month, Kettricken set her mourning aside. She came to bid Burrich and me a swift recovery, and to bid us farewell until she saw us at Buckkeep. The brief moment of Skilling from Verity had eliminated all her reservations about him. She spoke of her husband with a quiet pride, and went willingly to Buckkeep, knowing herself given to an honourable man.

It was not for me to ride alongside her at the head of that homeward procession, or to enter Buckkeep preceded by horns and tumblers and children ringing bells. That was Regal's place, and he put a gracious face on it. Regal appeared to take Verity's warning to heart. I do not think Verity ever completely forgave him. But he dismissed Regal's plottings as if they were nasty boyish tricks, and I think that cowed Regal more than any public reprimand could have. The poisoning was eventually blamed on Rowd and Sevens by those who knew of it. Sevens had, after all, obtained the poison, and Rowd had delivered the gift of apple wine. Kettricken pretended to be convinced that it was a misplaced ambition by servants on behalf of an unknowing master. And Rurisk's death was never openly spoken of as a poisoning. Nor did I become known as an assassin. Whatever was in Regal's heart, his outward demeanour was that of a younger prince graciously escorting his brother's bride home.

I had a long convalescence. Jonqui treated me with herbs she said would rebuild what had been damaged. I should have tried to learn her herbs and techniques, but my mind could not seem to hold things any better than my hands could. I remember little of that time. My recovery from the

poisoning was frustratingly slow. Jonqui sought to make it less tedious by arranging time for me in the Great Library, but my eyes wearied quickly and seemed as prone to trembling disorders as my hands. I spent most days lying in my bed, thinking. For a time I wondered if I wanted to return to Buckkeep. I wondered if I could still be Shrewd's assassin. I knew that if I returned, I would have to sit down the table from Regal and look up to see him at my king's left hand. I would have to treat him as if he had never tried to kill me, nor used me in the poisoning of a man I had admired. I spoke of it frankly one evening to Burrich. He sat and listened quietly. Then he said, I cannot imagine it will be easier for Kettricken than it would be for you. Nor for me, to look at a man who has tried to kill me twice, and call him "My prince". You must decide. I should hate to have him think he had frightened us away. But if you decide we are going elsewhere, then we shall.' I think I finally guessed then what the earring signified.

Winter was no longer a threat, but a reality, when we left the mountains. Burrich, Hands and I returned much later to Buckkeep than the others, for we took our time on the journey. I tired easily, and my strength was still very unpredictable. I would crumple at odd moments, falling from the saddle like a sack of grain. Then they would stop to help me re-mount, and I would force myself to go on. Many nights I awoke shaking, without even the strength to call out. These lapses were slow to pass. Worst, I think, were the nights when I could not waken, but dreamed only of endlessly drowning. From one such dream I woke to Verity standing over me.

You're enough to wake the dead, he told me genially. *We must find a master for you, to teach you some control if nothing else. Kettricken finds it a bit peculiar that I dream so often of drowning. I suppose I should be grateful you slept well on my wedding night at least.*

'Verity?' I said groggily.

Go back to sleep, he told me. *Galen is dead, and I've put Regal on a shorter leash. You've nothing to fear. Go to sleep, and stop dreaming so loudly.*

Verity, wait! But my act of groping after him broke the tenuous Skill contact, and I had no choice but to do as he had advised.

We travelled on, through increasingly unpleasant weather. We all looked forward to getting home long before we arrived there. Burrich had, I believe, overlooked Hands' abilities until that trip. Hands had a quiet competence that inspired trust in horses as well as dogs. Eventually he easily

replaced both Cob and me in the Buckkeep stables, and the friendship that grew between Burch and Hands caused me to be more aware of my aloneness than I care to admit.

Galen's death was considered a tragic thing at Buckkeep court. Those who had known him least spoke mostly kindly about him. Obviously the man had overstrained himself, for his heart to fail him so young. There was some talk of naming a warship after him, as if he were a fallen hero, but Verity never recognized the idea and it never came to pass. His body was sent back to Farrow for burial, with all honour. If Shrewd suspected anything of what had gone on between Verity and Galen, he kept it well hidden. Neither he nor even Chade ever mentioned it to me. The loss of our Skillmaster, with not even an apprentice to replace him, was no trivial thing, especially with the Red Ships on our horizons. That was what was openly discussed, but Verity flatly refused to consider Serene or any of the others Galen had trained.

I never found out if Shrewd had given me over to Regal. I never asked him, nor even mentioned my suspicions to Chade. I suppose I didn't want to know. I tried not to let it affect my loyalties. But in my heart, when I said, *My king*, I meant Verity.

The timbers Rurisk had promised came to Buckkeep even more slowly than I did, for they had to be dragged overland to the Vin River before they could be rafted down to Turlake, and thence down the Buck River to Buckkeep. They arrived by midwinter and were all Rurisk had said they would be. The first completed warship was named after him. I think he would have understood that, but not quite approved of it.

King Shrewd's plan had succeeded. It had been many years since Buckkeep had had a queen of any kind, and Kettricken's arrival stirred interest in court life. The tragic death of her brother on her wedding eve, and the brave way she had continued despite it captured the imagination of the people. Her unmistakable admiration for her new husband made Verity a romantic hero even to his own folk. They were a striking couple; her youth and pale beauty setting off Verity's quiet strength. Shrewd displayed them at balls that attracted every minor noble from every duchy, and Kettricken spoke with intense eloquence of the need for all to band together to defeat the Red Ship Raiders. So Shrewd raised his monies, and even in the storms of winter, the fortification of the Six Duchies began. More towers were constructed, and folk volunteered to man them. Shipwrights vied for the

honour of working on the warships, and Buckkeep Town was swollen with volunteers to man the ships. For a brief time that winter, folk believed in the legends they created, and it seemed the Red Ships could be defeated by sheer will alone. I mistrusted that mood, but watched as Shrewd promoted it, and wondered how he would sustain it when the realities of the Forgings began again.

Of one other I must speak, one dragged into that conflict and intrigue only by his loyalty to me. To the end of my days, I will bear the scars he gave me. His worn teeth sank deeply into my hand several times before he managed to drag me from that pool. How he did it, I will never know. But his head still rested on my chest when they found us; his mortal bonds to this world broken. Nosy was dead. I believe he gave his life freely, recalling that we had been good to one another, when we were puppies. Men cannot grieve as dogs do. But we grieve for many years.

Epilogue

'You are wearied,' my boy says. He is standing at my elbow and I do not know how long he has been there. He reaches forward slowly, to lift the pen from my lax grip. Wearily I regard the faltering tail of ink it has tracked down my page. I have seen that shape before, I think, but it was not ink then. A trickle of drying blood on the deck of a Red Ship, and mine the hand that spilled it? Or was it a tendril of smoke rising black against a blue sky as I rode too late to warn a village of a Red Ship Raid? Or poison swirling and unfurling yellowly in a simple glass of water, poison I had handed someone, smiling all the while? The artless curl of a strand of woman's hair left upon my pillow? Or the trail a man's heels left in the sand as we dragged the bodies from the smouldering tower at Sealbay? The track of a tear down a mother's cheek as she clutched her Forged infant to her despite his angry cries? Like Red Ships, the memories come without warning, without mercy. 'You should rest,' the boy says again, and I realize I am sitting, staring at a line of ink on a page. It makes no sense. Here is another sheet spoiled, another effort to set aside.

'Put them away,' I tell him, and do not object as he gathers all the sheets and stacks them haphazardly together. Herbery and history, maps and musings, all a hodge-podge in his hands as they are in my mind. I can no longer recall what it was I set out to do. The pain is back, and it would be so easy to quiet it. But that way lies madness, as has been proven so many times before me. So instead I send the boy to find two leaves of Carryme, and ginger root and peppermint to make a tea for me. I wonder if one day I will ask him to fetch three leaves of that Chyurdan herb.

Somewhere, a friend says softly, 'No.'

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ROYAL ASSASSIN

Book Two of *The Farseer Trilogy*

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ROBIN HOBB



Dedication

For Giles
and for Raphael and Freddy,
the Princes of Assassins

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PROLOGUE

Dreams and Awakenings

Why is it forbidden to write down specific knowledge of the magics? Perhaps because we all fear that such knowledge would fall into the hands of one not worthy to use it. Certainly there has always been a system of apprenticeship to ensure that the understanding of magic is passed only to those trained and judged worthy of such knowledge. While this seems a laudable attempt to protect us from unworthy practitioners of arcane lore, it ignores the fact that the magics are not derived from this specific knowledge. The predilection for a certain type of magic is either inborn or lacking. For instance, the ability for the magics known as the Skill is tied closely to blood relationship to the royal Farseer line, though it may also occur as a 'wild strain' amongst folk whose ancestors came from both the Inland tribes and the Outislanders. One trained in the Skill is able to reach out to another's mind, no matter how distant, and know what he is thinking. Those who are strongly Skilled can influence that thinking, or have converse with that person. For the conducting of a battle, or the gathering of information, it is a most useful tool.

Folklore tells of an even older magic, much despised now, known as the Wit. Few will admit a talent for this magic, hence it is always said to be the province of the folk in the next valley, or the ones who live on the other side of the far ridge. I suspect it was once the natural magic of those who lived on the land as hunters rather than as settled folk; a magic for those who felt kinship with the wild beasts of the woods. The Wit, it is said, gave one the ability to speak the tongues of the beasts. It was also warned that those who practised the Wit too long or too well became whatever beast they had bonded to. But this may be only legend.

There are the Hedge magics, though I have never been able to determine the source of this name, which are both verified and suspect, including palm reading, water gazing, the interpretation of crystal

reflections, and a host of other skills that attempt to predict the future. In a separate unnamed category are the magics that cause physical effects, such as invisibility, levitation, giving motion or life to inanimate objects – all the magics of the old legends, from the Flying Chair of the Widow's Son to the North Wind's bewitched tablecloth. I know of no people who claim these magics as their own. They seem to be solely the stuff of legend, ascribed to folk living in ancient times or distant places, or beings of mythical or near mythical reputation: dragons, giants, the Elderlings, the Others, pecksies.

I pause to clean my pen. My writing wanders from spidery to blobbish on this poor paper. But I will not use good parchment for these words; not yet. I am not sure they should be written. I ask myself, why put this to paper at all? Will not this knowledge be passed down by word of mouth to those who are worthy? Perhaps. But perhaps not. What we take for granted now, the knowing of these things, may be a wonder and a mystery someday to our descendants.

There is very little in any of the libraries on magic. I work laboriously, tracing a thread of knowledge through a patchwork quilt of information. I find scattered references, passing allusions, but that is all. I have gathered it, over these last few years, and stored it in my head, always intending to commit my knowledge to paper. I will put down what I know from my own experience, as well as what I have ferreted out. Perhaps to provide answers for some other poor fool, in times to come, who might find himself as battered by the warring of the magics within him as I have been.

But when I sit down to the task, I hesitate. Who am I to set my will against the wisdom of those who have gone before me? Shall I set down in plain lettering the methods by which a Wit-gifted one can expand his range, or can bond a creature to himself? Shall I detail the training one must undergo before being recognized as a Skilled one? The hedge wizardries and legendary magics have never been mine. Have I any right to dig out their secrets and pin them to paper like so many butterflies or leaves collected for study?

I try to consider what one might do with such knowledge, unjustly gained. It leads me to consider what this knowledge has gained for me. Power, wealth, the love of a woman? I mock myself. Neither the Skill nor the Wit has ever offered any such to me. Or if they did, I had not the sense nor ambition to seize them when offered.

Power. I do not think I ever wanted it for its own sake. I thirsted for it, sometimes, when I was ground down, or when those close to me suffered beneath ones who abused their powers. Wealth. I never really considered it. From the moment that I, his bastard grandson, pledged myself to King Shrewd, he always saw to it that all my needs were fulfilled. I had plenty to eat, more education than I sometimes cared for, clothes both simple and annoyingly fashionable, and often enough a coin or two of my own to spend. Growing up in Buckkeep, that was wealth enough and more than most boys in Buckkeep Town could claim. Love? Well. My horse Sooty was fond of me, in her own placid way. I had the true-hearted loyalty of a hound named Nosy, and that took him to his grave. I was given the fiercest of loves by a terrier pup, and it was likewise the death of him. I wince to think of the price willingly paid for loving me.

Always I have possessed the loneliness of one raised amidst intrigues and clustering secrets, the isolation of a boy who can not trust the completeness of his heart to anyone. I could not go to Fedwren, the court scribe who praised me for my neat lettering and well-inked illustrations, and confide that I was already apprenticed to the Royal Assassin, and thus could not follow his writing trade. Nor could I divulge to Chade, my master in the diplomacy of the knife, the frustrating brutality I endured trying to learn the ways of the Skill from Galen the Skillmaster. And to no one did I dare speak openly of my emerging proclivity for the Wit, the ancient beast magic, said to be a perversion and a taint to any who used it.

Not even to Molly.

Molly was that most cherished of items: a genuine refuge. She had absolutely nothing to do with my day to day life. It was not just that she was female, though that was mystery enough to me. I was raised almost entirely in the company of men, bereft not only of my natural mother and father, but of any blood relations who would openly acknowledge me. As a child, my care was entrusted to Burrich, the gruff Stablemaster who had once been my father's right-hand man. The stable hands and the guards were my daily companions. Then as now, there were women in the guard companies, though not so many then as now. But like their male comrades, they had duties to perform, and lives and families of their own when they were not on watch. I could not claim their time. I had no mother, nor sisters or aunts of my own. There were no women who offered me the special tenderness said to be the province of women.

None save Molly.

She was but a year or two older than myself, and growing the same way a sprig of greenery forces its way up through a gap in the cobblestones. Neither her father's near constant drunkenness and frequent brutality nor the grinding chores of a child trying to maintain the pretence of both home and family business could crush her. When I first met her, she was as wild and wary as a fox cub. Molly Nosebleed she was called among the street children. She often bore the marks of the beatings her father gave her. Despite his cruelty, she cared for him. I never understood that. He would grumble and berate her even as she tottered him home after one of his binges and put him to bed. And when he awoke, he never had any remorse for his drunkenness and harsh words. There were only more criticisms: why hadn't the chandlery been swept and fresh strewing herbs put on the floor? Why hadn't she tended the bee hives, when they were nearly out of honey to sell? Why had she let the fire go out under the tallow pot? I was mute witness more times than I care to remember.

But through it all, Molly grew. She flowered, one sudden summer, into a young woman who left me in awe of her capable ways and womanly charms. For her part, she seemed totally unaware of how her eyes could meet mine and turn my tongue to leather in my mouth. No magic I possessed, no Skill, no Wit, was proof against the accidental touch of her hand against mine, nor could defend me against the awkwardness that overwhelmed me at the quirk of her smile.

Should I catalogue her hair flowing with the wind, or detail how the colour of her eyes shifted from dark amber to rich brown depending on her mood and the hue of her gown? I would catch a glimpse of her scarlet skirts and red shawl amongst the market throng, and suddenly be aware of no one else. These are magics I witnessed, and though I might set them down on paper, no other could ever work them with such skill.

How did I court her? With a boy's clumsy gallantries, gaping after her like a simpleton watching the whirling discs of a juggler. She knew I loved her before I did. And she let me court her, although I was a few years younger than she, and not one of the town boys and possessed of small prospects as far as she knew. She thought I was the scribe's errand boy, a part-time helper in the stables, a keep runner. She never suspected I was the Bastard, the unacknowledged son who had toppled Prince Chivalry from his

place in the line of succession. That alone was a big enough secret. Of my magics and my other profession, she knew nothing.

Maybe that was why I could love her.

It was certainly why I lost her.

I let the secrets and failures and pains of my other lives keep me too busy. There were magics to learn, secrets to ferret out, men to kill, intrigues to survive. Surrounded by them, it never occurred to me that I could turn to Molly for a measure of the hope and understanding that eluded me everywhere else. She was apart from these things, unsullied by them. I carefully kept preserved from her any touch of them. I never tried to draw her into my world. Instead, I went to hers, to the fishing and shipping port town where she sold candles and honey in her shop, and shopped in the market and, sometimes, walked on the beaches with me. To me, it was enough that she existed for me to love. I did not even dare to hope she might return that feeling.

There came a time when my training in the Skill ground me into a misery so deep I did not think I could survive it. I could not forgive myself for being unable to learn it; I could not imagine that my failure might not matter to others. I cloaked my despair in surly withdrawal. I let the long weeks pass, and never saw her or even sent her word that I thought of her. Finally, when there was no one else that I could turn to, I sought her. Too late. I arrived at the Beebalm Chandlery in Buckkeep Town one afternoon, gifts in hand, in time to see her leaving. Not alone. With Jade, a fine broad-chested seaman, with a bold earring in one ear and the sure masculinity of his superior years. Unnoticed, defeated, I slunk away and watched them walk off arm in arm. I let her go, and in the months that followed, I tried to convince myself that my heart had let her go as well. I wonder what would have happened if I had run after them that afternoon, if I had begged one last word of her. Odd, to think of so many events turning upon a boy's misplaced pride and his schooled acceptance of defeats. I set her out of my thoughts, and spoke of her to no one. I got on with my life.

King Shrewd sent me as his assassin with a great caravan of folk going to witness the pledging of the Mountain princess Kettricken as Prince Verity's bride. My mission was quietly to cause the death of her older brother, Prince Rurisk, subtly of course, so that she would be left the sole heir to the Mountain throne. But what I found when I arrived there was a web of deceit and lies engineered by my youngest uncle, Prince Regal, who

hoped to topple Verity from the line of succession and claim the princess as his own bride. I was the pawn he would sacrifice for this goal; and I was the pawn who instead toppled the game pieces around him, bringing his wrath and vengeance down on myself, but saving the crown and the princess for Prince Verity. I do not think this was heroism. Nor do I think it was petty spite wreaked on one who had always bullied and belittled me. It was the act of a boy becoming a man, and doing what I had sworn to do years before I knew the cost of such an oath. The price was my healthy young body, so long taken for granted.

Long after I had defeated Regal's plot, I lingered in a sickbed in the Mountain Kingdom. But finally a morning came when I awoke and believed that my long illness was finally over. Burrich had decided I was recovered enough to begin the long journey back home to the Six Duchies. Princess Kettricken and her entourage had left for Buckkeep weeks before, when the weather was still fine. Now winter snows already smothered the higher parts of the Mountain Kingdom. If we did not leave Jhaampe soon, we would be forced to winter there. I was up early that morning, doing my final packing, when the first small tremors began. Resolutely, I ignored them. I was just shaky, I told myself, with not yet having eaten breakfast, and the excitement of the journey home. I donned the garments that Jonqui had furnished for our winter journey through the Mountains and across the plains. For me there was a long red shirt, padded with wool. The quilted trousers were green, but embroidered with red at the waist and cuffs. The boots were sacks of soft leather, almost shapeless until my feet were laced inside them, padded with sheared wool and trimmed with fur. They fastened to the feet with long wrappings of leather strips. My trembling fingers made tying them a difficult task. Jonqui had told us they were wonderful for the dry snow of the mountains, but to beware of getting them wet. There was a looking glass in the room. At first, I smiled at my reflection. Not even King Shrewd's Fool dressed as gaily as this. But above the bright garments, my face was thin and pale, making my dark eyes too large, while my fever-shorn hair, black and bristly, stood up like a dog's hackles. My illness had ravaged me. But I told myself I was finally on my way home. I turned aside from the mirror. As I packed the few small gifts I had selected to take home to my friends, the unsteadiness grew in my hands.

For the last time, Burrich, Hands and I sat down to break fast with Jonqui. I thanked her once again for all she had done towards healing me. I

picked up a spoon for the porridge, and my hand gave a twitch. I dropped it. I watched the silvery shape fall and fell after it.

The next thing I remember is the shadowy corners of the bedroom. I lay for a long time, not moving or speaking. I went from a state of emptiness to knowing I had had another seizure. It had passed; both body and mind were mine to command once more. But I no longer wanted them. At fifteen years old, an age when most were coming into their full strength, I could no longer trust my body to perform the simplest task. It was damaged, and I rejected it fiercely. I felt savagely vindictive toward the flesh and bone that enclosed me, and wished for some way to express my raging disappointment. Why couldn't I heal? Why hadn't I recovered?

'It's going to take time, that's all. Wait until half a year has passed since the day you were damaged. Then assess yourself.' It was Jonqui the healer. She was sitting near the fireplace, but her chair was drawn back into the shadows. I hadn't noticed her until she spoke. She rose slowly, as if the winter made her bones ache, and came to stand beside my bed.

'I don't want to live like an old man.'

She pursed her lips. 'Sooner or later, you will have to. At least, I so wish that you will survive that many years. I am old, and so is my brother King Eyod. We do not find it so great a burden.'

'I should not mind an old man's body if the years had earned it for me. But I can't go on like this.'

She shook her head, puzzled. 'Of course you can. Healing is tedious sometimes, but to say that you cannot go on ... I do not understand. It is, perhaps, a difference in our languages?'

I took a breath to speak, but at that moment Burrich came in. 'Awake? Feeling better?'

'Awake. Not feeling better,' I grumbled. Even to myself, I sounded like a fretful child.

Burrich and Jonqui exchanged glances over me. She came to the bedside, patted my shoulder, and then left the room silently. Their obvious tolerance was galling, and my impotent anger rose like a tide. 'Why can't you heal me?' I demanded of Burrich.

He was taken aback by the accusation in my question. 'It's not that simple,' he began.

'Why not?' I hauled myself up straight in the bed. 'I've seen you cure all manner of ailments in beasts. Sickness, broken bones, worms, mange ...

you're Stablemaster, and I've seen you treat them all. Why can't you cure me?'

'You're not a dog, Fitz,' Burrich said quietly. 'It's simpler with a beast, when it's seriously ill. I've taken drastic measures, sometimes, telling myself, well, if the animal dies, at least it's not suffering any more, and this may heal it. I can't do that with you. You're not a beast.'

'That's no answer! Half the time the guards come to you instead of the healer. You took the head of an arrow out of Den. You laid his whole arm open to do it! When the healer said that Greydin's foot was too infected and she'd have to lose it, she came to you, and you saved it. And all the time the healer was saying the infection would spread and she'd die and it would be your fault.'

Burrich folded his lips, quelling his temper. If I'd been healthy, I'd have been wary of his wrath. But his restraint with me during my convalescence had made me bold. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and controlled. 'Those were risky healings, yes. But the folk who wanted them done knew the risks. And,' he said, raising his voice to cover the objection I'd been about to voice, 'they were simple things. I knew the cause. Take out the arrow head and haft from his arm and clean it up. Poultice and draw the infection from Greydin's foot. But your sickness isn't that simple. Neither Jonqui nor I really know what's wrong with you. Is it the aftermath of the poison Kettricken fed you when she thought you had come to kill her brother? Is this the effect of the poisoned wine that Regal arranged for you? Or is it from the beating you took afterward? From being near drowned? Or did all those things combine to do this to you? We don't know, and so we don't know how to cure you. We just don't know.'

His voice clenched on his last words, and I suddenly saw how his sympathy for me overlay his frustration. He paced a few steps, then halted to stare into the fire. 'We've talked long about it. Jonqui has much in her mountain lore that I have never heard of before. And I've told her of cures I know. But we both agreed the best thing to do was give you time to heal. You're in no danger of dying that we can see. Possibly, in time, your own body can cast out the last vestiges of the poison, or heal whatever damage was done inside you.'

'Or,' I added quietly, 'it's possible that I'll be this way the rest of my life. That the poison or the beating damaged something permanently. Damn Regal, to kick me like that when I was trussed already.'

Burrich stood as if turned to ice. Then he sagged into the chair in the shadows. Defeat was in his voice. 'Yes. That is just as possible as the other. But don't you see we have no choice? I could physick you to try to force the poison out of your body. But if it's damage, not poison, all I would do was weaken you so that your body's own healing would take that much longer.' He stared into the flames, and lifted a hand to touch a streak of white at his temple. I was not the only one who'd fallen to Regal's treachery. Burrich himself was but newly recovered from a skull blow that would have killed anyone less thick-headed than he. I knew he had endured long days of dizziness and blurred vision. I did not recall he had complained at all. I had the decency to feel a bit of shame.

'So what do I do?'

Burrich started as if roused from dozing. 'What we've been doing. Wait. Eat. Rest. Be easy on yourself. And see what happens. Is that so terrible?'

I ignored his question. 'And if I don't get better? If I just stay like this, where the tremors or fits can come over me at any time?'

His answer was slow in coming. 'Live with it. Many folk have to live with worse. Most of the time, you're fine. You're not blind. You're not paralyzed. You've your wits, still. Stop defining yourself by what you can't do. Why don't you consider what you didn't lose?'

'What I didn't lose? What I didn't *lose*?' My anger rose like a covey of birds taking flight and likewise driven by panic. 'I'm helpless, Burrich. I can't go back to Buckkeep like this! I'm useless. I'm worse than useless, I'm a waiting victim. If I could go back and batter Regal into a pulp, that might be worth it. Instead, I will have to sit at table with Prince Regal, to be civil and deferential to a man who plotted to overthrow Verity and kill me as an added spice. I can't endure him seeing me tremble with weakness, or suddenly fall in a seizure. I don't want to see him smile at what he has made me; I don't want to watch him savour his triumph. He will try to kill me again. We both know that. Perhaps he has learned he is no match for Verity, perhaps he will respect his older brother's reign and new wife. But I doubt he will extend that to me. It'll be one more way he can strike at Verity. And when he comes, what shall I be doing? Sitting by the fire like a palsied old man, doing nothing. Nothing! All I've been trained for, all Hod's weaponry instruction, all Fedwren's careful teachings about lettering, even all you've taught me about taking care of beasts! All a waste! I can do none of it. I'm

just a bastard again, Burrich. And someone once told me that a royal bastard is kept alive only so long as he is useful.' I was practically shouting, but even in my fury and despair, I did not speak aloud of Chade and my training as an assassin. At that, too, I was useless now. All my stealth and sleight of hand, all the precise ways to kill a man by touch, the painstaking mixing of poisons, all were denied me by my own rattling body.

Burrich sat quietly, hearing me out. When my breath and my anger ran out and I sat gasping in my bed, clasping my traitorously trembling hands together, he spoke calmly.

'So. Are you saying we don't go back to Buckkeep?'

That put me off balance. 'We?'

'My life is pledged to the man who wears that earring. There's a long story behind that, one that perhaps I'll tell you someday. Patience had no right to give it to you. I thought it had gone with Prince Chivalry to his grave. She probably thought it just a simple piece of jewellery her husband had worn, hers to keep or to give. In any wise, you wear it now. Where you go, I follow.'

I lifted my hand to the bauble. It was a tiny blue stone caught up in a web of silver net. I started to unfasten it.

'Don't do that,' Burrich said. The words were quiet, deeper than a dog's growl. But his voice held both threat and command. I dropped my hand away, unable to question him on this at least. I felt strange that the man who had watched over me since I was an abandoned child now put his future into my hands. Yet there he sat before the fire and waited for my words. I studied what I could see of him in the dance of the firelight. He had once seemed a surly giant to me, dark and threatening, but also a savage protector. Now, for perhaps the first time, I studied him as a man. The dark hair and eyes were prevalent in those who carried Outislander blood, and in this we resembled each other. But his eyes were brown, not black, and the wind brought a redness to his cheeks above his curling beard that bespoke a fairer ancestor somewhere. When he walked, he limped, very noticeably on cold days, the legacy of turning aside a boar that had been trying to kill Chivalry. He was not as big as he had once seemed to me. If I kept on growing, I would probably be taller than he was before another year was out. Nor was he massively muscled, but instead had a compactness to him that was a readiness of both muscle and mind. It was not his size that had made him both feared and respected at Buckkeep, but his black temper and his tenacity.

Once, when I was very young, I had asked him if he had ever lost a fight. He had just subdued a wilful young stallion and was in the stall with him, calming him. Burrich had grinned, teeth showing white as a wolf's. The sweat had stood out in droplets on his forehead and was running down his cheeks into his dark beard. He spoke to me over the side of the stall. 'Lost a fight?' he'd asked, still out of breath. 'The fight isn't over until you win it, Fitz. That's all you have to remember. No matter what the other man thinks. Or the horse.'

I wondered if I were a fight he had to win. He'd often told me that I was the last task Chivalry had given him. My father had abdicated the throne, shamed by my existence. Yet he'd given me over to this man, and told him to raise me well. Maybe Burrich thought he hadn't finished that task yet.

'What do you think I should do?' I asked humbly. Neither the words nor the humility came easily.

'Heal,' he said after a few moments. 'Take the time to heal. It can't be forced.' He glanced down at his own legs stretched toward the fire. Something not a smile twisted his lips.

'Do you think we should go back?' I pressed.

He leaned back into the chair. He crossed his booted feet at the ankle and stared into the fire. He took a long time answering. But finally he said, almost reluctantly, 'If we don't, Regal will think he has won. And he will try to kill Verity. Or at least do whatever he thinks he must to make a grab for his brother's crown. I am sworn to my king, Fitz, as are you. Right now that is King Shrewd. But Verity is King-in-Waiting. I don't think it right that he should have waited in vain.'

'He has other soldiers more capable than I.'

'Does that free you from your promise?'

'You argue like a priest.'

'I don't argue at all. I merely asked you a question. And one other. What do you forsake, if you leave Buckkeep behind?'

It was my turn to fall silent. I did think of my king, and all I had sworn to him. I thought of Prince Verity and his bluff heartiness and open ways with me. I recalled old Chade and his slow smile when I had finally mastered some arcane bit of lore. Lady Patience and her maid Lacey, Fedwren and Hod, even Cook and Mistress Hasty the seamstress. There were not so many folk that had cared for me, but that made them more significant, not less. I would miss all of them if I never went back to

Buckkeep. But what leaped up in me like an ember rekindled was my memory of Molly. And somehow, I found myself speaking of her to Burrich, and him just nodding as I spilled out the whole story.

When he did speak, he told me only that he had heard that the Beebalm Chandlery had closed when the old drunkard that owned it had died in debt. His daughter had been forced to go to relatives in another town. He did not know what town, but he was certain I could find it out, if I were determined. 'Know your heart before you do, Fitz,' he added. 'If you've nothing to offer her, let her go. Are you crippled? Only if you decide so. But if you're determined that you're a cripple now, then perhaps you've no right to go and seek her out. I don't think you'd want her pity. It's a poor substitute for love.' And then he rose and left me to stare into the fire and think.

Was I a cripple? Had I lost? My body jangled like badly-tuned harp strings. That was true. But my will, not Regal's, had prevailed. My Prince Verity was still in line for the Six Duchies throne, and the Mountain princess was his wife now. Did I dread him smirking over my trembling hands? Could I not smirk back at he who would never be king? A savage satisfaction welled up in me. Burrich was right. I had not lost. But I could make sure that Regal knew I had won.

If I had won against Regal, could I not win Molly as well? What stood between her and me? Jade? But Burrich had heard she had left Buckkeep Town, not wed. Gone penniless to live with relatives. Shame upon him, had Jade let her do so. I would seek her out, I would find her and win her. Molly, with her hair loose and blowing, Molly with her bright red skirts and cloak, bold as a red-robber bird, and eyes as bright. The thought of her sent a shiver down my spine. I smiled to myself, and then felt my lips set like a rictus, and the shiver became a shuddering. My body spasmed and the back of my head rebounded sharply off the bedstead. I cried out involuntarily, a gargling wordless cry.

In an instant Jonqui was there, calling Burrich back, and then they were both holding down my flailing limbs. Burrich's body weight was flung on top of me as he strove to restrain my thrashing. And then I was gone.

I came out of blackness into light, like surfacing from a deep dive into warm waters. The down of the feather bed cradled me, the blankets were soft and warm. I felt safe. For a moment, all was peaceful. I lay quiescent, almost feeling good.

'Fitz?' Burrich asked, leaning over me.

The world came back. I knew myself a mangled, pitiful thing, a puppet with half its strings tangled or a horse with a severed tendon. I would never be as I was before; there was no place left for me in the world I had once inhabited. Burrich had said, pity is a poor substitute for love. I wanted pity from none of them.

‘Burrich.’

He leaned closer over me. ‘It wasn’t that bad,’ he lied. ‘Just rest now. Tomorrow ...’

‘Tomorrow you leave for Buckkeep,’ I told him.

He frowned. ‘Let’s take it slowly. Give yourself a few days to recover, and then we’ll ...’

‘No.’ I dragged myself up to a sitting position. I put every bit of strength I had into the words. ‘I’ve made a decision. Tomorrow you will go back to Buckkeep. There are people and animals waiting for you there. You’re needed. It’s your home and your world. But it’s not mine. Not any more.’

He was silent for a long moment. ‘And what will you do?’

I shook my head. ‘That’s no longer your concern. Or anyone’s, save mine.’

‘The girl?’

I shook my head again, more violently. ‘She’s taken care of one cripple already, and spent her youth doing so only to find that he left her a debtor. Shall I go back and seek her out, like this? Shall I ask her to love me, so I can be a burden to her like her father was? No. Alone or wed to another, she’s better off now as she is.’

The silence stretched long between us. Jonqui was busy in a corner of the room, concocting yet another herbal draught that would do nothing for me. Burrich stood over me, black and lowering as a thundercloud. I knew how badly he wanted to shake me, how he longed to cuff the stubbornness from me. But he did not. Burrich did not hit cripples.

‘So,’ he said at last. ‘That leaves only your king. Or do you forget you are sworn as a King’s Man?’

‘I do not forget,’ I said quietly. ‘And did I believe myself a man still, I would go back. But I am not, Burrich. I am a liability. On the gameboard, I have become but one of those tokens that must be protected. A hostage for the taking, powerless to defend myself or anyone else. No. The last act I can

make as a King's Man is to remove myself, before someone else does and injures my king in the doing.'

Burrich turned aside from me. He was a silhouette in the dim room, his face unreadable by the firelight. 'Tomorrow we will talk,' he began.

'Only to say farewell,' I interrupted. 'My heart is firm on this, Burrich.' I reached up to touch the earring in my ear.

'If you stay, then so must I.' There was a fierceness in his low voice.

'That isn't how it works,' I told him. 'Once, my father told you to stay behind, and raise a bastard for him. Now I tell you to leave, to go to serve a king who still needs you.'

'FitzChivalry, I don't –'

'Please.' I don't know what he heard in my voice. Only that he was suddenly still. 'I am so tired. So damnably tired. The only thing I know is that I can't live up to what every one else thinks I should do. I just can't do it.' My voice quavered like an old man's. 'No matter what I ought to do. No matter what I am pledged to do. There isn't enough of me left to keep my word. Maybe that's not right, but that's how it is. Every one else's plans. Every one else's goals. Never mine. I tried, but ...' The room rocked around me as if someone else were speaking, and I was shocked at what he was saying. But I couldn't deny the truth of his words. 'I need to be alone now. To rest,' I said simply.

Both of them just looked at me. Neither one of them spoke. They left the room, slowly, as if hoping I would relent and call them back. I did not.

But after they had gone, and I was alone, I permitted myself to breathe out. I felt dizzy with the decision I had made. I wasn't going back to Buckkeep. What I was going to do, I had no idea. I had swept my broken bits of life from the game table. Now there was room to set out anew what pieces I still had, to plot a new strategy for living. Slowly, I realized I had no doubts. Regrets warred with relief, but I had no doubts. Somehow it was much more bearable to move forward into a life where no one would recall who I had once been. A life not pledged to someone else's will. Not even my king's. It was done. I lay back in my bed, and for the first time in weeks, I relaxed completely. Farewell, I thought wearily. I would have liked to wish them all farewell, to stand one last time before Verity and see his brief nod that I had done well. Perhaps I could have made him understand why I did not wish to go back. It was not to be. It was done now, all done. 'I am sorry,

my king,' I muttered. I stared into the dancing flames in the hearth until sleep claimed me.

ONE

Siltbay

To be the King-in-Waiting, or the Queen-in-Waiting, is to straddle firmly the fence between responsibility and authority. It is said that the position was created to satisfy the ambitions of an heir for power, while schooling him in the exercising of it. The eldest child in the royal family assumes this position upon its sixteenth birthday. From that day on, the King- or Queen-in-Waiting assumes a full share of responsibility for the running of the Six Duchies. Generally, he immediately assumes such duties as the ruling monarch cares for least, and these have varied greatly from reign to reign.

Under King Shrewd, Prince Chivalry first became King-in-Waiting. To him, King Shrewd ceded over all that had to do with the borders and frontiers: warfare, negotiations and diplomacy, the discomforts of extended travel and the miserable conditions often encountered on the campaigns. When Chivalry abdicated and Prince Verity became King-in-Waiting, he inherited all the uncertainties of the war with the Outislanders, and the civil unrest this situation created between the Inland and Coastal duchies. All of these tasks were rendered more difficult in that, at any time, his decisions could be overridden by the King. Often he was left to cope with a situation not of his creating, armed only with options not of his choosing.

Even less tenable, perhaps, was the position of Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken. Her Mountain ways marked her as a foreigner in the Six Duchies court. In peaceful times, perhaps she would have been received with more tolerance. But the court at Buckkeep seethed with the general unrest of the Six Duchies. The Red Ships from the Outislands harried our shoreline as they had not for generations, destroying far more than they stole. The first winter of Kettricken's reign as Queen-in-Waiting saw also the first winter raiding we had ever experienced. The constant threat of raids, and the lingering torment of Forged ones in our midst rocked the foundations of the

Six Duchies. Confidence in the monarchy was low, and Kettricken had the unenviable position of being an unadmired King-in-Waiting's outlandish queen.

Civil unrest divided the court as the Inland duchies voiced their resentment at taxes to protect a coastline they did not share. The Coastal duchies cried out for warships and soldiers and an effective way to battle the raiders that always struck where we were least prepared. Inland-bred Prince Regal sought to gather power to himself by courting the Inland dukes with gifts and social attentions. King-in-Waiting Verity, convinced that his Skill was no longer sufficient to hold the raiders at bay, put his attentions to building warships to guard the Coastal duchies, with little time for his new queen. Over all, King Shrewd crouched like a great spider, endeavouring to keep power spread amongst himself and his sons, to keep all in balance and the Six Duchies intact.

I awakened to someone touching my forehead. With an annoyed grunt, I turned my head aside from the touch. My blankets were weltered around me; I fought my way clear of their restraint and then sat up to see who had dared disturb me. King Shrewd's Fool perched anxiously on a chair beside my bed. I stared at him wildly, and he drew back from my look. Uneasiness assailed me.

The Fool should have been back in Buckkeep, with the King, many miles and days from here. I had never known him to leave the King's side for more than a few hours or a night's rest. That he was here boded no good. The Fool was my friend, as much as his strangeness allowed him to be friends with anyone. But a visit from him always had a purpose, and such purposes were seldom trivial or pleasant. He looked as weary as I had ever seen him. He wore an unfamiliar motley of greens and reds and carried a fool's sceptre with a rat's head on it. The gay garments contrasted too strongly with his colourless skin, making him a translucent candle wreathed in holly. His clothing seemed more substantial than he did. His fine, pale hair floated from the confines of his cap like a drowned man's hair in sea water, while the dancing flames of the fireplace shone in his eyes. I rubbed my gritty eyes and pushed some of the hair back from my face. It was damp; I'd been sweating in my sleep.

'Hello,' I managed. 'I didn't expect to see you here.' My mouth felt dry, my tongue thick and sour. I'd been sick, I recalled. The details seemed hazy.

‘Where else?’ He looked at me woefully. ‘For every hour you’ve slept, the less rested you seem. Lie back, my lord. Let me make you comfortable.’ He plucked at my pillows fussily, but I waved him away. Something was wrong here. Never had he spoken me so fair. Friends we were, but the Fool’s words to me were always as pithy and sour as half-ripened fruit. If this sudden kindness was a show of pity, I wanted none of it.

I glanced down at my embroidered nightshirt, at the rich bedcovers. Something seemed odd about them. I was too tired and weak to puzzle it out. ‘What are you doing here?’ I asked him.

He took a breath and sighed. ‘I am tending you. Watching over you while you sleep. I know you think it foolish, but then, I am the Fool. You know then that I must be Foolish. Yet you ask me this same thing every time you awake. Let me then propose something wiser. I beg you, my lord, let me send for another healer.’

I leaned back against my pillows. They were sweat-damp, and smelled sour to me. I knew I could ask the Fool to change them and he would, but I would just sweat anew if he did. It was useless. I clutched at my covers with gnarled fingers and asked him bluntly, ‘Why have you come here?’

He took my hand in his and patted it. ‘My lord, I mistrust this sudden weakness. You seem to take no good from this healer’s ministrations. I fear that his knowledge is much smaller than his opinion of it.’

‘Burrich?’ I asked incredulously.

‘Burrich? Would that he were here, my lord! He may be the Stablemaster, but for all that, I warrant he is more of a healer than this Wallace who doses and sweats you.’

‘Wallace? Burrich is not here?’

The Fool’s face grew graver. ‘No, my king. He remained in the mountains, as well you know.’

‘Your king,’ I said, and attempted to laugh. ‘Such mockery.’

‘Never, my lord,’ he said gently. ‘Never.’

His tenderness confused me. This was not the Fool I knew, full of twisting words and riddles, of sly jabs and puns and cunning insults. I felt suddenly stretched thin as old rope, and as frayed. Still, I tried to piece things together. ‘Then I am in Buckkeep?’

He nodded slowly. ‘Of course you are.’ Worry pinched his mouth.

I was silent, plumbing the full depth of my betrayal. Somehow I had been returned to Buckkeep. Against my will. Burrich had not even seen fit to

accompany me.

‘Let me get you some food,’ the Fool begged me. ‘You always feel better after you have eaten.’ He rose. ‘I brought it up hours ago. I’ve kept it warm by the hearth.’

My eyes followed him wearily. At the big hearth he crouched to coax a covered tureen away from the edge of the fire. He lifted the lid and I smelled the rich beef stew. He began to ladle it into a bowl. It had been months since I’d had beef. In the mountains, it was all venison and mutton and goat’s flesh. My eyes wandered wearily about the room. The heavy tapestries, the massive wooden chairs. The heavy stones of the fireplace, the richly worked bed-hangings. I knew this place. This was the King’s bedchamber at Buckkeep. Why was I here, in the King’s own bed? I tried to ask the Fool, but another spoke with my lips. ‘I know too many things, Fool. I can no longer stop myself from knowing them. Sometimes it is as if another controlled my will, and pushed my mind where I would rather it did not go. My walls are breached. It all pours in like a tide.’ I drew a deep breath, but I could not stave it off. First a chill tingling, then as if I were immersed in a swift flowing of cold water. ‘A rising tide,’ I gasped. ‘Bearing ships. Red-keeled ships ...’

The Fool’s eyes widened in alarm. ‘In this season, your majesty? Surely not! Not in winter!’

My breath was pressed tight in my chest. I struggled to speak. ‘The winter has crept in too softly. She has spared us both her storms and her protection. Look. Look out there, across the water. See? They come. They come from the fog.’

I lifted my arm to point. The Fool came hastily, to stand beside me. He crouched to peer where I pointed, but I knew he could not see. Still, he loyally placed a hesitant hand on my thin shoulder, and stared as if he could will away the walls and the miles that stood between him and my vision. I longed to be as blind as he. I clasped the long-fingered, pale hand that rested on my shoulder. For a moment I looked down at my withered hand, at the royal signet ring that clung to a bony finger behind a swollen knuckle. Then my reluctant gaze was drawn up and my vision taken afar.

My pointing hand indicated the quiet harbour. I struggled to sit up taller, to see more. The darkened town spread out before me like a patchwork of houses and roads. Fog lay in hollows and was thick upon the bay. Weather change coming, I thought to myself. Something stirred in the

air that chilled me, cooling the old sweat on my skin so that I shivered. Despite the blackness of the night and the fog, I had no difficulty in seeing everything perfectly. Skill-watching I told myself, and then wondered. I could not Skill, not predictably, not usefully.

But as I watched, two ships broke out of the mists and emerged into the sleeping harbour. I forgot what I could or could not do. They were sleek and trim, those ships, and though they were black under the moonlight, I knew their keels were red. Red Ship Raiders from the Outislands. The ships moved like knives through the wavelets, cutting their way clear of the fog, slicing into the protected water of the harbour like a thin blade slicing into a pig's belly. The oars moved silently, in perfect unison, oarlocks muffled with rags. They came alongside the docks as boldly as honest merchants come to trade. From the first boat, a sailor leaped lightly, carrying a line to make fast to a piling. An oarsman fended her off the dock until the aft line was thrown and made fast as well. All so calmly, so blatantly. The second ship was following their example. The dreaded Red Ships had come into town, bold as gulls, and tied up at their victims' home dock.

No sentry cried out. No watchman blew a horn, or threw a torch onto a waiting heap of pitchpine to kindle a signal fire. I looked for them, and instantly found them. Heads on chests, they were idling at their posts. Good woollen homespun had gone from grey to red sopping up the blood of their slit throats. Their killers had come quietly, overland, sure of each sentry post, to silence every watcher. No one would warn the sleeping town.

There had not been that many sentries. There was not much to this little town, scarce enough to deserve a dot on the map. The town had counted on the humbleness of its possessions to shelter it from raids such as this. Good wool they grew there, and they spun a fine yarn, it was true. They harvested and smoked the salmon that came right up their river, and the apples here were tiny but sweet, and they made a good wine. There was a fine clam beach to the west of town. These were the riches of Siltbay, and if they were not great, they were enough to make life treasured by those who lived here. Surely, though, they were not worth coming after with a torch and a blade. What sane man would think a keg of apple wine or a rack of smoked salmon worth a raider's time?

But these were Red Ships, and they did not come to raid for wealth or treasures. They were not after prize breeding cattle or even women for wives or boys for galley slaves. The wool-fat sheep would be mutilated and

slaughtered, the smoked salmon trampled underfoot, the warehouses of fleeces and wines torched. They would take hostages, yes, but only to Forge them. The Forge magic would leave them less than human, bereft of all emotions and any but the most basic thoughts. The Raiders would not keep these hostages, but would abandon them here, to work their debilitating anguish upon those who had loved them and called them kin. Stripped of every human sensitivity, Forged ones would scour their homeland as pitilessly as wolverines. This setting of our own kin to prey upon us as Forged ones was the Outislanders' cruellest weapon. This I already knew as I watched. I had seen the aftermath of other raids.

I watched the tide of death rise to inundate the little town. The Outislander pirates leaped from the ship to the docks and flowed up into the village. They trickled silently up the streets in bands of twos and threes, as deadly as poison unfurling in wine. Some few paused to search the other vessels tied to the dock. Most of the boats were small open dories, but there were two larger fishing vessels and one trader. Their crews met swift death. Their frantic struggles were as pathetic as fowl flapping and squawking when a weasel gets into the chicken house. They called out to me with voices full of blood. The thick fog gulped their cries greedily. It made the death of a sailor no more than the keening of a sea bird. Afterwards, the boats were torched, carelessly, with no thought to their value as spoils. These raiders took no real booty. Perhaps a handful of coins if easily found, or a necklace from the body of one they had raped and killed, but little more than that.

I could do nothing except watch. I coughed heavily, then found a breath to speak. 'If only I could understand them,' I said to the Fool. 'If only I knew what they wanted. There is no sense to these Red Ships. How can we fight those who war for a reason they will not divulge? But if I could understand them ...'

The Fool pursed his pale lips and considered. 'They partake of the madness of he who drives them. They can only be understood if you share that madness. I myself have no wish to understand them. Understanding them will not stop them.'

'No.' I did not want to watch the village. I had seen this nightmare too often. But only a heartless man could have turned away as if it were a poorly-staged puppet show. The least I could do for my people was to watch

them die. It also was the most I could do for them. I was sick and a cripple, an old man far away. No more could be expected from me. So I watched.

I watched the little town awaken from soft sleep to the rough grip of a strange hand on the throat or breast, to a knife over a cradle, or the sudden cry of a child dragged from sleep. Lights began to flicker and glow throughout the village; some were candles kindled on hearing a neighbour's outcry; others were torches or burning houses. Although the Red Ships had terrorized the Six Duchies for over a year, for these folk it became completely real tonight. They had thought they were prepared. They had heard the horror stories, and resolved never to let it happen to them. But still the houses burned and the screams rose to the night sky as if borne on the smoke.

'Speak, Fool,' I commanded hoarsely. 'Remember forward for me. What do they say about Siltbay? A raid on Siltbay, in winter.'

He took a shuddering breath. 'It is not easy, nor clear,' he hesitated. 'All wavers, all is change still. Too much is in flux, your majesty. The future spills out in all directions there.'

'Speak any you can see,' I commanded.

'They made a song about this town,' the Fool observed hollowly. He gripped my shoulder still; through my nightshirt, the clutch of his long, strong fingers was cold. A trembling passed between us and I felt how he laboured to continue standing beside me. 'When it is sung in a tavern, with the refrain hammered out to the beat of ale mugs upon a table, none of this seems so bad. One can imagine the brave stand these folks made, going down fighting rather than surrendering. Not one, not one single person, was taken alive and Forged. Not one.' The Fool paused. A hysterical note mingled with the levity he forced into his voice. 'Of course, when you're drinking and singing, you don't see the blood. Or smell the burning flesh. Or hear the screams. But that's understandable. Have you ever tried to find a rhyme for "dismembered child"? Someone once tried "remembered wild" but the verse still didn't quite scan.' There was no merriment in his banter. His bitter jests could shield neither him nor me. He fell silent once more, my prisoner doomed to share his painful knowledge with me.

I witnessed in silence. No verse would tell of a parent pushing a poison pellet into a child's mouth to keep him from the Raiders. No one could sing of children crying out with the cramps of the swift, harsh poison, or the women who were raped as they lay dying. No rhyme nor melody could bear

the weight of telling of archers whose truest arrows slew captured kinfolk before they could be dragged away. I peered into the interior of a burning house. Through the flames, I watched a ten-year-old boy bare his throat for the slash of his mother's knife. He held the body of his baby sister, strangled already, for the Red Ships had come, and no loving brother would give her to either the Raiders or the voracious flames. I saw the mother's eyes as she lifted her children's bodies and carried them into the flames with her. Such things are better not remembered. But I was not spared the knowledge. It was my duty to know these things, and to recall them.

Not all died. Some fled into the surrounding fields and forests. I saw one young man take four children under the docks with him, to cling in the chill water to the barnacled pilings until the raiders left. Others tried to flee and were slain as they ran. I saw a woman in a nightgown slip from a house. Flames were already running up the side of the building. She carried one child in her arms and another clung to her skirts and followed her. Even in the darkness, the light from the fired huts awoke burnished highlights in her hair. She glanced about fearfully, but the long knife she carried in her free hand was up and at the ready. I caught a glimpse of a small mouth set grimly, eyes narrowed fiercely. Then, for an instant, I saw that proud profile limned against firelight. 'Molly!' I gasped. I reached a clawed hand to her. She lifted a door and shooed the children down into a root cellar behind the blazing home. She lowered the door silently over them all. Safe?

No. They came around the corner, two of them. One carried an axe. They were walking slowly, swaggering and laughing aloud. The soot that smeared their faces made their teeth and the whites of their eyes stand out. One was a woman. She was very beautiful, laughing as she strode. Fearless. Her hair was braided back with silver wire. The flames winked red in it. The Raiders advanced to the door of the root cellar, and the one swung his axe in a great arcing blow. The axe bit deep into the wood. I heard the terrified cry of a child. 'Molly!' I shrieked. I scrabbled from my bed, but had no strength to stand. I crawled toward her.

The door gave way, and the Raiders laughed. One died laughing as Molly came leaping through the shattered remnants of the door to put her long knife into his throat. But the beautiful woman with the shining silver in her hair had a sword. And as Molly struggled to pull her knife clear of the dying man, that sword was falling, falling, falling.

At that instant, something gave way in the burning house with a sharp crack. The structure swayed and then fell in a shower of sparks and an upburst of roaring flames. A curtain of fire soared up between me and the root cellar. I could see nothing through that inferno. Had it fallen across the door of the root cellar and the Raiders attacking it? I could not see. I lunged forth, reaching out for Molly.

But in an instant, all was gone. There was no burning house, no pillaged town, no violated harbour, no Red Ships. Only myself, crouching by the hearth. I had thrust my hand into the fire and my fingers clutched a coal. The Fool cried out and seized my wrist to pull my hand from the fire. I shook him off, then looked at my blistered fingers dully.

‘My king,’ the Fool said woefully. He knelt beside me, carefully moved the tureen of soup by my knee. He moistened a napkin in the wine he had poured for my meal, and folded it over my fingers. I let him. I could not feel the burned skin for the great wound inside me. His worried eyes stared into mine. I could scarcely see him. He seemed an insubstantial thing, with the faltering flames of the fireplace showing in his colourless eyes. A shadow like all the other shadows that came to torment me.

My burned fingers throbbed suddenly. I clutched them in my other hand. What had I been doing, what had I been thinking? The Skill had come on me like a fit, and then departed, leaving me as drained as an empty glass. Weariness flowed in to fill me, and pain rode it like a horse. I struggled to retain what I had seen. ‘What woman was that? Is she important?’

‘Ah.’ The Fool seemed even wearier, but struggled to gather himself. ‘A woman at Siltbay?’ He paused as if racking his brains. ‘No. I have nothing. It is all a muddle, my king. So hard to know.’

‘Molly has no children,’ I told him. ‘It could not have been her.’

‘Molly?’

‘Her name is Molly?’ I demanded. My head throbbed. Anger suddenly possessed me. ‘Why do you torment me like this?’

‘My lord, I know of no Molly. Come. Come back to your bed, and I will bring you some food.’

He helped me to my feet and I tolerated his touch. I found my voice. I floated, the focus of my eyes coming and going. One moment I could feel his hand on my arm, the next it seemed as if I dreamed the room and the men who spoke there. I managed to speak. ‘I have to know if that was Molly. I have to know if she is dying. Fool, I have to know.’

The Fool sighed heavily. 'It is not a thing I can command my king. You know that. Like your visions, mine rule me, not the reverse. I cannot pluck a thread from the tapestry, but must look where my eyes are pointed. The future, my king, is like a current in a channel. I cannot tell you where one drop of water goes, but I can tell you where the flow is strongest.'

'A woman at Siltbay,' I insisted. Part of me pitied my poor Fool, but another part insisted. 'I would not have seen her so clearly if she were not important. Try. Who was she?'

'She is significant?'

'Yes. I am sure of it. Oh, yes.'

The Fool sat cross-legged on the floor. He put his long fingers to his temples and pressed as if trying to open a door. 'I know not. I don't understand ... All is a muddle, all is a crossroads. The tracks are trampled, the scents gone awry ...' He looked up at me. Somehow I had stood, but he sat on the floor at my feet, looking up at me. His pale eyes goggled in his eggshell face. He swayed from the strain, smiled foolishly. He considered his rat sceptre, went nose to nose with it. 'Did you know any such Molly, Ratsy? No? I didn't think you would. Perhaps he should ask someone more in a position to know. The worms, perhaps.' A silly giggling seized him. Useless creature. Silly riddling soothsayer. Well, he could not help what he was. I left him and walked slowly back to my bed. I sat on the edge of it.

I found I was shaking as if with an ague. A seizure, I told myself. I must calm myself or risk a seizure. Did I want the Fool to see me twitching and gasping? I didn't care. Nothing mattered, except finding out if that was my Molly, and if so, had she perished? I had to know. I had to know if she had died, and if she had died, how she had died. Never had the knowing of something been so essential to me.

The Fool crouched on the rug like a pale toad. He wet his lips and smiled at me. Pain sometimes can wring such a smile from a man. 'It's a very glad song, the one they sing about Siltbay,' he observed. 'A triumphant song. The villagers won, you see. Didn't win life for themselves, no, but clean death. Well, death anyway. Death, not Forging. At least that's something. Something to make a song about and hold onto these days. That's how it is in Six Duchies now. We kill our own so the raiders can't, and then we make victory songs about it. Amazing what folk will take comfort in when there's nothing else to hold onto.'

My vision softened. I knew suddenly that I dreamed. ‘I’m not even here,’ I said faintly. ‘This is a dream. I dream that I am King Shrewd.’

He held his pale hand up to the firelight, considered the bones limned so plainly in the thin flesh. ‘If you say so, my liege, it must be so. I too, then, dream you are King Shrewd. If I pinch you, perhaps, shall I awaken myself?’

I looked down at my hands. They were old and scarred. I closed them, watched veins and tendons bulge beneath the papery surface, felt the sandy resistance of my own swollen knuckles. I’m an old man now, I thought to myself. This is what it really feels like to be old. Not sick, where one might get better. Old. When each day can only be more difficult, each month is another burden to the body. Everything was slipping sideways. I had thought, briefly, that I was fifteen. From somewhere came the scent of scorching flesh and burning hair. No, rich beef stew. No, Jonqui’s healing incense. The mingling scents made me nauseous. I had lost track of who I was, of what was important. I scrabbled at the slippery logic, trying to surmount it. It was hopeless. ‘I don’t know,’ I whispered. ‘I don’t understand any of this.’

‘Ah,’ said the Fool. ‘As I told you. You can only understand a thing when you become it.’

‘Is this what it means to be King Shrewd then?’ I demanded. It shook me to my core. I had never seen him like this, racked by the pains of age but still relentlessly confronted by the pains of his subjects. ‘Is this what he must endure, day after day?’

‘I fear it is, my liege,’ the Fool replied gently. ‘Come. Let me help you back to your bed. Surely, tomorrow you will feel better.’

‘No. We both know I will not.’ I did not speak those terrible words. They came from King Shrewd’s lips, and I heard them, and knew that this was the debilitating truth King Shrewd bore every day. I was so terribly tired. Every part of me ached. I had not known that flesh could be so heavy, that the mere bending of a finger could demand a painful effort. I wanted to rest. To sleep again. Was it I, or Shrewd? I should let the Fool put me to bed, let my king have his rest. But the Fool kept holding that one key morsel of information just above my snapping jaws. He juggled away the one mote of knowledge I must possess to be whole.

‘Did she die there?’ I demanded.

He looked at me sadly. He stooped abruptly, picked up his rat sceptre again. A tiny pearl of a tear trickled down Ratsy’s cheek. He focused on it

and his eyes went afar again, wandering across a tundra of pain. He spoke in a whisper. 'A woman in Siltbay. A drop of water in the current of all the women of Siltbay. What might have befallen her? Did she die? Yes. No. Badly burned, but alive. Her arm severed at the shoulder. Cornered and raped while they killed her children, but left alive. Sort of.' The Fool's eyes became even emptier. It was as if he read aloud from a roster. His voice had no inflection. 'Roasted alive with the children when the burning structure fell on them. Took poison as soon as her husband awoke her. Choked to death on smoke. And died of an infection in a sword wound only a few days later. Died of a sword thrust. Strangled on her own blood as she was raped. Cut her own throat after she had killed the children while Raiders were hacking her door down. Survived, and gave birth to a Raider's child the next summer. Was found wandering days later, badly burned, but recalling nothing. Had her face burned and her hands hacked off, but lived a short ...'

'Stop!' I commanded him. 'Stop it! I beg you, stop.'

He paused and drew a breath. His eyes came back to me, focused on me. 'Stop it?' he sighed. He put his face into his hands, spoke through muffling fingers. 'Stop it? So shrieked the women of Siltbay. But it is done already, my liege. We cannot stop what's already happening. Once it's come to pass, it's too late.' He lifted his face from his hands. He looked very weary.

'Please,' I begged him. 'Cannot you tell me of the one woman I saw?' I suddenly could not recall her name, only that she was very important to me.

He shook his head, and the small silver bells on his cap jingled wearily. 'The only way to find out would be to go there.' He looked up at me. 'If you command it, I shall do so.'

'Summon Verity,' I told him instead. 'I have instructions for him.'

'Our soldiers cannot arrive in time to stop this raid,' he reminded me. 'Only to help to douse the fires and assist the folk there in picking from the ruins what is left to them.'

'Then so they shall do,' I said heavily.

'First, let me help you return to your bed, my king. Before you take a chill. And let me bring you food.'

'No, Fool,' I told him sadly. 'Shall I eat and be warm, while the bodies of children are cooling in the mud? Fetch me instead my robe and buskins. And then be off to find Verity.'

The Fool stood his ground boldly. ‘Do you think the discomfort you inflict on yourself will give even one child another breath, my liege? What happened at Siltbay is done. Why must you suffer?’

‘Why must I suffer?’ I found a smile for the Fool. ‘Surely that is the same question that every inhabitant of Siltbay asked tonight of the fog. I suffer, my Fool, because they did. Because I am king. But more, because I am a man, and I saw what happened there. Consider it, Fool. What if every man in the Six Duchies said to himself, “Well, the worst that can befall them has already happened. Why should I give up my meal and warm bed to concern myself with it?” Fool, by the blood that is in me, these are my folk. Do I suffer more tonight than any one of them did? What is the pain and trembling of one man compared to what happened at Siltbay? Why should I shelter myself, while my folk are slaughtered like cattle?’

‘But two words are all I need to say to Prince Verity.’ The Fool vexed me with more words. “Raiders” and “Siltbay”, and he knows as much as any man needs to. Let me rest you in your bed, my lord, and then I shall race to him with those words.’

‘No.’ A fresh cloud of pain blossomed in the back of my skull. It tried to push the sense from my thoughts, but I held firm. I forced my body to walk to the chair beside the hearth. I managed to lower myself into it. ‘I spent my youth defining the borders of the Six Duchies to any who challenged them. Should my life be too valuable to risk now, when there is so little left of it, and all of that riddled with pain? No, Fool. Fetch my son to me at once. He shall Skill for me, since my own strength for it is at an end this night. Together, we shall consider what we see, and make our decisions as to what must be done. Now go. GO!’

The Fool’s feet pattered on the stone floor as he fled.

I was left alone with myself. Myself. I put my hands to my temples. I felt a painful smile crease my face as I found myself. *So, boy. There you are.* My king slowly turned his attention to me. He was weary, but he reached his Skill towards me to touch my mind as softly as blowing spider web. I reached clumsily, attempting to complete the Skill bond and it all went awry. Our contact tattered, frayed apart like rotten cloth. And then he was gone.

I hunkered alone on the floor of my bedchamber in the Mountain Kingdom, uncomfortably close to the hearth fire. I was fifteen, and my nightclothes were soft and clean. The fire in the hearth had burned low. My

blistered fingers throbbed angrily. The beginnings of a Skill headache pulsed in my temples.

I moved slowly, cautiously, as I rose. Like an old man? No. Like a young man whose health was still mending. I knew the difference now.

My soft, clean bed beckoned, like a soft clean tomorrow.

I refused them both. I took the chair by the hearth and stared into the flames, pondering.

When Burrich came at first light to bid me farewell, I was ready to ride with him.

TWO

The Homecoming

Buckkeep Hold overlooks the finest deep water harbour in the Six Duchies. To the north, the Buck River spills into the sea, and with its waters carries most of the goods exported from the interior Duchies of Tilth and Farrow. Steep black cliffs provide the seat for the castle which overlooks the river mouth, the harbour and the waters beyond. The town of Buckkeep clings precariously to those cliffs, well away from the great river's flood plain, with a good portion of it built on docks and quays. The original stronghold was a log structure built by the inhabitants of the area as a defence against Outislander raids. It was seized in ancient time, by a Raider named Taker, who with the seizing of the fort became a resident. He replaced the timber structure with walls and towers of black stone quarried from the cliffs themselves, and in the process sank the foundations of Buckkeep deep into the stone. With each succeeding generation of the Farseer line, the walls are fortified and the towers built taller and stouter. Since Taker, the founder of the Farseer line, Buckkeep has never fallen to enemy hands.

Snow kissed my face, wind pushed the hair back from my forehead. I stirred from a dark dream to a darker one, to a winterscape in forest land. I was cold, save where the rising heat of my toiling horse warmed me. Beneath me, Sooty was plodding stolidly along through wind-banked snow. I thought I had been riding long. Hands, the stable-boy, was riding before me. He turned in his saddle and shouted something back to me.

Sooty stopped, not abruptly, but I was not expecting it, and I nearly slid from the saddle. I caught at her mane and steadied myself. Falling flakes veiled the forest around us. The spruce trees were heavy with accumulated snow, while the interspersed birches were bare black silhouettes in the clouded winter moonlight. There was no sign of a trail. The woods were thick around us. Hands had reined in his black gelding in front of us, and

that was why Sooty halted. Behind me Burrich sat his roan mare with the practised ease of the lifelong horseman.

I was cold, and shaky with weakness. I looked round dully, wondering why we had stopped. The wind gusted sharply, snapping my damp cloak against Sooty's flank. Hands pointed suddenly. 'There!' He looked back at me. 'Surely you saw that?'

I leaned forward to peer through snow that fell like fluttering lace curtains. 'I think so,' I said, the wind and snow swallowing my words. For an instant I had glimpsed tiny lights, yellow and stationary, unlike the pale blue will o'the wisps that still occasionally plagued my vision.

'Do you think it's Buckkeep?' Hands shouted through the rising wind.

'It is,' Burrich asserted quietly, his deep voice carrying effortlessly. 'I know where we are now. This is where Prince Verity killed that big doe about six years ago. I remember because she leaped when the arrow went in, and tumbled down that gully. It took us the rest of the day to get down there and pack the meat out.'

The gully he gestured to was no more than a line of brush glimpsed through the falling snow. But suddenly it all snapped into place for me. The lie of this hillside, the types of trees, the gully there, and so Buckkeep was that way, just a brief ride before we could clearly see the fortress on the sea-cliffs overlooking the bay and Buckkeep Town below. For the first time in days, I knew with absolute certainty where we were. The heavy overcast had kept us from checking our course by the stars, and the unusually deep snowfall had altered the lay of the land until even Burrich had seemed unsure. But now I knew that home was but a brief ride away. In summer. But I picked up what was left of my determination.

'Not much farther,' I told Burrich.

Hands had already started his horse. The stocky little gelding surged ahead bravely, breaking trail through the banked snow. I nudged Sooty and the tall mare reluctantly stepped out. As she leaned into the hill, I slid to one side. As I scabbled futilely at my saddle, Burrich nudged his horse abreast of mine. He reached out, seized me by the back of my collar and dragged me upright again. 'It's not much farther,' he agreed. 'You'll make it.'

I managed a nod. It was only the second time he'd had to steady me in the last hour or so. One of my better evenings, I told myself bitterly. I pulled myself up straighter in the saddle, resolutely squared my shoulders. Nearly home.

The journey had been long and arduous. The weather had been foul, and the constant hardships had not improved my health. Much of it I remembered like a dark dream; days of jolting along in the saddle, barely cognizant of our path, nights when I lay between Hands and Burrich in our small tent and trembled with a weariness so great I could not even sleep. As we had drawn closer to Buck Duchy, I had thought our travel would become easier. I had not reckoned on Burrich's caution.

At Turlake, we had stopped a night at an inn. I had thought that we'd take passage on a river barge the next day, for though ice might line the banks of the Buck River, its strong current kept a channel clear year round. I went straight to our room, for I had not much stamina. Burrich and Hands were both anticipating hot food and companionship, to say nothing of ale. I had not expected them to come soon to the room. But scarcely two hours had passed before they both came up to ready themselves for bed.

Burrich was grim and silent, but after he had gone to bed, Hands whispered to me from his bed how poorly the King was spoken of in this town. 'Had they known we were from Buckkeep, I doubt they would have spoken so freely. But clad as we are in Mountain garments, they thought us traders or merchants. A dozen times I thought Burrich would challenge one of them. In truth, I do not know how he contained himself. All complain about the taxes for defending the coast. They sneer, saying that for all the taxes they bleed, the Raiders still came unlooked for in autumn, when the weather lasted fine, and burned two more towns.' Hands had paused, and uncertainly added, 'But they speak uncommonly well of Prince Regal. He passed through here escorting Kettricken back to Buckkeep. One man at the table called her a great white fish of a wife, fit for the Coast King. And another spoke up, saying that at least Prince Regal bore himself well despite his hardships, and looked ever as a prince should. Then they drank to the Prince's health and long life.'

A cold settled in me. I whispered back, 'The two Forged villages. Did you hear which ones they were?'

'Whale-jaw up in Bearns. And Siltbay in Buck itself.'

The darkness settled darker around me, and I lay watching it all night.

The next morning we left Turlake. On horseback. Overland. Burrich would not even let us keep to the road. I had protested in vain. He had listened to me complain, then taken me aside to demand fiercely, 'Do you want to die?'

I looked at him blankly. He snorted in disgust.

‘Fitz, nothing has changed. You’re still a royal bastard, and Prince Regal still regards you as an obstacle. He’s tried to be rid of you, not once, but thrice. Do you think he’s going to welcome you back to Buckkeep? No. Even better for him if we never make it back at all. So let’s not make easy targets of ourselves. We go overland. If he or his hirelings want us, they’ll have to hunt us through the woods. And he’s never been much of a hunter.’

‘Wouldn’t Verity protect us?’ I asked weakly.

‘You’re a King’s Man, and Verity is King-in-Waiting,’ Burrich had pointed out shortly. ‘You protect your king, Fitz. Not the reverse. Not that he doesn’t think well of you, and would do all he could to protect you. But he has weightier matters to attend. Red Ships. A new bride. And a younger brother who thinks the crown would sit better on his own head. No. Don’t expect the King-in-Waiting to watch over you. Do that for yourself.’

All I could think of was the extra days he was putting between me and my search for Molly. But I did not give that reason. I had not told him of my dream. Instead, I said, ‘Regal would have to be crazy to try to kill us again. Everyone would know he was the murderer.’

‘Not crazy, Fitz. Just ruthless. Regal is that. Let’s not ever suppose that Regal abides by the rules we observe, or even thinks as we do. If Regal sees an opportunity to kill us, he’ll take it. He won’t care who suspects so long as no one can prove it. Verity is our King-in-Waiting. Not our king. Not yet. While King Shrewd is alive and on the throne, Regal will find ways around his father. He will get away with many things. Even murder.’

Burrich had reined his horse aside from the well travelled road, plunged off through drifts and up the unmarked snowy hillside beyond, to strike a straight course for Buckkeep. Hands had looked at me as if he felt ill. But we had followed. And every night when we had slept, bundled all together in a single tent for warmth instead of in beds at a cosy inn, I had thought of Regal. Every floundering step up each hillside, leading our horses more often than not, and during every cautious descent, I had thought of the youngest prince. I tallied every extra hour between Molly and me. The only times I felt strength surge through me were during my day-dreams of battering Regal into ruin. I could not promise myself revenge. Revenge was the property of the crown. But if I could not have revenge, Regal would not have satisfaction. I would return to Buckkeep, and I would stand tall before him, and when his black eye fell upon me, I would not flinch. Nor, I vowed,

would Regal ever see me tremble, or catch at a wall for support, or pass a hand before my blurry eyes. He would never know how close he had come to winning it all.

So at last we rode to Buckkeep, not up the winding sea-coast road, but from the forested hills behind her. The snow dwindled, then ceased. The night winds blew the clouds aside, and a fine moon made Buckkeep's stone walls shine black as jet against the sea. Light shimmered yellow in her turrets and at the side gate. 'We're home,' Burrich said quietly. We rode down one last hill, struck the road at last, and rode around to the great gate of Buckkeep.

A young soldier stood night-guard. He lowered his pike to block our way and demanded our names.

Burrich pushed his hood back from his face, but the lad didn't move. 'I'm Burrich, the Stablemaster!' Burrich informed him incredulously. 'The Stablemaster here for longer than you've been alive, most likely. I feel I should be asking you what your business is here at my gate!'

Before the flustered lad could reply, there was a tumble and rush of soldiers from the guard house. 'It is Burrich!' the watch sergeant exclaimed. Burrich was instantly the centre of a cluster of men, all shouting greetings and talking at once while Hands and I sat on our weary horses at the edge of the hubbub. The sergeant, one Blade, finally shouted them to silence, mostly so he could speak his own comments easily. 'We hadn't looked for you until spring, man,' the burly old soldier declared. 'And even then, we was told you might not be the man that left here. But you look good, you do. A bit cold, and outlandishly dressed, and another scar or two, but yourself for all that. Word was that you was hurt bad, and the Bastard like to die. Plague or poison, the rumours was.'

Burrich laughed and held out his arms that all might admire his Mountain garb. For a moment I saw Burrich as they must have seen him, his purple and yellow quilted trousers and smock and buskins. I no longer wondered at how we had been challenged at the gate. But I did wonder at the rumours.

'Who said the Bastard would die?' I demanded curiously.

'Who's asking?' Blade demanded in return. He glanced over my garments, looked me in the eye, and knew me not. But as I sat up straighter on my horse, he gave a start. To this day, I believe he knew Sooty and that was how he recognized me. He did not cover his shock.

‘Fitz? There’s hardly half of you left! You look like you’ve had the blood plague.’ It was my first inkling of just how bad I looked to those who knew me.

‘Who said I had been poisoned, or afflicted with plague?’ I repeated the question quietly.

Blade flinched and glanced back over his shoulder. ‘Oh, no one. Well, no one in particular. You know how it is. When you didn’t come back with the others, well, some supposed this and some that, and pretty soon, it was almost like we knew it. Rumours, guard-room talk. Soldiers gossip. We wondered why you didn’t come back, that was all. No one believed anything that was said. We spread too many rumours ourselves to give gossip any credence. We just wondered why you and Burrich and Hands hadn’t come back.’

He finally realized he was repeating himself and fell silent before my stare. I let the silence stretch long enough to make it plain that I didn’t intend to answer this question. Then I shrugged it away. ‘No harm done, Blade. But you can tell them all the Bastard isn’t done for yet. Plagues or poisons, you should have known Burrich would physick me through it. I’m alive and well; I just look like a corpse.’

‘Oh, Fitz, lad, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that ...’

‘I said, no harm done, Blade. Let it go.’

‘Good enough, sir,’ he replied.

I nodded, and looked at Burrich to find him regarding me strangely. When I turned to exchange a puzzled glance with Hands, I met the same startlement on his face. I could not guess the reason.

‘Well, good night to you, sergeant. Don’t chide your man with the pike. He did well to stop strangers at Buckkeep’s gate.’

‘Yes sir. Good night, sir.’ Blade gave me a rusty salute and the great wooden gates swung wide before us as we entered the keep. Sooty lifted her head and some of the weariness fell from her. Behind me, Hands’ horse whinnied softly and Burrich’s snorted. Never before had the road from the keep wall to the stables seemed so long. As Hands dismounted, Burrich caught me by the sleeve and held me back. Hands greeted the drowsy stable-boy who appeared to light our way.

‘We’ve been some time in the Mountain Kingdom, Fitz,’ Burrich cautioned me in a low voice. ‘Up there, no one cares what side of the sheets

you were born on. But we're home now. Here, Chivalry's son is not a prince, but a bastard.'

'I know that.' I was stung by his directness. 'I've known it all my life. Lived it all my life.'

'You have,' he conceded. A strange look stole over his face, a smile half incredulous and half proud. 'So why are you demanding reports of the sergeant, and giving out commendations as briskly as if you were Chivalry himself? I scarce believed it, how you spoke, and how those men came to heel. You didn't even take notice of how they responded to you, you didn't even realize you'd stepped up and taken command away from me.'

I felt a slow flush creep up my face. All in the Mountain Kingdom had treated me as if I were a prince in fact, instead of a prince's bastard. Had I so quickly accustomed myself to that higher station?

Burrich chuckled at my expression, then quickly grew sober. 'Fitz, you need to find your caution again. Keep your eyes down and don't carry your head like a young stallion. Regal will take it as a challenge, and that's something we aren't ready to face. Not yet. Maybe not ever.'

I nodded grimly, my eyes on the churned snow of the stable yard. I had become careless. When I reported to Chade, the old assassin would not be pleased with his apprentice. I would have to answer for it. I had no doubt that he would know all about the incident at the gate before he next summoned me.

'Don't be a sluggard. Get down, boy.' Burrich interrupted my musings abruptly. I jumped to his tone and realized that he, too, was having to readjust to our comparative positions at Buckkeep. How many years had I been his stable-boy and ward? Best that we resume those roles as closely as possible. It would save kitchen gossip. I dismounted and, leading Sooty, followed Burrich into his stables.

Inside it was warm and close. The blackness and cold of the winter night were shut outside the thick stone wall. Here was home, the lanterns shone yellow and the stalled horses breathed slow and deep. But as Burrich passed, the stables came to life. Not a horse or a dog in the whole place didn't catch his scent and rouse to give greeting. The Stablemaster was home, and he was greeted warmly by those who knew him best. Two stable-boys soon trailed after us, rattling off simultaneously every bit of news concerning hawk or hound or horse. Burrich was in full command here, nodding sagely and asking a terse question or two as he absorbed every

detail. His reserve only broke when his old bitch hound Vixen came walking stiff to greet him. He went down on one knee to hug and thump her and she wiggled puppyishly and tried to lick his face. 'Now, here's a real dog,' he greeted her. Then he stood again, to continue his round. She followed him, hindquarters wobbling with every wag of her tail.

I lagged behind, the warmth robbing the strength from my limbs. One boy came hurrying back to leave a lamp with me, and then hastened away to pay court to Burrich. I came to Sooty's stall and unlatched the door. She entered eagerly, snorting her appreciation. I set my light on its shelf and looked about me. Home. This was home, more than my chamber up in the castle, more than anywhere else in the world. A stall in Burrich's stable, safe in his domain, one of his creatures. If only I could turn back the days, and burrow into the deep straw and drag a horse blanket over my head.

Sooty snorted again, this time rebukingly. She'd carried me all those days and ways, and deserved every comfort I could give her. But every buckle resisted my numbed and weary fingers. I dragged the saddle down from her back and very nearly dropped it. I fumbled at her bridle endlessly, the bright metal of the buckles dancing before my eyes. Finally I closed them and let my fingers work alone to take her bridle off. When I opened my eyes, Hands was at my elbow. I nodded at him, and the bridle dropped from my lifeless fingers. He glanced at it, but said nothing. Instead he poured for Sooty the bucket of fresh water he had brought, and shook out oats for her and fetched an armful of sweet hay with much green still to it. I had taken down Sooty's brushes when he reached past me and took them from my feeble grip. 'I'll do this,' he said quietly.

'Take care of your own horse first,' I chided him.

'I already did, Fitz. Look. You can't do a good job on her. Let me do it. You can barely stand up. Go get some rest.' He added, almost kindly, 'Another time, when we ride, you can do Stoutheart for me.'

'Burrich will have my hide off if I leave my animal's care for someone else.'

'No, he won't. He wouldn't leave an animal in the care of someone who can barely stand,' Burrich observed from outside the stall. 'Leave Sooty to Hands, boy. He knows his job. Hands, take charge of things here for a bit. When you've done with Sooty, check on that spotted mare at the south end of the stables. I don't know who owns her or where she came from, but she looks sick. If you find it so, have the boys move her away from the other

horses and scrub out the stall with vinegar. I'll be back in a bit after I see FitzChivalry to his quarters. I'll bring you food, and we'll eat in my room. Oh. Tell a boy to start us a fire. Probably cold as a cave up there.'

Hands nodded, already busy with my horse. Sooty's nose was in her oats. Burrich took my arm. 'Come along,' he said, just as he spoke to a horse. I found myself unwillingly leaning on him as he walked the long row of stalls. At the door he picked up a lantern. The night seemed colder and darker after the warmth of the stables. As we walked up the frozen path to the kitchens, the snow began to fall again. My mind went swirling and drifting with the flakes. I wasn't sure where my feet were. 'It's all changed, forever, now,' I observed to the night. My words whirled away with the snowflakes.

'What has?' Burrich asked cautiously. His tone bespoke his worry that I might be getting feverish again.

'Everything. How you treat me. When you aren't thinking about it. How Hands treats me. Two years ago, he and I were friends. Just two boys working in the stables. He'd never have offered to brush down my horse for me. But tonight, he treated me like some sickly weakling ... not even someone he can insult about it. As if I should just expect him to do things like that for me. The men at the gate didn't even know me. Even you, Burrich. Six months or a year ago, if I took sick, you'd have dragged me up to your loft and dosed me like a hound. And if I'd complained, you'd have had no tolerance for it. Now you walk me up to the kitchen doors and ...'

'Stop whining,' Burrich said gruffly. 'Stop complaining and stop pitying yourself. If Hands looked like you do, you'd do the same for him.' Almost unwillingly he added, 'Things change, because time passes. Hands hasn't stopped being your friend. But you are not the same boy who left Buckkeep at harvest time. That Fitz was an errand boy for Verity, and had been my stable-boy, but wasn't much more than that. A royal bastard, yes, but that seemed of small importance to any save me. But up at Jhaampe in the Mountain Kingdom, you showed yourself more than that. It doesn't matter if your face is pale, or if you can barely walk after a day in the saddle. You move as Chivalry's son should. That is what shows in your bearing, and what those guards responded to. And Hands.' He took a breath and paused to shoulder the heavy kitchen door open. 'And I, Eda help us all,' he added in a mutter.

But then, as if to belie his own words, he steered me into the watch-room off the kitchen and unceremoniously dumped me at one of the long benches beside the scarred wooden table. The watch-room smelled incredibly good. Here was where any soldier, no matter how muddy or snowy or drunk, could come and find comfort. Cook always kept a kettle of stew simmering over the fire, and bread and cheese waited on the table, as well as a slab of yellow summer butter from the deep larder. Burrich served us up bowls of hot stew thick with barley and mugs of cold ale to go with the bread and butter and cheese.

For a moment I just looked at it, too weary to lift a spoon. But the smell tempted me to one mouthful and that was all it took. Midway through, I paused to shoulder out of my quilted smock and break off another slab of bread. I looked up from my second bowl of stew to find Burrich watching me with amusement. 'Better?' he asked.

I stopped to think about it. 'Yes.' I was warm, fed, and though I was tired, it was a good weariness, one that might be cured by sleep. I lifted my hand and looked at it. I could still feel the tremors, but they were no longer obvious to the eye. 'Much better.' I stood, and found my legs unsteady under me.

'Now you're fit to report to the King.'

I stared at him in disbelief. 'Now? Tonight? King Shrewd's long abed. I won't get past his door guard.'

'Perhaps not, and you should be grateful for that. But you must at least announce yourself there tonight. It's the King's decision as to when he will see you. If you're turned away, then you can go to bed. But I'll wager that if King Shrewd turns you aside, King-in-Waiting Verity will still want a report. And probably right away.'

'Are you going back to the stables?'

'Of course.' He smiled in wolfish self-satisfaction. 'Me, I'm just the Stablemaster, Fitz. I have nothing to report. And I promised Hands I'd bring him something to eat.'

I watched silently as he loaded a platter. He sliced the bread lengthwise and covered two bowls of the hot stew with a slab of it, and then loaded a wedge of cheese and a thick slice of yellow butter onto the side.

'What do you think of Hands?'

'He's a good lad,' Burrich said grudgingly.

‘He’s more than that. You chose him to stay in the Mountain Kingdom and ride home with us, when you sent all the others back with the main caravan.’

‘I needed someone steady. At that time, you were ... very ill. And I wasn’t much better, truth to tell.’ He lifted a hand to a streak of white in his dark hair, testimony to the blow that had nearly killed him.

‘How did you come to choose him?’

‘I didn’t really. He came to me. Somehow he found where they’d housed us, and then talked his way past Jonqui. I was still bandaged up and scarce able to make my eyes focus. I felt him standing there more than saw him. I asked him what he wanted, and he told me that I needed to put someone in charge, because with me sick and Cob gone, the stable help were getting sloppy.’

‘And that impressed you.’

‘He got to the point. No idle questions about me, or you, or what was going on. He had found the thing he could do and come to do it. I like that in a man. Knowing what he can do, and doing it. So I put him in charge. He managed it well. I kept him when I sent the others home because I knew I might need a man who could do that. And also to see for myself what he was. Was he all ambition, or was there a genuine understanding of what a man owes a beast when he claims to own him? Did he want power over those under him, or the well-being of his animals?’

‘What do you think of him now?’

‘I am not so young as I once was. I think there still may be a good Stablemaster in Buckkeep Stables when I can no longer manage an ill-tempered stallion. Not that I expect to step down soon. There is still much he needs to be taught. But we are both still young enough, him to learn and me to teach. There is a satisfaction in that.’

I nodded. Once, I supposed, he had planned that spot for me. Now we both knew it would never be.

He turned to go. ‘Burrich,’ I said quietly. He paused. ‘No one can replace you. Thank you. For all you’ve done these last few months. I owe you my life. Not just that you saved me from death. But you gave me my life, and who I am. Ever since I was six. Chivalry was my father, I know. But I never met him. You’ve fathered me day in and day out, over a lot of years. I didn’t always appreciate ...’

Burrich snorted and opened the door. ‘Save speeches like that for when one of us is dying. Go report, and then go to bed.’

‘Yes, sir,’ I heard myself say, and knew that he smiled even as I did. He shouldered the door open and bore Hands’ dinner out to the stables for him. He was home there.

And this, here, was my home. Time I dealt with that. I took a moment to straighten my damp clothing and run a hand through my hair. I cleared our dishes from the table and then folded my wet smock over my arm.

As I made my way from the kitchen to the hall, and then to the Great Hall, I was mystified by what I saw. Did the tapestries glow more brightly than they once had? Had the strewing herbs always smelled so sweet, the carved woodwork by each doorway always gleamed so warmly? Briefly I put it down to my relief at finally being home. But when I paused at the foot of the great stair to take up a candle to light my way up to my chamber, I noticed that the table there was not bespattered with wax, and more, that an embroidered cloth graced it.

Kettricken.

There was a queen at Buckkeep now. I found myself smiling foolishly. So. This great fortress castle had had a going-over in my absence. Had Verity bestirred himself and his folk before her arrival, or had Kettricken herself demanded this vast scrubbing out? It would be interesting to find out.

As I climbed the great staircase, I noticed other things. The ancient soot marks above each sconce were gone. Not even the corners of the steps held dust. There were no cobwebs. The candelabra at each landing were full and bright with candles. And a rack at each landing held blades, ready for defence. So this was what it meant to have a queen in residence. But even when Shrewd’s Queen had been alive, I didn’t recall that Buckkeep had looked or smelled so clean or been so brightly lit.

The guard at King Shrewd’s door was a dour-faced veteran I had known since I was six. A silent man, he peered at me closely, then recognized me. He allowed me a brief smile as he asked, ‘Anything critical to report, Fitz?’

‘Only that I’m back,’ I said, and he nodded sagely. He was used to my coming and going here, often at some very odd hours, but he was not a man to make assumptions or draw conclusions, or even speak to those who might. So he stepped quietly inside the King’s chamber, to pass the word to someone that Fitz was here. In a moment the word came back that the King would summon me at his convenience, but also that he was glad I was safe. I

stepped quietly away from his door, making more of his message than if those words had come from any other man. Shrewd never mouthed polite nothings.

Further down the same corridor were Verity's chambers. Here again I was recognized, but when I requested the man let Verity know I was back and wished to report, he replied only that Prince Verity was not within his chamber.

'In his tower, then?' I asked, wondering what he would be watching for at this time of year. Winter storms kept our coast safe from raiders for at least these few months of the year.

A slow smile stole over the guard's face. When he saw my puzzled glance, it became a grin. 'Prince Verity is not in his chambers just now,' he repeated. And then added, 'I shall see that he gets your message as soon as he awakes in the morning.'

For a moment longer, I stood, stupid as a post. Then I turned and walked quietly away. I felt a sort of wonder. This, too, was what it meant for there to be a queen in Buckkeep.

I climbed another two flights of stairs, and went down the hall to my own chamber. It smelled stale, and there was no fire in the hearth. It was cold with disuse, and dusty. No touch of a woman's hand here. It seemed as bare and colourless as a cell. But it was still warmer than a tent in the snow, and the feather bed was as soft and deep as I remembered it. I shed my travel-stained garments as I walked toward it. I fell into it and sleep.

THREE

Renewing Ties

The oldest reference to the mythical Elderlings in the Buckkeep library is a battered scroll. Vague discoloration upon the vellum suggests that it came from a parti-coloured beast, one mottled in a way unfamiliar to any of our hunters. The lettering ink is one derived from squid ink and bell root. It has stood the test of time well, much better than the coloured inks that originally supplied illustrations and illuminations for the text. These have not only faded and bled, but in many places have drawn the attentions of some mite that has gnawed and stiffened the once supple parchment, making parts of the scroll too brittle to unroll.

Unfortunately, the damage is concentrated at the innermost parts of the scroll, which deal with portions of King Wisdom's quest that were not recorded elsewhere. From these fragmented remains, one can glean that sore need drove him to seek the homeland of the Elderlings. His troubles are familiar ones; ships raided his coastline mercilessly. Tatters hint that he rode off toward the Mountain Kingdom; but unfortunately the final stages of his journey and his encounter with the Elderlings seem to have been richly illustrated, for here the parchment is reduced to a lacy web of tantalizing word bits and body parts. We do not know anything of this first encounter. Nor have we even an inkling as to how he induced the Elderlings to become his allies. Many songs, rich in metaphor, tell how the Elderlings descended, like 'storms', like 'tidal waves', like 'vengeance gone gold', and 'wrath embodied in flesh of stone' to drive the Raiders away from our shores. Legend also tells us that they swore to Wisdom that if ever the Six Duchies had need of their aid, they would rise again to our defence. One may conjecture; many have, and the variety of legends that surround this alliance are proof of that. But King Wisdom's scribe's recounting of the event has been lost to mildew and worms for ever.

My chamber had a single tall window that looked out over the sea. In winter a wooden shutter closed out the storm winds, and a tapestry hung over that gave my room an illusion of cosy warmth. So I awakened to darkness, and for a time lay quietly finding myself. Gradually the subtle sounds of the keep filtered in to me. Morning sounds. Very early morning sounds. Home, I realized. Buckkeep. And in the next instant, 'Molly,' I said aloud to the darkness. My body was weary and aching still. But not exhausted. I clambered from my bed into the chill of my room.

I stumbled to my long disused hearth and kindled a small fire. I needed to bring up more firewood soon. The dancing flames lent the room a fickle yellow light. I took clothing from the chest at the foot of my bed, only to find the garments oddly ill-fitting. My long illness had wasted the muscle from my frame, but I had still somehow managed to grow longer in the legs and arms. Nothing fitted. I picked up my shirt from the day before, but a night in clean bedding had refreshed my nose. I could no longer abide the smell of the travel-stained garment. I dug in my clothes chest again. I found one soft brown shirt that had once been too long in the sleeve for me, and now just fitted. I put it on with my green quilted mountain trousers and buskins. I had no doubt that as soon as I encountered the Lady Patience or Mistress Hasty, I would be attacked and the situation remedied. But not, I hoped, before breakfast and a trip into Buckkeep Town. There were several places there where I might get word of Molly.

I found the castle stirring but not yet fully awake. I ate in the kitchen as I had when a child, finding that there, as always, the bread was freshest and the porridge sweetest. Cook exclaimed to see me, one minute commenting on how much I had grown, and the next lamenting how thin and worn I looked. I surmised that before the day was out I would be heartily sick of these observations. As traffic in the kitchen increased, I fled, carrying off a thick slice of bread well buttered and laden with rosehip preserves. I headed back towards my room to get a winter cloak.

In every chamber I passed through, I found more and more evidence of Kettricken's presence. A sort of tapestry, woven of different coloured grasses and representing a mountain scene, now graced the wall of the Lesser Hall. There were no flowers to be had this time of year, but in odd places I encountered fat pottery bowls full of pebbles, and these held bare but graceful branches, or dried thistles and cat tails. The changes were small but unmistakable.

I found myself in one of the older sections of Buckkeep, and then climbing the dusty steps to Verity's watch-tower. It commanded a wide view of our sea-coast, and from its tall windows Verity kept his summer vigil for raiding ships. From here he worked the Skill magic that kept the raiders at bay, or at least gave us some warning of their coming. It was a thin defence at times. He should have had a coterie of underlings trained in the Skill to assist him. But I myself, despite my bastard blood, had never been able to control my random Skill abilities. Galen our Skillmaster had died before he had trained more than a handful in the Skill. There was no one to replace him, and those he had trained lacked a true communion with Verity. So Verity Skilled alone against our enemies. It had aged him before his time. I worried that he would overspend himself upon it, and succumb to the addicting weakness of those who Skilled too much.

By the time I reached the top of the spiralling tower steps, I was winded and my legs ached. I pushed at the door and it gave easily on oiled hinges. From long habit, I stepped quietly as I entered the room. I had not really expected to find Verity or anyone else there. The sea storms were our watchmen in winter, guarding our coasts from raiders. I blinked in the sudden grey light of morning that was flooding in from the unshuttered tower windows. Verity was a dark silhouette against a dark storm sky. He did not turn. 'Shut the door,' he said quietly. 'The draught up the stairs makes this room as windy as a chimney.'

I did so, and then stood shivering in the chill. The wind brought the scent of the sea with it, and I breathed it in as if it were life itself. 'I had not expected to find you here,' I said.

He kept his eyes on the water. 'Didn't you? Then why did you come?' There was amusement in his voice.

It jolted me. 'I don't really know. I headed back to my room ...' My voice dwindled away as I tried to recall why I had come here.

'I Skilled you,' he said simply.

I stood silent and thought. 'I felt nothing.'

'I didn't intend that you should. It is as I told you a long time ago. The Skill can be a soft whisper in a man's ear. It doesn't have to be a shout of command.'

He turned slowly to face me, and as my eyes adjusted to the light, my heart leaped with joy at the change I saw in the man. When I had left Buckkeep at harvest time, he had been a withered shadow, worn thin by the

weight of his duties and his constant watchfulness. His dark hair was still salted with grey, but there was muscle once more on his stocky frame, and vitality snapped in his dark eyes. He looked every bit a king.

‘Marriage seems to agree with you, my prince,’ I said inanely.

That flustered him. ‘In some ways,’ he conceded, as a boyish flush rose on his cheeks. He turned back quickly to his window. ‘Come and see my ships,’ he commanded.

It was my turn to be baffled. I stepped to the window beside him and looked out over the harbour, and then over the sea itself. ‘Where?’ I asked in bewilderment. He took me by the shoulders and turned me toward the shipyard. A long barn of a building of new yellow pine had been erected there. Men were coming and going from it as smoke rose from chimneys and forges there. Dark against the snow were several of the immense timbers that had been Kettricken’s bride-offering to him.

‘Sometimes, when I stand up here on a winter morning, I look out to sea and I can almost see the Red Ships. I know they must come. But sometimes, too, I can see the ships we shall have to meet them. They will not find their prey so helpless this spring, my boy. And by next winter I intend to teach them what it is to be raided.’ He spoke with a savage satisfaction that would have been frightening, had I not shared it. I felt my grin mirror his as our eyes met.

And then his look changed. ‘You look terrible,’ he offered. ‘As bad as your clothes. Let’s go somewhere warmer and find you some mulled wine and something to eat.’

‘I’ve eaten,’ I told him. ‘And I’m much better than I was a few months ago, thank you.’

‘Don’t be prickly,’ he admonished me. ‘And don’t tell me what I already know. Nor lie to me. The climb up the stair has exhausted you, and you’re shivering as you stand there.’

‘You’re using the Skill on me,’ I accused him, and he nodded.

‘I’ve been aware of your approach for some days now. I tried several times to Skill to you, but could not make you aware of me. I was concerned when you left the road, but I understand Burrich’s concern. I am pleased that he has looked after you so well; not just in bringing you home safe, but in all that went on at Jhaampe. I am at a loss as to how to reward him. It would have to be subtle. Given who was involved, a public recognition would not do. Have you any suggestions?’

‘Your word of thanks would be all he would accept. He would bridle that you thought he needed more. My own feelings are that no object you gave him would be a match for what he did for me. The way to handle him is to tell him to take his pick of the likely two-year-olds, for his horse is growing old. He’d understand that.’ I considered it carefully. ‘Yes. You might do that.’

‘Might I?’ Verity asked me dryly. There was an acid edge to the amusement in his voice.

I was suddenly amazed at my own boldness. ‘I forgot myself, my prince,’ I said humbly.

A smile curved his lips and his hand fell on my shoulder in a heavy pat. ‘Well, I asked you, did I not? For a moment I would have sworn it was old Chivalry instructing me in handling my men, rather than my young nephew. Your trip to Jhaampe has quite changed you, boy. Come. I meant what I said about a warmer spot and a glass of something. Kettricken will be wanting to see you later in the day. And Patience, too, I imagine.’

My heart sank as he heaped the tasks before me. Buckkeep Town pulled at me like a lodestone. But this was my King-in-Waiting. I bowed my head to his will.

We left the tower and I followed him down the stairs, speaking of inconsequential things. He told me to tell Mistress Hasty I needed new clothes; I asked after Leon, his wolfhound. He stopped a lad in the corridor and asked him to bring wine and meat pies to his study. I followed him, not up to his chambers, but to a lower room at once familiar and strange. The last time I had been in it, Fedwren the scribe had been using it to sort and dry herbs and shells and roots for the making of his inks. All signs of that had been cleared from it. A fire burned low in the small hearth. Verity poked this up and added wood as I looked around. There was a large carved oak table and two smaller ones, a variety of chairs, a scroll rack, and a battered shelf littered with miscellaneous objects. Spread out on the table was the beginnings of a map of the Chalced States. The corners of it were weighted with a dagger and three stones. Various scraps of parchment that littered the table top were covered with Verity’s hand and preliminary sketches with notes scratched across them. The friendly litter that covered the two smaller tables and several of the chairs seemed familiar. After a moment I recognized it as the layer of Verity’s possessions that had previously been scattered about his bedchamber. Verity rose from awakening the fire and

smiled ruefully at my raised eyebrows. ‘My Queen-in-Waiting has small patience with clutter. “How,” she asked me, “Can you hope to create precise lines in the midst of such disorder?” Her own chamber has the precision of a military encampment. So, I hide myself away down here, for I quickly found that in a clean and sparse chamber I could get no work done at all. Besides, it gives me a place for quiet talk, where not all know to seek me.’

He had scarcely finished speaking before the door opened to admit Charim with a tray. I nodded to Verity’s serving-man who not only seemed unsurprised to see me, but had added to Verity’s request a certain type of spice bread that I had always enjoyed. He moved about the room briefly, making perfunctory tidying motions as he shifted a few books and scrolls to free a chair for me, and then vanished again. Verity was so accustomed to him he scarce seemed to notice him, save for the brief smile they exchanged as Charim left.

‘So,’ he said, as soon as the door was fairly shut. ‘Let’s have a full report. From the time you left Buckkeep.’

This was not a simple recounting of my journey and the events of it. I had been trained by Chade to be a spy as well as an assassin. And since my earliest days, Burrich had always demanded that I be able to give a detailed account of anything that went on in the stables in his absence. So as we ate and drank, I gave Verity an accounting of all I had seen and done since I had left the keep. This was followed by my summation of what I had concluded from my experiences, and then by what I suspected from what I had learned. By then, Charim had returned with another meal. While we consumed this, Verity limited our talk to his warships. He could not conceal his enthusiasm for them. ‘Mastfish has come down to supervise the building. I went up to High-downs myself to fetch him. He claimed to be an old man now. “The cold would stiffen my bones; I can’t build a boat in winter any more,” that was the word he sent me. So I set the apprentices work, and I myself went to fetch him. He could not refuse me to my face. When he got here, I took him down to the shipyards. And I showed him the heated shed, big enough to house a warship, built so he might work and not be cold. But that was not what convinced him. It was the white oak that Kettricken brought me. When he saw the timber, he could not wait to put a drawknife to it. The grain is straight and true throughout. The planking is well begun already. They will be lovely ships, swan-necked, sinuous as snakes upon the water.’

Enthusiasm spilled from him. I could already imagine the rising and falling of the oars, the bellying of the square masts when they were underway.

Then the dishes and oddments were pushed to one side, and he began to quiz me upon events in Jhaampe. He forced me to reconsider each separate incident from every possible perspective. By the time he was finished with me, I had relived the entire episode and my anger at my betrayal was fresh and vivid once more.

Verity was not blind to it. He leaned back in his chair to reach for another log. He flipped it onto the fire, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. 'You have questions,' he observed. 'This time, you may ask them.' He folded his hands quietly into his lap and waited.

I tried to master my emotions. 'Prince Regal, your brother,' I began carefully, 'is guilty of the highest treason. He arranged the killing of your bride's elder brother, Prince Rurisk. He attempted a plot that would have resulted in your death. His aim was to usurp both your crown and your bride. As little more than a spice, he twice tried to kill me. And Burrich.' I paused to breathe, forcing my heart and voice back to calmness.

'You and I both accept those things as true. They would be difficult for us to prove,' Verity observed mildly.

'And he relies upon that!' I spat out, and then turned my face aside from Verity until I could master my anger. The very intensity of it frightened me, for I had not allowed myself to feel it until now. Months ago, when I was using all my wits to stay alive, I had pushed it aside to keep my mind clear. There had followed the wasting months of convalescence as I recovered from Regal's botched poisoning attempt. Not even to Burrich had I been able to tell all, for Verity had made it clear that he wished no one to know any more about the situation than could be helped. Now I stood before my prince, and trembled with the force of my own anger. My face spasmed suddenly in a violent series of twitches. That dismayed me enough that I was able to force calm upon myself once more.

'Regal relies upon it,' I said more quietly. All this while Verity had not budged nor changed expression despite my outburst. He sat gravely at his end of the table, his work-scarred hands composed before him, watching me with dark eyes. I looked down at the tabletop and traced with a fingertip the carved scrollwork on the corner. 'He does not admire you, that you keep the laws of the kingdom. He sees it as a weakness, as a way to circumvent

justice. He may try to kill you again. Almost certainly, he will make an attempt upon me.'

'Then we must be careful, we two, mustn't we?' Verity observed mildly.

I lifted my eyes to look him in the face. 'That is all you say to me?' I asked tightly, choking down my outrage.

'FitzChivalry. I am your prince. I am your King-in-Waiting. You are sworn to me, as much as to my father. And, if it comes to it, you are sworn to my brother as well.' Verity rose suddenly, to take a pace around the room. 'Justice. There's a thing we shall ever thirst after, and ever be parched. No. We content ourselves with law. And this is only more true, the higher a man's rank rises. Justice would put you next in line for the throne, Fitz. Chivalry was my elder brother. But law says you were born outside of wedlock, and hence can never make any claim to the crown. Some might say I had snatched the throne from my brother's son. Should I be shocked that my younger brother should want to grab it from me?'

I had never heard Verity speak like this, his voice so even but so fraught with emotion. I kept silent.

'You think I should punish him. I could. I need not prove his wrongdoing to make life unpleasant for him. I could send him as emissary to Cold Bay, on some contrived errand, and keep him there, in uncomfortable conditions, far from court. I could all but banish him. Or I could keep him here at court, but so load him with unpleasant duties that he has no time for that which amuses him. He would understand he was being punished. So would every noble with half a wit. Those who sympathize with him would rally to his defence. The Inland Duchies could contrive some emergency in his mother's land that demanded the presence of her son. Once there, he could build further support for himself. He might very well be able to foment the civil unrest he sought before, and found an inland kingdom loyal only to him. Even if he did not achieve that end, he could cause enough unrest to steal the unity I must have if I am to defend our kingdom.'

He stopped speaking. He lifted his eyes and glanced around the room. I followed his gaze. The walls were hung with his maps. There was Bears, there was Shoaks and here was Rippon. On the opposite wall, Buck, Farrow and Tilth. All done in Verity's precise hand, every river blue inked, every town named. Here were his Six Duchies. He knew them as Regal never would. He had ridden those roads, helped set the markers of those

boundaries. Following Chivalry, he had treated with the folk who bordered our lands. He had swung a sword in defence of it, and known when to set down that sword and negotiate a peace. Who was I to be telling him how to rule at home?

‘What will you do?’ I asked quietly.

‘Keep him. He is my brother. And my father’s son.’ He poured himself more wine. ‘My father’s most cherished, youngest son. I have gone to my father the King, and suggested that Regal might be more content with his lot if he had more to do with the running of the kingdom. King Shrewd has consented to this. I expect to be much occupied with defending our land from the Red Ships. So to Regal will fall the task of raising the revenues we shall need, and he will also be dealing with any other internal crises that may arise. With a circle of nobles to assist him, of course. He is full welcome to deal with their bickering and dissensions.’

‘And Regal is content with this?’

Verity smiled a thin smile. ‘He cannot say he is not. Not if he wishes to keep the image of a young man adept at ruling and but waiting for opportunity to prove himself.’ He lifted his wine glass and turned to stare into the fire. The only sound in the room was the snapping of the flames as they consumed the wood. ‘When you come to me tomorrow,’ he began.

‘Tomorrow I must have for myself,’ I told him.

He set down his wine glass and turned to look at me. ‘Must you?’ he asked in an odd tone.

I looked up and met his eyes. I swallowed. I brought myself to my feet. ‘My prince,’ I began formally. ‘I would ask your kind permission to be excused from duties tomorrow, that I may ... pursue errands of my own.’

He let me stand for a moment. Then, ‘Oh, sit down, Fitz. Petty. I suppose that was petty of me. Thinking of Regal puts me in such a frame of mind. Certainly you can have the day, boy. If anyone asks, you are on my business. Might I ask what this urgent errand is?’

I looked into the fire at the leaping flames. ‘My friend was living in Siltbay. I need to find out ...’

‘Oh, Fitz.’ There was more sympathy in Verity’s voice than I could stand.

A sudden wave of weariness washed over me. I was glad to sit again. My hands began to tremble. I put them below the table and clasped them to

still them. I still felt the tremors, but at least no one could see my weakness now.

He cleared his throat. 'Go to your room and rest,' he said kindly. 'Do you want a man to ride with you to Siltbay tomorrow?'

I shook my head dumbly, suddenly and miserably certain of what I would discover. The thought made me sick. Another shudder went through me. I tried to breathe slowly, to calm myself and edge back from the fit that threatened. I could not abide the thought of shaming myself that way before Verity.

'Shame to me, not you, to have ignored how ill you have been.' He had risen silently. He set his glass of wine before me. 'The damage you took was taken for me. I am appalled by what I allowed to befall you.'

I forced myself to meet Verity's eyes. He knew all that I tried to conceal. Knew it, and was miserable with guilt.

'It is not often this bad,' I offered.

He smiled at me, but his eyes did not change. 'You are an excellent liar, Fitz. Do not think your training has gone awry. But you cannot lie to a man who has been with you as much as I have, not just these last few days, but often during your illness. If any other man says to you, "I know just how you feel," you may regard it as a politeness. But from me accept it as truth. And I know that with you it is as it is with Burrich. I shall not offer you the pick of the colts a few months hence. I do offer you my arm, if you wish it, to get back to your room.'

'I can manage,' I said stiffly. I was aware of how he honoured me, but also of how plainly he saw my weakness. I wanted to be alone, to hide myself.

He nodded, understanding. 'Would that you had mastered the Skill. I could offer you strength, just as I have too often taken it from you.'

'I could not,' I muttered, unable to mask how distasteful I would find the drawing off of another man's strength to replace my own. I instantly regretted the moment of shame I saw in my prince's eyes.

'I, too, could once speak with such pride,' he said quietly. 'Go get some rest, boy.' He turned slowly aside from me. He busied himself setting out his inks and his vellum once more. I left quietly.

We had been closeted for the whole day. Outside, it was full dark. The castle had the settled air of a winter's evening. The tables cleared, the folk would be gathered about the hearths in the Great Hall. Minstrels might be

singing, or a puppeteer moving his gangly charges through a story. Some folk would watch while fletching arrows, some would be plying needles, children would be spinning tops or matching markers or drowsing against their parents' knees or shoulders. All was secure. Beyond the walls the winter storms blew and kept us safe.

I walked with a drunkard's caution, avoiding the common areas where folk had gathered for the evening. I folded my arms and hunched my shoulders as if chilled, and so stilled the trembling in my arms. I climbed the first flight of stairs slowly, as if lost in thought. On the landing I permitted myself to pause for a count of ten, then forced myself to begin the next flight.

But as I set my foot to the first step, Lacey came bounding down. A plump woman more than a score of years older than myself, she still moved down the steps with a child's skipping gait. As she reached the bottom, she seized me with a cry of 'There you are!' as if I were a pair of shears she'd misplaced from her sewing basket. She clutched my arm firmly and turned me toward the hall. 'I've been up and down those stairs a dozen times today if I've been once. My, you've got taller. Lady Patience has not been at all herself and it's your fault. At first she expected you to tap on the door any moment. She was so pleased you were finally home.' She paused to look up at me with her bright bird eyes. 'That was this morning,' she confided. Then, 'You *have* been ill! Such circles under your eyes.'

Without giving me a chance to reply, she went on, 'By early afternoon, when you hadn't arrived, she began to be insulted and a bit cross. By dinner she was in such a temper over your rudeness she could scarcely eat. Since then, she's decided to believe the rumours about how sick you've been. She's sure that you've either collapsed somewhere, or that Burrich has kept you down in the stables cleaning up after horses and dogs despite your health. Now here we are, in you go. I have him, my lady.' And she whisked me into Patience's chambers.

Lacey's chatter had an odd undertone to it, as if she avoided something. I entered hesitantly, wondering if Patience herself had been ill or if some misfortune had befallen her. If either were so, then it hadn't affected her living habits at all. Her chambers were much as they always were. All her greenery had grown and twined and dropped leaves. A new layer of sudden interests overlay all the discarded ones in the room. Two doves had been added to her menagerie. A dozen or so horseshoes were scattered about the

room. A fat bayberry candle burned on the table, giving off a pleasant scent, but dripping wax onto some dried flowers and herbs on a tray beside it. Some oddly carved little sticks in a bundle were also threatened. They appeared to be fortune telling sticks such as the Chyurda used. As I entered, her tough little terrier bitch came up to greet me. I stooped to pat her, then wondered if I could stand again. To cover my delay, I carefully picked up a tablet from the floor. It was a rather old one, and probably rare, on the use of the fortune telling sticks. Patience turned away from her loom to greet me.

‘Oh, get up and stop being ridiculous,’ she exclaimed at seeing me crouch. ‘Going down on one knee is idiocy. Or did you think it would make me forget how rude you’ve been in not coming to see me right away. What’s that you’ve brought me? Oh, how thoughtful! How did you know I’d been studying them? You know, I’ve searched all the castle’s libraries and not found much on the predicting sticks at all!’

She took the tablet from my hand and smiled up at me at the supposed gift. Over her shoulder, Lacey winked at me. I gave a minuscule shrug in return. I glanced back at Lady Patience, who set the tablet upon a teetering stack of tablets. She turned back to me. For a moment she regarded me warmly, then she called up a frown to her face. Her brows gathered over her hazel eyes, while her small straight mouth held a firm line. The effect of her reproving look was rather spoiled by the fact that she came just to my shoulder now, and that she had two ivy leaves stuck in her hair. ‘Excuse me,’ I said, and boldly plucked them from the unruly dark curls. She took them from my hand seriously, as if they were important and set them on top of the tablet.

‘Where have you been, all these months, when you were needed here?’ she demanded. ‘Your uncle’s bride arrived months ago. You’ve missed the formal wedding, you’ve missed the feasting and the dancing and the gathering of the nobles. Here I am, expending all my energies to see that you are treated as the son of a prince, and there you are, avoiding all your social obligations. And when you do get home, you don’t come to see me, but go all about the keep where anyone else might talk to you, dressed like a ragged tinker. Whatever possessed you to cut your hair like that?’ My father’s wife, once horrified to discover that he had sired a bastard before they were wed, had gone from abhorring me to aggressively bettering me. Sometimes that was more difficult to deal with than if she had ostracized me. Now she demanded, ‘Had you no thought that you might have social duties here that

were more important than gallivanting about with Burrich looking at horses?’

‘I am sorry, my lady.’ Experience had taught me never to argue with Patience. Her eccentricity had delighted Prince Chivalry. It drove me to distraction on a good day. Tonight I felt overwhelmed by it. ‘For a time, I was ill. I did not feel well enough to travel. By the time I recovered, the weather delayed us. I am sorry to have missed the wedding.’

‘And that was all? That was the sole reason for your delay?’ She spoke sharply, as if suspecting some heinous deception.

‘It was.’ I answered gravely. ‘But I did think of you. I have something for you, out in my packs. I haven’t brought them up from the stable yet, but I will tomorrow.’

‘What is it?’ she demanded, curious as a child.

I took a deep breath. I desperately wished for my bed. ‘It’s a sort of a herbal. A simple one, for they are delicate, and the more ornate ones would not have stood up to the trip. The Chyurda don’t use tablets or scrolls for teaching herbs as we do. Instead, this is a wooden case. When you open it, you will discover tiny wax models of the herbs, tinted to the correct colours and scented with each herb to make it easier to learn them. The lettering is in Chyurda, of course, but I still thought you would enjoy it.’

‘It sounds quite interesting,’ she said, and her eyes shone. ‘I look forward to seeing it.’

‘Shall I bring him a chair, my lady? He does look as if he has been ill,’ Lacey interjected.

‘Oh, of course, Lacey. Sit down, boy. Tell me, what was your illness?’

‘I ate something, one of the foreign herbs, and had a strong reaction to it.’ There. That was truthful. Lacey brought me a small stool and I sat gratefully. A wave of weariness passed through me.

‘Oh. I see.’ She dismissed my illness. She took a breath, glanced about, then suddenly demanded, ‘Tell me. Have you ever considered marriage?’

The abrupt change in subject was so like Patience that I had to smile. I tried to put my mind to the question. For a moment I saw Molly, her cheeks reddened with the wind that teased her dark hair loose. Molly. Tomorrow, I promised myself. Siltbay.

‘Fitz! Stop that! I won’t have you staring through me as if I were not here. Do you hear me? Are you well?’

With an effort I called myself back. ‘Not really,’ I answered honestly. ‘It’s been a tiring day for me ...’

‘Lacey, fetch the boy a cup of elderberry wine. He does look worn. Maybe this isn’t the best time for talk,’ Lady Patience decided falteringly. For the first time, she really looked at me. Genuine concern grew in her eyes. ‘Perhaps,’ she suggested softly, after a moment, ‘I do not know the full tale of your adventures.’

I looked down at my padded mountain buskins. The truth hovered inside me, then fell and was drowned in the danger of her knowing all that truth. ‘A long journey. Bad food. Dirty inns with sour beds and sticky tables. That sums it up. I don’t think you really want to hear all the details.’

An odd thing happened. Our eyes met, and I knew she saw my lie. She nodded slowly, accepting the lie as necessary, and looked aside. I wondered how many times my father had told her similar lies. What did it cost her to nod?

Lacey put the cup of wine into my hand firmly. I lifted it, and the sweet sting of the first sip revived me. I held it in both hands and managed to smile at Patience over it. ‘Tell me,’ I began, and despite myself, my voice quavered like an old man’s. I cleared my throat to steady it. ‘How have you been? I imagine that having a queen here at Buckkeep has made your life much busier. Tell me of all I have missed.’

‘Oh,’ she said, as if pricked with a pin. Now it was Patience’s turn to look aside. ‘You know what a solitary creature I am. My health is not always strong. To stay up late, dancing and talking leaves me abed for two days afterward. No. I have presented myself to the Queen and sat at table with her a time or two. But she is young and busy and caught up in her new life. And I am old and odd, and my life is full of my own interests ...’

‘Kettricken shares your love of growing things,’ I ventured. ‘She would probably be most interested ...’ A sudden tremor rattled my bones and my teeth chattered to stillness. ‘I am just ... a bit cold,’ I excused myself and lifted my wine cup again. I took a gulp instead of a sip I had intended. My hands shook and wine sloshed over my chin and down my shirt front. I jumped up in dismay and my traitorous hands let go the cup. It struck the carpet and rolled away leaving a trail of dark wine like blood. I sat down again abruptly and clasped my arms around myself to try to still my shaking. ‘I am very tired,’ I attempted.

Lacey came at me with a cloth and dabbed at me until I took it from her. I wiped my chin and blotted most of the wine from my shirt. But when I crouched down to mop up what had spilled, I almost pitched forward onto my face.

‘No, Fitz, forget the wine. We can tidy up. You are tired, and half sick. Just take yourself up to bed. Come and see me when you’ve rested. I’ve something serious to discuss with you, but it will keep another night. Now off you go, boy. Off to bed.’

I stood, grateful for the reprieve, and made my cautious courtesies. Lacey saw me as far as the door, and then stood watching after me anxiously as far as the landing. I tried to walk as if the walls and floors weren’t wavering. I paused at the stairs to give her a small wave, and then started up them. Three steps up and out of her sight, I stopped to lean on the wall and catch my breath. I lifted my hands to shield my eyes from the brilliant candlelight. Dizziness was washing over me in waves. When I opened my eyes, my vision was wreathed in rainbow fogs. I closed them tight and pressed my hands to them.

I heard a light step coming down the stairs towards me. It paused two steps above me. ‘Are you all right, sir?’ someone asked uncertainly.

‘A bit too much to drink,’ I lied. Certainly the wine I had dumped over myself made me smell like a drunk. ‘I’ll be fine in a moment.’

‘Let me help you up the stairs. A stumble here might be dangerous.’ There was starchy disapproval in the voice now. I opened my eyes and peered through my fingers. Blue skirts. Of the sensible fabric that all the servants wore. No doubt she’d had to deal with drunks before.

I shook my head, but she ignored that, just as I would have in her position. I felt a strong hand grip my upper arm firmly, while her other arm encircled my waist. ‘Let’s just get you up the stairs,’ she encouraged me. I leaned on her, not wanting to, and stumbled up to the next landing.

‘Thank you,’ I muttered, thinking she would leave me now, but she kept her grip.

‘Are you sure you belong on this level? The servants’ quarters are the next flight up, you know.’

I managed a nod. ‘Third door. If you don’t mind.’

She was silent for longer than a moment. ‘That’s the Bastard’s room.’ The words were flung like a cold challenge.

I did not flinch to the words as I would have once. I did not even lift my head. ‘Yes. You may go now.’ I dismissed her as coldly.

Instead she stepped closer. She seized my hair, jerked my head up to face her. ‘Newboy!’ she hissed in fury. ‘I should drop you right here.’

I jerked my head up. I could not make my eyes focus on her eyes, but all the same, I knew her, knew the shape of her face and how her hair fell forward on her shoulders, and her scent, like a summer afternoon. Relief crashed over me like a wave. It was Molly, my Molly the candle-maker. ‘You’re alive!’ I cried out. My heart leaped in me like a hooked fish. I took her in my arms and kissed her.

At least, I attempted to. She stiff-armed me away, saying gruffly, ‘I shall never kiss a drunk. That’s one promise I’ve made to myself and shall always keep. Nor be kissed by one.’ Her voice was tight.

‘I’m not drunk, I’m ... sick,’ I protested. The surge of excitement had made my head spin more than ever. I swayed on my feet. ‘It doesn’t matter anyway. You’re here and safe.’

She steadied me. A reflex she had learned taking care of her father. ‘Oh. I see. You’re not drunk.’ Disgust and disbelief mingled in her voice. ‘You’re not the scribe’s boy, either. Nor a stable-hand. Is lying how you always begin with people? It seems to be how you always end.’

‘I didn’t lie,’ I said querulously, confused by the anger in her voice. I wished I could make my eyes meet hers. ‘I just didn’t tell you quite ... it’s too complicated. Molly, I’m just so glad you’re all right. And here in Buckkeep! I thought I was going to have to search ...’ She still gripped me, holding me on my feet. ‘I’m not drunk. Really. I did lie just now, because it was embarrassing to admit how weak I am.’

‘And so you lie.’ Her voice cut like a whip. ‘You should be more embarrassed to lie, Newboy. Or is lying permitted to a prince’s son?’

She let go of me and I sagged against a wall. I tried to get a grip on my whirling thoughts while keeping my body vertical. ‘I’m not a prince’s son,’ I said at last. ‘I’m a bastard. That’s different. And yes, that was too embarrassing to admit, too. But I never told you I wasn’t the Bastard. I just always felt, when I was with you, I was Newboy. It was nice, having a few friends who looked at me and thought, “Newboy” instead of “the Bastard”.’

Molly didn’t reply. Instead she grabbed me, much more roughly than before, by my shirtfront and hauled me down the hall to my room. I was amazed at how strong women were when they were angry. She shouldered

the door open as if it were a personal enemy and propelled me toward my bed. As soon as I was close, she let go and I fell against it. I righted myself and managed to sit down. By clutching my hands tightly together and gripping them between my knees, I could control my trembling. Molly stood glaring at me. I couldn't precisely see her. Her outline was blurred, her features a smear, but I could tell by the way she stood that she was furious.

After a moment, I ventured, 'I dreamed of you. While I was gone.'

She still didn't speak. I felt a bit braver. 'I dreamed you were at Siltbay. When it was raided.' My words came out tight with my effort to keep my voice from shaking. 'I dreamed of fires, and Raiders attacking. In my dream, there were two children you had to protect. It seemed as if they were yours.' Her silence held like a wall against my words. She probably thought I was ten kinds of an idiot, babbling about dreams. And why, oh why, of all the people in the world who could have seen me so unmanned, why did it have to be Molly? The silence had grown long. 'But you were here, at Buckkeep and safe.' I tried to steady my quavering voice. 'I'm glad you're safe. But what are you doing at Buckkeep?'

'What am I doing here?' Her voice was as tight as mine. Anger made it cold, but I thought it was hedged with fear, too. 'I came looking for a friend.' She paused and seemed to struggle for a bit. When she spoke again, her voice was artificially calm, almost kind. 'You see, my father died and left me a debtor. So my creditors took my shop from me. I went to stay with relatives, to help with the harvest, to earn money to start again. In Siltbay. Though how you came to know of it, I cannot even guess. I earned a bit and my cousin was willing to loan me the rest. The harvest had been good. I was to come back to Buckkeep the next day. But Siltbay was raided. I was there, with my nieces ...' Briefly, her voice trailed away. I remembered with her. The ships, the fire, the laughing woman with the sword. I looked up at her and could almost focus on her. I could not speak. But she was looking off, over my head. She spoke on calmly.

'My cousins lost everything they owned. They counted themselves lucky, for their children survived. I couldn't ask them to loan me money still. Truth was, they couldn't even have paid me for the work I had done, if I had thought to ask. So I came back to Buckkeep, with winter closing in, and no place to stay. And I thought, I've always been friends with Newboy. If there's anyone I could ask to loan me money to tide me over, it would be him. So I came up to the keep, and asked for the Scriber's boy. But everyone

shrugged and sent me to Fedwren. And Fedwren listened as I described you, and frowned, and sent me to Patience.’ Molly paused significantly. I tried to imagine that meeting, but shuddered away from it. ‘She took me on as a lady’s maid,’ Molly said softly. ‘She said it was the least she could do, after you had shamed me.’

‘Shamed you?’ I jerked upright. The world rocked around me and my blurry vision dissolved into sparks. ‘How? How shamed you?’

Molly’s voice was quiet. ‘She said you had obviously won my affections, and then left me. Under my false assumption that you would someday be able to marry me, I’d let you court me.’

‘I didn’t ...’ I faltered, and then: ‘We were friends. I didn’t know you felt any more than that ...’

‘You didn’t?’ She lifted her chin; I knew that gesture. Six years ago, she would have followed it with a punch to my stomach. I still flinched. But she just spoke more quietly when she said, ‘I suppose I should have expected you to say that. It’s an easy thing to say.’

It was my turn to be nettled. ‘You’re the one who left me, with not even a word of farewell. And with that sailor, Jade. Do you think I don’t know about him? I was there, Molly. I saw you take his arm and walk away with him. Why didn’t you come to me, then, before leaving with him?’

She drew herself up. ‘I had been a woman with prospects. Then I became, all unwittingly, a debtor. Do you imagine that I knew of the debts my father had incurred, and then ignored? Not till after he was buried did the creditors come knocking. I lost everything. Should I have come to you as a beggar, hoping you’d take me in? I’d thought that you’d cared about me. I believed that you wanted ... El damn you, why do I have to admit this to you!’ Her words rattled against me like flung stones. I knew her eyes were blazing, her cheeks flushed. ‘I thought you did want to marry me, that you did want a future with me. I wanted to bring something to it, not come to you penniless and prospectless. I’d imagined us with a little shop, me with my candles and herbs and honey, and you with your scribe’s skills ... And so I went to my cousin, to ask to borrow money. He had none to spare, but arranged for my passage to Siltbay, to talk to his elder brother Flint. I’ve told you how that ended. I worked my way back here on a fishing boat, Newboy, gutting fish and putting them down in salt. I came back to Buckkeep like a beaten dog. And I swallowed my pride and came up here that day, and found

out how stupid I was, how you'd pretended and lied to me. You are a bastard, Newboy. You are.'

For a moment, I listened to an odd sound, trying to comprehend what it was. Then I knew. She was crying, in little catches of her breath. I knew if I tried to stand and go to her, I'd fall on my face. Or I'd reach her, and she'd knock me flat. So stupidly as any drunk, I repeated, 'Well, what about Jade then? Why did you find it so easy to go to him? Why didn't you come to me first?'

'I told you! He's my cousin, you moron!' Her anger flared past her tears. 'When you're in trouble, you turn to your family. I asked him for help, and he took me to his family's farm, to help out with the harvest.' A moment of silence. Then, incredulously, 'What did you think? That I was the type of woman who could have another man on the side?' Icily. 'That I would let you court me, and be seeing someone else?'

'No. I didn't say that.'

'Of course you would.' She said it as if it suddenly all made sense. 'You're like my father. He always believed I lied, because he told so many lies himself. Just like you. "Oh, I'm not drunk," when you stink of it and you can barely stand. And your stupid story: "I dreamed of you at Siltbay." Everyone in town knew I went to Siltbay. You probably heard the whole story tonight, while you were sitting in some tavern.'

'No, I didn't, Molly. You have to believe me.' I clutched at the blankets on the bed to keep myself upright. She had turned her back on me.

'No. I don't! I don't have to believe anyone any more.' She paused, as if considering something. 'You know, once, a long time ago, when I was a little girl. Before I even met you.' Her voice was getting oddly calmer. Empty, but calmer. 'It was at Spring-fest. I remember when I'd asked my daddy for some pennies for the fair booths, he'd slapped me and said he wouldn't waste money on foolish things like that. And then he'd kicked me in the shop and gone drinking. But even then I knew how to get out of the shop. I went to the fair booths anyway, just to see them. One was an old man telling fortunes with crystals. You know how they do. They hold the crystal to a candle's light, and tell your future by how the colours fall across your face.' She paused.

'I know,' I admitted to her silence. I knew the type of hedge wizard she meant. I'd seen the dance of coloured lights across a woman's close-eyed face. Right now I only wished I could see Molly clearly. I thought if I could

meet her eyes, I could make her see the truth inside me. I wished I dared stand, to go to her and try to hold her again. But she thought me drunk, and I knew I'd fall. I would not shame myself in front of her again.

'A lot of the other girls and women were getting their fortunes told. But I didn't have a penny, so I could only watch. But after a bit, the old man noticed me. I guess he thought I was shy. He asked me if I didn't want to know my fortune. And I started crying, because I did, but I didn't have a penny. Then Brinna the fish-wife laughed, and said there was no need for me to pay to know it. Everyone knew my future already. I was the daughter of a drunk, I'd be the wife of a drunk, and the mother of drunks.' She whispered, 'Everyone started laughing. Even the old man.'

'Molly,' I said. I don't think she even heard me.

'I still don't have a penny,' she said slowly. 'But at least I know I won't be the wife of a drunk. I don't think I even want to be friends with one.'

'You have to listen to me. You're not being fair!' My traitorous tongue slurred my words. 'I –'

The door slammed.

'– didn't know you liked me that way,' I said stupidly to the cold and empty room.

The shaking overtook me in earnest. But I wasn't going to lose her that easily again. I rose and managed two strides before the floor rocked beneath me and I went to my knees. I remained there a bit, head hanging like a dog. I didn't think she'd be impressed if I crawled after her. She'd probably kick me. If I could even find her. I crawled back to my bed instead, and clambered back onto it. I didn't undress, but just dragged the edge of my blanket over me. My vision dimmed, closing in black from the edges, but I didn't sleep right away. Instead, I lay there and thought what a stupid boy I had been last summer. I had courted a woman, thinking that I was walking out with a girl. Those three years difference in age had mattered so much to me, but in all the wrong ways. I had thought she had seen me as a boy, and despaired of winning her. So I had acted like a boy, instead of trying to make her see me as a man. And the boy had hurt her, and yes, deceived her, and in all likelihood, lost her forever. The dark closed down, blackness everywhere but for one whirling spark.

She had loved the boy, and foreseen a life together for us. I clung to the spark and sank into sleep.

FOUR

Dilemmas

As regards the Wit and the Skill, I suspect that every human has at least some capacity. I have seen women rise abruptly from their tasks, to go into an adjacent room where an infant is just beginning to awake. Cannot this be some form of the Skill? Or witness the wordless cooperation that arises among a crew that has long tended the same vessel. They function, without spoken words, as closely as a coterie, so that the ship becomes almost a beast alive, and the crew her life force. Other folk sense an affinity for certain animals, and express it in a crest or in the names they bestow upon their children. The Wit opens one to that affinity. The Wit allows awareness of all animals, but folklore insists that most Wit users eventually develop a bond with one certain animal. Some tales insist that users of the Wit eventually took on the ways and finally the form of the beasts they bonded to. These tales, I believe, we can dismiss as scare tales to discourage children from Beast magic.

I awoke in the afternoon. My room was cold. My sweaty clothes clung to me. I staggered downstairs to the kitchen, ate something, went out to the bath house, began trembling, and went back up to my room. I got back into my bed, shaking with cold. Later, someone came in and talked to me. I don't remember what was said, but I do remember being shaken. It was unpleasant, but I could ignore it and did.

I awoke in early evening. There was a fire in my hearth, and a neat pile of firewood in the hod. A little table had been drawn up near my bed, and some bread and meat and cheese was set out on a platter upon an embroidered cloth with tatted edges. A fat pot with brewing herbs in the bottom was waiting for water from the very large kettle steaming over the fire. A washtub and soap were set out on the other side of the hearth. A clean nightshirt had been left across the foot of my bed; it wasn't one of my old ones. It might actually fit me.

My gratitude outweighed my puzzlement. I managed to get out of bed and take advantage of everything. Afterwards, I felt much better. My dizziness was replaced by a feeling of unnatural lightness, but that quickly succumbed to the bread and cheese. The tea had a hint of elfbark in it; I instantly suspected Chade and wondered if he were the one who'd tried to wake me. But no, Chade only summoned me at night.

I was dragging the clean nightshirt over my head when the door opened quietly. The Fool came slipping into my room. He was in his winter motley of black and white, and his colourless skin seemed even paler because of it. His garments were made of some silky fabric, and cut so loosely that he looked like a stick swathed in them. He'd grown taller, and even thinner, if that were possible. As always, his white eyes were a shock, even in his bloodless face. He smiled at me, and then waggled a pale pink tongue derisively.

'You,' I surmised, and gestured round. 'Thank you.'

'No,' he denied. His pale hair floated out from beneath his cap in a halo as he shook his head. 'But I assisted. Thank you for bathing. It makes my task of checking on you less onerous. I'm glad you're awake. You snore abominably.'

I let this comment pass. 'You've grown,' I observed.

'Yes. So have you. And you've been sick. And you slept quite a long time. And now you are awake and bathed and fed. You still look terrible. But you no longer smell. It's late afternoon now. Are there any other obvious facts you'd like to review?'

'I dreamed about you. While I was gone.'

He gave me a dubious look. 'Did you? How touching. I can't say I dreamed of you.'

'I've missed you,' I said, and enjoyed the brief flash of surprise on the Fool's face.

'How droll. Does that explain why you've been playing the fool yourself so much?'

'I suppose. Sit down. Tell me what's been happening while I was gone.'

'I can't. King Shrewd is expecting me. Rather, he isn't expecting me, and that is precisely why I must go to him now. When you feel better, you should go and see him. Especially if he isn't expecting you.' He turned abruptly to go. He whisked himself out the door, then leaned back in abruptly. He lifted the silver bells at the end of one ridiculously long sleeve,

and jingled them at me. 'Farewell, Fitz. Do try to do a bit better at not letting people kill you.' The door closed silently behind him.

I was left alone. I poured myself another cup of tea and sipped at it. My door opened again. I looked up, expecting the Fool. Lacey peeked in and announced, 'Oh, he's awake,' and then, more severely, demanded, 'Why didn't you say how tired you were? It's fair scared me to death, you sleeping a whole day round like that.' She did not wait to be invited, but bustled into the room, clean linens and blankets in her arms and Lady Patience on her heels.

'Oh, he *is* awake!' she exclaimed to Lacey, as if she had doubted it. They ignored my humiliation at confronting them in my nightshirt. Lady Patience seated herself on my bed while Lacey fussed about the room. There was not much to do in my bare chamber, but she stacked my dirty dishes, poked at my fire, tich-tiched over my dirty bath water and scattered garments. I stood at bay by the hearth while she stripped my bed, made it up afresh, gathered my dirty clothes over her arm with a disdainful sniff, glanced about, and then sailed out the door with her plunder.

'I was going to tidy that up,' I muttered, embarrassed, but Lady Patience didn't appear to notice. She gestured imperiously at the bed. Reluctantly I got into the bed. I don't believe I have ever felt more at a disadvantage. She emphasized it by leaning over and tucking the covers around me.

'About Molly,' she announced abruptly. 'Your behaviour that night was reprehensible. You used your weakness to lure her to your room. And upset her no end with your accusations. Fitz, I will not allow it. If you were not so sick, I would be furious with you. As it is, I am gravely disappointed. I cannot think what to say about how you deceived that poor girl, and led her on. So I will simply say that it will happen no more. You shall behave honourably to her, in every way.'

A simple misunderstanding between Molly and me had suddenly become a serious matter. 'There's been a mistake here,' I said, trying to sound competent and calm. 'Molly and I need to straighten it out. By talking together, privately. I assure you, for your peace of mind, that it is not at all what you seem to think it is.'

'Bear in mind who you are. The son of a prince does not ...'

'Fitz,' I reminded her firmly. 'I am FitzChivalry. Chivalry's bastard.' Patience looked stricken. I felt again how much I had changed since I had

left Buckkeep. I was not a boy any more for her to supervise and correct. She had to see me as I was. Still, I tried to soften my tone as I pointed out, 'Not the proper son of Prince Chivalry, my lady. Only your husband's bastard.'

She sat on the foot of my bed and looked at me. Her hazel eyes met mine squarely and held. I saw past her giddiness and distractibility, into a soul capable of more pain and vaster regret than I had ever suspected. 'How do you think I could ever forget that?' she asked quietly.

My voice died in my throat as I sought for an answer. I was rescued by Lacey's return. She had recruited two serving maids and a couple of small boys. The dirty water from my bath and my dishes were whisked away by them, while Lacey set out a tray of small pastries and two more cups, and measured out fresh brewing herbs for another pot of tea. Patience and I were silent until the serving folk left the room. Lacey made the tea, poured cups for all, and then settled herself with her ever-present tatting.

'It is precisely because of who you are that this is more than a misunderstanding.' Patience launched back into the topic, as if I had never dared interrupt. 'If you were just Fedwren's apprentice, or a stable-hand, then you would be free to court and marry however you wished. But you are not, FitzChivalry Farseer. You are of the royal blood. Even a bastard,' she stumbled slightly on the word, 'of that line must observe certain customs. And practise certain discretions. Consider your position in the royal household. You must have the king's permission to marry. Surely you are aware of that. Courtesy to King Shrewd demanded that you inform him of your intention to court, so that he might consider the case's merits, and tell you if it pleased him or not. He would consider it. Is it a good time for you to wed? Does it benefit the throne? Is the match an acceptable one, or is it likely to cause scandal? Will your courting interfere with your duties? Are the lady's bloodlines acceptable? Does the King wish you to have offspring?'

With each question she posed, I felt the shock go deeper. I lay back on my pillows and stared at the bed hangings. I had never really set out to court Molly. From a childhood friendship, we had drifted to a deeper companionship. I had known how my heart wished it to go, but my head had never stopped to consider it. She read my face plainly.

'Remember, too, FitzChivalry, that you have already sworn an oath to another. Your life belongs to your king already. What would you offer Molly

if you wed her? His leavings? The bits of time that he did not demand? A man whose duty is sworn to a king has little time for anyone else in his life.’ Tears stood suddenly in her eyes. ‘Some women are willing to take what such a man can honestly offer, and content themselves with it. For others, it is not enough. Could never be enough. You must ...’ she hesitated, and it seemed as if the words were wrung from her. ‘You must consider that. One horse cannot bear two saddles. However much he may wish to ...’ Her voice dwindled off on the last words. She closed her eyes as if something hurt her. Then she took a breath and went on briskly, as if she had never paused. ‘Another consideration, FitzChivalry. Molly is, or was, a woman of prospects. She has a trade, and knows it well. I expect she will be able to re-establish herself, after a time of hiring out. But what about you? What do you bring her? You write a fair hand, but you cannot claim a full scribe’s skills. You are a good stable-hand, yes, but that is not how you earn your bread. You are a prince’s bastard. You live in the keep, you are fed, you are clothed. But you have no fixed allowance. This could be a comfortable chamber, for one person. But did you expect to bring Molly here to live with you? Or did you seriously believe the King would grant you permission to leave Buckkeep? And if he did, then what? Will you live with your wife and eat the bread she earns with the work of her hands, and do naught? Or would you be content to learn her trade, and be a help to her?’

She finally paused. She did not expect me to answer any of her questions. I did not try. She took a breath and resumed. ‘You have behaved as a thoughtless boy. I know you meant no harm, and we must see that no harm comes of it. To anyone. But, most especially to Molly. You have grown up amidst the gossip and intrigues of the royal court. She has not. Will you let it be said she is your concubine, or worse, a keep whore? For long years now, Buckkeep has been a man’s court. Queen Desire was ... the Queen, but she did not hold court as Queen Constance did. We have a queen at Buckkeep again. Already, things are different here, as you will discover. If you truly hope to make Molly your wife, she must be brought into this court one step at a time. Or she will find herself an outcast among politely nodding people. I am speaking plainly to you, FitzChivalry. Not to be cruel to you. But far better I am cruel to you now than that Molly live a lifetime of casual cruelty.’ She spoke so calmly, her eyes never leaving my face.

She waited until I asked hopelessly, ‘What must I do?’

For a moment she looked down at her hands. Then she met my eyes again. ‘For now, nothing. I mean exactly that. I have made Molly one of my serving-women. I am teaching her, as best I can, the ways of the court. She is proving an apt student, as well as a most pleasant teacher for me in the matters of herbs and scent-making. I am having Fedwren teach her letters, something she is most eager to learn. But for now, that is all that must be happening. She must be accepted by the women of the court as one of my ladies – not the bastard’s woman. After a time, you may begin to call upon her. But for now it would be unseemly for you to see her alone, or even seek to see her at all.’

‘But I need to speak to her alone. Just once, just briefly, then I promise I’ll abide by your rules. She thinks I deliberately deceived her, Patience. She thinks I was drunk last night. I have to explain ...’

But Patience was shaking her head before the first sentence was out of my mouth, and continued until I faltered to a halt. ‘We have already had a sprinkling of rumours, because she came here seeking you. Or so the gossip was. I have crushed it, assuring everyone that Molly came to me because she was facing difficulties and her mother had been a tiring woman to Lady Heather during the time of Queen Constance’s court. Which is true, and hence she does have the right to seek me out, for was not Lady Heather a friend to me when I first came to Buckkeep?’

‘Did you know Molly’s mother?’ I asked curiously.

‘Not really. She had left, to marry a chandler, before I came to Buckkeep. But I did know Lady Heather, and she was kind to me.’ She dismissed my question.

‘But couldn’t I come to your chambers, and speak to her there, privately, and ...’

‘I will not have a scandal!’ she declared firmly. ‘I will not tempt a scandal. Fitz, you have enemies at court. I will not let Molly become their victim for their aims of hurting you. There. Have I spoken plainly enough at last?’

She had spoken plainly, and of things of which I had believed her ignorant. How much did she know of my enemies? Did she think it merely social? Though that would be enough at court. I thought of Regal, and his sly witticisms, and how he could turn and speak softly to his hangers-on at a feast and all would smirk to one another and add soft-voiced comments to the Prince’s criticism. I thought how I would have to kill him.

‘By the set of your jaw, I see you understand.’ Patience arose, setting her teacup on the table. ‘Lacey. I believe we should leave FitzChivalry to rest now.’

‘Please, at least tell her not to be angry with me,’ I begged. ‘Tell her I wasn’t drunk last night. Tell her I never meant to deceive her, or to cause her any harm.’

‘I will carry no such message! Nor shall you, Lacey! Don’t think I didn’t see that wink. Both of you, I insist that you will be decorous. Remember this, FitzChivalry, I expect you to get some rest tonight.’

They left me. Although I tried to catch Lacey’s eyes and win her alliance, she refused to glance at me. The door closed behind them and I leaned back on my pillows. I tried not to let my mind rattle against the restrictions Patience had set upon me. Annoying as it was, she was right. I could only hope that Molly would see my behaviour as thoughtless rather than deceitful or conniving.

I arose from my bed and went to poke at the fire. Then I sat on the hearth and looked about my chamber. After my months in the Mountain Kingdom, it seemed a bleak place indeed. The closest my chamber came to decoration was a rather dusty tapestry of King Wisdom befriending the Elderlings. It had come with the chamber, as had the cedar chest at the foot of my bed. I stared up at the tapestry critically. It was old and moth-eaten; I could see why it had been banished to here. When I had been younger, it had given me nightmares. Woven in an old style, King Wisdom appeared strangely elongated, while the Elderlings bore no resemblance to any creatures I had ever seen. There was a suggestion of wings on their bulging shoulders. Or perhaps that was meant to be a halo of light surrounding them. I leaned back on the hearth to consider them.

I dozed. I awakened to a draught on my shoulder. The secret door beside the hearth that led up to Chade’s domain was wide open and beckoning. I arose stiffly, stretched, and went up the stone stairs. Thus had I first gone, so long ago, clad then as I was now in just my nightshirt. I had followed a frightening old man with a pocked visage and eyes sharp and bright as a raven’s. He had offered to teach me to kill people. He had also offered, wordlessly, to be my friend. I had accepted both offers.

The stone steps were cold. Here there were still cobwebs and dust and soot above the sconces on the walls. So the housekeeping hadn’t extended to this staircase. Nor to Chade’s quarters. They were as chaotic, disreputable

and comfortable as ever. At one end of his chamber was his working hearth, bare stone floors and an immense table. The usual clutter overflowed it: mortars and pestles, sticky dishes of meat scraps for Slink the weasel, pots of dried herbs, tablets and scrolls, spoons and tongs, and a blackened kettle, still sending a reeking smoke curling into the chamber.

But Chade was not there. No, he was at the other end of the chamber, where a fatly cushioned chair faced a hearth with a dancing fire. Carpets overlay one another over the floor there, and an elegantly carved table held a glass bowl of autumn apples and a decanter of summer wine. Chade was ensconced in the chair, a partially unrolled scroll held to the light as he read it. Did he hold it farther from his nose than once he had, and were his spare arms more desiccated? I wondered if he had aged in the months I had been away, or if I had simply not noticed before. His grey woollen robe looked as well worn as ever, and his long grey hair overlay its shoulders and seemed the same colour. As always, I stood silent until he deigned to look up and recognize my presence. Some things changed, but some things did not.

He finally lowered the scroll and looked my way. He had green eyes, and their lightness was always surprising in his Farseer face. Despite the pox-like scars that stippled his face and arms, his bastard bloodlines were almost as plain marked as mine. I suppose I could have claimed him as a great-uncle, but our apprentice to master relationship was closer than a blood-tie. He looked me over and I self-consciously stood straighter under his scrutiny. His voice was grave as he commanded, 'Boy, come into the light.'

I advanced a dozen steps and stood apprehensively. He studied me as intently as he had studied the scroll. 'Were we ambitious traitors, you and I, we would make sure folk marked your resemblance to Chivalry. I could teach you to stand as he stood; you already walk as he did. I could show you how to add lines to your face to make you appear older. You have most of his height. You could learn his catch phrases, and the way he laughed. Slowly, we could gather power, in quiet ways, with none even recognizing what they were conceding. And one day, we could step up and take power.'

He paused.

Slowly I shook my head. Then we both smiled, and I came to sit on the hearth stones by his feet. The warmth of the fire on my back felt good.

'It's my trade, I suppose.' He sighed and took a sip of his wine. 'I have to think of these things, for I know that others will. One day, sooner or later,

some petty noble will believe it an original idea and approach you with it. Wait and see if I am not right.'

'I pray you are wrong. I have had enough of intrigues, Chade, and not fared as well at that game as I had expected to.'

'You did not do badly, with the hand you were dealt. You survived.' He looked past me into the fire. A question hung between us, almost palpably. Why had King Shrewd revealed to Prince Regal that I was his trained assassin? Why had he put me in the position of reporting to and taking orders from a man who wished me dead? Had he traded me away to Regal, to distract him from his other discontents? And if I had been a sacrificial pawn, was I still being dangled as bait and a distraction to the younger prince? I think not even Chade could have answered all my questions, and to ask any of them would have been blackest betrayal of what we were both sworn to be: King's Men. Both of us long ago had given our lives into Shrewd's keeping, for the protection of the royal family. It was not for us to question how he chose to spend us. That way lay treason.

So Chade lifted the summer wine and filled a waiting glass for me. For a brief time we conversed of things that were of no import to any save us, and all the more precious for that. I asked after Slink the weasel, and he haltingly offered sympathy over Nosy's death. He asked a question or two that let me know he was privy to everything I had reported to Verity, and a lot of stable gossip as well. I was filled in on the minor gossip of the keep, and all the doings I had missed among the lesser folk while I was gone. But when I asked him what he thought of Kettricken our Queen-in-Waiting, his face grew grave.

'She faces a difficult path. She comes to a queenless court, where she herself is and yet is not the Queen. She comes in a time of hardship, to a kingdom facing both Raiders and civil unrest. But most difficult for her is that she comes to a court that does not understand her concept of royalty. She had been besieged with feasts and gatherings in her honour. She is used to walking out among her own people, to tending her own gardens and looms and forge, to solving disputes and sacrificing herself to spare her people hardship. Here, she finds, her society is solely the nobility, the privileged, the wealthy. She does not understand the consumption of wine and exotic foods, the display of costly fabrics in dress, the flaunting of jewels that are the purpose of these gatherings. And so she does not "show well". She is a handsome woman, in her way. But she is too big, too heartily

muscled, too fair amongst the Buckkeep women. She is like a charger stabled among hunters. Her heart is good, but I do not know if she will be sufficient to the task, boy. In truth, I pity her. She came here alone, you know. Those few who accompanied her here have long since returned to the mountains. So she is very alone here, despite those who court her favour.'

'And Verity,' I asked, troubled. 'He does nothing to allay that loneliness, nothing to teach her of our ways?'

'Verity has little time for her,' Chade said bluntly. 'He tried to explain this to King Shrewd before the marriage was arranged, but we did not listen to him. King Shrewd and I were beguiled with the political advantages she offered. I forgot there would be a woman here, in this court, day after day. Verity has his hands full. Were they just a man and a woman, and given time, I think they could genuinely care for one another. But here and now, they must devote all their efforts to appearance. Soon an heir will be demanded. They have no time to get to know one another, let alone care for one another.' He must have seen the pain in my face, for he added, 'That's how it has always been for royalty, boy. Chivalry and Patience were the exception. And they bought their happiness at the cost of political advantages. It was unheard of, for the King-in-Waiting to marry for love. I'm sure you've heard over and over how foolish a thing it was.'

'And I'd always wondered if he'd cared.'

'It cost him,' Chade said quietly. 'I don't think he regretted his decision. But he was King-in-Waiting. You don't have that latitude.'

Here it came. I'd suspected he'd know everything. And useless to hope he'd say nothing. I felt a slow flush steal up my face. 'Molly.'

He nodded slowly. 'It was one thing when it was down in town, and you were more or less a boy. That could be ignored. But now you're being seen as a man. When she came here asking after you, it started tongues wagging and folk speculating. Patience was remarkably agile at hushing the rumours and taking charge of the situation. Not that I'd have kept the woman here, had it been left to me. But Patience handled it well enough.'

'The woman ...' I repeated, stung. If he'd said 'the whore' I couldn't have felt it more sharply. 'Chade, you misjudge her. And me. It began as a friendship, a long time ago, and if anyone was at fault in ... how things went, it was me, not Molly. I'd always thought that the friends I made in town, that the time I spent there as "Newboy" belonged to me.' I faltered to a halt, hearing only the foolishness of my words.

‘Did you think you could lead two lives?’ Chade’s voice was soft but not gentle. ‘We belong to the King, boy. King’s Men. Our lives belong to him. Every moment, of every day, asleep or awake. You have no time for your own concerns. Only his.’

I shifted slightly, to look into the fire. I considered what I knew of Chade in that light. I met him here, by darkness, in these isolated chambers. I had never seen him out and about around Buckkeep. No one spoke his name to me. Occasionally, disguised as Lady Thyme, he ventured forth. Once we had ridden together through the night, to that first awful Forging at Forge. But even that had been at the King’s command. What did Chade have for a life? A chamber, good food and wine, and a weasel for a companion. He was Shrewd’s older brother. But for his bastardy, he would be upon the throne. Was his life a foreshadowing of what mine was to be?

‘No.’

I hadn’t spoken, but as I looked up into Chade’s face, he guessed my thoughts. ‘I chose this life, boy. After a mishandled potion exploded and scarred me. I was handsome, once. And vain. Almost as vain as Regal. When I ruined my face, I wished myself dead. For months, I did not stir out of my chambers. When I finally went forth, it was in disguises, not Lady Thyme, not then, no. But disguises that covered my face and my hands. I left Buckkeep. For a long time. And when I came back, that handsome young man I had been was dead. I found myself more useful to the family, now that I was dead. There is much more to that story, boy. But know that I chose the way I live. It was not something Shrewd forced me into. I did it myself. Your future may be different. But do not imagine it is yours to command.’

Curiosity prodded me. ‘Is that why Chivalry and Verity knew of you, but not Regal?’

Chade smiled in an odd way. ‘I was a sort of a kindly step-uncle to the two older boys, if you can believe it. I watched over them, in some ways. But once I was scarred, I kept myself even from them. Regal never knew me. His mother had a horror of the pox. I think she believed all the legends of the pocked-man, harbinger of disaster and misfortune. For that matter, she had an almost superstitious dread of anyone who was not whole. You see it in Regal’s reaction to the Fool. She would never keep a club-footed maid or even a serving-man with a missing finger or two. So. When I returned, I was never introduced to the lady, or the child she bore. When Chivalry became King-in-Waiting to Shrewd, I was one of the things revealed to him. I was

shocked to find he recalled me, and had missed me. He brought Verity to see me that evening. I had to scold him over that. It was difficult to make them understand they could not come calling on me anytime they chose. Those boys.’ He shook his head and smiled at his memories. I can not explain the twinge of jealousy I felt. I called the conversation back to myself.

‘What do you think I should do?’

Chade pursed his lips, sipped his wine, and thought. ‘For now, Patience has given you good advice. Ignore or avoid Molly, but not obviously. Treat her as if she were a new scullery maid: courteously, if you encounter her, but not familiarly. Do not seek her out. Devote yourself to the Queen-in-Waiting. Verity will be glad of your distracting her. Kettricken will be glad of a friendly face. And if your intent is to win permission to marry Molly, the Queen-in-Waiting could be a powerful ally. As you divert Kettricken, watch over her as well. Bear in mind there are those whose interests do not support Verity having an heir. Those same ones who would not be enthused about your having children. So be wary and alert. Keep your guard up.’

‘Is that all?’ I asked, daunted.

‘No. Get some rest. Deadroot was what was used on you, by Regal?’ I nodded and he shook his head, narrowing his eyes. Then he looked me squarely in the face. ‘You are young. You may be able to recover, mostly. I’ve seen one other man survive it. But he trembled the rest of his life. I see the small signs of it on you yet. It will not show much, except to those who know you well. But do not overtire yourself. Weariness will bring on tremblings and blurred vision. Push yourself, and you will have fits. You do not want anyone to know you have a weakness. The best course is to conduct your life in such a way the weakness never shows.’

‘Was that why there was elfbark in the tea?’ I asked needlessly.

He raised an eyebrow at me. ‘Tea?’

‘Perhaps it was the Fool’s doing. I awoke to food and tea in my room ...’

‘And if it had been Regal’s doing?’

It took a moment for the realization to dawn. ‘I could have been poisoned.’

‘But you weren’t. Not this time. No, it was neither I nor the Fool. It was Lacey. There is someone deeper than you credit. The Fool discovered you, and something possessed him to tell Patience. While she was flustering, Lacey quietly ordered it all done. I think that privately she considers you as

scatter-brained as her mistress. Give her the slightest opening, and she will move in and organize your life. Good as her intentions are, you cannot allow that, Fitz. An assassin needs privacy. Get a latch for your door.'

'Fitz?' I wondered aloud.

'It is your name. FitzChivalry. As it seems to have lost its sting with you, I will use it now. I was beginning to weary of "boy".'

I bowed my head. We went on to talk of other things. It was an hour or so until morning when I left his windowless chambers and returned to my own. I went back to bed, but sleep eluded me. I had always stifled the hidden anger I felt at my position at court. Now it smouldered within me so that I could not rest. I threw off my blankets and dressed in my outgrown clothes, left the keep, and walked down into Buckkeep Town.

The brisk wind off the water blew damp cold like a wet slap in the face. I pulled my cloak more tightly around myself and tugged up my hood. I walked briskly, avoiding icy spots on the steep roadway down to town. I tried not to think, but I found that the brisk pumping of my blood was warming my anger more than my flesh. My thoughts danced like a reined-in horse.

When I had first come to Buckkeep Town, it had been a busy, grubby little place. In the last decade it had grown and adopted a veneer of sophistication, but its roots were only too plain. The town clung to the cliffs below Buckkeep Castle, and when those cliffs gave way to the rocky beaches, the warehouses and sheds were built out on docks and pilings. The good deep anchorage that sheltered below Buckkeep attracted merchant vessels and traders. Further to the north, where the Buck River met the sea, there were gentler beaches and the wide river to carry trading barges far inland to the Inland Duchies. The land closest to the river mouth was susceptible to flooding, and the anchorage unpredictable as the river shifted in its course. So the folk of Buckkeep Town lived crowded together on the steep cliffs above the harbour like the birds on Egg Bluffs. It made for narrow, badly cobbled streets that wound back and forth across the steepness as they made their way down to the water. The houses, shops and inns clung humbly to the cliff face, endeavouring to offer no resistance to the winds that were almost constant there. Higher up the cliff, the more ambitious homes and businesses were of timber, with their foundations cut into the stone itself. But I knew little of that stratum. I had run and played as a child among the humbler shops and sailors' inns that fronted almost on the water itself.

By the time I reached this area of Buckkeep Town, I was reflecting ironically that both Molly and I would have been better off had we never become friends. I had compromised her reputation, and if I continued my attentions, she would most likely become a target for Regal's malice. As for myself, the anguish I had felt at believing she had blithely left me for another was but a scratch compared to the bleeding now at knowing she thought I had deceived her.

I came out of my bleak thoughts to realize that my traitorous feet had carried me to the very door of her chandlery. Now it was a tea and herb shop. Just what Buckkeep Town needed, another tea and herb shop. I wondered what had become of Molly's bee hives. It gave me a pang to realize that for Molly the sense of dislocation must be ten times, no, a hundred times worse. I had so easily accepted that Molly had lost her father, and with him her livelihood and her prospects. So easily accepted the change that made her a servant in the keep. A servant. I clenched my teeth and kept walking.

I wandered the town aimlessly. Even in my bleak mood, I noticed how much it had changed in the last six months. Even on this cold winter day, it bustled. The construction of the ships had brought more folk, and more folk meant more trade. I stopped in a tavern where Molly, Dirk, Kerry and I had used to share a bit of brandy now and then. The cheapest blackberry brandy was usually what we got. I sat by myself and drank my short beer in silence, but around me tongues wagged and I learned much. It was not just the ship construction which had bolstered Buckkeep Town's prosperity; Verity had put out a call for sailors to man his warships. The call had been amply answered, by men and women from all of the Coastal Duchies. Some came with a grudge to settle, to avenge those killed or Forged by the Raiders. Others came for the adventure, and the hope of booty, or simply because, in the ravaged villages, they had no other prospects. Some were from fisher or merchant families, with sea time and water skills. Other were the former shepherds and farmers of ravaged villages. It mattered little. All had come to Buckkeep Town, eager to shed Red Ship blood.

For now, many were housed in what had once been warehouses. Hod, the Buckkeep Weapons-master, was giving them weapons training, winnowing out those she thought might be suitable for Verity's ships. The others would be offered hire as soldiers. These were the extra fold that swelled the town and crowded the inns and taverns and eating places. I heard complaints, too, that some of those who came to man the warships were

immigrant Outislanders, displaced from their own land by the very Red Ships that now menaced our coasts. They, too, claimed to be eager for revenge, but few Six Duchies folk trusted them, and some businesses in town would not sell to them. It gave an ugly charged undercurrent to the busy tavern. There was a snickering discussion of an Outislander who had been beaten on the docks the day before. No one had called the town patrol. When the speculation became even uglier, that these Outislanders were all spies and that burning them out would be a wise and sensible precaution, I could no longer stomach it, and left the tavern. Was there nowhere I could go to be free of suspicions and intrigues, if only for an hour?

I walked alone through the wintry streets. A storm was blowing up. The merciless wind prowled the twisting streets, promising snow. The same angry cold twisted and churned inside me, switching from anger to hatred to frustration and back to anger again, building to an unbearable pressure. They had no right to do this to me. I had not been born to be their tool. I had a right to live my life freely, to be who I was born to be. Did they think they could bend me to their will, use me however they would, and I would never retaliate? No. A time would come. My time would come.

A man hurried toward me, face shrouded in his hood against the wind. He glanced up and our eyes met. He blanched and turned aside, to hurry back the way he had come. Well, and so he might. I felt my anger building to an unbearable heat. The wind whipped at my hair and sought to chill me, but I only strode faster, and felt the strength of my hatred grow hotter. It lured me and I followed it like the scent of fresh blood.

I turned a corner and found myself in the market. Threatened by the coming storm, the poorer merchants were packing up their goods from their blankets and mats. Those with stalls were fastening their shutters. I strode past them. People scuttled out of my way. I brushed past them, not caring how they stared.

I came to the animal vendor's stall, and stood face to face with myself. He was gaunt, with bleak dark eyes. He glared at me balefully, and the waves of hatred pulsing out from him washed over me in greeting. Our hearts beat to the same rhythm. I felt my upper lip twitch, as if to snarl up and bare my pitiful human teeth. I straightened my features, batted my emotion back under control. But the caged wolf cub with the dirty grey coat stared up at me, and lifted his black lips to reveal all his teeth. *I hate you. All*

of you. Come, come closer. I'll kill you. I'll rip out your throat after I hamstring you. I'll feast on your entrails. I hate you.

'You want something?'

'Blood,' I said quietly. 'I want your blood.'

'What?'

I jerked my eyes from the wolf up to the man. He was greasy and dirty. He stank, by El, how he reeked. I could smell sweat and rancid food and his own droppings on him. He was swaddled in poorly-cured hides, and the stench of them hung about him as well. He had little ferret eyes, cruel dirty hands and a oak stick bound in brass that hung at his belt. It was all I could do to keep from seizing that hated stick and splattering his brains out with it. He wore thick boots on his kicking feet. He stepped too close to me and I gripped my cloak to keep from killing him.

'Wolf,' I managed to get out. My voice sounded guttural, choking. 'I want the wolf.'

'You certain, boy? He's a mean one.' He nudged the cage with his foot and I sprang at it, clashing my teeth against the wooden bars, bruising my muzzle again, but I didn't care, if I could get just one grip on his flesh, I'd tear it loose or never let go.

No. Get back, get out of my head. I shook my head to clear it. The merchant regarded me strangely. 'I know what I want.' I spoke flatly, refusing the wolf's emotions.

'Do you, eh?' The man stared at me, judging my worth. He'd charge what he thought I could afford. My outgrown clothes didn't please him, nor my youth. But I surmised he'd had the wolf for a while. He'd hoped to sell him as a cub. Now, with the wolf needing more food and not getting it, the man would probably take whatever he could get. As well for me. I didn't have much. 'What do you want him for?' the man asked casually.

'Pits,' I said nonchalantly. 'He's scrawny but there might be a bit of sport left in him.'

The wolf suddenly flung himself against the bars, jaws wide, teeth flashing. *I'll kill them, I'll kill them all, rip their throats out, tear their bellies open ...*

Be silent, if you want your freedom. I mentally gave him a push and the wolf leaped back as if stung by a bee. He retreated to the far corner of his cage and cowered there, teeth bared, but tail down between his legs. Uncertainty flooded him.

‘Dog fights, eh? Oh, he’ll put up a good fight.’ The merchant nudged at the cage again with a thick boot, but the wolf didn’t respond. ‘He’ll win you a lot of coin, this one will. He’s meaner than a wolverine.’ He kicked the cage, harder. The wolf cowered smaller.

‘Oh, he certainly looks as if he will,’ I said disdainfully. I turned aside from the wolf as if I’d lost interest. I studied the caged birds behind him. The pigeons and doves looked as if they were cared for, but two jays and a crow were crowded into a filthy cage littered with rotting scraps of meat and bird droppings. The crow looked like a beggar man in black tatters of feathers. *Pick at the bright bug*, I suggested to the birds. *Perhaps you’ll find a way out*. The crow perched wearily where he was, head sunk deep in his feathers, but one jay fluttered to a higher perch and began to tap and tug at the metal pin that held the cage fastened. I glanced back at the wolf.

‘I hadn’t intended to fight him anyway. I was only going to throw him to the dogs to warm them up. A bit of blood primes them for a fight.’

‘Oh, but he’d make you a fine fighter. Here, look at this. This is what he done to me but a month gone. And me trying to give him food when he went for me.’

He rolled back a sleeve to bare a grimy wrist striped with livid slashes, but half-healed still.

I leaned over as if mildly interested. ‘Looks infected. Think you’ll lose your hand?’

‘S’not infected. Just slow healing, that’s all. Look here, boy, a storm’s coming up. I got to put my wares in my cart and haul off before it hits. Now, you going to make me an offer for that wolf? He’ll make you a fine fighter.’

‘He might make bear bait, but not much more than that. I’ll give you, oh, six coppers.’ I had a grand total of seven.

‘Coppers? Boy, we’re talking silvers here, at least. Look, he’s a fine animal. Feed him up a bit, he’ll get bigger and meaner. I could get six coppers for his hide alone, right now.’

‘Then you’d best do it, before he gets any mangier. And before he decides to take your other hand off.’ I leaned closer to the cage, *pushing* as I did so, and the wolf cowered more deeply. ‘Looks sick to me. My master would be furious with me, if I brought him in and the dogs got sick from killing him.’ I glanced up at the sky. ‘Storm is coming. I’d better be off.’

‘One silver, boy. And that’s giving him to you.’

At that moment the jay succeeded in pulling the pin. The cage door swung open and he hopped to the door's edge. I casually stepped between the man and the cage. Behind me, I heard the jays hop out to the top of the pigeons' cage. *Door's open* I pointed out to the crow. I heard him rattle his pathetic feathers. I caught up the pouch at my belt, hefted it thoughtfully. 'A silver? I don't have a silver. But it's no matter, really. I just realized I've no way to cart him home with me. Best I don't buy him.'

Behind me, the jays took flight. The man blazed out a curse and lunged past me toward the cage. I managed to get entangled with him so that we both fell. The crow had made it as far as the cage door. I shook myself clear of the merchant and jumped to my feet, jarring the cage to spook the bird out into the free air. He beat his wings laboriously, but they carried him to the roof of a nearby inn. As the merchant lumbered to his feet, the crow opened his threadbare wings and cawed derisively.

'There's a whole cage full of my wares gone!' he began accusingly, but I caught up my cloak and pointed to a tear in it. 'My master's going to be angry with this!' I exclaimed, and matched him glare for glare.

He glanced up at the crow. The bird had huffed its feathers against the storm and sidled into the shelter of a chimney. He'd never catch that bird again. Behind me, the wolf whined suddenly.

'Nine coppers!' the merchant offered suddenly, desperately. He'd sold nothing that day, I'd wager.

'I told you, I've no way to take him home!' I countered. I tugged up my hood, glanced at the sky. 'Storm's here,' I announced as the thick wet flakes began to fall. This would be nasty weather, too warm to freeze, too cold to melt. By daylight, the streets would be shining with ice. I turned to go.

'Give me your six damned coppers then!' the merchant bellowed in frustration.

I fumbled them out hesitatingly. 'And will you cart him to where I live?' I asked as he snatched them out of my hand.

'Carry him yourself, boy. You've robbed me and you know it.'

With that he seized up his cage of doves and pigeons and heaved it into the cart. The empty crow's cage followed. He ignored my angry remonstrance as he climbed up on the seat and shook the pony's reins. The old beast dragged the creaking cart off, into the thickening snow and dusk. The market around us was abandoned. The only traffic now was folk

hurrying home through the storm, collars and cloaks tight against the wet wind and blowing snow.

‘Now what am I to do with you?’ I asked the wolf.

Let me out. Free me.

I can't. Not safe. If I turned a wolf loose here in the heart of town, he'd never find his way to the woods alive. There were too many dogs that would pack up to bring him down, too many men who would shoot him for his hide. Or for being a wolf. I bent toward the cage, intending to heft it and see how heavy it was. He lunged at me, teeth bared.

Get back! I was instantly angry. It was contagious.

I'll kill you. You're the same as he was, a man. You'd keep me in this cage, would you? I'll kill you, I'll rip your belly out and tussle with your guts.

You'll get BACK! I pushed at him, hard, and he cowered away again. He snarled and whined his confusion at what I had done, but he shrank away from me into the corner of his cage. I seized the cage, lifted it. It was heavy, and the frantic shifting of his weight didn't make it any easier. But I could carry it. Not very far, and not for long. But if I took it in stages, I could get him out of the town. Full grown, he'd probably weigh as much as I did. But he was skinny, and young. Younger than I had guessed at first glance.

I heaved the cage up, held it against my chest. If he went for me now, he could do some damage. But he only whined and cowered back from me into the far corner. It made it very awkward to carry him.

How did he catch you?

I hate you.

How did he catch you?

He remembered a den, and two brothers. A mother who brought him fish. And blood and smoke and his brothers and mother became smelly hides for the boot man. He was dragged out last and thrown into a cage that smelled like ferrets, and kept alive on carrion. And hate. Hate was what he had thrown upon.

You were whelped late, if your mother was feeding you on the fish runs.

He sulked at me.

All the roads were uphill, and the snow was starting to stick. My worn boots slid on the icy cobbles, and my shoulders ached with the awkward burden of the cage. I feared I would start trembling. I had to stop frequently to rest. When I did, I firmly refused to think about what I was doing. I told

myself that I would not bond with this wolf, or any other creature. I had promised myself. I was just going to feed this cub up and then turn him loose somewhere. Burrich need never know. I would not have to face his disgust. I hefted the cage up again. Who would have thought such a mangy little cub could be so heavy?

Not mangy. Indignant. Fleas. The cage is full of fleas.

So I wasn't imagining that itching on my chest. Wonderful. I'd have to bathe again tonight, unless I wanted to share my bed with vermin for the rest of the winter.

I had reached the edge of Buckkeep Town. From here, there were only a scattering of houses, and the road would be steeper. Much steeper. Once again, I lowered the cage to the snowy ground. The cub huddled in it, small and miserable without anger and hate to sustain him. He was hungry. I made a decision.

I'm going to take you out. I'm going to carry you.

Nothing from him. He watched me steadily as I worked the catch on the cage and swung the door open. I had thought he would charge past me and vanish into the night and the falling snow. Instead he crouched where he was. I reached into the cage and seized him by the scruff to drag him out. In a flash he was on me, driving into my chest, jaws going wide for my throat. I got my arm up just in time to shove my forearm crossways into his jaws. I kept my grip on the scruff of his neck and pushed my arm hard into his mouth, deeper than he liked. His hind legs tore at my belly, but my jerkin was thick enough to divert most of the damage. In an instant we were rolling over and over in the snow, both snapping and snarling like mad things. But I had the weight and the leverage and the experience of tussling with dogs for years. I got him on his back and held him there, helpless, while his head thrashed back and forth and he called me vile names that humans have no words for. When he had exhausted himself I leaned forward over him. I gripped his throat and leaned down to stare into his eyes. This was a physical message he understood. I added to it. *I am the Wolf. You are the Cub. You WILL obey me!*

I held him there staring into his eyes. He quickly looked away, but still I held him, until he looked back up at me and I saw the change in them. I let go of him and stood up and stepped away. He lay still. *Get up. Come here.* He rolled over and came to me, belly low to the ground, tail between his

legs. When he got close to me, he fell over on his side and then showed his belly. He whined softly.

After a moment I relented. *It's all right. We just had to understand each other. I don't intend to hurt you. Come with me now.* I reached over to scratch his chest, but when I touched him, he yelped. I felt the red flash of his pain.

Where are you hurt?

I saw the brass-bound club of the cage man. *Everywhere.*

I tried to be gentle as I felt him over. Old scabs, lumps on his ribs. I stood, and kicked the cage savagely aside from our path. He came and leaned against my leg. *Hungry. Cold. So tired.* His feelings were bleeding over into mine again. When I touched him, it was difficult to separate my thoughts from his. Was it my outrage over how he had been treated, or his own? I decided it didn't matter. I gathered him up carefully and stood. Without the cage, held close to my chest, he didn't weigh nearly as much. He was mostly fur and long, growing bones. I regretted the force I'd used on him, but also knew that it was the only language he would have recognized. 'I'll take care of you,' I forced myself to say aloud.

Warm, he thought gratefully, and I took a moment to pull my cloak over him. His senses were feeding mine. I could smell myself, a thousand times stronger than I wanted to. Horses and dogs and wood smoke and beer and a trace of Patience's perfume. I did my best to block out my awareness of his senses. I snuggled him to me and carried him up the steep path to Buckkeep. I knew of a disused cottage. An old pig man had once lived in it, out back behind the granaries. No one lived there now. It was too tumbledown, and too far from everyone else at Buckkeep. But it would suit my purposes. I'd put him there, with some bones to gnaw and some boiled grain, and some straw to bed down in. A week or two, maybe a month, and he'd be healed up and strong enough to care for himself. Then I'd take him out west of Buckkeep and turn him loose.

Meat?

I sighed. *Meat,* I promised. Never had any beast sensed my thoughts so completely, or expressed his own to me so clearly. It was good that we would not be around one another for long. Very good that he'd be leaving soon.

Warm, he contradicted me. He set his head on my shoulder and fell asleep, his muzzle snuffling damply against my ear.

FIVE

Gambit

Certainly there is an ancient code of conduct, and certainly its customs were harsher than ours today. But I would venture that we have not wandered so far from those customs, so much as put a veneer over them. A warrior's word is still his bond, and among those who serve side by side, there is nothing so foul as one who lies to his comrade, or leads him into dishonour. The laws of hospitality still forbid those who have shared salt at a man's table to shed blood on his floor.

Winter deepened around Buckkeep Castle. The storms came in off the sea, to pound us with icy fury and then depart. Snow usually fell in their wake, great dumps of it that iced the battlements like sweet paste on nut cakes. The great darks of the long nights grew longer, and on clear nights the stars burnt cold over us. After my long journey home from the Mountain Kingdom, the ferocity of the winter didn't threaten me as it once had. As I went my daily rounds to the stable and to the old pig hut, my cheeks might burn with cold and my eyelashes cling together with frost, but I always knew that home and a warm hearth were close by. The storms and the deep colds that snarled at us like wolves at the door were also the watch beasts that kept the Red Ships away from our shores.

Time dragged for me. I called on Kettricken each day, as Chade had suggested, but our restiveness was too much alike for us. I am sure I irritated her as much as she did me. I dared not spend too many hours with the cub, lest we bond. I had no other fixed duties. There were too many hours to the day, and all were filled with my thoughts of Molly. Nights were the worst, for then my sleeping mind was beyond my control, and my dreams were full of my Molly, my bright-red-skirted candle-maker, now gone so demure and drab in serving-girl blue. If I could not be near her by day, my dreaming self courted her with an earnestness and energy that my waking self had never mustered the courage for. When we walked the beaches after a storm, her

hand was in mine. I kissed her competently, without uncertainty, and met her eyes with no secrets to hide. No one could keep her from me. In my dreams.

At first, Chade's training of me seduced me into spying upon her. I knew which room on the servants' floor was hers, I knew which window was hers. I learned, without intention, the hours of her comings and goings. It shamed me to stand where I might hear her step upon the stairs and catch a brief glimpse of her going out on her market errands, but try as I might, I could not forbid myself to be there. I knew who her friends were among the serving-women. Though I might not speak to her, I could greet them, and have a chance bit of talk with them, hoping always for some stray mention of Molly. I yearned after her hopelessly. Sleep eluded me, and food held no interest for me. Nothing held any interest for me.

I was sitting one evening in the guard-room off the kitchen. I had found a place in the corner where I could lean against the wall and prop my boots up on the opposite bench to discourage company. A mug of ale that had gone warm hours ago sat in front of me. I lacked even the ambition to drink myself into a stupor. I was looking at nothing, attempting not to think when the bench was jerked out from under my propped feet. I nearly fell from my seat, then recovered to see Burrich seating himself opposite me. 'What ails you?' he asked without niceties. He leaned forward and pitched his voice for me alone. 'Have you had another seizure?'

I looked back at the table. I spoke as quietly. 'A few trembling fits, but no real seizures. They only seem to come on me if I strain myself.'

He nodded gravely, then waited. I looked up to find his dark eyes on me. The concern in them touched something in me. I shook my head, my voice suddenly gone. 'It's Molly,' I said after a moment.

'You haven't been able to find where she went?'

'No. She's here, at Buckkeep, working as a maid for Patience. But Patience won't let me see her. She says ...'

Burrich's eyes had widened at my first words. Now he glanced around us, then tossed his head at the door. I arose and followed him as he led me back to his stables, and then up to his room. I sat down at his table, before his hearth, and he brought out his good Tilth brandy and two cups. Then he set out his leather mending tools. And his perpetual pile of harness to be mended. He handed me a halter that needed a new strap. For himself, he laid out some fancy work on a saddle-skirt. He drew up his own stool and looked

at me. 'This Molly. I've seen her then, in the washer-courts with Lacey? Carries her head proud? Red glint to her coat?'

'Her hair.' I corrected him grudgingly.

'Nice wide hips. She'll bear easily,' he said with approval.

I glared at him. 'Thank you,' I said icily.

He shocked me by grinning. 'Get angry. I'd rather you were that than self-pitying. So. Tell me.'

And I told him. Probably much more than I would have in the guard-room, for here we were alone, the brandy went warm down my throat, and the familiar sights and smells of his room and work were all around me. Here, if anywhere in my life, I had always been safe. It seemed safe to reveal to him my pain. He did not speak or make any comments. Even after I had talked myself out, he kept his silence. I watched him rub dye into the lines of the buck he had incised in the leather.

'So. What should I do?' I heard myself ask.

He set down his work, drank off his brandy, and then refilled his cup. He looked about his room. 'You ask me, of course, because you have noted my rare success at providing myself with a fond wife and many children?'

The bitterness in his voice shocked me, but before I could react to it, he gave a choked laugh. 'Forget I said that. Ultimately, the decision was mine, and done a long time ago. FitzChivalry, what do you think you should be doing?'

I stared at him morosely.

'What made things go wrong in the first place?' When I did not reply, he asked me, 'Did not you yourself just tell me that you courted her as a boy, when she considered your offer a man's? She was looking for a man. So don't go sulking about like a thwarted child. Be a man.' He drank down half his brandy, then refilled both our cups.

'How?' I demanded.

'The same way you've shown yourself a man elsewhere. Accept the discipline, live up to the task. So you cannot see her. If I know anything of women, it does not mean she does not see you. Keep that in mind. Look at yourself. Your hair looks like a pony's winter coat, I'll wager you've worn that shirt a week straight and you're thin as a winter-foal. I doubt you'll regain her respect that way. Feed yourself up, groom yourself daily, and in Eda's name get some exercise instead of moping about the guard-room. Set yourself some tasks and get onto them.'

I nodded slowly to the advice. I knew he was right. But I could not help protesting. 'But all of that will do me no good if Patience will still not permit me to see Molly.'

'In the long run, my boy, it is not about you and Patience. It is about you and Molly.'

'And King Shrewd,' I said wryly.

He glanced up at me quizzically.

'According to Patience, a man cannot be sworn to a king and give his heart fully to a woman as well. "You cannot put two saddles on one horse," she told me. This from a woman who married a King-in-Waiting, and was content with whatever time he had for her.' I reached to hand Burrich the mended halter.

He did not take it. He had been in the act of lifting his brandy cup. He set it down on the table so sharply that the liquid leaped and slopped over the edge. 'She said that to you?' he asked me hoarsely. His eyes bored into mine.

I nodded slowly. 'She said it would not be honourable to expect Molly to be content with whatever time the King left to me as my own.'

Burrich leaned back in his chair. A chain of conflicting emotions dragged across his features. He looked aside into the hearth fire, and then back at me. For a moment he seemed on the verge of speaking. Then he sat up, drank off his brandy in one gulp and abruptly stood. 'It's too quiet up here. Let's go down to Buckkeep Town, shall we?'

The next day I arose and ignored my pounding heart to set myself the task of not behaving like a love-sick boy. A boy's impetuosity and carelessness were what had lost her to me. I resolved to attempt a man's restraint. If biding my time was my only path to her, I would take Burrich's advice and use that time well.

So I arose each day early, before even the morning cooks were up. In the privacy of my room, I stretched and then worked through sparring drills with an old stave. I would work myself into sweat and dizziness, and then go down to the baths to steam myself. Slowly, very slowly, my stamina began to return. I gained weight and began to rebuild the muscle on my bones. The new clothing that Mistress Hasty had inflicted on me began to fit. I was still not free of the tremors that sometimes assailed me. But I had fewer seizures, and always managed to return to my rooms before I could shame myself by

falling. Patience told me that my colour was better, while Lacey delighted in feeding me at every opportunity. I began to feel myself again.

I ate with the guards each morning, where quantity consumed was always of more importance than manners. Breakfast was followed with a trip to the stables, to take Sooty out for a snowy canter to keep her in condition. When I returned her to the stables, there was a comfort in taking care of her myself. Before our misadventures in the Mountain Kingdom, Burrich and I had been on bad terms over my use of the Wit. I had been all but barred from the stables. So there was more than satisfaction in rubbing her down and seeing to her grain myself. There was the busyness of the stables, the warm smells of the beasts and the gossip of the keep as only the stable-hands could tell it. On fortunate days, Hands or Burrich would take time to stop and talk with me. And on other days, busy days, there was the bittersweet satisfaction of seeing them conferring over a stallion's cough, or doctoring the ailing boar that some farmer had brought up to the keep. On those days they had little time for pleasantries, and without intending it, excluded me from their circle. It was as it had to be. I had moved on to another life. I could not expect the old one to be held ajar for me forever.

That thought did not prevent a pang of guilt as I slipped away each day to the disused cottage behind the granaries. Wariness always stalked me. My new peace with Burrich had not existed so long that I took it for granted; it was only too fresh in my memory exactly how painful losing his friendship had been. If Burrich ever suspected that I had returned to using the Wit, he would abandon me just as swiftly and completely as he had before. Each day I asked myself exactly why I was willing to gamble his friendship and respect for the sake of a wolf cub.

My only answer was, I had no choice. I could no more have turned aside from Cub than I could have walked away from a starved and caged child. To Burrich, the Wit that sometimes left me open to the minds of animals was a perversion, a disgusting weakness in which no true man indulged. He had all but admitted to the latent ability for it, but staunchly insisted that he never used it himself. If he did, I had never caught him at it. The opposite was never true. With uncanny perception, he had always known when I was drawn to an animal. As a boy, my indulgence in the Wit with a beast had usually led to a rap on the head or a sound cuff to rouse me back to my duties. When I had lived with Burrich in the stables, he had done everything in his power to keep me from bonding to any animal. He had

succeeded always, save twice. The keen pain of losing my bond companions had convinced me Burrich was right. Only a fool would indulge in something that inevitably led to such loss. So I was a fool, rather than a man who could turn aside from the plea of a beaten and starved cub.

I pilfered bones and meat scraps and crusts, and did my best so that no one, not even Cook or the Fool, knew of my activity. I took elaborate pains to vary the times of my visits each day, and to take every day a different path to avoid creating too beaten a trail to the back cottage. Hardest had been smuggling clean straw and an old horse blanket out of the stables. But I had managed it.

No matter when I arrived, I found Cub waiting for me. It was not just the watchfulness of an animal awaiting food. He sensed when I began my daily hike back to the cottage behind all the granaries and awaited me. He knew when I had ginger cakes in my pocket, and too quickly became fond of them. Not that his suspicions of me had vanished. No. I felt his wariness, and how he shrank in on himself each time I stepped within reach of him. But every day that I did not strike him, every bit of food I brought him was one more plank of trust in the bridge between us. It was a link I did not want to establish. I tried to be sternly aloof from him, to know him through the Wit as little as possible. I feared he might lose the wildness that he would need to survive on his own. Over and over I warned him, *You must keep yourself hidden. Every man is a danger to you, as is every hound. You must keep yourself within this structure, and make no sound if anyone is near.*

At first it was easy for him to obey. He was sadly thin, and would fall immediately upon the food I brought and devour it all. Usually he was asleep in his bedding before I left the cottage, or jealously eyeing me as he lay gnawing a treasured bone. But as he was fed adequately, and had room to move, and lost his fear of me, the innate playfulness of a cub began to reassert itself. He took to springing upon me in mock attacks as soon as the door was opened, and expressing delight in knuckly beef bones with snarls and tusslings inflicted on them. When I rebuked him for being too noisy, or for the tracks that betrayed his night romp in the snowy field behind the cottage, he would cower before my displeasure.

But I noted as well the masked savagery in his eyes at those times. He did not concede mastery to me. Only a sort of pack seniority. He bided his time until his decisions should be his own. Painful as it was sometimes, it was as it needed to be. I had rescued him with the firm intent of returning

him to freedom. A year from now, he would be but one more wolf howling in the distance at night. I told him this repeatedly. At first, he would demand to know when he would be taken from the smelly keep and the confining stone walls that fenced it. I would promise him soon, as soon as he was fed to strength again, as soon as the deepest snows of winter were past and he could fend for himself. But as weeks passed, and the storms outside reminded him of the snugness of his bed and the good meat filled out on his bones, he asked less often. Sometimes I forgot to remind him.

Loneliness ate at me from inside and out. At night I would wonder what would happen if I crept upstairs and knocked at Molly's door. By day I held myself back from bonding to the small cub who depended so completely on me. There was only one other creature in the keep who was as lonely as I was.

'I am sure you have other duties. Why do you come to call on me each day?' Kettricken asked me in the forthright Mountain way. It was mid-morning, on a day following a night of storm. Snow was falling in fat flakes and despite the chill, Kettricken had ordered the window shutters opened so she might watch it. Her sewing chamber overlooked the sea, and I thought she was fascinated by the immense and restless waters. Her eyes were much the same colour as the water that day.

'I had thought to help time pass more pleasantly for you, my Queen-in-Waiting.'

'Passing time,' she sighed. She cupped her chin in her hand and leaned on her elbow to stare pensively out at the falling snow. The sea wind tangled in her pale hair. 'It is an odd language, yours. You speak of passing time as in the mountains we speak of passing wind. As if it were a thing to be rid of.'

Behind us, her two ladies tittered apprehensively, then bent their heads industriously over their needlework again. Kettricken herself had a large embroidery frame set up, with the beginning of mountains and a waterfall in it. I had not noticed her making much progress on it. Her other ladies had not presented themselves today, but had sent pages with excuses as to why they could not attend her. Headaches, mostly. She did not seem to understand that she was being slighted by their inattention. I did not know how to explain it to her, and on some days I wondered if I should. Today was one of those days.

I shifted in my chair and crossed my legs the other way. 'I meant only that in winter, Buckkeep can become a tedious place. The weather keeps us within doors so much, there is little that is amusing.'

'That is not the case down at the shipwrights' sheds,' she informed me. Her eyes had a strangely hungry look. 'There it is all bustle, with every bit of daylight used in the setting of the great timbers and the bending of the planks. Even when the day is dim or wild with storm, within the sheds shipbuilders are still hewing and shaping and planing wood. At the metal forges, they make chains and anchors. Some weave stout canvas for sails, and others cut and sew it. Verity walks about there, overseeing it all. While I sit here with fancywork, and prick my fingers and strain my eyes to knot in flowers and birds' eyes. So that when I am finished, it can be set aside with a dozen other prettyworks.'

'Oh, not set aside, no, never, my lady,' one of her women burst in impulsively. 'Why, your needlework is much treasured when you gift it out. In Shoaks there is a framed bit in Lord Shemshy's private chambers, and Duke Kelvar of Rippon ...'

Kettricken's sigh cut short the woman's compliment. 'I would I worked at a sail instead, with a great iron needle or a wooden fid, to grace one of my husband's ships. There would be a work that was worthy of my time, and his respect. Instead, I am given toys to amuse me, as if I were a spoiled child that did not understand the value of time well spent.' She turned back to her window. I noticed then that the smoke rising from the shipyards was as easily visible as the sea. Perhaps I had mistaken the direction of her attention.

'Shall I send for tea and cakes, my lady?' one of her ladies inquired hopefully. Both of them sat with their shawls pulled up over their shoulders. Kettricken did not appear to notice the chill sea air spilling in the open window, but it could not have been pleasant for those two to sit and ply their needles in it.

'If you wish them,' Kettricken replied disinterestedly. 'I do not hunger or thirst. Indeed, I fear I will grow fat as a penned goose, sitting at needlework and nibbling and sipping all day. I long to do something of significance. Tell me true, Fitz. If you did not feel required to call upon me, would you be sitting idly in your chambers? Or doing fancy work at a loom?'

'No. But then, I am not the Queen-in-Waiting.'

‘Waiting. Ah, I understand well now that part of my title.’ A bitterness I had never heard from her before crept into her voice. ‘But Queen? In my land, as well you know, we do not say Queen. Were I there now, and ruling instead of my father, I would be called Sacrifice. More, I would *be* Sacrifice. To whatever was to the good of my land and my people.’

‘Were you there now, in the deep of winter, what would you be doing?’ I asked, thinking only to find a more comfortable area of conversation. It was a mistake.

She grew silent and stared out the window. ‘In the mountains,’ she said softly, ‘there was never time to be idle. I was the younger of course, and most of the duties of Sacrifice fell upon my father and my older brother. But, as Jonqui says, there is always enough work to go round and some to spare. Here, in Buckkeep, all is done by servants, out of sight, and one sees only the results, the tidied chamber, the meal on the table. Perhaps it is because this is such a populous place.’

She paused a moment and her eyes went afar. ‘In Jhaampe, in winter, the hall and the town itself grow quiet. Snows fall thick and heavy, and great cold closes in on the land. The lesser used trails disappear for the winter. Wheels are replaced by runners. Visitors to the city have long gone home by now. In the palace at Jhaampe, there is only the family, and those who choose to stay and help them. Not serve them, no, not exactly. You have been to Jhaampe. You know there are none who only serve, save for the royal family. In Jhaampe, I would rise early, to fetch the water for the household porridge, and to take my turn at the stirring of the kettle. Keera and Sennick and Jofron and I would make the kitchen lively with talk. And all the young ones dashing about, bringing in the firewood and setting out the plates and talking of a thousand things.’ Her voice faltered, and I listened to the silence of her loneliness.

After a bit she went on, ‘If there was work to be done, heavy or light, we all joined in it. I have helped to bend and lash the branches for a barn. Even in the deep of winter, I have helped to clear snow and raise new roof arches for a family devastated by a fire. Do you think a Sacrifice cannot hunt down a cranky old bear that has turned to killing goats, or strain against a rope to help brace a bridge battered by flood waters?’ She looked at me with real pain in her eyes.

‘Here, in Buckkeep, we do not risk our queens,’ I told her simply. ‘Another shoulder can brace a rope, we have dozens of hunters who would

vie for the honour of dispatching a cattle killer. We have but one queen. There are things a queen can do that no other can.'

Behind us in the room, her ladies had all but forgotten her. One had summoned a page, and he had returned with sweet cakes and steaming tea in a pot. They chatted together, warming their hands about their tea-cups. Briefly I looked at them, to remember well what ladies had chosen to attend their queen. Kettricken, I was coming to see, might not be the easiest of queens to attend upon. Kettricken's little maid, Rosemary, sat on the floor by the tea-table, dreamy-eyed, a sweet cake clasped in her small hands. I suddenly wished I were eight years old again and could join her there.

'I know what you speak of,' Kettricken said bluntly. 'I am here to bear an heir to Verity. It is a duty I do not avoid, for I do not consider it a duty, but a pleasure. I only wish I were sure my lord shared my sentiments. Always he is away and about the town on business. I know where he is today; down there, watching his ships arise from planks and timbers. Could I not be with him with no danger to myself? Surely, if only I can bear his heir, only he can sire it. Why must I be confined here while he immerses himself in the task of protecting our people? That is a task I should be sharing as Sacrifice for the Six Duchies.'

Accustomed as I had become to Mountain forthrightness in my time there, I was still shocked at how bluntly she spoke. It made me overbold in my reply. I found myself rising to lean past her and pull the shutters tight over the draughty window. I took advantage of the closeness to whisper fiercely, 'If you think that is the only duty that our queens bear, you are gravely mistaken, my lady. To speak as plainly as you have, you neglect your duties to your ladies, who are here this day only to attend upon you and converse with you. Think. Could they not be doing this same needlework in the cosiness of their own chambers, or in the company of Mistress Hasty? You sigh after what you perceive as a more important task; but before you is a task the King himself cannot do. You are here to do it. Rebuild the court at Buckkeep. Make it a desirable and attractive place to be. Encourage his lords and ladies to vie for his attention; make them eager to support him in his endeavours. It has been long since there was a congenial queen in this castle. Instead of looking down at a ship that other hands are more capable of building, take up the task you are given, and suit yourself to it.'

I finished re-draping the tapestry that covered the shutters and helped to seal out the cold of the sea storms. I then stepped back and met my queen's

eyes. To my chagrin, she was as chastened as if she were a milkmaid. Tears stood in her pale eyes, and her cheeks were as red as if I had slapped her. I glanced at her ladies, who were still taking tea and chatting. Rosemary, unwatched, was taking the opportunity to poke at the tarts carefully to see what was inside them. No one appeared to have noticed anything amiss. But I was learning rapidly how adept court ladies were at such dissimulation, and feared speculation as to what the Bastard might have said to the Queen-in-Waiting to bring tears to her eyes.

I cursed my clumsiness, and reminded myself that however tall Kettricken might be, she was not much older than myself, and in a foreign place alone. I should not have spoken to her, but should instead have presented the problem to Chade, and let him manipulate someone into explaining it to her. Then it dawned on me that he had already selected someone to explain such things to her. I met her eyes again and ventured a nervous smile. Quickly she followed my glance to the ladies, and as swiftly returned decorum to her face. My heart surged with pride in her.

‘What do you suggest?’ she asked quietly.

‘I suggest,’ I said humbly, ‘that I am ashamed at how boldly I have spoken to my queen. I ask her forgiveness. But I suggest, also, that she show these two royal ladies some special mark of royal favour, to reward them for their faithfulness.’

She nodded her comprehension. ‘And that favour might be?’ she asked softly.

‘A private gathering with their queen in her personal chambers, perhaps for a special minstrel or puppeteer. It matters not what entertainment you provide; only that those who have not chosen to attend you as faithfully be excluded.’

‘That sounds like something Regal would do.’

‘Probably. He is very adept at creating lackeys and hangers-on. But he would do it spitefully, to punish those who had not danced attendance upon him.’

‘And I?’

‘And you, my Queen-in-Waiting, you do it as a reward to those who have. With no thought of punishing those who have not, but only of enjoying the company of those who obviously reciprocate that feeling.’

‘I see. And the minstrel?’

‘Mellow. He has a most gallant way of singing to every lady in the room.’

‘Will you see if he is free this evening?’

‘My lady,’ I had to smile. ‘You are the Queen-in-Waiting. You honour him to request his presence. He will never be too busy to attend upon you.’

She sighed again, but it was a smaller sigh. She nodded her dismissal of me, and rose to advance smiling upon her ladies, begging them to excuse her wandering thoughts this morning, and then asking if they might also attend her this evening in her own chambers. I watched them exchange glances and smile, and knew we had done well. I noted their names to myself. Lady Hopeful and Lady Modesty. I bowed my way out of the room, my departure scarcely noticed.

So I came to be advisor to Kettricken. It was a not a role I relished, to be companion and instructor, to be the whisperer that told her what steps she next must dance. In truth, it was an uncomfortable task. I felt I diminished her by my chiding, and that I corrupted her, teaching her the spidery ways of power in the web of the court. She was right. These were Regal’s tricks. If she worked them with higher ideals and kinder ways than Regal did, my intentions were selfish enough for both of us. I wanted her to gather power into her hands, and with it bind the throne firmly to Verity in the minds of one and all.

Early each evening, I was expected to call on Lady Patience. She and Lacey both took these visits quite seriously. Patience considered me completely at her disposal, as if I were her page still, and thought nothing of requiring me to copy some ancient scroll for her onto her precious red paper, or to demand that I show her my improvement in playing the sea pipes. She always took me to task for not showing enough effort in that area, and would spend the better part of an hour confusing me whilst attempting to instruct me in it. I tried to be tractable and polite, but felt entrapped in their conspiracy to keep me from seeing Molly. I knew the wisdom of Patience’s course, but wisdom does not allay loneliness. Despite their efforts to keep me from her, I saw Molly everywhere. Oh, not her person, no, but in the scent of the fat bayberry candle burning so sweetly, in the cloak left draped over a chair, even the honey in the honey cakes tasted of Molly to me. Will you think me a fool that I sat close by the candle and smelled its scent, or took the chair that I might lean against her snow-damped cloak as I sat?

Sometimes I felt as Kettricken did, that I was drowning in what was required of me, and that there was nothing left in my life that was for me alone.

I reported weekly to Chade upon Kettricken's progress in court intrigue. Chade it was who warned me that suddenly the ladies most enamoured of Regal were courting favour with Kettricken as well. And so I must warn her, who to treat courteously, but no more than that, and whom to genuinely smile upon. Sometimes I thought to myself that I would rather be quietly killing for my king than to be so embroiled in all these secretive schemes. But then King Shrewd summoned me.

The message came very early one morning, and I made haste to dress myself to attend my king. This was the first time he had summoned me to his presence since I had returned to Buckkeep. It had made me uneasy to be ignored. Was he displeased with me, over what had happened at Jhaampe? Surely he would have told me so directly. Still. Uncertainty gnawed me. I tried to make great haste to wait upon him, and yet to take special care with my appearance. I ended up doing poorly at both. My hair, shorn for fever when I was in the mountains, had grown back as bushy and unmanageable as Verity's. Worse, my beard was beginning to bristle as well. Twice Burrich had told me that I had better decide to wear a beard, or to attend more closely to my shaving. As my beard came in as patchy as a pony's winter coat, I diligently cut my face several times that morning, before deciding that a bit of bristle would be less noticeable than all the blood. I curried my hair back from my face, and wished I could bind it back in a warrior's tail. I set into my shirt the pin that Shrewd had so long ago given me to mark me as his. Then I hurried to attend my king.

As I strode hastily down the hall to the King's door, Regal stepped abruptly from his own doorway. I halted not to run into him, and then felt trapped there, staring at him. I had seen him several times since I had returned, but it had always been across a hall, or a passing glimpse of him while I was engaged in some task. Now we stood, scarce an arm's length apart, and stared at one another. Almost, we could have been mistaken for brothers, I realized with shock. His hair was curlier, his features finer, his bearing more aristocratic. His garments were peacock's feathers compared to my wren colours, and I lacked silver at my throat and on my hands. Still, the stamp of the Farseers was plain on us both: we shared Shrewd's jaw and the fold of his eyelids and the curve of his lower lip. Neither of us would ever compare to Verity's widely-muscled build, but I would come closer than he

would. Less than a decade of years separated our ages. Only his skin separated me from his blood. I met his eyes and wished I could spill his guts upon the clean swept floor.

He smiled, a brief showing of white teeth. ‘Bastard,’ he greeted me pleasantly. His smile grew sharper. ‘Or, that is, Master Fits. A *fitting* name you’ve taken to yourself.’ His careful pronunciation left no room for doubting his insult.

‘Prince Regal,’ I replied, and let my tone make the words mean the same as his. I waited with an icy patience I had not known I owned. He had to strike me first.

For a time we held our positions, eyes locked. Then he glanced down, to flick imaginary dust from his sleeve. He strode past me. I did not step aside for him. He did not jostle me as once he would have. I took a breath and walked on.

I did not know the guardsman at the door, but he waved me into the King’s chamber. I sighed and set myself another task. I would learn names and faces again. Now that the court was swelling with folk come to see the new queen, I found myself being recognized by people I didn’t know. ‘That’d be the Bastard, by the look of him,’ I’d heard a baconmonger say to his apprentice the other day outside the kitchen doors. It made me feel vulnerable. Things were changing too fast for me.

King Shrewd’s chamber shocked me. I had expected to find the windows ajar to the brisk winter air, to find Shrewd up and dressed and alert at table, as keen as a captain receiving reports from his lieutenants. Always he had been so, a sharp old man, strict with himself, an early riser, Shrewd as his name. But he was not in his sitting room at all. I ventured to the entry of his bedchamber, peered within the open door.

Inside, the room was half in shadow still. A servant rattled cups and plates at a small table drawn up by the great curtained bed. He glanced at me, then away, evidently thinking I was a serving-boy. The air was still and musty, as if the room were disused or had not been aired in a long time. I waited a time for the servant to let King Shrewd know I had come. When he continued to ignore me, I advanced warily to the edge of the bed.

‘My king?’ I made bold to address him when he did not speak. ‘I have come as you bid me.’

Shrewd was sitting up in the curtained shadows of his bed, well propped with cushions. He opened his eyes when I spoke. ‘Who ... ah. Fitz.

Sit, then. Wallace, bring him a chair. A cup and plate, too.’ As the servant moved to his bidding, King Shrewd confided to me, ‘I do miss Cheffers. With me for so many years, and I never had to tell him what I wanted done.’

‘I remember him, my lord. Where is he, then?’

‘A cough took him. He caught it in the autumn, and it never left him. It slowly wore him away, until he couldn’t take a breath without wheezing.’

I recalled the servant. He had not been a young man, but not so old either. I was surprised to hear of his death. I stood silently, wordless, while Wallace brought the chair and a plate and cup for me. He frowned disapprovingly as I seated myself, but I ignored it. He would soon enough learn that King Shrewd designed his own protocol. ‘And you, my king? Are you well? I cannot recall that I ever knew you to keep to your bed in the morning.’

King Shrewd made an impatient noise. ‘It is most annoying. Not a sickness really. Just a giddiness, a sort of dizziness that sweeps down upon me if I move swiftly. Every morning I think it gone, but when I try to rise, the very stones of Buckkeep rock under me. So I keep to my bed, and eat and drink a bit, and then rise slowly. By midday I am myself. I think it has something to do with the winter cold, though the healer says it may be from an old sword cut, taken when I was not much older than you are now. See, I bear the scar still, though I thought the damage long healed.’ King Shrewd leaned forward in his curtained bed, lifting with one shaky hand a sheaf of his greying hair from his left temple. I saw the pucker of the old scar and nodded.

‘But, enough. I did not summon you for consultations about my health. I suspect you guess why you are here?’

‘You would like a complete report of the events at Jhaampe?’ I guessed. I glanced about for the servant, saw Wallace hovering near. Cheffers would have departed to allow Shrewd and me to talk freely. I wondered how plainly I dared speak before his new man.

But Shrewd waved it aside. ‘It is done, boy,’ he said heavily. ‘Verity and I have consulted. Now we let it go. I do not think there is much you could tell me that I do not know, or guess already. Verity and I have spoken at length. I ... regret ... some things. But. Here we are, and here is always the place we must start from. Eh?’

Words swelled in my throat, nearly choking me. Regal, I wanted to say to him. Your son who tried to kill me, your bastard grandson. Did you speak

at length with him, also? And was it before or after you put me into his power? But, as clearly as if Chade or Verity had spoken to me, I knew suddenly I had no right to question my king. Not even to ask if he had given my life over to his youngest son. I clenched my jaws and held my words unuttered.

Shrewd met my eyes. His eyes flickered to Wallace. 'Wallace. Take yourself to the kitchens for a bit. Or wherever you wish that is not here.' Wallace looked displeased, but he turned with a sniff and departed. He left the door ajar behind him. At a sign from Shrewd, I arose and shut it. I returned to my seat.

'FitzChivalry,' he said gravely. 'This will not do.'

'Sir.' I met his eyes for a moment, then looked down.

He spoke heavily. 'Sometimes, ambitious young men do foolish things. When they are shown the error of their ways, they apologize.' I looked up suddenly, wondering if he expected an apology from me. But he went on, 'I have been tendered such an apology. I have accepted it. Now we go on. In this, trust me,' he said, and he spoke gently but it was not a request. 'Least said is soonest mended.'

I leaned back in my chair. I took a breath, sighed it carefully out. In a moment I had mastered myself. I looked up at him with an open face. 'May I ask why you have called me, my king?'

'An unpleasantness,' he said distastefully. 'Duke Brawndy of Bearns thinks I should resolve it. He fears what may follow if I do not. He does not think it ... political to take direct action himself. So I have granted the request, but grudgingly. Have not we enough to face with the Raiders at our doorstep, without internal strife? Still. They have the right to ask it of me, and I the duty to oblige any who asks. Once more you will bear the King's Justice, Fitz.'

He told me concisely of the situation in Bearns. A young woman from Sealbay had come to Ripplekeep to offer herself to Brawndy as a warrior. He had been pleased to accept her, for she was both well-muscled and adept, skilled at staves, bows and blades. She was beautiful as well as strong, small and dark and sleek as a sea otter. She had been a welcome addition to his guard, and soon was a popular figure in his court as well. She had, not charm, but that courage and strength of will that draws others to follow. Brawndy himself had grown fond of her. She enlivened his court and instilled new spirit in his guard.

But lately she had begun to fancy herself a prophetess and soothsayer. She claimed to have been chosen by El the sea-god for a higher destiny. Her name had been Madja, her parentage unremarkable, but now she had renamed herself, in a ceremony of fire, wind and water, and called herself Virago. She ate only meat she had taken herself, and kept in her rooms nothing that she had not either made herself or won by show of arms. Her following was swelling, and included some of the younger nobles as well as many of the soldiers under her command. To all she preached the need to return to El's worship and honour. She espoused the old ways, advocating a rigorous, simple life that glorified what a person could win by her own strength.

She saw the Raiders and Forging as El's punishment for our soft ways, and blamed the Farseer line for encouraging that softness. At first she had spoken circumspectly of such things. Of late, she had become more open, but never so bold as to voice outright treason. Still, there had been bullock sacrifices on the sea cliffs, and she had blood-painted a number of young folk and sent them out on spirit-quests as in the very old days. Brawndy had heard rumours that she sought a man worthy of herself, who would join her to throw down the Farseer throne. They would rule together, to begin the time of the Fighter and put an end to the days of the Farmer. According to Bearn, quite a number of young men were ready to vie for that honour. Brawndy wished her stopped, before he himself had to accuse her of treason and force his men to choose between Virago and himself. Shrewd offered the opinion that her following would probably drop off drastically were she to be bested at arms, or have a severe accident or become victim to a wasting illness that depleted her strength and beauty. I was forced to agree that was probably so, but observed that there were many cases where folks who died became like gods afterwards. Shrewd said certainly, if the person died honourably.

Then, abruptly, he changed the topic. In Ripplekeep, on Seal Bay, there was an old scroll that Verity wished copied, a listing of all those from Bearn who had served the King in the Skill, as coterie members. It was also said that at Ripplekeep there was a relic from the days of the Elderling defence of that city. Shrewd wished me to leave on the morrow, to go to Seal Bay and copy the scrolls and to view the relic and bring him a report of it. I would also convey to Brawndy the King's best wishes and his certainty that the Duke's unease would soon be put to rest.

I understood.

As I stood to leave, Shrewd raised a finger to bid me pause. I stood, waiting.

‘And do you feel I am keeping my bargain with you?’ he asked. It was the old question, the one he had always asked me after our meetings when I was a boy. It made me smile.

‘Sir, I do,’ I said as I always had.

‘Then see that you keep your end of it as well.’ He paused, then added, as he never had before, ‘Remember, FitzChivalry. Any injury done to one of my own is an injury to me.’

‘Sir?’

‘You would not injure one of mine, would you?’

I drew myself up. I knew what he asked for, and I ceded it to him. ‘Sir, I will not injure one of yours. I am sworn to the Farseer line.’

He nodded slowly. He had wrung an apology from Regal, and from me my word that I would not kill his son. He probably believed he had made peace between us. Outside his door, I paused to push the hair back from my eyes. I had just made a promise, I reminded myself. I considered it carefully and forced myself to look at what it could cost me to keep it. Bitterness flooded me, until I compared what it would cost me should I break it. Then I found the reservations in myself, crushed them firmly. I formed a resolve, to keep my promise cleanly to my king. I had no true peace with Regal, but at least I could have that much peace with myself. The decision left me feeling better, and I strode purposefully down the hall.

I had not replenished my stocks of poisons since I had returned from the mountains. Nothing green showed outside now. I’d have to steal what I needed. The wool dyers would have some I might use, and the healer’s stock would yield me others. My mind was busy with this planning as I started down the stairs.

Serene was coming up the stairs. When I saw her, I halted where I was. The sight of her made me quail as Regal had not. It was an old reflex. Of all Galen’s coterie, she was now the strongest. August had retired from the field, gone far inland to live in orchard country and be a gentleman there. His Skill had been entirely blasted out of him during the final encounter that marked the end of Galen. Serene was now the key Skill-user of the coterie. In summers, she remained at Buckkeep, and all the other members of the coterie, scattered to towers and keeps up and down our long coast,

channelled all their reports to the King through her. During winter, the entire coterie came to Buckkeep to renew their bonds and fellowship. In the absence of a Skillmaster, she had assumed much of Galen's status at Buckkeep. She had also assumed, with great enthusiasm, Galen's passionate hatred of me. She reminded me too vividly of past abuses, and inspired in me a dread that would not yield to logic. I had avoided her since my return but now her gaze pinned me.

The staircase was more than sufficiently wide to allow two people to pass, unless one person deliberately planted herself in the middle of a step. Even looking up at me, I felt she had the advantage. Her bearing had changed since we had been Galen's students together. Her whole physical appearance reflected her new position. Her midnight blue robe was richly embroidered. Her long midnight hair was bound back intricately with burnished wire strung with ivory ornaments. Silver graced her throat and ringed her fingers. But her femininity was gone. She had adopted Galen's ascetic values, for her face was thinned to bone, her hands to claws. As he had, she burned with self-righteousness. It was the first time she had accosted me directly since Galen's death. I halted above her, with no idea of what she wanted from me.

'Bastard,' she said flatly. It was a naming, not a greeting. I wondered if that word would ever lose its sting with me.

'Serene,' I said, as tonelessly as I could manage.

'You did not die in the mountains.'

'No. I did not.'

Still she stood there, blocking my way. Very quietly she said, 'I know what you did. I know what you are.'

Inside, I was quivering like a rabbit. I told myself it was probably taking every bit of Skill strength she had to impose this fear on me. I told myself that it was not my true emotion, but only what her Skill suggested I should feel. I forced words from my throat.

'I, too, know what I am. I am a King's Man.'

'You are no kind of a man at all,' she asserted calmly. She smiled up at me. 'Some day everyone will know that.'

Fear feels remarkably like fear, regardless of the source. I stood, making no response. Eventually, she stepped aside to allow me to pass. I made a small victory of that, though in retrospect there was little else she

could have done. I went to ready things for my trip to Bearn, suddenly glad to leave the keep for a few days.

I have no good memories of that errand. I met Virago, for she was herself a guest at Ripplekeep while I was there doing my scribe tasks. She was as Shrewd had described her, a handsome woman, well-muscled, who moved lithe as a little hunting cat. She wore the vitality of her health like a glamour. All eyes followed her when she was in a room. Her chastity challenged every male who followed her. Even I felt myself drawn to her, and agonized about my task.

Our very first evening at table together, she was seated across from me. Duke Brawndy had made me very welcome indeed, even to having his cook prepare a certain spicy meat dish I was fond of. His libraries were at my disposal, as were the services of his lesser scribe. His youngest daughter had even extended her shy companionship to me. I was discussing my scroll errand with Celerity, who surprised me with her soft-spoken intelligence. Midway through the meal, Virago remarked quite clearly to her dining companion that at one time bastards were drowned at birth. The old ways of El demanded it, she said. I could have ignored the remark, had she not leaned across the table to smilingly ask me, 'Have you never heard of that custom, Bastard?'

I looked up to Duke Brawndy's seat at the head of the table, but he was engaged in a lively discussion with his eldest daughter. He didn't even glance my way. 'I believe it is as old as the custom of one guest's courtesy to another at their host's table,' I replied. I tried to keep my eyes and voice steady. Bait. Brawndy had seated me across the table from her as bait. Never before had I been so blatantly used. I steeled myself to it, tried to set personal feelings aside. At least I was ready.

'Some would say it was a sign of the degeneracy of the Farseer line, that your father came unchaste to his wedding bed. I, of course, would not speak against my king's family. But tell me. How did your mother's people accept her whoredom?'

I smiled pleasantly. I suddenly had fewer qualms about my task. 'I do not recall much of my mother or her kin,' I offered conversationally. 'But I imagine they believed as I do: better to be a whore, or the child of a whore, than a traitor to one's king.'

I lifted my wine glass and turned my eyes back to Celerity. Her dark blue eyes widened and she gasped as Virago's belt knife plunged into

Brawndy's table but inches from my elbow. I had expected it and did not flinch. Instead, I turned to meet her eyes. Virago stood in her table place, eyes blazing and nostrils flared. Her heightened colour enflamed her beauty.

I spoke mildly. 'Tell me. You teach the old ways, do you not? Do you not then hold to the one that forbids the shedding of blood in a house in which you are a guest?'

'Are you not unbloodied?' she asked by way of reply.

'As are you. I would not shame my duke's table, by letting it be said that he had allowed guests to kill one another over his bread. Or do you care as little for your courtesy to your duke as you do your loyalty to your king?'

'I have sworn no loyalty to your soft Farseer king,' she hissed.

Folk shifted, some uncomfortably, some for a better vantage. So some had come to witness her challenge me, at Brawndy's table. All of this had been as carefully planned as any battle campaign. Would she know how well I had planned also? Did she suspect the tiny package in my cuff? I spoke boldly, pitching my voice to carry. 'I have heard of you. I think that those you tempt to follow you into treachery would be wiser to go to Buckkeep. King-in-Waiting Verity has issued a call for those skilled in arms to come and man his new warships and bear those arms against the Outislanders, who are enemy to us all. That, I think, would be a better measure of a warrior's skill. Is not that more honourable a pursuit than to turn against leaders one has sworn to, or to waste bull's blood down a cliff-side by moonlight, when the same meat might go to feed our kin despoiled by Red Ships?'

I spoke passionately, and my voice grew in volume as she stared at how much I knew. I found myself caught up in my own words, for I believed them. I leaned across the table, over Virago's plate and cup, to thrust my face close to hers as I asked, 'Tell me, brave one. Have you ever lifted arms against one who was not your own countryman? Against a Red Ship crew? I thought not. Far easier to insult a host's hospitality, or maim a neighbour's son than to kill one who came to kill our own.'

Words were not Virago's best weapon. Enraged, she spat at me.

I leaned back, calmly, to wipe my face clean. 'Perhaps you would care to challenge me, in a more appropriate time and place. Perhaps a week hence, on the cliffs where you so boldly slew the cow's husband? Perhaps I, a scribe, might present you more of a challenge than your bovine warrior did?'

Duke Brawndy suddenly deigned to notice the disturbance. ‘FitzChivalry! Virago!’ he rebuked us. But our gazes remained locked, my hands planted to either side of her place setting as I leaned to confront her.

I think the man beside her might have challenged me also, had not Duke Brawndy then slammed his salt bowl against the table, near shattering it, and reminded us forcefully that this was his table and his hall and he’d have no blood shed in it. He, at least, was capable of honouring both King Shrewd and the old ways at once, and suggested we attempt to do the same. I apologized most humbly and eloquently, and Virago muttered her pardons. The meal resumed, and the minstrels sang, and over the next few days I copied the scroll for Verity and viewed the Elderling relic, which looked like nothing to me so much as a glass vial of very fine fish scales. Celerity seemed more impressed with me than I was comfortable with. The other side of that coin was facing the old animosity in the faces of those who sided with Virago. It was a long week.

I never had to fight my challenge, for before the week was out, Virago’s tongue and mouth had broken out in the boils and sores that were the legendary punishment for one who lied to arms companions and betrayed spoken vows. She scarce was able to drink, let alone eat, and so disfiguring was her affliction that all those close to her forsook her company for fear, it spread to them as well. Her pain was such that she could not go forth into the cold to fight, and there was no one willing to stand her challenge for her. I waited on the cliffs for a challenger who never came. Celerity waited with me, as did perhaps a score of minor nobles that Duke Brawndy had urged to attend me. We made casual talk, and drank entirely too much brandy to keep ourselves warm. As evening fell, a messenger from the keep came to tell us that Virago had left Ripplekeep, but not to face my challenge. She had ridden away, inland. Alone. Celerity clasped her hands together, and then astonished me with a hug. We returned chilled but merry to enjoy one more meal at Ripplekeep before my departure for Buckkeep. Brawndy sat me at his left hand, and Celerity beside me.

‘You know,’ he observed to me, towards the end of the meal. ‘Your likeness to your father becomes more remarkable every year.’

All of the brandy in Bearn’s could not have defeated the chill his words sent through me.

SIX

Forged Ones

The two sons of Queen Constance and King Shrewd were Chivalry and Verity. Only two years separated their births, and they grew up as close as two brothers can be. Chivalry was the eldest, and the first to assume the title of King-in-Waiting on his sixteenth birthday. He was almost immediately dispatched by his father to deal with a border dispute with the Chalced States. From that time on, he was seldom at Buckkeep for more than a few months at a time. Even after Chivalry had married, he was seldom allowed to spend his days at rest. It was not so much that there were so many border uprisings at that time as that Shrewd seemed intent on formalizing his boundaries with all his neighbours. Many of these disputes were settled with the sword, though as time went on, Chivalry became more astute at employing diplomacy first.

Some said that assigning Chivalry to this task was the plot of his stepmother Queen Desire, who hoped to send him to his death. Others say it was Shrewd's way of putting his eldest son out of his new Queen's sight and authority. Prince Verity, condemned by his youth to remain at home, made formal application to his father every month to be allowed to follow his brother. All of Shrewd's efforts to interest him in responsibilities of his own were wasted. Prince Verity performed the tasks given him, but never let anyone think for a moment that he would not rather be with his older brother. At last, on Verity's twentieth birthday, after six years of requesting monthly to be allowed to follow his brother, Shrewd reluctantly conceded to him.

From then, until the day four years later when Chivalry abdicated and Verity assumed the title of King-in-Waiting, the two princes worked as one in formalizing boundaries, treaties and trade agreements with the lands bordering the Six Duchies. Prince Chivalry's talent was for dealing with people, as individuals or as a folk. Verity's was for the detail of agreements,

the precise maps that delineated agreed borders, and the supporting of his brother in his authority both as a soldier and as a prince.

Prince Regal, youngest of Shrewd's sons and his only child with Queen Desire, spent his youth at home at court, where his mother made every effort to groom him as a candidate for the throne.

I travelled home to Buckkeep with a sense of relief. It was not the first time I had performed such a task for my king, but I had never developed a relish for my work as an assassin. I was glad at how Virago had insulted me and baited me, for it had made my task bearable. And yet, she had been a very beautiful woman, and skilled warrior. It was a waste, and I took no pride in my work, save that I had obeyed my king's command. Such were my thoughts as Sooty carried me up the last rise toward home.

I looked up the hill, and scarce could believe what I saw. Kettricken and Regal on horseback, riding side by side. Together. They looked like an illustration from one of Fedwren's best vellums. Regal was in scarlet and gold with glossy black boots and black gloves. His riding cloak was flung back from one shoulder, to display the brilliant contrast of the colours as they billowed in the morning wind. The wind had brought a redness of the outdoors to his cheeks, and tousled his black hair from its precise arrangement of curls. His dark eyes shone. Almost, he looked a man, I thought, astride the tall black horse that carried itself so well. He could be this if he chose, rather than the languid prince with always a glass of wine in hand and a lady beside him. Another waste.

Ah, but the lady beside him was another matter. Compared to the entourage that followed them, she showed as a rare and foreign blossom. She rode astride in loose trousers, and no Buckkeep dyeing vat had produced that crocus purple. Her trousers were adorned with intricate embroideries in rich colours, and tucked securely into her boot-tops. Her boots came almost to her knee; Burrich would have approved that practicality. She wore, not a cloak, but a short jacket of voluminous white fur, with a high collar to shield her neck from the wind. A white fox, I guessed, from the tundra on the far side of the mountains. Her hands were gloved in black. The wind had played with her long yellow hair, streaming it out and tangling it over her shoulders. Upon her head was a knitted cap of every bright colour I could imagine. She sat her horse high and forward, in the Mountain style, and it made Softstep think she must prance instead of walk. The chestnut mare's harness was a-jingle with tiny silver bells, ringing sharp as icicles in the brisk morning.

She brought to mind an exotic warrior from a northern clime or an adventurer from some ancient tale. It set her apart from her ladies, in their voluminous skirts and cloaks, not as a high-born and well-adorned woman shows her status among those less royal, but almost as a hawk would appear caged with song birds. I was not sure she should show herself so to her subjects. Prince Regal rode at Kettricken's side, smiling and talking to her. Their conversation was lively, spiced often with laughter. As I approached, I let Sooty slow her pace. Kettricken reined in, smiling and would have stopped to give me greeting, but Prince Regal nodded icily and kneed his horse to a trot. Kettricken's mare, not to be left behind, tugged at her bit and kept pace with him. I received as brisk a greeting from those who trailed after the Queen and Prince. I halted to watch them pass, and then continued up to Buckkeep with an uneasy heart. Kettricken's face had been animated, her pale cheeks pink with the cold air, and her smile at Regal had been as genuinely merry as the occasional smiles she still gave me. Yet I could not believe she would be so gullible as to trust him.

I pondered this while I unsaddled Sooty and rubbed her down. I had bent down to check her hooves when I felt Burrich watching me over the wall of the stall. I asked him, 'For how long?'

He knew what I was asking.

'He began a few days after you left. He brought her down here one day, and spoke me fair, saying he thought it quite a shame that the Queen was spending all her days shut up in the keep. She was used to such an open and hearty life up in the mountains. He claimed he had allowed her to persuade him to teach her to ride as we rode here in the lower lands. Then he had me saddle Softstep with the saddle Verity had made for his queen, and off they went. Well, what was I to do or say?' he asked me fiercely as I turned to look at him questioningly. 'It is as you have said before. We are King's Men. Sworn. And Regal is a prince of the Farseer House. Even if I were faithless enough to refuse him, there was my Queen-in-Waiting, expecting me to fetch her horse for her and saddle her.'

A slight motion of my hand reminded Burrich that his words sounded close to treason. He stepped into the stall beside me, to scratch behind Sooty's ear pensively as I finished with her.

'You could do nothing else,' I conceded. 'But I must wonder what his real intent is. And why she suffers him.'

‘His intent? Perhaps just to wriggle his way back into favour with her. It is no secret that she pines in the castle. Oh, she is fair spoken to all. But there is too much honesty in her for her to make others believe she is happy when she is not.’

‘Perhaps,’ I conceded grudgingly. I lifted my head as suddenly as a dog does when his master whistles. ‘I have to go. King-in-Waiting Verity ...’ I let the words trail away. I did not have to let Burrich know I had been summoned by the Skill. I slung my saddlebags with the arduously copied scrolls inside to my shoulder and headed up to the castle.

I did not pause to change my clothes, or even to warm myself at the kitchen fires, but went straight to Verity’s map-room. The door was ajar, and I tapped once and then entered. Verity leaned over a map secured to his table. He scarcely glanced up to acknowledge me. Steaming mulled wine already awaited me, and a generous platter of cold meats and bread stood on a table near the hearth. After a bit, he straightened up.

‘You block too well,’ Verity said by way of greeting. ‘I have been trying to get you to hurry for the past three days, and when do you finally know you are Skilled? When you are standing in my own stables. I tell you, Fitz, we must find time to teach you some sort of control over your Skill.’

But I knew even as he spoke that there would never be that time. Too many other things demanded his attention. As always, he immediately plunged into his concern. ‘Forged ones,’ he said. I felt a chill of foreboding run up my spine.

‘The Red Ships have struck again? This deep in winter?’ I asked incredulously.

‘No. At least we are still spared that. But it seems that the Red Ships can leave us and go home to their hearths, and still leave their poison among us.’ He paused. ‘Well, go on. Warm yourself and eat. You can chew and listen at the same time.’

As I helped myself to the mulled wine and food, Verity lectured me. ‘It is the same problem as before. Reports of Forged ones, robbing and despoiling, not just travellers, but isolated farms and houses. I have investigated, and must give credence to the reports. Yet the attacks are happening far from the sites of any raids; and in every case the folk claim there are not one or two Forged ones, but groups of them, acting in concert.’

I considered for a moment, swallowed, then spoke. ‘I don’t think Forged ones are capable of acting in bands or even as partners. When one

encounters them, one finds they have no sense of ... community. Of shared humanity. They can speak, and reason, but only selfishly. They are as wolverines would be if given human tongues. They care for nothing but their own survival. They see each other only as rivals for food or comfort of any kind.' I refilled my mug, grateful for the spreading warmth of the wine. At least it pushed aside the physical cold. The chill thought of the bleak isolation of the Forged ones it could not touch.

It was the Wit that had let me discover this about Forged ones. So deadened were they to all sense of kinship with the world that I could scarcely sense them at all. The Wit gave me a certain access to that web which bound all creatures together; but the Forged ones were separate from that net, as isolated as stones, as hungry and merciless as an unthinking storm or a river in flood. To encounter one unexpectedly was as startling to me as if a stone rose up to attack me.

But Verity only nodded thoughtfully. 'Yet even wolves, animals as they are, attack as a pack. As do tearfish on a whale. If these animals can band together to bring down food, why not the Forged ones?'

I set down the bread I had picked up. 'Wolves and tearfish do as they do by their nature, and share the flesh with their young. They do not kill, each for his own meat, but for meat for the pack. I have seen them in groups, but they do not act together. The time I was attacked by more than one Forged one, the only thing that saved me was that I was able to turn them against each other. I dropped the cloak they desired, and they fought over it. And when they came after me again, they more got in one another's way than helped one another.' I fought to keep my voice steady as the memory of that night rose up in me. Smithy had died that night, and I had first killed. 'But they do not fight together. That is what is beyond the Forged ones; the idea of co-operating so that all might benefit.'

I looked up to find Verity's dark eyes full of sympathy. 'I had forgotten that you have had some experience fighting them. Forgive me. I don't dismiss it. There is just so much besieging me lately.' His voice dwindled away and he seemed to be listening to something far away. After a moment he came back to himself. 'So. You believe they cannot cooperate. And yet it seems to be happening. See, here,' and he brushed his hand lightly over a map spread out on his table. 'I have been marking the places of the complaints, and keeping track of how many are said to be there. What do you think of this?'

I went to stand beside him. Standing next to Verity was now like standing next to a different sort of hearth. The strength of the Skill radiated from him. I wondered if he strove to hold it in check, if it always threatened to spill out of him and spread his consciousness over the whole kingdom.

‘The map, Fitz,’ he recalled me, and I wondered how much he knew of my thoughts. I forced myself to concentrate on the task at hand. The map showed Buck, done in wondrous detail. Shallows and tide flats were marked along the coast, as well as inland landmarks and lesser roads. It was a map made lovingly, by a man who had walked and ridden and sailed the area. Verity had used bits of red wax as markers. I studied them, trying to see what his real concern was.

‘Seven different incidents.’ He reached to touch his markers. ‘Some within a day’s ride of Buckkeep. But we have had no raids that close, so where would these Forged ones be coming from? They might be driven away from their home villages, true, but why would they converge upon Buckkeep?’

‘Perhaps these are desperate people pretending to be Forged ones when they go out to steal from their neighbours?’

‘Perhaps. But it is troubling that the incidents are happening closer and closer to Buckkeep. There are three different groups, from what the victims say. But each time there is a report of a robbery or a barn broken into or a cow butchered in the field, the group responsible seems to have moved closer to Buckkeep. I can think of no reason for Forged ones to do such a thing. And,’ he halted me as I began to speak, ‘the descriptions of one group match those of another attack, reported over a month ago. If these are the same Forged ones, they have come a long way in that time.’

‘It does not seem like Forged ones,’ I said and then, carefully, I asked, ‘Do you suspect a conspiracy of some kind?’

Verity snorted bitterly. ‘Of course. When do I not suspect conspiracies any more? But for this, at least, I think I can look further afield than Buckkeep to find the source.’ He halted abruptly, as if hearing how bluntly he had spoken. ‘Look into it for me, Fitz, will you? Ride out and about a bit, and listen. Tell me what they say in the taverns, and tell me what sign you find on the roads. Gather gossip of other attacks, and keep track of the detail. Quietly. Can you do that for me?’

‘Of course. But why quietly? It seems to me that if we alerted folk, we would hear more swiftly of what goes on.’

‘We would hear more, that’s true. More of rumours, and much more of complaint. So far these are individual complaints. I am the only one, I think, who has put together a pattern from them. I do not want Buckkeep itself up in arms, complaining that the King cannot even protect his capital city. No. Quietly, Fitz. Quietly.’

‘Just look into it quietly.’ I did not voice it as a question.

Verity gave his broad shoulders a small shrug. But it was more like a man shifting a burden than dislodging a load. ‘Put a stop to it where you can.’ His voice was small and he looked into the fire. ‘Quietly, Fitz. Very quietly.’

I nodded my head slowly. I had had these kinds of assignments before also. Killing Forged ones did not bother me as much as killing a man did. Sometimes I tried to pretend I was laying a restless soul to peace, putting a family’s anguish to a final end. I hoped I would not become too adept at lying to myself. It was a luxury an assassin could not afford. Chade had warned me that I must always remember what I truly was. Not an angel of mercy, but a killer who worked for the good of the King. Or the King-in-Waiting. It was my duty to keep the throne secure. My duty. I hesitated, then spoke.

‘My prince. As I was coming back, I saw our Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken. She was riding out with Prince Regal.’

‘They make a handsome pair, do they not? And does she sit her horse well?’ Verity could not entirely keep bitterness from his voice.

‘Aye. But in the Mountain style still.’

‘She came to me, saying she wished to learn to ride our tall lowland horses better. I commended the idea. I did not know she would choose Regal as a riding master.’ Verity leaned over his map, studying detail that was not there.

‘Perhaps she hoped you would teach her.’ I spoke thoughtlessly, to the man, not the prince.

‘Perhaps.’ He sighed suddenly. ‘Oh, I know she did. Kettricken is lonely, sometimes. Often.’ He shook his head. ‘She should have been married to a younger son, to a man with time on his hands. Or to a king whose kingdom was not on the verge of war and disaster. I do not do her justice, Fitz. I know this. But she is so ... young. Sometimes. And when she is not being so young, she is so fanatically patriotic. She burns to sacrifice herself for the Six Duchies. Always I have to hold her back, to tell her that it

is not what the Six Duchies need. She is like a gadfly. There is no peace in her for me, Fitz. Either she wants to be romped like a child, or she is quizzing me on the very details of some crisis I am trying to set aside for a few moments.'

I thought suddenly of Chivalry's single-minded pursuit of the frivolous Patience, and caught a glimpse of his motives. A woman who was an escape for him. Who would Verity have chosen, had he been allowed to choose for himself? Probably someone older, a placid woman possessed of inner self worth and peace.

'I grow so tired,' Verity said softly. He poured himself more mulled wine, and stepped to the hearth to sip at it. 'Do you know what I wish?'

It wasn't really a question. I didn't even bother to reply.

'I wish your father were alive, and King-in-Waiting. And I his right-hand man still. He would be telling me what tasks I must tackle, and I would be doing as he asked. I would be at peace with myself, no matter how hard my work, for I would be sure he knew best. Do you know how easy it is, Fitz, to follow a man you believe in?'

He looked up at last to meet my eyes.

'My prince,' I said quietly. 'I believe I do.'

For a moment, Verity was very still. Then, 'Ah,' he said. He held my eyes with his, and I did not need the warmth of his Skilling to feel the gratitude he sent me. He stepped away from the hearth, drew himself up straighter. My King-in-Waiting stood before me once more. He dismissed me with a tiny motion, and I went. As I climbed the stairs to my room, for the first time in my life I wondered if I should not be grateful to have been born a bastard.

SEVEN

Encounters

It has always been the custom and the expectancy that when a king or queen of Buckkeep wed, the royal spouse would bring an entourage of his or her own as attendants. Such had been the case with both of Shrewd's queens. But when Queen Kettricken of the Mountains came to Buckkeep, she came as Sacrifice, as was her country's custom. She came alone, with no women or men to attend her, not even a maid to be a confidante. No person in Buckkeep was there to give the comfort of familiarity to her in her new home. She began her reign surrounded completely by strangers, not just at her own social level, but extending down to servants and guards as well. As time progressed, she gathered friends to her, and found servants as well who suited her, though at first the idea of having a person whose life work was to wait on her was a foreign and distressing concept to her.

Cub had missed my company. Before I departed for Bears, I had left him the carcass of a deer, well frozen and concealed behind the hut. It should have been ample to feed him for the time I was gone. But in true wolf fashion, he had gorged, and slept, and gorged and slept again, until the meat was gone. *Two days ago*, he informed me, leaping and dancing about me. The interior of the hut was a litter of well-gnawed bones. He greeted me with frantic enthusiasm, doubly informed by the Wit and his nose of the fresh meat I brought. He fell upon it ravenously and paid me no mind at all as I gathered his chewed bones into a sack. Too much of this type of litter would draw rats, and the keep rat-hounds would follow. I couldn't chance that. I watched him surreptitiously as I tidied, saw the rippling of muscles in his shoulders as he braced his forefeet against the chunk of meat and tore a piece of flesh free. I noted, too, that all but the thickest deer bones had been cracked and licked clean of marrow. This was cub's play no longer, but the work of a powerful young animal. The bones he had cracked were thicker than the bones in my arm.

But why would I turn on you? You bring the meat. And ginger cakes.

His thought was laden with meaning. This was the way of a pack. I, an elder, brought meat to feed Cub, a young one. I was the hunter, bringing him back a portion of my kill. I quested toward him and found that, for him, our separateness was fading. We were pack. It was a concept I had never encountered before, going deeper than companion or partner. I feared that to him it meant what bonding did to me. I could not permit it.

‘I am a human. You are a wolf.’ I spoke the words aloud, knowing he would get their meaning from my thoughts, but trying to force him to know in all his senses our differences.

Outwardly. Inside, we are pack. He paused and licked his nose complacently. Blood dotted his forepaws.

‘No. I feed you and protect you here. But only for a time. When you are able to hunt for yourself, I will take you to a far place and leave you there.’

I have never hunted.

‘I will teach you.’

That, too, is of the pack. You will teach me, and I will hunt with you. We will share many kills and much rich meat.

I will teach you to hunt, and then I will set you free.

I am already free. You do not hold me here, save that I will it. He lolled his tongue out over white teeth, laughing at my assumption.

You are arrogant, Cub. And ignorant.

So teach me. He turned his head sideways to let his back teeth scissor meat and tendon from the bone he was working on. *It is your pack duty.*

We are not pack. I have no pack. My allegiance is to my king.

If he is your leader, then he is mine also. We are pack. As his belly filled, he was becoming more and more complacent about it.

I changed tactics. Coldly I told him, *I am of a pack that you cannot be part of. In my pack, all are humans. You are not a human. You are a wolf. We are not pack.*

A stillness welled in him. He did not try to reply. But he felt, and what he felt chilled me. Isolation, and betrayal. Loneliness.

I turned and left him there. But I could not hide from him how hard it was for me to leave him like that, nor conceal the deep shame at refusing him. I hoped he sensed also that I believed it was what was best for him. Much, I reflected, as Burrich had felt it was best for me when he took Nosy

away from me because I had bonded to the puppy. The thought burned me and I did not just hasten away, I fled.

Evening was falling as I returned to the keep and made my way up the stairs. I visited my room for certain bundles I had left there, and then made my way downstairs again. My traitorous feet slowed as I passed the second landing. I knew that very shortly Molly would be coming this way, bearing away the tray and dishes from Patience's meal. Patience seldom chose to dine in the hall with the other lords and ladies of the keep, preferring the privacy of her own rooms and Lacey's easy companionship. Her shyness had begun to take on overtones of reclusiveness lately. But it was not concern over that which kept me loitering on the stairs. I heard the tap of Molly's feet coming down the hall, I knew I should move on, but it had been days since I had even glimpsed her. Celerity's shy flirtations had only made me more acutely aware of how I missed Molly. Surely it could not be too much for me to simply wish her 'good evening' as I might any other servant girl. I knew I should not, I knew that if Patience heard of it, I would be rebuked. And yet ...

I pretended to be studying a tapestry on the landing, a tapestry that had hung there since before I had ever come to Buckkeep. I heard her footsteps approaching. I heard them slow. My heart was thundering high in my chest, the palms of my hands were moist with sweat as I turned to see her. 'Good evening,' I managed, between a squeak and a whisper.

'Good evening to you,' she said with great dignity. Her head went up a notch higher, her chin firmed. Her hair had been tamed into two thick braids and pinned about her head like a crown. Her dress of simple blue had a collar of delicate white lace, and there were lace cuffs to it as well. I knew whose fingers had worked that scalloped pattern. Lacey treated her well and gifted her with the work of her hands. That was good to know.

Molly did not falter as she passed me. Her eyes skittered sideways to me once, and I could not forbear to smile, and at my smile a blush so warm suffused her face and throat that almost I felt the heat of it. Her mouth went into a firmer line. As she turned and descended the stairs, her scent wafted back to me, lemon balm and ginger riding on the sweeter scent that was simply Molly's own.

Female. Nice. Vast approval.

I leaped as if stung and spun about, expecting foolishly to discover Cub behind me. He was not, of course. I quested out, but he was not with me in

my mind. I quested further, found him dozing on his straw in the hut. *Don't do that, I warned him. Stay out of my mind, unless I bid you be with me.*

Consternation. What is it you bid me do?

Do not be with me, except when I wish you to.

Then how would I know when you wished me to be with you?

I will seek your mind when I want you.

A long quiet. *And I shall seek yours when I want you, he offered. Yes, this is pack. To call when one needs help, and to be always ready to hear such a call. We are pack.*

No! That is not what I am telling you. I am saying you must keep out of my mind when I do not wish you to be there. I do not wish to be always sharing thoughts with you.

You make no sense at all. Shall I only breathe when you are not snuffing the air? Your mind, my mind, it is all the pack mind. Where else shall I think, but here? If you do not wish to hear me, do not listen.

I stood dumbfounded, trying to make sense of the thought. I realized I was staring off into space. A serving-boy had just wished me good evening, and I had offered no response. 'Good evening,' I replied, but he had already passed me. He glanced back in puzzlement, to see if he was summoned, but I waved him on. I shook my head to clear it of cobwebs, and started down the hall to Patience's room. I would discuss it with Cub later, and make him understand. And soon, he would be off on his own, out of touch, out of mind. I pushed the experience aside.

I tapped at Patience's door and was admitted. I saw that Lacey had gone on one of her periodic rampages, and restored a sort of order to the room. There was even a cleared chair to sit upon. They were both glad to see me. I told them of my trip to Bearn, avoiding any mention of Virago. I knew that eventually Patience would hear of it, and confront me about it, and I would then assure her that gossip had greatly exaggerated our encounter. I hoped that would work. In the meantime, I had brought gifts back with me. Tiny ivory fish, drilled to be strung as beads or attached to a garment for Lacey, and for Patience amber and silver earrings. An earthenware pot of wintergreen berries preserved and sealed with a lid of wax.

'Wintergreen? I've no taste for wintergreen.' Patience was puzzled when I offered it to her.

'Haven't you?' I feigned puzzlement. 'I thought you told me it was a flavour and scent you missed from your childhood. Did not you have an

uncle who brought you wintergreen?’

‘No. I recall no such conversation.’

‘Perhaps it was Lacey, then?’ I asked sincerely.

‘Not I, master. Stings my nose to taste it, though it has a nice scent in the air.’

‘Ah, well, then. My mistake.’ I set it aside on the table. ‘What, Snowflake? Not pregnant again?’ This I addressed to Patience’s white terrier who had finally decided to come forth and sniff at me. I could sense her doggy little mind puzzling over Cub’s scent on me.

‘No, she’s just getting fat,’ Lacey interjected for her, stooping to scratch her behind the ears. ‘My lady leaves sweetmeats and cakes about on plates, and Snowflake is always getting at them.’

‘You know you shouldn’t let her. It’s very bad for her teeth and coat,’ I rebuked Patience, and she replied that she knew it, but Snowflake was too old to be taught better. The conversation rambled from there, and it was another hour before I stretched and told them I must be going, to try once more to report to the King.

‘I was earlier turned aside from his door,’ I mentioned. ‘Though not by any guard. His man Wallace came to the door when I knocked, to refuse me entry. When I asked why there was no guard on the King’s door, he said they had been relieved of that duty. He had assumed it himself, the better to keep things quiet for the King.’

‘The King’s not well, you know,’ Lacey offered. ‘I’ve heard that he’s seldom seen out of his chambers before noon. Then, when he comes forth, he is like a man possessed, full of energy and appetite, but by early evening, he fades again, and begins to shuffle and mumble his words. He takes his dinner in his rooms, and cook says the tray comes back as full as it went up. It’s quite a worry.’

‘It is,’ I agreed, and made my departure, almost dreading to hear more. So the King’s health was now talk for the keep. That was not good. I must ask Chade about it. And I must see for myself. In my earlier attempt to report to the King, I had encountered only the officious Wallace. Wallace had been most brusque with me, as if I were come simply to pass the time of day, rather than to report after a mission. He behaved as if the King were the most delicate of invalids and took it upon himself to keep any one from bothering him. Wallace, I decided, had not been very well taught as to what the duties of his position were. He was a most annoying man. As I tapped, I

was wondering how long it would take Molly to find the wintergreen. She must know I had meant it for her, it was a taste she had always been greedy for when we were children.

Wallace came to the door and opened it a crack to peer out. He frowned at discovering me. He swung the door wider, but filled the opening with his body, as if my glimpsing the King might do him harm. He gave me no greeting, only demanded, 'Did not you come before, earlier today?'

'Yes. I did. At that time you told me King Shrewd slept. And so I have come again, to make my report.' I tried to keep my tone civil.

'Ah. It is important, this report?'

'I think the King can judge if it is, and send me away if he thinks I waste his time. I suggest you tell him I am here.' I smiled belatedly, trying to soften the sharpness of my tone.

'The King has little energy. I try to see that he expends it only where it is needed.' He wasn't moving from the door. I found myself sizing him up, wondering if I could just shoulder past him. That would create a commotion, and if the King were ill, I did not wish that. Someone tapped on my shoulder, but when I turned to look, no one was there. Turning back, I found the Fool in front of me, between Wallace and me.

'Are you his physician, then, to make such judgements?' The Fool took up my conversation for me. 'For surely, you would be an excellent one. You physick me merely with your looks, and your words dispel your wind as well as mine. How physicked then must our dear king be, who languishes all day in your presence?'

The Fool bore a tray covered with a napkin. I smelled good beef broth and egg bread warm from the oven. His winter motley of black and white he had made merry with enamelled bells and a garland of holly banded his cap. His Fool's sceptre was tucked up under his arm. A rat again. This one had been set atop the wand as if prancing. I had observed him holding long conversations with it in front of the Great Hearth, or on the steps before the King's throne.

'Begone, Fool! You've been in here twice today already. The King has already gone to his bed. He has no need of you.' The man spoke sternly. But Wallace was the one who retreated, without intending to. I saw he was one of those people who could not meet the Fool's pale eyes, and quailed from the touch of his white hand.

‘Twice shall be thrice, Wall Ass, dear, and your presence replaced with my presents. Toddle off hence, and tell Regal all your tattling. If walls have ears, then so must you, for you’ve already the Wall’s Ass. Such ears are filled to overflowing with the King’s business. You might physick our dear prince while you enlighten him. For the darkness of his glance, methinks, betokens that his bowels have backed up so far as to blind him.’

‘Dare you speak so of the Prince?’ Wallace sputtered. The Fool was already inside the door and I on his heels. ‘He shall hear of this.’

‘Speak so? Speak, sow. I doubt not that he hears all that you do. Do not vent your wind at me, Wall Ass dear. Save that for your prince who delights in such puffing. He is at his smokes now, I believe, and you might gust at him and he shall drowse and nod and think you speak wisely and your airs most sweet.’

The Fool continued his advance as he nattered on, the laden tray like a shield before him. Wallace gave ground readily, and the Fool forced him back, through the sitting room and into the King’s bedchamber. There the Fool set the tray down at the King’s bedside, while Wallace retreated to the other door of the chamber. The Fool’s eyes grew brighter.

‘Ah, not abed at all, our king, unless you’ve hidden him under coverlets, Wall Ass, my sweet. Come out, come out, my king, my Shrewd one. King Shrewd you are, not king of shrews to hide and creep about the walls and under the bedding.’ The Fool began to poke so assiduously about amongst the obviously empty bed and coverlets, and to send his rat sceptre peeping up amongst the bed curtains so that I could not contain my laughter.

Wallace leaned back against the inner door, as if to guard it from us, but at that instant it opened from within, and he all but tumbled into the King’s arms. He sat down heavily on the floor. ‘Mind him!’ the Fool observed to me. ‘See how he seeks to put himself in my place before the King’s feet, and to play the fool with his clumsy pratfalls. Such a man deserves the title fool, but not the post!’

Shrewd stood there, robed as for rest, a frown of vexation on his face. He looked down in puzzlement at Wallace on the floor, and up at the Fool and me waiting for him, and then dismissed whatever the situation was. He spoke to Wallace as he scrabbled to his feet. ‘This steam does me no good at all, Wallace. It but makes my head ache all the more, and leaves a foul taste in my mouth as well. Take it away, and tell Regal I think his new herb might drive flies away, but not sickness. Take it away now, before it stinks up this

room as well. Ah, Fool, you are here. And Fitz, you have finally come to report as well. Come in, sit down. Wallace, do you hear me? Remove that wretched pot! No, do not bring it through here, take it out the other way.' And with a wave of his hand, Shrewd swatted the man away as if he had been an annoying fly.

Shrewd shut the door to his bathing room firmly, as if to keep the stink from spreading into his bedchamber, and came to take a straight-backed chair by the fire. In a moment the Fool had drawn a table up beside it, the cloth covering the food had become a tablecloth, and he had set out food for the King as prettily as any serving-maid could have done. Silverware and a napkin appeared, a sleight of hand that had even Shrewd smiling, and then the Fool folded himself up on the hearth, knees nearly to his ears, chin cupped in his long-fingered hands, pale skin and hair picking up red tones from the fire's dancing flames. His every move was as graceful as a dancer's and the pose he struck now was artful as well as comical. The King reached down to smooth his flying hair as if the Fool were a kitten.

'I told you I was not hungry, Fool.'

'That you did. But you did not tell me not to bring food.'

'And if I had?'

'Then I should tell you this is not food, but a steaming pot such as Wall Ass afflicts you with, to fill your nostrils with a scent at least more pleasing than his. And this be not bread, but a plaster for your tongue, which you should apply at once.'

'Ah.' King Shrewd drew his table a bit closer, and took up a spoonful of the soup. Barley shouldered against bits of carrot and meat in it. Shrewd tasted, and then began to eat.

'Am I not at least as good a physician as Wall Ass?' the Fool purred, well pleased with himself.

'Well you know Wallace is not a physician, but simply my servant.'

'Well I know it, and well do you, but Wall Ass knows it not, and hence you are not well.'

'Enough of your nattering. Step up, Fitz, don't stand there grinning like a simpleton. What have you to tell me?'

I glanced at the Fool, and then decided I would insult neither King nor Fool by asking if I could report freely in front of him. So I did, a simple report, with no mention of my more clandestine actions other than their results. Shrewd listened gravely, and at the end he had no comment, other

than to rebuke me mildly for poor manners at the duke's table. He then asked if Duke Brawndy of Bearns seemed well and content with the peace in his duchy. I replied that he had when I left. Shrewd nodded. Then he requested the scrolls I had copied. These I took out and displayed for him, and was rewarded by a compliment on the gracefulness of my handiwork. He told me to take them to Verity's map-room, and be sure Verity knew of them. He asked if I had viewed the Elderling's relic. I described it to him in detail. And all the while the Fool perched on the hearthstones and watched us silent as an owl. King Shrewd ate his soup and bread under the Fool's watchful eyes as I read the scroll aloud to him. When I was finished, he sighed and leaned back in his chair. 'So, let's see this scroll-work of yours,' he commanded and, puzzled, I surrendered it to him. Once more he looked it over carefully, then re-rolled it. As he gave it back to me, he said, 'You've a graceful way with a pen, boy. Well-lettered and well done. Take it to Verity's map-room, and see that he knows of it.'

'Of course, my king,' I faltered, confused. I did not understand his motive in repeating himself, and was unsure if he were waiting for some other response from me. But the Fool was rising, and I caught from him something less than a glance; not quite the lift of an eyebrow, not quite the turn of a lip, but enough to bid me to silence. The Fool gathered up the dishes, all the while making merry talk with the King, and then both of us were dismissed together. As we left, the King was staring into the flames.

Out in the hall, we exchanged glances more openly. I began to speak, but the Fool commenced to whistle, and did not cease until we were halfway down the stairs. Then he paused, and caught at my sleeve, and we halted on the stairway, betwixt floors. I sensed he had chosen this spot carefully. None could see or hear us speak here, save that we saw them also. Still, it was not even the Fool that spoke to me, but the rat upon the sceptre. He brought it up before my nose, and squeaked in the rat's voice, 'Ah, but you and I, we must remember whatever he forgets, Fitz, and keep it safe for him. It costs him much to show as strong as he did tonight. Do not be deceived about that. What he said to you, twice, you must cherish and obey, for it means he held it twice as hard in his mind to be sure he would say it to you.'

I nodded and resolved to deliver the scroll that very night to Verity. 'I do not much care for Wallace,' I commented to the Fool.

'Tis not Wall's Ass you should have a care for, but Wall's Ears,' he replied solemnly. Abruptly he balanced the tray on one long-fingered hand,

lofted it high over his head, and went capering off down the stairs before me, leaving me alone to think.

I delivered the scroll that night, and in the days that followed, I took up the tasks Verity had assigned me earlier. I used fat sausage and smoked fish as the vehicles for my poisons, wrapped in small bundles. These I might easily scatter as I fled, in the hopes there would be sufficient for all who pursued me. Each morning I studied the map in Verity's map-room, and then saddled Sooty and took myself and my poisons out where I thought it most likely I would be set upon by Forged ones. Remembering my previous experiences, I carried a short sword on these riding expeditions, something that afforded both Hands and Burrich some amusement at first. I gave it out that I was scouting for game in case Verity wished to plan a winter hunt. Hands accepted it easily, Burrich with a tightened mouth that showed he knew I lied, and knew also that I could not tell him the truth. He did not pry, but neither did he like it.

Twice in ten days I was set upon by Forged ones, and twice fled easily, letting my poisoned provisions tumble from my saddlebags as I went. They fell upon them greedily, scarcely unwrapping the meat before stuffing it into their mouths. I returned to each site the following day, to document for Verity how many I had slain and the details of their appearances. The second group did not match any description we had received. We both suspected this meant there were more Forged ones than we had heard.

I did my task, but I took no pride in it. Dead, they were even more pitiful than alive. Ragged, thin creatures, frostbitten and battered by fights amongst themselves they were, and the savagery of the quick, harsh poisons I used twisted their bodies into caricatures of men. Ice glistened on their beards and eyebrows, and the blood from their mouths made red clumps like frozen rubies in the snow. Seven Forged ones I killed this way, and then heaped the frozen bodies with pitchpine, and poured oil on them and set them aflame. I cannot say which I found most distasteful, the poisoning, or the concealing of my deed. Cub had initially begged to go with me when he understood that I was riding out each day after feeding him, but at one point, as I stood over the frozen stick-men I had slain, I heard, *This is not hunting, this. This is no pack's doing. This is man's doing.* His presence was gone before I could rebuke him for intruding into my mind again.

In the evenings I returned to the keep, to hot, fresh food and warm fires, dry clothes and a soft bed, but the spectres of those Forged ones stood

between me and these comforts. I felt myself a heartless beast that I could enjoy such things after spreading death by day. My only easement was a prickly one, that at night when I slept, I dreamed of Molly, and walked and talked with her, unhaunted by Forged ones or their frost-rimed bodies.

Came a day I rode out later than I had intended, for Verity had been in his map-room and had kept me overlong in talk. A storm was coming up, but it did not seem too severe. I had not intended to go far that day, but I found fresh sign instead of my prey, a larger group of them than I had expected. The gathering clouds stole the light from the sky more swiftly than I had expected and the sign led me down game trails where Sooty and I found it slow going. When I finally glanced up from my tracking, admitting that they had eluded me this day, I found myself much farther from Buckkeep than I had intended and well off any travelled road.

The wind began to blow, a nasty cold one that foretold snow to follow. I wrapped my cloak more tightly about myself and turned Sooty's head toward home, relying on her to pick her path and pace. Darkness fell before we'd gone far, and snow with it. Had I not traversed this area so frequently of late, I would surely have been lost. But we pressed on, going always, it seemed, into the teeth of the wind. The cold soaked right through me, and I began to shiver. I feared the shivering might actually be the beginnings of trembling and a fit such as I had not suffered for a long time.

I was grateful when the winds finally tore a rent in the cloud cover, and moonlight and starlight leaked through to grey our way. We made a better pace then, despite the fresh snow that Sooty waded through. We broke out of a thin birch forest onto a hillside that lightning had burned off a few years ago. The wind was stronger here with nothing to oppose it, and I gathered my cloak and turned up the collar again. I knew that once I crested the hill, I would see the lights of Buckkeep, and that another hill away and a vale would find a well-used road to take me home. So I was of better cheer as we cut our way across the hill's smooth flank.

Sudden as thunder, I heard the hoofbeats of a horse struggling to make speed, but somehow encumbered. Sooty slowed, then threw back her head and whinnied. At the same moment I saw a horse and rider break out of the cover, downhill of me and to the south. The horse carried a rider, and two other people clung to it, one to its breast strap and one to the rider's leg. Light glinted on a blade that rose and fell, and with a cry the man clutching at the rider's leg fell away to wallow and shriek in the snow. But the other

figure had caught the horse's headstall, and as he tried to drag the beast to a halt, two other pursuers burst from the trees to converge on the struggling horse and rider.

The moment of recognizing Kettricken is inseparable from the moment I set heels to Sooty. What I saw made no sense to me, but that did not prevent my responding. I did not ask myself what my Queen-in-Waiting was doing out here, at night, unaccompanied and set upon by robbers. Rather, I found myself admiring how she kept her seat and set her horse to wheeling as she kicked and slashed at the men who tried to drag her down. I drew my sword as we closed on the struggle, but I do not recall that I made any sound. My recollection of the whole struggle is a strange one, a battle of silhouettes, done in black and white like a Mountain shadow play, soundless save for the grunts and cries of the Forged as one after another they fell.

Kettricken had slashed one across the face, blinding him with blood, but still he clung to her and tried to drag her from the saddle. The other ignored the plight of his fellows, tugging instead at saddlebags that probably carried no more than a bit of food and brandy packed for a day's ride.

Sooty took me in close to the one gripping Softstep's headstall. I saw it was a woman and then my sword was into her and out again, as soulless an exercise as chopping wood. Such a peculiar struggle. I could sense Kettricken, the fright of her horse and Sooty's battle-trained enthusiasm, but from her attackers, nothing. Nothing at all. No anger throbbed, no pain of their wounds shrieked for attention. To my Wit, they were not there at all, any more than the snow or the wind that likewise opposed me.

I watched as in a dream as Kettricken seized her attacker by the hair and leaned his head back that she might cut his throat. Blood spilled black in the moonlight, drenching her coat and leaving a sheen on the chestnut's neck and shoulder before he fell back to spasm in the snow. I swung my short sword at the last one, but missed. Kettricken did not. Her short knife danced in, and punched through jerkin and ribcage and into his lung, and out again as swift. She kicked him away. 'To me!' she said simply into the night, and put heels to her chestnut, driving Softstep straight up the hill. Sooty ran with her nose at Kettricken's stirrup, and so we crested the hill together, glimpsing the lights of Buckkeep briefly before we plunged down the other side.

There was brush at the bottom of the slope, and a creek hidden by the snow, so I kicked Sooty into the lead and turned Softstep before she could

blunder into it and fall. Kettricken said nothing as I turned her horse, but let me take the lead as we entered the forest on the other side of the stream. I moved us as swiftly as I dared, expecting always figures to shout and leap out at us. But we made the road at last, just as the clouds closed up again, stealing the moonlight from us. I slowed the horses and let them breathe. For some time we travelled in silence, both intently listening for any sounds of pursuit.

After a time, we felt safer, and I heard Kettricken let out her pent breath in a long, shaky sigh. ‘Thank you, Fitz,’ she said simply, but could not keep her voice quite steady. I made no comment, half-expecting that at any moment she would burst into weeping. I would not have blamed her. Instead she gradually gathered herself, tugging her clothes straight, wiping her blade on her trousers and then re-sheathing it at her waist. She leaned forward to pat Softstep’s neck and murmur words of praise and comfort to the horse. I felt Softstep’s tension ease and admired Kettricken’s skill to have so swiftly gained the confidence of the tall horse.

‘How came you here? Seeking me?’ she asked at last.

I shook my head. Snow was beginning to fall again. ‘I was out hunting, and went farther than I had intended. It was but good fortune that brought me to you.’ I paused, then ventured, ‘Did you get lost? Will there be riders searching for you?’

She sniffed, and took a breath. ‘Not exactly,’ she said in a shaky voice. ‘I went out riding with Regal. A few others rode with us, but when the storm began to threaten, we all turned back to Buckkeep. The others rode on before us, but Regal and I came more slowly. He was telling me a folk tale from his home duchy, and we let the others ride ahead, that I should not have to hear it through their chatter.’ She took a breath and I heard her swallow back the last of the night’s terror. Her voice was calmer when she went on.

‘The others were far ahead of us, when a fox started up suddenly from the brush by the path. “Follow me, if you’d like to see real sport!” Regal challenged me, and he turned his horse from the path and set off after the animal. Whether I would or no, Softstep sprang after them. Regal rode like a mad thing, all stretched out on his horse, urging it on with a quirt.’ There was consternation, and wonder, but also a stain of admiration in her voice as she described him.

Softstep had not answered the rein. At first she had been fearful of their pace, for she did not know the terrain, and feared that Softstep would

stumble. So she had tried to rein in her mount. But when she had realized that she could no longer see the road or the others, and that Regal was far ahead of her, she had given Softstep her head in the hopes of catching up, with the predictable result that as the storm closed in, she had lost her way completely. She had turned back to retrace her trail to the road, but the falling snow and blowing wind had quickly erased it. At last she had given Softstep the bit, trusting her horse to find her way home. Probably she would have, if those wild men had not set upon her. Her voice dwindled away into silence.

‘Forged ones,’ I told her quietly.

‘Forged ones,’ she repeated in a wondering voice. Then, more firmly, ‘They have no heart left. So it was explained to me.’ I felt more than saw her glance. ‘Am I so poor a Sacrifice that there are folk who would kill me?’

In the distance we heard the winding of a horn. Searchers.

‘They would have set upon any that crossed their paths,’ I told her. ‘For them, there was no thought that it was their Queen-in-Waiting they attacked. I doubt greatly that they knew who you were at all.’ I closed my jaws firmly before I could add that such was not the case with Regal. If he had not intended her harm, neither had he kept her from coming to it. I did not believe he had ever intended to show her ‘sport’ in chasing a fox across snowy hills in the twilight. He had meant to lose her. And done so handily.

‘I think my lord will be very wroth with me,’ she said woeful as a child. As if in answer to her prediction, we rounded the shoulder of the hill and saw men on horseback bearing torches coming toward us. We heard the horn again, more clearly, and in a few moments we were among them. They were the forerunners of the main search party, and a girl set out at once galloping back to tell the King-in-Waiting that his queen had been found. In the light of the torches, Verity’s guards exclaimed and swore over the blood that glinted yet on Softstep’s neck, but Kettricken kept her composure as she assured them that none of it was hers. She spoke quietly of the Forged ones who had set upon her and what she had done to defend herself. I saw admiration of her growing among the soldiers. I heard then for the first time that the boldest attacker had dropped out of a tree upon her. Him she had slain first.

‘Four she done, and not a scratch upon her!’ exulted one grizzled veteran, and then, ‘Begging your pardon, my lady queen. No disrespect meant!’

‘It might have been a different tale had not Fitz come to free my horse’s head,’ Kettricken said quietly. Their respect for her grew as she did not glory in her triumph, but made sure I received my due as well.

They congratulated her loudly, and spoke angrily of scouring the woods tomorrow all about Buckkeep. ‘It shames us all as soldiers, that our own queen cannot ride forth safely!’ declared one woman. She set her hand to the hilt of her blade, and swore on it to have it blooded with Forged blood by the morrow. Several others followed her example. The talk grew loud, bravado and relief at the Queen’s safety fuelling it. It became a triumphal procession home, until Verity arrived. He came at a dead gallop, on a horse lathered both by distance and speed. I knew then that the search had not been a brief one, and could only guess at how many roads Verity had travelled since he had received word that his lady was missing.

‘How could you be so foolish as to go so far astray!’ were his first words to her. His voice was not tender. I saw her head lose its proud lift, and heard the muttered comments of the man closest to me. From there nothing went well. He did not scold her before his men, but I saw him wince as she told him plainly what had become of her and how she had killed to defend herself. He was not pleased to have her speak so plainly of a band of Forged ones, brave enough to attack the Queen, and scarce out of Buckkeep’s shadow. That which Verity had sought to keep quiet would be on everyone’s lips tomorrow, with the added fillip that it had been the Queen herself they’d dared to attack. Verity shot me a murderous glance, as if it were all my doing, and roughly commandeered fresh horses from two of his guard to take himself and his queen back to Buckkeep. He whisked her away from them, carrying her back to Buckkeep at a gallop as if arriving there sooner would somehow make the breach of safety less real. He seemed not to realize he had denied his guard the honour of bringing her safely home.

I myself rode back slowly with them, trying not to hear the disgruntled words of the soldiers. They did not quite criticize the King-in-Waiting, but complimented the Queen more on her spirit and thought it sad she’d not been welcomed back with an embrace and a kind word or two. If any gave thought to Regal’s behaviour, they did not speak it aloud.

Later that night, in the stables, after I’d seen to Sooty, I helped Burrich and Hands put Softstep and Truth, Verity’s horse, to rights. Burrich grumbled at how hard both beasts had been used. Softstep had taken a minor scratch during the attack, and her mouth was sore bruised from fighting for

her head, but neither animal would take permanent hurt. Burrich sent Hands off to fix a warm mash of grain for them both. Only then did he quietly tell how Regal had come in, given his horse over for stabling, and gone up to the keep without so much as mentioning Kettricken. Burrich himself had been alerted by a stable-boy, asking where Softstep was. When Burrich had set about to find out, and made so bold as to ask Regal himself, Regal had replied that he had thought she had stayed on the road and come in with her attendants. So Burrich had been the one to sound the alarm, with Regal very vague as to where he had actually left the road, and what direction the fox had led him, and presumably Kettricken. 'He's covered his tracks well,' Burrich muttered to me as Hands came back with the grain. I knew he did not refer to the fox.

My feet were leaden as I made my way up to the keep that night, and my heart as well. I did not want to imagine what Kettricken was feeling, nor did I care to consider what the talk was in the guard-room. I pulled off my clothes and fell into bed, and instantly into a sleep. Molly was waiting for me in my dreams, and the only peace I knew.

I was awakened a short time later, by someone pounding on my latched door. I arose and opened it to a sleepy page, who'd been sent to fetch me to Verity's map-room. I told him I knew the way and sent him back to bed. I dragged my clothes on hastily and raced down the stairs, wondering what disaster had befallen us now.

Verity was waiting for me there, the hearth fire almost the only light in the room. His hair was rumpled and he had thrown a robe on over his nightshirt. Plainly he had just come from his bed himself, and I braced myself for whatever news he'd received. 'Shut the door!' he commanded me tersely. I did and then came to stand before him. I could not tell if the glint in his eyes were anger or amusement as he demanded, 'Who is Lady Red Skirts, and why do I dream of her every night?'

I could not find my tongue. Desperately I wondered just how privy to my dreams he had been. Embarrassment dizzied me. Had I stood naked before the whole court, I could not have felt more exposed.

Verity turned his face aside and gave a cough that might have started as a chuckle. 'Come, boy, it is not as if I cannot understand. I did not wish to be privy to your secret; rather you have thrust it upon me, especially so these last few nights. And I need my sleep, not to start up in bed fevered with your

... admiration for this woman.' He stopped speaking abruptly. My flaming blush was warmer than any hearth fire.

'So,' he said uncomfortably. Then, 'Sit down. I am going to teach you to guard your thoughts as well as you guard your tongue.' He shook his head. 'Strange, Fitz, that you can block my Skilling so completely from your mind at times, but spill your most private desires out like a wolf howling into the night. I suppose it springs from what Galen did to you. Would we could undo that. But as we can't, I shall teach you what I can whenever I can.'

I had not moved. Suddenly neither of us could look at the other. 'Come here,' he repeated gruffly. 'Sit down here with me. Look into the flames.'

And in the space of an hour, he gave me an exercise to practise, one that would keep my dreams to myself, or more likely, ensure that I had no dreams at all. With a sinking heart I realized I would lose even the Molly of my imagination as surely as I'd lost the real one. He sensed my glumness.

'Come, Fitz, it will pass. Keep a rein on yourself and endure. It can be done. May come a day when you will wish your life to be as empty of women as it is now. As I do.'

'She didn't mean to get lost, sir.'

Verity shot me a baleful glance. 'Intentions cannot be exchanged for results. She is Queen-in-Waiting, boy. She must always think, not once, but thrice, before she takes action.'

'She told me that Softstep followed Regal's horse, and would not respond to the rein. You can fault Burrich and I for that; we're supposed to have trained that horse.'

He sighed suddenly. 'I suppose so. Consider yourself rebuked, and tell Burrich to find my lady a less spirited horse to ride until she is a better horsewoman.' He sighed again, deeply. 'I suppose she will consider that a punishment from me. She will look at me sadly with those great blue eyes, but speak not a word against it. Ah, well. It cannot be helped. But did she have to kill, and then to speak of it so blithely? What will my people think of her?'

'She scarcely had a choice, sir. Would it have been better for her to die? As to what folk will think ... well. The soldiers who first found us thought her plucky. And capable. Not bad qualities for a queen, sir. The women, especially, in your guard spoke warmly of her as we returned. They see her as their queen now, much more than if she were a weeping, quailing thing.'

They will follow her without question. In times like these, perhaps a queen with a knife will give us more heart than a woman who drapes herself in jewels and hides behind walls.'

'Perhaps,' Verity said quietly. I sensed he did not agree. 'But now all shall know, most vividly, of the Forged ones who are gathering about Buckkeep.'

'They shall know, too, that a determined person can defend herself from them. And from the talk of your guard as we came back, I think there shall be far fewer Forged ones a week hence.'

'I know that. Some will be slaying their own kin. Forged or not, it is Six Duchies blood we are shedding. I had sought to avoid having my guard kill my own people.'

A small silence fell between us, as we both reflected he had not scrupled to set me to that same task. Assassin. That was the word for what I was. I had no honour to preserve, I realized.

'Not true, Fitz.' He answered my thought. 'You preserve my honour. And I honour you for that, for doing what must be done. The ugly work, the hidden work. Do not be shamed that you work to preserve the Six Duchies. Do not think I do not appreciate such work simply because it must remain secret. Tonight, you saved my queen. I do not forget that either.'

'She needed little saving, sir. I believe that even alone, she would have survived.'

'Well. We won't wonder about that.' He paused, then said awkwardly, 'I must reward you, you know.'

When I opened my mouth to protest, he held up a forbidding hand. 'I know you require nothing. I know, too, that there is already so much between us that nothing I could give you would be sufficient for my gratitude. But most folk know nothing of that. Will you have it said in Buckkeep Town that you saved the Queen's life, and the King-in-Waiting acknowledged you not at all? But I am at a loss to know what to gift you with ... it should be something visible, and you must carry it about with you for a while. That much I know of statecraft, at least. A sword? Something better than the piece of iron you were carrying tonight?'

'It's an old blade Hod told me to take to practise with,' I defended myself. 'It works.'

'Obviously. I shall have her select a better one for you, and do a bit of fancywork on the hilt and scabbard. Would that do it?'

‘I think so,’ I said awkwardly.

‘Well. Let’s back to bed, shall we? And I shall be able to sleep now, won’t I?’ There was no mistaking the amusement in his voice now. My cheeks burned anew.

‘Sir. I have to ask ...’ I fumbled the hard words out. ‘Do you know who I was dreaming about?’

He shook his head slowly. ‘Do not fear you have compromised her honour. I know only that she wears blue skirts, but you see them as red. And that you love her with an ardency that is appropriate to youth. Do not struggle to stop loving her. Only to stop Skilling it about at night. I am not the only one open to such Skilling, though I believe I am the only one who would recognize your signature on the dream so plain. Still, be cautious. Galen’s coterie is not without Skill, even if they use it clumsily and with little strength. A man can be undone when his enemies learn what is dearest to him from his Skill dreams. Keep your guard up.’ He gave an inadvertent chuckle. ‘And hope your Lady Red Skirts has no Skill in her blood, for if she does at all, she must have heard you all these many nights.’

And having put that unsettling thought into my head, he dismissed me back to my chambers and bed. I did not sleep again that night.

EIGHT

The Queen Awakes

*Oh, some folk ride to the wild boar hunt
Or for elk they nock their arrows.
But my love rode with the Vixen Queen
To lay to rest our sorrows.
She did not dream of fame that day
Nor fear what pain might find her.
She rode to heal her people's hearts
And my love rode behind her.*

The Vixen Queen's Hunt

The whole keep was astir early the next day. There was a fevered, almost festival air in the courtyard as Verity's personal guard and every warrior who had no scheduled duties that day massed for a hunt. Tracking hounds bayed restively, while the pull-down dogs with their massive jaws and barrel chests huffed excitedly and tested their restraints. Bets were already being set on who would hunt most successfully. Horses pawed the earth, bow-strings were checked, while pages ran helter-skelter everywhere. Inside the kitchen, half the cooking staff was busy putting up packages of food for the hunters to take with them. Soldiers young and old, male and female strutted and laughed aloud, bragging of past confrontations, comparing weapons, building spirit for the hunt. I had seen this a hundred times, before a winter hunt for elk, or bear. But now there was an edge to it, a rank smell of bloodlust on the air. I heard snatches of conversations, words that made me queasy: '... no mercy for that dung ...', '... cowards and traitors, to dare to attack the Queen ...', '... shall pay dearly. They don't deserve a swift death ...' I ducked hastily back into the kitchen, threaded my way through an area busy as a stirred ant-hill. Here, too, I heard the same sorts of sentiments voiced, the same craving for revenge.

I found Verity in his map-room. I could tell he had washed and dressed himself afresh this day, but he wore last night as plainly as a dirty robe. He was attired for a day inside, amongst his papers. I tapped lightly at the door, although it stood ajar. He sat in a chair before the fire, his back to me. He nodded, but did not look up at me as I entered. For all his stillness, there was a charged air to the room, the gathering of a storm. A tray of breakfast rested on a table beside his chair, untouched. I came and stood quietly beside him, almost certain I had been Skilled here. As the silence grew longer, I wondered if Verity himself knew why. At length I decided to speak.

‘My prince. You do not ride with your guard today?’ I ventured.

It was as if I had opened a floodgate. He turned to look at me; the lines in his face had been graven deeper over night. He looked haggard, sickened. ‘I do not, I dare not. How could I countenance such a thing, this hunting down of our own folk and kin! And yet what is my alternative? To hide and mope within the keep walls, while others go out to avenge this insult to my Queen-in-Waiting! I dare not forbid my men to uphold their honour. So I must behave as if I am unaware of what goes on in the courtyard. As if I am a simpleton, or a laggard, or a coward. There will be a ballad written about this day, I doubt it not. What shall it be called? *Verity’s Massacre of the Witless?* Or *Queen Kettricken’s Sacrifice of the Forged?*’ His voice rose on every word, and before he was half done, I had stepped to the door and shut it firmly. I looked about the room as he ranted, wondering who else besides myself was hearing these words.

‘Did you sleep at all, my prince? I asked when he had run down.

He smiled with bleak amusement. ‘Well you know what put an end to my first attempt at rest. My second was less ... engaging. My lady came to my chamber.’

I felt my ears begin to warm. Whatever he was about to tell me, I did not want to hear it. I had no wish to know what had passed between them last night. Quarrel or amendment, I wanted to know nothing of it. Verity was merciless.

‘Not weeping, as you might think she would. Not for comfort. Not to be held against night fears, or reassured of my regard. But sword-stiff as a rebuked sergeant, to stand at the foot of the bed and beg my pardon for her transgressions. Whiter than chalk and hard as oak ...’ His voice trailed off, as if realizing he betrayed too much of himself. ‘She foresaw this hunting

mob, not I. She came to me in the middle of the night, asking what must we do? I had no answer for her, any more than I do now ...'

'At least she foresaw this,' I ventured, hoping to bring some respite from his anger for Kettricken.

'And I did not,' he said heavily. 'She did. Chivalry would have. Oh, Chivalry would have known it would happen from the moment she went missing, and would have had all sorts of contingency plans. But I did not. I thought only to bring her swiftly home, and hope not too many heard of it. As if such a thing could be! And so today I think to myself that if ever the crown does come to rest on my brow, it will be in a most unworthy place.'

This was a Prince Verity I had never seen before, a man with his confidence in tatters. I finally saw how poor a match Kettricken was for him. It was not her fault. She was strong, and raised to rule. Verity often said himself he had been raised as a second son. The right sort of woman would have steadied him like a sea anchor, helped him rise to assume his kingship. A woman who had come weeping to his bed, to be cuddled and reassured, would have let him arise certain he was a man and fit to be a king. Kettricken's discipline and restraint made him doubt his own strength. My prince was human, I suddenly perceived. It was not reassuring.

'You should at least come out and speak to them,' I ventured.

'And say what? "Good hunting"? No. But you go, boy. Go and watch and bring me word of what is happening. Go now. And shut my door. I have no desire to see anyone else until you return with word of what goes on.'

I turned and did as he bid me. As I left the Great Hall and went down the passage to the courtyard, I encountered Regal. He was seldom up and about this early, and he looked as if his arising this morning had been no choice of his. His clothing and hair were well arranged, but all the tiny primping touches were missing: no earring, no carefully-folded and pinned silk at his throat, and the only jewellery was his signet ring. His hair was combed, but not scented and curled. And his eyes were networked in red. Fury rode him. As I sought to pass him, he seized me and jerked me to face him. That, at least, was his intention. I did not resist, but merely laxed my muscles. And found, to my delight and amazement, that he could not move me. He turned to face me, eyes blazing, and found out that he must look up, ever so slightly, to glare at me eye to eye. I had grown and put on weight. I had known that, but had never considered this delightful side-effect. I

stopped the grin before it reached my mouth, but it must have showed in my eyes. He gave me a violent shove, and I allowed it to rock me. A bit.

‘Where’s Verity?’ he snarled.

‘My prince?’ I queried, as if not grasping what he desired.

‘Where is my brother? That wretched wife of his ...’ He broke off, strangling on his anger. ‘Where is my brother usually at this time of day?’ he finally managed.

I did not lie. ‘Some days he goes early to his tower. Or he may be breakfasting, I suppose. Or in the baths ...’ I offered.

‘Useless bastard,’ Regal dismissed me, and whirled, to hurry off in the direction of the tower. I hoped the climb would amuse him. As soon as he was out of sight, I broke into a run, not to waste the precious time I had gained.

The moment I entered the courtyard, the reason for Regal’s fury was made clear. Kettricken stood upon a wagon seat, and every head was turned up toward her. She wore the same clothes she had the night before. By daylight, I could see how a spray of blood had marked the sleeve of the white fur jacket, and how a heavier plume of it had soaked and stained her purple trousers. She was booted and hatted, ready to ride. A sword was buckled at her hip. Dismay rose in me. How could she? I glanced about, wondering what she had been saying. Every face was turned to her, eyes wide. I had emerged into a moment of utter silence. Every man and woman seemed to be holding their breath, awaiting her next words. When they came, they were uttered in a speaking voice, calmly, but so silent was the crowd that her clear voice carried in the cold air.

‘This is not a hunt, I say,’ Kettricken repeated gravely. ‘Put aside your merriment and boasts. Remove from your bodies every bit of jewellery, every sign of rank. Let your hearts be solemn and consider what we do.’

Her words were accented still with the flavour of the mountains, but a cool part of my mind observed how carefully chosen was each word, how balanced each phrase.

‘We do not go to hunt,’ she repeated, ‘but to claim our casualties. We go to lay to rest those the Red Ships have stolen from us. The Red Ships have taken the hearts of the Forged ones, and left their bodies to stalk us. None the less, those we put down today are of the Six Duchies. Our own.’

‘My soldiers, I ask of you that no arrow be loosed today, no blow struck save for a clean kill. I know you skilled enough to do this. We have all

suffered enough. Let each death today be as brief and merciful as we can manage, for all our sakes. Let us clench our jaws, and remove that which infects us with as much resolve and regret as if we severed a maimed limb from a body. For such is what we do. Not vengeance, my people, but surgery, to be followed by a healing. Do as I say, now.'

For some few minutes she stood still and looked down at us all. As in a dream, folk began to move. Hunters removed feathers and ribbons, tokens and jewellery from their garments and handed them to pages. The mood of merriment and boasting had evaporated. She had stripped that protection away, forced all to consider truly what they were about to do. No one relished it. All were poised, waiting to hear what she would say next. Kettricken kept her absolute silence and stillness, so that each eye was perforce drawn back to her. When she saw she had the attention of all, she spoke again.

'Good,' she praised us quietly. 'And now, heed my words well. I desire horse-drawn litters, or wagons ... whatever you of the stable judge best. Pad them well with straw. No body of our folk will be left to feed foxes or be pecked by crows. They will be brought back here, names noted if known, and prepared for the pyre that is the honour of those fallen in battle. If families be known and be near, they shall be summoned to the mourning. To those who live far, word will be sent, and the honours due those who have lost their blood-kin as soldiers.' Tears ran unchecked, untouched down her cheeks. They glinted in the early winter sunlight like diamonds. Her voice thickened as she turned to command another group. 'My cooks and serving-folk! Set all tables in the Great Hall, and prepare a funeral feast. Set the Lesser Hall with water and herbs and clean garments, that we may prepare the bodies of our folk for burning. All others, leave your ordinary duties. Fetch wood and build a pyre. We shall return, to burn our dead and mourn them.' She gazed about, meeting every eye. Something in her face set. She drew the sword from her belt and pointed it aloft in an oath. 'When we have done with our grieving, we shall make ready to avenge them! Those who have taken our folk shall know our wrath!' Slowly she lowered her blade, sheathed it cleanly. Again her eyes commanded us. 'And now, we ride, my folk!'

My flesh stood up in goose-bumps. Around me, men and women were mounting horses and a hunt was forming up. With impeccable timing, Burrich was suddenly beside the wagon, with Softstep saddled and awaiting

her rider. I wondered where he had got the black and red harness, the colours of grief and vengeance. I wondered if she had ordered it, or if he had simply known. She stepped down, onto her horse's back, then settled into the saddle and Softstep stood steady despite the novel mount. She lifted her hand, and it held a sword. The hunt surged forth behind her.

'Stop her!' hissed Regal behind me, and I spun to find that both he and Verity stood at my back, completely unnoticed by the crowd.

'No!' I dared to breathe aloud. 'Cannot you feel it? Do not spoil it. She's given them all something back. I don't know what it is, but they have been sore missing it for a long time.'

'It is pride,' Verity said, his deep voice a rumble. 'What we have all been missing, and I most of all. There rides a queen,' he continued in soft amazement. Was there a shade of envy there as well? He turned slowly and went quietly back into the keep. Behind us a babble of voices arose, and folk hastened to do as she had bidden them. I walked behind Verity, near stunned by what I had witnessed. Regal pushed past me, to leap in front of Verity and confront him. He was quivering with outrage. My prince halted.

'How can you have allowed this to happen? Have you no control over that woman at all? She makes mockery of us! Who is she, to thus issue commands and take out an armed guard from the keep! Who is she, to decree all this so highhandedly?' Regal's voice cracked in his fury.

'My wife,' Verity said mildly. 'And your Queen-in-Waiting. The one you chose. Father assured me you would choose a woman worthy to be a queen. I think you picked better than you knew.'

'Your wife? Your undoing, you ass! She undermines you, she cuts your throat as you sleep! She steals their hearts, she builds her own name! Cannot you see it, you dolt? You may be content to let that mountain vixen steal the crown, but I am not!'

I turned aside hastily and bent to retie my shoe, so I could not witness that Prince Verity struck Prince Regal. I did hear something very like the crack of an open-handed blow to a man's face and a bitten-off cry of fury. When I looked up, Verity was standing as quietly as before, while Regal hunkered forward with a hand over his nose and mouth. 'King-in-Waiting Verity will brook no insults to Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken. Or even to himself. I said my lady had reawakened pride in our soldiers. Perhaps she has stirred mine as well.' Verity looked mildly surprised as he considered this.

‘The King will hear of this!’ Regal took his hand away from his face, looked aghast at the blood on it. He held it up, shaking, to show Verity. ‘My father will see this blood you have shed!’ he quavered, and choked on the blood coursing from his nose. He leaned forward slightly and held his bloody hand away from himself, so as not to spoil his clothing with a stain.

‘What? You intend to bleed all the way to this afternoon, when our father arises? If you can manage that, come and show me as well!’ To me, ‘Fitz! Have you nothing better to do than stand about gaping? Be off with you. See that my lady’s commands are well obeyed!’

Verity turned and strode off down the corridor. I made haste to obey and to take myself out of Regal’s range. Behind us, he stamped and cursed like a child in the midst of a tantrum. Neither of us turned back to him, but I at least hoped that no servants had marked what had transpired.

It was a long and peculiar day about the keep. Verity made a visit to King Shrewd’s rooms, and then kept himself to his map-room. I know not what Regal did. All folk turned out to do the Queen’s bidding, working swiftly, but almost silently, gossiping quietly amongst themselves as they prepared the one hall for food and the other for bodies. One great change I marked. Those women who had been most faithful to the Queen now found themselves attended, as if they were shadows of Kettricken. And these nobly born women suddenly did not scruple to come themselves to the Lesser Hall, to supervise the preparing of the herb scented water, and the laying out of towels and linens. I myself helped with the fetching of wood for the required pyre.

By late afternoon, the hunt returned. They came quietly, riding in solemn guard around the wagons they escorted. Kettricken rode at their head. She looked tired, and frozen in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. I wanted to go to her, but did not steal the honour as Burrich came to take her horse’s head and assist her dismount. Fresh blood spattered her boots and Softstep’s shoulders. She had not ordered her soldiers to do that which she would not do herself. With a quiet command, Kettricken dismissed the guard to wash themselves, to comb hair and beards, and to return freshly clothed to the hall. As Burrich led Softstep away, Kettricken stood briefly alone. A sadness greyer than anything I had ever felt emanated from her. She was weary. So very weary.

I approached her quietly. ‘If you have need, my lady queen,’ I said softly.

She did not turn. 'I must do this myself. But be close, in case I need you.' She spoke so quietly I am sure none heard her but myself. Then she moved forward, and the waiting keep folk parted before her. Heads bobbed as she acknowledged them gravely. She walked silently through the kitchens, nodding at the food she saw prepared, and then paced through the Great Hall, once more nodding approval of all she saw there. In the Lesser Hall, she paused, then removed her gaily knit cap and her jacket, to reveal underneath a simple soft shirt of purple linen. The cap and jacket she gave over to a page, who looked stunned by the honour. She stepped to the head of one of the tables, and began to fold her sleeves back. All movement in the hall ceased as heads turned to watch her. She looked up to our amazed regard. 'Bring in our dead,' she said simply.

The pitiful bodies were carried in, a heart-breaking stream of them. I did not count how many. More than I had expected, more than Verity's reports had led us to believe. I followed behind Kettricken, and carried the basin of warm, scented water as she moved from body to body, and gently bathed each ravaged face and closed tormented eyes forever. Behind us came others, a snaking procession as each body was undressed gently, completely bathed, hair combed, and wound in clean cloth. At some point I became aware that Verity was there, a young scribe beside him, going from body to body, taking down the names of those few who were recognized, writing briefly of every other.

One name I supplied him myself: Kerry. The last Molly and I had known of this street boy, he had gone off as a puppeteer's apprentice. He'd ended his days as little more than a puppet. His laughing mouth was stilled forever. As boys, we'd run errands together, to earn a penny or two. He'd been beside me the first time I got puking drunk, and laughed until his own stomach betrayed him. He'd wedged the rotten fish in the trestles of the tavern-keeper's table, the one who had accused us of stealing. The days we had shared I alone would remember now. I suddenly felt less real. Part of my past, Forged away from me.

When we were finished, and stood silently looking at the tables of bodies, Verity stepped forward, to read his tally aloud in the silence. The names were few, but he did not neglect those unknown. 'A young man, newly bearded, dark hair, the scars of fishing on his hands ...' he said of one, and of another, 'A woman, curly haired and comely, tattooed with the puppeteers' guild sign.' We listened to the litany of those we had lost, and if

any did not weep, they had hearts of stone. As a people, we lifted our dead and carried them to the funeral pyre, to set them carefully upon this last bed. Verity himself brought the torch for the kindling, but he handed it to the Queen who waited beside the pyre. As she set flame to the pitch-laden boughs, she cried out to the dark skies, 'You shall not be forgotten!' All echoed her with a shout. Blade, the old sergeant, stood beside the pyre with shears, to take from every soldier a finger's length lock of hair, a symbol of the mourning for a fallen comrade. Verity joined the queue, and Kettricken stood behind him, to offer up a pale lock of her own hair.

There followed a night such as I had never known. Most of Buckkeep Town came to the keep that night, and were admitted without question. All followed the Queen's example and kept a watching fast until the pyre had burned itself to ash and bone. Then the Great Hall and the Lesser were filled, and planks laid as tables outside in the courtyard for those who could not crowd within. Kegs of drink were rolled out, and such a setting out of bread and roasted meat and other viands as I had not even imagined that Buckkeep possessed. Later I was to learn that much of it had simply come up from the town, unsought but offered freely.

The King descended, as he had not for some weeks, to sit in his throne at the high table and preside over the gathering. The Fool came too, to stand beside and behind his chair and accept from his plate whatever the King offered. But this night he made not merry for the King; his fool's prattle was stilled, and even the bells on his cap and sleeves had been tied in strips of fabric to mute them. Only once did our eyes meet that night, but for me, the glance carried no discernible message. To the King's right was Verity, to his left Kettricken. Regal was there, too, of course, in so sumptuous a costume of black that only the colour denoted any sort of mourning. He scowled and sulked and drank, and I suppose for some his surly silence passed for grieving. For me, I could sense the anger seething within him, and knew that someone, somewhere would pay for what he saw as insult to himself. Even Patience was there, her appearance as rare as the King's, and I sensed the unity of purpose we displayed.

The King ate but little. He waited until those at the high table were filled before he arose to speak. As he spoke, his words were repeated at the lower tables, and in the Lesser Hall, and even outside in the courtyard by minstrels. He spoke briefly of those we had lost to the Red Ships. He said nothing of Forging, or of the day's task of hunting down and killing the

Forged ones. He spoke instead as if they had but recently died in a battle against the Red Ships, and said only that we must remember them. Then, pleading fatigue and grief, he left the table to return to his own chambers.

Then it was that Verity arose. He did little more than to repeat Kettricken's words of earlier, that we grieved now, but when the grieving was over, we must make ready our vengeance. He lacked the fire and passion of Kettricken's earlier speech, but I could see all at table responding to it. Folk nodded and began to talk amongst themselves, while Regal sat and glowered silently. Verity and Kettricken left the table late that night, she on his arm, and they made sure that all marked how they left together. Regal remained, drinking and muttering to himself. I myself slipped away shortly after Verity and Kettricken left, to seek my own bed.

I made no attempt to fall asleep, but only flung myself on my bed to stare into the fire. When the concealed door opened, I rose immediately to ascend to Chade's chambers. I found him ajitter with an infectious excitement. There was even a pinkness to his pale cheeks about his pock scars. His grey hair was wild, his green eyes glittered like gems. He was pacing about his chambers, and as I entered, he actually seized me in a rough embrace. He stepped back and laughed aloud at my shocked expression.

'She was born to rule! Born to it, and somehow now she has awakened to it! It could not have come at a better time! She may yet save us all!'

His exultation was unholy in its glee.

'I know not how many folk died today,' I rebuked him.

'Ah! But not in vain! At least not in vain! Those were not wasted deaths, FitzChivalry. By El and Eda, Kettricken has the instinct and the grace! I had not suspected it in her. Now had we still your father alive, boy, and him paired with her on the throne, we could have a pair as could cup the whole world in their hands.' He took another sip of his wine and paced again about his chambers. I had never seen him so elated. He all but capered. A covered basket rested on a table close to hand, and its contents had been set out on a cloth. Wine, cheese, sausages, pickles and bread. So even here in his tower, Chade shared the funeral feast. Slink the weasel popped up from the other side of the table, to regard me past the food with avaricious eyes. Chade's voice broke me from my thoughts.

'She has an ample share of what Chivalry had. The instinct for seizing the moment and turning it to advantage. She took an unavoidable, unmentionable situation and made high tragedy of what might have been

simple slaughter in lesser hands. Boy, we have a queen, a queen again at Buckkeep!’

I felt slightly repulsed by his joy. And, for an instant, cheated. Hesitantly, I asked, ‘Do you think, really, that the Queen did as she did for show? That it was all a calculated political move?’

He halted in his tracks, considered briefly. ‘No. No, FitzChivalry, I believe she acted from her heart. But that does not make it any less tactically brilliant. Ah, you think me heartless. Or callous in my ignorance. The truth is, I know only too well. Know far better than you what today meant to us. I know men died today. I even know that six of our own force took injuries, mostly minor, in today’s action. I can tell you how many Forged ones fell, and within a day or so, I expect to know most of their names. Names already listed by me, included in the tallies of all the Red Ships have done to us. It will be I, boy, who sees that the purses of blood-gold are paid to surviving kin. Those families will be told the King regards their fallen as the equal of any of his soldiers who fall in battle with the Red Ships. And entreats their aid in taking vengeance for them. They will not be pleasant letters to pen, Fitz. But pen them I shall, in Verity’s own hand, for Shrewd’s signature. Or did you think I did naught but kill for my king?’

‘I beg pardon. It was just that you seemed so merry when first I entered ...’ I began.

‘And merry I am! As you should be. We have been rudderless and drifted, pounded by the waves and pushed by every wind. And now, comes a woman, to take the tiller and cry the course. I find it a course full to my liking! As shall everyone in the kingdom who has sickened these past years from being always on our knees. We rise, boy, we rise to fight!’

I saw then how his ebullience was borne on the wave of his fury and his grief. I remembered the expression he had worn when first we rode into Forge town on that black day and saw what the Raiders had left of our folk. He had told me then that I would learn to care, that it was in my blood. With a rush I felt the rightness of his sentiment, and seized up a glass to join him. Together we toasted our queen. Then Chade grew more sober, and divulged the reason for his summons. The King, Shrewd himself, had once more repeated his order that I watch over Kettricken.

‘I’ve been meaning to speak to you about that; that Shrewd sometimes now repeats an order already given or a comment already made.’

‘I’m aware enough of that, Fitz. What can be done, is. But the King’s health is another topic for another time. For now, I myself assure you that his repetition was not the rattling of a sickly mind. No. The King made this request again today, as he was preparing himself to descend to dinner. He repeats it to make sure your efforts will be redoubled. He sees, as I do, that by arousing folk to follow her, the Queen puts herself more at risk. Though he would not speak it so plain. Be on your guard for her safety.’

‘Regal,’ I snorted.

‘Prince Regal?’ Chade queried.

‘He is who we have to fear, especially now that the Queen has taken a place of power.’

‘I said nothing of the kind. Nor should you,’ Chade observed quietly. His voice was calm but his face was severe.

‘Why not?’ I challenged him. ‘Why may not we, at least once, speak plain to one another?’

‘To one another, we might, if we were entirely alone and it concerned only you and I. But such is not the case. We are King’s Men sworn, and King’s Men do not entertain even thoughts of treason, let alone ...’

There was a gagging noise, and Slink disgorged himself. On the table, beside the food basket. He snorted, spraying drops of moisture.

‘Greedy little wretch! Choked yourself, did you?’ Chade rebuked him unconcernedly.

I found a rag to clean up the mess. But when I got there, Slink was lying on his side, panting, while Chade poked at the vomit with a skewer. I nearly retched myself. He waved my rag aside, picking up Slink instead and handing me the shivering creature. ‘Calm him, and get water down him,’ he directed me tersely. ‘Go on, old man, go to Fitz, he’ll see to you.’ This to the weasel.

I carried him over by the fire, where he promptly puked all down my shirt. At closer range, the smell was overpowering. As I set him down and pulled my shirt off, I caught an underlying scent, more bitter than vomit even. Even as I opened my mouth to speak, Chade confirmed my suspicions. ‘Varta leaves. Crushed fine. The spiciness of the sausage would conceal the taste well. Let’s hope the wine wasn’t poisoned as well, or we’re both dead.’

Every hair on my body stood up in horror. Chade looked up to see me frozen, and pushed gently past me to pick Slink up. He offered him a saucer of water and looked pleased when Slink sampled it. ‘I think he’ll live. The

little pig stuffed his mouth full, and got a better taste of it than a human would have. Up it came. The stuff on the table looks chewed, but not digested. I think the taste made him gag, not the poison.'

'I hope so,' I said faintly. Every one of my nerves was tuned to an inner waiting. Had I been poisoned? Did I feel sleepy, nauseous, dizzy? Was my mouth numb, dry, watering? I broke out in a sudden sweat and began to tremble. Not again.

'Stop it,' Chade said quietly. 'Sit down. Drink some water. You're doing this to yourself, Fitz. That bottle was well sealed with an old cork. If the wine was poisoned, it was done years ago. I know of few men with the patience to poison a bottle of wine, and then age it. I think we're fine.'

I drew a shaky breath. 'But such was not someone's intent. Who brought your food?'

Chade gave a snort. 'I prepared my own food, as always. But that on the table was from a gift basket left for Lady Thyme. From time to time, folk seek to curry favour with her, as it is rumoured she has the King's ear. I did not think my masquerade woman a likely target for poison.'

'Regal,' I said again. 'I told you he believes she is the King's poisoner. How could you have been so careless? You know he blames Lady Thyme for his mother's death! Shall we be so polite as to let him kill us all? He will not stop until the throne is his.'

'And I tell you again, I will hear nothing of treason!' Chade all but shouted the words. He sat down in his chair and cradled Slink in his lap. The little beast sat up, tidied his whiskers, and then curled up again to compose himself for sleep. I watched Chade's pale hand, the standing tendons, the paper skin, as he stroked his small pet. He looked only at the weasel, his face closed. After a moment, he spoke more calmly. 'I think our king was right. We should all redouble our caution. And not just for Kettricken. Or ourselves.' He lifted tortured eyes to mine. 'Watch over your women, boy. Neither innocence nor ignorance is any protection against this night's work. Patience, Molly, even Lacey. Find a way, a subtle way, to give Burrich warning as well.' He sighed, asked of no one, 'Have we not enemies enough outside our walls?'

'Aplenty,' I assured him. But I said no more of Regal to him.

He shook his head. 'This is an ill way for me to begin a journey.'

'A journey? You?' I was incredulous. Chade almost never left the keep. 'Where?'

‘Where I need to go. Now I think I need almost as much to stay.’ He shook his head to himself. ‘Take care of yourself while I’m gone, boy. I won’t be about to watch over you.’ And that was as much as he would tell me.

When I left him, he was still staring into the fire, his lax hands sheltering Slink. I went down the stairs on jelly legs. The attempt on Chade had shaken me more than anything ever had. Not even the secret of his existence had been enough to shield him. And there were other, easier targets, just as close to my heart.

I damned the bravado that had earlier let me make Regal aware of how much stronger I had grown. I had been a fool to tempt him to attack me, I should have known he would find a less obvious target. In my room, I changed hastily into fresh clothing. Then I left my chamber, climbed the stairs and went straight to Molly’s bedchamber. I tapped lightly on the door.

No answer. I did not tap louder. It lacked but an hour or two until dawn, most of the keep was exhausted, abed. Still, I had no desire to rouse the wrong person to see me at Molly’s door. Yet I had to know.

Her door was latched, but it was a simple one. I slipped it in a matter of seconds, and made note to myself that she would have a better one before tomorrow night. Soft as shadow, I entered her room and drew the door closed behind me.

A fire had burned low in the hearth. Its lingering embers cast an uncertain haze of light. I stood still a moment, letting my eyes adjust, then I moved carefully into the room, staying away from the hearth light. I could hear the steady sleep rhythm of Molly’s breath from her bed. It should have been enough for me. But I teased myself that she might be fevered and sinking even now into a death sleep from poison. I promised myself that I would do no more than touch her pillow, just to see if her skin were fevered or normal. No more than that. I drifted to the bedside.

I could just make out her shape under the covers in the dim light. She smelled heathery and warm and sweet. Healthy. No feverish poison victim slept here. I knew I should go. ‘Sleep well,’ I breathed.

Silently she sprang up at me. The ember light ran red along the blade in her hand. ‘Molly!’ I cried as I parried her knife hand aside with the back of my forearm. She froze, her other hand drawn back in a fist, and for an instant all in the room was silent and motionless. Then, ‘Newboy!’ she hissed furiously, and punched me in the belly with her left hand. As I doubled over,

gasping for air, she rolled from the bed. ‘You idiot! You frightened me to death! What do you think you’re about, rattling at my latch and sneaking about in my room! I should call the keep guardsmen to put you out!’

‘No!’ I begged, as she threw wood on the fire, and then kindled a candle at it. ‘Please. I’ll go. I meant no harm or offence. I just wanted to be sure you were all right.’

‘Well, I’m not!’ she stormed in a whisper. Her hair was confined for the night into two thick braids, reminding me sharply of the little girl I had met so long ago. A girl no longer. She caught me staring at her. She threw a heavier robe about her shoulders and belted it at her waist. ‘I’m a shaking wreck! I shan’t sleep another wink tonight! You’ve been drinking, haven’t you? Are you drunk, then? What do you want?’

She advanced on me with the candle as if it were a weapon. ‘No,’ I assured her. I drew myself upright and tugged my shirt straight. ‘I promise you, I’m not drunk. And truly, I had no bad intentions. But ... something happened tonight, something that made me worry that something bad might happen to you, so I thought I had best come and make sure you were all right, but I knew Patience would not approve, and I certainly didn’t want to go waking up the whole keep, so I thought I would just slip in and ...’

‘Newboy. You’re babbling,’ she informed me icily.

It was true. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said again, and sat down on the corner of the bed.

‘Don’t get comfortable,’ she warned me. ‘You were just leaving. Alone, or with the keep guards. Your choice.’

‘I’ll go,’ I promised, standing hastily. ‘I just wanted to be sure you were all right.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said testily. ‘Why wouldn’t I be fine? I’m as fine tonight as I was last night, as I have been for the last thirty nights. On none of them were you inspired to come and inspect my health. So why tonight?’

I took a breath. ‘Because on some nights threats are more obvious than others. Bad things happen, that make me take stock of what worse things could happen. On some nights, it is not the healthiest thing to be the beloved of a bastard.’

The lines of her mouth went as flat as her voice as she asked, ‘What is that supposed to mean?’

I took a breath, determined that I would be as honest with her as I was able. ‘I cannot tell you what happened. Only that it made me believe you

might be in danger. You will have to trust ...'

'That isn't the part I meant. What do you mean, beloved of a bastard? How do you dare to call me that?' Her eyes were bright with anger.

I swear that my heart thudded to a halt in my chest. The cold of death swept through me. 'It is true, I have no right,' I said haltingly. 'But neither is there any way I could stop caring for you. And whether or not I have the right to name you my beloved would not deter those who might seek to injure me by striking at you. How can I say I love you so much that I wish I did not love you, or at least could refrain from showing that I loved you, because my love puts you in such danger and have those words be true?' Stiffly, I turned to go.

'And how could I possibly dare to say I made sense of your last statement and have it be true?' Molly wondered aloud.

Something in her voice made me turn around. For a moment we just looked at one another. Then she burst out laughing. I stood, affronted and grim, as she came to me, still laughing. Then she put her arms around me. 'Newboy. You take a most roundabout path to finally declare you love me. To break into my room, and then to stand there, tying your tongue in knots about the word love. Could not you simply have said it, a long time ago?'

I stood stupid in the circle of her arms. I looked down at her. Yes, I realized dully, I had grown that much taller than she.

'Well?' she prompted, and for a moment I was puzzled.

'I love you, Molly.' So easy to say, after all. And such a relief. Slowly, cautiously, I put my arms around her.

She smiled up at me. 'And I love you.'

So, finally, I kissed her. In the moment of that kiss, somewhere near Buckkeep a wolf lifted up his voice in a joyous ululation that set every hound to baying and every dog to barking in a chorus that rang against the brittle night sky.

NINE

Guards and Bonds

Oftentimes I understand and commend Fedwren's stated dream. Had he his way, paper would be as common as bread and every child would learn his letters before he was thirteen. But even were it so, I do not think this would bring to pass all he hopes. He mourns for all the knowledge that goes into a grave each time a man dies, even the commonest of men. He speaks of a time to come when a blacksmith's way of setting a shoe, or a shipwright's knack for pulling a drawknife would be set down in letters, that any who could read could learn to do as well. I do not believe it is so, or ever will be. Some things may be learned from words on a page, but some skills are learned first by a man's hand and heart, and later by his head. I have believed this ever since I saw Mastfish set the fish-shaped block of wood that he was named after into Verity's first ship. His eyes had seen that mastfish before it existed, and he set his hands to shaping what his heart knew must be. This is not a thing that can be learned from words on a page. Perhaps it cannot be learned at all, but comes, as does the Skill or the Wit, from the blood of one's forebears.

I returned to my own chamber and sat watching the dying embers in my hearth, waiting for the rest of the keep to awaken. I should have been exhausted. Instead, I almost trembled with the energy rushing through me. I fancied that if I sat very still, I could still feel the warmth of Molly's arms around me. I knew precisely where her cheek had touched mine. A very faint scent of her clung to my shirt from our brief embrace, and I agonized over whether to wear the shirt that day, to carry that scent with me, or to set it aside carefully in my clothing chest, to preserve it. I did not think it a foolish thing at all to care so much about that. Looking back, I smile, but it is at my wisdom, not my folly.

Morning brought storm winds and falling snow to Buckkeep Castle, but to me it only made all inside the cosier. Perhaps it would give us all a chance

to recover ourselves from yesterday. I did not want to think about those poor ragged bodies, or bathing the still, cold faces. Nor of the roaring flames and heat that had consumed Kerry's body. We could all use a quiet day inside the keep. Perhaps the evening would find all gathered about the hearths, for storytelling, music and conversation. I hoped so. I left my chambers to go to Patience and Lacey.

I tormented myself, knowing well the exact moment when Molly would descend the stairs to fetch a breakfast tray for Patience, and also when she would ascend the stairs carrying it. I could be on the stairs or in the hallway as she passed. It would be a minor thing, a coincidence. But I had no question that there were those who had been set to watching me, and they would make note of such 'coincidences' if they occurred too often. No. I had to heed the warnings that both the King and Chade had given me. I would show Molly I had a man's self-control and forbearance. If I must wait before I could court her, then I would.

So I sat in my room and agonized until I was sure that she would have left Patience's chambers. Then I descended, to tap upon the door. As I waited for Lacey to open it, I reflected that redoubling my watch upon Patience and Lacey was easier said than done. But I had a few ideas. I had begun last night, by extracting a promise from Molly that she would bring up no food she had not prepared herself, or taken fresh from the common serving pots. She had snorted at this, for it had come after a most ardent goodbye. 'Now you sound just like Lacey,' she had rebuked me, and gently closed the door in my face. She opened it a moment later, to find me still staring at it. 'Go to bed,' she chided me. Blushing, she added, 'And dream of me. I hope I have plagued your dreams lately as much as you have mine.' Those words sent me fleeing down to my room, and every time I thought of it, I blushed again.

Now, as I entered Patience's room, I tried to put all such thoughts from my mind. I was here on business, even if Patience and Lacey must believe it a social call. Keep my mind on my tasks. I cast my eyes over the latch that had secured the door, and found it well to my liking. No one would be slipping that with a belt knife. As for the window, even if anyone had scaled the outer wall to it, they must burst through not only stoutly-barred wooden shutters, but a tapestry, and then rank upon rank of pots of plants, soldiered in rows before the closed window. It was a route no professional would willingly choose. Lacey resettled herself with a bit of mending while Patience greeted me. Lady Patience herself was seemingly idle, seated on the

hearth before the fire as if she were but a girl. She poked at the coals a bit. 'Did you know,' she asked me suddenly, 'that there is a substantial history of strong queens at Buckkeep? Not just those born as Farseers, either. Many a Farseer prince has married a woman whose name came to overshadow his in the telling of deeds.'

'Do you think Kettricken will become such a queen?' I asked politely. I had no idea where this conversation would lead.

'I do not know,' she said softly. She stirred the coals idly again. 'I know only that I would not have been one.' She sighed heavily, then lifted her eyes to say almost apologetically, 'I am having one of those mornings, Fitz, when all that fills my head is what might have been and what could have been. I should never have allowed him to abdicate. I'd wager he'd be alive today, if he had not.'

There seemed little reply I could make to such a statement. She sighed again, and drew on the hearth stones with the ash-coated poker. 'I am a woman of longings today, Fitz. While everyone else yesterday was stirred to amazement at what Kettricken did, it awakened in me the deepest discontent with myself. Had I been in her position, I would have hidden away in my chamber. Just as I do now. But your grandmother would not have. Now there was a Queen. Like Kettricken in some ways. Constance was a woman who spurred others to action. Other women especially. When she was queen, over half our guard was female. Did you know that? Ask Hod about her some time. I understand that Hod came with her when Constance came here to be Shrewd's queen.' Patience fell silent. For a few moments, she was so quiet I thought she had finished speaking. Then she added softly, 'She liked me, Queen Constance did.' She smiled almost shyly.

'She knew I did not care for crowds. So, sometimes, she would summon me, and only me, to come and attend her in her garden. And we would not even speak much, but only work quietly in the soil and the sunlight. Some of my pleasantest memories of Buckkeep are of those times.' She looked up at me suddenly. 'I was just a little girl then. And your father was just a boy, and we had not ever really met. My parents brought me to Buckkeep, the times they came to court, even though they knew I did not much care for all the folderol of court life. What a woman Queen Constance was, to notice a homely, quiet little girl, and give her of her time. But she was like that. Buckkeep was a different place then, a much merrier court. Times were safer, and all was more stable. But then Constance died, and her

infant daughter with her, of a birth fever. And Shrewd remarried a few years later, and ...' She paused and sighed again suddenly. Then her lips firmed. She patted the hearth beside her.

'Come and sit here. There are things we must speak of.'

I did as she bid me, likewise sitting on the hearthstones. I had never seen Patience so serious, nor so focused. All of this, I felt, was leading up to something. It was so different from her usual fey prattle that it almost frightened me. Once I was seated, she motioned me closer. I scooted forward until I was nearly in her lap. She leaned forward and whispered, 'Some things are best not spoken of. But there comes a time when they must be raised. FitzChivalry, my dear, do not think me mean-spirited. But I must warn you that your Uncle Regal is not as well disposed toward you as you might believe.'

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

Patience was instantly indignant. 'You must attend me!' she whispered more urgently. 'Oh, I know he is gay and charming and witty. I know what a flatterer he can be, and I have marked well how all the young women of the court flutter their fans at him, and how all the young men mimic his clothes and mannerisms. But underneath those fine feathers there is much ambition. And I am afraid there is suspicion there, and jealousy, also. I have never told you this. But he was totally opposed to my undertaking your schooling, as well as to your learning to Skill. Sometimes I think it is as well that you failed at that, for had you succeeded, his jealousy would have known no bounds.' She paused, and finding that I was listening with a sober face, she went on, 'These are unsettled times, Fitz. Not just because of the Red Ships that harry our shores. It is a time when any b ... born as you were should be careful. There are those who smile fairly at you, but may be your enemy. When your father was alive, we relied that his influence would be enough to shelter you. But after he was ... he died, I realized that as you grew, you would be more and more at risk, the closer you came to manhood. So, when I decently could, I forced myself to come back to court, to see if there truly was need. I found there was, and I found you worthy of my help. So I vowed to do all I could to educate and protect you.' She allowed herself a brief smile of satisfaction.

'I would say I had done fairly well by you so far. But,' and she leaned closer, 'comes a time when even I will not be able to protect you. You must begin to take care of yourself. You must recall your lessons from Hod, and

review them with her often. You must be cautious of what you eat and drink, and be wary of visiting isolated places alone. I hate to put these fears into you, FitzChivalry. But you are almost a man now, and must begin to think of such things.'

Laughable. Almost a farce. So I could have seen it, to have this sheltered, reclusive woman speaking to me so earnestly of the realities of the world I had survived in since I was six. Instead, I found tears stinging the corners of my eyes. I had always been mystified as to why Patience had come back to Buckkeep, to live a hermit's life in the midst of a society she obviously did not care for. Now I knew. She had come for me, for my sake. To protect me.

Burrich had sheltered me. So had Chade, and even Verity in his way. And of course Shrewd had claimed me as his own, very early. But all of them, in one way and another, had stood to gain by my survival. Even Burrich would have seen it as a great loss of pride if someone had managed to murder me while I was under his protection. Only this woman, who by all rights should have abhorred me, had come to shelter me for my sake alone. She was so often foolish and meddlesome and sometimes most annoying. But as our eyes met, I knew she had breached the final wall I had kept between us. I greatly doubted that her presence had done anything to deter bad will toward me; if anything, her interest in me must have been a constant reminder to Regal of who had fathered me. But it was not the deed, but the intention that moved me. She had given up her quiet life, her orchards and gardens and woods, to come here, to a damp castle of stone on the sea-cliffs, to a court full of folk she cared nothing about, to watch over her husband's bastard.

'Thank you,' I said quietly. And meant it with all my heart.

'Well,' she turned aside from my look quickly. 'Well. You are welcome, you know.'

'I know. But the truth was, I came here this morning thinking that perhaps someone should warn you and Lacey to be careful of yourselves. Times are unstable here, and you might be seen as an ... obstacle.'

Now Patience laughed aloud. 'I! I? Funny, dowdy, foolish old Patience? Patience, who cannot keep an idea fixed in her head for more than ten minutes? Patience, all but made mad by her husband's death? My boy, I know how they talk of me. No one perceives of me as a threat to anyone. Why, I am but another fool here at the court, a thing to be made sport of. I

am quite safe, I assure you. But, even if I were not, I have the habits of a lifetime to protect me. And Lacey.'

'Lacey?' I could not keep incredulity from my voice nor a grin from my face. I turned to exchange a wink with Lacey. Lacey glared at me as if affronted by my smile. Before I could even unfold from the hearth, she sprang up from her rocking chair. A long needle, stripped of its eternal yarn, prodded my jugular vein, while the other probed a certain space between my ribs. I very nearly wet myself. I looked up at a woman I suddenly knew not at all, and dared not make a word.

'Stop teasing the child,' Patience rebuked her gently. 'Yes, Fitz, Lacey. The most apt pupil that Hod ever had, even if she did come to Hod as a grown woman.' As Patience spoke, Lacey took her weapons away from my body. She reseated herself, and deftly re-threaded her needles into her work. I swear she didn't even drop a stitch. When she was finished, she looked up at me. She winked. And went back to her knitting. I remembered to start breathing again.

A very chastened assassin left their apartments sometime later. As I made my way down the hall, I reflected that Chade had warned me I was underestimating Lacey. I wondered wryly if this was his idea of humour, or of teaching me greater respect for seemingly mild folk.

Thoughts of Molly pushed their way into my mind. I resolutely refused to give into them, but could not resist lowering my face to catch that faint scent of her on the shoulder of my shirt. I took the foolish smile from my face and set off to locate Kettricken. I had duties.

I'm hungry.

The thought intruded without warning. Shame flooded me. I had taken Cub nothing yesterday. I had all but forgotten him in the sweep of the day's events.

A day's fast is nothing. Besides, I found a nest of mice beneath a corner of the cottage. Do you think I cannot care for myself at all? But something more substantial would be pleasing.

Soon, I promised him. There is a thing I must do first.

In Kettricken's sitting chamber, I found only two young pages, ostensibly tidying, but giggling as I came in. Neither of them knew anything. I next tried Mistress Hasty's weaving room, as it was a warm and friendly chamber where many of the keep women gathered. No Kettricken, but Lady

Modesty was there. She told me that her mistress had said she needed to speak with Prince Verity this morning. Perhaps she was with him.

But Verity was not in his chambers, nor his map-room. Charim was there, however, sorting through sheets of vellum and separating them by quality. Verity, he told me, had arisen very early and immediately set out for his boat-shed. Yes, Kettricken had been there this morning, but it had been after Verity left, and once Charim had told her he was gone, she too had departed. Where? He was not certain.

By this time I was starving, and I excused my trip to the kitchen on the grounds that gossip always grew thickest there. Perhaps someone there would know where our Queen-in-Waiting had gone. I was not worried, I told myself. Not yet.

The kitchens of Buckkeep were at their best on a cold and blustery day. Steam from bubbling stews mingled with the nourishing aroma of baking bread and roasting meat. Chilled stable-boys loitered there, chatting with the kitchen help and pilfering fresh baked rolls and the ends of cheeses, tasting stews and disappearing like mist if Burrich appeared in the door. I cut myself a slab of cold meal pudding from the morning's cooking, and reinforced it with honey and some bacon ends that Cook was rendering down for crackling. As I ate, I listened to the talk.

Oddly enough, few people spoke directly of the previous day's events. I grasped it would take a while for the keep to come to terms with all that had happened. But there was something there, a feeling almost of relief. I had seen that before, in a man who had had his maimed foot removed, or the family that finally finds their drowned child's body. To confront finally the worst there is, to look it squarely in the face and say, 'I know you. You have hurt me, almost to death, but still, I live. And I will go on living.' That was the feeling I got from the folk of the keep. All had finally acknowledged the severity of our injuries from the Red Ships. Now there was a sense that we might begin to heal, and to fight back.

I did not wish to make direct inquiries down here as to where the Queen might be. As luck would have it, one of the stable-boys was speaking of Softstep. Some of the blood I had seen on the horse's shoulder the previous day had been her own, and the boys were talking of how the horse had snapped at Burrich when he tried to work on her shoulder, and how it had taken two of them to hold her head. I wangled my way into the conversation.

‘Perhaps a horse of less temperament would be a better mount for the Queen? I suggested.

‘Ah, no. Our queen likes Softstep’s pride and spirit. She said so herself, to me, when she was down in the stables this morning. She came herself, to see the horse, and to ask when she might be ridden again. She spoke directly to me, she did. So I told her, no horse wanted to be ridden on a day such as this, let alone with a gashed shoulder. And Queen Kettricken nodded, and we stood talking there, and she asked how I had lost my tooth.’

‘And you told her a horse had thrown his head back when you were exercising him! Because you didn’t want Burrich to know we’d been wrestling up in the hayloft and you’d fallen into the grey colt’s stall!’

‘Shut up! You’re the one who pushed me, so it was your fault as much as mine!’

And the two were off, pushing and scuffling with each other, until a shout from Cook sent them tumbling from the kitchen. But I had as much information as I needed. I headed out for the stables.

I found it a colder and nastier day outside than I had expected. Even within the stables, the wind found every crack and came shrieking through the doors each time one was opened. The horses’ breath steamed in the air, and stablemates leaned companionably close for the warmth they could share. I found Hands, and asked where Burrich was.

‘Cutting wood,’ he said quietly. ‘For a funeral pyre. He’s been drinking since dawn, too.’

Almost this drove my quest from my mind. I had never known such a thing to be. Burrich drank, but in the evenings, when the day’s work was done. Hands read my face.

‘Vixen. His old bitch hound. She died in the night. Yet I have never heard of a pyre for a dog. He’s out behind the exercise pen now.’

I turned toward the pen.

‘Fitz!’ Hands warned me urgently.

‘It will be all right, Hands. I know what she meant to him. The first night he had care of me, he put me in a stall beside her, and told her to guard me. She had a pup beside her, Nosy ...’

Hands shook his head. ‘He said he wanted to see no one. To send him no questions today. No one to talk to him. He’s never given me an order like that.’

‘All right,’ I sighed.

Hands looked disapproving. ‘As old as she was, he should have expected it. She couldn’t even hunt with him any more. He should have replaced her a long time ago.’

I looked at Hands. For all his caring for the beasts, for all his gentleness and good instincts, he couldn’t really know. Once, I had been shocked to discover my Wit sense as a separate sense. Now to confront Hands’ total lack of it was to discover his blindness. I just shook my head, and dragged my mind back to my original errand. ‘Hands, have you seen the Queen today?’

‘Yes, but it was a while ago.’ His eyes scanned my face anxiously. ‘She came to me, and asked if Prince Verity had taken Truth out of the stables and down to town. I told her no, that the Prince had come to see him, but had left him in the stables today. I told her the streets would be all iced cobbles. Verity would not risk his favourite on a surface like that. He walks down to Buckkeep Town as often as not these days, though he comes through the stable almost every day. He told me it’s an excuse to be out in the air and the open.’

My heart sank. With a certainty that was like a vision, I knew that Kettricken had followed Verity into Buckkeep Town. On foot? With no one accompanying her? On this foul day? While Hands berated himself for not foreseeing the Queen’s intention, I took Sidekick, a well-named but sure-footed mule, from his stall. I dared not take the time to go back to my room for warmer clothes. So I borrowed Hands’ cloak to supplement mine, and dragged the reluctant animal out of the stables and into the wind and falling snow.

Are you coming now?

Not now, but soon. There is something I must see to.

May I go, too?

No. It isn’t safe. Now be quiet and stay out of my thoughts.

I stopped at the gate to question the guard most bluntly. Yes, a woman on foot had come this way this morning. Several of them, for there were some whose trades made this trip necessary, no matter the weather. The Queen? The men on watch exchanged glances. No one replied. I suggested perhaps there had been a woman, heavily-cloaked, and hooded well? White fur trimming the hood? A young guard nodded. Embroidery on the cloak, white and purple at the hem? They exchanged uncomfortable glances. There

had been a woman like that. They had not known who she was, but now that I suggested those colours, they should have known ...

In a coldly level voice, I berated them as dolts and morons. Unidentified folk passed unchallenged through our gates? They had looked on white fur and purple embroidery, and never even guessed it might be the Queen? And none had seen fit to accompany her? None chose to be her guard? Even after yesterday? A fine place was Buckkeep these days, when our queen had not even a foot soldier at her heels when she went out walking in a snowstorm down to Buckkeep Town. I kicked Sidekick and left them settling blame amongst themselves.

The going was miserable. The wind was in a fickle mood, changing directions as often as I found a way to block it with my cloak. The snow not only fell, the wind caught up the frozen crystals from the ground and swirled it up under my cloak at every opportunity. Sidekick was not happy, but he plodded along through the thickening snow. Beneath the snow, the uneven trail to town was glazed with treacherous ice. The mule became resigned to my stubbornness and trudged disconsolately along. I blinked the clinging flakes from my eyelashes and tried to urge him to greater speed. Images of the Queen, crumpled in the snow, the blowing flakes covering her over, kept trying to push into my mind. Nonsense! I told myself firmly. Nonsense.

I was on the outskirts of Buckkeep Town before I overtook her. I knew her from behind, even if she had not been wearing her purple and white. She strode through the drifting snow with a fine indifference, her mountain-bred flesh as immune to the cold as I was to salt-breeze and damp. 'Queen Kettricken! Lady! Please, wait for me!'

She turned and, as she caught sight of me, smiled and waited. I slid from Sidekick's back as I came abreast of her. I had not realized how worried I was until the relief flooded through me at seeing her unharmed. 'What are you doing out here, alone, in this storm?' I demanded of her, and belatedly added, 'My lady.'

She looked about her as if just noticing the falling snow and gusting wind, then turned back to me with a rueful grin. She was not the least bit chilled or uncomfortable: to the contrary, her cheeks were rosy with her walk, and the white fur around her face set off her yellow hair and blue eyes. Here, in this whiteness, she was not pale and colourless, but tawny and pink, blue eyes sparkling. She looked more vital than I had seen her in days. Yesterday she had been Death astride a horse, and Grief washing the bodies

of her slain. But today, here, in the snow, she was a merry girl, escaped from keep and station to go hiking through the snow. 'I go to find my husband.'

'Alone? Does he know you are coming, and like this, afoot?'

She looked startled. Then she tucked in her chin and bridled just like my mule. 'Is he not my husband? Do I need an appointment to see him? Why should not I go afoot and alone? Do I seem so incompetent to you that I might become lost on the road to Buckkeep Town?'

She set off walking again, and I was forced to keep pace with her. I dragged the mule along with me. Sidekick was not enthused. 'Queen Kettricken,' I began, but she cut me off.

'I grow so weary of this.' She halted abruptly and turned to face me. 'Yesterday, for the first time in many days, I felt as if I were alive and had a will of my own. I do not intend to let that slip away from me. If I wish to visit my husband at his work, I shall. Well do I know that not one of my ladies would care for this outing, in this weather and afoot, or otherwise. So I am alone. And my horse was injured yesterday, and the footing here is not kind to a beast anyway. So I do not ride. All of this makes sense. Why have you followed me and why do you question me?'

She had chosen bluntness as the weapon, so I took it up as well. But I took a breath and tuned my voice to courtesy before I began. 'My lady queen, I followed to be sure you had not come to any harm. Here, with only a mule's ears to hear us, I will speak plainly. Have you so swiftly forgotten who tried to topple Verity from the throne in your own Mountain Kingdom? Would he hesitate to plot here as well? I think not. Do you believe it an accident you were lost and astray in the woods two nights ago? I do not. And do you think that your actions yesterday were pleasing to him? Quite the contrary. What you do for the sake of your people, he sees as your ploy to take power to yourself. So he sulks and mutters and decides you are a greater threat than before. You must know all this. So why do you set yourself out as a target, here where an arrow or a knife could find you with such ease and no witnesses?'

'I am not so easy a target as that,' she defied me. 'I would take an excellent archer indeed to make an arrow fly true in these shifting winds. As for a knife, well, I've a knife, too. To strike me, one must come where I can strike back.' She turned and strode off again.

I followed relentlessly. 'And where would that lead? To your killing a man. And all the keep in an uproar, and Verity chastising his guard, that you

could be so endangered? And what if the killer were better with a knife than you? What consequence for the Six Duchies if I were now pulling your body out of a drift? I swallowed and added, 'My queen.'

Her pace slowed, but her chin was still up as she asked softly. 'What consequence for me if I sit day after day in the keep, growing soft and blind as a grub? FitzChivalry, I am not a game piece, to sit my space on the board until some player sets me in motion. I am ... there's a wolf watching us!'

'Where?'

She pointed, but he had vanished like a swirl of snow, leaving only a ghostly laughter in my mind. A moment later a trick of the wind brought his scent to Sidestep. The mule snorted and tugged at his lead rope. 'I did not know we had wolves so near!' Kettricken marvelled.

'Just a town dog, my lady. Probably some mangy, homeless beast out to sniff and paw through the village midden-heap. He is nothing to fear.'

You think not? I'm hungry enough to eat that mule.

Go back and wait. I shall come soon.

The midden-heap is nowhere near here. Besides, it's full of seagulls and stinks of their droppings. And other things. The mule would be fresh and sweet.

Go back, I tell you. I'll bring you meat later.

'FitzChivalry?' This from Kettricken, warily.

I snapped my eyes back to her face. 'I beg pardon, my lady. My mind wandered.'

'Then that anger in your face is not for me?'

'No. Another has ... crossed my will this day. For you, I have concern, not anger. Will not you mount Sidekick and let me take you back to the keep?'

'I wish to see Verity.'

'My queen, it will not please him, to see you come so.'

She sighed and grew a bit smaller inside her cloak. She looked aside from me as she asked more quietly, 'Have you never wished to pass your time in someone's presence, Fitz, whether they welcomed you or not? Cannot you understand my loneliness ...'

I do.

'To be his Queen-in-Waiting, to be Sacrifice for Buckkeep, this I know I must do well. But there is another part of me ... I am woman to his man and wife to his husbanding. To that I am sworn as well, and am more willing

than dutiful to it. But he comes seldom to me, and when he does, he speaks little and leaves soon.' She turned back to me. Tears sparkled suddenly on her eyelashes. She dashed them away and a note of anger crept into her voice. 'You spoke once of my duty, of doing what only a queen can do for Buckkeep. Well, I shall not get with child lying alone in my bed night after night!'

'My queen, my lady, please,' I begged her. Heat rose in my face.

She was merciless. 'Last night, I did not wait. I went to his door. But the guard claimed he was not there. That he had gone to his tower.' She looked aside from me. 'Even that work is preferable to how he must labour in my bed.' Not even that bitterness could cover the hurt under her words.

I reeled with the things I did not want to know. The cold of Kettricken alone in her bed. Verity, drawn to Skill at night. I did not know which was worse. My voice shook as I said, 'You must not tell me these things, my queen. To speak of this to me is not right ...'

'Then let me go and speak to him. He is the one who needs to hear this, I know. And I am going to speak it! If he will not come to me for his heart's sake, then he must come for his duty.'

This makes sense. She is the one who must bear if the pack is to increase.

Stay out of this. Go home.

Home! A derisive bark of laughter in my mind. Home is a pack not a cold, empty place. Listen to the female. She speaks well. We should all go, to be with him who leads. You fear foolishly for this bitch. She hunts well, with a keen tooth, and her kills are clean. I watched her yesterday. She is worthy of he who leads.

We are not pack. Be silent.

I am. At the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of movement. I turned quickly, but there was nothing there. I turned back to find Kettricken standing silent before me still. But I sensed the spark of anger that had spirited her was now damped in pain. It bled her resolve from her.

I spoke quietly through the wind. 'Please, lady, let me take you back to Buckkeep.'

She did not reply, but pulled her hood up around her face and tightened it to hide most of her face. Then she walked to the mule and mounted and suffered me to lead the beast back to the keep. It seemed a longer, colder walk in her subdued silence. I was not proud of the change I had wrought in

her. To take my mind from it, I quested out about me carefully. It did not take me long to find Cub. He stalked and shadowed us, drifting like smoke through the tree cover, using the windblown drifts and falling snow to hide himself. I could never once actually swear that I saw him. I caught motion from the corner of my eye, a tiny bit of his scent on the wind. His instincts served him well.

Think you I am ready to hunt?

Not until you are ready to obey. I made my reply severe.

What then shall I do when I hunt alone, packless one? He was stung, and angry.

We were drawing near to the outer wall of Buckkeep. I wondered how he had got outside the keep without passing through a gate.

Shall I show you? A peace offering.

Perhaps later. When I come with meat. I felt his assent. He was no longer pacing us, but had raced off ahead, and would be at the cottage when I got there. The guards at the gate abashedly challenged me. I identified myself formally, and the sergeant had the wit not to insist that I identify the lady with me. In the courtyard I halted Sidekick that she might dismount and offered her my hand. As she climbed down, I all but felt eyes on me. I turned, and saw Molly. She carried two buckets of water fresh drawn from the well. She stood still, looking at me, poised like a deer before flight. Her eyes were deep, her face very still. When she turned aside, there was a stiffness to her carriage. She did not glance at us again as she crossed the courtyard and went toward the kitchen entrance. I felt a cold foreboding inside me. Then Kettricken let go of my hand and gathered her cloak more closely about herself. She did not look at me either, but only said softly, 'Thank you, FitzChivalry.' She walked slowly toward the door.

I returned Sidekick to the stable and saw to him. Hands came by and raised an eyebrow at me. I nodded, and he went on about his work. Sometimes, I think that was what I liked best about Hands, his ability to leave alone that which was not his concern.

I made bold my heart for that which I did next. I went out behind the exercise pens. There was a thin trail of smoke rising and a nasty scent of scorching meat and hair. I walked toward it. Burrich stood next to the fire, watching it burn. The wind and snow kept trying to put it out, but Burrich was determined it would burn well. He glanced at me as I came up but would not look at me or speak to me. His eyes were black hollows full of

dumb pain. It would turn to anger if I dared speak to him. But I had not come for him. I took my knife from my belt and cut from my head a finger's-length lock of hair. I added it to the pyre, and watched as it burned. Vixen. A most excellent bitch. A memory came to me and I spoke it aloud. 'She was there the first time Regal ever looked at me. She lay beside me and snarled up at him.'

After a moment, Burrich nodded to my words. He, too, had been there. I turned and slowly walked away.

My next stop was the kitchen, to filch a number of meat bones left over from yesterday's wake. They were not fresh meat, but they'd have to do. Cub was right. He'd have to be put out on his own soon, to hunt for himself. Seeing Burrich's pain had renewed my resolve. Vixen had lived a long life, for a hound, but still too short for Burrich's heart. To bond to any animal was to promise oneself that future pain. My heart had been broken sufficient times already.

I was still pondering the best way to do this as I approached the cottage. I lifted my head suddenly, getting only the briefest precognition, and then his full weight hit me. He had come, swift as an arrow, speeding over the snow, to fling his weight against the backs of my knees, shouldering me down as he passed. The force of his momentum threw me onto my face in the snow. I lifted my head and got my arms under me as he wheeled tightly and raced up to me again. I flung up an arm but he ploughed over me again, sharp claws digging into my flesh for purchase as he ran. *Got you, got you, got you!* Glorious exuberance.

Halfway to my feet, and he hit me again, full in my chest. I flung up a forearm to shield my throat and face and he seized it in his jaws. He growled deeply as he mock-worried it. I lost my balance under his attack and went down in the snow. This time I kept a grip on him, hugging him to me, and we rolled over and over and over. He nipped me in a dozen places, some painful, and all the time, *Fun, fun, fun, got you, got you, and got you again! Here, you're dead, here, I broke your forepaw, there your blood runs out! Got you, got you, got you!*

Enough! Enough! and finally, 'Enough!' I roared, and he let go of me and leaped away. He fled over the snow, bounding ridiculously, to fling himself in a circle and come racing back at me. I flung my arms up to shelter my face, but he only seized my bag of bones and raced off with it, daring me to follow. I could not let him win so easily. So I leaped after him, tackling

him, seizing the bag of bones, and it degenerated into a tugging match, at which he cheated by letting go suddenly, nipping me on the forearm hard enough to numb my hand, and then grabbing the bag again. I gave chase again.

Got you. A tug on the tail. *Got you!* I kned his shoulder, pushing him off balance. *Got the bones!* And for an instant I had them and was running. He hit me full square in the back, all four paws, and drove me face down in the snow, seized the trove and was off again.

I do not know how long we played. We had flung ourselves finally down in the snow to rest and lay panting together in thoughtless simplicity. The sacking of the bag was torn in places, the bones peeking through, and Cub seized one, to shake and drag it from the clinging folds. He set upon it, scissoring the meat and then pinning the bone down with his paws as his jaws cracked the knuckly cartilage on the end. I reached for the sack and tugged at a bone, a good meaty one, a thick marrowbone and drew it forth.

And abruptly was a man again. Like awaking from a dream, like the popping of a soap bubble, and Cub's ears twitched and he turned to me as if I had spoken. But I had not. I had only separated myself from his. Abruptly I was cold, snow had got inside the tops of my boots and at my waist and collar. There were standing welts on my forearms and hands where his teeth had dragged over my flesh. My cloak was torn in two places. And I felt as groggy as if I were just coming out of a drugged sleep.

What's wrong? Real concern. Why did you go away?

I can't do this. I can't be like this, with you. This is wrong.

Puzzlement. Wrong? If you can do it, how can it be wrong?

I am a man, not a wolf.

Sometimes, he agreed. But you don't have to be all the time.

Yes, I must. I don't want to be bonded with you like this. We cannot have this closeness. I have to set you free, to live the life you were meant to live. I must live the life I was meant for.

A derisive snort, a sneer of fangs. *This is it, brother. We are as we are. How can you claim to know what life I was meant to lead, let alone threaten to force me into it? You cannot even accept what you are meant to be. You deny it even as you are it. All your quibbling is nonsense. As well forbid your nose to snuff, or your ears to hear. We are as we do. Brother.*

I did not drop my guard. I did not give him leave. But he swept through my mind like a wind sweeps through an unshuttered window and fills a

room. *The night and the snow. Meat in our jaws. Listen, snuff, the world is alive tonight and so are we! We can hunt until dawn, we are alive and the night and the forest are ours! Our eyes are keen, our jaws are strong, and we can run down a buck and feast before morning. Come! Come back to what you were born to be!*

A moment later, I came to myself. I was on my feet, standing, and I was trembling from head to foot. I lifted my hands and looked at them, and suddenly my own flesh seemed foreign and confining, as unnatural as the clothes I wore. I could go. I could go, now, tonight, and travel far to find our own kind, and no one would ever be able to follow us, let alone find us. He offered me a moonlit world of blacks and whites, of food and rest, so simple, so complete. Our eyes were locked, and his were lambent green and beckoning to me. *Come. Come with me. What have the likes of us to do with men and all their petty plotting? There is not one mouthful of meat to be had in all their wrangling, no clean joys in their scheming, and never a simple pleasure taken unthinkingly. Why do you choose it? Come, come away!*

I blinked. Snowflakes clung to my eyelashes, and I was standing in the dark, chilled and shaking. A short distance from me, a wolf stood up and shook himself all over. Tail out flat, ears up, he came to me, and rubbed his head along my leg and with his nose gave my cold hand a flip. I went down on one knee and hugged him, felt the warmth of his ruff against my hands, the solidity of his muscle and bone. He smelled good, clean and wild. 'We are what we are, brother. Eat well,' I told him. I rubbed his ears briefly, and then stood. As he picked up the sack of bones to drag them into the den he'd scuffed out under the cottage, I turned away. The lights of Buckkeep were almost blinding, but I went toward them anyway. I could not have said why just then. But I did it.

TEN

Fool's Errand

In times of peace, the teaching of the Skill was restricted to those of royal blood, to keep the magic more exclusive and reduce the chance of it being turned against the King. Thus, when Galen became apprentice to Skillmaster Solicy, his duties consisted of assisting in completing the training of Chivalry and Verity. No others were receiving instruction at that time. Regal, a delicate child, was judged by his mother to be too sickly to withstand the rigours of the Skill training. Thus, after Solicy's untimely death, Galen came to the title of Skillmaster, but had few duties. Some, at least, felt that the time he had served as apprentice to Solicy was insufficient to be the full training of a Skillmaster. Others have averred that he never possessed the Skill strength necessary to be a true Skillmaster. In any case, during those years he had no opportunity to prove himself, and disprove his critics. There were no young princes or princesses to train during the years that Galen was Skillmaster.

It was only with the Red Ship raids that it was decided that the circle of those trained in the Skill must be expanded. A proper coterie had not existed for years. Tradition tells us that in previous troubles with the Outislanders, it was not unusual for three, or even four coterie to exist. These usually consisted of six to eight members, mutually chosen, well suited to be bonded among themselves, and with at least one member possessing a strong affinity with the reigning monarch. This key member reported directly to the monarch all that his coterie members relayed to him, if they were a messaging, or information-gathering coterie. Other coterie existed to pool strength and extend to the monarch their Skilling resources as he might need them. The key members in these coterie were often referred to as a King's or Queen's Man or Woman. Very rarely, such a one existed independent of any coterie or training, but simply as one who had such an affinity for the monarch that strength could be tapped, usually by a physical touch. From

this key member, the monarch could draw endurance as needed to sustain a Skilling effort. By custom, a coterie was named after its key member. Thus we have legendary examples such as Crossfire's Coterie.

Galen chose to ignore all tradition in the creation of his first and only coterie. Galen's Coterie came to be named after the Skillmaster who fashioned it, and retained that name even after his death. Rather than creating a pool of Skilled ones and letting a coterie emerge from it, Galen himself selected those who would be members of it. The coterie lacked the internal bonding of the legendary groups, and their truest affinity was to the Skillmaster rather than to the King. Thus, the key member, initially August, reported to Galen fully as often as he reported to King Shrewd or King-in-Waiting Verity. With the death of Galen and the blasting of August's Skill sense, Serene rose to be key member of Galen's Coterie. The other surviving members of the group were Justin, Will, Carrod and Burl.

By night I ran as a wolf.

The first time I thought it a singularly vivid dream. The wide stretch of white snow with the inky tree shadows spilled on it, the elusive scents on the cold wind, the ridiculous fun of bounding and digging after shrews that ventured out of their winter burrows. I awoke clear-minded and good-tempered.

But the next night I dreamed again as vividly. I awoke knowing that when I blocked from Verity and hence myself my dreams of Molly, I left myself wide to the wolf's night thoughts. Here was a whole realm where neither Verity nor any Skilled one could follow me. It was a world bereft of court intrigues or plotting, of worries and plans. My wolf lived in the present. I found his mind clean of the cluttering detail of memories. From day to day, he carried only that necessary to his survival. He did not remember how many shrews he had killed two nights ago, but only larger things, such as which game yielded the most rabbits to chase or where the spring ran swift enough that it never iced over.

This, then, was when and how I first showed him how to hunt. We did not do so well at first. I still arose very early each morning, to take him food as needed. I told myself that it was but a small corner of my life that I kept for myself. It was as the wolf had said, not a thing I did, but something I was. Besides, I promised myself, I would not let this joining become a full bond. Soon, very soon, he would be able to hunt for himself, and I would send him away to be free. Sometimes I told myself that I permitted him into

my dreams only that I might teach him to hunt, the sooner to set him free. I refused to consider what Burrich would think of such a thing.

I returned from one of my early morning expeditions to find two soldiers sparring with one another in the kitchen yard. They had staves and were good-naturedly insulting one another as they huffed and shifted and traded whacks in the cold clear air. The man I did not know at all, and for a moment I thought both were strangers. Then the woman of the pair caught sight of me. 'Ho! FitzChivalry. A word with you!' she called, but without retiring her stave.

I stared at her, trying to place her. Her opponent missed a parry and she clipped him sharply with her stave. As he hopped, she danced back and laughed aloud, an unmistakable high-pitched whinny. 'Whistle?' I asked incredulously.

The woman I had just addressed flashed her famous gap-toothed smile, caught her partner's stave a ringing blow and danced back again. 'Yes?' she asked breathlessly. Her sparring partner, seeing her occupied, courteously lowered his stave. Whistle immediately darted hers at him. With so much skill he almost looked lazy, his stave leaped up to counter hers. Again she laughed and held up her hand to ask a truce.

'Yes,' she repeated, this time turning to me. 'I've come ... that is, I've been chosen to come and ask a favour of you.'

I gestured at the clothes she wore. 'I don't understand. You've left Verity's guard?'

She gave a tiny shrug, but I could see the question delighted her. 'But not to go far. Queen's Guard. Vixen badge. See?' She tugged the front of the short white jacket she wore to hold the fabric taut. Good sensible woollen homespun, I saw, and saw too the embroidered snarling white fox on a purple background. The purple matched the purple of her heavy woollen trousers. The loose cuff had been tucked into knee-boots. Her partner's garb matched hers. Queen's Guard. In light of Kettricken's adventure, the uniform made sense.

'Verity decided she needed a guard of her own?' I asked delightedly.

The smile faded a bit from Whistle's face. 'Not exactly,' she hedged, and then straightened as if reporting to me. 'We decided she needed a Queen's Guard. Me and some of the others that rode with her the other day. We got to talking about ... everything, later. About how she handled herself out there. And back here. And how she came here, all alone. We talked about

it then, that someone should get permission to form up a guard for her. But none of us really knew how to approach it. We knew it was needed, but no one else seemed to be paying much attention ... but then last week, at the gate, I heard you got pretty hot about how she'd gone out, on foot and alone, and no one at her back. Well you did! I was in the other room, and I heard!'

I bit back my protest, nodded curtly, and Whistle went on. 'So. Well, we just did. Those of us who felt we wanted to wear the purple and white just said so. It was a pretty even split. It was time to take in some new blood anyway; most of Verity's guard was getting a bit long in the tooth. And soft, from too much time in the keep. So we reformed, giving rank to some who should have made it long ago, if there'd been any openings to fill, and taking in some recruits to fill in where needed. It all worked out perfectly. These newcomers will give us something to hone our skills on while we teach them. The Queen will have her own guard, when she wants one. Or needs one.'

'I see.' I was beginning to get an uneasy feeling. 'And what was the favour you wanted of me?'

'Explain it to Verity. Tell the Queen she has a guard.' She said the words simply and quietly.

'This walks close to disloyalty,' I said just as simply. 'Soldiers of Verity's own guard, setting aside his colours to take on his queen's ...'

'Some might see it that way. Some might speak it that way.' Her eyes met mine squarely, and the smile was gone from her face. 'But you know it is not. It's a needed thing. Your ... Chivalry would have seen it, would have had a guard for her before she even arrived here. But King-in-Waiting Verity ... well, this is no disloyalty to him. We've served him well, because we love him. Still do. This is those who've always watched his back, falling back and reforming to watch his back even better. That's all. He's got a good queen, is what we think. We don't want to see him lose her. That was all. We don't think any the less of our King-in-Waiting. You know that.'

I did. But still. I looked away from her plea, shook my head and tried to think. Why me? a part of me demanded angrily. Then I knew, that in the moment I'd lost my temper and berated the guard for not protecting their queen, I'd volunteered for this. Burrich had warned me about not remembering my place. 'I will speak to King-in-Waiting Verity. And to the Queen, if he approves this.'

Whistle flashed her smile again. 'We knew you'd do it for us. Thanks, Fitz.'

As quickly she was spinning away from me, stave at the ready as she danced threateningly toward her partner, who gave ground grudgingly. With a sigh, I turned away from the courtyard. I had thought Molly would be fetching water at this time. I'd hoped for a glimpse of her. But she was not, and I left feeling disappointed. I knew I should not play at such games, but some days I could not resist the temptation. I left the courtyard.

The last few days had become a special sort of self-torture for me. I refused to allow myself to see Molly again, but could not resist shadowing her. So I was in the kitchen but a moment after she had left, fancying I could still catch the trace of her perfume in the air. Or I stationed myself in the Great Hall of an evening, and tried to be where I could watch her without being noticed. No matter what amusement was offered, minstrel or poet or puppeteer, or just folk talking and working on their handicrafts, my eyes would be drawn always to wherever Molly might be. She looked so sober and demure in her dark blue skirts and blouse, and she had never a glance for me. Always she spoke with the other keep women, or on the rare evenings when Patience chose to descend, she sat beside her and attended to her with a focus of attention that denied I even existed. Sometimes I thought my brief encounter with her had been a dream. But at night I could go back to my room, and take out the shirt I had hidden in the bottom of my clothes chest, and if I held it close to my face, I fancied I could still smell the faint trace of her perfume upon it. And so I endured.

A number of days had passed since we had burned the Forged ones on their funeral pyre. In addition to the formation of the Queen's Guard, other changes were afoot within and without the keep. Two other master boat-builders, unsummoned, had come to volunteer their skills for the building of the ships. Verity had been delighted. But even more so had Queen Kettricken been moved, for it was to her that they presented themselves, saying that they desired to be of service. Their apprentices came with them, to swell the ranks of those working in the shipyards. Now the lamps burned both before dawn and after the sun's setting, and work proceeded at a breakneck pace. So Verity was away all the more, and Kettricken, when I called on her, was more subdued than ever. I tempted her with books or outings to no avail. She spent most of her time sitting near idle at her loom, growing more pale and listless with every passing day. Her dark mood infected those ladies who

attended her, so that to visit her room was as cheery as keeping a death watch.

I had not expected to find Verity in his study, and was not disappointed. He was down at the boat-sheds, as always. I left word with Charim to ask that I be summoned whenever Verity might have the time to see me. Then, with a resolve to keep myself busy and to do as Chade suggested, I returned to my room. I took both dice and tally sticks with me, and headed for the Queen's chambers.

I had resolved to teach her some of the games of chance that the lords and ladies were fond of, in the hopes that she might expand her circle of entertainments. I also hoped, with less expectation, that such games might draw her to socialize more widely and to depend less on my companionship. Her bleak mood was beginning to burden me with its oppressiveness, so that I often heartily wished to be away from her.

'Teach her to cheat first. Only, just tell her that's how the game is played. Tell her the rules permit deception. A bit of sleight of hand, easily taught, and she could clean Regal's pockets for him a time or two before he dared suspect her. And then what could he do? Accuse Buckkeep's lady of cheating at dice?'

The Fool, of course. At my elbow, companionably pacing alongside me, his rat sceptre jouncing lightly on his shoulder. I did not startle physically, but he knew that, once more, he had taken me by surprise. His amusement shone in his eyes.

'I think our Queen-in-Waiting might take it amiss if I so misinformed her. Why do you not come with me instead, to brighten her spirits a bit? I shall set aside the dice, and you can juggle for her,' I suggested.

'Juggle for her? Why, Fitz, that is all I do, all day long, and you see it as but my foolery. You see my work and deem it play, while I see you work so earnestly at playing games you have not yourself devised. Take a Fool's advice on this. Teach the lady not dice, but riddles, and you will both be the wiser.'

'Riddles? That's a Bingtown game, is it not?'

'Twere one played well at Buckkeep these days. Answer me this one, if you can. How does one call a thing when one does not know how to call it?'

'I have never been any good at this game, Fool.'

‘Nor any other of your blood-line, from what I have heard. So answer this. What has wings in Shrewd’s scroll, a tongue of flame in Verity’s book, silver eyes in the Relltown Vellums, and gold-scaled skin in your room?’

‘That’s a riddle?’

He looked at me pityingly. ‘No. A riddle is what I just asked you. That’s an Elderling. And the first riddle was, how do you summon one?’

My stride slowed. I looked at him more directly, but his eyes were always difficult to meet. ‘A riddle, or a serious question?’

‘Is that a riddle? Or a serious question?’

‘Yes.’ The Fool was grave.

I stopped in mid-stride, completely bemuddled. I glared at him. In answer, he went nose to nose with his rat sceptre. They simpered at one another. ‘You see, Ratsy, he knows no more than his uncle or his grandfather. None of them knows how to summon an Elderling.’

‘By the Skill,’ I said impetuously.

The Fool looked at me strangely. ‘You know this?’

‘I suspect it is so.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Now that I consider it, I do not think it likely. King Wisdom made a long journey to find the Elderlings. If he could simply have Skilled to them, why didn’t he?’

‘Indeed. But sometimes there is truth in impetuosity. So riddle me this, boy. A king is alive. Likewise a prince. And both are Skilled. But where are those who trained alongside the King, or those who trained before him? How come we to this, this paucity of Skilled ones at a time when they are so grievously needed?’

‘Few are trained in times of peace. Galen didn’t see fit to train any, up until his last year. And the coterie he created ...’ I paused suddenly, and though the corridor was empty, I suddenly did not want to speak any more about it. I had always kept whatever Verity told me about the Skill in confidence.

The Fool pranced in a sudden circle about me. ‘If the shoe does not fit, one cannot wear it, no matter who made it for you,’ he declared.

I nodded grudgingly. ‘Exactly.’

‘And he who made it is gone. Sad. So sad. Sadder than hot meat on the table and red wine in your glass. But he who is gone was made by someone in turn.’

‘Solicity. But she is also gone.’

‘Ah. But Shrewd is not. Nor Verity. It seems to me, that if there are two she created still breathing, there ought to be others. Where are they?’

I shrugged. ‘Gone. Old. Dead. I don’t know.’ I forced my impatience down, tried to consider his question. ‘King Shrewd’s sister, Merry. August’s mother. She would have been trained, perhaps, but she is long dead. Shrewd’s father, King Bounty was the last to have a coterie, I believe. But very few folk of that generation are still alive.’ I halted my tongue. Verity had once told me that Solicity had trained as many in the Skill as she could find the talent in. Surely there must be some of them left alive; they would be no more than a decade or so older than Verity ...

‘Dead, too many of them, if you ask me. I do know.’ The Fool interjected an answer to my unspoken question. I looked at him blankly. He stuck his tongue out at me, waltzed away from me a bit. He considered his sceptre, chuckled the rat lovingly under the chin. ‘You see, Ratsy, it is as I told you. None of them know. None of them are smart enough to ask.’

‘Fool, cannot you ever speak plain?’ I cried out in frustration.

He halted as suddenly as if struck. In mid-pirouette, he lowered his heels to the floor and stood like a statue. ‘Would it help at all?’ he asked soberly. ‘Would you listen to me if I came to you and did not speak in riddles? Would that make you pause and think and hang upon every word, and ponder those words later, in your chamber? Very well then. I shall try. Do you know the rhyme, Six Wisemen went to *Jhaampe-town*?’

I nodded, as confused as ever.

‘Recite it for me.’

‘Six Wisemen went to Jhaampe-town, climbed a hill and never came down, turned to stone and flew away...’ The old nursery rhyme eluded me suddenly. ‘I don’t recall it at all. It’s nonsense anyway, one of those rhyming things that sticks in your head but means nothing.’

‘That, of course, is why it is enscrolled with the knowledge verses,’ the Fool concluded.

‘I don’t know!’ I retorted. I suddenly felt irritated beyond endurance. ‘Fool, you are doing it again. All you speak is riddles, ever! You claim to speak plain, but your truth eludes me.’

‘Riddles, dear Fitzzy-fitz, are supposed to make folk think. To find new truth in old saws. But, be that as it may ... Your brain eludes me. How shall I

reach it? Perhaps if I came to you, by dark of night, and sang under your window:

Bastard princeling, Fitz my sweet,
You waste your hours to your own defeat.
You work to stop, you strive to refrain,
When all your effort should go to a gain.'

He had flung himself to one knee, and plucked nonexistent strings on his sceptre. He sang quite lustily, and even well. The tune belonged to a popular love ballad. He looked at me, sighed theatrically, wet his lips and continued mournfully,

'Why does a Farseer look never afar,
Why dwells he completely in things as they are?
Your coasts are besieged, your people beset.
I warn and I urge, but they all say, "not yet!"
Oh bastard princeling, gentle Fitz,
Will you delay until chopped to bits?'

A passing servant girl paused to stand bemused and listen. A page came to the door of one chamber and peeped out at us, grinning widely. A slow flush began to heat my cheeks, for the Fool's expression was both tender and ardent as he looked up at me. I tried to walk casually away from him, but he followed me on his knees, clutching at my sleeve. I was forced to stand, or engage in a ridiculous struggle to free myself. I stood, feeling foolish. He simpered a smile up at me. The page giggled, and down the hall I heard two voices conferring in amusement. I refused to lift my eyes to see who was so enjoying my discomfort. The Fool mouthed a kiss up at me. He let his voice sink to a confidential whisper as he sang on:

'Will fate seduce you to her will?
Not if you struggle with all your Skill.
Summon your allies, locate the trained,
Consummate all from which you've refrained.
There's a future not yet fashioned
Founded by your fiery passions.
If you use your Wits to win
You'll save the duchies for your kin.
Thus begs a Fool, on bended knee,
Let not a darkness come to be.
Let not our peoples go to dust

When Life in you has placed this trust.’
He paused, then sang loudly and jovially:
‘And if you choose to let this pass
Like so much farting from your ass,
Behold my reverence for thee,
Feast eyes on what men seldom see!’

He suddenly released my cuff, to tumble away from me in a somersault that somehow reached a finish with his presentation of his bare buttocks to me. They were shockingly pale, and I could conceal neither my amazement nor affront. The Fool vaulted to his feet, suitably clothed again, and Ratsy on his sceptre bowed most humbly to all who had paused to watch my humiliation. There was general laughter and a scattering of applause. His performance had left me speechless. I looked aside and tried to walk past him, but with a bound the Fool blocked my passage once again. The Fool abruptly assumed a stern stance and addressed all who still grinned.

‘Fie and shame upon you all, to be so merry! To giggle and point at a boy’s broken heart! Do not you know the Fitz has lost one most dear to him? Ah, he hides his grief beneath his blushes, but she has gone to her grave and left his passion unslaked. That most stubbornly chaste and virulently flatulent of maidens, dear Lady Thyme, has perished. Of her own stench, I doubt it not, though some say it came of eating spoiled meat. But spoiled meat, you say, has a most foul odour, to warn off any from consuming it. Such we can say of Lady Thyme also, and so perhaps she smelt it not, or deemed it but the perfume of her fingers. Mourn not, poor Fitz, another shall be found for you. To this I shall devote myself, this very day! I swear it, by Sir Ratsy’s skull. And now, I bid you hasten on your tasks, for in truth I have delayed mine much too long. Fare well, poor Fitz. Brave, sad heart! To put so bold a face on your desolation! Poor disconsolate youth! Ah, Fitz, poor poor Fitz ...’

And he wandered off down the hall from me, shaking his head woefully, and conferring with Ratsy as to which elderly dowager he should court on my behalf. I stared in disbelief after him. I felt betrayed, that he could make so public a spectacle of me. Sharp-tongued and flighty as the Fool could be, I had never expected to be the public butt of one of his jokes. I kept waiting for him to turn around, and say some last thing that would make me understand what had just happened. He did not. When he turned a corner, I perceived that my ordeal was finally at an end. I proceeded down

the hallway, fuming with embarrassment and dazed with puzzlement at the same time. The doggerel of his rhymes had stored his words in my head, and I knew that I would ponder his love song much in days to come, to try and worry out the meanings hidden there. But Lady Thyme? Surely he would not say such a thing, were it not 'true'. But why would Chade allow his public personage to die in such a way? What poor woman's body would be carried out as Lady Thyme, no doubt to be carted off to distant relatives for burial? Was this his method of beginning his journey, a way to leave the keep unseen? But again, why let her be dead? So that Regal might believe he had succeeded in his poisoning? To what end?

Thus bemused, I finally came to the doors of Kettricken's chamber. I stood in the hall a moment, to recover my aplomb and compose my face. Suddenly the door across the hall flung open and Regal strode into me. His momentum jostled me aside, and before I could recover myself, he grandly offered, 'It's all right, Fitz. I scarcely expect an apology from one so bereaved as yourself.' He stood in the hallway, straightening his jerkin as the young men following him emerged from his chamber, tittering in amusement. He smiled round at them, and then leaned close to me to ask, in a quietly venomous voice, 'Where will you suckle up now that the old whore Thyme is dead? Ah, well. I am sure you will find some other old woman to coddle you. Or are you come to wheedle up to a younger one, now?' He dared to smile at me, before he spun on his heel and strode off in a fine flutter of sleeves, trailed by his three sycophants.

The insult to the Queen poisoned me into rage. It came with a suddenness such as I had never experienced. I felt my chest and throat swell with it. A terrible strength rushed through me; I know my upper lip lifted in a snarl. From afar I sensed, *What? What is it? Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!* I took a step, the next would have been a spring, and I know my teeth would have sunk into the place where throat meets shoulder.

But, 'FitzChivalry,' said a voice, full of surprise.

Molly's voice! I turned to her, my emotions wrenching from rage to delight at seeing her. But as swiftly she was turning aside, saying, 'Beg pardon, my lord,' and brushing past me. Her eyes were down, her manner that of a servant.

'Molly?' I called, stepping after her. She paused. When she looked back at me, her face was empty of emotion, her voice neutral.

'Sir? Had you an errand for me?

‘An errand?’ Of course. I glanced about us, but the corridor was empty. I took a step toward her, pitched my voice low for her ears only. ‘No. I’ve just missed you so, Molly, I...’

‘This is not seemly, sir. I beg you to excuse me.’ She turned, proudly, calmly, and walked away from me.

‘What did I do?’ I demanded, in angry consternation. I did not really expect an answer. But she paused. Her blue-clothed back was straight, her head erect under her tatted hair-cloth. She did not turn back to me, but said quietly, to the corridor. ‘Nothing. You did nothing at all, my lord. Absolutely nothing.’

‘Molly!’ I protested, but she turned the corner and was gone. I stood staring after her. After a moment, I realized I was making a sound somewhere between a whine and a growl.

Let us go hunting instead.

Perhaps, I found myself agreeing. That would be the best thing. To go hunting, to kill, to eat, to sleep. And to do no more than that.

Why not now?

I don’t really know.

I composed myself and knocked at Kettricken’s door. It was opened by little Rosemary who dimpled a smile at me as she invited me in. Once within, Molly’s errand here was evident. Kettricken was holding a fat green candle under her nose. On the table were several others. ‘Bayberry,’ I observed.

Kettricken looked up with a smile. ‘FitzChivalry. Welcome. Come in and be seated. May I offer you food? Wine?’

I stood looking at her. A sea change. I felt her strength, knew she stood in the centre of herself. She was dressed in a soft grey tunic and leggings. Her hair was dressed in her customary way. Her jewellery was simple, a single necklace of green and blue stone beads. But this was not the woman I had brought back to the keep a few days ago. That woman had been distressed, angry, hurt and confused. This Kettricken welled serenity.

‘My queen,’ I began, hesitantly.

‘Kettricken,’ she corrected me calmly. She moved about the room, setting some of the candles on shelves. It was almost a challenge in that she did not say more.

I came further into her sitting room. She and Rosemary were the only occupants. Verity had once complained to me that her chambers had the

precision of a military encampment. It had not been an exaggeration. The simple furnishings were spotlessly clean. The heavy tapestries and rugs that furnished most of Buckkeep were missing here. Simple mats of straw were on the floor, and frames supported parchment screens painted with delicate sprays of flowers and trees. There was no clutter at all. In this room, all was finished and put away, or not yet begun. That is the only way I can describe the stillness I felt there.

I had come in a roil of conflicting emotions. Now I stood still and silent, my breathing steadying and my heart calming. One corner of the chamber had been turned into an alcove walled with the parchment screens. Here there was a rug of green wool on the floor, and low padded benches such as I had seen in the mountains. Kettricken placed the green bayberry candle behind one of the screens. She kindled it with a flame from the hearth. The dancing candlelight behind the screen gave the life and warmth of a sunrise to the painted scene. Kettricken walked around to sit on one of the low benches within the alcove. She indicated the bench opposite hers. 'Will you join me?'

I did. The gently-lit screen, the illusion of a small private room and the sweet scent of bayberry surrounded me. The low bench was oddly comfortable. It took me a moment to recall the purpose of my visit. 'My queen, I thought you might like to learn some of the games of chance we play at Buckkeep. So you could join in when the other folk are amusing themselves.'

'Perhaps another time,' she said kindly. 'If you and I wish to amuse ourselves, and if it would please you to teach me the game. But for those reasons only. I have found the old adages to be true. One can only walk so far from one's true self before the bond either snaps, or pulls one back. I am fortunate. I have been pulled back. I walk once more in trueness to myself, FitzChivalry. That is what you sense today.'

'I don't understand.'

She smiled. 'You don't need to.'

She fell silent again. Little Rosemary had gone to sit by the hearth. She took up her slate and chalk as if to amuse herself. Even that child's normal merriment seemed placid today. I turned back to Kettricken and waited. But she only sat looking at me, a bemused smile on her face.

After a moment or two, I asked, 'What are we doing?'

'Nothing,' Kettricken said.

I copied her silence. After a long time, she observed, ‘Our own ambitions and tasks that we set for ourselves, the framework we attempt to impose upon the world is no more than a shadow of a tree cast across the snow. It will change as the sun moves, be swallowed in the night, sway with the wind and when the smooth snow vanishes, it will lie distorted upon the uneven earth. But the tree continues to be. Do you understand that?’ She leaned forward slightly to look into my face. Her eyes were kind.

‘I think so,’ I said uneasily.

She gave me a look almost of pity. ‘You would if you stopped trying to understand it, if you gave up worrying about why this is important to me, and simply tried to see if it is an idea that has worth in your own life. But I do not bid you to do that. I bid no one do anything here.’

She sat back again, a gentle loosening that made her straight spine seem effortless and restful. Again, she did nothing. She simply sat across from me and unfurled herself. I felt her life brush up against me and flow around me. It was but the faintest touching, and had I not experienced both the Skill and the Wit, I do not think I would have sensed it. Cautiously, as softly as if I assayed a bridge made of cobweb, I overlay my senses on hers.

She quested. Not as I did, toward a specific beast, or to read what might be close by. I discarded the word I had always given to my sensing. Kettricken did not seek after anything with her Wit. It was as she said, simply a being, but it was being a part of the whole. She composed herself and considered all the ways the great web touched her, and was content. It was a delicate and tenuous thing and I marvelled at it. For an instant I too relaxed. I breathed out. I opened myself, Wit wide to all. I discarded all caution, all worry that Burrich would sense me. I had never done anything to compare it to before. Kettricken’s reaching was as delicate as droplets of dew sliding down a strand of spider web. I was like a dammed flood, suddenly released, to rush out to fill old channels to overflowing and to send fingers of water investigating the lowlands.

Let us hunt! The wolf, joyfully.

In the stables, Burrich straightened from cleaning a hoof, to frown at no one. Sooty stamped in her stall. Molly shrugged away and shook out her hair. Across from me, Kettricken started and looked at me as if I had spoken aloud. A moment more I was held, seized from a thousand sides, stretched and expanded, illuminated pitilessly. I felt it all, not just the human folk with their comings and goings, but every pigeon that fluttered in the eaves, every

mouse that crept unnoticed behind the wine kegs, every speck of life, that was not and never had been a speck, but had always been a node on the web of life. *Nothing alone, nothing forsaken, nothing without meaning, nothing of no significance, and nothing of importance.* Somewhere, someone sang, and then fell silent. A chorus filled in after that solo, other voices, distant and dim, saying, *What? Beg pardon? Did you call? Are you here? Do I dream?* They plucked at me, as beggars pluck at a stranger's sleeves, and I suddenly felt that if I did not draw away, I could come unravelled like a piece of fabric. I blinked my eyes, seeing myself inside myself again. I breathed in.

No time had passed. A single breath, a wink of an eye. Kettricken looked askance at me. I appeared not to notice. I reached up to scratch my nose. I shifted my weight.

I resettled myself firmly. I let a few more minutes pass before I sighed and shrugged apologetically. 'I do not understand the game, I am afraid,' I offered.

I had succeeded in annoying her. 'It is not a game. You don't have to understand it, or "do" it. Simply stop all else, and be.'

I made a show of making another effort. I sat still for several moments, then fidgeted absently with my cuff until she looked at me doing it. Then I cast my eyes down as if ashamed. 'The candle smells very sweet,' I complimented her.

Kettricken sighed and gave up on me. 'The girl who makes them has a very keen awareness of scents. She can almost bring me my gardens and surround me with their fragrances. Regal brought me one of her honeysuckle tapers, and after that I sought out her wares myself. She is a serving-girl here, and does not have the time or resources to make too many. So I count myself fortunate when she brings them to offer to me.'

'Regal,' I repeated. Regal speaking to Molly. Regal knowing her well enough to know of her candle-making. Everything inside me clenched with foreboding. 'My queen, I think I distract you from what you wish to be doing. That is not my desire. May I leave you now, to return again when you wish to have company?'

'This exercise does not exclude company, FitzChivalry.' She looked at me sadly. 'Will not you try again to let go? For a moment, I thought ... No? Ah, then, I let you go.' I heard regret and loneliness in her voice. Then she straightened herself. She took a breath, breathed it out slowly. I felt again her

consciousness thrumming in the web. She has the Wit, I thought to myself. Not strong, but she has it.

I left her room quietly. There was a tiny bit of amusement to wondering what Burrich would think if he knew. Much less amusing to recall how she had been alerted to me when I quested out with the Wit. I thought of my night hunts with the wolf. Would soon the Queen begin to complain of strange dreams?

A cold certainty welled up in me. I would be discovered. I had been too careless, too long. I knew that Burrich could sense when I used the Wit. What if there were others? I could be accused of beast magic. I found my resolve and hardened myself to it. Tomorrow, I would act.

ELEVEN

Lone Wolves

The Fool will always remain one of Buckkeep's great mysteries. It is almost possible to say that nothing definite is known of him. His origin, age, sex and race have all been the subject of conjecture. Most amazing is how such a public person maintained such an aura of privacy. The questions about the Fool will always outnumber the answers. Did he ever truly possess any mystical powers, any prescience, any magic at all, or was it merely that his quick wits and razor tongue made it seem as if he knew all before it came to pass? If he did not know the future, he appeared to, and by his calm assumption of foreknowledge, he swayed many of us to help him shape the future as he saw fit.

White on white. An ear twitched, and that minute movement betrayed all.

You see? I prompted him.

I scent.

I see. I flicked my eyes toward the prey. No more a movement than that. It was sufficient.

I see! He leaped, the rabbit started, and Cub went floundering after it. The rabbit ran lightly over the unpacked snow, while Cub had to surge and bound and leap through it. The rabbit darted elusively, this way, that way, around the tree, around the clump of bushes, into the brambles. Had he stayed in there? Cub snuffed hopefully, but the density of the thorns turned his sensitive nose back.

It's gone. I told him.

Are you sure? Why didn't you help?

I can't run down game in loose snow. I must stalk and spring only when one spring is sufficient.

Ah. Enlightenment. Consideration. There are two of us. We should hunt as a pair. I could start game and drive it toward you. You could be ready, to

leap out and snap its neck.

I shook my head slowly. *You must learn to hunt alone, Cub. I will not always be with you, in mind or in flesh.*

A wolf is not meant to hunt alone.

Perhaps not. But many do. As you will. But I did not intend that you should start with rabbits. Come on.

He fell in at my heels, content to let me lead. We had left the keep before winter light had even greyed the skies. Now they were blue and open, clear and cold above us. The trail we were following was no more than a soft, shouldered groove in the deep snow. I sank calf-deep at every step. About us, the forest was a winter stillness, broken only by the occasional dart of a small bird, or the far-off cawing of a crow. It was open forest, mostly saplings with the occasional giant which had survived the fire that had cleared this hillside. It was good pasturage for goats in summer. Their sharp little hooves had cut the trail we were now following. It led to a simple stone hut and a tumbledown corral and shelter for the goats. It was used only in summer.

Cub had been delighted when I went to get him this morning. He had shown me his roundabout path for slipping past the guards. An old cattle gate, long bricked up, was his egress. Some shift of the earth had unsettled the stone and mortar blocking it, creating a crack wide enough for him to slip through. The beaten-down snow showed me that he had used it often. Once outside the walls, we had ghosted away from the keep, moving like shadows in the not-light of stars and moon on white snow. Once safely away from the keep, Cub had turned the expedition into stalking practice. He raced ahead to lie in wait, to spring out and tag me with a splayed paw or a sharp nip, and then race away in a great circle, to attack me from behind. I had let him play, welcoming the exertion that warmed me, as well as the sheer joy of the mindless romping. Always, I kept us moving, so that by the time the sun and light found us, we were miles from Buckkeep, in an area seldom visited during the winter. My spotting of the white rabbit against the white snow had been pure happenstance. I had even humbler game in mind for his first solo hunt.

Why do we come here? Cub demanded as soon as we came in sight of the hut.

To hunt, I said simply. I halted some distance away. The wolf sank down beside me, waiting. *Well, go ahead,* I told him. *Go and check for game*

sign.

Oh, this is worthy hunting, this. Sniffing about some man den for scraps. Disdainful.

Not scraps. Go and look.

He surged forward, and then angled toward the hut. I watched him go. Our dream hunts together had taught him much, but now I wished him to hunt entirely independently of me. I did not doubt that he could do it. I chided myself that demanding this proof was just one more procrastination.

He stayed in the snowy brush as much as he could. He approached the hut cautiously, ears alert and nose working. *Old scents. Humans. Goats. Cold and gone.* He froze an instant, then took a careful step forward. His motions now were calculated and precise. Ears forward, tail straight, he was totally intent and focused. *MOUSE.* He sprang and had it. He shook his head, a quick snap, and then let the little animal go flying. He caught it again as it came down. *Mouse!* He announced gleefully. He flipped his kill up into the air and danced up after it on his hind legs. He caught it again, delicately, in his small front teeth, and tossed it up again. I radiated pride and approval at him. By the time he had finished playing with his kill, the mouse was little more than a sodden rag of fur. He gulped it down finally in a single snap, and came bounding back to me.

Mice! The place is riddled with them. Their smell and sign are everywhere all about the hut.

I thought there would be plenty here. The shepherds complain about them, that the mice overrun this place and spoil their provisions in the summer. I guessed they would winter here, too.

Surprisingly fat, for this time of year, Cub opined, and was off again with a bound. He hunted with frantic enthusiasm, but only until his hunger was sated. Then it was my turn to approach the hut. Snow had drifted up against the rickety wooden door, but I shouldered it open. The interior was dismal. Snow had sifted in through the thatched roof and lay in streaks and stripes on the frozen dirt floor. There was a rudimentary hearth and chimney, with a kettle hook. A stool and a wooden bench were the only furnishings. There was still a bit of firewood left beside the hearth, and I used it to build a careful fire on the blackened stones. I kept it small, just enough to warm myself and to thaw the bread and meat I had packed with me. Cub came for a taste of that, more for the sharing than for any hunger. He made a leisurely exploration of the hut's interior, then lifted his nose abruptly from the corner

he'd been sniffing. He advanced a few steps toward me, then stopped, standing stiff-legged. His eyes met mine and held. The wilds were in their darkness. *You're abandoning me here.*

Yes. There is food in plenty here. In a while, I will come back to be sure you are all right. I think you will be fine here. You will teach yourself to hunt. Mice at first, and then larger game ...

You betray me. You betray pack.

No. We are not pack. I am setting you free, Cub. We are becoming too close. That is not good, for either of us. I warned you, long ago, that I would not bond. We can have no part of each other's lives. It is better for you to go off, alone, to become what you were meant to be.

I was meant to be a member of a pack. He levelled his stare at me. Will you tell me that there are wolves near here, ones who will accept an intruder into their territory and make me part of their pack?

I was forced to look aside from him. No. There are no wolves here. One would have to travel many days to come to a place wild enough for wolves to run freely.

Then what is there here for me?

Food. Freedom. Your own life, independent of mine.

Isolation. He bared his teeth at me, and then abruptly turned aside. He circled past me, a wide circle as he went to the door. Men, he sneered. Truly you are not pack, but man. He paused in the open door to look back at me. Men it is who think they can rule others' lives, but have no bonds to them. Do you think that to bond or not to bond is for you alone to decide? My heart is my own. I give it where I will. I will not give it to one who thrusts me aside. Nor will I obey one who denies pack and bond. Do you think I will stay here and snuff about this men's lair, to snap at the mice who have come for their leavings, to be like the mice, things that live on the droppings of men? No. If we are not pack, then we are not kin. I owe you nothing, and least of all obedience. I shall not stay here. I shall live as I please.

A slyness to his thoughts. He was hiding something, but I guessed it. You shall do as you wish, Cub, but for one thing. You shall not follow me back to Buckkeep. I forbid it.

You forbid? You forbid? Forbid the wind to blow past your stone den then, or the grass to grow in the earth around it. You have as much right. You forbid.

He snorted and turned away from me. I hardened my will, and spoke a final time to him. ‘Cub!’ I said in my man voice. He turned back to me, startled. His small ears went back at my tone. Almost he sneered his teeth at me. But before he could, I *repelled* at him. It was a thing I had always known how to do, as instinctively as one knows to pull the finger back from the flame. It was a force I had used but seldom, for once Burrich had turned it against me, and I did not always trust it. This was not a push, such as I had used on him when he was caged. I put force into it, the mental repulsing becoming almost a physical thing as he recoiled from me. He leaped back a stride then stood splay-legged on the snow, ready for flight. His eyes were shocked.

‘GO!’ I shouted at him, man’s word, man’s voice, and at the same time *repelled* him again with every bit of Wit I had. He fled, not gracefully, but leaping and scrabbling away through the snow. I held myself within myself, refusing to follow him with my mind and make sure that he did not stop. The *repelling* was a breaking of that bond, not only a withdrawing of myself from him, but a pushing back of every tie he had to me. Severed. And better to let them remain that way. Yet as I stood staring at the patch of brush where he had disappeared, I felt an emptiness that was very like to cold, a tingling itch of something lost, something missing. I have heard men speak so of an amputated limb, a physical groping about for a part gone forever.

I left the hut and began my hike home. The farther I walked, the more I hurt. Not physically, but that is the only comparison I have. As raw and flayed as if stripped of skin and meat. It was worse than when Burrich had taken Nosy, for I had done it to myself. The waning afternoon seemed chillier than the dark of dawn had. I tried to tell myself that I did not feel ashamed. I had done what was necessary, as I had with Virago. I pushed that thought aside. No. Cub would be fine. He would be better off than if he were with me. What life would it be for that wild creature, skulking about, always in danger of discovery, by the keep dogs or hunters or anyone who might spot him? He might be isolated, he might be lonely, but he would be alive. Our connection was severed. There was an insistent temptation to quest out about me, to see if I could sense him still, to grope and find if his mind still touched mine at all. I resisted it sternly, and sealed my thoughts against his as firmly as I could. Gone. He would not follow me. Not after I had *repelled* him like that. No. I tramped on and refused to look back.

Had I not been so deep in thought, so intent on remaining isolated inside myself, I might have had some warning. But I doubt it. The Wit was never any use against Forged ones. I do not know if they stalked me, or if I blundered right past their hiding-place. The first I knew of them was when the weight hit my back and I went down face-first in the snow. At first I thought it was Cub, come back to challenge my decision. I rolled and came almost to my feet before another one seized hold of my shoulder. Forged ones, three males, one young, two large and once well-muscled. My mind recorded it all quickly, categorizing them as neatly as if this were one of Chade's exercises. One big one with a knife, the others had sticks. Torn and filthy clothing. Faces reddened and peeling from the cold, filthy beards, shaggy hair. Faces bruised and cut. Did they fight amongst themselves, or had they attacked someone else before me?

I broke the one's grip, and leaped back, trying to get as clear of them as I could. I had a belt knife. It was not a long blade, but it was all I had. I had thought I would not need any weapon today; I had thought there were no more Forged ones anywhere near Buckkeep. They circled wide of me, keeping me in the centre of their ring. They let me get my knife clear. It didn't seem to worry them.

'What do you want? My cloak?' I undid the catch and let it fall. One's eyes followed it down, but none of them leaped for it as I had hoped. I shifted, turning, trying to watch all three at once, trying to have none of them completely behind me. It wasn't easy. 'Mittens?' I stripped them from my hands, tossed them as a pair toward the one who appeared youngest. He let them fall at his feet. They grunted as they shuffled, rocking on their feet, watching me. No one wanted to be the first to attack. They knew I had a knife; whoever went first would meet the blade. I took a step or two toward an opening in the ring. They shifted to block my escape.

'What do you want?' I roared at them. I spun around, trying to look at each of them, and for a moment locked eyes with one. There was less in his eyes than there had been in Cub's. No clean wildness, only the misery of physical discomfort and want. I stared at him and he blinked.

'Meat.' He grunted as if I had wrung the word from him.

'I have no meat, no food at all. You'll get nothing from me but a fight!'

'You,' huffed another, in a parody of laughter. Mirthless, heartless. 'Meat!'

I had paused a moment too long, looked too long at one, for another sprang suddenly to my back. He flung his arms around me, pinning one of my arms, and then suddenly, horribly, his teeth sank into my flesh where my neck met my shoulder. Meat. Me.

A horror beyond thought engulfed me and I fought. I fought just as I had the first time I had battled Forged ones, with a mindless brutality that rivalled their own. The elements were my only ally, for they were ravaged by cold and privation. Their hands were clumsy with cold, and if we were all powered by the frenzy for survival, at least mine was new and strong within me while theirs had been worn down by the brutality of their current existence. I left flesh in the mouth of that first attacker, but tear myself free I did. That I recall. The rest is not so clear. I cannot put it in order. I broke off my knife in the young one's ribs. I recall a thumb gouging into my eye, and the snap when I dislocated it from its socket. Locked in a struggle with one, another pounded me across the shoulders with his stick, until I managed to turn his mate to meet the blow. I don't recall that I felt the pain of that pounding, and the torn flesh at my neck seemed but a warm spot where blood flowed. I had no sense of damage to myself, no daunting of my desire to kill them all. I could not win. There were too many. The young one was down in the snow, coughing blood, but one was throttling me while the other tried to jerk the sword free from its entanglement in my flesh and sleeve. I was kicking and flailing, trying uselessly to inflict any sort of damage on my attackers while the edges of the world grew black and the sky began to spin.

Brother!

He came, slashing teeth and weight hitting our tangled struggle like a battering ram. We all went down in the snow then, and the impact loosened the Forged one's grip enough that I caught a whistle of air into my lungs. My head cleared, and suddenly I had heart to fight again, to ignore pain and damage, to fight! I swear I saw myself, face purpled from strangling, the rich blood streaming and soaking and the smell so maddening. I bared my teeth. Then Cub bore the one down and away from me. He attacked him with a speed no man could match, slashing and snapping and leaping clear before the grasping hands could seize his coat. He darted back in suddenly.

I know that I knew when Cub's jaws closed in his throat. I felt that death rattle in my own jaws and the swift, spurting blood that drenched my muzzle and flowed out over my jowls. I shook my head, my teeth tearing flesh, setting all the life loose to run free down his stinking garments.

Then was a time of nothing.

Then I was sitting in the snow, back against a tree. Cub was lying in the snow not far from me. His forepaws were dappled with blood. He was licking his legs clean, a careful, slow, thorough licking.

I lifted my sleeve to my mouth and chin. I wiped away blood. It was not mine. I knelt forward suddenly in the snow, to spit out beard hairs, and then to vomit, but not even the acid taste of my bile could cleanse the dead man's flesh and blood from my mouth. I glanced at his body, looked away. His throat was torn out. For a terrible instant I could recall how I had chewed down, the tendons of his throat taut against my teeth. I shut my eyes tight. I sat very still.

Cold nose against my cheek. I opened my eyes. He sat beside me, regarding me. *Cub.*

Nighteyes, he corrected me. *My mother named me Nighteyes. I was the last of my litter to get my eyes open.* He snuffed, then sneezed suddenly. He looked around at the fallen men. I followed his gaze unwillingly. My knife had taken the young one, but he had not died quickly. The other two ...

I killed faster, *Nighteyes* observed quietly. *But I have not the teeth of a cow. You did well, for your kind.* He stood up and shook himself. Blood, both cold and warm, spattered my face. I gasped and wiped it away, then realized the significance.

You're bleeding.

So are you. He pulled the blade out of you to put it in me.

Let me look at it.

Why?

The question hung between us in the cold air. Night was about to find us. Overhead the tree branches had gone black against the evening sky. I did not need the light to see him. I did not even need to see him. Do you need to see your ear to know it is part of you? As useless to deny that part of my flesh was mine as to deny *Nighteyes*.

We are brothers. We are pack, I conceded.

Are we?

I felt a reaching, a groping, a tugging for my attention. I let myself recall that I had felt this before and denied it. Now I did not. I gave him my focus, my undivided attention. *Nighteyes* was there, hide and tooth, muscle and claw, and I did not avoid him. I knew the sword thrust in his shoulder and felt how it had gone between two big muscles there. He held his paw

curled to his chest. I hesitated, and then felt his hurt that I would hesitate. So I paused no longer, but reached out to him as he had to me. *Trust is not trust until it is complete.* So close were we, I do not know which of us offered this thought. For an instant I had a double awareness of the world as Nighteye's perceptions overlay my own, his scenting of the bodies, his hearing telling me of scavenger foxes already creeping closer, his eyes making no difficulty of the fading light. Then the duality was gone, and his senses were mine, and mine his. We were bonded.

Cold was settling, on the land and into my bones. We found my cloak, clotted with frost, but I shook it out and put it on. I did not try to fasten it, but kept it wide away from where I had been bitten. I managed to drag my mittens on despite my injured forearm. 'We'd better go,' I told him softly. 'When we get home, I'll see to cleaning and bandaging us. But first, we'd better get there and get warm.'

I felt his assent. He walked beside me as we went, not behind me. He lifted his nose once, to snuff deeply of the fresh air. A cold wind had come up. Snow began to fall. That was all. His nose brought me the knowledge that I need fear no more Forged ones. The air was clean save for the stench of those behind us, and even that was fading, turning into carrion smell, mingling with the scavenger foxes come to find them.

You were wrong, he observed. *Neither of us hunts very well alone. Sly amusement. Unless you thought you were doing well before I came along?*

'A wolf is not meant to hunt alone,' I told him. I tried for dignity.

He lolled his tongue at me. *Don't fear, little brother. I'll be here.*

We continued walking through the crisp white snow and the stark black trees. *Not much farther to home,* he comforted me. I felt his strength mingling with mine as we limped on.

It was nearly noon when I presented myself at Verity's map-room door. My forearm was snugly bandaged and invisible inside a voluminous sleeve. The wound itself was not that severe, but it was painful. The bite between my shoulder and neck was not so easily concealed. I had lost flesh there, and it had bled profusely. When I had seen it with a looking glass the night before, I was nearly sick. Cleaning it had made it bleed even more profusely: there was a chunk of me gone. Well, and if Nighteyes had not intervened, more of me would have followed that mouthful. I cannot explain how sickening I found that thought. I had managed to get a dressing on it, but not a very good one. I had pulled my shirt high and fastened it in place to

conceal the bandaging. It chafed painfully against the wound, but it concealed it. Apprehensively, I tapped on the door, and was clearing my throat as it opened.

Charim told me Verity was not there. There was a worry deep in his eyes. I tried not to share it. 'He can't leave the boat-builders to that work, can he?'

Charim shook his head to my banter. 'No. Up in his tower,' the old servant said shortly. I turned aside as he shut the door slowly.

Well, Kettricken had told me as much. I had tried to forget that part of our conversation. Dread crept through me as I sought the tower stairs. Verity had no reason to be in this tower. This tower was where he Skilled from in summers, when the weather was fine and the Raiders harried our shores. There was no reason to be up there in winter, especially with the wind howling and the snow dropping as it was today. No reason save the terrible attraction of the Skill itself.

I had felt that lure, I reminded myself as I gritted my teeth and began the long climb to the top. I had known, for a time, the heady exuberance of the Skill. Like the clotted memory of long-ago pain, Galen the Skillmaster's words came back to me. 'If you are weak,' he had threatened us, 'if you lack focus and discipline, if you are indulgent and inclined to pleasure, you will not master the Skill. Rather, the Skill will master you. Practise the denial of all pleasures to yourself, deny all weaknesses that tempt you. Then, when you are as steel, perhaps you will be ready to encounter the lure of the Skill and turn aside from it. If you give into it, you will become as a great babe, mindless and drooling.' Then he had schooled us, with privations and punishments that went far past any sane level. Yet when I had encountered the Skill joy, I had not found it the tawdry pleasure Galen had implied. Rather, it had been the same rush of blood and thunder of heart that sometimes music brought to me, or a sudden flight of bright pheasant in an autumn wood, or even the pleasure of taking a horse perfectly over a difficult jump, that instant when all things come into balance, and for a moment turn together as perfectly as birds wheeling in flight. The Skill gave that to one, but not for just a moment. Rather it lasted for as long as a man could sustain it, and became stronger and purer as one's ability with the Skill refined; or so I believed. My own abilities with the Skill had been permanently damaged in a battle of wills with Galen. The defensive mental walls I had erected were such that not even someone as strongly Skilled as

Verity could always reach me. My own ability to reach out of myself had become an intermittent thing, skittish and flighty as a frightened horse.

I paused outside Verity's door. I took a very deep breath, then breathed it out slowly, refusing to let the blackness of spirit settle on me. Those things were over, that time was gone. No sense railing to myself about it. As was my old habit, I entered without knocking, lest the noise break Verity's concentration.

He should not have been Skilling. He was. The shutters of the window were open and he leaned out on the sill. Wind and snow swirled throughout the room, speckling his dark hair and dark blue shirt and jerkin. He was breathing in deep, long steady breaths, a cadence somewhere between a very deep sleep and that of a runner at rest and catching his wind. He seemed oblivious of me. 'Prince Verity?' I said softly.

He turned to me, and his gaze was like heat, like light, like wind in my face. He Skilled into me with such force that I felt driven out of myself, his mind possessing mine so completely that there was no room left to be myself in it. For a moment I was drowning in Verity, and then he was gone, withdrawing so rapidly that I was left stumbling and gasping like a fish deserted by a high wave. In a step he was beside me, catching my elbow and steadying me on my feet.

'I'm sorry,' he apologized. 'I was not expecting you. You startled me.'

'I should have knocked, my prince,' I replied, and then gave a quick nod to him that I could stand. 'What's out there, that you watch so intently?'

He glanced aside from me. 'Not much. Some boys on the cliffs, watching a pod of whales sporting. Two of our own boats, fishing halibut. Even in this weather, though not enjoying it much.'

'Then you are not Skilling for Outislanders ...'

'There are not any out there, this time of year. But I keep a watch.' He glanced down at my forearm, the one he had just released, and changed the subject. 'What happened to you?'

'That's what I came to see you about. Forged ones attacked me. Out on the face of the ridge, the one where the spruce hen hunting is good. Near the goatherd's shed.'

He nodded quickly, his dark brows knitting. 'I know the area. How many? Describe them.'

I sketched my attackers for him quickly and he nodded briefly, unsurprised. 'I had a report of them, four days ago. They should not be this

close to Buckkeep this soon; not unless they are consistently moving in this direction, every day. Are they finished?’

‘Yes. You expected this?’ I was aghast. ‘I thought we had wiped them out.’

‘We wiped out the ones who were here then. There are others, moving in this direction. I have been keeping track of them by the reports, but I had not expected them to be so close so soon.’

I struggled briefly, got my voice under control. ‘My prince, why do we simply keep track of them? Why do not we ... take care of this problem?’

Verity made a small noise in his throat and turned back to his window. ‘Sometimes one has to wait, and let the enemy complete a move, in order to discover what the full strategy is. Do you understand me?’

‘The Forged ones have a strategy? I think not, my prince. They were ...’

‘Report to me in full,’ Verity directed, without looking at me. I hesitated briefly, then launched into a complete retelling. Towards the end of the struggle, my account became a bit incoherent. I let the words die on my lips. ‘But I did manage to break his grip on me. And all three of them died there.’

He did not take his eyes from the sea. ‘You should avoid physical struggles, FitzChivalry. You always seem to get hurt in them.’

‘I know, my prince,’ I admitted humbly. ‘Hod did her best with me ...’

‘But you were not really trained to be a fighter. You have other talents. And those are the ones you should be putting to use to preserve yourself. Oh, you’re a competent swordsman, but you’ve not the brawn and weight to be a brawler. At least, not yet. And that is what you always seem to revert to in a fight.’

‘I was not offered the selection of weapons,’ I said, a bit testily, and then added, ‘my prince.’

‘No. You won’t be.’ He seemed to speak from afar. A slight tension in the air told me that he Skilled out even as we spoke. ‘Yet I’m afraid I must send you out again. I think you are perhaps right. I have watched what is happening long enough. The Forged ones are converging on Buckkeep. I cannot fathom why, and yet perhaps knowing that is not as important as preventing them from attaining their goal. You will again undertake the removal of this problem, Fitz. Perhaps this time I can keep my own lady

from becoming involved in it. I understand that if she wishes to go riding, she now has a guard of her own?’

‘As you have been told, sir,’ I told him, cursing myself for not coming to speak to him sooner of the Queen’s Guard.

He turned to regard me levelly. ‘The rumour I heard was that you had authorized the creation of such a guard. Not to steal your glory, but when such rumour reached me, I let it be supposed that I had requested it of you. As, I suppose, I did. Very indirectly.’

‘My prince,’ I said, and had the good sense to keep quiet.

‘Well. If she must ride, at least she is guarded now. Though I would greatly prefer she had no more encounters with Forged ones. Would I could think of something to busy her,’ he added wearily.

‘The Queen’s Garden,’ I suggested, recalling Patience’s account of them.

Verity cocked his eye at me.

‘The old ones, on top of the tower,’ I explained. ‘They have been unused for years. I saw what was left of them, before Galen ordered us to dismantle them to clear space for our Skill lessons. It must have been a charming place at one time. Tubs of earth and greenery, statuary, climbing vines.’

Verity smiled to himself. ‘And basins of water, too, with pond lilies in them, and fish, and even tiny frogs. The birds came there often in summer, to drink and to splash. Chivalry and I used to play up there. She had little charms hung on strings, made of glass and bright metal. And when the wind stirred them, they would chime together, or flash like jewels in the sun.’ I could feel myself warming with his memory of that place and time. ‘My mother kept a little hunting cat, and it would lounge on the warm stone when the sun struck it. Hisspit; that was her name. Spotted coat and tufted ears. And we would tease her with string and tufts of feathers, and she would stalk us among the pots of flowers. While we were supposed to be studying tablets on herbs. I never properly learned them. There was too much else to do there. Except for thyme. I knew every kind of thyme she had. My mother grew a lot of thyme. And catmint.’ He was smiling.

‘Kettricken would love such a place,’ I told him. ‘She gardened much in the mountains.’

‘Did she?’ He looked surprised. ‘I would have thought her occupied with more ... physical pastimes.’

I felt an instant of annoyance with him. No, of something more than annoyance. How could it be that I knew more of his wife than he did? ‘She kept gardens,’ I said quietly. ‘Of many herbs, and knew all the uses of those that grew therein. I have told you of them myself.’

‘Yes, I suppose you have.’ He sighed. ‘You are right, Fitz. Visit her for me, and tell her of the Queen’s Garden. It is winter now, and there is probably little she can do with it. But come spring, it would be a wondrous thing to see it restored ...’

‘Perhaps, you yourself, my prince,’ I ventured, but he shook his head.

‘I haven’t the time. But I trust it to you. And now, downstairs. To the maps. I have things I wish to discuss with you.’

I turned immediately toward the door. Verity followed more slowly. I held the door for him and on the threshold he paused and looked back over his shoulder at the open window. ‘It calls me,’ he admitted to me, calmly, simply, as if observing that he enjoyed plums. ‘It calls to me, at any moment when I am not busied. And so I must be busy, Fitz. And too busy.’

‘I see,’ I said slowly, not at all sure that I did.

‘No. You don’t.’ Verity spoke with great certainty. ‘It is like a great loneliness, boy. I can reach out and touch others. Some, quite easily. But no one ever reaches back. When Chivalry was alive ... I still miss him, boy. Sometimes I am so lonely for him; it is like being the only one of something in the world. Like the very last wolf, hunting alone.’

A shiver went down my spine. ‘What of King Shrewd?’ I ventured to ask.

He shook his head. ‘His Skills seldom now. His strength for it has dwindled, and it taxes his body as well as his mind.’ We went down a few more steps. ‘You and I are the only ones now to know that,’ he added softly. I nodded.

We went down the stairs slowly. ‘Has the healer looked at your arm?’ he queried.

I shook my head.

‘Nor Burrich.’

He was stating this as fact, already knowing it was true.

I shook my head again. The marks of Nighteyes’ teeth were too plain upon my skin, although he had given those bites in play. I could not show Burrich the marks of the Forged Ones without betraying my wolf to him.

Verity sighed. 'Well. Keep it clean. I suppose you know as well as any how to keep an injury clean. Next time you go out, remember this, and go prepared. Always. There may not always be one to step in and aid you.'

I came to a slow stop on the stairs. Verity continued down. I took a deep breath. 'Verity,' I asked quietly. 'How much do you know? About ... this.'

'Less than you do,' he said jovially. 'But more than you think I do.'

'You sound like the Fool,' I said bitterly.

'Yes. Sometimes. He is another one who has a great understanding of aloneness, and what it can drive a man to do.' He took a breath, and almost I thought he might say that he knew what I was, and did not condemn me for it. Instead, he continued, 'I believe the Fool had words with you, a few days ago.'

I followed him silently now, wondering how he knew so much about so many things. The Skilling, of course. We came to his study and I followed him in. Charim, as ever, was already waiting for us. Food was set out, and mulled wine. Verity set to upon it with a great appetite. I sat across from him, mostly watching him eat. I was not very hungry, but it built my appetite to watch how much he enjoyed this simple, robust meal. In this he was still a soldier, I thought. He would take this small pleasure, this good, well-served food when he was hungry, and relish it while he could. It gave me much satisfaction to see him with this much life and appetite to him. I wondered how he would be next summer, when he would have to Skill for hours every day, keeping watch for Raiders off our coast, and using the tricks of his mind to set them astray while giving our own folk early warning. I thought of Verity as he had been last summer by harvest time; worn to thinness, face lined, without the energy to eat save that he drank the stimulants that Chade put in his tea. His life had become the hours he spent Skilling. Come summer, his hunger for the Skilling would replace every other hunger in his life. How would Kettricken react to that, I wondered?

After we had eaten, Verity went over his maps with me. There was no longer any mistaking the pattern that emerged. Regardless of what obstacles, forest or river or frozen plains, the Forged ones were moving towards Buckkeep. It made no sense to me. The ones I had encountered seemed all but bereft of their senses. I found it difficult to believe that any one of them would conceive of travelling overland, despite hardships, simply to come to Buckkeep. 'And these records you've kept indicate that all of them have. All

of the Forged ones that you've identified seem to be moving towards Buckkeep.'

'Yet you have difficulty seeing it as a coordinated plan? Verity asked quietly.

'I fail to see how they could have any plan at all. How have they contacted each other? And it doesn't seem a concerted effort. They aren't meeting up and travelling here in bands. It simply seems that each and every one sets out this way, and some of them fall in together.'

'Like moths drawn to a candle flame,' Verity observed.

'Or flies to carrion,' I added sourly.

'The ones to fascination, the others to feed,' Verity mused. 'I wish I knew which it is that draws the Forged ones to me. Perhaps another thing entirely.'

'Why do you think you must know why they come? Do you think you are their target?'

'I do not know. But if I find out, I may understand my enemy. I do not think it chance that all the Forged ones make their way to Buckkeep. I think they move against me, Fitz. Perhaps not of their own will, but it is still a move against me. I need to understand why.'

'To understand them, you must become them.'

'Oh.' He looked less than amused. 'Now who sounds like the Fool?'

The question made me uneasy and I let it slip by me. 'My prince, when the Fool mocked me the other day ...' I hesitated, still stung by the memory. I had always believed the Fool to be my friend. I tried to push the emotion aside. 'He put ideas in my mind. In his teasing way. He said, if I understand his riddles aright, that I should be seeking for others who are Skilled. Men and women from your father's generation, trained by Solicity before Galen became Skillmaster. And he seemed also to say that I should be finding out more about the Elderlings. How are they summoned, what can they do? What are they?'

Verity leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers over his chest. 'Either of those quests might be enough for a dozen men. And yet, neither is even sufficient for one, for the answers to either question are so scarce. To the first, yes, there should yet be Skilled ones amongst us, folk older than my father even, trained for the old wars against the Outislanders. It would not have been common folk knowledge as to who was trained. Training was done privately, and even those in a coterie might know of few outside their

own circle. Still, there should have been records. I am sure there were, at one time. But what has become of them, no one can say. I imagine that they were passed from Solicity down to Galen. But they were not found in his room or among his things after he ... died.'

It was Verity's turn to pause. We both knew how Galen had died, in a sense had both been there, though we had never spoken much of it. Galen had died a traitor, in the act of trying to Skill-tap Verity's strength and drain it off and kill him. Instead, Verity had borrowed my strength to aid him in draining Galen. It was not a thing either of us enjoyed recalling. But I spoke boldly, trying to keep all emotion from my voice.

'Do you think Regal would know where such records are?'

'If he does, he has said nothing of it.' Verity's voice was as flat as my own, putting an end to that topic. 'But I have had some small success in uncovering a few Skilled ones. The names, at least. In every case, those I have managed to discover have either already died or cannot be located now.'

'Um.' I recalled hearing something of this from Chade some time ago. 'How did you discover their names?'

'Some my father could recall. The members of the last coterie, who served King Bounty. Others I knew vaguely, when I was very small. A few I discovered by talking to some of the very old folk in the keep, asking them to recall what rumours they could of who might have been trained in the Skill. Though of course I did not ask in so many words. I did not, and still do not, wish my quest to be known.'

'May I ask why?'

He frowned and nodded toward his maps. 'I am not as brilliant as your father was, my boy. Chivalry could make leaps of intuition that seemed nothing short of magical. What I discover are patterns. Does it seem likely to you that every Skilled one I can discover should be either dead, or unfindable? It seems to me that if I find one, and his name is known as a Skilled one, it might not be healthy for him.'

For a time we sat in silence. He was letting me come to my own conclusions. I was wise enough not to voice them aloud. 'And Elderlings?' I asked at last.

'A different sort of riddle. At the time they were written about, all knew what they were. So I surmise. It would be the same if you went to find a scroll that explained exactly what a horse was. You would find many passing

mentions of them, and a few that related directly to shoeing one, or to one stallion's blood-line. But who amongst us would see the need to devote the labour and time to writing out exactly what a horse is?'

'I see.'

'So, again, it is a sifting out of detail. I have not had the time required to devote myself to such a task.' For a moment he sat looking at me. Then he opened a little stone box on his desk and took out a key. 'There is a cabinet in my bedchamber,' he said slowly. 'I have gathered there what scrolls I could find that made even a passing mention of the Elderlings. There are also some related to the Skill. I give you leave to pore through them. Ask Fedwren for good paper, and keep notes of what you discover. Look for patterns among those notes. And bring them to me, every month or so.'

I took the little brass key in my hand. It weighed strangely heavy, as if attached to the task the Fool had suggested and Verity had confirmed. Look for patterns, Verity had suggested. I suddenly saw one, a web woven from me to the Fool to Verity and back again. Like Verity's other patterns, it did not seem to be an accident. I wondered who had originated the pattern. I glanced at Verity, but his thoughts had gone afar. I rose quietly to go.

As I touched the door, he spoke to me. 'Come to me. Very early tomorrow morning. To my tower.'

'Sir?'

'Perhaps we may yet discover another Skilled one, unsuspected in our midst.'

TWELVE

Tasks

Perhaps the most devastating part of our war with the Red Ships was the sense of helplessness that overpowered us. It was as if a terrible paralysis lay over the land and its rulers. The tactics of the Raiders were so incomprehensible that for the first year we stood still as if dazed. The second year of raiding, we tried to defend ourselves. But our skills were rusty; for too long they had been employed only against the chance Raiders, the opportunistic or the desperate. Against organized pirates who had studied our sea-coasts, our watchtower positions, our tides and currents, we were like children. Only Prince Verity's Skilling provided any protection for us. How many ships he turned aside, how many navigators he muddled or pilots he confused, we will never know. Because his people could not grasp what he did for them, it was as if the Farseers did nothing. Folk saw only the raids that were successful, never the ships that went onto the rocks or sailed too far south during a storm. The people lost heart. The Inland duchies bridled at taxes to protect a coastline they didn't share; the Coastal duchies were laboured under taxes that seemed to make no difference. So if the enthusiasm for Verity's warships was a fickle thing, rising and falling with the folk's current assessment of him, we cannot really blame the people. It seemed the longest winter of my life.

I went from Verity's study to Queen Kettricken's apartments. I knocked and was admitted by the same little page girl as previously. With her merry little face and dark curly hair, Rosemary reminded me of some pool sprite. Within, the atmosphere of the room seemed subdued. Several of Kettricken's women were there, and they all sat on stools around a frame holding a white linen cloth. They were doing edge-work on it, flowers and greenery done in bright threads. I had witnessed similar projects in Mistress Hasty's apartments. Usually these activities seemed merry, with tongues wagging and friendly banter, needles flashing as they dragged their tails of bright

thread through the heavy cloth. But here, it was near silent. The women worked with their heads bent, diligently, skilfully, but without gay talk. Scented candles, pink and green, burned in each corner of the room. Their subtle fragrances mingled scents over the frame.

Kettricken presided over the work, her own hands as busy as any. She seemed the source of the stillness. Her face was composed, even peaceful. Her self-containment was so evident I could almost see the walls around her. Her look was pleasant, her eyes kind, but I did not sense she was really there at all. She was like a container of cool, still water. She was dressed in a long simple robe of green, more of the Mountain style than of Buckkeep. She had set her jewellery aside. She looked up at me and smiled questioningly. I felt like an intruder, an interruption to a group of studying pupils and their master. So instead of simply greeting her, I tried to justify my presence. I spoke formally, mindful of all the watching women.

‘Queen Kettricken. King-in-Waiting Verity has asked me to bring a message to you.’

Something seemed to flicker behind her eyes, and then was still again. ‘Yes,’ she said neutrally. None of the needles paused in their jumping dance, but I was sure that every ear waited for whatever tidings I might be bringing.

‘Upon a tower there was once a garden, called the Queen’s Garden. Once, King Verity said, it had pots of greenery, and ponds of water. It was a place of flowering plants, and fish, and wind chimes. It was his mother’s. My queen, he wishes you to have it.’

The stillness at the table grew profound. Kettricken’s eyes grew very wide. Carefully, she asked, ‘Are you certain of this message?’

‘Of course, my lady.’ I was puzzled by her reaction. ‘He said it would give him a great deal of pleasure to see it restored. He spoke of it with great fondness, especially recalling the beds of flowering thyme.’

The joy in Kettricken’s face unfurled like the petals of a flower. She lifted a hand to her mouth, took a shivering breath through her fingers. Blood flushed through her pale face, rosing her cheeks. Her eyes shone. ‘I must see it,’ she exclaimed. ‘I must see it now!’ She stood abruptly. ‘Rosemary? My cloak and gloves, please.’ She beamed about at her ladies. ‘Will not you fetch your cloaks and gloves also, and accompany me?’

‘My queen, the storm is most fierce today ...’ one began hesitantly.

But another, an older woman with a motherly cast to her features, Lady Modesty, stood slowly. ‘I shall join you on the tower top. Pluck!’ A small

boy who had been drowsing in the corner leaped to his feet. 'Dash off and fetch my cloak and gloves. And my hood.' She turned back to Kettricken. 'I recall that garden well, from Queen Constance's days. Many a pleasant hour I spent there in her company. I will take joy in its restoration.'

There was a heartbeat's pause, and then the other ladies were taking similar action. By the time I had returned with my own cloak, they were all ready to go. I felt distinctly peculiar as I led this procession of ladies through the keep, and then up the long climb to the Queen's Garden. By then, counting the pages and the curious, there were nearly a score of people following Kettricken and me. As I led the way up the steep stone steps, Kettricken was right on my heels. The others trailed out in a long tail behind us. As I pushed on the heavy door, forcing it open against the layer of snow outside, Kettricken asked softly, 'He's forgiven me, hasn't he?'

I paused to catch my breath. Shouldering the door open was doing the injury on my neck no good at all. My forearm throbbed dully. 'My queen?' I asked in reply.

'My lord Verity has forgiven me. And this is his way of showing it. Oh, I shall make a garden for us to share. I shall never shame him again.' As I stared at her rapt smile, she casually put her own shoulder to the door and shoved it open. While I stood blinking in the chill and the light of the winter day, she walked out onto the tower top. She waded through crusted snow calf-high, and paid it no mind at all. I looked around the barren tower top and wondered if I had lost my mind. There was nothing here, only the blown and frozen snow under the leaden sky. It had drifted up over the discarded statuary and pots along one wall. I braced myself for Kettricken's disappointment. Instead, in the centre of the tower top, as the wind swirled the falling flakes around her, she stretched out her arms and spun in a circle, laughing like a child. 'It's so beautiful!' she exclaimed.

I ventured out after her. Others came behind me. In a moment Kettricken was by the tumbled piles of statuary and vases and basins that were heaped along one wall. She brushed snow from a cherub's cheek as tenderly as if she were its mother. She swept a load of snow from a stone bench, and then picked up the cherub and set it upon it. It was not a small statue, but Kettricken used her size and strength energetically as she extricated several other pieces from the drifted snow. She exclaimed over them, insisting that her women come and admire them.

I stood a little apart from them. The cold wind blew past me, awakening the pain in my injuries and bringing me hard memories. Here I had stood once, near naked to the cold, while Galen had tried to hammer the Skill ability into me. Here I had stood, in this very spot, while he beat me as if I were a dog. And here I had struggled with him and, in the struggle, burned and scarred over whatever Skill I had once had. This was a bitter place to me still. I wondered if any garden, no matter how green and peaceful, could charm me if it stood upon this stone. One low wall beckoned me. Had I gone to it and looked over the edge, I knew I would look down on rocky cliffs below. I did not. The quick end that fall had once offered me would never tempt me again. I pushed Galen's old Skill-suggestion aside. I turned back to watch the Queen.

Against the white backdrop of snow and stone, her colours came alive. There is a flower called a snowdrop, that sometimes blooms even as the banked snows of winter are retreating. She reminded me of one. Her pale hair was suddenly gold against the green cloak she wore, her lips red, her cheeks pink as the roses that would bloom here again. Her eyes were darting blue jewels as she excavated and exclaimed over each treasure. In contrast, her dark-tressed ladies with eyes of black or brown were cloaked and hooded against the winter chill. They stood quietly, agreeing with their queen and enjoying her enjoyment, but also rubbing chilled fingers together, or holding cloaks tightly closed against the wind. This, I thought, this is how Verity should see her, glowing with enthusiasm and life. Then he could not help but love her. Her vitality burned, even as his did when he hunted or rode. Or had once.

'It is, of course, quite lovely,' one Lady Hope ventured to say. 'But very cold. And there is little that can be done here until the snow melts and the wind grows kinder.'

'Oh, but you are wrong!' Queen Kettricken exclaimed. She laughed aloud as she straightened up from her treasures, walked again to the centre of the tower top. 'A garden begins in the heart. I must sweep the snow and ice from the tower top tomorrow. And then, all these benches and statues and pots must be set out. But how? Like the spokes of a wheel? As a charming maze? Formally, by variation of height and theme? There are a thousand ways they could be arranged, and I must experiment. Unless, perhaps, my lord will remember it for me just as it once was. Then I shall restore it to him, the garden of his childhood!'

‘Tomorrow, Queen Kettricken. For the skies grow dark, and colder,’ advised Lady Modesty. I could see what the climb followed by standing in the cold had cost the older woman. But she smiled kindly as she spoke. ‘I could, perhaps, tell you tonight what I remember of this garden.’

‘Would you?’ Kettricken exclaimed, and clasped both of her hands in her own. The smile she shed on Lady Modesty was like a blessing.

‘I should be glad to.’

And on those words we slowly began to file from the rooftop. I was the last to go. I pulled the door closed behind me and stood for a moment letting my eyes adjust to the darkness in the tower. Below me, candles bobbed as the others descended. I blessed whatever page had thought to run and fetch them. I followed more slowly, my whole arm, from bite to sword cut, throbbing nastily. I thought of Kettricken’s joy, and was glad of it, even as I guiltily reflected that it was built on a false foundation. Verity had been relieved at my suggestion to turn the garden over to Kettricken, but the act had not the significance to him that it did to Kettricken. She would attack this project as if she were building a shrine to their love. I doubted that by the morrow Verity would even recall he had gifted her with it. I felt both traitorous and foolish as I descended the steps.

I went to the evening meal thinking I wished to be alone, so I avoided the hall, and took myself instead to the guardroom off the kitchen. There I encountered both Burrich and Hands at their meal. When they invited me to join them, I could not refuse. But once I was seated, it was as if I were not there. They did not exclude me from their conversation but they spoke of a life I no longer shared. The immensely rich detail of all that went on in the stables and mews eluded me now. They discussed problems with the confident briskness of men who shared an intimate background knowledge. More and more, I found myself nodding at their words, but contributing nothing. They got along well. Burrich did not speak down to Hands. But Hands did not conceal his respect for a man he clearly regarded as his superior. Hands had learned much from Burrich in a short time. He had left Buckkeep as a lowly stable-boy last autumn. He now spoke competently of the hawks and dogs and asked solid questions concerning Burrich’s breeding choices for the horses. I was still eating when they got up to leave. Hands was concerned about a dog that had been kicked by a horse earlier in the day. They wished me good evening, and continued to talk together as they went out the door.

I sat quietly. There were others about me, guards and soldiers, eating and drinking and talking. The pleasant sounds of talk, of spoon against the pot's side, the thud as someone cut a wedge of cheese from a wheel was like a music. The room smelled of food and folk, of the wood fire and spilled ale and the rich stew bubbling. I should have felt content, not restless. Nor melancholy. Not alone.

Brother?

Coming. Meet me at the old pig shed.

Nighteyes had been hunting afar. I was there first, and I stood in the darkness and waited for him. There was a pot of unguent in my pouch, and I bore a sack of bones as well. The snow whirled around me, an endless dance of winter sparks. My eyes probed the darkness. I sensed him, felt him near, but he still managed to spring out and startle me. He was merciful, giving me no more than a nip and a shake on my uninjured wrist. We went inside the hut. I kindled the stump of a candle and looked at his shoulder. I had been weary last night, and in pain, so I was pleased to see I had done a good job. I had sheared the dense hair and undercoat close to his hide around the cut and wiped the injury with clean snow. The scab on it was thick and dark. I could tell it had bled a bit more today. But not much. I smeared my unguent over it in a thick greasy layer. Nighteyes winced slightly, but suffered my ministrations. Afterward, he turned his head and gave a questioning sniff to the spot.

Goosegrease, he observed, and began to lick at it. I let him. Nothing in the medicine would harm him, and his tongue would push it into the wound better than my fingers could.

Hungry? I asked.

Not really. There are mice in plenty along the old wall, then as he got a whiff of the bag I'd brought, but a bit of beef or venison would be just as welcome.

I tumbled the bones out in a heap for him and he flung himself down beside them to possess them. He snuffed them over, then picked out a meaty knuckle to work on. *We hunt soon?* He imaged Forged ones for me.

In a day or so. I want to be able to wield a sword the next time.

I don't blame you. Cow's teeth are not much of a weapon. But don't wait too long.

Why is that?

Because I saw some today. Senseless ones. They had found a winter-killed buck on a stream bank and were eating it. Fouled, stinking meat, and they were eating it. But it won't hold them for long. Tomorrow, they'll be coming closer.

Then we hunt tomorrow. Show me where you saw them. I closed my eyes, and recognized the bit of creek bank that he recalled for me. *I did not know you ranged that far! Did you go all that way today, with an injured shoulder?*

It was not far. I sensed a bit of bravado in that answer. *And I knew we would be seeking them. I can travel much faster alone. Easier for me to find them out alone, and then take you to them for the hunting.*

It is scarcely hunting, Nighteyes.

No. But it is a thing we do for our pack.

I sat with him for a while in companionable silence, watching him gnaw on the bones I had brought him. He had grown well this winter. Given a good diet and freed from the confines of a cage, he had put on weight and muscle. Snow might fall on his coat, but the thicker black guard-hairs interspersed throughout his grey coat shed the snowflakes and kept any moisture from reaching his skin. He smelled healthy, too, not the rank dogginess of an overfed canine kept inside and unexercised, but a wild, clean scent. *You saved my life, yesterday.*

You saved me from a death in a cage.

I think that I had been alone so long, I had forgotten what it meant to have a friend.

He stopped chewing his bone and looked up at me in mild amusement. *A friend? Too small a word for it, brother. And in the wrong direction. So do not look at me like that. I will be to you what you are to me. Bond brother, and pack. But I am not all you will ever need.* He went back to chewing his bone, and I sat chewing over what he had just advised.

Sleep well, brother, I told him as I left.

He snorted. *Sleep? Hardly. The moon may yet break through this overcast and give me some hunting light. But if not, I may sleep.*

I nodded and left him to his bones. As I walked back to the castle I felt less dismal and alone than I had before. But I also had a twinge of guilt that Nighteyes would so adapt his life and will to mine. It did not seem a clean thing for him to do, this snuffing out of Forged ones.

For the pack. This is for the good of the pack. The senseless ones are trying to come into our territory. We cannot allow it. He sounded comfortable with it, and surprised that it should bother me. I nodded to ourselves in the dark and pushed my way through the kitchen door, back into yellow light and warmth.

I climbed the stairs to my room, thinking of what I had wrought over the past few days. I had resolved to set the cub free. Instead, we had become brothers. I was not sorry. I had gone to warn Verity of new Forged ones near Buckkeep. Instead, I had found he already knew about them, and had gained for myself the task of studying the Elderlings and trying to discover other Skilled ones. I had asked him to give the garden to Kettricken, to busy her mind away from her hurts. Instead, I had deceived her, and bound her more to her love for Verity. I paused to catch my breath on a landing. Perhaps, I reflected, we all danced to the Fool's tune. Had not he suggested some of these very things to me?

I felt again the brass key in my pocket. Now was as good a time as any. Verity was not in his bedchamber, but Charim was. He had no qualms about allowing me to come in and use the key. I took an armload of the scrolls I found there; there were more than I had expected. I bore them back to my room and set them down on my dressing chest. I built up the fire in the fireplace. I peeked at the dressing on the bite on my neck. It was an ugly wad of cloth, saturated with blood. I knew I should change it. I dreaded pulling it loose. In a while. I put more wood on my fire. I sorted through the scrolls. Spidery little writing, faded illustrations. Then I lifted my eyes and looked around my room.

A bed. A chest. A small stand by the bed. An ewer and bowl for wash water. A truly ugly tapestry of King Wisdom conferring with a yellowish Elderling. A branch of candles on the mantel. It had scarcely changed in the years I had lived here from the first night I had moved into it. It was a bare and dreary room, devoid of imagination. Suddenly I was a bare and dreary person, devoid of imagination. I fetched and I hunted and I killed. I obeyed. More hound than man. And not even a favoured hound, to be petted and praised. One of the working pack. When was the last time I had heard from Shrewd? Or Chade? Even the Fool mocked me. What was I, any more, to anyone, except a tool? Was there anyone left who cared for me, myself? Suddenly I could no longer abide my own company. I set down the scroll I had picked up and left my room.

When I knocked at the door of Patience's room, there was a pause. 'Who is it?' came Lacey's voice.

'Only FitzChivalry.'

'FitzChivalry!' A bit of surprise in the tone. It was late for a visit from me. Usually I came during the day. Then I was comforted to hear the sound of a bar being removed, and a latch worked. She had paid attention to what I had told her, I thought. The door opened slowly and Lacey stepped back to admit me, smiling dubiously.

I stepped in, greeting Lacey warmly, and then glanced about for Patience. She was in the other chamber, I surmised. But in a corner, eyes lowered over needlework, sat Molly. She did not look up at me or acknowledge my presence at all. Her hair was tidied back in a bun under a lacy little cap. On another woman, her blue dress might have been simple and modest. On Molly it was drab. Her eyes stayed down on her work. I glanced at Lacey to find her regarding me levelly. I looked at Molly again and something inside me gave way. It took me four steps to cross the room to her. I knelt beside her chair and as she drew back from me, I seized her hand and carried it to my lips.

'FitzChivalry!' Patience's voice behind me was outraged. I glanced at her framed in the doorway. Her lips were set flat in anger. I turned away from her.

Molly had turned her face aside from me. I held her hand and spoke quietly. 'I cannot go on like this any more. No matter how foolish, no matter how dangerous, no matter what any other may think. I cannot be always apart from you.'

She pulled her hand away from me, and I let it go not to hurt her fingers. But I grasped at her skirt and clutched a fold of it like a stubborn child. 'At least speak to me,' I begged her, but it was Patience who spoke.

'FitzChivalry, this is not seemly. Stop it at once.'

'It was not seemly, nor wise, nor appropriate for my father to court you as he did, either. But he did not hesitate. I suspect he felt much as I do right now.' I did not look away from Molly.

That won me a moment of startled silence from Patience. But it was Molly who set aside her needlework and rose. She stepped away and when it became clear that I must let go or tear the fabric of her skirt, I released it. She stepped clear of me. 'If my Lady Patience will excuse me for the evening?'

‘Certainly,’ Patience replied, but her voice was not at all certain.

‘If you go away, there is nothing for me.’ I knew I sounded too dramatic. I was still on my knees by her chair.

‘If I stay, there is still nothing for you.’ Molly spoke levelly as she took off her apron and hung it on a hook. ‘I am a serving-girl. You are a young noble, of the royal family. There can never be anything between us. I’ve come to see that, over the last few weeks.’

‘No.’ I rose and stepped towards her, but forbore to touch her. ‘You are Molly and I am Newboy.’

‘Maybe. Once.’ Molly conceded. Then she sighed. ‘But not now. Do not make this harder for me than it is, sir. You must leave me in peace. I have no where else to go; I must stay here and work, at least until I earn enough ...’ She shook her head suddenly. ‘Good evening, my lady. Lacey. Sir.’ She turned aside from me. Lacey stood silently. I noticed she did not open the door for Molly, but Molly did not pause there. The door shut very firmly behind her. A terrible silence welled up in the room.

‘Well,’ Patience breathed at last. ‘I am glad to see that at least one of you has some sense. What on earth were you thinking, FitzChivalry, to barge in here and all but attack my maid?’

‘I was thinking that I loved her,’ I said bluntly. I dropped into a chair and put my head into my hands. ‘I was thinking that I am very weary of being so alone.’

‘That is why you came here?’ Patience sounded almost offended.

‘No. I came here to see you. I did not know she would be here. But when I saw her, it just came over me. It’s true, Patience. I cannot go on like this.’

‘Well, you’d better, because you’re going to have to.’ The words were hard, but she sighed as she said them.

‘Does Molly speak of it ... of me? To you. I must know. Please.’ I battered at their silence and exchanged looks. ‘Does she truly wish me to leave her alone? Have I become so despised of her? Have I not done all you demanded of me? I have waited, Patience. I have avoided her, I have taken care not to cause talk. But when is an end to it? Or is this your plan? To keep us apart until we forget each other? It cannot work. I am not a babe, and this is not some bauble you hide from me, to distract me with other toys. This is Molly. And she is my heart and I will not let her go.’

‘I am afraid you must.’ Patience said the words heavily.

‘Why? Has she chosen another?’

Patience batted my words away as if they were flies. ‘No. She is not fickle, not that one. She is smart and diligent and full of wit and spirit. I can see how you lost your heart to her. But she also has pride. She has come to see what you refuse. That you come, each of you, from places so far apart that there can be no meeting in the middle. Even were Shrewd to consent to a marriage, which I very much doubt, how would you live? You cannot leave the keep, to go down to Buckkeep Town and work in a candle shop. You know you cannot. And what status would she enjoy if you kept her here? Despite her goodness, people who did not know her well would see only the differences in your rank. She would be seen as a low appetite you had indulged. “Oh, the Bastard, he had an eye for his step-mother’s maid. I fancy he caught her around the corner one time too many, and now he has to pay the piper.” You know the kind of talk I mean.’

I did. ‘I don’t care what folk would say.’

‘Perhaps you could endure it. But what of Molly? What of your children?’

I was silent. Patience looked down at her hands idle in her lap. ‘You are young, FitzChivalry.’ She spoke very quietly, very soothingly. ‘I know you do not believe it now. But, you may meet another. One closer to your station. And she may also. Maybe she deserves that chance of happiness. Perhaps you should draw back. Give yourself a year or so. And if your heart has not changed by then, well ...’

‘My heart will not change.’

‘Nor will hers, I fear.’ Patience spoke bluntly. ‘She cared for you, Fitz. Not knowing who you really were, she gave her heart to you. She has said as much. I do not wish to betray her confidences to me, but if you do as she asks and leave her alone, she can never tell you herself. So I will speak, and hope you hold me harmless for the pain I must give you. She knows this can never be. She does not want to be a servant marrying a noble. She does not want her children to be the daughters and sons of a keep servant. So she saves the little I am able to pay her. She buys, her wax and her scents, and works still at her trade, as best as she is able. She means to save enough, somehow, to begin again, with her own chandlery. It will not be soon. But that is her goal.’ Patience paused. ‘She sees no place in that life for you.’

I sat a long time, thinking. Neither Lacey nor Patience spoke. Lacey moved slowly through our stillness, brewing tea. She pushed a cup of it into

my hand. I lifted my eyes and tried to smile at her. I set the tea carefully aside. 'Did you know, from the beginning, that it would come to this' I asked.

'I feared it,' Patience said simply. 'But I also knew there was nothing I could do about it. Nor can you.'

I sat still, not even thinking. Under the old hut, in a scratched out hollow, Nighteyes was dozing with his nose over a bone. I touched him softly, not even waking him. His calm breathing was an anchor. I steadied myself against him.

'Fitz? What will you do?

Tears stung my eyes. I blinked, and it passed. 'What I am told,' I said heavily. 'When have I ever done otherwise?'

Patience was silent as I got slowly to my feet. The wound on my neck was throbbing. I suddenly wanted only to sleep. She nodded to me as I excused myself. At the door I paused. 'Why I came this evening. Besides to see you. Queen Kettricken will be restoring the Queen's Garden. The one on top of the tower. She mentioned she would like to know how the garden was originally arranged. In Queen Constance's time. I thought perhaps you could recall it for her.'

Patience hesitated. 'I do recall it. Very well.' She was quiet for a moment, then brightened. 'I will draw it out for you, and explain it. Then you could go to the Queen.'

I met her eyes. 'I think you should go to her. I think it would please her very much.'

'Fitz, I have never been good with people.' Her voice faltered. 'I am sure she would find me odd. Boring. I could not –' Her voice stuttered to a halt.

'Queen Kettricken is very alone,' I said quietly. 'There are ladies around her, but I do not think she has real friends. Once, you were Queen-in-Waiting. Cannot you recall what it was like?'

'Very different for her than it was for me, I should think.'

'Probably,' I agreed. I turned to go. 'For one thing, you had an attentive and loving husband.' Behind me Patience made a small shocked sound. 'And I do not think Prince Regal was as ... clever then as he is now. And you had Lacey to support you. Yes, Lady Patience. I am sure it is very different for her. Much harder.'

'FitzChivalry!'

‘I paused at the door. ‘Yes, my lady?’

‘Turn about when I speak to you!’

I turned slowly and she actually stamped the floor at me. ‘This ill becomes you. You seek to shame me! Think you that I do not do my duty? That I do not know my duty?’

‘My lady?’

‘I shall go to her, tomorrow. And she will think me odd and awkward and flighty. She will be bored with me and wish I had never come. And then you shall apologize to me for making me do it.’

‘I am sure you know best, my lady.’

‘Take your courtier’s manners and go. Insufferable boy.’ She stamped her foot again, then whirled and fled back into her bedchamber. Lacey held the door for me as I left. Her lips were folded in a flat line, her demeanour subdued.

‘Well?’ I asked her as I left, knowing she had words left to say to me.

‘I was thinking that you are very like your father,’ Lacey observed tartly. ‘Except not quite as stubborn. He did not give up as easily as you have.’ She shut the door firmly behind me.

I looked at the closed door for a while, then headed back to my room. I knew I had to change the dressing on my neck wound. I climbed the flight of stairs, my arm throbbing at every step. I halted on the landing. For a time I watched the candles burning in their holders. I climbed the next flight of stairs.

I knocked steadily for several minutes. A yellow candle light had been coming out the crack under her door, but as I knocked, it suddenly winked out. I took out my knife and experimented, loudly, with the latch on her door. She’d changed it. There seemed to be a bar as well, a heavier one than the tip of my blade would lift. I gave it up and left.

Down is always easier than up. In fact, it can be too much easier, when one arm is already injured. I looked down at the waves breaking like white lace on the rocks far away. Nighteyes had been right. The moon had managed to come out for a bit. The rope slipped a bit through my gloved hand and I grunted as my injured arm had to take my weight. Only a little more, I promised myself. I let myself down another two steps.

The ledge of Molly’s window was narrower than I had hoped it would be. I kept the rope in a wrap around my arm as I perched there. My knife blade slipped easily into the crack between the shutters; they were very

poorly fitted. The upper catch had yielded and I was working on the lower one when I heard her voice from inside.

‘If you come in, I shall scream. The guards will come.’

‘Then you’d best put on tea for them,’ I replied grimly and went back to wriggling at the lower catch.

In a moment, Molly snatched the shutters open. She stood framed in the window, the dancing light of the fire on the hearth illuminating her from behind. She was in her nightdress, but she hadn’t braided her hair back yet. It was loose and gleaming from brushing. She had thrown a shawl over her shoulders.

‘Go away,’ she told me fiercely. ‘Get out of here.’

‘I can’t,’ I panted. ‘I haven’t strength to climb back up, and the rope isn’t long enough to reach to the base of the wall.’

‘You can’t come in,’ she repeated stubbornly.

‘Very well.’ I seated myself on the windowsill, one leg inside the room, the other dangling out of the window. Wind gusted past me, stirring her night robe and fanning the flames of the fire. I said nothing. After a moment, she began to shiver.

‘What do you want?’ she demanded angrily.

‘You. I wanted to tell you that tomorrow I am going to the King to ask permission to marry you.’ The words came out of my mouth with no planning. I was suddenly giddily aware that I could say and do anything. Anything at all.

Molly stared a moment. Her voice was low as she said, ‘I do not wish to marry you.’

‘I wasn’t going to tell him that part.’ I found myself grinning at her.

‘You are intolerable!’

‘Yes. And very cold. Please, at least let me come in out of the cold.’

She did not give me permission. But she did stand back from the window. I jumped lightly in, ignoring the jolt to my arm. I closed and fastened the shutters. I walked across the room. I knelt by her hearth and built up the fire well with logs to chase the chill from the room. Then I stood, thawing my hands at it. Molly said not a word. She stood sword straight, her arms crossed on her chest. I glanced over at her and smiled.

She didn’t smile. ‘You should go.’

I felt my own smile fade. ‘Molly, please, just talk to me. I thought, the last time we spoke, that we understood each other. Now you don’t speak to

me, you turn away ... I don't know what changed, I don't understand what is happening between us.'

'Nothing.' She suddenly looked very fragile. 'Nothing is happening between us. Nothing can happen between us. FitzChivalry' (and that name sounded so strange on her lips), 'I've had time to think. If you had come to me, like this, a week ago, or a month ago, impetuous and smiling, I know I would have been won over.' She permitted herself the ghost of a sad smile, as if she were remembering the way a dead child had skipped on some long ago summer day. 'But you didn't. You were correct and practical, and did all the right things, and, foolish as it may sound, that hurt me. I told myself that if you loved me as deeply as you had declared you did, nothing, not walls, not manners or reputation or protocol, would get in the way of your seeing me. That night, when you came, when we ... but it changed nothing. You did not come back.'

'But it was for your sake, for your reputation ...' I began desperately.

'Hush. I told you it was foolish. But feelings do not have to be wise. Feelings just are. Your loving me was not wise. Nor my caring for you. I've come to see that. And I've come to see that wisdom must overrule feelings.' She sighed. 'I was so angry when your uncle first spoke to me. So outraged. He made me defiant, he gave me a steel resolve to stay in spite of everything that stood between us. But I am not a stone. Even if I were, even a stone can be worn away by the constant cold drip of common sense.'

'My uncle? The prince?' I was incredulous at the betrayal.

She nodded slowly. 'He wished me to keep his visit to myself. Nothing, he said, could be gained by your knowing of it. He needed to act in his family's best interests. He said I should understand that. I did, but it made me angry. It was only over time that he made me see that it was in my own best interests as well.' She paused and brushed a hand over her cheek. She was crying. Silently, just the tears running as she spoke.

I walked across the room to her. Tentatively, I took her into my arms. She didn't resist me, and that surprised me. I held her carefully, as if she were a butterfly that might be crushed too easily. She leaned her head forward, so that her forehead barely rested on my shoulder, and spoke into my chest. 'In a few more months, I will have saved enough that I can start out on my own again. Not open a business, but rent a room somewhere, and find work to sustain me. And begin to start saving for a shop. That's what I intend to do. Lady Patience is kind, and Lacey has become a real friend to

me. But I do not like being a servant. And I will do it no longer than I have to.’ She stopped speaking and stood still in my arms. She was trembling lightly, as if from exhaustion. She seemed to have run out of words.

‘What did my uncle say to you?’ I asked carefully.

‘Oh.’ She swallowed, and moved her face lightly against me. I think she wiped tears on my shirt. ‘Only what I should have expected him to say. When first he came to me, he was cold and aloof. He thought me a ... street whore, I suppose. He warned me sternly that the King would tolerate no more scandals. He demanded to know if I was with child. Of course, I was angry. I told him it was impossible that I should be. That we had never ...’ Molly paused and I could feel how shamed she had been that anyone could even ask such a question. ‘So then he told me that if that was so, it was good. He asked what I thought I deserved, as reparation for your deceptions.’

The word was like a little knife twisted in my guts. The fury I felt was building, but I forced myself to keep silent that she might speak it all out.

‘I told him I expected nothing. That I had deceived myself as much as you had deceived me. So then, he offered me money. To go away. And never speak of you. Or what had happened between us.’

She was having trouble speaking. Her voice kept getting higher and tighter on each phrase. She fought for a semblance of calm I knew she didn’t feel. ‘He offered me enough to open a chandlery. I was angry. I told him I could not be paid to stop loving someone. That if the offer of money could make me love, or not love, then I was truly a whore. He grew very angry, but he left.’ She gave a sudden shuddering sob, then held herself still. I moved my hands lightly over her shoulders, feeling the tension there. I stroked her hair, softer than any horse’s mane, and sleeker. She had fallen silent.

‘Regal makes mischief,’ I heard myself say. ‘He seeks to injure me by driving you away. To shame me by hurting you.’ I shook my head to myself, wondering at my stupidity. ‘I should have foreseen this. All I thought was that he might whisper against you, or arrange for physical harm to befall you. But Burrich is right. The man has no morals, is bound by no rules.’

‘He was cold, at first. But never coarsely rude. He came only as the King’s messenger, he said, and came himself to save scandal, that no more should know of it than needed to. He sought to avoid talk, not make it. Later, after we had talked a few times, he said he regretted to see me cornered so, and that he would tell the King it was not of my devising. He even bought

candles of me, and arranged for others to know what I had to sell. I believe he is trying to help, FitzChivalry. Or so he sees it.'

To hear her defend Regal cut me deeper than any insult or rebuke she could level at me. My fingers tangled in her soft hair and I unwound them carefully. Regal. All the weeks I had gone alone, avoiding her, not speaking to her lest it cause scandal. Leaving her alone, so that Regal could come in my stead. Not courting her, no, but winning her with his practised charm and studied words. Chopping away at her image of me while I was not there to contradict anything he said. Making himself out to be her ally, while I was left voiceless to become the unthinking callow youth, the thoughtless villain. I bit my tongue before I spoke any more ill of him to her. It would only sound like a shallow angry boy striking back at one who sought to deny his will.

'Have you ever spoken of Regal's visits to Patience or Lacey? What did they say of him?'

She shook her head, and the movement loosed the fragrance of her hair. 'He cautioned me not to speak of it. "Women talk" he said, and I know that is true. I should not even have spoken of it to you. He said that Patience and Lacey would respect me more if it seemed I had reached this decision on my own. He said, also ... that you would not let me go ... if you thought the decision came from him. That you must believe that I turned away from you on my own.'

'He knows me that well,' I conceded to her.

'I should not have told you,' she murmured. She pushed a little away from me, to look up into my eyes. 'I don't know why I did.'

Her eyes and her hair were the colours of a forest. 'Perhaps you did not want me to let you go?' I ventured.

'You must,' she said. 'We both know there is no future for us.'

For an instant, all was stillness. The fire crackled softly to itself. Neither of us moved. But somehow, I stepped to another place, where I was achingly aware of every scent and touch of her. Her eyes and the herb scents of her skin and hair were one with the warmth and suppleness of her body under the soft woollen night robe. I experienced her as if she were a new hue suddenly revealed to my eyes. All concerns, even all thoughts, were suspended in that sudden awareness. I know I trembled, for she put her hands on my shoulders and clasped them, to steady me. Warmth flowed

through me from her hands. I looked down into her eyes and wondered at what I saw there.

She kissed me.

That simple act, of offering up her mouth to mine, was like the opening of a floodgate. What followed was a seamless continuation of her kiss. We did not pause to consider wisdom or morality, we did not hesitate at all. The permission we gave each other was absolute. We ventured together into that newness, and I cannot imagine a deeper joining than our shared amazement brought us. We both came whole to that night, unfettered by expectations or memories of others. I had no more right to her than she had to me. But I gave and I took and I swear I shall never regret it. The memory of that night's sweet awkwardness is the truest possession of my soul. My trembling fingers jumbled the ribbon at the neck closure of her nightgown into a hopeless knot. Molly seemed wise and sure as she touched me, only to betray her surprise with her sharply in-drawn breath when I responded. It did not matter. Our ignorance yielded to a knowing older than both of us. I strove to be both gentle and strong, but found myself amazed at her strength and gentleness.

I have heard it called a dance, I have heard it called a battle. Some men speak of it with a knowing laugh, some with a sneer. I have heard the sturdy market women chuckling over it like hens clucking over bread crumbs; I have been approached by bawds who spoke their wares as boldly as peddlers hawking fresh fish. For myself, I think some things are beyond words. The colour blue can only be experienced, as can the scent of jasmine or the sound of a flute. The curve of a warm, bared shoulder, the uniquely feminine softness of a breast, the startled sound one makes when all barriers suddenly yield, the perfume of her throat, the taste of her skin are all but parts, and sweet as they may be, they do not embody the whole. A thousand such details still would not illustrate it.

The fireplace logs burned down to dark red embers. The candles had long since guttered out. It seemed we were in a place we had entered as strangers, and discovered to be home. I think I would have given away all the rest of the world, just to remain in the drowsy nest of tousled blankets and feather quilts, breathing her warm stillness.

Brother, this is good.

I leaped like a hooked fish, jolting Molly out of her drowsing reverie. 'What is it?'

‘A cramp in my calf,’ I lied, and she laughed, believing me. So simple a fib, but I was suddenly shamed by the lie, by all the lies I had ever spoken and all the truths I had made into lies by leaving them unspoken. I opened my lips to tell her all. That I was the royal assassin, the King’s killing tool. That the knowledge of her that she had given me that night had been shared by my brother the wolf. That she had given herself so freely to a man who killed other men and shared his life with an animal.

It was unthinkable. To tell her those things would hurt and shame her. She would have felt permanently dirtied by the touch we had shared. I told myself that I could stand to have her despise me, but I could not stand to have her despise herself. I told myself that I clenched my lips shut because it was the nobler thing to do, to keep these secrets to myself was better than to let the truth destroy her. Did I lie to myself, then?

Don’t we all?

I lay there, with her arms twined warm around me, with the length of her body warming my side, and promised myself that I would change. I would stop being all those things, and then I would never need tell her. Tomorrow, I promised myself, I would tell Chade and Shrewd that I would no longer kill for them. Tomorrow, I would make Nighteyes understand why I must sever my bond with him. Tomorrow.

But today, in this day that was already beginning to dawn, I had to go forth with the wolf at my side, to hunt the Forged ones and slay them. Because I wanted to go to Shrewd with a fresh triumph, to put him in the mood to grant the boon I would ask. This very evening, when my killing was done, I would ask him to allow Molly and me to marry. I promised myself that his permission would mark the beginning of my new life as a man who would no longer have to keep secrets from the woman he loved. I kissed her forehead, then set her arms softly aside from me.

‘I have to leave you,’ I whispered as she stirred. ‘But I pray it will not be for long. Today I go to Shrewd, to ask permission to marry you.’

She stirred and opened her eyes. She watched in a sort of wonder as I went naked from her bed. I put more wood on the fire, then avoided her gaze as I gathered my scattered clothes and put them on. She was not so shy, for as I looked up from fastening my belt, I found her eyes upon me, smiling. I blushed.

‘I feel we are wed already,’ she whispered. ‘I cannot imagine how the speaking of any vows could make us more truly joined.’

‘Nor I.’ I came to sit on the edge of her bed, to take her hands in mine once again. ‘But there will be great satisfaction to me in letting all know of it. And that, my lady, requires a wedding. And a public speaking of all my heart has already vowed to you. But for now, I must go.’

‘Not yet. Stay a while yet. I am sure we have some small time left before anyone else begins to stir.’

I leaned over her to kiss her. ‘I have to go now, to retrieve a certain rope that is hanging from the battlements to my lady’s window. Otherwise, it might excite comment.’

‘At least stay long enough for me to help me change the dressings on your arm and neck. However did you hurt yourself so? I meant to ask you last night, but ...’

I smiled down at her. ‘I know. There were more interesting things to pursue. No, my dear. But I promise you I shall take care of it this morning, in my room.’ To call her ‘my dear’ made me feel a man as no words ever had before. I kissed her, promising myself that I would go immediately afterwards, but found myself lingering to her touch on my neck. I sighed. ‘I do have to go.’

‘I know. But you have not told me how you injured yourself.’

I could hear in her voice that she did not think my hurts were serious, but only tried to use the subject to detain me at her side. But still it shamed me, and I tried to make the lie as harmless as possible. ‘Dog bites. A bitch in the stable with pups. I guess I did not know her as well as I had thought. I bent to pick up one of her pups, and she went for me.’

‘Poor boy. Well. Are you sure you cleaned it well? Animal bites infect very easily.’

‘I’ll clean it again when I dress it. Now. I must go.’ I covered her over with the feather quilt, but not without a twinge of regret at leaving that warmth. ‘Get what little sleep is left for you before day breaks.’

‘FitzChivalry!’

I paused at the door, turned back. ‘Yes?’

‘Come to me tonight. Regardless of what the King may say.’

I opened my mouth to protest.

‘Promise me! Otherwise, I shall not survive this day. Promise me you will return to me. For no matter what the King may say, know this. I am your wife now. And always will be. Always.’

My heart stood still in me at that gift, and I could do no more than dumbly nod. My look must have been enough, for the smile she bestowed on me was bright and golden as midsummer sunshine. I lifted the bar and unhooked the latch of the door. Easing it open, I peered out into the darkened hallway. 'Be sure you lock up after me,' I whispered, and then I slipped away from her into the little that was left of the night.

THIRTEEN

Hunting

The Skill, like any other discipline, can be taught in a number of ways. Galen, Skillmaster under King Shrewd, used techniques of deprivation and enforced hardship to break down a student's inner walls. Once reduced to a level of cowering survival, the student was susceptible to Galen's invasion of his mind and his enforced acceptance of Galen's Skilling techniques. While the students who survived his training and went on to become his coterie could all Skill reliably, none were especially strong of talent. Galen reportedly congratulated himself at taking students of little talent, and teaching them to Skill reliably. This may be the case. Or perhaps he took students with great potential, and ground them down to adequate tools.

One may contrast Galen's techniques with that of Solicity, Skill mistress before him. She supplied the initial instruction to the then young princes Verity and Chivalry. Verity's account of his instruction indicates much was accomplished by gentleness and lulling her students into lowering their barriers. Both Verity and Chivalry emerged from her training as adept and strong Skill users. Her death unfortunately occurred before their full adult instruction was complete, and before Galen had advanced to a journey status as a Skill instructor. One can only wonder how much knowledge of the Skill went to her grave with her, and what potentials of this royal magic may never be rediscovered.

I spent little time in my room that morning. The fire had gone out, but the chill I felt there was more than that of an unwarmed room. This room was an empty shell of a life soon to be left behind. It seemed more barren than ever. I stood, bared to the waist, and shivered as I washed myself with unwarmed water, and belatedly changed the bandaging on my arm and neck. I did not deserve for those wounds to look as clean as they did. Nonetheless, they were healing well.

I dressed warmly, a padded mountain shirt going on under a heavy leather jerkin. I pulled on heavy leather over-trousers, and laced them close to my legs with strips of leather. I took down my work blade, and armed myself with a short dagger as well. From my working kit, I took a small pot of powdered death's cap. Despite all this, I felt unprotected, and equally foolish as I left my room.

I went straight to Verity's tower. I knew he would be awaiting me, expecting to work with me on Skilling. Somehow, I would have to convince him that I needed to hunt Forged ones today. I climbed the stairs swiftly, wishing this day were over. All of my life was presently focused on the moment when I could knock on King Shrewd's door and ask his permission to marry Molly. The mere thought of her flooded me with such a strange combination of unfamiliar feelings that my strides on the stairs slowed as I tried to consider them all. Then I gave it over as useless. 'Molly,' I said aloud, but softly, to myself. Like a magic word, it strengthened my resolve and spurred me on. I stopped outside the door and rapped loudly.

I felt rather than heard Verity's permission to enter. I pushed open the door and went inside. I shut the door behind me.

Physically, the room was still. A cool breeze sprang in from the open window and Verity sat enthroned before it on his old chair. His hands rested idly on the windowsill and his eyes were fixed on the distant horizon. His cheeks were pink, his dark hair ruffled by the wind's fingers. Save for the soft current from the window, the room was still and silent. Yet I felt as if I had stepped into a whirlwind. Verity's consciousness washed against me and I was drawn into his mind, swept along with his thoughts and his Skilling far out to sea. He carried me with him on a dizzying tour of every ship within the range of his mind. Here we brushed the thoughts of a merchant captain, '... if the price is good enough, load up with oil for the return trip ...' and then skipped from him to a net mender patching hastily, her fid flying, grumbling to herself as the captain railed at her to be faster about her task. We found a pilot worrying about his pregnant wife at home, and three families out digging clams in the dim morning light before the tide came in to cover the beds again. These, and a dozen others we visited before Verity suddenly recalled us to our own bodies and place. I felt as giddy as a small boy who has been boosted aloft by his father to perceive the whole chaos of the fair before being returned to his own feet and his child's view of knees and legs.

I approached the window to stand beside Verity. He still stared out over the water to the horizons. But I suddenly understood his maps and why he created them. The network of lives he had touched so briefly for me were as if he had opened his palm to reveal he cupped a handful of priceless gems. People. His people. It was not some rocky coast or rich pastureland that he stood watch over. It was these folk, these bright glimpses of other lives un-lived by him, but cherished all the same. This was Verity's kingdom. Geographical boundaries marked on parchment enclosed them for him. For a moment I shared his bafflement that anyone could wish harm on these people, and shared, too, his fierce determination that not one more life should be lost to the Red Ships.

The world steadied around me, as vertigo passing, and all was still in the tower top. Verity did not look at me as he spoke. 'So. Hunting today.'

I nodded, not caring that he did not see the gesture. It didn't matter. 'Yes. The Forged ones are closer than we suspected.'

'Do you expect to fight them?'

'You told me to go prepared. I will try the poison first. But they may not be as eager to gobble it down. Or they may still try to attack me. So I'm taking my blade, in case.'

'So I surmised. But take this one instead.' He lifted a sheathed sword from beside his chair and gave it into my hands. For a moment I could only look at it. The leather was fancifully tooled, the hilt had that beautiful simplicity possessed by weapons and tools made by a master. At Verity's nod, I drew the blade in his presence. The metal gleamed and shimmered, the hammering and folding that had given it strength recalled as a watery rippling of light down its length. I held it out and felt it perch in my hand, weightless and waiting. It was a much finer sword than my skill deserved. 'I should present it to you with pomp and ceremony, of course. But I give it to you now, lest for the lack of it you can't return later. During Winterfest, I might ask it back of you, so that I may present it to you properly.'

I slipped it back into its sheath, then drew it out, swift as an in-drawn breath. I had never possessed anything so finely made. 'I feel as if I should swear it to you or something,' I said awkwardly.

Verity permitted himself a smile. 'No doubt Regal would require some such oath. As for me, I don't think a man need swear his sword to me when he has already sworn me his life.'

Guilt assaulted me. I took my courage in both hands. 'Verity, my prince. I go forth today to serve you as an assassin.'

Even Verity was taken aback. 'Direct words,' he mused guardedly.

'It is time for direct words, I think. That is how I serve you today. But my heart has grown weary of it. I have sworn my life to you, as you say, and if you command it, so must I continue. But I ask that you find for me another way to serve you.'

Verity was silent for what seemed a long time. He rested his chin on his fist, and sighed. 'Were it only I you were sworn to, perhaps I could answer swiftly and simply. But I am only King-in-Waiting. This request must be made of your king. As must your request to wed.'

The silence in the room now grew very wide and deep, making a distance between us. I could not break it. Verity spoke at last. 'I showed you how to ward your dreams, FitzChivalry. If you neglect to enclose your mind, you cannot blame others for what you divulge.'

I pushed down my anger and swallowed it. 'How much?' I asked coldly.

'As little as possible, I assure you. I am well used to guarding my own thoughts, less so to blocking out those of others. Especially the thoughts of one as strongly, if erratically Skilled as yourself. I did not seek to be privy to your ... assignation.'

He was silent. I did not trust myself to speak. It was not just that my own privacy had been so badly betrayed. But Molly! How I was ever to explain this to Molly, I could not imagine. Nor could I tolerate the idea of yet another silence masking an unspoken lie between us. As always, Verity was as true as his name. The carelessness had been mine. Verity was speaking, very quietly.

'Truth to tell, I envy you, boy. Were it my choice, you should be wed today. If Shrewd denies you permission today, hold this in your heart, and impart it to Lady Red Skirts: when I am king, you will be free to marry when and where you choose. I will not do to you what was done to me.'

I think then that I grasped all that had been taken from Verity. It is one thing to sympathize with a man whose wife was chosen for him. It is another to come from the bed of one's beloved, and suddenly realize that a man you care for will never know the fullness of what I had experienced with Molly. How bitter must it have been to glimpse what Molly and I shared, and what he must be forever denied?

‘Verity. Thank you,’ I told him.

He met my eyes briefly and gave me a wan smile.

‘Well. I suppose.’ He hesitated. ‘This is not a promise, so do not take it as such. There may be something I can do about the other as well. You might not have time to function as a ... diplomat, if you were given other duties. Duties more valuable to us.’

‘Such as?’ I asked cautiously.

‘My ships grow, day by day, taking shape under their masters’ hands. And again, I am denied what I most desire. I will not be allowed to sail on them. There is much common sense to that. Here, I am able to look out over all and direct all. Here, my life is not risked to the violence of the Red Ship pirates. Here, I can coordinate the attacks of several vessels at once, and dispatch aid where it is most needed.’ He cleared his throat. ‘On the other hand, I will not feel the wind or hear it snapping in the sail, and I will never be allowed to fight the Raiders as I long to, with a blade in my hand, killing swiftly and cleanly, taking blood for the blood they have taken.’ Cold fury rode his features as he spoke. After a moment’s pause, he went on more calmly. ‘So. For those ships to function best, there must be someone aboard each one who can at least receive my information. Ideally, that one would also be able to relay to me detailed information as to what is going on aboard the ship. You have seen, this day, how I am limited. I can tell the thoughts of certain folk, yes, but I cannot direct them as to what they think about. Sometimes, I am able to find one more susceptible to my Skill, and influence his thoughts. But this is not the same thing as having a quick response to a direct question.

‘Have you ever considered sailing, FitzChivalry?’

To say I was taken aback would be an understatement. ‘I ... you have just reminded me that my ability with the Skill is erratic, sir. And reminded me, yesterday, that in a fight, I am more a brawler than a swordsman, despite Hod’s training ...’

‘And I now remind you that it is mid-winter. There are not many months until spring. I have told you it is a possibility, no more than that. I will be able to give you only the barest help with what you need to master by then. I am afraid it is entirely up to you, FitzChivalry. Can you, by spring, learn to control both your Skill and your blade?’

‘As you said to me, my prince, I cannot promise, but it will be my intention.’

‘Fine.’ Verity looked at me steadily for a long moment. ‘Will you begin today?’

‘Today? Today I have to hunt. I dare not neglect that duty, even for this.’

‘They need not exclude each other. Take me with you, today.’

I stared at him blankly for a moment, then nodded assent. I had thought he would arise, to go and put on winter clothes and fetch a sword. Instead, he reached out toward me and took hold of my forearm.

As his presence flowed into me, it was instinct to struggle against him. This was not like other times when he had shuffled through my thoughts as a man sorts scattered papers on a desk. This was a true occupation of my mind. I had not been so invaded since Galen had brutalized me. I tried to jerk free of his grip, but it was like iron on my wrist. Everything paused. *You have to trust me. Do you?* I stood sweating and shuddering like a horse with a snake in its stall.

I don't know.

Think about it, he bade me. He withdrew a trifle.

I could still sense him, waiting, but knew he was holding himself apart from my thoughts. My mind raced frantically. There were too many things to juggle. This was a thing I must do if I wished to win myself free from a life as an assassin. It was a chance to make all the secrets old secrets rather than an ongoing exclusion of Molly and her trust. I had to take it. But how could I do this, and keep secret from him Nighteyes and all that we shared. I quested toward Nighteyes. *Our bond is a secret. I must keep it so. Today, men, I must hunt alone. Do you understand?*

No. It is stupid and dangerous. I shall be there, but you may trust me to be unseen and unknowable.

‘What did you do, just then?’ It was Verity, speaking aloud. His hand was on my wrist. I looked down into his eyes. There was no harshness to his question. He asked it as I might ask it of a small child found carving on the woodwork. I stood frozen inside myself. I longed to unburden myself, to have one person in the world who knew all about me, everything that I was.

You already do, Nighteyes objected.

It was true. And I could not endanger him. ‘You must trust me, also,’ I found myself saying to my King-in-Waiting. And when he remained looking up at me consideringly, I asked, ‘My prince. Do you?’

‘Yes.’

With one word, he gave me his trust, and with it his confidence that whatever I had been doing would not bring him harm. It sounds a simple thing, but for a King-in-Waiting to permit his own assassin to keep secrets from him was a staggering act. Years ago, his father had bought my loyalty, with a promise of food and shelter and education and a silver pin thrust into my shirtfront. Verity's simple act of trust was suddenly more to me than any of these things. The love I had always felt for him suddenly knew no bounds. How could I not trust him?

He smiled sheepishly. 'You can Skill, when you've heart to.' With no more than that, he entered my mind again. As long as his hand was on my wrist, the joining of thoughts was effortless. I felt his curiosity and tinge of woe at looking down at his own face through my eyes. *A looking glass is kinder. I have aged.*

With him ensconced in my mind, it would have been useless to deny the truth of what he said. So, *It was a necessary sacrifice*, I agreed.

He lifted his hand from my wrist. For a moment I had dizzying double vision, looking at myself, looking at him, and then it settled. He turned carefully to set his own eyes once more on the horizon, and then sealed that vision from me. Without his touch, this clasping of minds was a different thing. I left the room slowly, and went down the stairs as if I were balancing a wine glass full to the brim. *Exactly. And in both cases, it is easier to do if you do not look at it and think about it so heavily. Just carry.*

I went down to the kitchens, where I ate a solid breakfast and tried to behave normally. Verity was right. It was easier to maintain our contact if I didn't focus on it. While everyone there was busied at other tasks, I managed to slip a plateful of biscuits into my carry sack. 'Going hunting?' Cook asked me as she turned about. I nodded.

'Well, be careful. What are you going after?'

'Wild boar,' I improvised. 'Just to locate one, not to attempt a kill today. I thought it might be a fine amusement during Winterfest.'

'For who? Prince Verity? You won't budge him out of the keep, pet. Stays too much in his rooms these days, he does, and poor old King Shrewd hasn't taken a real meal with us in weeks. I don't know why I keep cooking his favourites, when the tray comes back as full as I sent it. Now Prince Regal, he might go, long as it didn't spoil his curls.' There was a general clucking of laughter among the kitchen maids at that. My cheeks burned at Cook's boldness. *Steady. They don't know I'm here, boy. And naught of what*

is said to you shall be held against them by me. Don't betray us now. I sensed Verity's amusement, and also his concern. So I permitted myself a grin, thanked Cook for the pasty she insisted I take, and left the keep kitchen.

Sooty was restive in her stall, more than eager for an outing. Burrich passed by as I was saddling her. His dark eyes took in my leathers and the tooled sheath and fine hilt of the sword. He cleared his throat, but then stood silent. I had never been able to decide exactly how much Burrich knew of my work. At one time, in the mountains, I had divulged my assassin's training to him. But that had been before he took a blow on the head attempting to protect me. When he recovered from it, he professed to have lost the memories of the day that preceded it. But sometimes I wondered. Perhaps it was his sage way of keeping a secret a secret; that it could not be discussed even by those who shared it. 'Be careful,' he said at last, gruffly. 'Don't you let that mare come to harm.'

'We'll be careful,' I promised him, and then led Sooty out past him.

Despite my errands, it was still early morning, with just enough winter light to make it safe to canter. I let Sooty out, allowing her to choose her pace and express her spirits, and letting her warm herself without allowing her to break a sweat. There was broken cloud cover, and the sun was slipping through it to touch the trees and banked snow with glistening fingers. I pulled Sooty in, pacing her. We would be taking a roundabout way to get to the creek bed; I did not want to leave the trodden paths until we must.

Verity was with me every second. It was not that we conversed, but he was privy to my internal dialogue. He enjoyed the fresh morning air, Sooty's responsiveness, and the youth of my own body. But the farther I went from the keep, the more aware I became of holding onto Verity. From a touch he had initially imposed on me, the sharing had changed to a mutual effort more like clasping hands. I wondered if I would be able to maintain it. *Don't think about it. Just do it. Even breathing becomes a task if you pay attention to every breath.* I blinked my eyes, suddenly aware that he was now in his study, carrying on his normal morning tasks. Like the humming of far-away bees, I was aware of Charim consulting with him about something.

I could detect no sign of Nighteyes. I was trying not to think about him, nor look for him, a strenuous mental denial that was fully as demanding as keeping Verity's consciousness with me. So quickly had I become

accustomed to reaching out for my wolf and finding him awaiting my touch that I felt isolated, and as unbalanced as if my favourite knife were missing from my belt. The only image that could completely displace him from my mind was Molly's, and that too was one I did not wish to dwell on. Verity had not rebuked me for my actions of the night before, but I knew he regarded them as less than honourable. I had an uneasy feeling that if I allowed myself time to truly consider all that had happened, I would agree with him. Cowardly, I kept my mind reined away from that, too.

I realized I was putting most of my mental effort into not thinking. I gave my head a shake and opened myself up to the day. The road I was following was not well travelled. It wound through the rolling hills behind Buckkeep, and far more sheep and goats trod it than men. Several decades ago, a lightning fire had cleared it of trees. The first growth of trees on it was mostly birch and cottonwood, now standing bare but for snow-burden. This hilly country was ill-suited to farming, and served mostly as summer pasturage for grazing animals, but from time to time I would catch a whiff of wood smoke and see a trodden path leading from the road to a woodcutter's cottage, or a trapper's hut. It was an area of small, isolated homesteads occupied by folk of humbler persuasions.

The road became narrower, and the trees changed as I entered an older part of the forest. Here the dark evergreens still stood thick and crowded close to the road's edge. Their trunks were immense, and beneath their spreading branches snow lay in uneven hummocks on the forest floor. There was little underbrush. Most of the year's snowfall was still up above resting on those thickly-needled limbs. It was easy to turn Sooty aside from the trail here. We travelled under the snow-laden canopy through a greyish daylight. The day seemed hushed in the dimness of the great trees.

You are seeking a specific place. You have definite information as to where the Forged ones are?

They were seen on a certain creek bank, eating from a winter-killed deer. Just yesterday. I thought we could trail them from there.

Who saw them?

I hesitated. A friend of mine. He is shy of most folk. But I have gained his confidence, and sometimes, when he sees odd things, he comes to me and tells me.

Um. I could sense Verity's reservations as he considered my reticence. Well, I shall ask no more. Some secrets are necessary, I suppose. I remember

a little half-wit girl who used to come and sit at my mother's feet. My mother kept her clothed and fed and gave her trinkets and sweets. No one ever paid much attention to her. But once I came upon them unawares, and heard her telling my mother about a man in a tavern who had been selling pretty necklaces and armbands. Later that week, the King's guard arrested Rife the Highwayman in the very same tavern. Quiet folk often know much.

Indeed.

We rode on in a companionable silence. Occasionally I had to remind myself that Verity was not here in the flesh. *But I begin to wish I were. It has been too long, boy, since I rode through these hills simply for the sake of riding. My life has become too heavy with purpose. I cannot remember the last time I did something simply because I wanted to do it.*

I was nodding to his thought when the scream shattered the forest quiet. It was the wordless cry of a young creature, cut off in mid shriek, and before I could control myself, I quested toward it. My Wit found wordless panic, death fear, and sudden horror from Nighteyes. I sealed off my mind to it, but turned Sooty's head that way and urged her toward it. Clinging low to her neck, I nudged her along through the maze of banked snow and fallen limbs and clear ground that was the forest floor. I worked my way up a hill, never getting up to the speed I suddenly so desperately wanted. I crested the hill, and looked down on a scene I shall never be able to forget.

There were three of them, raggedy and bearded and smelly. They snarled and muttered at each other as they fought. They gave off no life sense to my Wit, but I recognized them as the Forged ones that Nighteyes had shown me the night before. She was small, three perhaps, and the woolly tunic she wore was bright yellow, the loving work of some mother's hands. They fought over her as if she were a snared rabbit, dragging on the limbs of her little body in an angry tug of war with no heed to the small life that still resided in her. I roared my fury at the sight and drew my sword just as a Forged one's determined jerk on her neck snapped her free of her body. At my cry, one of the men lifted his head and turned to me, his beard bright with blood. He had not waited for her death to begin feeding.

I kicked Sooty and rode down on them like vengeance on horseback. From the woods to my left, Nighteyes burst onto the scene. He was upon them before I was, leaping to the shoulders of one and opening his jaws wide to set his teeth into the back of the man's neck. One turned to me as I came down, and threw up a useless hand to shield himself from my sword. My

blow was such that my fine new blade half severed his neck from his body before wedging in his spine. I pulled my belt knife and launched myself from Sooty's back to grapple with the man who was trying to plunge his knife into Nighteyes. The third Forged one snatched up the girl's body and raced off into the woods with it.

The man fought like a maddened bear, snapping and stabbing at us even after I had opened up his belly. His entrails hung over his belt and still he came stumbling after us. I could not even take time for the horror I felt. Knowing he would die, I left him and we plunged off after the one who had fled. Nighteyes was a befurred grey streak that undulated up the hillside and I cursed my slow two legs as I sped after him. The trail was plain, trampled snow and blood and the foul stench of the creature. My mind was not working well. I swear that as I raced up that hillside, I somehow thought I could be in time to undo her death and bring her back. To make it have never happened. It was an illogical drive that sped me on.

He had doubled back. From behind a great stump he leapt at us, flinging the girl's body at Nighteyes and then leaping bodily onto me. He was big and muscled like a smith. Unlike other Forged ones I had encountered, this one's size and strength had kept him fed and well-clothed. The boundless anger of a hunted animal was his. He seized me, lifting me clear of my feet, and then fell upon me with one knotty forearm crushing my throat. He landed upon me, barrel chest on my back, pinning my chest and one arm to the earth below him. I reached back, to sink my knife twice into a meaty thigh. He roared with anger and increased the pressure. He pressed my face into the frozen earth. Black dots spotted my vision, and Nighteyes was a sudden addition to the weight on my back. I thought my spine would snap. Nighteyes slashed at the man's back with his fangs, but the Forged one only drew his chin into his chest and hunched his shoulders against the attack. He knew he was killing me with his strangle. Time enough to deal with the wolf when I was dead.

The struggle opened up the wound on my neck and warm blood spilled out. The added pain was a tiny spur to my struggle. I shook my head wildly in his grip, and the slipperiness of my own blood was enough to let me turn my throat a tiny bit. I got in one desperate wheeze of air before the giant shifted his grip on me. He began to bend my head back. If he could not throttle me, he would simply break my neck. He had the muscle for it.

Nighteyes changed tactics. He could not open his jaws wide enough to get the man's head into them, but his scraping teeth found enough purchase to tear part of the man's scalp from his skull. He set his teeth in the flap of flesh and pulled. Blood rained down on me as the Forged one roared wordlessly and kned me in the small of the back. He let go with one arm to flail at Nighteyes. I eeled around in his arms, to bring one knee up into his groin, and then to get a good knife thrust into his side. The pain must have been incredible, but he did not release me. Instead he cracked his head against mine in a flash of blackness, and then wrapped his huge arms around me, pinning me to him as he began to crush my chest.

That is as much of the struggle as I can remember coherently. I don't know what came over me next; perhaps it was the death fury some legends speak of. Teeth, nails and knife I fought him, taking flesh from his body wherever I could reach it. Still, I know it would not have been enough had not Nighteyes also been attacking with the same boundless frenzy. Some time later, I crawled from under the man's body. There was a foul coppery taste in my mouth and I spat out dirty hair and blood. I wiped my hands down my pants and then rubbed them in clean snow, but nothing could ever cleanse them.

Are you all right? Nighteyes lay panting in the snow a yard or two away. His jaws were likewise bloodied. As I watched, he snapped up a great mouthful of snow, then resumed his panting. I rose and stumbled a step or two toward him. Then I saw the girl's body and sank down beside it in the snow. I think that was when I realized I was too late, and had been too late from the instant I had spotted them.

She was tiny. Sleek black hair and dark eyes. Horribly her little body was still warm and lax. I lifted her to my lap and smoothed the hair back from her face. A small face, even baby teeth. Round cheeks. Death had not yet clouded her gaze; the eyes that stared up into mine seemed fixed on a puzzle beyond understanding. Her little hands were fat and soft and streaked with the blood that had run down from the bites on her arms. I sat in the snow with the dead child on my lap. So this was how a child felt in one's arms. So small, and once so warm. So still. I bowed my head over her smooth hair and wept. Sudden shudders ran over me, uncontrollably. Nighteyes snuffed at my cheek and whined. He pawed roughly at my shoulder and I suddenly realized I had shut him out. I touched him with a quieting hand, but could not open my mind to him or anything else. He

whined again, and I finally heard the hoof beats. He gave my cheek an apologetic lick, and then vanished into the woods.

I staggered to my feet, still holding the child. The riders crested the hill above me. Verity in the lead, on his black, with Burrich behind him, and Blade, and half a dozen others. Horribly, there was a woman, roughly dressed, riding behind Blade on his horse. She cried out aloud at the sight of me, and slid quickly from the horse's back, running toward me with hands reaching for the child. I could not bear the terrible light of hope and joy in her face. Her eyes seized on mine for an instant and I saw everything die in her face. She clawed her little girl from my arms, snatched at the cooling face on the lolling neck, and then began to scream. The desolation of her grief broke over me like a wave, sweeping my walls away and carrying me under with her. The screaming never stopped.

Hours later, sitting in Verity's study, I could still hear it. I vibrated to the sound, long shudders that ran over me uncontrollably. I was stripped to the waist, sitting on a stool before the fireplace. The healer was building the fire up, while behind me a stonily silent Burrich was swabbing pine needles and dirt out of the gouge on my neck. 'This, and this aren't fresh wounds,' he observed at one point, pointing down to the other injury on my arm. I said nothing. All words had deserted me. In a basin of hot water beside him, dried iris flowers were uncurling with bits of bog myrtle floating beside them. He moistened a cloth in the water and sponged at the bruises on my throat. 'The smith had big hands,' he observed aloud.

'You knew him?' the healer asked as he turned to look at Burrich.

'Not to talk to. I'd seen him, a time or two, at Springfest when some of the outlying trade folk come to town with their goods. He used to bring fancy silverwork for harness.'

They fell silent again. Burrich went back to work. The blood tingeing the warm water wasn't mine, for the most part. Other than a lot of bruises and sore muscles, I'd escaped with mostly scratches and scrapes and one huge lump on my forehead. I was somehow ashamed that I hadn't been hurt. The little girl had died; I should have at least been injured. I don't know why that thought made sense to me. I watched Burrich make a neat white bandage snug on my forearm. The healer brought me a mug of tea. Burrich took it from him, sniffed it thoughtfully, then gave it over to me. 'I would have used less valerian,' was all he said to the man. The healer stepped back and went to sit by the hearth.

Charim came in with a tray of food. He cleared a small table and began to set it out on it. A moment later Verity strode into the room. He took his cloak off and flung it over a chair back. 'I found her husband in the market,' he said. 'He's with her now. She had left the child playing on the doorstep while she went to the stream for water. When she got back, the child was gone.' He glanced toward me but I couldn't meet his eyes. 'We found her calling her little girl in the woods. I knew ...' He glanced abruptly at the healer. 'Thank you, Dem. If you've finished with FitzChivalry, you may go.'

'I haven't even looked at ...'

'He's fine.' Burrich had run a length of bandaging across my chest and under my opposite arm and up again in an effort to keep a dressing in place on my neck. It was useless. The bite was right on the muscle between the tip of my shoulder and my neck. I tried to find something amusing in the irritated look the healer gave Burrich before he left. Burrich didn't even notice it.

Verity dragged up a chair to face me. I began to lift the mug to my lips, but Burrich casually reached over and took it from my hand. 'After you've talked. There's enough valerian in here to drop you in your tracks.' He took it and himself out of the way. Over by the hearth, I watched him dump out half of the tea and dilute what was left with more hot water. That done, he crossed his arms on his chest and leaned against the mantelpiece, watching us.

I shifted my gaze to Verity's eyes, and waited for him to speak.

He sighed. 'I saw the child with you. Saw them fighting over her. Then you were suddenly gone. We lost our joining, and I couldn't find you again, not even with all my strength. I knew you were in trouble and set out to reach you as soon as I could. I'm sorry I wasn't faster.'

I longed to open myself up and tell Verity everything. But it might be too revealing. To possess a prince's secrets does not give one the right to divulge them. I glanced at Burrich. He was studying the wall. I spoke formally. 'Thank you, my prince. You could not have come faster. And even if you had, it would have been too late. She died at almost the same instant I saw her.'

Verity looked down at his hands. 'I knew that. Knew it better than you did. My concern was for you.' He looked up at me and tried for a smile. 'The most distinctive part of your fighting style is the incredible way you have of surviving it.'

From the corner of my eye, I saw Burrich shift, open his mouth to speak, then close it again. Cold dread uncoiled me. He had seen the bodies of the Forged ones, seen the tracks. He knew I hadn't fought alone against them. It was the only thing that could have made the day worse. I felt as if my heart were suddenly caught in a cold stillness. That Burrich had not spoken of it yet, that he was reserving his accusations for a private time only made it worse.

'FitzChivalry?' Verity called my attention back to him.

I started. 'I beg your pardon, my prince.'

He laughed, almost, a brief snort. 'Enough of "my prince". Rest assured that I do not expect it of you just now, and neither does Burrich. He and I know each other well enough; he did not "my prince" my brother at moments like this. Recall that he was King's Man to my brother. Chivalry drew on his strength, and oftentimes not gently. I am sure Burrich knows that I have used you likewise. And knows also that I rode with your eyes today, at least as far as the top of that ridge.'

I looked to Burrich, who nodded slowly. Neither of us were certain why he was being included here.

'I lost touch with you when you went into a battle frenzy. If I am to use you as I wish, that cannot happen.' Verity drummed his fingers lightly on his thighs for a moment, in thought. 'The only way I can see for you to learn this thing is to practise it. Burrich. Chivalry once told me that in a tight spot, you were better with an axe than a sword.'

Burrich looked startled. Plainly he had not expected Verity to know this about him. He nodded again, slowly. 'He used to mock me about it. Said it was a brawler's tool, not a gentleman's weapon.'

Verity permitted himself a tight smile. 'Appropriate for Fitz's style, then. You will teach him to use one. I don't believe it's something Hod teaches as a general rule. Though no doubt she could if I asked her. But I'd rather it was you. Because I want Fitz to practise keeping me with him while he learns it. If we can tie the two lessons together, perhaps he can master them both at once. And if you are teaching him, then he'll not be too distracted about keeping my presence a secret. Can you do it?'

Burrich could not completely disguise the dismay that crept over him. 'I can, my prince.'

'Then do so, please. Beginning tomorrow. Earlier is better for me. I know you have other duties as well, and few enough hours to yourself. Don't

hesitate to pass some of your duties on to Hands while you are busy with this. He seems a very capable man.'

'He is,' Burrich agreed. Guardedly. Another titbit of information that Verity had at his fingertips.

'Fine, then.' Verity leaned back in his chair. He surveyed us both as if he were briefing a whole roomful of men. 'Does anyone have any difficulties with any of this?'

I saw the question as a polite closing.

'Sir?' Burrich asked. His deep voice had gone very soft and uncertain. 'If I may ... I have ... I do not intend to question my prince's judgment, but ...'

I held my breath. Here it came. The Wit.

'Speak it out, Burrich. I thought I had made it clear that the "my princing" was to be suspended here. What worries you?'

Burrich stood up straight, and met the King-in-Waiting's eyes. 'Is this ... fitting? Bastard or no, he is Chivalry's son. What I saw up there, today ...' Once started, the words spilled out of Burrich. He was fighting to keep anger from his voice. 'You sent him ... He went into a slaughterhouse situation, alone. Most any other boy of his age would be dead now. I ... try not to pry into what is not my area. I know there are many ways to serve my king, and that some are not as pretty as others. But up in the mountains ... and then what I saw today. Could not you find someone besides your brother's child for this?'

I glanced back to Verity. For the first time in my life, I saw full anger on his face. Not expressed in a sneer or a frown, but simply as two hot sparks deep in his dark eyes. The line of his lips was flat. But he spoke evenly. 'Look again, Burrich. That's no child sitting there. And think again. I did not *send* him *alone*. I went with him, into a situation that we expected to be a stalk and a hunt, not a direct confrontation. It didn't turn out that way. But he survived it. As he has survived similar things before. And likely will again.' Verity stood suddenly. The whole air of the room was abruptly charged to my senses, boiling with emotion. Even Burrich seemed to feel it, for he gave me a glance, then forced himself to stand still, like a soldier at attention while Verity stalked about the room.

'No. This isn't what I would choose for him. This isn't what I would choose for myself. Would that he had been born in better times! Would that he had been born in a marriage bed, and my brother still upon the throne!

But I was not given that situation, nor was he. Nor you! And so he serves, as I do. Damn me, but Kettricken has had it right all along. The King is the sacrifice of the people. And so is his nephew. That was carnage up there today. I know of what you speak: I saw Blade go aside to puke after he saw that body, I saw him walk well clear of Fitz. I know not how the boy ... this man survived it. By doing whatever he had to, I suppose. So what can I do, man? What can I do? I need him. I need him for this ugly, secret battling, for he is the only one equipped and trained to do it. Just as my father sets me in that tower, and bids me burn my mind out with sneaking, filthy killing. Whatever Fitz must do, whatever skills he must call upon –'

(My heart stood still, my breath was ice in my lungs.)

'– them let him use. Because that is what we are about now. Survival. Because ...'

'They are my people.' I did not realize I had spoken until they both swung to stare at me. Sudden silence in the room. I took a breath. 'A long time ago, an old man told me that I would some day understand something. He said that the Six Duchies people were my people, that it was in my blood to care about them, to feel their hurts as my own.' I blinked my eyes, to clear Chade and that day at Forge from my vision. 'He was right,' I managed to say after a moment. 'They killed my child today, Burrich. And my smith, and two other men. Not the Forged ones. The Red Ship Raiders. And I must have their blood in return, I must drive them from my coast. It is as simple now as eating or breathing. It is a thing I must do.'

Their eyes met over my head. 'Blood will tell,' Verity observed quietly. But there was a fierceness in his voice, and a pride that stilled the day-long trembling of my body. A deep calm rose in me. I had done the right thing today. I suddenly knew it as a physical fact. Ugly, demeaning work, but it was mine, and I had done it well. For my people. I turned to Burrich, and he was looking at me with that considering gaze usually reserved for when the runt of a litter showed unusual promise.

'I'll teach him,' he promised Verity. 'What few tricks I know with an axe. And a few other things. Shall we begin tomorrow, before first light?'

'Fine,' Verity agreed before I could object. 'Now let us eat.'

I was suddenly famished. I rose to go to the table, but Burrich was suddenly beside me. 'Wash your face and hands, Fitz,' he reminded me gently.

The scented water in Verity's basin was dark with the smith's blood when I was through.

FOURTEEN

Winterfest

Winterfest is as much a celebration of the darkest part of the year as a festival of the returning light. For the first three days of Winterfest, we pay homage to the darkness. The tales told and puppet shows presented are those that tell of resting times and happy endings. The foods are salt fish and smoked flesh, harvested roots and fruit from last summer. Then, on the mid-day of the festival, there is a hunt. New blood is shed to celebrate the breaking point of the year, and new meat is brought fresh to the table, to be eaten with grain harvested from the year before. The next three days are days that look toward the coming summer. The looms are threaded with gayer thread, and the weavers take over an end of the Great Hall to vie amongst themselves for the brightest patterns and lightest weave. The tales told are ones that tell of beginnings of things, and of how things came to be.

I tried to see the King that afternoon. Despite all that had transpired, I had not forgotten my promise to myself. Wallace turned me away, saying that King Shrewd felt poorly and was seeing no one. I longed to hammer on the door and shout for the Fool to make Wallace admit me. But I did not. I was not so sure of the Fool's friendship as I had once been. We'd had no contact since that last mocking song of his. Thinking of him put me in mind of his words, and when I went back to my room, I once more rooted through Verity's manuscripts.

Reading made me sleepy. Even the diluted valerian had been a strong dose. Lethargy took over my limbs. I pushed the scrolls aside, no wiser than when I had begun. I pondered other avenues. Perhaps a public trumpeting at Winterfest that those trained in the Skill, no matter how old or how weak, were being sought? Would that make targets of any who responded? I thought again of the obvious candidates. Those who had trained alongside me. None of them had any fondness for me, but that did not mean they were not still faithful to Verity. Tainted perhaps by Galen's attitudes, but could not

that be cured? I ruled August out immediately. His final experience of the Skill at Jhaampe had burned his abilities out of him. He had retired quietly to some town on the Vin River, old before his time it was said. But there had been others. Eight of us had survived the training. Seven of us had come back from the testing. I had failed it, August had been burned clean of it. That left five.

Not much of a coterie. I wondered if they all hated me as much as Serene did. She blamed me for Galen's death and made no secret of it to me. Were the others as knowledgeable as to what had happened? I tried to recall them all. Justin. Very taken with himself and too proud of his Skilling. Carrod. He had once been a sleepy, likable boy. The few times I had seen him since he had become a coterie member, his eyes had seemed almost empty, as if nothing was left of who he had been. Burl had let his physical strength run to fat once he could Skill instead of carpenter for a living. Will had always been unremarkable. Skilling had not improved him. Still, they were all proven to have Skill ability. Could not Verity retrain them? Perhaps. But when? When did he have time for such an undertaking?

Someone comes.

I came awake. I was sprawled face-down on my bed, scrolls tumbled around me. I hadn't meant to sleep, and seldom slept so deeply. Had Nighteyes not been using my own senses to watch over me, I would have been taken completely unaware. I watched the door of my room ease open. The fire had burned low and there was little other light in the room. I had not latched the door; I had not expected to sleep. I lay very quiet, wondering who came so softly, hoping to take me unawares. Or was it someone hoping to find my room empty, someone after the scrolls perhaps? I eased my hand to my belt knife, gathered my muscles for a spring. A figure came slipping around the door, pushed it quietly shut. I eased the knife out of its sheath.

It's your female. Somewhere, Nighteyes yawned and stretched. His tail gave a lazy wag. I found myself taking a deep breath through my nose. *Molly*, I confirmed to myself with satisfaction as I took in her sweet scent, and then felt an amazing physical quickening. I lay still, eyes closed, and let her come to the bed. I heard her softly chiding exclamation, and then the rustling as she gathered up the scattered scrolls and set them safely upon the table. Hesitantly, she touched my cheek. 'Newboy?'

I could not resist the temptation to feign sleep. She sat beside me and the bed gave sweetly with her warm weight. She leaned over me and as I lay

perfectly motionless she set her soft mouth upon mine. I reached out and drew her to me, marvelling. Yesterday, I had been a man seldom touched: the clap of a friend on my shoulder, or the casual jostling of a crowd, or, too often lately, hands seeking to throttle me. That had been the extent of my personal contact. Then, last night, and now this. She finished the kiss and then lay beside me, gently arranging herself against me. I took a deep breath of her scent and kept still, savouring the places where her body touched mine and made warmth. The sensation was like a soap bubble floating on the wind; I feared even to breathe lest it vanish.

Nice, agreed Nighteyes. Not so much aloneness here. More like pack.

I stiffened and pulled slightly away from Molly.

‘Newboy? What’s wrong?’

Mine. This is mine, and not a thing to share with you. Do you understand?

Selfish. This is not a thing like meat, made more or less by sharing.

‘Just a moment, Molly. I’ve cramped a muscle.’

Which one? Smirking.

No, it is not like meat. Meat I would always share with you, and shelter, and always I will come to fight beside you if you need me. Always I will let you join me in the hunt, and always I will help you hunt. But this, with my ... female. This I must have to myself. Alone.

Nighteyes snorted, scratched at a flea. *You are always marking off lines that do not exist. The meat, the hunt, the defending of territory and females ... these are all pack. When she bears cubs, shall I not hunt to feed them? Shall I not defend them?*

Nighteyes ... I cannot explain this to you just now. I should have spoken with you earlier. For now, will you withdraw? I promise we shall discuss it. Later.

I waited. Nothing. No sense of him at all. One down, one to go.

‘Newboy? Are you all right?’

‘I’m fine. I just ... need a moment.’ I think it was the hardest thing I have ever done. Molly was beside me, suddenly hesitant, on the point of pulling away from me. I had to concentrate on finding my boundaries, on placing my mind in the middle of myself and setting limits to my thoughts. I took the breaths and let them out evenly. Adjusting harness. That was what it always reminded me of, and the image I always used. Not loose enough to

slip, not tight enough to bind. Confining myself to my own body, lest I startle Verity awake.

‘I heard the rumours,’ Molly began, then stopped. ‘I’m sorry. I should not have come. I thought perhaps you might need ... but maybe what you need is to be alone.’

‘No, Molly, please, Molly, come back, come back,’ and I flung myself across the bed after her and managed to catch the hem of her skirt as she stood.

She turned back to me, still full of uncertainty.

‘You are always exactly what I need. Always.’

A smile ghosted across her lips and she sat on the edge of the bed. ‘You seemed so distant.’

‘I was. Sometimes I just need to clear my mind.’ I stopped, uncertain of what else I could say without lying to her. I was determined to do that no longer. I reached and took her hand into mine.

‘Oh,’ she said after a moment. There was an awkward little pause as I offered no further explanation. ‘Are you all right?’ she asked carefully after a few more moments had slipped by.

‘I’m fine. I didn’t get in to see the King today. I tried, but he wasn’t feeling well, and ...’

‘Your face is bruised. And scratched. There were rumours ...’

I took a silent breath. ‘Rumours?’ Verity had enjoined the men to silence. Burrich wouldn’t have spoken, nor Blade. Perhaps none of them had spoken to anyone who hadn’t been there. But men will always discuss what they have witnessed together, and it wouldn’t take much for anyone to overhear them.

‘Don’t play cat and mouse with me. If you don’t want to tell me, then say so.’

‘The King-in-Waiting asked us not to speak of it. That isn’t the same as not wanting to tell you about it.’

Molly considered a moment. ‘I suppose not. And I shouldn’t listen to gossip, I know. But the rumours were so strange ... and they brought bodies back to the keep, for burning. And there was a strange woman, weeping and weeping in the kitchen today. She said that Forged ones had stolen and killed her child. And someone said you had fought them to try and get the baby back, and another said, no, that you’d come upon them just as a bear attacked them. Or something. Someone said you had killed them all, and

then someone who had helped burn the bodies said that at least two of them had been mauled by an animal of some kind.’ She fell silent and looked at me. She rested on her side, bare inches away from me, her eyes looking directly into mine. I didn’t want to think about any of it. I didn’t want to lie to her, nor even to tell her the truth. I couldn’t tell anyone the complete truth. So I just looked into her eyes and wished that things were simpler for us.

‘FitzChivalry?’

I would never get used to hearing that name from her. I sighed. ‘The King asked us not to speak of it. But ... yes, a child was killed by Forged ones. And I was there, too late. It was the ugliest, saddest thing I have ever witnessed.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just so hard, not knowing.’

‘I know.’ I reached out to touch her hair. She leaned her head against my hand. ‘I told you once that I had dreamed of you, at Siltbay. I journeyed from the Mountain Kingdom, all the way back to Buckkeep, not knowing if you had survived. Sometimes I thought the burning house had fallen on the cellar; at other times, I thought the woman with the sword had finished you ...’

Molly looked at me levelly. ‘When the house fell, a great wind of sparks and smoke whooshed towards us. It blinded her, but my back was to it. I ... I killed her with the axe.’ She suddenly started to tremble. ‘I told no one of it. No one. How did you know?’

‘I dreamed it.’ I pulled gently at her hand and she came down on the bed beside me. I put my arms around her, and felt her trembling still. ‘I have true dreams, sometimes. Not often,’ I told her quietly.

She drew back a little from me. Her eyes searched my face. ‘You would not lie to me about this, Newboy?’

The question hurt, but I deserved it. ‘No. This is not a lie. I promise you that. And I promise that I shall never lie ...’

Her fingers stopped my lips. ‘I hope to spend the rest of my life with you. Make me no promises that you cannot keep for the rest of your days.’ Her other hand went to the lacing of my shirt. It was my turn to tremble.

I kissed her fingers. And then her mouth. At some time, Molly got up and latched and barred my door. I remember sending up a fervent prayer that this would not be the night that Chade finally returned from his journeying. It was not. Instead I journeyed afar that night, into a place that was becoming ever more familiar, but none the less wondrous to me.

She left me in the deep of the night, shaking me awake to insist that I latch and bar the door after her. I wanted to dress and walk her back to her room, but she refused me indignantly, saying she was perfectly capable of going up some stairs, and that the less we were seen together, the better. Reluctantly I conceded her logic. The sleep I fell into then was deeper than any the valerian had induced.

I awoke to thunder and shouting. I found myself on my feet, dazed and confused. After a moment, the thunder turned to pounding on my door, and the shouting was Burrich's repetition of my name. 'A moment!' I managed to call back. I ached everywhere. I dragged on some clothes and staggered to the door. It took a long time for my fingers to manage the catch. 'What's wrong?' I demanded.

Burrich just stared at me. He was washed and dressed, hair and beard combed, and carrying two axes.

'Oh.'

'Verity's tower room. Hurry up, we're already late. But wash first. What is that scent?'

'Perfumed candles,' I extemporized. 'They're supposed to bring restful dreams.'

Burrich snorted. 'That's not the kind of dreams that scent would bring me. It's full of musk, boy. Your whole room reeks of it. Meet me up in the tower.'

And he was gone, striding purposefully down the hall. I went back into my room, groggily realizing that this was his idea of early morning. I washed myself thoroughly with cold water, not enjoying it, but lacking the time to warm any. I dug about for fresh clothes and was dragging them on when the pounding at my door began again. 'I'm nearly there,' I called out. The pounding went on. That meant Burrich was angry. Well, so was I. Surely he could understand how badly I ached this morning. I jerked the door open to confront him and the Fool slipped in as smoothly as a waft of smoke. He wore a new motley of black and white. The sleeves of his shirt were all embroidered with black vines crawling up his arms like ivy. Above the black collar, his face was as pale as a winter moon. Winterfest, I thought dully. Tonight was the first night of Winterfest. The winter had already been as long as any five others I had known. But tonight we would begin to mark the mid-point of it.

'What do you want?' I demanded, in no mood for his silliness.

He took a deep appreciative sniff. ‘Some of what you had would be lovely,’ he suggested, and then danced back gracefully at the look on my face. I was instantly angry. He leaped lightly to the centre of my tousled bed, then to the other side, putting it between us. I lunged across it after him. ‘But not from you,’ he exclaimed coquettishly and fluttered his hands at me in girlish rebuke before retreating again.

‘I’ve no time for you,’ I told him disgustedly. ‘Verity’s expecting me and I cannot keep him waiting.’ I rolled off the bed and stood to adjust my clothing. ‘Out of my room.’

‘Ah, such a tone. Time was when the Fitz could handle a jest better than this.’ He pirouetted in the middle of my room, then stopped abruptly. ‘Are you truly angry with me?’ he demanded straightforwardly.

I gaped to hear him speak so bluntly. I considered the question. ‘I was,’ I said guardedly, wondering if he were deliberately drawing me out. ‘You made a fool of me that day, with that song, before all those people.’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t take titles to yourself. Only I am the Fool. And the Fool is always only what I am. Especially that day, with that song, before all those people.’

‘You made me doubt our friendship,’ I said bluntly.

‘Ah, good. For doubt not that others must always doubt our friendship if we are to remain doughty friends.’

‘I see. Then it was your end to sow rumours of strife between us. I understand, then. But I still must go.’

‘Farewell, then. Have fun playing at axes with Burrich. Try not to be dumb-struck with all he teaches you today.’ He put two logs onto my failing fire, and made a great show of settling himself before it.

‘Fool,’ I began uncomfortably. ‘You are my friend, I know. But I like not to leave you here, in my room, while I am gone.’

‘I like it not when others enter my room when I am not there,’ he pointed out archly.

I flushed miserably. ‘That was long ago. And I apologized for my curiosity. I assure you, I have never done it again.’

‘Nor shall I, after this. And when you come back, I shall apologize to you. Shall that do?’

I was going to be late. Burrich was not going to be amused. No help for it. I sat down on the edge of the rumpled bed. Molly and I had lain here. Suddenly, it was a personal area. I tried to be casual as I tugged the quilts up

over the featherbeds. 'Why do you want to stay in my room? Are you in danger?'

'I live in danger, Fitzy-fitz. As do you. We are all in danger. I should like to stay here for part of the day, and try to find a way out of that danger. Or at least a way to lessen it.' He shrugged significantly toward the scatter of scrolls.

'Verity entrusted those to me,' I said uneasily.

'Obviously because he feels you are a man whose judgement he trusts. So, perhaps you shall judge it safe to entrust them to me?'

It is one thing to trust a friend with one's own possessions. It is another to allow him those another has put in your safekeeping. I found I had no doubt of my own trust of the Fool. But. 'Perhaps it would be wiser to ask Verity first,' I offered.

'The less connection between Verity and me, the better it is for both of us.' The Fool spoke flatly.

'You do not care for Verity?' I was startled.

'I am the King's Fool. He is the King-in-Waiting. Let him wait. When he is king, I shall be his. If he does not get us all killed before then.'

'I will hear nothing spoken against Prince Verity,' I told him softly.

'No? Then you must walk about with your ears closely stoppered these days.'

I walked to the door, set my hand to the latch. 'We must leave now, Fool. I am already late.' I kept my voice steady. His sneer at Verity had cut me as deeply as if aimed at me.

'Do not be the Fool, Fitz. That is my role. Think. A man can serve only one master. No matter what your lips may say, Verity is your king. I fault you not for that. Do you fault me that Shrewd is mine?'

'I do not fault you. Nor do I make mock of him before you.'

'Nor do you come to visit him, no matter how many times I have urged it.'

'I was at his door just yesterday. I was turned away. They said he was not well.'

'And if that were to happen at Verity's door, would you take it so meekly?'

That made me stop and think. 'No. I don't suppose I would.'

'Why do you give him up so easily?' The Fool spoke softly, like a man grieved. 'Why does not Verity bestir himself for his father, instead of luring

away Shrewd's men to his side?'

'I have not been lured away. Rather Shrewd has not seen fit to see me. As for Verity, well, I cannot speak for him. But all know it is Regal that Shrewd favours of his sons.'

'Do all know that? Then do all know as well where Regal's heart is truly set?'

'Some do,' I said briefly. This was dangerous talk.

'Reflect on this. Both of us serve the king we love best. Yet there is another that we love least. I do not think we have a conflict of loyalty, Fitz, while we are united in who we love least. Come. Confess to me that you have scarce had time to set your eyes upon the scrolls, and I shall remind you that the time you have not had has fled us all too swiftly. This is not a task that can wait upon your convenience.'

I teetered on the decision. The Fool came suddenly closer. His eyes were always hard to meet and harder to read. But the set of his mouth showed me his desperation. 'I will trade with you. I offer you a bargain you will find nowhere else. A secret I hold, promised to you, after you have let me search the scrolls for a secret which may not even be there.'

'What secret?' I asked reluctantly.

'My secret.' He turned aside from me and stared at the wall. 'The mystery of the Fool. Whence comes he and why?' He cast me a sidelong glance and said no more.

The curiosity of a dozen years leaped in me. 'Freely given?' I asked.

'No. Offered as a bargain, as I said.'

I considered. Then, 'I'll see you later. Latch the door when you leave.' And I slipped out.

There were serving-folk moving about in the corridors. I was grievously late. I forced myself into a creaking trot, and then to a run. I did not slow for the stairs to Verity's tower, but rushed up their full length, knocked once and then entered.

Burrich turned to me, greeting me with a frown. The spartan furnishings of the room had already been pushed to one wall, save for Verity's window chair. Verity was already ensconced in it. He turned his head to me more slowly, with eyes still full of distance. There was a drugged look to his eyes and mouth, a laxness painful to see when one knew what it meant. The Skill hunger gnawed at him. I feared that what he wished to teach me would only feed it and increase it. Yet how could either of us say

no? I had learned something yesterday. It had not been a pleasant lesson, but once learned it could not be undone. I knew now that I would do whatever I must to drive the Red Ships from my shore. I was not the king, I would never be the king. But the folk of the Six Duchies were mine, just as they were Chade's. I understood now why Verity spent himself so recklessly.

'I beg pardon that I am late. I was detained. But I am ready to begin now.'

'How do you feel?' The question came from Burrich, asked with genuine curiosity. I turned to find him regarding me as sternly as before, but also with some puzzlement.

'Stiff, sir. A bit. The run up the stairs warmed me up some. Sore, from yesterday. But otherwise I am all right.'

A bit of amusement quirked at his face. 'No tremors, FitzChivalry? No darkening at the edge of your vision, no dizzy spells?'

I paused to think for a moment. 'No.'

'Be damned.' Burrich gave a snort of amusement. 'Evidently the cure has been to beat it out of you. I'll remember that the next time you need a healer.'

Over the next hour, he seemed intent on applying his new theory of healing. The heads of the axes were blunt ones, and he had bundled them both in rags for this first lesson, but that did not prevent bruises. To be honest, most of them I earned with my own clumsiness. Burrich was not trying to land any blows that day, but only to teach me to use the whole weapon, not just the head of it. To keep Verity with me was effortless, for he remained in the same room with us. He was silent within me that day, offering no counsels or observations or warnings, but merely riding with my eyes. Burrich told me that the axe was not a sophisticated weapon, but was a very satisfactory one if used correctly. At the end of the session, he pointed out to me that he had been gentle with me, in consideration of the wounds I already bore. Verity dismissed us, and we both went down the stairs rather more slowly than I had come up.

'Be on time tomorrow,' Burrich charged me as we parted at the kitchen door, he going back to his stables, and I to find breakfast. I ate as I had not in days, with a wolf's appetite, and wondered at the source of my own sudden vitality. Unlike Burrich, I did not put it down to any beating I had received. Molly, I thought, had healed with a touch what all the herbs and rest in a year could never have put to rights. The day suddenly stretched long in front

of me, full of unbearable minutes of unendurable hours before nightfall and the kindly dark allowed us to be together again.

I set her resolutely from my mind and resolved to fill the day with tasks. A dozen immediately leapt to mind. I had been neglecting Patience. I had promised my aid with Kettricken's garden. An explanation was owed to Brother Nighteyes. A visit was owed King Shrewd. I tried to order them in importance. Molly kept moving to the top of the list.

I resolutely set her to last. King Shrewd, I decided. I gathered my crockery from the table and took it back to the kitchen. The bustle was deafening. It puzzled me for a moment, until I recalled that tonight was the first night of Winterfest. Old Cook Sara looked up from the bread she was kneading and motioned me over. I went and stood beside her as I often had as a child, admiring the deft way her fingers shaped handfuls of dough into rolls and set them to rise. She was flour to her dimpled elbows, and flour smudged one cheek as well. The racket and rush of the kitchen created a strange sort of privacy. She spoke quietly through the clatter and chatter, and I had to strain to hear her.

'I just wanted you to know,' she grunted as she folded and pushed a new batch of dough, 'that I know when a rumour is nonsense. And I speak it so when anyone tries to tell it here in my kitchen. They can gossip all they like in the laundry court, and tattle tales as much as they wish while they spin, but I'll not have ill said of you here in my kitchen.' She glanced up at me with snapping black eyes. My heart stood still with dread. Rumours? Of Molly and me?

'You've et at my tables, and often enough, stood aside me and stirred a pot while we chatted when you were small. I think that maybe I know you better than most. And them what says you fight like a beast because you're more than a half beast are talking evil nonsense. Them bodies was tore up bad, but I've seen worse done by men in a rage. When Sal Flatfish's daughter was raped, she cut up that beast with her fish-knife, chop, chop, chop, right there in the market, just like she was cutting bait to set her lines. What you done was no worse than that.'

I knew an instant of dizzying terror. More than half beast ... It wasn't so long ago or far away that folk with the Wit were burned alive. 'Thank you,' I said, fighting for a calm voice. I added a modicum of truth when I said, 'Not all of that was my doing. They were fighting over ... their prey when I came on them.'

‘Ginna’s daughter. You need not hide words from me, Fitz. I’ve children of my own, grown now, but if any was to attack them, why, I’d pray there’d be one like to you to defend them, no matter how. Or avenge them, if that’s all you could do.’

‘I’m afraid it was, Cook.’ The shudder that ran over me was not feigned. I saw again the lines of blood trickled over a fat little fist. I blinked, but the image stayed. ‘I’ve got to hurry off now. I’m to wait on King Shrewd this day.’

‘Are ye? Well, there’s a spot of good news, then. You just run these up with you, then.’ She trundled over to a cupboard, to take out a covered tray of small pastries baked rich with soft cheese and currants. She set a pot of hot tea beside them, and a clean cup. She arranged the pastries lovingly. ‘And you see he eats them, Fitz. His favourites, they are, and if he tastes one, I know he’ll eat them all. And do him good, too.’

Mine, too.

I jumped as if poked with a pin. I tried to cover it with a cough, as if I had suddenly choked, but Cook still looked at me oddly. I coughed again, and nodded at her. ‘I’m sure he’ll love them,’ I said in a choked voice, and bore the tray out of the kitchen. Several sets of eyes followed me. I smiled pleasantly and tried to pretend I didn’t know why.

I didn’t realize you were still with me, I told Verity. A tiny part of me was reviewing every thought I’d had since I left his tower, and was thanking Eda that I had not decided to seek out Nighteyes first, even as I pushed such thoughts aside, unsure how private they were.

I know. I didn’t intend to be spying on you. Only to show you that when you do not focus so tightly on this, you are able to do it.

I groped after his Skilling. *More your effort than mine,* I pointed out as I climbed the stairs.

You’re annoyed with me. Beg pardon. From now on, I shall be sure you are aware of me whenever I am with you. Shall I leave you to your day?

My own surliness had left me feeling embarrassed. *No. Not yet. Ride with me a bit more while I visit King Shrewd. Let’s see how far we can carry this.*

I sensed his assent. I paused before Shrewd’s door, and balanced the tray with one hand as I hastily smoothed my hair back and tugged my jerkin straight. My hair had begun to be a problem lately. Jonqui had cut it short during one of my fevers in the mountains. Now that it was growing out, I

didn't know whether to tie it back in a tail as Burrich and the guardsmen did, or keep it at my shoulders as if I were a page still. I was much too old to wear it in the half-braid of a child.

Tie it back, boy. I'd say you'd earned the right to wear it as a warrior, as much as any guardsman. Just don't start fussing about it and twining it into oiled curls as Regal does.

I fought the smirk off my face and knocked at the door.

I waited a bit, then knocked again, more loudly.

Announce yourself and open it, Verity suggested.

'It's FitzChivalry, sire. I've brought you something from Cook.' I set my hand to the door. It was latched from within.

That's peculiar. It has never been my father's way to latch a door. Put a man on it, yes, but not latch it and ignore someone knocking. Can you slip it?

Probably. But let me try knocking again first. I all but pounded on the door.

'A moment! A moment!' someone hissed from inside. But it was considerably more than that before several latches were undone and the door opened a hand's width. Wallace peered out at me like a rat from under a cracked wall. 'What do you want?' he demanded accusingly.

'Audience with the King.'

'He's asleep. Or was before you came pounding and shouting. Be off with you.'

'A moment.' I shoved my booted foot into the closing door. With one free hand, I turned up the collar of my jerkin, to expose the red-stoned pin I was seldom without. The door was closed firmly on my foot. I put a shoulder against it, leaned as much as I could without dropping the tray I still carried. 'This was given to me by King Shrewd a number of years ago. With it he gave the promise that whenever I showed it, I would be admitted to see him.'

'Even if he's asleep?' Wallace asked snidely.

'He placed no limitations on it. Do you?' I glared at him through the cracked door. He considered a moment, then stepped back from it.

'By all means, then, do come in. Come and see your king asleep, trying to get the rest he so badly needs in his condition. But do you disturb it, and I as his healer shall tell him to take away that pretty pin and see that you do not bother him again.'

‘You may recommend that as you wish. And if my king desires it, I shall not dispute it.’

He stood aside from me with an elaborate bow. I desperately wanted to knock that knowing sneer from his face, but I ignored it.

‘Wonderful,’ he elaborated as I passed him. ‘Sweet pastries to upset his digestion and tax him all the more. Thoughtful lad, aren’t you?’

I kept my temper. Shrewd was not in his sitting room. The bedchamber?

‘Will you truly bother him there? Well, why not? You’ve shown no other manners, why should I expect consideration now?’ Wallace’s voice was full of snide condescension.

I gripped my temper.

Don’t just accept that from him. Turn and face him down now. This was not advice from Verity, but a command. I set the tray down carefully upon a small table. I took a breath and turned to face Wallace. ‘Have you a dislike of me?’ I asked directly.

He took a step back but tried to keep his sneer in place. ‘A dislike? Why should I, a healer, mind if someone comes to disturb an ill man when he is finally resting?’

‘This room reeks of Smoke. Why?’

Smoke?

A herb they use in the mountains. Seldom for medicine, save pains nothing else will halt. But more often the burning fumes are breathed for pleasure. Much as we use carris seed at Springfest. Your brother has a liking for it.

As did his mother. If it is the same herb. She called it mirthleaf.

Almost the same leaf, but the mountain plant grows taller with fleshier leaves. And thicker smoke.

My exchange with Verity had taken less than a blink of an eye. One can Skill information as fast as one can think it. Wallace was still pursing his lips over my question. ‘Are you claiming to be a healer?’ he demanded.

‘No. But I’ve a working knowledge of herbs, one that suggests Smoke is not appropriate to a sick man’s chambers.’

Wallace was still a moment as he formulated an answer. ‘Well. A king’s pleasures are not his healer’s area of concern.’

‘Perhaps they are mine, then,’ I offered, and turned away from him. I picked up the tray and pushed open the door to the King’s dimly-lit bedchamber.

The reek of Smoke was heavier here, the air thick and cloying with it. Too hot a fire was burning, making the room close and stuffy. The air was still and stale as if no fresh wind had blown through the room for weeks. My own breath seemed heavy in my lungs. The King lay still, breathing stertorously beneath a mound of feather quilts. I looked about for a place to set down the tray of pastries. The small table close to his bed was littered. There was a censer for Smoke; the drifting ash thick on its top, but the burner was out and cold. Beside it was a goblet of lukewarm red wine, and a bowl with some nasty grey gruel in it. I set the vessel on the floor, and brushed the table clean with my shirt sleeve before setting the tray down. As I approached the King's bed, there was a fusty, foetid smell that became even stronger as I leaned over the King.

This is not like Shrewd at all.

Verity shared my dismay. *He has not summoned me much of late. And I have been too busy to call upon him unless he bids me to. The last time I saw him was in his sitting room, in an evening. He complained of headaches, but this...*

The thought trailed away between us. I glanced up from the King to find Wallace peering in round the door at us. There was something in his face; I know not whether to call it satisfaction or confidence, but it roused me to fury. In two steps I had reached the door. I slammed it, and had the satisfaction of hearing him yelp as he jerked his pinched fingers out. I dropped into place an ancient bar that had probably never been used in my lifetime.

I moved to the tall windows, jerked aside the tapestries that covered them, and flung wide the wooden shutters. Clear sunlight and fresh cold air spilled into the room.

Fitz, this is rash.

I made no reply. Instead, I moved about the room, dumping censer after censer of ash and herb out of the open window. I brushed the clinging ash out with my hand to free the room from its reek. From about the room I gathered a half a dozen sticky goblets of stale wine, and a tray full of bowls and plates of untouched or half-eaten food. I stacked them by the door. Wallace was pounding on it and howling with fury. I leaned against it and spoke through the crack. 'Hush!' I told him sweetly. 'You'll waken the King.'

Have a boy sent with ewers of warm water. And tell Mistress Hasty that the King's bed requires clean linens, I requested of Verity.

Such orders cannot come from me. A pause. Don't waste time in anger. Think, and you'll see why it must be so.

I understood, but knew also that I would not leave Shrewd in this dingy, smelly room any more than I would abandon him to a dungeon. There was half an ewer of water, stale, but mostly clean. I set it to warm by the hearth. I wiped his bed table clean of ash, and set out the tea and pastry tray upon it. Rummaging boldly through the King's chest, I found a clean nightshirt, and then washing herbs. Leftover, no doubt, from Cheffer's time. I had never thought I would so miss a valet.

Wallace's pounding ceased. I did not miss it. I took the warmed water scented with the herbs and a washing cloth and set it by the King's bedside. 'King Shrewd,' I said gently. He stirred slightly. The rims of his eyes were red, the lashes gummed together. When he opened his eyes, he blinked red-veined eyes at the light.

'Boy?' He squinted about the room. 'Where is Wallace?'

'Away for the moment. I've brought you warm wash water, and fresh pastries from the kitchen. And hot tea.'

'I ... I don't know. The window's open. Why is the window open? Wallace has warned me about taking a chill.'

'I opened it to clear the air in the room. But I'll close it if you like.'

'I smell the sea. It's a clear day, isn't it? Listen to those gulls cry a storm coming ... No. No, close the window, boy. I dare not take a chill, not as ill as I am already.'

I moved slowly to close the wooden shutters. 'Has your majesty been ill long? Not much has been said of it about the palace.'

'Long enough. Oh, forever it seems. It is not so much that I am ill as that I am never well. I am sick, and then I get a bit better, but as soon as I try to do anything, I am sick again, and worse than ever. I am so weary of being sick, boy. So tired of always feeling tired.'

'Come, sir. This will make you feel better.' I dampened the cloth and wiped his face gently. He recovered himself enough to motion me aside as he washed his own hands, and then wiped his face again more firmly. I was appalled at how the wash water had yellowed as it cleansed him.

'I've found a clean nightshirt for you. Shall I help you into it? Or would you rather that I sent for a boy to bring a tub and warm water? I would bring

clean linens for the bed while you bathed.'

'I, oh, I haven't the energy, boy. Where is that Wallace? He knows I cannot manage alone. What possessed him to leave me?'

'A warm bath might help you to rest,' I tried persuasively. Up close, the old man smelled. Shrewd had always been a cleanly man; I think that his grubbiness distressed me more than anything else.

'But bathing can lead to chills. So Wallace says. A damp skin, a cool wind, and whisk, I'm gone. Or so he says.' Had Shrewd really become this fretful old man? I could scarcely believe what I was hearing from him.

'Well, perhaps just a hot cup of tea then. And a pastry. Cook Sara said these were your favourites.' I poured the steaming tea into the cup and saw his nose twitch appreciatively. He had a sip or two, and then sat up to look at the carefully arranged pastries. He bade me join him, and I ate a pastry with him, licking the rich filling from my fingers. I understood why they were his favourites. He was well into a second when there were three solid thuds against the door.

'Unbar it, Bastard. Or the men with me will take it down. And if any harm has come to my father, you shall die where you stand.' Regal did not sound at all pleased with me.

'What's this, boy? The door barred? What goes on here? Regal, what goes on here?' It pained me to hear the King's voice crack querulously.

I crossed the room, I unbarred the door. It was flung open before I could touch it, and two of Regal's more muscular guards seized me. They wore his satin colours like bulldogs with ribbons about their necks. I offered no resistance, so they had no real excuse to throw me up against the wall, but they did. It awoke every pain I still bore from yesterday. They held me there while Wallace rushed in, tut-tutting about how cold the room was, and what was this, eating this, why, it was no less than poison to a man in King Shrewd's condition. Regal stood, hands on hips, very much the man in charge, and stared at me through narrowed eyes.

Rash, my boy. I very much fear that we have overplayed our hand.

'Well, Bastard? What have you to say for yourself? Exactly what were your intentions?' Regal demanded when Wallace's litany ran down. He actually added another log to the fire in the already stifling room, and took the half-eaten pastry from the King's hand.

'I came to report. And finding the King ill cared for, sought to remedy that situation first.' I was sweating, more from pain than nervousness. I

hated to see Regal smile at it.

‘Ill cared for? What exactly are you saying?’ he accused me.

I took a breath for courage. Truth. ‘I found his chamber untidy and musty. Dirty plates left about. The linens of his bed unchanged ...’

‘Dare you say such things?’ Regal hissed.

‘I do. I speak the truth to my king, as I ever have. Let him look about with his own eyes and see if it is not so.’

Something in the confrontation had stirred Shrewd to a shadow of his old self. He pushed himself up in bed and looked about himself. ‘The Fool has likewise made these complaints, in his own acid way ...’ he began.

Wallace dared to interrupt him. ‘My lord, the state of your health has been tender. Sometimes uninterrupted rest is more important than rolling you out of your bed to fuss with a change of blankets or linen. And a dish or two stacked about is less annoyance than the rattle and prattle of a page come in to tidy.’

King Shrewd looked suddenly uncertain. My heart smote me. This was what the Fool had wished me to see, why he had so often urged me to visit the King. Why had not he spoken more plainly? But then, when did the Fool ever speak plainly? Shame rose in me. This was my king, the king I had sworn to. I loved Verity, and my loyalty to him was unquestioning. But I had abandoned my king at the very moment when he needed me most. Chade was gone, for how long I did not know. I had left King Shrewd with no more than the Fool to protect him. And yet when had King Shrewd ever needed anyone to shelter him before? Always that old man had been more than capable of guarding himself. I chided myself that I should have been more emphatic with Chade about the changes I noted when I first returned home. I should have been more watchful of my sovereign.

‘How did he get in here?’ Regal suddenly demanded with a savage glare at me.

‘My prince, he had a token from the King himself, he claimed. He said the King had promised always to see him if he but showed that pin ...’

‘What rot! You believed such nonsense ...’

‘Prince Regal, you know it is true. You were witness when King Shrewd first gave it to me.’ I spoke quietly but clearly. Within me, Verity was silent, waiting and watching, and learning much. At my expense, I thought bitterly, and then strove to call back the thought.

Moving calmly and unthreateningly, I pulled one wrist free of a bulldog's grip. I turned back the collar of my jerkin and drew the pin out. I held it up for all to see.

'I recall no such thing,' Regal snapped, but Shrewd sat up.

'Come closer, boy,' he instructed me. Now I shrugged clear of my guards and tugged my clothing straight. Then I bore the pin up to the King's bedside. Deliberately, King Shrewd reached out. He took the pin away from me. My heart sank inside me.

'Father, this is ...' Regal began annoyedly, but Shrewd interrupted him.

'Regal. You were there. You do recall it, or you should.' The King's dark eyes were as bright and alert as I remembered them, but also plain were the lines of pain about those eyes and the corner of his mouth. King Shrewd fought for this lucidity. He held the pin up and looked at Regal with a shadow of his old calculating glance. 'I gave the boy this pin. And my word, in exchange for his.'

'Then I suggest you take them both back again, pin and word. You will never get well with this type of disruption going on in your rooms.' Again, that edge of command in Regal's voice. I waited, silent.

The King lifted a shaky hand to rub his face and eyes, 'I gave those things,' he said, and the words were firm, but the strength was fading from his voice. 'Once given, a man's word is no longer his to call back. Am I right about this, FitzChivalry? Do you agree that once a man has given his word, he may not take it back?' The old test was in that question.

'As ever I have, my king, I agree with you. Once a man has given his word, he may not call it back. He must abide by what he has promised.'

'Good, then. That's settled. It's all settled.' He proffered the pin to me. I took it from him, relief so immense it was like vertigo. He leaned back into his pillows. I had another dizzying moment. I knew those pillows, this bed. I had lain there, and looked with the Fool down on the sack of Siltbay. I had burned my fingers in that fireplace ...

The King heaved a heavy sigh. There was exhaustion in it. In another moment, he would be asleep.

'Forbid him to come and disturb you again, unless you summon him,' Regal commanded.

King Shrewd pried his eyes open one more time. 'Fitz. Come here, boy.'

Like a dog, I came closer to him. I knelt by his bed. He lifted a thinned hand, patted me awkwardly. 'You and I, boy. We have an understanding, don't we?' A genuine question. I nodded. 'Good lad. Good. I've kept my word. You see that you keep yours, now. But,' he glanced at Regal, and that pained me, 'it were better if you came to see me in the afternoons. I am stronger in the afternoons.' He was slipping away again.

'Shall I come back this afternoon, sire?' I asked quickly.

He lifted a hand and waved it in a vaguely denying gesture. 'Tomorrow. Or the next day.' His eyes closed and he sighed out as heavily as if he would never breathe in again.

'As you wish, my lord,' I concurred. I bowed deeply, formally. As I straightened, I carefully returned the pin to my jerkin lapel. I let them all spend a moment or two watching me do that. Then, 'If you will excuse me, my prince?' I requested formally.

'Get out of here,' Regal growled.

I bowed less formally to him, turned carefully and left. His guards' eyes watched me go. I was outside the room before I recalled that I had never brought up the subject of me marrying Molly. Now it seemed unlikely I would have an opportunity to for some time. I knew that afternoons would now find Regal or Wallace or some spy of theirs always at King Shrewd's side. I had no wish to broach that topic before anyone save my king.

Fitz?

I'd like to be alone for a while just now, my prince. If you do not mind?

He vanished from my mind like a bursting soap bubble. Slowly I made my way down the stairs.

FIFTEEN

Secrets

Prince Verity chose to unveil his fleet of warships on the mid-day of Winterfest that decisive year. Tradition would have had him wait until the coming of better weather, to launch them on the first day of Springfest. That is considered a more auspicious time to launch a new ship. But Verity had pushed his shipwrights and their crews hard to have all four vessels ready for a mid-winter launch. By choosing the mid-day of Winterfest, he ensured himself a large audience, both for the launch and for his words. Traditionally, a hunt is held that day, with the meat brought in seen as a harbinger of days to come. When he had the ships pushed out of the sheds on their rollers, he announced to the gathered folk that these were his hunters, and that the only prey that would slake them would be Red Ships. The reaction to his announcement was muted, and clearly not what he had hoped for. It is my belief that the people wanted to put all thoughts of the Red Ships from their minds, to hide themselves in winter and pretend that the spring would never come. But Verity refused to let them. The ships were launched that day, and the training of the crews begun.

Nighteyes and I spent the early afternoon hunting. He grumbled about it, saying it was a ridiculous time of day to hunt, and why had I wasted the early dawn hours tussling with my littermate? I told him that that was simply a thing that had to be, and would continue to be for several days, and possibly longer. He was not pleased. But neither was I. It rattled me not a little that he could be so clearly aware of how I spent my hours even if I had no conscious sense of being in touch with him. Had Verity been able to sense him?

He laughed at me. *Hard enough to make you hear me sometimes. Should I batter through to you and then shout for him as well?*

Our hunting success was small. Two rabbits, neither with much fat. I promised to bring him kitchen scraps on the morrow. I had even less success

at conveying to him my demand for privacy at certain times. He could not grasp why I set mating apart from other pack activities such as hunting or howling. Mating suggested offspring in the near future, and offspring were the care of the pack. Words cannot convey the difficulties of that discussion. We conversed in images, in shared thoughts, and such do not allow for much discretion. His candour horrified me. He assured me he shared my delight in my mate and my mating. I begged him not to. Confusion. I finally left him eating his rabbits. He seemed piqued that I would not accept a share of the meat. The best I had been able to get from him was his understanding that I did not want to be aware of him sharing my awareness of Molly. That was scarcely what I wanted but it was the best way I could convey it to him. The idea that at times I would want to sever my bond to him completely was not a thought he could comprehend. It made no sense, he argued. It was not pack. I left him wondering if I would ever again really and truly have a moment to myself.

I returned to the keep and sought the solitude of my own room. If only for a moment, I had to be where I could close the door behind me and be alone. Physically, anyway. As if to fuel my quest for quiet, the halls and stairways were full of hurrying folk. Servants were cleaning away old rushes and spreading new ones, fresh candles were being placed in holders, and boughs of evergreen were hung in festoons and swags everywhere. Winterfest. I didn't much feel like it.

I finally reached my own door and slipped inside. I shut it firmly behind me.

'Back so soon?' The Fool looked up from the hearth where he crouched in a semi-circle of scrolls. He seemed to be sorting them into groups.

I stared at him with unconcealed dismay. In an instant, it flashed into anger. 'Why didn't you tell me of the King's condition?'

He considered another scroll and, after a moment, set it in the pile to his right. 'But I did. A question in exchange for yours: Why didn't you already know of it?'

That set me back. 'I admit I've been lax in calling upon him. But ...'

'None of my words could have had the impact of seeing for yourself. Nor do you pause to think what it would have been like, had I not been there every single day, emptying chamberpots, sweeping, dusting, carrying out dishes, combing his hair and his beard ...'

Again he had shocked me into silence. I crossed the room, sat down heavily upon my clothing chest. 'He's not the king I remember,' I said bluntly. 'It frightens me that he could sink so far, so fast.'

'Frightens *you*? Appals *me*. At least you've another king when this one's been played.' The Fool flipped another scroll onto the pile.

'We all do,' I pointed out carefully.

'Some more than others,' the Fool said shortly.

Without thinking, my hand rose to tuck the pin tighter in my jerkin. I'd almost lost it today. It had made me think of all it had symbolized all these years. The King's protection, for a bastard grandson that a more ruthless man would have done away with quietly. And now that he needed protection? What did it symbolize to me now?

'So. What do we do?'

'You and I? Precious little. I'm but a Fool, and you are a Bastard.'

I nodded grudgingly. 'I wish Chade were here. I wish I knew when he was coming back.' I looked to the Fool, wondering how much he knew.

'Shade? Shade returns when the sun does, I've heard.' Evasive as always. 'Too late for the King, I imagine,' he added more quietly.

'So we are powerless?'

'You and I? Never. We've too much power to act here; that is all. In this area, the powerless ones are always the most powerful. Perhaps you are right; they are who we should consult in this. And now,' here he rose and made a show of shaking all his joints loose as if he were a marionette with tangled strings. He set every bell he had to jingling. I could not help but smile. 'My king will be coming into his best time of day. And I will be there, to do what little I can for him.'

He stepped carefully out of his ring of sorted scrolls and tablets. He yawned. 'Farewell, Fitz.'

'Farewell.'

He halted, puzzled, by the door. 'You have no objections to my going?'

'I believe I objected first to your staying.'

'Never bandy words with a Fool. But do you forget? I offered you a bargain. A secret for a secret.'

I had not forgotten. But I was not sure, suddenly, that I wanted to know. 'Whence comes the Fool, and why?' I asked softly.

'Ah.' He stood a moment, then asked gravely, 'You are certain you wish the answers to these questions?'

‘Whence comes the Fool, and why?’ I repeated slowly.

For an instant he was dumb. I saw him then. Saw him as I had not in years, not as the Fool, glib-tongued and wits as cutting as any barnacle, but as a small and slender person, all so fragile, pale flesh, bird-boned, even his hair seemed less substantial than that of other mortals. His motley of black and white trimmed with silver bells, his ridiculous rat sceptre were all the armour and sword he had in this court of intrigues and treachery. And his mystery. The invisible cloak of his mystery. I wished for an instant he had not offered the bargain, and that my curiosity had been less consuming.

He sighed. He glanced about my room, then walked over to stand before the tapestry of King Wisdom greeting the Elderling. He glanced up at it, then smiled sourly, finding some humour there I had never seen. He assumed the stance of a poet about to recite. Then he halted, looked at me squarely once more. ‘You are certain you wish to know, Fitzy-Fitz?’

Like a liturgy, I repeated the question. ‘Whence comes the Fool and why?’

‘Whence? Ah, whence?’ He went nose to nose with Ratsy for a moment, formulating a reply to his own question. Then he met my eyes. ‘Go south, Fitz. To lands past the edges of every map that Verity has ever seen. And past the edges of the maps made in those countries as well. Go south, and then east across a sea you have no name for. Eventually, you would come to a long peninsula, and on its snaking tip you would find the village where a Fool was born. You might even find, still, a mother who recalled her wormy-white babe, and how she cradled me against her warm breast and sang.’ He glanced up at my incredulous, enraptured face and gave a short laugh. ‘You cannot even picture it, can you? Let me make it harder for you. Her hair was long and dark and curling, and her eyes were green. Fancy that! Of such rich colours was this transparency made. And the fathers of the colourless child? Two cousins, for that was the custom of that land. One broad and swarthy and full of laughter, ruddy-lipped and brown-eyed, a farmer smelling of rich earth and open air. The other as narrow as the one was wide, and gold to his bronze, a poet and songster, blue-eyed. And, oh, how they loved me and rejoiced in me! All the three of them, and the village as well. I was so loved.’ His voice grew soft, and for a moment he fell silent. I knew with great certainty that I was hearing what no other had ever heard from him. I remembered the time I had ventured into his room, and the

exquisite little doll in its cradle that I had found there. Cherished as the Fool had once been cherished. I waited.

‘When I was ... old enough, I bade them all farewell. I set off to find my place in history, and choose where I would thwart it. This was the place I selected; the time had been destined by the hour of my birth. I came here, and became Shrewd’s. I gathered up whatever threads the fates put into my hands, and I began to twist them and colour them as I could, in the hopes of affecting what was woven after me.’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t understand a thing you just said.’

‘Ah.’ He shook his head, setting his bells to jingling. ‘I offered to tell you my secret. I didn’t promise to make you understand it.’

‘A message is not delivered until it is understood,’ I countered. This was a direct quote from Chade.

The Fool teetered on accepting it. ‘You do understand what I said,’ he compromised. ‘You simply do not accept it. Never before have I spoken so plainly to you. Perhaps that is what confuses you.’

He was serious. I shook my head again. ‘You make no sense! You went somewhere to discover your place in history? How can that be? History is what is done and behind us.’

He shook his head, slowly this time. ‘History is what we do in our lives. We create it as we go along.’ He smiled enigmatically. ‘The future is another kind of history.’

‘No man can know the future,’ I agreed.

His smile widened. ‘Cannot they?’ he asked in a whisper. ‘Perhaps, Fitz, somewhere, there is written down all that is the future. Not written down by one person, know, but if the hints and visions and premonitions and foreseeings of an entire race were written down, and cross-referenced and related to one another, might not such a people create a loom to hold the weaving of the future?’

‘Preposterous,’ I objected. ‘How would anyone know if any of it were true?’

‘If such a loom were made, and such a tapestry of predictions woven, not for a few years, but for tens of hundreds of years, after a time, it could be shown that it presented a surprisingly accurate foretelling. Bear in mind that those who keep these records are another race, an exceedingly long-lived one. A pale, lovely race, that occasionally mingled its blood-lines with that of men. And then!’ He spun in a circle, suddenly fey, pleased insufferably

with himself, 'And then, when certain ones were born, ones marked so clearly that history must recall them, they are called to step forward, to find their places in that future history. And they might further be exhorted to examine that place, that juncture of a hundred threads, and say, these threads, here, these are the ones I shall tweak, and in the tweaking, I shall change the tapestry, I shall warp the weft, alter the colour of what is to come. I shall change the destiny of the world.'

He was mocking me. I was certain of it now. 'Once, in perhaps a thousand years, there may come a man capable of making such a great change in the world. A powerful king, perhaps, or a philosopher, shaping the thoughts of thousands. But you and I, Fool? We are pawns. Ciphers.'

He shook his head pityingly. 'This, more than anything else, is what I have never understood about your people. You can roll dice, and understand that the whole game may hinge on one turn of a die. You deal out cards, and say that all a man's fortune for the night may turn upon one hand. But a man's whole life, you sniff at, and say, what, this nought of a human, this fisherman, this carpenter, this thief, this cook, why, what can they do in the great wide world? And so you putter and sputter your lives away, like candles burning in a draught.'

'Not all men are destined for greatness,' I reminded him.

'Are you sure, Fitz? Are you sure? What good is a life lived as if it made no difference at all to the great life of the world? A sadder thing I cannot imagine. Why should not a mother say to herself, if I raise this child aright, if I love and care for her, she shall live a life that brings joy to those about her, and thus I have changed the world? Why should not the farmer that plants a seed say to his neighbour, this seed I plant today will feed someone, and that is how I change the world today?'

'This is philosophy, Fool. I have never had time to study such things.'

'No, Fitz, this is life. And no one has time not to think of such things. Each creature in the world should consider this thing, every moment of the heart's beating. Otherwise, what is the point of arising each day?'

'Fool, this is beyond me,' I declared uneasily. I had never seen him so impassioned, never heard him speak so plainly. It was as if I had stirred grey-coated embers and suddenly found the cherry-red coal that glowed in their depths. He burned too brightly.

'No, Fitz. I have come to believe it is through you.' He reached out and tapped me lightly with Ratsy. 'Keystone. Gate. Crossroads. Catalyst. All

these you have been, and continue to be. Whenever I come to a crossroads, whenever the scent is uncertain, when I put my nose to the ground, and cast about and bay and snuffle, I find one scent. Yours. You create possibilities. While you exist, the future can be steered. I came here for you, Fitz. You are the thread I tweak. One of them, anyway.'

I felt a sudden chill of foreboding. Whatever more he had to say, I did not wish to hear it. Somewhere, far away, a thin howl arose. A wolf baying at mid-day. A shiver ran up me, setting up every hair on my body. 'You've had your joke,' I said, laughing nervously. 'I should have known better than to expect a real secret from you.'

'You. Or not you. Linchpin, anchor, knot in the line. I have seen the end of the world, Fitz. Seen it woven as plainly as I've seen my birth. Oh, not in your lifetime, nor even mine. But shall we be happy, to say that we live in the dusk rather than in the full night? Shall we rejoice that we shall only suffer, while your offspring will be the ones to know the torments of the damned? Shall this be why we do not act?'

'Fool. I wish not to hear this.'

'You had a chance to deny me. But thrice you demanded it, and hear it you shall.' He lifted his staff as if leading a charge, and spoke as if he addressed the full Council of the Six Duchies. 'The fall of the Kingdom of the Six Duchies was the pebble that started the landslide. The soulless ones moved on from there, spreading like a bloodstain down the world's best shirt. Darkness devours, and is never satiated until it feeds upon itself. And all because the line of House Farseer failed. That is the future as it is woven. But wait! Farseer!' He cocked his head and peered at me, considering as a gore-crow. 'Why do they call you that, Fitz? What have your ancestors ever foreseen afar to gain such a name? Shall I tell you how it comes about? The very name of your house is the future reaching back in time to you, and naming you by the name that someday your house will deserve. The Farseers. That was the clue I took to my heart. That the future reached back to you, to your house, to where your blood-lines intersected with my lifetime, and named you so. I came here, and what did I discover? One Farseer, with no name at all. Unnamed in any history, past or future. But I have seen you take a name, FitzChivalry Farseer. And I shall see that you deserve it.' He advanced on me, seized me by the shoulders. 'We are here, Fitz, you and I, to change the future of the world. To reach out and hold in place the tiny pebble that could trigger the boulder's tumbling.'

‘No.’ A terrible cold was welling up inside me. I shook with it. My teeth began to chatter, and the bright motes of light to sparkle at the edges of my vision. A fit. I was going to have another fit. Right here, in front of the Fool. ‘Leave!’ I cried out, unable to abide the thought. ‘Go away. Now! Quickly. Quickly!’

I had never seen the Fool astonished before. His jaw actually dropped open, revealing his tiny white teeth and pale tongue. A moment longer he gripped me, and then he let go. I did not stop to think of what he might feel at my abrupt dismissal. I snatched the door open and pointed out of it, and he was gone. I shut it behind him, latched it, and then staggered to my bed as wave after wave of darkness surged through me. I fell face-down on the coverlets. ‘Molly!’ I cried out, ‘Molly, save me!’ But I knew she could not hear me, and I sank alone into my blackness.

The brightness of a hundred candles, festoons of evergreen and swags of holly and bare, black winter branches hung with sparkling sugar candies to delight the eye and tongue. The clacking of the puppets’ wooden swords and the delighted exclamations of the children when the Piebald Prince’s head actually came flying off and arced out over the crowd. Mellow’s mouth wide in a bawdy song as his unattended fingers danced independently over his harp strings. A blast of cold as the great doors of the hall were thrown open and yet another group of merrymakers came into the Great Hall to join us. The slow knowledge stole over me that this was no longer a dream, this was Winterfest, and I was wandering benignly through the celebration, smiling blandly at everyone and seeing no one. I blinked my eyes slowly. I could do nothing quickly. I was wrapped in soft wool, I was drifting like an unmanned sailboat on a still day. A wonderful sleepiness filled me. Someone touched my arm. I turned. Burrich frowning and asking me something. His voice, always so deep, almost a colour washing against me when he spoke. ‘It’s all good,’ I told him calmly. ‘Don’t worry, it’s all good.’ I floated away from him, wafting through the room with the milling of the crowd.

King Shrewd sat on his throne, but I knew now that he was made of paper. The Fool sat on the step by his feet and clutched his rat sceptre like an infant clutches a rattle. His tongue was a sword, and as the King’s enemies drew closer to the throne, the Fool slew them, slashed them to bits and turned them back from the paper man on the throne.

And here were Verity and Kettricken on another dais, pretty as the Fool’s doll, each of them. I looked and saw they were both made of hungers,

like containers made of emptiness. I felt so sad, I'd never be able to fill either of them, for they were both so terribly empty. Regal came to speak to them, and he was a big black bird, not a crow, no, not so merry as a crow, and not a raven, he hadn't the cheery cleverness of a raven, no, a miserable eye-pecker of a bird, circling, circling, dreaming of them as carrion for himself to feast on. He smelled the carrion, and I covered my mouth and nose with a hand and walked away from them.

I sat down on a hearth, next to a giggling girl, happy in her blue skirts. She chattered like a squirrel and I smiled at her, and soon she leaned against me and began to sing a funny little song about three milkmaids. There were others sitting and standing about the hearth, and they joined in the song. We all laughed at the end, but I wasn't sure why. And her hand was warm, resting so casually on my thigh.

Brother, are you mad? Have you eaten fishbones, are you burned by fever?

'Huh?'

Your mind is clouded. Your thoughts are bloodless and sickly. You move like prey.

'I feel fine.'

'Do you, sir? Then I do, too.' She smiled up at me. Chubby little face, dark eyes, curly hair peeking out from under her cap. Verity would like this one. She patted my leg companionably. A bit higher than she had touched me before.

'FitzChivalry!'

I looked up slowly. Patience was standing over me, with Lacey at her elbow. I smiled to see her there. She so seldom came out of her rooms to socialize. Especially in winter. Winter was a hard time for her. 'I shall be so glad when summer returns, and we can walk in the gardens together,' I told her.

She looked at me silently for a moment. 'I have something heavy I wish carried up to my rooms. Will you bring it for me?'

'Certainly.' I stood carefully. 'I have to go,' I told the little servant girl. 'My mother needs me. I liked your song.'

'Goodbye sir!' she chirped at me, and Lacey glared at her. Patience's cheeks were very rosy. I followed her through the ebb and press of folk. We came to the foot of the stairs.

‘I forget how to do these,’ I told her. ‘And where is the heavy thing you wish carried?’

‘That was an excuse to get you away from there before you completely disgraced yourself!’ she hissed at me. ‘What is the matter with you? How could you behave so badly? Are you drunk?’

I thought about it. ‘Nighteyes said I was poisoned by fishbones. But I feel fine.’

Lacey and Patience looked at me very carefully. Then they each took an arm, and guided me upstairs. Patience made tea. I talked to Lacey. I told her how much I loved Molly and that I was going to marry her as soon as the King said I could. She patted my hand and felt my forehead and asked what I’d eaten today and where. I couldn’t remember. Patience gave me tea. Very soon I puked. Lacey gave me cold water. Patience gave me more tea. I puked again. I said I didn’t want any more tea. Patience and Lacey argued. Lacey said she thought I’d be all right after I slept. She took me back to my room.

I woke up with no clear idea of what had been dream and what had been real, if anything. My entire recall of the evening’s events had the same distance as events that had happened years ago. This was compounded by the open staircase with its beckoning yellow light and the draught from it chilling my room. I scrambled out of bed, swayed for a moment as a wave of dizziness overtook me and then slowly mounted the stairs, one hand always touching the cold stone wall to reassure myself that it was real. About midway up the steps, Chade came down to meet me. ‘Here, take my arm,’ he commanded, and I did.

He put his free arm around me and we went up the stairs together. ‘I’ve missed you,’ I told him. With my next breath, I told him, ‘King Shrewd is in danger.’

‘I know. King Shrewd is always in danger.’

We gained the top of the stairwell. There was a fire in his hearth, and a meal set out next to it on a tray. He guided me toward both.

‘I think I might have been poisoned today.’ A sudden shivering ran up me and I shuddered all over. When it passed, I felt more alert. ‘I seem to be waking up in stages. I keep thinking I’m awake, and then suddenly everything is clearer.’

Chade nodded gravely. ‘I suspect it was the ash residue. You weren’t thinking when you tidied King Shrewd’s room for him. Many times the burned residue of a herb concentrates the potency of the herb. You got it all

over your hands and then sat there eating pastries. There was little I could do. I thought you would sleep it off. What possessed you to go downstairs?’

‘I don’t know.’ Then, ‘How do you always know so much?’ I asked peevishly as he pushed me down into his old chair. He took my usual perch on the hearthstones. Even in my fuddled state, I noticed how fluidly he moved, as if he had somewhere abandoned the cramps and aches of an old man’s body. There was wind-burnt colour to his face and arms as well, the tan fading the pocks’ stigma. I had once noticed his resemblance to Shrewd. Now I saw Verity in his face as well.

‘I have my little ways of finding things out.’ He grinned at me wolfishly. ‘How much do you remember of Winterfest tonight?’

I winced as I considered it. ‘Enough to know that tomorrow is going to be a difficult day.’ The little servant girl suddenly popped up in my memory. Leaning on my shoulder, her hand on my thigh. Molly. I had to get to Molly tonight and somehow explain things to her. If she came to my room tonight, and I wasn’t there to answer her knock ... I started up in my chair, but then another shiver ran up over me. It felt almost like a skin being peeled off me.

‘Here. Eat something. Puking your guts out wasn’t the best thing for you, but I’m sure Patience meant well. And under other circumstances, it could have been a life-saver. No, you idiot, wash your hands first. Haven’t you heard a word I’ve said?’

I noticed then the vinegar-water set out beside the food. I washed my hands carefully to remove every trace of whatever had clung to them, and then my face, amazed as how much more alert I suddenly felt. ‘It’s been like an extended dream, all day ... is this what Shrewd has been feeling?’

‘I’ve no idea. Perhaps not all those burning herbs down there are what I think they are. It was one of the things I wanted to discuss with you tonight. How has Shrewd been? Has this come on him suddenly? How long has Wallace been calling himself a healer?’

‘I don’t know.’ I hung my head in shame. I forced myself to report to Chade just how lax I had been in his absence. And how stupid. When I was finished, he did not disagree with me.

‘Well,’ he said heavily. ‘We can’t undo, we can only salvage. Too much is happening here to sort at one sitting.’ He looked at me consideringly. ‘Much of what you tell me does not surprise me. Forged ones converging still on Buckkeep, the King’s illness lingering. But King Shrewd’s health has declined much more swiftly than I can account for, and the squalor in his

rooms makes no sense to me. Unless ...' He did not finish the thought. 'Perhaps they believe that Lady Thyme was his only defender. Perhaps they think we no longer care; perhaps they believe him an isolated old man, an obstacle to be removed. Your carelessness has drawn them out, at least. And having drawn them out, perhaps we can cut them off.' He sighed. 'I thought I could use Wallace as a tool, lead him subtly through the advice of others. He has little knowledge of herbs of his own; the man is a dabbler. But the tool I left carelessly lying about, perhaps another employs now. We shall have to see. Still. There are ways to stop this.'

I bit my tongue before I could utter Regal's name. 'How?' I asked instead.

Chade smiled. 'How were you rendered ineffective as an assassin in the Mountain Kingdom?'

I winced at the memory. 'Regal revealed my purpose to Kettricken.'

'Exactly. We shall shine a bit of daylight on what goes on in the King's chambers. Eat while I talk.'

And so I did, listening to him as he outlined my assignments for the next day, but also noting what he chose to feed me. The flavour of garlic predominated, and I knew his confidence in its purifying abilities. I wondered just what I had ingested, and also how much it coloured my recollection of my conversation with the Fool. I flinched as I recalled my brusque dismissal of him. He would be another I would have to seek out tomorrow. Chade noticed my preoccupation. 'Sometimes,' he observed obliquely, 'you have to trust people to understand you are not perfect.'

I nodded, then suddenly yawned immensely. 'Beg pardon,' I muttered. My eyelids were suddenly so heavy I could barely keep my head up. 'You were saying?'

'No, no. Go to bed. Rest. It's the real healer.'

'But I haven't even asked you where you've been. Or what you've been doing. You move and act as if you'd lost ten years of age.'

Chade puckered his mouth. 'Is that a compliment? Never mind. Such questions would be useless anyway, so you may save them for another time, and be frustrated then when I refuse to answer them. As to my condition ... well, the more one forces one's body to do, the more it can do. It was not an easy journey. Yet I believe it was worth the hardship.' He held up a halting hand as I opened my mouth. 'And that is all I am going to say. To bed, now, Fitz. To bed.'

I yawned again as I rose, and stretched until my joints popped. ‘You’ve grown again,’ Chade complained admiringly. ‘At this rate, you’ll even top your father’s height.’

‘I’ve missed you,’ I mumbled as I headed toward the stair.

‘And I you. But we shall have tomorrow night for catching up. For now, bed for you.’

I went down his stairs with the sincere intention of following his suggestion. As it always did, the staircase sealed itself moments after I exited it, by a mechanism I had never been able to discover. I threw three more logs on my dying fire and then crossed to my bed. I sat down on it to pull my shirt off. I was exhausted. But not so tired that I could not catch a faint trace of Molly’s scent on my own skin as I pulled my shirt off. I sat a moment longer, holding my shirt in my hands. Then I put it back on and rose. I went to my door and slipped out into the hallway.

It was late, by any other night’s standard. Yet this was the first night of Winterfest. There were many below who would not think of their beds until dawn was on the horizon. Others who would not find their own beds at all this night. I smiled suddenly, as I realized I intended to be part of the latter group.

There were others in the halls that night and on the staircases. Most were too inebriated, or too engrossed in themselves to notice me. As for the others, I resolved to let Winterfest be my excuse for any questions asked of me the next day. Still, I was discreet enough to be sure the corridor was clear before I tapped on her door. I heard no reply. But as I lifted my hand to tap again, the door swung silently open into darkness.

It terrified me. In an instant I was sure harm had come to her, that someone had been here and hurt her and left her there in the darkness. I sprang into the room, crying out her name. The door swung shut behind me and ‘Hush!’ she commanded.

I turned to find her, but it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. The light from the hearth fire was the only illumination in the room, and it was to my back. When my eyes did penetrate the darkness, I felt as if I could not breathe.

‘Were you expecting me?’ I asked at last.

In a little cat voice, she replied, ‘Only for hours.’

‘I thought you would be at the merrymaking in the Great Hall.’ Slowly it dawned on me that I had not seen her there.

‘I knew I would not be missed there. Except by one. And I thought perhaps that one might come seeking me here.’

I stood motionless and looked at her. She wore a wreath of holly upon the tumble of her hair. That was all. And she stood against the door, wanting me to look at her. How can I explain the line that had been crossed? Before, we had ventured into this together, exploring and inquisitive. But this was different. This was a woman’s frank invitation. Can there be anything so compelling as the knowledge that a woman desires you? It overwhelmed me and blessed me and somehow redeemed me from every stupid thing I had ever done.

Winterfest.

The heart of night’s secret.

Yes.

She shook me awake before dawn, and put me out of her rooms. The farewell kiss that she gave me before shoing me out the door was such that I stood in the hall trying to persuade myself that dawn was not all that close. After a few moments, I recalled that discretion was called for, and wiped the foolish smile off my face. I straightened my rumpled shirt and headed for the stairs.

Once inside my room, an almost dizzying weariness overtook me. How long had it been since I had had a full night’s sleep? I sat down on my bed and dragged my shirt off. I dropped it to the floor. I fell back onto the bed and closed my eyes.

A soft tap at my door jerked me upright. I crossed the room swiftly, smiling to myself. I was still smiling as I swung the door wide.

‘Good, you’re up! And almost dressed. I was afraid from the way you looked last night that I’d be dragging you out of your bed by the scruff of your neck.’

It was Burrich, freshly washed and brushed. The lines across his forehead were the only visible signs of the last night’s revelry. From my years of sharing quarters with him, I knew that no matter how fierce a hangover he might have, he would still rise to face his duties. I sighed. No good asking quarter, for none would be given. Instead I went to my clothes chest and found a clean shirt. I put it on as I followed him to Verity’s tower.

There is an odd threshold, physical as well as mental. There have been but a few times in my life that I have been pushed over it, but each time, an extraordinary thing happened. That morning was one of those times. After

an hour or so had passed, I stood in Verity's tower room, shirtless and sweating. The tower windows were open to the winter wind, but I felt no chill. The padded axe Burrich had given me was but a little lighter than the world itself, and the weight of Verity's presence in my mind felt as if it were forcing my brain out my eyes. I could no longer keep my axe up to guard myself. Burrich came at me again, and I made no more than a token defence. He batted it aside with ease, then came in swiftly, one, two blows, not hard, but not softly either. 'And you're dead,' he told me, and stood back. He let the head of his axe sag to the floor and stood leaning on it and breathing. I let my own axe thud head first to the floor. Useless.

Within my mind, Verity was very still. I glanced over to where he sat staring out the window across the sea to the horizon. The morning light was harsh on the lines in his face and the grey in his hair. His shoulders were slumped forward. His posture mirrored what I felt. I closed my eyes a moment, too weary to do anything anymore. And suddenly we meshed. I saw to the horizons of our future. We were a country besieged by a ravenous enemy who came to us only to kill and maim. That was their sole goal. They had no fields to plant, no children to defend, no stock to tend to distract them from their Raiding. But we strove to live our day to day lives at the same time we tried to protect ourselves from their destruction. For the Red Ship Raiders, their ravages were their day to day lives. That singleness of purpose was all they needed to destroy us. We were not warriors, had not been warriors for generations. We did not think like warriors. Even those of us who were soldiers were soldiers who had trained to fight against a rational enemy. How could we stand against an onslaught of madmen? What weapons did we have? I looked around. Me. Myself as Verity.

One man. One man, making himself old as he strove to walk the line between defending his people and being swept away in the addictive ecstasy of the Skill. One man, trying to rouse us, trying to ignite us to defend ourselves. One man, with his eyes afar, as we squabbled and plotted and bickered in the rooms below him. It was useless. We were doomed to fail.

The tide of despair swept over me and threatened to pull me down. It swirled around me, but suddenly, in the middle of it, I found a place to stand. A place where the very uselessness of it was funny. Horribly funny. Four little warships, not quite finished, with untrained crews. Watchtowers and fire signals to call the inept defenders forth to the slaughter. Burrich with his axe, and me standing in the cold. Verity staring out the window, while below

Regal fed his own father drugs. In the hopes of stealing his mind, and inheriting the whole mess, I didn't doubt. It was all so totally useless. And so unthinkable to give it up. A laugh welled up from inside me, and I could not contain it. I stood leaning on my axe, and laughed as if the world were the funniest thing I'd ever seen, while Burrich and Verity both stared at me. A very faint answering smile crooked the corners of Verity's mouth; a light in his eyes shared my madness.

'Boy? Are you all right?' Burrich asked me.

'I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine,' I told them both when my waves of laughter had subsided.

I pulled myself up to stand straight. I shook my head, and I swear I almost felt my brain settle. 'Verity,' I said, and embraced his consciousness to mine. It was easy; it had always been easy, but before I had believed there was something to lose by doing it. We did not meld into one person, but instead fit together like bowls stacked in a cupboard. He rode me comfortably, like a well-loaded pack. I took a breath and lifted my axe. 'Again,' I said to Burrich.

As he came at me, I no longer allowed him to be Burrich. He was a man with an axe, come to kill Verity, and before I could stop my momentum, I had laid him out on the floor. He rose, shaking his head, and I saw a touch of anger in his face. Again we came together, and again I made a telling touch. 'Third time,' he told me, and his battle-smile lit up his weathered face. We came together again with a jolt in the joy of struggle, and I overmatched him cleanly.

Twice more we clashed before Burrich suddenly stepped back from one of my blows. He lowered his axe to the floor and stood, hunkered slightly forward until his breath came easy again. Then he straightened and looked at Verity. 'He's got it,' he said huskily. 'He's caught the knack of it now. Not that he's fully honed yet. Drill will make him sharper, but you've made a wise choice for him. The axe is his weapon.'

Verity nodded slowly. 'And he is mine.'

SIXTEEN

Verity's Ships

In the third summer of the Red Ship War, the Six Duchies' warships were blooded. Although they numbered only four, they represented an important change in tactics to defending our realm. Our encounters that spring with the Red Ships swiftly taught us that we had forgotten much of being warriors. The Raiders were right; we had become a race of farmers. But we were farmers who had determined to take a stand and fight. We quickly found the Raiders to be resourceful and savage fighters. This was true to the extent that none of them ever surrendered or were taken alive. That, perhaps, should have been our first clue as to the nature of Forging and what we actually battled, but at the time it was too subtle a hint, and we were too busy surviving to wonder at it.

The rest of that winter passed as swiftly as the first half had dragged. The separate parts of my lives became like beads and I the string that ran through them all. I believe if I had ever paused to consider the intricacy of all I did to keep those parts separate, I would have found it impossible. But I was young then, much younger than I suspected, and somehow I found the energy and time to do and be it all.

My day began before dawn, with a session with Verity. At least twice a week, Burrich and his axes were included. But most often it was Verity and I alone. He worked on my Skill sense, but not as Galen had. He had specific tasks in mind for me, and these were what he trained me in. I learned to see through his eyes, and to give him the use of mine. I practised being aware of the subtle way he would steer my attention, and in keeping up a constant mental commentary that kept him informed of all that was going on around us. This involved me leaving the tower, and carrying his presence about with me like a hawk on my wrist as I went about my other daily tasks. At first a few hours were as long as I could sustain the Skill bond, but as time went on I managed to share my mind with him for days at a time. The bond did

weaken with the passing of time, however. It was not a true Skilling from me to Verity, but a touch-imposed bond that had to be renewed. It still gave me a sense of accomplishment to be able to do at least this much.

I put in a fair share of time in the Queen's Garden, moving and then shifting again benches and statuary and pots, until Ketricken was finally satisfied with the arrangements there. For those hours, I always made sure Verity was with me. I hoped it would do him good to see his Queen as others saw her, especially when she was caught up in the enthusiasm of her snowy garden spot. Glowing pink-cheeked and gold-haired, wind-kissed and lively: this was how I showed her to him. He heard her speak freely of the pleasure she hoped this garden would bring him. Was this a betrayal of Ketricken's confidences to me? I pushed such uneasiness firmly away. I took him with me when I paid my duties to Patience and Lacey.

I also tried to carry Verity out and among the folk more. Since he had begun his heavy Skill duties, he was seldom among the common folk he had once so enjoyed. I took him to the kitchen, and the watch-room, to the stables, and down to the taverns in Buckkeep Town. For his part, he steered me to the boat-sheds, where I watched the final work being done on his ships. Later, I frequently visited the dock where the ships were tied, to talk to the crews as they got to know their vessels. I made him aware of the grumbling of the men who thought it treasonous that some Outislander refugees had been allowed to become crew-members of our defence vessels. It was plain to any eye that these men were experienced in the handling of sleek raiding vessels, and were making our ships more effective with their expertise. Plain, too, that many of the Six Duchies men resented and distrusted the handful of immigrants among them. I was not sure if Verity's decision to use them had been wise. I said nothing of my own doubts, but only showed him the mutterings of other men.

He was with me, too, the times when I called upon Shrewd. I learned to make my visits in late morning or early afternoon. Wallace seldom admitted me easily, and it always seemed there were others in the room, serving-maids I did not know, a workman ostensibly repairing a door, when I went to visit. I hoped impatiently for a chance to talk with him privately about my marriage ambitions. The Fool was there always, and kept his word not to show friendship to me before other eyes. His mockery was sharp and stinging, and even though I knew its purpose, he still could manage to fluster or irritate me. The only satisfaction I could take was in the changes I saw in

the room. Someone had tattled to Mistress Hasty about the state of the King's chamber.

In the midst of the Winterfest activities, such a troop of housemaids and serving-boys flocked to the room that it brought the festivities to the King. Mistress Hasty, fists on hips, stood at the centre of the room and oversaw it all, all the while berating Wallace for ever letting things reach such a state. Evidently he had been assuring her that he had been personally seeing to the tidying and laundering in an effort to keep the King from being disturbed. I spent one very merry afternoon there, for the activity awoke Shrewd, and soon he seemed almost his old self. He hushed Mistress Hasty when she berated her own folk for laxness, and instead exchanged banter with them as floors were scrubbed, fresh reeds strewn, and the furniture rubbed well with fragrant cleansing oil. Mistress Hasty bundled a veritable mountain of quilts upon the King while she ordered the windows opened and the room aired. She, too, sniffed at all the ashes and burn pots. I quietly suggested that Wallace might best see to their cleansing, as he was most familiar with the qualities of the herbs that had burned there. He was a much more docile and tractable man when he returned with the pots. I wondered if he himself knew just what effect his smokes had upon Shrewd. But if these smokes were not his doing, then whose? The Fool and I exchanged more than one secret significant glance.

Not only was the chamber scrubbed out, but made bright as well, with festive candles and wreaths, evergreens and bare branches of trees gilded and hung with painted nuts. It brought the colour back into the King's cheeks. I sensed Verity's quiet approval. When that night the King descended from his chambers to join us in the Great Hall, and actually called out for his favourite musicians and songs, I took it as a personal victory.

Some moments were solely mine, of course, and not just my nights with Molly. As often as I could manage, I would creep off from the keep, to run and hunt with my wolf. Bonded as our minds were, I was never completely isolated from him, but a simple mind link did not have the deep satisfaction of sharing a hunt. It is hard to express the completeness of two beings moving as one, for a single purpose. Those times were really the fulfilling of our bond. But even when I went days without physically seeing him, he was with me. His presence was like a perfume, which one is aware of greatly when one first encounters it, but then becomes simply a part of the air one breathes. I knew he was there in small ways. My sense of smell seemed

more acute, and I attributed this to his expertise in reading what the air brought me. I became more aware of others around me, as if his consciousness were guarding my back, and alerting me to small sensory clues I might otherwise have ignored. Food was more savoury, perfumes more tangible. I tried not to extend this logic to my appetite for Molly's company. I knew he was there, but as he had promised, he did nothing overt to make me aware of him at such times.

A month after Winterfest, I found myself thrown into a new labour. Verity had told me he wished me aboard a ship. I found myself summoned one day to the deck of the *Rurisk*, and assigned a spot at an oar. The master of the vessel openly wondered why he had been sent a twig when he asked for a log. I could not dispute the question. Most of the men around me were brawny fellows and seasoned ship-hands. My only possible chance to prove myself was to throw myself into my tasks with every bit of energy I could muster. At least I had the satisfaction of knowing I was not alone in my inexperience. While the other men aboard had all served in some fashion on other vessels, all save the Outislanders among the crew were new to this style of ship.

Verity had had to seek out our oldest shipwrights to come up with men who knew how to build a fighting ship. The *Rurisk* was the largest of the four vessels launched at Winterfest. The lines of the boat were sleek and sinuous, and her shallow draught meant that she could skim across a calm sea like an insect on a pond, or ride out rough swell as handily as any gull. In two of the other boats, the planking was pegged edge to edge into the ribs, but the *Rurisk* and her smaller sister ship *Constance* were clinker-built, with the planking overlapped. The *Rurisk* had been built by Mastfish, and the planking was well fitted, but still had the give to withstand any battering the seas might offer. Only a minimum of caulking with tarred rope had been needed, so lovingly had this ship been crafted. Her mast of pine supported a sail of spun flax reinforced with rope. Verity's buck graced the sail of the *Rurisk*.

The new ship still smelled of wood shavings and tarred rope. Her decks were scarcely scarred, and the oars were clean their entire length. Soon the *Rurisk* would take on a character of its own; a bit of marlinspike work to make it easier to grip an oar, a splice in a line, all the nicks and dings of a well-used ship. But for now, the *Rurisk* was as green as we were. When we took the ship out, it reminded me of an inexperienced rider on a green-broke

horse. She sidled about, shied and curtsied amongst the waves, and then, as we all found a rhythm, stepped out and cut through the water like a greased knife.

It was Verity's will that I immerse myself in these new skills. I was given a bunk in the warehouse with the rest of my shipmates. I learned to be unobtrusive, but energetic in jumping to any order. The master was Six Duchies through and through, but the mate was an Outislander, and he it was who really taught us to handle the *Rurisk* and just what the ship could do. There were two other Outislander immigrants aboard, and when we weren't cleaning the ship or doing maintenance and sleeping, they congregated and spoke quietly amongst themselves. I wondered that they didn't see how this set the Six Duchies folk to muttering. My bunk was near to theirs, and oftentimes as I lay trying to fall asleep, I was aware of Verity urging me to pay attention to soft words spoken in a language I didn't understand. So I did, knowing that he made more sense of the sounds than I did. After a time I came to realize that it was not so very different from the Duchies' tongue, and that I could understand some of what was said for myself. I found no talk of betrayal or mutiny amongst them. Only soft, sad words of kin Forged away from them by their own countrymen, and harsh bitter vows of vengeance to be carried out against their own kind. They were not so different from the Six Duchies men and women of the crew. Almost everyone on board had lost someone to Forging. Guiltily, I wondered how many of those lost souls I had sent into the oblivion of death. It made a small barrier between me and the other crew members.

Despite the fury of the winter storms, we took the ships out nearly every day. We fought mock battles against each other, practising techniques for grappling or ramming another ship, and also gauging a leap so that one boarded the other vessel rather than ending up in the waters between them. Our master was at pains to explain all our advantages to us. The enemy we would encounter would be far from home, and already worn from weeks at sea. They would have been living aboard their vessels, cramped and punished by the weather, while we would be fresh each day and well fed. The rigours of their journey would demand that every oarsman must also be a Raider, while we could carry additional fighters who could use their bows or board another vessel while keeping our oars fully manned. Often I saw the mate shaking his head over these words. Privately, he confided to his fellows that the rigours of a raiding journey were what made a crew hard and fierce.

How could soft, well-fed farmers hope to prevail against sea-honed Red Ship Raiders?

One day out of ten I was allowed a day to myself, and those days I spent at the keep. They were scarcely restful. I reported to King Shrewd, detailing to him my experiences aboard the *Rurisk*, and taking pleasure in the interest that awoke in his eyes at such times. He seemed better, but was still not the robust king I remembered from my youth. Patience and Lacey likewise demanded a visit, and I made a dutiful call on Kettricken as well. An hour or two for Nighteyes, a clandestine visit to Molly's chambers, and then the excuses to hurry back to my own chamber for the rest of the night, so that I might be there when Chade would summon me for his quizzings. The following dawn, a brief report to Verity, where with a touch he renewed our Skill bond. Often it was a relief to return to the crew's quarters to get a solid night of sleep.

Finally, as winter drew to a close, chance afforded me an opportunity to speak privately with Shrewd. I had gone to his chambers on one of my days away from the boat, to report to him on our training progress. Shrewd was in better health than usual, and was sitting up in his chair by the fire. Wallace was not about that day. Instead, there was a young woman, ostensibly tidying the chamber, but almost certainly spying for Regal. The Fool, too, was underfoot as always, and taking a keen pleasure in making her uncomfortable. I had grown up with the Fool, and had always accepted his white skin and colourless eyes as simply the way he was. The woman obviously felt differently. She began it, it must be admitted, peering at the Fool whenever she thought he might not be paying attention. But as soon as he noted it, he began to peek back at her, and each time affected a more lascivious glance than the last. She became more and more nervous, and when finally, she must pass by us with her bucket, and the Fool sent Ratsy on his sceptre to peek up under her skirts, she leaped back with a shriek, dousing herself and the floor she had just scrubbed with dirty water. Shrewd rebuked the Fool, who grovelled extravagantly and remorselessly, and then dismissed the woman to get dry clothes on. I sprang to my opportunity.

She was scarcely clear of the room before I spoke. 'My liege, there is something I have been wishing to petition you about, for some time.'

Some note in my voice must have alerted both Fool and King, for I instantly had their undivided attention. I glared at the Fool, and he knew plainly I wished him to withdraw, but instead he leaned closer, actually

resting his head against Shrewd's knee as he simpered at me infuriatingly. I refused to let it rattle me. I looked at the King beseechingly.

'You may speak, FitzChivalry,' he said formally.

I drew a breath. 'My liege, I would ask your permission to marry.'

The Fool's eyes grew round with surprise. But my king smiled as indulgently as if I were a child begging a sweetmeat. 'So. Finally, it has come. But surely you mean to court her first?'

My heart was thundering in my chest. My king looked entirely too knowing. But pleased, very pleased. I dared to hope. 'May it please my king, I fear I have already begun to court her. Yet know I did not intend to do so presumptuously. It just ... came about.'

He laughed good-naturedly. 'Yes. Some things do. Though when you did not speak out sooner, I wondered what your intentions were, and if the lady had deceived herself.'

My mouth went dry. I could not breathe. How much did he know? He smiled at my terror.

'I have no objections. In fact, I am well pleased with your choice ...'

The smile that broke out on my face was amazingly echoed by one on the Fool's countenance. I drew a trembling breath, until Shrewd continued, 'But her father has reservations. He has told me that he would like to delay this, at least until her older sisters are pledged.'

'What?' I could barely utter the word. Confusion whirled in me. Shrewd smiled benignly.

'Your lady, it seems, is as good as her name. Celerity asked her father for permission to court you the very day you left for Buckkeep. I think you won her heart when you spoke so plainly to Virago. But Brawndy denied her, for the reason I have told you. I understand the lady raised quite a storm with her father, but Brawndy is a fine man. He did, however, send word to us, lest we take offence. He wishes us to know he has no opposition to the match itself, only to her preceding her sisters in marriage. I acceded in this. She is, I believe, but fourteen?'

I could not speak.

'Do not look so distressed, boy. You are both young and there is plenty of time. While he does not choose to allow a formal courting to begin as yet, I am sure he does not intend that you shall not see each other.' King Shrewd looked on me so tolerantly, with so much kindness in his eyes. The Fool's eyes flickered back and forth between us. I could not read his face.

I was trembling, as I had not in months. I would not allow this to continue, to become any worse than it was already. I found my tongue, formed words in my dry throat. ‘My king, that is not the lady I was considering.’

Silence descended. I met my king’s eyes, and saw his look change. Had I not been so desperate, I know I would have looked aside from that displeasure. Instead I looked at him beseechingly, praying he might understand. When he did not speak further, I attempted to.

‘My king, the woman I speak of is presently a lady’s maid, but in her own right she is not a servant. She is ...’

‘Be silent.’

It could not have been sharper if he had struck me. I was still.

Shrewd looked me up and down carefully. When he spoke, it was with the force of all his majesty. I thought I felt even the pressure of the Skill in his voice. ‘Be entirely certain of what I say to you, FitzChivalry. Brawndy is my friend, as well as my Duke. Neither he, nor his daughter, shall be offended or slighted by you. At this time, you shall court no one. No one. I suggest you consider well all you are offered when Brawndy considers you favourably as a match for Celerity. He makes no matter of your birth. Few others would do so. Celerity will have land and a title of her own. As will you, from me, if you have the wisdom to bide your time and do well by the lady. You will come to find that it is the wise choice. I will tell you when you may begin courting her.’

I summoned the last of my courage. ‘My king, please, I ...’

‘Enough, Chivalry! You have heard my word on this subject. There is no more to say!’

A short time later, he dismissed me, and I went shaking from his rooms. I do not know if fury or heartbreak were the force behind my trembling. I thought again of how he had called me by my father’s name. Perhaps, I told myself spitefully, it was because in his heart he knew I would do as my father had done. I would wed for love. Even, I thought savagely, if I had to wait until King Shrewd was in his grave, for Verity to keep his word to me. I went back to my rooms. To have wept would have been a relief. I could not even find tears. Instead I lay on my bed and stared at the hangings. I could not imagine telling Molly what had just transpired between my king and me. Telling myself that not to speak was also a deception, I resolved to find a way to tell her. But not right away. A time would come, I promised myself, a

time when I could explain and she would understand. I would wait for it. Until then, I would not think about it. Nor, I resolved coldly, would I go to my king unless I were summoned.

As spring drew closer, Verity arranged his ships and men as carefully as tokens on a gameboard. The watchtowers on the coast were always manned, and their signal fires kept ever ready for a torch. Such signal fires were for the purpose of alerting local citizenry that Red Ships had been sighted. He took the remaining members of the Skill coterie Galen had fashioned, and distributed them in the towers and on the ships. Serene, my nemesis and heart of Galen's coterie, remained at Buckkeep. Privately I wondered why Verity used her there, as a centre for the coterie, rather than having each member Skill individually to him. With Galen's death, and August's forced retirement from the coterie, Serene had taken on Galen's post, and seemed to consider herself the Skillmaster. In some ways, she almost became him. It was not just that she stalked Buckkeep in austere silence and wore always a disapproving frown. She seemed to have acquired his testiness and foul humour as well. The serving-folk now spoke of her with the same dread and distaste they had once reserved for Galen. I understood she had taken over Galen's personal quarters as well. I avoided her assiduously on the days I was at home. I would have been more relieved if Verity had placed her elsewhere. But it was not up to me to question my King-in-Waiting's decisions.

Justin, a tall, gangly young man with two years on me, was assigned as coterie member to the *Rurisk*. He had despised me since we had studied the Skill together, and I had failed so spectacularly at it. He snubbed me at every opportunity. I bit my tongue and did my best not to encounter him. The close quarters of the ship made that difficult. It was not a comfortable situation.

After great debate, with himself and me, Verity placed Carrod aboard the *Constance*, Burl at the Neatbay tower, and sent Will far north, to the Red Tower up in Bearn's that commanded such a wide view of the sea as well as the surrounding countryside. Once he had arranged their tokens on his maps, it made a reality of the pathetic thinness of our defences. 'It reminds me of the old folk tale, of the beggar who had but a hat to cover his nakedness,' I told Verity. He smiled without humour.

'Would that I could move my ships as swiftly as he did his hat,' he wished grimly.

Two of the ships Verity set to duty as roving patrol vessels. Two he kept in reserve, one docked at Buckkeep, and that was the *Rurisk*, while the *Stag* anchored in South Cove. It was a pitifully small fleet to protect the Six Duchies' straggling coastline. A second set of ships was being constructed, but it was not expected they would be finished soon. The best of the seasoned wood had been used in the first four vessels, and his shipwrights cautioned him he would be wiser to wait than to attempt to use green wood. It chafed him, but he listened to them.

Early spring saw us practising drills. The coterie members, Verity privately told me, functioned almost as well as carrier pigeons at relaying simple messages. His situation with me was a more frustrating one. For his own reasons, he had chosen not to disclose to anyone his training of me in the Skill. I believe he was enjoying the advantages of being able to go with me and observe and listen undetected to the everyday life of Buckkeep Town. I understood that the *Rurisk's* master had been given word that I was to be heeded if I requested a sudden change in course or announced that we were required at a certain location immediately. I fear he saw this mostly as Verity's indulgence of his bastard nephew, but in this he followed his orders.

Then, one early spring morning, we reported to our ship for yet another practice. We functioned well as a crew now in manoeuvring our ship. This exercise was to have us rendezvous with the *Constance* at an undisclosed location. It was a Skill exercise that so far we had not succeeded at. We were resigned to a frustrating day, save for Justin, who was stonily intent on succeeding. Arms crossed on his chest, dressed all in dark blue (I believe he thought the blue robe made him appear more Skilled) he stood on the dock and stared out into the thick fog that blanketed the ocean. I was forced to pass him as I put a keg of water aboard.

'To you, Bastard, it's an opaque blanket. But to me, all is as clear as a mirror.'

'How unfortunate for you,' I said kindly, ignoring his use of the word *bastard*. I had all but forgotten how much sting could be put into a word. 'I'd rather see the fog than your face of a morning.' Petty, but satisfying. I had the additional satisfaction of watching his robe bind about his legs as he boarded. I was sensibly dressed, in snug leggings, an undershirt of soft cotton, and a leather jerkin over that. I had considered some sort of mail, but Burrich had shook his head over it. 'Better to die cleanly from a weapon's wound than to fall overboard and drown,' he'd advised me.

Verity had quirked a smile at that. ‘Let’s not burden him with too much overconfidence,’ he suggested wryly, and even Burrich had smiled. After a moment.

So I had abandoned any thought of mail or armour. At any rate, today would be a rowing day, and what I wore was comfortable for that. No shoulder seams to strain against, no sleeves to catch on my forearms. I was inordinately proud of the chest and shoulders I was developing. Even Molly had expressed an astonished approval. I settled into my seat, and rolled my shoulders, smiling as I thought of her. I’d had far too little time with her lately. Well, only time would cure that. Summer brought the Raiders. As the long fair days came on, I’d have even less time with her. Autumn could not come too soon for me.

We settled in, a full complement of rowers and warriors. At some moment, as ropes were cast off and the steersman took his post and the oars began their steady beat, we became one animal. It was a phenomenon I had noted before. Perhaps I was more sensitized to it, nerves abraded clean by my Skill-sharing with Verity. Perhaps it was that all the men and women on board shared a single purpose, and that for most of them it was vengeance. Whatever it was, it lent a unity to us that I had never sensed before in a group of folk. Perhaps, I thought, this was a shadow of what it was to belong to a coterie. I felt a pang of regret, of opportunities lost.

You are my coterie. Verity, like a whisper behind me. And somewhere, from the distant hills, something less than a sigh. *Are we not pack?*

I do have you, I thought back to them. Then I settled in and paid attention to what I was doing. Oars and backs dipped and rose in unison and the Rurisk went nosing boldly out into the fog. Our sail hung limp. In a moment, we were a world unto ourselves. Sounds of water, of the rhythmic unity of our breathing as we rowed. A few of the fighters spoke softly amongst themselves, their words and thoughts muffled by the mist. Up in the bow, Justin stood beside the master, staring out into the fog. His brow was lined, his eyes distant, and I knew he reached for Carrod aboard the *Constance*. Almost idly, I reached out too, to see if I could sense what he Skilled.

Stop that! warned Verity, and I drew back feeling as if he slapped my hand. *I’m not ready for anyone to have suspicions about you yet.*

There was a lot behind that warning, more than I could devote myself to just now. As if what I had begun to do were actually a very dangerous

action. I wondered what he feared, but I concentrated on the steady rhythm of my rowing, and let my eyes stare into the infinite grey. Most of that morning passed in a mist. Several times Justin asked the master to have the steersman change his course. It made little difference that I could see, save in the texture of the rowing. All of the inside of a fog bank looks much the same. The steady physical effort, the lack of anything to focus on put me into a waking dream about nothing.

The cries of the young watchman broke my trance. ‘Ware treachery!’ he cried out, his shrill voice deepening as blood engulfed it. ‘We are attacked!’

I leaped up from my rowing bench, staring wildly all about. Fog. Only my oar dangling and skipping on the surface of the water, while my fellow oarsmen glared at me for breaking the rhythm. ‘You, Fitz! What ails you?’ the master demanded. Justin stood at his side, clear-browed and self-righteous.

‘I ... my back cramped. Sorry.’ I stooped to my oar again.

‘Kelpy, relieve him. Stretch and move about a bit, boy then take your oar back,’ the mate directed in his thick accent.

‘Aye, sir,’ I acknowledged his order, and stood to let Kelpy have my bench and oar. It did feel good to pause. My shoulders cracked when I rolled them. But I was ashamed, too, to take a rest when the others did not. I rubbed my eyes and gave my head a rattle, wondering what nightmare had seized me so firmly. What watchman? Where?

Antler Island. They came in under the fog’s cover. No town there, but the signal tower. I think they intend to slaughter the watchers, and then do their best to destroy the towers. A brilliant strategy. Antler Island is one of our first lines of defence. The outer tower watches the sea, the inner tower passes on the signals to both Buckkeep and Neatbay. Verity’s thoughts, almost calm with the same steadiness that seizes one as a weapon is brought to the ready. Then, after a moment, The single-minded slug is so intent on reaching Carrod, he won’t let me through. Fitz. Go to the master. Tell him Antler Island. If you get into the channel, the current will practically fly you to the cove where the tower is. The Raiders are there already, but they’ll have to beat against the current to get out again. Go now, and you may catch them on the beach. NOW!

Easier to give orders than to obey them, I thought, and then hurried forward. ‘Sir?’ I requested, and then stood an eternity waiting for the master

to turn and speak to me, while the mate glared at me for going straight to the master rather than through him.

‘Oarsman?’ the master said at last.

‘Antler Island. If we make for it now, and catch the current in the channel, we’ll practically fly to the cove where the tower is.’

‘That’s true. Do you read currents then, boy? It’s a useful skill. I thought I was the only man on board with an idea of where we actually are.’

‘No, sir.’ I took a deep breath. Verity had ordered this. ‘We should go there, sir. Now.’

The ‘now’ drew his brows together in a frown.

‘What is this nonsense!’ Justin demanded angrily. ‘Are you trying to make me look a fool? You’d sensed that we were getting close to each other, didn’t you? Why do you want me to fail? So you won’t feel so alone?’

I wanted to kill him. Instead I drew myself straight and told the truth. ‘A secret order from the King-in-Waiting, sir. One I was to pass on to you at this time.’ I addressed only the master. He dismissed me with a nod and I returned to my bench and took my oar back from Kelpy. The master stared dispassionately into the mist.

‘Jharck. Have the steersman swing her about and catch the current. Take her a bit deeper into the channel.’

The mate nodded stiffly, and in an instant we had changed course. Our sail bellied slightly, and it was as Verity had said it would be. The current combined with our rowing sent us skating down the channel. Time passes oddly in a fog. All senses are distorted in it. I don’t know how long I rowed, but soon Nighteyes whispered that there was a tinge of smoke in the air, and almost immediately we became aware of the cries of men in battle, carrying clear but ghostly through the fog. I saw Jharck, the mate, exchange glances with the master. ‘Put your backs into it!’ he snarled suddenly. ‘We’ve got a Red Ship attacking our tower.’

Another moment and the stink of the smoke was distinguishable in the fog, as were the battle cries and screams of men. Sudden strength leaped in me and about me I saw the same, the clenched jaws, the muscles that knotted and sprang as we rowed, even a different tang to the sweat of those who laboured around me. If we had been one creature before, we were now part of the same enraged beast. I felt the leap of the heating anger igniting and spreading. It was a Wit thing, a surging of hearts on the animal level that flooded us with hate.

We drove the *Rurisk* forward, sending her skimming up finally into the shallows of the cove and then we leaped out and ran her up the beach just as we had practised. The fog was a treacherous ally, concealing us from the attackers that we would in turn attack, but concealing from us also the lie of the land and a view of exactly what was happening. Weapons were seized and we rushed toward the sounds of the fighting. Justin stayed with the *Rurisk*, standing and staring into the fog toward Buckkeep earnestly, as if that would help him Skill the news to Serene.

The Red Ship was drawn up on the sand, just as the *Rurisk* was. Not far from her were the two small boats that served as ferries to the mainland. Both had been stove in. There had been Six Duchies men down here on the beach when the Red Ships arrived. Some of them were still there. Carnage. We ran past crumpled bodies leaking blood into the sand. All of them seemed to be our own folk. Suddenly the Antler Island inner tower loomed grey above us. On top of it her signal fire burned a ghostly yellow in the fog. The tower was besieged. The Raiders were dark, muscular men, wiry rather than massive. Most were heavily bearded and their hair hung black and wild to their shoulders. They wore body armour of plaited leather and carried heavy blades and axes. Some wore helms of metal. Their bared arms were marked with coils of scarlet, but whether this was tattoo or paint I could not tell. They were confident, swaggering, laughing and talking like workmen completing a task. The guardians of the tower were cornered; the structure had been built as a basis for a signal light, not as a defensible rampart. It was a matter of time before all the cornered men were dead. The Outislanders did not look back toward us as we came pouring up the rocky incline. They believed they had nothing to fear from behind them. One tower gate hung on its hinges, a huddle of men inside barricaded behind a wall of bodies. As we advanced, they sent a thin hail of arrows out toward the encircled Raiders. None of them hit.

I gave a cry between a whoop and a howl, terrible fear and vengeful joy merged into one sound. The emotions of those who ran beside me found vent in me, and spurred me on. The attackers turned to see us as we closed with them.

We caught the Raiders between us. Our ship's crew outnumbered them, and at sight of us, the beleaguered defenders of the tower took heart and poured forth themselves. Scattered bodies about the tower gate attested to several efforts before this one. The young watchman still lay where I had

seen him fall in my dream. Blood had spilled from his mouth and soaked into his embroidered shirt. A dagger thrown from behind had taken him. An odd detail to note as we rushed forward to join in the mêlée.

There was no strategy, no formation, no plan of battle. Simply a group of men and women suddenly offered the opportunity for vengeance. It was more than enough.

If I thought I had been one with the crew before, I was now engulfed in them. Emotions battered and thrust me forward. I will never know how much or which feelings were my own. They overwhelmed me, and FitzChivalry was lost in them. I became the emotions of the crew. Axe raised, roaring, I led the way. I had no desire for the position I had seized. Instead I was thrust forward by the crew's extreme desire for someone to follow. I suddenly wanted to kill as many Raiders as I could, as fast as I could. I wanted my muscles to crack with each swing, I wanted to fling myself forward through a tide of dispossessed souls, to tread on the bodies of fallen Raiders. And I did.

I had heard legends of berserks. I had thought them animalistic brutes, powered by bloodlust, insensitive to the damage they wrought. Perhaps, instead, they were oversensitized, unable to defend their own minds from the emotions that rushed in to drive them, unable to heed the pain signals of their own bodies. I do not know.

I have heard tales of myself on that day. Even a song. I do not recall that I frothed and roared as I fought. But neither do I recall that I did not. Somewhere, within me, were both Verity and Nighteyes, but they too were drowned in the passions of those around me. I know I killed the first Raider that went down before our mad rush. I also know that I finished the last standing man, in a battle we fought axe to axe. The song says it was the master of the Red Ship vessel. I suppose it could have been. His leather surcoat was well made, and spattered with the blood of other men. I don't recall another thing about him except how my axe crushed his helm deep into his skull, and how the blood gouted from beneath the metal as he sank to his knees.

So the battle ended, and defenders rushed forth to embrace our crew, to shout the victory and pound one another's backs. The change was too much for me. I stood, leaning on my axe, and wondered where my strength had fled. The anger had abandoned me as suddenly as carris seed leaves an addict. I felt drained and disoriented, as if I had wakened from one dream

into another. I could have dropped and slept amongst the bodies, so totally exhausted was I. It was Nonge, one of the Outislanders in the crew, who brought me water, and then walked me clear of the bodies so I could sit down to drink it. Then he waded back in among the carnage, to join in the looting. When he came back to me a while later, he held out to me a bloodied medallion. It was hammered gold, on a silver chain. A crescent moon. When I did not reach to take it from him, he looped it over the gory head of my axe. 'It was Harek's,' he said, finding the Six Duchies words slowly. 'You fought him well. He died well. He'd want you to have it. He was a good man, before the Korriks took his heart.' I did not even ask him which one had been Harek. I did not want any of them to have names.

After a time, I began to feel alive again. I helped to clear the bodies from the door of the tower, and then from the battlefield. The Raiders we burned, the Six Duchies men we laid out and covered, for kin to claim. I remember odd things about that long afternoon. How a dead man's heels leave a snaking trail in the sand when you drag him. How the young watchman with the dagger in him wasn't quite dead when we went to gather him up. Not that he lasted long afterwards. He soon was just one more body to add to a row that was too long already.

We left our warriors with what was left of the tower guard, to help fill up the watches until more men could be sent out. We admired the vessel we'd captured. Verity would be pleased, I thought to myself. Another ship. A very well-made one. I knew all these things, but felt nothing about any of them. We returned to the *Rurisk*, where a pale Justin awaited us. In a numbed silence, we launched the *Rurisk* and took our places at the oars and headed back to Buckkeep.

We encountered other boats before we were halfway there. A hastily-organized flotilla of fishing vessels laden with soldiers hailed us. The King-in-Waiting had sent them, at Justin's urgently Skilled behest. They seemed almost disappointed to find that the fighting was over, but our master assured them they would be welcomed at the tower. That, I think, was when I realized I could no longer sense Verity. And hadn't for some time. I groped after Nighteyes immediately, as another man might grope after his purse. He was there. But distant. Exhausted, and awed. *Never have I smelt so much blood*, he told me. I agreed. I still stank of it.

Verity had been busy. We were scarcely off the *Rurisk* before there was another crew aboard to take her back to Antler Island tower. Watch soldiers

and another crew of rowers set her heavy in the water. Verity's prize would be tied up at his home dock by this night. Another open boat followed them, to bring our slain home. The master, the mate and Justin departed on provided horses to report directly to Verity. I felt only relief that I hadn't been summoned also. Instead, I went with my crewmates. Faster than I would have thought possible, word of the battle and our prize spread through Buckkeep Town. There was not a tavern that was not anxious to pour us full of ale and hear our exploits. It was almost like a second battle frenzy, for wherever we went, folk ignited around us with savage satisfaction in what we had done. I felt drunk on the surging emotions of those around me long before the ale overwhelmed me. Not that I held back from that. I told few tales of what we had done, but my drinking more than made up for it. I threw up twice, once in an alley, and later in the street. I drank more to kill the taste of the vomit. Somewhere in the back of my mind, Nighteyes was frantic. *Poison. That water is poisoned.* I couldn't frame a thought to reassure him.

Some time before morning, Burrich hauled me out of a tavern. He was stonily sober, and his eyes were anxious. In the street outside the tavern, he stopped by a dying torch in a street sconce. 'There's still blood on your face,' he told me, and stood me up straight. He took out his handkerchief, dipped it in a rain barrel, and wiped my face as he had not since I was a child. I swayed under his touch. I looked into his eyes, and forced my gaze to focus.

'I've killed before,' I said helplessly. 'Why is this so different? Why does it sicken me like this, afterward?'

'Because it does,' he said softly. He put an arm around my shoulders, and I was surprised we were of a height. The walk back to Buckkeep was steep. Very long. Very quiet. He sent me to the baths, and told me to go to bed afterwards.

I should have stayed in my own bed, but I had not the sense. Luckily the castle was abuzz, and one more drunk clambering up a staircase was not remarkable. Stupidly, I went to Molly's room. She let me in. But when I tried to touch her, she pulled away from me. 'You're drunk,' she told me, almost crying. 'I told you, I promised myself to never kiss a drunk. Or be kissed by one.'

'But I'm not drunk that way,' I insisted.

'There's only one way to be drunk,' she told me. And turned me out of her rooms, untouched.

By noon the next day, I knew how much I had hurt her by not coming straight to her to find comfort. I could understand what she felt. But I also knew that what I had carried that night was nothing to take home to someone you loved. I wanted to explain that to her. But a boy came running up to me, to tell me I was needed on the *Rurisk*, and right now. I gave him a penny for his troubles and watched him dash off with it. Once, I had been the boy earning the penny. I thought of Kerry. I tried to remember him as the boy with the penny in his hand, running at my side, but forever now he was the Forged one dead on a table. No one, I told myself, had been taken for Forging yesterday.

Then I headed down to the docks. On the way I stopped at the stable. I gave the crescent moon over into Burrich's hands. 'Keep this safe for me,' I asked him. 'And there will be a bit more, my crewshare from the raid. I want to have you hold it for me ... what I make at doing this. It's for Molly. So if ever I don't come back, you be certain she gets it. She doesn't like being a servant.'

I hadn't spoken so plainly of her to Burrich in a long time. A line creased his brow, but he took the bloodied moon. 'What would your father say to me?' he wondered aloud as I turned wearily away from him.

'I don't know,' I told him bluntly. 'I never knew him. Only you.'

'FitzChivalry.'

I turned back to him. Burrich met my eyes as he spoke. 'I don't know what he'd say to me. But I know I can say this for him, to you. I'm proud of you. It's not the kind of work a man does that says he can be proud or not. It's how he does it. Be proud of yourself.'

'I will try,' I told him quietly. I went back to my ship.

Our next encounter with a Red Ship was a less decisive victory. We met them on the sea, and they were not surprised for they had seen us coming. Our master stood the course, and I think they were surprised when we began the engagement by ramming them. We sheared off a number of their oars, but missed the steering oar we had targeted. There was little damage to the ship itself; the Red Ships were as flexible as fish. Our grapples flew. We outnumbered them, and the master intended to use that advantage. Our warriors boarded them, and half our oarsmen lost their heads and jumped in too. It became a chaos that spread briefly to our own decks. It took every bit of will I could muster to withstand the vortex of emotions that engulfed us, but I stayed with my oar as I had been ordered. Nonge, at his oar, watched

me strangely. I gripped my oar and ground my teeth until I could find myself. I muttered a curse when I discovered that I'd lost Verity again.

I think our warriors let up a bit when they knew we had reduced their crew to where they could no longer manage their vessel. It was a mistake. One of the Raiders set fire to their own sail while a second one attempted to chop through their own planking. I guess they hoped the fire would spread and they could take us down with them. Certainly at the end they fought with no care for the damage they took to their ship or their own bodies. Our fighters finally finished them, and we got the fire put out, but the prize we towed back to Buckkeep was smoking and damaged, and man for man, we had lost more lives than they had. Still, it was a victory, we told ourselves. This time, when the others went out drinking, I had the sense to seek out Molly. And early the next morning, I found an hour or two for Nighteyes. We went hunting together, good clean hunting, and he tried to persuade me to run away with him. I made the mistake of telling him that he could leave if he wished, meaning only the best for him, and hurt his feelings. It took me another hour to convey to him what I had meant. I went back to my ship wondering if my ties were worth the effort it took to keep them intact. Nighteyes assured me they were.

That was the last clear victory for the *Rurisk*. It was far from the last battle of the summer. No, the clear, pleasant weather stretched impossibly long before us, and every fine day was a day when I might kill someone. I tried not to count them as days on which I might be killed. We had many skirmishes, and gave pursuit many times, and it did seem there were fewer raids attempted in the area we regularly patrolled. Somehow that only made it all the more frustrating. And there were successful raids for the Red Ships, times when we put into a town but an hour or so after they had left, and could do no more than help stack bodies or put out fires. Then Verity would roar and curse in my mind that he could not get messages more swiftly, that there were not enough ships and watches to be everywhere. I would rather have faced the fury of a battle than Verity's savage frustration racking through my brain. There was never any end in sight, save the respite that bad weather might bring us. We could not even put an accurate number to the Red Ships that plagued us, for they were painted identically, and as like as peas in a pod. Or drops of blood on the sand.

While I was an oarsman on the *Rurisk* that summer, we had one other encounter with a Red Ship that is worth telling for the strangeness of it. On a

clear summer night, we had been tumbled from our beds in the crew-shed and sent racing toward our ship. Verity had sensed a Red Ship lurking off Buck Point. He wanted us to overtake it in the dark.

Justin stood in our prow, Skill linked to Serene in Verity's tower. Verity was a wordless mumble in my mind as he felt our way through the dark toward the ship he sensed. And something else? I could feel him groping out, beyond the Red Ship, like a man feeling forward in the darkness. I sensed his uneasiness. We were allowed no talk, and our oars were muffled as we came closer. Nighteyes whispered to me that he had scent of them, and then we spotted them. Long and low and dark, the Red Ship was cutting through the water ahead of us. A sudden cry went up from their deck; they had seen us. Our master shouted to us to lay into our oars, but as we did, a sick wave of fear engulfed me. My heart began to hammer, my hands to tremble. The terror that swept through me was a child's nameless fear of things lurking in the dark, a helpless fear. I gripped my oar but could find no strength to ply it.

'Korrikska,' I heard a man groan in a thick Outislander accent. I think it was Nonge. I became aware I was not the only one unmanned. There was no steady beat to our oars. Some sat on their sea-chests, head bowed over their oars, while others rowed frantically, but out of rhythm, the blades of the oars skipping and slapping against the water. We skittered on the surface like a crippled pond-skater while the Red Ship forged purposefully toward us. I lifted up my eyes and watched my death coming for me. The blood hammered so in my ears that I could not hear the cries of the panic-stricken men and women about me. I could not even take a breath. I lifted up my eyes to the heavens.

Beyond the Red Ship, almost glowing on the black water, was a white ship. This was no raiding vessel; this was a ship, easily three times the size of the Red Ship, her two sails reefed, riding at anchor on the quiet water. Ghosts strode her deck, or Forged ones. I felt no hint of life from them, and yet they moved purposefully, readying a small boat to be lowered over the side. A man stood on the afterdeck. The moment I saw him, I could not look away.

He was cloaked in grey, yet I saw him limned against the dark sky as clearly as if a lantern illuminated him. I swear I could see his eyes, the jut of his nose, the dark curly beard that framed his mouth. He laughed at me. 'Here's one come to us!' he called out to someone, and lifted a hand. He

pointed it at me, and laughed aloud again, and I felt my heart squeeze in my chest. He looked at me with a terrible singleness, as if I alone of our crew were his prey. I looked back at him, and I saw him, but I could not sense him. *There! There!* I shrieked the word aloud, or perhaps the Skill I could never control sent it bounding off the insides of my skull. There was no response. No Verity, no Nighteyes, no one, nothing. I was alone. All the world had gone silent and still. Around me my crew fellows rattled with terror and cried out aloud, but I felt nothing. They were no longer there. No one was there. No gull, no fish in the sea, no life anywhere as far as any of my inner senses would reach. The cloaked figure on the ship leaned far out on the rail, the accusing finger pointing at me. He was laughing. I was alone. It was a loneliness too great to be endured. It wrapped me, coiled about me, blanketed me and began to smother me.

I *repelled* at it.

In a reflex I did not know I had, I used the Wit to push away from it as hard as I could. Physically, I was the one that flew backwards, landing in the bilge upon the thwarts, tangled in the feet of the other oarsmen. I saw the figure on the ship stumble, sag and then fall over the side. The splash was not large, but there was only one. If he rose to the surface at all, I did not see it.

Nor was there time to look for him. The Red Ship hit us amidships, shattering oars and sending oarsmen flying. The Outislanders were shouting with their confidence, mocking us with their laughter as they leaped from their ship to ours. I scabbled to my feet and lunged to my bench, reaching for my axe. Around me, the others were making the same sort of recovery. We were not battle-ready, but neither were we paralysed by fear any more. Steel met our boarders and battle was joined.

There is no place so dark as the open water at night. Fellow and foe were indistinguishable in the dark. A man leaped onto me, I caught at the leather of his foreign harness, bore him down and strangled him. After the numbness that had briefly clenched me, there was a savage relief in his terror beating against me. I think it happened quickly. When I straightened up, the other boat was pulling away from us. She had only about half her oarsmen, and there was still fighting on our decks, but she was leaving her men. Our master was shouting at us to finish them and be after the Red Ship. It was a useless command. By the time we had killed them and thrown them off our decks, the other ship was lost in the darkness. Justin was down, throttled and

battered, alive, but incapable of Skilling to Verity just then. In any case, one bank of our oars was a splintered mess. Our master cursed us all soundly as the oars were redistributed and shipped, but it was too late. He shouted us down to stillness, but we could hear nothing, and see nothing. I stood on my sea-chest and turned slowly in a complete circle. Empty black water. Of the oared vessel, no sign. But even more strange to me was what I spoke aloud, 'The white ship was at anchor. But she's gone, too!'

Around me, heads turned to stare at me. 'White ship?'

'Are you all right, Fitz?'

'A Red Ship, boy, it was a Red Ship we fought.'

'Speak not of a white ship. To see a white ship is to see your own death. Bad luck.' This last was hissed to me by Nonge. I opened my mouth to object that I had seen an actual ship, not some vision of disaster. He shook his head at me, and then turned away to stare out over the empty water. I closed my mouth and sat down slowly. No one else had seen it. Nor did any of the others speak of the terrible fear that had gripped us and changed our battle plans to panic. When we got back to town that night, the way it was told in the taverns was that we had come upon the ship, engaged battle, only to have the Red Ship flee us. No evidence remained of that encounter but some shattered oars, some injuries, and some Outislander blood on our decks.

When I privately conferred with both Verity and Nighteyes, neither had seen anything. Verity told me that I had excluded him as soon as we sighted the other vessel. Nighteyes was miffed to admit that I had completely closed myself to him as well. Nonge would say nothing to me of white ships; he was not much for conversation on any topic. Later, I found mention of the white ship in a scroll of old legends. There it was an accursed ship, where the souls of drowned sailors unworthy of the sea would work forever for a merciless master. I was forced to set aside all mention of it or be thought mad.

The rest of the summer, the Red Ships evaded the *Rurisk*. We would catch sight of them, and give chase, but never managed to run one down. Once it was our good fortune to chase one that had just raided. She threw her captives overboard to lighten herself and fled us. Of twelve folk they threw in, we rescued nine, and returned them unForged to their village. The three who drowned before we reached them were mourned, but all agreed it was a better fate than Forging.

The other ships had much the same luck. The *Constance* came upon Raiders in the midst of attacking a village. They didn't manage a quick victory, but had the foresight to damage the beached Red Ship so that the Raiders could not make a clean escape. It took days to hunt them all down, for they scattered into the woodlands when they saw what had been done to their ship. The other vessels had similar experiences: we gave chase, we drove off Raiders, the other ships even had some few successes at sinking raiding vessels, but we captured no more intact ships that summer.

So, the Forgings were reduced, and each time we sent a ship down, we told ourselves it was one less. But it never seemed to make a difference in how many remained. In one sense, we brought hope to the folk of Six Duchies. In another way, we gave them despair, for despite all we did, we could not drive the threat of Raiders from our shore.

For me, that long summer was a time of terrible isolation and incredible closeness. Verity was often with me, yet I found I could never seem to sustain the contact once any sort of fighting had begun. Verity himself was aware of the maelstrom of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me each time our crew engaged. He ventured the theory that in attempting to defend against the thoughts and feelings of others, I set up my boundaries so firmly that not even he could breach them. He also suggested that this might mean I was strong in the Skill, stronger than he was even, but so sensitized that to let down my barriers during a battle drowned me in the consciousness of everyone around me. It was an interesting theory, but one that offered no practical solutions to the problem. Still, in the days when I carried Verity about, I developed a feel for him that I had for no other man, save perhaps Burrich. With chilling familiarity, I knew how the Skill hunger gnawed at him.

When I was a boy, Kerry and I had one day climbed a tall cliff over the ocean. When we reached the top and looked out over it, he confessed to me an almost overwhelming impulse to fling himself off. I think this was akin to what Verity felt. The pleasure of the Skill enticed him, and he longed to fling all of himself, every ounce of his being, out into its web. His close contact with me only fed it. And yet we did too much good for the Six Duchies for him to give it up, even though the Skill was eating him hollow. Perforce I shared with him many of his hours at his lonely tower window, the hard chair where he sat, the weariness that destroyed his appetite for food, even the deep bone-aches of inactivity. I witnessed how he wasted away.

I do not know that it is good to know someone so well. Nighteyes was jealous, and said so plainly. At least with him it was an open anger about being slighted, as he saw it. It was a more difficult thing with Molly.

She could see no real reason why I had to be away so much. Why did I, of all people, have to crew on one of the warships? The reason I was able to give her, that Verity wished me to, satisfied her not at all. Our brief times together began to have a predictable pattern. We would come together in a storm of passion, find peace in each other briefly, and then begin to wrangle about things. She was lonely, she hated being a servant, the little bit of money she could set aside for herself grew terribly slowly, she missed me, why did I have to be gone so much when I was the only thing that made her life bearable? I approached her once with the offer of what money I had earned aboard the ship, but she stiffened as if I had called her a whore. She would take nothing of mine until we were joined in marriage before all. And I could offer her no real hope as to when that might happen. I still had never found the moment in which to reveal Shrewd's plans for Celerity and me. We were apart so much, we lost the threads of one another's day-to-day lives, and when we did come together, we always rechewed the bitter rinds of the same arguments.

One night, when I came to her, I found her with her hair bound back all in red ribbons, and graceful silver earrings shaped like willow leaves dangling against her bare neck. Clad in her simple white nightgown, the sight of her took my breath away. Later, during a quieter moment when we had breath for speaking, I complimented her on the earrings. Artlessly, she told me that when Prince Regal had last come to buy candles of her, he had gifted her with them, for he said he was so pleased with what she created that he scarcely felt he paid her what such finely-scented candles were worth. She smiled proudly as she told me this, her fingers toying with my warrior's queue while her own hair and ribbons tangled wildly upon the pillows. I do not know what she saw in my face, but it widened her eyes and she drew back from me.

'You will take gifts from Regal?' I asked her coldly. 'You will not accept from me coin that I had honestly earned, but you take jewellery from that ...'

I teetered on the edge of treason, but could find no word to express what I thought of him.

Molly's eyes narrowed, and it was my turn to draw back. 'What should I have said to him? "No, sir, I cannot accept your largesse, until you marry me?" There is not between Regal and me what there is between us. This was a perquisite from a customer, such as is often given to a skilled craftsman. Why did you think he gave them to me? In exchange for my favours?'

We stared at one another, and after a time I managed to speak what she was almost willing to accept as an apology. But then I made the mistake of suggesting that perhaps he had given them to her solely because he knew it would vex me. And then she wanted to know how Regal might know what was between us, and did I think her work so poor that largesse such as the earrings was not due her? Suffice to say that we mended our quarrels as well as we could in the short time we had left together. But a mended pot is never as sound as a whole one, and I returned to the ship as lonely as if I had had no time at all with her.

In the times when I leaned on my oar and kept perfect rhythm and tried to think of nothing at all, I often found myself missing Patience and Lacey, Chade, Kettricken, or even Burrich. The few times I was able to call on our Queen-in-Waiting that summer, I always found her on her tower-top garden. It was a beautiful place, but despite her efforts, it was nothing like the other Buckkeep gardens had ever been. There was too much of the mountains in her for her to ever convert entirely to our ways. There was a honed simplicity to how she arranged and trained the plants. Simple stones had been added, and bare driftwood branches, twisted and smoothed by the sea, rested against them in stark beauty. I could have meditated calmly there, but it was not a place to loll in the warm wind of summer, and I suspected that was how Verity had recalled it. She kept herself busy there, and enjoyed it, but it did not bond her to Verity as she had once believed it would. She was as beautiful as ever, but always her blue eyes were clouded grey with preoccupation and worry. Her brow was furrowed so often that when she did relax her face, one saw the pale lines of the skin the sun had never reached. In the times I spent with her there, she often dismissed most of her ladies, and then quizzed me about the *Rurisk's* activities as thoroughly as if she were Verity himself. When I had finished reporting to her, often she folded her lips into a firm line and went to stare out over the top of the tower wall and beyond to the sea touching the edge of the sky. Towards the end of summer, as she was staring so one afternoon, I ventured close to her to ask to be excused from her presence to return to my ship. She scarcely seemed to

hear what I had asked. Instead, she said softly, 'There has to be a final solution. Nothing, no one can go on like this. There must be a way to make an end of this.'

'Autumn storms come soon, my lady queen. Already, frost has touched some of your vines. Storms are never far behind the first chilling, and with them comes peace for us.'

'Peace? Ha.' She snorted in disbelief. 'Is it peace to lie awake and wonder who will die next, where will they attack next year? That is not peace. That is a torture. There must be a way to put an end to the Red Ships. And I intend to find it.'

Her words sounded almost like a threat.

SEVENTEEN

Interludes

‘Of stone were their bones made, of the sparkling veined stone of the mountains. Their flesh was made of the shining salts of the earth. But their hearts were made of the hearts of wise men.

‘They came from afar, those men, a long and trying way. They did not hesitate to lay down the lives that had become a weariness to them. They ended their days and began eternities, they put aside flesh and donned stone, they let fall their weapons and rose on new wings. Elderlings.’

When the King finally summoned me, I went to him. True to my promise to myself, I had not voluntarily gone to his chambers since that afternoon. Bitterness still ate at me over his arrangements with Duke Brawndy concerning Celerity and me. But a summons from one’s king was not a thing to be ignored, regardless of what anger churned inside me still.

King Shrewd sent for me on an autumn morning. It had been at least two months since I had last stood before him. I had ignored the wounded looks the Fool flung at me when I encountered him, and turned aside Verity’s occasional query as to why I had not sought out Shrewd’s chamber. It was easy enough. Wallace still guarded his door like a serpent on the hearth, and the King’s poor health was no secret from anyone. No one was admitted to his rooms before noon any more. So I told myself this morning summons betokened something important.

I had thought the morning would belong to me. An unseasonably early and vicious autumn storm had pounded us for two days. The driving wind was merciless, while drenching rain promised that anyone in an open boat would be fully occupied with bailing. I had spent the evening before in the tavern with the rest of the *Rurisk*’s crew, toasting the storm and wishing the Red Ships the full kiss of it. I had come back to the keep to tumble suddenly into my bed, certain that I could sleep as long as I wished the next morning.

But a determined page had battered my door until sleep forsook me, and then delivered to me the King's formal summons.

I washed, shaved, smoothed my hair back into a tail and donned clean clothes. I steeled myself to betray nothing of my smouldering resentment. When I was confident I was master of myself, I left my chamber. I presented myself at the King's door. I fully expected Wallace to sneer and turn me aside. But this morning he opened the door promptly to my knock. His glance was still disapproving, but he immediately ushered me into the King's presence.

Shrewd sat before his hearth in a cushioned chair. Despite myself, my heart sank at how wasted he had become. His skin was papery and translucent as parchment, his fingers gone to bone. His face sagged, skin drooping where flesh had once held it firm. His dark eyes were sunken into his face. He clasped his hands in his lap in a gesture I knew well. Thus did I hold my hands to conceal the trembling that occasionally overtook me still. A small table at his elbow supported a censer, and Smoke rose from it. The fumes already made a bluish haze about the rafters. The Fool sprawled disconsolately at his feet.

'FitzChivalry is here, your majesty,' Wallace announced me.

The King started as if poked, then shifted his gaze to me. I moved to stand before him.

'FitzChivalry,' the King acknowledged me.

There was no force behind the words, no presence at all. My bitterness was still strong in me, but it could not drown the pain I felt to see him so. He was still my king.

'My king, I have come as you ordered,' I said formally. I tried to cling to my coldness.

He looked at me wearily. He turned his head aside, coughed once into his shoulder. 'So I see. Good.' He stared at me for a moment. He took a deep breath that whispered into his lungs. 'A messenger arrived from Duke Brawndy of Bearns last night. He brought the harvest reports and such, mostly news for Regal. But Brawndy's daughter Celerity also sent this scroll. For you.'

He held it out to me. A small scroll, bound with a yellow ribbon and sealed with a blob of green wax. Reluctantly I stepped forward to take it.

'Brawndy's messenger will be returning to Bearns this afternoon. I am sure that by that time you will have created an appropriate reply.' His tone

did not make this a request. He coughed again. The roil of conflicting emotions I felt for him soured in my stomach.

‘If I may,’ I requested, and when the King did not object, I broke the seal on the scroll and untied the ribbon. I unwound it to discover a second scroll coiled inside it. I glanced over the first one. Celerity wrote with a clear, firm hand. I unrolled the second one and considered it briefly. I looked up to find Shrewd’s eyes on me. I met them without emotion. ‘She writes to wish me well, and to send me a copy of a scroll she found in the Ripplekeep libraries. Or, properly, a copy of what was still legible. From the wrapping, she believed it pertained to Elderlings. She had noted my interest in them during my visit to Ripplekeep. It looks to me as if the writing was actually philosophy, or perhaps poetry.’

I offered the scrolls back to Shrewd. After a moment, he took them. He unfurled the first one and held it out at arm’s length. He furrowed his brow, glared at it briefly, then set it down in his lap. ‘My eyes are befogged, sometimes, of a morning,’ he said. He rerolled the two scrolls together, carefully, as if it were a difficult task. ‘You will write her a proper note of thanks.’

‘Yes, my king.’ My voice was carefully formal. I received once more the scrolls he proffered me. When I had stood before him for some moments longer while he stared through me, I ventured, ‘Am I dismissed, my king?’

‘No.’ He coughed again, more heavily. He took another long sighing breath. ‘You are not dismissed. Had I dismissed you, it would have been years ago. I would have let you grow up in some backwater village. Or seen that you did not grow up at all. No, FitzChivalry, I have not *dismissed* you.’ Something of his old presence came back into his voice. ‘Some years ago, I struck a bargain with you. You have kept your end of it. And kept it well. I know how I am served by you, even when you do not see fit to report to me personally. I know how you serve me, even when you are brimming with anger at me. I could ask little more than what you have given me.’ He coughed again, suddenly, a dry wracking cough. When he could speak, it was not to me.

‘Fool, a goblet of the warmed wine, please. And ask Wallace for the ... spicing herbs to season it.’ The Fool rose immediately, but I saw no willingness on his face. Instead, as he passed behind the King’s chair, he gave me a look that should have drawn blood. King Shrewd made a small gesture at me to wait. He rubbed his eyes, and then stilled his hands once

more in his lap. 'I but seek to keep my end of the bargain,' he resumed. 'I promised to see to your needs. I would do more than that. I would see you wed to a lady of quality. I would see you ... ah. Thank you.'

The Fool was back with the wine. I marked how he filled the goblet but halfway, and how the King picked it up with both hands. I caught a waft of unfamiliar herbs mingled with the rising scent of the wine. The rim of the goblet chattered twice against Shrewd's teeth before he stilled it with his mouth. He took a long deep draught of it. He swallowed, then sat still a moment longer, eyes closed as if listening. When he opened his eyes to look up at me once more, he seemed briefly puzzled. After a moment, he recollected himself. 'I would see you with a title, and land to steward.' He lifted the goblet and drank again. He sat holding it, warming his thin hands around it while he considered me. 'I should like to remind you it is no small thing that Brawndy deems you a fit match for his daughter. He does not hesitate over your birth. Celerity will come to you with a title and estates of her own. Your match gives me the opportunity to see that you have the same. I wish only the best for you. Is this so hard to understand?'

The question left me free to speak. I took a breath and tried to reach him. 'My king, I know you wish me well. I am well aware of the honour that Duke Brawndy does me. The Lady Celerity is as fair a woman as any man could wish. But the lady is not of my choosing.'

His look darkened. 'Now there you sound like Verity,' he said crossly. 'Or your father. I think they suckled stubbornness from their mother's breasts.' He lifted the goblet and drained it off. He leaned back in his chair and shook his head. 'Fool. More wine, please.'

'I have heard the rumours,' he resumed heavily after the Fool had taken his cup. 'Regal brings them to me and whispers them like a kitchen maid. As if they were important. Chickens clucking. Dogs barking. Just as important.' I watched the Fool obediently refill the goblet, his reluctance plain in every muscle of his slender body. Wallace appeared as if summoned by magic. He heaped more Smoke onto the censer, blew on a tiny coal with carefully pursed lips until the heap smouldered and then drifted away. Shrewd leaned carefully so that the fumes curled past his face. He breathed in, gave a tiny cough, then drew in more of the Smoke. He leaned back in his chair. A silent Fool stood holding his wine.

'Regal claims you are enamoured of a chambermaid. That you pursue her relentlessly. Well, all men are young once. As are all maids.' He

accepted his goblet and drank again. I stood before him, biting the inside of my cheek, willing my eyes to stoniness. My traitorous hands began the shaking that physical exertion no longer wrung from them. I longed to cross my arms on my chest to still them, but I kept my hands at my side. I concentrated on not crushing the small scroll I gripped.

King Shrewd lowered the goblet. He set it on the table at his elbow and sighed heavily. He let his lax hands uncurl quietly in his lap as he leaned his head back against the cushions of his chair. 'FitzChivalry,' he said.

I stood numbly before him and waited. I watched as his eyelids drooped, then closed. Then opened again a crack. His head wavered slightly as he spoke. 'You have Constance's angry mouth,' he said. His eyes drooped again. 'I would like to do well by you,' he muttered. After a moment, a snore buzzed from his slack mouth. And still I stood before him and gazed at him. My king.

When finally I dropped my eyes from him, I saw the only thing that could have wrenched me into greater turmoil. The Fool huddled disconsolately at Shrewd's feet, his knees drawn up to his chest. He stared at me furiously, his mouth a flat line. Clear tears brimmed in his colourless eyes.

I fled.

Within my chamber, I paced a bit before my hearth. The feelings inside me seared me. I forced myself to calmness, sat down and took out pen and paper. I penned a brief, correct note of thanks to Duke Brawndy's daughter, carefully rolled it up, and sealed it with wax. I stood up, tugged my shirt straight, smoothed my hair back, and then threw the scroll onto my hearth fire.

Then I sat down again with my writing tools. I wrote a letter to Celerity, the shy girl who had flirted with me at table, and stood with me on the cliffs in the wind and waited for a challenge that never came. I thanked her for the scroll. And then I wrote to her of my summer. Of pulling an oar on the *Rurisk*, day after day. Of my clumsiness with a sword that made the axe my weapon. I wrote of our first battle, in ruthless detail, and of how sickened I had been afterwards. I told her of sitting frozen with terror at my oar while a Red Ship attacked us. I neglected to mention the white ship I had seen. I finished by confiding that I was still troubled by tremors occasionally as the aftermath of my long illness in the mountains. I read it over carefully. Satisfied that I had presented myself as a common oarsman, an oaf, a coward

and an invalid, I rolled the letter into a scroll and tied it with the same yellow ribbon she had used. I did not seal it. I did not care who read it. Secretly, I hoped that Duke Brawndy might peruse this letter to his daughter, and then forbid her to ever mention my name again.

When I knocked again at King Shrewd's door, Wallace answered it with his usual grim displeasure. He took the scroll from me as if it were dirtied with something, and shut the door firmly in my face. As I went back up to my room, I thought of what three poisons I would use on him, were I given the opportunity. It was less complicated than thinking of my king.

Back in my room, I flung myself down on my bed. I wished it were night and safe to go to Molly. Then I thought of my secrets, and even that pleasant anticipation vanished. I bounced up from my bed, to fling open the window shutters wide to the storm. But even the weather cheated me.

Blue had cracked the overcast wide, to admit a watery sunlight. A bank of black clouds boiling and mounting over the sea promised that this respite would not last long. But for now the wind and the rain had ceased. There was even a hint of warmth in the air.

Nighteyes came to my mind immediately.

It's too wet to hunt. Water clings to every blade of grass. Besides, it's full daylight. Only men are stupid enough to hunt in full daylight.

Lazy hound, I rebuked him. I knew he was curled, nose to tail, in his den. I sensed the warm satiation of his full belly.

Perhaps tonight, he suggested, and drifted back to sleep.

I pulled back from him, then snatched up my cloak. My feelings were not conducive to a day within walls. I left the keep and headed down toward Buckkeep Town. Anger at Shrewd's decision for me warred with dismay at how he had weakened. I walked briskly, trying to escape the King's trembling hands, his drugged sleep. Damn Wallace! He had stolen my king from me. My king had stolen my life from me. I refused to think any more.

Dripping water and yellow-edged leaves fell from the trees as I passed. Birds sang clearly and joyously at the unexpected respite from the downpour. The sun grew stronger, making everything sparkle with the wet, and steaming rich scents up from the earth. Despite my turmoil, the beauty of the day touched me.

The recent downpours had washed Buckkeep Town clean. I found myself in the market, in the midst of an eager crowd. Everywhere folk hurried to make purchases and rush them home before the storm could

drench us again. The amiable busyness and friendly clatter was at odds with my sour mood, and I glared about the market until a bright scarlet cloak and hood caught my eye. My heart turned over inside me. Molly might wear servant-blue about the keep, but when she came to market, she still wore her old cloak of red. No doubt Patience had sent her out on errands during this respite from the rain. I watched her, unnoticed, as she haggled stubbornly over packets of spiced tea from Chalced. I loved the jut of her chin as she shook her head at the merchant. A sudden inspiration lifted my heart.

I had coin in my pockets, my oarsman's pay. With it I bought four sweet apples, two current buns, a bottle of wine and some pepper-meat. I bought too, a string bag to carry it in, and a thick wool blanket. Red. It took every bit of every skill Chade had ever taught me to make my purchases and still keep sight of Molly without being seen. Even more taxing was to follow her unobtrusively as she went to the milliners to buy silk ribbon, and then to trail behind her as she started up toward Buckkeep.

At a certain bend in the path, overshadowed by trees, I caught up to her. She gasped as I light-footed up behind her, to lift and swing her suddenly in my arms. I landed her on her feet and kissed her soundly. Why it felt so different to kiss her out of doors and under the bright sun, I cannot say. I only know all my troubles suddenly fell from me.

I made a sweeping bow to her. 'Will my lady join me for a brief repast?'

'Oh, we cannot,' she replied, but her eyes sparkled. 'We'll be seen.'

I made a great show of glancing about us, then seized her arm and pulled her from the road. Beneath the trees there was not much underbrush. I hurried her through the dripping trees, over a fallen log and past a patch of buckbrush that clutched wetly at our legs. When we came to the cliff's edge above the boom and susurrus of the ocean, we scrambled like children down the rock chimneys to get to a small sandy beach.

Driftwood was piled haphazardly in this nook in the bay. An overhang of the cliffs had kept a small patch of sand and shale almost dry, but did not block the reaching sunbeams. The sun shone now with surprising warmth. Molly took the food and blanket from me, and commanded that I assemble firewood. She was the one who finally got the damp wood to burn, however. The salt made it burn with greens and blues, and it gave enough heat that we both set aside our cloaks and hoods. It was so good to sit with her and look at her out under the open sky, with the bright sun bringing out glints in her

hair and the wind rosyng her cheeks. It was so good to laugh aloud, to mingle our voices with the cries of the gulls without fear of awakening anyone. We drank the wine from the bottle, and ate with our fingers, and then walked down to the waves' edge to wash the stickiness from our hands.

For a brief time we scrambled about on the rocks and driftwood, looking for treasures tossed up by the storm. I felt more like myself than I had since I had returned from the mountains, and Molly looked very much the wild hoyden of my childhood. Her hair came unbraided and blew about her face. She slipped when I chased her, and stumbled into a tide pool. We went back to the blanket, where she took off her shoes and hose to let them dry by the fire. She leaned back on the blanket and stretched.

Taking things off suddenly seemed a very good idea.

Molly was not as sure of that as I. 'There's fully as much stone as sand under this blanket. I've no wish to go back with bruises up my back!'

I leaned over her to kiss her. 'Am not I worth it?' I asked persuasively.

'You? Of course not!' She gave me a sudden push that sent me sprawling on my back. Then she flung herself boldly upon me. 'But I am.'

The wild sparkle in her eyes as she looked down on me took my breath away. After she had claimed me ruthlessly, I discovered she had been right, both about the rocks, and her being well worth the bruises. I had never seen anything so spectacular as the blue sky glimpsed through the cascade of her hair over my face.

Afterward she lay more than half on top of me and we dozed in the chill sweet air. Eventually she sat up, shivering, to pull her clothing back around herself. Reluctantly I watched her lace up her blouse again. Darkness and candle-light had always hidden too much from me. She looked down at my bemused look, stuck her tongue out at me, then paused. My hair had come loose from its tail. She pulled it forward to frame my face, then set a fold of her red cloak across my forehead. She shook her head. 'You would have been a singularly homely girl.'

I snorted. 'I am not so much better as a man, either.'

She looked offended. 'You are not ill-favoured.' She traced a finger down the musculature of my chest speculatively. 'The other day, in the washer-courts, some were saying you were the best thing to come out of the stables since Burrich. I think it is your hair. It is not near as coarse as most Buck men.' She twined strands of it through her fingers.

‘Burrich!’ I said with a snort. ‘You cannot tell me he is favoured among the women!’

She quirked a brow at me. ‘And why not? He is a very well-made man, and clean and mannered besides. He has good teeth, and such eyes! His dark humours are daunting, but not a few would like to try their hands at lightening those. The washing maids agreed that day that, were he to turn up in their sheets, they would not hurry to shake him out.’

‘But that is not likely to happen,’ I pointed out.

‘No,’ she agreed pensively. ‘That was another thing they agreed on. Only one claimed to have ever had him, and she admitted he was very drunk at the time. At a Springfest, I believe she said.’ Molly glanced at me, then laughed aloud at the incredulous look on my face. ‘She said,’ Molly went on teasingly, “‘he has used his time well amongst the stallions to learn their ways. I carried the mark of his teeth on my shoulders for a week.’”

‘That cannot be,’ I declared. My ears burned for Burrich’s sake. ‘He would not mistreat a woman, no matter how drunk he was.’

‘Silly boy!’ Molly shook her head over me as her nimble fingers set to braiding her hair up again. ‘No one said she was mistreated.’ She glanced at me coyly, ‘Or displeased.’

‘I still do not believe it,’ I declared. Burrich? And the woman had liked it?

‘Has he really a small scar, here, shaped like a crescent moon?’ She put her hand high on my hip and looked at me from under her lashes.

I opened my mouth, shut it again. ‘I cannot believe that women chatter of such things,’ I said at last.

‘In the washer-courts, they talk of little else,’ Molly divulged calmly.

I bit my tongue until curiosity overwhelmed me. ‘What do they say of Hands?’ When we had worked in the stables together, his tales of women had always astonished me.

‘That he has pretty eyes and lashes, but that all the rest of him needs to be washed. Several times.’

I laughed joyously, and saved the words for when next he bragged to me. ‘And Regal?’ I encouraged her.

‘Regal. Uummm.’ She smiled dreamily at me, then laughed at the scowl on my face. ‘We do not speak of the princes, my dear. Some propriety is kept.’

I pulled her back down beside me and kissed her. She fit her body to mine and we lay still under the arching blue sky. Peace that had eluded me for so long now filled me. I knew that nothing could ever part us, not the plans of kings nor the vagaries of fate. It seemed, finally, to be the right time to tell her of my problems with Shrewd and Celerity. She rested warm against me and listened silently as I spilled out to her the foolishness of the King's plan and my bitterness at the awkward position it brought me. It did not occur to me that I was an idiot until I felt a warm tear spill and then slide down the side of my neck.

'Molly?' I asked in surprise as I sat up to look at her. 'What's wrong?'

'What's wrong?' her voice went high on the words. She took a shuddering breath. 'You lie beside me and tell me you are promised to another. And then you ask me what's wrong?'

'The only one I am promised to is you,' I said firmly.

'It's not that simple, FitzChivalry.' Her eyes were very wide and serious. 'What will you do when the King tells you that you must court her?'

'Stop bathing?' I asked.

I had hoped she would laugh. Instead she pulled away from me. She looked at me with a world of sorrow in her eyes. 'We haven't got a chance. Not a hope.'

As if to prove her words, the sky darkened suddenly above us and the squall winds rose. Molly leaped to her feet, snatching up her cloak and shaking sand from it. 'I'm going to get soaked. I should have been back to Buckkeep hours ago.' She spoke flatly, as if those two things were the only concerns that she had.

'Molly, they would have to kill me to keep me from you,' I said angrily.

She gathered up her market purchases. 'Fitz, you sound like a child,' she said quietly. 'A foolish, stubborn child.' With a pattering like flung pebbles, the first rain drops began to hit. They made dimples in the sand and swept across the sea in sheets. Her words had left me speechless. I could not think of a worse thing for her to have said to me.

I gathered up the red blanket, shook sand from it. She pulled her cloak tight against the wind that whipped at it. 'Best we don't go back together,' she observed. She came close to me, stood on tiptoe to kiss the angle of my jaw. I could not decide who I was angriest at: King Shrewd for creating this mess, or Molly for believing in it. I did not turn to her kiss. She said nothing

of that, but only hurried away, to scrabble lightly up the rock chimney and vanish from sight.

All joy had gone out of my afternoon. What had been as perfect as a gleaming seashell was now crushed bits under my feet. I walked disconsolately home through gusting winds and pelting rain. I had not rebound my hair and it whipped in lank strands across my face. The wet blanket stank as only wool can and bled red dye onto my hands. I went up to my room and dried off, then amused myself by carefully preparing the perfect poison for Wallace. One that would rack his bowels before he died. When the powder was mixed fine and put in a twist of paper, I set it down and looked at it. For a while I considered taking it myself. Instead, I took up needle and thread, to devise a pocket inside my cuff where I could carry it. I wondered if I would ever use it. The wondering made me feel more a coward than ever.

I did not go down to dinner. I did not go up to Molly. I opened my shutters and let the storm spill rain across my floor. I let the hearth fire go out and refused to light any candles. It seemed a time for gestures like those. When Chade opened his passage to me, I ignored it. I sat on the foot of my bed, staring out into the rain.

After a time I heard hesitant footsteps come down the stairs. Chade appeared in my darkened room like a wraith. He glared at me, then crossed to the shutters and slammed them shut. As he hooked them, he asked me angrily, 'Have you any idea of the kind of draught that creates in my rooms?' When I didn't reply, he lifted his head and snuffed, for all the world like a wolf. 'Have you been working with baneleaf in here?' he asked suddenly. He came to stand before me. 'Fitz, you've not done anything stupid, have you?'

'Stupid? Me?' I choked on a laugh.

Chade stooped to peer into my face. 'Come up to my chamber,' he said, in an almost kindly voice. He took my arm and I went with him.

The cheery room, the crackling fire, the autumn fruit ripe in a bowl; all of it clashed so badly with what I felt that I wanted to smash things. Instead I asked Chade, 'Does anything feel worse than being angry with people you love?'

After a bit he spoke. 'Watching someone you love die. And being angry, but not knowing where to direct it. I think that's worse.'

I flung myself onto a side chair, kicked my feet out in front of me. ‘Shrewd has taken up Regal’s habits. Smoke. Mirthweed. El only knows what else in his wine. This morning, without his drugs, he began to shake, and then he drank them mixed with his wine, took a chestful of Smoke and went to sleep in my face. After telling me, again, that I must court and marry Celerity, for my own good.’ The words spilled from me. I had no doubt that Chade already knew of everything I told him.

I pinned Chade with my eyes. ‘I love Molly,’ I told him bluntly. ‘I have told Shrewd that I love another. Yet he insists that I will be paired with Celerity. He asks how I cannot understand he means the best for me. How can he not understand that I wish to wed whom I love?’

Chade looked considering. ‘Have you discussed this with Verity?’

‘What good would that do? He could not even save himself from being wed off to a woman he did not desire.’ I felt disloyal to Kettricken as I said this. But I knew it was true.

‘Would you care for wine?’ Chade asked me mildly. ‘It might calm you.’

‘No.’

He raised his eyebrows at me.

‘No. Thank you. After watching Shrewd “calm” himself with wine this morning ...’ I let my complaint trail away. ‘Was that man never young?’

‘Once he was very young.’ Chade permitted himself a small smile. ‘Perhaps he remembers that Constance was a woman chosen for him by his parents. He did not court her willingly, nor wed her gladly. It took her death to make him know how deeply he had come to love her. Desire, on the other hand, he chose for himself, in a passion that fevered him.’ He paused. ‘I will not speak ill of the dead.’

‘This is different,’ I said.

‘How?’

‘I am not to be king. Whom I wed affects no one but me.’

‘Would it were that simple,’ Chade said softly. ‘Can you believe you can refuse Celerity’s courtship without offending Brawndy? At a time when the Six Duchies needs every bond of unity?’

‘I am convinced I can make her decide she does not want me.’

‘How? By being an oaf? And shaming Shrewd?’

I felt caged. I tried to think of solutions, but found only one answer in me. ‘I will marry no one except Molly.’ I felt better simply by saying it

aloud. I met Chade's eyes.

He shook his head. 'Then you will marry no one,' he pointed out.

'Perhaps not,' I acceded. 'Perhaps we shall never be married in name. But we shall have a life together ...'

'And little bastards of your own.'

I stood convulsively, my fists knotting of their own accord. 'Don't say that,' I warned Chade. I turned away from him to glare into his fire.

'I wouldn't. But everyone else will.' He sighed. 'Fitz, Fitz, Fitz.' He came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. Very, very gently, he said, 'It might be best to let her go.'

The touch and the gentleness had disarmed me of my anger. I lifted my hands to cover my face. 'I cannot,' I said through my fingers. 'I need her.'

'What does Molly need?'

A little chandlery with bee hives in the back yard. Children. A legitimate husband. 'You are doing this for Shrewd. To make me do as he wishes,' I accused Chade.

He lifted his hands from my shoulders. I listened to him walk away, to wine being poured into a single cup. He brought his wine with him to his chair and sat down before his fire.

'I'm sorry.'

He looked at me. 'Someday, FitzChivalry,' he warned me, 'those words will not be enough. Sometimes it is easier to pull a knife out of a man than to ask him to forget words you have uttered. Even words uttered in anger.'

'I am sorry,' I repeated.

'So am I,' he said shortly.

After a time, I asked humbly, 'Why did you wish to see me tonight?'

He sighed. 'Forged ones. Southwest of Buckkeep.'

I felt ill. 'I had thought I would not have to do that any more,' I said quietly. 'When Verity put me on a ship to Skill for him, he said that perhaps ...'

'This does not come from Verity. It was reported to Shrewd, and he wishes it taken care of. Verity is already ... overtaxed. We do not wish to trouble him with anything else just now.'

I put my head back into my hands. 'Is there no one else who can do this?' I begged him.

'Only you and I are trained for this.'

‘I did not mean you,’ I said wearily. ‘I do not expect you to do that sort of work any more.’

‘Don’t you?’ I looked up to find the anger back in his eyes. ‘You arrogant pup! Who do you think kept them from Buckkeep all summer, Fitz, while you were out on the *Rurisk*? Did you think that because you wished to avoid a task, the need for such work ceased?’

I was as shamed then as I have ever been. I looked aside from his anger. ‘Oh, Chade. I am sorry.’

‘Sorry that you avoided it? Or sorry that you thought me incapable of doing it any more?’

‘Both. Everything,’ I conceded it all suddenly. ‘Please, Chade, if one more person I care about becomes angry with me, I don’t think I shall be able to bear it.’ I lifted my head and looked at him steadily until he was forced to meet my eyes.

He lifted a hand to scratch at his beard. ‘It has been a long summer for both of us. Pray El for storms to drive the Red Ships away forever.’

We sat a time in silence.

‘Sometimes,’ Chade observed, ‘it would be much easier to die for one’s king than to give one’s life for him.’

I bowed my head in assent. The rest of the night we spent preparing the poisons I would need in order to begin killing for my king again.

EIGHTEEN

Elderlings

The autumn of the third year of the Red Ship War was a bitter one for King-in-Waiting Verity. His warships had been his dream. He had founded all his hopes on them. He had believed he could rid his own coast of Raiders, and be so successful at it that he could send forth raiders against the hostile Outisland coasts even during the worst of the winter storms. Despite early victories, the ships never achieved the command of the coast that he had hoped they would. Early winter found him with a fleet of five ships, two of which had recently sustained severe damage. One intact was the captured Red Ship vessel, which had been refitted and sent out with a crew to assist in patrols and escorting of merchant vessels. When the winds of autumn finally arrived, only one of his shipmasters expressed enough confidence in his crew's skills and his vessel to be willing to undertake a raid against the Outislander coasts. The other masters argued for at least one winter of practising seamanship along our own rough coast, and another summer of practising tactics before undertaking such an ambitious goal.

Verity would not send unwilling men, but neither did he hide his disappointment. He expressed it well when he outfitted the one willing ship, for the Revenge, as the vessel had been renamed, was provisioned handsomely. The master's hand-picked crew were outfitted as well, in whatever armour they chose for themselves, and were given new weapons of the best craftsmanship available. There was quite a ceremony at her send-off, with even King Shrewd in attendance despite his failing health. The Queen herself hung the gull's feathers from the ship's mast that are said to bring a vessel swiftly and safely back to her home port. A great cheer arose as the Revenge set out, and the health of the captain and crew were drunk many times over that evening.

A month later, to Verity's chagrin, we would receive word that a vessel matching that description was pirating in the calmer waters to the south of

the Six Duchies, and bringing much misery to the merchants of Bingtown and the Chalced States. That was as much news of the captain and crew and ship as ever came back to Buckkeep. Some blamed it on the Outislanders among the crew, but there were as many good Six Duchies hands aboard as Outislanders, and the captain had been raised right in Buckkeep Town. This was a crushing blow to Verity's pride and to his leadership of his people. Some believe it was then that he decided to sacrifice himself in the hopes of finding a final solution.

I think the Fool put her up to it. Certainly he had spent a great many hours in the tower-top garden with Ketricken, and his admiration for what she had accomplished there was unfeigned. Much goodwill can be won with a sincere compliment. By the end of the summer, not only was she laughing at his jests when he came up to entertain her and her ladies, but he had persuaded her to be a frequent caller in the King's chambers. As Queen-in-Waiting, she was immune to Wallace's humours. Ketricken herself undertook to mix King Shrewd strengthening tonics, and for a time the King did seem to rally under her care and attention. I think the Fool decided that he would accomplish through her what he had been unable to nag Verity and me into doing.

It was a wintry autumn evening when she first broached the subject to me. I was up on the tower top with her, helping her to tie bundles of straw about the more tender of the plants there, that they might withstand the winter snows better. This was something Patience had decreed must be done, and she and Lacey were performing the same task on a bed of windbower plants behind me. She had become a frequent advisor to Queen Ketricken in matters of growing things, albeit a very timid one. Little Rosemary was at my elbow, handing me twine as we needed it. One or two of Ketricken's other ladies, well-bundled, had stayed, but they were at the other end of the garden, talking quietly together. The others she had dismissed back to their hearths when she had noted them shivering and blowing on their fingers. My bare hands were near numb, as were my ears, but Ketricken seemed perfectly comfortable. As was Verity, tucked away somewhere inside my skull. He had insisted that I start carrying him again after he had discovered that once more I was going out after Forged ones alone. I scarcely noticed his presence in the back of my mind any more. Yet I believe that I felt him startle when Ketricken asked me, as she knotted a string about a bundled plant I was supporting, what I knew of the Elderlings.

‘Little enough, my lady queen,’ I replied honestly, and once more made a promise to myself to go through the long neglected manuscripts and scrolls.

‘Why not?’ she demanded.

‘Well, little was actually written about them. I believe at one time a knowledge of them was so common as not to need writing down. And the bits that are written about them are scattered here and there, not gathered in one place. It would take a scholar to track down all the remnants that remain ...’

‘A scholar like the Fool?’ she asked tartly. ‘He seems to know more of them than anyone else I have asked.’

‘Well. He is fond of reading, you know, and ...’

‘Enough of the Fool. I wish to speak to you of the Elderlings,’ she said abruptly.

I startled at her tone, but found her staring, grey-eyed, out over the sea once more. She had not intended either a rebuke or a rudeness. She was simply intent upon her objective. I reflected that in my months away, she had become more certain of herself. More queenly.

‘I know a little bit,’ I offered hesitantly.

‘As do I. Let us see if what each of us knows agrees. I shall begin.’

‘As you wish, my queen.’

She cleared her throat. ‘Long ago, King Wisdom was bitterly besieged by Raiders from the sea. When all else had failed him, and he feared that the next summer of kind weather would bring the end of the Six Duchies and House Farseer, he resolved to spend the winter searching for a legendary folk. The Elderlings. Do we agree so far?’

‘Mostly. As I have heard it, the legends called them not a folk, but near-gods. And the folk of the Six Duchies had always believed Wisdom something of a religious fanatic, almost a madman where such things were concerned.’

‘Men of passion and vision are often seen as mad,’ she calmly informed me. ‘I shall continue. He left his castle one autumn, with no more information than that the Elderlings resided in the Rain Wilds beyond the tallest mountains of the Mountain Kingdom. Somehow, he found them, and he won their alliance. He returned to Buckkeep, and together they drove the Raiders and invaders away from the coasts of the Six Duchies. Peace and

trade were re-established. And the Elderlings swore to him that if they were ever needed again, they would return. Do we still agree?’

‘As before, mostly. I have heard many minstrels say that the ending is a standard one in tales of heroes and quests. Always, they promise that if ever they are needed again, they will return. Some even pledge to return from beyond the grave if they must.’

‘Actually,’ Patience suddenly observed, rocking back on her heels, ‘Wisdom himself never returned to Buckkeep. The Elderlings came to his daughter, Princess Mindful, and it was to her they offered allegiance.’

‘Whence do you have that knowledge?’ Kettricken demanded.

Patience shrugged. ‘An old minstrel my father used to have always sang it that way.’ Unconcerned, she went back to knotting twine about a straw-bundled plant.

Kettricken considered a moment. The wind teased loose a long lock of her hair and blew it across her face like a net. She looked at me through the pale web. ‘It doesn’t matter what the tales say about their returning. If a king once sought them, and they gave aid, do you not think they might do so again, if a king again beseeched them? Or a queen?’

‘Perhaps,’ I said grudgingly. Privately I wondered if the Queen longed for her homeland and would make any excuse for a visit there. Folk were beginning to talk about her lack of pregnancy. While many ladies attended her now, she really had no favourites who were genuinely her friends. Lonely, I suspected. ‘I think,’ I began gently, pausing to consider how to frame a discouraging reply.

Tell her she should come to me and speak of it. I wish to know more of what she has gleaned. Verity’s thought quivered with excitement. It unsettled me.

‘I think you should take your idea to the King-in-Waiting, and discuss it with him,’ I dutifully suggested to her.

She was silent a long time. When she spoke, her voice was pitched very low, for my ears alone. ‘I think not. He will consider it another one of my foolishnesses. He will listen for a bit, and then begin to look at the maps on the wall, or move things about on his table as he waits for me to finish so he can smile and nod and send me on my way. Again.’ Her voice hoarsened on the last word. She brushed the hair back from her face, then brushed at her eyes again. She turned from me to look out over the sea again, as distant as Verity when he Skilled.

She's crying?

I could not conceal from Verity my annoyance that this surprised him.

Bring her to me. Now, at once!

'My queen?'

'A moment.' Kettricken looked aside from me. With her face away from me, she pretended to be scratching her nose. I knew she brushed at tears.

'Kettricken?' I ventured the familiarity as I had not for months. 'Let us go to him now with this idea. At once. I will go with you.'

She spoke hesitantly, not turning to look at me. 'You do not think it is foolish?'

I would not lie, I reminded myself. 'I think that, as things stand, we must consider any possible sources of aid.' As I spoke the words, I found I believed them. Had not both Chade and the Fool hinted, no, pleaded for this very idea? Perhaps Verity and I were the ones who were short-sighted.

She took a shuddering breath. 'We shall do it, then. But ... you must wait for me outside my chamber. I wish to fetch several scrolls to show him. I will be but a short time.' She turned to Patience, spoke more loudly. 'Lady Patience, might I ask you to finish these plants for me as well? I have something else I wish to attend to.'

'Of course, my queen. I should be pleased to.'

We left the garden, and I followed her to her chambers. I waited for more than a short time. When she emerged, her little maid Rosemary was behind her, insisting on carrying the scrolls for her. Kettricken had washed the soil from her hands. And changed her gown, and added scent and dressed her hair and was wearing the jewellery Verity had sent to her when she was pledged to him. She smiled at me cautiously as I looked at her. 'My lady queen, I am dazzled,' I ventured.

'You flatter me as wildly as Regal does,' she proclaimed, and hastened away down the hall, but a blush warmed her cheeks.

She dresses so just to come to speak to me?

She dresses so to ... attract you. How could a man so astute at reading men be so ignorant of women?

Perhaps he has had little time ever to learn much of their ways.

I clamped my mind shut on my thoughts and hastened after my queen. We arrived at Verity's study just in time to see Charim leaving. He was carrying an armful of laundry. It seemed odd until we were admitted. Verity

was wearing a soft shirt of pale-blue linen, and the mingled scents of lavender and cedar were lively in the air. It reminded me of a clothes chest. His hair and beard were freshly smoothed; well I knew that his hair never stayed that way for more than a few minutes. As Kettricken advanced shyly to curtsy to her lord, I saw Verity as I had not for months. The summer of Skilling had wasted him again. The fine shirt belled about his shoulders, and the smoothed hair was as much grey as black now. There were lines, too, about his eyes and mouth that I had never noticed before.

Do I look so poorly then?

Not to her, I reminded him.

As Verity took her hand and drew her to sit down beside him on a bench near the fire, she looked at him with a hunger as deep as his Skill drive. Her fingers clung to his hand, and I looked aside as he lifted her hand to kiss it. Perhaps Verity was right about a Skill sensitivity. What Kettricken felt battered at me as roughly as the fury of my fellow crew-mates during battle.

I felt a flutter of astonishment from Verity. Then, *Shield yourself*, he commanded me brusquely, and I was suddenly alone inside my skull. I stood still a moment, dizzied by the abruptness of his departure. *He really had no idea*, I found myself thinking, and felt glad the thought remained private.

‘My lord, I have come to ask a moment or two of your time for ... an idea I have.’ Kettricken’s eyes searched his face as she spoke quietly.

‘Certainly,’ Verity agreed. He glanced up at me. ‘FitzChivalry, will you join us?’

‘If you will, my lord.’ I took a seat on a stool on the opposite side of the hearth. Rosemary came and stood at my elbow with her armload of scrolls. Probably filched from my room by the Fool, I suspected. But as Kettricken began to talk to Verity, she took up the scrolls one by one, in each case to illustrate her argument. Without exception, they were scrolls that dealt, not with the Elderlings, but with the Mountain Kingdom. ‘King Wisdom, you may recall, was the first of Six Duchies’ nobility to come to our land ... to the land of the Mountain Kingdom, for anything other than the making of war upon us. So he is well-remembered in our histories. These scrolls, copied from ones made in his time, deal with his doings and travels in the Mountain Kingdom. And thus, indirectly, with the Elderlings.’ She unrolled the last scroll. Verity and I both leaned forward in amazement. A map. Faded with time, poorly copied probably, but a map – of the Mountain Kingdom,

with passes and trails marked on it. And a few straggling lines leading into the lands beyond.

‘One of these paths, marked here, must lead to the Elderlings. For I know the trails of the mountains, and these are not trade routes, nor do they go to any village I know. Nor do they lie in conjunction with the trails as I know them now to be. These are older roads and paths. And why else would they be marked here, save that they go where King Wisdom went?’

‘Can it be that simple?’ Verity rose quickly, to return with a branch of candles to light the map better. He smoothed the vellum lovingly with his hands and leaned close over it.

‘There are several paths marked that go off into the Rain Wilds. If that is what all this green represents. None seem to have anything marked at the end. How would we know which one?’ I objected.

‘Perhaps they all go to the Elderlings,’ Kettricken ventured. ‘Why should they reside in but one place?’

‘No!’ Verity straightened up. ‘Two at least have something marked at the end. Or had something. The damned ink has faded. But there was something there. I intend to find out what.’

Even Kettricken looked astonished at the enthusiasm in his voice. I was shocked. I had expected him to hear her out politely, not to endorse her plan wholeheartedly.

He rose suddenly, paced a quick turn around the room. The Skill energy radiated off him like heat from a hearth. ‘The full storms of winter are upon the coast now. Or will be, any day now. If I leave quickly, in the next few days, I can be to the Mountain Kingdom while the passes can still be used. I can force my way through to ... whatever is there. And return by spring. Perhaps with the help we need.’

I was speechless. Kettricken made it worse.

‘My lord, I had not intended that you should go. You should remain here. I must go. I know the mountains; I was born to their ways. You might not survive there. In this, I should be Sacrifice.’

It was a relief to see Verity as dumbfounded as I was. Perhaps, having heard it from her lips, he would now realize how impossible it was. He shook his head slowly. He took both her hands in his and looked solemnly at her. ‘My Queen-in-Waiting.’ He sighed. ‘I must do this. I. In so many other ways I have failed the Six Duchies. And you. When first you came here to be queen, I had no patience with your talk of Sacrifice. I thought it a girl’s

idealistic notion. But it is not. We do not speak it here, but it is what is felt. It is what I learned from my parents. To put the Six Duchies always ahead of myself. I have tried to do that. But now I see that always I have sent others in my place. I sat and Skilled, it is true, and you have an inkling what it has cost me. But it has been sailors and soldiers who I have sent out to put down their lives for the Six Duchies. My own nephew, even, doing the crude and bloody work for me. And despite those I have sent to be sacrificed, our coast is still not safe. Now it comes to this last chance, to this hard thing. Shall I send my queen to do it for me?’

‘Perhaps.’ Kettricken’s voice had gone husky with uncertainty. She looked down at the fire as she suggested, ‘Perhaps we might go together?’

Verity considered. He actually earnestly considered it, and I saw Kettricken realize he had taken her request seriously. She began to smile, but it faded as he slowly shook his head. ‘I dare not,’ he said quietly. ‘Someone must remain here. Someone I trust. King Shrewd is ... my father is not well. I fear for him. For his health. With myself away, and my father ill, there must be someone to stand in my stead.’

She looked aside. ‘I would rather go with you,’ she said fiercely.

I averted my eyes as he reached and took her chin in his fingers and lifted her face so he might see her eyes. ‘I know,’ he said evenly. ‘That is the sacrifice I must ask you to make. To stay here, when you would rather go. To be alone, yet again. For the sake of the Six Duchies.’

Something went out of her. Her shoulders sagged as she bowed her head to his will. As Verity gathered her to him, I rose silently. I took Rosemary with me and we left them alone.

I was in my room, poring belatedly over the scrolls and tablets there, when the page came to my door that afternoon. ‘You are summoned to the King’s chambers, in the hour after dinner,’ was the only message he gave me. Dismay rolled over me. It had been two weeks since my last visit to his chamber. I did not wish to confront the King again. If he were summoning me to say that he expected me to begin courting Celerity, I did not know what I would do or say. I feared I would lose control of myself. Resolutely I unrolled one of the Elderling scrolls and tried to study it. It was hopeless. I saw only Molly.

In the brief nights we had shared since our day on the beach, Molly had refused to discuss Celerity with me any further. In some ways it was a relief. But she had also stopped teasing me about all she would demand from me

when I was truly her husband and all the future children we would have. She had quietly given up hope that we would ever be wed. If I stopped to think of it, it grieved me to the edge of madness. She did not rebuke me with it, as she knew it was not of my choosing. She did not even ask what was to become of us. Like Nighteyes, she seemed to live only in the present now. Each night of closeness we shared, she accepted as a thing complete, and did not question if there would be another. What I sensed from her was not despair, but containment: a fierce resolve that we would not lose what we had now to what we could not have tomorrow. I did not deserve the devotion of such a faithful heart.

When I dozed beside her in her bed, safe and warm amidst the perfume of her body and her herbs, it was her strength that protected us. She did not Skill, she had no Wit. Her magic was a stronger kind, and she worked it by her will alone. When she closed and bolted her door behind me late at night, she created within her chamber a world and a time that belonged to us. If she had blindly placed her life and happiness in my hands, it would have been intolerable. But this was even worse. She believed there would eventually be a terrible price to pay for her devotion to me. Still she refused to forsake me. And I was not man enough to turn away from her and bid her seek a happier life. In my most lonely hours, when I rode the trails around Buckkeep with my saddle-bags full of poisoned bread, I knew myself for a coward, and worse than a thief. I had once told Verity I could not draw off another man's strength to feed my own, that I would not. Yet every day, that was what I did to Molly. The Elderling scroll fell from my lax fingers. My room was suddenly suffocating. I pushed aside the tablets and scrolls I had been attempting to study. In the hour before dinner, I sought out Patience's chamber.

It had been some time since I had last called upon her. But her sitting chamber never seemed to change, save in the uppermost layer of litter that reflected her current passion. This day was no exception. Autumn-gathered herbs, bundled for drying, were suspended everywhere, filling the room with their scents. I felt I was strolling through an inverted meadow as I ducked to avoid the dangling foliage.

'You've hung these a bit low,' I complained as Patience entered.

'No. You've managed to grow a bit too tall. Stand up straight and let me look at you now.'

I obeyed, even though it left me with a bundle of catmint resting on my head.

‘Well. At least rowing about killing people all summer has left you in good health. Much better than the sickly boy who came home to me last winter. I told you those tonics would work. As long as you’ve grown that tall, you may as well help me hang up these lot.’

Without more ado, I was put to work stringing lines from sconces to bedposts to anything else that a string could be tied to, and then to fastening bundles of herbs to them. She had me treed, up on a chair and tying bundles of balsam, when she demanded, ‘Why do you no longer whine to me about how much you miss Molly?’

‘Would it do me any good?’ I asked her quietly after a moment. I did my best to sound resigned.

‘No.’ She paused a moment as if thinking. She handed me yet another bouquet of leaves. ‘Those,’ she informed me as I fastened them up, ‘are stipple-leaf. Very bitter. Some say they will prevent a woman conceiving. They don’t. At least, not dependably. But if a woman eats them for too long, she can become ill from them.’ She paused as if considering. ‘Perhaps, if a woman is sick, she does not conceive as easily. But I would not recommend them to anyone, least of all anyone I cared about.’

I found my tongue, sought a casual air. ‘Why do you dry them, then?’

‘An infusion of them, gargled, will help a sore throat. So Molly Chandler told me, when I found her gathering them in the Women’s Garden.’

‘I see.’ I fastened the leaves to the line, dangling them like a body from a noose. Even their odour was bitter. Had I wondered, earlier, how Verity could be so unaware of what was right before him? Why had I never thought of this? How must it be for her, to dread what a rightfully-married woman would long for? What Patience had longed for in vain?

‘... seaweed, FitzChivalry?’

I started. ‘Beg pardon?’

‘I said, when you have an afternoon free, would you gather seaweed for me? The black, crinkly sort? It has the most flavour this time of year.’

‘I will try,’ I replied absently. For how many years would Molly have to worry? How much bitterness must she swallow?

‘What are you looking at?’ Patience demanded.

‘Nothing. Why?’

‘Because I’ve asked you twice to get down so we can move the chair. We’ve all these other packets to hang, you know.’

‘Beg pardon. I didn’t get much sleep last night; it’s left me dull-witted today.’

‘I agree. You should start sleeping more at night.’ These words were uttered a bit heavily. ‘Now come down and move the chair so we can hang these mints.’

I didn’t eat much at dinner. Regal was alone on the high dais, looking sullen. His usual circle of fawners clustered at a table just below him. I did not understand why he chose to dine separately. Certainly, he had the rank to, but why choose this isolation? He summoned one of the more flattering of the minstrels he had recently imported to Buckkeep. Most of them were from Farrow. All of them affected the nasal intonations of that region, and favoured the long, chanting styles of epics. This one sang a long telling of some adventure of Regal’s maternal grandfather. I listened as little as I was able; it seemed to have to do with riding a horse to death in order to be the one to shoot a great stag that had eluded a generation of hunters. It praised endlessly the great-hearted horse who had gone to his death at his master’s bidding. It said nothing of the master’s stupidity in wasting such an animal to gain some tough meat and a rack of antlers.

‘You look half-sick,’ Burrich observed as he paused beside me. I rose to leave table and walked through the hall with him.

‘Too much on my mind. Too many directions to think in all at once. I sometimes feel that if I had time to focus my mind on just one problem, I could solve it. And then go on to solve the others.’

‘Every man believes that. It isn’t so. Slay the ones you can as they come to hand, and after a while, you get used to the ones you can do nothing about.’

‘Such as?’

He shrugged and gestured downward. ‘Such as having a game leg. Or being a bastard. We all get used to things we once swore we could never live with. But what’s eating your liver this time?’

‘Nothing I can tell you about just yet. Not here, anyway.’

‘Oh. More of those, huh.’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t envy you, Fitz. Sometimes all a man needs is to growl about his problems to another man. They’ve denied you even that. But take heart. I have faith you can handle them even if you think you can’t.’

He clapped me on the shoulders, and then left in a blast of cold air from the outer doors. Verity was right. The winter storms were rising, if tonight's wind was any indicator. I was halfway up the stairs before I reflected that Burrich now spoke to me straight across. He finally believed I was a man grown. Well, maybe I would do better if I believed that about myself. I squared my shoulders and went up to my room.

I put more effort into dressing than I had in a long time. As I did, I thought of Verity hastily changing his shirt for Kettricken. How had he ever managed to be so blind to her? And I to Molly? What other things did she do for our sake that I had never realized? My misery returned, stronger than ever. Tonight. Tonight after Shrewd was done with me. I could not let her continue her sacrifices. For now, I could do nothing save put it out of my mind. I pulled my hair back into the warrior's tail that I felt fully-earned now, and tugged the front of my blue jerkin straight. It was a bit snug across the shoulders, but so was everything I owned lately. I left my room.

In the hallway outside King Shrewd's apartments I encountered Verity with Kettricken on his arm. Never had I seen them as they presented themselves now. Here, suddenly, was the King-in-Waiting and his queen. Verity was dressed in a long formal robe of deep forest green. An embroidered band of stylized bucks graced the sleeves and hem. He wore on his brow the silver circlet with the blue gem that was the mark of the King-in-Waiting. I had not seen him wear it in some time. Kettricken was dressed in the purple and white that she so often chose. Her gown of purple was very simple, the sleeves cut short and wide to reveal narrower and longer sleeves of white beneath them. She wore the jewellery that Verity had gifted her with, and her long blonde hair had been intricately dressed with a net of silver chain junctured with amethysts. I halted at the sight of them. Their faces were grave. They could be going nowhere except to see King Shrewd.

I presented myself formally, and carefully let Verity know that King Shrewd had summoned me.

'No,' he told me gently. 'I summoned you to present yourself to King Shrewd. Along with Kettricken and me. I wished you witness for this.'

Relief flooded me. This was not about Celerity then. 'Witness for what, my prince?' I managed to ask.

He looked at me as if I were daft. 'I ask the King's permission to leave on a quest. To seek out the Elderlings and bring back the aid we so desperately need.'

‘Oh.’ I should have noticed the quiet page, all in black, bearing an armful of scrolls and tablets. The boy’s face was white and stiff. I would wager he had never before done anything more formal for Verity than wax his boots. Rosemary, freshly-washed and clothed in Kettricken’s colours, reminded me of a scrubbed purple and white turnip. I smiled at the chubby child, but she returned my look gravely.

Without preamble, Verity rapped once on King Shrewd’s door. ‘A moment!’ called a voice. Wallace’s. He opened the door a crack, glared out, then realized that this was Verity he was keeping out. He had a moment of too obvious hesitation before he swung the door wide.

‘Sir,’ he quavered. ‘I did not expect you. That is, I was not informed that the King was to have ...’

‘You are not needed for this. You may go, now.’ Usually Verity did not dismiss even a page so coldly.

‘But ... the King may have need of me ...’ The man’s eyes shifted wildly about. He feared something.

Verity’s eyes narrowed. ‘If he does, I will see you are summoned. In fact, you may wait. Just outside the door. Be there if I call for you.’

After an instant’s pause, Wallace stepped outside the door and stood beside it. We entered the King’s chambers. Verity himself set hand to the door and shut it. ‘I do not like that man,’ he observed, more than loudly enough to be heard through the door. ‘He is officiously subservient, and greasily obsequious. A very poor combination.’

The King was not in his sitting room. As Verity crossed it the Fool suddenly appeared in Shrewd’s bedroom doorway. He goggled at us, grinned in a sudden lift of joy, and then made a floor-sweeping bow to all of us. ‘Sire! Awaken! It is as I have foretold, the minstrels have arrived!’

‘Fool,’ Verity growled, but it was good-natured. He brushed past him, fending off the Fool’s mocking attempts to kiss the hem of his robe. Kettricken lifted a hand to smother a smile and followed Verity. The Fool all but succeeded in tripping me with a suddenly stretched forth foot. I avoided it, but made a clumsy entrance, nearly colliding with Kettricken. The Fool grinned and simpered at me, then capered over to Shrewd’s bedside. He lifted the old man’s hand, patted it with true gentleness. ‘Your majesty? Your majesty? You have callers.’

In the bed, Shrewd stirred and took a sudden deep breath. ‘What’s this? Who’s here? Verity? Pull back the curtains, Fool, I can scarcely see who’s

here. Queen Kettricken? What's all this? The Fitz! What is this about?' His voice was not strong, and there was a querulous note to it, but for all that he was better than I had expected. As the Fool drew back the bed-curtains and propped pillows behind him, I found myself facing a man who looked older than Chade. The resemblance between the two seemed to become more marked as Shrewd aged. The flesh of the King's face had fallen, to reveal the same brow-line and cheekbones as his bastard brother. The eyes beneath those brows were alert, but weary. He seemed better than the last time I had seen him. He pushed himself more upright to confront us. 'Well, what is this about?' he demanded, his eyes scanning our circle.

Verity bowed deeply, formally, and Kettricken echoed it with her curtsey. I did as I knew was required: went down on one knee and stayed there, head bowed. I still managed to peek up when Verity spoke. 'King Shrewd. My father. I come to ask your permission for an undertaking.'

'Which is?' the King asked testily.

Verity lifted his eyes to meet his father's. 'I wish to leave Buckkeep, and with a picked band of men, attempt to follow the same path King Wisdom took so long ago. I wish to journey this winter to the Rain Wilds beyond the Mountain Kingdom, to find the Elderlings and ask them to keep the pledge they made to our ancestor.'

An incredulous look passed briefly over Shrewd's face. He pushed himself upright in bed, swung his thin legs over the side. 'Fool. Bring wine. Fitz, get up and help him. Kettricken, dear, your arm if you will to help me to that chair by the fire. Verity, fetch the small table by the window. Please.'

With this handful of requests, Shrewd popped the bubble of formality. Kettricken helped him with a familiarity that showed me she had a genuine bond with the old man. The Fool pranced off to the cupboard in the sitting room for wine glasses, leaving me to select a bottle of wine from the small store that Shrewd kept in his rooms. The bottles were covered in dust, as if he had not tasted these wines for a long time. I wondered suspiciously what was the source of what Wallace gave him. At least the rest of the room, I noted, was in good order. Much better than it had been before Winterfest. The Smoke censers that had so distressed me stood cold in the corner. And tonight the King seemed to have his wits still.

The Fool helped the King into a thick woollen robe and knelt to slipper his feet. Shrewd settled into his chair by the fire, and set his wine glass on the table at his elbow. Older. Much older. But the king I had reported to so

often in my youth once more held council before me. Suddenly I wished I could be the one speaking to him tonight. This sharp-eyed old man might actually hear out my reasons for wishing to wed Molly. I felt a new roiling of anger at Wallace for the habits he had led my king into.

But this was not my time. Despite the King's informality, Verity and Kettricken were strung tight as bowstrings. The Fool and I brought chairs that they might be seated to either side of Shrewd. I stood behind Verity and waited.

'Tell it simply,' Shrewd requested of Verity, and he did. Kettricken's scrolls were unfurled one at a time, and Verity read aloud the pertinent passages. The old map was studied at length. Shrewd did nothing but ask questions at first, making no comments or judgements until he was sure he had from them every scrap of information. The Fool stood at his elbow, alternately beaming at me, and making terrible faces at Verity's page in an attempt to make the petrified boy at least smile. I think it more likely he frightened the lad. Rosemary forgot entirely where she was and wandered off to toy with the tassels on the bed-curtains.

When Verity had finished speaking, and Kettricken had added her comments, the King leaned back in his chair. He drained the bit of wine that was still in his glass, then held it out to the Fool to refill. He took a sip, sighed, then shook his head. 'No. There is too much of pecksies and nursery tales to this for you to undertake it right now, Verity. You have shown me enough to make me believe it worth our while to send an emissary there. A man of your choosing, with a fitting entourage, gifts and letters from you and I to confirm he is there at our behest. But yourself, the King-in-Waiting? No. We have not the resources to spare just now. Regal was at me earlier today, going over the costs of the new ships being built, and the fortifying of the towers on Antler Island. Money is becoming scarce. And it might not make the folk feel safe, to have you leave the city.'

'I do not flee, I leave on a quest. A quest with their benefit as my goal. And I leave behind my Queen-in-Waiting, to represent me to them while I am gone. I did not have in mind a caravan with minstrels and cooks and embroidered tents, sir. We would be travelling on snowy roads, going into the heart of winter itself. I would take a military contingent, and travel as soldiers do. As I always have.'

'And you think this would impress the Elderlings? If you find them? If they ever existed at all?'

‘Legend has it that King Wisdom went on his own. I believe the Elderlings existed, and that he found them. If I fail, I will return, to take up again with my Skilling and my warships. What will we have lost? If I succeed, I bring back a powerful ally.’

‘And if you die in the seeking?’ Shrewd asked heavily.

Verity opened his mouth to reply. But before he could speak, the sitting-room door was flung open and Regal boiled into the room. His face was flushed. ‘What goes on here? Why was I not informed of this council?’ He shot me a venomous look. Behind him, Wallace peeped in at the door.

Verity permitted himself a small smile. ‘If you were not informed by your spies, why are you here now? Rebuke them that you did not know sooner, not me.’ Wallace’s head jerked back out of sight.

‘Father, I demand to know what goes on here!’ Regal very nearly stamped his foot. Behind Shrewd, the Fool mimicked Regal’s facial expression. At this, Verity’s page finally smiled, but then his eyes widened and he straightened his face.

King Shrewd addressed Verity instead. ‘Is there a reason that you wished Prince Regal excluded from this discussion?’

‘I did not see that it concerned him.’ He paused. ‘And I wished to be sure the decision reached was exclusively your own.’ Verity, faithful to his name.

Regal hackled, his nostrils pinching white, but Shrewd held up a hand to quell him. Again he spoke only to Verity. ‘Does not concern him? But on whom would fall the mantle of authority while you were gone?’

Verity’s eyes went icy. ‘My Queen-in-Waiting would represent my reign, of course. You wear the mantle of authority still, my king.’

‘But if you did not return ... ?’

‘I am sure my brother could adapt to that situation at a moment’s notice.’ Verity did not bother to mask the dislike in his voice. I knew then how deep the poison of Regal’s treacheries had worked into him. Whatever bond they had ever shared as brothers was eaten away by it. Solely rivals, now. Shrewd heard it too, I did not doubt. I wondered if he was at all surprised by it. If he was, he covered it well.

As for Regal, his ears had pricked up at the mention of Verity leaving. He now stood as avariciously alert as a dog begging at table. He spoke just a moment too soon to have any ring of sincerity to his voice. ‘If someone

would explain to me where Verity is going, perhaps I could speak for myself as to what I might be ready to assume.'

Verity kept his tongue. Clear-browed and silent, he looked at his father.

'Your brother,' the phrase sounded a bit heavy to my ears, 'wishes me to grant him leave for a quest. He wishes to go, and soon, to the Rain Wilds beyond the Mountain Kingdom. To seek out the Elderlings and obtain from them the help once promised us.'

Regal's eyes went owly. I don't know if he could not believe in the notion of Elderlings, or if he could not believe the quantity of good fortune he had suddenly been dealt. He licked his lips.

'I, of course, have forbidden it.' Shrewd watched Regal as he said it.

'But why?' Regal demanded. 'Surely all courses must be considered ...'

'The expense is prohibitive. Did not you report to me, just a short time ago, that the building of the warships and the manning and provisioning of them have all but drained our reserves?'

Regal's eyes flickered as swiftly as a snake's tongue. 'But I have had the rest of the harvest reports since then, father. I had not known they would be so good. Funds could be found. Provided he was willing to travel simply.'

Verity breathed out through his nose. 'I thank you for your consideration, Regal. I had not realized such decisions were your province.'

'I but advise the King, just as you do,' Regal pointed out hastily.

'You do not think sending an emissary would be the more sensible thing to do?' Shrewd probed. 'What would the people think of their King-in-Waiting leaving Buckkeep at such a time, and on such an errand?'

'An emissary?' Regal appeared to consider it. 'I think not. Not for all we must ask. Do not the legends say that King Wisdom went himself? What do we know of these Elderlings? Do we dare take a chance of sending an underling to offend them? In this, no, I believe the son of the king at least is called for. As for his leaving Buckkeep ... well, you are the King, and you are still here. As would his wife be.'

'My queen,' Verity growled, but Regal continued speaking.

'And I. Buckkeep would hardly be abandoned. And the errand itself? It might capture the people's imagination. Or, if you chose, the reason for his going might be kept quiet. It could be seen as a simple visit to our allies the Mountain folk. Especially if his wife went along.'

‘My queen remains here,’ Verity used her title pointedly. ‘To represent my reign. And to protect my interests.’

‘Do not you trust our father to do that?’ Regal asked blandly.

Verity held his tongue, and looked at the old man in his chair by the fire. The question in his look was plain to anyone with eyes. *Can I trust you?* it asked him. But Shrewd, true to his name, replied only with a question of his own.

‘You have heard Prince Regal’s thoughts on this undertaking. And mine. You know your own. Given these counsels, what do you now wish to do?’

I blessed Verity then, for he now turned and looked only at Kettricken. No nod, no whisper passed between them. But he turned back to his father with their accord. ‘I wish to go to the Rain Wilds beyond the Mountain Kingdom. And I wish to leave as soon as possible.’

As King Shrewd slowly nodded, my heart fell into the pit of my belly. But behind his chair, the Fool turned back-flips across the room, and then cartwheeled back, to stand as attentively behind him as if he had never moved. Regal was unsettled by this. But as Verity knelt to kiss King Shrewd’s hand and thank him for his permission, the smile that spread across Regal’s face was wide enough to engulf a shark.

There was little more to the council. Verity wished to leave in seven days. Shrewd accepted it. He wished to choose his own entourage. Shrewd accepted that, though Regal looked thoughtful. I was not pleased when the King finally dismissed all of us, to note how Regal dawdled behind, to converse with Wallace in the sitting room as we filed out. I found myself wondering if Chade would allow me to kill Wallace. He had already forbidden my solving Regal that way, and I had since promised to my king I would not. But Wallace had no such immunity.

In the hallway, Verity thanked me briefly. I dared to ask why he had wanted me present.

‘To witness,’ he said heavily. ‘Witnessing something is much more than hearing about it afterwards. To keep in your memory all the words that were said, so they may not be forgotten.’

I knew then to expect a summons from Chade that night.

But I could not resist going to Molly. Seeing the King as a king again had fanned my failing hope. I promised myself my visit would be brief, just

to talk to her, to let her know I appreciated all she did. I would be in my chambers before the small hours Chade favoured for our conversations.

I knocked on her door furtively, she let me in quickly. She must have seen how driven I was, for she came immediately into my arms, without questions or qualms. I stroked her shining hair, I looked down into her eyes. The passion that came over me suddenly was like a spring flood that bursts suddenly down a creek, flinging all winter's debris out of its way. My intentions of quietly talking were swept away. Molly gasped as I held her to me fiercely, then surrendered herself to me.

It seemed months rather than days since we had last been together. When she kissed me hungrily, I felt suddenly awkward, uncertain as to why she would desire me. She was so young and so beautiful. It seemed vanity to believe she could want someone as battered and worn down as me. She did not allow me to keep my doubts, but drew me down on top of her without hesitation. Deep in that sharing, I finally recognized the reality of the love in her blue eyes. I gloried in the passionate way she pulled me to her and clasped me in her strong, pale arms. Later, I would recall glimpses of golden hair spread across a pillow, the scents of honeywood and mountainsweet on her skin, even the way she threw back her head and gave soft voice to her fervour.

Afterwards, Molly whispered in amazement that my intensity made me seem a different man. Her head was pillowed on my chest. I kept silent, and stroked the dark hair that smelled always of her herbs. Thyme and lavender. I closed my eyes. I knew I had warded well my thoughts. It had long ago become a habit when I was with Molly.

Verity, then, had not.

I had not willed what had happened. I doubted that anyone had. Perhaps, I hoped, I was the only one who had sensed it fully. Then there might be no real harm done, as long as I never spoke of it. As long as I could blot forever from my mind the sweetness of Kettricken's mouth, and the softness of her white, white skin.

NINETEEN

Messages

King-in-Waiting Verity departed Buckkeep at the beginning of the third winter of the Red Ship Wars. He took with him a small group of hand-picked followers who would accompany him on his quest, as well as his personal guard who would travel with him as far as the Mountain Kingdom, and remain there to await his return. His reasoning was that a smaller expedition needed a smaller baggage train, and travelling through the mountains in winter demanded that all food supplies be carried with him. He had also decided that he did not wish to convey a martial aspect to the Elderlings. His real mission was disclosed to few except his companions. Ostensibly he went to the Mountain Kingdom to treat with his queen's father, King Eyod, about possible military support against the Red Ships.

Of those he asked to accompany him, there are several worth noting. Hod, Armsmaster for Buckkeep, was one of the first he selected. Her grasp of tactics was not exceeded by any within the realm and her prowess with weapons was still remarkable despite her years. Charim, Verity's body-servant, had been with him so long and accompanied him on so many campaigns, it was unthinkable to either of them that he be left behind. Chestnut, brown as his name, had been a member of Verity's military guard for over a decade of years. He was missing an eye and most of an ear, but despite that seemed twice as alert as any other man. Keef and Kef, born twins and, like Chestnut, members of Verity's honour-guard for years, went also. One other, Burrich, the master of stables at Buckkeep, joined the party of his own accord. When his leaving Buckkeep was protested, he pointed out that he left an able man in charge of Buckkeep's stables, and that the party would need a man who was knowledgeable of animals in order to get the beasts alive through the mountains in mid-winter. His abilities as a healer, and his experience as a King's Man to Prince Chivalry were also qualifications he pointed out, but this last one was known to but a few.

The night before Verity was to leave, he summoned me to his study. ‘You don’t approve of this, do you? You think it’s a fool’s errand,’ he greeted me.

I had to smile. Inadvertently, he had exactly stated what I thought. ‘I am afraid I have serious doubts,’ I agreed cautiously.

‘As do I. But what else is left to me? This, at least, is a chance for me to actually do something myself. Other than sit in that bedamned tower and Skill myself to death.’

He had painstakingly recopied Kettricken’s map over the last few days. As I watched, he rolled it carefully and slid it into a leather case. The difference the last week had made in the man amazed me. He was still grey, his body still worn and sadly dwindled from too many months of sitting. But he moved with energy, and both he and Kettricken had graced the Great Hall every evening since the decision had been made. It had been a pleasure to watch him eat with an appetite, and once more linger over a glass of wine while Mellow or another of the minstrels entertained us all. The renewed warmth between Kettricken and him was another appetite he had recovered. Her eyes seldom left her lord’s countenance when they were at table. While the minstrels entertained, her fingers were always resting on the back of his forearm. She glowed in his presence like a burning candle. Shield myself as I might, I was all too aware of how much they enjoyed their nights. I had attempted to hide from their passions by immersing myself in Molly. I ended up feeling guilty that Molly was so pleased with my renewed ardour. How would she feel if she knew my appetites were not entirely my own?

The Skill. I had been warned of its powers and pitfalls, of how it might call to a man, and drain him of everything except a hunger for its use. This was one trap I had never been warned about. In some ways, I was looking forward to Verity leaving so I could call my soul my own again.

‘What you do in that tower is not a lesser task. If folk could but understand how you burn yourself for them ...’

‘As you understand only too well. We’ve grown close this summer, boy. Closer than I’d ever have thought possible. Closer than any man has been to me since your father died.’

Closer even than you might suspect, my prince. But I did not utter those words. ‘We have.’

‘I’ve a favour to ask you. Two, actually.’

‘You know that I won’t refuse you.’

‘Never say that so easily. The first is that you look after my lady. She has grown wiser in Buckkeep ways, but she is still far too trusting. Keep her safe until I return.’

‘That is always yours without asking, my prince.’

‘And the other.’ He took a breath, sighed it out. ‘I wish to try to stay here, as well. In your mind. For as long as I can.’

‘My prince.’ I hesitated. He was right. This was not a thing I wished to grant him. But I had already said I would. I knew that, for the sake of the kingdom, it was a wise thing to do. But for myself? Already I had felt the boundaries of my self eroding before Verity’s strong presence. We were not talking about a contact of hours now, or days, but of weeks and likely months. I wondered if this was what happened to coterie members, if eventually they ceased having separate lives. ‘What of your coterie?’ I asked quietly.

‘What of them?’ he retorted. ‘I leave them in place, in the watchtowers and on my ships for now. Whatever messages they must send, they can send to Serene. In my absence, she will take them to Shrewd. If there is anything they feel I must know, they can Skill me.’ He paused. ‘There will be other sorts of information that I would seek through you. Things I would prefer kept private.’

Tidings of his queen, I thought to myself. How Regal would employ his powers in his brother’s absence. Gossips and intrigues. In one sense, trifling things. In another, the detail that secured Verity’s position. I wished for the thousandth time that I could Skill reliably of my own accord. If I had had that ability, Verity would not have needed to ask this of me. I would have been able to reach out to him at any time. But as matters stood, the touch-imposed Skill bond we had used over the summer was our only resource. Through it, he could be aware of what went on at Buckkeep when he chose to, and I could receive instructions from him. I hesitated, but already knew that I would accede. From loyalty to him and to the Six Duchies, I told myself. Not from any Skill hunger in myself. I looked up at him. ‘I will do it.’

‘Knowing well that this is how it begins,’ he said. It was not a question. Already, this was how accurately we could read one another. He did not wait for my answer. ‘I will be as inconspicuous as I can,’ he promised. I walked to him. He lifted a hand and touched my shoulder. Verity was with me again,

as he had not consciously been since the day in his study when he had bid me to shield myself.

The day of the departure was fine, crisply cold, but the skies were clear blue. Verity, true to his word, had kept his expedition to a minimum. Riders had been dispatched the morning after the council, to precede him on his route and arrange supplies and lodgings in the towns where he would pass. This would allow him to travel swiftly and lightly through much of the Six Duchies.

As his expedition set off that chill morning, I alone of the crowd did not bid Verity farewell. He nestled inside my mind, small and silent as a seed waiting for spring. As unnoticed, almost, as Nighteyes. Kettricken had chosen to watch the departure from the frosty walls of the Queen's Garden. She had said her farewells to him earlier, and chosen this spot so that if she wept, none would take it amiss. I stood at her side, and endured the resonance of what she and Verity had come to share in the last week. I was both glad for her, and heartsick that what she had so recently found must so quickly be taken from her. Horses and men, pack-animals and banners finally passed behind a shoulder of hills and out of our sight. Then I felt that which sent a chill up my spine. She Wit-quested after him. Very faintly, it was true, but enough that somewhere in my heart, Nighteyes sat up, eyes aflame, and asked, *What's this?*

Nothing. Nothing to do with us, anyway. I added, *We hunt together soon, my brother, as we have not for too long.*

For a few days after the cavalcade's departure, I almost had my own life again. I had dreaded Burrich's leaving with Verity. I understood what drove him to follow his King-in-Waiting, but felt uncomfortably exposed with them both gone. That told me much about myself that I really did not want to know. But the other side of that coin was that, with Burrich gone and Verity's presence inside me coiled tight, Nighteyes and I were finally free to use the Wit as openly as we wished. Almost every dawn I was with him, miles from the keep. On the days when we sought Forged ones, I rode Sooty, but she did not ever feel completely comfortable around the wolf. After a time, there seemed far fewer of them, and no more coming into the area. We began to be able to hunt game for ourselves. For that, I went afoot, for we hunted more companionably that way. Nighteyes approved of my physical improvement over the summer. That winter, for the first time since Regal had poisoned me, I felt I had the full use of my body and strength again. The

vigorous mornings of hunting and the deep hours of the night with Molly would have been enough life for any man. There is something completely satisfying about simple things such as these.

I suppose I wanted my life to be always this simple and complete. I tried to ignore things I knew were dangerous. The continued fine weather, I told myself, would assure Verity a fine start to his journey. I put from my mind whether there would be any end-of-season raids from the Red Ships while we were so unprotected. I avoided, too, Regal and the sudden round of social occasions that filled Buckkeep with his followers and kept the torches burning late every night in the Great Hall. Serene and Justin were also much more in evidence about Buckkeep. I never entered a room where they were but that I felt the arrows of their dislike. I began to avoid the common rooms in the evenings, where I must either encounter them, or Regal's guests who had come to swell our winter court.

Verity had not been gone more than two days before I heard rumours that the true purpose of his quest was to seek the Elderlings. I could not blame these on Regal. Those Verity had hand-chosen had known of their true mission. Burrich had ferreted it out for himself. If he could, so could another, and noise it about. But when I overheard two pantry-boys laughing about 'King Wisdom's folly, and Prince Verity's myth' I suspected the ridicule was Regal's doing. Verity's Skilling had made him too much the recluse. Folk wondered what he did so long alone in his tower. That is, they knew he Skilled, but that was too tame a topic for gossip. His preoccupied stare, his odd hours for eating and rest, his silent ghosting through the castle while other folks were abed were all grist for this mill. Had he lost his mind, and set out on a madman's errand? Speculation began to grow, and Regal gave it fertile ground. He found excuses and reasons for all sorts of banquets and gatherings of his nobles. King Shrewd was seldom well enough to be present and Kettricken did not enjoy the company of the witty knaves that Regal cultivated. I knew enough to stay away. I had only myself and Chade to grumble to about the cost of these parties when Regal had insisted that there were scarcely funds for Verity's expedition. Chade only shook his head.

The old man had become more close-mouthed of late, even with me. I had the uncomfortable feeling that Chade kept a secret from me. Secrets in themselves were nothing new. The old assassin was stuffed full of secrets. I simply could not be rid of the feeling that this secret somehow touched on me directly. I could not ask him outright, but I watched him. His work table

showed signs of heavy use when I was not about. Even stranger, all messes associated with that work had been cleaned meticulously whenever he summoned me. This was bizarre. For years I had tidied up after him and his 'cooking'. Now, for him to straighten up after himself seemed either a sharp rebuke to me or a concealment of whatever he had been doing.

Unable to resist, I watched him whenever I could. I learned nothing of his secret, but saw much that I had previously missed. Chade was getting old. Never tolerant of cold, the stiffness it brought to his joints no longer yielded to the cosy evenings before his hearth. He was Shrewd's elder half-brother, bastard as I was, and despite his stiffness, he still seemed the younger of the two. But he held scrolls farther from his nose when he read now, and avoided reaching for anything over his head. To watch these changes in him was as painful as to know he kept a secret from me.

Twenty-three days after Verity left, I came back from a dawn hunt with Nighteyes to find the keep abuzz. The feeling was that of a stirred ant-nest, but with none of their purposefulness. I went straight to Cook Sara and asked her what had happened. The kitchen of any keep is the heart of the rumour-mill, second only to the guard-room. At Buckkeep, the kitchen gossip was usually more accurate.

'A rider come in, his horse near to dead. Said there's been a raid up at Ferry. The whole city near gone from the fires they set. Seventy folk Forged. How many dead, there's no telling yet. And more will die, made homeless in this cold. Three shiploads of Raiders, the boy said. He went straight to Prince Regal, he did, and reported. Prince Regal sent him here to be fed; he's in the guard-room now, asleep.' She lowered her voice. 'That boy came all this way on his own. Got fresh horses in towns he went through, coming down the coast road, but wouldn't let no one else carry his message for him. He told me that every leg of the way, he kept expecting to find help coming, to hear from someone that they already knew and that ships had been sent out. But there was nothing.'

'From Ferry? Then it's been at least five days since it happened. Why weren't the signal tower fires lit?' I demanded. 'Or the message birds sent to Gulls and Sealbay? King-in-Waiting Verity left a patrol ship in that area. The patrol ship should have been able to see the light from Gulls or Ferry. And there's a coterie member, Will, at Red Tower. He should have seen the signal fires. He should have sent word back here, to Serene. How could it be that no word was received here; how could we know nothing at all of this?'

Cook lowered her voice even more, gave the dough she was kneading a meaningful thump. ‘Boy said the signal fires were lit, at Ferry and at Ice Town. He says the birds were sent to Gulls. The ship never came.’

‘Then why didn’t we know?’ I took a deep shuddering breath, set aside by useless anger. Within me, I felt a faint stirring of concern from Verity. Too faint. The Skill bond was fading, just when I wished it strong. ‘Well, I suppose it’s no good asking that just now. What has Regal done? Sent out the *Rurisk*? I wish I’d been here to go with them.’

Cook snorted and paused to throttle the dough a bit. ‘Go now, then, for you won’t be late. Nothing’s been done, no one sent that I’ve heard. No one sent, no one is being sent. No one. You know I’ve no tongue for gossip, Fitz, but what was whispered was that Prince Regal did know of it. When the boy came in, oh, the Prince was so kind, so full of sympathy as to make the ladies’ hearts melt. A meal, a new coat, a small purse for his troubles. But he told the boy it was too late now. The Raiders would be long gone. No sense to send a ship out now, or soldiers.’

‘Too late to fight Raiders, perhaps. But what of those burned out in Ferry? A contingent of workers to help repair houses, some wagons of food ...’

‘Says there’s no coin for it,’ Cook bit each word off separately. She began to break her dough into rolls and to slap each one down to rise. ‘Says the treasury was drained to build ships and man them. Said Verity took what little was left for this expedition to find Elderlings.’ A world of disdain on the last word. Cook paused to wipe her hands on her apron. ‘Then he said he was very sorry. Very truly sorry.’

A cold fury uncoiled inside me. I patted Cook’s shoulder and assured her that everything would be all right. Like a man in a daze, I left the kitchen and went to Verity’s study. Once inside the study, I paused, groping. One clear glimpse of Verity’s intent. In the back of a drawer, I would find an antique emerald necklace, the stones set in gold. It had been his mother’s mother’s. It would be enough to hire men, and buy grain to send with them. I pushed open the study door, and halted.

Verity was an untidy man, and he had packed hastily. Charim had gone with him; he had not been here to clean up after him. But this was no act of either of them. To another man’s eyes, probably little would have seemed amiss. But I saw the room both as myself and as Verity. It had been gone through. Whoever had done it had either not cared if it was detected, or had

not known Verity well. Every drawer was neatly shut, every cupboard closed. The chair was pushed up close to the table. It was all too tidy. Without much hope, I went to the drawer and opened it. I pulled it completely open, and peered into the back corner. Perhaps Verity's own untidiness had saved it. I would not have looked for an emerald necklace under a jumble that included an old spur, a broken belt-buckle and a piece of antler partly worked into a knife-haft. But it was there, wrapped up in a scrap of homespun. There were several other small but valuable items to be removed from the room. As I gathered them, I was puzzled. If these had not been taken, what had been the goal of the search? If not minor valuables, then what?

Methodically, I sorted out a dozen vellum maps, and then began to remove several others from the wall. As I was carefully rolling one of them, Kettricken entered silently. My Wit had made me aware of her before she had even touched the door, so I glanced up to meet her eyes without surprise. I stood firm before the surge of Verity's emotion that rushed through me. The sight of her seemed to strengthen him within me. She was lovely, pale and slender in a robe of soft blue wool. I caught my breath and looked aside. She looked at me quizzically.

'Verity wanted these put away while he was gone. Damp can harm them, and this room is seldom heated when he is not here,' I explained as I finished rolling the map.

She nodded. 'It seems so empty and cold in here without him. Not just the cold hearth. There is no scent of him, none of his clutter ...'

'Then you tidied in here?' I tried to ask it casually.

'No!' she laughed. 'My tidying only destroys what little order he keeps here. No, I will leave it as he left it, until he returns. I want him to come home to his own things in their places.' Her face grew grave. 'But this room is the least of it. I sent a page to find you this morning, but you were out. Have you heard the news about Ferry?'

'Only the gossip,' I replied.

'Then you have heard as much as I. I was not summoned,' she said coldly. Then she turned to me, and there was pain in her eyes. 'I heard the most of it from Lady Modesty, who heard Regal's serving-man talking to her maid. The guardsmen went to Regal, to tell him of the messenger's arrival. Surely, they should have sent to me? Do not they think of me as a queen at all?'

‘My lady queen,’ I reminded her gently, ‘by all rights, the message should have been taken directly to King Shrewd. I suspect it was, and Regal’s men, who mind the King’s door, sent for him instead of you.’

Her head came up. ‘There is a thing that must be remedied, then. Two can play at that silly game.’

‘I wonder if other messages have similarly gone astray,’ I speculated aloud.

Her blue eyes turned grey with chill. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The message birds, the signal fires. A Skill message, from Will in Red Tower to Serene. Surely at least one of these things should have brought us word that Ferry was attacked. One might go astray, but all three?’

Her face paled, her mind made the leap. ‘The Duke of Bearns will believe his call for aid went unheeded.’ She lifted a hand to cover her mouth. She whispered through it, ‘This is treachery to defame Verity!’ Her eyes grew very round and she hissed at me suddenly, ‘It shall not be tolerated!’

She turned and rushed for the door, anger in her every motion. I was barely able to leap in front of her. I put my back to it, held it closed. ‘Lady, my lady queen, I beg you, wait! Wait and consider!’

‘Consider what? How best to reveal the depth of his perfidy?’

‘We are not in the best position of power in this. Please, wait. Think with me. You think, as I do, that Regal must have known something of this and kept silent. But we have no proof. None at all. And perhaps we are wrong. We must go a step at a time, lest we bring dissension when we want it least. The first person to speak to must be King Shrewd. To see if he has been aware of this at all, to see if he has sanctioned Regal to speak on his behalf.’

‘He would not!’ she declared angrily.

‘He is often not himself,’ I reminded her. ‘But he, not you, must be the one to rebuke Regal publicly, if it is to be public. If you speak out against him, and the King later supports him, the nobles will see the Farseers as a house divided. Already, there has been too much doubt and discord sown amongst them. This is not a time to set Inland duchies against Coastal ones, with Verity not here.’

She halted. I could see that she still quivered with anger, but at least she was hearing me. She took a breath. I sensed her calming herself.

‘This was why he left you here, Fitz. To see these things for me.’

‘What?’ It was my turn to be jolted.

‘I thought you had known. You must have wondered why he did not ask you to accompany him. It was because I asked him who I should trust, as an advisor. He said to rely on you.’

Had he forgotten Chade’s existence, I wondered, and then realized that Kettricken knew nothing of Chade. He must have known I would function as a go-between. Inside myself, I felt Verity’s agreement. Chade. In the shadows as always.

‘Think with me again,’ she bade me. ‘What will happen next?’

She was right. This was not an isolated instance.

‘We will have visitors. The Duke of Bearn and his lesser nobles. Duke Brawndy is not a man to send emissaries on a mission like that. He will come himself and he will demand answers. And all the Coastal dukes will be listening to what is said to him. His coast is the most exposed of all, save that of Buck itself.’

‘Then we must have answers worth hearing,’ Kettricken declared. She closed her eyes. She set her hands to her forehead for a moment, then pressed her own cheeks. I realized how great a control she was keeping. Dignity, she was telling herself, calm and rationality. She took a breath and looked at me again. ‘I go to see King Shrewd,’ she announced. ‘I shall ask him about everything. This whole situation. I shall ask him what he intends to do. He is the King. His position must be affirmed to him.’

‘I think that is a wise decision,’ I told her.

‘I must go alone. If you go with me, if you are always at my side, it will make me appear weak. It may give rise to rumours of a schism in the reign. You understand this?’

‘I do.’ Though I longed to hear for myself what Shrewd might say to her.

She gestured at the maps and items I had sorted onto a table. ‘You have a safe place for those?’

Chade’s chambers. ‘I do.’

‘Good.’ She gestured with a hand, and I realized I was still blocking her from the door. I stepped aside. As she swept past me, her mountainsweet scent engulfed me for a moment. My knees went weak, and I cursed the fate that sent emeralds to rebuild houses when they should have girdled that graceful throat. But I knew, too, with a fierce pride, that if I set them in her hands this moment, she would insist they be spent for Ferry. I slipped them into a pocket. Perhaps she would be able to rouse King Shrewd’s wrath, and

he would rattle the coin loose from Regal's pocket. Perhaps, when I returned, these emeralds could still clasp that warm skin.

If Kettricken had looked back, she would have seen the Fitz blushing with her husband's thoughts.

I went down to the stables. It had always been a soothing place for me, and with Burch gone I felt a certain obligation to look in on it from time to time. Not that Hands had shown any signs of needing my help. But this time as I approached the stable doors, there was a knot of men outside them, and voices raised in anger. A young stable-boy hung onto the headstall of an immense draught-horse. An older boy was tugging at a lead attached to the horse's halter, attempting to take the horse from the boy, as a man in Tilth colours looked on. The usually placid animal was becoming distressed at the tugging. In a moment, someone was going to get hurt.

I stepped boldly into the midst of it, plucking the lead from the startled boy's hand even as I quested soothingly toward the horse. He did not know me as well as he once had, but he calmed at the touch. 'What goes on here?' I asked the stable-boy.

'They came and took Cliff out of his stall. Without even asking. He's my horse to take care of each day. But they didn't even tell me what they were doing.'

'I have orders ...' began the man who had been standing by.

'I am speaking to someone,' I informed him, and turned back to the boy. 'Has Hands left orders with you about this horse?'

'Only the usual ones.' The boy had been close to tears when I first came on the struggle. Now that he had a potential ally, his voice was firming. He stood up straighter and met my eyes.

'Then it's simple. We take the horse back to his stall until we have other orders from Hands. No horse moves from the Buckkeep stable without the knowledge of the acting Stablemaster.' The boy had never let go his grip on Cliff's headstall. Now I placed the lead rope in his hands.

'Exactly what I thought, sir,' he told me chirpily. He turned on his heel. 'Thank you, sir. Come on, Cliffie.' The boy marched off with the big horse lumbering placidly after him.

'I have orders to take that animal. Duke Ram of Tilth wishes him sent up the river immediately.' The man in Tilth colours was breathing through his nose at me.

‘He does, does he? And has he cleared that with our Stablemaster?’ I was sure he had not.

‘What goes on here?’ This was Hands come running, very pink about the ears and cheeks. On another man it might have looked funny. I knew it meant he was angry.

The Tilth man drew himself up straight. ‘This man, and one of your stable-hands interfered when we came to get our stock from the stables!’ he declared haughtily.

‘Cliff isn’t Tilth stock. He was foaled right here at Buckkeep. Six years ago. I was present at the time,’ I pointed out.

The man gave me a condescending look. ‘I was not speaking to you. I was speaking to him.’ He jerked a thumb at Hands.

‘I have a name, sir,’ Hands pointed out coldly. ‘Hands. I’m acting as Stablemaster while Burrich is gone with King-in-Waiting Verity. He has a name, too. FitzChivalry. He assists me from time to time. He belongs to my stable. As does my stable-boy, and my horse. As to you, if you have a name, I haven’t been told it. I know of no reason why you should be in my stable.’

Burrich had taught Hands well. We exchanged a glance. In accord, we turned our backs and began to go back into the stables.

‘I am Lance, a stableman for Duke Ram. That horse was sold to my duke. And not just him. Two spotted mares, and a gelding as well. I have the papers here.’

As we turned back slowly, the Tilth man proffered a scroll. My heart lurched at the sight of a blob of red wax with the buck sign mashed into it. It looked real. Hands took it slowly. He gave me a sideways glance, and I moved to stand beside him. He had some letters, but reading was usually a lengthy business for him. Burrich had been working on it with him, but letters did not come easily to him. I looked over his shoulder as he unrolled the scroll and began to study it.

‘It’s quite clear,’ said the Tilth man. He reached for the scroll. ‘Shall I read it to you?’

‘Don’t bother,’ I told him, as Hands re-rolled the scroll. ‘What’s written there is as plain as what’s not. Prince Regal has signed it. But Cliff is not his horse. He, and the mares and gelding, are Buckkeep horses. Only the King may sell them.’

‘King-in-Waiting Verity is away. Prince Regal acts in his stead now.’

I put a restraining hand on Hands' shoulder. 'King-in-Waiting Verity is indeed away. But King Shrewd is not. Nor is Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken. One of those must sign to sell a horse from Buckkeep stable.'

Lance snatched his scroll back, examined the signature for himself. 'Well, Prince Regal's mark should be good enough for you, with Verity away. After all, all know the old King is not in his right mind most of the time. And Kettricken is, well ... not of the family. Really. So, with Verity gone, Regal is ...'

'Prince.' I spoke the word crisply. 'To say less of him would be treason. As would be to say he were King. Or Queen. When he is not.'

I let the implied threat settle into his mind. I would not directly accuse him of treason, for then he would have to die for it. Not even a pompous ass like Lance deserved to die just for parroting what his master had no doubt spoken aloud. I watched his eyes grow wide.

'I meant nothing ...'

'And no harm is done,' I filled in. 'As long as you remember one cannot buy a horse from a man who doesn't own it. And these are Buckkeep horses, owned by the King.'

'Of course.' Lance dithered. 'Perhaps this is the wrong paper. I am sure there is a mistake of some kind. I will go back to my master.'

'A wise choice.' Hands spoke softly beside me, taking authority back.

'Well, come along, then,' Lance snapped at his boy and gave the lad a shove. The boy glowered at us as he trailed off after his master. I scarcely blamed him. Lance was the sort who must vent his ill temper somewhere.

'Will they be back, do you think?' Hands asked me quietly.

'Either that, or Regal must give Ram his coin back.'

We silently considered the likelihood of that.

'So. What must I do when they come back?'

'If it's only Regal's mark, nothing. If the King or Queen-in-Waiting's mark is upon it, then you must give him the horses.'

'One of those mares is pregnant!' Hands protested. 'Burrich has big plans for the foal. What will he say to me if he comes back and those horses are gone?'

'We have always had to remember that these horses belong to the King. He will not fault you for obeying a proper command.'

'I don't like this.' He looked up at me with anxious eyes. 'I don't think this would be happening if Burrich were still here.'

‘I think it would, Hands. Don’t take any blame to yourself. I doubt that this is the worst that we’ll see before the winter is over. But, send me word if they do come back.’

He nodded gravely and I left him, my visit to the stables soured. I did not want to walk down the rows of stalls and wonder how many horses would still remain by the end of winter.

I walked slowly across the courtyard and then inside and up the stairs to my room. I paused on the landing. Verity? Nothing. I could sense his presence inside myself, he could convey his will to me and sometimes even his thoughts. But still, whenever I tried to reach out to him, there was nothing. It frustrated me. If only I had been able to Skill reliably, none of this would be happening. I paused to carefully curse Galen and all he had done to me. I had had the Skill, and he had burnt it out of me, and left me with but this half-formed unpredictable form of it.

But what about Serene? Or Justin, or any of the others of the coterie? Why was not Verity using them to keep in touch with what was happening, and to let his will be known?

A creeping dread filled me. The messenger birds from Bearns. The signal lights, the Skilled ones in the towers. All the lines of communications within the kingdom and with the King seemed not to be working very well. They were what stitched the Six Duchies into one and made of us a kingdom rather than an alliance of dukes. Now, in these troubled times, more than ever we needed them. Why were they failing?

I saved the question to ask Chade, and prayed that he would summon me soon. He called me less often than he had once, and I felt I was not as privy to his councils as I once had been. Well, and had not I excluded him from much of my life as well? Perhaps what I felt was only a reflection of all the secrets I kept from him. Perhaps it was the natural distance that grew between assassins.

I arrived at the door of my room just as Rosemary had given up knocking.

‘Did you need me?’ I asked her.

She dropped a grave curtsy. ‘Our lady, the Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken, wishes you to attend her at your earliest convenience.’

‘That’s right now, isn’t it?’ I tried to get a smile out of her.

‘No.’ She frowned up at me. ‘I said “at your earliest convenience”, sir. Isn’t that right?’

‘Absolutely. Who has you practising your manners so assiduously?’

She heaved a great sigh. ‘Fedwren.’

‘Fedwren is back from his summer travels already?’

‘He’s been back for two weeks, sir!’

‘Well, see how little I know! I shall be sure to tell him of how well you spoke when next I see him.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ Forgetting her careful decorum, she was skipping by the time she reached the top of the stairs, and I heard her light footsteps go cascading down them like a tumble of pebbles. A likely child. I doubted not that Fedwren was grooming her to be a messenger. It was one of his duties as Scribe. I went into my room briefly to put on a fresh shirt, and then took myself down to Kettricken’s chambers. I knocked on the door and Rosemary opened it.

‘It is now my earliest convenience,’ I told her, and this time was rewarded with a dimpled smile.

‘Enter, sir. I shall tell my mistress you are here,’ she informed me. She gestured me to a chair and vanished into the inner chamber. From within, I could hear a quiet muttering of ladies’ voices. Through the open door I glimpsed them at their needlework and chatter. Queen Kettricken tilted her head to Rosemary, and then excused herself to come to me.

In a moment Kettricken stood before me. For a moment I just looked at her. The blue of the robe picked up the blue of her eyes. The late autumn light finding its way through the whorled glass of the windows glinted off the gold of her hair. I stared, I realized, and lowered my eyes. I rose immediately and bowed. She didn’t wait for me to straighten up. ‘Have you been recently to visit the King?’ she asked me without preamble.

‘Not in the last few days, my lady queen.’

‘Then I suggest you do so this evening. I am concerned for him.’

‘As you wish, my queen.’ I waited. Surely that was not what she had called me here to say.

After a moment she sighed. ‘Fitz. I am alone here as I have never been before. Cannot you call me Kettricken and treat me as a person for a bit?’

The sudden change in tone took me off balance. ‘Certainly,’ I replied, but my voice was too formal. *Danger*, Nighteyes whispered.

Danger? How?

This is not your mate. This is the leader’s mate.

It was like finding an aching tooth with your tongue. The knowledge jarred through me. There was a danger here, one to guard against. This was my queen, but I was not Verity and she was not my love, no matter how my heart set to beating at the sight of her.

But she was my friend. She had proven that in the Mountain Kingdom. I owed her the comfort that friends owe one another.

‘I went to see the King,’ she told me. She gestured me to sit and took a chair of her own across the hearth from me. Rosemary fetched her little stool to sit at Kettricken’s feet. Despite our being alone in the room, the Queen lowered her voice and leaned toward me as she spoke. ‘I asked him directly why I had not been summoned when the rider came in. He seemed puzzled by my question. But before he could even begin an answer, Regal came in. He had come in haste, I could tell. As if someone had run to tell him I was there, and he had immediately dropped everything to come.’

I nodded gravely.

‘He made it impossible for me to speak to the King. Instead, he insisted on explaining it all to me. He claimed that the rider had been brought directly to the King’s chamber, and that he had encountered the messenger as he came to visit his father. He had sent the boy to rest while he talked with the King. And that together they had decided that nothing could be done now. Then Shrewd had sent him to announce that to the boy and the gathered nobles, and to explain to them the state of the treasury. According to Regal, we are on the brink of ruin, and every penny must be watched. Bearn’s must look out for Bearn’s own, he told me. And when I asked if Bearn’s own were not Six Duchies folk, he told me that Bearn’s had always stood more or less on its own. It was not rational, he said, to expect that Buck could guard a coast so far to the north of us, and so long. Fitz, did you know that the Near Islands had already been ceded to the Raiders?’

I shot to my feet. ‘I know that no such thing is true!’ I blurted in outrage.

‘Regal claims it is so,’ Kettricken continued implacably. ‘He says that Verity had decided before he left that there was no real hope of keeping them safe from the Raiders. And that is why he called back our ship Constance. He says Verity Skilled to Carrod, the coterie member on the ship, to order the ship back home for repairs.’

‘That ship was refitted just after harvest. Then she was sent out, to keep the coast between Sealbay and Gulls, and to be ready should the Near

Islands call for her. It is what her master asked for, more time to practise seamanship in winter waters. Verity would not leave that stretch of coast unwatched. If the Raiders establish a stronghold on the Near Islands, we shall never be free of them. They can raid winter and summer alike from there.'

'Regal claims that is what they have done already. He says our only hope now is to treat with them.' Her blue eyes searched my face.

I sank down slowly, near stunned. Could any of this be true? How could it have been kept from me? My sense of Verity within me mirrored my confusion. He knew nothing of this either. 'I do not think the King-in-Waiting would ever treat with the Raiders. Save with the sharp of his sword.'

'This is not, then, a secret kept from me lest it distress me? Regal implied as much, that Verity would keep these things secret from me, as beyond my understanding.' There was a trembling in her voice. It went beyond her anger that the Near Islands might have been abandoned to the Raiders, to a more personal pain that her lord might have found her unworthy of his confidences. I longed so badly to take her in my arms and comfort her that I ached inside.

'My lady,' I said hoarsely. 'Take this truth from my lips as surely as it came from Verity's own. All this is as false as you are true. I shall find the bottom of this net of lies and slash it wide open. We shall see what sort of fish falls out.'

'I can trust you to pursue this quietly, Fitz?'

'My lady, you are one of the few who knows the extent of my training in quiet undertakings.'

She nodded gravely. 'The King, you understand, denied none of this. But neither did he seem to follow all that Regal said. He was ... like a child, listening to his elders converse, nodding, but understanding little ...' She glanced down at Rosemary at her feet fondly.

'I shall go to see the King as well. I promise, I shall have answers for you, and soon.'

'Before Duke Bearns arrives,' she cautioned me. 'I must have the truth by then. I owe him at least that.'

'We shall have more than just the truth for him, my lady queen,' I promised her. The emeralds weighed heavy still in my pocket. I knew she would not begrudge them.

TWENTY

Mishaps

During the years of the Red Ship raids, the Six Duchies suffered significantly from their atrocities. The folk of the Six Duchies at that time learned a greater hatred of the Outislanders than ever they had felt before.

In their grandfathers' and fathers' times, Outislanders had been both traders and pirates. Raids were carried out by solitary ships. We had not had a raiding 'war' such as this since the days of King Wisdom. Although pirate attacks were not rare occurrences, they were still far more infrequent than the Outisland ships that came to our shores to trade. The blood-ties among the noble families to Outisland kin were openly acknowledged, and many a family owned to a 'cousin' in the Outislands.

But after the savage raiding that preceded Forge, and the atrocities at Forge, all friendly talk of the Outislands ceased. Their ships had always been more wont to visit our shores than our traders to seek out their ice-plagued harbours and swift-tided channels. Now trade ceased entirely. Thus our folk knew nothing of their Outisland kin during the days when we suffered the Red Ships. Outislander became synonymous with Raider, and in our minds, all Outisland vessels had red hulls.

But one, Chade Fallstar, a personal advisor to King Shrewd, took it upon himself to travel to the Outislands in those perilous days. From his journals we have this:

'Kebal Rawbread was not even a name known in the Six Duchies. It was a name not breathed in the Outislands. The independent folk of the scattered and isolated villages of the Outislands had never owed allegiance to any one king. Nor was Kebal Rawbread thought of as a king there; rather he was a malevolent force, like a freezing wind that so coats a ship's rigging with ice that in a hour she turns belly-up on the sea.

'The few folk I encountered that did not fear to talk said Kebal had founded his power by subduing the individual pirates and raiding ships to

his control. With those in hand, he turned his efforts to “recruiting” the best navigators, the most capable captains and the most skilful fighters the scattered villages had to offer. Those who refused his offers saw their families esclalled, or Forged as we have come to call it. Then they were left alive, to cope with the shattered remnants of their lives. Most were forced to put family members to death with their own hands; Outislander customs are strict regarding a householder’s duty to maintain order amongst family members. As word of these incidents spread, fewer resisted the offers of Keбал Rawbread. Some few fled: their extended families still paid the price of esclal. Others chose suicide, but again, the families were not spared. Such examples left few daring to defy Rawbread or his ships.

‘Even to speak against him invited esclal. Sparse as was the knowledge I gained on this visit, it was gained with great difficulty. Rumours I gathered as well, though they were as sparse as black lambs in a white flock. I list them here. A “white ship.” is spoken of, a ship that comes to separate souls. Not to take them, or destroy them: to separate them. They whisper, too, of a pale woman whom even Keбал Rawbread fears and reveres. Many related the torments of their land to the unprecedented advances of the “ice whales” or glaciers. Always present in the upper reaches of their narrow valleys, they now advanced more swiftly than in the memory of any living man. They were rapidly covering what little arable soil the Outislands possessed, and in a way no one could or would explain to me, bringing a “change of water”.’

I went to see the King that evening. It was not without trepidation on my part. He would not have forgotten our last talk about Celerity, any more than I had. I reminded myself firmly that this visit was not for my personal reasons but for Kettricken and Verity. Then I knocked and Wallace grudgingly admitted me. The King was sitting up in his chair by the hearth. The Fool was at his feet staring pensively into the fire. King Shrewd looked up as I entered. I presented myself and he greeted me warmly, then bade me be seated and tell me how my day had gone. At this, I shot the Fool a brief, puzzled glance. He returned me a bitter smile. I took a stool opposite the Fool and waited.

King Shrewd looked down on me benignly. ‘Well, lad? Did you have a good day? Tell me about it.’

‘I have had a ... worrisome day, my king.’

‘Have you, now? Well, have a cup of tea. It does wonders to soothe the nerves. Fool, pour my boy a cup of tea.’

‘Willingly, my king. I do so at your command even more willingly than I do it for yourself.’ With a surprising alacrity, the Fool leaped to his feet. There was a fat clay pot of tea warming in the embers at the edges of the fire. From this the Fool poured me a mug and then handed it to me, with the wish, ‘Drink as deeply as our king does, and you shall share his serenity.’

I took the mug from his hand and lifted it to my lips. I inhaled the vapours, then let the liquid lap lightly against my tongue. It smelled warm and spicy, and tingled pleasantly against my tongue. I did not drink, but lowered the cup with a smile. ‘A pleasant brew, but is not merrybut addictive?’ I asked the King directly.

He smiled down on me. ‘Not in such a small quantity. Wallace has assured me it is good for my nerves, and for my appetite as well.’

‘Yes, it does wonders for the appetite,’ the Fool chimed in. ‘For the more you have, the more you shall want. Drink yours quickly, Fitz, for no doubt you will have company soon. The more you drink, the less you shall have to share.’ With a gesture like a petal unfurling, the Fool waved toward the door at the precise instant that it opened to admit Regal.

‘Ah, more visitors,’ King Shrewd chuckled pleasantly. ‘This shall be a merry evening indeed. Sit down, my boy, sit down. The Fitz was just telling us he’d had a vexatious day. So I offered him a mug of my tea to soothe him.’

‘No doubt it will do him good,’ Regal agreed pleasantly. He turned his smile on me. ‘A vexatious day, Fitz?’

‘A troubling one. First, there was the small matter down at the stables. One of Duke Ram’s men was down there, claiming that the Duke had purchased four horses. One of them Cliff, the stud-horse we use for the cart-mares. I persuaded him there must be some mistake, for the papers were not signed by the King.’

‘Oh, those!’ The King chuckled again. ‘Regal had to bring them back to me, I’d forgotten to sign them at all. But it is all taken care of now, and I am sure the horses will be on their way to Tilth by the morrow. Good horses too, Duke Ram will find them. He made a wise bargain.’

‘I had never thought to see us sell our best stock away from Buckkeep.’ I spoke quietly, looking at Regal.

‘And neither did I. But with the treasury as depleted as it is, we have had to take hard measures.’ He regarded me coolly a moment. ‘Sheep and

cattle are to be sold as well. We have not the grain to winter them over anyway. Better to sell them now than to see them starve this winter.'

I was outraged. 'Why have not we heard of these shortages before? I have heard nothing of a failed harvest. Times are hard, it is true, but ...'

'You have heard nothing because you have not been listening. While you and my brother have immersed yourselves in the glories of war, I have been dealing with the purse to pay for it. And it is well nigh empty. Tomorrow, I will have to tell the men working on the new ships that they must either labour for the love of it, or leave off their work. There is no longer coin to pay them, nor to buy the materials that would be needed to finish the ships.' He finished his speech and leaned back, considering me.

Within me, Verity roiled. I looked to King Shrewd. 'This is true, my king?' I asked.

King Shrewd started. He looked over at me, and blinked his eyes a few times. 'I did sign those papers, did I not?' He seemed puzzled, and I think his mind had gone back to a previous conversation. He had not followed our talk at all. At his feet, the Fool was strangely silent. 'I thought I had signed the papers. Well, bring them to me now, then. Let us get this done, and then get on with a pleasant evening.'

'What is to be done about the situation in Bearn's? Is it true that the Raiders have taken parts of the Near Islands?'

'The situation in Bearn's,' he said. He paused, considering. He took another sip of his tea.

'Nothing can be done about the situation in Bearn's,' Regal said sadly. Smoothly he added, 'It is time Bearn's took care of Bearn's' troubles. We cannot beggar all Six Duchies to protect a barren stretch of coastline. So the Raiders have helped themselves to a few frozen rocks. I wish them joy of them. We have folk of our own to care for, villages of our own to rebuild.'

I waited in vain for Shrewd to rouse, to say something in defence of Bearn's. When he was silent, I asked quietly, 'The town of Ferry is scarcely a frozen rock. At least, it wasn't until the Red Ships called. And when did Bearn's cease to be part of the Six Duchies?' I looked to Shrewd, tried to make him meet my eyes. 'My king, I beg you, order Serene to come. Have her Skill to Verity, that you may counsel together about this.'

Regal grew suddenly weary of our cat-and-mouse. 'When did the dog-boy come to be so concerned with politics?' he asked me savagely. 'Why cannot you understand that the King can make decisions without the

permission of the King-in-Waiting? Do you quiz your king on his decisions, Fitz? Have you so far forgotten your place? I knew Verity had made something of a pet of you, and perhaps your adventures with your axe have given you large ideas of yourself. But Prince Verity has seen fit to go gallivanting off after a chimera, and I am left to keep the Six Duchies rattling along as best I may.'

'I was present when you endorsed King-in-Waiting Verity's proposal to seek the Elderlings,' I pointed out. King Shrewd seemed to have gone off into another waking dream. He stared into the fire.

'And why that was so, I have no idea,' Regal rejoined smoothly. 'As I observed, you have come to have large ideas of yourself. You eat at the high table, and are clothed by the King's largesse, and somehow you have come to believe this gives you privileges rather than duties. Let me tell you who you really are, Fitz.' Regal paused. To me it seemed he looked at the King, as if gauging how safe it was for him to speak.

'You,' he continued in a lowered voice, tone as sweet as a minstrel's, 'are the misbegotten bastard of a princeling who had not even the courage to continue as King-in-Waiting. You are the grandson of a dead queen whose common breeding showed in the common woman her eldest son bedded to conceive you. You who take the name to yourself of FitzChivalry Farseer need do no more than scratch yourself to find Nameless the dog-boy. Be grateful I do not send you back to the stables, but suffer to let you abide in the keep.'

I do not know what I felt. Nighteyes was snarling at the venom in Regal's words, while Verity was capable of fratricide at that moment. I glanced at King Shrewd. He cupped his mug of sweet tea in both hands and dreamed into the fire. From the corner of my eyes, I had a glimpse of the Fool. There was fear in his colourless eyes, fear as I had never seen there before. And he was looking, not at Regal, but at me.

I abruptly realized that I had arisen and was standing over Regal. He was looking up at me. Waiting. There was a glint of fear in his eyes, but also the shine of triumph. All I would have to do was strike at him, and he could call the guards. It would be treason. He would hang me for it. I felt how the fabric of my shirt was binding on my shoulders and chest, so swollen with rage was I. I tried to exhale, willed the balled fists of my hands to loosen. It took a moment. *Hush*, I told them, *hush, or you'll get me killed*. When I had my voice under control, I spoke.

‘Many things have been made clear to me this night,’ I said quietly. I turned to King Shrewd. ‘My lord king, I bid you good evening, and ask to be excused from your presence.’

‘Eh? So you ... had an anxious day, lad?’

‘I did, my lord king,’ I said softly. His deep eyes looked up into mine as I stood before him, waiting to be released. I looked deep into their depths. He was not there. Not as he once had been. He looked at me puzzledly, blinked a few times.

‘Well. Perhaps you had best get some rest then. As should I. Fool? Fool, is my bed prepared? Warm it with the warming pan. I grow so cold at night these days. Ha! At night these days! There’s a bit of nonsense for you, Fool. How would you say it, to get it aright?’

The Fool sprang to his feet, bowed deeply before the King. ‘I would say there’s the chill of death about the days these nights as well, your majesty. A cold fair to curl the bones, it is. A man could take his death to it. ’Twould warm me more to hide in your shade than to stand before your sun’s heat.’

King Shrewd chuckled. ‘You don’t make a bit of sense, Fool. But then you never did. Good night to all, and off to bed, lads, both of you. Good night, good night.’

I slipped out while Regal was saying a more formal good night to his father. It was all I could do to walk past Wallace’s simpering smile without smashing it from his face. Once in the hall outside, I swiftly sought my own room. I would take the Fool’s advice, I thought, and hide myself in Chade rather than stand before the heat of the King’s son.

I spent the rest of that evening in my room alone. I knew that as night deepened, Molly would wonder when I did not come tapping at her door. But I had no heart for it tonight. I could not summon the energy to slip out of my room and go creeping up the stairs and slinking down the corridors, always worrying that someone might step out abruptly and find me where I had no right to be. At one time, I would have sought out Molly’s warmth and affection and found a measure of peace there. That was no longer the case. Now I dreaded the stealth and anxiety of our meetings, and a guardedness that did not even end when her door closed behind me. For Verity rode within me, and ever I must guard so that what I felt and thought with Molly did not spill over into the link I shared with Verity.

I gave up on the scroll I had been trying to read. What use now to learn of Elderlings, anyway? Verity would find whatever Verity found. I flung

myself back on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. Even still and silent, there was no peace in me. My link to Verity was like a hook in my flesh; so must a snagged fish feel when it fights the line. My ties to Nighteyes were on a deeper, more subtle level, but ever he was there as well, green eyes lambent in a dark corner of myself. These parts of me never slept, never rested, were never quiescent at all. And that constant strain was beginning to tell on me.

Hours later, the candles were guttering and the fire burned low. A change in the air of my room let me know that Chade had opened his soundless door to me. I arose and went to him. But with every step I took up that draughty staircase, my anger grew. It was not the kind of anger that led to ranting and blows between men. This was an anger born as much from weariness and frustration as from any hurt. This was the sort of anger that led a man to stop everything, to say simply, 'I cannot bear this any more.'

'Cannot bear what?' Chade asked me. He looked up from where he hunched over some concoction he was grinding on his stained stone table. There was genuine concern in his voice. It made me really stop and look at the man I addressed. A tall, skinny old assassin. Pox-scarred. Hair gone almost entirely white now. Wearing the familiar grey wool robe, always with stains or the tiny burns he inflicted on his clothes while he worked. I wondered how many men he had killed for his king, killed simply at a word or nod from Shrewd. Killed without question, true to his oath. For all those deaths, he was a gentle man. Suddenly I had a question, a question more pressing than answering his question.

'Chade,' I asked, 'have you ever killed a man for your own sake?'

He looked startled. 'For my own sake?'

'Yes.'

'To protect my own life?'

'Yes. I don't mean when on the King's business. I mean killed a man to ... make your life simpler.'

He snorted. 'Of course not.' He looked at me strangely.

'Why not?' I pressed.

He looked incredulous. 'One simply does not go about killing people for convenience. It's wrong. It's called murder, boy.'

'Unless you do it for your king.'

'Unless you do it for your king,' he agreed easily.

‘Chade. What’s the difference? If you do it for yourself, or if you do it for Shrewd?’

He sighed and gave up on the mixture he was making. He moved around the end of the table, sat on a tall stool there, ‘I remember asking these questions. But of myself, as my mentor was gone by the time I was your age.’ He met my eyes firmly. ‘It comes down to faith, boy. Do you believe in your king? And your king has to be more to you than your half-brother, or your grandfather. He has to be more than good old Shrewd, or fine honest Verity. He has to be the King. The heart of the kingdom, the centre of the wheel. If he is that, and if you have faith that the Six Duchies are worth preserving, that the good of all our people is furthered by dispensing the King’s Justice, then, well.’

‘Then you can kill for him.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Have you ever killed against your own judgement?’

‘You have many questions this night,’ he warned me quietly.

‘Perhaps you have left me alone too long to think of them all. When we met near nightly, and talked often and I was busy all the time, I did not think so much. But now I do.’

He nodded slowly. ‘Thinking is not always ... comforting. It is always good, but not always comforting. Yes. I’ve killed against my own judgement. Again, it came down to faith. I had to believe that the folk who gave the order knew more than I did, and were wiser in the ways of the wider world.’

I was silent for a long moment. Chade started to relax. ‘Come in. Don’t stand there in the draught. Let’s have a glass of wine together, and then I need to talk to you about ...’

‘Have you ever killed solely on the basis of your own judgement? For the good of the kingdom?’

For a time Chade looked at me, troubled. I did not look away. He did, finally, staring down at his old hands, rubbing their papery white skin against each other as he fingered the brilliant red pocks. ‘I do not make those judgements.’ He looked up at me suddenly. ‘I never accepted that burden, nor wished to. It is not our place, boy. Those decisions are for the King.’

‘I am not “boy”,’ I pointed out, surprising myself. ‘I am FitzChivalry.’

‘With an emphasis on the Fitz,’ Chade pointed out hastily. ‘You are the illegitimate get of a man who did not step up to become king. He abdicated.’

And in that abdication, he set aside from himself the making of judgements. You are not king, Fitz, nor even the son of a true king. We are assassins.'

'Why do we stand by while the true king is poisoned?' I asked bluntly then. 'I see it, you see it. He is lured into using herbs that steal his mind, and while he cannot think well, lured to use ones that make him even more foolish. We know its immediate source, and I suspect its true source. And yet we watch him dwindle and grow feeble. Why? Where is the faith in that?'

His words cut me like knives. 'I do not know where your faith is. I had thought perhaps it would be in me. That I knew more about it than you did, and that I was loyal to my king.'

It was my turn to drop my eyes. After a moment, I crossed the room slowly, to the cabinet where Chade kept the wine and the glasses. I took down a tray, and poured two careful glasses from the glass-stoppered bottle. I took the tray to the small table by the hearth. As I had for so many years, I seated myself on the hearthstones. After a moment, my master came and took his place in his well-cushioned chair. He lifted his wine glass from the tray and sipped.

'This last year has not been an easy time for either of us.'

'You have so seldom called me. And when you do, you are full of secrets.' I tried to keep the accusation from my voice, but couldn't quite.

Chade gave a short bark of laughter. 'And you being such an open spontaneous fellow, that annoys you?' He laughed again, ignoring my offended look. When he had finished, he wet his mouth with wine again, then looked at me. Amusement still danced in his dark eyes.

'Do not glower at me, *boy*,' he told me. 'I have not expected anything from you that you have not demanded from me two-fold. And more. For I have it in my mind that a master has some right to expect faith and trust from his student.'

'You do,' I said after some moments. 'And you are right. I have my secrets as well, and I have expected you to trust that they are honourable ones. But my secrets do not constrain you as yours do me. Every time I visit the King's chambers, I see what Wallace's Smokes and potions are doing to him. I want to kill Wallace, and restore my king to his wits. And after that, I want to ... finish the task. I want to eliminate the source of the poisons.'

'You wish to kill me then?'

It was like being doused with cold water. 'You are the source of the poisons Wallace gives to the King?' I was sure I had misunderstood.

He nodded slowly. ‘Some of them. Probably the ones you most object to.’

My heart was cold and still inside me. ‘But, Chade, why?’

He looked at me, his lips folded tight. After a moment, he opened his mouth and spoke softly. ‘A king’s secrets belong to a king only. They are not mine to give away, no matter if I think the receiver would keep them safe or not. But if you would only use your mind as I have trained you, you would know my secrets. For I have not hidden them from you. And from my secret, you could deduce much on your own.’

I turned to poke at the fire behind me. ‘Chade. I am so weary. Too weary to play at games. Cannot you simply tell me?’

‘Of course I could. But it would compromise my promise to my king. What I do is bad enough.’

‘You are splitting hairs over this!’ I exclaimed angrily.

‘Perhaps, but they are mine to split,’ he replied with equanimity.

His very calmness infuriated me. I shook my head violently, put the whole puzzle away from myself for a bit. ‘Why did you summon me tonight?’ I asked flatly.

There was a shadow of hurt behind the calm in his eyes now. ‘Perhaps just to see you. Perhaps to forestall your doing something foolish and permanent. I know that much of what is going on right now distresses you greatly. I assure you, I share your fears. But for now, we must continue on our allotted paths. With faith. Surely you believe that Verity will return before spring, and put all to rights?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted grudgingly. ‘It shocked me when he set off on this ridiculous quest. He should have stayed here, and continued with his original plan. By the time he returns, half his kingdom will be beggared or given away, the way Regal is going at things.’

Chade looked at me levelly. ‘“His” kingdom is still King Shrewd’s kingdom. Remember? Perhaps he has faith in his father to keep it intact.’

‘I do not think King Shrewd can even keep himself intact, Chade. Have you see him of late?’

Chade’s mouth went to a flat line. ‘Yes.’ He bit the word off. ‘I see him when no one else does. I tell you that he is not the feeble idiot you seem to believe he is.’

I shook my head slowly. ‘If you had seen him tonight, Chade, you would share my anxiety.’

‘What makes you so sure I did not?’ Chade was nettled now. I had no wish to anger the old man. But it seemed to be going all wrong, no matter how I spoke. I forced myself to keep silent now. Instead of speaking, I took another sip of my wine. I stared into the fire.

‘Are the rumours about the Near Islands true?’ I asked at last. My voice was my own again.

Chade sighed and rubbed at his eyes with his knuckly hands. ‘As in all rumours, there is a germ of truth. It may be true that the Raiders have established a base there. We are not certain. We have certainly not ceded the Near Islands to them. As you observed, once they had the Near Islands, they would raid our coast winter and summer.’

‘Prince Regal seemed to believe that they could be bought off. That perhaps those islands and a bit of Bearn’s coast were what they were truly after.’ It was an effort, but I kept my voice respectful as I spoke of Regal.

‘Many men hope that by saying a thing they can make it so,’ Chade said neutrally. ‘Even when they must know better,’ he added as a darker afterthought.

‘What do you think the Raiders want?’ I asked.

He stared past me into the fire. ‘Now there is a puzzle. What do the Raiders want? It is how our minds work, Fitz. We think they attack us because they want something from us. But surely, if they wanted something, by now they would have demanded it. They know the damage they do to us. They must know that we would at least consider their demands. But they ask for nothing. They simply go on raiding.’

‘They make no sense.’ I finished the thought for him.

‘Not the way we see sense,’ he corrected me. ‘But what if our basic assumption is wrong?’

I just stared at him.

‘What if they don’t want anything, except what they already have? A nation of victims. Towns to raid, villages to torch, people to torture. What if that is their entire aim?’

‘That’s insane,’ I said slowly.

‘Perhaps. But what if it is so?’

‘Then nothing will stop them. Except destroying them.’

He nodded slowly. ‘Follow that thought.’

‘We don’t have enough ships to even slow them down.’ I considered a moment. ‘We had best all hope the myths about the Elderlings are true.’

Because it seems to me they, or something like them, are our only hope.'

Chade nodded slowly. 'Exactly. So you see why I approve of Verity's course.'

'Because it's our only hope of survival.'

We sat for a long time together, staring silently into the fire. When I finally returned to my bed that night, I was assailed by nightmares of Verity attacked and battling for his life while I stood by and watched. I could not kill any of his attackers, for my king had not said I could.

Twelve days later, Duke Brawndy of Bearn's arrived. He came down the coast road, at the head of enough men to be impressive without being an open threat. He had mustered as much pomp and panoply as his dukedom could afford. His daughters rode at his side, save for the eldest who had remained behind to do all that could be done for Ferry. I spent most of the early afternoon in the stables, and then in the guard-room, listening to the talk of the lesser members of his entourage. Hands acquitted himself well at seeing that there was space and care for their beasts, and as always our kitchens and barracks made themselves hospitable places. Still, there was plenty of hard talk among the folk from Bearn's. They spoke bluntly of what they had seen at Ferry, and how their summons for help had gone unheeded. It shamed our soldiers that there was little they could say to defend what King Shrewd had apparently done. And when a soldier cannot defend what his leader has done, he must either agree with the criticism, or find another area in which to disagree. So there were fist-fights between Bearn's men and Buckkeep troops, isolated incidents for the most part, and over trivial differences. But such things did not usually happen under the discipline of Buckkeep, and so they were all the more unsettling. It underscored to me the confusion amongst our own troops.

I dressed carefully for dinner that evening, unsure as to who I might encounter or what might be expected of me. I had glimpsed Celerity twice that day, and each time slipped away before I could be noticed. I expected she would be my dinner partner, and dreaded it. Now was no time to give anyone from Bearn's any sort of affront, but I did not wish to encourage her. I could have saved my worrying. I found myself seated far down the table, among the lesser nobility, and the younger ones at that. I spent an uncomfortable evening as a minor novelty. Several of the girls at the table attempted to be flirtatious. This was a new experience for me and not one I relished. It made me realize just how great an influx of folk had swollen the

Buckkeep court that winter. Most of them were from the Inland duchies, sniffing after scraps from Regal's plate, but as these young women plainly indicated, they would be happy to court political influence wherever they could. The effort to follow their attempts at witty banter and respond on a level of at least moderate politeness made it nearly impossible for me to give any attention to what was going on at the high table. King Shrewd was there, seated between Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken and Prince Regal. Duke Brawndy and his daughters Celerity and Faith were seated closest to them. The rest of the table was filled with Regal's pets. Duke Ram of Tilth and his Lady Placid, and their two sons were the most noteworthy. Regal's cousin Lord Bright was there as well; the young heir to the Duke of Farrow was new to court.

From where I sat, I could see little, and hear even less. I felt Verity's churning frustration at the situation, but there was nothing I could do about it. The King looked more weary than dazed that evening, which I took to be positive. Kettricken seated beside him was near colourless save for two spots of pink on her cheeks. She did not seem to be eating much, and seemed graver and more silent than usual. Prince Regal, in contrast, was both social and merry. With Duke Ram and Lady Placid and their boys. He did not quite ignore Brawndy and his daughters, but his merriment clearly grated on the visitors' mood.

Duke Brawndy was a large man, and well-muscled even in his old age. Shocks of white hair in his black warrior's tail attested to old battle injuries, as did a hand missing a few fingers. His daughters sat just down table from him, indigo-eyed women whose high cheekbones told of his late queen's Near Island ancestry. Faith and Celerity wore their hair cut short and sleek in the Northern style. The quick ways they turned their heads to observe everyone at the table reminded me of hawks on a wrist. These were not the gentled nobility of the Inland duchies that Regal was used to dealing with. Of all the Six Duchies, the folk of Bearns came closest to being warriors still.

Regal was courting disaster to make light of their grievances. I knew they would not expect to discuss Raiders at the table, but his festive tone was completely at odds with their mission here. I wondered if he knew how badly he offended them. Kettricken obviously did. More than once, I saw her clench her jaw, or cast her eyes downward at one of Regal's witticisms. He was drinking too heavily as well, and it began to show in his extravagant

hand gestures, and the loudness of his laughter. I wished desperately I could hear what he was finding so humorous in his own words.

Dinner seemed interminable. Celerity rapidly located me at table. After that, I was hard put to avoid the measuring looks she sent my way. I nodded affably to her the first time our eyes locked; I could tell she was puzzled by where I had been seated. I dared not ignore every look she sent my way. Regal was offensive enough without my appearing to snub Bearns' daughter as well. I felt I teetered on a fence. I was grateful when King Shrewd rose and Queen Kettricken insisted on taking his arm to help him from the room. Regal frowned a trifle drunkenly to see the party disperse so soon, but made no effort to persuade Duke Brawndy and his daughters to stay at table. They excused themselves rather stiffly as soon as Shrewd had departed. I likewise made excuse of a headache and left my giggling companions for the solitude of my room. As I opened my door and went into my bed-chamber, I felt myself the most powerless person in the keep. Nameless the dog-boy indeed.

'I see dinner was absolutely fascinating for you,' the Fool observed. I sighed. I didn't ask how he had got in. No point to asking questions that would not be answered. He was sitting on my hearth, silhouetted against the dancing flames of a small fire he had kindled there. There was a peculiar stillness to him, no jingling of bells, no tumbling mocking words.

'Dinner was insufferable,' I told him. I did not bother with candles. My headache had not been entirely a fiction. I sat, then lay back on my bed with a sigh. 'I do not know what Buckkeep is coming to, nor what I can do about it.'

'Perhaps what you have already done is enough?' the Fool ventured.

'I've done nothing noteworthy lately,' I informed him. 'Unless you count knowing when to stop talking back to Regal.'

'Ah. That's a skill we're all learning, then,' he agreed morosely. He drew his knees up to his chin, rested his arms upon them. He took a breath. 'Have you no news, then, that you'd care to share with a Fool? A very discreet Fool?'

'I've no news to share with you that you would not already know, and probably sooner than I did.' The darkness of the room was restful. My headache was easing.

'Ah.' He paused delicately. 'Shall I, perhaps, ask a question? To be answered or not as you see fit?'

‘Save your breath and ask it. You know you shall, whether I give you permission or no.’

‘Indeed, there you are right. Well then. The question. Ah, I surprise myself, I blush. I do. FitzChivalry, have you made a fitz of your own?’

I sat up slowly on my bed and stared at him. He did not move nor flinch. ‘What did you ask me?’ I demanded quietly.

He spoke softly, almost apologetically now. ‘I must know. Is Molly carrying your child?’

I sprang at him from the bed, caught him by the throat and dragged him up to his feet. I drew back my fist, and then stopped, shocked by what the firelight revealed on his face.

‘Batter away,’ he suggested quietly. ‘New bruises will not show much upon the old ones. I can creep about unseen for a few more days.’

I snatched my hand back from him. Strange, how the act I had been about to commit now seemed so monstrous when I discovered someone else had already done it. As soon as I released him, he turned away from me, as if his discoloured and swollen face shamed him. Perhaps the pallor of his skin and his delicate bone structure made it all the more horrifying to me. It was as if someone had done this to a child. I knelt by the fire and began to build it up.

‘Didn’t get a good enough look?’ the Fool asked acidly. ‘I’ll warn you, it gets no better by giving more light to it.’

‘Sit on my clothes chest and take your shirt off,’ I told him brusquely. He didn’t move. I ignored that. I had a small kettle for tea-water. This I set to heat. I lit a branch of candles and set them upon the table, and then took out my small store of herbs. I did not keep that many in my room; I wished now I had Burrich’s full store to draw on, but I was sure that if I left to go to the stables, he would be gone when I returned. Still, those I kept in my room were mostly for bruises and cuts and the types of injuries my other profession exposed me to most often. They would do.

When the water was warm, I poured some into my washbasin and added a generous handful of herbs, crushing them as I did so. I found an outgrown shirt in my clothing chest and tore it into rags. ‘Come into the light.’ This I phrased as a request. After a moment, he did so, but moving hesitantly and shyly. I looked at him briefly, then took him by the shoulders and sat him down on my clothing chest. ‘What happened to you?’ I asked,

awed by the damage to his face. His lips were cut and swollen, and one eye swollen near closed.

‘I’ve been going about Buckkeep, asking bad-tempered individuals if they’ve fathered bastards lately.’ His one good eye met my glare straight on. Red webbed the white of it. I found I could neither be angry with him, nor laugh.

‘You should know enough medicine to take better care of something like this. Sit still now.’ I made the rag into a compress, held it gently but firmly to his face. After a moment, he relaxed. I sponged away some dried blood. There wasn’t much; he had obviously cleaned himself up after this beating, but some of the cuts had continued to ooze blood. I ran my fingers lightly down the lines of his jaw, and around his eye socket. At least no bone seemed damaged. ‘Who did this to you?’ I asked him.

‘I walked into a series of doors. Or the same one several times. It depends on which door you ask.’ He spoke glibly for someone with mashed lips.

‘That was a serious question,’ I told him.

‘As was mine.’

I glared at him again and he dropped his eyes. For a moment neither of us spoke as I searched out a pot of salve Burch had given me for cuts and scrapes. ‘I’d really like to know the answer,’ I reminded him as I took the lid off the pot. The familiar biting scent rose to my nostrils, and I suddenly missed Burch with an amazing intensity.

‘As would I.’ He flinched slightly under my touch as I applied the salve. I knew it stung. I also knew it worked.

‘Why do you ask such a question of me?’ I finally demanded.

He considered a moment. ‘Because it is easier to ask of you than to ask Kettricken if she carries Verity’s child. As far as I can determine, Regal has shared his favours only with himself of late, so that dismisses him. You or Verity, then, must be the father.’

I looked at him blankly. He shook his head sadly for me. ‘Cannot you feel it?’ he asked in a near whisper. He stared off in the distance dramatically. ‘Forces shift. Shadows flutter. Suddenly, there is a rippling in the possibilities. A reordering of the futures, as destinies multiply. All paths diverge, and diverge again.’ He looked back to me. I smiled at him, thinking he jested, but his mouth was sober. ‘There is an heir to the Farseer line,’ he said quietly. ‘I am certain of it.’

Have you ever missed a step in the dark? There is that sudden feeling of teetering on the edge, and no knowledge of how far you may fall. I said, far too firmly, 'I have fathered no child.'

The Fool regarded me with a sceptical eye. 'Ah,' he said with false heartiness. 'Of course not. Then it must be Kettricken who is carrying.'

'It must,' I agreed, but my heart sank. If Kettricken were pregnant, she would have no reason to conceal it. Whereas Molly would. And I had not been to see Molly in several nights. Perhaps she had news for me. I felt suddenly dizzy, but I forced myself to take a long calming breath. 'Take your shirt off,' I told the Fool. 'Let's see your chest.'

'I've seen it, thank you, and I assure you it's fine. When they popped the bag over my head, I presume it was to provide a target. They were most conscientious about striking nowhere else.'

The brutality of what they had done to him sickened me into silence. 'Who?' I finally managed to ask.

'With a bag over my head? Come now. Can you see through a bag?'

'No. But you must have suspicions.'

He canted his head at me in disbelief. 'If you do not know what those suspicions are already, then you are the one with your head in a bag. Let me cut a bit of a hole for you. "We know you are false to the King, that you spy for Verity the Pretender. Send him no more messages, for if you do, we shall know of it." He turned to stare into the fire, swung his heels briefly, thunk, thunk, thunk against my clothing chest.

'Verity the Pretender?' I asked in outrage.

'Not my words. Theirs,' he pointed out.

I forced my anger down, tried to think. 'Why would they suspect you spy for Verity? Have you sent him messages?'

'I have a king,' he said softly. 'Although he does not always remember he is my king. You must look out for your king. As I am sure you do.'

'What will you do?'

'What I have always done. What else can I do? I cannot stop doing what they command me to stop, for I have never begun it.'

A creeping certainty shivered up my spine. 'And if they act again?'

He gave a lifeless laugh. 'There is no point to my worrying about it, for I cannot prevent it. That is not to say I look forward to it. This,' he said, with a half-gesture toward his face. 'This will heal. What they did to my room will not. I shall be weeks picking up that mess.'

The words trivialized it. A terrible hollow feeling welled up in me. I had been in the Fool's tower chamber once. It had been a long climb up a disused staircase, past the dust and litter of years, to a chamber that looked out over the parapets and contained a garden of wonder. I thought of the bright fish swimming in the fat pots, the moss gardens in their containers, the tiny ceramic child, so meticulously cared for, in its cradle. I closed my eyes as he added to the flames, 'They were most thorough. Silly me. To think there was such a thing as a safe place in the world.'

I could not look at him. Save for his tongue, he was a defenceless person whose only drive was to serve his king. And save the world. Yet someone had smashed his world. Worse, I suspected the beating he had taken was in revenge for something I had done.

'I could help you set it to rights,' I offered quietly.

He shook his head tightly, quickly, twice. 'I think not,' he said. Then he added in a more normal voice, 'No offence intended.'

'None taken.'

I bundled the cleansing herbs with the pot of salve and the leftover rags from my shirt. He hopped off my clothes chest. When I offered them to him, he took them gravely. He walked to the door, stiffly despite his claims that they had only damaged his face. At the door he turned, 'When you know for certain, you will tell me?' He paused significantly. His voice dropped. 'After all, if this is what they do to a king's Fool, what might they do to a woman carrying a King-in-Waiting's heir?'

'They wouldn't dare,' I said fiercely.

He snorted disdain. 'Wouldn't they? I no longer know what they would or would not dare, FitzChivalry. Neither do you. I'd find a sounder way to latch my door, if I were you. Unless you wish to find your head in a bag as well.' He gave a smile that wasn't even a shadow of his usual mocking grin, and slipped out again. I walked to the door after he had left it, and dropped the bar into place. I leaned my back against it and sighed.

'It's all very well for the rest of them, Verity,' I said aloud to the silent room. 'But for myself, I think you should turn yourself about right now and ride home. There's more afoot than Red Ships, and somehow I misdoubt that Elderlings would be much help against the other threats we face.'

I waited, hoping to feel some sort of acknowledgement or agreement from him. There was nothing. My frustrations whirled in me. I was seldom certain of when Verity was aware with me, and never sure if he sensed the

thoughts I wished to send him. I wondered again at why he did not direct Serene as to the actions he wished taken. He had Skilled to her all summer about Red Ships; why was he so silent now? Had he Skilled to her already, and she concealed it? Or revealed it, perhaps, to Regal only. I considered it. Perhaps the bruises on the Fool's face reflected Regal's frustration at finding Verity aware of what was going on in his absence. Why he had chosen the Fool as the culprit was anyone's guess. Perhaps he had simply chosen him as a vent for his rage. The Fool had never avoided offending Regal. Or anyone else.

Later that night, I went to Molly. It was a dangerous time to go, for the keep was abuzz with extra folk and extra servants taking care of them. But my suspicions would not let me stay away. When I tapped on the door that night, Molly asked through the wood, 'Who is it?'

'It's me,' I replied incredulously. She had never asked before.

'Oh,' she replied, and opened the door. I slipped inside and bolted it behind me as she crossed to the hearth. She knelt before it, adding wood it didn't need and not looking at me. She was dressed in her blue servant's dress, and her hair was still bundled up. Every line of her body warned me. I was in trouble again.

'I'm sorry I haven't been here much lately.'

'So am I,' Molly said shortly.

She wasn't leaving me much in the way of openings. 'A lot has been going on, and they've been keeping me pretty busy.'

'With what?'

I sighed. I already knew where this conversation was going. 'With things I can't talk to you about.'

'Of course.' For all the calmness and coolness in her voice, I knew her fury was raging just beneath the surface. The slightest wrong word would set it off. So would not saying anything. So my question might as well be tackled head-on.

'Molly, the reason I came tonight –'

'Oh, I knew there had to be some special reason for you finally to drop in. The only thing that really surprises me is myself. Why am I here? Why do I come straight to my room after my duties each day and wait, on the off-chance that you might appear? There are other things I could be doing. There are minstrels and puppet shows aplenty lately. Prince Regal sees to that. I could be at one of the lesser hearths with the other servants, enjoying their

company. Instead of up here alone. Or I could be getting some work done. Cook lets me use the kitchen when it's not a busy time. I have wicking and herbs and tallow; I should be using them while the herbs still have their full potency. But no, I am up here, in the hope that you'll remember me and want to spend a few moments with me.'

I stood like a rock in the battering waves of her words. There was nothing else I could do. Everything she said was true. I looked at my feet while she caught her breath. When she spoke again, the anger had faded from her voice, to be replaced with something worse. Misery and discouragement.

'Fitz, it's just so hard. Every time I think I have accepted it, I turn a corner and catch myself hoping again. But there's never going to be anything for us, is there? Never going to be a time that belongs just to us, never going to be a place that is just ours.' She paused. She looked down, biting on her lower lip. When she spoke, her voice trembled. 'I've seen Celerity. She's beautiful. I even made an excuse to speak to her ... I asked if they needed more candles for their rooms ... She spoke back, shyly, but courteously. She even thanked me for being concerned, as few here thank servants. She's ... she's nice. A lady. Oh, they'll never give you permission to marry me. Why would you want to marry a servant?'

'You are not a servant to me,' I said quietly. 'I never think of you that way.'

'Then what am I? I am not a wife,' she pointed out quietly.

'In my heart, you are,' I said miserably. It was a pitiful comfort to offer her. It shamed me that she accepted it, and came to rest her forehead on my shoulder. I held her gently for a few moments, then pulled her into a warmer embrace. As she nestled against me, I said softly into her hair, 'There's something I have to ask you.'

'What?'

'Are you ... with child?'

'What?' She pulled back from me, to look up into my face.

'Are you carrying my child?'

'I ... no. No, I'm not.' A pause. 'What makes you ask such a thing all of a sudden?'

'It just occurred to me to wonder. That's all. I mean ...'

'I know what you mean. If we were married, and I weren't pregnant by now, the neighbours would be shaking their heads over us.'

‘Really?’ Such a thing had never really occurred to me before. I knew that some folk wondered if Kettricken were barren as she had not conceived in over a year of marriage, but a concern over her childlessness was a public issue. I had never thought of neighbours watching newlyweds expectantly.

‘Of course. By now, someone would have offered me a tea recipe from their mother’s telling. Or powdered boar’s tusk to slip into your ale at night.’

‘Oh really?’ I gathered her closer to me, grinning foolishly.

‘Um.’ She smiled back up at me. The smile faded slowly. ‘As it is,’ she said quietly. ‘There are other herbs I take. To be sure that I do not conceive.’

I had all but forgotten Patience scolding me that day. ‘Some herbs like that, I’ve heard, can make a woman ill, if she takes them for long.’

‘I know what I’m doing,’ she said flatly. ‘Besides, what is the alternative?’ she added with less heart.

‘Disaster,’ I conceded.

She nodded her head against me. ‘Fitz. If I had said yes tonight. If I were pregnant ... what would you have done?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.’

‘Think about it now,’ she begged me.

I spoke slowly. ‘I suppose I’d ... get a place for you, somehow, somewhere.’ (I’d go to Chade, I’d go to Burrich, and I’d beg for help. Inwardly I blanched to think of it.) ‘A safe place. Away from Buckkeep. Upriver, maybe. I’d come to see you when I could. Somehow, I’d take care of you.’

‘You’d set me aside is what you’re saying. Me, and our ... my child.’

‘No! I’d keep you safe, put you where no one would point shame at you or mock you for having a child alone. And when I could, I’d come to you and *our* child.’

‘Have you ever considered that you could come with us? That we could leave Buckkeep, you and I, and go upriver now?’

‘I can’t leave Buckkeep. I’ve explained that to you every way I know how.’

‘I know you have. I’ve tried to understand it. But I don’t see why.’

‘The work I do for the King is such that ...’

‘Stop doing it. Let someone else do it. Go away with me, to a life of our own.’

‘I can’t. It’s not that simple. I wouldn’t be allowed to leave just like that.’ Somehow, we had come uncoupled. Now she folded her arms across

her chest.

‘Verity’s gone. Almost no one believes he’s coming back. King Shrewd grows more feeble each day, and Regal prepares himself to inherit. If half of Regal’s feelings for you are what you say they are, why on earth would you wish to stay here with him as king? Why would he want to keep you here? Fitz, can’t you see that it’s all tumbling apart? The Near Islands and Ferry are just the beginning. The Raiders won’t stop there.’

‘All the more reason for me to stay here. To work and, if need be, fight for our people.’

‘One man can’t stop them,’ Molly pointed out. ‘Not even a man as stubborn as you. Why not take all that stubbornness and fight for us instead? Why don’t we run away, up the river and inland, away from the Raiders, to a life of our own? Why should we have to give up everything for a hopeless cause?’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing from her. If I had said it, it would have been treason. But she said it as if it were the commonest sense. As if she and I and a child that didn’t exist yet were more important than the King and the Six Duchies combined. I said as much.

‘Well,’ she asked me, looking at me levelly. ‘It’s true. To me. If you were my husband and I had our child, that’s how important it would be to me. More important than the whole rest of the world.’

And what was I to say to that? I reached for the truth, knowing it wouldn’t satisfy her. ‘You would be that important to me. You are that important to me. But it’s also why I have to stay here. Because something that important isn’t something you run away and hide with. It’s something that you stand and defend.’

‘Defend?’ Her voice went up a notch. ‘When will you learn we aren’t strong enough to defend ourselves? I know. I’ve stood between Raiders and children of my own blood, and just barely survived. When you’ve done that, talk to me about defending!’

I was silent. Not just that her words cut me. They did, and deeply. But she brought back to me a memory of holding a child, studying the blood that had trickled down her cooling arm. I couldn’t abide the thought of ever doing it again. But it could not be fled. ‘There is no running away, Molly. We either stand and fight here, or are slaughtered when the fighting overtakes us.’

‘Really?’ She asked me coldly. ‘It isn’t just your putting your loyalty to a king ahead of what we have?’ I could not meet her eyes. She snorted. ‘You’re just like Burrich. You don’t even know how much you’re like him!’

‘Like Burrich?’ I was left floundering. I was startled that she said it at all, let alone that she said it as if it were a fault.

‘Yes.’ She was decisive.

‘Because I am true to my king?’ I was still grasping at straws.

‘No! Because you put your king before your woman ... or your love, or your own life.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’

‘There! You see! You really don’t. And you go about, acting like you know all these great things and secrets and every important thing that ever happened. So answer me this. Why does Patience hate Burrich?’

I was completely at a loss now. I had no idea how this figured into what was wrong with me. But I knew somehow Molly would make a connection. Gingerly I tried, ‘She blames him for me. She thinks Burrich led Chivalry into bad ways ... and hence into conceiving me.’

‘There. You see. That’s how stupid you are. It’s nothing of the kind. Lacey told me one night. A bit too much elderberry wine, and I was talking of you and she of Burrich and Patience. Patience loved Burrich first, you idiot. But he wouldn’t have her. He said he loved her, but he couldn’t marry her, even if her father would give consent for her to wed beneath her station. Because he was already sworn, life and sword, to a lord of his own. And he didn’t think he could do justice to both of them. Oh, he said he wished he were free to marry her, and that he wished he hadn’t sworn before he’d met her. But all the same, he said he wasn’t free to marry her just then. He said something stupid to her, about no matter how willing the horse, it can only wear one saddle. So she told him, well, go off then, go follow this lord who’s more important to you than I am. And he did. Just as you would, if I told you that you had to choose.’ There were two spots of high colour on her cheeks. She tossed her head as she turned her back on me.

So there was the connection to my fault. But my mind was reeling as bits and pieces of stories and comments suddenly fell into place. Burrich’s tale of first meeting Patience. She’d been sitting in an apple tree, and she’d demanded that he take a splinter out of her foot. Scarcely something a woman would ask of her lord’s man. But something a direct young maid might ask of a young man who had caught her eye. And his reaction the

night I had spoken to him about Molly and Patience, and repeated Patience's words about horses and saddles.

'Did Chivalry know anything of all this?' I asked.

Molly spun about to consider me. It was obviously not the question she had expected me to ask. But she couldn't resist finishing the story either. 'No. Not at first. When Patience first came to know him, she had no idea he was Burrich's master. Burrich had never told her what lord he was sworn to. At first Patience would have nothing to do with Chivalry. Burrich still held her heart, you see. But Chivalry was stubborn. From what Lacey says, he loved her to distraction. He won her heart. It wasn't until after she had said yes, she'd marry him, that she found out he was Burrich's master. And only because Chivalry sent Burrich to deliver a special horse to her.'

I suddenly remembered Burrich in the stable, looking at Patience's mount and saying, 'I trained that horse.' I wondered if he'd trained Silk knowing she was to go to a woman he'd loved, as a gift from the man she'd marry. I'd bet it was so. I had always thought that Patience's disdain for Burrich was a sort of jealousy that Chivalry could care so much for him. Now the triangle was an even stranger one. And infinitely more painful. I closed my eyes and shook my head at the unfairness of the world. 'Nothing is ever simple and good,' I said to myself. 'There is always a bitter peel, a sour pip somewhere.'

'Yes.' Molly's anger seemed suddenly spent. She sat down on the bedside, and when I went and sat beside her, she didn't push me away. I took her hand and held it. A thousand thoughts cluttered my mind. How Patience hated Burrich's drinking. How Burrich had recalled her lap-dog, and how she always carried it about in a basket. The care he always took with his own appearance and behaviour. 'Just because you cannot see a woman does not mean she does not see you.' Oh, Burrich. The extra time he still took, grooming a horse that she seldom rode any more. At least Patience had had a marriage to a man she loved, and some years of happiness, complicated as they were by political intrigues. But some years of happiness, anyway. What would Molly and I ever have? Only what Burrich had now?

She leaned against me and I held her for a long time. That was all. But somehow in that melancholy holding that night, we were closer than we had been for a very long time.

TWENTY-ONE

Dark Days

King Eyod of the Mountains held the Mountain throne during the years of the Red Ships. The death of his elder son, Rurisk, had left his daughter Kettricken sole heir to that throne. By their customs, she would become Queen of the Mountains, or 'Sacrifice' as that people call it, upon the demise of her father. Thus her marriage to Verity ensured not only that we had an ally at our back during those unstable years, but also promised the eventual joining of a 'seventh duchy' to the Kingdom of the Six Duchies. That the Mountain Kingdom bordered only on the two inland duchies of Tilth and Farrow made the prospect of any civil sundering of the Six Duchies of especial concern to Kettricken. She had been raised to be 'Sacrifice'. Her duty to her folk was of supreme importance in her life. When she became Verity's Queen-in-Waiting, the Six Duchies folk became her own. But it could never have been far from her heart that on her father's death, her Mountain folk would once more claim her as 'Sacrifice' as well. How could she fulfil that obligation if Farrow and Tilth stood between her and her folk, not as part of the Six Duchies, but as a hostile nation?

A thick storm set in the next day. It was a mixed blessing. No one need fear Raiders anywhere along the coast on a day like that, but it also kept a restless and disparate group of soldiers penned up together. Up in the keep itself, Bearn was as visible as Regal was not. Whenever I ventured into the Great Hall, Duke Brawndy was there, pacing restlessly or staring coldly into one of the blazing hearths. His daughters flanked him like guardian snowcats. Celerity and Faith were young yet, and their impatience and anger showed more plainly on their faces. Brawndy had requested an official audience with the King. The longer he was kept waiting, the greater the implied insult. It denied the importance of what had brought him here. And the Duke's continued presence in our Great Hall was a plain announcement to his followers that, as yet, the King had not consented to see him. I

watched that kettle coming to a slow boil and wondered who would be scalded worst when it spilled over.

I was making my fourth cautious survey of the room when Kettricken appeared. She was dressed simply, a long straight robe of purple with an overwrap of soft white with voluminous sleeves that overhung her hands. Her hair was long and loose on her shoulders. She came in with her usual lack of ceremony, preceded only by Rosemary her little maid, and accompanied only by Lady Modesty and Lady Hopeful. Even now that she had become a bit more popular with the ladies, she did not forget that these two had followed her first, when she was alone, and she often honoured them by making them her companions. I do not believe Duke Brawndy recognized his Queen-in-Waiting as the simply-clad woman who approached him directly.

She smiled and took his hand in greeting. It was a simple Mountain way of recognizing one's friends. I doubt she realized how she honoured him, or how much that simple gesture did to assuage his hours of waiting. Only I saw the weariness in her face, I am sure, or the new circles under her eyes. Faith and Celerity were immediately charmed by this attention to their father. Kettricken's clear voice carried throughout the Great Hall, so those at any hearth who wished to hear undoubtedly did. As she had intended.

'I have called on our king twice this morning. I regret that he has been ... ill both times. I hope you have not found this waiting fretful. I know you will want to speak directly to the King about your tragedy and all that must be done to help our folk. But, for now, while he rests, I thought perhaps you might wish to join me for some refreshment.'

'That would be welcome, lady queen,' Bearn's replied cautiously. Already she had done much to soothe his ruffled feathers. But Brawndy was not one to be too easily charmed.

'I am pleased,' Kettricken replied. She turned and stooped slightly to whisper to Rosemary. The little maid gave a quick nod and turned and fled like a rabbit. All marked her exit. In but moments she was back, this time at the head of a procession of serving folk. A table was claimed and moved down before the Great Hearth. A snowy cloth was spread, and then one of Kettricken's bowl gardens set to grace the centre of it. A parade of kitchen folk trooped past, each to deposit platters, or cups of wine or sweetmeats or late autumn apples in a wooden bowl. So wonderfully was it orchestrated that it seemed almost magical. In moments the table was set, the guests were

seated, and Mellow appeared with his lute, already singing as he entered the Great Hall. Kettricken beckoned her ladies to join them, and then espying me as well, summoned me with a nod. She chose others from the other hearths at random; not by their nobility or wealth, but folk I knew she considered interesting. Fletch with his hunting stories, and Shells, a friendly girl of an age with Brawndy's daughters were among those summoned. Kettricken seated herself at Brawndy's right hand, and again I do not think she realized all the honour she did him to arrange it so.

When some bit of food and talk had been enjoyed, she signalled Mellow to soften his strumming. She turned to Brawndy and said simply, 'We have heard only the bare bones of your news. Will you share with us what has befallen Ferry?'

He hesitated briefly. He had brought his complaint for the King to hear and act on. But how could he refuse a Queen-in-Waiting who had treated him so graciously? He lowered his eyes a moment, and when he spoke, his voice was husky with unfeigned emotion. 'My lady queen, we have taken grievous hurt,' he began. Every voice at the table was quickly stilled. All eyes turned to him. I perceived that all of those chosen by the Queen were attentive listeners as well. From the time he launched into his tale, there was not a sound at the table, save soft exclamations of sympathy or mutters of anger at what the Raiders had done. He paused once in his tale, then visibly made a decision, and went on to tell how they had sent forth their summons for aid, and waited in vain for any response. The Queen heard him out, with no objections or denials. When his tale of woe was done, his burden had visibly lifted simply in the telling of it. For a few long moments, all were silent.

'Much of what you tell me is new to my ears,' Kettricken said quietly at last. 'And none of it is good. I do not know what our king will say of all this. You will have to wait for him to hear his words. But for myself, for now, I will say that my heart is full of grief for my people. And anger. I promise you that, for myself, these wrongs shall not go unredressed. Nor shall my folk be left shelterless in winter's bite.'

Duke Brawndy of Bearns looked down at his plate and toyed with the edge of the tablecloth. He looked up, and there was fire in his eyes, but also regret. When he spoke his voice was firm. 'Words. These are but words, my lady queen. The folk of Ferry cannot eat words, nor shelter beneath them at nightfall.'

Kettricken met his eyes squarely. Something seemed to tighten inside her. ‘Well do I know the truth of what you say. But words are all I have to offer you just now. When the King is well enough to see you, we shall see what can be done for Ferry.’

Brawndy leaned toward her. ‘I have questions, my queen. My need for answers is almost as great as my need for money and men. Why did our summons for help go unheeded? Why did the ship that should have come to our aid instead set sail for home port?’

Kettricken’s voice trembled very slightly. ‘To these questions, I have no answers, sir. And that is a shameful thing for me to admit. No word of your situation reached my ears until your young messenger arrived on horseback.’

Strong misgivings arose in me as she spoke. Should the Queen have admitted these things to Brawndy? Perhaps not, for the sake of political wisdom. But Kettricken, I knew, served truth before politics. Brawndy looked long into her face, and the lines around his mouth deepened. Boldly, he asked, but softly, ‘Are not you Queen-in-Waiting?’

Kettricken’s eyes went sword-grey as she met his gaze. ‘I am. Do you ask me if I lie to you?’

It was Brawndy’s turn to look aside. ‘No. No, my queen, that thought was never in my mind.’

The silence stretched over long. I do not know if there was some subtle signal from Kettricken, or if it was simply Mellow’s instincts that swept his fingers more vigorously across the strings. In a moment, his voice took up a winter song, full of blowing notes and skirling choruses.

More than three days passed before Brawndy was finally summoned to the King’s chambers. Kettricken tried to provide amusements, but it is hard to entertain a man whose mind is on his dukedom’s vulnerability. He was courteous, but distracted. Faith, his second daughter, quickly formed a friendship with Shells, and seemed to forget some of her sorrows in her company. Celerity, however, clung to her father’s side, and when her dark blue eyes did meet mine, they were like wounds. I experienced a strange variety of emotions from that gaze. I was relieved that she did not seek me out as an individual to pay attention to. At the same time, I knew her coolness to me was a reflection of her father’s present feelings toward all of Buckkeep. I welcomed her slighting of me; at the same time it rankled as I did not feel I deserved it. When the summons came at last, and Brawndy hastened to the King, I hoped that the awkwardness would be over.

I am sure I was not the only one who noticed that Queen Kettricken was not invited to the council. Neither was I present, being also uninvited. But it is not often that a queen is relegated to the same social standing as a bastard nephew. Kettricken kept her equanimity, and went on showing Brawndy's daughters and Shells a mountain technique for weaving beads into embroidery work. I hovered near the table, but doubted that their minds were on their craft any more than mine was.

We had not long to wait. In less than an hour, Duke Brawndy reappeared in the Great Hall with all the bluster and chill of a storm wind. To Faith, he said, 'Pack our things.' To Celerity, 'Tell our guard to be ready to depart within the hour.' He gave Queen Kettricken a very stiff bow. 'My queen, I excuse myself to depart. As House Farseer will offer no aid, Bears must now tend to its own.'

'Indeed. I see your need for haste,' Kettricken replied gravely. 'But I shall require that you attend me for but one more meal. It is not good to depart on a journey on an empty stomach. Tell me. Do you enjoy gardens?' Her question was addressed to his daughters as much as to Bears. They looked to their father. After a moment, he gave a curt nod.

Both the daughters admitted cautiously to Kettricken that they enjoyed gardens. But their puzzlement was plain. A garden? In winter, during a howling storm? I shared their misgivings, especially as at that moment Kettricken gestured to me.

'FitzChivalry. Attend to my wish. Rosemary, go with Lord FitzChivalry to the kitchens. Prepare food as he directs you, and bring it to the Queen's Garden. I shall escort our guests there.'

I widened my eyes at Kettricken desperately. No. Not there. The climb to the tower alone was taxing to many, let alone taking a cup of tea on a storm-lashed tower top. I could not fathom what she thought she was about. The smile she returned my anxious look was as open and serene as any I had seen. Taking Duke Brawndy's arm, she steered him out of the Great Hall, while the daughters trailed behind with the Queen's ladies. I turned to Rosemary and changed her orders.

'Go find warm wraps for them, and catch up with them. I'll take care of the food.'

The child scampered merrily off while I hastened to the kitchen. I tersely informed Sara of our sudden need, and she quickly created a platter of warmed pasties and hot mulled wine for me. 'Take these yourself, and I'll

send more with a boy in a bit.' I smiled to myself as I took the tray and hurried off toward the Queen's Gardens. The Queen herself might refer to me as Lord FitzChivalry, but Sara the cook would never think twice of ordering me off with a tray of food. It was oddly comforting.

I took the stairs as quickly as I could, then paused to breathe myself at the top landing. I braced myself for the two adjoining walls and a stretch of canvas wind and rain, and pushed the door open. The tower top was as miserable as I had expected it to be. The Queen's ladies and Brawndy's daughters and Shells were huddled in a bit of shelter offered by two adjoining walls and a stretch of canvas that had been set up as a shady spot, last summer. It broke most of the wind, and diverted a great deal of the freezing rain as well. There was a small table within its pathetic shelter and here I set the tray of warm food. Rosemary, warmly bundled, smiled smugly as she snatched a pastry from the edge of the tray. Lady Modesty presided over serving out the food.

As quickly as I could, I secured mugs of warmed wine for the Queen and Duke Brawndy and, on pretext of serving them, joined them. They were at the very edge of the parapet, looking out over the crenellated wall at the open sea below. The wind had lashed it to white froth, and was flinging seagulls about with a fine disregard for the birds' attempts to fly. As I approached, I could see they were speaking softly, but the roar of the wind frustrated my attempt to eavesdrop. I wished I had thought to get a cloak for myself. I was soaked through almost instantly and the wind blew off what heat my body generated by shivering. I tried to smile past my chattering teeth as I presented them with the wine.

'Lord FitzChivalry is known to you?' she asked Brawndy as they took the wine from me.

'Indeed, I have had the pleasure of having him at my own table,' Brawndy assured her. Rain dripped off his bushy eyebrows, while the wind had set his warrior's tail to flapping.

'You would not mind, then, if I asked him to join us in our conversation?' Despite the rain that soaked her, the Queen spoke calmly, as if we basked in spring sunshine.

I wondered if Kettricken knew that Brawndy would see her request as a veiled command.

'I would welcome his counsels, if you consider he has wisdom to offer, my queen,' Brawndy acquiesced.

‘I had hoped you would. FitzChivalry. Fetch yourself some wine, and rejoin us here, please.’

‘As my queen wishes.’ I bowed low, and hurried off to obey. My contact with Verity had grown more tenuous with each passing day that he journeyed farther away, but at that moment I could sense his nudging, eager curiosity. I hastened back to my queen’s side.

‘There is no undoing what has been done,’ the Queen was saying as I returned to them. ‘I grieved that we were not able to protect our folk. Yet if I cannot undo what the Raiders from the sea have done already, at least, perhaps, I can help to shelter them from the storms to come. This, I bid you take them, from their queen’s hand and heart.’

I noticed in passing that she made no mention of King Shrewd’s evident refusal to act. I watched her. She moved leisurely and purposefully at once. The loose white sleeve that she drew back from her arm was already dripping with cold rain. She ignored it as she bared her pale arm, to reveal a snaking of gold wire up her arm, with the dark opals of her mountains caught here and there in its web. I had seen the dark flash of mountain opals before, but never ones of this size. Yet she held out her arm for me to unfasten the catch, and with no hesitation at all, she unwound the treasure from her arm. From her other sleeve, she drew a small velvet bag. I held its mouth open as she slid the bracelets into it. She smiled warmly at Duke Brawndy as she pressed it into his hand. ‘From your King-in-Waiting Verity and me,’ she said quietly. I barely resisted Verity’s impulse in me to fling himself on his knees at the feet of this woman and declare her far too royal for his insignificant love. Brawndy was left stuttering his amazed thanks and vowing to her that not a penny of its worth would go to waste. Stout houses would rise once more in Ferry, and the folk there would bless the Queen for the warmth of them.

I suddenly saw the reason for the Queen’s Garden as a site. This was a queen’s gift, not contingent on anything Shrewd or Regal might have to say. Kettricken’s choice of place, and her manner of presenting it to Brawndy made that clear to him. She did not tell him to keep it secret; she did not need to.

I thought of the emeralds hidden in a corner of my clothes chest, but within me Verity was quiet. I made no move to get them. I hoped to see Verity himself fasten them about his queen’s neck one day. Nor did I wish to lessen the significance of her gift to Brawndy by adding another from a

bastard. For that was how I would have had to present it. No, I decided. Let the Queen's gift and her presentation of it stand alone in his memory.

Brawndy turned from Kettricken to consider me. 'My queen, you seem to hold this young man in considerable esteem, to make him privy to your counsels.'

'I do,' Kettricken replied gravely. 'He has never betrayed my trust in him.'

Brawndy nodded, as if confirming something to himself. He permitted himself a small smile. 'My youngest daughter, Celerity, was somewhat troubled by a missive from Lord FitzChivalry. Especially as her older sisters had opened it for her, and found much there to tease her with. But when she brought her misgivings to me, I told her that it is a rare man who so candidly admits to what might be seen as shortcomings. Only a braggart would claim to go fearless into battle. Nor would I wish to give my trust to a man who could kill and not feel heart-lost afterward. As to your physical health,' he clapped me suddenly on the shoulder, 'I would say a summer of pulling oars and wielding an axe had done you good.' His hawk's eyes pierced mine. 'I have not changed my assessment of you, FitzChivalry. Nor has Celerity. I wish you to be sure of that.'

I said the words I knew I must. 'Thank you, sir.'

He turned to look over his shoulder. I followed his gaze through the blowing rain, to where Celerity gazed at us. Her father gave her a tiny nod, and her smile broke like the sun from behind a cloud. Faith, watching her, said something, and Celerity turned blushing to give her sister a push. My guts turned to ice when Brawndy told me, 'You may bid my daughter farewell, if you wish.'

There were few things I wished less to do. But I would not undo what Kettricken had so laboriously wrought. I could not. So I bowed and excused myself, and forced myself to cross the rain-pelted garden, to present myself to Celerity. Faith and Shells immediately withdrew to a not-quite-discreet distance to watch us.

I bowed to her with absolute correctness. 'Lady Celerity, I must thank you again for the scroll you sent me,' I said awkwardly. My heart was pounding. As was hers, I am sure, for a completely different reason.

She smiled at me through the falling rain. 'I was glad to send it, and gladder of your reply. My father explained it to me. I hope you do not take it amiss that I showed it to him. I did not understand why you would belittle

yourself so. He said, “The man who must brag for himself knows that no one else will.” Then he told me there is no better way to learn the sea than at the oar of a boat. And that, in his younger years, the axe was always his weapon, too. He has promised my sisters and I a dory of our own, next summer, that we can take out on the sea on fine days ...’ she faltered suddenly. ‘I chatter, do I not?’

‘Not at all, my lady,’ I assured her quietly. I much preferred that she do the talking.

‘My lady,’ she repeated softly and then blushed as furiously as if I had kissed her right there.

I looked aside from her, only to find Faith’s wide eyes on us, her mouth an O of scandalized delight. Imagining what she imagined I had said to her sister brought the colour and heat to my face as well. As I went scarlet, she and Shells burst out giggling.

It seemed an eternity before we left the storm-battered Queen’s Garden. Our guests sought their rooms, both to change from sodden clothing and to prepare for their journey. I did likewise, dressing hastily lest I miss anything of their departure. I was at the outer courtyard to see Brawndy and his guard mount. So was Queen Kettricken, in her now-familiar purple and white, and her honour-guard had been turned out as well. She stood beside Brawndy’s horse to bid him farewell, and before he mounted, he went down on one knee and kissed her hand. Some brief words were spoken, I know not what, but the Queen smiled as the winds lashed her hair about her face. Brawndy and his troops set off into the teeth of the storm. There was anger yet in the set of Brawndy’s shoulders, but his obeisance to the Queen showed me that, as of yet, not all was lost.

Celerity and Faith both looked back to me as they rode off, and Celerity dared to lift a hand in farewell. I returned the gesture. I stood watching them go, chilled by more than the rain. I had supported Verity and Kettricken this day, but at what cost to myself? What was I doing to Celerity? Was Molly, perhaps, right about all this?

Later that evening, I went to pay my respects to my king. He had not summoned me. I did not intend to discuss Celerity with him. I went, wondering if Verity willed it in me or if it was my own heart cautioning me not to abandon him. Wallace grudgingly admitted me, with a stern warning that the King was still not feeling completely himself, and I must not weary him.

King Shrewd was sitting up before his fireplace. The air of the room was cloying with Smoke. The Fool, his face still an interesting landscape of purples and blues, sat at the King's feet. He had the good fortune to be below the most pungent level of the haze. I had no such luck as I took the low, backless stool that Wallace so thoughtfully provided for me.

A few moments after I had presented myself and sat down, the King turned to me. He regarded me blearily for a few moments as his head swayed on his neck. 'Ah, Fitz,' the King greeted me belatedly. 'How have your lessons been? Is Master Fedwren pleased with your progress?'

I glanced at the Fool, who did not meet my eyes, but poked morosely at the fire.

'Yes,' I said quietly. 'He has said my lettering is good.'

'That's fine. A clear hand is a thing any man may be proud of. And what of our bargain? Have I kept my word to you?'

It was our old litany. Once more I considered the terms he had offered me. He would feed me, clothe me and educate me, and in return he would have my complete loyalty. I smiled at the familiar words, but my throat closed at how the man who said them had wasted away, and what they had come to cost me.

'Yes, my king. You have,' I answered softly.

'Good. Then see you keep your word to me as well.' He leaned back heavily in his chair.

'I shall, your majesty,' I promised, and the Fool's eyes met mine as he witnessed again that promise.

For a few moments the room was still save for the crackling of the fire. Then the King sat up as if startled by a sound. He looked about confusedly. 'Verity? Where's Verity?'

'He's gone on a quest, my king. To seek the help of the Elderlings to drive the Red Ships from our shores.'

'Ah, yes. Of course. Of course he has. But just for a moment, I thought ...' He leaned back in his chair. Then all the hair on my skin prickled up. I could feel him vaguely Skilling, in an unfocused fumbling way. His mind tugged at mine like old hands seeking for a grip. I had believed him incapable of Skilling any more; I had thought that he had burned out his talent years ago. Verity had told me once that Shrewd used his talent but seldom. I had set those words aside as his loyalty to his father. But the

ghostly Skill plucked at my thoughts like unschooled fingers at harp strings. I sensed Nighteyes hackling at this new invasion. *Silence*, I cautioned him.

My breath snagged suddenly on an idea. Fostered by Verity within me? I set aside all cautions, reminded myself that this was what I had promised this man so long ago. Loyalty in all things. ‘My king?’ I asked his permission as I moved my stool closer to his chair. I took his withered hand in mine.

It was like plunging myself into a rushing river. ‘Ah, Verity, my boy, there you are!’ Just for a moment, I glimpsed Verity as King Shrewd still saw him. A chubby boy of eight or nine, more friendly than smart, not so tall as his big brother Chivalry. But a sound and likeable prince, an excellent second son, not too ambitious, not too questioning. Then, just as if I had stepped off a riverbank, I tumbled into a black, rushing roar of Skill. It was disorienting to see suddenly through Shrewd’s eyes. The edges of his vision were filmy with haze. For a moment I glimpsed Verity forging wearily through snow. *What’s this? Fitz?* Then I was whirled away, carried into the heart of King Shrewd’s pain. Skilled deep inside him, beyond where the herbs and smoke deadened him, I was scorched with the agony. It was a slow-growing pain, along his spine and in his skull, a pushing, crowding thing that would not be ignored. But deep inside his Smoke-fogged mind, a king still lived and raged at his confinement. The spirit was still there, battling the body that no longer obeyed him and the pain that was devouring the last years of his life. I swear I saw him, a young man, perhaps a year or so older than myself. His hair had been as busy and unruly as Verity’s, his eyes were wide and lively, and once his face’s only lines had been from a wide grin. This was who he still was, in his soul, this young man, trapped and desperate. He seized on me, asking wildly, ‘Is there a way out?’ I felt myself sinking with his grip.

Then like two rivers merging, another force crashed against me, sent me spinning with its current. *Boy! Contain yourself.* It was as if strong hands steadied me and established me as a separate strand in the twisting rope we were forming. *Father. I am here. Are you in need?*

No. No. All is as it has been for some time. But Verity ...

Yes, I am here.

Bearns is no longer true to us. Brawndy harbours Red Ships there, in exchange for protection for his own villages. He has turned on us. When you come home, you must ...

The thought wandered, lost strength.

Father. Whence come these tidings? I sensed Verity's sudden desperation. If what Shrewd spoke was true, there was no hope for Buckkeep to stand the winter.

Regal has spies. They bring word to him, and he comes to me. This must remain a secret, for a time, until we have the strength to strike back at Brawndy. Or until we decide to abandon him to his Red Ship friends. Yes. That is Regal's plan. To hold the Red Ships off from Buck, and then they will turn on Brawndy and punish him for us. Brawndy even sent a false call for help, in the hopes of luring our warships to their destruction.

Can this be so?

All Regal's spies confirm it. And I fear we can no longer trust your foreign wife. While Brawndy was here, Regal marked how she dallied with him, and made many excuses for private talk. He fears that she plots with our enemies to overthrow the throne.

THIS IS NOT SO! The force of this denial went through me like a sword's point. For an instant I was drowning again, lost, selfless, in the flood of Skill passing through me. Verity sensed it, steadied me again. We must be careful of the boy. He has not the strength to be used like this. Father. I beg you. Trust my queen. I know she is not false. And be wary of what Regal's spies report to you. Put spies upon the spies, before you act on any of their reports. Consult with Chade. Promise me this.

I am not a fool, Verity. I know how to hold my throne.

Good. Good then. Make sure the boy is tended to. He is not trained for this.

Someone snatched my hand back then, as if from a burning stove. I sagged forward, put my head down between my knees while the world spun around me. Next to me, I could hear King Shrewd panting for his breath as if he had run a race. The Fool pushed a glass of wine into my hand, then went back to urging small sips of wine into the King. And over all, suddenly, Wallace's voice, demanding, 'What have you done to the King?'

'It is both of them!' There was a sharp edge of fear to the Fool's voice. 'They were talking together, quite calmly, then suddenly this! Take the damned Smoke censers away! I fear you have killed them both!'

'Silence, Fool! Do not accuse my healing of this!' But I heard the hurry in Wallace's step as he made the rounds of the room, pinching out the burning twists in each censer or capping them with brass cups. In a moment

the windows were thrown wide to the icy winter night. The cool air steadied me. I managed to sit up and take a sip of the wine. Gradually my senses came back to me. Even so, I was still sitting there when Regal came bustling into the room, demanding to know what had happened. He addressed the question to me, as the Fool was helping Wallace put the King to bed.

I shook my head at him dumbly, and the giddiness was not all pretended.

‘How is the King? Will he recover?’ he called to Wallace.

Wallace immediately came hurrying to Regal’s side. ‘He seems to be steadying, Prince Regal. I do not know what overcame him. There was no sign of a struggle, but he is as wearied as if he had run a race. His health will not stand this sort of excitement, my prince.’

Regal turned an appraising glance on me. ‘What did you do to my father?’ he growled.

‘I? Nothing.’ That at least was truthful. Whatever had happened, it had been the King’s doing and Verity’s. ‘We were talking quietly. Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed. Dizzy. Weak. As if I were losing consciousness.’ I turned my gaze to Wallace. ‘Could it have been the Smoke?’

‘Perhaps,’ he conceded unhappily. He looked nervously at Regal’s darkening stare. ‘Well, it seems every day I must make it stronger, for it to have any effect at all. And still he complains that ...’

‘SILENCE!’ Regal cut him off with a roar. He gestured at me as if I were offal. ‘Get him out of here. Then get back to tend the King.’

At that moment, Shrewd moaned in his sleep, and I felt again the feather-soft brushing of the Skill against my senses. My hair hackled.

‘No. Go to the King now, Wallace. Fool. You get the Bastard out of here. And see that this is not spoken of amongst the servants. I shall know if I am disobeyed. Hurry up, now. My father is not well.’

I had thought I could rise on my own and depart, but found that I did need the Fool’s assistance, at least to stand. Once I was up on my feet, I teetered along precariously, feeling as if I tottered on stilts. Walls loomed near and then far, the floor heaved gently beneath me like the deck of a ship when she rides a slow swell.

‘I can manage from here,’ I told the Fool once we were outside the door. He shook his head.

‘You are too vulnerable to be left alone just now,’ he told me quietly, and then linked arms with me, and began some nonsensical discourse. He

put a fine front of camaraderie on helping me up the stairs and to my door. He waited, chattering on, while I unlatched it and then followed me in.

‘I told you, I am all right,’ I said with some annoyance. All I wanted to do was lie down.

‘Are you? And how is my king? What did you do to him, back there?’

‘I did nothing!’ I gritted out as I sat down on the foot of my bed. My head was beginning to pound. Elfbark tea. That was what I needed just now. I had none.

‘You did! You asked his permission, and then you took his hand. And in the next instant you were both gasping like fish.’

‘Just an instant?’ It had felt like hours to me. I had thought the whole evening spent.

‘No more than three heart beats.’

‘Ooh.’ I put my hands to my temples, tried to push my skull back into one piece. Why did Burrich have to be gone just now? I knew he would have elfbark. The pain demanded I take a chance. ‘Do you have any elfbark? For tea?’

‘With me? No. But I could go beg some of Lacey. She keeps a horde of all sorts of herbs.’

‘Would you?’

‘What did you do to the King?’ The trade he offered was plain.

The pressure in my head built, pushing out on my eyes. ‘Nothing,’ I gasped. ‘And what he did to me is for him to tell. If he chooses. Is that plain enough for you?’

A silence. ‘Perhaps. Are you really in that much pain?’

I lay back very slowly on my bed. Even putting my head down hurt.

‘I’ll be back shortly,’ he offered. I heard the door of my room open and shut. I lay still, eyes closed. Gradually the sense of what I had eavesdropped formed itself in my mind. Despite my pain, I sorted information. Regal had spies. Or claimed to. Brawndy was a traitor. Or so Regal claimed his supposed spies had informed him. I suspected Brawndy was as much a traitor as Kettricken was. Oh, the spreading poison. And the pain. Suddenly I remembered the pain. Had not Chade bid me simply to observe as I had been taught to find an answer to my question? It had been plain before me all the time, if only I had not been so blinded with fears of traitors and plots and poisons.

A disease was eating King Shrewd, gnawing him away from the inside. He drugged himself against the agony, in an effort to have some corner of his mind to himself, a place in which the pain could not come and rob him. If someone had just told me of that a few hours ago, I would have scoffed. Now, lying on my bed, trying to breathe softly because the slightest movement triggered another wave of pain, I could begin to understand. Pain. I'd only been enduring this for a few minutes, and I'd already sent the Fool running for elfbark. Another consideration pushed itself into my mind. I expected this pain to pass, that by tomorrow I would rise up free from it. What if I had to face it every moment for the rest of my life, with the certainty that it was devouring what hours were left to me? No wonder Shrewd kept himself drugged.

I heard my door open and close quietly. When I did not hear the Fool begin to make tea, I forced my eyes open. Justin and Serene stood inside the door of my room. They stood frozen, as if in the lair of a savage beast. When I shifted my head slightly to look at them, Serene's lips actually drew back as if she snarled. Within me, Nighteyes snarled back. The tempo of my heart suddenly increased. Danger here. I tried to loosen my muscles, to be ready to take any action, but the pain bludgeoning my head bade me only be still, be still. 'I didn't hear your knock,' I managed to say. Each word was edged in red as my voice echoed in my skull.

'I didn't knock,' Serene said harshly. Her clearly-spoken words were as painful to me as a clubbing. I prayed she didn't know how much power she had over me just then. I prayed for the Fool to come back. I tried to appear nonchalant, as if I kept to my bed only because I considered them so unimportant.

'Did you need something from me?' I sounded brusque. In reality, each word cost too much effort to waste even one.

'Need? Never,' Serene scoffed.

Skill nudged me. Clumsily. Justin, prodding at me. I could not repress the shudder that went through me. My king's use of me had left my mind as raw as a bleeding wound. Justin's awkward Skilling was like having cat's claws rake my brain.

Shield yourself. Verity was a whisper. I made an effort to set my guards, but could not find enough of myself to do it. Serene was smiling.

Justin was pushing into my mind like a hand shoving into a pudding. My senses jumbled suddenly. He smelled foul in my head, he was a terrible

rotten greenish-yellow and sounded like spurs jingling. *Shield*, Verity pleaded. He sounded desperate, weak, and I knew he was trying very hard to hold the tattered pieces of myself together for me. *He's going to kill you with sheer stupidity. He doesn't even know what he's doing.*

Help me!

From Verity, nothing. Our link was fading like perfume in the wind as my strength dwindled.

WE ARE PACK!

Justin slammed back against the door of my room so hard his head bounced. It was more than *repelling*. I had no word for what Nighteyes did from within Justin's own mind. It was a hybrid magic, Nighteyes using the Wit through a bridge the Skill had created. He attacked Justin's body from within Justin's mind. Justin's hands flew to his throat, fighting jaws he could not seize. Claws shredded skin and raised red welts on the skin beneath Justin's fine tunic. Serene screamed, a sword of a sound slashing through me, and flung herself on Justin, trying to help him.

Don't kill. Don't kill! DON'T KILL!

Nighteyes finally heard me. He dropped Justin, flinging him aside like a worried rat. He came and stood astraddle me, guarding me. Almost I could hear his panting breath, feel the warmth of his hide. I had no energy to question what had happened. I curled myself into a puppy, sheltered beneath him. I knew no one could get through Nighteyes' defence of me.

'What was that? What was that? What was that?' Serene was screaming hysterically. She had Justin by the shirt front and had dragged him to his feet. There were livid marks on his throat and chest, but through barely-opened eyes, I could see them fading rapidly. Soon there was no sign of Nighteyes' attack save the wet stain spreading down the front of Justin's trousers. His eyes sagged closed. Serene shook him like a doll. 'Justin! Open your eyes. Justin!'

'What are you doing to that man?' The Fool's stage voice, expressing outrage and surprise, filled my room. Behind him, my door stood open wide. A passing maid, arms full of shirts, peeped in, startled, then stopped to stare. The little page girl carrying a basket behind her came hurrying to peek around the door's edge. The Fool set the tray he was carrying down on the floor and came into my room. 'What is the meaning of this?'

'He attacked Justin,' Serene sobbed.

Disbelief flooded the Fool's face. 'Him? He looks like he could not attack a pillow. You were the one I saw worrying that boy.'

Serene let go of Justin's collar, and he dropped like a rag at her feet. The Fool looked down at him pityingly.

'Poor fellow! Was she trying to force herself on you?'

'Don't be ridiculous!' Serene was outraged. 'It was him!' She pointed at me.

The Fool looked at me consideringly. 'This is a grave accusation. Answer me truthfully, Bastard. Was she really trying to force herself on you?'

'No.' My voice came out like I felt. Sick, exhausted and groggy. 'I was sleeping. They came quietly into my room. Then ...' I knit my brows, and let my voice trail off. 'I think I have had too much Smoke this night.'

'And I agree!' There was a fine disdain in the Fool's voice. 'Such an unseemly show of lust I have seldom seen!' The Fool spun suddenly on the peeping page and maid. 'This shames all of Buckkeep! To find our own Skilled ones behaving so. I charge you to speak of this to no one. Let no gossip about this begin.' He turned back suddenly on Serene and Justin. Serene's face was flooded scarlet, her mouth open in outrage. Justin pulled himself to a sitting position at her feet and sat, swaying. He clutched at her skirts like a toddler trying to stand.

'I do not lust after this man,' she said coldly and clearly. 'Nor did I attack him.'

'Well, whatever it is you are doing, it were better done in your own chambers!' The Fool cut across her words sternly. Without another glance at her, he turned, picked up his tray, and bore it off down the hallway. At the sight of the elfbark tea departing, I could not contain a groan of despair. Serene spun back to me, lips drawn back in a grimace.

'I will get to the bottom of this!' she snarled at me.

I took a breath. 'But in your own chambers, please.' I managed to lift a hand and point at the open door. She stormed out, with Justin staggering along in her wake. The maid and page drew back in distaste from them as they passed. My chamber door was left standing ajar. It took a vast effort to rise and close it. I felt as if my head were something I balanced on my shoulders. Once the door was closed, I didn't even try to return to bed, but just slid down the wall to sit with my back to the door. I felt raw.

My brother. Are you dying?

No. But it hurts.

Rest. I will stand watch.

I cannot explain what happened next. I let go of something, something I had clutched all my life without being aware of gripping it. I sank down into soft warm darkness, into a safe place while a wolf kept watch through my eyes.

TWENTY-TWO

Burrich

Lady Patience, she who was Queen-in-Waiting to Chivalry's King-in-Waiting, came originally of Inland stock. Her parents, Lord Oakdell and Lady Averia, were of very minor nobility. For their daughter to rise in rank to marry a prince of the realm had to have been a shock to them, especially given their daughter's wayward, and, some might say, obtuse nature. Chivalry's avowed ambition to wed Lady Patience was the cause of his first difference with his father King Shrewd. By this marriage, he gained no valuable alliances or political advantages; only a highly eccentric woman whose great love for her husband did not preclude her forthright declaring of unpopular opinions. Nor did it dissuade her from the single-minded pursuit of any avocation which caught her fleeting fancy. Her parents preceded her in death, dying in the year of the Blood Plague, and she was childless and presumed barren when her husband Chivalry fell to his death from a horse.

I awoke. Or, at least, I came back to myself. I was in bed, surrounded by warmth and gentleness. I didn't move, but cautiously searched myself for pain. My head no longer pounded, but I felt tired and achey, stiff as one sometimes is after pain passes. A shiver went up my back. Molly was naked beside me, breathing gently against my shoulder. The fire had burned low, nearly out. I listened. It was either very very late, or very early. The keep was near silent.

I didn't remember getting here.

I shivered again. Beside me, Molly stirred. She pulled closer to me, smiled sleepily. 'You are so strange sometimes,' she breathed. 'But I love you.' She closed her eyes again.

Nighteyes!

I am here. He was always there.

Suddenly I couldn't ask, I didn't want to know. I just lay still, feeling sick and sad and sorry for myself.

I tried to rouse you, but you were not ready to come back. That other one had drained you.

That 'other one' is our king.

Your king. Wolves have no kings.

What did ... I let the thought trail off. Thank you for guarding me.

He sensed my reservations. *What should I have done? Turned her away? She was grieving.*

I don't know. Let us not talk of it. Molly was sad, and he had comforted her? I didn't even know why she was sad. Had been sad, I amended, looking at the soft smile on her sleeping face. I sighed. Better face it sooner than later. Besides, I had to send her back to her own room. It would not do for her to be here when she kept awake.

'Molly?' I said gently.

She stirred and opened her eyes. 'Fitz,' she agreed sleepily.

'For safety's sake, you have to go back to your own room.'

'I know. I shouldn't have come in the first place.' She stopped. 'All those things I said to you a few days ago. I didn't ...'

I put a finger across her lips. She smiled past it. 'You make these new silences ... very interesting.' She pushed my hand aside, kissed me warmly. Then she slid from my bed and began to dress briskly. I arose, moving more slowly. She glanced over at me, her face full of love. 'I'll go alone. It's safer. We should not be seen together.'

'Some day, that will ...' I began. This time she silenced me, small hand on my lips.

'We will talk of nothing like that now. Let us leave tonight as it is. Perfect.' She kissed me again, quickly, and slipped from my arms and then out the door. She shut it silently behind her. Perfect?

I finished dressing and built up my fire. I sat down in my chair by the hearth and waited. It was not long before I was rewarded. The entrance to Chade's domain opened. I went up the stairs as quickly as I could manage. Chade was sitting before his hearth. 'You have to listen to me,' I greeted him. His eyebrows rose in alarm at the intensity in my voice. He gestured at the chair opposite him, and I took it. I opened my mouth to speak. What Chade did then put every hair on my body on end. He glanced all around himself, as if we stood in the midst of a great crowd. Then he touched his

own lips, and made a gesture for softness. He leaned toward me until our heads were nearly touching. 'Softly, softly. Sit down. What is it?'

I sat, in my old place on the hearth. My heart was hammering in my chest. Of all places in Buckkeep, I had never expected to have to use caution in what I said here.

'All right,' he breathed out to me. 'Report.'

I took a breath, and began. I left out nothing, revealing my link with Verity so that the entire story would make sense. I put in every detail: the Fool's beating, and Kettricken's offering to Bearns, as well as my service to the King that evening. Serene and Justin in my room. When I whispered of Regal's spies, he pursed his mouth, but did not seem overly surprised. When I had finished, he regarded me calmly.

A whisper again. 'And what do you conclude from all this?' he asked me, as if it were a puzzle he had set me as a lesson.

'May I speak frankly of my suspicions?' I asked quietly.

A nod.

I sighed in relief. As I spoke of the picture that had emerged for me over the past weeks, I felt a great burden lifting. Chade would know what to do. And so I spoke, quickly, tersely. Regal knew that the King was dying of disease. Wallace was his tool, to keep the King sedated and open to Regal's whisperings. He would discredit Verity, he would strip Buckkeep of every bit of wealth that he could. He would abandon Bearns to the Red Ships, to keep them busy while Regal acted on his own ambitions. Paint Kettricken as a foreigner with ambitions to the throne. A devious, disloyal wife. Gather power to himself. His eventual aim, as ever, was the throne. Or at least as much of the Six Duchies as he could gather to himself. Hence his lavish entertainments for the Inland dukes and their nobles.

Chade nodded unwillingly as I spoke. When I paused, he injected softly, 'There are many holes in this web you say Regal is weaving.'

'I can fill a few,' I whispered. 'Suppose the coterie that Galen created is loyal to Regal? Suppose all messages go to him first, and only those he approves continue to their intended destination?'

Chade's face grew still and grave.

My whisper grew more desperate. 'What if messages are delayed just enough to make our efforts to defend ourselves pathetic? He makes Verity look a fool, he undermines confidence in him.'

'Wouldn't Verity be able to tell?'

I shook my head slowly. 'He is powerfully Skilled. But he cannot be listening everywhere at once. The strength of his talent is his ability to focus it so tightly. To spy on his own coterie, he would have had to give off watching the coast waters for Red Ships.'

'Does he ... is Verity aware of this discussion right now?'

I shrugged ashamedly. 'I don't know. That is the curse of my flaws. My link with him is erratic. Sometimes I know his mind as clearly as if he stood beside me and spoke it aloud. At other times, I am scarcely aware of him at all. Last night, when they spoke through me, I heard every word. Right now ...' I felt about inside myself, a pocket-patting sort of thinking. 'I feel nothing more than that we are still linked.' I leaned forward and put my head in my hands. I felt drained.

'Tea?' Chade asked me gently.

'Please. And if I could just sit for a bit longer, quietly. I don't know when my head has throbbled this badly.'

Chade set the kettle over the fire. I watched with distaste as he mixed brewing herbs for it. Some elfbark, but not near as much as I would have required earlier. Peppermint and catmint leaves. A bit of precious ginger root. I recognized much of what he used to give Verity for his Skill exhaustion. Then he came back to sit close beside me again. 'It could not be. What you suggest would require blind loyalty from the coterie to Regal.'

'It can be created by one strongly Skilled. My flaw is a result of what Galen did to me. Do you remember Galen's fanatical admiration of Chivalry? That was a created loyalty. Galen could have done it to them, before he died, when he was finishing their training.'

Chade shook his head slowly. 'Do you think Regal could be so stupid as to think the Red Ships would stop at Bearn's? Eventually they will want Buck, they will want Rippon and Shoaks. Where does that leave him?'

'With the Inland duchies. The only ones he cares about, the only ones with which he has a mutual loyalty. It would give him a vast perimeter of land as an insulation against anything the Red Ships might do. And like you, perhaps, he may believe they are not after territory, but only a raiding ground. They are sea folk. They will not come that far inland to trouble him. And the Coastal duchies will be too busy fighting the Red Ships to turn on Regal.'

'If the Six Duchies loses her sea-coast, she loses her trade, her shipping. How pleased will his Inland dukes be with that?'

I shrugged. 'I do not know. I have not all the answers, Chade. But this is the only theory I've been able to put together in which almost all the pieces fit.'

He rose, to pour steaming water from the kettle into a fat brown pot. He rinsed it well with the boiling water, then dumped in the paper of herbs he had compounded. I watched him pour the boiling water over the herbs. The scent of a garden filled his chambers. I took the image of the old man putting the lid on the pot, wrapped up the homely, simple moment of him setting the pot on the tray with some cups, and stowed it carefully somewhere in my heart. Age was creeping up on Chade, just as surely as disease devoured Shrewd. His deft movements were no longer quite so sure, his bird alertness not as quick as it once had been. My heart ached suddenly with my glimpse of the inevitable. As he set a warm cup of steaming tea in my hand, he frowned at my expression.

'What's wrong?' he whispered. 'Do you want some honey in that?'

I shook my head to his questions, took a sip of tea and near scalded my tongue. A pleasant taste overlay the bite of the elfbark. After a few moments, I felt my mind clear and a pain I had scarcely been aware of went back to sleep. 'That's much better,' I sighed, and Chade sketched a bow at me, pleased with himself.

He leaned close again. 'It is still a weak theory. Perhaps we simply have a self-indulgent prince, who pleases himself with entertainments for his flatterers while the heir is away. He neglects protecting his coastline because he is short sighted, and because he expects his brother will come home and tidy up his mess. He raids the treasury and sells off horses and cattle to amass wealth to himself while there is no one to stop him.'

'Then why paint Bearn as a traitor? And set up Kettricken as an outsider? Why spread rumours of ridicule about Verity and his quest?'

'Jealousy. Regal has always been his father's spoiled pet. I do not think he would turn on Shrewd.' Something in Chade's voice made me realize this was what he desperately wished to believe. 'I supply the herbs that Wallace administers to Shrewd for his pain.'

'I do not doubt your herbs. But I think others are added to them.'

'What would be the point? Even if Shrewd dies, Verity is still the heir.'

'Unless Verity dies first.' I held up my hand as Chade opened his mouth to protest. 'It need not really happen. If Regal controls the coterie, he can

supply word of Verity's death at any time. Regal becomes King-in-Waiting. Then ...' I let my words trail off.

Chade let out a long sigh. 'Enough. You have given me enough to ponder. I will look into these ideas, with my own resources. For now, you must watch over yourself. And Kettricken. And the Fool. If there is even a drop of truth in your theories, you all become obstacles to Regal's goal.'

'And what of you?' I asked quietly. 'What is this caution we now must suffer?'

'There is a chamber, whose wall adjoins this one. Always before, it was left empty. But one of Regal's guests is now ensconced in it. Bright, Regal's cousin, and heir to Farrow Duchy. The man is a very light sleeper. He has complained to the servants of rats squeaking in the walls. Then, last night, Slink overset a kettle, with quite a clatter. It awoke him. The man is overly curious as well. He asks servants now if spirits have ever been known to walk in Buckkeep. And I have heard him tapping at the walls. I think he suspects this chamber. It need not concern us all that much; soon he will be leaving, I'm sure. But a bit more caution is called for.'

I felt there was more, but whatever he did not wish to say would not be gained by questions. I asked one more, however. 'Chade. Are you still able to see the King once a day?'

He glanced down at his hands and shook his head slowly. 'Regal seems to suspect my existence. I will admit that to you. At least, he suspects something, and seems always to have some of his folk lurking about. It makes life difficult. But enough of our worries. Let us try to think of how things may go right.'

And then Chade began a long discussion of Elderlings, based on what little we knew of them. We chatted of how it would be if Verity succeeded, and speculated what form the Elderlings' aid would take. Chade seemed to speak with great hope and sincerity, even enthusiasm. I tried to share it, but my belief was that the salvation of the Six Duchies depended on eliminating the viper in our midst. It was not long before he sent me back to my own room. I lay down on the bed, intending to rest for just a few minutes before facing the day, but instead fell into a deep sleep.

We were blessed with storms for a time. Each day that I woke to driving wind and rain against my shutters was a day to be treasured. I tried to be unobtrusive about the keep, avoiding Regal even if it meant taking all my meals in the watch-room, drifting out of any room that Justin and Serene

might enter. Will, too, had returned from his Skill post at the Red Tower in Bearns. On rare occasions I saw him in company with Serene and Justin. More often he dawdled in the hall at table, his half-lidded eyes always seeming on the verge of closing. His dislike of me was not the focused hatred that Serene and Justin shared for me, but all the same I avoided him as well. I told myself I was wise, but feared myself a coward. I attended my king as often as I was allowed to. It was not often enough.

There came a morning when I was jolted awake by someone pounding on my door and yelling my name. I stumbled from my bed and jerked the door open. A white-faced stable-boy stood shaking on my doorstep. 'Hands says, come to the stables. Right now!'

He gave me no time to reply to his urgent message, but raced off as if seven kinds of demons were after him.

I pulled on yesterday's clothes. I thought of splashing my face with water, or smoothing my hair back into its tail afresh, but those thoughts occurred to me halfway down the stairs. As I raced across the courtyard, I could already hear the raised voices of a quarrel in the stable. I knew Hands would not have called me for a simple squabble among stable-hands. I could not imagine what he *would* call me for. I pushed open the stable doors, then shoved my way past a gaggle of stable-boys and grooms to get to the centre of the commotion.

It was Burrich. He was no longer shouting. Travelworn and weary, he now stood silent. Hands was beside him, white-faced but standing firm. 'I had no choice,' he said quietly in answer to something Burrich had said. 'You would have had to do the same.'

Burrich's face looked ravaged. His eyes were unbelieving, empty with shock. 'I know,' he said after a moment. 'I know.' He turned to look at me. 'Fitz. My horses are gone.' He swayed slightly on his feet.

'It wasn't Hands' doing,' I said quietly. Then I asked, 'Where is Prince Verity?'

His brows knit and he looked at me oddly. 'You did not expect me?' He paused, said more loudly, 'Messages were sent ahead of me. Didn't you get them?'

'We've heard nothing. What happened?' Why are you back?

He looked around at the gaping stable-boys, and something of the Burrich I knew came into his eyes again. 'If you have not heard yet, then it is not for gossip and common talk. I must go straight to the King.' He drew

himself up straight, looked around again at the boys and grooms. The old whiplash was back in his voice as he demanded, 'Have you no work to do? I shall be looking over how you have cared for things in my absence as soon as I return from the keep.'

Like fog in the sunlight, the workers dissipated. Burrich turned to Hands. 'Would you care for my horse? Poor Ruddy's been poorly treated these last days. Treat him well, now that he's home.'

Hands nodded. 'Of course. Shall I send for the healer? I could have him waiting here for you when you come back.'

Burrich shook his head. 'What can be done for this, I can do for myself. Come, Fitz. Give me your arm.'

In disbelief, I offered my arm and Burrich took it, leaning on me heavily. For the first time, I glanced down. What I had taken to be heavy winter leggings at first glance was actually a thick wrap of bandaging on his bad leg. He favoured it, putting most of his weight on me as he limped along. I could feel the exhaustion thrumming through him. Up close, I could smell the sweat of pain on him. His clothing was stained and torn, his hands and face begrimed. This was as unlike the man I knew as anything I could imagine. 'Please,' I said quietly as I helped him toward the castle. 'Is Verity all right?'

He gave me a ghost of a smile. 'You think our prince could be dead, and I still be alive? You insult me. Besides, use your wits. You'd know if he was dead. Or injured.' He paused and studied me carefully. 'Wouldn't you?'

It was plain what he spoke of. Ashamedly, I admitted, 'Our link is not reliable. Some things are clear. Some are not. Of this, I knew nothing. What's happened?'

He looked thoughtful. 'Verity said he would try to send word through you. If you've relayed no tidings to Shrewd, then this information should first go to the King.'

I asked no more questions.

I had forgotten how long it had been since Burrich had seen King Shrewd. Mornings were not the King's best times, but when I mentioned this to Burrich, he said he would rather report immediately at a bad time than delay information. So we knocked, and to my surprise, were admitted. Once within, I realized this was because Wallace was nowhere about.

Instead, as I entered, the Fool asked me graciously, 'Back for more Smoke?' Then, as he caught sight of Burrich, the mocking grin faded from

his face. His eyes met mine. ‘The Prince?’

‘Burrich has come to report to the King.’

‘I shall try to rouse him. Though the way he has been of late, one might as well report to him sleeping as awake. He takes as much notice either way.’

Accustomed as I was to the Fool’s mockery, this still jarred me. The sarcasm bit wrong, for there was too much resignation in his voice. Burrich looked at me worriedly. He whispered, ‘What is wrong with my king?’

I shook my head at him for quiet and tried to get him to take a seat.

‘I stand before my king, until he bids me be seated,’ he said stiffly.

‘You are injured. He would understand.’

‘He is my king. That is what I understand.’

So I gave off urging him. We waited for a time, and more than a time. At last the Fool came out of the King’s bedchamber. ‘He is not well,’ he cautioned us. ‘It has taken me a time to make him understand who is here. But he says he will hear your report. In his chambers.’

So Burrich leaned on me as we went into the dimness and fog of the King’s bedchamber. I saw Burrich wrinkle his nose in distaste. Acrid fumes of Smoke hung heavy here, and several small censers burned. The Fool had drawn back the bed-curtains, and as we stood, he patted and poked cushions and pillows behind the King’s back until Shrewd waved him aside with a small gesture.

I looked at our monarch and wondered how I had not seen the signs of his disease. They were plainly there when one looked. The general wasting of his body, the sour edge to his sweat, the yellow in the whites of his eyes: these were the least things I should have seen. The shock on Burrich’s face told me plainly that the change since Burrich had last seen him was immense. But he covered it well and drew himself up straight.

‘My king, I have come to report,’ he said formally.

Shrewd blinked slowly. ‘Report,’ he said vaguely, and I was not sure if he gave Burrich an order, or simply repeated the word. Burrich took it as a command. He was as thorough and exact as he had always insisted I be. I stood, and he supported his weight on my shoulder as he told of journeying with Prince Verity through the winter snows, travelling always toward the Mountain Kingdom. He did not mince words, but spoke plainly. The journey had been full of hardships. Despite messengers sent ahead of Verity’s expedition, hospitality and aid along the way had been poor. Those nobles

whose homes lay along their route professed to have known nothing of Verity's coming. In many cases, they found only servants to greet them, and the hospitality no more than what would have been offered to any ordinary traveller. Supplies and extra horses that should have been waiting for them at assigned locations were not. The horses had suffered more grievously than the men. The weather had been savage.

As Burrich reported, I felt a tremor run through him from time to time. The man was at the edge of complete exhaustion. But each time he shook, I felt him take a deep breath, steady himself, and go on.

His voice quavered only slightly as he told how they had been ambushed on the plains of Farrow, before they came in sight of Blue Lake. He drew no conclusions himself, but only observed that these highwaymen fought in a military style. While they wore no duke's colours, they seemed well-dressed and well-armed for brigands. And Verity was obviously their intended target. When two of the baggage animals broke loose and fled, none of their attackers broke away to follow them. Bandits usually would have preferred chasing laden pack-beasts to fighting armed men. Verity's men had finally found a place to take a stand, and had successfully stood them off. Their attackers had finally given up when they realized that Verity's guard would die to the last man before surrendering or giving way. They had ridden off, leaving their fallen dead in the snow.

'They had not defeated us, but we were not unscathed. We lost a good portion of our supplies. Seven men and nine horses were killed outright. Two of us were injured seriously. Three others took minor injuries. It was Prince Verity's decision to send the injured back to Buckkeep. With us he sent two sound men. His plan was to continue his quest, to take his guard with him as far as the Mountain Kingdom, and to have them stay there to await his return. Keen was placed in charge of those of us returning. To him, Verity entrusted written information. I do not know what that information packet contained. Keen and the others were killed five days ago. We were ambushed just outside the border of Buck, as we were travelling by the Buck River. Archers. It was very ... quick. Four of us went down right away. My horse was struck in the flank. Ruddy's a young beast. He panicked. He plunged over an embankment into the river, and I with him. The river is deep there, and the current strong. I clung to Ruddy, but we were both swept downriver. I heard Keen shouting to the others to ride, that some must make it back to Buckkeep. But none of them did. When Ruddy and I managed to

clamber out of the Buck, we went back. I found the bodies. The papers Keen had carried were gone.'

He stood straight as he reported, and his voice was clear. His words were simple. His report was a simple description of what had happened. He mentioned nothing of what he had felt at being sent back, or at being the sole survivor to return. He would drink himself sodden tonight, I suspected. I wondered if he would want company for that. But, for now, he stood, silent, awaiting his King's questions. The silence stretched over long. 'My king?' he ventured.

King Shrewd shifted in the shadows of his bed. 'It reminds me of my younger days,' he said hoarsely. 'Once I could sit a horse and hold a sword. When a man loses that – well, once that is gone, he has actually lost far more than that. But your horse was all right?'

Burrich furrowed his brow. 'I did what I could for him, my king. He will take no permanent harm from it.'

'Well. At least there is that, then. At least there is that.' King Shrewd paused. For a moment we listened to his breathing. He seemed to be working at it. 'Go and get some rest, man,' he said at last, gruffly. 'You look terrible. I may.' He paused and took two breaths. 'I will call you back later. When you are rested. I am sure there are things to ask ...' His voice trailed off, and again he simply breathed. The deep breaths a man takes when the pain is almost too much to bear. I remembered how I had felt last night. I tried to imagine listening to Burrich report while enduring such pain. And struggling not to show it. The Fool leaned in over the King to look into his face. Then he looked at us and gave a tiny shake to his head.

'Come,' I said softly to Burrich. 'Your king has given you an order.'

He seemed to lean on me more heavily as we left the King's bedchamber.

'He did not seem to care,' Burrich said quietly, carefully to me as we moved laboriously down the corridor.

'He does. Trust me. He cares deeply.' We had come to the staircase. I hesitated. A flight down, through the hall, the kitchen, across the court, and into the stables. Then up the steep stairs to Burrich's loft. Or up two flights of steps and down the hall to my room. 'I'm taking you up to my room,' I told him.

'No. I want to be in my own place.' He sounded fretful as a sick child.

‘In a while. After you’ve rested a bit,’ I told him firmly. He did not resist as I eased him up the steps. I don’t think he had the strength. He leaned against the wall while I unlatched my door. Once the door was open, I helped him in. I tried to get him to lie down on my bed, but he insisted on the chair by the hearth. Once ensconced here, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. When he relaxed, all the privations of his journey showed in his face. Too much bone showed beneath his flesh, and his colour was terrible.

He lifted his head and looked around the room as if he’d never seen it before. ‘Fitz? Have you anything to drink up here?’

I knew he didn’t mean tea. ‘Brandy?’

‘The cheap blackberry stuff you drink? I’d sooner drink horse liniment.’

I turned back to him, smiling. ‘I might have some of that up here.’

He didn’t react. It was as if he hadn’t heard me.

I built up my fire. I quickly sorted through the small supply of herbs I kept in my room. There wasn’t much there. I had given most of them to the Fool. ‘Burrich, I’m going to go get you some food, and a few things. All right?’

There was no reply. He was already deeply asleep sitting there. I went to stand by him. I did not even need to touch the skin of his face to feel the fever burning there. I wondered what had happened to his leg this time. An injury on top of an old injury, and then travelled on. It would not be soon healed, that was plain to me. I hurried out of my room.

In the kitchens, I interrupted Sara at pudding-making, to tell her that Burrich was injured and sick and in my room. I lied and said he was ravenously hungry, and to please send a boy up with food, and some buckets of clean hot water. She immediately put someone else to stirring the pudding, and began to clatter trays and tea pots and cutlery. I would have enough food to supply a small banquet very quickly.

I ran out to the stables to let Hands know that Burrich was up in my room and would be for a while. Then I climbed the steps to Burrich’s room. I had it in my mind to get the herbs and roots I would need there. I opened the door. The chamber was cold. The damp had got into it, and mustiness. I made a mental note to have someone come up and make a fire, and bring in a supply of wood, water and candles. Burrich had expected to be gone all winter. Characteristically, he had tidied his room to the point of severity. I

found a few pots of herbal salve, but no stores of freshly-dried herbs. Either he had taken them with him, or given them away before he left.

I stood in the centre of the room and looked around me. It had been months since I'd been here. Childhood memories came crowding back into my head. Hours spent before that hearth, mending or oiling harness. I'd used to sleep on a mat before the fire. Nosy, the first dog I'd ever bonded to. Burrich had taken him away, to try to break me of using the Wit. I shook my head at the flood of conflicting emotions, and quickly left the room.

The next door I knocked on was Patience's. Lacey opened it and, at the look on my face, demanded immediately, 'What's wrong?'

'Burrich's come back. He's up in my room. He's badly hurt. I don't have much in the way of healing herbs ...'

'Did you send for the healer?'

I hesitated. 'Burrich has always liked to do things his own way.'

'Indeed he has.' It was Patience, entering the sitting-room. 'What's that madman done to himself now? Is Prince Verity all right?'

'The Prince and his guard were attacked. The Prince was not harmed, and has continued to the mountains. He sent back those who were injured, with two sound men as an escort. Burrich was the only one to survive and get home.'

'Was the journey back so difficult?' Patience asked. Lacey was already moving about the room, gathering herbs and roots and materials for bandaging.

'It was cold and treacherous. Little hospitality was offered them along the way. But the men died when they were ambushed by archers, just across the Buck border. Burrich's horse carried him off into a river. They were swept downstream quite a way; it was probably the only thing that saved him.'

'How is he hurt?' Now Patience was moving too. She opened a little cupboard, and began to take out prepared salves and tinctures.

'His leg. The same one. I don't know exactly, I haven't looked at it yet. But it won't take his weight; he can't walk by himself. And he has a fever.'

Patience took down a basket and began loading the medicines into it. 'Well, what are you standing about for?' she snapped at me as I waited. 'Go back to your room and see what you can do for him. We'll be up in a moment with these.'

I spoke bluntly. 'I don't think he'll let you help.'

‘We’ll see,’ Patience said calmly. ‘Now go see that there is hot water.’

The buckets of water I had asked for were outside my door. By the time the water in my kettle was boiling, people had begun to converge on my room. Cook sent up two trays of food, and warmed milk as well as hot tea. Patience arrived and began to set out her herbs on my clothing chest. She quickly sent Lacey to fetch a table for her, and two more chairs. Burrich slept on in my chair, deeply asleep despite occasional bouts of shivering.

With a familiarity that astounded me, Patience felt his forehead, then searched under the angle of his jaw for swelling. She crouched slightly to look into his sleeping face. ‘Burr?’ she queried quietly. He did not even twitch. Very gently, she stroked his face. ‘You are so thin, so worn,’ she grieved softly. She dampened a cloth in warm water and gently wiped his face and hands as if he were a child. Then she swept a blanket off my bed and tucked it carefully about his shoulders. She caught me staring at her, and glared at me. ‘I need a basin of warmed water,’ she snapped. As I went to fill one, she crouched before him and calmly took out her silver shears and snipped up the side of the bandaging wrapping his leg. The stained wrappings did not look as if they had been changed since his dunk in the river. It went up past his knee. As Lacey took the basin of warmed water and knelt next to her, Patience opened the soiled bandaging as if it were a shell.

Burrich came awake with a groan, dropping his head forward onto his chest as his eyes opened. For a moment he was disoriented. He looked at me standing over him, and then at the two women crouched by his leg. ‘What?’ was all he managed.

‘This is a mess,’ Patience told him. She rocked back on her heels and confronted him as if he’d tracked muck on a clean floor. ‘Why haven’t you at least kept it clean?’

Burrich glanced down at his leg. Old blood and river silt were caked together over the swollen fissure down his knee. He recoiled visibly from it. When he replied to Patience, his voice was low and harsh. ‘When Ruddy took me into the river, we lost everything. I had no clean bandaging, no food, nothing. I could have bared it and washed it, and then frozen it. Do you think that would have improved it?’

‘Here is food,’ I said abruptly. It seemed the only way to prevent their quarrelling was to prevent them from talking to each other. I moved the small table laden with one of Cook’s trays over beside him. Patience stood to be out of his way. I poured him a mug of the warmed milk and put it into his

hands. They began to shake slightly as he raised it to his mouth. I had not realized how hungry he was.

‘Don’t gulp that!’ Patience objected. Both Lacey and I shot her warning looks. But the food seemed to take Burrich’s attention completely. He set down the mug and took a warm roll that I had slathered butter onto. He ate most of it in the space of time it took me to refill his mug. It was odd to see him begin to shake once he had the food in his hands. I wondered how he had managed to hold himself together before that.

‘What happened to your leg?’ Lacey asked him gently. Then, ‘Brace yourself,’ she warned him, and placed a warm, dripping cloth onto his knee. He gave a shudder and went paler, but refrained from making a sound. He drank some more milk.

‘An arrow,’ he said at last. ‘It was just damnably bad luck that it struck where it did. Right where that boar ripped me, so many years ago. And it lodged against the bone. Verity cut it out for me.’ He leaned back suddenly in the chair, as if the memory sickened him. ‘Right on top of the old scar,’ he said faintly. ‘And every time I bent my knee, it pulled open and bled some more.’

‘You should have kept the leg still,’ Patience observed sagely. All three of us stared at her. ‘Oh, I suppose you couldn’t, really,’ she amended.

‘Let’s take a look at it now,’ Lacey suggested and reached for the wet cloth.

Burrich fended her off with a gesture. ‘Leave it. I’ll see to it myself, after I’ve eaten.’

‘After you’ve eaten, you’ll rest,’ Patience informed him. ‘Lacey, please move aside.’

To my amazement, Burrich said nothing more. Lacey stepped back, out of the way, and Lady Patience knelt before the Stablemaster. He watched her, a strange expression on his face, as she lifted the cloth away. She damped the corner of the cloth in clean water, wrung it out, and deftly sponged the wound. The warm wet cloth had loosened the crusted blood. Cleaned, it did not look as evil as it had at first. It was still a nasty injury, and the hardships that Burrich had endured would complicate its healing. The parted flesh gaped and proud flesh had formed where it should have closed. But everyone visibly relaxed as Patience cleaned it. There was redness, and swelling, and infection at one end. But there was no putrefaction, no darkening of the flesh around it. Patience studied it a

moment. 'What do you think?' she asked aloud, of no one in particular. 'Devil's club root? Hot, mashed in a poultice? Do we have any, Lacey?'

'Some, my lady,' and Lacey turned to the basket they had brought and began to sort through it.

Burrich turned to me. 'Are those pots from my room?'

At my nod, he nodded in return. 'I thought so. That fat little brown one. Bring it here.'

He took it from my hands and lifted the stopper from its mouth. 'This. I had some of this, when I set out from Buckkeep, but it was lost with the pack-animals, during the first ambush.'

'What is it?' Patience asked. She came, devil's club root in hand, to gaze curiously.

'Chickweed and plantain leaves. Simmered in oil, then worked with beeswax into a salve.'

'That should work well,' she conceded. 'After the root poultice.'

I braced myself for his argument, but he only nodded. He suddenly looked very tired. He leaned back and pulled the blanket more closely about himself. His eyes sagged shut.

There was a knock at my door. I went to answer it, and found Kettricken standing there, with Rosemary at her elbow. 'One of my ladies told me there was a rumour that Burrich had returned,' she began. Then she looked past me into the room. 'It's true, then. And he's hurt? What of my lord, oh, what of Verity?' She went suddenly paler than I thought she could be.

'He's fine,' I reassured her. 'Come in.' I cursed myself for my thoughtlessness. I should have sent word to her immediately of Burrich's return and of the tidings he carried. I should have known that otherwise she would not be told. As she entered, Patience and Lacey looked up from the devil's club root they were steaming, to welcome her with quick curtsies and murmurs of greeting.

'What's happened to him?' Kettricken demanded. And so I told her, reporting to her all that Burrich had told King Shrewd, for I thought she had as much right to word of her husband as Shrewd had to word of his son. She blanched again at mention of the attack on Verity, but kept silent until my telling was done. 'Thank all our gods that he draws closer to my mountains. There he will be safe, from men at least.' That said, she drew closer to where Patience and Lacey were preparing the root. It had been steamed soft enough

to crush into a pliable mass, and they were letting it cool before applying it to the infection.

‘Mountain ash berry makes an excellent wash for such an injury,’ she suggested aloud.

Patience looked up at her shyly. ‘I have heard of that. But this warmed root will do much to draw the infection from the wound. Another good wash for proud flesh such as this is raspberry leaf and slippery elm. Or as a poultice.’

‘We have no raspberry leaf,’ Lacey reminded Patience. ‘The damp got into it somehow and it mouldered.’

‘I have raspberry leaf if you are in need of it,’ Kettricken said softly. ‘I had prepared it for a morning tea. It was a remedy my aunt taught me.’ She looked down and smiled oddly.

‘Oh?’ Lacey asked in sudden interest.

‘Oh my dear,’ Patience suddenly exclaimed. She reached to take Kettricken’s hand with a sudden, strange familiarity. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I am. At first I thought it was just ... But then I began to have the other signs. Some mornings, even the smell of the sea can make me so miserable. And all I want to do is sleep.’

‘But you should,’ Lacey exclaimed with a laugh. ‘As for the queasiness, it passes, after the first few months.’

I stood very still, foreign, excluded, forgotten. All three women suddenly laughed together. ‘No wonder you were so anxious to have word of him. Did he know, before he left?’

‘I did not even suspect it then. I so long to tell him, to watch his face.’

‘You’re with child,’ I said stupidly. They all turned to look at me, and then burst out laughing anew.

‘It’s a secret, still,’ Kettricken cautioned me. ‘I want no rumours before the King has been told. I want to be the one to tell him.’

‘Of course not,’ I assured her. I did not tell her that the Fool already knew, and had known for days. Verity’s child, I thought to myself. A sudden strange shivering raced over me. The branching of the path that the Fool had seen, the sudden multiplying of possibilities. One factor emerged above all others: the sudden removal of Regal, pushed one more step away from the throne. One more small life standing between him and the power he craved. How little he would care for that.

‘Of course not,’ I repeated more heartily. ‘This news is best kept an absolute secret.’ For once it was out, I had no doubt that Kettricken would be in as much danger as her husband.

TWENTY-THREE

Threats

That winter saw Bearns devoured slowly, as a cliff is eaten by storm tides. At first, Duke Brawndy sent tidings to Kettricken on a regular basis. Word came to her by liveried messengers coming on horseback directly from the Duke. At first the tidings they brought were optimistic. Her opals rebuilt Ferry. The folk there sent her not only their thanks, but a small chest of the very tiny pearls so prized by them. Odd. What had been too treasured to be sacrificed even to rebuild their own village was freely offered in thanks to a queen who had surrendered her jewels that they might have shelter. I doubt that the significance of their sacrifice would have meant as much to any other. Kettricken wept over the tiny chest.

Later messengers brought grimmer tidings. Between storms, the Red Ships struck again and again. The messengers reported to Kettricken that Duke Brawndy wondered why the coterie member had left the Red Tower. When Kettricken boldly questioned Serene as to whether this was so, she said it had become too dangerous to keep Will there, for his Skill was too precious to be risked to the Red Ships. The irony was lost on few folk. With each arriving messenger, the news worsened. The Outislanders had established footholds on Hook and Besham Islands. Duke Brawndy assembled fishing vessels and warriors and boldly attacked on his own, but found the Red Ships too well-entrenched there. Ships and warriors perished, and Bearns reported gravely that there were no funds for another expedition. At that juncture, Verity's emeralds were turned over to Kettricken. She sent them off without a qualm. If they did any good, we did not hear of it. We were not even certain they were ever received. Messages from Bearns became more erratic, and it was soon obvious that there had been tidings sent that we had not received. Communication with Brawndy broke down entirely. After two of her own messengers had been sent forth from Buckkeep, never to return, Kettricken vowed she would risk no more lives.

By then, the Raiders from Hook and Besham had begun to harry further down the coast, avoiding the immediate vicinity of Buckkeep, but making feints and challenges to both the north and south of us. To all these raids, Regal remained staunchly indifferent. He claimed he was conserving resources until Verity could return with the Elderlings to drive the Raiders away once and for all. But the merriment and entertainments at Buckkeep became ever more lavish and frequent, and his gifts to his Inland dukes and nobles ever more generous.

By mid-afternoon, Burrich was back in his own chambers. I had wanted to keep him where I could watch over him, but he had scoffed at the idea. Lacey herself had seen to getting his chamber ready, and Burrich had grumbled enough about that. All she had done was to build up the fire, see water brought fresh, the bedding aired and shaken, and the floors swept and fresh rushes strewn. One of Molly's candles burned in the centre of his table, putting a fresh, piney scent into the musty room. But Burrich had growled that it scarcely felt like his own room. I had left him there, well propped up in bed and with a bottle of brandy close to hand.

I had understood the bottle only too well. As I had helped him through the stables and up to his loft, we had passed one empty stall after another. Not only horses were missing; prime hunting dogs were gone. I had no heart to go look in the mews; I was sure I would find them likewise plundered. Hands had walked beside us, silent but stricken. His efforts were plain. The stables themselves were immaculate, the remaining horses groomed until they shone. Even the empty stalls were scrubbed and whitewashed. But an empty cupboard, no matter how clean, is no comfort to a starving man. I understood that the stables were Burrich's treasure and home. He had come back to find both looted.

After I left Burrich, I took a walk down to the barns and pens. Here the best of the breeding stock were wintered over. I found them as depleted as the stables. Prize bulls were gone. Of the curly-backed black sheep that used to fill one pen, there were only six ewes and one runty ram left. I was not as aware of what other stock had once been there, but too many pens and stalls were empty at a time of year when all were usually full.

From the barns, I wandered through the storage houses and outbuildings. Outside one, some men were loading sacks of grain into a wagon. Two other wagons, already loaded, stood nearby. I stood a bit, watching them, and then offered to help as the wagon's load grew higher and

the sacks harder to load. They accepted my help readily, and we talked as we worked. I waved them a cheery goodbye when the work was done, and walked slowly back to the keep, wondering why a full warehouse of grain was being loaded into a barge and sent upriver to Turlake.

I decided I would check on Burrich before going back to my own chambers. I climbed the steps to his chambers and was unsettled to find the door ajar. Fearing some sort of treachery, I pushed in, startling Molly who was setting out dishes on a small table beside Burrich's chair. The sight of her there rattled me, and I stared at her. When I turned to Burrich, I found him watching me.

'I thought you were alone,' I said lamely.

Burrich regarded me owlishly. He had made inroads on his bottle of brandy. 'I thought I would be,' he said gravely. As ever, he held his spirits well, but Molly was not deceived. Her lips were set in a thin line. She continued with her duties, ignoring me. Instead she spoke to Burrich.

'I shall not disturb you long. Lady Patience sent me to see that you had hot food, for you ate little this morning. I shall be leaving as soon as I have set out this meal.'

'And taking my thanks with you,' Burrich added. His eyes went from me to Molly, sensing awkwardness, and also her displeasure with him. He attempted an apology. 'I have had a harsh journey, mistress, and my injury gives me some pain. I hope I have not given offence.'

'It is not my place to take offence at anything you wish to do, sir,' she replied. She finished setting out the food she had brought. 'Is there anything else I can do for you, to make you comfortable?' she asked. There was courtesy in her voice, no more than that. She did not look at me at all.

'You could accept my thanks. Not just for the food, but also for the candles that freshened my chamber. I understand they are your handiwork.'

I saw her thaw slightly. 'Lady Patience asked me to bring them here. I was happy to oblige her.'

'I see.' The next words he spoke cost him more. 'Then please extend my thanks to her. And to Lacey as well, I am sure.'

'I shall. There is nothing more that you need, then? I have errands in Buckkeep Town for Lady Patience. She told me that if there was anything you required from town, I should fetch it for you.'

'Nothing. But it was kind of her to think of it. Thank you.'

‘You are welcome, sir.’ And Molly, empty basket on her arm, marched out past me as if I were not even there.

Burrich and I were left regarding one another. I glanced after Molly, then tried to put her out of my mind. ‘It’s not just the stables,’ I told him, and briefly reported what I had seen in the barns and warehouses.

‘I could have told you a bit of that,’ he said gruffly. He looked at the food Molly had brought, then poured himself more brandy. ‘As we came down the Buck River road, there were rumours and tidings. Some said Regal sold the beasts and grain off to fund the defence of the coasts. Others that he sent the breeding stock inland to safer pastures in Tilth.’ He drank his brandy down. ‘The best of the horses are gone. I saw that at a glance when I came back. In ten years, I might breed stock up again to the quality of what we had. But I doubt it.’ He poured again. ‘There’s my life’s work gone, Fitz. A man likes to think he’ll leave his touch on the world somewhere. The horses I had brought together here, the blood-lines I was establishing — gone now, scattered throughout the Six Duchies. Oh, not that they won’t improve anything they’re bred to. But I’ll never see what would have come if I’d been allowed to continue. Steady will be studding rangy Tilth mares, no doubt. And when Ember drops her new foal, whoever rubs it off will think it just another horse. For six generations, I’ve been waiting for just that foal. They’ll take the finest coursing horse that’s ever been foaled and hook it to a plough.’

There was nothing to say about that. I feared it was all true. ‘Eat something,’ I suggested. ‘How’s your leg now?’

He lifted the blanket to casually inspect it. ‘Still there, anyway. I suppose I should be grateful for that. And better than it was this morning. The devil’s club did draw out the infection. Chicken-brained as she is, the woman still knows her herbs.’

I did not need to ask to whom he referred. ‘Are you going to eat?’ I prodded.

He set down his cup and took up a spoon. He tasted the soup Molly had set out, grudgingly nodding his approval. ‘So,’ he observed between bites. ‘That was the girl. Molly.’

I nodded.

‘Seemed a bit cool with you today.’

‘A bit,’ I said dryly.

Burrich grinned. 'You're as testy as she was. I imagine Patience did not speak well of me to her.'

'She doesn't like drunks,' I told him bluntly. 'Her father drank himself to death. But before he finished the job, he managed to make her life unpleasant for years. Beating her when she was smaller. Railing and berating her when she got too big to beat.'

'Oh.' Burrich carefully refilled his cup. 'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'She was sorry to live it.'

He looked at me levelly. 'I did not do it, Fitz. Nor was I rude to her when she was here. I'm not even drunk. Not yet. So stuff your disapproval, and tell me what's been going on at Buckkeep while I was away.'

So I stood and reported to Burrich, just as if he had a right to demand it. In a way, I suppose he did. He ate as I spoke. When I finished, he poured himself more brandy and leaned back in his chair, holding it. He swirled the brandy in the cup, looked down at it, then up at me. 'And Kettricken is with child, but neither the King nor Regal know of it yet.'

'I thought you were asleep.'

'I was. I half-thought I'd dreamed that conversation. Well.' He downed the brandy. He sat up, swept the blanket off his leg. As I watched, he deliberately bent his knee until the pulling flesh began to gape the wound open. I winced at the sight of it, but Burrich only looked thoughtful. He poured more brandy, drank it off. The bottle was half gone. 'So. I'm going to have to splint the leg straight, if I'm going to keep that closed.' He glanced up at me. 'You know what I'll need. Will you fetch it for me?'

'I think you should stay off it for a day or so. Give it a chance to rest. You don't need a splint if you're in bed.'

He gave me a long look. 'Who guards Kettricken's door?'

'I don't think ... I assume she has women who sleep in the outer chamber of her apartments.'

'You know he'll try to kill her and the unborn child, as soon as he finds out.'

'It's a secret still. If you start guarding her door, all will know.'

'By my count, five of us know. That's no secret, Fitz.'

'Six,' I admitted ruefully. 'The Fool surmised it some days ago.'

'Oh!' I had the satisfaction of seeing Burrich looked shocked. 'Well, at least that's one tongue that won't go wagging. Still, as you see, it won't be

secret long. Rumours will fly before the day's out, mark my words. I guard her door this night.'

'Must it be you? Can't you rest, and I will ...'

'A man can die of failure, Fitz. Do you know that? Once, I told you, the fight isn't over until you've won. This,' and he gestured at his leg in disgust, 'this will not be my excuse for giving up. Shame enough for me that my prince went on without me. I shall not fail him here. Besides,' he gave a bark of sour laughter, 'there's not enough in the stables now to keep both Hands and me busy. And the heart for it has gone out of me. Now. Will you go get the splint works?'

So I did, and took them back to him, and helped him smear the wound with his salve before we wrapped it well and splinted it. He cut a pair of old trousers to go over the splint, and I helped him down the stairs. Then, despite his words, he went to Ruddy's stall, to see if his horse's arrow wound had been cleaned and doctored. I left him there and went back up to the keep. I wanted to speak to Kettricken, to let her know there would be a man on guard on her door that night, and why.

I knocked at her chamber door and was admitted by Rosemary. The Queen was indeed there, and a selection of her ladies. Most were working embroidery or small lap-looms as they talked. The Queen herself had her window opened to the mild winter day, and was looking out over the calm sea with a frown. She reminded me of Verity when he Skilled, and I suspected that much the same worries plagued her. I followed her gaze, and wondered, like her, where the Red Ships would strike today, and what was going on up in Bearn. Useless to wonder. Officially, there was no word at all from Bearn. The rumours were that the coasts ran red with blood.

'Rosemary. I wish a quiet word with her majesty.'

Rosemary nodded gravely, and went over to curtsy to her queen. In a moment Kettricken looked up, and with a nod and a gesture invited me to join her in her window seat. I greeted her quietly, and gestured smilingly out over the water as if we chatted of the fine weather. But softly I said, 'Burrich wishes to guard your door, beginning this night. He fears that when others discover you are with child, your life will be in danger.'

Another woman might have blanched or at least seemed surprised. Instead, Kettricken lightly touched the very serviceable knife she always wore beside her keys. 'Almost, I would welcome so direct an attack.' She considered. 'I suppose it is wise. What harm can come of letting them know

we suspect. Nay, that we know. Why should I be circumspect and tactful? Burrich has already received their greetings, in the form of an arrow through the leg.’ The bitterness in her voice and the ferocity beneath it shocked me. ‘He may take the guard-post, and with it my thanks. I could choose a sounder man, but I would not have the trust in him that I have in Burrich. Will his leg injury permit him to do this duty?’

‘I do not think his pride would permit any other to do it.’

‘Fine, then.’ She paused. ‘I will have a chair placed for him.’

‘I doubt he will use it.’

She sighed. ‘We all have our own ways of offering sacrifice. It shall be there, nevertheless.’

I bowed my head in acceptance and she dismissed me. I went back up to my room intending to tidy away all that had been dragged out for Burrich’s use. But as I walked softly down the hall, I was startled to see the door of my room open slowly. I eased to another doorway and flattened myself inside it. After a moment, Justin and Serene emerged from my room. I stepped out to confront them.

‘Still looking for a spot for your tryst?’ I asked acidly.

They both froze. Justin stepped back, stood almost behind Serene. Serene glared at him, then stood firm before me. ‘We don’t have to answer to you for anything.’

‘Not even for being in my room? Did you find anything interesting there?’

Justin was breathing as if he’d just run a race. I met his eyes deliberately. He was speechless. I smiled at him.

‘We need not speak to you at all,’ Serene announced. ‘We know what you are. Come, Justin.’

‘You know what I am? Interesting. Rest assured that I know what you are. And that I am not the only one who knows.’

‘Beast-man!’ Justin hissed. ‘You wallow in the filthiest of magics. Did you think you could go undetected amongst us? No wonder Galen found you unfit to Skill!’

His arrow had struck home and quivered in my most secret fear. I tried not to let it show. ‘I am loyal to King Shrewd.’ Face composed, I gazed at them steadily. I said no more than that. Not in words. But I looked them up and down, measuring them against what they should be, and found them lacking. In the minute shifting of their feet, in their quick glances at one

another, I decided that they knew they were traitors. They reported to Regal; they knew they should report to the King. They were not deceived as to what they were; they understood. Perhaps Galen had burned a loyalty to Regal into their minds; perhaps they could not conceive of turning against him. But parts of them still knew that Shrewd was king, and that they were disloyal to a king they had sworn to. I tucked away that bit of knowledge; it was a crack that might someday hold a wedge.

I stepped forward, and enjoyed watching Serene shrink away from me while Justin cowered between her and the wall. But I made no attack. I turned my back to them and opened my door. As I entered my room, I felt a sneaky little wisp of Skill grope at the edges of my mind. Without thinking, I blocked as Verity had taught me to. 'Keep your thoughts to yourself,' I warned them, and did not dignify them by looking back at them. I shut the door.

For a moment, I stood breathing. Calm. Calm. I did not relax my mindguards. Then quietly, carefully, I worked my latches. Once the door was secured, I moved cautiously through my room. Chade had once told me that assassins must always believe the other person has more skill than they do. It is the only way to remain alive and keep sharp. So I touched nothing lest it had been coated with poison. Instead, I stood in the centre of my room, closed my eyes, and tried to recall exactly how it had looked when I last left it. Then I opened my eyes and looked for changes in the room.

The small tray of herbs was squarely on top of my clothing chest. I had left it to one end, within easy reach of Burrich. So they had been through my clothing chest. The tapestry of King Wisdom, that had been slightly askew for months, now hung straight. That was all I could see. It puzzled me. I had no idea what they had been looking for. That they had dug through my clothing chest seemed to suggest it was a small enough item to fit in there. But why lift a tapestry and look behind it? I stood still, thinking a moment. This had not been a random search. I was not sure what they had been hoping to find. But I suspected they had been told to look for a secret passageway in my room. That meant that Regal had concluded that killing Lady Thyme had not been enough. His suspicions were stronger than Chade had led me to believe. I was almost grateful I had never been able to discover how to work the entry to Chade's apartments. It gave me more confidence in its secrecy.

I inspected every item in my room before I handled it. I saw that every scrap of food that had remained on Cook's trays was disposed of where no one and nothing would taste it. I discarded the water in the buckets as well as that in my ewer. I inspected my supply of firewood and candles for powders or resins, checked my bedding for powder and reluctantly discarded my complete supply of herbs. I would take no chances. I could discover no possessions missing, nor that anything had been added to my room. Some time later, I sat down on my bed, feeling exhausted and unnerved. I would have to be more on my guard, I concluded. I recalled the Fool's experience and pondered it. I did not want to encounter a bag and a beating the next time I entered my room.

My room suddenly seemed confining, a trap that I must return to each day. I left it, not bothering to lock it as I went. Locks were useless. Let them see I did not fear their intrusion. Even though I did.

Outside it was a mild, clear, late afternoon. The unseasonably kind weather ate at me, even as I enjoyed my walk through the inner circle of the keep. I decided I would walk down to the town, to pay a visit to the *Rurisk* and my shipmates there, and then perhaps go into a tavern for a beer. It had been too long since I'd walked to town, and far too long since I'd listened to the gossip of town folk. It would be a relief to get away from Buckkeep intrigues for a while.

I was going out of the gate when a young guardsman stepped into my path. 'Stand!' he commanded me, then, 'Please, sir,' he added as he recognized me.

I halted obediently. 'Yes?'

He cleared his throat, then suddenly went scarlet all the way to his hairline. He took a breath, then stood silent.

'Did you need something from me?' I asked.

'Please to wait a moment, sir,' the boy blurted.

The lad disappeared back into the guardhouse, and a moment later an older watch-officer emerged. She regarded me gravely, took a breath as if to steel herself, then said quietly, 'You are denied passage out of the keep.'

'What?' I could not believe my ears.

She drew herself up. When she spoke, her voice was firmer. 'You are denied passage out of the keep.'

A surge of anger heated me. I forced it down. 'By whose command?'

She stood firm before me. 'My commands come from the captain of the watch, sir. That is all I know of it.'

'I would speak to that captain.' I kept my voice courteous.

'He is not in the guard-room. Sir.'

'I see.' But I did not, quite. I could perceive all the nooses tightening about me, but could not understand why just now. The other obvious question to ask, however, was 'why not'? With Shrewd's enfeeblement, Verity had become my protector. But he was away. I could turn to Kettricken, but only if I were willing to bring her into open conflict with Regal. I was not. Chade was, as always, a shadow power. All of this passed through my mind quickly. I was turning away from the gate when I heard my name called. I turned back.

Coming up the hill from town was Molly. Her servant's blue dress flapped around her calves as she ran. And she ran heavily, unevenly, unlike her usual graceful stride. She was exhausted, or nearly so. 'Fitz!' she cried out again, and there was fear in her voice.

I started to go to her, but the guard stepped suddenly into my path. Fear was on her face, too, but also determination. 'I cannot let you go out of the gate. I have my orders.'

I wanted to smash her from my path. I forced my rage down. A struggle with her would not help Molly. 'Then you go to her, damn you! Can't you see the woman is in trouble of some kind?'

She stood eye to eye with me, unmoving. 'Miles!' she called, and the boy leaped out. 'Go see what is wrong with that woman. Quickly now!'

The boy took off like a shot. I stood, with the guard standing squarely before me, and watched helplessly over her shoulder as Miles raced to Molly. When he reached her, he put an arm around her, and took her basket on his other arm. Leaning heavily on him, gasping and near weeping, Molly came toward the gate. It seemed to take forever before she was through the gate and in my arms. 'Fitz, oh Fitz,' she sobbed.

'Come,' I told her. I turned her away from the guard, walked her away from the gate. I knew I had done the sensible thing, the calm thing, but I felt shamed and small from it.

'Why didn't you ... come to me?' Molly panted.

'The guard would not let me. They have orders that I am not to leave Buckkeep,' I said quietly. I could feel her trembling as she leaned against me. I took her around the corner of a warehouse, out of sight of the guards

standing gaping in the gate. I held her in my arms until she quieted. ‘What’s wrong? What happened?’ I tried to make my voice soothing. I brushed back the hair that hung about her face. After a few moments, she quieted in my arms. Her breathing steadied, but she still trembled.

‘I had gone into town. Lady Patience had given me the afternoon. And I needed to get a few things ... for my candles.’ As she spoke, her trembling lessened. I tilted her chin up so that she looked into my eyes.

‘And then?’

‘I was ... coming back. I was on the steep bit, just outside of town. Where the alders grow?’

I nodded. I knew the spot.

‘I heard horses coming. In a hurry. So I stepped off the road, to make way for them.’ She started to tremble again. ‘I kept walking, thinking they would pass me. But suddenly they were right behind me, and when I looked back, they were coming right at me. Not on the road, but right at me. I jumped back into the brush, and still they rode right at me. I turned and ran, but they kept coming ...’ Her voice was getting higher and higher.

‘Hush! Wait a bit. Calm down. Think. How many of them? Did you know them?’

She shook her head wildly. ‘Two. I couldn’t see their faces. I was running away, and they were wearing the kind of helm that comes down over your eyes and nose. They chased me. It’s steep there, you know, and brushy. I tried to get away, but they just rode their horses right through the brush after me. Herding me, like dogs herd sheep. I ran, and ran, but I couldn’t get away from them. Then, I fell, I caught my foot on a log and I fell. And they jumped from their horses. One pinned me down while the other snatched up my basket. He dumped it all out, like he was looking for something, but they were laughing and laughing. I thought ...’

My heart was hammering as hard as Molly’s now. ‘Did they hurt you?’ I asked fiercely.

She paused, as if she could not decide, then shook her head wildly. ‘Not as you fear. He just ... held me down. And laughed. The other one, he said, he said, I was pretty stupid, letting myself be used by a bastard. They said ...’

She paused a moment. Whatever they had said to her, called her, was ugly enough that she could not repeat it to me. It was like a sword through me, that they had been able to hurt her so badly she would not even share the

pain. 'They warned me,' she went on at last. 'They said, stay away from the Bastard. Don't do his dirty work for him. They said ... things I didn't understand, about messages and spies and treason. They said they could make sure that everyone knew I was the Bastard's whore.' She tried just to say the word, but it came out with greater force. She defied me to flinch from it. 'Then they said ... I would be hanged ... if I didn't pay attention. That to run errands for a traitor was to be a traitor.' Her voice grew strangely calmer. 'Then they spat on me. And they left me. I heard them ride away, but for a long time, I was afraid to get up. I have never been so scared.' She looked at me and her eyes were like open wounds. 'Not even my father ever scared me that badly.'

I held her close to me. 'It's all my fault.' I did not even know I had spoken aloud until she drew back from me, to look up in puzzlement.

'Your fault? Did you do something wrong?'

'No. I am no traitor. But I am a bastard. And I've let that spill over onto you. Everything Patience warned me of, everything Ch ... everyone warned me about, it's all coming true. I've got you caught up in it.'

'What is happening?' she asked softly, eyes wide. Her breath suddenly caught. 'You said ... the guard wouldn't let you out the gate. That you can't leave Buckkeep? Why?'

'I don't know, exactly. There's a lot I don't understand. But one thing I do know. I have to keep you safe. That means staying away from you, for a time. And you from me. Do you understand?'

A glint of anger came into her eyes. 'I understand you're leaving me alone in this!'

'No. That's not it. We have to make them believe that they've scared you, that you're obeying them. Then you'll be safe. They'll have no reason to come after you again.'

'They have scared me, you idiot!' she hissed at me. 'One thing I know. Once someone knows you're afraid of him, you're never safe from that person. If I obey them now, they will come after me again. To tell me to do other things, to see how far I'll obey them in my fear.'

These were the scars her father had left on her life. Scars that were a kind of strength, but also a vulnerability. 'Now is not the time to stand up to them,' I whispered. I kept looking over her shoulder, expecting that at any moment the guard would come to see where we had vanished. 'Come,' I said, and led her deeper into the maze of warehouses and outbuildings. She

walked silently beside me for a way, then suddenly jerked her hand from mine.

‘It is time to stand up to them,’ she declared. ‘Because once you start putting it off, you never do it. Why should not this be the time?’

‘Because I don’t want you caught up in this. I don’t want you hurt. I don’t want people saying you are the Bastard’s whore.’ I could barely force the words from my mouth.

Molly’s head came up. ‘I have done nothing I’m ashamed of,’ she said evenly. ‘Have you?’

‘No. But ...’

“‘But.’ Your favourite word,’ she said bitterly. She walked away from me.

‘Molly!’ I sprang after her, seized her by the shoulders. She spun and hit me. Not a slap. A solid punch in the mouth that rocked me back and put blood in my mouth. She stood glaring, daring me to touch her again. I didn’t. ‘I didn’t say I wouldn’t fight back. Only that I didn’t want you caught up in it. Give me a chance to fight this my way,’ I said. I knew blood was running over my chin. I let her look at it. ‘Trust that, given time, I can find them and make them pay. My way. Now. Tell me about the men. What they wore, how they rode. What did the horses look like? Did they speak like Buck folk, or Inlanders? Did they have beards? Could you tell the colour of their hair, their eyes?’

I saw her trying to think, saw her mind veer away from thinking about it. ‘Brown,’ she said at last. ‘Brown horses, with black manes and tails. And the men talked like anybody else. One had a dark beard. I think. It’s hard to see face-down in the dirt.’

‘Good. That’s good,’ I told her, though she had told me nothing at all. She looked down, away from the blood on my face. ‘Molly,’ I said more quietly. ‘I won’t be coming ... to your room. Not for a while. Because ...’

‘You’re afraid.’

‘Yes!’ I hissed. ‘Yes, I’m afraid. Afraid they’ll hurt you, afraid they’ll kill you. To hurt me. I won’t endanger you by coming to you.’

She stood still. I could not tell if she was listening to me or not. She folded her arms across her chest, hugged herself.

‘I love you too much to see that happen.’ My words sounded weak, even to myself.

She turned and walked away from me. She still hugged herself, as if to keep herself from flying apart. She looked very alone, in her draggled blue skirts with her proud head bowed. 'Molly Red Skirts,' I whispered after her, but I could no longer see that Molly. Only what I had made of her.

TWENTY-FOUR

Neatbay.

The Pocked Man is the legendary harbinger of disaster for the folk of the Six Duchies. To see him striding down the road is to know that disease and pestilence will soon come to call. To dream of him is said to be a warning of a death to come. Often the tales of him show him appearing to those deserving of punishment, but sometimes he is used, most often in puppet-shows, as a general omen of disaster to come. A marionette of the Pocked Man, hung dangling across the scenery, is a warning to all in the audience that soon they will witness a tragedy.

The days of winter dragged agonizingly slow. With every passing hour, I was braced for something to happen. I never walked into a room without surveying it first, ate no food I had not seen prepared, drank only the water I drew from the well myself. I slept poorly. The constant watchfulness told on me in a hundred ways. I was snappish to those who spoke to me casually, moody when I checked on Burrich, reticent with the Queen. Chade, the only one to whom I could have unburdened myself, did not summon me. I was miserably alone. I dared not go to Molly. I kept my visits to Burrich as brief as possible for fear of bringing my troubles down on him. I could not openly leave Buckkeep to spend time with Nighteyes, and I feared to leave by our secret way lest I be watched. I waited and I watched, but that nothing further happened to me became a sophisticated torture of suspense.

I did call on King Shrewd daily. I watched him dwindle before my eyes, saw the Fool become daily more morose, his humour more acid. I longed for savage winter weather to match my mood, but the skies continued blue and the winds calm. Within Buckkeep, the evenings were noisy with gaiety and revel. There were masked balls, and summonings of minstrels to compete for fat purses. The Inland dukes and nobles ate well at Regal's table, and drank well with him late into the night.

‘Like ticks on a dying dog,’ I said savagely to Burrich one day as I was changing the dressing on his leg for him. He had made comment that it was no trick to stay awake on his night guard-duty at Kettricken’s door, for the noise of the revelry would have made it difficult to sleep.

‘Who’s dying?’ he asked.

‘All of us. One day at a time, we’re all dying. Did no one ever tell you that? But this is healing, and surprisingly well for all you’ve done to it.’

He looked down at his bared leg and cautiously flexed it. The tissue pulled unevenly, but held. ‘Maybe the gash is closed up, but it doesn’t feel healed inside,’ he observed. It was not a complaint. He lifted his brandy cup and drained it off. I eyed it narrowly. His days had a pattern now. Once he left Kettricken’s door in the morning, he went to the kitchen and ate. Then he came back to his room and began drinking. After I appeared and helped him change the bandaging on his leg, he would drink until it was time for him to sleep. And wake up in the evening, just in time to eat and then go to guard Kettricken’s door. He no longer did anything in the stables. He had given them over to Hands, who went about looking as if the job were a punishment he hadn’t deserved.

Every other day or so, Patience sent Molly up to tidy Burrich’s room for him. I knew little of these visits other than they had happened, and that Burrich, surprisingly, tolerated them. I had mixed feelings about them. No matter how much Burrich drank, he always treated women graciously; yet the emptied brandy bottles in a row could not but remind Molly of her father. Still, I wished them to know one another. One day I told Burrich that Molly had been threatened because of her association with me. ‘Association?’ he had asked sharply.

‘Some few know that I care for her,’ I admitted gingerly.

‘A man does not bring his problems down on a woman he cares for,’ he told me severely.

I had no reply to that. Instead I gave him the few details Molly had recalled about her attackers, but they suggested nothing to him. For a time he had stared off, right through the walls of his room. After a time, he picked up his cup and drained it. He spoke carefully. ‘I am going to tell her that you are worried about her. I am going to tell her that if she fears danger, she must come to me. I am more in a position to deal with it.’ He looked up and met my eyes. ‘I am going to tell her that you are wise to stay away from her, for

her sake.’ As he poured himself another drink, he had added quietly to the table-top, ‘Patience was right. And she was wise to send her to me.’

I blanched to consider the full implications of that statement. For once, I was smart enough to know when to be quiet. He drank his brandy down, then looked at the bottle. Slowly, he slid it across the table toward me. ‘Put that back on the shelf for me, will you?’ he requested.

Animals and winter stores continued to be drained from Buckkeep. Some were sold off cheaply to the Inland duchies. The very finest of the hunting and riding horses were barged up the Buck, to an area near Turlake. Regal announced this as a plan to preserve our best breeding stock far from the ravages of the Red Ships. The mutter of the folk in Buckkeep Town, so Hands told me, was that if the King could not hold his own castle, what hope was there for them? When a shipment of fine old tapestries and furniture was sent upriver as well, the murmur became that soon the Farseers would abandon Buckkeep entirely, without even a fight, without even waiting for an assault. I had the uncomfortable suspicion that the rumour was correct.

Confined as I was to Buckkeep, I had little direct access to the talk of the common folk. A silence greeted my entry to the watch-room now. With my restriction to the keep had come gossip and speculation. The talk that had flown about me on the day I had failed to save the little girl from the Forged ones found new life. Few of the guard spoke to me of anything other than the weather or other pleasantries. While they did not make me a total pariah, I was banished from the easy conversations and rambling arguments that usually filled the watch-room. To talk to me had become bad luck. I wouldn’t inflict that on men and women I cared about.

I was still welcome about the stables, but I strove not to talk to any one person too much, or appear too close to any of the beasts. The stable-workers were a morose lot these days. There was not enough work to busy them, so quarrels were more frequent. The stable-hands were my major source of news and rumours. None of it was cheery. There were garbled stories of raids on Bearn towns, gossip about brawls in the taverns and on the docks of Buckkeep Town, and accounts of folk moving south or inland as their means allowed. What talk there was of Verity and his quest was demeaning or ridiculing. Hope had perished. Like me, the folk of Buckkeep were waiting in suspense for disaster to come to their doorsteps.

We had a month of stormy weather, and the relief and rejoicing in Buckkeep were more destructive than the preceding period of tension had

been. A waterfront tavern caught fire during an especially wild evening of revelry. The fire spread, and only the drenching rain that followed the gusting winds saved it from spreading to the dock warehouses. That would have been a disaster in more than one way, for as Regal drained the keep warehouses of grain and supplies, folk in the town saw little reason to conserve what was left. Even if the Raiders never came to Buckkeep itself, I was resigned to short rations before the winter was out.

I woke one night to stark stillness. The howl of the storm winds and the rattling of rain had stilled. My heart sank. A terrible premonition filled me, and when I rose to a clear blue morning, my dread increased. Despite the sunny day, the atmosphere in the keep was oppressive. Several times I felt the tickling of the Skill against my senses. It nearly drove me mad, for I did not know if it was Verity attempting better contact, or Justin and Serene prying. A late afternoon visit to King Shrewd and the Fool disheartened me further. The King, wasted to little more than bones, was sitting up and smiling vaguely. He Skilled feebly toward me as I came in the door, and then greeted me with, 'Ah, Verity, my lad. How did your sword lesson go today?' The rest of his conversation made as much sense. Regal appeared almost immediately after I arrived. He sat on a straight-backed chair, arms crossed on his chest and looked at me. No words were exchanged between us. I could not decide if my silence were cowardice or self-restraint. I escaped him as soon as I decently could, despite a rebuking look from the Fool.

The Fool himself looked little better than the King. On so colourless a creature as the Fool, the dark circles under his eyes looked painted on. His tongue had grown as still as the clappers in his bells. When King Shrewd died, nothing would stand between the Fool and Regal. I wondered if there were any way I could aid him.

As if I could aid myself, I reflected sourly.

In the solitude of my room that evening, I drank more than I should of the cheap blackberry brandy that Burrich despised. I knew I would be sick from it tomorrow. I didn't care. Then I lay on my bed, listening to the distant sounds of merriment from the Great Hall. I wished Molly were there to scold me for being drunk. The bed was too large, the linens glacier-white and cold. I closed my eyes and sought comfort in the company of a wolf. Confined as I was to the keep, I had begun to seek his dream company on a nightly basis, just to have an illusion of freedom.

I came awake just before Chade seized me and shook me. It was good I had recognized him in that split instant, for otherwise I am sure I would have tried to kill him. 'Up!' he hissed hoarsely. 'Get up, you sodden fool, you idiot! Neatbay is under siege. Five Red Ships. I wager they'll leave nothing standing if we delay. Get up, damn you!'

I staggered to my feet, the muzziness of drink giving way before the shock of his words.

'What can we do?' I asked stupidly.

'Tell the King. Tell Kettricken, tell Regal. Surely not even Regal can ignore this, it is at our very doorstep. If the Red Ships take and hold Neatbay, they will have us bracketed. No ships will get out of Buck Harbour. Even Regal will see that. Now go! Go!'

I dragged on trousers and a tunic, ran for the door barefoot with my hair dragging about my face. I halted there. 'How do I know this? Whence do I say this warning comes?'

Chade hopped up and down in frustration. 'Damn and damn! Tell them anything! Tell Shrewd you had a dream of the Pocked Man scrying it in a pool of water! He at least should understand that! Tell them an Elderling brought you the news! Say anything, but get them to act and now!'

'Right!' I raced off down the hallway, skidded down the steps and raced down the corridor to King Shrewd's chambers. I hammered on Shrewd's door. At the far end of the hall, Burrich stood beside his chair outside Kettricken's door. He looked at me, drew his short sword, and took a ready stance, eyes darting everywhere. 'Raiders!' I called down the hall to him, not caring who overheard or how they reacted. 'Five Red Ships in Neatbay! Rouse her majesty, tell her they need our aid now!'

Burrich turned without a question, to tap on Kettricken's door and be immediately admitted. It did not go so easily for me. Wallace finally opened the door a grudging crack, but would not budge until I suggested he should be the one to race down the stairs and inform Regal of my tidings. I believe it was the prospect of making a dramatic entrance and conferring with the Prince before all the merry-makers that decided him. He left the door unguarded as he hurried to his small antechamber to make himself presentable.

The King's bedchamber was in total darkness and heavy with the reek of Smoke. I took a candle from his sitting room, kindled it at the dwindling fire and hastened in. In the darkness, I nearly trod upon the Fool, who was

curled up like a cur at the King's bedside. I gaped in astonishment. He had not so much as a blanket or cushion for comfort, but huddled on the rug beside the King's bed. He uncurled stiffly, coming awake, and then alarmed in an instant. 'What is it? What's happened?' he demanded.

'Raiders in Neatbay. Five Red Ships. I have to rouse the King. What are you doing, sleeping here? Are you afraid to go back to your own room any more?'

He laughed bitterly. 'More like I fear to leave this one, lest I never be allowed in again. The last time Wallace locked me out, it took me an hour of yammering and hammering before the King realized I was missing and demanded to know where I was. The time before that, I slipped in with the breakfast things. The time before that ...'

'They seek to separate you from the King?'

He nodded. 'With honey or a whip. This night, Regal offered me a purse with five bits of gold in it, if I would make myself presentable and come down to entertain them. Oh, how he did go on after you had left, over how badly I was missed at the court below, and what a shame it was for me to waste my youth shut away up here. And when I said I found King Shrewd's company more congenial than that of other fools, he flung the teapot at me. Put Wallace in a fair bit of a huff, for he had just brewed up as nasty a mess of herb tea as would make one long for the perfume of farts.'

The Fool had been kindling candles and poking up the fire on the King's hearth as we spoke. Now he drew back one of the heavy bed curtains. 'My liege?' he said as gently as one might speak to a sleeping child. 'FitzChivalry is here with important tidings for you. Will you awaken and hear him?'

At first the King made no response. 'Your majesty?' the Fool called to him again. He damped a cloth in a bit of cool water and patted the King's face with it. 'King Shrewd?'

'My king, your folk have need of you.' The words tumbled from me in desperation. 'Neatbay is besieged by Red Ships. Five of them. We must send aid now, or all is lost. Once they have a toehold there ...'

'They could close Buck Harbour.' The King's eyes opened as he spoke. He did not move from his prone position, but he squeezed his eyes more tightly shut as if clenching them against pain. 'Fool. A bit of the red wine. Please.' His voice was soft, scarce more than a breath, but it was the voice of

my king. My heart surged as if I were an old dog hearing the voice of a returning master.

‘What must we do?’ I begged of him.

‘Every ship we have, down the coast to them. Not just the warships. Roust out the fishing fleet. We fight for our lives now. How dare they come this close, how came they to such boldness! Send horse overland. On their way tonight, within the hour, I say. They may not get there until day after tomorrow, but send them all the same. Put Keen in charge of it.’

My heart flip-flopped in my chest. ‘Your Majesty,’ I broke in gently. ‘Keen is dead. Coming back from the mountains, with Burrich. They were attacked by highwaymen.’

The Fool glared at me, and I instantly regretted my interruption. The command faded from King Shrewd’s voice. Uncertainly, he said, ‘Keen is dead?’

I took a breath. ‘Yes, your majesty. But there is Red. Kerf is also a good man.’

The King took the wine the Fool proffered. He sipped, and seemed to draw strength with it. ‘Kerf. Give it to Kerf, then.’ A shade of the confidence came back. I bit my tongue against saying that what horse we had left was not worth sending. Doubtless the folk of Neatbay would welcome whoever came to reinforce them.

King Shrewd considered. ‘What is the word from South Cove? Have they sent out warriors and ships?’

‘Your majesty, there is no word from there as yet.’ This was not a lie.

‘What goes on here?’ The shouting began before he even reached the bedchamber. It was Regal, puffy with drink and fury. ‘Wallace!’ He pointed an accusing finger at me. ‘Get him out of here. Get help to do it if you need it. You needn’t be gentle!’

Wallace had not far to look. Two of Regal’s brawny Inland guardsmen had followed him up from the feasting. I was lifted off my feet; Regal had chosen burly men for this duty. I looked about for the Fool, for any ally, but the Fool had vanished. I caught a glimpse of a pale hand vanishing under the bed and resolutely looked away. I did not blame him. There was nothing he could do for me by staying except be thrown out with me.

‘My father, has he disturbed your rest with his wild tales? And you so ill?’ Regal bent solicitously over the bed.

They had me almost to the door when the King spoke. His voice was not loud, but command was in it. 'Stand where you are,' King Shrewd ordered the guards. He still was prone in his bed, but he turned his eyes to Regal. 'Neatbay is besieged,' King Shrewd said firmly. 'We must send aid.'

Regal shook his head sadly. 'It is just another of the Bastard's ploys, to upset you and steal rest from you. There has been no call for help, no message of any kind.'

One of the guards was very professional in his grip. The other seemed intent on dislocating my shoulder even if I refused to struggle against him. I carefully memorized his face while trying not to show the pain.

'You need not have troubled yourself, Regal. I will discover the truth or the lie here.' Queen Kettricken had paused to dress. Short white fur jacket, purple trousers and boots. Her long Mountain sword was at her side and Burrich stood in the door, holding a heavy-hooded riding-cloak and gloves. She spoke as one would to a spoiled child. 'Go back to your guests. I will ride to Neatbay.'

'I forbid it!' Regal's voice rang out strangely shrill. Stillness suddenly flooded the room.

Queen Kettricken pointed out quietly what everyone in the room already knew. 'A prince does not forbid the Queen-in-Waiting. I ride tonight.'

Regal's face purpled. 'This is a hoax, a plot of the Bastard's to throw Buckkeep into an uproar, and instil fear in the folk. There has been no word of an attack on Neatbay.'

'Silence!' The King spat out the word. Everyone in the room froze. 'FitzChivalry? Damn it, release that man. FitzChivalry, stand before me. Report. Whence came your news?'

I tugged my jerkin square again and smoothed my hair back. As I went to stand before my king, I was painfully aware of my bare feet and tousled hair. I took a breath and threw it all away. 'In my sleep I had a vision, sire. Of the Pocked Man, scrying in a pool of water. He showed me the Red Ships at Neatbay.'

I dared emphasize no word. I stood firm before them. One of the guardsmen snorted in disbelief. Burrich's jaw dropped open and his eyes widened. Kettricken merely looked confused. On the bed, King Shrewd closed his eyes and breathed out slowly.

‘He’s drunk,’ Regal declared. ‘Get him out of here.’ I had never heard so much satisfaction in Regal’s voice. His guards reacted swiftly to seize me again.

‘As ...’ the King drew a deep breath in, obviously fighting pain, ‘I commanded.’ He found a bit of strength. ‘As I commanded. Go now. NOW!’

I jerked my arms free from the astonished guards. ‘Yes, your majesty,’ I said into the silence. I spoke clearly for the benefit of all. ‘That is, all warships dispatched to Neatbay, and as many of the fishing fleet as can be rallied. And all available horse to be sent overland, under Kerf’s command.’

‘Yes,’ the King sighed the word. He swallowed, took a breath, opened his eyes. ‘Yes, I order it so. Now go.’

‘Some wine, my liege?’ The Fool had materialized on the other side of the bed. I was the only one who startled. The Fool smiled a secret smile over that. Then he bent over the King, helping him to raise his head and sip at the wine. I bowed deeply, deeply, to my king. I straightened, and turned to leave the room.

‘You may ride with my guard, if you wish,’ Queen Kettricken told me.

Regal’s face was scarlet. ‘The King did not tell you to go!’ he sputtered at her.

‘Nor did he “forbid” it.’ The Queen looked at him flatly.

‘My queen!’ One of her guard announced herself at the door. ‘We are ready to ride.’ I looked at her in astonishment. Kettricken merely nodded.

She glanced at me. ‘You’d best make haste, Fitz. Unless you plan to ride like that.’

Burrich shook out the Queen’s cloak for her. ‘Is my horse ready?’ Kettricken asked her guard.

‘Hands promised it at the door by the time you descended.’

‘I will need but a moment or two to ready myself,’ Burrich said quietly. I noticed he did not phrase it as a request.

‘Go then. Both of you. Plan on catching up with us as quickly as you can.’

Burrich nodded. He followed me to my room, where he helped himself to winter garb from my clothing chest while I got dressed. ‘Brush your hair back and wash your face,’ he ordered me tersely. ‘Warriors have more confidence in a man who looks like he expected to be awake at this hour.’

I did as he advised and then we hastened down the stairs. His game leg seemed forgotten tonight. Once we were in the courtyard, he started

bellowing for stable boys to bring up Sooty and Ruddy. He sent another boy scrambling to find Kerf and pass on the orders, and another to ready every available horse in the stables. Four men he dispatched to town, one to the warships, three others to make the rounds of the taverns and rally the fleet. I envied his efficiency. He did not realize he had taken command away from me until we were mounting. He looked suddenly uncomfortable. I smiled at him. 'Experience counts,' I told him.

We rode for the gates. 'We should be able to catch up with Queen Kettricken before she reaches the coast road,' Burrich was saying, just as a guardsman stepped out to bar our way.

'Hold!' he commanded, his voice breaking on the word.

Our horses reared back in alarm. We reined in. 'What's this?' Burrich demanded.

The man stood firm. 'You may pass, sir,' he told Burrich respectfully. 'But I have orders that the Bastard is not allowed out of Buckkeep.'

'The Bastard?' I had never heard such outrage in Burrich's voice. 'Say "FitzChivalry, son of Prince Chivalry".'

The man gaped at him in astonishment.

'Say it now!' Burrich bellowed, and pulled steel. He suddenly seemed twice as large as he had. Anger radiated from him in waves I could feel.

'FitzChivalry, son of Prince Chivalry,' the man babbled. He took a breath and swallowed. 'But however I call him, I have my orders. He is not allowed out.'

'Not an hour ago, I heard our queen command us to ride with her, or to catch up as swiftly as we might. Do you say your order is superior to hers?'

The man looked uncertain. 'One moment, sir.' He stepped back into the guard house.

Burrich snorted. 'Whoever trained him ought to be ashamed. He relies entirely on our honour to keep us from riding through.'

'Maybe he just knows you,' I suggested.

Burrich glared at me. After a moment, the captain of the watch came out. He grinned at us. 'Ride well, and best of luck at Neatbay.'

Burrich flung him something between a salute and a farewell, and we urged our horses through. I let Burrich choose the pace. It was dark, but once we were down the hill, the road was straight and good and there was a bit of a moon. Burrich was as reckless as I had ever seen him, for he put the horses to a canter, and kept up the pace until we saw the Queen's Guard ahead of

us. He slowed us just short of joining them. I saw them turn to recognize us, and one soldier raised a hand in greeting.

‘A pregnant mare, in early pregnancy, does well to be exercised.’ He looked over at me through the darkness. ‘I don’t know that much about women,’ he said hesitantly.

I grinned at him. ‘And you think I do?’ I shook my head and grew sober. ‘I don’t know. Some women don’t ride at all when they are carrying. Some do. I think Kettricken would not put Verity’s child at risk. Besides. She is safer with us here, than left behind with Regal.’

Burrich said nothing, but I sensed his assent. It was not all I sensed.

We hunt together again at last!

Quietly! I warned him with a sideways glance at Burrich. I kept my thoughts tiny and private. *We go far. Will you be able to keep pace with the horses?*

Over a short distance, they can out speed me. But nothing outdistances the trotting wolf.

Burrich stiffened slightly in his saddle. I knew Nighteyes was off to the side of the road, trotting through the shadows. It did feel good to be out and alongside him again. It felt good to be out and doing things. It was not that I rejoiced at Neatbay being attacked; it was that, at last, I would have a chance to do something about it, even if it was only to clean up whatever was left standing. I glanced over at Burrich. Anger radiated from him.

‘Burrich?’ I ventured.

‘It’s a wolf, isn’t it?’ Burrich spoke grudgingly into the darkness. He looked straight ahead as we rode. I knew the set of his mouth.

You know I am. A grinning, tongue-lolling reply.

Burrich flinched as if poked.

‘Nighteyes,’ I admitted quietly, rendering the image of his name into human words. Dread sat me. Burrich had sensed him. He knew. No point in denying anything any more. But there was a tiny edge of relief in it as well. I was deathly tired of all the lies I lived. Burrich rode on silently, not looking at me. ‘I did not intend for it to happen. It just did.’ An explanation. Not an apology.

I gave him no choice. Nighteyes was being very jocular about Burrich’s silence.

I put my hand on Sooty’s neck, took comfort in the warmth and life there. I waited. Burrich still said nothing. ‘I know you will never approve,’ I

said quietly. 'But it is not something I can choose. It is what I am.'

It is what we all are, Nighteyes smirked. Come, Heart of the Pack, speak to me. Will not we hunt well together?

Heart of the Pack? I wondered.

He knows it is his name. It is what they called him, all those dogs that worshipped him, when they all gave tongue in the chase. It was what they taunted one another with. 'Heart of the Pack, here, here, the game is here, and I have found it for you, for you!' So they all yelped and tried to be first to yelp it to him. But now they are all gone, taken far away. They did not like to leave him. They knew he heard, even if he would not reply. Had you never heard them?

I suppose I tried not to.

A waste. Why choose to be deaf? Or mute?

'Must you do this in my presence?' Burrich's voice was stiff.

'Beg pardon,' I said, gravely aware that he was truly offended. Nighteyes snickered again. I ignored him. Burrich would not look at me. After a bit, he nudged Ruddy, and cantered forward to overtake Kettricken's guard. I hesitated, then kept pace with him. He formally reported to Kettricken of all he had done before leaving Buckkeep, and she nodded gravely as if accustomed to taking such reports. At a signal from her, we were honoured to fall back and ride to her left, while her captain of the guard, one Foxglove, rode to her right. Before dawn found us, the rest of the mounted soldiers from Buckkeep had caught up with us. When they joined us, Foxglove slowed the pace for a time, to allow their winded horses to breathe. But after we had come to a stream and let all the beasts water, we pushed on determinedly. Burrich did not speak to me.

Years earlier, I had made a trip to Neatbay as part of Verity's entourage. Then it had taken us five days, but we had travelled with wagons and litters, jugglers and musicians and valets. This time we travelled by horse, with seasoned warriors, and we need not keep to the wide coast road. The only thing that did not favour us was the weather. By mid-morning of our first day out, a winter storm swept in. It was miserable riding, not just for the physical discomfort but in the unsettling knowledge that the driving winds would slow our companion ships. Whenever our path took us overlooking the water, I watched for sails, but never saw any.

The pace Foxglove set was demanding but not destructive to horse or rider. While stops were not frequent, she varied the pace, and saw that no

animal wanted for water. At such stops, there was grain for the horses, and hard bread and dried fish for their riders. If anyone ever noticed a wolf shadowing us, no one spoke of it. Two full days later, as dawn and a gap in the weather found us, we were looking out over the wide river valley that opened onto Neatbay.

Bayguard was the keep of Neatbay. And Bayguard was the home keep of Duke Kelvar and Lady Grace, the heart of Rippon Duchy. The watchtower was on a sandy cliff above the town. The keep itself had been built on fairly level land, but fortified with a series of earthen walls and ditches. Once I had been told that no enemy had ever made it past the second wall. It was no longer true. We halted and looked out over the destruction.

The five Red Ships were still drawn up on the beach. The boats of Neatbay, mostly small fishing vessels, were a burnt and scuttled wreckage spread along the beach. The tides had played with them since the Raiders had destroyed them. Blackened buildings and smouldering wreckage fanned out from where they had landed, marking their path like a spreading contagion. Foxglove stood in her stirrups and pointed out over Neatbay, combining her observations with what she knew of the town and keep. 'It's a shallow, sandy bay, all the way out. So when the tide goes out, it goes way out. They've drawn their boats up too high. If we can force them to retreat, we want to do it at low tide, when their ships are sitting high and dry. They've cut through the town like a hot knife through butter: I doubt there was much of an effort to defend it, it's not really defensible. Probably everyone headed for the keep at the first sight of a red keel. It looks to me as if the Outislanders have battered their way in past the third circle. But Kelvar should be able to hold them off almost indefinitely now. The Fourth Wall is worked stone. It took years to build. Bayguard has a good well, and her warehouses should still be fat with grain this early in winter. She won't fall unless she falls to treachery.' Foxglove stopped gesturing and settled in her saddle again. 'It makes no sense, this attack,' she said more softly. 'How can the Red Ships expect to sustain a long siege? Especially if they are, in turn, attacked by our forces?'

'The answer could be that they did not expect anyone to come to Bayguard's aid,' Kettricken said succinctly. 'They have the town to pillage for supplies, and perhaps other ships are expected.' She turned to Kerf, motioned him alongside Foxglove. 'I have no battle experience,' she said

simply. 'You two will have to plan this. I listen now, as a soldier. What should we do next?'

I saw Burrich wince. Such honesty is admirable, but not always good leadership. I saw Foxglove and Kerf exchange measuring glances. 'My queen, Kerf has more battle experience than I. I would accept his command,' Foxglove offered quietly.

Kerf looked down, as if mildly ashamed. 'Burrich was Chivalry's man. He has seen far more battle than I have,' he observed to his mare's neck. He looked up suddenly, 'I commend him to you, my queen.'

Burrich's face was a struggle of conflicting emotions. For a moment, his eyes lit. Then I saw a hesitation build.

Heart of the Pack, they will hunt well for you, Nighteyes urged him.

'Burrich, take command. They will fight with heart for you.'

My skin prickled to hear Queen Kettricken virtually echo Nighteyes' thought. From where I sat, I could actually see a shiver run over Burrich. He straightened in his saddle. 'We have no hope of surprising them in this flat country. And the three circles they have already gained can become defences for them. We are not a vast force. What we have most of, my queen, is time. We can pen them. They have no access to fresh water. If Bayguard stands, and we keep the Outislanders trapped where they are, between the third earthwork and the wall, we can simply wait for our ships to arrive. At that time we can judge if we wish to join an attack on them, or simply starve them out.'

'This seems wise to me,' the Queen approved.

'They are fools if they have not left at least a small force with their ships. Those we will have to contend with immediately. Then we must set our own guards to the ships, with orders to destroy them if it looks as if any of the Outislanders have got past us and are trying to escape. If not, you will have ships to add to King-in-Waiting Verity's fleet.'

'This, too, seems sensible.' The idea clearly pleased Kettricken.

'It is tidy, but only if we act swiftly. They will soon be aware of us, if they are not already. Certainly they will see the situation as clearly as we have. We need to get down there, and contain those besieging the keep and destroy those guarding the ships.'

Kerf and Foxglove were both nodding. Burrich looked at them. 'I want your archers for our circle around the keep. We want to contain them there, not get into any close fighting. Simply pin them down where they are.'

Wherever they breached the wall is where they will try to trickle out again. Guard most heavily there, but watch all along the outer wall. And for now, do not try to go within the outer wall at all. Let them scuttle about like crabs in a pot.'

Terse nods from both captains. Burrich continued.

'I want swords for the ships. Expect the fighting to be nasty. They'll be defending their only escape routes. Send a few lesser archers, and have them prepare fire arrows. If all else fails, burn the ships where they're beached. But try to take them first.'

'The *Rurisk*!' Someone in the back ranks gave a cry. All heads turned to the water. There was the *Rurisk*, rounding the north tooth of Neatbay. In a moment, a second sail appeared. Behind us, the mounted warriors raised a shout. But out beyond our ships, anchored in deep water, white as a dead man's belly and her sails as bloated, floated the white ship. The moment I saw it, an icicle of terror sliced my guts.

'The white ship!' I choked. Fear sent a shudder through me that was almost like pain.

'What?' Burrich asked, startled. It was the first word he had spoken to me that day.

'The white ship!' I repeated and pointed a hand.

'What? Where? That? That's a fog bank. Our ships are coming into the harbour over there.'

I looked. He was right. A fog bank, melting in the morning sun even as I watched. My terror receded like the ghost of mocking laughter. But the day seemed suddenly chillier, and the sun that had briefly parted the storm clouds a weak and watery thing. An evil cast lingered on the day, like a bad smell.

'Split your forces and deploy them now,' Burrich said quietly. 'We don't want our ships to meet any resistance as they come into shore. Quickly, now. Fitz. You're to go with the force that attacks the Red Ships. Be there when the *Rurisk* beaches, and let those on board know what we've decided. As quickly as those Red Ships are cleaned out, we shall want all fighters to join us in containing the Outislanders. I wish there was a way to get word to Duke Kelvar of what we're doing. I suppose he'll see, soon enough. Well, let's get going.'

There was some milling about, some conferring between Kerf and Foxglove, but in a surprisingly short time, I found myself riding behind

Foxglove with a contingent of warriors. I had my sword, but what I really missed was the axe I had become so comfortable with over the summer.

Nothing was as tidy as was planned. We encountered Outislanders in the wreckage of the town, long before we reached the beach. They were moving back toward their ships, and hampered with a coffle of prisoners. We attacked the Raiders. Some stood and fought, and some abandoned their prisoners and ran before our horses. Our troops were soon scattered throughout the still-smouldering buildings and debris-scattered streets of Neatbay. Some of our force stayed to cut the ropes on the prisoners and help them as best they could. Foxglove swore at the delay, for the Raiders that had fled would warn the ship-guards. Swiftly she split our force, leaving a handful of soldiers to help the battered townsfolk. The smells of dead bodies and rain on charred timbers brought back my memories of Forge with a vividness that almost unmanned me. There were bodies everywhere, far more than we had expected to find. Somewhere I sensed a wolf prowling through the ruins, and took comfort from him.

Foxglove cursed us all with surprising skill, and then organized those she kept with her into a wedge. We swept down on the Red Ships in time to see one being launched into the retreating tide. There was little we could do about that, but we were in time to prevent a second ship from getting off. We killed those ones with surprising alacrity. There were not many, only a skeleton rowing crew. We even managed to kill them before they could slay most of their captives who lay bound on the thwarts of the ships. We suspected that the ship that escaped had been similarly laden. And hence, I surmised to myself, not initially planning to engage the *Rurisk* or any of the ships that now converged on the one that had eluded us.

But the Red Ships had been outward-bound with hostages. To where? To a ghost ship that only I had glimpsed? Even to think of the white ship brought a shudder over me and a pressure in my head like the beginning of pain. Perhaps they had intended to drown their hostages, or to Forge them, however that was done. I was not in a position to give it great thought then, but I saved the knowledge for Chade. Each of the three remaining beached ships had a contingent of warriors, and they fought as desperately as Burrich had predicted they would. One ship was set afire by an overzealous archer, but the others were taken intact.

We had secured all the ships by the time the *Rurisk* was beached. There was time now to lift my head, and to look out over Neatbay. No sign of the

white ship. Perhaps it had been only a cloud bank. Behind the *Rurisk* came the *Constance*, and behind them a flotilla of fishing vessels and even a couple of merchant ships. Most of them had to anchor out in the shallow harbour, but the men aboard them were ferried swiftly ashore. The warship crews waited for their captains to hear word of what went on, but those from the fishing vessels and merchant ships swept past us and headed directly for the besieged keep.

The trained crews from the warships soon overtook them, and by the time we reached the outer walls of the keep, there was an attitude of cooperation if not any real organization. The prisoners we had freed were weak from lack of food and water, but recovered quickly and were indispensable in giving us intimate knowledge of the outer earthworks. By afternoon, our siege of the besiegers was in place. With difficulty, Burrich persuaded all involved that at least one of our warships would remain fully manned and on alert, in the water. His premonition was proven correct the next morning, when two more Red Ships sailed around the northern point of the bay. The *Rurisk* ran them off, but they fled too easily for us to take any satisfaction in it. All knew they would simply find an undefended village to raid further up the coast. Several of the fishing vessels belatedly gave chase, though there was little chance of them catching the oared vessels of the Raiders.

By the second day of waiting, we were beginning to be bored and uncomfortable. The weather had turned foul again. The hard bread was starting to taste of mould, the dried fish was no longer completely dry. To cheer us, Duke Kelvar had added the Buck flag of the Six Duchies to his own pennon flying over Bayguard to acknowledge us. But like us, he had chosen a waiting strategy. The Outislanders were penned. They had not attempted to break out past us, nor to advance closer to the keep. All was still and waiting.

‘You don’t listen to warnings. You never have.’ Burrich spoke quietly to me.

Night had fallen. It was the first time since our arrival that we had had more than a few moments together. He sat on a log, his injured leg stretched straight in front of him. I crouched by the fire, trying to warm my hands. We were outside a temporary shelter set up for the Queen, tending a very smoky fire. Burrich had wanted her to settle in one of the few intact buildings left in Neatbay, but she had refused, insisting on staying close to her warriors. Her

guard came and went freely, in her shelter and at her fire. Burrich frowned over their familiarity, but also approved her loyalty. ‘Your father, too, was like that,’ he observed suddenly as two of Kettricken’s guard emerged from her shelter and went to relieve others still on watch.

‘Didn’t take warnings?’ I asked in surprise.

Burrich shook his head. ‘No. Always his soldiers, coming and going, at all hours. I’ve always wondered when he found the privacy to create you.’

I must have looked shocked, for Burrich suddenly flushed as well. ‘Sorry. I’m tired and my leg is – uncomfortable. I wasn’t thinking what I was saying.’

I found a smile unexpectedly. ‘It’s all right,’ I said, and it was. When he had found out about Nighteyes, I was afraid he was going to banish me again. A jest, even a rough jest, was welcome. ‘You were saying about warnings?’ I asked humbly.

He sighed. ‘You said it. We are as we are. And *he* said it. Sometimes, they don’t give you a choice. They just bond to you.’

Somewhere off in the darkness, a dog howled. It was not really a dog. Burrich glared at me. ‘I can’t control him at all,’ I admitted.

Nor I, you. Why should there be control, one of the other?

‘Nor does he stay out of personal conversations,’ I observed.

‘Nor personal anything,’ Burrich said flatly. He spoke in the voice of a man who knew.

‘I thought you said you never used ... it.’ Even out here, I would not say ‘the Wit’ aloud.

‘I don’t. No good comes of it. I will tell you plainly now what I’ve told you before. It ... changes you. If you give in to it. If you live it. If you can’t shut it out, at least don’t seek after it. Don’t become –’

‘Burrich?’

We both jumped. It was Foxglove, come quietly out of the darkness to stand on the other side of the fire. How much had she heard?

‘Yes? Is there a problem?’

She hunkered down in the darkness, lifted her red hands to the fire. She sighed. ‘I don’t know. How do I ask this? Are you aware that she’s pregnant?’

Burrich and I exchanged glances. ‘Who?’ he asked levelly.

‘I’ve got two children of my own, you know. And most of her guard are women. She pukes every morning, and lives off raspberry leaf tea. She can’t

even look at the saltfish without retching. She shouldn't be here, living like this.' Foxglove nodded toward the tent.

Oh. The vixen.

Shut up.

'She did not ask our advice,' Burrich said carefully.

'The situation here is under control. There is no reason she should not be sent back to Buckkeep,' Foxglove said calmly.

'I can't imagine "sending her back" anywhere,' Burrich observed. 'I think it would have to be a decision she reached on her own.'

'You might suggest it to her,' Foxglove ventured.

'So might you,' Burrich countered. 'You are captain of her guard. The concern is rightly yours.'

'I haven't been keeping watch outside her door each night,' Foxglove objected.

'Perhaps you should have,' Burrich said, then tempered it with a, 'Now that you know.'

Foxglove looked into the fire. 'Perhaps I should. So. The question is, who escorts her back to Buckkeep?'

'All her personal guard, of course. A queen should travel with no less.'

Somewhere off in the darkness there was a sudden outcry. I sprang to my feet.

'Stand fast!' Burrich snapped at me. 'Wait for word. Don't rush off until you know what is happening!'

In a moment, Whistle of the Queen's Guard reached our fire. She stood before Foxglove to report. 'Two-pronged attack. At the breach just below the south tower, they tried to break out. And some got through at ...'

An arrow swept through her and carried off forever whatever she had begun to tell us. Outlanders were suddenly upon us, more of them than my mind could grasp, and all converging on the Queen's tent. 'To the Queen!' I shouted, and had the slim comfort of hearing my cry taken up further down the line. Three guards rushed out of the tent, to put their backs to its flimsy walls, while Burrich and I stood our ground in front of it. I found my sword in my hand, and from the corner of my eye saw firelight run red up the edge of Burrich's. The Queen appeared suddenly in the door of the tent.

'Don't guard me!' she rebuked us. 'Get to where the fighting is.'

'It's here, my lady,' Burrich grunted, and stepped forward suddenly, to take off the arm of a man who had ventured too close.

I remember those words clearly and I remember seeing Burrich take that stride. It is the last coherent memory I have of that night. After that, all was shouting and blood, metal and fire. Waves of emotions pounded against me as all around me, soldiers and raiders fought to the death. Early on, someone set fire to the tent. Its towering blaze lit the battle scene like a stage. I remember seeing Kettricken, robe looped up and knotted, fighting bare-legged and barefoot on the frozen ground. She held her ridiculously long Mountain sword in a two-handed grip. Her grace made a deadly dance of the battle that would have distracted me at any other time.

Outslanders continued to appear. At one point, I was sure I heard Verity shouting commands, but could not make sense of any of them. Nighteyes appeared from time to time, fighting always at the edge of the light, a low sudden weight of fur and teeth, hamstringing with a slash, adding his weight to change a Raider's charge to a stumble. Burrich and Foxglove fought back to back at one point when things were going poorly for us. I was part of the circle that protected the Queen. At least, I thought I was, until I realized she was actually fighting beside me.

At some time I dropped my sword to snatch up a fallen Raider's axe. I picked my blade up the next day from the frozen ground, crusted with mud and blood. But at the moment I did not even hesitate to discard Verity's gift for a more savagely effective weapon. When at last the tide of the battle turned, I did not consider the wisdom of it, but pursued and hunted scattered enemy through the night-black, fire-stinking wreckage of Neatbay village.

Here, indeed, Nighteyes and I hunted very well together. I stood toe to toe with my final kill, axe against axe, while Nighteyes snarled and savaged his way past a smaller man's sword. He finished his but seconds before I dropped my man.

That final slaughtering held for me a wild and savage joy. I did not know where Nighteyes left off and I began; only that we had won and we both still lived. Afterwards, we went to find water together. We drank deep from a communal well's bucket, and I laved the blood from my hands and face. Then we sank down and put our backs to the brick well to watch the sun rise beyond the thick ground mist. Nighteyes leaned warm against me, and we did not even think.

I suppose I dozed a bit, for I was jostled alert as he quickly left me. I looked up to see what had startled him, only to discover a frightened Neatbay girl staring at me. The early sun struck glints off her red hair. A

bucket was in her hand. I stood and grinned, lifting my axe in greeting, but she sheered off like a frightened rabbit amongst the ruined buildings. I stretched, then made my way back through the trailing fog to where the Queen's tent had been. As I walked, images of last night's wolf hunting came back to me. The memories were too sharp, too red and black, and I pushed them down deep in my mind. Was this what Burrich had meant by his warning?

Even by the light of day, it was still difficult to understand all that had happened. The earth around the blackened remains of the Queen's shelter was trampled into mud. Here the fighting had been heaviest. Here was where most of the enemy had fallen. Some bodies had been dragged aside and tumbled into a heap. Others still lay where they had fallen. I avoided looking at them. It is one thing to kill in fear and anger. It is another thing to consider one's handiwork by the chill grey light of morning.

That the Outislanders had tried to break through our siege was understandable. They had, perhaps, had a chance of making it as far as their ships and reclaiming one or two of them. That the attack seemed to focus on the Queen's tent was least comprehensible. Once clear of the earthworks, why had not they seized their chance for survival and headed for the beach?

'Perhaps,' observed Burrich, gritting his teeth as I probed the angry swelling on his leg, 'they did not hope to escape at all. It is their Outislander way, to decide to die, and then to attempt to do as much damage before doing so. So they attacked here, hoping to kill our queen.'

I had discovered Burrich, limping about the battleground. He did not say he had been looking for my body. His relief at seeing me was evidence enough of that.

'How did they know it was the Queen in that tent?' I pondered. 'We flew no banners, we issued no challenges. How did they know she was here? There. Is that any better?' I checked the bandage for snugness.

'It's dry and it's clean and the wrapping seems to help the pain. I don't suppose we can do much more than that. I suspect that whenever I work that leg hard, I'm going to have the swelling and heat in it.' He spoke as dispassionately as if he discussed a horse's bad leg. 'At least it stayed closed. They did seem to make straight for the Queen's tent, didn't they?'

'Like bees to honey,' I observed tiredly. 'The Queen is in Bayguard?'

'Of course. Everyone is. You should have heard the cheer when they opened the gates to us. Queen Ketricken walked in, her skirts still bundled

to one side, her drawn blade still dripping. Duke Kelvar went down on his knees to kiss her hand. But Lady Grace looked at her, and said, “Oh, my dear, I shall have a bath drawn for you at once”.’

‘Now there is the stuff they make songs of,’ I said, and we laughed. ‘But not all are up at the keep. I saw a girl just now, coming for water, down in the ruins.’

‘Well, up at the keep they are rejoicing. There will be some who will have small heart for that. Foxglove was wrong. The folk of Neatbay did not yield easily before the Red Ships. Many, many died before the Neatbay folk retreated to the keep.’

‘Does anything strike you as odd about that?’

‘That folk should defend themselves? No. It is ...’

‘Does not it seem to you that there were too many Outislanders here? More than five ships’ worth?’

Burrich halted. He looked back to the scattered bodies. ‘Perhaps those other ships had left them here, and then gone out on patrol ...’

‘That is not their way. I suspect a larger ship, transporting a sizeable force of men.’

‘Where?’

‘Gone now. I think I glimpsed it, going into that fog bank.’

We fell silent. Burrich showed me to where he had tethered Ruddy and Sooty and we rode together up to Bayguard. The great doors of the keep stood wide open, and a combination of Buckkeep soldiers and Bayguard folk mingled there. We were greeted with a shout of welcome, and offered brimming cups of mead before we were even dismounted. Boys begged to take our horses for us, and to my surprise, Burrich let them. Within the hall was genuine rejoicing that would have put any of Regal’s revels to shame. All of Bayguard had been thrown open for us. Ewers and basins of warm, scented water had been set out in the Great Hall for us to refresh ourselves, and tables were heavy with food, none of it hard bread or saltfish.

We remained three days at Neatbay. During this time, our dead were buried, and the bodies of the Outislanders burned. Buckkeep soldiers and Queen’s Guard fell in alongside the people of Neatbay to assist in the repairs to Bayguard’s fortifications and in salvaging what was left of Neatbay town. I made a few quiet inquiries. I found that the watchtower signal had been lit as soon as the ships were sighted, but that the Red Ships had made extinguishing it one of their first goals. What of their coterie member, I

asked? Kelvar looked at me in surprise. Burl had been recalled weeks ago, for some essential duty inland. He had gone to Tradeford, Kelvar believed.

The day after the battle, reinforcements arrived from South Cove. They had not seen the signal fire, but the messengers sent out on horse had got through to them. I was present when Kettricken commended Duke Kelvar for his foresight in setting up a relay of horse for such messages, and sent her thanks also to Duke Shemshy of Shoaks for his response. She suggested they divide the captured ships, that they need no longer wait for warships to arrive, but could dispatch their own, for mutual defence. This was a sumptuous gift, and it was received in an awed silence. When Duke Kelvar recovered himself, he rose to offer a toast to his queen and to the unborn Farseer heir. So swiftly had the rumour become general knowledge. Queen Kettricken coloured prettily, but managed her thanks well.

Those brief days of victory were a healing balm to us all. We had fought, and fought well. Neatbay would rebuild, and the Outislanders had no hold in Bayguard. For a brief time, it seemed possible that we could win free of them entirely.

Before we had left Neatbay, the songs were already being sung, about a queen with her skirts bundled up standing bold against the Red Ships, and of the child in her womb who was a warrior before birth. That the Queen would risk not only herself but the heir to the throne for Rippon Duchy was not lost upon any of them. First Duke Brawndy of Bearn, and now Kelvar of Rippon, I thought to myself. Kettricken was doing well at winning the duchies' loyalty.

I had my moments at Neatbay, both warming and chilling. For Lady Grace, on seeing me in the Great Hall, recognized me and came to speak to me. 'So,' she had said after greeting me quietly, 'my kitchen dog-boy has the blood of kings in him. No wonder you advised me so well, those years ago.' She had grown well into being a lady and a duchess. Her feist dog still went everywhere with her, but now he ran about at her heels, and this change pleased me almost as much as her easy carriage of her title and her obvious affection for her duke.

'We have both changed much, Lady Grace,' I replied, and she accepted the compliment I intended. The last time I had seen her had been when I had travelled here with Verity. She had not then been so comfortable being a duchess. I had met her in the kitchens, when her dog had been choking on a bone. I had persuaded her then that her duke's coin was better spent on

watch towers than jewellery for her. Back then, she had been very new to being a duchess. Now she seemed to have never been anything else.

‘Not a dog-boy any more?’ she asked with a wry smile.

‘Dog-boy? Man-wolf!’ observed someone. I turned to see who had spoken, but the hall was crowded and no face seemed turned to watch us. I shrugged as if the remark were of no consequence, and Lady Grace appeared not to have even heard it. She presented me with a token of her favour before I left. It still makes me smile to think on it: a tiny pin in the shape of a fish’s bones. ‘I had this made, to remind me ... I should like you to have it now.’ She herself seldom wore jewellery any more, she told me. She handed it to me on a balcony, on a dark evening when the lights of Duke Kelvar’s watchtowers glittered like diamonds against the black sky.

TWENTY-FIVE

Buckkeep

Tradeford Castle on the Vin River was one of the traditional residences of the ruling family of Farrow. This was the place where Queen Desire had spent her childhood, and here she returned with her son Regal during the summers of his childhood. The town of Tradeford is a lively place, a centre for commerce in the heart of orchard and grain country. The Vin River is a sleepily navigable water, making travel easy and pleasant. Queen Desire had always insisted it was superior to Buckkeep in every regard and would have served much better as a seat for the royal family.

The trip back to Buckkeep was eventful only in small ways. Kettricken was worn and tired by the time we were to return. Although she tried not to show it, it was evident in the circles under her eyes and the set of her mouth. Duke Kelvar furnished her with a litter for the trip home, but a brief ride in it showed her that its swaying only made her more nauseous. She returned it with thanks, and rode home astride her mare.

During the second night on the road home, Foxglove came to our fire and told Burrich she thought she had seen a wolf several times that day. Burrich shrugged indifferently and assured her it was probably just curious, and was no threat to us. After she left, Burrich turned to me and said, 'That's going to happen once too often.'

'What?'

'A wolf, seen in your vicinity. Fitz, have a care. There were rumours, back when you killed those Forged ones. There were tracks all about, and the marks on those men were never made by any blade. Someone told me they saw a wolf prowling Neatbay the night of the battle. I even heard a wild tale about a wolf who changed into a man when the battle was over. There were tracks in the mud outside the Queen's very tent from that night; as well for you that everyone was so tired, and in so much of a hurry to dispose of the dead. There were a few there that did not die at a man's hand.'

A few! Fa!

Burrich's face contorted in anger. 'That will cease. Now.'

You are strong, Heart of the Pack, but –

The thought was broken and I heard a sudden yelp of surprise from off in the brush. Several of the horses startled and looked in that direction. I myself was staring at Burrich. He had *repelled* at Nighteyes, fiercely and from a distance.

Luckily for you, from a distance, for the strength of that ... I began to warn Nighteyes.

Burrich's gaze swung to me. 'I said, that will cease! Now!' He looked aside from me in disgust. 'I'd rather you rode with your hand in your pants than that you did that constantly in my presence. It offends me.'

I could think of nothing to say. Years of living together had taught me that he would not be argued out of his feelings about the Wit. That he knew I was bonded to Nighteyes and would still tolerate my presence was as far as he could unbend. I need not constantly remind him that the wolf and I shared minds. I bowed my head in assent. That night, for the first time in a long time, my dreams were my own.

I dreamed of Molly. She wore red skirts again, and crouched on the beach, cutting shell from the stones with her belt knife and eating them raw. She looked up at me and smiled. I came closer. She leaped up and ran barefoot down the beach in front of me. I chased her, but she was as fleet as she had ever been. Her hair blew back off her shoulders, and she only laughed when I called out to her to wait, wait. I awoke feeling strangely glad that she had outrun me, and with the dream scent of lavender still in my mind.

We expected to be well greeted at Buckkeep. The ships, given the kinder weather, should have made land before us, to give tidings of our success. So we were not surprised to see a contingent of Regal's guard coming forth to meet us. What did seem strange was that after they sighted us, they continued to walk their horses. Not a man yelled, or waved a greeting. Instead they came toward us silent and sober as ghosts. I think Burrich and I saw at the same time the baton the lead man carried, the small polished stick that betokened serious tidings.

He turned to me as we watched them approach. Dread was written large on his face. 'King Shrewd has died?' he suggested softly.

I felt no surprise, only a gaping loss in me. A frightened boy inside me gasped that now no one and nothing could stand between me and Regal. In another part, I wondered what it would have been like to call him grandfather instead of my king. But those selfish parts were small compared to what it meant to be this King's Man. Shrewd had shaped me, made me what I was, for good or ill. He had picked up my life one day, a boy playing under a table in the Great Hall, and set his stamp upon it. His decision that I must read and write, must be able to wield a sword or dispense a poison. It seemed to me that with his passing, I must take responsibility for my own acts now. It was a strangely frightening thought.

All had become aware of the lead man's burden. We halted on the road. Like a curtain parting, Kettricken's guard opened to allow him to approach her. A terrible silence held as he handed her the baton, and then the small scroll. The red sealing wax flaked away from her nail. I watched it fall to the muddy road. Slowly she opened the scroll, and read it. Something went out of her in that reading. Her hand fell to her side. She let the scroll follow the wax to the mud, a thing done with, a thing she never wished to peruse again. She did not faint, nor cry out. Her eyes looked afar, and she set her hand gently upon her belly. And in that motion, I knew it was not Shrewd who was dead, but Verity.

I reached for him. Somewhere, surely somewhere, coiled small inside me, a spark of a link, the tiniest thread of a connection ... no. I did not even know when it had vanished. I recalled that whenever I fought, I was likely to break my link with him. It did not help. I recalled now what had seemed just an oddity on the night of the battle. I had thought I had heard Verity's voice, crying out, issuing orders that made no sense. I could not recall one individual word of what he might have shouted. But now it seemed to me that they had been battle orders, orders to scatter, to seek cover perhaps, or ... but I could not recall anything with certainty. I looked over at Burrich, to find the question in his eyes. I had to shrug. 'I don't know,' I said quietly. His brow furrowed as he considered this.

Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken sat very still on her horse. No one moved to touch her, no one spoke a word. I glanced at Burrich, met his eyes. I saw fatalistic resignation there. This was the second time he had seen a King-in-Waiting fall before ascending the throne. After a long silence, Kettricken turned in her saddle. She surveyed her guard, and the mounted soldiers who followed her. 'Prince Regal has had tidings that King-in-Waiting Verity is

dead.’ She did not raise her voice, but her clear words carried. Merriment faded, and the triumph went out of every eye. She gave it a few moments to settle in. Then she nudged her horse to a walk, and we followed her back to Buckkeep.

We approached the gate unchallenged. The soldiers on watch looked up at us as we passed. One made a sketchy salute to the Queen. She did not notice it. Burrich’s scowl deepened, but he said nothing.

Within the castle courtyard, it seemed an ordinary day. Stable-help came to take the horses while other servants and folk moved about on the ordinary business of the keep. Somehow the very familiarity of it rattled against my nerves like stones. Verity was dead. It did not seem right that life should go on in such a workaday fashion.

Burrich had helped Kettricken to dismount into a cluster of her ladies. A part of me noted the look on Foxglove’s face as Kettricken was hustled away by court ladies who were exclaiming over how worn she looked, was she well, amid exclamations of sympathy, regret and sorrow: a twinge of jealousy passed over the face of the captain of the Queen’s Guard. Foxglove was but a soldier, sworn to protect her queen. She could not, at this time, follow her into the keep, no matter how much she cared about her. Kettricken was in the care of her court ladies now. But I knew Burrich would not stand guard alone before Kettricken’s door tonight.

The solicitous murmuring of her ladies on Kettricken’s behalf was enough to let me know that the rumour of her pregnancy had been spread. I wonder if it had yet been shared with Regal. I was well aware that some gossip circulated almost entirely through the women before becoming common knowledge. I suddenly wanted very badly to know if Regal knew that Kettricken carried the heir to the throne. I handed Sooty’s reins to Hands, thanked him, and promised to tell him all later. But as I headed for the keep, Burrich’s hand fell on my shoulder.

‘A word with you. Now.’

Sometimes he treated me almost as if I were a prince, sometimes as less than a stable-boy. These words now were no request. Hands gave me Sooty’s reins back with a wry smile, and vanished to see to other animals. I followed Burrich as he led Ruddy into the stables. He had no problem finding an empty stall for Ruddy near Sooty’s regular stall. There were only too many stalls available. We both began matter-of-factly to work on the horses. The old familiarity of that routine, seeing to a horse while Burrich worked near

by, was comforting. Our end of the stable was relatively quiet, but he waited until no one was about before asking, 'Is it true?'

'I don't know, exactly. My link with him is gone. It had been faint before we went to Neatbay, and I always have a problem maintaining my link to Verity when I get into a fight. He says I put my guard up so strongly against those around me that I wall him out.'

'I don't understand any of that, but I knew of that problem. Are you sure that is when you lost him?'

So I told him, about a vague sense of Verity during the battle, and the possibility that he had been under attack at the same time. Burrich nodded impatiently.

'But can't you Skill out to him, now that things are calm? Renew the link?'

I took an instant, pushed down my own seething frustration. 'No. I can't. I don't have the Skill that way.'

Burrich frowned. 'Look. We know that messages have gone awry lately. How do we know that this one hasn't been invented?'

'We don't, I suppose. Though it is hard to believe that even Regal would be so bold as to say Verity was dead if he was not.'

'There is nothing I believe him incapable of,' Burrich said quietly.

I straightened up from cleaning the mud out of Sooty's hooves. Burrich was leaning on the door of Ruddy's stall, staring off into the distance. The white streak in his hair was a vivid reminder of just how ruthless Regal could be. He had ordered Burrich killed as casually as one might swat an annoying fly. It had never seemed to give Regal a moment's concern that he had not stayed dead. He had no fear of retribution from a stablemaster or a bastard.

'So. What would he say when Verity came back?' I asked quietly.

'Once he was king, he could see that Verity never came back. The man who sits on the throne of the Six Duchies can do away with people who are inconvenient.' Burrich did not look directly at me as he said this, and I tried to let the barb go by me. It was true. Once Regal was in power, I had no doubt that there would be assassins ready to do his bidding. Perhaps there already were some. That thought sent a queer chill through me.

'If we want definite word that Verity is still alive, our only choice is to send someone to find him, and to come back with tidings of him.' I considered Burrich.

‘Assuming the messenger managed to survive it, it would still take too long. Once Regal is in power, the word of a messenger is nothing to him. The bearer of such tidings would not dare speak them aloud. We need proof that Verity is alive, proof that King Shrewd will accept, and we need it before Regal comes into power. That one would not be King-in-Waiting long.’

‘King Shrewd and Kettricken’s child still stand between him and the throne,’ I protested.

‘That location has proven unhealthy for full grown, strong men. I doubt an ailing old man or an unborn child will find it any luckier a place to be.’ Burrich shook his head and set that thought aside. ‘So. You cannot Skill to him. Who can?’

‘Any of the coterie.’

‘Pah. I have faith in none of them.’

‘King Shrewd might be able to,’ I suggested hesitantly. ‘If he took strength from me.’

‘Even if your link with Verity is broken?’ Burrich asked intently.

I shrugged and shook my head. ‘I don’t know. That is why I said *might*.’

He ran a final hand down Ruddy’s newly sleek coat. ‘It will have to be tried,’ he said decisively. ‘And the sooner the better. Kettricken must not be left to fret and grieve if there is no cause for it. She might lose the child of it.’ He sighed and looked at me. ‘Go get some rest. Plan on visiting the King tonight. Once I see you go in, I will see that there are witnesses to whatever King Shrewd finds out.’

‘Burrich,’ I protested. ‘There are too many uncertainties. I do not even know that the King will be awake tonight, or able to Skill, or that he will if I ask it. If we do this, Regal, and all else, will know that I am a King’s Man in the Skill sense. And ...’

‘Sorry, boy.’ Burrich spoke abruptly, almost callously. ‘There is more at stake here than your well-being. Not that I do not care about you. But I think you will be safer if Regal thinks you can Skill, and all know Verity is alive, than if all believe Verity is dead and Regal thinks it timely to be rid of you. We must try tonight. Perhaps we shall not succeed. But we must try.’

‘I hope you can get some elfbark somewhere,’ I grumbled to him.

‘Are you developing a fondness for that? Be wary.’ But then he grinned. ‘I am sure I can get some.’

I returned the grin, and then was shocked at myself. I didn't believe Verity was dead. That was what I admitted to myself with that grin. I did not believe my King-in-Waiting was dead, and I was about to stand toe to toe with Prince Regal and prove it was so. The only way that could have been more satisfying would be if I could do it with an axe in my hands. Yet.

'Do me one favour?' I asked of Burrich.

'What?' he asked guardedly.

'Be very, very careful of yourself.'

'Always. See that you do the same.'

I nodded, then stood silent, feeling awkward.

After a moment, Burrich sighed and said, 'Out with it. If I happen to see Molly, you'd like me to tell her ... what?'

I shook my head at myself. 'Only that I miss her. What else can I say to her? I've nothing to offer her but that.'

He glanced at me; an odd look. Sympathy, but no false comfort. 'I'll let her know,' he promised.

I left the stables feeling that somehow I had grown. I wondered if I would ever stop measuring myself by how Burrich treated me.

I went directly to the kitchen, intending to get something to eat, then go and rest as Burrich had suggested. The watch-room was packed with the returning soldiers, telling stories to the ones who had stayed home while devouring stew and bread. I had expected that, and intended to find my own provisions and carry them off to my room. But within the kitchen everywhere, kettles were bubbling, bread was rising and meat was turning on spits. Kitchen servants were chopping, stirring, and going to and fro hurriedly.

'There is a feast tonight?' I asked stupidly.

Cook Sara turned to face me. 'Oh, Fitz, so you're back and alive and in one piece for a change.' She smiled as if she had complimented me. 'Yes, of course, there's a feast to celebrate the victory at Neatbay. We would not neglect you.'

'With Verity dead, we still sit down to feast?'

Cook looked at me levelly. 'Were Prince Verity here, what would he wish?'

I sighed. 'He would probably say to celebrate the victory. That folk need hope more than mourning.'

‘So exactly Prince Regal explained it to me this morning,’ Cook said with satisfaction. She turned back to rubbing spices into a leg of venison. ‘We’ll mourn him, of course. But you have to understand, Fitz. He left us. Regal is the one who stayed here. He stayed here to look after the King, and mind the coasts as best as he could. Verity is gone, but Regal is still here with us. And Neatbay is not fallen to the Raiders.’

I bit my tongue and waited for the fit to pass. ‘Neatbay did not fall because Regal stayed here to protect us.’ I wanted to make certain that Cook was connecting those two events, not merely mentioning them both in the same lecture.

She nodded as she kept rubbing the meat. Pounded sage, my nose told me. And rosemary. ‘It’s what’s been needed all along. Soldiers sent right away. Skilling is fine, but what’s the good of knowing what’s happening if no one does anything about it?’

‘Verity always sent out the warships.’

‘And they always seemed to get there too late.’ She turned to me, wiping her hands down the front of her apron. ‘Oh, I know you worshipped him, lad. Our Prince Verity was a good-hearted man, who wore himself to death trying to protect us. I’m not speaking against the dead. I’m only saying that Skilling and chasing down Elderlings are not the way to fight these Red Ships. What Prince Regal done, sending the soldiers and ships out the minute he heard, that’s what was needed all along. Maybe with Prince Regal in charge, we’ll survive here.’

‘What about King Shrewd?’ I asked softly.

She misunderstood my question. In doing so, she showed me what she really thought. ‘Oh, he’s as good as can be expected. He’ll even be down to the feast tonight, at least for a bit. Poor man. He’s suffering so much. Poor, poor man.’

Dead man. She as much as said it. King no longer, Shrewd was just a poor, poor man to her. Regal had it. ‘Do you think our queen will be at the feast?’ I asked. ‘After all, she has just heard of the death of her husband and king.’

‘Oh, I think she’ll be there,’ Sara nodded to herself. She turned the leg over with a thud, to begin pricking the other side full of herbs. ‘I’ve heard it said she’s saying she’s with child now.’ The cook sounded sceptical. ‘She’ll want to announce it tonight.’

‘Do you doubt she’s with child?’ I asked bluntly. Cook was not offended by it.

‘Oh, I don’t doubt she’s pregnant, if she says she is. It just seems a bit odd, is all, her telling it after word of Verity’s death came in instead of before.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Well, some of us are bound to wonder.’

‘Wonder what?’ I asked coldly.

Cook darted a glance at me and I cursed my impatience. Shutting her up was not what I wanted to do. I needed to hear the rumours, all of them.

‘Well ...’ she hesitated, but could not deny my listening ears. ‘What’s always wondered, when a woman doesn’t conceive, and then when her husband’s away, suddenly she announces she’s pregnant by him.’ She glanced about to see who else might be listening. All seemed busy at their work, but I didn’t doubt a few ears were tilted our way. ‘Why now? All of a sudden. And if she knew she was pregnant, what was she thinking of, racing off in the middle of the night, right into battle? That’s strange behaviour for a queen carrying the throne’s heir.’

‘Well,’ I tried to make my voice mild. ‘I suppose when the child is born will show when it was conceived. Those who want to count moons on their fingers may do so then. Besides,’ and I leaned in conspiratorially, ‘I heard that some of her ladies knew of it before she left. Lady Patience, for instance, and her maid, Lacey.’ I would have to make sure that Patience bragged of her early knowledge, and that Lacey noised it about among the servants.

‘Oh. That one.’ Cook Sara’s dismissal quashed my hopes of an easy victory. ‘Well, not to offend, Fitz, but she can be a bit daft on occasion. Lacey, though, Lacey is solid. But she don’t say much, and don’t want to listen to what others have to say either.’

‘Well,’ I smiled and tipped her a wink. ‘That was where I heard it from. And I heard it well before we left for Neatbay.’ I leaned in closer. ‘Ask about. I bet you’ll find Queen Kettricken’s been drinking raspberry leaf tea for her morning sickness. You check, and see if I’m right. I’ll wager a silver bit I am.’

‘A silver bit? Oh. As if I’ve such to spare. But I’ll ask, Fitz, that I will. And shame on you for not sharing such a rich bit of gossip with me before. And all I tell you!’

‘Well, here’s something for you then. Queen Kettricken’s not the only one with child!’

‘Oh? Who else?’

I smiled. ‘Can’t tell you just yet. But you’ll be among the first to know, from what I’ve heard.’ I had no idea who might be pregnant, but it was safe to say that someone in the keep was, or would be, in time to substantiate my rumour. I needed to keep Cook pleased with me if I were to count on her for court talk. She nodded sagely at me, and I winked.

She finished her venison leg. ‘Here, Dod, come take this and put it on the meat-hooks over the big fire. Highest hooks, I want it cooked, not scorched. Go on with you, now. Kettle? Where’s that milk I asked you to fetch?’

I snagged bread and apples before I left for my room. Plain fare, but welcome to one as hungry as me. I went straight to my room, washed, ate and lay down to rest. I might have small chance at the King tonight, but I still wanted to be as alert as possible during the feast. I thought of going to Kettricken, to ask her not to mourn Verity just yet. But I knew I would never get past her ladies for a quiet word with her. And what if I were wrong? No. When I could prove Verity was still alive would be soon enough to tell her.

I awoke later to a tap on my door. I lay still for a moment, not sure if I had heard anything, then rose to undo my latches and open the door a crack. The Fool stood outside my door. I do not know if I was more surprised that he had knocked instead of slipping the latches, or at the way he was attired. I stood gaping at him. He bowed genteelly, then pushed his way into my room, closing the door behind him. He fastened a couple of latches, then stepped to the centre of the room and extended his arms. He turned in a slow circle for me to admire him. ‘Well?’

‘You don’t look like you,’ I said bluntly.

‘I am not intended to.’ He tugged his overjerkin straight, then plucked at his sleeves to display better not only the embroidery on them, but the slashes that showed off the rich fabric of the sleeves beneath them. He fluffed his plumed hat, set it once more upon his colourless hair. From deepest indigo to palest azure went the colours, and the Fool’s white face, like a peeled egg, peeping out of them. ‘Fools are no longer in fashion.’

I sat down slowly on my bed. ‘Regal has dressed you like this,’ I said faintly.

‘Hardly. He supplied the clothing, of course, but I dressed myself. If Fools are no longer in fashion, consider how lowly would be the valet of a Fool.’

‘How about King Shrewd? Is he no longer in fashion?’ I asked acidly.

‘It is no longer in fashion to be overly concerned with King Shrewd,’ he replied. He cut a caper, then stopped, drew himself up with dignity as befitted his new clothes, and took a turn about the room. ‘I am to sit at the Prince’s table tonight, and be full of merriment and wit. Do you think I shall do well at it?’

‘Better far than I,’ I said sourly. ‘Care you not at all that Verity is dead?’

‘Care you not at all that the flowers are blooming beneath the summer sun?’

‘Fool, it is winter outside.’

‘The one is as true as the other. Believe me.’ The Fool stood suddenly still. ‘I have come to ask a favour of you, if you can believe that.’

‘The second as easily as the first. What is it?’

‘Do you slay my king with your ambitions for your own?’

I looked at him in horror. ‘I would never slay my king! How dare you say it!’

‘Oh, I dare much, these days.’ He put his hands behind him and paced about the room. With his elegant clothes and unaccustomed postures, he frightened me. It was as if another being inhabited his body, one I knew not at all.

‘Not even if the King had killed your mother?’

A terrible sick feeling rose in me. ‘What are you trying to tell me?’ I whispered.

The Fool whirled at the pain in my voice. ‘No. No! You mistake me entirely!’ There was sincerity in his voice, and for an instant I could see my friend again. ‘But,’ he continued in a softer, almost sly tone. ‘If you believed the King *had* killed your mother, your much-cherished, loving, indulgent mother, had killed her and snatched her forever away from you, do you think you might then kill him?’

I had been blind for so long that it took me a moment to understand him. I knew Regal believed his mother had been poisoned. I knew it was one source of his hatred for me, and for ‘Lady Thyme’. He believed we had carried out the killing. At the behest of the King. I knew it all to be false.

Queen Desire had poisoned herself. Regal's mother had been overly fond of both drink and those herbs which bring surcease from worry. When she had not been able to rise to the power she believed was her right, she had taken refuge in those pleasures. Shrewd had tried several times to stop her, had even applied to Chade for herbs and potions that would end her cravings. Nothing had worked. Queen Desire had been poisoned, it was true, but it was her own self-indulgent hand that had administered it. I had always known that. And knowing it, I had discounted the hate that would breed in the heart of a coddled son, suddenly bereft of his mother.

Could Regal kill over such a thing? Of course he could. Would he be willing to bring the Six Duchies to the teetering edge of ruin as an act of vengeance? Why not? He had never cared for the Coastal duchies. The Inland duchies, always more loyal to his Inland mother, were where his heart was. If Queen Desire had not wed King Shrewd, she would have remained Duchess of Farrow. Sometimes, when in her cups and heady with herby intoxicants, she would ruthlessly suggest that if she had remained as Duchess, she would have been able to wield more power, enough to persuade Farrow and Tilth to unite under her as Queen and shrug off their allegiance to the Six Duchies. Galen, the Skillmaster, Queen Desire's own bastard son, had nurtured Regal's hatred along with his own. Had he hated enough to subvert his coterie to Regal's revenge? To me it seemed a staggering treason, but I found myself accepting it. He would. Hundreds of folk slain, scores Forged, women raped, children orphaned, entire villages destroyed for the sake of a princeling's vengeance over an imagined wrong. It staggered me. But it fitted, as snugly as a coffin lid.

'I think perhaps the present Duke of Farrow should have a care for his health,' I mused.

'He shares his older sister's fondness for fine wine and intoxicants. Well supplied with these, and careless of all else, I suspect he will live a long life.'

'As perhaps King Shrewd might?' I ventured carefully.

A spasm of pain twitched across the Fool's face. 'I doubt that a long life is left to him,' he said quietly. 'But what is left might be an easy one, rather than one of bloodshed and violence.'

'You think it will come to that?'

'Who knows what will swirl up from the bottom of a stirred kettle?' He went suddenly to my door, and set his hand to the latch. 'That is what I ask

you,' he said quietly. 'To forgo your twirling, Sir Spoon. To let things settle.'
'I cannot.'

He pressed his forehead to the door, a most un-Fool-like gesture. 'Then you shall be the death of kings.' Grieved words in a low voice. 'You know ... what I am. I have told you. I have told you why I am here. This is one thing of which I am sure. The end of the Farseer line was one of the turning points. Kettricken carries an heir. The line will continue. This is what was needed. Cannot an old man be left to die in peace?'

'Regal will not let that heir be born,' I said bluntly. Even the Fool widened his eyes to hear me speak so plain. 'That child will not come to power without a king's hand to shelter under. Shrewd, or Verity. You do not believe Verity is dead. You have as much as said so. Can you let Kettricken endure the torment of believing it is so? Can you let the Six Duchies go down in blood and ruin? What good is an heir to the Farseer throne, if the throne is but a broken chair in a burned-out hall?'

The Fool's shoulders slumped. 'There are a thousand crossroads,' he said quietly. 'Some clear and bold, some shadows within shadows. Some are nigh on certainties; it would take a great army or a vast plague to change those paths. Others are shrouded in fog, and I do not know what roads lead out to them, or to where. You fog me, Bastard. You multiply the futures a thousandfold, just by existing. Catalyst. From some of those fogs go the blackest, twisted threads of damnation, and from others shining twines of gold. To the depths or the heights, it seems, are your paths. I long for a middle path. I long for a simple death for a master who was kind to a freakish, jeering servant.'

He made no more rebuke than that. He lifted the latches and undid the bolts and left quietly. The rich clothing and careful walk made him appear deformed to me, as his motley and capers never had. I closed the door softly behind him and then stood leaning against it as if I could hold the future out.

I prepared myself most carefully for dinner that evening. When I was finally dressed in Mistress Hasty's latest set of clothes for me, I looked almost as fine as the Fool. I had decided that as yet I would not mourn Verity, nor even give the appearance of mourning. As I descended the stairs, it seemed to me that most of the keep was converging on the Great Hall this evening. Evidently all had been summoned to attend, grand folk and humble.

I found myself seated at a table with Burrich and Hands and other of the stable-folk. It was as humble a spot as I had ever been given since King

Shrewd had taken me under his wing, and yet the company was more to my liking than that of the higher tables, for the honoured tables of the Great Hall were packed with folk little known to me, the dukes and visiting nobility of Tilth and Farrow for the most part. There were a scattering of faces I knew, of course. Patience was seated as almost befitted her rank, and Lacey was actually seated at a table above me. I saw no sign of Molly anywhere. There were a scattering of folk from Buckkeep Town, most of them the well-to-do, and most of them seated more favourably than I would have expected. The King was ushered in, leaning on the newly elegant Fool, followed by Kettricken.

Her appearance shocked me. She wore a simple robe of drab brown, and she had cut her hair for mourning. She had left herself less than a hand's-width of hair and, bereft of its rich weight, it stuck out about her head like a dandelion gone to seed. Its colour seemed to have been cut away with its length, leaving it as pale as the Fool's. So accustomed had I been to seeing the heavy gold braids of her hair that her head now appeared oddly small upon her wide shoulders. Her pale blue eyes were made strange by eyelids reddened by weeping. She did not look like a mourning queen. Rather she appeared bizarre, a new kind of Fool for the court. I could see nothing of my queen, nothing of Kettricken in her garden, nothing of the barefoot warrior dancing with her blade; only a foreign woman, newly alone here. Regal, in contrast, was as lavishly clothed as if to go a-courting, and moved as surely as a hunting cat.

What I witnessed that evening was as cleverly-paced and carefully-led as a puppet-play. There was old King Shrewd, doddering and thin, nodding off over his dinner, or making vague and smiling conversation to no one in particular. There was the Queen-in-Waiting, unsmiling, barely eating, silent and mourning. Presiding over it all was Regal, the dutiful son seated next to the failing father, and beside him the Fool, magnificently clad and punctuating Regal's conversation with witticisms to make the Prince's conversation more sparkling than it truly was. The rest of the high table was the Duke and Duchess of Farrow, and the Duke and Duchess of Tilth, and their current favourites among the lesser nobility of those duchies. Bearn's, Rippon and Shoak's duchies were not represented at all.

Following the meat, two toasts were offered to Regal. The first came from Duke Holder of Farrow. He toasted the Prince lavishly, declaring him the defender of the realm, praising his swift action on behalf of Neat Bay

and lauding also his courage in taking the measures necessary for the best interests of the Six Duchies. That made me prick up my ears. But it was all a bit vague, congratulating and praising, but never quite laying out exactly what Regal had decided to do. Had it gone on any longer, it would have been suitable as a eulogy.

Early into the speech, Kettricken had sat up straighter and looked incredulously at Regal, obviously unable to believe that he would quietly nod and smile to praises not his due. If anyone besides myself noticed the Queen's expression, none commented on it. The second toast, predictably, came from Duke Ram of Tilth. He offered a toast to the memory of King-in-Waiting Verity. This was a eulogy, but a condescending one, speaking of all that Verity had attempted and intended and dreamed of and wished for. His achievements already having been heaped on Regal's plate, there was little left to add. Kettricken grew, if anything, whiter and more pinched about the mouth.

I believe that when Duke Ram finished, she was on the verge of rising to speak herself. But Regal arose, almost hastily, holding up his newly-filled glass. He motioned all to silence, then extended that glass toward the Queen.

'Too much has been said of me this night, and too little of our most fair Queen-in-Waiting, Kettricken. She has returned home to find herself most sadly bereaved. Yet I do not think my late brother Verity would wish sorrow for his death to overshadow all that is due his lady by her own effort. Despite her condition,' (and the knowing smile of Regal's face was perilously close to a sneer), 'she deemed it in the best interests of her adopted kingdom to venture forth to confront the Red Ships herself. Doubtless many Raiders fell to her valiant sword. No one can doubt that our soldiers were inspired by the sight of their queen, determined to do battle on their behalf, regardless of what she risked.'

Two spots of high colour began to glow on Kettricken's cheeks. Regal continued, shading his account of Kettricken's deeds with condescension and flattery. The insincerity of his courtier's phrases somehow diminished her deed to something done for show.

I looked in vain for someone at the high table to champion her. For me to rise from my common place and pit my voice against Regal's would have seemed almost more mocking. Kettricken, never sure of her place in her husband's court, and now without him to sustain her, seemed to shrink in on herself. Regal's retelling of her exploits made them seem questionable and

reckless rather than daring and decisive. I saw her dwindle before herself, and knew she would not speak up for herself now. The meal resumed with a very subdued queen attending to the addled King Shrewd beside her, grave and silent to the King's vague efforts at conversation.

But worse was to come. At the end of the meal, Regal once more called for silence. He promised the assembled folk that there would be minstrels and puppeteers to follow the meal, but asked them to endure while he announced but one more thing. After much grave consideration and great consultation, and with great reluctance, he had realized what the attack at Neat Bay had just proven. Buckkeep itself was no longer the safe and secure place it was once. It was certainly no place for anyone of delicate health. And so, a decision had been reached that King Shrewd (and the King lifted up his head and blinked about at the mention of his name) would be journeying inland, to reside in safety at Tradeford on the Vin River in Farrow until his health had improved. Here he paused to lavishly thank Duke Holder of Farrow for making Tradeford Castle available to the royal family. He added too that he was greatly pleased it was so accessible to both the main castles of Farrow and Tilth, for he wished to remain in good contact with these most loyal dukes, who had so often of late journeyed so far to assist him in these troubled, troubled times. It would please Regal to bring the life of the royal court to the ones who had previously had to travel far to enjoy it. Here he paused to accept their nodded thanks and murmurs of continued support. They subsided in immediate obedience when he next raised his hand.

He invited, nay, he entreated, he begged, the Queen-in-Waiting to join King Shrewd there. She would be more safe, she would find it more comfortable, for Tradeford Castle had been built as a home, not a fortress. It would put the minds of her subjects at rest to know that the coming heir and his mother were well-cared-for and well away from the dangerous coast. He promised that every effort would be made to make her feel at home. He promised her a merry court would re-form there. Many many of the furnishings and treasures of Buckkeep were to be moved there when the King went, to make the move less upsetting for him. Regal smiled all the while that he relegated his father to a position of elderly idiot and Kettricken to brood-mare. He dared to pause to hear her acceptance of her fate.

'I cannot,' she said with great dignity. 'Buckkeep is where my Lord Verity left me, and before he did so, he commended it to my care. Here I

shall stay. This is where my child will be born.'

Regal turned his head, ostensibly to hide a smile from her, but actually to display it better to the assemblage. 'Buckkeep shall be well guarded, my lady queen. My own cousin, Lord Bright, heir to Farrow, has expressed an interest in assuming the defence of it. The full militia will be left in place here, for we have no need of them at Tradeford. I doubt that they shall need the assistance of one more woman hampered by her skirts and a burgeoning belly.'

The laughter that erupted shocked me. It was a crude remark, a witticism more worthy of a tavern brawny than a prince in his own keep. It reminded me of nothing so much as of Queen Desire when she was at her worst, inflamed with wine and herbs. Yet they laughed, at the high table, and not a few at the lower tables joined them. Regal's charms and entertainments had served him well. No matter what insult or buffoonery he served up tonight, these fawners would sit and accept it with the meat and wine they gobbled at his table. Kettricken seemed incapable of speech. She actually rose and would have left the table, had not the King reached out a trembling hand. 'Please, my dear,' he said, and his faltering voice carried all too clearly. 'Do not leave me. I wish you at my side.'

'You see, it is the wish of your King,' Regal hastily admonished her, and I doubt that even he could fully token the good luck that had led the King to make such a request of her at such a time. Kettricken sank back unwillingly in her seat. Her lower lip trembled and her face flushed. For one terrifying instant, I thought she would burst into tears. It would have been the final triumph for Regal, a betrayal of her emotional weakness as a breeding female. Instead, she took a deep breath. She turned to the King and spoke low but audibly as she took his hand. 'You are my King, to whom I am sworn. My liege, it shall be as you wish. I shall not leave your side.'

She bowed her head, and Regal nodded affably, and a general outbreak of conversation congratulated itself on her agreement. Regal nattered on a bit longer when the din died down, but he had already achieved his goal. He spoke mostly of the wisdom of his decision, and how Buckkeep would be better able to defend itself without fearing for its monarch. He even had the audacity to suggest that by removing himself and the King and Queen-in-Waiting, he would be making Buckkeep a lesser target for the Raiders, as they would have less to gain by capturing it. It was all a nothing, a winding-down for show. Not long after, the King was taken away, carted off back to

his chamber, his display-duty done. Queen Kettricken excused herself to accompany him. The feast broke down into a general cacophony of entertainments. Kegs of beer were brought out, along with casks of the lesser wines. Various Inland minstrels held forth at opposite corners of the Great Hall, while the Prince and his cohorts chose the amusement of a puppet show, a bawdy piece entitled *The Seduction of the Inn Keeper's Son*. I pushed back my plate and looked to Burrich. Our eyes met, and we rose as one.

TWENTY-SIX

Skilling

‘The Forged ones appeared to be incapable of any emotion. They were not evil, they did not take joy in their wickedness or crimes. When they lost their capacity to feel anything for fellow humans, or any other creatures of the world, they lost their ability to be part of society. An unsympathetic man, a harsh man, an insensitive man still retains enough sensibility to know that he cannot always express how little he cares for others, and still be accepted into the kinship of a family or a village. The Forged ones had lost even the ability to dissemble that they felt nothing for their fellows. Their emotions did not simply stop; they were forgotten, lost to them so entirely that they could not even predict the behaviour of other humans based on emotional reaction.

‘A Skilled one might be seen as the other end of this spectrum. Such a man can reach forth, and tell from afar what others are thinking and feeling. He can, if strongly Skilled, impose his thoughts and feelings on others. In this increased sensitivity to the emotions and thoughts of others, he has a surfeit of what Forged ones lack entirely.

‘King-in-Waiting Verity confided that the Forged ones seemed immune to his Skilling abilities. That is, he could not feel what they felt, nor discover their thoughts. This does not, however, mean that they were insensible to the Skill. Could Verity’s Skilling have been what drew them to Buckkeep? Did his reaching out awaken in them a hunger, a remembrance perhaps of what they had lost? Drawn as they were, through ice and flood, to travel always toward Buckkeep, the motivation must have been intense. And when Verity departed Buckkeep on his quest, the movement of Forged ones toward Buckkeep seemed to abate.’

– Chade Fallstar

We arrived at King Shrewd’s door and knocked. The Fool opened it. I had marked well that Wallace was one of the feasters below, and had

remained when the King had departed. 'Let me in,' I said quietly while the Fool glared at me.

'No,' he said flatly. He started to close the door.

I put my shoulder to it, and Burrich assisted. It was the first and last time I would ever use force against the Fool. I took no joy in proving that I was physically stronger than he was. The look in his eyes as I forced him aside was something no one should ever see in a friend's face.

The King was sitting before his hearth, mumbling rapidly. The Queen-in-Waiting sat desolately beside him, while Rosemary dozed at her feet. Kettricken rose from her seat to regard us with surprise. 'FitzChivalry?' she asked quietly.

I went swiftly to her side. 'I have much to explain, and a very little time in which to do it. For what I need to do must be done now, tonight.' I paused, tried to decide how best to explain it to her. 'Do you remember when you pledged yourself to Verity?'

'Of course!' She looked at me as if I were crazy.

'He used August, then, a coterie member, to come and stand with you in your mind, to show you his heart. Do you remember that?'

She coloured. 'Of course I do. But I did not think anyone else knew exactly what had happened then.'

'Few did.' I looked around, to find Burrich and the Fool following the conversation wide-eyed.

'Verity Skilled to you, through August. He is strong in the Skill. You know that, you know how he guards our coasts with it. It is an ancestral magic, a talent of the Farseer line. Verity inherited it from his father. And I inherited a measure of it from mine.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because I do not believe Verity is dead. King Shrewd used to be strong in the Skill, I am told. That is no longer the case. His illness has stolen it away, as it has stolen so many other things. But, if we can persuade him to try, if we can rouse him to the effort, I can offer him my strength to sustain him. He may be able to reach Verity.'

'It will kill him.' The Fool spoke his challenge flatly. 'I have heard of what the Skill takes out of a man. My king has not that left to give.'

'I don't think it will. If we reach Verity, Verity will break it off before it hurts his father. More than once, he has drawn back from draining my strength, to be sure of not injuring me.'

‘Even a Fool can see the failure of your logic.’ The Fool tugged at the cuffs of his fine new shirt. ‘If you reach Verity, how will we know it is true, and not a show?’

I opened my mouth in an angry protest, but the Fool held up a forbidding hand. ‘Of course, my dear, dear Fitz, we should all believe you, as you are our friend, who has only our very best interests at heart. But there may be a few others prone to doubt your word, or regard you as so selfless.’ His sarcasm bit at me like acid, but I managed to stand silent. ‘And if you don’t reach Verity, what do we have? An exhausted and drained king to be further flaunted about as incapable. A grieving queen, who must wonder, in addition to all her other pains, if perhaps she grieves for a man who is not dead yet. That is the worst type of grieving there is. No. We gain nothing, even if you succeed, for our belief in you would not be enough to stop the wheels that are already turning. And we have much to lose if you fail. Too much.’

Their eyes were on me. There was question even in Burrich’s dark eyes, as if he debated the wisdom of what he had urged me to do. Kettricken stood very still, trying not to pounce on the bare bone of hope that I had thrown at her feet. I wished that I had waited, to talk first with Chade. I suspected I would never have another chance after this night, to have these people in this room, Wallace out of the way and Regal busy below. It had to be now or it would not be.

I looked at the only one who was not watching me. King Shrewd idly watched the leap and play of the flames in his hearth. ‘He is still the King,’ I said quietly. ‘Let us ask him, and let him decide.’

‘Not fair! He is not himself!’ The Fool flung himself between us. He stood high on his feet to try to look me in the eye. ‘On the herbs fed him, he is as tractable as a plough horse. Ask him to cut his own throat, and he’ll wait for you to hand him the knife.’

‘No.’ The voice quavered. It had lost its timbre and resonance. ‘No, my Fool, I am not so far gone as that.’

We waited, breathless, but King Shrewd spoke no more. At last I slowly crossed the room. I crouched down beside him, tried to make his eyes meet mine. ‘King Shrewd?’ I begged.

His eyes came to mine, darted away, came back unwillingly. At last he looked at me.

‘Have you heard all we have said? My king, do you believe Verity is dead?’

He parted his lips. His tongue was greyish behind them. He took a long breath. ‘Regal told me Verity is dead. He had word ...’

‘From where?’ I asked gently.

He shook his head slowly. ‘A messenger ... I think.’

I turned to the others. ‘It would have to have come by messenger. From the mountains, for Verity must be there by now. He was nearly in the mountains when Burrich was sent back. I do not believe a messenger would come all the way from the mountains, and not stay to convey such news to Kettricken herself.’

‘It might have come by relay,’ Burrich said unwillingly. ‘For one man and one horse, it is too exhausting a trip. A rider would have to exchange horses. Or pass on the word to another rider, who would go on, on a swift horse. The last is most likely.’

‘Perhaps. But how long would such word take, to come to us all the way from the mountains? I know Verity was alive on the day Bearns departed here. Because that was when King Shrewd used me to speak to him. That night when I all but fainted on this hearth. That was what had happened, Fool.’ I paused. ‘I believe I felt him with me during the battle at Neat Bay.’

I saw Burrich count back the days in his mind. He shrugged unwillingly. ‘It is still possible. If Verity were killed that day, and word were sent out immediately, and the riders and horses were both good ... it could be so. Barely.’

‘I don’t believe it.’ I turned to the rest of them, tried to force my hope into them. ‘I don’t believe Verity is dead.’ I turned my eyes up to King Shrewd once more. ‘Do you? Do you believe your son could have died, and you not feel anything?’

‘Chivalry ... went like that. Like a fading whisper. “Father”, he said, I think. Father.’

A silence seeped into the room. I waited, crouched on my heels, for my king’s decision. Slowly his hand lifted, as if it had a life of its own. It crossed the small space to me, rested on my shoulder. For a moment that was all. Just the weight of my king’s hand on my shoulder. King Shrewd shifted slightly in his chair. He took a breath through his nostrils.

I closed my eyes and we plunged into the black river again. Once more I faced the desperate young man trapped in King Shrewd's dying body. We tumbled together in the sweeping current of the world. 'There's no one here. No one here but us any more.' Shrewd sounded lonely.

I couldn't find myself. I had no body, no tongue here. He held me under with him in the rush and the roar. I could hardly think at all, let alone remember what little of the Skill lessons I had retained from Galen's harsh instruction. It was like trying to recite a memorized speech while being throttled. I gave up. I gave it all up. Then from somewhere, like a feather floating in a breeze, or a mote dancing in a sunbeam, came Verity's voice telling me, 'Being open is simply not being closed.'

The whole world was a spaceless place, all things inside of all other things. I did not say his name aloud or think of his face. Verity was there, had always been right there and joining him was effortless. *You live!*

Of course. But you won't, spilling all over like this. You're pouring out everything you have in one gush. Regulate your strength. Be precise. He steadied me, shaped me back into myself, then gasped in recognition.

Father!

Verity pushed at me roughly. *Get back! Let go of him, he hasn't the strength for this. You're draining him, you idiot! Let go!*

It was like being *repelled* but rougher. When I found myself and opened my eyes, I was sprawled on my side before the fireplace. My face was uncomfortably close to it. I rolled over, groaning, and saw the King. His lips were puffing in and out with each breath, and there was a bluish cast to his skin. Burrich and Kettricken and the Fool were a helpless circle standing about him. 'Do ... something!' I gasped up at them.

'What?' demanded the Fool, believing I knew.

I floundered about in my mind, came up with the only remedy I could recall. 'Elfbark,' I croaked. The edges of the room kept turning black. I shut my eyes and listened to them panicking about. Slowly I understood what I had done. I had Skilled.

I had tapped my king's strength to do it.

You will be the death of kings, the Fool had told me. A prophecy or a shrewd guess? A Shrewd guess. Tears came to my eyes.

I smelled elfbark tea. Plain strong elfbark, no ginger or mint to disguise it. I prised my eyes open a crack.

'It's too hot!' hissed the Fool.

‘It cools quickly in the spoon,’ Burrich insisted, and ladled some into the King’s mouth. He took it in, but I did not see him swallow. With the casual expertise of years in the stables, Burrich tugged gently at the King’s lower jaw, and then stroked his throat. He ladled another spoonful into his slack mouth. Not much was happening.

Kettricken came to crouch by me. She lifted my head to her knee, put a hot cup to my mouth. I sucked at it, too hot, I didn’t care, I sucked in air with it, noisily. I swallowed it, fought choking against its bitterness. The darkness receded. The cup came back, I sipped again. It was strong enough to nearly numb my tongue. I looked up at Kettricken, found her eyes. I managed a tiny nod.

‘He lives?’ she asked softly.

‘Yes.’ It was all I could manage.

‘He lives!’ She cried it out aloud to the others, joy in her voice.

‘My father!’ Regal shouted the words. He stood swaying in the door, face red with drink and anger. Behind him I glimpsed his guard, and little Rosemary peeping around the corner, wide-eyed. Somehow she managed to slip past the men, to race to Kettricken and clutch at her skirts. For an instant, our tableau held.

Then Regal swept into the room, ranting, demanding, questioning but giving no one a chance to speak. Kettricken kept a protective crouch beside me, or I swear Regal’s guards would have had me again. Above me, in his chair, the King had a bit of colour again in his face. Burrich put another spoonful of tea to his lips, and I was relieved to see him sip at it.

Regal was not. ‘What are you giving him? Stop that! I won’t have my father poisoned by a stable-hand!’

‘The King had another attack, my prince,’ the Fool said suddenly. His voice cut through the chaos in the room, made a hole that became a silence. ‘Elfbark tea is a common restorative. I am sure that even Wallace has heard of it.’

The Prince was drunk. He was not sure if he was being mocked or conciliated. He glared at the Fool, who smiled benignly back.

‘Oh.’ He said it grudgingly, not really wishing to be mollified. ‘Well, what then of him?’ He gestured at me in anger.

‘Drunk.’ Kettricken stood up, letting my head drop to the floor with a convincing thump. Flashes of light marred my vision. There was only disgust in her voice. ‘Stablemaster. Get him out of here. You should have

stopped him before he got this far. Next time, see that you use your judgement when he has none of his own.'

'Our Stablemaster is well known for having his own taste for the cup, lady queen. I suspect they have been at it together,' Regal sneered.

'The news of Verity's death hit him hard,' Burrich said simply. He was true to himself, offering an explanation, but no excuse. He took hold of my shirt-front, jerked me from the floor. With no effort at play-acting, I swayed on my feet until he gripped me more firmly. I caught a passing glimpse of the Fool hastily spooning another dose of elfbark into the King. I prayed no one would interrupt him. As Burrich ushered me roughly out of the room, I heard Queen Kettricken rebuking Regal, saying he should be below with his guests, and promising that she and the Fool could get the King to bed. As we were going up the stairs, I heard Regal and his guard going down. He was still muttering and then ranting, complaining that he was not stupid, he could tell a plot when he saw one. It worried me, but I was fairly certain he had no real idea of what had been going on.

At my door, I was well enough to work my latches. Burrich followed me in. 'If I had a dog that was sick as often as you are, I'd put it down,' he observed kindly. 'Do you need more elfbark?'

'It wouldn't hurt me. But in a gentler dose. Do you have any ginger or mint or rosehips?'

He gave me a look. I sat on my chair while he poked at the pathetic embers in my fireplace until he got them to glow. He built up a fire, put water in the kettle and set it to heat. He found a pot and put in the flaked elfbark, then found a mug and wiped the dust out of it. He set the things out ready, then looked about himself. Something like disgust was on his face. 'Why do you live like this?' he demanded.

'Like what?'

'In so bare a room, with so little care for it? I've seen winter-quarter tents that were cosier than this room. It's as if you've never expected to stay here more than a night or two longer.'

I shrugged. 'I've never given it much thought.'

There was a silence for a bit. 'You should,' he said unwillingly. 'And you should think about how often you're hurt, or sick.'

'This, what happened tonight, this couldn't be helped.'

'You knew what it would do to you, but you went ahead with it anyway,' he pointed out.

‘I had to.’ I watched him pour steaming water over the elfbark in the pot.

‘Did you? It seemed to me the Fool had a pretty convincing argument against it. Yet you went ahead. You and King Shrewd, both of you.’

‘So?’

‘I know a bit about the Skill,’ Burrich said quietly, ‘I was King’s Man to Chivalry. Not often, and it did not leave me as bad as you are now, save for once or twice. But I’ve felt the excitement of it, the –’ he groped for words, sighed. ‘The completion of it. The oneness with the world. Chivalry once spoke to me about it. A man can get addicted, he said. So that he looks for excuses to Skill, and then finally he is absorbed into it.’ He added after a moment, ‘It is not unlike the rush of battle, in some ways. The sense of moving unhampered by time, of being a force more powerful than life itself.’

‘As I cannot Skill alone, I dare say it is not a danger to me.’

‘You offer yourself very often to those who can.’ Bluntly spoken. ‘As often as you willingly plunge yourself into dangerous situations that offer that same kind of excitement. In a battle, you go into a frenzy. Is that what happens to you when you Skill?’

I had never considered the two together in such a light. Something like fear nibbled at me. I pushed it aside.

‘To be a King’s Man is my duty. Besides, was not this evening your suggestion?’

‘It was. But I would have let the Fool’s words dissuade us from it. You were determined. You put no value at all on what it would do to you. Perhaps you should have a care for yourself.’

‘I know what I’m doing.’ I spoke more sharply than I intended, and Burrich did not reply. He poured the tea he had made, and handed it to me with a ‘see what I mean’ look on his face. I took the mug and stared into the fire. He sat down on my clothing chest.

‘Verity is alive,’ I said quietly.

‘So I heard the Queen say. I had never believed he was dead.’ He accepted it very calmly. As calmly as he added, ‘But we have no proof.’

‘Proof? I spoke to him. The King spoke to him. Isn’t that enough?’

‘For me, more than enough. For most other folks, well ...’

‘When the King recovers, he will bear me out. Verity lives.’

‘I doubt it will be enough to prevent Regal from proclaiming himself King-in-Waiting. The ceremony is scheduled for next week. I think he would

have done it tonight, save that every duke must be present to witness it.'

Elfbark battling with exhaustion, or simply the unrelenting march of events suddenly made the room tilt around me. I felt I had thrown myself in front of a wagon to stop it, and instead it had rolled over me. The Fool had been right. What I had done tonight counted for little, save the peace of mind it brought Kettricken. A sudden welling of despair filled me. I set down my empty cup. The Six Duchies kingdom was falling apart. My King-in-Waiting Verity would return to a mockery of what he had left: a sundered country, a ravaged coastline, a plundered and empty keep. Perhaps if I had believed in Elderlings, I could have found some way to believe it would all come out right. All I could see now was my failure.

Burrich was looking at me oddly. 'Go to bed,' he suggested. 'A bleak spirit is sometimes what follows an over-indulgence in elfbark. Or so I have heard.'

I nodded. To myself, I wondered if that might account for Verity's often dour moods.

'Get some real rest. In the morning, things may look better.' He gave a bark of laughter and smiled wolfishly. 'Then again, they may not. But the rest will at least leave you better prepared to face them.' He paused, sobering. 'Molly came to my room, earlier.'

'Is she all right?' I demanded to know.

'Bringing candles she knew I did not need,' Burrich went on as if I had not spoken. 'Almost as if she wanted an excuse to speak to me ...'

'What did she say?' I rose from my chair.

'Not very much. She is always very correct with me. I am very direct with her. I simply told her you missed her.'

'And she said?'

'Nothing.' He grinned. 'But she blushes very prettily.' He sighed, suddenly serious. 'And, as directly, I asked her if anyone had given her any further cause to fear. She squared her little shoulders and tucked in her chin as if I was trying to force a bit in her teeth. She said she thanked me kindly for my concern, as she had before, but that she was capable of seeing to herself.' In a quieter voice, he asked, 'Will she ask for help if she needs it?'

'I don't know,' I confessed. 'She has her own store of courage. Her own way of fighting. She turns and confronts things. Me, I slink about and try to hamstring them when they aren't looking. Sometimes, she makes me feel a coward.'

Burrich stood up, stretching so that his shoulders cracked. ‘You’re no coward, Fitz. I’ll vouch for you there. Perhaps you just understand odds better than she does. I wish I could put your mind at rest about her. I can’t. I’ll watch over her as well as I can. As much as she’ll let me.’ He gave me a sideways glance. ‘Hands asked me today who the pretty lady is who calls on me so often.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Nothing. I just looked at him.’

I knew the look. There would be no more questions from Hands.

Burrich left and I sprawled on my bed, trying to rest. I could not. I made my body be still, reasoning that at least my flesh would take some rest, even if my mind persisted in rattling on. A better man’s thoughts would have been solely of his king’s plight. I am afraid a good share of mine went to Molly, alone in her room. When I could stand it no more, I rose from my bed and ghosted out into the keep.

Sounds of dying revelry still drifted up from the Great Hall below. The corridor was empty. I ventured silently toward the stairs. I told myself I would be very, very careful, that all I would do was tap at her door, perhaps go in for a few moments, just to see she was all right. No more than that. Just the briefest of visits ...

You are followed. Nighteyes’ new caution of Burrich made his voice but the tiniest whisper in my head.

I did not halt. That would have let my follower know I was suspicious. Instead I scratched my shoulder, making it an excuse to swivel my head about and glance behind me. I saw no one.

Snuff.

I did, a short breath followed by a deeper intake. A bare scent on the air. Sweat and garlic. I quested gently and my blood went cold. There, at the far end of the hall, concealed in a doorway. Will. Dark, slender Will, with his eyes always half-lidded. The coterie member who had been recalled from Bearns. Very cautiously I touched the Skill shield that hid him from me, a subtle bidding that I not notice him, a quiet scent of self-confidence sent my way to bolster me in doing whatever I wished to do. Very guileful. Very artful, much more delicate a touch than either Serene or Justin had ever shown me.

A much more dangerous man.

I went to the landing of the stairs, and took candles from the extra ones stored there, then returned to my room as if that had been my sole errand.

When I closed my door behind me, my mouth was dry. I sighed out a shuddering breath. I forced myself to examine the guards that warded my mind. He had not been in me, that I could tell. He was not sniffing out my thoughts then, but only imposing his on me to make it easier for him to shadow me. Had it not been for Nighteyes, he would have followed me right to Molly's door tonight. I forced myself to lie down on my bed again, to try to recall all of my actions since Will had returned to Buckkeep. I had been dismissing him as an enemy simply because he did not radiate the hatred for me as Serene and Justin did. He had always been a quiet and unimposing youth. He had grown to be an unremarkable man, scarce worth anyone's attention.

I had been a fool.

I do not think he has followed you before. But I cannot be sure either.

Nighteyes, my brother. How do I thank you?

Stay alive. A pause. And bring me ginger cake.

You shall have it, I promised fervently.

Burrich's fire had burned low and I still had not slept when I felt Chade's draught sweep through my room. It was almost a relief to rise and go to him.

I found him awaiting me impatiently, pacing about his small room. He pounced on me as I came out of the stairwell.

'An assassin is a tool,' he informed me in a hiss. 'Somehow, I never got that across to you. We are tools. We do not do anything of our own volition.'

I stopped still, shocked at the anger in his voice. 'I haven't killed anyone!' I said indignantly.

'Shush! Speak softly. I would not be too sure of that, were I you,' he replied. 'How many times have I done my job, not by putting the knife in myself, but simply by giving someone else sufficient reason and opportunity to do it for me?'

I said nothing.

He looked at me and sighed, the anger and strength going out of him. Softly he said, 'Sometimes, the best you can do is just salvagework. Sometimes we have to resign ourselves to that. We are not the ones to set the wheels in motion, boy. What you did tonight was ill-considered.'

‘So the Fool and Burchard have both told me. I don’t think Kettricken would agree.’

‘Kettricken and her child could both have lived with her grief. As could King Shrewd. Look at what they were. A foreign woman, widow of a dead King-in-Waiting, mother of a child that isn’t visible yet, and will be unable to wield power for years to come. Regal judged Shrewd to be but a doddering helpless old man, useful as a puppet perhaps, but harmless enough. Regal had no immediate reason to put them aside. Oh, I agree Kettricken’s position was not as secure as it could be, but she was not in direct opposition to Regal. That is where she is now.’

‘She did not tell him what we had discovered,’ I said unwillingly.

‘She did not have to. It will show, in her bearing and in her will to resist him. He had reduced her to a widow. You have restored her to a Queen-in-Waiting. But it is for Shrewd that I worry. Shrewd is the one who holds the key, who can stand up and say, even in a whisper, “Verity still lives, Regal has no right to be King-in-Waiting”. He is the one Regal must fear.’

‘I have seen Shrewd, Chade. Really seen him. I do not think he will betray what he knows. Beneath that faltering body, beneath the numbing drugs and the savage pain, there is a shrewd man still.’

‘Perhaps. But he is buried deep. Drugs, and pain even more so, will drive a sagacious man to foolish acts. A man dying of his wounds will leap to his horse to lead a last charge. Pain can make a man take risks, or assert himself in strange ways.’

What he was saying made all too much sense. ‘Cannot you counsel him against letting Regal know that he knows Verity is alive?’

‘I could try, perhaps. Were not that damnable Wallace always in my way. It was not so bad at first; at first, he was tractable and useful, easy to manipulate from afar. He never knew I was behind the herbs the peddlers brought him; never even suspected I existed. But now he clings to the King like a limpet, and not even the Fool can drive him away for long. I seldom have more than a few minutes with Shrewd at a time any more. And I am lucky if my brother is lucid for half of them.’

There was something in his voice. I lowered my head, shamed. ‘I am sorry,’ I said quietly. ‘Sometimes I forget that he is more to you than just your king.’

‘Well. We were never really that close, that way. But we are two old men, who have grown old together. Sometimes that is a greater closeness.’

We have come through time to your day and age. We can talk together, quietly, and share memories of a time that exists no more. I can tell you how it was, but it is not the same. It is like being two foreigners, trapped in a land we have come to, unable to return to our own, and having only each other to confirm the reality of the place where we once lived. At least, once we could.'

I thought of two children running wild on the beaches of Buckkeep, plucking shell off the rocks and eating them raw. Molly and me. It was possible to be homesick for a time, and to be lonely for the only other person who could recall it. I nodded.

'Ah. Well. Tonight we contemplate salvage. Now. Listen to me. On this I must have your word. You will take not actions of major consequence without conferring with me first. Agreed?'

I looked down. 'I want to say yes. I am willing to agree to it. But lately even small actions of mine seem to take on consequences like a pebble on a landslide. And events pile up, to where I have to make a choice suddenly, with no chance to consult anyone else. So I cannot promise. But I will promise to try. Is that enough?'

'I suppose. Catalyst.' He muttered.

'So the Fool calls me too,' I complained.

Chade stopped abruptly in the midst of starting to say something. 'Does he really?' he asked intently.

'He clubs me with the word every chance he gets.' I walked down to Chade's hearth and sat down before his fire. The heat felt good. 'Burrich says that too strong a dose of elfbark can lead to bleak spirits afterwards.'

'Do you find it so?'

'Yes. But it could be the circumstances. Yet Verity seemed often depressed, and he uses it frequently. Again, it could be the circumstances.'

'It may be we shall never know.'

'You speak very freely tonight. Naming names, ascribing motives.'

'All is gaiety in the Great Hall tonight. Regal was certain he had bagged his game. All his watches were relaxed, all his spies given a night's liberty.' He looked at me sourly. 'I am sure it will not be the same again for a while.'

'So you think what we say here can be listened to.'

'Anywhere I can listen and peep, from there it is possible I could be overheard and spied upon. Only just possible. But one does not get to be as old as I am by taking chances.'

An old memory suddenly made sense. 'You once told me that in the Queen's Garden, you are blind.'

'Exactly.'

'So you did not know ...'

'I did not know what Galen was putting you through, at the time he was doing it. I was privy to gossip, much of it unreliable and all of it far after the fact. But on the night he beat you and left you to die ... No.' He looked at me strangely. 'Had you believed I could know of such a thing, and take no action?'

'You had promised not to interfere with my instruction,' I said stiffly.

Chade took his chair, leaned back with a sigh. 'I don't think you will ever completely trust anyone. Or believe that someone cares about you.'

Silence filled me. I didn't know the answer. First Burrich and now Chade, forcing me to look at myself in uncomfortable ways.

'Ah, well,' Chade conceded to my silence. 'As I began to say earlier. Salvage.'

'What do you want me to do?'

He breathed out through his nose. 'Nothing.'

'But ...'

'Absolutely nothing. Remember this at all times. King-in-Waiting Verity is dead. Live that belief. Believe that Regal has the right to claim his spot, believe he has the right to do all the things he does. Placate him for now, give him nothing to fear. We must make him believe he has won.'

I thought for a moment. Then I stood and drew my belt knife.

'What are you doing?' Chade demanded.

'What Regal would expect me to do, did I truly believe Verity was dead.' I reached to the back of my head, to where a leather thong bound my hair back in a warrior's tail.

'I have shears,' Chade pointed out in annoyance. He went and got them and stood behind me. 'How much?'

I considered. 'As extreme as I can be, short of mourning him as a crowned king.'

'Are you sure?'

'It's what Regal would expect of me.'

'That's true, I suppose.' With a single clip, Chade took off my hair at the knot. It felt strange to have it suddenly fall forward, short, not even to my

jaw. As if I were a page again. I reached up and felt its shortness as I asked him, 'What will you be doing?'

'Trying to find a safe place for Kettricken and the King. I must make all things ready for their flight. When they go, they must vanish like shadows when the light comes.'

'Are you sure this is necessary?'

'What else is left for us? They are no more than hostages now. Powerless. The Inland dukes have turned to Regal, the Coastal dukes have lost faith in King Shrewd. Kettricken has made herself allies amongst them, however. I must tug at the strings she has spun, and see what I can arrange. At least we can see them placed where their safety cannot be used against Verity when he comes back to reclaim his crown.'

'If he returns,' I said gloomily.

'When. The Elderlings will be with him.' Chade looked at me sourly. 'Try to believe in something, boy. For my sake.'

Without a doubt, the time that I spent under Galen's tutelage was the worst period of my life at Buckkeep. But the week that followed that night with Chade runs a close second. We were an ant-hill, kicked apart. No matter where I went in the keep, there were constant reminders that the foundations of my life had been shattered. Nothing would ever be as it was before.

There was a great influx of folk from the Inland duchies, come to witness Regal becoming King-in-Waiting. Had not our stables been so depleted already, it would have taxed Burch and Hands to keep up with them. As it was, it seemed as if Inlanders were everywhere, tall, tow-headed Farrow men, and brawny Tilth farmers and cattlemen. They were a bright contrast to the glum Buckkeep soldiers with their mourning-cropped hair. Not a few clashes occurred. The grumble from Buckkeep Town took the form of jests comparing the invasion of the Inlanders to the raids of the Outlanders. The humour had always a bitter edge.

For the counterpoint to this influx of folk and business in Buckkeep Town was the outflow of goods from Buckkeep. Rooms were stripped shamelessly. Tapestries and rugs, furniture and tools, supplies of all kinds were drained out of the keep, to be loaded on barges and taken upriver to Tradeford, always to be 'kept safe' or 'for the comfort of the King'. Mistress Hasty was at her wits' end to house so many guests when half the furniture was being hauled off to barges. Some days it seemed that Regal was

attempting to see that all he could not carry off with him was devoured before he left.

At the same time, he was sparing no expense to be sure that his crowning as King-in-Waiting would be as full of pomp and ceremony as possible. I truly did not know why he bothered with it at all. To me, at least, it seemed plain he planned on abandoning four of the six duchies to their own devices. But as the Fool had once warned me, there was no point to trying to measure Regal's wheat with my bushels. We had no common standard. Perhaps to insist the dukes and nobles of Bearns and Rippon and Shoaks come to witness him assume Verity's crown was some subtle form of revenge I could not understand. Little enough did he care what hardship it worked upon them to come to Buckkeep at a time when their shores were so beleaguered. I was not surprised that they were slow to arrive, and that when they did, they were shocked at the sacking of Buckkeep. Word of Regal's plan to remove himself and the King and Kettricken had not been spread to the Coastal duchies by any other means than rumour.

But long before the Coastal dukes arrived, while I still endured the greater general chaos, the rest of my life began to rattle into pieces. Serene and Justin began to haunt me. I was aware of them, often physically following me, but just as often Skilling at the edges of my consciousness. They were like pecking birds come after any loose thoughts I might have, snatching at casual daydreams or any unguarded moment of my life. That was bad enough. But I saw them now as only the distraction, the diversion created to keep me from being aware of Will's more subtle haunting. So I set my guards most strongly about my mind, knowing well I probably shielded out Verity as well. I feared this was their actual intent, but dared reveal that fear to no one. I watched constantly behind myself, using every sense Nighteyes and I possessed. I vowed I would be more wary, and set myself the task of discovering what the other coterie members worked at. Burl was at Tradeford, ostensibly helping prepare the place for King Shrewd's comfort. I had no idea where Carrod was, and there was no one I could ask discreetly. The only thing I could discover for certain was that he was no longer on the *Constance*. So I worried. And became almost mad with worry that I did not detect Will shadowing after me any more. Did he know I had become aware of him? Or was he so good I could not detect him? I began to live my life as if every move I made were watched.

Horses and breeding stock were not all that was taken from the stables. Burrich told me one morning that Hands was gone. He had not time to bid anyone goodbye. 'They took the last of the good stock yesterday. The best is long gone, but these were good horses, and they were taking them overland to Tradeford. Hands was simply told he was to go along. He came to me, protesting, but I told him to go. At least the horses will have well-trained hands taking care of them in their new home. Besides, there is nothing for him here. There is no stable left for anyone to be Stablemaster over.'

I followed him silently on what had once been our morning rounds. The mews held only ancient or injured birds. The clamour of dogs had been reduced to a sparse baying and a few yips. The horses that remained were the unsound, the almost promising, the past their prime, the injured that had been kept in the hopes of breeding something from them. When I came to Sooty's empty stall, my heart stood still. I could not speak. I leaned on her manger, my face in my hands. Burrich put a hand on my shoulder. When I looked up at him, he smiled oddly. He shook his cropped head. 'They came for her and Ruddy yesterday. I told them they were fools, they had taken them last week. And truly they were fools, for they believed me. They did get your saddle.'

'Where?' I managed to ask.

'Better you don't know,' Burrich said darkly. 'One of us dangling as a horse thief would be quite enough.' No more would he say of it to me.

A late afternoon visit to Patience and Lacey was not the quiet interlude I had hoped for. I knocked, and there was an uncharacteristic pause before the door was opened. I found the sitting room in a shambles, worse than I had ever seen it, and Lacey dispiritedly trying to put things to rights. A great many more things were on the floor than usual.

'A new project?' I hazarded, attempting a bit of levity.

Lacey looked at me glumly. 'They came this morning to take my lady's table away. And my bed. They claimed they were needed for guests. Well, I shouldn't be surprised, with so much of the rest of the things gone upriver. But I greatly doubt that we'll see either item again.'

'Well, perhaps they'll be waiting for you when you get to Tradeford,' I suggested inanely. I had not realized the whole extent of the liberties Regal was taking.

There was a very long silence before Lacey spoke. 'Then they'll wait a long time, FitzChivalry. We are not among those to be taken to Tradeford.'

‘No. We’re among the odd folk to be left here, with the oddments of furniture.’ This from Patience as she abruptly re-entered the room. Her eyes were red and her cheeks pale, and I suddenly knew she had hidden herself when I first knocked until she had her tears under control.

‘Then surely you shall return to Withywoods,’ I suggested. My mind was working very swiftly. I had assumed that Regal was moving the entire household to Tradeford. Now I wondered who else was to be abandoned here. I put myself at the head of the list. I added Burrich and Chade. The Fool? Perhaps that was why he seemed lately to be Regal’s creature. That he might be allowed to follow the King to Tradeford.

Odd, how I had not even considered that the King and Kettricken were to be whisked not only out of Chade’s reach, but mine. Regal had renewed his orders confining me to Buckkeep itself. I had not wanted to trouble Kettricken to override them. I had, after all, promised Chade not to make waves.

‘I cannot return to Withywoods. August rules there, the King’s nephew, he who was head of Galen’s coterie, before his accident. He has no fondness for me, and I have no right to demand to be there. No. We shall be staying here, and making the best we can of it.’

I floundered for whatever comfort I could offer. ‘I have a bed still. I shall have it brought down here for Lacey. Burrich will help me bring it.’

Lacey shook her head. ‘I’ve made up a pallet, and I’ll be comfortable enough. Keep it where it is. Perhaps they daren’t take it from you. Were it down here, no doubt it would just be carried off tomorrow.’

‘Has King Shrewd no care for what is happening?’ Lady Patience asked of me sadly.

‘I do not know. All are turned away from his door these days. Regal has said he is too ill to see anyone.’

‘I thought perhaps it was just me he would not see. Ah, well. Poor man. To lose two sons, and see his kingdom come to this. Tell me, how is Queen Kettricken? I have not had a chance to go see her.’

‘Well enough, last I saw her. Grieved by her husband’s death, of course, but ...’

‘Then she was not injured in her fall? I feared she would miscarry.’ Patience turned aside from me, to gaze at a wall bereft of a familiar tapestry. ‘I was too cowardly to go and see her myself, if you would know the truth. I

know too well the pain of losing a child before you have held it in your arms.'

'Her fall?' I said stupidly.

'Had not you heard? On those awful steps coming down from the Queen's Garden. There was talk that some statuary had been removed from the gardens, and she had gone up to see what, and on her way back down she fell. Not a great tumbling fall, but heavily. On her back on those stone steps.'

I could not keep my mind on Patience's conversation after that. Much of it centred on the depletion of the libraries, a thing I did not wish to think of anyway. As soon as I graciously could, I excused myself, on the flimsy promise that I would bring them direct word of the Queen.

I was turned away from Kettricken's door. Several ladies told me at once not to fret, not to worry, she was fine, but she needed to rest, oh, but it was terrible ... I endured enough to be sure that she had not miscarried, then fled.

But I did not go back to Patience. Not yet. Instead, I slowly climbed the stairs to the Queen's Garden. I carried a lamp with me, and went most carefully. On the tower top, I found it was as I had feared. The smaller and more valuable of the statuary had been removed. Only the sheer weight had saved the larger pieces, I was sure. The missing bits took away the careful balance of Kettricken's creation, and added to the desolation of the garden in winter. I shut the door carefully behind me and went down the steps. Ever so slowly. Ever so carefully. On the ninth step down, I found it. I nearly discovered it as Kettricken had. But I caught my balance and then crouched low to study the step. Lamp-black had been mixed with the grease, to take the sheen off it and blend it with the well-used steps. It was right where the foot would most naturally fall, especially if one were hastening down the stairs in a temper. Close enough to the tower top that a slip could be blamed on slush or mud from the gardens still on a shoe. I rubbed at the black on the step that came off on my fingers, then sniffed at it.

'A fine bit of pork fat,' observed the Fool. I leapt to my feet and nearly fell down the steps. A wild pinwheeling of my arms brought my balance back.

'Interesting. Do you think you could teach me to do that?'

'Not funny, Fool. I have been followed of late, and my nerves are a jangle.' I peered down the stairwell into the darkness. If the Fool had crept

up on me, could not Will? ‘How’s the King?’ I demanded quietly. If this attempt had been made on Kettricken, I had no faith in Shrewd’s safety.

‘You tell me.’ The Fool stepped out of the shadows. Gone were his fine clothes, replaced with an old motley of blue and red. It went well with the new bruises that mottled one side of his face. On his right cheek, the flesh had been split. One arm carried the other close to his chest. I suspected a dislocated shoulder.

‘Not again,’ I gasped.

‘Exactly what I said to them. They paid small attention. Some folk just have not the knack of conversation.’

‘What happened? I thought you and Regal ...’

‘Yes, well, not even a Fool can seem stupid enough to please Regal. I did not wish to leave King Shrewd’s side today. They were questioning him relentlessly about what had happened the night of the feast. I became perhaps a trifle too witty in suggesting other ways they might amuse themselves. They threw me out.’

My heart sank in me. I was sure I knew exactly which guard had assisted him out the door. It was as Burrich had always warned me. One could never know what Regal might dare. ‘What did the King tell them?’

‘Ah! Not, was the King all right? or was the King recovering? No. Only “what did the King tell them?” Do you fear your precious hide is in danger, princeling?’

‘No.’ I could feel no resentment at his question, or even how he phrased it. I deserved it. I had not taken good care of our friendship lately. Despite that, when he needed help, he had come to me. ‘No. But as long as the King says nothing of Verity being alive, then Regal has no reason to ...’

‘My king was being ... taciturn. It had started out as a pleasant conversation between father and son, with Regal telling him how pleased he should be to have him finally as King-in-Waiting. King Shrewd was rather vague, as he often is these days. Something about it irritated Regal, and he began to accuse him of not being pleased, or even being opposed. Finally he began to insist there was a plot, a conspiracy to see that he never came to the throne. No man is so dangerous as the man who cannot decide what he fears. Regal is that man. Even Wallace was put ajar by his rantings. He had brought the King one of his brews, to deaden his mind along with his pain, but as he brought it near, Regal dashed it from his hands. He then spun on the poor trembling Wall’s Ass and accused him of being part of the

conspiracy. He claimed Wallace had intended to drug our king to keep him from speaking what he knew. He ordered Wallace from the room, saying the King would have no need of him until he had seen fit to speak plainly to his son. He ordered me out as well, then. My reluctance to leave was overcome by a couple of his hulking Inland ploughmen.'

A creeping dread rose in me. I remembered my moment of sharing the King's pain. Regal would remorselessly watch while that pain crept past the numbing herbs to overwhelm his father. I could not imagine a man being capable of this. Yet I knew Regal would do it. 'When did this happen?'

'Just an hour or so ago. You are not an easy person to find.'

I looked more closely at the Fool. 'Go down to the stables, to Burrich. See what he can do for you.' The healer, I knew would not touch the Fool. Like many around the keep, he feared his strange appearance.

'What will you be doing?' the Fool asked quietly.

'I don't know,' I replied honestly. This was exactly one of the situations I had warned Chade about. I knew whether I acted or not, the consequences would be grave. I needed to distract Regal from what he was doing. Chade, I was sure, was aware of what was going on. If Regal and all others could be lured away for a time ... I could think of only one piece of news that might be important enough to Regal to make him leave Shrewd.

'You'll be all right?'

The Fool had sunk down to sit on the cold stone steps. He leaned his head against the wall. 'I suppose so. Go.'

I started down the steps.

'Wait!' he called suddenly.

I halted.

'When you take my king away, I go with him.'

I just stared up at him.

'I mean it. I wore Regal's collar for the sake of that promise from him. It means nothing now to him.'

'I can make no promises,' I said quietly.

'I can. I promise that if my king is taken, and I do not go with him, I will betray every one of your secrets. Every one.' The Fool's voice was shaking. He put his head back against the wall.

I turned away hastily. The tears on his cheeks were tinged pink from the cuts on his face. I could not bear to see them. I ran down the stairs.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Conspiracy

*The Pocked Man at your window
The Pocked Man at your door
The Pocked Man brings the plague days
To stretch you on the floor.
When blue flames at your candles suck
You know a witch has got your luck.
Don't suffer a snake upon your hearth stone
Or plague will whittle your children to bone.
Your bread not to rise, your milk to stand sour,
Your butter not to churn.
Your arrow-shafts to twist as they dry,
Your own knife to turn and cut you,
Your roosters to crow by moonlight –
By these may a householder know himself cursed.*

‘We will need blood from somewhere.’ Kettricken had heard me out, and now made this request as calmly as if asking for a cup of wine. She looked from Patience to Lacey seeking for ideas.

‘I’ll go fetch a chicken,’ Lacey said unwillingly at last. ‘I’ll need a sack to put it in to keep it quiet ...’

‘Go then,’ Patience told her. ‘Go quickly. Bring it back to my room. I shall fetch a knife and a basin, and we shall do it there, and bring but a cup of the blood back here. The less we do here, the less we must conceal.’

I had gone first to Patience and Lacey, knowing I would never get past the Queen’s attendants on my own. While I made a quick visit to my room, they had gone before me to the Queen, ostensibly taking her a special herb tea but really quietly to beg a private audience for me. She had dismissed all her ladies, telling them she would be fine with just Patience and Lacey, and

then sent Rosemary to fetch me. Rosemary played by the hearth now, absorbed in dressing a doll.

As Lacey and Patience left the room, Kettricken looked at me. 'I will splatter my gown and my bedding with the blood, and I will send for Wallace, telling him I fear a miscarriage from my fall. But that is as far as I will go, Fitz. I will not allow that man to lay a hand on me, nor be so foolish as to drink or eat anything of his concocting. I do this only for the sake of distracting him from my king. Nor will I say I have lost the child. Only that I fear it.' She spoke fiercely. It chilled me that she accepted so easily what Regal had done and was doing, and what I said she must do as a counter-move. I wished desperately I was sure her trust in me was well-placed. She did not speak of treachery or evil. She only discussed strategy as coldly as a general planning a battle.

'It will be enough,' I promised her. 'I know Prince Regal. Wallace will run to him with the tale, and he will follow Wallace here, no matter how inappropriate. He will not be able to resist, he will long to see exactly how well he has succeeded.'

'It is tedious enough to have all my women always commiserating with me over Verity's death. It will be all I can bear to have them speak as if my child were gone as well. But I can bear it, if I must. What if they leave a guard with the King?' Kettricken asked.

'As soon as they leave to visit you, I intend to knock on the door and create a diversion. I will deal with any guard they have left.'

'But if you are drawing off the guard, how can you hope to accomplish anything?'

'I have a ... another who will be assisting me.' I hoped. I cursed again that Chade had never let me establish some way of reaching him in situations such as this. 'Trust me,' he had always told me. 'I watch, I listen where I should. I summon you when it is safe to do so. A secret is only a secret as long as only one man knows it.' I would not confide to anyone that I had already divulged my plans to my fireplace, in the hopes Chade was somehow listening. I hoped that in the brief time I would be able to buy, Chade would find a way to the King, to bring him respite from his pain, that he might withstand Regal's badgering.

'It amounts to torture,' Kettricken said quietly, as if able to read my thoughts. 'To abandon an old man like that to his pain.' She looked at me

directly. ‘You do not trust your queen enough to tell me who your assistant is?’

‘It is not my secret to share, but my king’s,’ I told her gently. ‘Soon, I believe, it will have to be revealed to you. Until then ...’

‘Go,’ she dismissed me. She shifted uncomfortably on her couch. ‘As bruised as I am, at least I shall not have to feign misery. Only tolerance of a man who would seek to kill his unborn kin and torment his aged father.’

‘I go,’ I said quickly, sensing her rage building and not desiring to feed it. All must be convincing for this masquerade. She must not reveal that she now knew her fall had not been any clumsiness of her own. I went out, brushing past Lacey who was carrying a tray with a teapot. Patience was on her heels. There would not be tea in that pot. As I went past the Queen’s ladies in her antechamber, I took care to look concerned. Their reactions to the Queen’s request that King Shrewd’s personal healer be sent for would be genuine enough. I hoped it would be enough to draw Regal out of his lair.

I slipped into Patience’s rooms and left the door just barely ajar. I waited. As I waited, I thought of an old man, the herbs fading from his body and his pain reawakening in him. I had visited that pain. Given that, and a man relentlessly questioning me, how long could I remain silent and vague? Days seemed to pass. Finally there was a flurry of skirts and pattering footsteps down the hall, and a frenzied knocking at King Shrewd’s door. I did not need to hear words, it was all in the tone, the frightened pleading of the women with someone at the door, then Regal’s angry questions, turning suddenly to feigned concern. I heard him call Wallace from whatever corner he had been banished to, heard the excitement in his voice as he ordered the man to attend the Queen immediately, she was suffering a miscarriage.

The ladies clattered past my door again. I stood still, holding my breath. That trot, that mutter, that would be Wallace, laden no doubt with all sorts of remedies. I waited, taking slow, quiet breaths, trying to be patient, waited until I was sure my ploy had failed. Then I heard the more deliberate strides of Regal, and then the running strides of a man overtaking him. ‘That’s good wine, you idiot, don’t jostle it,’ Regal rebuked him, and then they were out of my hearing. I waited again. Long after I was sure he had been admitted to the Queen’s apartments, I forced myself to wait for another hundred count. And then I eased out of the door and went to the King’s.

I tapped. I did not knock loudly, but my tapping was insistent and unending. After a moment or two, a voice demanded to know who was there.

‘FitzChivalry,’ I said boldly, ‘I demand to see the King.’

A silence. Then, ‘No one is to be admitted.’

‘By whose order?’

‘Prince Regal.’

‘I bear a token from the King, one on which he gave me his word that I would always be admitted to see him whenever I so wished.’

‘Prince Regal said specifically that you were not to be admitted.’

‘But that was before ...’ And I let my voice drop lower as I muttered a few meaningless syllables.

‘What did you say?’

I muttered again.

‘Speak up.’

‘This is not for all the keep to hear!’ I retorted indignantly. ‘This is not time to spread a panic.’

That did it. The door opened a tiny crack. ‘What is it?’ the man hissed.

I leaned in close to the door, looked up and down the corridor. I peered past him through the crack. ‘Are you alone?’ I asked suspiciously.

‘Yes!’ Impatiently. ‘Now what is it? It had better be good!’

I lifted my hands to my mouth as I leaned toward the door, unwilling to let the slightest breath of my secret escape. The guard leaned closer to the crack. I gave a quick puff of my lips and a white powder misted his face. He staggered back, clawing at his eyes and strangling. In an instant he was down. Nightmist: it was quick, it was effective. It was also often deadly. I could not find it in myself to care. It was not so much that this was my shoulder-wrenching friend. This guard could not have stood in the antechamber of Shrewd’s room and been totally unaware of what went on within.

I had reached in through the crack and was struggling to undo the chains that secured the door when I heard a familiar hiss. ‘Get out of here. Leave the door alone, just go away. Don’t unlatch it, you fool!’ I had a brief glimpse of a pocked visage and then the door was shut firmly in my face. Chade was right. It would be best for Regal to encounter a fully-latched door, and to spend his time having his men chop through it. Every moment Regal was shut out was another moment that Chade had with the King.

What followed was harder to do than what I had already done. I went down the stairs to the kitchen, made friendly with the Cook, and then asked her what the commotion upstairs had been. Had the Queen lost her baby?

She banished me quickly to find folk to talk to who would know more. I made my way into the watch-room off the kitchen, to consume a small beer and force myself to eat as if I wanted to. The food lay in my stomach like so much gravel. No one spoke to me much, but I was a presence. The gossip about the Queen's fall ebbed and flowed around me. There were Tilth and Farrow guards here now, big, slow-moving men, part of their dukes' retinues, hobnobbing with the Buckkeep counterparts. It was more bitter than bile to hear them speak avidly of what the loss of the child would mean to Regal's chances for the throne. It was as if they bet on a horse race.

The only other gossip that could compete with it was a rumour that a boy had seen the Pocked Man by the castle well in the courtyard. It was supposed to have been nearly midnight when the lad saw him. Not one had the sense to wonder what the boy was doing out there, or what light his eyes had used to see his vision of ill omen. Instead they were vowing to stay well away from water, for surely this omen meant the well had gone bad. At the rate at which they were drinking beer, I decided they had little to worry about. I stayed until word was sent down that Regal wanted three strong men with axes sent immediately to the King's chambers. That excited a fresh round of talk, and during it I quietly left the room and went to the stables.

I had intended to seek out Burrich and see if the Fool had found him yet. Instead I encountered Molly coming down his steep stairs just as I had begun to climb them. She looked down at the astounded look on my face and laughed. But it was a short laugh, and it never reached her eyes.

'Why did you go to see Burrich?' I demanded, and instantly realized how rude my question was. I had feared she had gone seeking help.

'He is my friend,' she said succinctly. She started to push past me. Without thinking, I stood firm. 'Let me past!' she hissed savagely.

Instead I put my arms around her. 'Molly, Molly, please,' I said hoarsely, as she pushed at me without heart. 'Let us find a place to talk, if only for a moment. I cannot bear to have you look at me that way, when I swear I have done you no wrong. You act as if I have cast you off, but you are in my heart always. If I cannot be with you, it is not because I do not wish to.'

She stopped struggling suddenly.

'Please?' I begged her.

She glanced about the dim barn. 'We will stand and we will talk. Briefly. Right here.'

‘Why are you so angry with me?’

She nearly answered me. I saw her bite back words, then turn suddenly cold. ‘Why do you think that what I feel about you is the centremost pillar of my life?’ she retorted. ‘Why do you think I have no other concerns but you?’

I gaped at her. ‘Perhaps because it is how I feel about you,’ I said gravely.

‘It is not.’ She was exasperated, correcting me the way she would correct a child who insisted the sky was green.

‘It is,’ I insisted. I tried to gather her to me, but she was wooden in my arms.

‘Your King-in-Waiting Verity was more important. King Shrewd is more important. Queen Kettricken and her unborn child are more important.’ She ticked them off on her fingers as if she were numbering my faults.

‘I know my duty,’ I said quietly.

‘I know where your heart is,’ she said flatly. ‘And it is not first with me.’

‘Verity is ... is no longer here to protect his queen, his child, or his father,’ I said reasonably. ‘So, for this time, I must put them ahead of my own life. Ahead of everything I hold dear. Not because I love them more but ...’ I floundered uselessly after words. ‘I am a King’s Man,’ I said helplessly.

‘I am my own woman.’ Molly made it the loneliest statement in the world. ‘I will take care of myself.’

‘Not forever,’ I protested. ‘Someday, we will be free. Free to wed, to do ...’

‘Whatever your king asks you to do,’ she finished for me. ‘No, Fitz.’ There was finality in her voice. Pain. She pushed away from me, stepped past me on the staircase. When she was two steps away and all of winter seemed to be blowing between us, she spoke.

‘I have to tell you something,’ she said, almost gently. ‘There is another in my life now. One who is for me what your king is for you. One who comes before my own life, who comes ahead of all else I hold dear. By your own words, you cannot fault me.’ She looked back up at me.

I do not know what I looked like, only that she looked aside as if she could not bear it.

‘For the sake of that one, I am going away,’ she told me. ‘To a safer place than this.’

‘Molly, please, he cannot love you as I do,’ I begged.

She did not look at me. ‘Nor can your king love you as I ... used to. But. It is not a matter of what he feels for me,’ she said slowly. ‘It is what I feel for him. He must be first in my life. He needs that from me. Understand this. It is not that I no longer care for you. It is that I cannot put that feeling ahead of what is best for him.’ She went down two more steps. ‘Goodbye, Newboy.’ She no more than breathed those final words, but they sank into my heart as if branded there.

I stood on the steps, watching her go. And suddenly that feeling was too familiar, the pain too well known. I flung myself down the steps after her, I seized her arm, I pulled her under the loft stairs into the darkness there. ‘Molly,’ I said. ‘Please.’

She said nothing. She did not even resist my grip on her arm.

‘What can I give you, what can I tell you to make you understand what you are to me? I can’t just let you go!’

‘No more can you make me stay,’ she pointed out in a low voice. I felt something go out of her. Some anger, some spirit, some will. I have no word for it. ‘Please,’ she said, and the word hurt me, because she begged. ‘Just let me go. Don’t make it hard. Don’t make me cry.’

I let go of her arm, but she did not leave.

‘A long time ago,’ she said carefully. ‘I told you that you were like Burrich.’

I nodded in the darkness, not caring she could not see me.

‘In some ways you are. In others, you are not. I decide for us, now, as he once decided for Patience and himself. There is no future for us. Someone already fills your heart. And the gap between our stations is too great for any love to bridge. I know that you love me. But your love is ... different from mine. I wanted us to share all our lives. You wish to keep me in a box, separate from your life. I cannot be someone you come to when you have nothing more important to do. I don’t even know what it is that you do, when you are not with me. You have never even shared that much with me.’

‘You wouldn’t like it,’ I told her. ‘You don’t really want to know.’

‘Don’t tell me that,’ she whispered angrily. ‘Don’t you see that that is what I cannot live with, that you do not let me even decide that for myself? You cannot make that decision for me. You have no right! If you cannot even tell me that, how can I believe you love me?’

‘I kill people,’ I heard myself say. ‘For my king. I’m an assassin, Molly.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ she hissed. She spoke too quickly. The horror in her voice was as great as the contempt. A part of her knew I had spoken the truth to her. Finally. A terrible silence, brief but so cold, grew between us as she waited for me to admit a lie. A lie she knew was truth. At last she denied it for me. ‘You, a killer? You couldn’t even run past the guard that day, to see why I was crying! You didn’t have the courage to defy them for me! But you want me to believe you kill people for the King.’ She made a choking sound, of anger and despair. ‘Why do you say such things now? Why now, of all times? To impress me?’

‘If I had thought it would impress you, I probably would have told you a long time ago,’ I confessed. And it was true. My ability to keep my secrets had been soundly based on my fear that telling Molly would mean losing her. I was right.

‘Lies,’ she said, more to herself than me. ‘Lies, all lies. From the beginning. I was so stupid. If a man hits you once, he’ll hit you again, they say. And the same is true for lying. But I stayed, and I listened and I believed. What a fool I’ve been!’ This last, so savagely that I recoiled from it as from a blow. She stood clear of me. ‘Thank you, FitzChivalry,’ she said coldly, formally. ‘You’ve made this so much easier for me.’ She turned away from me.

‘Molly,’ I begged. I reached to take her arm, but she spun about, her hand raised to slap me.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she hissed in a low voice. ‘Don’t you ever dare to touch me again!’

She left.

After a time, I remembered I was standing under Burrich’s stairs in the dark. I shivered with cold and something more. No. Something less. My lips drew back from my teeth in something neither a smile nor a snarl. I had always feared that my lies would make me lose Molly. But the truth had severed in an instant what my lies had held together for a year. What must I learn from that, I wondered? Very slowly I climbed up the steps. I knocked on the door.

‘Who is it?’ Burrich’s voice.

‘Me.’ He unlatched the door and I came into the room. ‘What was Molly doing here?’ I asked him, not caring how it might sound, not caring

that the bandaged Fool sat still at Burrich's table. 'Did she need help?'

Burrich cleared his throat. 'She came for herbs,' he said uneasily, 'I could not help her, I did not have what she wanted. Then the Fool came, and she stayed to help me with him.'

'Patience and Lacey have herbs. Lots of them,' I pointed out.

'That is what I told her.' He turned away from me, and began clearing away the things he had used to work on the Fool. 'She did not wish to go to them.' There was something in his voice, almost prodding, pushing me to the next question.

'She's going away,' I said in a small voice. 'She's going away.' I sat down on a chair before Burrich's fire and clenched my hands between my knees. I became aware I was rocking back and forth, tried to stop.

'Did you succeed?' The Fool asked quietly.

I stopped rocking. I swear that for an instant I had no idea what he was talking about. 'Yes,' I said quietly. 'Yes, I think I did.' I had succeeded at losing Molly, too. Succeeded at wearing away her loyalty and her love, taking her for granted, succeeded at being so logical and practical and loyal to my king that I had just lost any chance of ever having a life of my own. I looked at Burrich. 'Did you love Patience?' I asked suddenly. 'When you decided to leave?'

The Fool started, then visibly goggled. So there were some secrets even he did not know. Burrich's face went as dark as I had ever seen it. He crossed his arms on his chest, as if to restrain himself. He might kill me, I thought. Or maybe he sought only to hold some pain inside himself. 'Please,' I added, 'I have to know.'

He glared at me, then spoke carefully. 'I am not a changeable man,' he told me. 'If I had loved her, I would love her still.'

So. It would never go away. 'But, still, you decided ...'

'Someone had to decide. Patience would not see it could not be. Someone had to end the torment for us both.'

As Molly had decided for us. I tried to think just what I should do next. Nothing came to me. I looked at the Fool. 'Are you all right?' I asked him.

'I'm better off than you are,' he replied, sincerely.

'I meant, your shoulder. I had thought ...'

'Wrenched, but not broken. Much better than your heart.'

A quick bantering of witty words. I had not known he could weight a jest with so much sympathy. The kindness pushed me to the edge of

breaking. 'I don't know what to do,' I said brokenly. 'How can I live with this?'

The brandy bottle made a very small thud as Burrich set it in the centre of the table. He put out three cups around it. 'We will have a drink,' he said. 'To Molly finding happiness somewhere. We will wish it for her with all our hearts.'

We drank a round and Burrich refilled the cups.

The Fool swirled the brandy in his cup. 'Is this wise, just now?' he asked.

'Just now, I have finished with being wise,' I told him. 'I would rather be a fool.'

'You do not know of what you speak,' he told me. All the same, he raised his glass alongside mine. And a third time, to our king.

We made a sincere effort, but fate did not allow us sufficient time. A determined rapping at Burrich's door proved to be Lacey with a basket on her arm. She came in quickly, shutting the door fast behind her. 'Get rid of this for me, will you?' she asked, and tumbled the slain chicken out on the table before us.

'Dinner!' announced the Fool enthusiastically.

It took Lacey a moment to realize the state we were in. It took her less than that to be furious. 'While we gamble our lives and reputations, you get drunk!' She rounded on Burrich. 'In twenty years, you have not learned that it solves nothing!'

Burrich flinched not at all. 'Some things cannot be solved,' he pointed out philosophically. 'Drink makes those things much more tolerable.' He came to his feet easily, stood rocksteady before her. Years of drinking seemed to have taught him the knack of handling it well. 'What did you need?'

Lacey bit her lip a moment. She decided to follow where he had pointed the conversation, 'I need that disposed of. And I need an ointment for bruises.'

'Does no one around here ever use the healer?' the Fool asked of no one in particular. Lacey ignored him.

'That is what I supposedly came here for, so I had best return with it, in case someone asks to see it. My real mission is to find the Fitz, and ask him if he knows there are guards chopping down King Shrewd's door with axes.'

I nodded gravely. I wasn't going to attempt Burrich's graceful stance. The Fool leapt to his feet instead, crying, 'What?' He rounded on me. 'I thought you said you had succeeded! What success is this?'

'The best I could manage on very short notice,' I retorted. 'It will either be all right, or it won't. We've done all we can just now. Besides, think on it. That's a good, stout, oaken door. It will take them a while to get through it. And when they do, I fancy they will find the inner door to the King's bedchamber is likewise bolted and barred.'

'How did you manage that?' Burrich asked quietly.

'I didn't,' I said brusquely. I looked at the Fool. 'I have said enough, for now. It is time to have a bit of trust.' I turned to Lacey. 'How are the Queen and Patience? How went our masquerade?'

'Well enough. The Queen is sore bruised from her fall, and for myself, I am not all that sure that the babe is out of danger of being lost. A miscarriage from a fall does not always happen immediately. But let us not borrow trouble. Wallace was concerned but ineffectual. For a man who claims to be a healer, he knows remarkably little of the true lore of herbs. As for the Prince ...' Lacey snorted, but said no more.

'Does no one beside myself think there is a danger to letting a rumour of miscarriage circulate?' the Fool asked airily.

'I had no time to devise anything else,' I retorted.

'In a day or so, the Queen will deny the rumour, saying that all seems to be well with the child.'

'So. For the moment, we are as secured as we may be,' Burrich observed. 'But what comes next? Are we to see the King and Queen Kettricken carried off to Tradeford?'

'Trust. I ask for one day of trust,' I said carefully. I hoped it would be enough. 'And now we must disperse and go about our lives as normally as we can.'

'A Stablemaster with no horses and a Fool with no king,' the Fool observed. 'Burrich and I can continue to drink. I believe that is a normal life under these circumstances. As for you, Fitz, I have no idea what title you give yourself these days, let alone what you normally do all day. Hence ...'

'No one is going to sit about and drink,' Lacey intoned ominously. 'Put the bottle aside and keep your wits sharp. And disperse, as Fitz here said. Enough has been said and done in this room to put us all swinging from a

tree for treason. Save you, of course, FitzChivalry. It would have to be poison for you. Those of the royal blood are not allowed to swing.'

Her words had a chilling effect. Burrich picked up the cork and restoppered the bottle. Lacey left first, a pot of Burrich's ointment in her basket. The Fool followed her a short time later. When I left Burrich, he had finished cleaning the fowl and was plucking the last stubborn feathers from it. The man wasted nothing.

I went out and wandered about a bit. I watched behind me for shadows. Kettricken would be resting, and I did not think I could withstand Patience's nattering, or her insights just then. If the Fool was in his chamber, it was because he did not want company. And if he was elsewhere, I had no idea where that might be. The whole of Buckkeep was as plagued with Inlanders as a sick dog with fleas. I strolled through the kitchen, purloining gingerbread. Then I wandered about disconsolately, trying not to think, trying to appear without purpose as I headed back to the hut where once I had hidden Nighteyes. The hut was empty now, as cold within as without. It had been some time since Nighteyes had laired here. He preferred the forested hills behind Buckkeep. But I did not wait long before his shadow crossed the threshold of the open door.

Perhaps the greatest comfort of the Wit bond is never having to explain. I did not need to recount the last day's events to him, did not have to find words to describe how it felt to watch Molly walk away from me. Nor did he ask questions or make sympathetic talk. The human events would have made small sense to him. He acted on the strength of what I felt, not why. He simply came to me and sat beside me on the dirty floor. I could put an arm around him and lean my face against his ruff and sit.

Such packs men make, he observed to me after a while. *How can you hunt together when you cannot all run in the same direction?*

I made no reply to this. I knew no answer and he did not expect one.

He leaned down to nibble an itch on his foreleg. Then he sat up, shook himself all over, and asked, *What will you do for a mate now?*

Not all wolves take mates.

The leader always does. How else would the pack multiply?

My leader has a mate, and she is with child. Perhaps wolves have it aright, and men should pay attention. Perhaps only the leader should mate. That was the decision that Heart of the Pack made long ago. That he could not have both a mate, and a leader he followed with all of his heart.

That one is more wolf than he cares to admit. To anyone. A pause. Gingerbread?

I've missed your dreams at night.

They are not my dreams. They are my life. You are welcome to them, so long as Heart of the Pack does not get angry with us. Life shared is better. A pause. You would rather have shared the female's life.

It is my weakness to want too much.

He blinked his deep eyes. You love too many. My life is much simpler.

He loved only me.

That is true. The only real difficulty I have is knowing that you will never trust that is so.

I sighed heavily. Nighteyes sneezed suddenly, then shook himself all over. I dislike this mouse dust. But before I go, use your so clever hands to scratch inside my ears. It is hard for me to do well without leaving welts.

And so I scratched his ears, and under his throat and the back of his neck until he fell over on his side like a puppy.

'Hound,' I told him affectionately.

For that insult, you pay! He flipped himself up onto his feet, bit me hard through my sleeve, and then darted out the door and was gone. I pulled back my sleeve to survey the deep white dents in my flesh that were not quite bleeding. Wolf humour.

The brief winter day had ended. I went back to the keep and forced myself to go through the kitchens, to allow Cook to tell me all the gossip. She stuffed me full of plum cake and mutton as she told me of the Queen's possible miscarriage, and then how the men had chopped through the outer door of the King's room after his guard suddenly perished of apoplexy. 'And the second door too, all the time Prince Regal worriting and urging them on, for fear something had befallen the King himself. But when they got through, despite all that chopping, the King was sleeping like a babe, sir. And so deep a sleep they could not rouse him at all, to tell him why they'd chopped his doors away.'

'Amazing,' I agreed, and she went on to the lesser gossip of the keep. I found that centred these days mostly on who was and was not included in the flight to Tradeford. Cook was to go, for the sake of her gooseberry tarts and bundle cakes. She did not know who was to take over the cooking here, but no doubt it would be one of the guards. Regal had told her she might take all her best pots, for which she was grateful, but what she would really miss was

the west hearth, for she had never cooked on a better, for the draught being just right and the meat-hooks at all the right heights. I listened to her, and tried to think only of her words, to be fully intrigued by the small details of what she considered important in her life. The Queen's Guard, I found, was to stay at Buckkeep, as would those few who still wore the colours of King Shrewd's personal guard. Since they had lost the privilege of his rooms, they had become a dispirited lot. But Regal insisted it was necessary those groups stay, to maintain a royal presence in Buckkeep. Rosemary would go, and her mother, but that was hardly surprising, considering whom they served. Fedwren would not, nor Mellow. Now there was a voice she would miss, but she'd probably get used to that Inland warbling after a while.

She never thought to ask me if I were going.

As I climbed the stairs to my room, I tried to visualize Buckkeep as it would be. The high table would be empty at every meal, the food served would be the simple campaign food the military cooks were most familiar with. For as long as the food supplies lasted. I expected we would eat a lot of wild game and seaweed before spring. I worried more for Patience and Lacey than I did for myself. Rough quarters and coarse food did not bother me, but it was not what they were used to. At least there would be Mellow still to sing, if his melancholy nature did not overtake him at his abandonment. And Fedwren. With few children to teach, perhaps he and Patience could finally study out their paper-making. So putting a brave face on it all, I tried to find a future for us.

'Where have you been, Bastard?'

Serene, stepping out suddenly from a doorway. She had expected me to startle. I had known by the Wit someone was there. I did not flinch. 'Out.'

'You smell like a dog.'

'At least I have the excuse of having been with dogs. What few are left in the stable.'

It took her an instant to discover the insult in my polite reply.

'You smell like a dog because you are more than half a dog yourself. Beast-magicker.'

I nearly responded with some remark about her mother. Instead, I suddenly and truly recalled her mother. 'When we were first learning to scribe, remember how your mother always made you wear a dark smock, for you splattered your ink so?'

She stared at me sullenly, turning the remark every which way in her mind, trying to discover some insult or slight or trick in it.

‘What of it?’ she asked at last, unable to leave it hanging.

‘Nothing. I but remembered it. Was a time when I helped you getting the tails right on your letters.’

‘That has nothing to do with now!’ she declared angrily.

‘No, it does not. This is my door. Were you expecting to come in with me?’

She spat, not quite at me, but it landed on the floor at my feet. For some reason, I decided she would not have done it, had not she been leaving Buckkeep with Regal. It was no longer her home, and she felt free to soil it before leaving it. It told me much. She never expected to come back here.

Inside my room, I reset every latch and bolt meticulously, then added the heavy bar to the door. I went and checked my window and found it well-shuttered still. I looked under my bed. Finally, I sat down in a chair by my hearth to doze until Chade summoned me.

I came out of a light doze to a tapping at my door. ‘Who is it?’ I called.

‘Rosemary. The Queen wishes to see you.’

By the time I had undone the latches and catches, the child was gone. She was only a girl, but it still unnerved me to have such a message vocalized through a door. I groomed myself hastily and then hurried down to the Queen’s chambers. I noted in passing the wreckage that had once been the oak door to Shrewd’s room. A bulky guard stood in the gap; an Inlander, not a man I knew.

Queen Kettricken was reclining on a couch near her hearth. Several knots of her ladies gossiped in different corners of the room, but the Queen herself was alone. Her eyes were closed. She looked so utterly worn that I wondered if Rosemary’s message had been an error. But Lady Hopeful ushered me to the Queen’s side and fetched me a low stool to perch upon. She offered me a cup of tea and I accepted. As soon as Lady Hopeful departed to brew it, Kettricken opened her eyes. ‘What next?’ she asked in so low a voice that I had to lean closer to hear it.

I looked askance at her.

‘Shrewd sleeps now. He cannot sleep forever. Whatever was given him will wear off, and when it does, we are back to where we were.’

‘The King-in-Waiting ceremony approaches. Perhaps the Prince will be busied with that. No doubt there are new clothes to be sewn and tried upon

him, and all the other details he glories in. It may keep him from the King.'

'After that?'

Lady Hopeful was back with my cup of tea. I took it with murmured thanks, and as she pulled up a chair beside us, Queen Kettricken smiled weakly and asked if she might have one also. I was almost shamed by how swiftly Lady Hopeful leapt to do her bidding.

'I do not know,' I murmured in reply to her earlier question.

'I do. The King would be safe in my mountains. He would be honoured and protected, and perhaps Jonqui would know of ... Oh, thank you, Hopeful.' Queen Kettricken took the proffered cup and sipped at it as Lady Hopeful settled herself.

I smiled at Kettricken, and chose my words carefully, trusting her to read my meaning. 'But it is so far to the mountains, my queen, and the weather so hard this time of year. By the time a courier got through to seek your mother's remedy, it would be nigh on spring. There are other places that might offer the same cure for your troubles. Bearnis or Rippon, perhaps, might offer if we asked. The worthy dukes of those provinces can deny you nothing, you know.'

'I know.' Kettricken smiled wearily. 'But they have such problems of their own just now, I hesitate to ask anything more of them. Besides, the root we call livelong grows only in the mountains. A determined courier could travel there, I think.' She sipped again at her tea.

'Who to send with such a request; ah, that would be the hardest question,' I pointed out. Surely she could see the difficulties of sending a sick old man off on a journey to the mountains in winter. He could not go alone. 'The man that went would have to be very trustworthy and strong of will.'

'Such a man sounds like a woman to me,' Kettricken quipped, and Hopeful laughed merrily, more to see the Queen's mood lightened than at the witticism. Kettricken paused with her cup at her lips. 'Perhaps I should have to go myself, to see the thing done right,' she added, and smiled when my eyes widened. But the look she gave me was serious.

There followed some light talk, and a recipe of mostly fictitious herbs from Kettricken that I promised to do my best to find for her. I believed I took her meaning. When I excused myself and went back to my room, I wondered how I would keep her from acting before Chade could. It was a pretty puzzle.

I had scarcely refastened all my door catches and bars before I felt a draught up my back. I turned to find the entry to Chade's realm standing ajar. I climbed the stairs wearily. I longed to sleep, but knew that once I lay down, I would be unable to close my eyes.

The smell of food enticed me as I entered Chade's chamber, and I was suddenly aware I was hungry. Chade was already at the small table he had set out. 'Sit down and eat,' he told me tersely. 'We must plot together.'

I was two bites into a meat pie when he asked me softly, 'How long do you think we might keep King Shrewd here, in these chambers, undetected?'

I chewed and swallowed. 'I've never been able to find a way into this chamber,' I pointed out quietly.

'Oh, but they do exist. And as food and other necessities must go in and out of them, there are some few who are aware of them, without knowing exactly what they know. My warren connects to rooms in the keep which are regularly stocked with supplies for me. But my life was much simpler when food and linens were supplied for Lady Thyme.'

'How will you fare after Regal is gone to Tradeford?' I asked.

'Likely not as well as I have. Some tasks will be done out of habit, if those with the habits remain, no doubt. But as food becomes scarcer, some will wonder why they store supplies of it in a disused part of the keep. But we were speaking of Shrewd's comfort, not mine.'

'It depends on how Shrewd disappeared. If Regal thought he had left the keep by ordinary means, you might keep him hidden here for some time. But if Regal knows he is within Buckkeep still, he will stop at nothing. I suspect his first order would be to put men with hammers to work on the walls of the King's bedchamber.'

'Direct, but effective,' Chade concurred.

'Have you found a safe place for him, at Bearns or Rippon?'

'As swift as that? Of course not. We would have to hide him here, for days or perhaps weeks before a place was made ready. And then he must be smuggled out of the Keep. It would mean finding men who can be bribed, and knowing when they are on the gate. Unfortunately, men that can be bribed to do a thing can be bribed to speak of it later. Unless they had accidents.' He looked at me.

'Let that not be a concern. There is another way out of Buckkeep,' I told him, thinking of my wolf's way. 'We have another problem also, and that is Kettricken. She will act on her own if she does not soon know we

have a plan. Her own thoughts have taken her in the same direction as yours. Tonight she proposed herself taking Shrewd to the mountains for safety.'

'A pregnant woman and a sick old man in mid-winter? Ridiculous.' Chade paused. 'But. It would never be expected. They would never look for them on that road. And with all the flow of folk that Regal has created going up the Buck River, one more woman and her ailing father would scarcely be marked.'

'It's still ridiculous,' I protested. I did not like the sparks of interest I had seen kindle in Chade's eyes. 'Who could go with them?'

'Burrich. It would save him drinking himself to death from boredom, and he could manage their animals for them. And likely much else they would need. Would he go?'

'You know he would,' I said unwillingly. 'But Shrewd would never survive such a trip.'

'He is more likely to survive such a trip than to survive going with Regal. That which eats at him will continue to devour his life, wherever he is.' He frowned more darkly. 'But why it eats at him so much more swiftly these days is beyond me to say.'

'The cold. The privation. It will not help him.'

'There are inns for part of the way. I can find some coin for them yet. Shrewd looks so little like he used to, we almost need not fear him being recognized. The Queen would be trickier. There are few women with her colouring and height. Still, clothed heavily, we could increase her girth. Hood her hair, and ...'

'You cannot be serious.'

'Tomorrow night,' he replied. 'We must do something by tomorrow night. For that is when the sleeping potion I gave Shrewd will wear off. Another attempt will probably not be made on the Queen until she is on her way to Tradeford. But once Regal has her in his power, well, so many accidents happen on a journey. A slip from a barge into a freezing river, a runaway horse, a meal of bad meat. If his assassin is half as good as we are, he'll succeed.'

'Regal's assassin?'

Chade gave me a pitying look. 'You don't suppose our prince is up to spreading grease and lampblack on steps himself, do you? Who do you think it is?'

'Serene.' The name popped to my lips.

‘Then most obviously it is not her. No, we will find it to be some mouse of a man with a pleasant demeanour and a settled life. If we ever find him out at all. Ah, well, set it aside for now. Though there’s nothing quite as challenging as stalking another assassin.’

‘Will,’ I said quietly.

‘Will what?’ he asked.

I told him of Will, quickly and quietly. As he listened, his eyes widened.

‘It would be brilliant,’ he said admiringly. ‘A Skilled assassin. It’s a wonder no one thought of it before.’

‘Perhaps Shrewd did,’ I said quietly. ‘But perhaps his assassin failed to learn ...’

Chade leaned back in his chair. ‘I wonder,’ he said speculatively. ‘Shrewd is close-mouthed enough to have such an idea, and keep it even from me. But I doubt, myself, that Will is more than a spy, just now. A formidable one, and no mistaking that. You must be especially vigilant. But I do not think we need fear him as an assassin.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Ah, well. The urgency for speed becomes ever plainer. The escape must be made from the King’s room. You must find a way to draw the watchers all off again.’

‘During the King-in-Waiting ceremony ...’

‘No. We dare not wait that long. Tomorrow night. No later than that. You need not keep them occupied long. Just a few minutes will be all I will need.’

‘We must wait! Otherwise, the whole plot is impossible. By tomorrow night, you wish me to have the Queen and Burrich prepared, which means telling them you exist. And Burrich will have to see to horses and supplies ...’

‘Plug-horses. Nothing fine. They would be noticed too quickly. And a litter for the King.’

‘Plug-horses we have in plenty, for they are all that is left. But it will stick in Burrich’s craw for his king and queen to ride them.’

‘And a mule for himself. They are to be humble folk, with scarce the coin to journey inland. We have no wish to attract highwaymen.’

I snorted to think of Burrich astride a mule. ‘It cannot be done,’ I said quietly. ‘The time is too short. It must be done the night of the King-in-Waiting ceremony. All will be down at the feasting.’

‘Anything that must be done, can be done,’ Chade asserted. He sat thoughtfully a moment. ‘Perhaps you have a point. Regal cannot have the King incapacitated for the ceremony. If he is not there, not one of the Coastal dukes will give it any credence. Regal will have to allow Shrewd his pain herbs, to keep him tractable, if nothing else. Very well, then. The night after tomorrow. And if you absolutely must speak to me tomorrow, put some birchbark on your hearth fire. Not a lot, I have no wish to be smoked out. But a generous handful. I will open the way.’

‘The Fool will want to go with the King,’ I reminded myself slowly.

‘He cannot,’ Chade said decisively. ‘There is no disguising him. He would only increase the danger. Besides, it is necessary he stay. We will need his help to prepare for this disappearance.’

‘I do not think that will change his mind.’

‘Leave the Fool to me. I can show him that his king’s life depends on his getting away from here cleanly. An “atmosphere” must be created, in which the King and Queen’s disappearance is not seen as ... ah, well. Leave that part to me. I will discourage them from smashing walls. The Queen’s role is easy. All she need do is retire early from the ceremony, and declare that she wishes to sleep long, and send her attendants away. She should leave word she does not wish to be disturbed until she summons them. If all goes well, we should be able to give Shrewd and Kettricken most of the night hours to gain some distance.’ He smiled at me kindly. ‘Well. I think that is as much planning as we can do. No, no, I know nothing is fixed. It is better this way. We are more flexible. Now go get what sleep you can, boy. You’ve a busy day tomorrow. And I’ve much to do right now. I must mix enough medicines to take King Shrewd all the way to the mountains. And package them clearly. Burrich reads, does he not?’

‘Very well,’ I assured him. I paused. ‘Were you at the keep well last night, about midnight? Supposedly the Pocked Man was seen. Some are saying it means the well will go bad. Others are seeing it as a bad omen for Regal’s ceremony.’

‘Oh? Well, and perhaps it is.’ Chade chuckled to himself. ‘Omens and portents they shall have, boy, until a vanishing king and a missing queen seem but a natural thing in the midst of it.’ He grinned like a boy, and the years dropped from his face. Something like their old spark of mischief came into his green eyes. ‘Go get some rest. And let Burrich and the Queen know of our plans. I shall speak to Shrewd and the Fool. No others are to

know even a whisper. For some of it, we must trust to luck. But for the rest, trust to me!’

His laughter was not a wholly reassuring sound as it followed me down the stairs.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Treasons and Traitors

Prince Regal was the only child of King Shrewd and Queen Desire to survive birth. Some say the midwives never cared for the Queen and did not do overmuch to see her babes lived. Others that the midwives in their anxiety to spare the Queen her birth pangs, gave her too much of those herbs that dull pain. But as only two of her stillborn children had been carried more than seven months in her womb, most midwives say the Queen's use of intoxicants was at fault, as well as her evil habit of carrying her belt knife with the blade toward her belly, as all know this is bad luck for a woman of child-bearing years.

I did not sleep. Whenever I pushed my worries about King Shrewd from my mind, Molly stood there instead, beside someone else. My mind shuttled between them, weaving me a coat of misery and worry. I promised myself that as soon as King Shrewd and Kettricken were safe, I would find a way to win Molly back from whoever had stolen her from me. That decided, I turned over and stared into the dark some more.

Night's reign was still solid when I rolled from my bed. I ghosted past empty stalls and sleeping animals to go silently up Burrich's stairs. He heard me out, then asked gently, 'Are you sure you've not had a bad dream?'

'If I have, it's lasted most of my life,' I pointed out quietly.

'I begin to feel that way myself,' he agreed. We were talking in the dark. He was still in bed and I was sitting on the floor beside it, whispering. I would not suffer Burrich to build up his fire, or even light a candle, for I did not desire anyone to wonder about a sudden departure from his routine. 'For us to accomplish all he is asking in two days means that every task must be done perfectly the first time. I have come to you first. Can you do it?'

He was silent and in the darkness I could not see his face. 'Three sturdy horses, a mule, a litter and supplies for three. All without anyone noticing it.'

Another silence. 'I can't very well just load up the King and Queen and ride out through the gates of Buckkeep, either.'

'You know that copse of alder where the big dog-fox used to den? Have the horses waiting there. The King and Kettricken will meet you there.' Reluctantly I added, 'The wolf will guide them to you.'

'Must they know, as well as I, what you do?' He was aghast at the thought.

'I use what tools I have. And I do not perceive it as you do.'

'How long can you share minds with one who scratches and licks himself, who will roll in carrion, who goes mad when a female is in season, who thinks no further than his next meal before you accept his values as your own? Then what will you be?'

'A guardsman?' I hazarded.

Despite himself, Burrich gave a snort of laughter. 'I was serious,' he said after a moment.

'So am I, about the King and Queen. We must put our minds to how we will accomplish this. I no longer care what I sacrifice to accomplish it.'

He was quiet a moment. 'So somehow I'm to get four animals and a litter out of Buckkeep without exciting any interest?'

I nodded in the dark, then, 'Can it be done?'

Grudgingly he said, 'There's a stable-hand or two left that I trust. It's not a favour I like to ask of anyone. I don't want a lad swinging over something I asked him to do. But I suppose it could be made to look as if they were part of a coffle being taken upriver. But my lads are not stupid; I won't have a stupid hand in the stable. Once the news is out that the King is missing, they'll figure it out quickly.'

'Choose one who loves the King.'

Burrich sighed. 'Food supplies. It won't be sumptuous rations. More like marching fare. Am I to supply winter clothing as well?'

'No. Only for yourself. Kettricken can wear and carry what she'll need. And Chade can see to the King's needs.'

'Chade. The name is almost familiar, as if I heard it before, long ago.'

'He is supposed to have died, long ago. Before that, he was seen about the keep.'

'To live all these years as a shadow,' he marvelled.

'And he plans to go on living as a shadow.'

'You need not fear I'll betray him.' Burrich sounded hurt.

‘I know. I am just so ...’

‘I know. Go on, then. You’ve told me enough for me to do my part. I’ll be there with the horses and supplies. What time?’

‘Sometime in the night, when the feasting is still lively. I don’t know. I’ll get word to you somehow.’

He shrugged. ‘As soon as it gets dark, I’ll go out there and wait.’

‘Burrich. Thank you.’

‘He is my king. She is my queen. I need no thanks from you to do my duty.’

I left Burrich and crept down his staircase. I kept to the shadows and extended every sense I had to try to be sure no one was spying on me. Once I was clear of the stables, I flitted from warehouse to sty to pen, from shadow to shadow until I came to the old hut. Nighteyes came panting to meet me. *What is it? Why am I called back from my hunting?*

Tomorrow night, when it gets dark. I may need you. Will you stay here, within the keep, to come quickly if I send for you?

Of course. But why summon me here for this? You need not be this close to me to ask such a simple favour.

I crouched down in the snow and he came to me, to rest his throat on my shoulder. I hugged him hard.

Foolishness, he told me gruffly. *Go on, now. I will be here in case you need me.*

My thanks.

My brother.

Stealth and haste battled as I made my way back to the keep and up to my room. I fastened my door shut and lay down on my bed. Excitement thundered through me. I would know no real rest until all had been accomplished.

At mid-morning I was admitted to the Queen’s chamber. I brought with me a number of scrolls on herbs. Kettricken was reclining on a couch before the hearth, and I could see that her fall had caused her more pain in truth than she cared to admit. She looked little better than she had the night before, but I greeted her warmly, and proceeded to work my way through every herb listed, one after the other, with much discussion as to the benefits of each. I succeeded in boring most of her ladies away, and she finally dismissed the last three to bring tea, find her more pillows, and look for another scroll on herbs that Kettricken said was in Verity’s study. Little

Rosemary had long since dozed off in a warm corner by the hearth. As soon as the rustle of their skirts had faded, I spoke quickly, knowing I had little time.

‘You will be leaving tomorrow night, after the King-in-Waiting ceremony,’ I told her, and spoke on although she had parted her lips to ask a question. ‘Dress warmly and take winter things. Not many. Go to your bedchamber alone, as early as you decently can. Plead that the ceremony and your grief have exhausted you. Send your attendants away, say you must sleep, and tell them not to come back until you summon them. Bar your door. No. Only listen. There is little time. Ready yourself to leave, and then stay in your room. One will come for you. Trust the Pocked Man. The King is going with you. Trust me,’ I told her desperately as we heard returning footsteps. ‘All else will be arranged. Trust me.’

Trust. I did not trust any of it would come to pass. Daffodil was back with the pillows and, shortly after that, the tea arrived. We chatted amiably, and one of Kettricken’s younger ladies even flirted with me. Queen Kettricken asked me to leave the herbal scrolls with her, as her back still pained her. She had decided she would retire early this evening, and perhaps the scrolls would help her while away the time before she slept. I made my gracious farewells and escaped.

Chade had said he would handle the Fool. I had made my pathetic attempts at planning the escape. Now all that remained was for me to somehow arrange for the King to be alone after the ceremony. A few minutes were all Chade had asked for. I wondered if I would have to give my life for them. I put the notion aside. Just a few minutes. The two broken doors would be a hindrance or a help, I wasn’t sure which. I considered all the obvious ploys. I could feign drunkenness and bait the guards out to fight. Unless I had an axe, it wouldn’t take them more than a few minutes to deal with me. No. I wanted to remain functional. I considered and rejected a dozen schemes. Too much depended on factors I couldn’t control. How many guards would be there, would they be ones I knew, would Wallace be there, would Regal have dropped in for a chat?

On my earlier foray to Kettricken’s room, I had noticed that makeshift curtains had been tacked up over the splintered door-frames of the King’s chambers. Most of the wreckage had been carried off, but bits of oaken door still littered the corridor. No workmen had been called in to do repairs. Another sign that Regal had no intention of ever returning to Buckkeep.

I tried to find some excuse to introduce myself into that room. The keep downstairs was busier than ever, for today the dukes of Bearns, Rippon and Shoaks duchies were expected to arrive with their retinues to witness the King-in-Waiting ceremony for Regal. They were being put in the lesser guest-rooms. I wondered how they would react to the sudden disappearance of the King and Queen. Would it be seen as treachery, or would Regal find some way to conceal it from them? What would it augur for his new reign to begin so? I put it from my mind; it wasn't helping me to get the King alone in his chamber.

I left my room and went pacing through Buckkeep, hoping for inspiration. Instead I found only confusion. Noble folk of every degree were arriving for Regal's ceremony, and the influx of guests and their households and servants swept and eddied about the outflow of goods and folk that Regal was sending inland. My feet carried me unplanned to Verity's study. The door was ajar and I went in. The hearth was cold, the room musty with disuse. There was a distinct odour of mouse in the air. I hoped whatever scrolls they were nesting in weren't irreplaceable. I was fairly certain I had removed the ones Verity treasured to Chade's rooms. I walked about the room, touching his things. Suddenly I missed him acutely. His unyielding steadiness, his calmness, his strength; he would never have let things come to such a situation. I sat down in his work chair at his map-table. Scuffs and scribbles of ink where he had tried colours on it marred the table-top. Here were two badly-cut quills, discarded with a brush worn hairless. In a box on the table were several little pots of colour, cracked and dried now. They smelled like Verity to me, in the same way that leather and harness oil always smelled like Burrich. I leaned forward on the table and put my head in my hands. 'Verity, we need you now.'

I cannot come.

I leaped to my feet, my legs tangling in the chair's and fell on the rug. Frantically I scabbled to my feet, and even more frantically scabbled after the contact. *Verity!*

I hear you. What is it, boy? A pause. You've reached me on your own, have you? Well done!

We need you to come home right now!

Why?

Thoughts tumbled so much faster than words, and in far greater detail than he could have wished to know. I felt him grow sad with the information,

and wearier. *Come home. If you were here, you could put it all to rights. Regal could not claim to be King-in-Waiting, he could not strip Buckkeep like this, or take away the King.*

I cannot. Be calm now. Think this through. I could not come home in time to prevent any of this. It grieves me. But I am too close now to give up my goal. And if I am to be a father – his thoughts were warm with this new feeling – it becomes even more important that I succeed. My goal must be to retain the Six Duchies intact, and with a coast freed of sea-wolves. This, for the child to inherit.

What am I to do?

Just as you have planned. My father, my wife and my child; it is a weighty burden I have put upon you. He sounded suddenly uncertain.

I will do what I can do, I told him, fearing to promise any more than that.

I have faith in you. He paused. *Did you feel that?*

What?

Another is here, trying to break in, to listen on our Skilling. One of Galen's spying brood of vipers.

I did not think that possible!

Galen found a way, and schooled his poisonous offspring in it. Skill no more to me now.

I felt something similar to when he had broken our Skill contact the last time to save Shrewd's strength, but much rougher. A surging outward of Verity's Skill that pushed someone away from us. I thought I felt the effort it cost him. Our Skill contact broke.

He was gone, as abruptly as I had found him. I groped tentatively after our contact, found nothing. What he had said about another listening in on us rattled me. Fear warred with triumph in me. I had Skilled. We had been spied upon. But I had Skilled, alone and unaided! But how much had they overheard? I pushed back the chair from the table, sat a moment longer in the storm of my thoughts. Skilling had been easy. I still didn't know quite how I had initiated it, but it had been easy. I felt like a child who had worked a puzzle box, but was unable to recall the exact sequence of moves. The knowledge that it could be done made me want instantly to attempt it again. I set the temptation aside firmly. I had other tasks to accomplish, ones of far more weight.

I sprang up and rushed out of the study, almost tripping over Justin. He sat, legs outstretched, with his back against the wall. He looked drunk. I knew better. He was half-stunned by the push Verity had given him. I brought myself up short and stared down at him. I knew I should kill him. The poison I had composed for Wallace so long ago still rode in a pocket in my cuff. I could force it down his throat. But it was not designed to act quickly. As if he could guess my thoughts, he cowered away from me, scrabbling along the wall.

For a moment longer I stared at him, striving to think calmly. I had promised Chade to take no more actions on my own without consulting him. Verity had not bid me find and kill the spy. He could have, in less than an instant of thought. This decision did not belong to me. One of the hardest things I have ever done was to force myself to walk away from Justin. Half a dozen strides down the hall, I suddenly heard him blurt, 'I know what you've been doing!'

I founded to confront him. 'What are you talking about?' I asked in a low voice. My heart began to thunder. I hoped he'd make me kill him. It was frightening to know suddenly how badly I wanted to.

He blanched but did not back down. He reminded me of a braggart child. 'You walk as if you are the King himself, you sneer down at me, and make mock of me behind my back. Don't think I don't know it!' He clawed his way up the wall, staggered to his feet. 'But you are not so great. You Skill once, and think you are a master, but your Skilling stinks of your dog-magic! Do not think you will walk so proud always. You will be brought down! And soon!'

A wolf clamoured in me for instant vengeance. I leashed my temper. 'Do you dare to spy upon my Skilling to Prince Verity, Justin? I did not think you had the courage.'

'You know I did, Bastard. I do not fear you so that I must hide from you. I dare much, Bastard! Much more than you would suppose.' His stance showed him growing braver by the minute.

'Not if I suppose treachery and treason, though. Has not King-in-Waiting Verity been declared dead, oh loyally-sworn coterie member? Yet you spy upon me Skilling to him, and you express no surprise?'

For a moment, Justin stood stock-still. Then he grew bold. 'Say what you like, Bastard. No one will believe you if we deny it.'

‘Have the sense to be silent at least,’ Serene declared. She came down the hallway like a ship under full sail. I did not step aside, but forced her to brush past me. She seized Justin’s arm, claiming him like a dropped basket.

‘Silence is but another form of lying, Serene.’ She had turned Justin about and was walking him away from me. ‘You know that King Verity still lives!’ I shouted after them. ‘Do you think he will never return? Do you think you will never have to answer for the lie you live?’

They turned a corner and were gone, leaving me to seethe silently, and curse myself for shouting so blatantly aloud what as yet we must conceal. But the incident had pushed me into an aggressive frame of mind. I left Verity’s study and prowled the keep. The kitchens were abustle and Cook had no time for me, other than to ask if I had heard that a serpent had been found lying before the fire on the main hearth. I said doubtless it had crawled into the firewood to shelter for the winter, and come in with a log. The warmth would have brought it to life. She just shook her head, and said she had never heard of the like but that it boded evil. She told me again of the Pocked Man by the well, but in her story, he had been drinking from the bucket, and when he lowered it from his spotted face, the water that ran down his face was red as blood. She was making the kitchen boys bring water from the well in the washer-courts for all the cooking. She’d have no one dropping dead at her table.

On that cheerful note, I left the kitchen, with a couple of sweet cakes I had light-fingered from a tray. I had not got far before a page stood before me. ‘FitzChivalry, son of Chivalry?’ he addressed me cautiously.

His wider cheekbones marked him as probably being of Bearn’s stock, and when I looked for it, I found the yellow flower that was the Bearn’s sigil sewn to his patched jerkin. For a boy of his height, he was wretchedly thin. I nodded gravely.

‘My master, Duke Brawndy of Bearn’s, desires that you wait upon him as soon as you handily may.’ He spoke the words carefully. I doubted that he had been a page long.

‘That would be now.’

‘Then shall I show you to him?’

‘I can find my way. Here. I should not take these up there with me.’ I handed him the sweet cakes, and he received them doubtfully.

‘Shall I save them for you, sir?’ he asked seriously, and it smote me to see a boy put such a high value on food.

‘Perhaps you would eat them for me, and if they suit you, you might go in the kitchens and tell our cook, Sara, what you think of her work.’

No matter how busy it was in there, I knew a compliment from a skinny boy would win him at least a bowl of stew.

‘Yes, sir!’ His face lit at my orders and he hastened away from me, half of one cake already in his mouth.

The lesser guest-rooms were those on the opposite side of the Great Hall from the King’s rooms. They were considered lesser, I suppose, mostly because their windows faced on to the mountains rather than the sea, and hence the rooms were gloomier. But the chambers were no smaller, nor less handsome in any other way, save that the last time I had been admitted to one, it had been decently furnished. Bearn’s guards admitted me to a sitting room that offered only three chairs in which to sit, and a bare, rickety table in the middle. Faith greeted me, neutrally formal, and then went to let Duke Brawndy know I was there. The tapestries and hangings that had once warmed the walls and given colour to the stone chamber were gone. It was as cheery as a dungeon, save that a warm fire on the hearth brightened it. I remained standing in the centre of the room until Duke Brawndy emerged from his bedchamber to greet me. He invited me to be seated, and awkwardly we drew two of the chairs closer to the hearth. There should have been breads and pastries upon the table, there should have been kettles and mugs and brewing herbs for tea, and bottles of wine in these rooms to welcome Buckkeep’s guests. It pained me that there were not. Faith hovered in the background like a hunting hawk. I could not help but wonder where Celerity was.

We exchanged a few minor pleasantries, and then Brawndy plunged into his topic like a draught horse into a snowdrift. ‘I understand King Shrewd is ill, too ill to see any of his dukes. Regal, of course, is much too busy with preparations for tomorrow.’ The sarcasm was heavy as thick cream. ‘So I wished to visit her majesty Queen Kettricken,’ he announced ponderously. ‘For as you know, she has been most courteous to me in the past. But at her door, her ladies told me she was not well and should not have visitors. I have heard a rumour that she was with child, and that now, in her grief and her foolishness at riding to Rippon’s defence, she has lost it. Is this so?’

I took a breath, studied fair words for my response. ‘Our king is, as you say, very ill. I do not think you shall see him, save at the ceremony. Our

queen is likewise indisposed, but I am sure that if she had been told you were at her door yourself, you would have been admitted. She has not lost the child. She rode to the defence of Neatbay for the same reasons she has gifted you with opals; for fear that if she did not act, no other would. Nor was it her actions at Neatbay that threatened her child, but a fall down a tower stair here at Buckkeep. And the child was only threatened, not lost, though our queen was sorely bruised.'

'I see.' He sat back in his chair and pondered for a bit. The silence took root between us and grew while I waited. At last he leaned forward and motioned me to do the same. When our heads were close together, he asked quietly, 'FitzChivalry, have you any ambitions?'

This was the moment. King Shrewd had predicted it years ago, and Chade more recently. When I made no immediate answer, Brawndy went on as if each word were a stone he shaped before handing it to me. 'The heir to the Farseer throne is a babe as yet unborn. Once Regal has declared himself King-in-Waiting, do you think he will wait long to claim the throne? We do not. For although these words come from my lips, I speak for Rippon and Shoaks duchies as well. Shrewd has become old, and feeble. A king in name only. We have had a taste of what kind of king Regal would be. What should we suffer while Regal holds title until Verity's child comes of age? Not that I expect the child will manage to be born, let alone mount the throne.' He paused, cleared his throat, and looked at me earnestly. Faith stood by the door as if guarding our talk. I kept my silence.

'You're a man we know, a son of a man we knew. You bear his looks and almost his name. You've as much a right to call yourself royal as many who have worn the crown.' He paused again. Waiting.

Again I kept silent. It was not, I told myself, a temptation. I would simply hear him out. That was all. He had said nothing, as yet, that suggested I would betray my king.

He floundered for words, then looked up and met my eyes. 'Times are difficult.'

'They are,' I agreed quietly.

He looked down at his hands. They were worn hands, hands that bore the small scars and roughness of a man who did things with them. His shirt was freshly-washed and mended, but it was not a new garment made especially for this occasion. Times might be hard in Buckkeep, but they were harder in Bearn. Quietly he said it. 'If you saw fit to oppose Regal, to

declare yourself King-in-Waiting in his stead, Bearn and Rippon and Shoaks would support you. It is my belief that Queen Kettricken would support you as well, and that Buck would follow her.' He looked up at me again. 'We have talked much of this. We believe Verity's child would stand a better chance of gaining the throne with you as regent than with Regal.'

So. They had dismissed Shrewd already. 'Why not follow Kettricken?' I asked carefully.

He looked into the flames. 'It's a hard thing to say, after she has shown herself so true. But she is foreign born, and in some ways untried. It is not that we doubt her; we do not. Nor would we be setting her aside. Queen she is, and would remain, and her child to reign after her. But in these times, we need both King-in-Waiting and Queen.'

A question bubbled in me. A demon wanted me to ask, 'And if, when the child comes of age, I do not wish to relinquish power, what then?' They had to have asked themselves, they had to have agreed on some answer to have ready for me. For a moment longer I sat still and silent. Almost I could feel the eddies of possibility swirling about me; was this what the Fool was always prattling about, was this one of his misty crossroads where I always stood in the centre? 'Catalyst,' I taunted myself quietly.

'Beg pardon?' Brawndy leaned closer to me.

'Chivalry,' I said. 'As you have said, I bear his name. Almost. Duke Brawndy. You are a man hard-pressed. I know what you have risked in speaking to me, and I will be as blunt with you. I am a man with ambitions. But I do not desire the crown of my king.' I took a breath and looked into the fire. For the first time, I really considered what it would do to Bearn, Rippon and Shoaks for both Shrewd and Kettricken suddenly to disappear. The Coastal duchies would become like a rudderless ship with decks awash. Brawndy had as much as said they would not follow Regal. Yet I had nothing else I could offer them at this time. To whisper to him that Verity lived would demand that they rise tomorrow, to deny Regal's right to declare himself King-in-Waiting. To warn them that both Shrewd and Kettricken would suddenly vanish would be no assurance at all to them, but would certainly mean that too many folk would not be surprised when it happened. Once they were safely in the Mountain Kingdom, then, perhaps, the Coastal dukes could be told all. But that could be weeks away. I tried to think what I could offer him now, what assurances, what hopes.

‘For what it is worth, I, as a man, am with you.’ I said the words carefully, wondering if I spoke treason. ‘To King Shrewd I am pledged. To Queen Kettricken, and the heir she carries, I am loyal. I foresee dark days ahead of us, and the Coastal duchies must act as one against the Raiders. We have no time to worry what Prince Regal does inland. Let him go to Tradeford. Our lives are here, and here we must stand and fight.’

With my own words, I felt a sea-change in me. Like the shedding of a cloak, or an insect crawling from its cocoon, I felt myself emerge. Regal was leaving me here at Buckkeep, abandoning me as he thought, to hardship and danger, along with those I most cared about. Well let him. With the King and Queen Kettricken safely away in the mountains, I would no longer fear Regal. Molly was gone, lost to me. What had Burrich said, a time ago – that I might not see her, but perhaps she might see me. Let her see then that I could act, that one man standing could make a difference. Patience and Lacey would be safer in my keeping than inland as Regal’s hostages. My mind was racing. Could I make Buckkeep my own, and hold it for Verity until he returned? Who would follow me? Burrich would be gone. I could not count on using his influence. But those swilling Inland soldiers would be gone as well. What would be left would be Buckkeep warriors, with a vested interest in keeping this cold rock of a castle from falling. Some had watched me grow up, some had learned how to spar and swing a sword at the same time I had. Kettricken’s guard I knew, and the old soldiers who still wore the colours of King Shrewd’s guard knew me. I had belonged to them before I had belonged to King Shrewd. Would they remember that?

Despite the warmth of the fire, a shiver went up me and if I had been a wolf, my hackles would have stood on end. The spark in me quickened. ‘I am no king. I am no prince. I am but a bastard, but one who loves Buck. I want no bloodshed with Regal, no confrontation. We have no time to waste, and I have no heart for the killing of Six Duchies folk. Let Regal flee inland. When he and the dogs that sniff after him are gone, I am yours. And as much of Buck as I can rally to follow me.’

The words were spoken, the comment made. *Treason, traitor*, whispered a small voice inside me. But in my heart I knew the rightness of what I did. Chade might not see it my way. But I felt in that moment that the only way to declare myself for Shrewd and Verity and Kettricken’s child was to declare myself with those who would not follow Regal. But I wanted to be sure they understood that loyalty clearly. I looked deep into Brawndy’s

wearied eyes. 'This is my goal, Duke Brawndy of Bearns. I speak it plainly, and I will back no other. I will see a united Six Duchies, with her coastline freed of Raiders, place a crown upon the head of Kettricken's and Verity's child. I must hear you say that you share that goal.'

'I swear that I do, FitzChivalry, son of Chivalry.' To my horror, the war-scarred old man took my hands in his and placed them on his forehead in the ancient sign of one who gives fealty. It was all I could do not to snatch them away. Loyalty to Verity, I told myself. This is how I have begun this, and I must see that this is how I go on.

'I will speak to the others,' Brawndy was going on quietly. 'I will tell them that this is how you wish it. In truth, we have no wish for bloodshed. It is as you say. Let the whelp run inland with his tail between his legs. Here is where the wolves shall stand and fight.'

My scalp prickled at his choice of words.

'We will attend his ceremony. We will even stand before him, and swear once more to be loyal to a king of the Farseer line. But he is not that king. Nor ever shall be. I understand he departs the very day after the ceremony. We shall let him go, though by tradition a new King-in-Waiting is bound to stand before his dukes and hear their counsels. It may be that we shall linger close, a day or so longer, after Regal has departed. Buckkeep at least shall be yours, ere we depart. We shall see to that. And there will be much to discuss. The placement of our ships. There are other ships, half-finished in the boat-sheds, are there not?'

At my short nod, Brawndy grinned in wolfish satisfaction. 'We shall see them launched, you and I. Regal has plundered Buckkeep for supplies; this is known to all. We will have to look into replenishing your warehouses. The farmers and shepherds of Buck will have to understand that they must find more, must give of what they held back, if their soldiers are to keep their coast free. It will be a hard winter for all of us, but lean wolves fight fiercest, or so they say.'

And we are lean, my brother, oh we are lean.

A terrible foreboding rose in me. I wondered what I had done. I would have to find a way to speak to Kettricken before she departed, to assure her somehow I had not turned on her. And I must speak to Verity, as soon as I safely could. Would he understand? He must. He had always been able to see into the depths of my heart. Surely he would see what my intentions were. And King Shrewd? Once, long ago, when he had first bought my loyalty, he

had said to me, 'If ever any man or woman seeks to turn you against me by offering you more than I do, then come to me, and tell me of the offer, and I shall meet it.' Would you give Buckkeep into my hands, old king? I wondered.

I realized that Brawndy had fallen silent. 'Do not fear, FitzChivalry,' he said quietly. 'Do not doubt the rightness of what we do, or we are all undone. If yours was not the hand that reached forth to claim Buckkeep, another would have. We could not leave Buck with no one at the helm. Be glad it is yourself, as we are. Regal has gone where none of us may follow, fled inland to hide beneath his mother's bed. We must stand on our own. All the omens and portents point us that way. They say the Pocked Man was seen drinking blood from a Buckkeep well, and that a serpent coiled on the main hearth in the Great Hall, and dared to strike at a child. I myself, riding south to be here, witnessed a young eagle bedevilled by crows. But just as I thought she must plunge into the sea to avoid them, she turned and, in mid-air, seized a crow that had sought to dive on her from above. She clenched him and dropped him bloody to the water, and all the other crows fled squawking and flapping. These are signs, FitzChivalry. We'd be fools to ignore them.'

Despite my scepticism for such signs, a shiver ran up me, setting the hair on my arms upright. Brawndy glanced away from me, to the inner door of the chamber. I followed his eyes. Celerity stood there. The short, dark hair framed her proud face and her eyes gleamed fierce blue. 'Daughter, you have chosen well,' the old man told her. 'I wondered, once, what you saw in a scribe. Perhaps now I see it as well.'

He beckoned her into the room, and she came in a rustle of skirts. She stood by her father, looking boldly at me. For the first time I glimpsed the steel will that hid inside the shy child. It was unnerving.

'I bade you wait, and you have,' Duke Brawndy said to me. 'You have shown yourself a man of honour in this. I have given you my loyalty this day. Will you take my daughter's pledge to be your wife as well?'

What a precipice I teetered on. I met Celerity's eyes. She had no doubts. If I had never known Molly, I would have found her beautiful. But when I looked at her, all I could see was who she was not. I had no heart left to give to any woman, let alone at a time like this. I turned my eyes back to her father, determined to speak firmly.

'You do me more honour than I deserve, sir. But, Duke Brawndy, it is as you have said. These are evil times, and uncertain. With you, your daughter

is safe. At my side, she could know only greater uncertainty. What we have discussed here, today, some would call treason. I will not have it said that I took your daughter to bind you to me in a questionable endeavour, nor that you gave your daughter for such a reason.' I forced myself to look back at Celerity, to meet her eyes. 'Brawndy's daughter is safer than FitzChivalry's wife. Until my position is more certain, I pledge no one to me in any way. My regard for you is great, Lady Celerity. I am not a duke, nor even a lord. I am as I am named, an illegitimate son of a prince. Until I can say I am more than that, I will seek no wife, nor court any woman.'

Celerity was clearly displeased. But her father nodded slowly to my words. 'I see the wisdom of your words. My daughter, I fear, sees only the delay.' He looked at Celerity's pout, smiled fondly. 'Someday she will understand that the people who seek to protect her are the people who care for her.' He ran his eyes over me as if I were a horse. 'I believe,' he said quietly, 'that Buck will stand. And that Verity's child shall inherit the throne.'

I left him with those words echoing in my mind. Again and again, I told myself I had done nothing wrong. If I had not reached forth to claim Buckkeep, another would have.

'Who?' Chade demanded angrily of me some hours later.

I sat looking down at my feet. 'I don't know. But they would have found someone. And that person would have been far more likely to cause bloodshed. To act at the King-in-Waiting ceremony, and jeopardize our efforts to get Kettricken and Shrewd clear of this mess.'

'If the Coastal dukes are as close to rebellion as your report indicates, then perhaps we should reconsider that plan.'

I sneezed. The room still smelled of birchbark. I had used too much. 'Brawndy did not come to me speaking of rebellion, but of loyalty to the true and rightful king. And that was the spirit in which I responded. I have no wish to overthrow the throne, Chade, only to secure it for its lawful heir.'

'I know that,' he said briefly. 'Otherwise I would go straight to King Shrewd with this ... madness. I know not what to call it. It is not treason, quite, and yet ...'

'I am no traitor to my king.' I spoke with quiet vehemence.

'No? Let me ask you this, then. If, despite or, save us all, because of our efforts to save Shrewd and Kettricken, they both perish with the child

unborn, and Verity never returns; what then? Will you still be so eager to cede the throne to the rightful king?’

‘Regal?’

‘By the line of succession, yes.’

‘He is no king, Chade. He’s an indulged princeling, and always will be. I’ve as much Farseer blood as he does.’

‘And so you might say of Kettricken’s child, when the time comes. Do you see what a dangerous path we set ourselves on, when we set ourselves above our places? You and I, we swore to the Farseer line, of which we are but random shoots. Not to King Shrewd alone, or to a wise king alone, but to uphold the rightful king of the Farseer line. Even if he is Regal.’

‘You would serve Regal?’

‘I have seen more foolish princes than he become wise as they aged. What you contemplate will bring us civil war. Farrow and Tilth ...’

‘Have no interest in any kind of a war. They will say, “good riddance” to us, and let the Coastal duchies go. Regal has always said as much.’

‘And he probably thinks he believes it. But when he finds that he cannot buy fine silk, and that the wines of Bingtown and beyond no longer flow up the Buck River to his palate, he will think better. He needs his port cities, and he will come back for them.’

‘So what are we to do? What should I have done?’

Chade sat down across from me, clasped his mottled hands between his bony old knees. ‘I do not know. Brawndy is desperate indeed. If you had loftily refused him and rebuked him with treason, well ... I don’t say he’d have done away with you. But remember he had no hesitation about dealing quickly with Virago when she represented a threat to him. This is all too much for one old assassin. We need a king.’

‘Aye.’

‘Could you skill again to Verity?’

‘I fear to try. I do not know how to guard against Justin and Serene. Or Will.’ I sighed. ‘Still, I will try. Surely Verity will know if they ride with my Skilling.’ Another thought intruded. ‘Chade, tomorrow night, when you lead Kettricken to escape, you must find a moment or two, to tell her of what has transpired, and assure her of my loyalty.’

‘Oh, those will be reassuring tidings to give her, as she flees back to the mountains. No. Not tomorrow night. I will see that word reaches her, when she is safe. And you must continue to try to reach Verity, but beware of

having your Skilling spied upon. Are you sure our plans are unknown to them?’

I had to shake my head. ‘But I believe they are safe. I had told all to Verity when first I Skilled him. It was not until the end that he said someone tried to spy upon us.’

‘You probably should have killed Justin,’ Chade grumbled to himself. Then he laughed at my outraged look. ‘No, no, calm yourself. I will not rebuke you that you refrained from it. Would that you had been so circumspect with the scheme that Brawndy brought you. Even a breath of this would be sufficient for Regal to have your neck stretched. And were he ruthless and foolish, he could try to hang his dukes as well. No. Let us not even think of that! The halls of Buckkeep would run blood before that was done. Would you had found a way to turn the conversation, before ever he made you such an offer. Save, as you say, that they might have found another. Ah, well. We cannot put old heads on young shoulders. Unfortunately, Regal could remove your young head from your shoulders all too easily.’ He knelt and put another piece of wood on the fire. He took a breath and sighed it out. ‘Have you got all other things in readiness?’ he asked abruptly.

I was only too glad to change the topic. ‘As much as I could. Burrich will be in place and waiting, in the alder copse where the dog-fox used to den.’

Chade rolled his eyes. ‘How do I find that? Ask a passing dog-fox?’

I smiled inadvertently. ‘Close. Where will you emerge from Buck Castle?’

He was stubbornly silent for a moment. Still that old fox hated to reveal his back door. Finally he said, ‘We will come out of the grain shed, the one third back from the stables.’

I nodded slowly. ‘A grey wolf will meet you. Follow him silently, and he will show you a way out of the walls of Buck that does not take you through the gates.’

For a long moment Chade just looked at me. I waited. For condemnation, for a look of disgust, even for curiosity. But the old assassin had studied too long how to mask his feelings. He said at last, ‘We are fools if we do not use every weapon that comes to hand. Is he any ... danger to us?’

‘No more than I am. You need not wear wolfsbane, nor offer him mutton to be allowed to pass.’ I was as familiar with the old folklore as Chade was. ‘Simply show yourself and he will appear to guide you. He will take you through the walls, and out to the copse where Burrich waits with the horses.’

‘Is it a long walk?’

I knew he was thinking of the King. ‘It is not overly long, but it is not short, and the snow is deep and unpacked. It will not be easy to scabble through the gap in the wall, but it can be done. I could ask Burrich to meet you at the wall instead, but I do not wish to draw attention to it. Perhaps the Fool could help you manage?’

‘He will have to, from the sounds of things. I am not willing to bring any others in on this plot. Our position seems only to become more and more untenable.’

I bowed my head to the truth of that. ‘And you?’ I ventured to ask.

‘My tasks are done as completely as they could be, ahead of time. The Fool has assisted me. He has spirited away both clothing and coin for his king’s journey. Shrewd has reluctantly agreed to our plan. He knows it is wise, but every part of it chafes him. Despite all, Fitz, Regal is his son, his favoured youngest. Even having felt Regal’s ruthlessness, it is still hard for him to say the Prince threatens his life. You see how he is bound: to admit that Regal would turn on him is to admit he was wrong about his son. To flee Buckkeep is even worse, for that is admitting not only that Regal would turn on him, but that flight is his only option. Our king has never been a coward. It galls him now to run from one who should be most loyal to him. Yet he must. Of that I have convinced him; mostly, I’ll admit, by saying that without his acknowledgement, Kettricken’s child will have a poor claim on the throne.’ Chade sighed. ‘All is as ready as I can make it. I have prepared the medicines, and all is well packed.’

‘The Fool understands he cannot go with his king?’

Chade rubbed his forehead. ‘He intends to follow, a few days behind. He would not be dissuaded entirely. The best I could do was to get him to travel separately.’

‘Then it but depends on me to find a way to empty the king’s room of witnesses, and for you to spirit him away.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Chade observed mirthlessly. ‘All is well planned and ready to carry out, save for the actual deed.’

We stared together into the fire.

TWENTY-NINE

Escapes and Captures

The outbreak of strife between the Coastal and Inland duchies at the end of King Shrewd's reign was not a new sundering, but rather a resumption of old differences. The four Coastal duchies, Bearns, Buck, Rippon and Shoaks were a kingdom long before the Six Duchies came to be. When the unified battle tactics of the Chalced States convinced King Wielder that their conquest would be unprofitable, he turned his ambitions inland. The Farrow region, with its scattered, nomadic tribal populations fell easily to the organized armies he led. The more populous and settled Tilth grudgingly surrendered to him when the erstwhile king of that region found his territory surrounded and his trade routes severed.

Both the old kingdom of Tilth and the region that would come to be known as Farrow were held as conquered territory for over a generation. The wealth of their granaries, orchards and herds were exploited lavishly for the benefit of the Coastal duchies. Queen Munificence, granddaughter of Wielder, was wise enough to see that this was breeding discontent in the inland areas. She showed great tolerance and wisdom in elevating the tribal elders of the Farrow folk and the former ruling families of Tilth to nobles. She used marriages and grants of land to forge alliances between Coastal and Inland folk. She first referred to her kingdom as the Six Duchies. But all of her political manoeuvres could not change the geographic and economic interests of the different areas. Climate, folk and livelihoods of the Inland duchies remained vastly different from those of the Coastal peoples.

During Shrewd's reign, the differing interests of the two regions were exacerbated by the offspring of his two queens. His elder sons, Verity and Chivalry, were the sons of Queen Constance, a noblewoman of Shoaks with relatives among the nobility of Bearns as well. She was very much of the Coastal folk. Shrewd's second queen, Desire, was from Farrow, but traced her family lineage back to the long-founded royalty of Tilth as well as to a

distant Farseer connection. Hence came her oft-repeated claim that her son Regal was more royal than either of his half-brothers, and hence had more right to the throne.

With the disappearance of King-in-Waiting Verity and rumours of his death, and the obvious failing of King Shrewd, it appeared to the Coastal dukes that power and title would be passed on to Prince Regal, born of Inland lineage. They preferred to align with the unborn child of Verity, a Coastal prince, and predictably did all they could to retain and consolidate power in the Coastal blood-lines. Threatened as the Coastal duchies were by Raiders and Forgings, it was really the only rational choice they could make.

The King-in-Waiting ceremony was too long. Folk were assembled well ahead of time, to allow Regal to make a stately entrance through our ranks and ascend to the high seat, where a drowsing King Shrewd awaited him. Queen Kettricken, pale as a wax taper, stood behind Shrewd at his left shoulder. Shrewd was bedecked in robes and fur collars and the full regalia of the royal jewels, but Kettricken had resisted Regal's suggestions and enticements. She stood very tall and straight in a plain robe of purple, belted above her rounding belly. A simple circlet of gold confined the cropped remnants of her hair. Other than that band of metal at her temples, she might have been a servant standing ready to attend Shrewd. I knew she saw herself still as Sacrifice rather than Queen. She could not see that the starkness of her attire made her look dramatically foreign to the court. The Fool was there as well, in a well-worn motley of black and white, and with Ratsy once more upon his sceptre. He had striped his face in black and white as well, and I wondered if this was to camouflage his bruises, or simply to complement his motley. He had appeared some time before Regal had, and had very obviously enjoyed the spectacle he created by sauntering up the aisle, waving Ratsy about in airy benediction, curtsying to the assemblage and then plopping gracefully at the King's feet. Guards had begun to move to intercept him, but were blocked by grinning, craning people. When he reached the dais and seated himself, the King had reached down absently to tousle the Fool's sparse locks, and so he had been suffered to remain where he was. Scowls or grins were exchanged over the Fool's performance, depending largely on how deeply people had pledged their allegiance to Regal. I feared myself that it would be the Fool's last prank.

The atmosphere in the keep all day had been like to that of a seething pot. My trust that Bearn's was a tight-lipped man had been misplaced. Entirely too many minor nobles were suddenly nodding to me, or catching my eye for an exchanged look. I feared it could not be missed by any of Regal's minions, and so had kept myself to my room, or, for a good part of the early afternoon, in Verity's tower, where I had vainly attempted to Skill forth to him. I had chosen that spot in the hopes of invoking his memory cleanly to my mind, but I failed. Instead I found myself straining for a hint of Will's footstep on the tower stairs, or a brush of Justin's or Serene's presence against my Skill sense.

After I gave up on Skilling, I sat long, pondering the unsolvable riddle of how I would empty the King's room of guards. Outside I could hear the pounding of the sea and the wind, and when I opened the windows briefly the gusting storm fair blew me across the room. Most saw this as a fair day for the ceremony; the rising storm might keep Raiders berthed wherever they were at present and assure us no new raids. I watched the freezing rain putting a crust on the banked snow while making the roads treacherously slick, and imagined Burrich travelling through it by night with the Queen and King Shrewd in his litter. It was not a task I would enjoy.

The tone for something of great portent to happen had been well set. Now, in addition to stories of the Pocked Man and snakes on the hearth, there was despair in the kitchens. The day's bake of bread had failed to rise, and the milk had curdled in the casks before even the cream could be skimmed from it. Poor Cook Sara had been shaken to her core, and declared that never before had such a thing dared to happen in her kitchens. The pigmen would not even let the soured milk be given to the swine, so sure were all that it was cursed. The failure of the bread had meant twice the catch-up work for the kitchen servants, who were already overburdened with feeding all the guests who had come for the ceremony. I could now vouch that the tempers of an entire keep could be disturbed by an unhappy kitchen crew.

There had been short rations for the watch-room, and the stew had been overly salted, while somehow the beer had gone flat. The Duke of Tilth complained of vinegar instead of wine in his rooms, which led the Dukes of Bearn's to comment to those of Shoaks and Rippon that even a bit of vinegar would have been welcome as a sign of hospitality in their rooms. The unfortunate remark was conveyed somehow to Mistress Hasty, who soundly scolded all the chamberlains and serving-folk who had not somehow

managed to spread the thin cheer left at Buckkeep to include the lesser guestrooms. There was a complaint among the lesser servants that an order had come down to keep expenses for those guests to a minimum, but no one could be found who would admit to giving such an order, or even passing it down. And so the day had gone, so that I had been altogether relieved to isolate myself in Verity's tower.

But I dared not miss the King-in-Waiting ceremony, for too much would have been inferred from that. And so I stood, an uncomfortable victim of a shirt with over-full sleeves and some very itchy leggings, patiently awaiting Regal's entrance. My mind was not on his pomp and show; rather it whirled with questions and worries of my own. I fretted over whether Burrich had been able to smuggle out the horses and litter. It was dark now. He was probably sitting outside in this storm, in the pathetic shelter of the alder copse. He would have blanketed the horses, no doubt, but that would do little against the sleet that now fell steadily. He had given me the name of the smithy where Sooty and Ruddy had been taken. Somehow I must find a way to keep up the man's weekly bribes, and to check on them often to be sure they were well-cared-for. This he had made me promise to entrust to no one else. Would the Queen be able to retire alone to her room? And again and again, how was I to empty King Shrewd's room that Chade might spirit him away?

A mutter of wonder broke me from my reverie. I glanced toward the dais where everyone seemed to be staring. There was a brief flickering, and for an instant, one of the white tapers burning there flickered blue. Then another spat a spark, and burnt blue for an instant. There was another mutter, but the wayward candles settled after that to burning evenly and well. Neither Kettricken nor King Shrewd appeared to notice anything amiss, but the Fool sat up and shook Ratsy at the errant candles in rebuke.

At length Regal did appear, resplendent in red velvet and white silk. A little maid walked before him, swinging a censer of sandalwood incense. Regal smiled upon all as he advanced leisurely toward the throne, meeting many an eye and nodding many an acknowledgement on his way to that high seat. I am sure it did not go off so finely as Regal had planned. King Shrewd faltered and then looked puzzled over the scroll that had been given him to read. At length Kettricken took it from his shaky hands, and he smiled up at her as she read aloud the words that must have cut her to her heart. It was a careful listing of the children that King Shrewd had sired, including a

daughter who had died in infancy, by the order of their births, and then by order of their deaths, all leading up to Regal as sole survivor and legitimate heir. She did not hesitate at Verity's name, but read aloud the brief statement, 'Lost to misfortune while on a quest to the Mountain Kingdom' as if it were an ingredient list. Of the child she carried, no mention was made. A child as yet unborn was an heir, but not a King-in-Waiting. The child could not step forward to claim that title until he or she was at least sixteen.

Kettricken had taken from Verity's chest the simple silver circlet with the blue gem that was crown for a King-in-Waiting, and the pendant of gold and emerald in the shape of a leaping buck. These she passed first to King Shrewd, who looked down at them as if bewildered. He made no move to bestow them upon Regal. At length Regal reached for them, and Shrewd allowed him to take them out of his hands. And so Regal set the crown upon his own head, and slipped the pendant about his own neck, and stood before us all, the new King-in-Waiting of the Six Duchies.

Chade's timing was slightly off. The candles did not seriously begin to flicker blue until the dukes were wending their way forward to pledge once more to House Farseer. Regal tried to ignore this phenomenon, until the muttering of the folk threatened to drown out Duke Ram of Tilth's oath. Then Regal turned and casually pinched out the offending candle. I admired his aplomb, especially when a second candle almost immediately went blue, and he repeated the gesture. I myself thought it was a bit too much of a portent when a torch set in a sconce by the main door suddenly whooshed out a blue flame and a foul stench before it guttered dark. All eyes had turned to watch it. Regal waited it out, but I saw the clench of his jaw and the tiny vein that throbbed on his temple.

I do not know how he had planned to end his ceremony, but he brought it to a rather abrupt close after that. At his curt signal, minstrels struck up abruptly, while at another nod the doors opened and men bore in table-boards already laden, while boys hastened after them with the trestles to set them upon. At least for this feast he had spared nothing, and the well-prepared meats and pastries were welcomed by all. If there seemed to be something of a shortage of bread, no one thought to complain of it. Cloths and tables had been set in the lesser hall for the grand folk and thither I saw Kettricken slowly escorting King Shrewd, while the Fool and Rosemary trailed after them. For those of us with lesser rank, there were simpler but plentiful foods to hand and a cleared floor for dancing.

I had planned to make myself a hearty meal at the feasting but again and again I was accosted by men who clapped my shoulder too firmly, or women who met my eyes too knowingly. The Coastal dukes were in at table with the other high nobles, ostensibly breaking bread with Regal and cementing their new relationship to him. I had been prepared that all three Coastal dukes would know I concurred with their plan. It was unnerving to find evidence it was known among the lesser nobility as well. Celerity made no overt claim upon me as escort, but made me nervously aware of myself by following me about as mutely as a hound. I could not turn but I found her a half-dozen steps away. Plainly she wished me to speak to her, but I did not trust my wits to find suitable words. I almost broke when a lesser noble from Shoaks casually asked me if I thought any of the warships would be harboured as far south as False Bay.

With a sinking heart, I suddenly realized my error. None of them feared Regal. They saw no danger, only a spoiled popinjay of a boy who wished to wear fine clothes and a circlet and claim a title to himself. They believed he would go away and they could ignore him. I knew better.

I knew what Regal was capable of, in search of power, or on a whim, or simply because he believed he could get away with it. He would leave Buckkeep. He did not want it. But if he thought I did, he would do everything within his power to see that I did not get it. I was supposed to be dumped here, like a stray, left to starve or be raided. Not ascend to power on the wreckage he had left.

If I were not careful, they would get me killed. Or worse, if there was anything Regal could devise that he saw as worse.

Twice I tried to slip away, and each time was cornered by someone who wanted a quiet moment of talk with me. I finally pleaded a headache and openly announced I was seeking my bed. Then I must be resigned to at least a dozen folk hastening to wish me good night before I retired. Just as I thought I was free, Celerity touched a shy hand to mine and wished me 'good night' in such a dispirited voice that I knew that I had hurt her feelings. That, I think, rattled me more than anything else that evening. I thanked her, and in my most cowardly act of that night, dared to kiss her fingertips. The resurgence of light in her eyes shamed me. I fled up the stairs. As I climbed them, I wondered how Verity had ever stood this sort of thing, or my father. If I had ever thought or dreamed of being a real prince instead of a bastard, I abandoned the dream that night. It was entirely too

public a profession. With a sinking heart, I realized that this was how life would be for me until Verity returned. The illusion of power clung to me now, and too many would be dazzled by it.

I went to my own chamber and, with great relief, changed into sensible clothes. As I tugged on my shirt, I felt the tiny bulge of Wallace's poison, still sewn into my cuff. Perhaps, I reflected bitterly, it would bring me luck. I left my room, and then committed possibly my most foolish act of the evening. I went up to Molly's chamber. The servants' hall was empty, the corridor but dimly lit with two wavering torches. I tapped at her door. There was no reply. I tried the latch softly, but it was not fastened. The door swung open at my touch.

Darkness. Emptiness. The small hearth held no fire. I found a bit of a candle and kindled it at a torch. Then I went back in her room and shut the door. I stood there while the devastation finally became real. It was all too Molly. The stripped bed, the hearth swept clean, but with a small stack of wood set ready for a fire for the next resident. Those were the touches that told me she had tidied herself out of the room. Not a ribbon, not a taper, not even a scrap of wicking remained of the woman who had lived a servant's life here. The ewer set upside-down in the basin to keep the dust out. I sat in her chair before the cold hearth, I opened her clothing chest and peered within. But it was not her chair, or hearth, or chest. These were just objects she had touched in the brief time she had been here.

Molly was gone.

She wasn't coming back.

I had held myself together by refusing to think of her. This empty room jerked the blindfold from my eyes. I looked into myself and despised what I saw. I wished I could call back the kiss I had placed on Celerity's fingertips. Balm for a girl's wounded pride, or the lure to bind her and her father to me? I no longer knew which it had been. Neither could be justified. Both were wrong, if I believed at all in the love I had pledged to Molly. That one act was proof I was guilty of all she had charged me with. I would always put the Farseers ahead of her. I had dangled marriage before Molly like bait, left her with no pride in herself nor belief in me. She had hurt me by leaving me. What she could not leave behind was what I had done to her belief in herself. That she must carry with her for ever, a belief that she had been tricked and used by a selfish, lying boy who lacked even the courage to fight for her.

Can desolation be a source of courage? Or was it merely recklessness and a desire for self-destruction? I went boldly back downstairs, and went directly to the King's chambers. The torches in the wall sconces outside his door annoyed me by spitting blue sparks as I passed. A little too dramatic, Chade. I wondered if he had treated every candle and torch in the keep. I pushed the hanging curtain aside and entered. No one was there. Not in the sitting room, not even in the King's bedchamber. The place had a threadbare look to it, with all the best things taken away and carted off upriver. It reminded me of a room in a mediocre inn. Nothing left here was worth stealing, or Regal would have left a guard on the door. In a strange way, it reminded me of Molly's room. Here there were objects left, bedding, garments and the like. But this was no longer my king's room. I went and stood by a table, in the exact spot where I had stood as a young boy. Here, while Shrewd breakfasted, he had quizzed me astutely on my lessons each week, and made me aware, every time he spoke to me, that if I was his subject, he was also my king. That man was gone, stripped from this room. The clutter of an active man, the boot-trees, the blades, the scatter of scrolls, had been replaced with censers for burning herbs and sticky cups of drug tea. King Shrewd had left this room a long time ago. Tonight I would take away a sick old man.

I heard footsteps and cursed myself for my clumsiness. I slipped behind a hanging and stood motionless. I heard the murmur of voices from the sitting room. Wallace. That mocking reply would be the Fool. I ghosted from my hiding place to stand just inside the bedchamber and peer through the makeshift curtain. Kettricken sat on the couch beside the King, talking with him softly. She looked weary. Dark circles smudged beneath her eyes, but she smiled for the King. I was pleased to hear him murmur a reply to whatever she had asked him. Wallace crouched on the hearth, adding sticks of wood to the fire with excessive care. On the other side of the hearth Rosemary had collapsed in a heap, her new dress bunched up about her. As I watched she yawned sleepily, then heaved a sigh and straightened herself up. I pitied her. The long ceremony had left me feeling exactly the same way. The Fool stood behind the King's chair. He suddenly turned and stared directly at me, as if the curtain were no barrier at all. I could see no one else in the room.

The Fool turned abruptly back to Wallace. 'Yes, blow, Sir Wallace, blow well and hot. Perchance we shall not need the fire at all, with the

warmth of your breath to drive the chill from the room.'

Wallace did not rise from his crouch, but turned to glare at the Fool over his shoulder. 'Bring me some wood, would you? Not a stick of this will catch. The flame runs along it well, but the wood does not burn. I need hot water if I am to make the King his sleeping tea.'

'Would I bring wood? Wood? Would I? Wooden am I not, fair Wallace. Nor would I burn, no matter how closely you huffed and puffed upon me. Guards! Ho, guards! Enter, and bring with you wood, if you would!' The Fool leaped up from his place behind the King and capered to the door, where he made a great show of attempting to treat the curtain as if it were a proper door. At last he thrust his head out into the hall, and called loudly again for the guards. He drew his head back in after a moment and returned to the room with a dejected air. 'No guards, no wood. Poor Wallace.' He gravely studied the man. Wallace was on his hands and knees, poking angrily at the fire. 'Perhaps were you to turn, bow to stern, and blow thus upon the fire, the flames might dance more merrily for you. Fore to aft, to create a draught, brave Wallace.'

One of the candles that lit the room suddenly spat blue sparks. All, even the Fool, flinched to its hissing, while Wallace lumbered to his feet. I would not have thought him a superstitious man, but there was a brief wildness in his eyes that spoke well of how little he liked this omen. 'The fire simply will not burn,' he announced, and then as if realizing the significance of what he said, he paused, mouth agape.

'We are witched,' said the Fool benignly. On the hearth, little Rosemary drew her knees up under her chin and looked about with round eyes. All trace of sleepiness was gone from her.

'Why are there no guards?' Wallace demanded angrily. He strode to the door of the room and peered out into the hallway. 'The torches burn blue, every one of them!' he gasped. He drew his head back in, looked about wildly. 'Rosemary. Run and fetch the guards. They said they would follow us shortly.'

Rosemary shook her head and refused to budge. She hugged her knees tightly.

'Guards would follow us? Wood follow us? Followed by wood? Now that's a knotty subject! Would wooden guards burn?'

'Stop your nattering!' Wallace snapped at the Fool. 'Go fetch the guards.'

‘Go fetch? First he thinks I am wood, not that I am his little pet dog. Ah! Go fetch the wood, the stick, you mean. Where’s the stick?’ And the Fool began to bark like a feist and frolic about the room as if in search of a thrown stick.

‘Go fetch the guards!’ Wallace all but howled.

The Queen spoke firmly. ‘Fool. Wallace. Enough. You weary us with your antics, and Wallace, you are frightening Rosemary. Go and fetch the guards yourself, if you are so set on having them here. As for me, I would have a little peace. I am weary. Soon I must retire.’

‘My queen, there is something ill afoot this night,’ Wallace insisted. He glanced about him warily. ‘I am not a man swayed by chance omens, but of late there have been too many to ignore. I shall go fetch the guards, since the Fool here lacks the courage –’

‘He clamours and weeps for the guards to come guard him from wood that will not burn, but I, I am the one who lacks courage? Ah, me!’

‘Fool, peace, please!’ The Queen’s plea seemed genuine. ‘Wallace. Go bring, not guards, but simply different wood. Our king wishes not this commotion, but simply rest. Go now. Go.’

Wallace hovered at the door, plainly reluctant to brave the blue light of the corridor alone.

The Fool simpered at him. ‘Shall I come with you, to hold your hand, brave Wallace?’

That at last sent him striding from the room. As his footsteps faded, the Fool once more looked toward my hiding-place, his invitation plain. ‘My queen,’ I said softly, and a quickly in-drawn breath was the only sign that I startled her as I stepped out of the King’s bedchamber. ‘If you wished to retire, the Fool and I could see the King to his bed. I know you are weary and that you wished to rest early this night.’ From the hearth, Rosemary regarded me with round eyes.

‘Perhaps I shall,’ said Ketricken, rising with surprising alacrity. ‘Come, Rosemary. Good night, my king.’

She swept from the room, with Rosemary practically trotting at her heels. The child gave us many a backward glance. As soon as the door curtain fell behind them, I was at the King’s side. ‘My king, it is time,’ I told him gently. ‘I shall keep watch here as you go. Is there anything special you wished to take with you?’

He swallowed, then focused his eyes on me. ‘No. No, there is nothing here for me. Nothing to leave behind, and nothing to stay for.’ He closed his eyes, spoke softly. ‘I have changed my mind, Fitz. I think I shall stay here, and die in my own bed this night.’

The Fool and I were both struck dumb for an instant.

‘Ah, no!’ the Fool cried softly, while I said, ‘My king, you are but tired.’

‘And the only thing I shall get is more tired.’ There was a strange lucidity in his eyes. The boy-king I had touched briefly when we Skilled together looked out at me from that pain-racked body. ‘My body fails me. My son has become a serpent. Regal knows his brother lives. He knows the crown he wears is not rightfully his. I did not think he would ... I thought at the last, he would think better ...’ Tears welled in his ancient eyes. I had thought to save my king from a disloyal prince. I should have known there was no saving a father from the betrayal of a son. He reached a hand toward me, a hand gone from a muscled sword-holder to a gaunt and yellowed claw. ‘I would say farewell to Verity. I would have him know, from me, that I did not countenance any of this. Let me at least keep that much faith with the son who kept faith with me.’ He pointed to a spot by his feet. ‘Come, Fitz. Take me to him.’

There was no refusing that command. I did not hesitate. I came and knelt before him. The Fool stood behind him, tears cutting grey paths through the black and white paint on his face. ‘No,’ he whispered urgently. ‘My king, rise, let us go into hiding. There you may think this through. You need not decide this now.’

Shrewd paid him no mind. I felt Shrewd’s hand settle on my shoulder. I opened my strength to him, sorrowfully surprised that I had at last learned how to do that at will. We plunged together into the black Skill river. We turned in that current as I waited for him to give us direction. Instead, he suddenly embraced me. *Son of my son, blood of my blood. In my own way, I have loved you.*

My king.

My young assassin. What have I made of you? How I have twisted my own flesh. You do not know how young you still are. Chivalry’s son, it is not too late to grow straight again. Lift up your head. See beyond all this.

I had spent my life becoming what he wished me to be. These words now filled me with confusion and questions there was no time to answer. I

could feel his strength fading.

Verity, I whispered to remind him.

I felt him reach out, and steadied that reaching for him. I felt the brush of Verity's presence, and then a sudden dwindling of the King. I groped after him as one would dive after a drowning man in deep water. I seized his consciousness, held it to me, but it was like gripping a shadow. He was a boy in my arms, frightened and struggling against he knew not what.

Then he was gone.

Like a bubble popping.

I had thought I had glimpsed the frailty of life when I held the dead child in my arms. Now I knew it. Here, and then not here. Even a snuffed candle may leave a trailing wisp of smoke. My king was simply gone.

But I was not alone.

I think every child has flipped over the dead bird found in the woods, only to be shocked and terrified by the busy workings of the maggots on the underside. Fleas cluster thickest and ticks grow fastest on a dying dog. Justin and Serene, like sucking leeches forsaking a dying fish, rose and tried to fasten to me. Here, the source of their increased strength and the King's slow failing. Here the mist that had clouded his mind and filled his days with weariness. Galen, their master, had made Verity his target. But he had missed his kill, and instead met his own death. How long these had been fastened to the King, how long they had sucked Skill strength from him, I would never know. They would have been privy to all he Skilled through me to Verity. Much was suddenly made clear to me, but it was all too late. They closed on me, and I had no concept of how to evade them. I felt them fasten to me, knew they were drawing off my strength now, and that with no reason to refrain from it, they would kill me in moments.

Verity! I cried out, but I was already too weakened. I would never reach him.

Off him, curs! A familiar snarl, and then Nighteyes *repelled* through me. I did not think it would work, but as before, he forced the Wit weapon upon them through the channel the Skill had opened. The Wit and the Skill were two different things, as unlike as reading and singing, or swimming and riding a horse. Yet when they were linked to me by the Skill, they must be vulnerable to this other magic. I felt them repulsed from me, but there were two of them to withstand the impact of Nighteyes' attack. It would not defeat them both.

Up and run! Flee those you cannot fight!

I found it a wise suggestion. Fear drove me back into my own body and I slammed the guards of my mind closed to their Skill touch. When I could, I opened my eyes. I lay on the floor of the King's study, gasping, while above me the Fool had thrown his body across the King's and was weeping wildly. I felt the creeping tendrils of the Skill sense groping after me. I withdrew deep into myself, shielded frantically in the way Verity had taught me. And still I felt their presence, like ghostly fingers plucking at my clothes, trailing down my skin. It filled me with revulsion.

'You've killed him, you've killed him! You've killed my king, you rotten traitor!' The Fool shrieked at me.

'No! It was not I!' I could barely gasp out the words.

To my horror Wallace stood in the door, taking in the whole scene with wild eyes. Then he lifted his glance, and screamed aloud in horror. He dropped the armful of wood he had brought. Both the Fool and I turned our heads.

Standing in the door of the King's bedchamber was the Pocked Man. Even knowing it was Chade, I still knew one moment of hair-raising terror. He was dressed in tattered grave-clothes, smeared with earth and mildew. His long grey hair hung in filthy locks about his face, and he had smeared his skin with ash that the livid scars might stand out the better. He lifted a slow hand to point at Wallace. The man screamed, and then fled shrieking down the halls. His yammering for the guards echoed through the keep.

'What goes on here?' Chade demanded as soon as Wallace had fled. He crossed to his brother in a single stride, laid long thin fingers across the King's throat. I knew what he would find. I clambered painfully to my feet.

'He's dead. I DID NOT KILL HIM!' My shout cut across the Fool's rising wail. The Skill fingers plucked at me insistently. 'I go to kill those who did. Take the Fool to safety. Have you the Queen?'

Chade's eyes were very wide. He stared at me as if he had never seen me before. All the candles in the room went suddenly to sputtering blue. It seemed only fitting. 'Get her to safety,' I ordered my master. 'And see the Fool goes with her. If he stays here, he's dead. Regal will let no one live who has been in this room tonight.'

'No! I will not leave him!' The Fool's eyes were wide and empty as a mad thing's.

‘Take him however you can, Chade! His life depends on it!’ I grabbed the Fool by the shoulders and shook him savagely. His head whipped back and forth on his thin neck. ‘Go with Chade and be silent. Be silent, if you want your king’s death avenged. For that is what I go to do.’ A sudden tremor ran over me and the world rocked, black at the edges. ‘Elfbark!’ I gasped. ‘I need elfbark from you. Then flee!’ I thrust the Fool into Chade’s arms, and the old man took him in his ropy grasp. It was like watching him taken into the arms of death. They left the room, Chade propelling the weeping Fool along. After a moment, I heard the barest grating of stone on stone. I knew they were gone.

I sank to my knees, then could not keep from toppling. I fetched up against my dead king’s lap. His cooling hand fell from the chair arm to rest upon my head.

‘A stupid time for tears,’ I said aloud to the empty room. But that did not stop them. Blackness swirled at the edge of my vision. The ghostly Skill fingers plucked at my walls, scraping at the mortar, trying every stone. I pushed at them, but they came right back. The way Chade had looked at me, I suddenly doubted that he would be back. Still. I took a breath.

Nighteyes. Guide them to the fox’s den. I showed him the shed they would emerge from and where they must go. It was all I could manage.

My brother?

Guide them, my heart! I pushed him feebly away, and felt him go. Still the foolish tears tracked down my face. I reached to steady myself. My hand fell at the King’s waist. I opened my eyes, forced my vision to clear. His knife. Not some jewelled dagger, but the simple knife that every man carries at his waist, for the simple day-to-day tasks he does. I took a breath, then pulled it from its sheath. I held it in my lap and looked at it. An honest blade, honed thin from years of use. A handle of antler, probably carved once, but worn smooth with the grip of his hand. I ran my fingers lightly over it, and they found what my eyes could no longer read. Hod’s sign. The Weaponmaster had made this for her king. And he had used it well.

A memory tickled at the back of my mind. ‘We are tools,’ Chade had told me. I was the tool he had forged for the King. The King had looked at me, and wondered, *what have I made of you?* I did not need to wonder. I was the King’s assassin. In more ways than one. But I would see that I served him as I had been intended, one last time.

Someone crouched beside me. Chade. I turned my head slowly to look at him. 'Carris seed,' he told me. 'No time to prepare elfbark. Come. Let me take you into hiding as well.'

'No.' I took the small cake of carris seed compressed with honey. I put the whole thing in my mouth and chewed, grinding the seed between my back teeth to release the full strength. I swallowed. 'Go,' I bid him. 'I have a task, and so have you. Burrich is waiting. The alarm will be raised soon. Get the Queen away quickly, while you have a chance of getting ahead of the hunt. I will keep them busy.'

He released me. 'Goodbye, boy,' he said gruffly, and stooped to kiss me on the forehead. It was farewell. He didn't expect to see me alive again.

That made two of us.

He left me there, and before even I heard the grate of stone on stone, I felt the working of the carris seed. I had had the seed before, at Springfest when everyone does. A tiny pinch of it sprinkled across the top of a sugar cake brings a merry giddiness to the heart. Burrich had warned me that some dishonest horse-traders fed their charges carris oil on their grain, for the purpose of winning a race, or to make a sick horse show well at an auction. He had also warned me that a horse so treated was often never the same beast again. If he survived. I knew Chade had used it, on occasion, and I had seen him drop like a stone when the effects wore off. Yet I did not hesitate. Perhaps, I conceded briefly, perhaps Burrich was right about me. The ecstasy of the Skill, or the frantic flush and heat of the hunt. Did I taunt self-destruction, or did I desire it? I did not worry about it for long. The carris seed took me. My strength was as the strength of ten, and my heart soared like an eagle. I sprang to my feet. I started for the door, then turned back.

I knelt before my dead king. I lifted his knife, held it before my brow as I swore to him, 'This blade shall take your vengeance.' I kissed his hand and left him there before the fire.

If I had thought the candles spitting blue sparks were unnerving, then the blue glow of the torches in the hall was other-worldly. It was like looking down through still deep water. I sprinted down the hall, giggling to myself. Below, I could hear a clamour, with Wallace's voice raised shrill above the rest. Blue flames and the Pocked Man, he was yammering. Not as much time had passed as I had thought, and now time waited for me. Light as the wind I darted down the hall. I found a door that would open and slipped within. I waited. They took forever to come up the stairs, even longer to go past my

door. I let them reach the King's chamber, and when I heard the shouts of alarm begin, I sprang from my hiding-place and dashed down the stairs.

Someone shouted after me as I fled, but no one gave chase. I was to the bottom of the stairs before I heard someone finally give the order to catch me. I laughed aloud. As if they could! Buckkeep Castle was a warren of back ways and servants' passages for a boy who had grown up there. I knew where I was going, but I didn't go there directly. Like a fox I ran, appearing briefly in the Great Hall, dashing across the cobbles of the washer-courts, terrifying Cook with my frantic dash through her kitchens. And always, always, the pale Skill fingers plucked and fingered me, not knowing at all that I was coming, coming my dears, coming to find you.

Galen, born and raised in Farrow, had always hated the sea. He feared it, I think, and so his chamber had been on the side of the keep that faced the mountains. After he had died, I had heard it had become a shrine to him. Serene had taken over his bedchamber, but kept his sitting room as a gathering place for the coterie. I had never visited his rooms, but I knew the way. I took the steps up like an arrow in flight, whisked down the hall past a couple in a heated embrace and stopped at a heavy door banded with iron. But a thick door that is not properly barred is no barrier at all, and in moments this one swung open to my touch.

There was a semi-circle of chairs set up around a tall table. A fat candle burned in the centre of it. For focus, I imagined. Only two of the chairs were occupied. Justin and Serene sat side by side, hands clasped, eyes closed, heads lolled back in the throes of Skilling. No Will. I had hoped to find him here as well.

For the barest instant I looked at their faces. Perspiration gleamed on them, and I was flattered that they put so much effort to breaking down my walls. Their mouths twitched in small smiles, resisting the ecstasy of the Skill user, focusing on the object rather than on the pleasure of the pursuit. I did not hesitate. 'Surprise!' I said softly. I jerked Serene's head back and pulled the King's blade across her exposed throat. She jerked once, and I let her fall to the floor. There was a remarkable amount of blood.

Justin leaped to his feet with a shriek and I braced myself for his onslaught. He fooled me, though. He fled squealing down the hall and I followed, knife in hand. He sounded just like a pig, and he was incredibly fast. No fox-tricks for Justin, he favoured the most direct route to the Great Hall, shrieking all the way. I laughed as I ran. Even now it seems to me

incredible to recall that, but I cannot deny it. Did he suppose Regal would draw sword to defend him? Did he think, having killed my king, that anything in the world could stand between me and him?

In the Great Hall, musicians had been playing and folk dancing, but Justin's entrance put an end to that. I had gained on him so that there were scarce a score of steps between us when he caromed into one of the laden tables. Folk were still standing shocked at his entrance when I leaped on him and pulled him down. I punched the knife in and out of him half a dozen times before anyone thought they should interfere. As Regal's Farrow-bred guards reached for me, I flung his twitching body into them, found a table at my back, and leaped onto it. I held up my dripping blade. 'The King's knife!' I told them, and showed it round. 'Taking blood in vengeance for the King's death. That is all!'

'He's mad!' someone cried. 'Verity's death has driven him mad!'

'Shrewd!' I cried in fury. 'King Shrewd has fallen to treachery this night!'

Regal's Inlander guards hit my table in a wave. I had not thought there were that many of them. We all went down in a wave of food and crockery. Folk were screaming, but as many surged forwards to witness as retreated in horror. Hod would have been proud of me. With the King's belt knife, I held off three men with short swords. I danced, I leaped, I pirouetted. I was much too fast for them and the cuts they did inflict on me caused me no pain. I scored two good slashes on two of them, simply because they did not think I would dare lunge close enough to inflict them.

Somewhere back in the crowd, someone raised a cry. 'Arms! To the Bastard! They are killing FitzChivalry!' A struggle began but I could not see who was involved, nor give it any attention at all. I stabbed one of the guards in the hand and he dropped his blade. 'Shrewd!' Someone cried above the din. 'King Shrewd is slain!' By the sounds of the other struggle, more folk were becoming involved. I could not look to see. I heard another table crash to the floor, and a scream across the room. Then Buckkeep's own guard came pouring into the room. I heard Kerf's voice raised above the general din. 'Separate them! Quell it! Try not to spill blood in the King's own hall!' I saw my attackers ringed, saw Blade's look of consternation as he saw me and then cried out over his shoulder, 'It's FitzChivalry! They're trying to take down the Fitz!'

‘Separate them! Disarm them!’ Kerf butted heads with one of Regal’s guards, dropping him. Beyond him I saw knots of struggling break out as Buck guards fell on Regal’s personal guard, battering blades down, and demanding that swords be sheathed. I had space for a breath, and could lift my eyes from my own struggle to see that, indeed, a great many folk had become involved, and not just guards. Fist fights had broken out amongst the guests as well. It looked to become both brawl and riot when suddenly Blade, one of our own guardsmen, shouldered between two of my attackers, sending them sprawling to the floor. He leaped forward and confronted me.

‘Blade!’ I greeted him with delight, thinking him an ally. Then, as I noticed his defensive stance, I told him, ‘You know I would not draw blade against you!’

‘I know that well, lad,’ he told me sadly, and the old soldier flung himself forward to trap me in a bear hug. I do not know who hit me on the back of the head, or with what.

THIRTY

Dungeons

If a houndsman suspect that a dog-boy is using the Wit to defile and divert the hounds to his own ends, he should be watchful for these signs, if the boy speaks not overmuch to his fellows, be wary. If the hounds perk up before the boy is in sight, or whine before he has left, be watchful. If a hound will leave off his snuffing for a bitch in season, or turn aside from a bloodtrail and lie quiet at the boy's word, be certain. Let the boy be hung, over water if possible, well away from the stables, and his body burned. Let every hound he has trained be drowned, as well as all sired by defiled hounds. A hound who has known the Wit use will neither fear nor respect any other master, but is sure to turn vicious when deprived of the Witted one. A Witted boy cannot be trusted to beat an unruly hound, nor will he suffer his Wit hound to be sold away, or used as bear-bait, no matter how old the dog. A Wit-boy will turn his master's hounds to his own purposes, and never has any true loyalty to his master, but only to his Wit-hound.

I woke up sometime. Of all the cruel jests fate had recently played on me, I decided that awakening was the cruellest. I lay still and catalogued my various discomforts. The exhaustion from my carris seed frenzy combined well with the exhaustion from my Skill battle with Justin and Serene. I had taken some nasty sword cuts to my right forearm, and one to my left thigh that I recalled not at all. None of them had been dressed; my sleeve and trousers were matted to my skin with dried blood. Whoever had knocked me unconscious had made sure of his work with several more blows. Other than that, I was fine. I told myself this a number of times, ignoring the trembling in my left leg and arm. I opened my eyes.

The room I was in was small and stone. There was a pot in the corner. When I finally decided I could move, I craned my head enough to see that there was a door, with a small barred window in it. This was the light source, fed by a torch somewhere down a hallway outside. Oh. Yes. The dungeons.

My curiosity satisfied, I closed my eyes again and slept. Nose to tail, I rested safe in a deep den covered over by the blowing snow. The illusion of safety was as much as Nighteyes could offer me. So weak was I that even his thoughts to me seemed misty. *Safe*. That was as much as he could convey.

I awoke again. I could tell time had passed by how much thirstier I was. Other than that, everything was remarkably the same. This time I determined that the bench I was lying on was also made of stone. There was nothing between me and the stone save the clothes I wore. 'Hey!' I called. 'Guards!' There was no answer. Everything seemed a bit vague. After a time, I could not recall if I had already cried out, or if I were summoning the strength to do so. After a bit more time, I decided I did not have the strength. I went back to sleep. I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

I awoke to Patience's voice arguing. Whoever she was arguing with wasn't answering much, and wasn't giving in. 'It's ridiculous. What are you afraid I'll do?' A silence. 'I've known him since he was a child.' Another silence. 'He's hurt. What possible damage can it do for me to at least look at his injuries? You can hang him whole as easily as you can wounded, can't you?' Another silence.

After a time, I decided I might be able to move. I had a lot of bruises and scrapes I couldn't account for, probably gained on the journey between the Great Hall and here. The worst part of moving was that it tugged my clothing against the scabbed-over cuts. I decided I could stand it. For such a small room, it was a very long way from the bed to the door. When I got there, I discovered I could just see out the little barred window. What I could see was the stone wall on the opposite side of the narrow corridor. I gripped the bars with my good left hand.

'Patience?' I croaked.

'Fitz? Oh, Fitz, are you all right?'

Such a question. I started to laugh and coughed instead, finishing with the taste of blood in my mouth. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't fine, but it wasn't healthy for her to be too interested in me. Even as fuddled as I was, I knew that. 'I'm all right,' I croaked at last.

'Oh, Fitz, the King is dead!' she called to me from down the hall. The words tumbled from her in her haste to tell me all. 'And Queen Kettricken is missing, and King-in-Waiting Regal says you are at the bottom of all of it. They say ...'

‘Lady Patience, you’ll have to leave now,’ the guard attempted to break in. She ignored him.

‘... you went crazy in grief over Verity’s death, and killed the King and Serene and Justin, and they don’t know what you’ve done with the Queen, and no one can ...’

‘You cannot speak to the prisoner, madam!’ He spoke with conviction, but she paid no mind.

‘... find the Fool. Wallace, he’s the one, he said he saw you and the Fool quarrelling over the King’s body, and then he saw the Pocked Man, come to carry his spirit away. The man is crazy! And Regal accuses you, too, of the low magic, of having the soul of a beast! That’s how he said you killed the King. And –’

‘Madam! You have to leave now, or I will have to have you taken away.’

‘Then do that,’ Patience hissed at him. ‘I just dare you to try. Lacey, this man is bothering me. Ah! You dare to think of touching me! I, who was Chivalry’s Queen-in-Waiting! Now, Lacey, do not hurt him, he’s only a boy. A mannerless boy, but a boy nonetheless.’

‘Lady Patience, I beg you ...’ A change of tone from the guard.

‘You can’t very well drag me away from here without leaving your post. Do you think I’m so stupid I can’t see that? What will you do? Attack two old women with your sword?’

‘Chester! Chester, where are you?’ The guard on duty bellowed. ‘Damn you, Chester!’ I could hear frustration in his voice as he yelled for his partner, who had taken a break. He was probably up in the watch-room off the kitchen. Drinking cold beer. Eating hot stew. A wave of dizziness passed over me.

‘Chester?’ The guard’s voice was fading. He had actually been fool enough to leave Lady Patience by his post, and go looking for his comrade. In a moment I heard the light patter of her slippers outside my door. I felt the touch of her fingers on my hand that gripped the bar. She was not tall enough to look in, and the corridor was so narrow she could not step back where I could see her. But the touch of her hand was as welcome as sunlight.

‘Keep watch for him coming back, Lacey,’ she directed, then spoke to me. ‘How are you, really?’ She spoke low, pitching her voice for my ears alone.

‘Thirsty. Hungry. Cold. In pain.’ I saw no point in lying to her. ‘What is happening in the keep?’

‘Complete disorder. The Buckkeep guards broke up the riot in the Great Hall, but then, outside, there was a brawl between some of the Inlanders that Regal brought in and the Buckkeep Guard. Queen Kettricken’s guard drove a wedge between them, and their officers beat their troops back into line. Still, it’s tense. The fighters weren’t all soldiers. Many a guest has a black eye or walks with a limp still. Luckily, no one amongst the guests took serious harm. Blade took about the worst injuries, they say. He went down keeping the Farrow men off you. Cracked his ribs and blacked his eyes. But Burrich says he will be all right. The lines have been drawn, however, and the dukes walk about bristling at one another like dogs.’

‘Burrich?’ I asked hoarsely.

‘Did not get involved at all,’ she said reassuringly. ‘He’s fine. If being ill-tempered and surly to all is fine. Which, for him, I suppose is normal.’

My heart thundered inside me. Burrich. Why wasn’t he gone? I dared ask no more about him. One question too many, and Patience would get curious. So. ‘And Regal?’ I asked.

She snorted. ‘One gets the feeling that what really irritates Regal is that he no longer has an excuse to abandon Buckkeep. Before, you know, he was taking King Shrewd and Kettricken inland so they would be safe, and gutting the castle so they might have familiar things about them. He has no such excuse now, and the Coastal dukes have demanded he stay and defend the keep, or at least put in that place a man of their choosing. He has offered his cousin Lord Bright of Farrow, but the Coastal dukes do not like him. Now that Regal finds himself suddenly a king, I do not think he is enjoying it as much as he expected to.’

‘Has he crowned himself then?’ A roaring threatened my ears. I stood by gripping the bars. Must not faint, I told myself. The guard would be back soon. I had only this time to hear what was going on.

‘We have all been much too busy burying the King, and then searching for the Queen. When the King was found dead, we were sent to wake her, but found her doors locked and no answer to our knocking. Finally Regal resorted to his men and axes again. The inner chamber door was closed and locked as well. But the Queen was gone. It is a great mystery to all of us.’

‘What does Regal say of it?’ My head was clearing of cobwebs. Oh, how I hurt.

‘Little, save that she and her child are surely dead, and you have brought it about somehow. He speaks wild charges of beast magic, saying you have slain the King with your Wit. All demand proof for his claims, and he keeps saying, soon, soon.’

No mention of searching the roads and byways for Kettricken then. I had gambled that his Skill spies had not found out the whole of our plot. But, I cautioned myself, if he had sent out searchers, I doubted they were ordered to bring her back alive and safe.

‘What does Will do?’ I asked.

‘Will?’

‘Will, Hostler’s son. A member of the coterie.’

‘Oh. Him. I have not seen him about, that I recall.’

‘Ah.’ Another wave of dizziness threatened me. Suddenly logic eluded me. I knew I should ask more questions, but I could not think of what they should be. Burrich was still here, but the Queen and the Fool were gone. What had gone wrong? There was no safe way to ask Patience. ‘Does anyone else know you are here?’ I managed to ask. Surely, if Burrich had known she were coming, he would have sent a message.

‘Of course not! This was not an easy thing to plan, Fitz. Lacey had to get an emetic into the one guard’s food, so he would leave only one on watch. Then we had to watch for him to leave ... Oh. Lacey said to bring you these. She is wise, that one.’ Her hand went away, and then came back, to fumble one, and then two small apples through the bars. They hit the floor before I could catch them. I resisted the urge to pounce on them immediately.

‘What do they say of me?’ I asked quietly.

She was silent a moment. ‘Mostly, folk say that you are crazy. Some, that you were witched by the Pocked Man to bring death amongst us that night. There is some gossip that you had planned to lead a rebellion, and killed Serene and Justin because they found out about it. Others, not many, agree with Regal, saying you have the beast magic. Wallace, mostly, says such things. He declares the candles did not burn blue in the King’s chamber until you entered it. And he says the Fool was shouting that you had killed the King. But the Fool is gone, too. There have been so many omens of evil, and so many fear now ...’ Her voice dwindled away.

‘I did not kill the King,’ I said quietly. ‘Justin and Serene did. That was why I killed them, with the King’s own knife.’

‘The guards are coming back!’ A hiss from Lacey. Patience ignored it.

‘But Justin and Serene weren’t even ...’

‘I don’t have time to explain. It was done with Skill. But they did, Patience. I swear it.’ I paused. ‘What do they plan to do with me?’

‘It isn’t decided, really.’

‘We’ve no time for polite lies.’

I actually heard her swallow. ‘Regal wants to hang you. He’d have had you killed right there that night, in the Great Hall, save that Blade held off his guards until the riot was quelled. Then the Coastal dukes stood up for you. Lady Grace of Rippon reminded Regal that no carrier of the Farseer blood can be put to death by sword or hanging. He did not wish to concede you were of royal blood, but too many raised a shout when he denied it. Now he swears he can show you have the Wit, and hanging is what must be done for one that uses beast magic.’

‘Lady Patience! You must leave now, you must, or I’m the one that will be hanging!’ The guard was back, with Chester evidently, for there were more than one set of footsteps. They were hurrying down to the cell. Patience let go of my fingers.

‘I will do what I can for you,’ she whispered. She had tried so hard not to let any fear come into her voice, but now it broke on those words.

And then she was gone, scolding at the guard like a jay bird all the way as Chester or whoever escorted her from the cells. The moment she was gone, I laboriously stooped down to gather up my apples. They were not large, and they were withered from being winter-stored, but I found them delicious. I ate even the stems. The little moisture they contained did nothing to quench my thirst. I sat on my bench for a bit, holding my head in my hands, forcing myself to stay alert. I knew I had to think, but it was terribly hard. My mind would not focus. I was tempted to pick my shirt free of the cuts on my arm, but forced myself to leave it alone. As long as they were not festering, I would not bother them. I could not afford to bleed. It took all my strength to hobble back to my door. ‘Guards!’ I croaked.

They ignored me.

‘I want water. And food.’

Where are you? Another answered my request.

Beyond your reach, my friend. How are you?

Fine. But I have missed you. You slept so deep, almost I thought you dead.

Almost I thought myself dead. That night. Did you guide them to the horses?

I did. And they left. Heart of the Pack told them I was a half-breed you had tamed. Like I was a cur, doing tricks.

He sought to protect me, not to insult you. Why did not Heart of the Pack go with them?

I do not know. What shall we do now?

Wait.

‘Guards!’ I called again, as loudly as I was able. It wasn’t very loud.

‘Get back from the door.’ The man’s voice was right outside my cell. I had been so occupied with Nigteyes I had not heard him approach. I was not myself at all.

A small panel at the bottom of the door slid open. A pot of water and a half a loaf were set inside. The panel closed again.

‘Thank you.’

There was no reply. I picked them up, examined both carefully. The water smelled as if it had been standing for some time, but neither smell nor a cautious sip revealed any trace of poison. I broke the loaf into smaller pieces, looking for flecks in the dough or any discoloration. It was not fresh, but it was not poisoned in any way I could detect. And someone had eaten the other half of it. In a very short time, they were gone. I went and lay on my stone bench again, and tried to find the least uncomfortable position.

The cell was dry, but cold, in the way that any unused chamber in Buckkeep was cold during the winter. I knew exactly where I was. The cells were not far from the wine cellars. I knew I could scream my lungs bloody and no one but my guards would hear. I had explored down here as a boy. I had seldom found occupants in the cells, and even more rarely guards upon them. The swiftness of justice at Buckkeep meant there was seldom a reason to hold a prisoner for more than a few hours. Transgressions of the law usually demanded you pay with your life, or with the work of your hands. I suspected these cells would see a deal more use, now that Regal claimed to be king.

I tried to sleep, but insensibility had deserted me. Instead, I shifted about on the cold, hard stone and thought. I tried for a while to convince myself that if the Queen had escaped, I had won. After all, winning was getting what you wanted, wasn’t it? Instead, I found myself thinking of how quickly King Shrewd had gone. Like a bubble popping. If they hung me,

would it be that swift for me? Or would I strangle and dangle a long time? To divert myself from those pleasant thoughts, I wondered how long a civil war Verity would have to fight with Regal before he could put the Six Duchies on a map once more as the Six Duchies. Assuming, of course, that Verity returned and was able to rid the coast of Red Ships. When Regal abandoned Buckkeep, as I was sure he would, I wondered who would step forward to take it. Patience had said the Coastal dukes wanted nothing of Lord Bright. Buck had a few lesser nobles, but none of them so bold as to claim Buckkeep, I thought. Perhaps one of the three Coastal dukes would reach out a hand and claim it. No. None of them had the might right now to care for anything beyond their own borders. It would be each for his own now. Unless Regal stayed at Buckkeep. With the Queen missing and Shrewd dead, he was, after all, the rightful king. Unless one knew that Verity was alive. But few did. Would the Coastal duchies accept Regal as king now? Would the Coastal duchies accept Verity as their king when he returned? Or would they scorn the man who had left them on a foolish quest?

Time passed slowly in that unchanging place. I was not given food nor water unless I asked for them, and sometimes not then, so meals were no measure of the day. Awake, I was a prisoner of my thoughts and worries. Once I tried to Skill to Verity, but the effort brought on a darkening of my vision and a long period of pounding headache. I had not the strength for a second effort. Hunger became a constant, as unrelenting as the cold of the cell. I heard the guards twice turn Patience away, heard them refuse to give me the food and bandages she had brought. I did not call to her. I wanted her to give up, to disassociate herself from me. My only respite came when I slept and dream-hunted with Nighteyes. I tried to use his senses to explore what went on at Buckkeep, but he attached only a wolf's importance to things, and when I was with him, I shared his values. Time was not divided by days and nights, but from kill to kill. The meat I devoured with him could not sustain my human body, and yet there was satisfaction in the gorging. With his senses I found the weather changing, and awoke one morning knowing that a clear winter day had dawned. Raider weather. The Coastal dukes could not linger much longer in Buckkeep, if they had lingered at all.

As if to bear me out, there were voices at the guard station and the rasp of boots against the stone floor. I heard Regal's voice, strained with anger, and the guard's conciliatory greeting, and then they came down the corridor. For the first time since I had awakened there, I heard a key in the lock of my

cell, and the door was swung open. I sat up slowly. Three dukes and a traitor prince peered in at me. I managed to come to my feet. Behind my lords stood a row of soldiers armed with pikes, as if ready to hold a maddened beast at bay. A guard with a drawn sword stood beside the open door, between Regal and me. He did not underestimate my hatred.

‘You see him,’ Regal declared flatly. ‘He is alive and well. I have not done away with him. But know also that I have the right to. He killed a man, my servant, right in my hall. And a woman upstairs in her chamber. I have a right to his life, for those crimes alone.’

‘King-in-Waiting Regal. You charge FitzChivalry with killing King Shrewd using the Wit,’ Brawndy stated. With ponderous logic he added, ‘I have never heard of such a thing being possible. But if this is so, then the Council has first right to his life, for he would have killed the King first. It would take a convening of the Council, to decide his guilt or innocence, and to set his sentence.’

Regal sighed in exasperation. ‘Then I will convene the Council. Let us get it done and have it over with. It is ridiculous to delay my coronation for a murderer’s execution.’

‘My lord, a king’s death is never ridiculous,’ Duke Shemshy of Shoaks pointed out quietly. ‘And we will have done with one king before we have another, Regal, King-in-Waiting.’

‘My father is dead and buried. How much more done with him can you be?’ Regal was becoming reckless. There was nothing of grief or respect in his retort.

‘We will know how he died, and at whose hand,’ Brawndy of Bears told him. ‘Your man Wallace said FitzChivalry killed the King. You, King-in-Waiting Regal, agreed, saying he used the Wit to do it. Many of us believe that FitzChivalry was singularly devoted to his king and would not do such a thing. And FitzChivalry said the Skill users did.’ For the first time, Duke Brawndy looked directly at me. I met his eyes and spoke to him as if we were alone.

‘Justin and Serene killed him,’ I said quietly. ‘By treachery, they killed my king.’

‘Silence!’ Regal bawled. He lifted his hand as if to strike me. I did not flinch.

‘And so I killed them,’ I continued, looking only at Brawndy. ‘With the King’s knife. Why else would I have chosen such a weapon?’

‘Crazy men do strange things.’ This from Duke Kelvar of Rippon, while Regal strangled, livid with fury. I met Kelvar’s eyes calmly. Last time I had spoken with him had been at his own table, at Neatbay.

‘I am not crazy,’ I asserted quietly. ‘I was no more crazy that night than I was the night I wielded an axe outside the walls of Bayguard.’

‘That may be so,’ Kelvar affirmed thoughtfully. ‘It is common talk that he goes berserk when he fights.’

A glint came into Regal’s eyes. ‘It is common talk, too, that he has been seen with blood on his mouth after he has fought. That he becomes one of the animals that he was raised with. He is Witted.’

Silence greeted this remark. The Dukes exchanged glances, and when Shemshy glanced back at me, there was distaste in the look. Brawndy finally answered Regal. ‘This is a grave charge you level. Have you a witness?’

‘To blood on his mouth? Several.’

Brawndy shook his head. ‘Any man may finish a battle with a bloody face. An axe is not a tidy weapon. I can attest to that. No. It would take more than that.’

‘Then let us convene the Council,’ Regal repeated impatiently. ‘Hear what Wallace has to say about how my father died and at whose hand.’

The three dukes exchanged glances. Their eyes came back to me, considering. Duke Brawndy led the Coast now. I was certain of it when he was the one who spoke. ‘King-in-Waiting Regal. Let us speak plainly. You have accused FitzChivalry, son of Chivalry, of using the Wit, the beast magic, to slay King Shrewd. This is indeed a grave charge. To satisfy us of it, we ask that you prove to us that not only is he Witted, but that he can use it to do injury to another. All of us were witness that there were no marks on King Shrewd’s body, no sign of a death struggle at all. Had not you raised this cry of treachery, we might have accepted that he had died of his years. Some, even, have whispered that you but seek an excuse to be rid of FitzChivalry. I know you have heard these rumours; I speak them aloud that we may confront them.’ Brawndy paused, as if debating with himself. He glanced once more at his peers. When neither Kelvar nor Shemshy gave sign of dissension, he cleared his throat and continued.

‘We have a proposal, King-in-Waiting Regal. Prove to us, sir, that FitzChivalry is Witted, and that he used that Wit to kill King Shrewd, and we will let you put him to death as you see fit. We will witness your coronation

as King of the Six Duchies. Further, we will accept Lord Bright as your presence in Buckkeep and allow you to retire your court to Tradeford.'

Triumph gleamed briefly on Regal's face. Then suspicion masked it. 'And if, Duke Brawndy, I do not prove this to your satisfaction?'

'Then FitzChivalry lives,' Brawndy calmly decreed. 'And you give him stewardship of Buckkeep and the forces of Buck in your absence.' All three Coastal dukes lifted their eyes to meet Regal's.

'This is treason and treachery!' Regal hissed.

Shemshy's hand almost went to his sword. Kelvar reddened but said nothing. The tension in the line of men behind them tightened a notch. Only Brawndy remained unmoved. 'My lord, do you bring more charges?' he asked calmly. 'Again, we will demand them proved. It could further delay your coronation.'

After a moment of their stony eyes and silence, Regal said quietly, 'I spoke in haste, my dukes. These are trying times for me. Bereft of my father's guidance so suddenly, bereaved of my brother, our lady queen and the child she carries gone missing ... These surely are enough cause to drive any man to hasty statements. I ... very well. I will acquiesce to this ... bargain you set before me. I will prove FitzChivalry Witted, or I will set him free. Does that satisfy you?'

'No, my King-in-Waiting,' Brawndy said quietly. 'Such were not the terms we set. If innocent, FitzChivalry will be set in command of Buckkeep. If you prove him guilty, we shall accept Bright. Those were our terms.'

'And the deaths of Justin and Serene, valuable servants and coterie members? Those deaths at least we know we may put at his door. He has admitted as much.' The look Regal turned on me should have killed me right there. How deeply he must have regretted charging me with murdering Shrewd. But for Wallace's wild accusations and Regal's backing of them, he could have demanded me drowned for Justin's death. That, as everyone had witnessed, was my doing. Ironically, his own desire to vilify me was what was staving off my execution.

'You will have every chance to prove him Witted and the killer of your father. For those crimes, only, will we let you hang him. As to the others ... he claims they are the killers of the King. If he is not the guilty one, we are willing to accept that those he killed died justly.'

'This is intolerable!' Regal spat.

'My lord, those are our terms,' Brawndy returned calmly.

‘And if I refuse them?’ Regal flared angrily.

Brawndy shrugged. ‘The skies are clear, my lord. Raider weather, for those of us with coasts. We must disperse to our own keeps, to guard our coasts as well we may. Without the convening of the full Council, you cannot crown yourself king, nor lawfully appoint a man to hold Buck in your stead. You must winter at Buckkeep, my lord, and confront the sea-pirates even as we do.’

‘You ring me round with traditions and petty laws, all to force me to your will. Am I your king or am I not?’ Regal demanded bluntly.

‘You are not our king.’ Brawndy pointed it out quietly but firmly. ‘You are our King-in-Waiting. And likely to continue waiting until these charges and this issue is resolved.’

The blackness of Regal’s glare plainly showed how little this was to his liking. ‘Very well,’ he said flatly, all too quickly. ‘I suppose I must submit to this ... beginning. Remember that you have decreed it must be this way, not I.’ He turned and looked at me. I knew then that he would not keep his word; I knew I would die in this cell. That sick and sudden knowledge of my own death blackened the edges of my vision, set me swaying on my feet. I felt I had taken two steps back from life. A coldness crept up inside me.

‘Then we are agreed,’ Brawndy said smoothly. He turned his eyes back to me, and frowned. Something of what I was feeling must have showed on my face, for he asked quickly, ‘FitzChivalry. Are you fairly treated here? Do they feed you?’ As he asked this, he unfastened the brooch at his shoulder. His cloak was much worn, but of wool, and when he threw it to me the weight of it knocked me back against the wall.

I clutched the cloak, warm still with his body heat, gratefully. ‘Water. Bread,’ I said briefly. I looked down at the heavy wool garment. ‘Thank you,’ I said more quietly.

‘It’s better than many have!’ Regal retorted angrily. ‘Times are hard,’ he added lamely. As if those he spoke to did not know that better than he did.

Brawndy regarded me for a few moments. I said nothing. Finally he swung a cold look to Regal. ‘Too hard to at least give him some straw to sleep on, instead of a slab of stone?’

Regal returned his glare. Brawndy did not quail. ‘We will need proof of his guilt, King-in-Waiting Regal, before we will countenance his execution. In the meantime, we expect you to keep him alive.’

‘At least give him marching rations,’ Kelvar advised. ‘No one will say you have pampered him with those, and we shall have a live man, either for you to hang or to command at Buck for us.’

Regal crossed his arms on his chest and made no reply. I knew I would get but water and half a loaf. I think he would have tried to take Brawndy’s cloak away from me, save that he knew I would have fought for it. With a jerk of his chin, Regal indicated to the guard that he could close my door. As it slammed shut, I flung myself forward, to grip the bars and stare after them. I thought of calling out, of telling them all that Regal would not let me live, that he would find a way to kill me here. But I did not. They would not have believed me. They still did not fear Regal as they needed to. If they had known him as I did, they would have known that no promise could bind him to their bargain. He would kill me. I was too deeply within his power for him to resist ending me.

I let go of the door and walked woodenly back to my bench. I sat down. Reflex more than thought made me drape Brawndy’s cloak about my shoulders. The cold I felt now would not be warmed away by wool. As the wave of a rising tide rushes into a sea cavern, so the knowledge of my death once more filled me. Once again, I thought I might faint. I pushed at it, vaguely *repelling* at my own thoughts of how Regal might choose to kill me. There were so many ways I suspected he would try to wring a confession from me. Given enough time, he might be successful. The thought made me sick. I tried to pull myself back from the brink, to not realize so thoroughly that I was going to die painfully.

With a peculiar lightening of heart, I reflected that I could cheat him. Within my blood-matted sleeve cuff was the tiny pocket that still held the poison I had so long ago prepared for Wallace. Had it offered a less horrendous death, I would have taken it right then. But I had not formulated that poison for a quick and painless sleep, but for cramps and flux and fever. Later, I thought, it might become preferable to whatever Regal offered. There was no comfort in that thought. I lay back on my slab, and rolled myself up well in Brawndy’s ample cloak. I hoped he would not miss it too much. It was probably the last kind thing anyone would ever do for me. I did not fall asleep. I fled, wilfully submerging myself into my wolf’s world.

I awoke later from a human dream in which Chade had been lecturing me for not paying attention. I drew myself smaller in Brawndy’s cloak. Torchlight trickled into my cell. Day or night, I could not tell, but I thought it

was deep night. I tried to find sleep again. Chade's urgent voice had been pleading with me ...

I sat up slowly. The cadence and tone of the muffled voice was definitely Chade's. It seemed fainter when I sat up. I lay down again. Now it was louder, but I still couldn't pick out the words. I pressed my ear to the stone bench. No. I got up slowly and moved about my small cell, from wall to corner and back again. There was one corner in which the voice was loudest but I still could not make out the words. 'I can't understand you,' I said to my empty cell.

The muffled voice paused. Then it spoke again, a questioning inflection.

'I can't understand you!' I said more loudly.

Chade's voice resumed, more excitedly, but no louder.

'I can't understand you!' I shouted in frustration.

Footsteps outside my cell. 'FitzChivalry!'

The guard was short. She couldn't see in. 'What?' I asked sleepily.

'What were you shouting?'

'What? Oh. Bad dream.'

The footsteps went away. I heard her laugh to the other guard, 'Hard to imagine what dream could be worse than waking up for him.' She had an Inland accent.

I went back to my bench and lay down. Chade's voice had stopped. I tended to agree with the guard. I would not sleep again for a while, but would wonder what Chade had been so desperately trying to tell me. I doubted it would be good news, and I did not want to imagine bad. I was going to have to die here. At least let it be because I had aided the Queen's escape. I wondered how far she was on her journey. I thought of the Fool, and wondered how well he would withstand the rigours of a winter journey. I forbade myself to wonder why Burrich was not with them. Instead, I thought of Molly.

I must have drowsed, for I saw her. She was toiling up a path, a yoke of water buckets on her shoulders. She looked pale and sick and worn. On top of the hill was a tumble-down cottage, snow banked against its walls. She stopped and set her water buckets down at the door and stood looking out, over the sea. She frowned at the fair weather and the light wind that only tipped the waves with white. The wind lifted her thick hair just as I used to and slid its hand along the curve of her warm neck and jaw. Her eyes went

suddenly wide. Then tears brimmed them. 'No,' she said aloud. 'No. I won't think of you any more. No.' She stooped and lifted the heavy buckets and went into the cottage. She shut the door firmly behind her. The wind blew past it. The roof was poorly thatched. The wind blew harder and I let it carry me away.

I tumbled on it, dived through it, and let it flow my pains away. I thought of diving deeper, down into the main flow of it, where it could sweep me entirely away, right out of myself and all my petty worries. I trailed my hands in that deeper current, swift and heavy as a moving river. It tugged at me.

I'd stand back from that if I were you.

Would you? I let Verity consider my situation for a moment.

Perhaps not, he replied grimly. Something like a sigh. I should have guessed at how bad it was. It seems it takes great pain, or illness or extreme duress of some kind to break down your walls so you can Skill. He paused long and we were both silent, thinking of nothing and everything all at once. So. My father is dead. Justin and Serene. I should have guessed somehow. His weariness and dwindling strength; those are the hallmarks of a King's Man, drained too low too often. I suspect it had been going on long, probably since before Galen ... died. Only he could have conceived of such a thing let alone devised a way to do it. What a loathsome way to use the Skill. And they spied upon us?

Yes. I do not know how much they learned. And there is another to fear. Will.

Damn me thrice for a fool. Look at it, Fitz. We should have known. The ships worked so well for us at first, and then, as soon as they knew what we were up to, you and I, they found ways to block us. The coterie has been in Regal's pocket since they were formed. Thus we have delayed messages, or messages not delivered. Help always sent too late, or never sent at all. He is as full of hate as a tick is full of blood. And he has won.

Not quite, my king. I reined my mind back from thinking of Kettricken safely on her way to the mountains. Instead, I repeated, There is still Will. And Burl and Carrod. We must be circumspect, my prince.

A shade of warmth. I shall. But you know the depths of my thanks. Perhaps we paid highly, but what we bought was worth it. To me, at least.

To me, also. I sensed the weariness in him, and the resignation. Are you giving up?

Not yet. But like yours, my future does not seem promising. The others are all dead or fled. I will go on. But I don't know how much farther I must go. Or what I must do when I get there. And I am so very tired. To give in would be so easy.

Verity read me with ease, I knew. But I had to reach for him and for all he was not conveying to me. I sensed the great cold that surrounded him, and an injury that made it painful to breathe. His aloneness, and the pain of knowing that those who had died had died so far from home, and for him. Hod, I thought, my own grief echoing his. *Charim*. Gone for ever. And something else, something he could not quite convey. A temptation, a teetering at the brink. A pressure, a plucking, very similar to the Skillish plucking I had felt from Serene and Justin. I tried to push past him, to look at it more closely, but he held me back.

Some dangers become more dangerous when confronted, he warned me. This is one of them. But I am sure it is the path I must follow, if I am to find the Elderlings.

‘Prisoner!’

I jolted out of my trance. A key turned in the lock of my door and it swung open. A girl stood in the doorway. Regal was beside her, one hand comfortingly on her shoulder. Two guards, Inlanders both by the cut of their clothes, flanked them. One leaned forward to thrust a torch into my cell. I cowered back inadvertently, then sat blinking in the unaccustomed light. ‘Is that him?’ Regal asked the girl gently. She peered at me fearfully. I peered back, trying to decide why she looked familiar.

‘Yes, sir, lord prince, king, sir. That’s him. I went to the well that morning, had to, had to have water, or the baby would die, just as sure as if the Raiders killed him. And it had been quiet a while, all Neatbay as quiet as the dead. So I went to the well in the early morning, creeping like through the mist, sir. Then there was this wolf there, right by the well, and he starts up and stares at me. And the wind moves the mist, and the wolf is gone, he’s a man now. That man, sir. Your majesty king.’ She continued to stare at me wide-eyed.

I recalled her now. The morning after the battle for Neatbay and Bayguard. Nighteyes and I had paused to rest by the well. I recalled how he had jostled me awake as he fled at the girl’s approach.

‘You’re a brave girl,’ Regal praised her, and patted her shoulder again. ‘Here, guard, take her back above to the kitchens, and see she gets a good

meal and a bed somewhere. No, leave me the torch.’ They backed out of the door, and the guard shut it firmly behind him. I heard departing footsteps, but the light outside the door stayed. After the footsteps had dwindled, Regal spoke again.

‘Well, Bastard, it looks as if this game is played out. Your champions will abandon you fairly quickly, I suspect, once they understand what you are. There are other witnesses, of course. Ones who will speak of how there were wolf tracks and men dead of bites everywhere you fought at Neatbay. There are even some of our own Buckkeep guard, who, when put to oath, must admit that when you have fought Forged ones, some of the bodies have borne the marks of teeth and claws.’ He heaved a great sigh of satisfaction. I heard the sounds of him setting the torch into a wall sconce. He came back to the door. He was just tall enough to peer in at me. Childishly I stood, and approached the door to look down at him. He stepped back. I felt petty satisfaction.

It had tweaked his temper. ‘You were so gullible. Such a fool. You came limping home from the mountains with your tail between your legs, and thought that Verity’s favour would be all you needed to survive. You and all your foolish plottings. I knew of them all. All of them, Bastard. All your little chats with our queen, the tower-garden bribes to turn Brawndy against me. Even her plans to leave Buckkeep. Take warm things, you told her. The King will go with you.’ He stood on tip-toe to be sure I could see his smile. ‘She left with neither, Bastard. Not the King, nor the warm things she had packed.’ He paused. ‘Not even a horse.’ His voice caressed the last words as if he had been saving them for a long time. He watched my face avidly.

I suddenly knew myself for nine kinds of a fool. Rosemary. Sweet, sleepy child, always nodding off in a corner. So bright one could trust her with any errand. So young one forgot she was even there. Yet I should have known. I was no older when Chade had first begun to teach me my trade. I felt ill, and it must have shown on my face. I could not recall what I had or had not said in front of her. I had no way of knowing what secrets Kettricken had confided over that little, dark, curly head. What talks with Verity had she witnessed, what chats with Patience? The Queen and the Fool were missing. That only I knew for certain. Had they ever got out of Buckkeep alive? Regal was grinning, well satisfied with himself. The barred door between us was the only thing that kept my promise to Shrewd intact.

He left, still grinning.

Regal had his proof that I had the Wit. The Neatbay girl was the binding knot for that. All that remained now was for him to torture from me a confession that I had killed Shrewd. He had plenty of time for that. However much time as it would take, he had.

I sank down onto the floor. Verity had been right. Regal had won.

THIRTY-ONE

Torture

But nothing would satisfy the Wilful Princess but that she rode the Piebald Stallion to the hunt. All her ladies warned her, but she turned aside her head and would not hear them. All the lords warned her, but she scoffed at their fears. Even the Stablemaster sought to say her nay, telling her, 'Lady Princess, the stallion should be put down in blood and fire, for he was trained by Sly o'the Wit, and only to him is he true!' Then the Wilful Princess grew wroth and said, 'Are these not my stables and my horses, and may I not choose which of my beasts I shall ride?' Then all grew silent before her temper, and she ordered the Piebald Stallion saddled for the hunt.

Forth they went, with a great baying of hounds and fluttering of colours. And the Piebald Stallion bore her well, and carried her far ahead of the field, and at last out of sight of the other hunters entirely. Then, when the Wilful Princess was far and away, over the hill and beneath the green trees, the Piebald Stallion bore her this way and that, until she was lost and the crying of the hounds but an echo in the hills. At last she stopped by a stream to sip the cool water, but lo, when she turned, the Piebald Stallion was gone, and in his place stood Sly o'the Wit, as mottled as his Wit-beast. Then he was with her as a stallion is with a mare, so that ere the year had turned, she went heavy with child. And when those who attended her birth saw the babe, all mottled on the face and shoulders, they cried aloud with fear. When the Wilful Princess saw him, she screamed, and gave up her spirit in blood and shame, that she had borne Sly's Wit-child. So the Piebald Prince was born in fear and shame, and that was what he brought into the world with him.

– Legend of the Piebald Prince

The torch Regal had left set the shadows of the bars to dancing. I watched them for a time, thoughtless, hopeless. Knowledge of my own death numbed me. Gradually my mind began to work again, but without order. Was this what Chade had been trying to tell me? Without her horse; how

much had Regal known about the horses? Had he known the destination? How had Burrich escaped detection? Or had he? Might not I meet him in the torturer's chamber? Did Regal think Patience was connected to the escape plan? If he did, would he still be content simply to abandon her, or would he take more direct vengeance? When they came for me, should I fight? No. I would go with dignity. No. I would kill as many of his Inland-bred curs as I could with my bare hands. No. I would go quietly, and wait for a chance at Regal. I knew he would be there, to watch me die. My promise to Shrewd, not to kill one of his own? It no longer bound me. Did it? No one could save me. Don't even wonder if Chade would act, if Patience could do anything at all. After Regal had tortured a confession from me ... would he keep me alive to hang and quarter before all? Of course he would. Why deny himself that pleasure? Would Patience come to watch me die? I hoped not. Maybe Lacey could keep her away. I had thrown my life away, sacrificed all for nothing. At least, I had killed Serene and Justin. Had it been worth it? Had my queen escaped at all, or was she still hidden somewhere within the castle walls? Was that what Chade had been trying to tell me? No. My mind paddled and scrabbled through thoughts like a rat fallen into a rain barrel. I longed to talk to someone, anyone. I forced myself to calmness, to rationality, and finally found a grip. Nighteyes. Nighteyes had said that he had taken them, had guided them to Burrich.

My brother? I reached for Nighteyes.

I am here. I am always here.

Tell me of that night.

What night?

The night you guided the people from the keep to Heart of the Pack.

Ah. I sensed him struggling. His ways were a wolf's ways. A thing done was a thing done. He planned no further ahead than the next kill, recalled almost nothing of events that happened a month or a year ago, unless they touched most directly on his own survival. Thus he recalled the cage I had taken him from, but where he had hunted four nights ago was lost to him. General things he recalled: a well-used rabbit trail, a spring that did not freeze over, but specific details of how many rabbits he had killed three days ago were lost forever. I held my breath, hoping he could give me hope.

I took them all to Heart of the Pack. I wish you were here. I've a porcupine quill in my lip. I can't paw it loose. It hurts.

And how did you get that? In the midst of all else, I still had to smile. He knew better but had not been able to resist the fat, waddling creature.

It isn't funny.

I know. Truly, it was not funny. A quill was a nasty barbed thing that would only work deeper, festering all the way. It could get bad enough to keep him from hunting. I turned my attention to his problem. Until I had solved it for him, he would be able to focus on nothing else. *Heart of the Pack would get it out for you, if you asked him nicely. You can trust him.*

He pushed me when I spoke to him. But then he spoke to me.

Did he?

A slow working through of thought. *That night. When I guided them to him. He said to me, Bring them here to me, not to the dog-fox place.*

Picture me the place you went.

This was harder for him. But as he tried, he recalled the roadside, empty in the blowing snow, save for Burrich astride Ruddy and leading Sooty. I glimpsed the Female and the Scentsless One, as he thought of them. Chade he remembered well, chiefly for a fat beef-bone bestowed on Nighteyes at their parting.

Did they speak to one another?

Overly much. I left them yipping to one another.

Try as I might, that was really all he had for me. It was enough that I knew the plans had changed drastically and at the last minute. Odd. I had been willing to lay down my life for Kettricken, but at the last accounting, I was not sure how I felt about giving up my horse. Then I recalled I would probably never ride a horse again, save the one that carried me to the hanging tree. At least Sooty had gone with someone I cared about. And Ruddy. Why those two horses? And only those two? Had Burrich been unable to get others out of the stable? Was that why he had not gone?

The quill hurts, Nighteyes reminded me. I cannot eat for the pain.

I wish I could come to help you, but I cannot. You must ask Heart of the Pack.

Cannot you ask him to do it? He does not push you.

I smiled to myself. *He did once. It was enough, I learned from it. But if you go to him, asking for help, he will not repel you.*

Cannot you ask him to help me?

I cannot speak to him as we speak. And he is too far away for me to yip at him.

I will try, then, Nighteyes said doubtfully.

I let him go. I thought of trying to make him understand my situation. I decided against it. There was nothing he could do; it would only distress him. Nighteyes would tell Burrich I had sent him; Burrich would know I was still alive. There was little else to convey that he would not already know.

A long, slow time passed then. I measured it in the small ways I could. The torch Regal had left burned out. The guard changed. Someone came and put food and water through my door. I had not asked for it. I wondered if that meant a very long time had passed since I had last eaten. The guard changed again. These were a chatty pair, a man and a woman. But they spoke in low voices, and all I heard were the murmurs, and the laughter. Some sort of a ribald flirtation between the two, I surmised. Interrupted by someone's arrival.

The friendly chatter ceased suddenly. Low murmurs, in a very respectful tone. My stomach roiled cold inside me. Quietly I came to my feet, crept to my door. I peered through the bars toward the guard's station.

He came like a shadow down the hall. Silently. Not furtive. He was so unobtrusive, he did not need to worry about being furtive. This was Skill as I had never seen it used before. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck hackle when Will stopped outside the door and looked in at me. He did not speak and I dared not. Even looking at him was giving him too much of an opening to myself. Yet I feared to look away. The Skill shimmered around him like an aura of awareness. I coiled deep inside myself, tighter and tighter, pulling back everything I felt or thought, slamming my walls up as swiftly as I could, but knowing, somehow, that even those walls told him much about me. Even my defences were a way for this one to read me. Even as my mouth and throat went dry with fear, a question hovered. Where had he been? What had been so important to Regal that he had set Will upon it rather than using him to secure the crown?

White ship.

The answer came to me from deep within me, founded on a connection so deep I could not unearth it. But I did not doubt it. I looked at him, considering him in conjunction with the white ship. He frowned. I felt an increase in the tension between us, a pressing of the Skill against my boundaries. He did not scrabble or pluck at me like Serene and Justin had. Rather, I could compare it to an engagement of blades, where one tests the strength of his opponent's attack. I balanced myself against him, knowing

that if I wavered, if for one instant I did not hold him out, he would slip past my guard and skewer my soul. His eyes widened and surprised me with a brief look of uncertainty. But he followed it with a smile as welcoming as a shark's maw.

'Ah,' he sighed out. He seemed pleased. He stepped back from my door, stretched like a lazy cat. 'They have underestimated you. I shall not make that mistake. Well I know the advantages one gains when your rival undervalues you.' Then he left, neither abruptly nor slowly, but like smoke drifts away on a breeze. Here, and then gone.

After he was gone, I went back to my slab and sat. I took a deep breath and sighed it out to still the quivering inside me. I felt I had passed through a trial, and that this time, at least, I had held my own. I leaned back against the cold stone wall, and glanced once more at my door.

Will's half-lidded eyes bored into me.

I leaped up so suddenly that the scabbed-over injury on my leg tore open afresh. I glared at my window. Nothing. He was gone. Heart hammering, I forced myself to go to the tiny window and peer out. No one was there, that I could see. He was gone. But I could not make myself believe he was gone.

I limped back to my seat and sat down again, gathering Brawndy's cloak about me. I stared at my window, looking for motion, for some change in the shadowy light from the guard's torch, for anything to indicate that Will lurked outside my door. There was nothing. I longed to quest out, Wit and Skill, to see if I could feel him out there. I dared not. I could not venture out of myself without leaving a way for another to push in.

I set my guards about my thoughts, and a few moments later, reset them. The harder I tried to calm myself, the fiercer my panic became when it rose. I had been fearing physical torture. Now the sour fear-sweat trickled down my ribs and the sides of my face as I considered all that Will could do to me if he got past my walls. Once he got inside my head, I would stand before all the dukes and tell in detail how I had killed King Shrewd. Regal had invented for me something worse than merely dying. I could go to my death a self-proclaimed coward and traitor as well. I would cower at Regal's feet and beg his forgiveness before all.

I think the time that passed was a night. I slept for none of it, save to doze off and then wake with a start from a dream of eyes at my window. I dared not even reach out to Nighteyes for comfort, and I hoped he would not

try to reach me with thoughts. I came out of such a doze with a start, thinking I had heard footsteps down the hall. My eyes were sandy, my head ached with my vigilance, and my muscles were knotted from tension. I stayed where I was on the bench, conserving every bit of strength that I had.

The door was flung open. A guard thrust a torch into my cell, then cautiously followed it. Two other guards followed. 'You. On your feet!' barked the one with the torch. Farrow was in his accent.

I saw no point in refusing to obey. I stood up, letting Brawndy's cloak fall back on the bench. Their leader made a curt gesture, and I fell in between the two guards. There were four others outside my cell, waiting. Regal was taking no chances. None of them was anyone I knew. They all wore the colours of Regal's guard. I could tell their orders by the looks on their faces. I gave them no excuses. They took me down the hall a short way, past the deserted guard-post, to the larger chamber that served once as a guard-room. It had been cleared of furniture, save for a comfortable chair. Every sconce boasted a torch, making the room painfully bright to my light-deprived eyes. The guards left me standing in the middle of the room, and joined others lining the walls. Habit more than hope made me assess my situation. I counted fourteen guards. Surely that was an excess, even for me. Both doors to the chamber were closed. We waited.

Waiting, standing, in a brightly-lit room surrounded by hostile men can be underestimated as a form of torture. I tried to stand quietly, to shift my weight unobtrusively. I rapidly grew tired. It was frightening to discover how quickly starvation and inactivity had weakened me. I felt almost a sense of relief when the door finally opened. Regal entered, followed by Will. Will was remonstrating quietly with him.

'... unnecessary. Another night or so would be all I required.'

'I prefer this,' Regal said acidly.

Will bowed his head in silent assent. Regal was seated, and Will took a position behind his left shoulder. Regal considered me for a moment, then leaned back negligently in his chair. He cocked his head to one side and breathed out through his nose. He lifted a finger, indicated a man. 'Bolt. You. I want nothing broken. When we have what we want, I'll want to make him presentable once more. You understand.'

Bolt nodded briefly. He stripped off his winter cloak and let it fall, pulled off his shirt as well. The other men watched stony-eyed. From some long-ago discussion with Chade, a small bit of advice came to mind. 'You

can hold out longer under torture if you focus on what you will say rather than what you won't. I've heard of men repeating the same phrase, over and over, long past the point where they could hear the questions any more. By focusing on what you will say, you make it less likely you'll say that which you don't wish to.'

But this theoretical advice might not do much for me. Regal did not seem to have any questions to ask.

Bolt was taller than I was, heavier than I was. He looked as if his diet included a lot more than bread and water. He limbered and stretched as if we were going to wrestle for a Winterfest purse. I stood watching him. He met my look and smiled at me liplessly. I watched him pull on a pair of fingerless leather gloves. He'd come prepared for this. Then he bowed to Regal, and Regal nodded.

What's this?

Be silent! I ordered Nighteyes. But as Bolt stepped purposefully toward me, I felt a snarl twitch at my upper lip. I dodged his first punch, stepped in to land one of my own, and then moved back as he swung again. Desperation lent me agility. I had not expected a chance to defend myself, I had expected to be bound and tormented. Of course, there was plenty of time for that. Regal had all the time he needed. Don't think of that. I had never been good at this kind of fight. Don't think of that either. Bolt's fist grazed my cheek stingingly. Be wary. I was luring him to open up, taking his measure, when the Skill wrapped me. I reeled in Will's onslaught, and Bolt landed his next three blows effortlessly. Jaw, chest and high on my cheek. All quick and solid. The style of a man who did this a lot. The smile of a man who enjoyed it.

There followed a timeless period for me. I could not both shield myself from Will and defend myself from Bolt battering me. I reasoned, if the thinking one does in such a state can be called reasoning, that my body had its own defences against physical pain. I'd pass out, or die. Dying might be the only victory I could hope for here. So I chose to defend my mind rather than body. I veer away from recalling that beating. My token defence was to move away from his blows and force him to pursue me, to keep my eyes on him, to block where I could as long as it did not distract me from my vigil against Will's Skill pressure. I heard the guards jeer at my supposed lack of spirit as I scarcely fought back. When one of his blows sent me staggering

back against the soldiers who ringed us, their shoves and kicks drove me back toward Bolt again.

I could not devote my thoughts to strategy. When I swung, I swung wildly, and the few times my fists landed, it was with small impact. I longed to release myself, to tap my fury and just fling myself at Bolt and hammer at him any way I could. But that would have left me open to Will's intentions. No, I had to remain cool and endure. As Will increased his pressure on me, Bolt had a leisurely time of it. Eventually, I was reduced to two choices. I could use my arms to shelter either my head or my body. He merely shifted targets. The horror was that I knew the man was holding back, striking only to inflict pain and minor damage. I dropped my hands once and met Will's gaze face-on. I had the very brief satisfaction of seeing the sweat that streamed down his face. At that moment, Bolt's fist connected solidly with my nose.

Blade had once described to me the sound that he heard as his nose broke in a brawl. Words did not do it justice. A sickening sound combined with incredible pain. Pain so intense it was suddenly the only pain I was aware of. I blacked out.

I don't know how long I was out. I fluttered to the edge of consciousness, hovered there. Someone had flipped me over onto my back. Whoever it was straightened from inspecting me. 'Nose is broke,' he announced.

'Bolt, I said nothing broken!' Regal remonstrated with him angrily. 'I have to be able to show him intact. Bring me some wine,' he added irritably in an aside to someone else.

'Not a problem, King Regal,' someone assured him. That person bent over me, took a firm grip on the bridge of my nose, and dragged it straight again. That crude setting of it hurt worse than the breaking, and once more I dipped down into unconsciousness. I lingered there, hearing the voices discuss me for some time before they resolved into words and the words into sense.

Regal's voice. 'So what is he supposed to be able to do? Why hasn't he done it yet?'

'I know only what Serene and Justin told me, your majesty.' Will's voice was tired. 'They claimed he was weary from Skilling, and Justin was able to force his way into him. Then the Bastard ... fought back in some way. Justin said he believed himself attacked by a great wolf. Serene said

she actually saw the marks of claws on Justin, but that they faded shortly afterwards.'

I heard the creak of wood as Regal flung himself back in his chair. 'Well, make him do it. I wish to see this Wit for myself.' A pause. 'Or are you not strong enough? Perhaps Justin was the one I should have held in reserve.'

'I am stronger than Justin was, your majesty,' Will asserted calmly. 'But Fitz is aware of my intent. He was not expecting Justin's attack.' More quietly he added, 'He is stronger far than I was led to believe.'

'Just do it!' Regal commanded in disgust.

So Regal wanted to see the Wit? I drew a breath, gathered what little strength was inside me. I tried to focus my anger at Regal, to *repel* at him hard enough to drive him through the wall. But I could not. I was too riddled with pain to concentrate. My own walls defeated me. All Regal did was start, and then look at me more closely.

'He's awake,' he observed. Again his finger lifted lazily. 'Verde. You may have him. But have a care to his nose. Leave his face alone. The rest of him is easily covered.'

Verde devoted some little time in hauling me to my feet so he could knock me down again. I wearied of that repetition long before he did. The floor did as much damage as his fists. I could not seem to keep my feet under me, nor lift my arms to shield myself. I retreated inside myself, smaller and smaller, huddling there until sheer physical pain would force me to alertness and make me struggle again, usually just before I passed out once more. I became aware of another thing. Regal's enjoyment. He did not want to bind me and cause me pain. He wanted to watch me struggle, to see me attempt to fight back and fail. He watched his guard, too, noting, no doubt, which ones turned their eyes away from this sport. He used me to take their measure. I forced myself not to care that he took pleasure from my pain. All that truly mattered was keeping my walls up and keeping Will out of my head. That was the battle I had to win.

The fourth time I awoke, I was on the floor of my cell. A terrible snuffling, wheezing sound was what had wakened me. It was the sound of my breathing. I remained where they had dumped me. After a time, I lifted a hand and pawed Brawndy's cloak down from the bench. It fell partially on top of me. I lay a time longer. Regal's guards had listened to him. Nothing

was broken. Everything hurt, but no bones were broken. All they had given me was pain. Nothing I could die from.

I crawled over to my water. I will not enumerate the pains it cost for me to lift it and drink. My initial attempts to defend myself had left my hands swollen and sore. I tried vainly to keep the edge of the pot from bumping against my mouth. Finally, I managed to drink. The water strengthened me, to make me all the more aware of everywhere I hurt. My half loaf of bread was there as well. I stuck the end of it in what was left of my water, and then sucked the soaked bread from the loaf as it softened. It tasted like blood. Bolt's initial battering of my head had loosened teeth and cut my mouth. I was aware of my nose as an immense area of throbbing pain. I could not bring myself to touch it with my fingers. There was no pleasure in eating, only a partial relief from the hunger that clawed at me alongside my pain.

After a time, I sat up. I dragged the cloak around me and considered what I knew. Regal would batter at me physically until I either manifested the Wit in an attack his guards could witness, or until I dropped my walls enough that Will could get in my mind and inspire me to confess. I wondered which way he would rather win. I did not doubt he would win. My sole way out of this cell was by dying. Options. To try to make them beat me to death before I either used the Wit or dropped my Skill barrier to Will. Or, to take the poison I had made for Wallace. I would die from it. That was definite. In my weakened state, it would probably be faster than I had planned it for him. Still painful, though. Wretchedly painful.

One kind of pain seemed as good as another. Laboriously I folded back my bloodied right cuff. The hidden pocket was secured by a thread that should have come loose at a slight tug. But blood had matted it closed. I picked at it carefully. Mustn't spill it. I'd need to wait until they gave me more water to get it down, otherwise I'd just gag and retch on the bitter powder. I was still working at it when I heard voices down the hallway.

It did not seem fair they would come back at me so soon. I listened. It wasn't Regal. But anyone coming down here meant something to do with me. A deep voice, rumbling along in a rambling way. The guards replying briefly, in hostile tones. Another voice, interceding, reasoning. The rumbling again, getting louder, and the belligerence plain. Suddenly a shout.

'You're going to die, Fitz! Hung over water, and your body burned!'

Burrich's voice. A strange mix of anger and threat and pain.

‘Get him out of here.’ One of the guards, speaking loud and plain now. She was obviously an Inlander.

‘I will, I will.’ I knew that voice. Blade. ‘He’s just had a bit too much to drink, that’s all. It’s always been a problem with him. And he had the boy as his apprentice down there in the stables for years. Everyone’s saying he should have known about it, did know about it and didn’t do anything, maybe.’

‘Yessss.’ Burrich drew out the angry affirmation. ‘And I’m out of a job now, Bastard! No more buck’s crest for me! Well, by El’s ass, it hardly matters. Horses are gone. Best damned horses I ever trained, gone inland now, given over to fools! Dogs are gone, hawks are gone! All that’re left are the scrubs and a couple mules. Don’t have one horse I’d admit to owning!’ His voice was growing closer. There was madness in it.

I scabbled up the door, clung to the bars to see. I couldn’t see the guard-post, but their shadows were on the wall. Burrich’s shadow was attempting to come down the hall while the guards and Blade tried to drag him back.

‘Wait. Now, just wait a minute,’ Burrich remonstrated drunkenly. ‘Wait. Look. I only want to talk to him. That’s all.’ The cluster of people surged down the hall, halted again. The guards were between Burrich and my door. Blade was clinging to Burrich’s arm. He still showed the marks from the brawl, and one of his arms was in a sling. He could do little to stop Burrich.

‘Just get mine in before Regal gets his. That’s all. That’s all.’ Burrich’s voice was deep and slurry with drink. ‘Come on. Just for a minute. What’s it going to matter anyway? He’s good as dead.’ Another pause. ‘Look. I’ll make it worth your while. Look here.’

The guards were exchanging glances.

‘Uh, Blade, you got any coin left?’ Burrich was digging through his pouch, then snorted with disgust and upended it over his hand. Coins fell in a shower, spilling past his fingers. ‘Here, here.’ There was the chink and rattle of coins dropped and rolling on the stone floor of the passageway and he flung his arms wide in a gesture of largesse.

‘Hey, he doesn’t mean it. Burrich, you don’t bribe guards like that, you’re going to get yourself tossed in a cell, too.’ Blade stopped hastily, making apologies as he hurried to gather up the spilled coins. The guards stopped alongside him and I saw a hand make a furtive trip from floor to pocket.

Suddenly Burrich's face peered in my window. For a moment we stood eye to eye at the barred window. Grief and outrage battled in his face. His eyes were webbed red from his drinking, and his breath was strong with it. The fabric of his shirt showed ragged where the buck crest had been torn from it. He glared at me, then, as he looked at me, his eyes widened in shock. For a moment our gaze held, and I thought something of understanding and farewell passed between us. Then he leaned back and spat full in my face.

'That, for you,' he snarled. 'That for my life, which you took from me. All the hours, all the days I spent upon you. Better that you had lain down and died amongst the beasts before you let this come to pass. They're going to hang you, boy. Regal's having the gallows built, over water, like the old wisdom says. They'll hang you, then cut you up and burn you down to bones. Nothing left to bury. He's probably afraid the dogs would dig you up again. You'd like that, hey, boy? Buried like a bone, for some dog to dig up later? Better to just lie down and die right where you are.'

I had recoiled from him when he spat at me. Now I stood back from my door, swaying on my feet while he gripped the bars and stared in at me, his eyes wide and bright with madness and drink.

'You're so good with the Wit, they say. Why don't you change into a rat and scuttle out of there? Huh?' He leaned his forehead against the bars and peered in at me. Almost pensively, he said, 'Better that than to hang, whelp. Change into a beast and run off with your tail between your legs. If you can ... I heard you can ... they say you can turn into a wolf. Well, unless you can, you're going to hang. Hang by your neck, choking and kicking ...' His voice trailed off. His dark eyes locked with mine. They were teary with drink. 'Better to lie down and die right there than hang.' Suddenly he seemed full of fury. 'Maybe I'll help you lie down and die!' he threatened through gritted teeth. 'Better you die my way than Regal's!' He began to wrest at the bars, shaking the door back and forth against its locks.

The guards were instantly on him, one to an arm, tugging and cursing while he ignored them. Old Blade jiggled up and down behind them, saying, 'Give it up, come on, Burrich, you had your say, come on, man, before there's real trouble.'

They did not pry him loose, but he gave it up suddenly, just dropping his arms to his side. It caught the guards by surprise and they both stumbled back. I clutched at the barred window.

‘Burrich.’ It was hard to make my mouth form words. ‘I never meant to hurt you. I’m sorry.’ I took a breath, tried to find some words to end some of the torment in his eyes. ‘No one should blame you. You did the best with me you could.’

He shook his head at me, his face contorting with grief and anger. ‘Lie down and die, boy. Just lie down and die.’ He turned and walked away from me. Blade was walking backwards, apologizing a hundred times over to the two flustered guards who followed him up the corridor. I watched them go, and then watched Burrich’s shadow go lurching off, while Blade’s stayed a bit to mollify the guards.

I swiped at the spittle on my swollen face and went slowly back to my stone bench. I sat a long time, remembering. From the beginning, he had warned me off the Wit. The first dog that I had ever bonded to, he had mercilessly taken from me. I had fought him for that dog, *repelled* at him with every bit of strength I had, and he had just deflected it back at me. So hard I had not even attempted to *repel* anyone for years after that. And when he had relented, ignoring if not accepting my bond with the wolf, it had rebounded onto him. The Wit. All those times he had warned me, and all those times I had been so sure I knew what I was doing.

You did.

Nighteyes. I acknowledged him. I had no spirit to do more than that.

Come with me. Come with me and we will hunt. I can take you far from all of this.

In a while, perhaps, I put him off. I did not have the strength to deal with him.

I sat for a long time, actually. My encounter with Burrich hurt as badly as the beating had. I tried to think of one person in my life whom I had not failed, had not disappointed. I could think of no one.

I glanced down at Brawndy’s cloak. I was cold enough to want it, but too sore to pick it up. A pebble on the floor beside it caught my eye. It puzzled me. I had looked at this floor long enough to know there were no loose dark pebbles in my cell.

Curiosity is a disturbingly strong force. Finally, I leaned over and picked up the cloak, and the pebble next to it. It took some time to get the cloak around me. Then I examined my pebble. It wasn’t a pebble. It was dark and wet. A wad of something? Leaves. A pellet of wadded leaves. A pellet that had stung my chin when Burrich spat at me? Cautiously I held it

up to the fickle light that wandered in the barred window. Something white secured the outer leaf. I picked it loose. What had caught my eye was the white end of a porcupine quill, while the black, barbed tip had secured the leaf wrapping. Unfolded, the leaf revealed a sticky brown wad. I lifted it to my nose and sniffed it cautiously. A mixture of herbs, but one dominated. I recognized the scent queasily. Carryme. A mountain herb. A powerful painkiller and sedative, sometimes used to extinguish life mercifully. Kettricken had used it when she had tried to kill me in the mountains.

Come with me.

Not just now.

This was Burrich's parting gift to me? A merciful end? I thought over what he had said. Better just to lie down and die. This, from the man who had taught me the fight wasn't over until you had won it? The contradiction was too sharp.

Heart of the Pack says you should come with me. Now. Tonight. Lie down, he says. Be a bone for the dogs to dig up later, he says. I could feel the effort Nighteyes was putting into relaying this message.

I was silent, thinking.

He took the quill from my lip, brother. I think we can trust him. Come with me now, tonight.

I considered the three things that lay in my hand. The leaf, the quill, the pellet. I rewrapped the pellet in the leaf, secured it with the quill again.

I don't understand what he wants me to do, I complained.

Lie down and be still. Still yourself, and go with me, as myself. A long pause as Nighteyes worked something through in his head. *Eat what he gave you only if you must. Only if you cannot come to me on your own.*

I have no idea what he is up to. But, like you, I think we can trust him. In the dimness, past all weariness, I sat picking at the stitching in my sleeve. When it finally came loose, I coaxed the tiny paper packet of powder out, and then pushed the leaf-wrapped pellet in. I managed to force the quill to hold it there. I looked at the paper packet in my hand. A tiny idea came to me, but I refused to dwell on it. I gripped it in my hand. Then I wrapped myself in Brawndy's cloak and slowly lay myself down on the bench. I knew I should keep vigil, lest Will come back. I was too hopeless and too weary. *I am with you, Nighteyes.*

We sped away together, over crusted white snow, into a wolf world.

THIRTY-TWO

Execution

Stablemaster Burrich was renowned during his years at Buckkeep as an extraordinary horse-handler as well as a houndsman and hawker. His skill with beasts was near legendary even in his own lifetime.

He began his years of service as a common soldier. It is said he came from folk who had settled in Shoaks. Some say his grandmother was of slave stock, who bought herself free from a Bingtown master by an extraordinary service.

As a soldier, his fierceness in battle brought him to the attention of a young Prince Chivalry. It is rumoured that he first appeared before his prince on a disciplinary matter regarding a tavern brawl. He served Chivalry for a time as a weapons partner, but Chivalry discovered his gift for animals and put him in charge of his guards' horses. He was soon caring for Chivalry's hounds and hawks as well, and eventually came to oversee the entire stables of Buckkeep. His sage doctoring of beasts and knowledge of their internal workings extended to cattle, sheep and swine and the occasional treatment of fowl. No one exceeded him in his understanding of beasts.

Severely injured in a boar-hunting accident, Burrich acquired a limp he was to suffer the rest of his life. It seems to have mitigated the quick and savage temper that was his reputation as a young man. However, it is also true he remained a man that few crossed willingly to the end of his days.

His herbal remedy was responsible for halting the outbreak of scallers that afflicted the lambs in Bearns Duchy following the Blood Plague years. He saved the flocks from total decimation, and kept the disease from spreading into Buck Duchy.

A clear night under shining stars. A sound healthy body, surging down a snowy hillside in a series of exuberant leaps. Our passage left snow cascading from bushes in our wake. We had killed, we had eaten. All

hungers were satisfied. The night was fresh and open, cracking cold. No cage held us, no men beat us. Together, we knew the fullness of our freedom. We went to where the spring welled up so strongly it almost never froze, and lapped the icy water. Nighteyes shook ourselves all over, then took a deep snuff of the air.

Morning comes.

I know. I do not wish to think of it. Morning, when dreams must end and reality be endured.

You must come with me.

Nighteyes, I am already with you.

No. You must come with me, all the way. You must let go.

So he had told me, at least twenty times already. I could not mistake the urgency of his thoughts. His insistence was plain, and his single-mindedness amazed me. It was not like Nighteyes to cling so firmly to an idea that had nothing to do with food. This was a thing he and Burrich had decided. I must go with him.

I could not fathom what he wanted me to do.

Over and over, I had explained to him that I was trapped, my body in a cage, just as he had once been trapped in a cage. My mind could go with him, for a time at least, but I could not go with him as he urged me to. Each time he told me that he understood that, but I was not understanding him. And now we were back to it again.

I sensed him attempting patience. *You must come with me, now. All the way. Before they come to wake you.*

I cannot. My body is locked in a cage.

Leave it! he said savagely. *Let go!*

What?

Leave it, let go of it, come with me.

You mean, die? Eat the poison?

Only if you have to. But do it now, quickly, before they can hurt you more. Leave it and come with me. Let go of it. You did it once before. Remember?

The effort of making sense of his words was making me aware of our bond. The pain of my own racked body broke through to haunt me. Somewhere I was stiff with the cold, and aching with pain. Somewhere, every breath brought an answering twinge from my ribs. I scrabbled away from that, back to the wolf's strong sound body.

That's right, that's right. Just leave it. Now. Let go of it. Just let go.

I knew abruptly what he wanted me to do. I did not know quite how to do it, and I was not sure that I could. Once, yes, I remembered that I had let go of my body and left it in his care. Only to awaken hours later beside Molly. But I was not sure how I had done it. And it had been different. I had left the wolf to guard me, when I had gone wherever I had gone. This time he wanted me just to break my consciousness free from my body. To willingly let go the tie that bound mind to flesh. Even if I could discover how to do it, I did not know if I had the will to do it.

Just lie down and die, Burrich had told me.

Yes. That's right. Die if you must, but come with me.

I made an abrupt decision. Trust. Trust Burrich, trust the wolf. What did I have to lose?

I drew a deep breath, poised inside myself as for a dive into cold water.

No. No, just let go.

I am. I am. I groped about inside myself, looking for whatever bound me to my body. I slowed my breathing, I willed my heart to beat more slowly. I refused the sensations of pain, of cold, of stiffness. I sank away from all of it, deep into myself.

No! No! Nighteyes howled in desperation. *To me! Come to me, let go of that, come to me!*

But there was the scuff of footsteps, and the mutter of voices. A shudder of fear went through me and despite myself, I cowered deeper into Brawndy's cloak. One eye would open a bit. It showed me the same dimly lit cell, the same tiny barred window. There was a deep cold pain inside me, something more insidious than hunger. They had broken no bones, but inside me, something was torn. I knew it.

You are back in the cage! Nighteyes cried. *Leave it! Leave your body and come to me!*

It's too late, I whispered. *Run away, run away. Don't share this.*

Are we not pack? Desperation as throbbing as a wolf's drawn-out howl.

They were at my door, it was swinging open. Fear seized me in its jaws and shook me. Almost I lifted my cuff to my mouth and chewed the pellet from my sleeve right then. Instead, I gripped the tiny paper packet in my fist, and made a determined resolution to forget about it.

The same man with the torch, the same two guards. The same command. 'You. On your feet.'

I pushed Brawndy's cloak aside. One of the guards was still human enough to pale at what he saw. The other two were stolid. And when I could not move swiftly enough to suit them, one seized me by the arm and jerked me to my feet. I cried out wordlessly with pain; I could not help it. And that response set me to trembling with fear. If I could not keep from crying out, how could I hold my defences against Will?

They took me from my cell and down the hall. I do not say I walked. All my bruises had stiffened in the night. The beating had reopened the sword cuts on my right forearm and on my thigh. Those pains, too, had been renewed. Pain was like air now; I moved through it, I breathed it in and out of myself. In the centre of the guard-room, one shoved me and I fell. I lay on the floor on my side. I saw no point to struggling to sit up; I had no dignity to save. Better that they thought I could not stand. While I could, I would be still and marshal whatever strength I could still call my own. Slowly, laboriously, I cleared myself and began to set the guards on my mind. Over and over, through the pain haze, I went over the Skill walls I had erected, strengthening them, sealing myself away behind them. The walls of my mind were what I must guard, not the flesh of my body. Around me in the room, men lined the walls. They shuffled, and spoke quietly amongst themselves, waiting. I scarcely noticed them. My world was my walls and my pain.

There was the creak and draught of an opened door. Regal came in. Will walked behind him, carelessly radiating Skill strength. I was aware of him as I had never before been aware of a man. Even without sight, I could sense him, the shape of him, the heat of the Skill that burned inside him. He was dangerous. Regal supposed he was only a tool. I dared a tiny satisfaction in knowing Regal did not know the perils of such a tool as Will.

Regal took his chair. Someone brought a small table for him. I heard a bottle opened, then smelled wine as it was poured. The pain had tuned my senses to an unbearable keenness. I listened to Regal drink. I refused to acknowledge how much I longed for it.

'Dear me. Look at him. Do you suppose we have gone too far, Will?' Something in the arch amusement in Regal's voice informed me that he had taken more than wine today. Smoke, perhaps? So early? The wolf had said dawn. Regal would never be up at dawn ... something was wrong with my time sense.

Will walked slowly toward me, stood over me. I did not try to move to see his face. I gripped my tiny store of strength firmly. He nudged me sharply with his foot and I gasped despite myself. At almost the same instant, he slammed his Skill strength against me. There, at least, I held firm. Will took a short breath through his nose, snorted it out. He walked back to Regal.

‘Your majesty. You’ve done almost as much as you can to his body, without risking damage that would plainly show even a month hence. But within, he still resists. Pain can distract him from warding his mind, but it does not inherently weaken his Skill strength. I do not think you will break him this way.’

‘I did not ask you that, Will!’ Regal rebuked him sharply. I listened to him shift himself to a more comfortable position. ‘Ah, this takes too long. My dukes grow impatient. He must be broken today.’ Almost pensively, he asked Will, ‘Almost as much as I can, you say, to his body? What then would you suggest as the next step?’

‘Leave him alone with me. I can get what you wish from him.’

‘No.’ Regal’s refusal was flat. ‘I know what *you* want from him, Will. You see him as a fat wineskin, full of Skill strength, which you would like to drain. Well, perhaps, at the end, there will be a way for you to have him. But not just yet. I want him to stand before the dukes and confess himself a traitor. More, I want him to grovel before the throne, and beg for mercy. I will have him denounce all those who have defied me. He, himself, shall accuse them. No one will doubt it when he says they are traitors. Let Duke Brawndy see his own daughter accused, let all the court hear that the Lady Patience who cries so loudly for justice has herself betrayed the crown. And for him ... that candle-maker girl, that Molly.’

My heart lurched sideways inside me.

‘I have not yet found her, my lord,’ Will ventured.

‘Silence!’ Regal thundered. Almost, he sounded like King Shrewd. ‘Do not hearten him with that. She need not be found to be declared a traitor by his own lips. We can find her at our leisure. He can go to his death, knowing she will follow him, betrayed by his words. I will cleanse Buckkeep from dungheap to tower top of all who have sought to betray me and defy me!’ He lifted his cup in a toast to himself and drank deeply.

He sounded, I thought to myself, very like Queen Desire had in her cups. One part braggart and one part snivelling coward. He would fear

everyone he did not control. And the next day he would fear those he controlled even more.

Regal set his wine cup down with a thud. He leaned back in his chair. 'Well, let's continue, shall we? Kelfry, stand him up for us.'

Kelfry was a competent man who took no joy in his work. He was not gentle, but neither was he rougher than he needed to be. He stood behind me, gripping me by the upper arms to keep me upright. Hod had not trained him. I knew if I snapped my head back swiftly, I could break his nose and possibly take out some of his front teeth. Snapping my head back swiftly struck me as only slightly simpler than picking up the floor under my own feet would be. I stood, hands curled defensively over my belly, pushing the pain aside, gathering my strength. After a moment, I lifted my head and regarded Regal.

I ran my tongue about the inside of my mouth to free my lips from my teeth, then spoke. 'You killed your own father.'

Regal stiffened in his chair. The man holding me tensed. I leaned in his arms, forcing him to support my weight.

'Serene and Justin did it, but you ordered it,' I said quietly. Regal came to his feet.

'But not before we had Skilled to Verity,' I made my voice louder. The effort broke sweat on me. 'Verity knows everything.' Regal was coming at me, with Will right behind him. I swung my gaze to Will, put threat in my voice. 'He knows about you, too, Will. He knows it all.'

The guard held me as Regal backhanded me. Once. Another slap, and I felt the swollen skin of my face split under the impact. Regal drew his fist back. I set myself to take it, pushed away all pain, centred myself, got ready.

'Look out!' Will yelled, and sprang to knock Regal aside.

I had wanted it too badly, he had Skilled what I intended to do. As Regal swung, I jerked free of my guard, slipped aside from Regal's blow, then stepped in. With one hand I seized the back of Regal's neck, to pull his face toward my other hand that gripped the now-crushed paper of powder. My intent had been to rub it into his nose and mouth, to hope against hope he'd get enough of it to kill him.

Will spoiled it all. My swollen fingers would not close on Regal's neck. Will snatched Regal from my wooden grasp, swung him sideways away from me. As Will's shoulder collided with my chest, I reached for his face instead, grinding the torn paper and fine white powder into his nose and

mouth and eyes. Most of it floated up in a fine cloud between us. I saw him gasp at the bitterness and then we were down, both of us, under a wave of Regal's guards.

I dived for unconsciousness, but it eluded me. I was struck, kicked and throttled before Regal's frenzied cries of, 'Don't kill him! Don't kill him!' seemed to matter to anyone save me. I felt them get off me, felt them drag Will from under me, but I could not see. Blood was sheeting down over my face. My tears mingled with it. My last chance, and I had failed. I had not even killed Will. Oh, he would be sick for a few days, but I doubted he would die of it. Even now I heard them muttering over him.

'Take him to a healer, then,' I heard Regal finally give the command. 'See if he can work out what's wrong with him. Did one of you kick him in the head?'

I thought that he spoke of me, until I heard the sounds of Will being carried out. So either I had got more into him than I had thought, or someone had kicked him in the head. Perhaps his gasp had pulled it into his lungs. I had no idea what it would do there. As I felt his Skill presence fading, it was relief almost as blessed as surcease from pain. Cautiously I relaxed my vigilance against him. It was like setting down a terribly heavy weight. Another thought blessed me. They didn't know. No one had seen the paper and powder, it had happened too quickly for them. They might not even think of poison until it was too late for him.

'Is the Bastard dead?' Regal demanded angrily. 'If he is, I swear, every man of you will hang!'

Someone stooped hastily beside me, to lay fingers at the pulse in my throat. 'He's alive,' a soldier said gruffly, almost sullenly. Some day Regal would learn not to threaten his own guard. I hoped he'd be taught it by an arrow through his back.

A moment later, someone dashed a bucket of cold water over me. The shock of it jarred every pain I had to new frenzy. I pulled my one eye open. The first thing I saw was the water and blood on the floor in front of me. If all that blood was mine, I was in trouble. Dazedly, I tried to think of whose else it could be. My mind did not seem to be working very well. Time seemed to be flowing in jumps. Regal was standing over me, angry and dishevelled, and then suddenly he was sitting in his chair. In and out. Light and dark and light again.

Someone knelt beside me, ran competent hands over me. Burrich? No. That was a dream from long ago. This man had blue eyes and the nasal twang of a Farrow-man. 'He's bleeding a lot, King Regal. But we can stop that.' Someone put pressure on my brow. A cup of watered wine held against my cracked lips, splashed into my mouth. I choked on it. 'You see, he's alive. I'd leave off, for today, your majesty. I doubt if he'll be able to answer any more questions before tomorrow. He'll just faint on you.' A calm professional opinion. Whoever it was stretched me out on the floor again and left.

A spasm rattled through me. Seizure coming soon. Good thing Will was gone. Didn't think I could keep my walls up through a seizure.

'Oh, take him away,' Regal said, disgusted and disappointed. 'This has been nothing but a waste of my time today.' His chair's legs scraped on the floor as he left it. I heard the sounds of his boots on the stone floor as he strode from the room.

Someone grabbed me by the shirt front, jerked me to my feet. I could not even scream for the pain. 'Stupid piece of dung,' he snarled at me. 'You'd better not die. I'm not going to take lashes over the likes of you dying.'

'Great threat, Verde,' someone mocked him. 'What are you going to do to him after he's dead?'

'Shut up. It'll be your back flayed to the bone as much as mine. Let's get him out of here and clean this up.'

The cell. The blank wall of it. They had left me on the floor, facing away from the door. Somehow that seemed unfair of them. I'd have to do all the work of rolling over just to see if they'd left me any water.

No. It was too much trouble.

Are you coming now?

I really want to, Nighteyes. But I just don't know how.

Changer. Changer! My brother! Changer.

What is it?

You have been silent for so long. Are you coming now?

I have been ... silent?

Yes. I thought you had died, without coming to me first. I could not reach you.

Probably a seizure. I didn't know it had happened. But now I am right here, Nighteyes. Right here.

Then come to me. Hurry, before you die.

A moment. Let us be sure of this.

I tried to think of a reason not to. I knew there had been some, but I could no longer recall them. Changer, he had called me. My own wolf, calling me that, just as the Fool or Chade called me a catalyst. Well. Time to change things for Regal. The last thing I could do was make sure I died before Regal broke me. If I had to go down, I would do it alone. No words of mine would implicate anyone else. I hoped the dukes would demand to see my body.

It took a long time to get my arm from the floor to my chest. My lips were cracked and swollen, my teeth aching in my gums. But I put my shirt cuff to my mouth, and found the tiny lump of the leaf pellet inside the fabric. I bit down at it as hard as I could, then sucked on it. After a moment, the taste of carryme flooded my mouth. It was not unpleasant. Pungent. As the herb deadened the pain in my mouth, I could chew at my sleeve more strongly. Stupidly, I tried to be careful of the porcupine quill. Didn't want to get a quill in my lip.

It really hurts when that happens.

I know, Nighteyes.

Come to me.

I'm trying. Give me a moment.

How does one leave one's body behind? I tried to ignore it, to be aware of myself only as Nighteyes. Keen nose. Lying on my side, chewing diligently at a lump of snow wadded up in the space between my toes. I tasted snow and my own paw as I nibbled and licked it away. I looked up. Evening coming on. It would soon be a good time to hunt. I stood up, shook myself all over.

That's right, Nighteyes encouraged me.

But there was still that thread, that tiny awareness of a stiff and aching body on a cold stone floor. Just to think of it made it more real. A tremor ran through it, rattling its bones and teeth. Seizure coming. Big one this time.

Suddenly, it was all so easy. Such an easy choice. Leave that body for this one. It didn't work very well any more anyway. Stuck in a cage. No point to keeping it. No point to being a man at all.

I'm here.

I know. Let us hunt.

And we did.

THIRTY-THREE

Wolf Days

The exercise for centring oneself is a simple one. Stop thinking of what you intend to do. Stop thinking of what you have just done. Then, stop thinking that you have stopped thinking of those things. Then you will find the Now, the time that stretches eternal, and is really the only time there is. Then, in that place, you will finally have time to be yourself.

There is a cleanness to life that can be had when you but hunt and eat and sleep. In the end, no more than this is really needed by anyone. We ran alone, we the Wolf, and we lacked for nothing. We did not long for venison when a rabbit presented itself nor begrudge the ravens that came to pick through our leavings. Sometimes we remembered a different time and a different way. When we did, we wondered what had been so important about any of it. We did not kill what we could not eat, and we did not eat what we could not kill. Dusks and dawns were the best times for hunting, and other times were good for sleeping. Other than this, time had no meaning.

For wolves, as for dogs, life is a briefer thing than for men, if you measure it by counting days and how many turns of a season one sees. But in two years, a cub wolf does all a man does in a score. He comes to the full of his strength and size, he learns all that is needful for him to be a hunter or a mate or a leader. The candle of his life burns briefer and brighter than a man's. In a decade of years, he does all that a man does in five or six times that many. A year passes for a wolf as a decade does for a man. Time is no miser when one lives always in the now.

So we knew the nights and the days, the hunger and the filling. Savage joys and surprises. Snatch up a mouse, fling it up, eat it down with a snap. So good. To start a rabbit, to pursue it as it dodges and circles, then suddenly, to stretch your stride and seize it in a flurry of snow and fur. The shake that snaps its neck, and then the leisure eating, the tearing open of its belly and nosing through the hot entrails, and then the thick meat of the

haunches, the easy crunching of its backbone. Surfeit and sleep. And waken to hunt again.

Chase a doe over pond ice, knowing we cannot make such a kill, but rejoicing in the hunt. When through the ice she goes, and we circle, circle, circle endlessly as she battles her hooves against the ice and finally clammers out, too weary to evade the teeth that slash her hamstrings, the fangs that close in her throat. Eating to satiation, not once, but twice from the carcass. A storm comes full of sleet to drive us to the den. Sleeping snug, nose to tail, while the wind flings icy rain and then snow about outside the den. Awake to pale light glistening in through a layer of snow. Dig out to snuff the clear cold day that is just fading. There is meat still on the doe, frozen red and sweet, ready to be dug from the snow. What can be more satisfying than to know of meat that is waiting for you?

Come.

We pause. No, the meat is waiting. We trot on.

Come now. Come to me. I've meat for you.

We've meat already. And closer.

Nighteyes. Changer. Heart of the Pack summons you.

We pause again. Shake all over. This is not comfortable. And what is Heart of the Pack to us? He is not pack. He pushes us. There is meat closer. It is decided. We go to the pond's edge. Here. Somewhere here. Ah. Dig down to her through the snow. The crows come to watch us, waiting for us to be finished.

Nighteyes. Changer. Come. Come now. Soon it will be too late.

The meat is frozen, crisp and red. Turn our head to use our back teeth to scissor it from the bones. A crow flies down, lands on the snow nearby. Hop, hop. He cocks his head. For sport, we lunge at him, put him to flight again. Our meat, all of it. Days and nights of meat.

Come. Please. Come. Please. Come soon, come now. Come back to us. You are needed. Come. Come.

He does not go away. We put back our ears, but still we hear him, *come, come, come*. He steals the pleasure from the meat with his whining. Enough. We have eaten enough for now. We will go, just to still him.

Good. That's good. Come to me, come to me.

We go, trotting through the gathering darkness. A rabbit sits up suddenly, scampers away across the snow. Shall we? No. Belly is full. Trot

on. Cross a man's path, an open empty strip under the night sky. We fade across it swiftly, trot on through the woods that border it.

Come to me. Come. Nigtheyes, Changer, I summon you. Come to me.

The forest ends. There is a cleared hillside below us, and beyond that a flat, bare place, shelterless under the night sky. Too open. The crusted snow is untracked, but at the bottom of the hill, there are humans. Two. Heart of the Pack digs while another watches. Heart of the Pack digs fast and hard. His breath smokes in the night. The other has a light, a too-bright light that shrinks the eye to behold. Heart of the Pack stops his digging. He looks up at us.

Come, he says. Come.

He jumps into the hole he has dug. There is black earth, frozen chunks of it, on top of the clean snow. He lands with a thud like deer antlers on a tree. He crouches and there is a tearing sound. He uses a tool that thuds and tears. We settle down to watch him, wrapping tail around to warm front feet. What has this to do with us? We are full, we could go sleep now. He looks up at us suddenly through the night.

Wait. A moment longer. Wait.

He growls to the other, and that one holds the light to the hole. Heart of the Pack bends his back and the other reaches to help him. They drag something from the hole. The smell of it sets our hackles ajar. We turn, we leap to run, we circle, we cannot leave. There is a fear here, there is a danger, a threat of pain, of loneliness, of endings.

Come. Come down to us here, come down. We need you now. It is time.

This is not time. Time is always, is everywhere. You need us, but perhaps we do not want to be needed. We have meat, and a warm place to sleep, and even more meat for another time. With a full belly and a warm den, what else is to be needed? Yet. We will go closer. We will snuff it, we will see what it is that threatens and beckons. Belly to snow, tail low, we slink down the hill.

Heart of the Pack sits in the snow holding it. He motions the other away, and that one steps back, back, back taking his painful light with him. Closer. The hill is beyond us now, bare, shelterless. It is a far run back to hiding if we are threatened. But nothing moves. There is only Heart of the Pack and that which he holds. It smells of blood. He shakes it, as if to worry off a piece of meat. Then he rubs at it, moving his hands like a bitch's teeth

go over a cub to rid it of fleas. We know the smell of it. Closer we come. Closer. It is but a leap away.

What do you want? we demand of him.

Come back.

We have come.

Come back here. Changer. He is insistent. *Come back to this.* He lifts an arm, shows up a hand. He shows us a head lolling on his shoulder.

That?

This. This is yours, Changer.

It smells bad. It is spoiled meat, we do not want it. There is better meat by the pond than that.

Come here. Come closer.

This is not a good idea. We will come no closer. He looks at us and grips us with his eyes. He edges closer to us, bringing it with him. It flops in his arms.

Easy. Easy. This is yours, Changer. Come closer.

We snarl, but he does not look away. We cower, tail to belly, wanting to leave, but he is strong. He takes its hand and puts it on our head. He holds the scruff of our neck to still us.

Come back. You must come back. He is so insistent.

We cower down, digging claws into the snowy earth. Humping our back, we try to pull away, struggle to take one step backward. He still holds onto the scruff of our neck. We gather strength to wheel and break away.

Let him go, Nighteyes. He is not yours. A hint of teeth in those words, his eyes stare at us too hard.

He is not yours, either, Nighteyes says.

Whose am I, then?

A moment of teetering, of balancing between two worlds, two realities, two fleashes. Then a wolf wheels and flees, tail tucked, over the snow, running away alone, fleeing from too much strangeness. On top of a hill he stops, to point his nose at the sky and howl. Howl for the unfairness of it all.

I do not have a memory of that frozen graveyard that is my own. I have a sort of dream. I was wretchedly cold, stiff, and the raw taste of brandy burned, not just in my mouth, but all through me. Burrich and Chade would not leave me alone. They didn't care how much they were hurting me, they just kept on rubbing my hands and feet, careless of the old bruises, the scabs on my arms. And every time I closed my eyes, Burrich would seize me and

shake me like a rag. 'Stay with me, Fitz,' he kept saying. 'Stay with me, stay with me. Come on, boy. You're not dead. You're not dead.' Then suddenly he hugged me to him, his bearded face bristling against mine and his hot tears falling on my face. He rocked me back and forth, sitting in the snow at the edge of my grave. 'You're not dead, son. You're not dead.'

Epilogue

It was a thing Burrich had heard of, in a tale told by his grandmother. A tale of a Witted one who could leave her body, for a day or so, and then come back to it. And Burrich had told it to Chade, and Chade had mixed the poisons that would take me to the brink of death. They told me I had not died, that my body had but slowed to an appearance of death.

I do not believe that.

And so I lived once more in man's body. Though it took me some days and time to remember that I had been a man. And sometimes, still, I doubt it.

I did not resume my life. My life as FitzChivalry lay in smoking ruins behind me. In all the world, only Burrich and Chade knew I had not died. Of those who had known me, few remembered me with smiles. Regal had killed me, in every way that mattered to me as a man. To present myself to any of those who had loved me, to stand before them in my human flesh would have only been to give them proof of the magic I had tainted myself with.

I had died in my cell, a day or two after that final beating. The dukes had been wroth about my death, but Regal had had enough evidence and witnesses to my Wit magic to save face with them. I believe that his guards saved themselves from the lash by testifying that I had attacked Will with the Wit, and that was why he lay ill so long. They said they had had to beat me to break my Wit hold on him. In the face of so many witnesses, the dukes not only abandoned me, but witnessed Regal's coronation, and the appointment of Lord Bright as castellan for Buckkeep and all of Buck's coast. Patience had begged that my body not be burned, but be buried whole. The Lady Grace had also sent word on my behalf, much to her husband's disgust. Only those two stood by me, in the face of Regal's proof of my Wit taint. But I do not think it was out of any consideration for them that he gave me up, but only that by dying ahead of time, I had spoiled the spectacle that hanging and burning would have afforded. Cheated of his full vengeance, Regal simply lost interest. He left Buckkeep to go inland to Tradeford. Patience claimed my body to bury me.

To this life did Burch awaken me, to a life in which there was nothing left for me. Nothing save my king. The Six Duchies would crumble in the months to come, the Raiders would possess our good harbours almost at will, our folk were driven from their homes, or brought to slavery while the Outlanders squatted there. Forgings flourished. But as my Prince Verity had done, I turned my back on all of it, and went inland. But he went to be a king, and I went following my queen, seeking my king. Hard days followed.

Yet even now, when the pain presses most heavily and none of the herbs can turn its deep ache, when I consider the body that entraps my spirit, I recall my days as a wolf, and know them not as a few but as a season of living. There is a comfort in their recalling, as well as a temptation. Come, hunt with me, the invitation whispers in my heart. Leave the pain behind and let your life be your own again. There is a place where all time is now, and the choices are simple and always your own.

Wolves have no kings.

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ASSASSIN'S QUEST

Book Three of *The Parseer Trilogy*

Assassin's Quest

Book Three of The Farseer Trilogy

Robin Hobb



DEDICATION

For the very real Kat Ogden
Who threatened, at an early age, to grow up and be
a tap dancing,
fencing,
judoka,
movie-star,
archaeologist,
and
President of the United States.
And is getting frighteningly close to the end of her list.
Never mistake the movie for the book.

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PROLOGUE

The Unremembered

I awake every morning with ink on my hands. Sometimes I am sprawled, face down, on my work table, amidst a welter of scrolls and papers. My boy, when he comes in with my tray, may dare to chide me for not taking myself off to bed the night before. But sometimes he looks at my face and ventures no word. I do not try to explain to him why I do as I do. It is not a secret one can give to a younger man; it is one he must earn and learn on his own.

A man has to have a purpose in life. I know this now, but it took me the first score years of my life to learn it. In that I scarcely think myself unique. Still, it is a lesson that, once learned, has remained with me. So, with little besides pain to occupy myself these days, I have sought out a purpose for myself. I have turned to a task that both Lady Patience and Scribe Fedwren had long ago advocated. I began these pages as an effort to write down a coherent history of the Six Duchies. But I found it difficult to keep my mind long fixed on a single topic, and so I distract myself with lesser treatises, on my theories of magic, on my observations of political structures, and my reflections on other cultures. When the discomfort is at its worst and I cannot sort my own thoughts well enough to write them down, I work on translations, or attempt to make a legible recording of older documents. I busy my hands in the hope of distracting my mind.

My writing serves me as Verity's map making once served him. The detail of the work and the concentration required is almost enough to make one forget both the longings of the addiction, and the residual pains of having once indulged it. One can become lost in such work, and forget oneself. Or one can go even deeper, and find many recollections of that self. All too often, I find I have wandered far from a history of the duchies into a history of FitzChivalry. Those recollections leave me face to face with who I once was, and who I have become.

When one is deeply absorbed in such a recounting, it is surprising how much detail one can recall. Not all the memories I summon up are painful. I have had more than a just share of good friends, and found them more loyal than I had any right to expect. I have known beauties and joys that tried my

heart's strength as surely as the tragedies and uglinesses have. Yet I possess, perhaps, a greater share of dark memories than most men; few men have known death in a dungeon, or can recall the inside of a coffin buried beneath the snow. The mind shies away from the details of such things. It is one thing to recall that Regal killed me. It is another to focus on the details of the days and nights endured as he starved me and then had me beaten to death. When I do, there are moments that still can turn my bowels to ice, even after all these years. I can recall the eyes of the man and the sound of his fist breaking my nose. There still exists for me a place I visit in my dreams, where I fight to remain standing, trying not to let myself think of how I will make a final effort to kill Regal. I recall the blow from him that split my swollen skin and left the scar down my face that I still bear.

I have never forgiven myself the triumph I ceded to him when I took poison and died.

But more painful than the events I can recall are those that are lost to me. When Regal killed me, I died. I was never again commonly known as FitzChivalry, I never renewed bonds to the Buckkeep folk who had known me since I was a child of six. I never lived in Buckkeep Castle again, never more waited on the Lady Patience, never sat on the hearthstones at Chade's feet again. Lost to me were the rhythms of lives that had intertwined with mine. Friends died, others were wed, babes were born, children came of age, and I saw none of it. Though I no longer possess the body of a healthy young man, many still live who once called me friend. Sometimes, still, I long to rest eyes on them, to touch hands, to lay to peace the loneliness of years.

I cannot.

Those years are lost to me, and all the years of their lives to come. Lost too, is that period, no longer than a month, but seeming much longer, when I was confined to dungeon and then coffin. My king had died in my arms yet I did not see him buried. Nor was I present at the council after my death when I was found guilty of having used the Wit magic, and hence deserving of the death that had been dealt me.

Patience came to lay claim to my body. My father's wife, once so distressed to discover he had sired a bastard before they were wed, was the one who took me from that cell. Hers the hands that washed my body for burial, that straightened my limbs and wrapped me in a grave cloth. Awkward, eccentric Lady Patience, for whatever reason, cleansed my wounds and bound them as carefully as if I still lived. She alone ordered the

digging of my grave and saw to the burying of my coffin. She and Lacey, her woman, mourned me, when all others, out of fear or disgust at my crime, abandoned me.

Yet she knew nothing of how Burrich and Chade, my assassin mentor, came nights later to that grave, and dug away the snow that had fallen and the frozen clumps of earth that had been tossed down on my coffin. Only those two were present as Burrich broke through the lid of the coffin and tugged out my body, and then summoned, by his own Wit magic, the wolf that had been entrusted with my soul. They wrested that soul from the wolf and sealed it back into the battered body it had fled. They raised me, to walk once more in a man's shape, to recall what it was to have a king and be bound by an oath. To this day, I do not know if I thank them for that. Perhaps, as the Fool insists, they had no choice. Perhaps there can be no thanks nor any blame, but only recognition of the forces that brought us and bound us to our inevitable fates.

ONE

Gravebirth

In the Chalced States, slaves are kept. They supply the drudge labour. They are the miners, the bellows workers, the galley rowers, the crews for the offal wagons, the field workers, and the whores. Oddly, slaves are also the nursemaids and children's tutors and cooks and scribes and skilled craftsmen. All of Chalced's gleaming civilization, from the great libraries of Jep to the fabled fountains and baths at Sinjon's, are founded on the existence of a slave class.

The Bingtown Traders are the major source of the slave supply. At one time, most slaves were captives taken in war, and Chalced still officially claims this is true. In more recent years there have not been sufficient wars to keep up with the demand for educated slaves. The Bingtown Traders are very resourceful in finding other sources, and the rampant piracy in the Trade Islands is often mentioned in association with this. Those who are slave owners in Chalced show little curiosity about where the slaves come from, so long as they are healthy.

Slavery is a custom that has never taken root in the Six Duchies. A man convicted of a crime may be required to serve the one he has injured, but a limit of time is always placed, and he is never seen as less than a man making atonement. If a crime is too heinous to be redeemed by labour, then the criminal pays with his death. No one ever becomes a slave in the Six Duchies, nor do our laws support the idea that a household may bring slaves into the kingdom and have them remain so. For this reason, many Chalced slaves who do win free of their owners by one path or another often seek the Six Duchies as a new home.

These slaves bring with them the far-flung traditions and folklore of their own lands. One such tale I have preserved has to do with a girl who was Vecci, or what we would call Witted. She wished to leave her parents' home, to follow a man she loved and be his wife. Her parents did not find him worthy and denied her permission. When they would not let her go, she was too dutiful a child to disobey them. But she was also too ardent a woman to live without her true love. She lay down on her bed and died of sorrow. Her parents buried her with great mourning and much self-reproach

that they had not allowed her to follow her heart. But unbeknownst to them, she was Wit-bonded to a she-bear. And when the girl died, the she-bear took her spirit into her keeping, so it might not flee the world. Three nights after the girl had been buried, the she-bear dug up the grave, and restored the girl's spirit to her body. The girl's gravebirth made her a new person, no longer owing duty to her parents. So she left the shattered coffin and went seeking her one true love. The tale has a sad ending, for having been a she-bear for a time, she was never wholly human again, and her true love would not have her.

This scrap of a tale was the basis for Burrich's decision to try to free me from Prince Regal's dungeon by poisoning me.

The room was too hot. And too small. Panting no longer cooled me. I got up from the table and went to the water barrel in the corner. I took the cover off it and drank deeply. Heart of the Pack looked up with an almost snarl. 'Use a cup, Fitz.'

Water ran from my chin. I looked up at him steadily, watching him.

'Wipe your face.' Heart of the Pack looked away from me, back to his own hands. He had grease on them and was rubbing it into some straps. I snuffed it. I licked my lips.

'I am hungry,' I told him.

'Sit down and finish your work. Then we will eat.'

I tried to remember what he wanted of me. He moved his hand toward the table and I recalled. More leather straps at my end of the table. I went back and sat in the hard chair.

'I am hungry now,' I explained to him. He looked at me again in the way that did not show his teeth but was still a snarl. Heart of the Pack could snarl with his eyes. I sighed. The grease he was using smelled very good. I swallowed. Then I looked down. Leather straps and bits of metal were on the table before me. I looked at them for a while. After a time, Heart of the Pack set down his straps and wiped his hands on a cloth. He came to stand beside me, and I had to turn to be able to see him. 'Here,' he said, touching the leather before me. 'You were mending it here.' He stood over me until I picked it up again. I bent to sniff it and he struck my shoulder. 'Don't do that!'

My lip twitched, but I did not snarl. Snarling at him made him very, very angry. For a time I held the straps. Then it seemed as if my hands

remembered before my mind did. I watched my fingers work the leather. When it was done, I held it up before him and tugged it, hard, to show that it would hold even if the horse threw its head back. 'But there isn't a horse,' I remembered out loud. 'All the horses are gone.'

Brother?

I come. I rose from my chair. I went to the door.

'Come back and sit down,' Heart of the Pack said.

Nighteyes waits, I told him. Then I remembered he could not hear me. I thought he could if he would try, but he would not try. I knew that if I spoke to him that way again, he would push me. He would not let me speak to Nighteyes that way much. He would even push Nighteyes if the wolf spoke too much to me. It seemed a very strange thing. 'Nighteyes waits,' I told him with my mouth.

'I know.'

'It is a good time to hunt, now.'

'It is a better time for you to stay in. I have food here for you.'

'Nighteyes and I could find fresh meat.' My mouth ran at the thought of it. A rabbit torn open, still steaming in the winter night. That was what I wanted.

'Nighteyes will have to hunt alone this night,' Heart of the Pack told me. He went to the window and opened the shutters a little. The chill air rushed in. I could smell Nighteyes and further away, a snow cat. Nighteyes whined. 'Go away,' Heart of the Pack told him. 'Go on, now, go hunt, go feed yourself. I've not enough to feed you here.'

Nighteyes went away from the light that spilled from the window. But he did not go too far. He was waiting out there for me, but I knew he could not wait long. Like me, he was hungry now.

Heart of the Pack went to the fire that made the room too hot. There was a pot by it, and he poked it away from the fire and took the lid off. Steam came out, and with it smells. Grains and roots, and a tiny bit of meat smell, almost boiled away. But I was so hungry I snuffed after it. I started to whine, but Heart of the Pack made the eye-snarl again. So I went back to the hard chair. I sat. I waited.

He took a very long time. He took all the leather from the table and put it on a hook. Then he put the pot of grease away. Then he brought the hot pot to the table. Then he set out two bowls and two cups. He put water in the cups. He set out a knife and two spoons. From the cupboard he brought

bread and a small pot of jam. He put the stew in the bowl before me, but I knew I could not touch it. I had to sit and not eat the food while he cut the bread and gave me a piece. I could hold the bread, but I could not eat it until he sat down too, with his plate and his stew and his bread.

‘Pick up your spoon,’ he reminded me. Then he slowly sat down in his chair right beside me. I was holding the spoon and the bread and waiting, waiting, waiting. I didn’t take my eyes off him but I could not keep my mouth from moving. It made him angry. I shut my mouth again. Finally he said, ‘We will eat now.’

But the waiting still had not stopped. One bite I was allowed to take. It must be chewed and swallowed before I took more, or he would cuff me. I could take only as much stew as would fit on the spoon. I picked up the cup and drank from it. He smiled at me. ‘Good, Fitz. Good boy.’

I smiled back, but then I took too large a bite of the bread and he frowned at me. I tried to chew it slowly, but I was so hungry now, and the food was here, and I did not understand why he would not just let me eat it now. It took a long time to eat. He had made the stew too hot on purpose, so that I would burn my mouth if I took too big a bite. I thought about that for a bit. Then I said, ‘You made the food too hot on purpose. So I will be burned if I eat too fast.’

His smile came more slowly. He nodded at me.

I still finished eating before he did. I had to sit on the chair until he had finished eating, too.

‘Well, Fitz,’ he said at last. ‘Not too bad a day today. Hey boy?’

I looked at him.

‘Say something back to me,’ he told me.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘Anything.’

‘Anything.’

He frowned at me and I wanted to snarl, because I had done what he told me. After a time, he got up and got a bottle. He poured something into his cup. He held the bottle out to me. ‘Do you want some?’

I pulled back from it. Even the smell of it stung in my nostrils.

‘Answer,’ he reminded me.

‘No. No, it’s bad water.’

‘No. It’s bad brandy. Blackberry brandy, very cheap. I used to hate it, you used to like it.’

I snorted out the smell. 'We have never liked it.'

He set the bottle and the cup down on the table. He got up and went to the window. He opened it again. 'Go hunting, I said!' I felt Nighteyes jump and then run away. Nighteyes is as afraid of Heart of the Pack as I am. Once I attacked Heart of the Pack. I had been sick for a long time, but then I was better. I wished to go out to hunt and he would not let me. He stood before the door and I sprang on him. He hit me with his fist, and then held me down. He is not bigger than I. But he is meaner, and more clever. He knows many ways to hold and most of them hurt. He held me on the floor, on my back, with my throat bared and waiting for his teeth, for a long, long time. Every time I moved, he cuffed me. Nighteyes had snarled outside the house, but not very close to the door, and he had not tried to come in. When I whined for mercy, he struck me again. 'Be quiet!' he said. When I was quiet, he told me, 'You are younger. I am older and I know more. I fight better than you do, I hunt better than you do. I am always above you. You will do everything I want you to do. You will do everything I tell you to do. Do you understand that?'

Yes, I had told him. *Yes, yes, that is pack, I understand, I understand.* But he had only struck me again and held me there, throat wide, until I told him with my mouth, 'Yes, I understand.'

When Heart of the Pack came back to the table, he put brandy in my cup. He set it in front of me, where I would have to smell it. I snorted.

'Try it,' he urged me. 'Just a little. You used to like it. You used to drink it in town, when you were younger and not supposed to go into taverns without me. And then you would chew mint, and think I would not know what you had done.'

I shook my head at him. 'I would not do what you told me not to do. I understood.'

He made his sound that is like choking and sneezing. 'Oh, you used to very often do what I had told you not to do. Very often.'

I shook my head again. 'I do not remember it.'

'Not yet. But you will.' He pointed at the brandy again. 'Go on. Taste it. Just a little bit. It might do you good.'

And because he had told me I must, I tasted it. It stung my mouth and nose, and I could not snort the taste away. I spilled what was left in the cup.

'Well. Wouldn't Patience be pleased,' was all he said. And then he made me get a cloth and clean what I had spilled. And clean the dishes in

water and wipe them dry, too.

Sometimes I would shake and fall down. There was no reason. Heart of the Pack would try to hold me still. Sometimes the shaking made me fall asleep. When I awakened later, I ached. My chest hurt, my back hurt. Sometimes I bit my tongue. I did not like those times. They frightened Nighteyes.

And sometimes there was another with Nighteyes and me, another who thought with us. He was very small, but he was there. I did not want him there. I did not want anyone there, ever again, except Nighteyes and me. He knew that, and made himself so small that most of the time he was not there.

Later, a man came.

‘A man is coming,’ I told Heart of the Pack. It was dark and the fire was burning low. The good hunting time was past. Full dark was here. Soon he would make us sleep.

He did not answer me. He got up quickly and quietly and took up the big knife that was always on the table. He pointed at me to go to the corner, out of his way. He went softly to the door and waited. Outside, I heard the man stepping through the snow. Then I smelled him. ‘It is the grey one,’ I told him. ‘Chade.’

He opened the door very quickly then, and the grey one came in. I sneezed with the scents he brought on him. Powders of dry leaves are what he always smelled like, and smokes of different kinds. He was thin and old, but Heart of the Pack always behaved as if he were pack higher. Heart of the Pack put more wood on the fire. The room got brighter, and hotter. The grey one pushed back his hood. He looked at me for a time with his light-coloured eyes, as if he were waiting. Then he spoke to Heart of the Pack.

‘How is he? Any better?’

Heart of the Pack moved his shoulders. ‘When he smelled you, he said your name. Hasn’t had a seizure in a week. Three days ago, he mended a bit of harness for me. And did a good job, too.’

‘He doesn’t try to chew on the leather any more?’

‘No. At least, not while I’m watching him. Besides, it’s work he knows very well. It may touch something in him.’ Heart of the Pack gave a short laugh. ‘If nothing else, mended harness is a thing that can be sold.’

The grey one went and stood by the fire and held his hands out to it. There were spots on his hands. Heart of the Pack got out his brandy bottle. They had brandy in cups. He made me hold a cup with a little brandy in the bottom of it, but he did not make me taste it. They talked long, long, long, of things that had nothing to do with eating or sleeping or hunting. The grey one had heard something about a woman. It might be crucial, a rallying point for the Duchies. Heart of the Pack said, 'I won't talk about it in front of Fitz. I promised.' The grey one asked him if he thought I understood, and Heart of the Pack said that that didn't matter, he had given his word. I wanted to go to sleep, but they made me sit still in a chair. When the old one had to leave, Heart of the Pack said, 'It is very dangerous for you to come here. So far a walk for you. Will you be able to get back in?'

The grey one just smiled. 'I have my ways, Burrich,' he said. I smiled too, remembering that he had always been proud of his secrets.

One day, Heart of the Pack went out and left me alone. He did not tie me. He just said, 'There are some oats here. If you want to eat while I'm gone, you'll have to remember how to cook them. If you go out of the door or the window, if you even open the door or the window, I will know it. And I will beat you to death. Do you understand that?'

'I do,' I said. He seemed very angry at me, but I could not remember doing anything he had told me not to do. He opened a box and took things from it. Most were round metal. Coins. One thing I remembered. It was shiny and curved like a moon, and had smelled of blood when I first got it. I had fought another for it. I could not remember that I had wanted it, but I had fought and won it. I did not want it now. He held it up on its chain to look at it, then put it in a pouch. I did not care that he took it away.

I was very, very hungry before he came back. When he did there was a smell on him. A female's smell. Not strong, and mixed with the smells of a meadow. But it was a good smell that made me want something, something that was not food or water or hunting. I came close to him to smell it, but he did not notice that. He cooked the porridge and we ate. Then he just sat before the fire, looking very, very sad. I got up and got the brandy bottle. I brought it to him with a cup. He took them from me but he did not smile. 'Maybe tomorrow I shall teach you to fetch,' he told me. 'Maybe that's something you could master.' Then he drank all the brandy that was in the bottle, and opened another bottle after that. I sat and watched him. After he

fell asleep, I took his coat that had the smell on it. I put it on the floor and lay on it, smelling it until I fell asleep.

I dreamed, but it made no sense. There had been a female who smelled like Burrich's coat, and I had not wanted her to go. She was my female, but when she left, I did not follow. That was all I could remember. Remembering it was not good, in the same way that being hungry or thirsty was not good.

He was making me stay in. He had made me stay in for a long, long time, when all I wanted to do was go out. But that time it was raining, very hard, so hard the snow was almost all melted. Suddenly it seemed good not to go out. 'Burrich,' I said, and he looked up very suddenly at me. I thought he was going to attack, he moved so quickly. I tried not to cower. Cowering made him angry sometimes.

'What is it, Fitz?' he asked, and his voice was kind.

'I am hungry,' I said. 'Now.'

He gave me a big piece of meat. It was cooked, but it was a big piece. I ate it too fast and he watched me, but he did not tell me not to, or cuff me. That time.

I kept scratching at my face. At my beard. Finally, I went and stood in front of Burrich. I scratched at it in front of him. 'I don't like this,' I told him. He looked surprised. But he gave me very hot water and soap, and a very sharp knife. He gave me a round glass with a man in it. I looked at it for a long time. It made me shiver. His eyes were like Burrich's, with white around them, but even darker. Not wolf eyes. His coat was dark like Burrich's, but the hair on his jaws was uneven and rough. I touched my beard, and saw fingers on the man's face. It was strange.

'Shave, but be careful,' Burrich told me.

I could almost remember how. The smell of the soap, the hot water on my face. But the sharp, sharp blade kept cutting me. Little cuts that stung. I looked at the man in the round glass afterward. Fitz, I thought. Almost like Fitz. I was bleeding. 'I'm bleeding everywhere,' I told Burrich.

He laughed at me. 'You always bleed after you shave. You always try to hurry too much.' He took the sharp, sharp blade. 'Sit still,' he told me. 'You've missed some spots.'

I sat very still and he did not cut me. It was hard to be still when he came so near to me and looked at me so closely. When he was done, he took

my chin in his hand. He tipped my face up and looked at me. He looked at me hard. 'Fitz?' he said. He turned his head and smiled at me, but then the smile faded when I just looked at him. He gave me a brush.

'There is no horse to brush,' I told him.

He looked almost pleased. 'Brush this,' he told me, and roughed up my hair. He made me brush it until it would lie flat. There were sore places on my head. Burrich frowned when he saw me wince. He took the brush away and made me stand still while he looked and touched beneath my hair. 'Bastard!' he said harshly, and when I cowered, he said, 'Not you.' He shook his head slowly. He patted me on the shoulder. 'The pain will go away with time,' he told me. He showed me how to pull my hair back and tie it with leather. It was just long enough. 'That's better,' he said. 'You look like a man again.'

I woke up from a dream, twitching and yelping. I sat up and started to cry. He came to me from his bed. 'What's wrong, Fitz? Are you all right?'

'He took me from my mother!' I said. 'He took me away from her. I was much too young to be gone from her.'

'I know,' he said, 'I know. But it was a long time ago. You're here now, and safe.' He looked almost frightened.

'He smoked the den,' I told him. 'He made my mother and brothers into hides.'

His face changed and his voice was no longer kind. 'No, Fitz. That was not your mother. That was a wolf's dream. Nighteyes. It might have happened to Nighteyes. But not you.'

'Oh, yes, it did,' I told him, and I was suddenly angry. 'Oh, yes it did, and it felt just the same. Just the same.' I got up from my bed and walked around the room. I walked for a very long time, until I could stop feeling that feeling again. He sat and watched me. He drank a lot of brandy while I walked.

One day in spring I stood looking out of the window. The world smelled good, alive and new. I stretched and rolled my shoulders. I heard my bones crackle together. 'It would be a good morning to go out riding,' I said. I turned to look at Burrich. He was stirring porridge in a kettle over the fire. He came and stood beside me.

‘It’s still winter up in the Mountains,’ he said softly. ‘I wonder if Kettricken got home safely.’

‘If she didn’t, it wasn’t Sooty’s fault,’ I said. Then something turned over and hurt inside me, so that for a moment I couldn’t catch my breath. I tried to think of what it was, but it ran away from me. I didn’t want to catch up with it, but I knew it was a thing I should hunt. It would be like hunting a bear. When I got up close to it, it would turn on me and try to hurt me. But something about it made me want to follow anyway. I took a deep breath and shuddered it out. I drew in another, with a sound that caught in my throat.

Beside me, Burrich was very still and silent. Waiting for me.

Brother, you are a wolf. Come back, come away from that, it will hurt you, Nighteyes warned me.

I leaped back from it.

Then Burrich went stamping about the room, cursing things, and letting the porridge burn. We had to eat it anyway, there was nothing else.

For a time, Burrich bothered me. ‘Do you remember?’ he was always saying. He wouldn’t leave me alone. He would tell me names, and make me try to say who they were. Sometimes I would know, a little. ‘A woman,’ I told him when he said Patience. ‘A woman in a room with plants.’ I had tried, but he still got angry with me.

If I slept at night, I had dreams. Dreams of a trembling light, a dancing light on a stone wall. And eyes at a small window. The dreams would hold me down and keep me from breathing. If I could get enough breath to scream, I could wake up. Sometimes it took a long time to get enough breath. Burrich would wake up, too, and grab the big knife off the table. ‘What is it, what is it?’ he would ask me. But I could not tell him.

It was safer to sleep in the daylight, outside, smelling grass and earth. The dreams of stone walls did not come then. Instead, a woman came, to press herself sweetly against me. Her scent was the same as the meadow flowers, and her mouth tasted of honey. The pain of those dreams came when I awoke, and knew she was gone forever, taken by another. At night I sat and looked at the fire. I tried not to think of cold stone walls, nor of dark eyes weeping and a sweet mouth gone heavy with bitter words. I did not sleep. I dared not even lie down. Burrich did not make me.

Chade came back one day. He had grown his beard long and he wore a wide-brimmed hat like a pedlar, but I knew him all the same. Burrich wasn't at home when he arrived, but I let him in. I did not know why he had come. 'Do you want some brandy?' I asked, thinking perhaps that was why he had come. He looked closely at me and almost smiled.

'Fitz?' he said. He turned his head sideways to look into my face. 'So. How have you been?'

I didn't know the answer to that question, so I just looked at him. After a time, he put the kettle on. He took things out of his pack. He had brought spice tea, some cheese and smoked fish. He took out packets of herbs as well and set them out in a row on the table. Then he took out a leather pouch. Inside it was a fat yellow crystal, large enough to fill his hand. In the bottom of the pack was a large shallow bowl, glazed blue inside. He had set it on the table and filled it with clean water when Burrich returned. Burrich had gone fishing. He had a string with six small fish on it. They were creek fish, not ocean fish. They were slippery and shiny. He had already taken all the guts out.

'You leave him alone now?' Chade asked Burrich after they had greeted one another.

'I have to, to get food.'

'So you trust him now?'

Burrich looked aside from Chade. 'I've trained a lot of animals. Teaching one to do what you tell it is not the same as trusting a man.'

Burrich cooked the fish in a pan and then we ate. We had the cheese and the tea also. Then, while I was cleaning the pans and dishes, they sat down to talk.

'I want to try the herbs,' Chade said to Burrich. 'Or the water, or the crystal. Something. Anything. I begin to think that he's not really ... in there.'

'He is,' Burrich asserted quietly. 'Give him time. I don't think the herbs are a good idea for him. Before he ... changed, he was getting too fond of herbs. Toward the end, he was always either ill, or charged full of energy. If he was not in the depths of sorrow, he was exhausted from fighting or from being King's Man to Verity or Shrewd. Then he'd be into the elfbark instead of resting. He'd forgotten how to just rest and let his body recover. He'd never wait for it. That last night ... you gave him carris seed, didn't you? Foxglove said she'd never seen anything like it. I think more folk might have

come to his aid, if they hadn't been so frightened of him. Poor old Blade thought he had gone stark raving mad. He never forgave himself for taking him down. I wish he could know the boy hadn't actually died.'

'There was no time to pick and choose. I gave him what I had to hand. I didn't know he'd go mad on carris seed.'

'You could have refused him,' Burrich said quietly.

'It wouldn't have stopped him. He'd have gone as he was, exhausted, and been killed right there.'

I went and sat down on the hearth. Burrich was not watching me. I lay down, then rolled over on my back and stretched. It felt good. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth of the fire on my flank.

'Get up and sit on the stool, Fitz,' Burrich said.

I sighed, but I obeyed. Chade did not look at me. Burrich resumed talking.

'I'd like to keep him on an even keel. I think he just needs time, to do it on his own. He remembers. Sometimes. And then he fights it off. I don't think he wants to remember, Chade. I don't think he really wants to go back to being FitzChivalry. Maybe he liked being a wolf. Maybe he liked it so much he's never coming back.'

'He has to come back,' Chade said quietly. 'We need him.'

Burrich sat up. He'd had his feet up on the wood pile, but now he set them on the floor. He leaned toward Chade. 'You've had word?'

'Not I. But Patience has, I think. It's very frustrating, sometimes, to be the rat behind the wall.'

'So what did you hear?'

'Only Patience and Lacey, talking about wool.'

'Why is that important?'

'They wanted wool to weave a very soft cloth. For a baby, or a small child. "It will be born at the end of our harvest, but that's the beginning of winter in the Mountains. So let us make it thick," Patience said. Perhaps for Kettricken's child.'

Burrich looked startled. 'Patience knows about Kettricken?'

Chade laughed. 'I don't know. Who knows what that woman knows? She has changed much of late. She gathers the Buckkeep guard into the palm of her hand, and Lord Bright does not even see it happening. I think now that we should have let her know our plan, included her from the beginning. But perhaps not.'

‘It might have been easier for me if we had.’ Burrich stared deep into the fire.

Chade shook his head. ‘I am sorry. She had to believe you had abandoned Fitz, rejected him for his use of the Wit. If you had gone after his body, Regal might have been suspicious. We had to make Regal believe she was the only one who cared enough to bury him.’

‘She hates me now. She told me I had no loyalty, nor courage.’ Burrich looked at his hands and his voice tightened. ‘I knew she had stopped loving me years ago. When she gave her heart to Chivalry. I could accept that. He was a man worthy of her. And I had walked away from her first. So I could live with her not loving me, because I felt she still respected me as a man. But now, she despises me. I ...’ He shook his head, then closed his eyes tightly. For a moment all was still. Then Burrich straightened himself slowly and turned to Chade. His voice was calm as he asked, ‘So, you think Patience knows that Kettricken fled to the Mountains?’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me. There has been no official word, of course. Regal has sent messages to King Eyod, demanding to know if Kettricken fled there, but Eyod replied only that she was the Six Duchies Queen and what she did was not a Mountain concern. Regal was angered enough by that to cut off trade to the Mountains. But Patience seems to know much of what goes on outside the keep. Perhaps she knows what is happening in the Mountain Kingdom. For my part, I should dearly love to know how she intends to send the blanket to the Mountains. It’s a long and weary way.’

For a long time, Burrich was silent. Then he said, ‘I should have found a way to go with Kettricken and the Fool. But there were only the two horses, and only supplies enough for two. I hadn’t been able to get more than that. And so they went alone.’ He glared into the fire, then asked, ‘I don’t suppose anyone has heard anything of King-in-Waiting Verity?’

Chade shook his head slowly. ‘King Verity,’ he reminded Burrich softly. ‘If he were here.’ He looked far away. ‘If he were coming back, I think he’d be here by now,’ he said quietly. ‘A few more soft days like this, and there will be Red Ship Raiders in every bay. I no longer believe Verity is coming back.’

‘Then Regal truly is King,’ Burrich said sourly. ‘At least until Kettricken’s child is born and comes of age. And then we can look forward to a civil war if the child tries to claim the crown. If there is still a Six Duchies left to be ruled. Verity. I wish now that he had not gone questing for

the Elderlings. At least while he was alive, we had some protection from the Raiders. Now, with Verity gone and spring getting stronger, nothing stands between us and the Red Ships ...'

Verity. I shivered with the cold. I pushed the cold away. It came back and I pushed it all away. I held it away. After a moment, I took a deep breath.

'Just the water, then?' Chade asked Burrich, and I knew they had been talking but I had not been hearing.

Burrich shrugged. 'Go ahead. What can it hurt? Did he use to scry things in water?'

'I never tried him. I always suspected he could if he tried. He has the Wit and the Skill. Why shouldn't he be able to scry as well?'

'Just because a man can do a thing does not mean he should do a thing.'

For a time, they looked at one another. Then Chade shrugged. 'Perhaps my trade does not allow me so many niceties of conscience as yours,' he suggested in a stiff voice.

After a moment, Burrich said gruffly, 'Your pardon, sir. We all served our king as our abilities dictated.'

Chade nodded to that. Then he smiled.

Chade cleared the table of everything but the dish of water and some candles. 'Come here,' he said to me softly, so I went back to the table. He sat me in his chair and put the dish in front of me. 'Look in the water,' he told me. 'Tell me what you see.'

I saw the water in the bowl. I saw the blue in the bottom of the bowl. Neither answer made him happy. He kept telling me to look again but I kept seeing the same things. He moved the candle several times, each time telling me to look again. Finally he said to Burrich, 'Well, at least he answers when you speak to him now.'

Burrich nodded, but he looked discouraged. 'Yes. Perhaps with time,' he said.

I knew they were finished with me then, and I relaxed.

Chade asked if he could stay the night with us. Burrich said of course. Then he went and fetched the brandy. He poured two cups. Chade drew my stool to the table and sat again. I sat and waited, but they began talking to one another again.

'What about me?' I asked at last.

They stopped talking and looked at me. ‘What about you?’ Burrich asked.

‘Don’t I get any brandy?’

They looked at me. Burrich asked carefully, ‘Do you want some? I didn’t think you liked it.’

‘No, I don’t like it. I never liked it.’ I thought for a moment. ‘But it was cheap.’

Burrich stared at me. Chade smiled a small smile, looking down at his hands. Then Burrich got another cup and poured some for me. For a time they sat watching me, but I didn’t do anything. Eventually they began talking again. I took a sip of the brandy. It still stung my mouth and nose, but it made a warmth inside me. I knew I didn’t want any more. Then I thought I did. I drank some more. It was just as unpleasant. Like something Patience would force on me for a cough. No. I pushed that memory aside as well. I set the cup down.

Burrich did not look at me. He went on talking to Chade. ‘When you hunt a deer, you can often get much closer to it simply by pretending not to see it. They will hold position and watch you approach and not stir a hoof as long as you do not look directly at them.’ He picked up the bottle and poured more brandy in my cup. I snorted at the rising scent of it. I thought I felt something stirring. A thought in my mind. I reached for my wolf.

Nighteyes?

My brother? I sleep, Changer. It is not yet a good time to hunt.

Burrich glared at me. I stopped.

I knew I did not want more brandy. But someone else thought that I did. Someone else urged me to pick up the cup, just to hold it. I swirled it in the cup. Verity used to swirl his wine in the cup and look into it. I looked into the dark cup.

Fitz.

I set the cup down. I got up and walked around the room. I wanted to go out, but Burrich never let me go out alone, and not at all at night. So I walked around the room until I came back to my chair. I sat down in it again. The cup of brandy was still there. After a time I picked it up, just to make the feeling of wanting to pick it up go away. But once I held it in my hand, he changed it. He made me think about drinking it. How warm it felt in my belly. Just drink it quick, and the taste wouldn’t last long, just the warm, good feeling in my belly.

I knew what he was doing. I was beginning to get angry.

Just another small sip then. Soothingly. Whispery. Just to help you relax, Fitz. The fire is so warm, you've had food. Burrich will protect you. Chade is right there. You needn't be on guard so much. Just another sip. One more sip.

No.

A tiny sip, then, just getting your mouth wet.

I took another sip to make him stop making me want to. But he didn't stop, so I took another. I took a mouthful and swallowed it. It was getting harder and harder to resist. He was wearing me down. And Burrich kept putting more in my cup.

Fitz. Say, 'Verity's alive'. That's all. Say just that.

No.

Doesn't the brandy feel nice in your belly? So warm. Take a little more.

'I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to get me drunk. So I can't keep you out. I won't let you.' My face was wet.

Burrich and Chade were both looking at me. 'He was never a crying drunk before,' Burrich observed. 'At least, not around me.' They seemed to find that interesting.

Say it. Say, 'Verity's alive'. Then I'll let you go. I promise. Just say it. Just once. Even as a whisper. Say it. Say it.

I looked down at the table. Very softly, I said, 'Verity's alive.'

'Oh?' said Burrich. He was too casual. He leaned too quickly to tip more brandy into my cup. The bottle was empty. He gave to me from his own cup.

Suddenly I wanted it. I wanted it for myself. I picked it up and drank it all off. Then I stood up. 'Verity's alive,' I said. 'He's cold, but he's alive. And that's all I have to say.' I went to the door and worked the latch and went out into the night. They didn't try to stop me.

Burrich was right. All of it was there, like a song one has heard too often and cannot get out of one's mind. It ran behind all my thoughts and coloured all my dreams. It came pushing back at me and gave me no peace. Spring ventured into summer. Old memories began to overlay my new ones. My lives began stitching themselves together. There were gaps and puckers in the joining, but it was getting harder and harder to refuse to know things. Names took on meanings and faces again. Patience, Lacey, Celerity, and

Sooty were no longer simple words but rang as rich as chiming bells with memories and emotions. ‘Molly,’ I finally said out loud to myself one day. Burrich looked up at me suddenly when I spoke that word, and nearly lost his grip on the fine plaited gut snare line he was making. I heard him catch his breath as if he would speak to me, but instead he kept silent, waiting for me to say more. I did not. Instead I closed my eyes and lowered my face into my hands and longed for oblivion.

I spent a lot of time standing at the window looking out over the meadow. There was nothing to see there. But Burrich did not stop me or make me go back to my chores as he once would have. One day, as I looked over the rich grass, I asked Burrich, ‘What are we going to do when the shepherds get here? Where will we go to live then?’

‘Think about it.’ He had pegged a rabbit hide to the floor and was scraping it clean of flesh and fat. ‘They won’t be coming. There are no flocks to bring up to summer pasture. Most of the good stock went inland with Regal. He plundered Buckkeep of everything he could cart or drive off. I’m willing to bet that any sheep he left in Buckkeep turned into mutton over the winter.’

‘Probably,’ I agreed. And then something pressed into my mind, something more terrible than all the things I knew and did not want to remember. It was all the things I did not know, all the questions that had been left unanswered. I went out to walk on the meadow. I went past the meadow, to the edge of the stream, and then down it, to the boggy part where the cattails grew. I gathered the green cattail spikes to cook with the porridge. Once more, I knew all the names of the plants. I did not want to, but I knew which ones would kill a man, and how to prepare them. All the old knowledge was there, waiting to reclaim me whether I would or no.

When I came back in with the spikes, he was cooking the grain. I set them on the table and got a pot of water from the barrel. As I rinsed them off and picked them over, I finally asked, ‘What happened? That night?’

He turned very slowly to look at me, as if I were game that might be spooked off by sudden movement. ‘That night?’

‘The night King Shrewd and Kettricken were to escape. Why didn’t you have the scrub horses and the litter waiting?’

‘Oh. That night.’ He sighed out as if recalling old pain. He spoke very slowly and calmly, as if fearing to startle me. ‘They were watching us, Fitz. All the time. Regal knew everything. I couldn’t have smuggled an oat out of

the stable that day, let alone three horses, a litter and a mule. There were Farrow guards everywhere, trying to look as if they had just come down to inspect the empty stalls. I dared not go to you to tell you. So, in the end, I waited until the feasting had begun, until Regal had crowned himself and thought he had won. Then I slipped out and went for the only two horses I could get. Sooty and Ruddy. I'd hidden them at the smith's, to make sure Regal couldn't sell them off as well. The only food I could get was what I could pilfer from the guard-room. It was the only thing I could think to do.'

'And Queen Kettricken and the Fool got away on them.' The names fell strangely off my tongue. I did not want to think of them, to recall them at all. When I had last seen the Fool, he had been weeping and accusing me of killing his king. I had insisted he flee in the King's place, to save his life. It was not the best parting memory to carry of one I had called my friend.

'Yes.' Burrich brought the pot of porridge to the table and set it there to thicken. 'Chade and the wolf guided them to me. I wanted to go with them, but I couldn't. I'd only have slowed them down. My leg ... I knew I couldn't keep up with the horses for long, and riding double in that weather would have exhausted the horses. I had to just let them go.' A silence. Then he growled, lower than a wolf's growl, 'If ever I found out who betrayed us to Regal ...'

'I did.'

His eyes locked on mine, a look of horror and incredulity on his face. I looked at my hands. They were starting to tremble.

'I was stupid. It was my fault. The Queen's little maid, Rosemary. Always about, always underfoot. She must have been Regal's spy. She heard me tell the Queen to be ready, that King Shrewd would be going with her. She heard me tell Kettricken to dress warmly. Regal would have to guess from that that she would be fleeing Buckkeep. He'd know she'd need horses. And perhaps she did more than spy. Perhaps she took a basket of poisoned treats to an old woman. Perhaps she greased a stair-tread she knew her Queen would soon descend.'

I forced myself to look up from the spikes, to meet Burrich's stricken gaze. 'And what Rosemary did not overhear, Justin and Serene did. They were leeches onto the King, sucking Skill-strength out of him, and privy to every thought he Skilled to Verity, or had from him. Once they knew what I was doing, serving as King's Man, they began to Skill-spy on me as well. I did not know such a thing could be done. But Galen had discovered how,

and taught it to his students. You remember Will, Hostler's son? The coterie member? He was the best at it. He could make you believe he wasn't even there when he was.'

I shook my head, tried to rattle from it my terrifying memories of Will. He brought back the shadows of the dungeon, the things I still refused to recall. I wondered if I had killed him. I didn't think so. I didn't think I'd got enough poison into him. I looked up to find Burrich watching me intently.

'That night, at the very last moment, the King refused to go,' I told him quietly. 'I had thought of Regal as a traitor so long, I had forgotten that Shrewd would still see him as a son. What Regal did, taking Verity's crown when he knew his brother was alive ... King Shrewd didn't want to go on living, knowing Regal was capable of that. He asked me to be King's Man, to lend him the strength to Skill a farewell to Verity. But Serene and Justin were waiting.' I paused, new pieces of the puzzle falling into place. 'I should have known it was too easy. No guards on the King. Why? Because Regal didn't need them. Because Serene and Justin were leeches onto him. Regal was finished with his father. He had crowned himself King-in-Waiting; there was no more good to be had out of Shrewd for him. So they drained King Shrewd dry of Skill-strength. They killed him. Before he could even bid Verity farewell. Probably Regal had told them to be sure he did not Skill to Verity again. So then I killed Serene and Justin. I killed them the same way they had killed my king. Without a chance of fighting back, without a moment of mercy.'

'Easy. Easy now.' Burrich crossed swiftly to me, put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me down in a chair. 'You're shaking as if you're going into a seizure. Calm yourself.'

I could not speak.

'This is what Chade and I could not puzzle out,' Burrich told me. 'Who had betrayed our plan? We thought of everyone. Even the Fool. For a time we feared we had sent Kettricken off in the care of a traitor.'

'How could you think that? The Fool loved King Shrewd as no one else did.'

'We could think of no one else who knew all our plans,' Burrich said simply.

'It was not the Fool who was our downfall. It was I.' And that, I think, was the moment when I came fully back to myself. I had said the most unsayable thing, faced my most unfaceable truth. I had betrayed them all.

‘The Fool warned me. He said I would be the death of kings, if I did not learn to leave things alone. Chade warned me. He tried to make me promise I would set no more wheels in motion. But I would not. So my actions killed my king. If I had not been helping him to Skill, he would not have been so open to his killers. I opened him up, reaching for Verity. But those two leeches came in instead. The King’s assassin. Oh, in so many, many ways, Shrewd. I am so sorry, my king. So sorry. But for me, Regal would have had no reason to kill you.’

‘Fitz.’ Burrich’s voice was firm. ‘Regal never needed a reason to kill his father. He needed only to run out of reasons to keep him alive. And you had no control over that.’ A sudden frown creased his brow. ‘Why did they kill him, right then? Why did they not wait until they had the Queen as well?’

I smiled at him. ‘You saved her. Regal thought he had the Queen. They thought they’d stopped us when they kept you from getting horses out of the stables. Regal even bragged of it to me, when I was in my cell. That she’d had to leave with no horses. And with no warm winter things.’

Burrich grinned hard. ‘She and the Fool took what had been packed for Shrewd. And they left on two of the best horses ever to come out of Buckkeep’s stables. I’ll wager they got to the Mountains safely, boy. Sooty and Rud are probably grazing in Mountain pastures now.’

It was too thin a comfort. That night I went out and ran with the wolf, and Burrich made no rebuke to me. But we could not run far enough, nor fast enough, and the blood we shed that night was not the blood I wished to see run, nor could the hot fresh meat fill the void inside me.

So I remembered my life and who I had been. As the days passed, Burrich and I began to speak openly, as friends again. He gave over his dominance of me, but not without mockingly expressing his regrets for that. We recalled our old ways with one another, old ways of laughing together, old ways of disagreeing. But as things steadied between us and became normal, we were both reminded, all the more sharply, of all we no longer had.

There was not enough work in a day to busy Burrich. This was a man who had had full authority over all of Buckkeep’s stables and the horses, hounds and hawks that inhabited them. I watched him invent tasks to fill the hours, and knew how much he pined for the beasts he had overseen for so

long. I missed the bustle and folk of court, but hungered most keenly for Molly. I invented conversations I would have had with her, gathered meadowsweet and daysedge flowers because they smelled like her, and lay down at night recalling the touch of her hand on my face. But these were not the things we spoke of. Instead, we put our pieces together to make a whole, of sorts. Burrich fished and I hunted, there were hides to scrape, shirts to wash and mend, water to haul. It was a life. He tried to speak to me, once, of how he had come to see me in the dungeon, to bring me the poison. His hands worked with small twitching motions as he spoke of how he had had to walk away, to leave me inside that cell. I could not let him go on. 'Let's go fishing,' I suddenly proposed. He took a deep breath and nodded. We went fishing and spoke no more that day.

But I had been caged, and starved, and beaten to death. From time to time, when he looked at me, I knew he saw the scars. I shaved around the seam down my cheek, and watched the hair grow in white above my brow where my scalp had been split. We never spoke about it. I refused to think about it. But no man could have come through that unchanged.

I began to dream at night. Short vivid dreams, frozen moments of fire, searing pain, hopeless fear. I awoke, cold sweat sleeking my hair, queasy with fear. Nothing remained of those dreams when I sat up in darkness, not the tiniest thread by which I could unravel them. Only the pain, the fear, the anger, the frustration. But above all, the fear. The overwhelming fear that left me shaking and gulping for air, my eyes tearing, sour bile up the back of my throat.

The first time it happened, the first time I sat bolt upright with a wordless cry, Burrich rolled from his bed and put his hand on my shoulder, to ask if I was all right. I shoved him away from me so savagely he crashed into the table and nearly upset it. Fear and anger crested into an instant of fury when I would have killed him simply because he was where I could reach him. At that moment I rejected and despised myself so completely that I desired only to destroy everything that was me, or bordered on myself. I *repelled* savagely at the entire world, almost displacing my own consciousness. *Brother, brother, brother*, Nighteyes yelped desperately within me, and Burrich staggered back with an inarticulate cry. After a moment I could swallow and mutter to Burrich, 'A nightmare, that was all. Sorry. I was still dreaming, just a nightmare.'

‘I understand,’ he said brusquely, and then, more thoughtfully, ‘I understand.’ He went back to his bed. But I knew what he understood was that he could not help me with this, and that was all.

The nightmares did not come every night, but often enough to leave me dreading my bed. Burrich pretended to sleep through them, but I was aware of him lying awake as I fought my night battles alone. I had no recollection of the dreams, only the wrenching terror they brought me. I had felt fear before. Often. Fear when I had fought Forged ones, fear when we had battled Red Ship warriors, fear when I had confronted Serene. Fear that warned, that spurred, that gave one the edge to stay alive. But the night fear was an unmanning terror, a hope that death would come and end it, because I was broken and knew I would give them anything rather than face more pain.

There is no answer to a fear like that or the shame that comes after it. I tried anger, I tried hatred. Neither tears nor brandy could drown it. It permeated me like an evil smell and coloured every remembrance I had, shading my perception of who I had been. No moment of joy, or passion, or courage that I could recall was ever quite what it had been, for my mind always traitorously added, ‘yes, you had that, for a time, but after came this, and this is what you are now’. That debilitating fear was a cowering presence inside me. I knew, with a sick certainty, that if I were pressed I would become it. I was no longer FitzChivalry. I was what was left after fear had driven him from his body.

On the second day after Burrich had run out of brandy, I told him, ‘I’ll be fine here if you want to go into Buckkeep Town.’

‘We’ve no money to buy more supplies, and nothing left to sell off.’ He said it flatly, as if it were my fault. He was sitting by the fire. He folded his two hands together and clasped them between his knees. They had been shaking, just a little. ‘We’re going to have to manage on our own now. There’s game in plenty to be had. If we can’t feed ourselves up here, we deserve to starve.’

‘Are you going to be all right?’ I asked flatly.

He looked at me through narrowed eyes. ‘Meaning what?’ he asked.

‘Meaning there’s no more brandy,’ I said as bluntly.

‘And you think I can’t get by without it?’ His temper was rising already. It had become increasingly short since the brandy ran out.

I gave a very small shrug. 'I was asking. That's all.' I sat very still, not looking at him, hoping he wouldn't explode.

After a pause, he said, very quietly, 'Well, I suppose that's something we'll both have to find out.'

I let a long time pass. Finally I asked, 'What are we going to do?'

He looked at me with annoyance. 'I told you. Hunt to feed ourselves. That's something you should be able to grasp.'

I looked away from him, gave a bobbing nod. 'I understood. I mean ... past that. Past tomorrow.'

'Well. We'll hunt for our meat. We can get by for a bit that way. But sooner or later, we'll want what we can't get nor make for ourselves. Some Chade will get for us, if he can. Buckkeep is as picked over as bare bones now. I'll have to go to Buckkeep Town, for a while, and hire out if I can. But for now ...'

'No,' I said quietly. 'I meant ... we can't always hide up here, Burrich. What comes after that?'

It was his turn to be quiet a while. 'I suppose I hadn't given it much thought. At first it was just a place to take you while you recovered. Then, for a time, it seemed as if you'd never ...'

'But I'm here, now.' I hesitated. 'Patience,' I began.

'Believes you dead,' Burrich cut in, perhaps more harshly than he'd intended. 'Chade and I are the only ones who know different. Before we pulled you from that coffin, we weren't sure. Had the dose been too strong, would you be really dead from it, or frozen from your days in the earth? I'd seen what they'd done to you.' He stopped, and for a moment stared at me. He looked haunted. He gave his head a tiny shake. 'I didn't think you could live through that, let alone the poison. So we offered no hope to anyone. And then, when we had you out ...' He shook his head, more violently. 'At first, you were so battered. What they'd done to you – there was just so much damage ... I don't know what possessed Patience to clean and bind a dead man's wounds, but if she hadn't ... Then later ... it was not you. After those first few weeks, I was sickened at what we had done. Put a wolf's soul in a man's body, it seemed to me.'

He looked at me again, his face going incredulous at the memory. 'You went for my throat. The first day you could stand on your own, you wanted to run away. I wouldn't let you and you went for my throat. I could not show Patience that snarling, snapping creature, let alone ...'

‘Do you think Molly ... ?’ I began.

Burrich looked away from me. ‘Probably she heard you died.’ After a time, he added, uncomfortably, ‘Someone had burned a candle on your grave. The snow had been pushed away, and the wax stump was there still when I came to dig you up.’

‘Like a dog after a bone.’

‘I was fearful you would not understand it.’

‘I did not. I just took Nighteyes’ word for it.’

It was as much as I could handle, just then. I tried to let the conversation die. But Burrich was relentless. ‘If you went back to Buckkeep, or Buckkeep Town, they would kill you. They’d hang you over water and burn your body. Or dismember it. But folk would be sure you stayed dead this time.’

‘Did they hate me so?’

‘Hate you? No. They liked you well enough, those that knew you. But if you came back, a man who had died and been buried, again walking among them, they’d fear you. It’s not a thing you could explain away as a trick. The Wit is not a magic that is well thought of. When a man is accused of it and then dies and is buried, well, in order for them to remember you fondly, you’d have to stay dead. If they saw you walking about, they’d take it as proof that Regal was right; that you were practising Beast magic, and used it to kill the King. They’d have to kill you again. More thoroughly the second time.’ Burrich stood suddenly, and paced the room twice. ‘Damn me, but I could use a drink,’ he said.

‘Me, too,’ I said quietly.

Ten days later, Chade came up the path. The old assassin walked slowly, with a staff, and he carried his pack up high on his shoulders. The day was warm, and he had thrown back the hood of his cloak. His long grey hair blew in the wind and he had let his beard grow to cover more of his face. At first glance, he looked to be an itinerant tinker. A scarred old man, perhaps, but no longer the Pocked Man. Wind and sun had weathered his face. Burrich had gone fishing, a thing he preferred to do alone. Nighteyes had come to sun himself on our doorstep in Burrich’s absence, but had melted back into the woods behind the hut at the first waft of Chade’s scent on the air. I stood alone.

For a time I watched him come. The winter had aged him, in the lines of his face and the grey of his hair. But he walked more strongly than I remembered, as if privation had toughened him. At last I went to meet him, feeling strangely shy and embarrassed. When he looked up and saw me, he halted and stood in the trail. I continued toward him. 'Boy?' he asked cautiously when I was near. I managed a nod and a smile. The answering smile that broke forth on his face humbled me. He dropped his staff to hug me, and then pressed his cheek to mine as if I were a child. 'Oh, Fitz, Fitz, my boy,' he said in a voice full of relief. 'I thought we had lost you. I thought we'd done something worse than let you die.' His old arms were tight and strong about me.

I was kind to the old man. I did not tell him that they had.

TWO

The Parting

After crowning himself King of the Six Duchies, Prince Regal Farseer essentially abandoned the Coastal Duchies to their own devices. He had stripped Buckkeep itself and a good part of Buck Duchy of as much coin as he could wring from it. From Buckkeep, horses and stock had been sold off, with the very best taken inland to Regal's new residence at Tradeford. The furnishings and library of the traditional royal seat had been plundered as well, some to feather the new nest, some divvied out to his Inland dukes and nobles as favours or sold outright to them. Grain warehouses, winecellars, the armouries, all had been plundered and the loot carried off inland.

His announced plan had been to move the ailing King Shrewd, and the widowed and pregnant Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken inland to Tradeford, that they might be safer from the Red Ship raids that plagued the Coastal Duchies. This, too, was the excuse for the looting of furnishings and valuables from Buckkeep. But with the death of Shrewd and the disappearance of Kettricken, even this flimsy reason vanished. Nonetheless he left Buckkeep as soon after his coronation as he could. The tale has been told that when his Council of Nobles questioned his decision, he told them that the Coastal Duchies represented only war and expense to him, that they had always been a leech upon the resources of the Inland Duchies and he wished the Outislanders the joy of taking such a rocky and cheerless place. Regal was later to deny having ever uttered such words.

When Kettricken vanished, King Regal was left in a position for which there was no historical precedent. The child Kettricken carried had obviously been next in line for the crown. But both Queen and unborn child had vanished, under very suspicious circumstances. Not all were certain that Regal himself had not engineered it. Even if the Queen had remained at Buckkeep, the child could not assume even the title of King-in-Waiting for at least seventeen years. Regal became very anxious to assume the title of King as swiftly as possible, but by law he needed the recognition of all Six Duchies to claim it. He bought the crown with a number of concessions to his Coastal Dukes. The major one was Regal's promise that Buckkeep would remain manned and ready to defend the coast.

The command of the ancient keep was foisted off on his eldest nephew, heir to the title Duke of Farrow. Lord Bright, at twenty-five, had grown restless waiting for his father to pass power to him. He was more than willing to assume authority over Buckkeep and Buck, but had little experience to draw on. Regal took himself inland to Tradeford Castle on the Vin River in Farrow, while young Lord Bright remained at Buckkeep with a picked guard of Farrow men. It is not reported that Regal left him any funds to operate from, so the young man endeavoured to wring what he needed from the merchants of Buckkeep Town, and the already embattled farmers and shepherds of surrounding Buck Duchy. While there is no indication that he felt any malice toward the folk of Buck or the other Coastal Duchies, neither did he have any loyalty toward them.

Also in residence at Buckkeep at this time were a handful of minor Buck nobility. Most landholders of Buck were at their own lesser keeps, doing what little they could to protect their local folk. The most notable to remain at Buckkeep was Lady Patience, she who had been Queen-in-Waiting until her husband Prince Chivalry abdicated the throne to his younger brother Verity. Manning Buckkeep were the Buck soldiers, as well as Queen Kettricken's personal guard, and the few men who remained of King Shrewd's guard. Morale was poor among the soldiers, for wages were intermittent and the rations poor. Lord Bright had brought his own personal guard with him to Buckkeep, and obviously preferred them to the Buck men. The situation was further complicated by a muddled chain of command. Ostensibly the Buck troops were to report to Captain Keffel of the Farrow men, the commander of Lord Bright's guard. In reality, Foxglove of the Queen's Guard, Kerf of the Buckkeep Guard, and old Red of King Shrewd's guard banded together and kept their own counsels. If they reported regularly to anyone, it was Lady Patience. In time the Buck soldiers came to speak of her as the Lady of Buckkeep.

Even after his coronation, Regal remained jealous of his title. He sent messengers far and wide, seeking word of where Queen Kettricken and the unborn heir might be. His suspicions that she might have sought shelter with her father, King Eyod of the Mountain Kingdom, led him to demand her return of him. When Eyod replied that the whereabouts of the Queen of the Six Duchies was no concern for the Mountain folk, Regal angrily severed ties with the Mountain Kingdom, cutting off trade and attempting to block even common travellers from crossing the boundaries. At the same time,

rumours that almost certainly began at Regal's behest began to circulate that the child Kettricken carried was not of Verity's getting and hence had no legitimate claim to the Six Duchies throne.

It was a bitter time for the small folk of Buck. Abandoned by their king and defended only by a small force of poorly-provisioned soldiers, the common folk were left rudderless on a stormy sea. What the Raiders did not steal or destroy, Lord Bright's men seized for taxes. The roads became plagued with robbers, for when an honest man cannot make a living, folk will do what they must. Small crofters gave up any hope of making a living and fled the coast, to become beggars, thieves and whores in the inland cities. Trade died, for ships sent out seldom came back at all.

Chade and I sat on the bench in front of the hut and talked. We did not speak of portentous things, nor the significant events of the past. We did not discuss my return from the grave or the current political situation. Instead, he spoke of our small shared things as if I had been gone on a long journey. Slink the weasel was getting old; the past winter had stiffened him, and even the coming of spring had not enlivened him. Chade feared he would not last another year. Chade had finally managed to dry pennant plant leaves without them mildewing, but had found the dried herb to have little potency. We both missed Cook Sara's pastries. Chade asked if there was anything from my room that I wanted. Regal had had it searched, and had left it in disarray, but he did not think much had been taken, nor would be missed if I chose to have it now. I asked him if he recalled the tapestry of King Wisdom treating with the Elderlings. He replied that he did, but that it was far too bulky for him to drag up here. I gave him such a stricken look that he immediately relented and said he supposed he could find a way.

I grinned. 'It was a joke, Chade. That thing has never done anything save give me nightmares when I was small. No. There's nothing in my room that's important to me now.'

Chade looked at me, almost sadly. 'You leave behind a life, with what, the clothes on your back and an earring? And you say there's nothing there you'd wish brought to you. Does that not strike you as strange?'

I sat thinking for a moment. The sword Verity had given me. The silver ring King Eyod had given me, that had been Rurisk's. A pin from Lady Grace. Patience's sea-pipes had been in my room – I hoped she had got them back. My paints and papers. A little box I had carved to hold my poisons.

Between Molly and me there had never been any tokens. She would never allow me to give her any gifts, and I had never thought to steal a ribbon from her hair. If I had ...

‘No. A clean break is best, perhaps. Though you’ve forgotten one item.’ I turned the collar of my rough shirt to show him the tiny ruby nestled in silver. ‘The stickpin Shrewd gave me, to mark me as his. I still have that.’ Patience had used it to secure the gravecloth that had wrapped me. I set aside that thought.

‘I’m still surprised that Regal’s guard didn’t rob your body. I suppose the Wit has such an evil reputation they feared you dead as well as alive.’

I reached to finger the bridge of my nose where it had been broken. ‘They did not seem to fear me much at all, that I could tell.’

Chade smiled crookedly at me. ‘The nose bothers you, does it? I think it gives your face more character.’

I squinted at him in the sunlight. ‘Really?’

‘No. But it’s the polite thing to say. It’s not so bad, really. It almost looks as if someone tried to set it.’

I shuddered at the jagged tip of a memory. ‘I don’t want to think about it,’ I told him honestly.

Pain for me clouded his face suddenly. I looked away from it, unable to bear his pity. The recollections of the beatings I had endured were more bearable if I could pretend that no one else had known of them. I felt shamed at what Regal had done to me. I leaned my head back against the sun-soaked wood of the cabin wall and took a long breath. ‘So. What is happening down there where people are still alive?’

Chade cleared his throat, accepting the change in topic. ‘Well. How much do you know?’

‘Not much. That Kettricken and the Fool got away. That Patience may have heard Kettricken got safely to the Mountains. That Regal is angry with King Eyod of the Mountains and has cut his trade routes. That Verity is still alive, but no one has heard from him.’

‘Whoa! Whoa!’ Chade sat up very straight. ‘The rumour about Kettricken ... you remember that from the night Burrich and I discussed it.’

I looked aside from him. ‘In the way that you might remember a dream you once had. In underwater colours, and the events out of order. Only that I heard you say something about it.’

‘And that about Verity?’ The sudden tension in him put a chill of dread down my spine.

‘He Skilled to me that night,’ I said quietly. ‘I told you then that he was alive.’

‘DAMN!’ Chade leaped to his feet and hopped about in rage. It was a performance I had never witnessed before and I stared at him, caught between amazement and fear. ‘Burrich and I gave your words no credence! Oh, we were pleased to hear you utter them, and when you ran off, he said, “Let the boy go, that’s as much as he can do tonight, he remembers his prince”. That’s all we thought it was. Damn and damn!’ He halted suddenly and pointed a finger at me. ‘Report. Tell me everything.’

I fumbled after what I recalled. It was as difficult to sort it out as if I had seen it through the wolf’s eyes. ‘He was cold. But alive. Either tired or hurt. Slowed, somehow. He was trying to get through and I was pushing him away so he kept suggesting I drink. To get my walls down, I suppose ...’

‘Where was he?’

‘I don’t know. Snow. A forest.’ I groped after ghostly memories. ‘I don’t think he knew where he was.’

Chade’s green eyes bored into me. ‘Can you reach him at all, feel him at all? Can you tell me he still lives?’

I shook my head. My heart was starting to pound in my chest.

‘Can you Skill to him now?’

I shook my head. Tension tightened my belly.

Chade’s frustration grew with every shake of my head. ‘Damn it, Fitz, you must!’

‘I don’t want to!’ I cried out suddenly. I was on my feet.

Run away! Run away fast!

I did. It was suddenly that simple. I fled Chade and the hut as if all the devils of the Outislander hell-islands were after me. Chade called after me but I refused to hear his words. I ran, and as soon as I was in the shelter of the trees, Nighteyes was beside me.

Not that way, Heart of the Pack is that way, he warned me. So we bolted uphill, away from the creek, up to a big tangle of brambles that overhung a bank where Nighteyes sheltered on stormy nights. *What was it? What was the danger?* Nighteyes demanded.

He wanted me to go back, I admitted after a time. I tried to frame it in a way that Nighteyes would understand. *He wanted me to ... be not a wolf any*

more.

A sudden chill went up my back. In explaining to Nighteyes, I had brought myself face to face with the truth. The choice was simple. Be a wolf, with no past, no future, only today. Or a man, twisted by his past, whose heart pumped fear with his blood. I could walk on two legs, and know shame and cowering as a way of life. Or run on four, and forget until even Molly was just a pleasant scent I recalled. I sat still beneath the brambles, my hand resting lightly on Nighteyes' back, my eyes staring into a place only I could see. Slowly the light changed and evening deepened to dusk. My decision grew as slowly and inevitably as the creeping dark. My heart cried out against it, but the alternatives were unbearable. I steeled my will to it.

It was dark when I went back. I crept home with my tail between my legs. It was strange to come back to the cabin as a wolf again, to smell the rising wood smoke as a man's thing, and to blink at the fire's glow through the shutters. Reluctantly I peeled my mind free of Nighteyes'.

Would you not rather hunt with me?

I would much rather hunt with you. But I cannot this night.

Why?

I shook my head. The edge of decision was so thin and new, I dared not test it by speaking. I stopped at the edge of the woods to brush the leaves and dirt from my clothes and to smooth back my hair and retie it in a tail. I hoped my face was not dirty. I squared my shoulders and forced myself to walk back to the cabin, to open the door and enter and look at them. I felt horribly vulnerable. They'd been sharing information about me. Between the two of them they knew almost all of my secrets. My tattered dignity now dangled in shreds. How could I stand before them and expect to be treated as a man? Yet I could not fault them for it. They had been trying to save me. From myself, it was true, but save me all the same. Not their fault that what they had saved was scarcely worth having.

They were at table when I entered. If I had run off like this a few weeks ago, Burrich would have leapt up, to shake me and cuff me when I returned. I knew we were past that sort of thing now but the memory gave me a wariness I could not completely disguise. However, his face showed only relief, while Chade looked at me with shame and concern.

'I did not mean to press you that hard,' he said earnestly, before I could speak.

‘You didn’t,’ I said quietly. ‘You but put your finger on the spot where I had been pressing myself the most. Sometimes a man doesn’t know how badly he’s hurt until someone else probes the wound.’

I drew up my chair. After weeks of simple food to see cheese and honey and elderberry wine all set out on the table at once was almost shocking. There was a loaf of bread as well to supplement the trout Burrich had caught. For a time we just ate, without talk other than table requests. It seemed to ease the strangeness. But the moment the meal was finished and cleared away, the tension came back.

‘I understand your question now,’ Burrich said abruptly. Chade and I both looked at him in surprise. ‘A few days ago, when you asked what we would do next. Understand that I had given Verity up as lost. Kettricken carried his heir, but she was safe now in the Mountains. There was no more I could do for her. If I intervened in any way, I might betray her to others. Best to let her stay hidden, safe with her father’s people. By the time her child came to an age to reach for his throne ... well, if I was not in my grave by then, I supposed I would do what I could. For now, I saw my service to my king as a thing of the past. So when you asked me I saw only the need to take care of ourselves.’

‘And now?’ I asked quietly.

‘If Verity lives still, then a pretender has claimed his throne. I am sworn to come to my king’s aid. As is Chade. As are you.’ They were both looking at me very hard.

Run away again.

I can’t.

Burrich flinched as if I had poked him with a pin. I wondered, if I moved for the door, would he fling himself upon me to stop me? But he did not speak or move, just waited.

‘Not I. That Fitz died,’ I said bluntly.

Burrich looked as if I had struck him. But Chade asked quietly, ‘Then why does he still wear King Shrewd’s pin?’

I reached up and drew it out of my collar. Here, I had intended to say, here, you take it and all that goes with it. I’m done with it. I haven’t the spine for it. Instead I sat and looked at it.

‘Elderberry wine?’ Chade offered, but not to me.

‘It’s cool tonight. I’ll make tea,’ Burrich countered.

Chade nodded. Still I sat, holding the red-and-silver pin in my hand. I remembered my king's hands as he'd pushed the pin through the folds of a boy's shirt. 'There,' he had said. 'Now you are mine.' But he was dead now. Did that free me from my promise? And the last thing he had said to me? 'What have I made of you?' I pushed that question aside once more. More important, what was I now? Was I now what Regal had made of me? Or could I escape that?

'Regal told me,' I said consideringly, 'that I had but to scratch myself to find Nameless the dog-boy.' I looked up and forced myself to meet Burrich's eyes. 'It might be nice to be him.'

'Would it?' Burrich asked. 'There was a time when you did not think so. Who are you, Fitz, if you are not the King's Man? What are you? Where would you go?'

Where would I go, were I free? To Molly, cried my heart. I shook my head, thrusting aside the idea before it could sear me. No. Even before I had lost my life, I had lost her. I considered my empty, bitter freedom. There was only one place I could go, really. I set my will, looked up, and met Burrich's eyes with a firm gaze. 'I'm going away. Anywhere. To the Chalced States, to Bingtown. I'm good with animals, I'm a decent scribe, too. I could make a living.'

'No doubt of it. But a living is not a life,' Burrich pointed out.

'Well, what is?' I demanded, suddenly and truly angry. Why did they have to make this so hard? Words and thoughts suddenly gouted from me like poison from a festering wound. 'You'd have me devote myself to my king and sacrifice all else to it, as you did. Give up the woman I love to follow a king like a dog at his heels, as you did. And when that king abandoned you? You swallowed it, you raised his bastard for him. Then they took it all away from you, stable, horses, dogs, men to command. They left you nothing, not even a roof over your head, those kings you were sworn to. So what did you do? With nothing else left to you, you hung onto me, dragged the Bastard out of a coffin and forced him back to life. A life I hate, a life I don't want!' I glared at him accusingly.

He stared at me, bereft of words. I wanted to stop, but something drove me on. The anger felt good, like a cleansing fire. I clenched my hands into fists as I demanded, 'Why are you always there? Why do you always stand me up again, for them to knock down? For what? To make me owe you something? To give you a claim on my life because you don't have the spine

to have a life of your own? All you want to do is make me just like you, a man with no life of my own, a man who gives it all up for my king. Can't you see there's more to being alive than giving it all up for someone else?'

I met his eyes and then looked away from the pained astonishment I saw there. 'No,' I said dully after a breath. 'You don't see, you can't know. You can't even imagine what you've taken away from me. I should be dead, but you wouldn't let me die. All with the best of intentions, always believing you were doing what was right, no matter how it hurt me. But who gave you that right over me? Who decreed you could do this to me?'

There was no sound but my own voice in the room. Chade was frozen, and the look on Burrich's face only made me angrier. I saw him gather himself up. He reached for his pride and dignity as he said quietly, 'Your father gave me that task, Fitz. I did my best by you, boy. The last thing my prince told me. Chivalry said to me, "Raise him well." And I ...'

'Gave up the next decade of your life to raising someone else's bastard,' I cut in with savage sarcasm. 'Took care of me, because it was the only thing you really knew how to do. All your life, Burrich, you've been looking after someone else, putting someone else first, sacrificing any kind of a normal life for someone else's benefit. Loyal as a hound. Is that a life? Haven't you ever thought of being your own man, and making your own decisions? Or is a fear of that what pushes you down the neck of a bottle?' My voice had risen to a shout. When I ran out of words, I stared at him, my chest rising and falling as I panted out my fury.

As an angry boy, I'd often promised myself that someday he would pay for every cuff he had given me, for every stall I'd had to muck out when I thought I was too tired to stand. With those words, I kept that sulky little promise tenfold. His eyes were wide and he was speechless with pain. I saw his chest heave once, as if to catch a breath knocked out of him. The shock in his eyes was the same as if I had suddenly plunged a knife into him.

I stared at him. I wasn't sure where those words had come from, but it was too late to call them back. Saying 'I'm sorry' would not un-utter them, would not change them in the least. I suddenly hoped he would hit me, that he would give both of us at least that much.

He stood unevenly, the chair legs scraping back on the wooden floor. The chair itself teetered over and fell with a crash as he walked away from it. Burrich, who walked so steadily when full of brandy, wove like a drunk as

he made it to the door and went out into the night. I just sat, feeling something inside me go very still. I hoped it was my heart.

For a moment all was silence. A long moment. Then Chade sighed. 'Why?' he asked quietly after a time.

'I don't know.' I lied so well. Chade himself had taught me. I looked into the fire. For a moment, I almost tried to explain it to him. I decided I could not. I found myself talking all around it. 'Maybe I needed to get free of him. Of all he'd done for me, even when I didn't want him to do it. He has to stop doing things I can never pay him back for. Things no man should do for another, sacrifices no man should make for another man. I don't want to owe him any more. I don't want to owe anyone anything.'

When Chade spoke, it was matter-of-factly. His long-fingered hands rested on his thighs, quietly, almost relaxed. But his green eyes had gone the colour of copper ore, and his anger lived in them. 'Ever since you came back from the Mountain Kingdom, it's been as if you were spoiling for a fight. With anyone. When you were a boy and you were sullen or sulky, I could put it down to your being a boy, with a boy's judgment and frustrations. But you came back with an ... anger. Like a challenge to the world at large, to kill you if it could. It wasn't just that you threw yourself in Regal's path: whatever was most dangerous to you, you plunged yourself into. Burrich wasn't the only one to see it. Look back over the last year: every time I turned about, here was Fitz, railing at the world, in the middle of a fistfight, in the midst of a battle, wrapped up in bandaging, drunk as a fisherman, or limp as a string and mewling for elfbark. When were you calm and thoughtful, when were you merry with your friends, when were you ever simply at peace? If you weren't challenging your enemies, you were driving away your friends. What happened between you and the Fool? Where is Molly now? You've just sent Burrich packing. Who's next?'

'You, I suppose.' The words came out of me any way, inevitably. I did not want to speak them but I could not hold them back. It was time.

'You've moved a fair way toward that already, with the way you spoke to Burrich.'

'I know that,' I said bluntly. I met his eyes. 'For a long time now, nothing I've done has pleased you. Or Burrich. Or anyone. I can't seem to make a good decision lately.'

'I'd concur with that,' Chade agreed relentlessly.

And it was back, the ember of my anger billowing into flame. ‘Perhaps because I’ve never been given the chance to make my own decisions. Perhaps because I’ve been everyone’s “boy” too long. Burrich’s stable-boy, your apprentice assassin, Verity’s pet, Patience’s page. When did I get to be mine, for me?’ I asked the question fiercely.

‘When did you not?’ Chade demanded just as heatedly. ‘That’s all you’ve done since you came back from the Mountains. You went to Verity to say you’d had enough of being an assassin just when quiet work was needed. Patience tried to warn you clear of Molly, but you had your way there as well. It made her a target. You pulled Patience into plots that exposed her to danger. You bonded to the wolf, despite all Burrich said to you. You questioned my every decision about King Shrewd’s health. And your next to last stupid act at Buckkeep was to volunteer to be part of an uprising against the crown. You brought us as close to a civil war as we’ve been in a hundred years.’

‘And my last stupid act?’ I asked with bitter curiosity.

‘Killing Justin and Serene.’ He spoke a flat accusation.

‘They’d just drained my king, Chade,’ I pointed out icily. ‘Killed him in my arms as it were. What was I to do?’

He stood up and somehow managed to tower over me as he had used to. ‘With all your years of training from me, all my schooling in quiet work, you went racing about in the keep with a drawn knife, cutting the throat of one, and stabbing the other to death in the Great Hall before all the assembled nobles ... My fine apprentice assassin! That was the only way you could think of to accomplish it?’

‘I was angry!’ I roared at him.

‘Exactly!’ he roared back. ‘*You* were angry. So *you* destroyed our power base at Buckkeep! You had the confidence of the Coastal Dukes, and you chose to show yourself to them as a madman! Shattered their last bit of faith in the Farseer line.’

‘A few moments ago, you rebuked me for having the confidence of those dukes.’

‘No. I rebuked you for putting yourself before them. You should never have let them offer you the rule of Buckkeep. Had you been doing your tasks properly, such a thought would never have occurred to them. Over and over and over again, you forget your place. You are not a prince, you are an assassin. You are not the player, you are the game-piece. And when you

make your own moves, you set every other strategy awry and endanger every piece on the board!’

Not being able to think of a reply is not the same thing as accepting another’s words. I glowered at him. He did not back down but simply continued to stand, looking down at me. Under the scrutiny of Chade’s green stare the strength of my anger deserted me abruptly, leaving only bitterness. My secret undercurrent of fear welled once more to the surface. My resolve bled from me. I couldn’t do this. I did not have the strength to defy them both. After a time, I heard myself saying sullenly, ‘All right. Very well. You and Burrich are right, as always. I promise I shall no longer think, I shall simply obey. What do you want me to do?’

‘No.’ Succinct.

‘No what?’

He shook his head slowly. ‘What has come most clear to me tonight is that I must not base anything on you. You’ll get no assignment from me, nor will you be privy to my plans any longer. Those days are over.’ I could not grasp the finality in his voice. He turned aside from me, his eyes going afar. When he spoke again, it was not as my master, but as Chade. He looked at the wall as he spoke. ‘I love you, boy. I don’t withdraw that from you. But you’re dangerous. And what we must attempt is dangerous enough without you going berserk in the middle of it.’

‘What do you attempt?’ I asked, despite myself.

His eyes met mine as he slowly shook his head. In the keeping of that secret, he sundered our ties. I felt suddenly adrift. I watched in a daze as he took up his pack and cloak.

‘It’s dark out,’ I pointed out. ‘And Buckkeep is a far, rough walk, even in daylight. At least stay the night, Chade.’

‘I can’t. You’d but pick at this quarrel like a scab until you got it bleeding afresh. Enough hard words have already been said. Best I leave now.’

And he did.

I sat and watched the fire burn low alone. I had gone too far with both of them, much farther than I had ever intended. I had wanted to part ways with them; instead I’d poisoned every memory of me they’d ever had. It was done. There’d be no mending this. I got up and began to gather my things. It took a very short time. I knotted them into a bundle made with my winter cloak. I wondered if I acted out of childish pique or sudden decisiveness. I

wondered if there was a difference. I sat for a time before the hearth, clutching my bundle. I wanted Burrich to come back, so he would see I was sorry, would know I was sorry as I left. I forced myself to look carefully at that. Then I undid my bundle and put my blanket before the hearth and stretched out on it. Ever since Burrich had dragged me back from death, he had slept between me and the door. Perhaps it had been to keep me in. Some nights it had felt as if he were all that stood between me and the dark. Now he was not there. Despite the walls of the hut, I felt I curled alone on the bare, wild face of the world.

You always have me.

I know. And you have me. I tried, but could not put any real feeling in the words. I had poured out every emotion in me, and now I was empty. And so tired. With so much still to do.

The Grey One has words with Heart of the Pack. Shall I listen?

No. Their words belong to them. I felt jealous that they were together while I was alone. Yet I also took comfort in it. Perhaps Burrich could talk Chade into coming back until morning. Perhaps Chade could leech some of the poison I'd sprayed at Burrich. I stared into the fire. I did not think highly of myself.

There is a dead spot in the night, that coldest, blackest time when the world has forgotten evening and dawn is not yet a promise. A time when it is far too early to arise, but so late that going to bed makes small sense. That was when Burrich came in. I was not asleep, but I did not stir. He was not fooled.

'Chade's gone,' he said quietly. I heard him right the fallen chair. He sat on it and began taking his boots off. I felt no hostility from him, no animosity. It was as if my angry words had never been spoken. Or as if he'd been pushed past anger and hurt into numbness.

'It's too dark for him to be walking,' I said to the flames. I spoke carefully, fearing to break the spell of calm.

'I know. But he had a small lantern with him. He said he feared more to stay, feared he could not keep his resolve with you. To let you go.'

What I had been snarling for earlier now seemed like an abandonment. The fear surged up in me, undercutting my resolve. I sat up abruptly, panicky. I took a long shuddering breath. 'Burrich. What I said to you earlier, I was angry, I was ...'

‘Right on target.’ The sound he made might have been a laugh, if not so freighted with bitterness.

‘Only in the way that people who know one another best know how to hurt one another best,’ I pleaded.

‘No. It is so. Perhaps this dog does need a master.’ The mockery in his voice as he spoke of himself was more poisonous than any venom I had spewed. I could not speak. He sat up, let his boots drop to the floor. He glanced at me. ‘I did not set out to make you just like me, Fitz. That is not a thing I would wish on any man. I wished you to be like your father. But sometimes it seemed to me that no matter what I did, you persisted in patterning your life after mine.’ He stared into the embers for a time. At last he began to speak again, softly, to the fire. He sounded as if he were telling an old tale to a sleepy child.

‘I was born in the Chalced States. A little coast town, a fishing and shipping port. Lees. My mother did washing to support my grandmother and me. My father was dead before I was born, taken by the sea. My grandmother looked after me, but she was very old, and often ill.’ I heard more than saw his bitter smile. ‘A lifetime of being a slave does not leave a woman with sound health. She loved me, and did her best with me. But I was not a boy who would play in the cottage at quiet games. And there was no one at home strong enough to oppose my will.

‘So I bonded, very young, to the only strong male in my world who was interested in me. A street cur. Mangy. Scarred. His only value was survival, his only loyalty to me. As my loyalty was to him. His world, his way was all I knew. Taking what you wanted, when you wanted it, and not worrying past getting it. I am sure you know what I mean. The neighbours thought I was a mute. My mother thought I was a half-wit. My grandmother, I am sure, had her suspicions. She tried to drive the dog away, but like you, I had a will of my own in those matters. I suppose I was about eight when he ran between a horse and its cart and was kicked to death. He was stealing a slab of bacon at the time.’ He got up from his chair, and went to his blankets.

Burrich had taken Nosy away from me when I was less than that age. I had believed him dead. But Burrich had experienced the actual, violent death of his bond companion. It was little different from dying oneself. ‘What did you do?’ I asked quietly.

I heard him making up his bed and lying down on it. ‘I learned to talk,’ he said after a bit. ‘My grandmother forced me to survive Slash’s death. In a

sense, I transferred my bond to her. Not that I forgot Slash's lessons. I became a thief, a fairly good one. I made my mother and grandmother's life a bit better with my new trade, though they never suspected what I did. About a hand of years later, the blood plague went through Chalced. It was the first time I'd ever seen it. They both died, and I was alone. So I went for a soldier.'

I listened in amazement. All the years I had known him as a taciturn man. Drink had never loosened his tongue, but only made him more silent. Now the words were spilling out of him, washing away my years of wondering and suspecting. Why he suddenly spoke so openly, I did not know. His voice was the only sound in the firelit room.

'I first fought for some petty land chief in Chalced. Jecto. Not knowing or caring why we fought, if there was any right or wrong to it.' He snorted softly. 'As I told you, a living is not a life. But I did well enough at it. I earned a reputation for viciousness. No one expects a boy to fight with a beast's ferocity and guile. It was my only key to survival amongst the kind of men I soldiered with then. But one day we lost a campaign. I spent several months, no, almost a year, learning my grandmother's hatred of slavers. When I escaped, I did what she had always dreamed of doing. I went to the Six Duchies, where there are no slaves, nor slavers. Grizzle was Duke of Shoaks then. I soldiered for him for a bit. Somehow I ended up taking care of my troop's horses. I liked it well enough. Grizzle's troops were gentlemen compared with the dregs that soldiered for Jecto, but I still preferred the company of horses to them.

'When the Sandsedge war was done, Duke Grizzle took me home to his own stables. I bonded with a young stallion there. Neko. I had the care of him, but he was not mine. Grizzle rode him to hunt. Sometimes, they used him for stud. But Grizzle was not a gentle man. Sometimes he put Neko to fight other stallions, as some men fight dogs or cocks for amusement. A mare in season, and the better stallion to have her. And I ... I was bonded to him. His life was mine as much as my own was. And so I grew to be a man. Or at least, to have the shape of one.' Burrich was silent a moment. He did not need to explain further to me. After a time, he sighed and went on.

'Duke Grizzle sold Neko and six mares, and I went with them. Up the coast, to Rippon.' He cleared his throat. 'Some kind of horse plague went through that man's stables. Neko died, just a day after he started to sicken. I was able to save two of his mares. Keeping them alive kept me from killing

myself. But afterwards, I lost all spirit. I was good for nothing, save drinking. Besides, there were scarcely enough animals left in that stable to warrant calling it such. So I was let go. Eventually, to become a soldier again, this time for a young prince named Chivalry. He'd come to Rippon to settle a boundary dispute between the Shoaks and Rippon Duchies. I don't know why his sergeant took me on. These were crack troops, his personal guard. I had run out of money and been painfully sober for three days. I didn't meet their standards as a man, let alone as a soldier. In the first month I was with Chivalry, I was up before him for discipline twice. For fighting. Like a dog, or a stallion, I thought it was the only way to establish position with the others.

'The first time I was hauled before the Prince, bloody and struggling still, I was shocked to see we were of an age. Almost all his troops were older than I; I had expected to confront a middle-aged man. I stood there before him and I met his eyes. And something like recognition passed between us. As if we each saw ... what we might have been in different circumstances. It did not make him go easy on me. I lost my pay and earned extra duties. Everyone expected Chivalry to discharge me the second time. I stood before him, ready to hate him, and he just looked at me. He cocked his head as a dog will when it hears something far off. He docked my pay and gave me more duties. But he kept me. Everyone had told me I'd be discharged. Now they all expected me to desert. I can't say why I didn't. Why soldier for no pay and extra duties?'

Burrich cleared his throat again. I heard him shoulder deeper into his bed. For a time he was silent. He went on again at last, almost unwillingly. 'The third time they dragged me in, it was for brawling in a tavern. The City Guard hauled me before him, still bloody, still drunk, still wanting to fight. By then my fellow guards wanted nothing more to do with me. My sergeant was disgusted, I'd made no friends among the common soldiers. So the City Guard had me in custody. And they told Chivalry I'd knocked two men out and held off five others with a stave until the Guard came to tip the odds their way.

'Chivalry dismissed the Guards, with a purse to pay for damages to the tavern-keeper. He sat behind his table, some half-finished writing before him, and looked me up and down. Then he stood up without a word and pushed his table back to a corner of the room. He took off his shirt and picked up a pike from the corner. I thought he intended to beat me to death.

Instead, he threw me another pike. And he said, “All right, show me how you held off five men.” And lit into me.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I was tired, and half drunk. But I wouldn’t quit. Finally, he got in a lucky one. Laid me out cold.

‘When I woke up, the dog had a master again. Of a different sort. I know you’ve heard people say Chivalry was cold and stiff and correct to a fault. He wasn’t. He was what he believed a man should be. More than that. It was what he believed a man should want to be. He took a thieving, unkempt scoundrel and ...’ He faltered, sighed suddenly. ‘He had me up before dawn the next day. Weapons practice till neither of us could stand. I’d never had any formal training at it before. They’d just handed me a pike and sent me out to fight. He drilled me, and taught me sword. He’d never liked the axe, but I did. So he taught me what he knew of it, and arranged for me to learn it from a man who knew its strategies. Then the rest of the day, he’d have me at his heels. Like a dog, as you say. I don’t know why. Maybe he was lonely for someone his own age. Maybe he missed Verity. Maybe ... I don’t know.

‘He taught me numbers first, then reading. He put me in charge of his horse. Then his hounds and hawk. Then in general charge of the pack beasts and wagon animals. But it wasn’t just work he taught me. Cleanliness. Honesty. He put a value on what my mother and grandmother had tried to instil in me so long ago. He showed them to me as a man’s values, not just manners for inside a woman’s house. He taught me to be a man, not a beast in a man’s shape. He made me see it was more than rules, it was a way of being. A life, rather than a living.’

He stopped talking. I heard him get up. He went to the table and picked up the bottle of elderberry wine that Chade had left. I watched him as he turned it several times in his hands. Then he set it down. He sat down on one of the chairs and stared into the fire.

‘Chade said I should leave you tomorrow,’ he said quietly. He looked down at me. ‘I think he’s right.’

I sat up and looked up at him. The dwindling light of the fire made a shadowy landscape of his face. I could not read his eyes.

‘Chade says you have been my boy too long. Chade’s boy, Verity’s boy, even Patience’s boy. That we kept you a boy and looked after you too much. He believes that when a man’s decisions came to you, you made them as a

boy. Impulsively. Intending to be right, intending to be good. But intentions are not good enough.'

'Sending me out to kill people was keeping me a boy?' I asked incredulously.

'Did you listen to me at all? I killed people as a boy. It didn't make me a man. Nor you.'

'So what am I to do?' I asked sarcastically. 'Go looking for a prince to educate me?'

'There. You see? A boy's reply. You don't understand, so you get angry. And venomous. You ask me that question but you already know you won't like my answer.'

'Which is?'

'It might be to tell you that you could do worse than to go looking for a prince. But I'm not going to tell you what to do. Chade has advised me not to. And I think he is right. But not because I think you make your decisions as a boy would. No more than I did at your age. I think you decide as an animal would. Always in the now, with never a thought for tomorrow, or what you recall from yesterday. I know you know what I'm speaking of. You stopped living as a wolf because I forced you to. Now I must leave you alone, for you to find out if you want to live as a wolf or a man.'

He met my gaze. There was too much understanding in his eyes. It frightened me to think that he might actually know what I was facing. I denied that possibility, pushed it aside entirely. I turned a shoulder to him, almost hoping my anger would come back. But Burrich sat silently.

Finally I looked up at him. He was staring into the fire. It took me a long time to swallow my pride and ask, 'So, what are you going to do?'

'I told you. I'm leaving tomorrow.'

Harder still to ask the next question. 'Where will you go?'

He cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. 'I've a friend. She's alone. She could use a man's strength about her place. Her roof needs mending, and there's planting to do. I'll go there, for a time.'

'She?' I dared to ask, raising an eyebrow.

His voice was flat. 'Nothing like that. A friend. You would probably say that I've found someone else to look after. Perhaps I have. Perhaps it's time to give that where it is truly needed.'

I looked into the fire, now. 'Burrich. I truly needed you. You brought me back from the edge, back to being a man.'

He snorted. 'If I'd done right by you in the first place, you'd never have gone to the edge.'

'No. I'd have gone to my grave instead.'

'Would you? Regal would have had no charges of Wit magic to bring against you.'

'He'd have found some excuse to kill me. Or just opportunity. He doesn't really need an excuse to do what he wants.'

'Perhaps. Perhaps not.'

We sat watching the fire die. I reached up to my ear, fumbled with the catch on the earring. 'I want to give this back to you.'

'I would prefer that you kept it. Wore it.' It was almost a request. It felt odd.

'I don't deserve whatever it is that this earring symbolizes to you. I haven't earned it, I have no right to it.'

'What it symbolizes to me is not something that is earned. It's something I gave to you, deserved or not. Whether or not you wear that, you still take it with you.'

I left the earring dangling from my ear. A tiny silver net with a blue gem trapped inside it. Once Burrich had given it to my father. Patience, all unknowing of its significance, had passed it on to me. I did not know if he wanted me to wear it for the same reason he had given it to my father. I sensed there was more about it, but he had not told me and I would not ask. Still, I waited, expecting a question from him. But he only rose and went back to his blankets. I heard him lie down.

I wished he had asked me the question. It hurt that he hadn't. I answered it anyway. 'I don't know what I'm going to do,' I said into the darkened room. 'All my life, I've always had tasks to do, masters to answer to. Now that I don't ... it's a strange feeling.'

I thought for a time that he wasn't going to reply at all. Then he said abruptly, 'I've known that feeling.'

I looked up at the darkened ceiling. 'I've thought of Molly. Often. Do you know where she went?'

'Yes.'

When he said no more than that, I knew better than to ask. 'I know the wisest course is to let her go. She believes me dead. I hope that whoever she went to takes better care of her than I did. I hope he loves her as she deserves.'

There was a rustling of Burrich's blankets. 'What do you mean?' he asked guardedly.

It was harder to say than I had thought it would be. 'She told me when she left me that day that there was someone else. Someone that she cared for as I cared for my king, someone she put ahead of everything and everyone else in her life.' My throat closed up suddenly. I took a breath, willing the knot in my throat away. 'Patience was right,' I said.

'Yes, she was,' Burrich agreed.

'I can blame it on no one save myself. Once I knew Molly was safe, I should have let her go her own way. She deserves a man who can give her all his time, all his devotion ...'

'Yes, she does,' Burrich agreed relentlessly. 'A shame you didn't realize that before you had been with her.'

It is quite one thing to admit a fault to yourself. It is another thing entirely to have a friend not only agree with you, but point out the full depth of the fault. I didn't deny it, or demand how he knew of it. If Molly had told him, I didn't want to know what else she had said. If he had deduced it on his own, I didn't want to know I had been that obvious. I felt a surge of something, a fierceness that made me want to snarl at him. I bit down on my tongue and forced myself to consider what I felt. Guilt and shame that it had ended in pain for her, and made her doubt her worth. And a certainty that no matter how wrong it had been, it had also been right. When I was sure of my voice, I said quietly, 'I will never regret loving her. Only that I could not make her my wife in all eyes as she was in my heart.'

He said nothing to that. But after a time, that separating silence became deafening. I could not sleep for it. Finally I spoke. 'So. Tomorrow we go our own ways, I suppose.'

'I suppose so,' Burrich said. After a time, he added, 'Good luck.' He actually sounded as if he meant it. As if he realized how much luck I would need.

I closed my eyes. I was so tired now. So tired. Tired of hurting people I loved. But it was done now. Tomorrow Burrich would leave and I would be free. Free to follow my heart's desire, with no intervention from anyone.

Free to go to Tradeford and kill Regal.

THREE

The Quest

The Skill is the traditional magic of the Farseer royalty. While it seems to run strongest in the royal bloodlines, it is not all that rare to discover it in a lesser strength in those distantly related to the Farseer line, or in those whose ancestry includes both Outislanders and Six Duchy folk. It is a magic of the mind, giving the practitioner the power to communicate silently with those at a distance from him. Its possibilities are many; at its simplest, it may be used to convey messages, to influence the thoughts of enemies (or friends) to sway them to one's purposes. Its drawbacks are twofold: it requires a great deal of energy to wield it on a daily basis, and it offers to its practitioners an attraction that has been misnamed as a pleasure. It is more of a euphoric, one that increases in power proportionately with the strength and duration of Skilling. It can lure the practitioner into an addiction to Skilling, one which eventually saps all mental and physical strength, to leave the mage a great, drooling babe.

Burrich left the next morning. When I awoke, he was up and dressed and moving about the hut, packing his things. It did not take him long. He took his personal effects, but left me the lion's share of our provisions. There had been no drink the night before, yet we both spoke as softly and moved as carefully as if pained by the morning. We deferred to one another until it seemed to me worse than if we had not been speaking to one another at all. I wanted to babble apologies, to beg him to reconsider, to do something, anything, to keep our friendship from ending this way. At the same time, I wished him gone, wished it over, wished it to be tomorrow, a new day dawning and I alone. I held to my resolution as if gripping the sharp blade of a knife. I suspect he felt something of the same, for sometimes he would stop and look up at me as if about to speak. Then our eyes would meet and hold for a bit, until one or the other of us looked aside. Too much hovered unspoken between us.

In a horribly short time he was ready to leave. He shouldered his pack and took up a stave from beside the door. I stood staring at him, thinking how odd he appeared thus: Burrich the horseman, afoot. The early summer

sunlight spilling in the open door showed me a man at the end of his middle years, the white streak of hair that marked his scar foretelling the grey that had already begun to show in his beard. He was strong and fit, but his youth was unquestionably behind him. The days of his full strength he had spent watching over me.

‘Well,’ he said gruffly. ‘Farewell, Fitz. And good luck to you.’

‘Good luck to you, Burrich.’ I crossed the room quickly, and embraced him before he could step back.

He hugged me back, a quick squeeze that nearly cracked my ribs, and then pushed my hair back from my face. ‘Go comb your hair. You look like a wild man.’ He almost managed a smile. He turned from me and strode away. I stood watching him go. I thought he would not look back, but on the far side of the pasture, he turned and lifted his hand. I raised mine in return. Then he was gone, swallowed into the woods. I sat for a time on the step, considering the place where I had last seen him. If I kept to my plan, it might be years before I saw him again. If I saw him again. Since I was six years old, he had always been a factor in my life. I had always been able to count on his strength, even when I didn’t want it. Now he was gone. Like Chade, like Molly, like Verity, like Patience.

I thought of all I had said to him the night before and shuddered with shame. It had been necessary, I told myself. I had meant to drive him away. But far too much of it had erupted from ancient resentments that had festered long inside me. I had not meant to speak of such things. I had intended to drive him away, not cut him to the bone. Like Molly, he would carry off the doubts I had driven into him. And by savaging Burrich’s pride, I had destroyed what little respect Chade had still held for me. I suppose some childish part of myself had been hoping that someday I could come back to them, that someday we would share our lives again. I knew now we would not. ‘It’s over,’ I told myself quietly. ‘That life is over, let it go.’

I was free of both of them now. Free of their limitations on me, free of their ideas of honour and duty. Freed of their expectations. I’d never again have to look either of them in the eyes and account for what I had done. Free to do the only thing I had the heart or the courage left to do, the only thing I could do to lay my old life to rest behind me.

I would kill Regal.

It only seemed fair. He had killed me first. The spectre of the promise I had made to King Shrewd, that I would never harm one of his own, rose

briefly to haunt me. I laid it to rest by reminding myself that Regal had killed the man who had made that promise, as well as the man I had given it to. That Fitz no longer existed. I would never again stand before old King Shrewd and report the result of a mission, I would not stand as King's Man to loan strength to Verity. Lady Patience would never harry me with a dozen trivial errands that were of the utmost importance to her. She mourned me as dead. And Molly. Tears stung my eyes as I measured my pain. She had left me before Regal had killed me, but for that loss, too, I held him responsible. If I had nothing else out of this crust of life Burrich and Chade had salvaged for me, I would have revenge. I promised myself that Regal would look at me as he died, and know that I killed him. This would be no quiet assassination, no silent venture of anonymous poison. I would deliver death to Regal myself. I wished to strike like a single arrow, like a thrown knife, going straight to my target unhampered by fears for those around me. If I failed, well, I was already dead in every way that mattered to me. It would hurt no one that I had tried. If I died killing Regal, it would be worth it. I would guard my own life only until I had taken Regal's. Whatever happened after that did not matter.

Nighteyes stirred, disturbed by some inkling of my thoughts.

Have you ever considered what it would do to me if you died?

Nighteyes asked me.

I shut my eyes tightly for an instant. But I had considered it. *What would it do to us if I lived as prey?*

Nighteyes understood. *We are hunters. Neither of us was born to be prey.*

I cannot be a hunter if I am always waiting to be prey. And so I must hunt him before he can hunt me.

He accepted my plans too calmly. I tried to make him understand all I intended to do. I did not wish him simply to follow me blindly.

I'm going to kill Regal. And his coterie. I'm going to kill all of them, for all they did to me, and all they took from me.

Regal? There is meat we cannot eat. I do not understand the hunting of men.

I took my image of Regal and combined it with his images of the animal trader who had caged him when he was a cub and beat him with a brass-bound club.

Nighteyes considered that. *Once I got away from him, I was smart enough to stay away from him. To hunt that one is as wise as to go hunting a porcupine.*

I cannot leave this alone, Nighteyes.

I understand. I am the same about porcupines.

And so he perceived my vendetta with Regal as equivalent to his weakness for porcupines. I found myself accepting my stated goals with less equanimity. Having stated them, I could not imagine turning aside for anything else. My words from the night before came back to rebuke me. What had happened to all my fine speeches to Burrich, about living a life for myself? Well, I hedged, and perhaps I would, if I survived tying up these loose ends. It was not that I could not live my own life. It was that I could not stomach the idea of Regal going about thinking he had defeated me, yes, and stolen the throne from Verity. Revenge, plain and simple, I told myself. If I was ever going to put the fear and shame behind me, I had to do this.

You can come in now, I offered.

Why would I want to?

I did not have to turn and see that Nighteyes had already come down to the hut. He came to sit beside me, then peered into the hut.

Phew! You fill your den with such stinks, no wonder your nose works so poorly.

He crept into the hut cautiously and began a prowling tour of the interior. I sat on the doorstep, watching him. It had been a time since I had looked at him as anything other than an extension of myself. He was full grown now, and at the peak of his strength. Another might say he was a grey wolf. To me, he was every colour a wolf could be, dark-eyed, dark-muzzled, buff at the base of his ears and throat, his coat peppered with stiff, black guard-hairs, especially on his shoulders and the flat of his rump. His feet were huge, and spread even wider when he ran over crusted snow. He had a tail that was more expressive than many a woman's face, and teeth and jaws that could easily crack a deer's leg bones. He moved with that economy of strength that perfectly healthy animals have. Just watching him salved my heart. When his curiosity was mostly satisfied, he came to sit beside me. After a few moments, he stretched out in the sun and closed his eyes. *Keep watch?*

'I'll watch over you,' I assured him. His ears twitched at my spoken words. Then he sank into a sun-soaked sleep.

I rose quietly and went inside the hut. It took a remarkably short time for me to take stock of my possessions. Two blankets and a cloak. I had a change of clothes, warm woolly things ill-suited to summer travel. A brush. A knife and whetstone. Flint firestone. A sling. Several small cured hides from game we had taken. Sinew thread. A hand-axe. A small kettle and several spoons. The last were the recent work of Burrich's whittling. There was a little sack of meal, and one of flour. The leftover honey. A bottle of elderberry wine.

Not much to begin this venture with. I was facing a long overland journey to Tradeford. I had to survive that before I could plan how to get past Regal's guards and Skill coterie and kill him. I considered carefully. It was not yet the height of summer. There was time to gather herbs and dry them, time to smoke fish and meat for travelling rations. I needn't go hungry. For now, I had clothing and the other basics. But eventually I'd need some coin. I had told Chade and Burrich that I could make my own way, on my skills with animals and scribing skills. Perhaps those abilities could get me as far as Tradeford.

It might have been easier if I could have remained FitzChivalry. I knew boatmen who plied the river trade, and I could have worked my passage to Tradeford. But that FitzChivalry had died. He couldn't very well go looking for work at the docks. I could not even visit the docks, for fear of being recognized. I lifted my hand to my face, recalling what Burrich's looking glass had shown me. A streak of white in my hair to remind me where Regal's soldiers had laid my scalp open. I fingered the new configuration of my nose. There was also a fine seam down my right cheek under my eye, where Regal's fist had split my face. No one would remember a Fitz that bore these scars. I would let my beard grow. And if I shaved my hair back from my brow as the scribes did, that might be enough change to put off the casual glance. But I would not deliberately venture among those who had known me.

I'd be afoot. I'd never made an extended journey on foot.

Why can't we just stay right here? A sleepy inquiry from Nighteyes. *Fish in the creek, game in the woods behind the hut. What more do we need? Why must we go?*

I must. I must do this to be a man again.

You truly believe you wish to be a man again? I sensed his disbelief but also his acceptance that I would try. He stretched lazily without getting up,

spreading wide the toes of his forepaws. *Where are we going?*

Tradeford. Where Regal is. A far journey up the river.

Are there wolves there?

Not in the city itself, I am sure. But there are wolves in Farrow. There are wolves in Buck still, too. Just not around here.

Save we two, he pointed out. And added, I should like to find wolves where we go.

Then he sprawled over and went back to sleep. That was part of what it meant to be a wolf, I reflected. He would worry no more until we left. Then he would simply follow me and trust his survival to our abilities.

But I had become too much a man again to do as he did. I began to gather provisions the very next day. Despite Nighteyes' protest, I hunted for more than we needed to eat each day. And when we were successful, I did not let him gorge, but jerked some of the meat, and smoked some of it. I had enough leather skill from Burrich's perpetual harness mending to make myself soft boots for the summer. I greased my old boots well and set them aside for winter use.

During the days, while Nighteyes dozed in the sun, I gathered my herbs. Some were the common medicinal herbs I wished to have on hand: willowbark for fever, raspberry root for cough, plantain for infection, nettle for congestion, and the like. Others were not so wholesome. I made a small cedar box and filled it. I gathered and stored the poisons as Chade had taught me: water-hemlock, deathcap mushroom, nightshade, elderberry pith, baneberry and heartseize. I chose as best I could, for ones that were tasteless and odourless, for ones that could be rendered as fine powders and clear liquids. Also I harvested elfbark, the powerful stimulant Chade had used to help Verity survive his sessions of Skilling.

Regal would be surrounded and protected by his coterie. Will was the one that I most feared, but I would underestimate none of them. I had known Burl as a big husky boy and Carrod had been something of a dandy with the girls. But those days were long past. I had seen what Skill use had made of Will. It had been long since I had made contact with either Carrod or Burl, and I would make no assumptions about them. They were all trained in the Skill, and though my natural talent had once seemed much stronger than theirs, I had found out the hard way that they knew ways of using the Skill that not even Verity had understood. If I were Skill attacked by them, and survived, I would need the elfbark to restore myself.

I made a second case, large enough to hold my poison box, but otherwise designed like a scribe's case, to thus create the guise of a wandering scribe. The case would proclaim me as that to the chance acquaintance. Quills for pens I obtained from a nesting goose we ambushed. Some of the powders for pigments I could make, and I fashioned bone tubes and stoppers to hold them. Nighteyes grudgingly furnished me hair for coarse brushes. Finer brushes I attempted with rabbit hair, but with only partial satisfaction. It was very discouraging. A proper scribe was expected by folk to have the inks, brushes and pens of his trade. I reluctantly concluded that Patience had been right when she told me I wrote a fine hand, but could not claim the skills of a full scribe. I hoped my supplies would suffice for any work I might pick up on the way to Tradeford.

There came a time when I knew I was as well provisioned as I could be and that I should leave soon, to have the summer weather for travelling. I was eager for revenge, and yet strangely reluctant to leave this cabin and life. For the first time that I could recall, I arose from sleep when I awoke naturally, and ate when I was hungry. I had no tasks save those I set myself. Surely it would not hurt if I took a bit of time to recover my physical health. Although the bruises of my dungeon time had long faded, and the only external signs of my injuries were scars, I still felt oddly stiff some mornings. Occasionally, my body would shock me with a twinge when I leaped after something, or turned my head too quickly. A particularly strenuous hunt would leave me trembling and dreading a seizure. It would be wiser, I decided, to be fully healed before I departed.

So we lingered a time. The days were warm, the hunting was good. As the days slipped by, I made peace with my body. I was not the physically hardened warrior I had been the summer before, but I could keep pace with Nighteyes through a night's hunting. When I sprang to make a kill, my actions were quick and sure. My body healed, and I set behind me the pains of the past, acknowledging them, but not dwelling on them. The nightmares that had plagued me were shed like the last remnants of Nighteyes' winter coat. I had never known a life so simple. I had finally made peace with myself.

No peace lasts long. A dream came to wake me. Nighteyes and I arose before dawn, hunted, and together killed a brace of fat rabbits. This particular hillside was riddled with their warrens, and catching enough to fill ourselves had degenerated quickly to a silly game of leaping and digging. It

was past dawn before we left off our play. We flung ourselves down in dappling birch shade, fed again from our kills and drowsed off. Something, perhaps the uneven sunlight on my closed eyelids, had plunged me into a dream.

I was back in Buckkeep. In the old watchroom, I sprawled on a cold stone floor in the centre of a circle of hard-eyed men. The floor beneath my cheek was sticky-slick with cooling blood. As I panted open-mouthed, the smell and the taste of it combined to fill my senses. They were coming for me again, not just the man with the leather-gloved fists, but Will, elusive invisible Will, slipping silently past my walls to creep into my mind. 'Please, wait, please,' I begged them. 'Stop, I beg you. I am nothing you need fear or hate. I'm only a wolf. Just a wolf, no threat to you. I'll do you no harm, only let me be gone. I'm nothing to you. I'll never trouble you again. I'm only a wolf.' I lifted my muzzle to the sky and howled.

My own howling woke me.

I rolled to my hands and knees, shook myself all over and then came to my feet. A dream, I told myself. Only a dream. Fear and shame washed over me, dirtying me in their passage. In my dream I had pleaded for mercy as I had not in reality. I told myself I was no craven. Was I? It seemed I could still smell and taste the blood.

Where are you going? Nighteyes asked lazily. He lay deeper in the shade and his coat camouflaged him surprisingly well there.

Water.

I went to the steam, splashed sticky rabbit blood from my face and hands, and then drank deeply. I washed my face again, dragging my nails through my beard to get the blood out. Abruptly I decided I couldn't stand the beard. I didn't intend to go where I expected to be recognized anyway. I went back to the shepherd's hut to shave.

At the door, I wrinkled my nose at the musty smell. Nighteyes was right; sleeping inside had dampened my sense of smell. I could hardly believe I had abided in here. I padded in reluctantly, snorting out the man smells. It had rained a few nights ago. Damp had got into my dried meat and soured some of it. I sorted it out, wrinkling my nose at how far gone it was. Maggots were working in some of it. As I checked the rest of my meat supply carefully, I pushed aside a nagging sense of uneasiness. It was not until I took out the knife and had to clean a fine dusting of rust from it that I admitted it to myself.

It had been days since I had been here.

Possibly weeks.

I had no idea of time's passage. I looked at the spoiled meat, at the dust that overlay my scattered possessions. I felt my beard, shocked at how much it had grown. Burrich and Chade had not left me here days ago. It had been weeks. I went to the door of the hut and looked out. Grass stood tall where there had been pathways across the meadow to the stream and Burrich's fishing spot. The spring flowers were long gone, the berries green on the bushes. I looked at my hands, at dirt ingrained in the skin of my wrists, old blood caked and dried under my nails. At one time, eating raw flesh would have disgusted me. Now the notion of cooking meat seemed peculiar and foreign. My mind veered away and I did not want to confront myself. Later, I heard myself pleading, tomorrow, later, go find Nighteyes.

You are troubled, little brother?

Yes. I forced myself to add, *You cannot help me with this. It is man trouble, a thing I must solve for myself.*

Be a wolf instead, he advised lazily.

I did not have the strength to say either yes or no to that. I let it go by me. I looked down at myself, at my stained shirt and trousers. My clothing was caked with dirt and old blood, and my trousers tattered off into rags below my knees. With a shudder, I recalled the Forged ones and their ragged garments. What had I become? I tugged at the collar of my shirt and then averted my face from my own stink. Wolves were cleaner than this. Nighteyes groomed himself daily.

I spoke it aloud, and the rustiness of my voice only added to it. 'As soon as Burrich left me here, alone, I reverted to something less than an animal. No time, no cleanliness, no goals, no awareness of anything save eating and sleeping. This was what he was trying to warn me about, all those years. I did just what he had always feared I would do.'

Laboriously I kindled a fire in the hearth. I hauled water from the stream in many trips and heated as much as I could. The shepherds had left a heavy rendering kettle at the hut, and this held enough to half-fill a wooden trough outside. While the water heated, I gathered soapwort and horsetail grass. I could not remember that I had ever before been this dirty. The coarse horsetail grass scrubbed off layers of skin with the grime before I was satisfied I was clean. There were more than a few fleas floating in the water. I also discovered a tick on the back of my neck and burned him off with an

ember twig from my fire. When my hair was clean, I combed it out and then bound it back once more in a warrior's tail. I shaved in the glass Burrich had left me, and then stared at the face there. Tanned brow and pale chin.

By the time I had heated more water and soaked and pounded my clothes clean, I was starting to understand Burrich's fanatical and constant cleanliness. The only way to save what was left of my trousers would be to hem them up at the knee. Even then, there was not much wear left in them. I extended my spree to my bedding and winter clothing as well, washing the musty smell out of them. I discovered that a mouse had borrowed from my winter cloak to make a nest. That, too, I mended as well as I could. I looked up from draping wet leggings on a bush to find Nighteyes watching me.

You smell like a man again.

Is that good or bad?

Better than smelling like last week's kill. Not so good as smelling like a wolf. He stood and stretched, bowing low to me and spreading his toes wide against the earth. *So. You do wish to be a man after all. Do we travel soon?*

Yes. We travel west, up the Buck River.

Oh. He sneezed suddenly, then abruptly fell over on his side, to roll about on his back in the dust like a puppy. He wiggled happily, working it well into his coat, and then came to his feet to shake it all out again. His blithe acceptance of my sudden decision was a burden. What was I taking him into?

Nightfall found me with every garment I owned and all my bedding still damp. I had sent Nighteyes hunting alone. I knew he would not soon return. The moon was full and the night sky clear. Plenty of game would be moving about tonight. I went inside the hut and built up the fire enough to make hearth cakes from the last of the meal. Weevils had got into the flour and spoiled it. Better to eat the meal now than to waste it similarly. The simple cakes with the last of the grainy honey from the pot tasted incredibly good. I knew I had best expand my diet to include more than meat and a handful of greens each day. I made an odd tea from the wild mint and the tips of the new nettle growth, and that, too, tasted good.

I brought in an almost-dry blanket and spread it out before the hearth. I lay on it, drowsing and staring into the fire. I quested for Nighteyes, but he disdained to join me, preferring his fresh kill and the soft earth under an oak at the edge of the meadow. I was as alone, and as human, as I had been in months. It felt a little strange, but good.

It was when I rolled over and stretched that I saw the packet left on the chair. I knew every item in the hut by heart. This had not been here when last I was. I picked it up and snuffed at it, and found Burrich's scent faintly upon it, and my own. A moment later I realized what I had done and rebuked myself for it. I had best start behaving as if there were always witnesses to my actions, unless I wished to be killed as a Witted one again.

It was not a large bundle. It was one of my shirts, somehow taken from my old clothes chest, a soft brown one I'd always favoured, and a pair of leggings. Bundled up inside the shirt was a small earthenware pot of Burrich's unguent that he used for cuts, burns and bruises. Four silver bits in a little leather pouch; he'd worked a buck in the stitching on the front. A good leather belt. I sat staring at the design he'd worked into that. There was a buck, antlers lowered to fight, similar to the crest Verity had suggested for me. On the belt, it was fending off a wolf. Difficult to miss that message.

I dressed before the fire, feeling wistful that I had missed his visit, and yet relieved that I had. Knowing Burrich, he'd probably felt much the same at hiking up here and then finding me gone. Had he brought me these presentable clothes because he wanted to persuade me to return with him? Or to wish me well on my way? I tried not to wonder what his intent had been, or his reaction to the abandoned hut. Clothed again, I felt much more human. I hung the pouch and my sheath knife from the belt and cinched it around my waist. I pulled a chair up before the fire and sat in it.

I stared into the fire. I finally allowed myself to think about my dream. I felt a strange tightening in my chest. Was I a coward? I was not sure. I was going to Tradeford to kill Regal. Would a coward do that? Perhaps, my traitor mind told me, perhaps a coward would, if it was easier than seeking out one's king. I pushed that thought from my mind.

It came right back. Was killing Regal the right thing to do, or merely what I wished to do? Why should that matter? Because it did. Maybe I should be going to find Verity instead.

Silly to think about any of it, until I knew if Verity were still alive. If I could Skill to Verity, I could find out. But I had never been able to Skill predictably. Galen had seen to that, with the abuse that had taken my strong natural talent for Skill and turned it into a fickle and frustrating thing. Could that be changed? I'd need to be able to Skill well, if I wanted to get past the coterie to Regal's throat. I'd have to learn to control it. Was the Skill something one could teach oneself to master? How could one learn a thing if

one did not even know the full scope of it? All the ability that Galen had neither beaten into nor out of me, all the knowledge that Verity had never had time to teach me: how was I to learn all that on my own? It was impossible.

I did not want to think of Verity. That, as much as anything, told me that I should. Verity. My prince. My king now. Linked by blood and the Skill, I had grown to know him as I knew no other man. Being open to the Skill, he had told me, was as simple as not being closed to it. His Skill-warring with the Raiders had become his life, draining away his youth and vitality. He had never had the time to teach me to control my talent, but he had given me what lessons he could in the infrequent chances he had. His Skill-strength was such that he could impose a touch on me, and be one with me for days, sometimes weeks. And once, when I had sat in my prince's chair, in his study before his worktable, I had Skilled to him. Before me had been the tools of his map-making and the small personal clutter of the man who waited to be king. That one time, I had thought of him, longed for him to be home to guide his kingdom, and had simply reached out and Skilled to him. So easily, without preparation or even real intent. I tried to put myself in that same frame of mind. I had not Verity's desk nor clutter to put him in mind, but if I closed my eyes, I could see my prince. I took a breath and tried to call forth his image.

Verity was broader of shoulder than I but not quite of my height. My uncle shared with me the dark eyes and hair of the Farseer family, but his eyes were set more deeply than mine, and his unruly hair and beard were shot through with grey. When I was a boy, he had been well-muscled and hard, a stocky man who wielded a sword as easily as a pen. These later years had wasted him. He had been forced to spend too much time physically idle as he used his Skill-strength to defend our coastline from the Raiders. But even as his muscle had dwindled, his Skill-aura had increased, until to stand before him now was like standing before a blazing hearth. When I was in his presence, I was much more aware of his Skill now than his body. For his scent, I called to mind the piquancy of the coloured inks he used when he made his maps, the smell of fine vellum, and, too, the edge of elfbark that was often on his breath. 'Verity,' I said softly aloud, and felt the word echo within me, bouncing off my walls.

I opened my eyes. I could not reach out of myself until I lowered my walls. Visualizing Verity would do nothing for me until I opened a way for

my Skill to go forth, and his to enter my mind. Very well. That was easy enough. Just relax. Stare into the fire and watch the tiny sparks that rode upward on the heat. Dancing floating sparks. Relax the vigilance. Forget how Will had slammed his Skill-strength against that wall and nearly made it give way. Forget that holding the wall was all that had kept my mind my own while they hammered away at my flesh. Forget that sickening sense of violation the time that Justin had forced his way into me. The way Galen had scarred and crippled my Skill ability the time he had abused his position as Skillmaster to force his control on my mind.

As clearly as if Verity were beside me, I heard again my prince's words. 'Galen has scarred you. You've walls I can't begin to penetrate, and I am strong. You'd have to learn to drop them. That's a hard thing.' And those words to me had been years ago, before Justin's invasion, before Will's attacks. I smiled bitterly. Did they know they had succeeded at un-Skilling me? They'd probably never even given it thought. Someone, somewhere, should make a record of that. Someday a Skilled king might find it handy, to know that if you hurt a Skilled one badly enough with the Skill, you could seal him up inside himself and render him powerless in that area.

Verity had never had the time to teach me how to drop those walls. Ironically, he had found a way to show me how to reinforce them, so I could seal my private thoughts from him when I did not wish to share them. Perhaps that was a thing I had learned too well. I wondered if I would ever have time to unlearn it.

Time, no time, Nighteyes interrupted wearily. Time is a thing that men made up to bother themselves with. You think on it until I am dizzy. Why do you follow these old trails at all? Snuff out a new one that may have some meat at the end of it. If you want the game, you must stalk it. That is all. You cannot say, to stalk this takes too long, I wish to simply eat. It is all one. The stalking is the beginning of the eating.

You do not understand, I told him wearily. There are only so many hours in a day, and only so many days in which I can do this thing.

Why do you chop your life into bits and give the bits names? Hours, days. It is like a rabbit. If I kill a rabbit, I eat a rabbit. A sleepy snort of disdain. When you have a rabbit, you chop it up and call it bones and meat and fur and guts. And so you never have enough.

So what should I do, oh wise master?

Stop whining about it and just do it. So I can sleep.

He gave me a slight mind-nudge, like an elbow in the ribs when a companion crowds too close to you on the tavern bench. I suddenly realized how closely I had been holding our contact these past few weeks. Had been a time when I had rebuked him for always being in my mind. I had not wanted his company when I was with Molly, and I had tried to explain to him then that such times must belong to me alone. Now his nudge made it plain to me that I had been clinging as close to him as he had to me when he was a cub. I firmly resisted my first impulse to clutch at him. Instead I settled back in my chair and looked at the fire.

I took the walls down. I sat for a time, with my mouth dry, waiting for an attack. When nothing came, I thought carefully, and again lowered my walls. They believe me dead, I reminded myself. They will not be lying in wait to ambush a dead man. It was still not easy to will my walls down. Far easier to unsquint my eyes on a day of bright sunlight on the water, or to stand unflinching before a coming blow. But when finally I did it, I could sense the Skill flowing all about me, parting around me as if I were a stone in the current of a river. I had but to plunge into it and I could find Verity. Or Will, or Burl, or Carrod. I shuddered and the river retreated. I steeled myself and returned to it. A long time I stood teetering on that bank, daring myself to plunge in. No such thing as testing the water with the Skill. In or out. In.

In, and I was spinning and tumbling, and I felt my self fraying apart like a piece of rotten hemp rope. Strands peeling and twisting away from me, all the overlays that made me myself, memories, emotions, the deep thoughts that mattered, the flashes of poetry that one experiences that strike deeper than understanding, the random memories of ordinary days, all of it tattering away. It felt so good. All I had to do was let go.

But that would have made Galen right about me.

Verity?

There was no reply. Nothing. He wasn't there.

I drew back into myself and pulled my entire self about my mind. I could do it, I found, I could hold myself in the Skill stream and yet maintain my identity. Why had it always been so hard before? I set that question aside and considered the worst. The worst was that Verity had been alive and spoken to me, a few short months ago. 'Tell them Verity's alive. That's all.' And I had, but they had not understood, and no one had taken any action. Yet what could that message have been, if not a plea for help? A call for help from my king had gone unanswered.

Suddenly that was not a thing to be borne, and the Skill cry that went out from me was something I felt, as if my very life sprang out of my chest in a questing reach.

VERITY!

... Chivalry?

No more than a whisper brushing against my consciousness, as slight as a moth battering at a window-curtain. It was my turn, this time, to reach and grasp and steady. I flung myself out toward him and found him. His presence flickered like a candle-flame guttering out in the pool of its own wax. I knew he would soon be gone. I had a thousand questions. I asked the only important one.

Verity. Can you take strength from me, without touching me?

Fitz? The question more feeble, more hesitant. *I thought Chivalry had come back ...* He teetered on the edge of darkness ... *to take this burden from me ...*

Verity, pay attention. Think. Can you take strength from me? Can you do it now?

I don't ... I can't reach. Fitz?

I remembered Shrewd, drawing strength from me to Skill a farewell to his son. And how Justin and Serene had attacked him and leeches all his strength away and killed him. How he had died, like a bubble popping. Like a spark winking out.

VERITY! I flung myself at him, wrapped myself around him, steadied him as he had so often steadied me in our Skill contacts. *Take from me,* I commanded him, and opened myself to him. I willed myself to believe in the reality of his hand on my shoulder, tried to recall what it had felt like the times when he or Shrewd had drawn strength from me. The flame that was Verity leapt up suddenly, and after a moment burned strong and clean again.

Enough, he cautioned me, and then more strongly, *Be careful, boy!*

No, I'm all right, I can do this, I assured him, and willed my strength to him.

Enough! he insisted, and drew back from me. It was almost as if we stepped slightly apart and considered one another. I could not see his body, but I could sense the terrible weariness in him. It was not the healthy weariness that comes at the end of a day's labour, but the bone weariness of one grinding day piled upon another, with never food enough nor rest enough in between them. I had given him strength, but not health, and he

would quickly burn the vitality he had borrowed from me, for it was not true strength any more than elfbark tea was a sustaining meal.

Where are you? I demanded of him.

In the Mountains, he said unwillingly, and added, *it is not safe to say more. We should not Skill at all. There are those who would try to hear us.*

But he did not end the contact, and I knew he was as hungry to ask questions as I was. I tried to think what I could tell him. I could sense no one save ourselves but I was not certain I would know if we were spied upon. For long moments our contact held simply as an awareness of one another. Then Verity warned me sternly, *You must be more careful. You will draw down trouble on yourself. Yet I take heart from this. I have gone long without the touch of a friend.*

Then it is worth any risk to myself. I hesitated, then found I could not confine the thought within myself. *My king. There is something I must do. But when it is done, I will come to you.*

I sensed something from him then. A gratitude humbling in its intensity. *I hope I shall still be here if you arrive.* Then, more sternly, *Speak no names, Skill only if you must.* More softly, then, *Be careful of yourself, boy. Be very careful. They are ruthless.*

And then he was gone.

He had broken the Skill contact off cleanly. I hoped that wherever he was, he would use the strength I had loaned him to find some food or a safe place to rest. I had sensed him living as a hunted thing, always wary, ever hungry. Prey, much as I was. And something else. An injury, a fever? I leaned back in my chair, trembling lightly. I knew better than to try to stand. Simply Skilling took strength out of me, and I had opened myself to Verity and let him draw off even more. In a few moments, when the shaking lessened, I would make some elfbark tea and restore myself. For now I sat and stared into the fire and thought of Verity.

Verity had left Buckkeep last autumn. It seemed an eternity ago. When Verity had departed, King Shrewd had lived yet, and Verity's wife Kettricken had been pregnant. He had set himself a quest. The Red Ship Raiders from the Out Islands had assailed our shores for three full years, and all our efforts to drive them away had failed. So Verity, King-in-Waiting for the throne of the Six Duchies, had set out to go to the Mountains, there to find our near legendary allies, the Elderlings. Tradition had it that generations ago King Wisdom had sought them out and they had aided the Six Duchies against

similar raiders. They had also promised to return if ever we needed them. And so Verity had left throne and wife and kingdom behind to seek them out and remind them of their promise. His aged father, King Shrewd, had remained behind, and also his younger brother, Prince Regal.

Almost the moment Verity was gone, Regal began to move against him. He courted the Inland Dukes and ignored the needs of the Coastal Duchies. I suspected he was the source of the whispered rumours that made mock of Verity's quest and painted him as an irresponsible fool if not a madman. The coterie of Skill users who should have been sworn to Verity had long been corrupted to Regal's service. He used them to announce that Verity had died while en route to the Mountains, and then proclaimed himself King-in-Waiting. His control over the ailing King Shrewd became absolute; Regal had declared he would move his court inland, abandoning Buckkeep in every way that mattered to the mercies of the Red Ships. When he announced that King Shrewd and Verity's Queen Kettricken must go with him, Chade had decided we must act. We knew Regal would suffer neither of them to stand between him and the throne. So we had made our plans to spirit them both away, on the very evening he declared himself King-in-Waiting.

Nothing went as planned. The Coastal Dukes had been close to rising up against Regal; they had tried to recruit me to their rebellion. I had agreed to aid their cause, in the hope of keeping Buckkeep as a position of power for Verity. Before we could spirit the King away, two coterie members had killed him. Only Kettricken had fled, and although I had killed those who had killed King Shrewd, I myself was captured, tortured, and found guilty of the Wit magic. Lady Patience, my father's wife, had interceded on my behalf to no avail. Had Burrich not managed to smuggle poison to me, I would have been hung over water and burned. But the poison had been enough to counterfeit death convincingly. While my soul rode with Nighteyes in his body, Patience had claimed my body from the prison cell and buried it. Unbeknownst to her, Burrich and Chade had disinterred me as soon as they safely could.

I blinked my eyes and looked away from the flames. The fire had burned low. My life was like that now, all in ashes behind me. There was no way to reclaim the woman I had loved. Molly believed me dead now, and doubtless viewed my use of Wit magic with disgust. And anyway she had left me days before the rest of my life had fallen apart. I had known her since we were children and had played together on the streets and docks of

Buckkeep Town. She had called me Newboy, and assumed I was just one of the children from the keep, a stable-boy or a scribe's lad. She had fallen in love with me before she discovered that I was the Bastard, the illegitimate son that had forced Chivalry to abdicate the throne. When she found out, I very nearly lost her. But I had persuaded her to trust me, to believe in me, and for almost a year, we had clung to one another, despite every obstacle. Time and again, I had been forced to put my duty to the King ahead of what we wished to do. The King had refused me permission to marry; she had accepted that. He had pledged me to another woman. Even that, she had tolerated. She had been threatened and mocked, as the 'bastard's whore'. I had been unable to protect her. But she had been so steadfast through it all ... until one day she simply told me there was someone else for her, someone she could love, and put above all else in her life, just as I did my king. And she had left me. I could not blame her. I could only miss her.

I closed my eyes. I was tired, nearly exhausted. And Verity had warned me to Skill no more unless I must. But surely it could not hurt to attempt a glimpse of Molly. Just to see her, for a moment, to see that she was well ... I probably wouldn't even succeed at seeing her. But what could I hurt by trying, just for a moment?

It should have been easy. It was effortless to recall everything about her. I had so often breathed her scent, compounded of the herbs she used to scent her candles, and the warmth of her own sweet skin. I knew every nuance of her voice, and how it went deeper when she laughed. I could recall the precise line of her jaw, and how she set her chin when she was annoyed with me. I knew the glossy texture of her rich brown hair and the darting glance of her dark eyes. She had had a way of putting her hands to the sides of my face and holding me firmly while she kissed me ... I lifted my own hand to my face, wishing I could find her hand there, that I could trap it and hold it forever. Instead I felt the seam of a scar. The foolish tears rose warm in my eyes. I blinked them away, seeing the flames of my fire swim for a moment before my vision steadied. I was tired, I told myself. Too tired to try and find Molly with my Skill. I should try to get some sleep. I tried to set myself apart from these too-human emotions. Yet this was what I chose when I chose to be a man again. Maybe it was wiser to be a wolf. Surely an animal never had to feel these things.

Out in the night, a single wolf lifted his nose and howled suddenly up to the sky, piercing the night with his loneliness and despair.

FOUR

The River Road

Buck, the oldest Duchy of the Six Duchies, has a coastline that stretches from just below the Highdowns southwards to include the mouth of the Buck River and Bay of Buck. Antler Island is included in the Duchy of Buck. Buck's wealth has two major sources: the rich fishing grounds that the coastal folk have always enjoyed, and the shipping trade created by supplying the Inland Duchies with all they lack via the Buck River. The Buck River is a wide river, meandering freely in its bed, and often flooding the lowlands of Buck during the spring. The current is such that an ice-free channel has always remained open in the river year round, save for the four severest winters in Buck's history. Not only Buck goods travel up the river to the Inland Duchies, but trade goods from Rippon and Shoaks Duchies, not to mention the more exotic items from the Chalced States and those of the Bingtown Traders. Down the river comes all that the Inland Duchies have to offer, as well as the fine furs and ambers from the Mountain Kingdom trade.

I awoke when Nighteyes nudged my cheek with a cold nose. Even then I did not startle awake, but became soddenly aware of my surroundings. My head pounded and my face felt stiff. The empty bottle from the elderberry wine rolled away from me as I pushed myself to a sitting position on the floor.

You sleep too soundly. Are you sick?

No. Just stupid.

I never before noticed that it made you sleep soundly.

He poked me with his nose again and I pushed him away. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, then opened them again. Nothing had improved. I tossed a few more sticks of wood onto the embers of last night's fire. 'Is it morning?' I asked sleepily, aloud.

The light is just starting to change. We should go back to the rabbit warren place.

You go ahead. I'm not hungry.

Very well. He started off, then paused in the open doorway. *I do not think that sleeping inside is good for you.* Then he was gone, a shifting of

greyness from the threshold. Slowly I lay down again and closed my eyes. I would sleep for just a short time longer.

When I awoke again, full daylight was streaming in the open door. A brief Wit-quest found a satiated wolf drowsing in the dappling sunlight between two big roots of an oak tree. Nighteyes had small use for bright sunny days. Today I agreed with him, but forced myself back to yesterday's resolution. I began to set the hut to rights. Then it occurred to me that I would probably never see this place again. Habit made me finish sweeping it out anyway. I cleared the ashes from the hearth, and set a fresh armload of wood there. If anyone did pass this way and need shelter, they would find all ready for them. I gathered up my now-dry clothing and set everything I would be taking with me on the table. It was pathetically little if one were thinking of it as all I had. When I considered that I had to carry all of it on my own back, it seemed plentiful. I went down to the stream to drink and wash before trying to make it into a manageable pack.

As I walked back from the stream, I was wondering how disgruntled Nighteyes was going to be about travelling by day. I had dropped my extra leggings on the doorstep somehow. I stooped and picked them up as I entered, tossing them onto the table. I suddenly realized I wasn't alone.

The garment on the doorstep should have warned me, but I had become careless. It had been too long since I had been threatened. I had begun to rely too completely on my Wit-sense to let me know when others were around. Forged ones could not be perceived that way. Neither the Wit nor the Skill would avail me anything against them. There were two of them, both young men, and not long Forged by the look of them. Their clothing was mostly intact and while they were dirty, it was not the ground-in filth and matted hair that I had come to associate with the Forged.

Most of the times I had fought Forged ones it had been winter and they had been weakened by privation. One of my duties as King Shrewd's assassin had been to keep the area around Buckkeep free of them. We had never discovered what magic the Red Ships used on our folk, to snatch them from their families and return them but hours later as emotionless brutes. We knew only that the sole cure was a merciful death. The Forged ones were the worst of the horrors that the Raiders loosed on us. They left our own kin to prey on us long after their ships were gone. Which was worse: to face your brother, knowing that theft, murder or rape were perfectly acceptable to him

now, as long as he got what he wished? Or to take up your knife and go out to hunt him down and kill him?

I had interrupted the two as they were pawing through my possessions. Hands full of dried meat, they were feeding, each keeping a wary eye on the other. Though Forged ones might travel together, they had absolutely no loyalty to anyone. Perhaps the company of other humans was merely a habit. I had seen them turn savagely upon one another to dispute ownership of some plunder, or merely when they had become hungry enough. But now they swung their gazes to me, considering. I froze where I was. For a moment, no one moved.

They had the food and all my possessions. There was no reason for them to attack me, as long as I didn't challenge them. I eased back toward the door, stepping slowly and carefully, keeping my hands down and still. Just as if I had come upon a bear on its kill, so I did not look directly at them as I gingerly eased back from their territory. I was nearly clear of the door when one lifted a dirty hand to point at me. 'Dreams too loud!' he declared angrily. They both dropped their plunder and sprang after me.

I whirled and fled, smashing solidly chest to chest with one who was just coming in the door. He was wearing my extra shirt and little else. His arms closed around me almost reflexively. I did not hesitate. I could reach my belt knife and did, and punched it into his belly a couple of times before he fell back from me. He curled over with a roar of pain as I shoved past him.

Brother! I sensed, and knew Nighteyes was coming, but he was too far away, up on the ridge. A man hit me solidly from behind and I went down. I rolled in his grip, screaming in hoarse terror as he suddenly awakened in me every searing memory of Regal's dungeon. Panic came over me like a sudden poison. I plunged back into nightmare. I was too terrified to move. My heart hammered, I could not take a breath, my hands were numb, I could not tell if I still gripped my knife. His hand touched my throat. Frantically I flailed at him, thinking only of escape, of evading that touch. His companion saved me, with a savage kick that grazed my side as I thrashed and connected solidly with the ribs of the man on top of me. I heard him gasp out his air, and with a wild shove I had him off me. I rolled clear, came to my feet and fled.

I ran powered by fear so intense I could not think. I heard one man close behind me, and thought I could hear the other behind him. But I knew

these hills and pastures now as my wolf knew them. I took them up the steep hill behind the cottage and before they could crest it I changed direction and went to earth. An oak had fallen during the last of the winter's wild storms, rearing up a great wall of earth with its tangled roots, and taking lesser trees down with it. It had made a fine tangle of trunks and branches, and let a wide slice of sunlight into the forest. The blackberries had sprung up rejoicing and overwhelmed the fallen giant. I flung myself to the earth beside it. I squirmed on my belly through the thorniest part of the blackberry canes, into the darkness beneath the oak's trunk and then lay completely still.

I heard their angry shouting as they searched for me. In a panic I threw up my mental walls as well. 'Dreams too loud,' the Forged one had accused me. Well, Chade and Verity had both suspected that Skilling drew the Forged ones. Perhaps the keenness of feeling it demanded and the outreaching of that feeling in Skill touched something in them and reminded them of all they had lost.

And made them want to kill whomever could still feel? Maybe.

Brother?

It was Nighteyes, muted somehow, or at a very great distance. I dared open to him a bit.

I'm all right. Where are you?

Right here. I heard a rustling and suddenly he was there, bellying through to me. He touched his nose to my cheek. *Are you hurt?*

No. I ran away.

Wise, he observed, and I could sense that he meant it.

But I could sense too that he was surprised. He had never seen me flee from Forged ones. Always before I had stood and fought, and he had stood and fought beside me. Well, those times I had usually been well armed and well fed, and they had been starved and suffering from the cold. Three against one when you've only a belt knife as a weapon are bad odds, even if you know a wolf is coming to help you. There was nothing of cowardice in it. Any man would have done so. I repeated the thought several times to myself.

It's all right, he soothed me. Then he added, *Don't you want to come out?*

In a while. When they've gone, I hushed him.

They've been gone a long time, now, he offered me. *They left while the sun was still high.*

I just want to be sure.

I am sure. I watched them go, I followed them. Come out, little brother.

I let him coax me out of the brambles. I found when I emerged that the sun was almost setting. How many hours had I spent in there, senses deadened, like a snail pulled into its shell? I brushed dirt from the front of my formerly clean clothes. There was blood there as well, the blood of the young man in the doorway. I'd have to wash my clothes again, I thought dumbly. For a moment I thought of hauling the water and heating it, of scrubbing out the blood, and then I knew I could not go into the hut and be trapped in there again.

Yet the few possessions I had were there. Or whatever the Forged ones had left of them. By moonrise I had found the courage to approach the hut. It was a good full moon, lighting up the wide meadow before the hut. For some time I crouched on the ridge, peering down and watching for any shadows that might move. One man was lying in the deep grass near the door of the hut. I stared at him for a long time, looking for movement.

He's dead. Use your nose, Nighteyes recommended.

That would be the one I had met coming out the door. My knife must have found something vital; he had not gone far. Still, I stalked him through the darkness as carefully as if he were a wounded bear. But soon I smelled the sweetish stench of something dead left all day in the sun. He was sprawled face down in the grass. I did not turn him over, but made a wide circle around him.

I peered through the window of the hut, studying the still darkness of the interior for some minutes.

There's no one in there, Nighteyes reminded me impatiently.

You are sure?

As sure as I am that I have a wolf's nose and not a useless lump of flesh beneath my eyes. My brother ...

He let the thought trail off, but I could feel his wordless anxiety for me. I almost shared it. A part of me knew there was little to fear, that the Forged ones had taken whatever they wanted and moved on. Another part could not forget the weight of the man upon me, and the brushing force of that kick. I had been pinned like that against the stone floor of a dungeon and pounded, fist and boot, and I had not been able to do anything. Now that I had that memory back, I wondered how I would live with it.

I did, finally, go into the hut. I even forced myself to kindle a light, once my groping hands had found my flint. My hands shook as I hastily gathered what they had left me and bundled it into my cloak. The open door behind me was a threatening black gap through which they might come at any moment. Yet if I closed it, I might be trapped inside. Not even Nighteyes keeping watch on the doorstep could reassure me.

They had taken only what they had immediate use for. Forged ones did not plan beyond each moment. All the dried meat had been eaten or flung aside. I wanted none of what they had touched. They had opened my scribe's case, but lost interest when they found nothing to eat in there. My smaller box of poisons and herbs they had probably assumed held my scribe's colour pots. It had not been tampered with. Of my clothes, only the one shirt had been taken, and I had no interest in reclaiming it. I'd punched its belly full of holes anyway. I took what was left and departed. I crossed the meadow and climbed to the top of the ridge, where I had a good view in all directions. There I sat down and with trembling hands packed what I had left for travelling. I used my winter cloak to wrap it, and tied the bundle tightly with leather thongs. A separate strapping allowed me to sling it over a shoulder. When I had more light, I could devise a better way to carry it.

'Ready?' I asked Nighteyes.

Do we hunt now?

No. We travel. I hesitated. *Are you very hungry?*

A bit. Are you in so much of a hurry to be away from here?

I didn't need to think about that. 'Yes. I am.'

Then do not be concerned. We can both travel and hunt.

I nodded, then glanced up at the night sky. I found the Tiller in the night sky, and took a bearing off it. 'That way,' I said, pointing down the far side of the ridge. The wolf made no reply, but simply rose and trotted purposefully off in the direction I had pointed. I followed, ears pricked and all senses keen for anything that might move in the night. I moved quietly and nothing followed us. Nothing followed me at all, save my fear.

The night travelling became our pattern. I had planned to travel by day and sleep by night. But after that first night of trotting through the woods behind Nighteyes, following whichever game trails led in a generally correct direction, I decided it was better. I could not have slept by night anyway. For the first few days I even had trouble sleeping by day. I would find a vantage point that still offered us concealment and lie down, certain of my

exhaustion. I would curl up and close my eyes and then lie there, tormented by the keenness of my own senses. Every sound, every scent would jolt me back to alertness, and I could not relax again until I had arisen to assure myself there was no danger. After a time, even Nighteyes complained of my restlessness. When finally I did fall asleep, it was only to shudder awake at intervals, sweating and shaking. Lack of sleep by day made me miserable by night as I trotted along in Nighteyes' wake.

Yet those sleepless hours and the hours when I trotted after Nighteyes, head pounding with pain, those were not wasted hours. In those hours I nurtured my hatred of Regal and his coterie. I honed it to a fine edge. This was what he had made of me. Not enough that he had taken from me my life, my lover, not enough that I must avoid the people and places I cared about, not enough the scars I bore and the random tremblings that overtook me. No. He had made me this, this shaking, frightened rabbit of a man. I had not even the courage to recall all he had done to me, yet I knew that when push came to shove, those memories would rise up and reveal themselves to unman me. The memories I could not summon by day lurked as fragments of sounds and colours and textures that tormented me by night. The sensation of my cheek against cold stone slick with a thin layer of my warm blood. The flash of light that accompanied a man's fist striking the side of my head. The guttural sounds men make, the hooting and grunting that issues from them as they watch someone being beaten. Those were the jagged edges that sliced through my efforts at sleep. Sandy-eyed and trembling, I would lie awake beside the wolf and think of Regal. Once I had had a love that I had believed would carry me through anything. Regal had taken that from me. Now I nurtured a hatred fully as strong.

We hunted as we travelled. My resolution always to cook the meat soon proved futile. I managed a fire perhaps one night out of three, and only if I could find a hollow where it would not attract attention. I did not, however, allow myself to sink down to being less than a beast. I kept myself clean, and took as much care with my clothing as our rough life allowed me.

My plan for our journey was a simple one. We would travel cross country until we struck the Buck River. The river road paralleled it up to Turlake. A lot of people travelled the road; it might be difficult for the wolf to remain unseen, but it was the swiftest way. Once there, it was but a short distance to Tradeford on the Vin River. In Tradeford, I would kill Regal.

That was the total sum of my plan. I refused to consider how I would accomplish any of this. I refused to worry about all I did not know. I would simply move forward, one day at a time, until I had met my goals. That much I had learned from being a wolf.

I knew the coast from a summer of manning an oar on Verity's warship the *Rurisk*, but I was not personally familiar with the inlands of Buck Duchy. True, I had travelled through it once before, on the way to the Mountains for Kettricken's pledging ceremony. Then I had been part of the wedding caravan, well mounted and well provisioned. But now I travelled alone and on foot, with time to consider what I saw. We crossed some wild country, but much, too, had once been summer pasturage for flocks of sheep, goats and cattle. Time after time, we traversed meadows chest-high in ungrazed grasses, to find shepherds' huts cold and deserted since last autumn. The flocks we did see were small ones, not nearly the size of flocks I recalled from previous years. I saw few swineherds and goose-girls compared to my first journey through this area. As we drew closer to the Buck River, we passed grainfields substantially smaller than I recalled, with much good land given back to wild grasses, not even ploughed.

It made small sense to me. I had seen this happening along the coast, where farmers' flocks and crops had been repeatedly destroyed by the raids. In recent years, whatever did not go to the Red Ships in fire or plunder was taken by taxes to fund the warships and soldiers that scarcely protected them. But upriver, out of the Raiders' reach, I had thought to find Buck more prosperous. It disheartened me.

We soon struck the road that followed the Buck River. There was much less traffic than I recalled, both on the road and the river. Those we encountered on the road were brusque and unfriendly, even when Nighteyes was out of sight. I stopped once at a farmstead to ask if I might draw cold water from their well. It was allowed me, but no one called off the snarling dogs as I did so, and when my waterskin was full, the woman told me I'd best be on my way. Her attitude seemed to be the prevailing one.

And the further I went, the worse it became. The travellers I encountered on the roads were not merchants with wagons of goods or farmers taking produce to market. Instead they were ragged families, often with all they possessed in a pushcart or two. The eyes of the adults were hard and unfriendly, while those of the children were often stricken and empty. Any hopes I had had of finding day-work along this road were soon

surrendered. Those who still possessed homes and farms guarded them jealously. Dogs barked in the yards and farmworkers guarded the young crops from thieves after dark. We passed several 'beggar-towns', clusters of makeshift huts and tents alongside the road. By night, bonfires burned brightly in them and cold-eyed adults stood guard with staffs and pikes. By day, children sat along the road and begged from passing travellers. I thought I understood why the merchant wagons I did see were so well guarded.

We had travelled on the road for several nights, ghosting silently through many small hamlets before we came to a town of any size. Dawn overtook us as we approached the outskirts. When some early merchants with a cart of caged chickens overtook us, we knew it was time to get out of sight. We settled for the daylight hours on a small rise that let us look down on a town built half out onto the river. When I could not sleep, I sat and watched the commerce on the road below us. Small boats and large were tied at the docks of the town. Occasionally the wind brought me the shouts of the crews unloading from the ships. Once I even heard a snatch of song. To my surprise, I found myself drawn to my own kind. I left Nighteyes sleeping, but only went as far as the creek at the foot of the hill. I set myself to washing out my shirt and leggings.

We should avoid this place. They will try to kill you if you go there, Nighteyes offered helpfully. He was sitting on a creek bank beside me, watching me wash myself as evening darkened the sky. My shirt and leggings were almost dry. I had been attempting to explain to him why I wished to have him wait for me while I went into the town to the inn there.

Why would they want to kill me?

We are strangers, coming into their hunting grounds. Why shouldn't they try to kill us?

Humans are not like that, I explained patiently.

No. You are right. They will probably just put you in a cage and beat you.

No they won't, I insisted firmly to cover my own fears that perhaps someone might recognize me.

They did before, he insisted. *Both of us. And that was your own pack.*

I could not deny that. So I promised, *I will be very, very careful. I shall not be long. I just want to go listen to them talk for a bit, to find out what is happening.*

Why should we care what is happening to them? What is happening to us is that we are neither hunting, nor sleeping, nor travelling. They are not pack with us.

It may tell us what to expect, further on our journey. I may find out if the roads are heavily travelled, if there is work I can take for a day or so to get a few coins. That sort of thing.

We could simply travel on and find out for ourselves, Nighteyes pointed out stubbornly.

I dragged on my shirt and leggings over my damp skin. I combed my hair back with my fingers, squeezed the moisture from it. Habit made me tie it back in a warrior's tail. Then I bit my lip, considering. I had planned to represent myself as a wandering scribe. I took it out of its tail and shook it loose. It came almost to my shoulders. A bit long for a scribe's hair. Most of them kept their hair short, and shaved it back from the brow line to keep it from their eyes when they worked. Well, with my untrimmed beard and shaggy hair, perhaps I could be taken for a scribe who had been long without work. Not a good recommendation for my skills, but given the poor supplies I had, perhaps that was best.

I tugged my shirt straight to make myself presentable. I fastened my belt, checked to be sure my knife sat securely in its sheath, and then hefted the paltry weight of my purse. The flint in it weighed more than the coins. I did have the four silver bits from Burrich. A few months ago it would not have seemed like much money. Now it was all I had, and I resolved not to spend it unless I must. The only other wealth I had was the earring Burrich had given me and the pin from Shrewd. Reflexively my hand went to the earring. As annoying as it could be when we were hunting through dense brush, the touch of it always reassured me. Likewise the pin in the collar of my shirt.

The pin that wasn't there.

I took the shirt off and checked the entire collar, and then the complete garment. I methodically kindled a small fire for light. Then I undid my bundle completely and went through everything in it, not once, but twice. This despite my almost certain knowledge of where the pin was. The small red ruby in its nest of silver was in the collar of a shirt worn by a dead man outside the shepherd's hut. I was all but certain, and yet I could not admit it to myself. All the while I searched, Nighteyes prowled in an uncertain circle around my fire, whining in soft agitation about an anxiety he sensed but

could not comprehend. ‘Shush!’ I told him irritably and forced my mind to go back over the events as if I were going to report to Shrewd.

The last time I could remember having the pin was the night I had driven Burrich and Shrewd away. I had taken it out of the shirt’s collar and showed it to them both, and then sat looking at it. Then I had put it back. I could not recall handling it since then. I could not recall taking it out of the shirt when I washed it. It seemed I should have jabbed myself with it when I washed it if it was still there. But I usually pushed the pin into a seam where it would hold tighter. It had seemed safer so. I had no way of knowing if I had lost it hunting with the wolf, or if it were still in the shirt the dead man wore. Perhaps it had been left on the table, and one of the Forged ones had picked up the bright thing when they pawed through my possessions.

It was just a pin, I reminded myself. With a sick longing I wished I would suddenly see it, caught in the lining of my cloak or tumbled inside my boot. In a sudden flash of hope, I checked inside both boots again. It still wasn’t there. Just a pin, just a bit of worked metal and a gleaming stone. Just the token King Shrewd had given me when he claimed me, when he created a bond between us to replace the blood one that could never be legitimately recognized. Just a pin, and all I had left of my king and my grandfather. Nighteyes whined again, and I felt an irrational urge to snarl back at him. He must have known that, but still he came, flipping my elbow up with his nose and then burrowing his head under my arm until his great grey head was up against my chest and my arm around his shoulders. He tossed his nose up suddenly, clacking his muzzle painfully against my chin. I hugged him hard, and he turned to rub his throat against my face. The ultimate gesture of trust, wolf to wolf, that baring of the throat to another’s possible snarl. After a moment I sighed, and the pain of loss I felt over the thing was less.

It was just a thing from a yesterday, Nighteyes wondered hesitantly. A thing no longer here? It is not a thorn in your paw, or a pain in your belly?

‘Just a thing from yesterday,’ I had to agree. A pin that had been given to a boy who no longer existed by a man who had died. Perhaps it was as well, I thought to myself. One less thing that might connect me to FitzChivalry the Witted. I ruffled the fur on the back of his neck, then scratched behind his ears. He sat up beside me, then nudged me to get me to rub his ears again. I did, thinking as I did so. Perhaps I should take off Burrich’s earring and keep it concealed in my pouch. But I knew I would not. Let it be the one link I carried forward from that life to this one. ‘Let me

up,' I told the wolf, and he reluctantly stopped leaning on me. Methodically I repacked my possessions into a bundle and fastened it, then trampled out the tiny fire.

'Shall I come back here or meet you on the other side of town?'

Other side?

If you circle about the town and then come back toward the river, you will find more of the road there, I explained. *Shall we find one another there?*

That would be good. The less time we spend near this den of humans, the better.

Fine, then. I shall find you there before morning, I told him.

More likely, I shall find you, numb nose. And I shall have a full belly when I do.

I had to concede that was likelier.

Watch out for dogs, I warned him as he faded into the brush.

You watch out for men, he rejoined, and then was lost to my senses save for our Wit-bond.

I slung my pack over my shoulder and made my way down to the road. It was full dark now. I had intended to reach town before dark and stop at a tavern for the talk and perhaps a mug, and then be on my way. I had wanted to walk through the market square and listen in on the talk of the merchants. Instead I walked into a town that was mostly abed. The market was deserted save for a few dogs nosing in the empty stalls for scraps. I left the square and turned my steps toward the river. Down there I would find inns and taverns aplenty to accommodate the river trade. A few torches burned here and there throughout the town, but most of the light in the streets was what spilled from poorly-shuttered windows. The roughly-cobbled streets were not well kept up. Several times I mistook a hole for a shadow and nearly stumbled. I stopped a town watchman before he could stop me, to ask him to recommend a waterfront inn to me. The Scales, he told me, was as fair and honest to travellers as its name implied, and was easily found as well. He warned me sternly that begging was not tolerated there, and that cutpurses would be lucky if a beating was all they got. I thanked him for his warnings and went on my way.

I found the Scales as easily as the watchman had said I would. Light spilled out from its open door, and with it the voices of two women singing a merry round. My heart cheered at the friendly sound of it, and I entered

without hesitation. Within the stout walls of mud brick and heavy timbers was a great open room, low-ceilinged and rich with the smells of meat and smoke and riverfolk. A cooking hearth at one end of the room had a fine spit of meat in its maw, but most folk were gathered at the cooler end of the room on this fine summer evening. There the two minstrels had dragged chairs up on top of a table and were twining their voices together. A grey-haired fellow with a harp, evidently part of their group, was sweating at another table as he fastened a new string to his instrument. I judged them a master and two journey singers, possibly a family group. I stood watching them sing together, and my mind went back to Buckkeep and the last time I had heard music and seen folk gathered together. I did not realize I was staring until I saw one of the women surreptitiously elbow the other and make a minute gesture at me. The other woman rolled her eyes, then returned my look. I looked down, reddening. I surmised I had been rude and turned my eyes away.

I stood on the outskirts of the group, and joined in the applause when the song ended. The fellow with the harp was ready by then, and he coaxed them into a gentler tune, one with the steady rhythm of oars as its beat. The women sat on the edge of the table, back to back, their long black hair mingling as they sang. Folk sat down for that one, and some few moved to tables against the wall for quiet talk. I watched the man's fingers on the strings of the harp, marvelling at the swiftness of his fingers. In a moment a red-cheeked boy was at my elbow, asking what I would have. Just a mug of ale, I told him, and swiftly he was back with it and the handful of coppers that were the remains of my silver piece. I found a table not too far from the minstrels, and rather hoped someone would be curious enough to join me. But other than a few glances from obviously regular customers, no one seemed much interested in a stranger. The minstrels ended their song and began talking amongst themselves. A glance from the older of the two women made me realize I was staring again. I put my eyes on the table.

Halfway down the mug, I realized I was no longer accustomed to ale, especially not on an empty stomach. I waved the boy back to my table and asked for a plate of dinner. He brought me a fresh cut of meat from the spit with a serving of stewed root vegetables and broth spilled over it. That, and a refilling of my mug took away most of my copper pieces. When I raised my eyebrows over the prices, the boy looked surprised. 'It's half what they'd

charge you at the Yardarm Knot, sir,' he told me indignantly. 'And the meat is good mutton, not someone's randy old goat come to a bad end.'

I tried to smooth things over, saying, 'Well, I suppose a silver bit just doesn't buy what it used to.'

'Perhaps not, but it's scarcely my fault,' he observed cheekily, and went back to his kitchens.

'Well, there's a silver bit gone faster than I expected,' I chided myself.

'Now that's a tune we all know,' observed the harper. He was sitting with his back to his own table, apparently watching me as his two partners discussed some problem they were having with a pipe. I nodded at him with a smile, and then spoke aloud when I noticed that his eyes were hazed over grey.

'I've been away from the river road for a while. A long while, actually, about two years. The last time I was through here, inns and food were less expensive.'

'Well, I'd wager you could say that about anywhere in the Six Duchies, at least the coastal ones. The saying now is that we get new taxes more often than we get a new moon.' He glanced about us as if he could see, and I guessed he had not been blind long. 'And the other new saying is that half the taxes go to feed the Farrow men who collect them.'

'Josh!' one of his partners rebuked him, and he turned to her with a smile.

'You can't tell me there are any about just now, Honey. I've a nose that could smell a Farrow man at a hundred paces.'

'And can you smell who you are talking to, then?' she asked him wryly. Honey was the older of the two women, perhaps my age.

'A lad a bit down on his luck, I'd say. And therefore, not some fat Farrow man come to collect taxes. Besides, I knew he couldn't be one of Bright's collectors the moment he started snivelling over the price of dinner. When have you known one of them to pay for anything at an inn or tavern?'

I frowned to myself at that. When Shrewd had been on the throne, nothing was taken by his soldiers or tax-collectors without some recompense offered. Evidently it was a nicety Lord Bright did not observe, at least in Buck. But it did recall me to my own manners.

'May I offer to refill your mug, Harper Josh? And those of your companions as well?'

‘What’s this?’ asked the old man, between a smile and a raised eyebrow. ‘You growl about spending coin to fill your belly, but you’d put it down willingly to fill mugs for us?’

‘Shame to the lord that takes minstrels’ songs, and leaves their throats dry from the singing of it,’ I replied with a smile.

The women exchanged glances behind Josh’s back, and Honey asked me with gentle mockery, ‘And when were you last a lord, young fellow?’

‘’Tis but a saying,’ I said after a moment, awkwardly. ‘But I wouldn’t grudge the coin for the songs I’ve heard, especially if you’ve a bit of news to go with it. I’m headed up the river road; have you perchance just come down?’

‘No, we’re headed up that way ourselves,’ put in the younger woman brightly. She was perhaps fourteen, with startlingly blue eyes. I saw the other woman make a hushing motion at her. She introduced them. ‘As you’ve heard, good sir, this is Harper Josh, and I am Honey. My cousin is Piper. And you are ... ?’

Two blunders in one short conversation. One, to speak as if I still resided at Buckkeep and these were visiting minstrels, and the other, to have no name planned out. I searched my mind for a name, and then after a bit too much of a pause, blurted out, ‘Cob’. And then wondered with a shiver why I had taken to myself the name of a man I’d known and killed.

‘Well ... Cob,’ and Honey paused before saying the name just as I had, ‘we might have a bit of news for you, and we’d welcome a mug of anything, whether you’re lately a lord or not. Just who are you hoping we won’t have seen on the road looking for you?’

‘Beg pardon?’ I asked quietly, and then lifted my own empty mug to signal the kitchen-boy.

‘He’s a runaway ’prentice, Father,’ Honey told her father with great certainty. ‘He carries a scribe’s case strapped to his bundle, but his hair’s grown out, and there’s not even a dot of ink on his fingers.’ She laughed at the chagrin on my face, little guessing the cause. ‘Oh, come, ... Cob, I’m a minstrel. When we aren’t singing, we’re witnessing anything we can to find a deed to base a song on. You can’t expect us not to notice things.’

‘I’m not a runaway apprentice,’ I said quietly, but had no ready lie to follow the statement. How Chade would have rapped my knuckles over this blundering!

‘We don’t care if you are, lad,’ Josh comforted me. ‘In any case, we haven’t heard any cry of angry scribes looking for lost apprentices. These days, most would be happy if their bound lads ran away ... one less mouth to feed in hard times.’

‘And a scribe’s boy scarcely gets a broken nose, or a scarred face like that from a patient master,’ Piper observed sympathetically. ‘So small blame to you if you did run away.’

The kitchen-boy came at last, and they were merciful to my flat purse, ordering no more than mugs of beer for themselves. First Josh, and then the women came to share my table. The kitchen-boy must have thought better of me for treating the minstrels well, for when he brought their mugs, he refilled mine as well, and did not charge me for it. Still, it broke another silver bit to coppers to pay for their drinks. I tried to be philosophical about it, and reminded myself to leave a copper bit for the boy when I left.

‘So, then,’ I began when the boy had left, ‘what news from downriver, then?’

‘And have not you just come from there yourself?’ Honey asked tartly.

‘No, my lady, in truth I had come cross country, from visiting some shepherd friends,’ I extemporized. Honey’s manner was beginning to wear on me.

‘My lady,’ she said softly to Piper and rolled her eyes. Piper giggled. Josh ignored them.

‘Downriver is much the same as up these days, only more so,’ he told me. ‘Hard times, and harder to come for those who farm. The food grain went to pay the taxes, so the seed grain went to feed the children. So only what was left went into the fields, and no man grows more by planting less. Same is true for the flocks and herds. And no signs that the taxes will be less this harvest. And even a goose-girl that can’t cipher her own age knows that less take away more leaves naught but hunger on the table. It’s worst along the salt water. If a person goes out fishing, who knows what will happen to home before he returns? A farmer plants a field, knowing it won’t yield enough both for taxes and family, and that there will be less than half of it left standing if the Red Ships come to pay a call. There’s been a clever song made about a farmer who tells the tax-collector that the Red Ships have already done his job for him.’

‘Save that clever minstrels don’t sing it,’ Honey reminded him tartly.

‘Red Ships raid Buck’s coast as well, then,’ I said quietly.

Josh gave a snort of bitter laughter. 'Buck, Bearn, Rippon or Shoaks ... I doubt the Red Ships care where one duchy ends and another begins. If the sea brushes up against it, they'll raid there.'

'And our ships?' I asked softly.

'The ones that have been taken away from us by the Raiders are doing very well. Those left defending us, well, they are as successful as gnats at bothering cattle.'

'Does no one stand firm for Buck these days?' I asked, and heard the despair in my own voice.

'The Lady of Buckkeep does. Not only firmly, but loudly. There's some as say all she does is cry out and scold, but others know that she doesn't call on them to do what she hasn't already done herself.' Harper Josh spoke as if he knew this at first hand.

I was mystified, but did not wish to appear too ignorant. 'Such as?'

'Everything they can. She wears no jewellery at all any more. It's all been sold and put toward paying patrol ships. She sold off her own ancestral lands, and put the money to paying mercenaries to man the towers. It's said she sold the necklace given her by Prince Chivalry, his grandmother's rubies, to King Regal himself, to buy grain and timber for Buck villages that wanted to rebuild.'

'Patience,' I whispered. I had seen those rubies once, long ago, when we had first been getting to know one another. She had deemed them too precious a thing even to wear, but she had shown them to me and told me some day my bride might wear them. Long ago. I turned my head aside and struggled to control my face.

'Where have you been sleeping this past year ... Cob, that you know none of this?' Honey demanded sarcastically.

'I have been away,' I said quietly. I turned back to the table and managed to meet her eyes. I hoped my face showed nothing.

She cocked her head and smiled at me. 'Where?' she countered brightly.

I did not like her much at all. 'I've been living by myself, in the forest,' I said at last.

'Why?' She smiled at me as she pressed me. I was certain she knew how uncomfortable she was making me.

'Obviously, because I wished to,' I said. I sounded so much like Burrich when I said it, I almost looked over my shoulder for him.

She made a small mouth at me, totally unrepentant, but Harper Josh set his mug down on the table a bit firmly. He said nothing, and the look he gave her from his blind eyes was no more than a flicker, but she subsided abruptly. She folded her hands at the edge of the table like a rebuked child, and for a moment I thought her quashed, until she looked up at me from under her lashes. Her eyes met mine directly, and the little smile she shot me was defiant. I looked away from her, totally mystified as to why she wished to peck at me like this. I glanced at Piper, only to find her face bright red with suppressed laughter. I looked down at my hands on the table, hating the blush that suddenly flooded my face.

In an effort to start the conversation again, I asked, 'Are there any other new tidings from Buckkeep?'

Harper Josh gave a short bark of laughter. 'Not much new misery to tell. The tales are all the same, with only the names of the villages and towns different. Oh, but there is one small bit, a rich one. Word is now that King Regal will hang the Pocked Man himself.'

I had been swallowing a sip of ale. I choked abruptly and demanded, 'What?'

'It's a stupid joke,' Honey declared. 'King Regal has had it cried about that he will give gold coin reward to any who can turn over to him a certain man, much scarred with the pox, or silver coin to any man who can give information as to where he may be found.'

'A pox-scarred man? Is that all the description?' I asked carefully.

'He is said to be skinny, and grey-haired, and to sometimes disguise himself as a woman.' Josh chuckled merrily, never guessing how his words turned my bowels to ice. 'And his crime is high treason. Rumour says the King blames him for the disappearance of Queen-in-Waiting Kettricken and her unborn child. Some say he is just a cracked old man who claims to have been an adviser to Shrewd, and as such he has written to the Dukes of the Coastal Duchies, bidding them be brave, that Verity shall return and his child inherit the Farseer throne. But rumour also says, with as much wit, that King Regal hopes to hang the Pocked Man and thus end all bad luck in the Six Duchies.' He chuckled again, and I plastered a sick smile on my face and nodded like a simpleton.

Chade, I thought to myself. Somehow Regal had picked up Chade's trail. If he knew he was pock-scarred, what else might he know? He had obviously connected him to his masquerade as Lady Thyme. I wondered

where Chade was now, and if he was all right. I wished with sudden desperation that I knew what his plans had been, what plot he had excluded me from. With a sudden sinking of heart, my perception of my actions flopped over. Had I driven Chade away from me, to protect him from my plans, or had I abandoned him just when he needed his apprentice?

‘Are you still there, Cob? I see your shadow still, but your place at the table’s gone very quiet.’

‘Oh, I’m here, Harper Josh!’ I tried to put some life into my words. ‘Just mulling over all you’ve told me, that’s all.’

‘Wondering what pocked old man he could sell to King Regal, by the look on his face,’ Honey put in tartly. I suddenly perceived that she saw her constant belittlement and stings as a sort of flirtation. I quickly decided I had had enough companionship and talk for an evening. I was too much out of practice at dealing with folk. I would leave now. Better they thought me odd and rude than that I stayed longer and made them curious.

‘Well, I thank you for your songs, and your conversation,’ I said as gracefully as I could. I fingered out a copper to leave under my mug for the boy. ‘And I had best take myself back to the road.’

‘But it’s full dark outside!’ Piper objected in surprise. She set down her mug and glanced at Honey, who looked shocked.

‘And cool, my lady,’ I observed blithely. ‘I prefer the night for walking. The moon’s close to full, which should be light enough on a road as wide as the river road.’

‘Have you no fear of the Forged ones?’ Harper Josh asked in consternation.

Now it was my turn to be surprised. ‘This far inland?’

‘You *have* been living in a tree,’ Honey exclaimed. ‘All the roads have been plagued with them. Some travellers hire guards, archers and swordsmen. Others, such as we, travel in groups when we can, and only by day.’

‘Cannot the patrols at least keep them from the roads?’ I asked in astonishment.

‘The patrols?’ Honey sniffed disdainfully. ‘Most of us would as soon meet Forged ones as a pack of Farrow men with pikes. The Forged ones do not bother them, and so they do not bother the Forged ones.’

‘What, then, do they patrol for?’ I asked angrily.

‘Smugglers, mainly.’ Josh spoke before Honey could. ‘Or so they would have you believe. Many an honest traveller do they stop to search his belongings and take whatever they fancy, calling it contraband, or claiming it was reported stolen in the last town. Methinks Lord Bright does not pay them as well as they think they deserve, so they take whatever pay they are able.’

‘And Prince ... King Regal, he does nothing?’ How the title and the question choked me.

‘Well, perhaps if you go so far as Tradeford, you might complain to him yourself,’ Honey told me sarcastically. ‘I am sure he would listen to you, as he has not the dozens of messengers who have gone before.’ She paused, and looked thoughtful. ‘Though I have heard that if any Forged ones do make it far enough inland to be a bother, he has ways of dealing with them.’

I felt sickened and wretched. It had always been a matter of pride to King Shrewd that there was little danger of highwaymen in Buck, so long as one kept to the main roads. Now, to hear that those who should guard the king’s roads were little more than highwaymen themselves was like a small blade twisted in me. Not enough that Regal had claimed the throne to himself, and then deserted Buckkeep. He did not keep up even the pretence of ruling wisely. I wondered numbly if he were capable of punishing all Buck for the lacklustre way he had been welcomed to the throne. Foolish wonder; I knew he was. ‘Well, Forged ones or Farrow men, I still must be on my way, I fear,’ I told them. I drank off the last of my mug and set it down.

‘Why not wait at least until the morning, lad, and then travel with us?’ Josh suddenly offered. ‘The days are not too hot for walking, for there’s always a breeze off the river. And four are safer than three, these days.’

‘I thank you kindly for the offer,’ I began, but Josh interrupted me.

‘Don’t thank me, for I wasn’t making an offer, but a request. I’m blind, man, or close enough. Certainly you’ve noticed that. Noticed, too, that my companions are comely young women, though from the way Honey’s nipped at you, I fancy you’ve smiled more at Piper than at her.’

‘Father!’ indignantly from Honey, but Josh ploughed on doggedly.

‘I was not offering you the protection of our numbers, but asking you to consider offering your right arm to us. We’re not rich folk; we’ve no coin to hire guards. And yet we must travel the roads, Forged ones or no.’

Josh’s fogged eyes met mine unerringly. Honey looked aside, lips folded tightly, while Piper openly watched me, a pleading look on her face.

Forged ones. Pinned down, fists falling on me. I looked down at the table-top. 'I'm not much for fighting,' I told him bluntly.

'At least you would see what you were swinging at,' he replied stubbornly. 'And you'd certainly see them coming before I did. Look, you're going the same direction we are. Would it be that hard for you to walk by day for a few days rather than by night?'

'Father, don't beg him!' Honey rebuked him.

'I'd rather beg him to walk with us, than beg Forged ones to let you go unharmed!' he said harshly. He turned his face back to me as he added, 'We met some Forged ones, a couple of weeks back. The girls had the sense to run when I shouted at them to do so, when I could not keep up with them any longer. But we lost our food to them, and they damaged my harp, and ...'

'And they beat him,' Honey said quietly. 'And so we have vowed, Piper and I, that the next time we will not run from them, no matter how many. Not if it means leaving Papa.' All the playful teasing and mockery had gone out of her voice. I knew she meant what she said.

I will be delayed, I sighed to Nighteyes. *Wait for me, watch for me, follow me unseen.*

'I will travel with you,' I conceded. I cannot say I made the offer willingly. 'Though I am not a man who does well at fighting.'

'As if we couldn't tell that from his face,' Honey observed in an aside to Piper. The mockery was back in her voice, but I doubted that she knew how deeply her words cut me.

'My thanks are all I have to pay you with, Cob.' Josh reached across the table for me, and I gripped hands with him in the ancient sign of a bargain settled. He grinned suddenly, his relief plain. 'So take my thanks, and a share of whatever we're offered as minstrels. We've not enough coin for a room, but the innkeeper has offered us shelter in his barn. Not like it used to be, when a minstrel got a room and a meal for the asking. But at least the barn has a door that shuts between us and the night. And the innkeeper here has a good heart; he won't begrudge extending shelter to you if I tell him you're travelling with us as a guard.'

'It will be more shelter than I've known for many a night,' I told him, attempting to be gracious. My heart had sunk into a cold place in the pit of my belly.

What have you got yourself into now? Nighteyes wondered. As did I.

FIVE

Confrontations

What is the Wit? Some would say it is a perversion, a twisted indulgence of spirit by which men gain knowledge of the lives and tongues of the beasts, eventually to become little more than beasts themselves. My study of it and its practitioners has led me to a different conclusion, however. The Wit seems to be a form of mind linking, usually with a particular animal, which opens a way for the understanding of that animal's thoughts and feelings. It does not, as some have claimed, give men the tongues of the birds and beasts. A Witted one does have an awareness of life all across its wide spectrum, including humans and even some of the mightier and more ancient of trees. But a Witted one cannot randomly engage a chance animal in 'conversation'. He can sense an animal's nearby presence, and perhaps know if the animal is wary or hostile or curious. But it does not give one command over the beasts of the land and the birds of the sky as some fanciful tales would have us believe. What the Wit may be is a man's acceptance of the beast nature within himself, and hence an awareness of the element of humanity that every animal carries within it as well. The legendary loyalty that a bonded animal feels for his Witted one is not at all the same as what a loyal beast gives its master. Rather it is a reflection of the loyalty that the Witted one has pledged to his animal companion, like for like.

I did not sleep well, and it was not just that I was no longer accustomed to sleeping at night. What they had told me about Forged ones had put the wind up my back. The musicians all climbed up into the loft to sleep on the heaped straw there, but I found myself a corner where I could put my back to a wall and yet still have a clear view of the door. It felt strange to be inside a barn again at night. This was a good tight barn, built of river-rock and mortar and timber. The inn kept a cow and a handful of chickens in addition to their hire-horses and the beasts of their guests. The homely sounds and smells of the hay and animals put me sharply in mind of Burrich's stables. I felt suddenly homesick for them as I never had for my own room up in the keep.

I wondered how Burrich was, and if he knew of Patience's sacrifices. I thought of the love that had once been between them, and how it had foundered on Burrich's sense of duty. Patience had gone on to marry my father, the very man to whom Burrich had pledged all that loyalty. Had he ever thought of going to her, attempting to reclaim her? No. I knew it instantly and without doubt. Chivalry's ghost would stand forever between them. And now mine as well.

It was not a far jump from pondering this to thinking of Molly. She had made the same decision for us that Burrich had made for Patience and himself. Molly had told me that my obsessive loyalty to my king meant we could never belong to one another. So she had found someone she could care about as much as I cared for Verity. I hated everything about her decision except that it had saved her life. She had left me. She had not been at Buckkeep to share my fall and my disgrace.

I reached vaguely toward her with the Skill, then abruptly rebuked myself. Did I really want to see her as she probably was this night, sleeping in another man's arms, his wife? I felt an almost physical pain in my chest at the thought. I did not have a right to spy on any happiness she had claimed for herself. Yet as I drowsed off, I thought of her, and longed hopelessly after what had been between us.

Some perverse fate brought me dreams of Burrich instead, a vivid dream that made no sense. I sat across from him. He was sitting at a table by a fire, mending harness as he often did of an evening. But a mug of tea had replaced his brandy cup, and the leather he worked at was a low soft shoe, much too small for him. He pushed the awl through the soft leather and it went through too easily, jabbing him in the hand. He swore at the blood, and then looked up abruptly, to awkwardly beg my pardon for using such language in my presence.

I woke up from the dream, disoriented and bemused. Burrich had often made shoes for me when I was small but I could not recall that he had ever apologized for swearing in my presence, though he had rapped me often enough when I was a boy if I had dared to use such language in his. Ridiculous. I pushed the dream aside, but sleep had fled with it.

Around me, when I quested out softly, were only the muzzy dreams of the sleeping animals. All were at peace save me. Thoughts of Chade came to nigger and worry at me. He was an old man in many ways. When King Shrewd had lived, he had seen to all Chade's needs, so that his assassin

might live in security. Chade had seldom ventured forth from his concealed room, save to do his 'quiet work'. Now he was out on his own, doing El knew what, and with Regal's troops in pursuit of him. I rubbed vainly at my aching forehead. Worrying was useless, but I could not seem to stop.

I heard four light foot scuffs, followed by a thud, as someone climbed down from the loft and skipped the last step on the ladder. Probably one of the women headed for the backhouse. But a moment later I heard Honey's voice whisper, 'Cob?'

'What is it?' I asked unwillingly.

She turned toward my voice, and I heard her approach in the darkness. My time with the wolf had sharpened my senses. Some little moonlight leaked in at a badly-shuttered window. I picked out her shape in the darkness. 'Over here,' I told her when she hesitated, and saw her startle at how close my voice was. She groped her way to my corner, and then hesitantly sat down in the straw beside me.

'I daren't go back to sleep,' she explained. 'Nightmares.'

'I know how that is,' I told her, surprised at how much sympathy I felt. 'When, if you close your eyes, you tumble right back into them.'

'Exactly,' she said, and fell silent, waiting.

But I had nothing more to say, and so sat silent in the darkness.

'What kind of nightmares do you have?' she asked me quietly.

'Bad ones,' I said drily. I had no wish to summon them by speaking of them.

'I dream Forged ones are chasing me, but my legs have turned to water and I cannot run. But I keep trying and trying as they come closer and closer.'

'Uhm.' I agreed. Better than dreaming of being beaten and beaten and beaten ... I reined my mind away from that.

'It's a lonely thing, to wake up in the night and be afraid.'

I think she wants to mate with you. Will they accept you into their pack so easily?

'What?' I asked, startled, but it was the girl who replied, not Nighteyes.

'I said, it's lonely to awake at night and be afraid. One longs for a way to feel safe. Protected.'

'I know of nothing that can stand between a person and the dreams that come at night,' I said stiffly. Abruptly I wanted her to go away.

‘Sometimes a little gentleness can,’ she said softly. She reached over and patted my hand. Without intending to, I snatched it away.

‘Are you shy, prentice-boy?’ she asked coyly.

‘I lost someone I cared for,’ I said bluntly. ‘I’ve no heart to put another in her place.’

‘I see.’ She rose abruptly, shaking straw from her skirts. ‘Well. I’m sorry to have disturbed you.’ She sounded insulted, not sorry.

She turned and groped her way back to the loft ladder. I knew I had offended her. I did not feel it was my fault. She went up the steps slowly, and I thought she expected me to call her back. I didn’t. I wished I had not come to town.

That makes two of us. The hunting is poor, this close to all these men. Will you be much longer?

I fear I must travel with them for a few days, at least as far as the next town.

You would not mate her, she is not pack. Why must you do these things?

I did not try to form it into words for him. All I could convey was a sense of duty, and he could not grasp how my loyalty to Verity bound me to help these travellers on the road. They were my people because they were my king’s. Even I found the connection so tenuous as to be ridiculous, but there it was. I would see them safely to the next town.

I slept again that night, but not well. It was as if my words with Honey had opened the door to my nightmares. No sooner had I dipped down into sleep than I experienced a sense that I was being watched. I cowered low inside my cell, praying that I could not be seen, keeping as still as I possibly could. My own eyes were clenched tight shut, like a child who believes that if he cannot see, he cannot be seen. But the eyes that sought me had a gaze I could feel; I could sense Will looking for me as if I were hiding under a blanket and hands were patting at it. He was that close. The fear was so intense that it choked me. I could not breathe, I could not move. In a panic, I went out of myself, sideways, slipping into someone else’s fear, someone else’s nightmare.

I crouched behind a barrel of pickled fish in old man Hook’s store. Outside, the darkness was splintered by the rising flames and shrieks of the captured or dying. I knew I should get out. The Red Ship Raiders were certain to loot and torch the store. It was not a good place to hide. But there was no good place to hide, and I was only eleven, and my legs were shaking

beneath me so that I doubted I could stand, let alone run. Somewhere out there was Master Hook. When the first cries arose, he had grabbed his old sword down and rushed out the door. 'Watch the store, Chad!' he had called after him, as if he were just going next door to hobnob with the baker. At first I had been happy to obey him. The uproar was far down the town, downhill by the bay, and the store seemed safe and strong around me.

But that had been an hour ago. Now the wind from the harbour carried the taint of smoke, and the night was no longer dark, but a terrible torch-lit twilight. The flames and the screams were coming closer. Master Hook had not come back.

Get out, I told the boy in whose body I hid. Get out, run away, run as far and as fast as you can. Save yourself. He did not hear me.

I crawled toward the door that still swung open and wide as Master Hook had left it. I peered out of it. A man ran past in the street and I cowered back. But he was probably a townsman, not a Raider, for he ran without looking back, with no other thought than to get as far away as he could. Mouth dry, I forced myself to my feet, clinging to the door jamb. I looked down on the town and harbour. Half the town was aflame. The mild summer night was choked with smoke and ash rising on the hot wind off the flames. Ships were burning in the harbour. In the light from the flames, I could see figures darting, fleeing and hiding from the Raiders who strode almost unchallenged through the town.

Someone came about the corner of the potter's store at the end of the street. He was carrying a lantern and walking so casually I felt a sudden surge of relief. Surely if he could be so calm, then the tide of the battle must be turning. I half rose from my crouch, only to cringe back as he blithely swung the oil lantern against the wooden storefront. The splashing oil ignited as the lamp broke, and fire raced gaily up the tinder-dry wood. I shrank back from the light of the leaping flames. I knew with a sudden certainty that there was no safety to be gained by hiding, that my only hope was in fleeing, and that I should have done it as soon as the alarms sounded. The resolution gave me a small measure of courage, enough that I leaped to my feet and dashed out and around the corner of the store.

For an instant, I was aware of myself as Fitz. I do not think the boy could sense me. This was not my Skilling out but his reaching to me with some rudimentary Skill sense of his own. I could not control his body at all, but I was locked into his experience. I was riding this boy and hearing his

thoughts and sharing his perceptions just as Verity had once ridden me. But I had no time to consider how I was doing it, nor why I had been so abruptly joined to this stranger. For as Chad darted into the safety of the shadows, he was snatched back suddenly by a rough hand on his collar. For a brief moment he was paralysed with fear, and we looked up into the bearded grinning face of the Raider who gripped us. Another Raider flanked him, sneering evilly. Chad went limp with terror in his grasp. He gazed up helplessly at the moving knife, at the wedge of shining light that slid down its blade as it came towards his face.

I shared, for an instant, the hot-cold pain of the knife across my throat, the anguished moment of recognition as my warm wet blood coursed down my chest that it was over, it was already too late, I was dead now. Then as Chad tumbled heedlessly from the Raider's grasp into the dusty street, my consciousness came free of him. I hovered there, sensing for one awful moment the thoughts of the Raider. I heard the harshly guttural tones of his companion who nudged the dead boy with his booted foot, and knew that he rebuked the killer for wasting one who could have been Forged instead. The killer gave a snort of disdain, and replied something to the effect that he had been too young, not enough of a life behind him to be worth the Masters' time. Knew too, with a queasy swirling of emotions, that the killer had desired two things: to be merciful to a lad, and to enjoy the pleasure of a personal kill.

I had looked into the heart of my enemy. I still could not comprehend him.

I drifted down the street behind them, bodiless and substanceless. I had felt an urgency the moment before. Now I could not recall it. Instead, I roiled like fog, witnessing the fall and the sacking of Grimsmire Town in Bearn's Duchy. Time after time, I was drawn to one or another of the inhabitants, to witness a struggle, a death, a tiny victory of escape. Still I can close my eyes and know that night, recall a dozen horrendous moments in lives I briefly shared. I came finally to where one man stood, great sword in hand, before his blazing home. He held off three Raiders, while behind him his wife and daughter fought to lift a burning beam and free a trapped son, that they might all flee together. None of them would forsake the others, and yet I knew the man was weary, too weary and weakened by blood-loss to lift his sword, yet alone wield it. I sensed, too, how the Raiders toyed with him, baiting him to exhaust himself, that they might take and Forge the whole

family. I could feel the creeping chill of death seeping through the man. For an instant his head nodded toward his chest.

Suddenly the beleaguered man lifted his head. An oddly familiar light came into his eyes. He gripped the sword in both hands and with a roar suddenly sprang at his attackers. Two went down before his first onslaught, dying with amazement still printed plain on their features. The third met his sword blade to blade, but could not overmatch his fury. Blood dripped from the townsman's elbow and sheened his chest, but his sword rang like bells against the Raider's, battering down his guard and then suddenly dancing in, light as a feather, to trace a line of red across the Raider's throat. As his assailant fell, the man turned and sprang swiftly to his wife's side. He seized the burning beam, heedless of the flames, and lifted it off his son's body. For one last time, his eyes met those of his wife. 'Run!' he told her. 'Take the children and flee.' Then he crumpled into the street. He was dead.

As the stony-faced woman seized her children's hands and raced off with them, I felt a wraith rise from the body of the man who had died. It's me, I thought to myself, and then knew it was not. It sensed me and turned, his face so like my own. Or it had been, when he had been my age. It jolted me to think this was how Verity still perceived himself.

You, here? He shook his head in rebuke. *This is dangerous, boy. Even I am a fool to attempt this. And yet what else can we do, when they call us to them?* He considered me, standing so mute before him. *When did you gain the strength and talent to Skill-walk?*

I made no reply. I had no answers, no thoughts of my own. I felt I was a wet sheet flapping in the night wind, no more substantial than a blowing leaf.

Fitz, this is a danger to both of us. Go back. Go back now.

Is there truly a magic in the naming of a man's name? So much of the old lore insists there is. I suddenly recalled who I was, and that I did not belong here. But I had no concept of how I had come here, let alone how to return to my body. I gazed at Verity helplessly, unable to even formulate a request for help.

He knew. He reached a ghostly hand toward me. I felt his push as if he had placed the heel of his hand on my forehead and given a gentle shove.

My head bounced off the wall of the barn, and I saw sudden sparks of light from the impact. I was sitting there, in the barn behind the Scales inn. About me was only peaceful darkness, sleeping beasts, tickling straw.

Slowly I slid over onto my side as wave after wave of giddiness and nausea swept over me. The weakness that often possessed me after I had managed to use the Skill broke over me like a wave. I opened my mouth to call for help, but only a wordless caw escaped my lips. I closed my eyes and sank into oblivion.

I awoke before dawn. I crawled to my pack, pawed through it, and then managed to stagger to the back door of the inn, where I quite literally begged a mug of hot water from the cook there. She looked on in disbelief as I crumbled strips of elfbark into it.

‘‘S not good for you, you know that,’ she warned me, and then watched in awe as I drank the scalding, bitter brew. ‘They give that to slaves, they do, down in Chalced. Mix it in their food and drink, to keep them on their feet. Makes them despair as much as it gives them staying power, or so I’ve heard. Saps their will to fight back.’

I scarcely heard her. I was waiting to feel the effect. I had harvested my bark from young trees and feared it would lack potency. It did. It was some time before I felt the steeling warmth spread through me, steadying my trembling hands and clearing my vision. I rose from my seat on the kitchen’s back steps, to thank the cook and give her back her mug.

‘It’s a bad habit to take up, a young man like you,’ she chided me, and went back to her cooking. I departed the inn to stroll the streets as dawn broke over the hills. For a time, I half expected to find burned storefronts and gutted cottages, and empty-eyed Forged ones roaming the streets. But the Skill nightmare was eroded by the summer morning and the river wind. By daylight, the shabbiness of the town was more apparent. It seemed to me there were more beggars than we had had in Buckkeep Town, but I did not know if that was normal for a river town. I considered briefly what had happened to me last night, then with a shudder I set it aside. I did not know how I had done it. Like as not, it would not happen to me again. It heartened me to know Verity was still alive, even as it chilled me to know how rashly still he expended his Skill-strength. I wondered where he was this morning, and if, like me, he faced the dawn with the bitterness of Elf bark all through his mouth. If only I had mastered the Skill, I would not have had to wonder. It was not a thought to cheer one.

When I returned to the inn, the minstrels were already up and inside the inn breakfasting on porridge. I joined them at table, and Josh bluntly told me

he had feared I had left without them. Honey had no words at all for me, but several times I caught Piper looking at me appraisingly.

It was still early when we left the inn, and if we did not march like soldiers, Harper Josh still set a respectable pace for us. I had thought he would have to be led, but he made his walking staff his guide. Sometimes he did walk with a hand on Honey's or Piper's shoulder, but it seemed more companionship than necessity. Nor was our journey boring, for as we walked he lectured, mostly to Piper, on the history of this region, and surprised me with the depth of his knowledge. We stopped for a bit when the sun was high and they shared with me the simple food they had. I felt uncomfortable taking it, yet there was no way I could excuse myself to go hunt with the wolf. Once the town was well behind us, I had sensed Nighteyes shadowing us. It was comforting to have him near, but I wished it were just he and I travelling together. Several times that day we were passed by other travellers, on horses or mules. Through gaps in the trees we occasionally glimpsed boats beating their way upriver against the current. As the morning passed, well-guarded carts and wagons overtook us. Each time Josh called out to ask if we might ride on the wagons. Twice we were politely refused. The others answered not at all. They moved hurriedly, and one group had several surly-looking men in a common livery that I surmised were hired guards.

We walked the afternoon away to the reciting of 'Crossfire's Sacrifice', the long poem about Queen Vision's coterie and how they laid down their lives that she might win a crucial battle. I had heard it before, several times, in Buckkeep. But by the end of the day, I had heard it two score times, as Josh worked with infinite patience to be sure that Piper sang it perfectly. I was grateful for the endless recitations, for it prevented talk.

But despite our steady pace, the falling of evening still found us far short of the next river town. I saw them all become uneasy as the light began to fail. Finally, I took command of the situation and told them we must leave the road at the next stream we crossed, and find a place to settle for the evening. Honey and Piper fell back behind Josh and me, and I could hear them muttering worriedly to one another. I could not reassure them, as Nighteyes had me, that there was not even a sniff of another traveller about. Instead, at the next crossing I guided them upstream and found a sheltered bank beneath a cedar tree where we might rest for the night.

I left them on the pretence of relieving myself, to spend time with Nighteyes assuring him all was well. It was time well spent, for he had discovered a place where the swirling creek water undercut the bank. He watched me intently as I lay on my belly and eased my hands into the water, and then slowly through the curtain of weeds that overhung it. I got a fine fat fish on my first try. Several minutes later, another effort yielded me a smaller fish. When I gave up, it was almost full dark, but I had three fish to take back to camp, leaving two, against my better judgment, for Nighteyes.

Fishing and ear scratching. The two reasons men were given hands, he told me genially as he settled down with them. He had already gulped down the entrails from mine as fast as I had cleaned them.

Watch out for bones, I warned him yet again.

My mother raised me on a salmon run, he pointed out. *Fish bones don't bother me.*

I left him shearing through the fish with obvious relish and returned to camp. The minstrels had a small fire burning. At the sound of my footsteps, all three leaped to their feet brandishing their walking staffs. 'It's me!' I told them belatedly.

'Thank Eda,' Josh sighed as he sat down heavily, but Honey only glared at me.

'You were gone a long time,' Piper said by way of explanation. I held up the fish threaded through the gills onto a willow stick.

'I found dinner,' I told them. 'Fish,' I added, for Josh's benefit.

'Sounds wonderful,' he said.

Honey took out waybread and a small sack of salt as I found a large flat stone and wedged it into the embers of the fire. I wrapped the fish in leaves and set them on the stone to bake. The smell of the cooking fish tantalized me even as I hoped it would not draw any Forged ones to our campfire.

I'm keeping watch still, Nighteyes reminded me, and I thanked him.

As I watched over the cooking fish, Piper muttered 'Crossfire's Sacrifice' to herself at my elbow.

'Hist the halt, and Cleave the blind,' I corrected her distractedly as I tried to turn the fish over without breaking it.

'I had it right!' she contradicted me indignantly.

'I'm afraid you did not, my lass. Cob is correct. Hist was the clubfoot and Cleave was blind from birth. Can you name the other five, Cob?' He sounded just like Fedwren hearing a lesson.

I had burned my finger on a coal and I stuck it in my mouth before answering. ‘Burnt Crossfire led, and those around – were like him, not of body sound, but strong of heart. And true of soul. And herein let me count their roll – for you. ’Twas Hist the halt, and Cleave the blind, and Kevin of the wandering mind, hare-lipped Joiner, Sever was deaf, and Porter, who the foe men left – for dead, without his hands or eyes. And if you think you would despise such ones as these, then let me say ...’

‘Whoa!’ Josh exclaimed with pleasure, and then asked, ‘Had you bard’s training, Cob, when you were small? You’ve caught the phrasing as well as the words. Though you make your pauses a bit too plain.’

‘I? No. I’ve always had a quick memory, though.’ It was hard not to smile at his praise of me, even though Honey sneered and shook her head at it.

‘Could you recite the whole thing, do you think?’ Josh asked challengingly.

‘Perhaps,’ I hedged. I knew I could. Both Burrich and Chade had drilled my memory skills often. And I’d heard it so often today I could not drive it from my head.

‘Try it then. But not spoken. Sing it.’

‘I have no voice for singing.’

‘If you can speak, you can sing. Try it. Indulge an old man.’

Perhaps obeying old men was simply too deep a habit with me for me to defy it. Perhaps it was the look on Honey’s face that told me plainly she doubted I could do it.

I cleared my throat and began it, singing softly until he gestured at me to raise my voice. He nodded his head as I worked my way through it, wincing now and then when I soured a note. I was about halfway through when Honey observed drily, ‘The fish is burning.’

I dropped the song and sprang to poke stone and wrapped fish from the fire. The tails were scorched, but the rest was fine, steaming and firm. We portioned it out and I ate too rapidly. Twice as much would not have filled me, and yet I must be content with what I had. The waybread tasted surprisingly good with the fish, and afterwards Piper made a kettle of tea for us. We settled on our blankets about the fire.

‘Cob, do you do well as a scribe?’ Josh suddenly asked me.

I made a deprecating sound. ‘Not as well as I’d like. But I get by.’

‘Not as well as he’d like,’ Honey muttered to Piper in mocking imitation.

Harper Josh ignored her. ‘You’re old for it, but you could be taught to sing. Your voice is not so bad; you sing like a boy, not knowing you’ve a man’s depth of voice and lungs to call on now. Your memory is excellent. Do you play any instruments?’

‘The sea-pipes. But not well.’

‘I could teach you to play them well. If you took up with us ...’

‘Father! We scarcely know him!’ Honey objected.

‘I could have said the same to you when you left the loft last night,’ he observed to her mildly.

‘Father, all we did was talk.’ She flashed a look at me, as if I had betrayed her. My tongue had turned to leather in my mouth.

‘I know,’ Josh agreed. ‘Blindness seems to have sharpened my hearing. But if you have judged him someone safe to talk to, alone, at night, then perhaps I have judged him someone safe to offer our company to as well. What say you, Cob?’

I shook my head slowly, then, ‘No,’ I said aloud. ‘Thank you all the same. I appreciate what you are offering, and to a stranger. I will travel with you as far as the next town, and I wish you well in finding other companions to travel with you from there. But ... I have no real wish for ...’

‘You lost someone dear to you. I understand that. But total solitude is not good for any man,’ Josh said quietly.

‘Who did you lose?’ Piper asked in her open way.

I tried to think how to explain without leaving myself open for more questions. ‘My grandfather,’ I said at last. ‘And my wife.’ Saying those words was like tearing a wound open.

‘What happened?’ Piper asked.

‘My grandfather died. My wife left me.’ I spoke shortly, wishing they’d let it be.

‘The old die in their time,’ Josh began gently, but Honey cut in brusquely with, ‘That was the love you lost? What can you owe to a woman who left you? Unless you gave her cause to leave you?’

‘It was more that I did not give her cause to stay,’ I admitted unwillingly. Then, ‘Please,’ I said bluntly. ‘I do not wish to speak of these things. At all. I will see you to the next town, but then my way is my own.’

‘Well. That’s clearly spoken,’ Josh said regretfully. Something in his tone made me feel I had been rude, but there were no words I wished to call back.

There was little talk the rest of that evening, for which I was grateful. Piper offered to take first watch and Honey second. I did not object, as I knew Nighteyes would prowl all about us this night. Little got past that one. I slept better out in the open air, and came awake quickly when Honey stooped over me to shake me. I sat up, stretched, then nodded to her that I was awake and she could get more sleep. I got up and poked at the fire, then took a seat by it. Honey came to sit beside me.

‘You don’t like me, do you?’ she asked quietly. Her tone was gentle.

‘I don’t know you,’ I said as tactfully as I could.

‘Um. And you don’t wish to,’ she observed. She looked at me levelly. ‘But I’ve wanted to know you since I saw you blush in the inn. Nothing challenges my curiosity quite as much as a man who blushes. I’ve known few men who turn scarlet like that, simply because they’re caught looking at a woman.’ Her voice went low and throaty, as she leaned forward confidentially. ‘I would love to know what you were thinking that brought the blood to your face like that.’

‘Only that I had been rude to stare,’ I told her honestly.

She smiled at me. ‘That was not what I was thinking as I was looking back at you.’ She moistened her mouth and hitched closer.

I suddenly missed Molly so acutely it was painful. ‘I have no heart for this game,’ I told Honey plainly. I rose. ‘I think I shall get a bit more wood for the fire.’

‘I think I know why your wife left you,’ Honey said nastily. ‘No heart, you say? I think your problem was a bit lower.’ She rose and went back to her blankets. All I felt was relief that she had given up on me. I kept my word and went to gather more dry wood.

The first thing I asked Josh the next morning when he arose was, ‘How far is it to the next town?’

‘If we keep the same pace we struck yesterday, we should be there by tomorrow noon,’ he told me.

I turned aside from the disappointment in his voice. As we shouldered our packs and set off, I reflected bitterly that I had walked away from people I had known and cared about to avoid the very situation I was now in with comparative strangers. I wondered if there were any way to live amongst

other people and refuse to be harnessed by their expectations and dependencies.

The day was warm, but not unpleasantly so. If I had been alone, I would have found it pleasant hiking along the road. In the woods to one side of us, birds called to one another. To the other side of the road, we could see the river through the scanty trees, with occasional barges moving downstream, or oared vessels moving slowly against the current. We spoke little, and after a time, Josh put Piper back to reciting 'Crossfire's Sacrifice'. When she stumbled, I kept silent.

My thoughts drifted. Everything had been so much easier when I had not had to worry about my next meal or a clean shirt. I had thought myself so clever in dealing with people, so skilled at my profession. But I had had Chade to plot with, and time to prepare what I would say and do. I did not do so well when my resources were limited to my own wits and what I could carry on my back. Stripped of everything I had once unthinkingly relied on, it was not just my courage I had come to doubt. I questioned all my abilities now. Assassin, King's Man, warrior, man ... was I any of them any more? I tried to recall the brash youngster who had pulled an oar on Verity's warship *Rurisk*, who had flung himself unthinkingly into battle wielding an axe. I could not grasp he had been me.

At noon Honey distributed the last of their waybread. It was not much. The women walked ahead of us, talking quietly to one another as they munched the dry bread and sipped from their waterskins. I ventured to suggest to Josh that we might camp earlier tonight, to give me a chance to do a bit of hunting or fishing.

'It would mean we would not get to the next town by noon tomorrow,' he pointed out gravely.

'Tomorrow evening would be soon enough,' I assured him quietly. He turned his head toward me, perhaps to hear me better, but his hazed-over eyes seemed to look inside me. It was hard to bear the appeal I saw there, but I made no reply to it.

When the day finally began to cool, I began to look for likely stopping places. Nighteyes had ranged ahead of us to scout when I sensed a sudden prickling of his hackles. *There are men here, smelling of carrion and their own filth. I can smell them, I can see them, but I cannot sense them otherwise.* The distress he always felt in the presence of Forged ones drifted back to me. I shared it. I knew they had once been human, and shared that

Wit spark that every living creature does. To me, it was passing strange to see them move and speak when I could not sense they were alive. To Nighteyes, it was as if stones walked and ate.

How many? Old, young?

More than us, and bigger than you. A wolf's perception of odds. *They hunt the road, just around the bend from you.*

'Let's stop here,' I suggested suddenly. Three heads swivelled to regard me in puzzlement.

Too late. They've scented you, they are coming.

No time to dissemble, no time to come up with a likely lie.

'There are Forged ones ahead. More than two of them. They've been watching the road, and they're headed toward us now.' Strategy? 'Get ready,' I told them.

'How do you know this?' Honey challenged me.

'Let's run!' suggested Piper. She didn't care how I knew. The wideness of her eyes told me how much she had feared this.

'No. They'll overtake us, and we'll be winded when they do. And even if we did outrun them, we'd still have to get past them tomorrow.' I dropped my bundle to the road, kicked it clear of me. Nothing in it was worth my life. If we won, I'd be able to pick it up again. If we didn't, I wouldn't care. But Honey and Piper and Josh were musicians. Their instruments were in their bundles. None of them moved to free themselves from their burdens. I didn't waste my breath suggesting they do so. Almost instinctively, Piper and Honey moved to flank the old man. They gripped their walking sticks too tightly. Mine settled in my hands and I held it balanced and at the ready, waiting. For an instant I stopped thinking entirely. My hands seemed to know what to do of their own accord.

'Cob, take care of Honey and Piper. Don't worry about me, just don't let them get hurt,' Josh ordered me tersely.

His words broke through to me, and suddenly terror flooded me. My body lost its easy ready stance, and all I could think of was the pain defeat would bring me. I felt sick and shaky and wanted more than anything to simply turn and run, with no thought for the minstrels. Wait, wait, I wanted to cry to the day. I am not ready for this, I do not know if I will fight or run or simply faint where I stand. But time knows no mercy. *They come through the brush,* Nighteyes told me. *Two come swiftly and one lags behind. I think he shall be mine.*

Be careful, I warned him. I heard them crackling through the brush and scented the foulness of them. A moment later, Piper cried out as she spotted them, and then they rushed out of the trees at us. If my strategy was stand and fight, theirs was simply run up and attack. They were both larger than I was, and seemed to have no doubts at all. Their clothing was filthy but mostly intact. I did not think they had been Forged long. Both carried clubs. I had little time to comprehend more than that.

Forging did not make folk stupid, nor slow. They could no longer sense or feel emotions from others, nor, it seemed, recall what those emotions might make an enemy do. That often made their actions almost incomprehensible. It did not make them any less intelligent than they had been when whole, or any less skilled with their weapons. They did, however, act with an immediacy in satisfying their wants that was wholly animal. The horse they stole one day they might eat the next, simply because hunger was a more immediate want than the convenience of riding. Nor did they cooperate in a battle. Within their own groups, there was no loyalty. They were as likely to turn on one another to gain plunder as to attack a common enemy. They would travel together, and attack together, but not as a concerted effort. Yet they remained brutally cunning, remorselessly clever in their efforts to get what they desired.

I knew all this. So I was not surprised when both of them tried to get past me to attack the smaller folk first. What surprised me was the cowardly relief I felt. It paralysed me like one of my dreams, and I let them rush past me.

Honey and Piper fought like angry and frightened minstrels with sticks. There was no skill, no training there, not even the experience to fight as a team and thus avoid clubbing each other or Josh in the process. They had been schooled to music, not battle. Josh was paralysed in the middle, gripping his staff, but unable to strike out without risking injury to Honey or Piper. Rage contorted his face.

I could have run then. I could have snatched up my bundle and fled down the road and never looked back. The Forged ones would not have chased me; they were content with whatever prey was easiest. But I did not. Some tatter of courage or pride survived in me still. I attacked the smaller of the two men, even though he seemed more skilled with his cudgel. I left Honey and Piper to whack away at the larger man, and forced the other to engage with me. My first blow caught him low on the legs. I sought to

cripple him, or at least knock him down. He did roar out with pain as he turned to attack me, but seemed to move no slower for it.

It was another thing I had noticed about Forged ones: pain seemed to affect them less. I knew that when I had been so badly beaten, a great part of what unmanned me was distress at the destruction of my body. It was odd to realize I had an emotional attachment to my own flesh. My deep desire to keep it functioning well surpassed simple avoidance of pain. A man takes pride in his body. When it is damaged, it is more than a physical thing. Regal had known that. He had known that every blow his guardsmen dealt me inflicted a fear with its bruise. Would he send me back to what I had been, a sickly creature who trembled after exertion, and feared the seizures that stole both body and mind from him? That fear had crippled me as much as their blows. Forged ones seemed not to have that fear; perhaps when they lost their attachment to everything else, they lost all affection for their own bodies.

My opponent spun about and dealt me a blow with his cudgel that sent a shock up to my shoulders as I caught it on my staff. Small pain, my body whispered to me of the jolt, and listened for more. He struck at me again, and again I caught it. Once I had engaged him, there was no safe way to turn and flee. He used his cudgel well: probably a warrior once, and one trained with an axe. I recognized the moves and blocked, or caught, or deflected each one. I feared him too much to attack him, feared the surprise blow that might streak past my staff if I did not constantly guard myself. I gave ground so readily that he glanced back over his shoulder, perhaps thinking he could just turn away from me and go after the women. I managed a timid reply to one of his blows; he barely flinched. He did not weary, nor did he give me space to take advantage of my longer weapon. Unlike me, he was not distracted by the shouts of the minstrels as they strove to defend themselves. Back up in the trees, I could hear muffled curses and faint growls. Nighteyes had stalked the third man, and had rushed in to attempt to hamstring him. He had failed, but now he circled him, keeping well out of range of the sword he carried.

I do not know that I can get past his blade, brother. But I think I can delay him here. He dares not turn his back on me to come down and attack you.

Be careful! It was all I had time to say to him, for the man with the club demanded every bit of my attention. Blow after blow he rained on me, and I

soon realized he had stepped up his efforts, putting more force into his blows. He no longer felt he had to guard against a possible attack from me; he put all his strength into battering down my defence. Every jolt I caught squarely with my staff sent an echoing shock up to my shoulders. The impacts awakened old pains, jouncing healed injuries I had almost forgotten. My endurance as a fighter was not what it had been. Hunting and walking did not toughen a body and build muscle the way pulling an oar all day had. A flood of doubt undercut my concentration. I suspected I was overmatched, and so feared the pain to come that I could not plot how to avoid it. Desperation to avoid injury is not the same as determination to win. I kept trying to work away from him, to gain space for my staff, but he pressed me relentlessly.

I caught a glimpse of the minstrels. Josh stood squarely in the middle of the road, staff ready, but the battle had moved away from him. Honey was limping backwards as the man pursued her. She was trying to ward off blows from the man's club while Piper followed, ineffectually thwacking him across the shoulders with her slender staff. He simply hunched to her blows and remained intent on the injured Honey. It woke something in me. 'Piper, take his legs out!' I yelled to her, and then put my attention to my own problems as a cudgel grazed my shoulder. I dealt back a couple of quick blows that lacked force and leaped away from him.

A sword sliced my shoulder and skimmed along my rib-cage.

I cried out in astonishment and nearly dropped my staff before I realized the injury wasn't mine. I felt as much as heard Nighteyes' surprised yelp of pain. And then the impact of a boot to my head.

Dazed, cornered. *Help me!*

There were other memories, deeper memories, buried beneath my recall of the beatings Regal's guards had inflicted on me. Years before then, I had felt the slash of a knife and the impact of a boot. But not on my own flesh. A terrier I had bonded with, Smithy, not even full grown, had fought in the dark against one who had attacked Burrich in my absence. Fought, and died later of his injuries, before I could even reach his side again. I discovered abruptly there was a threat more potent than my own death.

Fear for myself crumpled away before my terror of losing Nighteyes. I did what I knew I had to do. I shifted my stance, stepped in and accepted the blow on my shoulder to bring me in range. The shock of it jolted down my arm and for an instant I couldn't feel anything in that hand. I trusted it was

still there. I had shortened my grip on my staff, and I brought that end up sharply, catching his chin. Nothing had prepared him for my abrupt change in tactics. His chin flew up, baring his throat, and I jabbed my staff sharply against the hollow at the base of his throat. I felt the small bones there give way. He gasped out blood in a sudden exhalation of pain and I danced back, shifted my grip, and brought the other end around to impact his skull. He went down, and I turned and raced up into the woods.

Snarls and grunts of effort led me to them. Nighteyes had been brought to bay, his left forepaw curled up to his chest. Blood slicked his left shoulder, and beaded like red jewels on the guardhairs all along his left side. He had backed deeply into a dense thicket of tangled blackberry canes. The savage thorns and snagging runners that he had sought as shelter now fenced him round and blocked his escape. He had pressed into them as deeply as he could to avoid the slashes of the sword, and I could feel the damage to his feet. The thorns that jabbed into Nighteyes likewise kept his attacker at a distance, and the yielding canes absorbed many of the sword's blows as the man strove to hack through them and get at the wolf.

At the sight of me Nighteyes gathered his courage and rounded suddenly to face his attacker with a savage outburst of snarls. The Forged one drew back his sword for a thrust that would impale my wolf. There was no point on the end of my staff, but with a wordless cry of fury I drove it into the man's back so brutally that it punched through flesh and into his lungs. He roared out a spattering of red drops and rage. He tried to turn to confront me, but I still had hold of my staff. I threw my weight against it, forcing him staggering into the blackberry tangle. His outstretched hands found nothing to catch him save tearing brambles. I pinned him into the yielding blackberry canes with my full weight on the staff and Nighteyes, emboldened, sprang onto his back. The wolf's jaws closed on the back of the man's thick neck and worried at him until blood spattered both of us. The Forged one's strangling cries gradually diminished to passive gurglings.

I had completely forgotten about the minstrels until a deep cry of anguish recalled them to me. Stooping, I seized the sword the Forged one had dropped and ran back to the road, leaving Nighteyes to flop down exhausted and begin licking at his shoulder. As I burst out of the woods, a horrifying sight met my eyes. The Forged one had flung himself upon a struggling Honey and was tearing at her clothes. Piper knelt in the road dust,

clutching at her arm and shrieking wordlessly. A dishevelled and dusty Josh had climbed to his feet and, staffless, was groping toward Piper's cries.

In a moment I was in their midst. I kicked the man to lift him off Honey, then plunged the sword into him in a downward two-handed thrust. He struggled wildly, kicking and clutching at me, but I leaned on the blade, forcing it down into his chest. As he fought against the metal that pinned him, he tore the wound wider. His mouth cursed me with wordless cries and then panting gasps that flung droplets of blood with the sounds. His hands seized my right calf and tried to jerk my leg from under me. I simply put more weight on the blade. I longed to pull the sword out and kill him quickly, but he was so strong I did not dare release him. Honey ended him finally, bringing the end of her staff down in a smashing drive to the centre of his face. The man's sudden stillness was as much a mercy to me as to him. I found the strength to pull the sword out of him, then staggered backwards to sit down suddenly in the road.

My vision dimmed and cleared and dimmed again. Piper's screams of pain might have been the distant crying of seabirds. Suddenly there was too much of everything and I was everywhere. Up in the woods, I licked at my shoulder, a laying aside of dense fur with my tongue, a careful probing of the slash as I coated it with saliva. And yet I sat in the sun on the road, smelling dust and blood and excrement as the slain man's bowels loosened. I felt every blow I had taken and dealt, the exertion as well as the jolting damage from the club's impact. The savage way I had killed suddenly had a different connotation to me. I knew what it was to feel the kind of pain that I had inflicted. I knew what they had felt, down and struggling without hope, with death as their only escape from more pain. My mind vibrated between the extremes of killer and victim. I was both.

And alone. More alone than I had ever been. Always before, at a time like this, there had been someone for me. Shipmates at the end of a battle, or Burrich coming to patch me up and drag me home, and a home waiting for me, with Patience to come and fuss over me, or Chade and Verity to remonstrate with me to be more careful of myself. Molly arriving with the quiet and the darkness to touch me softly. This time the battle was over, and I was alive, but no one save the wolf cared. I loved him, but suddenly I knew that I longed for a human touch as well. The separation from those who had cared about me was more than I could bear. Had I been truly a wolf, I would have lifted my nose to the sky and howled. As it was, I reached out, in a way

I cannot describe. Not the Wit, not the Skill, but some unholy blending of the two, a terrible questing for someone, anywhere, who might care to know I was alive.

Almost, I felt something. Did Burrich, perhaps, somewhere lift up his head and look about the field he worked in, did he for an instant smell blood and dust instead of the rich earth he turned up to harvest the root crops? Did Molly straighten up from her laundering and set her hands to her aching back and look about, wondering at a sudden pang of desolation? Did I tug at Verity's weary consciousness, distract Patience for a moment or two from sorting her herbs on the drying trays, set Chade to frowning as he set a scroll aside? Like a moth battering against a window, I rattled myself against their consciousnesses. I longed to feel the affection I had taken for granted. Almost, I thought, I reached them, only to fall back exhausted into myself, sitting alone in the dust of the road, with the blood of three men spattered on me.

She kicked dirt on me.

I lifted my eyes. At first Honey was a dark silhouette against the westering sun. Then I blinked and saw the look of disgust and fury on her face. Her clothes were torn, her hair dragged about her face. 'You ran away!' she accused me. I felt how much she despised my cowardice. 'You ran away, and left him to break Piper's arm and club my father down and try to rape me. What kind of a man are you? What kind of a man can do a thing like that?'

There were a thousand answers to that, and none. The emptiness inside me assured me that nothing would be solved by speaking to her. Instead I pushed myself to my feet. She stared after me as I walked back down the road to where I had dropped my pack. It seemed like hours since I had kicked it clear of my feet. I picked it up and carried it back to where Josh sat in the dust beside Piper and tried to comfort her. Pragmatic Honey had opened their packs. Josh's harp was a tangle of wood bits and string. Piper would play no pipes until her arm healed weeks from now. It was as it was, and I did what I could do about it.

And that was nothing, save build a fire by the side of the road, and fetch water from the river and set it to boiling. I sorted out the herbs that would calm Piper and soften the pain of her arm. I found dry straight sticks and shaved them flat for splinting. And up on the hillside in the woods behind

me? *It hurts, my brother, but it did not go deep. Still, it pulls open when I try to walk. And thorns, I am thick with thorns like flies on carrion.*

I shall come to you now and pick out every one.

No. I can take care of this myself. See to those others. He paused. *My brother. We should have run away.*

Why was it so hard to go to Honey and ask quietly if she had cloth we could tear to bind the splinting to Piper's arm? She did not deign to reply to me, but blind Josh mutely handed me the soft fabric that had once wrapped his harp. Honey despised me, Josh seemed numbed with shock, and Piper was so lost in her own pain she scarcely noticed me. But somehow I got them to move over beside the fire. I walked Piper over there, my arm around her and my free hand supporting her injured arm. I got her seated, and then gave her first the tea I had brewed. I spoke more to Harper Josh than to her when I said, 'I can draw the bone straight, and splint it. I've had to do as much before for men hurt in battle. But I do not claim to be a healer. When we get to the next town, it may have to be set again.'

He nodded slowly. We both knew there was no real alternative. So he knelt behind Piper and held her by the shoulders, and Honey gripped her upper arm firmly. I set my teeth against the pain she felt and firmly drew her forearm straight. She screamed, of course, for no mere tea could deaden that sort of pain completely. But she also forced herself not to struggle. Tears coursed down her cheeks and her breath came raggedly as I splinted and bound her arm. I showed her how to carry it partially inside her vest to support the weight and steady it against movement. Then I gave her another mug of the tea and turned to Josh.

He had taken a blow to the head, and it had dazed him for a moment, but not knocked him out. There was swelling, and he winced at my touch, but the flesh had not split. I washed it with cool water, and told him the tea might ease him as well. He thanked me, and somehow I felt shamed by it. Then I looked up to where Honey watched me with cat's eyes across the small fire.

'Were you hurt?' I asked her quietly.

'There's a knot on my shin the size of a plum where he hit me. And he left claw marks down my neck and breasts trying to get at me. But I can care for my hurts myself, thank you all the same ... Cob. Small thanks to you I am alive at all.'

‘Honey.’ Josh spoke in a dangerously low voice. There was as much weariness in it as anger.

‘He ran away, Father. He felled his man and then he turned and ran. If he had helped us then, none of this would have happened. Not Piper’s broken arm, nor your smashed harp. He ran away.’

‘But he came back. Let us not imagine what would have happened if he had not. Perhaps we took some injuries, but you can still thank him that you are alive.’

‘I thank him for nothing,’ she said bitterly. ‘One moment of courage, and he could have saved our livelihood. What have we now? A harper with no harp, and a piper who cannot lift her arm to hold her instrument.’

I rose and walked away from them. I was suddenly too weary to hear her out, and much too discouraged to explain myself at all. Instead I dragged the two bodies from the road, and pulled them onto the sward on the river side. In the failing light, I re-entered the woods, and sought out Nighteyes. He had already cared for his own injuries better than I could. I dragged my fingers through his coat, dusting thorns and bits of blackberry tangle from it. For a short time I sat next to him. He lay down and put his head on my knee and I scratched his ears. It was all the communication we needed. Then I got up, found the third body, gripped him by the shoulders, and dragged him down out of the woods to join the other two. Without compunction, I went through their pockets and pouches. Two of them yielded but a handful of small coins, but the one with the sword had had twelve silver bits in his pouch. I took his pouch and added the other coins to it. I also took his battered sword belt and sheath, and picked up the sword from the road. Then I busied myself until the darkness was complete in picking up river stones and piling them around and finally on top of the bodies. When I had finished, I went down to the river’s edge and laved my hands and arms and splashed water up onto my face. I took off my shirt and rinsed the blood from it, then put it back on cold and wet. For a moment it felt good on my bruises; then my muscles began to stiffen with the chill of it.

I went back to the small fire that now lit the faces of the folk around it. When I got there, I reached for Josh’s hand, and then set the pouch into it. ‘Perhaps it will be enough to help you along until you can replace your harp,’ I told him.

‘Dead men’s money to ease your conscience?’ Honey sneered.

The frayed ends of my temper parted. ‘Pretend they survived, for by Buck law they would have had to pay you restitution at least,’ I suggested. ‘And if that still does not please you, throw the coins in the river for all I care.’ I ignored her much more thoroughly than she had me. Despite my aches and twinges, I unbundled the sword belt. Nighteyes had been right: the swordsman had been a lot bigger than me. I set the leather against a piece of wood and bored a new hole into the strap with my knife. That done, I stood, and fastened it about me. There was comfort in the weight of a sword at my side again. I drew the blade and examined it by the firelight. It was not exceptional, but it was functional and sturdy.

‘Where did you get that?’ Piper asked. Her voice was a bit wavery.

‘Took it off the third man, up in the woods,’ I said shortly. I resheathed it.

‘What is it?’ Harper Josh asked.

‘A sword,’ Piper said.

Josh turned his hazy eyes to me. ‘There was a third man up in the woods with a sword?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you took it away from him and killed him?’

‘Yes.’

He snorted softly and shook his head at himself. ‘When we shook hands, I knew well it was no scribe’s hand I gripped. A pen does not leave calluses such as you bear, nor does it muscle a forearm that way. You see, Honey, he did not run away. He but went to ...’

‘If he had killed the man attacking us first, it would have been wiser,’ she insisted stubbornly.

I undid my bundle and shook out my blanket. I lay down on it. I was hungry, but there was nothing to be done about that. I could do something about how tired I was.

‘Are you going to sleep?’ Piper asked. Her face reflected as much alarm as she could muster in her drugged state.

‘Yes.’

‘What if more Forged ones come?’ she demanded.

‘Then Honey can kill them in whatever order she deems wise,’ I suggested sourly. I shifted on my blanket until my sword was clear and handy, and closed my eyes. I heard Honey rise slowly and begin to put out bedding for the rest of them.

‘Cob?’ Josh asked softly. ‘Did you take any coin for yourself?’

‘I do not expect to have need of coin again,’ I told him as quietly. I did not explain that I no longer planned to have much to do with humans. I never wanted to explain myself again to anyone. I did not care if they understood me or not.

I closed my eyes and groped out, to touch briefly with Nighteyes. Like me, he was hungry but had chosen to rest instead. *By tomorrow evening, I shall be free to hunt with you again,* I promised him. He sighed in satisfaction. He was not that far away. My fire was a spark through the trees below him. He rested his muzzle on his forepaws.

I was wearier than I had realized. My thoughts drifted, blurred. I let it all go and floated free, away from the pains that niggled at my body. Molly, I thought wistfully. Molly. But I did not find her. Somewhere Burrich slept on a pallet made up before a hearth. I saw him, and it felt almost as if I Skilled him but I could not hold the vision. The firelight illuminated the planes of his face; he was thinner, and burnt dark with hours of field work. I spun slowly away from him. The Skill lapped against me, but I could find no control of it.

When my dreams brushed up against Patience, I was shocked to find her in a private chamber with Lord Bright. He looked like a cornered animal. A young woman in a lovely gown was evidently as startled as he to have Patience intrude on them. She was armed with a map, and she was speaking as she pushed aside a tray of dainties and wine to unfurl it on the table. ‘I have found you neither stupid nor craven, Lord Bright. So I must assume you are ignorant. I intend that your education shall no longer be neglected. As this map by the late Prince Verity will prove to you, if you do not take action soon, all the coast of Buck will be at the mercy of the Red Ships. And they have no mercy.’ She lifted those piercing hazel eyes and stared at him as she had so often stared at me when she expected to be obeyed. I almost pitied him. I lost my feeble grip on the scene. Like a leaf borne by wind, I swirled away from them.

I did not know if I next went higher or deeper, only that I felt all that bound me to my body was a tenuous thread. I turned and spun in a current that tugged at me, encouraging me to let go. Somewhere a wolf whined in anxiety. Ghostly fingers plucked at me as if seeking my attention.

Fitz. Be careful. Get back.

Verity. But his Skilling had no more force than a puff of wind, despite the effort I knew it cost him. Something was between us, a cold fog, yielding yet resisting, entangling like brambles. I tried to care, tried to find enough fear to send me fleeing back to my body. But it was like being trapped inside a dream and trying to awaken. I could not find a way to struggle out of it. I could not find the will to try.

A whiff of dog-magic stench in the air, and look what I find. Will hooked into me like cat claws, drew me tight against him. Hello, Bastard. His deep satisfaction reawakened every nuance of my fear. I could feel his cynical smile. Neither of them dead, not the Bastard with his perverted magic nor Verity the pretender. Tsk, tsk. Regal will be chagrined to find he was not as successful as he had thought. This time, though, I shall make sure of things for him. My way. I felt an insidious probing of my defences, more intimate than a kiss. As if he kneaded a whore's flesh, he felt me over for weaknesses. I dangled like a rabbit in his grasp, waiting only for the twist and jerk that would end my life. I felt how he had grown in strength and cunning.

Verity, I whimpered, but my king could neither hear nor respond.

He weighed me in his grip. What use to you this strength you have never learned to master? None at all. But to me, ah, to me it shall give wings and claws. You shall make me strong enough to seek out Verity no matter how he may hide himself.

Suddenly I was leaking strength like a punctured waterskin. I had no idea how he had penetrated my defences, and knew of no way to ward him off. He clutched my mind greedily to his and leeches at me. This was how Justin and Serene had killed King Shrewd. He had gone swiftly, like a bubble popping. I could find neither will nor strength to struggle as Will forced down all walls between us. His foreign thoughts were a pressure inside my mind as he scabbled at my secrets, all the while drawing off my substance.

But within me, a wolf was waiting for him. *My brother!* Nighteyes declared, and launched at him, tooth and nail. Somewhere in the vast distance, Will shrieked in horror and dismay. However strong he might be in the Skill, he had no knowledge at all of the Wit. He was as powerless before Nighteyes' attack as I had been before his. Once, when Justin had Skill-attacked me, Nighteyes had responded. I had watched as Justin had gone down just as if he were being physically savaged by a wolf. He had lost all

concentration and control over his Skill and I had been able to break free of him. I could not see what was happening to Will, but I sensed Nighteyes' snapping jaws. I was buffeted by the strength of Will's horror. He fled, breaking the Skill-link between us so suddenly that for a moment I was unsure of my identity. Then I was back, wide awake, inside my own body.

I sat up on my blanket, sweat streaming down my back, and slammed up every wall about myself that I could remember how to erect.

'Cob?' Josh asked in some alarm, and I saw him sit up sleepily. Honey was staring at me from her own blanket where she sat keeping watch. I choked back a panting sob.

'A nightmare,' I managed huskily. 'Just a nightmare.' I staggered to my feet, horrified at how weakened I was. The world spun around me. I could barely stand. Fear of my own weakness spurred me. I caught up my small kettle, and carried it off with me as I headed for the river. Elfbark tea, I promised myself, and hoped it would be potent enough. I veered wide of the heaped stones that covered the Forged ones' bodies. Before I reached the bank of the river, Nighteyes was beside me, hitching along on three legs. I dropped my kettle and sank down beside him. I threw my arms around him, mindful of the slash on his shoulder, and buried my face in his ruff.

I was so scared. I nearly died.

I understand now why we must kill them all, he said calmly. If we do not, they will never let us be. We must hunt them down to their own lair and kill them all.

It was the only comfort he could offer me.

SIX

The Wit and the Skill

Minstrels and wandering scribes hold special places in the society of the Six Duchies. They are repositories of knowledge, not only of their own crafts, but of so much more. The minstrels hold the histories of the Six Duchies, not just the general history that has shaped the kingdom, but the particular histories, of the small towns and even the families who make them up. Although it is the dream of every minstrel to be sole witness to some great event, and thus gain the authoring of a new saga, their true and lasting importance lies in their constant witnessing of the small events that make up life's fabric. When there is a question of a property line, or family lineage, or even of a long-term promise made, the minstrels are called upon, to supply the details that others may have forgotten. Supporting them, but not supplanting them, are the wandering scribes. For a fee, they will provide written record of a wedding, a birth, of land changing hands, of inheritances gained or dowries promised. Such records may be intricate things, for every party involved must be identified in a way that is unmistakable. Not just by name and profession, but by lineage and location and appearance. As often as not, a minstrel is then called to make his mark as witness to what the scribe has written, and for this reason, it is not unusual to find them travelling in company together, or for one person to profess both trades. Minstrels and scribes are by custom well treated in the noble houses, finding their winter quarters there and sustenance and comfort in old age. No lord wishes to be ill remembered in the tellings of minstrels and scribes, or worse yet, not remembered at all. Generosity to them is taught as simple courtesy. One knows one is in the presence of a miser when one sits at table in a keep that boasts no minstrels.

I bid the musicians farewell at the door of an inn in a shoddy little town called Crowsneck the next afternoon. Rather, I bid Josh farewell. Honey stalked into the inn without a backwards glance at me. Piper did look at me, but the look was so puzzled that it conveyed nothing to me. Then she followed Honey in. Josh and I were left standing in the street. We had been

walking together and his hand was still on my shoulder. 'Bit of a step here at the inn door,' I warned Josh quietly.

He nodded his thanks. 'Well. Some hot food will be welcome,' he observed and pushed his chin toward the door.

I shook my head, then spoke my refusal. 'Thank you, but I won't be going in with you. I'm moving on.'

'Right now? Come, Cob, at least have a mug of beer and a bite to eat. I know that Honey is ... difficult to tolerate sometimes. But you needn't assume she speaks for all of us.'

'It's not that. I simply have something that I must do. Something I have put off for a long, long time. Yesterday I realized that until I have done it, there will be no peace for me.'

Josh sighed heavily. 'Yesterday was an ugly day. I would not base any life decision on it.' He swung his head to look toward me. 'Whatever it is, Cob, I think time will make it better. It does most things, you know.'

'Some things,' I muttered distractedly. 'Other things don't get better until you ... mend them. One way or another.'

'Well.' He held out his hand to me, and I took it. 'Good luck to you then. At least this fighter's hand has a sword to grip now. That can't be bad fortune for you.'

'Here's the door,' I said, and opened it for him. 'Good luck to you as well,' I told him as he passed me, and closed it behind him.

As I stepped out into the open street again, I felt as if I had tossed a burden aside. Free again. I would not soon weight myself down with anything like that again.

I'm coming, I told Nighteyes. This evening, we hunt.

I'll be watching for you.

I hitched my bundle a bit higher on my shoulder, took a fresh grip on my staff and strode down the street. I could think of nothing in Crowsneck that I could possibly desire. My path took me straight through the market square however, and the habits of a lifetime die hard. My ears pricked up to the grumbles and complaints of those who had come to bargain. Buyers demanded to know why prices were so high; sellers replied that the trade from downriver was scarce, and whatever goods came upriver as far as Crowsneck were dear. Prices were worse upriver, they assured them. For all those who complained about the high prices, there were as many who came looking for what was simply not there. It was not just the ocean fish and the

thick wool of Buck that no longer came up the river. It was as Chade had predicted; there were no silks, no brandies, no fine Bingtown gemwork, nothing from the Coastal Duchies, nor from the lands beyond. Regal's attempt to strangle the Mountain Kingdom's trade routes had also deprived the Crowsneck merchants of Mountain amber and furs and other goods. Crowsneck had been a trading town. Now it was stagnant, choking on a surplus of its own goods and naught to trade them for.

At least one shambling drunk knew where to put the blame. He wove his way through the market, caroming off stalls and staggering through the wares lesser merchants had displayed on mats. His shaggy black hair hung to his shoulders and merged with his beard. He sang as he came, or growled, more truly, for his voice was louder than it was musical. There was little melody to fix the tune in my mind, and he botched whatever rhyme had once been to the song, but the sense of it was clear. When Shrewd had been King of the Six Duchies, the river had run with gold, but now that Regal wore the crown, the coasts all ran with blood. There was a second verse, saying it was better to pay taxes to fight the Red Ships than pay them to a king that hid, but that one was interrupted by the arrival of the City Guard. There were a pair of them, and I expected to see them halt the drunk and shake him down for coins to pay for whatever he'd broken. I should have been forewarned by the silence that came over the market when the guards appeared. Commerce ceased, folk melted out of the way or pressed back against the stalls to allow them passage. All eyes followed and fixed on them.

They closed on the drunk swiftly, and I was one of the silent crowd watching as they seized him. The drunk goggled at them in dismay, and the look of appeal he swept over the crowd was chilling in its intensity. Then one of the guards drew back a gauntleted fist and sank it into his belly. The drunk looked to be a tough old man, gone paunchy in the way that some thickly-set men do as they age. A soft man would have collapsed to that blow. He curled himself forward over the guard's fist, his breath whistling out, and then abruptly spewed out a gush of soured ale. The guards stepped back in distaste, one giving the drunk a shove that sent him tottering off balance. He crashed against a marketstall, sending two baskets of eggs splatting into the dirt. The egg merchant said nothing, only stepped back deeper into his stall as if he did not wish to be noticed at all.

The guards advanced on the unfortunate man. The first one there gripped him by the shirt front and dragged him to his feet. He struck him a

short, straight blow to the face that sent him crashing into the other guard's arms. That one caught him, and held him up for his partner's fist to find his belly again. This time the drunk dropped to his knees and the guard behind him casually kicked him down.

I did not realize I had started forward until a hand caught at my shoulder. I looked back into the wizened face of the gaunt old woman who clutched at me. 'Don't make them mad,' she breathed. 'They'll let him off with a beating, if no one makes them angry. Make them angry, and they'll kill him. Or worse, take him off for the King's Circle.'

I locked eyes with her weary gaze, and she looked down as if ashamed. But she did not take her hand from my shoulder. Like her, then, I looked aside from what they did, and tried not to hear the impacts on flesh, the grunts and strangled cries of the beaten man.

The day was hot, and the guards wore more mail than I was accustomed to seeing on City Guards. Perhaps that was what saved the drunk. No one likes to sweat in armour. I looked back in time to see one stoop and cut loose the man's purse, heft it, and then pocket it. The other guard looked about at the crowd as he announced, 'Black Rolf has been fined and punished for the treasonous act of making mock of the King. Let it be an example to all.'

The guards left him lying in the dirt and litter of the market square and continued their rounds. One guard watched over his shoulder as they strode away, but no one moved until they turned a corner. Then gradually the market stirred back to life. The old woman lifted her hand from my shoulder and turned back to haggling for turnips. The egg merchant came around the front of his stall, to stoop and gather the few unbroken eggs and the yolky baskets. No one looked directly at the fallen man.

I stood still for a time, waiting for a shaky coldness inside me to fade. I wanted to ask why City Guards should care about a drunkard's song, but no one met my querying glance. I suddenly had even less use for anyone or anything in Crowsneck. I hitched my pack a notch higher and resumed my trek out of town. But as I drew near the groaning man, his pain lapped against me. The closer I came, the more distinct it was, almost like forcing my hand deeper and deeper into a fire. He lifted his face to stare at me. Dirt clung to the blood and vomit on it. I tried to keep walking.

Help him. My mind rendered thus the sudden mental urging I felt.

I halted as if knifed, nearly reeling. That plea was not from Nighteyes. The drunk got a hand under himself and levered himself higher. His eyes met

mine in dumb appeal and misery. I had seen such eyes before; they were those of an animal in pain.

Maybe we should help him? Nighteyes asked uncertainly.

Hush, I warned him.

Please, help him. The plea had grown in urgency and strength. *Old Blood asks of Old Blood,* the voice in my mind spoke more clearly, not in words but images. I Witted the meaning behind it. It was a laying on of clan obligation.

Are they pack with us? Nighteyes asked wonderingly. I knew he could sense my confusion, and did not reply.

Black Rolf had managed to get his other hand under himself. He pushed himself up onto one knee, then mutely extended a hand to me. I clasped his forearm and drew him slowly to his feet. Once he was upright, he swayed slightly. I kept hold of his arm and let him catch his balance against me. As dumb as he, I offered him my walking staff. He took it, but did not relinquish my arm. Slowly we left the market place, the drunk leaning on me heavily. Entirely too many people stared after us curiously. As we walked through the streets, people glanced up at us, and then away. The man said nothing to me. I kept expecting him to point out some direction he wished to go, some house claimed as his, but he said nothing.

As we reached the outskirts of town, the road meandered down to the riverbank. The sun shone through an opening in the trees, glinting silver on the water. Here a shoal of the river swept up against a grassy bank framed by willow woods. Some folk carrying baskets of wet washing were just leaving. He gave me a slight tug on the arm to indicate he wished to get to the river's edge. Once there, Black Rolf sank to his knees, then leaned forward to plunge not just his face but his entire head and neck into the water. He came up, rubbed at his face with his hands, and then ducked himself again. The second time he came up, he shook his head vigorously as a wet dog, sending water spraying in all directions. He sat back on his heels, and looked up at me blearily.

'I drink too much when I come to town,' he said hollowly.

I nodded to that. 'Will you be all right now?'

He nodded back. I could see his tongue move inside his mouth, checking for cuts and loose teeth. The memory of old pain rolled over restlessly inside me. I wanted to be away from any reminders of that.

‘Good luck, then,’ I told him. I stooped, upstream of him, and drank and refilled my waterskin. Then I rose, hefted my pack again, and turned to leave. A prickling of the Wit swivelled my head suddenly toward the woods. A stump shifted, then suddenly reared up as a brown bear. She snuffed the air, then dropped to all fours again and shambled toward us. ‘Rolf,’ I said quietly as I started to slowly back up. ‘Rolf, there’s a bear.’

‘She’s mine,’ he said as quietly. ‘You’ve nothing to fear from her.’

I stood stock-still as she shuffled out of the woods and down the grassy bank. As she drew close to Rolf, she gave a low cry, oddly like a cow’s bawl for her calf. Then she nudged her big head against him. He stood up, leaning a hand on her sloping front shoulders to do so. I could sense them communicating with one another, but had no notion of their messages. Then she lifted her head to look directly at me. *Old Blood*, she acknowledged me. Her little eyes were deep set above her muzzle. As she walked, the sunlight sleeked her glossy, rolling hide. They both came toward me. I did not move.

When they were very close, she lifted her nose and pressed her snout firmly against me and began to take long snuffs.

My brother? Nighteyes queried in some alarm.

I think it is all right. I scarcely dared to breathe. I had never been this close to a live bear.

Her head was the size of a bushel basket. Her hot breath against my chest reeked of river fish. After a moment she stepped away from me, huffing an *uh, uh, uh* sound in her throat as if considering all she had scented on me. She sat back on her haunches, taking air in through her open mouth as if tasting my scent on it. She wagged her head slowly from side to side, then seemed to reach a decision. She dropped to all fours again and trundled off. ‘Come,’ Rolf said briefly, and motioned me to follow. They set off towards the woods. Over his shoulder, he added, ‘We have food to share. The wolf is welcome, too.’

After a moment, I set out after them.

Is this wise? I could sense that Nighteyes was not far away and was moving toward me as swiftly as he could, eeling between trees as he came down a hillside.

I need to understand what they are. Are they like us? I have never spoken to any like us.

A derisive snort from Nighteyes. *You were raised by Heart of the Pack. He is more like us than these. I am not certain I wish to come close to a bear,*

or to the man who thinks with the bear.

I want to know more, I insisted. *How did she sense me, how did she reach out to me?* Despite my curiosity, I stayed well back from the strange twosome. Man and bear shambled along ahead of me. They wended their way through the willow woods beside the river, avoiding the road. At a place where the forest drew densely down to the opposite side of the road, they crossed hastily. I followed. In the deeper shadow of these larger trees, we soon struck a game trail that cut across the face of a hill. I sensed Nighteyes before he materialized beside me. He was panting from his haste. My heart smote me at how he moved on three legs. Too often he had taken injuries on my behalf. What right did I have to ask that of him?

It is not as bad as all that.

He did not like to walk behind me, but the trail was too narrow for both of us. I ceded him the path and walked alongside, dodging branches and trunks, closely watching our guides. Neither of us were easy about that bear. A single swipe from one of her paws could cripple or kill, and my small experience of bears did not indicate they had even temperaments. Walking in the flow of her scent kept Nighteyes' hackles erect and my skin aprickle.

In time we came to a small cabin set snug against the side of the hill. It was made of stone and log, chinked with moss and earth. The logs that roofed it were overlain with turf. Grasses and even small bushes sprouted from the roof of the cabin. The door was unusually wide and gaped open. Both man and bear preceded us inside. After a moment of hesitation, I ventured near to peer inside. Nighteyes hung back, hackles half-raised, ears pricked forward.

Black Rolf stepped back to the door to look out at us. 'Come in and be welcome,' he offered. When he saw that I hesitated, he added, 'Old Blood does not turn on Old Blood.'

Slowly I entered. There was a low slab table in the centre of the room with a bench to either side of it, and a river rock hearth in a corner between two large comfortable chairs. Another door led to a smaller sleeping room. The cabin smelt like a bear's den, rank and earthy. In one corner was a scattering of bones and the walls there bore the marks of claws.

A woman was just setting aside a broom after sweeping the dirt floor. She was dressed in brown, and her short hair was sleeked to her head like an acorn's cap. She turned her head quickly toward me and fixed me with an

unblinking stare from brown eyes. Rolf gestured toward me. 'Here are the guests I was telling you about, Holly,' he announced.

'Thank you for your hospitality,' I ventured.

She looked almost startled. 'Old Blood always welcomes Old Blood.'

I brought my eyes back to confront the glittering blackness of Rolf's gaze. 'I have never heard of this "Old Blood" before.'

'But you know what it is.' He smiled at me, and it seemed a bear's smile. He had the bear's posture: his lumbering walk, a way of slowly wagging his head from side to side, of tucking his chin and looking down as if a muzzle divided his eyes. Behind him, his woman slowly nodded. She lifted her eyes and exchanged a glance with someone. I followed her gaze to a small hawk perched on a cross rafter. His eyes bored into me. The beams were streaked white with his droppings.

'You mean the Wit?' I asked.

'No. So it is named by those who have no knowing of it. That is the name it is despised by. Those of us who are of the Old Blood do not name it so.' He turned away to a cupboard set against the stout wall and began to take food from it. Long thick slabs of smoked salmon. A loaf of bread heavy with nuts and fruit baked into it. The bear rose on her hind legs, then dropped again to all fours, snuffing appreciatively. She turned her head sideways to take a side of fish from the table; it looked small in her jaws. She lumbered off to her corner with it and turned her back as she began on it. The woman had silently positioned herself on a chair from which she could watch the whole room. When I glanced at her she smiled and motioned her own invitation to the table. Then she resumed her stillness and her watching.

I found my own mouth watering at the sight of the food. It had been days since I had eaten to repletion and I'd had almost nothing in the last two days. A light whine from outside the cottage reminded me that Nighteyes was in the same condition. 'No cheese, no butter,' Black Rolf warned me solemnly. 'The City Guard took all the coin I'd traded for before I got around to buying butter and cheese. But we've fish and bread in plenty, and honeycomb for the bread. Take what you wish.'

Almost inadvertently, my eyes flickered toward the door.

'Both of you,' he clarified for me. 'Among the Old Blood, two are treated as one. Always.'

Nighteyes? Will you come in?

I will come to the door.

A moment later a grey shadow slunk past the door opening. I sensed him prowling about outside the cabin, taking up the scents of the place, registering bear, over and over. He passed the door again, peered in briefly, then made another circuit of the cabin. He discovered a partially-devoured carcass of a deer, with leaves and dirt scuffed over it not too far from the cabin. It was a typical bear's cache. I did not need to warn him to leave it alone. Finally he came back to the door and settled before it, sitting alertly, ears pricked.

'Take food to him if he does not wish to come inside,' Rolf urged me. He added, 'None of us believe in forcing a fellow against his natural instincts.'

'Thank you,' I said, a bit stiffly, but I did not know what manners were called for here. I took a slab of the salmon from the table. I tossed it to Nighteyes and he caught it deftly. For a moment he sat with it in his jaws. He could not both eat and remain totally wary. Long strings of saliva began to trail from his mouth as he sat there gripping the fish. *Eat*, I urged him. *I do not think they wish us any harm.*

He needed no more urging than that. He dropped the fish, pinned it to the ground with his forepaw and then tore off a large hunk of it. He wolfed it down, scarcely chewing. His eating awoke my hunger with an intensity I had been suppressing. I looked away from him to find that Black Rolf had cut me a thick slab of the bread and slathered it with honey. He was pouring a large mug of mead for himself. Mine was already beside my plate.

'Eat, don't wait on me,' he invited me, and when I looked askance at the woman, she smiled.

'Be welcome,' she said quietly. She came to the table and took a platter for herself, but put only a small portion of fish and a fragment of bread on it. I sensed she did so to put me at ease rather than for her own hunger. 'Eat well,' she bade me, and added, 'we can sense your hunger, you know.' She did not join us at table, but carried her food off to her chair by the hearth.

I was only too glad to obey her. I ate with much the same manners as Nighteyes. He was on his third slab of salmon, and I had finished as many pieces of bread and was eating a second piece of salmon before I recalled myself to my host. Rolf refilled my mug with mead and observed, 'I once tried to keep a goat. For milk and cheese and such. But she never could become accustomed to Hilda. Poor thing was always too nervous to let down

her milk. So. We have mead. With Hilda's nose for honey, that's a drink we can supply ourselves with.'

'It's wonderful,' I sighed. I set down my mug, a quarter drained already, and breathed out. I hadn't finished eating, but the urgent edge of my hunger was gone now. Black Rolf picked up another slab of fish from the table and tossed it casually to Hilda. She caught it, paws and jaws, then turned aside from us to resume eating. He sent another slab winging to Nighteyes, who had lost all wariness. He leaped for it, then lay down, the salmon between his front paws, and turned his head to scissor off chunks and gulp them down. Holly picked at her food, tearing off small strips of dried fish and ducking her head as she ate them. Every time I glanced her way, I found her looking at me with her sharp black eyes. I looked back at Hilda.

'How did you ever come to bond with a she-bear?' I asked, and then added, 'if it isn't a rude question. I've never spoken to anyone else who was bonded to an animal, at least, no one who admitted it openly.'

He leaned back in his chair and rested his hands upon his belly. 'I don't "admit it openly" to just anyone. I supposed that you knew of me, right away, as Hilda and I are always aware when there are others of the Old Blood near by. But, as to your question ... my mother was Old Blood, and two of her children inherited it. She sensed it in us, of course, and raised us in the ways. And when I was of an age, as a man, I made my quest.'

I looked at him blankly. He shook his head, a pitying smile touching his lips.

'I went alone, out into the world, seeking my companion beast. Some look in the towns, some look in the forest, a few, I have heard tell, even go out to sea. But I was drawn to the woods. So I went out alone, senses wide, fasting save for cold water and the herbs that quicken the Old Blood. I found a place, here, and I sat down among the roots of an old tree and I waited. And in time, Hilda came to me, seeking just as I had been seeking. We tested one another and found the trust and, well, here we are, seven years later.' He glanced at Hilda as fondly as if he spoke of a wife and children.

'A deliberate search for one to bond with,' I mused.

I believe that you sought me that day, and that I called out for you. Though neither of us knew at the time what we were seeking, Nighteyes mused, putting my rescuing him from the animal trader in a new light.

I do not think so, I told him regretfully. *I had bonded twice before, with dogs, and had learned too well the pain of losing such a companion. I had*

resolved never to bond again.

Rolf was looking at me with disbelief. Almost horror. ‘You had bonded twice before the wolf? And lost both companions?’ He shook his head, denying it could be so. ‘You are very young even for a first bonding.’

I shrugged at him. ‘I was just a child when Nosy and I joined. He was taken away from me, by one who knew something of bonding and did not think it was good for either of us. Later, I did encounter him again, but it was at the end of his days. And the other pup I bonded to ...’

Rolf was regarding me with a distaste as fervent as Burrich’s was for the Wit while Holly silently shook her head. ‘You bonded as a child? Forgive me, but that is perversion. As well allow a little girl to be wed off to a grown man. A child is not ready to share the full life of a beast; all Old Blood parents I know most carefully shelter their children from such contacts.’ Sympathy touched his face. ‘Still, it must have been excruciating for your bond-friend to be taken from you. But whoever did it, did the right thing, whatever his reason.’ He looked at me more closely. ‘I am surprised you survived, knowing nothing of the Old Blood ways.’

‘Where I come from, it is seldom spoken of. And when it is, it is called the Wit, and is deemed a shameful thing to do.’

‘Even your parents told you this? For while I well know how the Old Blood is regarded and all the lies that are told about it, one usually does not hear them from one’s own parents. Our parents cherish our lines, and help us to find proper mates when the time comes, so that our blood may not be thinned.’

I glanced from his frank gaze to Holly’s open stare. ‘I did not know my parents.’ Even anonymously, the words did not come easily to me. ‘My mother gave me over to my father’s family when I was six years old. And my father chose not to ... be near me. Still, I suspect the Old Blood came from my mother’s side. I recall nothing of her or her family.’

‘Six years old? And you recall nothing? Surely she taught you something before she let you go, gave you some knowledge to protect yourself ...?’

I sighed. ‘I recall nothing of her.’ I had long ago grown weary of folk telling me that I must remember something of her, that most people have memories that go back to when they were three or even younger.

Black Rolf made a low noise in his throat, between a growl and a sigh. ‘Well, someone taught you something.’

‘No.’ I said it flatly, tired of the argument. I wished an end to it, and so resorted to the oldest tactic I knew for diverting people when they asked too many questions about me. ‘Tell me about yourself,’ I urged him. ‘What did your mother teach you, and how?’

He smiled, his cheeks wrinkling fatly about his black eyes and making them smaller. ‘It took her twenty years to teach it to me. Have you that long to hear about it?’ At my look he added, ‘No, I know you asked but to make conversation. But I offer what I see you needing. Stay with us a bit. We’ll teach you what you both need to know. But you won’t learn it in an hour or a day. It’s going to take months. Perhaps years.’

Holly spoke suddenly from the corner in a quiet voice. ‘We could find him a mate as well. He might do for Ollie’s girl. She’s older, but she might steady him down.’

Rolf grinned widely. ‘Isn’t that like a woman! Knows you for five minutes, and already matching you up for marriage.’

Holly spoke directly to me. Her smile was small but warm. ‘Vita is bonded to a crow. All of you would hunt well together. Stay with us. You will meet her, and like her. Old Blood should join to Old Blood.’

Refuse politely, Nighteyes suggested immediately. Bad enough to den among men. If you start sleeping near bears, you shall stink so that we can never hunt well again. Nor do I desire to share our kills with a teasing crow. He paused. *Unless they know of a woman who is bonded with a bitch-wolf?*

A smile twitched at the corner of Black Rolf’s mouth. I suspected he was more aware of what we said than he let on, and I told Nighteyes as much.

‘It is one of the things that I could teach you, should you choose to stay,’ Rolf offered. ‘When you two speak, to one of the Old Blood it is as if you were shouting to one another over the rattle of a tinker’s cart. There is no need to be so ... wide open with it. It is only one wolf you address, not all of the wolf kindred. No. It is even more than that. I doubt if anything that eats meat is unaware of you two. Tell me. When was the last time you encountered a large carnivore?’

Dogs chased me some nights ago, Nighteyes said.

‘Dogs will stand and bark from their territory,’ Rolf observed. ‘I meant a wild carnivore.’

‘I don’t think I’ve seen any since we bonded,’ I admitted unwillingly.

‘They will avoid you as surely as Forged ones will follow you,’ Black Rolf said calmly.

A chill went down my spine. ‘Forged ones? But Forged ones seem to have no Wit at all. I do not sense them with my Wit-sense at all, only with eyes or nose or ...’

‘To your Old Blood senses, all creatures give off a kinship warmth. All save the Forged ones. This is true?’

I nodded uneasily.

‘They have lost it. I do not know how it is stolen from them, but that is what Forging does. And it leaves an emptiness in them. This much is well known among those of the Old Blood, and we know, too, that we are more likely to be followed and attacked by Forged ones. Especially if we use those talents carelessly. Why this is so, no one can say with certainty. Perhaps only the Forged ones know, if they truly “know” anything any more. But it gives us one more reason to be cautious of ourselves and our talents.’

‘Are you suggesting that Nighteyes and I should refrain from using the Wit?’

‘I am suggesting that perhaps you should stay here for a while, and take the time to learn to master the talents of the Old Blood. Or you may find yourself in more battles such as the one you fought yesterday.’ He permitted himself a small smile.

‘I said nothing to you of that attack,’ I said quietly.

‘You did not need to,’ he pointed out. ‘I am sure that everyone of Old Blood for leagues around heard you when you fought them. Until you both learn to control how you speak to one another, nothing between you is truly private.’ He paused then added, ‘Did you never think it strange that Forged ones would spend time attacking a wolf when there is apparently nothing to gain from such an attack? They only focus on him because he is bonded to you.’

I gave Nighteyes a brief apologetic glance. ‘I thank you for your offer. But we have a thing we must do and it will not wait. I think that we shall encounter fewer Forged ones as we move inland. We should be fine.’

‘That is likely. The ones that go so far inland are gathered up by the King. Still, any that may be left will be drawn to you. But even if you encounter no more Forged ones, you are likely to encounter the King’s Guards. They take a special interest in “witted” folk these days. Of late, many of the Old Blood have been sold to the King, by neighbours, and even

family. His gold is good, and he does not even ask much proof that they are truly Old Blood. Not for years has the vendetta against us burned so hot.'

I looked away uncomfortably, well aware of why Regal hated those with the Wit. His coterie would support him in that hate. I felt sickened as I thought of innocent folk sold to Regal that he might revenge himself on them in my stead. I tried to keep the rage I felt masked.

Hilda came back to the table, looked it over consideringly, then seized the pot that held the honeycombs in both her paws. She waddled carefully away from the table, to seat herself in the corner and begin a careful licking out of the pot. Holly continued to watch me. I could read nothing from her eyes.

Black Rolf scratched at his beard, then winced as his fingers found a sore spot. He smiled a careful, rueful smile at me. 'I can sympathize with your desire to kill King Regal. But I do not think you shall find it as easy as you suppose.'

I just looked at him, but Nighteyes rolled a light snarl in the back of his throat. Hilda looked up at that and thumped down on all fours, the honey jar rolling away from her across the floor. Black Rolf sent her a glance and she sat back, but fixed both Nighteyes and me with a glare. I don't think there is anything as gut-tightening as an angry glare from a brown bear. I did not move. Holly sat up straight in her chair but remained calm. Above us in the rafters Sleet rattled his plumage.

'If you bay out all your plans and grievances to the night moon, you cannot be astonished that others know of them. I do not think you shall encounter many of the Old Blood who are sympathetic to King Regal ... or any, perhaps. In fact, many would be willing to aid you if you asked them. Still, silence is wisest, for a plan such as that.'

'From your song earlier, I would suspect you share my sentiments,' I said quietly. 'And I thank you for your warning. But Nighteyes and I have had to be circumspect before about what we shared with one another. Now we know there is a danger of being overheard, I think we can compensate for it. One question I will ask of you. What care the City Guards of Crowsneck if a man has a few drinks and sings a mocking song about the ... King?' I had to force the word from my throat.

'None at all, when they are Crowsneck men. But that is no longer the case in Crowsneck, nor in any of the river road towns. Those are King's Guards, in the livery of the Crowsneck Guard, and paid from the town purse,

but King's Men all the same. Regal had not been king two months before he decreed that change. He claimed the law would be enforced more equitably if city guards were all sworn King's Men, carrying out the law of the Six Duchies above any other. Well. You have seen how they carry it out ... mostly by carrying off whatever they can from any poor sot who treads upon the King's toes. Still those two in Crowsneck are not so bad as some I've heard of. Word is that down in Sand bend, a cutpurse or thief can make an easy living, so long as the guard gets a share. The town masters are powerless to dismiss the guards the King has appointed. Nor are they allowed to supplement them with their own men.'

It sounded only too much like Regal. I wondered how obsessed he would become with power and control. Would he set spies upon his spies? Or had he already done so? None of it boded well for the Six Duchies as a whole.

Black Rolf broke me from my musings. 'Now, I've a question I would ask of you.'

'Be free to ask,' I invited him, but held to myself how freely I should answer.

'Late last night ... after you had finished with the Forged ones. Another attacked you. I could not sense who, only that your wolf defended you, and that he somehow went ... somewhere. That he threw his strength into a channel I did not understand, nor could follow. I know no more than that he, and you, were victorious. What was that thing?'

'A servant of the King,' I hedged. I did not wish to entirely refuse him an answer, and this seemed harmless, as he seemed to already know it.

'You fought what they call the Skill. Didn't you?' His eyes locked with mine. When I did not answer, he went on anyway. 'There are many of us who would like to know how it was done. In our past, Skilled ones have hunted us down as if we were vermin. No one of the Old Blood can say that his family has not suffered at their hands. Now those days have come again. If there is a way to use the talents of the Old Blood against those who wield the Farseer's Skill, it is knowledge worth much to us.'

Holly sidled from the corner, then came to grip the back of Rolf's chair and peer over his shoulder at me. I sensed the importance of my answer to them.

'I cannot teach you that,' I said honestly.

His eyes held mine, his disbelief plain. ‘Twice tonight, I have offered to teach you all I know of the Old Blood, to open to you all the doors that only your ignorance keeps closed. You have refused me, but by Eda, I have offered, and freely. But this one thing I ask, this one thing that might save so many lives of our own kind, you say you cannot teach me?’

My eyes flickered to Hilda. Her eyes had gone beady and bright again. Black Rolf was probably unaware of how his posture mimicked that of his bear. They both had me measuring the distance to the door, while Nighteyes was already on his feet and ready to flee. Behind Rolf, Holly cocked her head and stared at me. Above us, the hawk turned his head to watch us. I forced myself to loosen my muscles, to behave much more calmly than I felt. It was a tactic learned from Burrich when confronting any distressed animal.

‘I speak truth to you,’ I said carefully. ‘I cannot teach you what I do not fully understand myself.’ I refrained from mentioning that I myself carried that despised Farseer blood. I was sure now of what I had only suspected before. The Wit could be used to attack a Skilled one only if a Skill channel had been opened between them. Even if I had been able to describe what Nighteyes and I had done, no one else would have been able to copy it. To fight the Skill with the Wit, one had to possess both the Skill and the Wit. I met Black Rolf’s eyes calmly, knowing I had spoken the truth to him.

Slowly he relaxed his hunched shoulders, and Hilda dropped back to all fours and went snuffling after the trailing honey. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, quietly stubborn, ‘perhaps if you stayed with us, and learned what I have to teach you, you would begin to understand what you do. Then you could teach it to me. Do you think so?’

I kept my voice calm and even. ‘You witnessed the King’s servants attack me last night. Do you think they will suffer me to remain here and learn more to use against them? No. My only chance is to beard them in their den before they come seeking me out.’ I hesitated, then offered, ‘Although I cannot teach you to do as I do, you may be assured that it will be used against the enemies of the Old Blood.’

This, finally, was a reasoning he could accept. He snuffed several times thoughtfully. I wondered uncomfortably if I had as many wolf mannerisms as he had bear and Holly had hawk.

‘Will you stay the night at least?’ he asked abruptly.

‘We do better when we travel by night,’ I said regretfully. ‘It is more comfortable for both of us.’

He nodded sagely to that. ‘Well. I wish you well, and every good fortune in achieving your end. You are welcome to rest safely here until the moon rises, if you wish.’

I conferred with Nighteyes, and we accepted gratefully. I checked the slash on Nighteyes’ shoulder and found it to be no better than I had suspected. I treated it with some of Burrich’s salve, and then we sprawled outside in the shade and napped the afternoon away. It was good for both of us to be able to relax completely, knowing that others stood guard over us. It was the best sleep either of us had had since we had begun our journey. When we awoke, I found that Black Rolf had put up fish, honey and bread for us to carry with us. There was no sign of the hawk. I imagined he had gone to roost for the night. Holly stood in the shadows near the house, regarding us sleepily.

‘Go carefully, go gently,’ Rolf counselled us after we had thanked him and packed his gifts. ‘Walk in the ways Eda has opened for you.’

He paused, as if waiting for a response. I sensed a custom I was not familiar with. I wished him simply, ‘Good luck,’ and he nodded to that.

‘You will be back, you know,’ he added.

I shook my head slowly. ‘I doubt that. But I thank you for what you have given me.’

‘No. I know you will be back. It is not a matter of your wanting what I can teach you. You will find you need it. You are not a man as ordinary men are. They think they have a right to all beasts; to hunt them and eat them, or to subjugate them and rule their lives. You know you have no such right to mastery. The horse that carries you will do so because he wishes to, as does the wolf that hunts beside you. You have a deeper sense of yourself in the world. You believe you have a right, not to rule it, but to be part of it. Predator or prey; there is no shame to being either one. As time goes on, you will find you have urgent questions. What must you do when your friend wishes to run with a pack of true wolves? I promise you, that time will come. What must he do if you marry and have a child? When the time comes for one of you to die, as it must, how does the other make room for what is left, and carry on alone? In time you will hunger for others of your kind. You will need to know how to sense them and how to seek them out. There are answers to these questions, Old Blood answers, ones I cannot tell you in a

day, ones you cannot understand in a week. You need those answers. And you will come back for them.'

I looked down at the trodden soil of the forest path. I had lost all certainty that I would not return to Rolf.

Holly spoke softly but clearly from the shadows. 'I believe in what you go to do. I wish you success, and would aid you if I could.' Her eyes darted to Rolf, as if this were a thing they had discussed, but had not agreed upon. 'If you are in need, cry out, as you do to Nighteyes, asking that any of Old Blood who hear you pass word back to Holly and Sleet of Crowsneck. Those who hear may come to help you. Even if they do not, they will send word to me, and I will do what I can.'

Rolf let out a sudden huff of breath. 'We will do what we can,' he amended her words. 'But you would be wiser to stay here and learn first how to better protect yourself.'

I nodded to his words, but resolved privately that I would not involve any of them in my revenge against Regal. When I glanced up at Rolf, he smiled at me wryly, and shrugged his shoulders. 'Go then. But be wary, both of you. Before the moon goes down you'll leave Buck behind and be in Farrow. If you think King Regal has a grip on us here, wait until you get to where folk believe he has a right to it.'

I nodded grimly to that, and once more Nighteyes and I were on our way.

SEVEN

Farrow

Lady Patience, the Lady of Buckkeep as she came to be called, rose to power in a unique fashion. She had been born into a noble family and was by birth a lady. She was raised to the loftier status of Queen-in-Waiting by her precipitous marriage to King-in-Waiting Chivalry. She never asserted herself in either position to take the power that birth and marriage had brought her. It was only when she was alone, almost abandoned, as eccentric Lady Patience at Buckkeep that she gathered to herself the reins of influence. She did it, as she had done everything else in her life, in a haphazard, quaint way that would have availed any other woman not at all.

She did not call on noble family connections, nor exert influential connections based on her deceased husband's status. Instead she began with that lowest tier of power, the so-called men-at-arms, who were just as frequently women. Those few remaining of King Shrewd's personal guard, and Queen Kettricken's guard had been left in the peculiar position of guardians with nothing left to guard. The Buckkeep Guard had been supplanted in their duties by the personal troops that Lord Bright brought with him from Farrow, and delegated to lesser tasks that involved the cleaning and maintenance of the keep. The former guards were erratically paid, had lost respect among and for themselves, and were too often idle or occupied with degrading tasks. The Lady Patience, ostensibly because they were not otherwise busied, began to solicit their services. She began by requesting a guard when she abruptly began to ride out on her ancient palfrey, Silk. Afternoon rides gradually lengthened to all-day forays, and then to overnight visits to villages that had either been raided or feared raids. In the raided villages, she and her maid Lacey did what they could for the injured, logged down a tally of those slain or Forged, and provided, in the form of her guard, strong backs to aid in the clearing of rubble from the main streets and the raising of temporary shelter for folks left homeless. This, while not true work for fighters, was a sharp reminder of what they had been trained to fight against, and of what happened when there were no defenders. The gratitude of the folk they aided restored to the guard their pride and inner cohesiveness. In the unraided villages, the guard were a

small show of force that Buckkeep and the Farseer pride still existed. In several villages and towns, makeshift stockades were raised where the folk could retreat from the Raiders and have a small chance of defending themselves.

There is no record of Lord Bright's feelings regarding Lady Patience's forays. She never declared these expeditions in any official way. They were her pleasure rides, the guards that accompanied her had volunteered to do so, and likewise for the duties she put them to in the villages. Some, as she came to trust them, ran 'errands' for her. Such errands might involve the distance carrying of messages to keeps in Rippon, Bearns and even Shoaks, requesting news of how the coastal towns fared, and giving news of Buck; they took her runners into and through occupied territories and were fraught with danger. Her messengers often were given a sprig of the ivy she grew year round in her rooms as a token to present to the recipients of her messages and support. Several ballads have been written about the so-called Ivy Runners, telling of the bravery and resourcefulness they showed, and reminding us that even the greatest walls must, in time, yield to the over-climbing ivy. Perhaps the most famous exploit was that of Pansy, the youngest runner. At the age of eleven, she travelled all the way to where the Duchess of Bearns was in hiding in the Ice Caves of Bearns, to bring her tidings of when and where a supply boat would beach. For part of that journey, Pansy travelled undiscovered amidst the sacks of grain in a wagon commandeered by the Raiders. From the very heart of a Raiders' camp, she escaped to continue her mission, but only after she had set fire to the tent in which their leader slept in revenge for her Forged parents. Pansy did not live to be thirteen, but her deeds will be long remembered.

Others aided Patience in disposing of her jewellery and ancestral lands for coin, which she then employed 'as she pleased, as was her right' as she once informed Lord Bright. She bought grain and sheep from inland, and again her 'volunteers' saw to its transport and distribution. Small supply boats brought hope to embattled defenders. She made token payments to stonemasons and carpenters who helped to rebuild ravaged villages. And she gave coin, not much but accompanied by her sincerest thanks, to those guards who volunteered to assist her.

By the time the Ivy badge came into common usage among the Buckkeep guard, it was only to acknowledge what was already a fact. These men and women were Lady Patience's guard, paid by her when they were

paid at all, but more important to them, valued and used by her, doctored by her when they were injured, and sharply defended by her acid tongue against any who spoke disparagingly of them. These were the foundation of her influence, and the basis of the strength she came to wield. 'A tower seldom crumbles from the bottom up,' she told more than one, and claimed to have the saying from Prince Chivalry.

We had slept well and our bellies were full. Without the need to hunt, we travelled the whole night. We stayed off the road, and were far more cautious than we had previously been, but no Forged ones did we encounter. A large white moon silvered us a path through the trees. We moved as one creature, scarcely even thinking, save to catalogue the scents we encountered and the sounds we heard. The icy determination that had seized me infected Nighteyes as well. I would not carelessly trumpet to him my intention, but we could think of it without focusing on it. It was a different sort of hunting urge, driven by a different sort of hunger. Each night we walked the miles away beneath the moon's peering stare.

There was a soldier's logic to it, a strategy Verity would have approved. Will knew I lived. I did not know if he would reveal that to the others of the coterie, or even Regal. I suspected he hungered to drain off my Skill-strength as Justin and Serene had drained King Shrewd's. I suspected there would be an obscene ecstasy to such a theft of power, and that Will would wish to savour it alone. I was also fairly certain that he would search for me, determined to ferret me out no matter where I hid. He knew also that I was terrified of him. He would not expect me to come straight for him, determined to kill not only him and the coterie, but also Regal. My swift march toward Tradeford might be my best strategy for remaining hidden from him.

Farrow's reputation is for being as open as Buck is craggy and wooded. That first dawn found us in an unfamiliar type of forest, more open and deciduous. We bedded down for the day in a birch copse on a gentle hill overlooking open pasture. For the first time since the fight I took off my shirt and by daylight examined my shoulder where the club had connected. It was black and blue, and painful if I tried to lift my arm above my head. But that was all. Minor. Three years ago, I would have thought it a serious injury. I would have bathed it in cold water and poulticed it with herbs to hasten its healing. Now, although it purpled my whole shoulder and twinged whenever

I moved it, it was only a bruise, and I left it to heal on its own. I smiled wryly to myself as I put my shirt back on.

Nighteyes was not patient as I looked at the slice in his shoulder. It was starting to close. As I pushed the hair back from the edges of the cut, he reached back suddenly and seized my wrist in his teeth. Not roughly, but firmly.

Let it alone. It will heal.

There's dirt in it.

He gave it a sniff and a thoughtful lick. *Not that much.*

Let me look at it.

You never just look. You poke.

Then sit still and let me poke at it.

He conceded, but not graciously. There were bits of grass stuck in it and these had to be plucked loose. More than once he grabbed at my wrist. Finally he rumbled at me in a way that let me know he'd had enough. I wasn't satisfied. He was barely tolerant of me putting some of Burrich's salve on it.

You worry about these things too much, he informed me irritably.

I hate that you are injured because of me. It's not right. This isn't the sort of life a wolf should lead. You should not be alone, wandering from place to place. You should be with a pack, hunting your territory, perhaps taking a mate someday.

Someday is someday, and maybe it will be or maybe it won't. This is a human thing, to worry about things that may or may not come to be. You can't eat the meat until you've killed it. Besides, I am not alone. We are together.

That is true. We are together. I lay down beside Nighteyes to sleep.

I thought of Molly. I resolutely put her out of my mind and tried to sleep. It was no good. I shifted about restlessly until Nighteyes growled, got up, stalked away from me and lay down again. I sat up for a bit, staring down into a wooded valley. I knew I was close to a foolish decision. I refused to consider how completely foolish and reckless it was. I drew a breath, closed my eyes and reached for Molly.

I had dreaded I might find her in another man's arms. I had feared I would hear her speak of me with loathing. Instead, I could not find her at all. Time and again, I centred my thoughts, summoned all my energies and reached out for her. I was finally rewarded with a Skill-image of Burrich

thatching the roof of a cottage. He was shirtless and the summer sun had darkened him to the colour of polished wood. Sweat ran down the back of his neck. He glanced down at someone below him and annoyance crossed his features. 'I know, my lady. You could do it yourself, thank you very much. I also know I have enough worries without fearing that both of you will tumble off here.'

Somewhere I panted with effort, and became aware of my own body again. I pushed myself away and reached for Burrich. I would at least let him know that I lived. I managed to find him, but I saw him through a fog. 'Burrich!' I called to him. 'Burrich, it's Fitz!' But his mind was closed and locked to me; I could not catch even a glimmer of his thoughts. I damned my erratic Skill ability, and reached again into the swirling clouds.

Verity stood before me, his arms crossed on his chest, shaking his head. His voice was no louder than a whisper of wind, and he stood so still I could scarcely see him. Yet I sensed he used great force to reach me. 'Don't do this, boy,' he warned me softly. 'It will only hurt you.' I was suddenly in a different place. He leaned with his back against a great slab of black stone and his face was lined with weariness. Verity rubbed at his temples as if pained. 'I should not be doing this, either. But sometimes I so long for ... Ah, well. Pay no mind. Know this, though. Some things are better not known, and the risks of Skilling right now are too great. If I can feel you and find you, so can another. He'll attack you any way he can. Don't bring them to his attention. He would not scruple to use them against you. Give them up, to protect them.' He suddenly seemed a bit stronger. He smiled bitterly. 'I know what it means to do that; to give them up to keep them safe. So did your father. You've the strength for it. Give it all up, boy. Just come to me. If you've still a mind to. Come to me, and I'll show you what can be done.'

I awoke at midday. The full sunlight falling on my face had given me a headache, and I felt slightly shaky with it. I made a tiny fire, intending to brew some some elfbark tea to steady myself. I forced myself to be sparing of my supply, using only one small piece of bark and the rest nettles. I had not expected to need it so often. I suspected I should conserve it; I might need it after I faced Regal's coterie. Now there was an optimistic thought. Nighteyes opened his eyes to watch me for a bit, then dozed off again. I sat sipping my bitter tea and staring out over the countryside. The bizarre dream had made me homesick for a place and time when people had cared for me. I had left all that behind me. Well, not entirely. I sat beside Nighteyes and

rested a hand on the wolf's shoulder. He shuddered his coat at the touch. *Go to sleep*, he told me grumpily.

You are all I have, I told him, full of melancholy.

He yawned lazily. *And I am all you need. Now go to sleep. Sleeping is serious*, he told me gravely. I smiled and stretched out again beside my wolf, one hand resting on his coat. He radiated the simple contentment of a full belly and sleeping in the warm sun. He was right. It was worth taking seriously. I closed my eyes and slept dreamlessly the rest of the day.

In the days and nights that followed, the nature of the countryside changed to open forests interspersed with wide grassland. Orchards and grainfields surrounded the towns. Once, long ago, I had travelled through Farrow. Then I had been with a caravan, and we had gone cross country rather than following the river. I had been a confident young assassin on my way to an important murder. That trip had ended in my first real experience of Regal's treachery. I had barely survived it. Now once more I travelled across Farrow, looking forward to a murder at my journey's end. But this time I went alone and upriver, the man I would kill was my own uncle and the killing was at my own behest. Sometimes I found that deeply satisfying. At other times, I found it frightening.

I kept my promise to myself, and avoided human company assiduously. We shadowed the road and the river, but when we came to towns, we skirted wide around them. This was more difficult than might be imagined in such open country. It had been one thing to circle about some Buck hamlet tucked into a bend in the river and surrounded by deep woods. It is another to cross grainfields, or slip through orchards and not rouse anyone's dogs or interest. To some extent, I could reassure dogs that we meant no harm. If the dogs were gullible. Most farm dogs have a suspicion of wolves that no amount of reassurances could calm. And older dogs were apt to look askance at any human travelling in a wolf's company. We were chased more than once. The Wit might give me the ability to communicate with some animals, but it did not guarantee that I would be listened to, nor believed. Dogs are not stupid.

Hunting in these open areas was different, too. Most of the small game was of the burrowing sort that lived in groups, and the larger animals simply outran us over the long flat stretches of land. Time spent in hunting was time not spent travelling. Occasionally I found unguarded hen-houses and slipped in quietly to steal eggs from the sleeping birds. I did not scruple to raid plums and cherries from the orchards we passed through. Our most

fortuitous kill was an ignorant young haragar, one of the rangy swine that some of the nomadic folk herded as a food beast. Where this one had strayed from, we did not question. Fang and sword, we brought it down. I let Nighteyes gorge to his content that night, and then annoyed him by cutting the rest of the meat into strips and sheets which I dried in the sun over a low fire. It took the better part of a day before I was satisfied the fatty meat was dried enough to keep well, but in the days to follow, we travelled more swiftly for it. When game presented itself, we hunted and killed, but when it did not, we had the smoked haragar to fall back on.

In this manner we followed the Buck River northeast. When we drew close to the substantial trading town of Turlake, we veered wide of it, and for a time steered only by the stars. This was far more to Nighteyes' liking, taking us over plains carpeted with dry sedgy grasses at this time of year. We frequently saw herds in the distance, of cattle and sheep or goats, and infrequently, haragar. My contact with the nomadic folk who followed those herds was limited to glimpses of them on horseback, or the sight of their fires outlining the conical tents they favoured when they settled for a night or so.

We were wolves again for these long trotting days. I had reverted once more, but I was aware of it and told myself that as long as I was it would do me little harm. In truth, I believe it did me good. Had I been travelling with another human, life would have been complicated. We would have discussed route and supplies and tactics once we arrived in Tradeford. But the wolf and I simply trotted along, night after night, and our existence was as simple as life could be. The comradeship between us grew deeper and deeper.

The words of Black Rolf had sunk deep into me and given me much to think about. In some ways, I had taken Nighteyes and the bond between us for granted. Once he had been a cub, but now he was my equal. And my friend. Some say 'a dog' or 'a horse' as if every one of them is like every other. I've heard a man call a mare he had owned for seven years 'it' as if he were speaking of a chair. I've never understood that. One does not have to be Witted to know the companionship of a beast, and to know that the friendship of an animal is every bit as rich and complicated as that of a man or woman. Nosy had been a friendly, inquisitive, boyish dog when he was mine. Smithy had been tough and aggressive, inclined to bully anyone who would give way to him, and his sense of humour had had a rough edge to it.

Nighteyes was as unlike them as he was unlike Burrich or Chade. It is no disrespect to any of them to say I was closest to him.

He could not count. But, I could not read deer scent on the air and tell if it were a buck or doe. If he could not plan ahead to the day after tomorrow, neither was I capable of the fierce concentration he could bring to a stalk. There were differences between us, neither of us claimed superiority. No one issued a command to the other, or expected unquestioning obedience of the other. My hands were useful things for removing porcupine quills and ticks and thorns and for scratching especially itchy and unreachable spots on his back. My height gave me a certain advantage in spotting game and spying out terrain. So even when he pitied me for my 'cow's teeth' and poor vision at night, and a nose he referred to as a numb lump between my eyes, he did not look down on me. We both knew his hunting prowess accounted for most of the meat that we ate. Yet he never begrudged me an equal share. Find that in a man, if you can.

'Sit, hound!' I told him once, jokingly. I was gingerly skinning out a porcupine that I had killed with a club after Nighteyes had insisted on pursuing it. In his eagerness to get at the meat, he was about to get us both full of quills. He settled back with an impatient quivering of haunches.

Why do men speak so? he asked me as I tugged carefully at the skin's edge of the prickling hide.

'How?'

Commanding. What gives a man a right to command a dog, if they are not pack?

'Some are pack, or almost,' I said aloud, consideringly. I pulled the hide tight, holding it by a flap of belly fur where there were no quills, and slicing along the exposed integument. The skin made a ripping sound as it peeled back from the fat meat. 'Some men think they have the right,' I went on after a moment.

Why? Nighteyes pressed.

It surprised me that I had never pondered this before. 'Some men think they are better than beasts,' I said slowly. 'That they have the right to use them or command them in any way they please.'

Do you think this way?

I didn't answer right away. I worked my blade along the line between the skin and the fat, keeping a constant pull on the hide as I worked up around the shoulder of the animal. I rode a horse, didn't I, when I had one?

Was it because I was better than the horse that I bent it to my will? I'd used dogs to hunt for me, and hawks on occasion. What right had I to command them? There I sat, stripping the hide off a porcupine to eat it. I spoke slowly. 'Are we better than this porcupine that we are about to eat? Or is it only that we have bested it today?'

Nighteyes cocked his head, watching my knife and hands bare meat for him. *I think I am always smarter than a porcupine. But not better. Perhaps we kill it and eat it because we can. Just as, and here he stretched his front paws out before him languorously, just as I have a well-trained human to skin these prickly things for me, that I may enjoy eating them the better.* He lolled his tongue at me, and we both knew it was only part of the answer to the puzzle. I ran my knife down the porcupine's spine, and the whole hide was finally free of it.

'I should build a fire and cook off some of this fat before I eat it,' I said consideringly. 'Otherwise I shall be ill.'

Just give me mine, and do as you wish with your share, Nighteyes instructed me grandly. I cut around the hind legs and then popped the joints free and cut them loose. It was more than enough meat for me. I left them on the skin side of the hide as Nighteyes dragged his share away. I kindled a small fire as he was crunching through bones and skewered the legs to cook them. 'I don't think I am better than you,' I said quietly. 'I don't think, truly, that I am better than any beast. Though, as you say, I am smarter than some.'

Porcupines, perhaps, he observed benignly. *But a wolf? I think not.*

We grew to know every nuance of the other's behaviour. Sometimes we were fiercely competent at our hunting, finding our keenest joy in a stalk and kill, moving purposefully and dangerously through the world. At other times, we tussled like puppies, nudging one another off the beaten trail into bushes, pinching and nipping at each other as we strode along, scaring off the game before we even saw it. Some days we lay drowsing in the late afternoon hours before we roused to hunt and then travel, the sun warm on our bellies or backs, the insects buzzing a sound like sleep itself. Then the big wolf might roll over on his back like a puppy, begging me to scratch his belly and check his ears for ticks and fleas, or simply scratch thoroughly all around his throat and neck. On chill foggy mornings we curled up close beside one another to find warmth before sleep. Sometimes I would be awakened by a rough poke of a cold nose against mine; when I tried to sit up, I would discover he was deliberately standing on my hair, pinning my

head to the earth. At other times I might awaken alone, to see Nighteyes sitting at some distance, looking out over the surrounding countryside. I recall seeing him so, silhouetted against a sunset. The light evening breeze ruffled his coat. His ears were pricked forward and his gaze went far into the distance. I sensed a loneliness in him then that nothing from me could ever remedy. It humbled me, and I let him be, not even questing toward him. In some ways, for him, I was not better than a wolf.

Once we had avoided Turlake and the surrounding towns we swung north again to strike the Vin River. It was as different from the Buck River as a cow is from a stallion. Grey and placid, it slid along between open fields, wallowing back and forth in its wide gravelly channel. On our side of the river, there was a trail that more or less paralleled the water, but most of the traffic on it were goats and cattle. We could always hear when a herd or flock was being moved, and we easily avoided them. The Vin was not as navigable a river as the Buck, being shallower and given to shifting sandbars, but there was some boat trade on it. On the Tilth side of the Vin, there was a well-used road, and frequent villages and even towns. We saw barges being drawn upstream by mule teams along some stretches; I surmised that such cargo would have to be portaged past the shallows. Settlements on our side of the river seemed limited to ferry landings and infrequent trading posts for the nomadic herders. These might offer an inn, a few shops and a handful of houses clinging to the outskirts, but not much more than that. Nighteyes and I avoided them. The few villages we encountered on our side of the river were deserted at this time of year.

The nomadic herders, tent dwellers during the hotter months, pastured their herds on the central plains now, moving sedately from waterhole to waterhole across the rich grazing lands. Grass grew in the village streets and up the sides of the sod houses. There was a peace to these abandoned towns, and yet the emptiness still reminded me of a raided village. We never lingered close to one.

We both grew leaner and stronger. I wore through my shoes and had to patch them with rawhide. I wore my trousers off at the cuff and hemmed them up about my calves. I grew tired of washing my shirt so often; the blood of the Forged ones and our kills had left the front and the cuffs of it mottled brown. It was as mended and tattered as a beggar's shirt, and the uneven colour made it only more pathetic. I bundled it into my pack one day and went shirtless. The days were mild enough that I did not miss it, and

during the cooler nights we were on the move and my body made its own warmth. The sun baked me almost as dark as my wolf. Physically, I felt good. I was not as strong as I had been when I was pulling an oar and fighting, nor as muscled. But I felt healthy and limber and lean. I could trot all night beside a wolf and not be wearied. I was a quick and stealthy animal, and I proved over and over to myself my ability to survive. I regained a great deal of the confidence that Regal had destroyed. Not that my body had forgiven and forgotten all that Regal had done to it, but I had adapted to its twinges and scars. Almost, I had put the dungeon behind me. I did not let my dark goal overshadow those golden days. Nighteyes and I travelled, hunted, slept and travelled again. It was all so simple and good that I forgot to value it. Until I lost it.

We had come down to the river as evening darkened, intending to drink well before beginning our night's travel. But as we drew near, Nighteyes had suddenly frozen, dropping his belly to the earth while canting his ears forward. I followed his example, and then even my dull nose caught an unfamiliar scent. *What and where?* I asked him.

I saw them before he could reply. Tiny deer, stepping daintily along on their way down to water. They were not much taller than Nighteyes, and instead of antlers, they had goat-like spiralling horns that shone glossy black in the full moon's light. I knew of such creatures only from an old bestiary that Chade had, and I could not remember what they were properly called.

Food? Nighteyes suggested succinctly, and I immediately concurred. The trail they were following would bring them within a leap and a spring of us. Nighteyes and I held our positions, waiting. The deer came closer, a dozen of them, hurrying and careless now as they scented the cool water. We let the one in the lead pass, waiting to spring on the main body of the herd where they were most closely bunched. But just as Nighteyes gathered himself with a quiver to jump, a long wavering howl slid down the night.

Nighteyes sat up, an anxious whine bursting from him. The deer scattered in an explosion of hooves and horns, fleeing us even though we were both too distracted to pursue them. Our meal became suddenly a distant light thunder. I looked after them in dismay, but Nighteyes did not even seem to notice.

Mouth open, Nighteyes made sounds between a howl and a keen, his jaws quivering and working as if he strove to remember how to speak. The jolt I had felt from him at the wolf's distant howl had made my heart leap in

my chest. If my own mother had suddenly called out to me from the night, the shock could not have been greater. Answering howls and barks erupted from a gentle rise to the north of us. The first wolf joined in with them. Nighteyes' head swivelled back and forth as he whined low in his throat. Abruptly he threw back his head and let out a jagged howl of his own. Sudden stillness followed his declaration, then the pack on the rise gave tongue again, not a hunting cry, but an announcement of themselves.

Nighteyes gave me a quick apologetic look, and left. In disbelief I watched him race off toward the ridge. After an instant of astonishment, I leaped to my feet and followed. He was already a substantial distance ahead of me, but when he became aware of me, he slowed, and then rounded to face me.

I must go alone, he told me earnestly. *Wait for me here*. He whirled about to resume his journey.

Panic struck me. *Wait! You can't go alone. They are not pack. We're intruders, they'll attack you. Better not to go at all.*

I must! he repeated. There was no mistaking his determination. He trotted off.

I ran after him. *Nighteyes, please!* I was suddenly terrified for him, for what he was charging into so obsessedly.

He paused and looked back at me, his eyes meeting mine in what was a very long stare for a wolf. *You understand. You know you do. Now is the time for you to trust as I have trusted. This is something I must do. And I must do it alone.*

And if you do not come back? I asked in sudden desperation.

You came back from your visit into that town. And I shall come back to you. Continue to travel along the river. I shall find you. Go on, now. Go back.

I stopped trotting after him. He kept going. *Be careful!* I flung the plea after him, my own form of howling into the night. Then I stood and watched him trot away from me, the powerful muscles rippling under his deep fur, his tail held out straight in determination. It took every bit of strength I had to refrain from crying out to him to come back, to plead with him not to leave me alone. I stood alone, breathing hard from running, and watched him dwindle in the distance. He was so intent on his seeking that I felt closed out and set aside. For the first time I experienced the resentment and jealousy

that he had felt during my sessions with Verity, or when I had been with Molly and had commanded him to stay away from my thoughts.

This was his first adult contact with his own kind. I understood his need to seek them out and see what they were, even if they attacked him and drove him away. It was right. But all the fears I had for him whined at me to run after him, to be by his side in case he were attacked, to be at least within striking distance if he should need me.

But he had asked me not to.

No. He had told me not to. Told me, exerting the same privilege of self that I had exerted with him. I felt it wrenched my heart sideways in my chest to turn away from him and walk back toward the river. I felt suddenly half blind. He was not trotting beside and ahead of me, relaying his information to supplement what my own duller senses delivered to me. Instead, I could sense him in the distance. I felt the thrilling of anticipation, fear and curiosity that trembled through him. He was too intent on his own life at the moment to share with me. Suddenly I wondered if this was akin to what Verity had felt, when I was out on the *Rurisk*, harrying the Raiders while he had to sit in his tower and be content with whatever information he could glean from me. I had reported much more fully to him, had made a conscious effort to keep up a stream of information to him. Still, he must have felt something of this wrenching exclusion that now sickened me.

I reached the riverbank. I halted there, to sit down and wait for him. He had said he would come back. I stared out over the darkness of the moving water. My life felt small inside me. Slowly I turned to look upstream. All inclination to hunt had fled with Nighteyes.

I sat and waited for a long time. Finally I got up and moved on through the night, paying scant attention to myself and my surroundings. I walked silently on the sandy riverbank, accompanied by the hushing of the waters.

Somewhere, Nighteyes scented other wolves, scented them clean and strong, well enough to know how many and what sexes they were. Somewhere he showed himself to them, not threatening, not entering their company, but simply announcing to them that he was there. For a time they watched him. The big male of the pack advanced and urinated on a tussock of grass. He then scratched deep furrows with the claws on his hind feet as he kicked dirt at it. A female stood and stretched and yawned, and then sat, staring green-eyed up at him. Two half-grown cubs stopped chewing one another long enough to consider him. One started toward him, but a low

rumble from his mother brought him hastening back. He went back to chewing at his littermate. And Nighteyes sat down, a settling on the haunches that showed he meant no harm and let them look at him. A skinny young female gave half a hesitant whine, then broke it off with a sneeze.

After a time, most of the wolves got up and set out purposefully together. Hunting. The skinny female stayed with the cubs, watching over them as the others left. Nighteyes hesitated, then followed the pack at a discreet distance. From time to time, one of the wolves would glance back at him. The lead male stopped frequently to urinate and then scuff at the ground with his back legs.

As for me, I walked on by the river, watching the night age around me. The moon performed her slow passage of the night sky. I took dry meat from my pack and chewed it as I walked, stopping once to drink the chalky water. The river had swung toward me in its gravelly bed. I was forced to forsake the shore and walk on a tussocky bank above it. As dawn created a horizon, I cast about for a place to sleep. I settled for a slightly higher rise on the bank and curled up small amidst the coarse grasses. I would be invisible unless someone almost stepped on me. It was as safe a spot as any.

I felt very alone.

I did not sleep well. A part of me sat watching other wolves, still from a distance. They were as aware of me as I was of them. They had not accepted me, but neither had they driven me off. I had not gone so close as to force them to decide about me. I had watched them kill a buck, of a kind of deer I did not know. It seemed small to feed all of them. I was hungry, but not so hungry that I needed to hunt yet. My curiosity about this pack was a more pressing hunger. I sat and watched them as they sprawled in sleep.

My dreams moved away from Nighteyes. Again I felt the disjointed knowledge that I was dreaming, but was powerless to awaken. Something summoned me, tugging at me with a terrible urgency. I answered that summons, reluctant but unable to refuse. I found another day somewhere, and the sickeningly familiar smoke and screams rising together into the blue sky by the ocean. Another town in Bearns was fighting and falling to the Raiders. Once more I was claimed as witness. On that night, and almost every night to follow, the war with the Red Ships was forced back on me.

That battle, and each of the ones that followed are etched somewhere on my heart, in relentless detail. Scent and sound and touch, I lived them all. Something in me listened, and each time I slept, it dragged me mercilessly to

where Six Duchies folk fought and died for their homes. I was to experience more of the fall of Bearns than any one who actually lived in that Duchy. For from day to day, whenever I tried to sleep, I might at any time find myself called to witness. I knew no logic for it. Perhaps the penchant for the Skill slept in many folk of the Six Duchies and faced with death and pain they cried out to Verity and me with voices they did not know they possessed. More than once, I sensed my king likewise stalking the nightmare-wracked towns, though never again did I see him so plainly as I had that first time. Later, I would recall that once I had dream-shared a time with King Shrewd when he was similarly called to witness the fall of Siltbay. I have wondered since how often he was tormented by witnessing the raids on towns he was powerless to protect.

Some part of me knew that I slept by the Vin River, far from this rampaging battle, surrounded by tall river grass and swept by a clean wind. It did not seem important. What mattered was the sudden reality of the ongoing battles the Six Duchies faced against the Raiders. This nameless little village in Bearns was probably not of great strategic importance, but it was falling as I watched, one more brick crumbling out of a wall. Once the Raiders possessed the Bearns coast, the Six Duchies would never be freed of them. And they were taking that coast, town by town, hamlet by hamlet, while the erstwhile King sheltered in Tradeford. The reality of our struggle against the Red Ships had been imminent and pressing when I had pulled an oar on the *Rurisk*. Over the past few months, insulated and isolated from the war, I had allowed myself to forget the folk who lived that conflict every day. I had been as unfeeling as Regal.

I finally awoke as evening began to steal the colours from the river and plain. I did not feel I had rested, and yet it was a relief to awaken. I sat up, looked about myself. Nighteyes had not returned to me. I quested briefly toward him. *My brother*, he acknowledged me, but I sensed he was annoyed at my intrusion. He was watching the two cubs tumble each other about. I pulled my mind back to myself wearily. The contrast between our two lives was suddenly too great even to consider. The Red Ship Raiders, the Forgings and Regal's treacheries, even my plan to kill Regal were suddenly nasty human things I had foisted off on the wolf. What right was there in letting such ugliness shape his life? He was where he was supposed to be.

As little as I liked it, the task I had set myself was mine alone.

I tried to let go of him. Still, the stubborn spark remained. He had said he would come back to me. I resolved that if he did, it must be his own decision. I would not summon him to me. I arose, and pressed on. I told myself that if Nighteyes decided to rejoin me, he could overtake me easily. There is nothing like a wolf's trot for devouring the miles. And it was not as if I were travelling swiftly without him. I very much missed his night vision. I came to a place where the riverbank dropped down to become little better than a swamp. I could not decide at first whether to press through it or to try to go around it. I knew it could stretch for miles. At length I decided to stay as close to the open river as I could. I spent a miserable night, swishing through bulrushes and cattails, stumbling over their tangled roots, my feet wet more often than not, and bedevilled by enthusiastic midges.

What kind of a moron, I asked myself, tried to walk through an unfamiliar swamp in the dark? Serve me right if I found a bog-hole and drowned in it. Above me were only the stars, around me the unchanging walls of cattails. To my right I caught glimpses of the wide, dark river. I kept moving upstream. Dawn found me still slogging along. Tiny single-leaved plants with trailing roots coated my leggings and shoes and my chest was welted with insect bites. I ate dried meat as I walked. There was no place to rest, so I walked on. Resolving to take some good from this place, I gathered some cattail root-stocks as I trudged. It was past midday before the river began to have a real bank again, and I pushed myself on for another hour beyond that to get away from the midges and mosquitoes. Then I washed the greenish swamp slime and mud off my leggings, shoes and skin before flinging myself down to sleep.

Somewhere, Nighteyes stood still and unthreatening as the skinny female came closer to him. As she came closer, he dropped to his belly, rolled over on his side, then curled onto his back and exposed his throat. She came closer, a single step at a time. Then she stopped suddenly, sat down and considered him. He whined lightly. She put her ears back suddenly, bared all her teeth in a snarl, then whirled and dashed away. After a time Nighteyes got up, and went to hunt for meadow mice. He seemed pleased.

Again, as his presence drifted away from me, I was summoned back to Bearns. Another village was burning.

I awoke discouraged. Instead of pushing on, I kindled a small fire of driftwood. I boiled water in my kettle to cook the root-stocks while I cut some of my dried meat into chunks. I stewed the dried meat with the starchy

root-stocks and added a bit of my precious store of salt and some wild greens. Unfortunately the chalky taste of the river predominated. Belly full, I shook out my winter cloak, rolled up in it as protection against the night insects and drowsed off again.

Nighteyes and the lead wolf stood looking at one another. They were far enough apart that there was no challenge in it, but Nighteyes kept his tail down. The lead wolf was rangier than Nighteyes and his coat was black. Not so well fed, he bore the scars of both fights and hunts. He carried himself confidently. Nighteyes did not move. After a time the other wolf walked a short way, cocked his leg on a tuft of grass and urinated. He scuffed his front feet in the grass, then walked off without a backward glance. Nighteyes sat down and was still, considering.

The next morning I arose and continued on my way. Nighteyes had left me two days ago. Only two days. Yet it seemed very long to me that I had been alone. And how, I wondered, did Nighteyes measure our separation? Not by days and nights. He had gone to find out a thing, and when he had found it out, then his time to be away from me would be over and he would come back to me. But what, really, had he gone to find out? What it was like to be a wolf among wolves, a member of a pack? If they accepted him, what then? Would he run with them for a day, a week, a season? How long would it take for me to fade from his mind into one of his endless yesterdays?

Why should he want to return to me, if this pack would accept him?

After a time, I allowed myself to realize I was as heartsore and hurt as if a human friend had snubbed me for the company of others. I wanted to howl, to quest out to Nighteyes with my loneliness for him. By an effort of will, I did not. He was not a pet dog, to be whistled to heel. He was a friend and we had travelled together for a time. What right did I have to ask him to give up a chance at a mate, at a true pack of his own, simply that he might be at my side? None at all, I told myself. None at all.

At noon I struck a trail that followed the bank. By late afternoon I had passed several small farmsteads. Melons and grain predominated. A network of ditches carried river-water inland to the crops. The sod houses were set well back from the river's edge, probably to avoid flooding. I had been barked at by dogs, and honked at by flocks of fat white geese, but had seen no folk close enough to hail. The trail had widened to a road, with cart-tracks.

The sun was beating on my back and head from a clear blue sky. High above me, I heard the shrill *ki* of a hawk. I glanced up at him, wings open and still as he rode the sky. He gave cry again, folded his wings and plummeted toward me. Doubtless, he dived on some small rodent in one of the fields. I watched him come at me, and only at the last moment realized I was truly his target. I flung up an arm to shield my face just as he opened his wings. I felt the wind of his braking. For a bird his size, he landed quite lightly on my upflung arm. His talons clenched painfully in my flesh.

My first thought was that he was a trained bird gone feral, who had seen me and somehow decided to return to man. A scrap of leather dangling from one of his legs might be the remainder of jesses. He sat blinking on my arm, a magnificent bird in every way. I held him out from me to have a better look at him. The leather on his leg secured a tiny scroll of parchment. ‘Can I have a look at that?’ I asked him aloud. He turned his head to my voice and one gleaming eye stared at me. It was Sleet.

Old Blood.

I could make no more of his thoughts than that, but it was enough.

I had never been much good with the birds at Buckkeep. Burch had finally bid me leave them alone, for my presence always agitated them. Nevertheless, I quested gently toward his flame-bright mind. He seemed quiet. I managed to tug the tiny scroll loose. The hawk shifted on my arm, digging his talons into fresh flesh. Then, without warning, he lifted his wings and launched away from me into the air. He spiralled up, beating heavily to gain altitude, cried once more his high *ki, ki*, and went sliding off down the sky. I was left with blood trickling down my arm where his talons had scored my flesh, and one ringing ear from the beating of his wings as he launched. I glanced at the punctures in my arm. Then curiosity made me turn to the tiny scroll. Pigeons carried messages, not hawks.

The handwriting was in an old style, tiny, thin and spidery. The brightness of the sun made it even harder to read. I sat down at the edge of the road and shaded it with my hand to study it. The first words almost stilled my heart. ‘Old Blood greets Old Blood.’

The rest was harder to puzzle out. The scroll was tattered, the spellings quaint, the words as few as would suffice. The warning was from Holly, though I suspected Rolf had penned it. King Regal actively hunted down Old Blood now. To those he captured, he offered coins if they would help find a wolf – man pair. They suspected Nighteyes and I were the ones he wanted.

Regal threatened death to those who refused. There was a little more, something about giving my scent to others of Old Blood and asking that they aid me as they could. The rest of the scroll was too tattered to read. I tucked the scroll into my belt. The bright day seemed edged with darkness now. So Will had told Regal I yet lived. And Regal feared me enough to set these wheels in motion. Perhaps it was as well that Nighteyes and I had parted company for a time.

As twilight fell, I ascended a small rise on the riverbank. Ahead of me, tucked into a bend of the river, were a few lights. Probably another trading post or a ferry dock to allow farmers and herders easy passage across the river. I watched the lights as I walked toward them. Ahead there would be hot food, and people, and shelter for the night. I could stop and have a word with the folk there if I wished. I still had a few coins to call my own. No wolf at my heels to excite questions, no Nighteyes lurking outside hoping no dogs would pick up his scent. No one to worry about except myself. Well, maybe I would. Maybe I'd stop and have a glass and a bit of talk. Maybe I'd learn how much farther it was to Tradeford, and hear some gossip of what went on there. It was time I began formulating a real plan as to how I would deal with Regal.

It was time I began depending only on myself.

EIGHT

Tradeford

As summer mellowed to an end, the Raiders redoubled their efforts to secure as much of the coast of Bearns Duchy as they could before the storms of winter set in. Once they had secured the major ports, they knew they could strike along the rest of the Six Duchies coastline at their pleasure. So although they had made raids as far as Shoaks Duchy that summer, as the pleasant days dwindled they concentrated their efforts on making the coast of Bearns their own.

Their tactics were peculiar. They made no effort to seize towns or conquer the folk. They were solely intent on destruction. Towns they captured were burned entirely, the folk slain, Forged or fled. A few were kept as workers, treated as less than beasts, Forged when they became useless to their captors, or for amusement. They set up their own rough shelters, disdainful to use the buildings they could simply have seized rather than destroyed. They made no effort to establish permanent settlements but instead simply garrisoned the best ports to be sure they could not be taken back.

Although Shoaks and Rippon Duchies gave aid to Bearns Duchy where they could, they had coasts of their own to protect and scant resources to employ. Buck Duchy wallowed along as best it could. Lord Bright had belatedly seen how Buck relied on its outlying holdings for protection, but he judged it too late to salvage that line of defence. He devoted his men and money to fortifying Buckkeep itself. That left the rest of Buck Duchy with but its own folk and the irregular troops that had devoted themselves to Lady Patience as a bulwark against the Raiders. Bearns expected no succour from that quarter, but gratefully accepted all that came to them under the Ivy badge.

Duke Brawndy of Bearns, long past his prime as a fighter, met the challenge of the Raiders with steel as grey as his hair and beard. His resolution knew no bounds. He did not scruple to beggar himself of personal treasure, nor to risk the lives of his kin in his final efforts to defend his duchy. He met his end trying to defend his home castle, Ripplekeep. But neither his death nor the fall of Ripplekeep stopped his daughters from

carrying on the resistance against the Raiders.

My shirt had acquired a peculiar new shape from being rolled in my pack so long. I pulled it on anyway, grimacing slightly at its musty odour. It smelled faintly of wood smoke, and more strongly of mildew. Damp had got into it. I persuaded myself that the open air would disperse the smell. I did what I could with my hair and beard. That is, I brushed my hair and bound it back into a tail, and combed my beard smooth with my fingers. I detested the beard, but hated taking the time each day to shave. I left the riverbank where I had made my brief ablutions and headed toward the town lights. This time, I had resolved to be better prepared. My name, I had decided, was Jory. I had been a soldier, and had a few skills with horses and a pen, but had lost my home to Raiders. I was presently intent on making my way to Tradeford to start life anew. It was a role I could play convincingly.

As the last of the day's light faded, more lamps were kindled in the riverside town and I saw I had been much mistaken as to the size of it. The sprawl of the town extended far up the bank. I felt some trepidation, but convinced myself that walking through the town would be much shorter than going around it. With no Nighteyes at my heels I had no reason to add those extra miles and hours to my path. I put my head up and affected a confident stride.

The town was a lot livelier after dark than most places I had been. I sensed a holiday air in those strolling the streets. Most were headed toward the centre of town, and as I drew closer, there were torches, folk in bright dress, laughter, and the sound of music. The lintels of the inn doors were adorned with flowers. I came to a brightly lit plaza. Here was the music, and merrymakers were dancing. There were casks of drink set out, and tables with bread and fruit piled upon them. My mouth watered at the sight of the food, and the bread smelled especially wonderful to one so long deprived of it.

I lingered at the edges of the crowd, listening, and discovered that the Capaman of the town was celebrating his wedding: hence the feasting and dancing. I surmised that the Capaman was some sort of Farrow title for a noble, and that this particular one was well regarded by his folk for his generosity. One elderly woman, noticing me, approached me and pushed three coppers into my hand. 'Go to the tables, and eat, young fellow,' she told me kindly. 'Capaman Logis has decreed that on his wedding night all

are to celebrate with him. The food is for the sharing. Go on, now, don't be shy.' She patted me reassuringly on the shoulder, standing on tiptoe to do so. I blushed to be mistaken for a beggar, but thought better of dissuading her. If so she thought me, so I appeared, and better to act as one. Still, as I slipped the three coppers into my pouch, I felt oddly guilty, as if I had tricked them away from her. I did as she had bid me, going to the table to join the line of those receiving bread and fruit and meat.

There were several young women managing the tables, and one piled up a trencher for me, handing it across the table hastily, as if reluctant to have any contact with me at all. I thanked her, which caused some giggling among her friends. She looked as affronted as if I had mistaken her for a whore, and I quickly took myself away from there. I found a corner of a table to sit at, and marked that no one sat near to me. A young boy setting out mugs and filling them with ale gave me one, and was curious enough to ask me where I had come from. I told him only that I had been travelling upriver, looking for work, and asked if he had heard of anyone hiring.

'Oh, you want the hiring fair, up the water in Tradeford,' he told me familiarly. 'It's less than another day's walk. You might get harvest work this time of year. And if not, there's always the King's Great Circle being built. They'll hire anyone for that as can lift a stone or use a shovel.'

'The King's Great Circle?' I asked him.

He cocked his head at me. 'So that all may witness the King's justice being served.'

Then he was called away by someone waving a mug and I was left alone to eat and muse. *They'll hire anyone.* So I appeared that wayward and strange. Well, it could not be helped. The food tasted incredibly good. I had all but forgotten the texture and fragrance of good wheaten bread. The savoury way it mingled with the meat juices on my trencher suddenly recalled Cook Sara and her generous kitchen to me. Somewhere up the river, in Tradeford, she would be making pastry dough now, or perhaps pricking a roast full of spices before putting it in one of her heavy black kettles and covering it well, to let it slow cook in the coals all night. Yes, and in Regal's stables, Hands would be making his final rounds for the night as Burrich used to do in the stables at Buckkeep, checking to see that every beast had fresh clean water and that every stall was securely fastened. A dozen other stable-hands from Buckkeep would be there as well, faces and hearts well known to me from years spent together in Burrich's domain and under his

tutelage. House servants, too, Regal had taken with him from Buck. Mistress Hasty was probably there, and Brant and Lowden and ...

Loneliness suddenly engulfed me. It would be so good to see them, to lean on a table and listen to Cook Sara's endless gossip, or lie on my back in the hayloft with Hands and pretend I believed his outrageous tales of the women he had bedded since last I had seen him. I tried to imagine Mistress Hasty's reaction to my present garb, and found myself smiling at her outrage and scandalized offence.

My reverie was broken by a man shouting a string of obscenities. Not even the drunkest sailor I had ever known would so profane a wedding feast. Mine was not the only head that turned and for a moment all normal conversation lapsed. I stared at what I had not noticed before.

Off one side of the square, at the edge of the torches' reach, was a cart and team. A great barred cage sat upon it and three Forged ones were in it. I could make out no more than that, that there were three of them and that they registered not at all upon my Wit. A teamster woman strode up to the cage, cudgel in hand. She banged it loudly on the slats of the cage, commanding those within to be still, and then spun about to two young men lounging against the tail of her cart. 'And you'll leave them be as well, you great louts!' she scolded them. 'They're for the King's Circle, and whatever justice or mercy they find there. But until then, you'll leave them be, you understand me? Lily! Lily, bring those bones from the roast over here and give them to these creatures. And you, I told you, get away from them! Don't stir them up!'

The two young men stepped back from her threatening cudgel, laughing with upraised hands as they did so. 'Don't see why we shouldn't have our fun with them first,' objected the taller of the lads. 'I heard that down at Rundsford, their town's building their own justice circle.'

The second boy made a great show of rolling the muscles in his shoulders. 'Me, I'm for the King's Circle myself.'

'As Champion or prisoner?' someone hooted mockingly, and both the young men laughed, and the taller one gave his companion a rough push by way of jest.

I remained standing in my place. A sick suspicion was rising in me. The King's Circle. Forged ones and Champions. I recalled the avaricious way Regal had watched his men beat me as I stood encircled by them. A dull numbness spread through me as the woman called Lily made her way to the

cart and then flung a plateful of meat bones at the prisoners there. They fell upon them avidly, striking and snapping at one another as each strove to claim as much of the bounty as he could. Not a few folk stood around the cart pointing and laughing. I stared, sickened. Didn't they understand those men had been Forged? They were not criminals. They were husbands and sons, fishers and farmers of the Six Duchies, whose only crime had been to be captured by the Red Ships.

I had no count of the number of Forged ones I had slain. I felt a revulsion for them, that was true, but it was the same revulsion I felt at seeing a leg that had gone to gangrene, or a dog so taken with mange that there was no cure for him. Killing Forged ones had nothing to do with hatred, or punishment, or justice. Death was the only solution to their condition and it should have been meted out as swiftly as possible, in mercy to the families that had loved them. Those young men had spoken as if there would be some sort of sport in killing them. I stared at the cage queasily.

I sat down slowly at my place again. There was still food on my platter but my appetite for it had faded. Common sense told me that I should eat while I had the chance. For a moment I just looked at the food. I made myself eat.

When I lifted my eyes, I caught two young men staring at me. For an instant I met their looks; then I recalled who I was supposed to be and cast my glance down. They evidently were amused by me, for they came swaggering over to sit down, one across the table from me and one uncomfortably close beside me. That one made a great show of wrinkling his nose and covering his nose and mouth for his comrade's amusement. I gave them both good evening.

'Good evening for you, perhaps. Haven't had a feed like this in a while, eh, beggar?' This from the one across from me, a tow-headed lout with a mask of freckles across his face.

'That's true, and my thanks to your Capaman for his generosity,' I said mildly. I was already looking for a way to extricate myself.

'So. What brings you to Pome?' the other asked. He was taller than his indolent friend, and more muscled.

'Looking for work.' I met his pale eyes squarely. 'I've been told there's a hiring fair in Tradeford.'

'And what kind of work would you be good at, beggar? Scarecrow? Or do you perhaps draw the rats out of a man's house with your smell?' He set

an elbow on the table, too close to me, and then leaned forward on it, as if to show me the bunching of muscle in his arm.

I took a breath, then two. I felt something I had not felt in a while. There was the edge of fear, and that invisible quivering that ran over me when I was challenged. I knew, too, that at times it became the trembling that presaged a fit. But something else built inside me as well, and I had almost forgotten the feel of it. Anger. No. Fury. The mindless, violent fury that gave me the strength to lift an axe and sever a man's shoulder and arm from his body, or fling myself at him and choke the life out of his body regardless of how he pummelled at me as I did so.

In a sort of awe I welcomed it back and wondered what had summoned it. Had it been recalling friends taken from me for ever, or the battle scenes I had Skill-dreamed so often recently? It didn't matter. I had the weight of a sword at my hip and I doubted that the dolts were aware of it, or aware of how I could use it. Probably they'd never swung any blade but a scythe, probably never seen any blood other than that of a chicken or cow. They'd never awakened at night to a dog's barking and wondered if it were Raiders coming, never come in from a day's fishing praying that when the cape was rounded, the town would still be standing. Blissfully ignorant farm-boys, living fat in soft river country far from the embattled coast, with no better way to prove themselves than to bait a stranger or taunt caged men.

Would that all Six Duchies boys were so ignorant.

I started as if Verity had laid his hand on my shoulder. Almost I looked behind me. Instead, I sat motionless, groping inside me to find him, but found nothing. Nothing.

I could not say for certain the thought had come from him. Perhaps it was my own wish. And yet it was so like him, I could not doubt its source. My anger was gone as suddenly as they had roused it, and I looked at them in a sort of surprise, startled to find they were still there. Boys, yes, no more than big boys, restless and aching to prove themselves. Ignorant and callous as young men often were. Well, I would neither be a proving ground for their manhood, nor would I spill their blood in the dust on their Capaman's wedding feast.

'I think perhaps I have overstayed my welcome,' I said gravely, and rose from the table. I had eaten enough, and I knew I did not need the half-mug of ale that sat beside it. I saw them measure me as I stood and saw one startle plainly when he saw the sword that hung at my side. The other stood,

as if to challenge my leaving, but I saw his friend give his head a minuscule shake. With the odds evened, the brawny farm-boy stepped away from me with a sneer, drawing back as if to keep my presence from soiling him. It was strangely easy to ignore the insult. I did not back away from them, but turned and walked off into the darkness, away from the merrymaking and dancing and music. No one followed me.

I sought the waterfront, purpose growing in me as I strode along. So I was not far from Tradeford, not far from Regal. I felt a sudden desire to prepare myself for him. I would get a room at an inn tonight, one with a bathhouse, and I would bathe and shave. Let him look at me, at the scars he had put upon me, and know who killed him. And afterwards? If I lived for there to be an afterwards, and if any who saw me knew me, so be it. Let it be known that the Fitz had come back from his grave to work a true King's Justice on this would-be king.

Thus fortified, I passed by the first two inns I came to. From one came shouts that were either a brawl or an excess of good fellowship; in either case, I was not likely to get much sleep there. The second had a sagging porch and a door hung crooked on its hinges. I decided that did not bode well for the upkeep of the beds. I chose instead one that displayed an inn board of a kettle, and kept a night torch burning outside to guide travellers to its door.

Like most of the larger buildings in Pome, the inn was built of riverstone and mortar and floored with the same. There was a big hearth at the end of the room, but only a summer fire in it, just enough to keep the promised kettle of stew simmering. Despite my recent meal, it smelled good to me. The tap-room was quiet, much of the trade drawn off to the Capaman's wedding celebration. The innkeeper looked as if he were ordinarily a friendly sort, but a frown creased his brow at the sight of me. I set a silver piece on the table before him to reassure him. 'I'd like a room for the night, and a bath.'

He looked me up and down doubtfully. 'If ye take the bath first,' he specified firmly.

I grinned at him. 'I've no problems with that, good sir. I'll be washing out my clothes as well; no fear I'll bring vermin to the bedding.'

He nodded reluctantly and sent a lad to the kitchens for hot water. 'You've come a long way, then?' he offered as a pleasantry as he showed me the way to the bathhouse behind the inn.

‘A long way and a bit beside. But there’s a job waiting for me in Tradeford, and I’d like to look my best when I go to do it.’ I smiled as I said it, pleased with the truth of it.

‘Oh, a job waiting. I see, then, I see. Yes, best to show up clean and rested, and there’s the pot of soap in the corner, and don’t be shy about using it.’

Before he left, I begged the use of a razor, for the washroom boasted a looking-glass, and he was glad to furnish me one. The boy brought it with the first bucket of hot water. By the time he had finished filling the tub, I had taken off the length of my beard to make it shavable. He offered to wash my clothes out for me for an extra copper, and I was only too happy to let him. He took them from me with a wrinkling of his nose that showed me I smelled far worse than I had suspected. Evidently my trek through the swamps had left more evidence than I had thought.

I took my time, soaking in the hot water, slathering myself with the soft soap from the pot, then scrubbing vigorously before rinsing off. I washed my hair twice before the lather ran white instead of grey. The water that I left in the tub was thicker than the chalky river water. For once I went slowly enough with my shaving that I only cut myself twice. When I sleeked my hair back and bound it in a warrior’s tail I looked up to find a face in the mirror that I scarcely recognized.

It had been months since I’d last seen myself, and then it had been in Burrich’s small looking-glass. The face that looked back at me now was thinner than I had expected, showing me cheekbones reminiscent of those in Chivalry’s portrait. The white streak of hair that grew above my brow aged me, and reminded me of a wolverine’s markings. My forehead and the tops of my cheeks were tanned dark from my summer outside, but my face was paler where the beard had been, so that the lower half of the scar down my cheek seemed much more livid than the rest. What I could see of my chest showed a lot more ribs than it ever had before. There was muscle there, true, but not enough fat to grease a pan, as Cook Sara would have said. The constant travelling and mostly meat diet had left their marks on me.

I turned aside from the looking-glass smiling wryly. My fears of being instantly recognized by any who had known me were laid to rest completely. I scarcely knew myself.

I changed into my winter clothes to make the trip up to my room. The boy assured me he would hang my other clothes by the hearth and have them

to me dry by morning. He saw me to my room and left me with a good night and a candle.

I found the room to be sparsely furnished but clean. There were four beds in it, but I was the only customer for the night, for which I was grateful. There was a single window, unshuttered and uncurtained for summer. Cool night air off the river blew into the room. I stood for a time, looking out through the darkness. Upriver, I could see the lights of Tradeford. It was a substantial settlement. Lights dotted the road between Pome and Tradeford. I was plainly into well-settled country now. Just as well I was travelling alone, I told myself firmly, and pushed aside the pang of loss I felt whenever I thought of Nighteyes. I tossed my bundle under my bed. The bed's blankets were rough but smelled clean, as did the straw-stuffed mattress. After months of sleeping on the ground, it seemed almost as soft as my old feather bed in Buckkeep. I blew out my candle and lay down expecting to fall asleep at once.

Instead I found myself staring up at the darkened ceiling. In the distance, I could hear the faint sounds of the merrymaking. Closer to hand were the now-unfamiliar creakings and settling of a building, the sounds of folk moving in other rooms of the inn. They made me nervous, as the wind through the branches of a forest, or the gurgling of the river close by my sleeping spot had not. I feared my own kind more than anything the natural world could ever threaten me with.

My mind wandered to Nighteyes, to wondering what he was doing and if he were safe this evening. I started to quest out toward him, then stopped myself. Tomorrow I would be in Tradeford, to do a thing he could not help me with. More than that, I was in an area now where he could not safely come to me. If I succeeded tomorrow, and lived to go on to the Mountains to seek Verity, then I could hope that he would remember me and join me. But if I died tomorrow, then he was better off where he was, attempting to join his own kind and have his own life.

Arriving at the conclusion and recognizing my decision as correct were easy. Remaining firm in it was the difficult part. I should not have paid for that bed, but have spent the night in walking, for I would have got more rest. I felt more alone than I ever had in my life. Even in Regal's dungeon, facing death, I had been able to reach out to my wolf. Now on this night I was alone, contemplating a murder I was unable to plan, fearing Regal would be guarded by a coterie of Skill-adepts whose talents I could only guess at.

Despite the warmth of the late summer night, I felt chilled and sickened whenever I considered it. My resolution to kill Regal never wavered; only my confidence that I would succeed. I had not done so well on my own but tomorrow I resolved to perform in a way that would make Chade proud.

When I considered the coterie, I felt a queasy certainty that I had deceived myself regarding my strategy. Had I come here of my own will, or was this some subtle tweaking that Will had wrought on my thoughts, to convince me that to run toward him was the safest thing to do? Will was subtle with the Skill. So insidiously gentle a touch he had that one could scarcely feel when he was using it. I longed suddenly to attempt to Skill out, to see if I could feel him watching me. Then I became sure that my impulse to Skill out was actually Will's influence on me, tempting me to open my mind to him. And so my thoughts went, chasing themselves in tighter and tighter circles until I almost felt his amusement as he watched me.

Past midnight I finally felt myself drawn down into sleep. I surrendered my tormenting thoughts without a qualm, flinging myself down into sleep as if I were a diver intent on plumbing the depths. Too late I recognized the imperatives of that sinking. I would have struggled if I could have recalled how. Instead I recognized about me the hangings and trophies that decorated the great hall of Ripplekeep, the main castle of Bearn's Duchy.

The great wooden doors sagged open on their hinges, victims of the ram that lay halfway inside them, its terrible work done. Smoke hung in the air of the hall, twining about the banners of past victories. There were bodies piled thickly there, where fighters had tried to hold back the torrent of Raiders that the heavy oaken planks had yielded to. A few strides past that wall of carnage a line of Bearn's warriors still held, but raggedly. In the midst of a small knot of battle was Duke Brawndy, flanked by his younger daughters, Celerity and Faith. They wielded swords, trying vainly to shield their father from the press of the foe. Both fought with a skill and ferocity I would not have suspected in them. Like matched hawks they seemed, their faces framed by short, sleek black hair, their dark blue eyes narrowed with hatred. But Brawndy was refusing to be shielded, refusing to yield to the murderous surge of Raiders. He stood splay-legged, spattered with blood, and wielded a battle axe in a two-handed grip.

Before and below him, in the shelter of his axe's swing, lay the body of his eldest daughter and heir. A sword blow had cloven deep between her shoulder and neck, splintering her collar-bones before the weapon wedged in

the ruin of her chest. She was dead, hopelessly dead, but Brawndy would not step back from her body. Tears runnelled with blood on his cheeks. His chest heaved like a bellows with every breath he took, and the ropy old muscles of his torso were revealed beneath his rent shirt. He held off two swordsmen, one an earnest young man whose whole heart was intent on defeating this duke, and the other an adder of a man who held back from the press of the fighting, his longsword ready to take advantage of any opening the young man might create.

In a fraction of a second, I knew all this, and knew that Brawndy would not last much longer. Already the slickness of blood was battling with his failing grip on his axe, while every gasp of air he drew down his dry throat was a torment in itself. He was an old man, and his heart was broken and he knew that even if he survived this battle, Bearn had been lost to the Red Ships. My soul cried out at his misery, but still he took that one impossible step forward, and brought his axe down to end the life of the earnest young man who had fought him. In the moment that his axe sank into the Raider's chest, the other man stepped forward, into the half-second gap and danced his blade in and out of Brawndy's chest. The old man followed his dying opponent down to the bloodied stones of his keep.

Celerity, occupied with her own opponent, turned fractionally to her sister's scream of anguish. The Raider she had been fighting seized his opportunity. His heavier weapon wrapped her lighter blade and tore it from her grip. She stepped back from his fiercely delighted grin, turned her head away from her death, in time to see her father's killer grip Brawndy's hair preparatory to taking his head as a trophy.

I could not stand it.

I lunged for the axe Brawndy had dropped, seized its blood-slick handle as if I were gripping the hand of an old friend. It felt oddly heavy, but I swung it up, blocked the sword of my assailant, and then, in a combination that would have made Burrich proud, doubled it back to take the path of the blade across his face. I gave a small shudder as I felt his facial bones cave away from that stroke. I had no time to consider it. I sprang forward and brought my axe down hard, severing the hand of the man who had sought to take my father's head. The axe rang on the stone flags of the floor, sending a shock up my arms. Sudden blood splashed me as Faith's sword ploughed up her opponent's forearm. He was towering above me, and so I tucked my shoulder and rolled, coming to my feet as I brought the blade of my axe up

across his belly. He dropped his blade and clutched at his spilling guts as he fell.

There was an insane moment of total stillness in the tiny bubble of battle we occupied. Faith stared down at me with an amazed expression that briefly changed to a look of triumph before being supplanted with one of purest anguish. 'We can't let them have their bodies!' she declared abruptly. She lifted her head suddenly, her short hair flying like the mane of a battle stallion. 'Bearn! To me!' she cried, and there was no mistaking the note of command in her voice.

For one instant I looked up at Faith. My vision faded, doubled for an instant. A dizzy Celerity wished her sister, 'Long life to the Duchess of Bearn'. I witnessed a look between them, a look that said neither of them expected to live out the day. Then a knot of Bearn warriors broke free of battle to join them. 'My father and my sister. Bear their bodies away,' Faith commanded two of the men. 'You others, to me!' Celerity rolled to her feet, looked at the heavy axe with puzzlement and stooped to regain the familiarity of her sword.

'There, we are needed there,' Faith declared, pointing, and Celerity followed her, to reinforce the battle line long enough to allow their folk to retreat.

I watched Celerity go, a woman I had not loved but would always admire. With all my heart I wished to go after her, but my grip on the scene was failing, all was becoming smoke and shadows. Someone seized me.

That was stupid.

The voice in my mind sounded so pleased. Will! I thought desperately as my heart surged in my chest.

No. But it could as easily have been so. You are getting sloppy about your walls, Fitz. You cannot afford to. No matter how they call to us, you must be cautious. Verity gave me a push that propelled me away, and I felt the flesh of my own body receive me again.

'But you do it,' I protested, but heard only the wan sound of my own voice in the inn room. I opened my eyes. All was darkness outside the single window in the room. I could not tell if moments had passed or hours. I only knew I was grateful that there was still some darkness left for sleeping, for the terrible weariness that pulled at me now would let me think of nothing else.

When I awoke the next morning, I was disoriented. It had been too long since I had awakened in a real bed, let alone awakened feeling clean. I forced my eyes to focus, then looked at the knots in the ceiling beam above me. After a time, I recalled the inn, and that I was not too far from Tradeford and Regal. At almost the same instant, I remembered that Duke Brawndy was dead. My heart plummeted inside me. I squeezed my eyes shut against the Skill-memory of that battle and felt the hammer and anvil of my headache begin. For one irrational instant I blamed it all on Regal. He had orchestrated this tragedy that took the heart out of me and left my body trembling with weakness. On the very morning when I had hoped to arise strong and refreshed and ready to kill, I could barely find the strength to roll over.

After a time, the inn-boy arrived with my clothes. I gave him another two coppers and he returned a short time later with a tray. The look and smell of the bowl of porridge revolted me. I suddenly understood the aversion to food that Verity had always manifested during the summers when his Skilling had kept the Raiders from our coast. The only item on the tray that interested me was the mug and the pot of hot water. I clambered out of bed and crouched to pull my pack from under my bed. Sparks danced and floated before my eyes. By the time I got the pack open and located the elfbark, I was breathing as hard as if I had run a race. It took all my concentration to focus my thoughts past the pain in my head. Emboldened by my headache's throbbing, I increased the amount of elfbark I crumbled into the mug. I was nearly up to the dose that Chade had been using on Verity. Ever since the wolf had left me, I had suffered from these Skill-dreams. No matter how I set my walls, I could not keep them out. But last night's had been the worst in a long time. I suspected it was because I had stepped into the dream, and through Celerity, acted. The dreams had been a terrible drain both on my strength and my supply of elfbark. I watched impatiently as the bark leached its darkness into the steaming water. As soon as I could no longer see the bottom of the mug, I lifted it and drank it off. The bitterness nearly gagged me, but it didn't stop me from pouring more hot water over the bark in the bottom of the mug.

I drank this second, weaker dose more slowly, sitting on the edge of my bed and looking off into the distance outside the window. I had quite a view of the flat river country. There were cultivated fields, and milk cows in fenced pastures just outside Pome, and beyond I could glimpse the rising

smoke of small farmsteads along the road. No more swamps to cross, no more open wild country between Regal and me. From hence forward, I would have to travel as a man.

My headache had subsided. I forced myself to eat the cold porridge, ignoring my stomach's threats. I'd paid for it and I'd need its sustenance before this day was over. I dressed in the clean clothes the boy had returned to me. They were clean, but that was as much as I could say for them. The shirt was misshapen and discoloured various shades of brown. The leggings were worn to thinness in the knees and seat and too short. As I pushed my feet into my self-made shoes, I became newly aware of how pathetic they were. It had been so long since I had stopped to consider how I must appear to others that I was surprised to find myself dressed more poorly than any Buckkeep beggar I could recall. No wonder I had excited both pity and disgust last night. I'd have felt the same for any fellow dressed as I was.

The thought of going downstairs dressed as I was made me cringe. The alternative however was to don my warm, woolly winter clothes, and swelter and sweat all day. It was only common sense to descend as I was, and yet I now felt myself such a laughing stock, I wished I could slink out unseen.

As I briskly repacked my bundle, I felt a moment of alarm when I realized how much elfbark I had consumed in one draught. I felt alert; no more than that. A year ago, that much elfbark would have had me swinging from the rafters. I told myself firmly it was like my ragged clothes. I had no choice in the matter. The Skill-dreams would not leave me alone, and I had no time to lie about and let my body recover on its own, let alone the coin to pay for an inn room and food while I did so. Yet as I slung my bundle over my shoulder and went down the stairs, I reflected that it was a poor way to begin the day. Brawndy's death and Bearns Duchy falling to the Raiders and my scarecrow clothing and elfbark crutch. It had all put me in a fine state of the doldrums.

What real chance did I have of getting past Regal's walls and guards and making an end of him?

A bleak spirit, Burrich had once told me, was one of the after-effects of elfbark. So that was all I was feeling. That was all.

I bade the innkeeper farewell and he wished me good luck. Outside the sun was already high. It bid to be another fine day. I set myself a steady pace as I headed out of Pome and toward Tradeford.

As I reached the outskirts, I saw an unsettling sight. There were two gallows, and a body dangled from each. This was unnerving enough, but there were other structures as well: a whipping post, and two stocks. Their wood had not silvered out in the sun yet; these were recent structures and yet by the look of them they had already seen a bit of use. I strode swiftly past them but could not help recalling how close I had come to gracing such a structure. All that had saved me was my bastard royal blood and the ancient decree that such a one could not be hung. I recalled, too, Regal's evident pleasure at watching me beaten.

With a second chill I wondered where Chade was. If Regal's soldiery did manage to capture him, I had no doubt that Regal would put a quick end to him. I tried not to imagine how he would stand, tall and thin and grey under bright sunlight on a scaffold.

Or would his end be quick?

I shook my head to rattle loose such thoughts and continued past the poor scarecrow bodies that tattered in the sun like forgotten laundry. Some black humour in my soul pointed out that even they were dressed better than I was.

As I hiked along the road I often had to give way to carts and cattle. Trade prospered between the two towns. I left Pome behind me and walked for a time past well-tended farmhouses that fronted the road with their grainfields and orchards behind them. A bit further and I was passing country estates, comfortable stone houses with shade trees and plantings about their sturdy barns and with riding and hunting horses in the pastures. More than once I was sure I recognized Buckkeep stock there. These gave way for a time to great fields, mostly of flax or hemp. Eventually I began to see more modest holdings and then the outskirts of a town.

So I thought. Late afternoon found me in the heart of a city, streets paved with cobbles and folk coming and going on every sort of business imaginable. I found myself looking around in wonder. I had never seen the like of Tradeford. There was shop after shop, taverns and inns and stables for every weight of purse, and all sprawled out across this flat land as no Buck town ever could. I came to one area of gardens and fountains, temples and theatres and schooling places. There were gardens laid out with pebbled walkways and cobbled drives that wound between plantings and statuary and trees. The people strolling down the walks or driving their carriages were dressed in finery that would have been at home at any of Buckkeep's most

formal occasions. Some of them wore the Farrow livery of gold and brown, yet even the dress of these servants was more sumptuous than any clothing I had ever owned.

This was where Regal had spent the summers of his childhood. Always he had disdained Buckkeep Town as little better than a backward village. I tried to imagine a boy leaving all this in fall, to return to a draughty castle on a rainswept and storm-battered sea-cliff above a grubby little port town. No wonder he had removed himself and his court here as soon as he could. I suddenly felt an inkling of understanding for Regal. It made me angry. It is good to know well a man you are going to kill; it is not good to understand him. I recalled how he had killed his own father, my king, and steeled myself to my purpose.

As I wandered through these thriving quarters, I drew more than one pitying glance. Had I been determined to make my living as a beggar, I could have prospered. Instead, I sought humbler abodes and folk where I might hear some talk of Regal and how his keep at Tradeford was organized and manned. I made my way down to the waterfront, expecting to feel more at home.

There I found the real reason for Tradeford's existence. True to its name, the river flattened out here into immense rippling shallows over gravel and bedrock. It sprawled so wide that the opposite shore was obscured in mist, and the river seemed to reach to the horizon. I saw whole herds of cattle and sheep being forded across the Vin River, while downstream a series of shallow-draught cable barges took advantage of the deeper water to transport an endless shuttling of goods across the river. This was where Tilth met Farrow in trade, where orchards and fields and cattle came together, and where goods shipped upriver from Buck or Bearns or the far lands beyond were unloaded at last and sent on their way to the nobles who could afford them. To Tradeford, in better days, had come the trade-goods of the Mountain Kingdom and the lands beyond: amber, rich furs, carved ivory and the rare incense barks of the Rain Wilds. Here too was flax brought to be manufactured into fine Farrow linen, and hemp worked into fibre for rope and sailcloth.

I was offered a few hours' work unloading grain sacks from a small barge to a wagon. I took it, more for the conversation than the coppers. I learned little. No one spoke of Red Ships or the war being fought along the coast, other than to complain of the poor quality of goods that came from the

coast and how much was charged for the little that was sent. Little was said of King Regal, and what few words I did hear took pride in his ability to attract women and to drink well. I was startled to hear him spoken of as a Mountwell king, the name of his mother's royal line. Then I decided it suited me just as well that he did not name himself a Farseer. It was one less thing I had to share with him.

I heard much of the King's Circle however, and what I heard soured my guts.

The concept of a duel to defend the truth of one's words was an old one in the Six Duchies. At Buckkeep there were the great standing pillars of the Witness Stones. It is said that when two men meet there to resolve a question with their fists, El and Eda themselves witness it and see that justice does not go awry. The stones and the custom are very ancient. When we spoke of the King's Justice at Buckkeep, often enough it referred to the quiet work that Chade and I did for King Shrewd. Some came to make public petition to King Shrewd himself and to abide by whatever he might see as right. But there were times when other injustices came to be known by the King, and then he might send forth Chade or me to work his will quietly upon the wrongdoer. In the name of the King's Justice I had meted out fates both mercifully swift and punitively slow. I should have been hardened to death.

But Regal's King's Circle had more of entertainment than justice to it. The premise was simple. Those judged by the King as deserving of punishment or death were sent to his Circle. There they might face animals starved and taunted to madness, or a fighter, a King's Champion. Some occasional criminal who put up a very good show might be granted royal clemency, or even become a Champion for the King. Forged ones had no such chance. Forged ones were put out for the beasts to maul, or starved and turned loose on other offenders. Such trials had become quite popular of late, so popular that the crowds were outgrowing the market circle at Tradeford where the 'justice' was currently administered. Now Regal was having a special circle built. It would be conveniently closer to his manorhouse, with holding cells and secure walls that would confine both beasts and prisoners more strongly, with seats for those who came to observe the spectacle of the King's Justice being meted out. The construction of the King's Circle was providing new commerce and jobs for the city of Tradeford. All welcomed it as a very good idea in the wake of the shutdown of trade with the Mountain Kingdom. I heard not one word spoken against it.

When the wagon was loaded, I took my pay and followed the other stevedores to a nearby tavern. Here, in addition to ale and beer, one could buy a handful of herbs and a smoke censer for the table. The atmosphere inside the tavern was heavy with the fumes, and my eyes soon felt gummy and my throat raw from it. No one else seemed to pay it any mind, or even to be greatly affected by it. The use of burning herbs as an intoxicant had never been common at Buckkeep and I had never developed a head for it. My coins bought me a serving of meal pudding with honey and a mug of very bitter beer that tasted to me of river water.

I asked several folk if it were true that they were hiring stable-hands for the King's own stable, and if so, where a man might go to ask for the work. That one such as I might seek to work for the King himself afforded most of them some amusement, but as I had affected to be slightly simple the whole time I was working with them, I was able to accept their rough humour and suggestions with a bland smile. One rake at last told me that I should go ask the King himself, and gave me directions to Tradeford Hall. I thanked him and drank off the last of my beer and set out.

I suppose I had expected some stone edifice with walls and fortifications. This was what I watched for as I followed my directions inland and up away from the river. Instead, I eventually reached a low hill, if one could give that name to so modest an upswelling. The extra height was enough to afford a clear view of the river in both directions, and the fine stone structures upon it had taken every advantage of it. I stood on the busy road below, all but gawking up at it. It had none of Buckkeep's forbidding martial aspects. Instead, the white-pebbled drive and gardens and trees surrounded a dwelling at once palatial and welcoming. Tradeford Hall and its surrounding buildings had never seen use as fortress or keep. It had been built as an elegant and pensive residence. Patterns had been worked into the stone walls and there were graceful arches to the entryways. Towers there were, but there were no arrow-slits in them. One knew they had been constructed to afford the dweller a wider view of his surroundings, more for pleasure than for any wariness.

There were walls, too, between the busy public road and the mansion, but they were low, fat stone walls, mossy or ivied, with nooks and crannies where statues were framed by flowering vines. One broad carriageway led straight up to the great house. Other narrower walks and drives invited one to investigate lily ponds and cleverly-pruned fruit trees or quiet, shady

walks. For some visionary gardener had planted here oaks and willows, at least one hundred years ago, and now they towered and shaded and whispered in the wind off the river. All of this beauty was spread over more acreage than a good-sized farm. I tried to imagine a ruler who had both the time and resources to create all this.

Was this what one could have, if one did not need warships and standing armies? Had Patience ever known this sort of beauty in her parents' home? Was this what the Fool echoed in the delicate vases of flowers and bowls of silver fish in his room? I felt grubby and uncouth, and it was not because of my clothes. This, indeed, I suddenly felt, was how a king should live. Amid art and music and graciousness, elevating the lives of his people by providing a place for such things to flourish. I glimpsed my own ignorance, and worse, the ugliness of a man trained only to kill others. I felt a sudden anger, too, at all I had never been taught, never even glimpsed. Had not Regal and his mother had a hand in that as well, in keeping the Bastard in his place? I had been honed as an ugly, functional tool, just as craggy, barren Buckkeep was a fort, not a palace.

But how much beauty would survive here, did not Buckkeep stand like a snarling dog at the mouth of the Buck River?

It was like a dash of cold water in my face. It was true. Was not that why Buckkeep had been built in the first place, to gain control of the river trade? If Buckkeep ever fell to the Raiders, these broad rivers would become highroads for their shallow-draught vessels. They would plunge like a dagger into this soft underbelly of the Six Duchies. These indolent nobles and cocky farm-lads would waken to screams and smoke in the night, with no castle to run to, no guards to stand and fight for them. Before they died, they might come to know what others had endured to keep them safe. Before they died, they might rail against a king who had fled those ramparts to come inland and hide himself in pleasures.

But I intended that king would die first.

I began a careful walk of the perimeter of Tradeford Keep. The easiest way in must be weighed against the least-noticed one, and the best ways out must be planned as well. Before nightfall, I would find out all I could about Tradeford Hall.

NINE

Assassin

The last true Skillmaster to preside over royal pupils at Buckkeep was not Galen, as is often recorded, but his predecessor, Solicy. She had waited, perhaps overlong, to select an apprentice. When she chose Galen, she had already developed the cough that was to end her life. Some say she took him on in desperation, knowing she was dying. Others, that he was forced on her by Queen Desire's wish to see her favourite advanced at court. Whatever the case, he had been her apprentice for scarcely two years before Solicy succumbed to her cough and died. As previous Skillmasters had served apprenticeships as long as seven years before achieving journey status, it was rather precipitate that he declared himself Skillmaster immediately following Solicy's death. It scarcely seems possible that she could have imparted her full knowledge of the Skill and all its possibilities in such a brief time. No one challenged his claim, however. Although he had been assisting Solicy in the training of the two princes Verity and Chivalry, he pronounced their training complete following Solicy's death. Thereafter, he resisted suggestions that he train any others until the years of the Red Ship wars, when he finally gave in to King Shrewd's demand and produced his first and only coterie.

Unlike traditional coterie that selected their own membership and leader, Galen created his from hand-picked students and during his life retained a tremendous amount of control over them. August, the nominal head of the coterie, had his talent blasted from him in a Skill mishap while on a mission to the Mountain Kingdom. Serene, who next assumed leadership following Galen's death, perished along with another member, Justin, during the riot that followed the discovery of King Shrewd's murder. Will was next to assume the leadership of what has come to be known as Galen's Coterie. At that time but three members remained: Will himself, Burl and Carrod. It seems likely that Galen had imprinted all three with an unswerving loyalty to Regal, but this did not prevent rivalry among them for Regal's favour.

By the time dusk fell, I had explored the outer grounds of the royal estate rather thoroughly. I had discovered that anyone might stroll the lower walks freely, enjoying the fountains and gardens, the yew hedges and the chestnut trees, and there were a number of folk in fine clothes doing just that. Most looked at me with stern disapproval, a few with pity and the one liveried guard I encountered reminded me firmly that no begging was allowed within the King's Gardens. I assured him that I had come only to see the wonders I had so often heard of in tales. In turn, he suggested that tales of the gardens were more than sufficient for my ilk, and pointed out to me the most direct path for leaving the gardens. I thanked him most humbly and walked off. He stood watching me leave until the path carried me around the end of a hedge and out of his sight.

My next foray was more discreet. I had briefly considered way-laying one of the young nobles strolling amongst the flowers and herbaceous borders and availing myself of his clothes, but had decided against it. I was unlikely to find one lean enough for his clothes to fit me properly, and the fashionable apparel they were wearing seemed to require a lot of lacing up with gaily-coloured ribbons. I doubted I could get myself into any of the shirts without the assistance of a valet, let alone get an unconscious man out of one. The tinkling silver charms stitched onto the dangling lace at the cuffs were not conducive to an assassin's quiet work anyway. Instead, I relied on the thick plantings along the low walls for shelter and made my way gradually up the hill.

Eventually I encountered a wall of smooth, worked stone that encircled the crown of the hill. It was only slightly higher than a tall man could reach at a jump. I did not think it had been intended as a serious barrier. There were no plantings along it, but stubs of old trunks and roots showed that once it had been graced with vines and bushes. I wondered if Regal had ordered it cleared. Over the wall I could see the tops of numerous trees, and so dared to count on their shelter.

It took me most of the afternoon to make a full circuit of the wall without coming out into the open. There were several gates in it. One fine main one had guards in livery greeting carriages of folk as they came and went. From the number of carriages arriving some sort of festivity was scheduled for the evening. One guard turned, and laughed harshly. The hair stood up on my neck. For a time I stood frozen, staring from my place of concealment. Had I seen his face before? It was difficult to tell at my

distance, but the thought roused a strange mixture of fear and anger in me. Regal, I reminded myself. Regal was my target. I moved on.

Several lesser gates for delivery folk and servants had guards lacking in lace, but making up for it in their militant questioning of every man or woman who went in and out. If my clothes had been better I would have risked impersonating a serving-man but I dared not attempt it in my beggar's rags. Instead, I positioned myself out of sight of the guards on the gate and began to beg of the tradefolk coming and going. I did so mutely, simply approaching them with cupped hands and a pleading expression. Most of them did what folk do when confronted with a beggar. They ignored me and continued their conversations. And so I learned that tonight was the night of the Scarlet Ball, that extra servants, musicians and conjurers had been brought in for the festivity, that merrybud had replaced mirthweed as the King's favourite smoke, and that the King had been very angry with the quality of the yellow silk one Festro had brought him, and had threatened to flog the merchant for even bringing him such poor stuff. The ball was also a farewell to the King, before he embarked on the morrow for a trip to visit his dear friend Lady Celestra at Amber Hall on the Vin River. I heard a great deal more, besides, but little that related to my purpose. I ended up with a handful of coppers for my time as well.

I returned to Tradeford. I found a whole street devoted to the tailoring of clothes. At the back door of Festro's shop, I found an apprentice sweeping out. I gave him several coppers for some scraps of yellow silk in various shades. I then sought out the humblest shop on the street, where every coin I possessed was just sufficient to purchase loose trousers, a smock and a head kerchief such as the apprentice had been wearing. I changed my clothes in the shop, braided my warrior's tail up and concealed it under the kerchief, donned my boots and emerged from the shop a different person. My sword now hung down my leg inside the trousers. It was uncomfortable, but not overly noticeable if I affected a loping stride. I left my worn clothes and the rest of my bundle, save for my poisons and other pertinent tools, in a patch of nettles behind a very smelly backhouse in a tavern yard. I made my way back to Tradeford's keep.

I did not permit myself to hesitate. I went directly to the tradefolks' gate and stood in line with the others seeking admittance. My heart hammered inside my ribs but I affected a calm demeanour. I spent my time studying what I could see of the house through the trees. It was immense. Earlier I

had been amazed that so much arable land had been given over to decorative gardens and walks. Now I saw that the gardens were simply the setting for a dwelling that both sprawled and towered in a style of house completely foreign to me. Nothing about it spoke of fortress or castle; all was comfort and elegance. When it came my turn, I showed my swatches of silk and said I came bearing Festro's apologies and some samples that he hoped would be more to the King's liking. When one surly guard pointed out that Festro usually came himself, I replied, somewhat sulkily, that my master thought stripes would better become my back than his, if the samples did not please the King. The guards exchanged grins and admitted me.

I hastened up the path until I was on the heels of a group of musicians who had come in before me. I followed them around to the back of the manorhouse. I knelt to refasten my boot as they asked directions and then straightened up just in time to follow them inside. I found myself in a small entry hall, cool and almost dark after the heat and light of the afternoon sun. I trailed them down a corridor. The minstrels talked and laughed among themselves as they hastened on. I slowed my steps and dropped back. When I passed a door that was ajar on an empty room, I stepped into it and shut the door quietly behind me. I drew a deep breath and looked around.

I was in a small sitting room. The furniture was shabby and ill-matched, so I surmised it was for servants or visiting craftsmen. I could not count on being alone there for long. There were, however, several large cupboards along the wall. I chose one that was not in direct view of the door should it open suddenly, and quickly rearranged its contents in order to sit inside it. I ensconced myself with the door slightly ajar for some light and went to work. I inspected and organized my vials and packets of poisons. I treated both my belt knife and my sword's edge with poison, then resheathed them carefully. I arranged my sword to hang outside my trousers. Then I made myself comfortable and settled down to wait.

Days seemed to pass before dusk gave way to full dark. Twice folk briefly entered the room, but from their gossip I gathered that every servant was busy preparing for the gathering tonight. I passed the time by imagining how Regal would kill me if he caught me. Several times I almost lost my courage. Each time I reminded myself that if I walked away from this, I would have to live with the fear forever. Instead, I tried to prepare myself. If Regal were here, then his coterie would surely be close by. I put myself carefully through the exercises Verity had taught me to shield my mind from

other Skilled ones. I was horribly tempted to venture out with a tiny touch of the Skill, to see if I could sense them. I refrained. I doubted I could sense them without betraying myself. And even if I could so detect them, what would it tell me that I did not already know? Better to concentrate on guarding myself from them. I refused to allow myself to think specifically of what I would do, lest they pick up traces of my thoughts. When finally the sky outside the window was full black and pricked with stars, I slipped out from my hiding place and ventured out into the hallway.

Music drifted on the night. Regal and his guests were at their festivities. I listened for a moment to the faint notes of a familiar song about two sisters, one of whom drowned the other. To me, the wonder of the song was not a harp that would play by itself, but a minstrel who would find a woman's body, and be inspired to make a harp of her breastbone. Then I put it out of my mind and concentrated on business.

I was in a simple corridor, stone-floored and panelled with wood, lit with torches set at wide intervals. Servants' area, I surmised; it was not fine enough for Regal or his friends. That did not make it safe for me, however. I needed to find a servants' stair and get myself to the second floor. I crept along the hall. I went from door to door, pausing to listen outside each one. Twice I heard folk within, women talking together in one, the clack of a weaving frame being used in another. The quiet doors that were not locked, I opened briefly. They were workrooms for the most part, with several given over to weaving and sewing. In one, a suit of fine blue fabric was pieced out on a table, ready for sewing. Regal apparently still indulged his fondness for fine clothing.

I came to the end of the corridor and peered around the corner. Another hallway, much finer and wider. The plastered ceiling overhead had been imprinted with fern shapes. Again I crept down a corridor, listening outside doors, cautiously peeping into some of them. Getting closer, I told myself. I found a library, with more vellum books and scrolls than I had ever known existed. I paused in one room where brightly-plumed birds in extravagant cages dozed on their perches. Slabs of white marble had been set to hold ponds of darting fishes and water lilies. There were benches and cushioned chairs set about gaming tables there. Small cherrywood tables scattered about held Smoke censers. I had never even imagined such a room.

I eventually came to a proper hall with framed portraits along the walls and a floor of gleaming black slate. I drew back when I spotted the guard

and stood silent in an alcove until his bored pacing carried him past me. Then I slipped out to flit past all those mounted nobles and simpering ladies in their sumptuous frames.

I blundered out into an antechamber. There were hangings on the wall and small tables supporting statuary and vases of flowers. Even the torch sconces here were more ornate. There were small portraits in gilt frames to either side of a fireplace with an elaborate mantel. Chairs were set close together for intimate talk. The music was louder here, and I could hear laughter and voices as well. Despite the lateness of the hour, the merriment went on. On the opposite wall were two tall carved doors. They led to the gathering hall where Regal and his nobles danced and laughed. I pulled myself back around the corner as I saw two servants in livery enter from a door to my far left. They bore trays carrying an assortment of incense pots. I surmised they were to replace ones that had burned out. I stood frozen, listening to their footsteps and conversation. They opened the tall doors and the music of harps spilled out more loudly and the narcotic scent of Smoke. Both were quenched by the closing doors. I ventured to peep out again. All was clear before me, but behind me –

‘What do you here?’

My heart fell into my boots, but I forced a sheepish smile to my face as I turned to face the guard who had entered the room behind me. ‘Sir, I’ve lost my way in this great maze of a house,’ I said guilelessly.

‘Have you? That doesn’t explain why you wear a sword within the King’s walls. All know weapons are forbidden save to the King’s own guard. I saw you sneaking about just then. Did you think with the merrymaking going on, you could just slip about and fill your pockets with whatever you found, thief?’

I stood frozen with terror, watching the man approach me. I am sure he believed he had discovered my purpose from the stricken look on my face. Verde would never have smiled so if he thought he advanced on a man he had helped beat to death in a dungeon. His hand rested carelessly on the hilt of his own blade and he grinned confidently. He was a handsome man, very tall and fair as many of the Farrow folk were. The badge he wore was Mountwell of Farrow’s golden oak, with the Farseer buck overleaping it. So Regal had modified his coat of arms as well. I but wished he’d left the buck off it.

A part of me noticed all these things as another part relived the nightmare of being dragged to my feet by my shirt front and stood up, so that this man could strike me and drive me once more to the floor. He was not Bolt, the one who had broken my nose. No, Verde had followed him, beating me insensible a second time, after Bolt had left me too battered to stand on my own. He had towered over me then and I had cowered and flinched away from him, tried vainly to scabble away from him over the cold stone floor that was already spattered with my blood. I remembered the oaths he had laughingly uttered each time he had had to haul me to my feet so he could hit me again. 'By Eda's tits,' I muttered to myself, and with the words, fear died in me.

'Let's see what you have in that pouch,' he demanded, and came closer.

I could not show him the poisons in my pouch. No way to explain those away. No amount of smooth lying would let me escape this man. I would have to kill him.

Suddenly it was all so simple.

We were much too close to the gathering hall. I wished no sound to alarm or alert anyone. So I retreated from him, a slow step at a time, backing in a wide circle that took me into the chamber I had just left. The portraits looked down at us as I backed hesitantly away from the tall guardsman.

'Stand still!' he ordered, but I shook my head wildly in what I hoped was a convincing display of terror. 'I said, stand still, you scrawny little thief!' I glanced quickly over my shoulder, then back at him, desperate, as if I were trying to find the courage to turn and run from him. The third time I did so, he leaped for me.

I'd been hoping for that.

I sidestepped him and then drove my elbow savagely into the small of his back, adding just enough momentum to his charge that he went to his knees. I heard them smack bonily against the stone floor. He gave a wordless roar of both anger and pain. I could see how suddenly furious it made him for the scrawny thief to dare strike him. I silenced him sharply when I kicked him under the chin, clacking his mouth shut. I was grateful that I'd switched back to my boots. Before he could make another sound I had my knife out and across his throat. He gurgled his amazement and lifted both hands in a vain attempt to contain that warm gushing of blood. I stood over him, looking down into his eyes. 'FitzChivalry,' I told him quietly. 'FitzChivalry.' His eyes widened in sudden understanding and terror, then lost all

expression as life left him. Abruptly he was stillness and nothingness, as devoid of life as a stone. To my Wit sense, he had disappeared.

So quickly it was done. Vengeance. I stood looking down at him, waiting to feel triumph or relief, or satisfaction. Instead I felt nothing, felt as lost to all life as he was. He was not even meat I could eat. I wondered belatedly if there was somewhere a woman who had loved this handsome man, blonde children who depended on his wages for food. It is not good for an assassin to have such thoughts; they had never plagued me when I had carried out the King's Justice for King Shrewd. I shook them from my head.

He was making a very large puddle of blood on the floor. I had silenced him quickly but this was just the sort of mess I hadn't wished to make. He was a large man, and he'd had a lot of blood in him. My mind raced as I debated whether to take time to conceal the body, or to accept that he would be quickly missed by his fellow guards and use that discovery as a diversion.

In the end I took off my shirt and sopped up as much of the blood as I could with it. Then I dumped it on his chest and wiped my bloody hands on his shirt. I seized him by the shoulders and dragged him out of the portrait hall, all the time almost shuddering with the effort of straining my senses to be aware of anyone coming. My boots kept slipping on the polished floors and the sound of my panting breath was a roar to my ears. Despite my efforts at mopping up the blood, we left a sheen of red on the floors behind us. At the door to the room of birds and fish, I forced myself to listen well before entering. I held my breath and tried to ignore the pounding of my heart in my ears. The room was clear of humans, however. I shouldered the door open and dragged Verde in. Then I caught him up and tumbled him into one of the stone fish pools. The fish darted frantically as his blood trailed and swirled out into the clear water. I hastily rinsed my hands and chest clean of blood in another pond, and then left by a different door. They'd follow the blood trail here. I hoped they'd take some time puzzling as to why the killer had dragged him here and dumped him in a pond.

I found myself in an unfamiliar room. I glanced quickly about at the vaulted ceiling and panelled walls. There was a grandiose chair on a dais at the far end. Some kind of an audience chamber then. I glanced about to get my bearings, then froze where I was. The carved doors to my far right swung suddenly open. I heard laughter, a muttered question and a giggling response. There was no time to hide and nothing to shelter behind. I flattened myself against a wall hanging and was still. The group entered on a

wave of laughter. There was a note of helplessness in the laughter that told me they were either drunk or giddy with Smoke. They walked right past me, two men vying for the attention of a woman who simpered and tittered behind a tasselled fan. All three of them were dressed entirely in shades of red, and one of the men had tinkling silver charms not just at the lace of his cuffs, but all along his loose sleeves to his elbows. The other man carried a small censer of Smoke on an ornamented rod, almost like a sceptre. He swung it back and forth before them as they walked so that they were always wreathed in the sweetish fumes. I doubted that they would have noticed me even if I had leaped out before them turning cartwheels. Regal seemed to have inherited his mother's fondness for intoxicants, and to be turning it into a court fashion. I stood motionless until they had passed. They went into the fish-and-bird room. I wondered if they would notice Verde in the pond. I doubted it.

I flitted to the doorway from which the courtiers had entered, and slipped through it. I found myself suddenly in a great entry hall. It was floored with marble and my mind boggled at the expense of hauling such an expanse of stone to Tradeford. The ceiling was high and plastered white, with designs of immense flowers and leaves pressed into the plaster. There were arched windows of stained glass, dark now against the night, but between them hung tapestries glowing with such rich colours as to seem windows on some other world and time. All was illuminated with ornate candelabra hung with sparkling crystals and suspended from gilded chains. Hundreds of candles burned in them. Statues were displayed on pedestals at intervals about the room and from the look of them, most were of Regal's Mountwell ancestors from his mother's side. Despite the danger I was in, the grandness of the room captured me for a moment. Then I lifted my eyes and saw the wide staircase ascending. This was the main staircase, not the back servants' stairs I had sought. Ten men abreast could have gone up it easily. The woodwork of the balustrades was dark and full of twirling knots, but shone with a deep lustre. A thick rug spilled down the centre of the steps like a blue cascade.

The hall was empty, as was the staircase. I did not give myself time to hesitate, but slipped silently across the room and up the stairs. I was halfway up when I heard the scream. Evidently they *had* noticed Verde. At the top of the first landing, I heard voices and running footsteps coming from the right. I fled to the left. I came to a door, pressed my ear against it, heard nothing,

and slipped inside, all in less time than it takes to tell it. I stood in darkness, heart thundering, thanking Eda and El and any other gods that might exist that the door had not been fastened.

I stood in the darkness, my ear pressed to the thick door, trying to hear more than my own pounding heart. I heard shouts from below, and boots running down the staircase. A moment or so passed, then I heard an authoritative voice shouting orders. I slipped to where the opening door would at least temporarily conceal me, and waited, breath stilled, hands trembling. Fear welled up in me like a sudden blackness, threatening to overwhelm me. I felt the floor rock under me and I crouched down quickly to keep from falling in a faint. The world spun about me. I made myself small, hugging myself tight and squeezing my eyes shut, as if somehow that would better conceal me. A second wave of fear washed over me. I sank the rest of the way to the floor and fell over on my side, all but whimpering. I curled in a ball, enduring a terrible squeezing pain in my chest. I was going to die. I was going to die and I'd never see them again, not Molly, not Burrich, not my king. I should have gone to Verity. I knew that now. I should have gone to Verity. I wanted to scream and weep, for I was suddenly certain I could never escape, that I would be found and tortured. They would find me and kill me very, very slowly. I experienced an almost overwhelming drive simply to leap up and run out of the room, to draw sword against the guards and force them to end me quickly.

Steady now. They try to trick you into betraying yourself. Verity's Skilling was finer than a cobweb. I caught my breath, but had the wisdom to keep still.

After what seemed a long time, my blind terror lifted. I took a long shuddering breath and seemed to come to myself again. When I heard the footsteps and voices outside the door, my fear surged up again, but I forced myself to lie still and listen.

'I was sure of it,' said a man.

'No. He's long gone. If they find him at all, they'll find him out on the grounds. No one could have stood up to both of us. If he were still in the house, we would have flushed him out.'

'I tell you, there was something.'

'Nothing,' insisted the other voice with some annoyance. 'I sensed nothing.'

'Check again,' insisted the other.

‘No. It’s a waste of time. I think you were mistaken.’ The first man’s anger was becoming obvious despite their subdued voices.

‘I hope I was, but I fear I am not. If I am correct, we’ve given Will the excuse he’s been looking for.’ There was anger in the second man’s voice too, but also a whining self-pity.

‘Looking for an excuse? Not that one. He speaks ill of us to the King at every turn. To hear him talk, you would think he was the only one who had made any sacrifices in King Regal’s service. A maidservant told me yesterday that he makes no niceties at all about it any more. You, he says, are fat, and me he accuses of every weakness of the flesh a man can have.’

‘If I am not as lean as a soldier, it is because I am not a soldier. It is not my body that serves the King, but my mind. As well look to himself before he faults us, him with his one good eye.’ The whine was unmistakable now. Burl, I suddenly realized. Burl speaking to Carrod.

‘Well. I am satisfied that tonight at least he cannot fault us. There is nothing amiss here that I can find. He has you jumping at shadows and seeing danger in every corner. Calm yourself. This is a matter for the guards now, not us. They’ll probably find it was done by a jealous husband or another guardsman. I’ve heard it said that Verde won a little too often at dice. Perhaps that is why he was left in the gaming room. So if you will excuse me, I will return to the fairer company from which you distracted me.’

‘Go, then, if that is all you can think of,’ the whiner said sulkily. ‘But when you’ve a moment to spare, I think we might be wise to take counsel together.’ After a moment, Burl added, ‘I’ve more than half a mind to go to him right now. Make it his problem.’

‘You’d only end up looking like a fool. When you worry so much, you are but giving in to his influence. Let him mouth his warnings and dire predictions and spend every moment of his life on guard. To hear him tell it, his watchfulness is all the King needs. He seeks to instil that fear in us. Your quaking probably gives him much satisfaction. Guard such thoughts carefully.’

I heard one set of footsteps walking briskly away. The roaring in my ears softened a little. After a time, I heard the other man leave, walking more ponderously and muttering to himself. When I could no longer hear his footfalls, I felt as if a great weight had been lifted off me. I swallowed drily and debated my next move.

Dim light filtered in through tall windows. I could make out a bedstead, with the blankets turned back to expose the white linens. It was unoccupied. There was the dark shape of a wardrobe in the corner, and by the bed a stand held a bowl and ewer.

I forced myself to calmness. I took long steadying breaths, then rose silently to my feet. I needed to find Regal's bedchamber, I reminded myself. I suspected it would be on this floor, with servants' quarters in the higher levels of the house. Stealth had got me this far, but perhaps now it was time to be bolder. I crossed to the wardrobe in the corner and opened it quietly. Luck had favoured me again; this was a man's chamber. I went through the garments by touch, feeling for a fabric that felt serviceable. I had to work hastily, for I assumed the rightful owner was at the festivities below and might return at any time. I found a light-coloured shirt, much more fussy about the sleeves and collar than I could wish, but almost long enough in the arms. I managed to get into it, and a darker coloured pair of leggings that felt too loose on me. I belted them up and hoped they did not hang too strangely. There was a pot of scented pomade. I finger-brushed my hair back from my face with it and secured it afresh in a tail, discarding the tradesman's kerchief. Most of the courtiers I had seen earlier wore theirs in oiled curls much as Regal did, but a few of the younger ones kept their hair tied back. I felt about in several drawers. I found some sort of medallion on a chain and put it on. There was a ring, too large for my finger, but that scarcely mattered. I would pass a casual glance and hoped to attract no more than that. They would be looking for a shirtless man in coarse trousers to match the bloodied shirt I had left. I dared to hope they would be seeking him outside. At the threshold I paused, took a deep breath, and then slowly opened the door. The hall was empty and I stepped out.

Once out in the light, I was not pleased to find the leggings were a dark green and the shirt a buttery yellow. Well it was no more garish than what I had seen folk wearing earlier, though I could scarcely blend with the guests at his Scarlet Ball. I resolutely set the worry aside and struck off down the hall, walking casually yet purposefully to seek a door that was larger and more ornate than the others.

I boldly tried the first one I came to, and found it unlocked. I entered, only to find myself in a room with an immense harp and several other musical instruments set out as if awaiting minstrels. A variety of cushioned chairs and couches filled the rest of the room. The paintings were all of

songbirds. I shook my head, baffled at the endless riches of this one house. I continued my search.

Nervousness made the hall stretch out endlessly before me. I forced myself to walk in an unhurried and confident manner. I passed door after door, cautiously sampling a few. Those on my left seemed to be bedchambers, while those on my right were larger rooms, libraries and dining rooms and the like. Instead of wall sconces, the hall was lit with shielded candles. The wall hangings were richly-coloured, and at intervals niches held vases of flowers or small statuary. I could not help but contrast it to the stark stone walls of Buckkeep. I wondered how many warships could have been built and manned with the coin that instead went to ornament this finely-feathered nest. My anger fed my competence. I would find Regal's chamber.

I passed three more doors, then came to one that looked promising. It was a double door, of golden oak, and the oak tree that was the symbol of Farrow was inlaid upon it. I set my ear briefly to the door and heard nothing. Cautiously I tried the burnished handle; the door was latched. My sheath knife was a crude tool for this type of work. Sweat soaked the yellow shirt to my back before the catch yielded to my efforts. I eased the door open and slipped inside, quickly locking it behind me.

This was certainly Regal's chamber. Not his bedchamber, no, but his nonetheless. I went through it swiftly. There were no less than four tall wardrobes, two on each side wall with a tall looking-glass between each set. The ornately-carved door of one wardrobe was ajar; or possibly the press of the clothing from within would not allow it to be fully closed. Other garments hung on hooks and racks about the room or were draped on chairs. A set of locked drawers in a small chest probably held jewellery. The looking-glass between the wardrobes was framed by two branches of candles, now burned low in their holders. Two small censers for Smoke were set to either side of one chair that faced yet another mirror. Behind and to one side of the chair, a table held brushes, combs, pots of pomade and vials of perfume. A narrow twining of grey fumes still rose from one of the censers. I wrinkled my nose against the sweet odour of it, and went to work.

Fitz. What do you do? The faintest query from Verity.

Justice. I put no more than a breath of Skill onto the thought. I was not sure if it were my own or Verity's apprehension that I suddenly felt. I brushed it aside and turned to my task.

It was frustrating. There was little here that was a sure vehicle for my poisons. I could treat the pomade, but I was more likely to kill whoever dressed his hair for him than Regal. The censers held mostly ash. Anything I placed there would probably be dumped with the ash. The corner hearth was swept clean for the summer and there was no supply of wood. Patience, I told myself. His bedchamber could not be far, and opportunities would be better there. For now, I treated the bristles of his hairbrush with one of my more potent concoctions and used what was left to dip as many of his earrings as I could. The last drops I added to his vials of scent but with small hope that he would apply enough to kill himself. For the scented handkerchiefs folded in his drawer, I had the white spore of the death angel mushroom to beguile his hours until death with hallucinations. I took greater pleasure in dusting the insides of four sets of gloves with deadroot powder. This was the poison Regal had used on me in the Mountains, and the most likely source of the seizures that had plagued me intermittently since then. I hoped he would find his own falling fits as amusing as he had mine. I selected three of his shirts that I thought he would favour, and treated their collars and cuffs as well. There was no wood in the hearth, but I had a poison that blended well with the traces of ash and soot left on the brick. I sprinkled it generously and hoped that when they set a fire upon it, the burning fumes might reach Regal's nose. I had just returned my poison to my pouch when I heard a key turn the door latch.

I stepped silently around the corner of a wardrobe and stood there. My knife was already in my hand, waiting. A deadly calm had settled on me. I breathed silently, waiting, hoping fortune had brought Regal to me. Instead, it was another guardsman in Regal's colours. The man pushed into the room and cast a quick glance about. His irritation showed in his face as he impatiently said, 'It was locked. There's no one in here.' I waited for his partner to reply, but he was alone. He stood still a moment, then sighed and walked over to the open wardrobe. 'Foolishness. I'm wasting time up here while he's going to get away,' he muttered to himself, but he drew his sword and carefully prodded about the interior behind the clothes.

As he leaned to reach deeper into the wardrobe's interior, I caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror opposite me. My guts turned to water, and then hatred blazed up in me. I had no name for this one, but his mocking face had been forever etched into my memory. He had been part of Regal's personal guard, and had stood by to witness my death.

I think he saw my reflection at the same time I saw his. I did not give him time to react, but sprang on him from behind. The blade of his sword was still tangled inside Regal's wardrobe when my knife punched low into his belly. I clamped my forearm across his throat to give me leverage as I dragged up on the knife, gutting him like a fish. His mouth gaped open to scream, and I let go of my knife to slap my hand over his mouth. I held him a moment as his entrails bulged out of the gash I'd made. When I let him go, he went down, his unvoiced bellow turned to a groan. He'd not let go of his sword, so I stamped on his hand, breaking his fingers around its hilt. He rolled slightly to one side, to stare up at me in agony and shock. I went down on one knee beside him, put my face close to his.

'FitzChivalry,' I said quietly, meeting his eyes, making sure he knew. 'FitzChivalry.' For the second time that night, I cut a throat. It scarcely needed doing. I wiped my knife on his sleeve as he died. As I stood, I felt two things. Disappointment that he had died so swiftly. And a sensation as if a harp string had been plucked, letting out a sound I felt rather than heard.

In the next instant, I felt a wave of Skill inundate me. It was laden with terror, but this time I recognized it for what it was and knew its source. I stood firm before it, my defences strong. I almost felt it part and go around me. Yet I sensed that even that act was read by someone, somewhere. I did not wonder who. Will felt the shape of my resistance. I felt the echo of his surge of triumph. For a moment it froze me with panic. Then I was moving, sheathing my knife, rising to slip out the door and into the still-empty hallway. I had but a short time to find a new hiding place. Will had been riding with the guardsman's mind, had seen that chamber and me just as clearly as the dying man had. Like the sounding of horns, I could sense him Skilling out, setting the guards in motion as if he were setting dogs to a fox's trail.

As I fled, a part of me knew with undeniable certainty that I was dead. I might be able to hide myself for a time, but Will knew I was within the mansion. All he had to do was block off every exit and begin a systematic search. I raced down a hall, turned a corner and went up a staircase there. I held my Skill walls firm and clutched my tiny plan to myself as if it were a precious gem. I would find Regal's chambers and poison everything there. Then I would go seeking Regal himself. If the guards discovered me first, well, I'd lead them a merry chase. They couldn't kill me. Not with all the

poison I was carrying. I'd take my own life first. It wasn't much of a plan, but the only alternative was surrendering.

So I raced on, past more doors, more statuary and flowers, more hangings. Every door I tried was locked. I turned another corner and was suddenly back at the top of the staircase. I felt a moment of dizzy disorientation. I attempted to brush it off but panic rose like a black tide inside my mind. It appeared to be the same staircase. I knew I had not turned enough corners to have come back to it. I hurried past the staircase, past the doors again, hearing the shouts of guardsmen below me as knowledge grew and squirmed queasily inside me.

Will leaned on my mind.

Dizziness and pressure inside my eyes. Grimly I set my mental walls yet again. I turned my head quickly and my vision doubled for a moment. Smoke, I wondered? I had no head for any of the fume intoxicants that Regal favoured. Yet this felt like more to me than the giddiness of Smoke or the mellowness of merrybud.

The Skill is a powerful tool in the hand of a master. I had been with Verity when he had used it against the Red Ships, to so muddle a helmsman that he turned his own ships onto the rocks, to convince a navigator that he had not yet passed a point of land when it was far behind him, to raise fears and doubts in a captain's heart before he went into battle, or to bolster the courage of a ship's crew so that they foolhardily set sail into the very teeth of a storm.

How long had Will been working on me? Had he lured me here, for this encounter, by subtly convincing me that he would never expect me to come?

I forced myself to halt at the next door. I held myself firm, focused myself on the latch of the door as I worked it. It was not locked. I slipped into it, closing the door behind me. Blue fabric was set out on a table before me, ready for sewing. I'd been in this room before. I knew a moment of relief, then checked it. No. This room had been on the ground floor. I was upstairs. Wasn't I? I crossed quickly to the window, stood to one side of it as I peered out. Far below me were the torchlit grounds of the King's Gardens. I could see the white of the great drive gleaming in the night. Carriages were coming up it and liveried servants darted here and there, opening doors. Ladies and gentlemen in extravagant red evening clothes were leaving in droves. I gathered that Verde's end had rather spoiled Regal's ball. There were liveried guards on the doors, regulating who might leave and who must

wait. All this I took in at a glance, and realized also that I was up a lot higher than I had thought.

Yet I had been sure that this table and the blue garments waiting to be sewn had been down in the servants' wing of the ground floor.

Well, it was not all that unlikely that Regal would be having two different sets of blue clothes sewn. No time to puzzle about it; I had to find his bedchamber. I felt a strange elation as I slipped out of the room and fled once more down the hallway, a thrill not unlike that of a good hunt. Let them catch me if they could.

I came suddenly to a T in the corridor and stood a moment, puzzled. It did not seem to fit in with what I had seen of the building from outside. I glanced left, then right. Right was noticeably grander, and the tall double doors at the end of the hall were emblazoned with the golden oak of Farrow. As if to put spurs to me, I heard a mutter of angry voices from a room somewhere off to my left. I went right, drawing my knife as I ran. When I came to the great double doors, I put my hand to the latch quietly, expecting to find it locked tight. Instead the door gave easily and swung forward silently. It was almost too easy. I set those apprehensions aside and slipped in, knife drawn.

The room before me was dark, save for two candles burning in silver holders on the mantelpiece. I slipped inside what was obviously Regal's sitting room. A second door stood ajar, revealing the corner of a magnificently-curtained bed and beyond it a hearth with a rack of firewood laid ready in it. I pulled the door gently closed behind me and advanced into the room. On a low table a carafe of wine and two glasses awaited Regal's return, as did a platter of sweets. The censer beside it was heaped with powdered Smoke waiting to be ignited on his return. It was an assassin's fantasy. I could scarcely decide where to begin.

'That, you see, is how it is done.'

I spun about, then experienced a distortion of my senses that dizzied me. I stood in the middle of a well-lit but rather bare room. Will sat, negligently relaxed, in a cushioned chair. A glass of white wine waited on a table beside him. Carrod and Burl flanked him, wearing expressions of irritation and discomfiture. Despite my longing, I dared not take my eyes off them.

'Go ahead, Bastard, look behind you. I shan't attack you. It would be a shame to spring such a trap as this on one such as you, and have you die

before you appreciated the fullness of your failure. Go on. Look behind you.'

I turned my whole body slowly, to allow me to glance back with a mere shifting of my eyes. Gone, it was all gone. No royal sitting room, no curtained bed or carafe of wine, nothing. A plain, simple room, probably for several lady's maids to share. Six liveried guards stood silent but attentive. All had drawn swords.

'My companions seem to feel that a drenching of fear will ferret out any man. But they, of course, have not experienced your strength of will as completely as I have. I do hope you appreciate the finesse I used, in simply assuring you that you were seeing exactly what you most wished to see.' He gave a glance each to Carrod and Burl. 'He has walls the like of which you have never experienced. But a wall that will not yield to a battering ram can still be breached by the gentle twining of ivy.' He swung his attention back to me. 'You would have been a worthy opponent, save that in your conceit you always underestimated me.'

I still had not said a word. I stared at them all, letting the hatred that filled me strengthen my Skill walls. All three had changed since I had last seen them. Burl, once a well-muscled carpenter, showed the effects of a good appetite and lack of exercise. Carrod's attire outshone the man within it. Ribbons and charms festooned his garments like blossoms on a spring-time apple tree. But Will, seated between them in his chair, showed the greatest change of all. He was dressed entirely in dark blue in garments whose precise tailoring made them seem richer than Carrod's costume. A single chain of silver, a silver ring on his hand, silver earrings; these were his only ornaments. Of his dark eyes, once so terrifyingly piercing, only one remained. The other was sunken deep in its socket, showing cloudy in the depths like a dead fish in a dirty pool. He smiled at me as he saw me looking at it. He gestured at his eye.

'A memento of our last encounter. Whatever it was that you threw into my face.'

'A pity,' I said, quite sincerely. 'I had meant those poisons to kill Regal, not half-blind you.'

Will sighed lackadaisically. 'Another admission of treason. As if we needed one. Ah, well. We shall be more thorough this time. First, of course, we will spend a bit of time ferreting out just how you escaped death. A bit of time for that, and however much longer King Regal finds you amusing. He

will have no need for either haste or discretion this time.’ He gave a minuscule nod to the guards behind me.

I smiled at him as I set the poisoned blade of my own knife to my left arm. I clenched my teeth against the pain as I dragged it down the length of my arm, not deeply, but enough to open my skin and let the poison from the blade into my blood. Will leapt to his feet in shock, while Carrod and Burl looked horrified and disgusted. I passed my knife to my left hand, drew my sword with my right.

‘I’m dying now,’ I told them, smiling. ‘Probably very soon. I’ve no time to waste, and nothing to lose.’

But he had been correct. I had always underestimated him. Somehow I found myself facing, not the coterie members, but six guards with drawn blades. Killing myself was one thing. Being hacked to death while those I desired vengeance on watched was another. I spun about, and felt a wave of dizziness as I did so, as if the room moved rather than I myself. I lifted my eyes to find the swordsmen still confronting me. I turned again and again experienced a sensation of swinging. The thin line of blood along my arm had begun to burn. My chance to do anything about Will and Burl and Carrod was leaking away as the poison seeped through my blood.

The guards were advancing on me, unhurriedly, fanning out in a half circle and driving me before them as if I were an errant sheep. I backed up, glanced once over my shoulder and caught the most fleeting glimpse of the coterie members. Will stood, a step or so in front of the others, an annoyed look on his face. I had come here in the hope of killing Regal. I had barely succeeded in annoying his henchman with my suicide.

Suicide? Somewhere deep within me, Verity was horrorstruck.

Better than torture. Less than a whisper of Skill on that thought, but I swear I felt Will go groping after it.

Boy, stop this insanity. Get out of there. Come to me.

I cannot. It’s too late. There’s no escape. Let go of me, you only reveal yourself to them.

Reveal myself? Verity’s Skill boomed suddenly in my mind, like thunder on a summer night, like storm waves shaking a shale cliff. I had seen him do this before. Angered, he would expend all of his Skill-strength in one effort, with no thought to what might befall him afterwards. I felt Will hesitate, then plunge into that Skilling, reaching after Verity and trying to leech onto him.

Study this revelation, you nest of adders! My king let forth his wrath.

Verity's Skilling was a blast, of a strength I had never encountered anywhere. It was not directed at me, but still I went to my knees. I heard Carrod and Burl cry out, guttural cries of terror. For a moment my head and perceptions cleared, and I saw the room as it had always been, with the guardsmen arrayed between me and the coterie. Will was stretched senseless on the floor. Perhaps I alone felt the great surge of strength it cost Verity to save me. The guards were staggering, wilting like candles in the sun. I spun, saw the door at my back as it opened to admit more guards. Three strides would carry me to the window.

COME TO ME!

There was no choice left for me in that command. It was impregnated with the Skill it rode on, and it burned into my brain, becoming one with my breathing and the beating of my heart. I had to go to Verity. It was a cry both of command, and now, of need. My king had sacrificed his reserves to save me.

There were heavy curtains over the window, and thick whorled glass behind them. Neither stopped me as I launched myself out into the air beyond, hoping there would at least be bushes below me to break some of my fall. Instead I slammed to the earth amid the shards of glass a fraction of a moment later. I had leaped, expecting to fall at least one storey, from a ground-floor window. For a split second I appreciated the completeness of how Will had deceived me. Then I staggered to my feet, still clutching my knife and my sword, and ran.

The grounds were not well lit outside the servants' wing. I blessed the darkness and fled. Behind me I heard cries, and then Burl shouting orders. They'd be on my trail in moments. I'd not escape here on foot. I veered off to the more solid darkness of the stables.

The departure of the ball's guests had stirred the stable to activity. Most of the hands on duty were probably around in front of the mansion, holding horses. The doors of the stable were opened wide to the soft night air, and lanterns were lit within it. I charged in, very nearly bowling over a stable-hand. She could not have been more than ten, a skinny, freckled girl, and she staggered back, then shrieked at the sight of my drawn weapons.

'I'm just taking a horse,' I told her reassuringly. 'I won't hurt you.' She was backing away as I sheathed my sword and then my knife. She spun suddenly. 'Hands! Hands!' She raced off shrieking his name. I had no time

to give any thought to it. Three stalls down from me, I saw Regal's own black regarding me curiously over his manger. I approached him calmly, reached to rub his nose and recall myself to him. Perhaps it had been eight months since he'd smelled me, but I'd known him since he was foaled. He nibbled at my collar, his whiskers tickling my neck. 'Come on, Arrow. We're going for some night exercise. Just like old times, huh, fellow?' I eased his stall open, took his halter and walked him out. I didn't know where the girl had gone, but I could no longer hear her.

Arrow was tall, and not accustomed to being ridden bareback. He crow-hopped a bit as I scabbled up onto his sleek back. Even in the midst of all the danger, I felt a keen pleasure at being on horseback again. I gripped his mane, kneed him forward. He took three steps, then halted at the man blocking his way. I looked down at Hands' incredulous face. I had to grin at his shocked expression.

'Just me, Hands. Got to borrow a horse, or they'll kill me. Again.'

I think perhaps I expected him to laugh and wave me through. Instead he just stared up at me, going whiter and whiter until I thought he'd faint.

'It's me, Fitz. I'm not dead! Let me out, Hands!'

He stepped back. 'Sweet Eda!' he exclaimed, and I thought surely he would throw back his head and laugh. Instead, he hissed, 'Beast magic!' Then he spun and fled off into the night, bawling, 'Guards! Guards!'

I lost perhaps two seconds gawking after him. I felt a wrench inside me such as I had not felt since Molly had left me. The years of friendship, the long day-in, day-out routine of stable-work together, all washed away in a moment of his superstitious terror. It was unfair, but I felt sickened by his betrayal. Coldness welled up in me, but I set heels to Arrow and plunged out into darkness.

He trusted me, did that good horse so well trained by Burrich. I took him away from the torchlit carriage path and the cleared walkways, fleeing through flowerbeds and plantings, before racing out past a huddle of guards at one of the tradefolks' gates. They had been watching up the path, but Arrow and I came thundering across the turf and were out the gate before they knew what we were about. They'd wear stripes for that tomorrow, if I knew Regal at all.

Beyond the gate, we once more cut across the gardens. Behind us, I could hear shouts of pursuit. Arrow answered my knees and weight very well for a horse that was used to a rein. I convinced him to push through a

hedge and out onto a side road. We left the King's Garden behind us, and kept our gallop up through the better section of town over cobbled streets where torches still burned. But soon we left the fine houses behind as well. We thundered along past inns still lit for travellers, past shops dark and shuttered for the night, Arrow's hooves thudding on the clay roads. As late as it was, there was little movement on the streets. We raced through them as unchecked as the wind.

I let him slow as we reached the commoner section of town. Here street torches were more widely spaced and some had already burned out for the night. Still, Arrow sensed my urgency and kept up a respectable pace. Once I heard another horse, ridden hard, and for a moment I thought the pursuit had found us. Then a messenger passed us by, heading in the opposite direction, without even checking his horse's pace. I rode on and on, always fearing to hear horses behind us, waiting for the sounds of horns.

Just when I began to think we had eluded pursuit, I discovered that Tradeford held one more horror for me. I entered what had once been the Great Circle Market of Tradeford. In the earliest days of the city, it had been the heart of it, a wonderful great open market where a man might stroll and find goods from every corner of the known world on display.

How it had degenerated from that to Regal's King Circle I have never exactly been able to discover. I only knew that as I rode through the great open circle of the market, Arrow snorted at the smell of old blood on the cobbles under his hooves. The old gallows and the whipping posts were still there, elevated now for the benefit of the crowd, along with other mechanical devices whose uses I had no wish to understand. No doubt those in the new King's Circle would be even more imaginatively cruel. I kneed Arrow and passed them all with a chill shudder and a prayer to Eda that I be preserved from them.

Then a twist of feeling writhed through the air, wrapped itself around my thoughts and bent them. For a heart-thudding moment, I thought that Will reached after me with the Skill and sought to drive me mad. But my Skill walls were as stout as I knew how to raise, and I doubted that Will or anyone else would be soon able to Skill after Verity's blast. No. This was worse. This came from a deeper, more primal source, as insidious as clear water that was poisoned. It flowed into me, hatred and pain and stifling claustrophobia and hunger all rolled into one dreadful longing for freedom and revenge. It reawakened everything I had ever felt in Regal's dungeons.

It came from the cages. A great stench came from the row of them at the edge of the circle, a stench of infected wounds and urine and rotted meat. Yet even that affront to my nose was not as great as the press of hell-tinged Wit that emanated from them. They held but insane beasts, the creatures kept to savage the human criminals and Forged ones that Regal threw to them. There was a bear, heavily muzzled despite the bars he paced behind. There were two great cats of a kind I had never seen, in agony from the broken fangs and torn claws they had wasted on the bars, and yet stubbornly battling their prisons still. There was an immense black bull with a great sweep of horns. This last animal's flesh was studded with ribboned darts sunken in wounds that festered and oozed pus down his hide. Their misery dinned at me, clamouring for relief, yet I did not need to stop to see the heavy chains and locks that secured each cage. Had I had a pick, I might have tried to cheat the locks. Had I had meat or grain, I might have freed them with poison. But I had neither of those things, and even less time. So I rode past them, until the wave of their madness and agony crested over and drenched me. I pulled in on the reins. I could not leave them behind. But, *come to me*, the command surged through me, Skill-graven. It was not endurable to disobey it. I set my heels to jittering Arrow and left them behind, tallying up to Regal's account yet another debt that some day I would settle.

True light found us finally on the outskirts of town. I had never imagined that Tradeford was so large. We came to a slow stream feeding into the river. I pulled Arrow in, then dismounted and led him down to the waterside. I let him drink a bit, then walked him for a while, then let him drink some more. The whole time my mind seethed with a thousand thoughts. They were probably searching the roads that led south, expecting me to head back to Buck. I had a good lead on them now; as long as I kept moving, I had a good chance of escape. I recalled my cleverly-stashed bundle that would never be reclaimed. My winter clothes, my blanket, my cloak, all lost to me. I wondered suddenly if Regal would blame Hands for my stealing the horse. I kept recalling the look in Hands' eyes before he fled me. I found myself being glad I had not yielded to the temptation to track Molly down. It was hard enough to see that horror and disgust in the face of a friend. I never wanted to see it in her eyes. I recalled again the dumb agony of the beasts that my Wit made me witness. Such thoughts were pushed aside by my frustration that my attempt on Regal had been thwarted, and the wondering if they would detect the poisons I had used on his clothes, or if I

might yet succeed at killing him. Over all, thundering through me, was Verity's command. *Come to me*, he had said, and I could not quite stop hearing those words. A small part of my mind was obsessed with them, nagged me even now not to waste my time in thinking or drinking, but merely to get back on the horse and go, go to Verity, that he needed me, commanded me.

Yet stoop to drink I did, and it was while I was on my knees at the water's edge that I noticed I wasn't dead.

I wet the sleeve of the yellow shirt in the stream, then gently peeled the blood-caked fabric loose. The cut I had inflicted on myself was shallow, not much more than a long slice up my arm. It was sore, and angry to look at, but it did not appear poisoned. I recalled belatedly that I had used my knife to kill twice that night, and wiped it off at least once. There had probably been no more than a trace of poison left on it when I cut myself.

Like a morning dawning, hope suddenly gleamed for me. They'd be looking for a body by the road, or searching for a poisoned man hiding somewhere in the city, too ill by now to bestride a horse. The whole coterie had watched me poison myself, and must have sensed my complete belief in my imminent death. Could they convince Regal I was dying? I wouldn't trust to that, but I could hope for it. I remounted and pushed swiftly on. We passed farmsteads, grainfields, and orchards. We passed farmers on carts, too, taking their crops to town. I rode clutching my arm to my chest, staring straight ahead. It would only be a matter of time before someone thought to question folk coming into town. Best to play my part.

Eventually we began to see stretches of unworked land, with sheep or haragar scattered across them in open pasturage. Shortly after noon, I did what I knew I had to do. I dismounted by a brushy creekside, let Arrow water again, and then turned his head back to Tradeford. 'Back to the stables, boy,' I told him, and when he did not move, I clapped him soundly on the flank. 'Go on, go back to Hands. Tell them all I'm dead somewhere.' I pictured his manger for him, brimming with the oats I knew he loved. 'Go on, Arrow. Go.'

He snorted at me curiously, but then paced off. He paused once to look back at me, expecting me to come after him and catch him. 'Go on!' I shouted at him, and stamped my foot. He startled at that, and then took off at his high-kneed trot, tossing his head. Scarcely even tired, that one. When he came back riderless to the stable, perhaps they'd believe I was dead. Perhaps

they'd waste more time searching for a body instead of pursuing me. It was the best I could do to mislead them, and certainly better than riding the king's own horse for all to see. Arrow's hoofbeats were fading. I wondered if I'd ever again ride an animal that fine, let alone own one. It didn't seem likely.

Come to me. The command still echoed through my mind.

'I am, I am,' I muttered to myself. 'After I hunt for something to eat and get some sleep. But I'm coming.' I left the road and followed the creek up into deeper brush. I had a long and weary way to go, with little more than the clothes on my back.

TEN

Hiring Fair

Slavery is a tradition in the Chalced States, and is at the heart of much of its economy. They claim prisoners taken in war are the major source of its slaves. However, a great portion of the slaves who escape to the Six Duchies tell tales of being taken in pirate raids against their native lands. Chalced's official stance is that such raids do not occur, but Chalced also officially denies that they turn a blind eye to pirates operating from the Trade Islands. The two go hand in hand.

Slavery has never been commonly accepted in the Six Duchies. Many of the early border conflicts between Shoaks and the Chalced States had more to do with the slavery issue than actual boundary lines. Shoaks families refused to accept that soldiers wounded or captured in war would be kept the rest of their lives as slaves. Any battle that Shoaks lost was almost immediately followed by a second savage attack against the Chalced States to regain those lost in the first battle. In this way, Shoaks came to hold much land originally claimed by the Chalced States. The peace between the two regions is always uneasy. Chalced constantly brings complaint that the folk of Shoaks not only shelter runaway slaves, but encourage others to escape. No Six Duchies monarch has ever denied the truth of this.

My whole drive now was to reach Verity, somewhere beyond the Mountain Kingdom. To do it, I would have to cross all of Farrow first. It would not be an easy task. While the region along the Vin River is pleasant enough, the farther one travels from the Vin, the more arid the countryside becomes. The arable stretches are given over to great fields of flax and hemp, but beyond these are vast stretches of open, uninhabited land. The interior of Farrow Duchy, while not a desert, is flat, dry country, used only by the nomadic tribes who move their herds across it, following the forage. Even they forsake it after the 'green times' of the year are past, to congregate in temporary villages along rivers or near water places. In the days that followed my escape from Tradeford Hall, I came to wonder why King Wielder had ever bothered to subjugate Farrow, let alone make it one of the Six Duchies. I knew that I had to strike away from the Vin, to head

southwest toward Blue Lake, to cross vast Blue Lake, and then follow the Cold River to the hems of the Mountains. Yet it was not a journey for a lone man. And without Nighteyes, that was what I was.

There are no sizeable cities in the interior, though there are rudimentary towns that subsist year round near some of the springs that randomly dot the interior. Most of these survive by virtue of the trade caravans that pass near them. Trade does flow, albeit slowly, between the folk of Blue Lake and the Vin River, and by this same path do the goods of the Mountain folk come into Six Duchies hands. The obvious course was to somehow attach myself to one of those caravans. Yet what is obvious is not always easy.

When I had entered Tradeford town, I had looked to be the poorest type of beggar imaginable. I left it finely dressed, on one of the best animals ever bred at Buckkeep. But the moment after I had parted with Arrow, the gravity of my situation began to dawn on me. I had the clothing I had stolen and my leather boots, my belt and pouch, a knife and a sword, plus a ring and a medallion on a chain. In my pouch there were no coins left at all, though it did contain implements for fire making, a sharpening stone for my knife and a good selection of poisons.

Wolves are not meant to hunt alone. So Nighteyes had once told me, and before the day was out, I came to appreciate the wisdom of that statement. My meal that day consisted of rice-lily roots and some nuts a squirrel had hoarded in too obvious a hiding place. I would gladly have eaten the squirrel, who sat overhead scolding at me as I raided his cache, but I had not the means to make that wish a reality. Instead, as I pounded the nuts with a stone to open them, I reflected that one by one, my illusions about myself had been stripped away.

I had believed myself a self-sufficient and clever fellow. I had taken pride in my skills as an assassin, had even, deep down, believed that although I could not competently master my Skill ability, my strength at it was easily the equal of any in Galen's Coterie. But take away both King Shrewd's largesse and my wolf companion's hunting ability, subtract from me Chade's secret information and plotting skill and Verity's Skill-guidance, and what I saw left was a starving man in stolen clothes, halfway between Buckkeep and the Mountains, with small prospect of getting any closer to either one.

Satisfyingly bleak as such thoughts were, they did nothing to assuage the nagging of Verity's Skill-suggestion. *Come to me.* Had he intended for

those words to burn into my mind with such command? I doubted it. I think he had sought only to keep me from killing both Regal and myself. And yet now the compulsion was there, festering like an arrowhead. It even infected my sleep with anxiety, so that I dreamed often of going to Verity. It was not that I had given up my ambition of killing Regal; a dozen times a day, I constructed plots in my mind, ways in which I might return to Tradeford and come at him from an unexpected angle. But all such plots began with the reservation, 'after I have gone to Verity'. It had simply become unthinkable to me that there was anything else that had a higher priority.

Several hungry days upriver of Tradeford is a town called Landing. While not nearly as large as Tradeford, it is a healthy settlement. Much good leather is made here, not just from cowhide, but from the tough pigskin of the haragar herds as well. The other main industry of the town seemed to be a fine pottery made from the banks of white clay that front the river. Much that one would expect to be made from wood or glass or metal elsewhere is made from leather or pottery in Landing. Not just shoes and gloves, but hats and other garments are of leather there, as are chair seats and even the roofs and walls of the stalls in the markets. In the shop windows I saw trenchers and candlesticks and even buckets made of finely-glazed pottery, all inscribed or painted in a hundred styles and colours.

I also found, eventually, a small bazaar where one might sell whatever one had to sell and not be asked too many questions. I traded away my fine clothes for the loose trousers and tunic of a working man, plus one pair of stockings. I should have got a better trade, but the man pointed out several brownish stains on the cuffs of the shirt that he believed would not come out. And the leggings were stretched from fitting me so poorly. He could launder them, but he was not sure he could get them back into their proper shape ... I gave it up and was content with the bargain I'd made. At least these clothes had not been worn by a murderer escaping from King Regal's mansion.

In a shop further down the street I parted with the ring, the medallion and the chain for seven silver bits and seven coppers. It was not near the passage fare to join a caravan to the Mountains, but it was the best offer of the six I'd had. The chubby little woman who bought them from me reached out timidly to touch my sleeve as I turned away.

'I'd not ask this, sir, save I can see you're in a desperate way,' she began hesitantly. 'So I pray you, take no offence at my offer.'

‘Which is?’ I asked. I suspected she would offer to buy the sword. I had already decided I would not part with it. I would not get enough money for it to make it worth my while to go unarmed.

She gestured shyly toward my ear. ‘Your freeman’s earring. I’ve a patron who collects such rarities. I believe that one is from the Butran Clan. Am I correct?’ She asked it so hesitantly, as if expecting that at any moment I might fly into a rage.

‘I do not know,’ I told her honestly. ‘It was a gift from a friend. It’s not a thing I’d part with for silver.’

She smiled knowingly, suddenly more confident. ‘Oh, I know we are speaking of golds for such a thing. I would not insult you with an offer of silvers.’

‘Golds?’ I asked incredulously. I reached to touch the small bauble at my ear. ‘For this?’

‘Of course,’ she assented easily, thinking I was feeling for a bid. ‘I can see the workmanship is superior. Such is the reputation of the Butran Clan. There is also the rarity of it. The Butran Clan grants freedom to a slave but rarely. Even this far from Chalced, that is known. Once a man or woman wears the Butran tattoos, well ...’

It took very little to draw her into a learned conversation about Chalced’s slave trade and slave tattoos and freedom rings. It soon became apparent that she desired Burrich’s earring, not for any patron, but for herself. She’d had an ancestor who had won his way out of slavery. She still possessed the freedom ring he’d been granted by his owners as the visible sign that he was no longer a slave. The possession of such an earring, correctly matching the last clan symbol tattooed on a slave’s cheek, was the only way a former slave might move freely in Chalced, let alone leave that country. If a slave was troublesome, it was easily seen from the number of tattoos across the face, tracking the history of ownership. So that a ‘mapface’ was a byword for a slave that had been sold all over Chalced, a troublemaker fit for nothing but galley or mine work. She bade me take the earring off and truly look at it, at the fineness of the linked silver that made up the mesh that entrapped what was definitely a sapphire. ‘You see,’ she explained, ‘a slave had not only to win himself free, but to then earn from his master the cost of such an earring. For without it, his freedom was little more than an extended leash. He could go nowhere without being stopped at the checkpoints, could accept no freeman’s work without the written consent of his former owner.

The former master was no longer liable for his food or shelter, but the former slave had no such freedom from his old owner.'

She offered me three golds without hesitation. That was more than caravan fare; I could have bought a horse, a good horse, and not only joined a caravan but travelled in comfort on that. Instead I left her shop before she could try to dissuade me with a higher offer. With a copper I bought a loaf of coarse bread and sat down to eat it near the docks. I wondered a great many things. The earring had probably been Burrich's grandmother's. He had mentioned she had been a slave but had won free of that life. I wondered what the earring had come to mean to him, that he had given it to my father, and what it had meant to my father that he had kept it. Had Patience known any of this when she had passed it on to me?

I am human. I tempted myself with her offer of golds. I reflected that if Burrich knew of my situation, he would tell me to go ahead and sell it, that my life and safety were worth more to him than an earring of silver and sapphire. I could get a horse and go to the Mountains and find Verity and put an end to the constant nagging of his Skill-order that was like an itch I could not scratch.

I stared out over the river and finally confronted the enormous journey before me. From here I must journey through near desert to get to Blue Lake. I had no idea how I would cross Blue Lake itself. On the other side, forest trails wound through the foothills up into the rugged lands of the Mountain Kingdom. To Jhaampe the capital city I must go, to somehow obtain a copy of the map Verity had used. It had been based on old writings in the Jhaampe library; perhaps the original was still there. Only that map could lead me to Verity somewhere in the unknown territory beyond the Mountain Kingdom. I would need every coin, every resource I could command.

But despite all that, I decided to keep the earring. Not for what it meant to Burrich, but what it had come to mean to me. It was my last physical link to my past, to who I had been, to the man who had raised me, even to the father who had once worn it. It was oddly difficult to bring myself to do what I knew was wise. I reached up and undid the tiny catch that secured the earring to my ear. I still had the scraps of silk from my masquerade, and I used the smallest one to wrap the earring well and put it inside my belt pouch. The trader woman had been too interested in it and marked its appearance too well. If Regal did decide to send seekers after me, that earring would be one of the ways I'd be described.

Afterwards I walked about the city, listening to folk talk and trying to learn what I needed to know without asking questions. I loitered in the marketplace, wandering from stall to stall idly. I allotted myself the lavish sum of four coppers, and spent them on what seemed exotic luxuries: a small bag of tea herbs, dried fruit, a piece of looking glass, a small cooking pot and a cup. I asked at several herb stalls for elfbark, but either they did not know it or they knew it by another name in Farrow. I told myself it was all right, for I did not expect to have any need for its restorative powers. I hoped I was right. Instead I dubiously purchased something called sunskirt seeds, which I was assured would revive a man to wakefulness no matter how weary he might be.

I found a rag woman who let me go through her cart for two more coppers. I found a smelly but serviceable cloak and some leggings that promised to be as itchy as they were warm. I traded her my remaining scraps of yellow silk for a head kerchief, and with many leering remarks she showed me how to tie it about my head. I did as I had done before, making the cloak into a bundle to carry my things, and then went down to the slaughteryards east of town.

I had never encountered such a stench as I found there. There was pen after pen after pen of animals, veritable mountains of manure, the smell of blood and offal from the slaughtersheds and the harsh stinks of the tannery pits. As if the assault on my nose was not enough, the air was likewise filled with the bawling of cattle, the squealing of haragars, the buzzing of the blowflies and the shouts of the folk moving the animals from pen to pen or dragging them off to slaughter. Steel myself as I would, I could not insulate myself from the blind misery and panic of the waiting animals. They had no clear knowledge of what awaited them, but the smell of the fresh blood and the cries of the other beasts awoke in some of them a terror equivalent to what I had felt as I sprawled on the dungeon floor. Yet here I must be, for this was where the caravans ended, and also where some began. Folk who had driven animals here to sell would most likely be returning. Most would be buying other trade goods to take back with them, so as not to waste a trip. I had hopes of finding some sort of work with one of them that would gain me the companionship of a caravan at least as far as Blue Lake.

I soon found I was not the only one with such hopes. There was a rag-tag hiring fair in a space between two taverns that fronted on the holding pens. Some of the folk there were herders who had come from Blue Lake

with one herd, stayed in Landing to spend their earnings, and now, out of coin and far from home, were looking for passage back. For some of them, that was the pattern of their lives as drovers. There were a few youngsters there, obviously looking for adventure and travel and a chance to strike out on their own. And there were those who were obviously the dregs of the town, folk who could get no steady work, or had not the character to live in one place for long. I did not blend very well with any group, but I ended up standing with the drovers.

My tale was that my mother had recently died and turned over her estates to my older sister, who had little use for me. And so I had set out to travel to my uncle, who lived past Blue Lake, but my coin had run out before I had reached there. No, I'd not been a drover before, but we'd been wealthy enough to have horses, cattle and sheep, and I knew the basic care of them and, so some said, 'had a way' with dumb beasts.

I was not hired that day. Few were, and night found most of us bedding down right where we had stood all day. A baker's apprentice came among us with a tray of left-over wares, and I parted with another copper for a long loaf of dark bread studded with seeds. I shared it with a stout fellow whose pale hair kept creeping out of his kerchief and over his face. In return, Creece offered me some dried meat, a drink of the most appalling wine I'd ever tasted, and a great deal of gossip. He was a talker, one of those men who take the most extreme stance on any topic and have, not conversations, but arguments with their fellows. As I had little to say, Creece soon needled the other folk about us into a contentious discussion of the current politics in Farrow. Someone kindled a small fire, more for light than any need for warmth, and several bottles were passed about. I lay back, my head pillowed on my bundle and pretended to be dozing as I listened.

There was no mention of the Red Ships, no talk at all of the war that raged along the coast. I understood abruptly how much these folk would resent being taxed for troops to protect a coast they'd never even seen, for warships to sail an ocean they could not even imagine. The arid plains between Landing and Blue Lake were their ocean, and these drovers the sailors who travelled on it. The Six Duchies were not by nature six regions of land bound into a whole, but were a kingdom only because a strong line of rulers had fenced them together with a common boundary and decreed them to be one. Should all of the Coastal Duchies fall to the Red Ships, it would mean little for these folk here. There would still be cattle to herd, and

loathsome wine to drink, there would still be grass and the river and the dusty streets. Inevitably I must wonder what right we had to force these folk to pay for a war so far from their homes. Tilt and Farrow had been conquered and added to the duchies; they had not come to us asking for military protection or the benefits of trade. Not that they hadn't prospered, freed of all their petty inland herdlords and given an eager market for their beef and leather and rope. How much sailcloth, how many coils of good hemp rope had they sold before they were part of the Six Duchies? But it still seemed a minor return.

I grew weary of such thoughts. The only constant to their conversation was complaint about the trade embargo with the Mountains. I had begun to doze off when my ears pricked up to the words, 'Pocked Man'. I opened my eyes and lifted my head slightly.

Someone had mentioned him in the traditional way, as the harbinger of disaster, laughingly saying that Hencil's sheep had all seen him, for they were dying in their pen before the poor man could even sell them. I frowned to myself at the thought of disease in such close quarters, but another man laughed and said that King Regal had decreed it was no longer bad luck to see the Pocked Man, but the greatest good that could befall one. 'If I saw that old beggar, I'd not blanch and flee, but tackle him and take him to the King himself. He's offered one hundred golds to any man can bring him the Pocked Man from Buck.'

'Was fifty, only fifty golds, not a hundred,' Creece interrupted jeeringly. He took another drink from his bottle. 'What a story, a hundred golds for a grey old man!'

'No, it's a hundred, for him alone, and another hundred for the man-wolf that dogs his heels. I heard it cried anew just this afternoon. They crept into the King's Mansion at Tradeford, and slew some of his guard with Beast magic. Throats torn right out that the wolf might drink the blood. He's the one they want bad now. Dresses like a gentleman, they said, with a ring and a necklace and a silver dangle at his ear. Streak of white in his hair from an old battle with our king, and a scar down his face and a broken nose from the same. Yes, and a nice new sword-slash up his arm is what the King gave him this time.'

There was a low mutter of admiration from several of them at this. Even I had to admire Regal's audacity at claiming that, even as I turned my

face back into my bundle and burrowed down as if to sleep. The gossip continued.

‘Supposed to be Wit-bred, he is, and able to turn himself into a wolf whenever the moon is on him. They sleep by day and prowl by night, they do. It’s said it’s a curse put on the King by that foreigner queen he chased out of Buck for trying to steal the crown. The Pocked Man, it’s told, is a half-spirit, charmed from the body of old King Shrewd by her Mountain magic, and he travels all the roads and streets, anywhere in the Six Duchies, bringing ill wherever he goes, and wearing the face of the old King himself.’

‘Dung and rot,’ Creece said disgustedly. He took another swig himself. But some of the others liked this wild tale and leaned closer, whispering for him to go on, go on.

‘Well, that’s what I heard,’ the storyteller said huffily. ‘That the Pocked Man is Shrewd’s half-spirit, and he can’t know any rest until the Mountain queen that poisoned him is in her grave as well.’

‘So, if the Pocked Man is Shrewd’s ghost, why is King Regal offering a hundred golds reward for him?’ Creece asked sourly.

‘Not his ghost. His half-spirit. He stole part of the King’s spirit as he was dying, and King Shrewd can know no rest until the Pocked Man is dead so the King’s spirit can be rejoined. And some say,’ and he dropped his voice lower, ‘that the Bastard was not killed well enough, that he walks again as a man-wolf. He and the Pocked Man seek vengeance against King Regal, to destroy the throne he could not steal. For he was in league to be king to the Vixen’s queen once they’d done away with Shrewd.’

It was the right sort of night for such a tale. The moon was swollen and orange and riding low in the sky, while the wind brought us the mournful lowing and shifting of the cattle in their pens mixed with the stench of rotting blood and tanning hides. High tattered clouds drifted from time to time across the face of the moon. The storyteller’s words put a shiver up my back, probably for a different reason than he thought. I kept waiting for someone to nudge me with a foot, or cry out, ‘Hey, let’s have a better look at him.’ No one did. The tone of the man’s tale had them looking for wolf eyes in the shadows, not for a weary workman sleeping in their midst. Nonetheless, my heart was thudding in my chest as I looked back down my trail. The tailor where I’d traded clothes would recognize that description. Possibly the earring woman. Even the old rag woman who had helped me tie the kerchief over my hair. Some might not want to come forward, some

might want to avoid dealing with the King's guards. Some would, though. I should behave as if they all would.

The speaker was going on, embroidering his tale of Kettricken's evil ambitions and how she had lain with me to conceive a child we could use to claim the throne. There was loathing in the storyteller's voice as he spoke of Kettricken, and no one scoffed at his words. Even Creece at my side was acquiescent, as if these bizarre plots were common knowledge. Confirming my worst fears, Creece spoke up suddenly.

'You tell it like it's all new, but all knew her big belly came not from Verity but from the Wit-Bastard. Had Regal not driven off the Mountain whore, we would eventually have had one like the Piebald Prince in line for the throne.'

There was a low murmur of assent to this. I closed my eyes and lay back as if bored, hoping that my stillness and lowered lids could conceal the rage that threatened to consume me. I reached up to tug my kerchief more snugly about my hair. What could be Regal's purpose in letting such evil gossip be noised about? For I knew this kind of poison must come from him. I did not trust my voice to ask any questions, nor did I wish to appear ignorant of what was evidently common knowledge. So I lay still and listened with savage interest. I gathered that all knew Kettricken had returned to the Mountains. The freshness of the contempt they had for her suggested to me that this was recent news. There was muttering too that it was the fault of the Mountain witch that the passes were closed to honest Tilth and Farrow traders. One man even ventured to say that now that trade with the coast was shut down, the Mountains saw a chance to fence Farrow and Tilth in and force them to come to terms or lose all trade routes. One man recounted that even a simple caravan escorted by Six Duchies men in Regal's own colours had been turned back from the Mountain border.

To me, such talk was obviously stupid. The Mountains needed the trade with Farrow and Tilth. Grain was more important to the Mountain folk than the lumber and furs of the Mountains to these lowlanders. Such free trade had been openly admitted as a reason for wedding Kettricken to Verity. Even if Kettricken had fled back to the Mountains, I knew her well enough to be sure she would not support any cutting off of trade between her folk and the Six Duchies. She was too bonded to both groups, so intent on being Sacrifice for all of them. If there were a trade embargo as I had heard, I was sure it

had begun with Regal. But the men about me grumbled on about the Mountain witch and her vendetta against the King.

Was Regal fomenting a war with the Mountains? Had he been attempting to send armed troops there under the guise of escorts for traders? It was a foolish idea. Long ago my father had been sent to the Mountains to formalize boundaries and trade agreements with them, marking the end of long years of border skirmishes and raids. Those years of battle had taught King Shrewd that no one was going to take and hold the Mountain Kingdom passes and trails by force. Unwillingly I followed that thought. Regal had been the one to suggest Ketricken as a bride for Verity. He had done all the courtier's work of wooing her for his brother. Then, as the time for the wedding drew near, he had attempted to kill Verity, with the aim of securing the princess as his own bride. He had failed, and his plots and plans had been revealed to only a few. The chance for him to claim Princess Ketricken as his own, and all that went with her, such as her eventual inheritance of the Mountain crown, had slipped through his fingers. I recalled some talk I had once heard between Regal and the traitorous Galen. They had seemed to think that Tilth and Farrow would be best secured if they could control the Mountain ranges and passes that backed them. Did Regal now think to take by force what he had once hoped to claim by marriage? Did he think he could rally enough ill will against Ketricken to make his followers believe they were waging a just war, one of vengeance against a Mountain witch, one to keep open key trade routes?

Regal, I reflected, was capable of believing anything he wished to believe. In the depths of his cups, head wreathed with his smokes, I did not doubt that he now believed his own wild tales. A hundred golds for Chade, and another hundred for me. I knew well enough what I had done lately to merit such a head-price, but I wondered keenly just what Chade had been up to. In all my years with Chade, he had always worked unnamed and unseen. He still had no name, but his pocked skin and resemblance to his half-brother were known now. That meant he had been seen somewhere, by someone. I hoped he was well and safe this night wherever he was. A part of me yearned to turn back, to return to Buck and track him down. As if somehow I could keep him safe.

Come to me.

No matter what I longed to do, no matter what I felt, I knew that first I would go to Verity. I promised myself that over and over and was finally

able to drop off into a wary doze. I dreamed, but they were pale dreams, barely touched by the Skill, shifting and turning as if blown by the autumn winds. My mind seemed to have caught up and jumbled together thoughts of every person I missed. I dreamed of Chade taking tea with Patience and Lacey. He wore a robe of red silk patterned over with stars, cut in a very old style, and he smiled charmingly at the women over his cup and brought laughter even to Patience's eyes, although she looked strangely worn and weary. I then dreamed of Molly peeping out of a cottage door while Burrich stood outside it, pulling his cloak tight against the wind and telling her not to worry, he'd not be gone that long and any heavy chores could keep until he returned, that she should stay within doors and have only a care for herself. Even of Celerity did I dream, that she had taken shelter in the fabled ice caves of the Hungry Glacier in Bearns, and hid there with what troops she could still rally and many of her folk made homeless by the Raider wars. I dreamed she tended Faith, who lay suffering with a fever and a festering arrow wound in her belly. I dreamed finally of the Fool, his white face turned to ivory as he sat before a hearth and stared into the flames. There was no hope left in his face, and I felt that I was within the flames, looking deeply into his eyes. Somewhere nearby and yet not very near, Kettricken was weeping inconsolably. My dreams withered in my mind, and then I dreamed of wolves hunting, hunting, running down a buck, but they were wild wolves, and if my wolf was among them, he was theirs and mine no longer.

I awoke with a headache and a crick in my back from a stone I'd slept on. The sun had only begun to crack the sky, but I rose anyway, to go to a well and draw water for washing, and to drink as much as I could hold. Burrich had once told me that drinking a lot of water was a good way to stave off hunger. It was a theory I'd have to test today. I put an edge on my knife, considered shaving, then decided against it. Better to let my beard grow over the scar as swiftly as possible. I rubbed reluctantly at the coarse growth that already irritated me. I went back to where the others still slept.

They were just beginning to stir when a bulky little man appeared, to call shrilly that he would hire a man to help move his sheep from one pen to another. It was only a morning's work, if that, and most of the men shook their heads, wishing to remain where they might be hired for a drover's trip to Blue Lake. He almost pleaded, saying he must move the sheep through the city streets, hence he needed to get it done before the day's common

traffic began. Finally, he offered to include breakfast, and I really think that was why I nodded to him and followed him. His name was Damon and he talked the whole time we walked, fluttering his hands about, explaining needlessly to me just how he wanted these sheep handled. They were good stock, very good stock, and he didn't want them injured or even flustered. Calmly, slowly, that was the best way to move sheep. I nodded wordlessly to his worrying and followed him to a pen far down the slaughter street.

It soon became apparent why he was so anxious to move his sheep. The next pen must have belonged to the luckless Hencil. A few sheep still baahed in that pen, but most of them were down, dead or dying of flux. The stench of their sickness added a new foul note to the other smells in the air. Some men were there, taking the skins off the dead animals to salvage what they could from the flock. They were making bloody, messy work of it, leaving the skinned dead animals right there in the pen with the dying ones. It reminded me in some gruesome way of a battlefield, with looters moving among the fallen. I turned my eyes from the sight and helped Damon bunch up his sheep.

Trying to use the Wit on sheep is almost a waste of time. They are flighty of thought. Even those ones who appear most placid are so because they have forgotten what they were thinking about. The worst of them are capable of an inordinate amount of wariness, becoming suspicious of the simplest act. The only way to deal with them is much as herd dogs do. Convince them they have had a good idea about where they wish to go, and encourage them in it. I amused myself briefly by considering how Nighteyes would have bunched up and moved these woolly fools, but my even thinking of a wolf caused a few of them to halt in their tracks suddenly and glance about wildly. I suggested to them they should follow the others before they were lost, and they started as if surprised at the notion, then crowded in amongst the rest of the sheep.

Damon had given me a general idea of where we were going, and a long stick. I worked the back and sides of the flock, running and soon panting like a dog, while he led the way and kept the flock from scattering at every intersection. He took us to an area on the outskirts of town, and we put the sheep into one of the ramshackle pens there. Another pen held a very fine red bull, while there were six horses in yet another. After we had caught our breath, he explained that tomorrow a caravan would be forming up here to travel to Blue Lake. He had bought these sheep just yesterday, and

intended to take them to his home there to add to his flocks. I asked him if he might want another hand to herd the sheep to Blue Lake, and he gave me a considering look but no answer.

He was as good as his word about breakfast. We had porridge and milk, plain fare that tasted wonderfully good to me. It was served to us by a woman who lived in a house near the holding pens and made her living keeping watch over the animals penned there and providing meals and sometimes beds for those in charge of them. After we had eaten, Damon laboriously explained to me that yes, he was in need of an extra hand, possibly two, for the trip, but that he judged by the cut of my clothes that I knew little of the type of work I was seeking. He'd taken me on this morning because I was the only one who looked really awake and eager for the work. I told him my story of my heartless sister, and assured him that I was familiar with handling sheep, horses or cattle. After much dithering and druthering, he hired me. His terms were that he would provide my food for the journey, and at the end of it would pay me ten silver bits. He told me to run and fetch my things and say my goodbyes, but to be certain to be back here by the evening, or he would hire another to take my place.

'I have nothing to fetch, and no one to bid goodbye to,' I told him. It would not be wise to go back to town, not after what I'd heard last night. I wished the caravan were leaving right now.

For an instant he looked shocked, but then decided he was well pleased. 'Well, I have both to attend to, so I shall leave you here to watch over the sheep. They'll need water hauled to them; that was one reason I was leaving them in the town pens, they've a pump there. But I didn't like to have them so near sick sheep. You haul them water, and I'll send a man out with a cart of hay for them. See you give them a good feed. Now, mind, I'll judge how we are to go on together by how you begin with me ...' And so on and so on he went, telling me to the last detail how he wished the animals watered, and how many separate piles of feed to make to be sure each animal got a share. I suppose it was to be expected; I did not look like a shepherd. It made me miss Burch, and his calm assumption that I would know my business and do it. As he was turning to go, he suddenly turned back. 'And your name, lad?' he called to me.

'Tom,' I said after an instant's hesitation. Patience had thought once to call me that, before I had accepted the name FitzChivalry. The reflection called to mind something Regal had once flung at me. 'You have to but

scratch yourself to find Nameless the dog-boy,' he'd sneered. I doubted he would think Tom the shepherd much above that.

There was a dug well, not very near the pens, with a very long rope to its bucket. By working constantly, I finally managed to get the water-trough filled. Actually, I filled it several times before the sheep allowed it to remain filled. About then, a cart with hay arrived, and I carefully created four separate piles of feed in the corners of the pen. It was another exercise in frustration, as the sheep bunched and fed off each pile as I created it. It was only after all but the weakest were satiated that I could finally establish a pile in each corner.

I whiled away the afternoon with drawing more water. The woman gave me the use of a large kettle to heat it, and a private place where I could wash the worst of the road from my body. My arm was healing well. Not bad for a deadly injury, I told myself, and hoped Chade would never hear of my blundering. How he would laugh at me. When I was clean, I fetched more water to heat, this for washing out the clothes I'd bought from the rag woman. I discovered the cloak was actually a much lighter grey than I had thought it. I could not get all the smell out of it, but by the time I hung it to dry, it smelled more of wet wool and less of its previous owner.

Damon had left me no provision for food, but the woman offered to feed me if I would haul the water for the bull and the horses, as it was a chore she'd grown much weary of doing for the last four days. So I did, and earned myself a dinner of stew and biscuits and a mug of ale to wash it all down. Afterwards I checked on my sheep. Finding them all placid, habit made me turn to the bull and the horses. I stood leaning on the fence, watching the animals, wondering how it would be if this were all there was to my life. It made me realize that it would not have been bad, not if there'd been a woman like Molly waiting for me to come home at night. A rangy white mare came over to rub her nose up my shirt and beg to be scratched. I petted her and found her missing a freckled farm-girl who had brought her carrots and called her Princess.

I wondered if anyone, anywhere, got to live the life he'd wanted. Perhaps Nighteyes finally had. I truly hoped so. I wished him well, but was selfish enough to hope that sometimes he'd miss me. Sullenly I wondered if perhaps that was why Verity had not come back. Maybe he'd just got sick of the whole business of crowns and thrones and kicked over all his traces. But even as I thought it, I knew it was not so. Not that one. He'd gone to the

Mountains to rally the Elderlings to our aid. And if he'd failed at that task, then he'd think of another way. And whatever it was, he'd called me to help him do it.

ELEVEN

Shepherd

Chade Fallstar, adviser to King Shrewd, was a loyal servant of the Farseer throne. Few knew of his services during the years he served King Shrewd. This did not displease him for he was not a man who sought glory. Rather he was devoted to the Farseer reign with a loyalty that surpassed his loyalty to himself or any other consideration most men have. He took most seriously his vow to the royal family. With the passing of King Shrewd, he pursued his vow to see that the crown followed the true line of succession. For this reason alone, he was sought after as an outlaw, for he openly challenged Regal's claim to be King of the Six Duchies. In missives he sent to each of the dukes as well as to Prince Regal, he revealed himself after years of silence, declaring himself a loyal follower of King Verity and vowing he would follow no other until he was shown proof of the King's death. Prince Regal declared him a rebel and a traitor and offered reward for his capture and death. Chade Fallstar evaded him by many clever artifices and continued to rally the Coastal dukes to the belief that their king was not dead and would return to lead them to victory over the Red Ships. Bereft of any hope of aid from 'King' Regal, many of the lesser nobles clung to these rumours. Songs began to be sung, and even the common folk spoke with hope that their Skilled King would return to save them, with the legendary Elderlings riding at his back.

By late afternoon, folk began to gather for the caravan. One woman owned the bull and horses. She and her husband arrived in a wagon drawn by a brace of oxen. They built their own fire, cooked their own food and seemed content with their own company. My new master returned later, a bit tipsy, and goggled at the sheep to be sure I'd fed and watered them. He arrived in a high-wheeled cart drawn by a sturdy pony, one he immediately entrusted to my care. He'd hired another man, he told me, one Creece. I should watch for him to come and show him where the sheep were. He then disappeared into a room to sleep. I sighed to myself to think of a long journey with Creece's tongue and abrasive way to speed it, but did not

complain. Instead I busied myself caring for the pony, a willing little mare named Drum.

Next to arrive was company of a merrier sort. They were a troupe of puppeteers with a gaily-painted wagon drawn by a team of dappled horses. There was a window in one side of the wagon that could be let down for puppet-shows, and an awning that could be unrolled from the side to roof a stage when they were using the larger marionettes. The master puppeteer was named Dell. He had three apprentices and one journey puppeteer, as well as a minstrel who had joined them for the trip. They did not make their own fire, but proceeded to liven up the woman's little house with song and the clacking of marionettes and a number of mugs of ale.

Two teamsters came next, with two wagons full of carefully-packed crockery, and then finally the caravan master and his four helpers. These were the ones who would do more than guide us. The very look of their leader inspired confidence. Madge was a stoutly-built woman, her slate-grey hair constrained from her face by a band of beaded leather. Two of her help seemed to be a daughter and a son. They knew the waterholes, clean and foul, would defend us from bandits, carried extra food and water, and had agreements with nomads whose pasturing territory we'd be passing through. That last was as important as any of the rest, for the nomads did not welcome folk who passed through their lands with grazing animals to eat the feed their own flocks needed. Madge called us together that evening, to inform us of this, and to remind us that they would keep order within our group as well. No theft or trouble-making would be tolerated, the pace set would be one all could sustain, the caravan master would handle all dealings at the watering places and with the nomads and all must agree to abide by the decisions of the caravan master as law. I murmured my assent along with the others. Madge and her help then checked the wagons to be sure each was fit for travel, that the teams were sound and that there were adequate water and food supplies for emergencies. We would travel a zig-zag course from watering place to watering place. Madge's wagon carried several oak casks for water, but she insisted every private wagon and team carry some for their own needs.

Creece arrived with the setting sun, after Damon had already gone back to his room and bed. I dutifully showed him the sheep, and then listened to his grumbling that Damon had not provided us with a room to sleep in. It was a clear, warm night with only a bit of wind, so I saw little to complain

about. I did not say so, but let him mutter and complain until he was weary of it. I slept just outside the sheep pen, on guard lest any predators come near, but Creece wandered off to annoy the puppeteers with his dour nature and extensive opinions.

I don't know how long I truly slept. My dreams parted like curtains blown by a wind. I came alert to a voice whispering my name. It seemed to come from far away, but as I listened, I was compelled inexorably to it as if summoned by a charm. Like an errant moth, I became aware of candle flames and was drawn toward them. Four candles burned brightly on a rough wooden table and their mingling scents sweetened the air. The two tall tapers gave off the scent of bayberry. Two smaller ones burned before them giving off a sweet spring scent. Violets, I thought, and something else. A woman leaned forward over them, breathing deeply of the rising perfume. Her eyes were closed, her face misted with sweat. Molly. She spoke my name again.

'Fitz, Fitz. How could you die and leave me like this? It wasn't supposed to be this way, you were supposed to come after me, you were supposed to find me so I could forgive you. You should have lit these candles for me. I wasn't supposed to be alone for this.'

The words were interrupted by a great gasp, as of a wrenching pain, and with it a wave of fear, frantically fought down. 'It's going to be all right,' Molly whispered to herself. 'It's going to be all right. It's supposed to be like this. I think.'

Even within the Skill dream, my heart stood still. I looked down at Molly as she stood near the hearth in a small hut. Outside, an autumn storm was raging. She grasped the edge of a table and half crouched, half leaned over it. She wore only a nightrobe, and her hair was slick with sweat. As I watched aghast, she took another great gulping breath, and then cried out, not a scream, but a thin caw of a sound as if that were all she had strength for. After a minute she straightened a bit and put her hands softly on the top of her belly. I felt dizzied at the size of it. It was so distended, she looked pregnant.

She was pregnant.

If it were possible to lose consciousness when one is asleep, I think I would have done so. Instead my mind reeled suddenly, reordering every word she had said to me when we had parted, recalling the day when she had asked me what I would do, if she had been carrying my child. The baby was the one she had spoken of, the one she had left me for, the one she would put

ahead of every other in her life. Not another man. Our child. She'd left to protect our child. And she hadn't told me because she was afraid I wouldn't go with her. Better not to ask than to ask and be refused.

And she had been right. I wouldn't have gone. There had been too much happening at Buckkeep, too pressing the duties to my king. She'd been right to abandon me. It was so like Molly to make the leaving and the facing this alone her own choice. Stupid, but so like her I wanted to hug her. I wanted to shake her.

She clutched the table again suddenly, her eyes going wide, voiceless now with the force that moved through her.

She was alone. She believed I was dead. And she was having the child alone, in that tiny windswept hut somewhere.

I reached for her, crying, *Molly, Molly*, but she was focused inwards on herself now, listening only to her own body. I suddenly knew Verity's frustration those times when he could not make me hear him and most desperately needed to reach me.

The door gusted open suddenly, admitting blowing storm winds into the hut and a blast of cold rain with it. She lifted her eyes, panting, to stare at it. 'Burrich?' she called breathlessly. Her voice was full of hope.

Again I felt a wave of astonishment, but it was drowned by her gratitude and relief when his dark face peered suddenly around the door frame. 'It's only me, soaked through. I couldn't get you any dried apples, no matter what I offered. The town stores are bare. I hope the flour didn't get wet. I'd have been back sooner, but this storm ...' He was coming in as he spoke, a man coming home from town, a carry-sack over his shoulder. Water streamed down his face and dripped from his cloak.

'It's time, it's now,' Molly told him frantically.

Burrich dropped his sack as he dragged the door shut and latched it. 'What?' he asked her as he wiped rain from his eyes and pushed the wet hair back from his face.

'The baby's coming.' She sounded oddly calm now.

He looked at her blankly for an instant. Then he spoke firmly. 'No. We counted, you counted. It can't be coming now.' Abruptly he sounded almost angry, he was so desperate to be right. 'Another fifteen days, maybe longer. The midwife, I talked to her today and arranged everything, she said she'd come to see you in a few days ...'

His words died away as Molly gripped the table's edge again. Her lips drew back from her teeth as she strained. Burrich stood like a man transfixed. He went as pale as I'd ever seen him. 'Shall I go back to the village and get her?' he asked in a small voice.

There was the sound of water pattering on the rough floorboards. After an eternity, Molly caught a breath. 'I don't think there's time.'

Still he stood as if frozen, his cloak dripping water onto the floor. He came no further into the room, stood still as if she were an unpredictable animal. 'Shouldn't you be lying down?' he asked uncertainly.

'I tried that. It really hurts if I'm lying down and a pain comes. It made me scream.'

He was nodding like a puppet. 'Then you should stand up, I suppose. Of course.' He didn't move.

She looked up at him pleadingly. 'It can't be that different,' she panted, 'from a foal or a calf ...'

His eyes went so wide I could see the whites all round them. He shook his head fiercely, mutely.

'But Burrich ... there's no one else to help me. And I'm ...' Her words were suddenly torn away from her in a sort of cry. She leaned forward on the table, her legs folding so her forehead rested on the edge of it. She made a low sound, full of fear as well as pain.

Her fear broke through to him. He gave his head a tiny quick shake, a man awakening. 'No. You're right, it can't be that different. Can't be. I've done this hundreds of times. Just the same, I'm sure of it. All right. Now. Let's see. It's going to be all right, let me just ... uh.' He tore off his cloak and let it drop to the floor. He hastily pushed his wet hair back from his face, then came to kneel beside her. 'I'm going to touch you,' he warned her, and I saw her bowed head give a small bob of agreement.

Then his sure hands were on her belly, stroking down gently but firmly as I'd seen him do when a mare was having a bad time and he wished to hasten things for her. 'Not long now, not much more,' he told her. 'It's really dropped.' He was suddenly confident, and I felt Molly take heart from his tone. He kept his hands on her as another contraction took her. 'That's good, that's right.' I'd heard him say those same comforting words a hundred times in the stalls of Buckkeep. Between pains, he steadied her with his hands, talking all the while softly, calling her his good girl, his steady girl, his fine girl that was going to drop a fine baby. I doubt either of them heard the sense

of what he said. It was all the tone of his voice. He rose once to get a blanket and folded it on the floor beside him. He said no awkward words as he lifted Molly's nightdress out of the way, but only spoke softly, encouragingly, as Molly clenched the table's edge. I could see the ripple of muscle, and then she cried out suddenly and Burrich was saying, 'Keep going, keep going, here we are, here we are, keep going, that's fine, and what do we have here, who's this?'

Then the child was in his grasp, head in one cupped, callused hand, his other supporting the tiny, curled body and Burrich sat down suddenly on the floor, looking as amazed as if he had never seen anything born before. The women's talk I had overheard had made me expect hours of screaming and pools of blood. But there was little blood on the babe that looked up at Burrich with calm blue eyes. The greyish cord coiling from the belly looked large and thick compared to the tiny hands and feet. All was silence save for Molly's panting.

Then, 'Is he all right?' Molly demanded. Her voice shook. 'Is something wrong? Why doesn't he cry?'

'She's fine,' Burrich said softly. 'She's fine. And as beautiful as she is, what would she have to cry about?' He was silent for a long time, a man transfixed. Finally he reluctantly set her gently aside on the blanket, turned a corner of it up to cover her. 'You've a bit more work to do here, girl, before we're done,' he told Molly gruffly.

But it was not long before he had Molly seated in a chair by the fire, a blanket about her to keep her from taking a chill. He hesitated a moment, then cut the cord with his belt knife before wrapping the child in a clean cloth and taking her to Molly. Molly immediately unwrapped her. While Burrich was tidying the room, Molly examined every inch of her, exclaiming over her sleek black hair, the tiny fingers and toes with their perfect nails, the delicacy of her ears. Then Burrich did the same while he held the baby and turned his back so that Molly might change into a nightgown that wasn't soaked through with sweat. He studied her with an intentness I'd never seen him give to a foal or a pup. 'You're going to have Chivalry's brow,' he told the babe softly. He smiled at her and touched her cheek with one finger. She turned her head toward the touch.

When Molly returned to her seat by the fire, he handed the child back to her, but crouched on the floor beside the chair as Molly put the babe to her breast. It took the baby a few tries to find and hold the nipple, but when she

finally suckled, Burrich heaved such a sigh that I knew he had been holding his breath for fear she would not nurse. Molly had eyes only for the child, but I marked how Burrich lifted his hands to rub at his face and eyes, and that those hands trembled. He smiled as I had never seen him do before.

Molly lifted her gaze to him, her face like a sunrise. 'Would you make me a cup of tea, please?' she softly asked him, and Burrich nodded, grinning like a simpleton.

I came out of my dream hours before dawn, not knowing at first when I passed from thoughtfulness to wakefulness. I became aware my eyes were open and I was staring at the moon. It would be impossible to describe my feelings at that time. But slowly my thoughts took shape, and I understood the previous Skill dreams I'd had of Burrich. It explained much. I'd been seeing him through Molly's eyes. He'd been there, all this time, with Molly, taking care of her. She was the friend he'd gone to help, the woman who could use a man's strength for a bit. He'd been there with her, while I had been alone. I felt a sudden rising of anger that he had not come to me and told me that she carried my child. It was quickly quenched as I suddenly realized that perhaps he'd tried. Something had brought him back to the cabin that day. I wondered again what he had thought when he'd found it abandoned. That all his worst fears for me had come true? That I'd gone feral, never to return?

But I would return. Like a door swinging open, I suddenly understood that I could do that. Nothing truly stood between Molly and me. There was no other man in her life, only our child. I grinned suddenly to myself. I would not let so small a thing as my death come between us. What was death, compared to a child's life shared? I would go to her, and explain, I'd tell her everything this time, and this time she would understand, and she'd forgive me, because there would never be any other secrets between us.

I didn't hesitate. I sat up in the darkness, picked up my bundle that I'd been using as a pillow, and set out. Downriver was so much easier than up. I had a few silvers, I'd get onto a boat somehow, and when they ran out, I'd work my passage. The Vin was a slow river, but once I was past Turlake, the Buck River would rush me along in its strong current. I was going back. Home, to Molly and our daughter.

Come to me.

I halted. It was not Verity Skilling to me. I knew that. This came from within me, the mark left by that sudden and powerful Skilling. I was certain

that if he knew why I had to go home, he'd tell me to hurry, not to worry about him, that he'd be fine. It would be all right. All I had to do was keep walking.

One step after another down a moonlit road. With each footfall, with each beat of my heart, I heard words in my mind. *Come to me. Come to me.* I can't, I pleaded. I won't, I defied them. I kept walking. I tried to think only of Molly, only of my tiny daughter. She would need a name. Would Molly have named her before I got there?

Come to me.

We'd need to get married right away. Find some local Witnesser in some small village. Burrich would vouch that I was a foundling, with no parentage for the Witnesser to memorize. I'd say my name was Newboy. An odd name, but I'd heard odder, and I could live with it the rest of my life. Names, once so important to me, no longer mattered. They could call me Horsedung, as long as I could live with Molly and my daughter.

Come to me.

I'd need to get work of some kind, any kind. I abruptly decided that the silvers in my pouch were far too important to spend, that I'd have to work for my entire passage home. And once I was there, what could I do to earn a living? What was I fit for? I pushed the thought aside angrily. I'd find something, I'd find a way. I'd be a good husband, a good father. They would want for nothing.

Come to me.

My steps had gradually slowed. Now I stood upon a small rise, looking down the road before me. Lights still burned in the river-town below. I had to go down there and find a barge heading downriver, willing to take on an unproven hand. That was all. Just keep moving.

I did not then understand why I could not. I took a step, I stumbled, the world swung around me dizzily, and I went to my knees. I could not go back. I had to go on, to Verity. I still do not understand it, so I cannot explain it. I knelt on the rise, looking down at the town, knowing clearly what I wished with all my heart to do. And I could not do it. Nothing held me back, no man lifted a hand or sword to me and bid me turn aside. Only the small insistent voice in my mind, battering at me. *Come to me, come to me, come to me.*

And I could not do otherwise.

I could not tell my heart to stop beating, I could not cease breathing and die. And I could not ignore that summoning. I stood alone in the night,

trapped and suffocating in another man's will for me. A cool-headed portion of myself, said, there, well, you see, that is how it is for them. For Will and the rest of the coterie, Skill-imprinted by Galen to be loyal to Regal. It did not make them forget they had had another king, it did not make them believe what they did was right. They simply had no choice about it any more. And to take it back a generation, that was how it had been for Galen, forced to be so fanatically loyal to my father. Verity had told me that his loyalty was a Skill-imprinting, done by Chivalry when they were all little more than boys. Done in anger against some cruelty Galen had wrought against Verity. The act of an older brother taking revenge on someone who had been mean to his little brother. It had been done to Galen in anger and ignorance, not even knowing fully that such a thing was possible. Verity said Chivalry had regretted it, would have undone it if he had known how. Had Galen ever awakened to what had been done to him? Did that account for his fanatical hatred of me, had it been a passing down to the son of the anger he could not allow himself to feel toward Chivalry, my father?

I tried to get to my feet and failed. I sank slowly to the dirt in the centre of the moonlit road, then sat there hopelessly. It didn't matter. None of it mattered, save that there were my lady and my child, and I could not go to them. Could no more go to them than I could climb the night sky and take down the moon. I gazed afar to the river, shining blackly in the moonlight, rippled like black slate. A river that could carry me home, but would not. Because the fierceness of my will was still not enough to break past that command in my mind. I looked up to the moon. 'Burrich,' I pleaded aloud, as if he could hear me. 'Oh, take care of them, see they come to no harm, guard them as if they were your own. Until I can come to them.'

I do not recall going back to the holding pens, or lying down to sleep. But morning came and when I opened my eyes, that was where I was. I lay, looking up at the blue arch of the sky, hating my life. Creece came to stand between me and the heavens and look down on me.

'You'd better get up,' he told me, and then, peering closer, he observed, 'Your eyes are red. You got a bottle you didn't share?'

'I've got nothing to share with anybody,' I told him succinctly. I rolled to my feet. My head was pounding.

I wondered what Molly would name her. A flower name, probably. Lilac, or something like that. Rose. Marigold. What would I have named her? It didn't matter.

I stopped thinking. For the next few days, I did what I was told. I did it well and thoroughly, distracted by no thoughts of my own. Somewhere inside me, a madman raged in his cell, but I chose not to know of that. Instead I herded sheep. I ate in the morning, I ate in the evening. I lay down at night and I rose in the morning. And I herded sheep. I followed them, in the dust of the wagons and the horses and the sheep themselves, dust that clotted thick on my eyelashes and skin, dust that coated my throat with dryness, and I thought of nothing. I did not need to think to know that every step carried me closer to Verity. I spoke so little that even Creece wearied of my company, for he could not provoke me to argument. I herded the sheep as single-mindedly as the best sheep-dog that ever lived. When I lay down to sleep at night, I did not even dream.

Life went on for the rest of them. The caravan master guided us well and the trip was blessedly uneventful. Our misfortunes were limited to dust, little water, and sparse grazing, and those misfortunes were ones we accepted as part of the road. In the evenings, after the sheep were settled and the meal cooked and eaten, the puppeteers rehearsed. They had three plays and they seemed bent on perfecting all of them before we reached Blue Lake. Some nights it was merely the motions of the puppets and their dialogue, but several times they set up completely, torches, stage and backdrops, the puppeteers dressed in the pure white drapings that signified their invisibility, and went through the entire repertoire of plays. The master was a strict one, very ready with his strap, and he did not spare even his journeyman a lash or two if he thought he deserved it. A single line intoned incorrectly, one flip of a marionette's hand that was not as Master Dell dictated it, and he was amongst his cast, flaying about with the strap. Even if I had been in the mood for amusements, that would have spoiled it for me. So more often I went and sat looking out over the sheep, while the others watched the performances.

The minstrel, a handsome woman named Starling, was often my companion. I doubted that it was from any desire for my company. Rather it was that we were far enough from the camp that she could sit and practise her own songs and harpings, away from the endless rehearsals and the weeping of the corrected apprentices. Perhaps it was that I was from Buck, and could understand what she missed when she spoke quietly of the gulls crying and the blue sky over a sea after a storm. She was a typical Buck woman, dark-haired and dark-eyed, and no taller than my shoulder. She

dressed simply, blue leggings and tunic. There were holes in her ears for earrings, but she wore none, nor were there any rings to her fingers. She would sit not far from me, and run her fingers over her harp-strings and sing. It was good to hear a Buck accent again, and the familiar songs of the Coastal Duchies. Sometimes she talked to me. It was not a conversation. She spoke to herself in the night and I just happened to be within earshot, as some men talk to a favourite dog. So it was that I knew she had been one of the minstrels in a small keep in Buck, one I'd never been to, held by a minor noble whose name I didn't even recognize. Too late to worry about visiting or knowing; the keep and the noble were no more, swept through and burned out by the Red Ships. Starling had survived, but without a place to rest her head or a master to sing for. So she had struck out on her own, resolved to head so far inland that she'd never again see a ship of any colour. I could understand that drive. By walking away she saved Buck for herself, as a memory of how it had been once.

Death had come close enough to her to brush her with its wingtips, and she wasn't going to die as she was, a minor minstrel for a lesser noble. No, somehow she was going to make her name, was going to witness some great event and make a song about it that would be sung down the years. Then she'd be immortal, remembered as long as her song was sung. It seemed to me she would have had a better chance of witnessing such an event if she'd stayed on the coast where the war was, but as if in answer to my unspoken thought, Starling assured me that she was going to witness something that left its witnesses alive. Besides, if you've seen one battle, you've seen them all. She saw nothing especially musical about blood. To that I nodded mutely.

'Ah. I thought you looked more like a man-at-arms than a shepherd. Sheep don't break one's nose, or leave a scar like that down your face.'

'They do if you tumble down a cliff looking for some in a mist,' I told her dourly, and turned my face aside from her.

For a long time, that was as close as I came to having a conversation with anyone.

We journeyed on, moving only as fast as laden wagons and a herd of sheep would permit. The days were remarkably similar. The countryside we passed was remarkably similar. There were a few novelties. Sometimes there were other folk camped at the watering places we came to. At one, there was a tavern of sorts, and here the caravan master delivered some small kegs of

brandy. Once we were followed for half a day by folk on horseback who might have been bandits. But they veered off and left our trail in the afternoon, either bound to a destination of their own, or deciding what we possessed wasn't worth the effort of a raid. Sometimes other folk passed us, messengers and folk travelling on horseback, unslowed by sheep and wagons. Once it was a troop of guards in the Farrow colours, pushing their horses hard as they passed us. I felt an uneasiness as I watched them pass our caravan, as if an animal scrabbled briefly against the walls that shielded my mind. Did a Skilled one ride amongst them, Burl or Carrod, or even Will? I tried to persuade myself it was merely the sight of the gold and brown livery that unnerved me.

On another day we were intercepted by three of the nomadic folk whose grazing territory we were in. They came to us on tough little ponies that wore no more harness than a hackamore. The two grown women and the boy were all blonde with faces baked brown by the sun. The boy's face was tattooed with stripes like a cat. Their arrival occasioned a complete halting of the caravan, while Madge set up a table and cloth and brewed a special tea, which she served to them with candied fruit and barley-sugar cakes. No coin exchanged hands that I saw, only this ceremonial hospitality. I suspected from their manner that Madge was long known to them, and that her son was being groomed to continue this passage arrangement.

But most days were the same plodding routine. We rose, we ate, we walked. We stopped, we ate, we slept. One day I caught myself wondering if Molly would teach our child to make candles and tend bees. What could I teach her? Poisons and strangling techniques, I thought bitterly. No. Her letters and numbers she'd learn from me. She'd still be young enough when I returned for me to teach her that. And all Burrich had ever taught me about horses and dogs. That was the day when I realized I was looking ahead again, was planning for a life after I'd found Verity and somehow taken him safely back to Buck. My baby was just an infant now, I told myself, suckling at Molly's breast and looking about with wide eyes and seeing all new. She was too young to know something was missing, too young to know her father wasn't there. I'd be back with them soon, before she learned to say 'Pa', I'd be there to see her first steps.

That resolve changed something in me. I'd never looked forward to something so much. This was not an assassination that would end in someone's death. No, I looked forward to a life, and imagined teaching her

things, imagined her growing up bright and pretty and loving her father, knowing nothing, ever, of any other life he'd ever led. She wouldn't remember me with a smooth face and a straight nose. She'd only know me as I was now. That was oddly important to me. So I would go to Verity because I had to, because he was my king and I loved him, and because he needed me. But finding him no longer marked the end of my journey, but the beginning. Once I had found Verity, I could turn about and come home to them. For a time, I forgot Regal.

So I thought to myself sometimes, and when I did I walked behind the sheep in their dust and stink and smiled a tightlipped smile behind the kerchief over my face. At other times, when I lay down alone at night, all I could think of was the warmth of a woman and a home and a child of my own. I think I felt every mile that stretched between us. Loneliness was a thing that ate at me then. I longed to know every detail of what was going on. Every night, every moment of quiet was a temptation to reach out with the Skill. But I understood Verity's admonition now. If I Skilled to them, then Regal's coterie could find them as well as me. Regal would not hesitate to use them against me in any way he could imagine. So I hungered for knowledge of them, but dared not attempt to satisfy that hunger.

We came to one village that was almost worthy of the name. It had sprouted up like a fairy ring of mushrooms around a deep-water spring. It had an inn, a tavern and even several stores, all catering to travellers, with a scattering of houses surrounding it. We got there at midday, and Madge declared that we would have a rest, and not move on until the following morning. No one really objected. Once we'd watered our animals, we moved our beasts and wagons to the outskirts of town. The puppeteer decided to take advantage of the situation, and announced in the tavern and inn that his troupe would stage a performance for the whole town, with gratuities cheerfully accepted. Starling had already found a corner of the tavern to call her own and was introducing this Farrow town to some Buck ballads.

I was content to stay with the sheep on the outskirts of the town. I was soon the only one at our encampment. I did not especially mind. The horses' owner had offered me an extra copper if I'd keep an eye on them. They scarcely needed watching. They were hobbled, but even so, all the animals were grateful to stop for a bit and search out whatever grazing they could find. The bull was staked out and likewise occupied with scavenging grass. There was a sort of peace to being still and alone. I was learning to cultivate

an emptiness of spirit. I could now go for long stretches without thinking of anything in particular. It made my endless waiting less painful. I sat on the tail of Damon's cart and stared out over the animals and the gentle undulating of the brush-spotted plain beyond them.

It did not last for long. In the late afternoon, the puppeteer's wagon came rattling into camp. Only Master Dell and the youngest apprentice were in it. The others had stayed in town to drink and talk and generally enjoy themselves. But the shouting of the master soon made it apparent that his youngest apprentice had disgraced herself with forgotten lines and incorrect movements. Her punishment was to stay in camp with the wagon. To this he added several sharp cuts with his strap. Both the snap of the leather and yelps of the girl were clearly audible across camp. I winced at the second one and was on my feet by the third one. I had no clear idea of my intention, and was actually relieved to see the master go striding off away from the wagon and back into town.

The girl wept noisily as she went about the task of unhitching the team and pegging it out. I'd noticed her before in a casual way. She was the youngest of the troupe, no more than sixteen, and seemed most often to be under her master's lash. Not that that was unusual. It was not uncommon for a master to have a lash to keep his apprentices devoted to their tasks. Neither Burrich nor Chade had ever taken a strap to me, but I'd had my share of cuffs and raps, and an occasional boot from Burrich if I wasn't moving fast enough to suit him. The puppeteer was no worse than many masters that I'd seen, and kinder than some. All of his underlings were well-fed and well-clothed. I suppose what irritated me about him was that one snap of his lash never seemed enough for him. It was always three or five or even more when he was in a temper.

The peace of the night was gone. Long after she'd finished staking out the horses, her deep sobbing rent the stillness. After a time I could not stand it. I went to the back of their travelling wagon and rapped on the small door. The weeping paused with a sniff. 'Who is it?' she asked hoarsely.

'Tom the shepherd. Are you all right?'

I'd hoped that she'd say she was and tell me to go away. Instead the door opened after a moment and she stood peering out at me. Blood was dripping from her jaw-line. I saw at a glance what had happened. The end of the strap had curled past her shoulder and the tip had bitten wickedly into her cheek. I didn't doubt that it hurt badly, but I suspected the amount of blood

was scaring her even more. I saw a looking-glass set up on a table behind her and a bloody cloth beside it. For a moment we looked at one another wordlessly. Then, 'He's ruined my face,' she sobbed.

I couldn't think of words to say. Instead I stepped up into the wagon and took her by the shoulders. I sat her down. She'd been using a dry rag to poke at her face. Had she no sense at all? 'Sit still,' I told her tersely. 'And try to be calm. I'll be right back.'

I took her rag and damped it in cool water. I went back in and dabbed the blood away. As I suspected, the cut was not large, but it was bleeding profusely as cuts to the face or scalp often do. I folded the rag into a square and pressed it against her face. 'Hold that there. Press on it a bit, but don't move it. I'll be back.' I looked up to find her eyes fastened to the scar on my cheek as tears brimmed over from her eyes. I added, 'Skin as fair as yours doesn't scar all that easily. Even if it leaves a mark, it won't be large.'

The hugeness of her eyes at my words let me know I'd said exactly the wrong thing. I left the wagon, berating myself for getting involved at all.

I'd lost all my healing herbs and my pot of Burrich's ointment when I had abandoned my things in Tradeford. I'd noticed a flower that looked a bit like a stunted golden-rod in the area where the sheep were grazing, however, and some succulents sort of like bloodroot. So I pulled up one of the succulents, but it smelled wrong, and the juice from the leaves was sticky rather than like jelly. I washed my hands and then looked at the stunted goldenrod. It smelled right. I shrugged. I started out picking just a handful of leaves, but then decided as long as I was at it, I could restock a bit of what I'd lost. It appeared to be the same herb, but growing smaller and more straggly in this dry rocky soil. I spread out my harvest on the tail of the cart and sorted through it. The fatter leaves I left to dry. The smaller tips I crushed between two cleaned stones, and then took the resulting paste on one of the stones to the puppeteer's wagon. The girl looked at it with doubt, but nodded hesitantly when I told her, 'This will stop the bleeding. Soonest closed is smallest scar.'

When she took the rag away from her face, I saw that it had almost stopped bleeding. I smoothed on a fingertip's worth of the woundwort paste anyway. She sat quietly under my touch, and it was suddenly unnerving to recall that I had not touched a woman's face since I'd last seen Molly. This girl had blue eyes and they were wide open and looking up into my face. I looked aside from the earnest gaze. 'There. Now leave it alone. Don't wipe

at it, don't touch it with your fingers, don't wash it. Let the scab form and then do your best to leave that alone.'

'Thank you,' she said in a tiny voice.

'Welcome,' I told her, and turned to leave.

'My name is Tassin,' she said to my back.

'I know. I've heard him roaring it at you,' I said. I started to go down the steps.

'He's an awful man. I hate him! I'd run away if I could.'

It didn't seem like a good time simply to walk away from her. I stepped off the wagon and paused. 'I know it's hard to feel a strap when you're trying hard. But ... that's how it is. If you ran away and had no food, no place to sleep and your clothing all going to rags, that would be worse. Try to do better, so he won't take up the strap.' I believed so little of what I said, I could scarcely form the words. But those words seemed better than to tell her to leave now and run away. She wouldn't survive a day on the open prairie.

'I don't want to do better.' She'd found a spark of spirit, to be defiant. 'I don't want to be a puppeteer at all. Master Dell knew that when he bought my years.'

I edged away back toward my sheep, but she came down the steps and followed after me.

'There was a man I liked in our village. He'd made an offer for me, to be his wife, but had no money just then. He was a farmer, you see, and it was spring. No farmer has money in spring. He told my mother he'd pay a bride-price for me at harvest-time. But my mother said, "If he's poor now with one mouth to feed, he'll only be poorer after he has two. Or more." And then she sold me to the puppeteer, for half what he'd usually pay for an apprentice, because I wasn't willing.'

'They do it differently where I'm from,' I said awkwardly. I couldn't grasp what she was telling me. 'Parents pay a master to take on their child as apprentice, hoping the child can make a better life.'

She smoothed her hair back from her face. It was light brown, with a lot of curl to it. 'I've heard of that. Some do it that way, but most don't. They buy an apprentice, usually a willing one, and if he doesn't work out, then they can sell him for a drudge. Then you're not much better than a slave for six years.' She sniffed. 'Some say it makes an apprentice try harder, to know

he may end up doing scut work in a kitchen or pumping a bellows in a smithy for six years if his master isn't pleased.'

'Well. It sounds to me like you'd better learn to like puppets,' I said lamely. I sat on the tail of my master's cart and looked out over my flock. She sat down next to me.

'Or hope someone buys me from my master,' she said despondently.

'You make yourself sound like a slave,' I said reluctantly. 'It's not that bad, is it?'

'Doing something you think is stupid, day after day?' she asked me. 'And being hit for not doing it perfectly? How is that better than being a slave?'

'Well, you're fed and clothed and sheltered. And he's giving you a chance to learn something, a trade that would let you travel all over the Six Duchies if you became good at it. You might end up performing for the King's Court at Buckkeep.'

She looked at me oddly. 'You mean Tradeford.' She sighed and shifted herself closer to me. 'It's lonely for me. All the others, they all want to be puppeteers. They get angry at me when I make mistakes, and always call me lazy and won't talk to me when they say I spoiled a performance. There's not one kind one among them; none of them would have cared about my face getting scarred as you did.'

There seemed nothing to reply to that. I didn't know the others well enough to agree or disagree. So I said nothing and we sat watching the sheep. The silence lengthened as the night got darker. I thought that soon I should kindle a fire.

'So,' she began after a few more minutes of my silence. 'How did you become a shepherd?'

'My parents died. My sister inherited. She didn't particularly care for me, and here I am.'

'What a bitch!' she said fiercely.

I took a breath to defend my fictitious sister, and then realized I'd only be extending the conversation. I tried to think of something I needed to go and do, but the sheep and other beasts were right there before us, grazing peacefully. Useless to hope that the others would soon return. Not with a tavern and new faces to talk to after our days on the road.

I finally made excuse that I was hungry and got up to gather stones and then dry dung and sticks for a fire. Tassin insisted on cooking. I was not

truly hungry, but she ate with a hearty appetite, and fed me well from the puppeteer's travelling supplies. She made a pot of tea as well, and afterwards we sat by the fireside sipping it from heavy red porcelain mugs.

Somehow the silence had changed from awkward to companionable. It had been pleasant to sit and watch someone else prepare the meal. She had chattered at first, asking if I liked this sort of spice and did I make my tea strong, but not really listening for any answers. Seeming to find some sort of acceptance in my silence, she had gone on to speak more intimately of herself. With a sort of despair, she spoke of days spent learning and practising a thing she had no desire to learn nor practise. She spoke with a grudging marvel of the dedication of the other puppeteers, and their enthusiasm that she could not share. Her voice dwindled off and she looked up at me with eyes full of misery. She did not need to explain to me the loneliness she felt. She turned the talk to lighter things, the minor irritations she felt, the foods they ate that she disliked, the way one of the other puppeteers always smelled of old sweat, of one woman who reminded her to speak her lines by pinching her.

Even her complaints were pleasant in an odd way, filling my mind with her trivialities so that I could not focus on my larger problems. Being with her was in some ways like being with the wolf. Tassin was focused on the now, on this meal and this night, with little thought of anything else. From considering this my thoughts wandered to Nighteyes. I quested softly toward him. I could sense him, somewhere, alive, but could tell little more than that. Perhaps too great a distance separated us; perhaps he was too focused on his new life. Whatever the reason, his mind was not as open to me as it had once been. Perhaps he was simply becoming more attuned to the ways of his pack. I tried to feel glad that he had found such a life for himself, with many companions and possibly a mate.

'What are you thinking about?' Tassin asked.

She spoke so softly that I replied without thinking, still staring into the fire. 'That sometimes it only makes one more lonely to know that somewhere else, one's friends and family are well.'

She shrugged. 'I try not to think of them. I suppose my farmer found another girl, one whose parents would wait for a bride-price. As for my mother, I suspect her prospects were better without me. She was not so old that she could not catch another man.' She stretched, an oddly catlike gesture, then turned her head to gaze into my face and added, 'There's no

sense in thinking of what's far away and what you haven't got. It will only make you unhappy. Be content with what you can have now.'

Our eyes were locked suddenly. There was no mistaking her meaning. For an instant I was shocked. Then she leaned across the small space between us. She put one hand on each side of my face. Her touch was gentle. She pushed the kerchief back from my hair, then used both hands to smooth the hair back from my face. She looked into my eyes as the tip of her tongue moistened my lips. She slid her hands down the sides of my face, down my neck to my shoulders. I was as entranced as a mouse looking at a snake. She leaned forward and kissed me, opening her mouth against mine as she did so. She smelled like sweet smoky incense.

I wanted her with a suddenness that dizzied me. Not as Tassin, but as woman and gentleness and closeness. It was lust that raced through me, and yet it was not that at all. It was like the Skill-hunger that eats at a man, demanding closeness and total communion with the world. I was unutterably weary of being alone. I caught her to me so quickly I heard her gasp of surprise. I kissed her as if I could devour her and somehow be less lonely by doing so. Suddenly we were prone and she was making small pleased sounds that suddenly changed to her pushing at my chest. 'Stop a moment,' she hissed. 'Just wait. There's a rock under me. And I mustn't spoil my clothes, give me your cloak to spread out ...'

I watched her avariciously as she spread my cloak out on the earth by the fire. She lay down upon it and patted a place beside her. 'Well? Aren't you coming back?' she asked me flirtatiously. More lewdly, she added, 'Let me show you all I can do for you.' She smoothed her hands down the front of her shirt, inviting me to think of my hands doing the same.

If she had said nothing, if we had never paused, if she had simply looked up at me from the cloak ... but her question and her manner were all wrong, suddenly. All the illusion of gentleness and closeness were gone, replaced by the same sort of challenge another fighter might offer me in a practice-yard with staves. I am no better than any man. I didn't want to think, to consider anything. I longed to be able to simply throw myself down upon her and quench myself in her, but instead I heard myself asking, 'And if I get you with child?'

'Oh,' and she laughed lightly as if she had never considered such a thing. 'Then you can marry me, and buy my prentice years from Master Dell. Or not,' she added, as she saw my face change. 'A baby's not so large a

thing to be rid of as a man might think. A few silvers for the right herbs ... but we needn't think of that now. Why worry about a thing that may never come to pass?'

Why indeed? I looked at her, wanting her with all the lust of my months alone and untouched. But I knew also that for that deeper hunger for companionship and understanding, she offered me no more solace than any man might find in his own hand. I shook my head slowly, more to myself than to her. She smiled up at me mischievously and reached a hand toward me.

'No.' I said the word quietly. She looked up at me, so incredulously amazed that I nearly laughed. 'This is not a good idea,' I said, and hearing the words aloud, I knew they were true. There was nothing lofty in it, no thoughts of undying faithfulness to Molly or shame that I had already left one woman with the burden of bearing a child alone. I knew those feelings, but they were not what came to me then. What I sensed was a hollowness in me that would only be made worse by laying myself down beside a stranger. 'It's not you,' I said as I saw her cheeks redden suddenly and the smile fade from her face. 'It's me. The fault's with me.' I tried to make my voice comforting. It was a waste.

She stood up suddenly. 'I know that, stupid,' she said scathingly. 'I only meant to be kind to you, nothing more.' She stalked angrily away from the fire, blending with the shadows quickly. I heard the slam of the wagon door.

I stooped slowly to pick my cloak up and shake the dust from it. Then, the night having become suddenly colder with a rising wind, I put it around my shoulders and sat down again to stare into my fire.

TWELVE

Suspicious

The use of the Skill is addictive. All students of this magic are warned of this from the very beginning. There is a fascination to this power that draws the user in, tempting him to use it more and more often. As the user's expertise and power increase, so does the lure of the Skill. The fascination of the Skill eclipses other interests and relationships. Yet it is a difficult attraction to describe to anyone who has not experienced the Skill itself. A rising covey of pheasant on a crisp autumn morning, or catching the wind's benefit perfectly in a boat's sails or the first mouthful of hot savoury stew after a cold and hungry day; these are all sensations that hover for only a moment. The Skill sustains that sensation, for as long as the strength of the user lasts.

It was very late when the others came back to our campsite. My master Damon was drunk and leaning companionably on Creece, who was drunk and irritable and reeked of Smoke. They dragged their blankets off the cart and rolled up in them. No one offered to relieve me in my watch. I sighed, doubting that I'd get any sleep until the next night.

Dawn came as early as it always does, and the caravan master was merciless in insisting that we rise and get ready for the road. I suppose she was wise. If she'd allowed them to sleep as long as they wanted, the earlier risers would have gone back to town, and she would have had to spend the day rounding them up. But it made for a miserable morning. Only the teamsters and the minstrel Starling seemed to have known when to stop drinking. We cooked and shared porridge while the others compared headaches and complaints.

I've noticed that drinking together, especially to excess, forms a bond between folk. So when the master decided his head ached too badly for him to drive the cart, he allotted that task to Creece. Damon slept in the cart as it jostled along while Creece drowsed over the reins as the pony followed the other wagons. They'd tied the bellwether to the tail of the cart, and the flock followed. Somewhat. To me fell the task of trotting behind in the dust, keeping the flock as well bunched as I could. The sky was blue but the day

remained chill, with rising winds that stirred and carried the dust we raised. The night had been sleepless for me, and my head soon pounded with pain.

Madge called a brief halt at noon. Most of the caravan folk had recovered enough by then that they wished to eat. I drank from the water-casks on Madge's wagon, then wet my kerchief and sopped some of the dust from my face. I was trying to rinse grit from my eyes when Starling came up beside me. I stepped aside, thinking she wanted water. Instead, she spoke softly.

'I'd keep my kerchief on, were I you.'

I wrung it out and retied it about my head. 'I do. It does nothing to keep the dust from my eyes, though.'

Starling looked at me levelly. 'It's not your eyes you should worry about. It's that white shock of hair. You should black it with grease and ash tonight, if you get a private moment. It might make it a bit less noticeable.'

I looked questioningly at her, trying to keep my expression bland.

She smiled at me archly. 'King Regal's guard had been through that water-town just a few days before we arrived. They told the folk there that the King believed that the Pocked Man would be crossing Farrow. And you with him.' She paused, expecting me to say something. When I just looked at her, her grin widened. 'Or perhaps it's some other fellow with a broken nose, scar down his face, white streak in his hair, and ...' she gestured toward my arm, 'a fresh sword-slash up his forearm.'

I found my tongue and a measure of my wits. I pushed back my sleeve, offered my arm for her inspection. 'A sword-slash? This is just a scratch I got off a nail-head in a tavern door. On my way out, a bit unwillingly. Take a look for yourself. It's almost healed now, anyway.'

She leaned over and looked at my arm obligingly. 'Oh. I see. Well. My mistake. Still,' and she met my eyes again, 'I'd keep your kerchief on anyway. To prevent anyone else from making the same mistake.' She paused, then canted her head at me. 'I'm a minstrel, you see. I'd rather witness history than make it. Or change it. But I doubt all the others in this caravan feel that way.'

I watched mutely as she strolled away, whistling. Then I drank again, being careful not to take too much, and went back to my sheep.

Creece was on his feet and helping, somewhat, for the rest of the afternoon. Even so, it seemed a longer, wearier day than I'd had in a while. There was nothing complicated about my task to make it so. The problem, I

decided, was that I'd begun thinking again. I let my despair over Molly and our child drag me down. I'd let my guard down, I hadn't been fearful enough on my own behalf. Now it occurred to me that if Regal's guard managed to find me, they'd kill me. Then I'd never see Molly or our daughter. Somehow that seemed worse than the threat to my life.

At the evening meal that night, I sat back further from the fire than usual, even though it meant wrapping myself in my cloak against the cold. My silence was taken as normal. The rest of them talked, much more than usual, about the last evening in town. I gathered the beer had been good, the wine poor, while the resident minstrel had had small goodwill toward Starling for performing for his captive audience. The members of our caravan seemed to take it as a personal victory that Starling's songs had been well received by the villagers. 'You sang well, even if all you knew was those Buck ballads,' Creece even conceded magnanimously. Starling nodded to that dubious praise.

As she did every evening, Starling unwrapped her harp after the meal. Master Dell was giving his troupe a rare night off from their constant rehearsing, by which I gathered he had been pleased with his performers save Tassin. Tassin had not even a glance for me that evening, but instead perched by one of the teamsters, smiling up at his every word. I noticed that her injury was little more than a scratch on her face with some bruising around it. It would heal well.

Creece went off to stand night watch over our flock. I stretched out on my cloak just beyond reach of the firelight, thinking to drowse off immediately. I expected the others would soon be off to bed as well. The hum of their conversation was lulling, as was the lazy strumming of Starling's fingers on her harp-strings. Gradually the strumming changed to a rhythmic plucking, and her voice lifted in song.

I was floating at the edge of sleep when the words 'Antler Island Tower' jolted me awake. My eyes flew open as I realized she was singing about the battle there last summer, the *Rurisk's* first real engagement with the Red Ship Raiders. I recalled both too much and very little about that battle. As Verity had observed more than once, despite all Hod's weapons-instruction, I tended to revert to brawling in any sort of a fight. So I'd carried an axe into that battle and used it with a savagery I'd never expected of myself. Afterwards, it had been said that I'd killed the chief of the raiding party we'd cornered. I'd never known if that were true or not.

In Starling's song, it certainly was. My heart nearly stood still when I heard her sing of 'Chivalry's son, with eyes of flame, who carried his blood if not his name'. The song went on with a dozen improbable embellishments of blows I'd dealt and warriors I'd felled. It was strangely humiliating to hear those deeds sung of as noble and now almost legendary. I knew there were many fighters who dreamed of having songs sung of their exploits. I found the experience uncomfortable. I didn't recall the sun striking flames from my axe-head or that I fought as bravely as the stag on my crest. Instead I recalled the clinging smell of blood and treading on a man's entrails, a man who squirmed and moaned still. All the ale in Buckkeep that night had not been enough to bring me any sort of peace.

When the song was finally done, one of the teamsters snorted. 'So, that's the one ye daren't sing in the tavern last night, eh, Starling?'

Starling gave a deprecating laugh. 'Somehow I doubted it would be enjoyed. Songs about Chivalry's Bastard would not have been popular enough to earn me a penny there.'

'It's an odd song,' observed Dell. 'Here's the King offering gold for his head, and the guard telling all, beware, the Bastard has the Wit and used it to trick death. But your song makes him out to be some sort of hero.'

'Well, it's a Buck song, and he was well thought of in Buck, at least for a time,' Starling explained.

'But not any more, I'd wager. Save that any man would think well of a hundred gold coins if one could turn him over to the King's Guard,' one of the teamsters observed.

'Like as not,' Starling agreed easily. 'Though there's still some in Buck who would tell you that not all his tale has been told, and the Bastard was not so black as he's been tarred of late.'

'I still don't understand it. I thought he was executed for using the Wit to kill King Shrewd,' complained Madge.

'So some say,' Starling replied. 'Truth of it was, he died in his cell before he could be executed and was buried instead of burned. And the tale goes,' and here Starling's voice dropped to a near-whisper, 'that when spring came, not a leaf of greenery would grow on his grave. And an old wise woman, hearing this, knew that meant his Wit magic still slept in his bones and might be claimed by any bold enough to pull a tooth from his mouth. And so she went, by full moonlight, and took a manservant with a spade with her. She put him to digging up the grave. But he hadn't turned but a

shovelful of earth before he found splintered wood from the Bastard's coffin.'

Starling paused theatrically. There wasn't a sound save the crackling of the fire.

'The box was empty, of course. And those that saw it said that the coffin had been splintered out from inside, not stove in. And one man told it to me that caught in the splintered edge of the coffin lid were the coarse grey hairs of a wolf's coat.'

A moment longer the silence held. Then, 'Not truly?' Madge asked Starling.

Her fingers ran lightly over her harp-strings. 'So I heard it told in Buck. But I also heard the Lady Patience, she that buried him, say it was all nonsense, that his body had been cold and stiff when she washed it and wrapped it in a gravecloth. And of the Pocked Man, that King Regal so fears, she declared he is no more than an old adviser of King Shrewd's, some old recluse with a scarred face, come out of his hermitage to keep alive a belief that Verity still lives and lend heart to those who must go on battling the Red Ships. So. I suppose you can choose to believe whichever you wish.'

Melody, one of the puppeteers, gave a mock shiver. 'Brrr. So. Sing us something merry now, to go to sleep on. I've no wish to hear more of your ghost tales before I seek my blankets tonight.'

So Starling willingly swept into a love ballad, an old one with a lilting refrain that Madge and Melody joined in singing. I lay in the darkness, pondering all I'd heard. I was uncomfortably aware that Starling had stirred it up intending for me to hear it. I wondered if she thought she were doing me a favour, or if she simply wished to see if any of the others had suspicions of me. One hundred gold coins for my head. That was enough to make a duke greedy, let alone a strolling minstrel. Despite my weariness, it was a long time before I dozed off that night.

The next day's drive was almost comforting in its monotony. I paced along behind my sheep, and tried not to think. It was not as easy to do as previously. It seemed that whenever I blanked my mind to my worries, I heard Verity's *Come to me* echoing inside my head. When we made camp that night, it was on the banks of a giant sinkhole with water at its centre. The talk about the fire was desultory. I think we were all more than a little weary of our trudging pace and longed to see the shores of Blue Lake. I wished simply to go to sleep, but I had first watch over the flock.

I climbed slightly up the hillside to where I could sit looking down on my woolly charges. The great bowl of the sinkhole cupped our whole caravan, with the small cook fire near the water showing like a star at the bottom of a well. Whatever wind blew passed us by, leaving us sheltered in a great stillness. It was almost peaceful.

Tassin probably thought she was being stealthy. I watched her come silently, her cloak pulled well up over her hair and about her face. She circled widely as if to pass by me. I did not follow her with my eyes, but listened to her as she went above me on the hillside and then came back down behind me. I caught her scent even in the still air and felt an involuntary anticipation. I wondered if I'd have the strength of will to refuse her a second time. Mistake it might be, but my body was all in favour of making it. When I judged her about a dozen steps away, I turned to look at her. She startled back from my gaze.

'Tassin,' I greeted her quietly, and then turned to look back at my sheep. After a moment, she came down the slope to stand a few steps away from me. I turned slightly and looked up at her without speaking. She pushed her hood back from her face and confronted me, challenge in her eyes and stance.

'You're him, aren't you?' she demanded breathlessly. There was a very slight edge of fear in her voice.

It was not what I'd expected her to say. I didn't have to pretend surprise. 'I'm him? I'm Tom the shepherd if that's the him you mean.'

'No, you're him, that Wit Bastard the King's Guard is seeking. Drew the teamster told me what they were saying in town, after Starling told that tale last night.'

'Drew told you I was a Wit Bastard?' I spoke carefully, as if baffled by her tumbling words. A terrible cold fear was welling up inside me.

'No.' A trace of anger mixed with her fear. 'Drew told me what the King's Guard said of him. A broken nose and a scar on the cheek and a white streak in his hair. And I saw your hair that night. You've a white streak in it.'

'Any man who's been hit on the head can have a white streak in his hair. It's an old scar.' I tilted my head and looked at her critically. 'I'd say your face is healing well.'

'You're him, aren't you?' She sounded even angrier that I'd tried to change the subject.

‘Of course not. Look. He’s got a sword-slash on his arm, hasn’t he? Look at this.’ I bared my right arm for her inspection. The knife-slash I’d given myself was down the back of my left forearm. I was gambling that she’d know a slash taken defending myself should have been on my sword-arm.

She scarcely glanced at my arm. ‘Do you have any coin?’ she asked me suddenly.

‘If I’d had any coin, why would I have stayed in camp when the others went to town? Besides. Why would you care?’

‘I wouldn’t. But you would. You could use it to buy my silence. Otherwise, I might go to Madge with what I suspect. Or the teamsters.’ She lifted her chin defiantly at me.

‘Then they could look at my arm, as easily as you’ve done,’ I said wearily. I turned away from her to look back over my sheep. ‘You’re being a silly little girl, Tassin, letting Starling’s ghost tales get you all stirred up. Go back to bed.’ I tried to sound disgusted with her.

‘You’ve a scratch on your other arm. I saw it. Some might take it for a sword-slash.’

‘Probably the same ones that would take you for intelligent,’ I said derisively.

‘Don’t make mock of me,’ she warned me in a voice gone flat with ugliness. ‘I won’t be made fun of.’

‘Then don’t say stupid things. What’s the matter with you, anyway? Is this some sort of revenge? Are you angry because I wouldn’t bed you? I told you, it’s nothing to do with you. You’re pretty to look at, and I don’t doubt there’d be pleasure in touching you. But not for me.’

She spat suddenly on the ground beside me. ‘As if I’d have let you. I was amusing myself, shepherd. No more than that.’ She made a small sound in her throat. ‘Men. How can you look at yourself and think anyone would want you for your own sake? You stink of sheep, you’re skinny and your face looks like you’ve lost every fight you’ve ever been in.’ She turned on her heel, then seemed to abruptly remember why she’d come. ‘I won’t tell any of them. Yet. But when we get to Blue Lake, your master must pay you something. See you bring it to me, or I’ll have the whole town seeking you out.’

I sighed. ‘Whatever amuses you, I’m sure you’ll do. Create all the fuss you wish. When it comes to naught and folk laugh about it, it will probably

give Dell one more reason to beat you.'

She turned away from me and went stalking off down the hillside. She lost her footing in the moonlight's uncertainty and nearly took a tumble. But she recovered herself and then glared back at me, as if daring me to laugh. I had no such inclination. Despite my defiance of her, my stomach was clenched up under my throat. A hundred gold coins. Spread a rumour of it, and that much money was enough to start a riot. After I was dead, they'd probably decide they had the wrong man.

I wondered how well I'd do at crossing the rest of the Farrow plains alone. I could leave right after Creece relieved me on watch. I'd go to the wagon and get my things quietly and sneak away into the night. How much farther could it be to Blue Lake anyway? I was pondering that as I watched yet another figure slip away from the campsite and come up the slope toward me.

Starling came quietly, but not stealthily. She lifted a hand to me in greeting before she sat down companionably at my side. 'I hope you didn't give her any money,' she greeted me affably.

'Umph,' I said, letting her take it however she wished.

'Because you're at least the third man who's supposedly got her pregnant on this trip. Your master had the honour of being the first accused. Madge's son was the second. At least I think he was. I don't know how many fathers she's selected for this possible child.'

'I haven't been with her, so she could scarcely accuse me of that,' I said defensively.

'Oh? Then you're probably the only man in the caravan who hasn't.'

That jolted me a bit. Then I thought about it and wondered if I would ever reach a place in which I ceased finding out how stupid I could be. 'So you think she's with child and is looking for a man to buy her out of her apprenticeship?'

Starling snorted. 'I doubt she's with child at all. She wasn't asking to be married, only for coin to buy herbs to shake the child loose. I think Madge's boy might have actually given her some. No. I don't think she wants a husband, just some money. So she looks for ways that allow her a bit of a tumble, and a man who might pay her for it afterwards.' She shifted, tossed aside an offending stone. 'So. If you haven't got her pregnant, what have you done to her?'

'I told you. Nothing.'

‘Ah. That explains why she speaks so ill of you then. But only in the last day or so, so I supposed you “nothinged” her the night the rest of us went to town.’

‘Starling,’ I began warningly, and she raised a placating hand.

‘I shan’t say a word about whatever you didn’t do to her. Not another word. That’s not what I came up here to speak to you about anyway.’

She paused, and when I refused to ask the question, she did. ‘What do you plan to do after we get to Blue Lake?’

I glanced at her. ‘Collect my pay. Have a beer and a decent meal, a hot bath and a clean bed for one night at least. Why? What do you plan?’

‘I thought I might go on to the Mountains.’ She gave me a sideways glance.

‘To seek your songworthy event there?’ I tried to keep my question casual.

‘Songs are more likely to be found clinging to a man than bound to a place,’ she suggested. ‘I thought you might be going to the Mountains as well. We could travel together.’

‘You’ve still that idiotic notion that I’m the Bastard,’ I accused her flatly.

She grinned. ‘The Bastard. The Witted one. Yes.’

‘You’re wrong,’ I said flatly. ‘And even if you were right, why follow him to the Mountains? I’d take the chance for a bigger profit, and sell him to the King’s Guard. With a hundred gold pieces, who’d need to make songs?’

Starling made a small sound of disgust. ‘You’ve more experience of the King’s Guard than I have, I’m sure. But even I’ve enough to know that a minstrel who tried to claim that reward would probably be found floating in the river a few days later. While some guardsmen became suddenly very wealthy. No. I’ve told you. I’m not after gold, Bastard. I’m after a song.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ I warned her sharply. She shrugged and turned away. After a moment she twitched as if I’d poked her and then turned back to me with a grin widening across her face.

‘Ah. I believe I’ve worked it out. That’s how Tassin was squeezing you, isn’t it? Asking for money to still her tongue.’

I made no reply.

‘You’re smart to refuse her. Give her any and she’ll think she’s right. If she truly believed you were the Bastard, she’d be holding her secret to sell to the King’s Guard. Because she’s had no experience of them, and would

believe she might actually get to keep the gold.' Starling stood, stretching leisurely. 'Well. I'm back to bed while I may. But keep my offer in mind. I doubt you'll find a better one.' She swirled her cloak about herself theatrically, then bowed to me as if I were the King. I watched her stroll away from me down the hill, sure-footed as a goat even in the moonlight. She reminded me briefly of Molly.

I considered slipping away from the camp and going on to Blue Lake on my own. I decided that if I did, Tassin and Starling would only become certain that they had guessed correctly. Starling might try to follow and find me. Tassin would try to find a way to collect the reward. I wanted neither of those things. Better to stick it out and plod along as Tom the shepherd.

I lifted my eyes to the night sky. Clear and cold it arched above me. The dead of the night had a nasty chill to it of late. By the time I got to the Mountains, winter would be more than just a threat. If only I hadn't wasted those early months of summer being a wolf, I'd be in the Mountains by now. But that was another useless thought. The stars were close and bright tonight. It made the world seem a smaller place to have the sky so close. I felt suddenly that if I just opened up and reached for Verity, I would find him there, right at my fingertips. Loneliness swelled so suddenly inside me that I felt it would tear its way out of me. Molly and Burrich were no farther away than the closing of my eyes. I could go to them, could trade the hunger of not knowing for the pain of being unable to touch. The Skill walls, clutched so closely every waking moment since I had left Tradeford, now felt suffocating rather than shielding. I bowed my head to my drawn-up knees and hugged myself against the chill emptiness of the night.

After a time, the hunger passed. I lifted my head and looked out over the peaceful sheep, the cart and wagons, the motionless camp. A glance at the moon told me my watch was well over. Creece was never good about rousing himself to take his turn. So I stood and stretched and went down the hill to poke him from his warm blankets.

The next two days passed uneventfully, save that the weather grew colder and windier. On the evening of the third, just as we had settled for the night and I had taken up my first watch of the evening, I saw a dust cloud on the horizon. I thought little of it at first. We were on one of the more travelled caravan routes, and had stopped at a watering place. A wagon full of a tinker family had already been there. I assumed that whoever was raising the dust would also be seeking a water-place to rest for the night. So I

sat and watched the dust get closer as the evening darkened. Slowly the dust resolved into figures on horseback, riding in an orderly formation. The closer they came, the more certain I became. King's Guards. The light was too weak for me to see the gold and brown of Regal's colours, but I knew.

It was all I could do to keep myself from leaping up and fleeing. Cold logic told me that if they were seeking me specifically, it would only take them a few minutes to ride me down. This vast plain offered me no near hiding places. And if they were not seeking me, to flee would only attract their attention, and make both Tassin and Starling certain in their suspicions. So I gritted my teeth and remained where I was, sitting with my stick across my knees watching the sheep. The riders bypassed me and the sheep and went directly to the water. I counted as they went past. Six of them. I recognized one of the horses, a buckskin colt Burch had said would be a good courser someday. Seeing him reminded me too vividly of how Regal had plundered Buckkeep of every valuable thing before he left it to fend for itself. A tiny spark of anger ignited in me, one that somehow made it easier to sit and bide my time.

After a while, I decided that they were just on their way as we were, and had stopped only to water and rest for the night. Then Creece came lumbering out to find me. 'You're wanted in the camp,' he told me with ill-conceived irritability. Creece always liked to sleep as soon as he'd eaten. I asked him what had changed our schedule as he settled down in my place.

'King's Guards,' he huffed angrily. 'Pushing everybody about, demanding to see every member of our caravan. They searched all the wagons, too.'

'What are they looking for?' I asked idly.

'Damned if I know. Didn't care to get a fist in the face for asking, either. But you suit yourself about finding out.'

I took my staff with me as I walked back into the camp. My short sword still hung at my side. I thought of concealing it, then decided against it. Anyone might carry a sword, and if I needed to draw it, I didn't want to be wrestling with my trousers.

The camp was like a stirred hornets' nest. Madge and her folk looked both apprehensive and angry. The guardsmen were currently harassing the tinker. One guardswoman kicked over a stack of tin pots with a fine clatter and then shouted something about searching anything she pleased, any way she pleased. The tinker stood by his wagon, his arms crossed on his chest.

He looked as if he'd already been knocked down once. Two guardsmen had his wife and youngsters backed up against the tail of the wagon. The wife had a trickle of blood coming from her nose. She still looked ready to fight. I drifted into camp as silent as smoke and took a place beside Damon as if I'd always been there. Neither of us spoke.

The leader of the guards turned away from his confrontation with the tinker, and a shiver went up my back. I knew him. It was Bolt, favoured by Regal for his skill with his fists. I'd last seen him in the dungeon. He was the one who had broken my nose. I felt the beating of my heart pick up speed and heard my pulse in my ears. Darkness threatened the edges of my vision. I fought to breathe quietly. He paced to the centre of the camp and cast a disdainful eye over us. 'This is everyone?' he demanded more than queried.

We all bobbed nods. He cast his gaze over us and I looked down to avoid it. I forced my hands to be still, to stay away from both knife and sword. I tried not to let my tension show in my stance.

'As sorry a lot of vagabonds as I've ever seen.' His tone dismissed our importance. 'Caravan master! We've been riding all day. Have your boy see to our horses. We'll want food prepared, and more fuel gathered for the fire. And warm us some water for washing.' He ran his glance over us again. 'I want no trouble. The men we were looking for aren't here, and that's all we required to know. Just do as we ask, and there won't be any problems. You can go about your normal business.'

There were a few mutters of agreement, but mostly silence greeted this. He snorted his disdain for us, then turned to his riders and spoke quietly to them. Whatever orders he was giving did not seem to sit well with them, but the two that had cornered the tinker-woman came to heel at his words. They took over the fire Madge had built earlier, forcing the folk of our caravan to move off from it. Madge spoke quietly to her help, sending two off to care for the guards' horses, and another to fetch water and set it to warm. She herself strode heavily past our cart toward her own wagon and the food stores.

An uneasy semblance of order returned to the camp. Starling kindled a second, smaller fire. The puppeteer's troupe, the minstrel and the teamsters resettled next to it. The horse owner and her husband went quietly off to bed. 'Well, seems to have settled down,' Damon observed to me, but I noticed that he still twisted his hands nervously. 'I'm off to bed. You and Creece settle out the watches between you.'

I started to go back to my sheep. Then I paused and looked back around the camp. The guards were silhouettes around the fire now, lounging and talking, while a single one of them stood slightly back of the group keeping a general watch. He was looking toward the other fire. I followed his gaze. I could not decide if Tassin was looking back at him, or simply staring off at the other guards about their fire. Either way, I suspected I knew what was on her mind.

I turned aside and went to the back of Madge's wagon. She was scooping out beans and peas from sacks and measuring them into a soup kettle. I touched her lightly on the arm, and she jumped.

'Beg pardon. Could you use some help with that?'

She raised an eyebrow at me. 'Why would I?'

I glanced down at my feet and chose my lie carefully. 'I didn't care for how they looked at the tinker-woman, ma'am.'

'I know how to handle myself among rough men, shepherd. I couldn't be a caravan master if I didn't.' She measured salt into the kettle, then a handful of seasonings.

I nodded my head and said nothing. It was too obviously true for me to protest. But I did not leave, either, and after a few moments, she handed me a bucket and told me to fetch her some clean water. I obeyed her willingly, and when I brought it back, I stood holding it until she took it from me. I watched her fill the soup kettle and stood at her elbow until she told me with some asperity to get out from under her feet. I apologized and backed away, upsetting her water bucket as I did so. So I took it and fetched her more fresh water in it.

After that, I went and got a blanket from Damon's cart, and rolled up in it for a few hours. I lay under the cart as if sleeping and watched, not the guardsmen, but Starling and Tassin. I noticed Starling did not take out her harp that night, as if she did not wish to call any attention to herself either. That somewhat reassured me about her. It would have been easy enough for her to visit their fire with her harp, to ingratiate herself with a few songs, and then offer to sell me. Instead she seemed as intent on watching Tassin as I was. Tassin rose once to leave on some excuse. I did not hear what Starling said quietly, but Tassin glared at her and Master Dell angrily ordered her back to her place. Certainly Dell wanted nothing to do with the guards in any way. But even after they had all gone off to bed, I could not relax. When it came time to relieve Creece on watch, I went reluctantly, not at all sure that

Tassin would not choose the small hours of night in which to seek out the guards.

I found Creece sound asleep, and had to wake him to send him back to the cart. I sat down, my blanket around my shoulders, and thought of the six men down below, now sleeping around their fire. I had cause for true hatred of only one of them. I recalled Bolt to myself as he had been then, smirking as he drew on his leather gloves to beat me, sulking when Regal reprimanded him for breaking my nose lest it make me less presentable if the dukes wished to see me. I recalled the disdainful way he had performed his task for Regal, hammering easily past my token defence as I strove to keep Will and his Skill out of my mind.

Bolt hadn't even known me. He'd run his eyes over me and dismissed me, not even recognizing his own handiwork. I sat thinking for a bit about that. I supposed I had changed that much. Not just the scars he'd given me. Not just the beard and the workman's garb and the dirt of the road on me and my gauntness. FitzChivalry wouldn't have lowered his eyes before his gaze, would not have stood silent and let the tinker-folk fend for themselves. FitzChivalry would not, perhaps, have poisoned all six guards for the sake of killing one. I wondered if I had grown wiser or wearier. Both, perhaps. It did not make me proud.

The Wit-sense gives me an awareness of other living things, all other living things, around me. I am seldom startled by anyone. So they did not take me by surprise. The dawn had just begun to blanch the blackness from the sky when Bolt and his guards came for me. I sat still, first feeling and then hearing their stealthy approach. Bolt had roused all five of his soldiers for the task.

With a sinking dismay, I wondered what had gone wrong with my poison. Had it lost its potency from being carried about so long? Been rendered useless by the cooking with the soup? I swear that for a moment my uppermost thought was that Chade would have not made this error. But I had no time to think about it. I glanced about at the gently undulating, near-featureless plain. Scrub-brush and a few rocks. Not even a gully or a mound for cover.

I could have run, and perhaps lost them for a time in the darkness. But in the end, that game was theirs. I'd have to come back for water eventually. If they did not track me down on the flat land by daylight on horseback, they

could simply sit by the waterhole and wait me out. Besides, to flee was to admit I was FitzChivalry. Tom the shepherd would not run.

And so I looked up, startled and anxious when they came for me, but not, I hoped, betraying the heart-pounding fear I felt. I came to my feet, and when one seized me by an arm, I did not struggle but only looked up at him incredulously. Another guard came up from the other side, to take both my knife and my sword. 'Come down to the fire,' she told me gruffly. 'Captain wants a look at you.'

I went quietly, almost limply, and when they had reassembled at the campfire to present me to Bolt, I looked fearfully from one face to another, being careful not to single out Bolt. I was not sure I could look at him full face at close range and betray nothing. Bolt stood up, kicked at the fire to stir up the flames and then came to inspect me. I caught a glimpse of Tassin's pale face and hair peeking at me around the end of the puppeteer's wagon. For a time Bolt just stood looking at me. After a time, he pursed his mouth and gave his guards a disgusted look. With a small shake of his head, he let them know I wasn't what he'd wanted. I dared to take a deeper breath.

'What's your name?' Bolt suddenly demanded of me sharply.

I squinted at him across the fire. 'Tom, sir. Tom the shepherd. I've done nothing wrong.'

'Haven't you? Then you're the only man in the world who hasn't. You sound like a Buckman, Tom. Take off your kerchief.'

'I am, sir. From Buck, sir. But times are hard there.' I hastily dragged my kerchief off, then stood clutching and wringing it. I hadn't taken Starling's advice about staining my hair. That wouldn't have done any good during a close inspection. Instead, I had used my looking-glass and plucked out a good portion of the white hairs. Not all of them, but what I had now appeared more as a grey scattering of hair above my brow rather than a white streak. Bolt came around the fire to have a closer look at it. I flinched when he gripped me by the hair and tilted my head back to stare down into my face. He was as big and muscled as I remembered him. Every evil memory I had of him suddenly flooded my mind. I swear I even recalled the smell of him. The wretched sickness of fear filled me.

I offered him no resistance as he glared down at me. Nor did I meet his eyes, but rather shot frightened looks at him and then glanced away as if beseeching help. I noticed that Madge had come from somewhere and was standing, arms crossed on her chest, regarding us.

‘Got a scar on your cheek, don’t you, man?’ Bolt demanded of me.

‘Yes, sir, I do. Got it when I was a boy, fell out of a tree and a branch cut me ...’

‘You break your nose then, too?’

‘No, sir, no, that was a tavern brawl, that was, about a year ago ...’

‘Take off your shirt!’ he demanded.

I fumbled at the neck of it, then dragged it off over my head. I had thought he would look at my forearms and was prepared with my nail story for that. Instead he leaned over to look at a place between my shoulder and my neck, where a Forged one had bitten a chunk out of me in a long ago fight. My bowels turned to water. He looked at the gnarled scar there, then suddenly threw his head back and laughed.

‘Damn. I didn’t think it was you, Bastard. I was sure it wasn’t. But that’s the mark I remember seeing, the first time I drove you into the floor.’ He looked at the men standing around us, surprise and delight still on his face. ‘It’s him! We’ve got him. The King’s got his Skill-wizards spread from the Mountains to the coast looking for him, and he falls like fruit into our hands.’ He licked his lips as he ran his eyes over me gloatingly. I sensed a strange hunger in him, one he almost feared. He seized me suddenly by the throat and hauled me up on my toes. He brought his face close to mine as he hissed, ‘Understand me. Verde was a friend. It’s not a hundred gold pieces for you alive that keeps me from killing you here. It’s only my faith that my king can come up with more interesting ways for you to die than I can improvise here. You’re mine again, Bastard, in the Circle. Or as much of you as my king leaves for me anyway.’

He shoved me violently away from him into the fire. I stumbled through it and was immediately seized by two men on the other side. I looked from one to the other wildly. ‘It’s a mistake!’ I cried out. ‘A terrible mistake!’

‘Shackle him,’ Bolt ordered them hoarsely.

Madge stepped suddenly forward. ‘You’re certain of this man?’ she asked him directly.

He met her eyes, captain to captain. ‘I am. It’s the Wit Bastard.’

A look of total disgust crossed Madge’s face. ‘Then take him and welcome to him.’ She turned on her heel and walked away.

My guards had been watching the conversation between Madge and their captain rather than paying attention to the trembling man between

them. I chanced it all, breaking toward the fire as I snapped my arms free of their careless grips. I shouldered a startled Bolt aside and fled like a rabbit. I wove through the camp, past the tinker's wagon, and saw only wide open country before me. Dawn had greyed the plain to a featureless rumpled blanket. No cover, no destination. I just ran.

I had expected men on foot after me, or men on horses. I hadn't expected a man with a sling. The first rock hit me on the flat of my left shoulder, numbing my arm. I kept running. I thought at first I'd taken an arrow. Then the bolt of lightning hit me.

When I woke up, my wrists were chained. My left shoulder ached horribly, but not as badly as the lump on my head. I managed to wiggle up to a sitting position. No one paid much attention to me. A shackle on each of my ankles was hooked to the length of chain that ran up and through a loop forged onto the chain that shackled my wrists together. A second, much shorter chain between my ankles was not even enough to let me take a full step. If I'd been able to stand.

I said nothing, did nothing. Shackled, I had no chance against six armed men. I didn't want to give them any excuse to brutalize me. Still, it took every bit of my will to sit quietly and consider my situation. The sheer weight of the chain was daunting, as was the chill of the iron biting into my flesh in the cold night air. I sat, head bowed, looking at my feet. Bolt noticed I was awake. He came to stand looking down at me. I kept my eyes on my own feet.

'Say something, damn you!' Bolt ordered me suddenly.

'You've got the wrong man, sir,' I said timidly. I knew there would be no convincing him of that, but perhaps I could shake his men's belief.

Bolt laughed. He went and sat back down by the fire. Then he lay back on his elbows. 'If I have, it's just too damn bad for you. But I know I don't. Look at me, Bastard. How was it you didn't stay dead?'

I shot him a fearful glance. 'I don't know what you mean, sir.'

It was the wrong response. He was tigerish in his speed, coming up from his reclining position to fly across the fire at me. I scabbled to my feet but there was no escaping him. He seized me by my chains, drew me up, and slapped me stingingly. Then, 'Look at me,' he ordered.

I brought my eyes back to his face.

'How was it you didn't die, Bastard?'

'It wasn't me. You've got the wrong man.'

I got the back of his hand the second time.

Chade had once told me that, under torture, it is easier to resist questioning if you focus your mind on what you will say, rather than what you must not. I knew it was stupid and useless to tell Bolt I was not FitzChivalry. He knew I was. But having adopted that course, I stuck to it. The fifth time he hit me, one of his men spoke out behind me.

‘With all respect, sir?’

Bolt flashed a furious look at the man. ‘What is it?’

The man wet his lips. ‘The captive was to be alive, sir. For the gold to be paid.’

Bolt turned his eyes back to me. It was unnerving to see the hunger in him, a craving such as Verity had for the Skill. This man liked to give pain. Liked to kill slowly. It only made him hate me all the more that he could not. ‘I know that,’ he said brusquely to the man. I saw his fist coming, but there was no way to avoid it.

When I came awake, it was full morning. There was pain. For a time, that was all I really knew. Pain, bad pain in one shoulder, and down my ribs on the same side. He’d probably kicked me, I decided. I didn’t want to move any part of my face. Why, I wondered, is pain always worse when you’re cold? I felt curiously detached from my situation. I listened for a time, with no desire at all to open my eyes. The caravan was getting ready to move on. I could hear Master Dell yelling at Tassin, who was crying that it was her money by right, that if he’d only help her get it, he could have his apprentice fee back and full welcome to it. He ordered her to get in the wagon. Instead I heard her footsteps crunching across the dry earth as she hurried over to me. But it was Bolt she spoke to in a whining voice. ‘I was right. You didn’t believe me, but I was right. I found him for you. If it weren’t for me, you’d have ridden off after looking right at him. That gold is mine, by right. But I’ll give you half and be more than happy. That’s better than fair for you, you know it is.’

‘I’d get in that wagon, were I you,’ Bolt answered her coldly. ‘Otherwise, once it leaves and we leave, you’re left with nothing but a long walk.’

She had the sense not to argue with him, but she muttered dirty names to herself all the way back to the wagon. I heard Dell tell her she was nothing but trouble and he’d be well rid of her at Blue Lake.

‘Get him on his feet, Joff,’ Bolt ordered someone.

They dashed water on me, and I got one eye open. I watched a guard pick up the slack of my chain and jerk on it. That woke a host of lesser pains. ‘Get up!’ she ordered me. I managed to nod. One of my teeth was loose. I could only see out of one eye. I started to lift my hands to my face to see how bad it was, but a tug on my chain prevented me. ‘Does he ride or walk?’ the one holding my chain asked Bolt as I staggered upright.

‘I’d love to drag him, but it would slow us down too much. He rides. You double with Arno and put him on your horse. Tie him in the saddle and keep a tight grip on your horse’s lead. He’s playing dumb now, but he’s mean and he’s tricky. I don’t know if he can do all the Wit things they say he can, but I don’t want to find out. So keep a good grip on that lead rope. Where’s Arno, anyway?’

‘Off in the scrub, sir. His guts ain’t too well today. He was up and down all night, dumping his sack.’

‘Get him.’ Bolt’s tone made it plain that he wasn’t interested in the man’s problems. My guard hurried off, leaving me swaying on my feet. I lifted my hands to my face. I had only seen the one blow coming, but plainly there had been others. Endure, I told myself sternly. Live, and see what chances are offered you. I dropped my hands to find Bolt watching me.

‘Water?’ I asked in a slurry voice.

I didn’t really expect any, but he turned to one of his other guards and made a small motion. A few moments later the fellow brought me a bucket of water and two dry biscuits. I drank and splashed my face. The biscuits were hard and my mouth was very sore, but I tried to get down what I could of them. I doubted I’d get much more in the day to come. I noticed then that my pouch was gone. I supposed Bolt had taken it while I was unconscious. My heart sank at the thought of Burrich’s earring gone. As I gnawed gingerly at my biscuit, I wondered what he had thought of the powders in my pouch.

Bolt had us mounted and riding out before the caravan left. I caught one glimpse of Starling’s face, but could not read her expression. Creece and my master carefully avoided even looking at me for fear of catching my taint. It was as if they had never known me at all.

They’d put me on a sturdy mare. My wrists were strapped tightly to the saddle pommel, making it impossible to ride comfortably or well even if I hadn’t felt like a bag of broken bones. They hadn’t taken the shackles off,

only removed the short chain between my ankles. The longer chain to my wrists was looped up over the saddle. There was no way to avoid the chain's chafing. I had no idea what had become of my shirt, but I sorely missed it. The horse and motion would warm me somewhat, but not in any comfortable way. When a very pale-faced Arno was mounted behind his fellow guard, we set off, back toward Tradeford. My poison, I reflected ruefully, had done no more than give one man slack bowels. Such an assassin I was.

Come to me.

Would that I could, I told myself wearily as I was led off in the wrong direction. Would that I could. Every step the mare took rubbed my pains together. I wondered if my shoulder were broken or dislocated. I wondered at the strange sense of removal I felt from everything. And I wondered if I should hope to get to Tradeford alive, or try to get them to kill me before then. I could imagine no way of talking my way out of the chains, let alone fleeing in this flat land. I lowered my throbbing head and watched my hands as we rode. I shivered with the cold and the wind. I groped toward the mare's mind, but only succeeded in making her aware of my pain. She had no interest in jerking her head free and galloping away with me. She didn't much like the way I smelled of sheep, either.

The second time we halted for Arno to empty his guts, Bolt rode back and reined in beside me. 'Bastard!'

I turned my head slowly to look at him.

'How did you do it? I saw your body, and you were dead. I know a dead man when I see one. So how are you walking around again?'

My mouth wouldn't let me form words even if I'd had any. After a moment, he snorted at my silence. 'Well, don't count on it happening again. This time I'm cutting you up personally. I've got a dog at home. Eats anything. Figure he'll get rid of your liver and heart for me. What do you think of that, Bastard?'

I felt sorry for the dog, but I said nothing. When Arno staggered back to his horse, Joff helped him mount. Bolt spurred his horse back to the head of our column. We rode on.

The morning was not even half gone when Arno had his friend halt for the third time. He slipped down from the horse's back and staggered a few steps away to vomit. He doubled up, holding his aching guts as he did so, and then suddenly fell forward on his face in the dirt. One of the other

guards laughed aloud, but when Arno only rolled over, groaning, Bolt ordered Joff to see what ailed him. We all watched as Joff dismounted and took water to Arno. Arno could not take the proffered water bottle and when Joff put it to his mouth the water just ran over his chin. He turned his head aside from it slowly and closed his eyes. After a moment, Joff looked up, her eyes wide with disbelief.

‘He’s dead, sir.’ Joff’s voice went a bit shrill on the words.

They scraped out a shallow grave for him and heaped rocks over the top. Two more guards had vomited before the burial was completed. Bad water was the consensus, though I caught Bolt looking at me with narrowed eyes. They hadn’t bothered to take me off my horse. I hunched over my belly as if it pained me and kept my eyes down. It was no difficulty at all to look sick.

Bolt got his men remounted and we pushed on. By noon it was apparent that no one was well. One boy was swaying in his saddle as we rode. Bolt halted us for a brief rest but it turned into a longer one. No sooner would one man finish retching than another would begin. Bolt finally ordered them tersely back to their saddles despite their groaning complaints. We went on but at a gentler pace. I could smell the sour reek of sweat and puke on the woman who led my mare.

As we were going up a gentle rise, Joff fell from her saddle into the dust. I gave my mare a sharp nudge with my heels, but she only sidled sideways and put her ears back, too well-trained to gallop off with her reins dangling down from her bit. Bolt halted his troop, and every man immediately dismounted, some to puke, others to simply sink down in misery beside the horses. ‘Make camp,’ Bolt ordered, despite the early hour. Then he walked aside a little way, to crouch and retch dryly for a time. Joff didn’t get up.

It was Bolt who walked back to me and cut my wrists loose from my saddle pommel. He gave a tug at my chain and I all but fell down on top of him. I staggered away a few steps, then sank down, my hands over my belly. He came to hunker down beside me. He grabbed the back of my neck, gripped it tightly. But I could feel his strength was not what it had been. ‘What do you think, Bastard?’ he asked me in a hoarse growl. He was very close to me and his breath and body stank of sickness. ‘Was it bad water? Or something else?’

I made gagging sounds and leaned toward him as if to puke. He moved wearily away from me. Only two of his guards had managed to unsaddle their mounts. The others were collapsed miserably in the dirt. Bolt moved among them, cursing them uselessly but feelingly. One of the stronger guards finally began to gather the makings for a fire, while another crabbed down the line of horses, doing little more than uncinching saddles and dragging them from the horses' backs. Bolt came to fasten the hobble chain between my ankles.

Two more guards died that evening. Bolt himself dragged their bodies to one side, but could not find the strength to do more than that. The fire they had managed to kindle died soon for lack of fuel. The open night on the flat land seemed darker than anything I had ever known and the dry cold a part of the darkness. I heard the groans of the men, and one babbling about his guts, his guts. I heard the restless shifting of the unwatered horses. I thought longingly of water and warmth. Odd pains bothered me. My wrists were chafed raw from the shackles. They hurt less than my shoulder, but in an ever-present way I could not ignore. I guessed the blade-bone in my shoulder was at least fractured.

Bolt came staggering over to where I lay at dawn. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks drawn with his misery. He fell to his knees beside me and gripped my hair. I groaned. 'Are you dying, Bastard?' he asked me hoarsely. I moaned again and tried feebly to pull free of him. It seemed to satisfy him. 'Good. Good then. Some were saying it was the Wit magic you'd put on us, Bastard. But I think bad water can kill a man, be he Witted or honourable. Still. Let's be sure of it, this time.'

It was my own knife that he drew out. As he dragged back on my hair to expose my throat, I brought up my shackled hands to crash the chain against his face. At the same time I *repelled* at him with all the strength of Wit I could muster. He fell back from me. He crawled a few paces away, then fell on his side in the sand. I heard him breathing heavily. After a time, he stopped. I closed my eyes, listening to that silence, feeling the absence of his life like sunlight on my face.

After a time, when the day was stronger, I forced myself to open my eye. It was harder to crawl over to Bolt's body. All my aches had stiffened and combined to one pain that shrieked whenever I moved. I went over his body carefully. I found Burrich's earring in his pouch. Odd to think that I stopped right then and put it back in my ear lest I lose it. My poisons were

there as well. What wasn't in his pouch was the key to my shackles. I started to sort my possessions out from his, but the sun was pounding spikes into the back of my head. I simply put his pouch at my belt. Whatever he'd had in there was mine now. Once you've poisoned a man, I reflected, you might as well rob him as well. Honour no longer seemed to have much to do with my life.

Whoever had shackled me probably carried the key, I surmised. I crawled to the next body, but found nothing in his pouch save some Smoke herbs. I sat up, and became aware of faltering footsteps crunching over the dry earth toward me. I lifted my eyes, squinted against the sunlight. The boy came slowly toward me, his steps wavering. In one hand he had a waterskin. In the other he held the key where I might see it.

A dozen steps away from me, he halted. 'Your life for mine,' he croaked. He was swaying where he stood. I made no response. He tried again. 'Water and the key to your bonds. Any horse you want to take. I won't fight you. Only lift your Wit-curse off me.'

He looked so young and pitiful standing there.

'Please,' he begged me abruptly.

I found myself shaking my head slowly. 'It was poison,' I told him. 'There's nothing I can do for you.'

He stared at me, bitterly, incredulous. 'Then I have to die? Today?' His words came out as a dry whisper. His dark eyes locked to mine. I found myself nodding.

'Damn you!' He shrieked the words, burning whatever life strength he had left. 'Then you die, too. You die right here!' He flung the key from us as far as he could, then staggered off in a feeble run, squawking and flailing at the horses.

The beasts had stood all night unpicketed, had even waited all morning hoping for grain and water. They were well-trained animals. But the smell of sickness and death and this boy's incomprehensible behaviour were too much for them. When he screamed suddenly and then fell face down almost among them, a big grey gelding threw up his head, snorting. I sent calming thoughts toward him, but he had thoughts of his own. He pranced nervously away, then suddenly decided this was a good decision and broke into a canter. The other horses followed his lead. Their hooves were not a thundering on the plain; rather they were the diminishing patter of a rainstorm as it vanishes, taking all hope of life with it.

The boy did not move again, but it was a time before he died. I had to listen to his soft weeping as I searched for the key. I wanted desperately to go look for waterskins instead, but I feared that if I turned away from the area where he had thrown it, I would never be able to decide which unremarkable stretch of sand held my salvation. So I crawled over it on my hands and knees, manacles cutting and chafing at my wrists and ankles, as I peered at the ground with my one good eye. Even after the sound of his weeping became too soft to hear, even after he died, I heard it still inside my mind. Sometimes I still can. Another young life ended senselessly, to no profit, as a result of Regal's vendetta with me. Or perhaps because of mine with him.

I did eventually find the key, just as I was certain that the setting sun would hide it forever. It was crudely made and turned very stiffly in the locks, but it worked. I opened the shackles, prying them out of my puffy flesh. The one on my left ankle had been so tight that my foot was cold and near numb. After a few minutes, pain flooded back into my foot with life. I didn't pay much attention. I was too busy seeking for water.

Most of the guards had drained their waterskins just as my poison had drained all fluids from their guts. The one the boy had shown me held only a few mouthfuls. I drank them very slowly, holding the water in my mouth for a long time before swallowing it. In Bolt's saddle-bags I found a flask of brandy. I allowed myself one small mouthful of it, then capped it and set it aside. It was not much more than a day's walk back to the waterhole. I could make it. I'd have to.

I robbed the dead for what I needed. I went through the saddlebags and bundles on the heaped saddles. When I was finished, I wore a blue shirt that fit me in the shoulders, though it hung almost to my knees. I had dried meat and grain, lentils and peas, my old sword that I decided fit me best, Bolt's knife, a looking-glass, a small kettle, a mug and a spoon. I spread out a sturdy blanket and put these things on it. To them I added a change of clothing that was too large for me, but would be better than nothing. Bolt's cloak would be long on me, but it was the best made, so I took it. One of the men had carried some linen for bandaging and some salves. I took these, an empty waterskin and Bolt's flask of brandy.

I could have gone over the bodies for money and jewellery. I could have burdened myself with a dozen other perhaps-useful possessions. I found I wanted only to replace what I'd had, and to be away from the smell

of the bloating bodies. I made the bundle as small and tight as I could, cinching it with leather straps from the horses' harness. When I lifted it to my good shoulder, it still felt much too heavy.

My brother?

The query seemed tentative, faint with more than distance. With disuse. As if a man spoke in a language he had not used in many years.

I live, Nighteyes. Stay with your pack, and live also.

Do you not need me? I felt his twinge of conscience as he asked this.

I always need you. I need to know you are alive and free.

I sensed his faint assent, but little more than that. After a time I wondered if I had not imagined his touch against my mind. But I felt oddly strengthened as I walked away from the bodies into the deepening night.

THIRTEEN

Blue Lake

Blue Lake is the terminus of the Cold River. It is also the name of the largest town on its shores. Early in King Shrewd's reign, the country surrounding the northeast side of the lake was renowned for its grainfields and orchards. A grape peculiar to its soil produced a wine with a bouquet no other could rival. Blue Lake wine was known not just throughout the Six Duchies, but was exported by the caravan load as far as Bingtown. Then came the long droughts and the lightning fires that followed them. The farmers and vintners of the area never recovered. Blue Lake subsequently began to rely more heavily on trade. The present-day town of Blue Lake is a trade town, where the caravans from Farrow and the Chalced States meet to barter for the goods of the Mountain folk. In summers, huge barges navigate the placid waters of the lake, but in winter the storms that sweep down from the mountains drive the barge folk from the lake and put an end to trade on the water.

The night sky was clear with an immense orange moon hanging low. The stars were true and I followed their guidance, sparing a few moments for weary wonderment that these were the same stars that had once shone down on me as I made my way home to Buckkeep. Now they guided me back to the Mountains.

I walked the night away. Not swiftly, and not steadily, but I knew that the sooner I got to water, the sooner I could ease my pains. The longer I went without water, the weaker I would become. As I walked, I moistened one of the linen bandages with Bolt's brandy, and dabbed at my face. I had looked at the damage briefly in the looking-glass. There was no mistaking that I had lost another fight. Most of it was bruising and minor cuts. I expected no new scars. The brandy stung on the numerous abrasions, but the moisture eased some of the scabbing so that I could open my mouth with minimal pain. I was hungry, but feared the salty dried meat would only accentuate my thirst.

I watched the sun come up over the great Farrow plain in a marvellous array of colours. The chill of the night eased and I loosened Bolt's cloak. I

kept walking. With the increasing light, I scanned the ground hopefully. Perhaps some of the horses had headed back to the waterhole. But I saw no fresh tracks, only the crumble-edged hoofprints we had made yesterday, already being devoured by the wind.

The day was still young when I reached the water-place. I approached it cautiously, but my nose and my eyes told me it was blessedly deserted. I knew I could not depend on my luck that it would be that way long. It was a regular stopping place for caravans. My first act was to drink my fill. Then there was a certain luxury to building my own small fire, heating a kettle of water and adding lentils, beans, grain and dried meat to it. I set it on a stone close to the fire to simmer while I stripped and washed in the waterhole. It was shallow at one end, and the sun had almost warmed it. The flat blade of my left shoulder was still quite painful to touch or move, as were the chafed places on my wrists and ankles, the knot on the back of my head, my face in general ... I left off cataloguing my pain for myself. I wasn't going to die from any of it. What more than that mattered?

The sun dried me while I shivered. I sloshed out my clothes and spread them on some brush. While the sun dried them, I wrapped myself in Bolt's cloak, drank brandy and stirred my soup. I had to add more water, and it seemed to take years for the dried beans and lentils to soften. I sat by my fire, occasionally adding some more branches or dried dung to it. After a time, I opened my eyes again and tried to decide if I were drunk, beaten or incredibly weary. I decided that was as profitable as cataloguing my pain. I ate the soup as it was, with the beans still a bit hard. I had more of the brandy with it. There wasn't much left. It was difficult to persuade myself to do it, but I cleaned the kettle and warmed more water. I cleaned the worst of my cuts, treated them with the salve, wrapped the ones that could be bandaged. One ankle looked nasty; I could not afford for it to become infected. I lifted my eyes to find the daylight fading. It seemed to have gone swiftly. With the last of my energy, I put out my fire, bundled up all my possessions, and moved away from the waterhole. I needed to sleep and I would not risk being discovered by other travellers. I found a small depression that was slightly sheltered from the wind by some tarry-smelling brush. I spread out the blanket, covered myself with Bolt's cloak and sank down into sleep.

I know that for a time I slept dreamlessly. Then I had one of those confusing dreams in which someone called my name, but I could not find

who. A wind was blowing and it was rainy. I hated the sound of the blowing wind, so lonely. Then the door opened and Burrich stood in it. He was drunk. I felt both irritated and relieved. I had been waiting for him to come home since yesterday, and now he was here, he was drunk. How dared he be so?

A shivering ran over me, an almost awakening. And I knew that these were Molly's thoughts, it was Molly I was Skill-dreaming. I should not, I knew I should not, but in that edgeless dream state, I had not the will to resist. Molly stood up carefully. Our daughter was sleeping in her arms. I caught a glimpse of a small face, pink and plump, not the wrinkled red face of the newborn I'd seen before. To have already changed so much! Silently, Molly carried her to the bed and placed her gently on it. She turned up a corner of the blanket to keep the baby warm. Without turning around, she said in a low tight voice, 'I was worried. You said you'd be back yesterday.'

'I know. I'm sorry. I should have been, but ...' Burrich's voice was hoarse. There was no spirit in it.

'But you stayed in town and got drunk,' Molly filled in coldly.

'I ... yes. I got drunk.' He shut the door and came into the room. He moved to the fire to warm his red hands before it. His cloak was dripping and so was his hair, as if he had not bothered to pull the hood up as he walked home. He set a carry-sack down by the door. He took the soaked cloak off and sat down stiffly in the chair by the hearth. He leaned forward to rub his bad knee.

'Don't come in here when you're drunk,' Molly told him flatly.

'I don't. I'm not drunk. I know that's how you feel. I was drunk yesterday. I had a bit, earlier today, but I'm not drunk. Not now. Now I'm just ... tired. Very tired.' He leaned forward and put his head in his hands.

'You can't even sit up straight.' I could hear the anger rising in Molly's voice. 'You don't even know when you're drunk.'

Burrich looked up at her wearily. 'Perhaps you're right,' he conceded, shocking me. He sighed. 'I'll go,' he told her. He rose, wincing as he put weight on his leg, and Molly felt a pang of guilt. He was still cold, and the shed where he slept at night was draughty and damp. But he'd brought it on himself. He knew how she felt about drunkards. Let a man have a drink or two, that was fine, she had a cup herself now and then, but to come staggering home like this and try to tell her ...

'Can I see the baby for a moment?' Burrich asked softly. He had paused at the door. I saw something in his eyes, something Molly did not know him

well enough to recognize, and it cut me to the bone. He grieved.

‘She’s right there, on the bed. I just got her to sleep,’ Molly pointed out briskly.

‘Can I hold her ... just for a minute?’

‘No. You’re drunk and you’re cold. If you touch her, she’ll wake up. You know that. Why do you want to do that?’

Something in Burrich’s face crumpled. His voice was hoarse as he said, ‘Because Fitz is dead, and she’s all I have left of him or his father. And sometimes ...’ He lifted a wind-roughened hand to rub his face. ‘Sometimes it seems as if it’s all my fault.’ His voice went very soft on those words. ‘I should never have let them take him from me. When he was a boy. When they first wanted to move him up to the keep, if I’d put him on a horse behind me and gone to Chivalry, maybe they’d both still be alive. I thought of that. I nearly did it. He didn’t want to leave me, you know, and I made him. I nearly took him back to Chivalry instead. But I didn’t. I let them have him, and they used him.’

I felt the trembling that ran suddenly through Molly. Tears stung suddenly at her own eyes. She defended herself with anger. ‘Damn you, he’s been dead for months. Don’t try to get around me with drunkard’s tears.’

‘I know,’ Burrich said. ‘I know. He’s dead.’ He took a sudden deep breath, and straightened himself in that old familiar way. I saw him fold up his pains and weakness and hide them deep inside himself. I wanted to reach out and put a steadying hand on his shoulder. But that was truly me and not Molly. He started for the door, and then paused. ‘Oh. I have something.’ He fumbled inside his shirt. ‘This was his. I ... took it from his body, after he died. You should keep it for her, so she has something of her father’s. He had this from King Shrewd.’

My heart turned over in my chest as Burrich stretched out his hand. There on his palm was my pin, with the ruby nestled in the silver. Molly just looked at it. Her lips were set in a flat line. Anger, or tight control of whatever she felt. So harsh a control even she did not know what she hid from. When she did not move toward him, Burrich set it carefully on the table.

It all came together for me suddenly. He’d gone up to the shepherd’s cabin, to try again to find me, to tell me I had a daughter. Instead, what had he found? A decayed body, probably not much more than bones by now,

wearing my shirt with the pin still thrust safely into the lapel. The Forged boy had been dark-haired, about my height and age.

Burrich believed I was dead. Really and truly dead. And he mourned me.

Burrich. Burrich, please, I'm not dead. Burrich, Burrich!

I rattled and raged around him, battering at him with every bit of my Skill-sense, but as always, I could not reach him. I came suddenly awake trembling and clutching at myself, feeling as if I were a ghost. He'd probably already gone to Chade. They'd both think me dead. A strange dread filled me at that thought. It seemed terribly unlucky to have all of one's friends believe one to be dead.

I rubbed gently at my temples, feeling the beginning of a Skill-headache. A moment later I realized my defences were down, that I'd been Skilling as fiercely as I was able toward Burrich. I slammed my walls up and then curled up shivering in the dusk. Will hadn't stumbled onto my Skilling that time, but I could not afford to be so careless. Even if my friends believed me dead, my enemies knew better. I must keep those walls up, must never take a chance of letting Will into my head. The new pain of the headache pounded at me, but I was too weary to get up and make tea. Besides, I had no elfbark, only the Tradeford woman's untried seeds. I drank the rest of Bolt's brandy instead, and went back to sleep. At the edge of awareness, I dreamed of wolves running. *I know you live. I shall come to you if you need me. You need but ask.* The reaching was tentative but true. I clung to the thought like a friendly hand as sleep claimed me.

In the days that followed, I walked to Blue Lake. I walked through wind carrying scouring sand in it. The scenery was rocks and scree, crackly brush with leathery leaves, low-growing fat-leaved succulents and far ahead, the great lake itself. At first the trail was no more than a scarring in the crusty surface of the plain, the cuts of hooves and the long ridges of the wagon paths fading in the ever-present cold wind. But as I drew closer to the lake, the land gradually became greener and gentler. The trail became more of a road. Rain began to fall with the wind, hard pattering rain that pelted its way through my clothes. I never felt completely dry.

I tried to avoid contact with the folk that travelled the road. There was no hiding from them in that flat country, but I did my best to look uninteresting and forbidding. Hard-riding messengers passed me on that trail, some headed toward Blue Lake, others back toward Tradeford. They

did not pause for me, but that was small comfort. Sooner or later, someone was going to find five unburied King's Guards and wonder at that. And the tale of how the Bastard had been captured right in their midst would be too juicy a gossip for Creece or Starling to forbear telling. The closer I got to Blue Lake, the more folk were on the road, and I dared to hope I blended in with other travellers. For in the rich grassy pasture lands, there were holdings and even small settlements. One could see them from a great distance, the tiny hummock of a house and the wisp of smoke rising from a chimney. The land began to have more moisture in it, and brush gave way to bushes and trees. Soon I was passing orchards and then pastures with milk cows, and chickens scratching in the dirt by the side of the road. Finally I came to the town that shared the name of the lake itself.

Beyond Blue Lake was another stretch of flat land, and then the foothills. Beyond them, the Mountain Kingdom. And somewhere beyond the Mountain Kingdom was Verity.

It was a little unsettling when I considered how long it had taken me to come this far afoot compared to the first time when I had travelled with a royal caravan to claim Kettricken as bride for Verity. Out on the coast, summer was over and the winds of the winter storms had begun their lashing. Even here, it would not be long before the harsh cold of an inland winter seized the plains in the grip of the winter blizzards. I supposed the snow had already begun to fall in the Mountains. It would be deep before I reached the Mountains, and I did not know what conditions I would face as I travelled up into the heights to find Verity in the lands beyond. I did not truly know if he still lived; he had spent much strength helping me win free of Regal. Yet, *Come to me, come to me*, seemed to echo with the beating of my heart, and I caught myself keeping step to that rhythm. I would find Verity or his bones. But I knew I would not truly belong to myself again until I had done so.

Blue Lake town seems a larger city than it is because it sprawls so. I saw few dwellings of more than one storey. Most were low, long houses, with more wings added to the building as sons and daughters married and brought spouses home. Timber was plentiful on the other side of Blue Lake, so the poorer houses were of mud brick while those of veteran traders and fishers were of cedar plank roofed with wide shingles. Most of the houses were painted white or grey or a light blue, which made the structures seem

even larger. Many had windows with thick, whorled panes of glass in them. But I walked past them and went to where I always felt more at home.

The waterfront was both like and unlike a seaport town. There were no high and low tides to contend with, only storm-driven waves, so many more houses and businesses were built out on pilings quite a way into the lake itself. Some fisherfolk were able to tie up literally at their own doorsteps, and others delivered their catch to a back door so that the fish merchant might sell it out the front. It seemed strange to smell water without salt or iodine riding the wind; to me the lake air smelled greenish and mossy. The gulls were different, with black-tipped wings, but in all other ways as greedy and thieving as any gulls I'd ever known. There were also entirely too many guardsmen for my liking. They prowled about like trapped cats in Farrow's gold and brown livery. I did not look in their faces, nor give them reason to notice me.

I had a total of fifteen silvers and twelve coppers, the sum of my funds and what Bolt had been carrying in his own purse. Some of the coins were a style I did not recognize, but the weights felt good in my hand. I assumed they'd be accepted. They were all I had to get me as far as the Mountains, and all I had that I might ever take home to Molly. So they were doubly valuable to me and I did not intend to part with any more than I must. But neither was I so foolish as to even consider heading into the Mountains without some provisions and some heavier clothes. So spend some I must, but I also hoped to find a way to work my passage across Blue Lake, and perhaps beyond.

In every town, there are always poorer parts, and shops or carts where folk deal in the cast-off goods of others. I wandered Blue Lake for a bit, staying always to the waterfront where trade seemed the liveliest, and eventually I came to streets where most of the shops were of mud brick even if they were roofed with shingles. Here I found weary tinkers selling mended pots and rag-pickers with their carts of well-worn wares and shops where one might buy odd crockery and the like.

From now on, I knew, my pack would be heavier, but it could not be helped. One of the first things I bought was a sturdy basket plaited from lake reeds with carry straps to go over my shoulders. I placed my present bundle inside it. Before the day was out, I had added padded trousers, a quilted jacket such as the Mountain folk wore and a pair of loose boots, like soft leather socks. They had leather lacing to secure them tightly to my calves. I

also bought some woollen stockings, mismatched in colour but very thick, to wear beneath the boots. From another cart I purchased a snug woollen cap and a scarf. I bought a pair of mittens that were too large for me, obviously made by some Mountain wife to fit her husband's hands.

At a tiny herb stall, I was able to find elfbark, and so secured a small store of that for myself. In a nearby market, I bought strips of dried smoked fish, dried apples and flat cakes of very hard bread that the vendor assured me would keep well no matter how far I might travel.

I next endeavoured to book passage for myself on a barge across Blue Lake. Actually, I went to the waterfront hiring square, hoping to work my passage across. I swiftly found out no one was hiring. 'Look, mate,' a boy of thirteen loftily told me, 'everyone knows the big barges don't work the lake this time of year 'less there's gold in it. And there ain't this year. Mountain Witch shut down all the trade to the Mountains. Nothing to haul means no money worth taking the risk. And that's it, plain and simple. But even if the trade was open, you'd not find much going back and forth in winter. Summers is when the big barges can cross from this side to that. Winds can be iffy even then, but a good crew can work a barge, sail and oar, there and back again. But this time of year, it's a waste of time. The storms blow up every five days or so and the rest of the time the winds only blow one way, and if they aren't full of water, they're carrying ice and snow. It's a fine time to come from the Mountain side to Blue Lake town, if you don't mind getting wet and cold and chopping ice off your rigging all the way. But you won't find any of the big freight barges making the run from here to there until next spring. There's smaller boats that will take folk across, but passage on them is dear and for the daring. If you take ship on one of those, it's because you're willing to pay gold for the passage, and pay with your life if your skipper makes a mistake. You don't look as if you've got the coin for it, man, let alone to pay the King's tariff on the trip.'

Boy he might have been, but he knew what he spoke about. The more I listened, the more I heard the same thing. The Mountain Witch had closed the passes and innocent travellers were being attacked and robbed by Mountain brigands. For their own good, travellers and traders were being turned back at the border. War was looming. That chilled my heart, and made me all the more certain I must reach Verity. But when I insisted I had to get to the Mountains, and soon, I was advised to somehow avail myself of five gold pieces for the passage across the lake and good luck from there. In

one instance, a man hinted he knew of a somewhat illegal endeavour in which I might gain that much in a month's time or less, if I were interested. I was not. I already had enough difficulties to contend with.

Come to me.

I knew that somehow, I would.

I found a very cheap inn, run down and draughty, but at least not smelling too much of Smoke. The clientele could not afford it. I paid for a bed and got a pallet in an open loft above the common room. At least heat also rose with the errant smoke from the hearth below. By draping my cloak and clothes over a chair by my pallet, I was finally able to dry them completely for the first time in days. Song and conversation, both rowdy and quiet, were a constant chorus to my first effort at sleep. There was no privacy and I finally got the hot bath I longed for at a bath-and-steamhouse five doors away. But there was a certain weary pleasure in knowing where I would sleep at night, if not how well.

I had not planned it, but it was an excellent way also to listen to the common gossip of Blue Lake. The first night I was there, I learned much more than I wished to of a certain young noble who had got not one, but two serving women with child and the intimate details of a major brawl in a tavern two streets away that had left Jake Ruddy-Nose without his namesake portion of anatomy, having had it bitten off by Crookram the Scribe.

The second night I was at the inn, I heard the rumour that twelve King's Guards had been found slaughtered by brigands half a day's ride past Jernigan's Spring. By the next night, someone had made the connection, and tales were told of how the bodies had been savaged and fed upon by a beast. I considered it quite likely that scavengers had found the bodies and fed from them. But as the tale was told, it was clearly the work of the Wit Bastard, who had changed himself into a wolf to escape his fetters of cold iron, and fallen upon the whole company by the light of a full moon to wreak his savage violence on them. As the teller described me, I had little fear of being discovered in their midst. My eyes did not glow red in firelight, nor did my fangs protrude from my mouth. I knew there would be other, more prosaic descriptions of me passed about. Regal's treatment of me had left me with a singular set of scars that were difficult to conceal. I began to grasp how difficult it had been for Chade to work with a pock-scarred face.

The beard I had once found an irritant now seemed natural to me. It grew in wiry curls that reminded me of Verity's and was just as unruly. The

bruises and cuts Bolt had left on my face were mostly faded, though my shoulder still ached endlessly in the cold weather. The damp chill of the wintry air reddened my cheeks above my beard and fortunately made the edge of my scar less noticeable. The cut on my arm had long healed, but the broken nose I could do little about. It, too, no longer startled me when I saw it in a mirror. In a way, I reflected, I was as much Regal's creation now as Chade's. Chade had only taught me how to kill; Regal had made me a true assassin.

My third evening in the inn, I heard the gossip that made me cold.

'The King himself, it was, aye, and the head Skill-wizard. Cloaks of fine wool with so much fur at the collar and hood you could scarcely see their faces. Riding black horses with gold saddles, fine as you please, and a score of brown and golds riding at their heels. Cleared the whole square so they might pass, did the guards. So I said to the fella next to me, hey, what's all this, you know? And he told me King Regal has come to town to hear for himself what the Mountain Witch has been doing to us, and to put an end to it. And more. Says he, the King himself has come to track down the Pocked Man and the Witted Bastard, for it's well known they work hand in glove with the Mountain Witch.'

I overheard this from a rheumy-eyed beggar who'd earned enough coin to buy a mug of hot cider and nurse it next to the inn fire. This bit of gossip earned him another round, while his patron told him yet again the tale of the Wit Bastard and how he had slaughtered a dozen of the King's Guard and drunk their blood for his magic. I found myself a turmoil of emotions. Disappointment that my poisons had evidently done nothing to Regal. Fear that I might be discovered by him. And a savage hope that I might have one more chance at him before I found my way to Verity.

I scarcely needed to ask any questions. The next morning found all of Blue Lake abuzz with the King's arrival. It had been many years since a crowned king had actually visited Blue Lake, and every merchant and minor noble intended to take advantage of the visit. Regal had commandeered the largest and finest inn in the town, blithely ordering that all the rooms be cleared for him and his retinue. I heard rumours that the innkeeper was both flattered and aghast at being chosen, for while it would certainly establish the reputation of his inn, there had been no mention of recompense, only a lengthy list of victuals and vintages that King Regal expected to be available.

I dressed in my new winter garments, pulled my wool cap down over my ears and set forth. The inn was found easily. No other inn at Blue Lake was three storeys high, nor could any boast so many balconies and windows. The streets outside the inn were thick with nobles attempting to present themselves to King Regal, many with comely daughters in tow. They were jostling elbow to elbow with minstrels and jugglers offering to entertain, merchants bearing samples of their finest wares as gifts, as well as those making deliveries of meat, ale, wine, bread, cheese and every other foodstuff imaginable. I did not attempt to get in, but listened mostly to those coming out. The tap-room was packed with guardsmen, and a rude lot were they, badmouthing the local ale and whores as if they got better in Tradeford. And King Regal was not receiving today, no, he felt poorly after his hasty trip, and had sent for the best stocks of merrybud to settle his complaints. Yes, there was to be a dinner this evening, a most lavish affair, my dear, only the very finest of folk to be invited. And did you see him, with that one eye gone like a dead fish's, fair give me the creeps, was I the King, I'd find a better made man to advise me, Skill or no. Such was the talk from a variety of folk leaving by front door and back, and I stored it all away as well as noting well which windows in the inn were curtained against the day's brief light. Resting, was he? I could aid him with that.

But there I found my dilemma. A few weeks ago, I would simply have slipped in and done my best to plant a knife in Regal's chest, and damn the consequences. But now I not only had Verity's Skill-command eating at me, but also the knowledge that if I survived, I had a woman and child awaiting me. I was no longer willing to trade my life for Regal's. This time, I needed a plan.

Nightfall found me on the roof of the inn. It was a cedar-shake roof, sharply peaked, and very slippery with frost. There were several wings to the inn, and I lay in the juncture of the pitched roofs between two of them, waiting. I was grateful to Regal for having chosen the largest and finest inn. I was up well above the level of the neighbouring buildings. No one was going to see me with a casual glance; they'd have to be looking for me. Even so, I waited till full dark before I half slid and half clambered down to the edge of the eaves. I lay there a time, calming my heart. There was nothing to hold on to. The roof had a generous eave, to shield the balcony below it. I would have to slide down, catch the eave with my hands in passing, and swing myself in if I was to land on the balcony. Otherwise, it was a three-

storey drop to the street. I prayed I would not land upon the balcony's decoratively spiked railing.

I had planned well. I knew which rooms were Regal's bedchamber and sitting room, I knew the hour at which he would be at dinner with his guests. I had studied the door and window latches on several buildings in Blue Lake. I found nothing I was unfamiliar with. I had secured some small tools and a length of light line would provide my exit. I would enter and leave without a trace. My poisons waited in my belt pouch.

Two awls taken from a cobbler's shop earlier in the day provided my hand grips as I worked my way down the roof. I thrust them, not into the tough shakes, but between them so they caught on the overlapping shakes below. I was most nervous for the moments when part of my body dangled off the roof, with no clear view of what was happening below. At the crucial moment, I swung my legs a few times for impetus, and braced myself to let go.

Trap-trap.

I froze where I was, my legs curled under the eave of the roof while I clung to the two awls sunk between the shakes. I did not even breathe. It was not Nighteyes.

No. Small Ferret. Trap-trap. Go away. Trap-trap.

It's a trap?

Trap-trap for Wolf-Fitz. Old Blood knows, Big Ferret said, go with, go with, warn Wolf-Fitz. Rolf-Bear knew your smell. Trap-trap. Go away.

I almost cried out when a small warm body suddenly struck my leg and then ran up my clothes. In a moment, a ferret poked its whiskery face into mine. *Trap-trap*, he insisted. *Go away, go away.*

Dragging my body back up onto the roof was more difficult than lowering it down. I had a bad moment when my belt caught on the edge of the eaves. After a bit of wriggling, I got loose and slowly slithered back up onto the roof. I lay still a moment, catching my breath, while the ferret sat between my shoulders, explaining over and over. *Trap-trap*. A tiny, savagely predatory mind was his, and I sensed a great anger in him. I would not have chosen such a bond animal for myself, but someone had. Someone who was no more.

Big Ferret hurt to death. Tells little Ferret, go with, go with. Take the smell. Warn Fitz-Wolf. Trap-trap.

There was so much I wanted to ask. Somehow Black Rolf had interceded for me with the Old Blood. Since I had left Tradeford, I had feared that every Witted one I encountered would be against me. But someone had sent this small creature to warn me. And he had held to his purpose, even though his bond-partner was dead. I tried to learn more from him, but there was not much more in that small mind. Great hurt and outrage at the passing of his bond-partner. A determination to warn me. I would never learn who Big Ferret had been, nor how he had discovered this plan nor how his bond-beast had managed to conceal himself in Will's possessions. For that was who he showed me waiting silently in the room below. One-eye. The trap-trap.

Come with me? I offered him. Fierce as he was, he still seemed small and all alone. To touch minds with him was like seeing what remained of an animal cloven in two. The pain drove from his mind all save his purpose. There was room for only one other thing now.

No. Go with, go with. Hide in One-Eye's things. Warn Fitz-Wolf. Go with, go with. Find Old Blood-Hater. Hide-hide. Wait, wait. Old Blood-Hater sleep, Small Ferret kill.

He was a small animal, with a small mind. But an image of Regal, Old Blood-Hater, was fixed in that simple mind. I wondered how long it had taken Big Ferret to implant this notion firmly enough for him to carry it for weeks. Then I knew. A dying wish. The little creature had been driven all but mad by the death of his bond-human. This had been Big Ferret's last message to him. It seemed a futile errand for so small a beast.

Come with me, I suggested gently. *How can Small Ferret kill Old Blood-Hater?*

In an eye-blink he was at my throat. I actually felt the sharp teeth grip the vein in my throat. *Snip-snip when he sleeps. Drink his blood like a coney. No more Big Ferret, no more holes, no more coneys. Only Old Blood-Hater. Snip-snip.* He let go of my jugular and slipped suddenly inside my shirt. *Warm.* His small clawed feet were icy on my skin.

I had a strip of dried meat in my pocket. I lay on the roof and fed it to my fellow assassin. I would have persuaded him to come with me if I could, but I sensed he could no more change his mind than I could refuse to go to Verity. It was all he had left of Big Ferret. Pain, and a dream of revenge. *Hide-hide. Go with, go with the One-Eye. Smell the Old Blood-Hater. Wait until he sleeps. Then snip-snip. Drink his blood like a coney's.*

Yes-yes. My hunt. Trap-trap Fitz-Wolf. Go away, go away.

I took his advice. Someone had given much to send me this courier. I did not wish to face Will in any case. Much as I wanted to kill him, I knew now I was not his equal in the Skill. Nor did I wish to spoil Small Ferret's chance. There is honour among assassins, of a kind. It warmed my heart to know I was not Regal's only enemy. Soundless as the dark, I made my way over the inn roof and then down to the street by the stable.

I returned to my dilapidated inn, paid my copper and took a place at a plank table beside two other men. We ate the inn's potato and onion mainstay. When a hand fell on my shoulder, I did not startle so much as flinch. I had known there was someone behind me; I had not expected him to touch me. My hand went to my belt knife stealthily as I turned on my bench to face him. My table-mates went on eating, one noisily. No man in this inn professed an interest in any business save his own.

I looked up at Starling's smiling face and my guts turned over inside me. 'Tom!' she greeted me jovially, and claimed a seat at the table beside me. The man next to me gave over the space without a word, scraping his bowl along with himself over the stained table plank. After a moment I took my hand from my knife and put it back on the table's edge. Starling gave a small nod to that gesture. She wore a black cloak of good thick wool, trimmed with yellow embroidery. Small silver rings graced her ears now. She was entirely too pleased with herself to suit me. I said nothing, but only looked at her. She made a small gesture toward my bowl.

'Please, go on eating. I didn't mean to disturb your meal. You look as if you could use it. Short rations lately?'

'A bit,' I said softly. When she said no more, I finished the soup, wiping out the wooden bowl with the last two bites of coarse bread that had come with it. By then Starling had attracted the attention of a serving-girl, who brought us two mugs of ale. She took a long draw from hers, made a face, and then set it back on the table. I sipped at mine and found it no worse to the palate than the lake water that was the alternative.

'Well?' I said at last when she still had not spoken. 'What do you want?'

She smiled affably, toying with the handle of her mug. 'You know what I want. I want a song, one that will live after me.' She glanced about us, especially at the man who was still noisily sucking down his soup. 'Have you a room?' she asked me.

I shook my head. 'I've a pallet in the loft. And I've no songs for you, Starling.'

She shrugged her shoulders, a tiny movement. 'I've no songs for you right now, but I've got tidings that would interest you. And I've a room. At an inn some way from here. Walk there with me, and then we shall talk. There was a fine shoulder of pork roasting on the hearth fire when I left. It would likely be cooked by the time we got there.'

Every sense I had pricked up at the mention of meat. I could smell it, I could almost taste it. 'I couldn't afford it,' I told her bluntly.

'I could,' she offered blandly. 'Get your things. I'll share my room as well.'

'And if I decline?' I asked quietly.

Again she made the tiny shrugging motion. 'It's your choice.' She returned my gaze levelly. I could not decide if there was a threat in her small smile or not.

After a time I rose and went to the loft. When I returned, I had my things. Starling was waiting for me by the base of the ladder.

'Nice cloak,' she observed wryly. 'Haven't I seen it somewhere before?'

'Perhaps you have,' I said quietly. 'Would you like to see the knife that goes with it?'

Starling only smiled more broadly and made a small warding gesture with her hands. She turned and walked away, not looking back to see if I followed. Again, there was that curious mixture of trusting me and challenging me. I walked behind her.

Outside it was evening. The sharp wind that blew through the streets was full of lake damp. Even though it was not raining, I felt the moisture beading on my clothes and skin. My shoulder began to ache immediately. There were no street torches still burning; what little light there was escaped from shutters and doorsills. But Starling walked with sureness and confidence, and I followed, my eyes swiftly adjusting to the darkness.

She led me away from the waterfront, away from the poorer quarters of the town, up to the merchant streets and the inns that served the tradefolk of the town. It was not so far from the inn where King Regal was not truly staying at all. She opened an inn door that was inscribed with a tusked boar's head, and nodded to me to precede her. I did, but cautiously, glancing about

well before I entered. Even after I saw no guardsmen, I was not sure if I were running my head into a snare or not.

This inn was bright and warm, with glass as well as shutters for its windows. The tables were clean, the reeds on the floor almost fresh, and the smell of roasting pork filled the air. A serving-boy walked by us with a tray full of brimming mugs, looked at me, then raised an eyebrow to Starling, obviously questioning her choice of men. Starling replied with a swooping bow, and in the process swept off her damp cloak. I followed suit more slowly, and then trailed after her as she led me to a table near the hearth.

She seated herself, then looked up at me. She was confident she had me now. 'Let's eat before we talk, shall we?' she invited me engagingly, and indicated the chair opposite her. I took the offered seat, but turned it so my back was to the wall and I could command a view of the room. A small smile twitched at her mouth and her dark eyes danced. 'You've nothing to fear from me, I assure you. On the contrary, it is I who place myself at risk in seeking you out.'

She glanced about, then called to a boy named Oak that we wished two platters of the roast pork, some fresh bread and butter, and apple wine to go with it. He hastened off to fetch it, and served it out on our table with a charm and grace that bespoke his interest in Starling. He exchanged some small chatter with her, but noticed me very little, save to make a face of distaste as he stepped around my damp carry-basket. Another patron called him away, and Starling attacked her plate with appetite. After a moment, I sampled mine. I had not had fresh meat in some days, and the hot crackling fat on the pork almost made me dizzy with its savour. The bread was fragrant, the butter sweet. I had not tasted food this good since Buckkeep. For a second my appetite was all I considered. Then the taste of the apple wine put me suddenly in mind of Rurisk and how he had died of poisoned wine. I set my goblet carefully back on the table and recalled my caution. 'So. You sought me out, you say?'

Starling nodded as she chewed. She swallowed, wiped her mouth and added, 'And you were not easy to find, for I was not asking folk for news of you. Only looking with my own two eyes. I hope you appreciate that.'

I gave a half nod. 'And now that you have found me? What do you want of me? A bribe for your silence? If so, you'll have to content yourself with a few coppers.'

‘No.’ She took a sip of wine, then cocked her head to look at me. ‘It is as I’ve told you. I want a song. It seems to me I’ve missed one already, not following you when you were ... removed from our company. Though I hope you’ll favour me with the details of exactly how you survived.’ She leaned forward, the power of her trained voice dropping down to a confidential whisper. ‘I can’t tell you what a thrill that was for me, when I heard they’d found those six guardsmen dead. I had thought I was wrong about you, you see. I truly believed they had dragged off poor old Tom the shepherd as a scapegoat. Chivalry’s son, I told myself, would never go as quietly as all that. And so I let you go and I didn’t follow. But when I heard the news, it put a shiver up my spine as stood every hair on my body on end. “It was him,” I chided myself. “The Bastard was there and I watched him taken away and never stirred a finger.” You can’t imagine how I cursed myself for doubting my instincts. But then I decided, well, if you survived, you’d still come here. You’re on your way to the Mountains, aren’t you?’

I just looked at her, a flat gaze that would have sent any Buckkeep stable-boy scuttling, and wiped the grin from the face of a Buck guard. But Starling was a minstrel. Singers of songs are never easily abashed. She went on with her meal, waiting for my answer. ‘Why would I be going to the Mountains?’ I asked her softly.

She swallowed, took a sip of wine, then smiled. ‘I don’t know why. To rally to Kettricken’s aid perhaps? Whatever the reason, I suspect there’s a song in it, don’t you?’

A year ago, her charm and smile might have won me. A year ago I would have wanted to believe this engaging woman, I’d have wanted her to be my friend. Now she only made me tired. She was an encumbrance, a connection to avoid. I didn’t answer her question. I only said, ‘It’s a foolish time to even think of going to the Mountains. The winds are against the trip; there will be no barge runs until spring; and King Regal has forbidden travel or trade between Six Duchies and the Mountains. No one’s going to the Mountains.’

She nodded her agreement. ‘I understand that the King’s Guards pressed two barges and their crews a week ago, and forced them to attempt the trip. Bodies from at least one barge washed back to shore. Men and horses. No one knows if the other soldiers made it across or not. But,’ she smiled with satisfaction and drew closer to me as she dropped her voice, ‘I do know of one group who are still bound for the Mountains.’

‘Who?’ I demanded.

She made me wait a moment.

‘Smugglers.’ She spoke the word very softly.

‘Smugglers?’ I asked cautiously. It made sense. The tighter the restrictions on trade, the more profitable for those who managed it. There would always be men who would risk their lives for a profit.

‘Yes. But that is not truly why I sought you out. Fitz, you must have heard that King Regal has come to Blue Lake. But it’s all a lie, a trap to lure you in. You must not go there.’

‘I knew that,’ I told her calmly.

‘How?’ she demanded. She spoke quietly, but I could see how annoyed she was that I had known before she had told me.

‘Perhaps a little bird told me,’ I told her loftily. ‘You know how it is, we Witted ones speak the tongues of all the animals.’

‘Truly?’ she asked me, gullible as a child.

I raised one eyebrow at her. ‘It would be more interesting to me to know how you knew.’

‘They tracked us down to question us. Everybody they could find from Madge’s caravan.’

‘And?’

‘And such tales as we told. According to Creece, several sheep were lost along the way, dragged off at night without a sound. And when Tassin told of the night you tried to rape her, she said it was only then she noticed that your nails were black like a wolf’s claws, and your eyes glowed in the darkness.’

‘I never tried to rape her!’ I exclaimed, and then hushed myself when the waiting-boy turned toward us inquiringly.

Starling leaned back in her chair. ‘But such a fine tale as it made, it fair brought tears to my eyes. She showed the Skill-wizard the mark on her cheek where you’d clawed her, and said she would never have escaped you but for the wolfsbane that happened to grow nearby.’

‘It sounds to me as if you should follow Tassin about if you are looking for a song,’ I muttered disgustedly.

‘Oh, but the tale I told was even better,’ she began, then shook her head at the serving-boy as he approached. She pushed away her empty plate and glanced about the room. It was starting to fill with the evening’s customers. ‘I have a room upstairs,’ she invited me. ‘We can talk more privately there.’

This second meal had finally filled my belly. And I was warm. I should have felt wary; but the food and the warmth were making me sleepy. I tried to focus my thoughts. Whoever these smugglers were, they offered the hope of getting to the Mountains. The only hope I'd had lately. I gave a small nod. She rose and I followed with my carry-basket.

The room upstairs was clean and warm. There was a feather bed on the bedframe, with clean wool blankets upon it. A pottery ewer of water and a washbasin rested on a small stand by the bed. Starling lit several candles in the room, driving the shadows back into the corners. Then she gestured me in. As she latched the door behind us, I sat down on the chair. Odd, how a simple, clean room could seem such a luxury to me now. Starling sat down on the bed.

'I thought you said you had no more coin than I did,' I commented.

'I didn't, back then. But since I came to Blue Lake, I've been in demand. Even more so since the guards' bodies were found.'

'How is that?' I asked her coldly.

'I'm a minstrel,' she retorted. 'And I was there when the Wit Bastard was taken. Do you think I can't tell the story of that well enough to be worth a coin or two?'

'So. I see.' I mulled over what she had told me, then asked, 'So, do I owe my glowing red eyes and fangs to your telling?'

She gave a snort of disdain. 'Of course not. Some street-corner ballad-maker came up with that.' Then she halted, and smiled almost to herself. 'But I'll admit to a bit of embroidery. As I tell it, Chivalry's Bastard was stoutly thewed and fought like a buck, a young man in the prime of his years, despite the fact that his right arm still bore the savage marks of King Regal's sword. And above his left eye, he'd a streak of white as wide as a man's hand in his hair. It took three guardsmen just to hold him, and he did not stop fighting, even when the leader of the guard struck him so hard it knocked the teeth from the front of his mouth.' She paused and waited. When I said nothing, she cleared her throat. 'You might thank me for making it a bit less likely that folk would recognize you on the street.'

'Thank you. I suppose. How did Creece and Tassin react to that?'

'They nodded all the while. My story only made theirs all the better, you see.'

'I see. But you still haven't told me how you know it was a trap.'

‘They offered us money for you. If any of us had had word from you. Creece wanted to know how much. We had been taken up to the King’s own sitting room for this questioning. To make us feel more important, I suppose. We were told the King himself felt ill after his long trip, and was resting right next door. While we were there, a servant came out, bringing the King’s cloak and his boots to be cleaned of mud.’ Starling gave me a small smile. ‘The boots were immense.’

‘And you know the size of the King’s feet?’ I knew she was correct. Regal had small hands and feet, and was more vain of them than many a court lady.

‘I’ve never been to court. But a few of those better born at our keep had been up to Buckkeep for occasions. They spoke much of the handsome youngest prince, of his fine manners and dark, curling hair. And his tidy feet, and how well he danced on them.’ She shook her head. ‘I knew it was not King Regal in that room. The rest was easy to deduce. They had come to Blue Lake too promptly following the killings of the guards. They came for you.’

‘Perhaps,’ I conceded. I was beginning to have a high opinion of Starling’s wits. ‘Tell me more of the smugglers. How did you come to hear of them?’

She shook her head, smiling. ‘If you strike a bargain with them, it will be through me. And I shall be a part of it.’

‘How are they getting to the Mountains?’ I asked.

She looked at me. ‘If you were a smuggler, would you tell others what route you used?’ Then she shrugged. ‘I’ve heard gossip that smugglers have a way to cross the river. An old way. I know there was once a trade route that went upriver and then across. It fell out of favour when the river became so unpredictable. Since the bad fires a few years back, the river floods every year. When it does, it shifts in its bed. So the regular traders have come to rely more on boats than on a bridge that may or may not be intact.’ She paused to gnaw briefly at a thumbnail. ‘I think that at one time, there was a bridge a way upstream but after the river washed it out for the fourth consecutive year, no one had the heart to rebuild it. Someone else told me that in summer there is a pulley ferry, and that they used to cross on the ice in winter. In the years when the river freezes. Maybe they are hoping the river will freeze this year. My own thought is, when trade is stopped in one place, it starts in another. There will be a way across.’

I frowned. 'No. There must be another way to the Mountains.'

Starling seemed mildly insulted that I'd doubt her. 'Ask about it yourself, if you choose. You might enjoy waiting with the King's Guard that strut all about the waterfront. But most folk will tell you to wait for spring. A few will tell you that if you want to get there in the winter, you don't start from here. You could go south, around Blue Lake entirely. From there, I gather there are several trade routes to the Mountains, even in winter.'

'By the time I did that, it would be spring. I could get to the Mountains just as quickly by waiting it out here.'

'That's another thing I've been told,' Starling agreed smugly.

I leaned forward and put my head in my hands. *Come to me*. 'Are there no close, easy ways across that damnable lake?'

'No. If there were an easy way to cross, there would not still be guardsmen infesting the entire waterfront.'

There seemed no other choice for me. 'Where would I find these smugglers?'

Starling grinned broadly. 'Tomorrow, I will take you to them,' she promised. She rose and stretched. 'But tonight I must take myself to the Gilded Pin. I have not sung my songs there yet, but yesterday I was invited. I've heard their clients can be quite generous to travelling minstrels.' She stooped to gather up her well-wrapped harp. I rose as she picked up her still-damp cloak.

'I must be on my way as well,' I said politely.

'Why not sleep here?' she offered. 'Less chance of being recognized and a lot fewer vermin in this room.' A smile twisted the corner of her mouth as she looked at my hesitant face. 'If I wanted to sell you to the King's Guard, I could have done it. As alone as you are, FitzChivalry, you had better decide to trust someone.'

When she called me by my name, it was as if something twisted inside me. And yet, 'Why?' I asked her softly. 'Why do you aid me? And don't tell me it's the hope of a song that may never be.'

'That shows how little you understand minstrels,' she said. 'There is no more powerful lure for one than that. But I suppose there is more. No. I know there is.' She looked up at me suddenly, her eyes meeting mine squarely. 'I had a little brother. Jay. He was a guard stationed at the Antler Island Tower. He saw you fight the day the Raiders came.' She gave a brief snort of laughter. 'Actually, you stepped over him. You sank your axe into

the man who had just struck him down. And waded deeper into the battle without even a glance back at him.’ She looked at me from the corner of her eyes. ‘That is why I sing “Antler Tower Raid” slightly different from any other minstrel. He told me of it, and I sing you as he saw you. A hero. You saved his life.’

She looked abruptly aside from me. ‘For a time, anyway. He died later, fighting for Buck. But for a time, he lived because of your axe.’ She stopped speaking, and swung her cloak around her shoulders. ‘Stay here,’ she told me. ‘Rest. I won’t be back until late. You can have the bed until then, if you want.’

She whisked out the door without waiting for a reply. I stood for a time staring at the closed door. FitzChivalry. Hero. Just words. But it was as if she had lanced something inside me, drained away some poison and now I could heal. It was the strangest feeling. Get some sleep, I advised myself. I actually felt as if I could.

FOURTEEN

Smugglers

There are few spirits so free as those of travelling minstrels, at least within the Six Duchies. If a minstrel is sufficiently talented, he can expect almost all rules of conduct to be suspended for him. They are permitted to ask the most prying of questions as a normal part of their trade. Almost without exception, a minstrel can presume hospitality anywhere from the King's own table to the lowliest hovel. They seldom marry in youth, though it is not unusual for them to bear children. Such children are free of the stigma of other bastards, and are frequently keep-raised to become minstrels themselves. It is expected of minstrels that they will consort with outlaws and rebels as well as nobles and merchants. They carry messages, bring news and hold in their long memories many an agreement and promise. At least, so it is in times of peace and plenty.

Starling came in so late, Burrich would have regarded it as early morning. I was awake the instant she touched the latch. I rolled quickly off her bed as she came in, then wrapped myself well in my cloak and lay down on the floor. 'FitzChivalry,' she greeted me fuzzily, and I could smell the wine on her breath. She stripped off her damp cloak, looked sideways at me, then spread it over me as an extra covering. I closed my eyes.

She dropped her outer clothing to the floor behind me with a fine disregard for my presence. I heard the give of the bed as she threw herself onto it. 'Um. Still warm,' she muttered, shouldering into the bedding and pillows. 'I feel guilty, taking your warm spot.'

Her guilt could not have been too sharp-edged, for in just a matter of moments her breathing went deep and even. I followed her example.

I awoke very early and left the inn. Starling didn't stir as I let myself out of her room. I walked until I found a bathhouse. The baths were almost deserted at this hour of the day; I had to wait while the first day's water was warmed. When it was ready, I stripped down and clambered gingerly in. I eased the ache in my shoulder in the deep, hot tub. I washed myself. Then I leaned back in the hot water and silence and thought.

I didn't like taking up with the smugglers. I didn't like linking up with Starling. I couldn't see any other choice. I could not think of how I'd bribe them to take me. I had little enough coin. Burrich's earring? I pondered. For a long time, I lay up to my chin in the water and refused to consider it. *Come to me.* I would find another way, I swore to myself. I would. I thought of what I had felt back in Tradeford when Verity had intervened to save me. That blast of Skill had left Verity without reserves. I did not know his situation, only that he had not hesitated to expend all he had for my sake. And if I had to choose between parting with Burrich's earring and going to Verity, I would choose Verity. Not because he had Skill-summoned me, nor even for the oath I had sworn to his father. For Verity.

I stood up and let the water stream off me. I dried off, spent a few minutes attempting to trim my beard, gave it up as a bad job, and went back to the Boar's Head. I had one bad moment on my way back to the inn. A wagon passed me as I strode along, none other than the wagon of Dell the puppeteer. I kept walking briskly and the young journeyman driving the wagon gave no sign of noticing me. Nonetheless, I was glad to reach the inn and get inside.

I found a corner table near the hearth and had the serving-boy bring me a pot of tea and a loaf of morning bread. This last proved to be a Farrow concoction full of seeds and nuts and bits of fruit. I ate slowly, waiting for Starling to descend. I was both impatient to be out to meet these smugglers, and reluctant to put myself in Starling's power. As the morning hours dragged by, I caught the serving-boy looking oddly at me twice. The third time I caught his stare, I returned it until he blushed suddenly and looked aside. I divined then the reason for his interest. I'd spent the night in Starling's room, and no doubt he wondered what would possess her to share quarters with such a vagabond. But it was still enough to make me uncomfortable. The day was more than halfway to noon anyway. I rose and went up the stairs to Starling's door.

I knocked quietly and waited. But it took a second round of louder knocking before I heard a sleepy reply. After a bit she came to the door, opened it a crack, then yawned at me and motioned me in. She wore only her leggings and a recently donned oversized tunic. Her curly dark hair was tousled all about her face. She sat down heavily on the edge of her bed, blinking her eyes as I closed and fastened the door behind me. 'Oh, you took a bath,' she greeted me, and yawned again.

‘Is it that noticeable?’ I asked her testily.

She nodded at me affably. ‘I woke up once and thought you’d just left me here. I wasn’t worried about it, though. I knew you couldn’t find them without me.’ She rubbed her eyes, and then looked at me more critically. ‘What happened to your beard?’

‘I tried to trim it. Without much success.’

She nodded in agreement. ‘But it was a good idea,’ she said comfortingly. ‘It might make you look a bit less wild. And it might prevent Creece or Tassin or anyone else from our caravan from recognizing you. Here. I’ll help you. Sit on that chair. Oh, and open the shutters, let some light in here.’

I did as she suggested, without much enthusiasm. She arose from the bed, stretched like a cat, and rubbed her eyes. She took a few moments to splash some water on her face, then worried her own hair back into order and fastened it with a couple of small combs. She belted the tunic to give it a shape, then slipped on her boots and laced them up. In a remarkably short time she was presentable. Then she came to me, and taking hold of my chin turned my face back and forth in the light with no shyness at all. I could not be as nonchalant as she was.

‘Do you always blush so easily?’ she asked me with a laugh. ‘It’s rare to see a Buck man able to flush so red. I suppose your mother must have been fair-skinned.’

I could think of nothing to say to that, so I sat silently as she rummaged in her pack and came up with a small pair of shears. She worked quickly and deftly. ‘I used to cut my brothers’ hair,’ she told me as she worked. ‘And my father’s hair and beard, after my mother died. You’ve a nice shape to your jaw, under all this brush. What have you been doing with it, just letting it grow out anyway it pleased?’

‘I suppose,’ I muttered nervously. The scissors were flashing away right under my nose. She paused and brushed briskly at my face. A substantial amount of curly black hair fell to the floor. ‘I don’t want my scar to be visible,’ I warned her.

‘It won’t,’ she said calmly. ‘But you will have lips and a mouth instead of a gap in your moustache. Tilt your chin up. There. Do you have a shaving blade?’

‘Only my knife,’ I admitted nervously.

‘We’ll make do then,’ she said comfortingly. She walked to the door, flung it open, and used the power of a minstrel’s lungs to bellow for the serving-boy to bring her hot water. And tea. And bread and some rashers of bacon. When she came back into the room, she cocked her head and looked at me critically. ‘Let’s cut your hair, too,’ she proposed. ‘Take it down.’

I moved too slowly to satisfy her. She stepped behind me, tugged off my kerchief and freed my hair from the leather thong. Unbound, it fell to my shoulders. She took up her comb and curried my hair roughly forward. ‘Let’s see,’ she muttered as I gritted my teeth to her rough combing.

‘What do you propose?’ I asked her, but hanks of hair were already falling to the floor. Whatever she had decided was rapidly becoming a reality. She pulled hair forward over my face, then cut it off square above my eyebrows, tugged her comb through the rest of it a few times, then cut it off at jaw length. ‘Now,’ she told me, ‘you look a bit more like Farrow merchant stock. Before you were obviously a Buckman. Your colouring is still Buck, but now your hair and clothes are Farrow. As long as you don’t talk, folk won’t be certain where you’re from.’ She considered a moment, then went to work again on the hair above my brow. After a moment she rummaged around and gave me a mirror. ‘The white will be a lot less noticeable now.’

She was right. She had trimmed out most of the white hair, and pulled forward black hair to fall over the stubble. My beard now hugged my face as well. I nodded a grudging approval. There was a knock at the door. ‘Leave it outside!’ Starling called through the door. She waited a few moments, then fetched in her breakfast and the hot water. She washed, then suggested I put a good edge on my knife while she ate. I did so, wondering as I honed the blade if I felt flattered or irritated at her refashioning of me. She was beginning to remind me of Patience. She was still chewing as she came to take the knife from my hand. She swallowed, then spoke.

‘I’m going to give your beard a bit more shape. You’ll have to keep it up, though, I’m not going to shave you every day,’ she warned me. ‘Now damp your face down well.’

I was substantially more nervous as she brandished the knife, especially as she worked near my throat. But when she was finished and I took up the looking-glass, I was amazed at the changes she had wrought. She had defined my beard, confining it to my jaw and cheek. The square-cut hair hanging over my brow made my eyes look deeper. The scar on my cheek

was still visible, but it followed the line of my moustache and was less noticeable. I ran my hand lightly over my beard, pleased with how much less of it there was. 'It's quite a change,' I told her.

'It's a vast improvement,' she informed me. 'I doubt that Creece or Dell would recognize you now. Let's just be rid of this.' She gathered up the hair cuttings and opened the window to fling them out onto the wind. Then she shut it and brushed off her hands.

'Thank you,' I said awkwardly.

'You're welcome,' she told me. She glanced about the room, and breathed a small sigh. 'I'm going to miss that bed,' she told me. She set to packing with a swift efficiency. She caught me watching her and grinned. 'When you're a minstrel who wanders, you learn to do this quickly and well.' She tossed in the last items, then laced her pack shut. She swung it to one shoulder. 'Wait for me at the bottom of the back stairs,' she commanded. 'While I go and settle my bill.'

I did as she bade me, but waited substantially longer in the cold and wind than I had expected. Eventually she emerged, rosy-cheeked and ready for the day. She stretched herself like a little cat. 'This way,' she directed me.

I had expected to shorten my stride to accommodate her, but found that we matched pace easily. She glanced across at me as we strode away from the merchants' sector of town, and headed to the northern outskirts. 'You look different today,' she informed me. 'And it's not just the haircut. You've made up your mind about something.'

'I have,' I agreed with her.

'Good,' she said warmly as she took my arm companionably. 'I hope it's to trust me.' I glanced at her and said nothing. She laughed, but did not release my arm.

The wooden walkways of the merchants' section of Blue Lake soon disappeared and we walked in the street past houses that huddled against each other as if seeking shelter from the cold. The wind was a constant chill push against us as we strode along cobbled streets that gave way eventually to roads of packed earth that ran past small farmsteads. The road was rutted and muddy from the rains of the last few days. This day at least was fair, even if the blustery wind was cold. 'Is there much farther to go?' I finally asked of her.

'I'm not certain. I'm simply following directions. Watch for three stacked rocks at the side of the road.'

‘What do you really know of these smugglers?’ I demanded.

She shrugged a bit too casually. ‘I know they are going to the Mountains, when no one else is. And I know they are taking the pilgrims with them.’

‘Pilgrims?’

‘Or whatever you wish to call them. They go to honour Eda’s shrine in the Mountain Kingdom. They had bought passage on a barge earlier in the summer. But then the King’s Guards claimed all the barges for their own use and shut down the borders to the Mountain Kingdom. The pilgrims have been stuck in Blue Lake since then, trying to find a way to continue their journey.’

We came to the three stacked rocks and a weedy track through a rocky, brambly pasture surrounded by a rock-and-pole fence. A few horses were grazing disconsolately. I noted with interest they were Mountain-bred, small and patchy-coated at this time of year. A little house was set well back from the road. It was built of river-rock and mortar, with a sod roof. The small outbuilding behind it matched it. A thin trickle of smoke escaped its chimney, to be swiftly dispersed by the wind. A man sat on the fence, whittling at something. He lifted his eyes to regard us and evidently decided we were no threat. He made no challenge to us as we passed him and went to the door of the cottage. Just outside the cottage, fat pigeons cooed and strutted in a cote. Starling knocked at the door, but the answer came from a man who walked around the corner of the house. He had rough brown hair and blue eyes and was dressed like a farmer. He carried a brimming bucket of warm milk. ‘Who do you seek?’ he greeted us.

‘Nik,’ Starling replied.

‘I know no Nik,’ the man said. He opened the door and went into the house. Starling boldly followed him, and I trailed her with less confidence. My sword was at my hip. I put my hand closer to the hilt but not on it. I didn’t want to provoke a challenge.

Inside the hut, a driftwood fire burned in the hearth. Most, but not all of the smoke was going up the chimney. A boy and a spotted kid shared a pile of straw in one corner. He regarded us with wide blue eyes, but said nothing. Smoked hams and sides hung low from the rafters. The man carried the milk to a table where a woman was chopping up fat yellow roots. He set the bucket down beside her work and turned to us mildly.

‘I think you’ve come to the wrong house. Try down the road a way. Not the next house. That’s where Pelf lives. But beyond, maybe.’

‘Thank you kindly. We shall.’ Starling smiled round at them all, and went to the door. ‘Coming, Tom?’ she asked me. I nodded pleasantly at the folk and followed her. We left the house and walked up the lane. When we were well away I asked her, ‘Now what?’

‘I’m not precisely sure. From what I overheard, I think we go to Pelf’s house and ask for Nik.’

‘From what you overheard?’

‘You don’t think I have personal knowledge of smugglers, do you? I was in the public baths. Two women were talking as they bathed. Pilgrims on their way to the Mountains. One was saying it might be their last chance at a bath for a while, and the other was saying she didn’t care as long as they finally got to leave Blue Lake. Then one told the other where they were supposed to meet the smugglers.’

I said nothing. I suppose my expression said it all, for Starling asked me indignantly, ‘Do you have any better ideas? This will either work out or it won’t.’

‘It may work out to us with our throats cut.’

‘Then go back to town and see if you can do better.’

‘I think if we did that, the man following us would decide we were certainly spies and do more than just follow us. Let us go on to Pelf, and see what comes of it. No, don’t look back.’

We returned to the road and walked to the next farmstead. The wind had become stronger and I tasted snow on it. If we did not find this Nik soon, it was going to be a long, cold walk back to town.

Someone had once cared about this next farm. Once there had been a line of silver birches to either side of the drive. Now they were brittle scarecrows of trees, their branches long bare, bark peeling in the wind. A few survivors wept yellow coin leaves in the wind. Extensive pastures and fields had been fenced, but whatever stock they had held was long gone. The weedy fields went unplanted, the thistly pastures ungrazed. ‘What happened to this land?’ I demanded as we walked past the desolation.

‘Years of drought. Then, a summer of fire. Out beyond these farmsteads, the riverbanks used to be covered with open oak forests and grazing land. Here, these were dairy farms. But out there, smallholders ran their goats in the free pasturage, and their haragars scavenged under the oaks

for acorns. I've heard it was magnificent hunting as well. Then came the fire. It burned for over a month they say, so that a man could scarcely breathe and the river ran black with ash. Not just the forests and wild meadows, but hayfields and homes were torched by the flying sparks. After the years of drought, the river was no more than a trickle of itself. There was nowhere to flee from the fire. And after the fire came more hot dry days. But the winds that blew carried dust now as well as ash. Smaller streams choked with it. It blew until the rains finally came that fall. All the water that folk had prayed for for years came in one season. Floods of it. And when the water went down, well, you see what was left. Washed-out gravelly soil.'

'I recall hearing something of the sort.' It had been a conversation long ago. Someone ... Chade? ... had told me that the people held the King accountable for everything, even droughts and fires. It had meant little to me then, but to these farmers it must have seemed like the end of the world.

The house, too, spoke of a loving hand and better times. It was two storeys, built of timber, but its paint was long faded. Shutters were closed tight over the windows in the upper storey. There were two chimneys at either end of the house, but one was losing its stones. Smoke rose from the other one. A young woman stood before the door of the house. A fat grey pigeon perched on her hand and she was stroking it lightly. 'Good day,' she bid us in a pleasantly low voice as we approached. Her tunic was leather over a loose cream shirt of wool. She wore leather trousers as well, and boots. I put her age at about twelve, and knew she was some kin to the folk in the other house by her eyes and hair.

'Good day,' Starling returned to her. 'We are looking for Nik.'

The girl shook her head. 'You have come to the wrong house. There is no Nik here. This is Pelf's house. Perhaps you should seek further down the road.' She smiled at us, no more than puzzlement on her face.

Starling gave me an uncertain glance. I took her arm. 'We have been given poor directions. Come, let us take ourselves back to town and try again.' At that time I hoped no more than to get ourselves out of the situation.

'But ...' she objected in confusion.

I had a sudden inspiration. 'Shush. We were warned these are not people to take lightly. The bird must have gone astray, or a hawk taken it. There is nothing more to be done here today.'

'A bird?' the girl piped suddenly.

‘Only a pigeon. Good day to you.’ I put my arm about Starling and turned her firmly. ‘We did not mean to bother you.’

‘Whose pigeon?’

I let my eyes meet hers for a moment. ‘A friend of Nik’s. Do not let it concern you. Come, Starling.’

‘Wait!’ the girl said suddenly. ‘My brother is inside. Perhaps he knows this Nik.’

‘I would not wish to bother him,’ I assured her.

‘No bother.’ The bird on her hand stretched out his wings as she gestured to the door with it. ‘Come inside out of the cold for a bit.’

‘It is a cold day,’ I conceded. I turned to confront the whittler just as he was emerging from the line of birches. ‘Perhaps we should all go inside.’

‘Perhaps.’ The girl grinned at my shadow’s discomfiture.

Within the door was a bare entry hall. The fine inlaid wood of the floor was scuffed and had gone unoled for some time. Lighter spaces on the walls showed where paintings and tapestries had once hung. A bare staircase led to the upper floor. There was no light save what came in the thick windows. Inside, there was no wind, but it was not much warmer. ‘Wait here,’ the girl told us, and entered a chamber to our right, closing the door firmly behind her. Starling stood a bit closer to me than I wished. The whittler watched us expressionlessly.

Starling took a breath. ‘Hush,’ I told her before she could speak. Instead, she took my arm. I made the excuse of stooping to adjust my boot. As I straightened, I turned and put her on my left side. She immediately took hold of that arm. It seemed a very long time before the door opened. A tall man, brown-haired and blue-eyed, came out. He was dressed like the girl in leathers. A very long knife hung at his belt. The girl came on his heels, looking petulant. He had rebuked her, then. He scowled at us and demanded, ‘What’s this about?’

‘My mistake, sir,’ I said immediately. ‘We were seeking one named Nik, and obviously we have come to the wrong house. Your pardon, sir.’

He spoke reluctantly. ‘I’ve a friend with a cousin named Nik. I could give word of you to him, perhaps.’

I squeezed Starling’s hand for silence. ‘No, no, we wouldn’t wish to trouble you. Unless you’d like to tell us where we could find Nik himself.’

‘I could take a message,’ he offered again. But it was not really an offer.

I scratched at my beard and considered. 'I've a friend whose cousin wished to send something across the river. He had heard that Nik might know someone who could take it for him. He promised my friend's cousin that he would send a bird, to let Nik know we were coming. For a fee, of course. That was all, a paltry matter.'

He gave a slow nod. 'I've heard of folks hereabouts who do such things. It's dangerous work, yes, treasonous work, too. They'd pay with their heads if the King's Guards caught them.'

'That they would,' I agreed readily. 'But I doubt that my friend's cousin would do business with the kind of folk who'd get caught. That was why he was wishing to speak to Nik.'

'And who was it sent you here to seek this Nik?'

'I forget,' I said coolly. 'I'm afraid I'm rather good at forgetting names.'

'Are you?' the man asked consideringly. He glanced at his sister and gave a small nod. 'May I offer you some brandy?'

'That would be most welcome,' I told him.

I managed to pry my arm free of Starling as we entered the chamber. As the door shut behind us, Starling sighed in the welcome warmth. This room was as opulent as the other was bare. Rugs coated the floor, tapestries lined the walls. There was a heavy oak table with a branch of white candles for illumination. A fire blazed in the huge hearth before a half circle of comfortable chairs. It was to this area our host led us. He snagged a glass decanter of brandy as he passed the table. 'Find some cups,' he peremptorily ordered the girl. She seemed to take no offence at it. I guessed his age at about twenty-five. Older brothers are not the kindest of heroes. She handed the whittler her pigeon, and gestured both of them out before she went to find cups.

'Now. You were saying,' he offered when we were settled before the fire.

'Actually, you were saying,' I suggested.

He was silent as his sister came back with cups. He passed them to us as he filled them and the four of us raised cups together.

'To King Regal,' he suggested.

'To my king,' I offered affably, and drank. It was good brandy, one Burrich would have appreciated.

‘King Regal would see folk like our friend Nik swinging,’ the man suggested.

‘Or more likely in his Circle,’ I suggested. I gave a small sigh. ‘It’s a dilemma. On the one hand, King Regal threatens his life. On the other hand, without King Regal’s embargo on the mountain, what livelihood would Nik pursue? I heard all that his family’s holdings grow these days is rocks.’

The man nodded in commiseration. ‘Poor Nik. A man must do something to survive.’

‘That he must,’ I agreed. ‘And sometimes to survive, a man must cross a river, even if his king forbids it.’

‘Must he?’ the man asked. ‘Now that’s a bit different from sending something across the river.’

‘Not that different,’ I told him. ‘If Nik is good at his trade, the one should no more tax him than the other. And I’d heard Nik was good.’

‘The best,’ the girl said with quiet pride.

Her brother shot her a warning glance. ‘What would this man be offering to cross?’ he asked quietly.

‘He’d offer it to Nik himself,’ I said as softly.

For a few breaths the man looked into the fire. Then he stood and extended a hand. ‘Nik Holdfast. My sister Pelf.’

‘Tom,’ I said.

‘Starling,’ the minstrel added.

Nik held his cup aloft again. ‘To a bargain in the making,’ he suggested, and again we drank. He sat and asked immediately, ‘Shall we speak plainly?’

I nodded. ‘The plainest possible. We had heard that you were taking a group of pilgrims over the river and across the border into the Mountain Kingdom. We seek the same service.’

‘At the same price,’ Starling chimed in smoothly.

‘Nik, I don’t like this,’ Pelf broke in suddenly. ‘Someone’s tongue has been wagging too freely. I knew we should never have agreed to the first lot. How do we know ...’

‘Hush. I’m the one taking the risks, so I’ll be the one to say what I will or will not do. You’ve naught to do but wait here and mind things while I’m gone. And see that your own tongue doesn’t wag.’ He turned back to me. ‘It will be a gold each, up front. And another on the other side of the river. A third at the Mountain border.’

‘Ah!’ The price was shocking. ‘We can’t ...’ Starling dug her nails suddenly into my wrist. I shut my mouth.

‘You will never convince me the pilgrims paid that much,’ Starling said quietly.

‘They have their own horses and wagons. Food supplies, too.’ He cocked his head at us. ‘But you look to be folk travelling with what’s on your backs and no more.’

‘And a lot easier to conceal than a wagon and team. We’ll give you one gold now, and one at the Mountain border. For both of us,’ Starling offered.

He leaned back in his chair and pondered a moment. Then he poured more brandy all round. ‘Not enough,’ he said regretfully. ‘But I suspect it’s all you have.’

It was more than I had. I hoped, perhaps, it was what Starling had. ‘Take us over the river for that much,’ I offered. ‘From there, we’re on our own.’

Starling kicked me under the table. She seemed to be speaking only to me as she said, ‘He’s taking the others to the Mountain border and across it. We may as well enjoy the company that far.’ She turned back to Nik. ‘It will have to take us all the way to the Mountains.’

Nik sipped at his brandy. He sighed heavily. ‘I’ll see your coin, begging your pardon, before we say it’s a bargain.’

Starling and I exchanged glances. ‘We’ll require a private moment,’ she said smoothly. ‘Begging your pardon.’ She rose and, taking my hand, led me to the corner of the room. Once there she whispered, ‘Have you never bargained before in your life? You give too much, too fast. Now. How much coin do you truly have?’

For answer, I upended my purse in my hand. She picked through the contents as swiftly as a magpie stealing grain. She hefted the coins in her hand with a practised air. ‘We’re short. I thought you’d have more than this. What’s that?’ Her finger jabbed at Burrich’s earring. I closed my hand around it before she could pick it up.

‘Something very important to me.’

‘More important than your life?’

‘Not quite,’ I admitted. ‘But close. My father wore it, for a time. A close friend of his gave it to me.’

‘Well, if it must go, I’ll see that it goes dearly.’ She turned away from me without another word and walked back to Nik. She took her seat, tossed

the rest of her brandy down and waited for me. When I was seated, she told Nik, 'We'll give you what coin we have now. It's not as much as you ask. But at the Mountain border, I'll give you all my jewellery as well. Rings, earrings, all of it. What say you?'

He shook his head slowly. 'It's not enough for me to risk hanging over.'

'What's the risk?' Starling demanded. 'If they discover you with the pilgrims, you'll hang. You've already been paid for that risk in what they gave you. We don't increase your risk, only your supply burden. Surely it's worth that.'

He shook his head, almost reluctantly. Starling turned and held out her hand to me. 'Show it to him,' she said quietly. I felt almost sick as I opened my pouch and fingered out the earring.

'What I have might not seem like much at first glance,' I told him. 'Unless a person were knowledgeable about such things. I am. I know what I have and I know what it's worth. It's worth whatever trouble you'd have to go through for us.'

I spread it out on my palm, the fine silver net trapping the sapphire within. Then I picked it up by the pin and held it before the dancing fire. 'It's not just the silver or the sapphire. It's the workmanship. Look how supple is the silver net, see how fine the links.'

Starling reached one fingertip to touch it. 'King-in-Waiting Chivalry once owned it,' she added respectfully.

'Coins are more easily spent,' Nik pointed out.

I shrugged. 'If coins to spend are all a man wants, that is true. Sometimes there is pleasure in the owning of something, pleasure greater than coins in the pocket. But when it is yours, you could change it for coins, if you wished. Were I to attempt it now, in haste, I'd get but a fraction of its worth. But a man with your connections, and the time to bargain well, could get well over four golds for it. But if you'd rather, I could go back to town with it and ...'

Greed had kindled in his eyes. 'I'll take it,' he conceded.

'On the other side of the river,' I told him. I lifted the jewellery and restored it to my ear. Let him look at it each time he looked at me. I made it formal. 'You undertake to get us both safely to the other side of the river. And when we get there, the earring is yours.'

'As your sole payment,' Starling added quietly. 'Though we will allow you to hold all our coins until then. As a surety.'

‘Agreed, and here’s my hand on it,’ he acknowledged. We shook hands.

‘When do we leave?’ I asked him.

‘When the weather’s right,’ he said.

‘Tomorrow would be better,’ I told him.

He rose slowly. ‘Tomorrow, eh? Well, if the weather’s right tomorrow, then is when we’ll leave. Now I’ve a few things I need to attend to. I’ll have to excuse myself, but Pelf can see to you here.’

I had expected to walk back to town for the night, but Starling bargained with Pelf, her songs for a meal for us, and then to prepare us a room for the night. I was a bit ill at ease to sleep among strangers, but reflected it might actually be safer than going back to town. If the food Pelf cooked for us was not as fine as we had enjoyed at Starling’s inn the night before, it was still far better than onion and potato soup. There were thick slices of fried ham and apple sauce and a cake made with fruits and seeds and spices. Pelf brought us beer to go with it and joined us at table, speaking casually of general topics. After we’d eaten, Starling played a few songs for the girl, but I found I could scarcely keep my eyes open. I asked to be shown to a room, and Starling said she, too, was weary.

Pelf showed us to a chamber above Nik’s elaborate room. It had been a very fine room once, but I doubted it had been regularly used for years. She had started a fire in the hearth there, but the long chill of disuse and the must of neglect still filled the room. There was an immense bed with a featherbed on it and greying hangings. Starling sniffed critically at it, and as soon as Pelf left, she busied herself in draping the blankets from the bed over a bench and setting it by the fire. ‘They will both air and warm that way,’ she told me knowledgeably.

I had been barring the door, and checking the latches on the windows and shutters. They all seemed sound. I was suddenly too weary to reply. I told myself it was the brandy followed by the beer. I dragged one chair to wedge it against the door while Starling watched me with amusement. Then I came back to the fire and sank down onto the blanket-draped bench and stretched my legs to the warmth. I toed my boots off. Well. Tomorrow I’d be on my way to the Mountains.

Starling came to sit beside me. For a time she didn’t speak. Then she lifted a finger and batted at my earring with it. ‘Was it truly Chivalry’s?’ she asked me.

‘For a while.’

‘And you’d give it up to get to the Mountains. What would he say?’

‘Don’t know. Never knew the man.’ I suddenly sighed. ‘By all accounts, he was fond of his little brother. I don’t think he’d begrudge me spending it to get to Verity.’

‘Then you do go to seek out your king.’

‘Of course.’ I tried in vain to stifle a yawn. Somehow it seemed foolish to deny it now. ‘I’m not sure it was wise to mention Chivalry to Nik. He might make a connection.’ I turned to look at her. Her face was too close. I couldn’t bring her features into focus. ‘But I’m too sleepy to care,’ I added.

‘You’ve no head for merrybud,’ she laughed.

‘There was no Smoke tonight.’

‘In the cake. She told you it was spiced.’

‘Is that what she meant?’

‘Yes. That’s what spiced means all over Farrow.’

‘Oh. In Buck it means there’s ginger. Or citron.’

‘I know that.’ She leaned against me and sighed. ‘You don’t trust these people, do you?’

‘Of course not. They don’t trust us. If we trusted them, they’d have no respect for us. They’d think us gullible fools, the sort who get smugglers into trouble by talking too much.’

‘But you shook hands with Nik.’

‘I did. And I believe he will keep his word. As far as it goes.’

We both fell silent, thinking about that. After a time, I started awake again. Starling sat up beside me. ‘I’m going to bed,’ she announced.

‘Me, too,’ I replied. I claimed a blanket and started to roll up in it by the fire.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she told me. ‘That bed’s big enough for four. Sleep in a bed while you can, for I bet we aren’t going to see another one soon.’

I took very little persuading. The featherbed was deep, if a trifle smelly from damp. We each had a share of the blankets. I knew I should retain some caution but the brandy and the merrybud had unloosed the knot of my will. I fell into a very deep sleep.

Towards morning, I awoke once when Starling threw an arm over me. The fire had burned out and the room was cold. In her sleep she had migrated across the bed and was pressed up against my back. I started to ease away from her but it was too warm and companionable. Her breath was

against the back of my neck. There was a woman smell to her that was not a perfume but a part of her. I closed my eyes and lay very still. Molly. The sudden desperate longing I felt for her was like a pain. I clenched my teeth to it. I willed myself into sleep again.

It was a mistake.

The baby was crying. Crying and crying. Molly was in her nightgown with a blanket draped over her shoulders. She looked haggard and weary as she sat by the fire and rocked her endlessly. Molly sang a little song to her, over and over, but the tune had long since gone out of it. She turned her head slowly to the door as Burrich opened it. 'May I come in?' he asked quietly.

She nodded him in. 'What are you doing awake at this hour?' she asked him tiredly.

'I could hear her crying clear out there. Is she ill?' He went to the fire and poked it up a little. He added another piece of wood, then stooped to look in the baby's small face.

'I don't know. She just cries and cries and cries. She doesn't even want to nurse. I don't know what's wrong with her.' There was misery in Molly's voice far past the use of tears.

Burrich turned to her. 'Let me take her for a while. You go lie down and try to rest a bit, or you'll both be ill. You can't do this night after night.'

Molly looked up at him without comprehension. 'You want to take care of her? You'd truly do that?'

'I may as well,' he told her wryly. 'I can't sleep through her crying.'

Molly stood up as if her back ached. 'Warm yourself first. I'll make some tea.'

For answer he took the babe from her arms. 'No, you go back to bed for a while. No sense in all of us not sleeping.'

Molly seemed unable to grasp it. 'You truly don't mind if I go back to bed?'

'No, go ahead, we'll be fine. Go on, now.' He settled the blanket about her and then set the infant to his shoulder. She looked very tiny with his dark hands against her. Molly walked slowly across the room. She looked back at Burrich but he was looking into the baby's face. 'Hush now,' he told her. 'Hush.'

Molly clambered into bed and pulled the blankets up over herself. Burrich did not sit down. He stood before the fire, rocking slightly on his feet as he patted the baby's back slowly.

‘Burrich,’ Molly called to him quietly.

‘Yes?’ He did not turn to look at her.

‘There’s no sense your sleeping in that shed in this weather. You should move inside for the winter, and sleep by the hearth.’

‘Oh. Well. It’s not so very cold out there. It’s all in what you’re used to, you know.’

A small silence fell.

‘Burrich. I would feel safer, were you closer.’ Molly’s voice was very small.

‘Oh. Well. Then I suppose I shall be. But there’s nothing you need fear tonight. Go to sleep, now. Both of you.’ He bent his head and I saw his lips brush the top of the baby’s head. Very softly he began singing to her. I tried to make out the words, but his voice was too deep. Nor did I know the language. The baby’s wailing became less determined. He began to pace slowly around the room with her. Back and forth before the fire. I was with Molly as she watched him until she too, fell asleep to Burrich’s soothing voice. The only dream I had after that was of a lone wolf, running, endlessly running. He was as alone as I was.

FIFTEEN

Kettle

Queen Kettricken was carrying Verity's child when she fled King-in-Waiting Regal to return to her Mountains. Some have criticized her, saying if she had remained at Buck and forced Regal's hand, the child would have been born safely there. Perhaps if she had, Buckkeep Castle would have rallied to her, perhaps all of Buck Duchy would have presented a more unified resistance to the Outislander Raiders. Perhaps the Coastal Duchies would have fought harder if they had had a queen at Buck. So some say.

The general belief of those who lived in Buckkeep Castle at the time and were well informed of the internal politics of the Farseer regency is very different. Without exception, they believed that both Kettricken and her unborn child would have met with foul play. It can be substantiated that even after Queen Kettricken had removed herself from Buckkeep, those who supported Regal as king did all that they could to discredit her, even to saying that the child she carried was not Verity's at all, but had been fathered by his bastard nephew FitzChivalry.

Whatever suppositions might be made about what would have happened if Kettricken had remained at Buckkeep are but useless speculations now. The historical fact is that she believed her child would have the best chance of surviving if born in her beloved Mountain Kingdom. She also returned to the Mountains in the hopes of being able to find Verity and restore her husband to power. Her search efforts, however, only yielded her grief. She found the battle site of his companions against unidentified attackers. The unburied remains were little more than scattered bones and draggled bits of clothing after the scavengers had finished with them. Among those remains, however, she found the blue cloak Verity had worn when she had last seen him, and his sheath knife. She returned to the royal residence at Jhaampe and mourned her husband as dead.

More distressing to her was that for months afterwards she received reports of sightings of folk in the garb of Verity's Guard in the mountains beyond Jhaampe. These individual guards were seen wandering alone by Mountain villagers. They seemed reluctant to have conversation with the villagers and despite their ragged condition often refused offers of aid or

food. Without exception, they were described by those who saw them as 'pathetic' or 'piteous'. Some few of these men trickled in to Jhaampe from time to time. They seemed unable to answer her questions about Verity and what had become of him coherently. They could not even recall when they had parted company with him or under what circumstances. Without exception, they seemed almost obsessed with returning to Buckkeep.

In time she came to believe that Verity and his guard had been attacked, not only physically but by magic. The ambushers who struck at him with arrow and sword, and the false coterie that disheartened and confused his guard were, she surmised, in the employ of his younger brother, Prince Regal. This is what precipitated her unceasing ill will toward her brother-in-law.

I awoke to a hammering on the door. I shouted something back as I sat up disoriented and cold in the dark. 'We leave in an hour!' was the reply.

I fought my way clear of weltering blankets and Starling's sleepy embrace. I found my boots and pulled them on, and then my cloak. I snugged it around me against the chilly room. Starling's only move had been to immediately burrow into the warm place where I had lain. I leaned over the bed. 'Starling?' When there was no response, I reached down and shook her slightly. 'Starling! We leave in less than an hour. Get up!'

She heaved a tremendous sigh. 'Go ahead. I'll be ready.' She shouldered deeper into the blankets. I shrugged my shoulders and left her there.

Downstairs in the kitchen Pelf had stacks of griddle-cakes keeping warm by the cooking hearth. She offered me a plate with butter and honey and I was only too glad to accept. The house, so quiet a place the day before, was now thronged with folk. From the strong resemblances, this was a family business. The small boy with the spotted kid was sitting at a stool by the table, feeding the goat bits of griddle-cake. From time to time, I caught him staring at me. When I smiled back, the boy's eyes got wide. With a serious expression he arose and carried his plate off, with the goat skittering after him.

Nik strode through the kitchen, black wool cloak swirling about his calves. It was dotted with fresh snowflakes. He caught my eye in passing. 'Ready to go?'

I gave a nod.

‘Good.’ He gave me a glance on his way out. ‘Dress warmly. Storm is just beginning.’ He grinned. ‘Perfect travelling weather for you and me.’

I told myself I had not expected to enjoy the trip. I had finished my breakfast before Starling came down the stairs. When she reached the kitchen, she surprised me. I had expected her to be sleepy. Instead she was brightly alert, her cheeks flushed and mouth laughing. As she came into the kitchen she was trading quips with one of the men, and getting the best of it. She did not hesitate when she got to table, but helped herself to a hearty serving of everything. When she looked up from her empty plate, she must have seen the surprise on my face.

‘Minstrels learn to eat well when food is offered,’ she said, and held her cup out to me. She was drinking beer with her breakfast. I filled her cup from the pitcher on the table. She had just set her mug down with a sigh when Nik came through the kitchen looking like a storm cloud. He caught sight of me and stopped in mid-stride. ‘Ah. Tom. Can you drive a horse?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Well?’

‘Well enough,’ I said quietly.

‘Good, then, we’re ready to go. My cousin Hank was to drive, but he’s breathing like a bellows this morning, took a cough in the night. His wife won’t let him go. But if you can drive a cart ...’

‘He’ll expect you to adjust your fee,’ Starling broke in suddenly. ‘By driving a horse for you, he’s saved you the cost of a horse for himself. And what your cousin would have eaten.’

Nik was taken aback for a moment. He glanced from Starling to me. ‘Fair is fair,’ I observed. I tried not to smile.

‘I’ll make it right,’ he conceded, and hastened out of the kitchen again. In a short time he was back. ‘The old woman says she’ll try you. It’s her team and wagon, you see.’

It was still dark outside. Torches spluttered in the wind and snow. Folk hurried about, hoods up and cloaks well fastened. There were four wagons and teams. One was full of people, about fifteen of them. They huddled together, bags on their laps, heads bowed against the cold. A woman glanced toward me. Her face was full of apprehension. At her side, a child leaned against her. I wondered where they had all come from. Two men loaded a cask into the last wagon, then stretched a canvas over the whole load.

Behind the wagon loaded with passengers was a smaller two-wheeled cart. A little old woman swathed all in black sat erect on the seat. She was well bundled in cloak, hood and shawl, with a travelling blanket thrown across her knees as well. Her sharp black eyes watched me carefully as I walked around her rig. The horse was a speckled mare. She didn't like the weather and her harness was binding her. I adjusted it as best as I could, persuading her to trust me. When I was finished, I looked up to find the old woman watching me closely. Her hair was glistening black where it peeped from her hood, but not all of the white in it was snow. She pursed her lips at me but said nothing, even when I stowed my pack under the seat. I gave her 'Good day', as I climbed up on the seat beside her and took up the reins. 'I think I'm supposed to be driving for you,' I said genially.

'You think. Don't you know?' She peered at me sharply.

'Hank has been taken ill. Nik asked if I would drive your team. My name is Tom.'

'I don't like changes,' she told me. 'Especially not at the last minute. Changes say you weren't really ready in the first place, and now you're even less ready.'

I suspected I knew why Hank was suddenly feeling poorly. 'My name is Tom,' I introduced myself again.

'You already said that,' she informed me. She stared off into the falling snow. 'This whole trip was a bad idea,' she said aloud, but not to me. 'And no good is going to come of it. I can see that right now.' She kneaded her gloved hands in her lap. 'Damn old bones,' she said to the falling snow. 'If it weren't for my old bones, I'd not need a one of you. Not a one.'

I could think of nothing to reply to that, but was saved by Starling. She reined in beside me. 'Will you look at what they've given me to ride?' she challenged me. Her mount shook her black mane and rolled her eyes at me as if demanding that I look at what she was expected to carry.

'Looks fine to me. She's Mountain stock. They're all like that. But she'll go all day for you, and most of them have sweet tempers.'

Starling scowled. 'I told Nik that for what we're paying, I expected a proper horse.'

Nik rode past us at that moment. His mount was no larger than Starling's. He looked at her and then away, as if wary of her tongue. 'Let's go,' he said in a quietly carrying voice. 'It's better not to talk, and it's best to

stay close to the wagon in front of you. It's easier to lose sight of each other in this storm than you might think.'

For all his soft voice, the command was instantly obeyed. There were no shouted commands nor calls of farewell. Instead the wagons in front of us rolled silently away from us. I stirred the reins and clucked to the team. The mare gave a snort of disapproval, but stepped out to the pace. We moved forward in near silence through a perpetual curtain of falling snow. Starling's pony tugged restlessly at her bit until Starling gave her her head. Then she trotted swiftly up to join the other horses at the front of the group. I was left sitting by the silent old woman.

I soon found the truth to Nik's warning. The sun came up, but the snow continued to fall so thickly the light seemed milky. There was a mother-of-pearl quality to the swirling snow that both dazzled and wearied the eye. It seemed an endless tunnel of white that we travelled through with only the tail of the other wagon to guide us.

Nik did not take us by the road. We went crunching off across the frozen fields. The thickly-falling snow soon filled in the tracks we left. In no time, there would be no trace of our passage. We travelled cross country until past noon, with the riders dismounting to take down fence railings and then restoring them in our wake. I glimpsed another farmhouse once through the swirling storm, but its windows were dark. Shortly after midday a final fence was opened for us. With a creak and a jolt, we came out of the field onto what had once been a road but was now little more than a trail. The only tracks on it were those we made ourselves, and the snow swiftly erased those.

And all that way, my companion had been as chilly and silent as the falling snow itself. From time to time, I watched her from the corner of my eye. She stared straight ahead, her body swaying to the motion of the wagon. She kneaded her hands restlessly in her lap as if they pained her. With little else to amuse myself, I spied upon her. Buck stock, obviously. The accent of my home was on her tongue still, though faded by many years of travel in other places. Her headscarf was the work of Chalced weavers, but the embroidery along the edges of her cloak, done black on black, was totally unfamiliar to me.

'You're a long way from Buck, boy,' she observed abruptly. She stared straight ahead as she said it. Something about her tone set my back up.

'As are you, old woman,' I replied.

She turned her whole face to look at me. I was not sure if I glimpsed amusement or annoyance in her bright crow eyes. 'That I am. Years and distance alike, a long way.' She paused, then asked abruptly, 'Why are you bound for the Mountains?'

'I want to see my uncle,' I replied truthfully.

She gave a snort of disdain. 'A Buck boy has an uncle in the Mountains? And you want to see him enough to put your head at risk?'

I looked over at her. 'He's my favourite uncle. You, I understand, go to Eda's shrine?'

'The others do,' she corrected me. 'I'm too old to pray for fertility. I seek a prophet.' Before I could speak, she added, 'He's my favourite prophet.' Almost, she smiled at me.

'Why don't you travel with the others in the wagon?' I asked her.

She gave me a chill look. 'They ask too many questions,' she replied.

'Ah!' I said, and grinned at her, accepting the rebuke.

After a few moments, she spoke again. 'I've been a long time on my own, Tom. I like to go my own way and keep my own counsels and decide for myself what I'll eat for my supper. Those ones, they're nice enough folk, but they scratch and peck like a flock of chickens. Left to themselves, not a one of them would make this journey alone. They all need the others to say, yes, yes, this is what we should be doing, it's worth the risk. And now that they've decided it, the decision is bigger than all of them. Not a one of them could turn back on their own.'

She shook her head at that, and I nodded thoughtfully. She said nothing more for a long time. Our trail had found the river. We followed it upstream, through a scanty cover of brush and very young trees. I could scarcely see it through the steadily-falling snow, but I could smell it and hear the rush of its passage. I wondered how far we'd go before we tried to cross it. Then I grinned to myself. I was certain Starling would know when I saw her this evening. I wondered if Nik was enjoying her company.

'What are you smirking about?' the old woman demanded suddenly.

'I was thinking on my friend the minstrel. Starling.'

'And she makes you smile like that?'

'Sometimes.'

'She's a minstrel, you say. And you? Are you a minstrel?'

'No. Just a shepherd. Most of the time.'

'I see.'

Our talk died off again. Then as evening began to fall, she told me, 'You may call me Kettle.'

'I'm Tom,' I replied.

'And that's the third time you've told me,' she reminded me.

I had expected we would camp at nightfall, but Nik kept us moving. We halted briefly while he took out two lanterns and hung them from a couple of the wagons. 'Just follow the light,' he told me tersely as he rode past us. Our mare did just that.

The light was gone and the cold getting intense when the wagon in front of us turned off the road and jolted into an opening in the trees by the river. Obediently I turned our mare to follow, and we bumped down off the road with a thud that made Kettle curse. I smiled: there were few Buckkeep guardsmen who could have done better.

In a short time we halted. I kept to my seat, wondering, for I could not see a thing. The river was a black sweeping force somewhere to our left. The wind off it added a new note of damp to the cold. The pilgrims in the wagon ahead of us were shifting restlessly and talking in soft whispers. I heard Nik's voice speaking and saw a man lead his horse past us. He took the lantern from the tail of the wagon as he went by. I followed its passage. In a moment man and horse had passed into a long, low building that had been invisible in the dark.

'Get down, go inside, we'll spend the night here,' Nik instructed us as he rode past us again. I dismounted and then waited to help Kettle down. As I offered her my hand, she looked almost startled.

'I thank you, kind sir,' she said quietly as I helped her down.

'You're welcome, my lady,' I replied. She took my arm as I guided her toward the building.

'Pretty damn well-mannered for a shepherd, Tom,' she observed in an entirely different voice. She gave a snort of laughter at the door and went inside, leaving me to go back and unhitch the mare. I shook my head at myself, but had to smile. I liked this old woman. I slung my pack over my shoulder and led the mare into the building where the others had gone. As I lifted her harness from her, I glanced around. It was one long open room. A fire had been kindled in a hearth at one end. The low-ceilinged building was of river-rock and clay with an earthen floor. The horses were at one end, crowding around a manger full of hay. As I turned our mare in with the others, one of Nik's men came bringing buckets of water to fill a trough. The

depth of manure at that end of the room told me this building was frequently used by the smugglers.

‘What was this place originally?’ I asked Nik as I joined the others around the hearth.

‘Sheep camp,’ he told me. ‘The shelter was for the early lambing. Then later, we’d shear here, after we’d washed the sheep in the river.’ His blue eyes were afar for a time. Then he gave a harsh laugh. ‘That was a long time ago. Now there’s not enough feed for a goat, let alone sheep like we had.’ He gestured at the fire. ‘Best eat and sleep while you can, Tom. Morning comes early for us.’ His glance seemed to linger on my earring as he passed me.

Food was simple. Bread and smoked fish. Porridge. Hot tea. Most of it was from the pilgrims’ supplies, but Nik put in enough that they did not object to feeding his men and Starling and me. Kettle ate by herself, from her own stores, and brewed her own pot of tea. The other pilgrims were polite to her and she was courteous in return but there was plainly no bond between them save that they were all going to the same place. Only the three children of the party seemed unafraid of her, begging dried apples and stories from her until she warned them they would all be sick.

The shelter soon warmed, from the horses and folk in it as much as from the hearth. Door and window shutters were closed tight, to keep in light and sound as well as warmth. Despite the storm and lack of other travellers on our path, Nik was taking no chances. I approved of that in a smuggler. The meal had given me my first good look at the company. Fifteen pilgrims, of mixed age and gender, not counting Kettle. About a dozen smugglers, of which six had enough resemblance to Nik and Pelf that they were at least cousins. The others looked a mixed bunch, professionally tough and watchful. At least three were on watch at all times. They spoke little and knew their tasks well enough that Nik directed them very little. I found myself feeling confident that I would see at least the other side of the river, and probably the Mountain border. It was the most optimistic I’d felt in a long time.

Starling showed to her best advantage in such a company. As soon as we had eaten, she took out her harp, and despite Nik’s frequent cautions to us to speak softly, he did not forbid the soft music and song she gave us. For the smugglers she sang an old ballad about Heft the highwayman, probably the most dashing robber that Buck had ever known. Even Nik was smiling at that song, and Starling’s eyes flirted with him as she sang. To the pilgrims

she sang about a winding river-road that carried folk home, and finished with a lullaby for the three children in our midst. By then more than just the children were stretched out on bedrolls. Kettle had peremptorily sent me out to fetch hers from the back of her cart. I wondered when I had been promoted from driver to servant, but said nothing as I fetched it for her. I supposed there was something about me that made all elderly folk assume my time was at their disposal.

I unrolled my own blankets next to Kettle's and lay down to seek sleep. Around me most of the others were already snoring. Kettle curled in her blankets like a squirrel in its nest. I could imagine how much her bones ached with the cold, but there was little I could do for her. Over by the hearth, Starling sat talking to Nik. From time to time, her fingers wandered lightly over her harp strings, their silvery notes a counterpoint to her low voice. Several times she made Nik laugh.

I was almost asleep.

My brother?

My whole body jerked with the shock of it. He was near.

Nighteyes?

Of course! Amusement. Or do you have another brother now?

Never! Only you, my friend. Where are you?

Where am I? Outside. Come to me.

I rose hastily and redonned my cloak. The man guarding the door frowned at me, but asked me no questions. I walked into the darkness, beyond the pulled-up wagons. The snow had ceased and the blowing wind had cleared a patch of starlit sky. Snow silvered the branches of every bush and tree. I was casting about for his presence when a solid weight hit me in the back. I was flung face-first in the snow and would have cried out, save that my mouth was full of snow. I managed to roll over and was trampled several times by a joyous wolf.

How did you know where to find me?

How do you know where to scratch when it itches?

I suddenly knew what he meant. I was not always aware of our bond. But to think of him now and to find him was suddenly no more difficult than to bring my two hands together in the dark. Of course I knew where he was. He was a part of me.

You smell like a female. You have taken a new mate?

No. Of course not.

But you share a den?

We travel together, as a pack. It is safer so.

I know.

For a time we sat in stillness of mind and body, simply adjusting to one another's physical presence again. I felt whole once more. I had peace. I had not known I had worried so much about him until the sight of him put my mind at rest. I sensed his unwilling agreement to that. He knew I had faced hardship and dangers alone. He had not thought I could survive them. But he had also missed me. He had missed my form of thinking, the sorts of ideas and discussions that wolves never shared amongst themselves. *Is that why you came back to me?* I asked him.

He stood up suddenly and shook himself all over. *It was time to come back,* he replied evasively. Then he added, *I ran with them. They finally allowed me to be part of their pack. We hunted together, we killed together, we shared meat. It was very good.*

But?

I wanted to be the leader. He turned and looked at me over his shoulder, his tongue lolling out. *I am used to being the leader, you know.*

Are you? And they would not accept you?

Black Wolf is very large. And quick. I am stronger than he is, I think, but he knows more tricks. It was much like when you fought Heart of the Pack.

I laughed quietly and he spun on me, lifting his lips in a mock snarl.

'Be easy,' I said quietly, warding him off with open hands. 'So. What happened?'

He flung himself down beside me. *He is still the leader. He still has the mate and the den.* He considered and I sensed him wrestling with the concept of the future. *It could be different, another time.*

'It could be,' I agreed. I scratched him gently behind the ear and he all but fell over in the snow. 'Will you go back to them, some day?'

He was having difficulty focusing on my words while I scratched his ears. I stopped and asked him again. He cocked his head to one side and regarded me with amusement. *Ask me on the some day, and I will be able to answer.*

One day at a time, I agreed with him. *I am glad you are here. But I still don't understand why you came back to me. You could have stayed with the pack.*

His eyes met mine, and even in the darkness they gripped me. *You are called, are you not? Did not your king howl to you, 'Come to me'?*

I nodded unwillingly. *I am called.*

He stood suddenly, shook himself all over. He looked off into the night. *If you are called, I am called, too.* He did not admit it willingly.

You do not have to come with me. This call from my king binds me, not you.

In that, you are wrong. What binds you, binds me.

I do not understand how that could be, I said carefully.

Nor do I. But it is so. Come to me, he called to us. And for a time, I could ignore it. But no more.

I am sorry. I groped for a way to express it. *He has no right to you. I know that. I do not think he intended to call you. I do not think he intended to bind me. But it happened, and I must go to him.*

I stood up and dusted off the snow that was starting to melt on me. I felt ashamed. Verity, a man whom I trusted, had done this to me. That was bad enough. But through me it was imposed on the wolf. Verity had no right to put any demands on Nighteyes. For that matter, I had no right to put any demands on him. What had been between us had always been entered into voluntarily, a mutual giving on both sides with no laying-on of obligations. Now, through me, he was entrapped as surely as if I had caged him.

We share a cage, then.

I wish it were otherwise. I wish there were some way I could free you of this. But I do not even know how to free myself. Not knowing how you are bound, I do not know how to loose you. You and I, we share the Wit. Verity and I share the Skill. How could his Skill-sending have gone through me to seize you? You were not even with me when he summoned me.

Nighteyes sat very still in the snow. The wind had come up, and in the faint starlight I could see it ruffling his coat. *I am always with you, brother. You may not always be aware of me, but I am always with you. We are one.*

We share many things, I agreed. Uneasiness itched at me.

No. He turned to face me squarely, met my eyes as no wild wolf would have. *We do not share. We are one. I am no longer a wolf, you are no longer a man. What we are together, I have no name for. Perhaps the one who spoke to us of the Old Blood would have a word to explain it.* He paused. *See how much a man I am, that I speak of having a word for an idea? No word is needed. We exist, and we are whatever we are.*

I would set you free if I could.

Would you? I would not part from you.

That is not what I meant. I meant I would have for you a life of your own.

He yawned, then stretched. *I will have for us a life of our own. We shall win it together. So. Do we travel by night or by day?*

We travel by day.

He sensed what I meant. *You will stay with this huge pack to travel? Why not break free of it and run with me? We shall go faster.*

I shook my head. *It is not that simple. To travel where we must, I will need shelter, and I have none that is mine alone. I need the aid of this pack to survive in this weather.*

There followed a difficult half hour, as I tried to explain to him that I would need the support of the others in the caravan to reach the Mountains. Had I had a horse and provisions of my own, I would not have hesitated to trust to luck and strike out with the wolf. But on foot with only what I could carry myself, facing the deep snows and deeper cold of the Mountains, not to mention a river crossing? I would not be that great a fool.

We could hunt, Nighteyes insisted. We would curl together in the snow at night. He could take care of me as he always had. With persistence, I was able to convince him that I must continue to travel as I did. *Then I shall have to continue to sneak along like a stray dog, following all these folk?*

‘Tom? Tom, are you out there?’ There was irritated annoyance and worry in Nik’s voice.

‘Right here!’ I stepped out of the bushes.

‘What were you doing?’ he demanded suspiciously.

‘Pissing,’ I told him. I made a sudden decision. ‘And my dog has followed me from town and caught up with us here. I left him with friends, but he must have chewed his rope. Here, boy, come to heel.’

I’ll chew your heel off for you, Nighteyes offered savagely, but he came, following me out into the cleared yard.

‘Damn big dog,’ Nik observed. He leaned forward. ‘Looks more than half a wolf to me?’

‘Some in Farrow have told me that. It’s a Buck breed. We use them for herding sheep.’

You will pay for this. I promise you.

In answer I leaned down to pat his shoulder and then scratch his ears. *Wag your tail, Nighteyes.* ‘He’s a loyal old dog. I should have known he wouldn’t be left behind.’

The things I endure for you. He wagged his tail. Once.

‘I see. Well. You’d best get yourself inside and get some sleep. And next time, don’t go off by yourself. For anything. At least, not without letting me know first. When my men are on watch, they get jumpy. They might cut your throat before they knew you.’

‘I understand.’

I walked right past two of them.

‘Nik, you don’t mind, do you? The dog, I mean.’ I tried to be affably abashed. ‘He can stay outside. He’s a real good watch-dog, actually.’

‘Just don’t expect me to feed him for you,’ Nik growled. ‘And don’t let him be any trouble to us.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he won’t. Will you, boy?’

Starling chose that moment to come to the door. ‘Nik? F ... Tom?’

‘We’re right here. You were right, he was just pissing,’ Nik said quietly. He took Starling’s arm and began to guide her back into the shed.

‘What’s that?’ she demanded, sounding almost alarmed.

I suddenly had to wager everything on her quick wits and our friendship. ‘Just the dog,’ I said quickly. ‘Nighteyes must have chewed his rope. I warned Creece to watch him when I left him there, that he’d want to follow me. But Creece didn’t listen, and here he is. I’ll guess I’ll have to take him to the Mountains with us after all.’

Starling was staring at the wolf. Her eyes were as wide and black as the night sky above us. Nik tugged at her arm and she finally turned back to the door. ‘I suppose so,’ she said faintly.

I silently thanked Eda and any other god that might be listening. To Nighteyes I said, ‘Stay and guard, there’s a good fellow.’

Enjoy it while you can, little brother. He flung himself down by the cart. I doubted that he’d stay there for more than a few heartbeats. I followed Starling and Nik inside. Nik shut the door firmly behind us and dropped the bolt in place. I pulled off my boots and shook out my snow-laden cloak before I wrapped myself in my blankets. Sleep was suddenly very close as I grasped the full relief I felt. Nighteyes was back. I felt whole. Safe, with the wolf at the door.

Nighteyes. I’m glad you’re here.

You've an odd way of showing it, he replied, but I could sense he was more amused than upset.

Black Rolf sent me a message. Regal seeks to turn those of Old Blood against us. He offers them gold to hunt us down for him. We should not speak overly much.

Gold. What is gold to us, or those like us? Do not fear, little brother. I am here to take care of you again.

I closed my eyes and sank into sleep, hoping he was right. For an instant, as I teetered on the edge of wakefulness, I noticed that Starling had not spread her blankets by mine. She sat on her blankets on the other side of the room. By Nik. Heads together, they spoke softly about something. She laughed. I could not hear the words she next said, but the tone was a teasing challenge.

I almost felt a pang of jealousy. I rebuked myself for it. She was a companion, no more. What was it to me how she spent her nights? Last night she had slept against my back. This night she would not. I decided it was the wolf. She couldn't accept it. She was not the first. Knowing I was Witted was not the same thing as confronting my bond-animal. Well. That was how that was.

I slept.

Sometime in the night I felt a gentle groping. It was the barest brushing of the Skill across my senses. I came alert, but still, waiting. I felt nothing. Had I imagined it, dreamed it? A more chilling thought came to me. Perhaps it was Verity, too weakened to do more than reach for me. Perhaps it was Will. I lay still, longing to reach out, and fearing to. I wanted so badly to know that Verity was all right; since he had blasted Regal's coterie that night, I had felt nothing of him. *Come to me*, he had said. What if that had been his dying wish? What if all my seeking would yield me were bones? I pushed the fear away and tried to be open.

The mind I felt brush mine was Regal's.

I had never Skilled to Regal, had only suspected he was able to Skill. Even now, I doubted what I sensed. The strength of the Skill seemed Will's, but the feel of the thoughts was Regal's. *And you have not found the woman either?* The Skilling was not meant for me. He reached for someone else. I grew bolder, venturing closer. I tried to be open to his thoughts without reaching for them.

Not as of yet, my king. Burl. Hiding his trembling behind formality and courtesy. I knew Regal could sense it as clearly as I could. I even knew that he enjoyed it. Regal had never been able to grasp the difference between fear and respect. He had no belief in a man's respect for him unless it was tainted with fear. I had not thought he would extend that to his own coterie. I wondered what the threat was that he held over them.

And nothing of the Bastard? Regal demanded. There was no mistaking it now. Regal Skilled, using Will's strength. Did that mean he could not Skill by himself?

Burl steeled himself. *My king, I have found no sign of him. I believe he is dead. Truly dead, this time. He cut himself with a poisoned blade; the despair he felt at that moment of decision was absolute. No man could have pretended it.*

Then there should be a body, should there not?

Somewhere, my king, I am sure there is. Your guards have simply not found it yet. This from Carrod, who did not tremble with fear. He hid his fear even from himself, pretending it was anger. I understood how he might need to do that, but doubted the wisdom of it. It forced him to stand up to Regal. Regal did not appreciate a man who spoke his mind.

Perhaps I should put you in charge of riding the roads, looking for it, Regal suggested pleasantly. *At the same time, you might find the man who killed Bolt and his patrol.*

My lord king ... Carrod began, but **SILENCE!** Regal overrode him. He drew freely on Will's strength to do it. The effort cost him nothing.

I believed him dead once before, and my trust in the word of others nearly got me killed. This time I will see him, see him hacked in pieces before I rest. Will's feeble attempt to trap the Bastard into betraying himself failed miserably.

Perhaps because he is already dead, Carrod ventured foolishly.

Then I witnessed a thing I wished I had not. A needle of pain, hot and piercing, he sent to Carrod with Will's Skill. In that sending, I finally glimpsed the whole of what they had become. Regal rode Will, not like a man rides a horse, to be thrown by the horse in anger, but as a tick or a leech bites into its victim and clings and sucks life from him. Waking or asleep, Regal was with him always, had access always to his strength. And now he spent it viciously, caring nothing for what it would cost Will. I had not known pain could be inflicted with Skill alone. A numbing blast of strength

such as Verity had spent upon them, that I knew. But this was different. This was no show of force or temper. This was a display of purest vindictiveness. Somewhere, I knew, Carrod fell to the floor and thrashed in wordless agony. Linked as they were, Burl and Will must have shared a shadow of that pain. It surprised me that a member of a coterie was even capable of doing that to another. But then, it was not Will who sent the pain. It was Regal.

It passed, after a time. Perhaps in reality it only lasted an instant. For Carrod, it certainly lasted long enough. I sensed from him a faint mental whimpering. He was capable of no more than that just now.

I do not believe the Bastard died. I dare not believe it until I've seen his body. Someone killed Bolt and his men. So find his body and bring it to me, whether alive or dead. Burl. Remain where you are, and redouble your efforts. I am certain he is bound that way. Let no traveller pass you unchallenged. Carrod, I think perhaps you should join Burl. An indolent life does not seem to agree with your temperament. Be on your way tomorrow. And as you travel, do not be lazy. Keep your minds upon your task. We know that Verity lives; he proved that to all of you most effectively. The Bastard will try to get to him. He must be stopped before he does so, and then my brother must be eliminated as a threat. These are the only tasks I have given you; why cannot you do them? Have you no thought for what will become of us should Verity succeed? Search for him, with Skill and men. Do not let folk forget what I have offered for his capture. Do not let them forget the punishment for aiding him. Am I understood?

Of course, my lord king. I shall spare no effort. Burl was quick to reply.

Carrod? I hear nothing from you Carrod. The threat of punishment hung over them all.

Please, my lord King. I shall do all, everything. Alive or dead, I shall find him for you. I shall.

Without even an acknowledgement, Will and Regal's presence vanished. I felt Carrod collapse. Burl lingered a moment longer. Did he listen, did he grope back toward my presence? I let my thoughts float free, my concentration dissipate. Then I opened my eyes and lay staring at the ceiling, thinking. The Skilling had left me queasy and trembling.

I am with you, my brother, Nighteyes assured me.

And I am glad that you are. I rolled over and tried to find sleep.

SIXTEEN

Bolthole

In many of the old legends and tales of the Wit, it is insisted that a Wit user eventually takes on many traits of his bond-animal. Some of the most frightening tales say that eventually a Witted one becomes capable of assuming the guise of that animal. Those who know intimately of such magic have assured me it is not so. It is true that a Witted one may, without realizing it, assume some of the physical mannerisms of his bond-animal, but one bonded to an eagle will not sprout wings, nor will one bonded to a horse begin to neigh. As time goes by, a Witted one grows in understanding of the bond-beast, and the longer a human and an animal are bonded, the greater will be the similarity of their mannerisms. The bond-animal is as likely to assume the mannerisms and traits of the human as the human is to adopt those of his beast. But this only happens over a long period of intense contact.

Nik agreed with Burrich's idea of when mornings began. I awoke to the sound of his men leading the horses out. A cold wind blew in the open door. Around me in the darkness the others were stirring. One of the children was crying at being awakened so early. Her mother shushed her. Molly, I thought with sudden longing. Somewhere hushing my child.

What's this?

My mate bore a cub. Far away.

Immediate concern. But who will hunt meat to feed them? Should not we return to her?

Heart of the Pack watches over her.

Of course. I should have known that. That one knows the meaning of pack, no matter how he denies it. All is well, then.

As I rose and bundled my blankets together, I wished I could accept it as blithely as he did. I knew Burrich would care for them. It was his nature. I recalled all the years he had watched over me as I had grown. Often I had hated him then; now I could not think of anyone else I would prefer to care for Molly and my baby. Save myself. I would much rather it was I watching over them, even rocking a crying babe in the middle of the night. Though I

rather wished, just now, that the pilgrim woman would find a way to quiet her child. I was paying for my Skill-spying of the night before with a savage headache.

Food seemed to be the answer, for when the girl had a piece of bread and some honeycomb, she soon quieted. It was a hasty meal we shared, the only hot item being tea. I noticed Kettle was moving very stiffly and took pity on her. I fetched her a cup of hot tea to wrap her twisted fingers around while I rolled up her blankets for her. I had never seen hands so distorted by rheumatism; they reminded me of bird claws.

‘An old friend of mine said that sometimes the sting of nettles actually relieved his hands when they ached,’ I suggested to her as I tied her bundle.

‘You find me nettles growing under the snow and I’ll try them, boy,’ she replied peevishly. But a few moments later she was offering me a dried apple from her small store. I accepted it with thanks. I loaded our things onto the cart and harnessed the mare while she finished her tea. I glanced about but saw nothing of Nighteyes.

Hunting, came the reply.

Wish I was with you. Good luck.

Aren’t we supposed to speak but little, lest Regal hear us?

I didn’t reply. It was a clear cold morning, almost shockingly bright after yesterday’s snow. It was colder than it had been the day before; the wind off the river seemed to cut right through my garments, finding the gaps at cuffs and collars to poke its cold fingers through. I helped Kettle mount the cart, and then tucked one of her blankets around her in addition to her wraps. ‘Your mother trained you well, Tom,’ she said with genuine kindness.

I still winced at the remark. Starling and Nik stood talking together until everyone else was ready to go. Then she mounted her Mountain pony and took a place beside Nik at the head of our procession. I told myself that it was likely Nik Holdfast would make a better ballad than FitzChivalry anyway. If he could persuade her to go back with him at the Mountain border, my life would only be simpler.

I gave my mind to my task. There was really little to it, other than to keep the mare from lagging too far behind the pilgrims’ wagon. I had time to see the country we traversed. We regained the little-used road we had been on the day before and continued to follow the river upstream. Along the river, it was sparsely treed, but a short distance away from the riverbank, it became a rolling, treeless terrain of brush and scrub. Gullies and washes cut

our road on their way to the river. It seemed that at some time water had been plentiful here, perhaps in spring. But now the land was dry save for the crystal snow that blew loosely across it like sand and the river in its bed.

‘Yesterday the minstrel made you smile to yourself. For whom is the frown today?’ Kettle asked quietly.

‘I was thinking it a shame, to see what this rich land has come to.’

‘Were you?’ she asked drily.

‘Tell me of this seer of yours,’ I said, mostly to change the subject.

‘He is not mine,’ she said with asperity. Then she relented. ‘It is probably a fool’s errand I go on. He whom I seek may not even be there. And yet what better use do I have for these years, than to chase a chimera?’

I kept silence. I was beginning to find it was the question she answered best. ‘Do you know what’s in this cart, Tom? Books. Scrolls and writings. Ones I’ve collected for years. I have gathered them in many lands, learned to read many tongues and letterings. In so many places, I found mention, over and over again, of the White Prophets. They appear at the junctures of history and shape it. Some say they come to set history on its proper course. There are those who believe, Tom, that all of time is a circle. All of history, a great wheel, turning inexorably. Just as seasons come and go, just as the moon moves endlessly through her cycle, so does time. The same wars are fought, the same plagues descend, the same folk, good or evil, rise to power. Humanity is trapped on that wheel, doomed endlessly to repeat the mistakes we have already made. Unless someone comes to change it. Far to the south, there is a land where they believe that for every generation, somewhere in the world there is a White Prophet. He or she comes, and if what is taught is heeded, the cycle of time moves into a better course. If it is ignored, all time is pushed into a darker path.’

She paused, as if waiting for me to say something. ‘I know nothing of such teachings,’ I admitted.

‘I would not expect you to. It was in a far place I first studied such things. There they held that if such prophets fail, again and again, the repeating history of the world will grow more and more evil, until the entire cycle of time, hundreds of thousands of years, becomes a history of misery and wrong.’

‘And if the prophet is heeded?’

‘Each time one succeeds, it is easier for the next one. And when an entire cycle passes in which every prophet succeeds, time itself will finally

stop.'

'So they work for the end of the world to come?'

'Not the end of the world, Tom. The end of time. To free humanity of time. For time is the great enslaver of us all. Time that ages us, time that limits us. Think how often you have wished to have more time for something, or wished you could go back a day and do something differently. When humanity is freed of time, old wrongs can be corrected before they are done.' She sighed. 'I believe this is the time for such a prophet to come. And my readings lead me to believe that this generation's White Prophet shall arise in the Mountains.'

'But you are alone on your quest. Do no others agree with you?'

'Many others. But few, very few, go to seek a White Prophet. It is the folk the Prophet is sent to who must heed him. Others should not interfere, lest they set all time awry forever.'

I was still puzzling over what she had said about time. It seemed to make a knot in my thinking. Her voice fell silent. I stared forward between the mare's ears and pondered. Time to go back and be honest with Molly. Time to follow Fedwren the scribe instead of being an assassin's apprentice. She had given me much to think about.

Our talk lapsed for some time.

Nighteyes reappeared shortly after noon. He came trotting purposefully out of the trees, to fall into place trotting beside our wagon. The mare gave him several nervous glances as she tried to puzzle out wolf smell and dog behaviour. I quested toward her and reassured her. He had been for some time on my side of the cart before Kettle caught sight of him. She leaned forward to look past me, then sat back again. 'There's a wolf beside our cart,' she observed.

'He's my dog. Though he has some wolf blood in him,' I admitted casually.

Kettle leaned forward to look at him again. She glanced up at my placid expression. Then she sat back. 'So they herd sheep with wolves in Buck these days.' She nodded, and said no more about him.

We pushed on steadily for the rest of the day. We saw no folk save ourselves, and only one small cabin sending up a trail of smoke in the distance. The cold and the blowing wind were a constant, but not one that became easier to ignore as the day went on. The faces of the pilgrims in the wagon in front of us became paler, noses redder, lips almost blue on one

woman. They were packed together like fish in brine but all their closeness seemed to be no protection against the cold.

I moved my feet inside my boots to keep my toes awake, and shifted the reins from one hand to the other as I took turns warming my fingers under my arm. My shoulder ached, and the ache ran down my arm until even my fingers throbbed with it. My lips were dry but I dared not wet them lest they crack. Few things are as miserable to confront as constant cold. As for Kettle, I did not doubt it tortured her. She did not complain, but as the day went by she seemed to get smaller within her blanket as she curled closer on herself. Her silence seemed but further evidence of her misery.

We were still short of darkness when Nik turned our wagons away from the road and up a long trail nearly obscured by the blown snow. The only sign of it I could make out was that less grass stuck up above the snow, but Nik seemed to know it well. The mounted smugglers broke trail for the wagons. It was still heavy going for Kettle's little mare. I looked back behind us once to see the sweeping hand of the wind smoothing our trail out to no more than a ripple in the snowy landscape.

The land we crossed seemed featureless, but it undulated gently. We eventually crested the long rise we had ascended, and looked down onto a huddle of buildings that had been invisible from the road. Evening was drawing on. A single light shone in a window. As we wended our way down toward it, other candles were lit, and Nighteyes caught a trace of woodsmoke on the wind. We were expected.

The buildings were not old. They looked as if they had been recently completed. There was an ample barn. Wagons and all, we led the horses down into it, for the earth had been dug away so that the barn was half underground. This low profile was why we had not seen this place from the road, and I didn't doubt that was the reason for it. Unless a man knew this place was here, he'd never find it. The earth from the digging had been heaped up around the barn and other buildings. Inside the thick walls with the doors shut, we could not even hear the wind. A milk cow shifted in her stall as we unhitched the horses and put them in stalls. There was straw and hay and a trough of fresh water.

The pilgrims had got out of the wagon, and I was helping Kettle down when the barn door opened again. A lithe young woman with a mass of red hair piled on her head came storming in. Fists on her hips, she confronted

Nik. 'Who are all these people and why have you brought them here? What good is a bolthole if half the countryside knows of it?'

Nik handed his horse to one of his men and turned to her. Without a word, he swept her into his arms and kissed her. But a moment later, she pushed him away. 'What are you ...'

'They paid well. They've their own food, and can make do in here for the night. Then they'll be on their way to the Mountains tomorrow. Up there, no one cares what we do. There's no danger, Tel, you worry too much.'

'I have to worry for two, for you haven't the sense to. I've food ready, but not enough for all this lot. Why didn't you send a bird to warn me?'

'I did. Didn't it get here? Maybe the storm delayed it.'

'That's what you always say when you don't think to do it.'

'Let it go, woman. I've good tidings for you. Let's go back to your house and talk.' Nik's arm rested easily about her waist as they left. It was up to his men to settle us. There was straw to sleep in and plenty of space to spread it. There was a dug well with a bucket outside for water. There was a small hearth at one end of the barn. The chimney smoked badly, but it sufficed to cook on. The barn was not warm, save in comparison to the weather outside. But no one complained. Nighteyes had stayed outside.

They've a coop full of chickens, he told me. And a pigeon coop, too.

Leave them alone, I warned him.

Starling started to leave with Nik's men when they went up to the house, but they stopped her at the door. 'Nik says all of you are to stay inside tonight, in one place.' The man shot a meaningful glance at me. In a louder voice, he called, 'Get your water now, for we'll be bolting the door when we leave. It keeps the wind out better.'

No one was fooled by his comment, but no one challenged it. Obviously the smuggler felt the less we knew of his bolthole, the better. That was understandable. Instead of complaining we fetched water. Out of habit, I replenished the animals' trough. As I hauled the fifth bucket, I wondered if I would ever lose the reflex of seeing to the beasts first. The pilgrims had devoted themselves to seeing to their own comfort. Soon I could smell food cooking on the hearth. Well, I had dried meat and hard bread. It would suffice.

You could be hunting with me. There's game here. They had a garden this summer and the rabbits are still coming for the stalks.

He sprawled in the lee of the chicken house, the bloody remnants of a rabbit across his forepaws. Even as he ate, he kept one eye on the snow-covered garden patch, watching for other game. I chewed a stick of dry meat glumly while I heaped up straw for Kettle's bed in the stall next to her horse. I was spreading her blanket over it when she returned from the fire carrying her teapot.

'Who put you in charge of my bedding?' she demanded. As I took a breath to reply, she added, 'Here's tea if you've a cup to your name. Mine's in my bag on the cart. There's some cheese and dried apples there as well. Fetch it for us, there's a good lad.'

As I did so, I heard Starling's voice and harp take up a tune. Singing for her supper, I didn't doubt. Well, it was what minstrels did, and I doubted she'd go hungry. I brought Kettle's bag back to her, and she portioned me out a generous share while eating lightly herself. We sat on our blankets and ate. During the meal, she kept glancing at me, and finally declared, 'You've a familiar cast to your features, Tom. What part of Buck did you say you were from?'

'Buckkeep Town,' I replied without thinking.

'Ah. And who was your mother?'

I hesitated, then declared, 'Sal Flatfish.' She had so many children running about Buckkeep Town, there was probably one named Tom.

'Fisherfolk? How did a fisherwoman's son end up a shepherd?'

'My father herded,' I extemporized. 'Between the two trades, we did well enough.'

'I see. And they taught you courtly courtesies to old women. And you've an uncle in the Mountains. Quite a family.'

'He took to wandering at an early age, and settled there.' The badgering was beginning to make me sweat a little. I could tell she knew it, too. 'What part of Buck did you say your family came from?' I asked suddenly.

'I didn't say,' she replied with a small smile.

Starling suddenly appeared at the door of the stall. She perched on the edge of it and leaned over. 'Nik said we'd cross the river in two days,' she offered. I nodded, but said nothing. She came around the end of the stall and casually tossed her pack down beside mine. She followed it to sit leaning against it, her harp on her lap. 'There are two couples down by the hearth, squabbling and bickering. Some water got into their travel bread, and all they can think to do is spit about whose fault it is. And one of the children is

sick and puking. Poor little thing. The man who is so angry about the wet bread keeps going on about it's just a waste of food to feed the boy until he stops being sick.'

'That would be Rally. A more conniving, tight-fisted man I never met,' Kettle observed genially. 'And the boy, Selk. He's been sick on and off since we left Chalced. And before, like as not. I think his mother thinks Eda's shrine can cure him. She's grasping at straws, but she has the gold to do so. Or did.'

It started off a round of gossiping between the two. I leaned in the corner and listened with half an ear and dozed. Two days to the river, I promised myself. And how much longer to the Mountains? I broke in to ask Starling if she knew.

'Nik says there's no way to tell that, it all depends on the weather. But he told me not to worry about it.' Her fingers wandered idly over the strings of her harp. Almost instantly, two children appeared in the door of the stall.

'Are you going to sing again?' asked the girl. She was a spindly little child of about six, her dress much worn. There were bits of straw in her hair.

'Would you like me to?'

For answer, they came bounding in to sit on either side of her. I had expected Kettle to complain at this invasion, but she said nothing, even when the girl settled comfortably against her. Kettle began to pick the straw from the child's hair with her twisted old fingers. The little girl had dark eyes and clutched a poppet with an embroidered face. When she smiled up at Kettle, I could see they were not strangers.

'Sing the one about the old woman and her pig,' the boy begged Starling.

I stood up and gathered my pack. 'I need to get some sleep,' I excused myself. I suddenly could not bear to be around the children.

I found an empty stall nearer the door of the barn and bedded down there. I could hear the mutter of the pilgrims' voices at their hearth. Some quarrelling still seemed to be going on. Starling sang the song about the woman, the stile and the pig, and then a song about an apple tree. I heard the footsteps of a few others as they came to sit and listen to the music. I told myself they'd be wiser to sleep, and closed my own eyes.

All was dark and still when she came to find me in the night. She stepped on my hand in the dark, and then near dropped her pack on my head. I said nothing, even when she stretched out beside me. She spread her

blankets out to cover me as well, then wiggled in under the edge of mine. I didn't move. Suddenly I felt her hand touch my face questioningly. 'Fitz?' she asked softly in the darkness.

'What?'

'How much do you trust Nik?'

'I told you. Not at all. But I think he'll get us to the Mountains. For his own pride, if nothing else.' I smiled in the dark. 'A smuggler's reputation must be perfect, among those who know of it. He'll get us there.'

'Were you angry at me, earlier today?' When I said nothing, she added, 'You gave me such a serious look this morning.'

'Does the wolf bother you?' I asked her as bluntly.

She spoke quietly. 'It's true then?'

'Did you doubt it before?'

'The Witted part ... yes. I thought it an evil lie they had told about you. That the son of a prince could be Witted ... You did not seem a man who would share his life with an animal.' The tone of her voice left me no doubt as to how she regarded such a habit.

'Well. I do.' A tiny spark of anger made me forthright. 'He's everything to me. Everything. I have never had a truer friend, willing without question to lay his life down for mine. And more than his life. It is one thing to be willing to die for another. It is another to sacrifice the living of one's life for another. That is what he gives me. The same sort of loyalty I give to my king.'

I had set myself to thinking. I'd never put our relationship in those terms before.

'A king and a wolf,' Starling said quietly. More softly she added, 'Do you care for no one else?'

'Molly.'

'Molly?'

'She's at home. Back in Buck. She's my wife.' A queer little tremor of pride shivered through me as I said the words. My wife.

Starling sat up in the blankets, letting in a draught of cold air. I tugged at them vainly as she asked, 'A wife? You have a wife?'

'And a child. A little girl.' Despite the cold and the darkness, I grinned at those words. 'My daughter,' I said quietly, simply to hear how the words sounded. 'I have a wife and a daughter at home.'

She flung herself down in the darkness beside me. ‘No you don’t!’ she denied it with an emphatic whisper. ‘I’m a minstrel, Fitz. If the Bastard had married, the word would have gone round. In fact, there were rumours you were for Celerity, Duke Brawndy’s daughter.’

‘It was done quietly,’ I told her.

‘Ah. I see. You’re not married at all. You’ve a woman, is what you’re trying to say.’

The words stung me. ‘Molly is my wife,’ I said firmly. ‘In every way that matters to me, she is my wife.’

‘And in the ways that might matter to her? And a child?’ Starling asked me quietly.

I took a deep breath. ‘When I go back, that will be the first thing we remedy. It was promised to me, by Verity himself, that when he was king, I should marry whomever I wished.’ Some part of me was aghast at how freely I was speaking to her. Another part asked, what harm could it do for her to know? And there was relief in being able to speak of it.

‘So you do go to find Verity?’

‘I go to serve my king. To lend whatever aid I may to Kettricken and Verity’s heir-child. And then to go on, to beyond the Mountains, to find and restore my king. So he may drive the Red Ships from the Six Duchies coast and we may know peace again.’

For a moment all was silence save for the slicing wind outside the canvas. Then she snorted softly. ‘Do even half of that, and I shall have my hero song.’

‘I have no desire to be a hero. Only to do what I must to be free to live my own life.’

‘Poor Fitz. None of us are ever free to do that.’

‘You seem very free to me.’

‘Do I? To me it seems as if every step I take carries me deeper into a mire, and the more I struggle, the more firmly I embed myself.’

‘How is that?’

She gave a choked laugh. ‘Look about you. Here I am, sleeping in straw and singing for my supper, gambling that there will eventually be a way to cross this river and go on to the Mountains. And if I get through all that, have I achieved my goal? No. I still must dangle after you until you do something songworthy.’

‘You really needn’t,’ I said in some dismay at the prospect. ‘You could go on your way, making your way as a minstrel. You seem to do well enough at it.’

‘Well enough. Well enough for a travelling minstrel. You’ve heard me sing, Fitz. I’ve a good enough voice, and nimble enough fingers. But I am not extraordinary, and that is what it takes to win a position as keep minstrel. That’s assuming there will be any more keeps in five years or so. I’ve no mind to sing to a Red Ship audience.’

For a moment we were both quiet, considering.

‘You see,’ she went on after a time, ‘I’ve no one any more. Parents and brother gone. My old master gone, Lord Bronze gone, who was partial to me mostly for my master’s sake. All gone when the keep burned. The Raiders left me for dead, you know, or I’d truly be dead.’ For the first time, I heard hints of an old fear in her voice. She was quiet for a time, thinking of all that she would not mention. I rolled to face her. ‘I’ve only myself to rely on. For now, for always. Only myself. And there’s a limit to how long a minstrel can wander about singing for coins in inns. If you wish to be comfortable when you’re old, you have to earn a place in a keep. Only a truly great song will do that for me, Fitz. And I’ve a limited amount of time in which to find one.’ Her voice grew softer, her breath warm as she said, ‘And so I shall follow you. For great events seem to happen in your wake.’

‘Great events?’ I scoffed.

She hitched herself closer to me. ‘Great events. The abdication of the throne by Prince Chivalry. The triumph against the Red Ships at Antler Island. Were not you the one who saved Queen Ketricken from Forged Ones the night she was attacked, right before the Vixen Queen’s Hunt? (Now there’s a song I wish I had written.) To say nothing of precipitating the riots the night of Prince Regal’s coronation. Let’s see. Rising from the dead, making an attempt on Regal’s life right inside Tradeford Hall and then escaping unscathed. Killing half a dozen of his guard single-handedly while manacled ... I had a feeling I should have followed you that day. But I’d say I’d a good chance of witnessing something noteworthy if I but held onto your shirttail from now on.’

I’d never thought of those events as a list of things I’d caused. I wanted to protest that I had not caused any of them, that I had merely been caught up in the grinding wheels of history. Instead I just sighed. ‘All I want to do is go home to Molly and our little daughter.’

‘She probably longs for the same thing. It can’t be easy for her, wondering when you’ll come back, or if.’

‘She doesn’t wonder. She already believes me dead.’

After a time, Starling said hesitantly, ‘Fitz. She thinks you dead. How can you believe she will be there waiting when you return, that she won’t find someone else?’

I had played a dozen scenes in my head. That I might die before I returned home, or that when I returned, Molly would see me as a liar and a Witted one, that she would be repelled by my scars. I fully expected her to be angry at me for not letting her know I was alive. But I would explain that I had believed she had found another man and was happy with him. And then she’d understand and forgive me. After all, she was the one who had left me. Somehow I had never imagined returning home to find she had replaced me with someone else. Stupid. How could I not have foreseen that might happen, simply because it was the worst possible thing I could imagine? I spoke more to myself than Starling. ‘I suppose I’d better get word to her. Send her a message, somehow. But I don’t know exactly where she is. Nor who I’d entrust with such a message.’

‘How long have you been gone?’ she demanded to know.

‘From Molly? Almost a year.’

‘A year! Men,’ Starling muttered softly to herself. ‘They go off to fight or to travel and they expect their lives to be waiting for them when they get back. You expect the women who stay behind to keep the fields and raise the children and patch the roof and mind the cow, so that when you walk back in the door, you can find your chair still by the fire and hot bread on the table. Yes, and a warm, willing body in your bed, still waiting for you.’ She was beginning to sound angry. ‘How many days have you been gone from her? Well, that’s how many days she has had to cope without you. Time doesn’t stop for her just because you’re gone. How do you think of her? Rocking your baby beside a warm hearth? How about this? The baby is inside, crying and untended on the bed, while she’s out in the rain and wind trying to split wood for kindling because the fire went out while she was walking to and from the mill to get a bit of meal ground.’

I pushed the image away. No. Burrich wouldn’t let that happen. ‘In my mind, I see her in many ways. Not just in good times,’ I defended myself. ‘And she isn’t completely alone. A friend of mine is looking after her.’

‘Ah, a friend,’ Starling agreed smoothly. ‘And is he handsome, spirited and bold enough to steal any woman’s heart?’

I snorted. ‘No. He’s older. He’s stubborn, and cranky. But he’s also steady and reliable and thoughtful. He always treats women well. Politely and kindly. He’ll take good care of both her and the child.’ I smiled to myself, and knew the truth of it as I added, ‘He’ll kill any man that even looks a threat at them.’

‘Steady, kind and thoughtful? Treats women well?’ Starling’s voice rose with feigned interest. ‘Do you know how rare a man like that is? Tell me who he is, I want him for myself. If your Molly will let him go.’

I confess I knew a moment’s unease. I remembered a day when Molly had teased me, saying I was the best thing to come out of the stables since Burrich. When I had been sceptical as to whether that was a compliment, she had told me he was well regarded among the ladies, for all his silences and aloof ways. Had she ever looked at Burrich and considered him? No. It was me she had made love with that day, clinging to me although we could not be wed. ‘No. She loves me. Only me.’

I had not intended to say the words aloud. Some note in my voice must have touched a kinder place in Starling’s nature. She gave over tormenting me. ‘Oh. Well, then. I still think you should send her word. So she has hope to keep her strong.’

‘I will,’ I promised myself. As soon as I reached Jhaampe. Kettricken would know some way by which I could get word back to Burrich. I could send back just a brief written message, not too plainly worded in case it was intercepted. I could ask him to tell her I was alive and I would return to her. But how would I get the message to him?

I lay silently musing in the dark. I did not know where Molly was living. Lacey would possibly know. But I could not send word via Lacey without Patience finding out. No. Neither of them must know. There had to be someone we both knew, someone I could trust. Not Chade. I could trust him, but no one would know how to find Chade, even if they knew him by that name.

Somewhere in the barn, a horse thudded a hoof against a stall wall. ‘You’re very quiet,’ Starling whispered.

‘I’m thinking.’

‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘You didn’t. You just made me think.’

‘Oh.’ A pause. ‘I am so cold.’

‘Me, too. But it’s colder outside.’

‘That doesn’t make me the least bit warmer. Hold me.’

It was not a request. She burrowed into my chest, tucking her head under my chin. She smelled nice. How did women always manage to smell nice? Awkwardly I put my arms around her, grateful for the added warmth but uneasy at the closeness. ‘That’s better,’ she sighed. I felt her body relax against mine. She added, ‘I hope we get a chance to bathe soon.’

‘Me, too.’

‘Not that you smell that bad.’

‘Thank you,’ I said a bit sourly. ‘Mind if I go back to sleep now?’

‘Go ahead.’ She put a hand on my hip and added, ‘If that’s all you can think of to do.’

I managed to draw a breath. Molly, I told myself. Starling was so warm and near, smelling so sweet. Her minstrel’s ways made nothing of what she suggested. To her. But what was Molly, truly, to me? ‘I told you. I’m married.’ It was hard to speak.

‘Um. And she loves you, and you obviously love her. But we are the ones who are here, and cold. If she loves you that much would she begrudge you an added bit of warmth and comfort on such a cold night?’

It was difficult, but I forced myself to think about it a bit, then smiled to myself in the darkness. ‘She wouldn’t just begrudge me. She’d knock my head off my shoulders.’

‘Ah.’ Starling laughed softly into my chest. ‘I see.’ Gently she drew her body away from mine. I longed to reach out and pull her back to me. ‘Perhaps we’d better just go to sleep, then. Sleep well, Fitz.’

So I did, but not right away and not without regrets.

The night brought us rising winds, and when the barn doors were unbolted in the morning, a fresh layer of snow greeted us. I worried that if it got much deeper, we’d have serious problems with the wagons. But Nik seemed confident and genial as he loaded us up. He bid a fond farewell to his lady and we set forth again. He led us away from the place by a different trail from the one we had followed to get there. This one was rougher, and in a few places the snow had drifted deep enough that the wagon bodies gouged a path through it. Starling rode beside us for part of the morning, until Nik sent a man back to ask her if she’d come ride with them. She thanked him cheerily for the invitation and promptly went to join him.

In the early afternoon, we came back to the road. It seemed to me that we had gained little by avoiding the road for so long, but doubtless Nik had had his reasons. Perhaps he simply did not want to create a beaten track to his hiding place. That evening our shelter was crude, some tumbledown huts by the riverbank. The thatched roofs were giving way, so there were fingers of snow on the floors in places and a great plume of snow that had blown in under the door. The horses had no shelter at all other than the lee of the cabin. We watered them at the river and they each got a portion of grain, but no hay awaited them here.

Nighteyes went with me to gather firewood, for while there was enough by the hearths to start a fire for a meal, there was not enough to last the night. As we walked down to the river to look for driftwood I mused on how things had changed between us. We spoke less than we once had, but I felt that I was more aware of him than I had ever been before. Perhaps there was less need to speak. But we had also both changed in our time apart. When I looked at him now, I sometimes saw the wolf first and then my companion.

I think you have finally begun to respect me as I deserve. There was teasing but also truth in that statement. He appeared suddenly in a patch of brush on the riverbank to my left, loped easily across the snowswept trail, and somehow managed to vanish in little more than snow dunes and leafless, scrubby bushes.

You're no longer a puppy, that's true.

Neither of us are cubs any more. We've both discovered that on this journey. You no longer think of yourself as a boy at all.

I trudged wordlessly through the snow and pondered that. I did not know quite when I had finally decided I was a man and not a boy any longer, but Nighteyes was right. Oddly, I felt a moment of loss for that vanished lad with the smooth face and easy courage.

I think I made a better boy than I do a man, I admitted ruefully to the wolf.

Why not wait until you've been at it a bit longer and then decide? he suggested.

The track we followed was barely a cart wide and visible only as a swatch where no brush poked up above the snow. The wind was busy sculpting the snow into dunes and banks. I walked into the wind, and my forehead and nose soon burned with its rough kiss. The terrain was little different from what we had passed for the last few days, but the experience

of moving through it with only the wolf, silently, made it seem a different world. Then we came to the river.

I stood on top of the bank and looked across. Ice frosted the edges in places, and occasional knots of driftwood washing down the river sometimes carried a burden of dirty ice and clinging snow. The current was strong, as the swiftly bobbing driftwood showed. I tried to imagine it frozen over and could not. On the far side of that rushing flood were foothills dense with evergreens that gave onto a plain of oaks and willows that came right down to the water's edge. I suppose the water had stopped the fire's spread those years ago. I wondered if this side of the river had ever been as thickly treed as that.

Look, Nighteyes growled wistfully. I could feel the heat of his hunger as we eyed a tall buck that had come down to the river to water. He lifted his antlered head, sensing us, but regarded us calmly, knowing he was safe. I found my mouth watering with Nighteyes' thoughts of fresh meat. *Hunting will be much better on the other side.*

I hope so. He leaped from the bank to the snow-swathed gravel and rock of the river edge, and padded off upriver. I followed him less gracefully, finding dry sticks as I went. The walking was rougher down here, and the wind crueller, laden as it was with the river's cold. But it was also more interesting walking, somehow laden with more possibility. I watched Nighteyes range ahead of me. He moved differently now. He had lost a lot of his puppyish curiosity. The deer skull that once would have required a careful sniffing now got no more than a swift flipping over to be sure it was truly bare bones before he moved on. He was purposeful as he checked tangles of driftwood to see if game might be sheltering underneath it. He watched the undercut banks of the river as well, sniffing for game sign. He sprang upon and devoured a small rodent of some kind that had ventured out of a den under the bank. He dug briefly at the den's entrance, then thrust his muzzle in to snuff thoroughly. Satisfied there were no other inhabitants to dig out, he trotted on.

I found myself watching the river as I followed him. It became more daunting, not less, the more I saw of it. The depth of it and the strength of its current were attested to by the immense snaggle-rooted logs that swung and turned as the waters rushed them along. I wondered if the windstorm had been worse upriver to tear loose such giants, or if the river had slowly eaten away their foundations until the trees had tottered into the water.

Nighteyes continued to range ahead of me. Twice more I saw him leap and pin a rodent to the earth with his teeth and paws. I was not sure exactly what they were; they did not look like rats exactly, and the sleekness of their coats seemed to indicate they'd be at home in the water.

Meat doesn't really need a name, Nighteyes observed wryly, and I was forced to agree with him. He flipped his prey gleefully into the air and caught it again as it somersaulted down. He worried the dead thing fiercely and then launched it once more, dancing after it on his hind legs. For a moment his simple pleasure was contagious. He had the satisfaction of a successful hunt, meat to fill his belly and time to eat it unmolested. This time it went winging over my head, and I leaped up to catch the limp body and then fling it up higher still. He sprang high after it, all four legs leaving the ground. He seized it cleanly, then crouched, showing it to me, daring me to chase him. I dropped my armload of wood and sprang after him. He evaded me easily, then looped back to me, daring me, rushing past me just out of arm's reach as I flung myself at him.

'Hey!'

We both halted in our play. I got up slowly from the ground. It was one of Nik's men, standing far up the riverbank and staring at us. He carried his bow. 'Get some wood and come back now,' he ordered me. I glanced about, but could see no reason for the edgy tone to his voice. Nevertheless, I gathered my scattered armload of wood and headed back to the huts.

I found Kettle squinting at a scroll by the firelight, ignoring those who were trying to cook around her. 'What are you reading?' I asked her.

'The writings of Cabal the White. A prophet and seer of Kimoalan times.'

I shrugged. The names meant nothing to me.

'Through his guidance, a treaty was wrought that put an end to a hundred years of war. It enabled three folk to become one people. Knowledge was shared. Many kinds of foods that once grew only in the southern valleys of Kimoala came into common usage. Ginger, for instance. And kim-oats.'

'One man did that?'

'One man. Or two, perhaps, if you count the general he persuaded to conquer without destroying. Here, he speaks of him. "A catalyst was DarAles for his time, a changer of hearts and lives. He came not to be hero, but to enable the hero in others. He came, not to fulfil prophecies, but to

open the doors to new futures. Such is ever the task of the catalyst.” Above, he has written that it is in every one of us to be a catalyst in our own time. What do you think of that, Tom?’

‘I’d rather be a shepherd,’ I answered her truthfully. Catalyst was not a word I cherished.

That night I slept with Nighteyes at my side. Kettle snored softly not far from me, while the pilgrims huddled together in one end of the hut. Starling had chosen to sleep in the other hut with Nik and some of his men. For a time, the sound of her harp and voice were occasionally borne to me on gusts of wind.

I closed my eyes and tried to dream of Molly. Instead I saw a burning village in Buck as the Red Ships pulled away from it. I joined a young lad as he put on sail in the dark, to ram his dory into the side of a Red Ship. He flung a burning lantern on board her and followed it with a bucket of cheap fish oil such as poor folk burned in their lamps. The sail blazed up as the boy sheered away from the burning ship. Behind him the curses and cries of the burning men rose with the flames. I rode with him that night, and felt his bitter triumph. He had nothing left, no family, no home, but he had spilled some of the blood that had spilled his. I understood the tears that wet his grinning face only too well.

SEVENTEEN

River Crossing

The Outislanders have always spoken mockingly of the Six Duchies folk, declaring us slaves of the earth, farmers fit only for grubbing in the dirt. Eda, the mother goddess who is thanked for plentiful crops and multiplying flocks, is disdained by the Outislanders as a goddess for a settled folk who have lost all spirit. The Outislanders themselves worship only El, the god of the sea. He is not a deity to offer thanks to, but a god to swear by. The only blessing he sends his worshippers are storms and hardships to make them strong.

In this they misjudged the people of the Six Duchies. They believed folk who planted crops and raised sheep would soon come to have no more spirit than sheep. They came amongst us slaughtering and destroying and mistook our concern for our folk for weakness. In that winter, the small folk of Buck and Bearns, Rippon and Shoaks, the fisherfolk and herders, goose-girls and pig-boys, took up the war that our wrangling nobles and scattered armies waged so poorly and made it their own. The small folk of a land can only be oppressed so long before they rise up in their own defence, be it against outlanders or an unjust lord of their own.

The others grumbled the next morning about the cold and the need for haste. They spoke longingly of hot porridge and hearth-cakes. There was hot water, but little more than that to warm our bellies. I filled Kettle's teapot for her and then went back to fill my cup with hot water. I squinted my eyes against the pain as I dug in my pack for my elfbark. My Skill-dream of the night before had left me feeling sick and shaky. The very thought of food made me ill. Kettle sipped her tea and watched as I used my knife to scrape shavings from a lump of bark into my mug. It was hard to make myself wait for the liquid to brew. The extreme bitterness of it flooded my mouth, but almost immediately I felt my headache ease. Kettle abruptly reached a claw-like hand to pluck the chunk of bark from my hand. She looked at it, sniffed it and, 'Elf bark!' she exclaimed. She gave me a look of horror. 'That's a vicious herb for a young man to be using.'

‘It calms my headaches,’ I told her. I took a breath to steel myself, then drank off the rest of the mug. The gritty remnants of bark stuck to my tongue. I forced myself to swallow them, then wiped out my mug and returned it to my pack. I held out my hand and she gave back the chunk of bark, but reluctantly. The look she was giving me was very strange.

‘I’ve never seen anyone just drink it down like that. Do you know what that stuff is used for, in Chalced?’

‘I’ve been told they feed it to galley slaves, to keep their strength up.’

‘Strength up and hopes down. A man on elfbark is easily discouraged. Easier to control. It may dull the pain of a headache, but it dulls the mind as well. I’d be wary of it, were I you.’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve used it for years,’ I told her as I put the herb back in my pack.

‘All the more reason to stop now,’ she replied tartly. She handed me her pack to put back in the wagon for her.

It was mid-afternoon when Nik ordered our wagons to a halt. He and two of his men rode ahead, while the others assured us all was fine. Nik went ahead to ready the crossing place before we arrived there. I did not even need to glance at Nighteyes. He slipped away to follow Nik and his men. I leaned back on the seat and hugged myself, trying to stay warm.

‘Hey, you. Call your dog back!’ One of Nik’s men commanded me suddenly.

I sat up and made a show of looking around for him. ‘He’s probably just scented a rabbit. He’ll be back. Follows me everywhere, he does.’

‘Call him back now!’ the man told me threateningly.

So I stood up on the wagon seat and called Nighteyes. He did not come. I shrugged an apology at the men and sat down again. One continued to glare at me, but I ignored him.

The day had been clear and cold, the wind cutting. Kettle had been miserably silent all day. Sleeping on the ground had awakened the old pain in my shoulder to a constant jab. I did not even want to imagine what she was feeling. I tried to think only that we would soon be across the river, and that after that the Mountains were not far. Perhaps in the Mountains I would finally feel safe from Regal’s coterie.

Some men pull ropes by the river. I closed my eyes and tried to see what Nighteyes did. It was difficult, for he directed his eyes at the men

themselves, while I wished to study the task they did. But just as I discerned they were using a guideline to restring a heavier rope across the river, two other men on the far side began energetically digging through a pile of driftwood in the curve of a bank. The concealed barge was soon revealed, and the men went to work chopping away the ice that had formed on it.

‘Wake up!’ Kettle told me irritably, and gave me a poke in the ribs. I sat up to see the other wagon already in motion. I stirred the mare’s reins and followed the others. We travelled a short way down the river-road before turning off it onto an open section of bank. There were some burned-out huts by the river that had apparently perished in the fires years ago. There was also a crude ramp of logs and mortar, much decayed now. On the far side of the river, I could see the remains of the old barge, half sunken. Ice covered parts of it, but dead grass also stuck up from it. It had been many seasons since it had floated. The huts on the other side were in as poor repair as the ones over here, for their thatched roofs had collapsed completely. Behind them rose gentle hills covered in evergreens. Beyond them, towering in the distance, were the peaks of the Mountain Kingdom.

A team of men had attached the revealed barge and were working it across the river to us. The bow was pointed into the current. The barge was tightly bridled to the pulley-line; even so the angry river strove to tear it loose and wash it downstream. It was not a large vessel. A wagon and team was going to be a snug fit. There were railings down the side of the barge, but other than that it was simply a flat, open deck. On our side, the ponies that Nik and his men had been riding had been harnessed to pull on the barge’s tow-line while on the other side a team of patient mules backed slowly toward the water. As the barge came slowly toward us, her bow rose and fell as the river pushed against it. The current foamed and churned around its sides, while an occasional dip of the bow allowed a surge of water to fly up and over. It was not going to be a dry ride across.

The pilgrims muttered amongst themselves anxiously, but one man’s voice suddenly rose to quell them. ‘What other choice do we have?’ he pointed out. Thereafter silence fell. They watched the barge come toward us with dread.

Nik’s wagon and team were the first load across. Perhaps Nik did it that way to give the pilgrims courage. I watched as the barge was brought up snug to the old ramp and secured stern-in. I sensed the displeasure of his team, but also that they were familiar with this. Nik himself led them onto

the barge and held their heads while two of his men scrambled about and tied the wagon down to the cleats. Then Nik stepped off, and waved his hand in signal. The two men stood, one by each horse's head, as the mule team on the other side took up the slack. The barge was cast off and moved out into the river. Laden, it sat more deeply in the water, but it did not bob as freely as it had. Twice the bow lifted high and then plunged back deeply enough to take a wash of water over it. All was silence on our side of the river as we watched the barge's passage. On the other side, it was pulled in and secured bow-first, the wagon unfastened, and the men drove it off and up the hill.

'There. You see. Nothing to worry about.' Nik spoke with an easy grin, but I doubted that he believed his own words.

A couple of men rode the barge back as it came across. They did not look happy about it. They clung to the railings and winced away from the flying spray off the river. Nevertheless they were both soaked by the time the barge reached our side and they stepped off. One man gestured Nik to one side and began to confer with him angrily, but he clapped him on the shoulders and laughed loudly as if it were all a fine joke. He held out his hand and they passed him a small pouch. He hefted it approvingly before hanging it from his belt. 'I keep my word,' he reminded them, and then strode back to our group.

The pilgrims went across next. Some of them wished to cross in the wagon, but Nik patiently pointed out that the heavier the load, the lower the barge rode in the river. He herded them onto the barge and made sure that each person had a good place to grip along the rail. 'You, too,' he called, motioning to Kettle and Starling.

'I'll go across with my cart,' Kettle declared, but Nik shook his head.

'Your mare isn't going to like this. If she goes crazy out there, you don't want to be on the barge. Trust me. I know what I'm doing.' He glanced at me. 'Tom? You mind riding across with the horse? You seem to handle her well.'

I nodded, and Nik said, 'There, now, Tom'll see to your mare. You go on, now.'

Kettle scowled, but had to own the sense of that. I helped her down, and Starling took her arm and walked her to the barge. Nik stepped onto the barge and spoke briefly to the pilgrims, telling them to simply hold on and not fear. Three of his men boarded the barge with them. One insisted on holding the smallest pilgrim child himself. 'I know what to expect,' he told

the anxious mother. 'I'll see she gets across. You just have a care to yourself.' The little girl began to cry at that and her shrill wailing could be heard even over the rushing of the river water as the barge was pulled out onto the river. Nik stood beside me watching them go.

'They'll be fine,' he said, as much to himself as to me. He turned to me with a grin. 'Well, Tom, a few more trips and I'll be wearing that pretty earring of yours.'

I nodded to that silently. I'd given my word on the bargain but I was not happy about it.

Despite Nik's words, I heard him sigh with relief when the barge reached the other side. The drenched pilgrims scuttled off even as the men were securing it. I watched Starling help Kettle off, and then some of Nik's men hurried them up the bank and into the shelter of the trees. Then the barge was coming back to us again, bearing two more men. The pilgrims' empty wagon went next, along with a couple of ponies. The pilgrims' horses were not at all pleased. It took blindfolds and three men tugging to get them onto the barge. Once there and tied down, the horses still shifted as much as they could, snorting and shaking their heads. I watched them cross. On the other side, the team needed no urging to get the wagon swiftly off the barge. A man took the reins and the wagon rattled up the hill and out of sight.

The two men who rode back that time had the worst crossing yet. They were halfway across the river when an immense snag came in sight, bearing directly down on the barge. The clawing roots looked like a monstrous hand as the log bobbed in the fierce current. Nik shouted at our ponies and all of us sprang to help them haul on the rope, but even so the log struck the barge a glancing blow. The men on board yelled as the impact shook them from their grips on the railing. One was nearly flung off, but managed to catch a second post and hung on for dear life. Those two came off glaring and cursing, as if they suspected the mishap had been deliberate. Nik had the barge secured and himself checked all the lines fastening her to the pulley-rope. The impact had knocked one railing loose. He shook his head over that, and warned his men about it as they drove the last wagon aboard it.

Its crossing was no worse than any of the others. I watched with some trepidation, knowing that my turn was next. *Fancy a bath, Nigteyes?*

It will be worth it if there's good hunting on the other side, he replied, but I could sense he shared my nervousness.

I tried to calm myself and Kettle's mare as I watched them fasten the barge to the landing. I spoke soothingly to her as I led her down, doing all I could to assure her that she would be fine. She seemed to accept it, stepping calmly onto the scarred timbers of the deck. I led her out slowly, explaining it all as I went. She stood quietly as I tied her to a ring set in the deck. Two of Nik's men roped the cart down fast. Nighteyes leapt on, then sank down, belly low, his claws digging into the wood. He didn't like the way the river tugged at the barge greedily. Truth to tell, neither did I. He ventured over to crouch beside me, feet splayed.

'You go on across with Tom and the cart,' Nik told the soaked men who had already made one trip. 'Me and my boys will bring our ponies on the last trip. Stay clear of that mare, now, in case she decides to kick.'

They came aboard warily, eyeing Nighteyes almost as distrustfully as they watched the mare. They clustered at the back of the cart, and held on there. Nighteyes and I remained at the bow. I hoped we'd be out of reach of the mare's hooves there. At the last moment, Nik declared, 'I think I'll ride this one over with you.' He cast the barge off himself with a grin and a wave at his men. The mule team on the other side of the river started up, and with a lurch we moved out into the river.

Watching something is never the same as doing it. I gasped as the first slashing spray of river-water struck me. We were suddenly a toy in the clutches of an unpredictable child. The river rushed past us, tearing at the barge and roaring its frustration that it could not drag us free. The furious water near deafened me. The barge took a sudden plunge and I found myself gripping the railing as a surge of water flowed over the deck and clutched at my ankles in passing. The second time a plume of water smacked up from the bow and drenched us all, the mare screamed. I let go of my grip of the railing, intending to take hold of her headstall. Two of the men seemed to have the same idea. They were working their way forward, clinging to the cart. I waved them away and turned to the mare.

I will never know what the man intended. Perhaps to club me with the pommel of his knife. I caught the motion from the corner of my eye and turned to face him just as the barge gave another lurch. He missed me and staggered forward against the mare. The horse, already anxious, panicked into a frenzy of kicking. She threw her head wildly, slamming it against me so that I staggered away. I had almost caught my balance when the man made another flailing try at me. On the back of the cart, Nick was struggling

with another man. He angrily shouted something about his word and his honour. I ducked my attacker's blow just as a crash of water came over the bow. The force of it washed me toward the centre of the barge. I caught hold of a cartwheel and clung there, gasping I clawed my sword half-free just as someone else grabbed me from behind. My first attacker came at me, grinning, his knife blade-first this time. Suddenly a wet furry body streaked past me. Nighteyes hit him squarely in the chest, slamming him back against the railing.

I heard the crack of the weakened post. Slowly, so slowly, wolf, man and railing went tipping toward the water. I lunged after them, dragging my assailant with me. As they went in, I managed to catch both the shattered remains of the post and Nighteyes' tail. I sacrificed my sword to do it. My grip was only on the end of his tail but I held on. His head came up, his front paws scrabbled frantically against the edge of the barge. He started to climb back on.

Then a booted foot came down with a smash on my shoulder. The dull ache in it exploded. The next boot caught me in the side of the head. I watched my fingers fly open, saw Nighteyes spun away from me, snatched by the river and borne off.

'My brother!' I cried aloud. The river swallowed my words, and the next slosh of water over the deck drenched me and filled my mouth and nose. When the water passed, I tried to get to my hands and knees. The man who had kicked me knelt beside me. I felt the press of his knife against my neck.

'Just stay where you are, and hold on,' he suggested grimly. He turned and yelled back at Nik. 'I'm doing this my way!'

I did not answer. I was questing out savagely, putting all my strength into reaching after the wolf. The barge surged under me, the river roared past, and I was drenched by spray and waves. Cold. Wet. Water in my mouth and nose, choking. I couldn't tell where I ended and Nighteyes began. If he still existed at all.

The barge scraped suddenly against the ramp.

They were clumsy in getting me to my feet on the other side. The one removed his knife before the second man had a good grip on my hair. I came up fighting, caring nothing for anything else they might do to me now. I radiated hate and fury and the panicky horse followed my lead. One man went down close enough to the mare that one of her hooves stove in his ribs.

That left two, or so I thought. I shouldered one into the river. He managed to catch hold of the barge and clung there while I choked his companion. Nik shouted what sounded like a warning. I was squeezing his throat and bashing his head on the deck when the others fell on me. These ones wore their brown and gold openly. I tried to make them kill me, but they didn't. I heard other cries from far up the hillside and thought I recognized Starling's voice raised in anger.

After a time, I lay trussed on the snowy riverbank. A man stood guard over me with a drawn sword. I didn't know if he threatened me, or if he was charged with keeping the others from killing me. They stood in a circle, staring down at me avidly, like a pack of wolves who had just brought down a deer. I didn't care. Frantically, I quested out, caring nothing for anything they might do to me. I could sense that somewhere he fought for his life. My sense of him grew fainter and fainter as he put all his energies into simply surviving.

Nik was suddenly flung down beside me. One of his eyes was starting to puff shut and when he grinned at me, blood stained his teeth. 'Well, here we are, Tom, on the other side of the river. I said I'd bring you here, and here we are. I'll take that earring now, as we agreed.'

My guard kicked him in the ribs. 'Shut up,' he growled.

'This wasn't the agreement,' Nik insisted when he could take a breath.

He looked up at them all, tried to choose one to speak to. 'I had a deal with your captain. I told him I'd bring him this man, and in return, he offered me gold and safe passage. For me and the others.'

The sergeant gave a bitter laugh. 'Well, it wouldn't be the first deal Captain Mark made with a smuggler. Odd. Not a one of them ever profited us, hey, boys? And Captain Mark, he's down the river a way now, so it's hard to tell just what he promised you. Always liked his glory shows, did Mark. Well, now he's gone. But I know what my orders are, and that's to arrest all smugglers and bring them back to Moonseye. I'm a good soldier, I am.'

The sergeant stooped down and relieved Nik of the pouch of gold, and his own pouch as well. Nik struggled, and lost some blood in the process. I did not bother watching much of it. He'd sold me to Regal's guards. And how had he known who I was? Pillow talk with Starling, I told myself bitterly. I had trusted, and it had brought me what it always did. I did not even turn to look when they dragged him away.

I had but one true friend, and my foolishness had cost him. Again. I stared up at the sky and reached out of my body, threw my senses as wide as I could, questing, questing. I found him. Somewhere, his claws scabbled and scratched at a steep and icy bank. His dense coat was laden with water, heavy with it so he could scarcely keep his head up. He lost his purchase, the river seized him again, and once more he spun around in it. It pulled him under and held him there, then threw him suddenly to the surface. The air he gasped in was laden with spray. He had no strength left.

Try! I commanded him. *Keep trying!*

And the fickle current flung him again against a riverbank, but this one was a tangle of dangling roots. His claws caught in them, and he hauled himself high, scabbling at them as he choked out water and gasped in air. His lungs worked like bellows.

Get out! Shake off!

He gave me no answer at all, but I felt him haul himself out. Little by little, he gained the brushy bank. He crawled out like a puppy, on his belly. Water ran from him, forming a puddle around him where he cowered. He was so cold. Frost was already forming on his ears and muzzle. He stood up and tried to shake. He fell over. He staggered to his feet again and tottered a few more steps from the river. He shook again, water flying everywhere. The action both lightened him and stood his coat up. He stood, head down, and gagged out a gush of river-water. *Find shelter. Curl up and get warm,* I told him. He was not thinking very well. The spark that was Nighteyes had almost winked out. He sneezed violently several times, then looked around himself. *There,* I urged him. *Under that tree.* Snow had bent the evergreen's fronds almost to the ground. Beneath the tree was a little hollow, thickly floored with shed needles. If he crept in there, and curled up, he might get warm again. *Go on,* I urged him. *You can make it. Go on.*

'I think you kicked him too hard. He's just staring at the sky.'

'Did you see what that woman did to Skef? He's bleeding like a pig. He popped her a good one back.'

'Where'd the old one go? Did anyone find her?'

'She won't get far in this snow, so don't worry about it. Wake him up and get him on his feet.'

'He's not even blinking his eyes. He's hardly even breathing.'

'I don't care. Just take him to the Skill-wizard. After that, he's not our problem.'

I knew guards dragged me to my feet, I knew I was walked up the hill. I paid no attention to that body. Instead, I shook myself again, and then crept under the tree. There was just room to curl myself up. I put my tail over my nose. I flicked my ears a few times to shake the last of the water from them. *Go to sleep now. Everything's fine. Go to sleep.* I closed his eyes for him. He was still shivering, but I could feel a hesitant warmth creeping through him again. Gently I drew myself clear.

I lifted my head and looked out of my own eyes. I was walking up a trail, with a tall Farrow guard on either side of me. I didn't need to look back to know that others followed. Ahead of us, I saw Nik's wagons, pulled up in the shelter of the trees. I saw his men sitting on the ground with their hands bound behind them. The pilgrims, still dripping, huddled around a fire. Several guards stood around their group as well. I didn't see Starling or Kettle. One woman clutched her child to her and wept noisily over his shoulder. The boy did not appear to be moving. A man met my eyes, then turned aside to spit on the ground. 'It's the Witted Bastard's fault we've come to this,' I heard him say loudly. 'Eda scowls upon him! He tainted our pilgrimage!'

They marched me to a comfortable tent pitched in the lee of some great trees. I was shoved through the tent flaps and pushed down onto my knees on a thick sheepskin rug on an elevated wooden floor. One guard kept a firm grip on my hair as the sergeant announced, 'Here he is, sir. The wolf got Captain Mark, but we got him.'

A fat brazier of coals gave off a welcome heat. The interior of the tent was the warmest place I'd been in days. The sudden heat almost stupefied me. But Burl did not share my opinion. He sat in a wooden chair on the other side of the brazier, his feet outstretched toward it. He was robed and hooded and covered over with furs as if there were nothing else between him and the night cold. He had always been a large-framed man; now he was heavy as well. His dark hair had been curled in imitation of Regal's. Displeasure shone in his dark eyes.

'How is it that you aren't dead?' he demanded of me.

There was no good answer to that question. I merely looked at him, expression bland, walls tight. His face flushed suddenly red and his cheeks appeared swollen with his anger. When he spoke, his voice was tight. He glared at the sergeant.

‘Report properly.’ Then, before the man could begin, he asked, ‘You let the wolf get away?’

‘Not let him, no sir. He attacked the captain. He and Captain Mark went into the river together, sir, and were carried off. Water that cold and swift, neither had a chance to survive. But I’ve sent a few men downriver to check the bank for the captain’s body.’

‘I’ll want the wolf’s body as well, if it’s washed up. Be sure your men know that.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Did you secure the smuggler, Nik? Or did he get away, as well?’ Burl’s sarcasm was heavy.

‘No, sir. We have the smuggler and his men. We have those travelling with him as well, though they put up more of a fight than we expected. Some ran off in the woods, but we got them back. They claim to be pilgrims seeking Eda’s shrine in the Mountains.’

‘That concerns me not at all. What matters why a man broke the King’s law, after he has broken it? Did you recover the gold the captain paid the smuggler?’

The sergeant looked surprised. ‘No, sir. Gold paid to a smuggler? There was no sign of that. I wonder if it went downriver with Captain Mark. Perhaps he hadn’t given it to the man ...’

‘I am not a fool. I know far more of what goes on than you think I do. Find it. All of it, and return it here. Did you capture all the smugglers?’

The sergeant took a breath and decided on the truth. ‘There were a few with the pony team on the far side when we took down Nik. They rode off before ...’

‘Forget them. Where is the Bastard’s accomplice?’

The sergeant looked blank. I believe he did not know the word.

‘Did not you capture a minstrel? Starling?’ Burl demanded again.

The sergeant looked uncomfortable. ‘She got a bit out of control, sir. When the men were subduing the Bastard on the ramp. She lit into the man holding her and broke his nose. It took a bit to ... get her under control.’

‘Is she alive?’ Burl’s tone left no doubt of his contempt for their competence.

The sergeant flushed. ‘Yes, sir. But ...’

Burl silenced him with a look. ‘Were your captain still alive, he would wish he were dead now. You have no concept of how to report, or of how to

retain control of a situation. A man should have been sent to me immediately, to inform me of these events as they happened. The minstrel should not have been permitted to see what was happening, but secured immediately. And only an idiot would have tried to subdue a man on a barge in the middle of a strong current when all he had to do was wait for the barge to land. He'd have had a dozen swords at his command there. As for the smuggler's bribe, it will be returned to me, or you shall all go unpaid until it is made up. I am not a fool.' He glared around at everyone in the tent. 'This has been bungled. I will not excuse it.' He folded his lips tightly. When he spoke again, he spat out the words. 'All of you. Go.'

'Yes sir. Sir? The prisoner?'

'Leave him here. Leave two men outside, swords drawn. But I wish to speak to him alone.' The sergeant bowed and hastened out of the tent. His men followed him promptly.

I looked up at Burl and met his eyes. My hands were bound tightly behind me, but no one held me on my knees any more. I got to my feet and stood looking down on Burl. He met my gaze unflinchingly. When he spoke his voice was quiet. It made his words all the more threatening. 'I repeat to you what I told the sergeant. I am not a fool. I do not doubt that you already have a plan to escape. It probably includes killing me. I have a plan as well, and it includes my surviving. I am going to tell it to you. It's a simple plan, Bastard. I have always preferred simplicity. It is this. If you give me any trouble at all, I shall have you killed. As you have no doubt deduced, King Regal wishes you brought to him alive. If possible. Don't think that will prevent me from killing you if you become inconvenient. If you are thinking of your Skill, I will warn you my mind is well warded. If I even suspect you of trying it, we will try your Skill against my guard's sword. As for your Wit, well, it seems my problems are solved there, as well. But should your wolf materialize, he, too, is not proof against a sword.'

I said nothing.

'Do you understand me?'

I gave a single nod.

'That is as well. Now. If you give me no problems, you will be treated fairly. As will the others. If you are difficult at all, they, too, will share your privations. Do you understand that as well?' He met my gaze, demanding an answer.

I matched his quiet tone. 'Do you truly think I'd care if you spilled Nik's blood, now that he's sold me to you?'

He smiled. It turned me cold, for that smile had once belonged to the carpenter's genial apprentice. A different Burl now wore his skin. 'You're a wily one, Bastard, and have been since I've known you. But you've the same weakness of your father and the Pretender; you believe even one of these peasants' lives to be worth the equal of yours. Be any trouble to me, and they all pay, to the last drop of blood. Do you understand me? Even Nik.'

He was right. I had no stomach to visualize the pilgrims paying for my daring. I quietly asked, 'And if I am co-operative? What becomes of them, then?'

He shook his head over my foolishness in caring. 'Three years' servitude. Were I a less kindly man, I'd take a hand from each of them, for they have directly disobeyed the King's orders in attempting to cross the border and deserve to be punished as traitors. Ten years for the smugglers.'

I knew few of the smugglers would survive. 'And the minstrel?'

I do not know why he answered my question, but he did. 'The minstrel will have to die. You know that already. She knew who you were, for Will questioned her back in Blue Lake. She chose to help you, when she could have served her king instead. She is a traitor.'

His words ignited the spark of my temper. 'In helping me, she serves the true king. And when Verity returns, you will feel his wrath. There will be no one to shield you or the rest of your false coterie.'

For a moment, Burl only looked at me. I caught control of myself. I had sounded like a child, threatening another with his big brother's wrath. My words were useless, and worse than useless.

'Guards!' Burl did not shout. He scarcely lifted his voice at all, but the two were inside the tent instantly, swords drawn and pointed at my face. Burl behaved as if he did not notice the weapons. 'Bring the minstrel to us here. And see that she does not get "out of control" this time.' When they hesitated, he shook his head and sighed. 'Go on, now, both of you. Send your sergeant to me as well.' When they had departed, he met my eyes and made a face of discontent. 'You see what they give me to work with. Moonseye has ever been the refuse pile for Six Duchies soldiery. I have the cravens, the fools, the discontents, the connivers. And then I must face my king's displeasure when every task given them is botched.'

I think he actually expected me to commiserate with him. ‘So, Regal has sent you here to join them,’ I observed instead.

Burl gave me a strange smile. ‘As King Shrewd sent your father and Verity here before me.’

That was true. I looked down at the thick sheepskin covering the floor. I was dripping on it. The warmth from the brazier was seeping into me, causing me to shiver as if my body were giving up cold it had hoarded. For an instant I quested away from myself. My wolf slept now, warmer than I was. Burl reached to a small table beside his chair and took up a pot. He poured a steaming cup of beef broth for himself and sipped at it. I could smell its savour. Then he sighed and leaned back in his chair.

‘We’ve come a long way from where we began, haven’t we?’ He almost sounded regretful.

I bobbed my head. He was a cautious man, Burl, and I did not doubt that he would carry out his threats. I had seen the shape of his Skill, and seen, too, how Galen had bent and twisted it into a tool that Regal would use. He was loyal to an upstart prince. That Galen had forged into him; he could no longer separate it from his Skill. He had ambitions for power, and he loved the indolent life his Skill had earned him. His arms no longer bulged with the muscles of his work. Instead his belly stretched his tunics and the jowls of his cheeks hung heavy. He seemed a decade older than I was. But he would guard his position against anything that threatened it. Guard it savagely.

The sergeant reached the tent first, but his men came with Starling shortly afterwards. She walked between them and entered the tent with dignity despite her bruised face and swollen lip. There was an icy calm to her as she stood straight before Burl and gave him no greeting at all. Perhaps only I sensed the fury she contained. Of fear she showed no sign at all.

When she stood alongside me, Burl lifted his eyes to consider us both. He pointed one finger at her. ‘Minstrel. You are aware that this man is FitzChivalry, the Witted Bastard.’

Starling made no response. It was not a question.

‘In Blue Lake, Will, of Galen’s Coterie, servant of King Regal, offered you gold, good honest coin, if you could help us track down this man. You denied all knowledge of where he was.’ He paused, as if giving her a chance to speak. She said nothing. ‘Yet, here we have found you, travelling in his company again.’ He took a deep breath. ‘And now he tells me that you, in

-serving him, serve Verity the Pretender. And he threatens me with Verity's wrath. Tell me. Before I respond to this, do you agree with this? Or has he misspoken on your behalf?'

We both knew he was offering her a chance. I hoped she'd have the sense to take it. I saw Starling swallow. She did not look at me. When she spoke, her voice was low and controlled. 'I need no one to speak for me, my lord. Nor am I any man's servant. I do not serve FitzChivalry.' She paused, and I felt dizzying relief. But then she took breath and went on, 'But if Verity Farseer lives, then he is true king of the Six Duchies. And I do not doubt that all who say otherwise will feel his wrath. If he returns.'

Burl sighed out through his nose. He shook his head regretfully. He gestured to one of the waiting men. 'You. Break one of her fingers. I don't care which one.'

'I am a minstrel!' Starling objected in horror. She stared at him in disbelief. We all did. It was not unheard of for a minstrel to be executed for treason. To kill a minstrel was one thing. To harm one was entirely another.

'Did you not hear me?' Burl asked the man when he hesitated.

'Sir, she's a minstrel.' The man looked stricken. 'It's bad luck to harm a minstrel.'

Burl turned away from him to his sergeant. 'You will see he receives five lashes before I retire this night. Five, mind you, and I wish to be able to count the separate welts on his back.'

'Yes, sir,' the sergeant said faintly.

Burl turned back to the man. 'Break one of her fingers. I don't care which one.' He spoke the command as if he had never uttered the words before.

The man moved toward her like a man in a dream. He was going to obey, and Burl was not going to stop the order.

'I will kill you,' I promised Burl sincerely.

Burl smiled at me serenely. 'Guardsmen. Make that two of her fingers. I do not care which ones.' The sergeant moved swiftly, drawing his knife and stepping behind me. He set it to my throat and pushed me to my knees. I looked up at Starling. She glanced at me once, her eyes flat and empty, then looked away. Her hands, like mine, were bound behind her. She stared straight ahead at Burl's chest. Still and silent she stood, going whiter and whiter until the guardsman actually touched her. She cried out, a hoarse guttural sound as he gripped her wrists. Then she screamed, but her cry

could not cover the two small snaps her fingers made as the man bent them backwards at the joints.

‘Show me,’ Burl commanded.

As if angry with Starling that he had had to do this, the man thrust her down on her face. She lay on the sheepskin before Burl’s feet. After the scream, she had not made a sound. The two smallest fingers on her left hand stood out crazily from the others. Burl looked down at them, and nodded, satisfied.

‘Take her away. See she is well guarded. Then come back and see your sergeant. When he is finished with you, come to me.’ Burl’s voice was even.

The guard seized Starling by her collar and dragged her to her feet. He looked both ill and angry as he prodded her out of the tent. Burl nodded to the sergeant. ‘Let him up, now.’

I stood looking down at him, and he looked up at me. But there was no longer the slightest doubt as to who was in control of the situation. His voice was very quiet as he observed, ‘Earlier you said you understood me. Now I know that you do. The journey to Moonseye can be swift and easy for you, FitzChivalry. And for the others. Or it can be otherwise. It is entirely up to you.’

I made no reply. None was needed. Burl nodded to the other guardsman. He took me from Burl’s tent to another one. Four other guards inhabited it. He gave me both bread and meat and a cup of water. I was docile as he retied my hands in front of me so I could eat. Afterwards, he pointed me to a blanket in a corner, and I went like an obedient dog. They bound my hands behind me again and tied my feet. They kept the brazier burning all night, and always there were at least two watching me.

I did not care. I turned away from them and faced the wall of the tent. I closed my eyes, and went, not to sleep, but to my wolf. His coat was mostly dry, but still he slept in exhaustion. Both the cold and the battering of the river had taken their toll of him. I took what small comfort was left to me. Nighteyes lived, and now he slept. I wondered on which side of the river.

EIGHTEEN

Moonseye

Moonseye is a small but fortified town on the border between the Six Duchies and the Mountain Kingdom. It is a provisioning town and traditional stopping-place for trade caravans using the Chelika trail to the Wide Vale pass and the lands beyond the Mountain Kingdom. It was from Moonseye that Prince Chivalry negotiated his last great treaty with Prince Rurisk of the Mountain Kingdom. On the heels of finalizing this treaty came the discovery that Chivalry was father to an illegitimate son conceived with a woman from that area and already some six years old. King-in-Waiting Chivalry concluded his negotiations and immediately rode home to Buckkeep, where he offered his queen, father and subjects his deepest apologies for his youthful failure, and abdicated the throne to avoid creating any confusion as to the line of succession.

Burl kept his word. By day I walked, flanked by guards, my hands bound behind me. I was housed in a tent by night and my hands unbound that I might feed myself. No one was unnecessarily cruel to me. I do not know if Burl had ordered that I be strictly left alone, or if enough tales of the Witted, poisoning Bastard had been spread that no one ventured to bother me. In any case, my trek to Moonseye was no more unpleasant than foul weather and military provisions made it. I was sequestered from the pilgrims so I knew nothing of how Kettle, Starling and the pilgrims fared. My guards did not talk among themselves in my presence, so I had not even camp gossip for rumours. I dared not ask after any of them. Even to think of Starling and what they had done to her made me ill. I wondered if anyone would pity her enough to straighten and bind her fingers. I wondered if Burl would allow it. It surprised me how often I thought of Kettle and the children of the pilgrims.

I did have Nighteyes. My second night in Burl's custody, after a hasty feeding of bread and cheese, I was left alone in a corner of a tent that housed six men-at-arms as well. My wrists and ankles were well bound, but not cruelly tight, and a blanket flung over me. My guards soon became engrossed in a game of dice by the candle that lit the tent. It was a tent of

good goat leather, and they had floored it with cedar boughs for their own comfort, so I did not suffer much from cold. I was aching and weary and the food in my belly made me drowsy. Yet I struggled to stay awake. I quested out toward Nighteyes, almost fearful of what I might find. I had had only the barest traces of his presence in my mind since I had bid him sleep. Now I reached for him and was jolted to feel him quite close by. He revealed himself as if stepping through a curtain, and seemed amused at my shock.

How long have you been able to do that?

A while. I had been giving thought to what the bear-man told us. And when we were apart, I came to know I had a life of my own. I found a place of my own in my mind.

I sensed a hesitancy to his thought, as if he expected me to rebuke him for it. Instead I embraced him, wrapping him in the warmth I felt for him. *I feared you would die.*

I fear the same for you, now. Almost humbly he added, *But I lived. And now at least one of us is free, to rescue the other.*

I am glad you are safe. But I fear there is little you can do for me. And if they catch sight of you, they will not rest until they have killed you.

Then they shall not catch sight of me, he promised lightly. He carried me off hunting with him that night.

The next day it took all of my concentration to stay on my feet and moving. A storm blew up. We attempted a military pace despite the snowy trails we followed and the shrieking winds that constantly buffeted us with threats of snow. As we moved away from the river and up into the foothills, the trees and underbrush were thicker. We heard the wind in the trees above us, but felt it less. The cold became dryer and more bitter at night the higher we went. The food I was given was enough to keep me on my feet and alive, but little more. Burl rode at the head of his procession, followed by his mounted guard. I walked behind in the midst of my guards. Behind us came the pilgrims flanked by regulars. Behind all that trailed the baggage train.

At the end of each day's march, I was confined to a swiftly-pitched tent, fed and then ignored until the next day's rising. My conversations were limited to accepting my meals, and to night-time thought-sharing with Nighteyes. The hunting on this side of the river was lush compared to where we had been. He found game almost effortlessly and was well on his way to rebuilding his old strength. He found it no trouble at all to keep pace with us and still have time to hunt. Nighteyes had just torn into a rabbit's entrails on

my fourth night as a prisoner when he suddenly lifted his head and snuffed the wind.

What is it?

Hunters. Stalkers. He abandoned his meat and stood. He was on a hillside above Burl's camp. Moving toward it, slipping from tree to tree, were at least two dozen shadowy figures. A dozen carried bows. As Nighteyes watched, two crouched in the cover of a dense thicket. In a few moments, his keen nose caught the scent of smoke. A tiny fire glowed dully at their feet. They signalled the others, who spread out, noiseless as shadows. Archers sought vantage points while the others slipped into the camp below. Some went toward the picket-lines of the animals. With my own ears, I heard stealthy footsteps outside the tent where I lay trussed. They did not pause. Nighteyes smelled the stench of burning pitch. An instant later, two flaming bolts went winging through the night. They struck Burl's tent. In a moment, a great cry arose. As sleeping soldiers stumbled out of their tents and headed toward the blaze, the archers on the hillside rained arrows down on them.

Burl stumbled out of the burning tent, wrapping his blankets about himself as he came and bellowing orders. 'They're after the Bastard, you fools! Guard him at all costs!' Then an arrow went skipping past him over the frozen ground. He cried out and flung himself flat into the shelter of a supply wagon. A breath later two arrows thudded into it.

The men in my tent had leaped up at the first commotion. I had largely ignored them, preferring Nighteyes' view of the events. But when the sergeant burst into the tent, his first order was, 'Drag him outside before they fire the tent. Keep him down. If they come for him, cut his throat!'

The sergeant's orders were followed quite literally. A man knelt on my back, his bared knife set to my throat. Six others surrounded us. All about us, in the darkness, other men scrambled and shouted. There was a second outcry as another tent went up in flames, joining Burl's that now blazed merrily and lit his end of the camp well. The first time I tried to lift my head and see what was happening, the young soldier on my back slammed my face back into the frozen ground energetically. I resigned myself to ice and gravel and looked through the wolf's eyes instead.

Had not Burl's guard been so intent on keeping me, and on protecting Burl, they might have perceived that neither of us were the targets of this raid. While arrows fell about Burl and his blazing tent, at the dark end of the

camp the silent invaders were freeing smugglers and pilgrims and ponies. Nighteyes' spying had shown me that the archer who had fired Burl's tent wore the Holdfast features as clearly as Nik did. The smugglers had come after their own. The captives trickled out of the camp like meal from a holed sack while Burl's men guarded him and me.

Burl's assessment of his men had been correct. More than one man-at-arms waited out that raid in the shadow of a wagon or a tent. I did not doubt that they'd fight well if personally attacked, but no one ventured to lead a sortie against the archers on the hill. I suspected then that Captain Mark had not been the only man to have an arrangement with the smugglers. The fire they did return was ineffective, for the blazing tents in the camp had ruined their night vision, whereas the fire made silhouettes and targets of the archers who stood to return the smugglers' fire.

It was over in a remarkably short time. The archers on the hill continued to loose arrows down on us as they slipped away, and that fire held the attention of Burl's men. When the rain of missiles abruptly ceased, Burl immediately roared for his sergeant, demanding to know if I had been kept. The sergeant looked warningly about at his men, and then called back that they'd held them off me.

The rest of that night was miserable. I spent a good part of it face-down in the snow while a half-dressed Burl snorted and stamped all around me. The burning of his tent had consumed most of his personal supplies. When the escape of the pilgrims and smugglers was discovered, it seemed to be of secondary importance to the fact that no one else in camp had clothing of a size that would fit Burl.

Three other tents had been fired. Burl's riding-horse had been taken in addition to the smugglers' ponies. For all Burl's bellowed threats of dire vengeance, he made no effort to organize a pursuit. Instead he contented himself with kicking me several times. It was nearly dawn before he thought to ask if the minstrel, too, had been taken. She had. And that, he declared, proved that I had been the true target of the raid. He tripled the guard around me for the rest of that night, and for the next two days' journey to Moonseye. Not surprisingly, we saw no more of our attackers. They had got all they wished and vanished into the foothills. I had no doubt that Nik had boltholes on this side of the river as well. I could not feel any warmth toward the man who had sold me but I confessed to myself a grudging admiration

that he had carried off the pilgrims with him when he escaped. Perhaps Starling could make a song of that.

Moonseye seemed a small town hidden in a fold of the mountains' skirts. There were few outlying farmsteads, and the cobbled streets began abruptly just outside the wooden palisade that surrounded the town. A sentry issued a formal challenge to us there from a tower above the walls. It was only after we had entered it that I appreciated what a thriving little city it was. I knew from my lessons with Fedwren that Moonseye had been an important military outpost for the Six Duchies before it had become a stopping-place for caravans bound for the other side of the Mountains. Now traders in amber and furs and carved ivory passed through Moonseye on a regular basis and enriched it in their passing. Or so it had been in the years since my father had succeeded in negotiating an open pass treaty with the Mountain Kingdom.

Regal's new hostilities had changed all that. Moonseye had reverted to the military holding it had been in my grandfather's day. The soldiers that moved through the streets wore Regal's gold and brown instead of Buck's blue, but soldiers are soldiers. The merchants had the weary, wary air of men rich only in their sovereign's scrip and wondering how redeemable it would prove in the long run. Our procession attracted the attention of the locals, but it was a surreptitious curiosity they showed us. I wondered when it had become bad luck to wonder too much about the King's business.

Despite my weariness, I looked about the town with interest. This was where my grandfather had brought me to abandon me to Verity's care, and where Verity had passed me on to Burrich. I had always wondered if my mother's folk had lived near Moonseye or if we had travelled far to seek out my father. But I looked in vain for any landmark or sign that would awaken some memory of my lost childhood in me. Moonseye looked to me both as strange and as familiar as any small town I had ever visited.

The town was thick with soldiers. Tents and lean-tos had been thrown up against every wall. It looked as if the population had recently increased a great deal. Eventually we came to a courtyard that the animals in the baggage train recognized as home. We were drawn up and then dismissed with military precision. My guard marched me off to a squat wooden building. It was windowless and forbidding. Inside was a single room where an old man sat on a low stool by a wide hearth where a welcoming fire burned. Less welcoming were three doors with small barred windows in

them that opened off that room. I was shown into one, my bonds summarily cut, and then I was left alone.

As prisons go, it was the nicest one I'd ever been in. I caught myself in that thought and bared my teeth to it in something that was not quite a grin. There was a rope-laced bedstead with a bag of straw on it for a mattress. There was a chamber pot in the corner. Some light came in from the barred window, and some warmth. Not much of either, but it was still a great deal warmer than outside. It had not the severity of a serious prison. I decided it was a holding area for drunk or disruptive soldiers. It felt odd to take off my cloak and mittens and set them aside. I sat down on the edge of the bed and waited.

The only remarkable thing that happened that evening was that the meal offered meat and bread and even a mug of ale. The old man opened the door to pass me the tray. When he came to take the tray back, he left two blankets for me. I thanked him, and he looked startled. Then he shocked me by observing, 'You've your father's voice as well as his eyes.' Then he shut the door in my face, rather hastily. No one spoke further to me, and the only conversation I overheard were the curses and jibes of a dice game. From the voices I decided there were three younger men in the antechamber as well as the old key-holder.

As evening came on, they gave up their dice for quiet talk. I could make out little of what was said over the shrilling of the wind outside. I arose soundlessly from my bed and ghosted to the door. When I peered out of its barred window, I saw no less than three sentries on duty. The old man was asleep on his own bed in the corner, but these three in Regal's gold and brown took their duties seriously. One was a beardless boy, probably no more than fourteen. The other two moved like soldiers. One had a face more scarred than mine; I decided he was a brawler. The other wore a neatly-trimmed beard and was obviously in command of the other two. All were awake, if not exactly alert. The brawler was teasing the boy about something. The boy's face was sullen. Those two, at least, did not get along. From teasing the lad, the brawler went to endlessly complaining about Moonseye. The liquor was bad, there were too few women, and those there were were as cold as the winter itself. He wished the King would cut their leash and let them loose on the Mountain whore's thieving cut-throats. He knew they could cut a path to Jhaampe and take that tree-fort town in a matter of days. Where was the sense in waiting? On and on, he ranted. The

others nodded to it as to a litany they knew well. I slipped away from the window and returned to my bed to think.

Nice cage.

At least they fed me well.

Not as well as I fed myself. A little warm blood in your meat is what you need. Will you escape soon?

As soon as I work out how.

I spent some time carefully exploring the limits of my cell. Walls and floors of hewn plank, old and hard as iron to my fingers. A tightly-planked ceiling I could barely brush with my fingertips. And the wooden door with the barred window.

If I were getting out, it would have to be through the door. I returned to the barred window. 'Could I have some water?' I called out softly.

The youngster startled rather badly and the brawler laughed at him. The third guard looked at me, then went silently to take a dipper of water from a barrel in the corner. He brought it to the window and passed only the bowl of it through the bars. He let me drink from it, then withdrew it and walked away. 'How long are they going to hold me here?' I called after him.

'Till you're dead,' the brawler said confidently.

'We're not to speak to him,' the boy reminded him, and 'Shut up!' ordered their sergeant. The command included me. I stayed at the door, watching them, gripping the bars. It made the boy nervous but the brawler regarded me with the avaricious attention of a circling shark. It would take very little baiting to make that one want to hit me. I wondered if that could be useful. I was very tired of being hit, but it seemed the one thing I did well lately. I decided to press a little, to see what would happen. 'Why are you not to speak to me?' I asked curiously.

They exchanged glances. 'Get away from the window and shut up,' the sergeant ordered me.

'I just asked a question,' I objected mildly. 'What can be the harm in speaking to me?'

The sergeant stood up and I immediately backed away obediently.

'I'm locked up and there's three of you. I'm bored, that's all. Can't you at least tell me what you know about what's to become of me?'

'They'll do with you what should have been done the first time they killed you. Hanged over water and chopped into quarters and burned, Bastard,' the brawler offered me.

His sergeant rounded on him. 'Shut up. He's baiting you, you idiot. No one says another word to him. Not one. That's how a Witted one gets you into his power. By drawing you into talk. That's how he killed Bolt and his troop.' The sergeant shot me a savage look, then turned it on his men as well. They resumed their posts. The brawler gave me a sneering smile.

'I don't know what they've told you about me, but it's not true,' I offered. No one replied. 'Look, I'm no different from you. If I had some great magical power, do you think I'd be locked up like this? No. I'm just a scapegoat, that's all. You all know how it's done. If something goes wrong, someone has to take the blame for it. And I'm the one who's landed in the shit. Well, look at me and think of the stories you've heard. I knew Bolt when he was with Regal at Buckkeep. Do I look like a man who could take Bolt down?' I kept it up for the better part of their watch. I did not really think I could convince them I was an innocent man. But I could convince them that my talking or their replying was nothing to be feared. I told tales of my past life and misfortunes, certain they would be repeated all over the camp. Though what good that might do me, I did not know. But I stood at the door, gripping the bars at the window, and with very tiny motions, twisted at the bars I gripped. Back and forth I worked them against their settings. If they moved, I could not detect it.

The next day dragged for me. I felt that each hour that passed was one that brought danger closer to me. Burl had not come to see me. I felt sure he was holding me, waiting for someone to come and take me off his hands. I feared it would be Will. I did not think Regal would trust me to anyone else to transport. I did not want another encounter with Will. I did not feel I had the strength to withstand him. My work for the day consisted of jimmying at my bars and watching my captors. By the end of that day, I was ready to take a chance. After my evening meal of cheese and porridge, I lay down on my bed and composed myself to Skill.

I lowered my walls cautiously, fearing to find Burl waiting for me. I reached out of myself and felt nothing. I composed myself and tried again, with the same results. I opened my eyes and stared up into blackness. The unfairness of it sickened me. The Skill-dreams could come and take me at their will, but now when I sought that Skill-river, it eluded me completely. I made two more efforts before a throbbing headache forced me to give it up. The Skill was not going to help me get out of here.

That leaves the Wit, Nighteyes observed. He felt very near. I don't really see how that is going to help me, either, I confided to him.

Nor do I. But I have dug out a spot under the wall, in case you are able to get out of your cage. It was not easy, for the ground is frozen and the logs of the wall were buried deep. But if you can get out of the cage, I can get you out of the city.

That is wise planning, I praised him. At least one of us was doing something.

Do you know where I den tonight? There was suppressed merriment in the thought.

Where do you den? I asked obediently.

Right under your feet. There was just space enough for me to crawl under here.

Nighteyes, this is foolish boldness. You may be seen or the marks of your digging discovered.

A dozen dogs have been here before me. No one will mark my coming and going. I have used the evening to see much of this men's warren. All of the buildings have spaces beneath them. It is very easy to slip from one to another.

Be careful, I warned him, but could not deny there was comfort in knowing him so close. I passed an uneasy night. The three guards were careful always to keep a door between us. I tried my charms on the old man the next morning when he passed me a mug of tea and two pieces of hard bread. 'So you knew my father,' I observed as he manoeuvred my food through the bars. 'You know, I have no memories of him. He never spent any time with me.'

'Count your blessings, then,' the old man replied shortly. 'Knowing the prince was not the same as liking him. Stiff as a stick he was. Rules and orders for us, while he was out making bastards. Yes, I knew your father. I knew him too well for my comfort.' And he turned away from the bars, dashing any hope I had of making him an ally. I retired to sit on my bed with my bread and tea and stare hopelessly at the walls. Another day had ticked endlessly by. I was sure it brought Will another day's journey closer to me. Another day closer to being dragged back to Tradeford. One day closer to death.

In the cold and the dark of the night, Nighteyes awoke me. Smoke. A lot of it.

I sat up in my bed. I went to the barred window and peered out. The old man was asleep in his cot. The boy and the brawler were playing at dice, while the other man carved at his nails with his belt knife. All was calm.

Where is the smoke coming from?

Shall I go and see?

If you would. Be careful.

When am I not?

A time passed, during which I stood to one side of my cell door and watched my guards. Then Nighteyes reached me again. *It's a big building, smelling of grain. It burns in two places.*

Does no one cry an alarm?

No one. The streets are empty and dark. This end of town is asleep.

I closed my eyes and shared his vision. The building was a granary. Someone had set two fires against it. One only smouldered, but the other was licking well up the dry wooden wall of the building.

Come back to me. Perhaps we can use this to our advantage.

Wait.

Nighteyes moved purposefully up the street, slipping from building to building as he went. Behind us, the granary fire began to crackle as it gained strength. He paused, sniffed the air and changed his direction. Soon he was looking at another fire. This one was eating eagerly into a covered pile of hay at the back of a barn. Smoke rose lazily, wisping up into the night. Suddenly, a tongue of flame leapt up and with an immense whoosh, the whole pile was ablaze. Sparks rode the heat into the night sky. Some still glowed as they settled onto roofs nearby.

Someone is setting those fires. Come back to me now!

Nighteyes came swiftly. On his way to me, he saw another fire nibbling at a pile of oily rags stuffed under the corner of a barracks. An errant breeze encouraged it to explore. The flames licked up a piling supporting the building, and curled eagerly along the bottom of the floor.

Winter had dried the wooden town with its harsh cold as thoroughly as any heat of summer. Lean-tos and tents spanned the spaces between the buildings. If the fires burned undetected much longer, all of Moonseye would be a cinder by morning. And I with it, if I were still locked in my cell.

How many guard you?

Four. And a locked door.

One of them will have the key.

Wait. Let us see if our odds get better. Or they may open the door to move me.

Somewhere in the cold town, a man raised his voice in a shout. The first fire had been spotted. I stood inside my cell, listening with Nighteyes' ears. Gradually the outcry increased, until even the guards outside my door stood, asking one another, 'What's that?'

One went to the door and opened it. Cold wind and the smell of smoke coiled into the room. The brawler drew his head back in and announced, 'Looks like a big fire at the other end of town.' In an instant, the other two men were leaning out the door. Their tense conversation woke the old man, who also came to have a look. Outside, someone ran past in the street, shouting, 'Fire! Fire down by the granary! Bring buckets!'

The boy looked to the officer. 'Should I go and see?'

For a moment the man hesitated but the temptation was too much. 'No. You stay here while I go. Stay alert.' He snatched up his cloak and headed out into the night. The boy looked disappointedly after him. He remained standing at the door, staring out into the night. Then, 'Look, there's more flames! Over there!' he exclaimed. The brawler swore, then snatched up his cloak.

'I'm going to go and have a look.'

'But we were told to stay and guard the Bastard!'

'You stay! I'll be right back, I just want to see what's going on!' He called the last words over his shoulder as he hurried away. The boy and the old man exchanged glances. The old man went back to his bed and lay down, but the boy continued to hang out the door. From my cell door I could see a slice of the street. A handful of men ran by, then someone drove a team and wagon past at a fast clip. Everyone seemed headed toward the fire.

'How bad does it look?' I asked.

'Can't see much from here. Just flames beyond the stables. A lot of sparks flying up.' The boy sounded disappointed to be so far from the excitement. He suddenly recalled whom he was speaking to. He abruptly drew in his head and shut the door. 'Don't talk to me!' he warned me and then went to sit down.

'How far from here is the granary?' I asked. He refused to even glance at me, but sat stony-eyed, staring at the wall. 'Because,' I went on conversationally, 'I just wondered what you were going to do if the fires spread this far. I wouldn't care to burn alive. They did leave you the keys,

didn't they?' The boy glanced immediately toward the old man. His hand made an involuntary twitch toward his pouch as if to be sure he had them still, but neither made a reply. I stood by the barred window and watched him. After a time the boy went to the door and peered out again. I saw his jaw clench. The old man went to look over his shoulder.

'It's spreading, isn't it? A winter fire is a terrible thing. Everything dry as bones.'

The boy would not reply, but he turned to look at me. The old man's hand stole down to the key in his pouch.

'Come and bind my hands now and take me out of here. None of us want to be in this building if the flames come this far.'

A glance from the boy. 'I'm not stupid,' he told me. 'I won't be the one to die for letting you go free.'

'Burn where you stand, Bastard, for all I care,' the old man added. He craned his neck out the door again. Even from afar I could hear the sudden whoosh as some building vanished in an eruption of fire. The wind brought the smell of the smoke strongly now and I saw tension building in the boy's stance. I saw a man run past the open door, shouting something to the boy about fighting in the market square. More men ran past in the street, and I heard the jangle of swords and light armour as they ran. Ash rode on the winds now and the roaring of flames was louder than the gusting winds. Drifting smoke greyed the air outside.

Then suddenly boy and man came tumbling back into the room. Nighteyes followed them, showing every tooth he had. He filled the door and blocked their escape. The snarl he let loose was louder than the crackling of the flames outside.

'Unlock the door of my cell, and he won't hurt you,' I offered them.

Instead the boy drew his sword. He was good. He did not wait for the wolf to come in, but charged at him, weapon levelled, forcing Nighteyes back out of the door. Nighteyes avoided the blade easily, but he no longer had them cornered. The boy followed up his advantage, stepping out into the darkness to follow the wolf. The second the door was no longer blocked, the old man slammed it.

'Are you going to stay in here and burn alive with me?' I asked him conversationally.

In an instant, he had decided. 'Burn alone!' he spat at me. He flung the door open again and raced outside.

*Nighteyes! He's the one with the key, the old one who runs away.
I'll get it.*

I was alone in my prison now. I half expected the boy to come back, but he did not. I grabbed the bars of the windows and shook the door against its latch. It barely budged. One bar felt slightly loose. I wrenched at it, bracing my feet against the door to lever at it with all my weight. An eternity later, one end twisted free. I bent it down and worked it back and forth until it came out in my hand. But even if all the bars came out, the opening would still be too small for me to get through. I tried, but the loose bar I gripped was too thick to get into the cracks around the door to pry at it. I could smell smoke everywhere now, thick in the air. The fire was close. I slammed my shoulder against the door but it didn't even shiver. I reached through the window and groped down. My straining fingers encountered a heavy metal bar. I walked my fingertips across it until I came to the lock that secured it in place. I could brush my fingers against it but no more. I couldn't decide if the room were truly getting warmer or if I were imagining it.

I was blindly bashing my iron bar against the lock and the braces that supported it when the outer door opened. A guard in gold and brown strode into the room, calling, 'I've come for the Bastard.' Then her glance took in the empty room.

In a moment, she pushed back her hood and became Starling. I stared at her in disbelief.

'Easier than I'd hoped,' she told me with a stark grin. It looked ghastly on her bruised face, more like a snarl.

'Maybe not,' I said faintly. 'The cell's locked.'

Her grin became a look of dismay. 'The back of this building is smouldering.'

She snatched my bar with her unbandaged hand. Just as she lifted it to smash at the lock, Nighteyes appeared in the door. He padded into the room and dropped the old man's pouch on the floor. Blood had darkened the leather.

I looked at him, suddenly aghast. 'You killed him?'

I took from him what you needed. Hurry. The back of this cage burns.

For a moment I could not move. I looked at Nighteyes and wondered what I was making of him. He had lost some of his clean wildness. Starling's eyes went from him, to me, to the pouch on the floor. She did not move.

And some of what makes you a man is gone from you. We have no time for this, my brother. Would not you kill a wolf if it would save my life?

I didn't need to answer that. 'The key is in that pouch,' I told Starling.

For a moment she just stared down at it. Then she stooped and fumbled the heavy iron key out of the leather pouch. I watched her fit it into the keyhole, now praying that I had not dented the mechanism too badly. She turned the key, jerked loose the hasp and then lifted the bar from the door. As I came out she ordered me, 'Bring the blankets. You'll need them. The cold outside is fierce.'

As I snatched them up, I could feel the heat radiating from the back wall of my cell. I grabbed up my cloak and mittens. Smoke was beginning to slink in between the planks. We fled with the wolf at our heels.

No one took any notice of us outside. The fire was beyond battling. It held the town and raced wherever it willed. The people I saw were engaged in the selfish business of salvage and survival. A man trundled a barrow of possessions past us with no more than a warning look. I wondered if they were his. Down the street I could see a stable afire. Frantic grooms were dragging horses out but the screams of the panicked animals still within were shriller than the wind. With a tremendous crash a building across the street collapsed, wheezing hot air and ash toward us in a terrible sigh. The wind had spread the fire throughout all Moonseye. The fire sped from building to building, and the wind carried burning sparks and hot ash beyond the walls to the forest above. I wondered if even the deep snows would be enough to stop it. 'Come on!' Starling yelled angrily and I realized I had been standing and gawking. Clutching the blankets I followed her wordlessly. We ran through the winding streets of the burning town. She seemed to know the way.

We came to a crossroads. Some sort of struggle had taken place there. Four bodies sprawled in the street, all in Farrow colours. I paused, to stoop over a soldier and take the fallen woman's knife and the pouch at her belt.

We neared the gates of the town. Suddenly a wagon rattled up beside us. The two horses drawing it were mismatched and lathered. 'Get in!' someone shouted at us. Starling leaped into the wagon without hesitation.

'Kettle?' I asked, and 'Hurry up!' was her reply. I climbed in and the wolf leaped easily up beside me. She did not wait to see us settled but slapped the reins on the horses. The wagon plunged forward with a lurch.

Ahead of us were the gates. They were open and unmanned, swinging on their hinges in the wind from the fire. To one side I caught a glimpse of a sprawled body. Kettle did not even slow the team. We were through the gates without a backwards glance, and rattling down the dark road, to join others fleeing the destruction with carts and barrows. Most seemed bound toward the few outlying homesteads to seek shelter for the night, but Kettle kept our horses moving. As the night about us grew darker and folk fewer, Kettle stirred the horses to a faster clip. I peered ahead into the darkness.

I realized Starling was looking back behind us. 'It was only supposed to be a diversion,' she said in an awestruck voice. I turned to look back.

An immense orange glow silhouetted the palisade of Moonseye in black. Sparks rose thick as swarming bees into the night sky above it. The roar of the flames was like storm winds. As we watched, a building caved in and another wave of sparks rose into the air.

'A diversion?' I peered at her through the darkness. 'You did all that? To free me?'

Starling shot me an amused glance. 'Sorry to disappoint you. No. Kettle and I came along for you, but that was not what this was about. Most of that is the work of Nik's family. Revenge against those who broke faith with them. They went in to find them and kill them. Then they left.' She shook her head. 'It's too complicated to explain it all right now, even if I understood it. Evidently the King's Guard at Moonseye has been corrupt for years. They've been well paid to see nothing of the Holdfast smugglers. And the smugglers have seen to it that the men posted here enjoyed some of the better things in life. I gather that Captain Mark enjoyed the best of the profits. He was not alone, but neither was he generous about sharing.

'Then Burl was sent here. He knew nothing of the arrangement. He brought a huge influx of soldiers with him, and tried to impose military discipline here. Nik sold you to Mark. But when Nik was selling you to Mark, someone saw a chance to sell Mark and his arrangement to Burl. Burl saw a chance to take you, and clean up a ring of smugglers. But Nik Holdfast and his clan had paid well for safe passage for the pilgrims. Then the soldiers broke faith with them, and the Holdfast promise to the pilgrims was broken.' She shook her head. Her voice went tight. 'Some of the women were raped. One child died of the cold. One man will never walk again because he tried to protect his wife.' For a time, the only sounds were the noises of the wagon and the distant roaring of the fires. Her eyes were very

black as she looked back at the burning town. 'You've heard of honour among thieves? Well, Nik and his men have avenged theirs.'

I was still staring back at the destruction of Moonseye. I cared not a whit for Burl and his Farrow men. But there had been merchants there, and traders, families and homes. The flames were devouring them all. And Six Duchies soldiers had raped their captives as if they were lawless raiders instead of King's Guards. Six Duchies soldiers, serving a Six Duchies king. I shook my head. 'Shrewd would have hanged them all.'

Starling cleared her throat. 'Don't blame yourself,' she told me. 'I learned long ago not to blame myself for evil done to me. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't even your fault. You were just the catalyst that started the chain of events.'

'Don't call me that,' I begged her. The wagon rumbled on, carrying us deeper into the night.

NINETEEN

Pursuit

The peace between the Six Duchies and the Mountain Kingdom was relatively new at the time of King Regal's reign. For decades, the Mountain Kingdom had controlled all trade through the passes with as tight a grip as the Six Duchies had on all trade on the Cold and Buck Rivers. Trade and passage between the two regions had been capriciously managed by both powers, to the detriment of both. But during the reign of King Shrewd, mutually beneficial trade agreements were worked out between King-in-Waiting Chivalry of the Six Duchies and Prince Rurisk of the Mountains. The peace and prosperity of this arrangement was secured further when, over a decade later, the Mountain princess Kettricken became the bride of King-in-Waiting Verity. Upon the untimely death of her older brother, Rurisk, on the very eve of her wedding, Kettricken became the sole heir to the Mountain crown. Thus it appeared for a time that the Six Duchies and the Mountain Kingdom might share a monarch and eventually become one land.

Circumstances put all such hope to ruin, however. The Six Duchies were threatened from without by the Raiders, and torn within by the bickering of princes. King Shrewd was murdered, King-in-Waiting Verity disappeared while on a quest, and when Prince Regal claimed the throne for his own, his hatred for Kettricken was such that she felt obliged to flee to her native Mountains for the sake of her unborn child. Self-proclaimed 'King' Regal saw this somehow as a reneging on a promised surrender of territory. His initial endeavours to move troops into the Mountain Kingdom, ostensibly as 'guards' for trading caravans, were repulsed by the Mountain folk. His protestations and threats prompted the closing of the Mountain borders to Six Duchy trade. Thwarted, he embarked on a vigorous campaign of discrediting Queen Kettricken and building patriotic hostility toward the Mountain Kingdom. His eventual goal seemed obvious: to take, by force if necessary, the lands of the Mountain Kingdom as a Six Duchies province. It seemed a poor time for such a war and such a strategy. The lands he justly possessed were already under siege by an outside enemy, one he seemed unable or disinclined to defeat. No military force had ever conquered the Mountain Kingdom, and yet this was what he seemed intent upon doing. Why

he so desperately desired to possess this territory was a question that initially baffled everyone.

The night was clear and cold. The bright moonlight was enough to show us where the road ran, but not more than that. For a time I simply sat in the wagon, listening to the crunching of the horses' hooves on the road and trying to absorb all that had happened. Starling took the blankets we had brought from my cell and shook them out. She gave me one and draped one across her own shoulders. She sat huddled and apart from me, looking out the back of the wagon. I sensed she wanted to be left alone. I watched the orange glow that had been Moonseye dwindle in the distance. After a time, my mind started working again.

'Kettle?' I called over my shoulder. 'Where are we going?'

'Away from Moonseye,' she said. I could hear the weariness in her voice.

Starling stirred and glanced at me. 'We thought you would know.'

'Where did the smugglers go?' I asked.

I felt more than saw Starling shrug. 'They wouldn't tell us. They said if we went after you, we had to part company with them. They seemed to believe Burl would send soldiers after you, no matter how badly Moonseye had been hit.'

I nodded, more to myself than to her. 'He will. He's going to blame the whole raid on me. And it will be said that the raiders were actually from the Mountain Kingdom, soldiers sent to free me.' I sat up, easing away from Starling. 'And when they catch us, they'll kill you both.'

'We didn't intend that they should catch us,' Kettle observed.

'And they won't,' I promised. 'Not if we act sensibly. Pull up the horses.'

Kettle scarcely needed to stop them. They had slowed to a weary walk long ago. I tossed my blanket at Starling and went around the team. Nighteyes launched himself from the wagon and followed me curiously. 'What are you doing?' Kettle demanded as I unbuckled the harness and let it fall to the snowy ground.

'Changing this over so they can be ridden. Can you ride bareback?' I was using the guard's knife to hack through the reins as I spoke. She'd have to ride bareback, whether she could or not. We had no saddles.

‘I suppose I’ll have to,’ she observed grumpily as she clambered down from the wagon. ‘But we aren’t going to get very far very fast, doubled on these horses.’

‘You and Starling will do fine,’ I promised her. ‘Just keep going.’

Starling was standing in the bed of the wagon looking down on me. I didn’t need the moonlight to know there was disbelief on her face. ‘You’re leaving us here? After we came back for you?’

That wasn’t how I’d seen it. ‘You are leaving me here,’ I told her firmly. ‘Jhaampe is the only large settlement, once you’ve turned your back on Moonseye and headed toward the Mountain Kingdom. Ride steadily. Don’t go directly to Jhaampe. That’s what they’ll expect us to do. Find one of the smaller villages and hide there for a time. Most of the Mountain folk are hospitable. If you hear no rumours of pursuit, go on to Jhaampe. But get as far as you can as fast as you can before you stop to ask for shelter or food.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Starling asked in a low voice.

‘Nighteyes and I are going our own way. As we should have a long time ago. We travel fastest alone.’

‘I came back for you,’ Starling said. Her voice was close to breaking at my betrayal. ‘Despite all that had happened to me. Despite ... my hand ... and everything else ...’

‘He’s drawing them off our trail,’ Kettle suddenly said.

‘Do you need help to mount?’ I asked Kettle quietly.

‘We don’t need any help from you!’ Starling declared angrily. She shook her head. ‘When I think of all I’ve been through, following you. And all we did to free you ... You’d have burned alive in that cell back there but for me!’

‘I know.’ There was no time to explain all of it to her. ‘Goodbye,’ I said quietly. And I left them there, walking away from them into the forest. Nighteyes walked at my side. The trees closed in around us and they were soon lost to sight.

Kettle had seen quickly to the heart of my plan. As soon as Burl had the fires under control, or perhaps before, he would think of me. They’d find the old man killed by a wolf, and never believe I had perished in my cell. There would be pursuit. They’d send out riders on all the roads into the mountains, and they’d soon catch up with Kettle and Starling. Unless the hunters had

another, more difficult trail to follow. One that cut cross-country, headed directly to Jhaampe. Due west.

It would not be easy. I had no specific knowledge of what lay between me and the capital city of the Mountain Kingdom. No towns, most likely, for the Mountain Kingdom was sparsely populated. The folk were mostly trappers, hunters and nomadic herders of sheep and goats who tended to live in isolated cabins or tiny villages surrounded by ample hunting and trapping range. There would be little chance for me to beg or steal food or supplies. What worried me more was that I might find myself on the edge of an unscalable ridge or having to ford one of the many swift cold rivers that swept fiercely down the ravines and narrow valleys.

Useless to worry until we find ourselves blocked, Nighteyes pointed out. *If it happens, then we must simply find a way around it. It may slow us down. But we will never get there at all if we stand still and worry.*

So we hiked the night away, Nighteyes and I. When we came to clearings, I studied the stars, and tried to travel as close to due west as I could. The terrain proved every bit as challenging as I had expected it to be. Deliberately I chose routes kinder to a man and wolf afoot than to men on horseback. We left our trail up brushy hillsides and through tangled thickets in narrow gorges. I comforted myself as I forged through such places by imagining Starling and Kettle making good time on the roads. I tried not to think that Burl would send out enough trackers to follow more than one trail. No. I had to get a good lead on them and then lure Burl to send them after me in full force.

The only way I could think of to do that was to represent myself as a threat to Regal. One that must be dealt with immediately.

I lifted my eyes to the top of a ridge. Three immense cedars stood together in a clump. I would stop there, build a tiny fire, and try to Skill. I had no elfbark, I reminded myself, so I would have to make provisions to rest well afterwards.

I will watch over you, Nighteyes assured me.

The cedars were huge, their reaching branches interweaving overhead so thickly that the ground beneath was bare of snow. The soil was thickly carpeted with fragrant bits of cedar frond that had fallen over time. I scraped myself up a couch of them to keep my body off the cold earth and then gathered a good supply of firewood. For the first time, I looked inside the pouch I had stolen. There was a fire flint. Also five or six coins, some dice, a

broken bracelet, and folded up in a scrap of fabric, a lock of fine hair. It summarized too neatly a soldier's life. I scraped away a bit of earth and buried the hair, the dice, and the bracelet together. I tried not to wonder if it were a child or a lover that she had left behind. Her death was none of my doing, I reminded myself. Still, a chill voice whispered the word 'catalyst' in the back of my mind. But for me, she would be alive still. For a moment, I felt old and weary and sick. Then I forced myself to set both the soldier and my own life aside. I kindled the fire and fed it up well. I stacked the rest of my firewood close to hand. I wrapped myself in my cloak and lay back on my cedar frond bed. I took a breath, closed my eyes and Skilled.

It was as if I had tumbled into a swift river. I had not been prepared to succeed so easily, and was nearly swept away. Somehow the Skill-river seemed deeper and wilder and stronger here. I did not know if it were a waxing of my own abilities or something else. I found and centred myself and resolutely firmed my will against the temptations of the Skill. I refused to consider that from here I might fling my thoughts to Molly and our child, might see as with my own eyes how she was growing and how they both fared. Nor would I reach for Verity, much as I longed to. The strength of this Skilling was such I had no doubt I could find him. But that was not what I was here for. I was here to taunt an enemy and must be on my guard. I set every ward I could that would not seal me off from the Skill, and turned my will toward Burl.

I extended myself, feeling for him cautiously. I was ready to fling up my walls in an instant if attacked. I found him easily and was almost startled at how unaware of my touch he was.

Then his pain jolted through me.

I drew back, faster than a startled sea anemone in a tide pool. I shocked myself by opening my eyes and staring up into cedar boughs burdened with snow. Sweat slicked my face and back.

What was that? Nighteyes demanded.

You know as much as I do, I told him.

It had been purest pain. Pain independent of an injury to the body, pain that was not sorrow or fear. Total pain, as if every part of the body, inside and out, were immersed in fire.

Regal and Will were causing it.

I lay shaking in the aftermath, not of the Skilling, but Burl's pain. It was a monstrosity larger than my mind could grasp. I tried to sort out all I had

sensed in that brief moment. Will, and perhaps some shadow of Carrod's Skill, immobilizing Burl for this punishment. From Carrod there had been poorly-masked horror and distaste for this task. Perhaps he feared it would some day be turned upon him again. Will's strongest emotion had been wrath that Burl had had me in his power and somehow let me slip away. But beneath the wrath was a sort of fascination with what Regal was doing to Burl. Will did not take any pleasure in it. Not yet.

But Regal did.

There had been a time when I had known Regal. Never well, it was true. Once he had been simply the younger of my uncles, the one who did not like me at all. He had vented it boyishly, in shoves and clandestine pinches, in teasing and tattling. I had not liked it, I had not liked him, but it had been almost understandable. It had been a boy's jealousy that the favoured eldest son had created yet another rival for King Shrewd's time and attention. At one time he had been simply a pampered young prince, envious that his elder brothers were in line for the throne ahead of him. He had been spoiled and rude and selfish.

But he had been human.

What I had felt from him just now was so far beyond what I could understand in terms of cruelty that it was almost incomprehensible. Forged Ones had lost their humanity, but in their emptiness was the shadow of what they had been. Had Regal opened his breast and showed me a nest of vipers, I could not have been more shocked. Regal had thrown humanity aside, to embrace something darker. And this was the man the Six Duchies now called King.

This was the man who would send troops after Starling and Kettle.

'I'm going back,' I warned Nighteyes, and did not give him time to object. I closed my eyes and flung myself into the Skill-river. I opened myself wide to it, drawing its cold strength into me without thought that too much of it would devour me. At the instant Will became aware of me, I spoke to them. 'You will die at my hand, Regal. As certainly as Verity will reign again as King.' Then I smashed that gathered power against them.

It was almost as instinctive as a clenched fist. I did not plan it, but suddenly I understood this was what Verity had done to them back in Tradeford. There was no message, nothing but a furious unleashing of strength upon them. I opened wide to them and showed myself, then when they turned to me, I willed myself to blast them with every bit of Skill I had

gathered. Like Verity, I held back nothing of my strength. I believe if there had been only one, I would have succeeded in burning the Skill right out of him. Instead, they shared the jolt. I will never know what effect it had on Burl. Perhaps he was grateful for my savagery, for it shattered Will's concentration and released him from Regal's sophisticated torture. I felt Carrod's shriek of terror as he broke off his Skilling. I think Will might have stood and challenged me, had not Regal feebly commanded him *Break it off, you fool, do not risk me for your vengeance!* In the blinking of an eye, they were gone.

The day was strong when I was next aware. Nighteyes was lying almost on top of me and there was blood on his coat. I pushed feebly at him and he moved immediately. He stood up and sniffed my face. I smelled my own blood with him; it was revolting. I sat up suddenly and the world spun around me. I became slowly aware of the clamour of his thoughts.

Are you all right? You were trembling and then you began to bleed from your nose. You have not been here, I have not been able to hear you at all!

'I'm all right,' I soothed him hoarsely. 'Thank you for keeping me warm.'

My fire was down to a few embers. I reached carefully for my wood and added a few sticks to the fire. It seemed as if my hands were a long way away from me. When I had the fire burning, I sat and warmed myself. Then I stood and staggered a few steps to where the snow began. I rubbed a handful across my face to cleanse it of the taste and smell of blood. I put a bit of clean snow in my mouth for my tongue felt thick and clotted.

Do you need to rest? Do you need food? Nighteyes asked me anxiously.

Yes and yes. But most of all, we needed to flee. I had no doubt that what I had done would bring them after me. I had done what I had wanted, and beyond all my expectations, it had been real. I had given them a reason to fear me. Now they would never rest until they'd destroyed me. I had also shown them plainly where I was; they'd have a feel for where to send their men. I must not be here when they arrived. I went back to my fire and kicked earth onto it. I stamped it to be sure it was out. Then we fled.

We travelled as swiftly as I could manage. There was no question that I held Nighteyes back. He would look at me pityingly as I toiled up a hill, hip-deep in snow that he but spread toes and ran lightly over. It was not unusual that when I begged for a rest and stopped to lean against a tree, he would range ahead, searching out the best trail. When both light and my strength

were near exhausted and I would stop to build a fire for the night, he would disappear to return with meat for both of us. Most often it was white snow hares, but once it was a fat beaver that had ventured too far from its iced-over pond. I made pretence to myself that I cooked my meat, but it was a very brief searing over a fire. I was too tired and too hungry to do more. The meat diet put no fat on my flesh, but it did keep me alive and moving. I had little of true sleep, for I had to constantly replenish my fire to keep from freezing and rise several times a night to stamp feeling back into my feet. Endurance. That was what it was all about. Not swiftness or great strength, but a miserly eking out of my ability to force myself to keep moving every day.

I kept my Skill-walls up tight, but even so I was aware of Will's battling against them. I did not think he could track me as long as I guarded myself, but I was not certain of that. The constant mental wariness was yet another draw on my strength. Some nights I longed simply to drop all my guards and let him in, to finish me off once and for all. But at such times, all I had to do was recall what Regal was now capable of doing. Without fail it put a bolt of terror through me and inspired me to push myself all the harder to increase the distance between us.

When I arose on the fourth dawn of our travelling, I knew we were deep within the Mountain Kingdom. I had seen no sign of pursuit since we had left Moonseye. Surely this deep within Kettricken's own land, we were safe.

How much farther is this Jhaampe, and what shall we do when we get there?

I don't know how much farther. And I don't know what we shall do.

For the first time, I considered it. I forced myself to think of all that I had not permitted myself to consider before. I knew nothing truly of what had become of Kettricken since the time I had sent her from the King's side to flee into the night. She had had no word from me or about me. Kettricken would have borne the child by now. By my reckoning, her babe would be close in age to my own daughter. I suddenly found myself very curious. I could hold that babe and say to myself, 'This must be how it feels to hold my daughter.'

Except that Kettricken believed me dead. Executed by Regal and long buried would be what she had heard. She was my queen and Verity's wife. Surely I could reveal to her how I had survived. But to tell the truth to her

would be like dropping a pebble in a pond. Unlike Starling or Kettle or anyone else who had deduced who I was, Kettricken had known me before. It would not be rumour or legend, not a wild tale of someone who had glimpsed me for a moment, but a fact. She could say to others who had known me, ‘Yes, I saw him, and he truly lives. How? Why, by his Wit, of course.’

I trudged along behind Nighteyes through the snow and cold and thought what that would mean to Patience when word reached her. Shame, or joy? Hurt that I had not revealed myself to her? Through Kettricken, word could be sent, to spread to those I had known. Eventually, it would reach Molly and Burrich. What would it do to Molly, to hear it from afar like that, not only that I was alive and had not returned to her, but that I was tainted with the Wit? It had cut me to the heart to know she had kept from me the knowledge that she carried our child. That had been my first true glimpse of how betrayed and hurt she must have felt by all the secrets I had kept from her over the years. To have one more and one of such magnitude pushed in her face might end whatever feelings she might still have for me. My chances of rebuilding a life with her were small enough; I could not bear for them to dwindle further.

And all the others, the stable-folk I had known, the men I had rowed and fought alongside, the common soldiers of Buckkeep would find out as well. However I might feel about the Wit, I had already seen the disgust in one friend’s eyes. I had seen how it had changed even Starling’s attitude toward me. What would folks think of Burrich, that he had had a Witted one in his stable and tolerated me? Would he be discovered as well? I gritted my teeth. I would have to remain dead. Better, perhaps, to by-pass Jhaampe altogether and press on to find Verity. Save that, without supplies I had as much chance of that as Nighteyes had of passing himself off as a lapdog.

And there was one other small matter. The map.

When Verity had departed Buckkeep, it had been on the strength of a map. It was an old one that Kettricken had unearthed in the Buckkeep libraries. It had been faded and ancient, made in the days of King Wisdom, who had first visited the Elderlings and enlisted them to the aid of the Six Duchies. The detail of the map had faded, but both Kettricken and Verity had been convinced that one of the marked trails led to where King Wisdom had first encountered those elusive beings. Verity had left Buckkeep determined to follow the map into the regions beyond the Mountain Kingdom. He had

taken with him the fresh copy of the map he had made. I had no idea of what had become of the older map; probably carried off to Tradeford when Regal had looted Buckkeep's libraries. But the style of the map and the unusual characteristics of the bordering had made me long suspect that the map was a copy of yet an older map. The bordering was in the Mountain style; if the original were to be found anywhere, it would be in the libraries of Jhaampe. I had had some access to them in the months of my convalescence in the Mountains. I knew their library was both extensive and well kept. Even if I did not find the original of that particular map, I might perhaps find others that covered the same area.

During my time in the Mountains, I had also been impressed with what a trusting folk they were. I had seen few locks and no guards such as we had at Buckkeep. It would be no trick to get into the royal residence. Even if they had established a practice of setting guards, the walls were only made of layers of barkcloth that had been plastered over with clay and painted. I felt confident I could get in one way or another. Once within, it would not take me long to rifle through their library and steal what I needed. I could resupply at the same time.

I had the grace to be ashamed of that thought. I also knew that shame would not keep me from doing it. Once again, I had no choice. I slogged up yet another ridge through the snow and it seemed to me my heart beat out that phrase over and over. No choice, no choice, no choice. Never any choice about anything. Fate had made me a killer, a liar and a thief. And the harder I tried to avoid those roles, the more firmly I was pushed into them. Nighteyes padded at my heels, and fretted about my black mood.

So distracted were we that we crested the ridge and both of us stood, foolishly outlined, in full view of the troop of horsemen on the road below us. The yellow and brown of their jackets stood out against the snow. I froze like a startled deer. Even so, we might have escaped their notice were it not for the pack of hounds with them. I took it in at a glance. Six hounds, not wolf-hounds, thank Eda, but short-legged rabbit-hounds, unsuited to this weather or terrain. There was one long-legged dog, a gangly, curly-backed mongrel. He and his handler moved separately from the pack. The pursuit was using whatever it had to find us. There were a dozen men on horseback, however. Almost instantly the mongrel threw his head up and bayed. In an instant the hounds took it up, milling, heads raised to snuff, and giving cry as they found our scents. The huntsman controlling the hounds lifted a hand

and pointed up at us as we took to our heels. The mongrel and his handler were already racing toward us.

'I didn't even know there was a road there,' I panted apologetically to Nighteyes as we fled down the hillside. We had a very brief advantage. We went downhill following our own trail, while the hounds and horsemen in pursuit of us must come up a hill of unbroken snow. I hoped that by the time they reached the ridge we had just left, we could be out of view in the brushy ravine below us. Nighteyes was holding back, loath to leave me behind. The hounds were baying and I heard the voices of men raised in excitement as they took up the chase.

RUN! I commanded Nighteyes.

I will not leave you.

I'd have small chance if you did, I admitted. My mind worked frantically. *Get to the bottom of the ravine. Lay as much false trail as you can, loop around, go downstream following the ravine. When I get there, we'll flee uphill. It may delay them a while.*

Fox tricks! he snorted, and then raced past me in a blur of grey and vanished into the thick brush of the ravine. I tried to drive myself faster through the snow. Just before I reached the brushy ravine's edge, I looked back. Dogs and horsemen were just cresting the ridge. I gained the shelter of the snow-cloaked brush and scrabbled down the steep side. Nighteyes had left enough tracks there for a whole pack of wolves. Even as I paused for a quick breath, he raced past me in yet another direction.

Let's get out of here!

I did not wait for his reply, but took off up the ravine as fast as my legs would carry me. The snow was shallower at the very bottom for the overhanging trees and brush had caught and held most of it. I went half doubled over, knowing that if I snagged on the branches they would dump their cold loads upon me. The belling of the hounds rang in the freezing air. I listened to it as I pushed my way on. When I heard their excitement give way to a frustrated canine yelling, I knew they had reached the muddled trail at the bottom of the ravine. Too soon; they were there too soon and would be coming too fast.

Nighteyes!

Silence, fool! The hounds will hear you! And that other.

My heart near stopped in my chest. I could not believe how stupid I had been. I toiled on through the snowy brush, my ears straining after what was

happening behind us. The huntsmen had liked the false trail Nighteyes had left and were all but forcing the hounds along it. There were too many men on horseback for the narrowness of the ravine. They were getting in one another's way, and perhaps fouling our true trail. Time gained, but only a bit of it. Then suddenly I heard alarmed cries and a wild yelping of hounds. I picked up a confused babble of doggy thoughts. A wolf had sprung down on them and raced right through the centre of their pack, slashing as he went, dashing off right through the very legs of the horses the men rode behind them. One man was down and having trouble catching his wild-eyed mount. A dog had lost most of one floppy ear and was agonized with it. I tried to shut my mind to his pain. Poor beast, and all for none of your own gain. My legs were like lead and my mouth dry, but I tried to force speed from myself, to use well the time Nighteyes had gained at such risk to himself. I wanted to cry out to him to leave off his taunting, to flee with me, but dared not betray to the pack the true direction of our retreat. Instead I pushed myself on.

The ravine was getting narrower and deeper. Vines and brambles and brush grew from the steepening sides and dangled down. I suspected I walked on top of a winter-frozen stream. I began to look for a way out of it. Behind me the hounds were yelping again, baying out to one another that they had the true trail now, follow the wolf, the wolf, the wolf. I knew then with certainty that Nighteyes had shown himself to them once more and was deliberately drawing them away from me. *Run, boy, run!* He flung the thought to me, uncaring that the hounds would hear him. There was a wild merriment to him, a hysterical silliness to his thought. It reminded me of the night I had chased Justin through the halls of Buckkeep, to slaughter him in the Great Hall before all the guests at Regal's King-in-Waiting ceremony. Nighteyes was in a frenzy that had carried him past worrying over his own survival. I plunged on, my heart in my throat for him, fighting the tears that pricked the corners of my eyes.

The ravine ended. Before me was a glistening cascade of ice, a memorial to the mountain stream that cut this canyon during the summer months. The ice hung in long, rippled icicles down the face of a rocky crack in the mountain, gleaming with a faint sheen of moving water still. The snow at its base was crystalline. I halted, suspecting a deep pool, one I might unwittingly find under a layer of too-thin ice. I lifted my eyes. The walls here were mostly undercut and overgrown. In other places, bare slabs of rock showed through the drapery of snow. Runty saplings and twiggy brush grew

in a scattering, leaning out to catch the sunlight from above. None of it looked promising for a climb. I turned to double back on my trail and heard a single howl rise and fall. Neither hound nor wolf, it could only be the mongrel dog. Something in the certainty of his cry convinced me he was on my trail. I heard a man shout encouragement and the dog yelped again, closer. I turned to the wall of the ravine and started to climb. I heard the man halloo to the others, calling and whistling for them to follow him, he had a man's tracks here, never mind the wolf, it was just a Wit-trick. In the distance the hounds suddenly took up a different yelping. In that moment, I knew that Regal had finally found what he had sought. A Witted one to hunt me. Old Blood had been bought.

I jumped and caught at a sapling leaning out from the wall of the ravine. I hauled myself up, got my feet on it, balanced and reached for another above me. When I put my weight on it, its roots tore loose from the rocky soil. I fell, but managed to catch myself on the first tree again. Up again, I told myself fiercely. I stood on it, and heard it crack under my weight. I reached up to grab handfuls of twiggy brush leaning down from the undercut bank. I tried to go up quickly, to not let my weight hang from any sapling or bush for more than a few moments. Handfuls of twigs broke off in my grip, tufts of old grasses pulled free, and I found myself scrabbling along the lip of the ravine but not getting any higher. I heard a shout below me and against my will I glanced back and down. A man and dog were in the clearing below. As the mongrel bayed up at me, the man was nocking an arrow to his bow. I hung helpless above them, as easy a shot as a man could wish.

'Please,' I heard myself gasp, and then heard the tiny unmistakable sound of a bowstring being released. I felt it hit me, a fist in the back, one of Regal's old tricks from my childhood, and then a deeper, hotter pain inside me. One of my hands had let go. I had not commanded it to, it had simply come unhooked from its grip. I swung from my right hand. I could hear, so clearly, the yelping of the dog as it smelled my blood. I could hear the rustle of the man's garment as he drew another arrow from his quiver.

Pain bit again, deep into my right wrist. I cried out as my fingers let go. In a reflex of terror, my legs scrabbled fiercely against the yielding brush that dangled over the undercut bank. And somehow I was rising, my face brushing crusty snow. I found my left arm and made vague swimming motions with it. *Get your legs up!* Nighteyes snapped at me. He made not a

sound, for his teeth were set firmly in the sleeve and flesh of my right arm as he dragged me up. The chance at living rejuvenated me. I kicked wildly and then felt solid ground under my belly. I clawed my way forward, trying to ignore the pain that centred in my back, but spread out from there in red waves. If I had not seen the man loose an arrow, I would have believed I had a pole as thick as a wagon axle sticking out of my back.

Get up, get up! We have to run.

I don't recall how I got to my feet. I heard dogs scrabbling up the cliff behind me. Nighteyes stood back from the edge and met them as they came up. His jaws tore them open and he flung their bodies back down on the rest of the pack. When the curly-backed mongrel fell, there was a sudden lessening in the yelping below. We both knew his agony, and heard the screams of the man below as his bond-animal bled to death in the snow. The other huntsman was calling his dogs off, angrily telling the others it would do no good to send them up to be slaughtered. I could hear the men yelling and cursing as they turned their weary horses and started back down the ravine, to try and find a place where they could get up and after us, to try and pick up our trail again.

Run! Nighteyes told me. We would not speak of what we had just done. There was a sensation of terrible warmth running down my back that was also a spreading coldness. I put my hand to my chest, almost expecting to feel the arrowhead and shaft sticking out there. But no, it was buried deep. I staggered after Nighteyes, my consciousness awash in too much sensation, too many kinds of pain. My shirt and cloak tugged against the arrow-shaft as I moved, a tiny wiggling of the wood that was echoed by the arrowhead deep inside me. I wondered how much further damage it was doing. I thought of the times I had butchered arrow-slain deer, of the black puddingy flesh full of blood that one found around such a wound. I wondered if he'd got my lung. A lung-shot deer didn't go far. Did I taste blood in the back of my throat ... ?

Don't think about it! Nighteyes commanded me savagely. *You weaken us both. Just walk. Walk and keep walking.*

So he knew as well as I did that I could not run. I walked and he walked at my side. For a time. Then I was walking blindly forward in the dark, not even caring in which direction I went, and he was not there. I groped for him, but could not find him. Somewhere afar I heard the yelping of dogs again. I walked on. I blundered into trees. Branches scratched my face but it

was all right because my face was numb. The shirt on my back was a slushy sheet of frozen blood that moved chafingly against my skin. I tried to pull my cloak more closely around me, but the sudden pain nearly drove me to my knees. Silly me. I had forgotten it would drag against the arrow-shaft. Silly me. Keep walking, boy. I walked on.

I bumped into another tree. It released a shower of snow on me. I staggered clear and kept on walking. For a long time. Then I was sitting in the snow, getting colder and colder. I had to get up. I had to keep moving.

I walked again. Not for very long, I don't think. Under the shelter of some great evergreens where the snow was shallow, I sank to my knees. 'Please,' I said. I had not the strength to weep for mercy. 'Please.' I could not think whom I was asking.

I saw a hollow between two thick roots. Pine needles were thick on the ground there. I huddled into the small space. I could not lie down for the arrow sticking out of my back. But I could lean my forehead against the friendly tree and cross my arms on my chest. I made myself small, folding my legs under me and sinking into the space between the roots. I would have been cold save I was too tired. I sank into sleep. When I woke up, I'd build a fire and get warm. I could imagine how warm I'd be, could almost feel it.

My brother!

I'm here, I told him calmly. *Right here*. I quested out to touch him reassuringly. He was coming. The ruff around his throat was spiky with frozen saliva, but not a tooth had got through. He had one slash down the side of his muzzle but it was not bad. He'd led them in circles and then harried their horses from behind before leaving them plunging through a snow-covered swale of deep grass in the dark. Only two of their dogs were left alive and one of the horses was limping so badly the rider had doubled up with another.

Now he came to find me, surging up the snowy slopes easily. He was tired, yes, but the energy of triumph surged through him. The night was crisp and clean around him. He caught the scent and then the tiny eye-flicker of the hare that crouched beneath a bush, hoping he'd pass by. We did not. A single, sudden sideways pounce and the hare was in his jaws. We clutched it by its bony head and snapped its spine with one shake. We trotted on, the meat a welcome dangling weight from his jaws. We would eat well. The night forest was silver and black around us.

Stop. My brother, do not do this.

Do what?

I love you. But I do not wish to be you.

I hovered where I was. His lungs working so strongly, drawing in the cold night air past the hare's head in his mouth. The slight sting of the slash down his muzzle, his powerful legs carrying his lean body so well.

You do not wish to be me, either, Changer. Not really.

I was not sure he was correct. With his eyes I saw and smelled myself. I had wedged myself into the space between the roots of the great tree, and was curled up as small as an abandoned pup. My blood smell was strong on the air. Then I blinked, and I was looking down into the darkness of my crooked elbow over my face. I lifted my head slowly, painfully. Everything hurt and all the pain traced back to that arrow centred in my back.

I smelled rabbit guts and blood. Nighteyes stood beside me, feet braced on the carcass as he tore it open. *Eat, while it's hot.*

I don't know if I can.

Do you want me to chew it for you?

He was not jesting. But the only thing more revolting than eating was the thought of eating disgorged meat. I managed a tiny shake of my head. My fingers were almost numb, but I watched my hand pinch up the small liver and carry it up to my mouth. It was warm and rich with blood. Suddenly I knew Nighteyes was right. I had to eat. Because I had to live. He had torn the hare apart. I picked up a portion and bit into the warm meat. It was tough but I was determined. Without thinking, I had nearly abandoned my body for his, nearly climbed in beside him into that perfect healthy wolf's body. I had done it once before, with his consent. But now we both knew better. We would share, but we could not become one another. Not without both of us losing.

Slowly I sat up. I felt the muscles of my back move against the arrow, protesting at the way it snagged them. I could feel the weight of the shaft. When I imagined it sticking out of me, I nearly lost the food I'd eaten. I forced myself to a calm I did not feel. Suddenly, oddly, an image of Burrich came to me. That deadly stillness in his face when he had flexed his knee and watched the old wound pulling open. Slowly I reached my hand back. I walked my fingers up my spine. It made the muscles pull against the arrow. Finally my fingers touched the sticky wood of the arrow-shaft. Even that light touch was a new sort of pain. Awkwardly I closed my fingers around the shaft, closed my eyes and tried to pull on it. Even if there had been no

pain involved, it would have been difficult. But the agony rocked the world around me, and when it steadied, I found myself on my hands and knees with my head hanging down.

Shall I try?

I shook my head, remaining as I was. I was still afraid I'd faint. I tried to think. If he pulled it out, I knew I'd pass out. If the bleeding was bad, I'd have no way to stop it. No. Best to leave it in there. I gathered all my courage. *Can you break it off?*

He came close to me. I felt his head against my back. He turned his head, manoeuvred his jaws so that his back teeth would close on the shaft. Then he closed his jaws. There was a snick, like a gardener pruning a sapling, and a shiver of new pain. A wave of giddiness washed over me. But somehow I reached back and tugged my blood-sodden cloak free of the stub of arrow. I pulled it closer around me, shuddering. I closed my eyes.

No. Build a fire first.

I peeled my eyes open again. It was all too hard. I scraped together all the twigs and sticks within easy reach. Nighteyes tried to help, fetching branches to me, but it still took an eternity before I had a tiny flame dancing. Slowly I added sticks. About the time I had the fire burning, I realized the day was dawning. Time to move on again. We stayed only to finish eating the rabbit and to let me get my hands and feet thoroughly warm. Then we started off again, Nighteyes leading me unpityingly onwards.

TWENTY

Jhaampe

Jhaampe, the capital city of the Mountain Kingdom, is older than Buckkeep, just as the ruling line of the Mountain Kingdom is older than the house of Farseer. As a city, Jhaampe is as far removed in style from the fortress city of Buckkeep as the Farseer monarchs are different from the philosopher guides of the Sacrifice lineage that rule the Mountains.

There is no permanent city such as we know. There are few permanent buildings. Instead, along the carefully-planned and garden-bordered roads are spaces where the nomadic folk of the Mountains may come and go. There is a designated space for the market, but the merchants migrate in a procession that parallels that of the seasons. A score of tents may spring up overnight and their inhabitants swell the population of Jhaampe for a week or a month, only to disappear without a trace when their visiting and trading is over. Jhaampe is an ever-changing city of tents populated by the vigorous outdoor-dwelling folk of the mountains.

The homes of the ruling family and the companions that choose to stay year round with them are not at all like our castles and halls. Instead, their dwellings centre around great trees, living still, their trunks and branches patiently trained over scores of years to provide a framework for the building. This living structure is then draped with a fabric woven of tree-bark fibres and reinforced with a latticework. Thus the walls can take on the gently curving shapes of a tulip bud or the dome of an egg. A clay coating is spread over the fabric layer and this in turn is painted with a shiny resinous paint in the bright hues the mountain folk enjoy. Some are decorated with fanciful creatures or patterns but most are left simple. Purples and yellows predominate, so that to come upon the city growing in the shade of the great mountain trees is like coming upon a patch of crocus in springtime.

About these homes and at the intersections of the roads in this nomadic 'city' are the gardens. Each is unique. One may centre around an unusually-shaped stump or an arrangement of stones or a graceful bit of wood. They may contain fragrant herbs or bright flowers or any combination of plants. One notable one has at its heart a bubbling spring of steaming water. Here grow plants with fleshy leaves and exotically-scented flowers, denizens of

some warmer clime brought here to delight the mountain-dwellers with their mystery. Often visitors leave gifts in the gardens when they depart, a wooden carving or a graceful pot or perhaps merely an arrangement of bright pebbles. The gardens belong to no one, and all tend them.

At Jhaampe can also be found hot springs, some of water that can scald a man, others merely a gently bubbling warmth. These have been confined, both as public baths and as a source of heat in some of the smaller dwellings. In every building, in every garden, at every turn the visitor finds the austere beauty and simplicity of colour and form that are the Mountain ideal. The overall impression that one carries away is of tranquility and joy in the natural world. The chosen simplicity of life there may lead the visitor to question his own choice in life.

I was night. I recall little more than that it followed long days of pain. I moved my staff and took another step. I moved my staff again. We were not going quickly. A scurrying of snowflakes in the air was more blinding than the darkness. I could not get away from the circling wind that carried them. Nighteyes wove a pacing path around me, guiding my hesitant steps as if it could hurry me. From time to time he keened anxiously. His body was tight with fear and weariness. He smelled wood smoke and goats... *not to betray you, my brother. But to help you. Remember that. You need someone with hands. But if they try to mistreat you, you have but to call and I shall come. I shall not be far ...*

I could not make my mind focus on his thoughts. I felt his bitterness that he could not help me and his fear that he was leading me into a trap. I thought we had been arguing but I could not remember what I had been insisting on. Whatever it was, Nighteyes had won, simply by virtue of knowing what he wanted. My feet slipped on the packed snow of the road and I went to my knees. Nighteyes sat down beside me and waited. I tried to lie down and he seized my wrist in his jaws. He tugged gently, but the thing in my back burst into sudden flames. I made a noise.

Please, my brother. There are huts ahead, and lights within them. Fires and warmth. And someone with hands, who can cleanse the foul wound in your back. Please. Get up. Just once more.

I lifted my hanging head and tried to see. There was something in the road ahead of us, something the road forked and went around on either side. The silver moonlight gleamed on it but I could not make out what it was. I

blinked hard, and it became a carved stone, taller than a man. It had not been shaped to be an object, but was simply smoothed into a graceful shape. At its base, bare twiggy limbs recalled summer shrubbery. An irregular wall of smaller stones bordered it. Snow garnished all. It reminded me of Kettricken somehow. I tried to rise but could not. Beside me, Nighteyes whined in agony. I could not frame a thought to reassure him. It took all my strength to remain on my knees.

I did not hear footsteps but I felt a sudden increase in the tension thrumming through Nighteyes. I lifted my head again. Far ahead of me, past the garden, someone came walking through the night. Tall and slender, draped in heavy fabric, hood pulled forward so far it was almost a cowl. I watched the person come. Death, I thought. Only death could come so silently, gliding so smoothly through this icy night. 'Run away,' I whispered to Nighteyes. 'No sense in letting him take both of us. Run away now.'

For a wonder, he obeyed me, slipping away silently from my side. When I turned my head, I could not see him, but I sensed he was not far. I felt his strength leave me as if I had taken off a warm coat. Part of me tried to go with him, to cling to the wolf and be the wolf. I longed to leave this battered body behind.

If you must, my brother. If you must, I will not turn you away.

I wished he had not said it. It did not make it easier to resist the temptation. I had promised myself I would not do that to him, that if die I must, I would die and leave him free and clean of me to carve his own life. Yet as the moment for dying grew nearer there seemed so many good reasons to forsake that promise. The healthy wild body, that simple life in the now called to me.

Slowly the figure drew nearer. A great shivering of cold and pain racked me. I could go to the wolf. I summoned the last of my strength to defy myself. 'Here!' I croaked to Death. 'Here I am. Come and take me and let it be done at last.'

He heard me. I saw him halt and stand stiffly as if afraid. Then he came with sudden haste, his white cloak swirling in the night wind. He stood by me, tall and slender and silent. 'I've come to you,' I whispered. Abruptly he knelt by me, and I glimpsed the chiselled ivory of his bony face. He put his arms around me and lifted me to bear me away. The pressure of his arm on my back was agonizing. I fainted.

Warmth was seeping back into me, bringing pain with it. I sprawled on my side, within walls, for the wind surged like the ocean outside. I smelled tea and incense, paint and wood-shavings and the wool rug I lay on. My face burned. I could not stop the shuddering that ran through me, though every wave of it awakened the searing pain in my back. My hands and feet throbbed.

‘The knots of your cloak-strings are frozen. I’m going to cut them. Lie still now.’ The voice was curiously gentle, as if unused to such a tone.

I managed to get an eye open. I was lying on the floor. My face was turned toward a stone hearth where a fire burned. Someone leaned over me. I saw the glitter of a blade nearing my throat, but I could not move. I felt it sawing and honestly could not tell if it tasted my flesh. Then my cloak was being lifted back. ‘It’s frozen to your shirt,’ someone muttered. I almost thought I knew the voice. A gasp. ‘It’s blood. All this is frozen blood.’ My cloak made an odd tearing sound as it was peeled loose. Then someone sat down on the floor beside me.

I turned my eyes up slowly but could not lift my head to see a face. Instead I saw a slender body clothed in a soft robe of white wool. Hands the colour of old ivory pushed the cuffs of his sleeves up. The fingers were long and thin, the wrists bony. Then he rose abruptly to get something. For a time I was alone. I closed my eyes. When I opened them a wide vessel of blue pottery was by my head. Steam rose from it and I smelled willow and rowan. ‘Steady,’ said the voice, and for a moment one of those hands rested on my shoulder reassuringly. Then I felt spreading warmth on my back.

‘I’m bleeding again,’ I whispered to myself.

‘No. I’m soaking the shirt loose.’ Once again, the voice was almost familiar. I closed my eyes. A door opened and shut and a gust of cold air wafted across me. The man beside me paused. I felt him glance up. ‘You might have knocked,’ he said with mock severity. I felt again the spreading warmth of water on my back. ‘Even one such as I occasionally has other guests.’

Feet crossed hastily to me. Someone lowered herself fluidly to the floor beside me. I saw the folding of her skirts as she sank down. A hand pushed the hair back from my face. ‘Who is he, holy one?’

‘Holy one?’ There was bitter humour in his voice. ‘If you would speak of holes, you should speak of him, not me. Here, look at his back.’ He spoke softer then. ‘As to who he is, I have no idea.’

I heard her give a gasp. 'All of that is blood? How does he yet live? Let us get some warmth to him, and clean away the blood.' Then she tugged at my mittens and dragged them free of my hands. 'Oh, his poor hands, his fingers all gone black at the ends!' she exclaimed in horror.

That I did not want to see or know. I let go of everything.

For a time, it seemed as if I were a wolf again. I stalked an unfamiliar village, alert for dogs or anyone stirring about, but all was white silence and snow falling in the night. I found the hut I sought and prowled about it, but dared not enter it. After a time, it seemed I had done all I could about something. So I went hunting. I killed, I ate, I slept.

When I opened my eyes again, the room was washed with the pale light of day. The walls curved. I thought at first my eyes would not focus, and then I recognized the shape of a Mountain dwelling. Slowly I took in detail. Thick rugs of wool on the floor, simple wooden furniture, a window of greased hide. On a shelf, two dolls leaned their heads together beside a wooden horse and tiny cart. A huntsman puppet dangled in a corner. On a table were bits of brightly-painted wood. I smelled the clean shavings and the fresh paint. Puppets, I thought. Someone was making puppets. I was belly down on a bed with a blanket over me. I was warm. The skin of my face and my hands and feet burned unpleasantly but that could be ignored, for the great pain that bored into my back took precedence. My mouth was not so dry. Had I drunk something? I seemed to recall the spill of warm tea in my mouth but it was not a definite memory. Feet in felted wool slippers approached my bed. Someone bent down and lifted the blanket off me. Cool air flowed across my skin. Deft hands moved over me, prodding the area around my wound. 'So thin. Were he better fleshed, I'd say he had more chance,' said an old woman's voice sadly.

'Will he keep his toes and fingers?' A woman's voice, close by. A young woman. I could not see her but she was near. The other woman bent over me. She handled my hands, bending the fingers and pinching at the ends of them. I winced and tried feebly to pull away. 'If he lives, he'll keep his fingers,' she said, not unkindly but factually. 'They will be tender, for he must shed all the skin and flesh that was frozen. By themselves, they are not too bad. The infection in his back is what may kill him. There's something inside that wound. An arrowhead and part of the shaft by the look of it.'

'Cannot you take it out?' Ivory-hands spoke from somewhere in the room.

‘Easily,’ the woman replied. I realized she was speaking the tongue of Buck, with a Mountain accent. ‘But he will certainly bleed and he has not much blood left he can part with. And the foulness of his wound may spread in fresh-flowing blood to poison all his body.’ She sighed. ‘Would that Jonqui were alive still. She was very wise in this type of thing. It was she who pulled from Prince Rurisk the arrow that had pierced his chest. The wound bubbled with his very life’s breath and still she did not let him die. I am not such a healer as she, but I will try. I will send my apprentice with a salve for his hands and feet and face. Rub his skin well with it each day, and do not be dismayed at the shedding of skin. As for his back, that we must keep a drawing poultice on, to suck the poisons from it as best we may. Food and drink you must get into him, as much as he will take. Let him rest. And a week hence, we will pull that arrow and hope he has built the strength to live through it. Jofron. Know you a good drawing poultice?’

‘One or two. Bran and goosegrass is a good one,’ she offered.

‘It will do well. Would that I could stay and tend him, but I have many another to see to. Cedar Knoll was attacked last night. A bird has come with tidings that many were injured before the soldiers were driven off. I cannot tend one and leave many. I must leave him in your hands.’

‘And in my bed,’ Ivory-hands said dolefully. I heard the door close behind the healer.

I drew in a deeper breath but found no strength to speak.

Behind me, I heard the man moving about the hut, the small sounds of water poured and crockery moved. Footsteps came closer. ‘I think he’s awake,’ Jofron said softly.

I gave a small nod against my pillow.

‘Try to get this down him, then,’ suggested Ivory-hands. ‘Then let him rest. I shall return with bran and goosegrass for your poultice. And some bedding for myself, for I suppose he must stay here.’ A tray was passed over my body and came into my view. There were a bowl and a cup on it. A woman sat beside me. I could not turn my head to see her face, but the fabrics of her skirt were Mountain-woven. Her hand spooned up a bit from the bowl and offered it to me. I sipped at it cautiously. Some sort of broth. From the cup wafted the scents of chamomile and valerian. I heard a door slide open, and then shut. I felt a waft of cold air move through the room. Another spoonful of broth. A third.

‘Where?’ I managed to say.

‘What?’ she asked, leaning closer. She turned her head and leaned down to see my face. Blue eyes. Too close to my own. ‘Did you say something?’

I refused the spoon. It was suddenly too much effort to eat, even though what I had taken had heartened me. The room seemed darker. When next I awoke night was deep around me. All was silent save for the muted crackling of a fire in the hearth. The light it cast was fitful, but enough to show me the room. I felt feverish and very weak and horribly thirsty. There was a cup of water on a low table near my bed. I tried to reach for it, but the pain in my back stopped my arm’s movement. My back felt taut with the swollen wound. Any movement awakened it. ‘Water,’ I mouthed, but the dryness of my mouth made it a whisper. No one came.

Near the hearth, my host had made up a pallet for himself. He slept like a cat, lax, but with that aura of constant wariness. His head was pillowed on his outstretched arm and the fire glazed him with light. I looked at him and my heart turned over in my chest.

His hair was smoothed back sleek on his skull, confined to a single plait, baring the clean lines of his face. Expressionless and still, it seemed a chiselled mask. The last trace of boyishness had been burned away, leaving only the clean planes of his lean cheeks and high forehead and long straight nose. His lips were narrower, his chin firmer than I recalled. The dance of the firelight lent colour to his face, staining his white skin with its amber. The Fool had grown up in the time we had been apart. It seemed too much change for twelve months, and yet this year had been longer than any in my life. For a time I simply lay and looked at him.

His eyes opened slowly, as if I had spoken to him. For a time he stared back at me without a word. Then a frown creased his brow. He sat up slowly, and I saw that truly he was ivory, his hair the colour of fresh-ground flour. It was his eyes that stopped my heart and tongue. They caught the firelight, yellow as a cat’s. I finally found my breath. ‘Fool,’ I sighed sadly. ‘What have they done to you?’ My parched mouth could barely shape the words. I reached out my hand to him, but the movement pulled the muscles of my back and I felt my injury open again. The world tilted and slid away.

Safety. That was my first clear sensation. It came from the soft warmth of the clean bedding, the herb fragrance of the pillow beneath my head. Something warm and slightly damp pressed gently on my wound and muffled its stab. Safety clasped me as gently as the cool hands that held my

frostbitten hand between them. I opened my eyes and the firelit room slowly swam into focus.

He was sitting by my bed. There was a stillness about him that was not repose as he stared past me and into the darkened room. He wore a plain robe of white wool with a round collar. The simple clothes were a shock after the years of seeing him in motley. It was like seeing a garish puppet stripped of its paint. Then a single silver tear tracked down one cheek beside the narrow nose. I was astonished.

‘Fool?’ My voice came out as a croak this time.

His eyes came instantly to mine and he dropped to his knees beside me. His breath came and went raggedly in his throat. He snatched up the cup of water and held it to my mouth while I drank. Then he set it aside, to take up my dangling hand and clasp it gently. He spoke softly as he did this, more to himself than to me. ‘What have they done to me, Fitz? Gods, what have they done to you, to mark you so? What has become of me, that I did not even know you though I carried you in my arms?’ His cool fingers moved tentatively down my face, tracing the scar and the broken nose. He leaned down suddenly to rest his brow against mine. ‘When I recall how beautiful you were,’ he whispered brokenly, and then fell silent. The warm drip of his tear against my face felt scalding.

He sat up abruptly, clearing his throat. He wiped his sleeve across his eyes, a child’s gesture that unmanned me even more. I drew a deeper breath and gathered myself. ‘You’ve changed,’ I managed to say.

‘Have I? I imagine I have. How could I not have changed? I thought you dead, and all my life for naught. Then now, this moment, to be given back both you and my life’s purpose ... I opened my eyes to you and thought my heart would stop, that madness had finally claimed me. Then you spoke my name. Changed, you say? More than you can imagine, as much as you have plainly changed yourself. This night, I hardly know myself.’ It was as close as I had ever heard the Fool come to babbling. He took a breath, and his voice cracked on his next words. ‘For a year, I have believed you dead, Fitz. For a whole year.’

He had not released my hand. I felt the trembling that went through him. He stood suddenly, saying, ‘We both need something to drink.’ He walked away from me across the darkened room. He had grown, but it was in shape rather than size. I doubted he was much taller, but his body was no longer a child’s. He was lean and slight as ever, muscled as tumblers are. He

brought a bottle from a cabinet, two simple cups. He uncorked the bottle and I smelled the warmth of the brandy before he poured. He came back to sit by my bed and offer me a cup. I managed to wrap my hand around it despite my blackened fingertips. He seemed to have recovered some of his aplomb. He looked at me over the rim as he drank. I lifted my head and tipped a spill of mine into my mouth. Half went down my beard and I choked as if I had never had brandy before. Then I felt the hot race of it in my belly. The Fool shook his head as he gently wiped my face.

‘I should have listened to my dreams. Over and over, I dreamed you were coming. It was all you ever said, in the dream. I am coming. Instead I believed so firmly that I had failed somehow, that the Catalyst was dead. I could not even see who you were when I picked you up from the ground.’

‘Fool,’ I said quietly. I wished he would stop speaking. I simply wanted to be safe for a time, and think of nothing. He did not understand.

He looked at me and grinned his old sly Fool’s smile. ‘You still don’t understand, do you? When word reached us that you were dead, that Regal had killed you ... my life ended. It was worse, somehow, when the pilgrims began to trickle in, to hail me as the White Prophet. I knew I was the White Prophet. I’ve known it since I was a child, as did those who raised me. I grew up, knowing that some day I would come north to find you and that between the two of us we would put time in its proper course. All of my life, I knew I would do that.

‘I was not much more than a child when I set out. Alone, I made my way to Buckkeep, to seek the Catalyst that only I would recognize. And I found you, and I knew you, though you did not know yourself. I watched the ponderous turning of events and marked how each time you were the pebble that shifted that great wheel from its ancient path. I tried to speak to you of it, but you would have none of it. The Catalyst? Not you, oh, no!’ He laughed, almost fondly. He drained off the rest of his brandy at a gulp, then held my cup to my lips. I sipped.

He rose, then, to pace a turn about the room and then halted to refill his cup. He came back to me again. ‘I saw it all come to the tottering brink of ruin. But always you were there, the card never dealt before, the side of the die that had never before fallen uppermost. When my king died, as I knew he must, there was an heir to the Farseer line, and FitzChivalry yet lived, the Catalyst that would change all things so that an heir would ascend to the throne.’ He gulped his brandy again and when he spoke the scent of it rode

his breath. 'I fled. I fled with Kettricken and the unborn child, grieving, yet confident that all would come to pass as it must. For you were the Catalyst. But when word came to us that you were dead ...' He halted abruptly. When he tried to speak again, his voice had gone thick and lost its music. 'It made of me a lie. How could I be the White Prophet if the Catalyst were dead? What could I predict? The changes that could have been, had you lived? What would I be but a witness as the world spun deeper and deeper into ruin? I had no purpose any more. Your life was more than half of mine, you see. It was in the interweaving of our doings that I existed. Worse, I came to wonder if any part of the world were truly what I believed it. Was I a White Prophet at all, or was it but some peculiar madness, a self-deception to console a freak? For a year, Fitz. A year. I grieved for the friend I had lost, and I grieved for the world that somehow I had doomed. My failure, all of it. And when Kettricken's child, my last hope, came into the world still and blue, what could it be but my doing somehow?'

'No!' The word burst from me with a strength I had not known I had. The Fool flinched as if I had struck him. Then, 'Yes,' he said simply, carefully taking my hand again. 'I am sorry. I should have known you did not know. The Queen was devastated at the loss. And I. The Farseer heir. My last hope crumbled away. I had held myself together, telling myself, well, if the child lives and ascends the throne, perhaps that will have been enough. But when she was brought to bed with naught but a dead babe for all her travails ... I felt my whole life had been a farce, a sham, an evil jest played on me by time. But now ...' He closed his eyes a moment. 'Now I find you truly alive. So I live. And again, suddenly, I believe. Once more I know who I am. And who my Catalyst is.' He laughed aloud, never dreaming how his words chilled my blood. 'I had no faith. I, the White Prophet, did not believe my own foreseeing! Yet here we are, Fitz, and all will still come to pass as it was ever meant to do.'

Again he tipped the bottle to fill his cup. The liquor, when he poured it, was the colour of his eyes. He saw me staring and grinned delightedly. 'Ah, you say, but the White Prophet is no longer white? I suspect it is the way of my kind. I may gain more colour now, as the years pass.' He made a deprecating motion. 'But that is of little import. I have already talked too much. Tell me, Fitz. Tell me all. How did you survive? Why are you here?'

'Verity calls me. I must go to him.'

The Fool drew in breath at my words, not a gasp, but a slow inhalation as if he took life back into himself. He almost glowed with pleasure at my words. 'So he lives! Ah!' Before I could speak more, he lifted his hands. 'Slowly. Tell me all, in order. These are words I have hungered to hear. I must know everything.'

And so I tried. My strength was small and sometimes I felt myself borne up on my fever so that my words wandered and I could not recall where I had left off my tale of the past year. I got as far as Regal's dungeon, then could only say, 'He had me beaten and starved.' The Fool's quick glance at my scarred face and the casting aside of his eyes told me he understood. He, too, had known Regal too well. When he waited to hear more, I shook my head slowly.

He nodded, then put a smile on his face. 'It's all right, Fitz. You are weary. You have already told me what I most longed to hear. The rest will keep. For now, I shall tell you of my year.' I tried to listen, clinging to the important words, storing them in my heart. There was so much I had wondered for so long. Regal had suspected the escape. Kettricken had returned to her rooms to find that her carefully-chosen and packed supplies were gone, spirited away by Regal's spies. She had left with little more than the clothes on her back and a hastily-grabbed cloak. I heard of the evil weather the Fool and Kettricken had faced the night they slipped away from Buckkeep.

She had ridden my Sooty and the Fool had battled headstrong Ruddy all the way across the Six Duchies in winter. They had reached Blue Lake at the end of the winter storms. The Fool had supported them and earned their passage on a ship by painting his face and dying his hair and juggling in the streets. What colour had he painted his skin? White, of course, all the better to hide the stark white skin that Regal's spies would be watching for.

They had crossed the lake with little incident, passed Moonseye and travelled into the Mountains. Immediately Kettricken had sought her father's aid in finding what had become of Verity. He had, indeed, passed through Jhaampe but nothing had been heard of him since. Kettricken had put riders on his trail and even joined in the search herself. But all her hopes had come to grief. Far up in the mountains, she had found the site of a battle. The winter and the scavengers had done their work. No one man could be identified, but Verity's buck standard was there. The scattered arrows and hewn ribs of one body showed it was men and not the beasts or elements that

had attacked them. There were not enough skulls to go with the bodies and the scattering of the bones made the number of dead uncertain. Kettricken had clung to hope until a cloak had been found that she remembered packing for Verity. Her hands had embroidered the buck on the breast patch. A tumble of mouldering bones and ragged garments were beneath it. Kettricken had mourned her husband as dead.

She had returned to Jhaampe to pendulum between devastated grief and seething rage at Regal's plots. Her fury had solidified into a determination that she would see Verity's child upon the Six Duchies throne, and a fair reign returned to the folk. Those plans had sustained her until the stillbirth of her child. The Fool had scarcely seen her since, save to catch glimpses of her pacing through her frozen gardens, her face as still as the snows that overlay the beds.

There was more, shuffled in with his account, of both major and minor news for me. Sooty and Ruddy were both alive and well. Sooty was in foal to the young stallion despite her years. I shook my head over that. Regal had been doing his best to provoke a war. The roving gangs of bandits that now plagued the Mountain folk were thought to be in his pay. Shipments of grain that had been paid for in spring had never been delivered, nor had the Mountain traders been permitted to cross the border with their wares. Several small villages close to the Six Duchies border had been found looted and burned with no survivors. King Eyod's wrath, slow to stir, was now at white heat. Although the Mountain folk had no standing army as such, there was not one inhabitant who would not take up arms at the word of their Sacrifice. War was imminent.

And he had tales of Patience, the Lady of Buckkeep, brought erratically by word of mouth passed among merchants and on to smugglers. She did all she could to defend Buck's coast. Money was dwindling, but the folk of the land gave to her what they called the Lady's Levy and she disposed of it as best she could amongst her soldiers and sailors. Buckkeep had not fallen yet, though the Raiders now had encampments up and down the whole coastline of the Six Duchies. Winter had quieted the war, but spring would bathe the coast in blood once more. Some of the smaller keeps spoke of treaties with the Red Ships. Some openly paid tribute in the hopes of avoiding Forging.

The Coastal Duchies would not survive another summer. So said Chade. My tongue was silent as the Fool spoke of him. He had come to Jhaampe by secret ways in high summer, disguised as an old pedlar, but

made himself known to the Queen when he arrived. The Fool had seen him then. 'War agrees with him,' the Fool observed. 'He strides about like a man of twenty. He carries a sword at his hip and there is fire in his eyes. He was pleased to see how her belly swelled with the Farseer heir, and they spoke bravely of Verity's child on the throne. But that was high summer.' He sighed. 'Now I hear he has returned. I believe because the Queen has sent word of her stillbirth. I have not been to see him yet. What hope he can offer us now, I do not know.' He shook his head. 'There must be an heir to the Farseer throne,' he insisted. 'Verity must get one. Otherwise ...' He made a helpless gesture.

'Why not Regal? Would not a child from his loins suffice?'

'No.' His eyes went afar. 'No. I can tell you that quite clearly, yet I cannot tell you why. Only that in all futures I have seen, he makes no child. Not even a bastard. In all times, he reigns as the last Farseer, and ushers in the dark.'

A shiver walked over me. He was too strange when he spoke of such things. And his odd words had brought another worry into my mind. 'There were two women. A minstrel Starling, and an old woman pilgrim, Kettle. They were on their way here. Kettle said she sought the White Prophet. I little thought he might be you. Have you heard aught of them? Have they reached Jhaampe town?'

He shook his head slowly. 'No one has come seeking the White Prophet since winter closed on us.' He halted, reading the worry in my face. 'Of course, I do not know of all who come here. They may be in Jhaampe. But I have heard nothing of two such as that.' He reluctantly added, 'Bandits prey on roadside travellers now. Perhaps they were ... delayed.'

Perhaps they were dead. They had come back for me, and I had sent them on alone.

'Fitz?'

'I'm all right. Fool, a favour?'

'I like not that tone already. What is it?'

'Tell no one I am here. Tell no one I am alive, just yet.'

He sighed. 'Not even Kettricken? To tell her that Verity lives still?'

'Fool, what I have come to do, I intend to do alone. I would not raise false hopes in her. She has endured the news of his death once. If I can bring him back to her, then will be time enough for true rejoicing. I know I ask much. But let me be a stranger you are aiding. Later, I may need your aid in

obtaining an old map from the Jhaampe libraries. But when I leave here, I would go alone. I think this quest is one best accomplished quietly.' I glanced aside from him and added, 'Let FitzChivalry remain dead. Mostly, it is better so.'

'Surely you will at least see Chade?' He was incredulous.

'Not even Chade should know I live.' I paused, wondering which would anger the old man more: that I had attempted to kill Regal when he had always forbidden it, or that I had so badly botched the task. 'This quest must be mine alone.' I watched him and saw a grudging acceptance in his face.

He sighed again. 'I will not say I agree with you completely. But I shall tell no one who you are.' He gave a small laugh. Talk fell off between us. The bottle of brandy was empty. We were reduced to silence, staring at one another drunkenly. The fever and the brandy burned in me. I had too many things to think of and too little I could do about any of them. If I lay very still, the pain in my back subsided to a red throb. It kept pace with the beating of my heart.

'Too bad you didn't manage to kill Regal,' the Fool observed suddenly.

'I know. I tried. As a conspirator and an assassin, I'm a failure.'

He shrugged for me. 'You were never really good at it, you know. There was a naiveté to you that none of the ugliness could stain, as if you never truly believed in evil. It was what I liked best about you.' The Fool swayed slightly where he sat, but righted himself. 'It was what I missed most, when you were dead.'

I smiled foolishly. 'A while back, I thought it was my great beauty.'

For a time the Fool just looked at me. Then he glanced aside and spoke quietly. 'Unfair. Were I myself, I would never have spoken such words aloud. Still. Ah, Fitz.' He looked at me and shook his head fondly. He spoke without mockery, making almost a stranger of himself. 'Perhaps half of it was that you were so unaware of it. Not like Regal. Now there's a pretty man, but he knows it too well. You never see him with his hair tousled or the red of the wind on his cheeks.'

For a moment I felt oddly uncomfortable. Then I said, 'Nor with an arrow in his back, more's the pity,' and we both went off into the foolish laughter that only drunks understand. It woke the pain in my back to a stabbing intensity however, and in a moment I was gasping for breath. The Fool rose, steadier on his feet than I would have expected, to take a drippy

bag of something off my back and replace it with one almost uncomfortably warm from a pot on the hearth. That done, he came again to crouch beside me. He looked directly in my eyes, his yellow ones as hard to read as his colourless ones had been. He laid one long cool hand along my cheek and then gentled the hair back from my eyes.

‘Tomorrow,’ he told me gravely. ‘We shall be ourselves again. The Fool and the Bastard. Or the White Prophet and the Catalyst, if you will. We will have to take up those lives, as little as we care for them, and fulfil all fate has decreed for us. But for here, for now, just between us two, and for no other reason save I am me and you are you, I tell you this. I am glad, glad that you are alive. To see you take breath puts the breath back in my lungs. If there must be another my fate is twined around, I am glad it is you.’

He leaned forward then and for an instant pressed his brow to mine. Then he breathed a heavy sigh and drew back from me. ‘Go to sleep, boy,’ he said in a fair imitation of Chade’s voice. ‘Tomorrow comes early. And we’ve work to do.’ He laughed unevenly. ‘We’ve the world to save, you and I.’

TWENTY-ONE

Confrontations

Diplomacy may very well be the art of manipulating secrets. What would any negotiation come to, were not there secrets to either share or withhold? And this is as true of a marriage pact as it is of a trade agreement between kingdoms. Each side knows truly how much it is willing to surrender to the other to get what it wishes; it is in the manipulation of that secret knowledge that the hardest bargain is driven. There is no action that takes place between humans in which secrets do not play a part, whether it be a game of cards or the selling of a cow. The advantage is always to the one who is shrewder in what secret to reveal and when. King Shrewd was fond of saying that there was no greater advantage than to know your enemy's secret when he believed you ignorant of it. Perhaps that is the most powerful secret of all to possess.

The days that followed were not days for me, but disjointed periods of wakefulness interspersed with wavery fever dreams. Either my brief talk with the Fool had burned my last reserves, or I finally felt safe enough to surrender to my injury. Perhaps it was both. I lay on a bed near the Fool's hearth and felt wretchedly dull when I felt anything at all. Overheard conversations rattled against me. I slipped in and out of awareness of my own misery, but never far away, like a drum beating the tempo of my pain was Verity's *come to me, come to me*. Other voices came and went through the haze of my fever but his was a constant.

'She believes you are the one she seeks. I believe it, too. I think you should see her. She has come a long and weary way, seeking the White Prophet.' Jofron's voice was low and reasonable.

I heard the Fool set down his rasp with a clack. 'Tell her she is mistaken, then. Tell her I am the White Toymaker. Tell her the White Prophet lives further down the street, five doors down on the left.'

'I will not make mock of her,' Jofron said seriously. 'She has travelled a vast distance to seek you and on the journey lost all but her life. Come, holy one. She waits outside. Will not you talk to her, just for a bit?'

‘Holy one,’ the Fool snorted with disdain. ‘You have been reading too many old scrolls. As has she. No, Jofron.’ Then he sighed, and relented. ‘Tell her I will talk with her two days hence. But not today.’

‘Very well.’ Jofron plainly did not approve. ‘But there is another one with her. A minstrel. I don’t think she will be put off as easily. I think she is seeking him.’

‘Ah, but no one knows he is here. Save you, me and the healer. He wishes to be left alone for a time, while he heals.’

I moved my mouth. I tried to say I would see Starling, that I had not meant to turn Starling away.

‘I know that. And the healer is still at Cedar Knoll. But she is a smart one, this minstrel. She has asked the children for news of a stranger. And the children, as usual, know everything.’

‘And tell everything,’ the Fool replied glumly. I heard him fling down another tool in annoyance. ‘I see I have but one choice then.’

‘You will see them?’

A snort of laughter from the Fool. ‘Of course not. I mean that I will lie to them.’

Afternoon sun slanting across my closed eyes. I woke to voices, arguing.

‘I only wish to see him.’ A woman’s voice, annoyed. ‘I know he is here.’

‘Ah, I suppose I shall admit you are right. But he sleeps.’ The Fool, with his maddening calm.

‘I still would see him.’ Starling, pointedly.

The Fool heaved a great sigh. ‘I could let you in to see him. But then you would wish to touch him. And once you had touched him, you would wish to wait until he awakened. And once he awakened, you would wish to have words with him. There would be no end to it. And I have much to do today. A toymaker’s time is not his own.’

‘You are not a toymaker. I know who you are. And I know who he truly is.’ The cold was flowing in the open door. It crept under my blankets, tightened my flesh and tugged at my pain. I wished they would shut it.

‘Ah, yes, you and Kettle know our great secret. I am the White Prophet, and he is Tom the shepherd. But today I am busy, prophesying puppets finished tomorrow, and he is asleep. Counting sheep, in his dreams.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’ Starling lowered her voice, but it carried anyway. ‘He is FitzChivalry, son of Chivalry the Abdicated. And you are the Fool.’

‘Once, perhaps, I was the Fool. It is common knowledge here in Jhaampe. But now I am the Toymaker. As I no longer use the other title, you may take it for yourself if you wish. As for Tom, I believe he takes the title Bed Bolster these days.’

‘I will be seeing the Queen about this.’

‘A wise decision. If you wish to become her Fool, she is certainly the one you must see. But for now, let me show you something else. No, step back, please, so you can see it all. Here it comes.’ I heard the slam and the latch. ‘The outside of my door,’ the Fool announced gladly. ‘I painted it myself. Do you like it?’

I heard a thud as of a muffled kick, followed by several more. The Fool came humming back to his work table. He took up the wooden head of a doll and a paintbrush. He glanced over at me. ‘Go back to sleep. She won’t get in to see Kettricken any time soon. The Queen sees few people these days. And when she does, it’s not likely she’ll be believed. And that is the best we can do for now. So sleep while you may. And gather strength, for I fear you will need it.’

Daylight on white snow. Belly down in the snow amongst the trees, looking down on a clearing. Young humans at play, chasing one another, leaping and dragging one another down to roll over and over in the snow. They are not so different from cubs. Envious. We never had other cubs to play with while we were growing. It is like an itch, the desire to race down and join in. They would be frightened, we caution ourselves. Only watch. Their shrill yelps fill the air. Will our she-cub grow to be like these, we wonder? Braided hair flies behind as they race through the snow chasing one another.

‘Fitz. Wake up. I need to talk to you.’

Something in the Fool’s tone cut through both fog and pain. I opened my eyes, then squinted painfully. The room was dark, but he had brought a branch of candles to the floor by my bedside. He sat beside them, looking into my face earnestly. I could not read his face; it seemed that hope danced in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, but also he seemed braced as if

he brought me bad tidings. ‘Are you listening? Can you hear me?’ he pressed.

I managed a nod. Then, ‘Yes.’ My voice was so hoarse I hardly knew it. Instead of getting stronger for the healer to pull the arrow, I felt as if the wound were getting stronger. Each day the area of pain spread. It pushed always at the edge of my mind, making it hard to think.

‘I have been to dine with Chade and Kettricken. He had tidings for us.’ He tilted his head and watched my face carefully as he said, ‘Chade says there is a Farseer child in Buck. Just a babe yet, and a bastard. But of the same Farseer lineage as Verity and Chivalry. He swears it is so.’

I closed my eyes.

‘Fitz. Fitz! Wake up and listen to me. He seeks to persuade Kettricken to claim the child. To either say that it is her rightful child by Verity, hidden by a false stillbirth to protect her from assassins. Or to say the child is Verity’s bastard, but that Queen Kettricken chooses to legitimize her and claim her as heir.’

I could not move. I could not breathe. My daughter, I knew. Kept safe and hidden, guarded by Burrich. To be sacrificed to the throne. Taken from Molly, and given to the Queen. My little girl, whose name I didn’t even know. Taken to be a princess and in time a queen. Put beyond my reach forever.

‘Fitz!’ The Fool put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it gently. I knew he longed to shake me. I opened my eyes.

He peered into my face. ‘Have you nothing to say to me?’ he asked carefully.

‘May I have some water?’

While he got it for me, I composed myself. He helped me drink. By the time he took the cup, I had decided what question would be most convincing. ‘What did Kettricken say to the news that Verity had fathered a bastard? It could scarcely bring her joy.’

The uncertainty I had hoped for spread across the Fool’s face. ‘The child was born at the end of harvest. Too late for Verity to have sired it before he left on his quest. Kettricken grasped it faster than I did.’ He spoke almost gently. ‘You must be the father. When Kettricken asked Chade directly, he said as much.’ He cocked his head to study me. ‘You did not know?’

I shook my head slowly. What was honour to one such as I? Bastard and assassin, what claim did I have to nobility of soul? I spoke the lie I would always despise. 'I could not have fathered a child born at harvest. Molly had turned me out of her bed months before she left Buck.' I tried to keep my voice steady as I spoke. 'If the mother is Molly, and she claims the child is mine, she lies.' I strove to be sincere as I added, 'I am sorry, Fool. I have fathered no Farseer heir for you, nor do I intend to.' It was no effort to let my voice choke and tears mist my eyes. 'Strange.' I shook my head against the pillow. 'That such a thing could bring me such pain. That she could seek to pass the babe off as mine.' I closed my eyes.

The Fool spoke gently. 'As I understand it, she has made no claims for the child. As of yet, I believe she knows nothing of Chade's plan.'

'I suppose I should see both Chade and Kettricken. To tell them I am alive and reveal the truth to them. But when I am stronger. Just now, Fool, I would be alone,' I begged him. I wanted to see neither sympathy nor puzzlement on his face. I prayed he would believe my lie even as I despised myself for the foul thing I had said of Molly. So I kept my eyes closed, and he took his candles and went away.

I lay for a time in the dark, hating myself. It was better this way, I told myself. If ever I returned to her, I could make all right. And if I did not, at least they would not take our child from her. I told myself over and over again I had done the wise thing. But I did not feel wise. I felt traitorous.

I dreamed a dream at once vivid and stultifying. I chipped black stone. That was the entire dream, but it was endless in its monotony. I was using my dagger as a chisel and a rock as a hammer. My fingers were scabbed and swollen from the many times my grip had slipped and I'd struck them instead of the dagger hilt. But it didn't stop me. I chipped black stone. And waited for someone to come and help me.

I awoke one evening to find Kettle sitting by my bed. She looked even older than I recalled. Hazy winter daylight seeped through a parchment window to touch her face. I studied her for a time before she realized I was awake. When she did, she shook her head at me. 'I should have guessed, from all your strangeness. You were bound for the White Prophet yourself.' She leaned closer and spoke in a whisper. 'He will not allow Starling in to see you. He says you are too weak for so lively a visitor. And that you wish

no one to know you are here, just yet. But I'll take word of you to her, shall I?'

I closed my eyes.

A time of bright morning and a knock at the door. I could not sleep, nor could I stay awake for the fever that racked me. I had drunk willowbark tea until my belly was sloshing. Still my head pounded, and I was always shivering or sweating. The knock came again, louder, and Kettle set down the cup she had been plaguing me with. The Fool was at his work table. He put aside his carving tool, but Kettle called, 'I'll get it!' and opened the door, even as he was saying, 'No, let me.'

Starling pushed in, so abruptly that Kettle exclaimed in surprise. Starling came past her, into the room, shaking snow from her cap and cloak. She shot the Fool a look of triumph. The Fool merely nodded cordially at her as if he had been expecting her. He turned back to his carving without a word. The bright sparks of anger in her eyes grew hotter, and I sensed her satisfaction in something. She shut the door loudly behind her and came into the room like the northwind herself. She dropped to sit cross-legged on the floor beside my bed. 'So, Fitz. I'm so glad to finally see you again. Kettle told me you were hurt. I'd have come to see you before, but I was turned away at the door. How are you today?'

I tried to focus my mind. I wished she would move more slowly and speak more softly. 'It's too cold in here,' I complained petulantly. 'And I've lost my earring.' I had only discovered the loss that morning. It fretted me. I could not recall why it was so important, but my mind would not let go of it either. The very thought made my headache worse.

She stripped off her mittens. One hand was bandaged still. She touched my forehead with the other. Her hand was blessedly cold. Odd that cold could feel so good. 'He's burning up!' she accused the Fool. 'Haven't you the sense to give him willowbark tea?'

The Fool shaved off another curl of wood. 'There's a pot of it there by your knee, if you haven't overset it. If you can get him to drink any more of it, you're a better man than I.' Another curl of wood.

'That would not be hard,' Starling said in an ugly little voice. Then, in a kinder tone, to me, 'Your earring isn't lost. See, I have it right here.' She took it from the pouch at her belt. One small part of me worked well enough to notice that she was warmly dressed in the Mountain style now. Her hands

were cold and a bit rough as she put the earring back in my ear for me. I found a question.

‘Why did you have it?’

‘I asked Kettle to bring it to me,’ she told me bluntly. ‘When *he* would not let me in to see you. I had to have a token, something to prove to Kettricken that all I told her was true. I have been to her and spoken to her and her counsellor, this very day.’

The Queen’s name broke through my wandering thoughts and gave me a moment of focus. ‘Kettricken! What have you done?’ I cried in dismay. ‘What have you told her?’

Starling looked startled. ‘Why, all she must know so that she will help you on your quest. That you are truly alive. That Verity is not dead, and that you will seek him. That word must be sent to Molly that you are alive and well, so that she shall not lose heart but will keep your child safe until you return. That ...’

‘I trusted you!’ I cried out. ‘I trusted you with my secrets and you have betrayed me. What a fool I’ve been!’ I cried out in despair. All, all was lost.

‘No, I am the Fool.’ He broke into our conversation. He walked slowly across the room and stood looking down on me. ‘The more so that I had believed you trusted me, it seems,’ he went on, and I had never seen him so pale. ‘Your child,’ he said to himself. ‘A true child of Farseer lineage.’ His yellow eyes flickered like a dying fire as they darted from Starling to me. ‘You know what such tidings mean to me. Why? Why lie to me?’

I did not know what was worse, the hurt in the Fool’s eyes, or the triumph in the glance Starling gave him.

‘I had to lie, to keep her mine! The child is mine, not a Farseer heir!’ I cried out desperately. ‘Mine and Molly’s. A child to grow and love, not a tool for a kingmaker. And Molly must not hear I am alive from any save me! Starling, how could you have done this to me? Why was I such an idiot, why did I talk of such things at all to anyone?’

Now Starling looked as injured as the Fool. She stood up stiffly and her voice was brittle. ‘I but sought to help you. To help you do what you must do.’ Behind Starling, the wind gusted the door open. ‘That woman has a right to know her husband is alive.’

‘To which woman do you refer?’ asked another icy voice. To my consternation, Kettricken swept into the room with Chade at her heels. She regarded me with a terrible face. Grief had ravaged her, had carved deep

lines beside her mouth and eaten the flesh from her cheeks. Now anger raged in her eyes as well. The blast of cold wind that came with them cooled me for an instant. Then the door was closed and my eyes moved from face to familiar face. The small room seemed crowded with staring faces, with cold eyes looking at me. I blinked. There were so many of them and so close, and all stared at me. No one smiled. No welcome, no joy. Only the savage emotions that I had wakened with all the changes I had wrought. Thus was the Catalyst greeted. No one wore any expression I'd hoped to see.

None save Chade. He crossed the room to me in long strides, stripping off his riding gloves as he came. When he threw back the hood of his winter cloak, I saw that his white hair was bound back in a warrior's tail. He wore a band of leather across his brow, and centred on his forehead was a medallion of silver. A buck with antlers lowered to charge. The sigil Verity had given to me. Starling moved hastily from his path. He gave her not a glance as he folded easily to sit on the floor by my bed. He took my hand in his, narrowed his eyes at the sight of the frostbite. He held it softly. 'Oh, my boy, my boy, I believed you were dead. When Burrich sent me word he had found your body, I thought my heart would break. The words we had when last we parted ... but here you are, alive if not well.'

He bent and kissed me. The hand he set to my cheek was callused now, the pocks scarcely visible on the weathered flesh. I looked up in his eyes and saw welcome and joy. Tears clouded my own as I had to demand, 'Would you truly take my daughter for the throne? Another bastard for the Farseer line ... Would you have let her be used as we have been used?'

Something grew still in his face. The set of his mouth hardened into resolve. 'I will do whatever I have to do to see a true-hearted Farseer on the Six Duchies throne again. As I am sworn to do. As you are sworn also.' His eyes met mine.

I looked at him in dismay. He loved me. Worse, he believed in me. He believed that I had in me that strength and devotion to duty that had been the backbone of his life. Thus he could inflict on me things harder and colder than Regal's hatred of me could imagine. His belief in me was such that he would not hesitate to plunge me into any battle, that he would expect any sacrifice of me. A dry sob suddenly racked me and tore at the arrow in my back. 'There is no end!' I cried out. 'That duty will hound me into death. Better I were dead! Let me be dead then!' I snatched my hand away from Chade, heedless of how much that motion hurt. 'Leave me!'

Chade didn't even flinch. 'He is burning with fever,' he said accusingly to the Fool. 'He doesn't know what he's saying. You should have given him willowbark tea.'

A terrible smile crooked the Fool's lips. Before he could reply, there was a sharp shredding sound. A grey head was forced through the greased hide window, flashing a muzzle full of white teeth. The rest of the wolf soon followed, oversetting a shelf of potted herbs onto some scrolls set out below them. Nighteyes sprang, nails skittering on the wood floor, and slid to a halt between me and the hastily-standing Chade. He snarled all round. *I will kill them all for you, if you say so.* I dropped my head down to my pillows. My clean, wild wolf. This was what I had made of him. Was it any better than what Chade had made of me?

I looked around them again. Chade was standing, his face very still. Every single face held some shock, some sadness, some disappointment that I was responsible for. Despair and fever shook me. 'I'm sorry,' I said weakly. 'I have never been what you thought I was,' I confessed. 'Never.'

Silence filled up the room. The fire crackled briefly.

I dropped my face to my pillow and closed my eyes. I spoke the words I was compelled to say. 'But I shall go and find Verity. Somehow, I will bring him back to you. Not because I am what you believe me to be,' I added, slowly lifting my head. I saw hope kindle in Chade's face. 'But because I have no choice. I have never had any choices.'

'You do believe Verity is alive!' The hope in Kettricken's voice was savagely hungry. She swept toward me like an ocean storm.

I nodded my head. Then, 'Yes,' I managed. 'Yes, I believe he lives. I have felt him strongly with me.' Her face was so close, huge in my sight. I blinked my eyes, and then could not focus them.

'Why has not he returned then? Is he lost? Injured? Does he have no care for those he left behind?' Her questions rattled against me like flung stones, one after another.

'I think,' I began, and then could not. Could not think, could not speak. I closed my eyes. I listened to a long silence. Nighteyes whined, then growled deep in his throat.

'Perhaps we should all leave for a time,' Starling ventured unevenly. 'Fitz is not up to this just now.'

'You may leave,' the Fool told her grandly. 'Unfortunately I still live here.'

Going hunting. It is time to go hunting. I look to where we came in, but the Scentless One has blocked that way, covering it over with another piece of deerskin. Door, part of us knows that is the door and we go to it, to whine softly and prod at it with our nose. It rattles against its catch like a trap about to spring shut. The Scentless One comes, stepping lightly, warily. He stretches his body past me, to put a pale paw on the door and open it for me. I slip out, back into a cool night world. It feels good to stretch my muscles again, and I flee the pain and the stuffy hut and the body that does not work to this wild sanctuary of flesh and fur. The night swallows us and we hunt.

It was another night, another time, before, after, I did not know, my days had come unlinked from one another. Someone lifted a warm compress from my brow and replaced it with a cooler one. 'I'm sorry, Fool,' I said.

'Thirty-two,' said a voice wearily. Then, 'Drink,' it added more gently. Cool hands raised my face. A cup lapped liquid against my mouth. I tried to drink. Willowbark tea. I turned my face away in disgust. The Fool wiped my mouth and sat down on the floor beside my bed. He leaned companionably close against it. He held his scroll up to the lamplight and went on reading. It was deep night. I closed my eyes and tried to find sleep again. All I could find were things I'd done wrong, trusts I'd betrayed.

'I'm so sorry,' I said.

'Thirty-three,' said the Fool without looking up.

'Thirty-three what?' I asked.

He glanced over at me in surprise. 'Oh. You're truly awake and talking?'

'Of course. Thirty-three what?'

'Thirty-three "I'm sorrys". To various people, but the greatest number of them to me. Seventeen calls for Burrich. I lost count of your calls for Molly, I'm afraid. And a grand total of sixty-two "I'm coming, Verity".'

'I must be driving you crazy. I'm sorry.'

'Thirty-four. No. You've just been raving, rather monotonously. It's the fever, I suppose.'

'I suppose.'

The Fool went back to reading. 'I'm so tired of lying on my belly,' I ventured.

‘There’s always your back,’ the Fool suggested, to see me wince. Then, ‘Do you want me to help you shift to your side?’

‘No. That just hurts more.’

‘Tell me if you change your mind.’ His eyes went back to the scroll.

‘Chade hasn’t been back to see me,’ I observed.

The Fool sighed and set aside his scroll. ‘No one has. The healer came in and berated us all for bothering you. They’re to leave you alone until she pulls the arrow out. That’s tomorrow. Besides. Chade and the Queen have had much to discuss. Discovering that both you and Verity are still alive has changed everything for them.’

‘Another time, he would have included me.’ I paused, knowing I was wallowing in self-pity, but unable to stop myself. ‘I suppose they feel they cannot trust me any more. Not that I blame them. Everyone hates me now. For the secrets I kept. For all the ways I failed them.’

‘Oh, not everyone hates you,’ the Fool chided gently. ‘Only me, really.’

My eyes darted to his face. His cynical smile reassured me. ‘Secrets,’ he said, and sighed. ‘Someday I shall write a long philosophical treatise on the power of secrets, when kept or told.’

‘Do you have any more brandy?’

‘Thirsty again? Do have some more willowbark tea.’ There was acid courtesy in his voice now, overladen with honey. ‘There’s plenty you know. Buckets of it. All for you.’

‘I think my fever is down a bit,’ I offered humbly.

He lifted a hand to my brow. ‘So it is. For now. But I do not think the healer would approve of you getting drunk again.’

‘The healer is not here,’ I pointed out.

He arched a pale eyebrow at me. ‘Burrich would be so proud of you.’ But he rose gracefully and went to the oak cabinet. He stepped carefully around Nighteyes sprawled on the hearth in heat-soaked sleep. My eyes travelled to the patched window and then back to the Fool. I supposed some sort of agreement had been worked out between them. Nighteyes was so deeply asleep he was not even dreaming. His belly was full as well. His paws twitched when I quested toward him, so I withdrew. The Fool was putting the bottle and two cups on a tray. He seemed too subdued.

‘I am sorry, you know.’

‘So you have told me. Thirty-five times.’

‘But I am. I should have trusted you and told you about my daughter.’ Nothing, not a fever, not an arrow in my back would keep me from smiling when I said that phrase. My daughter. I tried to speak the simple truth. It embarrassed me that it seemed a new experience. ‘I’ve never seen her, you know. Only with the Skill, anyway. It’s not the same. And I want her to be mine. Mine and Molly’s. Not a child that belongs to a kingdom, with some vast responsibility to grow into. Just a little girl, picking flowers, making candles with her mother, doing ...’ I floundered and finished, ‘whatever it is that ordinary children are allowed to do. Chade would end that. The moment that anyone points to her and says, “There, she could be the Farseer heir,” she’s at risk. She’d have to be guarded and taught to fear, to weigh every word and consider every action. Why should she? She isn’t truly a royal heir. Only a bastard’s bastard.’ I said those harsh words with difficulty, and vowed never to let anyone say them to her face. ‘Why should she be put in such danger? It would be one thing if she were born in a palace and had a hundred soldiers to guard her. But she has only Molly and Burrich.’

‘Burrich is with them? If Chade chose Burrich, it is because he thinks him the equal of a hundred guards. But far more discreet,’ the Fool observed. Did he know how that would wrench me? He brought the cups and the brandy and poured for me. I managed to pick up my own cup. ‘To a daughter. Yours and Molly’s,’ he offered and we drank. The brandy burned clean in my throat.

‘So,’ I managed. ‘Chade knew all along and sent Burrich to guard her. Even before I knew, they knew.’ Why did I feel they had stolen something from me?

‘I suspect so, but I am not certain.’ The Fool paused, as if wondering at the wisdom of telling me. Then I saw him discard the reserve. ‘I’ve been putting pieces together, counting back the time. I think Patience suspected. I think that’s why she started sending Molly to take care of Burrich when his leg was injured. He didn’t need that much care, and he knew it as well as Patience did. But Burrich is a good ear, mostly because he talks so little himself. Molly would need someone to talk to, perhaps someone that had once kept a bastard himself. That day we were all up in his room ... you had sent me there, to see what he could do for my shoulder? The day you locked Regal out of Shrewd’s rooms to protect him ...’ for a moment he seemed caught in that memory. Then he recovered. ‘When I came up the stairs to Burrich’s loft I heard them arguing. Well, Molly arguing, and Burrich being

silent, which is his strongest way to argue. So, I eavesdropped,' he admitted frankly. 'But I didn't hear much. She was insisting he could get some particular herb for her. He wouldn't. Finally, he promised her he would tell no one, and bade her to think well and do what she wished to do, not what she thought was wisest. Then they said no more, so I went in. She excused herself and departed. Later, you came and said she had left you.' He paused. 'Actually, looking back, I was as dull-witted as you, not to have worked it out just from that.'

'Thank you,' I told him drily.

'You're welcome. Though I will admit we all had much on our minds that day.'

'I'd give anything to be able to go back in time and tell her that our child would be the most important thing in the world for me. More important than king or country.'

'Ah. So you would have left Buckkeep that day, to follow her and protect her.' The Fool quirked an eyebrow at me.

After a time, I said, 'I couldn't.' The words choked me and I washed them down with brandy.

'I know you couldn't have. I understand. You see, no one can avoid fate. Not as long as we are trapped in time's harness, anyway. And,' he said more softly, 'no child can avoid the future that fate decrees. Not a fool, not a bastard. Not a bastard's daughter.'

A shiver walked up my spine. Despite all my disbelief, I feared. 'Are you saying that you know something of her future?'

He sighed and nodded. Then he smiled and shook his head. 'That is how it is, for me. I know something of a Farseer's heir. If that heir is she, then doubtless, years from now, I shall read some ancient prophecy and say, ah, yes, there it is, it was foretold how it would come to be. No one truly understands a prophecy until it comes true. It's rather like a horseshoe. The smithy shows you a bit of iron stock and you say, it will never fit. But after it's been through the fire and hammered and filed, there it is, fitting perfectly to your horse's hoof as it would never fit any other.'

'It sounds as if you are saying prophets shape their prophecies to be true after the fact.'

He cocked his head. 'And a good prophet, like a good smith, shows you that it fits perfectly.' He took the empty glass from my hand. 'You should be

sleeping, you know. Tomorrow the healer is going to draw the arrowhead out. You will need your strength.'

I nodded, and suddenly found my eyes were heavy.

Chade gripped my wrists and pulled down firmly. My chest and cheek pressed against the hard wooden bench. The Fool straddled my legs and pinned my hips down with his leaning weight. Even Kettle had her hands on my bare shoulders, pressing me down on the unyielding bench. I felt like a hog trussed for slaughter. Starling stood by with lint bandaging and a basin of hot water. As Chade drew my hands down tight, I felt as if my whole body might split open at the rotten wound in my back. The healer squatted beside me. I caught a glimpse of the pincers she held. Black iron. Probably borrowed from the blacksmith's shed.

'Ready?' she asked.

'No,' I grunted. They ignored me. It wasn't me she was talking to. All morning she had worked on me as if I were a broken toy, prodding and pressing the foul fluids of infection from my back while I squirmed and muttered curses. All had ignored my imprecations, save the Fool, who had offered improvements on them. He was very much himself again. He had persuaded Nighteyes to go outside. I could sense the wolf prowling about the door. I had tried to convey to him what was to be done. I'd pulled enough quills from him in our time together that he had some idea of necessary pain. He still shared my dread.

'Go ahead,' Chade told the healer. His head was close to mine, his beard scratching my shaven cheek. 'Steady my boy,' he breathed into my ear. The cold jaws of the pincers pressed against my inflamed flesh.

'Don't pant. Hold still,' the healer told me severely. I tried. It felt as if she were plunging them into my back seeking for a grip. After an eternity of probing, the healer said, 'Hold him.' I felt the jaws of the pincers clench. She pulled, ripping my spine up and out of my body.

Or so it felt. I recall that first grating of metal head against bone, and all my resolutions not to scream were forgotten. I roared out my pain and my consciousness together. I tumbled again into that vague place that neither sleep nor wakefulness could reach. My feverish days had made it entirely too familiar to me.

Skill-river. I was in it and it was in me. Only a step away, it had always been only a step away. Surcease from pain and loneliness. Swift and sweet. I was tattering away in it, coming undone like a piece of knitting comes unravelled when the right thread is tugged. All my pain was coming undone as well. *No*. Verity forbade it firmly. *Back you go, Fitz*. As if he shooed a small child away from the fire. I went.

Like a diver surfacing, I came back to the hard bench and voices over me. The light seemed dim. Someone exclaimed about blood and called for a cloth full of snow. I felt it pressed to my back while a sopping red rag was tossed to the Fool's rug. The stain spread out on the wool and I flowed with it. I was floating and the room was full of black specks. The healer was busy by the fire. She drew another smith's tool from the flames. It glowed and she turned to look at me. 'Wait!' I cried in horror and half reared up off the bench, only to have Chade catch me by the shoulders.

'It has to be done,' he told me harshly and held me in a grip of iron as the healer came near. At first I felt only pressure as she held a hot brand to my back. I smelled the burning of my own flesh and thought I did not care, until a spasm of pain jerked me more sharply than a hangman's noose. The black rose up to drag me down. 'Hung over water and burned!' I cried out in despair. A wolf whined.

Rising. Coming up, nearer and nearer the light. The dive had been deep, the waters warm and full of dreams. I tasted the edge of consciousness, took a breath of wakefulness.

Chade. '... but surely you could have told me, at least, that he was alive and had come to you. Eda and El in a knot, Fool, how often have I trusted you with my closest counsels?'

'Almost as often as you have not,' the Fool replied tartly. 'Fitz asked me to keep his presence here a secret. And it was, until that minstrel interfered. What would it have hurt if he had been left alone to rest completely before that arrow came out? You've listened to his ravings. Do they sound to you like a man at peace with himself?'

Chade sighed. 'Still. You could have told me. You know what it would have meant to me, to know he was alive.'

'You know what it would have meant to me, to know there was a Farseer heir,' the Fool retorted.

'I told you as soon as I told the Queen!'

‘Yes, but how long had you known she existed? Since you sent Burrich to keep watch over Molly? You knew Molly carried his child when last you came to visit, yet you said nothing.’

Chade took a sharp breath, then cautioned. ‘Those are names I’d as soon you did not speak, not even here. Not even to the Queen have I given those names. You must understand, Fool. The more folk who know, the greater the risk to the child. I’d never have revealed her existence, save that the Queen’s child died and we believed Verity dead.’

‘Save your hope of keeping secrets. A minstrel knows Molly’s name; minstrels keep no secrets.’ His dislike of Starling glittered in his voice. In a colder tone, he added, ‘So what did you really plan to do, Chade? Pass off Fitz’s daughter as Verity’s? Steal her from Molly and give her to the Queen, to raise as her own?’ The Fool’s voice had gone deadly soft.

‘I ... the times are hard and the need so great ... but ... not steal her, no. Burrich would understand, and I think he could make the girl understand. Besides. What can she offer the child? A penniless candlemaker, bereft of her trade ... how can she care for her? The child deserves better. As does the mother, truly, and I would do my best to see she was provided for, also. But the baby cannot be left with her. Think, Fool. Once others knew the babe was of Farseer lineage she could only be safe on the throne, or in line for it. The woman listens to Burrich. He could make her see that.’

‘I’m not so sure you could make Burrich see that. He gave one child up to royal duty. He may not feel it’s a wise choice a second time.’

‘Sometimes all the choices are poor ones, Fool, and still a man must choose.’

I think I made some small sound, for they both came to me quickly. ‘Boy?’ Chade demanded anxiously. ‘Boy, are you awake?’

I decided I was. I opened one eye a crack. Night. Light from the hearth and a few candles. Chade and the Fool and a bottle of brandy. And me. My back felt no better. My fever felt no less. Before I could even try to ask, the Fool held a cup to my lips. Damnably willowbark tea. I was so thirsty, I drank it all. The next cup he offered was meat broth, wonderfully salty. ‘I’m so thirsty,’ I managed to say when I’d finished it. My mouth felt sticky with thirst, thick with it.

‘You’ve lost a lot of blood,’ Chade explained needlessly.

‘Do you want more broth?’ the Fool asked.

I managed the tiniest nod. The Fool took the cup and went to the hearth. Chade leaned close and whispered, strangely urgent, ‘Fitz. Tell me one thing. Do you hate me, boy?’

For a moment, I didn’t know. But the thought of hating Chade meant too great a loss to me. Too few folk in the world cared for me. I could not hate even one of them. I shook my head a tiny bit. ‘But,’ I said slowly, carefully forming the thick words, ‘don’t take my child.’

‘Do not fear,’ he told me gently. His old hand smoothed my hair back from my face. ‘If Verity’s alive, there will be no need of it. For the time being, she is safest where she is. And if King Verity returns and assumes his throne, he and Kettricken will get children of their own.’

‘Promise?’ I begged.

He met my eyes. The Fool brought the broth to me, and Chade stepped aside to make room for him. This cup was warmer. It was like life itself flowing back into me. When it was gone, I could speak more strongly. ‘Chade,’ I said. He had walked over to the hearth and was staring into it. He turned back to me when I spoke.

‘You did not promise,’ I reminded him.

‘No,’ he agreed gravely. ‘I did not promise. Times are too uncertain for that promise.’

For a long time I just looked at him. After a time, he gave his head a tiny shake and looked aside. He could not meet my eyes. But he offered me no lies. So it was up to me.

‘You can have me,’ I told him quietly. ‘And I will do my best to bring Verity back, and do all I can to restore to him his throne. You can have my death, if that is what it takes. More than that, you can have my life, Chade. But not my child’s. Not my daughter’s.’

He met my eyes and nodded slowly.

Recovery was a slow and painful business. It seemed to me that I should have relished each day in a soft bed, each mouthful of food, each moment of safe sleep. But it was not so. The frostbitten skin on my fingers and toes peeled and snagged on everything, and the new skin beneath was horribly tender. Every day the healer came to poke at me. She insisted that the wound on my back must be kept open and draining. I grew weary of the foul-smelling bandages she took away, and wearier still of her picking at my

wound to see that it did not close too soon. She reminded me of a crow on a dying animal, and when I tactlessly told her so one day, she laughed at me.

After a few days, I was moving about again, but never carelessly. Every step, every reach of a hand was a cautious thing. I learned to keep my elbows snug to my sides to decrease the pull of muscles in my back, learned to walk as if I balanced a basket of eggs on my head. Even so, I wearied quickly, and too strenuous a stroll might bring the fever back at night. I went daily to the baths and though soaking in the hot water eased my body, I could not be there even a moment without recalling that here was where Regal sought to drown me, and there was where I had seen Burrich clubbed to the ground. *Come to me, come to me*, would begin the siren call in my head then, and my mind would soon be full of thoughts and wonderings about Verity. It was not conducive to a peaceful spirit. Instead I would find myself planning every detail of my next journey. I made a mental list of the equipment I must beg from Kettricken and debated long and hard over taking a riding animal. In the end I decided against it. There was no grazing for one; my capacity for unthinking cruelty was gone. I would not take a horse or pony simply to have it die. I knew, too, that soon I must ask leave to search the libraries to see if there might be found a precursor to Verity's map. I dreaded seeking out Kettricken for she had not summoned me at all.

Every day I reminded myself of these things, and every day I put it off one more day. As of yet, I still could not walk the length of Jhaampe without stopping to rest. Conscientiously, I began to force myself to eat more and to push the limits of my strength. Often the Fool joined me on my strengthening walks. I knew he hated the cold, but I welcomed his silent companionship too much to suggest he stay warm within. He took me once to see Sooty, and that placid beast welcomed me with such pleasure that I returned every day thereafter. Her belly was swelling with Ruddy's foal; she'd drop early in spring. She seemed healthy enough, but I fretted over her age. I took an amazing amount of comfort from the old mare's gentle presence. It pulled at my injury to lift my arms to groom her, but I did anyway, and Ruddy as well. The spirited young horse needed more handling than he was getting. I did my best with him, and missed Burrich every moment of it.

The wolf came and went as he pleased. He joined the Fool and me on our walks, and strolled into the hut afterwards at our heels. It was almost distressing to see how swiftly he adapted. The Fool muttered about the claw

marks on his door and the shed fur on his rugs, but they liked each other well enough. A wolf puppet began to emerge in sections from chunks of wood on the Fool's work table. Nighteyes developed a taste for a certain seedcake that was also the Fool's favourite. The wolf would stare fixedly at him whenever the Fool was eating it, drooling great pools of saliva onto the floor until the Fool would relent and give him a share. I scolded them both about what sweets could do to his teeth and coat and was ignored by both of them. I suppose I felt a bit of jealousy at how quickly he came to trust the Fool, until Nighteyes asked pointedly one day, *Why should not I trust whom you trust?* I had no answer to that.

'So. When did you become a toymaker?' I asked the Fool idly one day. I was leaning on his table, watching his fingers thread the limbs and torso of a jumping jack onto his stick framework. The wolf was sprawled out under the table, deeply asleep.

He shrugged one shoulder. 'It became obvious once I was here that King Eyod's court was no place for a Fool.' He gave a short sigh. 'Nor did I truly have the desire to be the Fool for anyone save King Shrewd. That being so, I cast about for some other means to earn my bread. One evening, quite drunk, I asked myself what I knew best. "Why, being a puppet," I replied to myself. Jerked about by the strings of fate, and then tossed aside to crumple in a heap. That being so, I decided that I would no longer dance to the string's pull, but would pull the strings. The next day I put my resolution to the test. I soon discovered a liking for it. The simple toys I grew up with and the ones that I saw in Buck seem wondrously strange to Mountain children. I found I needed to have few dealings with the adults, which suited me well. Children here learn to hunt and fish and weave and harvest at a very early age, and whatever they garner is their own. So I trade for what I need. Children, I have found, are much more swift to accept the unusual. They admit their curiosity, you see, rather than disdaining the object that arouses it.' His pale fingers tied a careful knot. Then he picked his creation up and set it to dancing for me.

I watched its gay prancing with a retroactive desire to have possessed such a thing of brightly-painted wood and finely-sanded edges. 'I want my daughter to have things such as that,' I heard myself say aloud. 'Well-made toys and soft bright shirts, pretty hair ribbons and dolls to clutch.'

'She will,' he promised me gravely. 'She will.'

The slow days passed. My hands began to look normal again and even to have some calluses on them again. The healer said I might go with no bandaging on my back. I began to feel restless but knew I did not yet have the strength to leave. My disquiet in turn agitated the Fool. I did not realize how much I paced until the evening he rose from his chair and shoved his table over into my path to divert me from my course. We both laughed, but it did not dispel the underlying tension. I began to believe I destroyed peace wherever I went.

Kettle visited often and drove me to distraction with her knowledge of the scrolls concerning the White Prophet. Too often they mentioned a Catalyst. Sometimes the Fool was drawn into her discussions. More often he simply made noncommittal noises as she tried to explain it all to me. I almost missed her dour taciturnity. I confess, too, that the more she talked, the more I wondered how a woman of Buck had ever chanced to wander so far from her homeland, to become a devotee of a distant teaching that would someday lead her back to her homeland. But the old Kettle showed through when she deflected my slyly-posed questions.

Starling came, though not as often as Kettle, and usually when the Fool was out and about on errands. It seemed that they could not be in the same room without striking sparks from one another. As soon as I was able to move about at all, she began to persuade me to take outside walks with her, probably to avoid the Fool. I suppose they did me good, but I took no enjoyment in them. I had had my fill of winter cold and usually her conversation made me feel both restless and spurred. Her talk was often of the war back in Buck, snippets of news overheard from Chade and Kettricken, for she was often with them. She played for them in the evenings, as best she could with her damaged hand and a borrowed harp. She lived in the main hall of the royal residence. This taste of a court life seemed to agree with her. She was frequently enthused and animated. The bright clothes of the Mountain folk set off her dark hair and eyes, while the cold brought colour to her face. She seemed to have recovered from all misfortune, to be once more filled with life. Even her hand was healing well, and Chade had helped her barter for wood to make a new harp. It shamed me that her optimism only made me feel older and weaker and more wearied. An hour or two with her wore me out as if I had been exercising a headstrong filly. I felt a constant pressure from her to agree with her. Often I could not.

‘He makes me nervous,’ she told me once, in one of her frequent diatribes against the Fool. ‘It’s not his colour; it’s his manner. He never says a kind or simple word to anyone, not even to the children who come to trade for his toys. Have you marked how he teases and mocks them?’

‘He likes them, and they like him,’ I said wearily. ‘He does not tease them to be cruel. He teases them as he teases everyone. The children enjoy it. No child wishes to be spoken down to.’ The brief walk had tired me more than I wished to admit to her. And it was tedious constantly to defend him to her.

She made no reply. I became aware of Nighteyes shadowing us. He drifted from the shelter of a cluster of trees to the snow-laden bushes of a garden. I doubted his presence was a great secret, and yet he was uneasy about strolling openly through the streets. It was strangely comforting to know he was close by.

I tried to find another topic. ‘I have not seen Chade in some days now,’ I ventured. I hated to fish for news of him. But he had not come to me and I would not go to him. I did not hate him, but I could not forgive his plans for my child.

‘I sang for him last night.’ She smiled at the recollection. ‘He was at his most witty. He can even bring a smile to Kettricken’s face. It is hard to believe he lived in such isolation for years. He draws people to himself like a flower draws bees. He has a most gentlemanly way of letting a woman know she is admired. And ...’

‘Chade?’ The word burst from me incredulously. ‘Gentlemanly?’

‘Of course,’ she said in amusement. ‘He can be quite charming, when he has the time. I sang for him and Kettricken the other night, and he was quite gracious in his thanks. A courtier’s tongue he has.’ She smiled to herself, and I could see that whatever Chade had said had stayed pleasantly with her. To try to envision Chade as a charmer of women required my mind to bend in an unaccustomed direction. I could think of nothing to say, and so left her in her pleasant reverie. After a time, she added unexpectedly, ‘He will not be going with us, you know.’

‘Who? Where?’ I could not decide if my recent fever had left me slow-witted or if the minstrel’s mind jumped about like a flea.

She patted my arm comfortingly. ‘You are getting tired. We had best turn back. I can always tell when you are wearied, you ask the most inane questions.’ She took a breath and returned to her topic. ‘Chade will not be

going with us to seek Verity. He has to go back to Buck, to pass the word of your quest and hearten the folk there. Of course, he will respect your wishes and make no mention of you. Only that the Queen has set forth to find the King and restore him to the throne.'

She paused, and tried to say casually, 'He has asked me to devise some simple ditties for him, based on the old songs so they may be easily learned and sung.' She smiled at me and I could tell how pleased she was he had asked this of her. 'He will spread them among the taverns and inns of the road and like seeds they will sprout and trail from there. Simple songs saying that Verity will return to set things right and that a Farseer heir will rise to the throne to unite the Six Duchies in both victory and peace. He says it is most important to keep the heart in the people, and to keep before them the image of Verity returning.'

I sorted my way back through her chatter of songs and prophecies. 'Us, you said. Us, who? And going where?'

She stripped off her glove and set her hand to my forehead quickly. 'Are you feverish, again? A bit, perhaps. Let us turn back now.' As we began retracing our steps through the quiet streets, she added patiently, 'Us, you and I and Kettricken, going to find Verity. Had you forgotten that was why you came to the Mountains? Kettricken says the way will be hard. It is not terribly difficult to travel to the scene of the battle. But if Verity went on from there, then it is on one of the ancient paths marked on her old map, and they may not be paths at all any more. Her father is plainly not enthused with her undertaking. His mind is fixed only on the waging of war against Regal. "While you seek your husband king, your false brother seeks to make our folks his slaves!" he has told her. So she must gather what supplies are given to her willingly, and take only such folk as would go with her rather than stay to fight Regal. There are not many of those, to be sure, and ...'

'I wish to go back to the Fool's house,' I said faintly. My head was spinning and my stomach churning. I had forgotten that this had been the way of it at King Shrewd's court. Why had I expected it to be different here? The plans would be made, the arrangements undertaken, and then they would tell me what they wished me to do and I would do it. Had not that always been my function? To go to such and such a place, and kill that certain man, a man I'd never met before, all on someone else's say? I did not know why it suddenly shocked me so to find that all their momentous

planning had moved on without any words from me, as if I were no more than a horse in a stall, waiting to be saddled, mounted and reined to the hunt.

Well, was not that the bargain I had offered Chade, I reminded myself. That they could have my life, if they would but leave my child alone. Why be surprised? Why even be concerned at all? I should simply go back to the Fool's, to sleep and eat and build my strength until called for.

'Are you all right?' Starling asked me suddenly, anxiously. 'I don't think I have ever seen you so pale.'

'I'm fine,' I assured her dully. 'I was just thinking it would be pleasant to help the Fool make the puppets for a time.'

She frowned again. 'I still do not understand what you see in him. Why do not you come to stay in a room near Kettricken and me? You need little tending any more; it is time you resumed your rightful place at the Queen's side.'

'When the Queen summons me, I will go to her,' I said dutifully. 'That will be time enough.'

TWENTY-TWO

Departure

Chade Fallstar occupies a unique niche in the history of the Six Duchies. Although he was never acknowledged, his strong physical resemblance to the Farseers makes it almost certain that he was blood-related to the royal line. Be that as it may, who he was pales in significance compared to what he was. Some have said he was a spy for King Shrewd for decades before the Red Ship Wars. Others have linked his name to that of Lady Thyme, who almost certainly was a poisoner and thief for the royal family. These beliefs can never be substantiated.

What can be known, without a doubt, was that he emerged into public life following the desertion of Buckkeep by the Pretender, Regal Farseer. He put his services at the beck and call of Lady Patience. She was able to draw on his established network of people throughout the Six Duchies, both to gather information and to distribute resources for the defence of the coastline. There is much evidence to suggest that initially he endeavoured to remain a private and secretive figure. His unique appearance made this difficult and he eventually abandoned all attempts. Despite his years, he became something of a hero, a dashing old man, if you will, coming and going from inns and taverns at all hours, eluding and taunting Regal's guardsmen, bringing news and passing funds for the defence of the Coastal Duchies. His exploits made him admired. Always he bade the folk of the Six Duchies to take heart and foretold to them that King Verity and Queen Kettricken would return, to lift from their backs the yokes of taxation and warfare under which they suffered. While a number of songs have been made of his deeds, the most accurate is the song cycle 'Chade Fallstar's Reckoning', attributed to Queen Kettricken's minstrel, Starling Birdsong.

My memory rebels at recalling those last days in Jhaampe. A bleakness of spirit settled on me, one that remained unchanged by friendship or brandy. I could find no energy, no will to bestir myself. 'If fate is some great wave that is going to bear me up and dash me against a wall, regardless of what I choose, why then I choose to do nothing. Let it do with me as it will,' I declared grandiosely, if a trifle drunkenly to the Fool one evening. To this he

said nothing. He simply continued sanding the shags into the wolf-puppet's coat. Nighteyes, wakeful but silent, lay at the Fool's feet. When I was drinking he shielded his mind from me and expressed his disgust by ignoring me. Kettle sat in the hearth corner, knitting and alternating between looking disappointed or disapproving. Chade sat in a straight-backed chair across the table from me. A cup of tea was before him and his eyes were cold as jade. Needless to say, I was drinking alone, for the third straight night. I was testing to the limits Burrich's theory that while drinking could solve nothing, it could make the unbearable tolerable. It did not seem to be working for me. The more I drank, the less tolerable my situation seemed. And the more intolerable I became to my friends.

The day had brought me more than I could bear. Chade had come to see me finally, to say that Kettricken wished to see me on the morrow. I allowed as I would be there. With a bit of prodding from Chade, I agreed that I would be presentable – washed, shaven, cleanly attired and sober. None of which I was at that moment. It was a poor time for me to endeavour to match wits or words with Chade, but my judgment was such that I attempted it. I asked bellicose and accusing questions. He answered them calmly. Yes, he had suspected Molly carried my child, and yes, he had urged Burrich to become her protector. Burrich had already been seeing that she had money and shelter, he had been reluctant to share her dwelling, but when Chade had pointed out the dangers to her and the child if anyone else figured out the circumstances, Burrich had agreed. No, he had not told me. Why? Because Molly had coerced Burrich into promising her he would not tell me of her pregnancy. His condition for guarding her as Chade requested was that Chade would also respect that promise. Initially Burrich had hoped I would puzzle out for myself why Molly had disappeared. He had also confided to Chade that as soon as the child was born he would consider himself freed of his promise and would tell me, not that she was pregnant, but that I had a child. Even in my state, I could see that that was about as devious as Burrich had ever managed to be. A part of me appreciated the depth of his friendship that he'd bend his promise that far for me. But when he had gone to tell me of my daughter's birth, he had instead discovered evidence of my death.

He had gone straight to Buck, to leave words with a stonemason there, who passed word to another and so on until Chade came to meet Burrich at the fish-docks. They had both been incredulous. 'Burrich could not believe that you had died. I could not understand why you had still been there. I had

left word with my watchers, all up and down the river road, for I had been sure you would not flee to Bingtown, but would immediately set out for the Mountains. I had been so sure that despite all you had endured, your heart was true. It was what I told to Burrich that night; that we must leave you alone, to discover for yourself where your loyalty was. I had wagered Burrich that left to your own devices you would be like an arrow released from a bow, flying straight to Verity. That, I think, was what shocked us both the most. That you had died there, and not on the road to your king.'

'Well,' I declared with a drunkard's elaborate satisfaction, 'you were both wrong. You both thought you knew me so well, you both thought you had crafted such a tool as could not defy your purposes. But I did NOT die there! Nor did I go to seek my king. I went to kill Regal. For myself.' I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms on my chest. Then sat up abruptly at the uncomfortable pressure on my healing injury. 'For myself!' I repeated. 'Not for my king or Buck or any of the Six Duchies. For me, I went to kill him. For me.'

Chade merely looked at me. But from the hearth corner where Kettle rocked, her old voice rose in complacent satisfaction. 'The White Scriptures say, "He shall thirst for the blood of his own kin, and his thirst shall go unslaked. The Catalyst shall hunger for a hearth and children in vain, for his children shall be another's, and another's child his own ..."'

'No one can force me to fulfil any such prophecies!' I vowed in a roar. 'Who made them, anyway?'

Kettle went on rocking. It was the Fool who answered me. He spoke mildly, without looking up from his work. 'I did. In my childhood, in the days of my dreaming. Before I knew you anywhere, save in my dreams.'

'You are doomed to fulfil them,' Kettle told me gently.

I slammed my cup back onto the table. 'Damned if I will!' I shouted. No one jumped or replied. In a terrible instant of crystalline recall, I heard Molly's father's voice from his chimney corner. 'Damn you, girl!' Molly had flinched but ignored him. She had known there was no reasoning with a drunk. 'Molly,' I moaned soddenly and put my head down on my arms to weep.

After a time, I felt Chade's hands on my shoulders. 'Come, boy, this avails you nothing. To bed with you. Tomorrow you must face your queen.' There was far more patience in his voice than I deserved, and I suddenly knew the depths of my churlishness.

I rubbed my face on my sleeve and managed to lift my head. I did not resist as he helped me to my feet and steered me toward the cot in the corner. As I sat down on the edge of it, I said quietly, 'You knew. You knew all along.'

'Knew what?' he asked me tiredly.

'Knew all this about the Catalyst and the White Prophet.'

He blew air out through his nose. 'I "know" nothing of that. I knew something of the writings about them. Recall that things were comparatively settled before your father abdicated. I had many long years after I had taken to my tower, when my king did not require my services for months at a time. I had much time for reading, and many sources for scrolls. So I had encountered some of the foreign tales and writings that deal with a Catalyst and a White Prophet.' His voice became milder, as if he'd forgotten the anger in my question.

'It was only after the Fool had come to Buckkeep, and I had quietly discovered that he had a strong interest in such writings, that my own interest was piqued. You yourself once told me that he had referred to you as the Catalyst. So I began to wonder ... but in truth, I give all prophecies small credence.'

I lay back gingerly. I could almost sleep on my back again. I rolled to my side, kicked off my boots and dragged a blanket up over me.

'Fitz?'

'What?' I asked Chade grudgingly.

'Kettricken is angry with you. Do not expect her patience tomorrow. But keep in mind that she is not only our queen. She is a woman who has lost a child and been kept in suspense over her husband's fate for over a year, hounded away from her adopted country, only to have trouble dog her steps to her native land. Her father is understandably bitter. He turns a warrior's eyes toward the Six Duchies and Regal, and has no time for quests to search for the brother of his enemy, even if he believed he lived. Kettricken is alone, more grievously alone than you or I can imagine. Find tolerance for the woman. And respect for your queen.' He paused uncomfortably. 'You will need both tomorrow. I can be of little help to you with her.'

I think he went on after that, but I had ceased to listen. Sleep soon dragged me under its waves.

It had been some time since Skill-dreams had troubled me. I do not know if my physical weakness had finally banished my dreams of battle, or if my constant guard against Regal's coterie had blocked them from my mind. That night my brief respite ended. The strength of the Skill-dream that snatched me from my body was as if a great hand had reached inside me, seized me by the heart and dragged me out of myself. I was suddenly in another place.

It was a city, in the sense that folk dwelt there in great numbers. But the folk were unlike any I had ever seen, nor had I ever seen such dwellings. The buildings soared and spiralled to airy heights. The stone of the walls seemed to have flowed into their forms. There were bridges of delicate tracery and gardens that both cascaded down and tendrilled up the sides of the structures. There were fountains that danced and others that pooled silently. Everywhere brightly-clad people moved through the city, as numerous as ants.

Yet all was silent and still. I sensed the flow of folk, the play of the fountains, the perfume of the unfolding blossoms in the gardens. All was there, but when I turned to behold it, it was gone. The mind could sense the delicate tracery of the bridge but the eye saw only the fallen rubble gone to rust and rot. Frescoed walls had been wind-polished away to roughly plastered bricks. A turn of the head changed a leaping fountain to weedy dust in a cracked basin. The hastening crowd in the market spoke only with the voice of a racing wind heavy with stinging sand. I moved through this ghost of a city, bodiless and seeking, unable to decipher why I was there or what was drawing me. It was neither light nor dark there, neither summer nor winter. I am outside time, I thought to myself, and wondered if this was the ultimate hell of the Fool's philosophy or the final freedom.

I saw at last, far ahead of me, a small figure plodding along one of the vast streets. His head was bowed to the wind and he held his cloak's hem over his mouth and nose as he walked to shield him from the sand-laden wind. He was not a part of the ghostly crowd but moved through the rubble, skirting the places where some unrest in the earth had sunken or ridged the paved street. I knew in that instant of sighting him that this was Verity. I knew by the jerk of life I felt in my chest, and knew then that what had pulled me here was the tiny pebble of Verity's Skill that hid still within my own consciousness. I sensed also that the danger to him was extreme. Yet I saw nothing to threaten him. He was at a great distance from me, seen

through the hazy shadows of buildings that had been, veiled in the ghosts of a market-day crowd. He trudged heavily along, alone and immune to the ghost city, and yet entwined in it. I saw nothing, but danger loomed over him like a giant's shadow.

I hastened after him and in the blinking of an eye was beside him. 'Ah,' he greeted me. 'So you have come at last, Fitz. Welcome.' He did not pause as he walked, nor turn his head. Yet I felt a warmth as if he had clasped my hand in greeting, and I felt no need to reply. Instead I saw with his eyes the lure and the danger.

A river flowed ahead. It was not water. It was not glistening stone. It partook of both those things, but was neither. It sliced through the city like a gleaming blade, sliding out of the riven mountain behind us and continuing until it disappeared into a more ancient river of water. Like a seam of coal bared by a cutting tide, or gold veining quartz, it lay exposed on the earth's body. It was magic. Purest ancient magic, inexorable and heedless of men, flowed there. The river of Skill I had so tediously learned to navigate was to this magic as the bouquet of wine is to wine. That which I glimpsed with Verity's eyes had a physical existence as concrete as my own. I was immediately drawn to it as a moth is drawn to a candle flame.

It was not just the beauty of that shining flow. The magic filled every one of Verity's senses. The sound of its rushing was musical, a running of notes that kept one waiting and listening, in the certainty that the sound was building to something. The wind carried its scent, elusive and changeable, one moment the edge of lemon blossoms and the next a smoky coiling of spices. I tasted it on every breath, and longed to plunge myself into it. I was suddenly sure that it could quench every appetite I had ever suffered, not just those of my body but the vague yearnings of my soul as well. I longed for my body to be here as well, that I might experience it as completely as Verity did.

Verity paused, lifting his face. He drew in a deep breath, air laden with Skill as fog is laden with moisture. Suddenly I could taste in the back of Verity's throat a hot metallic tang. The longing he had felt for it suddenly became an all-consuming desire. He thirsted for it. When he got to it, he would throw himself on his knees and drink his fill. He would be filled with all the consciousness of the world, he would partake of the whole and become the whole. At last he would know completion.

But Verity himself would cease to exist.

I drew back in fascinated horror. I don't think there is anything more frightening than to encounter the true will for self-destruction. Despite my own attraction to the river, it touched off an anger in me. This was not worthy of Verity. Neither the man nor the prince I had known could be capable of such a cowardly act. I looked at him as if I had never seen him.

And realized how long it had been since I had seen him.

The bright blackness of his eyes had become a dull darkness. The cloak that the wind snapped about him was a rent rag of a thing. The leather of his boots had long ago cracked, the stitches of the seams giving way and gaping open. The steps he took were uncertain, uneven things. Even if the wind had not buffeted him, I doubted his stride would have been steady. His lips were pale and cracked and his flesh had a greyish overtone to it as if the very blood of his body had forsaken it. There had been summers when he Skilled against the Red Ships to such an extent that the flesh and muscle fell from his body, leaving him a gaunt skeleton of a man with no physical stamina. Now he was a man of stamina alone, ropy muscles stretched on a framework of bones that was scarcely cloaked in flesh at all. He was the embodiment of weary purpose. Only his will kept him upright and moving. Toward the magic flow.

I do not know where I found my own will to resist it. Possibly it was because I had paused and focused myself on Verity for an instant, and seen all that the world would lose if he ceased to exist as himself. Whatever the source of my strength, I pitted it against his. I threw myself into his path but he walked through me. There was nothing to me, here. 'Verity, please, stop, wait!' I cried and flung myself at him, a furious feather on the wind. I had no effect on him. He didn't even pause.

'Someone has to do it,' he said quietly. Three steps later he added, 'For a time, I hoped it would not be me. But over and over, I have asked myself, "Who else, then?"' He turned to look at me with those burnt-to-ashes eyes. 'No other answer has ever come. It has to be me.'

'Verity, stop,' I pleaded, but he continued to walk. Not hurrying, not lagging, but simply trudging along the way a man does when he has measured the distance he must go and matched his strength to it. He had the endurance to get there if he walked.

I withdrew a bit, feeling my strength ebbing. For a moment, I feared I would lose him by being drawn back to my sleeping body. Then I realized an equally potent fear. Linked so long, and even now being pulled along after

him, I might find myself drowned alongside him in that vein of magic. If I had had a body in that realm, I probably would have seized onto something and held on. As I pleaded with Verity to stop and listen to me, I instead anchored myself in the only other way I could imagine. I reached with my Skill, grasping after those others whose lives touched mine: Molly, my daughter, Chade and the Fool, Burrich and Kettricken. I had no true Skill-links with any of them so my grip was a tenuous one at best, lessened by my frantic fear that at any moment Will or Carrod or even Burl might somehow become aware of me. It seemed to me that it slowed Verity. 'Please wait,' I said again.

'No,' he said quietly. 'Don't seek to dissuade me, Fitz. It's what I have to do.'

I had never thought to measure my Skill-strength against Verity's. I had never imagined we could be opposed to each other. But as I proceeded to batter myself against him, I felt very much like a child kicking and screaming as his father calmly carried him off to bed. Verity not only ignored my attack, I sensed that his will and concentration were elsewhere. He moved implacably on toward the black flow and my consciousness was borne along with him. Self-preservation lent a frantic new strength to my struggles. I strove to push him away, to drag him back, but it availed me nothing.

But there was a terrible duality to my struggle. I longed for him to win. If he overpowered me and dragged me down with him, then I need take no responsibility for it. I could open myself to that flow of power and be quenched in it. It would be an end to all torments, surcease at last. I was so tired of doubts and guilts, so weary of duties and debts. If Verity carried me into that flow of Skill with him I could finally surrender with no shame.

There came a moment when we stood on the brink of that iridescent flow of power. I stared down at it with his eyes. There was no gradual shore. Instead there was a knife's edge brink where solid earth gave way to a streaming otherness. I stared at it, seeing it as a foreign thing in our world, a warping of our very world's nature. Ponderously Verity lowered himself to one knee. He stared into that black luminescence. I did not know if he hesitated to say farewell to our world, or if he paused to gather his will to destroy himself. My will to resist was suspended. This was a door to an otherness I could not even imagine. Hunger and curiosity drew us closer to the brink.

In the next moment he plunged his hands and forearms into the magic.

I shared that sudden knowledge with him. So I screamed with him as the hot current ate the flesh and muscle from his arms. I swear I felt the acid lick of it across the bared bones of his fingers and wrist and forearm. I knew his pain. Yet it was crowded from his features by the rapturous smile that overwhelmed his face. My link with him was suddenly a clumsy thing that barred me from sensing in full what he felt. I longed to be beside him, to bare my own flesh to that magic river. I shared his conviction that he could end all pain if only he would give in and plunge the rest of himself into the stream. So easy. All he had to do was lean forward a bit and let go. He crouched over the stream on his knees, sweat dripping from his face only to disappear as tiny puffs of steam when it fell into the flow. His head was bowed, and his shoulders moved up and down with the strength of his panting. Then he begged me suddenly, in a tiny voice, 'Pull me back.'

I had not had the strength to oppose his determination. But when I joined my will to his and together we fought the terrible allure of the power, it was just enough. He was able to draw his forearms and hands free from the stuff, though it felt as if he drew them out of solid stone. It gave him up reluctantly and as he staggered back I sensed in full for a moment what he had shared. There was the oneness of the world flowing there, like a single sweet note drawn out purely forever. It was not the song of humanity but an older, greater song of vast balances and pure being. Had Verity surrendered to it, it would have ended all his torments.

Instead, he tottered to his feet and turned away from it. He carried his forearms stretched out before him, palms up, the fingers curled into cups as if he begged something. In shape they had not changed. But now arms and fingers gleamed silver with the power that had penetrated and fused with his flesh. As he began to walk away from the stream with the same studied purposefulness with which he had approached it, I felt how his arms and hands burned as if with frostbite.

'I don't understand,' I said to him.

'I don't want you to. Not yet.' I felt a duality in him. The Skill burned in him like a forge-fire of incredible heat, but the strength of his body was only sufficient to keep him walking. It was effortless for him to shield my mind from the pull of that river now. But for him to move his own body up the path taxed both his flesh and his will. 'Fitz. Come to me. Please.' It was no Skill-order this time, not even the command of a prince, only the plea of a

man to another. 'I have no coterie, Fitz. Only you. If the coterie that Galen created for me had been true, then I would have more faith that what I must do is possible. Yet not only are they false to me, but they seek to defeat me. They peck at me like birds on a dying buck. I do not think their attacks can destroy me, but I fear they may weaken me enough that I do not succeed. Or worse yet, that they may distract me and succeed in my place. We cannot allow that, boy. You and I are all that stand between them and their triumph. You and I. The Farseers.'

I was not there in any physical sense. Yet he smiled at me and lifted one terrible gleaming hand to cup my face. Did he intend what he did? I do not know. The jolt was as powerful as if a warrior had slammed his shield into my face. But not pain. Awareness. Like sunlight bursting through clouds to illuminate a clearing in the forest. Everything suddenly stood out clearly, and I saw all the hidden reasons and purposes for what we did, and I understood with a painful purity of enlightenment why it was necessary I follow the path before me.

Then all was gone, and I dwindled off into blackness. Verity was gone and my understanding with him. But for one brief instant, I had glimpsed the completeness of it. Only I remained now, but my self was so tiny I could only exist if I held on with all my might. So I did.

From a world away I heard Starling cry out in fear, 'What's wrong with him?' And Chade replied gruffly, 'It's only a seizure, such as he has from time to time. His head, Fool, hold his head or he'll dash his own brains out.' Distantly I felt hands gripping and restraining me. I surrendered myself to their care and sank into the darkness. I came to, for a bit, some time later. I recall little of it. The Fool raised my shoulders and steadied my head that I could drink from a cup a concerned Chade held to my lips. The familiar bitterness of elfbark puckered my mouth. I had a glimpse of Kettle standing over me, lips folded in a tight line of disapproval. Starling stood away, her eyes huge as a cornered animal's, not deigning to touch me. 'That should bring him round,' I heard Chade say as I sank into a deep sleep.

The next morning I arose early despite my pounding head and sought the baths. I slipped out so silently that the Fool did not waken, but Nighteyes arose and ghosted out with me.

Where did you go, last night? he demanded, but I had no answer for him. He sensed my reluctance to think about it. *I go to hunt now,* he

informed me tartly. *I advise you to drink but water after this.* I assented humbly and he left me at the door of the bathhouse.

Within was the mineral stink of the hot water that bubbled up from the earth. The Mountain folk trapped it in great tanks, and channelled it through pipes to other tubs so that one might choose the heat and depth one wished. I scrubbed myself off in a washing tub, then submerged myself in the hottest water I could stand and tried not to recall the scalding of the Skill on Verity's forearms. I emerged red as a boiled crab. At the cool end of the bath-hut there were several mirrors on the wall. I tried not to see my own face as I shaved. It reminded me too vividly of Verity's. Some of the gauntness had left it in the last week or so, but the streak of white at my brow was back and showed even more plainly when I bound my hair back in a warrior's tail. I would not have been surprised to see Verity's handprint on my face, or to find my scar eradicated and my nose straightened, such had been the power of that touch. But Regal's scar on my face stood out pallidly against my steam-reddened face. Nothing had improved the broken nose. There was no outward sign of my encounter last night at all. Again and again, my mind circled back to that moment, to that touch of purest power. I fumbled to recall it and almost could. But the absolute experience of it, like pain or pleasure, could not be recalled in full, but only in pale memory. I knew I had experienced something extraordinary. The pleasures of Skilling, which all Skill-users were cautioned against, were like a tiny ember compared to the bonfire of knowing, feeling and being that I had briefly shared last night.

It had changed me. The anger I had been nursing toward Kettricken and Chade was gutted. I could find the emotion still, but I could not bring it back in force. I had briefly seen, not only my child, but the entire situation from all possible views. There was no malice in their intent, nor even selfishness. They believed in the morality of what they did. I did not. But I could no longer deny entirely the sense of what they sought. It left me feeling soulless. They would take my child away from Molly and me. I could hate what they did, but I could not focus that anger at them.

I shook my head, drawing myself back to the moment. I looked at myself in the mirror, wondering how Kettricken would see me. Did she still see the young man who had dogged Verity's steps and so often served her at court? Or would she look at my scarred face and think she did not know me, that the Fitz she had known was gone? Well, she knew by now how I had

gained my scars. My queen should not be surprised. I would let her judge who stood behind those marks.

I braced my nerves, then turned my back to the mirror. I looked over my shoulder. The centre of injury in my back reminded me of a sunken red starfish in my flesh. Around it the skin was tight and shiny. I flexed my shoulders and watched the skin tug against the scar. I extended my sword arm and felt the tiny pull of resistance there. Well, no sense worrying about it. I pulled on my shirt.

I returned to the Fool's hut to clothe myself afresh and found to my surprise that he was dressed and ready to accompany me. Clothes were laid out on my cot: a white loose-sleeved shirt of soft warm wool, and dark leggings of a heavier woollen weave. There was a short dark surcoat to match the leggings. He told me that Chade had left them. It was all very simple and plain.

'It suits you,' the Fool observed. He himself was dressed much as he did every day, in a woollen robe, but this one was dark blue with embroidery at the sleeves and hem. It was closer to what I had seen the Mountain folk wear. It accentuated his pallor far more than the white one had, and made plainer to my eyes the slight tawny skin, eyes and hair were beginning to possess. His hair was as fine as ever. Left to itself, it still seemed to float freely around his face, but today he was binding it back.

'I did not know Kettricken had summoned you,' I observed, to which he grimly replied, 'All the more reason to present myself. Chade came to check on you this morning, and was concerned to find you gone. I think he half fears that you have run off with the wolf again. But in case you had not, he left a message for you. Other than those who have been in this hut, no one in Jhaampe has been told your true name. Much as it must surprise you to find that the minstrel had that much discretion. Not even the healer knows who she healed. Remember, you are Tom the shepherd until such time as Queen Kettricken feels she can speak more plainly to you. Understand?'

I sighed. I understood all too well. 'I never knew Jhaampe to host intrigue before,' I observed.

He chuckled. 'You have visited here only briefly before this. Believe me, Jhaampe breeds intrigues every bit as convoluted as Buckkeep did. As strangers here, we are wise to avoid being drawn into them, as much as we can.'

‘Save for the ones we bring with us,’ I told him, and he smiled bitterly as he nodded.

The day was bright and crisp. The sky glimpsed overhead through the dark evergreen boughs was an endless blue. A small breeze ran alongside us, rattling dry snow crystals across the frozen tops of the snow banks. The dry snow squeaked under our boots and the cold roughly kissed my freshly-shaven cheeks. From further off in the village, I could hear the shouts of children at play. Nighteyes pricked his ears to that, but continued to shadow us. The small voices in the distance reminded me of sea-birds crying and I suddenly missed the shores of Buck acutely.

‘You had a seizure last night,’ the Fool said quietly. It was not quite a question.

‘I know,’ I said briefly.

‘Kettle seemed very distressed by it. She questioned Chade most closely about the herbs he prepared for you. And when they did not rouse you as he had said they would, she went off in her corner. She sat there most of the night, knitting loudly and peering at him disapprovingly. It was a relief to me when they all finally left.’

I wondered if Starling had stayed, but did not ask it. I did not even want to know why it mattered to me.

‘Who is Kettle?’ the Fool asked abruptly.

‘Who is Kettle?’ I asked, startled.

‘I believe I just said that.’

‘Kettle is ...’ It suddenly seemed odd that I knew so little about someone I had travelled with so long. ‘I think she grew up in Buck. And then she travelled, and studied scrolls and prophecies, and returned to seek the White Prophet.’ I shrugged at the scantiness of my knowledge.

‘Tell me. Do you find her ... portentous?’

‘What?’

‘Do you not feel there is something about her, something that ...’ He shook his head angrily. It was the first time I had ever seen the Fool searching for words. ‘Sometimes, I feel she is significant. That she is wound up with us. Other times, she seems but a nosy old woman with an unfortunate lack of taste in her choice of companions.’

‘You mean me,’ I laughed.

‘No. I mean that interfering minstrel.’

‘Why do you and Starling dislike one another so?’ I asked tiredly.

‘It is not dislike, dear Fitzy. On my part, it is disinterest. Unfortunately, she cannot conceive of a man who could look at her with no interest in bedding her. She takes my simple dismissal of her as an insult, and strives to make of it some lack or fault in me. Whilst I take offence at her proprietary attitude toward you. She has no true affection for Fitz, you know, only for being able to say she knew FitzChivalry.’

I was silent, fearing that what he said was true. And so we came to the palace at Jhaampe. It was as unlike Buckkeep as I could imagine. I have heard it said that the dwellings at Jhaampe owe their origins to the dome-shaped tents some of the nomadic tribes still use. The smaller dwellings were still tent-like enough that they did not startle me as the palace still did. The living heart tree that was its centrepole towered immensely above us. Other secondary trees had been patiently contorted over years to form supports for the walls. When this living framework had been established, mats of bark cloth had been draped gracefully over them to form the basis for the smoothly curving walls. Plastered with a sort of clay and then painted in bright colours, the houses would always remind me of tulip buds or mushroom caps. Despite its great size, the palace seemed organic, as if it had sprouted up from the rich soil of the ancient forest that sheltered it.

Size made it a palace. There were no other outward signs, no flags, no royal guards flanking the doors. No one sought to bar our entrance. The Fool opened the carved wood-framed doors of a side entrance, and we went in. I followed him as he threaded his way through a maze of freestanding chambers. Other rooms were on platforms above us, reached by ladders or, for the grander ones, staircases of wood. The walls of the chambers were flimsy things, with some temporary rooms of no more than barkcloth tapestries stretched on frameworks. The inside of the palace was only slightly warmer than the forest outside. The individual chambers were heated by free-standing braziers in the winter.

I followed the Fool to a chamber whose outer walls were decorated with delicate illustrations of water birds. This was a more permanent room, with sliding wooden doors likewise carved with birds. I could hear the notes of Starling’s harp from within and the murmur of low voices. He tapped at the door, waited briefly and then slid it open to admit us. Kettricken was within, and the Fool’s friend Jofron and several other people I did not recognize. Starling sat on a low bench to one side, playing softly while Kettricken and the others embroidered a quilt on a frame that almost filled

the room. A bright garden of flowers was being created on the quilt top. Chade sat not far from Starling. He was dressed in a white shirt and dark leggings with a long wool vest, gaily embroidered, over the shirt. His hair was pulled back in a grey warrior's tail, with the leather band on his brow bearing the buck sigil. He looked decades younger than he had at Buckkeep. They spoke together more softly than the music.

Kettricken looked up, needle in hand, and greeted us calmly. She introduced me to the others as Tom, and politely asked if I were recovering well from my injury. I told her I was, and she bade me be seated and rest myself a bit. The Fool circled the quilt, complimented Jofron on her stitchery, and when she invited him, he took a place beside her. He took up a needle and floss, threaded it and began adding butterflies of his own invention to one corner of the quilt while he and Jofron talked softly of gardens they had known. He seemed very at ease. I felt at a loss, sitting idly in a room full of quietly occupied people. I waited for Kettricken to speak to me, but she went on with her work. Starling's eyes met mine and she smiled, but stiffly. Chade avoided my glance, looking past me as if we were strangers.

There was conversation in the room, but it was soft and intermittent, mostly requests for a skein of thread to be passed, or comments on each other's work. Starling played the old familiar Buck ballads, but wordlessly. No one spoke to me or paid me any mind. I waited.

After a time, I began to wonder if it were a subtle form of punishment. I tried to remain relaxed, but tension repeatedly built up in me. Every few minutes I would remember to unclench my jaws and loosen my shoulders. It took some time for me to see a similar anxiety in Kettricken. I had spent many times attending my lady in Buckkeep when she had first come to court. I had seen her lethargic at her needlework, or lively in her garden, but now she sewed furiously, as if the fate of the Six Duchies depended on her completing this quilt. She was thinner than I recalled, the bones and planes of her face showing more plainly. Her hair, a year after she had cut it to mourn Verity, was still too short for her to confine it well. The pale strands of it constantly crept forward. There were lines in her face, around her eyes and mouth and she frequently chewed on her lips, a thing I had never seen her do before.

The morning seemed to drag on, but finally one of the young men sat up straight, then stretched and declared his eyes were getting too weary to do

any more today. He asked the woman at his side if she had a mind to hunt with him today, and she readily agreed. As if this were some sort of signal, the others began to rise and stretch and make their farewells to Kettricken. I was struck at their familiarity with her, until I recalled that here she was not regarded as Queen, but as eventual Sacrifice to the Mountains. Her role among her own folk would never be seen as that of ruler, but as guide and co-ordinator. Her father King Eyod was known among his own folk as the Sacrifice, and was expected to be ever and always unselfishly available to his folk to help in any way they might require. It was a position that was both less regal than that of Buck royalty, and more beloved. I wondered idly if it might not have suited Verity more to have come here and been Kettricken's consort.

'FitzChivalry.'

I looked up to Kettricken's command. Only she, I, Starling, Chade, and the Fool remained in the room. I almost looked to Chade for direction. But his eyes had excluded me earlier. I sensed I was on my own here. The tone of Kettricken's voice made this a formal interview. I stood straight, and then managed a rather stiff bow. 'My queen, you summoned me.'

'Explain yourself.'

The wind outside was warmer than her voice. I glanced up at her eyes. Blue ice. I lowered my gaze and took a breath. 'Shall I report, my queen?'

'If it will explain your failures, do so.' That startled me. My eyes flew to hers, but though our glances met, there was no meeting. All the girl in Kettricken had burned away, as the impurities are burned and beaten from iron ore in a foundry. With it seemed to have gone any feeling for her husband's bastard nephew. She sat before me as ruler and judge, not friend. I had not expected to feel that loss so keenly.

Despite my better judgment, I let ice creep into my own voice. 'I shall submit to my queen's judgment on that,' I offered.

She was merciless. She had me start not with my own death, but days before that, when we had first begun plotting to whisk King Shrewd secretly from Buckkeep and Regal's reach. I stood before her, and had to admit that the Coastal Dukes had approached me with the offer of recognizing me as King-in-Waiting rather than Regal. Worse, I had to tell her that although I had refused that, I had promised to stand with them, assuming the command of Buckkeep Castle and the protection of Buck's coast. Chade had once warned me that it was as close to treason as made no difference. But I was

tired to death of all my secrets, and I relentlessly bared them. More than once I wished Starling were not in the room, for I dreaded hearing my own words made into a song denouncing me. But if my queen deemed her worthy of confidence, it was not my place to question it.

So on I went, down the weary track of days. For the first time, she heard from me how King Shrewd had died in my arms, and how I had hunted down and killed both Serene and Justin in the Great Hall before everyone. When it came to my days in Regal's dungeon, she had no pity on me. 'He had me beaten and starved, and I would have perished there if I had not feigned death,' I said. It was not good enough for her.

No one, not even Burrich, had known a full telling of those days. I steeled myself and launched into it. After a time, my voice began to shake. I faltered in my telling. Then I looked past her at the wall, took a breath, and went on. I glanced at her once, to find her gone white as ice. I stopped thinking of the events behind my words. I heard my own voice dispassionately relating all that had happened. I heard Kettricken draw in her breath when I spoke of Skilling to Verity from my cell. Other than that, there was not a sound in the room. Once my eyes wandered to Chade. I found him sitting, deathly still, his jaw set as if he endured some torment of his own.

I forged my way on through the story, telling without judgment of my own resurrection by Burrich and Chade, of the Wit-magic that made it possible and of the days that followed. I told of our angry parting, of my journeys in detail, of the times when I could sense Verity and the brief joinings we shared, of my attempt on Regal's life, and even of how Verity had unwittingly implanted into my soul his command to come to him. On and on, my voice getting huskier as my throat and mouth dried with the telling. I did not pause nor rest until I had finished telling her of my final staggering trek into Jhaampe. And when at last my full tale of days was told out to her, I continued to stand, emptied and weary. Some people say there is a relief in the sharing of cares and pains. To me there was no catharsis, only an unearthing of rotting corpses of memories, a baring of still suppurating wounds. After a time of silence, I found the cruelty to ask, 'Does my account excuse my failures, my queen?'

But if I had thought to rend her, I failed there also. 'You make no mention of your daughter, FitzChivalry.'

It was true. I had not made mention of Molly and the child. Fear sliced through me like a cold blade. 'I had not thought of her as pertaining to my

report.'

'She obviously must,' Queen Kettricken said implacably. I forced myself to look at her. She clasped her hands before her. Did they tremble, did she feel any remorse for what she said next? I could not tell. 'Given her lineage, she much more than "pertains" to this discussion. Ideally, she should be here, where we could guarantee a measure of safety to the Farseer heir.'

I imposed calm on my voice. 'My queen, you are mistaken in naming her so. Neither I nor she have any legitimate claim to the throne. We are both illegitimate.'

Kettricken was shaking her head. 'We do not consider what is or is not between you and her mother. We consider only her bloodline. Regardless of what you may claim for her, her lineage will claim her. I am childless.' Until I heard her speak that word aloud, I did not grasp what her depth of pain was. A few moments ago, I had thought her heartless. Now I wondered if she were completely sane any more. Such was the grief and despair that one word conveyed. She forced herself on. 'There must be an heir to the Farseer throne. Chade has advised me that alone I cannot rally the people to protect themselves. I am too foreign to their eyes still. But no matter how they see me, I remain their queen. I have a duty to do. I must find a way to unite the Six Duchies and repulse the invaders from our shores. To do that, they must have a leader. I had thought to offer you, but he has said that they will not accept you either. That matter of your supposed death and use of Beast magic is too big an obstacle. That being so, there remains only your child of the Farseer line. Regal has proven false to his own blood. She, then, must be Sacrifice for our people. They will rally to her.'

I dared to speak. 'She is only an infant, my queen. How can she ...'

'She is a symbol. It is all the people will require of her right now, that she exist. Later, she will be their queen in truth.'

I felt as if she had knocked the wind from me. She spoke on. 'I shall be sending Chade to fetch her here, where she may be kept safe and properly educated as she grows.' She sighed. 'I would like her mother to be with her. Unfortunately, we must present the child as mine, somehow. How I hate such deceptions. But Chade has convinced me of the necessity. I hope he will also be able to convince your daughter's mother.' More to herself, she added, 'We shall have to say that we said my child was stillborn to make Regal believe there was no heir to threaten. My poor little son. His people

will never even know he was born. And that, I suppose, is how he is Sacrifice for them.'

I found myself looking at Kettricken closely, and finding there remained very little of the Queen I had known at Buckkeep. I hated what she was saying; it outraged me. Yet my voice was gentle as I asked, 'Why is any of this necessary, my queen? King Verity lives. I shall find him and do all I can to return him to you. Together, you shall rule at Buckkeep, and your children after you.'

'Shall he? Will we? Will they?' Almost she shook her head in denial. 'It may be, FitzChivalry. But for too long I put my faith in believing that things would turn out as they should. I will not fall prey to those expectations again. Some things must be made certain before further risks can be taken. An heir to the Farseer line must be assured.' She met my eyes calmly. 'I have made up the declaration and given a copy to Chade, with another to be kept safely here. Your child is heir to the throne, FitzChivalry.'

I had been keeping my soul intact with a tiny hope for so long. For so many months, I had lured myself along with the idea that when all was over and done, I could somehow go back to Molly and win again her love, that I could claim my daughter as my own. Other men might dream of high honours or riches or deeds of valour sung by minstrels. I wanted to come to a small cot as the light faded, to sit in a chair by a fire, my back aching from work, my hands rough with toil, and hold a little girl in my lap while a woman who loved me told me of her day. Of all the things I had ever had to give up simply by virtue of the blood I carried, that was the dearest. Must I now surrender that? Must I become to Molly forever the man who had lied to her, who had left her with child and never returned, and then caused that child to be stolen from her as well?

I had not meant to speak aloud. I did not realize I had until the Queen replied. 'That is what it is to be Sacrifice, FitzChivalry. Nothing can be held back for oneself. Nothing.'

'I will not acknowledge her, then.' The words burned my tongue to speak them. 'I will not claim her as mine.'

'You need not, for I shall claim her as mine. No doubt she will carry the Farseer looks. Your blood is strong. For our purposes, it is sufficient that I know the child is yours. You have already acknowledged that to Starling the minstrel. To her you said you had fathered a child with Molly, a candlemaker from Buckkeep Town. In all of the Six Duchies, the witness of a minstrel is

recognized by law. She has already set her hand to the document, with her oath that she knows the child to be a true Farseer. FitzChivalry,' she went on and her voice was almost kind, though my ears rang to hear her words and I near reeled where I stood, 'no one can escape fate. Not you, nor your daughter. Step back and see this is why she came to be. When all circumstances conspired to deny the Farseer line an heir, somehow one was yet made. By you. Accept, and endure.'

They were the wrong words. She might have been raised to them, but I had been told, 'The fight is not over until you have won it.' I lifted my eyes and looked around at them all. I don't know what they saw on my face but their faces became still. 'I can find Verity,' I said quietly. 'And I will.'

They were silent.

'You want your king,' I said to Kettricken. I waited until I saw assent in her face.

'I want my child,' I said quietly.

'What are you saying?' Kettricken demanded coldly.

'I am saying that I want the same things you do. I wish to be with the one I love, to raise our child with her.' I met her eyes. 'Tell me I can have that. It is all I have ever wanted.'

She met my eyes squarely. 'I cannot make you that promise, FitzChivalry. She is too important for simple love to claim her.'

The words struck me as both utterly absurd and completely true. I bowed my head in what was not assent. I stared a hole into the floor, trying to find other choices, other ways.

'I know what you will say next,' Kettricken said bitterly. 'That if I claim your child for the throne, you will not help me find Verity. I have considered long and well, knowing that this will sever me from your help. I am prepared to seek him out on my own. I have the map. Somehow, I shall ...'

'Kettricken.' I cut into her speech with her name said quietly, bereft of her title. I had not meant to. I saw it startled her. I found myself slowly shaking my head. 'You do not understand. Were Molly standing here before me with our daughter, still I would have to seek my king. No matter what is done to me, no matter how I am wronged. Still, I must seek Verity.'

My words changed the faces in the room. Chade lifted his head and looked at me with fierce pride shining in his eyes. Kettricken turned aside, blinking at tears. I think she may have felt slightly ashamed. To the Fool, I

was once more his Catalyst. In Starling there bloomed the hope that I might still be worthy of a legend.

But in me there was the overriding hunger for the absolute. Verity had shown it to me, in its pure physical form. I would answer my king's Skill-command and serve him as I had vowed. But another call beckoned me now as well. The Skill.

TWENTY-THREE

The Mountains

One might suppose that the Mountain Kingdom, with its sparse hamlets and scattered folk, was a new realm but recently gathered together. In truth, its history far predates any of the written records of the Six Duchies. To call this region a kingdom is truly a misnomer. In ancient times, the diverse hunters, herders and farmers, both nomadic and settled, gradually gave their allegiance to a Judge, a woman of great wisdom, who resided at Jhaampe. Although this person has come to be called the King or Queen of the Mountains by outsiders, to the residents of the Mountain Kingdom, he or she is still the Sacrifice, the one who is willing to give all, even life, for the sake of those who are ruled. The first Judge who lived at Jhaampe is now a shadowy figure of legend, her deeds known only by the songs of her that Mountain folk still sing.

Yet old as those songs are, there is an even older rumour of a more ancient ruler and capital city. The Mountain Kingdom, as we know it today, consists almost entirely of the wandering folk and settlements on the eastern flanks of the Mountains. Beyond the Mountains lie the icy shores that border the White Sea. Some few trade routes still meander through the sharp teeth of the Mountains to reach the hunting folk who live in that snowy place. To the south of the Mountains are the unsettled forests of the Rain Wilds, and somewhere the source of the Rain River that is the boundary of the Chalced States. These are the only lands and folks that have been truly charted beyond the Mountains. Yet there have always been legends of another land, one locked and lost in the peaks beyond the Mountain Kingdom. As one travels deeper in the Mountains, past the boundaries of the folk who owe allegiance to Jhaampe, the land becomes even more rugged and unyielding. Snow never leaves the taller peaks, and some valleys host only glacial ice. In some areas, it is said that great steams and smokes pour up from cracks in the mountains and that the earth may tremble quietly or wrench itself in violent shakings. There are few reasons for anyone to venture into that region of scree and cliffs. Hunting is easier and more profitable on the greener slopes of the mountains. There is insufficient grazing to lure any shepherd's flocks.

Regarding that land, we have the usual tales that distant lands spawn. Dragons and giants, ancient tumbledown cities, savage unicorns, treasure hoards and secret maps, dusty streets paved with gold, valleys of eternal spring where the water rises steaming from the ground, dangerous sorcerers spell-locked in caves of gems and ancient sleeping evils embedded in the earth. All are said to reside in the ancient, nameless land beyond the boundaries of the Mountain Kingdom.

Kettricken truly had expected me to refuse to help her search for Verity. In the days of my convalescence she had determined she would seek for him on her own, and to that end she had mustered supplies and animals. In the Six Duchies, a queen would have had the royal treasury to draw on, as well as the enforced largesse of her nobles. Such was not the case in the Mountain Kingdom. Here, while King Eyod remained alive, she was no more than a younger relative of the Sacrifice. While it was expected that she would succeed him some day, it gave her no right to command the wealth of her people. In truth, even were she Sacrifice, she would not have had access to riches and resources. The Sacrifice and his immediate family lived simply within their beautiful dwelling. All of Jhaampe, the palace, the gardens, the fountains, all belonged to the folk of the Mountain Kingdom. The Sacrifice did not want for anything, but neither did he possess excess.

So Kettricken turned, not to royal coffers and nobles eager to curry favour, but to old friends and cousins for what she needed. She had approached her father, but he had told her, firmly but sadly, that finding the King of the Six Duchies was her concern, not that of the Mountain Kingdom. Much as he grieved with his daughter over the disappearance of a man she loved, he could not divert supplies from defending the Mountain Kingdom from Regal of the Six Duchies. Such was the bond between them that she could accept his refusal with understanding. It shamed me to think of the rightful Queen of the Six Duchies turning to the charity of her relatives and friends. But only when I was not nursing my resentment toward her.

She had designed the expedition to her convenience, not mine. I approved of little of it. In the few days before we departed, she deigned to consult me on some aspects of it, but my opinions were overridden as often as they were listened to. We spoke to one another civilly, without the warmth of either anger or friendship. There were many areas where we disagreed,

and when we did, she did as she judged wisest. Unspoken but implied was that my judgment in the past had been faulty and short-sighted.

I wanted no beasts of burden that might starve and freeze. Block as I might, the Wit left me vulnerable to their pain. Kettricken, however, had procured half a dozen creatures that she claimed did not mind snow and cold, and browsed rather than grazed. They were jeppas, creatures native to some of the remoter parts of the Mountain Kingdom. They reminded me of long-necked goats with paws instead of hooves. I had small faith that they would be able to carry enough to make them worth the nuisance of dealing with them. Kettricken told me calmly that I would soon get used to them.

It all depends on how they taste, Nighteyes suggested philosophically. I was prone to agree with him.

Her choice of companions for the expedition irked me even more. I saw no sense to her risking herself, but on that point I knew better than to argue. I resented Starling's going, once I discovered what she had bargained to be allowed to go. Her reason was still to find a song that would make her reputation. She had bought her place in our group by her unspoken trade that only if she were allowed to go would she make written record that Molly's child was mine also. She knew I felt she had betrayed me, and wisely avoided my company after that. With us would go three cousins of Kettricken's, all big, stoutly-muscled folk well practised in travelling through the Mountains. It would not be a large party. Kettricken assured me that if six were not enough to find Verity, then six hundred would not suffice. I agreed with her that it was easier to supply a smaller party, and that often they travelled faster than large groups.

Chade was not to be of our party. He was going back to Buckkeep, to bear the tidings to Patience that Kettricken would seek out Verity, and to plant the seeds of rumour that there was, indeed, an heir to the Six Duchies throne. He would also be seeing Burrich and Molly and the child. He had offered to let Molly and Patience and Burrich know that I was still alive. The offer had come awkwardly, for he knew full well that I hated the part he had played in claiming my daughter for the throne. But I swallowed my anger and spoke to him politely and was rewarded with his solemn promise that he would say nothing of me to any of them. At the time it seemed like the wisest course. I felt that only I could fully explain to Molly why I had acted as I had. And she had already mourned me as dead once. If I did not survive this quest, she would not grieve any more than she had.

Chade came to bid me farewell the night he left for Buck. At first we both tried to pretend that all was well between us. We talked of small things that had once mattered to both of us. I felt genuine loss when he told me of Slink's death. I tried to talk him into taking Ruddy and Sooty with him, to return them to Burrich's care. Ruddy needed a firmer hand than he was getting, and the stallion could be far more than transportation to Burrich. His stud service could be sold or traded, and Sooty's foal represented more wealth to come. But Chade shook his head and said he must travel swiftly and attract no attention. One man with three horses was a target for bandits if nothing else. I had seen the vicious little gelding Chade had for a mount. Bad-tempered as he was, he was tough and agile, and Chade assured me, very swift in a chase over bad terrain. He grinned as he said it, and I knew that that particular ability of the horse had been well tested. The Fool was right, I thought to myself then bitterly. War and intrigue did agree with him. I looked at him, in his tall boots and swirling cloak, at the rampant buck he wore so openly on his brow above his green eyes, and tried to equate him with the gentle-handed old man who had schooled me in how to kill people. His years were there still, but he carried them differently. Privately I wondered what drugs he used to prolong his energy.

Yet as different as he was, he was still Chade. I wanted to reach out to him and know that there was still a bond of some kind between us, but I could not. I could not understand myself. How could his opinion still matter so much to me, when I knew he was willing to take my child and my happiness for the sake of the Farseer throne? I felt it as a weakness in myself that I could not find the strength of will to hate him. I reached for that hatred, and came up with only a boyish sulkiness that kept me from clasping his hand at his departure or wishing him well. He ignored my surliness, which made me feel even more childish.

After he was gone, the Fool gave me the leather saddlebag he had left for me. Inside was a very serviceable sheath knife, a small pouch of coins and a selection of poisons and healing herbs, including a generous supply of elfbark. Wrapped and carefully labelled that it should be used only with the greatest caution and in greatest need was a small paper of carris seed. In a battered leather sheath was a plain but serviceable short sword. I felt a sudden anger at him that I could not explain. 'It is so typical of him,' I exclaimed and dumped the bag out on the table for the Fool to witness.

‘Poison and knives. That is what he thinks of me. This is still how he sees me. Death is all he can imagine for me.’

‘I doubt he expected you to use them on yourself,’ the Fool observed mildly. He pushed the knife away from the marionette he was stringing. ‘Perhaps he thought you might use them to protect yourself.’

‘Don’t you understand?’ I demanded of him. ‘These are gifts for the boy Chade taught to be an assassin. He can’t see that isn’t who I am any longer. He can’t forgive me for wanting a life of my own.’

‘Any more than you can forgive him for no longer being your benevolent and indulgent tutor,’ the Fool observed drily. He was knotting the strings from the control paddles to the marionette’s limbs. ‘It’s a bit of a threat, isn’t it, to see him stride about like a warrior, putting himself joyfully in danger for something he believes in, flirting with women, and generally acting as if he’d claimed a life of his own for himself?’

It was like a dash of cold water in the face. Almost, I had to admit my jealousy that Chade had boldly seized what still eluded me. ‘That isn’t it at all!’ I snarled at the Fool.

The marionette he was working on wagged a rebuking finger at me while the Fool smirked at me over his head. It had an uncanny resemblance to Ratsy. ‘What I see,’ he observed to no one in particular, ‘is that it is not Verity’s buck head he wears on his brow. No, the sigil he chose is more like one, oh, let me see, one that Prince Verity chose for his bastard nephew. Do not you see a resemblance?’

I was silent for a time. Then, ‘What of it?’ I asked grudgingly.

The Fool swung his marionette to the floor, where the bony creature shrugged eerily. ‘Neither King Shrewd’s death, nor Verity’s supposed death flushed that weasel out of hiding. Only when he believed you murdered did anger flare up in him hot enough for him to fling aside all hiding and pretence and declare he would yet see a true Farseer on the throne.’ The marionette wagged a finger at me.

‘Are you trying to say he does this for me, for my sake? When the last thing I would wish is to see the throne claim my child?’

The marionette crossed its arms and wagged its head thoughtfully. ‘It seems to me that Chade has always done what he thought was best for you. Whether you agreed or not. Perhaps he extends that to your daughter. She would be, after all, his great grand-niece, and the last living remnant of his bloodline. Excluding Regal and yourself, of course.’ The marionette danced

a few steps. ‘How else would you expect a man that old to provide for a child so young? He does not expect to live forever. Perhaps he thought she would be safer astride a throne than ridden over by another who wished to claim it.’

I turned away from the Fool and made some pretence of gathering clothing to wash. It would take me a long time to think through what he had said.

I was willing to accept Ketricken’s choice of tents and clothing for her expedition, and honest enough to be grateful that she saw fit to provide for my clothing and shelter as well. Had she excluded me totally from her entourage, I could not have completely faulted her. Instead, Jofron came one day bearing a stack of clothing and bedding for me, and to measure my feet for the sacklike boots the Mountain folk favoured. She proved merry company, for she and the Fool exchanged playful barbs all the while. His fluency in Chyurda exceeded my own, and at times I was hard pressed to follow the conversation, while half of the Fool’s word-plays escaped me. I wondered in passing exactly what went on between those two. When I had first arrived, I had thought her some sort of disciple to him. Now I wondered if she had not affected that interest simply as an excuse to be near him. Before she left, she measured the Fool’s feet as well, and asked him questions as to what colours and trims he wished worked into the boots.

‘New boots?’ I asked him after she had gone. ‘As little as you venture outside, I would scarcely think you need them.’

He gave me a level look. The recent merriment faded from his face. ‘You know I must go with you,’ he pointed out calmly. He smiled an odd smile. ‘Why else do you think we have been brought together in this far place? It is by the interaction of the Catalyst and the White Prophet that the events of this time shall be returned to their proper course. I believe that if we succeed, the Red Ships will be driven from the Six Duchies coast, and a Farseer will inherit a throne.’

‘That would seem to fit most of the prophecies,’ Kettle agreed from her hearth corner. She was tying off the last row of knitting on a thick mitten. ‘If the plague of the mindless hunger is Forging, and your actions put a stop to that, that would fit another prophecy as well.’

Kettle’s knack of providing a prophecy for every occasion was beginning to grate on me. I took a breath, and then asked the Fool, ‘And

what does Queen Kettricken say about your joining her party?’

‘I haven’t discussed it with her,’ he replied blithely. ‘I am not joining her, Fitz. I am following you.’ A sort of bemusement came over his face. ‘I have known since I was a child that together we should do this task. It had not occurred to me to question that I would go with you. I have been making preparations since the day you arrived here.’

‘As have I,’ Kettle observed quietly.

We both turned to stare at her. She feigned not to notice as she tried on the mitten and admired its fit.

‘No.’ I spoke bluntly. Bad enough to look forward to dying pack animals. I was not going to witness the death of another friend. It was too obvious to voice that she was hopelessly too old for such a trek.

‘I thought you might stay here, in my home,’ the Fool offered more gently. ‘There is plenty of firewood for the rest of the winter and some supplies of meal and –’

‘I expect to die on the journey, if it’s any comfort to you.’ She took off the mitten and set it with its mate. Casually she inspected what was left of her skein of wool. She began to cast on stitches, the yarn flowing effortlessly through her fingers. ‘And you needn’t worry about me before then. I’ve made provision for myself. Done a bit of trading, and I have the food and such that I’ll need.’ She glanced up at me from her needles, and added quietly, ‘I have the wherewithal to see this journey through to the end.’

I had to admire her calm assumption that her life was still her own, to do with as she wished. I wondered when I had begun to think of her as a helpless old woman that someone would have to look after now. She looked back down to her knitting. Needlessly, for her fingers continued to work whether she watched them or not. ‘I see you understand me,’ she said quietly. And that was that.

I have never known any expedition to get off exactly as planned. Generally, the larger one is, the more difficulties it has. Ours was no exception. The morning before we were scheduled to depart, I was rudely shaken out of my sleep.

‘Get up, Fitz, we have to leave now,’ Kettricken said tersely.

I sat up slowly. I was wide awake instantly, but my healing back still did not encourage me to move swiftly. The Fool was sitting on the edge of his bed, looking more anxious than I had ever seen him. ‘What is it?’ I demanded.

‘Regal.’ I had never heard so much venom in one word. Her face was very white and she knotted and unknotted her fists at her side. ‘He has sent a courier under a truce flag to my father, saying that we harbour a known traitor to the Six Duchies. He says that if we release you to him, he will see it as a sign of good faith with the Six Duchies and will not consider us an enemy. But if we do not, he will loose the troops he has poised on our borders, for he will know that we plot with his enemies against him.’ She paused. ‘My father is considering what to do.’

‘Kettricken, I am but the excuse,’ I protested. My heart was hammering in my chest. Nighteyes whined anxiously. ‘You must know it has taken him months to mass those troops. They are not there because I am here. They are in place because he plans to move against the Mountain Kingdom no matter what. You know Regal. It is all a bluff to see if he can get you to turn me over to him. Once you do, he will find some other pretext to attack.’

‘I am not a simpleton,’ she said coldly. ‘Our watchers have known of the troops for weeks. We have been doing what we can to prepare ourselves. Always our mountains have been our strongest defence. But never before have we confronted an organized foe in such numbers. My father is Sacrifice, Fitz. He must do whatever will best serve the Mountain Kingdom. So now he must ponder if by turning you over, he will have a chance to treat with Regal. Do not think my father is stupid enough to trust him. But the longer he can delay an attack against his people, the better prepared they will be.’

‘It sounds as if there is little left to decide,’ I said bitterly.

‘There was no reason for my father to make me privy to the courier’s message,’ Kettricken observed. ‘The decision is his.’ Her eyes met mine squarely, and held a shadow of our old friendship. ‘I think perhaps he offers me a chance to spirit you away. Before I would be defying his orders to turn you over to Regal. Perhaps he thinks to tell Regal you have escaped but he intends to track you down.’

Behind Kettricken, the Fool was pulling on leggings under his nightshirt.

‘It will be harder than I had planned,’ Kettricken confided in me. ‘I cannot involve any other Mountain folk in this. It will have to be you, I and Starling. Alone. And we must leave now, within the hour.’

‘I’ll be ready,’ I promised her.

‘Meet me behind Joss’s woodshed,’ she said, and left.

I looked at the Fool. ‘So. Do we tell Kettle?’

‘Why are you asking me?’ he demanded.

I gave a small shrug. Then I got up and began dressing hastily. I thought of all the small ways in which I was not prepared and then gave it up as useless. In a very short time, the Fool and I shouldered our packs. Nighteyes rose, stretched thoroughly, and went to the door to precede us. *I shall miss the fireplace. But the hunting will be better.* He accepted all so calmly.

The Fool took a careful look around the hut, and then closed the door behind us. ‘That’s the first place I’ve ever lived that was solely mine,’ he observed as we walked away from it.

‘You leave so much behind to do this,’ I said awkwardly, thinking of his tools, his half-finished puppets, even the plants growing inside by the window. Despite myself, I felt responsible for it. Perhaps it was because I was so glad that I was not going on alone.

He glanced over at me and shrugged. ‘I take myself with me. That’s all I truly need, or own.’ He glanced back at the door he had painted himself. ‘Jofron will take good care of it. And of Kettle, too.’

I wondered if he left behind more than I knew.

We were nearly to the woodshed when I saw some children racing down the path toward us. ‘There he is!’ one cried, pointing. I shot a startled glance at the Fool, then braced myself, wondering what was to come. How could one defend oneself against children? At a loss, I awaited the attack. But the wolf did not wait. He sank low to his belly in the snow, even his tail flat. As the children closed the distance, he suddenly shot forward straight at the leader. ‘NO!’ I cried aloud in horror, but none of them paid me any heed. The wolf’s front paws struck the boy’s chest, to drive him down hard in the snow. In a flash Nighteyes was up and after the others, who fled, shrieking with laughter as one after another he caught up with them and mowed them down. By the time he’d felled the last one, the first boy was up and after him, vainly trying to keep up with the wolf and making wild grabs at his tail as Nighteyes flashed by him, tongue lolling.

He felled them all again, twice more, before he halted in one of his racing loops. He watched the children getting to their feet, then glanced over his shoulder at me. He folded his ears down abashedly, then looked back to the children, his tail wagging low. One girl was already digging a chunk of fatbread out of her pocket while another teased him with a strip of leather,

snaking it over the snow and trying to get him involved in a tug-of-war. I feigned not to notice.

I'll catch up with you later, he offered.

No doubt, I told him drily. The Fool and I kept walking. I glanced back once to see the wolf, teeth set in the leather and all four feet braced while two boys dragged at the other end of it. I surmised that I now knew how he had been spending his afternoons. I think I felt a pang of envy.

Kettricken was already waiting. Six laden jeppas were roped together in a train. I wished now I had taken the time to learn more about them, but I had assumed the others would have the care of them. 'We're still taking all of them?' I asked in dismay.

'It would take too long to unpack the loads and repack with only what we need. Perhaps later we'll abandon the extra supplies and animals. But for now, I simply wish to be gone as soon as possible.'

'Then let's leave,' I suggested.

Kettricken looked pointedly at the Fool. 'What are you doing here? Wishing Fitz farewell?'

'I go where he does,' the Fool said quietly.

The Queen looked at him and something in her face almost softened. 'It will be cold, Fool. I have not forgotten how you suffered from the cold on the way here. Where we go, now, the cold will linger long after spring has reached Jhaampe.'

'I go where he does,' the Fool repeated quietly.

Kettricken shook her head to herself. Then she shrugged. She strode to the head of the line of jeppas and snapped her fingers. The lead animal flapped his hairy ears and followed her. The others followed him. Their obedience impressed me. I quested briefly toward them and found such a strong herd instinct at work that they scarcely thought of themselves as separate animals. As long as the lead animal followed Kettricken, there would be no problems with the others.

Kettricken led us along a trail that was little more than a path. It wound mostly behind the scattered cottages that housed the winter residents of Jhaampe. In a very short time we left the last of the huts behind and travelled through ancient forest. The Fool and I walked behind the string of animals. I watched the one in front of us, marking how his wide, flat feet spread on the snow much as the wolf's did. They set a pace slightly faster than a comfortable walk.

We had not gone too far before I heard a shout behind us. I flinched and glanced hastily over my shoulder. It was Starling, coming at a run, her pack jouncing on her shoulders. When she came up to us, she said accusingly, 'You left without me!'

The Fool grinned. I shrugged. 'I left when my queen commanded it,' I observed.

She glared at us, and then hurried past us, floundering through the loose snow beside the trail to pass the jeppas and catch up with Kettricken. Their voices carried clearly in the cold air. 'I told you I was leaving right away,' the Queen said tersely. 'Then I did.'

To my amazement, Starling had the sense to be quiet. For a brief time she struggled along in the loose snow beside Kettricken. Then she gradually gave it up, letting first the jeppas, and then the Fool and I pass her. She fell in behind me. I knew our pace would be difficult for her to match. I felt sorry for her. Then I thought of my daughter, and did not even look back to see if she were keeping up.

It was the beginning of a long, uneventful day. The path led always uphill, never steeply, but the constant grade was taxing. Kettricken did not let up on the pace, but kept us moving steadily. None of us talked much. I was too busy breathing, and trying to ignore the gradually increasing ache in my back. Sound flesh covered the arrow-wound now, but the muscles under it still complained of their new healing.

Great trees towered above us. Most of the trees were evergreens, some of kinds I had never seen before. They made a perpetual twilight of the brief winter day's greyness. There was little underbrush to struggle with; most of the scenery was of the staggered ranks of immense trunks and a few low swooping branches. For the most part, the live branches of the trees began far over our heads. From time to time, we passed patches of smaller deciduous trees that had sprung up in areas of open forest made by a great tree's demise. The path was well packed, evidently used often by animals and by folk on skis. It was narrow, and if one did not pay attention, it was easy to step off the path and sink surprisingly deep in the unpacked snow. I tried to pay attention.

The day was mild, by mountain standards, and I soon discovered that the clothing Kettricken had procured for me was very efficient at keeping me warm. I loosened my coat at the throat and then the collar of my shirt to let body heat escape. The Fool threw back the fur-rimmed hood of his coat, to

reveal that he wore a gay woollen hat within it. I watched the tassel on the end of it bobbing as he walked. If the pace bothered him, he said nothing about it. Perhaps, like me, he had no breath left to complain.

Shortly after midday, Nighteyes joined us.

‘Good doggie!’ I observed aloud to him.

That pales in comparison to what Kettle is calling you, he observed smugly. *I pity you all when the old bitch catches up with the pack. She has a stick.*

Is she following us?

She tracks quite well, for a noseless human. Nighteyes trotted past us, moving with surprising ease even in the unpacked snow to the side of the trail. I could tell he was enjoying the ripple of unease that his scent pushed through the trailing jeppas. I watched him as he passed them all and then Kettricken. Once he was in the lead, he ranged confidently ahead, just as if he knew where we were going. I soon lost sight of him, but I did not worry. I knew he would circle back often to check on us.

‘Kettle is following us,’ I told the Fool.

He shot me a questioning look.

‘Nighteyes says she is quite angry with us.’

His shoulders rose and fell in a quick sigh. ‘Well. She has a right to her own decision,’ he observed to himself. Then, to me, he added, ‘It still unnerves me a bit when you and the wolf do that.’

‘Does it bother you? That I am Witted?’

‘Does it bother you to meet my eyes?’ he rejoined.

It was enough. We kept walking.

Kettricken held us to a steady pace for as long as the daylight lasted. A trampled area under the shelter of some of the great trees was our stopping-place. While it did not look frequently used, we were on some sort of traders’ trail to Jhaampe. Kettricken was matter-of-fact in her total command of us. She gestured Starling to a small rick of dry firewood protected from the snow by canvas. ‘Use some to get a fire started, and then take care to replace at least as much as we use. Many folk stop here, and in foul weather, a life may depend on that wood being there.’ Starling meekly obeyed.

She directed the Fool and I as we assisted her in setting up a shelter. When we were finished, we had a tent shaped rather like the cap of a mushroom. That done, she portioned out the tasks of unloading bedding and moving it into the tent, unloading the animals and picketing the lead animal,

and melting snow for water. She herself shared fully in the tasks. I watched the efficiency with which she established our camp and saw to our needs. With a pang, I realized she reminded me of Verity. She would have made a good soldier.

Once our basic camp was established, the Fool and I exchanged glances. I went to where Kettricken was checking our jeppas. Those hardy beasts were already at work nibbling bud tips and bark from the smaller trees that fronted one side of the camp. 'I think Kettle may be following us,' I told her. 'Do you think I should go back and look for her?'

'To what end?' Kettricken asked me. The question sounded callous, but she went on, 'If she can catch up with us, then we will share what we have. You know that. But I suspect that she will weary before she gets here, and turn back to Jhaampe. Perhaps she has already turned back.'

And perhaps she has become exhausted and sunk down by the side of the trail, I thought to myself. But I did not go back. I recognized in Kettricken's words the harsh practicality of the Mountain folk. She would respect Kettle's decision to follow us. Even if her attempt to do so killed her, Kettricken would not interfere with her own will for herself. I knew that among the Mountain folk, it was not unusual for an old person to choose what they called Sequestering, a self-imposed exile where cold might put an end to all infirmities. I, too, respected Kettle's right to choose her life-path, or die in the attempt. But it did not stop me from sending Nighteyes back down our trail to see if she was still coming. I chose to believe it was only curiosity on my part. He had just returned to camp with a bloody white hare in his jaws. At my request, he stood, stretched and woefully commanded me, *Guard my meat, then*. He disappeared into the gathering dusk.

The evening meal of porridge and hearth-cakes was just finished cooking when Kettle came into camp with Nighteyes at her heels. She stalked up to the fire and stood warming her hands at it as she glowered at the Fool and me. The Fool and I exchanged a glance. It was a guilty one. I hastily offered Kettle the cup of tea I had just poured for myself. She took it and drank it before she said accusingly, 'You left without me.'

'Yes,' I admitted. 'We did. Kettricken came to us and said we must leave right away, so the Fool and I –'

'I came anyway,' she announced triumphantly, cutting through my words. 'And I intend to go on with you.'

‘We are fleeing,’ Kettricken said quietly. ‘We can’t slow our pace for you.’

Sparks near leaped from Kettle’s eyes. ‘Did I ask you to?’ she asked the Queen tartly.

Kettricken shrugged. ‘Just so you understand,’ she said quietly.

‘I do,’ Kettle replied as quietly. And it was settled.

I had watched this interchange with a sort of awe. I felt an increase in respect for both of the women afterwards. I think I fully grasped then how Kettricken perceived herself. She was the Queen of the Six Duchies and she did not doubt it. But unlike many, she had not hidden behind a title or taken offence at Kettle’s quick reply to her. Instead, she had answered her, woman to woman, with respect but also authority. Once more I had glimpsed her mettle and found I could not fault it.

We all shared the yurt that night. Kettricken filled a small brazier with coals from our fire and brought it within. It made the shelter surprisingly comfortable. She posted a watch and included both Kettle and herself in that duty. The others slept well. I lay awake for a time. I was once more on my way to find Verity. That brought a tiny measure of release from the incessant Skill-command. But I was also on my way to the river where he had laved his hands in raw Skill. That seductive image lurked always at the edge of my mind now. Resolutely I pushed the temptation from my mind, but that night my dreams were full of it. We broke camp early, and were on our way before the day was fairly born. Kettricken bid us discard a second, smaller yurt that had been brought along to accommodate our original larger party. She left it carefully stowed at the stopping-place where another might find and make use of it. The freed beast was loaded instead with the bulk of the packs the humans had carried. I was grateful, for the throbbing of my back was unceasing now.

For four days Kettricken held us to that pace. She did not say if she truly expected pursuit. I did not ask. There were no real opportunities for private talk with anyone. Kettricken always led, followed by the animals, the Fool and me, Starling, and, often trailing us by quite a distance, Kettle. Both women kept their promises. Kettricken did not slow the pace for the old woman, and Kettle never complained of it. Each night she came into camp late, usually accompanied by Nighteyes. She was usually just in time to share our food and shelter for the night. But she arose the moment Kettricken did the next day and never complained.

The fourth night, when we were all within the tent and settling down to sleep, Kettricken suddenly addressed me. ‘FitzChivalry, I would have your thoughts on something,’ she declared.

I sat up, intrigued by the formality of her request. ‘I am at your service, my queen.’

Beside me, the Fool muffled a snicker. I suppose we both looked a bit odd, sitting in a welter of blankets and furs and addressing one another so formally. But I kept my demeanour.

Kettricken added a few bits of dry wood to the brazier to bring up a flame and light. She took out an enamelled cylinder, removed the cap and coaxed out a piece of vellum. As she gently unrolled it, I recognized the map that had inspired Verity to his quest. It seemed odd to look at the faded map in this setting. It belonged to a much more secure time in my life, when hot meals of good food were taken for granted, when my clothes were tailored to fit me and I knew where I would sleep each night. It seemed unfair that my whole world had changed so much since I had last seen the map, but that it remained unchanged, an ageing flap of vellum with a worn tracery of lines on it. Kettricken held it flat on her lap and tapped a blank spot on it. ‘This is about where we are,’ she told me. She took a breath as if bracing herself. She tapped another spot, likewise unmarked. ‘This is about where we found the signs of a battle. Where I found Verity’s cloak and ... the bones.’ Her voice quavered a bit on the words. She looked up suddenly and her eyes met mine as they had not since Buckkeep. ‘You know, Fitz, it is hard for me. I gathered up those bones and thought they were his. For so many months, I believed him dead. And now, solely on your word of some magic that I do not possess or understand, I try to believe he is alive. That there is hope still. But ... I have held those bones. And my hands cannot forget the weight and chill of them, nor my nose that smell.’

‘He lives, my lady,’ I assured her quietly.

She sighed again. ‘Here is what I would ask you. Shall we go directly to where the trails are marked on this map, the ones that Verity said he would follow? Or do you wish to be taken to the battle-site first?’

I thought for a time. ‘I am sure you gathered from that place all there was to gather, my queen. Time has passed, part of a summer and more than half of a winter since you were last there. No. I can think of nothing I might find there that your trackers did not when the ground was bared of snow.

Verity lives, my queen, and he is not there. So let us not seek him there, but where he said he would go.'

She nodded slowly, but if she took heart from my words, she did not show it. Instead, she tapped the map again. 'This road here shown is known to us. It was a trade road once, and although no one even recalls what its destination was, it is still used. The more remote villages and the solitary trappers have their paths to it, and they then follow it down to Jhaampe. We could have been travelling on it all this time, but I did not wish to. It is too well used. We have come by the swiftest route, if not the widest. Tomorrow, however, we shall cross it. And when we do, we shall set our backs toward Jhaampe and follow it up into the Mountains.' Her finger traced it on the map. 'I have never been to that part of the Mountains,' she said simply. 'Few have, other than trappers or occasional adventurers who go to see if the old tales are true. Usually they bring back tales of their own that are even stranger than the ones that prompted them to go adventuring.'

I watched her pale fingers walk slowly across the map. The faint lines of the ancient road diverged into three separate trails with different destinations. It began and ended, that road, with no apparent source or destination. Whatever had once been marked at the end of those lines had faded away into inky ghosts. Neither of us had any way of knowing which destination Verity had chosen. Though they did not look far separated on the map, the terrain of the Mountains could mean they were days or even weeks apart. I also had small trust in such an old map being reliably to scale.

'Where are we going first?' I asked her.

She hesitated briefly, then her finger tapped one of the trail ends. 'Here. I think this one would be closest.'

'Then that is a wise choice.'

She met my eyes again. 'Fitz. Could not you simply Skill to him, and ask him where he is? Or bid him come to us? Or at least ask him why he has not returned to me?'

At each small shake of my head, her eyes grew wilder. 'Why not?' she demanded in a shaking voice. 'This great and secret magic of the Farseers cannot even call him to us in such need?'

I kept my eyes on her face, but wished there had been fewer listening ears. Despite all Ketricken knew of me, I still felt very uneasy speaking of the Skill with anyone save Verity. I chose my words carefully. 'By Skilling

to him, I might place him in great danger, my lady. Or draw trouble down on us.'

'How?' she demanded.

I briefly considered the Fool, Kettle and Starling. It was hard to explain to myself the uneasiness I felt at speaking bluntly of a magic that had been guarded as a secret for so many generations. But this was my queen and she had asked me a question. I lowered my eyes and spoke. 'The coterie Galen made was never loyal to the King. Not to King Shrewd, not to King Verity. Always they were the tool of a traitor, used to cast doubt on the King's abilities and undermine his ability to defend his kingdom.'

From Kettle came a small gasp of indrawn breath, while Ketricken's blue eyes went steely grey with cold. I continued. 'Even now, were I to openly Skill to Verity, they might find a way to listen. By such a Skilling, they might find him. Or us. They have grown strong in the Skill, and ferreted out ways of using it that I have never learned. They spy on other Skill-users. They can, using only the Skill, inflict pain, or create illusion. I fear to Skill to my king, Queen Ketricken. That he has not chosen to Skill to me makes me believe my caution is the same as his.'

Ketricken had gone snow pale as she mulled my words. Softly she asked, 'Always disloyal to him, Fitz? Speak plainly. Did not they aid in defending the Six Duchies at all?'

I weighed my words as if I were reporting to Verity himself. 'I have no proof, my lady. But I would guess that Skill-messages of Red Ships were sometimes never relayed, or were deliberately delayed. I think the commands that Verity Skilled forth to the coterie members in the watchtowers were not passed on to the keeps they were to guard. They obeyed him enough that Verity could not tell his messages and commands had been delivered hours after he had sent them. To his dukes, his efforts would appear inept, his strategies untimely or foolish.' My voice trailed away at the anger that blossomed in Ketricken's face. Colour came up in her cheeks, angry roses.

'How many lives?' she asked harshly. 'How many towns? How many dead, or worse, Forged? All for a prince's spite, all for a spoiled boy's ambition for the throne? How could he have done it, Fitz? How could he have stood to let people die simply to make his brother look foolish and incompetent?'

I did not have any real answer to that. ‘Perhaps he did not think they were people and towns,’ I heard myself say softly. ‘Perhaps to him they were only game pieces. Possessions of Verity’s to be destroyed if he could not win them for himself.’

Kettricken closed her eyes. ‘This cannot be forgiven,’ she said quietly to herself. She sounded ill with it. With an oddly gentle finality, she added, ‘You will have to kill him, FitzChivalry.’

So odd, to be given that royal command at last. ‘I know that, my lady. I knew it when last I tried.’

‘No,’ she corrected me. ‘When last you attempted it, it was for yourself. Did not you know that had angered me? This time, I tell you that you must kill him for the sake of the Six Duchies.’ She shook her head, almost surprised. ‘It is the only way in which he can be Sacrifice for his people. To be killed for them before he can hurt them any more.’

She looked around abruptly at the circle of silent people huddled in bedding, staring at her. ‘Go to sleep,’ she told all of us, as if we were wilful children. ‘We must get up early again tomorrow and once more travel swiftly. Sleep while you can.’

Starling went outside to take up her first night’s watch. The others lay back and as the flames from the brazier fell and the light dimmed, I am sure they slept. But despite my weariness, I lay and stared into the darkness. About me were only the sounds of people breathing, of the night wind barely moving through the trees. If I quested out, I could sense Nighteyes prowling about, ever alert for the unwary mouse. The peace and stillness of the winterbound forest was all around us. They all slept deeply, save for Starling on watch.

No one else heard the rushing drive of the Skill-urge that grew stronger within me every day of our journeying. I had not spoken to the Queen of my other fear: that if I reached out to Verity with the Skill, I would never return, but would instead immerse myself in that Skill river I had glimpsed and be forever borne away on it. Even to think on that temptation brought me quivering to the edge of acquiescence. Fiercely I set my walls and boundaries, putting every guard between me and the Skill that I had ever been taught. But tonight I set them, not just to keep Regal and his coterie out of my mind, but to keep myself in it.

TWENTY-FOUR

The Skill Road

What is the true source of magic? Is one born with it in the blood, as some dogs are born to follow a scent while others are best at herding sheep? Or is it a thing that may be won by any with the determination to learn? Or rather are magics inherent to the stones and waters and earths of the world, so that a child imbibes abilities with the water he drinks or the air he breathes? I ask these questions with no concept of how to discover the answers. Did we know the source, could a wizard of great power be deliberately created by one desiring to do so? Could one breed for magic in a child as one breeds a horse for strength or speed? Or select a babe, and begin instruction before the child could even speak? Or build one's house where one might tap the magic where the earth is richest with it? These questions so frighten me that I have almost no desire to pursue the answers, save that if I do not, another may.

It was early afternoon when we came to the wide trail marked on the map. Our narrow path merged into it as a stream joins a river. For some days we were to follow it. Sometimes it led us past small villages tucked into sheltered folds of the Mountains, but Kettricken hastened us past them without stopping. We passed other travellers on the road, and these she greeted courteously, but firmly turned aside all efforts at conversation. If any recognized her as Eyod's daughter, they gave no sign of it. There came a day, however, when we passed the entire day without so much as a glimpse of another traveller, let alone a village or hut. The trail grew narrower, and the only tracks upon it were old ones, blurred by fresh snow. When we rose the next day and set forth upon it, it soon dwindled to no more than a vague track through the trees. Several times Kettricken paused and cast about, and once she made us backtrack and then go on in a new direction. Whatever signs she was following were too subtle for me.

That night, when we camped, she again took out her map and studied it. I sensed her uncertainty, and came to sit beside her. I asked no questions and offered no advice, only gazing with her at the map's worn markings. Finally she glanced up at me.

‘I think we are here,’ she said. Her finger showed me the end of the trade trail we had followed. ‘Somewhere north of us, we should find this other road. I had hoped there would be some ancient connecting trail between the two. It was an idea that made sense to me, that this old road would perhaps connect to one even more forgotten. But now ...’ she sighed. ‘Tomorrow, I suppose we blunder on and hope for luck to aid us.’

Her words did not put heart into any of us.

Nevertheless, the next day we moved on. We moved steadily north, through forest that seemed to have been forever untouched by an axe. Branches laced and intertwined high above us, while generations of leaves and needles lay deep beneath the uneven blanketing of snow that had filtered down to the forest floor. To my Wit-sense, these trees had a ghostly life that was almost animal, as if they had acquired some awareness simply by virtue of their age. But it was an awareness of the greater world of light and moisture, soil and air. They regarded our passage not at all, and by afternoon I felt no more significant than an ant. I had never thought to be disdained by a tree.

As we travelled on, hour after hour, I am sure I was not the only one to wonder if we had lost our way completely. A forest this old could have swallowed a road a generation ago. Roots would have lifted its cobbles, leaves and needles blanketed it. What we sought might no longer exist except as a line on an old map.

It was the wolf, ranging well ahead of us as always, who found it first.

I like this not at all, he announced.

‘The road is that way,’ I called to Kettricken ahead of me. My puny human voice seemed like a fly’s buzzing in a great hall. I was almost surprised when she heard me and looked back. She took in my pointing hand, then, with a shrug, led her pack sheep in a more westerly direction. We still walked for some time before I saw an arrow-straight break in the clustering trees ahead of us. A stripe of light penetrated the forest there.

What is wrong with it?

The wolf shook himself all over as if to rid his coat of water. *It is too much of man. Like a fire to cook meat over.*

I do not understand.

He lay back his ears. *Like a great force made small and bent to a man’s will. Always fire seeks a way to escape containment. So does this road.*

His answer made no sense to me. Then we came to the road. Kettricken led her pack sheep down onto it. I hesitated. The wide road was a straight cut through the trees, its surface lower than that of the forest floor, as when a child drags a stick through sand and leaves a trough behind. The forest trees grew alongside it and leaned over it, but none of them had sent roots thrusting out into the road, nor had any saplings sprouted up from it. Neither had the snow that covered the road's surface been marred, not even by a bird's track. There were not even the muted signs of old tracks covered with snow. No one had trodden this road since the winter snows had begun. As far as I could see, no game trails even crossed it.

I stepped down onto the road's surface.

It was like walking into trailing cobwebs face first. A piece of ice down the back. Stepping into a hot kitchen after being out in an icy wind. It was a physical sensation that seized me, as sharply as any of those others, and yet as indescribable as wet or dry is. I halted, transfixed. Yet none of the others showed any awareness of it as they hopped down from the lip of the forest onto the road surface. Starling's only comment, to herself, was that at least here the snow was shallower and the walking better. She did not even ask herself why the snow should be shallower on the road, but only hurried after the trailing line of jeppas. I was still standing on the road, looking about me, some minutes later when Kettle stepped out of the trees and onto the road's surface. She, too, halted. For an instant, she seemed startled and muttered something.

'Did you say Skill-wrought?' I demanded of her.

Her eyes jumped to me as if she had been unaware of me standing right there before her. She glared. For a moment she didn't speak. Then, 'I said "Hell-rot!"' she declared. 'Near twisted my ankle jumping down. These mountain boots are no stiffer than socks.' She turned away from me and trudged off after the others. I followed her. For some reason, I felt as if I were wading in water, save without the resistance of water. It is a difficult sensation to describe. As if something flowed uphill around me and hurried me along with its current.

It seeks a way to escape containment, the wolf observed again sourly. I glanced up to find him trotting along beside me, but on the lip of the forest rather than on the smooth road surface. *You'd be wiser to travel up here, with me.*

I thought about it. *I seem to be all right. Walking is easier here. Smoother.*

Yes, and fire makes you warmer, right up until the time it burns you.

I had no reply to that. Instead I walked alongside Kettle for a way. After days of travelling single file on the narrow trail, this seemed easier and more companionable. We walked all the rest of the afternoon on the ancient road. It climbed ever upward, but always angling across the faces of the hills, so that the going was never too steep. The only things that ever marred the smooth coat of snow on its surface were occasional dead branches dropped from trees above, and most of these were decaying into sawdust. Not once did I see any animal tracks, either on the road or crossing it.

Not even a sniff of any game, Nighteyes confirmed woefully. *I shall have to range this night to find fresh meat for myself.*

You could go now, I suggested.

I trust you not alone upon this road, he informed me sternly.

What could harm me? Kettle is right here beside me, so I would not be alone.

She is as bad as you are, Nighteyes insisted stubbornly. But despite my questions, he could not explain to me what he meant.

Yet as afternoon deepened into evening, I began to have notions of my own. Time and again, I caught my mind drifting in vivid daydreams, musings so engrossing that coming out of them was like waking with a start. And like many a dream, they popped like bubbles, leaving me with almost no recall of what I had been thinking. Patience giving military commands as if she were Queen of the Six Duchies. Burrich bathing a baby and humming as he did so. Two people I did not know, setting charred stones upon one another as they rebuilt a house. Foolish, bright-coloured images they seemed, but edged so vividly that almost I believed my own musings. The easy walking on the road that had seemed so pleasant at first began to seem an involuntary hurrying, as if a current urged me on independent of my own will. Yet I could not have been hurrying much, for Kettle kept pace with me all the afternoon. Kettle broke in often on my thoughts, to ask me trivial questions, to draw my attention to a bird overhead, or to ask if my back was bothering me. I endeavoured to answer, but moments later I could not recall what we had been talking about. I could not blame her for frowning at me, so muddle-witted was I, but neither could I seem to find a remedy for my absent mind. We passed a fallen log across the road. I thought something odd

about it, and intended to mention it to Kettle but the thought fled before I could master it. So caught up was I in nothing at all, that when the Fool hailed me, I startled. I peered ahead, but could not even see the jeppas any more. Then, 'FitzChivalry!' he shouted again, and I turned around, to find I had walked past not only him, but our whole expedition. Kettle at my side muttered to herself as she turned back.

The others had halted and were already unloading the jeppas. 'Surely you don't mean to pitch the tent in the centre of the road?' Kettle asked in alarm.

Starling and the Fool looked up from where they were stretching out the goat leather shape of the yurt. 'Fear ye the hurrying throngs and carts?' the Fool asked sarcastically.

'It's flat and level. Last night, I had a root or a rock under my bedding,' Starling added.

Kettle ignored them and spoke to Kettricken. 'And we'd be in full view for anyone who stepped onto this road for quite a way in both directions. I think we should move off and camp under the trees.'

Kettricken glanced about. 'It's nearly dark, Kettle. And I do not think we have a great deal to fear from pursuit. I think ...'

I flinched when the Fool took my arm and walked me to the edge of the road. 'Climb up,' he told me gruffly when we got to the edge of the forest. I did, scrambling up to stand once more on forest moss. Once I was there, I yawned, feeling my ears pop. Almost right away, I felt more alert. I glanced back to the road where Starling and Kettricken were gathering up the yurt hides to move them. Kettle was already dragging the poles off the road. 'So, we've decided to camp off the road,' I observed stupidly.

'Are you all right?' the Fool asked me anxiously.

'Of course. My back is no worse than usual,' I added, thinking he referred to that.

'You were standing there, staring off up the road, paying no heed to anyone. Kettle says you've been like that most of the afternoon.'

'I've been a bit muddled,' I admitted. I dragged off my mitten to touch my own face. 'I don't think I'm getting a fever. But it was like that ... bright-edged fever thoughts.'

'Kettle says she thinks it's the road. She said that you said it was Skill-wrought.'

‘She said I said? No. I thought that was what she said when we came onto it. That it was Skill-wrought.’

‘What is “Skill-wrought”?’ the Fool asked me.

‘Shaped by the Skill,’ I replied, then added, ‘I suppose. I’ve never heard of the Skill used to make or shape something.’ I looked wondering back at the road. It flowed so smoothly through the forest, a pure white ribbon, vanishing off under the trees. It drew the eye, and almost I could see what lay beyond the next fold of the forested hillside.

‘Fitz!’

I jerked my attention back to the Fool in annoyance. ‘What?’ I demanded.

He was shivering. ‘You’ve just been standing there, staring off down the road since I left you. I thought you’d gone to get firewood, until I looked up and saw you standing here still. What is the matter?’

I blinked my eyes slowly. I had been walking in a city, looking at the bright yellow and red fruit heaped high in the market stalls. But even as I groped after that dream, it was gone, leaving only a confusion of colour and scent in my mind. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps I am feverish. Or just very weary. I’ll go get the wood.’

‘I’m going with you,’ the Fool announced.

By my knee, Nighteyes whined anxiously. I looked down at him. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked him aloud.

He looked up at me, the fur between his eyes ridged with worry. *You do not seem to hear me. And your thoughts are not ... thoughts.*

I’ll be all right. The Fool is with me. Go and hunt. I can feel your hunger.

And I feel yours, he answered ominously.

He left then, but reluctantly. I followed the Fool into the woods, but did little more than carry the wood he picked up and handed to me. I felt as if I could not quite wake up. ‘Have you ever been studying something tremendously interesting, only to suddenly look up and realize hours have passed? That is how I feel just now.’

The Fool handed me another stick of wood. ‘You are frightening me,’ he informed me quietly. ‘You speak much as King Shrewd did in the days he was weakening.’

‘But he was drugged then, against pain,’ I pointed out. ‘And I am not.’

‘That is what is frightening,’ he told me.

We walked together back to camp. We had been so slow that Kettle and Starling had gathered some fuel and got a small fire going already. The light of it illuminated the dome-shaped tent and the folk moving around it. The jeppas were shadows drifting nearby as they browsed. As we piled our wood by the fire for later use, Kettle looked up from her cooking.

‘How are you feeling?’ she demanded.

‘Better, somewhat,’ I told her.

I glanced about for any chores that needed doing, but camp had been set without me. Kettricken was inside the tent, poring over the map by candlelight. Kettle stirred porridge by the fire while, strange to say, the Fool and Starling conversed quietly. I stood still, trying to recall something I’d meant to do, something I’d been in the middle of doing. The road. I wanted another look at the road. I turned and walked toward it.

‘FitzChivalry!’

I turned, startled at the sharpness in Kettle’s call. ‘What is it?’

‘Where are you going?’ she asked. She paused, as if surprised by her own question. ‘I mean, is Nighteyes about? I haven’t seen him for a bit.’

‘He went to hunt. He’ll be back.’ I started toward the road again.

‘Usually he’s made his kill and come back by now,’ she continued.

I paused. ‘There’s not much game near the road, he said. So he’s had to go further.’ I turned away again.

‘Now there’s a thing that seems odd,’ she went on. ‘There’s no sign of human traffic on the road. And yet the animals avoid it still. Doesn’t game usually follow whatever path is easiest?’

I called back to her, ‘Some animals do. Others prefer to keep to cover.’

‘Go and get him, girl!’ I heard Kettle tell someone sharply.

‘Fitz!’ I heard Starling call, but it was the Fool who caught up with me and took me by the arm.

‘Come back to the tent,’ he urged me, tugging at my arm.

‘I just want to have another look at the road.’

‘It’s dark. You’ll see nothing now. Wait until morning, when we’re travelling on it again. For now, come back to the tent.’

I went with him, but told him irritably, ‘You’re the one who is acting strange, Fool.’

‘You’d not say that, had you seen the look on your face but a moment ago.’

The rations that night were much the same as they had been since we left Jhaampe: thick grain porridge with some chopped dried apple in it, some dried meat, and tea. It was filling, but not exciting. It did nothing to distract me from the intent way the others watched me. I finally set down my tea mug and demanded, 'What?'

No one said anything at first. Then Kettricken said, bluntly, 'Fitz, you don't have a watch tonight. I want you to stay in the tent and sleep.'

'I'm fine, I can stand a watch,' I began to object, but it was my queen who ordered, 'I tell you to stay within the tent tonight.'

For a moment I fought my tongue. Then I bowed my head. 'As you command. I am, perhaps, overly tired.'

'No. It is more than that, FitzChivalry. You scarcely ate tonight, and unless one of us forces you to speak you do nothing save gaze off into the distance. What distracts you?'

I tried to find an answer to Kettricken's blunt question. 'I do not know. Exactly. At least, it is a difficult thing to explain.' The only sound was the tiny crackling of the fire. All eyes were on me. 'When one is trained to Skill,' I went on more slowly, 'one becomes aware that the magic itself has a danger to it. It attracts the attention of the user. When one is using the Skill to do a thing, one must focus one's attention tightly on the intent and refuse to be distracted by the pulling of the Skill. If the Skill-user loses that focus, if he gives in to the Skill itself, he can become lost in it. Absorbed by it.' I lifted my eyes from the fire and looked around at their faces. Everyone was still save for Kettle, who was nodding ever so slightly.

'Today, since we found the road, I have felt something that is almost like the pull of the Skill. I have not attempted to Skill; actually, for some days, I have blocked the Skill from myself as much as I can, for I have feared that Regal's coterie may try to break into my mind and do me harm. But despite that, I have felt as if the Skill were luring me. Like a music I can almost hear, or a very faint scent of game. I catch myself straining after it, trying to decide what calls me ...'

I snapped my gaze back to Kettle, saw the distant hunger in her eyes. 'Is it because the road is Skill-wrought?'

A flash of anger crossed her face. She looked down to her old hands curled in her lap. She gave a sigh of exasperation. 'It might. The old legends that I have heard say that when a thing is Skill-wrought, it can be dangerous to some folk. Not to ordinary people, but to those who have an aptitude for

the Skill but have not been trained in it. Or to those whose training is not advanced far enough for them to know how to be wary.'

'I have never heard of any legends about Skill-wrought things.' I turned to the Fool and Starling. 'Have either of you?'

Both shook their heads slowly.

'It seems to me,' I said carefully to Kettle, 'that someone as well-read as the Fool should have come across such legends. And certainly a trained minstrel should have heard something about them.' I continued to look at her levelly.

She crossed her arms on her chest. 'I am not to blame for what they have not read or heard,' she said stiffly. 'I only tell you what I was told, a long time ago.'

'How long ago?' I pressed. Across from me, Kettricken frowned, but did not interfere.

'A very long time ago,' Kettle replied coldly. 'Back when young men respected their elders.'

The Fool's face lit with a delighted grin. Kettle seemed to feel she had won something, for she set her tea mug in her porridge bowl with a clatter and handed them to me. 'It is your turn to clean the dishes,' she told me severely. She got up and stamped away from the fire and into the tent.

As I slowly gathered the dishes to wipe them out with clean snow, Kettricken came to stand beside me. 'What do you suspect?' she asked me in her forthright way. 'Do you think she is a spy, an enemy among us?'

'No. I do not think she is an enemy. But I think she is ... something. Not just an old woman with a religious interest in the Fool. Something more than that.'

'But you don't know what?'

'No. I don't. Only I have noticed that she seems to know a deal more about the Skill than I expect her to. Still, an old person gathers much odd knowledge in a lifetime. It may be no more than that.' I glanced up to where the wind was stirring the treetops. 'Do you think we shall have snow tonight?' I asked Kettricken.

'Almost certainly. And we shall be fortunate if it stops by morning. We should gather more firewood, and stack it near the tent's door. No, not you. You should go within the tent. If you wandered off now, in this darkness and with snow to come, we'd never find you.'

I began to protest, but she stopped me with a question. ‘My Verity. He is more highly trained than you are in the Skill?’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Do you think this road would call to him, as it does to you?’

‘Almost certainly. But he has always been far stronger than I in matters of Skill or stubbornness.’

A sad smile tweaked her lips. ‘Yes, he is stubborn, that one.’ She sighed suddenly, heavily. ‘Would that we were only a man and a woman, living far from both sea and mountains. Would that things were simple for us.’

‘I wish for that as well,’ I said quietly. ‘I wish for blisters on my hands from simple work and Molly’s candles lighting our home.’

‘I hope you get that, Fitz,’ Kettricken said quietly. ‘I truly do. But we’ve a long road to tread between here and there.’

‘That we do,’ I agreed. And a sort of peace bloomed between us. I did not doubt that if circumstances demanded it, she would take my daughter for the throne. But she could no more have changed her attitude about duty and sacrifice than she could have changed the blood and bones of her body. It was who she was. It was not that she wished to take my child from me.

All I needed do to keep my daughter was to bring her husband safely back to her.

We went to bed later that night than had become our custom. All were wearier than usual. The Fool took first watch despite the lines of strain in his face. The new ivory cast his skin had taken on made him look terrible when he was cold, like a statue of misery carved from old bone. The rest of us did not notice the cold much when we were moving during the day, but I don’t think the Fool was ever completely warm. Yet he bundled himself warmly and went to stand outside in the rising wind without a murmur of complaint. The rest of us lay down to sleep.

The storm was, at first, a thing that was happening above us, in the treetops. Loose needles fell rattling against the yurt’s skin and as the storm grew more intense, small branches and occasional dumps of icy snow. The cold grew stronger and became a thing that crept in at every gap of blanket or garment. Midway through Starling’s watch, Kettricken called her in, saying the storm would stand watch for us now. When Starling entered, the wolf slunk in at her heels. To my relief, no one objected very loudly. When Starling commented that he carried snow in with him, the Fool replied that he had less on him than she did. Nighteyes came immediately to our part of

the tent, and lay down between the Fool and the outer wall. He set his great head on the Fool's chest and heaved a sigh before closing his eyes. I almost felt jealous.

He's colder than you are. Much colder. And, in the city, where hunting was so poor, he often shared food with me.

So. He is pack, then? I asked with a trace of amusement.

You tell me, Nighteyes challenged me. He saved your life, fed you from his kills and shared his den with you. Is he pack with us or not?

I suppose he is, I said after a moment's consideration. I had never seen things in quite that light before. Unobtrusively, I shifted in my bedding to be slightly closer to the Fool. 'Are you cold?' I asked him aloud.

'Not so long as I keep shivering,' he told me miserably. Then he added, 'Actually, I'm warmer with the wolf between me and the wall. He gives off a lot of heat.'

'He's grateful for all the times you fed him in Jhaampe.'

The Fool squinted at me through the tent's dimness. 'Really? I did not think animals carried memories for that long.'

That startled me into thinking about it. 'Usually, they don't. But tonight, he recalls that you fed him and is grateful.'

The Fool lifted a hand to scratch carefully around Nighteyes' ears. Nighteyes made a puppy growl of pleasure and happily snuggled closer. I wondered again at all the changes I was seeing in him. More and more often, his reactions and thoughts were a mixture of human and wolf.

I was too tired to give it much thought. I closed my eyes and started to sink into sleep. After a time, I realized that my eyes were tightly shut, my jaw clenched, and I was no closer to sleep. I wanted to simply let go of consciousness, so weary was I, but the Skill so threatened and lured me that I could not relax enough to sleep. I kept shifting, trying to find a physical position that was more relaxing, until Kettle on the other side of me pointedly asked me if I had fleas. I tried to be still.

I stared up into the darkness of the tent's ceiling, listening to the blowing wind outside and the quiet breathing of my companions inside. I closed my eyes and relaxed my muscles, trying to at least rest my body. I wanted so desperately to fall asleep. But Skill-dreams tugged at me like tiny barbed hooks in my mind until I thought I should scream. Most were horrible. Some sort of Forging ceremony in a coastal village, a huge fire burning in a pit, and captives dragged forward by jeering Outislanders and

offered the choice of being Forged or flinging themselves into the pit. Children were watching. I jerked my mind back from the flames.

I caught my breath and calmed my eyes. Sleep. In a night chamber in Buckkeep Castle, Lacey was carefully removing lace from an old wedding gown. Her mouth was pinched shut with disapproval as she picked out the tiny threads that secured the ornate work. 'It will bring a good price,' Patience said to her. 'Perhaps enough to supply our watchtowers for another month. He would understand what we must do for Buck.' She held her head very upright, and there was more grey in the black of her hair than I recalled as her fingers unfastened the strings of tiny pearls that glistened in scalloping at the neckline of the gown. Time had aged the white of the gown to ivory, and the luxuriant breadth of the skirts cascaded over their laps. Patience cocked her head suddenly as if listening, a puzzled frown on her face. I fled.

I used all my will to pry my eyes open. The fire in the small brazier burned small, shedding a reddish light. I studied the poles that supported the taut hides. I willed my breath to calmness. I dared not think of anything that might lure me out of my own life, not Molly, not Burrich, not Verity. I tried to find some neutral image to rest my mind upon, something with no special connotations to my life. I called up a bland landscape. A smooth blank plain of land cloaked in white snow, a peaceful night sky over it. Blessed stillness ... I sank into it as into a soft featherbed.

A rider comes, swiftly, leaning low, clinging to his horse's neck, urging him on. There is a simple safe beauty to the duo, the running horse, the man's streaming cloak echoed by the horse's flowing tail. For a time, there is no more than this, the dark horse and rider cleaving the snowy plain under an open moonlit night. The horse runs well, an effortless stretching and gathering of muscles and the man sits him lightly, almost appearing to ride above him rather than on his back. The moon glints silver off the man's brow, glistening upon the rampant buck badge that he wears. Chade.

Three riders and horses appear. Two come from behind, but those horses are running wearily, heavily. The lone rider will outdistance them if the chase goes much longer. The third pursuer cuts the plain at an angle to the others. The piebald horse runs with a will, unmindful of the deeper snow he churns through in pursuit. His small rider sits him high and well, a woman or a young man. The moonlight dances lightly along a drawn blade. For a time it looks as if the young rider will intersect with Chade's path of flight, but the old assassin has seen him. He speaks to his horse, and the

gelding puts on a burst of speed, incredible to see. He leaves the two lumbering pursuers far behind, but the piebald reaches the packed trail now and his legs stretch long as he endeavours to catch up. For a time, it looks as if Chade will escape cleanly, but the piebald horse is fresher. The gelding cannot maintain his burst of speed, and the even pace of the piebald slowly eats into his lead. The gap closes gradually but relentlessly. Then the piebald is running right behind the black gelding. The gelding slows and Chade turns in the saddle and lifts an arm in greeting. The other rider shouts to him, her voice thin in the cold air. 'For Verity the true King!' She tosses a bag to him, and he throws a packet to her. Abruptly they separate, the two horses both veering from the trodden path to go wide of one another. The hoofbeats dwindle in the night.

The labouring mounts of the pursuers are lathered and wet, steaming in the cold air. Their riders pull them up, cursing, when they reach the place where Chade and his cohort separated. Snatches of conversation mixed with curses float on the air. 'Damned Farseer partisans!' and 'No way to tell which one has it now!' and finally, 'Not going back to face a lash over this mess.' They seem to have reached an agreement, for they let their horses breathe, and then proceed more slowly, following the trodden path away from wherever they have come.

I found myself briefly. Strange to discover I was smiling even though sweat misted my face. The Skilling was strong and true. I was breathing deep with the strain of it. I tried to draw back from it, but the sweet rush of knowing was too keen. I was elated at Chade's escape, elated to know that there were partisans who worked on Verity's behalf. The world stretched out wide before me, tempting as a tray of sweet cakes. My heart chose instantly.

A baby is wailing, in that endless, hopeless way that infants have. My daughter. She is lying on a bed, still wrapped in a blanket that is beaded with rain. Her face is red with the earnestness of her screaming. The pent frustration in Molly's voice is frightening as she says, 'Be quiet. Can't you just be quiet!'

Burrich's voice, stern and weary. 'Don't be cross at her. She's only a babe. She's probably just hungry.'

Molly stands, lips pinched tight, arms folded tightly across her chest. Her cheeks are red, her hair has gone to wet strands. Burrich is hanging up his dripping cloak. They have all been somewhere, together, and just returned. The ashes are dead in the fireplace, the cottage cold. Burrich goes

to the hearth and awkwardly kneels by it, favouring his knee, and begins to select kindling to build a fire. I can feel the tension in him, and I know how he strives to contain his temper. 'Take care of the baby,' he suggests quietly. 'I'll get the fire going and put some water to boil.'

Molly takes off her cloak and moves deliberately to hang it by his. I know how she hates to be told what to do. The baby continues wailing, as remorseless a demand as the winter wind outside. 'I am cold, and tired, and hungry, and wet. She's going to have to learn that sometimes she just has to wait.'

Burrich leans down to blow on a spark, curses softly when it does not catch. 'She is cold and hungry and tired and wet, too,' he points out. His voice is getting crisper. He continues doggedly with his fire-making. 'And she is too small to do anything about it. So she cries. Not to torment you, but to tell you she needs help. It's like a puppy yelping, woman, or a chick cheeping. She doesn't do it to annoy.' His voice is rising on every sentence.

'Well, it annoys me!' Molly declares, and turns to the fight. 'She will just have to cry it out. I'm too tired to deal with her. And she's getting spoiled. All she does is cry to be held. I never have a moment to myself any longer. I can't even sleep a night through. Feed the baby, wash the baby, change the baby, hold the baby. That's all my life is any more.' She lists off her grievances aggressively. That glint is in her eye, the same one I'd seen when she defied her father, and I know she expects Burrich to stand and advance on her. Instead, he blows on a tiny glow and grunts in satisfaction when a narrow tongue of flame licks up and kindles a curl of birch bark. He doesn't even turn to look at Molly or the wailing child. Twig after twig he sets on the tiny fire, and I marvel that he cannot be aware of Molly seething behind him. I would not be so composed were she behind me and wearing that expression.

Only when the fire is well established does he rise, and then he turns, not to Molly but to the child. He walks past Molly as if she is not there. I do not know if he sees how she steels herself not to flinch from the sudden blow she half-expects from him. It wrings my heart to see this scar her father has left on her. Burrich leans over the baby, speaking in his calming voice as he unwraps her. I watch in a sort of awe as he competently changes her napkin. He glances about, then takes up a wool shirt of his that is hanging on a chair back and wraps her in it. She continues to wail, but on a different note. He props her against his shoulder and uses his free hand to fill the kettle and set

it on the fire. It is as if Molly is not there at all. Her face has gone white and her eyes are huge as he begins to measure out grain. When he finds the water is not yet boiling, he sits down with the baby and pats her back rhythmically. The wailing becomes less determined, as if the baby is wearying of crying.

Molly stalks over to them. 'Give me the baby. I'll nurse her now.'

Burrich slowly turns his eyes up to her. His face is impassive. 'When you're calm, and want to hold her, I'll give her to you.'

'You'll give her to me now! She's my child!' Molly snaps and reaches for her. Burrich stops her with a look. She steps back. 'Are you trying to make me ashamed?' she demands. Her voice is going shrill. 'She's my child. I have a right to raise her as I see fit. She doesn't need to be held all the time.'

'That's true,' he agrees blandly, but makes no move to give her the child.

'You think I'm a bad mother. But what do you know about children, to say I'm wrong?'

Burrich gets up, staggers a half step on his bad leg, and regains his balance. He takes up the measure of grain. He sprinkles it over the boiling water, then stirs it to wet it evenly. Then he puts a tight lid on the pot and pulls it slightly back from the fire's reach. All this while balancing the babe in the crook of one arm. I can tell he has been thinking when he answers, 'Not babies, perhaps. But I know about young things. Colts, puppies, calves, piglets. Even hunting cats. I know if you want them to trust you, you touch them often when they are small. Gently, but firmly, so they believe in your strength, too.'

He was warming to his subject. I'd heard this lecture a hundred times before, usually delivered to impatient stable-boys. 'You don't shout at them, or make sudden moves that look threatening. You give them good feed and clean water, and keep them clean and give them shelter from the weather.' His voice drops accusingly as he adds, 'You don't take out your temper on them, or confuse punishment with discipline.'

Molly looks shocked at his words. 'Discipline comes from punishment. A child learns discipline when she is punished for doing something wrong.'

Burrich is shaking his head. 'I'd like to "punish" the man that beat that into you,' he says, and an edge of his old temper creeps into his voice. 'What did you really learn from your father taking his temper out on you?' he demands. 'That to show tenderness to your baby is a weakness? That to give

in and hold your child when she cries because she wants you is somehow not an adult thing to do?’

‘I don’t want to talk about my father,’ Molly declares suddenly, but there is uncertainty in her voice. She reaches for the baby like a child clutching at a favourite toy and Burrich lets her take the infant. Molly sits on the hearthstones and opens her blouse. The baby seeks her breast greedily and is instantly silent. For a time the only sounds are the wind muttering outside, the bubbling of the porridge pot and the small stick noises of Burrich feeding the fire. ‘You did not always keep your patience with Fitz when he was little,’ Molly mutters chidingly.

Burrich gives a brief snort of laughter. ‘I don’t think anyone would have been eternally patient with that one. When I got him, he was five or six, and I knew nothing of him. And I was a young man, with many other interests. You can put a colt in a corral, or tie a dog up for a time. Not so with a child. You can never forget you have a child for even an instant.’ He shrugs his shoulders helplessly. ‘Before I knew it, he’d become the centre of my life.’ An odd little pause. ‘Then they took him from me, and I let them ... And now he’s dead.’

A silence. I wanted desperately to reach to them both, then, to tell them that I lived. But I could not. I could hear them, I could see them, but I could not reach them. Like the wind outside the house, I roared and pounded at the walls, to no avail.

‘What am I going to do? What will become of us?’ Molly asks abruptly of no one. The despair in her voice is rending. ‘Here I am. No husband, and a child, and no way to make my own way in the world. Everything I saved is gone.’ She looks at Burrich. ‘I was so stupid. I always believed he would come to find me, that he would marry me. But he never did. And now he never will.’ She begins to rock as she clutches the baby to her. Tears spill unheeded down her cheeks. ‘Don’t think I didn’t hear that old man today, the one that said he’d seen me in Buckkeep Town and I was the Wit-Bastard’s whore. How long before that tale races through Capelin Beach? I daren’t go to town any more, I can’t hold up my head.’

Something goes out of Burrich at her words. He slumps, elbow on knee, head in his hand. He mutters, ‘I thought you had not heard him. Had he not been half as old as god, I’d have made him answer for his words.’

‘You can’t challenge a man for speaking the truth,’ Molly says dispiritedly.

That brings Burrich's head up. 'You're not a whore!' he declares hotly. 'You were Fitz's wife. It's not your fault if not all were privy to it.'

'His wife,' Molly says mockingly to herself. 'I was not, Burrich. He never married me.'

'Such was how he spoke of you to me. I promise you, I know this. Had he not died, he would have come to you. He would. He always intended to make you his wife.'

'Oh, yes, he had many intentions. And he spoke many lies. Intentions are not deeds, Burrich. If every woman who had heard a man promise marriage were a wife, well, there'd be a spate less of bastards in the world.' She straightens up and wipes the tears from her face with a weary finality. Burrich makes no answer to her words. She looks down into the little face that is finally at peace. The babe has gone to sleep. She slips her little finger into the child's mouth to free her nipple from the babe's sleepy grip on it. As Molly does up her blouse, she smiles weakly. 'I think I feel a tooth coming through. Maybe she's just colicky from teething.'

'A tooth? Let me see!' Burrich exclaims and comes to bend over the baby as Molly carefully pushes down her pink lower lip to reveal a tiny half-moon of white showing in her gum. My daughter pulls away from the touch, frowning in her sleep. Burrich takes her gently from Molly and carries her over to the bed. He settles her into it, still wrapped in his shirt. By the fire, Molly takes the lid off the kettle and gives the porridge a stir.

'I'll take care of you both,' Burrich offers awkwardly. He is looking down at the child as he speaks. 'I'm not so old I can't get work, you know. As long as I can swing an axe, we can trade or sell firewood in town. We'll get by.'

'You're not old at all,' Molly says absently as she sprinkles a bit of salt into the porridge. She goes to her chair and drops into it. From a basket by her chair, she takes up a piece of mending and turns it about in her hands, deciding where to begin. 'You seem to wake up new each day. Look at this shirt. Torn out at the shoulder seam as if a growing boy did it. I think you get younger each day. But I feel as if I get older with every passing hour. And I can't live on your kindness forever, Burrich. I've got to get on with my life. Somehow I just can't think how to begin, just now.'

'Then don't worry about it, just now,' he says comfortingly. He comes to stand behind her chair. His hands lift as if he will put them on her shoulders. Instead he crosses his arms on his chest. 'Soon it will be spring.'

We'll put in a garden and the fish runs will begin again. There may be some hiring work down in Capelin Beach. You'll see, we'll get by.'

His optimism reaches something in her. 'I should start now and make some straw hives. With great good luck, I might chance on a swarming of bees.'

'I know a flowering field up in the hills where the bees work thick in summer. If we set out hives there, would the bees move in to them?'

Molly smiles to herself. 'They are not like birds, silly. They only swarm when the old hive has too many bees. We might get a swarm that way, but not until high summer or autumn. No. Come spring, when the bees first stir, we'll try to find a bee tree. I used to help my father hunt bees when I was smaller, before I grew wise enough to winter a hive over. You put out a dish of warmed honey to draw them. First one, and then another will come. If you are good at it, and I am, you can find the bee line and follow it back to the bee tree. That is only the start, of course. Then you have to force the swarm out of the tree and into the hive you've made ready. Sometimes, if the bee tree is small, you can simply cut it down and take the bee gum home with you.'

'Bee gum?'

'The part of the tree they nest in.'

'Don't they sting you?' Burrich asks incredulously.

'Not if you do it right,' she tells him calmly.

'You'll have to teach me how,' he says humbly.

Molly twists in her seat to look up at him. She smiles, but it is not like her old smile. It is a smile that acknowledges that they are pretending it will all go as they plan. She knows too well now that no hope can be completely trusted. 'If you'll teach me to write my letters. Lacey and Patience started, and I can read a bit, but the writing comes harder to me.'

'I'll teach you and then you can teach Nettle,' he promises her.

Nettle. She has named my daughter Nettle, after the herb she loves, though it leaves great rashes on her hands and arms if she is careless when she gathers it. Is that how she feels about our daughter, that she brings pain even as she brings enjoyment? It pains me to think it is so. Something tugs at my attention, but I cling fiercely where I am. If this is as close as I can come to Molly right now, then I will take what I can and cling to it.

No. Verity speaks firmly. Come away now. You put them in danger. Do you think they would scruple to destroy them, if they thought by doing so

they could hurt and weaken you?

Abruptly I am with Verity. He is somewhere cold and windy and dark. I try to see more of what is around us, but he blocks my eyes. So effortlessly he has brought me here against my will, so effortlessly he closes off my vision. The strength of Skill on him is frightening. Yet I can sense he is tired, weary almost to death despite this vast power. The Skill is like a strong stallion and Verity is the fraying rope that tethers it. It pulls at him every minute and every minute he resists it.

We are coming to you, I tell him needlessly.

I know. Hurry. And do this no more, think of them no more, and give no thought at all to the names of those who would do us harm. Every whisper here is a shout. They have powers you do not imagine, in strengths you cannot defy. Where you go, your enemies may follow. So leave no trail.

But where are you? I demand as he thrusts me away from him.

Find me! he commands me, and slams me back into my own body and life.

I sat up in my blankets, convulsively gasping for air. It reminded me of wrestling and being slammed down on the flat of my back. For a moment I made tiny sounds as I sought to fill my lungs. Finally I drew a full breath. I looked about me in the darkness. Outside the tent, the windstorm howled. The brazier was a small red glow in the centre that illuminated little more than Kettle's huddled form sleeping close to it.

'Are you all right?' the Fool asked me quietly.

'No,' I said softly. I lay back down beside him. I was suddenly too tired to think, too tired to say another word. The sweat on my body chilled and I began to shiver. The Fool surprised me by putting an arm around me. I moved closer to him gratefully, sharing warmth. The sympathy of my wolf wrapped me. I waited for the Fool to say something comforting. He was too wise to try. I fell asleep longing for words that did not exist.

TWENTY-FIVE

Strategy

*Six Wisemen came to Jhaampe-town
Climbed a hill, and never came down
Found their flesh and lost their skins
Flew away on stony wings.
Five Wisemen came to Jhaampe-town
Walked a road not up nor down
Were torn to many and turned to one
In the end, left a task half-done.
Four Wisemen came to Jhaampe-town
They spoke in words without a sound
They begged their Queen to let them go
And what became of them, no one can know.
Three Wisemen came to Jhaampe-town
They'd helped a king to keep his crown.
But when they tried to climb the hill
Down they came in a terrible spill.
Two Wisemen came to Jhaampe-town
Gentle women there they found.
Forgot their quest and lived in love
Perhaps were wiser than ones above.
One Wiseman came to Jhaampe-town.
He set aside both queen and crown
Did his task and fell asleep
Gave his bones to the stones to keep.
No wise men go to Jhaampe-town
To climb the hill and never come down.
'Tis wiser far and much more brave
To stay at home and face the grave.*

'Fitz? Are you awake?' The Fool was bending over me, his face very close to mine. He seemed anxious.

'I think so.' I shut my eyes. Images and thoughts flickered through my mind. I could not decide which of them were mine. I tried to remember if it

was important to know that.

‘Fitz!’ This was Kettricken, shaking me.

‘Make him sit up,’ Starling suggested. Kettricken promptly gripped me by my shirt front and hauled me into a sitting position. The sudden change dizzied me. I could not understand why they wanted me to be awake in the middle of the night. I said so.

‘It’s midday,’ Kettricken said tersely. ‘The storm hasn’t let up since last night.’ She peered at me closely. ‘Are you hungry? Would you like a cup of tea?’

While I was trying to decide, I forgot what she had asked me. There were so many people talking softly, I could not sort my thoughts from theirs. ‘I beg your pardon,’ I told the woman politely. ‘What did you ask me?’

‘Fitz!’ The pale man hissed in exasperation. He reached behind me and dragged a pack over to him. ‘He has elfbark in here, for tea. Chade left it with him. It should bring him back to himself.’

‘He doesn’t need that,’ an old woman said sharply. She crawled closer to me, reached up and gripped my ear. She pinched it tightly.

‘Ouch! Kettle!’ I rebuked her, and tried to pull away. She kept her painful hold.

‘Wake up!’ she told me sternly. ‘Right now!’

‘I’m awake!’ I promised her and after a scowl at me, she let go of my ear. While I looked about me in some confusion, she muttered angrily, ‘We’re too close to that damnable road.’

‘It’s still stormy outside?’ I asked bewilderedly.

‘You’ve only been told that six times,’ Starling retorted, but I could hear the worry that underlay her words.

‘I had ... nightmares last night. I didn’t sleep well.’ I looked around at the circle of folk clustered around the small brazier. Someone had braved the wind for a fresh supply of wood. A kettle hung on a tripod over the brazier, heaped full of melting snow. ‘Where’s Nighteyes?’ I asked as soon as I missed him.

‘Hunting,’ Kettricken said and, *With very little luck*, came the echo from the hillside above us. I could feel the wind past his eyes. He had folded his ears back from it. *Nothing is moving in this storm. I don’t know why I bother.*

Come back and stay warm, I suggested. At that moment, Kettle leaned over and pinched my arm savagely. I jerked back from it with a cry.

‘Pay attention to us!’ she snapped at me.

‘What are we doing?’ I demanded as I sat rubbing my arm. No one’s behaviour made any sense to me today.

‘Waiting for the storm to pass,’ Starling told me. She leaned closer to me, peering into my face. ‘Fitz, what is the matter with you? I feel as if you’re not really here.’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘I feel caught in a dream. And if I don’t concentrate on staying awake, I start to fall right back to sleep.’

‘Then concentrate,’ Kettle advised me roughly. I could not understand why she seemed so angry with me.

‘Maybe he should just sleep,’ the Fool suggested. ‘He seems tired, and from all the leaping and yelping he did in his sleep last night, his dreams were scarcely restful.’

‘So he will get more rest staying awake now than from going back to dreams like that,’ Kettle insisted mercilessly. She poked me suddenly in the ribs. ‘Talk to us, Fitz.’

‘About what?’ I hedged.

Kettricken moved quickly to the attack. ‘Did you dream of Verity last night?’ she demanded. ‘Is Skilling last night what has left you so dazed today?’

I sighed. One does not answer a direct question from one’s queen with a lie. ‘Yes,’ I told her, but as her eyes lit I had to add, ‘But it was a dream that will bring you small comfort. He is alive, in a cold, windy place. He would let me see no more than that, and when I asked where he was, he simply told me to find him.’

‘Why would he behave so?’ Kettricken asked. The hurt on her face was as if Verity himself had shoved her away.

‘He warned me severely against all Skilling. I had been ... watching Molly and Burrich.’ It was so hard to admit this, for I wanted to speak nothing of what I had seen there. ‘Verity came and took me away from there, and warned me that our enemies might find them through me and hurt them. I believe that is why he concealed his surroundings from me. Because he feared that if I knew them, somehow Regal or his coterie might come to know them.’

‘Does he fear that they seek for him also?’ Kettricken asked wonderingly.

‘So it seems to me. Though I have felt no tremor of their presence, he seems to believe they will seek him out, either by the Skill or in the flesh.’

‘Why should Regal bother to do so, when all believe Verity dead?’ Kettricken asked me.

I shrugged. ‘Perhaps to make certain that he never returns to prove them all wrong. I do not truly know, my queen. I sense that my king conceals much from me. He warned me that the powers of the coterie are many and strong.’

‘But surely Verity is as strong?’ Kettricken asked with a child’s faith.

‘He masters a storm of power such as I have never witnessed, my lady. But it takes all his will to control it.’

‘All such control is an illusion,’ Kettle mumbled to herself. ‘A trap to deceive the unwary.’

‘King Verity is scarcely unwary, Dame Kettle!’ Kettricken retorted angrily.

‘No, he is not,’ I agreed in a conciliatory tone. ‘And the words were mine, not Ver ... King Verity’s, my lady. I only seek to make you understand that what he now does is beyond my comprehension. All I can do is trust that he knows what he is about. And do as he has ordered me.’

‘To find him,’ Kettricken agreed. She sighed. ‘Would that we could leave now, this very minute. But only a fool defies a storm such as this one.’

‘While we bide here, FitzChivalry is in constant danger,’ Kettle informed us. All eyes turned to her.

‘What makes you say so, Kettle?’ Kettricken asked.

She hesitated. ‘Anyone can see it is so. Unless he is kept talking, his thoughts drift, his eyes become empty. He cannot sleep at night without the Skill coming upon him. It is obvious that the road is at fault.’

‘While these things are so, it is not at all obvious to me that the road is the problem. A lingering fever from his injury could be at fault, or ...’

‘No.’ I risked interrupting my queen. ‘It is the road. I have no fever. And I did not feel this way before I travelled on it.’

‘Explain this to me,’ Kettricken commanded.

‘I don’t understand it myself. I can only suppose that Skill was somehow used to construct that road. It runs straighter and more level than any road I have ever known. No tree intrudes upon it, despite how little it is used. There are no animal tracks upon it. And did you mark the one tree we passed yesterday, the log that had fallen across the road? The stump and the

uppermost branches were still almost sound ... but all of the trunk that had fallen upon the road itself was rotted away to almost nothing. Some force moves still in that road, to keep it so clear and true. And I think whatever it is, it is related to the Skill.'

Kettricken sat a moment considering this. 'What do you suggest we do?' she asked me.

I shrugged. 'Nothing. For now. The tent is well pitched here. We'd be foolish to try to move it in this wind. I must simply be aware of the danger to myself, and endeavour to avoid it. And tomorrow, or whenever the wind falls, I should walk beside the road instead of upon it.'

'That will be little better for you,' Kettle grumbled.

'Perhaps. But as the road is our guide to Verity, it would be foolish to leave it. Verity survived this path, and he walked it alone.' I paused, thinking that I now understood better some of the fragmented Skill-dreams I had had of him. 'I will manage, somehow.'

The circle of faces doubtfully regarding me were not reassuring. 'You must, I suppose,' Kettricken concluded dolefully. 'If there is any way we can assist you, FitzChivalry ...'

'There is none that I can think of,' I admitted.

'Save to keep his mind occupied as best we can,' Kettle offered. 'Do not let him sit idly, nor sleep overmuch. Starling, you have your harp, have you not? Could not you play and sing for us?'

'I have *a* harp,' Starling corrected her sourly. 'It's a poor thing compared to my old one that was taken from me at Moonseye.' For a moment her face emptied and her eyes turned inward. I wondered if that were how I looked when the Skill pulled at me. Kettle reached to pat her softly on one knee, but Starling flinched to the touch. 'Still, it's what I have, and I'll play it, if you think it will help.' She reached behind her for her pack and drew from it a bundled harp. As she drew the harp from its wrappings, I could see that it was little more than a framework of raw wood with strings stretched across it. It had the essential shape of her old harp, but with none of its grace and polish. It was to Starling's old harp what one of Hod's practice blades was to a fine sword: a thing of utility and function, no more than that. But she settled it on her lap and began tuning it. She began the opening notes of an old Buck ballad when she was interrupted by a snowy nose poking its way into the tent door.

'Nighteyes!' The Fool welcomed him.

I've meat to share. This came as a proud announcement. *More than enough to gorge well on.*

It was not an exaggeration. When I crawled out of the tent to see his kill, it was a sort of boar. The tusks and coarse hair were much the same as those I had hunted before, but this creature had larger ears and the coarse hair was mottled black and white. When Kettricken joined me, she exclaimed over it, saying she had seen few of them before, but they were known to roam the forests and had a reputation as vicious game best left alone. She scratched the wolf behind the ear with a mittened hand and praised him overmuch for his bravery and skill, until he fell over in the snow overcome with pride in himself. I looked at him, lolling near on his back in the snow and wind and could not help but grin. In an instant he had flipped to his feet, to give me a nasty pinch on the leg and demand that I open its belly for him.

The meat was fat and rich. Kettricken and I did most of the butchering, for the cold savaged the Fool and Kettle mercilessly and Starling begged off for the sake of a harpist's hands. Cold and damp were not the best things for her still-healing fingers. I did not much mind. Both the task and the harsh conditions kept my mind from wandering as I worked, and there was an odd pleasure to being alone with Kettricken, even under such circumstances, for in sharing this humble work, we both forgot station and past and became but two people in the cold rejoicing in a richness of meat. We cut off long skewering strips that would cook swiftly over the little brazier in sufficient quantity for all of us to gorge. Nighteyes took the entrails for himself, revelling in the heart and liver and guts and then a front leg with the satisfaction of bones to crack. He brought this gristly prize into the tent with him, but no one made comment on the snowy, bloody wolf that lay along one side of the tent wall and noisily chewed his meat save to praise him. I thought him insufferably satisfied with himself and told him so; he but informed me that I had never made so difficult a kill alone, let alone dragged it back intact to share. All the while the Fool scratched his ears.

Soon the rich smell of cooking filled the tent. It had been some days since we had had fresh meat of any kind, and the cold we had endured made the fat taste doubly rich to us. It brought our spirits up and we could almost forget the howling of the wind outside and the cold that pressed so fiercely against our small shelter. After we were all sated with meat, Kettle made tea

for us. I know of nothing more warming than hot meat and tea and good fellowship.

This is pack, Nighteyes observed in contentment from his corner. And I could do no more than agree.

Starling cleansed her fingers of grease and took her harp back from the Fool who had asked to see it. To my surprise, he leaned over it with her, and traced down the frame with a pale fingernail saying, ‘Had I my tools here, I could shave the wood here, and here, and smooth a curve like so along this side. I think it might fit your hands better.’

Starling looked at him hard, caught between suspicion and hesitancy. She studied his face for mockery, but found none. Carefully she observed, as if she spoke to us all, ‘My master who taught me harping was good at the making of harps as well. Too good, perhaps. He tried to teach me, and I learned the basics, but he could not stand to watch me “fumble and scrape at fine wood” as he put it. So I never learned for myself the finer points of shaping the frame. And with this hand still stiff ...’

‘Were we back at Jhaampe, I could let you fumble and scrape as much as you wanted. To do so is truly the only way to learn. But for here, for now, even with such knives as we have, I think I might bring a more graceful shape out of this wood.’ The Fool spoke openly.

‘If you would,’ she accepted quietly. I wondered when they had set aside their hostilities and realized I had not, for some days, paid much attention to anyone save myself. I had accepted that Starling wanted little more to do with me than to be present if I did something of vast import. I had not made any of friendship’s demands upon her. Both Kettricken’s rank and her grief had imposed a barrier between us that I had not ventured to breach. Kettle’s reticence about herself made any true conversation difficult. But I could think of no excuse for how I had excluded the Fool and the wolf from my thoughts lately.

When you throw up waits against those who would use Skill against you, you lock more than your Skill-sense inside, Nighteyes observed.

I sat pondering that. It seemed to me that my Wit and my feeling for people had dimmed somewhat of late. Perhaps my companion was right. Kettle poked me suddenly, sharply. ‘Don’t wander!’ she chided me.

‘I was just thinking,’ I said defensively.

‘Well, think aloud then.’

‘I’ve no thoughts worth sharing just now.’

Kettle glowered at me for being unco-operative.

‘Recite then,’ commanded the Fool. ‘Or sing something. Anything to keep yourself focused here.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ Kettle agreed, and it was my turn to glower at the Fool. But all eyes were on me. I took a breath and tried to think of something to recite. Almost everyone had a favourite story or bit of poetry memorized. But most of what I had possessed had to do with the poisoning herbs or others of the assassin’s arts. ‘I know one song,’ I finally admitted. “‘Crossfire’s Sacrifice”.’

Now Kettle scowled, but Starling struck up the opening notes with an amused smile on her face. After one false start, I launched into it, and carried it off fairly well, though I saw Starling flinch a time or two at a soured note. For whatever reason, my choice of song displeased Kettle, who sat grim and staring at me defiantly. When I had finished, the turn was passed to Kettricken, who sang a hunting ballad from the Mountains. Then it was the Fool’s turn, and he humoured us with a ribald folk song about courting a milk-maid. I believe I saw grudging admiration from Starling for that performance. That left Kettle, and I had expected her to beg off. Instead, she sang the old children’s nursery rhyme about ‘Six Wise Men went to Jhaampe-town, climbed a hill and never came down’, all the time eyeing me as if each word from her cracked old voice were a barb meant just for me. But if there was a veiled insult there, I missed it, as well as the reason for her ill-will.

Wolves sing together, Nighteyes observed, just as Kettricken suggested, ‘Play us something we all know, Starling. Something to give us heart.’ So Starling played that ancient song about gathering flowers for one’s beloved, and we all sang along, some with more heart than others.

As the last note died away, Kettle observed, ‘The wind’s dropping.’

We all listened, and then Kettricken crawled from the tent. I followed her, and we stood quiet for a time in a wind that had gone quieter. Dusk had stolen the colours from the world. In the wake of the wind, snow had begun thickly falling. ‘The storm has almost blown itself out,’ she observed. ‘We can be on our way tomorrow.’

‘None too soon for me,’ I said. *Come to me, come to me* still echoed in the beating of my heart. Somewhere up in those Mountains, or beyond them, was Verity.

And the river of Skill.

‘As for me,’ Kettricken said quietly, ‘would that I had followed my instincts a year ago, and gone to the ends of the map. But I reasoned that I could do no better than Verity had done. And I feared to risk his child. A child I lost anyway, and thus failed him both ways.’

‘Failed him?’ I exclaimed in horror. ‘By losing his child?’

‘His child, his crown, his kingdom. His father. What did he entrust me with that I did not lose, FitzChivalry? Even as I rush to be with him again, I wonder how I can meet his eyes.’

‘Oh, my queen, you are mistaken in this, I assure you. He would not perceive that you have failed him, but fears only that he abandoned you in the greatest of danger.’

‘He only went to do what he knew he must,’ Kettricken said quietly. And then added plaintively, ‘Oh, Fitz, how can you speak for what he feels, when you cannot even tell me where he is?’

‘Where he is, my queen, is but a bit of information, a spot on that map. But what he feels, and what he feels for you ... that is what he breathes, and when we are together in the Skill, joined mind to mind, then I know such things, almost whether I would or no.’ I recalled the other times I had been privy unwillingly to Verity’s feelings for his queen, and was glad the night hid my face from her.

‘Would this Skill were a thing I could learn ... do you know, how often and how angry I have felt with you, solely because you could reach forth to the one I longed for, and know his mind and heart so easily? Jealousy is an ugly thing, and always I have tried to set it aside from me. But sometimes it seems so monstrously unfair that you are joined to him in such a way, and I am not.’

It had never occurred to me that she might feel such a thing. Awkwardly, I pointed out, ‘The Skill is as much curse as it is gift. Or so it has been to me. Even if it were a thing I could gift you with, my lady, I do not know that is a thing one would do to a friend.’

‘To feel his presence and his love for even a moment, Fitz ... for that I would accept any curse that rode with it. To know his touch again, in any form ... can you imagine how I miss him?’

‘I think I can, my lady,’ I said quietly. Molly. Like a hand gripping my heart. *Chopping hard winter turnips on the table-top. The knife was dull, she would ask Burrich to put an edge on it if he ever came in from the rain. He*

was cutting wood to take down to the village and sell tomorrow. The man worked too hard, his leg would be hurting him tonight.

‘Fitz? FitzChivalry!’

I snapped back to Kettricken shaking me by the shoulders.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said quietly. I rubbed at my eyes and laughed. ‘Irony. All my life, it has been so difficult to use the Skill. It came and went like the wind in a ship’s sails. Now, I am here, and suddenly Skilling is as effortless as breathing. And I hunger to use it, to find out what is happening to those I love best. But Verity warns me I must not, and I must believe he knows best.’

As must I,’ she agreed wearily.

We stood a moment longer in the dimness, and I fought a sudden impulse to put my arm around her shoulders and tell her it would be all right, that we would find her husband and king. Briefly, she seemed that tall slender girl who had come from the Mountains to be Verity’s bride. But now she was the Queen of the Six Duchies, and I had seen her strength. Surely she needed no comfort from one such as I.

We cut more slices of meat from the freezing boar and then rejoined our companions in the tent. Nighteyes was sleeping contentedly. The Fool had Starling’s harp clutched between his knees and was using a skinning knife as a makeshift draw-knife to gentle some of the frame’s lines. Starling sat beside him, watching and trying not to look anxious. Kettle had taken off a little pouch she wore about her neck, opened it and was sorting out a handful of polished stones. As Kettricken and I built up the small fire in the brazier and prepared to cook the meat, Kettle insisted on explaining the rules of a game to me. Or attempting to. She finally gave up, exclaiming, ‘You’ll understand it when you’ve lost a few times.’

I lost more than a few times. She kept me at it for long hours after we had eaten. The Fool continued to shave wood from Starling’s harp, with many pauses to put a fresh edge on the knife. Kettricken was silent, almost moody, until the Fool noticed her melancholy mood and began to tell tales of Buckkeep life before she had come there. I listened with one ear, and even I was drawn back to those days when the Red Ships were no more than a tale and my life had been almost secure if not happy. Somehow the talk rounded into the various minstrels that had played at Buckkeep, both famous and lesser, and Starling plied the Fool with questions about them.

I soon found myself caught up in the play of the stones. It was strangely soothing: the stones themselves were red, black and white, smoothly polished and pleasant to hold. The game involved each player randomly drawing stones from the pouch and then placing them on the intersections of lines on a patterned cloth. It was a game at once simple and complex. Each time I won a game, Kettle immediately introduced me to more complicated strategies. It engrossed me and freed my mind from memories or ponderings. When finally all the others were already drowsing in their sleeping skins, she set up a game on the board and bade me study it.

‘It can be won decisively in one move of a black stone,’ she told me. ‘But the solution is not easy to see.’

I stared at the game layout and shook my head. ‘How long did it take you to learn to play?’

She smiled to herself. ‘As a child, I was a fast learner. But I will admit you are faster.’

‘I thought this game came from some far land.’

‘No, it is an old Buck game.’

‘I’ve never seen it played before.’

‘It was not uncommon when I was a girl, but it was not taught to everyone. But that is of no matter now. Study the layout of the pieces. In the morning, tell me the solution.’

She left the pieces set up on the cloth by the brazier. Chade’s long training of my memory served me well. When I lay down, I visualized the board and gave myself one black stone with which to win. There was quite a variety of possible moves, as a black stone could also claim the place of a red stone and force it to another intersection, and a red stone had similar powers over a white. I closed my eyes, but held onto the game, playing the stone in various ways until I finally fell asleep. Either I dreamed of the game, or of nothing at all. It kept the Skill-dreams safely at bay but when I awoke in the morning, I still had no solution to the puzzle she had set me.

I was the first one awake. I crawled out of the tent and returned with a pot packed full of new wet snow to melt for morning tea. It was substantially warmer outside than it had been in days. It cheered me, even as it made me wonder if spring were already a reality in the lowlands. Before my mind could start wandering, I returned to puzzling about the game. Nighteyes came to rest his head on my shoulder where I sat.

I'm tired of dreaming of rocks. Lift up your eyes and see the whole thing, little brother. It is a hunting pack, not isolated hunters. See. That one. Put the black there, and do not use the red to displace a white, but set it there to close the trap. That is all.

I was still wondering at the marvellous simplicity of Nighteyes' solution when Kettle awoke. With a grin she asked me if I had solved it yet. In answer, I took a black stone from the pouch and made the moves the wolf had suggested. Kettle's face went slack with astonishment. Then she looked up at me in awe. 'No one has ever figured it out that rapidly,' she told me.

'I had help,' I admitted sheepishly. 'It's the wolf's game, not mine.'

Kettle's eyes grew round. 'You are jesting with an old woman,' she rebuked me carefully.

'No. I am not,' I told her, as I seemed to have hurt her feelings. 'I thought about it for most of the night. I believe I even dreamed about game strategies. But when I woke, it was Nighteyes who had the solution.'

She was silent for a time. 'I had thought that Nighteyes was ... a clever pet. One who could hear your commands even if you did not speak them aloud. But now you say he can comprehend a game. Will you tell me he understands the words I speak?'

Across the tent, Starling was propped up on one elbow, listening to the conversation. I tried to think of a way to dissemble, then rejected it fiercely. I squared my shoulders as if I were reporting to Verity himself and spoke clearly. 'We are Wit-bound. What I hear and understand, he comprehends as I do. What interests him, he learns. I do not say he could read a scroll, or remember a song. But if a thing intrigues him, he thinks on it, in his own way. As a wolf, usually, but sometimes almost as anyone might ...' I struggled to try and put in words something I myself did not understand perfectly. 'He saw the game as a pack of wolves driving game. Not as black and red and white markers. And he saw where he would go, were he hunting with that pack, to make their kill more likely. I suppose that sometimes I see things as he sees them ... as a wolf. It is not wrong, I believe. Only a different way of perceiving the world.'

There was still a trace of superstitious fear in Kettle's eyes as she glanced from me to the sleeping wolf. Nighteyes chose that moment to let his tail rise and fall in a sleepy wag to indicate he was fully cognizant that we spoke of him. Kettle gave a shiver. 'What you do with him ... is it like Skilling from human to human, only to a wolf?'

I started to shake my head, but then had to shrug. ‘The Wit begins more as a sharing of feelings. Especially when I was a child. Following smells, chasing a chicken because it would run, enjoying food together. But when you have been together as long as Nighteyes and I have, it starts to be something else. It goes beyond feelings, and it’s never really words. I am more aware of the animal that my mind lives inside. He is more aware of ...’

Thinking. Of what comes before and after choosing to do an action. One becomes aware that one is always making choices, and considers what the best ones are.

Exactly. I repeated his words aloud for Kettle. By now Nighteyes was sitting up. He made an elaborate show of stretching and then sat looking at her, his head cocked to one side.

‘I see,’ she said faintly. ‘I see.’ Then she got up and left the tent.

Starling sat up and stretched. ‘It gives one an entirely different outlook on scratching his ears,’ she observed. The Fool answered her with a snort of laughter, sat up in his bedding, and immediately reached to scratch Nighteyes behind the ears. The wolf fell over on him in appreciation. I growled at both of them and went back to making tea.

We were not as swift to be packed and on our way. A thick layer of damp snow overlay everything, making breaking camp that much more difficult. We cut up what was left of the boar and took it with us. The jeppas were rounded up; despite the storm, they had not wandered far. The secret seemed to be in the bag of sweetened grain that Kettricken kept to lure the leader. When we were loaded and finally ready to leave, Kettle announced that I must not be allowed to walk on the road, and that someone must always be with me. I bristled a bit at that, but they ignored me. The Fool volunteered quickly to be my first partner. Starling gave him an odd smile and a shake of her head over that. I accepted their ridicule by sulking manfully. They ignored that, too.

In a short time the women and the jeppas were moving easily up the road, while the Fool and I scabbled alongside on the berm that marked the edge of it. Kettle turned to shake her walking stick. ‘Get him further away than that!’ she scolded the Fool. ‘Get to where you can just see us to follow us. Go on, now. Go on.’

So we obediently edged back into the woods. As soon as we were out of sight of the others, the Fool turned to me and excitedly demanded, ‘Who is Kettle?’

‘You know as much as I do,’ I pointed out shortly. And added a question of my own, ‘What is between you and Starling now?’

He lifted his eyebrows at me and winked slyly.

‘I doubt that very much,’ I retorted.

‘Ah, not all are as immune to my wiles as you are, Fitz. What can I tell you? She pines for me, she yearns for me in the depths of her soul, but knows not how to express it, poor thing.’

I gave it up as a bad question. ‘What do you mean by asking me, “Who is Kettle?”’

He gave me a pitying glance. ‘It is not so complex a question, princeling. Who is this woman who knows so much of what troubles you, who suddenly fishes out of a pocket a game I have only seen mentioned once in a very old scroll, who sings for us “Six Wise Men Went to Jhaampe-Town” with two additional verses I’ve never heard anywhere. Who, oh light of my life, is Kettle, and why does so ancient a woman choose to spend her last days hiking up a mountain with us?’

‘You’re in fine spirits this morning,’ I observed sourly.

‘Aren’t I?’ he agreed. ‘And you are almost as adept at avoiding my question. Surely, you must have some musings on this mystery to share with a poor Fool?’

‘She doesn’t give me enough information about herself to base any wondering on,’ I returned.

‘So. What can we surmise about one who guards her tongue as closely as all that? About someone who seems to know something of the Skill as well? And the ancient games of Buck, and old poetry? How old do you suppose she is?’

I shrugged. ‘She didn’t like my song about Crossfire’s coterie,’ I offered suddenly.

‘Ah, but that could easily have been just your singing. Let’s not grasp at straws, here.’

In spite of myself, I smiled. ‘It has been so long since your tongue has had an edge to it, it’s almost a relief to hear you mock me.’

‘Had I known you missed it, I would have been rude to you much sooner.’ He grinned. Then he grew more serious. ‘FitzChivalry, mystery hovers about that woman like flies on ... spilt beer. She absolutely reeks of omens and portents and prophecies coming into focus. I think it is time one of us asked her a few direct questions.’ He smiled at me. ‘Your best chance

will be when she is shepherding you along this afternoon. Be subtle, of course. Ask her who was king when she was a girl. And why she was exiled.'

'Exiled?' I laughed aloud. 'There's a leap of the imagination.'

'Do you think so? I don't. Ask her. And be sure to tell me whatever she doesn't say.'

'And in return for all this, you will tell me what is truly going on between you and Starling?'

He gave me a sideways glance. 'Are you sure you want to know? The last time we made such a trade, when I gave you the secret you'd bargained for, you found you did not want it.'

'Is this such a secret?'

He arched one eyebrow at me. 'You know, I am hardly certain of the answer to that myself. Sometimes you surprise me, Fitz. More often, you don't, of course. Most often I surprise myself. Such as when I volunteer to slog through loose snow and dodge trees with some bastard when I could be parading up a perfectly straight avenue with a string of charming jeppas.'

I got as little information from him the rest of the morning. When afternoon came, it was not Kettle, but Starling who was my walking companion. I expected that to be uncomfortable. I still had not forgotten that she had bargained her knowledge of my child in order to be part of this expedition. But somehow in the days since we had begun our journey, my anger had become a weary wariness toward her. I knew now there was no bit of information she would scruple to use against me, and so I guarded my tongue, resolving to say nothing at all of Molly or my daughter. Not that it would do much good now.

But to my surprise, Starling was affable and chatty. She plied me with questions, not about Molly, but about the Fool, to the point at which I began to wonder if she *had* conceived a sudden affection for him. There had been a few times at court when women had taken an interest in him and pursued him. To those who were attracted by the novelty of his appearance, he had been mercilessly cruel in exposing the shallowness of their interest. There had been one gardener maid who was impressed with his wit so much that she was tongue-tied in his presence. I heard kitchen gossip that she left bouquets of flowers for him at the base of his tower stairs, and some surmised that she had occasionally been invited to ascend those steps. She

had had to leave Buckkeep Castle to care for her elderly mother in a distant town, and that had been where it ended, as far as I knew.

Yet as slight as this knowledge of the Fool was, I kept it from Starling, turning aside her questions with banalities that the two of us were childhood friends whose duties had left us very little time for socializing. This was actually very close to the truth, but I could see it both frustrated and amused her. Her other questions were as odd. She asked if I had ever wondered what his true name was. I told her that not being able to recall the name my own mother had given me had left me chary of asking others such questions. That quieted her for a time, but then she demanded to know how he had dressed as a child. My descriptions of his seasonal motleys did not suit her, but I truthfully told her that until Jhaampe I had never seen him dressed in other than his jester's clothes. By afternoon's end, her questions and my answers had more of sparring in them than conversation. I was glad to join the others in a camp, pitched at quite a distance from the Skill road.

Even so, Kettle kept me busy, letting me do her chores as well as my own for the sake of occupying my mind. The Fool concocted a respectable stew from our supplies and the pork. The wolf contented himself with another leg off the animal. When the meal things were finally cleared away, Kettle immediately set out the game cloth and pouch of stones. 'Now we shall see what you have learned,' she promised me.

But half a dozen games later, she squinted up at me with a frown. 'You were not lying!' she accused me.

'About what?'

'About the wolf devising the solution. Had you mastered that strategy yourself, you would play a different game now. Because someone gave you the answer rather than your discovering it yourself, you don't fully understand it.'

At the moment the wolf rose and stretched. *I weary of stones and cloth*, he informed me. *My hunting is more fun, and offers real meat at the end of it.*

So you are hungry?

No. Bored. He nosed the flap of the tent open and slipped out into the night.

Kettle watched him go with pursed lips. 'I was about to ask if you could not team together to play this game. It would interest me to see how you played.'

‘I think he suspected that,’ I muttered, a bit disgruntled that he had not invited me to join him.

Five games later, I grasped the brilliant simplicity of Nighteyes’ noose tactic. It had lain before me all that time, but suddenly it was as if I saw the stones in motion rather than resting on the vertices of the cloth’s pattern. In my next move, I employed it to win easily. I won the next three games handily, for I saw how it could be employed in a reverse situation as well.

At the third win, Kettle cleared the cloth of stones. Around us the others had already sunk into sleep. Kettle added a handful of twigs to the brazier to give us one last burst of light. Rapidly her knotted old fingers set out the stones on the cloth. ‘Again, this is your game, and it is your move,’ she informed me. ‘But this time, you have only a white stone to place. A little weak white stone, but it can win for you. Think well on this one. And no cheating. Leave the wolf out of it.’

I stared at the situation to fix the game in my mind and then lay down to sleep. The game she had set out for me looked hopeless. I did not see how it could be won with a black stone, let alone a white one. I do not know if it were the stone game or our distance from the road, but I sank quickly into a sleep that was dreamless until near dawn. Then I joined the wolf in his wild running. Nighteyes had left the road far behind him and was joyously exploring the surrounding hillsides. We came on two snow cats feeding off a kill, and for a time he taunted them, circling just out of reach to make them hiss and spit at us. Neither would be lured from the meat and after a time we gave off the game to head back for the yurt. As we approached the tent, we circled stealthily about the jeppas, scaring them into a defensive bunch and then nudging them along to mill about just outside the tent. When the wolf crept back into the tent, I was still with him as he poked the Fool rudely with an icy nose.

It is good to see you have not lost all spirit and fun, he told me as I unlocked my mind from his and roused up in my own body.

Very good, I agreed with him. And rose to face the day.

TWENTY-SIX

Signposts

One thing I have learned well in my travels. The riches of one region are taken for granted in another. Fish we would not feed to a cat in Buckkeep is prized as a delicacy in the inland cities. In some places water is wealth, in others the constant flooding of the river is both an annoyance and a peril. Fine leather, graceful pottery, glass as transparent as air, exotic flowers ... all of these I have seen in such plentiful supply that the folk who possess them no longer see them as wealth.

So perhaps, in sufficient quantity, magic becomes ordinary. Instead of a thing of wonder and awe, it becomes the stuff of roadbeds and signposts, used with a profligacy that astounds those who have it not.

That day I travelled, as before, across the face of a wooded hillside. At first the flank of the hill was broad and gentle. I could walk in sight of the road and only slightly below it on the hillside. The huge evergreens held most of the burden of winter snow above me. The footing was uneven and there were occasional patches of deep snow but walking was not too difficult. By the end of that day, however, the trees were beginning to dwindle in size and the slope of the hill was markedly steeper. The road hugged the hillside, and I walked below it. When it came time to camp that night, my companions and I were hard pressed to find a level place to pitch the tent. We scabbled quite a way down the hill before we found a place where it levelled. When we did have the yurt up, Kettricken stood looking back up at the road and frowning to herself. She took out her map and was consulting it by the waning daylight when I asked her what the matter was.

She tapped the map with a mittened finger and then gestured to the slope above us. 'By tomorrow, if the road keeps climbing and the slopes get steeper, you won't be able to keep pace with us. We'll be leaving the trees behind us by evening tomorrow. The country is going to be bare, steep and rocky. We should take firewood with us now, as much as the jeppas can easily carry.' She frowned. 'We may have to slow our pace to allow you to match us.'

'I'll keep up,' I promised her.

Her blue eyes met mine. 'By the day after tomorrow, you may have to join us on the road.' She looked at me steadily.

'If I do, then I'll have to cope with it.' I shrugged and tried to smile despite my uneasiness. 'What else can I do?'

'What else can any of us do?' she muttered to herself in reply.

That night when I had finished cleaning the cooking pots, Kettle once again set out her cloth and stones. I looked at the spread of pieces and shook my head. 'I haven't worked it out,' I told her.

'Well, that is a relief,' she told me. 'If you, or even if you and your wolf had, I would have been too astonished for words. It's a difficult problem. But we shall play a few games tonight, and if you keep your eyes open and your wits sharp, you may see the solution to your problem.'

But I did not, and lay down to sleep with gamecloth and pieces scattered in my brain.

The next day's walk went as Kettricken had foretold. By noon I was scrabbling through brushy places and over tumbles of bared rock with Starling at my heels. Despite the breathless effort the terrain demanded, she was full of questions, and all about the Fool. What did I know of his parentage? Who had made his clothing for him? Had he ever been seriously ill? It had become routine for me to answer her by giving her little or no information. I had expected her to weary of this game, but she was as tenacious as a bull-dog. Finally, I rounded on her in exasperation and demanded to know exactly what it was about him that fascinated her so.

A strange look came to her face, as one who steels oneself to a dare. She started to speak, paused, and then could not resist. Her eyes were avid on my face as she announced, 'The Fool is a woman, and she is in love with you.'

For a moment it was as if she had spoken in a foreign language. I stood looking down on her and trying to puzzle out what she had meant. Had she not begun to laugh, I might have thought of a reply. But something in her laughter offended me so deeply that I turned my back on her and continued making my way across the steep slope.

'You're blushing!' she called from behind me. Merriment choked her voice. 'I can tell from the back of your neck! All these years, and you never even knew? Never even suspected?'

'I think it's a ridiculous idea,' I said without even looking back.

'Really? What part of it?'

‘All of it,’ I said coldly.

‘Tell me you absolutely know that I’m wrong.’

I didn’t dignify her taunt with an answer. I did forge through a patch of thick brush without pausing to hold the branches back for her. I know she knew I was getting angry because she was laughing. I pushed my way clear of the last of the trees and stood looking out over a nearly-sheer rockface. There was almost no brush, and cracked grey stone pushed up in icy ridges through the snow. ‘Stay back!’ I warned Starling as she pushed up beside me. She looked around me and sucked in her breath.

I looked up the steep hillside to where the road was scored across the mountain’s face like a gouge in a piece of wood. It was the only safe way across that sheer mountain face. Above us was the steep boulder-strewn mountainside. It was not quite sheer enough to call it a cliff. There was a scattering of wind-warped trees and bushes, some with roots straggling over the rocky soil as much as in it. Snow frosted it unevenly. Climbing up to the road would be a challenge. The slope we traversed had been getting steeper all morning. I should not have been surprised, but I had been so intent on picking the best path that it had been some time since I had looked up to the road.

‘We’ll have to return to the road,’ I told Starling and she nodded mutely.

It was easier said than done. In several places I felt rock and scree slew under my feet, and more than once I went on all fours. I could hear Starling panting behind me. ‘Only a little further!’ I called back to her as Nighteyes came toiling up the slope beside us. He passed us effortlessly, moving by leaps up the slope until he reached the edge of the road. He disappeared over the edge of it, and then returned to stand on the lip looking down at us. In a moment the Fool appeared beside him, to gaze down at us anxiously. ‘Need any help?’ he called down.

‘No. We’ll make it!’ I called back up to him. I paused, crouching and clinging to the trunk of a stunted tree, to catch my breath and wipe the sweat from my eyes. Starling halted behind me. And suddenly I felt the road above me. It had a current like a river, and as the current of a river stirs the air to wind over it, so did the road. It was a wind not of winter cold, but of lives, both distant and near. The Fool’s strange essence floated on it, and Kettle’s close-mouthed fear and Kettricken’s sad determination. They were as separate and recognizable as the bouquets of different wines.

‘FitzChivalry!’ Starling emphasized my name by hitting me between the shoulder blades.

‘What?’ I asked her absently.

‘Keep moving! I can’t cling here much longer, my calves are cramping!’

‘Oh.’ I found my body and climbed the remaining distance to the lip of the road. The flowing Skill made me effortlessly aware of Starling behind me. I could feel her placing her feet and gripping the scraggly mountain willow at the edge of the cliff. I stood for an instant on the lip of the road’s edge. Then I stepped down, onto the smooth surface of the road, slipping into its pull like a child slipping into a river.

The Fool had waited for us. Kettricken was at the head of the line of jeppas, looking back anxiously to watch us join them. I took a deep breath and felt as if I were gathering myself together. Beside me, Nighteyes suddenly flipped my hand with his nose.

Stay with me, he suggested. I felt him groping for a firmer grip on our bond. That I could not help him alarmed me. I looked down into his deep eyes and suddenly found a question.

You’re on the road. I didn’t think animals could come on the road.

He gave a sneeze of disgust. *There’s a difference between thinking an action is wise and doing it. And you might have noticed that the jeppas have been travelling on the road for some days.*

It was too obvious. *Why do the wild animals avoid it then?*

Because we still depend on ourselves for survival. The jeppas depend on humans, and will follow them into any danger, no matter how foolish it seems to them. Thus they have not the sense to run from a wolf, either. Instead they flee back to you humans when I scare them. It’s a lot like horses or cattle and rivers. Left to themselves, they swim them only if death is right behind them, from predators or starvation. But humans convince them to swim rivers any time the human wishes to be on the other side. I think they are rather stupid.

So why are you on this road? I asked him with a smile.

Do not question friendship, he told me seriously.

‘Fitz!’

I startled, and turned to Kettle. ‘I’m fine,’ I told her, even as I knew I was not. My Wit-sense usually made me very aware of others around me. But Kettle had walked up right behind me and I’d not noticed until she spoke

to me. Something about the Skill road was dulling my Wit. When I did not think specifically of Nighteyes, he faded into a vague shadow in my mind.

I'd be less than that, were I not striving to stay with you, he pointed out worriedly.

'It will be all right. I just have to pay attention,' I told him.

Kettle assumed I was speaking to her. 'Yes, you do.' Pointedly she took my arm and started me walking. The others had gone ahead. Starling was walking with the Fool, and singing some love ditty as she walked, but he was looking over his shoulder worriedly at me. I gave him a nod and he nodded back uneasily. Beside me, Kettle pinched my arm. 'Pay attention to me. Talk to me. Tell me. Have you solved the game problem I gave you?'

'Not yet,' I admitted. The days were warmer, but the wind that blew past us now still brought the threat of ice on the higher mountain peaks. If I thought about it, I could feel the cold on my cheeks, but the Skill road bade me ignore it. The road was steadily climbing now. Even so, I seemed to walk effortlessly on its surface. My eyes told me that we were going uphill, but I strode along as easily as if it were down.

Another pinch from Kettle. 'Think about the problem,' she bade me curtly. 'And do not be deceived. Your body labours and is cold. Simply because you are not constantly aware of it does not mean you can ignore it. Pace yourself.'

Her words seemed both foolish and wise. I realized that by hanging onto my arm, she was not only supporting herself but was forcing me to walk more slowly. I shortened and slowed my stride to match hers. 'The others seem to take no harm from it,' I observed to her.

'True. But they are neither old nor Skill-sensitive. They will ache tonight, and tomorrow they will slow their pace. This road was built with the assumption that those who used it would be either unaware of its more subtle influences, or trained in how to manage them.'

'How do you know so much about it?' I demanded.

'Do you want to know about me, or about this road?' she snapped angrily.

'Both, actually,' I told her.

She didn't answer that. After a time she asked me, 'Do you know your nursery rhymes?'

I don't know why it made me so angry. 'I don't know!' I retorted. 'I don't recall my earliest childhood, when most children learn them. I suppose

you could say I learned stable rhymes instead. Shall I recite for you the fifteen points of a good horse?’

‘Recite for me instead “Six Wisemen went to Jhaampe-town”!’ she snarled. ‘In my days, children were not only taught their learning rhymes, they knew what they meant. This is the hill in the poem, you ignorant pup! The one no wise man goes up and expects to come down again!’

A shiver walked down my spine. There have been a few times in my life when I have recognized some symbolic truth in a way that stripped it down to its most frightening bones. This was one. Kettle had brought to the forefront of my mind a thing I had known for days. ‘The Wisemen were Skilled ones, weren’t they?’ I asked softly. ‘Six, and five, and four ... coteries, and the remains of coteries ...’ My mind skipped up the stair of logic, substituting intuition for most of the steps. ‘So that’s what became of the Skilled ones, the old ones we could not find. When Galen’s coterie did not work well, and Verity needed more help to defend Buck, Verity and I sought for older Skilled ones, folk who had been trained by Solicity before Galen became Skillmaster,’ I explained to Kettle. ‘We could find few records of names. And they had all either died, or disappeared. We suspected treachery.’

Kettle snorted. ‘Treachery would be nothing new to coteries. But what more commonly happened is that as people grew in the Skill, they became more and more attuned to it. Eventually the Skill called them. If one were strong enough in the Skill, one could survive the trip up this road. But if she were not, she perished.’

‘And if one succeeded?’ I asked.

Kettle gave me a sidelong glance, but said nothing.

‘What is at the end of this road? Who built it, and where does it lead?’

‘Verity,’ she said quietly at last. ‘It leads to Verity. You and I need know no more than that.’

‘But you know more than that!’ I accused her. ‘As do I. It leads to the source of all Skill as well.’

Her glance became worried, then opaque. ‘I know nothing,’ she told me sourly. Then, as conscience smote her, ‘There is much I suspect, and many half-truths have I heard. Legends, prophecies, rumours. Those are what I know.’

‘And how do you know them?’ I pressed.

She turned to regard me levelly. 'Because I am fated to do so. Even as you are.'

And not another word on the subject would she say. Instead, she set up hypothetical game boards and demanded to know what moves I would make, given a black, red or white stone. I tried to focus on the tasks, knowing that she gave them to me to keep my mind my own. But ignoring the Skill-force of that road was rather like ignoring a strong wind or a current of icy water. I could choose not to pay attention to it, but that did not make it stop. In the midst of puzzling out game strategy, I would wonder at the pattern of my own thoughts and believe them not my own at all, but those of another whom I had somehow tapped. While I could keep the game puzzle in front of me, it did not stop the gallery of voices whispering in the back of my mind.

The road wound up and up. The mountain itself rose nearly sheer on our left, and dropped off as abruptly on our right. This road went where no sane builders would have placed it. Most trade routes meandered between hills and over passes. This one traversed the face of a mountain, carrying us ever higher. By the time the day was fading, we had fallen far behind the others. Nighteyes raced ahead of us and then came trotting back to report that they had come to a resting-place, wide and level, where they were setting up the tent. With the coming of night, the mountain winds bit more fiercely. I was glad to think of warmth and rest, and persuaded Kettle to try to hurry.

'Hurry?' she asked. 'You are the one who keeps slowing. Keep up, now.'

The last march before rest always seems longest. So the soldiers of Buckkeep always told me. But that night I felt we waded through cold syrup, so heavy did my feet seem. I think I kept pausing. I know that several times Kettle tugged at my arm and told me to come along. Even when we rounded a fold in the mountainside and saw the lit tent ahead of us, I could not seem to make myself move faster. Like a fever dream, my eyes brought the tent closer to me, and then set it afar. I plodded on. Multitudes whispered around me. The night dimmed my eyes. I had to squint to see in the cold wind. A crowd streamed past us on the road, laden donkeys, laughing girls carrying baskets of bright yarn. I turned to watch a bell merchant pass us. He carried a rack high on his shoulder, and dozens of brass bells of every shape and tone jingled and rang as he walked along. I tugged at Kettle's arm to bid her

turn and see it, but she only seized my hand in a grip of iron and hurried me on. A boy strode past us, going down to the village with a basketful of bright mountain flowers. Their fragrance was intoxicating. I pulled free of Kettle's grip. I hurried after him, to buy a few for Molly to scent her candles.

'Help me!' Kettle called. I looked to see what was the matter, but she was not by me. I couldn't find her in the crowd.

'Kettle!' I called. I glanced back but then realized I was losing the flower-monger. 'Wait!' I called to him.

'He's getting away!' she cried, and there was fear and desperation in her voice.

Nighteyes suddenly hit me from behind, his front paws striking my shoulders. His weight and speed threw me face first on the thin layer of snow covering the road's smooth surface. Despite my mittens, I skinned the palms of my hands and the pain in my knees was like fire. 'Idiot!' I snarled at him and tried to rise, but he caught me by one ankle and flipped me down onto the road again. This time I could look down over the edge into the abyss below. My pain and astonishment had stilled the night, the folk had all vanished, leaving me alone with the wolf.

'Nighteyes!' I protested. 'Let me up!'

Instead he seized my wrist in his jaws, clamped his teeth down and began to drag me on my knees away from the road's edge. I had not known he had such strength, or rather, I had never supposed it would be turned on me. I swatted at him ineffectually with my free hand, all the while yelling and trying to get to my feet. I could feel blood running on my arm where one tooth had sunk in.

Kettricken and the Fool suddenly flanked me, seizing me by my upper arms and hoisting me to my feet. 'He's gone mad!' I exclaimed as Starling raced up behind them. Her face was white, her eyes huge.

'Oh, wolf,' she exclaimed, and dropped to one knee to give him a hug. Nighteyes sat panting, obviously enjoying her embrace.

'What is the matter with you?' I demanded of him. He looked up at me, but did not reply.

My first reaction was a stupid one. I lifted my hands to my ears. But that had never been how I had heard Nighteyes. He whined as I did so, and I heard that clearly. It was just a dog's whine. 'Nighteyes!' I cried. He reared up to stand on his hind legs, his front paws on my chest. He was so big he could almost look me in the eye. I caught an echo of his worry and

desperation, but no more than that. I quested out toward him with my Wit-sense. I could not find him. I could not sense any of them. It was as if they had all been Forged.

I looked around at their frightened faces and realized they were talking, no, almost shouting, something about the edge of the road and the black column and what was the matter, what was the matter? For the first time it struck me how ungainly speech was. All of those separate words, strung together, every voice mouthing them differently, and this was how we communicated with each other. 'Fitz, fitz, fitz,' they shouted, my name, meaning me, I suppose, but each voice sounding the word differently, and each with a different image of whom they spoke to and why they needed to speak to me. The words were such awkward things, I could not concentrate on what they were trying to convey by them. It was like dealing with foreign traders, pointing and holding up fingers, smiling or frowning, and guessing, always guessing at what the other truly meant.

'Please,' I said. 'Hush. Please!' I only wanted them to be silent, to stop their noises and mouthings. But the sound of my own words caught my attention. 'Please,' I said again, marvelling at all the ways my mouth must move to make that inexact sound. 'Hush!' I said again, and realized the word meant too many things to have any real meaning at all.

Once, when I was very new to Burrich, he had told me to unharness a team. It was when we were still getting a measure of one another, and no task any sane man would give a child. But I managed, climbing all over the docile beasts, and unfastening every shining buckle and clasp until the harness lay in pieces on the ground. When he came to see what was taking me so long, Burrich had been mutely astounded but unable to fault that I had done what he had told me to do. As for me, I had been amazed at how many pieces there were to something that had seemed to be all one thing when I had started in on it.

So it was for me then. All these sounds to make a word, all these words to frame a thought. Language came apart in my hands. I had never stopped to consider it before. I stood before them, so drenched in the Skill-essence on that road that speech seemed as childishy awkward as eating porridge with one's fingers. Words were slow and inexact, hiding as much meaning as they revealed. 'Fitz, please, you have to ...' began Kettricken, and so engrossed did I become in considering every possible meaning those five words might have that I never heard the rest of what she said.

The Fool took hold of my hand and led me into the tent. He pushed at me until I sat down, and took off my hat and mittens and outer coat. Without a word, he put a hot mug into my hands. That I could understand, but the rapid, worried conversation of the others was like the frightened squawking of a coop full of chickens. The wolf came and lay down beside me, to rest his big head on one of my thighs. I reached down to stroke the broad skull and finger the soft ears. He pressed closer against me as if pleading. I scratched him behind the ears, thinking that might be what he wanted. It was terrible not to know.

I was not much use to anyone that evening. I tried to do my share of the chores, but the others kept taking them out of my hands. Several times I was pinched, or poked and bid, 'Wake up!' by Kettle. One time I became so fascinated by the motion of her mouth as she scolded me that I didn't realize when she walked away from me. I don't remember what I was doing when the back of my neck was seized in her claw-like grip. She dragged my head forward and kept her hold while she tapped each stone in turn on her gamecloth. She put a black stone in my hand. For a time I just stared at the markers. Then suddenly I felt that shift in perception. There was no space between me and the game. For a time I tried my pebble in various positions. I finally found the perfect move, and when I set my stone in place, it was as if my ears had suddenly cleared, or like blinking sleep from my eyes. I lifted my eyes to consider those around me.

'Sorry,' I muttered inadequately. 'Sorry.'

'Better now?' Kettle asked me softly. She spoke as if I were a toddler.

'I'm more myself now,' I told her. I looked up at her, suddenly desperate. 'What happened to me?'

'The Skill,' she said simply. 'You just aren't strong enough in it. You nearly followed the road where it no longer goes. There is some sort of marker there, and once the road diverged there, one track going down into the valley and the other continuing across the mountainside. The downhill path is sheared off, carried away in a cataclysm years ago. There is nothing but tumbled stone at the bottom, but one can just see where the road emerges from the ruin and continues. It vanishes in another jumble of stone in the distance. Verity could not have gone there. But you nearly followed its memory to your death.' She paused and looked at me severely. 'In my days ... you haven't been trained enough to do what you've been doing, let alone face this challenge. If this is the best you were taught ... Are you certain

Verity is alive?’ she suddenly demanded of me. ‘That he survived this trial alone?’

I decided one of us had to stop keeping secrets. ‘I saw him, in a Skill-dream. In a city, with folk such as we passed today. He laved his hands and arms in a magic river, and walked away laden with power.’

‘God of fishes!’ Kettle swore. Something of horror and something of awe lit in her face.

‘We passed no folk today,’ Starling objected. I had not been aware she had seated herself by me until she spoke. I jumped, startled that someone could get that close to me and I had not sensed it.

‘All those who have ever trodden this road have left something of themselves upon it. Your senses are muffled to those ghosts, but Fitz walks here naked as a new-born child. And as naive.’ Kettle leaned back suddenly against her bedroll, and all the lines in her face deepened. ‘How can such a child be the Catalyst?’ she asked of no one in particular. ‘You don’t know how to save yourself from yourself. How are you going to save the world?’

The Fool leaned over from his bedroll suddenly to take my hand. Something like strength flowed into me with that reassuring touch. His tone was light, but his words sank into me. ‘Competence was never guaranteed in the prophecies. Only persistence. What does your White Colum say? “They come like raindrops against the stone towers of time. But in time it is always the rain that prevails, not the tower.”’ He gave my hand a squeeze.

‘Your fingers are like ice,’ I told him as he let go.

‘I am cold past belief,’ he agreed with me. He drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. ‘Cold and tired. But persistent.’

I lifted my eyes from him to find Starling with a knowing smile on her face. Gods, how it irked me. ‘I have elfbark in my pack,’ I suggested to the Fool. ‘It gives warmth as well as strength.’

‘Elf bark.’ Kettle scowled, as if it were disgusting. But after a moment’s reflection, she said excitedly, ‘Actually, that might be a good idea. Yes. Elf bark tea.’

When I took the drug out of my pack, Kettle snatched it out of my hands as if I might cut myself on it. She muttered to herself as she measured tiny portions of it into mugs for us. ‘I’ve seen what kind of doses you expose yourself to,’ she chided me, and brewed the tea herself. She put none of it in the tea she prepared for Kettricken, Starling and herself.

I sipped at my hot tea, tasting first the acrid bite of the elfbark and then the warmth of it in my belly. Its enervating heat spread through me. I watched the Fool, and saw him relax in its embrace, even as his eyes began to sparkle with it.

Kettricken had her map out and was frowning over it. ‘FitzChivalry, study this with me,’ the Queen suddenly commanded. I moved around the brazier to sit next to her. I was scarcely settled before she began. ‘I believe we are here,’ she told me. Her finger tapped the first juncture of the trail that was marked on the map. ‘Verity said he would visit all three places that were marked on the map. I believe that when this map was made, the road that you nearly followed tonight was intact. Now it is no longer there. And has not been there for some time.’ Her blue eyes met mine. ‘What do you suppose Verity did when he reached this point?’

I considered a moment. ‘He’s a pragmatic man. This other, second destination looks no more than three or four days from here. I think he might go there first, seeking the Elderlings there. And this third one is but, oh, seven days past there. I think he would decide it would be fastest to visit those two places first. Then, if he had no success there, he might return here, to try and find a way down to ... whatever’s there.’

She wrinkled her brow. I suddenly recalled how smooth it had been when she was first his bride. Now I seldom saw her without lines of care and worry in her face. ‘He has been gone long, my husband. Yet it did not take us all that long to reach here. Perhaps he has not yet returned because he is down there. Because it took him so long to find a way down there to continue his journey.’

‘Perhaps,’ I agreed uneasily. ‘Bear in mind that we are well supplied and travel together. By the time Verity reached this far, he would have been alone, and with few resources.’ I refrained from telling Kettricken that I suspected he had been injured in that last battle. There was no sense in giving her more anxiety. Against my will, I felt a part of me groping out toward Verity. I shut my eyes and resolutely sealed myself in again. Had I imagined a taint upon the Skill-current, a too-familiar feeling of insidious power? I set my walls again.

‘... split the party?’

‘I beg pardon, my queen,’ I said humbly.

I did not know if the look in her eyes were exasperation or fear. She took my hand and held it firmly. ‘Attend me,’ she commanded. ‘I said,

tomorrow we shall seek a way down. If we see anything that looks promising, we will attempt it. But I think we should give such a search no more than three days. If we find nothing, we should move on. But an alternative is to split the party. To send ...'

'I do not think we should split the party,' I said hastily.

'You are most likely correct,' she conceded. 'But it takes so long, so very long, and I have been alone with my questions too long.'

I could think of nothing to say to that, so I pretended to be busy rubbing Nighteyes' ears.

My brother. It was a whisper, no more, but I looked down at Nighteyes beside me. I rested a hand on his ruff, strengthening the bond with a touch. *You were as empty as an ordinary human. I could not make you even feel me.*

I know. I don't know what happened to me.

I do. You are moving ever farther from my side to the other side. I fear you will go too far and be unable to return. I feared it had already happened today.

What do you mean, my side, and the other side?

'Can you hear the wolf again?' Kettricken asked me worriedly. I was surprised, when I looked up, to see how anxiously she regarded me.

'Yes. We are together again,' I told her. A thought occurred to me. 'How did you know we were unable to communicate?'

She shrugged. 'I suppose I assumed it. He seemed so anxious and you seemed so distant from everyone.'

She has the Wit. Don't you, my queen?

I can not say for certain that something passed between them. Once, long before in Buckkeep, I thought I had sensed Kettricken using the Wit. I suppose she well could have been using it then, for my own sense of it was so diminished I could scarce sense my own bond-animal. In any case Nighteyes lifted his head to look at her and she returned his gaze steadily. With a small frown, Kettricken added, 'Sometimes I wish I could speak to him as you do. Had I his speed and stealth at my disposal, I could be more certain of the safety of the road, both before us and behind. He might be able to find a path down, one not apparent to our eyes.'

If you can keep your Wits about you enough to tell her what I see, I would not mind doing such a task.

'Nighteyes would be most pleased to help you in such a way, my queen,' I offered.

She gave a weary smile. ‘Then, I suppose, if you can keep aware of both of us, you may serve as go-between.’

Her eerie echoing of the wolf’s thought unsettled me, but I only nodded my assent. Every aspect of conversation now demanded my complete attention, or it slipped away from me. It was like being horribly tired and having to constantly fight off sleep. I wondered if it were this hard for Verity.

There is a way to ride it, but lightly, lightly, like mastering an ill-tempered stallion who rebels against every touch of the rein or heel. But you are not ready to do so yet. So fight it, boy, and keep your head above water. Would that there were another way for you to come to me. But there is only the road, and you must follow it – No, make no reply to me. Know that there are others that listen avariciously if not as keenly as I. Be wary.

Once, in describing my father Chivalry, Verity had said that when he Skilled it was like being trampled by a horse, that Chivalry would rush into his mind, dump out his messages and flee. I now had a better understanding of what my uncle had meant. I felt rather like a fish suddenly deserted by a wave. There was that gaping sense of something missing in the instant after Verity’s departure. It took me a moment to remember I was a person. Had I not been fortified already with the elfbark, I think I might have fainted. As it was, the drug was increasing its hold on me. I had a sense of being muffled in a warm soft blanket. My weariness was gone, but I felt muted. I finished the little that was left in my cup and waited for the flush of energy that elfbark usually gave me. It didn’t come.

‘I don’t think you used enough,’ I told Kettle.

‘You have had plenty,’ she said with asperity. She sounded like Molly did when she thought I was drinking too much. I braced myself, expecting images of Molly to fill my mind. But I stayed within my own life. I do not know if I felt relieved or disappointed. I longed to see her and Nettle. But Verity had warned me ... belatedly I announced to Kettricken, ‘Verity Skilled to me. Just now.’ Then I cursed myself as a churl and a lackwit as I saw the hope flush her face. ‘It was not really a message,’ I amended hastily. ‘Just a warning reminder to me that I am to avoid Skilling. He still believes there may be others seeking me that way.’

Her face fell. She shook her head to herself. Then she looked up to demand, ‘He had no word at all for me?’

‘I do not know if he realizes you are with me,’ I hastily sidestepped the question.

‘No words,’ she said dully as if she had not heard me. Her eyes were opaque as she asked, ‘Does he know how I have failed him? Does he know about ... our child?’

‘I do not believe he does, my lady. I sense no such grief in him, and well I know how it would grieve him.’

Kettricken swallowed. I cursed my clumsy words, and yet, was it my place to utter words of comfort and love to his wife? She straightened up abruptly, then rose. ‘I think I shall bring in a bit more firewood for tonight,’ she announced. ‘And grain the jeppas. There is scarcely a twig for them to browse on here.’

I watched her leave the tent for the dark and still cold outside. No one spoke a word. After a breath or two, I rose and followed her. ‘Don’t be long,’ Kettle warned me enigmatically. The wolf shadowed after me.

Outside the night was clear and cold. The wind was no worse than usual. Familiar discomforts can almost be ignored. Kettricken was neither fetching wood nor graining the jeppas. I was sure both tasks had already been done earlier. Instead she was standing at the edge of the cloven road, staring out over the blackness of cliff at her feet. She stood tall and stiff as a soldier reporting to his sergeant and made not a sound. I knew she was crying.

There is a time for courtly manners, a time for formal protocol and a time for humanity. I went to her, took her by the shoulders and turned her to face me. She radiated misery and the wolf beside me whined high. ‘Kettricken,’ I said simply. ‘He loves you. He will not blame you. He will grieve, yes, but what kind of a man would not? As for Regal’s deeds, they are Regal’s deeds. Do not take the blame for those to yourself. You could not have stopped him.’

She wiped a hand across her face and did not speak. She looked past me, her face a pale mask in the starlight. She sighed heavily, but I could sense her strangling on her sorrow. I set my arms about my Queen and pulled her to me, pressing her face to my shoulder. I stroked her back, feeling the terrible tension there. ‘It’s all right,’ I lied to her. ‘It’s going to be all right. In time, you’ll see. You’ll be together again, you’ll make another child, both of you will sit in the Great Hall at Buckkeep and listen to the minstrels sing. There will be peace again, somehow. You’ve never seen Buckkeep at peace. There will be time for Verity to hunt and fish, and you’ll ride at his side. Verity will laugh and shout and roar through the halls like the

north wind again. Cook used to chase him out of the kitchen for slicing the meat from the roast before it was cooked through, he would come home from the chase that hungry. He'd come right in and cut the leg off a cooking fowl, that he would, and carry it about with him, telling stories in the guardroom, waving it about like a sword ...'

I patted her back as if she were a child and told her tales of the bluff, hearty man I remembered from my boyhood. For a time her forehead rested on my shoulder and she was completely still. Then she coughed once, as if starting to choke, but instead terrible sobs welled up from her. She cried suddenly and unabashedly as a child that has taken a bad fall and is hurt as well as frightened. I sensed these were tears that had long gone unshed, and I did not try to help her stop. Instead I went on talking and patting her, scarcely hearing what I was saying myself, until her sobs began to quiet and her shaking to still. At last she drew away from me a little, to grope in her pocket for a kerchief. She wiped her face and eyes and blew her nose before she tried to speak.

'I'm going to be all right,' she said. To hear the strength of her belief in those words made my heart ache. 'It's just ... It's hard just now. Waiting to tell him all these terrible things. Knowing how they will hurt him. They taught me so many things about being Sacrifice, Fitz. From the beginning, I knew I might have terrible sorrows to bear. I am strong enough ... to bear these things. But no one warned me that I might come to love the man they'd choose for me. To bear my sorrow is one thing. To bring sorrow to him is another.' Her throat closed on the words and she bowed her head. I feared she might begin to weep again. Instead when she lifted her head she smiled at me. Moonlight touched the silver wetness on her cheeks and lashes. 'Sometimes I think only you and I see the man beneath the crown. I want him to laugh, and roar about, and leave his bottles of ink open and his maps scattered about. I want him to put his arms about me and hold me. Sometimes I want those things so much, I forget about the Red Ships and Regal and ... everything else. Sometimes I think that if we could only be together again, all the rest would come right as well. It is not a very worthy thought to have. A Sacrifice is supposed to be more ...'

A glint of silver behind her caught my eyes. I saw the black column over her shoulder. It leaned at a cant over the broken edge of the road, half its stone support gone. I did not hear the rest of what she said. I wondered how I had not seen it before. It gleamed brighter than the moon on the

sparkling snow. It was hewn of black stone webbed with glittering crystal. Like moonlight on a rippling river of Skill. I could decipher no writing on its surface. The wind was screaming behind me as I reached out and ran a hand down that smooth stone. It welcomed me.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The City

There runs through the Mountain Kingdom an old trade trail that serves none of the present-day towns of the Mountain Kingdom. Portions of this old highway appear as far south and east as the shore of Blue Lake. The trail is not named, no one recalls who constructed it, and few use it even for the stretches that remain intact. In places the road has been gradually destroyed by the freezing swells that are common to the Mountains. In other places flooding and landslides have reduced it to rubble. Occasionally an adventurous Mountain youth will undertake to trace the road to its source. Those who return have tall tales of ruined cities and steaming valleys where sulphurous ponds smoke, and they speak too, of the forbidding nature of the territory the road spans. No game and poor hunting, they say, and it is not recorded anywhere that anyone has ever been impressed enough to make a return trip to the road's end.

I stumbled to my knees in the snowy street. I got to my feet slowly, groping for a memory. Had I got drunk? The queasiness, the dizziness were right for that. But not this darkly gleaming and silent city. I looked all around me. I was in a town square of some sort, standing in the shadow of a looming stone memorial of some kind. I blinked my eyes, squeezed them shut, then opened them again. The nebulous light still fogged me. I could scarcely see more than an arm's length in any direction. I waited in vain for my eyes to adjust to the vague starlight. But soon I began to shiver, so I began to walk silently through the empty streets. My natural wariness came back first, followed by a dim recollection of my companions, the tent, the sundered road. But between that hazy memory and my standing up in this street, there was nothing.

I looked back the way I had come. Darkness had swallowed the road behind me. Even my footprints were being filled in by the slowly falling damp snowflakes. I blinked snowflakes from my eyelashes and peered about me. I saw the damply glistening sides of stone buildings to either side of the street. My eyes could make no sense of the light. It was sourceless and evenly insufficient. There were no looming shadows or especially dark

alleys. But neither could I make out where I was going. The heights and styles of the buildings, the destinations of the streets remained a mystery.

I felt panic rise in me and fought it down. The sensations I had reminded me too vividly of how I had been Skill-deceived in Regal's manor. I was terrified to grope out with the Skill lest I encounter Will's taint in this city. But if I moved blindly on, trusting that I was not being deceived, I might blunder into a trap. In the shelter of a wall, I paused and forced myself to composure. I tried once more to recall how I had come here, how long ago I had left my companions and why. Nothing came to me. I quested out with my Wit-sense, trying to find Nighteyes, but I sensed nothing else alive. I wondered if there were truly no living creatures nearby, or if my Wit-sense had once more failed. I had no answers to that either. When I listened, I heard only wind. I smelled only damp stone, fresh snow and somewhere, perhaps, river water. Panic rose in me once more and I leaned back against the wall.

The city suddenly sprang to life around me. I perceived I was leaning up against the wall of an inn. From within I heard the sounds of a shrill piping instrument and voices lifted in an unfamiliar song. A wagon rumbled past in the street, and then a young couple darted past the mouth of the alley, hand in hand, laughing as they ran. It was night in this strange city, but it was not sleeping. I lifted my eyes to the impossible heights of their strangely-spired buildings, and saw lights burning in the upper storey. In the distance, a man called loudly to someone.

My heart was hammering. What was wrong with me? I steeled myself and found the resolve to go forth and find out what I could about this strange city. I waited until another keg-laden ale-wagon had rumbled past the mouth of my alley. Then I stepped away from the wall.

And in that instant, all was once more quiet, gleaming darkness. Gone was the song and laughter from the tavern; no one passed in the streets. I ventured to the mouth of the alley and peered cautiously in both directions. Nothing. Only softly falling wet snow. At least, I told myself, the weather was milder here than it had been on the road above. Even if I had to spend the entire night out of doors, I would not suffer too much.

I wandered a time through the city. At every intersection, I chose the widest road to follow, and soon realized a pattern of always going gently downhill. The river smell grew stronger. I paused once to rest on the edge of a great circular basin that might have enclosed a fountain or been a washing

court. Immediately the city once more sprang to life around me. A traveller came and watered his horse at the dry basin so close that I could have reached out to touch him. He noticed me not at all, but I marked well the strangeness of his garb and the odd shape of the saddle the horse wore. A group of women walked past me, talking and laughing quietly together. They wore long, straight garments that hung softly from their shoulders and fluttered about their calves as they walked. All wore their long fair hair loose to their hips, and their boots rang on the cobbled street. When I rose to speak to them, they vanished and the light with them.

Twice more I woke the city before I realized all it took was the touch of my hand on a crystal-veined wall. It took an unreasonable amount of courage but I began to walk with just my fingers trailing along the buildings' sides. When I did so, the city bloomed into life about me as I walked. It was night and the quiet snow still fell. The passing wagons left no tracks in it. I heard the slamming of doors that had long since rotted away and saw folk walk lightly over a deep gully some wild rainstorm had created down one street. It was hard to dismiss them as ghosts when they called greetings aloud to one another. I was the one who was ignored and invisible as I drifted along.

At length I came to a wide black river flowing smoothly under the starlight. Several ghost quays ran out into it and two immense ships were anchored out in the river. Lights shone from their decks. Hogsheads and bales waited dockside to be loaded. A huddle of folk were engaged in some game of chance and someone's honesty was being loudly disputed. They dressed differently from the river-rats who came into Buck and the language was different, but in all else that I could tell, they were the same breed. As I watched, a fight broke out and spread to become a general brawl. It dispersed quickly when the whistle of the night-watch sounded, combatants fleeing in all directions before the city guard arrived.

I lifted my hand from the wall. I stood a moment in the snowspangled darkness, letting my eyes adjust. Ships, quays, river folk were all gone. But the quiet black water still flowed, steaming in the colder air. I walked toward it, feeling the road go rough and broken under my feet as I advanced. The waters of this river had risen and fallen over this street, working their damage with no one to oppose them. When I turned my back to the river and studied the skyline of the city, I could see the faint silhouettes of fallen spires

and crumpled walls. Once again I quested out about me; once again I found no life.

I turned back to the river. Something in the general configuration of the land tugged at my memory. It was not precisely here, I knew that, but I felt sure that this was the river where I had seen Verity lave his hands and arms and bring them out gleaming with magic. Cautiously I walked over broken paving stones right down to the edge of the river. It looked like water, it smelled like water. I crouched down beside it and thought. I had heard tales of pools of tarry mud covered over with water; I knew well how oil floated upon water. Perhaps beneath the black water there flowed another river, one of silver power. Perhaps, further upstream or down, was the tributary of pure Skill I had seen in my vision.

I drew off my mitten and bared my arm. I set my hand upon the flow of the water, feeling its icy kiss against my bare palm. Senses straining, I tried to detect whether there was Skill beneath that surface; I felt nothing. But perhaps if I plunged in my arm and hand, they would come up gleaming with strength. I dared myself to reach in to discover for myself.

That was as far as my courage went. I was no Verity. I knew the strength of his Skilling, and I had seen how his immersion in the magic had tried his will. I was no match for it. He had marched alone up the Skill road while I ... My mind darted back to that puzzle. When had I left the Skill road and my companions? Perhaps I never had. Perhaps all this was a dream. I reached up and patted cold water on my face. I felt no different. I set my nails to my face and scratched the skin until it hurt. It proved nothing to me but only made me wonder if I could dream pain. I had found no answers in this strange dead city, only more questions.

With great resolve I turned my steps back the way I had come. Visibility was poor and the clinging snow was rapidly filling my footprints. With reluctance I set my fingers to the stone of a wall. It was easier to trace my way back that way, for the living city had had more landmarks than the cold cinders of it did. Yet as I hurried through the snowy streets, I wondered when all these folk had been here. Did I view the events of a night a hundred years ago? Had I come here another night would I view the same events played out or see a different night from the city's history? Or did these shades of folk perceive themselves as living now, was I an odd cold shadow that crept through their lives? I forced myself to stop wondering about things I had no answer to. I had to trace my way back the way I had come.

Either I came to the end of places I could remember or I took a wrong turning. The result was the same. I found myself wandering up a road I was sure was unfamiliar. I trailed my fingers down the fronts of a row of shops, all locked up tight for the night. I passed two lovers locked in an embrace in a doorway. A ghost dog padded past me without giving me so much as a curious sniff.

Despite the milder weather, I was getting cold. And tired. I glanced up at the sky. It would soon be morning. By daylight, I could perhaps climb up one of the buildings and get the lay of the land. Perhaps when I awoke, I would recall how I came here. Foolishly, I cast about for some overhanging eave or shed where I might shelter before it occurred to me that there was no reason not to go inside one of the buildings. Even so, I felt queer as I chose a door and walked through it. While I touched a wall, I saw a dim interior. Tables and shelves were laden with fine pottery and glassware. A cat slept by a banked hearth. When I lifted my hand from the wall, all was cold and pitch-black. So I trailed my fingers along the wall, nearly stumbling over the crumbling remains of one of the tables. I stooped, and gathered together the bits by touch and took them to the hearth. By great perseverance, I made a true fire of them where the ghost fire burned.

When it was going well and I stood over it to warm myself, its flickering light showed me a different view of the room. Bare walls and debris-strewn floor. There was no trace of the fine crockery and glassware, though there were a few more bits of wood from long-fallen shelves. I thanked my luck that they had been made of good oak, for surely they would have rotted to splinters long ago if they had not. I decided to lay my cloak on the floor to save me from the stone's chill and trust my fire to keep me warm enough. I lay down and closed my eyes and tried not to think of ghost cats or what phantom folk slept in their beds on the floor above me.

I tried to set my Skill-walls before I slept, but it was rather like drying one's feet while standing in a river. The closer I came to sleep, the harder it was to recall where those boundaries lay. How much of my world was me and how much was the folk I cared about? I dreamed first of Ketricken, Starling, Kettle and the Fool wandering about with torches while Nighteyes ran back and forth, back and forth whining. It was not a comfortable dream and I turned away from it and drifted deeper into myself. Or so I supposed.

I found the familiar hut. I knew the simple room, the rough table, the tidy hearth, the narrow bed so neatly made. Molly sat in her nightrobe by the

hearth, rocking Nettle and singing softly a song about stars and starfish. I could recall no lullabies and was as charmed by it as Nettle. The baby's wide eyes were on Molly's face as her mother sang. She gripped one of Molly's forefingers in her small fist. Molly sang the song over and over and over, but I found no boredom there. It was a scene I could watch for a month, for a year, and never know tedium.

But the babe's eyelids slid shut, once, to open quickly. They closed more slowly a second time, and stay closed. Her tiny pursed mouth moved as if she suckled in her sleep. Her black hair had begun to curl. Molly lowered her face to brush her lips across Nettle's forehead.

Molly rose wearily and carried the baby to her bed. She pulled open the blanket, nestled the child in, and then went back to the table to blow out the single candle there. By the light from the hearth, I watched her ease into bed beside the child and draw the blankets up over them both. She closed her eyes and sighed and did not stir again. I watched over her leaden sleep, recognizing it as the sleep of exhaustion. I knew sudden shame. This hard, bare life was not anything I ever envisioned for her, let alone our child. Were it not for Burrich, life would be even harder for them. I fled from seeing them this way, promising myself that things would get better, that somehow I would make things better for them. When I returned.

'I expected that by the time I returned, things would be better. But this is too good to trust, in a way.'

It was Chade's voice. He leaned over a table in a darkened room, studying a scroll. A branch of candles lit his face and the unrolled map before him. He looked tired but in good spirits. His grey hair was dishevelled. His white shirt was half open and loose of his breeches so it hung about his hips like a skirt. The old man was lean and muscular where before he was skinny. He took a long draw from a steaming mug and shook his head over something. 'Regal seems to gain no ground in his war against the Mountains. In every attack against the border towns, the Usurper's troops feint and then withdraw. There is no concerted effort to seize territory they have ravaged, no massing of troops to force their way to Jhaampe. What is his game?'

'Come here and I'll show you.'

Chade looked up from his scroll, half amused and half annoyed. 'I've a serious question to ponder. I'll not find the answer to this in your bed.'

The woman threw back the bedding and rose, to pad softly over to the table. She moved like a stalking cat. Her nakedness was not vulnerability, but armour. Her long brown hair had pulled loose of its warrior tail to reach past her shoulders. She was not young, and long ago a sword had left its tracks down her ribs. She was still breathtaking in a formidable, female way. She bent over the map beside him and pointed to something. 'Look here. And here. And here. Were you Regal, why would you attack all these places at once, with forces too small to hold any of them?'

When Chade did not answer, she moved her finger to tap another spot on the map. 'None of those attacks came as any great surprise. Mountain troops that had been gathered here were diverted to these two villages. Another second force from this location went to the third village. Now, see where the Mountain troops were not?'

'There's nothing along there worth having.'

'Nothing,' she agreed. 'But once there was a trade route that went through the lesser pass, here, and thence into the heart of the Mountains. It bypasses Jhaampe, and is little used any more for that reason. Most traders want a route that will allow them to sell and trade in Jhaampe as well as the lesser towns.'

'Of what value is that to Regal? Does he seek to take and hold it?'

'No. No troops have been seen there at all.'

'Where does the trail lead?'

'Now? Nowhere save a few scattered villages. But it is good travelling for a small force moving fast.'

'Where does it go?'

'It dwindles away at Shishoe.' She tapped another spot on the map. 'But it would carry that hypothetical band of warriors deep into Mountain territory. Well behind all the troops watching and guarding the border. West of Jhaampe and unsuspected.'

'But what would be their goal?'

The woman shrugged casually, and smiled to see Chade's eyes leave the map. 'Perhaps an assassination attempt on King Eyod? Perhaps an attempt to recapture this bastard that is supposed to be sheltering in the Mountains. You tell me. This is more your trade than mine. Poison the wells at Jhaampe?'

Chade suddenly paled. 'It's been a week. They'll already be in place, their plot already in motion.' He shook his head. 'What am I to do?'

‘Were it I, I’d send a swift courier to King Eyod. A lass on a horse. Alert him that there may be spies at his back.’

‘I suppose that’s best,’ Chade agreed. There was a sudden weariness in his voice. ‘Where are my boots?’

‘Relax. The messenger was sent yesterday. By now King Eyod’s trackers will be working the trail. He has very good trackers. I can vouch for that.’

Chade looked at her consideringly in a way that had nothing to do with her nakedness. ‘You know the quality of his trackers. Yet you sent one of your own lasses to his very doorstep, with a missive penned by your own hand, to warn him.’

‘I saw no good in letting such tidings wait.’

Chade smoothed his short beard over his jaw. ‘When first I asked your aid, you told me you’d work for coin, not patriotism. You told me that to a horse thief, one side of the border was as good as another.’

She stretched, rolling her shoulders. She stepped to face him, placing her hands on his hips in calm assumption. They were nearly of a height. ‘Perhaps you have won me to your side.’

His green eyes gleamed like a hunting cat’s. ‘Have I?’ he mused as he drew her closer.

I came to myself with a small start and shifted uncomfortably. I felt ashamed to have spied on Chade, and envious of him as well. I poked a bit at my fire and lay down again, reminding myself that Molly also slept alone, save for the small warmth of our daughter. It was little comfort and my sleep was restless for the remainder of the night.

When I opened my eyes again, a square of watery sunlight overlay me from the unshuttered window. My fire had burned to a few coals, but I was not that cold. In the light of day, the chamber I was in was dismal. I went and peered into a second room, seeking a stairway to the upper storeys that might offer me a better view of the city. Instead I saw the sagging remnants of wooden steps I dared not trust even for a brief ascent. The damp was heavier as well. The dank cold stone walls and floor reminded me of the dungeons of Buckkeep. I left the shop, stepping out into a day that seemed almost warm. Last night’s snow was retreating into puddles. I took off my hat and let the gentler wind move against my hair. Spring, some part of me whispered. The edge of spring was in the air.

I had expected that daylight would vanquish the phantom denizens of the city. Instead, the light seemed to make them stronger. Black stone with quartz-like veins had been used widely in constructing the city and I had but to touch any piece of it to see the city's life awaken around me. But even when I touched nothing I still seemed to catch glimpses of folk, to hear the murmur of their chatter and sense the tumult of their passage. I walked for some time, seeking a tall, mostly intact building that would offer me the view I sought. By daylight, the city was far more ruined than I had suspected. Whole domes of roofs had fallen in, and some buildings had great cracks green with moss running up their walls. In others, outer walls had fallen away entirely, exposing the inner chambers and filling the street below with rubble I must clamber over. Few of the taller buildings were totally intact and some leaned drunkenly against one another. I finally saw a likely building with a tall spire peeping up above its neighbours, and made my way toward it.

When I reached it, I wasted some little time in standing and staring up at it. I wondered if it had been a palace. Great lions of stone guarded the entrance steps. The exterior walls were of the same shining black stone I had come to regard as the common building material for the city, but affixed to them were silhouettes of folk and beasts all cut from some gleaming white stone. The stark contrast of white on black and the grand scale of these images made them almost overwhelming. A giant of a woman gripped an immense plough behind a team of monstrous oxen. A winged creature, perhaps a dragon, took an entire wall to himself. I slowly climbed the wide stone steps to the entryway. It seemed to me that as I did so, the murmuring of the city grew louder and more insistently real. A grinning young man came hastening down the steps, a scroll gripped in one hand. I sidestepped to avoid colliding with him, but as he hastened past I felt not the slightest sense of his being. I turned to stare after him. His eyes had been yellow as amber.

The great wooden doors were closed and had been latched, but so rotted were they that one cautious push tore the lock free. One door swung open while the other sagged gratefully down to collapse on the floor. I peered in before I entered. Streaked and dusty windows of thick glass admitted the winter sunlight. Dust motes from the settling door danced in the air. I half expected bats or pigeons or a scurrying rat or two. There was nothing, not even a scent of animal habitation. Like the road, the city was avoided by wild beasts. I stepped inside, my boots scuffing lightly on the dusty floors.

There were the tatters of ancient hangings, a collapsed wooden bench. I lifted my eyes to a ceiling far above my head. This chamber alone could have held the entire exercise grounds at Buckkeep. I felt tiny. But across the chamber from me were stone steps marching up into the gloom. As I crossed to them, I heard the businesslike mutter of talk, and suddenly the stairs were peopled with tall robed folk coming and going. Most gripped scrolls or clutched papers, and the tone of their conversation was that of people discussing weighty matters. They were subtly different from any folk I had ever been among. The colours of their eyes were too bright; the bones of their bodies were elongated. But for all that, much else about them was ordinary. This must have been some chamber of laws or ruling, I decided. Only such matters put lines upon so many brows and scowls on so many faces. There were a number of folk in yellow robes and black leggings, bearing a sort of insignia plates upon their shoulders, and these I judged to be officials. As I climbed first one staircase, and then another from the second floor, these yellow-robes increased in number.

The stairs were somewhat lit by the wide windows at each landing. The first showed me only the upper storey of the next building. On the second landing, I gained a view of some roofs. The third floor I had to cross to reach another stairway. Judging by the generous tatters on the walls, this floor had been even more opulent. I began to perceive ghostly furniture as well as people, as if the magic were stronger here. I kept to the edges of the walkways, loath to feel the un-touch of folk walking through me. There were many cushioned benches for waiting, another sure sign of officialdom, and many lesser scribes sitting at tables recording information from the scrolls presented to them.

I went up yet another flight of stairs, but was frustrated in my quest for a clear view of the city by an immense window of stained glass. The image presented was one of a woman and a dragon. They did not appear to be at odds, but instead stood as if speaking to one another. The woman in this window had black hair and black eyes and wore a band of bright red on her brow. She carried something in her left hand, but whether it was weapon or wand of office I could not tell. The immense dragon wore a jewelled collar, but nothing else in its stance or demeanour suggested domestication. I stared at the window, light gleaming through its dusty colours, for several long minutes before I could go on. I felt it had some significance I could not quite grasp. At last I turned away from it to survey this upper chamber.

This floor was better lit than the other ones had been. It was all one huge open chamber, but substantially smaller than the main floor had been. Tall narrow windows of clear glass alternated with stretches of wall ornately decorated with friezes of battles and agrarian scenes. I was drawn to the artwork, but resolutely directed my steps to another staircase. This was not broad, but was a spiralling stair that I hoped led up to the tower I had glimpsed from outside the building. The city spirits seemed less numerous here.

The climb was steeper and longer than I had expected it to be. I opened both my coat and my shirt before I reached the top. The winding steps were lit at intervals by windows scarce wider than arrow-slits. At one a young woman stood staring out over the city, an air of hopelessness in her lavender eyes. She seemed so real I found myself begging her pardon as I stepped around her. She paid no heed, of course. Again I had the eerie feeling that I was the ghost here. There were a few landings on this stair and doors leading to chambers, but these were locked and time seemed to have been more merciful here. The dry air of the upper levels had preserved the wood and metal. I wondered what lay behind their undisturbed fastness. Gleaming treasure? The knowledge of the ages? Mouldering bones? None gave to my shovings, and as I continued up, I hoped I would not find a locked door as my reward at the top of the tower.

The whole city was a mystery to me. The ghost life that teemed through it was such a contrast to its utter desertion now. I had seen no sign of battle; the only upheavals I had seen in the city seemed to be the result of the earth's deep unease. Here I passed more locked doors; I wonder if Eda herself knew what was behind them. No one locks a door unless he expects to return. I wondered where they had gone, the folk of this town who still moved here as ghosts. Why was this river city abandoned, and when? Had this been the home of the Elderlings? Were they the dragons I had seen on the buildings and in the stained-glass window? Some folk enjoy a puzzle; it gave me a pounding headache to complement the nagging hunger that had been growing in me since daybreak.

I reached at last the upper tower chamber. It opened all around me, a round chamber with a domed ceiling. Sixteen panels made up the walls of the room and eight were of thick glass, streaked and filthy. They subdued the winter sunlight flooding into the room through them, making it at once lit and gloomy. One of the windows was shattered and lay in shards both within

and without the chamber, for a narrow parapet ran around the outside of the tower. A great round table was partially collapsed in the centre of the room. Two men and three women, all armed with pointers, were gesturing at where the table had once dominated the chamber, discussing something. One of the men seemed quite angry. I stepped around the phantom table and bureaucrats. A narrow door opened easily out onto the balcony.

There was a wooden railing running about the edge of the parapet but I did not trust it. Instead I walked a slow circuit of that tower, caught between wonder and fear of falling. On the south side, a wide river valley spread out before me. In the far distance was an edging of dark blue hills that held up the pale winter sky. The river wound, a fat lazy snake, through the near part of the valley. In the distance I could see other towns on the river. Beyond the river was a wide green valley, thickly treed or populated with tidy farmsteads which blinked in and out of existence when I shook my head to clear my eyes of ghosts. I saw a wide black bridge across the river and the road continuing on beyond it. I wondered where it led. Briefly I saw bright towers glinting in the distance. I pushed the ghosts away from my mind and saw a distant lake with steam rising off it in the watery sunlight. Was Verity out there somewhere?

My eyes wandered to the southeast and widened at what I saw there. Perhaps there was the answer to some of my questions. A whole section of the city was gone. Simply gone. No crumble of ruins was there, no fire-blackened rubble. Only a great and sudden rift gaped in the earth, as if some vast giant had driven in a giant wedge and split it wide. The river had filled it in, a shining tongue of water intruding into the city. The remains of buildings teetered on its edge still, streets ended abruptly at the water. My eyes traced this huge wound in the earth. Even at this distance, I could tell that the great crack extended beyond the far shore of the river. The destruction had plunged like a spear deep into the heart of the city. The placid water shone silver under the winter sky. I wondered if some sudden earthquake had been the death blow to this city. I shook my head. Too much of it remained standing still. No doubt it had been a great disaster, but it did not explain the city's death to me.

I walked slowly around to the north side of the tower. The city spread out at my feet, and beyond it I saw vineyards and grainfields. And beyond them, a forested stretch with the road running through it. Several days' ride away were the mountains. I shook my head to myself. By all my bearings, I

must have come from there. Yet I did not recall the intervening journey at all. I leaned back against the wall and wondered what to do. If Verity were somewhere in this city, I felt no tingle of his presence. I wished I could recall why I had left my companions and when. *Come to me, come to me*, whispered through my bones. An overwhelming dreariness rose up in me and I longed simply to lie down where I was and die. I tried to tell myself it was the elfbark. It felt more like the after-effects of near-constant failure. I went back into the central chamber to get out of the chill winter wind.

As I stepped back in through the shattered window, a stick rolled under my foot and I nearly fell. When I recovered, I glanced down and wondered that I had not noticed before. At the base of the broken window were the remains of a small fire. Soot had smudged some of the hanging glass remaining in the side part of the window frame. I stooped to touch it cautiously; my finger came away black. It was not very fresh, but neither was it older than a few months; otherwise the winter storms would have weathered more of it away. I stepped away and tried to make my weary mind work. The fire was made from wood, but it had included sticks as from trees or bushes. Someone had deliberately carried small twigs up here to kindle this fire. Why? Why not use the remains of the table? And why climb this high to make a fire? For the view?

I sat down beside the remains of the fire and tried to think. When I leaned my back against the stone wall, it gave more substance to the arguing phantoms around the table. One shouted something at another, and then drew an imaginary line with his pointer over the collapsed table. One of the women crossed her arms across her chest and looked stubborn, while another smiled coldly and tapped with her own stick on the table. Cursing myself for an idiot, I leaped to my feet to look down at the ancient ruins of the table.

The second that I perceived it was a map, I was sure Verity had made the fire. A foolish grin spread wide across my face. Of course. A tall-windowed tower looking out over the city and surrounding countryside, and in the centre of the room, a great table holding the most peculiar map I had ever seen. It was not drawn on paper, but made of clay to mimic the rolling countryside. It had cracked in the collapsing of the table, but I could see how the river had been wrought of shining chips of black glass. There were tiny models of the buildings of the city beside the arrow-straight roads, tiny fountains filled with blue chips of glass, even twigs leafed with green wool to represent the greater trees in the city. At intervals throughout the city,

small crystals of stone were fixed in the map. I suspected they represented compass points. All was there, even tiny squares to represent stalls in the market. Despite its ruin, it delighted the eye with its detail. I smiled, very certain that within months of Verity returning to Buckkeep, there would be a similar table and map in his Skill-tower.

I bent over it, ignoring the phantoms, to retrace my steps. I located the map tower easily. As luck would have it that section of the map was much cracked, but I still was fairly certain of my path as my fingers walked where my feet had the night before. Once more I marvelled at the straightness of the roads and the precise intersections where they met. I was not certain exactly where I had first 'awakened' the night before, but I was able to select a section of the city that was not too large and say with certainty it was within that square. My eye returned to the tower and I carefully noted the number of intersections and the turns I must make to return to my starting-point. Perhaps once there, if I cast about, I might find something that would awaken my memories of the missing days. I wished suddenly for a bit of paper and a quill to sketch out the surrounding area. When I did so, the meaning of the fire was instantly clear.

Verity had used a burnt stick to make his map. But upon what? I glanced around the room, but there were no hangings on these walls. Instead the walls between the windows were slabs of white stone, incised with ... I stood up to get a closer look. Wonder overtook me. I put my hand on the cold white stone, and then peered out of the dirty window beside it. My fingers traced the river I could see in the distance, then found the smooth track of the road that crossed it. The view out of each window was represented by the panel beside it. Tiny glyphs and symbols might have been the names of towns or holdings. I scrubbed at the window, but most of the dirt was on the outside.

The significance of the broken window was suddenly clear. Verity had broken out that pane, for a clearer view of what lay beyond it. And then he had kindled that fire and used a burnt stick to copy something, probably to the map he had been carrying since Buckkeep. But what? I went to the broken window and studied the panels to either side of it. A hand had smeared the left one, wiping dust away from it. I set my own hand upon the print of Verity's palm in the dust. He had cleared this panel and stared out the window, and then copied something down. I could not doubt that it was his destination. I wondered if what was marked on the panel somehow co-

ordinated with the markings on the map he had carried. I wished in vain that I had Kettricken's copy with me to compare the two.

Out of the window, I could see the mountains to the north of me. I had come from there. I studied the view and then tried to relate it to the etched panel beside me. The flickering ghosts of the past were no help. One moment I looked out over a forested countryside; the next I was looking at vineyards and grainfields. The only feature that was in common to both views was the black ribbon of road that went straight as an arrow to the mountains. My fingers tracked the road up the panel. There in the distance it reached the mountains. Some glyphs were marked there, where the road diverged. And a tiny sparkle of crystal had been embedded in the panel there.

I put my face close to the panel and tried to study the tiny glyphs there. Did they match the markings on Verity's map? Were they symbols Kettricken would recognize? I left the tower room and hastened down the stairs, passing through phantoms that seemed to grow stronger and stronger. I heard their words clearly now and caught glimpses of the tapestries that had once graced the walls. There were many dragons depicted on them. 'Elderlings?' I asked of the echoing stone walls, and heard my words shivering up and down the stairs.

I sought something to write upon. The tattered tapestries were damp rags that crumbled at a touch. What wood there was was old and rotten. I broke down the door to one inner chamber, hoping to find its contents well preserved. Inside, I found the interior walls lined with wooden racks of pigeonholes, each holding a scroll. They looked substantial, as did the writing implements on the table in the centre of the room. But my groping fingers found little more than the ghosts of paper, crisp and fragile as ashes. My eyes showed me a stack of fresh vellums on a corner shelf. My groping fingers pushed away rotted debris, finally to find a usable fragment no bigger than my two hands. It was stiff and yellowed, but it might serve. A heavy stoppered glass pot held the dried remnants of an ink. The wooden handles of their writing implements were gone, but the metal tips had survived and they were long enough for me to grasp firmly. Armed with these supplies, I returned to the map-room.

Spittle restored the ink to life and I honed the metal nib on the floor until it shone clean again. I rekindled the remnants of Verity's fire, for the afternoon was becoming overcast and the light through the dusty windows

was dimming. I knelt in front of the panel Verity's hand had dusted and copied as much as I could of the road, mountains and other features onto the scrap of stiffened leather. Painstakingly I squinted at the tiny glyphs and transferred as many of them as I could to the vellum. Perhaps Kettricken could make sense of them. Perhaps when we compared this clumsy map of mine to the map she carried, some common feature would make sense. It was all I had to go on. The sun was setting outside and my fire no more than embers when I finally finished. I looked down on my scratchings ruefully. Neither Verity nor Fedwren would have been impressed with my work. But it would have to do. When I was certain the ink was set and would not smear, I put the vellum inside my shirt to carry it. I would not chance rain or snow on it to blur my markings.

I left the tower as night was falling. My ghostly companions had long since gone home to hearth and supper. I walked the streets among scores of folk seeking their homes or venturing out for an evening's pleasure. I passed inns and taverns that seemed to blaze with light and heard merry voices from within. It was becoming harder and harder for me to see the truth of the empty streets and abandoned buildings. It was a special misery to walk with my belly growling and my throat dry past inns where phantoms filled themselves with ghostly cheer and shouted aloud to one another in greeting.

My plans were simple. I would go to the river and drink. Then I would do my best to return to the first place I remembered in the city. I would find some sort of shelter in that vicinity for the night, and by morning light I would head back toward the mountains. I hoped if I went by the path I had probably used to come here, something would stimulate my memory.

I was kneeling by the river's edge, one palm flat on the paving stone, drinking cold water when the dragon appeared. One moment the sky above me was empty. Then there was a great golden light on everything and the noise of great wings beating, like the whirring of a pheasant's wings in flight. About me folk cried out, some in startlement and some in delight. The creature dived down on us and circled low. The wake of wind it put out set the ships to rocking and the river to rippling. Once more it circled and then without warning it plunged completely out of sight in the river. The golden light it had shed was extinguished and the night seemed all the darker by comparison.

I jerked back reflexively from the dream wave that leaped against the shore as the river absorbed the dragon's impact. All around me, people were

staring expectantly at the water. I followed their gazes. At first I saw nothing. Then the water parted and a great head emerged from the river. Water dripped from it and ran gleaming down the golden serpentine neck that next appeared. All the tales I had ever been told had alluded to dragons as worms or lizards or snakes. But as this one emerged from the river, holding out its dripping wings, I found myself thinking of birds. Graceful cormorants rising out of the sea from a dive after fish, or brightly-plumaged pheasants came to my mind as the huge creature emerged. It was fully as large as one of the ships and the spread of its wings put the canvas sails to shame. It paused on the riverbank and preened the water from its scaled wings. The word scale does no justice to the ornate plates that sheathed its wings, yet feather is too airy a word to describe them. Could a feather be made of finely beaten gold, perhaps it might come close to the dragon's plumage.

I was transfixed with delight and wonder. The creature ignored me, emerging from the river so close to me that had it been real, I would have been soaked by the water that dripped from its outstretched wings. Every drop that fell back into the river carried the unmistakable shimmer of raw magic with it. The dragon paused on the riverbank, its four great clawed feet sinking deep in the damp earth as it carefully folded its wings and then preened its long, forked tail. Golden light bathed me and illuminated the gathering crowd. I turned away from the dragon to regard them. Welcome shone in their faces and great deference. The dragon had the bright eyes of a gyrfalcon and the carriage of a stallion as it strode up to them. The folk parted to make way for it, murmuring respectful greetings.

'Elderling,' I said aloud to myself. I followed it, my fingers trailing the building fronts, one with the entranced crowd, as it paraded slowly up the street. Folk poured from taverns to add their greetings and swelled the crowd that followed it. Obviously this was no common event. I do not know what I hoped to discover by following it. I do not think I really thought of anything at that time, save to follow this immense, charismatic creature. I understood now the reason why the main streets of this city had been built so wide. It was not to allow the passage of wagons, but so that nothing might impede one of these great visitors.

It paused once before a great stone basin. Folk rushed forward to vie for the honour of working a windlass of sorts. Bucket after bucket rose on a loop of chain, each spilling its cargo of liquid magic into the basin. When the

basin brimmed with the shimmering stuff, the Elderling gracefully bowed its neck and drank. Ghost-Skill it might be, but even the sight of it awakened that insidious hunger in me. Twice more the basin was filled and twice more the Elderling drank it down before it proceeded on its way. I followed, marvelling at what I had seen.

Ahead of us suddenly loomed that great gash of destruction that marred the city's symmetrical form. I followed the ghostly procession to the lip of it, only to see everyone, man, woman and Elderling, vanish completely as they strode unconcernedly out into the space. In a short time I stood alone on the edge of that gaping crevasse, hearing only the wind whispering over the still deep water. A few patches of stars showed through the overcast sky and were reflected in the black water. Whatever other secrets of the Elderlings I might have learned had been swallowed long ago in that great cataclysm.

I turned and walked slowly away, wondering where the Elderling had been bound and for what purpose. I shuddered again as I recalled how it had drunk down the silver gleaming power.

It took me some time to retrace my steps first to the river. Once there, I focused my mind on recalling what I had seen in the map-room earlier that day. My hunger was a hollow thing that rattled against my ribs now, but I resolutely ignored it as I threaded my way through the streets. My strength of will carried me through a knot of brawling shadows but my resolution failed me when the city guard came charging down the streets on their massive horses. I leaped to one side to let them pass, and winced as I heard the sounds of their falling truncheons. Unreal as it was, I was glad to leave the noisy discord behind me. I made a right turn up a slightly narrower street and walked on past three more intersections.

I halted. Here. This was the plaza where I had been kneeling in the snow the night before. There, that pillar standing at its centre, I recalled some sort of monument or sculpture looming over me. I walked toward it. It was made of the same ubiquitous black stone veined with gleaming crystal. To my weary eyes it seemed to gleam brighter with the same mysterious unlight the other structures gave off. The faint shining outlined on its side glyphs cut deep into its surface. I walked slowly around it. Some, I was sure, were familiar and perhaps twin to those I had copied earlier in the day. Was this then some sort of guidepost, labelled with destinations according to compass headings? I reached out a hand to trace one of the familiar glyphs.

The night bent around me. A wave of vertigo swept over me. I clutched at the column for support, but somehow missed it and went stumbling forward. My outstretched hands found nothing and I fell face forward into crusted snow and ice. For a time I just lay there, my cheek against the icy road, blinking my useless eyes at the blackness of the night. Then a warm, solid weight hit me. *My brother!* Nighteyes greeted me joyously. He thrust his cold nose into my face and pawed at my head to rouse me. *I knew you would come back. I knew it!*

TWENTY-EIGHT

The Coterie

Part of the great mystery that surrounds the Elderlings is that the few images we have of them bear small resemblance to each other. This is true not only of tapestries and scrolls that are copies of older works and hence might contain errors, but also of the few images of Elderlings that have survived from King Wisdom's time. Some of the images bear superficial resemblances to the legends of dragons, featuring wings, claws, scaly skin and great size. But others do not. In at least one tapestry, the Elderling is depicted as similar to a human, but gold of skin and great of size. The images do not even agree in the number of limbs that benevolent race possessed. They may have as many as four legs and two wings also, or have no wings at all and walk upon two legs as a man.

It has been theorized that so little was written about them because knowledge of the Elderlings at that time was regarded as common knowledge. Just as no one sees fit to create a scroll that deals with the most basic attributes of what a horse is, for it would serve no useful purpose, so no one thought that one day Elderlings would be the stuff of legends. To a certain degree, this makes sense. But one has only to look about at all the scrolls and tapestries in which horses are featured as the stuff of common life to find a flaw. Were Elderlings so accepted a part of life, surely they would have been more often depicted.

After a very confusing hour or two, I found myself back in the yurt with the others. The night seemed all the colder for having spent an almost warm day in the city. We huddled in the tent in our blankets. They had told me I had vanished from the lip of the cliff only the night before; I had told them of all I had encountered in the city. There had been a certain amount of disbelief on everyone's part. I had felt both moved and guilty to see how much anguish my disappearance had caused them. Starling had obviously been weeping, while both Kettle and Kettricken had the owly look of folks who had not slept. The Fool had been the worst, pale and silent with a slight trembling to his hands. It had taken a bit of time for all of us to recover. Kettle had cooked a meal twice the size of what we usually had and all save

the Fool had eaten heartily. He had not seemed to have the energy. While the others sat in a circle around the brazier listening to my tale, he was already curled in his blankets, the wolf snug beside him. He seemed completely exhausted.

After I had been over the events of my adventure for the third time, Kettle commented cryptically, 'Well, thank Eda you were dosed with elfbark before you were taken; otherwise you would never have kept your wits at all.'

'You say "taken"?' I pressed immediately.

She scowled at me. 'You know what I mean.' She looked about at all of us staring at her. 'Through the guidepost or whatever it is. They must have something to do with it.' A silence met her words. 'It seems obvious to me, that's all. He left us at one, and arrived there at one. And returned to us the same way.'

'But why didn't they take anyone else?' I protested.

'Because you are the only Skill-sensitive one among us,' she pointed out.

'Are they Skill-wrought as well?' I asked her bluntly.

She met my glance. 'I looked at the guidepost by daylight. It is hewn of black stone with wide threads of shining crystal in it. Like the walls of the city you describe. Did you touch both posts?'

I was silent a moment, thinking. 'I believe so.'

She shrugged. 'Well, there you are. A Skill-imbued object can retain the intent of its maker. Those posts were erected to make travel easier for those who could master them.'

'I've never heard of such things. How do you know them?'

'I am only speculating on what seems obvious to me,' she told me stubbornly. 'And that is all I am going to say. I'm going to sleep. I'm exhausted. We all spent the entire night and most of the day looking for you and worrying about you. What hours we could rest, that wolf never stopped howling.'

Howling?

I called you. You did not answer.

I did not hear you, or I would have tried.

I begin to fear, Little Brother. Forces pull at you, taking you to places I cannot follow, closing your mind to mine. This, right now, is as close as I

have ever come to being accepted into a pack. But if I lost you, even it would be lost to me.

You will not lose me, I promised him, but I wondered if it was a promise I could keep.

‘Fitz?’ Kettricken asked in a nudging voice.

‘I am here,’ I assured her.

‘Let us look at the map you copied.’

I took it out and she drew out her own map. We compared the two. It was hard to find any similarities, but the scales of the maps were different. At last we decided that the piece I had copied down in the city bore a superficial resemblance to the portion of trail that was drawn on Kettricken’s map. ‘This place,’ I gestured to one destination marked on her map, ‘would seem to be the city. If that is so, then this corresponds to this, and this to this.’

The map Verity had set out with had been a copy of this older, faded map. On that one the trail I now thought of as the Skill road had been marked, but oddly, as a path that began suddenly in the Mountains and ended abruptly at three separate destinations. The significance of those endpoints had once been marked on the map, but those markings had faded into inky smears. Now we had the map I had copied in the city, with those three endpoints on it also. One had been the city itself. The other two were now our concern.

Kettricken studied the glyphs I had copied from the city’s map. ‘I’ve seen such markings, from time to time,’ she admitted uneasily. ‘No one truly reads them anymore. A handful of them are still known. One encounters them mostly in odd places. In a few places in the Mountains, there are raised stones that have such marks. There are some at the west end of the Great Chasm Bridge. No one knows when they were carved, or why. Some are thought to mark graves, but others say they marked land boundaries.’

‘Can you read any of them?’ I asked her.

‘A few. They are used in a challenge game. Some are stronger than others ...’ her voice trailed off as she studied my scratchings. ‘None match exactly the ones I know,’ she said at last, disappointment heavy in her voice. ‘This one is almost like the one for “stone”. But the others I have never seen at all.’

‘Well, it’s one of the ones that was marked here.’ I tried to make my voice cheery. ‘Stone’ conveyed nothing at all to me. ‘It seems closest to

where we are. Shall we go there next?’

‘I would have liked to see the city,’ the Fool said softly. ‘I should have liked to see the dragon, too.’

I nodded slowly. ‘It is a place and a thing worth seeing. Much knowledge is there, if only we had the time to ferret it out. Did not I have Verity always in my head with his “come to me, come to me” I think I would have been more curious to explore.’ I had said nothing to them of my dreams of Molly and Chade. Those were private things, as was my ache to be home with her again.

‘Doubtless you would have,’ Kettle agreed. ‘And doubtless got yourself into more trouble that way. I wonder, did he so bind you to keep you on the road and protect you from distractions?’

I would have challenged her again on her knowledge, had not the Fool repeated softly, ‘I would have liked to see the city.’

‘We should all sleep now. We are up at first light, to travel hard tomorrow. It heartens me to think that Verity had been there before FitzChivalry, even as it fills me with foreboding. We must get to him quickly. I can no longer stand wondering each night why he never returned.’

‘Comes the Catalyst, to make stone of flesh and flesh of stone. At his touch shall be wakened the dragons of the earth. The sleeping city shall tremble and waken to him. Comes the Catalyst.’ The Fool’s voice was dreamy.

‘The writings of White Damir,’ Kettle added reverently. She looked at me and for a moment was annoyed. ‘Hundreds of writings and prophecies and they all terminate in you?’

‘Not my fault,’ I said inanely. I was already rucking my way into my blankets. I thought longingly of the almost warm day I had had. The wind was blowing and I felt chilled to the bone.

I was drowsing off when the Fool reached over to pat my face with a warm hand. ‘Good you’re alive,’ he muttered.

‘Thank you,’ I said. I was summoning up Kettle’s game board and pieces in an effort to keep my mind to myself for the night. I had just begun to contemplate the problem. Suddenly I sat up, exclaiming, ‘Your hand is warm! Fool! Your hand is warm!’

‘Go to sleep,’ Starling chided me in an offended tone.

I ignored her. I dragged the blanket down from the Fool’s face and touched his cheek. His eyes opened slowly. ‘You’re warm,’ I told him. ‘Are

you all right?’

‘I don’t feel warm,’ he informed me miserably. ‘I feel cold. And very, very tired.’

I began building up the fire in the brazier hastily. Around me the others were stirring. Starling across the tent had sat up and was peering at me through the gloom.

‘The Fool is never warm,’ I told them, trying to make them understand my urgency. ‘Always, when you touch his skin, it is cool. Now he’s warm.’

‘Indeed?’ Starling asked in an oddly sarcastic voice.

‘Is he ill?’ Kettle asked tiredly.

‘I don’t know. I’ve never known him to be ill in my whole life.’

‘I am seldom ill,’ the Fool corrected me quietly. ‘But this is a fever I have known before. Lie down and sleep, Fitz. I’ll be all right. I expect the fever will have burned out by morning.’

‘Whether it has or not, we must travel tomorrow morning,’ Kettricken said implacably. ‘We have already lost a day lingering here.’

‘Lost a day?’ I exclaimed, almost angrily. ‘Gained a map, or more detail for one, and knowledge that Verity had been to the city. For myself, I doubt not that he went there as I did, and perhaps returned to this very spot. We have not lost a day, Kettricken, but gained all the days it would have taken us to find a way down to what remains of the road down there and then tramp to the city. And back again. As I recall, you had proposed spending a day just to seek for a way down that slide. Well, we did, and we found the way.’ I paused. I took a breath and imposed calm on my voice. ‘I will not seek to force any of you to my will. But if the Fool is not well enough to travel tomorrow, I shall not travel either.’

A glint came into Kettricken’s eyes, and I braced myself for battle. But the Fool forestalled it. ‘I shall travel tomorrow, well or not,’ he assured us both.

‘That’s settled, then,’ Kettricken said swiftly. Then, in a more human voice she asked, ‘Fool, is there anything I can do for you? I would not use you so harshly, were not the need so great. I have not forgotten, and never shall, that without you I would never have reached Jhaampe alive.’

I sensed a story I was not privy to, but kept my questions to myself.

‘I will be fine. I am just ... Fitz? Could I beg some elfbark of you? That warmed me last night as nothing else has.’

‘Certainly.’ I was rummaging in my pack for it when Kettle spoke out warningly.

‘Fool, I counsel you against it. It is a dangerous herb, and almost always more damaging than good. Who knows but you are ill tonight because you had some the night before last?’

‘It is not that potent a herb,’ I said disdainfully. ‘I’ve used it for a number of years, and taken no lasting ill from it.’

Kettle gave a snort. ‘None that you are wise enough to see, anyway,’ she said sarcastically. ‘But it is a warming herb that gives energy to the flesh, even if it is deadening to the spirit.’

‘I always found it restored me rather than deadened me,’ I countered as I found the small packet and opened it. Without my asking her, Kettle got up to put water on to boil. ‘I never noticed it dulling my mind,’ I added.

‘The one taking it seldom does,’ she retorted. ‘And while it may boost your physical energy for a time, you must always pay for it later. Your body is not to be tricked, young man. You will know that better when you are as old as I.’

I fell silent. As I thought back over the times I had used elfbark to restore myself, I had the uncomfortable suspicion that she was at least partly right. But my suspicion was not enough to keep me from brewing two cups rather than just one. Kettle shook her head at me, but lay back down and said no more. I sat beside the Fool as we drank our tea. When he handed me back the empty mug, his hand seemed warmer, not cooler.

‘Your fever is rising,’ I warned him.

‘No. It is just the heat of the mug on my skin,’ he suggested.

I ignored him. ‘You are shaking all over.’

‘A bit,’ he admitted. Then his misery broke through and he said, ‘I am cold as I have never been before. My back and my jaws ache from shaking with it.’

Flank him, suggested Nighteyes. The big wolf shifted to press more closely against him. I added my blankets to those covering the Fool and then crawled in beside him. He said not a word but his shivering lessened somewhat.

‘I can’t recall that you were ever ill at Buckkeep,’ I said quietly.

‘I was. But very seldom, and I kept to myself. As you recall, the healer had little tolerance for me, and I for him. I would not have trusted my health

to his purges and tonics. Besides, what works for your kind sometimes does nothing for mine.'

'Is your kind so vastly different from mine?' I asked after a time. He had brought us close to a topic we had seldom even mentioned.

'In some ways,' he sighed. He lifted a hand to his brow. 'But sometimes I surprise even myself.' He took a breath, then sighed it out as if he had endured some pain for an instant. 'I may not even be truly ill. I have been going through some changes in the past year. As you have noticed.' He added the last in a whisper.

'You have grown, and gathered colour,' I agreed softly.

'That is a part of it.' A smile twitched over his face, then faded. 'I think I am almost an adult now.'

I snorted softly. 'I have counted you as a man for many years, Fool. I think you found your manhood before I did mine.'

'Did I? How droll!' he exclaimed softly, and for a moment sounded almost like himself. His eyes sagged shut. 'I am going to sleep now,' he told me.

I made no reply. I shouldered deeper into the blankets beside him and set my walls once more. I sank into a dreamless rest that was not cautionless sleep.

I awoke before first light with a foreboding of danger. Beside me, the Fool slept heavily. I touched his face, and found it warm still and misted with sweat. I rolled away from him, tucking the blankets in tight around him. I added a twig or two of precious fuel to the brazier and began drawing my clothes on quietly. Nighteyes was immediately alert.

Going out?

Just to sniff about.

Shall I come?

Keep the Fool warm. I won't be long.

Are you sure you'll be all right?

I'll be very careful. I promise.

The cold was like a slap. The darkness, absolute. After a moment or two, my eyes adjusted but even so I could see little more than the tent itself. An overcast had blotted the stars even. I stood still in the icy wind, straining my senses to find what had disturbed me. It was not the Skill but my Wit that quested out into the darkness for me. I sensed our party, and the hunger of the huddled jeppas. Grain alone would not keep them long. Another worry.

Resolutely I set it aside and pushed my senses further. I stiffened. Horses? Yes. And riders? I thought so. Nighteyes was suddenly beside me.

Can you scent them?

The wind is wrong. Shall I go see?

Yes. But be unseen.

Of course. See to the Fool. He whimpered when I left him.

In the tent, I quietly woke Kettricken. 'I think there may be danger,' I told her softly. 'Horses and riders, possibly on the road behind us. I'm not certain yet.'

'By the time we are certain, they will be here,' she said dourly. 'Wake everyone. I want us up and ready to move by light.'

'The Fool is still feverish,' I said, even as I stooped and shook Starling's shoulder.

'If he stays here, he won't be feverish, he'll be dead. And you with him. Has the wolf gone to spy for us?'

'Yes.' I knew she was right, but it was still hard to force myself to shake the Fool to consciousness. He moved like a man in a daze. While the others bundled our gear, I hurried him into his coat and nagged him into an extra pair of leggings. I wrapped him in all our blankets and stood him outside while the rest of us struck the tent and loaded it. Of Kettricken I asked quietly, 'How much weight can a jeppa bear?'

'More than the Fool weighs. But they are too narrow to straddle comfortably, and they are skittish with a live load. We might put him on one for a way, but it would be uncomfortable for him and the jeppa would be difficult to control.'

It was the answer I had expected, but it did not make me happy.

'What news from the wolf?' she asked me.

I reached for Nighteyes, and was dismayed to find what an effort it was to touch minds with him. 'Six riders,' I told her.

'Friend or foe?' she asked.

'He has no way to know,' I pointed out to her. To the wolf I asked, *How do the horses look?*

Delicious.

Large, like Sooty? Or small, like Mountain horses?

Between. One pack mule.

'They are on horses, not Mountain ponies,' I told Kettricken.

She shook her head to herself. 'Most of my folk do not use horses this high in the Mountains. They would use ponies, or jeppas. Let us decide they are enemies and act accordingly.'

'Run or fight?'

'Both, of course.'

She had already taken her bow from one of the jeppas' loads. Now she strung it to have it ready. 'First we look for a better place to stage an ambush. Then we wait. Let's go.'

It was easier said than done. Only the smoothness of the road made it possible at all. Light was only a rumour as we started that day. Starling led the jeppas ahead. I brought the Fool behind them, while Kettle with her staff and Kettricken with her bow followed us. At first I let the Fool try to walk on his own. He lurched slowly along, and as the jeppas drew inexorably away from us, I knew it would not do. I put his left arm across my shoulders and my arm about his waist and hurried him along. In a short time he was panting and struggling to keep his feet from dragging. The unnatural warmth of his body was frightening. Cruelly, I forced him on, praying for cover of some sort.

When we came to it, it was not the kindness of trees, but the cruelty of sharp stone. A great portion of the mountain above the road had given way and cascaded down. It had carried off more than half the road with it, and left what remained heaped high with stone and earth. Starling and the jeppas were looking at it dubiously when the Fool and I limped up. I set him down on a stone, where he sat, eyes closed and head bowed. I pulled the blankets more closely around him, and then went to stand by Starling.

'It's an old slide,' she observed. 'Maybe it won't be that hard to scramble across it.'

'Maybe,' I agreed, my eyes already looking for a place to attempt it. Snow overlay the stone, cloaking it. 'If I go first, with the jeppas, can you follow with the Fool?'

'I suppose.' She glanced over at him. 'How bad is she?'

There was only worry in Starling's voice, so I swallowed my annoyance. 'He can stagger along, if he has an arm to lean on. Don't start to follow until the last animal is up and moving across it. Then follow our tracks.'

Starling bobbed her head in agreement but did not look happy.

'Shouldn't we wait for Kettricken and Kettle?'

I thought. 'No. If those riders do catch up with us, I don't want to be here with stone at my back. We cross the slide.'

I wished the wolf were with us, for he was twice as sure-footed as I and much quicker of reflex.

Can't come to you without their seeing me. It's sheer rock above and below the road here, and they are between you and me.

Don't fret about it. Just watch them and keep me alerted. Do they travel swiftly?

They walk their horses and argue much among themselves. One is fat and weary of riding. He says little but he does not hasten. Be careful, my brother.

I took a deep breath, and, as no place looked better than any other, simply followed my nose. At first it was just a scattering of loose stone across the road, but beyond that was a wall of great boulders, rocky soil and loose sharp-edged stone. I picked my way up this treacherous footing. The lead jeppa followed me and the others came behind her unquestioningly. I soon found that blowing snow had frozen across the rocks in thin sheets, often covering hollows and cracks beneath them. I stepped carelessly on one and thrust my leg down to my knee in a crack. I extricated myself carefully and proceeded.

When I took a moment and looked around me my courage almost failed. Above was a great slope of slide debris going up to a sheer wall of rock. I walked on a hillside of loose rock and stone. Looking ahead, I could not see where it ended. If it gave way, I would tumble and slide with it to the edge of the road and shoot off it into the deep valley beyond. There would be nothing, not a twig of greenery, not a boulder of any size that I could cling to. Small things became suddenly frightening. The jeppa's nervous tugging at the lead rope I clutched, a sudden shift in the push of the breeze, even my hair blowing in my eyes were abruptly life-threatening. Twice I dropped to all fours and crawled. The rest of the way, I went at a crouch, looking before I placed a foot and trusting my weight to it slowly.

Behind me came the line of jeppas, all following the lead beast. They were not as cautious as I. I heard stone shift beneath them, and small scatterings of rock that they loosened went pebbling and bounding down the slope, to shoot off in space. Each time it happened, I feared it would waken other rocks and set them sliding. They were not roped together, save for the lead I had on the first beast. At any moment I dreaded to see one go slipping

down the hillside. They were strung out behind me like corks on a net, and far behind them came Starling and the Fool. I stopped once to watch them and cursed myself as I realized the difficulty of the task I had given her. They came at half my crawling pace, with Starling gripping the Fool and watching footing for both of them. My heart was in my mouth when she stumbled once and the Fool sprawled flat beside her. She looked up then and saw me staring back at her. Angrily she lifted an arm and motioned to me to go on. I did. There was nothing else I could do.

The dump of rock and stone ended as abruptly as it had begun. I scabbled down to the road's flat surface with gratitude. Behind me came the lead jeppa, and then the other beasts, jumping from scarp to rock to road like goats as they descended. As soon as they were all down, I scattered some grain on the road to keep them well bunched and clambered back up the slide's shoulder.

I could see neither Starling nor the Fool.

I wanted to run back across the face of the slide. Instead I forced myself to go slowly, picking my way back along the tracks the jeppas and I had left. I told myself that I should be able to see their brightly coloured garments in this dull landscape of greys and blacks and whites. And finally I did. Starling was sitting quite still in a patch of scree with the Fool stretched out beside her on the stones.

'Starling!' I called to her softly.

She looked up. Her eyes were huge. 'It all started to move around us. Little rocks and then bigger ones. So I stopped still to let it settle. Now I can't get the Fool up and I can't carry her.' She fought the panic in her voice.

'Sit still. I'm coming.'

I could plainly see where a section of the surface rock had broken loose and started tumbling. Rolling pebbles had left their tracks over the snowy surface. I sized up what I could see and wished I knew more of avalanches. The movement of stone seemed to have begun well above them and to have flowed past them. We were still a good way above the edge, but once the scree began moving, it would swiftly carry us over the edge. I made my heart cold and relied on my head.

'Starling!' I called to her softly again. It was needless; her attention was entirely focused on me. 'Come to me. Very slowly and carefully.'

'What about the Fool?'

‘Leave him. Once you are safe, I will go back for him. If I come to you, all three of us will be at risk.’

It is one thing to see the logic of something. It is another to force oneself to keep a resolve that smacks of cowardice. I do not know what Starling was thinking as she got slowly to her feet. She never straightened up entirely, but ventured toward me one slow step at a time, crouched over. I bit my lip and kept silent though I longed to urge her to hurry. Twice small herds of pebbles were loosened by her steps. They went cascading downhill, rousing others to join them as they flowed down the incline and then bounded over the edge. Each time she froze in a crouch, her eyes fixed desperately on me. I stood and stupidly wondered what I would do if she started to slide with the rocks. Would I fling myself uselessly after her, or watch her go and keep forever the memory of those dark eyes pleading?

But at last she reached the relative stability of the larger rocks where I stood. She clutched at me and I held her, feeling the trembling that rattled through her. After a long moment, I gripped her upper arms firmly and held her a little apart from me. ‘You have to go on, now. It’s not far. When you get there, stay there and keep the jeppas bunched together. Do you understand?’

She gave a quick nod and then took a deep breath. She stepped free of me and began cautiously to follow the trail the jeppas and I had left. I let her get a safe distance away before I took my first cautious steps toward the Fool.

The rocks shifted and grated more noticeably under my greater weight. I wondered if I would be wiser to walk higher or lower on the slope than she had. I thought of going back to the jeppas for a rope, but could think of nothing to secure it to. And all the while I kept moving forward, one cautious step at a time. The Fool himself did not move.

Rocks began to move around my feet, tapping against my ankles as they tumbled past me, slipping out from under my feet. I halted where I was, frozen by the gravel hurrying past me. I felt one of my feet start to slip, and before I could control myself, I plunged forward a step. The exodus of small rocks became swifter and more determined. I did not know what to do. I thought of flinging myself flat and spreading my weight, but decided swiftly it would only make it more easy for the tumbling rocks to carry me with them. Not one of the moving stones was bigger than my fist, but there were

so many of them. I froze where I was and counted ten breaths before the rattlings settled again.

It took every scrap of courage I could muster to take the next step. I studied the ground for a time and selected a place that looked least unstable. I eased my weight to that foot and chose a place for my next step. By the time I reached the Fool's prone body, my shirt was sweated to my back and my jaw ached from clenching it. I eased myself down beside him.

Starling had lifted the blanket's corner to shelter his face, and he still lay covered like a dead man. I lifted it away, to look down at his closed eyes. He was a hue I had never seen before. The deathly white of his skin at Buckkeep had taken on a yellowish cast in the Mountains, but now he was a terrible dead colour. His lips were dry and chapped, his eyelashes crusted yellow. And he was still warm to the touch.

'Fool?' I asked him gently, but he made no response. I spoke on, hoping some part of him would hear me. 'I'm going to have to lift you and carry you. The footing is bad, and if I slip, we're going to fall all the way. So once I have you up in my arms, you must be very, very still. Do you understand?'

He took a slightly deeper breath. I took it for assent. I knelt downhill of him and worked my hands and arms under his body. As I straightened up, the arrow scar in my back screamed. I felt sweat pop out on my face. I knelt upright for a moment, the Fool in my arms, mastering my pain and gaining my balance. I shifted one leg to get my foot under me. I tried to stand up slowly, but as I did so rocks began cascading past me. I fought a terrible urge to clutch the Fool to me and run. The rattling and scattering of loose shale went on and on and on. When it finally ceased, I was trembling with the effort of standing perfectly still. I was ankle-deep in loose scree.

'FitzChivalry?'

I turned my head slowly. Kettricken and Kettle had caught up. They were standing uphill of me, well off the patch of loosened stone. They both looked sickened at my predicament. Kettricken was the first to recover.

'Kettle and I are going to cross above you. Stay where you are, and be as still as you can. Did Starling and the jeppas make it across?' I managed a small nod. I had not the spit to speak.

'I'll get a rope and come back. I'll be as quick as it is safe to be.'

Another nod from me. I had to twist my body to watch them, so I did not. Nor did I look down. The wind blew past me, the stone ticked under my feet, and I looked down into the Fool's face. He did not weigh much, for a

man grown. He had always been slight and bird-boned, relying on his tongue for defence rather than fist and muscle. But as I stood and held him, he grew weightier and weightier in my arms. The circle of pain in my back slowly expanded, and somehow managed to make my arms ache with it.

I felt him give a slight twitch in my arms. 'Be still,' I whispered.

He prised his eyes open and looked up at me. His tongue sought to moisten his lips. 'What are we doing?' he croaked.

'We're standing very still in the middle of an avalanche,' I whispered back. My throat was so dry it was hard to talk.

'I think I could stand,' he offered weakly.

'Don't move!' I ordered him.

He took a slightly deeper breath. 'Why are you always near when I get into these sort of situations?' he wondered hoarsely.

'I could ask you the same,' I retorted, unfairly.

'Fitz?'

I twisted my screaming back to look up at Kettricken. She was silhouetted against the sky. She had a jeppa with her, the lead one. She had a coil of rope looped on one shoulder. The other end was fixed to the jeppa's empty pack harness.

'I'm going to throw the rope to you. Don't try to catch it, let it go past you and then pick it up and wrap it around yourself. Understand?'

'Yes.'

She could not have heard my answer, but she nodded back to me encouragingly. In a moment the rope came flopping and uncoiling past me. It unsettled a small amount of pebbles, but their scurrying motion was enough to make me sick. The length of the rope sprawled across the rock, less than an arm's length from my foot. I looked down at it and tasted despair. I steeled my will.

'Fool, can you hold onto me? I have to try to pick up the rope.'

'I think I can stand,' he offered again.

'You may have to,' I admitted unwillingly. 'Be ready for anything. But whatever else, hold onto me.'

'Only if you promise to hold onto the rope.'

'I'll do my best,' I promised grimly.

My brother, they have stopped where we camped last night. Of the six men –

Not now, Nighteyes!

*Three have gone down as you did, and three remain with the horses.
Not now!*

The Fool shifted his arms to get an awkward hold on my shoulders. The damnable blankets that had swathed him were everywhere I didn't want them to be. I clutched at the Fool with my left arm and got my right hand and arm somewhat clear even though my arm was still under him. I fought a ridiculous impulse to laugh. It was all so stupidly awkward and dangerous. Of all the ways I had thought I might die, this one had never occurred to me. I met the Fool's eyes and saw the same panicky laughter in them. 'Ready,' I told him, and crouched toward the rope. Every taut muscle in my body screeched and cramped.

My fingers failed to touch the rope by a handsbreadth. I glanced up to where Kettricken and the jeppa were anxiously poised. It came to me that I had no idea what was supposed to happen once I had the rope. But my muscles were already extended too far to stop and ask questions. I forced my hand to the rope, even as I felt my right foot sliding out from under me.

Everything happened simultaneously. The Fool's grip on me tightened convulsively as the whole hillside beneath us seemed to break into motion. I grasped the rope but was still sliding downhill. Just before it tightened I managed to flip one wrap around my wrist. Above us and to the east of us, Kettricken led the sure-footed jeppa on. I saw the animal stagger as it took part of our weight. It dug in its feet and kept moving across the slide zone. The rope tightened, biting into my wrist and hand. I held on.

I don't know how I scabbled my feet under me, but I did, and made a semblance of walking as the hill kept rattling away beneath me. I found myself swinging like a slow pendulum with the taut rope providing me just enough resistance to keep me atop the rattling stone sliding downhill past me. Suddenly I felt firmer footing. My boots were full of tiny pebbles, but I ignored them as I kept my grip on the rope and moved steadily across the slide area. By now we were far downhill of the original path I had chosen. I refused to look down and see how close we were to the edge. I concentrated on keeping my awkward grip on the Fool and the rope and keeping my feet moving.

Abruptly, we were out of danger. I found myself in an area of bigger rocks, free of the loose scree that had nearly ended our lives. Above us, Kettricken kept moving steadily and so did we, and then we were climbing down onto the blessedly level road bed. In a few more minutes we were all

on flat snowy ground. I dropped the rope and slowly sagged down with the Fool. I closed my eyes.

‘Here. Drink some water.’ It was Kettle’s voice, and she was offering me a waterskin as Kettricken and Starling pried the Fool out of my arms. I drank some water and shook for a short while. Every part of me hurt as if bruised. As I sat recovering, something pushed into the front of my mind. I suddenly staggered to my feet.

‘Six of them, and three have gone down as I did, he said.’

All eyes turned to me at my blurted words. Kettle was getting water down the Fool, but he did not look much better. Her mouth was pursed with worry and displeasure. I knew what she feared. But the fear the wolf had given me was more compelling.

‘What did you say?’ Kettricken asked me gently, and I realized they thought my mind was wandering again.

‘Nighteyes has been following them. Six men on horses, one pack animal. They stopped at our old campsite. And he said that three of them went down as I did.’

‘Meaning to the city?’ Kettricken asked slowly.

To the city, Nighteyes echoed. It chilled me to see Kettricken nod as if to herself.

‘How can that be?’ Starling asked softly. ‘Kettle told us the signpost only worked for you because you had had Skill-training. It didn’t affect any of the rest of us.’

‘They must be Skilled ones,’ Kettle said softly and looked at me questioningly.

There was only one answer. ‘Regal’s coterie,’ I said and shuddered. The sickness of dread rose in me. They were so horribly close, and they knew how to hurt me so badly. An overwhelming fear of pain flooded my mind. I fought panic.

Kettricken patted my arm awkwardly. ‘Fitz. They’ll not get past that slide easily. With my bow, I can pick them off as they cross.’ Kettricken offered these words. There was irony in my queen offering to protect the royal assassin. Somehow it steadied me, even as I knew her bow was no protection from the coterie.

‘They don’t need to come here to attack me. Or Verity.’ I took a deep breath, and suddenly heard an additional fact in my words. ‘They don’t need

to physically follow us here to attack us. So why have they come all this way?’

The Fool leaned up on an elbow. He rubbed at his pasty face. ‘Maybe they don’t come here to pursue you at all,’ he suggested slowly. ‘Maybe they want something else.’

‘What?’ I demanded.

‘What did Verity come here for?’ he demanded. His voice was weak but he seemed to be thinking very carefully.

‘The aid of the Elderlings? Regal never believed in them. He saw it only as a way to get Verity out of his path.’

‘Perhaps. But he knew the tale he spread of Verity’s death was a fabrication of his own. You yourself say that his coterie waited and spied upon you. In what hopes, if not to discover Verity’s whereabouts? By now, he must wonder as much as the Queen does, why Verity has not returned. And Regal must wonder, what errand was so important that the Bastard turned aside from killing him to set forth on it. Look behind you, Fitz. You have left a trail of blood and mayhem. Regal must wonder where it all leads.’

‘Why would they go down into the city?’ I asked, and then a worse question, ‘How did they know how to go down into the city? I blundered into it, but how did they know?’

‘Perhaps they are far stronger than you in the Skill. Perhaps the guidepost spoke to them, or perhaps they came here already knowing much more than you did.’ Kettle spoke carefully, but there was no ‘perhaps’ in her voice.

It was all suddenly clear to me. ‘I don’t know why they are here. But I know I am going to kill them before they can get to Verity, or trouble me any further.’ I heaved myself to my feet.

Starling sat staring at me. I think she realized at that moment exactly what I was. Not some romanticized princeling in exile who would eventually do some heroic task, but a killer. And not even a very competent one.

‘Rest a bit first,’ Kettricken advised me. Her voice was steady and accepting.

I shook my head. ‘I wish I could. But the opportunity they’ve given me is now. I don’t know how long they’ll be in the city. I hope they’ll spend some time there. I’m not going down to meet them, you see. I’m no match for them in the Skill. I can’t fight their minds. But I can kill their bodies. If

they've left their horses, guards and supplies behind them, I can take those things from them. Then when they come back, they'll be trapped. No food, no shelter. No game to hunt around here, even if they remembered how to hunt. I won't get a chance as good as this again.'

Kettricken was nodding reluctantly. Starling looked ill. The Fool had sagged back into his bedding. 'I should be going with you,' he said quietly.

I looked at him and tried to keep amusement out of my voice. 'You?'

'I've just a feeling ... that I should go with you. That you should not go alone.'

'I won't be alone. Nighteyes is waiting for me.' I quested out briefly and found my comrade. He was crouched on his belly in the snow, downtrail of the guards and horses. They had built a small fire and were cooking food over it. It was making the wolf hungry.

Shall we have horse tonight?

We shall see, I told him. I turned to Kettricken. 'May I take your bow?'

She handed it over reluctantly. 'Can you shoot it?' she asked.

It was a very fine weapon. 'Not well, but well enough. They've no cover worth mentioning, and they aren't expecting an attack. If I'm lucky, I can kill one before they know I'm even around.'

'You'll shoot one without even issuing a challenge?' Starling asked faintly.

I looked into the sudden disillusionment in her eyes. I closed my eyes and focused on my task instead. *Nighteyes?*

Shall I drive the horses over the cliff, or just down the trail? They've already scented me and are getting anxious. But the men pay no attention.

I'd like the supplies they are carrying, if it can be managed. Why did killing a horse bother me more than killing a man?

We'll see, Nighteyes replied judiciously. *Meat is meat*, he added.

I slung Kettricken's quiver over my back. The wind was kicking up again, promising more snow. The thought of crossing the slide area again turned my bowels to water. 'There is no choice,' I reminded myself. I looked up to see Starling turning away from me. She had evidently taken my remark as her reply. Well, it would serve there as well. 'If I fail, they will come after you,' I said carefully. 'You should get as far from here as you can; travel until you can't see any more. If all goes well, we'll catch up with you soon enough.' I crouched down beside the Fool. 'Can you walk at all?' I asked him.

‘For a way,’ he said dully.

‘If I must, I can carry him.’ Kettricken spoke with quiet certainty. I looked at the tall woman and believed her. I gave a short nod of my head.

‘Wish me luck,’ I told them, and turned back to the slide zone.

‘I’m coming with you,’ Kettle announced abruptly. She stood up from retying her boots. ‘Give me the bow. And follow where I walk.’

I was speechless for a moment. ‘Why?’ I demanded at last.

‘Because I know what I’m doing crossing that rock. And I’m more than “good enough” with a bow. I’ll wager I can drop two of them before they know we’re there.’

‘But –’

‘She is very good on the slide,’ Kettricken observed calmly. ‘Starling, take the jeppas. I’ll bring the Fool.’ She gave us an unreadable look. ‘Catch up as soon as you can.’

I recalled that I’d tried to leave Kettle behind once before. If she was going with me, I wanted her to be with me, not coming up behind me when I didn’t expect it. I glared at her, but nodded.

‘The bow,’ she reminded me.

‘Can you really shoot well?’ I asked her as I grudgingly surrendered it.

A funny smile twisted her face. She looked down at her crooked fingers. ‘I would not tell you I could do a thing if I could not. Some of my old skills are still mine,’ she said quietly.

We set out to clamber back up onto the tumbled rock. Kettle went first, her probing staff in hand, and I came behind her, one staff length back as she had bid me. She didn’t say a word to me as she glanced back and forth between the ground at her feet and where she wished to take us. I could not discern what it was that decided her path, but the loose stone and crystalline snow remained quiet under her short steps. She made it look easy enough that I began to feel foolish.

They are eating now. And no one keeps a watch.

I relayed the information to Kettle, who nodded grimly. To myself I fretted and wondered if she would be able to do what needed doing. To be good with a bow is one thing. To shoot a man down while he is eating his dinner peacefully is another. I thought of Starling’s objection, and wondered what kind of man would show himself and issue a challenge before trying to kill all three men. I touched the hilt of my short sword. Well, it was what Chade had promised me so long ago. Killing for my king, with none of the

honour or glory of the soldier on the battlefield. Not that any of my battle memories had much of honour or glory in them.

We were suddenly clambering down from the loose rock of the slide area, going very quietly and carefully. Kettle spoke very softly. 'We've a way to go yet. But when we get there, let me choose my spot, and get my first shot off. As soon as the man is down, show yourself and draw their attention. They may not look for me, and I may get another clean shot.'

'Have you done this sort of thing before?' I asked softly.

'It's not that different from our game, Fitz. From here, let us go silently.'

I knew then she had not killed this way before, if she had ever killed a human before at all. I began to doubt the wisdom of giving her the bow. At the same time, I was selfishly grateful for her companionship. I wondered if I were losing my courage.

Perhaps you are learning that a pack is best for such things.

Perhaps.

There was little cover on the road. Above and below us, the mountainside rose sheer. The road itself was flat and bare. We rounded a shoulder of the mountain and their camp was in plain sight. All three guards still sat carelessly about the fire, eating and talking. The horses caught our scent and shifted with small snortings. But as the wolf had kept them uneasy for some time, the men paid them no mind. Kettle set an arrow to her bow as we walked and carried it ready. In the end, it was simple. Ugly mindless slaughter, but simple. She let go her arrow when one of the men noticed us. It took him through the chest. The other two leaped to their feet, turned to see us, and dived for their weapons. But in that short space of time, Kettle had nocked another arrow and let fly as the helpless wretch drew a sword clear. Nighteyes came suddenly from behind to bear the last man down and hold him until I could rush in to finish him with a sword.

It had happened swiftly, almost quietly. Three dead men sprawled in the snow. Six sweating, restless horses, one impassive mule. 'Kettle. See what food they have on the horses,' I told her, to stop her awful staring. She swung her gaze to me, then slowly nodded.

I went over the bodies, to see what they might tell me. They did not wear Regal's colours, but the origin of two were plain in the features of their faces and the cut of their clothes. Farrow men. The third one, when I turned him over, near stopped my heart. I'd known him in Buckkeep. Not well, but

enough to know his name was Tallow. I crouched looking down into his dead face, ashamed that I could recall no more of him than that. I supposed he had gone on to Tradeford when Regal moved the court there; many of the servants had. I tried to tell myself it did not matter where he had begun; he had ended here. I closed my heart and did my tasks.

I tumbled the bodies off the cliff's edge. While Kettle went through their stores and sorted out what she thought we two could carry back, I stripped the horses of every bit of harness and tack. This followed the bodies down the cliff. I went through their bags, finding little besides warm clothes. The pack animal carried only their tent and such things. No papers. What need would coterie members have of written instructions?

Drive the horses well down the road. I doubt they'll come back here on their own.

That much meat, and you want me to just chase it away?

If we kill one here, it's more than we can eat and carry. Whatever we left would feed those three when they return. They were carrying dry meat and cheese. I'll see your belly is full tonight.

Nighteyes was not pleased, but he heeded me. I think he chased the horses further and faster than he truly needed to, but at least he left them alive. I had no idea what their chances were in the mountains. Probably end up in a snowcat's belly, or as a feast for the ravens. I was suddenly horribly tired of it all.

'Shall we go on?' I asked Kettle needlessly, and she nodded. It was a good trove of food she had packed for us to carry, but I privately wondered if I'd be able to stomach any of it. What little we could not carry nor the wolf stuff down, we kicked over the edge. I looked around us. 'Dare I touch it, I'd try to push that pillar over the edge, too,' I told Kettle.

She gave me a look as if she thought I had asked it of her. 'I fear to touch it also,' she said at last, and we both turned away from it.

Evening crept across the mountains as we went up the road, and night came swift on her heels. I followed Kettle and the wolf across the landslide in near darkness. Neither of them seemed afraid, and I was suddenly too weary to care if I survived the trek. 'Don't let your mind wander,' Kettle chided me as we finally came down off the tumble of stone and onto the road again. She took my arm and gripped it tightly. We walked for a time in almost blackness, simply following the straight flat road before us as it cut across the face of the mountain. The wolf went ahead of us, coming back

frequently to check on us. *Camp's not much farther*, he encouraged me after one such trip.

‘How long have you been doing this?’ Kettle asked me after a time.

I didn’t pretend to misunderstand the question. ‘Since I was about twelve,’ I told her.

‘How many men have you killed?’

It was not the cold question it sounded. I answered her seriously. ‘I don’t know. My ... teacher advised me against keeping a count. He said it wasn’t a good idea.’ Those weren’t his exact words. I remembered them well. ‘How many doesn’t matter after one,’ Chade had said. ‘We know what we are. Quantity makes you neither better nor worse.’

I pondered now what he had meant by that as Kettle said to the dark, ‘I killed once before.’

I made no reply. I’d let her tell me about it if she wished, but I really didn’t want to know.

Her arm in mine began to tremble slightly. ‘I killed her, in a temper. I didn’t think I could, she had always been stronger. But I lived and she died. So they burned me out, and turned me out. Sent me into exile forever.’ Her hand found mine and gripped it tightly. We kept on walking. Ahead of us, I spied a tiny glow. It was most likely the brazier burning inside the tent.

‘It was so unthinkable, to do what I had done,’ Kettle said wearily. ‘It had never happened before. Oh, between coteries, certainly, once in a great while, for rivalry for the King’s favour. But I Skill-duelled a member of my own coterie, and killed her. And that was unforgivable.’

TWENTY-NINE

The Rooster Crown

There is a game played among the Mountainfolk. It is a complex game to learn, and a difficult one to master. It features a combination of cards and rune chips. There are seventeen cards, usually about the size of a man's hand and made from any light-coloured wood. Each of these cards features an emblem from Mountain lore, such as the Old Weaver-Man or She Who Tracks. The renderings of these highly stylized images are usually done in paint over a burnt outline. The thirty-one rune chips are made from a grey stone peculiar to the Mountains, and are incised with glyphs for Stone, Water, Pasture, and the like. The cards and stones are dealt out to the players, usually three, until no more remain. Both cards and runes have traditional weights that are varied when they are played in combination. It is reputed to be a very old game.

We walked the rest of the way to the tent in silence. What she had told me was so immense I could not think of anything to say. It would have been stupid to voice the hundreds of questions that sprang up in me. She had the answers, and she would choose when to give them to me. I knew that now. Nighteyes came back to me silently and swiftly. He slunk close to my heels.

She killed within her pack?

So it seems.

It happens. It is not good, but it happens. Tell her that.

Not just now.

No one said much as we came into the tent. No one wanted to ask. So I quietly said, 'We killed the guards and drove off the horses and threw their supplies off the cliff.'

Starling only stared at us, without comprehension. Her eyes were wide and dark, bird-like. Kettricken poured mugs of tea for us and quietly added the stores of food we had brought to our own dwindling supplies. 'The Fool is a bit better,' she offered by way of conversation.

I looked at him sleeping in his blankets and doubted it. His eyes had a sunken look. Sweat had plastered his fine hair to his skull and his restless sleep had stood it up in tufts. But when I set my hand to his face, it was

almost cool to the touch. I snuggled the blanket closer around him. 'Did he eat anything?' I asked Kettricken.

'He drank some soup. I think he'll be all right, Fitz. He was sick once before, for a day or so in Blue Lake. It was the same, fever and weakness. He said then that it might not be a sickness, but only a change his kind go through.'

'He said somewhat the same to me yesterday,' I agreed. She put a bowl of warm soup in my hands. For an instant it smelled good. Then it smelled like the remains of the soup the panicked guards had spilled on the snowy road. I clenched my jaws.

'Did you see the coterie members at all?' Kettricken asked me.

I shook my head, then forced myself to speak. 'No. But there was a big horse there, and the clothing in his bags would have fit Burl. In another there were blue garments such as Carrod favours. And austere things for Will.'

I said their names awkwardly, in a way fearing to name them, lest I summon them. In another way, I was naming those I had killed. Skilled or not, the Mountains would make an end of them. Yet I took no pride in what I had done, nor would I completely believe it until I saw their bones. All I knew for now was that it was not likely they would attack me this night. For an instant I imagined them returning to the pillar, expecting to find food and fire and shelter awaiting them. They would find cold and dark. They would not see the blood on the snow.

I realized the soup was getting cold. I forced myself to eat it, mouthfuls that I simply swallowed, not wishing to taste. Tallow had played the penny whistle. I had a sudden memory of him sitting on the back steps outside the scullery, playing for a couple of kitchen maids. I shut my eyes, wishing vainly that I could recall something evil about him. I suspected his only crime had been serving the wrong master.

'Fitz.' Kettle instantly poked me.

'I wasn't wandering,' I complained.

'You would have, soon. Fear has been your ally this day. It has kept you focused. But you must sleep sometime tonight, and when you do, you must have your mind well warded. When they get back to the pillar, they will recognize your handiwork and come hunting you. Do you not think so?'

I knew it was so, but it was still unsettling to hear it spoken aloud. I wished Kettricken and Starling were not listening and watching us.

'So. We shall have a bit of our game again, shall we?' Kettle cajoled.

We played four chance games. I won twice. Then she set up a game with almost entirely white pieces, and gave me one black stone with which to win. I tried to focus my mind on the game, knowing it had worked before, but I was simply too tired. I found myself thinking that it had been over a year since I had left Buckkeep as a corpse. Over a year since I had slept in a real bed I called my own. Over a year since meals had been reliable. Over a year since I had held Molly in my arms, over a year since she had bid me leave her alone forever.

‘Fitz. Don’t.’

I lifted my eyes from the gamecloth to find Kettle watching me closely.

‘You can’t indulge that. You have to be strong.’

‘I am too tired to be strong.’

‘Your enemies were careless today. They did not expect you to discover them. They won’t be careless again.’

‘I hope they’ll be dead,’ I said with a cheer I did not feel.

‘Not that easily,’ Kettle replied, unknowing of how her words chilled me. ‘You said it was warmer down in the city. Once they see they’ve no supplies, they’ll go back to the city. They have water there, and I’m sure they took at least some supplies for the day. I don’t think we can disregard them yet. Do you?’

‘I suppose not.’

Nighteyes sat up beside me with an anxious whine. I quelled my own despair and then quieted him with a touch. ‘I just wish,’ I said quietly, ‘that I could simply sleep for a time. Alone in my mind, dreaming my own dreams, without fearing where I’ll go or who might attack me. Without fearing that my hunger for the Skill will overcome me. Just simple sleep.’ I spoke to her directly, knowing now she understood well what I meant.

‘I can’t give you that,’ Kettle told me calmly. ‘All I can give you is the game. Trust it. It’s been used by generations of Skill-users to keep such dangers at bay.’

And so I bent to the board once more, and fixed the game in my mind, and when I lay down by the Fool that night, I kept it before my eyes.

I hovered that night, like a nectar bird, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. I could reach a place just short of sleep and keep myself there by contemplating Kettle’s game. More than once, I drifted back to wakefulness. I would become cognizant of the dim light from the brazier and the sleeping forms beside me. Several times I reached out to check the Fool;

each time his skin seemed cooler and his own sleep deeper. Kettricken, Starling and Kettle rotated through watches that night. I noticed that the wolf shared Kettricken's. They still did not trust me to remain wary through one, and I was selfishly grateful for that.

Just short of dawn, I stirred once more to find all still quiet. I checked the Fool, and then lay back and closed my eyes, hoping to find a few more moments of rest. Instead, in horrific detail, I beheld a great eye, as if the closing of my own eyes had opened this one. I struggled to open my own eyes again, I floundered desperately toward wakefulness, but I was held. There was a terrible pull on my mind, like the sucking pull of an undertow on a swimmer. I resisted with all my will. I could feel wakefulness just above me, like a bubble I could break into, if only I could touch it. But I could not. I struggled, grimacing my face, trying to pull my wayward eyes open.

The eye watched me. One single immense dark eye. Not Will's. Regal's. He stared at me, and I knew he took delight in my struggles. It seemed effortless for him to hold me there, like a fly under a glass bowl. Yet even in my panic, I knew that if he could have done more than hold me, he would. He had got past my walls, but had not the power to do more than threaten me. That was still enough to make my heart pound with terror.

'*Bastard,*' he said fondly. The word broke over my mind like a cold ocean wave. I was drenched in its threat. '*Bastard, I know about the child. And your woman. Molly. Tit for tat, Bastard.*' He paused and his amusement grew as my terror swelled. '*Now there's a thought. Has she pretty tits, Bastard? Would I find her amusing?*'

'NO!'

I wrenched clear of him, sensing for an instant Carrod, Burl, and Will as well. I flung myself free.

I came awake abruptly. I scabbled from my bedding and fled outside, bootless and uncloaked. Nighteyes followed at my heels, snarling in every direction. The sky was black and scattered with stars. The air was cold. I drew breath after shuddering breath of it, trying to still the sick fear in me. 'What is it?' Starling demanded fearfully. She was on watch outside the tent.

I just shook my head at her, unable to voice the horror of it. After a time, I turned and went back inside. Sweat was coursing down my body as if I had been poisoned. I sat down in my muddle of blankets. I could not stop panting. The more I tried to still my panic, the greater it became. *I know*

about the child. And your woman. Those words echoed and echoed through me. Kettle stirred in her bedding, then rose and came across the tent to sit behind me. She set her hands on my shoulders. ‘They broke through to you, did they?’

I nodded, tried to swallow with a dry throat.

She reached for a waterskin and handed it to me. I took a drink, almost choked, and then managed another swallow. ‘Think about the game,’ she urged me. ‘Clear your mind of everything but the game.’

‘The game!’ I cried out savagely, jerking both the Fool and Kettricken awake. ‘The game? Regal knows about Molly and Nettle. He threatens them. And I am powerless! Helpless.’ I felt the panic building in me again, the unfocused fury. The wolf whined, then growled deep in his throat.

‘Can’t you Skill to them, warn them somehow?’ Kettricken asked.

‘No!’ Kettle cut in. ‘He should not even think of them.’

Kettricken gave me a look that mingled apology and righteousness. ‘I fear Chade and I were correct. The princess will be safer in the Mountain Kingdom. Do not forget that his task was to fetch her. Take heart. Perhaps even now Nettle is with him, on her way to safety, out of Regal’s reach.’

Kettle called my gaze away from the Queen. ‘Fitz. Focus on the game. Only on the game. His threats could be a ploy, to trick you into betraying them. Don’t talk about them. Don’t think about them. Here. Look here.’ Her trembling old hands moved my blanket away and spread out the gamecloth. She spilled stones into her hand, and plucked out white ones to re-create the problem. ‘Solve this. Focus on this, and this only.’

It was next to impossible. I looked at the white stones and thought it all a stupid task. What players could be so clumsy and short-sighted as to let the game degrade into such a clutter of white stones? It was not a problem worth solving. But neither could I lie down and sleep. I scarcely dared blink lest I see that eye again. Had it been Regal’s whole countenance or both his eyes it would not perhaps have seemed so awful. But the disembodied eye seemed all-seeing and constant, inescapable. I stared at the game pieces until the white stones seemed to float above the junctures of the lines. One black stone, to bring a winning pattern out of this chaos. One black stone. I held it in my hand, rubbing it with my thumb.

All the next day, as we followed the road down the mountain’s flank, I held the stone in my bare hand. My other arm was about the Fool’s waist, his arm around my neck. These two things kept my mind focused.

The Fool seemed somewhat better. His body was no longer feverish, but he seemed unable to stomach food or even tea. Kettle forced water on him until he simply sat and refused it, shaking his head wordlessly. He seemed as indisposed to talk as I was. Starling and Kettle with her staff led our weary little procession. The Fool and I followed the jeppas, while Kettricken with her bow strung kept our rear guarded. The wolf prowled restlessly up and down the line, now ranging ahead, now loping up our back trail.

Nighteyes and I had gone back to a sort of wordless bond. He understood that I did not wish to think at all, and did his best not to distract me. It was still unnerving to sense him trying to use the Wit to communicate with Kettricken. *No sign of anyone behind us*, he would tell her as he trotted past on one of his endless trips. Then he would go ranging far ahead of the jeppas and Starling, only to come back to Kettricken and assure her in passing that all was clear ahead of us. I tried to tell myself that she merely had faith that Nighteyes would let me know if he found anything amiss on his scouting trips. But I suspected she was becoming more and more attuned to him.

The road led us very swiftly downwards. As we descended the land changed. By late afternoon, the slope above the road was gentling and we began to pass twisted trees and mossy boulders. Snow faded and became patchy on the hillside while the road was dry and black. Dry tufts of grass showed green at their bases just off the shoulder of the road. It was hard to make the hungry jeppas keep moving. I made a vague Wit-effort to let them know that there would be better browsing ahead, but I doubt that I had enough familiarity with them to make any lasting impression on them. I tried to limit my thoughts to the fact that firewood would be more plentiful tonight, and to gratitude that the lower the road carried us the warmer grew the day.

At one time, the Fool made a gesture to a low growing plant that had tiny white buds on it. 'It would be spring in Buckkeep by now,' he said in a low voice, and then added quickly, 'I'm sorry. Pay no attention to me, I'm sorry.'

'Are you feeling any better?' I asked him, resolutely thrusting spring flowers and bees and Molly's candles out of my mind.

'A little.' His voice shook and he took a quick breath. 'I wish we could walk more slowly.'

‘We’ll camp soon,’ I told him, knowing that we could not slow our pace now. I felt a growing urgency and had developed the notion it came from Verity. I pushed that name, too, from my mind. Even walking down the wide road in daylight, I feared that Regal’s eye was only a blink away and that if I glimpsed it they would once more hold me under their power. For an instant I hoped Carrod and Will and Burl were cold and hungry, but then realized I could not safely think of them, either.

‘You were sick like this before,’ I observed to the Fool, mostly to think of something else.

‘Yes. In Blue Lake. My lady queen spent the food money on a room that I might be in out of the rain.’ He turned his head to stare at me. ‘Do you think that might have caused it?’

‘Caused what?’

‘Her child to be stillborn ...’

His voice dwindled off. I tried to think of words. ‘I don’t think it was any one thing, Fool. She simply suffered too many misfortunes while she was carrying the babe.’

‘Burrich should have gone with her and left me. He would have taken better care of her. I wasn’t thinking clearly at the time ...’

‘Then I’d be dead,’ I pointed out. ‘Among other things. Fool, there is no sense in trying to play that game with the past. Here is where we are today, and we can only make our moves from here.’

And in that instant, I suddenly perceived the solution to Kettle’s game problem. It was so instantly clear that I wondered how I could not have seen it. Then I knew. Each time I had studied the board, I wondered how it could have got into such a sorry condition. All I had seen were the senseless moves that had preceded mine. But those moves had no longer mattered, once I held the black stone in my hand. A half-smile crooked my lips. My thumb rubbed the black stone.

‘Where we are today,’ the Fool echoed, and I felt his mood shadow mine.

‘Kettricken said that you might not truly be ill. That it might be ... peculiar to your kind.’ I was uncomfortable coming even that close to a question regarding this.

‘It could be. I suppose. Look.’ He drew off his mitten, then reached up and dragged his nails down his cheek. Dry white trails followed them. He

rubbed at it and the skin powdered away beneath his hands. On the back of his hand, the skin was peeling as if it had been blistered.

‘It’s like a sunburn peeling away. Do you think it’s the weather you’ve been in?’

‘That, too, is possible. Save that if it is like last time, I shall itch and peel over every bit of my body. And gain a bit more colour in the process. Are my eyes changing?’

I obliged him by meeting his gaze. Familiar as I was with him, it was still not an easy task. Had those colourless orbs darkened a trifle more? ‘Perhaps they are a bit darker. No more than ale held up to the light. What will happen to you? Will you continue to have fevers and gain colour?’

‘Perhaps. I don’t know,’ he admitted after a few moments had passed.

‘How could you not know?’ I demanded. ‘What were your elders like?’

‘Like you, foolish boy. Human. Somewhere back in my bloodline, there was a White. In me, as rarely happens, that ancient blood is given form again. But I am no more White than I am human. Did you think that one such as I was common to my people? I have told you. I am an anomaly, even among those who share my mixed lineage. Did you think White Prophets were born every generation? We would not be taken so seriously if we were. No. Within my lifetime, I am the only White Prophet.’

‘But could not your teachers, with all those records you said they kept, tell you anything of what to expect?’

He smiled, but bitterness was in his voice. ‘My teachers were too certain that they knew what to expect. They planned to pace my learning, to reveal what they thought I should know when they thought I should know it. When my prophecies were different from what they had planned, they were not pleased with me. They tried to interpret my own words for me! There have been other White Prophets, you see. But when I tried to make them see that I was the White Prophet, they could not accept it. Writing after writing they showed to me, to try to convince me of my effrontery in insisting on such a thing. But the more I read, the more my certainty grew. I tried to tell them my time was nearly upon me. All they could counsel was that I should wait and study more to be certain. We were not on the best terms when I left. I imagine they were quite startled to find I was gone so young from them, even though I had prophesied it for years.’ He gave me a strangely apologetic smile. ‘Perhaps if I had stayed to complete my schooling, we would know better how to save the world.’

I felt a sudden sinking in the pit of my stomach. So much had I come to rely on a belief that the Fool, at least, knew what we were about. ‘How much do you truly know of what is to come?’

He took a deep breath, then sighed it out. ‘Only that we do it together, Fitzy-fitz. Only that we do it together.’

‘I thought you had studied all those writings and prophecies ...’

‘I did. And when I was younger, I dreamed many dreams, and even had visions. But it is as I have told you before; nothing is a precise fit. Look you, Fitz. If I showed you wool and a loom and a set of shears, would you look at it and say, oh, that is the coat I will someday wear? But once you have the coat on, it is easy to look back and say, oh, those things foretold this coat.’

‘What is the good of it, then?’ I demanded in disgust.

‘The good of it?’ he echoed. ‘Ah. I have never quite thought of it in those terms before. The good of it.’

We walked for a time in silence. I could see what an effort it was for him to keep to the pace, and wished vainly there had been a way to keep one of the horses and get it past the slide area.

‘Can you read weather signs, Fitz? Or animal tracks?’

‘Some, for weather. I am better at animal tracks.’

‘But in either one, are you always sure you are right?’

‘Never. You don’t really know until the next day dawns, or you bring the beast to bay.’

‘So it is with my reading of the future. I never know ... please, let us stop, even if for only a bit. I need to get my breath, and take a sip of water.’

I obliged him reluctantly. There was a mossy boulder just off the road, and he seated himself there. Not too far from the road were evergreens of a type I did not know. It rested my eyes to look on trees again. I left the road to sit beside him, and was instantly aware of a difference. As subtle as bees’ humming was the working of the road, but when it suddenly ceased, I felt it. I yawned to pop my ears, and suddenly felt more clear-headed.

‘Years ago I had a vision,’ the Fool observed. He drank a bit more water, then passed the skin to me. ‘I saw a black buck rising from a bed of shining black stone. When first I saw the black walls of Buckkeep rising over the waters, I said to myself, “Ah, that is what that meant!” Now I see a young bastard whose sigil is a buck walking on a road wrought from black stone. Maybe that is what the dream signified. I don’t know. But my dream

was duly recorded, and someday, in years to come, wise men will agree as to what it signified. Probably after both you and I are long dead.'

I asked a question that had long prickled me. 'Kettle says there is a prophecy about my child ... the child of the Catalyst ...'

'That there is,' the Fool confirmed calmly.

'Then you think Molly and I are doomed to lose Nettle to the throne of the Six Duchies?'

'Nettle. You know, I like her name. Very much, I do.'

'You did not answer my question, Fool.'

'Ask me again in twenty years. These things are so much easier when one looks back.' The sideways glance he gave me told me he would say no more on that topic. I tried a new tack.

'So you came, all that way, so that the Six Duchies would not fall to the Red Ships.'

He gave me an odd look, then grinned as if astonished. 'Is that how you see it? That we do all this to save your Six Duchies?' When I nodded, he shook his head. 'Fitz, Fitz. I came to save the world. The Six Duchies falling to the Red Ships is but the first pebble in the avalanche.' He took another deep breath. 'I know the Red Ships seem disaster enough to you, but the misery they make to your folk is no more than a pimple on the world's buttocks. Were that all, were it simply one set of barbarians seizing land from another, it would be no more than the ordinary working of the world. No. They are the first stain of poison spreading in a stream. Fitz, do I dare tell you this? If we fail, the spread is fast. Forging takes root as a custom, nay, as an amusement for the high ones. Look at Regal and his "King's Justice". He has succumbed to it already. He pleasures his body with drugs and deadens his soul with his savage amusements. Aye, and spreads the disease to those around him, until they take no satisfaction in a contest of skill that draws no blood, until games are only amusing if lives are wagered on the outcome. The very coinage of life becomes debased. Slavery spreads, for if it is accepted to take a man's life for amusement, then how much wiser to take it for profit?'

His voice had grown in strength and passion as he spoke. Now he caught his breath suddenly and leaned forward over his knees. I set a hand on his shoulder, but he only shook his head. After a moment, he straightened. 'I declare, talking to you is more wearying than hiking. Take me at my word, Fitz. As bad as the Red Ships are, they are amateurs and

experimenters. I have seen visions of what the world becomes in the cycle when they prosper. I vow it shall not be this cycle.'

He heaved himself to his feet with a sigh and crooked out his arm. I took it and we resumed our walking. He had given me much to think about, and I spoke little. I took advantage of the gentling countryside to walk alongside the road rather than upon it. The Fool did not complain of the uneven ground.

As the road plunged ever deeper into the valley, the day warmed and the foliage increased. By evening, the terrain had mellowed so much that we were able to pitch the tent, not only off the road, but quite a distance from the road. Before bedtime, I showed Kettle my solution to her game, and she nodded as if well pleased. She immediately began to set out a new puzzle. I stopped her.

'I do not think I will need that tonight. I am looking forward to truly sleeping.'

'Are you? Then you shouldn't look forward to waking up again.'

I looked shocked.

She resumed setting out her pieces. 'You are one against three, and those three a coterie,' she observed more gently. 'And possibly those three are four. If Regal's brothers could Skill, he most likely has some ability. With the aid of the others, he could learn to lend his strength to them.' She leaned closer to me and lowered her voice, although the others were all busy with camp chores. 'You know it is possible to kill with the Skill. Would he wish to do less than that to you?'

'But if I sleep off the road –' I began.

'The force of the road is like the wind that blows alike on all. The ill wishes of a coterie are like an arrow that targets only you. Besides. There is no way you can sleep and not worry about the woman and the child. And every time you think of them, it is possible the coterie sees them through your eyes. You must crowd them out of your mind.'

I bent my head over the gamecloth.

I awoke the next morning to the pattering of rain on the tent skins. I lay for a time listening to it, grateful that it was not snow but dreading a day of walking in rain. I sensed the others waking up around me with a keenness I had not felt in days. I felt almost as if I had rested. Across the tent, Starling observed sleepily, 'We walked from winter to spring yesterday.'

Next to me the Fool shifted, scratched and muttered, 'Typical minstrel. Exaggerate everything.'

'I see you are feeling better,' Starling retorted.

Nighteyes thrust his head into the tent, a bloody rabbit dangling in his jaws. *The hunting is better, too.*

The Fool sat up in his blankets. 'Is he offering to share that?'

My kill is your kill, little brother.

Somehow it stung to hear him call the Fool 'brother'. *Especially when you've already eaten two this morning?* I asked him sarcastically.

No one forced you to lie in bed all dawn.

I was silent a moment. *I have not been much companion to you lately, I apologized.*

I understand. It is no longer just we two. Now we are pack.

You are right, I told him humbly. But this evening, I intend to hunt with you.

The Scentless One may come too, if he wishes. He could be a good hunter, did he try, for his scent could never give him away.

'He not only offers to share meat, he invites you to hunt with us this evening.'

I had expected the Fool to decline. Even at Buck he had never shown any inclination toward hunting. Instead he inclined his head gravely toward Nighteyes and told him, 'I would be honoured.'

We struck camp speedily and were soon on our way. As before I walked beside the road rather than upon it, and felt clearer-headed for it. The Fool had eaten voraciously at breakfast and now seemed almost his old self. He walked upon the road, but within hailing distance and kept up a merry chattering to me all day. Nighteyes ranged ahead and behind as always, frequently at a gallop. All of us seemed infected with the relief of warmer weather. The light rain soon gave way to a streaky sunlight, and the earth steamed fragrantly. Only my constant ache over Molly's safety and a nagging fear that at any time Will and his cohorts might attack my mind kept it from being a lovely day. Kettle had warned me about letting my mind dwell on either problem, lest I attract the coterie's attention. So I carried my fear inside me like a cold black stone, resolutely telling myself there was absolutely nothing I could do.

Odd thoughts popped into my head all day. I could not see a flower bud without wondering if Molly would have used it for scent or colour in her

work. I found myself wondering if Burrich was as good with a wood axe as he was with a battle axe, and if it would be enough to save them. If Regal knew of them, he would send soldiers after them. Could he know of them without knowing exactly where they were?

‘Stop that!’ Kettle reprimanded me sharply, with a light rap of her walking stick. I jolted back to full awareness. The Fool glanced over at us curiously.

‘Stop what?’ I demanded.

‘Thinking those thoughts. You know what I mean. Were you thinking of anything else, I would not have been able to walk up behind you. Find your discipline.’

I did, and reluctantly dredged up the game problem from the night before to concentrate on.

‘That’s better,’ Kettle told me in quiet approval.

‘What are you doing back here?’ I asked suddenly. ‘I thought you and Starling were leading the jeppas.’

‘We’ve come to a fork in the road. And another pillar. Before we proceed, we want the Queen to see it.’

The Fool and I hastened ahead, leaving Kettle to go back and tell Kettricken of the juncture. We found Starling sitting on some ornamental stonework at the side of the road while the jeppas browsed greedily. The juncture of the road was marked by a great paved circle, surrounded by open grassy meadow, with another monolith at its centre. I would have expected it to be crowned with moss and scarred by lichen. Instead the black stone was smooth and clean save for dust deposited by wind and rain. I stood staring up at the stone, studying the glyphs while the Fool wandered about. I was wondering if any of the markings on this one matched the markings I had copied to the map when the Fool exclaimed, ‘There was a village here, once!’ He gestured wide with his hands.

I glanced up, and saw what he meant. There were indentations in the meadows where stunted grass cloaked old, paved walkways. A wide, straight way that might have been a street once ran through the meadow and off beneath the trees. Moss- and vine-shrouded upthrusts were all that remained of cottage and shop walls that had lined it. Trees grew where once hearths had burned and folk had dined. The Fool found a large block of stone and climbed upon it to spy in all directions. ‘It might have been a sizeable town, at one time.’

It made sense. If this road had been the highway for commerce that I had seen in my Skill-seeing, then it was only natural that a town or market would spring up at every crossroads. I could imagine it on a bright spring day, when farmers brought fresh eggs and new spring greens to town and weavers hung out their new goods to tempt the buyers and ...

For half an instant, the circle about the pillar thronged with folk. The vision began and ended at the pavement stones. Only within the virtue of the black stone did the people laugh and gesture and barter with one another. A girl crowned with a twist of green vine came through the crowd, glancing back over her shoulder at someone. I swear she caught my eye and winked at me. I thought I heard my name called and turned my head. Upon a dais stood a figure dressed in a flowing garment that shimmered with the glint of gold thread. She wore a gilded wooden crown decorated with cunningly carved and painted rooster heads and tail feathers. Her sceptre was no more than a feather duster but she gestured with it royally as she issued some decree. In the circle about me, folk roared with laughter. I could only stare at her ice-white skin and colourless eyes. She looked right at me.

Starling slapped me, hard. My head snapped on my neck with the force of her blow. I looked at her in astonishment, blood pooling in my mouth where my teeth had cut my cheek. She lifted her clenched fist again, and I realized she had not slapped me. I stepped back hastily, catching her wrist as her fist went by. 'Stop it!' I cried angrily.

'You ... stop it!' she panted. 'And make her stop it, too!' She gestured angrily to where the Fool perched still upon his stone, frozen in artful mime of a statue. He did not breathe nor blink. But as I watched he slowly toppled over, falling like a stone.

I expected him to change it to a handspring in mid-fall, to come flashing to his feet as he so often had when he amused King Shrewd's court. Instead he measured his length in the meadow grass and lay still.

For a moment I stood stunned. Then I raced to his side. I seized the Fool under the arms and dragged him away from both the black circle and the black stone he had climbed upon. Some instinct made me take him into shade and lean him back against the trunk of a live oak. 'Get water!' I snapped at Starling, and her scolding and fluttering ceased. She ran back to the loaded jeppas and got a waterskin.

I put my fingers alongside his throat and found his life pulsing steadily there. His eyes were only half-closed and he lay like a man stunned. I called

his name and patted at his cheek until Starling returned with the water. I unstopped the skin and let a cold stream of it spatter down over his face. For a time there was no response. Then he gasped, snorted out water and sat up abruptly. His eyes were blank. Then his gaze met mine and he grinned wildly. 'Such a folk and such a day! It was the announcing of Realdar's dragon, and he had promised he would fly me ...' He frowned suddenly and looked about in confusion. 'It fades, like a dream it fades, leaving less than its shadow behind ...'

Kettle and Kettricken were suddenly with us as well. Starling tattled out all that had happened while I helped the Fool to drink some water. When she was finished, Kettricken looked grave, but it was Kettle who lashed out at us. 'The White Prophet and the Catalyst!' she cried in disgust. 'Rather name them as they are, the Fool and the Idiot. Of all the careless, foolish things to do! He has no training at all, how is he to protect himself from the coterie?'

'Do you know what happened?' I demanded, cutting into her tirade.

'I ... well, of course not. But I can surmise. The stone he clambered on must be a Skill-stone, the same stuff as the road and the pillars. And somehow this time the road seized you both with its power instead of just you.'

'Did you know it could happen?' I didn't wait for her reply. 'Why didn't you warn us?'

'I didn't know!' she retorted, and then added guiltily, 'I only suspected, and I never thought either of you would be so foolish as to ...'

'Never mind!' the Fool cut in. Abruptly he laughed and stood up, pushing away my arm. 'Oh, this! This is such as I have not felt in years, not since I was a child. The certainty, the power of it. Kettle! Would you hear a White Prophet speak? Then hearken to this, and be glad as I am glad. We are not only where we must be, we are when we must be. All junctures coincide, we draw closer and closer to the centre of the web. You and I.' He clasped my head suddenly between his two hands and placed his brow against mine. 'We are even who we must be!' He freed me suddenly and spun away. He launched the handspring I had expected earlier, came to his feet, curtsied deeply and laughed aloud again, exultantly. We all gawked at him.

'You are in great danger!' Kettle told him severely.

'I know,' he replied, almost sincerely, and then added, 'as I said. Exactly where we need to be.' He paused, then asked me suddenly, 'Did you

see my crown? Wasn't it magnificent? I wonder if I shall be able to carve it from memory?'

'I saw the rooster crown,' I said slowly. 'But what to make of any of this, I do not know.'

'You don't?' He cocked his head at me, then smiled pityingly. 'Oh, Fitz-fitz, I would explain it if I could. It is not that I wish to keep secrets, but these secrets defy telling in mere words. They are more than half a feeling, a grasping of rightness. Can you trust me in this?'

'You are alive again,' I said wonderingly. I had not seen such light in his eyes since the days when he had made King Shrewd bellow with laughter.

'Yes,' he said gently. 'And when we have finished, I promise that you will be, also.'

The three women stood glaring and excluded. When I looked at the outrage on Starling's face, the rebuke in Kettle's and the exasperation in Kettricken's, I suddenly had to grin. Behind me the Fool chuckled. And try as we might, we could not explain to their satisfaction exactly what had happened. Nevertheless, we wasted quite some time in attempting it.

Kettricken took out both maps and consulted them. Kettle insisted on accompanying me when I took my map back to the central pillar to compare the glyphs on it to the ones on the map. They shared a number of marks in common, but the only one that Kettricken recognized was the one she had named before. Stone. When I reluctantly offered to see if this pillar might not transport me as the other one had, Kettricken adamantly refused. I am ashamed to admit I was greatly relieved. 'We began together, and I intend that we shall finish together,' she said darkly. I knew she suspected that the Fool and I were keeping something from her.

'What do you propose then?' I asked her humbly.

'What I first suggested. We will follow that old road that goes off through the trees. It appears to match what is marked here. It cannot take us more than two marches to reach the end of it. Especially if we start now.'

And with no more announcement than that, she got up and clicked to the jeppas. The leader came immediately and the rest obediently fell into line behind her. I watched her long even strides as she led them off down the shady road.

'Well, get along, both of you!' Kettle snapped at the Fool and me. She shook her walking stick and I almost suspected she wished she could prod us

along like errant sheep. But the Fool and I both fell obediently into line behind the jeppas, leaving Starling and Kettle to follow us.

That night the Fool and I left the tent's shelter and went with Nighteyes. Both Kettle and Kettricken had been dubious as to the wisdom of this, but I had assured them I would act with all caution. The Fool had promised not to let me out of his sight. Kettle rolled her eyes at this, but said nothing. Plainly we were both still suspected of being idiots, but they let us leave anyway. Starling was sulkily silent, but as we had not had words, I assumed her pique had some other source. As we left the fireside, Kettricken said quietly, 'Watch over them, wolf,' and Nighteyes replied with a wave of his tail.

Nighteyes led us swiftly away from the grassy road and up into the wooded hills. The road had been leading us steadily downwards into more sheltered country. The woods that we moved through were open groves of oaks with wide meadows between. I saw sign of wild boar but was relieved when we did not encounter any. Instead, the wolf ran down and killed two rabbits that he graciously allowed me to carry for him. As we were returning to the camp by a roundabout path we came on a stream. The water was icy and sweet and cress grew thick along one bank. The Fool and I tickled for fish until our hands and arms were numb with the cold water. As I hauled out a final fish, its lashing tail splashed the enthusiastic wolf. He leaped back from it then snapped at me in rebuke. The Fool playfully scooped up another handful and flung it at him. Nighteyes leaped, jaws wide to meet it. Moments later, all three of us were involved in a water battle, but I was the only one who landed bodily in the stream when the wolf sprang on me. Both Fool and wolf were laughing heartily as I staggered out, soaked and chilled. I found myself laughing also. I could not recall the last time I had simply laughed aloud about so simple a thing. We returned to camp late, but with fresh meat, fish, and watercress to share.

There was a small, welcoming fire burning outside the tent. Kettle and Starling had already made porridge for our meal, but Kettle volunteered to cook again for the sake of the fresh food. While she was preparing it, Starling stared at me until I demanded, 'What?'

'How did you all get so wet?' she asked.

'Oh. By the stream where we got the fish. Nighteyes pushed me in.' I gave him a passing nudge with my knee as I headed toward the tent. He made a mock snap at my leg.

'And the Fool fell in as well?'

‘We were throwing water at one another,’ I admitted wryly. I grinned at her, but she did not smile. Instead she gave a small snort as if disdainful. I shrugged and went into the tent. Kettricken glanced up at me from her map, but said nothing. I rucked through my pack and found clothes that were dry if not clean. Her back was turned so I changed hastily. We had grown accustomed to granting one another the privacy of ignoring such things.

‘FitzChivalry,’ she said suddenly in a voice that commanded my attention.

I dragged my shirt down over my head and buttoned it. ‘Yes, my queen?’ I came to kneel beside her, thinking she wanted to consult on the map. Instead, she set it aside and turned to me. Her blue eyes met mine squarely.

‘We are a small company, all dependent on one another,’ she abruptly told me. ‘Any kind of strife within our group serves the purpose of our enemy.’

I waited, but she said no more. ‘I do not understand why you tell me this,’ I said humbly at last.

She sighed and shook her head. ‘I feared as much. And perhaps I do more harm than good to speak of it at all. Starling is tormented by your attentions to the Fool.’

I was speechless. Kettricken spared me with a blue glance, then looked aside from me again. ‘She believes the Fool is a woman and that you kept a tryst with her tonight. It chagrins her that you disdain her so completely.’

I found my tongue. ‘My lady queen, I do not disdain Mistress Starling.’ My outrage had rendered me formal. ‘In truth, she is the one who has avoided my company and put a distance between us since finding that I am Witted and sustain a bond with the wolf. Respecting her wishes, I have not pressed my friendship upon her. As to what she says of the Fool, surely you must find it as ludicrous as I do.’

‘Should I?’ Kettricken asked me softly. ‘All I can truthfully say I know of it is that he is not a man like other men.’

‘I cannot disagree with that,’ I said quietly. ‘He is unique among all the people I have ever known.’

‘Cannot you show some kindness to her, FitzChivalry?’ Kettricken burst out suddenly. ‘I do not ask that you court her, only that you do not let her be rent with jealousy.’

I folded my lips, forced my feelings to find courteous answer. ‘My queen, I will offer her, as I ever have, my friendship. She has given me small sign of late of even wanting that, let alone more. But as to that topic, I do not disdain her nor any other woman. My heart is given already. It is no more right to say that I disdain Starling than it is to say that you disdain me because your heart is filled with my Lord Verity.’

Kettricken shot me an oddly startled look. For a moment she seemed flustered. Then she looked down at the map she still gripped. ‘It is as I feared. I have only made it worse by speaking to you. I am so tired, Fitz. Despair drags at my heart always. To have Starling moody is like sand against raw flesh to me. I but sought to put things right between you. I beg your pardon if I have intruded. But you are a comely youth still, and it will not be the last time you have such cares.’

‘Comely?’ I laughed aloud, both incredulous and bitter. ‘With this scarred face and battered body? It haunts my nightmares that when next Molly sees me, she shall turn aside from me in horror. Comely.’ I turned aside from her, my throat suddenly too tight to speak. It was not that I mourned my appearance so much as I dreaded that Molly must look some day on my scars.

‘Fitz,’ Kettricken said quietly. Her voice was suddenly that of a friend, not the Queen. ‘I speak to you as a woman, to tell you that although you bear scars, you are far from the grotesque you seem to believe yourself. You are, still, a comely youth, in ways that have nothing to do with your face. And were my heart not full with my Lord Verity, I would not disdain you.’ She reached out a hand and ran cool fingers down the old split down my cheek, as if her touch could erase it. My heart turned over in me, an echo of Verity’s embedded passion for her amplified by my gratitude that she would say such a thing to me.

‘You well deserve my lord’s love,’ I told her artlessly from a full heart.

‘Oh, do not look at me with his eyes,’ she said dolefully. She rose suddenly, clasping the map to her breast like a shield, and left the tent.

THIRTY

Stone Garden

Dimity Keep, a very small holding on the coast of Buck, fell shortly before Regal crowned himself King of the Six Duchies. A great many villages were destroyed in that dread time, and there has never been a true count made of all the lives that were lost. Small keeps like Dimity were frequent targets for the Red Ships. Their strategy was to attack simple villages and the smaller holdings to weaken the overall defence line. Lord Bronze, to whom the Keep of Dimity was entrusted, was an old man, but nonetheless he led his men in defending his small castle. Unfortunately, heavy taxation for general coastline protection had drained his resources for some time, and Dimity Keep's defences were in poor repair. Lord Bronze was among the first to fall. The Red Ships took the keep almost easily, and reduced it with fire and sword to the rubble-strewn mound that it is today.

Unlike the Skill road, the road we travelled the next day had experienced the full ravages of time. Doubtless once a wide thoroughfare, the encroachments of the forest had narrowed it to little more than a track. While to me it seemed almost carefree to march down a road that did not at every moment threaten to steal my mind from me, the others muttered about the hummocks, upthrust roots, fallen branches and other obstacles we scrambled through all day. I kept my thoughts to myself and enjoyed the thick moss that overlay the once-cobbled surface, the branchy shade of the bud-leaved trees that overarched the road and the occasional patter of fleeing animals in the underbrush.

Nighteyes was in his element, racing ahead and then galloping back to us, to trot purposefully along beside Kettricken for a time. Then he would go ranging off again. At one time he came dashing back to the Fool and me, tongue lolling, to announce that tonight we would hunt wild pig, for their sign was plentiful. I relayed this to the Fool.

'I did not lose any wild pigs. Therefore, I shall not hunt for any,' he replied loftily. I rather agreed with his sentiments. Burrich's scarred leg had made me more than wary of the great tusked animals.

Rabbits, I suggested to Nighteyes. Let us hunt rabbits.

Rabbits for rabbits, he snorted disdainfully, and dashed off again.

I ignored the insult. The day was just pleasantly cool for hiking and the verdant forest smells were like a homecoming to me. Kettricken led us on, lost in her own thoughts, while Kettle and Starling followed us, caught up in talk. Kettle still tended to walk more slowly, though the old woman seemed to have gained stamina and strength since our journey had begun. But they were a comfortable distance behind us when I quietly asked the Fool, ‘Why do you allow Starling to believe you are a woman?’

He turned to me, waggled his eyebrows and blew me a kiss. ‘And am I not, fair princeling?’

‘I’m serious,’ I rebuked him. ‘She thinks you are a woman and in love with me. She thought that we had a tryst last night.’

‘And did we not, my shy one?’ He leered at me outrageously.

‘Fool,’ I said warningly.

‘Ah.’ He sighed suddenly. ‘Perhaps the truth is, I fear to show her my proof, lest ever afterwards she find all other men a disappointment.’ He gestured meaningfully at himself.

I looked at him levelly until he grew sober. ‘What does it matter what she thinks? Let her think whatever is easiest for her to believe.’

‘Meaning?’

‘She needed someone to confide in and, for a time, chose me. Perhaps it was easier for her to do that if she believed I was a woman, also.’ He sighed again. ‘That is one thing that in all my years among your folk I have never become accustomed to. The great importance that you attach to what gender one is.’

‘Well it is important ...’ I began.

‘Rubbish!’ he exclaimed. ‘Mere plumbing, when all is said and done. Why is it important?’

I stared at him, at a loss for words. It all seemed so obvious to me as to not need saying. After a time, I said, ‘Could you not simply tell her you are a man and let the issue be laid to rest?’

‘That would scarcely lay it to rest, Fitz,’ he replied judiciously. He clambered over a fallen tree and waited for me to follow. ‘For then she would need to know why, if I am a man, I do not desire her. It would have to be either a fault in me, or something I perceived as a fault in her. No. I do not think anything needs to be said on that topic. Starling, however, has the minstrel’s failing. She thinks that everything in the world, no matter how

private, should be a topic for discussion. Or better yet, made into a song. Ah, yes!’

He struck a sudden pose in the middle of the forest trail. His stance was so artfully reminiscent of Starling when she readied herself to sing that I was horrified. I glanced back at her as the Fool launched into sudden, hearty song:

‘Oh, when the Fool pisses
Pray tell, what’s the angle?
Did we take down his pants
Would he dimple or dangle?’

My eyes darted from Starling to the Fool. He bowed, an embroidery of the elaborate bow that often marked the end of her performances. I wanted at once to laugh aloud and to sink into the earth. I saw Starling redden and start forward, but Kettle caught at her sleeve and said something severely. Then they both glared at me. It was not the first time that one of the Fool’s escapades had embarrassed me, but it was one of the most keenly-edged ones. I made a helpless gesture back at them, then rounded on the Fool. He was capering down the path ahead of me. I hastened to catch up with him.

‘Did you ever stop to think you might hurt her feelings?’ I asked him angrily.

‘I gave it as much thought as she gave to whether such an allegation might hurt mine.’ He rounded on me suddenly, wagging a long finger. ‘Admit it. You asked that question with never a thought as to whether it would hurt my vanity. How would you feel if I demanded proof that you were a man? Ah!’ His shoulders slumped suddenly and he seemed to lose all energy. ‘Such a thing to waste words on, with all else we must confront. Let it go, Fitz, and I will as well. Let her refer to me as “she” as much as she wishes. I will do my best to ignore it.’

I should have left it alone. I did not. ‘It is only that she thinks that you love me,’ I tried to explain.

He gave me an odd look. ‘I do.’

‘I mean, as a man and a woman love.’

He took a breath. ‘And how is that?’

‘I mean ...’ It half-angered me that he pretended not to understand me. ‘For bedding. For ...’

‘And is that how a man loves a woman,’ he interrupted me suddenly, ‘for bedding?’

‘It’s a part of it!’ I felt suddenly defensive but could not say why.

He arched an eyebrow at me and said calmly, ‘You are confusing plumbing and love again.’

‘It’s more than plumbing!’ I shouted at him. A bird abruptly flew off, cawing. I glanced back at Kettle and Starling, who exchanged puzzled glances.

‘I see,’ he said. He thought a bit as I strode ahead of him on the path. Then, from behind me he called out, ‘Tell me, Fitz, did you love Molly or that which was under her skirts?’

Now it was my turn to be affronted. But I was not going to let him baffle me into silence. ‘I love Molly and all that is a part of her,’ I declared. I hated the heat that rose in my cheeks.

‘There, now you have said it,’ the Fool replied as if I had proven his point for him. ‘And I love you, and all that is a part of you.’ He cocked his head and the next words held a challenge. ‘And do you not return that to me?’

He waited. I desperately wished I had never started this discussion. ‘You know I love you,’ I said at last, grudgingly. ‘After all that has been between us, how can you even ask? But I love you as a man loves another man ...’ Here the Fool leered at me mockingly. Then a sudden glint lit his eyes, and I knew that he was about to do something awful to me.

He leaped to the top of a fallen log. From that height, he gave Starling a triumphant look and cried dramatically, ‘He loves me, he says! And I love him!’ Then with a whoop of wild laughter he leapt down and raced ahead of me on the trail.

I ran my hand back through my hair and then slowly clambered over the log. I heard Kettle laughing and Starling’s angry comments. I walked silently through the forest, wishing I’d had the sense to keep my mouth shut. I was certain that Starling was simmering with fury. Lately she had had almost no words for me. I had accepted that she found my Wit something of an abomination. She was not the first to be dismayed by it; at least she showed some tolerance for me. But now the anger she carried would have a more personal bite to it. One more small loss of what little I had left. A part of me greatly missed the closeness we had shared for a time. I missed the human comfort of having her sleep against my back, or suddenly take my arm when we were walking. I thought I had closed my heart against those needs, but I suddenly missed that simple warmth.

As if that thought had opened a breach in my walls, I suddenly thought of Molly. And Nettle, both in danger because of me. Without warning, my heart was in my throat. I must not think of them, I warned myself, and reminded myself that there was nothing I could do. There was no way I could warn them without betraying them. There was no possible way I could reach them before Regal's henchmen did. All I could do was trust to Burrich's strong right arm, and cling to the hope that Regal did not truly know where they were.

I jumped over a trickling creek and found the Fool waiting for me on the other side. He said nothing as he fell into pace beside me. His merriment seemed to have deserted him.

I reminded myself that I scarcely knew where Molly and Burrich were. Oh, I knew the name of a nearby village, but as long as I kept that to myself, they were safe.

'What you know, I can know.'

'What did you say?' I asked the Fool uneasily. His words had replied so exactly to my thoughts that it sent a chill up my spine.

'I said, what you know, I can know,' he repeated absently.

'Why?'

'Exactly my thought. Why would I wish to know what you know?'

'No. I mean, why did you say that?'

'In truth, Fitz, I've no idea. The words popped into my head and I said them. I often say things I have not well considered.' The last he said almost as an apology.

'As do I,' I agreed. I said no more to him, but it bothered me. He seemed, since the incident at the pillar, to be much more of the Fool I remembered from Buckkeep. I welcomed his sudden growth in confidence and spirits but I also worried that he might have too much faith in events flowing as they should. I also recalled that his sharp tongue was more prone to bare conflicts than resolve them. I myself had felt its edge more than once, but in the context of King Shrewd's court, I had expected it. Here, in such a small company, it seemed to cut more sharply. I wondered if there were any way I could soften his razor humour. I shook my head to myself, then resolutely dredged up Kettle's latest game problem and kept it before my mind even as I clambered over forest debris and sidestepped hanging branches.

As late afternoon wore on, our path led us deeper and deeper into a valley. At one point the ancient trail afforded a view of what lay below us. I glimpsed the green-beaded, trailing branches of willows coming into leaf and the rose-tinged trunks of paper birches presiding over a deeply grassed meadow. Beyond I saw the brown standing husks of last year's cattails deeper in the vale. The lush rankness of the grasses and ferns foretold swampland as surely as the green smell of standing water did. When the ranging wolf came back wet to his knees, I knew I was right.

Before long we came to where an energetic stream had long ago washed out a bridge and devoured the road to either side of it. Now it trickled shining and silver in a gravelly bed, but the fallen trees on either bank attested to its floodtime fury. A chorus of frogs stilled suddenly at our approach. I went rock to rock to get past it with dry feet. We had not gone far before a second stream crossed our path. Given a choice of wet feet or wet boots, I chose the former. The water was icy. The only kindness was that it numbed my feet from the stones in its bed. On the far side I put my boots back on. Our small company had closed its ranks as the trail grew more difficult. Now we continued to march silently together. Blackbirds called and early insects hummed.

'So much life here,' Kettricken said softly. Her words seemed to hang in the still sweet air. I found myself nodding in agreement. So much life around us, both green and animal. It filled my Wit-sense and seemed to hang in the air like a mist. After the barren stones of the mountains and the deserted Skill road, this abundance of life was heady.

Then I saw the dragon.

I halted in my tracks and lifted my arms out in a sudden gesture for both stillness and silence that all seemed to recognize. All of my companions' gazes followed mine. Starling gasped and the hackles on the wolf stood up. We stared at it, as unmoving as it was.

Golden and green, he sprawled under the trees in their dappled shade. He was far enough off the trail that I could only see patches of him through the trees, but those were impressive enough. His immense head, as long as a horse's body, rested deep in the moss. His single eye that I could see was closed. A great crest of feather-scales, rainbow-hued, lay lax about his throat. Similar tufts above each eye looked almost comical, save that there could be nothing comical about a creature so immense and so strange. I saw

a scaled shoulder, and winding between two trees, a length of tail. Old leaves were heaped about it like a sort of nest.

After a long breathless moment, we exchanged glances. Kettricken raised her eyebrows at me, but I deferred to her with a tiny shrug. I had no concept of what dangers it might present, or how to face them. Very slowly and silently I drew my sword. It suddenly looked like a very silly weapon. As well face a bear with a table-knife. I don't know how long our tableau held. It seemed an endless time. My muscles were beginning to ache with the strain of remaining motionless. The jeppas shifted impatiently, but held their places in line as long as Kettricken kept their leader still. At last Kettricken made a small silent motion, and slowly started our party forward again.

When I could no longer see the slumbering beast, I began to breathe a bit easier. Just as quickly, reaction set in. My hand ached from gripping my sword hilt and all my muscles suddenly went rubbery. I wiped my sweaty hair back from my face. I turned to exchange a relieved look with the Fool, only to find him staring beyond me with unbelieving eyes. I turned hastily, and like flocking birds, the others mimed my gesture. Yet again we halted, silently transfixed, to stare at a sleeping dragon.

This one sprawled in the deep shade of evergreen trees. Like the first, she nestled deep in moss and forest debris. But there the resemblance ended. Her long sinuous tail was coiled and wrapped around her like a garland, and her smoothly scaled hide shone a rich, coppery brown. I could see wings folded tight to her narrow body. Her long neck was craned over her back like a sleeping goose's and the shape of her head was bird-like also, even to a hawk-like beak. From the creature's brow spiralled up a shining horn, wickedly sharp at the tip. The four limbs folded beneath her put me more in mind of a hind than a lizard. To call both these creatures dragons seemed a contradiction, yet I had no other word for beings such as these.

Again we stood silent and staring while the jeppas shifted restlessly. Abruptly Kettricken spoke. 'I do not think they are living beings. I think they are clever carvings of stone.'

My Wit-sense told me otherwise. 'They are alive!' I cautioned her in a whisper. I started to quest toward one, but Nighteyes near panicked. I drew my mind-touch back. 'They sleep very deeply, as if still hibernating from the cold weather. But I know they are alive.'

While Kettricken and I were speaking, Kettle went to decide it for herself. I saw Kettricken's eyes widen, and turned to look back at the dragon, fearing it was awakening. Instead I saw Kettle place her withered hand on the creature's still brow. Her hand seemed to tremble as she touched it, but then she smiled, almost sadly, and stroked her hand up the spiralling horn. 'So beautiful,' she mused. 'So cunningly wrought.'

She turned back to us all. 'Mark how last year's vine twined about her tail tip. See how deeply she lies in the fallen leaves of a score of years. Or perhaps a score of scores. Yet each tiny scale still gleams, so perfectly fashioned is she!'

Starling and Kettricken started forward with exclamations of wonder and delight, and were soon crouched by the sculpture, calling each other's attention to crafted detail after detail. The individual scales of each wing, the fluidly graceful looping of the tail coils and every other marvel of the artist's design were admired. Yet while they pointed and touched so avidly, the wolf and I held back. Hackles stood up all along Nighteyes' back. He did not growl; instead he gave a whine so high it was almost like a whistle. After a moment, I realized the Fool had not joined the others. I turned to find him regarding it from afar, as a miser might look on a pile of gold larger even than his dreams. There was the same sort of wideness to his eyes. Even his pale cheeks seemed to hold a rosy flush.

'Fitz, come and see! It is only cold stone, carved so well as to appear alive. And look! There is another, with the antlers of a stag and the face of a man!' Kettricken lifted a hand to point and I glimpsed yet another figure sprawled sleeping on the forest floor. They all departed the first effigy to regard this new one, exclaiming anew over the beauty and details of it.

I moved myself forward on leaden feet, the wolf pressed tightly to my side. When I stood next to the horned one, I could see for myself the fuzzy sac of spider webs affixed in the hollow of one hooped foot. The creature's ribs did not move with the pumping of any lungs, nor did I feel any body warmth at all. I finally forced myself to set a hand to the cold, carved stone. 'It's a statue,' I said aloud, as if to force myself to believe what my Wit-sense denied. I looked around me, past the stag-man that Starling still admired, to where Kettle and Kettricken stood smiling by yet another sculpture. Its boar-like body sprawled on its side, and the tusks that protruded from its snout were as long as I was tall. In all ways it resembled

the forest pig that Nighteyes had killed, save for its immense size and the wings tucked close to its side.

‘I spy at least a dozen of these things,’ the Fool announced. ‘And, behind those trees, I found another carved column such as we have seen before.’ He set a curious hand to the skin of the sculpture, then almost winced away at the cold contact.

‘I cannot believe they are lifeless stone,’ I told him.

‘I, too, have never seen such realistic detail in a carving,’ he agreed.

I did not try to tell him he had misunderstood me. Instead, I stood pondering a thing. Here, I sensed life, but there was only cold stone under my hand. It had been the opposite with Forged ones; savage life obviously motivated their bodies, yet my Wit-sense regarded them as but cold stone. I groped for some sort of connection but found only the odd comparison.

I glanced about me but found my companions scattered throughout the forest, moving from sculpture to sculpture, and calling to one another in delight as they discovered new ones under clambering ivy or engulfed in fallen leaves. I drifted after them slowly. It seemed to me that this might be the destination marked on the map. It almost certainly was, if the old mapmaker had had his scale correct. And yet, why? What was important about these statues? The significance of the city I had seen at once; it might have been the original habitation of the Elderlings. But this?

I hastened after Kettricken. I found her by a winged bull. He slept, legs folded under him, powerful shoulders bunched, heavy muzzle dropped to his knees. It was a perfect replica of a bull in every way, from its wide sweep of horns to its tufted tail. His cloven hooves were buried beneath the forest loam, but I did not doubt they were there. She had stretched her arms wide to span the sweep of his horns. Like all the others, he had wings, folded in repose on his wide black back.

‘May I see the map?’ I asked her, and she started out of her reverie.

‘I’ve already checked it,’ she told me quietly. ‘I am convinced this is the marked area. We passed the remains of two stone bridges. That corresponds to what is shown on the map. And the marking on the column the Fool found corresponds to one you copied in the city for this destination. I think we are on what were once the shores of a lake. That is how I’ve been reading the map, anyway.’

‘The shores of a lake.’ I nodded to myself as I considered what Verity’s map had shown me. ‘Perhaps. Perhaps it silted in and became swamp. But

then, what do all these statues signify?’

She made a vague gesture around at the forest. ‘A garden or park of some kind, perhaps?’

I looked around us and shook my head. ‘Not like any garden I’ve ever seen. The statues seem random. Should not a garden possess unity and theme? At least, so Patience taught me. Here I see only sprawled statues, with no sign of paths or beds or ... Kettricken? Are all the statues of sleeping creatures?’

She frowned to herself for a moment. ‘I believe so. And I think that all are winged.’

‘Perhaps it is a graveyard,’ I ventured. ‘Perhaps there are tombs beneath these creatures. Perhaps this is some strange heraldry, marking the burial places for different families.’

Kettricken looked about us, considering. ‘Perhaps it is so. But why would that be marked on the map?’

‘Why would a garden?’ I countered.

We spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the area. We found a great many more animals. There were all kinds and a variety of styles, but all were winged and sleeping. And they had been here a very long time. A closer examination showed me that these great trees had grown around the statues, the statues had not been placed around them. Some were almost captured by the encroaching moss and leaf mould. Of one, little remained to be seen save a great toothed snout projecting from a boggy bit of ground. The bared teeth shone silver and the tips were sharp.

‘Yet I found not a single one with a chip or a crack. Every one looks as perfect as the day it was created. Nor can I decide how the colours were put to the stone. It does not feel like paint or stain, nor does it appear weathered by the years.’

I was expounding my thoughts slowly to the others as we sat about our campfire that evening. I was trying to work Kettricken’s comb through my wet hair. In the late afternoon, I had slipped away from the others, to wash thoroughly for the first time since we had left Jhaampe. I had also attempted to wash out some of my clothes. When I returned to camp, I had found that all of the others had had much the same ideas. Kettle was moodily draping wet laundry on a dragon to dry. Kettricken’s cheeks were pinker than usual and she had rebraided her wet hair into a tight queue. Starling seemed to have forgotten her earlier anger at me. Indeed, she seemed to have forgotten

entirely about the rest of us. She stared at the flames of the campfire, a musing look on her face, and I could almost see the tumbling words and notes as she fit them together. I wondered what it was like, if it was like solving the game puzzles that Kettricken set for me. It seemed odd to watch her face, knowing a song was unfolding in her mind.

Nighteyes came to lean his head against my knee. *I do not like denning in the midst of these living stones*, he confided to me.

‘It does seem as if at any moment they might awaken,’ I observed.

Kettle had settled with a sigh to the earth beside me. She shook her old head slowly. ‘I do not think so,’ she said quietly. She almost sounded as if she grieved.

‘Well, as we cannot fathom their mystery, and what remains of the road has ended here, we shall leave them tomorrow and resume our journey,’ Kettricken announced.

‘What will you do,’ the Fool asked quietly, ‘if Verity is not at the last map destination?’

‘I do not know,’ Kettricken confided to us quietly. ‘Nor shall I worry about it until it happens. I still have an action left to take; until I have exhausted it, I shall not despair.’

It struck me then that she spoke as if considering a game, with one final move left that might yet lead to victory. Then I decided that I had spent too much time focusing on Kettle’s game problems. I yanked a last snarl from my hair and pulled it back into a tail.

Come hunt with me before the last light is gone, the wolf suggested.

‘I think I shall hunt with Nighteyes tonight,’ I announced as I stood and stretched. I raised one eyebrow at the Fool, but he seemed lost in thought and made no response. As I stepped away from the fire, Kettricken asked me, ‘Are you safe, alone?’

‘We are far from the Skill road. This has been the most peaceful day I’ve known in some time. In some ways.’

‘We may be far from the Skill road, but we are still in the heart of a land once occupied by Skill-users. They have left their touch everywhere. You cannot say, while you walk these hills, that you are safe. You should not go alone.’

Nighteyes whined low in his throat, anxious to be gone. I longed to go hunt with him, to stalk and chase, to move through the night with no human thoughts. But I would not discount Kettle’s warning.

‘I’ll go with him,’ Starling offered suddenly. She rose, dusting her hands on her hips. If anyone besides myself thought it was strange, no one made sign of it. I expected at least a mocking farewell from the Fool, but he continued to gaze off into the darkness. I hoped he was not getting sick again.

Do you mind if she goes with us? I asked Nighteyes.

In reply he gave a small sigh of resignation, and trotted away from the fire. I followed him more slowly and Starling followed me.

‘Shouldn’t we catch up with him?’ she asked me several moments later. The forest and the deepening dusk were closing in around us. Nighteyes was nowhere to be seen, but then, I did not need to see him.

I spoke, not in a whisper, but very low. ‘When we hunt, we move independently of one another. When one of us starts up some game, the other comes swiftly, either to intercept, or to join in the chase.’

My eyes had adjusted to the dark. Our quest led us away from the statues, into a forest night innocent of man’s workings. Spring smells were strong, and the songs of frogs and insects were all around us. I soon struck a game trail and began to move along it. Starling came behind me, not silently, but not awkwardly either. When one moves through the forest by day or by night, one can either move with it or against it. Some people know how to do it instinctively; others never learn. Starling moved with the forest, ducking under hanging branches and sidestepping others as we wove our way through the night. She did not try to force her way through the thickets we encountered, but turned her body to avoid being caught on the twiggy branches.

You are so aware of her, you will not see a rabbit if you step on it! Nighteyes chided me.

At that moment, a hare started from a bush right beside my path. I sprang after it, going doubled over to follow it on the game trail. It was far faster than me, but I knew it would most likely circle. I also knew that Nighteyes was moving swiftly to intercept it. I heard Starling hurrying after me but had no time to think of her as I kept the hare in sight as it dodged around trees and under snags. Twice I nearly had it, and twice it doubled away from me. But the second time it doubled, it raced straight into the jaws of the wolf. He sprang, pinned it to the earth with his front paws, then seized its small skull in his jaws. As he stood, he gave it a sharp shake, snapping its neck.

I was opening its belly and spilling its entrails out for the wolf when Starling caught up with us. Nighteyes snapped the guts up with relish. *Let's find another*, he suggested, and moved swiftly off into the night.

'He always gives up the meat to you like that?' Starling asked me.

'He doesn't give it up. He lets me carry it. He knows that now is the best hunting, and so he hopes to kill again swiftly. If not, he knows I will keep meat safe for him, and that we will share later.' I secured the dead hare to my belt. I started off through the night, the warm body flopping lightly against my thigh as I walked.

'Oh.' Starling followed. A short time later, as if in answer to something I'd said, she observed, 'I do not find your Wit-bond with the wolf offensive.'

'Neither do I,' I replied quietly. Something in her choice of words nettled me. I continued to prowl along the trail, eyes and ears alert. I could hear the soft pad, pad, pad of Nighteyes' feet off to my left and ahead of me. I hoped he would scare game toward me.

A short time later, Starling added, 'And I will stop calling the Fool "she". Whatever I may suspect.'

'That's good,' I told her noncommittally. I did not slow my pace.

I truly doubt you will be much good as hunter this night.

This is not of my choosing.

I know.

'Do you want me to apologize as well?' Starling asked in a low strained voice.

'I ... uh,' I stammered, and fell silent, unsure of what this was all about.

'Very well then,' she said in an icily determined voice. 'I apologize, Lord FitzChivalry.'

I rounded on her. 'Why are you doing this?' I demanded. I spoke in a normal voice. I could sense Nighteyes. He was already topping the hill, hunting alone now.

'My lady queen bid me stop spreading discord within the company. She said that Lord FitzChivalry carried many burdens I could not know of, and did not deserve to bear also my disapproval,' she informed me carefully.

I wondered when all this had come to pass, but dared not ask it. 'None of this is necessary,' I said quietly. I felt oddly shamed, like a spoiled child who had sulked until the other children gave in. I took a deep breath, determined simply to speak honestly and see what came of it. 'I do not know what made you withdraw your friendship, save that I disclosed my Wit to

you. Nor do I understand your suspicions of the Fool, or why they seem to anger you. I hate this awkwardness between us. I wish we could be friends, as we were before.'

'You do not despise me, then? For giving my witness that you claimed Molly's child as your get?'

I groped inside me after the lost feelings. It had been long since I had even thought about it. 'Chade already knew of them,' I said quietly. 'He would have found a way, even if you had not existed. He is very ... resourceful. And I have come to understand that you do not live by the same rules that I do.'

'I used to,' she said softly. 'A long time ago. Before the keep was sacked and I was left for dead. After that, it was hard to believe in the rules. Everything was taken from me. All that was good and beautiful and truthful was laid waste by evil and lust and greed. No. By something even baser than lust and greed, some drive I could not even understand. Even while the Raiders were raping me, they seemed to take no pleasure in it. At least, not the kind of pleasure ... They mocked my pain and struggling. Those who watched were laughing as they waited.' She was looking past me into the darkness of the past. I believe she spoke as much to herself as me, groping to understand something that defied meaning. 'It was as if they were driven, but not by any lust or greed that could be sated. It was a thing they could do to me, so they did it. I had always believed, perhaps childishly, that if you followed the rules, you would be protected, that things like that would not happen to you. Afterwards, I felt ... tricked. Foolish. Gullible, that I had thought ideals could protect me. Honour and courtesy and justice ... they are not real, Fitz. We all pretend to them, and hold them to us like shields. But they guard only against folk who carry the same shields. Against those who have discarded them, they are no shields at all, but only additional weapons to use against their victims.'

I felt dizzied for an instant. I had never heard a woman speak of something like that so dispassionately. Mostly it was not spoken of at all. The rapes that occurred during a raid, the pregnancies that might follow, even the children that Six Duchies women bore to the Red Ship Raiders were seldom spoken of as such. I suddenly realized we had been standing still a long time. The chill of the spring night was reaching me. 'Let's go back to the camp,' I suggested abruptly.

‘No,’ she said flatly. ‘Not yet. I fear I may cry, and if I do, I’d rather do it in the dark.’

It was getting close to full dark. But I led her back to a wider game trail, and we found a log to sit down on. Around us, the frogs and insects filled the night with mating songs.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked her after we had sat some time in the silence.

‘No. I am not,’ she said shortly. ‘I need to make you understand. I did not sell your child cheaply, Fitz. I did not betray you casually. At first, I did not even think of it that way. Who would not want her daughter to become a princess, and eventually a queen? Who would not want lovely clothes and a fine home for his child? I did not think that you or your woman would see it as a misfortune befalling her.’

‘Molly is my wife,’ I said quietly, but I truly believe she did not hear me.

‘Then, even after I knew it would not please you, I did it anyway. Knowing it would buy me a place here, at your side, witnessing ... whatever it is you are going to do. Seeing strange sights no minstrel has ever sung of before, like those statues today. Because it was my only chance at a future. I must have a song, I must witness something that will assure me forever of a place of honour among minstrels. Something that will guarantee me my soup and wine when I am too old to travel from keep to keep.’

‘Couldn’t you have settled for a man to share your life and children?’ I asked quietly. ‘It seems to me you have no problem catching a man’s eye. Surely there must be one that ...’

‘No man wants a barren woman to wed,’ she said. Her voice went flat, losing its music. ‘At the fall of Dimity Keep, Fitz, they left me for dead. And I lay there among the dead, sure that I would die soon, for I could not imagine continuing to live. Around me buildings were burning and injured folk were screaming and I could smell flesh scorching ...’ She stopped speaking. When she resumed, her voice was a bit more even. ‘But I didn’t die. My body was stronger than my will. On the second day, I dragged myself to water. Some other survivors found me. I lived, and was better off than many. Until two months later. By then I was sure that what had been done to me was worse than killing me. I knew I carried a child fathered by one of those creatures.’

‘So I went to a healer, who gave me herbs that did not work. I went to her again, and she warned me, saying if they had not worked, then I had better leave it to happen. But I went to another healer, who gave me a different potion. It ... made me bleed. I shook the child loose from me, but the bleeding did not stop. I went back to the healers, both of them, but neither could help me. They said it would stop on its own, in time. But the one told me that it was likely I would never have other children.’ Her voice tightened, then thickened. ‘I know you think it slatternly, the way I am with men. But once you have been forced, it is ... different. Ever after. I say to myself, well, I know that it can happen to me at any time. So this way, at least I decide with whom and when. There will never be children for me, and hence there will never be a permanent man. So why should not I take my pick of what I can have? You made me question that for a time, you know. Until Moonseye. Moonseye proved me right again. And from Moonseye I came to Jhaampe, knowing that I was free to do whatever I must do to assure my own survival. For there will be no man and no children to look after me when I am old.’ Her voice went brittle and uneven as she said, ‘Sometimes I think it were better had they Forged me ...’

‘No. Never say that. Never.’ I feared to touch her, but she turned suddenly and burrowed her face against me. I put an arm around her and found her trembling. I felt compelled to confess my stupidity. ‘I did not understand. When you said Burl’s soldiers had raped some of the women ... I did not know you had suffered that.’

‘Oh.’ Her voice was very small. ‘I had thought you deemed it unimportant. I have heard it said in Farrow that rape bothers only virgins and wives. I thought perhaps you felt that to one such as I, it was no more than my due.’

‘Starling!’ I felt an irrational flash of anger that she could have believed me so heartless. Then I thought back. I had seen the bruises on her face. Why had not I guessed? I had never even spoken to her of how Burl had broken her fingers. I had assumed she had known how that had sickened me, that she knew it was Burl’s threat of greater damage to her that had kept me leashed. I had thought that she withdrew friendship from me because of my wolf. What had she believed of my distance?

‘I have brought much pain into your life,’ I confessed. ‘Do not think I do not know the value of a minstrel’s hands. Or that I discount the violation

of your body. If you wish to speak of it, I am ready to listen. Sometimes, talking helps.'

'Sometimes it does not,' she countered. Her grip on me suddenly tightened. 'The day you stood before us all, and spoke in detail of what Regal had done to you. I bled for you that day. It did not undo anything that was done to you. No. I do not want to talk about it, or think about it.'

I lifted her hand and softly kissed the fingers that had been broken on my account. 'I do not confuse what was done to you with who you are,' I offered. 'When I look at you, I see Starling Birdsong the minstrel.'

She nodded her face against me, and I knew it was as I surmised. She and I shared that fear. We would not live as victims.

I said no more than that, but only sat there. It came to me again that even if we found Verity, even if by some miracle his return would shift the tides of war and make us victors, for some the victory would come far too late. Mine had been a long and weary road, but I still dared to believe that at the end of it there might be a life of my own choosing. Starling had not even that. No matter how far inland she might flee, she would never escape the war. I held her closer and felt her pain bleed over into me. After a time, her trembling stilled.

'It's full dark,' I said at last. 'We had best go back to the camp.'

She sighed, but she straightened up. She took my hand. I started to lead her back to camp, but she tugged back on my hand. 'Be with me,' she said simply. 'Just for here and just for now. With gentleness and friendship. To take the ... other away. Give me that much of yourself.'

I wanted her. I wanted her with a desperation that had nothing to do with love, and even, I believe, little to do with lust. She was warm and alive and it would have been sweet and simple human comfort. If I could have been with her, and somehow arisen from it unchanged in how I thought of myself and what I felt for Molly, I would have done so. But what I felt for Molly was not something that was only for when we were together. I had given Molly that claim to me; I could not rescind it simply because we were apart for a time. I did not think there were words that could make Starling understand that in choosing Molly I was not rejecting her. So instead I said, 'Nighteyes comes. He has a rabbit.'

Starling stepped close to me. She ran a hand up my chest to the side of my neck. Her fingers traced the line of my jaw and caressed my mouth. 'Send him away,' she said quietly.

‘I could not send him far enough that he would not know everything of what we shared,’ I told her truthfully.

Her hand on my face was suddenly still. ‘Everything?’ she asked. Her voice was full of dismay.

Everything. He came and sat down beside us. Another rabbit dangled in his jaws.

‘We are Wit-bonded. We share everything.’

She took her hand from my face and stood clear of me. She stared down at the dark shape of the wolf. ‘Then all I just told you ...’

‘He understands it in his own way. Not as another human would, but ...’

‘How did Molly feel about that?’ she abruptly demanded.

I took a sharp breath. I had not expected our conversation to take this turn. ‘She never knew,’ I told her. Nighteyes started back to the camp. I followed him more slowly. Behind me came Starling.

‘And when she does know?’ Starling pressed. ‘She will just accept this ... sharing?’

‘Probably not,’ I muttered unwillingly. Why did Starling always make me think of things I had avoided considering?

‘What if she forces you to choose between her and the wolf?’

I halted in my tracks for an instant. Then I started walking again, a bit faster. The question hung around me, but I refused to think about it. It could not be, it could never come to that. Yet a voice whispered inside me, ‘If you tell Molly the truth, it will come to that. It must.’

‘You are going to tell her, aren’t you?’ Starling relentlessly asked me the one question I was hiding from.

‘I don’t know,’ I said grimly.

‘Oh,’ she said. Then after a time, she added, ‘When a man says that, it usually means, “No, I won’t, but from time to time, I’ll toy with the idea, so I can pretend I eventually intend to do it.”’

‘Would you please shut up?’ There was no strength in my words.

Starling followed me silently. After a time, she observed, ‘I don’t know who to pity. You, or her.’

‘Both of us, perhaps,’ I suggested stonily. I wanted no more words about it.

The Fool was on watch when we got back to camp. Kettle and Kettricken were asleep. ‘Good hunting?’ he asked in a comradely way as we

approached.

I shrugged. Nighteyes was already gnawing his way through the rabbit he had carried. He sprawled contentedly by the Fool's feet. 'Good enough.' I held up the hare. The Fool took it from me and casually hung it from the tent pole.

'Breakfast,' he told me calmly. His eyes darted to Starling's face, but if he could tell she had been weeping, he made no jest of it. I don't know what he read in my face, for he made no comment on it. She followed me into the tent. I pulled off my boots and sank gratefully into my bedding. When I felt her settle herself against my back a few moments later, I was not very surprised. I decided it meant she had forgiven me. It did not make it easy to fall asleep.

But eventually I did. I had set up my walls, but somehow I managed a dream of my very own. I dreamed that I sat by Molly's bed and watched over her as she and Nettle slept. The wolf was at my feet, while in the chimney corner the Fool sat on a stool and nodded to himself, well pleased. Kettle's gamecloth was spread on the table, but instead of stones, it had tiny statues of different dragons in white and black. The red stones were ships, and it was my move. I had the piece in my hand that could win the game, but I only wished to watch Molly sleep. It was almost a peaceful dream.

THIRTY-ONE

Elfbark

There are a number of old 'White Prophecies' that relate to the betrayal of the Catalyst. White Colum says of this event, 'By his love is he betrayed, and his love betrayed also.' A lesser-known scribe and prophet, Gant the White, goes into more detail. 'The heart of the Catalyst is bared to a trusted one. All confidence is given, and all confidence betrayed. The child of the Catalyst is given into his enemies' hands by one whose love and loyalty are above question.' The other prophecies are more oblique, but in each case the inference is that the Catalyst is betrayed by one who has his implicit trust.

Early the next morning, as we ate toasted bits of rabbit meat, Kettricken and I consulted her map again. We scarcely needed it any more, we both knew it so well. But it was a thing to set between us and point at as we discussed things. Kettricken traced a fading line on the battered scroll. 'We shall have to return to the column in the stone circle, and then follow the Skill road for some little way beyond it. Right up to our final destination, I believe.'

'I have no great wish to walk upon that road again,' I told her honestly. 'Even walking beside it strains me. But I suppose there is no help for it.'

'None that I can see.'

She was too preoccupied to offer much sympathy. I looked at the woman. The once gleaming blonde hair was a short scruffy braid. Cold and wind had weathered her face, chapping her lips and etching fine lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, to say nothing of the deeper worry lines in her brow and between her eyes. Her clothing was travel-stained and worn. The Queen of the Six Duchies could not even have passed muster as a chambermaid in Tradeford. I suddenly wanted to reach out to her. I could think of no way to do so. So I simply said, 'We will get there, and we will find Verity.'

She lifted her eyes to meet mine. She tried to put faith into her gaze and voice as she said, 'Yes, we will.' I heard only courage.

We had torn down and moved our camp so often, it no longer took any thought. We moved as a unit, almost as a single creature. Like a coterie, I

thought to myself.

Like a pack, Nighteyes corrected me. He came to push his head against my hand. I paused and scratched his ears and throat thoroughly. He closed his eyes and laid back his ears in pleasure. *If your mate makes you send me away, I shall miss this greatly.*

I won't let that happen.

You believe she will make you choose.

I refuse to think about it just now.

Ah! He fell over on his side then rolled to his back so I could scratch his belly. He bared his teeth in a wolfish smile. *You live in the now and refuse to think of what may come. But I, I find I can think of little else save what may come to be. These times have been good for me, my brother. Living with others, hunting together, sharing meat. But the howling bitch had it aright last night. Cubs are needed to make a pack. And your cub...*

I cannot think of that just now. I must think only of what I must do today to survive, and all I must do before I can hope to go home.

'Fitz? Are you all right?'

It was Starling, coming to take me by the elbow and give me a small shake. I looked at her, wakened from my bemusement. The howling bitch. I tried not to grin. 'I'm fine. I was with Nighteyes.'

'Oh.' She glanced down at the wolf, and I saw her struggle again to grasp just what we shared. Then she shrugged it off. 'Ready to leave?'

'If everyone else is.'

'They seem to be.'

She went to help Kettricken load the final jeppa. I glanced about for the Fool, and saw him sitting silently on top of his pack. His hand rested lightly upon one of the stone dragons and he had a faraway look on his face. I walked up softly behind him. 'Are you all right?' I asked quietly.

He did not jump. He never startled. He just turned his pale gaze up to meet mine. The look on his face was a lost yearning with none of his usual sharp wit to it. 'Fitz. Have you ever felt you recalled something, but when you groped after it, there was nothing there?'

'Sometimes,' I said. 'I think it happens to everyone.'

'No. This is different,' he insisted quietly. 'Since I stood on that stone the day before yesterday, and suddenly glimpsed the old world that was here ... I keep having odd half-memories. Like him.' He stroked the dragon's head gently, a lover's caress to the wedge-shaped reptilian head. 'I can

almost remember knowing him.’ He suddenly fixed me with a pleading look. ‘What did you see, back then?’

I gave a small shrug. ‘It was like a market plaza, with shops around it, and folk plying their trades. A busy day.’

‘Did you see me?’ he asked very quietly.

‘I’m not sure.’ I suddenly felt very uneasy, speaking about it. ‘Where you were, there was someone else. She was like you, in a way. No colour to her, and behaving, I think, as a jester. You spoke of her crown, carved like rooster heads and tails.’

‘Did I? Fitz, I can recall little of what I said immediately afterward. I only recall the feeling, and how swiftly it faded. Briefly, I was connected to everything. Part of it all. It was wonderful, like feeling a surge of love or glimpsing something perfectly beautiful or ...’ He struggled for words.

‘The Skill is like that,’ I told him softly. ‘What you felt is the pull of it. It is what a Skill-user must constantly resist, lest he be swept away on it.’

‘So that was Skilling,’ he observed to himself.

‘When you first came out of it, you were ecstatic. You said something about somebody’s dragon that you were to introduce. It made small sense. Let me think. Realder’s dragon. And he had promised to fly you.’

‘Ah. My dream last night. Realder. That was your name.’ He caressed the statue’s head as he spoke. When he did so, the oddest thing happened. My Wit-sense of the statue surged and Nighteyes came springing to my side, every hackle on his back standing erect. I know the hair on the back of my neck stood up as well, and I recoiled, expecting the statue suddenly to stir to life. The Fool shot us a puzzled glance. ‘What is it?’

‘The statues seem alive to us. To both Nighteyes and me. And when you spoke that name, it almost seemed to stir.’

‘Realder,’ the Fool repeated experimentally. I caught my breath as he said it, but felt no response. He glanced at me and I shook my head. ‘Just stone, Fitz. Cold and beautiful stone. I think perhaps your nerves are fraying.’ He took my arm companionably and we walked away from the statues and back to the faded trail. The others were already out of sight, save for Kettle. She stood leaning on her stick and glaring back at us. Instinctively I quickened my pace. When we got to the place where she waited, she took my other arm, and then imperiously waved at the Fool to precede us. We followed him, but at a slower pace. When he was a

substantial distance ahead of us, she squeezed my arm in a grip of steel and demanded, 'Well?'

For an instant I looked at her blankly. Then, 'I haven't worked it out yet,' I apologized to her.

'That much is plain,' she told me severely. She sucked on her teeth for a moment, frowned at me, nearly spoke, and then shook her head briskly at herself. She did not let go of my arm.

For much of the rest of the day, as I walked silently by her side, I pondered the game puzzle.

I do not think there is anything quite so tedious as retracing one's steps when one is desperate to get somewhere. Now that we were no longer following an ancient road near invisible in overgrowth, we followed our own trampled way back through the marshy forest and up into the hills, and made better speed leaving than we had in getting there. With the shifting of the seasons, the daylight was lingering longer, and Kettricken pushed our march to the edge of dusk. Thus it was that we found ourselves only one hill away from the plaza of black stone when we made our camp that night. I think it was for my sake that Kettricken chose to camp on the ancient road for another night. I had no desire to sleep any closer to that crossroads than I must.

Shall we hunt? Nighteyes demanded as soon as our shelter was set.

'I'm going hunting,' I announced to the others. Kettle glanced up disapprovingly.

'Stay well away from the Skill road,' she warned me.

The Fool surprised me by coming to his feet. 'I shall go with them. If the wolf doesn't mind.'

The Scentless One is welcome.

'You are welcome to go with us. But are you sure you feel that strong?'

'If I get tired, I can come back,' the Fool pointed out.

As we strode off into the deepening dusk, Kettricken was poring over her map and Kettle was on watch. 'Don't be long, or I shall come and find you,' she warned me as I left. 'And stay away from the Skill road,' she repeated.

Somewhere above the trees, a full moon sailed. Light from her crept and snaked down in silvery spills through the newly leafed branches to illuminate our way. For a time we simply travelled together through the pleasantly open woods. The wolf's senses supplemented mine. The night

was alive with the smells of growing things and the calls of tiny frogs and night insects. The night air had a crisper bite to it than the day did. We found a game trail and followed it. The Fool kept pace with us, saying not a word. I breathed in deeply and then sighed it out. Despite everything else, I heard myself say, *This is good.*

Yes. It is. I shall miss it.

I knew he was thinking of what Starling had said the night before. *Let us not think of tomorrows that may never come. Let us just hunt,* I suggested, and we did. The Fool and I kept to the trail and the wolf veered off through the woods, to spook game back toward us. We moved with the forest, sliding near noiselessly through the night, every sense alert. I came across a porcupine trundling along through the night, but I did not feel like clubbing it to death, let alone gingerly skinning it before we could eat. I wanted simple meat tonight. With great difficulty, I persuaded Nighteyes to seek other prey with me. *If we do not find anything else, we can always come back for it. They are not exactly swift of foot,* I pointed out to him.

He agreed grudgingly, and we quartered out again. On an open hillside still warm from the sun, Nighteyes spotted the flick of an ear and the glint of a bright eye. In two bounds he was on top of the rabbit. His spring started another rabbit that fled toward the top of the hill. I gave chase, but the Fool called out he was going back now. Halfway up the hill, I knew I would not catch him. I was tired from the long day of walking and the rabbit was in fear of its life. By the time I reached the top of the hill, it was nowhere in sight. I halted, panting. The night wind moved lightly through the trees. On it I caught a scent, at once strange and oddly familiar. I could not identify it, but all the connotations to it were unpleasant. While I stood, nostrils flared, trying to place it, Nighteyes raced soundlessly up to me. *Be small!* he ordered me.

I didn't pause to think, but obeyed, crouching where I was and peering about for danger.

No! Be small in your mind.

This time I instantly grasped what he meant, and threw my Skill walls up in a panic. His keener nose had instantly associated the faint scent on the air with the scent of Burl's clothing in his saddlebags. I crouched as small as I could make myself and set and reset my boundaries about my mind, even as I pleaded with reality that it was next to impossible that he be here.

Fear can be a powerful spur to the mind. I suddenly grasped what should always have been obvious. We were not that far from the crossroads plaza and the black guidepost there. The symbols carved on the guidepost columns did not merely indicate where the adjacent roads led; they also indicated where the signposts could transport one. Anywhere there was a column, one could be transported to the next column. From the ancient city to any marked location was no more than a step away. All three of them could be but steps away from me right now.

No. There is only the one, and he is not even close to us. Use your nose, if not your brain, Nighteyes scathingly reassured me. *Shall I kill him for you?* he offered casually.

Please. But be careful of yourself.

Nighteyes snorted softly in disdain. *He is fatter far than that wild pig I killed. He puffs and sweats just to walk down the trail. Lie still, little brother, while I get rid of him.* Silent as death, the wolf moved off through the forest.

I crouched an eternity, waiting to hear something, a snarl, a scream, the noises of someone running through the brush. There was nothing. I flared my nostrils but could catch no trace of the elusive scent. Suddenly I could no longer stand to crouch and wait. I surged to my feet and followed the wolf, as silently lethal as he. Before, when we had been hunting, I had not paid much attention to where we had gone. Now I perceived that we had approached closer to the Skill road than I had suspected; that our campsite was not that far from it at all.

Like a strain of distant music, I was suddenly aware of their Skilling. I halted where I stood. I willed my mind to stillness, and let their Skill brush my senses while I made no response.

I'm close. Burl, breathless with both excitement and fear. I sensed him poised and waiting. *I feel him, he draws near. A pause. Oh, I like not this place. I like it not at all.*

Be calm. A touch is all it will take. Touch him as I showed you, and his walls will come down. Will spoke, master to apprentice.

And if he has a knife?

He won't have time to use it. Believe me. No man's walls can stand before that touch, I promise you. All you need do is touch him. I will come through you and do the rest.

Why me? Why not you or Carrod?

Would you really rather have Carrod's task? Besides. You are the one who had the Bastard in your power and was stupid enough to try to hold him in a cage. Go and complete the task you should have finished long ago. Or would you care to feel our king's wrath again?

I felt Burl shiver. And I trembled, too, for I felt him. Regal. The thoughts were Will's, but somehow, somewhere, Regal heard them, too. I wondered if Burl knew as plainly as I did that no matter whether he killed the Bastard or not, Regal would enjoy giving him pain again. That the memory of torturing him was so pleasurable a one that Regal could no longer think of him at all without being reminded of how completely it had satiated him. Briefly.

I was glad I was not Burl.

There! That was the Bastard! Find him!

I should have died then, by all rights. Will had found me, had found my careless thought floating in the air. My brief sympathy for Burl was all it had taken. He bayed on my trail like a hound. *I have him!*

There was a moment of poised tension. My heart hammered against my ribs as I sent the Wit questing out all around me. Nothing bigger than a mouse was close by. I found Nighteyes down the hill from me, moving with swift stealth. Yet Burl had said he drew near to me. Had he found a way to shield himself from my Wit-sense? The thought made my knees weak.

Somewhere far down the hill, I heard the crash of a body through brush and a man's shout. The wolf was on him, I thought.

No, brother, not I.

I could scarcely understand the wolf's thought. I reeled with a Skill-impact, yet could feel no source for it. My senses contradicted each other, as if I plunged into water and felt it as sand. With no clear idea of what I did, I began a shambling run down the hill.

This is not him! Will, in great anger and agitation. What is this? Who is this?

A pause of consternation. *It's that freak thing, the Fool!* Then vast anger. *Where is the Bastard? Burl, you clumsy moron! You have betrayed us all to him.*

But it was not I, but Nighteyes who charged down on Burl. Even at my distance, I could hear his snarls. In the dark woods below, a wolf launched himself at Burl, and the Skill-shriek he sent up at the sight of those ravaging jaws coming toward his face was such that Will was distracted. In that

instant, I slammed up my walls, and raced to join my wolf in the physical attack on Burl.

I was doomed to disappointment. They were much farther away than I had thought them. I never even got a glimpse of Burl, save through the wolf's eyes. Fat and clumsy as the wolf might think Burl, he proved an excellent runner when the wolf was at his heels. Even so, Nighteyes would have pulled him down if he had had any farther to go than he did. At his first spring, Nighteyes got only his cloak as Burl spun. His second attack tore legging and flesh, but Burl fled as if uninjured. Nighteyes saw him reach the edge of the black flagged plaza and race up to the column, one hand outstretched pleadingly. His palm slapped the shining stone, and Burl suddenly vanished into the column. The wolf braced his legs to halt, his feet skittering on the slick stone. He cowered back from the standing stone as if Burl had leaped into a blazing bonfire. He halted a handspan from it, snarling furiously, not only in anger but in savage fear. All this I knew, although I was a hillside away, running and stumbling in the dark.

Suddenly there was a wave of Skill. It made no physical manifestation, yet the impact flung me to the ground and drove the breath out of me. It left me dazed, ears ringing, helplessly open to anyone who might wish to possess me. I lay there, sick and stunned. Perhaps that was what saved me, that at that moment I felt absolutely no trace of Skill within myself.

But I heard the others. There was no sense to their Skilling, only awestruck fear. Then they faded in the distance, as if the Skill river itself washed them away. I almost went reaching after them, in my amazement at what I sensed. They seemed to have been shattered to fragments. Their dwindling bewilderment washed against me. I closed my eyes.

Then I heard Kettle frantically calling my name. Panic stained her voice.

Nighteyes!

I'm already on my way. Catch up! the wolf told me grimly. I did as I was told.

I was scratched, dirty, and one trouser leg was torn at the knee when I reached the yurt. Kettle was standing outside it, waiting for me. The fire had been built up as a beacon. At the sight of her the pounding of my heart lessened somewhat. I had half-believed that they were being attacked. 'What's wrong?' I demanded as I charged up to her.

‘The Fool,’ she said, and added, ‘We heard an outcry and raced outside. Then I heard the wolf snarling. We went toward the sound and found the Fool.’ She shook her head. ‘I am not sure what has happened to him.’

I started to push past her into the tent, but she caught me by the arm. She was surprisingly strong for an old woman. She halted me to face her. ‘You were attacked?’ she demanded.

‘In a way.’ Briefly I told her what had happened. Her eyes widened as I spoke of that Skill-wave.

When I was finished, she nodded to herself, grimly confirming her suspicions. ‘They reached for you and seized him instead. He has not the faintest idea of how to protect himself. For all I know, they have him still.’

‘What? How?’ I asked numbly.

‘Back there at the plaza. You two were Skill-linked, however briefly, by the strength of the stone and the strength of who you are. It leaves a ... sort of a path. The more often two are linked, the stronger it becomes. With frequency it becomes a bond, like a coterie bond. Others who are Skilled can see such bonds, if they look for them. Often they are like back doors, unguarded ways into a Skilled one’s mind. This time, however, I would say they found the Fool in your stead.’

The look on my face made her let go of my arm. I pushed my way into the tent. There was a tiny fire burning in the brazier. Kettricken knelt by the Fool, speaking to him low and earnestly. Starling sat unmoving in her bedding, pale and staring at him, while the wolf restlessly prowled the crowded interior of the tent. His hackles still stood high.

I went quickly to kneel by the Fool. At first glimpse of him, I recoiled. I had expected him to lie limply unconscious. Instead he was rigid, his eyes open and his eyeballs twitching about as if he watched some terrible struggle we could not witness. I touched his arm. The rigidity of his muscles and the coolness of his body reminded me of a corpse. ‘Fool?’ I asked him. He gave no sign at all of hearing me. ‘Fool!’ I cried louder, and leaned over him. I shook him, lightly at first and then more violently. It had no effect.

‘Touch him and Skill to him,’ Kettle instructed me gruffly. ‘But be careful. If they still have him, you put yourself at risk as well.’

It shames me to say that I froze for an instant. As much as I loved the Fool, I feared Will still. I reached at last, a second and an eternity later, to put my hand on his brow.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ Kettle told me uselessly. And then added that which almost paralysed me: ‘If they have him and hold him still, it is only a matter of time before they use the link between you to take you as well. Your only choice is to battle them from his mind. Go on, now.’

She set her hand to my shoulder, and for one eerie moment, it was Shrewd’s hand on my shoulder, drawing Skill-strength from me. Then she gave me a reassuring little pat. I closed my eyes, felt the Fool’s brow under my hand. I dropped my Skill walls.

The Skill river flowed, full to floodtime, and I fell into it. A moment to gain orientation. I knew an instant of terror as I sensed Will and Burl at the very edges of my perception. They were in great agitation about something. I recoiled from them as if I had brushed a hot stove, and narrowed my focus. The Fool, the Fool, only the Fool. I sought for him, I almost found him. Oh, he was passing strange, and surpassing strange. He darted and eluded me, like a bright gold carp in a weedy pool, like the motes that dance before one’s eyes after being dazzled by the sun. As well to clutch at the moon’s reflection in a still midnight pond as to seek a grip on that bright mind. I knew his beauty and his power in the briefest flashes of insight. In a moment I understood and marvelled at all that he was, and in the next I had forgotten that understanding.

Then, with an insight worthy of the stone game, I knew what to do. Rather than attempt to seize him, I surrounded him. I made no effort to invade or capture, but simply to encompass all that I saw of him and hold it separate from harm. It reminded me of when I had first been learning to Skill. Often Verity had done this for me, helping me contain myself when the current of the Skill threatened to spill me wide to the world. I steadied the Fool as he gathered himself back into himself.

I suddenly felt a cool clasp of my wrist. ‘Stop it,’ he begged gently. ‘Please,’ he added, and it smote me that he thought he needed that word. I withdrew from my seeking and opened my eyes. I blinked a few times, and then was surprised to find myself shivering with the cold sweat that cloaked me. It was impossible for the Fool to look any paler than he always was, but there was a tentative look to his eyes and mouth, as if he were not sure he was awake. My eyes met his, and I felt almost a jolt of awareness of him. A Skill-bond, thin as a thread, but there. Had not my nerves been so raw from reaching after him, I probably would not have felt it at all.

‘I did not like that,’ he said quietly.

‘I am sorry,’ I told him gently. ‘I thought they had hold of you, so I went seeking you.’

He waved a hand feebly. ‘Oh, not you. I meant the others.’ He swallowed as if sickened. ‘They were within me. In my mind, in my memories. Smashing and befouling like evil, lawless children. They ...’ His eyes went glassy.

‘Was it Burl?’ I suggested gently.

‘Ah. Yes. That is his name, though he scarce remembers it himself these days. Will and Regal have taken him over for their own uses. They came through him into me, thinking they had found you ...’ His voice dwindled off. ‘Or so it seems. How could I know such a thing?’

‘The Skill brings strange insights. They cannot overcome your mind without showing much of their own,’ Kettle informed him grudgingly. She took a small pot of steaming water off the brazier. To me she added, ‘Give me your elfbark.’

I immediately reached for my pack to dig it out, but I could not resist asking her chidingly, ‘I thought you said this herb was not beneficial.’

‘It isn’t,’ she said tersely. ‘For Skill-users. But for him, it may give him the protection he cannot provide for himself. They will try this again, I do not doubt. If they can invade him, even for a moment, they will use him to find you. It is an old trick.’

‘One I have never heard of,’ I pointed out as I handed her my bag of elfbark. She shook some into a cup, and added boiling water. Then she calmly put my bag of herbs into her pack. It was obviously not an oversight, and I dismissed as useless asking for them back.

‘How do you know so much about Skill matters?’ the Fool asked her pointedly. He was recovering some of his spirit.

‘Perhaps I learned by listening instead of asking personal questions all the time,’ she snapped at him. ‘Now, you are going to drink this,’ she added, as if she regarded the topic as settled. If I had not been so anxious, it would have been humorous to see the Fool so deftly quelled.

The Fool took the cup but looked over at me. ‘What was that, that happened at the last? They held me, and then suddenly, it was all earthquake and flood and fire at once.’ He knitted his brow. ‘And then I was gone, scattered. I could not find myself. Then you came ...’

‘Would anyone care to explain to me what has happened this night?’ Kettricken asked a bit testily.

I half expected Kettle to answer but she kept silent.

The Fool lowered his mug of tea. 'It is a hard thing to explain, my queen. Like two ruffians bursting into your bedchamber, dragging you from your bed and shaking you, all the while calling you by another's name. And when they discovered I was not the Fitz, they were very angry with me. Then came the earthquake and I was dropped. Down several flights of stairs. Metaphorically speaking, of course.'

'They let you go?' I asked delightedly. I instantly turned to Kettle. 'They are not as clever as you feared, then!'

Kettle scowled at me. 'Nor you as clever as I had hoped,' she muttered darkly. 'Did they let him go? Or did a Skill blast shake them loose? And if so, whose power was that?'

'Verity,' I said with sudden certainty. Comprehension washed over me. 'They attacked Verity tonight as well! And he defeated them!'

'Of what do you speak?' Ketricken demanded in her Queen's voice. 'Who attacked my king? What knowledge of these others who attack the Fool does Kettle have?'

'No personal knowledge, my lady, I assure you!' I declared hastily.

'Oh, do shut up!' Kettle snapped at me. 'My queen, I have a scholar's knowledge, if you will, of one who has studied but cannot do a thing. Since Fool and Catalyst were joined for that moment back in the plaza, I feared they might share a bond the Skill-users could turn against them. But either the coterie does not know this, or something distracted them tonight. Perhaps the Skill wave that Fitz spoke of.'

'This Skill wave ... you believe it was Verity's doing?' Ketricken's breath was suddenly swift, her colour heightened.

'Only from him have I ever felt such strength,' I told her.

'Then he lives,' she said softly. 'He lives.'

'Perhaps,' said Kettle sourly. 'To blast with Skill like that can kill a man. And it may not have been Verity at all. It may have been a failed effort by Will and Regal to get at Fitz.'

'No. I told you. It scattered them like chaff in a wind.'

'And I told you. They may have destroyed themselves in trying to kill you.'

I had thought that Ketricken would chide her, but both she and Starling stared wide-eyed in astonishment at Kettle's sudden professing of Skill

knowledge. ‘How kind of you both to have warned me so well,’ the Fool said with acid courtesy.

‘I didn’t know ...’ I began my protest, but again Kettle overrode me.

‘It would have done no good to warn you, save to put your mind to dwelling on it. We can make this comparison. It has taken all our combined effort to keep Fitz both focused and sane on the Skill road. He would never have survived his journey into the city, had not his senses been numbed with elfbark first. Yet these others travel the road and use the Skill beacons freely. Obviously their strength overmatches his by much. Ah, what to do, what to do?’

No one replied to her questioning of herself. She looked up suddenly at the Fool and me accusingly. ‘This cannot be right. It simply cannot be right. The Prophet and the Catalyst, and you are scarcely more than boys. Green to manhood, untrained in Skill, full of pranks and lovesick woes. These are the ones sent to save the world?’

The Fool and I exchanged glances, and I saw him take a breath to reply to her. But at that moment, Starling snapped her fingers. ‘And that is what makes the song!’ she exclaimed suddenly, her face transfigured with delight. ‘Not a song of heroic strength and mighty-thewed warriors. No. A song of two, graced only with friendship’s strength. Each possessed of a loyalty to a king that would not be denied. And that in the refrain ... “Green of manhood”, something, ah ...’

The Fool caught my eye, glanced meaningfully down at himself. ‘Green manhood? I really should have showed her,’ he said quietly. And despite everything, despite even the glowering of my queen, I burst out laughing.

‘Oh, stop it,’ Kettle rebuked us, with such discouragement in her voice that I was instantly sober. ‘It is neither the time for songs nor knavery. Are you both too foolish to see the danger you are in? The danger you put all of us in with your vulnerability?’ I watched her as she reluctantly took my elfbark out of her pack again and put her kettle back to boil. ‘It is the only thing I can think of to do,’ she apologized to Kettricken.

‘What is that?’ she asked.

‘To drug the Fool at least with elfbark. It will deafen him to them, and hide his thoughts from them.’

‘Elfark doesn’t work like that!’ I objected indignantly.

‘Doesn’t it?’ Kettle turned on me fiercely. ‘Then why was it used traditionally for years for just that purpose? Given to a royal bastard young

enough, it could destroy any potential for Skill use. Often enough was that done.'

I shook my head defiantly. 'I've used it for years, to restore my strength after Skilling. So has Verity. And it has never ...'

'Sweet Eda's mercy!' Kettle exclaimed. 'Tell me you are lying, please!'

'Why should I lie about this? Elfbark revives a man's strength, though it may bring on melancholy spirits following use. Often I would carry elfbark tea up to Verity in his Skill-tower, to sustain him.' My telling faltered. The dismay on Kettle's face was too sincere. 'What?' I asked softly.

'Elfbark is well known among Skilled ones as a thing to avoid,' she said quietly. I heard every word, for no one in the tent even seemed to be breathing. 'It deadens a man to Skill, so that he can neither use the Skill himself, nor may others reach through its fog to Skill to him. It is said to stunt or destroy Skill talent in the young, and to impede its development in older Skill-users.' She looked at me with pity in her eyes. 'You must have been strongly talented, once, to retain even a semblance of Skilling.'

'It cannot be ...' I said faintly.

'Think,' she bade me. 'Did ever you feel your Skill-strength wax strong after using it?'

'What of my lord Verity?' Kettricken suddenly demanded.

Kettle shrugged reluctantly. She turned to me. 'When did he start using it?'

It was hard for me to focus my mind on her words. So many things were suddenly in a different light. Elfbark had always cleared my head of the pounding that heavy Skilling brought on. But I had never tried to Skill immediately after I had used elfbark. Verity had, I knew that. But how successfully, I did not know. My erratic talent for Skilling ... could that have been my elfbark use? Like a lightning bolt was the immense knowledge that Chade had made a mistake in giving it to Verity and me. Chade had made a mistake. It had never occurred to me, somehow, that Chade could be wrong or mistaken. Chade was my master, Chade read and studied and knew all the old lore. But he had never been taught to Skill. A bastard like myself, he had never been taught to Skill.

'FitzChivalry!' Kettricken's command jerked me back to myself.

'Uh, so far as I know, Verity began to use it in the early years of the war. When he was the only Skill-user to stand between us and the Red Ships. I believe he had never used the Skill so intensely as then, nor been as

exhausted by it. So Chade began to give him elfbark. To keep up his strength.'

Kettle blinked a few times. 'Unused, the Skill does not develop,' she said, almost to herself. 'Used, it grows, and begins to assert itself, and one learns, almost instinctively, the many uses to which it may be put.' I found myself nodding faintly to her soft words. Her old eyes came up suddenly to meet mine. She spoke without reservation. 'You are most likely stunted, both of you. By the elfbark. Verity, as a man grown, may have recovered. He may have seen his Skill grow in the time he has spent away from the herb. As you seem to have. Certainly he seems to have mastered the road alone.' She sighed. 'But I suspect those others had not used it, and their talents and usage of Skill had grown and outstripped what yours is. So now you have a choice, FitzChivalry, and only you can make it. The Fool has nothing to lose by using the drug. He cannot Skill, and by using it, he may keep the coterie from finding him again. But you ... I can give you this, and it will deaden you to the Skill. It will be harder for them to reach you, and much harder for you to reach out. You might be safer that way. But you will be once more thwarting your talent. Enough elfbark may kill it off completely. And only you can choose.'

I looked down at my hands. Then I looked up at the Fool. Once more, our eyes met. Hesitantly, I groped toward him with my Skill. I felt nothing. Perhaps it was only my own erratic talent cheating me again. But it seemed likely to me that Kettle had been right; the elfbark the Fool had just drunk had deadened him to me.

As Kettle spoke, she had been taking the kettle from the fire. The Fool held his cup out to her wordlessly. She gave him a pinch more of the bitter bark and filled it again with water. Then she looked at me, quietly waiting. I looked at the faces watching me, but found no help there. I picked up a mug from the stacked crockery. I saw Kettle's old face darken and her lips tightened, but she said nothing to me. She simply reached into the pouch of elfbark, working her fingers to get to the bottom where the bark had crushed itself into powder. I looked into the empty mug, waiting. I glanced back up at Kettle. 'You said the Skill blast might have destroyed them?'

Kettle shook her head slowly. 'It is not a thing to count on.'

There was nothing I could count on. Nothing that was certain.

Then I set the mug down and crawled over to my blankets. I was suddenly tremendously weary. And frightened. I knew Will was out there

somewhere, seeking me. I could hide myself in elfbark, but it might not be enough to stave him off. It might only weaken my already-stunted defences against him. Abruptly I knew I would sleep not at all that night. 'I'll take the watch,' I offered and stood again.

'He should not stand alone,' Kettle said grumpily.

'His wolf watches with him,' Kettricken told her confidently. 'He can aid Fitz against this false coterie as no one else can.'

I wondered how she knew that, but dared not ask her. Instead I took up my cloak and went to stand outside by the dwindling fire, watching and waiting like a condemned man.

THIRTY-TWO

Capelin Beach

The Wit is held in much disdain. In many areas it is regarded as a perversion, with tales told of Witted ones coupling with beasts to gain this magic, or offering blood sacrifice of human children to gain the gift of the tongues of beasts and birds. Some tale-tellers speak of bargains struck with ancient demons of the earth. In truth, I believe the Wit is as natural a magic as a man can claim. It is the Wit that lets a flock of birds in flight suddenly wheel as one, or a school of fingerlings hold place together in a swiftly flowing stream. It is also the Wit that sends a mother to her child's bedside just as the babe is awakening. I believe it is at the heart of all wordless communication, and that all humans possess some small aptitude for it, recognized or not.

The next day we once more reached the Skill road. As we trailed past the forbidding pillar of stone, I felt myself drawn to it. 'Verity may be but one stride away for me,' I said quietly.

Kettle snorted. 'Or your death. Have you taken complete leave of your senses? Do you think any one Skill-user could stand against a trained coterie?'

'Verity did,' I replied, thinking of Tradeford and how he had saved me. The rest of that morning, she walked with a thoughtful look on her face.

I did not endeavour to get her to speak, for I carried a burden of my own. I felt within me a nagging sense of loss. It was almost the irritating sensation of knowing one had forgotten something, but was unable to recall what. I had left something behind. Or I had forgotten to do something important, something I had been intending to do. By late afternoon, with a sinking feeling, I grasped what was missing.

Verity.

When he had been with me, I had seldom been sure of his presence. Like a hidden seed waiting to unfurl was how I had thought of him. The many times I had sought him within myself and failed to find him suddenly meant nothing. This was not a doubt or a wondering. This was a growing certainty. Verity had been with me for over a year. And now he was gone.

Did it mean he was dead? I could not be certain. That immense wave of Skill I had felt could have been him. Or something else, something that had forced him to withdraw into himself. That was probably all it was. It was a miracle that his Skill touch upon me had lasted as long as it had. Several times I started to speak of it to Kettle or Kettricken. Each time, I could not justify it. What would I say: Before this, I could not tell if Verity was with me, and now I cannot feel him at all? At night by our fires, I studied the lines in Kettricken's face and asked myself what point there was in increasing her worry. So I pushed my worries down and kept silent.

Continuous hardship makes for monotony and days that run together in the telling. The weather was rainy, in a fitful, windy way. Our supplies were precariously low, so that the greens we could gather as we walked and whatever meat Nigteyes and I could bring down at night became important to us. I walked beside the road instead of on it, but remained constantly aware of its Skill-murmur, like the muttering of a river of water beside me. The Fool was kept well dosed with elfbark tea. Very soon he began to exhibit both the boundless energy and bleak spirits that were elfbark's properties. In the Fool's case, it meant endless cavorting and tumbling tricks as we made our way along the Skill road, and a cruelly bitter edge to his wits and tongue. He jested all too often of the futility of our quest, and to any encouraging remark he riposted with savage sarcasm. By the end of the second day, he reminded me of nothing so much as an ill-mannered child. He heeded no one's rebukes, not even Kettricken's, nor did he recall that silence could be a virtue. It was not so much that I feared his endless prattle and edged songs would bring the coterie down on us as that I worried his constant noise might mask their approach. Pleading with him to be quiet did me as little good as roaring at him to shut up. He wore on my nerves until I dreamed of throttling him, nor do I think I was alone in that impulse.

The kinder weather was the only way in which our lot improved on those long days as we followed the Skill road. The rain became lighter and more intermittent. The leaves opened on the deciduous trees that flanked the road and the hills about us greened almost overnight. The health of the jeppas improved with the browse, and Nigteyes found plentiful small game. The shorter hours of sleep told on me, but letting the wolf hunt alone would not have solved it. I feared to sleep any more. Worse, Kettle feared to let me sleep.

Of her own accord, the old woman took charge of my mind. I resented it, but was not so stupid as to resist. Both Kettricken and Starling had accepted her knowledge of the Skill. I was no longer permitted to go off alone, or in the sole company of the Fool. When the wolf and I hunted at night, Kettricken went with us. Starling and I shared a watch, during which, at Kettle's urging, she kept my mind busy with learning to recite both songs and stories from Starling's repertoire. During my brief hours of sleep Kettle watched over me, a dark stewing of elfbark at her elbow where, if need be, she could pour it down my throat and douse my Skill. All of this was annoying, but worst was during the day when we walked together. I was not allowed to speak of Verity, or the coterie, or anything that might touch upon them. Instead, we worked at game problems, or gathered wayside herbs for the evening meal, or I recited Starling's stories for her. At any time when she suspected my mind was not fully with her, she might give me a sharp rap with her walking stick. The few times I tried to direct our talk with questions about her past, she loftily informed me that it might lead to the very topics we must avoid.

There is no more slippery task than to refrain from thinking of something. In the midst of my busywork, the fragrance of a wayside flower would bring Molly to my mind, and from thence to Verity who had called me away from her was but a skip of thought. Or some chance nattering of the Fool would call to my thoughts King Shrewd's tolerance for his mockery, and recall to me how my king had died and at whose hands. Worst of all was Kettricken's silence. She could no longer speak to me of her anxiety over Verity. I could not see her without feeling how she longed to find him, and then rebuking myself for thinking of him. And so the long days of our travelling passed for me.

Gradually the countryside around us changed. We found ourselves descending deeper and deeper into valley after winding valley. For a time our road paralleled that of a milky grey river. In places its rising and fallings had gnawed the road at its side to no more than a footpath. We came at length to an immense bridge. When we first glimpsed it from a distance, the spider web delicacy of its span reminded me of bones, and I feared that we would find it reduced to splintered fragments of reaching timbers. Instead we crossed on a creation that arched over the river needlessly high, as if in joy that it could. The road we crossed on shone black and shining, while the archwork that graced above and below the span was a powdery grey. I could

not identify what it was wrought from, whether true metal or strange stone, for it had more the look of a spun thread than hammered metal or chiselled rock. The elegance and grace of it stilled even the Fool for a time.

After the bridge, we climbed a series of small hills, only to begin another descent. This time the valley was narrow and deep, a steep-sided cleft in the earth as if some giant had long ago cleaved it with a war-axe. The road clung to one side of it and followed it inexorably down. We could see little of where we were going, for the valley itself seemed full of clouds and greenery. This puzzled me until the first rivulet of warm water cut our pathway. It bubbled up steamily from a spring right beside the road, but had long ago disdained the ornately carved stone walls and drainage channel some vanished engineer had placed to contain it. The Fool made great show of considering its stench and whether it should be attributed to rotten eggs or some flatulence of the earth itself. For once not even his rudeness could make me smile. It was for me as if his knavery had gone on too long, the merriment fled and only the crudity and cruelty left.

We came in early afternoon to a region of steaming pools. The lure of hot water was too much to resist, and Kettricken let us make camp early. We had the long-missed comfort of hot water for soaking our weary bodies in, though the Fool disdained it because of its smell. To me it smelled no worse than the steaming waters that rose to feed the baths in Jhaampe, but for once I was just as glad to forgo his company. He went off in search of more potable water, while the women took over the largest pool and I sought out the relative privacy of a smaller one at some distance. I soaked for a time, and then decided to pound some of the dirt from my clothing. The mineral stink of the water was far less than the odour my own body had left on them. That done, I spread my garments on the grass to dry and went to lie once more in the water. Nighteyes came to sit on the bank and watch me in puzzlement, his tail tucked neatly around his feet.

It feels good, I told him needlessly, for I knew he could sense my pleasure.

It must have something to do with your lack of fur, he decided at last.

Come in and I'll scrub you off. It would help you shed off your winter undercoat, I offered him.

He gave a disdainful sniff. *I think I'd prefer to scratch it off a bit at a time.*

Well, you needn't sit and watch me and be bored. Go hunting if you wish.

I would, but the high bitch has asked me to watch you. So I shall.

Kettricken?

So you name her.

How asked you?

He gave me a puzzled glance. *As you would. She looked at me and I knew her mind. She worried that you were alone.*

Does she know you hear her? Does she hear you?

Almost, at times. He lay down abruptly on the sward and stretched, curling his pink tongue. *Perhaps when your mate bids you set me aside, I shall bond to her.*

Not funny.

He made no reply to me, but rolled over and proceeded to roll about scratching his back. The topic of Molly was now an edge of uneasiness between us, a rift I dared not approach and one he obsessively peered into. I wished abruptly that we were as we once had been, joined and whole, living only in the now. I leaned back, resting my head on the bank, half in and half out of the water. I closed my eyes and thought of nothing.

When I opened them again, the Fool was standing looking down on me. I startled visibly. So did Nighteyes, springing to his feet with a growl. 'Some guardian,' I observed to the Fool.

He has no scent, and walks lighter than falling snow! the wolf complained.

'He is always with you, isn't he?' the Fool observed.

'One way or another,' I agreed and lay back in the water. I would have to get out soon. The late afternoon was becoming evening. The additional chill in the air only made the hot water more soothing. After a moment, I glanced over at the Fool. He was still just standing and staring at me. 'Is something wrong?' I asked him.

He made an inconclusive gesture, and then sat down awkwardly on the bank. 'I've been thinking about your candlemaker girl,' he said suddenly.

'Have you?' I asked quietly. 'I've been doing my best not to.'

He thought about this for a bit. 'If you die, what will become of her?'

I rolled over on my belly and propped myself on my elbows to stare at the Fool. I half expected this was the lead line to some new mockery of his, but his face was grave. 'Burrich will take care of her,' I said quietly. 'For as

long as she needs help. She's a capable woman, Fool.' After a moment's consideration, I added, 'She took care of herself for years before ... Fool, I've never really taken care of her. I was near her, but she always stood on her own.' I felt both shamed and proud as I said that. Shamed that I had given her so little besides trouble, and proud that such a woman had cared for me.

'But you would at least want me to take word to her, would you not?'

I shook my head slowly. 'She believes me dead. They both do. If in fact I die, I'd just as soon let her believe I died in Regal's dungeons. For her to learn otherwise would only tar me blacker in her eyes. How could you explain to her that I did not come to her immediately? No. If something happens to me, I wish no tales told her.' Bleakness gripped me once more. And if I survived and went back to her? That was almost worse to consider. I tried to imagine standing before her and explaining to her that once more, I had put my king ahead of her. I clenched my eyes tight shut at the thought of it.

'Still, when all this is done and gone, I should like to see her again,' the Fool observed.

I opened my eyes. 'You? I did not know that you had even spoken to one another.'

The Fool seemed a bit taken aback at this. 'But, that is, I meant for your sake. To see for myself that she is well provided for.'

I felt oddly touched. 'I don't know what to say,' I told him.

'Say nothing, then. Tell me only where I may find her,' he suggested with a smile.

'I don't precisely know that myself,' I admitted to him. 'Chade knows. If ... if I do not live through what we must do, ask it of him.' It felt unlucky to speak of my own death, so I added, 'Of course, we both know we shall survive. It is foretold, is it not?'

He gave me an odd look. 'By whom?'

My heart sank. 'By some White Prophet or other, I had hoped,' I muttered. It occurred to me that I had never asked the Fool if my survival was foretold. Not every man survives winning a battle. I found my courage. 'Is it foretold that the Catalyst lives?'

He appeared to be thinking hard. He suddenly observed, 'Chade leads a dangerous life. There is no assurance that he will survive either. And if he

does not, well, surely you must have some idea of where the girl is. Will not you tell me?’

That he had not answered my question seemed suddenly answer enough. The Catalyst did not survive. It was like being hit by a wave of cold salt water. I felt tumbled in that cold knowledge, drowning in it. I’d never hold my daughter, never feel Molly’s warmth again. It was almost a physical pain, and it dizzied me.

‘FitzChivalry?’ the Fool pressed me. He lifted a hand to suddenly cover his mouth tightly, as if he could speak no more. His other hand rose to grip his wrist suddenly. He looked sickened.

‘It’s all right,’ I said faintly. ‘Perhaps it’s better that I know what is to come.’ I sighed and racked my brain. ‘I’ve heard them speak of a village. Burrich goes there to buy things. It cannot be far. You could start there.’

The Fool gave a tiny nod of encouragement to me. Tears stood in his eyes.

‘Capelin Beach,’ I said quietly.

A moment longer he sat staring at me. Then he suddenly toppled over sideways.

‘Fool?’

There was no response. I stood, the warm water running off me and looked over at him. He sprawled on his side as if asleep. ‘Fool!’ I called irritably. When there was still no response, I waded out of the pond and over to him. He lay on the grassy bank, miming the deep, even breathing of sleep. ‘Fool?’ I asked again, half expecting him to come leaping up in my face. Instead he made a vague motion as if I disturbed his dreaming. It irritated me beyond words that he could go so abruptly from serious words to some kind of knavery. Yet it was typical of his behaviour over the past few days. There was suddenly no relaxation or peace left in the hot water. Still dripping, I began to gather my clothes. I refused to look at him as I brushed and shook most of the water from my body. The clothing I pulled on was slightly damp anyway. The Fool slept on as I turned away from him and walked back to camp. Nighteyes trailed at my heels.

Is it a game? he asked me as we walked.

Of a kind, I suppose, I told him shortly. *Not one I enjoy.*

The women were already back at the camp. Kettricken was poring over her map while Kettle gave the jeppas tiny shares of the remaining grain.

Starling was sitting by the fire, worrying a comb through her hair, but looked up as I approached. 'Did the Fool find clean water?' she asked me.

I shrugged. 'Not when I last saw him. At least, if he had, he wasn't carrying it with him.'

'We've enough in the waterskins to get by with, anyway. I just prefer fresh for the tea.'

'Me, too.' I sat down by the cook fire and watched her. She seemed to give no thought to her fingers at all as they danced over her hair, binding the wet shining hair into smooth braids. She coiled them to her head and pinned them down securely.

'I hate wet hair flapping around my face,' she observed, and I realized I had been staring. I glanced away, embarrassed.

'Ah, he can still blush,' she laughed. Then added, pointedly, 'Would you like to borrow my comb?'

I lifted my hand to my own draggled hair. 'I suppose I should,' I muttered.

'Truly,' she agreed, but did not pass it to me. Instead she came to kneel behind me. 'How did you do all this?' she wondered aloud as she began to tug the comb through it.

'It just gets that way,' I mumbled. Her gentle touch, the soft tugging at my scalp felt incredibly good.

'It's so fine, that's the problem. I never met a Buck man with hair so fine.'

My heart moved sideways in my chest. A Buck beach on a windy day, and Molly on a red blanket beside me, her blouse not quite laced. She had told me I was considered the best thing to have come out of the stables since Burrich. 'I think it is your hair. It is not as coarse as most Buck men.' One brief interlude, of flirtatious compliments and idle talk and her sweet touch under the open sky. I almost smiled. But I could not recall that day without also recalling that, like so many of our times together, it had ended in quarrelling and tears. My throat closed up and I shook my head, trying to clear the memories away.

'Sit still,' Starling chided me with a sharper tug on my hair. 'I've almost got it smooth. Brace yourself, this is the last snarl.' She caught hold of my hair above it, and ripped out the snarl with a swift jerk that I almost didn't feel. 'Give me the thong,' she told me, and took it from me to bind my hair back for me.

Kettle came back from tending the jeppas. ‘Any meat?’ she asked me pointedly.

I sighed. ‘Not yet. Soon,’ I promised. I hauled myself to my feet wearily.

‘Watch him, wolf,’ Kettle asked Nighteyes. He gave a slight wag of his tail and then led me away from the camp.

It was past dark when we returned to camp. We were well pleased with ourselves, for we brought, not rabbit, but a cloven-hoofed creature rather like a small kid, but with a silkier hide. I had opened its belly at the kill site, both to let Nighteyes have the entrails and to lighten it for carrying. I slung the meat over my shoulder, but regretted that after a short time. Whatever biting vermin it had been carrying were only too happy to transfer to my neck. I would have to wash myself again this night.

I grinned at Kettle as she came to meet me and unslung the kid to hold it up for her inspection. But instead of congratulations, she only demanded, ‘Have you any more elfbark?’

‘I gave you all I had,’ I told her. ‘Why? Have we run out? The way it makes the Fool behave, I’d almost welcome that news.’

She gave me an odd look. ‘Did you quarrel?’ she demanded. ‘Did you strike him?’

‘What? Of course not!’

‘We found him by the pool where you bathed,’ she said quietly. ‘Twitching in his sleep like a dreaming dog. I woke him, but even awake, he seemed vague. We brought him back here, but he only sought his blankets. Since then, he has been sleeping like a dead thing.’

We had reached the cook fire and I dropped the kid beside it and hurried into the tent, Nighteyes pushing his way in front of me.

‘He revived, but only for a bit,’ Kettle continued. ‘Then he dropped off to sleep again. He behaves like a man recovering from exhaustion, or a very long illness. I fear for him.’

I scarcely heard her. Once in the tent, I dropped to my knees beside him. He lay on his side, curled in a ball. Kettricken knelt by him, her face clouded with worry. He looked to me simply like a man sleeping. Relief warred with irritation in me.

‘I’ve given him almost all the elfbark,’ Kettle was going on. ‘If I give him what’s left now, we have no reserves if the coterie tries to attack him.’

‘Is there no other herb ...’ Kettricken began, but I interrupted her.

‘Why don’t we simply let him sleep? Perhaps this is just the end of his other illness. Or maybe an effect of the elfbark itself. Even with potent drugs, one can only trick the body so long, and then it makes its demands known.’

‘That is true,’ Kettle agreed reluctantly. ‘But this is so unlike him ...’

‘He has been unlike himself since the third day he was using the elfbark,’ I pointed out. ‘His tongue too sharp, his jibes too cutting. If you asked me, I would say I prefer him asleep to awake these days.’

‘Well. Perhaps there is something to what you say. We will let him sleep then,’ Kettle conceded. She took a breath, as if to say more, but did not. I went back outside to prepare the kid for cooking. Starling followed me.

For a time, she just sat silently watching me skin it out. It was not that large an animal. ‘Help me build up the fire and we’ll roast the whole thing. Cooked meat will keep better in this weather.’

The whole thing?

Except a generous portion for you. I worked my knife around a knee joint, snapped the shank free and cut the remaining gristle.

I’ll want more than bones, Nighteyes reminded me.

Trust me, I told him. By the time I was finished, he had the head, hide, all four shanks, and one hind quarter to himself. It made it awkward to fasten the meat to a spit, but I managed. It was a young animal, and though it did not have much fat, I expected the meat would be tender. The hardest part would be waiting for it to be cooked. The flames licked their tips against it, searing it, and the savoury smell of roasting meat taunted me.

‘Are you so angry with the Fool?’ Starling asked me quietly.

‘What?’ I glanced over my shoulder at her.

‘In the time we have travelled together, I have come to see how you are with one another. Closer than brothers. I would have expected you to sit beside him and fret, as you did when he was ill. Yet you behave as if nothing is wrong with him at all.’

Minstrels, perhaps, see too clearly. I pushed my hair back from my face and thought. ‘Earlier today, he came to me and we talked. About what he would do, for Molly, if I did not live to return to her.’ I looked at Starling and shook my head. When my throat went tight, it surprised me. ‘He does not expect me to survive. And when a prophet says such a thing, it is hard to believe otherwise.’

The look of dismay on her face was not comforting. It gave the lie to her words when she insisted, 'Prophets are not always right. Did he say, for certain, that he had seen your death?'

'When I asked him, he would not answer,' I replied.

'He should not have even brought up such a topic,' Starling suddenly exclaimed angrily. 'How can he expect you to have heart for whatever you must do, when you believe it will be your death?'

I shrugged my shoulders at her silently. I had refused to think of it the whole time we had been hunting. Instead of going away, the feelings had only built up. The misery I suddenly felt was overwhelming. Yes, and the anger, too. I was furious at the Fool for telling me. I forced myself to consider it. 'The tidings are scarcely his doing. And I cannot fault his intent. Yet it is hard to face one's death, not as a thing that will happen someday, somewhere, but as something that will likely occur before this summer loses its green.' I lifted my head and looked around the verdant wild meadow that surrounded us.

It is amazing how different a thing appears when you know it is the last one you will have. Every leaf on every limb stood out, in a multitude of greens. Birds sang challenges to one another, or winged by in flashes of colour. The smells of the cooking meat, of the earth itself, even the sound of Nighteyes cracking a bone between his jaws were all suddenly unique and precious things. How many days like this had I walked through blindly, intent only on having a mug of ale when I got to town or what horse must be taken for shoeing today? Long ago, in Buckkeep, the Fool had warned me that I should live each day as if it were significant, as if every day the fate of the world depended on my actions. Now I suddenly grasped what he had been trying to tell me. Now, when the days left to me had dwindled to where I might count them.

Starling put her hands on my shoulders. She leaned down and put her cheek against mine. 'Fitz, I am so sorry,' she said quietly. I scarcely heard her words, only her belief in my death. I stared at the meat cooking over the flames. It had been a live kid.

Death is always at the edge of now. Nighteyes' thought was gentle. Death stalks us, and he is ever sure of his kill. It is not a thing to dwell on, but it is something we all know, in our guts and bones. All save humans.

With shock, I beheld what the Fool had been trying to teach me about time. I suddenly wished to go back, to have again each separate day to

spend. Time. I was trapped in it, fenced into a tiny piece of now that was the only time I could influence. All the soon's and tomorrows I might plan were ghost things that might be snatched from me at any moment. Intentions were nothing. Now was all I had. I suddenly stood up.

'I understand,' I said aloud. 'He had to tell me, to push me. I have to stop acting as if there is a tomorrow when I can put things right. It all has to be done now, right away, with no concern for tomorrow. No belief in tomorrow. No fears for tomorrow.'

'Fitz?' Starling drew back from me a little way. 'You sound as if you are going to do something foolish.' Her dark eyes were full of worry.

'Foolish,' I said to myself. 'Foolish as the Fool is. Yes. Could you watch the meat, please?' I asked Starling humbly.

I did not wait for her reply. I stood as she stepped free of me and went into the yurt. Kettle sat by the Fool, simply watching him sleep. Kettricken was mending a seam in her boot. They both glanced up as I came in. 'I need to talk to him,' I said simply. 'Alone, if you would not mind.'

I ignored their puzzled glances. I already wished I had not told Starling what the Fool had told me. Doubtless she would tell the others, but just now I did not want to share it with them. I had something important to tell the Fool, and I would do it now. I did not wait to watch them leave the yurt. Instead I sat down beside the Fool. I touched his face gently, feeling the coolness of his cheek. 'Fool,' I said quietly. 'I need to talk to you. I understand. I think I finally understand what you've been trying to teach me all along.'

It took me several more efforts before he stirred to wakefulness. I finally shared some of Kettle's concern. This was not the simple sleep of a man at a day's end. But finally he opened his eyes and peered up at me through the gloom. 'Fitz? Is it morning?' he asked.

'Evening. And there is fresh meat roasting, and soon it will be done. I think a good meal will help put you right.' I started to hesitate, then recalled my new resolution. Now. 'I was angry at you earlier, for what you told me. But now I think I understand why. You are right, I have been hiding in the future and wasting my days.' I took a breath. 'I want to give Burrich's earring over to you, into your keeping. Af ... afterwards, I'd like you to take it to him. And tell him I did not die outside some shepherd's hut, but keeping my oath to my king. That will mean something to him, it may pay him back

a bit for all he has done for me. He taught me to be a man. I don't want that left unsaid.'

I unfastened the catch of the earring and drew it from my ear. I pressed it into the Fool's lax hand. He lay on his side, listening silently. His face was very grave. I shook my head at him.

'I have nothing to send Molly, nothing for our child. She'll have the pin Shrewd gave me so long ago, but little more than that.' I was trying to keep my voice steady, but the importance of my words was choking me. 'It may be wisest not to tell Molly that I lived past Regal's dungeons. If that can be managed. Burrich would understand the reason for such a secret. She has mourned me as dead once, there is no sense in telling her otherwise. I am glad you will seek her out. Make toys for Nettle.' Against my will, tears stung my eyes.

The Fool sat up, his face full of concern. He gripped my shoulder gently. 'If you want me to find Molly, you know I will, if it comes to that. But why must we think of such things now? What do you fear?'

'I fear my death.' I admitted it. 'But fearing it will not stop it. So I make what provisions I can. As I should have, long ago.' I met his smoky eyes squarely. 'Promise me.'

He looked down at the earring in his hand. 'I promise. Though why you think my chances are better than yours, I do not know. Nor do I know how I will find them, but I will.'

I felt great relief. 'I told you earlier. I know only that their cottage is near a village called Capelin Beach. There is more than one Capelin Beach in Buck, that is true. But if you tell me you will find her, I believe you will.'

'Capelin Beach?' His eyes went distant. 'I think I recall ... I thought I had dreamed that.' He shook his head and almost smiled. 'So I am now a party to one of the closest-held secrets in Buck. Chade told me that not even he knew precisely where Burrich had hidden Molly away. He had only a place to leave a message for Burrich, so Burrich might come to him. "The fewer who know a secret, the fewer can tell it," he told me. Yet it seems to me I have heard that name before. Capelin Beach. Or dreamed it, perhaps.'

My heart went cold. 'What do you mean? Have you had a vision of Capelin Beach?'

He shook his head. 'Not a vision, no. Yet a nightmare toothier than most, so that when Kettle found and woke me, I felt I had not slept at all, but had been fleeing for my life for hours.' He shook his head again slowly and

rubbed at his eyes, yawning. 'I do not even recall lying down to sleep outside. But that is where they found me.'

'I should have known something was wrong with you,' I apologized. 'You were by the hot spring, speaking to me of Molly and ... things. And then you suddenly lay down and went to sleep. I thought you were mocking me,' I admitted sheepishly.

He gave a tremendous yawn. 'I do not even recall seeking you out,' he admitted. He sniffed suddenly. 'Did you say there was meat roasting?'

I nodded. 'The wolf and I got a kid. It's young and should be tender.'

'I'm hungry enough to eat old shoes,' he declared. He threw back his bedding and left the tent. I followed him.

That meal was a better time than we had had in days. The Fool seemed weary and pensive, but had abandoned his barbed humour. The meat, though not tender as fat lamb, was better than anything we had had in weeks. By the end of the meal, I shared Nighteyes' sleepy satiation. He curled up outside by Kettricken to share her watch while I sought my blankets in the tent.

I had half expected the Fool to be wakeful after he had slept so much of the afternoon away. Instead he was first to his blankets and deeply asleep before I had even dragged my boots off. Kettle set out her gamecloth and gave me a problem to consider. I lay down to get what rest I could while Kettle watched over my sleep.

But I got small rest that night. No sooner had I dozed off than the Fool began to twitch and yip in his sleep. Even Nighteyes poked his head in the tent door to see what it was about. It took Kettle several tries to rouse him, and when he dozed off again, he slipped right back into his noisy dreams. That time I reached over to shake him. But when I touched his shoulder, awareness of him surged through me. For an instant, I shared his night terror. 'Fool, wake up!' I cried out to him, and as if in answer to that command, he sat up.

'Let go, let go!' he cried desperately. Then, looking round and finding that no one held him, he dropped back to his bedding. He turned his eyes to meet mine.

'What were you dreaming?' I asked him.

He thought, then shook his head. 'It's gone, now.' He took a shuddering breath. 'But I fear it waits for me, should I close my eyes. I think I shall see if Kettricken wants some company. I would rather be awake than face ... whatever it was I was facing in my dreams.'

I watched him leave the tent. Then I lay back in my blankets. I closed my eyes. I found it, faint as a silver shining thread. There was a Skill-bond between us.

Ah. Is that what that is? the wolf marvelled.

Can you feel it, too?

Only sometimes. It is like what you had with Verity.

Only weaker.

Weaker? I think not. Nighteyes considered. Not weaker, my brother. But different. Fashioned more like a Wit-bond than a Skill-joining.

He looked up at the Fool as the Fool came out of the tent. After a time, the Fool frowned to himself and looked down at Nighteyes.

You see, said the wolf. *He senses me. Not clearly, but he does. Hello, Fool. My ears itch.*

Outside the tent, the Fool reached down suddenly to scratch the wolf's ears.

THIRTY-THREE

The Quarry.

There are legends, among the Mountain folk, of an ancient race, much gifted with magic and knowing many things now lost to men forever. These tales are in many ways similar to the tales of elves and Old Ones that are told in the Six Duchies. In some cases, the tales are so similar as to be obviously the same story adapted by different folk. The most obvious example of this would be the tale of The Flying Chair of the Widow's Son. Among the Mountain folk, that Buck tale becomes The Flying Sled of the Orphan Boy. Who can tell which telling was first?

The folk of the Mountain Kingdom will tell you that that ancient race is responsible for some of the more peculiar monuments that one may chance upon in their forests. They are also credited with lesser achievements, such as some of the games of strategy that Mountain children still play, and for a very peculiar wind instrument, powered not by a man's lungs, but by breath trapped in an inflated bladder. Tales are also told of ancient cities far back in the mountains that were once the dwelling of these beings. But nowhere in all their literature, spoken or written, have I found any account of how these people ceased to be.

Three days later we reached the quarry. We had had three days of hiking through suddenly hot weather. The air had been full of the scents of opening leaves and flowers and the whistles of birds and the drones of insects. To either side of the Skill road, life burgeoned. I walked through it, senses keen, more aware of being alive than I had ever been. The Fool had spoken no more about whatever he had foreseen for me. For that I was grateful. I had found Nighteyes was right. Knowing was hard enough. I would not dwell on it.

Then we came to the quarry. At first it seemed to us that we had simply come to a dead end. The road ramped down into a worked gorge of bare stone, an area twice the size of Buckkeep Castle. The walls of the valley were vertically straight and bare, scarred where immense blocks of black stone had been quarried from it. In a few places, cascading greenery from the earth at the edge of the quarry covered the sheared rock sides. At the

lower end of the pit, rain water had collected and stagnated greenly. There was little other vegetation, for there was precious little soil. Beneath our feet, past the end of the Skill road, we stood on the raw black stone the road had been wrought from. When we looked up at the looming cliff across from us, black stone veined with silver met our eyes. On the floor of the quarry a number of immense blocks had been abandoned amidst piles of rubble and dust. The huge blocks were bigger than buildings. I could not imagine how they had been cut, let alone how they would have been hauled away. Beside them were the remains of great machines, reminding me somewhat of siege engines. Their wood had rotted, their metal rusted. Their remains hunched together like mouldering bones. Silence brimmed the quarry.

Two things about the place immediately caught my attention. The first was the black pillar that reared up in our pathway, incised with the same ancient runes we had encountered before. The second was the absolute absence of animal life.

I came to a halt by the pillar. I quested out, and the wolf shared my searching. Cold stone.

Perhaps we shall learn to eat rocks, now? the wolf suggested.

‘We shall have to do our hunting elsewhere tonight,’ I agreed.

‘And find clean water,’ added the Fool.

Kettricken had stopped by the pillar. The jeppas were already straying away, searching disconsolately for anything green. Possessing the Skill and the Wit sharpened my perceptions of other folk. But for the moment, I sensed nothing from her. Her face was still and empty. A slackness came over it, as if she aged before my eyes. Her eyes wandered over the lifeless stone, and by chance turned to me. A sickly smile spread over her mouth.

‘He’s not here,’ she said. ‘We’ve come all this way, and he isn’t here.’

I could think of nothing to say to her. Of all the things I might have expected at the end of our quest, an abandoned stone quarry seemed unlikeliest. I tried to think of something optimistic to say. There was nothing. This was the last location marked on our map, and evidently the final destination of the Skill road as well. She sank down slowly to sit flat on the stone at the pillar’s base. She just sat there, too weary and discouraged to weep. When I looked to Kettle and Starling, I found them staring at me as if I were supposed to have an answer. I did not. The heat of the warm day pressed down on me. For this, we had come so far.

I smell carrion.

I don't. It was the last thing I wanted to think about just now.

I didn't expect you would, with your nose. But there is something very dead not far from here.

'So go roll in it and have done with it,' I told him with some asperity.

'Fitz,' Kettle rebuked me as Nighteyes trotted purposefully away.

'I was talking to the wolf,' I told her lamely. The Fool nodded, almost vacantly. He had not been at all himself. Kettle had insisted that he continue taking the elfbark, though our small supply limited him to a very weak dose of the same bark brewed over again. From time to time, I thought I caught a brief hint of the Skill-bond between us. If I looked at him, he would sometimes turn and return my look, even across camp. It was little more than that. When I spoke of it to him, he said he sometimes felt something, but was not sure what it was. Of what the wolf had told me, I made no mention. Elfbar tea or no, he remained solemn and lethargic. His sleep at night did not seem to rest him; he moaned or muttered through his dreams. He reminded me of a man recovering from a long illness. He hoarded his strength in many small ways. He spoke little; even his bitter merriment had vanished. It was but one more worry for me to bear.

It's a man!

The stench of the corpse was thick in Nighteyes' nostrils. I nearly retched with it. Then, 'Verity,' I whispered to myself in horror. I set out at a run in the direction the wolf had taken. The Fool followed more slowly in my wake, drifting like down on the wind. The women watched us go without comprehension.

The body was wedged between two immense blocks of stone. It was huddled as if even in death it sought to hide. The wolf circled it restlessly, hackles up. I halted at some distance, then tugged the cuff of my shirt down over my hand. I lifted it to cover my nose and mouth. It helped a bit, but nothing could have completely drowned that stink. I walked closer, steeling myself to what I knew I must do. When I got close to the body, I reached down, seized hold of its rich cloak, and dragged it out into the open.

'No flies,' the Fool observed almost dreamily.

He was right. There were no flies and no maggots. Only the silent rot of death had been at work on the man's features. They were dark, like a ploughman's tan, only darker. Fear had contorted them, but I knew it was not Verity. Yet I had stared at him for some moments before I recognized him. 'Carrod,' I said quietly.

‘A member of Regal’s coterie?’ the Fool asked, as if there could be another Carrod about.

I nodded. I kept my shirt cuff over my nose and mouth as I knelt beside him.

‘How did he die?’ the Fool asked. The smell did not seem to bother him, but I did not think I could speak without gagging. I shrugged. To answer I would have had to take a breath. I reached gingerly to tug at his clothes. The body was both stiff and softening. It was hard to examine it, but I could find no sign of any violence on him. I took a shallow breath and held it, then used both hands to unbuckle his belt. I pulled it free of the body with his purse and knife still on it, and hastily retreated with it.

Kettricken, Kettle and Starling came up on us as I was coaxing the mouth of his purse open. I did not know what I had hoped to find, but I was disappointed. A handful of coins, a flint, and a small whetstone were all he carried. I tossed it to the ground, and rubbed my hand down my trouser leg. The stench of death clung to it.

‘It was Carrod,’ the Fool told the others. ‘He must have come by the pillar.’

‘What killed him?’ Kettle asked.

I met her gaze. ‘I don’t know. I believe it was the Skill. Whatever it was, he tried to hide from it. Between those rocks. Let’s get away from this smell,’ I suggested. We retreated back to the pillar. Nighteyes and I came last and more slowly. I was puzzled. I realized I was putting everything I could into keeping my Skill walls strong. Seeing Carrod dead had shocked me. One less coterie member, I told myself. But he was here, right here in the quarry when he died. If Verity had killed him with the Skill, perhaps that meant Verity had been here as well. I wondered if we would stumble across Burl and Will somewhere in the quarry, if they too had come here to attack Verity. Colder was my suspicion that it was more likely we would find Verity’s body. But I said nothing to Kettricken of these thoughts.

I think the wolf and I sensed it at the same time. ‘There’s something alive back there,’ I said quietly. ‘Deeper in the quarry.’

‘What is it?’ the Fool asked me.

‘I don’t know.’ A shivering ran all over me. My Wit-sense of whatever was back there ebbed and flowed. The more I tried for a feel of what it was, the more it eluded me.

‘Verity?’ Kettricken asked. It broke my heart to see hope quicken once more in her eyes.

‘No,’ I told her gently. ‘I don’t think so. It doesn’t feel like a human. It’s like nothing I’ve ever sensed before.’ I paused and added, ‘I think you should all wait here while the wolf and I go see what it is.’

‘No.’ Kettle spoke, not Kettricken, but when I glanced back at my queen, I saw her complete agreement.

‘If anything, I should have you and the Fool hang back while we investigate,’ she told me severely. ‘You are the ones at risk here. If Carrod has been here, Burl and Will could be back there.’

In the end it was decided we would all approach, but with great caution. We spread out in a fan and moved forward across the quarry floor. I could not tell them specifically where I sensed the creature, and so we were all on edge. The quarry was like a nursery floor with some immense child’s blocks and toys scattered across it. We passed one partially carved block of stone. It had none of the finesse of the carvings we had seen in the stone garden. It was lumpish and crude, and somehow obscene. It reminded me of the foetus of a miscarried foal. It repulsed me and I slipped past it as swiftly as I could to my next vantage point.

The others were doing likewise, moving from cover to cover, all of us endeavouring to keep at least one other of our party in sight. I had thought I could see nothing more disturbing than that crude stone carving, but the next one we passed wrenched at me. Someone had carved, in heart-breaking detail, a mired dragon. The thing’s wings were half spread and its half-lidded eyes were rolled up in agony. A human rider, a young woman, bestrode it. She clutched the undulant neck and leaned her cheek against it. Her face was a mask of agony, her mouth open and the lines of her face taut, the muscles of her throat standing out like cords. Both the girl and the dragon had been worked in detailed colours and lines. I could see the woman’s eyelashes, the individual hairs on her golden head, the fine green scales about the dragon’s eyes, even the droplets of saliva that clung to its lips. But where the dragon’s mighty feet and lashing tail should have been, there was only puddled black stone, as if the two had landed in a tar pit and been unable to escape it.

Just as a statue, it was wrenching. I saw Kettle turn her face aside from it, tears starting in her eyes. But what unnerved Nighteyes and me was the writhing of Wit-sense that it gave off. It was fainter than what we had sensed in the statues back in the garden, but all the more poignant for that. It was

like the final death throes of a trapped creature. I wondered what talent had been used to infuse such a living nuance into a statue. Even as I appreciated the artistry of what had been done, I was not sure I approved it. But that was true of much that this ancient Skilled race had wrought. As I crept past the statue, I wondered if this was what the wolf and I had sensed. It prickled my skin to see the Fool turn and stare back at it, his brow furrowed in discomfort. Plainly he sensed it, though not as well. *Perhaps this is what we sensed, Nighteyes. Perhaps there is no living creature in the quarry after all, only this monument to slow death.*

No. I smell something.

I widened my nostrils, cleared them with a silent snort, then took in a deep slow breath of air. My nose was not as keen as Nighteyes', but the wolf's senses augmented my own. I smelled sweat and the faint tang of blood. Both were fresh. Suddenly the wolf pressed close to me and as one we slunk around the end of a block of stone the size of two huts.

I peered around the corner, then cautiously crept forth. Nighteyes slipped past me. I saw the Fool round the other end of the stone, and felt the others drawing near as well. No one spoke.

It was another dragon. This one was the size of a ship. It was all of black stone, and it sprawled sleeping upon the block of stone it was emerging from. Chips and chunks and grindings of rock dust surrounded the ground around the block. Even from a distance, it impressed me. Despite its sleep, every line of the creature spoke of both strength and nobility. The wings folded alongside it were like furled sails while the arch of the powerful neck put me in mind of a battle charger. I had looked at it for some moments before I saw the small grey figure that sprawled alongside it. I stared at him and tried to decide if the flickering life I sensed came from him or the stone dragon.

The discarded fragments of stone were almost a ramp up to the block the dragon was emerging from. I thought the figure would stir to my crunching footsteps, but he did not move. Nor could I detect any small motions of breath. The others hung back, watching my ascent. Only Nighteyes accompanied me, and he came hackles a-bristle. I was within arm's reach of the figure when he jerkily arose and faced me.

He was old and thin, grey of both hair and beard. His ragged garments were grey with stone dust, and a smear of grey coated one of his cheeks. The knees that showed through the legs of his trousers were scabbed and bloody

from kneeling on broken stone. His feet were wrapped in rags. He gripped a much-notched sword in a grey-gauntleted hand, but he did not bring it up to the ready. I felt it taxed his strength to hold the blade at all. Some instinct made me lift my arms wide of my body, to show him I held no weapon. He looked at me dully for a bit; then he slowly lifted his eyes to my face. For a time we stared at one another. His peering, near-blind gaze reminded me of Harper Josh. Then his mouth gaped wide in his beard, baring surprisingly white teeth. ‘Fitz?’ he said hesitantly.

I knew his voice, despite the rust. He had to be Verity. But all I was cried out aghast that he could have come to this, this wreckage of a man. Behind me I heard the swift crunching of footsteps and turned in time to see Kettricken charging up the ramp of crumbling stone. Hope and dismay battled in her face, yet, ‘Verity!’ she cried, and there was only love in the word. She charged, arms reaching for him, and I was barely able to catch her as she hurtled past me.

‘No!’ I cried aloud to her. ‘No, don’t touch him!’

‘Verity!’ she cried again, and then struggled against my grip, crying out, ‘Let me go, let me go to him.’ It was all I could do to hold her back.

‘No,’ I told her quietly. As sometimes happens, the softness of my command made her stop struggling. She looked her question at me.

‘His hands and arms are covered with magic. I do not know what would happen to you, were he to touch you.’

She turned her head in my rough embrace to stare at her husband. He stood watching us, a kindly, rather confused smile on his face. He tilted his head to one side as if considering us, then stooped carefully to set down his sword. Kettricken saw then what I had glimpsed before. The betraying shimmer of silver crawled over his forearms and fingers. Verity wore no gauntlets; the flesh of his arms and hands was impregnated with raw power. The smudge on his face was not dust, but a smear of power where he had touched himself.

I heard the others come up behind us, their footsteps crunching slowly over the stone. I did not need to turn to feel them staring. Finally the Fool said softly, ‘Verity, my prince, we have come.’

I heard a sound between a gasp and a sob. That turned my head, and I saw Kettle slowly settling, going down like a holed ship. She clasped one hand to her chest and one to her mouth as she sank to her knees. Her eyes goggled as she stared at Verity’s hands. Starling was instantly beside her. In

my arms, I felt Kettricken calmly push against me. I looked at her stricken face, then let her go. She advanced to Verity a slow step at a time and he watched her come. His face was not impassive, but neither did he show any sign of special recognition. An arm's length away from him, she stopped. All was silence. She stared at him for a time, then slowly shook her head, as if to answer the question she voiced. 'My lord husband, do you not know me?'

'Husband,' he said faintly. His brow creased deeper, his demeanour that of a man who recalls something once learned by rote. 'Princess Kettricken of the Mountain Kingdom. She was given me to wife. Just a little slip of a girl, a wild little mountain cat, yellow-haired. That was all I could recall of her, until they brought her to me.' A faint smile eased his face. 'That night, I unbound golden hair like a flowing stream, finer than silk. So fine I durst not touch it, lest it snag in my callused hands.'

Kettricken's hands rose to her hair. When word had reached her of Verity's death, she had cut her hair to no more than a brush on her skull. It now reached almost to her shoulders, but the fine silk of it was gone, roughened by sun and rain and road-dust. But she freed it from the fat braid that confined it and shook it loose around her face. 'My lord,' she said softly. She glanced from me to Verity. 'May I not touch you?' she begged.

'Oh –' He seemed to consider the request. He glanced down at his arms and hands, flexing his silvery fingers. 'Oh, I think not, I'm afraid. No. No, it were better not.' He spoke regretfully, but I had the sense that it was only that he must refuse her request, not that he regretted being unable to touch her.

Kettricken drew a ragged breath. 'My lord,' she began, and then her voice broke. 'Verity, I lost our child. Our son died.'

I did not understand until then what a burden it had been for her, seeking for her husband, knowing she must tell him this news. She dropped her proud head as if expecting his wrath. What she got was worse.

'Oh,' he said. Then, 'Had we a son? I do not recall ...'

I think that was what broke her, to discover that her earthshaking tidings did not anger nor sorrow him, but only confused him. She had to feel betrayed. Her desperate flight from Buckkeep Castle and all the hardships she had endured to protect her unborn child, the long lonely months of her pregnancy, culminating in the heart-rending stillbirth of her child, and her dread that she must tell her lord how she had failed him: that had been her reality for the past year. And now she stood before her husband and her king,

and he fumbled to recall her and of the dead child said only ‘Oh.’ I felt shamed for this doddering old man who peered at the Queen and smiled so wearily.

Kettricken did not scream or weep. She simply turned and walked slowly away. I sensed great control in that passage, and great anger. Starling, crouched by Kettle, looked up at the Queen as she passed. She started to rise and follow, but Kettricken made a tiny movement of her hand that forbade it. Alone she descended from the great stone dais and strode off.

Go with her?

Please. But do not bother her.

I am not stupid.

Nighteyes left me, to shadow off after Kettricken. Despite my caution to him, I knew he went straight to her, to come up beside her and press his great head against her leg. She dropped suddenly to one knee and hugged him, pushing her face against his coat, her tears falling into his rough fur. He turned and licked her hand. *Go away*, he chided me, and I pulled my awareness back from them. I blinked, realizing I had been staring at Verity all the while. His eyes met mine.

He cleared his throat. ‘FitzChivalry,’ he said, and drew a breath to speak. Then he let half of it out. ‘I am so weary,’ he said piteously. ‘And there is still so much to do.’ He gestured at the dragon behind him. Ponderously he sank, to sit beside the statue. ‘I tried so hard,’ he said to no one in particular.

The Fool recovered his senses before I did mine. ‘My lord Prince Verity,’ he began then paused. ‘My king. It is I, the Fool. May I be of service to you?’

Verity looked up at the slender pale man who stood before him. ‘I would be honoured,’ he said after a moment. His head swayed on his neck. ‘To accept the fealty and service of one who served both my father and my queen so well.’ For an instant I glimpsed something of the old Verity. Then the certainty flickered out of his face again.

The Fool advanced and then knelt suddenly beside him. He patted Verity on the shoulder, sending up a small cloud of rock dust. ‘I will take care of you,’ he said. ‘As I did your father.’ He stood up suddenly and turned to me. ‘I am going to fetch firewood, and find clean water,’ he announced. He glanced past me to the women. ‘Is Kettle all right?’ he asked Starling.

‘She nearly fainted,’ Starling began. But Kettle cut in abruptly with, ‘I was shocked to my core, Fool. And I am in no hurry to stand up. But Starling is free to go and do whatever must be done.’

‘Ah. Good.’ The Fool appeared to have taken complete control of the situation. He sounded as if he were organizing tea. ‘Then, if you would be so kind, Mistress Starling, would you see to the setting up of the tent? Or two tents, if such a thing can be contrived. See what food we have left, and plan a meal. A generous meal, for I think we all need it. I shall return shortly with firewood, and water. And greens, if I am lucky.’ He cast a quick look at me. ‘See to the King,’ he said in a low voice. Then he strode away. Starling was left gaping. Then she arose and went in search of the straying jeppas. Kettle followed her more slowly.

And so, after all that time and travel, I was left standing alone before my king. ‘Come to me’, he had told me, and I had. There was an instant of peace in realizing that that nagging voice was finally stilled. ‘Well, I am here, my king,’ I said quietly, to myself as much as to him.

Verity made no reply. He had turned his back to me and was busy digging at the statue with his sword. He knelt, clutching the sword by the pommel and by the blade and scraped the tip along the stone at the edge of the dragon’s foreleg. I stepped close to watch him scratching at the black rock of the dais. His face was so intent, his movement so precise that I did not know what to make of it. ‘Verity, what are you doing?’ I asked softly.

He did not even glance up at me. ‘Carving a dragon,’ he replied.

Several hours later, he still toiled at the same task. The monotonous scrape, scrape, scrape of the blade against the stone set my teeth on edge and shredded every nerve in my body. I had remained on the dais with him. Starling and the Fool had set up our tent, and a second smaller one cobbled together from our now excess winter blankets. A fire was burning. Kettle presided over a bubbling pot. The Fool was sorting the greens and roots he had gathered while Starling arranged bedding in the tents. Kettricken had rejoined us briefly, but only to get her bow and quiver from the jeppas’ packs. She had announced she was going hunting with Nighteyes. He had given me one lambent glance from his dark eyes, and I had held my tongue.

I knew but little more than I had when we had first found Verity. His Skill walls were high and tight. I received almost no sense of the Skill from him. What I discovered when I quested toward him was even more unnerving. I grasped the fluttering Wit-sense I had of him, but could not

understand it. It was as if his life and awareness fluctuated between his body and the great statue of the dragon. I recalled the last time I had encountered such a thing. It had been between the Wit-man and his bear. They had shared the same flowing of life. I suspected that if anyone had quested toward the wolf and me, they would discover the same sort of pattern. We had shared minds for so long that in some ways we were one creature. But that did not explain to me how Verity could have bonded with a statue, nor why he persisted in scraping at it with his sword. I longed to grab hold of the sword and snatch it from his grasp, but I refrained. In truth, he seemed so obsessed with what he did that I almost feared to interrupt him.

Earlier I had tried asking him questions. When I asked him what had become of those who left with him, he had shaken his head slowly. 'They harried us as a flock of crows will haunt an eagle. Coming close, squawking and pecking, and fleeing when we turned to attack them.' 'Crows?' I had asked him, blankly.

He shook his head at my stupidity. 'Hired soldiers. They shot at us from cover. They came at us at night, sometimes. And some of my men were baffled by the coterie's Skill. I could not shield the minds of those who were susceptible. Night fears they sent to stalk them, and suspicion of one another. So I bid them go back; I pressed my own Skill-command into their minds, to save them from any other.' It was almost the only question he truly answered. Of the others I asked, he did not choose to answer many, and the answers he did give were either inappropriate or evasive. So I gave it up. Instead, I found myself reporting to him. It was a long accounting, for I began with the day I had watched him ride away. Much of what I told him, I was sure he already knew, but I repeated it anyway. If his mind was wandering, as I feared, it might anchor him to refresh his memory. And if my king's mind was as sharp as ever beneath this dusty demeanour, then it could not hurt for all the events to be put in perspective and order. I could think of no other way to reach him.

I had begun it, I think, to try to make him realize all we had gone through to be here. Also, I wished to awaken him to what was happening in his kingdom while he loitered here with his dragon. Perhaps I hoped to wake in him some sense of responsibility for his folk again. As I spoke, he seemed dispassionate, but occasionally he would nod gravely, as if I had confirmed some secret fear of his. And all the time the sword tip moved against the black stone, scrape, scrape, scrape.

It was verging on full dark when I heard the scuff of Kettle's footsteps behind me. I paused in recounting my adventures in the ruined city and turned to look at her. 'I've brought you both some hot tea,' she announced.

'Thank you,' I said, and took my mug from her, but Verity only glanced up from his perpetual scraping.

For a time, Kettle stood proffering the cup to Verity. When she spoke, it was not to remind him of tea. 'What are you doing?' she asked in a gentle voice.

The scraping stopped abruptly. He turned to stare at her, then glanced at me as if to see if I, too, had heard her ridiculous question. The querying look I wore seemed to amaze him. He cleared his throat. 'I am carving a dragon.'

'With your sword blade?' she asked. In her tone was curiosity, no more.

'Only the rough parts,' he told her. 'For the finer work, I use my knife. And then, for finest of all, my fingers and nails.' He turned his head slowly, surveying the immense statue. 'I would like to say it is nearly done,' he said falteringly. 'But how can I say that when there is still so much to do? So very much to do ... and I fear it will all be too late. If it is not already too late.'

'Too late for what?' I asked him, my voice as gentle as Kettle's had been.

'Why ... too late to save the folk of the Six Duchies.' He peered at me as if I were simple. 'Why else would I be doing it? Why else would I leave my land and my queen, to come here?'

I tried to grasp what he was telling me, but one overwhelming question popped out of my mouth. 'You believe you have carved this whole dragon?'

Verity considered. 'No. Of course not.' But just as I felt relief that he was not completely mad, he added, 'It isn't finished yet.' He looked again over his dragon with the fondly proud look he had once reserved for his best maps. 'But even this much has taken me a long time. A very long time.'

'Won't you drink your tea while it's hot, sir?' Kettle asked, once more proffering the cup.

Verity looked at it as if it were a foreign object. Then he took it gravely from her hand. 'Tea. I had almost forgotten about tea. Not elfbark, is it? Eda's mercy, how I hated that bitter brew!'

Kettle almost winced to hear him speak of it. 'No, sir, no elfbark, I promise you. It is made from wayside herbs, I'm afraid. Mostly nettle, and a bit of mint.'

‘Nettle tea. My mother used to give us nettle tea as a spring tonic.’ He smiled to himself. ‘I will put that in my dragon. My mother’s nettle tea.’ He took a sip of it, and then looked startled. ‘It’s warm ... it has been so long since I had time to eat anything warm.’

‘How long?’ Kettle asked him conversationally.

‘A ... long time,’ Verity said. He took another sip of the tea. ‘There are fish in a stream, outside the quarry. But it is hard enough to take time to catch them, let alone cook them. Actually, I forget. I have put so many things into the dragon ... perhaps that was one of them.’

‘And how long since you slept?’ Kettle pressed him.

‘I cannot both work and sleep,’ he pointed out to her. ‘And the work must be done.’

‘And the work shall be done,’ she promised him. ‘But tonight you will pause, just for a bit, to eat and drink. And then to sleep. See? Look down there. Starling has made you a tent, and within it will be warm, soft bedding. And warmed water, to wash yourself. And such fresh clothing as we can manage.’

He looked down at his silvered hands. ‘I do not know if I can wash myself,’ he confided to her.

‘Then FitzChivalry and the Fool will help you,’ she promised him blithely.

‘Thank you. That would be good. But ...’ His eyes went afar for a time. ‘Kettricken. Was not she here, a while ago? Or did I dream her? So much of her was what was strongest, so I put it into the dragon. I think that is what I have missed the most, of all I have put there.’ He paused and then added, ‘At the times when I can recall what I miss.’

‘Kettricken is here,’ I assured him. ‘She has gone hunting, but she will return soon. Would you like to be washed and freshly clothed when she returns?’ I had privately resolved to respond to the parts of his conversation that made sense, and not upset him by questioning the other parts.

‘That one sees past such things,’ he told me, a shade of pride in his voice. ‘Still, it would be nice ... but there is so much work to do.’

‘But it is getting too dark to work any more today. Wait until tomorrow. It will get done,’ Kettle assured him. ‘Tomorrow, I will help you.’

Verity shook his head slowly. He sipped more of the tea. Even that thin beverage seemed to be strengthening him. ‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘I am afraid you cannot. I must do it myself, you see.’

‘Tomorrow, you will see. I think, if you have strength enough by then, then it may be possible for me to help you. But we shall not worry about it until then.’

He sighed and offered the empty mug back to her. Instead, she quickly gripped his upper arm and drew him to his feet. She was strong for such an old woman. She did not seek to take the sword from his grasp, but he let it fall. I stooped to gather it up. He followed Kettle docilely, as if her simple act of taking his arm had deprived him of all will. As I followed, I ran my eyes down the blade that had been Hod’s pride. I wondered what had possessed Verity to take such a kingly weapon and turn it into a rock-carving tool. The edges were turned and notched from the misuse, the tip no more pointed than a spoon. The sword was much like the man, I reflected, and followed them down to the camp.

When we got down to the fireside, I was almost shocked to see that Kettricken had returned. She sat by the fire, staring dispassionately into it. Nighteyes lay almost across her feet. His ears pricked toward me as I approached the fire, but he made no move to leave the Queen.

Kettle guided Verity directly to the makeshift tent that had been pitched for him. She nodded to the Fool, and without a word he took up a steaming basin of water from beside the fire and followed her. When I ventured to enter the tiny tent also, the Fool shooed both me and Kettle away. ‘He will not be the first king I have tended to,’ he reminded us. ‘Trust him to me.’

‘Touch not his hands nor forearms!’ Kettle warned him sternly. The Fool looked a bit taken aback by that, but after a moment he gave a bobbing nod of agreement. As I left he was untying the much-knotted thong that closed Verity’s worn jerkin, speaking all the while of inconsequential things. I heard Verity observe, ‘I have missed Charim so. I should never have let him come with me, but he had served me so long ... He died slowly, with much pain. That was hard for me, watching him die. But, he, too, has gone into the dragon. It was necessary.’

I felt awkward when I returned to the fire. Starling was stirring the pot of stew that was bubbling merrily. A large chunk of meat on a spit was dripping fat into the fire, making the flames leap and hiss. The smell of it reminded me of my hunger so that my belly growled. Kettle was standing, her back to the fire, staring off into darkness. Kettricken’s eyes flickered toward me.

‘So,’ I said suddenly, ‘how was the hunting?’

‘As you see,’ Kettricken said softly. She gestured at the pot, and then tossed a hand casually to indicate a butchered out wood-sow. I stepped over to admire it. It was not a small animal.

‘Dangerous prey,’ I observed, trying to sound casual rather than horrified that my queen would take on such a beast alone.

‘It was what I needed to hunt,’ she said, her voice still soft. I understood her only too well.

It was very good hunting. Never have I taken so much meat with so little effort, Nighteyes told me. He rubbed the side of his head against her leg in true affection. She dropped a hand to pull gently at his ears. He groaned in pleasure and leaned heavily against her.

‘You’ll spoil him,’ I mock-warned her. ‘He tells me he has never taken so much meat with so little effort.’

‘He is so intelligent. I swear, he drove the game toward me. And he has courage. When my first arrow did not drop her, he held her at bay while I nocked another one to my bow.’ She spoke as if she had nothing else on her mind but this. I nodded to her words, content to let our conversation be thus. But she suddenly asked me, ‘What is wrong with him?’

I knew she did not speak of the wolf. ‘I am not sure,’ I said gently. ‘He has known a great deal of privation. Perhaps enough to ... weaken his mind. And ...’

‘No.’ Kettle’s voice was brusque. ‘That is not it at all. Though I will grant you he is weary. Any man would be, to do what he has done alone. But —’

‘You cannot believe he has carved that whole dragon himself!’ I interrupted her.

‘I do,’ the old woman replied with certainty. ‘It is as he told you. He must do it himself, and so he has done it.’ She shook her head slowly. ‘Never have I heard such a thing. Even King Wisdom had the help of his coterie, or what was left of it when he reached here.’

‘No one could have carved that statue with a sword,’ I said stubbornly. What she was saying was nonsense.

For answer, she rose and stalked off into the darkness. When she returned, she dropped two objects at my feet. One had been a chisel, once. Its head was peened over into a lump, its blade gone to nothing. The other was an ancient iron mallet head, with a relatively new wooden handle set

into it. 'There are others, scattered about. He probably found them in the city. Or discarded hereabouts,' she observed before I could ask the question.

I stared at the battered tools, and considered all the months that Verity had been gone. For this? For the carving of a stone dragon?

'I don't understand,' I said faintly.

Kettle spoke clearly, as if I were slow. 'He has been carving a dragon, and storing all his memories in it. That is part of why he seems so vague. But there is more. I believe he used the Skill to kill Carrod, and has taken grievous hurt in so doing.' She shook her head sadly. 'To have come so close to finishing, and then to be defeated. I wonder how sly Regal's coterie is. Did they send one against him, knowing that if Verity killed with the Skill, he might defeat himself?'

'I do not think any of that coterie would willingly sacrifice himself.'

Kettle smiled bitterly. 'I did not say he was willingly sent. Nor did I say he knew what his fellows intended. It is like the game of stones, FitzChivalry. One plays each stone to best advantage in the game. The object is to win, not to hoard one's stones.'

THIRTY-FOUR

Girl on a Dragon

Early in our resistance to the Red Ships, before anyone in the Six Duchies had begun to call it a war, King Shrewd and Prince Verity realized that the task facing them was overwhelming. No individual man, no matter how Skilled, could stand alone to fend the Red Ships from our coasts. King Shrewd summoned before him Galen, the Skillmaster, and directed him to create for Verity a coterie to aid the prince's efforts. Galen resisted this idea, especially when he found that one of those he must train was a royal bastard. The Skillmaster declared that none of the students presented to him were worthy of training. But King Shrewd insisted, telling him to make the best of them that he could. When Galen grudgingly gave in, he created the coterie that bore his name.

It soon became apparent to Prince Verity that the coterie, while internally cohesive, did not work well with the Prince at all. By then Galen had died, leaving Buckkeep with no successor to the post of Skillmaster. In desperation, Verity sought for others trained in the Skill who might come to his aid. Although there had been no coterie created in the peaceful years of King Shrewd's reign, Verity reasoned that there might still live men and women trained for coterie before that. Had not the longevity of coterie members always been legendary? Perhaps he could find one who would either help him, or be able to train others in the Skill.

But Prince Verity's efforts in this area availed him nothing. Those he could identify as Skill-users from records and word of mouth were all either dead, or mysteriously vanished. So Prince Verity was left to wage his war alone.

Before I could press Kettle to clarify her answers, there was a cry from Verity's tent. Every one of us jumped, but Kettle was the first to the tent flap. The Fool emerged, gripping his left wrist in his right hand. He went straight to the water bucket and plunged in his hand. His face was contorted with either pain or fear, perhaps both. Kettle stalked after him to peer at the hand he gripped.

She shook her head in disgust. 'I warned you! Here, take it out of the water, it won't do it any good. Nothing will do it any good. Stop. Think about it. It's not really pain, it's just a sensation you've never felt before. Take a breath. Relax. Accept it. Accept it. Breathe deep, breathe deep.'

All the while she spoke, she tugged at the Fool's arm until he reluctantly drew his hand from the water. Kettle immediately overset the bucket with her foot. She scuffed rock dust and gravel over the spilled water, all the while gripping the Fool's arm. I craned my neck to peer past her. His first three fingers on his left hand were now tipped with silver. He looked at them with a shudder. I had never seen the Fool so unnerved.

Kettle spoke firmly. 'It won't wash off. It won't wipe off. It's with you now, so accept it. Accept it.'

'Does it hurt?' I asked anxiously.

'Don't ask him that!' Kettle snapped at me. 'Don't ask him anything just now. See to the King, FitzChivalry, and leave the Fool to me.'

In my worry over the Fool, I had all but forgotten my king. I stooped to enter the tent. Verity sat on two folded blankets. He was struggling to lace up one of my shirts. I deduced that Starling had ransacked all the packs to find clean clothes for him. It smote me to see him so thin that one of my shirts fit him.

'Allow me, my king,' I suggested.

He not only dropped his hands away, he put them behind his back. 'Is the Fool much hurt?' he asked me as I fought with the knotted strings. He sounded almost like my old Verity.

'Just three fingertips are silvered,' I told him. I saw that the Fool had laid out a brush and thong. I stepped behind Verity, and began to brush his hair back. He hastily snatched his hands around in front of him. Some of the grey in his hair had been rock dust, but not all. His warrior's queue was now grey with black streaks in it and coarse as a horse's tail. I struggled to smooth it back. As I tied the thong I asked him, 'What does it feel like?'

'These?' he asked, holding up his hands and waggling the fingers. 'Oh. Like Skill. Only more so, and on my hands and arms.'

I saw he thought he had answered my question. 'Why did you do it?' I asked.

'Well, to work the stone, you know. When this power is on my hands, the stone must obey the Skill. Extraordinary stone. Like the Witness Stones in Buck, did you know that? Only they are not nearly as pure as what is here.'

Of course, hands are poor tools for working stone. But once you have cut away all the excess, down to where the dragon waits, then he can be awakened with your touch. I draw my hands over the stone, and I recall to it the dragon. And all that is not dragon shivers away in shards and chips. Very slowly, of course. It took a whole day just to reveal his eyes.'

'I see,' I murmured, at a loss. I did not know whether he was mad or if I believed him.

He stood up as far as he could in the low tent. 'Is Kettricken angry with me?' he asked abruptly.

'My lord king, it is not for me to say ...'

'Verity,' he interrupted wearily. 'Call me Verity, and for Eda's sake, answer the question, Fitz.'

He sounded so like his old self I wanted to embrace him. Instead, I said, 'I do not know if she is angry. She is definitely hurt. She came a long and weary way to find you, bearing terrible news. And you did not seem to care.'

'I care, when I think of it,' he said gravely. 'When I think of it, I grieve. But there are so many things I must think of, and I cannot think of them all at once. I knew when the child died, Fitz. How could I not know? He, too, and all I felt, I have put into the dragon.'

He walked slowly away from me, and I followed him out of the tent. Outside, he stood up straight, but did not lose the stoop in his shoulders. Verity was an old man now, far older than Chade somehow. I did not understand that, but I knew it was true. Kettricken glanced up at his approach. She looked back into the fire, and then, almost unwillingly she stood, stepping clear of the sleeping wolf. Kettle and Starling were binding the Fool's fingers in strips of cloth. Verity went straight to Kettricken and stood beside her. 'My queen,' he said gravely. 'If I could, I would embrace you. But you have seen that my touch ...' He gestured at the Fool and let his words trail away.

I had seen the look on her face when she had told Verity about the stillbirth. I expected her to turn aside from him, to hurt him as he had hurt her. But Kettricken's heart was larger than that. 'Oh, my husband,' she said, and her voice broke on the words. He held his silvered arms wide, and she came to him, taking him in her embrace. He bowed his grey head over the rough gold of her hair, but could not allow his hand to touch her. He turned his silvered cheek away from her. His voice was husky and broken as he asked her, 'Did you give him a name? Our son?'

‘I named him according to the customs of your land.’ She took a breath. The word was so soft I scarce heard it. ‘Sacrifice,’ she breathed. She clung to him tightly and I saw his thin shoulders convulse in a sob.

‘Fitz!’ Kettle hissed at me sharply. I turned to find her scowling at me. ‘Leave them alone,’ she whispered. ‘Make yourself useful. Get a plate for the Fool.’

I had been staring at them. I turned away, shamed to have been gawking, but glad to see them embrace, even in sorrow. I did as Kettle had ordered, getting food for myself at the same time. I took the plate to the Fool. He sat cradling his injured hand in his lap.

He looked up as I sat beside him. ‘It doesn’t rub off on anything else,’ he complained. ‘Why did it cling to my fingers?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Because you’re alive,’ Kettle said succinctly. She sat down across from us as if we needed supervising.

‘Verity told me he can shape rock with his fingers because of the Skill on them,’ I told her.

‘Is your tongue hinged in the middle so that it flaps at both ends? You talk too much!’ Kettle rebuked me.

‘Perhaps I would not talk too much if you spoke a bit more,’ I replied. ‘Rock is not alive.’

She looked at me. ‘You know that, do you? Well, what is the point of my talking when you already know everything?’ She attacked her food as if it had done her a personal wrong.

Starling joined us. She sat down beside me, her plate on her knees, and said, ‘I don’t understand about the silvery stuff on his hands. What is it?’

The Fool snickered into his plate like a naughty child when Kettle glared at her. But I was getting tired of Kettle’s evasions. ‘What does it feel like?’ I asked the Fool.

He glanced down at his bandaged fingers. ‘Not pain. Very sensitive. I can feel the weave of the threads in the bandages.’ His eyes started to get distant. He smiled. ‘I can see the man who wove it, and I know the woman who spun it. The sheep on the hillside, rain falling on their thick wool, and the grass they ate ... wool is from grass, Fitz. A shirt woven from grass. No, there is more. The soil, black and rich and ...’

‘Stop it!’ Kettle said harshly. And she turned to me angrily. ‘And you stop asking him, Fitz. Unless you want him to follow it too far and be lost

forever.’ She gave the Fool a sharp poke. ‘Eat your food.’

‘How is it you know so much about the Skill?’ Starling suddenly asked her.

‘Not you, too!’ Kettle angrily declared. ‘Is there nothing private any more?’

‘Among us? Not much,’ the Fool replied, but he was not looking at her. He was watching Kettricken, her face still puffy from weeping, as she dished up food for herself and Verity. Her worn and stained clothing, her rough hair and chapped hands and the simple, homely task she performed for her husband should have made her seem like any woman. But I looked at her and saw perhaps the strongest queen that Buckkeep had ever known.

I watched Verity wince slightly as he took from her hand the simple wooden dish and spoon. He shut his eyes a moment, struggling against the pull of the implement’s history. He composed his face and took a mouthful of food. Even across camp from him, I felt the sudden awakening of plain hunger. It was not just hot food he had been long without, it was solid sustenance of any kind. He took a shuddering breath and began to eat like a starved wolf.

Kettle was watching him. A look of pity crossed her face. ‘No. Very little privacy left for any of us,’ she said sadly.

‘The sooner we get him back to Jhaampe, the sooner he can get better,’ Starling said soothingly. ‘Should we start tomorrow, do you think? Or give him a few days of food and rest to rebuild his strength?’

‘We shall not be taking him back to Jhaampe,’ Kettle said, an undercurrent of sadness in her voice. ‘He has begun a dragon. He cannot leave it.’ She looked around at us levelly. ‘The only thing we can do for him now is stay here and help him finish it.’

‘With Red Ships torching the entire coastline of the Six Duchies and Farrow attacking the Mountains, we should stay here and help the King carve a dragon?’ Starling was incredulous.

‘Yes. If we want to save the Six Duchies and the Mountains, that is exactly what we should do. Now, you will excuse me. I think I shall put on more meat to cook. Our king looks as if he could use it.’

I set my empty plate aside. ‘We should probably cook it all. In this weather, meat will sour fast,’ I said unwisely.

I spent the next hour butchering the pig into portions that could dry-cook over the fire all night. Nighteyes awoke and helped dispose of scraps

until his belly was distended. Kettricken and Verity sat talking quietly. I tried not to watch them, but even so, I was aware that his gaze frequently strayed from her to the dais where his dragon crouched over us. The low rumble of his voice was hesitant, and often died away altogether until prompted by another question from Kettricken.

The Fool was amusing himself by touching things with his Skill-fingers; a bowl, a knife, the cloth of his shirt. He met Kettle's scowls with a benign smile. 'I'm being careful,' he told her once.

'You have no idea of how to be careful,' she complained. 'You won't know you've lost your way until you're gone.' She got up from our butchery with a grunt and insisted on rebandaging his fingers. After that, she and Starling left together to get more firewood. The wolf got up with a groan and followed them.

Kettricken helped Verity into the tent. After a moment she reappeared to go into the main tent. She emerged carrying her bedding. She caught my quick glance and abashed me by meeting my eyes squarely. 'I have taken your long mittens from your pack, Fitz,' she told me calmly. Then she joined Verity in the smaller tent. The Fool and I looked everywhere except at each other.

I went back to my cutting on the meat. I was tired of it. The smell of the pig was suddenly the smell of something dead rather than that of fresh meat and I had smears of sticky blood up to my elbows. The worn cuffs of my shirt were soaked with it. I continued doggedly with my task. The Fool came to crouch beside me.

'When my fingers brushed Verity's arm, I knew him,' he said suddenly. 'I knew he was a worthy king for me to follow, as worthy as his father before him. I know what he intends,' he added in a lower voice. 'It was too much for me to grasp at first, but I have been sitting and thinking. And it fits in with my dream about Realdar.'

A shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with chill. 'What?' I demanded.

'The dragons are the Elderlings,' the Fool said softly. 'But Verity could not wake them. So he carves his own dragon, and when it is finished, he will waken it, and then he will go forth to fight the Red Ships. Alone.'

Alone. That word struck me. Once again, Verity expected to fight the Red Ships alone. But there was too much I didn't quite grasp. 'All the Elderlings were dragons?' I asked. My mind went back to all the fanciful

drawings and weavings of Elderlings I had ever seen. Some had been dragon-like, but ...

‘No. The Elderlings *are* dragons. Those carved creatures back in the stone garden. Those are the Elderlings. King Wisdom was able to wake them in his time, to rouse them and recruit them to his cause. They came to life for him. But now they either sleep too deeply or they are dead. Verity spent much of his strength trying to rouse them in every way he could think of. And when he could not, he decided that he would have to make his own Elderling, and quicken it, and use it to fight the Red Ships.’

I sat stunned. I thought of the Wit-life both the wolf and I had sensed crawling through those stones. With a sudden pang, I remembered the trapped anguish of the girl on a dragon statue in this very quarry. Living stone, trapped and flightless forever. I shuddered. It was a different kind of dungeon.

‘How is it done?’

The Fool shook his head. ‘I don’t know. I don’t think Verity himself knows. He blunders toward it, blind and groping. He shapes the stone, and gives it his memories. And when it is finished, it will come to life. I suppose.’

‘Do you hear what you are saying?’ I asked him. ‘Stone is going to rise and defend the Six Duchies from the Red Ships. And what of Regal’s troops and the border skirmishes with the Mountain Kingdom? Will this “dragon” drive them off as well?’ Slow anger was building in me. ‘This is what we have come all this way for? For a tale I would not expect a child to believe?’

The Fool looked mildly affronted. ‘Believe it or not as you choose. I but know that Verity believes it. Unless I am much mistaken, Kettle believes it as well. Why else would she insist we must stay here, and help Verity complete the dragon?’

For a time, I pondered this. Then I asked him, ‘Your dream about Realdar’s dragon. What do you recall of it?’

He gave a helpless shrug. ‘The feelings of it, mostly. I was exuberant and joyful, for not only was I announcing Realdar’s dragon, but he was going to fly me on it. I felt I was a bit in love with him, you know. That sort of lift to the heart. But ...’ he faltered. ‘I cannot recall if I loved Realdar or his dragon. In my dream, they are mingled ... I think. Recalling dreams is so hard. One must seize them as soon as one awakes, and quickly repeat them to oneself, to harden the details. Otherwise they fade so quickly.’

‘But in your dream, did a stone dragon fly?’

‘I was announcing the dragon in my dream, and knew I was to fly upon it. I had not yet seen it, in my dream.’

‘Then maybe it has nothing to do at all with what Verity does. Perhaps, in the time from which your dream came, there were real dragons, of flesh and blood.’

He looked at me curiously. ‘You do not believe there are real dragons, today?’

‘I have never seen one.’

‘In the city,’ he pointed out quietly.

‘That was a vision of a different time. You said today.’

He held one of his own pale hands up to the firelight. ‘I think they are like my kind. Rare, but not mythical. Besides, if there were no dragons of flesh and blood and fire, whence would come the idea for these stone carvings?’

I shook my head wearily. ‘This conversation goes in circles. I am tired of riddles and guesses and beliefs. I want to know what is real. I want to know why we came all this way, and what it is we must do.’

But the Fool had no answers to that. When Kettle and Starling got back with the wood, he helped me layer the fire and arrange the meat where the heat would drive the fat from it. What meat we could not set to cook, we bundled aside in the pigskin. There was a sizeable pile of bones and scraps. Despite how he had gorged earlier, Nighteyes settled down with a leg bone to gnaw. I surmised he had regurgitated part of his bellyful somewhere.

There is no such thing as having too much meat in reserve, he told me contentedly.

I made a few attempts to needle Kettle into talking to me, but somehow it evolved into a lecture on how much more aware of the Fool I must be now. He must be protected, not only from Regal’s coterie, but from the Skill-pull of objects that might take his mind wandering. For that reason, she wished us to stand our watches together. She insisted the Fool must sleep on his back, his bared fingers upturned so they touched nothing. As the Fool usually slept huddled in a ball, he was not overly pleased. But at last we settled for the night.

I was not due to take my watch until the hours before dawn. But it was short of that when the wolf came to push his nose under my cheek and jog my head until I opened my eyes.

‘What?’ I demanded tiredly.

Kettricken walks alone, weeping.

I doubted she would want my company. I also doubted that she should be alone. I rose noiselessly and followed the wolf out of the tent. Outside, Kettle sat by the fire, poking disconsolately at the meat. I knew she must have seen the Queen leave, so I did not dissemble.

‘I’m going to go find Kettricken.’

‘Probably a good idea,’ she said quietly. ‘She told me she was going to look at his dragon, but she has been gone longer than that.’

We needed to say no more about it. I followed Nighteyes as he trotted purposefully away from the fire. But he led me, not toward Verity’s dragon, but back through the quarry. There was little moonlight, and what there was the looming black blocks of stone seemed to drink away. Shadows seemed to fall in all different directions, altering perspective. The need for caution made the quarry vast as I picked my way along in the wolf’s wake.

My skin prickled as I realized we were going in the direction of the pillar. But we found her before we reached there. She was standing, motionless as the stone itself, by the girl on the dragon. She had clambered up onto the block of stone that mired the dragon, and reached up to lay a hand on the girl’s leg. A trick of the moonlight made it look as if the girl’s stone eyes looked down at her. Light sparkled silver on a stone tear, and glistened on the tears on Kettricken’s face. Nighteyes padded lightly up, leaped weightlessly upon the dais and leaned his head against Kettricken’s leg with a tiny whine.

‘Hush,’ she told him softly. ‘Listen. Can you hear her weeping? I can.’

I did not doubt it, for I could feel her questing out with the Wit, more strongly than I had ever sensed it from her before.

‘My lady,’ I said quietly.

She startled, her hand flying to her mouth as she turned to me.

‘I beg your pardon. I did not mean to frighten you. But you should not be out here alone. Kettle fears there may still be danger from the coterie, and we are not so far from the pillar.’

She smiled bitterly. ‘Wherever I am, I am alone. Nor can I think of anything they could do to me worse than what I have done to myself.’

‘That is only because you do not know them as well as I do. Please, my queen, come back to the camp with me.’

She moved and I thought she would step down to me. Instead she sat down and leaned back against the dragon. My Wit-sense of the dragon-girl's misery was echoed by Kettricken's. 'I just wanted to lie beside him,' she said quietly. 'To hold him. And to be held. To be held, Fitz. To feel ... not safe. I know none of us are safe. But to feel valued. Loved. I did not expect more than that. But he would not. He said he could not touch me. That he dared not touch anything live save his dragon.' She turned her head aside. 'Even with his hands and arms gloved, he would not touch me.'

I found myself clambering up the dais. I took her by the shoulders and drew her to her feet. 'He would if he could,' I told her. 'This I know. He would if he could.'

She lifted her hands to cover her face, and her silent sliding tears suddenly became sobs. She spoke through them. 'You ... and your Skill. And him. You speak so easily of knowing what he feels. Of love. But I ... I don't have that. I am only ... I need to feel it, Fitz. I need to feel his arms about me, to be close to him. To believe he loves me. As I love him. After I have failed him in so many ways. How can I believe ... when he refuses to even ...' I put my arms about her and drew her head down on my shoulder, while Nighteyes leaned up against both of us and keened softly.

'He loves you,' I told her. 'He does. But fate has laid this burden upon both of you. It must be borne.'

'Sacrifice,' she breathed, and I did not know if she named her child or defined her life. She continued to weep, and I held her, soothing her hair and telling her it would get better, it had to be better someday, there would be a life for them when all this was over, and children, children growing up safe from Red Ships or Regal's evil ambitions. In time I felt her quiet, and realized it was Wit as much as words I had been giving her. The feeling I had for her had mingled with the wolf's and joined us. Gentler than a Skill-bond, more warm and natural, I held her in my heart as much as in my arms. Nighteyes pressed up against her, telling her he would guard her, that his meat would ever be her meat, that she need fear nothing that had teeth, for we were pack, and always would be.

It was she who finally broke the embrace. She gave a final shuddering sigh, and then stepped apart from me. Her hand rose to smear the wetness on her cheeks. 'Oh, Fitz,' she said, simply, sadly. And that was all. I stood still, feeling the chill apartness where for a time we had been together. A sudden pang of loss assailed me. And then a shiver of fear as I realized its source.

The girl on the dragon had shared our embrace, her Wit-misery briefly consoled by our closeness. Now, as we drew apart, the far, chill wailing of the stone rose up again, louder and stronger. I tried to leap lightly down from the dais, but as I landed I staggered and nearly fell. Somehow that joining had drawn strength from me. It was frightening, but I masked my uneasiness as I silently accompanied Kettricken back to the camp.

I was just in time to relieve Kettle on watch. She and Kettricken went to sleep, promising to send the Fool out to stand watch with me. The wolf gave me an apologetic glance and then followed Kettricken into the tent. I assured him I approved. A moment later the Fool emerged, rubbing his eyes with his left hand and carrying his right lightly curled against his chest. He took a seat on a stone across from me as I looked over the meat to see which pieces needed turning. For a time he watched me silently. Then he stooped, and with his right hand, picked up a piece of firewood. I knew I should rebuke him, but instead I watched, as curious as he. After a moment, he tucked the wood into the fire and straightened. 'Quiet and lovely,' he told me. 'Some forty years of growing, winter and summer, storm and fair weather. And before that, it was borne as a nut by another tree. And so the thread goes back, over and over. I do not think I need fear much from natural things, only those that have been wrought by man. Then the threads go ravelling out. But trees, I think, will be pleasant to touch.'

'Kettle said you should touch no live things,' I reminded him like a tattling child.

'Kettle has not to live with this. I do. I must discover the limits it places on me. The sooner I find what I can and cannot do with my right hand, the better.' He grinned wickedly, and made a suggestive gesture toward himself.

I shook my head at him, but could not keep from laughing.

He joined my laughter with my own. 'Ah, Fitz,' he said quietly a moment later, 'you do not know how much it means to me that I can still make you laugh. If I can stir you to laughter, I can laugh myself.'

'It surprises me that you can still jest at all,' I replied.

'When you can either laugh or cry, you might as well laugh,' he replied. Abruptly he asked, 'I heard you leave the tent earlier. Then, while you were gone ... I could feel something of what happened. Where did you go? There was much I did not understand.'

I was silent, thinking. 'The Skill-bond between us may be growing stronger instead of weaker. I do not think that is a good thing.'

‘There is no elfbark left. I had the last of it two days ago. Good or bad, it is as it is. Now explain to me what happened.’

I saw little point in refusing. So I attempted to explain. He interrupted with a number of questions, few of which I could answer. When he decided he understood it as well as words could convey it, he quirked a smile at me. ‘Let us go see this girl on a dragon,’ he suggested.

‘Why?’ I asked warily.

He lifted his right hand and waggled his silver fingertips at me as he lifted one eyebrow.

‘No,’ I said firmly.

‘Afraid?’ he needled me.

‘We are on watch here,’ I told him severely.

‘Then you will go with me tomorrow,’ he suggested.

‘It is not wise, Fool. Who knows what effect it might have on you?’

‘Not I. And that is exactly why I wish to do it. Besides. What call has a Fool to be wise?’

‘No.’

‘Then I shall have to go alone,’ he said with a mock sigh.

I refused to rise to the bait. After a moment, he asked me, ‘What is it you know about Kettle that I do not?’

I looked at him uncomfortably. ‘About as much as I know about you that she does not.’

‘Ah. That was well spoken. Those words could have been stolen from me,’ he conceded. ‘Do you wonder why the coterie has not tried to attack us again?’ he asked next.

‘Is this your night to ask unfortunate questions?’ I demanded.

‘Of late, I have no other kind.’

‘At the very least, I dare to hope that Carrod’s death has weakened them. It must be a great shock to lose a member of your coterie. Almost as bad as losing a Wit-beast companion.’

‘And what do you fear?’ the Fool pressed.

It was a question I had been pushing away from myself. ‘What do I fear? The worst, of course. What I fear is that they are somehow marshalling greater strength against us, to offset Verity’s power. Or perhaps they are setting a trap for us. I fear they are turning their Skill to seeking out Molly.’ I added the last with great reluctance. It seemed the greatest bad luck even to think about it, let alone speak it aloud.

‘Cannot you Skill a warning to her somehow?’

As if it had never occurred to me. ‘Not without betraying her. I have never been able to reach Burrich with the Skill. Sometimes, I am able to see them, but I cannot make them aware of me. I fear that even making the effort might be enough to expose her to the coterie. He may know of her, but not know where she is. You told me that not even Chade himself knew where she was. And Regal has many places to send his troops and attention. Buck is far from Farrow, and the Red Ships have kept it in turmoil. Surely he would not send troops into that for the sake of finding one girl.’

‘One girl and a Farseer child,’ the Fool reminded me gravely. ‘Fitz. I do not speak to grieve you, but only to warn you. I have contained his anger at you. That night, when they held me ...’ He swallowed and his eyes went distant. ‘I have tried so hard to forget it. If I touch those memories at all, they seethe and burn within me like a poison I cannot be rid of. I have felt Regal’s very being inside my own. Hatred for you squirms through him like maggots through rotting meat.’ He shook his head, sickened at recalling it. ‘The man is mad. He ascribes to you every evil ambition he can imagine. Your Wit he regards with loathing, and terror. He cannot conceive that what you do, you do for Verity. In his mind, you have devoted your life to injuring him since you came to Buckkeep. He believes that both Verity and you have come to these Mountains not to wake the Elderlings to defend Buck, but to find some Skill-treasure or power to use against him. He believes he has no choice but to act first, to find whatever it is you seek and turn it against you. To that, he bends all his resources and determination.’

I listened to the Fool in a sort of frozen horror. His eyes had taken on the stare of a man who recalls torture. ‘Why have you not spoken of this to me before?’ I asked him gently when he paused to catch his breath. The skin of his arms was standing up in gooseflesh.

He looked away from me. ‘It is not a thing I enjoy recalling.’ He was trembling very lightly. ‘They were in my mind like evil, idle children, smashing what they could not grasp. I could keep nothing back from them. But they were not interested in me at all. They regarded me as less than a dog. Angry, in that moment of finding I was not you. They nearly destroyed me because I was not you. Then they considered how they might use me against you.’ He coughed. ‘If that Skill-wave had not come ...’

I felt like Chade himself as I said quietly, ‘Now I will turn that back upon them. They could not hold you in thrall like that without revealing

much of themselves to you. As much as you can, I ask you to reach back to that time, and tell me all you can recall.'

'You would not ask that, if you knew what you were asking.'

I thought I did know, but I refrained from saying it. Instead, I let silence bid him think it through. Dawn was greying the sky, and I had just returned from walking a circuit of our camp when next he spoke.

'There were Skill books you know nothing about. Books and scrolls that Galen removed from Solicity's rooms as she was dying. The information they held was for a Skillmaster alone, and some were even fastened shut with clever locks. Galen had many years to tinker those locks loose. A lock does no more than keep an honest man honest, you know. Galen found there much he did not understand. But there were also scrolls listing those who had been Skill-trained. Galen sought out all he could find and questioned them. Then he did away with them, lest others should ask them the same questions he had. Galen found much in those scrolls. How a man might live long and enjoy good health. How to give pain with the Skill, without even touching a man. But in the oldest scrolls he found hints of great power awaiting a strongly Skilled man in the Mountains. If Regal could bring the Mountains under his sway, he could come into power no one could withstand. To that end did he seek the hand of Kettricken for Verity, with no intent that she would ever be his bride. He intended that when Verity was dead, he would take her in his brother's stead. And her inheritance.'

'I don't understand,' I said gently. 'The Mountains have amber and furs and ...'

'No. No.' The Fool shook his head. 'It was nothing like that. Galen would not divulge the whole of his secret to Regal, for he then would have had no hold over his half-brother. But you can be sure that when Galen died, Regal immediately possessed those scrolls and books and set to studying them. He is no master of the older languages, but he feared to seek the help of others, lest they discover the secret first. But he puzzled it out at last, and when he did, he was horrified. For by then he had eagerly dispatched Verity into the Mountains to die on some foolish quest. He finally ciphered out that the power Galen had sought for him was power over the Elderlings. Immediately he decided Verity had conspired with you to seek that very power for himself. How dare he seek to steal the very treasure that Regal had worked so long to gain! How dare he try to make a fool of Regal in such a way!' The Fool smiled weakly. 'In his mind, his domination over the

Elderlings is his birthright. You seek to steal it from him. He believes he upholds what is right and just by trying to kill you.'

I sat nodding to myself. The pieces all fit, every one of them. Holes in my understanding of Regal's motives were being closed up, to present me with a frightening picture. I had known the man was ambitious. I also knew he feared and suspected anyone or anything he could not control. I had been a double danger to him, a rival for his father's affection and with a strange Wit-talent he could neither understand nor destroy. To Regal, every other person in the world was a tool or a threat. All threats must be destroyed.

He had probably never considered that all I wanted from him was to be left alone.

THIRTY-FIVE

Kettle's Secrets

Nowhere is there mention of who raised the Witness Stones that stand on the hill near Buckkeep. They may very well pre-date the actual building of Buckkeep Castle itself. Their supposed power seems to have little to do with the worship of Eda or El, but folk believe in it with the same fierce religious fervour. Even those who profess to doubt the existence of any gods at all would still hesitate to give false oath before the Witness Stones. Black and weathered those tall stones stand. If ever they bore inscriptions of any kind, wind and water have erased them.

Verity was the first of the others to rise that morning. He came staggering from his tent as the first true light of day brought colour back to the world. 'My dragon!' he cried as he stood blinking in the light. 'My dragon!' For all the world as if he expected it to be gone.

Even when I assured him his dragon was fine, he was like a spoiled child. He wished to resume his work on it instantly. With the greatest difficulty, I persuaded him to drink a mug of nettle and mint tea, and eat some of the slow-cooked meat from the skewers. He would not wait for the porridge to boil, but left the fire with meat and sword in hand. He did not mention Kettricken at all. In time the scrape, scrape, scrape of the sword's point against the black stone resumed. The shadow I had seen of Verity last night had fled with the morning's coming.

It seemed strange to greet a new day and not immediately pack up all our belongings. No one was in a good humour. Kettricken was puffy-eyed and silent, Kettle sour and reserved. The wolf was still digesting all the meat he had consumed the day before and only wanted to sleep. Starling seemed annoyed with everyone, as if it were our fault that our quest had ended in such confusing disappointment. After we had eaten, Starling declared that she was going to check on the jeppas and do some washing in the stream the Fool had found. Kettle grumpily agreed to go with her for safety, though her eyes strayed often to Verity's dragon. Kettricken was up there also, gloomily watching her husband and king as he gouged away at the black stone. I

busied myself in removing the fire-dried meat, wrapping it, refuelling the slow fire and putting the rest of the meat to dry over it.

‘Let’s go,’ the Fool invited me as soon as I was finished.

‘Where?’ I asked, thinking longingly of a nap.

‘The girl on a dragon,’ he reminded me. He set off eagerly, not even looking back to see if I followed. He knew I must.

‘I think this is a foolish idea,’ I called after him.

‘Exactly,’ he replied with a grin, and would say no more until we approached the great statue.

The girl on a dragon seemed more quiescent this morning, but perhaps I was merely becoming more accustomed to the trapped Wit-unrest I sensed there. The Fool did not hesitate, but immediately clambered up on the dais beside the statue. I followed more slowly. ‘She looks different to me today,’ I said quietly.

‘How?’

‘I can’t say.’ I studied her bent head, the stone tears frozen on her cheeks. ‘Does she look different to you?’

‘I didn’t really look at her that closely yesterday.’

Now that we were actually here, the Fool’s banter seemed dampened. Very gingerly, I set a hand to the dragon’s back. The individual scales were so cunningly worked, the curve of the beast’s body so natural that I almost expected it to heave with breath. It was cold, hard stone. I held my breath, daring myself, then quested toward the stone. It felt unlike any questing I had ever done before. There was no beating heart, no rush of breath, nor any other physical sign of life to guide me. There was only my Wit-sense of life, trapped and desperate. For a moment it eluded me; then I brushed against it, and it quested back to me. It sought the feel of wind on skin, the warm pumping of blood, oh, the scents of the summer day, the sensation of my clothing against my skin, any and all that was part of the experience of living it hungered for. I snatched my hand back, frightened by the intensity of its reaching. Almost I thought it might draw me in to join it there.

‘Strange,’ whispered the Fool, for linked to me as he was, he felt the ripples of my experience. His eyes met mine and held for some time. Then he reached a single bare silver fingertip toward the girl.

‘We should not do this,’ I said, but there was no force in my words. The slender figure astride the dragon was dressed in a sleeveless jerkin, leggings and sandals. The Fool touched his finger to her upper arm.

A Skill-scream of pain and outrage filled the quarry. The Fool was flung backwards off the pedestal, to land hard on his back on the rock below. He sprawled there senseless. My knees buckled under me and I fell beside the dragon. From the torrent of Wit-anger I felt, I expected the creature to trample me underfoot like a maddened horse. Instinctively I curled up, my arms sheltering my head.

It was done in an instant, yet the echoes of that cry seemed to rebound endlessly from the slick black stone walls and blocks all around us. I was shakily clambering down to check on the Fool when Nighteyes came rushing up to us. *What was that? Who threatens us?* I knelt by the Fool. He had struck his head and blood was leaking onto the black stone, but I didn't think that was why he was unconscious. 'I knew we shouldn't have done it. Why did I let you do it?' I asked myself as I gathered him up to take him back to camp.

'Because you're a bigger fool than he is. And I am the biggest of all, to have left you alone and trusted you to act with sense. What did he do?' Kettle was still puffing from her hurry.

'He touched the girl on the dragon. With the Skill on his finger.'

I glanced up at the statue as I spoke. To my horror, there was a bright silver fingerprint on the girl's upper arm, outlined in scarlet against her bronze-toned flesh. Kettle followed my gaze and I heard her gasp. She spun on me and lifted her gnarled hand as if to strike me. Then she clenched her hand into a contorted fist that trembled and forced it down by her side. 'Is it not enough that she is trapped there in misery forever, alone and cut off from all she once loved? You two must come to give her pain on top of all that! How could you be so vicious?'

'We meant no harm. We did not know ...'

'Ignorance is always the excuse used by the cruelly curious!' Kettle snarled.

My own temper suddenly rose to match hers. 'Don't rebuke me with my ignorance, woman, when all you have done is refuse to lift it for me. You hint and warn and give us ominous words, but you refuse to speak anything that might help us. And when we make mistakes, you rail at us, saying we should have known better. How? How can we know better when the one who does refuses to share her knowledge with us?'

In my arms, the Fool stirred faintly. The wolf had been prowling about my feet. Now he came back with a whine to sniff at the Fool's dangling

hand.

Careful! Don't let his fingers touch you!

What bit him?

I don't know. 'I don't know anything,' I said aloud, bitterly. 'I'm blundering in the dark, hurting everyone I care about in the process.'

'I dare not interfere,' Kettle shouted at me. 'What if some word of mine set you on the wrong course? What of all the prophecies then? You must find your own way, Catalyst.'

The Fool opened his eyes to look at me blankly. Then he closed them again and leaned his head on my shoulder. He was starting to get heavy and I needed to find out what was wrong with him. I shrugged him up more firmly in my arms. I saw Starling coming up behind Kettle, her arms laden with wet laundry. I turned and walked away from them both. As I headed back to camp with the Fool, I said over my shoulder, 'Maybe that is why you are here. Maybe you were called here, with a part to play. Maybe it is lifting our ignorance so we can fulfil this bedamned prophecy of yours. And maybe keeping your silence is how you will thwart it. But,' and I halted to fling the words savagely over my shoulder, 'I think you keep silent for reasons of your own. Because you are ashamed!'

I turned away from the stricken look on her face. I covered my shame to have spoken to her so with my anger. It gave me new strength of purpose. I was suddenly determined that I was going to start making everyone behave as they should. It was the sort of childish resolution that often got me into trouble, but once my heart had seized hold of it, my anger gripped it tight.

I carried the Fool into the big tent and laid him out on his bedding. I took a ragged sleeve off what remained of a shirt, dampened it in cool water, and applied it firmly to the back of his head. When the bleeding slowed, I checked it. It was not a large cut, but it was on top of a respectable lump. I still felt that was not why he had fainted. 'Fool?' I said to him quietly, then more insistently, 'Fool?' I patted his face with water. He came awake with a simple opening of his eyes. 'Fool?'

'I'll be all right, Fitz,' he said wanly. 'You were right. I should not have touched her. But I did. And I shall never be able to forget it.'

'What happened?' I demanded.

He shook his head. 'I can't talk about it just yet,' he said quietly.

I shot to my feet, head slapping against the tent roof and nearly bringing the whole structure down around me. 'No one in this whole company can

talk about anything!’ I declared furiously. ‘Except me. And I intend to talk about everything.’

I left the Fool leaning up on one elbow and staring after me. I don’t know if his expression was amused or aghast. I didn’t care. I strode from the tent, scabbled up the pile of tailings to the pedestal where Verity carved his dragon. The steady scrape, scrape, scrape of his sword point against the stone was like a rasp against my soul. Kettricken sat by him, hollow-eyed and silent. Neither paid me the slightest bit of attention.

I halted a moment and got my breathing under control. I swept my hair back from my face and tied my warrior’s tail afresh, brushed off my leggings and tugged the stained remnants of my shirt straight. I took three steps forward. My formal bow included Kettricken.

‘My lord, King Verity. My lady, Queen Kettricken. I have come to conclude my reporting to the King. If you would allow it.’

I had honestly expected both of them to ignore me. But King Verity’s sword scraped twice more then ceased. He looked at me over his shoulder. ‘Continue, FitzChivalry. I shall not cease my work, but I shall listen.’

There was grave courtesy in his voice. It heartened me. Kettricken suddenly sat up straighter. She brushed the straggling hair back from her eyes, then nodded her permission at me. I drew a deep breath and began, reporting as I had been taught, everything that I had seen or done since my visit to the ruined city. Sometime during that long telling, the scraping of the sword slowed, then ceased. Verity moved ponderously to take a seat beside Kettricken. Almost he started to take her hand in his, then stopped himself and folded his own hands before him. But Kettricken saw that small gesture, and moved a trifle closer to him. They sat side by side, my threadbare monarchs, throned on cold rock, a stone dragon at their backs, and listened to me.

By one and by two, the others came to join us. First the wolf, then the Fool and Starling, and finally old Kettle ranged themselves in a half circle behind me. When my throat began to grow dry and my voice to rasp, Kettricken lifted a hand and sent Starling for water. She returned with tea and meat for all of us. I took but a mouthful of the tea and went on while they picnicked around me.

I held to my resolution and spoke plainly of all, even that which shamed me. I did not leave out my fears nor foolishness. I told him how I had killed Regal’s guard without warning, even giving him the name of the man I had

recognized. Nor did I skirt about my Wit-experiences as I once would have. I spoke as bluntly as if it were only Verity and me, telling him of my fears for Molly and my child, including my fear that if Regal did not find and kill them, Chade would take the child for the throne. As I spoke, I reached for Verity in every way I could, not just my voice, but Wit and Skill, I tried to touch him and reawaken him to who he was. I know he felt that reaching, but try as I might, I could stir no response from him.

I finished by recounting what the Fool and I had done with the girl on a dragon. I watched Verity's face for any change of expression, but there was none I could see. When I had told him all, I stood silent before him, hoping he would question me. The old Verity would have taken me over my whole tale again, asking questions about every event, asking what I had thought, or suspected of anything I had observed. But this grey-headed old man only nodded several times. He made as if to rise.

'My king!' I begged him desperately.

'What is it, boy?'

'Have you nothing to ask me, nothing to tell me?'

He looked at me, but I was not sure he was really seeing me. He cleared his throat. 'I killed Carrod with the Skill. That is true. I have not felt the others since then, but I do not believe they are dead, but only that I have lost the Skill to sense them. You must be careful.'

I gaped at him. 'And that is all? I must be careful?' His words had chilled me to the bone.

'No. There is worse.' He glanced at the Fool. 'I fear that when you speak to the Fool, he listens with Regal's ears. I fear it was Regal who came to you that day, speaking with the Fool's tongue, to ask you where Molly was.'

My mouth went dry. I turned to look at the Fool. He looked stricken. 'I do not recall ... I never said ...' He took a half-breath, then suddenly toppled to one side in a faint.

Kettle scabbled over to him. 'He breathes,' she told us.

Verity nodded. 'I suspect they have abandoned him then. Perhaps. Do not trust that is true.' His eyes came back to me. I was trying to remain standing. I had felt it as they fled the Fool. Felt it like a silk thread abruptly parting. They had not had a strong hold on him, but it had been enough. Enough to make me reveal all they needed to kill my wife and child. Enough

to ransack his dreams each night since then, stealing whatever was of use to them.

I went to the Fool. I took his unSkilled hand and reached for him. Slowly his eyes opened and he sat up. For a time he stared at us all without comprehension. His eyes came back to mine, shame washing through their smoky depths. “And the one who loves him best shall betray him most foully.” My own prophecy. I have known that since my eleventh year. Chade, I had told myself, when he was willing to take your child. Chade was your betrayer.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘But it was me. It was me.’ He got slowly to his feet. ‘I am sorry. So sorry.’

I saw the start of tears on his face. Then he turned and walked slowly away from us. I could not bring myself to go after him, but Nighteyes rose soundlessly and trailed at his heels.

‘FitzChivalry.’ Verity took a breath, then spoke quietly. ‘Fitz. I will try to finish my dragon. It is really all I can do. I only hope it will be enough.’

Despair made me bold. ‘My king, will not you do this for me? Will not you Skill a warning to Burrich and Molly, that they may flee Capelin Beach before they are found?’

‘Oh, my boy,’ he said pityingly. He took a step toward me. ‘Even if I dared to, I fear I have not the strength any more.’ He lifted his eyes and looked at each of us in turn. His gaze lingered longest on Kettricken. ‘It all fails me. My body, my mind, and my Skill. I am so tired, and there is so little left of me. When I killed Carrod, my Skill fled me. My work has been greatly slowed since then. Even the raw power on my hands weakens, and the pillar is closed to me; I cannot pass through it to renew the magic. I fear I may have defeated myself. I fear I will not be able to complete my task. In the end, I may fail you all. All of you, and the entire Six Duchies.’

Kettricken bowed her face into her hands. I thought she would weep. But when she lifted her eyes again, I saw the strength of her love for the man shining through whatever else she felt. ‘If this is what you believe you must do, then let me help you.’ She gestured at the dragon. ‘There must be something I can do to help you complete it. Show me where to cut stone away, and then you can work the details.’

He shook his head sadly. ‘Would that you could. But I must do it myself. It all must be done by me.’

Kettle suddenly surged to her feet. She came to stand beside me, giving me a glare as if everything were all my fault. ‘My lord, King Verity,’ she

began. She seemed to lose courage for a moment, then spoke again louder. 'My king, you are mistaken. Few dragons were created by a single person. At least, not the Six Duchies dragons. Whatever the others, the true Elderlings could do on their own, I do not know. But I know that those dragons that were made by Six Duchies hands were most often made by an entire coterie working together, not a single person.'

Verity stared at her mutely. Then, 'What are you saying?' he demanded in a shaking voice.

'I am saying what I know. Regardless of how others may come to think of me.' She gave one glance around at us, as if bidding us farewell. Then she put her back to us and addressed only the King. 'My lord king. I name myself Kestrel of Buck, once of Stanchion's Coterie. But by my Skill I did slay a member of my own coterie, for jealousy over a man. To do so was high treason, for we were the Queen's own strength. And I destroyed that. For this I was punished as the Queen's Justice saw fit. My Skill was burned out of me, leaving me as you see me: sealed into myself, unable to reach beyond the walls of my own body, unable to receive the touch of those I had held dear. That was done by my own coterie. For the murder itself, the Queen banished me from the Six Duchies, for all time. She sent me away so that no Skilled one would be tempted to take pity on me and try to free me. She said she could imagine no worse punishment, that one day in my isolation, I would long for death.' Kettle sank slowly to her old knees on the hard stone. 'My king, my queen, she was right. I ask your mercy now. Either put me to death. Or ...' Very slowly she lifted her head. 'Or use your strength to reopen me to the Skill. And I will serve you as coterie in the carving of this dragon.'

All was silence for a time. When Verity spoke, it was in confusion. 'I know of no Stanchion's Coterie.'

Kettle's voice shook as she admitted, 'I destroyed it, my lord. There were but five of us. My act left only three alive to the Skill, and they had experienced the physical death of one member and the ... burning of myself. They were greatly weakened. I heard that they were released from their service to the Queen, and sought the road that once began in Jhaampe town. They never returned, but I do not think they survived the rigours of this road. I do not think they ever made a dragon such as we once used to dream about.'

When Verity spoke, he did not seem to be replying to her words. ‘Neither my father nor either of his wives had coterie sworn to them. Nor my grandmother.’ His brow wrinkled. ‘Which queen did you serve, woman?’

‘Queen Diligence, my king,’ Kettle said quietly. She was still kneeling on the hard stone.

‘Queen Diligence reigned over two hundred years ago,’ Verity observed.

‘She died two hundred and twenty-three years ago,’ Starling interposed.

‘Thank you, minstrel,’ Verity said drily. ‘Two hundred and twenty-three years ago. And you would have me believe you were coterie to her.’

‘I was, my lord. I had turned my Skill upon myself, for I wished to keep my youth and beauty. It was not regarded as an admirable thing to do, but most Skilled ones did it to some extent. It took me over a year to master my body. But what I had done, I did well. To this day, I heal swiftly. Most illnesses pass me by.’ She could not keep a note of pride from her voice.

‘The legendary longevity of the coterie members,’ King Verity observed softly to himself. He sighed. ‘There must have been much in Solicity’s books that Chivalry and I were never made privy to.’

‘A great deal.’ Kettle spoke with more confidence now. ‘It amazes me that, with as little training as you and FitzChivalry have, you have managed to come this far alone. And to carve a dragon alone? It is a feat for a song.’

Verity glanced back at her. ‘Oh, come, woman, sit down. It pains me to see you kneel. Obviously there is much you can and should tell me.’ He shifted restlessly and glanced back at his dragon. ‘But while we are talking, I am not working.’

‘Then I shall say to you only what needs most to be said,’ Kettle offered. She clambered painfully to her feet. ‘I was powerful in the Skill. Strong enough to kill with it, as few are.’ Her voice halted, thickening. She took a breath and resumed. ‘That power is still within me. One strongly Skilled enough could open me to it again. I believe you have that strength. Though right now, you may not be able to master it. You have killed with the Skill, and that is a heinous thing. Even though the coterie member was not true to you, still, you had worked together. In killing him, you killed a part of yourself. And that is why you feel you have no Skill left to you. Had I my Skill, I could help you heal yourself.’

Verity gave a small laugh. 'I have no Skill, you have no Skill, but if we did, we could heal one another. Woman, this is like a tangle of rope with no ends. How is the knot to be undone, save with a sword?'

'We have a sword, my king. FitzChivalry. The Catalyst.'

'Ah. That old legend. My father was fond of it.' He looked at me consideringly. 'Do you think he is strong enough? My nephew August was Skill-burned and never recovered. For him, I sometimes thought it a mercy. The Skill was leading him down a path ill-suited to him. I think I suspected then that Galen had done something to the coterie. But I had so much to do. Always so much to do.'

I sensed my king's mind wavering. I stepped forward resolutely. 'My lord, what is it you wish me to attempt?'

'I wish you to attempt nothing. I wish you to do. There. That is what Chade often said to me. Chade. Most of him is in the dragon now, but that is a bit I left out. I should put that in the dragon.'

Kettle stepped closer to him. 'My lord, help me to free my Skill. And I will help you to fill the dragon.'

There was something in the way she said those words. She spoke them aloud before us all, yet I felt that only Verity truly knew what she said. At last, very reluctantly, he nodded. 'I see no other way,' he said to himself. 'No other way at all.'

'How am I to do a thing, when I don't even know what that thing is?' I complained. 'My king,' I added, at a rebuking look from Kettricken.

'You know as much as we do,' Verity rebuked me quietly. 'Kestrel's mind was burned with the Skill, by her own coterie, to condemn her to isolation for the rest of her life. You must use what Skill you have in any way you can, to try to break through the scarring.'

'I have no idea how to begin,' I began. But then Kettle turned and looked at me. There was pleading in her old eyes. Loss, and loneliness. And Skill-hunger that had built to the point at which it was devouring her from within. Two hundred and twenty-three years, I thought to myself. It was a long time to be exiled from one's homeland. An impossible time to be confined to one's own body. 'But I will try,' I amended my words. I put out my hand to her.

Kettle hesitated, then set her hand in mine. We stood, clasping hands, looking at one another. I reached for her with the Skill, but felt no response. I looked at her and tried to tell myself I knew her, that it should be easy to

reach Kettle. I ordered my mind and recalled all I knew of the irascible old woman. I thought of her uncomplaining perseverance, of her sharp tongue, and her clever hands. I recalled her teaching me the Skill game, and how often we had played it, heads bent together over the gamecloth. Kettle, I told myself sternly. Reach for Kettle. But my Skill found nothing there.

I did not know how much time had passed. I only knew that I was very thirsty. 'I need a cup of tea,' I told her, and let go of her hand. She nodded at me, keeping her disappointment well hidden. It was only when I let go her hand that I became aware of how the sun had moved above the mountaintops. I heard again the scrape, scrape, scrape of Verity's sword. Kettricken still sat, silently watching him. I did not know where the others had gone. Together we left the dragon and walked down to where our fire still smouldered. I broke wood into pieces as she filled the kettle. We said little as it heated. There were still herbs that Starling had gathered earlier for tea. They were wilted, but we used them, and then sat drinking our tea together. The scraping of Verity's sword against the stone was a background noise, not unlike an insect sound. I studied the old woman beside me.

My Wit-sense told me of a strong and lively life within her. I had felt her old woman's hand in my own, the flesh soft on the swollen, bony fingers save where work had callused her skin. I saw the lines in her face around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. Old, her body said to me. Old. But my Wit-sense told me that there sat a woman of my own years, lively and wild-hearted, yearning for love and adventure and all that life might offer. Yearning, but trapped. I willed myself to see, not Kettle, but Kestrel. Who had she been before she had been buried alive? My eyes met hers. 'Kestrel?' I asked her suddenly.

'So I was,' she said quietly, and her grief was still fresh. 'But she is no more, and has not been for years.'

When I said her name, I had almost sensed her. I felt I held the key, but did not know where the lock was. There was a nudge at the edge of my wit. I looked up, annoyed at the interruption. It was Nighteyes and the Fool. The Fool looked tormented and I ached for him. But he could not have picked a worse time to come to speak to me. I think he knew it.

'I tried to stay away,' he said quietly. 'Starling told me what you were doing. She told me all that was said while I was gone. I know I should wait, that what you do is vital. But ... I cannot.' He suddenly had trouble meeting my eyes. 'I betrayed you,' he whispered softly. 'I am the Betrayer.'

Linked as we were, I knew the depth of his feelings. I tried to reach through that, to make him feel what I felt. He had been used against me, yes, but it was no doing of his own. But I could not reach him. His shame, guilt and remorse stood between us, and blocked him from my forgiveness. Blocked him, too, from forgiving himself.

‘Fool!’ I suddenly exclaimed. I smiled at him. He looked horrified that I could smile at all, least of all at him. ‘No, it is all right. You have given me the answer. You are the answer.’ I took a breath and tried to think carefully. Go slowly, be careful, I cautioned myself, and then, no, I thought. Now. Now is the only time in which to do this. I bared my left wrist. I held it out to him, my palm up. ‘Touch me,’ I commanded him. ‘Touch me with the Skill on your fingers, and see if I feel you have betrayed me.’

‘No!’ Kettle cried aghast, but the Fool was already reaching for me like a man in a dream. He took my hand in his right hand. Then he laid three silver fingertips against my upturned wrist. As I felt the cold burn of his fingers on my wrist, I reached over and grabbed Kettle’s hand. ‘KESTREL!’ I cried aloud. I felt the stir of her, and I pulled her into us.

I was the Fool and the Fool was me. He was the Catalyst and so was I. We were two halves of a whole, sundered and come together again. For an instant I knew him in his entirety, complete and magical, and then he was pulling apart from me, laughing, a bubble inside me, separate and unknowable, yet joined of me. *You do love me!* I was incredulous. He had never truly believed it before. *Before, it was words. I always feared it was born of pity. But you are truly my friend. This is knowing. This is feeling what you feel for me. So this is the Skill.* For a moment he revelled in simple recognition.

Abruptly, another joined us. *Ah, little brother, you find your ears at last! My kill is ever your kill, and we shall be pack forever!*

The Fool recoiled at the wolf’s friendly onslaught. I thought he would break the circle. Then suddenly he leaned into it. *This? This is Nighteyes? This mighty warrior, this great heart?*

How to describe that moment? I had known Nighteyes so completely for so long, it shocked me to see how little the Fool had known of him.

Hairy? That was how you saw me? Hairy and drooling?

Your pardon. This from the Fool, quite sincerely. *I am honoured to know you as you are. I had never suspected such nobility within you.* Their mutual approval was almost overwhelming.

Then the world settled around us. *We have a task*, I reminded them. The Fool lifted his touch from my wrist, leaving behind three silver prints on my skin. Even the air pressed too heavily against that mark. For a time, I had been somewhere else. Now I was once more within my own body. It all had taken but moments.

I turned back to Kettle. It was an effort to look only through my eyes. I still gripped her hand. ‘Kestrel?’ I said quietly. She lifted her gaze to mine. I looked at her and tried to see her as she had once been. I do not think she even knew then of that tiny hair of Skill between us. In the moment of her shock at the Fool touching me, I had pressed past her guard. It was too fine a line to be called a thread. But I now knew what choked it. ‘All this guilt and shame and remorse you carry, Kestrel. Don’t you see? That is what they burned you with. And you have added to it, all these years. The wall is of your own making. Take it down. Forgive yourself. Come out.’

I caught at the Fool’s wrist and held him beside me. Somewhere I felt Nighteyes as well. They were back within their own minds, but I could reach them easily. I drew strength from them, carefully, slowly. I drew their strength and love and turned it against Kettle, trying to force it into her through that tiny chink in her armour.

Tears began to trickle down her seamed cheeks. ‘I can’t. That is the hardest part. I can’t. They burned me to punish me. But it was not enough. It would never be enough. I can never forgive myself.’

Skill was starting to seep from her as she reached to me, trying to make me understand. She reached, to clasp my hand between both of hers. Her pain flowed through that clasp to me. ‘Who could forgive you then?’ I found myself asking.

‘Gull. My sister Gull!’ The name was torn from her, and I sensed she had refused to think of it, let alone utter it, for years. Her sister, not just her coterie-mate, but her sister. And she had killed her in a fury when she had found her with Stanchion. The leader of the coterie?

‘Yes,’ she whispered, though no words were needed between us now. I was past the burn wall. Strong, handsome Stanchion. Making love to him, body and Skill, an experience of oneness like no other. But then she had come upon them, him and Gull, together, and she had ...

‘He should have known better,’ I cried out indignantly. ‘You were sisters and members of his own coterie. How could he have done that to you? How could he?’

‘Gull!’ she cried out loud, and for an instant I saw her. She was behind a second wall. Both of them were. Kestrel and Gull. Two little girls, running barefoot down a sandy shore, just out of reach of the icy waves licking up the sand. Two little girls, as like as apple pips, their father’s joy, twins, racing to meet the little boat coming in to shore, hurrying to see what Papa had caught in his nets today. I smelled the salt wind, the iodine of the tangled, squidgy kelp as they dashed through it squealing. Two little girls, Gull and Kestrel, locked and hidden behind a wall inside her. But I could see them even if she could not.

I see her, I know her. And she knew you, through and through. Lightning and thunder, your mother called you, for while your temper flashed and was gone, Gull could carry a grudge for week. But not against you, Kestrel. Never against you, and not for years. She loved you, more than either of you loved Stanchion. As you loved her. And she would have forgiven you. She would never have wished this on you.

I ... don’t know.

Yes, you do. Look at her. Look at you. Forgive yourself. And let the part of her within you live again. Let yourself live again.

She is within me?

Most certainly. I see her, I feel her. It must be so.

What do you feel? Cautiously.

Only love. See for yourself. I took her deep inside her mind, to the places and memories she had denied to herself. It was not the burn-walls her coterie had imposed on her that had hurt her most. It was the ones she had put up between herself and the memory of what she had lost in a moment of fury. Two girls, older now, wading out to seize the line their father threw to them, and helping to pull his laden boat up onto the beach. Two Buck girls, still as alike as apple pips, wanting to be the first ones to tell their Papa they had been chosen for Skill-training.

Papa said we were one soul in two bodies.

Open, then, and let her out. Let both of you out to live.

I fell silent, waiting. Kestrel was in a part of her memories she had denied for longer than other folk lived. A place of fresh wind and girlish laughter, and a sister so like yourself you scarcely needed to speak to one another. The Skill had been between them from the moment they were born.

I see what I must do now. I felt her overwhelming surge of joy and determination. *I must let her out, I must put her into the dragon. She will live*

forever in the dragon, just as we planned it. The two of us, together again.

Kettle stood up, letting go of my hands so suddenly that I cried out at the shock. I found myself back in my body. I felt I had fallen there from a very great distance. The Fool and Nighteyes were still near me, but no longer a part of a circle. I could scarcely feel them for all else I felt. Skill. Racing through me like a riptide. Skill. Emanating from Kettle like heat from a smith's furnace. She glowed with it. She wrung her hands, smiled at the straightened fingers.

'You should go and rest now, Fitz,' she told me gently. 'Go on. Go to sleep.'

A gentle suggestion. She did not know her own Skill-strength. I lay back and knew no more.

When I awoke, it was full dark. The weight and warmth of the wolf's body were comfortable against me. The Fool had tucked a blanket around me and was sitting by me, staring raptly into the fire. When I stirred, he clutched at my shoulder with a sharp intake of breath.

'What?' I demanded. I could make no sense of anything I heard or saw. Fires had been kindled up on the stone dais beside the dragon. I heard the clash of metal against stone, and voices lifted in conversation. In the tent behind me, I heard Starling trying notes on her harp.

'The last time I saw you sleep like that, we had just taken an arrow out of your back and I thought you were dying of infection.'

'I must have been very tired,' I smiled at him, able to trust he understood. 'Are not you wearied? I took strength from you and Nighteyes.'

'Tired? No. I feel healed.' He did not hesitate, but added, 'I think it is as much that the false coterie has fled my body, as knowing that you do not hate me. And the wolf. Now, he is a wonder. Almost, I can still sense him.' A very strange smile touched his face. I felt him groping out for Nighteyes. He had not the strength to truly use the Skill or the Wit on his own. But it was unnerving to feel him try. Nighteyes let his tail rise and fall in one slow wag.

I'm sleepy.

Rest then, my brother. I set my hand to the thick fur of his shoulder. He was life and strength and friendship I could trust. He gave one more slow wag of his tail and lowered his head again; I looked back to the Fool and gave a nod toward Verity's dragon.

'What goes on, up there?'

‘Madness. And joy. I think. Save for Kettricken. I think her heart eats itself hollow with jealousy, but she will not leave.’

‘What goes on up there?’ I repeated patiently.

‘You know more of it than I do,’ he retorted. ‘You did something to Kettle. I could understand part of it, but not all. Then you fell asleep. And Kettle went up there and did something to Verity. I know not what, but Kettricken said it left them both weeping and shaking. Then Verity did something to Kettle. And they both began to laugh and to shout and to cry out it would work. I stayed long enough to watch both of them start attacking the stone around the dragon with chisels and mallets and swords and anything else that was to hand. While Kettricken sits silent as a shadow and watches them mournfully. They will not let her help. Then I came down here and found you unconscious. Or asleep. Whichever you prefer. And I have sat here a long time, watching over you and making tea or taking meat to anyone who yells at me for some. And now you are awake.’

I recognized his parody of me reporting to Verity, and had to smile. I decided that Kettle had helped Verity unlock his Skill and that work was proceeding on the dragon. But Kettricken. ‘What makes Kettricken sad?’ I asked.

‘She wishes she were Kettle,’ the Fool explained, in a tone that said any moron would have known that. He handed me a plate of meat and a mug of tea. ‘How would you feel, to have come this long and weary way, only to have your spouse choose another to help him in his work? He and Kettle chatter back and forth like magpies. All sorts of inconsequential talk. They work and chip, or sometimes, Verity just stands still, his hands pressed to the dragon. And he tells her of his mother’s cat, Hisspit, and of thyme that grew in the garden on the tower. And all the while, Kettle speaks to him, with no break, of Gull who did this, and Gull who did that, and all she and Gull did together. I thought they would cease when the sun went down, but that was the only time that Verity seemed to recall Kettricken was alive. He asked her to bring firewood and make fires for light. Oh, and I think he has allowed her to sharpen a chisel or two for him.’

‘And Starling,’ I said stupidly. I did not like to think of what Kettricken must be feeling. I reined my thoughts away from it.

‘She works on a song about Verity’s dragon. I think she has given up on you and me ever doing anything of note.’

I smiled to myself. 'She is never about when I do anything of significance. What we wrought today, Fool, was better than any battle I have ever fought. But she will never understand all of that.' I cocked my head toward the yurt. 'Her harp sounds mellower than I recall it,' I said to myself.

In answer, he lifted his eyebrows and waggled his fingers at me.

My eyes widened. 'What have you been doing?' I demanded.

'Experimenting. I think that if I survive all this, my puppets shall be the stuff of legend. I have always been able to look at wood and see what I wished to call forth. These,' and again he waggled his fingers at me, 'make it so much easier.'

'Be cautious,' I pleaded with him.

'Me? I have no caution within me. I cannot be what I am not. Where are you going?'

'Up to see the dragon,' I replied. 'If Kettle can work on it, so can I. I may not be as strongly Skilled, but I've been linked with Verity for far longer.'

THIRTY-SIX

The Wit and the Sword

The Outislanders have always raided the coastline of the Six Duchies. The founder of the Farseer monarchy was, in fact, no more than a Raider grown weary of the sea life. Taker's crew overwhelmed the original builders of the wooden fort at the mouth of the Buck River and made it their own. Over a number of generations, the black stone walls of Buckkeep Castle replaced it, and the Outislander raiders became residents and monarch.

Trade and raiding and piracy have all existed simultaneously between the Six Duchies and the Out Islands. But the commencement of the Red Ship raids marked a change in this abrasive and profitable interchange. Both the savagery and destruction of the raids were unprecedented. Some attributed it to the rise to power in the Out Islands of a ferocious chieftain who espoused a bloody religion of vengeance. The most savage of his followers became Raiders and crew for his Red Ships. Other Outislanders, never before united under one leader, were coerced into swearing fealty to him, under threat of Forging for those and their families who refused him. He and his raiders brought their vicious hatred to the shores of the Six Duchies. If he ever had any intent beyond killing, raping, and destroying, he never made it known. His name was Kebab Rawbread.

'I don't understand why you deny me,' I said stiffly.

Verity stopped his endless chopping at the dragon. I had expected him to turn and face me, but instead he only crouched lower, to brush away rock chips and dust. I could scarcely believe the progress he had made. The entire clawed right foot of the dragon now rested upon the stone. True, it lacked the fine detail of the rest of the dragon, but the leg itself was now complete. Verity wrapped a careful hand over the top of one of its toes. He sat motionless beside his creation, patient and still. I could not see any movement of his hand, but I could sense Skill at work. If I reached toward it at all, I could feel the tiny fissuring of stone as it flaked away. It truly seemed as if the dragon had been hidden in the stone, and that Verity's task was to reveal it, one gleaming scale at a time.

‘Fitz. Stop it.’ I could hear annoyance in his voice. Annoyance that I was Skill-sharing with him, and annoyance that I was distracting him from his work.

‘Let me help you,’ I begged again. Something about the work drew me. Before, when Verity had been scraping at the stone with his sword, the dragon had seemed an admirable work of stone-carving. But now there was a shimmering of Skill to him as both Verity and Kettle employed their powers. It was immensely attractive, in the way that a sparkling creek glimpsed through trees draws the eye, or the smell of fresh-baked bread wakes hunger. I longed to put hands on, and help shape this powerful creature. The sight of their working awakened a Skill-hunger in me such as I had never known. ‘I have been Skill-linked with you more than anyone has. In the days when I pulled an oar on the *Rurisk*, you told me I was your coterie. Why do you turn me away now, when I could help, and you need help so badly?’

Verity sighed and rocked back on his heels. The toe was not done, but I could see the faint outline of scales upon it now, and the beginning of the sheath for the wickedly curved talon. I could feel how the claw would be, striated like a hawk’s talon. I longed to reach down and draw forth those lines from the stone.

‘Stop thinking about it,’ Verity bade me firmly. ‘Fitz. Fitz, look at me. Listen to me. Do you remember the first time I took strength from you?’

I did. I had fainted. ‘I know my own strength better now,’ I replied.

He ignored that. ‘You didn’t know what you were offering me, when you told me you were a King’s Man. I took you at your word that you knew what you were doing. You didn’t. I tell you plainly right now that you don’t know what you are asking me for. I do know what I am refusing you. And that is all.’

‘But Verity ...’

‘In this, King Verity will hear no “buts”, FitzChivalry.’ He drew that line with me as he had so seldom before.

I took a breath and refused to let my frustration become anger. He placed his hand carefully on the dragon’s toe again. I listened a moment to the clack, clack, clack of Kettle’s chisel working the dragon’s tail free of the stone. She was singing as she worked, some old love ballad.

‘My lord, King Verity, if you would tell me what it is I don’t know about helping you, then I could decide for myself, perhaps, if ...’

‘It is not your decision, boy. If you truly wish to help, go get some boughs and make a broom. Sweep the rock chips and dust away. It is damnable stuff to kneel in.’

‘I would rather be of real help to you,’ I muttered disconsolately as I turned away.

‘FitzChivalry!’ There was a sharp note to Verity’s voice, one I had not heard since I was a boy. I turned back to it with dread.

‘You overstep yourself,’ he told me bluntly. ‘My queen keeps these fires going and sharpens my chisels for me. Do you put yourself above such work?’

At such times, a brief answer suffices best. ‘No, sir.’

‘Then you shall make me a broom. Tomorrow. For now, much as I hate to say it, we all should rest, at least for a time.’ He stood slowly, swayed, then righted himself. He placed a silver hand affectionately on the dragon’s immense shoulder. ‘With the dawn,’ he promised it.

I had expected him to call to Kettle, but she was already standing and stretching. Skill-linked, I thought to myself. Words were no longer necessary. But they were for his queen. He walked around his dragon to where Kettricken sat near one of the fires. She was grinding at a chisel’s edge. The rough rasping of her work hid our soft footsteps from her. For a time, Verity looked down at his queen as she crouched at this chore. ‘My lady, shall we sleep awhile?’ he asked her quietly.

She turned. With a grey-dusted hand she wiped the straggling hair from her eyes. ‘As you wish, my lord,’ she replied. She was able to keep almost all her pain from her voice.

‘I am not that tired, my lord king. I would continue working, if you will it.’ Kettle’s cheerful voice was almost jarring. I marked that Kettricken did not turn to look at her at all. Verity only said, ‘Sometimes it is better to rest before you are tired. If we sleep while it is dark, we will work better by the day’s light.’

Kettricken winced as if criticized. ‘I could build the fires larger, my lord, if that is what you wish,’ she said carefully.

‘No. I wish to rest, with you beside me. If you would, my queen.’

It was no more than the bones of his affection, but she seized on it. ‘I would, my lord.’ It hurt me to see her content with so little.

She is not content, Fitz, nor am I unaware of her pain. I give her what I can. What it is safe for me to give her.

My king still read me so easily. Chastened, I bid them good night and went off to the tent. As we drew near, Nighteyes rose up, stretching and yawning.

Did you hunt?

With all this meat left, why would I hunt? I noticed then the tumble of pig bones all round him. He lay down amongst them again, nose to tail, rich as any wolf could ever be. I knew a moment's envy of his satisfaction.

Starling sat watch outside the tent by the fire, her harp nestled in her lap. I started to go past her with a nod, then halted to peer at her harp. With a delighted smile, she held it up for my inspection.

The Fool had outdone himself. There was no gilt or curlicues, no inlays of ivory or ebony such as some would say set a harp apart. Instead there was only the silken gleam of curving wood, and that subtle carving that highlighted the best of the wood's grain. I could not look at it without wanting to touch it and hold it. The wood drew the hand to it. The firelight danced upon it.

Kettle stopped to stare also. She folded her lips tightly. 'No caution. It will be the death of him someday,' she said ominously. She then preceded me into the tent.

Despite my long nap earlier, I sank into sleep almost as soon as I lay down. I do not think I had slept long before I became aware of a stealthy noise outside. I Wit-quested toward it. Men. Four. No, five of them, moving softly up the hillside toward the hut. I could know little more about them than that they came in stealth, like hunters. Somewhere in a dim room, Burrich sat up soundlessly. He rose barefoot and crossed the hut to Molly's bed. He knelt by the side of it, then touched her arm softly.

'Burrich?' She caught her breath on his name, then waited in wonder.

'Make no sound,' he breathed. 'Get up. Put on your shoes and wrap Nettle well, but try not to wake her. Someone is outside, and I do not think they mean us well.'

I was proud of her. She asked no questions, but sat up immediately. She pulled her dress on over her nightgown and thrust her feet into her shoes. She folded up the bedding around Nettle until she looked like little more than a bundle of blankets. The baby did not wake.

Meanwhile Burrich had drawn on his own boots and taken up a short sword. He motioned Molly toward the shuttered window. 'If I tell you to, go

out that window with Nettle. But not unless I say to. I think there are five of them.'

Molly nodded in the firelight. She drew her belt knife and stood between her child and danger.

Burrich stood to one side of the door. The entire night seemed to pass as they waited silently for their attackers to come.

The bar was in place, but it had little meaning on such an old door frame. Burrich let them slam into it twice, then, as it started to give, he kicked it out of its brackets, so that on their next onslaught the door was flung wide. Two men came staggering in, surprised at the sudden lack of resistance. One fell, the other fell over the first, and Burrich had put his sword in and out of both of them before the third man was in the door.

The third man was a big man, red-headed and red-bearded. He came in the door with a roar, trampling right over the two injured men who squirmed under his boots. He carried a long sword, a lovely weapon. His size and blade gave him almost twice Burrich's reach. Behind him, a stout man bellowed, 'In the name of the King, we've come for the Wit-Bastard's whore! Put down your weapon and stand aside.'

He'd have been wiser not to rouse Burrich's anger any brighter than it was. Almost casually, Burrich dropped his blade to finish one of the men on the floor, and then brought the blade back up inside Red-beard's guard. Red-beard retreated, trying to get space for the advantage of his blade. Burrich had no choice but to follow him, for if the man reached a place where he could swing freely, Burrich would have small chance. The stout man and a woman immediately surged into the door. Burrich spared a glance for them. 'Molly! As I told you!'

Molly was already by the window, clutching Nettle who had begun to wail in fear. She leaped to a chair, snatched the shutters open, and got one leg out the window. Burrich was busying Red-beard when the woman dashed behind him and sank her knife into his lower back. Burrich cried out hoarsely, and frantically parried the longer blade. As Molly got her other leg over the window sill and began to drop outside, the stout man leaped across the room and snatched Nettle from her arms. I heard Molly's shriek of terror and fury.

Then she ran away into the darkness.

Disbelief. I could feel Burrich's disbelief as plainly as my own. The woman pulled her knife from his back and lifted it to strike again. He

banished his pain with anger, spun to cut her a slash across her chest and then turned back to Red-beard. But Red-beard had stepped back. His sword was still at the ready but he stood motionless as the stout man said, 'We've got the child. Drop your sword or the baby dies here and now.' He darted his eyes at the woman clutching at her chest. 'Get after the woman. Now!'

She glared at him, but went without a murmur. Burrich did not even watch her go. He had eyes only for the wailing babe in the stout man's arms. Red-beard grinned as the tip of Burrich's weapon slowly dropped toward the floor. 'Why?' Burrich asked in consternation. 'What have we ever done, that you attack us and threaten to kill my daughter?'

The stout man looked down at the red-faced baby screaming in his arms. 'She's not yours,' he sneered. 'She's the Wit-Bastard's bastard. We have it on the best authority.' He lifted Nettle high as if he would dash her against the floor. He stared at Burrich. Burrich made an incoherent sound, half-fury, half-plea. He dropped his sword. By the door, the injured man groaned and tried to sit up.

'She's only a tiny baby,' Burrich said hoarsely. As if it were my own, I knew the warmth of the blood running down Burrich's back and hip. 'Let us go. You are mistaken. She's my own blood, I tell you, and no threat to your king. Please. I have gold. I'll take you to it. But let us go.'

Burrich, who would have stood and spat and fought to the death, dropped his sword and pleaded for the sake of my child. Red-beard roared out his laughter, but Burrich did not even turn to it. Still laughing, the man stepped to the table and casually lit the branch of candles there. He lifted the light to survey the dishevelled room. Burrich could not take his eyes off Nettle. 'She's mine,' he said quietly, almost desperately.

'Stop your lies,' the stout man said disdainfully. 'She's the Wit-Bastard's get. As tainted as he was.'

'That's right. She is.'

All eyes turned to the door. Molly stood there, very pale, breathing hard. Her right hand was reddened with blood. She clutched to her chest a large wooden box. An ominous humming came from it. 'The bitch you sent after me is dead,' Molly said harshly. 'As you will soon be, if you don't put down your weapons and free my child and man.' The stout man grinned incredulously. Red-beard lifted his sword.

Her voice shook only slightly as she added, 'The child is Witted, of course. As am I. My bees will not harm us. But injure one of us, and they

will rise up and follow you and give you no quarter. You shall die of a million burning stings. Think your swords will be of much use against my Wit-bees?’ She looked from face to face, her eyes flashing with anger and her threat as she clutched the heavy wooden hive box to her. One bee escaped it, to buzz angrily about the room. Red-beard’s eyes followed it, even as he exclaimed, ‘I don’t believe it!’

Burrich’s eyes were measuring the distance to his sword as Molly asked softly, almost coyly, ‘Don’t you?’ She smiled oddly as she lowered the hive to the floor. Her eyes met Red-beard’s as she lifted the lid of the box. She reached in and even as the stout man gasped aloud, she drew out her hand, gloved with moving bees. She closed the lid of the hive and then stood. She looked down at the bees coating her hand and said quietly, ‘The one with the red beard, little ones.’ Then she held her hand out as if offering them as a gift.

It took a moment, but as each bee took flight, it unerringly sought out Red-beard. He flinched as first one and then another buzzed past him, and then came back, circling. ‘Call them back or we kill the child!’ he cried out suddenly. He batted at them ineffectually with the branch of candles he held.

Molly instead stooped suddenly and heaved up the whole hive as high as she could. ‘You’ll kill her anyway!’ she cried out, her voice breaking on the words. She gave the hive a shake, and the agitated humming of the bees became a roar. ‘Little ones, they would kill my child! When I set you free, avenge us!’ She raised the hive higher yet in her arms, preparatory to smashing it to the floor. The injured man at her feet groaned loudly.

‘Hold!’ cried the stout man. ‘I’ll give you your child!’

Molly froze. All could see that she could not hold the weight of the hive box much longer. There was strain in her voice but she calmly directed, ‘Give my baby to my man. Let them both come to me. Or you shall all die, most certainly and most horribly.’ The stout man looked uncertainly at Red-beard. Candles in one hand and sword in the other, Red-beard had retreated from the table, but the bees still buzzed confusedly about him. His efforts to slap them away only seemed to make them more determined. ‘King Regal will kill us do we fail!’

‘Then die from my bees instead,’ Molly suggested. ‘There are hundreds of bees in here,’ she added in a low voice. Her tone was almost seductive as she offered, ‘They will get inside your shirts and the legs of your trousers. They will cling to your hair as they sting. They will crawl into your ears to

sting, and up your noses. And when you scream, they will crowd into your mouth, dozens of humming, fuzzy bodies, to sting your tongue until it will not fit inside your mouth. You will die choking on them!’

Her description seemed to decide them. The stout man crossed the room to Burrich, thrust the still-screaming babe into his arms. Red-beard glared but said nothing. Burrich took Nettle, but did not neglect to stoop and seize up his sword as well. Molly glared at Red-beard. ‘You. Get over there beside him. Burrich. Take Nettle outside. Take her to where we picked mint yesterday. If they force me to act, I do not wish her to see it. It might make her fear the very bees who are her servants.’

Burrich obeyed. Of all the things I had witnessed that night, that seemed to me the most amazing. Once he was outside, Molly backed slowly toward the door. ‘Do not follow,’ she warned them. ‘My Wit-bees will be keeping watch for me, right outside the door.’ She gave the hive a final shake. The roaring hum increased and several more bees escaped into the room, buzzing angrily. The stout man stood frozen, but Red-beard lifted his sword as if it would defend him. The man on the floor gave an incoherent cry and scabbled away from her as Molly backed outside. She dragged the door shut behind her, then leaned the hive against it. She took the lid off the hive and then kicked it before she turned and ran off into the night. ‘Burrich!’ she called quietly. ‘I’m coming.’ She did not go toward the road, but off toward the woods. She did not look back.

‘Come away, Fitz.’ It was no Skilling, but Verity’s soft voice close by me. ‘You have seen them safe. Watch no more, lest others see with your eyes and know where they go. It is better if you do not know yourself. Come away.’

I opened my eyes to the dimness inside the tent. Not only Verity, but Kettle sat beside me. Kettle’s mouth was set in a flat line of disapproval. Verity’s face was stern, but understanding was also there. He spoke before I could. ‘Did I believe you had sought that, I would be most angry with you. Now I say to you plainly. It is better if you know nothing of them. Nothing at all. Had you heeded me when I first advised you of that, none of them would have been threatened as they were tonight.’

‘You both were watching?’ I asked quietly. For an instant, I was touched. They both cared that much for my child.

‘She is my heir, too,’ Verity pointed out relentlessly. ‘Do you think I could stand by and do nothing if they had injured her?’ He shook his head at

me. 'Stay away from them, Fitz. For all our sakes. Do you understand?'

I nodded my head. His words could not distress me. I had already decided I would choose not to know where Molly and Burrich took Nettle. But not because she was Verity's heir. Kettle and Verity stood and left the tent. I flung myself back into my blankets. The Fool, who had been propped on one elbow, lay down also. 'I will tell you tomorrow,' I told him. He nodded mutely, his eyes huge in his pale face. Then he lay back down. I think he went to sleep. I stared up into darkness. Nighteyes came to lie beside me.

He would protect your cub as his own, he pointed out quietly. *That is pack.*

He meant the words for comfort. I did not need them. Instead I reached to rest a hand on his ruff. *Did you see how she stood and faced them down?* I demanded with pride.

A most excellent bitch, Nighteyes agreed.

I felt I had not slept at all when Starling woke the Fool and me for our watch. I came out of the tent stretching and yawning, and suspecting that keeping watch was not really a necessity. But the last shard of night was pleasantly mild and Starling had left meat broth simmering at the fire's edge. I was halfway through a mug when the Fool finally followed me out.

'Starling showed me her harp last night,' I said by way of greeting.

He smirked with satisfaction. "'A crude bit of work. Ah, this was but one of his early efforts," they shall say of it some day,' he added with strained modesty.

'Kettle said you have no caution.'

'No, I have not. Fitz. What do we do here?'

'Me? What I'm told. When my watch is over, I'm off to the hills, to gather broom twigs. So that I can sweep the rock chips out of Verity's way.'

'Ah. Now there's lofty work for a Catalyst. And what shall a Prophet do, do you suppose?'

'You might prophesy when that dragon will be finished. I fear we shall think of nothing else until it is done.'

The Fool was shaking his head minutely.

'What?' I demanded.

'I do not feel we were called here to make brooms and harps. This feels like a lull to me, my friend. The lull before the storm.'

‘Now there’s a cheery thought,’ I told him glumly. But privately I wondered if he might not be right.

‘Are you going to tell me what went on last night?’

When my account was finished, the Fool sat grinning. ‘A resourceful lass, that one,’ he observed proudly. Then he cocked his head at me. ‘Think you the baby will be Witted? Or be able to Skill?’

I had never stopped to consider it. ‘I hope not,’ I said immediately. And then wondered at my own words.

Dawn had scarcely broken before both Verity and Kettle arose. They each drank a mug of broth standing, and carried off dried meat as they headed back up to the dragon. Kettricken had also come out of Verity’s tent. Her eyes were hollow and defeat was in the set of her mouth. She had but half a mug of broth before setting it aside. She went back into the tent and returned with a blanket fashioned into a carry-sack.

‘Firewood,’ she replied flatly to my raised eyebrow.

‘Then Nighteyes and I may as well go with you. I need to gather broom twigs and a stick. And he needs to do something besides sleep and grow fat.’

And you fear to go off in the woods without me.

If sows like that abound in these woods, you are absolutely correct.

Perhaps Kettricken would bring her bow?

But even as I turned to make the suggestion, she was ducking back into the tent to fetch it. ‘In case we meet another pig,’ she told me as she came out.

But it was an uneventful expedition. Outside the quarry, the countryside was hilly and pleasant. We stopped at the stream to drink and wash. I saw the flash of a tiny fingerling in the water, and the wolf immediately wanted to fish. I told him I would after I had finished gathering my broom. So he came at my heels, but reluctantly. I gathered my broom twigs and found a long straight branch for a handle. Then we filled Kettricken’s carry-sack with wood, which I insisted on bearing so her hands could be free for her bow. On the way back to camp, we stopped at the stream. I looked for a place where plants overhung the bank, and it did not take us long to find one. We then spent far longer than I had intended in tickling for fish. Kettricken had never seen it done before, but after some impatience, she caught the trick of it. They were a kind of trout I had not seen before, tinged with pink along their bellies. We caught ten, and I cleaned them there, with Nighteyes snapping up

the entrails as quickly as I gutted them. Kettricken threaded them onto a willow stick, and we returned to camp.

I had not realized how much the quiet interlude had soothed my spirits until we came in sight of the black pillar guarding the mouth of the quarry. It seemed more ominous than ever, like some dark scolding finger lifted to warn me that, indeed, this might be the lull but the storm was coming. I gave a small shudder as I passed it. My Skill-sensitivity seemed to be growing again. The pillar radiated controlled power alluringly. Almost against my will, I stopped to study the characters incised on it.

‘Fitz? Are you coming?’ Kettricken called back to me, and only then did I realize how long I had been gawking. I hastened to catch up with them, and rejoined them just as they were passing the girl on a dragon.

I had deliberately avoided that spot since the Fool had touched her. Now I glanced up guiltily to where the silver fingerprint still shone against her flawless skin. ‘Who were you, and why did you make such a sad carving?’ I asked her. But her stone eyes only looked at me pleadingly above her tear-specked cheeks.

‘Maybe she could not finish her dragon,’ Kettricken speculated. ‘See how its hind feet and tail are still trapped in the stone? Maybe that’s why it’s so sad.’

‘She must have carved it sad to begin with, don’t you see? Whether or not she finished it, the upper portion would be the same.’

Kettricken looked at me in amusement. ‘You still don’t believe that Verity’s dragon will fly when it is finished? I do. Of course, I have very little else to believe in any more. Very little.’

I had been going to tell her I thought it a minstrel’s tale for a child, but her final words shut my mouth.

Back at the dragon, I bound my broom together and went at my sweeping with a vengeance. The sun was high in a bright blue sky with a light and pleasant breeze. It was altogether a lovely day and for a time I forgot all else in my simple chore. Kettricken unloaded her firewood and soon left to get more. Nighteyes followed at her heels, and I noticed with approval that Starling and the Fool hastened after her with carry-sacks of their own. With the rock chips and dust cleared away from the dragon, I could see more of the progress Verity and Kettle had made. The black stone of the dragon’s back was so shiny it almost reflected the blue of the sky. I observed as much to Verity, not really expecting an answer. His mind and

heart were focused entirely on the dragon. On all other topics his mind seemed vague and wandering, but when he spoke to me of his dragon and the fashioning of it he was very much King Verity.

A few moments later, he rocked back on his heels from his crouch beside the dragon's foot. He stood and ran a silver hand tentatively over the dragon's back. I caught my breath, for in the wake of his hand there was suddenly colour. A rich turquoise, with every scale edged in silver, followed the sweep of Verity's finger. The hue shimmered there for an instant, then faded. Verity made a small sound of satisfaction. 'When the dragon is full, the colour will stay,' he told me. Without thinking, I reached a hand toward the dragon, but Verity abruptly shouldered me aside. 'Don't touch him,' he warned me, almost jealously. He must have seen the shock on my face, for he looked rueful. 'It's not safe for you to touch him any more, Fitz. He is too ...' His voice trailed off, and his eyes went afar in search of a word. Then he apparently forgot all about me, for he crouched back to his work on the creature's foot.

There is nothing like being treated like a child to provoke one to act that way. I finished the last of my sweeping, set my broom aside, and wandered off. I was not overly surprised when I found myself staring up at the girl on a dragon again. I had come to think of the statue as 'Girl-on-a-Dragon', for they did not seem like separate entities to me. Once more I climbed up on the dais beside her, once more I felt the swirling of her Wit-life. It lifted like fog and reached toward me hungrily. So much entrapped misery. 'There is nothing I can do for you,' I told her sadly, and almost felt that she responded to my words. It was too saddening to remain close to her for long. But as I clambered down, I noticed that which alarmed me. Around one of the dragon's hind feet, someone had been chiselling at the miring stone. I stooped down for a closer inspection. The chips and dust had been cleared from the cut, but the edges of it were new and sharp. The Fool, I told myself, was truly without caution. I stood with the intention of seeking him out immediately.

FitzChivalry. Return to me at once, please.

I sighed to myself. Probably more stone chips to sweep. For this I must be away from Molly, while she fended for herself. As I walked back to the dragon, I indulged myself in forbidden thoughts of her. I wondered if they had found a place to shelter, and how badly Burrich was hurt. They had fled with little more than the clothes on their backs. How would they survive? Or

had Regal's men attacked them again? Had they dragged her and the baby off to Tradeford? Did Burrich lie dead in the dirt somewhere?

Do you truly believe that could happen and you not know of it? Besides. She seemed more than capable of caring for herself and the child. And Burrich for that matter. Stop thinking of them. And stop indulging in self-pity. I have a task for you.

I returned to the dragon and picked up my broom. I had been sweeping for some minutes before Verity seemed to notice me. 'Ah, Fitz, there you are.' He stood, stretched, arching his back to take the ache out of it. 'Come with me.'

I followed him down to the campfire where he busied himself for a moment by putting water to heat. He picked up a piece of the dry-cooked meat, looked at it, and said sadly, 'What I would not give for one piece of Sara's fresh bread. Oh, well.' He turned to me. 'Sit down, Fitz, I want to talk to you. I've been giving much thought to all you told me, and I've an errand for you.'

I sat down slowly on a stone by the fire, shaking my head to myself. One moment he made no sense at all to me; the next he sounded just like the man who had been my mentor for so long. He gave me no time to mull my thoughts.

'Fitz, you visited the place of the dragons, on your way here. You told me that you and the wolf sensed life in them. Wit-life, you called it. And that one, Realder's dragon, seemed almost to awaken when you called him by name.'

'I get the same sense of life from the girl on the dragon, in the quarry,' I agreed with him.

Verity shook his head sadly. 'Poor thing, nothing can be done for her, I fear. She persisted in trying to keep her human shape, and thus she held back from filling her dragon. There she is and likely to remain for all time. I have taken to heart her warning; at least her error has done that much good. When I fill the dragon, I shall hold nothing back. It would be a poor ending, would it not, to have come so far and sacrificed so much, to end only with a mired dragon? That mistake, at least, I shall not make.' He bit off a chunk of the dry meat and chewed it thoughtfully.

I kept silent. He had lost me again. Sometimes all I could do was wait until his own thoughts brought him back to some topic where he made sense. I noticed he had a new smudge of silver at the top of his brow, as if he had

unthinkingly wiped sweat away. He swallowed. 'Are there any tea-herbs left?' he asked, and then added, 'I want you to return to the dragons. I want you to see if you can use your Wit with your Skill to awaken them. When I was there, try as I might, I could detect no life in any of them. I feared they had slumbered too long, and starved themselves to death, feeding only on their own dreams until nothing was left.'

Starling had left a handful of wilted nettles and mint. I gingerly coaxed them into a pot then spilled the heated water over them. While they steeped, I sorted my thoughts.

'You want me to use the Wit and Skill to awake the dragon statues. How?'

Verity shrugged. 'I don't know. Despite all Kestrel has told me, there are still great gaps in my knowledge of the Skill. When Galen stole Solicity's books, and ceased all training for Chivalry and me, it was a master stroke against us. I still keep coming back to that. Did he even then plot to secure the throne for his half-brother, or was he merely greedy for power? We will never know.'

I spoke then of a thing I had never before voiced. 'There is something I do not understand. Kettle says that your killing Carrod with the Skill left you injured yourself. Yet you drained Galen, and seemed to suffer nothing from it. Nor did Serene and Justin seem to take ill from draining the King.'

'Draining off another's Skill is not the same as killing one with a blast of Skill.' He gave a brief snort of bitter laughter. 'Having done both, I well know the difference. In the end, Galen chose to die rather than surrender all his power to me. I suspect that my father made the same choice. I also suspect that he did so to keep from them the knowledge of where I was. What secrets Galen died protecting, we now have an inkling.' He looked at the meat in his hand, set it aside. 'But what concerns us now is waking the Elderings. You look about us and see a lovely day, Fitz. I see fair seas and a clean wind to bring Red Ships to our shores. While I chip and scrape and labour, Six Duchies folk die or are Forged. Not to mention that Regal's troops harry and burn the Mountain villages along the border. My own queen's father rides to battle to protect his folk from my brother's armies. How that rankles within me! Could you rouse the dragons to their defence, they could take flight now.'

'I am reluctant to undertake a task when I do not know just what it demands,' I began, but Verity stopped me with a grin.

‘It seems to me that just yesterday that was what you were begging to do, FitzChivalry.’

He had me. ‘Nighteyes and I will set out tomorrow morning,’ I offered.

He frowned at me. ‘I see no reason to delay. It is no long journey for you, but merely a step through the pillar. But the wolf cannot pass through the stone. He will have to stay here. And I would that you went now.’

He told me so calmly to go without my wolf. I would sooner have gone stark naked. ‘Now? As in *immediately*?’

‘Why not? You can be there in a matter of minutes. See what you can do. If you are successful, I shall know it. If not, come back to us tonight, through the pillar. We will have lost nothing by trying.’

‘Do you think the coterie is no longer a danger?’

‘They are no greater a danger to you there than here. Now go.’

‘Should I wait for the others to return and let them know where I have gone?’

‘I will tell them myself. FitzChivalry. Will you do this thing for me?’

There could be only one answer to such a question. ‘I will. I go now.’ I hesitated a final time. ‘I am not sure how to use the pillar.’

‘It is no more complicated than a door, Fitz. Place your hand on it, and it draws on the Skill within you. Here, this symbol.’ He sketched with a finger in the dust. ‘That is the one for the place of the dragons. Simply put your hand on it and walk through. This,’ another sketch in the dust, ‘is the sign for the quarry. It will bring you back here.’ He lifted his dark eyes to regard me steadily. Was there a test in those eyes?

‘I shall be back this evening,’ I promised him.

‘Good. Luck ride with you,’ he told me.

And that was it. I rose and left the fire behind me, walking toward the pillar. I passed Girl-on-a-Dragon and tried not to be distracted by her. Somewhere off in the woods, the others were gathering firewood while Nighteyes ranged all around them.

Are you really going without me?

I shall not be gone long, my brother.

Shall I come back and wait for you by the pillar?

No, watch over the Queen for me, if you would.

With pleasure. She shot a bird for me today.

I sensed his admiration and sincerity. What finer thing than a bitch who kills efficiently?

A bitch who shares well.

See that you save some for me, as well.

You can have the fish, he assured me magnanimously.

I looked up at the black pillar that now loomed before me. There was the symbol. As simple as a door, Verity had said. Touch the symbol and pass through. Perhaps. But my stomach was full of butterflies and it was all I could do to lift my hand and press it to the shining black stone. My palm met the symbol and I felt a cold tug of Skill. I stepped through.

I went from bright sunlight to cool dappling shade. I stepped away from the tall black pillar and onto deeply grassed earth. The air was heavy with moisture and plant smells. Branches that had been beaded with leaf buds the last time I had been here were now lush with foliage. A chorus of insects and frogs greeted me. The forest around me swarmed with life. After the empty silence of the quarry, it was almost overwhelming. I stood for a time, just adjusting to it.

Cautiously I lowered my Skill walls and reached warily out. Save for the pillar behind me, I had no sense of Skill in use. I relaxed a bit. Perhaps Verity's blasting of Carrod had done more than he realized. Perhaps they feared to challenge him directly now. I warmed myself with that thought as I set off through the luxuriant growth.

I was soon soaked to the knee. It was not that there was water underfoot, but that the riotous growth of grasses and reeds that I waded through were laden with moisture. Overhead twining vines and hanging leaves dripped. I did not mind. It seemed refreshing after the bare stone and dust of the quarry. What had been a rudimentary pathway the last time we were here was now a narrow corridor through leaning, sprawling plant-life. I came to a shallow gurgling stream, and took a handful of peppery cress from it to nibble as I walked. I promised I would take some back to camp with me come nightfall, and then recalled myself to my mission. Dragons. Where were the dragons?

They had not moved, though greenery grew taller around them than it had been. I spotted a lightning-blasted stump I remembered, and from there found Realdar's dragon. I had already decided he might be the most promising one to start with, for I had definitely felt a strong Wit-life in him. As if it could make some difference, I took a few minutes to clear him of vines and wet, clinging grasses. As I did so, one thing struck me. The way the sleeping creature was sprawled upon the earth followed the contour of

the ground beneath him. It did not look like a statue carved and then set in place here. It looked like a living creature that had flung itself down to rest and never moved again.

I tried to force belief on myself. These were the very Elderlings that rose to King Wisdom's call. They flew like great birds to the coast and there they defeated the Raiders and drove them from our shores. From the skies they fell on the ships, driving the crews mad with terror or oversetting the ships with the great wind from their wings. And they would again, could we but wake them.

'I shall try,' I said aloud, and then repeated, 'I shall wake them,' and sought to have no doubt in my voice. I walked slowly about Realdar's dragon, trying to decide how to begin. From the wedge-shaped reptilian head to the barbed tail, this was one stone dragon that was all of the stuff of legend. I reached an admiring hand to run it over the gleaming scales. I could sense the Wit curling lazily through it like smoke. I willed myself to believe in the life in it. Could any artist have contrived so perfect a rendering? There were knobs of bone at the apex of its wings, similar to those on a gander. I did not doubt that it could clout a man down with it. The barbs of its tail were still sharp and nasty. I could imagine it lashing through rigging or rowers, shearing, slicing, snagging. 'Realdar,' I cried aloud to it. 'Realdar!'

I felt no response. Not a stirring of Skill, not even much difference in its Wit. Well, I told myself I had not expected it to be that easy. In the next few hours, I tried every way I could imagine to wake that beast. I pressed my face to its scaly cheek, and quested into that stone as deeply as I could probe. I got less response from it than an earthworm would have given me. I stretched my body out beside that cold stone lizard, and willed myself to oneness with it. I sought to bond with that lazy stirring of Wit within it. I radiated affection toward it. I commanded it strenuously. Eda help me, I even sought to threaten it with dire consequences if it did not arise to obey my command. It all availed me nothing. I began to clutch at straws. I recalled the Fool to it. Nothing. I reached back for the Skill-dream the Fool and I had shared. I brought into my mind every detail of the woman in the rooster crown that I could recall. I offered her to the dragon. There was no response. I tried basic things. Verity said perhaps they had starved. I visualized pools of cool, sweet water, fat, silvery fish there for the devouring. I Skill-

visualized Realder's dragon being devoured by a greater one, and offered it that picture. No response.

I ventured to reach for my king. *If there is life in these stones, it is too small and sunken for me to reach.*

It troubled me a little that Verity did not even bother to reply. But perhaps he too had seen this as a desperation measure, with small chance of success. I left Realder's dragon and wandered for a time, from stone beast to stone beast. I quested amongst them, looking for any that might have a stronger flicker of Wit-life to them. Once, I thought I had found one, but a closer check showed me that a fieldmouse had made its home under the dragon's chest.

I chose a dragon antlered like a buck and tried again every tactic I had tried on Realder's dragon, with as little result. By then, the daylight was waning. As I picked my way through the trees back to the pillar, I wondered if Verity had truly expected any sort of success. Doggedly, I moved from dragon to dragon on my way back to the pillar, giving each one a last effort. It was probably what saved me. I straightened from one, thinking I felt a strong Wit-life coming from the next one. But when I got to him, the hulking winged boar with his curving razor tusks, I perceived the Wit was coming from beyond him. I lifted my eyes and peered through the trees, rather expecting to see a deer or wild pig. Instead I saw a man with a drawn sword standing with his back to me.

I folded up behind the boar. My mouth was suddenly dry, my heart hammering. He was neither Verity nor the Fool. That much I knew in an instant's glance. He was someone shorter than I, sandy-haired, and holding a sword as if he knew how to wield it. Someone dressed in gold and brown. Not bulky Burl, nor slender dark Will. Someone else, but Regal's.

In a moment all became clear to me. How stupid could I have been? I had destroyed Will and Burl's men, horses and supplies. What else would they do, but Skill to Regal that they needed more? With the constant skirmishing along the Mountain borders it would be no trick for another raiding party to slip through, bypass Jhaampe and travel up the Skill road. The slide area we had crossed was a formidable barrier but not an insurmountable one. Risking his men's lives was something Regal was proficient at. I wondered how many had attempted the crossing and how many had survived. I was sure now that Will and Burl were once more comfortably provisioned.

Then a more chilling thought struck me. He might be Skilled. There was nothing to stop Will from training others. He had all Solicity's books and scrolls to draw on, and while Skill-potential was not common, it was not excessively rare. In moments my imagination had multiplied the man to an army, all at least marginally Skilled, all fanatically loyal to Regal. I leaned against the stone boar, trying to breathe softly despite the fear coursing through me. For a moment, despair had me in thrall. I had finally realized the immensity of the resources that Regal could turn against us. This was no private vendetta between us; this was a king, with a king's armies and powers, out to exterminate those he had branded as traitors. The only thing that had bound Regal's hands before was the possible embarrassment if it were discovered that Verity had not died. Now, back in this remote area, he had nothing to fear. He could use his soldiers to do away with his brother and nephew, his sister-in-law, with all witnesses. Then his coterie could dispose of the soldiers.

These thoughts passed through my mind the way lightning illuminates the blackest night. In one flash, I suddenly saw all details. In the next moment, I knew I must get to the pillar and back to the quarry to warn Verity. If it were not already too late.

I felt myself calm as soon as I had a goal in mind. I considered Skilling to Verity, and quickly rejected the idea. Until I knew my enemy better, I would not risk exposing myself to him. I found myself seeing it as if it were Kettle's game. Stones to capture or destroy. The man was between me and the pillar. That was to be expected. What I now had to discover was if there were others as well. I drew my own belt knife; a sword was no weapon to use in dense brush. I took a deep steadying breath, and slipped away from the boar.

I had a rough familiarity with the area. It served me in good stead as I moved from dragon to tree trunk to old stump. Before darkness was complete, I knew there were three men and that they seemed to be guarding the pillar. I did not think they had come here to hunt me, but rather to keep anyone save Regal's coterie from using the pillar. I had found the tracks of their passage from the Skill road; they were fresh, the men newly arrived. I could then rely that I knew the lay of the land better than they did. I decided I would believe them unSkilled, as they had come by the trail rather than by the pillar. But they were probably very able soldiers. I also decided I should believe Will and Burl might be very close by. Able to come through the

pillar at a moment's notice. For that reason I kept my Skill walls high and tight. And I waited. When I did not return, Verity would know something was wrong. I did not think he would be so unwary as to come through the pillar in search of me. In truth, I did not think he would leave his dragon for that long. This was my own fix to get myself out of.

As darkness fell, insects came out. Stinging, biting, swarming insects by the hundreds, and always the one who insisted on humming right by my ear. Ground mists began to rise, damping my clothes to my body. The guards had made a small fire. I smelled hearth-cakes cooking and found myself wondering if I could kill them before they had eaten them all. I grinned hard to myself and ghosted closer. Night and a fire and food usually meant talk. These men spoke little and most of it was in low tones. They did not care for this duty. The long black road had driven some men mad. But tonight it was not the long way they had come, but the stone dragons themselves that bothered them. I also heard enough to confirm what I had guessed. There were three men guarding this pillar. There were a full dozen guarding the one at the plaza where the Fool had had his vision. The main body of soldiers had pushed on toward the quarry. The coterie was seeking to close off escape routes for Verity.

I felt a bit of relief that it would take them fully as long to get there as it had taken our party. For tonight, at least, Verity and the others were in no danger of attack. But it was only a matter of time. My resolution to get back through the pillar as swiftly as possible hardened. I had no intention of fighting them. That left killing them by ambush, one by one, a feat I doubted even Chade could have accomplished. Or creating enough of a diversion to draw them off long enough for me to make a dash for the pillar.

I slipped well away from the men, to where I judged I was out of earshot and proceeded to gather dry firewood. It was not an easy task in such a lush and verdant place, but I finally had a respectable armful. My plan was simple. I told myself it would either work or it wouldn't. I doubted I would get a second chance; they would be too cautious for that.

I considered where the symbol for the quarry was on the pillar and worked my way around to the dragons that were on the opposite side of it. Of the dragons, I chose the fierce-looking fellow with ear tufts that I had remarked upon on my first visit here. He would cast a fine shadow. I cleared a space behind him of wet grass and leaves and set my fire there. I had only enough fuel for a small fire, but I hoped I would not need more than that. I

wanted enough light and smoke to be mysterious without enlightening. I got the fire going well, then slipped away from it in the darkness. Belly in the grass, I worked my way as close to the pillar as I dared. Now I only need wait until the guards noticed my fire. I hoped at least one man would go to investigate it, and that the other two would watch where he had gone. Then a noiseless dash, a slap to the pillar, and I'd be gone.

Save that the guards did not notice my fire. From my vantage, it seemed glaringly obvious. There was rising smoke and a rosy glow through the trees, partially outlining the dragon's silhouette. I had hoped that would pique their interest. Instead it was blocking my fire too well. I decided a few well-placed rocks would draw their attention to my fire. My groping hands found only lush plant life growing in thick loam. After an interminable wait, I realized my fire was going out, and the guards had noticed it not at all. Once more I slipped out of earshot. Once more I gathered dry sticks in the dark. Then my nose as much as my eyes guided me back to my smouldering fire.

My brother, you are long gone. Is all well? There was anxiety in Nighteyes' faint thought.

I am hunted. Be still. I shall come as soon as I can. I pushed the wolf gently from my thoughts and stole through the dark toward my dwindling fire.

I refuelled it and waited for it to catch. I was just slipping away from it when I heard their voices raised in speculation. I do not think I was careless. It was but an ill twist of luck that as I moved from the cover of a dragon to that of a tree, one guard lifted his torch high, throwing my shadow into stark relief. 'There! A man!' one shouted, and two of them charged out at me. I eeled away through the wet underbrush.

I heard one trip and fall, cursing, in a patch of vines, but the second was a swift and agile fellow. He was on my heels in an instant, and I swear I felt the wind from the first sweep of his sword. I lunged away from it, and found myself half leaping, half falling over the stone boar. I clipped a knee painfully on his rocky back and fell to the earth on the other side of him. Instantly I scrabbled to my feet. My pursuer leaped forward, swinging a mighty blow that surely would have cloven me in two if he had not caught his leg on one curving, razor tusk. He tripped and fell squarely, impaling himself on the second tusk where it thrust up like a scimitar from the boar's red maw. The sound the man made was not a large one. I saw him begin to struggle to rise, but the curve of the tusk was hooked inside him. I leaped to

my feet, mindful of the second man who had been pursuing me, and fled into the dark. Behind me rose a long cry of pain.

I kept my wits enough to circle. I had nearly reached the pillar when I felt a queasy twist of Skill. I recalled the last time I had felt such a thing. Was Verity himself under attack, back at the quarry? One man still guarded the pillar, but I decided to risk his sword to get back to my king. I emerged from the trees, racing toward the pillar while the guard stared off toward my fire and the cries of the fallen man. Another tendril of Skill brushed me.

‘No!’ I cried out, ‘Don’t risk yourself!’ as my king came through the pillar, notched grey sword clutched in his gleaming silver grip. He emerged behind the guard who had remained on post. My foolish cry had turned him toward the pillar, and he came at my king, sword lifted, even as his face betrayed his terror.

Verity in their firelight looked like a demon out of a tale. His face was splashed with silver from the careless touching of his hands, while his hands and arms gleamed as if made of polished silver. His gaunt face and ragged clothes, the utter blackness of his eyes would have terrified any man. I will have to give Regal’s guard this: he stood his post, and caught the King’s first blow and turned it. Or so he thought. It was an old trick of Verity’s. Instead his blade wrapped the other. His cut should have severed the hand from the arm, but the dulled blade stopped at the bone. Nonetheless the man dropped his sword. As the man fell to his knees clutching at the gouting wound, Verity’s sword swept in again, across his throat. I felt a second tremoring of Skill. The lone remaining guard came racing toward us from the trees. His eyes fixed on Verity and he cried out in terror. He halted where he stood. Verity took a step toward him.

‘My king, enough! Let us leave!’ I cried out. I did not want him to risk himself for me again.

Instead Verity glanced down at his sword. He frowned. Suddenly he grasped the blade in his left hand just below the hilt and drew it through his shining grip. I gasped at what I saw. The sword he brandished now gleamed and came to a perfect point. Even by torchlight, I could see the wavering ripples of the many-folded metal of the blade. The King glanced at me. ‘I should have known I could do that.’ He almost smiled. Then Verity lifted it to the other man’s eyes. ‘When you are ready,’ he said quietly.

What happened next stunned me.

The soldier fell to his knees, casting his sword into the grass before him. 'My king. I know you, even if you do not know me.' Buck accent spoke plainly in his tumbling words. 'My lord, we were told that you were dead. Dead because your queen and the Bastard had conspired against you. Those were who we were told might be found here. It was half for that revenge that I came. I served you well at Buck my lord, and if you live, I serve my king still.'

Verity peered at him in the flickering torchlight. 'You're Tig, aren't you? Reaver's boy?'

The soldier's eyes widened that Verity recalled him. 'Tag my lord. Serving my king as my father did before me.' His voice shook a bit. His dark eyes never left the point of the sword Verity had levelled at him.

Verity lowered his blade. 'Do you speak truth, lad? Or simply seek to save your skin?'

The young soldier looked up at Verity and dared to smile. 'I have no need to fear. The prince I served would not strike down a kneeling, unarmed man. I dare say the King will not either.'

Perhaps no other words would have convinced Verity. Despite his weariness, he smiled. 'Go then, Tag. Go as swift as you may and as silent as you may, for those who have used you will kill you if they know you are true to me. Return to Buck. And on the way there, and when you get there, tell everyone that I shall be returning. That I shall bring my good and true queen with me, to sit the throne, and that my heir will claim it after me. And when you get to Buckkeep Castle, present yourself to my brother's wife. Tell the Lady Patience that I commend you to her service.'

'Yes, my king. King Verity?'

'What is it?'

'More troops are coming. We are but the vanguard ...' He paused. He swallowed. 'I accuse no one of treachery, least of all your own brother. But ...'

'Let it not concern you, Tag. What I have asked you to do is important to me. Go quickly and challenge no one on your way. But carry back those tidings as I have asked you.'

'Yes, my king.'

'Now,' Verity suggested.

And Tag rose, took up his sword and sheathed it, and strode off into the darkness.

Verity turned and his eyes shone with triumph. 'We can do it!' he told me quietly. He gestured me fiercely toward the pillar. I reached to palm the symbol and tumbled through as the Skill clutched at me. Verity came on my heels.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Feeding the Dragon

By midsummer of that final year, the Six Duchies situation had become desperate. Buckkeep Castle, so long avoided by the Raiders, came under sudden siege from them. They had possessed Antler Island and its watchtowers since midwinter. Forge, the first village to fall victim to the scourge that took its name, had long since become a watering stop for Red Ships. There had been for some time rumours of Outisland sailing ships anchoring off Scrim Island, including several sightings of the elusive 'White Ship'. For most of the spring, no ships had made passage either into or out of Buck harbour. This strangle of trade was felt not just in Buck, but in every trade village on the Buck, Bear and Vin Rivers. The Red Ships had become a sudden reality to the merchants and lords of Tilth and Farrow.

But at the high point of summer, the Red Ships came to Buckkeep Town. The Red Ships came in the dead of night after several weeks of deceptive quiet. The fighting was the savage defence of a cornered folk, but they were also a starved and beggared folk. Almost every wooden structure of the town was burned to the ground. It is estimated that only one quarter of the town's residents were able to flee up the steep hills to Buckkeep Castle. Although Lord Bright had endeavoured to refortify and supply the castle, the weeks of strangulation had taken their toll. The deep wells of Buckkeep Castle assured them a good supply of fresh water, but all other things were in scarce supply.

Catapults and other engines of war had been in place for decades to defend the mouth of the Buck River, but Lord Bright diverted them to the defence of Buckkeep Castle itself. Unchallenged, the Red Ships beat their way up the Buck River, carrying their war and Forging deep into the Six Duchies like a spreading poison following a vein to the heart.

At a time when Red Ships threatened Tradeford itself, the lords of Farrow and Tilth were to discover that a great part of the Six Duchies armies had been sent far inland, to Blue Lake, and beyond, to the very borders of the Mountain Kingdom. The nobles of these duchies suddenly discovered that their own guardsmen were all that stood between them and

death and ruin.

I emerged from the pillar into a circle of frantic people. The first thing to happen was that a wolf hit me full force in the chest, driving me backwards, so that as Verity emerged he all but fell over me.

I made her understand me, I made her know you were in danger and she made him go after you. I made her understand me, I made her understand me! Nighteyes was in a puppyish frenzy. He thrust his nose into my face, nipped at my nose, then flung himself to the ground beside me and half in my lap.

‘He stirred a dragon! Not quite to wakening, but I felt one stir! We may yet wake them all!’ This was Verity, laughing and shouting to the others these good tidings as he calmly stepped over us. He flourished his shining sword aloft as if to challenge the moon. I had no idea what he was talking about. I sat flat on the earth, staring around at them. The Fool looked wan and weary, Kettricken, ever a mirror to her king, smiled at his exultation. Starling looked at all of us with greedy minstrel eyes, memorizing every detail. And Kettle, her hands and arms silver to the elbow, knelt carefully beside me to ask, ‘Are you all right, FitzChivalry?’

I looked at her magic-coated arms and hands. ‘What have you done?’ I asked her.

‘Only what was necessary. Verity took me to the river in the city. Now our work will proceed more swiftly. What happened to you?’

I did not answer her. Instead I pinned Verity with a glare. ‘You sent me off so I would not follow you! You knew I could not wake the dragons, but you wanted me out of the way!’ I could not conceal the outrage and betrayal I felt.

Verity gave me one of his old grins, denying all regrets. ‘We know one another very well, don’t we?’ was all he offered by way of apology. Then his grin grew wider. ‘Yes, it was a fool’s errand I sent you on. But I was the fool, for you did it. You woke one, or stirred him at least.’

I shook my head at him.

‘Yes, you did. You must have felt it, that rippling of Skill, just before I reached you. What did you do, how did you stir him?’

‘A man died on the stone boar’s tusks,’ I said flatly. ‘Perhaps that is how you rouse these dragons. With death.’ I cannot explain the hurt I felt. He had taken what should have been mine and given it to Kettle. He owed

that Skill-closeness to me, no other. Who else had come so far, given up so much for him? How could he deny me the carving of his dragon?

It was Skill-hunger, pure and simple, but I did not know it then. At that time, all I could feel was how perfectly linked he was with Kettle, and how firmly he repulsed me from joining that link. He walled me out as tightly as if I were Regal. I had forsaken my wife and child and crossed all of the Six Duchies to be of service to him, and now he turned me away. He should have taken me to the river, been beside me as I had that experience. I had never known myself capable of such jealousy. Nighteyes came back from frisking about Kettricken to push his head under my arm. I rubbed his throat and hugged him. He, at least, was mine.

She understood me, he repeated anxiously. *I made her understand, and she told him he must go.*

Kettricken, coming to stand beside me, said, 'I had the strongest feeling you needed help. It took much urging, but finally Verity left the dragon and went for you. Are you much hurt?'

I got to my feet slowly, dusting myself off. 'Only my pride, that my king would treat me as a child. He might have let me know he preferred Kettle's company.'

A flash of something in Kettricken's eyes made me recall to whom I spoke. But she hid her twin hurt well, saying only, 'A man was killed, you say?'

'Not by me. He fell on the stone boar's tusks in the dark and gutted himself. But I saw no stirring of dragons.'

'Not the death, but the spilled life,' Kettle said to Verity. 'That might be it. Like the scent of fresh meat rousing a dog starved near to death. They are hungry, my king, but not past rousing. Not if you find a way to feed them.'

'I like not the sound of that!' I exclaimed.

'It is not for us to like or dislike,' Verity said heavily. 'It is the nature of dragons. They must be filled, and life is what fills them. It must be given willingly to create one. But dragons will take what they need to sustain them, once they rise in flight. What had you supposed that King Wisdom offered them in return for defeating the Red Ships?'

Kettle pointed a scolding finger at the Fool. 'Pay heed to that, Fool and understand now why you are so weary. When you touched her with Skill, you linked with her. She draws you to her now, and you think you go out of

pity. But she will take from you whatever she needs to rise. Even if it is your whole life.'

'No one is making any sense,' I declared. Then, as my own scattered wits returned to me, I exclaimed, 'Regal has sent soldiers. They are on the march here. They are no more than a few days away at most. I suspect they push themselves and travel swiftly. The men guarding the pillars are placed there to prevent Verity's escape.'

It was much later that night before I had it all sorted out. Kettle and Verity had indeed gone to the river, almost as soon as I left. They had used the pillar to get down to the city, and there they had laved Kettle's arms in the stuff and renewed the power in Verity's. Every glimpse of that silvering of her arms woke in me a Skill-hunger that was almost a lust. It was something I masked myself and attempted to hide from Verity. I do not believe he was deceived, but he did not force me to confront it. I masked my jealousy with other excuses. I told them both hotly it was only the purest luck they had not encountered the coterie there. Verity had calmly replied that he had known the risk and taken it. Somehow it hurt me all the more that even my anger left him so unmoved.

It had been on their return that they had discovered the Fool chipping at the stone that mired Girl-on-a-Dragon. He had cleared an area around one foot, and begun on the other. The foot itself remained a shapeless chunk of stone but the Fool insisted that he could feel the foot, intact inside it. He felt certain that all she wished from him was that he chop the dragon free of that which mired it. He had been shaking with exhaustion when they found him. Kettle had insisted he go right to bed. She had taken the last piece of often-boiled elfbark and ground it down fine, to make one last dose of tea for him. Despite the drug, he remained detached and weary, scarcely even asking a question as to what had happened to me. I felt deep uneasiness for him.

The news I had brought of Regal's men stirred everyone to action. After food, Verity sent Starling, the Fool, and the wolf to the mouth of the quarry, to keep watch there. I sat by the fire for a time, with a cold wet rag wrapped around my swollen and discoloured knee. Up on the dragon dais, Kettricken kept her fires burning, and Verity and Kettle worked the stone. Starling, in helping Kettle search for more elfbark, had discovered the carris seeds that Chade had give me. Kettle had appropriated them and brewed them up into a stimulant drink she and Verity were sharing. The noise of their work had taken on a frightening tempo.

They had also found the sunskirt seeds I had bought so long ago as a possible substitute for elfbark. With a sly grin, Starling asked me why I was carrying those. When I explained, she had snorted with laughter, and finally managed to explain they were regarded as an aphrodisiac. I recalled the herb-seller's words to me and shook my head to myself. A part of me saw the humour, but I could not find a smile.

After a time of sitting alone by the cook fire, I quested toward Nighteyes. *How goes it?*

A sigh. The minstrel would rather be playing with her harp. The Scentless One would rather be chipping at that statue. And I would rather be hunting. If there is danger coming, it is a long way away.

Let us hope it stays there. Keep watch, my friend.

I left the camp and gimped up the scree of stone to the dragon dais. Three of its feet were free now, and Verity worked on the final front foot. I stood for a time beside him, but he did not deign to notice me. Instead he went on chipping and scraping, and all the while muttered old nursery rhymes or drinking songs to himself. I limped past Ketricken listlessly tending her fires back to where Kettle was smoothing her hands over the dragon's tail. Her eyes were distant as she called for the scales, and then deepened their detail and added texture to them. Part of the tail also remained hidden in the stone. I started to lean on the thick portion of the tail to take weight off my bruised knee, but she immediately sat up and hissed at me. 'Don't do that! Don't touch him!'

I straightened away from him. 'I touched him before,' I said indignantly. 'And it did no harm.'

'That was before. He is much closer to completion now.' She lifted her eyes to mine. Even in the firelight, I could mark how thickly rock dust coated her features and clung to her eyelashes. She looked dreadfully tired and yet animated by some fierce energy. 'As close as you are to Verity, the dragon would reach for you. And you are not strong enough to say no. He would pull you in completely. That's how strong he is, how magnificently strong.' She all but crooned the last words as she stroked her hands again down the tail. For an instant, I saw a sheen of colour right behind their passage.

'Is anyone ever going to explain any of this to me?' I asked petulantly.

She gave me a bemused look. 'I try. Verity tries. But you of all people should know how wearisome words are. We try and try and try to tell you,

and still your mind does not grasp it. It is not your fault. Words are not big enough. And it is too dangerous to include you in our Skilling now.'

'Will you be able to make me understand after the dragon is finished?'

She looked at me and something like pity crossed her face. 'FitzChivalry. My dear friend. When the dragon is finished? Rather say that when Verity and I are finished, the dragon will be begun.'

'I don't understand!' I snarled in frustration.

'But he told you. I said it again when I warned the Fool. Dragons feed on life. A whole life, willingly given. That is what it takes to make a dragon rise. And usually not just one. In olden times, when wise men sought out Jhaampe town, they came as a coterie, as a whole that was more than the sum of its parts, and gave that all over into a dragon. The dragon must be filled. Verity and I must put all of ourselves, every part of our lives, into it. It is easier for me. Eda knows I have lived more than my share of years, and I have no desire to go on in this body. It is harder, much harder, for Verity. He leaves behind his throne, his pretty, loving wife, his love of doing things with his hands. He leaves behind riding a fine horse, hunting stags, walking amongst his own people. Oh, I feel them all within the dragon already. The careful inking of colour onto a map, the feel of a clean piece of vellum under his hands. I even know the smells of his inks, now. He has put them all into the dragon. It is hard for him. But he does it, and the pain it costs him is one more thing he puts into the dragon. It will fuel his fury toward the Red Ships when he rises. In fact, there is only one thing he has held back from his dragon. Only one thing that may make him fall short of his goal.'

'What is that?' I asked her unwillingly.

Her old eyes met mine. 'You. He has refused to allow you to be put into the dragon. He could do it, you know, whether you willed it or not. He could simply reach out and pull you into him. But he refuses. He says you love your life too much, he will not take it from you. That you have already laid down too much of it for a king who has returned you only pain and hardship.'

Did she know that with her words she gave Verity back to me? I suspect she did. I had seen much of her past during our Skill-sharing. I knew the experience had to have flowed both ways. She knew how I had loved him, and how hurt I had been to find him so distant when I got here. I stood up immediately to go speak with him.

‘Fitz!’ she called me back. I turned to her. ‘Two things I would have you know, painful as you may find them.’

I braced myself. ‘Your mother loved you,’ she said quietly. ‘You say you cannot recall her. Actually, you cannot forgive her. But she is there, with you, in your memories. She was tall and fair, a Mountain woman. And she loved you. It was not her choice to part from you.’

Her words angered me and dizzied me. I pushed away the knowledge she offered me. I knew I had no memories of the woman who had borne me. Time and again, I had searched myself, and found no trace of her. None at all. ‘And the second thing,’ I asked her coldly.

She did not react to my anger, save with pity. ‘It is as bad, or perhaps worse. Again, it is a thing you already know. It is sad, that the only gifts I can offer you, the Catalyst who has changed my living death to dying life, are things you already possess. But there it is, and so I will say it. You will live to love again. You know you have lost your springtime girl, your Molly on the beach with the wind in her brown hair and red cloak. You have been gone too long from her, and too much has befallen you both. And what you loved, what both of you truly loved, was not each other. It was the time of your life. It was the spring of your years, and life running strong in you, and war on your doorstep and your strong, perfect bodies. Look back, in truth. You will find you recall fully as many quarrels and tears as you do love-making and kisses. Fitz. Be wise. Let her go, and keep those memories intact. Save what you can of her, and let her keep what she can of the wild and daring boy she loved. Because both he and that merry little miss are no more than memories any more.’ She shook her head. ‘No more than memories.’

‘You are wrong!’ I shouted furiously. ‘You are wrong!’

The force of my cries had brought Ketricken to her feet. She stared at me, in fear and worry. I could not look at her. Tall and fair. My mother had been tall and fair. No. I recalled nothing of her. I strode past her, heedless of the wrench of pain my knee gave me at every step. I walked around the dragon, damning it with every step I took, and defying it to sense what I felt. When I reached Verity working on the left fore-foot, I crouched down beside him and spoke in a savage whisper.

‘Kettle says you are going to die when this dragon is done. That you will put all of yourself into it. Or so, with my feeble understanding of her words, I take it. Tell me I am wrong.’

He leaned back on his heels and swiped at the chips he had loosened. 'You are wrong,' he said mildly. 'Fetch your broom, would you, and clear this?'

I fetched my broom and came up beside him, almost of a mind to break it over his head more than use it. I knew he sensed my simmering fury, but he still gestured for me to clear his work-space. I did so with one furious brush. 'Now,' he said gently. 'That is a fine anger you have. Potent and strong. That, I think, I shall take for him.'

Soft as the brush of a butterfly's wing, I felt the kiss of his Skill. My anger was snatched from me, flayed whole from my soul and swept away to ...

'No. Don't follow it.' A gentle Skill-push from Verity, and I snapped back to my body. An instant later, I found myself sitting flat on the stone while the whole universe swung dizzily around my head. I curled forward slowly, bringing up my knees to lean my head against them. I felt wretchedly ill. My anger was gone, replaced by a weary numbness.

'There,' Verity continued. 'As you asked for, I have done. I think you understand better now, what it is to put something into the dragon. Would you care to feed it more of yourself?'

I shook my head mutely. I feared to open my mouth.

'I will not die when the dragon is finished, Fitz. I will be consumed, that is true. Quite literally. But I will go on. As the dragon.'

I found my voice. 'And Kettle?'

'Kestrel will be a part of me. And her sister Gull. But I shall be the dragon.' He had gone back to his wretched stone chipping.

'How can you do that?' My voice was filled with accusation. 'How can you do that to Kettricken? She's given up everything to come here to you. And you will simply leave her, alone and childless?'

He leaned forward so that his forehead rested against the dragon. His endless chipping stopped. After a time, he spoke in a thick voice. 'I should have you stand here and talk to me while I work, Fitz. Just when I think I am past any great feelings at all, you stir them in me.' He lifted his face to regard me. His tears had cut two paths through the grey rock dust. 'What choice do I have?'

'Simply leave the dragon. Let us go back to the Six Duchies, and rally the folk, and fight the Red Ships with sword and Skill, as we did before. Perhaps ...'

‘Perhaps we would all be dead before we even reached Jhaampe. Is that a better end for my queen? No. I shall carry her back to Buckkeep, and clean the coasts, and she shall reign long and well as Queen. There. That is what I choose to give her.’

‘And an heir?’ I asked bitterly.

He shrugged wearily and took up his chisel again. ‘You know what must be. Your daughter will be raised as heir.’

‘NO! Threaten me with that again, and regardless of the risk, I will Skill to Burrich to flee with her.’

‘You cannot Skill to Burrich,’ Verity observed mildly. He appeared to be measuring for the dragon’s toe. ‘Chivalry closed his mind to the Skill years ago, to keep Burrich from being used against him. As the Fool was used against you.’

Another small mystery laid to rest. For all the good it did me. ‘Verity, please. I beg you. Do not do this thing to me. Far better I should be consumed in the dragon as well. I offer you that. Take my life and feed it to the dragon. I will give you anything you ask of me. But promise me that my daughter will not be sacrificed to the Farseer throne.’

‘I cannot make you that promise,’ he said heavily.

‘If you bore any feelings at all for me any more,’ I began, but he interrupted me.

‘Cannot you understand, no matter how often you are told? I have feelings. But I have put them into the dragon.’

I managed to stand up. I limped away. There was nothing more to say to him. King or man, uncle or friend, I seemed to have lost all knowledge of who he was. When I Skilled toward him, I found only his walls. When I quested toward him with the Wit, I found his life flickering between himself and the stone dragon. And of late, it seemed to burn brighter within the dragon, not Verity.

There was no one else in camp and the fire was nearly out. I flung more wood on it, and then sat eating dried meat beside it. The pig was nearly gone. We’d have to hunt again soon. Or rather, Nighteyes and Kettricken should hunt again. She seemed to bring meat down easily for him. My self-pity was losing its savour, but I could think of no better solution than to wish I had some brandy to drown it in. At last, with few other interesting alternatives, I went to bed.

I slept, after a fashion. Dragons plagued my dreams and Kettle's game took on odd meanings as I tried to decide if a red stone were powerful enough to capture Molly. My dreams were rambling and incoherent, and I broke often to the surface of my sleep, to stare at the dark inside the tent. I quested out once to where Nighteyes prowled near a small fire while Starling and the Fool slept turn and turn about. They had moved their sentry post to the brow of a hill where they could command a good view of the winding Skill road below them. I should have walked out and joined them. Instead I rolled over and dipped into my dreams again. I dreamed of Regal's troops coming, not by dozens or scores, but hundreds of gold and brown troops pouring into the quarry, to corner us against the vertical black walls and kill us all.

I awoke in the morning to the cold poke of a wolf's nose. *You need to hunt*, he told me seriously, and I agreed with him. As I emerged from my tent, I saw Kettricken just coming down from the dais. Dawn was breaking, her fires were needed no longer. She could sleep, but up by the dragon, the endless clinking and scraping went on. Our eyes met as I stood up. She glanced at Nighteyes.

'Going hunting?' she asked us both. The wolf gave a slow wag to his tail. 'I'll fetch my bow,' she announced, and vanished into her tent. We waited. She came out wearing a cleaner jerkin and carrying her bow. I refused to look at Girl on a Dragon as we passed her. As we walked by the pillar, I observed, 'Had we the folk to do it, we should put two on guard here, and two overlooking the road.'

Kettricken nodded to that. 'It is odd. I know they are coming to kill us, and I see small way for us to escape that fate. Yet we still go out to hunt for meat, as if eating were the most important thing.'

It is. Eating is living.

'Still, to live, one must eat,' Kettricken echoed Nighteyes' thought.

We saw no game truly worthy of her bow. The wolf ran down a rabbit, and she brought down one brightly coloured fowl. We ended up tickling for trout and by midday had more than enough fish to feed us, at least for that day. I cleaned them on the bank of the stream, and then asked Kettricken if she would mind if I stayed to wash myself.

'In truth, it might be a kindness to us all,' she replied, and I smiled, not at her teasing, but that she was still able to do so. In a short time I heard her

splashing upstream from me, while Nighteyes dozed on the creek bank, his belly full of fish guts.

As we passed Girl on a Dragon on the way back to camp, we found the Fool curled up on the dais beside her, sound asleep. Kettricken woke him, and scolded him for the fresh chisel marks about the dragon's tail. He professed no regrets, but only stated that Starling had said she would keep watch until evening, and he would really prefer to sleep here. We insisted he return to camp with us.

We were talking amongst ourselves as we returned to the tent. Kettricken it was who stopped us suddenly. 'Hush!' she cried out. And then, 'Listen!'

We froze where we were. I half expected to hear Starling crying a warning to us. I strained my ears, but heard nothing save the wind in the quarry and distant bird sounds. It took a moment for me to grasp the importance of that. 'Verity!' I exclaimed. I shoved our fish into the Fool's hands and began to run. Kettricken passed me.

I had feared to find them both dead, attacked by Regal's coterie in our absence. What I found was almost as strange. Verity and Kettle stood, side by side, staring at their dragon. He shone black and glistening as good flint in the afternoon sunlight. The great beast was complete. Every scale, every wrinkle, every claw was impeccable in its detail. 'He surpasses every dragon we saw in the stone garden,' I declared. I had walked about him twice, and with every step I took, the wonder of him increased. Wit-life burned powerfully in him now, stronger than it did in either Verity or Kettle. It was almost shocking that his sides did not bellow with breath, that he did not twitch in his sleep. I glanced to Verity, and despite the anger I still harboured, I had to smile.

'He is perfect,' I said quietly.

'I have failed,' he said without hope. Beside him, Kettle nodded miserably. The lines in her face had gone deeper. She looked every bit of two hundred years old. So did Verity.

'But he is finished, my lord,' Kettricken said quietly. 'Is not this what you said you must do? Finish the dragon?'

Verity shook his head slowly. 'The carving is finished. But the dragon is not completed.' He looked around at us, watching him, and I could see how he struggled to make the words hold his meaning. 'I have put all I am into him. Everything save enough to keep my heart beating and the breath

flowing in my body. As has Kettle. That, too, we could give. But it would still not be enough.'

He walked forward slowly, to lean against his dragon. He pillowed his face on his thin arms. All about him, where his body rested against the stone, an aura of colour rippled on the dragon's skin. Turquoise, edged with silver, the scales flashed uncertainly in the sunlight. I could feel the ebbing of his Skill into the dragon. It seeped from Verity into the stone as ink soaks into a page.

'King Verity,' I said softly, warningly.

With a groan, he stood free of his creation. 'Do not fear, Fitz. I will not let him take too much. I will not give up my life to him without reason.' He lifted his head and looked around at us all. 'Strange,' he said softly. 'I wonder if this is what it feels like to be Forged. To be able to recall what one once felt, but unable to feel it anymore. My loves, my fears, my sorrows. All have gone into the dragon. Nothing have I held back. Yet it is not enough. Not enough.'

'My lord Verity.' Kettle's old voice was cracked. All hope had run out of it. 'You will have to take FitzChivalry. There is no other way.' Her eyes, once so shiny, looked like dry black pebbles as she looked at me. 'You offered it,' she reminded me. 'All your life.'

I nodded my head. 'If you would not take my child,' I added quietly. I drew a breath deep into my lungs. Life. Now. Now was all the life I had, all the time I could truly give up. 'My king. I no longer seek any bargain of any kind. If you must have my life so that the dragon may fly, I offer it.'

Verity swayed slightly where he stood. He stared at me. 'Almost, you make me feel again. But ...' He lifted a silver finger and pointed it accusingly. Not at me, but at Kettle. His command was as solid as the stone of his dragon as he said, 'No. I have told you that. No. You will not speak of it to him again. I forbid it.' Slowly he sank down to his knees, then sat flat beside his dragon. 'Damn this carris seed,' he said in a low voice. 'It always leaves you, just when you need its strength most. Damn stuff.'

'You should rest now,' I said stupidly. In reality, there was nothing else he could do. That was how carris seed left one. Empty and exhausted. I knew that only too well.

'Rest,' he said bitterly, his voice failing on the word. 'Yes. Rest. I shall be well rested when my brother's soldiers find me and cut my throat. Well rested when his coterie comes and tries to claim my dragon as their own.'

Make no mistake, Fitz. That is what they seek. It won't work, of course. At least, I don't think it will ...' His mind was wandering now. 'Though it might,' he said in the faintest of breaths. 'They were Skill-linked to me, for a time. It might be enough that they could kill me and take him.' He smiled a ghastly smile. 'Regal as dragon. Do you think he will leave two stones of Buckkeep Castle upon each other?'

Behind him, Kettle had folded herself up, her face against her knees. I thought she wept, but when she slowly fell over onto her side, her face was lax and still, her eyes closed. Dead, or sleeping the exhausted sleep of the carris seed. After what Verity had said to me, it scarcely seemed to matter. My king stretched himself out on the bare gritty pedestal. He slept beside his dragon.

Kettricken went and sat down beside him. She bowed her head to her knees and wept. Not quietly. The rending sobs that shook her should have roused even the dragon of stone. They did not. I looked at her. I did not go to her, I did not touch her. I knew it would have been of no use. Instead I looked to the Fool. 'We should bring blankets and make them more comfortable,' I said helplessly.

'Ah. Of course. What better task for the White Prophet and his Catalyst?' He linked arms with me. His touch renewed the thread of Skill-bond between us. Bitterness. Bitterness flowed through him with his blood. The Six Duchies would fall. The world would end.

We went to fetch blankets.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Verity's Bargain

When all the records are compared, it becomes plain that no more than twenty Red Ships actually ventured inland as far as Turlake, and only twelve proceeded past Turlake to menace the villages adjoining Tradeford. The minstrels would have us believe there were scores of ships, and literally hundreds of Raiders upon their decks. In song, the banks of the Buck and Vin Rivers were red with flames and blood that summer. They are not to be faulted for this. The misery and terror of those days should never be forgotten. If a minstrel must embroider the truth to help us recall it fully, then let her, and let no one say she has lied. Truth is often much larger than facts.

Starling came back with the Fool that evening. No one asked her why she no longer kept watch. No one even suggested that perhaps we should flee the quarry before Regal's troops cornered us there. We would stay and we would stand, and we would fight. To defend a stone dragon.

And we would die. That went without saying. Quite literally, it was knowledge that none of us uttered.

When Kettricken had fallen asleep, exhausted, I carried her down to the tent she had shared with Verity. I lay her down on her blankets, and covered her well. I stooped and kissed her lined forehead as if I were kissing my sleeping child. It was a farewell, of sorts. Better to do things now, I had decided. Now was all I had for certain.

As dusk fell, Starling and the Fool sat by the fire. She played her harp softly, wordlessly, and looked into the flames. A bared knife lay on the ground beside her. I stood a time and watched how the firelight touched her face. Starling Birdsong, the last minstrel to the last true Farseer King and Queen. She would write no song that anyone would recall.

The Fool sat still and listened. They had found a friendship, of sorts. I thought to myself, if this is the last night she can play, he can give her no finer thing than that. To listen well, and let her music lull him with her skill.

I left them sitting there and took up a full waterskin. Slowly I climbed the ramp up to the dragon. Nighteyes followed me. Earlier, I had built a fire on the dais. Now I fed it from what remained of Kettricken's firewood, and

then sat down beside it. Verity and Kettle slept on. Once Chade had used carris seed for two days straight. When he collapsed, he had taken most of a week to recover. All he had wanted to do was sleep and drink water. I doubted that either would awaken soon. It was all right. There was nothing left to say to them anyway. So I simply sat beside Verity and kept watch over my king.

I was a poor watchman. I came awake to his whispering my name. I sat up instantly and reached for the waterskin I had brought with me. ‘My king,’ I said quietly.

But Verity was not sprawled on the stone, weak and helpless. He stood over me. He made a sign to me to rise and follow him. I did, moving as quietly as he did. At the base of the dragon’s dais, he turned to me. Without a word, I offered him the waterskin. He drank half of what it held, paused a bit, and then drank the rest. When he was finished, he handed it back to me. He cleared his throat. ‘There is a way, FitzChivalry.’ His dark eyes, so like my own, met mine squarely. ‘You are the way. So full of life and hungers. So torn with passions.’

‘I know,’ I said. The words came out bravely. I was more frightened than I had ever been in my life. Regal had scared me badly in his dungeon. But that had been pain. This was death. I suddenly knew the difference. My traitorous hands twisted the front hem of my tunic.

‘You will not like it,’ he warned me. ‘I do not like it. But I see no other way.’

‘I am ready,’ I lied. ‘Only ... I should like to see Molly once more. To know that she and Nettle are safe. And Burrich.’

He peered at me. ‘I recall the bargain you offered. That I would not take Nettle for the throne.’ He glanced away from me. ‘What I ask of you will be worse. Your actual life. All the life and energy of your body. I have spent all my passions, you see. I have nothing left. If I could but kindle in myself one more night of feelings ... if I could recall what it was to desire a woman, to hold the woman I loved in my arms ...’ His voice dwindled away from me. ‘It shames me to ask it of you. Shames me more than when I drew strength from you, when you were no more than an unsuspecting boy.’ He met my eyes again and I knew how he struggled to use words. Imperfect words. ‘But you see, even that. The shame I feel, the pain that I do this to you ... even that is what you give me. Even that I can put into the dragon.’ He looked away from me. ‘The dragon must fly, Fitz. He must.’

‘Verity. My king.’ He stared away from me. ‘My friend.’ His eyes came back to mine. ‘It is all right. But ... I should like to see Molly again. Even briefly.’

‘It is dangerous. I think what I did to Carrod woke true fear in them. They have not tried their strength against us since then, only their cunning. But ...’

‘Please.’ I said the small word quietly.

Verity sighed. ‘Very well, boy. But my heart misgives me.’

Not a touch. He didn’t even take a breath. Even as Verity dwindled, that was the power of his Skill. We were there, with them. I sensed Verity retreating, giving me the illusion I was there alone.

It was an inn room. Clean and well furnished. A branch of candles burned beside a loaf of bread and a bowl of apples on a table. Burrich lay shirtless on his side on the bed. Blood had clotted thickly about the knife-wound and soaked the waist of his breeches. His chest moved in the slow, deep rhythms of sleep. He was curled around Nettle. She was snuggled against him, deeply asleep, his right arm over her protectively. As I watched, Molly leaned over them and deftly slid the babe from under Burrich’s arm. Nettle did not stir as she was carried over to a basket in the corner and tucked into the blankets that lined it. Her small pink mouth worked with memories of warm milk. Her brow was smooth beneath her sleek black hair. She seemed none the worse for everything she had endured.

Molly moved efficiently about the room. She poured water into a basin, and took up a folded cloth. She returned to crouch beside Burrich’s bed. She set the basin of water on the floor beside the bed and dipped the rag into it. She wrung it out well. As she set it to his back he jerked awake with a gasp. Fast as a striking snake, he had caught her wrist.

‘Burrich! Let go, this has to be cleaned.’ Molly was annoyed with him.

‘Oh. It’s you.’ His voice was thick with relief. He released her.

‘Of course it’s me. Who else would you expect?’ She sponged at the knife-wound gently, then dipped the rag in the water again. Both the rag in her hand and the basin of water beside her were tinged with blood.

His hand groped carefully over the bed beside him. ‘What have you done with my baby?’ he asked.

‘Your baby is fine. She’s asleep in a basket. Right there.’ She wiped his back again, then nodded to herself. ‘The bleeding has stopped. And it looks

clean. I think the leather of your tunic stopped most of her thrust. If you sit up, I can bandage it.'

Slowly Burrich moved to sit up. He gave one tiny gasp, but when he was sitting up, he grinned at her. He pushed a straggle of hair back from his face. 'Wit-bees,' he said admiringly. He shook his head at her. I could tell it was not the first time he had said it.

'It was all I could think of,' Molly pointed out. She could not keep from smiling back. 'It worked, did it not?'

'Wondrously,' he conceded. 'But how did you know they'd go after the red-bearded one? That was what persuaded them. And damn near persuaded me as well!'

She shook her head to herself. 'It was luck. And the light. He had the candles and stood before the hearth. The hut was dim. Bees are drawn to light. Almost like moths are.'

'I wonder if they are still inside the hut.' He grinned as he watched her rise to take away the bloody rag and water.

'I lost my bees,' she reminded him sadly.

'We will go burning for more,' Burrich comforted her.

She shook her head sadly. 'A hive that has worked the whole summer makes the most honey.' At a table in the corner, she took up a roll of clean linen bandaging and a pot of unguent. She sniffed at it thoughtfully. 'It doesn't smell like what you make,' she observed.

'It will probably work all the same,' he said. A frown creased his brow as he looked slowly around the room. 'Molly. How are we to pay for all this?'

'I've taken care of it.' She kept her back to him.

'How?' he asked suspiciously.

When she looked back at him, her mouth was flat. I'd known better than to argue with that face. 'Fitz's pin. I showed it to the innkeeper to get this room. And while you both slept this afternoon, I took it to a jeweller and sold it.' He had opened his mouth, but she gave him no chance to speak. 'I know how to bargain and I got its full worth.'

'Its worth was more than coins. Nettle should have had that pin,' Burrich said. His mouth was as flat as hers.

'Nettle needed a warm bed and porridge far more than she needed a silver pin with a ruby in it. Even Fitz would have had the wisdom to know that.'

Oddly enough, I did. But Burrich only said, 'I shall have to work many days to earn it back for her.'

Molly took up the bandages. She did not meet his eyes. 'You are a stubborn man, and I am sure you will do as you please about that,' she said.

Burrich was silent. I could almost see him trying to decide if that meant he had won the argument. She came back to the bed. She sat beside him on the bed to smear the ointment on his back. He clenched his jaws, but made no sound. Then she came to crouch in front of him. 'Lift your arms so I can wrap this,' she commanded him. He took a breath and lifted his arms up and away from his body. She worked efficiently, unrolling the bandaging as she wrapped it around him. She tied it over his belly. 'Better?' she asked.

'Much.' He started to stretch, then thought better of it.

'There's food,' she offered as she went to the table.

'In a moment.' I saw his look darken. So did Molly. She turned back to him, her mouth gone small. 'Molly.' He sighed. He tried again. 'Nettle is King Shrewd's great-grandchild. A Farseer. Regal sees her as a threat to him. He may try to kill you again. Both of you. In fact, I am sure he will.' He scratched at his beard. Into her silence, he suggested, 'Perhaps the only way to protect you both is to put you under the true king's protection. There is a man I know ... perhaps Fitz told you of him. Chade?'

She shook her head mutely. Her eyes were going blacker and blacker.

'He could take Nettle to a safe place. And see you were well provided for.' The words came out of him slowly, reluctantly.

Molly's reply was swift. 'No. She is not a Farseer. She is mine. And I will not sell her, not for coin or safety.' She glared at him and practically spat the words. 'How could you think I would!'

He smiled at her anger. I saw guilty relief on his face. 'I did not think you would. But I felt obliged to offer it.' His next words came even more hesitantly. 'I had thought of another way. I do not know what you will think of it. We will still have to travel away from here, find a town where we are not known.' He looked at the floor abruptly. 'If we were wed before we got there, folk would never question that she was mine ...'

Molly stood as still as if turned to stone. The silence stretched. Burrich lifted his eyes and met hers pleadingly. 'Do not take this wrong. I expect nothing of you ... that way. But ... even so, you need not wed me. There are Witness Stones in Kevdor. We could go there, with a minstrel. I could stand before them, and swear she was mine. No one would ever question it.'

‘You’d lie before a Witness Stone?’ Molly asked incredulously. ‘You’d do that? To keep Nettle safe?’

He nodded slowly. His eyes never left her face.

She shook her head. ‘No, Burrich, I will not have it. It is the worst of luck, to do such a thing. All know the tales of what becomes of those who profane the Witness Stones with a lie.’

‘I will chance it.’ He spoke grimly. I had never known the man to lie before Nettle had come into his life. Now he offered to give a false oath. I wondered if Molly knew what he was offering her.

She did. ‘No. You will not lie.’ She spoke with certainty.

‘Molly. Please.’

‘Be quiet!’ she said with great finality. She cocked her head and looked at him, puzzling something out. ‘Burrich?’ she asked with a tentative note to her voice. ‘I have heard it told ... Lacey said that once you loved Patience.’ She took a breath. ‘Do you love her still?’ she asked.

Burrich looked almost angry. Molly met his stare with a pleading look until Burrich looked away from her. She could barely hear his words. ‘I love my memories of her. As she was then, as I was then. Probably much as you still love Fitz.’

It was Molly’s turn to wince. ‘Some of the things I remember ... yes.’ She nodded as if reminding herself of something. Then she looked up and met Burrich’s eyes. ‘But he is dead.’ So oddly final, those words coming from her. Then, with a plea in her voice, she added, ‘Listen to me. Just listen. All my life it’s been ... First my father. He always told me he loved me. But when he struck me and cursed me, it never felt like love to me. Then Fitz. He swore he loved me and touched me gently. But his lies never sounded like love to me. Now you ... Burrich, you never speak to me of love. You have never touched me, not in anger nor desire. But both your silence and your look speak more of love to me than ever their words or touches did.’ She waited. He did not speak. ‘Burrich?’ she asked desperately.

‘You are young,’ he said softly. ‘And lovely. So full of spirit. You deserve better.’

‘Burrich. Do you love me?’ A simple question, timidly asked.

He folded his work-scarred hands in his lap. ‘Yes.’ He gripped his hands together. To stop their trembling?

Molly’s smile broke forth like the sun from a cloud. ‘Then you shall marry me. And afterwards, if you wish, I shall stand before the Witness

Stones. And I will admit to all that I was with you before we were wed. And I will show them the child.'

He finally lifted his eyes to hers. His look was incredulous. 'You'd marry me? As I am? Old? Poor? Scarred?'

'You are none of those things to me. To me, you are the man I love.'

He shook his head. Her answer had only baffled him more. 'And after what you just said about bad luck? You would stand before a Witness Stone and lie?'

She smiled a different sort of smile at him. One I had not seen in a long time. One that broke my heart. 'It need not be a lie,' she pointed out quietly.

His nostrils flared like a stallion's as he surged to his feet. The breath he drew swelled his chest.

'Wait,' she commanded him softly, and he did. She licked her thumb and forefinger. She swiftly pinched out all but one candle. Then she crossed the darkened room to his arms.

I fled.

'Oh, my boy. I am so sorry.'

I shook my head silently. My eyes were squeezed tight shut, but tears leaked from them anyway. I found my voice. 'He will be good to her. And Nettle. He is the sort of man she deserves. No, Verity. I should take comfort in it. To know he will be with her, caring for them both.'

Comfort. I could find no comfort in it. Only pain.

'It seems a very poor bargain I have made you.' Verity sounded genuinely grieved for me.

'No. It's all right.' I caught my breath. 'Now, Verity. I would it were done quickly.'

'Are you sure?'

'As you will.'

He took my life from me.

It was a dream I had had before. I knew the feel of an old man's body. The other time, I had been King Shrewd, in a soft nightshirt, in a clean bed. This time was harsher. I ached in every joint of my body. My gut burned inside me. And I had scalded myself, on my face and hands. There was more pain than life left in this body. Like a candle almost burned to the socket. I opened my eyes stickily. I sprawled on cold, gritty stone. A wolf sat watching me.

This is wrong, he told me.

I could think of nothing to say to that. It certainly did not feel right. After a time, I pushed myself up to my hands and knees. My hands hurt. My knees hurt. Every joint in my body creaked and complained as I drew myself up and looked around. The night was warm, but I still shivered. Above me, on a dais, an incomplete dragon slumbered.

I do not understand. Nighteyes pleaded for an explanation.

I do not wish to understand. I do not want to know.

But whether I wished it or not, I did know. I walked slowly and the wolf came at my heels. We walked past a dying fire between two tents. No one kept watch. From Kettricken's tent, there were small noises. Verity's face was what she saw in the dimness. Verity's dark eyes, looking into hers. She believed her husband had finally come to her.

In truth, he had.

I did not want to hear, I did not want to know. I walked on with my old man's careful pacing. Great black blocks of stone loomed around us. Ahead of us, something clicked and chinked softly. I walked through the sharp-edged stone shadows and into moonlight again.

Once you shared my body. Is this like that?

'No.' I spoke the word aloud, and in the wake of my voice, I heard a small scrabbling. *What's that?*

I'll go and see. The wolf melted into the shadows. He returned instantly. *It's only the Scentless One. He hides from you. He does not know you.*

I knew where I would find him. I took my time. This body had all it could do to move, let alone move swiftly. When I came to Girl on a Dragon, it was horribly hard to clamber up on her dais. Once I was up, I could see the fresh rock chips everywhere. I sat down by the dragon's feet, a cautious lowering of my body to cold stone. I looked at his work. He had almost cut her free. 'Fool?' I called out softly in the night.

He came slowly, from the shadows, to stand eyes down before me. 'My king,' he said softly. 'I tried. But I cannot help myself. I cannot just leave her here ...'

I nodded slowly, wordlessly. At the base of the dais, Nighteyes whined. The Fool glanced down at him, then back up at me. Puzzlement crossed his face. 'My lord?' he asked.

I reached for the thread of Skill-bond between us and found it. The Fool's face grew very still as he struggled to understand. He came to sit beside me. He stared at me, as if he could see through Verity's skin. 'I like this not,' he said at last.

'Nor I,' I agreed.

'Why have you ...'

'Better not to know,' I said briefly.

For a time we sat in silence. Then the Fool reached back to brush a handful of fresh stone chips from about the dragon's foot. He met my eyes, but there was still furtiveness as he drew a chisel from his shirt. His hammer was a stone.

'That's Verity's chisel.'

'I know. He doesn't need it any more, and my knife broke.' He set the edge carefully to the rock. 'It works much better anyway.' I watched him tap another small chip free. I aligned my thoughts with his.

'She draws on your strength,' I observed quietly.

'I know.' Another chip came free. 'I was curious. And my touch hurt her.' He placed his chisel again. 'I feel I owe her something.'

'Fool. She could take all you offer her and it would still not be enough.'

'How do you know?'

I shrugged. 'This body knows.'

Then I stared as he laid his Skill-fingers to the place where he had chiselled. I winced, but sensed no pain from her. She took something from him. But he had not the Skill to shape her with his hands. What he gave her was only enough to torment her.

'She reminds me of my older sister,' he said into the night. 'She had golden hair.'

I sat in stunned silence. He did not look at me as he added, 'I should have liked to see her again. She used to spoil me outrageously. I would have liked to have seen all my family again.' His tone was no more than wistful as he moved his fingers idly against the chiselled stone.

'Fool? Let me try?'

He gave me a look that was almost jealous. 'She may not accept you,' he warned me.

I smiled at him. Verity's smile, through his beard. 'There is a link between us. Fine as thread and neither the elfbark nor your weariness aid it. But it is there. Put your hand to my shoulder.'

I did not know why I did it. Perhaps because he had never before spoken to me of a sister or a home he missed. I refused to stop and wonder. Not thinking was so much easier, and not feeling was easiest of all. He put his unSkilled hand, not to my shoulder, but to the side of my neck. Instinctively, he was right. Skin to skin, I knew him better. I held Verity's silver hands up before my eyes and marvelled at them. Silver to the eye, scalded and raw to the senses. Then, before I could change my mind, I reached down and grasped the dragon's shapeless forefoot between my two hands.

Instantly, I could feel the dragon. Almost it squirmed within the stone. I knew the edge of each scale, the tip of each wicked claw. And I knew the woman who had carved it. The women. A coterie, so long ago. Salt's Coterie. But Salt had been too proud. Her features were on the carven face, and she had sought to remain in her own form, carving herself upon the dragon that her coterie shaped around her. They had been too loyal to object. And almost she had succeeded. The dragon had been finished, and almost filled. The dragon had quickened and began to rise as the coterie was absorbed into it. But Salt had striven to remain only within the carved girl. She had held back from the dragon. And the dragon had fallen before it could even rise, sinking back into the stone, miring down forever. Leaving the coterie trapped in the dragon and Salt trapped in the girl.

All this I knew, swifter than lightning. I felt, too, the hunger of the dragon. It pulled at me, pleading for sustenance. Much had it taken from the Fool. I sensed what he had given, light and dark. The jeering taunts of gardeners and chamberlains when he was young at Buckkeep. A branch of apple blossoms outside a window in spring. An image of me, my jerkin flapping as I hurried across the yard at Burrich's heels, trying to make my shorter legs match his long stride. A silver fish leaping above a silent pond at dawn.

The dragon tugged at me insistently. I suddenly knew what had really drawn me here. *Take my memories of my mother, and the feelings that went with them. I do not want to know them at all. Take the ache in my throat when I think of Molly, take all the sharp-edged, bright-coloured days I recall with her. Take their brilliance and leave me but the shadows of what I saw and felt. Let me recall them without cutting myself on their sharpness. Take my days and nights in Regal's dungeons. It is enough to know what was done to me. Take it to keep, and let me stop feeling my face against that stone*

floor, hearing the sound of my nose breaking, smelling and tasting my own blood. Take my hurt that I never knew my father, take my hours of staring up at his portrait when the great hall was empty and I could do so alone. Take my –

Fitz. Stop. You give her too much, there will be nothing left of you. The Fool's voice inside me was horror-stricken at what he had encouraged.

– memories of that tower-top, of the bare windswept Queen's Garden and Galen standing over me. Take that image of Molly going so willingly to Burrich's arms. Take it and quench it and seal it away where it can never sear me again. Take –

My brother. Enough.

Nighteyes was suddenly between me and the dragon. I knew I still gripped that scaly foreleg, but he snarled at it, defying it to take more of me.

I do not care if it all is taken, I told Nighteyes.

But I do. I would sooner not be bonded with a Forged one. Get back, Cold One. He snarled in spirit as well as beside me.

To my surprise the dragon yielded. My companion nipped at my shoulder. *Let go. Get away from that!*

I let go of the dragon's foreleg. I opened my eyes, surprised to find it was still night all around me.

The Fool had his arm around Nighteyes. 'Fitz,' he said quietly. He spoke into the wolf's ruff, but I heard him clearly. 'Fitz, I am sorry. But you cannot throw away all your pain. If you stop feeling pain ...'

I did not listen to the rest of what he said. I stared at the dragon's foreleg. Where my two hands had rested against the lumpy stone there were two handprints now. Within those shapes, each scale stood fine and perfect. All of that, I thought. All of that, and this is how much dragon it brought me. Then I thought of Verity's dragon. It was immense. How had he done it? What had he held inside him, all those years, to have enough for the shaping of such a dragon?

'He feels much, your uncle. Great loves. Vast loyalty. Sometimes I think that my two hundred odd years pale beside what he has felt in his forty some.'

All three of us turned to Kettle. I felt no surprise. I had known she was coming and I had not cared. She leaned heavily on a stick and her face seemed to hang from the bones of her skull. She met my eyes and I knew

that she knew everything. Skill-linked as she was to Verity, she knew it all. 'Get down from there. All of you, before you hurt yourselves.'

We obeyed slowly and I slowest of all. Verity's joints ached and his body was weary. Kettle looked at me balefully when I finally stood beside her. 'If you were going to do that, you might have put it in Verity's dragon instead,' she pointed out.

'He wouldn't let me. You wouldn't let me.'

'No. We wouldn't have. Let me tell you something, Fitz. You are going to miss what you gave away. You will recover some of the feelings in time, of course. All memories are connected, and like a man's skin, they can heal. In time, left to themselves, those memories would have stopped hurting you. You may someday wish you could call up that pain.'

'I do not think so,' I said calmly, to cover my own doubt. 'I still have plenty of pain left.'

Kettle lifted her old face to the night. She drew a long breath in through her nose. 'Dawn comes,' she said, as if she had scented it. 'You must return to the dragon. To Verity's dragon. And you two,' her head swivelled to regard the Fool and Nighteyes, 'you two should go up to that look-out point and see if Regal's troops are in sight yet. Nighteyes, you let Fitz know what you see. Go on, both of you. And Fool. You leave Girl on a Dragon alone after this. You would have to give her your entire life. And even then, it might not be enough. That being so, stop torturing yourself. And her. Go on, now!'

They went, but not without some backward looks. 'Come on,' Kettle ordered me tersely. She began to hobble back the way she had come. I followed, walking as stiffly as she, through the black and silver shadows of the blocks that littered the quarry. She looked every bit of her two hundred odd years. I felt even older. Aching body, joints that caught and creaked. I lifted my hand and scratched my ear. Then I snatched it down, chagrined. Verity would have a silver ear now. Already the skin of it burned, and it seemed the distant night insects chirred more loudly now.

'I am sorry, by the way. About your Molly girl and all. I did try to tell you.'

Kettle did not sound sorry. But I understood that now. Almost all of her feelings were in the dragon. She spoke of what she knew she would have felt, once. She still had pain for me, but she no longer recalled any pain of

her own to compare it with. I only asked, quietly, 'Is there nothing private any more?'

'Only the things we keep from ourselves,' she replied sadly. She looked over at me. 'It is a good thing you do this night. A kind thing.' Her lips started to smile but her eyes teared. 'To give him one last night of youth and passion.' She studied me, the set look on my face. 'I shall say no more of it, then.'

I walked the rest of the way beside her in silence.

I sat by the warm embers of last night's fire and watched the dawn come. The shrilling of night insects changed gradually to the morning challenges of distant birds. I could hear them very well now. It was strange, I thought, to sit and wait for myself. Kettle said nothing. She breathed deep of the changing scent of the air as night turned to dawn and watched the lightening of the sky with avid eyes. Storing it all up to put into the dragon.

I heard the grate of boot against stone and looked up. I watched myself coming. My stride was confident and brisk, my head up. My face was freshly washed, my wet hair slicked back from my brow into a warrior's tail. Verity wore my body well.

Our eyes met in the early light. I saw my eyes narrow as Verity appraised his own body. I stood up and without thinking, began to brush my clothes off. Then I realized what I was doing. This was not a *shirt* I had borrowed. My laugh boomed out, louder than I used it. Verity shook my head at me.

'Leave it, boy. There's no making it better. And I'm almost finished with it anyway.' He slapped my chest with the palm of my hand. 'Once I had a body like this,' he told me, as if I hadn't known. 'I had forgotten so much of how that felt. So much.' The smile faded from his face as he regarded me peering at him from his own eyes. 'Take care of it, Fitz. You only get one. To keep, anyway.'

A wave of giddiness. Black closed from the edges of my vision, and I folded up my knees and sank down to keep from falling.

'Sorry,' Verity said quietly, and it was in his own voice.

I looked up to find him looking down on me. I stared up at him mutely. I could smell Kettricken's scent on my skin. My body was very tired. I knew a moment of total outrage. Then it crested and fell away as if the emotion were too much effort. Verity's eyes met mine and accepted all I felt.

‘I will neither apologize to you nor thank you. Neither would be adequate.’ He shook his head to himself. ‘And in truth, how could I say I am sorry? I am not.’ He looked away from me, out over my head. ‘My dragon will rise. My queen will bear a child. I will drive the Red Ships from our shore.’ He took a deep breath. ‘No. I am not sorry for our bargain.’ His eyes came back to me. ‘FitzChivalry. Are you sorry?’

Slowly I stood up. ‘I don’t know.’ I tried to decide. ‘The roots of it go too deep,’ I said at last. ‘Where would I start to undo my past? How far back would I have to reach, how much would I have to change in order to change this, or to say I was not sorry now?’

The road is empty below us. Nighteyes spoke in my mind.

I know. Kettle knows, too. She but looked for something to busy the Fool and sent you along to keep him safe. You can come back now.

Oh. Are you all right?

‘FitzChivalry. Are you all right?’ There was concern in Verity’s voice. But it could not completely mask the triumph there as well.

‘Of course not,’ I told them both. ‘Of course not.’ I walked away from the dragon.

Behind me, I heard Kettle ask eagerly, ‘Are we ready to quicken him?’

Verity’s soft voice carried to my ears. ‘No. Not just yet. For a little while longer, I would have these memories to myself. For a short time more, I would remain a man.’

As I passed through the camp, Kettricken emerged from her tent. She wore the same travel-wearied tunic and leggings she had the day before. Her hair was caught back from her face in a short, thick braid. There were still lines in her brow and at the corners of her mouth. But her face had the warm luminescence of the finest pearls. Renewed faith shone in her. She took a deep breath of the morning air and smiled at me radiantly.

I hurried past her.

The stream water was very cold. Coarse horsetail grasses grew along one bank. I used handfuls of them to scrub myself. My wet clothes were draped on the bushes on the other side of the stream. The heat of the day promised they would soon be dry. Nighteyes sat on the bank and watched me with a pucker between his eyes.

I do not understand. You do not smell bad.

Nighteyes. Go hunting. Please.

You wish to be alone?

As much as that is possible any more.

He stood up and stretched, curtseying low to me as he did so. *Someday, it will be only you and I. We shall hunt and eat and sleep. And you will heal.*

May we both live to see that, I agreed wholeheartedly.

The wolf slipped off through the trees. Experimentally, I scrubbed at the Fool's fingerprints on my wrist. They did not come off, but I learned a great deal about the life cycle of a horsetail fern. I gave it up. I decided I could take my entire skin off and still not feel free of what had happened. I waded out of the stream, dashing the water off myself as I went. My clothing was dry enough to put back on. I sat down on the bank to put my boots on. I nearly thought of Molly and Burrich but I quickly pushed the image away. Instead I wondered how soon Regal's soldiers would arrive and if Verity would have his dragon finished before then. Perhaps it was even now finished. I should want to see it.

I wanted more to be alone.

I lay back on the grass and looked up into the blue sky overhead. I tried to feel something. Dread, excitement, anger. Hate. Love. Instead I felt only confused. And tired. Weary of flesh and spirit. I closed my eyes against the brightness of the sky.

The harp notes walked alongside the sounds of the stream flowing. They blended with it, then danced apart. I opened my eyes to it and squinted at Starling. She sat on the stream bank beside me and played. Her hair was down, drying in ripples down her back in the sun. She had a stem of green grass in her mouth and her bare feet nestled against the soft grass. She met my eyes but said nothing. I watched her hands play on the strings. Her left hand worked harder, compensating for the stiffness in the last two fingers. I should have felt something about that. I didn't know what.

'What good are feelings?' I didn't know I had the question until I spoke it aloud.

Her fingers poised over the strings. She furrowed her brow at me. 'I don't think there's an answer to that question.'

'I'm not finding answers to much of anything lately. Why aren't you back in the quarry, watching them complete the dragon? Surely that is the stuff for a song to spring from.'

'Because I am here with you,' she said simply. Then she grinned. 'And because everyone else seems busy. Kettle sleeps. Kettricken and Verity ... she was combing his hair when I left. I do not think I had seen King Verity

smile before. When he does, he looks a great deal like you, about the eyes. Anyway. I do not think they will miss me.'

'And the Fool?'

She shook her head. 'He chips at the stone around Girl on a Dragon. I know he should not, but I do not think he can stop. Nor do I know any way to force him.'

'I don't think he can help her. But I don't think he can resist trying. For all his quick tongue, he has a soft nature.'

'I know that. Now. In some ways I've come to know him very well. In others, he will always be unknowable to me.'

I nodded silently to that. The silence lasted a time. Then, subtly, it became a different kind of silence. 'Actually,' Starling said uncomfortably. 'The Fool suggested I should find you.'

I groaned. I wondered just how much he had told her.

'I'm sorry to hear about Molly ...' she began.

'But not surprised,' I filled in for her. I lifted my arm and put it across my eyes to block the sunlight.

'No.' She spoke quietly. 'Not surprised.' She cast about for something to say. 'At least you know she is safe and cared for,' she offered.

I knew that. It shamed me that I could find so little comfort in it. Putting it into the dragon had helped in the same way that cutting off an infected limb helped. Being rid of it was not the same as being healed of it. The empty place inside me itched. Perhaps I wanted to hurt. I watched her from the shade of my arm.

'Fitz,' she said quietly. 'I asked you once, for yourself. In gentleness and friendship. To chase a memory away.' She looked away from me, at the sunlight glinting on the stream. 'Now I offer that,' she said humbly.

'But I don't love you,' I said honestly. And instantly knew that it was the worst thing I could have said just then.

Starling sighed and set her harp aside. 'I know that. You know that. But it was not a thing that had to be said just now.'

'And I know that. Now. It is just that I don't want any lies, spoken or unspoken ...'

She leaned over me and stopped my mouth with hers. After a time she lifted her face a little. 'I am a minstrel. I know more about lying than you will ever discover. And minstrels know that sometimes lies are what a man needs most. In order to make a new truth of them.'

‘Starling,’ I began.

‘You know you will just say the wrong thing,’ she told me. ‘So why don’t you be quiet for a time? Don’t make this complicated. Stop thinking, just for a while.’

Actually, it was quite a while.

When I awoke, she still lay warm against my side. Nighteyes stood over us, looking down at me, panting with the heat of the day. When I opened my eyes, he folded his ears back and gave his tail a slow wag. A drop of warm saliva fell on my arm.

‘Go away.’

The others are calling you. And looking for you. He cocked his head at me and offered, *I could show Kettricken where to find you.*

I sat up and squashed three mosquitoes on my chest. They left bloody smears. I reached for my shirt. *Is something wrong?*

No. They are ready to wake the dragon. Verity wishes to tell you goodbye.

I shook Starling gently. ‘Wake up. Or you will miss Verity waking the dragon.’

She stirred lazily. ‘For that, I shall get up. I can think of nothing else that would stir me. Besides, it may be my last chance at a song. Fate has ruled that I always be elsewhere whenever you do something interesting.’

I had to smile at that. ‘So. You will make no songs about Chivalry’s Bastard after all?’ I teased her.

‘One, perhaps. A love song.’ She gave me a last secret smile. ‘That part, at least, was interesting.’

I stood up and drew her to her feet. I kissed her. Nighteyes whined his impatience, and she turned quickly in my arms. Nighteyes stretched and bowed low to her. When she turned back to me, her eyes were wide.

‘I warned you,’ I told her.

She only laughed and stooped to gather up our clothes.

THIRTY-NINE

Verity's Dragon

Six Duchies troops poured into Blue Lake and took ship for the farther side and the Mountain Kingdom on the very days that the Red Ships were beating their way up the Vin River to Tradeford. Tradeford had never been a fortified city. Although word of the ships' coming preceded them by fast messenger, the news was greeted with general disdain. What menace were twelve ships of barbarians to such a great city as Tradeford? The city guard was alerted, and some of the dockside merchants took steps to remove their goods from warehouses close to the water, but the general attitude was that if they did manage to get as far up the river as Tradeford, archers would easily pick off the Raiders before they could do any real damage. The general consensus was that the ships must be bringing some offer of treaty to the King of the Six Duchies. There was much discussion as to how much of the Coastal Duchies they would ask ceded to them, and the possible value of reopening trade with the Out Islands themselves, not to mention restoring the trade flow down the Buck River.

This is but one more example of the errors that can be made when one thinks one knows what the enemy desires, and acts upon it. The folk of Tradeford ascribed to the Red Ships the same desire for prosperity and plenty that they themselves felt. To base their estimation of the Red Ships on that motive was a grievous mistake.

I don't think Kettricken had accepted the idea that Verity must die for the dragon to quicken until the actual moment he kissed her goodbye. He kissed her so carefully, his hands and arms held wide of her, his head cocked so that no silver smear would touch her face. For all that, it was a tender kiss, a hungry and lingering one. A moment longer she clung to him. Then he said something softly to her. She immediately put her hands to her lower belly. 'How can you be so sure?' she asked him, even as the tears began to course down her cheeks.

'I know,' he said firmly. 'And so my first task must be to return you to Jhaampe. You must be kept safe this time.'

'My place is in Buckkeep Castle,' she protested.

I had thought he would argue. But, ‘You are right. It is. And thither I shall bear you. Farewell, my love.’

Kettricken did not reply. She stood watching him walk away from her, an intense look of incomprehension on her face.

For all the days we had spent striving for this very thing, at the end it seemed rushed and untidy. Kettle paced stiffly by the dragon. She had bid us all farewell with a distracted air. Now she hovered beside the dragon, breathing as if she had just run a race. At every moment, she was touching the dragon, a fingertip caress, a dragging hand. Colour rippled in the wake of her touch and lingered, fading slowly.

Verity took more care with his goodbyes. To Starling, he admonished, ‘Care for my lady. Sing your songs well and true, and let no man ever doubt the child she carries is mine. With that truth I charge you, minstrel.’

‘I shall do my best, my king,’ Starling replied gravely. She went to stand beside Kettricken. She was to accompany the queen on the dragon’s broad back. She kept wiping her damp palms down the front of her tunic and checking to make sure the pack that carried her harp was secure to her back. She gave me a nervous smile. Neither of us needed more farewell than that.

There had been some furore about my decision to stay. ‘Regal’s troops draw nearer with every passing moment,’ Verity reminded me yet again.

‘Then you should hurry, so I will not be in this quarry when they arrive,’ I reminded him.

He frowned at that. ‘If I see any of Regal’s troops upon the road, I shall see they do not get this far,’ he offered me.

‘Take no risks with my queen,’ I reminded him.

Nighteyes was my excuse to stay. He had no wish to ride upon a dragon. I would not leave him. I am sure Verity knew the real reasons. I did not think I should return to Buck. I had already made Starling promise me that there would be no mention of me in song. It had not been an easy promise to wring from a minstrel. But I had insisted. I never wanted either Burrich or Molly to know that I yet lived. ‘In this, dear friend, you have been Sacrifice,’ Kettricken had told me quietly. She could offer me no greater compliment. I knew no word of me would ever pass her lips.

The Fool was the one who was being difficult. All of us urged him to go with the Queen and the minstrel. He consistently refused. ‘The White Prophet will stay with the Catalyst,’ was all he would say. I privately believed it was more a case of the Fool staying with Girl on a Dragon. He

had become obsessed with her and it frightened me. He would have to leave her before Regal's troops arrived at the quarry. I had privately told him that, and he had nodded easily, but with a distracted look. I doubted not that he had plans of his own. We had run out of time to argue with him.

There came a time when there was no reason left for Verity to linger. We had said little to one another, but I felt there was little we could say. Everything that had happened now seemed inevitable to me. It was as the Fool said. Looking back, I could see where his prophecies had long ago swept us into this channel. No one could be blamed. No one could be blameless.

He gave me a nod, before he turned and walked toward the dragon. Then he halted suddenly. As he turned back, he was unbuckling his battered sword belt. He came toward me, wrapping the belt loosely about the sheath as he came. 'Take my sword,' he said abruptly. 'I won't need it. And you seem to have lost the last one I gave you.' He halted suddenly in mid-stride, as if reconsidering. He hastily drew the sword from the sheath. One last time he ran a silver hand down the blade, leaving it gleaming behind his touch. His voice was gruff as he said, 'It would be a poor courtesy to Hod's skill to pass this on with a blunted blade. Take better care of it than I did, Fitz.' He resheathed it and handed it to me. His eyes met mine as I took it. 'And better care of yourself than I did. I did love you, you know,' he said brusquely. 'Despite all I've done to you, I loved you.'

At first I could think of no answer to that. Then, as he reached his dragon and placed his hands on its brow, I told him, *I never doubted it. Never doubt I loved you.*

I don't think I shall ever forget that final smile over his shoulder. His eyes went a last time to his queen. He pressed his hands firmly to the dragon's chiselled head. He watched her as he went. For an instant, I could smell Kettricken's skin, recall the taste of her mouth on mine, the smooth warmth of her bare shoulders gripped in my hands. Then the faint memory was gone and Verity was gone and Kettle was gone. To my Wit and my Skill they disappeared as completely as if they had been Forged. For an unnerving instant, I saw Verity's empty body. Then he flowed into the dragon. Kettle had been leaning on the statue's shoulder. She was gone faster than Verity, spreading out across the scales as turquoise and silver. Colour flooded the creature and suffused him. No one breathed, save that Nighteyes keened

softly. A great stillness held under the summer sun. I heard Kettricken give a single, choked sob.

Then, like a sudden wind, the great scaled body drew air into its lungs. His eyes, when he opened them, were black and shining, the eyes of a Farseer, and I knew Verity looked out of them. He lifted his great head upon his sinuous neck. He stretched like a cat, bowing and rolling reptilian shoulders and spreading claws. As he drew his clawed feet back, his talons scored the black stone deeply. Suddenly, like a sail catching the wind, his immense wings unfurled. He rattled them, a hawk settling his plumage, and refolded them sleek to his body. His tail gave a single lash, stirring rock dust and grit into the air. The great head turned, his eyes demanding we be as pleased with this new self as he was.

Verity-as-Dragon strode forward to present himself to his queen. The head he bent to her dwarfed her. I saw her whole reflection in one gleaming black eye. Then he dipped a shoulder to her, bidding her mount.

For one instant, grief controlled her face. Then Kettricken drew a breath and became Queen. Fearlessly she strode forward. She placed her hand on Verity's shining blue shoulder. His scales were slick and she slipped a trifle as she clambered to his back and then crawled forward to where she could straddle his neck. Starling gave me a look, of terror and amazement, and followed the Queen more slowly. I saw her take her place behind Kettricken, and check once more that her harp-pack was secured to her back.

Kettricken lifted an arm in farewell to us. She shouted something, but the words were lost to me in the wind of the dragon's opening wings. Once, twice, thrice he flapped them, as if getting the feel of them. Rock dust and grit flew stingingly against my face and Nighteyes pressed close against my leg. The dragon crouched as he gathered his great legs under him. The wide turquoise wings beat again and he sprang up suddenly. It was not a graceful launch, and he wobbled a bit as he took flight. I saw Starling clutch desperately at Kettricken, but Kettricken leaned forward against his neck, shouting her encouragement. In four beats, his wings carried him half the length of the quarry. He lifted, circling over the hills and trees that surrounded the quarry. I saw him dip his wings and turn to inspect the Skill road that led to the quarry. Then his wings began to beat steadily, carrying him higher and higher. His belly was a bluish white, like a lizard's. I squinted to see him against the summer sky. Then, like a blue and silver

arrow, he was gone, speeding toward Buck. Long after he was gone from sight, I stared after him.

I let out my breath finally. I was trembling. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and turned toward the Fool. Who was gone.

‘Nighteyes! Where is the Fool?’

We both know where he is gone. There is no need to shout.

I knew he was right. Yet I could not deny the urgency I felt. I ran down the ramp of stone, leaving the empty dais behind me. ‘Fool?’ I cried as I reached the tent. I even paused to look inside, hoping that he might be packing up what we’d need to take with us. I don’t know why I indulged such a foolish hope.

Nighteyes had not waited. When I reached Girl on a Dragon, he was already there. He was sitting patiently, tail neatly coiled about his feet, looking up at the Fool. I slowed when I saw him. My premonition of danger faded. He was sitting on the edge of the dais, feet dangling, head leaned back against the dragon’s leg. The surface of the dais was littered with fresh chips from this day’s efforts. I walked toward him. His eyes were lifted to the sky and the expression on his face was wistful. Contrasted against the dragon’s rich green hide, the Fool was white no longer, but the palest of golds. There was even a tawny edge to his silky fine hair. The eyes he turned to me were pale topaz. He very slowly shook his head at me, but he did not speak until I leaned against her pedestal.

‘I had been hoping. I could not help hoping. But I have seen today what must be put into a dragon so it can fly.’ He shook his head more forcefully. ‘And even if I had the Skill to give it, I do not have it to give. Even were she to consume all of me, it would not be enough.’

I did not say that I knew that. I did not even say that I had suspected it all along. I had finally learned something from Starling Birdsong. I let him have a silence for a time. Then I said, ‘Nighteyes and I are going to go get two jeppas. When I come back, we had better pack swiftly and be gone. I did not see Verity give chase to anything. Perhaps that means Regal’s troops are still far away. But I don’t want to take any chances.’

He drew a deep breath. ‘That is wise. It is time for this Fool to be wise. When you come back, I shall help you pack.’

I realized then I was still gripping Verity’s sword in its sheath. I took off the plain short sword and replaced it with the blade Hod had made for Verity.

It weighed strangely against me. I offered the short sword to the Fool. ‘Want this?’

He glanced at me, a puzzled look. ‘What for? I’m a Fool, not a killer. I’ve never even learned to use one.’

I left him there, to say his farewells. As we wended our way out of the quarry and toward the woods where we had been pasturing the jeppas, the wolf lifted his nose and snuffed.

Nothing left of Carrod but a bad smell, he noted as we passed the vicinity of the body.

‘I suppose I should have buried him,’ I said as much to myself as him.

No sense in burying meat that is already rotten, he noted with puzzlement.

I passed the black pillar, but not without a small shudder. I found our straying jeppas on a hillside meadow. They were more reluctant to be caught than I had expected. Nighteyes enjoyed rounding them up considerably more than they or I did. I chose the lead jeppa and one other, but as I led them away, the others decided to trail along after us as well. I should have expected it. I had rather hoped the rest would stay and go wild. I did not relish the idea of six jeppas at my heels all the way back to Jhaampe. A new thought came to me as I led them past the pillar and into the quarry.

I did not have to return to Jhaampe.

The hunting here is as good as any we’ve found.

We’ve the Fool to think of, as well as ourselves.

I would not let him go hungry!

And when winter comes?

When winter comes, then ... He is attacked!

Nighteyes did not wait for me. He streaked past me, grey and low, claws scratching against the black stone of the quarry floor as he ran. I let go of my jeppas and ran after him. The wolf’s nose told me of human scent in the air. An instant later, he had identified Burl, even as he hurtled toward them.

The Fool had not left Girl on a Dragon. That was where Burl had found him. He must have come quietly, for the Fool was never easy to take unawares. Perhaps his obsession had betrayed him. Whatever the case, Burl had got the first cut in. Blood ran down the Fool’s arm and dripped from his fingertips. He had left smears of it all up the dragon as he climbed her. Now he clung, feet braced against the girl’s shoulders and one hand gripping the

dragon's gaping lower jaw. In his free hand he gripped his knife. He stared down at Burl balefully, waiting. Skill boiled from Burl, angry and frustrated.

Burl had climbed up onto the dais and was seeking to clamber up the dragon itself now as he strove to reach up and impose a Skill-touch on the Fool. The smoothly-scaled hide was defying him. Only one as agile as the Fool could have shinnied up to the perch where he clung just out of Burl's reach. Burl drew his sword in frustration and swung it at the Fool's braced feet. Its tip missed, but not by much, and its blade rang against the girl's back. The Fool cried out as loudly as if the blade had bit truly, and sought to scabble higher. I saw his hand slip where his own blood had greased the dragon's hide. Then he was sliding down, scrabbling frantically as he came down hard right behind the girl's seat on the dragon's back. I saw his head bounce glancingly against her shoulder. He looked half stunned, and clung where he was.

Burl lifted his sword for a second swing, one that could easily separate the Fool's leg from his body. Instead, soundless as hate could be, the wolf surged up onto the dais and took Burl from behind. I was still running toward them as I saw Nighteyes' impact drive Burl forward to smack against Girl on a Dragon. He sank to his knees against the statue. His sword blow missed the Fool and rang again against the dragon's gleaming green hide. Ripples of colour raced away from that clash of metal against stone, like the ripples made when one tosses a pebble in a still pond.

I reached the dais as Nighteyes darted his head in. His jaws closed, gripping Burl from behind, between his shoulder and neck. Burl screamed, his voice going amazingly shrill. He dropped his sword and lifted his hands to clutch at the wolf's ravening jaws. Nighteyes worried him like a rabbit. Then the wolf braced his front feet on Burl's wide back and made more sure of his grip.

Some things happen too swiftly to tell well. I felt Will behind me at the same moment that the wild spattering of Burl's blood became a sudden gushing. Nighteyes had severed the great vein in his throat, and Burl's life was pumping out in jumping goutts of scarlet. *For you, my brother!* Nighteyes told the Fool. *This kill for you!* Nighteyes still did not let go, but shook him again. The blood leaped like a fountain as Burl struggled, not knowing he was already dead. The blood struck the dragon's gleaming hide and ran down it, to puddle in the chiselled troughs the Fool had made attempting to free his feet and tail. And there the blood bubbled and

steamed, eating into the stone as scalding water would have eaten into a chunk of ice. The scales and claws of the dragon's hind feet were unveiled, the detail of the whiplike tail exposed. And as Nighteyes finally flung down Burl's lifeless body, the dragon's wings opened.

Girl on a Dragon soared up into the sky as she had strained to do for so long. It seemed an effortless lifting, almost as if she floated away. The Fool was borne away with her. I saw him lean forward, clutching instinctively at the supple waist of the girl before him. His face was turned away from me. I glimpsed the bland eyes and still mouth of the girl's face. Perhaps her eyes saw, but she was no more separate from the dragon than its tail or wing; merely another appendage, one to which the Fool clung as they rose higher and higher.

I saw all these things, but not because I stood and stared. I saw them in glimpses, and through the wolf's eyes. My own gaze I turned on Will as he ran up behind me. He carried a bared blade in his hand and ran easily. I drew Verity's sword as I turned, and found it took longer coming out of its sheath than the short sword I had become accustomed to.

The strength of Will's Skill hit me in a buffeting wave just as the tip of Verity's blade came free of the scabbard. I staggered back a step and threw up my walls against him. He knew me well. That first wave had been compounded not just of fear, but of specific pains. They had been prepared especially for me. I knew again the shock of my broken nose, I felt the burn of my split face even if it did not stream hot blood down my chest as it once had. For a frozen heartbeat, all I could do was hold my walls against that crippling pain. The sword I gripped seemed suddenly made of lead. It sagged in my hand, its tip drooping toward the earth.

Burl's death saved me. In the moment that Nighteyes flung his lifeless body down, I saw that death lap against Will. His eyes sagged almost shut with the impact of it. The last member of his coterie was gone. I felt Will diminish abruptly, not just as Burl's Skill no longer supplemented his own, but as grief washed over him. I found in my mind an image of Carrod's rotting body and flung that at him for good measure. He staggered back.

'You've failed, Will!' I spat the words. 'Verity's dragon has already risen. Even now it wings toward Buck. His queen rides with him, and she bears within her his heir. The rightful king will reclaim his throne and crown, he will scourge his coasts of Red Ships and scour Regal's troops from the Mountains. No matter what you do here now, you are defeated.' A

strange smile twisted my mouth. 'I win.' Snarling, Nighteyes advanced to stand at my side.

Then Will's face changed. Regal looked at me out of his eyes. He was as unmoved by Burl's death as he would be by Will's. I sensed no grief, only anger at a lessening of his power. 'Perhaps,' he said with Will's voice, 'perhaps then, all I should care for is killing you, Bastard. At whatever the cost.' He smiled at me, the smile of a man who knows how the tumbling dice will fall before they land. I knew a moment of uncertainty and fear. I flung my walls up tighter against Will's insidious tactics.

'Do you really think a one-eyed swordsman has a fighting chance against my blade and my wolf, Regal? Or do you plan to throw his life away as casually as you have the rest of the coterie?' I flung the question in a faint hope of stirring discord between them.

'Why not?' Regal asked me calmly with Will's voice. 'Or did you think I was truly as stupid as my brother, to be content with only one coterie?'

A wave of Skill struck me with the force of a wall of water. I staggered back before it, then regained myself and charged at Will. I'd have to kill him quickly. Regal had control of Will's Skill. He little cared what it would do to Will, how it might scorch him if he killed me with a Skill-blast. I could feel him drawing up Skill-power into himself. Yet even as I put all my heart into killing Will, Regal's words ate at me. Another coterie?

One-eyed or not, Will was fast. His blade was a part of him as he met my first thrust and turned it. I wished for an instant for the familiarity of my battered short sword. Then I threw such thoughts aside as useless and thought only of breaking past his guard. The wolf moved swiftly past me, belly low, as he sought to close on Regal from Will's blind side.

'Three new coteries!' Will's voice gasped with effort as he parried my blade again. I slipped away from his thrust and tried to wrap his blade. He was too fast for that.

'Young, strong Skill-users. To carve dragons of my own.' A swiping slash whose breeze I felt. 'Dragons at my beck, loyal to me. Dragons to bring down Verity, in blood and scales.' He spun and darted a thrust at Nighteyes. The wolf leapt wildly away. I sprang in, but his blade was already back to meet mine. He fought with incredible speed. Another use of the Skill? Or a Skill-illusion he forced on me?

'Then they shall clear the Red Ships. For me. And open the Mountain passes. The Mountains will be mine as well. I shall be a hero. No one will

oppose me then.’ His blade struck mine hard, a jolt I felt in my shoulder. His words jolted me as well. They rang with truth and determination. Skill-imbued, they pounded against me with the solid force of hopelessness. ‘I shall master the Skill road. The ancient city will be my new capital. All my Skill-users shall be drenched in the river’s magic.’

Another swipe at Nighteyes. It shaved a wisp of hair from his shoulder. And again that opening passed too swiftly for my own clumsy blade. I felt I stood shoulder-deep in water and fought a man whose blade was light as a straw. ‘Stupid Bastard! Did you truly think I cared about one pregnant whore, one dragon a-wing? The quarry itself is the true prize, the one you have left unguarded for me. The stuff from which a score, no, a hundred dragons shall rise!’

How had we been so stupid? How had we not seen what Regal truly sought? We had thought with our hearts, of Six Duchies folk, of farmers and fishermen who needed their king’s arm to defend them. But Regal? He had thought only of what the Skill could win for him. I knew his next words before he flung them. ‘In Bingtown and Chalced they will bend their knees to me. And in the Out Islands, they will cower at my name.’

Others come! And above us!

Nighteyes’ warning nearly killed me. For in the instant I lifted my eyes, Will sprang at me. I gave ground, all but running backwards to avoid his blade. Far behind him, from the mouth of the quarry, a dozen men ran toward us, brandishing blades. They moved, not in step, but with a oneness to them far more cohesive than any mere troops could have mastered. A coterie. I sensed their Skill as they approached like the storm winds that precede a squall. Will suddenly halted his advance. My wolf raced to meet them, teeth bared, snarling.

Nighteyes! Stop! You cannot fight twelve blades wielded by one mind!

Will lowered his blade, then casually sheathed it. He called to the coterie over his shoulder, ‘Don’t bother with them. Let the archers finish them.’

A glance at the towering walls of the quarry showed me this was no bluff. Gold-and-brown-clad soldiers were coming into position. I grasped this was what the troops were about. Not to defeat Verity, but to take and hold this quarry. Another wave of humiliation and despair washed over me. Then I lifted my blade and charged at Will. Him, at least, I would kill.

An arrow clattered across the stone where I had stood, another skittered right between Nighteyes' legs. A scream rose from the walls of the quarry to the west of us. Girl on a Dragon swept low over me, the Fool on her back, a gold and brown archer writhing in the dragon's jaws. The man was gone suddenly, a puff of smoke or steam swept away by the wind of her passage. She banked her wings, came in low again, snatching up another archer and sending one leaping into the quarry to avoid her. Another puff of smoke.

On the floor of the quarry, all of us were frozen, gaping up. Will recovered more quickly than I did. An angry shout to his archers, ringing with Skill. 'Fire upon her! Bring her down!'

Almost instantly a phalanx of arrows went singing toward her. Some arched and fell before they even reached her. The rest she deflected with a single powerful beat of her wings. The arrows suddenly wobbled in the gust of her wind, and fell tumbling like straws to shatter on the quarry floor. Girl on a Dragon abruptly stooped and came diving directly at Will.

He fled. I believe Regal abandoned him for at least as long as it took him to make that decision. He ran, and for an instant it appeared that he chased the wolf who had nearly closed the distance between him and the coterie. Save at the moment the coterie realized that Will was fleeing toward them with a dragon sheering through the air behind him, the coterie turned on their heels and fled as well. I caught a brief flash of Nighteyes' delighted triumph that twelve swordsmen would not stand to meet his charge. Then he cowered to the earth as Girl on a Dragon swept low over all of us.

It was not only the harsh wind of her passage that I felt, but also a dizzying sweep of Skill, that in an instant snatched from my mind every thought I had been holding. It was as if the world had been plunged briefly into absolute darkness and then handed back to me in full brightness. I stumbled as I ran, and for an instant could not recall why I carried a bared sword or whom I chased. Ahead of me Will faltered as her shadow swept him, and then the coterie staggered in their turn.

Her claws snatched fruitlessly at Will as she passed. The scattered blocks of black stone were his salvation, for such was her wing span that he could elude her in the narrowness of their maze. She shrieked her frustration, the high wild cry of a hawk thwarted. She rose and banked to make a second sweep at him. I gasped as she flew right into a singing flight of arrows. They rattled uselessly off her hide as if the archers had targeted the black stone of the quarry itself. Only the Fool cowered away from them. Girl on a Dragon

changed course abruptly, to fly low over the archers and snatch another from their midst and consume him in an instant.

Again her shadow swept over me, and again a moment of my life was snatched from me. I opened my eyes to find Will gone. Then I caught a brief glimpse of him, veering as he ran dodging between the standing blocks of stone much as a hare breaks his trail as he flees from a hawk. I could no longer see the coterie, but suddenly Nighteyes sprang from the shadow of a stone block to race by my side.

Oh, my brother, the Scentless One hunts well! he exulted. *We were wise to take him into our pack!*

Will is my kill! I declared to him.

Your kill is my kill, he pointed out, quite seriously. *That is pack. And he shall be no one's kill unless we spread out to find him.*

He was right. Ahead of us, I heard shouts and occasionally saw a gold and brown flash as a man dashed across a wide space between the blocks of stone. But most of them had rapidly understood that the way to remain sheltered from the dragon was to cling closely to the edges of the immense stone blocks.

They are running for the pillar. If we get to where we can see it, we can wait for him there.

It seemed logical. To flee through the pillar would be the only way they could hope to escape the dragon for any length of time. I still heard the occasional clatter as arrows rained down in the dragon's wake, but a good portion of the archers who had ringed the quarry walls had retreated to the shelter of the surrounding forest.

Nighteyes and I abandoned all efforts to find Will and simply went directly to the pillar. I had to admire the discipline of some of Regal's archers. Despite all else, if the wolf and I broke cover for more than a few strides, we would hear a cry of 'There they are!' and moments later arrows would be hailing down where we had been.

We reached the pillar in time to see two of Regal's new coterie dash across the open, hands reaching, to plunge into the dark pillar itself the moment they touched it. The rune for the stone garden was the one they chose, but perhaps it was only because it was the side of the pillar closest to cover. We did not move from the angle of a great block that sheltered us from arrows.

Did he go through already?

Perhaps. Wait.

Several eternities passed. I became certain that Will had eluded us. Above us Girl on a Dragon swept her shadow over the quarry walls. The cries of her victims were less frequent. The archers were using the cover of trees to hide themselves. Briefly I watched her rise, circling high above the quarry. She hung shining green high against the blue sky, rocking on her wings. I wondered what it was like for the Fool to ride so. At least he had the girl part of the dragon to cling to. Abruptly Girl on a Dragon tipped, side-slipped in the sky, and then folded her wings, plummeting down toward us. At the moment she did, Will broke cover and ran for the pillar.

Nighteyes and I leaped after him. We were agonizingly close behind him. I ran fast, but the wolf ran faster, and Will fled the fastest of all. At the moment when his reaching fingertips brushed the pillar, the wolf made a final spring. His front paws slammed into Will's back, sending him head first toward the pillar. As I saw him melting into it, I cried out a warning to Nighteyes and gripped his fur to drag him back. He seized one of Will's calves as Will was snatched away from us. At the moment that his jaws closed on Will's flesh, the dragon's shadow swept over us. I lost my grip on the world and fell into blackness.

Tales abound of heroes who have wrestled dark foes in the underworld. There are a few told of those who have willingly entered the dark unknown to rescue friends or lovers. In a timeless moment, I was offered quite clearly a choice. I could seize Will and choke the life out of him. Or clasp Nighteyes to me and hold him together against all the forces that tore at his wolf's mind and being. It was, really, no decision at all.

We emerged into cool shade and trampled grass. One moment there was only darkness and passage; in the next we breathed, and felt again. And feared. I scrambled to my feet, amazed to find I still gripped Verity's sword. Nighteyes heaved himself up, staggered two steps and fell over. *Sick. Poisoned. The whole world sways.*

Lie still and breathe. I stood before him and lifted my eyes to glare around us. My gaze was returned, not only by Will but by most of Regal's new coterie. Most of them were still breathing hard, and one gave a shout of alarm at the sight of us. When Will shouted, a number of Farrow guards came running as well. They fanned out to surround us.

We must go back through the pillar. It's our only chance.

I cannot. You go. Nighteyes' head drooped toward his paws and his eyes closed.

That is not pack! I told him sternly. I lifted Verity's sword. So this was how I was going to die. I was glad the Fool had not told me. I probably would have killed myself first.

'Just kill him,' Will ordered them. 'We've wasted enough time on him. Kill him and the wolf. And then find me an archer who can shoot a man off a dragon's back for me.' Regal turned Will's back to me and strode away, still issuing orders. 'You, Third Coterie. You told me a finished dragon could not be wakened and made to serve. Well, I have just seen an unSkilled Fool do that very thing. You will find out how it was done. You will begin now. Let the Bastard test his Skill against swords.'

I lifted my sword and Nighteyes pulled himself to his feet. His queasiness lapped against my fear as the circle of soldiers closed around us. Well, if I must die now, there was no more to fear. Perhaps I would try my Skill against their swords. I discarded my walls, flinging them aside disdainfully. The Skill was a river that raged all around me, a river that in this place was always in flood. As easily as drawing a breath it was to fill myself with it. A second breath banished my body's weariness and pains. I reached out with strength to my wolf. Beside me, Nighteyes gave himself a shake. The rising of his hackles and the baring of his teeth made him twice as large. My eyes circled the swords that surrounded us. Then we no longer waited, but sprang to meet them. As swords lifted to meet mine, Nighteyes raced forward and under them, then spun to slash a man's leg from behind.

Nighteyes became a creature of speed, teeth and fur. He did not try to bite and hold. Instead he used his weight to knock men off balance, sending them stumbling into one another, hamstringing them when he could, slashing with his teeth rather than biting. For me the challenge became not to strike at him as he dashed thither and yon. He never tried to challenge their swords. The moment a man turned to him and advanced, he fled, to shoulder past the legs of those who sought to confront me.

As for me I wielded Verity's sword with a grace and a skill I had never before known with such a weapon. Hod's lessons and Hod's work finally came together for me, and if such a thing were possible, I would say that the spirit of the swordmaster was in the weapon and that she sang to me as I wielded it. I could not break out of the circle they pinned me in, but neither could they get past my guard to do more than minor damage.

In that first flurry of battle, we fought well and did well, but the odds were impossible. I could force men back from my sword and step toward them, but in the next moment I must turn to fight those who had closed behind me. I could move the circle of battle, but not escape it. Still, I blessed the greater reach of Verity's sword that kept me alive. Other men were coming at a run to the din and shouts of fighting. Those who came drove a wedge between Nighteyes and me, forcing him ever further away.

Get clear of them all and run. Run. Live, my brother.

For answer he raced away from them all, then suddenly came looping back, charging right through their midst. Regal's men hacked at each other in a futile effort to stop him. They were not used to an opponent less than half the height of a man and with twice the speed of one. Most aimed chopping blows at him that did no more than cleave the earth in his wake. In an instant, he was past them and had vanished once more into the lush forest. Men glared about wildly, wondering where next he would come from.

But even at the hottest of the fight, I knew the hopelessness of what we did. Regal would win. Even were I to kill every man here, Will included, Regal would win. Had already won for that matter. And had I not known he always would? Had not I known, from the very beginning, that Regal was destined to rule?

I took a sudden step forward, took off a man's arm at the elbow, and used the momentum of that blow to call the sword's blade back in an arc that took the tip across the face of another man. As the two fell, tangling together, there was a tiny opening in the circle. I took a step into the brief space, focused my Skill and seized Will's insidious grip upon my mind. I felt a blade lick against my left shoulder as I did so. I spun to engage my attacker's sword, then bade my body think for itself for a moment and made good my grip on Will. Wound through Will's consciousness I found Regal, twisted into him like a drill-worm in a deer's heart. Will could not have broken free of him even if he had been able to think of doing it. And it seemed to me that there was not enough left of Will to even form a thought for himself. Will was a body, a vessel of meat and blood, holding Skill for Regal to wield. Bereft of the coterie that had strengthened him, he was not all that formidable a weapon any more. Less valuable. One that might be used and cast aside with little remorse.

I could not fight in both directions at once. I kept my grip on Will's mind, forced his thoughts away from mine, and strove to direct my body as

well. In the next instant, I took two cuts, one to my left calf and one to my right forearm. I knew I could not sustain it. I could not see Nighteyes. He at least had a chance. *Get clear of this, Nighteyes. It's all over.*

It but begins! he contradicted me. He surged through me like a flash of heat. From some other part of the camp, I heard a cry in Will's voice. Somewhere, a Wit-wolf ravaged his body. I could sense Regal trying to unwind his mind from Will's. I clamped my hold tighter on them both. *Stay and face it, Regal!*

The point of a sword found my hip. I jerked away from it and stumbled against stone, leaving a bloody handprint as I pushed myself upright again. It was Realdar's dragon; I had dragged the battle that far. I put my back to him thankfully and turned to face my attackers. Nighteyes and Will still fought; plainly Regal had learned something from his tortures of Witted ones. He was not as vulnerable to the wolf as he once would have been. He could not hurt the wolf with Skill, but he could wrap him with layer upon layer of fear. Nighteyes' heart was suddenly thundering in my ears. I opened myself once more to the Skill, filled myself and did what I had never attempted before. I fed Skill-strength as Wit to Nighteyes. *For you, my brother.* I felt Nighteyes *repel* at Will, breaking free of him for an instant. Will used that instant to flee us both. I longed to give chase, but behind me, I felt an answering stir of the Wit in Realdar's dragon. In a brief stench, my bloody handprint on his hide smoked away. He stirred. He was awakening. And he was hungry.

There was a sudden crackling of branches and a storm of torn leaves as a great wind broke into the still heart of the forest. Girl on a Dragon landed abruptly in the small cleared space by the pillar. Her lashing tail cleared the area around her of men. 'Over there!' the Fool shouted to her, and in a moment her head snaked out, to seize one of my attackers in her fearsome jaws. He vanished in a puff of smoke, and I felt her Skill swell with the life she had consumed.

Behind me, a wedge-shaped reptilian head lifted suddenly. For a moment all was blackness as that shadow passed over me. Then the head darted out, swifter than a striking snake, to seize the man nearest us. He vanished, the steam of what he had been stinking briefly past me. The roar the dragon gave near deafened me.

My brother?

I live, Nighteyes.

As do I, brother.

AS DO I, BROTHER. AND I HUNGER!

The Wit-voice of a very large carnivore. Old Blood indeed. The strength of it shivered through my bones. Nighteyes had the wit to reply.

Feed, then, large brother. Make our kill yours, and welcome. That is pack.

Realders' dragon did not have to be invited twice. Whoever Realders had been, he had put a healthy appetite into his dragon. Great clawed feet tore clear of the moss and earth, a tail lashed free, felling a small tree as it passed. I was barely able to scramble out of his path as he lunged to engulf another Farrowman in his jaws.

Blood and the Wit! That is what it takes. Blood and the Wit. We can wake the dragons.

Blood and the Wit? At the moment, we are drenched in both. He understood me instantly.

In the midst of slaughter, Nighteyes and I played an insane child's game. It was almost a contest to see who could wake the most, a contest the wolf easily won. He would dart to a dragon, shake blood from his coat onto it, then bid it, *Wake, brother, and feed. We have brought you meat.* And as each great body smoked with wolf-blood and then stirred, he would remind it, *We are pack!*

I found King Wisdom. His was the antlered dragon, and he roused from his sleep shouting *Buck! For Buckkeep! Eda and El, but I am hungry!*

There are Red Ships aplenty off the coast of Buck, my lord. They but await your jaws, I told him. For all his words, there was little human left about him. Stone and souls had merged, to become dragons in truth. We understood one another as carnivores do. They had hunted as a pack before, and that they recalled well. Most of the other dragons had nothing at all human about them. They had been shaped by Elderlings, not men, and we understood little more of one another than that we were brothers and had brought them meat. Those who had been formed by coteries had dim recollections of Buck and Farseer kings. It was not those memories that bound them to me, but my promise of food. I counted it as the greatest blessing that I could imprint that much on those strange minds.

There came a time when I could find no more dragons in the underbrush. Behind me, where Regal's soldiers had camped, I heard the cries of hunted men and the roaring of dragons as they competed for, not meat, but life. Trees gave way before their charges and their lashing tails sliced

brush as a scythe cuts grain stalks. I had paused to breathe, one hand braced on my knee, the other still gripping Verity's sword. Breath came harsh and dry to me. Pain was beginning to break through the Skill I had imposed on my body. Blood was dripping from my fingers. Lacking a dragon to give it to, I wiped my hand down my jerkin.

'Fitz?'

I turned as the Fool ran up to me. He caught me in his arms, hugged me hard.

'You still live! Thank all gods everywhere. She flies like the wind itself, and she knew where to find you. Somehow she felt this battle, from all that distance.' He paused for breath, and added, 'Her hunger is insatiable. Fitz, you must come with me, now. They are running out of prey. You must mount her with me, and lead them to where they can feed, or I do not know what they will do.'

Nighteyes joined us. *This is a large and hungry pack. It will take much game to fill them.*

Shall we go with them, to their hunting?

Nighteyes hesitated. *On the back of one? Through the air?*

That is how they hunt.

That is not this wolf's way. But if you must leave me, I will understand.

I do not leave you, my brother. I do not leave you.

I think the Fool sensed something of what passed between us, for he was already shaking his head before I spoke. 'You must lead them. On Girl on a Dragon. Take them back to Buck and Verity. They will hearken to you, for you are pack with us. It is something they understand.'

'Fitz, I cannot. I was not made for this, this slaughter! This taking of life is not why I came. I have never seen this, not in any dream, nor read of it in any scroll. I fear I may lead time awry.'

'No. This is right. I feel it. I am the Catalyst, and I came to change all things. Prophets become warriors, dragons hunt as wolves.' I hardly knew my own voice as I spoke. I had no idea where such words came from. I met the Fool's unbelieving eyes. 'It is as it must be. Go.'

'Fitz, I ...'

Girl on a Dragon came lumbering toward us. On the ground, her airy grace deserted her. Instead she walked with power, as a hulking bear or a great horned bull does. The green of her scales shone like dark emeralds in sunlight. The girl on her back was a breathtaking beauty, for all her empty

expression. The dragon head lifted and she opened her mouth and darted her tongue out to taste the air. *More?*

‘Hurry,’ I bid him.

He embraced me almost convulsively, and shocked me when he kissed my mouth. He spun and ran toward Girl on a Dragon. The girl part of her leaned down, to offer him a hand as she drew him up to sit behind her. The expression on her face never changed. Just another part of the dragon.

‘To me!’ he cried to the dragons that were already gathering around us. The last look he gave me was a mocking smile.

Follow the Scentless One! Nighteyes commanded them before I could think. *He is a mighty hunter and will lead you to much meat. Harken to him, for he is pack with us.*

Girl on a Dragon leaped up, her wings opened, and with powerful beats they carried her steadily upwards. The Fool clung behind her. He lifted a hand in farewell, then quickly put it back to clutch at her waist. It was my last sight of him. The others followed, giving cry in a way that reminded me of hounds on a trail, save they sounded more like the shrilling of raptor birds. Even the winged boar rose, ungainly as was his leap into the air. The beating of their wings was such that I covered my ears and Nighteyes shrank belly-down to the earth beside me. Trees swayed in that great passage of dragons, and dropped branches both dead and green. For a time the sky was filled with jewelled creatures, green and red and blue and yellow. Whenever the shadow of one passed over me, I knew a blackness, but my eyes were opened and watching as Realder’s dragon lifted, last of them all, to follow that great pack into the sky. In a short time, the canopy of the trees hid them from my view. Gradually their cries faded.

‘Your dragons are coming, Verity,’ I told the man I had once known. ‘The Elderlings have risen to Buck’s defence. Just as you said they would.’

FORTY

Regal

The Catalyst comes to change all things.

In the wake of the dragons' departure, there was a great silence, broken only by the whispers of leaves as a few sifted down to the forest floor. Not a frog croaked, not a bird sang. The dragons had broken the roof of the forest in their departure. Great shafts of sunlight shone down on soil that had been shaded since before I was born. Trees had been uprooted or snapped off and great troughs had been gouged in the forest floor by the passage of their immense bodies. Scaly shoulders had gashed the bark from ancient trees, baring the secret white cambium beneath. The slashed earth and trees and trampled grasses gave up their rich odours to the warm afternoon. I stood in the midst of the destruction, Nighteyes at my side, and looked about slowly. Then we went to look for water.

Our passage took us through the camp. It was an odd battle scene. There were scattered weapons and occasional helms, trampled tents and scattered gear, but little more than that. The only bodies that remained were those of soldiers that Nighteyes and I had killed. The dragons had no interest in dead meat; they fed on the life that fled such tissue.

I found the stream I had recalled and threw myself flat by it to drink as if my thirst had no bottom. Nighteyes lapped beside me, then flung himself to the cool grass by the stream. He began a slow, careful licking of a slash on his forepaw. It had parted his hide, and he pressed his tongue into that gap, cleaning it carefully. It would heal as a fusing of dark hairless skin. *Just another scar*, he dismissed my thought. *What shall we do now?*

I was carefully peeling my shirt off. Drying blood made it cling to my injuries. I set my teeth and jerked it loose. I leaned over the stream, to splash cold water up onto the sword cuts I had taken. Just a few more scars, I told myself glumly. And what shall we do now? *Sleep.*

The only thing that would sound better than that would be eating.

'I've no stomach to kill anything else right now,' I told him.

That's the trouble with killing humans. All that work, and nothing to eat for it.

I heaved myself wearily to my feet. ‘Let’s go look through their tents. I need something to use for bandaging. And they must have some food stores.’

I left my old shirt where it had fallen. I’d find another. Right now, even its weight seemed too much to bother carrying. I probably would have dropped Verity’s sword, except that I had already sheathed it. Drawing it again would have been too much trouble. I was suddenly that tired.

The tents had been trampled flat in the dragons’ hunting. One had collapsed into a cook fire and was smouldering. I dragged it away and trampled it out. Then the wolf and I began systematically to salvage what we would need. His nose quickly found their food supplies. There was some dried meat, but it was mostly travel bread. We were too famished to be fussy. I had gone so long without bread of any kind that it tasted almost good. I even found a skin of wine, but one taste persuaded me to use it to wash my injuries instead. I bound my wounds in brown cambric from a Farrow man’s shirt. I still had some wine left. I tasted it again. Then I tried to persuade Nighteyes to let me wash his injuries, but he refused, saying they already hurt enough.

I was starting to stiffen, but I forced myself to my feet. I found a soldier’s pack and discarded from it all things useless to me. I rolled up two blankets and tied them snugly, and found a gold and brown cloak to wear against chilly evenings. I rummaged up more bread and put it in the pack.

What are you doing? Nighteyes was drowsing, nearly asleep.

I don’t want to sleep here tonight. So I gather what I will need for our journey.

Journey? Where are we going?

I stood still for a moment. Back to Molly and Buck? No. Never again. Jhaampe? Why? Why travel that long and wearisome black road again? I could think of no good reasons. *Well, I still don’t want to sleep here tonight. I’d like to be well away from that pillar before I rest again.*

Very well. Then, What was that?

We froze as we stood, every sense prickling. ‘Let’s go and find out,’ I suggested quietly.

Afternoon was venturing into evening, and the shadows under the trees were deepening. What we had heard was a sound that didn’t belong amongst the creakings of the frogs and insects and the fading calls of the day birds. It had come from the place of battle.

We found Will on his belly, dragging himself toward the pillar. Rather, he had been dragging himself. When we found him, he was still. One of his legs was gone, severed away jaggedly. Bone thrust out of the torn flesh. He had bound a sleeve about the stump, but not tightly enough. Blood still leaked from it. Nighteyes bared his teeth as I stooped to touch him. He lived, but barely. No doubt he had hoped to reach the pillar and slip through to find others of Regal's men to aid him. Regal must have known he still lived, but he had sent no one back for him. He had not even the decency to be loyal to a man who had served him that long.

I loosed the sleeve, and bound it more tightly. Then I lifted his head, and dribbled a little water into his mouth.

Why do you bother? Nighteyes asked. We hate him, and he's nearly dead. Let him die.

Not yet. Not just yet.

'Will? Can you hear me, Will?'

The only sign was a change in his breathing. I gave him a bit more water. He breathed some in, gasped, then swallowed the next mouthful. He took a deeper breath, and sighed it out.

I opened myself and gathered Skill.

My brother, leave this. Let him die. This is the doing of carrion birds, to peck at a dying thing.

'It's not Will I'm after, Nighteyes. This may be the last chance I'll ever get at Regal. I'm going to take it.'

He made no reply, but lay down on the ground beside me. He watched as I drew still more Skill into myself. How much, I wondered, did it take to kill? Could I summon enough?

Will was so weak I almost felt shamed. I thrust past his defences as easily as one would push aside a sick child's hands. It was not just the loss of blood and the pain. It was Burl's death, following so close on Carrod's. And it was the shock of Regal's abandonment. His own loyalty to Regal had been Skill-imprinted on him. He could not grasp that Regal had felt no real bond with him. It shamed him that I could see that in him. *Kill me now, Bastard. Go ahead. I'm dying anyway.*

It's not about you, Will. It was never about you. I saw that clearly now. I groped inside him as if I were probing a wound for an arrowhead. He struggled feebly against my invasion, but I ignored that. I shuffled through his memories, but found little that was useful. Yes, Regal had coterie, but

they were young and green, little more than groups of men with potential for the Skill. Even the ones I had seen at the quarry were uncertain. Regal wanted him to make large coteries, so they could pool more power. Regal did not understand that closeness could not be forced, nor shared by that many. He had lost four young Skill-users on the Skill road. They were not dead, but vacant-eyed and vague. Another two had come through the pillars with him, but had lost all ability to Skill afterwards. Coteries were not so easily made.

I went deeper and Will threatened to die on me but I linked with him, and forced strength into him. *You won't die. Not yet*, I told him fiercely. And there, deep within him, my probing finally found what I sought. A Skill-link to Regal. It was tenuous and faint; Regal had abandoned him, done all he could to leave Will behind. But it was as I had suspected. They had been linked too strongly for too long for the bond to be easily dissolved.

I gathered my Skill, centred myself and sealed myself. I poised myself, and then I leaped. As when a sudden rain gathers and fills a stream bed that has been dry all summer, so I flowed through that Skill-link between Will and Regal. At the last possible moment, I held myself back. I seeped into Regal's mind like slow poison, listening with his ears, seeing with his eyes. I knew him.

He slept. No. He almost slept, his lungs thick with Smoke, his mouth numb from brandy. I drifted into his dreams. The bed was soft beneath him, the coverlets warm over him. This last falling fit had been a bad one, a very bad one. It was disgusting, to fall and twitch like the Bastard Fitz. Not proper for this to happen to a king. Stupid healers. They could not even say what had brought these fits on. What would people think of him? The tailor and his apprentice had seen, now he would have to kill them. No one must know. They would laugh at him. The healer had said he was better, last week. Well, he would find a new healer, and hang the old healer tomorrow. No. He would give him to the Forged ones in the King's Circle, they were very hungry now. And then let the big cats out with the Forged ones. And the bull, the big white one with the sweeping horns and the hump.

He tried to smile and tell himself it would be amusing, to tell himself that tomorrow would bring him pleasure. The room was thick with the cloying odour of Smoke, but even it could scarcely soothe him. All had been going so well, so very very well. And then the Bastard had ruined it all. He had killed Burl, and wakened the dragons and sent them to Verity.

Verity, Verity, it was always Verity. Ever since he'd been born. Verity and Chivalry got tall horses, while he was kept to a pony. Verity and Chivalry got real swords, but he must practise with wood. Verity and Chivalry, always together, always older, always bigger. Always thinking they were better, even though he came of finer blood than they, and by right should have inherited the throne. His mother had warned him of their jealousy of him. His mother had bid him always be careful, and more than careful. They would kill him if they could, they would, they would. Mother had done her best, she had seen them sent away as much as she could. But even sent away, they might come back. No. There was only one way to be safe, only one way.

Well, he would win tomorrow. He had coteries, did he not? Coteries of fine strong young men, coteries to make dragons for him, and him alone. The coteries were bound to him and the dragons would be bound to him. And he would make more coteries and more dragons, and more, until he had far more than Verity. Except Will had been teaching the coteries for him, and now Will was useless. Broken like a toy, the dragon bit his leg off when he flung him in the air, and Will had landed in a tree like a kite with no wind. It was disgusting. A man with one leg. He couldn't stand broken things. His blind eye had been bad enough, but to lose a leg, too? What would men think of a king who kept a crippled servant? His mother had never trusted cripples. They are jealous, she had warned him, always jealous, and they will turn on you. But Will he had needed for the coteries. Stupid Will. It was all Will's fault. But Will was the one who knew how to wake Skill in people and form them into coteries. So maybe he should send someone back for Will. If Will still lived.

Will? Regal Skilled tentatively toward us.

Not exactly. I closed my Skill around him. It was ridiculously easy, like picking up a sleeping hen from its perch.

Let me go! Let me go!

I felt him reaching for his other coteries. I slapped them away from him, closed him off from their Skilling. He had no strength, he had never had any real Skill-strength. It had all been the coterie's power that he had puppeteered. It shocked me. All the fear I had borne inside me, over a year's time now. Of what? Of a whining, spoiled child who schemed to take his older brothers' toys. The crown and the throne were no more to him than their horses and swords had been. He had no concept of governing a

kingdom; only of wearing a crown and doing what he wished. First his mother and then Galen had done his scheming for him. He had learned from them only a sly cunning as to how to get his way. If Galen had not bound the coterie to him, he would never have wielded any true power. Stripped of his coterie, I saw him as he was: a cosseted child with a penchant for cruelty that had never been denied.

This is what we have feared and fled? This?

Nighteyes, what do you here?

Your kill is my kill, my brother. I would see what meat we have come so far to take.

Regal squirmed and thrashed, literally sickened by the Wittouch of the wolf against his mind. It was unclean and disgusting, a dirty doggy thing, nasty and smelly, as bad as that rat creature that scuttled in his rooms at night and could not be caught. Nighteyes leaned closer, pressed the Wit against him as if he could smell him all that way away. Regal retched and shuddered.

Enough, I told Nighteyes, and the wolf relented.

If you are going to kill him, do it soon, Nighteyes advised. The other one weakens and will die if you do not hurry.

He was right. Will's breath had gone shallow and rapid. I gripped Regal firmly, then fed more strength into Will. He tried not to take it, but his self-mastery was not that strong. Given a chance, the body will always choose to live. And so his lungs steadied and his heart beat more strongly. Once more I drew Skill into myself. I centred myself in it and honed its purpose. I turned my attention back to Regal.

If you kill me, you will burn yourself. You will lose your own Skill if you kill me with it.

I had thought of that. I had never much enjoyed being Skilled. I would rather far be Witted than Skilled. It would be no loss.

I forced myself to recall Galen. I called to mind the fanatical coterie he had created for Regal. It gave shape to my purpose.

As I had longed to do for so long, I loosed my Skill upon him.

Afterwards, there was little left of Will. But I sat by him, and gave him water when he asked for it. I even covered him when he complained faintly of cold. It puzzled the wolf, my death-watch. A knife across his throat would have been so much faster for both of us. Kinder, perhaps. But I had decided I was no longer an assassin. So I waited for his last breath, and when he

sighed it out, I stood up and walked away.

It is a long way from the Mountain Kingdom to the coast of Buck. Even as the dragon flies, tirelessly and swift, it is a long, long way. For a few days, Nighteyes and I knew peace. We travelled far from the empty Stone Garden, far from the black Skill road. We were both too stiff to hunt well, but we had found a good trout stream and we followed it. The days were almost too warm, the nights clear and kind. We fished, we ate, we slept. I thought only of things that did not hurt. Not of Molly in Burrich's embrace, but of Nettle sheltered by his good right arm. He would be a good father to her. He had had practice. I even found it in me to hope that she might have younger brothers and sisters in years to come. I thought of peace returning to the Mountain Kingdom, of Red Ships driven from the coast of the Six Duchies. I healed. Not completely. A scar is never the same as good flesh, but it stops the bleeding.

I was there on the summer afternoon when Verity-as-Dragon appeared in the skies over Buckkeep. With him, I saw the shining black towers and turrets of Buckkeep Castle far below us. Beyond the castle, where Buckkeep Town had been, were the blackened shells of buildings and warehouses. Forged ones ambled through the streets, pushed aside by swaggering Raiders. Masts with tatters of canvas dangling from them thrust up through the calm waters. A dozen Red Ships rocked peacefully in the harbour. I felt the heart of Verity-as-Dragon swell with anger. I swear I heard Kettricken's cry of anguish at the sight.

Then the great turquoise and silver dragon was alighting in the centre grounds of Buckkeep Castle. He ignored the flight of arrows that rose to meet him, ignored, too, the cries of the soldiers who cowered before him, senseless as his shadow spread over them and his great wings beat to lower his bulk to the ground. It was a wonder he did not crush them. Even as he was alighting, Kettricken was trying to stand up upon his shoulders, crying to the guard to lower their pikes and stand away.

On the ground, he dipped his shoulder to let a dishevelled Queen Kettricken dismount. Starling Birdsong slid down behind her and distinguished herself by bowing to the line of pikes that were pointed at them. I saw not a few faces I recognized, and shared Verity's pain at how privation had transformed them. Then Patience came forth, pike gripped

tightly, helm askew upon her bundled hair. She pushed through the awe-stricken guards, her hazel eyes flinty in a pinched face. At the sight of the dragon, she halted. Her gaze went from the Queen to the dragon's dark eyes. She took a breath, caught it, then breathed the word. 'Elderling.' Then she threw both helm and pike into the air with a whoop, and rushed forward to embrace Kettricken, crying, 'An Elderling! I knew it, I knew it, I knew they would come back!' She spun on her heel, issuing a flurry of orders that included everything from a hot bath for the Queen to readying a charge from the gates of Buckkeep Castle. But what I will always hold in my heart is the moment when she turned back, to stamp her foot at Verity-as-Dragon and tell him to hurry up and get those damned ships out of her harbour.

The Lady Patience of Buckkeep had become used to being obeyed swiftly.

Verity rose and went to the battle as he always had. Alone. Finally, he had his wish, to confront his enemies, not with the Skill, but in the flesh. On his very first pass, a slash of his tail shattered two of their ships. He intended that none should escape him. It was but hours later that the Fool and Girl on a Dragon and their followers arrived to join him, but by then not a Red Ship remained in Buck Harbour. They joined him in his hunting through the steep streets of what had been Buckkeep Town. It was not yet evening when the streets were empty of Raiders. Those who had sheltered in the castle poured back into the town, to weep at the wreckage, it is true, but also to come near and wonder at the Elderlings who had returned to save them. Despite the number of dragons who came, Verity was the dragon that the folk of Buck would remember clearest. Not that folk remember anything too clearly when dragons are flying overhead, casting their shadows below. Still, he is the dragon one sees on all the tapestries of the Cleansing of Buck.

It was a summer of dragons for the Coastal Duchies. I saw it all, or as much as would fit into my sleeping hours. Even awake, I was aware of it, like thunder more felt than heard from the distance. I knew when Verity led the dragons northward, to purge all Buck and Bearn and even the Near Islands of Red Ships and Raiders. I saw the scouring of Ripple Keep, and the return of Faith, Duchess of Bearn, to her proper keep. Girl on a Dragon and the Fool flew south along the coast of Rippon and Shoaks, rooting Raiders out from their strongholds on the islands as well. How Verity conveyed to them that they must feed only on the Raiders, I do not know, but that line was held. The folk of the Six Duchies feared them not. Children ran out from

huts and cottages, to point overhead at the jewelled passing of the creatures. When the dragons slept, temporarily satiated, on the beaches and in the pastures, the people came out to walk among them fearlessly, to touch with their own hands these jewel-glittering creatures. And everywhere the Raiders had established strongholds, the dragons fed well.

The summer died slowly, and autumn came to shorten the days and promise storms to come. As the wolf and I gave thought to shelter for the winter, I had dreams of dragons flying over shores I had never seen before. Water churned cold against those harsh shores, and ice encroached on the edges of their narrow bays. The Out Islands, I surmised. Verity had always longed to bring the war to their shores, and did so with a vengeance. And that, too, was as it had been in King Wisdom's time.

It was winter and snows had come to the higher reaches of the Mountains but not to the valley where the hot springs steamed in the chill air when the dragons last passed over my head. I came to the door of my hut to watch them pass, flying in great formations like migrating geese. Nighteyes turned his head to their strange calls, and sent up a howl of his own in answer. As they swept over me, the world blinked around me and I lost all but the vaguest memory of it. I could not tell you if Verity led their flight, or even if Girl on a Dragon was among them. I only knew that peace had been restored to the Six Duchies and that no Red Ships would venture near our shores again. I hoped they would all sleep well in the Stone Garden as they had before. I went back into the hut to turn the rabbit on the cooking spit. I looked forward to a long quiet winter.

So the promised aid of the Elderlings was brought to the Six Duchies. They came, just as they had in King Wisdom's time, and drove the Red Ships from the shores of the Six Duchies. Two great sailed White Ships were sunk as well in that great cleansing. And just as in King Wisdom's time, their outstretched shadows on the folk below stole moments of life and memory as they passed. All the myriad shapes and colours of the dragons made their way into the scrolls and tapestries of that time, just as they had before. And folk filled in what they could not remember of the battles when dragons filled the sky overhead, with guesses and fancies. Minstrels made songs of it. All the songs say that Verity came home himself upon the turquoise dragon, and rode the beast into the battle against the Red Ships. And the best songs say that when the fighting was over, Verity was carried off by the Elderlings, to feast with them in great honour and then sleep

beside them in their magic castle until such time as Buck shall need to call on him again. So the truth became, as Starling had told me, something bigger than the facts. It was, after all, a time for heroes and all sorts of marvellous things to occur.

As when Regal himself came riding, at the head of a column of six thousand Farrow men, to bring aid and supplies, not just to Buck, but to all the Coastal Duchies. The news of his return had preceded him, as had the barges of livestock, grain and treasures from Tradeford Hall itself that came in a steady stream down the Buck River. All spoke in wonder, of how the prince had started up from a dream, and run half-dressed through the halls of Tradeford, miraculously foretelling the return of King Verity to Buckkeep and the summoning of the Elderlings to save the Six Duchies. Birds were sent, withdrawing all troops from the Mountains and offering his most humble apologies and generous monetary reparation to King Eyod. He summoned his nobles, to foretell to them that Queen Kettricken would bear Verity's child, and that he, Regal, wished to be first to pledge fealty to the next Farseer monarch. In honour of the day, he had ordered all gallows pulled down and burned, all prisoners pardoned and freed, and the King's Circle was to be renamed the Queen's Garden, and planted with trees and flowers from all six of the duchies as a symbol of new unity. When, later that day, the Red Ships attacked the outskirts of Tradeford, Regal himself called for his horse and armour, and rode to lead the defence of his folk. Side by side he fought, next to merchants and longshoremen, nobles and beggars. He gained in that battle the love of the common folk of Tradeford. When he announced his allegiance must always be to the child Queen Kettricken carried, they joined their vows to his.

When he reached Buckkeep, it is said he remained on his knees and robed only in sackcloth at the gate of Buckkeep Castle for some days until the Queen herself deigned to come forth and accept his most abject apologies for ever doubting her honour. Into her hands he returned both the crown of the Six Duchies, and the simpler band of the King-in-Waiting. He no longer wished, he told her, to hold any higher title than uncle to his monarch. The Queen's paleness and silence at his words were put down to the uneasy stomach her pregnancy gave her. To Lord Chade, the Queen's advisor, he returned all the scrolls and books of Skillmaster Solicity, with the plea that he guard them well, for there was much in them that could be turned to evil in the wrong hands. He had lands and a title he wished to

confer on the Fool, as soon as he returned from his warring to Buckkeep. And to his dear, dear sister-in-law Lady Patience, he returned the rubies that Chivalry had given her, for they could never grace any neck as finely as they did her own.

I had considered having him erect a statue in my memory, but had decided that would be going too far. The fanatical loyalty I had imprinted on him would be my best memorial. While Regal lived, Queen Kettricken and her child would have no more loyal subject.

Ultimately, of course, that was not long. All have heard of the tragic and bizarre death of Prince Regal. The rabid creature that savaged him in his bed one night left bloody tracks, not just on his bed-clothes, but all about the bedchamber, as if it had exulted in its deed. Gossip had it that it was an extremely large river rat that had somehow journeyed with him all the way from Tradeford. It was most disturbing to all the folk in the Keep. The Queen had the rat-dogs brought in, to scour every chamber, but to no avail. The beast was never captured or killed, though rumours of sightings of the immense rat were rampant among the keep servants. Some say that that was why, for months afterwards, Lord Chade was seldom seen without his pet ferret.

FORTY-ONE

The Scribe

If the truth be known, Forging was not an invention of the Red Ships. We had taught it well to them, back in the days of King Wisdom. The Elderlings that took our revenge on the Out Islands soared many times over that country of islands. Many Outislanders were devoured outright, but many others were overflowed by dragons so often that they were stripped of their memories and feelings. They became callous strangers to their own kin. That was the grievance that had rankled so amongst that long-remembered folk. When the Red Ships sailed, it was not to claim Six Duchies territory or wealth. It was for revenge. To do to us as so long ago we had done to them, in the days of their great, great grandmothers.

What one folk know, another may discover. They had scholars and wise folk of their own, despite Six Duchies disdain of them as barbarians. So it was that mention of dragons was studied by them, in every ancient scroll they could find. While it would be difficult to find absolute proof, it seems to me that some copies of scrolls collected by the Skillmasters of Buck might actually have been sold, in the days before the Red Ships menaced our coasts, to Outislander traders who paid well for such things. And when the slow movement of glaciers bared, on their own shores, a dragon carved of black stone and outcroppings of more of that black stone, their wise men combined their knowledge with the insatiable lust for vengeance of one Keбал Rawbread. They resolved to create dragons of their own, and visit upon the Six Duchies the same savage destruction we had once served upon them.

Only one White Ship was driven ashore by the Elderlings when they cleansed Buck. The dragons devoured all her crew, down to the last man. In her hold were found only great blocks of shining black stone. Locked within them, I believe, were the stolen lives and feelings of the folk of the Six Duchies who had been Forged. Their studies had led the Outislander scholars to believe that stone sufficiently imbued with life-force could be fashioned into dragons to serve the Outislanders. It is chilling to think how close they came to discovering the complete truth of creating a dragon.

Circles and circles, as the Fool once told me. The Outislanders raided our shore, so King Wisdom brought the Elderlings to drive them back. And the Elderlings Forged the Outislanders with Skill when they flew over their huts so frequently. Generations later, they came to raid our shores and Forge our folk. So King Verity went to wake the Elderlings, and the Elderlings drove them back. And Forged them in the process. I wonder if once more the hate will fester until ...

I sigh and set my quill aside. I have written too much. Not all things need to be told. Not all things should be told. I take up the scroll and make my slow way to the hearth. My legs are cramped from sitting on them. It is a cold damp day, and the fog off the ocean has found every old injury on my body and awakened it. The arrow wound is still worst. When cold tightens that scar, I feel its pull on every part of my body. I throw the vellum onto the coals. I have to step over Nighteyes to do it. His muzzle is greying now and his bones do not like this weather any more than mine do.

You are getting fat. All you do any more is lie by the hearth and bake your brains. Why don't you go hunting?

He stretches and sighs. *Go bother the boy instead of me. The fire needs more wood.*

But before I can call him, my boy comes into the room. He wrinkles his nose at the smell of burning vellum and gives me a scathing look. 'You should have just asked me to bring more wood. Do you know how much good vellum costs?'

I make no reply, and he just sighs and shakes his head over me. He goes out to replenish the wood supply.

He is a gift from Starling. I have had him for two years now, and I am still not used to him. I do not believe I was ever a boy such as he is. I recall the day she brought him to me, and I have to smile. She had come, as she does, some twice or thrice a year, to visit me and chide me for my hermit ways. But that time she had brought the boy to me. He had sat outside on a skinny pony while she pounded on my door. When I opened to her, she had immediately turned and called to him, 'Get down and come inside. It's warm here.'

He had slid from the pony's bare back and then stood by him, shivering, as he stared at me. His black hair blew across his face. He clutched an old cloak of Starling's about his narrow shoulders.

‘I’ve brought you a boy,’ Starling announced, and grinned at me.

I met her gaze incredulously. ‘Do you mean ... he is mine?’

She shrugged at me. ‘If you’ll have him. I thought he might do you good.’ She paused. ‘Actually, I thought you might do him good. With clothing and regular meals and such. I’ve cared for him as long as I can, but a minstrel’s life ...’ She let her words trail off.

‘Then he is ... Did you, did we ...’ I floundered my way through the words, denying my hope. ‘He is your son? Mine?’

Her grin had widened at that, even as her eyes had softened in sympathy. She shook her head. ‘Mine? No. Yours? I suppose it’s possible. Did you pass through Flounder Cove about eight years ago? That’s where I found him six months ago. He was eating rotten vegetables from a village midden heap. His mother is dead, and his eyes don’t match, so her sister wouldn’t have him. She says he’s a demon-gotten bastard.’ She cocked her head at me and smiled as she added, ‘So I suppose he might be yours.’ She turned back to him again and raised her voice. ‘Come inside, I tell you. It’s warm. And a real wolf lives with him. You’ll like Nighteyes.’

Hap is a strange boy, one brown eye and one blue. His mother had not been merciful, and his early memories are not gentle ones. She had named him Mishap. Perhaps, to her, he was. I find I call him ‘boy’ as often as not. He does not seem to mind. I have taught him his letters and his numbers and the growing and harvesting of herbs. He was seven when she brought him to me. Now he is nearly ten. He is good with a bow. Nighteyes approves of him. He hunts well for the old wolf.

When Starling comes, she brings me news. I do not know that I always welcome it. Too many things have changed, too much is strange. Lady Patience rules at Tradeford. Their hemp fields yield fully as much paper now as they do fine rope. The size of the gardens there has doubled. The structure that would have been the King’s Circle is now a botanical garden of plants gathered from every corner of the Six Duchies and beyond.

Burrich and Molly and their children are well. They have Nettle and little Chivalry and another on the way. Molly tends her hives and candle shop, while Burrich has used stud fees from Reddy and Reddy’s colt to begin to breed horses again. Starling knows these things, for it was she who tracked them down and saw to it that Reddy, and Sooty’s colt were given over to him. Poor old Sooty was too old to survive the journey home from the Mountains. Molly and Burrich both believe I am many years dead.

Sometimes I believe that, too. I have never asked her where they live. I have never seen any of the children. In that, I am truly my father's son.

Kettricken bore a son, Prince Dutiful. Starling told me he has his father's colouring, but looks as if he will be a tall slender man, like Kettricken's brother Rurisk, perhaps. She thinks he is more serious than a boy should be, but all of his tutors are fond of him. His grandfather journeyed all the way from the Mountain Kingdom to see the lad who will someday rule both lands. He was well pleased with the child. I wondered what his other grandfather would have thought of all that had come to pass from his treaty-making.

Chade no longer lives in the shadows, but is the honoured advisor to the Queen. According to Starling, he is a foppish old man who is entirely too fond of the company of young women. But she smiles as she says it, and 'Chade Fallstar's Reckoning' will be the song she is remembered for when she is gone. I am sure he knows where I am, but he has never sought me out. It is as well. Sometimes, when Starling comes, she brings me curious old scrolls, and seeds and roots for strange herbs. At other times she brings me fine paper and clear vellum. I do not need to ask the source. Occasionally, I give her in return scrolls of my own writing; drawings of herbs, with their virtues and dangers; an account of my time in that ancient city; records of my journeys through Chalced and the lands beyond. She bears them dutifully away.

Once it was a map of the Six Duchies that she brought to me from him. It was carefully begun in Verity's hand and inks, but never completed. Sometimes I look at it and think of the places I could fill in upon it. But I have hung it as it is upon my wall. I do not think I will ever change it.

As for the Fool, he returned to Buckkeep Castle. Briefly. Girl on a Dragon left him there, and he wept as she rose without him. He was immediately acclaimed as a hero and a great warrior. I am sure that is why he fled. He accepted neither title nor land from Regal. No one is quite sure where the Fool went or what became of him after that. Starling believes he returned to his homeland. Perhaps. Perhaps, somewhere there is a toymaker who makes puppets that are a delight and a marvel. I hope he wears an earring of silver and blue. The fingerprints he left on my wrist have faded to a dusky grey.

I think I will always miss him.

I was six years in finding my way back to Buck. One we spent in the Mountains. One was spent with Black Rolf. Nighteyes and I learned much of our own kind in our seasons there, but discovered we like our own company best. Despite Holly's best effort, Ollie's girl looked at me and decided I would most definitely not do. My feelings were not injured in the least and it provided an excuse to move on again.

We have been north to the Near Islands, where the wolves are as white as the bears. We have been south to Chalced, and even beyond Bingtown. We have walked up the banks of the Rain River and ridden a raft back down. We have discovered that Nighteyes does not like travelling by ship, and I do not like lands that have no winters. We have walked beyond the edges of Verity's maps.

I had thought I would never return to Buck again. But we did. The autumn winds brought us here one year, and we have not left since. The cottage we claimed as ours once belonged to a charcoal burner. It is not far from Forge, or rather where Forge used to be. The sea and the winters have devoured that town and drowned the evil memories of it. Someday, perhaps, men will come again to seek the rich iron ore. But not soon.

When Starling comes, she chides me, and tells me I am a young man yet. What, she demands of me, became of all my insistence that one day I would have a life of my own? I tell her I have found it. Here, in my cottage, with my writing and my wolf and my boy. Sometimes, when she beds with me and I lie awake afterwards listening to her slow breathing, I think I will rise on the morrow and find some new meaning to my life. But most mornings, when I awake aching and stiff, I think I am not a young man at all. I am an old man, trapped in a young man's scarred body.

The Skill does not sleep easily in me. In summers especially, when I walk along the sea-cliffs and look out over the water, I am tempted to reach forth as Verity once did. And sometimes I do, and I know for a time, of the fisherwoman's catch, or the domestic worries of the mate of the passing merchant ship. The torment of it, as Verity once told me, is that no one ever reaches back. Once, when the Skill-hunger was on me to the point of madness, I even reached for Verity-as-Dragon, imploring him to hear me and answer.

He did not.

Regal's coteries long ago disbanded for lack of a Skillmaster to teach them. Even on the nights when I Skill out in despair as lonely as a wolf's

howling, begging anyone, anyone to respond, I feel nothing. Not even an echo. Then I sit by my window and look out through the mists past the tip of Antler Island. I grip my hands to keep them from trembling and I refuse to plunge myself whole into the Skill river that is waiting, always waiting to sweep me away. It would be so easy. Sometimes all that holds me back is the touch of a wolf's mind against mine.

My boy has learned what that look means, and he measures the elfbark carefully to deaden me. Carryme he adds that I may sleep, and ginger to mask the elfbark's bitterness. Then he brings me paper and quill and ink and leaves me to my writing. He knows that when morning comes, he will find me, head on my desk, sleeping amidst my scattered papers, Nighteyes sprawled at my feet.

We dream of carving our dragon.

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