

Wizard Run



Lee Willard

Wizard

Run

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The fictional world of Kassidor at 61 Cygni and the premise that the 'hippy' culture of the 1960's originated there is a creation of Lee Willard.

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This is dedicated to Ruthie, not just for looking like Luray but for enduring trials nearly as desperate as Luray faces in this book and others. May the ending of her story be happier than this.

Background information and other stories of Kassidor can be found at www.kassidor.com

Cover by Lee Willard.

Wizard Run

Let us go back twenty one centuries into the past, to a time when Nordics were just entering the new lands. To a time when there were kingdoms, when peasant life was short and hard with only the harvest festival to relieve it. A time when the wars of magic were still remembered and wizards were hated and feared.

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1. Festival

"Hey Luray, you going to hang out with your old man all night?" Buron called from near the fire. "If you aren't, how about joining the dance with me? We've already missed a lot of it."

She looked to her father, worrying a little how he felt about her going. "Why don't you go take a few laps?" Oliar told her, "let me sit and watch."

She looked at the huge bonfire that was lighting most of the south pasture and the people dancing wildly around it. They were well on the way to the berserk stupor that would overtake them when the festival reached its height, for this one celebration was the antidote for a year of staid peasant life. Buron knew the ways of the Harvesthenge and no doubt planned to be with her when the celebration climaxed in an hour or so.

Luray had no problem with enjoying a little sexuality, in fact she had much less trouble with it than these simple people, many of whom took only this one annual experience with someone other than their sworn mate. She didn't have any real problem with Buron either. He was a little sweaty just now, but he had bathed just this Afternoonday. His face was unlined, his body firm, strong and bronzed, and he had enough innate intelligence to carry on a conversation about something other than livestock and plowing if pressed.

She worried about her father, because he was now so aged. It wasn't much fun to look like a peasant in his twentieth decade. His face was heavily lined, his long hair and beard white as old snow, his limbs thin and feeble, leaving sleeves and leggings floppy. She hated to leave him alone anymore. She wished he could still participate in the fun and not just sit and watch. It hurt the most because she knew he could if he dared.

Luray was nothing like that. She presented herself as a beautiful peasant girl of four decades, mature but still in the full bloom of youth. She was tall, well rounded, blonde, blue-eyed, tawny-skinned and strong, emphasizing the Nordic in her heritage. At times she would put on an act of being all body and no brains, an empty-headed ornament whose only purpose was to care for her aging father and tease the village youths to a frenzy. To close friends she presented another aspect, she let them know that there really was a mind under those loose golden curls. To no one but her father had she ever revealed the level beyond that.

So soon she was dancing the dance of the Harvesthenge. Enjoying contact with Buron, at least to the extent it was possible. She did enjoy it, letting his arm and hand pass across her chest as he spun her around, clasping his leg between hers when they came back together. It was flattering to feel that she aroused him for he was one of the most sought-after men in the village. They whirled and pranced

around the fire, the drums and flutes taking them farther than the foamy beer would have taken them by itself. For an hour they danced and drank. Soon came the time of complete abandon when the alcohol had done its work and awareness focused on more than mundane reality. She never noticed whether she undressed herself or whether Buron or even one of his friends did it for her. Only casually did she notice it at all. She wasn't the only girl so attired, so completely did these people change on Nightday of Iyosaign.

The Harvesthenge ends with some people dancing united around the embers of the fire, others coupling among the thick ribbonleaves of the pasture and any elders who are not playing the music sitting and arguing over to one side. Luray lay among the ribbonleaves, welcoming Buron within her while the drums throbbed heavy and slow, played by the oldest now, and the whistles intertwined high in the night sky.

When it was over she noticed one of Buron's friends, another girl, and another guy whose name she didn't know were with them. The last was rather advanced in years to be rolling a young girl in the fields and might have been hurt if Buron's friend hadn't taken the edge off the girl. Luray never knew who she was, as soon as the older man spent himself she was up and off toward the fire, presumably to find more pleasure with another man before the celebration ended. The last to pass puberty were often the last to call it a year on this dark of Iyosaign. Luray put some of her clothing back on because of the Nightday chill, as did the men. The four of

them were still sitting there when Oliar came by.

"I'm crawling back to the hut," he told her. He was bent so his nightcoat came nearly to the ground like a robe. "Kortrax will bring light soon and I cannot stay awake any longer. If you come home, please try to keep it calm."

Their cabin had only one living room, and though they had separate beds, the noise of one could wake the other. "I believe we are done also. I will be home soon and I will be alone."

The older man looked intently at Oliar, then at Luray. "I know you two," he said, "I couldn't really pin you down when you were by yourself, but now that I see you together, I know I've seen you before."

"We've been around half a decade," Luray volunteered, "You would have seen us around the village all the time."

"No, I mean before that, when I was young. I've only been here these three years, since I've taken a wife in this village. I know you from village Puthreel."

Alarms went off in her mind, no doubt as they did in Oliar's. It was a long time since they'd lived in Puthreel, a generation ago. Why did this dolt have to come all the way from there? Suddenly, she felt very cold, and sat up to put her remaining clothing on.

"We may have passed thru Puthreel," Oliar said, "We like to wander around, especially when I was a little younger."

"No, there was something special about you two, let me see..." Then his eyes widened. "I remember now. I know you

because my first wife was so jealous of you," he said to Luray. "That's right, I was a youth at the time but you look the same as you did when I was your age...YOU TWO ARE WIZARDS. There's no other way you could still look just as you did then!"

"Now wait a minute, you have us confused with someone else," Oliar said.

"No I don't. It was a long time ago, but I noticed everything about you," he said to Luray. "I remember the curve of your lips, the color of your eyes, the shape of your hair. You never were afraid to show off your looks, you remember I was never afraid to look."

Luray knew it was true and knew it was too long ago, he had been a youth at the time, too young for her to consider. She was well aware of the common people's jealousy of those who had preserved the secrets of the golden age. This was no time to philosophize about it however, for the man was raising an alarm.

"We have magicians here! Did you know that everybody?"

"Don't say that," Luray told him, "They might think you're serious."

"She didn't feel like a wizard to me," Buron said, "she felt like a regular woman, a fine one at that."

"How do you think a witch is supposed to feel? She'd feel unnaturally fine wouldn't she, better than anyone you've ever had?"

"Most pleasant to lie with, but not unnatural."

"All your sons will be sissy's," he said, but anything further was drowned out by the rising mob.

Buron's protests were to no avail. There were still enough people remaining, especially elders, that his shouts brought response. The elders are always the most dangerous. Among youngsters, they could almost admit to what they were. Youngsters who hadn't felt the weight of years were merely curious. The Elders had a lifetime to hone their hate. To them the legends held lessons and were not just adventure stories. To them the reality of those legends was just a little bit closer. To them the jealousy for extended youth was more immediate.

Many of them started to get up. There was shouting and the music stopped. They called to the younger ones, telling them to stop their dance. With horror Luray saw that it was working, they were stopping and looking toward her and Oliar. The elders were moving toward them, slowly but purposefully. She wondered how they could turn so fast. Just minutes ago they were accepted members of this small community, known to almost all of them. Now they were advancing with hatred in their eyes. The gasping growl of their breathing was full of menace in the silence that had fallen. The silence around the fire where there had been celebration seconds before was ominous. Already a couple of field hands had taken up burning brands and were working

their way around behind them.

"What foolishness is this?" Oliar shouted, "you all know us. He made a simple mistake, he thinks we're someone else."

One the elders, a communicator of King Doeslon spoke, "You've lived here less than a decade, but already too much whispering do we hear of your daughter's unnatural and unchanging beauty."

Luray knew she wasn't unnaturally beautiful. She had used very little sorcery to change her original appearance. In this village she was exceptional, but in a noble's brothel in any city she would be a frump destined to scrub floors. Because any comely daughters in this region would be sold at puberty, many here had never seen an attractive woman.

The speaker continued, "Too much you speak of the Old Lands. We've needed only an accusation to confront you."

"You've just wanted an excuse to let your black fears run wild," Oliar's voice rang clear, "or is it you crave some headier excitement for the celebration? You're jealous of your youths having all the fun."

"To the contrary, it would be preferred not to mar the festivities with trials such as this, but no matter the time or place we must all do whatever is necessary to keep the black arts at bay."

"Have you ever seen us perform any wizard rites?" Oliar demanded.

"You have been here over a half a decade, but still we know you not. How do we know what you do when no one

watches, how do we know what you did in another village?"

"Is no one ever to leave the village they are born in?"

"That would be sage advice in these days of wizardry and corruption." One of the other elders said. "It is not safe to trust one whom one hasn't known since birth, who's parents weren't known to one's parents."

"In a new land such as this?"

"A new land is it?" some elder in the back growled, "This village has stood for five generations now, an eternity for us mortal men."

"Are you going to kill any stranger who comes to your village?"

"Only those who practice eldrich arts of death and destruction, those who bewitch our youths, get them to abandon their families and run off. Those who come here with too much money, enough so they do only token work to support themselves, those with expensive treasures."

"We run the mill!"

"A mill that has never supported a family before."

While they argued, the crowd had moved around them. Now there was no chance to get away. Buron engaged one in a brief scuffle as they reached out for her, but it was to no avail. Four men wrestled Buron to the ground. She screamed and tried to run, pulling her father with her. He tried, they flew toward the elders and she bowled several of them over before they brought Oliar down.

"Save yourself!" he screamed when she turned to help him.

It was too late. Several men had hands on her already and she was borne to the ground.

2. From the Stake

How long Kortrax lays on the horizon, how red he is, how delicate his filigrees of violet lacework. The hours they were bound here gave her plenty of time to contemplate the beauty and the might of the great star that gave life and birth to the world. Never had she wanted him to stay on the horizon longer, for when he broke free of the stubbled fields the torch would be put to the sticks surrounding them and fire would consume them, ending forever their long journey thru life.

The whole village was gathering around them. Few had slept at all that Dawnsleep, those few had only a few hours. Missing Harvesthenge was unthinkable in Village Korbach for it meant a whole year would have to be endured without the beauty and mysticism of drink, with no arms but one's mate to hold one, with no exercise but the plow and the sickle, with no music but the lumins and charraspas.

It was a quite a crowd that studied them. The children didn't understand the meaning of what was to happen, they capered and laughed like Luray and Oliar were lentosaurs about to be roasted for a feast. How could they understand at their age what real life was like? How could even their parents understand? How could she blame them, they knew nothing of the lives they were taking. They only knew fears brought about by hazy legends of the great wars of magic which took place five centuries ago, centuries before either of

them were born.

She cursed the dark days even deeper in the past when the secrets of science had been lost. Lost with all the other wonders of the ancient times. If power-crazed emperors hadn't fought over the last scraps of coal and metal maybe some of the important knowledge would remain. If they hadn't filled the world with Orcs and Goblins maybe people wouldn't have fled to these remote locations, maybe they could have preserved the knowledge.

That same mentality was at work here. 'If I can't have it, let me at least make sure that nobody else does either.' Because of that, they would take the lives of two of the very few people who did preserve at least a fragment of a memory of those days.

She continued to look at Kortrax. So little remained in contact with the land. It was only fourteen minutes that the great sun remained in contact with the horizon. In one sense it was so long, long enough that all she could remember of her life passed thru her mind, and she'd already lived three mortal lives put end to end. In another sense it was such a short time, far too short for his feeble dawn rays to be concentrated thru the round bauble on her ring and burn thru the ropes that bound her.

Right then she was remembering listening to her father tell her that in the old days the current king's whole city would fit in just one palace in Dempala. She wouldn't have

believed if she hadn't journeyed thru some of the ruins many decades before when they had passed thru the ancient lands. Seeing those ruins, which made Kobal itself look like a fresh ytith nest in a single lengko and knowing that the ruins she had seen were those of just one small market hundreds of miles out on the rim of Dempala convinced her.

She smelled the burning of the rope. It was a good sign, but so little and so late. Already the village Prophet was making his way thru the crowd. She dared to glance at Oliar to see what he was doing. They had not removed his clothing as they had hers and she knew he would have a few tricks hidden in his pockets for use in an emergency. It wasn't that they expected any emergency as desperate as this, but you never knew what louts and bandits you would run into on the way back to your cabin during the Dawnsleep after Harvesthenge. He was striving to get his hands free by working at the ropes, not having a ring like hers that could be used as a burning glass. She saw that his wrists were bloody from the effort, but he seemed to be making more progress than she. At the same time his face portrayed stoic resignation to his fate. She knew better than to dare more than just a quick glance and turned away to watch the Prophet's approach.

He came up onto the low earthen platform upon which their stakes were raised. Just as Kortrax cleared the horizon, he raised his arms. The crowd drew breath and began a low hum of homage, maintaining it for almost the full minute that

he held his arms aloft. He brought his arms down and they abruptly stopped.

"Oh great Sun," he began, just as everyone was sure the sun was free of the land way out there in the fields, "Giver of all life, lord of the Lightdays, ruler of the land and sky; we gather here today to offer to you those who have defied your will. We offer to you this day two who have refused your life everlasting. Worshippers of Oncheegeela and Kunaë, they have refused union with you, they have refuted the kingdom of light, they have embraced the cunt-faced ones and sought to bring eternal enslavement in flesh to us all. They have sought to possess the ancient evil, the all-powerful weapons of apocalypse, the power to deform men and beasts, the power to steal thoughts, bend hearts and usurp reason.

"Forgive them and welcome them, oh Great Sun, as we use our pitiful fires to send them to your great fires. Their life we return to your sky, their dust we return to your land, their souls we return to your light. We know they are unworthy of your great brilliance, as are we all. We know they are unmindful of your love, as are we all. We know they are but specks in the system of your rule, as are we all. With abandoned hopes we beg you take them, an unworthy offering as they are, made by your unworthy servants.

"For the people of our humble village I beg you..."

She wondered how long he was going to go on. Listening to this mindless babble droning on to a ball of hot gases with

no more mind than a blob of ingethor shit was rather difficult to take. The heat of the rope was beginning to get painful. That was a good sign, maybe there was some kind of a chance it would actually burn thru. If this self-appointed spokesman of the Almighty Furnace went on long enough, it might even burn thru before they came over to light the fire. The problem was keeping her expression dull and dejected while the heat cooked her flesh. Pain was not something she often had to deal with, even in the pre-dawn hours when several of her captors had used her, she was able to put her mind in a state where she imagined she was with someone she wanted and thus escape injury. True it was disgusting and required concentration, but not as much as this was taking. She tried to think of how the peasants stoically bore working in the fields mere hours after childbirth or while parasites ate their internal organs. It was no use. She tried to think of something pleasant, but her wrists felt like there were raw flames licking over them.

It was when some of the crowd started yelling that she realized there really were raw flames licking over them. The ropes parted and her hands came free at the same time the prophet realized something was happening.

"Oh great lord thank you for the sign," he said, "for now we truly know that what we do is right, for you yourself have brought the flames that will consume them..."

Luray wasn't waiting around for that. With what was left of her hands, she ripped the burning ropes off and threw them

toward the prophet. At the same time Oliar tossed a handful of pop-pebbles into the crowd. They were harmless, but they made a loud noise when they hit and could be quite frightening to anyone who knew nothing about them. She didn't know how long he had been free and didn't care, he was free now, and it was time for them to leave. She ran, thinking of nothing but getting away and hoping something would be resolved before her adrenalin level dropped and the pain of her burns reached her conscious mind.

Of course, there was no way they could just run away from the whole village. Luray was a shade better than average in foot speed, but hardly the fastest runner in town. Oliar was faster than his looks might lead one to believe, but could be easily overtaken by any youth. They had gained only a few dozen steps before the townsfolk realized the pop-pebbles hadn't destroyed them and were off in pursuit.

There were no natural barriers they would get across and hold the others at bay. The village was surrounded by open fields for a mile or more on all sides. The small brooks that ran thru it could be vaulted by even an old man. There were no walls, no moats or any other defenses, for peace had reigned in Doeslan's kingdom since this land was settled. Their only chance was a keda and trap that was standing idle just a few dozen yards from the village square.

By the time they got there, the fleetest runners were already nearing them. Oliar shook the harness and Luray in

desperation somehow managed to kick one young man back. The keda was spirited and doubtless terrified by the bedlam bearing down on it. It took flight as soon as given sign and they clattered over the cobblestones and out of the village.

Thinking that was the end of their duress would have been very naïve. Some of the village youths were so fleet they actually chased the wagon behind this bolting keda for a ways. Two others jumped other kedas bareback and came after them. Without a wagon to hold them back these were much faster at first. They would tire when their rider's weight took its toll, but long before they gained the high road they were riding alongside.

Oliar kept up a stream of shouts and signs to their stolen keda while one of the riders drew a dagger and took aim at him. While he was doing that, Luray was looking for something to use to shield him from the blade, but there was nothing. She knew that at his age, he could not survive a knife thrust in a vital part, she knew he was required to drive the wagon. Without a further thought she put her hand out to stop the hurtling blade, fully expecting to take its bite in the hand or wrist, fully expecting the pain in her wrists to pale to insignificance in comparison to the pain of a blade penetrating her hand. As it happened, the guy was a much better daggerman than that and the blade would have rotated into position when it reached Oliar. Where her hand was, a yard in front of him, the side of the hilt struck her palm and it

bounced harmlessly over the top of their carriage.

The other youth had no weapon, but bent to stop their keda. He drew along side and grabbed at its left two eyestalks. A spirited keda is not about to permit any human to make a grab for its eyestalks. It reared up and attempted to come down clawing on the human on the neighboring keda's back. This disagreed with the momentum of the carriage and it came up, over its back, and spilled over the guy who had thrown the knife. Luray and Oliar were thrown from the wagon, the knife thrower was thrown from his keda and was instantly killed by the wagon, the other youth was grievously wounded by the claws of the keda he tried to grab and all kedas escaped pretty much unharmed.

Luray didn't consider herself unharmed. If she stopped to think about it she might have decided she had a broken bone or two to go along with the half acre of missing skin, but she was conscious and Oliar wasn't. The wagon was hopelessly smashed and back in the village there were several more on the way. With the hand that seemed to be working correctly, she desperately undid a harness strap from the remains of the wagon and desperately got Oliar up onto a keda, then used it to tie him on. He was breathing but what internal injuries he had and what the ride would do to them there was no way of telling. She waved the keda off toward the east and then got onto another, not knowing or caring which one it was. By now it was already obvious that only one arm was going to do her much good, she dug those fingers in the keda's fur, being

careful of the sensitive manes, and urged it on, aiming away from the village and toward the distant Sea of Reeds.

3. The Forest

It was unlikely that they could get away like they did, but two things made it difficult for the villagers to catch them. One was that they piled two or three people into each cart and weighted them down, the other was that they were afraid to leave the vicinity of their own village. Thus once Luray and Oliar made the mile or two distance to where the fields of the next village began, their pursuers lost heart and dropped back, leaving them to proceed uncontested toward the east.

Oliar was not quick in coming around, and when he did he was in such agony that Luray was ashamed to have come thru it so lightly. His right arm was broken in two places, his left leg in one place and possibly his left foot. Luray on the other hand figured she had a sprained right elbow and wrist, along with the burns on both her wrists and large scrapes from hitting the ground when the wagon was destroyed. They were painful surely, but they weren't impairing her functions and weren't threatening her life.

In spite of his injuries, Oliar insisted that they go on till they reached the fens of Lharmouth, so Luray really had no choice but to make him as comfortable as possible and press on. They had to stop and let the kedas graze and take water. They had to take water themselves. She bound Oliar's arms and legs as well as she could using strips ripped from his robe, making splints from some dead branches. She still had

not a stitch of clothing herself. During the light days that was not a great problem, but when darkness came, the cold would make her miserable. Oliar slipped in and out of consciousness as they pressed on and Morningday gave way to Noonsleep. They napped a bit in the shade of an archwood out of the searing heat late in Noonsleep. After three or four hours they moved on again.

They reached the forest of the fens by the middle of Afternoonday when the heat was abating a little. Oliar was delirious. She proceeded only a mile or so within the forest and then made camp in a thicket near a small stream. She lay Oliar down beside it and bathed his brow with the cool water. After awhile he slept peacefully and she did likewise.

*

When she woke it was nearly dusk, only feeble rays of Kortrax slanted in thru the leaves, wandering erratically, impossible to catch with her ring to light a fire. Her elbow and wrist were now stiff and sore and already she was getting cool. The dark times of Dusksleep, Nightday and Dawnsleep promised to be especially unpleasant.

There were plenty of stones around with which to make a fireplace, and plenty of dry twigs with which to make a fire if there was only some way to get it lit. It was now two and a half days since the Harvesthenge feast, the last time either of them had eaten, so food was important. That she was able to

do a little about, there were a few gloribards nearby so she spent the twilight hours gathering a good supply of them.

She went thru Oliar's pockets to see if he had anything that might be useful. He had a small knife, some string and a few more pop-pebbles. She spent the pop-pebbles in a vain attempt to get a fire started.

The kedas had wandered off. She wished they hadn't because their body warmth would be very welcome. She cuddled as close to Oliar as possible as darkness gathered and hoped it wouldn't be a cold dark this week.

It must have been Nightday when Oliar awoke. She could do little for him but provide berries and a wet strip of cloth. He was just barely coherent enough to realize he must not make too much noise for fear that these woods would be full of sneaky nyobbas, could hide hakken or even a theirops. He knew that Luray could not hope to defend them with that tiny knife even if she wasn't injured. He was also coherent enough to notice that she still had no clothing. He tried to offer his, but he was thick with fever while she were merely cold. Had she taken them, he surely would have died.

She couldn't help thinking how unfair it was however. 'In any situation like this, be it fact or fable, the girl always gets stripped of her clothing while the man keeps his. All because the male has such an insatiable desire to look upon the naked female body. That in itself isn't a real problem, I've shown my body to many a man, freely, with delight. The problem is that

they use it as a weapon against women when all the while it is women who should use it as a weapon against men. After all, we females aren't all bent out of shape by looking at a naked man, but a man can be distracted to the point of insensibility by the presence of an unclothed female. Still they insist on stripping us down when they want to punish us, even though they are the ones that lose their composure. All we get out of the whole experience is chilly. It's so stupid of them. Maybe if they had left my clothes on they wouldn't have been too distracted to notice that I was getting loose. In that case it's for the best, I'd rather be cold and alive than roasted dead'.

Her arm was at its worst at this time. It throbbed incessantly if she didn't move it, and stabbed her with blades of fire if she did. There was nothing she could use to tie it up, she just had to sit still with it in her lap. Had it been broken neither one of them would have been able to care for the other, then their situation would have been even worse. At least when Morningday came she would be able to start a fire and wouldn't have to suffer with the cold.

She made a few trips to the stream for water, and even managed to get back over to the berry bush and eat a few more of them.

She found a couple bigleaf bushes and used a few leaves as blankets. They weren't the warmest, and they really weren't quite big enough, but with some effort she was able to get them wrapped around herself enough so she could sit up next to Oliar without her shivering disturbing his rest. Nightday

was interminable this way. Narrulla was a sleep-time moon in this part of the year and at this time of year Kunae, the three century star, was nowhere to be found even though it was much brighter in this century. Thus it was too dark to do anything at all, especially here in the forest.

She listened to the noises of darkness, and worried about them. A couple of times she heard animals that were big enough to be dangerous should they take the notion. Neither one of them did, but that didn't prevent her from worrying about it for hours afterward.

**

She slept again, but woke up before Morningday actually arrived when a drizzle began to fall. In the dark she stumbled around till she got some more big leaves pulled off, then put them over Oliar to keep him as dry as possible. By now it was over a week since they had eaten a real meal and she knew she had better find something more than berries this coming Morningday. It also better clear off so she could start a fire.

In the dim first light she did what she could to improve their camp, building a bed of dry leaves and a very crude lean-to of sticks and bigleaves. It was a lot of work because she had only the small knife to cut the sticks with and no way to sew the leaves. At least they would stay dry if it was to start raining again.

As Morningday began in earnest, Oliar was in a worsening way. His arm had turned black and she feared it would have to come off. He would have to receive medicines that day if this arm, nay his very life, were to be preserved. Luray had no choice but to go and seek them, without transport, money, or even clothing. At least her elbow and wrist were feeling better, they were still weak and tender, but as long as she didn't have to do heavy work they would be all right.

Kingsmen

*

Line Commander Revan tried his best to focus his thoughts on the assignment and how he would best carry it out, but it wasn't easy. It seemed crazy that the King wanted the whole West Line mobilized in search of one pair of escaped wizards while the far marches simmered on the edge of rebellion and the power of the Dwarves was resurgent in the west. He had been told no reason for the quest but the recovery of their artifacts. He had been told so little about the wizards also, just that they had escaped from village Korbach heading east, and that they were in the guise of an old man and comely maiden.

He wanted to know what he was up against but Kovinga, Chief Counselor of the Armed Services, had not been a fount of information on eldritch forces. The best he could do was recommend a tamed sorcerer who roomed with the king's acrobats on the other side of the palace. Revan was on his way there now.

Walking across the palace was no mean feat in itself, it was in three sections sprawled around the Plaza of State in the center of Kobal. Each section was walled and contained many smaller private plazas and courtyards, innumerable wings and passages, halls up to four stories in height, outbuildings, turrets, garrets and dungeons. Parts of it were

nearly a century old, each succeeding king had added to it without plan or purpose. The Section of State was the oldest, once it was the whole palace, in fact the whole town back when this was near the mouth of the river. Now it housed the main audience chamber, the council halls and the bureaucrat's warrens. It was the most imposing, and it made him feel important just to walk thru it. The residency was reached by a bridge that spanned the palace walls and Hiremouth Promenade, one of the four main streets of the greater new city that stretched for blocks in all directions. The residency was a compound in itself with the King's inner palace in the center of a complex of private gardens and servant's barracks, supply barns and other parts of the king's domestic needs.

The area he sought was a pile of lesser buildings against the far wall. Turleet lived in a third floor turret overlooking the jumbled roofs of the residency and some commoner's shacks outside the palace walls. His quarters were what Revan expected for a sorcerer, cages of vermin lined the walls beneath shelves of large and dusty scrolls, the tables were covered with jars and other unintelligible implements, a caldron bubbled and spat in an oversized fireplace. Turleet himself was old beyond counting, as ugly as death and completely devoid of pleasantries.

"Yeah, I'm Turleet, What do you want?"

"I need to search for a pair of escaped wizards in the guise of an old man and a comely maiden, what should I expect

from them?"

"Oh I'll tell you what you can expect from them," he answered to Revan's inquiries. "They'll change shape on you for one thing, the old goat will appear a young bull the next time you see them, the maiden might be a crone. There's cases where a wizard turned himself into a keda, most Elves and Goblins are wizards, all Balrogs are. They'll know your thoughts, a master can control your thoughts."

"What about their weapons?" Revan asked.

"Do not allow them to use their weapons. The eldritch weapons are invincible. There are magic swords, magic arrows and magic eyes, most evil ones will have all of those. They can cause stars to fall upon your head or the earth to open beneath your feet. Most can throw fire, even I can throw fire though I would only do so in service of the King."

"All you are telling me is to fear them, what can I do to defeat them?"

"They get their power from the lesser moon, beware when it is high, take action when it is underground. It is still effective when Kortrax is high though the lesser moon hides in His glare. I can give you a chart that predicts its whereabouts at all times." He went to a shelf and blew dust off some papers that he then looked thru. He continued talking.

"When you are confronted with them, watch them at all times. They cannot work their magic when there are eyes upon them. Do not allow their skin to touch yours, especially

a she-wizard, and whatever you do, don't ever, ever, allow yourself or any of your men to join in union with a she-wizard for you will certainly remain under her power for the remainder of your natural life and your soul for eternity beyond. If you bed her even once, all your sons by any woman will be cowards and all your daughters by any woman will be whores." Revan knew about that, he was convinced that fate befell any who mated with any Nymph, not just their sorceresses.

Turleet had found the paper he sought, it was fairly fresh for these quarters, unstained and pliable. It was a calendar for the current year, with parts of each week marked off with crude arrows to indicate when Onchegeela was high. Revan accepted it without a word and rolled it to put in his shoulder pouch.

Turleet continued his lecture. "They can be defeated if they don't have their weapons, the fire they throw is mortal fire if it doesn't come from a weapon. If they have their weapons, all is lost, get away if you can, if they allow you I should say. If you can capture their weapons it is possible to use them against their makers if you know the right spells. I might be able to make them work if you could get them to me."

"My orders are to retrieve any treasure they have hoarded of any kind," Revan said, "so if I have success, you may get your chance."

"I'll not abandon hope then."

Revan left the palace and Kobal feeling uneasy. If they could change form, how was he ever to find them? All he could do would be to round up all strangers. On the near and south marches he might do that, the far west would be plunged into bloody conflict if he tried and all the locals would welcome the Dwarven legions that would certainly come riding in to restore order.

If he was to find them, how would he capture them? To find their treasures he would have to capture and interrogate them. Perhaps he would have to follow them? Perhaps he would need magical assistance?

He rode on into Dusksleep to make it back to his garrison the same week. The garrison was really a permanent fortress in the inner west central part of the kingdom. It was a place of a certain rough splendor, thick soaring walls and turrets of roughly dressed stone, a commodious drill court, and a commanding view of the western marches from its tower. It was already a century old, built when men from the Old Lands first pushed the Dwarves back into the western hills as the Sea of Reeds began to recede. It looked even older, having been built to the plans of the Old Lands. A half-completed stable lent an air of ruin to the site, making it look even more like the Old Lands. The sear plain of the area, nearly bare of trees for miles, gave it an austerity that befitted its military bearing. He drew strength from it, as if the great warriors of ancient times were with him now. The Great Sun

knew he would need them to face the force from their times. Nothing like that had been seen in these lands since they were settled. His own quarters were in the upper part of the main keep and there he went for a few hours of fitful sleep while Onchegeela was high in the sky.

Thru Nightday he held council in the command center that was below his quarters and above the keep's main hall. By torchlight they made plans to conduct a search of all their territory. The two hundred fifteen men under his command were the entire military presence west of the capital. He had to leave at least a token force at the garrison, and at least another thirty five to keep a lid on the trouble in the far west. Revan would take two more squads and their chiefs and set up a command center in village Korbach. They would watch the village in case the wizards returned and question the residents at length. Every other officer would take a squad and go house to house thru every village and ask for signs of the fugitives, any suspicious strangers or evidence of magic. It would take at least two weeks to do so, but seemed the only way to turn up anything.

4. The Farm

Luray left the forest by going back the way they entered. On the way there was a brief cloudburst, but as she came out onto the open range Kortrax broke thru and flooded the countryside with light.

Before her was an endless expanse of grazing and crop land, with no real horizon in the hazy, flat distance. The nearest homestead was a half mile away across the fields and easily visible in this land without hill or dale. Three people labored in the fields between here and the buildings, leading her to believe it was a clan home or a large family. These families on the newest edge of the kingdom were rumored to be quite straight-laced and might be quite aghast at her nakedness. There didn't seem to be anything she could do about it however, so she set out across the fields to them.

They noticed her approach long before she was close enough to speak with them. For the last few minutes they all stopped their work and leaned on their hoes watching her with frank and open-mouthed stares.

"Be you a wood Nymph come to seduce us?" the grizzle-bearded elder called. His accent was thick with old tongue and she tried to imitate it as best she could.

"No, just a traveler beset by bandits in the fens."

"What were you doing there? Only fools would travel those fens."

"But in village Kuthreim we know that not." Kuthreim was a village across the mouths of both rivers in the next kingdom. She knew its name but little of it, it was unlikely these people knew any more.

"You have traveled far."

They were quiet another minute while she finished closing the distance between them. "Come inside and clothe yourself before you try to tell your tale or I'll not be responsible for the behavior of my sons toward you."

"Surely I won't be more roughly used than I was at the hands of those bandits," she showed them her burns, scrapes and bruises.

"You've borne up remarkably well in that case," one of the young men said.

"Remarkably well; if a village girl hadn't died in the struggle," the elder said, "she would have killed herself afterward."

It was obvious she shouldn't have volunteered that information, the only thing to do now was try to find a way out of this corner. "I've had a week to lament my situation already. It's not just for myself I live, but my aged father lies grievously injured in the wood and I must care for him."

"Commendable sentiments."

He was leading the way toward the house. As they got closer she noticed he made a show of averting his eyes from her. They crossed a dusty farmyard and approached a large

but ramshackle house built of shaved logs. There was a huge chimney, a malodorous outhouse and several sheds. Puss worms seethed over a vile heap of slaughtering offal and ythith crawled unchecked over the harvest piles.

Once they entered the structure the smell was, if anything, worse. It was plain that any food consumed here was moldy and rancid, personal cleanliness was considered effete, and some or all family members presumably used the dirt floor instead of the outhouse for liquid waste. They passed a kitchen where a pair of scruffy girls worked over a crusty caldron. The man led on to a stairway. At the top of the stairway was a dim central room, in that an enormously fat woman sat in the midst of a mound of sewing.

She started to berate her mate as she saw him ascend the steps, then screamed as Luray became visible. Her language became even more abusive, accusing him of every debased form of adultery and hedonsim an uneducated mind could think of. The man tried to tell her what was really happening but she gave him no time. Luray saw her try to get up and noticed that she could not. The man shouted that he was going to give her some of Alotta's clothes but she never stopped her yelling the whole time.

They entered a bedroom where four wooden boxes held leaves covered with blankets that should have been part of the pile of sewing outside. Inside a large chest were a collection of girl's shifts, one of which was large enough to fit her. It was rough, ill fitting and a little ragged but clearly the best

woman's clothing available in the house. He tried to offer her some other article to bind around her chest but this she refused, the shift was tight enough already.

"It is so kind of you to provide this help," she said above the racket his gross mate was still making in the center hall, "And I shall surely repay you as soon as I am able."

"Alotta will not be needing this dress any more. She's married off to a prosperous clan five miles east of here."

"You have more daughters."

"Why yes, that is true."

"And they shall have it back and more, but now it is most urgent that I find a physician as soon as possible for my father lies dying in the wood."

"There is none for a dozen miles."

"Then a dozen miles I must go."

"Never, we shall go into the wood and pick up your father with the cart. I'll send a son for the healer."

"All our money was taken by the bandits."

"They wouldn't be bandits now would they if they hadn't made off with it?"

"I mean there is no way we can repay you."

"Young lady, I am but a simple farmer and I know my home is rough and my people crude, but I'm not so simple of mind that I don't know when I'm in the presence of my betters even when they arrive unclothed across the fields. You try to speak like a simple country girl and well you do for the benefit of my family, but I hear the breeding beneath it. You

may be naked and ravaged but yet you are washed, your hair is soft and free of parasites. You can't fool one who has been to the capital as easily as those who have never been beyond the village market."

His wife was still screaming as they went back thru her hallway. He tried to tell her what was happening but it was apparent that words flowed only outward from her.

"If I may be so bold I would say it appears you don't have the best of relationships with her."

"Oh it's just that the twichrots have taken her ears and she doesn't like to admit it. Maybe she likes to let the world know that her tongue is still as sharp as ever. It's been rough for her this last decade."

"That would be rough."

"There's more than that, but let's not trouble you with it."

The young men had come into the house and were chattering with the girls about Luray. "Enough of that," the father said, "remember her father. Chubat, get the cart and empty it. Chilliiss, you run next door and get their little keda, we'll need him in the woods. Chofa, you get on the road to fetch Shaman Volyen. Don't let him refuse, tell him there's a nobleman injured in the wood. Ride our keda, let Volyen ride him back if he will, you walk unless he has his own keda.

His youngsters got in motion, all but the younger girl, Chartor, who was just over a decade in age. Chilliiss, the older girl, was about two decades. Chubat was the younger

son, he was probably nearing three decades of age, Chofa was nearly Luray's own apparent age.

Luray followed Chubat out to clean the cart. It was a two-wheeled stake-side last used for hauling dung. When Luray also picked up a hoe, favoring the uninjured arm, and helped scrape out the cart, he was aghast.

"You need not bother with this filth work."

"It's quite all right," she said, "he called us nobles only for the benefit of the medicine man. We are millers by trade and not strangers to farm work."

"One would think you look much too fine for a miller's daughter."

She laughed, "I think I look a standard field girl right now, though my own attire is hardly finer than this." It was plain without any embellishments, but Luray was thankful it was reasonably clean and free of pests.

"Were you a daughter on any farm around here you would be the talk of the village."

"Maybe we should stay here if that be the case. In truth, I don't know how we can go anywhere with my father the way he is, if he lives at all."

"Surely you will be welcome here as long as he requires."

"I'm grateful for that," she said, but wondered how she could accustom herself to this environment.

They were already done with the cart before Chilliiss

even reached the next farmhouse. There was little more to do but wait for her to return with a very small keda, a light and thin eight-leg no more than forty decades old who looked too small to move even the unloaded cart. Even so it was soon hitched up and the three of them set off with Luray across the fields. The father told Chartor to stay and take care of her mother when the younger girl came running out after them.

They all walked, Chilliiss leading the keda and cart, Luray leading the way. Chubat walked beside her and chatted in spite of the hostile glances from his father. It took a little more than half an hour to get back to the forest with the cart slowing them down. Once in the wood progress slowed even more. There were few paths they could get the cart thru and for awhile she wasn't sure of the way back to where Oliar lay. She hoped he had not fallen prey to something while she was away. It wound up taking another hour to get back to Oliar. He was unconscious at the time, and revived slightly when they reached him.

"I've brought help," Luray told him. "This is..." Luray realized she didn't know the father's name.

"Chaldot 'im Klidoreen, sir."

"He's a farmer right outside this wood. We're taking you back to his house. His oldest son has already gone to fetch a healer."

Oliar mumbled something, but even Luray couldn't tell what it was.

"You don't trouble yourself sir, your girl has already told

us all about the bandits and what happened. We're going to get you up into this cart now. We'll be gentle as baby talrins, you just rest easy."

They wrestled the cart into a position as close to him as they could and made it as soft as possible with a thick layer of leaves. She was glad they wouldn't put him directly on the dung. When they lifted him up he issued a mighty screech and then lapsed into unconsciousness again.

"That arm's powerfully bad," Chaldot told her. "He needs to have it off you know."

"I feared as much," Luray said, and couldn't fight back the tears. She let them come, and went on, "I should have come to your house last Morningday when this all happened. He shouldn't have tried to defend me, they might not have beat him so if he had just let them have their way."

"That may be, but he did no more than any father would do."

She knew she was laying it on a little thick, but because they were so much under this man's power it was good to get as far into his good graces as possible.

They were another hour and a half getting him back to the house. By now it was well past the time of mid-Morningday meal, but none said anything about it. In truth Luray was more in favor of eating the wild foods of the forest than what might come from Chaldot's kitchen.

By the time they returned to the house, the wife had

somehow managed to get down the stairs. She wasn't screaming any more, in fact she tried to sound soothing as they brought Oliar in and laid him on a pallet in the room next to the kitchen. This was probably the boy's room. There were two beds in it and a lot of dismembered farm equipment. The smell of urine was strong, along with a faint but unmistakable smell of stale male sex. He groaned as they laid him down but did not regain consciousness.

"To me I think the smart thing would be to have that off now while he's not fully with us. No doubt the pain of the cutting would be no more than what it's giving him now."

"I can't bear to do it," Luray said.

"Still without child are you, woman?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

"That be as bloody a task as this will," he said, leading her to believe he didn't suspect they were Elvish. He straightened up from looking at it. "Chilliiss, get me the baling cinch strap would you. Chubat, where's the good saw?"

"It's back to its owner, we only borrowed it you know."

"Yes I know, though what good it does him I know not. Then where is the old one?"

"Right here." It was lying on the floor under a pile of tools and rags.

"Filthy as an Old One's dung too. Well, we'll need it into the fire, along with the good cleaver."

Luray didn't really believe they were so calmly going to

do this. She didn't believe she was going to let them, but she could see they were right. The arm was grey as well as black, bubbles of putrefaction ran beneath the skin. In a few minutes the girl was back with the cinch strap, soon after that Chaldot was back with the tools.

He put the strap on far up the arm, explaining that they couldn't leave any of the rot with him.

"This man fought on after the arm was broken, fought for a long time. A man with strength like that will recover from this, though he be not young. He be in very good condition for one of his age, you be right when you say you work for a living, this is not the body of a man rich and idle."

A few quick chops with the cleaver, a few strokes with the saw and the arm was off. Thru it Oliar moaned in his sleep. When the torch was applied to the stump he shrieked again and flailed mightily, then collapsed.

"Has he died!?" Luray exclaimed.

Chaldot put his hand to Oliar's neck. "No, he lives, his heart is strong. My guess, he will live should Volyen get here or not. His fever is great however, he will not wake this day, maybe not this week."

Luray went to him while Chaldot took the arm and threw it on the offal pile. She sat beside him with her hand on his burning forehead, sobbing quietly and letting the tears fall on him. In the kitchen she heard Chaldot shouting the whole story to his wife, trying to make her hear what was going on.

Even at that volume he had to repeat and repeat. If she was that deaf she was just reading lips and he could have done just as well with no sound at all.

She stayed with Oliar thru the remainder of Morningday except for a couple hours when she helped out in the kitchen. In that time she was able to get it cleaned up quite a bit. The girls had never had any training in the kitchen arts and had made up their own rules probably since they were very young. They were fairly willing to listen to her, but thought she was putting them thru a lot of extra work and trouble having to wash everything. They also knew nothing about the storage of food and had left it open so everything was full of vermin. It was her desire to throw it all out and start over but it was plain to see that would break them. Letting them know that they would have more food for themselves if they didn't let the ytith eat it all made some sense to them, and they were in favor of having more food. She sifted thru what they would eat for dinner, picking out the rot and the droppings.

5. The Healer's Warning

It was just before dinner when Chofa arrived with Volyen the healer. Volyen had a fine carriage bedecked with brilliant plumes with Old Nordic prayer runes all around the wheels. He was dressed in a robe no less splendid, he had long white hair and beard, silky enough to make Oliar's look like a farmer's. In spite of that, his face and walk showed he was still possessed of strength and vigor. He had dark penetrating eyes and an imperious air all out of proportion to a village shaman.

"Where is the gentleman who had the misfortune to be stricken in a place such as this?"

"In here..." Luray said and shut up as his glare became fixed on her.

"Do you not let your elder's speak?"

"He lies dying in the other room, could he but speak I would be delighted."

"Forgive me your highness," he bowed, "I was unaware that you were the daughter. In those rags one could mistake you for one of the household girls."

"These are good people sire, they have been very kind to us, we were robbed and came here with nothing, not even clothing. They have my fullest gratitude and trust."

"Very well," he was resigned, "let us see your father then."

He went into the other room. Luray could see it was required to play the part of nobles. This fool thought of the peasants as beasts and she doubted he would have treated them at all.

"I see you've removed the arm," he said, bending to examine it closely. "'Tis a pity it was his right."

Luray would never mention he was left handed, Oliar did all he could to disguise that fact for it only added to suspicion. "Chaldon, the man of the house, did sire."

"I see. It's as clean a job as is ever done on a draft animal. Hopefully it's done him no more harm, though it's a shame we couldn't have saved the arm. If I wasn't delayed by kingsmen looking for escaped wizards I might have been here in time."

A huge rock suddenly sat down in Luray's stomach, she fought the urge to faint. She was glad his eyes were on her father and not on her to see her reaction to those words. Summoning all her self control she let that pass and said, "It was running with petrification sir."

"Yes, well, this fever's going to be the death of him."

"Do you have anything for it?" She asked.

"Well, I do have something and I will be giving him some." He had finished his examination of the stump of Oliar's arm and gone on to his leg. While he did he said, "It's good for you I know better than to think a pair of wizards would be seeking my services, because you two answer the description the kingsmen gave. In spite of the rags you wear, even old eyes like mine can see you are a maiden of great

beauty and your father is strong for his age. Bear in mind that the king's men will not be as educated as I and are likely to be a lot more suspicious. Mind what you say till you get your seals back, even if the king himself knows you by sight, you might not last long enough to see him with such as that about in the countryside."

"I'll take that to heart," she said, trying to retain an outward calm while her heart hammered and sweat broke forth from her brow. She waited while he dug into his pouch, then asked, as casually as she could, "What have these wizards done?"

"I assure you the king's soldiers did not confer with me, but the mere possession of eldritch artifacts, powers or knowledge is a capital offense in this kingdom as you must surely know."

"I know that of course," she said. She had to, it was common knowledge all thru these lands. She knew it better than most as it was the very definition of their lives. "I just wondered how a wizard might be found out?"

"That is not of my knowledge or concern, young lady, I do not stop to chat with royal soldiers." He looked up at her as he said that. He must have noticed her agitation, though he said only, "It is not wise to even ask such questions in this land."

He gave Oliar a powder, forcing it between his lips with a few drops of wine. Oliar eventually got it down and deliriously mumbled something of which the only intelligible

words were, "Faster, we have to go faster."

"He's reliving when the bandits beset us, when we were trying to escape from them. We had a cart and pair." She knew it was impossible not to hear the fear in her voice now. She hoped he would think it came from reliving the experience.

"That's to be expected. He might say anything with this much fever. Someone should stay with him at all times, will you be sleeping in here with him?"

"I don't know, I imagine so, but it is the boy's room."

"I wouldn't move him. You should stay with him. Here is more medicine," he said, handing her a small pouch of soft leather. "Give it to him upon waking, at lunch, and before sleep until you have used it up, just a pinch in some wine each time. It should last two weeks."

He then went to work on the leg, splinting it tighter than Luray had done and padding it with some additional rags. He did not move it from its position, saying it was straight enough. Luray stood by, trying not to wring her hands with worry. But she should be worried, she thought, her father is on the brink of death. The knowledge that the king pursued them already only intensified her agitation. All she could hope for was that he really believed a wizard would never seek his services, if he actually knew the truth of ancient powers he could very well be suspicious. She wondered if he was suspicious, would he have treated them anyway? He hardly seemed the type.

When he finished his ministrations, he stood up and said, "Now I understand that you have been plundered by bandits who have left you with nothing. Because of that I know you cannot pay for my services. You might know that few in these villages can, but I hope you might see fit to remember me when you are back in your own provinces. In that hope I will leave you with a card. Am I correct in assuming you can read and write?"

"Yes, I can myself," she answered truthfully, though she would seldom admit as much to peasants. "We have several fine scholars at our court."

"Good. I don't mean to be rude, but I must depart, there is nowhere I would stay in this village and it is a two hour ride back to my own. If he was up to the journey I would take you both with me and not subject you to this lodging."

"We'll be fine," Luray told him.

With no further ceremony he was gone, saying not one word to anyone on his way out. Luray was very relieved to have him gone. He was a very strange person. She wished she could be sure that he really didn't suspect them, but the feeling wouldn't go away. He did suspect, she was almost sure of it and she greatly feared that he would be reporting them as soon as he was able. How soon it would be before anything would come of it she had no idea. No one could get here from the capital before the dark fell, whether there were men closer she didn't know. Maybe there weren't? Maybe they wouldn't

ride during darkness? Maybe he would tell the village elders here, but then why hadn't he said something to the man of this household? Maybe he really didn't suspect? Maybe there was a reward?

All thru dinner she was pretty poor company because she was so distracted thinking about that, as well as worrying about Oliar. Chofa did his best to entertain her in spite of his father's glower. Luray didn't want to put him off, true he was a bumpkin, even a notch lower in education and wealth than the villagers she was used to, but he meant well and would be attractive if cleaned up a little. No doubt he had very little chance to meet girls here.

"Why don't you leave the girl alone?" Chaldon finally said. "Her father lies on death's doorstep in the other room, she's been raped and beaten by bandits practically outside our door, would you think she's in a mood for courting?"

"I wasn't meaning to court her, I was just trying to be civil."

"You're well beyond civil son."

"It is true, but she be so much more than the village girls, I hunger for the tales of other lands and peoples. Surely I would be teasing any boy that came across the rivers?"

"Not with eyes so full as yours are of her."

"Please, I don't mind," Luray said, "I'm sorry I'm such poor company tonight, it's true I'm somewhat distracted. Glad I am to get my mind off it, even a little, even for a short time. Your sons are fine men, I'm flattered to have their interest. I

only hope you don't begrudge me what has happened thru no fault of my own?"

"I can allow different customs from other lands. If I may be so bold, may I ask what you will do with the issue of that evil union?"

"I believe there will be none for I was not at my fertile time."

"May Kortrax grant that be true."

She helped out in the kitchen again after the meal, cleaning up and working on the food bins a little more. The wife had stayed in the kitchen thru the whole meal and supervised the whole operation to no avail. When it was done the whole family joined in the project of getting her back up the stairs. Luray was sure the steps were going to break under their combined weight, but they were made of split logs each the better part of a foot in diameter.

Noonsleep was long in this household, as long as any of the darktime sleeps. While the others were still asleep Oliar woke up. She gave him water and a few bits of rinko that weren't moldy, then told him about the healer and her suspicions. He wanted to get up and leave right then, but he was too weak, his leg was unusable and he could not move the stump of his arm without mortal agony. They would just have to take their chances that nothing would happen until at least the next Morningday.

When Afternoon began, she helped out in the kitchen again, the girls were already getting the message about keeping things clean. By the time a batch of nleets and rinko patters were cooked they had cleaned out all the food bins and closed them up. All the garbage was carried outside, and with a little washing and sweeping up, the room might even come to resemble a kitchen.

"Chilliiss, did you do the cooking this morning?" Chaldon asked.

"Not entirely father, Miss Luray helped us."

"It would seem she's doing the world of good. Pay attention to her advice."

"We are sir."

"You done well in the kitchen, a man would make a good catch of you, in spite of what's happened."

"I'm pleased you think so." This seemed to be a change in attitude on his part from the day before. Maybe as long as a girl could cook he could forgive her lost hymen?

There was a lot to do around their homestead. They had a small herd of lentosaurs that had to be moved. The crops were full of weeds and various ytith infestations. Luray continued with the attempt to make the kitchen something they could eat from without fear. She dug deep enough to find there was a real hard-pan floor under all the filth that had rotted to top soil. The offal pile in the yard was almost twice as big by the time she was done, but long before the middle of

Afternoonday the kitchen looked no worse than that of any other peasant household.

Oliar began eating as the day wore on, and drank a goodly amount. He took his medicine with water, since these people had no wine. Either the medicine or his natural strength were working. He still couldn't sit up, couldn't really talk and wasn't totally aware of his surroundings, but she knew he was improving. It must have been the way he was breathing or his color.

6. The Barn

There was no real mid-day meal here, people came in for a nibble of fruit or bread and then went back out. Luray went out to look around the yard while Oliar was sleeping. She found one barn was abandoned and useless, another was filled with dried ribbonleaves that were probably used for lentosaur feed during the dry season. She had only just gone in there when Chofa came in after her.

"One might almost think you were looking for something in particular?" he asked her.

She wondered if he was going to jump her, and just stood and looked at him for a couple seconds. He wasn't going to move on her right away. "No, nothing in particular. I guess I shouldn't be poking around like this. Please forgive me."

"You need not forgiving. I'm surprised you have any interest in our place."

"It's true there's nothing here I'm not used to."

"You're not a farm girl," he said.

"Like I said, we're millers, I'm very familiar with farms and farmers. We have a garden of our own back home. We have no livestock, but I've had plenty of friends with beasts."

"What's it like where you're from?" he asked, "I've never been deep in the fens, much less to the other side."

She knew very little about it, but relayed the rumors she had heard in hopes they would suffice. "It's king Shaddom's

realm. He's a just king but pompous. He loves the merchants and leaves the farmers alone. His soldiers have the greatest finery but are untried in battle. His court is in the countryside, there are no large towns but those on the seacoast."

"What are the people like?"

"Like anywhere I should think. There are a lot of Dwarves about still, little or no purebread Elves though."

"There are no Dwarves or Elves in Doeslon's realm, he would never permit it. What are the religions there?"

"Kortraxian, wood spirits. People aren't as concerned with the spirit world as you seem to be here."

"Deeper in the kingdom they have little respect. Here we are recent in the new lands and have many of the old ways about us. Can you read?"

"Yes, can you?"

"Not I, not anyone of this family. What can one learn from books?"

"Everything there is to know can be learned from books if one has the money to buy them and time to read them. All I ever seem to read are the notes and records of the business."

"It must make you rich."

"No," she laughed. "Oh maybe you might think us rich but there is more we must buy. My own clothing was little better than this, our house and shop is as big as your house, but only one room on the upper floor is for living in."

She sat down in the dried ribbonleaves. They were very soft, they should have used them for bedding rather than the

leaves they were using.

"Would you mind if I sat with you?" he asked.

"This is your home, I wouldn't dare to tell you where you might sit and might not."

"I would not want you to think I have no respect for you."

"I'm flattered that you have any concern at all for my wishes." She was worried he would think it was his right to take her just for being in a place where he could. "Too many men there are who believe that women have no thoughts of their own. They take us and never have a single thought that we may have some feelings in regard to who might have us and who might not."

"I've heard of them. I would not be one of them."

"The way your father talks, half the girls in your village must kill themselves if that kind of man is as common here as they are in my village."

"He knows not the ways of our village, or much of the village girls either. He hears what other fathers say. If there be a girl in this village that would fight a man's advances, much less take her own life afterward, I've not heard of such."

"It is useless to fight."

"I can understand why you could feel that way. I know they hunt in packs like some kind of vermin, I know they would not dare take on a healthy girl alone. I also understand how you must feel about your father."

"I'm filled with joy today for I can see he is starting to recover. It will be a time yet but I'm sure he will be well

again."

"But without an arm."

"Oh, for sure," she almost forgot that for these people that was a permanent problem. Oliar would have his arm back in a decade once they were able to get to their cache. True they would have to stay out of sight while it grew, or maybe go back to the great wizard's keep at Kassidor.

"Where are your thoughts?" he asked.

"Wondering what he will do with only one arm. Knowing that it matters so little. He's already of an age where the heavy work is getting too much. I will just have to do more of it."

"Yea, and I think also you are of an age where you are not a child any more. A man to help you might be wise."

She looked at him, no doubt he thought himself a likely candidate. If he was to wash she might consider him for a little diversion while they stayed here. Even if she wasn't a wizard's child, the chance of a permanent relationship was nil.

"There is truth in what you say," she began, "but it pains me so to make a choice. Whichever of my suitors I choose, the others will be hurt and I do not wish to do that. I do love all of them in fact, and am very loath to give any of them up."

"So in truth you are not unsought?"

She made a face at him. "Surely you didn't think so. I try not to be vain and boastful, but I do have a mirror and know why it is that having a man is no problem for me. In truth I can have my pick of them."

"So I can have not the smallest particle of hope," he said

with great dejection.

She sighed. Sometimes she was too honest. Perhaps she could be more so. "I will be most blunt with you, in our land it is the custom to wash oneself, especially when courting. The smell of dung, dirt and sweat is not romantic to our nostrils. To impart an even greater helping of truth, were it not for that I could be quite friendly with you while we are here. I find you attractive enough, kind enough and personable enough."

"Chaldon, my father, would wonder about our virtue if I had to bathe to court you."

"If that be important to you, be warned I am not a girl of high virtue. Even if I was, I would still prefer clean men."

"I'll keep that in my mind."

He had actually backed off during this conversation, but it wasn't when she mentioned his odors, it was when she said she wasn't a virgin. That was probably important to him, or if not to him, at least to his father. In his religion it was probably a sin to marry such a girl.

"I must get back to the fields now, the others will come looking for me and think the worst if they find us in here."

She made no reply to that. She wanted to say something about how that could hardly be the worst but it wouldn't have gone over well. Maybe he wasn't interested in a girl who wasn't a virgin? Maybe he wasn't at all interested in a girl he couldn't have for a sworn mate? She couldn't believe he was

really silly enough to think he would have her for such, but that would only prove he didn't suspect anything about them.

Afternoonday wore on. The wife never came downstairs that day but had the girls run up to serve her. Luray took the lead in making the family supper that evening and drew pleased comments from them all. Chubat even said she had wrought a miracle in their kitchen.

The yard of the house faced west, Luray sat on the firewood pile watching the darkening sky. Kingsmen hadn't come during the light, they probably wouldn't come during the dark either. Cynd would not be rising till late in Dawnsleep, the lesser suns were approaching each other in the sky. Chilliiss was with her. She talked about the keeping of house, professed an overwhelming hatred for her mother, and asked her about boys.

"What age are you?" Luray asked her.

"Two and ten I think. Happy I would be if I could do figures. Only with trouble can I count."

"This Nightday I'll make you a numbers chart and show you how to use it," Luray said. "I should be a teacher to stay here."

"You are a teacher, look what you've done for our kitchen."

"It's only common knowledge your mother should have told you."

"She knows not as much herself. But tell me of men. How

does one go about capturing their hearts?"

"Tis the simplest thing in the world. There are only three things that they want. Tis beauty that opens the door to their hearts, something you will have in some abundance before many years pass. The use of your body is something they crave, it's said that virtue is its own reward, but mind you that may be its only reward. Lastly, and this is what makes them stay till the cold ground covers them up, they need their frail and fragile egos cherished. Make them feel important, strong, wise and potent and they will be like baby ingletors on their mother's back."

"The first is fate, the third is easy, but the second is something my father would object and my mother would denounce."

"That they may, and if you intend to marry as soon as possible, you might wait till then. If there are no others around who are giving of love, you might get away with it. With some caution your family need not know. They do not follow you to that glade by the stream or into your lover's hut. One need not stay the sleep, a half hour after lunch, a quick meeting at the edge of the fields, they will not know why your step springs a little more, they will say that sparkle in your eye is a sign of good health. All you must know is that the weeks midway between the weeks of blood is when the seed will take root. Avoid that and you may make sport to your heart's content."

"Do you?"

"How would I know if not? In truth you will meet many men who will not give you the choice. With two fine brothers you might seek some revenge if you are exceptionally ill-used but when you are in it, fight will often be useless, many girls die for their efforts, in your land as well as in mine."

"I am struck with horror," Chilliiss said.

"As am I, yet still it happens."

"How will I know when the right man comes?"

"How will I?" Luray answered. "I can't know that till it happens and so far I think it hasn't. Maybe it is that too many are right, for there are several that I love. I wish I could keep them all."

She thought it best to tell the same story to every member of the family in case they compared notes. In truth she could not keep any man, many times she wished it wasn't so. Her dream was that sometime she would meet another like herself, maybe she already had but each was afraid to tell the other. It took more trust than anyone could muster these days to tell someone you were possessed of ancient science. To do so was handing your life to the other and asking him to change his life forever in case an errant slip of the tongue should send her to oblivion.

Chofa came out to join them. "Heavy talk for a youngster such as you?" he asked Chilliiss.

"I must get knowledge when I can. In ten more years another traveler might come, but might not."

"True that is," he said, "But that's enough now, your

mother needs tending."

"For sure?" the youngster said with exaggerated sarcasm.

"If there is truth in that," Luray told him, "fine, but if you just intend to drive her off, slow. The evening is very young, there is time for all things. With great joy I remember when I was about to become a woman. A very precious time is this for the first steps determine the direction of a journey."

"Yes, but also consider that we sometimes like in our friends what we despise in our relatives." He stared intently at her when he said that, intent that she get the meaning behind his words.

"Yes, and sometimes we also forget that each body has a separate soul within." She stared at him, hoping he would get at least one of the meanings of her words.

"I think I have all I can absorb at one time," Chilliiss said, seeming to understand all the meanings hidden in those words. "It's true I must tend to other's needs before I can sleep. Good sleep to you both," she said, but clicked her tongue at Chofa mischievously, proving that she knew his intent.

He waited till she was in the house and then said, "I suppose you're making a wanton wench of her?"

"And why not? She'll be a beauty, you know of that. Would you rather she just tease the boys around her till they take her against her will?"

"Better that than the village tart."

"Is that what you think of me?"

"I know not what to think. Having you here is difficult for me, for Chubat also I believe, though he stands off for my benefit."

She turned toward him, "But I notice you have washed, that means you wish to have me?"

"I wish it and I fear it. I came here to attempt such but now I fear I must not for I will fall too heavy in love and my heart will break when you leave."

"That is a chance you take. Have you ever been with a woman before?"

"There are other wenches about, and tarts."

"And what of your heart then?"

"They are not the same. You look not the part, you act not the part. You act so very unlike any girl I have ever known. Your charms tempt, yet casually. I know it is not a business with you, but easier it would be for me were it. I could pay the price in copper and keep my heart. With you I must pay with my soul."

"Perhaps it is better if you didn't pay. I have no desire to hurt you, I will not pretend affection beyond friendship and sport. You have been too kind to us for me to use you as a toy."

There was a period of silence between them. Darkness was nearly total now so that when Narrulla rose out of the dusk it was the thinnest sliver. After a long while, many minutes, he put his arm around her shoulders.

"Is your mind settled now?"

"No, more confused than ever am I, but too strong is your call to resist."

She pulled away. "I don't mean to call you. True it has been many days since I tumbled in love; and true my hunger is great, but it will not be satisfied at the cost of your pain." She got up and started toward the house.

"No, don't leave. By now it is that any course will give me pain. Do not make me have the pain without the pleasure."

She stopped, wondering what he really meant. For both of them it was a no win situation. "And what of me? No matter what I do now I will eventually win your wrath. Should I refuse you now you will denounce me as a tease, should I take you now you will denounce me when I leave."

"You do not know me. Should you refuse me now it is your decision and shall be respected. Should you leave and take my heart with you, you will do so with my blessing."

She waited before replying, looking into his eyes and trying to read his thoughts. Probably he was sincere, it was a very open and honest speech he'd made already. "I'll try to chance that trust," she said, and sat beside him again. "Enough that I'll chance your acquaintance anyway."

7. Righteous Wrath

Nightday was rather uneventful at this farmstead. Chaldon and the girls stayed upstairs except for a brief period after breakfast. There were various bursts of shouting from the woman of the house and thunderous replies from her mate. Oliar improved a little more. He stayed awake for long periods of time and was coherent enough for her to tell him all about where they were and what she had told these people. He thanked her for her quick wits and tried to figure some way to get them out of there on the very first light.

She spent some time with Chofa and found he might have had her spend all her time with him out in the haybarn. Chubat also wanted to get in on her, to the point where they held a whispered shouting match in the kitchen around midday. She stopped it by saying she'd made her choice and only because of age. Having them fight over her was definitely not in her best interest. It would be a very short time before the father found out what was happening, and it was plain they would be very unwelcome as soon as that happened.

The other side of the problem was that she was getting to like Chofa a lot more than she had anticipated. He might be uneducated, but he wasn't crude and he was most kind and thoughtful. Besides that he was an excellent stud and much more beautiful with his coarse clothing off, so that she did

relent to a second trip to the barn that day.

It was after supper that they returned from that trip. They were both quite joyful and too exuberant, for though they thought they were talking and laughing quietly, they were heard and Chaldot greeted them as they came in thru the farmyard door.

"Tis lucky your mother can't hear you, for what would she think of her son now?"

Chofa said nothing but cast his eyes to the floor.

"And is this how you repay our hospitality?" he spat at Luray.

"I'm sorry that your son is such a fine man that I cannot help but feel warmly toward him."

"I have suspected and now confirmed that you feel warmly toward any man that would lower his trousers for you."

"Why? Because I can go on living after being raped?"

He ignored that, instead turned to Chofa. "Do you think you are going to make a life with this woman?"

"I know I shall not. She has been very honest with me and had me think hard on what would become of me and my heart when she must leave. I thought and decided a single feast is better than none at all."

"And how do you show respect for your family and your mother's religion that way?"

"I thought not of that," he confessed, "I thought to go on the sly."

"You're not the slyest I've known. Your rousting and giggling out there was a scandal. Your sisters heard you, Lord only knows what they think you were doing. Your brother heard you and he no doubt knows."

"We should have gone somewhere farther."

"You'll go nowhere else. Young wench you can stay away from all my children, stay with your poor father. Son of mine, while you live in this house you will have respect for your mother's Church and respect for your virgin sisters. I know you, and your brother too, go whoring in the village and I can't stop that, though it pains me to my death. But here under your mother's roof I cannot abide it."

"Respectfully sir, it was not whoring."

"You were playing norts out there am I to believe!"

"If not love it's something very like it," Luray said.

"Lust, pure heathen lust is what it was. None can talk of love till they've made a home together, raised a child together. I'll not waste more breath on the foolishness of youth." With that he turned and went back to the stairs.

Luray could not resist putting a finger to her nose in the direction of his retreating back. Chofa doubled in silent mirth.

"Well, I think I must go to my room," he said a little louder than normal conversation.

"And I, I'm sorry I caused you grief," she also said for the benefit of other ears.

They covered their mouths until the mirth passed, then held each other again.

"Why is he so concerned?" she whispered.

"Mother, mother, always it is mother. She thinks herself a priestess in the Kluboeb Ascetics. All pleasures of the flesh are evil to her, this life is but a test for what comes after."

"But does he believe it?"

"Not a twitch, though he says so."

"I don't understand why he keeps her? He's not so aged he can't find another woman."

"Loyalty, maybe the embers of love. She was a fine woman when I was a tyke. I notice the outburst of my father has changed your speech."

"Yeah, that's true. I wanted to sound more like one of you but a lot of good that did me. I hope you aren't mad?"

"No, it becomes you. Really it did seem odd to hear a fine girl such as you speaking with a peasant utter. Could it be you really are of noble lineage?"

"No, we really are millers. We did live in the capital when I was just a babe. That's probably why I talk like a city girl."

They kissed and caressed some more, seeing each other in the light of Narrulla coming in the doorway. She closed her eyes and basked in the pleasure of his touch, then opened them again and saw his face in some other setting, maybe a seafarer or a mountaineer with long curls and a full beard. He could be beautiful she decided.

"Have you ever thought of moving away?" she asked.

"Much. I think of it every Afternoonday when Kortrax flogs me in the fields. I think of it every time I hear of

Mother's Church. I think of it every time a beautiful girl passes by in a fine carriage."

"Then why are you still here?"

"I know not in truth," he sighed. "Someday I will leave but never is it the day."

"What would it take to make it the day?"

"A girl like you beckoning would be more than enough, if that is your question."

As soon as he said that she saw it was an opportunity to use whatever attraction she had to her advantage. "I must go away, after what happened tonight I can't stay under this roof any longer."

"What of your father?"

"We must find a way to take him with us."

"You actually want me to come with you?"

"Yes," she said. "I want you as well as need your help. Even if you don't want to travel with me, would you at least help us get away from here? I know we haven't known each other long enough for you to know, but after this we can't stay past dawn."

"I'd love to travel with you, but it be a big step. I'm needed here too. Can you but stay another week or two?"

"Not after this. Will you help us?"

"I think he would not throw you from the house while you father convalesces."

"I don't care, I cannot stay here but remain apart from you, not after today." She pressed his hands to her again while

she said that. She was able to act that out rather well because there was quite a bit of truth in it. She saw that it had quite a bit of effect on him too. He had a great desire to believe it and probably had no desire to think that she had any other reason for wanting to get away from here.

"At the least I will help you, though I understand not your feelings."

"I think I've spelled them out quite plainly. It would be too much of a tease for me, that, added to the hostility your father has for me now."

"I'm very flattered. But what shall we do?" he asked.

"Put our heads together and figure out a plan."

Kingsmen

**

They must have visited fifteen villages in the last week, each one hotter, smaller and dustier than the one before. One more house and they would finish this one before lunch, with luck they would do two more before this Morningday ended. At the last house on the north side of this village, third officer Talmin reined up his patrol. He dismounted and pounded heavily on the door rather than calling.

A nubile girl opened the door, one just about to enter that brief but intense blossoming that peasant girls were known for. She stood with her mouth agape at the spectacle of four huge kedas standing up in their yard, covered with the brilliant yellow blankets of King Doeslon. On three of them his troops in leather armor sat erect with lances and pikes gleaming like jewels, catching the rays of Kortrax still low in the sky.

"I would speak with the man of the house," Talmin said.

"Yes, I'll get him," the girl almost stammered. She turned and ran back into the house.

He could hear her father mutter as he made his way back to the door a few moments later, "First Chofa runs off with that damn whore and now the army is here, after more taxes no doubt. They could impale me right now and take the whole farm for all the good your brother and I can do working it

alone." He changed his attitude when he got to the door and saw he was speaking to an officer in the king's service. "I be Chaldon the landholder," he said meekly as he could.

It was not Talmin's plan to unnecessarily intimidate the peasants. They could not help what they were, and their willing cooperation could be helpful. "We are here on the trail of some escaped wizards," Talmin said. "They escaped from village Korbach two weeks ago. They were last going about as an old man and a young woman. The man was tall and gaunt, white hair and beard, strong for his age. The woman was blonde and said to be quite comely."

The man's eyes went wide. "They were here! They were just here!" The girl cast an evil eye toward her father, who was nearly sobbing. Perhaps she would not have told of them. "I might have suspected something like this but I was too ignorant," the father continued. "I thought it was just with her charms she bewitched my eldest boy. But had I known.... Of course it had to be, he was a good boy, he wouldn't have run off for such as a simple whore no matter how much beauty she carried."

"They left? When?" Talmin asked.

"Before the dawn light, maybe deep in Dawnsleep, I know not. I awoke this morning to find them, my son, my wagon and my keda also gone."

"Where did they go? Did your son leave any word?"

"No, he snuck out like a tharvish on an egg run. Not like him at all is that. Not like him to be wenching right in the

haybarn either, but that's what she made him do." Talmin was about to say that made no difference to him but the man went on. "They went into the fens I think. That's the direction the tracks go. When you find them don't harm my boy, he's a good boy when he isn't under the spell of that sorceress."

"We thought it was the old man who was the dangerous one?" Talmin asked.

"He's mortally wounded he is. Put his arm on my slaughtering pile, you can see it yourself. It was broken and festering. That's why they came here. They told a tale of being beset by bandits in the wood. I should have known."

"Do not take it so to heart," Talmin said and clapped his shoulder, "there is no way one can know these things, they disguise themselves cleverly as human beings, even an expert often cannot tell."

"But how can we save ourselves?" the peasant asked.

"You've done well. Just show us the tracks they made and we'll go on our way after them."

"Spare my son."

"If we can, though I must warn you he may be so enchanted that he fights us and if he's a strong boy we may not be able to subdue him without harm." Talmin held the man's shoulder as he said that.

"A man he is, a fine man, four decades of age, strong and fair, he was the pride of my house. A curse to the witch who stole him from me. He's not a fighter, he's a kind and gentle boy."

"We will do our best to send him home safe."

He led them around to the farmyard and showed them the wagon tracks that led off across the fields.

"There was much activity here. The tracking will be difficult," one of his men said.

"Only the tracks where we went into the wood to pick them up should go that far. That was right straight that way. It was just a week ago now we did that. Any others would be tracks they made in their flight."

Talmin had heard enough. He didn't want to stay and listen to this man bemoan the loss of his son thru the middle of the day. "That's good. We thank you for your kind cooperation. We would stay but the more we dally the farther they get ahead of us. There may be others along later in the day. If you would tell them what you told us and let them know that Talmin's patrol is in pursuit, that would be helpful."

"I will surely do that."

Talmin dispatched one of his men with the message that they had found a trace of the wizards and were in pursuit. With the other two, he followed the cart track towards the wood. Another son watched them go from where he was working in the field, looking on with a faint hostility. While they rode he heard the girl speak to her father behind them.

"They will kill him you know. They won't even look to see if he intends to fight. They'll kill him in his sleep if that's how they find him."

That was irrational fear talking. Perhaps it would be better

on a mission like this if the king's troops didn't look quite so intimidating. Talmin knew he would not deal with the youth in that manner and would deal harshly with any of his men if they did so.

"Chilliiss I want none of your lip. Has that witch stolen your soul too?"

"No, she has not taken my soul, but she has shown me how to make kitchen work and told me more of what I would know about womanhood in one day than mother has ever taught me."

The last thing they heard before distance swallowed even the shouting was the father's hand cracking across the daughter's face. "That's what you are of a woman little girl. You would be like your sister would you? I should flog you within an inch of your life to purge that evil out of you!"

Talmin followed the tracks right up to the wood, wondering if the children of the house might know more about the situation than the old man did. If so, they weren't being as cooperative. He would rather go back and question them further, but this trail wasn't that cold and should be followed as soon as possible. The thought of trailing a wizard and sorceress with a young man under their power into a dark wood however, had not the least appeal.

8. The Camp

Luray saw that the wood of the fens was dark and damp, but cheerful with the sounds of lumins and takeets. This maze of brooks and channels, sloughs and bogs received the flows of both the Lita and the Lhar where they spilled into the Sea of Reeds. There were a few channels in it big enough for ships to pass from the rivers to the sea, but most of it was a tangled morass of mud, roots, grottos and pools with a few remains of old beaches left behind as the sea slowly retreated.

Their big old keda couldn't get into the tighter spaces, and Luray had to be somewhat devious to get them into areas where they would leave no trail without arousing Chofa's suspicions. Oliar took it well, he was much better this morning. The fever was gone, the arm stump was crusted and the leg was comfortable. He hadn't been enthusiastic about bringing Chofa along with them, but acquiesced when he saw how much help he was and how much equipment he brought. Still it was true they wouldn't be able to keep their fugitive status a secret from him for long, he was just too quick for that. Still Luray wasn't prepared when he asked her....

"Wouldn't it be about time you told me who is after you and why?"

"After me?"

"You or your father or both."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Why would you want to go into this wood to camp? Why do you choose the hardest ground and the thinnest brush to pass over? I know I be not a woodsman but I can tell you wish not to be followed."

She looked at Oliar, he nodded. "You think we can trust him?"

"We have no choice," Oliar said, "the worst he could do is kill us now."

"Why should I do that?"

"How dearly do you love your king?" Oliar asked him.

"I'm a law-abiding subject if that be your meaning, is it that you are some kind of criminals?"

"No, we really are millers, I have not lied to you about that," Luray told him, "but we do know some noble persons."

"The truth is we were being used to carry a message from King Shaddom," Oliar said, "by way of some lesser nobles of course, to your king. Thru some mishap that we still don't understand, your king heard of it and got the notion into his head that we are spies. To make matters even worse, for who would really care about a couple of simple spies? He has put out the word that we are wizards so that the people rise against us."

"This has the sound of too much intrigue for me."

"For me too I'm afraid," Oliar said. "I am, as you can see, a mere mortal with no use for fighting and slinking about. Twas fear maddened farmers that did this to me, by the time they saw I was mortal it was too late and the damage was

done. Then the cowards ran off and left us."

"After they were done with me," Luray added.

"Should my father hear that story he will fall for it."

"After he had my arm off?"

"He knows nothing of wizards and witches. He will think you a witch just because of our affection."

"All the more reason to make our path invisible," Luray said.

"How close be they behind you?" Chofa asked.

"I don't know," Luray answered. "I suspect that healer you brought knew something of it and led them to your house for a reward. I suspected they would get there by today."

"And that is why you had such haste to leave?"

"Yes," Luray said. "We were going to throw ourselves at your father's mercy but after Nightday's incident I didn't trust his mercy any more."

"And well you did not. Even had that not happened, I doubt he would have harbored you if soldiers came to the door. More certain am I if there was an informant. He is not one to defy the crown."

"Then it is good that we left when we did," Oliar said.

"Surely it is. Perhaps it would be good if we went straight thru these fens and across the rivers and to your home brought you?"

"I thought you wanted to get this wagon back so your brother can pick it up?" Luray said.

"Its importance is secondary."

"I appreciate that," Oliar told him, "but truthfully I don't relish the journey. We would have to camp in the wood anyway thru Nightday, and I am fairing rather poorly from this bumping. I'm doing my best to bear up with it and perhaps I can go a little farther. Besides that, I don't think we will be able to take this wagon very much further, as we get deeper into here the land becomes wetter and we shall soon be slogging thru deep muck."

"I understand, but you will be some weeks in healing."

"That I will, but in a few I will be well enough to travel."

"We shall have no cart or keda then."

"Never mind that, a crutch shall do me fine when I regain my strength. Lucky it is the arm on one side and the leg on the other."

"You are a man of great courage."

"We find it when we must. There is nothing I can do but make the best of it. If I was of great courage I might let you carry me thru this wood now, but I cannot bear the thought of possibly losing this leg too. It's bad enough I'm without my right arm, but I'll get a hook for it someday. A peg leg too would be too much wood, I'd be afraid of the worms."

They both laughed at the attempted humor. "I still think you a man of great courage."

"Well I thank you, you're a fine young man to help us like this. I'll put in a good word for you with my daughter."

They were still in the first part of Morningday when they

came to a good sized stream that ran clear, northward toward the great river. There was a deep wood, a small meadow and a dense bower that faced the meadow, away from the stream. They could not get the wagon that far, but there was enough solid ground that they were able to carry Oliar without great difficulty. They got him settled in the bower, ate of their provisions, and then Chofa immediately departed to bring the wagon back.

"Such a pleasant place this is," Oliar said. "I could build a cabin here and make it my home. Maybe we could do that while I regenerate."

"Perhaps we could," she was silent, she should have known he would notice.

"What is it child?"

She sighed, "Just the usual, the same old thing."

"For him?"

"Why not?" Luray asked.

"Why not indeed. There have been worse men on the face of the world. I would worry that his father might come out in him sometime."

"I don't see it now."

"So once again you want to ask if we can take someone into our confidence?"

"Not yet, let me be sure."

"You're growing girl, you're realizing how long forever is."

"It isn't forever. It may seem like forever to me, but for

you it must seem like our supplies will soon run out."

"There is time yet. Before it is gone we can go back to the Keep. Maybe by then someone will know how to make it again. I know many are working hard on that problem."

"Then what's the worry in making him one of us?"

"The worry!?" Oliar tried to shout but wasn't strong enough. "The worry is what if he doesn't want any part of it? We have to share with him I know, but there is only so much a mind can absorb at one time. The Age of Energy was so long ago that none remember it, they think legends of it refer only to the times of the great wars. To today's people even our weapons are black magic. Those times held powers beyond those that they attribute to Gods today. If you just told him everything at once he wouldn't understand most of it and most of what he did understand he wouldn't believe. The only things which are within his frame of reference would be the money and the weapons and just possibly some of the medicines."

"So I will have to tell him a little at a time."

"With many history lessons in between and physical evidence to back it up. As you know there is little physical evidence in this basin to show, we would have to take him to the ancient lands."

"Whatever you say, you should be better at this than I, after all, you taught me."

"Right, but I taught you from a baby, and we saw the ruins together. Also I didn't have to undo almost half a lifetime of

learning. It won't be easy to impart the training even without considering the risk. Are you sure it's worth it?"

"I'll think about it some more, but right now to me it is."

"It's good that you'll think, he seems a good boy but no different than many others. I know we owe him and I know how sincerely you want to have someone to be close with."

"Wouldn't you like to have someone?"

"But I do, I have you," Oliar said.

"You know what I mean, someone to share a passion with?"

"I know that's what you mean, but why do you think I keep myself in the guise of an old man? This way I am not as sensitive to the needs of the flesh. This way I can get my pleasure from watching you, and you are something to watch."

"Is that why you don't want me to keep anyone?"

"I never said I didn't. Who knows, we may have to take him in to assure his loyalty. If need be I will do it, for without him it may not be possible to get back to the cache even now."

Luray shuddered to think of the distance of that journey, all the way across the kingdom to the hills of the Northern Teeth.

"I've told you many times about your mother have I not?" Oliar asked.

"Yes, and many times you've said you would do it all again if you had it in your power."

"That is only because of you. Your mother herself was not worth the pain and the fear she caused. Whatever you do, I hope no one ever turns on you like that, we live in too dangerous times, in too dangerous an area."

Thru the second half of Morningday, Luray did what she could to make the camp comfortable. There was plenty of long false vedn to use for bedding. She found a patch of loose rocks to make a fireplace on the lip of the bower and some more rocks made reasonable stools near it. She filled the water skin Chofa brought and washed their clothes in the stream. She dug lots of wild lorvs and thloggs and used her dress as a net to catch a few decent sized ensals in the stream. While she was waiting for it to dry again, Chofa returned.

"It seems you really be a wood Nymph," he joked.

"Does it bother you?"

"I think not. Were there others about I might object, but for me alone to look upon you brings only joy. But what of your father, does he sleep?"

"I don't know, but I know he doesn't mind if that was what you were thinking. I was dancing naked at the Harvesthenge the Nightday before we left while he watched."

"But that was the Harvesthenge."

"True, but he wouldn't mind now. He knows we've been together, he doesn't object to that either. I'm old enough to make my own choice."

"That's good, but something there is of great concern. A

group of soldiers were in the wood. They will find the cart and keda."

"But did they find you?"

"No, they stamped about far from the trail. If that be all that is sent against us we need not worry, even I have more woodcraft than they."

"There's a good chance they'll send more when those don't find us. We want to stay out of sight as much as possible."

"Maybe we could stand a watch."

"There is only two of us. We will just have to keep our eyes open and not leave any signs of our presence around."

They went back to the bower and discussed the matter with Oliar. He was of the same opinion, they were too few to keep a lookout, they would just have to stay out of sight and silent.

They had as good a meal as could be managed in these woods while Kortrax neared zenith, then made love in the meadow, took a dip in the stream and came back to the cool bower to sleep.

*

The weeks rolled by. Living in the fens wasn't that easy. The food nearby for the picking was soon used up, the ensals learned to avoid them, as did the inglethors. They had to range far to hunt and pick, often they had to eat distasteful things, dtairoid vermin, sumaids and archwood seeds. But

they got by and Oliar got better. Luray did not grow tired of Chofa, instead her love slowly grew stronger as his enthusiasm for knowledge of the world gave them lots to talk about. She didn't quite want to stay with him forever, but she didn't want to give him up. She wanted to stay with him a decade or so but there was no way she could get away with that, especially with Oliar in his present condition. Oliar had his splints off and was up and around with a crutch and soon he would be ready to attempt the journey to their cabin and then the cache. They could not postpone it any longer than necessary.

They saw no further evidence of the king's soldiers and gradually relaxed their cautions. They walked normally when they were about, they talked and laughed and made fires to cook with.

When Chofa was out hunting they spoke of him often. It came down to two choices, they were going to have to take him into their confidence, or they were going to leave without him. They knew they were prolonging their stay here to give her time to decide, as it turned out, this was a dangerous move for midway thru the sixth Morningday Chofa came hurriedly back to camp.

"Someone followed me," he said.

"You lead him here?"

"No, earlier it was." Chofa was losing his accent but at times it came back.

"Who was it?"

"I know not. A huge man in black robes riding a monster twelve-leg."

"Where was he?"

"Downstream about two, maybe three miles."

"How did you lose him?"

"A dive into the water and a swim downstream. The keda could not follow and he did not leave it. I thought of wood lore and went downstream another mile and then climbed out by an overhanging tree. Then to two more trees I went before I came to ground on soft moss. If he can track me he is possessed of magic."

"This is distressing news, though I don't see what part he would play in it unless he was a scout sent by the king. I would say it is time we were going but we don't want to let him panic us. If we could hold out till next dawn that would be wise."

They did hold out, but it was a very tense week from then on. Not only did they worry that they were going to be discovered at any minute, but Oliar and Luray were unable to discuss what they would do about Chofa. They dared not go out any more to hunt when who-knows-what was out there looking for them, thus they had little to eat that week.

9. The Last Dark

At last it was Nightday, they were to leave at first light and so far they had not changed the tale regarding where they would be going. Luray sat in Chofa's arms to stay warm, for they dared not attempt a fire. Oliar sat beside her, huddled in his robes and staring at the dark.

She turned to him and said, "I think I've made up my mind."

"I think you have too, and well. We would neither of us be alive today if it weren't for him."

"Are you speaking of me?" Chofa asked.

"Yes."

"Have you decided to wed me?" he asked with excitement.

"No, but I have decided to give you more time. As you know we must leave with the dawn."

"And I aim to accompany you," Chofa said.

"I'm glad you will," Luray said, and kissed him lightly, "But if you are going with us, I now confess that we cannot return to our native land."

"Oh? But why?"

"The palace intrigue we spoke of before runs a little deeper than we would like. Spies of Doeslon have made us suspect in our own land also."

"We must return to the cabin where we were staying in

Korbatach," Oliar admitted, "and from there I mean to find a cache of treasure out in the Dwarven ruins on the Northern Teeth."

"Why return to your cabin?"

"There are things there that we need," Oliar said.

"What do you need?"

"We need a bit of money and a hunting kit to defend ourselves and hunt," Luray said. "We'll have to live off the land till we can find a country where we can settle again."

"We can't stay in either kingdom," Oliar continued. "I don't know where we can stay, I've heard there are new lands beyond the TduunZhorp pass in the far south, maybe we shall try there, or maybe we shall take our chances with the Dwarves in the mountains."

"If you can accept us for what we are," Luray said, "I'd like to have you accompany us."

"Think hard young man, before you answer her," Oliar said. "We are hunted as wizards in both kingdoms. Think hard of all you know of what it means to be hunted as wizards and look at what we have with us and what powers we have. A healthy young man and woman, and an old man, almost helplessly crippled and with this painful stump of an arm."

"Surely they will understand once they see you?"

"Chofa," Luray said, "we had lived with them for years. Only one of my suitors rose in my defense and two others who sought me only hours before wrestled him to the ground."

"There is no more evidence needed than an accusation," Oliar went on. "The village where we'd lived peacefully for over thirty years brought their children out to see us consumed by flames. Think of your family and their religion, what evidence would they need? What is your father thinking of us now if the kingsmen have questioned him?"

"They would not tell him we are suspected of being wizards," Luray said, "they would tell him that we are."

"But you really are spies?"

"We really were on a mission, it was more diplomatic than espionage. Shaddom wants to arrange negotiations regarding a cache of ancient treasure that he knows of which lies in the old Dwarven ruins to the west of Doeslon's lands. We were to arrange for such a meeting."

"We were set up," Luray continued, "Doeslon has a man at Shaddom's court. That man told Doeslon that we know the location of the cache and told Shaddom that we had sold out the location of the cache."

"Doeslon meant to capture us and learn the location of that cache for himself and cut Shaddom out of the deal. We have nothing to offer but the lives of desperate criminals until we can settle in a new land."

"I'm sorry," Luray said, "but this is the only offer I can make you."

"But you do know the location of the cache?"

"Yes," Oliar admitted.

"It has the sound of too grand adventure for a farmboy

such as me."

They talked long, giving up time they should have been sleeping. Chofa was both reluctant and excited. As Oliar predicted, he was able to understand the stories of the cache from the perspective of the ancient weapons more easily than anything else. The treasure he could also understand. The secret of life itself he understood only as medicines and would not grasp their meaning. He paid rapt attention to the stories Oliar told of the history of this cache but it was the same kind of attention a child paid to a story teller at a carnival.

Oliar meant to find this cache, the medicines might heal him, weapons greater than those at their cabin could help them make their way across the western wilds to the lands to the south or to the mountains of the Dwarves. Chofa's enthusiasm grew and he agreed to the adventure before too much Dawnsleep was gone.

"We should try and get some sleep," Oliar said.

"By all means," Chofa told him. "Lay yourself down," he said, and made a bit more room in their tiny space.

He and Luray also lay down, but with their faces inches apart. She could not see his face in the profound darkness, but her lips found his just the same. He returned her kiss with heat, and that gladdened her. She needed to be sure that after knowing her for an outlaw, he still thought her wholesome enough to lie with. He was still too embarrassed by Oliar's

presence, but as silently as they could, they began to probe each other's body. She began to unlace the ragged dress that was still her only clothing, again as silently as she could.

"Shh," Chofa whispered.

"You couldn't have heard that," she whispered back, close to his ear and silently as she could.

"No," he whispered in her ear, "Something approaches."

She strained her ears, trying to penetrate the calls of the lumins. At first she heard nothing, but after what seemed like minutes, she heard the unmistakable snap of a twig under a heavy foot. She did not say anything, but gripped Chofa tighter. He gripped her also. They barely breathed. They heard another heavy foot sink slowly into muck.

Luray could only think of a stalking theirops. With that, she knew they were done for. It could smell them thru the darkness as plainly as they could see in daylight. The little camp knife they had would barely annoy it. They couldn't get Oliar up into the trees and it might already be too close for them to get into a tree.

More brush rustled, a body was sliding thru the tangle right on the far side of the nearby slough. She and Chofa gripped even tighter. They heard Oliar move very slowly, he was not asleep yet. Better it would have been had he been taken in his sleep and not have to know these long minutes of terror. A theirops is a mighty beast, a ton of fang and claw and muscle, but it is a cautious beast also.

She thought she could hear the whistle of its breath in its

nostrils, they have many along their back like a keda. It couldn't be much more than fifty yards from them by now. She thought she heard something enter the water.

Death by theirops is a horrible way to go. They might first take a limb in their great pincers, and wait to see if their prey can harm them. It might eat them limb at a time, holding them down with one of its six legs while it tears the flesh from them. She could feel them both shaking, but none of them made a sound. Another stick snapped under a heavy hoof, and the sound of mud was repeated.

All lay silent for a minute more, except for the faint whistling of air in and out of several pairs of big lungs. She began to ache from the tension in her body. She thought it would be better to jump up and charge it, at least her death would be swift. Though her heart was pounding and her sweat was chill in the cold of Dawnsleep, she began to gather herself for just such a move.

Chofa might have guessed her intent for he held her tighter. Silently she tried to struggle free, but his strength was too much for her. She could cry out, but that would set it on all of them. Should she charge it, it might content itself with her alone.

Just then, from across the slough, came a hideous scream that ended in a bubbling rattle. It was the scream of a dying man and not a beast. Seconds later a man-sized body plunged into the slough.

KingsMen

Chubat was thrown back into the cell beaten and broken. There was blood all over him, his fingernails had been ripped out. He had been whipped and burned and blood flowed from his mouth and anus. Chilliiss screamed and sobbed as she ran to him, horrified beyond the power to even begin caring for him. All she could do was lift his head into her lap and sob.

His eyes opened, he shuddered once. "I had to tell them, I told them everything and they didn't care." He coughed and an ocean of blood came up. "They didn't believe me."

His head drooped and Chilliiss went on crying. There was nothing she could do. He never woke again and before she got up he was dead.

About the time she was sure he was dead, before she could begin a death wail for him, the door flew open with a tremendous boom. She started in terror for there, with four guards, stood an important officer in the king's service. His yellow was trimmed with black, his uniform ornamented with more wealth than her family's hands had touched in their combined lifetimes. His face was a study in crags and angles with tiny eyes that nevertheless dominated his visage by their hardness and coldness. She didn't know it but this was Bal't'notire, chief of state security. He had been chosen for this job partly because of his intimidating appearance. She

also didn't know it was the four with him who were responsible for Chubat's demise, and that they were chosen by Bal't'notire chiefly for their wanton cruelty.

"Come," was all he said.

Chilliiss trembled so much she thought she was going to vomit. She got a close look at his four men as soon as she was out of the cell. They had not changed their clothes. They wore leather riding armor and it was still splattered with blood.

The room to which she was taken looked nothing like a torture chamber. It was in a lower wall of the palace but there was a window with a view of a corner of the gardens. There was a polished marble floor, marble columns supporting the heavily beamed ceiling. There was statuary, sumptuous chairs and tables and a huge thing that might have been a bed except that it was the size of a small cabin and had its own roof below the lofty ceiling of the room. On the table were fruits and bottles of wine and other spirits. She was placed in one of the chairs and the officer dismissed his men.

Bal't'notire took another chair and sat there lost in thought watching Chilliiss. She sat there just sweating for what seemed like an eternity while he just stared at her. She was so rigid it hurt, unable to move and unable to speak. At last the officer spoke.

"As you must know, we were unable to get anything of value from your brother by physical persuasion so I thought maybe we could try a little friendly chat with you in hopes

that we don't have to get rough. It would be a shame to have to ruin a tender young body like yours."

"Chubat is dead," was all she could say. It was a hoarse whisper.

"Yes. I'll have to speak to my men about that. They weren't supposed to let him get away that easily. They were supposed to save him so he could watch if we had to work on you."

She tried to shrink back into the chair. She was far too innocent to try and play this cool and pretend it was no concern of hers. She didn't know it would be better to deny him the satisfaction of seeing her fear, didn't even notice the start of his arousal. She had never experienced anything like this in her life. She never knew these horrors existed and was so petrified she could no longer generate rational thoughts.

"Do you know what we want to know?"

She could only shake her head.

"All we want to know is where the wizards have gone. We already know you kids know something about it because you knew where to find that cart when he brought it back."

She wondered how their own father was able to turn them in for that, punishing them for retrieving his cart. Letting his second son die a more horrible death than she had ever known possible, letting her surely die the same way. Even if Luray was a sorceress, she was kind and smart. These people were so far beyond cruel that her mind could not grasp the reality of it.

She tried to speak but her words wouldn't come right away. When sounds finally did come out, she stuttered, "He t-t-told you all we know."

"No, all he told us was some baloney about getting away from your father and camping in the wood, then going back to village Kuthreim."

"That's all we know sir." She was sobbing by this time.

"But it's nonsense, that's on the far side of the rivers, across a mile of open water. Those wizards escaped from village Korbatch, the opposite direction from that forest. We have to know how they plan to get back there."

"They said not a word of Korbatch or any other village in this kingdom. We never knew them for wizards. The old man had his arm off sir, one wouldn't think a wizard for that would one?"

"But how did you know to fetch the wagon if you didn't know their plans?"

"Follow the ruts of the wheels sir, there is nothing but what Chubat DIED telling you. Chofa meant to camp with them in the wood while the old man mended. He was quite smitten with lady Luray and our father was livid from it. He knew them not for wizards, I'm sure of it."

"But that doesn't change the facts now does it?"

"It doesn't change the fact that we know nothing more about it." Something new came up inside her, a strength or maybe just a stroke of fatalism for she said, "Could you please just kill me now? I've told you all I know and I know

you won't believe it. If you didn't believe Chubat you aren't going to believe me either so why don't you just get it over with and stop wasting your time."

"Very well, if that's the way you feel, but first I'm going to make some use of that fine young body of yours."

He stood up and came over to her, then reached out and ripped the ragged dress from her body. Up until then she hadn't quite understood what he meant and what he intended to do. She twitched with fright and then let herself go limp. Whatever happened now, there was only one way she was ever getting out of it, fighting would only prolong it. As of yet she had only the vaguest stirring of sexual feelings. She knew intellectually what was to happen, but emotionally it gave her only mild feelings of distress.

He picked her up and tossed her on the thing that might have been a bed and put his hands on her body. She pretended she had fainted. It didn't quite tickle, and was quite annoying, but not actually painful. She kept tensing up from the fear of what would happen later and going limp again when she remembered there was nothing she could do about it. He was somewhat smelly, and getting more so by the minute, but not as bad as her mother. She jumped when he first jammed his finger into her slit, but again that was something that was more annoying than painful. There was the twinge when her hymen popped, but if that was as bad as it got she would be able to take it. It was the strangeness of it all that was the

most disconcerting. Why was he doing this to her?

Then when he removed his breechclout and she saw what he meant to stick her with, she saw there was going to be a real problem. Her teeth clenched and she squealed, and weakly tried to close her legs. He roughly forced them apart and mounted her. She gasped under his weight, unable to scream at the pain when he forced himself into her.

Somehow she didn't die. It hurt like hell but somehow she didn't rip in half like she thought she would, and somehow she didn't suffocate beneath him. What happened was he became totally absorbed in shoving his middle leg in and out of her body. Meanwhile she became completely detached. All this was happening to a lump of flesh she used to inhabit but which was now being taken from her. She knew not what it would be like without this flesh, but somehow it was no longer quite hers.

Then her eyes, roving over the view available to her while lying there beneath him, saw a pair of ceremonial swords hanging crossed above the head of the bed. They looked like they weren't even blunted. She had a hand free, he had shoved her so far up against the headboard that she could reach the hilt of one. For a long time she thought about that. It wasn't really that long, but in her situation it seemed like half a lifetime. She slowly came to believe that she held in her hand a means to do violence to the one who was violating her. She knew he must have had a part in the death of Chubat. Just

then Bal't'notire spent his passion and the violent spasms made her cry out and almost made her lose her grip on the hilt. Instead it came free in her hand. As he sank down spent, almost as limp as she had been, Chilliiss, with grim deliberation, quietly ran him thru.

He expired quickly and quietly, a gasp, a look of shock, a grunt, a shudder, and then there was just dead weight upon her. With a little effort she crawled out from under him. His organ, now deflated, let go of hers. She sat up, sore but alive. This was not the first creature she had killed, but the first human being. 'How little different it is from killing a lentosaur' she thought, 'once he was alive and now he's not. Unlike a lentosaur, people will miss him. Maybe they will be so enraged they will hack me to death quickly and I won't suffer so the way Chubat did. But then, if my life is forfeit already there is no reason to fear getting into any more trouble. I might as well try and get away. Not that it will do any good, but at least I can end my life cut down like a tragic heroine in a legend.'

So with that thought she got up, cleaned the blood off herself, found some clothes that didn't look too ridiculous on her and went out the window and across the king's garden. Well, real life is not like old legends. By the time Bal't'notire was missed Chilliiss had walked right out of the palace grounds thru a servant gate and into the crowds of Kobal. She was taken in as a housegirl by a merchant family the next week, married one of their sons a decade after that, had three

children, seven grandchildren and lived to a ripe and prosperous old age without ever hearing another word about the early demise of Bal't'notire.

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"So he learned nothing?" Revan bellowed.

"Not that we know of. He might have learned something from the little wench, but if so the knowledge left with him."

"Well I must say it serves him right," Revan continued bellowing at the poor messenger who could do nothing about it. "It was against my better judgment that I handed those kids over in the first place. We ought to take the father in to find out why he was so quick to hand them over. Anyway, the idiot kills the older one, who was more likely to know something, then the girl skewers his liver with his own sword. It serves him right, he always was a cradle robber."

Revan stopped shouting but continued to pace the hut that was his temporary command center. The messenger was clearly uncomfortable hearing him speak like this of a man who had inspired such fear in life. Bal't'notire had never been one of his favorite people. In fact he had been a slimy quibarta of a man, vicious, sadistic and more interested in his own cheap thrills than in doing the king's business. In contrast the kids from the farm where the wizards had stayed seemed bright, strong and honest for such simple folk. He deeply felt the loss of the boy. After only an hour of acquaintance under

trying circumstances he knew the lad would have made a fine soldier, even an officer. That his sister had avenged him should have earned her a reward. If he was to ever run across her it would be hard to choose between his duty to the law of the land and his duty to common decency.

Meanwhile the immediate problem was that their only possible source of information was lost. "Nothing more than that they were camping in that fens?" he repeated to the messenger.

"That is all."

"Either they aren't any more, or they've changed themselves into forest animals. I've had patrols going back and forth thru that wood for weeks and none of them have seen a thing. They must have walked every square inch of it twice by now. I sent the best woodsman in the kingdom in to track them and haven't even heard from him."

"It may be possible the boy was telling the truth," the messenger said.

"Oh I'm sure he was," Revan said, "as well as he knew it anyway. You don't think a young farm boy was going to die in the torture chamber carrying something like an old mercenary do you?"

"I would hardly think so sir."

"He wouldn't. He couldn't. Beside that, he told me essentially the same thing when we first brought him in." Revan stopped pacing and turned to the messenger. "Take back the message that I'm going to bring in the father from

that farm for questioning. They can't very well ask me to turn him over to Bal't'notire now can they? Tell them I will question him and release him at my discretion. I know it's going to take them a year, maybe, to find a new security chief, but don't make that part of the message."

The messenger left and Revan extinguished the torches. Narrulla was up, Nightday was over, Dawnsleep was underway. By the moon's light he could see part of the western plains. Without wanting to, he found himself looking at the chart and finding that Onchigeela was also in the sky when Bal't'notire died.

Had the girl been given some sort of power? Was that why she was able to dispatch Bal't'notire so readily and escape so cleanly? Had the wizards transformed themselves into some kind of forest creature? Or had they gone across the rivers to Kuthreim?

10. Theives Journey

Whatever beast had stalked them, it crashed thru the dark away from them. A theirops would have never dropped its prey and run like that. They were left in total silence. Even the lumins of dark had stopped their calls. The ripples in the water died away and the beast bounded deeper into the darkness. They still did not dare move, did not hardly dare breathe. Minutes passed, the lumins slowly started their songs again. The darkness remained total. The remainder of the fens resumed its silence, and so it hung till dawn.

Sore from the tension and weary from lack of sleep, they ate breakfast, what there was of it, in the first grey. The slough had carried the body away, no sign remained of the events of Dawnsleep. They remained silent as they packed their meager camp, then started on their journey a little before the first sight of Kortrax. They went south thru the scrubby wood along the swamp coast till they were well beyond Chofa's village, then struck out across the fields far from any dense habitation. They would have a long way to go, especially since they wanted to stay well south of Kobal.

Oliar knew he would be the one easiest to spot and was most likely to slow them down. He could move along on his crutch and good leg, but slowly. The country was so open and flat in this area that they could be seen for a mile if they didn't stay along the stream courses. Moving with caution and at the

speed Oliar could make it would take them at least two and maybe three weeks to get back to their cabin. When they neared it they would have to send Chofa into the village, Oliar and Luray would be too easily recognized. It wasn't till they got there that they had any chance of getting any money or weapons, till then they could only hide and live off the land.

Half a day passed. It was time to eat but they had nothing. At a watering hole along the tiny rivulet they were following they stopped to rest in lieu of a midday meal.

After only half a day of walking Oliar knew he was going to make even less progress than he feared. The crutch pained his armpit and the leg throbbed from the motion. The stump of the severed arm was still quite tender and it throbbed also.

"We're deeply in need of a wagon," Chofa said. "If we keep on like this it will be many days before we reach village Korbatch."

"If we steal one it will be noticed and we have nothing to buy one with," Oliar told him.

"That is true, but I have a plan. Let me take employment as a driver bound for the capital. Once out of town I can bump my teammate and come back for you."

"Too risky. You may be recognized and followed. Better to find a wagon that won't be missed and be well away with it before the alarm is raised."

"Where would we find such a thing?"

"Maybe some farmer's market wagon, maybe one that had been abandoned as useless but still has one trip left in it."

"You'll not find such as that in these parts, a wagon with one trip left in it would be used for two, then mended for more."

"Perhaps I could sit a keda," Oliar said. "There are many out in these pastures, surely we could find one gentle enough to take me."

"With a good saddle perhaps you could," Chofa said.

"I rode two days with the injury and without a saddle, now I am much more fit."

"Then maybe we will try it," Chofa said, "but you know it made the injuries much worse for that."

"I know it very well, but the alternative was death at the stake."

"Still your bravery astounds me."

"This talk will not get us there any faster," Oliar said. He might have been thinking about getting up, but only rose to a slightly more upright sitting position.

"But how can we get there any faster if you can't walk?" Chofa asked.

"Perhaps we should have waited to make this trip till your leg was healed?" Luray asked.

"It will be a year before I can walk on it at all. We would be found before then. I was nervous about that already. I feel better on the move."

"But a farmer can come and find us any time here."

"We are sheltered by this brush. They would have to come quite close to spot us," Oliar said. "We won't be here that long anyway."

"Perhaps we could move better during darkness," Luray suggested. "Taking it slow is not our problem, we have to move slowly anyway. We could make two days in the dark and one around Noonsleep. Traffic will be lighter then."

"This has the sound of a good plan," Chofa said.

"Since I am about done in already, why don't we take an early rest and begin moving again as the time of Noonsleep approaches?"

That they did. During Noonsleep they moved falteringly onward, keeping to the low ground, the brushy spots and the wood lots. They had no formal meal this 'Noonday', but ate a few vegetables from the fields they passed thru. The countryside was eerily quiet during this time of the week. Kortrax slammed down unmercifully, trying to pin them to the sand when they moved in the open. Even winter did not dull the heat of noon in these lands and winter was on the wane. Only the charraspas broke the silence with their grating calls. The stream passed close to two farmsteads, both of them silent and seemingly abandoned in the midweek heat. Their progress was slightly better than that of Morningday, but after eight hours Oliar was more than done in again.

They snatched a couple talrins from one of the sleeping farms and made a hearty meal of them, then hid themselves

well in the brush and slept, waiting for the time of Dusksleep. Traveling thru Dusksleep was more difficult than they had hoped. Along the stream there was the blackest of darkness, making it impossible for Oliar to move with his crutch. He tripped and fell, causing himself to cry out. After that the others had to support him. After Narrulla set they dared to try the open country and even the roads. Even here it was the darkest of darks, no Kunae, no Narrulla, no Cynd, and a light overcast dimming the stars. They ducked off the road into the nearest crops when they heard the click and patter of keda feet on the road behind them, then watched the shadows of twelve soldiers pass by in the night.

"They are really out in force now," Luray said.

"Why would the king send so many?" Chofa asked.

"Surely two wizards can't be worth all the trouble?"

"It's that treasure they want," Luray told him.

"It could be they are on a mission other than us." Oliar said. "The king must have some other concerns?"

"There is talk of rebellion in the west near the Teeth I hear," Chofa said. "This road will tend to the north towards the capital, I think, in the coming miles."

"Then we will have to leave it, our way lies to the west."

"We can go a bit farther, but let us listen for a following band."

"Why would anyone follow?"

"Sometimes thieves follow in the wake of soldiers hoping for corpses to plunder," Chofa told them. "I see one from long

settled lands doesn't learn the ways of the newer marches."

Before they reached another village they turned from the road and moved across the fields to the west, south of the village. None of them knew just where they were, but the country was thickly settled so they were probably within a few miles of the city. At least here they didn't have to worry about falling prey to a theirops or quibarta. Oliar tired about the time distant lanterns told them Nightday must be starting. The croplands they passed thru provided them a supper and they bedded down in a clump of trees.

Before Nightday was really over they were up and moving down toward the center of the trees where they hoped to find some water. The air was very still so they were able to listen for the sound of water flowing. They could hear none. There were very distant sounds of habitation, a few kedas cooing in nearby scrapes and the ever-present lumins. They emerged from the trees into farm groves and orchards, as always the land was dead flat, they couldn't even tell which way was downhill. They went along the edge of the trees for awhile since there was a lot of habitation to the north of them.

There were some stars out this night, and Narrulla was low in the east. Even so they passed around a small clump of fruit trees and stumbled right into another camp. There was the smell of a dead fire and people in bedrolls around it. As they noticed this, two of the people sleeping near the campfire woke up, one of them sat up.

"You'll not find anything here worth your trouble," a voice said.

"Excuse us," Oliar said, "we don't come to rob you. We are travelers unfamiliar with this country. We mean you no harm and will be on our way."

"Travelers are you?"

"And with a crutch? Surely you cannot expect to make much distance in the dark that way." The one who hadn't sat up grabbed Oliar's crutch.

"What are you up to?" Oliar asked with some anger.

"Wondering what you are up to?" the one lying down holding the crutch asked. "No one up to any good would be traveling when it should be Dawnsleep."

"Tis not Dawnsleep yet, and why is that your concern? If you were up to any good you wouldn't be camped in a farmer's field like this."

"Wait a minute, these must be those escaped wizards and the boy they bewitched."

"Right you are, there's the golden-haired girl behind him, just like on the posters."

"The king himself's got a reward out."

They couldn't run because Oliar's crutch was firmly in the grasp of one of the younger two. It wouldn't have done them any good anyway since Oliar could barely make the speed of a walk.

Chofa was watching the other two. The one who seemed to be asleep moved. Luray couldn't see what he did, but

Chofa must have seen something because he pinned the man's hand beneath his heel. Before the other two sprang into motion Luray just had time to see the knife clutched in his hand.

The one holding Oliar's crutch pulled Oliar to the ground and the one who was sitting sprang for Chofa. Luray was close enough to get between him and Chofa and did so. The guy was a little old, but leathery looking. It would not be easy for her to handle him, but he wouldn't get right thru her. She didn't have time to see what Chofa was doing with the guy he had pinned, she also didn't have time to see if the one she was grappling with had a weapon.

He tried to level her with a roundhouse punch but it glanced off her shoulder and left him off balance so she was able to push him over before she fell over herself. She could see that the one who dumped Oliar was crawling out of his bedroll, but Oliar had possession of the crutch again and was beating him with it. She couldn't see Chofa, and just had time to roll to the side before her assailant tried to jump on her again. He got a hand on her and pulled her around by the arm. She had no choice but to go with it or get her shoulder dislocated. This gave him a chance to land a painful blow across her face.

Everything stopped when someone let out a horrible bubbling shriek. They looked and saw Chofa getting up from the other who was still in his bedroll and writhing in agony. Chofa held the knife now, and with it the upper hand.

"Cease your attacks all of you or join in the bleeding," Chofa called out. "He'll live if he's tended but he won't be walking."

"Why did they attack us?" Luray asked.

"They be just common bandits," Chofa observed, "and so stricken with greed for the king's reward that they care not for the truth."

"We better be on our way," Oliar said. "Let them tend each other."

"Right, there'll be some attention drawn. Perhaps we should kill them?" Chofa asked.

"I'm not a murderer. Let's just see that they don't pursue us."

Oliar got up and started moving off. The one who was up went to the injured one, the other just glared at Chofa. Luray got up and stood beside him, rubbing her face and noting that she wasn't seriously injured. She didn't want to leave Chofa alone with the three of them and brought out Oliar's knife, which she still carried. It wasn't meant to be a weapon but it was a sturdy camp knife and better than nothing. She hadn't survived looking the way she did without learning to be at least somewhat dangerous.

The one who went to the injured one bellowed, "Look at this blood, what do you mean he will live? You've stabbed him in the heart!"

"It's the leg. Why not shut the noise and try to be of some

aide?"

"Murderer!" The third one hurtled from the ground straight at Chofa. "I'll kill the one who's killed my brother."

He had no chance against the two of them, especially in his berserk rage.

"You'll be the one killed," Chofa said, and stepped away from his wild slash.

Luray stepped around and slashed him in the hamstring. He screamed but lurched one more time with one leg functioning. This time he caught Chofa in the chest but he was so uncontrolled the blade did not penetrate. In nearly the same motion he swung around while falling and swiped at Luray, getting a great deal of her shift but almost none of her flesh. At this same time Chofa buried his blade in this one's side, leaving him on the ground screaming.

"All this noise is going to bring people out," Luray shouted as she grabbed the knife this one had dropped, a long dagger with a keen edge. "We better get out of here."

"We best at that, they can't follow us now."

They moved off in the direction of Oliar, away from the road and the houses.

"You go ahead with your father," Chofa said, "I'll be coming but let me lag a little behind you in case the old man comes after us. I can be pretty quiet."

"There's little chance of him coming after us."

"Still, it would be good for me to know your father is well on his way. I'll be less than a hundred yards behind you."

"But..."

"He needs you."

There seemed little point in arguing about it. By now Luray was well aware that Chofa was a much better woodsman and handy man than he gave himself credit for. They had very little choice but to keep going in the direction they had started, all the while wishing they could do something less obvious. It wasn't the easiest route either, there were lots of orchards and a few fences.

Two of the three they left behind were making the most noise they could, screaming that they were beset by murdering wizards. The one who had attacked them last was also screaming from his wounds. It seemed like ten or fifteen minutes later they could still hear them splitting the night with their calls. They raised one final huge ballyhoo and then abruptly stopped, leaving the night silent at last.

Oliar was all right, he hadn't hurt his leg any more than it was. Luray cleaned up the little nick in her side. Her face bothered her more. Most of all she didn't want an ugly bruise showing up. After an hour they passed the last trace of that settlement and were able to get to a another small road. There was a stream here where they paused to drink. While they did so Chofa caught up with them again.

"About time we saw you again."

"I would have come up with you sooner but once they

quieted down I was afraid maybe others had joined them and they were coming after us."

"I trust they did not?"

"I think not. I've heard nothing behind us."

"I think it would still be wise to put as much distance between us and this place as we can," Luray said.

"Right you are, let's move."

With that Oliar got up and began stumping along briskly beside the stream. They went as fast as they could for as long as they possibly could, thru Dawnsleep and well into Morningday. They went to the north and swampy country, down the stream and not on the direct route to village Korbatch.

11. On the Lhar

When they moved out during Noonsleep they found they were practically at the river. In a small inlet they found a lonsman's boat tied up at a rickety dock with no one up and about. It was little more than a raft and in somewhat questionable condition, but looked like it would remain afloat.

"We should not pass up this opportunity," Chofa pleaded. "We can sail this right to Korbatch and we'll be well away before this lon farmer wakes up and misses it."

"Can you sail?" Luray asked.

"A bit," Chofa answered, "and certainly I can paddle."

"We'll be easily seen on the river," Oliar said, "and I'm sure they'll be looking for us there also."

"You should lie under this tarp, we'll prop it up and cover it with leaves, it will look like I'm sailing home with a harvest."

"If we weren't going far," Oliar said.

"If someone notices us for any time I'll pull into an inlet."

"It would be good for you," Luray said to Oliar. "We won't take much longer getting there than we would walking with you on that crutch, you'll get more chance to mend and we'll have plenty to eat."

"Yes, look, fishing gear." Chofa had found some under the tarp wrapped in some rags.

Oliar might not have wanted to take the chance if it wasn't for the effort this hike was causing him. This would certainly be a more comfortable journey for him by river, so he abandoned his protests and let them take him aboard. They got into the raft and moved off down the inlet, wanting to be out of sight in case someone came by. Luray and Chofa paddled till they were out in the plantation, then Luray cut a few stems of waterbrush to make a little enclosure under the tarp so Oliar would have some air and then set to with the weedhook harvesting a large enough pile to cover the tarp. That took half of Noonsleep, but they stayed in the side channels, and since almost no one was out at the time, they were not seen.

Luray knew that she must stay out of sight as much as possible also; and failing that, disguise herself as much as possible. There was a lonsman's night jacket on the boat also, now nothing more than a rag, but she washed it out and tucked her hair inside it. From a distance she wouldn't be recognizable. If they were stuck in heavy traffic she could squeeze under the lon-covered tarp with Oliar.

The river was a twisted skein of channels here and as a lonsman it was normal that they would stay out of the main shipping lanes. Neither of them was experienced with this part of the river, so they got into a few dead ends and had to backtrack. Chofa wasn't a sailor at all, but Luray had quite a bit of experience, especially with little boats like this, and he

was a fast learner. For Afternoon they pulled up deep in a swampy inlet where they were shaded by wild archwoods and hangleaves from the full heat of Kortrax and were able to get a good rest.

It was a long tedious journey on the great river Lhar against its lazy current, but nearly uneventful. A few times Luray thought it best to get beneath the tarp and twice Chofa thought it best to put into a farmer's inlet and once even go thru the motions of starting to unload the craft when one of the king's boats swung close to the inlet and trained a scope on him. Thru those weeks Oliar mended, sometimes coming out on deck when they were alone in the dark. They usually stopped and cooked fish during the light days when their fire wouldn't be as noticeable. Every week they covered the tarp with fresh lon so the disguise stayed fresh.

They spent much time teaching Chofa bits of history, bits he would need to know to understand the truth of their lives. She told him her knowledge was all from books, he would have known she was not old enough to have come from the Old Lands herself. Oliar was and they gradually let him know that Oliar had walked those lands of legend where the wars of magic had been fought. Chofa sat in rapt wonder thru it all, displaying an intelligence that Luray would have never suspected in the farm hand he had been when she met him. They did not tell him that Oliar's parents had met while recovering from wounds in the same hospital in that war.

Most people knew it was five centuries ago when it had been fought.

Luray and Chofa had plenty of quiet time together during the weeks on the river and their love grew ever stronger. He was reluctant to make love in Oliar's presence, but would take walks with her into the wilds or fields or secret beaches if there were any where they camped. Luray had always loved sex in the outdoors and was wrapped in bliss nearly every time. Their physical relationship was both the most thrilling and the most tender in her memory, heightened even more by her knowledge that this time it might even have a chance to last. This part of the journey was such a pleasure it made her wish this long, lazy river could go on forever.

She felt really good about this love. This was what she had always needed, a powerful hero to round out their little band. To have discovered him in that filthy hovel seemed almost supernatural. She longed to see him with Oliar's old sword in his hand. He was learning so much that she felt that this time she had someone she could take into the future with her.

But it was one of these times they were making love on a deserted little beach, when caressing her face, that he uncovered her ear. "You are a Nymph?!" he said, pulling back.

"A part; does that repel you?"

"I am surprised is all, I thought there were none in the

kingdom."

"There are none who keep Elvish ways, at least openly," she said, "but Elves are just a race of man like any other. My father is a part Mountain Elf, hardly a difference from the Nordic you probably thought us."

"This makes it all the harder for you to deny the king's claims."

"Oh yes I know," Luray sighed. "We've both had to live with this prejudice all our lives." She was hurt by this, because she could see that he clearly was. There was a lot less joy in their walk back to Oliar and the boat than there had been lately.

12. At Village Korbatch

It was just starting to get a little lighter in the east when they reached the environs of their old village. Luray and Chofa struggled mightily to drag the boat up into the reeds where it should remain out of sight for a few days. They stopped in a small clump of trees near an inlet about half a mile from where the village actually started on the west side. Their house was on the southwest, so it wasn't the most convenient place to stop as far as access to the house was concerned, but provided the most cover and was a good place to camp. It was also not on the side they would be expected to approach from. Most of the village was well back from this little inlet to the river. There were only a few lon farmers in the village and the inlet was too small to take ships large enough for trade.

They talked about how they were going to get to the house. Oliar wanted to send Chofa by it and see if anyone was around. If not they might chance coming to it at next dark. It was too bad they got here at the beginning of Morningday, they would have to waste a lot of time. Luray thought they could send Chofa in during the day. They could tell him where their money and weapons were hidden.

No doubt the place had been ransacked, there was a good chance it had been burned. The villagers wouldn't know that no wizard would keep his cache in a village and might expect

to eliminate it by burning the house. Even if they had, some of it could have survived if it was there.

The weapons they had in the house were conventional. There was a good bow and five fine arrows, better knives and a good plain sword of Elvish manufacture. They weren't much, but they would be vital in traversing the wilderness to reach the cache. The weapons they had at the cache would be even more useful, but they couldn't let any who saw them live.

The money in the house wasn't a large sum. Enough to let them eat at inns and stay in lodges, enough to buy a good keda maybe, or rough passage on a ship. It wouldn't do them any good now however since they couldn't show their faces anywhere in the kingdom.

Oliar agreed to let Chofa try getting into the house as long as he was sure he wasn't watched. There was a wash that lead from this clump of trees past the village on the west. Though it was only a few feet deep and he had to crawl to stay out of sight, he set off in this, hoping to get around to the area of their house before many people were up. He was gone a good long while, it was nearly mid-Morningday before he returned. He had to crawl on the way back also for there were people out in the fields now and he didn't want to draw attention to their camp.

"The situation is not good," he said when he was close, "There are several watchers. They do not mean to appear as watchers, but I went by the place there and back and the same

remained both times. There is a group of men with a wagon who pretend to wait for someone to come with the kedas. There is another who sits in the vacant lot across the path and whittles."

"You don't have to worry about him too much," Oliar said, "He's been doing that for a decade or more now. I guess he might raise an alarm now if Luray or I showed up, but he's just one of the natives."

"But the house is still there?" Luray asked.

"Oh yes, but empty it seems. The door and windows hang open."

"I think it might be worth the chance," she told them.

"We might be able to get in during Noonsleep. This is a very quiet little village," Chofa said. "I would think that no one is about at that time."

"That's very true. Besides that, we are almost as likely to be discovered sitting here."

"Then I'm for a rest," Chofa said. "I think I've worked out the lay of the land so I can make an unnoticed approach to the back during Noonsleep. That is, if they have no one posted behind."

They slept and before Noonsleep was over they woke. All of them moved off down the wash, Luray and Oliar stayed in a smaller clump of brush while Chofa went up to the orchard to try and make his way into the village. It was hot, as the time of Noonsleep always was. The waiting was interminable.

By the time Afternoonday was near they were both nearly asleep, but Luray was brought back instantly by the sound of keda trappings. There was a group of four soldiers in the wash, mounted but riding at a slow walk and looking at the ground. It was clear they were following their tracks.

One of them spoke, "They must have come back to look into their cabin, there must be something of their hoard in it."

"Then why haven't we found it?"

"Who knows sir? Permission to ride back and look?"

"Yes, and take Parman with you. Lorpsee come with me, we'll check this draw and follow them as far as we can."

Oliar saw them also and motioned for total stillness. What good that would do with their tracks as plain as day behind them she didn't know. Together they watched two soldiers wander down the draw. Her heart leapt when they went by, sank again as they pulled up just a dozen yards past them.

"They turned off, check that side," the officer said.

Oliar got his knife out, Luray did likewise. Even the knives they took from the thieves would be useless against the thick leather of the soldier's armor. The troop soon found the tracks that lead up to the brush where they hid.

"They went this way sir," the soldier called.

"All of them?"

"Yes, it looks that way."

The officer turned and came over with the other. The first one was coming up the tiny slope and had actually gotten past

them. Luray hoped the officer would go past also. When he did she could jump out behind him and have a remote chance of slitting his throat. She had never done anything like that before and didn't think she had the stomach for it, but the desperation of their situation seemed to leave her no choice.

He didn't get past, the soldier turned, "Only one goes on from here."

"Here they are," the officer said, looking right at them. "Come on out," he called into the brush. "Your game ends here." Neither of them moved, the soldier went around the other side of their thicket. "We can come get you, but if you come peacefully it will go easier with you."

Still they didn't move. In truth Luray was too paralyzed by fear to move. The soldier got down from his keda and drew his sword. He advanced on them, looking Luray straight in the eye. Somehow she stood up and helped Oliar to his feet.

"That's good," the officer said. "Come along and I won't be giving my man here his way with you." Luray looked at him and thought it might be worth a try. The guy wasn't that dung-ugly and if he got deep enough into a passion she might be able to change the situation. But the officer went on.

"Now, we finally catch up with you. It's been a merry chase I must say, but now it's over." He smiled a thoroughly wicked smile. "The only remaining question is whether you'll make the chase worth our while."

"You'll find it a sad disappointment," Oliar rose to his full

height on his crutch, still dignified in his tattered robe.

"You've squandered a fortune to hunt down a simple country miller and his daughter. You have nothing in me for all your trouble and nothing in her you couldn't get from any pretty farm girl."

"Are you going to keep up a tale like that? It'll just go harder on you. Once the simple peasants see that we have you there is no deal you can make that will give you any life. The King is of a much more enlightened mind. Give your treasures up to him and he might let you finish your lives normally."

"We have no treasures. Doeslon is a fool to believe the wild tales these yokels tell."

"Then why did you run off?"

"They had us bound to the burning stake! We could see no profit in continuing efforts to try and talk sense to them. We didn't expect the king and his men to be such fools also."

"You have too much arrogance for a peasant."

"I am too weary to go on. I'm an old man, I've lost an arm and the use of a leg in this chase. Were it not for my daughter I would have given up long ago. I've lived my life and now it's over."

"Will you not give up your treasure to spare her?"

"I have no treasure to give up, nor am I such a fool to think that anything I can do will have any effect on what will become of her."

"You never know. You obviously have something the king

wants very badly."

"I'm sure he wants wizard magic very badly. If I possessed any I would lose no time in handing it over with my blessings. I would have done so before all this foolishness."

"Then what are you sneaking back here for?"

"Just a few coins and a hunting kit. Hardly worth a glance from one such as you but vital to we who must flee for our lives from the fear-crazed ignorance these silly tales arouse."

"And what of you pretty one?" he asked Luray. "Are you willing to give up your life to save your treasure?"

"I-I don't know what this is all about. I don't even know what wizards are." She didn't have to put on an act to make her voice sound as fearful as possible.

"You would rather be violated and burned at the stake?"

"NO! I know nothing about it! Take our hunting kit! Take our cabin! What treasure? Would we have lived this crummy life in this crummy village if we had treasure?" She broke into tears. It was easy enough to do. She really did hate the life they lived here.

They weren't buying any of it however. "Very well, start walking up the hill," the officer sighed.

Kingsmen

** **

It was deep in Noonsleep and Kovinga, Revan's immediate commander and the highest ranking man in Doeslon's entire military organization, was due to arrive in a few hours. Revan was in the command post in village Korbatch trying to get some rest, but he was too worried about what Kovinga's visit meant. The search wasn't going well. There hadn't been any real leads since that farm family on the fens. He had reward posters up all over his marches but all they were doing was getting every greedy peasant to turn in every old man who even spoke to a pretty woman, much less had one for a daughter. Kovinga had hinted that Doeslon would probably approve of trying them all by fire, but Revan knew that would put his whole district in open rebellion. Revan was well aware of how impatient Doeslon was getting however and feared that the matter might soon be taken out of his hands.

As he was thinking these things, there was a call at the door, "Excuse me sir, but there may be a development of some importance."

"Yes, what is it?" Revan asked.

A messenger entered dressed in unadorned yellow, dirty and out of breath. "Three bodies have been found just outside a village southeast of the capital, about a two week march

from here."

"Yes, what of them?"

"Witnesses say the victims screamed they were being attacked by wizards before they died. The healer in the village examined the bodies and found that they had superficial burns and two had knife wounds but only one was threatening. He was sure none of them died of those wounds or the burns. Commander Kutaiaa thought it would be wise to bring you the news in case the wizards really were involved."

"A good decision, is there any more?"

"Just this written report sir."

Revan took it. The report was brief, with nothing in it but the details of the verbal message. Revan considered this proof that the wizards were heading this way. That village was almost on a direct line between Lharmouth fens and here. This had happened three and a half weeks ago, it was possible they were in this vicinity already.

"Why wasn't I informed of this earlier?"

"Kutaiaa only learned of it this Morningday. I've ridden as hard as my keda would bear to bring this to you."

"Very well. Am I to guess this had to be pried from the villagers?"

"Oh no, they were happy there was some interest in the event. They're so far off the king's roads that they didn't know this was all going on. They were terrified that they had to face eldrich forces alone and grateful for the king's help."

Revan wondered if he should station more men inside the cabin or re-double his efforts on the street patrols. He wanted to get up and do something himself, but the command post had to be manned in anticipation of Kovinga's arrival. He had to be here, but he could send the duty officer and two guards out to the cabin and leave the street patrols on duty thru the remainder of the sleep. He had to keep one guard and runner here, but that would be enough.

The patrol watching the house from the street wasn't all that conspicuous, when the wizards returned they would probably not notice and walk right into their cabin. It was nearly impossible to approach the cabin from the rear due to the fence and the neighbors, so he wasn't really worried about them sneaking in. Still it would be more thorough if he had more than one man inside.

For another hour he worried about these things and failed to find sleep. He gave up the thought of Noonsleep and went out to the front room of the house which he had commandeered and started explaining the situation to second officer Pindarn. Just then there was a hubbub outside, one of the men from the road patrol came riding in breathless.

"We found their tracks! Someone from the village came out to meet them," the soldier went on. "Then we went to their cabin and found the bunk in the mill room was all torn up. They must have had a compartment we never found because it wasn't like that this breakfast time."

"Where's officer Sandeel?" was the first thing Revan

asked.

"Following the tracks sir. One set came out from the village and met them just off the west road, then they all came into the village up that little wash."

"They could only be heading for the cabin," Revan said.

"That's why we were sent ahead to it," the soldier said.

"We think they've already been there."

He would have to mobilize everyone, leaving only one man back to inform Kovinga of what was happening. The messenger was still around, he would have to be the one to stay.

"We'll search the whole village. Take these two, seal off all roads east," he told Pindarn. "You take the north," he told the other two guards. "Get back to Sandeel and take the south, I'll get Tarton from the watch and get the west taken care of." He paused, thinking of something he'd forgot, "Where was Calbine? He had the duty in the cabin didn't he?"

"I never saw a trace of him," the soldier answered.

"Did you look for him?"

"No, I came right here."

"We better find him, one of Tarton's men will take care of that. Get back to Sandeel." He turned to the messenger.

"You're going to have to stay here and fill Minister Kovinga in on what's happening here and why I..."

Another rukus sprang up outside, all the guards started yelling. Revan ran to the window just in time to see another of Sandeel's men fall from the arms of a husky local farmer.

There was an arrow buried in his shoulder. Revan was outside in a split second, joining the guards in helping him up and carrying him inside.

"We found them both," the injured man gasped, "They were hiding in some brush in that wash on the west side. We were marching them in when some dude came and shot us. I fear Officer Sandeel's dead."

This was about the worst news there could be. "Where did they go?" Revan asked.

"They took the kedas, I think they headed west. I was on the ground."

"How long ago?"

"Less than fifteen minutes. I walked till I reached the street, then I'm afraid I collapsed."

"Loss of blood, you did the best you could. They'll take care of you."

The man was on the map table by now. One of the guards was ready with a rag for a tourniquet. It would of course do no good, but the medic was also hurrying into the room.

"Everyone who isn't needed here better come with me." Revan stood up and moved back into the yard. There were three kedas saddled, he mounted the one which looked most rested. "I'm going to their cabin, we'll ride from there as soon as we get a patrol with fresh kedas."

He was just turning and let his eyes look up the street to the north where a guilded entourage surrounding a massive

carriage studded with stylized representations of every piece of military hardware known to man would soon be materializing. That would be more trouble than he could handle. His only chance now was to personally lead a patrol to give chase. He knew better than to come back without them.

13. On the Run Again

They were glad Chofa knew how to use a bow and hadn't hesitated. Killing sickened her but there was no way they could be in any more trouble than they were already. There was nothing to be done but make a run for it. These military kedas weren't cavalry so they were used to strange riders and didn't hesitate to take them. Luray and Oliar took the larger one, Chofa sat by himself on the smaller.

They stayed off the roads, heading due west thru the fields once they got a little way from the village. They rode hard. The hardest problem was the river, the Northern Teeth and the cache were on the far side. The nearest ferry in this direction was seven miles away and this bank of the river was too populated to let them make it. There was every possibility the ferry would be guarded also and even if it wasn't, they would be recognized.

"We'll have to try and get these kedas over the ford," Luray called out.

"There can't be a ford in the Lhar," Chofa called back.

"There's a swim in it, but just up here the main channel is small and there are islands like stepping stones."

"How will we get Oliar over a swim?" Chofa asked.

"I'll help him," Luray said.

"You can't do that!"

"She's a good strong swimmer my boy," Oliar said, "and I fear we have no choice."

Luray had ridden the ford before, but with a familiar keda. Still these were military beasts and should be trained for most emergencies. She waved their keda at the turn and it flowed down the new path, which soon brought them across a small watercourse. It was a long winding course on this island, then two more sloughs, somewhat larger than the others but not enough to worry the kedas or cause them to dismount. Next there was a long reach of brushy shallow water, still not enough to bother them. After that there was a long plankway across a reach of soggy ground, then a gallop over a sandy island.

They burst thru onto the beach and the main channel was before them, nearly three hundred yards of water with a noticeable current and two ships visible. It was guarded by two soldiers lounging sleepily in the shade at the end of the path. Of course they were up and on their feet when they heard the galloping kedas break into the opening. The nearest made a grab for Luray just as she was swinging down from her mount. She saw him just in time to swing both feet into his face and cause his just-drawn sword to swing past her.

"It's them!" the other was yelling, "oh Flaming God it's them," he repeated.

Chofa dashed past them to the water's edge and whirled his mount as he brought the bow up. The soldier near Luray

was regaining his balance and drawing back for another swing at her.

"We need to take the girl alive!" She heard the other yell, "Kill the master!" and the one near her redirected his swing toward Oliar.

Luray was still stumbling away from the keda and toward the water, unable to regain her balance. The bow sang and an arrow whizzed to bury itself in the soldier's upper thigh. That slowed him enough that Oliar slid off the other side of the keda. Meanwhile the other soldier had his sword held high and was closing on Chofa, who was desperately trying to fumble another arrow from the quiver. By this time Luray had regained her balance and drawn her knife. Chofa wasn't going to get the arrow drawn in time, so with all her strength and skill Luray hurled the clumsy hunting knife toward his attacker. She had a little skill with knives and bows, but this knife was unfamiliar and she hadn't done much practicing throwing it. It struck the man in the face, breaking his swing for Chofa while opening a gash, but did not embed. It bounced back toward Oliar who was hopping on one leg toward it.

Chofa was now too close for the bow, but had drawn his own sword in time to fend the assailant's blow and the crystal rang while Oliar tried to come up behind him with the knife. Meanwhile the other soldier showed his military toughness by yanking the arrow from his leg with a mighty scream, then came for Luray. She was now unarmed, but could easily

outrun him with his wound. She didn't want to leave the keda however, they would need it.

The soldier who was fighting with Chofa was a far better swordsman than he was, but distracted by Oliar coming up behind him and disadvantaged because Chofa was still mounted and an excellent rider. After only a few swings he broke away to have them both in front of him and Chofa immediately brought the bow back up and drew an arrow. At this point the soldier knew his situation was hopeless and bolted into the brush crying that he was going for help. Luray led the other away from the keda while this was happening. Chofa jumped down from his mount, arrow still drawn.

"Stop!" he yelled, "Or this arrow will be the death of you!" The man stopped, the pain of his wound strong on his face. "Move back up the path," Chofa commanded, and the soldier began to do so, now dragging his leg heavily.

Once he was out of sight, Chofa retrieved the blooded arrow, then took the leads of both kedas and bid Luray and Oliar to the water. She lost no time in setting out for the far shore. Chofa let them get a good start before taking his eyes from the path and entering the flow himself. She looked back only until she was sure the kedas would come with him, then swam with all her strength for the far side. It was a long swim and the current was bringing her as far down the beach as the width of the river. The Lhar is not a hideously dangerous river, but there are some spheelunge in it and she was afraid

there might be some lingering smells from hers and Olliar's wounds that would help draw them.

As she began to near the shore, she saw that one of the ships, thankfully the further one, was in the king's service. It was too distant to threaten them, but it would be more confirmation of where they had gone.

The other good news was that this side of the ford was unguarded. They couldn't give the kedas time to dry and they were cranky about that. This was a worry because there were two other channels in the ford, one of which was the second largest, needing a second hundred-yard swim. With some protests, the kedas crossed them and were glad to get on dry land again, so glad they were able to get them to a gallop again till they were beyond the stares of the densest habitation on the north bank of the Lhar, where they dropped to a twine. They made good time and were soon well away from habitation. It was very open country here in the far west of Doeslon's realm, an open plain with very few trees and settlements miles apart.

They stopped to make a lunch of wild leshin and a large inglethor. During that they noticed a tiny dot on the horizon behind them. Luray could guess that it was a man on a keda by concentrating on it. The only thing they could see for sure was that it was a single entity. At least it was no company of soldiers. The disturbing thing was that there probably wouldn't be anyone out this way except after them. Whoever

it was went behind a distant grove and didn't come any closer.

They cut lunch short and went on. Ollar was doing all right. His leg wasn't bothering him and with Luray's help he was staying on. The keda they rode was big enough to carry them both though they didn't go as fast as they did earlier.

The miles rolled on and the country got wilder than ever. As they drew closer to the hills there were outcrops of rock scattered around and the plain began to show a bit of elevation here and there. The only habitation was an occasional hunter's or herdsman's cabin. They could reach the cache during Dawnsleep if the kedas would keep going, the country was open enough to travel by the light of Narrulla.

But as Kortrax set he illuminated for them that single rider on an undulation of the plain a few miles back. It was now obvious that he was following them, and it was equally obvious that there was no way they could avoid him. Their best bet would be to find a good place to make a stand.

A few miles further on they came to a likely spot. It was an outcrop of rock, so eroded it looked almost like ruins, or maybe ruins so old they looked like eroded rock. Dwarves and Trolls had claimed these lands since prehistoric times, Nordics and Elves were the trespassers here. Whatever it was, it was on slightly higher ground and had plenty of cover for themselves and the kedas. It was open around them so anyone coming up on them would have none.

"How long do you think it will take him to get here?"

Luray asked.

"Who knows, if he knows we've come up here he may never show himself, he may wait us out."

"Who could he be?" Chofa asked.

"I'm sure I don't have the faintest idea."

"To my eyes he looks like the one I saw in the wood the week before we left on this journey."

"I'm amazed that you can even guess at this distance and in this light."

"Oh no, Luray groaned, "look!"

The single rider was long out of sight but now the last glimmers of evening illuminated four other specks on the far swell. These were undoubtedly a patrol of the king's men.

"He must be their scout," Oliar said, "this will be a harder fight than I would like."

"Maybe we can make a run for the cache?" Luray said.

"We could try it, but we are riding double while they are single. They could easily overtake us and they are riding hard now."

"He hasn't overtaken us yet."

"He was just waiting for the troops to get here. He wasn't about to take us alone, we see that now."

For hours they sat in nervous anticipation. Darkness became total except for the icy light of Narrulla. The plains were stark and beautiful in that light. There was such a profound silence, only occasionally would a bird or a nyobba

cry, no lumins inhabited these rocks. They stared into the darkness until their straining eyes picked out things that weren't there, until their ears made sounds for them. Luray thought she felt the thudding of a running kranjan, then realized it was just the pounding of her own heart. The kedas took it with indifference, they just lay down to sleep. It had been a long day for all of them, especially Chofa. It was now at least twenty hours since any of them had any rest, and he had only a few hours even then. They huddled together in the darkness, talking quietly in an effort to keep themselves awake.

"I've heard you talk of a place called Dempala," Chofa asked, "Where might that be?"

"It's on the far side of the great sea from the Old Lands, but long gone in time."

"How long?"

"I guess there is time to explain," Oliar began. "Dempala was a city like no other before or since. It stretched over seven hundred miles along the southwest shore of the sea, and often two hundred miles in width. All the ruins in those lands from the pre-breakout shore to the impossible peaks are of that one city."

Luray knew that wouldn't mean much to him because he had never traveled in the Old Lands, never mind the ancient lands across the sea where Dempala had stood. What he knew of it was only from their narration and there is no way to get a sense of scale from that. He could have thought about the

miles, they had come almost thirty today, but he probably hadn't felt how big that was. Those were just numbers. They should have said it was as big as all the mountains of all the Dwarves' realms.

"What has become of it all?" Chofa asked.

"It's rotted, crumbled and carried away. Today's kings still take their building stone from the ruins. Twelve centuries have passed since Dempala was a city."

"And what has happened to its time, its people, how did such a city fall?"

"Many things. People got lazy, the burning rock ran out, kings and emperors got lazy, people stopped learning. Greed was the worst of it. A whole way of life was built that was not sustainable. As things ran out the powerful fought over what was left. The wars of legend were centuries later, when a surviving scion of a former emperor tried to rebuild."

"This is just too much. Is the world never ending? Does it go back in time forever?"

"No, but on the scale of human life it might as well."

"I thought history only goes back to the wars of magic?"

"History goes much, much, farther back than that. The Nordic men who settle these lands trace their history back to the wars of magic because that is when they began the flight from the monsters of that time. The stories of the Elvish Gods are really distorted stories of Dempala. "

Oliar went on and lectured him some more, relating the various Gods to kings in old Dempala. Chofa hadn't even

heard of those Gods. Those legends were popular before the wars of magic, now even the legends of those Gods had been forgotten.

They came to realize they were being waited out. Possibly they were being surrounded. Very carefully Luray went to look around. She stayed low, not wanting to be silhouetted against the sky for even an instant. Possibly no one knew they were up here. Possibly the kingsmen had figured it was impossible to track them in the dark and had made camp.

Luray saw nothing, heard nothing. When Dusksleep was about half over and Narrulla was long set they decided to take turns sleeping. Two of them would have to stand watch, the other could sleep. That was how they would spend the rest of the dark. They gave Chofa the first rest, Oliar the second. By the time it was Luray's turn to sleep she was finding it almost impossible to stay awake in spite of the hunger which was now growing fierce. By the time she got to sleep it was nearly Dawnsleep.

Narrulla was well up again when she woke, meaning Dawnsleep was more than half over. It was now possible to see clearly across the plains, she could see nothing stirring anywhere. Oliar was watching the north but was sound asleep. She panicked when she saw that Chofa was nowhere to be found.

She shook her father awake. "What happened to Chofa," she whispered desperately.

"Nothing, why? What are you doing up already?"

"It's late in Dawnsleep, Chofa's gone."

"Gone? I must have dozed off. But where would he have gone?"

"Could someone have snuck up here while we slept and taken him?" Luray asked.

"I think not, we are the ones they want. I don't think he would have run out on us though, he's in as deep as we are now."

"He wouldn't run out. He must have gone to try and scout them."

"Don't be silly," Oliar said, "that would be suicidal."

Kingsmen

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Revan, two guards and a bowman were riding the middle course. Officer Pindarn had taken three men and was riding a couple miles to the north, officer Tarton and his men were riding south of them. They had lost sight of each other in the wild country here in the far west of his dominions beyond the rebellion but Revan didn't dare pare their strength by sending any of his men to communicate with the other parties.

He felt like a field officer again, on patrol with troops at his back. His concerns were of the field. It was a welcome change from a life of court intrigue and political scheming. He had nature and the enemy to answer to and not a pompous fool in a gilded carriage.

Strange thoughts crossed his mind. How little he wanted to face Kovinga. He saw little hope that this chase would prove fruitful for there were now only a couple hours of daylight remaining and once darkness set in tracking would be nearly impossible. He thought of never coming in. Would these men follow him if he set them up as a band of highwaymen? Would they follow him into neighboring kingdoms? He knew none of them had families. As far as he knew none of them had sweethearts. His men commonly vented their passions on peasant girls in the areas where they served. It had been his policy that they not kill or seriously

injure the girls they used, a policy that was slowly raising the popularity of the king's forces.

Maybe he could hire on as a soldier in another land. His experience should be worth something. He would hire in at a level below his current post so he wouldn't be in the political arena any more. He missed his days as a field officer.

But he also knew he was getting old for it. His tenth decade was drawing to a close and already his body longed for the comforts of garrison and palace that his mind shunned. In two more decades the rigors of the field would be too much for him and he would have to return to a gentler life.

This was the age when one most regrets the life of a soldier. Now it would be good to have sons nearing maturity, someone to tend the heavy work of the farm, someone to take young wives to brighten the household. Now it would be pleasant to have a good woman to stay home with instead of plundered wenches never seen before or since. Some real affection would be nice, not just fear and occasionally a little gratitude at being allowed to live.

They rode hard, but not in desperation. His keda wasn't fresh and would not go at a full run. From the tracks of the quarry they should be gaining, their strides were not overly long. He idly wondered where they got the third keda from, but it wasn't important. They could have stolen it from any number of farms along the way. One of them rode a little apart from the others. He thought that would be the boy.

He wondered how the boy was fairing. Without a doubt Calbine had been his first kill. That vomit hadn't been from a trained and experienced soldier. Sandeel must have been a little easier. Had he become a hardened killer already? Would he be a dangerous adversary? The men at the ford seemed to think so, they said he had been ready to kill again.

Darkness fell as they rode on toward the west. He didn't like doing this in such open country. They were exposed now that there were low ridges and it was now getting too dark to leave the spoor and hope to find it again after a detour.

"I think they've holed up in those rocks sir," Tellow the bowman said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Kedas're nervous. There's more kedas around. They must smell an unfamiliar one."

The rocks he talked about were those on an outcropping a fair distance ahead. It was too dark to be sure, but it seemed likely there was no place else around they could be hiding. He could see no other cover anywhere till the distant rocks of the Teeth, still many miles away.

"In this next dip we'll dismount and proceed on foot. We'll have to scout around but we'll need a little more darkness for cover."

"Right sir."

The dip was only a couple hundred yards farther on. It was just a low spot in the gentle roll of the land but it was

enough to get them out of sight. The rocks were about five hundred yards farther on. They staked the kedas and unlimbered weapons. Then went up the nearly imperceptible slope of the next rise until they could see the outcropping again. The ground was covered with ribbonleaves with an occasional clump of wild thumor that would provide cover to a prone man during darkness.

"We must remain silent, no matter what happens. They may know we are here, they may not. Any sound gives us away."

"They may not even be up there."

"They may not, but we can't track them any farther in darkness anyway, so let's check this out. Tellow and Varga, take the south flank, Graag and I will take the north. Meet back here in one hour."

They moved out, staying far enough downslope so they could just get a glimpse of the rocks while they walked. At times they had to drop to a crawl to keep out of sight. It was long and tiring. The place was difficult to approach. Eventually they came to a tiny rain gully that let them get a little closer. Revan took the lead as they crawled single file up it. As they passed a difficult rocky spot Graag grunted behind him and Revan motioned him to silence. He crawled on another hundred yards until the gully would take him no closer. He then looked out from between thumor at the rocks still a hundred yards above.

There was someone up there. He could just barely hear the sound of a voice, but could not make out the words. The wizards knew they had the high ground and knew they had weapons enough to stand off a small band of soldiers. It was going to take care to get closer to them and maybe some waiting to let them fall to sleep. No doubt they had two of their number on one side and one on the other. He could pick out the places where they could watch the maximum approach and not be seen. Assuming they were smart enough to use those places, he saw that they would have to look for a better approach.

He wondered if they had some of their magic employed. They might have some kind of magic eye that could see in the dark. Maybe they could talk to kedas and use their keen sense of smell to warn them of their approach? He would have to take both of these possibilities into account. Those and how many more?

He turned around to motion to Graag and saw that he was not here. He looked back to see which clump of brush he had ducked into but could not see him. Maybe he had hurt himself badly on one of the sharp rocks back there. He wanted to go check on him but also wanted to watch longer to see if there was anything more to be learned. Graag was a soldier, he would have to take care of himself for a few more minutes.

Nothing more happened. He thought he heard the distant voice again. It was more of a drone than a conversation. Revan got the uneasy feeling that it could be the old wizard

working up some kind of a spell. Revan was not a coward, he's faced long odds and wrathful superiors on many occasions, but this stood his hair on end and made his anus twitch. In a very few minutes he was crawling down the ravine somewhat faster than he crawled up it.

He came upon Graag. In the dim light he could see a lifeless face twisted in agony. He was over on his back with a welter of blisters on his face. Revan fought panic for long seconds, then carefully looked around. There was nothing and no one. Not a sound but the lumins could be heard.

Whatever had done this had been silent. It had obviously happened when Revan thought Graag had only banged himself on a rock. Whether it had been nearly instantaneous or whether Graag had endured what looked like unspeakable agony in silence he had no way of knowing.

There could be no doubt that this was some form of wizard magic. Did they know Revan and Graag were here, or were they throwing invisible fireballs at random? There was no way to tell. If they knew, then they were just playing with Revan now. They could do the same to him at any time. If they were casting at random they might not hit this spot again. Probably Graag's silence had saved him in that case. Had he screamed they might have assumed there were more people here and hurled more into the area.

With intense effort Revan dragged the big man farther down the gully. He didn't go very far, just enough so he

thought he wouldn't be visible from the rocks where the wizards camped. Then he hoisted the body over his back and stumbled back toward the meeting point. Graag had been a noble soldier, well worthy of an honorable pyre.

Tellow and Varga were already back with the kedas when he got there. They were quite concerned about Graag, even more so when they found out he was dead. Even more so when they found out he was dead from wizard magic.

"I never would have believed it sir," Tellow said, "I never thought they really had any magic in them. I thought it was a just a bunch of tales."

"Aye, and did you think the great wars of magic were just a bunch of fairy tales too?" Varga chided.

"I'd've said they were somewhat embellished," Tellow answered.

"They're not fairy tales, I'll tell you that. Me own grandpappy seen the dead heath by the blooded plain where them magicians hashed it out. There's still not a stick that grows there. I've heard tell all of Gorgoroth is still just as dead."

Tellow didn't argue, instead he wanted to know the details of how Graag was killed. It was unfortunate that Revan didn't really know. He told what he could, which made it seem he was killed swiftly and silently, practically under Revan's nose. To change the subject he asked what they found out.

"Didn't see or hear a thing," Tellow replied. "Nothing

moved, nothing peeped the whole time we watched."

"Well we know they're up there," Revan said. "They might be anywhere up there but it seems to me they'd be set up to watch from every direction. I don't know if they have to sleep or not..."

"'Scuse me sir but there's nary a wizard needs a wink 'o sleep. Don't need eats either the way I hear it."

"Then we'll have to assume they're watching all directions," Tellow said.

He wasn't that convinced that Varga was the final authority on the black arts but this wasn't the time to argue. He was no expert either, having never had to deal with any before. His own confidence was shaken to the point where he was ready to believe anything.

"We may have to try and round up Pindarn's and Tarton's parties and try to get them here by dawn. Maybe we can intercept those wizards if they try to move out to the west with the dawn."

"How'll we find the rest of us? A fire arrow will surely give us away to them wizards," Tellow said.

"They should each be a few miles from us. If you move off five miles to the north you won't be seen from here but Pindarn may see your arrow."

"Am I to try for Tarton sir?" Varga asked. "If so you'll be left here with nothing but yer broadsword between you and them evil ones."

"No, there's time. Tellow can reach them both."

"Aye sir."

"Before you leave lets plan a little more. Perhaps if we had done that the first time Graag would still be with us now. It seems we should have brought our forces together before going to scout them the first time."

"We didn't even know they were about sir."

"True, and I won't waste time worrying that issue now. I'm assuming we're safe from them at this distance. They can neither see us nor hear us."

"Except for they're havin' a magic eye," Varga said.

"They've eyes that can see from one side of the kingdom to the other, even into another kingdom. They've got eyes that can see thru the dark and make men and beasts glow. I've seen it meself at a fair in the Dwarven Lands, may The Flame take me." He wiggled his fingers in the sign.

"I think we can assume that if they did we'd all be like poor Graag now."

"That's a fact," Tellow observed.

"I also think if you stay in this dip when you ride out you'll be safe."

"Shh!" Varga said.

They were instantly silent and fell to the ground, Tellow with his crossbow up. No threat seemed apparent.

"What is it?" Revan asked.

"The lumins."

Revan noticed. The lumins had stopped their incessant calls on the side toward the wizards. They stayed tense and

silent, eyes straining against the dark, palms ice-watered. Revan thought the hammering of his heart would give them away. Above it he could not hear a sound but the rustle of the vaguest breeze and the more distant lumins behind them. He kept watch on his companions as well as the rise in front of them, hoping they were not going to erupt in boils the way Graag had. Nothing happened to them, no sound was heard, no motion was seen.

"Prob'ly a nyobba," Tellow said at last, when the lumins were back to full call.

"You're probably right," Revan answered, wishing he believed it, wishing Tellow believed it himself.

They went on planning, but did it in whispers from the cover of wild thumor, all the time with their eyes scanning the area.

"It seems to me the old man is the one we have to worry about," Revan said, "I'm pretty sure it was him I heard chanting spells when I was near them. More than likely the daughter has few powers that will be dangerous if we don't let her charm us. I'm sure they can't have taught the boy anything by now, though we've seen he can be dangerous as a warrior."

"I'll not complain to face a warrior," Varga whispered. "Let me face two together and then be out of this and a merry man I will be."

"I think that goes for all of us."

"Right," Tellow agreed.

"We know what our king wants, it's their hoard. If we kill

them both we'll lose it, so we must take the daughter alive."

"Can we sir?" Tellow asked.

"I think we can. From what I was told in Kobal a she-wizard's powers are all in her loins. It may be a sore test, but we must not put her to use. If we can avoid that I think we can prevail."

"I'll not be putting her to use," Varga said. "I'll not be darin' to look at her for fear she'll show me her true self."

"I think we can deal with the boy also," Tellow said.

"We've agreed to that," Revan said.

"Which means we must eliminate the old man," Tellow said.

"And there's the rub, aye sir?" Varga said.

"Yes. I'm still thinking an ambush for when they move out at dawn," Revan said. "We'll need all our forces and we'll need to find a place to set it."

"I think I should be moving out in that case. It may be they are not easy to find, and I'm not long on fire arrows."

"Yes, it's time," Revan told him. "Stay low and stay quiet on the way out of here. Find Pindarn first, we'll be right here when you return. While you look for Tarton we'll move around to the west, but I want to have a larger force before we do that."

Tellow tried to rouse a keda to carry him but had no luck. They were spent from the day and would have nothing to do with the notion. At this time there was no way to discipline

them without raising a ruckus, so Tellow gave it up and set off at a gentle trot.

He was not yet out of sight when he began clutching at himself, then gasped, then fell. Revan swung in that direction, straining to see something, anything, but could not. There was no motion, no sound. Tellow lay there inert, the lumins still sang, the gentle night breeze blew over them and the dark plains undulated into the distance beyond.

He heard Varga expel a breath and realized he was also holding his. He breathed, but nothing more. Long minutes of unbearable tension passed. There was nothing to see, nothing to be done. Quick Narrulla set in the east, leaving the darkness even darker. Only the uncountable stars on this desolate plain remained.

With conscious effort Revan relaxed his muscles lest he be too cramped to move should the need arise. He was now prepared to wait in this clump of Thumor thru Nightday and Dawnsleep. Without a doubt if Morningday ever arrived he was resigning his commission on the spot, forsaking Doeslon and taking a new life, be it as a peasant laborer, a soldier in another kingdom or a highwaymen. It mattered not in the least. He didn't mind facing an enemy he could see and fight, he had gone into battle against long odds with dry palms and a clear head. But this was nothing that could be fought. It struck from a distance without sight or sound to precede it. It killed horribly and quickly. He was as a ytith fighting a farmer against this.

His people's ancestors had come down from the Old Lands to get away from this. To get away from the tales of this. He had never really believed it; until now. Now he knew why his ancestors had come to these shores and why their discipline was strict. All he could see was the silhouettes of this desolate land against the stars. The rocks seemed to loom above him from here. The old man's chanting had stopped. What did that mean?

After what must have been more than an hour Varga stirred. "I'm gonna be bringing him in now. I can't abide the waiting any longer. If it be my turn, I'm a gonna take it."

With that he got up and deliberately walked over to Tellow's body. He reached it, stooped and lifted it, then staggered back toward Revan under the load. He set it gently next to Graag's. Revan watched Varga's lips move silently with some words, watched his face blossom into a mass of welts and blisters and watched him slump silently over the others, making a neat pile.

Once again there was nothing to see, nothing to hear. Revan watched the night on the edge of shock, barely able to breathe, his lips and fingers numb, his brain screaming in his ears.

Revan heard the tread of a heavy foot, and turned to see a huge shadow approach. Where he had come from Revan had no idea, he seemed to have materialized out of the night, like the darkness had coalesced into this darker shadow. It was

blackier than the night but seemingly solid. It carried a shield and the hilt of a sword or dagger. In the dim light he saw it lift a black shield from its eyes, something like a knight's visor on its helmet.

This couldn't be the old wizard, it must be an apparition. If it was any of them it had to be the boy. If so he had become much more than a peasant, had already learned much from the old one. Then he remembered Turleet's warning that they could change shape. No doubt this had been the old man at one time.

"A pity for you that your stupid king thinks he can send his pitiful troops in such a vain attempt to claim a share of ancient knowledge. You are such fools to give your lives in his attempt to retain his life. Your life is worth little I'm sure, you soldiers have no families, no loved ones. It's a shame that no one will miss you, no one will mourn you. It should be some consolation to know that your king will not be among the living for much longer than you."

"What use will my death be to you? I can do nothing against you."

"You have seen, that gives you knowledge. We prefer you remain ignorant and tell your comical fables about us. Knowledge of the truth is something we cannot permit."

There was nothing to see, nothing to hear. The apparition raised his hilt of a weapon and pointed it at Revan. For the briefest instant there was an intense searing heat, then the brilliant light at the entrance to death.

14. A Final Confession

It was another hour before Chofa returned. He was almost there before they saw him, crawling over the ground, invisible to anyone who wasn't at an elevation.

"Where did you go?" Luray whispered.

"That was a foolhardy stunt," Oliar whispered.

"I had to know what they were doing," Chofa whispered back.

"See, I told you," Luray said.

"Yes, but what did you find?" Oliar asked.

"The tale is hard to believe, but I found the troops all dead in their camp."

"Dead, how?" Oliar asked.

"Burned, like they were pushed into the fire, but I saw no embers, nor anything they could have burned."

Luray's skin got very cold. "What about the scout?"

"I saw nothing of him. Whatever it was did them in; either it took him off or he escaped it."

"I think it was he that did them in," Oliar said.

"His own troops, what game is this?" Chofa asked.

"A much more serious game. What burned them is something that hasn't been used in this world since the wars of legend. Our 'scout' carries a sun sword from the age of Dempala."

"That means nothing to me."

"No, it wouldn't," Oliar said, "but to us it means that he who pursues us can be nothing but a wizard himself, a rogue wizard."

"A rogue wizard, what does that mean?"

"A person from the golden age who's supply of the dust of youth had run out," Oliar said. "Those who's dust has run out have but one lifetime to try and find more, and in this age the only way to find it is from another wizard."

"The dust of youth?" Chofa sounded more and more confused.

"Medicine which preserves youth," Oliar explained.

"For how long?" Chofa asked.

"Indefinitely," Oliar answered.

"And he pursues you for it?"

"He pursues the treasure we do," Luray told him. She knew already how this conversation would come out, but feared it none the less.

"And this dust is in that treasure?" Chofa asked.

"He believes so," Luray answered.

"And you?"

"I hope so," Oliar said.

"And is that the medicine you seek?"

"Yes." Oliar told him. Well there it was, there was nothing to do now but get this over with.

He stiffened and let go of her. "If that is true, you would be defying the most sacred laws. You mean to usurp immortality..."

"I'll still be mortal, just young and healthy," he said. "I believe there are medicines in that cache that can grow me a new arm."

"But holy law..." Chofa trailed off. He had no words for the blasphemy he was hearing. "How could you? The evil."

"We intend no evil," Oliar said. "Evil is this oppression we all live under. If the knowledge of the ancients hadn't been destroyed we could all be eternally young and much more prosperous right now."

"And for me?" Chofa asked.

"About the only thing we can offer you," Luray said, "is some ancient knowledge and artifacts, and a small amount of wealth. I do mean small, we can buy a small mill, for that really is how we make our day-to-day living, or maybe a small ship, or a farmstead somewhat better than your father's. Of course it will have to be in another land, and before we can do anything we have to undertake a perilous journey to where our treasure is hidden."

"What say you to that?" Oliar asked.

"What can I say! How can I change from one type of being to another in the space of a breath? I admit, I was not as devote as my mother, but to claim ancient knowledge..." He let that go, then said, "How do you know it is there, how do you know what is in it."

"We have been there before," Luray told him. Oliar winced, but she knew it was all going to have to come out and they were going to have to get beyond this issue before they

left this camp.

He didn't even try to respond to that, but just let it bounce off and drop. He was able to go from that, to what it really meant. They were what the kingsmen hunted, and worse than that, what the rogue hunted. The rogue wouldn't be hunting them and clearing a path for them if he didn't know, would he? The silence stretched. She was not going to break it for him, even if he started running without saying a word. His heart was no doubt hammering and his breath was labored when he took her hand. "And what would become of me? Will I turn into some other kind of creature. What are you under your human skin?"

"We are every bit as human as you. We are what you see."

"You saw my arm removed, you say my blood."

"Right, if you are wizards, why did you lose your arm?"

Chofa asked.

"Because wizards are flesh and blood human beings who just happen to possess a little ancient knowledge that is forbidden by the ignorant savages that populate the world today," Oliar was bitter about this. "We know things they don't, we possess some artifacts they don't, but we are every bit as human as every one of them."

"In spite of the evil knowledge?"

"The knowledge is not evil." Oliar told him. "No knowledge is evil in and of itself. Some knowledge can be used for evil and was used for evil in the Old Lands, some can be used for good. We possess some that could be used

either way, much that could be used only for good and most of all, knowledge for its own sake, a legacy of that great time far before the oldest legends."

"I know the great wars of magic were to defeat the evil wizards," Chofa said. "That's a fact of history."

"Yes it is," Luray said, "and they were defeated. It was wizards on the side of good that helped defeat them. You can be sure of this, if there was no wizardry employed by our side, we would never have prevailed."

"Our side?" You say.

"My father and mother both gave blood in that war and none can take that from me. The sword was my father's and has spilled Orc blood."

"The one I carry?" he asked.

"No, the one at the cache, that's a policeman's issue from modern Valindor," Oliar pointed. "There's a whole story behind that but we don't have time for that now."

Chofa was still reeling. He knew how long ago that was, he heard Oliar say, indefinitely, and Luray admitted they had been to this cache before. He looked more carefully at her.

"What would you look like without magic?" he asked her.

"It isn't magic, it's medicine, and without it I'd be dead by now. In addition I'd be flatter in the chest and my hair would be lighter and thinner."

"But will you expire in a few more decades?"

"No, if I took nothing more I would live as long as you and age as quickly as you. With the medicines we own we

could preserve youth somewhat longer."

"Then what about me? Will you then leave me for someone younger when I show age?"

"The medicines will work as well on you as on us," she told him.

That seemed to interest him, for he paused for quite a while. There was a pass of, 'Don't believe it,' across his face but that was replaced by something more like lust. After some thought he asked, "If I join you, will I also have to run from normal men?"

"There are costs. That is why I can never settle on a lover for they must denounce me as a witch. The only lover I can take is one who would accept the offer I make to you now, you are the first and only one I have ever said these words to. You must understand how deep must be the love in my heart before I can dare to say these things."

"I think I can understand that, I can also understand how desperate is your situation. Though when this is over you can simply dispose of me and no one will be the wiser."

"How?" Luray asked. "You have the strength, you can reach any weapons before us. No, you will leave this camp alive whether you are with us or not. Our lives have been in your hands many times these weeks, now they are in your hands again. I do not know if you will come join us or not but I have put all my faith in you that you will not betray us."

"We have never done it before, and in all likelihood will never do it again. We owe our lives to you and this is all we

have with which to repay you. Besides that, I want you, I want to have you with me, I think I want to settle down to someone special, at least I want to try it, I don't know how long yet."

"It is so much to grasp, it is so much to unbelieve."

He was silent, just staring at her lost in his thoughts. They both waited anxiously for the outcome. Luray had a hard time imagining what this must be like for him. For generations children had been raised to fear and despise those with ancient knowledge, and for some reason. Twelve centuries ago greedy Emperors had brought the Energy Age crashing down, destroying untold billions of people and plunging the world into it's present cycle of ignorance and poverty. Of course today people knew nothing of that time. But a few centuries ago, less than forty generations, a certain few evil sorcerers had resurrected some ancient weapons and mutated ghastly warriors into being, plunging these people's whole ancestral countryside into a paroxym of war and violence on a scale that current minds could comprehend. All wizards were condemned because of that, in spite of the wizards on the side of humanity that prevented the triumph of darkest evil and the enslavement of everyone in these countries.

More legends told of the foul creatures that were bred in those days, the distorted caricatures of human beings. People today didn't understand how that was done, instead they thought wizards either were of those forms or could change

into those forms. Many believed that when a wizard appeared as a human it was only an illusion and behind it there was some distorted creature. She could only hope he had enough contact with her to know it was impossible that she could have kept up an illusion that completely and that intimately.

"If I keep the notion that I have any choice in the matter, what do I have to do? Is there some sort of initiation? Must I be transformed?"

"You do have a choice, everything is just as real as it ever was," Luray said. "There is no such thing as magic, everything we or any other wizard can do is done with devices or medicines or some application of science."

"If we were in the Keep there would be an initiation ceremony in the university hall up on the canyon rim with all the other new enrollees," Oliar told him, "but out here there is nothing we could do."

"There is no transformation of your person," Luray said, "your body is as much a wizard's as ours."

"We will have to get to our cache however. Without the treasures there we are no more than any other human being."

"Any where is that?" Chofa asked.

"Deep in the Northern Teeth."

They were silent for awhile, concentrating on watching for any sign of movement on the plains in front of them. They listened for any sound, but heard nothing but the normal sounds of the dark.

After the silence had become boring again Chofa asked, "Why did you become wizards?"

"I was born to one," Luray said.

"I did it for survival."

"How did it help your survival? It seems a great danger to me."

"Survival of civilization, survival of the way life that existed in the golden age. When the golden age was ending some people had the foresight to see that civilization was coming to an end and a long spell of troubled times was coming. Those with this foresight hoarded what they could of the products of that age against the time when they would not be available."

"And what did you hoard?"

"There were powerful weapons, far seeing eyes, vast fortunes and most especially..." here he drew a deep breath for this was what they most feared telling him about "...the dust of eternal youth."

"I can now understand why you are so resented. I can also understand why the king pursues you so. He is a very old man, they say he could die any year."

"True, we've always suspected that was what he wanted," Oliar said, "but we don't know how he ever got the knowledge that it even exists."

"I knew nothing of it till just now. I'm sorely taxed to believe such a tale."

"But it IS true," Luray insisted.

"A wonderful miracle if it is. Do you intend to share this with me also?"

"Of course," Luray said, "If not, I cannot stay in love with you for in a few decades I would have to watch you shrivel and in a few decades more, die."

"Forgive me that I find this hard to believe." He stared at them in silence awhile, then asked, "Is there enough? How long will your supply of this magic dust last?"

"I will not presume on my father's share," Luray told him, "But for the two of us mine should last three, maybe four centuries."

"Three or four centuries, I can't conceive of life that long."

"But should we win thru to our cache and nothing befalls us, you will live it," Luray told him.

"Surely that is not possible!"

"But it is," Oliar told him. "I have lived five already. I was born in the 25th century, when Goblins ruled the Old Lands and the wars of magic were fresh memories."

Nervously Chofa turned to Luray and spoke. "You said you are somewhat older than you look. I must know how much older."

This was the question she dreaded the most. To hear that an ancient wizard was five centuries old was just some magic fairy tale and no more personal than hearing that God was over a hundred centuries old. How would he take it now that it was someone close to him? Someone he had lain with? This

time of reckoning had to come, and come it did, earlier than she would have liked. There was nothing to do now but tell the truth and face the consequences.

"I am about one century," she told him, "not a decade short of it."

"A century," was all he said at first. He said it calmly and quietly, like she had told him her weight or height. In the same calm voice he went on. "The oldest person I ever heard of was my great grandmother, and I only heard of her because my grandmother took me to visit her grave when I was just a tyke, before grandmother died. Great grandmother was born over thirty decades ago. Once I thought that must have been the beginning of time." He turned and looked at her. "You are twice as old as that?"

"I was already a grown woman when the Kliack kingdom broke apart." That was an event in the Old Lands that had triggered the latest great migration to these lands.

"Ancient history."

"No, current events. Ancient history would be something like the Thulitlanth colonies."

"Those are made-up words. A century I can scarcely comprehend and cannot imagine. To me you are immortal, you always have been and will forever be. You try to tell me being a wizard is not a big thing. You say you are just people but with more knowledge. But each new revelation makes you less like me. You are more different than I thought. If you are not Gods you are something very near."

There was a distance in his voice when he spoke those words. No doubt his insides vibrated with the same cold fear that hers did. He turned to watch the darkness again. He stayed at her side, and even glanced at her now and then, but said nothing further on the subject and did not touch her.

"So if this rogue pursues us because his supply of the dust of youth has run out, why is it that yours hasn't run out too?"

"Some of us were wiser than others in judging the length of these troubled times and put up larger supplies," Oliar said. "We can talk about this later, right now I think we had better fly."

"You can fly? Is there no end to your powers?"

"A figure of speech. Though in the days of Dempala huge airships plied the skies and took people to places where today's maps don't even have blank parchment, for the world is much bigger than anyone suspects."

15. At the Cache

They stopped talking and roused the kedas, trying to be as quiet as they could. Narrulla was well up, Dawnsleep gripped the world of men, though there were so few men out here to take it.

It was tough going in the dark, made even worse knowing that the rogue could be behind them, almost surely was behind them. Besides that danger, this was getting into very wild country. Just as Narrulla slipped into eclipse, they saw the heights ahead of them that were their goal. Now there would be only a few more hours and they would complete their journey.

Luray had been to this cache twice before. Each time they had taken enough of the dust to last them a few decades, a small vial that wouldn't be noticed if it was found. It was a viral powder, a whiff a decade was all that was required. When this crisis developed they were less than a decade from coming again. Still it had been so long that the way was unfamiliar. When she saw the first Dwarvish ruin however the way began coming back to her mind.

It wasn't much of a ruin, just a broken watchtower sticking up out of the ground. It was only a few feet in diameter and about ten feet high. Still it was a wonder to Chofa.

"Wait till you get further into it," Oliar said. "There was

quite a Dwarvish presence in this area before Nordics drove them back to the mountains."

The country was scruffier here, the carpet of ribbonleaves was giving way to wild thumor and prickerbrac with a few shaftwood shrubs. The rough gravel soil showed thru in many places. The air of late dark was crisp and cold.

They were doing nothing to conceal themselves now, but had stepped up the pace. This was the final race to the prize. If they could get there before the other they would have some chance of defending it, if not, all was lost. They could not get there too soon however, their weapon had been buried for half a century and would not function till Kortrax filled it. She didn't think they would get there too soon, there was still a long way to go.

The positive thing was that it would be very hard to track them in this country. They weren't making enough noise that it would be possible to track them by sound unless their pursuer was very close. That thought kept her turning around. She could see nothing in the dark, but the spot between her shoulder blades tingled every time she faced west.

By the time Narrulla was out of eclipse they moved into the area where ruins were commonplace. This had been an island just after the breakout of the great sea when the whole basin had been flooded by the sea of reeds. On it had been a thriving Dwarf settlement with several villages and what might have even been called a city at one time, almost the

size of Kobal. The walls were cut with unfamiliar geometric designs and the stonework was heavy and solid. The island had been settled when they first arrived in this basin, the naturally longer lived Dwarves were not as hostile to ancient Elves and given them shelter for a decade. The Dwarves had left this island as it became part of the mainland and they were cut off from their fellows by hostile Nordics instead of a shallow sea.

Because it was important that there be light when they came out with their treasure, they took a round-about route to it. They also did what they could to make it as difficult as possible to track them, doubling back over the hard pavement, riding backwards and leaving false trails.

Finally they reached the place where their treasure was hidden. It was the skeleton of some ancient palace from the time when the island's king reigned. Now it lay half buried in the ground, large trees growing out of its stones. They left the kedas here and strode into a hall that lead into its bowels. It was dark in here, even darker than the dark that was only starting to lose its grip on the country. Small animals scurried and something large hissed and slithered. The hall lead to an enormous room, so vast a small town could be built in it. In the center of this ruined throne room a series of steep steps rose to the old dais. Oliar could not climb it, Luray went on without him. The animal hissed again, it was on top of the dais. She couldn't see it, but lashed out with the sword in the

direction of the sound. It didn't sound like a theirops. It was probably a hkyiitn which would be bad enough if it got its teeth in contact with her.

She was glad when she heard it plop into the water that had collected in this room on the far side of the dais. She struggled the ancient throne out of the way with great effort, what remained of it was at least two hundred pounds of stone. In the dark she scraped off the dung and debris that had collected beneath it in the last fifteen decades. She didn't know just where the hatch was. The seam where it joined was so fine that one had to run a fingernail carefully across it to feel it. Finally she had the hatch clean and found the hole she could put the sword point in to turn it. It turned hard with a grating sound, but it came free.

She was certain in her mind that the chamber within would be free of inhabitants, but even so, squeezing into it feet first in total darkness with all this gamey smell around was difficult. She did it however and closed her hand around the big leather pack that held their urns. She brought that out, and the sunfighter that was made up of a collector shield and attached sunsword. The money sack was small, being mainly aluminum and titanium. Most of the magic books they would have to leave. It was a shame, for untold knowledge was contained in them. The genetics manual she knew by the worn feel of its case, that she would take. Oliar would treasure the ancient atlas, a third she picked at random. Three would fit into the reader once the plates were removed from

their cases. The rest would remain. Maybe someday they could return for them, maybe someday someone would find them who would be able to make sense of the stories they told.

Once outside again they saw Kortrax was nearing the eastern horizon. Their shield was an inky black meaning the sword was totally discharged. They would have to wait a half hour before it would be useful, they would have to wait till Kortrax was full upon it before it would function at full power.

"We'll leave the kedas here, maybe he will think we're still inside. He might even go in after us, or wait some time for us to come out," Oliar planned. "We will leave over the stones, that won't leave tracks and he won't be expecting it. Chofa, you take the sword, you can be more effective with it than Luray. She's pretty good with the bow and with this arm I can still use the sunsword."

"That's a sword? It looks like only the hilt of a sword?"

"When Kortrax fills it, it sprouts a blade twenty feet long with no weight at all that makes the burns you saw."

He looked incredulous, but said nothing about that.

"Where will we go?" Chofa asked.

"I do not know, but I know my intention is to leave the world known to men here and make my way to a new one. I've grown weary of being hunted."

"And well you should. Do you go with him?" he asked

Luray.

"Only if you go also."

"Can we ever come back? I would like to see my brother and sisters sometime."

"Know now that if you come with us all mortal men will shrivel and die in a twinkling. You might have heard that as you grow older time passes more swiftly. It does, and before long the lifetime of a mortal man seems very brief. You may be back to see their great great grandchildren someday, but never in this lifetime can we enter this land again. If you wish to return, you go with my blessing, and I for one feel we owe you a share in our secret of life. You can tell people you were captured by us and we released you when we left the country. Take not the powder till you are old and none will know, but they may suspect and may burn you anyway."

"No, I agreed to join you and I'll not back down as long as you will have me."

"I'll have you." Luray put her arms around him and they held for a long few seconds but she could feel in his embrace that, in spite of his words, the feeling was different.

"I should remind you that the game is not yet won," Oliar said. "There is still a rogue who pursues us and we won't be rid of him till his ashes are scattered to the winds."

They made their way up and out of that open space, stepping carefully on rocks and walls, climbing over and thru the tangled ruins. It was very difficult with Oliar, and at times

they had to hand him up or carry him. They wanted to get completely away before daring to leave a track however, so much time passed while they were still in the ruins.

Then before them the rogue stood. He was dressed mainly in black, a black cape over obsidian crystal armor. His head was covered in a black helmet with silver trim that Oliar alone recognized as that of a Dempalan field marshal. He carried a shield not nearly as dark as Oliar's, and in his hand was the hilt of a sunsword.

He faced them across a small lawn, about thirty feet away. Luray knew from the color of his shield he had at most twelve feet of range. He was facing away from the light so attempting to use that weapon would discharge it faster than it was charging. Still his armor would make him impervious to attack by conventional weapons.

"So at last we meet." The voice was distorted in the helmet. "I have no need of your lives, set down your weapons and your pack and I will be gone."

"Were you of the military?" Oliar asked. "One of the overlords, or did you just pick that up in the ruins?"

"What does it matter?"

"Because the overlords would be gracious enough to allow an old man like me one more refresh before stealing life forever. You could allow my companions a pinch also."

"The overlords were always very generous with people of their own class, while the slaves and peasants went without."

"So you are not. If you feel you are more just, show it by

granting us one last taste."

Luray pulled an urn from the bag. "Allow us that or I will smash this and let it scatter to the winds."

"Try that and you will die now."

"What difference does it make," Luray said, "now or in a few decades? You play to our instincts like you are talking to peasants. Do you think we fear a quick death more than a slow one?"

"I don't think anyone who had come from the golden age could ever smash an urn of the dust of life on the stones."

Oliar whispered to them both, "I want you two to run. Kill his keda and you can get away from him. He can't catch you in that armor and can't stand against your weapons without it. I'll stave him off as best I can here."

"Never, you've little charge yet anyway," Luray whispered back.

"Our shields are now nearly equal in color and I have more light."

"If you were well and strong I still wouldn't hear of it."

"It's your only chance."

"I care not for your scheming," the rogue shouted, "I also do not care to waste time."

He began advancing across the yard. The three backed into the ruined doorway they had just come out of. Luray knocked an arrow and wondered if there was a vulnerable spot in that armor. Oliar held the shield where it would get

maximum light and give him maximum protection. It was charging, but the dawn light was not enough to quench its thirst. In full sunlight it could be used continually. In this light the sword might not even penetrate that armor. Luray let the arrow go, it bounced off the face of his helmet and rattled off a wall.

"Do not annoy me with your toys," he said, "or I will lose my resolve to let you die a natural death."

"We have no desire for natural death," Chofa bellowed and charged into the yard with his sword raised.

"NOOO!" Luray screamed and put her hands to her mouth.

"It's an energy weapon," Oliar yelled at the same time, "You can't fight it."

Chofa heard and did not attempt to close with him. Instead he went to the side and circled around him.

"He's got twelve to fifteen feet of blade in there. Circle around him but stay out of range. Don't let him corner you."

The rogue had to take his attention off them to keep an eye on Chofa. When he did, that let Oliar stump forward a few strides. Luray also burst into the yard beside him so they now faced him from three different directions. She looked around herself and found a few paving stones, some of which were small enough for her to lift with one hand. There was a chance that a heavy stone well thrown could shatter the armor. First she retreated a little and put down the urns. All the while the rogue was watching them but devoting most of

his attention to Oliar and the energy weapon he held.

Luray threw the smaller of her stones as hard as she could. The rogue saw it and dodged out of the way. As he did Chofa lunged at him for a split second and did actually manage to strike him with the sword. It did nothing to the rogue and Chofa was in grave danger because he was far too close. As fast as possible Luray threw her other stone while the rogue was turning toward Chofa. This time it struck him on the back of the helmet, staggering him but not breaking the helmet or knocking him over. At the same time Oliar gave him a taste of the sunsword on maximum range. Between the two of them they got his attention and thus Chofa was able to scoot back to safety.

The black warrior turned, saw Oliar and then Luray. He began to methodically advance toward Luray. She picked up the urns and retreated. There was nothing more she could do against him. She tried to dart around toward Oliar, but the black one had the angle and cut her off. She darted toward Chofa or the gate behind him. Again he cut her off. He moved very quickly in spite of the weight of his armor.

Then she saw she had made a grave error, she was cornered. She fainted this way and that, but there were only two gates to this yard and she was in the corner opposite them. She was conscious of both Oliar and Chofa calling to her. She knew they were both trying to distract their adversary at the same time. Oliar advanced as quickly as he could, using his sword to keep the rogue from dispatching

Luray.

In a matter of less than fifteen seconds Luray was panting in the corner with the black giant bearing down on her. Already one hand was reaching out for the urns, the other keeping the hilt of his sword flashing back and forth between lunging toward Oliar and aiming straight at her face. He was now close enough to use it.

Luray thought of throwing the urns over the wall. They would smash and a great quantity of the dust would be lost, but it might distract him enough to preserve her life. She thought of throwing one at him. It had less chance of breaking his armor than the stones did, but again, because it was the dust of life it might distract him enough to let her escape with the other. Possibly he would even settle for stopping to pick up what he could of that one.

She heard running steps and looked up at the same time the rogue began looking around. It was Chofa charging with his sword held straight in front of him. Luray tried to scream, tried to tell him you couldn't fight a sunsword with a conventional sword.

She didn't have time for that. There was no time for screaming or taking defensive action. Chofa was very fast and had already approached quite close. Chofa was nearly on the rogue as he brought the sunsword around. Luray saw it all in slow motion, Chofa's mighty lunge, the hilt coming up, the nearly invisible blade leaping from it, the bubbling flesh, the hideous shriek as Chofa's life left him and the mighty clack as

the sword struck the armor. He was already dead but the force of his charge sent them both toppling over, the rogue's weapon flew from his hand. Instantly Oliar moved. In two bounds he covered the distance between them and brought his weapon to bear on the rogue's midsection. It was still a feeble beam, not as strong as the other's had been, and working on armor, but still the scream came. He twisted, reaching for his own blade which was draining itself making magma of the soil. As he reached for it Luray jumped on his hand and arm and kicked it from his grasp once more. He knocked her down and tried to rise, but Oliar kept the beam on him. With one more hideous roar he settled to the ground, inert.

Luray's tears came as she rushed over to lift the charred remains of Chofa. She turned him over and was sick. She laid him back face down, unable to expose such horror to the sky. Meanwhile Oliar had lifted the mask of their pursuer and revealed the lifeless face of Volyen the healer.

16. To New Lands

Two fires burned in the early light, one with honor, one without. Luray continued the wail till the last flames were gone though her throat was raw and hoarse. Oliar held it between her breaths so it might be continuous as if a whole village called his soul swiftly back to the world. Now the flames were gone and there was nothing left but ash and tears. Oliar held her. It was comforting but so much different than the arms that were gone.

"Why did he do it?" Luray croaked, "I just can't understand why he threw his life away like that."

"He didn't know. He was so used to simple things that even when his curiosity brought new knowledge to his mind, his heart didn't know. We should have told him more about it. He just didn't know that you can't fight a sunsword."

"I still wonder if he did know," she sobbed, "and this was the only way he could get free of all the great changes we made in his life. He took them all so easily, a normal person would have balked any number of times but he calmly threw his old life away and came with us. Maybe it unbalanced him a lot more than he ever let us know. I don't think we will ever know the truth."

She cried loud, it hurt less than the wail. "How long have I wanted someone I could love with, someone I could keep. I thought I had someone at last. I did have someone, he saved

us. In spite of all our powers, no, because of our powers, death has stolen him from me again."

"You did have him. I know how hard it is. These folk are so simple, to find one with a sense of wonder instead of fear is a rare thing."

"Don't I know it!" she sobbed. "How many times have I heard, 'Stay with me Luray, stay and tend my weeds, stay and give me lots of sons!' Finally someone who was at least curious about the world beyond his village, beyond his kingdom even."

"That's a rare thing in days like these." He kissed her tears. "But come, let us not stay here, there is nothing but sorrow for us in this land now, let us find another. Lets start by going up into the mountains and seeing the Dwarves again. There is a great king of all Wescarp now in the great halls at Plauwlee, we should find a better welcome there."

"Yes," she said, "none I could love, but a better welcome. That will be fine, I'm weary of love for now."

She put her arm around him to help him on his way with the crutch. Though she helped his body toward the far mountains, it seemed that somehow she was leaning on him.

Epilog

There is much of this I was not privy to at the time, and much that history has not recorded. It was interesting to go back thru the records during the 42nd to research this dramatization of a tiny piece of history in which I played a part. The adventures of the Kingsmen are mainly my own conjecture. The historical record shows only the names of the dead and where and when they fell. Nothing in the historical record disproves any of this conjecture, and it is my hope that it adds to the narration.

The later life of Chilliiss is very heart-warming for her wealth was able to buy the earliest life extending treatments when we brought them from the Keep in the 35th. She did remain elderly for many decades, but eventually was able to join the modern age and I was able to find her and have a very warm reunion with her at the trading company where she was a partner. It was in the, then, brand-new city of Lastriss that was growing in what was the fens we camped in just after the last time I saw her. She became, or was once again, as beautiful as I had expected her to be, by then well educated, worldly and kind hearted. My only regret is that we have since lost touch, but I'm confident she is still out there somewhere finding happiness and bringing it to those around her.

Oliar is currently working at pinnacle labs in Yondure, all

who know Wescarp know his exploits in that land as the modern age began.

Alas, to the best of my knowledge, no other participant in this incident has made it to the modern age. I mourn for all of them, even those who tried to oppose us for they would now see the error of their ways. Most of all, I still, whenever I read this over again, mourn for the simple man to whom I owe my twenty one centuries of life since then.

...Luray