

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This is his first novel.

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BY STEVEN SMITH:

THE TREE OF LIFE

The Map of the Known World

The Ordeal of Fire

The Last Days

This Sacred Isle

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STEVEN SMITH

THE MAP
OF THE
KNOWN
WORLD

monster field press

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Set in Garamond

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For Abby

- PROLOGUE -

The waves tossed Vortigern around like a rag doll. Seaweed entangled his legs and salt water blurred his vision. Weighed down by his sodden clothes, he waded the last few yards to the beach. The waves kept pulling him back but with a huge effort he broke free of their grip and collapsed onto the damp sand. There he lay, fighting for breath as the foamy surf lapped around his legs. The sound of the sea's constant wash and drag filled his ears.

When enough strength had returned to his body, Vortigern stood. He looked out to sea; a burning ship drifted on the dark water and the flames illuminated the waves with angry red and yellow reflections. Vortigern had sailed on the *Endeavour* for six months; now he watched its death throes. Anchored close to it was another vessel—an Ironclad warship.

One hour earlier, the Ironclad had emerged from the mist like a ghost. For the lightly armed *Endeavour* there had been no escape, Vortigern knew the crew of his ship would be dead by now. He remembered their faces as he prepared to jump overboard; the faces of men who knew they were about to die. He would have stayed and died with them but

the captain had insisted, 'You are the strongest swimmer. You must take the map to Lord Hereward. He will know what to do.'

So he alone had survived but the Redeemers would soon discover that he had escaped. Vortigern looked around, taking in his surroundings. He stood in a wide cove, towering cliffs rose in front of him but a steep path offered an escape from the beach. Digging into his last resources of will and strength he made for the path. His footsteps left a trail across the sand; an easy trail for the Redeemers to follow but he had no time to do anything about it.

He scrambled over the bank of pebbles at the top of the beach, the cold wind pushed his damp clothes against his skin and his teeth chattered violently. As he wiped his salt-stung eyes, he saw a band of men, their bearded faces turned demonic by their flickering lamps. Scavengers. Wrecks were common on the treacherous southern coastline and there were rich pickings for those who scoured the beaches. They carried pick-axes, hatchets, crowbars and ropes, and as they reached the foot of the beach, one scavenger noticed Vortigern and bellowed, 'LOOK YONDER, A SURVIVOR!'

Vortigern knew they were Nulled. They were enemies and they would tell the Redeemers that they had seen him.

With a new vigour born of fear, Vortigern ran.

PART ONE

The Black Wagon

Elowen Aubyn sprinted along the narrow street. She wore a linen dress, the skirt of which hung unevenly above her cheap leather shoes. Stitched onto her right sleeve was a piece of red cloth shaped in the letter 'P', the sign of a pauper.

The street, rutted and holed by countless horses and carts, sloped down to a central drain blocked with rubbish and horse droppings, above which swarmed a horde of flies. Washing hung on lines that ran from house to house, billowing in the fitful wind like the sails of a ragtag fleet of ships. A scrawny mongrel dog that had been happily sniffing around the wheel of a cart barked with alarm as Elowen hurried past. Sparrows pecking at scattered pieces of grain flew away. A lazy cat basking in the sun bolted for cover.

Elowen knew she was late. She tried to run faster but the effort gave her a painful stitch. A bitter, salty taste formed in her mouth and her lungs felt as though they were going to burst out of her body. Her knees ached from hours knelt cleaning the Orphanage latrines. She always got that job, she thought bitterly. She had been left alone to work, two hours of retching and gagging as she emptied the stinking

pails and scrubbed the filthy floor. The smell still lingered on her clothes and her hands. Now she was late and would get into even more trouble. It wasn't fair.

Elowen reached the town market square, known by all as the Shambles, where a crowd had already gathered. Opposite the church stood a wooden stand erected for the ceremony. Only the aldermen, the most important people in the town, were permitted to sit within the stand and, by Mayoral decree, the orphans were to work all day serving them food and drink. As Elowen reached the stand someone grabbed her arm; she was dragged to a halt and spun round to face a short boy with broad shoulders and a square body. His thick ginger hair stood up like the spikes of a hedgehog and angry spots and white-heads erupted all over his pale face. Around his waist he wore a black and white cloth sash, the sign of his authority.

He was Diggory Bulhorn, the head boy of the Orphanage.

'You are late,' he said in the slow, pompous voice he always used when trying to sound like an adult.

'I know. I'm sorry,' said Elowen between gasps, the apology added as an afterthought. She hated apologising to Bulhorn. She knew how much he enjoyed any chance to humiliate her but it was the only way to speed up the inevitable lecture and lessen any punishment.

'I was cleaning the latrines,' she continued, knowing that her explanation would fall on deaf ears.

'That is no excuse. You should work harder and faster. The Master will hear of this,' he said.

He paused, waiting for a reaction, waiting for any sign of fear. Elowen knew what he wanted. He wanted her to beg

him not to tell the Master, but she was determined not to give Bulhorn the satisfaction of seeing her grovel.

‘Do what you have to,’ she replied with a shrug, trying to sound unconcerned.

Faced with this unexpected resistance, Bulhorn opened and closed his mouth like a grounded fish. ‘The Master will deal with you. Now get to work and help with the serving. Useless girl.’

With that he marched up the steps.

Useless girl. People always said that about her.

A voice from inside her head said, ‘*You are useless. Everybody laughs at you.*’

It was a voice Elowen often heard. Sometimes it spoke with her voice, sometimes with the voice of other people. It sneered, criticised, mocked. It reminded her of all the humiliations she had ever endured and it echoed words and memories from past beatings, past abuse, past failings. She tried to fight the voice, she tried to ignore it, she knew she would never be happy until it went away. But it never left her. She doubted it ever would.

Elowen ran a hand through her scruffy dark hair and stared at the church. It was a grim, fearful building with a dull slate roof, angular windows and a spire that threw a heavy shadow onto the town. A stage had been built onto the church’s broad steps—a stage for the ceremony to come.

Somewhere within the church was Elowen’s best friend, Uther Bantling. Elowen wondered if he would enjoy his special day. Every May Day all the children who had come of age received the Holy Null, the mark of adulthood. At

fourteen, Elowen was still a year short but Uther was due to receive the Null that very day.

Beneath a fog of tobacco smoke the crowd grew restless. Like maggots left in a box, everyone in the crowd wriggled for a better position. They stood on tip-toes, necks craned and children hoisted onto adult shoulders, triggering loud protests from those stood behind. Through the crowd wandered tumblers, acrobats, jugglers and fire-eaters. One figure caught Elowen's eye, he carried a staff that reached his shoulders and around it were tied pieces of coloured ribbon. His eyes peeked out behind the strands of long red hair that fell over his forehead; a hat decorated with bird feathers perched on his head. His clothes were poor: a white shirt patched under the arm and torn and patched breeches made of rust-coloured cloth with tattered ties below his knees. He wandered through the restless crowd, telling jokes, singing songs. Some laughed at him, most ignored him. Elowen knew his name, *everyone* knew his name. Tom Hickathrift.

Hickathrift scratched out a living as a storyteller and singer in the taverns of Trecadok. He lived in the Old Tower, an abandoned watchtower on the town wall. Elowen often saw him marching around the town, his long shanks like the legs of some giant spider. He was strange, out of place in the greyness of Trecadok.

Elowen had no time to consider it further. The aldermen and their families demanded food and drink, and much of both. The orphan boys battled with heavy platters of roasted chickens, boiled mutton and hunks of rich cheese. The girls, including Elowen, carried ewers of sugared wine and

jugs of ale. Elowen struggled over seats, big feet, lazily discarded coats and hats. Flagons were filled, refilled, and filled again.

A smell of grease lingered under the roof, Elowen smelt it on her fingers, on the sleeves of her dress. It was a sickening, unsettling smell but the glimpses of bread and cheese also reminded her that she was hungry. Being hungry was nothing new in the Orphanage, meals there were poor and a rumbling stomach was her constant companion. But this morning was worse than ever; hunger made her stomach feel as though it was being knotted and folded.

An unpleasant shout broke her thoughts. 'GIRL! MORE WINE!'

The shout came from the town magistrate, Horatio Morvel. He sat in his full black gown with long hanging sleeves. Morvel's wife, Melder, sat next to him scowling at the crowd and picking at her ceruse filled pockmarks. The couple were accompanied by their daughter, and the apple of their collective eyes, Borra. She sat perched on the end of her seat, chin lifted, nose in the air. To her good fortune she had not inherited her mother's looks. Her hair tumbled down in chestnut curls and faint freckles dusted her pretty face, yet Borra's delicate beauty concealed her true nature. Borra attended the same school as Elowen and never passed an opportunity to tease or torment her. Her lashing tongue frightened all the girls and Elowen, as a lowly orphan, always received the worst of it. Elowen looked down at her feet and avoided meeting Borra's sharp glances.

Morvel held up his empty mug. 'Don't tarry, girl. I'm dying of thirst here.'

Elowen grabbed an ewer and picked her way across to him, all the time conscious of Borra's sneering stare. Melder Morvel, who had clearly not noticed Elowen, yawned and stretched out her flabby arms, banging into the ewer. Elowen managed to stop it falling but a small dribble of wine splashed onto Melder's white ruff.

Morvel shrieked and leapt to her feet, a look of pure anger on her face. Everyone in the stand turned round to look. Elowen froze, wanting the earth to swallow her. Meanwhile Horatio, adept at reading his wife's fiery moods, sunk low in his seat. Melder leant forward and showed Elowen the stained ruff. 'You have *ruined* this.'

Elowen stammered an apology. Borra smiled, cruel pleasure drawn all over her face.

'There is nothing you can say or do to repair the damage,' said Morvel. Then she smacked Elowen across the face. 'You are an imbecile. Master Cronack will hear of this!'

Her face red and throbbing, Elowen stepped back, nearly falling over the seats behind her. But if she thought her day could not get any worse, she was sorely mistaken.

'Elowen Aubyn!'

A harsh voice caused her to turn round, a harsh voice she knew well. A cold creeping fear gripped her; at the top of the narrow stairway stood Cornelius Cronack, the Master of the Orphanage.

Cronack ruled the Orphanage like a king and Elowen spent every day in fear of him. In his presence she lost the ability to think calmly, leading to more stupid mistakes. For Cronack the Orphanage was not just his kingdom but his saviour. To the despair of his late father, Lieutenant-

Colonel Cronack of the Penwyth Regiment, the young Cornelius proved too weak and cowardly for the army. Instead luck and patronage steered him to the vacant stewardship of the Trecadok Orphanage, a position previously held by the perennially aged Darius Deadlock who performed his functions scarcely less effectively in death than he had done in life.

Cronack found in the Orphanage a vocation that suited his nature. The many beatings he had endured at his father's hands transferred to the children in his charge. The outside world may have defeated Cronack but within the Orphanage he found a world he could control, a world he could shape in his own image: cold, cruel and paranoid.

Cronack strode down the stairs; he walked with his head up, his chin out and one hand holding the other behind his back. Being short and bowlegged, Cronack could not risk losing vital inches by slouching. He wore a thigh-length cloak over a black doublet and grey breeches, a broad rimmed sugarloaf hat concealed his baldness.

His icy grey eyes looked Elowen up and down, examining each detail like an explorer poring over a map. He doffed his hat to Melder Morvel. 'Madam, is there a problem?'

Elowen's heart pounded, she felt as though she was sinking into the earth. Morvel showed her ruff to the Master. 'Look at the damage this wretch has done! Look!'

With exaggerated care, Cronack examined the ruff and made a suitably horrified expression. With his tongue he moistened his lips. 'Her behaviour is shameful. This is a particularly idle and sinful girl, a constant source of trouble to me.'

‘Then I trust you will punish her!’ said Morvel.

Cronack glared at Elowen and rubbed his clammy hands together. ‘She shall be punished and shall work until her fingers bleed, you have my word. Do you hear me, child?’ He pointed to the external stairway that led up to the seats. ‘Scrub those steps; scrub them until they are perfectly clean. And do not think that is the end of your punishment. Do you understand?’

Elowen nodded dutifully. Cronack looked her over, searching hungrily for any sign of dissent but she kept her feelings hidden, bowing her head in feigned shame and remorse. She knew if she said anything it would only make matters worse.

Morvel settled back into her seat and said to Cronack, ‘Pray keep better control over these orphans in future. They are *all* wretches.’

‘You shall not be troubled again, Madam, I assure you,’ said Cronack. He pulled himself to his full, though far from impressive, height and clipped Elowen on the back of her head. ‘Be gone, child. Back to work!’

Elowen swiftly retreated. She heard Melder Morvel still complaining about the incident.

‘A typical orphan,’ she declared to anyone who would listen. ‘They have not the slightest idea of how to behave in public.’

When she had heard enough mumbles of ‘too true’ and ‘I agree’ from the people around her, Melder sat down, still complaining and berating Horatio for doing nothing.

*

Brought up in the Orphanage, Trecadok was the only home Elowen had ever known. The town lay in the far south-west peninsular of the island of Helagan. A moss-smothered wall circled the town and generation after generation had been born, grown old and died within its crumbling stonework. In places, the buildings inside touched the wall's pale stones as though struggling to escape.

The Gwindgack River bent around the town's southern edge. Like birds of prey, dragonflies buzzed and swooped over the turgid surface and the beds of swaying reeds that flanked the river. The Witchwood sat on the shallow hills to the north of Trecadok. Apart from the birds which skimmed across the treetops, there were few visible signs of life from the ancient forest. The Witchwood often displayed different moods and characteristics. The clean sunshine of early summer encouraged the forest to display its fine covering of green and gold leaves; in the winter it would brood angry and silent, as dense mists swirled above the tree tops like frozen breath from some hidden, monstrous mouth.

Many strange creatures and spirits were said to stalk the forest: woodwights who devoured men and beasts, leshy who delighted in leading travellers astray by pulling them deeper into the forest with singing and whispered rumours of lost gold, and pixies, the scourge of the woodsmen, who stole food, tools, clothes, anything in fact that was left unattended for more than a few moments. Such creatures were condemned by the Mother Church as 'the tainted ones'. On Saints' days, the aldermen summoned enough courage, and enough armed militia, to plunge into the forest. There, with

musket, hound and horse, they hunted the tainted ones. Success was rare but occasionally they returned with a prize: a corpse of a strange deformed creature. After being paraded through the town, the corpse was hung in a gibbet for the disgusted fascination of all. Elowen knew that the tainted ones were evil, soulless beings, accursed in the eyes of God. But each time she saw a little corpse swinging in the gibbets she felt pity, its bloodied face and broken limbs the evidence of a violent death.

But at all other times, the people of Trecadok and the surrounding villages feared the forest and avoided it wherever possible, especially at night. The dark brought out all manner of eerie sounds and cries from among the densely packed trees. Children in the villages near the forest liked to challenge each other to get as near to the trees as they dared. The first inhuman shriek was always enough to send them wailing back to their cottages.

That was the world that lay outside Trecadok but it remained distant to Elowen. She knew that she would never leave the town. She was an orphan, a pauper; if she left to go to another village or town she would be flogged or thrown into gaol. The law held no sympathy for vagrants.

Elowen scrubbed the steps; they were not very dirty but she knew that the Master would find every speck of dust. Orphan after orphan passed Elowen and hurried up the steps, balancing overloaded plates and bowls. They all looked tired, their faces grey and careworn, aged beyond their tender years. As one boy struggled up the steps his plate tipped, dropping a slice of bread and a small hunk of cheese.

Elowen checked no-one was looking and then she picked up the bread, dusted it off and stuffed it in her mouth. She was about to eat the cheese when a cat, its ribs visible through thin tufty fur, rubbed against her leg. It looked up at Elowen with pleading eyes. Despite the gurgles of her own stomach, Elowen passed the small piece of cheese to the cat, who ate it down eagerly in one gulp. It rubbed its head against Elowen's hand and she felt the touch of its rough dry tongue. Pleased to have a little food in its belly, the cat sat beside Elowen and cleaned its paws.

The church bells tolled for noon; Elowen jumped at the sound.

The ceremony began.

The church's Great Door swung open and Bishop Gorlas emerged into the sunlight, surrounded by church acolytes who bore candles and banners of the Mother Church. Gorlas, the third son of Lord Proudlock, clung to his position through patronage rather than through intellect, which he lacked somewhat, or piety, which he lacked completely. His sermons achieved widespread fame for their length and tedium and he alone held the ability to throw a veil of drudgery over the Nulling ceremony.

The Bishop and his acolytes advanced down the steps like a small army marching to battle, plumes of incense floating around them like cannon smoke. If they were an army, the twelve children that followed them resembled a rabble of frightened and weary prisoners of war. There were six boys and six girls; among them Elowen spotted Uther. He walked with his head bowed; his faded, patchy Orphanage clothes stood out against the other children's fine gowns.

Elowen felt sorry for her friend, she expected the other children had parents watching them but for Uther there was no proud father, no mother weeping happily.

Bishop Gorlas shepherded the children onto the stage and spoke to the crowd. 'We are humble servants of God and of Prester John. And we are all sinners. Ever we draw closer to the Last Days.'

His speech descended into a distant drone. The crowd's interest faded, and idle, impatient chatter drowned out the Bishop. Elowen's attention drifted to Uther. She remembered their conversation from the day before. They had met as usual during recreation in the high-walled yard behind the main Orphanage building. Other children milled around, talking among themselves, kicking at the ground, swiping at the swarm of flies attracted by the foul-smelling latrines nearby.

Elowen had been friends with Uther for as long as she could remember. They talked about everything but most of all they loved to talk of *adventures*, adventures that took them out of the Orphanage, out of Trecadok. They cast themselves in the roles of heroes of the past. Daydreams were their only freedom, daydreams inspired by the chapbooks and pamphlets Elowen kept hidden under her bed blankets. She had found them, years earlier, laying on the street outside school, dropped no doubt by a careless seller. They were her most precious, indeed her only, possessions. Elowen loved the smell of the cheap ink, the texture of the crinkled and yellowing paper; she knew each word of the exciting tales but never tired of reading them or acting out the stories with Uther.

Her friend had been quieter than usual and Elowen had never seen him look so unhappy. He picked at the ground, moving stones between his fingers; his watery blue eyes remained fixed on the ground. The odd gust of wind sneaked into the yard, playing with his wispy blond hair. Bothered by his silence Elowen had kept quiet and traced out the letters of her name in the sandy soil. Then at last her natural curiosity had overwhelmed her.

‘Why are you so sad?’ she had asked. ‘You should be excited about tomorrow’s ceremony.’

‘I’m not sad. It’s just...’ he rubbed his forehead, trying to find the right words. ‘Everything will be different after tomorrow. I’m apprenticed to Old Man Panchent, so I’ll be leaving the Orphanage. Everything is changing.’

Elowen shared those same fears but buried them. ‘We’ll still see each other, won’t we?’

‘Folk are different after Nulling. They become more serious, more grown up.’

‘Is that so bad? Aren’t we all supposed to be grown up?’

‘That’s what everyone says,’ he had replied, sounding far from certain.

‘Sounds to me like you don’t want to be Nulled.’

She had regretted the words as soon as she said them. She had uttered a blasphemy, a terrible blasphemy, and was lucky none of the wardens had been close enough to hear her.

Uther had heard her though. ‘You mustn’t say things like that, Elowen. Being Nulled is God’s blessing. To not be Nulled is to live forever in sin. Look, promise me this. We will always be friends, even after the Nulling.’

‘Of course,’ said Elowen, surprised. Why wouldn’t they still be friends after the ceremony? His words kept repeating in her mind. *Promise me this. We will always be friends.*

*

Elowen’s attention returned to the present and to the words of Bishop Gorlas. He announced, ‘On this special day, these sons and daughters of God emerge from the shackles of childhood and, by the will of Prester John, take the final steps towards adulthood. May this blessing purify their souls as we approach the Last Days and the final Judgment.’

Elowen heard a slow, repetitive creaking sound. The sound of heavy wheels turning. The Black Wagon drew into view. A large windowless four-wheeled coach, drawn by two powerful horses. The hooded and cloaked driver sat as shapeless as a white cloud.

A Redeemer, a monk of the Brotherhood of Redemption. Redeemers were the Mother Church’s most feared servants—they hunted down heretics and witches wherever they found them. Uther once told her about the Summons: in some places, where children had been bad, the Redeemers came and took them all. Mothers told their children, ‘Be good or the Redeemers will take you away.’

Every May Day, the Black Wagon came to Trecadok as they came to every town and village across the Holy Empire. They came to take children to one of the many monasteries dotted throughout the land. Before dusk they were returned, returned as adults, returned wearing the Null.

Elowen didn't know what happened to them and she was afraid to ask. You never asked about the Nulling. Never.

The aldermen stood with their heads bowed and a hush fell over the crowd. The Black Wagon stopped near the stage. Breathing heavily, the horses relaxed their huge slabs of muscles. The Redeemer leapt off the Wagon, his white robes sweeping around him like a thick mist. He walked in a crooked fashion, like an arthritic old man, and opened the double doors at the back of the Wagon. Bishop Gorlas led the twelve children off the stage and down to the Wagon. He bowed to the Redeemer, looking pale and fearful, like a little boy expecting a beating from his father.

One by one the children disappeared inside the Black Wagon. The doors closed with a loud metallic clang that made Elowen jump. The Redeemer mounted his seat on the wagon. He sat motionless but stared at Elowen. For that terrible, lingering moment he stared right at her. The cat scampered for cover beneath the stand and a coldness gripped Elowen, like hundreds of icy fingers touching her all at once.

The Redeemer looked away and the coldness passed—warmth returned to Elowen's body. The Redeemer whipped the horses into action, the Black Wagon turned on a wide circle before thundering down Westgate Street and out of sight.

The next few hours passed slowly. The crowd waited for the Black Wagon's return; they grew impatient, hot and bored but none dared leave. The aldermen filled the long hours with more feasting and drinking. Elowen found no rest, scrubbing and scrubbing. Boredom, tiredness and

hunger mixed to produce a misery she found hard to cope with.

The thought of Uther kept her going. She longed to see her friend, to ask him what it was like to be Nulled. Uther wouldn't mind talking about it; he wouldn't be like other adults. In Elowen's experience, most grown-ups were horrible with nothing but scorn for children. Uther would be different, he would not change. She knew that for certain.

Then, as the clocks struck four o'clock, the Black Wagon returned.

Gorlas emerged from the church as the Redeemer led the twelve children back onto the stage. Soon they would go into the church for a blessing but first they had to be presented to the people of Trecadok, presented as adults for the first time. They stood in line while the crowd cheered and clapped. Elowen leant forward, straining for a clearer view of Uther. A piece of metal protruded an inch above his right eye—the Null. Uther had become a man.

Punishment

The Black Wagon churned up clouds of dust as it swept out of the town. With the ceremony over the crowd drifted away. The taverns swiftly filled; laughter and singing carried on the evening air. Their chores finished, Cornelius Cronack rounded up the orphans. ‘FOLLOW ME BACK TO THE ORPHANAGE. KEEP PACE, NO DAUDDLING. NO TALKING,’ he shouted from the front. The orphans formed an untidy line behind him. Elowen kept to the rear.

Cronack led them along Westgate Street. They passed a narrow, ten foot tall pyramid of perfectly smooth black metal. The Sentinel. By command of Prester John, Sentinels stood in every village, town and city. Elowen often wondered what purpose they served but she dared not ask; nobody asked questions about the Sentinels. Elowen kept her distance from it as everyone knew that if you touched it you became ill or mad. Elowen shivered every time she saw it, she felt a sense of unease—birds refused to perch on it and not even weeds grew near it.

Shops lined the length of Westgate Street, their roofs and projecting upper storeys thrusting out in different angles.

From each shop swung sign-boards nine feet off the ground, high enough to allow a man on horseback to pass underneath. Each board carried clues to the nature of the business: the apothecary used the symbol of the unicorn horn and dragon, the faded ironmonger's board showed a bag of nails and the Jack-in-the-Green for the distillers. The boards were a rare flash of colour in Trecadok.

To the side of the apothecary lurked a dark alley. Elowen spotted someone leaning against the wall, partly hidden by the gloom. The tall figure stepped forward into the light—it was Tom Hickathrift. He bowed and said, 'A good evening to you, child.'

Elowen stopped but was too surprised to answer; he had never spoken to her before. Hickathrift smiled, a crooked but warm smile, and his eyes twinkled like stars. 'I suggest you keep pace with your friends.'

Elowen saw the other orphans were now some distance ahead. 'Cronack will—'

'I think you would be wise to hurry along, child,' said Hickathrift. With that he bowed again, winked and melted into the gloom.

'ELOWEN AUBYN! KEEP UP! DO NOT MAKE ME COME AND GET YOU!' shouted Cronack. Elowen hastened to rejoin the line.

Cronack led the orphans through a warren of murky yards and half-drowned lanes, which emerged in front of a two-storey brick building.

The Orphanage.

Tall, narrow windows formed strict lines each side of a heavy, arched black door. A sign hung above the door, writ-

ten in stark black writing were the words, *'In God and Prester John we trust.'*

For Elowen the Orphanage was her home, her prison, her life. The walls, the grime-smearred windows and draughty corridors were as familiar to her as her own body.

Cronack waited by the door as the orphans filed inside. Beside him stood Diggory Bulhorn and the head boy greeted each returning child with a different instruction.

'Come on, Greenwood. Hurry it up.'

'Dowley, wipe that stupid grin off your face.'

His voice was in the process of breaking and had the habit of turning into a high-pitched squeal, an occurrence guaranteed to send ripples of laughter through the orphans.

Elowen tried to sneak past, hoping that Cronack had forgotten her earlier accident but it proved a vain hope. He grabbed her left ear, painfully twisting the lobe. In a grim voice he said, 'You are coming with me.'

He pulled her from the front door into the waiting hall; as they walked their footsteps echoed against the wainscoted walls and lofty ceiling. Portraits of former Orphanage Masters hung on the walls, old men with stern faces and white hair. Elowen swore their eyes followed her every step.

Cronack let go of her ear and ushered her down the steps that led to the Master's Room. He opened the door with his free hand and pushed her inside. She half fell into a narrow room with a ceiling that sloped at a sharp angle, a room Elowen had been inside many times before. At the far end a single window, its shutters ajar, offered a ray of weak light. Shelves, empty of books, lined the oak panelled walls. The room stunk of body odour and cheap tallow candles. In the

middle of the room lay a table, its surface grey with dust and littered with yellowed papers, a leather-bound Holy Book and a pile of tattered chapbooks. But another object drew Elowen's gaze, on the table edge rested a long, thin piece of wood. The switch. Almost unconsciously Elowen closed her palm; she knew the punishment that awaited her: five strokes.

With the floorboards creaking with every step, Cronack sat behind the table, his back to the window. He took off his hat and rested it on the pile of chapbooks. Elowen remained standing, hands clasped behind her back; she tried to swallow but her tinder dry throat prevented it. Without looking up, the Master said, 'Once again you have embarrassed this institution. Tell me, child, do you say your prayers every night?'

Elowen nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

He shuffled his papers into a neat pile. 'And in your prayers do you give thanks to God and Prester John for the kindnesses shown to you by this Orphanage? For the food you eat, for the clothes you wear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And do you believe that the rules of this esteemed institution should be followed as one would follow the word of God?'

Elowen hesitated, trying to work out what Cronack meant. Her stomach churned, not sure where the conversation was going. She knew Cronack was going to punish her for spilling the wine on Melder Morvel. He did not normally waste time with questions. A little less surely she replied, 'Yes, sir.'

He stared at her, his pale eyes as cold as ice. ‘Then why do you insist on defying these rules at every turn?’

Without looking away he moved his hat and picked up the pile of chapbooks. In a slow deliberate move he stood; a cold twinge travelled through Elowen’s body when she realised what the Master held in his hands. The books on the table were *her* chapbooks, *her* pamphlets. She thought she had hidden them safely beneath her blankets but Cronack must have found them when inspecting the dormitory or maybe another girl had seen her reading them and told the Master. Elowen failed to conceal her wobbling bottom lip.

Cronack held up her chapbooks for her to see. ‘You know the rules of this Orphanage and you know those rules forbid such *material*. They fill your feeble mind with ungodly nonsense and dangerous fantasies.’

With his teeth clenched he tore up her precious chapbooks and pamphlets and threw the pieces at her. Elowen flinched but dared not speak or move. With his voice rising to a shout, Cronack pointed to the Holy Book. ‘**THAT IS THE ONLY BOOK YOU SHOULD READ. THE VERY WORD OF GOD!**’

He picked up the switch and rang a finger along its springy length. ‘Hold out your right hand.’

Knowing she had no choice, Elowen did so. She gritted her teeth. The first blow was always the worst—the breathtaking pain sometimes numbed the four that followed.

She heard the switch crack and a sudden pain exploded in her palm. Her eyes watered and she bit her lip to avoid crying out. He struck her again. Three times. Four. Five.

It was over.

But before she could move her hand, Cronack struck her again. Elowen cried out in pain and surprise but the Master did not stop. Time and time again he struck her until she lost count.

*

Elowen joined the other children in the dining hall for supper. Her hand still stung, the skin cracked by thin red lines. More painful though was the loss of her books. Her hand would heal, the pain would fade, but she could not replace her books.

Cronack and Diggory Bulhorn watched the orphans like hawks. A small, thin woman with cropped grey hair lurked behind Cronack. Warden Markham, the Orphanage house-keeper. The skin on her face was stretched tightly across her skull, causing her Null to bulge out. Her fingers were bony and nimble, always moving, always working. Markham viewed chores such as cleaning and cooking as the noblest tasks in Mother Earth, all other concerns were mere trifles. Her favourite saying was 'God has a purpose for us all in his great plan and this is mine'. When she worked she sang hymns and recited prayers from the Holy Book, as though to steel herself in battle.

The orphans sat in silence at the long wooden tables. The only sound was the clink, clink of spoons against the old pewter bowls. Two faded banners hung on the wall. One proclaimed, 'God is Just.' The other said, 'Trust in Prester John.'

Elowen's stomach grumbled with hunger but she knew

the meal in front of her would not satisfy: a thin soup, little more than discoloured water with small, ugly pieces of potato and onion floating in it. Elowen slowly scooped up mouthful after mouthful. It hurt her hand to hold the spoon but hunger overwhelmed the pain. A brittle slice of bread lay next to the bowl; she tried to break it in half but succeeded only in sending small, rock hard pieces flying into her soup and onto the table. The other orphans sniggered. Cronack rasped, 'Elowen Aubyn! Pray be more careful.'

Elowen blushed and lowered her head.

When all the children had finished supper they were sent to their rooms. The Orphanage was divided: one dormitory for the boys and one for the girls. It was routine and life in the Orphanage centred on routine.

The girls' dormitory was a narrow room with a solitary window at the far end. There were two parallel rows of eight trough-shaped beds. There weren't enough beds for all the girls so Elowen had to sleep on the floor with only a few rags and a smelly, hole-riddled blanket for comfort. She hated the dormitory. It was so cold, so dark, so lifeless. It never changed, always the same stark walls and the same stale smell, more a prison than a home.

Several buckets of cold water stood under the window for the girls to wash in. The girls washed in silence, the watching Warden Markham made sure of that. Elowen huffed and puffed as she splashed the icy water on her face and body. The cheap, gritty cake of soap she used broke up into several tiny, useless pieces. The water stung her wounded hand and she winced as she patted it dry. When they had

washed, the girls changed into their grey nightshirts, said the Holy Prayer and climbed into bed. Warden Markham blew out the candles and slammed the door behind her as she left.

Rain nibbled against the window, sounding like the cackle of a small fire. There was a persistent tapping as water dripped down from the overhanging roof. Elowen sorted out her smelly blanket and bundle of dirty rags, attempting the daily impossible task of making her sleeping place comfortable. She had nothing to compare Orphanage life with—it had been her only home but a feeling rooted deep in her stomach confirmed it was not a good place to live. Something was wrong. It was not just the beatings, the terrible food, the cold, the boredom. There was something wrong about the Orphanage, something wrong about her life, a wrong that troubled her like a bad dream half-remembered.

Elowen had no memory of her mother. She thought of her often and in her mind had built up a picture: a warm smile, long flowing hair, kind eyes and a soft voice. In her daydreams Elowen talked to her mother, she talked about the Orphanage, about school, about Uther. She talked about what worried her, about what made her laugh and what made her cry. And all the time her mother listened patiently.

But it was a fantasy only.

Elowen envied children with parents. She had never been kissed or cuddled. Elowen had no friends among the other girls, in fact she hardly knew any of their names. It was the Orphanage way—friendship was not encouraged, the or-

phans were meant to feel ashamed and worthless. Cronack frowned upon laughter; even a smile could earn a rebuke. Elowen was rarely alone in the Orphanage, but she always felt lonely.

Elowen found it hard to sleep. Her flea-bitten legs itched and scratching only made them worse. The other girls snored, sighed and mumbled in their sleep: the troubled sounds of night in the Orphanage. She heard the night watchman cry from outside, 'Twelve o'clock!' A draught sneaked through the window above so Elowen pulled the rags and blanket tightly around her.

'Go to sleep,' she whispered to herself. Sleep was precious. Only when sleep took her did the grey walls of her prison fade.

*

The Ulsacro. For five centuries the residence of the Patriarch, the head of the Mother Church. A palace, a church, a monastery, a laboratory and a library: all contained within a vast rectangular wall of granite hewn from the Ulmeria Mountains on whose grey slopes the palace stood, above the mosquito line—a deliberate advantage in such malaria-plagued lands. The blackened exterior wall was broken only by thin window openings and four corner towers.

Within the Royal Palace a solitary figure strode down the long corridor towards the Hall of Light. His robes billowed as he walked, stretching out like the wings of a monstrous bird. He stood seven foot tall and wore a full face mask, as white as alabaster, with blank features that concealed any

signs of humanity, leaving only raised angular cheeks, dead eyes. In his hand he gripped a scroll. The guards posted along the corridor did not challenge him. All knew his name and all feared it.

Lord Lucien.

The floor beneath his feet shone, rubbed smooth by the feet of those who in generations past had come to beg for counsel, to beg favour or to beg for their very souls. Lucien felt the weight of history in the air. The Ulsacro had witnessed many sides of humanity: piety, ambition, treachery and greed. Memories drifted through the walls and to Lucien they were as tangible as icy water on his lips, as cool wind on his face. He held his own memories of the Ulsacro—memories of darkness, of solitude, of fear. Once he had been a prisoner, the Mother Church's hidden secret.

He pushed those weak thoughts to the back of his mind. He needed all his strength.

Along the corridor marble columns rose to capitals decorated with intricate leaf carvings. The ceiling above remained a dark space, the meagre light unable to penetrate. But as Lucien emerged into the vast open space beneath the Hall of Light's dome, the darkness retreated. The large windows in the dome flooded the interior with golden light. Within these slabs of light millions of grains of dust swam like frenzied schools of fish. The dome ceiling was decorated with mosaics of angels and saints, formed of irregular cubes of glass set at angles so that they sparkled in the sunlight.

But Lucien ignored these miracles. Instead he marched towards the centre-piece of the Hall of Light, a dais of six

steps nestled under a marble canopy crowned by a gilded figure of the Saviour, his right hand extended in blessing. A metal throne crowned the dais and upon that throne sat an old man, seemingly asleep with his chin resting on his chest. Prester John. Lucien's heart beat faster as he beheld his master. Prester John wore simple clothes, a cowl and cape made of coarse wool. Rumours abound he wore a hair shirt, a symbol of his piety, his humility, his devotion to the Almighty. Lucien always smiled at the story, how little they knew.

Courtiers congregated, whispering, gossiping, plotting. All wore brimmed hats decorated with colourful feathers and their jerkins, breeches and quarter length capes were the finest money could buy. They all carried gleaming ceremonial swords, blades untouched. Their soft hands were not marked by the blisters and gashes of sword fighting. Their dreams were not filled with the screams of the dead and dying; they sent others to do their killing.

Lucien despised them; they were all flatterers and deceivers. Their perfumed smell sickened him and they were drawn to the power of Prester John like moths to a flame. Their talk quietened when they became aware of Lucien's presence. Sensing his mood, they edged away and melted into the shadowy recesses in the far side of the Hall. When they had gone, Lucien knelt. Prester John made no sign that he was awake but Lucien was happy to wait for his master, the man who had saved him, the man who had set him on the true path. Prester John remained his leader, his teacher.

His master did not look up or make any other sign he was awake. When he spoke the voice sounded old and raspy, the

words dragged out of a strained throat. ‘My old friend, this is an unexpected visit. Please, stand. What brings you here? I know how much you detest the Ulsacro and the heat of this land. I believed you to be camped near the Preven Gap.’

‘So I was but then this was brought to me,’ said Lucien as he stood and he held up the scroll. ‘These are tidings that could not be delayed.’

At that Prester John lifted his head and stared down at Lucien. He adjusted his position in the throne, his bones creaked like snapping branches. Light fell upon his face to reveal dry, shrivelled skin and deep sunken eyes. ‘Tidings?’

Lucien mounted the steps and passed the scroll into the shaky hands of his master. Prester John opened the scroll and brought the parchment closer to his weak eyes. He licked his lips and frowned. ‘Are you *sure* of this, Lord Lucien? You are certain it was the Map of the Known World?’

His throat dry, Lucien said, ‘Quite sure, my master. The Illuminati had gone to considerable lengths to keep this hidden from us. The Brotherhood pursued their ship from the southern sea to the shores of Helagan.’

Prester John fell silent, rubbing his tired eyes. Then he rolled up the scroll and rested it on his knees. ‘How did the map slip through the Brotherhood’s fingers?’

Lucien paused before answering. That was the question he had feared. He sensed his master’s displeasure. He had failed him and he felt ashamed. ‘An Illuminati survived the sinking of the ship and fled with the map. Footprints were found on the beach near the wreck. Local scavengers saw him flee. They have been silenced of course.’

Prester John wrung his pale, wrinkled hands. 'We cannot allow the map to reach the Illuminati's sanctuary.'

Lord Lucien bowed. 'Command me, Lord.'

Prester John leant back in his throne and spoke, his voice rising to a shout. 'Instruct the Brotherhood to find this map at all costs. Find it and slay the one who carries it. Slay all with whom he comes into contact with. Especially children. We can take no chances with them. Mercy is weakness, Lucien. We must harden our hearts, what we do now is for the generations to come.'

'The Brotherhood shall carry out its duty,' said Lucien. 'There will be nowhere he can hide.'

'Do not be troubled, my friend. The map will soon be found and with it the Illuminati's last hope vanquished. And now to other matters, I trust your army is ready to march on Prevennis?'

'They are camped two days south of Hammersund. Our allies in the palace have assured us that surprise will be total.'

'Then let us hope they prove worthy of our trust,' said Prester John. 'For too long King Olaf has defied me. He protects those cursed Barbegs and he knows the location of the sanctuary of the Illuminati, I am certain of it.'

Lucien took a deep breath. 'Even so, this is not without risk. What of our enemies to the east, the Oroks and the Khiltoi, should we not deal with them first? They threaten the Mother Church more than King Olaf.'

Prester John leant forward, his eyes narrowed. 'It is a risk we *must* take. Olaf is key to finding the Illuminati, and finding and destroying the Illuminati is key to eliminating our

eastern enemies. It is only through the Illuminati's guidance that the Khiltoi persist in hiding in the accursed Alheart forest. Without the Illuminati's hindrance, our crusades would have broken the Oroks long ago. No, once the Illuminati are crushed, no power on earth can oppose us.'

Prester John laughed, an icy, staccato chuckle and put a fatherly hand on Lucien's arm. 'You have done well, my friend. Your long labours shall soon be at an end. All that we have worked for, all that we have fought for, is within our grasp.'

Lucien felt pride swell within him. The conclusion of his master's plan drew close.

*

Dawn brought Elowen little comfort. Her injured hand still throbbed, the skin stretched and dry. Warden Markham roused the girls at six and after reciting the Holy Prayer together they made their beds, washed, dressed and marched into the silent dining hall. Diggory Bulhorn checked the orphans' names on his list. Trying to sound like Cronack, he said, 'Hurry it up now.'

As Elowen ate her breakfast of thin gruel, she thought of Uther. Today would be his first day as a man, living and working with the gardener, Old Man Panchent. Panchent often worked at the school, cutting the grass, trimming the hedge and Elowen hoped he would be there today, with Uther. She was bursting with questions to ask her friend.

Like an unwelcome guest, Monday morning had arrived in Trecadok. Tired and hung-over from the May Day celebra-

tions, the town groaned at its appearance and stumbled to work or, as in Elowen's case, school.

It was a short walk from the Orphanage to her school but Elowen never hurried; the walks to and from school were her only moments of freedom. Orphans up to the age of eleven were taught in the Orphanage classroom but following a charitable act by the Board of Governors, older boys and girls were allowed to attend school. And Elowen hated it.

She loved learning and she loved reading. The pamphlets she had hoarded opened whole other worlds; as she read her surroundings would melt away to leave only the voices of the people in the story. For those brief moments she became free, free from the Orphanage's grey walls, free from Trecadok. But she experienced nothing like that at school.

Nothing she learnt there interested her. Needlecraft. Holy Book readings. Housewifery. How could you feel excited about *housewifery*? Elowen knew there was a place for domestic chores, after all, everyone needed to eat, wear clothes and wash but such chores failed to bring her the leap of joy that a book or a tale brought.

It was another of those fickle Trecadok mornings when the sky stubbornly refused to give a clear sign of the weather to come. A patch of blue sky here, a miserable cloud there—the sun appeared then disappeared, as though frightened to show itself. As she walked, Elowen tried to think but as each thought grew in her mind its roots were pulled up by the competing noises that filled the air: the rumble and squeak of cart wheels, clatter and hammering

from workshops, overhead signs creaked and squeaked in the breeze, leather shod shoes clattered on the cobbles and horses neighed and stamped.

As Elowen crossed the Shambles the market was already busy. Pears, apples, cheese, eggs and fish were heaped together on the same stalls. Housewives bartered with sellers; from a rickety stage, a mountebank held the attention of a growing throng with lurid cries, 'Predictions! Solving of omens! Curing of ailments!'

Elowen hated crowds, she hated people being too close, knocking into her, touching her. Voices, hundreds of voices.

'MIND OUT, IDIOT!'

Elowen stepped back just in time to miss the horse-drawn cart which sped past her onto the Shambles.

'Watch yourself, pauper!' he said, his face animated by anger. He waved a fist and sped on, the wheels of his cart throwing up a cloud of dust and grit.

Elowen trembled at his violent reaction. She had wandered into the road, a mistake, an accident. Why were people so aggressive? They needed only the slightest provocation. Everyone was in a constant rush, a constant hurry.

A little shaken, she continued on her journey. Sparrows darted here and there, picking up morsels from the oats scattered onto the road from horses' nosebags. Amongst them strutted starlings, arrogant and pushy like drunken yobs. As if from thin air, Tom Hickathrift appeared in front of her. Elowen flinched and stopped, only inches away from bumping into him.

'Ah, I beg your forgiveness. My eyes were not following

my feet,' he said. The ribbons around his staff and the ties around his knees rustled as he moved. He smelt strongly of tobacco.

Elowen took half a step backward. 'There is no need to say sorry.'

'Such manners for one so young,' he smiled, his eyes glistening. 'Pray may I be so bold as to ask your name?'

Naturally wary, Elowen paused before answering. 'Elowen. Elowen Aubyn.'

'A fair name.'

Feeling more than a little embarrassed, Elowen said, 'Excuse me, sir. I must be getting on. It's school you see—'

'Of course, how rude of me,' he exclaimed so loudly that several by-passers stared. 'Pray carry on. I hope we will talk again one day, Elowen. You have a friendly face and that is a rare gift in these troubled times. For now, farewell.'

He bowed theatrically and strode off towards the Shambles. Hickathrift's behaviour was odd. Strangers never spoke to orphans; she was used to averting her gaze, not catching someone's eyes lest she caused offence. Why was he being so friendly?

Before she could consider it any further Elowen reached the arched gate of Trecadok Girls School. Ahead stood a two storey building with clean symmetrical lines, broad windows and an imposing front door. A gravel path led to the door, evenly dividing a lawn of closely cropped grass. A horse chestnut grew near the school; the tree's white flowers sprouted in large upright masses that resembled candles. A few younger girls played on the lawn whilst the older ones stood around talking. Old Man Panchent was busy

weeding the lawn; he wore a dirty smock with baggy, grass-stained breeches. A big man, he crouched down with obvious difficulty, gasping and cursing as he did so.

As she had hoped she would, Elowen saw Uther. With a rusty scythe he hacked at a patch of tall, unruly grass. Elowen ran towards him and said, 'Uther! I saw you at the ceremony! I saw you!'

Uther scratched the small metal strip above his right eye—he looked embarrassed to see her. Pushing her doubts aside Elowen said, 'Did it hurt? The Nulling I mean. What happened? How did they do it?'

He replied swiftly, a harsh tone to his voice that she had never heard him use before. 'Do not talk of such things. You are old enough to know better.'

Elowen jolted, taken aback by his response; Uther sounded like every other grown-up she had ever known. It couldn't be. Not Uther. As always happened when she was nervous, words spilled out of her, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I thought...you know...we used to talk—'

'It's different now.'

'But—'

'I had better get on with my work,' he said. He smiled but not a friendly smile—a plain, blank, polite, meaningless smile of the kind adults give each other when they want the other person to leave but are too polite to tell them to go away. 'It was good to see you, Elowen.'

He picked up his scythe but before he could continue working Elowen blurted out, 'What about the promise we made to each other? That we'd always be friends? And all the stories—'

Uther spun round. ‘I’m a *man* now, Elowen; I don’t have time for this silliness and neither should you. It’s time you grew up.’

He said no more and carried on with his work. Too many emotions struck Elowen for her to cope with. How could Uther behave like that? He had become like every other adult. Just another scornful, miserable face. Just another grown-up who hated children. What had the Null done to him?

Then the morning bell rang, school was starting. Elowen took a lingering look at Uther before heading inside, feeling more miserable than she could ever remember. He had cast aside their long friendship in seconds. Uther was lost to her, her friend was gone forever. Without him she faced life alone, she had no-one else to talk to. What would happen to all those thoughts, worries and dreams she shared with him? Would they shrivel up and die like a leaf in autumn? She would become like all the people she hated, only interested in petty things, work, rules, money...

A huge part of her life had been ripped away and she was left with nothing to replace it.

*

Elowen was the last pupil to arrive in the classroom and the other girls’ chatter drowned out her footsteps. The room had a tall ceiling with gnarled, exposed timbers. Two low windows interrupted the wall opposite. Hanging velvet tapestries decorated the other walls; they depicted events from the Holy Book and were captioned by numerous proverbs

and sayings such as *'Wherein have I denied myself this day for God?', 'Am I mourner for the sins of the land?' and 'Have I given thanks to Prester John?'*

The middle of the room was dominated by a large oak table with narrow, uneven benches along three of its sides. On the table rested copies of *The Respectable Girls Primer*, *Book of Arithmetic and Institutes of Grammar* as well as several prints of the Holy Book.

Matron Grinling was late as usual. While waiting for her to arrive, the other girls all stood together, talking excitedly. Borra Morvel held court as usual, her nasal, whining voice rising above all others. Borra's closest friends were Glanna and her twin sister Sowenna. Borra liked them because they agreed with everything she said and did everything she told them to do.

Hoping that her entrance went unnoticed, Elowen sat at the nearest bench. She kept her gaze trained on the dozens of names and dates scratched onto the table's surface, not wishing to make eye contact. Elowen fidgeted, trying to get comfortable. The bench creaked loudly, betraying her arrival and the girls turned round as one, their conversations silenced. Elowen looked up from the table and offered a watery smile—her insides twisted and gurgled. One girl stood in front of the group and Elowen was not surprised to see who it was.

Borra Morvel.

'Elowen,' she said in a voice loud enough to capture all the girls' attention. 'I didn't hear you come in. When I heard a squeak I assumed it must have been a rat, but then I was not far wrong was I?'

The sisters giggled on cue. Borra smiled but it was not the smile of friendship or warmth. Her expression reminded Elowen of a cat toying with its prey, allowing it a glimpse of freedom before inflicting the fatal bite. She stepped forward and fiddled with the cloth 'P' on Elowen's sleeve. 'I was about to tell everyone about your little accident in the stand yesterday.'

Elowen looked down at the table as Borra described the incident in great detail, every single moment. Elowen silently cursed Matron Grinling for her lateness; at least when the Matron arrived, her torment might cease. As Borra finished her story she asked, 'My mother thinks you are an imbecile. Is there anything you can do right, orphan?'

A chorus of laughter followed Borra's words. A voice echoed in Elowen's mind. '*They hate you. Everyone hates you.*' A sudden rage took her over. Elowen picked up a Book of Arithmetic and flung it at Borra; the book smacked the girl on the bridge of her nose and she fell back into the arms of the other girls.

'YOU'VE REALLY DONE IT NOW, ORPHAN!' Borra screamed, holding her nose and crying.

A new voice burst into the room.

'CEASE THAT PRATTLING AND BE SEATED!'

The voice belonged to Matron Grinling. She was a squat woman with eyes that matched her blue woollen dress, a red wart protruded from her forehead and there a line of facial hair above her top lip. Her feet remained hidden underneath a wide circular skirt.

'MATRON!' howled Borra, wiping her teary eyes, 'ELOWEN THREW A BOOK AT ME!'

'Is this true, girl?' said Grinling.

Elowen protested, 'Yes but—'

'No buts,' said Grinling. 'This is no place for petty squabbling. Stand in the corner. Now. Another word from you and it will be five lashes of the switch!'

Borra rubbed her nose and smiled at Elowen. She had won again.

Grinling forced Elowen to stand in the corner with her hand over her mouth, the usual classroom punishment. Her eyes filled with tears. It was so *unfair*. Nobody ever listened to her side of the story; she was always got the blame.

Elowen listened as the class recited the Prayer of the Blessed Father. They were halfway through the morning's housewifery lesson before Grinling allowed her to return to the table.

Elowen sat—across the table, Borra smirked and stuck out her tongue. Elowen wanted to throw another book at her but knew that would be stupid. She could not risk getting in trouble again, if she did Cronack would hear of it.

It was all unfair. She hated people. She hated all people.

*

The school day finished at three o'clock and Elowen made sure she would be first out of the classroom. The other girls were busy clearing away the books and chattering among themselves but before Elowen reached the door, someone grabbed her arm.

Borra.

She pulled Elowen close to her and through gritted teeth

she whispered, 'You won't get away with what you did. How dare you throw things at me? *You*, a filthy orphan, a scrounging orphan. I'll give you a hiding to pay you back. Try running if you want but we'll catch you—'

'Miss Morvel! Come and help the girls.'

At the sound of Grinling's voice Borra let go of Elowen's arm but she did not break eye contact.

'I'll catch you, orphan swine,' she said before strutting away.

Trembling, Elowen didn't linger. She had to get away. She knew Borra's threat was not an idle one.

Outside, black clouds loomed overhead and the wind smelt of rain. Elowen hurried down the school path. She was relieved to find that both Uther and Old Man Panchent had gone. As she reached the arched gate, she heard a shout from behind.

'THERE SHE IS! GET HER!'

Borra and the sisters, Glanna and Sowenna, bundled out of the schoolhouse.

Elowen knew she had only one option. Run.

The road in front of her was full of traffic; horses and the slow-moving carts trundled down from the Shambles. Going that way would only slow her down.

Then Elowen had an idea. She remembered the Chase, the narrow lane which cut between the school and the cemetery and then followed the route of the town wall. Going that way would give her a head start.

She ran as fast as she could. The Chase was poorly maintained, Elowen saw a rat scurrying around the banks of nettles and ground elder. The town wall loomed over her.

Elowen's ears filled with the sound of her own breathing and the thumping of her feet on the ground. Borra and the twins couldn't be far behind. Elowen knew she had to keep going. She reached a bend in the lane. Her side burnt with a stitch; Elowen felt as though her heart was going to burst free of her chest.

Then, from behind came a dreaded sound: feet crunching on the rough path. Borra and the sisters were coming. Their howls and laughs sounded closer and closer. Slowing all the time, Elowen reached another bend in the path. In front of her brooded the Old Tower. She shivered at the sight of the dark ivy, the damp-stained walls, the arrow slits and empty windows. Like an ill-fitting hat, a roof of dark red tiles sat on top of the tower—on every wall and every ledge perched street pigeons, their glossy lilac and green necks shining like bright jewels. They sung with a persistent, low cooing o-roo-coo. Her eyes momentarily off the path, Elowen tripped. She fell, thumping down hard onto her knees, jerking her head. The ground, the wall and the sky all spun around.

Before Elowen could scramble to her feet, Borra and the sisters surrounded her. Borra, her cheeks bright red, clapped her hands with glee and said to the sisters, 'Grab her arms. It's time for her to pay.'

They obeyed and lunged at Elowen. Out of instinct Elowen swung a fist and cuffed Sowenna on the cheek; the girl yelped and fell backwards but Borra was not so easily daunted. She may have been pretty but she was not beyond fighting and fighting dirty. She forced her whole weight down on Elowen, crushing the breath out of her chest.

Sowenna rose groggily and helped her sister pin down Elowen's arms.

Elowen struggled but against the three of them she had no chance. Punishment rained down on her: punches, kicks and slaps. They pulled her hair and scratched her arms.

'Cry your dirty tears, *orphan*,' said Borra. 'Nobody throws things at me and gets away with it. And especially not a filthy orphan.'

Elowen heard the girls' cruel, cold laughter but another sound cut in, an eerie, high-pitched cry, birdlike but unmistakably human.

Birds filled the air.

With a flurry of flapping wings and feathers, pigeons dived down onto Borra and the twins. The girls screamed and swiped at the birds but they kept coming. Borra tried to cover her head with her hands but to no avail. Within seconds her hair was streaked with slick black and white dung.

'GET OFF, GET OFF!' she screamed, waving her arms around.

The sisters ran away, scampering down the lane as fast as their short legs would allow.

Tears pouring down her cheeks Borra shouted after them, 'COME BACK! DON'T LEAVE ME!'

It was no good. The birds chased the twins out of sight. Borra did not want to be left alone; she took to her heels wailing and crying, her arms flailing around like the sails of a windmill.

Elowen, still on her back, could barely believe her eyes. Then she heard the strange call again. The pigeons returned to their perches on the Old Tower.

Before she managed to stand, a tall figure loomed over her.

It was Tom Hickathrift.

A History Lesson

Tom Hickathrift leant down and gently helped Elowen to her feet. ‘You have a talent for falling into trouble, young lady.’

‘What’s happening?’ said Elowen.

‘There is nothing to fear. We had better get you cleaned up a little, eh? Come inside.’

He gestured towards the Old Tower. A natural caution would normally have prevented Elowen from accepting his invitation but she did not fear Hickathrift; she sensed no malice in the old man and decided to follow him.

The tower’s heavy oak door had long been broken and thrown down, leaving scattered shards of wood and rusted bolts as its memorial. Two planks of wood now formed a feeble barrier across the doorway. With Hickathrift’s help, Elowen crouched and stepped between the planks.

Once inside it took her eyes a few moments to adjust to the gloom. Water dripped down from the low ceiling, plopping down onto a floor already slimy with the debris of abandoned bird nests and rotting flotsam of windy days. The smell made Elowen pinch her nose, a foul odour of decomposing things, of dead things. A spiral staircase rose

up from the centre of the room. Time and use had worn away the steps to shiny stumps.

‘We go up here, please tread carefully,’ said Hickathrift, taking off his hat.

With knees bent Elowen slowly climbed, one hand on the step in front of her, the other held against the damp wall, feeling her way along. She found it hard going.

‘Not far now,’ said her guide between hacking, chesty coughs.

Elowen grimaced with each step, trying not to think of the horrors that might be crawling around in the dark. Then something touched her hand and crawled over her fingers, between her fingers.

She squealed and pulled her hand from the wall; a large spider with long, hairy knotted legs dropped onto her foot. Elowen screamed and nearly tipped backwards. ‘Go away! Go away!’

To her relief, the spider scuttled into a slimy hole.

Hickathrift chuckled. ‘Don’t let the old attercob bother you. He won’t bite you.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Elowen, shivering. ‘I *hate* spiders.’

Fear gave a new strength to her legs and Elowen raced up the remaining stairs. She pushed through the half-opened door and came out into a wide room, an old guard room she guessed. A smell of stale tobacco smoke lingered there; a few caskets, barrels and chests remained, all grey with ancient dust; a rusted sword leant against the wall. There were cobwebs in every nook and crevice. With goosebumps rising on her arms, Elowen feared more spiders lurked there.

At the far end of the room lay a bed of straw and old

blankets. A question popped out of Elowen's mouth before politeness could stop it. 'You live *here*?'

Hickathrift shrugged his shoulders. 'I suppose it is no palace.'

Another spiral staircase led up from the guard room to the top of the tower. Elowen shivered—she certainly wasn't going up there.

The source of light in the guard room was the large rectangular open window: it offered a wide view across Treca-dok. Hickathrift pointed to two low wooden stools and said, 'Please be seated, I shall return in a moment.'

Elowen sat as Hickathrift rested his staff against the wall and scampered up the second flight of stairs. He soon returned with a bucket.

'Rainwater, collected through holes in the roof,' he said as he sat. 'We need to clean you up.'

With a piece of rag he carefully wiped the dirt and mud from her clothes. 'Are you hurt, Elowen?'

'No, only a few bumps and bruises,' she said, a little surprised by his gentle, caring manner. She wasn't used to people being kind to her. He stopped wiping her clothes; Elowen realised he was staring at her injured hand.

'That looks painful,' he said. 'How did that happen?'

Elowen told him of her accident at the ceremony and the beating that followed. He listened to her thoughtfully. 'Only the ignorant punish children in such a way. This happens often?'

Elowen nodded. 'All the orphans are beaten when they break the rules.'

'That does not make it just.'

Feeling awkward, Elowen tried to change the subject. 'I still don't understand what happened outside. Did you see the birds?'

A bluebottle buzzed around the room and Tom Hickathrift grumpily swiped it away. 'Aye. I saw them. Quite a sight.'

'They attacked Borra and the twins. But not me. They left me alone.'

'I have often found that birds have good sense, at least compared to humans,' he said with a wry smile. 'It is pleasant to have company. Most people avoid me. They think me odd.'

In truth Elowen found him odd too but he was far from unpleasant company. She asked, 'How long have you lived in Trecadok?'

He sat with a wince and cleared his throat. 'I am tempted to say too long.'

'Were you born here?'

A broad smile illuminated his face and he stood again, pacing around the room. He couldn't keep still and fidgeted constantly. 'No. From the east of Helagan come I. Land of the three hidden crowns and the endless sky. Such wonders! The shimmering sun rising above the fens. The bittern's booming call. The gliding marsh harrier. The reeds dancing in the breeze...ah, it is another world and one I miss.'

His description captivated Elowen, his words, the joyful enthusiasm of his voice, the light of his eyes. 'It sounds wonderful. Why did you leave?'

To that he did not answer but fell into a thoughtful silence which he broke only after a couple of minutes had passed.

He leant down and from a bag beside the stool took out an apple which he passed to Elowen. 'Here, a little food. You look hungry.'

Elowen bit into it and sweet juice dribbled down her chin, which she quickly wiped with her sleeve. The apple was delicious, so much better than the stale Orphanage food that she was used to.

From a hidden pocket Hickathrift pulled out a long clay pipe. Once lit he took several deep sucks from it and exhaled contentedly. The clouds of tobacco smoke made Elowen's nose twitch and she rubbed it to avoid sneezing.

'I find a little tobacco clears the mind,' he said. 'So, Elowen, tell me, why were the girls chasing you?'

'Borra is a bully. She hates me because I'm an orphan. All the girls at school hate me.' Elowen felt anger rise within her. 'And I hate them. I hate people, they are all cruel. I wish I could be alone.'

'People can be cruel,' said Hickathrift. 'But do not wish for loneliness, there is no greater curse. Lose all faith in humanity and you will lose all faith in yourself.'

'You wouldn't say that if you had to go to school. Every day there is misery.'

'Ah. A great shame,' said Hickathrift, looking genuinely saddened by her words. He sat, rubbing his chin. 'One should always enjoy learning.'

'It's *school* I hate. I like reading. I like stories and history.'

Hickathrift brightened. 'That is well. Reading is a joy though too few appreciate it. As for history, who can truly understand the present if they do not understand a little of the past?'

Elowen nodded in agreement though she wasn't entirely sure what he meant.

'What kind of history do they teach you in school?' he said, his words muffled by the pipe in his mouth.

'They don't teach any really,' said Elowen as she finished her apple. 'I read about it in pamphlets, chapbooks and the like. I've tried to talk to other girls about stories and history. They laugh at me. They say I'm dull. I'm not like other people. I'm told that all the time.'

Hickathrift's eyes narrowed. 'Is that such a bad thing? Do you wish to be like other people?'

Elowen shrugged. 'I don't know. Perhaps if I was like everyone else then I wouldn't get into trouble, perhaps then I wouldn't get picked on. Perhaps I'd be happier.'

Hickathrift pulled the pipe out of his mouth. 'I doubt that. If you try to change yourself to make others happy you will only become more miserable.'

'I don't think I could be any *more* miserable,' said Elowen. 'I suppose I am strange. It's...I have so many questions. Questions about everything.'

Hickathrift leant forward. 'These questions, have you put them to anyone else?'

Elowen shook her head, shocked at the very idea. 'It isn't safe to ask questions, especially of grown-ups. My friend Uther, we talk about things. Or at least we used to. He's changed since...' she stopped, years of being told never to discuss the Nulling blocked the flow of words.

Hickathrift looked interested. 'Changed? How? Please tell me.'

Elowen hesitated. This was dangerous talk. At first she

spoke slowly, picking her words with caution but soon she relaxed and spoke of the sorrow, the humiliation she had suffered. Hickathrift listened. Occasionally he nodded but never once interrupted her, never once corrected her. He let her speak her mind; Elowen found it an unusual sensation but a happy one.

When she had finished, Hickathrift sucked on his pipe and said, 'Tis a sad tale and one repeated across the Holy Empire. The Null is powerful. It corrupts the mind and the soul. It can corrupt even the Earthsoul.'

'Earthsoul? What is that?'

Hickathrift waved his hands in an expansive gesture. 'You feel the Earthsoul all the time. The Earthsoul is the heart of all life. It flows through you like the blood that flows through your veins. Every bird, every animal, every plant, all are touched by it, given life by it. It is on the wind, in the water, in the light of the sun.'

Hickathrift stood and stretched his long legs, groaning as he did so. 'The Earthsoul is cyclical and it sustains all life by maintaining the balance that makes life possible. In turn it is sustained by life, by the unhindered and bountiful growing of trees and plants, by clean water and air and by animals allowed to live their natural lives. It is from these sources that the Earthsoul draws its strength and purity. Great power it holds. There is power in the Earthsoul beyond any weapon forged by man.'

'Where is it?' said Elowen. 'Can you see it?'

'It cannot be seen, at least not directly. Some, the most blessed, talk of seeing threads of golden light. But the Earthsoul can definitely be felt. Although it is true that

some feel it more than others, all feel it to some measure. It is this connection with the Earthsoul that the Null breaks.’

Hickathrift rubbed his thick hair away from his forehead—he did not wear the Null. Her mouth formed an O and she pointed.

He laughed so hard that it made him cough. ‘So you noticed I do not wear the Null. Dangerous to be sure but who looks closely at an old vagrant, even in these suspicious days? People see what they wish to see.’

‘I thought every adult received the Null,’ said Elowen, her mind spinning with these new ideas.

He cleared his throat. ‘Only a few of us avoid such a fate. Through the Null, Redeemers can guide the thoughts of the bearer, like a puppeteer controls a stringed puppet.’

That was an idea so fantastic that Elowen found it impossible to make any sense out of it. ‘But the Mother Church only acts to protect us.’

Hickathrift raised one of his bushy eyebrows. ‘Protect you from what?’

Elowen struggled to recall the sermons of Bishop Gorlas. ‘From evil. It says so in the Holy Book.’

‘Yes, that *is* the way it is told in the Holy Book. That is what your church calls history. But understand this, Elowen, seldom is history a clear window on the past. Instead it is a mirror showing distorted reflections, reflections that can be manipulated if one wishes. Well, perhaps I can tell a story. This is not the history you will hear from the pulpit. I do not say this is the truth for others may doubt my veracity. I only say that this is the history *I* believe.’

The jolly smile had gone, the twinkle in his eyes faded, it

was as though a mask of an older, sadder man had been put over his face. He took the pipe from his mouth and emptied the ashen contents onto the floor. In slow, serious tones he spoke. ‘The Eldar, the firstborn, they were here countless ages before we Men walked blinking into the sunlight. There many races. Pixies. Fairies. Barbegs. Goblins. Uldra...’

He went on, listing names that meant nothing to Elowen. He noticed her confusion. ‘I am in danger of boring you. Alas when indulged I have the habit of talking too much. I will try not to wander in my thoughts. The Eldar were ever at one with the world and with the Earthsoul. During that age of joy many wondrous beings walked the earth. The Earthsoul flowed through them and they in turn enriched the Earthsoul.’

Hickathrift picked up his staff and toyed with the ribbons. ‘When Men first came into the world, the Eldar felt delight in their hearts. And they felt pity too for Men were weak and short-living. The Eldar graced these newcomers with their knowledge. Speech. The lore of plants. The lore of beasts and birds. Early Men recognised kinship with animals. They mimed them in their dances, feared them, and loved them. To early man, animals were different only in shape, not in nature. Some Men shared speech and thought with animals. They were known as Adepts and respected as wise men and women.’

‘Are you an Adept?’

‘Aye, although time and old age have eroded my abilities.’

‘And it was you that summoned the birds?’

‘I had a hand in it you might say. But in truth my work is

insignificant compared to feats achieved by the Adepts of old. To you they would have seemed like wizards.'

'Wizards!' said Elowen, covering her mouth after she spoke, an instinctive gesture but one too late to stop the heretical word forming on her lips.

'Aye, wizards. But they were no mere conjurers or illusionists. They worked to protect the world around them and to sustain the Earthsoul.'

Excited, Elowen said, 'Could you show me some magic?'

Hickathrift sneered. '*Magi*? Magic is for clowns and jesters. They do not interest me, nor should they you. The Adepts worked as healers, as teachers, as tellers of tales. They were simpler times, happier times.' Hickathrift sighed deeply and shook his head. 'Alas, this age of peace was not destined to last. The Mother Church saw to that.'

'What do you mean?'

He took a deep breath. 'As with most endeavours, the Mother Church began with noble intentions. To spread wisdom, peace, understanding. To spread the teachings of the one you would call the Saviour.'

'The son of God?' said Elowen, glad to be briefly on familiar ground.

Hickathrift examined his dirty fingernails. 'That depends on what you call God. But yes, the messenger of a higher power he was. A being to restore the balance of the Earthsoul, to bring peace to men's hearts. He was the first messenger. There have been others. Some successful, some lost to time. Some lost to...' he hesitated before continuing. 'But this first messenger remained true to his purpose, though he endured great hardship. From his teachings grew

the Mother Church. And at first the church consisted of those wishing to preserve the lessons he brought, to spread his wisdom. But as its influence grew, corruption seeped in, like poison entering the roots of a mighty tree, slowly killing it from inside, always unseen.'

Elowen's throat felt dry. She knew they were discussing things she should never talk about but she wanted to know more, she needed to know more. 'Where did the corruption come from?'

'Power does strange things to men and the Mother Church then, as now, wielded immense dominion,' said Hickathrift. 'The church became insular, protective, and suspicious. Everywhere it saw rivals, threats, enemies. It grew to fear other religions, other races. And most of it all it feared the Eldar. For the Mother Church had become strangled by its own rules and morality. It despised the untamed nature of the Eldar and the Earthsoul. Mistrust turned to hatred and hatred turned to persecution. Slowly a lust for power replaced a love for the Earthsoul. Forests felled to build new cities. Animals enslaved. Many wondrous beings lost, remembered now only in tales and legends. The bonds between humans and animals were severed. Few learn of the Earthsoul now and many that in generations past would have become Adepts never come to fulfil their true ability, restrained by the fear created by the Mother Church. Those that do find their true path are persecuted as witches or heretics.'

Elowen was shocked to hear Hickathrift describe the Mother Church in such a brutal way. His words shook the foundations of everything she had been told, everything she

believed. ‘The church has to protect us from the forces of evil.’

Hickathrift laughed bitterly, the sound echoing in the room. ‘The Eldar offered no threat. No, the Mother Church acted to secure its own power. Thus the Eldar were hunted down, the Adepts persecuted. The truth of the Earthsoul was denied, those who spoke of it were accused of heresy and murdered.’

Hickathrift stretched and sat again. ‘The church had grown old and fearful. It saw enemies at every border. And such a climate of fear allowed Prester John to rise to power. How the Mother Church welcomed him! This great king from the Dark Continent. A legend that had come to life. His followers drove the Church’s enemies before them. Through murder, treachery, cunning and bribery he was proclaimed Patriarch. And he was swift to exploit his new found power. Science and arcane knowledge obsessed him. In his efforts to further his knowledge he tortured animals, burned trees and plants. Many discoveries he made, from tools to weapons, to machines. But most of all he loved the lore of metal and through long study revealed the many secrets of Cold Iron.’

‘Cold Iron?’ said Elowen. ‘What’s that?’

‘A foul substance and a curse on this earth. The Cold Iron ore is found only in the pits of Gorefayne. There it is mined by slaves, in pits of indescribable horror. Black smoke belches into the sky. Fires burn night and day. Through the use of Cold Iron, Prester John managed to stretch his mind to reach places far beyond the limits of his senses and gain unnatural long life.’

‘But it is the Fountain of Life that gives Prester John long life,’ said Elowen, quoting the Mother Church’s teachings.

Hickathrift laughed. ‘The Fountain of Life? So that old tale is still spun is it? My, I suppose they still talk of the Sandy Sea, where the fish live in sand not water. And the four great rivers, all bursting with gold and jewels? Prester John’s country. Nonsense. Only a fool believes such tales.’

Elowen blushed. She believed the stories about Prester John’s country; everyone believed them. ‘The church would not tell lies about Prester John.’

‘My child, the minions of Prester John fill every position in the Mother Church,’ said Hickathrift. ‘His hold over the church is complete. It took him many years but when he gained control of the Mother Church, his power spread swiftly. Land after land fell under his sway. Kings swore allegiance to him or else were slain. Few can withstand his army or the terror of his Redeemers. His Ironclad ships rule the seas. Once he was named Patriarch, he declared war on those he named enemies. There were massacres, burnings, and hangings. Redeemers roamed the Empire and all trembled in their shadow. As the Terror raged, Prester John proclaimed that in a dream, God had ordained that all must wear the sign of the Almighty. The Null distinguished the holy from the unworthy. Of course, who would dare question Prester John, the saviour of humanity? So the Nulling began, enforced by the Redeemers.’

‘But the Terror was necessary,’ said Elowen, the Church’s teachings spilling out of her. ‘We are coming into the Last Days. Prester John and the Mother Church are preparing us for it, purifying the world before the Day of Judgement.’

‘The Last Days, eh? Yes, only when the Eldar and the heretics are liquidated will God bring forth his mercy. Prester John the Good! The saviour of souls!’ said Hickathrift, making no attempt to hide the sarcasm in his voice. He leant forward and said in a soft voice, ‘These are all lies, dangerous lies to justify unimaginable evil. Believe me, Elowen, Prester John brings death, nothing else.’

Elowen stared at Hickathrift with her mouth open. There was so much she wanted to say, so much so she wanted to ask that the words stuck in her throat, allowing no sound to come out. Hickathrift picked up his staff and placed his other hand on Elowen’s shoulder. He said, ‘None of this is easy for you to accept. It goes against everything you have ever been taught. But you must understand the truth about Prester John. You must see the danger of the Null and why you must seek to escape the fate that has taken so many others. The people you see around you, the people you talk to, the people you listen to, they are all prisoners. The Null keeps them enslaved, it keeps them in ignorance.’

Elowen took a deep breath. Her mind ticked over with the stories Hickathrift told her. How could she make sense of it all? ‘I’m frightened of Nulling; I think I always have been. I often think I’m the only person who feels the way I do.’

Hickathrift shook his head. ‘Many children share your fears.’

Elowen surprised herself with her openness, she was so used to being guarded and not talking of feelings but with Hickathrift it was different. Despite his strangeness, she felt at ease. He was not judging her, mocking her. ‘I don’t want

to end up like the others. I have always wanted to escape the Orphanage, escape Trecadok. See other lands. It is stupid I know—just foolish dreams.’

‘There is nothing foolish about dreams. Without dreams to inspire you, you cannot be truly alive. Pity the one who dreams not, for what joy can there be in life then? You must escape this town. There is strength in you, Elowen. A strength inherited from your mother.’

Elowen jolted as though she had been stung. She wondered if she had heard him properly. ‘My mother? You knew her?’

Hickathrift beamed, his eyes twinkled. ‘Indeed, I knew her well. We shared many adventures.’

‘Adventures?’ said Elowen, her head dizzy with surprise and excitement, ‘but my mother was a servant girl from Porth—’

Laughter from Hickathrift cut her words short. ‘A servant girl! I’m glad that story stuck. That was the story told to the Orphanage after her death. Your life would have been in danger had the truth been known. Your mother was an Adept—among the most powerful I have ever seen. How greatly I miss her.’

Her throat dry, her voice failing, Elowen said, ‘What happened to her? How did she die?’

Hickathrift took a deep breath and stared down at the floor. ‘Murdered by the Brotherhood of Redemption. Long she suffered, tortured by the dark arts of Lord Lucien. Her death was cruel but she did not beg for Lucien’s mercy and she did not betray her friends.’

Elowen felt a coldness grow within her, as though her

blood chilled. ‘Lord Lucien. I have heard mention of his name.’

‘Then we shall say no more of him.’

‘But—’

‘I have something that belonged to your mother,’ said Hickathrift. He stood and walked over to the chest. The lid opened with an irritated groan, as though reluctant to reveal the treasures hidden inside. Hickathrift fumbled inside the chest like a blackbird digging for a worm. A short, ‘A-ha!’ announced success in his search. He passed Elowen an object. ‘Your mother would have been delighted to think you had this. For me, it is a reminder of a happier time.’

It was a tiny figurine, carved from a limestone pebble with faint stains of red ochre visible; a feminine figure with swollen breasts, belly and buttocks. The blank, faceless head betrayed nothing, inscrutable in its lack of detail—the surface smoothed by long years.

‘It is a representation of Mother Earth herself,’ said Hickathrift. He pointed to a thin strap of leather tied around the figurine. ‘Your mother wore this as a pendant.’

‘Then I shall do the same,’ said Elowen, as she tied it around her neck.

‘Do so but keep it hidden from less friendly eyes and less open minds. You remind me of her. The same eyes, the same smile. Much she has passed on to you. That is why you must avoid Nulling.’

Elowen snorted as she tucked the pendant in behind the collar of her dress. ‘That’s absurd. Everybody in the Holy Empire receives the Null. You have to. There are no exceptions.’

‘No exceptions? Look at me,’ said Hickathrift, pointing at his forehead. ‘People accept the Null because they know of no other way. You have said you feel at odds with the world, or at least the world as shaped by men. You are not alone in that feeling. Others feel that same hurt, the same loneliness. Many live with this pain, at least before they are Nulled. They accept it as the will of God. However, the Illuminati do not agree. They see through the lies and deceit of Prester John.’

Elowen stumbled over the unfamiliar word, ‘Illum...’

‘The Illuminati,’ Hickathrift gently corrected. ‘They are scholars, philosophers, mystics. Drawn from every land, from every race. One purpose unites them, the protection of Mother Earth. They remain your best chance.’

‘Chance for what?’

‘The chance to escape a life imprisoned. To escape the Null. To be free. There is a place, to the far north, a sanctuary. The home of the Illuminati.’ He paused, as though gauging Elowen’s mood. ‘It is a perilous journey but I could take you there.’

‘*Leave Trecadok?* That’s impossible. I’m not like my mother. I’m not an Adept. I’m just an orphan. I can’t run away.’

‘So you would stay here instead? Come to the sanctuary, Elowen. Learn the Earthsoul’s secrets. Through it you could achieve so much. Of course I cannot force you to leave. I must give you time to decide.’

Elowen thought about what Hickathrift said when one word struck her like a blow.

Time.

The mention of the word brought Elowen back to reality.

If she did not return to the Orphanage soon, she would be late and being late would risk more chores and another beating.

‘I...I must go,’ she said, panic growing within her.

‘Of course. I have detained you for too long. But please, come and see me again. I have enjoyed our talk.’

Elowen smiled. ‘Yes, I have too. And thank you for helping me.’

Hickathrift bowed. ‘The pleasure was mine. I ask only one thing of you. Say nothing of what we have discussed to anyone else.’

‘No, of course not,’ said Elowen. She made her way down the stairs and began the long run back to the Orphanage. As she ran, she replayed in her mind all that Hickathrift had told her and especially what he had said about her mother. Her own mother, an Adept. Elowen’s stomach tingled with excitement. She caressed the pendant; it was a link to her mother, tangible, real.

Change rarely invaded her life. Routine usually ruled every waking moment with each day much like the one that preceded it, like the sound of one note endlessly repeated. This day had been different, the door to another world, a bigger world, had crept open and she wanted to see what lay beyond it. She did not want to stay trapped in Trecadok. Some days, the town walls closed in on her. They crushed her body and soul. Her world became grey: the grey of stone, the grey of rain clouds and the grey of faces of people who breathed but had long ceased to live, only existing in their daily procession of empty prayer, work and sleep.

She wanted to escape but to run away would go against

everything she had been told, against every rule. Guilt grew inside her—Hickathrift would be considered a heretic by many, a danger to all he met. She remembered the visions of hell described in the Holy Book: the fire, ash and demons. Could she ignore those fears, the fears that ate her up from inside?

Elowen reached the Orphanage just in time: the clock struck four as she passed through the door. Diggory Bulhorn, who had been waiting for her, looked disappointed that, for once, she had escaped punishment.

Bucca

Strange dreams invaded Elowen's sleep that night, dreams filled not with shadowy fantasies but with images as vivid as those of waking hours.

A woman holding a baby. She sung a soft lullaby. They sat close to a fire. Elowen smelt wood smoke.

Then a solitary figure strode across bleak moors, angry clouds boiled above. Rain lashed down in thick veils. The figure held something in its arms, something hidden by rags and cloths.

The moors vanished. Her mother's figurine loomed large, bathed in an eerie light. A single tear fell from its right eye, moisture sliding down the dry surface of its face.

All turned to darkness. If Elowen dreamed any more that night, she did not remember it.

For the next three nights after school, Elowen visited Tom Hickathrift in the Old Tower. She could not resist hearing more of his tales. He spoke of old times, of the Eldar, of animals that talked, of fabulous beasts that once roamed the earth. He used all manner of strange voices and accents to bring the tales to life. He showed Elowen dusty old maps of lands unknown to her. She dreamt about following the roads marked on them, of exploring distant

kingdoms and mysterious forests. Hickathrift said nothing more of her going to the sanctuary and Elowen assumed that he considered the matter closed. Since the incident with the birds, Borra and the twins had left Elowen alone. Of course, they still glared at her across the classroom table but they troubled her no more. So for the briefest of times, Elowen enjoyed a little peace but it was not to last.

Friday morning began like any other day. Still wrapped up in the tales of Tom Hickathrift, Elowen barely noticed the blood red sky that burned above her as though a fire raged in the heavens, nor the animated chatter of birds that came from the trees and rooftops. She daydreamed through school, the lessons passed as no more than background chatter. Her mind wandered, drifting onto the tales Hickathrift told her. The moments spent with him were her escape from the tedium of daily routine.

When the school day finished Elowen raced out of the building. She reached the Old Tower; before entering she looked around to make sure she had not been followed. Satisfied she was alone, she stepped through the broken door and made her way up the narrow stairway. She reached the top step and stopped. The door in front of her was ajar—she heard voices coming from inside the room. She leant forward towards the door and strained to listen.

The first voice belonged to Tom Hickathrift but he sounded different, his voice graver, deeper. ‘Why have you come here?’

A man replied in a thickly accented voice. ‘Forgive me. I had no choice. The Redeemers found us. The ship was lost but I escaped, escaped to bring you this.’

Silence fell between the two men. Elowen's heart pounded and the blood rushed in her ears. Then Hickathrift spoke again. 'You brought it *here*?'

'I had no choice,' said the other. 'I had nowhere else to go.'

Hickathrift's voice grew louder. 'You should have brought it anywhere but here! You fool! Do you not see what you have done? You have led the enemy straight to Elowen.'

At the mention of her name, Elowen's curiosity overwhelmed her and she pushed the door open. A man knelt on the floor, his hair wild and knotted, a filthy beard reached down to his chest but he was not an old man. By his lean, muscular body Elowen judged him no older than thirty years. He cradled his right arm as though it was injured. Hickathrift stood above the man like a king accepting homage from a subject. The kindly smile, the shining eyes had vanished. Elowen jumped when he spoke to her, his voice sounded so fierce, so primal. 'Elowen, how long have you been listening?'

Startled, she backed away. 'I'll go if...'

Hickathrift stepped forward; the softness in his face returned. 'Pray forgive my harsh words, you surprised me. Please, come in. Do not be alarmed, this is Vortigern. He is a friend.'

Before her brain engaged, Elowen said, 'Is he an Illuminati?'

'Do not be so swift to say that word aloud,' said Hickathrift. 'Enemies are all around. Danger draws close.'

'*Danger?*' said Elowen.

The only sound in the room was that of birds singing out-

side. Hickathrift looked down at her gravely. ‘You are in the very greatest danger, Elowen, a danger I have long sought to protect you from.’

‘I...I don’t understand,’ said Elowen.

‘Of course not, but I shall explain. Vortigern, it is time. Show Elowen what you have brought.’

With his one good hand Vortigern pulled a tiny, ivory box out of his pocket. He fumbled and dropped it on the floor—the lid opened and a folded parchment fell out. Elowen knelt and picked it up. Yellow and dry, the parchment felt old and coarse against her fingertips. It smelt of smoke and dust. Gently she unfolded it; it was a map, with its borders marked with strange letters and symbols. Elowen saw rivers, mountains and oceans marked but they had names she had never heard of. At the centre of the map lay the image of a tree. ‘What is it?’

Hickathrift paced around the room. He avoided looking at Vortigern. ‘This map is ancient beyond count, and precious beyond price.’

‘Precious?’ said Elowen. ‘Why is it precious?’

‘The time for questions has passed,’ said Hickathrift. ‘You need only know this. The Redeemers will kill to find this map.’

Elowen shivered, she remembered the horrible sight of the Redeemer on the Day of Nulling. She folded the map and slipped it back into the box, carefully closing the lid. She passed it to Tom Hickathrift. ‘But they won’t find it? They don’t know where it is?’

Hickathrift lowered his head. ‘Tell her, Vortigern.’

The man frowned. ‘Can she be trusted?’

‘She needs to know,’ said Hickathrift.

Vortigern looked at her, his dark eyes impenetrable. ‘Since my ship was attacked I have carried that map across Helagan, pursued at each step by Redeemers. I eluded them, barely. Only once did they come close, two nights ago. I escaped from their clutches but only after being struck by an arrow.’

With great effort Vortigern pulled up the sleeve of his limp right arm. Elowen gasped and retched at the sight she beheld. The skin on his hand was peeled back in large slivers. His fingers were like the melted tips of candles. Elowen’s stomach churned and she took deep breaths to avoid being sick.

‘The arrow head was made of Cold Iron,’ Vortigern said. ‘A piece broke off in the wound.’

But if Elowen expected Hickathrift to show any pity towards Vortigern she was mistaken. ‘Your pain matters not. The Redeemers will be following you. They will sense the Cold Iron in you. You have brought them to us. They will be here in hours.’

Elowen felt a cold sweat all over her body. ‘The Redeemers are coming here? What does that mean?’

Hickathrift wiped his eyes and placed his hands on her shoulders. ‘It means there can be no further delay. You must flee, Elowen. You must flee this very night.’

‘Flee?’

‘Yes, you must come with me to the sanctuary.’

‘I can’t. You know that. Besides, what has this got to do with me? Why am I in danger?’

‘I do not have time to explain but you must believe me. If

you—’ he stopped and stood as rigid as a statue. ‘The birds have stopped singing.’

Suddenly the walls shuddered and plumes of dust fell down from the ceiling.

‘Tom, what is happening?’ said Elowen.

Vortigern sprung to his feet, his eyes wide like a startled rabbit. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came. His injured arm trembled, moving with a life of its own. He cried out in pain. ‘It burns! It burns!’

Hickathrift clenched his fists. ‘So, they have found us.’

Voices came up from below. The Redeemers were inside the tower.

Elowen could not stop her whole body from trembling. She heard slow, heavy steps coming up the stairs.

Swift as a hawk, Hickathrift grabbed Vortigern and dragged him towards the open door. ‘Slow them in any way you can.’

Vortigern looked at Hickathrift, his eyes full of pleading but he said nothing. With his good hand he searched within his tattered robes and pulled out a knife. He bowed to Elowen and slipped through the doorway. As soon as Vortigern vanished from sight Hickathrift slammed the door shut. With Elowen’s help, he moved the wooden chest and wedged it in front of the door.

From outside the room, from the stairs, came shouts, muffled words and curses. Then a strangled scream.

‘Have they killed Vortigern?’ said Elowen.

Hickathrift faced Elowen, his eyes red and moist. ‘It matters not. You must flee, child. They will kill you if they find you.’

‘But aren’t you are coming with me?’

He shook his head. ‘I must stay and hold them.’

‘But—’

‘It is the only way,’ he said. He took her hand and placed the little ivory box in her palm. ‘Keep this hidden. Do you understand?’

Fists thumped on the door.

‘Do you understand, Elowen?’ said Hickathrift.

Elowen nodded, trembling with fear. ‘Where am I to go?’

‘Go up the other stairs. From the top you can climb down the wall.’

‘Climb down?’ said Elowen, her mind spinning at the idea.

‘Aye, make for the Witchwood,’ he said. He whistled out of the window—a sparrow perched on the ledge. Hickathrift cupped it in his hands, whispered and let it fly away. ‘Walk until you come to a glade with a standing stone at its heart. A friend will find you there, Elowen. You can trust him. He will help you.’

Fists thumped on the door, the whole frame rattled. A voice cut in, a voice as cold as a January wind. ‘Open in the name of Prester John.’

‘There is so much more I should have told you, but the sands of time have run out for me—this shall be my final task,’ he said. He grabbed her right sleeve and ripped off the cloth P. He screwed it up and dropped it on the floor. ‘You no longer need that. Now go.’

He pushed Elowen towards the upper stairway but the door behind her exploded into shards of wood and shattered hinges. Two Redeemers swept into the room. Elowen felt all warmth leave her body; their presence chilled the

very marrow of her bones. One of Redeemers said, 'Lord Hereward. Your long exile is at an end. Surrender the map or die like the other Illuminati wretch.'

Hickathrift stood his ground and raised his staff. 'There is nothing for you here.'

The Redeemer noticed Elowen. He held out a long, skeletal hand towards her. 'The child—'

Hickathrift swung his staff towards the Redeemer, missing only by a few inches. 'No further! I warn you!'

His voice boomed out like a cannon shot. The Redeemers paused. There was a silence, following by slow, chilling laughter. The Redeemer spoke again. 'Your powers have faded, Lord Hereward. Curse in vain if you must but it will not save you. Surrender the map.'

Both the Redeemers drew their long, cruel swords.

'RUN, ELOWEN!' said Hickathrift.

This time she obeyed, not wishing to linger in the Redeemers' presence for a second longer. She dragged herself up the narrow steps. She heard the Redeemer's foul voice again. 'You are a fool to the end, Lord Hereward.'

'Aye, this is the end,' she heard Hickathrift reply grimly.

Elowen took one last look behind. Hickathrift swung his staff, round and round in his nimble hands. The Redeemers moved to parry a blow but his swing was not aimed at them. The air around him shimmered, as though Elowen viewed everything through a watery veil. She saw threads of golden light swirl around the chamber. The Redeemers lunged at Hickathrift but their movements became sluggish, like one trying to walk through thick mud. Try as they might they could not reach Hickathrift.

‘Up the stairs, Elowen!’ he said. ‘I cannot hold them forever.’

Elowen knew that she could not help him. She did not want to leave him but there was no other choice, his efforts would be in vain if she dithered long enough for the Redeemers to catch her. She mounted the rest of the steps, and emerged out onto a small ledge that looked towards the Witchwood. The wind whipped around the ledge, moaning in a soft voice and tossing Elowen’s hair around. The ground looked a long way down.

A deep rumble came from inside the tower. The walls trembled; tiles from the roof slipped and fell, pelting the ground below with explosions of clay.

The town wall was pitted and riddled with holes. With care, Elowen guessed she could climb down.

She fought to control the shaking of her body as she eased herself down. Her throat was so dry she couldn’t swallow. With each movement, she muttered to herself, ‘Don’t fall. Don’t fall.’

Twice, falling roof tiles missed her by a whisker.

Her feet touched the ground. She was out.

Still shaking, Elowen stumbled away from the wall.

She had taken no more than a few steps when the tower’s peak disintegrated into dust, brick and smoke. A blast of hot air knocked her off her feet; a cloud of dust white-washed her face, hair and clothes. She got up choking and coughing. The sound of the explosion echoed, lingering for several seconds. Elowen struggled to focus her eyes and a persistent buzzing sound filled her ears.

What had happened? She remembered what Hickathrift

had once said. *There is power in the Earthsoul beyond any weapon forged by man.*

He must have used that power to save her; Elowen knew he was now dead.

She had little time to grieve. She could already hear shouts and screams from inside the town. In front of her in the distance stretched the black, shapeless mass of the Witchwood.

Elowen realised she was still clutching the box with the map inside. She tucked it away in a pocket. Despite her fear, grief and pain, a fresh determination grew in her. She did not want to waste Hickathrift's sacrifice. A raw, reckless excitement flowed through her. She had to keep going, she had to get away from Trecadok.

Elowen crossed the broad meadow that led down from the wall. Long slicks of mud and deep puddles peppered the meadow and Elowen sent up explosions of brown water as she splashed across. She startled a foraging partridge and it flew away with noisy wing beats.

Hot and out of breath, Elowen reached the rounded earthwork bank which enclosed the Witchwood. Six feet tall, no tales told who had constructed it or for what purpose. For the first time, Elowen stood at the Witchwood's border. The forbidden forest. The haunted place. The place of nightmares. The place of fear. Elowen knew if she climbed over the bank and into the forest, there would be no turning back, it would be too late to return. She either returned now or kept going. The town was no more than a black smudge on the landscape—a thin coil of smoke rose from the ruined tower.

Trecadok was a prison, a prison for her body and mind. She would not walk back into that prison. She gripped her mother's pendant. Trecadok offered her nothing, the road ahead was terrifying, with little hope but if she returned, the Redeemers would be waiting for her. If she was certain of one thing, it was that she did not want to fall into their hands.

Elowen clambered over the bank, her hands and feet sinking into the mossy grass. Elowen pushed her fears aside and plunged into the forest.

It was beyond her wildest imaginings, beyond anything she had ever experienced in Trecadok. Ancient oak trees towered above her, giants of bark, branch and leaf. They creaked and groaned, speaking a strange language of trees. The air filled with the smell of damp earth, of growing things, of decaying things. Dense thickets of bramble filled much of the space between the trees but Elowen spied a few well-lit patches of ground sprinkled with bluebells and wood anemones. There were so many colours, sounds, smells and Elowen felt as though all of her senses were sharpened. As she walked, she became aware of more life in the forest. High above, squirrels leapt from branch to branch. In an act of courtship, a male blue tit fed caterpillars to his mate. Blackbirds scuffled around on the ground and Elowen heard the sleepy cooing of wood pigeons.

Elowen had no idea of where she was or which direction to walk in so she stepped forward and trusted to luck. She walked slowly, feeling exposed and vulnerable. She plodded on through banks of bracken and coils of bramble which cut her skin. She found a way through the undergrowth and

struck a narrow path although it was made bumpy by tree roots and littered with the fallen trunks of long dead oaks. After an hour she reached the edge of a sun-drenched glade, which lay at the foot of a roughly terraced grass slope, as though someone had once carved steps into the living earth of the slope only for neglect and time to smooth away the edges.

Elowen picked her way down the slope. At the heart of the glade stood the stump of a dead oak tree, hollow and brittle with age. A dome-shaped standing stone leant against the stump, its surface covered in scratches and markings. She guessed that this was the glade Tom Hickathrift had described.

Trees perched on the edge of the slopes, trees older than the ones Elowen had already passed. They were choked by other life; wood-rushes and ferns sprouted from their clefts. Pockets of ailing bluebells and primroses peeked through the glade's grassy floor. Birds chattered, insects buzzed.

Elowen leant against the stump. Her whole body was clammy with sweat, her every breath was an effort that strained her lungs and a taste of salt filled her mouth. She wondered if Hickathrift's friend would come. She struggled to think of anyone living in such a wild place.

Once Elowen had got her breath back she walked around the standing stone, tracing her fingers over the faded marks on its surface. As she did so, her fingertips tingled as though she passed them through the tip of a candle flame, yet there was no pain. At the same time, her senses heightened: every sound became louder. She heard the rapid breathing of a mouse that scuttled for cover beneath the

stump and the chirping of a cricket hidden in a clump of grass at Elowen's feet sounded as loud as a drum. Smells became so distinct, so vivid. The forest colours glowed. Threads of golden light weaved around the glade, animated with life of their own. Elowen felt at one with the forest, as though her feet were rooted in the earth. A feeling of inner warmth grew within her, like a flame burning inside her body. Yet, when she lifted her fingers from the stone, sounds became muted, colours drained. It was like waking from a dream.

Startled, Elowen moved away from the stone. Was she enchanted? Was she going mad? No, no, she must have dozed off.

She thought about things she had said to Tom Hickathrift, about how she had wished to be alone, far from other people.

'Well,' she said aloud, 'you are certainly alone now.'

'No, not alone.'

Elowen cried out at the sudden voice.

Someone stood next to the tree stump. At first she thought that it must be a child but as she stared she realised the stranger was like no child she had ever seen before.

He stood no taller than four feet, with short, bow legs and long arms that almost reached his knees; his aged, tanned skin resembled leather. He wore a cloak and a hood; his large watery eyes looked out beneath a pronounced, hairy forehead. He smiled to reveal chipped, yellowing teeth. Over his left shoulder he carried a cylindrical, flat-bottomed container, fashioned from birch bark and a sturdy leather bag.

Elowen picked up a fallen branch and held it with both hands as a weapon. 'Who are you?'

The little man bowed and pulled down his hood, revealing long braided hair. In a single swift motion he unfastened his cloak; beneath he wore tightly fastened animal furs. He had a strong musty smell.

'Be not afraid, child,' he said a low scratchy voice. 'Bucca Gwidden means you no harm.'

Elowen was in no mood to take that on face value. 'Are you an outlaw?'

Bucca Gwidden laughed a deep chesty laugh that made his little shoulders shake. 'No outlaw is Bucca. Not of your race is he. A pixie is he.'

The significance of his words struck Elowen and her whole body went cold with fear. In front of her stood a pixie, an Eldar, a tainted one. For all Hickathrift had said, the years of teaching drummed into her could not be easily ignored. She got ready to swing the branch. 'Don't come a step closer.'

Bucca held up his hands. 'There is no need for that, child. Just a weary traveller is old Bucca. But he wonders, why are you wandering the forest alone? Flee you from some danger?'

The closeness of his guess made Elowen uncomfortable. 'I'm looking for someone. A friend.'

'Long way from any friends you are Bucca thinks.'

'It's nothing to do with you.'

The pixie bowed. 'No offence Bucca means. Please, lower your weapon. Bucca too seeks someone. Long and swiftly has he walked this morning. May he rest here awhile?'

'I suppose,' said Elowen, far from pleased at the prospect. She laid the branch down on the ground.

Bucca sat, his legs crossed. He settled his container and bag down on the ground beside him and hummed a tune. Elowen paced around, trying to ignore the unwelcome stranger. How long would she have to wait for Hickathrift's friend? With each rustle of a branch, with each fluttering of a bird she looked around hopefully, but no-one else appeared. What if the Redeemers were looking for her? Surely they could track her and find her in the forest? If Tom's friend didn't come to help her, how could she survive?

Her dark thoughts were interrupted by the pixie.

'What is the name of your friend? Know him perhaps Bucca does.'

'I doubt it. Have you got nothing better to do than sit there making that racket and asking questions? Why can't you leave me *alone*?'

Bucca's leathery face creased into a frown. 'Anger there is in you, child, and sadness too.'

Elowen took a deep breath, trying to control herself, trying to fight the tears. 'I have lost a good friend.'

'Clumsy of you to lose a friend,' he said with a mischievous grin.

His flippant reply angered Elowen. 'He is not lost. He is dead. Killed. It was my fault. If I had not gone to him...'

The pixie's expression changed and in an instant he became more serious. 'Not your fault, child. Not your fault at all.'

'What do you know about it?' said Elowen.

The pixie stood and stretched his arms. 'Brave was Tom

Hickathrift. Knew the danger he did. Knew that he could not escape the dark ones, not forever.'

Understanding dawned on Elowen, though she still found it hard to believe the words as she said them, 'You're his friend! You're the one he wanted me to meet.'

The pixie nodded. 'Bucca is here to help you. He received word that a girl by the name of Elowen would be wandering the forest alone and in need of guidance. Bucca is guessing you are her.'

'Yes...yes. Why didn't you say so before?' she said, feeling embarrassed about her sharp words and behaviour.

'Bucca needed to be sure you were the girl he sought. Of great importance is the map you carry. Guide you on your journey Bucca can.'

'Journey? I'm not going anywhere with you,' said Elowen, trying to hide her surprise that Bucca knew of the map.

'So you wish to find your own path through the forest. Of course. How foolish of Bucca to think otherwise.'

Elowen looked down at her feet. 'I'd survive. I don't need your help.'

'Bucca has no time for this,' said the pixie. He snatched his belongings and bounded up the slope. Elowen felt guilty: what had the pixie done to her? She knew she was breaking the law and disobeying the Mother Church by even speaking to him but he had been friendly, courteous, he had offered to help her and although he was strange company, she did not want to be all alone in the forest. She called out to him, 'I'm sorry. Please come back.'

The pixie stopped and smiled. 'You are suspicious of old Bucca. Expected that he did. Bucca knows humans are told

Eldar are foul creatures, demons. Those tales are lies. In peaceful harmony with the Earthsoul we live. Learn to look with your own eyes, not through the eyes of the bitter, of the prejudiced.'

Elowen took another deep breath. Tears stung her eyes. 'I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. So much has happened, so many terrible things...'

The pixie made his way down the slope. 'Help you Bucca can. Alone and lost you are. Bucca offers himself as your guide. Will you have him? Will you trust him?'

Elowen said, 'Yes, I trust you.'

'Always a good beginning trust is. Bucca hopes Tom Hickathrift's faith in you is well placed.'

'I won't let him down. I promise.'

Bucca laughed grimly. 'Of precious little worth are the promises of humans. But, reveal the truth time shall. Now, we have tarried long enough. Searching for you the Redeemers will be. Until they have the map, they will not cease.'

A cold shiver ran down Elowen's spine. 'Do you think they'll find us here?'

He waved his hands around the glade. 'Bucca is not sure. The Earthsoul is stronger in some places than others and here it is *very* strong, being a sacred place for the Eldar. Shield us from the Redeemers' malice it may.'

Bucca placed his hand on the stone. He closed his eyes. 'Ah, the rhythms of the forest.'

Recalling her own experience with the stone, Elowen said, 'I touched the stone. Everything seemed...brighter, clearer. And the golden threads, they are just like Tom described.'

Bucca took his hands off the stone, opened his eyes and smiled. ‘Earthsoul goes beyond words and only through experience can it be known. It flows through this stone like a river. Fortunate indeed you are if you saw the golden threads. Few humans experience such a sensation. Most humans never feel the Earthsoul. Perhaps hope for you there is.’

Bucca took off his cloak; his belt was full of strange tools. He opened the leather bag and spilled its contents onto the ground. ‘Here, Bucca has brought clothes more fitting the journey. A thick shirt. Breeches—’

‘Where did you get these?’ said Elowen.

Bucca laughed his deep, chesty laugh. ‘Let us say that a woodsman will go cold today.’

Elowen could not believe what Bucca had told her. ‘You stole them? From a peasant?’

‘A small act of mischief compared to what your people have done to Bucca’s folk,’ replied the pixie, his tone hardened, the smile dead on his lips.

Elowen wanted to argue but thought better of it. Instead she went to the other side of the stump to change. The shirt made her skin itch but it felt thick and warm. She was sure she looked ridiculous in the breeches, they came down to her toes, but at least they were easier to walk in than her Orphanage dress.

‘What about food and drink?’ said Elowen after she had changed.

‘Food Bucca has and in need the forest will feed us,’ said the pixie as he passed Elowen the leather bag. ‘Here, take this. Need it you will.’

Elowen slung the bag from her left shoulder to her right hip, it felt heavy and its sides bulged.

‘What’s inside?’ she said.

Bucca picked his nose. ‘Some old rags, rope, a stone knife. All may prove useful in the journey to come.’

‘But which way are we going?’

Bucca picked up the birch bark container and fastened it to his back. ‘Too dangerous is the road. Use it the Redeemers may and besides, Bucca cannot risk being seen on the roads of men. Through the forest we must travel, a journey of two days. By that time he hopes that your pursuers will be far away. By the end of the second day we will reach the Great North Road, close to the Mengoon. From there you can travel to Dinas Hein. No further than the border of the Mengoon shall Bucca go. From there, alone you are.’

Alone. Elowen did not like the sound of that word. ‘Is it far to Prevennis? How long will it take me to get there?’

Bucca hesitated before answering. He picked his nose and squinted. ‘Long, long way it is, with many perils on the journey.’

‘I’m not really made for adventures,’ said Elowen.

‘Ah, in measure we are all made for adventure, child. It is whether we choose to accept the adventures laid before us or not that is important. Now, let us go.’ The pixie knelt, kissed the stone and scrambled up the bank and into the trees. ‘Come, child, follow Bucca,’ he called.

With a deep sigh and a sudden sense of foreboding, Elowen followed her guide into the depths of the Witchwood.

The Witchwood

Elowen was used to walking but soon tired. An inch-thick layer of leaf mould stuck to the soles of her shoes, weighing down her every step. The bag felt heavy too and the strap dug into her shoulder. If an easy path through the forest existed, Bucca did not seek it. Instead he led her through thick banks of dry bracken. The pixie kept several paces ahead of Elowen and rarely spoke. From time to time he stopped and bent down to pick up leaves, twigs and stones from the forest floor. He examined them like a curious child before dropping them into one of his innumerable pockets and continuing on his way.

They walked for hours and Elowen lost all sense of where she was or which direction they were walking in. For all she knew, they were marching in endless circles. Bucca pushed forward, never stopping, never slowing. Cursing her sore feet, Elowen trudged on behind him. Each step took her further into the unknown, each step mattered and each step held the potential to take her in a myriad of different directions. She had no idea what lay ahead or where she was going. Such freedom felt strange. She was used to having each

hour of her day planned and controlled. School. Chores. Sleep.

It was not like that now.

What would this day bring? And tomorrow? And the day after that? She felt scared but excited. Confused but exhilarated. She felt *alive*. Each step into the forest revealed more delights. Birdsong filled the air: the trill of wood warblers and blue tits, the incessant cooing of wood pigeons and the cat-like mewling of a prowling buzzard.

‘Ah, the music of the forest,’ said Bucca, breaking his long silence. He sighed like one satisfied after a hearty meal.

‘The birds do sing prettily,’ said Elowen, pleased for some conversation.

‘Bucca is surprised you noticed, for most humans blunder through the forest only hearing their own clumsy footsteps and endless chatter. So much you miss. To the forest’s rhythm you must slow. Look long, hold yourself quiet. Silence is important. Only then will you feel and see the Earthsoul’s golden threads. Feel the wind’s kiss. Ageless is the wind. It counts not days or years. It is ever changing but ever the same. The wind that dries your face is the same that touched the cheeks of your ancestors in times long gone.’

The pixie fell silent and lowered his head, lost in thought. Glad for a chance to catch her breath, Elowen stretched her aching legs. Between the thickets and the trees nestled small standing stones, weathered and lichen smothered, each with crude human-like face. ‘What are these?’

‘The first humans made them. Represent the spirits of the oak trees they do.’

Elowen shivered. ‘The trees have...*sprits?*’

Bucca tenderly stroked the trunk of the nearest oak. ‘Yes, though now many are silent. The first humans named the spirits Oakmen.’

‘Oakmen,’ Elowen repeated, liking the sound of the name.

The pixie spat into his palms and rubbed his hands together. ‘The first humans wanted to show their love and respect of the forest. A love and respect few later humans have shown.’

Elowen realised Bucca never missed a chance to show his scorn for mankind. Doing her best to ignore this, she said, ‘But what do the Oakmen do?’

‘They protect the trees, nurture them,’ said Bucca as though he was stating the most obvious thing imaginable. ‘Each tree has a spirit of course but the oaks, the most powerful are they. Of such things humans know little. Dulled their senses are. To them what is a tree but a block of wood to burn? Little they know of the damage they have wrought. When a tree is felled, the spirit of the tree dies. Now as the forests shrink, many spirits withdraw into slumber, numbing themselves to the horror of this darkening world. And with the spirits silent, the forests wither more still.’

Elowen found herself genuinely moved by Bucca’s words. She felt the sense of loss, of wonders forever lost to the world. ‘What do the Oakmen look like?’

‘They look as they choose to look. To your eyes they may appear as wretched men, small and wizened, perhaps not unlike your guide. But they can move through the forest unseen, no more visible than the wind. Bucca has heard

they conceal themselves as young saplings—if they do not wish for you to see them, then see them you will not.’

‘I’d like to see them,’ said Elowen.

Bucca gave her a disgusted look. ‘No love they hold for humans.’

‘I’m getting used to that,’ Elowen mumbled under her breath.

The pixie’s keen ears had clearly caught her comment. ‘Trust Bucca when he says the Oakmen’s hatred of humans is fierce.’

Eager to learn more, Elowen risked another question. ‘Where are your folk? Do they live in the forest?’

‘Some still dwell here, though few in number they are.’

‘Will we see them?’ said Elowen.

Bucca laughed. ‘No, most hide themselves from humans, fearing the weapons they wield and the hunting hounds that run with them. They think Bucca mad for all his travelling and dealings with men.’

Elowen found the conversation fascinating and wanted to know more. ‘Do they live underground in tunnels and caves like the stories tell?’

The pixie sighed, clearly irritated by having to explain so much. ‘Some dwell underground. Others, like Bucca, wander the lands. You will rarely see them of course. Not unless they choose to show themselves. If a pixie so chooses it, you would walk within a yard of him and not see him. There is much that lives in this forest that humans will never be aware of.’

With that he cleared his throat, a gesture Elowen took to mean that their conversation was over for now. Sure

enough, the pixie increased his pace and once again she was left to stumble after him.

As the afternoon slid into evening, the forest colours dimmed to leave only muted greens and greys. They struck a twisted path; little light penetrated through the trees. Blasted by salt-laden winds from the nearby coast, the oaks clinging to the slopes were as twisted as cork-screws and grew little taller than the height of a man. Thick, dark green ferns grew among the trunks; lichen hung from the branches like tangled strands of wool and painted the rocks on the forest floor in shades of orange, green and yellow.

Ahead, Bucca moved swiftly and silently. Like a foraging squirrel, he darted from rock to rock, often holding the tree trunks for balance. Elowen struggled to keep pace with him; she ducked under the low hanging branches, tripped over bulging roots and slipped on the wet rocks.

‘Slow down,’ Elowen moaned as she scrambled to catch up with her guide. She felt light-headed and her legs ached.

Bucca stopped and sighed. ‘What is wrong? Are you hurt, child?’

‘No, I’m not hurt but I can’t keep up with you. We have been walking for hours and hours.’

The pixie made no attempt to hide his irritation at his delay. He stomped towards her. ‘Do you wish to rest? Are you hungry?’

Elowen rubbed her stomach. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Ah, we have gone long without food, that is true. Bucca supposes we have travelled far enough for one day. He senses the Redeemers are not close. Safe we are for now. We shall rest here tonight. But before we eat, we make fire.’

Bucca sent Elowen to collect inner oak bark and dry grass for tinder, as well as twigs for kindling. She was exhausted but glad to feel useful. When she returned, Bucca cleared a patch of leaf mould to reveal a circle of dry bare earth. With the tinder Elowen collected he built a platform for the fire and two overlapping, interlaced bundles of branches.

Elowen watched, fascinated by Bucca's busy, clever movements. She looked on as he produced two pieces of wood from his belt. 'What are they?'

'Bucca's tools for making fire,' he said without looking up. 'One is the drill. The other, the hearth. Watch please. Learn. You may need this skill one day.'

Bucca quickly worked the drill between his palms and soon smoking coal formed in the notch of the hearth. He placed the coal onto the tinder and blew until first smoke and vivid, healthy flames emerged. Elowen laughed and clapped her hands.

The pixie shrugged. 'Many fires has old Bucca made. But he is glad you are pleased.'

The fire was soon crackling merrily, giving out welcome heat and light. Elowen said, 'Can we eat now?'

The pixie stood and dusted down his knees. 'First, shelter we must build before too dark it grows.'

From long branches Bucca built a lean-to shelter against a fallen tree. He weatherproofed the roof with a thick covering of leaf mould; inside he made a bed of young spring branches and for comfort added a further layer of leaves and moss. It was open against the fire and to Elowen's surprise, she felt comfortably warm in the shelter. Bucca sat beside her. From his birch bark container he pulled out a

small loaf and broke it into two pieces. He passed one half to Elowen and she bit into it hungrily. She couldn't cram the bread into her mouth quick enough.

The pixie chuckled as he ate. 'Hungry you were indeed! Do you want more, child?'

With her mouth still full, Elowen nodded enthusiastically. Bucca dipped into the container and passed her a small lump of cheese and a bruised apple. Elowen happily devoured both while Bucca gnawed at a piece of bread.

'Where did you get all this food?' she said.

'Plentiful pickings from humans there are,' he said with his mouth full. 'Cheese. Milk. Bread—'

'You stole all this?' said Elowen.

The pixie picked inside his ear. 'Bucca does what he must to survive. And in time so shall you.'

When they had finished their meal Elowen tried to begin another conversation with the pixie. 'Did you know Tom Hickathrift well?'

Bucca nodded and toyed with his braided hair. 'A good friend he was. Many adventures we shared. Much sadness Bucca feels at his passing.'

'I wished I had spent more time with him,' said Elowen. 'I barely knew him. I thought he was just a storyteller, a tumbler, a juggler.'

The pixie smiled. 'Carefully did he choose his disguise. Full of cunning, like the fox. Truly an Adept of great power, he was.'

Elowen remembered those last terrible moments in the Old Tower. 'The Redeemers knew him. Or at least I think they did. They called him *Lord Hereward*.'

Bucca visibly jerked. ‘Many moons have passed since Bucca last heard the name of Lord Hereward.’

‘Why did they call him that?’

The pixie stretched out his arms. ‘Lord Hereward was his real name. A name the Redeemers fear.’

‘The Redeemers feared him? Why?’

‘They fear all who oppose them. Lord Hereward long aided my folk, much he did to protect the Eldar from the Mother Church.’

Elowen thought about that. ‘Tom once said the Mother Church want to destroy the Eldar. Do you think that will happen?’

‘To that Bucca knows not the answer,’ he said. The pixie dropped another twig onto the fire which spat and sizzled at the new offering. ‘Tis time for sleep, child. Many hard miles lie ahead of us tomorrow.’

‘I’ve never slept outside before,’ said Elowen, failing to conceal the trepidation in her voice.

Bucca showed little sign of interest and no sign at all of concern. ‘You will grow used it.’

Seeing little point in arguing, Elowen climbed fully inside the shelter and tried to settle down. Despite the carpet of moss and dry leaves, roots still poked into her back while tiny pieces of soil and damp moss stuck to her lips and cheeks, but it was still better than her cold blankets in the Orphanage.

The Orphanage. Elowen had spent all her life there but it belonged to part of another world, another time. And would the Redeemers be searching for her and for the map? That thought terrified her. She shuddered and snuggled up

her body as tightly as she could. She imagined all sorts of eerie sounds.

The creeping, crawling, scuttling of insects.

Eerie cries. Probably the scream of a vixen calling her mate.

The laboured breathing of creatures unknown hunting among the trees. She tried to convince herself that she was safe. She whispered, 'It's the wind, silly.'

For reassurance she looked up at Bucca. The pixie sat in front of the fire. He sung gently, in a low voice that sounded like a tree rustling in the breeze. Elowen could not make out the words; she guessed he sung in the old tongue of his people. The song reassured her somehow and she forgot all about the scary sounds and the Redeemers. She laid her head down and soon the lullaby of Bucca's singing and the fire's crackling led her into a deep sleep.

*

When Elowen woke, every inch of her body felt sore and stiff. She groaned and stretched her legs. She lifted her head and thumped it on the shelter's ceiling.

'Awake at last I see.'

Bucca stood outside the shelter, smiling and scratching his backside. An eerie silence gripped the forest. A milky mist had slipped in like a thief in the night and stripped the trees of colour, leaving them only stark, skeletal outlines.

'What time is it?' said Elowen, rubbing her head.

'Time to move on. Let us clear the mess we have made.'

Bucca quickly dismantled the shelter and carefully placed

the branches beneath the trees. The fire had died to a neat pile of white ash. By hand, Bucca scattered the ash around the rocks and dropped leaf mould over the patch cleared for the fire. 'Come now, many miles lie ahead of us.'

Elowen inwardly groaned at the prospect, painful blisters had formed on her feet and her legs felt heavy and lifeless. Bucca collected all his belongings and sprung forward, he showed no sign of tiredness. Grimacing with each step, Elowen hobbled after him.

As they walked, Bucca told Elowen much forest lore. He pointed out safe plants to eat, plants that eased ailments, plants that stemmed bleeding. He named trees, animals and birds. When they stopped for a brief rest, Bucca showed her how, with stones and sticks, to divine the direction of true north. Elowen struggled to absorb all his lessons. Her head ached; she wondered if all this new knowledge could fit inside her skull.

They weaved among the thickening trees. Roots burst free from the soil and coiled into complicated knots. Heavy branches hung down lazily, some even reached their roots below. To Elowen it felt as though she climbed through the skeleton of some great animal.

The path fell away to a steep drop. Trees grew at strange angles, fighting to keep their hold on the earth. The pixie descended in smooth steps but Elowen stumbled down, gripping any branch that looked strong enough to hold onto. The wet moss and decaying leaves made it slippery underfoot. Terrified of falling, Elowen tensed her legs until they ached. Then, at last, she reached the bottom of the slope and the ground levelled out. The higher, thinner can-

opy allowed generous amounts of crisp sunlight to pour through, making every shade, every colour more vivid.

Bucca stopped and looked around before announcing to Elowen's relief, 'Rest here we shall for a short time.'

The pixie stretched and lowered his pack onto the ground. Elowen found a dry patch on the trunk of a long-fallen oak and sat, grateful for the rest. Her head thumped with tiredness, she rubbed her forehead but it made little difference. She noticed more Oakmen statues half-hidden by the ferns.

'How much further is it?' she said. 'When do we get out of the forest?'

Bucca looked up. 'Several hours more. Hard to tell.'

Elowen groaned and massaged her aching feet. 'Several hours—'

Bucca cut off her complaints. 'Only the beginning of your journey this is. Long way still to go!'

At that moment, all the worries, fears, frustrations that had been festering within her found their way to the surface. Elowen stamped her foot on the ground. 'It's not fair. I shouldn't have to do all this. What have I done wrong? Why is my life in danger?'

Bucca shrugged. 'This is the life you have been given. Set before you are these tasks.'

His answer infuriated her. 'But I don't want these tasks. Why can't I be like everyone else?'

Bucca raised an eyebrow. 'Is that truly what you wish for?'

'Yes, I want to be safe,' said Elowen, she pulled out the little ivory box. 'I don't care about this stupid map.'

'Selfish you are being,' said Bucca, scratching his armpits as he spoke. 'Do you care nothing for this world?'

'I care about me,' said Elowen. She stomped away from Bucca. She tried to fight tears but failed. A voice rattled around her mind. It taunted her. 'Baby! Baby!' Elowen knew it spoke the truth which only served to make her angrier. She was being stupid and childish. She leant against a gnarled oak. Its moss smothered trunk was oddly shaped, with bumps and ridges and two arm-like low branches. An alarmed squirrel scrambled up the tree like a grey ghost.

'It's not fair,' said Elowen aloud, wiping her eyes. She heard a strange sound, a mournful groaning—the wind, probably.

She was glad to get away from Bucca; his constant sniping and sarcasm wore her down. She picked up a sharp-edged stone from the ground and began to carve her name into the bark. With her tongue slightly stuck out, as she always unconsciously did when concentrating, she slowly worked the stone to shape each letter.

E. L. O. W.

She heard the groaning again and stopped.

Elowen looked around. Nothing. She carried on but as she tried to carve out the second 'E', the stone slipped on the moss and she gouged out a chunk of bark, ruining all her previous work. She kicked the tree.

The groaning returned, this time much louder and it came from all round the forest and it shook the branches and leaves. The bark on the tree shimmered and writhed. Bumps and ridges on the bark smoothed out, bracken curled away from the tree.

A grey amorphous shape emerged from the trunk. Slowly, as a ray of light fired through the canopy above, the shadow

revealed detail. Elowen saw a figure standing in front of her. It had an angular, masculine face, peppered with heavy warts, his sharp nose curled over a small mouth and a long beard, riddled and entwined with moss and leaves, reached his stomach. He stood naked, his skin smudged with green and brown dyes.

An Oakman.

Elowen became aware of movement all around her.

In seconds, she was surrounded by Oakmen. They formed a circle around her, smoky, ghostlike, their eyes as black as coal—they laughed, a sound like the rustling of leaves on a windy day.

An odour of damp earth blocked out all other smells. The Oakmen chanted. Elowen understood none of their words; their speech consisted of many whistles, gasps and groans. They closed in on her, one slow step at a time.

‘BUCCA!’ she yelled.

The Oakmen’s chanting grew louder. Elowen’s head thumped, overwhelmed by the noise. Somewhere in the distance she thought she heard Bucca shouting but it was faint, so faint. Hands touched her, hands as rough and dry as bark. They stroked her, caressed her, and gripped her. They pushed her down, down onto the ground, down into darkness.

‘I can’t breathe.’

The rustling, the creaking filled her ears.

‘I can’t breathe.’

She struggled, flexing every muscle, every limb but she sunk further and further down.

Then she had the sensation of being lifted.

She saw light again, fractured light. She spluttered and heaved, tasting only dirt and rotting leaves.

Someone pulled her upright.

Elowen rubbed the dirt from her eyes. The Oakmen were still there, only now they were bowing, bowing to Bucca who held her upright. The pixie spoke aloud, his voice sounded disembodied, as though it came from all around them and not from his mouth. ‘Away wood wights! You are in no danger here!’

At his words, the Oakmen faded back into the trees and disappeared from sight.

The forest fell silent again.

Still trembling with fear and shock, Elowen tried to rub the soil and dead leaves from her clothes. In a shaky voice she asked Bucca, ‘Why did they attack me?’

‘Threatened them you did,’ he said. ‘Many reasons to be fearful of humans they have. Too much they have seen of axes and fires. Vengeful they have grown.’

Elowen saw a power in Bucca that she had not seen before. She had been intrigued by his wisdom, by his knowledge of forest lore but now she saw a real power, a real strength far beyond his stature. She realised how stupidly she had behaved. For all his sarcasm, for all his constant criticisms, the pixie had helped her. Without him she would have wandered the forest alone, lost, left to starve or to fall into the Redeemers’ hands. Bucca saved her from that fate. She thought of the faith Tom Hickathrift had placed in her, he had died protecting her, and she felt ashamed. She took a deep breath, holding back tears. ‘I was foolish and childish. I’m sorry.’

To Elowen's surprise, the pixie smiled and patted her arm. 'From your mistakes you will learn. Bucca knows this journey is hard for you. But know this: nothing that is worthwhile in life is easy. Whether you wish it or not, being tested you are. Bucca does not say this is fair, he merely says this is how it must be.'

Elowen did not like the sound of being tested but from that moment on, she walked with greater care. She dared not disturb any trees. When she had first stumbled into the forest it existed as a blur of shapes and colours, all sounds and smells alike. Now her senses were sharpened, she noticed much more of the forest around her: badger tracks, deer droppings and the songs of birds.

By late afternoon, they reached a gap in the trees. Below them, at the foot of a grass bank thick with creamy waves of cow parsley, ran the Great North Road—in the distance, the brooding grey hills of the Mengoon.

The pixie sniffed the air and cleared his throat. 'Through the forest we are. Bucca has no scent of the enemy.'

'Which way now?' said Elowen, swiping away an inquisitive hover fly.

'First we must...wait...get down.' Bucca threw himself onto his stomach. Although not knowing what the danger was, Elowen did likewise. The pixie crawled forward and pulled apart a clump of long grass to gain a clear view of the road below. Curious, Elowen lifted her head to see.

A figure walked along the road. He staggered like a drunk picking his unsteady way home, lurching from one side of the road to the other. As he came closer, Elowen realised it was a boy, short and stocky with a scruffy shock of red hair.

It was Diggory Bulhorn.

Elowen leapt to her feet, Bucca scrambled to pull her down but she shrugged him off.

Bulhorn stopped and looked up. As he saw Elowen, a look of complete bewilderment came over his face. He took one stumbling step forward towards her and fell down.

Across the Moors

Elowen sped down the slope, nearly falling once but managing to keep her feet. Diggory lay face down in the road. He wore only a nightshirt, torn and tattered, reduced to little more than rags that clung limply on his body. The black and white sash still hung around him, dirty and twisted. He wore no shoes and angry blisters marked his feet. Elowen rolled him over onto his back. His face was bruised and red, with cheeks puffed up. With effort he opened his eyes and blinked several times as though unsure of what he was seeing. ‘Elowen? How...how did you get here? You escaped as well?’ He closed his eyes, drained by the effort of speaking.

Before she could answer, Bucca pushed between them and knelt beside the boy. He sniffed Diggory like he was a piece of meat. ‘Bucca is not pleased to see another human. An enemy spy he may be.’

Elowen rolled her eyes. ‘A spy? Don’t be ridiculous. He’s no spy. I know him.’

The pixie stood, rubbing his knees as he did so. ‘Bucca likes not the look of this one.’

Elowen hated Bulhorn. Many times she had fantasised

about hurting him to gain revenge for his ill treatment of her. Part of her wanted to leave him to suffer in the wild, he deserved it but now, as he lay at her feet, weak and vulnerable, she felt no reaction other than pity, no desire other than a need to help him. However badly he had treated her in the past, she would gain no satisfaction from making him suffer.

The boy opened his eyes again, they looked glassy and bloodshot. He spoke quick words between sharp intakes of breath, 'Elowen? What are you doing here? How did you get escape Trecadok? Where am I? Are there grown-ups?'

Before Elowen could answer, Bucca said, 'Hurry, child. We must get out of sight.'

The boy jabbed a finger at the pixie. 'Who are you?'

'He won't hurt you,' said Elowen. 'He's one of the forest folk. He's my guide.'

The boy looked stunned. 'Forest folk? He is a tainted one?'

'This boy is frightened of his own shadow,' said Bucca.

Elowen ignored the pixie. 'Don't be afraid, Diggory. He won't hurt you.'

Bucca held up a hand.

Worried by his reaction, Elowen said, 'What is it?'

'Horses,' said the pixie.

Elowen helped Bulhorn to his feet and they scrambled up the far bank and ducked behind a thick hawthorn shrub. Elowen heard the sounds of hooves. Everything else was still. The birds fell silent. She leant forward and peered through the heavily flowered branches.

Five horses emerged, riding in a line; they were powerful

beasts, at least seventeen hands high with wide muscular bodies and short thick necks. As terrifying as the horses were, it was the sight of their riders that made Elowen's blood run cold. Redeemers.

They rode slowly, their icy breath steamed in front of them. Elowen dared not breathe. The blood pounded in her ears like a drum. Diggory trembled like a doll being shaken by a child. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, the riders passed.

Then to Elowen's horror, the last rider slowed to a stop. He pulled back his hood to reveal a white hairless head ridged with pieces of metal. He looked around in all directions. Elowen fought to control herself, she wanted to run away but Bucca gripped her arm.

The Redeemer kicked his steed forward and galloped away.

'They were looking for us,' said Diggory.

'Is that true, Bucca?' said Elowen.

The pixie picked his nose before answering. 'Bucca is not sure. But this at least he knows, not safe to linger here.'

Bucca led Elowen and Diggory to a small wood—among the tall silver birch trunks Elowen felt her spirits rise a little. The higher branches formed a delicate interlacing roof; heather and bilberry grew in clumps around the trees; red-polls and blue tits foraged on the ground.

Bucca built a shelter around a fallen trunk and soon had a healthy fire burning. The pixie still had a few stolen clothes left in his bag. An ill-fitting shirt and a pair of frayed, patched breeches gave Diggory a little more warmth. From the remaining rags Bucca made boots of a fashion by heavily bandaging Diggory's feet. The boy allowed Bucca to do it

but glared at him throughout. When he was finished, the pixie sat in front of the fire and nibbled on a few nuts and chewy roots. The boy sat, his legs folded, his head bowed. He picked endlessly at the ground, occasionally grumbling to himself. He threw vicious looks at Bucca and refused all offers of food.

Elowen sat between the pixie and the boy. She tingled with curiosity; she wanted to know what had happened to Diggory.

When she asked him, he took a sharp intake of breath and looked up at Elowen's expectant face. Bucca nodded and said, 'Yes, boy, tell us your story.'

With a sigh that betrayed his reluctance, Diggory told the tale. 'It all started on Friday afternoon, when I was leading the older boys back from school.'

Elowen easily pictured the scene. Bulhorn strutting ahead of the ragged line of orphans like a peacock.

'As we turned onto Westgate Street we heard a tremendous roar, and a cloud of smoke and dust swept over half the town,' said Diggory. With pride he added, 'I led the boys back to the Orphanage double quick, keeping good order as you understand.'

'By evening, all seemed well. The Master said the explosion must have been an accident and sent us to bed early. I was tired and soon fell asleep. Strange dreams troubled me. Dreams of fire. And then, rough hands shook me awake. When I opened my eyes I wondered if I was still asleep and had passed only into a worse nightmare. A face looked down at me. A face lit up by flames. I screamed...I thought it was a demon...but it was a man. One of the militia.'

‘Militia?’ said Elowen.

‘Aye. They stormed into the dormitory, a dozen of them at least. They pulled us all out of bed. They kicked and punched us. I asked what we had done wrong. They punched me in the face. They looked possessed, more like demons than men. They dragged me out, still wearing only my nightshirt. The Master watched it all happen. He stood and watched. I called out to him, I begged him to help us. But he said nothing. He did nothing. He looked...different. His eyes were open and he was awake but...he looked like a stuffed animal, with no life inside him. The militia dragged us outside. It was dark, close to midnight. They herded us all together, girls and boys, herded us like cattle onto the Orphanage lawn. There waiting for us were five Black Wagons.’

‘Redeemers!’ said Elowen, feeling sick as she uttered the word.

The boy nodded, his eyes glassy with tears. ‘They waited beside the Black Wagons. They watched us like hawks. They waited in silence. I have never been so scared...’

Elowen reluctantly put aside her natural curiosity. ‘You don’t have to say anything more if you don’t want to.’

He shook his head. ‘No, I must tell you. The militia made us lay face down on the ground. They shouted at us all the time. ‘HEATHENS! TAINTED!’ We had no idea why we were being punished. We all wept from fear. I thought they were going to kill us. Then, the other children arrived.’

‘The other children?’ said Elowen.

Diggory nodded. ‘All the children in Trecadok had been rounded up.’

‘By the militia?’

He shivered. ‘Not by the militia; by their own parents. Mothers and fathers brought their own children to the Redeemers.’

‘How could parents act like that?’ said Elowen, barely able to comprehend what Diggory was telling them.

‘No choice had they, no choice at all,’ said Bucca. ‘The Redeemers control them through the Null and they have not the strength to resist.’

Diggory’s voice wobbled. ‘When all the children were gathered together, the militia forced us inside the Black Wagons. Babies were thrown in by their own fathers, by their own mothers. It was so dark, so hot, you could hardly breathe. All the time I was being punched and kicked by someone trying to claw their way out. The infants were the worst. They scratched at the walls of the wagon, screamed out for their mothers. The wagon floor became wet and sticky with sick and urine. The smell...I can’t...’

He took a deep gulp of breath before continuing. ‘The Redeemers jammed the wagon doors shut and set off at a great pace. As it moved we were thrown all over the place. Elbows cracked against heads. Bodies fell on top of bodies. I think, I know, some of them were dead. And then a miracle, a miracle sent by God. With all the bumps in the road the door was knocked open. We all had the same thought. Escape. I climbed over bodies to get out. I pushed and kicked. I’m ashamed...I should not have done so. May God punish me. The Redeemers caught some children but not all. We were outside of Trecadok. I had no idea where to go. I just kept running. All the time I expected to be shot or

for a Redeemer to snatch me but I was lucky. I stopped and looked back. By the grace of God, I wasn't being followed. I cried. I'm ashamed to admit it. I cried. Then I thought, 'Diggory, you're head boy. Pull yourself together.' I knew I had to keep running but I didn't know which way to go. I guessed the Great North Road would be safest. I knew it would be too dangerous to go back to Trecadok. I hoped to find another town or at least a village. Find some grown-ups who would know what to do. I was starting to think I was never going to find anyone. But then I saw you.'

Elowen said, 'I don't understand. Why would they take children away like that? What had they done wrong?'

Bucca ran his hand through his braided hair. 'The Redeemers are not beyond fear. They imagine enemies everywhere. Most of all they fear children.'

'How can children be such a threat to them?' said Elowen.

'Bucca does not claim to know the minds of Redeemers. But children have not been Nulled. The Redeemers fear that others may come to corrupt children and lead them away from the Mother Church.'

Wiping away tears from his eyes, Diggory said, 'Where are they being taken?'

'Bucca does not know for sure but he believes they will be taken to Gorefayne. A terrible place, but let us not speak of it, not as the dark surrounds us.'

*

As night fell, Diggory drifted into a deep sleep, overcome by exhaustion. While the boy slept Bucca spoke to Elowen.

‘The Redeemers attacked your town because of the map. Fearful they are that Tom Hickathrift may have influenced the other children. They take no risks and Bucca believes the Redeemers we saw are seeking the map you carry. And thus it is now *you* they hunt.’

Elowen shivered at that thought. ‘Is the map really that important?’

Bucca rummaged a finger around in his ear and wiped the contents on the ground. ‘Of these matters Bucca knows little. But understand this. For the map you carry, Hickathrift gave his life. Consider that. Already the Redeemers have shown how desperate they are to find this map. In great danger you are. Many are the enemy’s spies and agents. Bucca is troubled. He will guide you a little further north. With the Redeemers abroad, avoid the road completely you must. Safer it is to cross the Mengoon. Bucca will help you that far.’

Although delighted to have Bucca’s help, Elowen did not like the sound of his plan to cross the moors. ‘The Mengoon? How long will it take?’

‘Difficult to guess. Great perils dwell there.’

‘*Perils?*’ said Elowen.

‘Demon hounds prowl the moors,’ said Bucca. ‘You can hear their screams on the wind. It is said their master, Old Dewer the Black Huntsman, strides across the moors, ever seeking lost souls. Knockers lurk in the caves and mines. Even worse, Spriggans haunt the moors and even we pixies are wary of them, though they will not trouble us unless they are disturbed.’

Elowen felt a creeping horror linger round her. She saw

sinister shapes in every shadow and every wisp of smoke from the fire. Bucca said, 'Perhaps it is best not to talk of such matters at night. You have need of rest. At dawn we must leave. For the boy, Bucca will leave water and a little food. His own path he must seek.'

'I hate Bulhorn but I won't leave him out here alone,' said Elowen, realising Bucca's intentions.

'He will slow us down and we have little time. Also, Bucca wonders whether the boy would want to come. Hates Bucca he does.'

'He will come,' said Elowen. 'He'll see he has no other choice.'

Bucca spat onto the fire, which hissed angrily at the offering. 'You are a stubborn one, child. Very well, the boy may come if he wishes, but it is your decision and you must accept the consequences. Now for once obey old Bucca and sleep. Keep watch he will.'

Relieved, Elowen lay down and soon fell asleep. It was still dark when Bucca roused her but she could tell dawn was close, as faint orange light leaked across the sky. Elowen in turn woke Diggory. At first he said little but sat with his arms wrapped around his legs, shivering in the early morning chill. He eyed Bucca suspiciously. The pixie showed no sign of listening to their conversation.

'So, where are you going?' said Diggory in his usual head boy tone. 'To find some grown-ups?'

Elowen looked at Bucca but he said nothing. The decision whether or not to tell Diggory the truth rested with her. What if he fled...told someone...no, he wouldn't do that. She had to trust him. 'No, not grown-ups.'

He looked up at her and smirked. ‘The Redeemers weren’t looking for me were they? They were hunting you and that *creature*.’

The accuracy of his guess made Elowen uncomfortable and she decided it was pointless to lie. She drew the little ivory box out of her pocket, flipped open the lid and pulled out the map. ‘It is this they want.’

Diggory looked incredulous. ‘A map?’

‘Yes and the Redeemers will kill to find it,’ she said, echoing Hickathrift’s words. ‘This is why they attacked Trecadok. They’ll kill anyone who comes close to it. Me. Bucca. Even you.’

The boy went white. ‘Me? What have I done? Why is the map so important?’

‘I wish I knew,’ said Elowen.

‘Why keep it?’ said Diggory. ‘Why not throw it away?’

‘I can’t, I promised Tom Hickathrift...’

Diggory looked at her suspiciously, his eyes narrowed. ‘Tom Hickathrift! So it was him that put these fantasies in your head. I never liked the look of that old vagrant.’

Elowen clenched her fingers into a fist. ‘It wasn’t his fault. He only wanted to help me, to protect me. He saved my life.’

Diggory shook his head. ‘The Master always said you would come to a bad end.’

‘I don’t care what Cronack says,’ said Elowen.

‘That was always your problem. So, where are you going?’

‘To a place far away. A sanctuary. The sanctuary is safe. Tom Hickathrift promised me.’

Bulhorn lifted his head. ‘You trust the word of that fool?’

Well, you can do whatever you want. But I for one am not going. We should find the nearest town or church. There will be grown-ups who can help us—'

'And then be handed over to the Redeemers?'

'Tis you they want,' said Bulhorn, a cruel smile playing on his lips. 'A God-fearing boy like me will be safe.'

'Like you were safe in Trecadok?' said Elowen.

Bulhorn tried another route of attack. He pointed at Bucca. 'You want to run into the wild with a demon? If that is not sinful, then I don't know what is.'

'He can protect us and we need protecting.'

'Aye, we need protection from the likes of him,' said Diggory.

The anger that had slowly been simmering within Elowen boiled over. 'I've had enough of you. I wanted to help you, though God only knows why. I'm going with Bucca. You can stay and starve for all I care!'

When Elowen finished her outburst she found that she was trembling. Diggory looked shocked, he opened his mouth to argue but no words came out.

Bucca spoke. He made no sign that he had heard their discussions.

'Time we were going,' he said.

Elowen gathered her belongings, and as the sun crept over the forest to the east, traipsed behind Bucca as he walked towards the Mengoon. After a brief pause and without a word, Diggory dragged himself to his feet and followed them.

*

Dawn chased away the morning mist and a blue sky welcomed the three walkers. The moors stretched as far as the eye could see. The Mengoon was an ancient land, the piles of lichen-stained granite had once flowed as rivers of molten rock. The gentle hills, stumps of mountains long worn down by the relentless hands of time and the elements, stood smothered in blankets of bracken and heather. A few rowan trees perched on big boulders, twisted into fearful shapes by the relentless wind. Thousands of tiny insects buzzed around like busy flecks of golden dust. Elowen could hear the soaring songs of skylarks and the sweet twittering of linnets.

Diggory trudged wearily behind Elowen with heavy, lumpy footsteps. As they walked Bucca said to Elowen, ‘So the boy decided to come. Let us hope he has strength enough for the journey.’

‘I can hear you,’ said Diggory.

Ahead four sombre hills lined up like knuckles on a hand; low cloud lingered around their peaks. Bucca pointed to them. ‘Those hills are the Mist Tors. If good pace we make, by nightfall we should be there.’

Elowen’s heart sank at the sight of the gloomy hills. ‘Why are we going that way?’

‘Bucca knows this land. The best way through the moors he knows. Treacherous peat bogs lay each side of those hills but if you would prefer to walk through them...’

‘No, I’ll follow you,’ said Elowen, regretting having opened her mouth.

‘Good. Because only with Bucca’s aid will you survive.’

The sun beat down, burning onto Elowen's neck. Heat haze made the horizon wobble.

'The Mengoon smiles on us this day,' said Bucca holding up his hands to shield his eyes. 'But beware, when the sun is hidden, deadly the Mengoon can be.'

But even in the sun, Elowen thought the moors looked empty and unwelcoming. No wonder people who travelled the Mengoon told such terrible tales about it. The moors felt like the end of the world.

As the afternoon drew on, Elowen found the going tough. The spongy soil dragged down her every footstep, requiring great effort to pull up her feet and keep walking. On drier patches, the tough, wiry stems of heather kept tripping her. Flies buzzed around her, they clung to her clothes and became entangled in her hair; as soon as she wiped them off, dozens more replaced them. But her struggles were nothing to Bulhorn's suffering. She heard his laboured breathing. He battled to keep pace and soon fell behind. Then his clumsy, meandering steps disturbed a grouse—the bird flew fast and low to escape, firing out a cackling call as it did so.

'Mind where you put your feet, boy,' said Bucca.

Bulhorn stopped walking and glared at the pixie. 'I'm not taking orders from you.'

'Go if you wish. Bucca would not be sorry.'

They stared at each other in silence. Diggory backed down, muttered under his breath and carried on walking, his head bowed. Elowen wondered if she had made a mistake by not leaving Diggory behind, clearly Bucca thought so. She had wanted to do the right thing, but once again she had only made matters worse.

The grim moors hardly improved Elowen's mood. The sky filled with slabs of grey cloud that rested upon each other like the layers of a cake. A bank of mist rolled in from the north and swallowed the contours of the land, the sky and earth became as one, a single white sheet. Elowen found it impossible to judge how far they had walked or how many miles still loomed ahead.

As they walked on, the mist swirled around them and made strange, ghostly shapes but at last they could see the hills rising above them. Peering through the mist Elowen saw a narrow path that wove snake-like around and up the tallest hill.

'Keep close,' said Bucca as he led them up the path. 'If you wander and get lost, hard it will prove to find you.'

The moisture laden air dampened Elowen's clothes and hair. Cold nibbled furiously at every part of her body and the raw wind rubbed painfully against her face. After a slow climb they reached the hill's broad, flat summit and Bucca led them to an outcrop of layered rock that crowned the peak. Against the mist, the silhouette of the rock resembled a human head. Elowen picked out prominent features that looked like a nose, a chin and a forehead. A circular stone rested on its head like a crown. The rock was hollowed at the bottom, forming a small cave. Bucca pointed to it. 'That is the Longrock. Here we rest tonight.'

The cave offered little shelter. It kept out the wind but Elowen found that it was not deep enough to stretch out in and the floor consisted of thousands of sharp pieces of granite, seemingly placed for the maximum discomfort of any unfortunate traveller choosing to rest there.

‘Is there nowhere better than this?’ said Diggory as he wiped his endlessly dripping nose. ‘I could freeze to death out here.’

‘No, Bucca fears you will survive the night. The Mengoon offers no comforts. It does not welcome travellers.’

‘Can’t we at least start a fire?’ said Elowen. She had never felt so cold, her teeth chattered with a life of their own and the tips of her fingers throbbed with pain.

‘Much too dangerous,’ said Bucca. ‘Attract unwelcome attention a fire would.’

‘Who’s going to see it up *here*?’

Bucca answered in a low voice, ‘More eyes watch this land than you can guess.’

He did not elaborate on his dark hints and for that Elowen felt grateful. She tried to sleep but, sat upright and wedged between Diggory and the cave wall, she only managed to doze for a few fitful moments. Bucca did not sleep but neither did he talk; he sat at the cave entrance, looking out. Diggory groaned and thrashed in his sleep, several times digging Elowen in the ribs with flailing hands.

When morning came, Elowen felt more tired than ever. She yawned loudly and, forgetting the cramped space, banged into still sleeping Diggory. Startled, the boy sprang to his feet, hitting his head on the cave ceiling.

‘I hate this *stupid* cave,’ he said, rubbing his head.

‘The cave is not at fault, boy,’ said Bucca. ‘Stood here for thousands of years it has. ‘Tis you that brings stupidity here.’

Diggory swore and stormed off.

‘Things are hard enough as it is,’ said Elowen. ‘Do you have to argue like that?’

‘Many times has Bucca seen his kind. Clumsy and ignorant.’

With that, the pixie left the cave and concentrated on drinking from the rainwater collected in the many deep rock basins outside. Elowen knew Diggory was the kind of human whom Bucca would naturally be wary of, perhaps fear and hate, and she knew that countless sermons had drummed into Diggory a deep hatred of the Eldar. Common ground between the boy and the pixie would not be easy to find, but she hoped they would at least learn to get along otherwise the journey ahead would become harder still.

Wanting to stretch her arms and legs, Elowen stepped out of the cave. The bright morning sun had burned the fog away to leave only a wispy layer of mist hanging above the ground. The summit of the hill was much broader than she had realised. On the far side of the summit lay a wedge-shaped mound of earth surrounded by a circle of low stones and topped by five heavy granite roofing slabs. Two large standing stones flanked the entrance of an antechamber marked by slabs set sideways in the walls. Diggory stood in front of the mound, lethargically throwing stones down into the antechamber.

Freed from the grip of darkness and fog, the surrounding landscape became visible. In all directions the Mengoon stretched as far as Elowen could see: a rolling carpet of heather and bracken peppered with messy heaps of granite. From the summit, a steep drop fell away into the bogs below. Bucca had said that the bogs were known as the Mire. Elowen shuddered to think what lurked down there.

Bucca finished drinking and wiped his mouth.

‘Get ready to move on,’ he said to Elowen without looking up. Then, hearing the clump, clump, clump caused by Diggory’s stone throwing, the pixie froze, a look of horror flashed across his face. He ran towards Diggory waving his arms. ‘Stop, you fool!’

Elowen followed him, unsure of what the panic was.

A fierce gale fired up, waves of fog rolled in and devoured the land below. The ground shook violently; Elowen was rocked back on her heels.

From the chamber’s dark mouth swarmed dozens of creatures, all barely four foot tall. To Elowen, their appearance was more terrifying than that of the Oakmen: bulbous eyes that glowed like moons, translucent skin that revealed the muscles beneath, mouths full of misshapen teeth and long arms that reached the ground. Their fingers were tipped with barbed claws that shone like polished knives.

‘SPRIGGANS!’ shouted Bucca.

Diggory cried out in terror and stumbled, falling down flat on his back. In seconds the creatures surrounded him, kicking, biting and poking. He wailed and flapped as he tried to fight them off. Bucca uttered a cry, a bestial yell that carried even above the fierce wind. Fearing some terrible creature stood in their midst, the Spriggans squealed in fear and darted towards the chamber. Bucca charged towards the boy; he moved with a speed that surprised Elowen. He dragged the bruised, bloodied Diggory to his feet and away from the chamber.

When the Spriggans realised Bucca’s trickery they howled with rage. They ripped at the ground and threw clods of

earth and showers of stones into the air. Then, as though some silent order had been given, they swarmed after the pixie and the boy.

Diggory and Bucca ran towards Elowen, fear seemingly giving the boy new strength in his legs. Bucca pointed to the Longrock and shouted to Elowen, 'Climb!'

Seeing the hordes of angry Spriggans, Elowen didn't need to be told twice. She scrambled up, finding footholds and places to grip on the layered rock, beside her Bucca and Diggory also climbed.

Something gripped Elowen's leg and pulled it hard. A Spriggan was pulling her down, to the cackling delight of its fellow creatures. With all her strength she clung onto the rock. Bucca and Diggory had already reached the top and the pixie cried, 'Hold on! Bucca is coming.' Elowen looked up and saw him scuttling down the rock like a spider.

The pulling stopped and for a second Elowen thought she was free. Then, she felt the Spriggan climb up her back. Its claws dug into her back like tiny needles. It grabbed her hair and yanked back her head.

Elowen screamed in fear and pain.

The Spriggan brought its face close to hers. Its yellow eyes stared into hers and it blew its foul breath over her. As the creature stared at her it made a gargling sound, a crude speech of some sort. But it was about to take its last breath. Being so engrossed in its prey, the Spriggan failed to notice Bucca. The pixie grabbed and twisted its neck. Elowen heard a sickening click and the Spriggan tumbled limply to the ground. The Spriggans below shrieked wildly and tore the body apart, sending limbs spinning into the air.

Bucca grabbed Elowen's left wrist and pulled her up. Somehow she managed to reach the top of the Longrock, clinging on precariously. A writhing mass of Spriggans gathered; they made a strange ticking sound, like thousands of crickets, as they climbed. Diggory sat trembling, crying, too scared to fight. Elowen and Bucca threw down loose pieces of rock and succeeded in knocking off some climbers, only for more to replace them.

'It's no good,' said Elowen, turning to Bucca. 'There's too many of them. We're trapped.'

The pixie ignored her. He stopped throwing stones and knelt, his eyes closed in concentration, his hands clutched into fists. He muttered to himself, words Elowen did not understand. Then, as sudden as rays of sunlight bursting through broken cloud, threads of golden light appeared around him. They stretched ever wider and swirled around the Longrock. The Spriggans made no sign that they noticed the threads, nor did Diggory, whose cries became increasingly hysterical. The threads dived down to strike the ground around the Longrock like shards of lightning. A gash ripped the base of the Longrock, as though invisible hands ripped the ground apart. Several Spriggans fell screaming into the hole, the others wailed in terror and retreated into the darkness of the chamber. The wind died, the ground stilled and the fog below dissipated.

Diggory yelled, 'THEY'VE GONE! THEY'VE RUN AWAY! IT'S A MIRACLE!'

Bewildered by what she had seen, Elowen said, 'How did you...?'

Bucca looked at her. 'No time for lessons, flee we must.'

‘But they’ve gone!’ said Diggory. ‘God has saved us from the demons!’

‘Easily startled they are but return swiftly they shall.’

The relief on Diggory’s face melted away.

‘Then what do we do?’ said Elowen.

The pixie pointed down towards the Mire. ‘Follow us there the Spriggans may not.’

‘Down into the *bogs*?’ said Diggory. ‘It would be safer to stay here.’

The pixie gave Diggory a hard stare. ‘Believe Bucca when he says it would not.’

Bucca led them down from the Longrock. There was no clear path down from the to the Mire; the loose pieces of granite strewn on the steep slope made the surface underfoot treacherous and several times Diggory fell over, cursing loudly as he did so. Elowen held her arms out to give balance as she ran down, she dared not turn in case the Spriggans were following. Bucca descended with ease; when Elowen and Diggory fell behind he shouted, ‘MAKE HASTE, CHILDREN!’

‘Will the Spriggans follow us down here?’ said Elowen between heavy breaths.

‘Seldom do they leave their dwelling place but Bucca fears to tarry.’

When they reached the foot of the hill, Elowen stopped to catch her breath.

Bucca approached her. ‘The map! You have it still?’

Elowen’s stomach lurched. She searched her inside pocket and her fingers touched the ivory box, it was safe. She exhaled in relief and nodded to Bucca.

‘This is madness,’ said Diggory as he wiped down his damp and stained clothes. ‘These bogs look dangerous. We’ll probably drown, or worse.’

Bucca jumped at the boy and grabbed his collar. ‘Your foolishness nearly cost all our lives. From this step on, you do as Bucca says. Understand?’

Clearly shocked, Diggory mumbled that he did. Bucca let the boy go. ‘Cautious we must be. Many travellers have been lost in the Mire. But trust old Bucca. He knows of a path, though a tough walk it may prove.’

‘There’s a surprise,’ said Elowen. The pixie gave her a hard look before leading them on through the Mire.

From a distance, the Mire looked a green and brown patch of dead grass and murky water. Now closer and free of the grip of mist, the bogs revealed more colour and life. Lurid green sphagnum moss, together with sedges and rushes, covered the ground yet there were also patches of bog asphodel and little tufts of cotton-grass, their fluffy white flowers like sprinkled snowflakes. From time to time, Elowen heard the bubbling, haunting call of a curlew. Dragonflies patrolled the air, zipping around, performing complicated twists and turns at great speed.

The three walkers moved at little more than a crawling pace, Bucca picked each step with great care. Elowen expected an attack from hordes of hissing, cackling Spriggans, but nothing happened and to her surprise Elowen found herself enjoying walking in the Mire, fascinated by the cushion of plants quaking and undulating under her feet. However, she soon discovered the perils of straying from the narrow path Bucca led them on. A frog hopped in front of

her and as Elowen attempted to sidestep it, the ground gave way and smelly liquid peat mud filled her shoe before Bucca pulled her onto a drier ground.

Time after time they had to double-back and Elowen found it impossible to tell where they were or how far they had come. So she trusted to the pixie, who said, 'Fear not! Bucca has a nose for finding the safest path! By tomorrow morning, out of the Mire we shall be.'

'*Tomorrow* morning!' said Elowen. 'You mean we're spending a night in this godforsaken place?'

The pixie looked unmoved by her concerns. 'Many safe places there are to camp.'

'How can we be safe with those Spriggans about?' said Diggory.

Bucca shrugged. 'They have not followed us so far.'

Elowen rubbed her aching legs. 'But aren't we exposed out here at night?'

The pixie nodded thoughtfully but said nothing. Elowen had the feeling that asking Bucca any further questions would prove as fruitful as banging her head against a wall.

As they walked on a pale yellow fog crept in; the experience of being in a wide open landscape was replaced by the sense of walking in a confined space, dark and misty. Bucca stopped; he looked one way then another and then scratched his head.

'What's wrong?' said Elowen.

The pixie rubbed his nose. 'Bucca is trying to remember the path. Here it forks. One to the north-west, the other north-east. Consider this Bucca must.'

Diggory bundled past Elowen to glare down at the pixie.

He stood with his hands on his hips, just like Elowen had seen him do a thousand times when addressing an errant orphan.

‘We’re *lost* aren’t we?’ said Diggory, sounding every bit like the head boy Elowen had spent most days wanting to kick in the shins. ‘We are lost in this stinking bog and those demons probably aren’t far...’

The conversation between the boy and Bucca soon descended into another argument. Tired, hungry and fed up with their bickering, Elowen turned her back on them. Movement caught her eye. At first she saw nothing but swirling mist and wondered if she was imagining things, then a green light flickered. It moved, burning brightly before dying, only to reappear a few feet away. She saw the green light flicker again, this time close enough to touch. The flames flickered above the ground, dancing and weaving, animated by a life of their own. Elowen could not take her eyes off them, she wanted to reach out and run her fingers through the cool emerald flames. Wherever they went, she would follow. She had to see them closer, she simply *had* to. They were so beautiful. She stood up, her eyes trained on the dancing flames.

Elowen struggled to think of anything other than the flames. She was so confused; she lost her sense of time. Seconds passed as minutes, minutes as seconds. She wanted to be close to the flames, sure they would lead her safely to a better place, to a place without fear and pain. The green flames danced for her, and in fair, lilting voices they called to her.

Elowen. Come to us. Come now.

All tiredness, all pain left her; she forgot about the Sprigans; she forgot about the map; strength filled her limbs; her arms and legs tingled; she wanted to run after the flames. The voices urged her on.

Come to us. Come to us.

How she wanted to! She became aware of her body moving, of being shaken. The voices faded and a single voice replaced it.

‘Elowen. Look away. Stare not at the flames.’

Slowly, the real world returned to her. The dancing green flames no longer filled her every thought. Bucca stood there, Diggory beside him, his eyes firmly closed, his face white with fear. The pixie whispered to Elowen, ‘Close your eyes.’

Elowen did so and felt more confused. ‘What is happening?’

‘The Lantern Men,’ said Bucca. ‘They seek to put you under their spell. Look not at the flames. Listen not to their voices. They deceive.’

Elowen repeated his words slowly in her mind, it was the only way she could take them in. Her mind swirled around—all her thoughts and hearing scrambled. She rubbed her eyes. ‘I feel strange.’

‘The power of their enchantment that is,’ said Bucca. ‘Strange tricks they play on the mind. Many a soul has been lost here. Not safe to move when the Lantern Men prowl.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We wait.’

Elowen still heard the voices; they were faint and despairing, stripped of their earlier power. The voices died and the

grogginess passed. She opened her eyes and stood—the fog had cleared, the starry sky above them revealed. She felt as though she had woken from a dream-riddled sleep. She asked Bucca, ‘Have the flames gone?’

Bucca nodded.

Still trembling, Diggory said, ‘What on earth are they?’

‘Bucca has heard many different tales. Some speak of spirits condemned to wander the earth. Punishment for lives full of malice. Those captured by the Lantern Men are doomed to share their fate. No more shall we speak of them.’

Night drew in. There was no time or available material to build a shelter so Elowen and Diggory settled down as best they could. Bucca sat cross-legged, keeping watch as usual. He looked older since their escape from the Mist Tors, his eyes were sunken and bloodshot, his skin paler and more wrinkled, his breathing laboured. Elowen asked him, ‘Are you ill?’

The pixie shook his head and smiled sadly. ‘Weary only. Great is the power that can be wielded through the Earthsoul but greater still is the toil it takes. Seldom should that power be used.’

Elowen remembered their escape from the Longrock. ‘The ground...it moved.’

‘The Earthsoul connects all. Rocks, air, water. Through its power, much can be achieved. Strong the body can be, but stronger still is the mind.’

‘And you control the golden threads?’

He arched a hairy eyebrow. ‘Not control. Bucca *guides*. A life of their own have the threads. Force them to obey

Bucca cannot. The Earthsoul has no master. This time, lucky we were.'

'So are you an Adept?'

He chuckled in a manner which made Elowen feel her question had been foolish. 'Adept? Nay. We Eldar have no need of learning or instruction. At one with the Earthsoul we are.'

'Then how do the Adepts guide the Earthsoul?'

'Through great will and strength of mind. Often only when death stares them in the face do they find the strength.'

Elowen remembered the explosion Tom Hickathrift created when he had faced the Redeemers in the Old Tower. She said quietly, 'He must have known he was going to die.'

If the pixie understood what she meant he did not show it. Instead he yawned and stretched his arms. 'Sleep now, child, keep watch Bucca shall.'

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Elowen shivered through the night. She stayed awake, fearful of sleep as every time she closed her eyes she saw only the horrors of the moor: the choking mist, the Spriggans and the Lantern Men. Diggory groaned and thrashed in his sleep, troubled, Elowen guessed, by the memories of Trecadok. She wondered if those memories would ever fade. At last, sleep took her too, for a time shielding her from the Mengoon's grip.

Bucca roused them soon after dawn. Even when walking, Elowen found it hard to stay awake; her eyelids felt as

though heavy weights hung from them, pulling them down, pulling them shut.

They spoke little until they passed out of the Mire. The dreary land ahead offered little cheer and Elowen felt a sense of foreboding grow within her, she knew the moment that Bucca would leave them was not far away. She hoped he would change his mind.

They reached the crest of a slope and the landscape in front of them opened up. Elowen looked ahead and saw a ribbon of shimmering blue: the River Stennack.

The pixie said, 'This is as far as Bucca travels. From here, on your own you are. To hidden places Bucca must keep.'

Elowen looked at him, hoping against hopes that he would change his mind. She said, 'I wish you were coming with us.'

To her surprise, Bucca smiled. 'Think on all that Bucca has told you. Use this knowledge and survive you shall.'

'But which way do I go?'

'Show you Bucca shall,' said the pixie, he knelt and with his fingers drew in the dusty soil. He busily drew in various features, mountains, rivers, towns. He pointed to one of the rivers. 'The Stennack this is, travel north from this point. Reach the sea you shall. Then head east through Gronland. A hard land of fells and lakes it is. A road cuts through the fells and past the great lake that men call Vinnudermere. Wild is the road, little more than a track. But seldom is it used by men and should prove safe. Follow it and lead you to Dinas Hein it will. When there you reach, look for a man named Black Francis, a captain of a sea boat. Trust him you can but trust no others. Remember, as you do not wear the

Null, arouse suspicion you will. Everywhere there are spies and servants of the Redeemers. With caution treat all you meet!

Bucca reached up to Elowen's head and pulled her hair down so that her forehead was covered. 'Enough to hide that you have not Nulled, Bucca hopes this will prove. And boy, is it your intent to travel with Elowen?'

Diggory scratched his head and adjusted his sash. 'I suppose so. Got no other choice, have I?'

Elowen was not encouraged by his lack of enthusiasm but was grateful not to be left alone.

From his birch bark container, Bucca gave them a little food and a bag of coins. 'Useful shall you find these coins in Dinas Hein.'

'Where did you—'

'And now two final gifts,' he said. He dipped into the container again and passed Elowen a seashell. 'Give this to Black Francis. Understand the message he will.'

Then he gave Elowen a feather. She held up the strange gift and frowned. 'What is this for?'

'An old custom of the Eldar is the split goose feather. One who carries this is entitled to the help and protection of the Eldar in times of trouble.'

'Do you think I'll meet other Eldar?'

Bucca winked. 'It may prove so. Stay true to your purpose, be not swayed from it by threat or promise!' He held Diggory in his gaze. 'Farewell, boy, look after Elowen.'

Diggory nodded but said nothing.

Elowen's eyes moistened. She dug her nails into her palms. She refused to cry—she did not want to appear

weak. For all his strangeness, the thought of being parted from Bucca now saddened and terrified her. ‘Will you be safe alone? What about the Spriggans?’

The pixie smiled. ‘Safer Bucca will be alone than with you two. Worry not about old Bucca. Learnt to survive he has. Farewell, Elowen. Perhaps Bucca shall meet you again one day.’

With that he strode back into the Mengoon. Elowen watched him until he disappeared from sight. ‘Well, I guess we’re on our own.’

Diggory nodded. ‘We won’t survive long without grown-ups. It’s only a matter of time before we starve to death or those Redeemers find us.’

‘What else can we do? We can’t go back. That’s plain. We’ve got to keep going.’

‘Yes but which way?’

‘Bucca said head north at first,’ she said pointing in that direction, ‘north until we reach the coast.’

‘That’s dangerous sea round there,’ said Diggory in a pompous manner. He was always proud of his schooling. ‘I’ve heard that strange creatures haunt those shores. Boats have been attacked by sea monsters and merpeople.’

Elowen tried to shrug off his concerns though she too had heard tales of the seas, tales of monsters and spirits that intrigued and terrified her in equal measure. ‘We won’t be going in any boats, at least not until we reach Dinas Hein.’

‘We’ll be lucky to survive long enough to get there, let alone get to this sanctuary you keep going on about,’ said Diggory, stretching his legs. ‘Well, I suppose we had better get on with it.’

Saying no more, they turned their backs on the Mengoon and headed north. The river ran swiftly but they came to a ford and were able to cross without much difficulty. Clear of the Mengoon they may have been, but the scruffy heathland in front of them was just as unwelcoming. The soil was dry and lifeless; each footstep sent up plumes of dust. Little grew save the windblown heather and bracken.

By late afternoon, a few clouds had sneaked across the sky, casting fast-moving shadows onto the ground. Elowen and Diggory struck a faint path that led them over a group of low hills, before dipping down into a flat stretch painted gold with prickly gorse, the rich almond-like smell of which filled the air. They forced their way through the gorse but gained several scratches on their arms and legs for their efforts.

As they walked on, the land became less wild, more ordered, with well-worn paths and, to the west, a dreary village of thatched roofed cottages, with wispy smudges of smoke coming from their chimneys. Elowen heard a dog barking and cows lowing. On higher ground, a windmill stood like a giant, its sails turning slowly in the sluggish wind. Elowen and Diggory kept their distance; two children walking alone, far from home, would arouse suspicion and suspicion would bring trouble.

Soon they came upon a dusty, rutted track flanked by a hawthorn hedgerow. Clusters of primroses and towering foxgloves splashed some colour along the track and a single holly grew in the hedgerow, spared the woodman's axe by superstition. Elowen found a few discarded carrots, dropped no doubt by a passing cart. The carrots were skin-

ny and misshapen but Elowen and Diggory were grateful for any food and added them to their supplies.

Fearful that following the track would bring them too close to other people, they cut across open country until evening fell. They spent an uncomfortable night huddled underneath a solitary tree. Diggory hogged most of the spare rags for his own comfort, leaving Elowen to shiver and sniffle through the night. Diggory certainly would not have been Elowen's first choice for a companion. He was still arrogant, he still insisted on arguing with her every decision, but however annoying he could be, Elowen decided she was pleased he was with her. She could not face the journey alone.

The morning brought heavy rain that lashed down like hail. Elowen and Diggory trudged on. Both were soon soaked to the skin and shivering, and the rain flattened Diggory's spiky hair. Everything around them looked grey and uninviting. The land rolled up and down in gentle, bracken-covered rises and slopes, while a few trees battled against the elements in low, sheltered spots. By noon the rain had stopped but the sky was still full of slate-coloured clouds. From the last scraps of food they made a meagre meal. Elowen struggled to think of where on earth they would find something else to eat. Images of desperate raids of peasants' hovels and farmers' fields flashed through her mind. Would it come to that? It was hard to see how else they could survive.

'Get down!' said Diggory. He threw himself down on his stomach. Elowen followed suit.

'What is it?' she said, her heart racing.

‘Lucky I was keeping a look out. Lift your head up, there, to the left, near those stones. Horses, can’t you see them?’

Elowen lifted her head to see. In front of her she saw a broad circle of stones, all about five feet tall, and within the circle bulky shapes moved. She laughed. ‘Are you trying to scare me?’

Diggory gave a blank expression. ‘What do you mean? Keep low, they might see you.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Why not?’

‘Stand up and look for yourself. It’s quite safe.’

Warily Diggory stood and looked. When he saw what Elowen meant, he lowered his head in embarrassment.

‘Ponies!’ said Elowen. ‘They’re only wild ponies!’

‘How was *I* supposed to know?’ said Diggory, kicking the ground with his heel.

Still laughing, Elowen jogged over to the circle, followed by Diggory who cursed quietly to himself as he walked. The ponies were unconcerned by their visitors. They were Goonhillies, wild ponies who roamed the heathland between the Mengoon and the sea. The ponies had sturdy bodies and short legs; they picked around the standing stones, nibbling at the tough, wiry grass. A stallion stood on a mound, ever watchful for danger but the rest were content to let Elowen stroke their thick manes, which were still damp from the earlier rain. Elowen forgot all about hunger, grief, pain and tiredness. Diggory kept his distance from the ponies, eyeing them suspiciously as though expecting them to attack at any moment.

One of the Goonhillies, an old brown-haired pony, nuz-

zled against Elowen. Grey hair streaked her face and she looked up with sad, aged eyes. She chewed slowly on a wad of grass, swishing her long tail. Elowen giggled and scratched the pony behind the ears. Diggory stood with his arms folded, still angry about his earlier mistake.

‘Come on,’ said Elowen, reluctantly leaving the ponies behind. ‘We must keep going.’

Diggory’s hands made fists. ‘Don’t give *me* orders! I’m still head boy. Remember that!’

He tried to sound defiant but Elowen doubted he believed his own words.

After walking for two more hours they reached a slight rise and in front of them lay a town, or at least the remnants of a town. Elowen saw dozens of ruined houses, the shell of a large church and the fading lines of forgotten roads.

They followed a winding track down to the town. Elowen found the silence between the rotting buildings unnerving. A few houses still retained four walls but none had roofs, and some stonework had been blackened by fire and smoke. Nettles, dock and dandelions flourished among the dead stones.

The wind whispered unknown words to them; it hissed through and around the spaces where doors had once been, animating rusty hinges, creaking blackened beams. Windows, long stripped of their glass panes and shutters, looked out like empty eye sockets. In the road lay an old cart, rotten and riddled with damp, its wheels cracked and buckled. Spread by the restless wind, rubbish and debris lay against every wall, in every puddle.

‘I don’t like this place,’ said Diggory.

‘Me neither,’ said Elowen.

They came to the town square. Above them loomed the church’s skeleton—a huge hole in its west front opened up like a hungry mouth with split timbers and broken stone forming jagged teeth.

Diggory grabbed Elowen’s arm. ‘Stop. Be quiet.’

‘What is—’

He gave her no chance to finish. ‘I heard...horses.’

Elowen laughed. ‘More ponies?’

He gave her a steely look. ‘I’m being serious. Listen.’

To avoid an argument, Elowen did so. To her horror she realised Diggory was right. She heard heavy hooves, not the pattering of little ponies.

‘We have to hide,’ she said.

For once, Diggory did not argue and they hurried into the nearest house. The floor was covered in broken wood and shards of clay pots and jugs which crunched beneath their feet. They ducked down behind a partially standing wall. The many holes riddled in the wall allowed Elowen a view of the square.

From the east a grey mist rolled in like an ocean wave; the air became icy cold; all around Elowen’s feet, spiders and beetles scuttled from their holes and hiding places, running around like a drunken mob.

The sound of approaching horses grew louder.

Black shadows moved in the fog. The shadows took shape, becoming clearer forms. Five horses. She saw the tall, hooded silhouettes of their riders. Redeemers.

The Redeemers rode into the square. Elowen trembled with fear and she heard harsh voices.

‘Can you see anything?’

‘Nay but...I sense our prey is close.’

Diggory whispered, ‘They know we are here.’

Elowen put a finger to her mouth, signalling silence.

The Redeemers dismounted. Their movements looked slow, their hands, arms and legs were twisted, but Elowen knew they were still deadly. Fear moved through her like a slow poison in her veins and she clenched the pendant, trying to draw some courage from it. Diggory shook violently, seemingly no longer in control of his body. She was about to try to hold him when someone gripped her shoulder.

Before she could speak a hand covered her mouth and pulled her back. She struggled vainly against her unseen attacker, who whispered in her ear, a flowing, honey-tipped whisper. ‘Be silent, child. Be silent if you want to stay alive.’

PART TWO

A Life in the Shadows

The palace of Hammersund had been built with one purpose in mind: defence. Not for the Preven kings the romantic spires and towers that glorified the castles of other realms. Guarded by a polygonal curtain wall with a pentagonal bastion at each salient angle, the palace brooded over the nearby town. Each bastion possessed a lethal all-round field of fire: into the town and low slopes that led down to the grey sea, along the face of the curtain wall and, if some terrible crisis so demanded it, back on to the ramparts and the palace itself. Any attacker foolish enough to assault the curtain wall between two bastions would be caught in a deadly crossfire. Within the range of the palace, there was not a yard of dead ground for attackers to use. Behind the curtain wall and bastions lay a series of ditches, redoubts and murder holes, and beyond those stood the citadel, a fortress in its own right.

Against the rise of Prester John, Prevennis survived, remote and defiant, protected by its narrow, strongly defended border and the treacherous seas around its mountainous coasts. But the fulcrum of the defences of Prevennis remained the palace of Hammersund and it was in the depths

of the palace citadel that Prince Asbjorn, the king's youngest son, lurked.

He wandered down to the Vault of Artefacts, a chamber so far below the citadel's living quarters that few knew of its existence, but Asbjorn, or Bo as he had been known since an infant, spent many a happy hour there. He had first found the Vault when wandering around the citadel as a ten-year-old. Now, six years later, he still used it as a hiding place, at home among the shelves of discarded gifts from foreign dignitaries, old heirlooms and the flotsam and jetsam of courtly life. The Vault was a place of shadows, of forgotten things but that did not trouble Bo; bright light hurt his eyes. He preferred darkness and secrets.

Today of all days, Bo wanted to hide. His brother Haakon had returned from the south and the king decreed a feast in his honour.

The whole palace buzzed with preparations for the evening ahead. Servants, cooks and errand boys hurried around like bees mending a broken nest. Queen Isabella spent the morning firing out orders, her strong southern accent echoing around the palace's frozen stones. Everybody in the palace worked and lived under the cloud of her anger. Forever bitter about the politics that forced her to endure exile in the cold north, she never tried to hide her contempt for all things Preven. More than anyone, Bo knew about her tempers. She never failed to punish him for any indiscretion or perceived failing on his part, and she found many of those. Time and time again, she hurled the same names at him: sneak, fool, weakling. He was different, with hair whiter than snow, with his weak, juddering pink eyes. Every

time his mother's eyes fell upon him, he felt her shame, her embarrassment and her disappointment. She had endured the pain of his birth but that marked the end of her involvement in his upbringing, his white, blood streaked, wriggling body was thrust into the wet nurse's lap, never to return to his mother's arms. Bo was the youngest son, the spare, the odd one, second in every way to his older brother. He had found ways of coping. He found comfort in being alone.

The feast loomed over his day like a black cloud and Bo cringed each time he thought about the night ahead. As a prince of the realm and Haakon's brother, he had to attend, not doing so would be considered a grave insult but he hoped for a little peace before the grim night to come—he wanted to spend some time alone and the Vault was the only part of the palace that guaranteed solitude. In happier days, he would have sneaked out to go hunting alone in the forest but now, with the rumour of war a persistent whisper, his father forbade his leaving the citadel. So the Vault offered his only escape. He had skipped breakfast and crept down the long spiral staircase. As the stairs plunged deeper and deeper they became narrow and slippery but the route was familiar to him and he soon reached the door of the Vault. Bo paused before knocking. The words of his mother returned to him, as they often did when he was about to break her instructions.

'Cease your wandering and remain in your chamber. You know the punishment if you disobey. When the bell tolls, go to the Great Hall.'

Life in the palace ran to the mournful tolls of the bell in

the High Tower. Morning Prayer, feasts, funerals, celebrations, all were announced by the grim metallic clanging that reverberated around every passage, every chamber, every hall. Bo had grown to hate its noisy intrusions into his life.

The warning in his mother's words hung around Bo like a chain, pulling him back to where he should be. To defy a parent was a sin and if he was caught down in the Vault, on the day of his brother's triumphant return, his mother's anger would know no bounds. The chain pulled on him but another force lingered inside him, a stronger force. The same mysterious force that made every dark forest a place of wonder to him, that made him want to delve into the deep secrets and half-drowned passages, a force that made his stomach tingle with excitement.

He broke the chain.

He knocked on the door once and waited.

From inside came a series of violent coughs followed by a rasping voice. 'Who's that?'

When Bo announced himself he received a mumbled reply. 'Oh, ye are back again.'

Bo heard a key scraping around in the lock and with a screeching sound that echoed off the low ceiling, the door opened. Bo was faced by a short, hunchbacked man carrying a lantern and a huge key—the latter looked like a device of torture with its twisted barbs and hooks. Gramboil, the Vault archivist. His hair, sticky with grease, rested on his shoulders and over his warty forehead like strips of leather. His face was as pale as Bo's, having scarcely seen the sun in years. He greeted the prince with a hacking cough that filled the air with spittle.

‘Nothing new to see here. I can’t guess why ye keep coming down...highness,’ the last word was tacked on with great effort. In the Vault, the archivist was king, royalty from upstairs were mere intruders. ‘I suppose ye had better come in.’

The door was held open wide enough for Bo to step in sideways and then kicked shut. The archivist’s lantern allowed enough light for Bo to see the tall shelves, all full of dusty objects. Gramboil had little need for light as he preferred to feel his way around with his hands, his long fingernails tapping on the walls like claws. With each movement, clouds of dust shifted off his ragged coat.

The Vault widened out into a chamber filled with overloaded tables and shelves.

‘I’ll leave ye here, highness,’ said the archivist between two loud coughs.

‘Thank you, and here, I have a gift,’ said Bo. He passed Gramboil a small pouch containing tobacco.

The old man bowed stiffly and the sneer became a smile. ‘Much obliged to yer. Have a good look around, but take care to put everything back proper.’

‘I will,’ said Bo. Smoking a pipe was Gramboil’s only visible luxury and the gift of tobacco assured Bo a couple of hours free from the old man’s grumbling. He would have given the archivist money but of what use were coins to Gramboil? He did not live in the dark for profit or glory—he did it to escape from other people. Solitude was his reward, his fortune—at times Bo envied him.

‘I’ll set up candles for ye,’ said the archivist.

Bo thanked him, a gesture that was deflected by a shrug

and a sneer. Gramboil lit two foul-smelling tallow candles, picked out a filthy clay pipe from the depths of his robes and shuffled off into the enclave that housed his bed and meagre possessions.

Bo looked around. On the nearest table lay a pile of mouldy parchments, the log of the artefacts stored in the Vault. The prince flicked through them, fascinated by the damp, yellowing pages and Gramboil's long columns of spidery writing. There were hundreds upon hundreds of entries, stretching back years before Bo had been born. From time to time, an object would be requested for the pleasure of a foreign visitor. A thin, crackly line snaked across each requested artefact. Bo sensed the reluctance in the ink marks—the archivist hated parting with any of his collection. On each request, Gramboil would slowly, grudgingly, clean up the artefact, all the time cursing the dust-free gap it left on the shelf. At the last minute, the very last minute, he allowed the steward to take the object, all the time brooding like a dragon being robbed of a piece of its jealously guarded hoard.

A smell of tobacco pipe drifted around the vault, accompanied by the occasional hacking cough. Old Gramboil was enjoying his gift. Confident he would not be disturbed, Bo picked through the artefacts, hoping to find a new, unseen treasure. Most objects he found dated back to pagan times. He found a fluted bowl, gold and silver brooches ornamented with a gripping beast motif and a spear-head encrusted with silver and copper wires, its point still sharp enough to kill. Bo wondered about the people who had made these objects. What had driven them to create? A

sense of wonder, of beauty? Or had they simply sought fame and wealth? Hours of intense concentration must have been poured into their creation.

A sudden noise made Bo jump. A dull, relentless metal clanging shook the palace walls. The bell. The feast was about to begin—he had lost track of time and now he was late. A miserable night lay ahead.

*

The Great Hall was the largest room in the palace. Dozens of ancient spears, swords and crossbows hung on the walls. Against the back wall stood the heavy black armour that once belonged to Magnus the Mighty, the greatest king of modern Prevennis. The armour still showed the dents made by the weapons of his enemies. An open fire roared; a hole in the roof allowed the columns of smoke escape. Moonlight crept through two lines of narrow lancet windows. As Bo made his way to the royal table he stopped to look outside. Shards of light glistened on the sea like innumerable jewels and down in the harbour Bo saw a forest of tall masts: the Preven fleet lay at anchor. The nine ships, including the hundred-gun royal flagship *King Magnus*, had been summoned to Hammersund at the insistence of Crown Prince Haakon, who wanted the fleet as the centre piece of the celebrations—as a sign of his gratitude, he ordered all taverns open to accommodate the thirsty sailors.

Bo left the window. Two long trestle tables ran horizontal, one for the royal family, the other for lesser nobles. Plates of beef, salmon, trout, cheese and bread filled the tables

from end to end. In addition there were jugs of mead, beer and mulled wine. The smell of cooked meat and wood smoke hung thickly.

Bo took his place at the royal table and as he had expected, his brother led the merrymaking. After sinking a jug of ale, Haakon stood on the royal table with several of his men, throwing food at each other and singing lewd songs like the 'Merry Whore'. With each rousing chorus they cheered and stamped their feet, making the table shake.

Haakon was a bear of man. Muscles bulged through his tight fitting doublet and breeches and his smooth black hair fell down onto his shoulders. He was every inch a prince, every inch an heir to the throne. Bo examined his own pale bony fingers and wondered how they could possibly be brothers.

With his knife, Bo pushed the rubbery pieces of beef and cheese around the pewter plate. He had little appetite and hated eating with so many people around. He sat next to his father. King Olaf picked at his upturned moustache, lost in thought. He had a fat, rosy face sprinkled with dry warts. His ginger hair was parted in the middle and combed flat on either side, with a single strand hanging loose. His tiny eyes peered into the dancing flames and the stubby, freckled fingers of his left hand drummed impatiently on the arm on the chair. He kept his deformed, withered right hand hidden beneath his robes. Behind the king stood a man as grey and stiff as a statue. Hallvard, Olaf's bodyguard. Rarely had Bo heard him speak but the king trusted him, perhaps more than he trusted any other man in the palace.

Bo knew his father hated feasts as much as he did. The

king preferred quiet evenings in the palace library, studying the countless volumes of ancient histories, genealogies and tales of myth and legend.

Bo's mother, however, was in her element.

She dressed like a Salvinian Empress from the days of old, wearing a long trained skirt and embroidered stomacher while a jewelled tiara topped her dark hair. She beamed as she watched her eldest son, giggling as he poured ale over his companions, laughing uncontrollably as he thrust his crotch at the elderly, and now very shocked, Countess of Noatun. In the queen's eyes, Haakon could do no wrong. His every choice was the right one, his every move admired. In the fickle, flickering light, Bo saw the similarities between the queen and the crown prince: the same slick, flowing black hair, square jaw and strong cheekbones.

As though he somehow sensed his brother's thoughts, Haakon stopped his dancing and stared at Bo. His companions did likewise.

'BO!' yelled the crown prince, the taut muscles in his thick neck straining. 'WILL YOU NOT JOIN OUR LARKS?'

Bo smiled wanly and looked down at his plate.

'Hark at the youngling,' said Haakon, wiping smears of ale from his lips. 'Too scared to sit with real men.'

His companions roared with laughter and Haakon returned to the singing. Bo sunk lower in his seat. The two brothers had never been close—Haakon claimed that Bo seethed with jealousy at not being heir to the throne but Bo had never desired the crown. The life of duty, of servitude to the realm, to him represented only a gilded cage. No, jealousy was not the root of Bo's feelings towards his

brother: he hated Haakon because he was loud, coarse, ignorant and violent. Even at the tender age of thirteen he beat a servant to within an inch of his life. The servant's crime? He had forgotten to bow as the young prince passed him. The poor wretch was too frightened to fight back, so he endured blow after blow until he lost consciousness.

'Have you lost your appetite, my son?'

The sudden question made Bo jump. His father stared at him, a weak smile on his thin, delicate lips.

'I am not hungry,' said Bo.

Olaf leant back in his chair and considered his reply. 'Do you enjoy the revels, Asbjorn?'

Bo felt sure it was a question to which his father knew the answer. He shook his head.

The king smiled knowingly. 'For good or ill much of my character has passed to you. We are both made for quiet contemplation. I often wonder if the might of my father, bless his name and glory, skipped me and passed to Haakon. They would find much in common, of that I am sure.'

'Haakon is a worthy heir,' lied Bo, wishing to sound polite in his father's presence.

The king coughed. Bo tried to decide whether it was a genuine cough or a last ditch attempt to withhold a more immediate, direct and honest response.

'Will Haakon prove worthy?' said Olaf. 'Only time can answer that question.'

The king fell silent again, stroking his moustache, and his eyes drifted to the fire.

The queen was still enraptured by Haakon's antics and her face glowed with pride and happiness. The crown prince

had now removed his shirt and doublet to reveal his muscle packed torso. He lapped up the cheers of his companions and the admiring whispers and giggles of watching ladies. Bo failed to suppress a twinge of envy.

At that moment, Bo became aware of someone standing behind him. It was Bishop Ofnir Neidelhart, the king's chief counsellor. He wore a green oval cape, a purple tunic with decorated edges and a long stole. Bo's father remained enraptured by the fire and he did not notice Neidelhart's arrival. Tired of waiting, the bishop cleared his throat, a sound which made the king jump and turn around.

'Ofnir, old friend. I did not see you arrive.'

Neidelhart bowed in an extravagant manner. He took the king's offered hand and kissed it. 'Your Majesty, please accept my blessings on this happy day. God has blessed us. Your seed is strong. You have an heir worthy of you and your noble ancestors. I foresee that our nation will be safe for many years to come.'

The king beamed. 'If it proves so, then your wise, patient tutoring of Haakon will be the main cause of it.'

The bishop paused before he replied. He chose his words with great care. 'I am but a humble servant of your Majesty. The crown prince is a most attentive pupil. He will make a great king.'

Feeling left out of the conversation, Bo's concentration drifted. A small figure lurked in the shadows made by the heavy tapestries. Bo leapt to his feet and strode over to the guest, who upon seeing the prince, emerged from the shadows.

The light revealed a small creature, man-like but no taller

than four foot. It had large webbed feet and its white hair and beard resembled icicles. It wore a coat of thick furs, leaving only its strong, hairy arms exposed; the creature's dark eyes were almost hidden under a prominent brow.

It was Bjorgolf, Chief of the Barbegs, the fairy race of Eldar that dwelt in the wild far north of Prevennis. He was one of Bo's few friends, perhaps his only friend. With the blessing of his father, Bo had been allowed to accompany the Barbeg on many adventurous forays into the Hlithvid forest. His mother and Neidelhart never approved, fearing that it exposed him to ungodly influences but Bo loved every moment spent with the Barbegs: hunting, tracking and exploring.

During those hours among the gloomy pines Bo had learnt so much from Bjorgolf, more than any of his tutors in the palace had ever taught him. When a young boy, Bo used to fantasise that he escaped the palace and went to live with the Barbegs in the forests and mountains. Even on the cusp of manhood he often found himself daydreaming, playing out the same fantasy. He didn't want to be a prince, he didn't want the burdens of duty that came with the title—he wanted to live free.

'It is good to see you again, my friend,' said Bjorgolf. To Bo, the Barbeg's voice always sounded like the whistling or hooting of animals, although his words were clear. 'There are few other friendly faces here.'

Bo smiled and tried to hide his embarrassment. He knew why Bjorgolf kept to the shadows. The men and women of Prevennis did not wear the Null, but many clung to the old prejudices, the hatred of the Eldar, a hatred only kept in

check by the king's laws, which forbade any harm being done to the Barbegs or their lands, laws which many resented and some broke. Bo said, 'There aren't many friendly faces for me either I'm afraid. But I am glad to see you. I did not think you would come.'

The Barbeg nodded. 'The houses of men are not to my liking. But I could not ignore your father's invitation. He has been a good friend to my tribe.'

Haakon shouted loudly, a shout that rose above all other sounds in the hall. Evidently he had been victorious in a drinking game. Bjorgolf said, 'I hope your brother inherits his father's wisdom.'

'Yes, let us hope so,' said Bo. He always found he could speak freely with Bjorgolf, more freely than with anyone else. He asked, 'What news from your tribe?'

Bjorgolf shrugged his little shoulders. 'Times are hard and they may get harder still. Few younglings are born now. The winters worsen. But we Barbegs have weathered many storms since the world was born.'

Bo loved to hear Bjorgolf talk of the Barbeg's home: the snow-tipped mountains, the Salmon River, the cursed forest of Myrkvid. He never tired of such tales.

'You must join us again soon, Asbjorn, if your father allows it.'

'I should like that too. Perhaps—'

A roaring sound cut Bo off mid-sentence.

Cannon fire.

*

Musketeer Stark Olgarsson stamped his feet to keep warm. A frigid wind swept across Hammersund harbour and made his old bones ache with cold. He leant his musket against his leg and blew onto his cupped hands, but warm breath only made his fingertips hurt more. Not for the first time that evening he cursed the sergeant who had put him on watch duty, punishment for being drunk on parade. Olgarsson spat on the ground, bristling with anger at the injustice of it all; he had not been drunk, he had just had a sip or two of ale to warm him against the cold.

The thought of ale drew his attention towards the taverns and inns that clung to the harbour. Olgarsson saw the orange glow of firelight through their windows, he heard songs and laughter and could smell tobacco. Sailors and soldiers filled the taverns, all celebrating the crown prince's return. Olgarsson thought enviously about the ale they would drink and the girls they would chase. Not wishing to torture himself further, he picked up his musket and turned to face the sea. The nine ships of the Preven fleet towered in front of him, their timbers and rigging creaking and straining. Beyond, the open sea reflected the silvery moonlight, its tranquil surface like a shimmering expanse of ice. Olgarsson rubbed his dripping nose and yawned, for a second closing his eyes. When he opened them again he saw shadowy shapes out to sea. He took a step forward and squinted, wondering if the cold made his eyes deceive him. No, he saw them again, dark shapes moving swiftly towards the harbour. Olgarsson heard a rumble like thunder. Before he took another breath, the ship nearest to him in the harbour shook and splinters of wood exploded into the air.

The shock wave rocked Olgarsson onto his heels and his musket clattered to the floor. He staggered around, his eardrums burst. Through watery eyes he saw explosions tear the proud ships apart like matchwood. He fell to his knees and yelled, a belated warning drowned by the angry noise.

*

Bo ran over to the nearest window. Shouts of alarm filled the hall. The guests crowded around the windows, so Bo stood on tip-toes to look out onto the bay below. Dark silhouettes cut through the water like sea monsters. Ironclads.

Their armoured sloped sides bristled with gun ports and from the middle of each vessel rose a smoke-spewing chimney. The Ironclads sprayed the anchored royal fleet with cannon fire and already many ships were ablaze or sinking, their wooden hulls and masts snapped like children's toys. Bo watched the *Royal Sovereign*, the oldest ship of the fleet, lurch violently to port before slipping beneath the surface. There was no returning fire; the ships were unmanned, their crews submerged in Hammersund's taverns.

An eerie, fearful silence filled the hall, only broken when a voice Bo did not recognise said aloud, 'Who is doing this?'

Bo knew the answer to that question. Only one navy possessed Ironclads. Only one navy would dare attack Hammersund. The navy of Prester John.

A Family Secret

‘The fleet is lost.’
It was no more than a whisper but Bo heard it clearly.

‘The fleet is lost.’

The voice belonged to his father and Bo sensed the grief, the anger, the frustration and the fear in those four words.

With the ships of the fleet ablaze or sinking, the Ironclads stopped firing and slipped away, out into the sea, out of sight.

Trembling, the ashen-faced guests retreated from the window—Prevennis was not used to war.

With his left hand shaking violently, the king said, ‘My friends, the raid has ceased. There is nothing to fear though none should leave the palace tonight, rooms will be found for you here. You are all safe here. The palace is impregnable.’

The room filled with the hum of fearful conversation as the Kingsguard led the guests from the hall. Meanwhile the king summoned the queen, Bo and the still shirtless Haakon to his side. He spoke to his heir first of all. ‘Son, command the Kingsguard, ensure that the palace is secure. We may

not have seen the last of the enemy. We must be wary of attack from the south.'

'Fear not, father, the palace is safe in my command,' said Haakon, at last putting his shirt back on. 'This raid is little more than sabre-rattling by Prester John, I am sure of it. As to the south, I have garrisoned my best troops in the borderlands.'

Bo knew how Haakon ruled the borderlands. It had become his personal domain; he raised his own taxes and punished peasants for any minor transgressions; travellers carried whispers, rumours of villages burnt to the ground, rumours of executions. Bo often wondered why their father tolerated Haakon's excesses—perhaps the queen's soothing, honey-tipped words blinded him to Haakon's faults. Perhaps he too was afraid of the crown prince.

Haakon pushed past Bo and called out to his men.

'Return to our chamber, you will be safe there,' said Olaf to his wife. He went to kiss her cheek but she pulled away from him. The king watched her leave. 'Asbjorn, return to your room and remain there. Try to get some sleep. And none of your wandering!'

Bo nodded. He turned to leave before remembering Bjorgolf. He looked around the hall but the Barbeg had vanished.

*

Bo never found it easy to sleep. He was used to spending hours awake at night. Trapped within the fertile, doubt-ridden soil of his mind and the oppressive darkness of his

bedchamber, worries had a tendency to grow in scale and severity. Sometimes the arrival of dawn brought solutions, other times they were left to linger into the day, clouding every moment with fear and misery.

Outside, a battle raged in the heavens. Shards of lightning illuminated his room for an instant before darkness took over again; thunder grumbled in the sky. Bo kept thinking about the raid, he wondered if it was the prelude to the war long feared. He had often read about battles, he had seen paintings full of cannons, smoke and corpses, he had listened to tales of wars long past, long forgotten. But he had never seen a battle and perhaps that day drew close. The prospect excited and terrified him in equal measure.

Bo knew he had skill with a blade and readily absorbed the military lessons of his tutors, but he was not like Haakon. Haakon lived to fight. Bo felt like a child in a world of men. He would never be strong like Haakon; men would not follow him into battle and death.

Bo felt thirsty and remembered the pitcher of water he had left on the table beneath the window. He groped around blindly in the darkness, stubbing his toe on the chamber pot beside his four poster bed. He thanked God it was empty. His fingers found the candle that stood on the oak chest of drawers and managed to light it. The dancing flame revealed a small wainscoted room with gleaming wooden floors. There was a single wooden chair and opposite the narrow window was the fireplace, a cold, dark hole in the wall. Above the fireplace hung a portrait of Magnus the Mighty, the famous 'Lion of the North', Bo's grandfather, clad in a suit of black armour and a fierce spear in his

right hand. Bo felt as though his eyes followed him around the room.

Bo found the pitcher of water and took three deep swigs straight from it. As he placed the pitcher on the table, a knock on the door made him jump.

He opened the door and peered out. In the corridor outside stood his father and behind him, like a shadow, waited old Hallvard.

'I am sorry to disturb you, Asbjorn,' the king said with a sad smile. 'May I come in?'

'Of course, Father, please come in. Take the chair by the fireplace.'

'You may leave, Hallvard,' said Olaf.

Hallvard bowed, his bones creaking like the branches of a tree in the wind.

Once inside, the king sat on the chair with a wince. He wore a simple long shirt and plain breeches. He looked old, as though he had aged twenty years since the Ironclads' attack. Bo sat on the bed and waited for his father to speak.

'I will have no sleep this night,' the king said at last. He laughed a short, bitter laugh. 'Your mother sleeps soundly, as though all the problems of this world have been solved. To sleep on such a night...remarkable.'

'How bad is the damage to the fleet?' said Bo.

The king leant forward in his seat. 'Eight ships lost. The *King Magnus* is damaged but afloat, thank God.'

Bo struggled to digest what his father told him. 'Does this mean there is going to be a war?'

'I know not, my son,' said the king. His fingers drummed on the arms of the chair. 'Imperial raids on our southern

lands are not rare but to strike at Hammersund...I am a damned fool. I should never have consented to such a deployment of the fleet but I never expected...'

The king rubbed his eyes and for a horrible moment Bo thought his father was going to cry, but Olaf gathered himself. 'The worst is probably over. Prester John has vowed to break me and to force the Null upon my people but we Prevens are not so easily beaten. We have thwarted the Holy Empire for decades; it will take more than a raid to subdue us.'

Bo tried to share his father's optimism but found it difficult. He gave voice to a question that had long plagued him. 'What is war like, Father?'

'If you ever experience war, you will come to understand why I have tried throughout my reign to avoid it,' said Olaf, giving Bo a hard look. The king stood and walked over to the portrait of Magnus the Mighty. 'Much bloodshed I witnessed in my younger days, riding alongside my father. Those who speak of the glory of battle have never been in one. The blood of those you slay never washes off. Never. I often think back to when I was your age. Long ago it seems now, like a dream almost forgotten. I too was the second born. Of course you know this.'

Bo did know it, he knew the whole tale and had heard it many times and knew he was about to hear it again.

'I never wanted the crown,' continued the king, not so much talking as thinking aloud, 'but the early death of my brother bequeathed me this poisoned chalice. What a king my brother would have made. O, Asbjorn, you should have seen him. Tall as a mountain with long hair that flowed like

a river of gold. All loved him, as did I. If only he had not died.'

'You are a great king, Father,' said Bo.

'Sons are often blind to their father's faults,' said Olaf. He stood, wincing and rubbing his stiff knees. He pointed to the portrait of Magnus the Mighty. 'They called my father Captain of Kings and the King of Captains. When the Salvinian barbarians attacked this very palace he stood side by side with his men. How heavy history can lay on the soul! I was not born to be king and it is not a role one can grow into it. Yet, I do what I can with what skills God gave to me.'

'Prevennis will endure,' said Bo, quoting the family motto.

His reply tickled the king's humour. He chuckled, 'Indeed! You are wise, Asbjorn and will become wiser yet I deem. Have faith in your strength.' Olaf put his left hand on Bo's shoulder. 'You are on the cusp of manhood, my son. The choices you make now will dictate the type of man you become. You are my son and I am proud of you, though I say it too seldom. Nay, do not protest. I make no claim to be a better father than I am a king. But for now I must return to my affairs. Sleep if you can. I will call for you later.'

The visit of his father unsettled Bo. Throughout his life, Bo clung onto the idea that the king was a wise man, a strong man. He ignored court whispers that named his father 'Olaf the Lame King' or 'Olaf the Unready'. But this night, his father had acted like a confused child, overwhelmed by events around him. Trying to make himself feel better, Bo said out loud, 'Father knows best.' But he wasn't sure he believed it.

Bo sat at the window and looked out, trying to lose himself in the vista. The dawn light turned the sea from silvery black to blue green and peeled back the darkness to reveal the colourful roofs of the densely packed townhouses below the palace. The harbour wall had been reduced to rubble and many houses smouldered, ugly gouges ripped out of their walls, while others were still ablaze. Lines of Kingsguard stood on the palace battlements below—their armour and swords glinted in the sun.

Bo pushed the window open. A blast of sea-salt wind struck his face, noisy gulls wheeled above the palace, shrieking like children. Bo's stomach grumbled loudly and nudged hunger to the forefront of his mind. A plate of fruit lay on the table: berries, pears and apples. He picked up an apple and bit into the soft watery flesh, savouring the sweet taste. When he finished he dropped the skinny core onto the plate and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He had just begun to pick out the loose piece of apple skin stuck between his teeth when someone pounded on his door and he heard a gruff, muffled voice. 'Tis the Kingsguard, your highness, please open at once.'

Bo opened the door to three grim-looking men; one said, 'I apologise for disturbing you, Prince Asbjorn, but his Majesty has commanded your presence in the Throne Room.'

The Kingsguard led him down the East Wing. Bo's heart thumped like a drum, his skin felt clammy with cold sweat. He barely had time to dress; he threw on a shirt and his old hunting breeches. Hallvard greeted him at the Throne Room door. The old man eyed the Kingsguard suspiciously; he gestured to Bo to come inside and slammed the door

shut behind him. Bo followed Hallvard across the expansive Throne Room, the old man's weather-beaten leather jerkin squeaking with each step. Bo's footsteps echoed on the tiled floor, he felt small under the lofty, smoke-blackened ceiling. A frigid draught chilled the room; Bo wished he had thrown on more clothes as the great fire place in the far wall loomed unlit and dark.

Hallvard and Bo passed beneath the ancient stone statue of Geirrod the Spear-Reddener, the first king of Prevennis. Geirrod's crown and spear touched the ceiling and his shadow swallowed all light in the room, just as his shadow lay over all his successors. On a dais opposite the statue an iron throne, wrought from metal from the northern isle, stood watch over the room.

Memories filled the room, Bo sensed them. They were everywhere and they touched everything of age in the room. The black-stained ceiling remembered the roaring fires that warmed hands during countless harsh Preven winters. The arms of the throne discoloured by the sweaty fingers of generations of kings. Old deeds and words lingered. They whispered to Bo: voices of kings, voices of the loyal, voices of traitors and voices of the doomed. How many men were condemned in this very room, knelt before the king begging for his mercy? The walls recorded their pleas, their curses, you only had to listen, concentrate, strain your ears.

'Please hurry, your highness,' said Hallvard, bringing Bo back to the present.

Hallvard led Bo out to the balcony that stood high up the east wall, exposed to the relentless wind. There stood the king, wearing his ceremonial armour, and the queen. Beside

them lurked Bishop Neidelhart. They all stood as still as statues.

Bo's eyes juddered at the sudden exposure to bright light but his vision slowly settled. The balcony looked out upon the plains of Thingvollur, a wide undulating expanse of coarse grass in the middle of which rose a circular mound topped with a single standing stone, the Logberg, the law rock. Faint, worn paths snaked around the slopes and hills, beaten down by the feet of tribes long forgotten. But it was not the faded scars of the past that gripped those stood on the balcony. They watched the horizon, where the gentle slopes of Thingvollur surrendered to the mountains.

For on those slopes stood the army of Prester John.

In the sharp wind countless flags and banners thrashed at their poles like wild animals leashed. Bo saw musketeers and pikemen in the Holy Empire's red livery, cavalry, cannons and mortars. Shouts and cries of alarm reached the balcony from the battlements below.

After a long silence, the king spoke. His voice trembled and he coughed out the words, 'So the moment of doom has come.'

Neidelhart slid across to his king, his hands folded in front of him like a shy maiden. 'Your Majesty, you must leave the palace. The *King Magnus* still floats and can be readied within the hour.'

Olaf span around, his heavy, bagged eyes dark with anger. 'And pray tell me where am I to go? Who will offer me sanctuary? I would be a beggar king, ransomed and sold. Nay. Like my ancestors before me, I stand my ground. No enemy has yet taken the palace of Hammersund.'

Neidelhart bowed. 'I respect your wishes, Majesty, forgive me. I should have expected such a brave gesture.'

Olaf forgave the bishop with a flick of his good hand. The king strode around the balcony, pulling at his moustache and hair. His armour clunked and clinked like a crazed musical instrument, his father's withered arm shook fiercely. From his belt hung his sword, the sword passed down by generations of Preven kings. It looked out of place, as it always did; his father's hands were more suited to holding books than swords. Olaf looked out at the army on the Thingvollur and said, 'We cannot stand here doing nothing. There must be some stroke we can make—'

Trumpets sounded and the enemy marched towards the palace. Like floodwater, thousands of soldiers poured over the Thingvollur plains.

Bo felt a hand on his shoulder; he smelt his mother's perfume and her shallow breath played on his neck.

'You have difficult choices ahead,' she whispered. He met her deep dark eyes, those perilous pools of intrigue. She smiled and gently removed her hand from his shoulder. 'There is wisdom in you, Asbjorn. Soon, that wisdom will be tested.'

Bo was too confused to reply. With no further word, his mother turned away.

Olaf puffed out his cheeks. 'Where is Haakon? Why has he not mustered the Kingsguard? The enemy is within range of our cannons.'

As if in answer, footsteps rattled across the Throne Room. Haakon strode up to them, his face grimy and damp with sweat. A dozen Kingsguard followed the crown prince;

they said nothing but beneath their heavy cloaks Bo spied the shapes of swords and pistols. Something in their manner, their expressions, worried him. Two Kingsguard stood in front of the door, a barrier to any who wished to enter or leave.

Olaf walked in from the balcony to greet his son but Haakon pushed past him. Olaf stood like a spurned lover, his mouth agape, his eyes wide with confusion. The crown prince mounted the iron throne, letting his long legs sprawl down.

Olaf took a couple of timid steps towards his son. ‘Haakon, what are you doing? How could the enemy have broken through? You promised me the south was secure. What is being done to defend the palace?’

Haakon brought his fist down on the throne, sending out a metallic thud that echoed around the room. ‘Father, you should show more respect when you address me.’

His words brought on a terrible silence, like the silence that follows a gunshot. Bo wondered if his ears deceived him, surely Haakon could not have spoken to their father in such a manner?

Haakon smiled, a cruel knowing smile that might have been played on the lips of the queen. Bo saw again how alike they were, mother and son. Haakon said, ‘This is an hour long awaited.’

Haakon leapt to his feet and pulled away his cloak to reveal the red uniform of the Imperial Army. At the same time his followers did likewise, they drew their swords and one of them locked the door.

‘None are to leave this room,’ said Haakon.

‘What is going on?’ said the king. ‘Why are you dressed in the stolen garb of the enemy?’

‘Not stolen,’ said Haakon. ‘Given to us by our true master, Lord Lucien.’

Bo felt his legs tremble. No, it could not be. It could not be. Bo didn’t know what to do. Was Father in danger? Had Haakon turned mad? What was going on?

Olaf retreated, shaking his head. ‘Have you betrayed me, Haakon?’

‘Nay, I am no traitor. It was you who betrayed this realm, betrayed it by leading it away from the Mother Church. I seek to right the wrongs you have wrought.’

Bo could barely breathe; his brother had betrayed them all.

The king looked at Neidelhart but the Bishop backed away and kept his eyes trained on the floor. He offered no help, no guidance. With what little strength of voice he could summon, the king said, ‘You stand alone, Haakon. I am the king and protected by the Kingsguard.’

Haakon gave a short laugh. ‘The Kingsguard? They serve me. Loyalty is easily bought and gold I have in abundance. And with the Imperial Army at our gates who dares to oppose me? You have lost, Father, and you believed you were so very clever, hiding behind the walls of this palace.’

Olaf flinched. ‘But what about the *people*? They will resist the rule of Prester John.’

Haakon clenched his fists. ‘Any rebellion will be crushed, I promise you that. Our plans have been long in the making. Nothing has been left to chance. The raid last night was the signal that the time of deliverance was at hand. It was I

who requested that the Preven fleet should come to anchor at Hammersund. I knew the Ironclads were coming. As you can see, Father, you are quite alone.'

'The king does not stand alone.'

Hallvard. The old warrior pushed away two Kingsguard and before any could resist him, he drew his sword and stood beside the king.

'I had hoped for more of you, Hallvard. Why throw your life away in service of a fallen king?' said Haakon with mock sadness

'The king is still king, appointed by God,' said Hallvard. 'Nothing a traitor can do or say alters that.'

'Old fool,' said Haakon. 'I have no time for this nonsense.'

Hallvard cried out, a short, strangled cry and his sword clattered to the ground. He gripped his throat; blood flowed through his fingers, dripping onto his chest. Hallvard took a single step forward before collapsing—a figure stood behind him, a figure holding a bloody knife.

The queen.

The king knelt beside his fallen servant and looked up at his wife. 'Isabella...have you lost your wits?'

'No, I have found my freedom from you,' she said, wiping the blade clean on a white handkerchief.

Olaf understood. 'So, you have betrayed me too.'

'I was never loyal to *you*, Olaf, never. Ever since my father forced me to marry you for politics, I have dreamed of this moment.'

Haakon kicked the twisted, blood-soaked corpse. 'Anyone who opposes me shall share his fate.'

The king stood and faced Neidelhart. The bishop avoided meeting his glance.

‘And you? You knew of this?’ said Olaf.

The bishop cleared his throat. ‘It was a matter of conscience. The Almighty guided me to the path of Prester John. These are the Last Days. My soul must be pure.’

Olaf laughed bitterly. ‘So what have you been promised? The gown of a cardinal?’

‘I warned you to leave. Remember that. You could have fled. All of this would have been avoided.’

‘So, you are a traitor too. My oldest friend. To whom I gave great power and dominion. You owe everything to me. And my reward? Betrayal.’

Neidelhart blushed and rubbed the back of his neck. ‘I only sought to serve my people.’

‘And the people are best served by your betrayal?’

‘It was the only way to avoid war. Under the protection of Prester John and the Mother Church, Prevennis will enjoy peace and security.’

‘Peace and security? Do you forget the Inquisition? You have seen what has become of other lands.’

‘Prester John, may God praise him, will take whatever steps necessary to cleanse this heretical land ready for the Day of Judgement,’ said the queen, her hands waving with each word. ‘We should fall down on our knees and thank God for His mercy.’

‘Enough of talk,’ said Haakon irritably and he gestured to his men.

The Kingsguard grabbed Olaf. Haakon stepped forward and ripped the sword from Olaf’s belt. He held it up to the

light. 'Mine at last. Take my father to the dungeon. Lord Lucien will want to see him.'

Neidelhart slid towards the crown prince, with the same serpent-like movements Bo had seen him use a thousand times with his father. He spoke softly but loud enough for Bo to hear.

'My Lord, what of Prince Asbjorn?' said the Bishop. 'Is he loyal to you?'

'I shall give my brother the chance to do the right thing,' said the crown prince. He held his hand out to Bo. 'Come, Bo, will you not forsake this empty shell of a king and father and join me? We are flesh and blood. Kiss my hand and swear fealty to me. Be swift, I will not offer again.'

Bo knew it would be sensible to do so, Haakon had won and the Kingsguard supported him. He clearly had the patronage of Prester John and the Mother Church. Father would be executed and Bo was sure he would join him in death unless he swore fealty to his brother.

But he could not do it.

For all his father's weakness, for all his failings, he was still his father and he was still the rightful king of Prevennis. Bo remembered all the old tales of usurpers and tyrants who gained power through betrayal. Yes, Haakon had won, but in the years to come, would he join the likes of Grinarr the Deceiver and Gagnrad Forkbeard, hated by the generations that followed?

Bo could not betray his father.

He took a slow, deliberate step back.

Any remaining benevolence in Haakon's face vanished, leaving only tensed skin and hard eyes.

‘Asbjorn, go to them,’ said Olaf.

Bo pulled himself to his full height. ‘No, Father, I am not a traitor.’

‘You have nothing to prove to me,’ said Olaf. ‘Do not throw your life away on my account. I am lost. Go with them.’

‘I am not a traitor.’

‘But you remain a fool,’ said Haakon.

The crown prince waved his great paw of a hand at the Kingsguard. ‘Take the boy down to the dungeon with his father. We shall deal with him later. He’s a slippery one. Make sure he doesn’t give you any trouble.’

Before Bo could resist, the Kingsguard grabbed him and forced a hood over his head.

Dark Places

Bo's world reduced to sounds and smells: the harsh whispers of his captors, the odour of greased armour mixed with sweat and the lifeless air of stuffy passages. Rough hands held him, each step accompanied by hard kicks, shoves and punches.

With his hands tied behind his back, Bo was forced down long winding steps. He feared tumbling forward and down...down...

He received a hard shove on his back and his knees cracked against stone. He did not cry out, he was determined not to give his captors the satisfaction of knowing they had hurt him. He heard grunts and gasps, the sounds of someone being punched. The hood was pulled off but if Haakon's intent had been to disorientate Bo it had failed. He had spent many hours exploring the palace's passages and hidden nooks and he knew where he was: the dungeons, deep down in the palace bowels, far from view, far from help. Not that any help would come now.

He looked around. He knelt within a windowless chamber. Water dripped down from the ceiling, creating black puddles between the cracked stone floor tiles, and rusty

chains hung down from the walls like dead limbs. Bo's nostrils filled with the smell of stale air trapped for centuries. Like grumpy old men angry at their peace being broken, spiders scuttled across the floor, seeking dark places to hide. An impenetrable blackness swallowed the far end of the dungeon.

Bo's father knelt beside him, his hands also tied behind his back. He had been stripped of his armour, bruises smothered his face and his lips were bloodied and swollen. Their eyes met and the king offered a rueful smile. He looked so feeble and helpless which only increased Bo's sense of despair. A childish part of him expected his father to put everything right. Father had protected him all his life but no more.

Six Kingsguard surrounded them, all armed with short clubs.

Another figure stood at the doorway—seven foot tall, his white robes shimmered like sheets of ice.

Lord Lucien. The room went cold as though exposed to an icy wind.

Bo barely dared to breathe; his bowels churned. He had heard many terrible tales about the Head of the Brotherhood of Redemption. Greybeards shuddered when the name of Lucien was mentioned.

Muffled by the mask, Lucien's voice was little more than a whisper but every word was clear. 'Your eyes are full of hate, King Olaf, but your hatred is misplaced. Indeed I have come to save you.'

Olaf grunted his disbelief at this statement.

Lucien, hidden behind the mask, offered no reaction. 'I

speaking the truth. Left to his own devices your heir would have you hanged by nightfall. I am offering you life, a chance to escape the noose—'

Olaf did not let him finish. 'There is nothing you can offer that I would accept.'

Bo felt proud of his father's defiance. He was acting like a king.

Lucien paced around the chamber, his footsteps echoing loudly. He stood beside the chains that hung from the wall; he pulled at one and watched as it rattled. He wiped the rust from his hand. 'I see you wish to make this difficult. But do not be rash in your judgement. Aid me now and I shall spare your people the Inquisition and you, King Olaf, may leave this land for peaceful exile. Thwart me and things may turn out less well.'

'What is it that you want of me?' said Olaf.

Lucien knelt before the king. 'One thing and one thing only. The sanctuary of the Illuminati, tell me where it can be found.'

Olaf made an incredulous expression. 'The sanctuary? I know not. Does such a place truly exist? Surely only in the tales of storytellers and minstrels—'

Lucien stood and gripped the king by the throat, lifting him off the ground. Bo jolted at the sudden violence of his response.

'It is foolhardy to play games with me,' said Lucien. 'I know you have dealings with the Illuminati. Tell me where the sanctuary is. Tell me or I will show no mercy to your people.'

Lucien released his grip and turned his back, waiting for

an answer. In Bo's eyes his father knelt as a man broken, crushed by events and forces too great for him to deal with. The king rubbed his reddened neck and said between heavy gasps, 'Very well, if you swear to spare my people and my land.'

'I swear it,' said Lucien without turning.

Olaf took a deep breath, shame written all over his face. He bowed his head and choked out a single word. 'Rangbeinn.'

Time hung suspended. Lucien turned, his robes swishing as he did so. 'Rangbeinn. I know of it. A mountain in the eastern wastes of this cursed land. I have your word that this is the truth?'

'On my life,' said Olaf, his voice shrunk to little more than a mouse squeak. It pained Bo to see his father reduced to this shell of a man. He knew he had no choice but to submit to Lucien's demands but deep down Bo felt ashamed of his father's capitulation.

'I thank you, King Olaf, you have done a great service for all loyal servants of Prester John,' said Lucien. With a bow more in mockery than respect.

'I will never be his servant,' said Olaf, using his last remnants of defiance and strength.

'Indeed and that is why you still must die,' said Lucien.

'You said you would spare him!' said Bo.

Lucien glared with dark dead eyes at Bo. 'He has told me all he knows and I regret now I have no further need for him. His heresies and crimes cannot be forgiven. It is the will of Prester John.'

'But you said... Father, tell him.'

Lucien leapt towards Bo like a cat and grabbed him by the chin. The tips of his fingers were as cold as icicles. 'You have courage, boy, but speak again and I shall cut your throat from ear to ear and watch you die.'

Bo could do nothing other than obey. Lucien released his hold and said to the Kingsguard. 'Take the king to the condemned cell. He is to hang at dawn. Spare the boy, at least for now. We may have some use for him later.'

Bo watched the Kingsguard drag his father to the door. The king faced his youngest son—he tried to speak but no words came. He was pulled to his feet and led out of the chamber. The door slammed behind him.

Bo looked up at Lucien, hatred filling every part of his body but he knew it was futile; he could not hurt the Lord. That only worsened the pain of his anger and sorrow but the prince had no further time to consider it. A heavy blow on the back of his head sent him spinning into darkness.

*

When Bo regained consciousness, he found himself in a cramped dungeon. One tiny barred window offered the only ventilation and light. Damp had discoloured the stone bricks and a heavy door with a small grill of thick iron bars provided the only entrance or exit. Water dripped down from the low ceiling. Stuffy, damp and hot, the air clung around Bo like a blanket. His hands had been untied but his head felt as though it was being thumped with a hammer.

A plate and a bowl had been left on the floor. On the plate lay a slice of stale wheaten bread, while greasy water

filled the bowl. His insides raw, Bo nibbled the bread; it was difficult to swallow, scratching his throat as it passed down. He sipped a little water from the bowl, the taste was bitter and it did little to ease his thirst.

‘This is all wrong,’ he said, throwing the bowl against the door. The clatter echoed around the dungeon. A gruff voice bellowed from outside, ‘Keep quiet in there, or I’ll come in and shut you up.’

Bo realised he didn’t want that either. Bruises and welts already covered his body; more punches and kicks wouldn’t help him. Trying to remain calm, he sat on the damp floor and leant against the wall. So much had happened so quickly. What fate awaited him now? Exile? Execution?

Bo’s sharp ears picked up sounds other than the drip, drip of water and the guard’s coughing outside. Muffled sounds, eerie sounds: screaming, cries of pain and weeping.

Bo held his hands over his ears and tried to block out the cries. He thought of icy lakes, of forests, of towering mountains, the places he loved. He tried to imagine being there. In his mind, he drank water from mountain streams, in his mind all he could smell was the crackling wood fire and the meat that cooked above it.

Despite the fear and danger, Bo drifted into a shallow sleep, a sleep which only became a thin blanket drawn over waking and where the waking world could still be heard, smelt and touched.

When he woke, Bo had no idea of how long he had slept. In the constant gloom, time had lost all meaning. A scuffling sound wiped away the last remnants of sleep. Movement. Scurrying. Quick, little feet: a rat.

Bo yelped and threw the plate at it, he missed and the plate smacked against the wall. The rat bolted down a small hole.

The guard's voice thundered from outside the cell. 'What's all that noise? If you can't be quiet, I'll shut you up.'

A key rattled in the lock and the door was kicked open. A yellow glow drifted in, briefly illuminating the dungeon, before a black shadow extinguished the hesitant, hopeful light. Bo faced a large man with short untidy hair and a neck thick with muscle. He carried a heavy club, and grabbed Bo painfully by the throat. 'I'll beat some sense into you. No point in squealing, runt. No one is coming to help you. You ain't a prince now.'

Bo closed his eyes, bracing himself for the pain.

The fingers around his throat loosened.

Bo heard a heavy thump on the ground. He opened his eyes, at his feet lay the guard, flat on his stomach; Bo saw an angry wound in the back of his skull that oozed blood.

Bjorgolf stood in the doorway. In his right hand he carried a small axe with a stone head.

'Bjorgolf!' said Bo, his mind spinning. 'How did you get here? How did you get past the guards?'

'I explored this castle ere you were born, ere your father's father was born come to that,' said the Barbeg with a wry smile. 'This castle is ancient and much of it is forgotten. But not by old Bjorgolf. I know of passages long hidden. And it is those passages we must now seek.'

'How did you know I'd been imprisoned and where to find me?'

The Barbeg twirled the axe in his hand. 'We Eldar do not

forsake our friends. I sensed you would be in danger after the metal ships attacked. My eyes and ears are ever watchful. Now, let us leave before we are discovered. Other guards will come.'

'Is he dead?' said Bo stepping over the fallen guard.

'Yes, dead he is,' said Bjorgolf, looking down at the body. 'Alas, in my haste I struck him harder than I had wished.'

'Well I won't shed any tears for him,' said Bo.

'Always try to value life,' said the Barbeg. His face became serious and dark. 'Asbjorn, your father is dead. I am sorry.'

The news struck Bo like a wave crashing against a ship. His legs buckled and he placed a hand on the damp wall to avoid falling.

'He was hanged as a traitor,' continued Bjorgolf. 'There have been many hangings, many deaths. Your brother's reign as king has been anointed with blood.'

Bo wanted to vomit; he wanted to cry; grief and anger raced through him. He hated Haakon, hated him more than anyone or anything else.

'You are full of sorrow but we must hurry,' said Bjorgolf. Despite his grief, Bo knew that the Barbeg was right.

Once out of the dungeon they faced a flight of twenty wooden steps, themselves replacing the worn stubs of the stone stairway that lay underneath. The steps led to a wide circular room with a tall conical ceiling; daylight poured through six arched windows, illuminating a well and a narrow spiral stairway. Barrels, chests and ropes lay on the floor, and against the walls rested muskets and pikes. A strong smell of tobacco lingered in the air.

'This is a guard room,' said Bo. He tried to concentrate,

and block out all thoughts of his murdered father. 'There must be dozens of Kingsguard around here.'

'Then we must be ready for trouble.'

Bo heard footsteps. Bjorgolf readied his axe. Slow, heavy footsteps came down the spiral staircase. Bo heard the clinking of armour, a sneeze, a throat being cleared.

A man appeared at the bottom of the stairs, a Kingsguard. He stared at Bo and the Barbeg and his mouth gaped open, 'Who the hell—'

He never finished his sentence.

Without a word, Bjorgolf threw his axe at the man; the sharp head struck him in the face—he fell and blood flowed across the wooden floor like a river.

The Barbeg stepped over to the body, retrieved his weapon and wiped it clean. 'I take no pleasure in this. Hurry, boy, up the stairs.'

Still shaking from the fierce attack he had witnessed, Bo followed the Barbeg. A line of flickering torches lit the spiral stairway. Bjorgolf edged up the steps, his axe at the ready; like a prowling cat, his movements were slow and poised. He wanted to act like a brave warrior but he felt like a scared child, as every dancing flame, every shifting shadow made him jump. He thought of all the times he had wandered around the castle, exploring it, with his mother's wrath his only fear. How he wanted to draw back time, and return to those carefree days, rather than running for his life.

They stepped into a small chapel. Arches of brown and white stone stretched around the walls, broken only by a single stained glass window, the main entrance door and a

tiny circular door in the far wall. The floor tiles were cracked; dirt and water filled the gaps between them.

‘This is a dead-end,’ said Bo. As if in answer, he heard raised voices from the guard room. ‘They’ve found the guard you killed. We’re trapped.’

Bjorgolf casually rummaged around his fur coat, pulled out a ring of keys, and tried to unlock the circular door in the far wall.

‘What are you doing?’ said Bo. ‘That door just leads to an old sewer.’

‘How little you know!’ said the Barbeg, much to Bo’s annoyance. He wiggled a key in the lock but the door remained closed.

The shouts from below grew louder. Bo recognised words within the shouts.

‘The prince is gone!’

‘We have to find him. Haakon will have our heads on stakes if we don’t. He couldn’t have gone far. You three, wait here in case he doubles back. You two, follow me to the chapel.’

Bo spun round. Bjorgolf fiddled with the key.

‘Hurry up,’ said the prince. ‘They’re coming.’

Bjorgolf held up a little hand, a sign Bo recognised as a request for quiet and patience.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs and Bo heard the rattle of armour and of weapons.

Bjorgolf still struggled with the lock, humming as he did so.

‘Come on,’ said Bo.

‘Ah!’ said the Barbeg. ‘Success.’

The key turned in the lock and the door swung open, releasing a rush of dusty air.

The footsteps got closer and closer.

‘In we go,’ said Bjorgolf, still calm. ‘The enemy is close. Take this.’

The Barbeg passed Bo a small crystal.

‘What’s this?’ said Bo. ‘Magic?’

‘You might call it magic but humans know so very little,’ said Bjorgolf. He ushered Bo to the open door; the prince had to duck to get through. In front of him lay a passage, dark, low and narrow. He hesitated but a kick on the backside from Bjorgolf forced him forward and the Barbeg followed close behind him. The crystal in his hand felt warm and a blue glow illuminated the passage. Bo heard shouting from behind them. ‘QUICK! THE DOOR! THE DOOR!’

The Kingsguard.

‘They have seen us,’ said Bjorgolf, slamming the door behind him. In one fluid motion, he slipped the key in the lock and turned it.

Their pursuers thumped on the door, the frame shuddered and dust fell down from the ceiling like rain.

‘The door will hold for a while but time is short and this passage runs for some distance. Hold up the crystal as you walk,’ said Bjorgolf.

At that, he pushed Bo forward and the prince crouched to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling. He held the crystal in front of him to light the way. Bjorgolf walked more comfortably, his head clearing the ceiling.

‘Not always a bad thing to be small!’ said the Barbeg.

The passage did not follow a straight line, it curved,

dipped and rose. The strain on Bo's knees and thighs worsened and he found it a struggle to keep moving forward. The thick dust made him cough and sneeze; several times he had to stop and spit out the foul mucus that collected in the back of his throat.

'How much further?' he said between spits. He gritted his teeth, trying to shut out the pain in his legs.

'Just a little way,' said Bjorgolf. 'This passage runs deep beneath the palace.'

'But where does it lead to?'

Before the Barbeg answered the sound of cracking wood rushed along the passage like a musket ball.

'They have broken down the door,' said Bjorgolf, urging Bo on with pushes and shoves. 'They will not be far behind.'

'I'm going as fast as I can,' said Bo. His legs burned with pain. To his relief, they reached another door. Bjorgolf squeezed past him and pulled out the ring of keys. Frowning, he flicked through them.

'You have the right one?' said Bo, fearing the worse.

'Ah, yes, it will be here. I need to find it, that's all.'

'We don't have any time, the Kingsguard are gaining on us.'

'That is why I am hurrying,' said Bjorgolf, going from one key to another.

A voice echoed in the passage. 'Stop and face the king's justice. You cannot escape.'

Bo turned the crystal to throw its blue light down the passage. Crawling towards them he saw three hulking Kingsguard, barely fifty feet away.

‘Confound it, boy,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘I need the light.’

‘But they’re coming—’

‘I know. And I shall be quicker if I can see.’

Bo held the crystal to the door, darkness swallowed the Kingsguard but Bo knew they were still there and scrambling to reach them.

‘Ah! *This* is it,’ said Bjorgolf. He slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. The prince and the Barbeg spilled out of the passage, down two steep steps and onto a damp stone floor. Bjorgolf leapt to his feet and slammed the door shut behind him, he locked it and laughed. ‘That was close.’

The door shook violently, the impact of feet and fists.

‘Open in the name of the king!’ cursed muffled voices.

Bjorgolf snarled and shouted back in the whistling Barbeg tongue. Bo did not understand the words but he felt sure they were not a polite refusal to the Kingsguards’ request.

‘Where are we?’ said Bo.

Bjorgolf rubbed his nose. ‘The lower levels, the very oldest parts of this castle.’

‘*More* tunnels,’ said Bo. He never thought he would grow weary of dark hidden places but the escape through the passage had left him exhausted.

‘It is best if I take the crystal for I know the swiftest way through the tunnels,’ said Bjorgolf.

Bjorgolf led the prince into the tunnel, which although was wider and taller than the passage from which they had emerged, was more uncomfortable. Cold smelly water reached Bo’s waist and Bjorgolf’s chest. Things floated in the water, things Bo did not want to look down to identify.

‘You have a gift for finding interesting places,’ said Bo.

Bjorgolf took this as a genuine compliment. ‘Verily. This tunnel was made long ago, for escape in case the palace fell under siege. Now it is all but drowned and forgotten. Nobody uses this now.’

‘I wonder why,’ said Bo under his breath.

The tunnel twisted so much that Bo wondered if they weren’t going back on themselves. Several times Bo nearly lost his footing on the slippery ground. He clung onto the wall as he walked; he did not want to fall face first into the filthy water.

The smell became unbearable; Bo retched and would have sold his soul for fresh air. Finally they reached steps that led them out of the water. Bo looked up, he realised they stood at the foot of a stairway so steep the top could not be seen.

‘The last stretch,’ said the Barbeg, himself breathing hard.

To Bo, climbing the steps felt more like climbing a rock face. His every muscle ached and his eyes watered. It took every ounce of effort and concentration to keep going. Up and up they climbed until Bo felt cooler air on his face. Above he saw a spot of bright sunlight. He found new strength in his limbs and pushed on.

They reached the top stair and with the last of his strength, Bo hauled himself up. Daylight. He gulped in the pure air and laughed as he felt the wind on his face. Bjorgolf sat, taking deep breaths to recover from his exertions.

They had come further than Bo had expected: they were perched on the rock-strewn Jutul ridge. Far below them stretched the plain of Thingvollur, beyond which stood the palace of Hammersund.

Bjorgolf stood and stretched his legs. ‘The hunt will soon be up. Your brother will be furious when he learns you have escaped.’

Bo nodded agreement. He did not envy the guards when Haakon discovered their failure. He said, ‘Where do we go now?’

The Barbeg looked northwards. ‘Some of my kin have camped in the Hlithvid forest. They await me there. First I shall seek the counsel of Frodi the Hermit—he is wise and I place great worth on his words. From there, I shall return to the home of my tribe, the Gladsheim. I would be honoured if you were to join us. My folk have need of aid.’

The offer surprised Bo. ‘I cannot see what aid I can offer.’

Bjorgolf placed a hand on his arm and smiled. ‘You do yourself an injustice, my friend. Courage you have, and strength too. Dark times have come to the north. What you have witnessed is but the beginning. The terror of Prester John shall sweep through all this land and all are under threat—human, Eldar, bird and beast. And this terror shall overcome all unless we resist it.’

‘But how can we resist? The Imperial army is huge and combined with Haakon’s men—’

‘I do not say that this evil can be defeated. But I, Bjorgolf, shall fight it with every last breath in my body.’

Bo felt humbled by the Barbeg’s simple bravery. Bjorgolf had saved his life. The world Bo had known all his life, the palace, the royal court, had been swept away. The life he had dreamed about, a life of freedom in the wilderness, lay in his grasp. He felt frightened—he knew the dangers that awaited him, he knew his brother would hunt him down—

but certain in his choice. He bowed in front of Bjorgolf and said, 'And I shall fight with you.'

The Isle of Ictis

The grasping hands released Elowen and she spun round to face her attacker.

A man stood there. Hooded and cloaked he may have been, but he was no Redeemer. He lowered the hood to reveal his thick, shiny black hair and unfastened his cloak, beneath which he wore a jerkin and breeches bedecked with colourful ribbons.

Standing beside Diggory, who was still trembling with fear, Elowen clenched her fists and said in a hushed voice, 'Who are you?'

The man whispered, 'I am Malengin of Ictis. Please, we must hurry. The Redeemers will find us if we stay here. Come, follow me.'

'Where to?' said Elowen.

'Somewhere safe,' said Malengin.

Elowen feared he was an enemy agent although he offered no obvious threat. They had no choice—anything was better than the Redeemers.

The man led Elowen and Diggory out of the house and into the building next to it. It was dark and water dripped down from the cracked roof; Malengin lifted up a trap door

and ushered them down some narrow steps into a gloomy cellar lit by a single candle.

Malengin ran his delicate, soft hands through his hair. He wore gaudy, jewel-encrusted rings on all his fingers and a band of brightly dyed leather around his left wrist. And for the first time Elowen realised that he was not Nulled. Elowen wanted to ask him about it but thought it wise to stay quiet on the subject.

‘We should be safe here for the moment,’ said Malengin. ‘Now if you would permit, I would ask your names.’

Elowen paused before answering, fearful of giving their real names, but she couldn’t see what harm it would do. Malengin was clearly afraid of the Redeemers and eager to avoid being found by them. Besides, he wasn’t Nulled. ‘My name is Elowen and this is Diggory.’

‘And where might you be going in this wild land?’

Elowen paused, she had not expected that. Thinking quickly she said, ‘We are travelling to Dinas Hein. Diggory is being apprenticed to a blacksmith. I am due to join the household of a wealthy merchant.’

‘*Dinas Hein?* That’s many leagues from here and a town of poor reputation if you forgive me for saying it.’

‘We’ll be fine,’ said Elowen.

Malengin’s face twitched. ‘Please remain here a moment. I will check if all is clear.’

He slipped away up the steps. He returned moments later, his face red and covered in sweat. ‘The Redeemers have left. Whatever they seek they have gone elsewhere to search.’

‘Please sir, what do you know about Redeemers?’ said Elowen.

‘Dark stories are told of their deeds. It is wise to avoid them, that much I know for sure.’

‘But you...do not wear the Null?’ said Elowen.

Malengin shuffled awkwardly. ‘No, I do not. We on Ictis have little involvement with the Mother Church. Of course we still pay generous tithes but we are largely left alone, the Redeemers do not come to Ictis. A more beautiful place than Ictis you will not find. It is not far and Count Nadelek would, I am sure, be delighted to have you as his honoured guests.’

Surprised by the sudden offer, Diggory and Elowen exchanged puzzled, worried glances.

‘That’s very kind but we have a long journey ahead,’ said Elowen.

‘Of course, but please, at least come for one or two nights, honour us by visiting our wondrous home. Then, when you are ready to leave, I shall take you by boat further inland along the river that feeds from the Bay of Poltaran. As a further sign of our goodwill, I will ensure that you are furnished with whatever provisions you require for your journey. We have no shortage of good food on Ictis.’

Elowen’s stomach rumbled at the mere mention of food, they had not eaten properly for days. She looked at Diggory again, hoping for a response. He nodded eagerly.

Although still feeling uneasy, she buried her concerns. ‘Well, that would be all right I suppose.’

The man clapped his hands. ‘Then it is done. My people will be delighted to welcome you to Ictis, be assured of that. Count Nadelek is a man of great learning and culture, you should consider it an honour to meet him. It is less than a

two hour walk to the coast and with myself to accompany you, fear no danger in these parts. I know these lands well.'

Malengin led them out of their hiding place. Outside, the fog had lifted, leaving the ghostly town to stand silently in the sunshine. Elowen looked around but there was no sign of Redeemers. Malengin set a brisk pace and kept his distance, always walking several steps ahead of Elowen and Diggory.

Diggory nudged Elowen in the back. 'Some luck at last. I tell you, we've fallen on our feet.'

'Don't you think he's a bit strange?' whispered Elowen, pointing at Malengin. 'What if he's a spy? Bucca told us not to trust anyone.'

'He told us not to trust anyone who was Nulled. Besides, what would you prefer? Starving to death? He is a grown-up. He'll know what to do. And if he was a spy, wouldn't he have let the Redeemers catch us? Why go to all the trouble of hiding us?'

Elowen had to admit that was true, Malengin had helped them and Ictis appealed to her. Food, warmth, a proper bed to sleep in, surely that wasn't too much to ask?

The route out of the town took them over a bridge that spanned a fast-flowing river. As they passed by fields enclosed by dry stone walls and full of grazing sheep and cows, Elowen called to Malengin. 'Who do these fields belong to?'

He slowed their pace to walk side by side with her. 'There is village close by—Penwyth. We have few dealings with the folk who live there, for they are a crude and uncultured people.'

‘It must be wonderful living beside the sea,’ said Elowen. ‘Are all the old tales true?’

Malengin frowned. ‘What tales?’

‘The old legends, like sea monsters, pirate treasure and the merpeople.’

To Elowen’s surprise, Malengin scowled. ‘Speak not of such stories.’

Taken aback, Elowen decided not to pursue the subject and she walked on in silence. Her stomach churned with embarrassment. Why had Malengin spoken so harshly? She felt like a stupid child again. She never understood grown-ups; they switched from being your friend to enemy in seconds and for no clear reason. She was taunted by a voice inside her head saying, ‘*He hates you, everyone hates you.*’ She tried to ignore it.

They soon reached Penwyth. The dwellings were mud-wall cottages with turf roofs. People lingered in the shadows between the buildings, their faces dirty, hair scrappy and long. When the villagers saw the three walkers, they muttered furtively among themselves and retreated further into the shadows.

As they came away from the village the air changed. The wind picked up and carried a smell of salt. Gulls flew overhead, shrieking loudly and in the distance, Elowen heard a crashing sound. The rough track that ran through Penwyth turned into a wide road paved with white stones. To the left Elowen saw a freshwater marsh full of swaying reeds above which swooped swallows and martins.

‘We are close now,’ said Malengin, delight in his eyes. His earlier harshness was a distant memory, a passing mood.

Elowen felt a little better and smiled warmly—she did not want to upset him again.

They reached a cliff sprinkled with clusters of thrift and orchids. Malengin led Elowen and Diggory to the cliff edge and stretched out his arms. ‘Behold, my young friends, the Bay of Poltaran and the Isle of Ictis.’

Elowen could do nothing but stare, her mouth hung open in amazement. The sea surpassed all her imaginings: an endless blanket of shimmering blue and silver, stretching to the horizon. At the foot of the cliff lay a wide bay with a crescent-shaped beach of golden sand. The Isle of Ictis stood in the bay, half a mile from the beach. The conical island’s steep granite slopes climbed to a tall castle of angular towers and battlemented parapets.

‘*That* is a sight and no mistake,’ said Diggory.

Elowen nodded. She failed to find the words to describe what her eyes saw; there was only the experience, the moment itself. An island leapt from the pages of a storybook, a castle leapt forth from her dreams.

Malengin said, ‘There is a path leading down to the beach, come follow me.’

They picked their way down the narrow path, which wound down the cliff side. Once they had scrambled over the dunes, Elowen slipped off her shoes, letting her toes sink into the warm, soft sand. On the high water mark lay a line of debris: driftwood, pieces of ropes and long trails of sea weed coiled into shapes resembling fantastical sea monsters.

Malengin brought them to a small, rickety rowing boat that sat on the beach.

‘We’re going across on *that?*’ said Diggory. Elowen remained silent but shared his apprehension.

‘It’s quite safe,’ said Malengin as he pushed the boat into the surf. ‘There is a causeway to the island but it can only be used at low tide. At all other times, we sail across. Now jump in. I don’t want to leave you behind!’

Elowen and Diggory didn’t want that either so they scrambled on-board. With Malengin rowing they pulled away from the shore. Neither Elowen nor Diggory had ever been on a boat before and they clung to the sides of the vessel for dear life. The sea was in gentle mood but the slight rolling still made Elowen anxious.

‘I hope we’re not going to sink. I can’t swim,’ she said, barely daring to move.

Malengin laughed as he rowed. ‘Fear not. I have made this short journey many, many times, not once have we sunk.’

‘There’s a first time for everything,’ muttered Diggory.

As the boat made its slow progress towards the island, Elowen’s fears subsided. She enjoyed the fresh salty wind on her face, the boat’s creaking timbers and the watery percussion of the waves. Wonders surrounded her, a sense of space she had never experienced before. The fading sun formed a golden road of reflected light across the sea, and ahead, rising from the water, the Isle of Ictis.

Elowen looked down at the water, wondering what lurked beneath. Movement caught her eye: a head emerged from the water, a head with long green hair, silvery grey skin and piercing eyes. It bobbed up and down with the waves. Elowen shrieked. ‘Look, there’s someone in the water.’

The head slipped under water.

'I see nothing,' said Malengin without turning his head. Elowen heard an echo of Cornelius Cronack in Malengin's voice, a mocking, arrogant tone and it riled her.

'There was something there, something alive,' said Elowen. She hated it when people didn't believe her.

Malengin stopped rowing and his expression hardened.

'It was a reflection, or a shadow,' he said in a raised voice. He glared at her, rubbing the back of his reddening neck. Elowen glanced at Diggory, who said nothing but worry was etched on his face.

Malengin ran the boat onto a small pebbly beach. Elowen had imagined a host of friendly islanders waiting on the beach, ready to welcome them but she saw no-one. The mighty granite rise of Ictis towered above them; they stood in its shadow and shivered in the cool breeze.

When Malengin had secured the boat, he led them up a steep, winding path towards the castle. Butterflies busied themselves around the lush rhododendrons that lined the path, and among the bushes and shrubs nestled tall wood carvings and rock statues; some were recognisable shapes like animals, birds, people; others had no discernible form.

'I've never seen anything like these before,' said Elowen.

'I'm not surprised,' said Malengin, once again bright and friendly. 'The artists of Ictis are, in my opinion, unrivalled. There are greater works to behold in the castle!'

They soon reached the main gate. Each side of the gateway was carved with intricate emblems and symbols; wrought with such cunning and skill, the shapes of dragons and eagles gave the illusion of life, stretching and writhing. Malengin knocked once—the gate swung silently open.

They passed through the gateway and came into a lawn bordered by perfectly rounded beds bursting with flowers and divided by a curved path which led to the keep. There were topiaries and sheltered hedges of sweet-smelling briar roses, and pots and urns were spaced along the low walls. The lawn sloped down to a paved terrace, beyond which lay a terrifyingly steep drop onto the rocks and sea below. The castle keep loomed over them, its honey coloured limestone walls decorated with carvings and gargoyles. Broad steps led up to the main doorway, itself flanked by walls of immense thickness. For the first time since they had arrived on the island, Elowen noticed other people. Some islanders stood on the grass, stretching their limbs and moving in a curious rhythmic manner, like dancing but there was no music and no joy in the movements. Others sat cross-legged, reading. Another stood on the terrace, silently looking out to sea.

The men wore wigs or wide-brimmed hats decorated with plumes of feathers; ribbon rosettes decorated their jerkins while scented gloves protected their hands from the sun and the wind. The women dressed in flowing gowns, high-waisted with full sleeves. Their faces were whitened with powder, their hair worn in elaborate curls. None of them were Nulled. Nobody sat together and nobody touched.

‘Welcome back, Malengin. I am glad to see you have brought friends.’

A man walked down the steps leading from the doorway of the keep. He walked slowly, as though he was balancing a great weight on his head. He wore a slashed sleeved jerkin with a large laced falling band collar and a three quarter length velvet cape. His wig formed a mass of curls which

reached his shoulders and framed his face. His padded breeches were secured at the knees and his shoes had raised heels. When he reached the bottom of the steps he bowed theatrically. 'Greetings, my young friends. I am Count Nadelek of Ictis. You are most welcome guests.'

Nadelek smiled but his blue eyes were weary and sad, as though to smile required great effort and caused great pain. Despite his friendly manner, a cold tingle danced down Elowen's spine.

Malengin introduced them by name and added, 'They are travelling to Dinas Hein.'

Nadelek raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'Dinas Hein? A long and perilous journey. Well then, all the more need for refreshment and rest.'

The other islanders kept their distance from their new guests. Elowen stared at their sad eyes, *tired* eyes, *old* eyes. Many of the islanders twitched, just for a second, a flash, but their bodies visibly shuddered. Some clasped their hands together to conceal the trembling. Elowen saw no children and no old people, at least not old in the way she had seen in Trecadok, grey-bearded, white-haired, dry, shrivelled skin. She judged that not one of the islanders had seen fifty winters.

Count Nadelek said, 'It is nearly time for the feast. I am sure you are ready to eat.'

'More than ready!' said Diggory. Even Elowen cracked into a wide smile at the thought of food. In a line, the islanders walked up the steps towards the keep. Count Nadelek urged Elowen and Diggory to follow them.

Once inside they came into a plain wide hallway with

stairs on each side, and on to a long hall with cold, white-washed walls punctuated by a series of slit windows and an open arched wagon roof. Stuffed animals leant against the walls: a wolf, a bear and a fox. They made Elowen uncomfortable, dead eyes, frozen limbs, bodies empty of life. Dozens of circular tables were laid out in random lines and at the far end of the hall, Elowen spied a long table full of every kind of food she could think of: bread, pears, strawberries, figs, grapes, oysters, thick slabs of ham and beef, roasted chickens, pots of honey, kippers and cakes. Elowen had never seen so much food.

Along with Diggory, Elowen joined Count Nadelek at his table while Malengin vanished among the crowd. As the islanders sat, servants appeared; they reminded Elowen of the villagers they had seen when passing through Penwyth. They brought out platters of food and began to serve. Soon, Elowen's table bulged with food and she struggled to find a space for her pewter plate. As she looked around, she was surprised that the islanders had already begun to eat.

'Do you say grace here?' Elowen asked Nadelek.

Nadelek nearly choked on his food as he laughed. 'Nay, we do not care for such quaint traditions on Ictis.'

'But you do believe in God?'

Count Nadelek acted as though he hadn't heard her. 'Come now, child, eat up.'

Elowen wanted to pursue the matter further but the glorious smells of food distracted her. At Nadelek's urging, she filled her plate with slices of honey roasted ham, beef and chunks of buttered bread. Diggory did likewise, the food on his plate towering to a precarious height.

Elowen grinned as she ate, savouring each mouthful, her legs swinging merrily from her chair. When she cleared her plate, Nadelek called over to a sour-faced servant and ordered them to give Elowen another serving. She did not refuse and tucked in heartily.

Elowen's mind ticked over—there was so much to learn about Ictis, of that she was sure, so she braved a question.

'Where do you get all this food?' she asked Nadelek. 'I mean, you have no room to grow crops on the island.'

'Indeed not,' said Nadelek, his mouth full. 'We buy from settlements around Poltaran. We always pay a fair price so they are always willing to trade. Come, keep eating.'

Elowen persisted with the questions. 'What work do you do here?'

Count Nadelek shivered and gave a look of disgust. 'Work? We do not work. Work is evil, a chain around the necks of men. Work is slavery. We prefer art and thoughtful contemplation.'

'But how do you pay for all these things?'

He rubbed his ear and looked to the side. 'I do not like talking of money, tis vulgar. Pray, let us consider another subject. Tell me, what do you think of our island?'

'Great!' said Diggory, stuffing his mouth full of ham.

'It is very beautiful,' said Elowen. 'Coming across on the boat was incredible. The sun was setting and we saw seagulls...and I think we saw one of the merpeople.'

Nadelek was lifting a piece of bread to his mouth but stopped halfway and dropped it on his plate. The left side of his face raised in a momentary sneer. 'I'm sorry, child, you saw a what?'

Elowen's stomach lurched, her cheeks felt hot. Her mouth became dry but she forced words out. 'Merpeople...yards from the boat.'

Count Nadelek smiled. 'You are mistaken. It must have been a seal. Grey seals are very common in these parts. A favourite subject of our artists. There is a sculpture in the blue room—'

'It wasn't a seal,' said Elowen. She had endured a life of people ignoring her, not believing her. In the Orphanage she had to accept it but not any more. She knew what she had seen.

Nadelek pursed his lips. 'Well, if it wasn't a seal, then it must have been a trick of the light or you imagined it. There are no *merpeople* here.'

A long silence fell between them.

The meal finished with more cakes. Elowen sighed, feeling bloated. She looked across the table to Diggory; he sat back in his chair with a contented look on his face, licking his lips.

'Are you full, children?' said Nadelek, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Diggory burped. 'Aye, very.'

'Completely full,' said Elowen, nodding her head, not wishing to antagonise Nadelek any further.

'This must be very different from your homes, wherever they may be,' said the count with a dismissive flick of his hand.

'Very different,' said Diggory. 'We've had to get used to sleeping outside, walking across moors and—'

Nadelek yawned loudly, not a yawn of tiredness but of

boredom. He looked around the hall, paying no attention to the boy's story. Diggory stopped his description of their journey, thrown by the sudden rude interruption. He looked at Nadelek blankly, unsure of whether to carry on or not.

'A fine meal,' said Nadelek, stretching out his arms with a satisfied groan.

Diggory blushed and looked down at his empty plate. Elowen shuffled awkwardly in her seat, for once feeling sorry for him. Why had Nadelek reacted to Diggory in such a rude way? The islanders acted friendly and welcoming but they didn't show much interest in anything but themselves. Perhaps they were too clever and too important for the journey of two children from the south to be of any interest or importance to them.

'You must both be weary, young friends. I will show you to your chamber,' said the count. He gestured to two servants, both women, one old and stooped with a crooked back, the other was younger, taller, with long thick black hair and heavy eyebrows. They followed silently, heads bowed—both were Nulled. Elowen remembered Malengin's words. *The Redeemers do not come to Ictis*. She hoped that was true.

Count Nadelek led them along a corridor he called the Long Passage. The polished wooden floorboards beneath their feet creaked with each step. Gloomy portraits of old men decorated the walls.

'My ancestors,' said Count Nadelek with a flick of his wrist. 'See how misery is etched on their faces. God-fearing fools.' He laughed to himself, enjoying a private joke that Elowen did not understand.

They passed door after door until Nadelek stopped. ‘This is the guestroom.’

As Nadelek struggled with the lock, muttering and cursing under his breath, Elowen became aware of noises coming from the far end of the Long Passage, odd noises resembling the calls and cries of animals. She asked, ‘What is—’

‘Ah we are in!’ said Nadelek and he pushed the door open.

They walked into a square room, sparsely furnished but it did have two soft-looking beds.

‘This is your room,’ said Nadelek. ‘There is a bath in the antechamber; the servants have filled it with hot water.’

Nadelek pointed to one of the beds beside which stood a pair of boots. ‘These boots are for you, young man. You cannot walk around for much longer with those rags around your feet. I will leave you now. Please enjoy a restful night. I will call upon you in the morning for breakfast.’

When he left, Elowen and Diggory looked around the room in wonder, sparse it might have been but in their eyes it represented luxury. Diggory bounded over to the boots and tried them on for size.

‘At last I can get rid of these filthy rags,’ he said as he peeled them off his feet and slipped the boots on. ‘These fit perfectly. And look, proper beds and a bath too. I can’t believe our luck.’

Elowen knew that they had been lucky. Another couple of days wandering in the wild could have finished them both. Even if the Redeemers hadn’t found them, they would have surely succumbed to hunger but she still felt uncomfortable around the islanders. ‘Diggory, do you think the people here are strange?’

Still admiring his new boots, the boy screwed up his face. ‘What do you mean? They’ve looked after us, fed us, given us a place to sleep—’

Eager to make her point, Elowen interrupted, ‘I know. I don’t want to sound ungrateful. But they act...odd. Look at how they reacted when I spoke about seeing the merpeople, and remember what Count Nadelek was like when you talked about our journey. He frightens me.’

Diggory nodded, recalling his embarrassment at the table. ‘They have been a bit funny a couple of times I suppose. But does it matter? We should be pleased they’ve saved our lives.’

‘Yes, you’re probably right,’ said Elowen, but she felt far from convinced.

However, despite her misgivings a bath was a treat beyond words. Elowen savoured the moment she sunk into the hot water, it soothed her aches and pains and the steam cleared her head. She felt as though a year’s worth of grime had been scrubbed off her skin.

Later when Elowen got into her bed, she felt as though she could sleep for a hundred years. Diggory was already asleep and snoring loudly. As she stretched her legs, it felt as though she sunk onto a tender, milky cloud, every part of her body felt comfortable.

Then a sound made her jerk upright.

Voices.

She heard voices from outside. Diggory was still snoring. Elowen slipped out of bed, on tiptoes she moved over to the door and gently put her ear against it.

She heard two female voices. The servants, she felt sure of

it. Elowen listened carefully; the first voice, which she guessed belonged to the younger girl, said, 'You have to tell them.'

'Hold your tongue. You want to lose our pay?'

'It ain't right not to tell them. We have to warn them. They're only children.'

'What do you know? We must keep quiet. How else can we put food on the table? Do you want to go to the poor-house? We didn't bring them here and we're not keeping them here either. We're just servants—you remember that. Let's be going, it will soon be high tide and I don't want to spend a moment longer with these heathens than I have to.'

The voices trailed away and Elowen heard their footsteps creaking down the Long Passage. Elowen returned to bed and before she could consider their words further, sleep took her.

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Nadelek roused them both at nine o'clock and led them to the main hall for breakfast. Elowen and Diggory tucked into white bread spread thickly with butter and honey, followed by an apple and a pear. When they had finished breakfast, Nadelek said, 'Come, children, I will show you around the island. There is much to see.'

A proud sun dominated a cloudless sky and the invigorating wind rippled the green and blue sea. Elowen and Diggory spent the whole day with Nadelek, exploring the castle and the island. They climbed over the old crumbling sentry box. They examined the rusted cannons in the long

abandoned gun batteries. Nadelek said they had come from the wreck of a frigate driven aground on the island during a long forgotten war. Elowen ran her hands along the cold surface of the cannons; they were horrible, ugly metal monsters.

As they walked, Nadelek told them more of the island's history, stories Elowen happily absorbed. He spoke of the giants that were supposed to have built Ictis, the sieges during the civil war and the many storms that had battered the island.

'It is hard to believe it on a day such as this but Ictis has known terrible hardship,' said Nadelek, holding on to his wig to prevent it flying off in the wind. 'My grandfather, once Count of this island of course, died a broken man. A debtor, a gambler, a fool. His son, my father, set about reviving the fortunes of Ictis. He struck a bargain, a deal that secured both the prosperity and the safety of this island.'

'What was the bargain?' said Elowen.

Nadelek blinked and ignored the question. He looked up at the sky. 'It is nearly time for supper. Come, I do not want either of you to go hungry.'

There was no danger of that but the thought of more delicious food pushed all questions out of Elowen's mind.

If Elowen had believed their first supper on the island sumptuous, it was easily surpassed by the offerings on their second evening. Huge plates full of food were pushed in front of her. She felt bloated, her stomach bulged as never before. Diggory ate greedily, clearing plate after plate. They had gone so long without proper meals that neither Elowen nor Diggory wanted to risk being hungry again.

When the meal was finished, Count Nadelek invited the two children to his private drawing room. A carved fireplace with painted heraldic devices dominated the room; mouldy portraits covered the walls; a wrought iron chandelier hung down from the mahogany ceiling. Light poured in through the windows, revealing the dust that lay over all the furniture, Diggory began sneezing as soon as he stepped inside. The air felt solid, a mixture of wood smoke, tobacco and sweet herbs.

Nadelek strode over to a table that stood beneath one of the windows. A decanter full of red wine rested on the table, beside it a solitary glass. He filled the glass, took a sip and licked his lips. 'I imagine you will soon be leaving us.'

Elowen realised that she had forgotten all about continuing her journey. Indeed, she found she had little desire to leave Ictis. She liked the feeling of having food in her stomach, of sleeping in real beds, of not being cold. She had not asked to go on such a journey, she had not wanted to endure such hardships. Why should she not live in comfort, if only for a little while?

'I sense your reluctance to leave this island,' said Nadelek. 'If you wish it you can become one of us and remain here in peace and comfort. We have no other young people here. It would grieve us all if you were to leave. After all, you could travel from one end of the Known World to the other and never find anywhere to match the beauty of Ictis.'

Diggory nudged Elowen's arm. 'He's right. I can't imagine finding a better place than this. Why don't we stay?'

'We can't stay here,' said Elowen trying to sound as though she was angry with his suggestion. But she felt

guilty—the same thought had passed through her mind. ‘We have to carry on.’

‘But that’ll be so hard, just plodding on without any hope.’

Nadelek stepped between them and placed his hands on the boy’s shoulder.

‘You speak the truth, Diggory. Life should not be about danger, fear and hardship. Elowen, life is short, but a passing moment, but the blink of an eye. It is madness not to seize whatever sweetness life has to offer. Stay with us here, my young friends. Stay here where it is safe. Do not flee into darkness and danger.’

Elowen took a deep breath. Somewhere, in the darkest recesses of her mind, nagged the distant voice of Bucca: *don’t stay. Leave.* She stepped over to the window. She saw the sense in Nadelek’s words; if she and Diggory left the island, what could the future hold? More hardship, hunger, suffering and grief. And the Redeemers. Surely they could not escape the Redeemers forever? Since they had arrived on Ictis, there had been no sign of those terrible riders and Nadelek had said that they never came to the Bay of Poltaran. If they stayed on Ictis they would be safe and the map would be safe too. Hickathrift said that the enemy must never find it, well they would never find it on Ictis so she would not be betraying his trust, not really. And the sanctuary was so far away—Prevennis might as well be on the moon. She had suffered enough.

She looked at Diggory and saw the expectation in his eyes. In a voice barely above a whisper, she said, ‘Very well, we shall stay.’

*

Two more blissful days passed, days spent eating, thinking, relaxing. On the evening of their fourth day on Ictis, Elowen stood on the terrace, looking out over the sea as the sun sank in the west. Her stomach felt bloated from another huge meal. She had begun to put on weight; her ribs no longer showed and colour returned to her cheeks. She looked around the terrace, watching the islanders. Some read books. Some painted. Others sat in silence, staring down at the sea, enjoying the fresh, cooling wind. Surely nowhere else on earth could be this peaceful? They had made the right decision to stay. Hickathrift and Bucca would have understood, she convinced herself of that. They would not have wished for her to run in the wild, hunted like an animal by the Redeemers and the map was safe, still in the tiny box, still in her pocket.

A scream interrupted her thoughts; in the corner of her eye Elowen saw fast-moving flashes of silver grey. Three creatures crawled over the nearby wall: merpeople, but they were not the beings of beauty and grace Elowen had seen in her chapbooks and pamphlets: the scaly skin of their fish like tails shone even in the fading light, long hair draped down their backs like seaweed and their webbed fingers were tipped with claws. The creatures slithered on their bellies like snakes, leaving a trail of slime but they moved with terrifying speed. They grabbed the nearest islander, a woman Elowen knew as Athwenna. Their claws ripped her clothes and sunk into her flesh.

Elowen took a moment to react, to shrug off the shock. She spun round and shouted to the other islanders, 'WE'RE BEING ATTACKED!'

Nobody responded. They carried on reading, painting and thinking. Elowen bellowed, ‘HELP ME!’

Diggory came running down from the top of the lawn—the others ignored her; some turned around so they couldn’t see what was happening.

Diggory reached her, red faced and puffing hard. ‘What in God’s name—’

‘No one will help,’ said Elowen.

It was already too late. The sea creatures tore Athwenna apart like a rag doll. Gouges of flesh and shattered bones flew up into the air. They shredded limbs from her torso; some they devoured, others they clung onto, trophies to add to some ghastly store.

Elowen picked up a stone and went to throw it but Diggory grabbed her arm and held her back. ‘Don’t. They’re going.’

She cursed him but he was right. With their grisly work done, the merpeople crawled over the wall and down towards the sea. Behind, the gory remains of Athwenna were already attracting hordes of flies.

Elowen shielded her eyes; she did not want to see any more. She crouched down and wept. She heard Diggory being sick. She felt hands on her shoulders, hands pulling her up. She opened her eyes. Count Nadelek stood in front of her, his face twisted with anger. ‘You have seen too much.’

For a split second, she was aware of somebody behind her before a heavy blow struck the back of her head and all turned dark.

Ulfur

When Elowen opened her eyes, she saw only darkness. She gently probed the back of her head with her fingertips, only to withdraw them with a wince when she felt a sharp jolt of pain. She heard strange scraping, screeching sounds.

Slowly her eyes became accustomed to the dark although her vision spun around and around. She lay on the stone floor of a windowless room. A foul smell filled her nose, a smell that reminded her of the blocked drains on Trecadok High Street during the height of summer. Ugly, twisted wire cages filled the room from floor to ceiling and inside them were foxes, rabbits, badgers and birds. Many were already dead, and those that lived clambered over the corpses to claw at the wire, trying in vain to escape. Her bag lay on the floor, the contents strewn around it: rope, rags and the stone knife. By instinct she checked the map. It was still in her pocket.

‘Elowen?’

She jumped at the sudden mention of her name. It was Diggory.

‘Elowen, is that you?’

She grunted that it was and crawled over to him. His eyes were red and watery; he looked as though he had been crying and a bruise marked his forehead. As Elowen came close, he sat upright. He rubbed his head and looked all round, his eyes wild.

‘They attacked us,’ he said, his voice whiny with fear. ‘Malengin struck you from behind. And then three of them came after me. They hit me with a stick. That’s all I remember. I don’t know how long I was unconscious for, could have been hours. Why do you think they are keeping all these animals in here? What are we going to do?’

Elowen had no idea. She thought about the savage attacks of the merpeople. Why had the islanders not helped Athwenna? Were they afraid? Whatever the truth, she and Diggory were now imprisoned. Everything had gone wrong. Why had she trusted Malengin, Nadelek and all the others?

Elowen stood. She still felt dizzy but managed to walk. She found the door and, as she had expected, it was locked. It was made from thick oak beams fastened with strong iron rivets, so there was no chance of kicking it down. Her chest tightened with panic—they couldn’t get out; they were at the islanders’ mercy.

It was her fault; Malengin and the others had troubled her from the start but she had pushed away her fears, pushed away her gut instinct. The lure of food, of comfort, of ease had proved too strong. She remembered the words of Bucca: *nothing that is worthwhile in life is easy*. It was so clear now. What madness had taken her? She had cast aside the quest to reach the sanctuary and after all that Tom Hickathrift had done, after all he had sacrificed. She had

betrayed him; if she did not reach the sanctuary, if she did not get the map to the Illuminati, his death would be in vain. Elowen slumped to the ground. How little she justified the trust Hickathrift and Bucca had placed in her.

The shrieks and calls grew louder—they sounded less like animal calls and more like words.

Look at me. Look.

‘What did you say?’ she asked Diggory.

He looked blank and shrugged.

Not boy. Look.

Elowen sprung to her feet, wary of an attack. ‘Can you hear that voice?’

Diggory looked irritated. ‘You’re hearing things. There’s only us and these stinking animals.’

Elowen heard the voice again.

Look behind.

Behind Elowen stood a single cage, much larger than the others. A heavy lock, thick with rust, kept the cage’s wire door fastened. Elowen saw a nose, a snout and a pair of fierce, yellow eyes.

A wolf.

Elowen cried out and backed away from the cage.

Fear not. Help you. Help you escape.

The voice belonged to the wolf. The wolf was speaking to her.

Trapped. The Keeper. The Keeper will return.

Elowen’s legs wobbled. ‘I...I can *understand* the animals. They’re talking to me.’

‘What’s wrong?’ said Diggory.

Elowen pointed at the wolf. ‘It’s talking to me.’

‘WOLF!’ said Diggory, scrambling as far away from the cage as was possible.

‘He doesn’t mean us any harm.’

‘It’s a wolf, it’s meant to do harm, that’s what wolves do.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Elowen. ‘Besides, it’s in a cage. It can’t hurt us even if it wanted to.’

Diggory slowly walked towards Elowen. ‘I think you’re going mad, that’s what it is.’

‘I’m not,’ said Elowen, annoyed by his comment because she wondered if he was right. She tried to make sense of what had happened so she knelt and stared at the wolf, transfixed by its penetrating eyes and its pointed, twitching ears. Feeling more than a little foolish speaking to an animal, she said, ‘Can you understand what I am saying?’

The wolf tilted its head and after a long wait, its jaws moved.

Yes.

Elowen stood and clapped her hands. ‘You see, it spoke.’

Diggory made a derisory snort. ‘It barked like a dog. This is completely stupid.’

Elowen persisted. ‘You must have heard—’

‘I heard nothing but a bark,’ said Diggory. He threw his hands up in frustration. ‘I don’t know why you keep going on like this. Things are bad enough already without worrying about... talking animals.’

Ignoring Diggory, Elowen looked at the wolf again and an idea sprung into her mind. She leant down, so close she felt his breath as a hot blast on her face. ‘Hold up a paw.’

The wolf snarled to show its large canine teeth, clearly unhappy at such a performance, but to Elowen’s amaze-

ment it followed her instruction and she spun round triumphantly to say to Diggory, ‘There. I told you.’

Diggory still looked unimpressed. ‘Doesn’t prove much. I’ve seen dogs that can do that.’

Elowen knelt and brought her face close to the wire cage. The wolf’s snout was only inches away but she felt no fear, only an excitement that made her whole body tingle. Barely able to catch her breath, she said, ‘I’m Elowen. Have you got a name?’

Those bright yellow eyes narrowed. The wolf opened its jaws, showing off its jagged teeth.

Ulfur.

Elowen’s heart pounded. The wolf, Ulfur, understood her. Questions spilled out of her.

‘How long have you been here?’

One moon.

‘Why are you here? What do the islanders want with you?’

Death.

She shuddered at the immediate, blunt response. Diggory said nothing but watched, his doubt visibly fading.

‘Do they want to eat you?’ asked Elowen.

Not the humans. The water creatures. Feed Ulfur to water creatures. Feed you to water creatures.

Elowen’s blood ran cold. ‘The...merpeople?’

The wolf told her much, at first she found it difficult to understand him but soon she learnt that he had been captured while hunting and that his mate had been killed. She also learnt that the islanders captured many wild animals.

Feed them all to water creatures. Even feed each other to water creatures.

‘Each other?’ said Elowen, her voice wavering with shock. No it could not be true. People did not do such things.

They fear the water creatures. But water creatures leave them alone if given meat. Even bring them lots of bright metal. Bright metal from sea.

Elowen tried to piece together his words to divine the meaning. Thinking aloud she said, ‘Bright metal? You mean gold. So that’s where their wealth comes from. There must be loads of it in the sea, from old wrecks. The merpeople give the islanders gold and treasures, and in return the islanders give them easy killings like wild animals, or they sacrifice strangers or allow the merpeople to take one of their own.’

She remembered the words of Count Nadelek. A bargain, a deal that secured both the prosperity and the safety of the island. Diggory picked up the thread of the conversation, his eyes widening with horror. ‘You mean they want to *sacrifice* us?’

Elowen nodded slowly, trying to come to terms with the idea herself. ‘But why go to all the trouble of looking after us? They could have killed us and chucked us over the cliff.’

Water creatures like thick meat.

‘They’re fattening us up like cattle!’ said Elowen, as the grim truth sunk in. So that was the real reason why Count Nadelek wanted them to stay: Ictis was no paradise, only a trap and one they were caught in, like a fly caught in a spider’s web.

The wolf growled and pushed his nose through the wire.

Listen to Ulfur. Ulfur help you escape.

*

Elowen feared the tension alone would kill her. The plan was risky. She stood next to the cage, her right hand on the rusty lock, looking down at the wolf. Ulfur laid down, licking his paws.

‘There is no other choice,’ she whispered to Diggory, who was staring at her, his face full of concern. She tried to replay Ulfur’s descriptions and instructions in her mind.

Man will come. Open big door...

Diggory shattered her concentration with a question. ‘Do you think this can work?’

‘It *has* to.’

‘Even if we do get out, what’s to stop this beast turning on us? If you ask me—’

The sound of footsteps and creaking floorboards silenced him.

‘Someone’s coming,’ whispered Elowen.

All the animals cried out in fear; their terror struck Elowen like a punch. *The Keeper. He comes.* But the wolf made no sound. He stood, stretching his legs against the wire of the cage. He tensed his lean muscles and crouched as if ready to spring.

The footsteps grew louder; Elowen heard a key turn in the lock. Mad with fear, the animals threw themselves at the walls of their cages. With a tired wooden groan, the door opened and light poured in from the corridor. A man stood silhouetted in the doorway, the Keeper. Elowen recognised the tall figure in front of her.

Malengin.

He stepped forward, a faint smile playing on his lips. He carried a bludgeon, the same one, Elowen guessed, he had

used to strike her before. Seeing Malengin again brought all her anger, all her frustration, to the surface.

‘YOU TRICKED US! YOU LIED TO US!’ she yelled.

He smiled knowingly. ‘I told you no lies. I said the islanders would be pleased to see you and indeed they were. You will spare our lives for a time at least. Now you must come, the sea devils grow hungry.’

He leapt forward and grabbed Diggory, holding the boy with his arm twisted behind his back. Sure of his grip on the boy, Malengin advanced towards Elowen, lifting his bludgeon as he did so, ready to attack.

Elowen heard Ulfur snarl. He lowered his head and the hairs on his shoulders rose.

Do it now.

With all her strength, Elowen pulled at the lock and just as Ulfur had said, it snapped off in her hand, spraying the floor with shards of ancient rust. Malengin lifted up his bludgeon to strike Elowen but he was too slow. Ulfur threw his weight against the now unlocked cage door and it opened. He jumped at the man, claspng his jaws around his wrist. The bludgeon dropped to the floor.

Malengin screamed and he frantically shook his arm, trying to free himself from the wolf but Ulfur, with blood and saliva foaming around his jaws, refused to let go. Malengin released Diggory, who fell down hard onto his knees. Seeing her chance, Elowen picked up the bludgeon and swung it at Malengin’s head. Her anger gave her strength she barely realised she possessed. Malengin’s whole body shook at the impact. He fell backwards and his head smacked on the floor. He twitched once more and then was still.

Elowen froze, her whole body trembling and she asked the question she dreaded hearing the answer to. ‘Is he dead?’

With his snout, Ulfur nudged Malengin and looked up at Elowen.

Dead. We go now.

Elowen looked down at Malengin’s face—the life given to him by God, extinguished by her act. ‘I’ve killed him.’

Diggory, Ulfur, the animals, all faded into a grey background. Guilt flooded her, she had killed a man. She looked down at the bludgeon that she still carried; flecks of blood, his blood, were sprinkled over its surface. In horror she flung it away. She was a murderer and murderers went to hell, of all the bad things she had done, all her mistakes, accidents, misjudgements, nothing matched the pain and guilt she now felt.

Diggory pulled himself up and stared at Malengin. ‘Is he really dead?’

Elowen could only nod dumbly.

‘Then we’re in trouble now,’ said Diggory, his face curdled with disgust.

Ulfur growled to get attention.

We go now. Other men will come.

Still shaking, Elowen nodded agreement. She turned away from the body; she could not bear to look upon it again. The animals still frantically pulled at the cages; Elowen stopped. ‘We have to let them out.’

‘There isn’t time,’ said Diggory.

Elowen ignored him and set to work. Grumbling under his breath, Diggory helped her. They snapped, pulled and

cracked open all the locks, freeing the animals. They burst out of their prisons and out of the room. They all gave Ulfur a worried look and kept well out of his way but the wolf only wagged his tail and made no move towards them.

Elowen picked up her bag and stuffed her meagre belongings inside it. As the last animals escaped the room, the boy, the girl and the wolf followed them out.

Whether by instinct or by senses far more attuned than those possessed by humans, the host of birds and animals found a route through the keep's corridors and passages to reach the main hall and then out into the bright sunshine. As they passed through the main hall, Elowen and Diggory raided the long table, stuffing bread and fruit into the bag.

It was mid-morning and the sun was climbing, the sea breeze cool and keen. The lawn and terrace outside was filled with islanders, idly passing their time. They cried with horror and fear as the animals emerged from the keep. A few islanders made half-hearted attempts to recapture the animals but they were too slow, too feeble.

Elowen noticed Count Nadelek hiding behind a shrub.

'Get him,' she said to Ulfur. The wolf curled his lips, displaying his incisors, and he bounded over to the man.

Elowen heard a shriek and saw the wolf dragging Nadelek by his arm towards her. His powdered wig fell off at her feet; Elowen picked it up and threw it as far away as she could, she hated its texture, its sickly sweet smell.

'Are you to blame for all this?' said Elowen. Anger consumed her. She wanted to hit him, to lash out but the memory of Malengin returned to her and her temper cooled a little. Ulfur released the man's arm but waited beside him.

The count said nothing. He clasped his injured arm and his eyes darted everywhere; he wept and his bottom lip trembled.

‘Were you going to feed Diggory and me, and all these animals to the merpeople?’ said Elowen.

Nadelek nodded but did not look up.

‘Why? Answer me or I’ll set the wolf on you.’

Ulfur snarled, saliva dribbled down from his jaws. That got a response.

‘No, no, I beg you,’ said Nadelek.

‘Then explain,’ said Elowen.

Nadelek wiped his dripping nose. ‘The merpeople give us wealth and protection. No pirate comes within a league of the island. Not even the Mother Church troubles us. We are safe here. That is all we have ever craved, safety and peace.’

‘But at a *price*,’ said Elowen.

Count Nadelek rubbed his nose and sniffed. ‘Sometimes they will accept animals. But other times, many times, they demand human flesh. Each week, they take at least one of us. We try to capture travellers, as and when they pass this way.’

Elowen understood the grim logic. ‘So each traveller you sacrifice keeps you alive a little longer.’

Nadelek lowered his eyes. ‘Yes.’

‘But why don’t you run away, go somewhere else?’ said Diggory.

‘Where?’ said Nadelek. His voice rose above a murmur, his delicate hand made a feeble fist. ‘You expect us to scratch a living on the land? Farm? Keep animals? That is below us.’

‘And killing isn’t?’ said Elowen.

Nadelek didn’t answer; he kept his head bowed.

‘You’re cowards who let others suffer for your comfort,’ said Elowen, anger made words spill out of her. ‘I know why you’re not Nulled. The Redeemers see no danger in you. You’re already prisoners of your own greed and fear. Your lives are empty. All those fine clothes, all that jewellery, those carvings, they mean nothing. There’s no life in you or this place. You’re all as good as dead. And we’re leaving, now.’

Elowen felt flushed after her outburst, the ferocity of which surprised her. She took a deep breath to compose herself while Nadelek crawled away like a scolded infant.

Ulfur nuzzled into Elowen’s legs.

Which way?

Elowen remembered what Malengin had said about the low tide.

‘Follow me,’ she said.

She led Diggory and the animals away from the castle. They kept to the path which wound down to the beach.

‘How are we going to get across to the mainland?’ said Diggory as they walked. ‘I can’t handle a boat and neither can you.’

‘I’m trusting to luck,’ said Elowen.

As they reached the bottom of the path, her heart skipped as she saw that, for now at least, her luck was in. It was low tide and the shallow waters exposed a narrow cobbled causeway leading from the island to the shore, their way to their mainland was clear. Ulfur trotted happily to Elowen’s side and licked her hand with his rough tongue; she laughed

and stroked the wolf's back. Now in the light, Elowen marvelled at how beautiful the wolf was: his lithe, loose front legs and sturdy hind legs; his grey coat of short, dark hairs. He contained such power and energy.

The barely retreated sea left the narrow, twisting causeway wet and slippery, so Elowen and Diggory picked their way along slowly. Lines of seaweed filled the gaps between the roughly laid granite slabs that formed the path. Elowen found the walk to the beach a giddy experience—to left and right the sea lapped at their feet and it felt like walking on water. All around the causeway, the low tide revealed a landscape of yellow rocks, golden brown sea weed, ridges of barnacles and rock pools full of tiny fish and crabs.

They stepped off the causeway and onto the soft, golden beach. The host of animals dispersed.

'I wonder if the islanders will follow us?' said Diggory, not able to hide the fear in his voice.

'I think they're too scared,' said Elowen.

She looked down at Ulfur; she had expected the wolf to run away once they reached the beach, but he sat beside her like a loyal dog. He began grooming, licking and nibbling gently to clean his coat.

'Where are you going now?' said Elowen.

Ulfur looked up from his ablutions.

You saved Ulfur. Ulfur follows you now.

Elowen jolted with surprise. 'But you can't come with us. We're going to a place far away, across the sea.'

Ulfur comes. Perhaps with you he finds new home. New mate. Ulfur joins your pack.

Elowen nodded and smiled. She rubbed the pendant

around her neck, perhaps a little of her mother's power had passed to her. She found a strange kind of strength from being with the wolf; she felt braver with him close.

'That damned wolf is coming with us, isn't he?' said Diggory. But he did not argue further.

Elowen looked at Ictis. From a distance it looked so peaceful, no hint of the danger that lurked within. She was glad to leave—the horror of killing Malengin jabbed into her consciousness like a wasp's sting and she fought to put it out of her mind.

As the sun reached its zenith, Elowen, Ulfur and a wary Diggory crossed the beach, climbed to the cliffs above and headed east.

*

The corpse of King Olaf hung from the gallows. The wind toyed with the body, swinging it back and forth like a pendulum. The wooden frame of the gallows creaked and groaned under the strain.

A crowd had gathered outside the palace gates to watch. Most stood in silence, a few shouted insults at the bloated corpse while others threw rotten fruit. However a popular leader has been in life, there are always those who rejoice in their passing. From the north window of the Throne Room, Lord Lucien watched the scene below and, behind his mask, he allowed himself a rare smile. Death was always the obsession of humans: they feared it, ignored it, relished it. Their lives were so fleeting, so meaningless, a moment in time soon forgotten. As the crowd below stared at the dead

king, they witnessed only a glimpse of their future, rotting, decaying, carrion for birds and insects...

Lucien left the window and looked up at the statue of Geirrod the Spear Reddener and in doing so remembered an old foe, a cunning foe. Two centuries before they had fought a long war, the only war Lucien had ever lost. Eldar blood ran through Geirrod's veins and it had given him unnatural cunning and strength. He had truly been a foe to respect, even fear, but although mortals could be strong they all had one vital weakness, one opponent they could never defeat.

Time.

Through the centuries of bitter pain Lucien had learnt the value of patience, of waiting for the right chance. The bloodline of Geirrod had proved strong but eventually blood thins, strength fails. A little conspiracy, a little plotting had achieved more than a dozen battles and brought victory with barely a shot being fired. Lucien reached up and touched the tip of Geirrod's spear. 'Now you are merely dust, old friend, and your kingdom belongs to Prester John.'

Lucien turned from the statue, his lip curling with disgust at those that shared the Throne Room with him. The Eldar-laced blood of Geirrod had long diminished; Lucien saw little evidence of its power in his descendants.

King Haakon sat upon his throne, fidgeting, trying to get comfortable. He slurped from an ale mug filled with wine, spilling more than he drank. Red raw flesh circled the Null on his forehead; a hastily arranged Nulling ceremony had welcomed Haakon and his followers into the Mother

Church. Around the new king lurked his mother, now the dowager queen, and Jarngrimnir, captain of the Kingsguard. Lucien hated being so close to them; they were like vermin crawling around his feet. A feeling of sickness, of disgust grew in his stomach, the pain that dogged his every waking hour burned with greater intensity. Grim memories pushed their way into his consciousness...

The endlessly dripping ceiling of the dungeon.

The mocking, cruel sound of human laughter.

Cold stone walls. Iron bars. Darkness. Empty hours, empty days, empty years.

The darkness, the hunger, the loneliness...

The king broke Lucien's thoughts.

'My Lord, you are reluctant to celebrate our victory,' said Haakon.

'Your victory is not yet complete,' said Lucien. 'There is still much to be done.'

'The Illuminati will be crushed now that my father has betrayed the location of their sanctuary,' said Haakon.

'I hope so but enemies still persist in the north.'

Haakon frowned. 'Enemies? You mean the remaining bands of rebels hiding in the Hlithvid? I will have them rounded up in days.'

'Nay, I speak not of them,' said Lucien. Haakon's stupidity irritated him. 'The threat comes not from men but from the Eldar.'

Haakon took another deep swig from his mug. 'The Barbegs? They are of no concern. As soon as the Illuminati are dealt with I shall ride north and wipe them out. There is no urgency; they pose no threat to us.'

‘You have much to learn, your Majesty. The Barbegs are more dangerous than you know.’

His words fell on deaf ears; drunk on power and wine, Haakon was in no mood to listen to sensible arguments. The king moved to another subject, one that Lucien knew troubled Haakon above all others. ‘I don’t understand why we have delayed Asbjorn’s execution. He should have been hanged this morning. The hangman grows impatient, as do I.’

Lucien smiled. Death, always death, the great fear and the solver of all problems. Haakon burned with the desire to execute his brother but Lucien found the king’s youngest son inscrutable, troubling. ‘Let no harm befall your brother. He was close to your father. We may need him yet.’

Haakon smiled cruelly as a new thought developed in his mind. ‘If that be so then torture may loosen his tongue. I have men in my charge who are well trained in the arts of persuasion.’

‘I have seen the work of your butchers. Your brother is of no use to me dead.’

‘But he is just a boy. A weakling and a simpleton at that,’ said Haakon, his speech slurred by wine. ‘He knows nothing.’

‘Do you consider that I am *wrong* in this matter?’

Haakon hesitated, his mouth open. He realised he had stepped on dangerous ground and steadied himself before answering, ‘No, Lord Lucien. I trust your counsel above all others.’

Dowager Queen Isabella stepped between Haakon and Lucien. ‘My Lord, the king fully understands the debt he

owes to you, to the Mother Church and to Prester John. He shall fulfil all his duties.'

Lord Lucien bowed but he saw the truth behind Isabella's sugared words—she was desperate for power both for herself and for her beloved son. Power. What did these wretches know of power? So small and fleeting were their dreams and ambitions and to achieve those petty dreams and ambitions they would commit untold horrors. Lord Lucien smiled his secret smile again; it amused him how they eagerly, unknowingly, played a part in their own downfall, their own destruction. They could not see that they were mere pawns, playing a part in events beyond their feeble understanding. They thought that the world was theirs forever, but they could not see the catastrophe that approached them.

The Throne Room doors swung open and a Kingsguard stepped inside. He looked terrified and knelt on one knee, every part of his body trembled. 'Forgive my intrusion, Majesty, but I bring urgent tidings.'

'Well, they had better be important,' said Haakon. 'Speak swiftly.'

The Kingsguard took a deep breath and gathered enough strength to speak. 'Majesty, Prince Asbjorn has escaped.'

Even Lucien jolted at that revelation. Haakon stood as though frozen before indignant rage thawed his body and he threw his mug down. 'Escaped? How?'

'We know not,' said the guard, withering under the pressure. 'Two guards were slain, so he must have had an accomplice. They fled through the old tunnels. We searched for them but—'

Haakon had heard enough, he unsheathed his sword and in a single slash cut off the Kingsguard's head, sending it rolling across the floor, leaving a trail of blood. Then the king roared like a furious bear.

'GOD CURSE HIM! CURSE HIM TO DAMNATION!' he bellowed before turning to his shaken captain Jarngrimnir. 'Send out patrols. As many men as can be spared. Find my brother! Bring him to me alive!'

Jarngrimnir almost fell over his own feet in his eagerness to leave the Throne Room and carry out his master's bidding.

As servants cleared up the mess, Haakon said to Lucien through gritted, grinding teeth, 'When my brother is found his death shall be slow, I swear unto you. Slow and painful.'

Lucien cared nothing for Haakon's anger but he was perplexed by Asbjorn's escape. The boy possessed a hitherto unseen strength and will to defy his brother; perhaps the blood of Geirrod was not yet completely spent.

The doors swung open again.

'Is there no end to these interruptions?' said Haakon in exasperation.

He regretted his words as soon as he saw who the visitor was.

A Redeemer.

The visitor gave a perfunctory nod to King Haakon before bowing at the feet of Lord Lucien.

Lucien considered the Redeemer. His face was bleached of all colour except for the patches of inflamed red skin into which were woven twisted pieces of Cold Iron, the dead eyes, like black stones forced into the socket, sunken,

colourless, unmoving, the pale lips and the yellow teeth, crumbling mounds of enamel. Food never passed his lips. Redeemers needed no nourishment; Cold Iron gave them everything they needed to endure and stripped them of everything else.

‘Leave us, Haakon,’ said Lucien.

‘But this is *my* Throne Room,’ said the king, engaging his mouth before his brain.

‘I will not ask again.’

Defeated, Haakon stood and left the chamber with as much dignity as he could muster. Lucien enjoyed watching him leave; a king of men cowering like a whipped dog. Isabella followed her son, head bowed. The servants scurried behind them, leaving the gory mess on the floor only half cleared.

When they were alone, Lucien asked the Redeemer, ‘Know you more of the map?’

‘I bring news from Helagan. The one who escaped the ship with the map fled inland. We believe he was trying to pass it to one of their agents on the island. Our brothers believe the agent was Lord Hereward, living under a secret identity.’

Lucien froze, Lord Hereward was a name from the past, a name he had not expected to hear again and a name he had not wanted to hear again. He tried to conceal his surprise and dismay. ‘Lord Hereward? He lives still?’

‘No longer. He was slain defending a girl, an orphan girl from the town in which he was hiding. She has taken the map and fled into the wild.’

‘And this girl. Has she not been traced?’

The Redeemer paused, hesitating to give ill news to his master. 'As yet no but we have many spies in Helagan so she will not evade us for long. Brother Marburg leads the hunt for her. He will not fail.'

'I hope so for this map is precious,' said Lucien. 'If it falls into the wrong hands it may prove dangerous. Find the girl, alive or dead.'

The Redeemer bowed. 'She will not escape us.'

Lucien's mind raced with worrying possibilities. 'Were any other children in the town infected by Lord Hereward?'

'The precautions of the Inquisition were followed. The town was cleansed and the children have been taken to Gorefayne.'

'Good. Leave now with the blessing of God and Prester John. Continue your search.'

The Redeemer bowed again and left. Lucien returned to the window to consider the complications of the situation. Despite the unexpected escape of Asbjorn and the unwelcome mention of Lord Hereward, events had turned to their advantage. The Illuminati would soon be crushed; he planned to lead the Imperial Army to the Rangbeinn the next day. And the map, the last threat to Prester John, now lay within his grasp. Lucien had waited long for his revenge, all the years of torture, of misery, he had endured would soon be avenged.

Outside the palace gates, the crowd grew bored with Olaf's corpse. Only the wind remained a loyal bystander, gently rocking it back and forth.

*

Within two days of leaving the coast Elowen and her companions reached the border of Gronland. Lofty fells brooded like giants, mocking any who dared to challenge them. The taller peaks were streaked with veins of snow. Elowen looked at them with wonder—they were of a scale beyond her experience, beyond her imagination. Gronland was a region forged in a crucible of ice: the scree-lined fells, the sweeping valleys and the sinuous lakes had all been carved by the slow, imperceptible movement of glaciers in centuries long lost in time.

They struck a narrow path which followed the course of a fast-running brook. They spoke little, trudging in a line spaced well apart. Diggory remained openly hostile to the presence of Ulfur; he kept to the back, several yards behind, sulking and scowling. His eyes never left the wolf, as though he expected an attack at any moment. For his part, Ulfur appeared content trotting alongside Elowen. He was always alert, with his tail held horizontal, and occasionally he would slink away, only to catch up with them an hour or so later, his jaw moist with the blood of his latest kill. Elowen felt a connection with the wolf, as though the energy that flowed through him passed to her. A tingle played down her spine when he was close, her senses sharpened—she could see further, hear a little clearer. She wondered if it was her imagination but it felt real.

The path they followed led to, and threaded around, an oval lake, dark as an obsidian mirror. Along the far side of the lake towered a grey wall of rock; from its heights, frozen rivers of scree descended sheer into the watery depths. The

persistent sun peeked through lazy clouds, softening the harsh rock face in an orange glow. But in seconds the clouds again swallowed the upstart sun and the warm colours peeled away. The water betrayed no sign of life, content to slurp and lap at the rocks on the shore. Buzzards circled far overhead. The wind took advantage of the wide open space, moaning mournfully as it swept across the lake. Elowen felt like an ant in a land of giants, a landscape not fit for mortals.

‘This is a horrible place,’ said Diggory, shivering and rubbing his arms to keep warm. ‘Do you know where we are? Feels like the middle of nowhere.’

Elowen tried to remember the map Bucca had drawn in the Mengoon’s dusty soil. To the east stood a knot of rugged, rounded fells; two peaks rose above the others like the turrets of a fortress and Elowen pointed to them. ‘The path seems to run between those two peaks. It looks a hard climb.’

And so it proved. With each mile their pace slowed. The path reached a great height, becoming a narrow track flanked by a steep drop, falling hundreds of feet away onto the rocky outcrops below. Elowen’s stomach rolled over as she looked down from the path. Her feet felt every sharp stone and every hole and her knees ached with the strain. She felt sick and light-headed. Apart from the faint, precipitous path itself and the occasional weather-beaten milestone, Elowen saw little sign of the influence of man; she wondered if people ever came to such a place.

To add to their woes the weather worsened—the gloomy clouds threw down drizzle, which quickly strengthened to

driving rain. Battered by the fierce rain, Elowen found it impossible to look up, her face was permanently trained onto the path. Her clothes became damp and clung to her raw, chapped skin. As they climbed, it grew colder, so cold that Elowen struggled to imagine ever being warm again. She tried to think of roaring fires and hot food but it only made things worse. Other thoughts, other images, lingered: the death face of Malengin haunted her every waking moment. The wind carried whispered words. *Murderer. Murderer.* Elowen covered her ears.

They spent an uncomfortable night sheltering beside a large rock; it spared them from the worst assaults of the wind but they were still bitterly cold. The food they had snatched from Ictis had swiftly turned rotten and they were left only with small pieces of stale bread and a couple of bruised apples. Hungry and exhausted by the journey, Elowen laid down on the stony ground and tried to sleep.

*

As the sun sank to the horizon it bled red and orange light into the evening sky. The island of Ictis rose out from the fiery sea. Like a length of ribbon, the causeway stretched from the island back to the beach. The restless sea licked at its edges, watery fingers slowly occupying the dry land that intruded on its realm. Five shapes moved along the causeway, heading for Ictis.

Brother Marburg and his four companions rode in single file. They made for the castle that crowned the island's rocky outcrop. Marburg knew that he was riding towards a

nest of heretics and unbelievers. As he looked down at the water he sensed life lurking beneath the surface: watchful, primal, unclean life. He silently prayed for God and Prester John to bring him the strength to fulfil his duty. His wasted muscles and brittle bones ached, only the Cold Iron deep in his flesh kept him alive, slowing the decay that should have devoured his body decades earlier.

The will of his master drove him on. *Find the girl and take the map she carries. Find her at all costs.*

So far she had proven elusive, disappearing into the wild like a ghost.

The salty wind, the murmuring waves and the throaty yells of seagulls reminded Marburg of a place far away in both distance and time. Fragments of memories came to him: a burning sun, a young boy collecting seashells on the beach and his sister, blond haired, giggling, singing. Marburg shook his head; they were no longer his memories, they belonged to another. He did not want them and he did not need them. He lived now only to serve Prester John and God.

The five riders reached the castle's main gate and Marburg sneered as he examined the carvings around the archway, shapes sensuous and bestial offended his eyes. For too long the denizens of this island had evaded the justice of the Mother Church. Marburg wanted to change that. He dismounted and thumped on the gate. He called out, 'Open in the name of Prester John.'

The gate swung open to reveal a bewigged man dressed in richly decorated clothes. The man's face was bruised, his soft skin discoloured like a damaged apple and he had not

been Nulled. The man's mouth opened when he saw Marburg and his brethren. He stood there, as still as a statue.

'It is customary to bow before the Brotherhood of Redemption,' said Marburg. He was used to seeing terror, respect or hatred on the faces of those he beheld, not such blank bewilderment. The man disgusted him, Marburg wanted to kill him on the spot but he knew he must show patience.

The man did as he had been instructed and bowed. 'Forgive me. I welcome you all to the Isle of Ictis. I am Count Nadelek.'

Marburg ignored his empty words. 'I seek news. News of two children who were said to have passed this way not four nights ago.'

Nadelek frowned, an over exaggerated expression, like a mummer on a stage. 'Children? We have seen no children here.'

Marburg pointed back across the sea, towards the tiny settlement near the shore. 'The villagers yonder claim to have seen the children, accompanied by an inhabitant of this island.'

Nadelek clasped his hands together in front of his face. 'My friend, listen not to their nonsense. They are a simple folk given to the telling of fanciful tales. Heed them not.'

Marburg knew Nadelek lied: his rapid speech, his sweaty brow, the way he nervously fiddled with his perfumed wig, all betrayed him. The Redeemer unsheathed his sword and held its tip to Nadelek's nose. 'I give you one last chance to tell me the truth.'

Nadelek's eyes widened and he slowly edged away from

the blade. 'Please do not hurt me. Wait...now it returns to me. Two wild, feral children. A boy and a girl. They came to this very gate, begging for food and shelter and in the spirit of charity we aided them.'

Marburg knew he was getting closer to the truth. 'And what became of these children?'

Nadelek shrugged. 'The wretched little thieves fled. But not before stealing many valuables.'

'I am surprised you have forgotten such memorable visitors.'

With a nervous, manic laugh, Nadelek said, 'Old age creeps up on me. My wits are not what they once were.'

'I do not take kindly to deception,' said Marburg. He paused before continuing, a pause to allow the power of his implied threat to sink in. It had the desired effect. Nadelek withered under the Redeemer's glare. 'Where were the children going?'

Now eager to please, Nadelek said, 'They spoke several times of Dinas Hein.'

'Dinas Hein? That was their destination? You are sure?'

'So they said.'

Marburg turned to his brethren. 'They must be trying to leave Helagan by sea. I shall ride east and find them, I am swifter alone. If the children get to Dinas Hein our spy there shall bring news of it to me. You must complete our task here.'

The Redeemers replied as one. 'As you wish.'

Nadelek nervously rubbed his hands together. 'Can I be of further assistance? Perhaps you are in need of food, of water or hay for your steeds?'

‘We want nothing from you, *heretic*,’ said Marburg. ‘For too long you and your people have hidden from the justice of Prester John.’

‘But we are *protected*,’ said Nadelek. ‘We pay generous tithes to the Mother Church—’

Marburg sheathed his sword. ‘Souls are not saved by money. The law of Prester John is enforced without exception and you are damned by your heresies. My brothers are here to speed you and your people to judgment.’

Nadelek took a step back, his face white with fear. He fell to his knees, tears tumbling down his pale cheeks. ‘Show mercy.’

Marburg looked down at the pitiful creature and disgust rose within him, disgust at the perfumed vermin at his feet. ‘Yes, we shall show mercy. Your death will be swift.’

Marburg remounted his horse. He did not glance around as his brethren hacked Nadelek down but he heard a gargled scream and the sound of metal striking flesh. As he rode away he heard other screams: screams of fear and screams of the dying. His brethren would not fail to carry out God’s work—the island would be cleansed.

As the hooves of his horse splashed along the watery causeway, Marburg’s ancient heart pounded with joy. His prey was close and the will of his master coursed through his veins. By the time he reached the beach Ictis already burned, flame-flecked smoke climbing up to the fiery sky.

*

Elowen moved through the forest. A low mist lingered around the tree

trunks. Surrounded by scents of incredible intensity she cut through the banks of low-lying bracken. She heard distant sounds: the leaves rustling in the wind, fallen branches cracking as deer scampered over them and the warning calls of birds perched in the high canopy. She moved in a monochrome world but relied more on smell than sight. Hunger burned inside her like a wound. The scent of blood led her on.

She came to the edge of a lake, the far shore of which lay concealed beneath a bank of fog. With no wind, the water lay as still as ice. She sniffed the air, the scent grew stronger.

Then she saw it.

An injured sheep, blood smeared on its hind leg. It baaed mournfully, a sound of loneliness, of pain, of despair. Lost in its misery it failed to notice Elowen.

She salivated uncontrollably, overpowered by the smell of blood. She leapt on the sheep. Teeth tore into flesh. Warm blood splashed across her face. Bones cracked.

When she had gorged her fill she trotted to the lake to drink. The still, silent water offered a perfect reflection.

A bloodied face stared back at her. Long snout. Yellow eyes.

The face of a wolf.

Elowen jerked awake and reality washed away the dream. It was still night. Beside her lay the sleeping Ulfur, his warm body against her legs and Diggory lay a little further away, his snores sounding above the wind. But a taste of blood lingered in Elowen's mouth.

The next day brought a welcome change in the weather. The clouds had gone and the fells reflected the better weather, becoming patchworks of shade and colour: brown, orange, green and red. Elowen and her companions trudged

along the corkscrewing, boulder-strewn path. In the valley below, the tree tops drowned in early morning mist.

By midday they reached another brook, the waters of which turned frothy white as they tumbled down the hillside. Elowen took off her shoes and stepped into the water, balancing on the rocks and stones. She leant down and drank; Elowen felt the cold water flow down her throat and chest, for a second taking her breath away. Ulfur lapped at the brook, his long tongue scooping up water, and then he cocked up a leg and urinated on a clump of rough grass, marking his territory. Several feet away, Diggory knelt, cupping his hands to bring up water to drink and wash with. His mood had worsened since they left Ictis. Elowen wondered if she should say something to him but she decided it best to leave him alone.

When they had all drank, they continued their journey. The path dropped down to the shore of a long, reed-edged lake. Elowen guessed it was Vinnudermere, the lake Bucca had mentioned. It stretched for miles and coiled like a basking snake, its glassy surface broken only by a solitary rock, on top of which perched a heron, as still as stone.

‘Let’s rest here a while,’ said Elowen.

Diggory grunted agreement but said no more. Ulfur nudged her hand.

Wait here. Ulfur need meat. Return soon.

His tongue lolling out, the wolf bounded off into the shadows of a group of alder trees.

Elowen found a dry stone on the lake edge and sat. She stretched her tired legs, groaning with the pleasurable ache. She pulled out the little box and flipped it open to examine

the map. She loved to hold it, to feel its ancient, crinkled paper against her hand, it was so delicate—how could it be so precious, so important that people would kill to possess it? What secrets did it hold?

She became aware of Diggory standing beside her.

Elowen pushed the map into her pocket and took a deep breath.

‘Diggory?’ she said.

‘Aye?’ he said without looking at her.

‘What’s troubling you? Since we left Ictis, you’ve hardly said a word.’

He picked up a small pebble and sent it skimming into the water. He glanced over his shoulder to check Ulfur wasn’t close. ‘It’s the wolf. You two are closed off from me. I’m the odd one out. It’s not right; I should be the one in charge, I’m head boy. Oh, it’s probably all hopeless. I wonder if we’ll ever get to this sanctuary.’

‘We’ll get there,’ said Elowen, not wishing to admit she held the same fears.

‘I hope so, for I’ve had enough fear to last me a lifetime,’ he said. He threw one more pebble and sat, falling into a sullen silence.

Ulfur did not return until early evening so they decided to camp on the shore. When they rose at first light the next morning, a thin mist hung over the tranquil water; clouds rolled down the fells like ocean waves. It took them three hours to walk the length of the lake. Ramsons formed a carpet among the oak and beech trees which bordered the shore, their clusters of white flowers released a stench of garlic as Elowen and her companions walked through them.

They passed the carcass of a sheep, strings of dirty wool clung to the blackened bones. Ulfur sniffed at the skeleton suspiciously before trotting on. Troubling echoes of her dream returned to Elowen.

When they reached the end of the lake, the path rose up a steep hill. The loose stones and damp grass made walking difficult, at least for Elowen and Diggory. Ulfur, secure on four feet, bounded up the hill, full of energy.

When they came to the open, flat summit, Diggory said, ‘I need to stop. My legs are killing me.’

Elowen agreed, grateful herself for a rest. Diggory slumped on the ground, groaning as he rubbed his legs. Ulfur padded around the circle of standing stones that topped the summit. There were thirty-eight stones, few of which were taller than four feet, and the circle had a wide entrance formed by the two tallest stones, both shaded by yellow lichen. The wolf sniffed at a standing stone before cocking up his leg and spraying it.

The summit commanded a clear view of the surrounding landscape: behind them to the west, stretched the silvery snake of Vinnudermere; to the north Elowen saw a flaming, angry red horizon, the Firelands; to the east, a patchwork of sun-dappled green fields and little woods. Past the fields, she saw a cluster of white buildings, a town and beyond the town the grey expanse of the Corridor Sea. She pointed to the town. ‘That must be Dinas Hein. We should be there by nightfall. It would be nice to find an inn and a proper place to sleep.’

Diggory screwed up his face in disgust. ‘An *inn*? They’re cursed, ungodly places, full of wicked people.’

‘Well we can’t sleep rough forever. Besides, it might take time to find Black Francis. We’ll need somewhere to stay in the meantime.’

‘Inns are dangerous, and what about Ulfur? How on earth are we going to get him into a town?’

Elowen frowned, she hadn’t thought about that. ‘I can’t abandon him.’

Diggory stood with his hands on his hips. ‘What are you going to do then?’

‘We could put the rope round his neck like it’s a lead and pretend he’s a dog.’

‘Pretend he’s a *dog*! We’ll fool nobody.’

‘Have *you* got any better ideas?’

Diggory shrugged his shoulders. ‘Alright, try your stupid idea then.’

Elowen called Ulfur to her and told him the plan. He pulled back his ears and gave a low growl.

Ulfur not happy. Ulfur not a dog.

‘I know but it’s the only way,’ said Elowen as she opened her bag and pulled out the length of rope. It was old and frayed and looked like it would fall apart under the slightest strain. Elowen hoped it would hold.

The wolf sniffed the rope and narrowed his eyes, clearly unhappy.

Wanting to take charge, Diggory snatched the rope from Elowen. ‘I’ll put this round his neck—’

Ulfur growled and lunged at the boy. Diggory moved his hand just in time to avoid a nasty bite.

‘Wait, wait,’ said Elowen, pulling Diggory away. ‘We don’t need to put that on now. We will only put the rope on

when we get near the town. As soon as we can, we'll take it off.'

Ulfur stared at Diggory; his yellow eyes smouldered with anger. Hands trembling, the boy dropped the rope. The wolf lowered its tail and trotted to the standing stones.

'I think that we should leave Ulfur alone for now,' said Elowen.

'Aye,' said Diggory, keeping his distance from the wolf, 'sounds like a good idea.'

Fearing to tarry for long on an exposed summit, they hurried down the hill's bracken-covered slopes and on towards Dinas Hein. They passed fields divided by drystone walls; ferns sprung out of shady crevices between stones. Dried sheep droppings covered the path and a pungent faecal smell lingered in the air. Longhaired sheep nibbled at the lush green grass, sheep that attracted the attention of Ulfur. Elowen sensed his urges and told him sharply, 'We have no time for hunting.'

Keeping their distance from a group of slate-roofed farm buildings, they reached the top of a wooded slope. The slope was crowned by a large flat rock incised with several cup marks surrounded with crude rectangles and ring marks, and between the marks ran linear grooves. A wide road ran from north to south, with a narrow road branching off east towards Dinas Hein. A flint-encrusted wall surrounded the town, taller and stronger than the crumbling moss choked wall that protected Trecadok. Beyond the wall Elowen spied roofs and chimneys. There were two church spires: one as narrow and pointed as a spear; the other, thick and crooked.

The road was busy—stage coaches thundered past and a post courier, his horse laden with letters and packages, trudged along wearily. Horse-drawn carts heavily loaded with coal rattled southwards; they had travelled from the coalfields to the north, coalfields that were always hungry for new workers. Thousands had gone there, whole communities moved, some by choice, others by force. Elowen had heard tales of slag heaps as tall as mountains, of people with permanently blackened faces, of vast chimneys spewing out flames and black smoke. Elowen shivered at the thought of such a place.

Diggory whispered in her ear, ‘What now? Shall we go into the town?’

‘Yes but not yet. Let’s wait until the road is quiet. The fewer people that see us the better.’

They waited until the road cleared of carts and carriages, then Elowen and her companions cautiously approached the gate. Elowen slipped the rope around Ulfur’s neck. The wolf growled his displeasure but made no attempt to resist. Elowen held the rope like a lead, feeling Ulfur’s strength. She feared he would attack the first person or animal he encountered but, despite his discomfort and anger, he played the role of a dog, trotting beside Elowen like a faithful hound.

As they came to the gate, the guard waiting there picked up his musket and held it in both hands. He wore rusty body armour and a leather jerkin that looked as though it might have fitted him well ten years earlier and the remains of his most recent meal clung to his beard. The Null was clearly visible in his forehead. Elowen was used to seeing

Nullled people every day of her life and the Null was as normal a feature as eyes, noses and teeth. But now, after all she had heard, all she had witnessed, the man's Null stood out. The guard stared suspiciously. He spoke but Elowen couldn't understand his thick northern accent.

'Excuse me?' she said.

'And—who—might—you—be?' he repeated in slow, patronising tones.

Elowen was about to answer when she noticed severed heads impaled on spikes on top of the town gate, their faces swollen and decayed. 'Who are they?'

The guard laughed. 'Thieves, footpads, vagabonds. A warning to all would be wrong doers. So, I ask again. Who are you?'

'We are travellers seeking passage to Prevennis,' said Elowen, her voice shaking.

'Travellers, eh? You are both young for taking to the road,' said the guard, rubbing his beard. Elowen thought he was about to ask about them not being Nullled but he glanced down at Ulfur. 'Great God! What's that beast? A wolf?'

Elowen's heart raced and her voice cracked with fear, she took a deep breath to control it and said, 'No, it's not a wolf. A Preven hound. Rare, in these parts.'

The guard's eyes narrowed. 'Not a breed I've heard of. Still looks like a wolf to me but it's a half-starved creature so it's hard to judge. Very well. You can pass...for a price.'

'A price?' said Elowen.

The guard smirked. 'Aye, there's a toll for entering the town. Rules are rules.'

Elowen hesitated. She wondered if the guard had a nice little swindle going on, hoping to fleece travellers but these were foreign parts and what did she know of their customs and rules? Anyway, they needed to go in and she doubted the guard would allow that without payment and the swollen heads skewered on the gate were a reminder of how the town treated unwanted visitors.

‘Very well, how much?’ she said, the words sticking in her throat.

A crooked smile parted the guard’s lips. ‘Hmm, let me see. Two travellers, half a crown each.’

Elowen dipped into her pocket. ‘So, one crown then—’

The guard pointed to Ulfur with his musket. ‘Not so fast. Extra for the dog.’

Elowen bit her lip. ‘How much—’

‘A crown.’

Elowen was scarcely able to believe her ears. ‘A crown? So we pay more for the dog than for ourselves?’

He held up his hands. ‘I don’t make the rules. Take it or leave it.’

With great reluctance, Elowen passed the guard two coins, which he took into his blackened, sweaty hands. He looked around before dropping them into a pouch on his belt. He stepped aside to let them pass, eyeing Ulfur warily. ‘A fair evening to you. Welcome to Dinas Hein.’

When they were almost out of earshot, Elowen heard the guard chuckling to himself.

Dinas Hein

Elowen and her companions passed into the narrow streets of Dinas Hein. The town's buildings had grown like weeds, unplanned, unwanted but now established and determined to remain. Some houses were brick dwellings topped with slate tiles, others were small timber hovels. Cramped alleyways snaked between the buildings and twisted narrow steps reached into dark hidden places. Steaming piles of horse dung splattered the potholed streets.

Elowen decided to head for the harbour, if they were going to find Black Francis that surely had to be the best place to try. After so long in the wild, Elowen felt out of place among so many people, as though everyone was staring at her. Carts and drays thundered along. Gangs of weary fishermen, stinking of fish, trudged home after a day on the sea; drunken sailors stumbled around like new born deer, loudly singing bawdy songs; apprentice boys strutted down along the streets, with their silk-lined clothes and daggers hanging from their belts. But few paid the boy and girl any attention. Only Ulfur attracted any glances, glances of surprise or fear, so Elowen tightened her grip on the rope and pulled the

wolf closer to her. Diggory looked around nervously, jumping at every loud noise.

As they drew close to the harbour they passed the church with the crooked spire—a foreboding and ugly building. It grew from the hovels that surrounded it like a wind-battered tree growing clear of a bank of weeds. Its harsh, angular walls were blackened with smoke and in every nook and ledge lurked hideous stone gargoyles. Wide, mud-smothered steps rose reluctantly to the church door. Elowen stared at the church as she walked, fascinated by its grimness. And it was at that moment, with her eyes trained to the side and not to the front, that she walked into a man coming the other way.

He stumbled but managed to stay upright. Elowen was shocked to notice he had a wooden leg. A bundle of letters he carried dropped to the ground, finding a resting place in a muddy puddle.

‘Have ye lost your wits, lassie? Is there not enough of me to see?’ he said. He pointed down at the sodden letters. ‘Look what ye have done.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Elowen, feeling guilty and embarrassed, especially as several people had turned around, their attention attracted by the man’s booming voice.

‘Sorry? Aye, ye should be sorry. Barging into a war veteran like some kind of ruffian.’

‘I meant no harm, honest,’ said Elowen as she bent down and collected the muddy letters. Cautiously she passed them to the man. He snapped them off her like a hungry dog taking food from its master’s fingers.

He tried to shake the letters dry before stuffing them in

one of his pockets. ‘Aye but harm’s been done now hasn’t it? Look at these letters. Ruined they are.’

Elowen stepped back, her whole body cold with fear. A crowd had already gathered round them. An onlooker shouted out, ‘What’s the bother here, Rabbie?’

‘This young hooligan, that’s what. Barging me over near enough, and by her accent, I reckon she’s a southerner!’

An onlooker shouted, ‘Shame on them! Damned southerners! Got no place here!’

Elowen hoped Diggory would help but he was as pale as a ghost and remained silent. However, she was not alone. Ulfur growled and took a menacing step towards the man. Just in time, Elowen yanked the wolf back. From inside his coat, Rabbie pulled out a knife. ‘I’ll kill your beast, in God’s name I will. I’ll cut his throat.’

Ulfur snarled and his fur bristled. Elowen felt his anger and bloodlust burning. Rabbie stepped forward, holding the knife. ‘I’m going to cut him.’

The crowd egged him on.

Ulfur pulled at the rope, burning Elowen’s hand as she tried to hold him back. Rabbie swung his wooden leg forward and swiped the blade at the wolf, missing by inches.

‘Stop it!’ said Elowen.

She thought about letting Ulfur go, letting him deal with the man but someone sprung between the man and the wolf, an old man in flowing red robes. A priest.

‘Stop! What is this fuss in aid of?’ he asked in clipped tones. He looked first at Elowen and then at her new found enemy. ‘Rabbie? Why are you wielding that knife? Remember the teachings of Prester John! Violence is ungodly.’

His blade still held up, the man flashed his eyes from Elowen back to the priest and back again. He relented and slipped the knife back in his pocket. 'Forgive me, Father.'

'That is better,' said the priest. 'Now, Rabbie, I think it is best you be on your way, don't you agree?'

'Aye, Father,' he said through gritted teeth. Throwing one last angry stare at Elowen, he pushed his way through the crowd which quickly dispersed now that the fun was over.

Elowen was still trembling when the priest spoke to her. 'You have made quite a scene.'

'Father, I meant no harm. It was a simple accident.'

To her surprise, he laughed. 'Be at peace, child. You have done nothing wrong.' He was a small, dusty man, almost drowning in his robes. He leant on a walking stick and his head was bald save for a couple of tufts of white hair. His bright eyes twinkled and a warm smile lit up his face. The Null protruded from his dry, wrinkled forehead like a wart.

The priest noticed Ulfur, and his eyes widened. 'What a fine creature. Look at his eyes! Such strength and nobility! So, my young friends, I have not seen *your* faces before.'

'We are travellers,' said Elowen, eager to keep moving, to avoid conversations. The priest seemed harmless enough but she did not want to linger.

'By your accents you are a long way from home and this is a hard town for strangers.'

'I guessed that, Father,' said Elowen.

The priest smiled. 'Do not be troubled by old Rabbie Heckspeckle. He is, shall we say, a local *character*. Hot are his humours. He could begin an argument in an empty room. But please, forgive me. I have yet to introduce myself. I am

Father Austwick,' he straightened his robes before gesturing towards the church that loomed over them. 'St Michael is my church. A unique monument to God and Prester John. The crooked spire! Our ancestors enjoyed strange tastes in architecture. I am going there now, I would be honoured if you would both join our congregation this evening. Afterwards I can give you food. You both look hungry and I so enjoy meeting visitors from other lands.'

Diggory began to speak but Elowen cut in first. 'Thank you, Father, but we are meeting a friend and we are already late.'

The priest nodded sadly and gave an exaggerated shrug. 'I understand. A pity but we will meet another time perhaps. Farewell, young friends, I hope to meet you again soon. God bless you and please be careful in this town!'

Austwick made the sign of blessing before hobbling away.

When the priest had gone, Diggory said, 'Why did you do that for? He wanted to help us.'

'We can't trust anybody.'

'But he's a *priest*!'

'He's Nulled, and that means we can't trust him.'

Diggory shook his head. 'A priest would not harm us. Besides, neither of us have been to church for days. A sin, that's what it is.'

'I said we can't trust anybody. *Anybody*. Now, come on. I don't want to risk meeting that Rabbie Heckspeckle again.'

They walked on to the harbour. It was filled with boats of every kind: tall sailing vessels, flat barges and fishing boats all as grubby and weather-beaten as their crews. There was a forest of different sized masts, all gently bobbing up and

down. A dirty green harbour wall shielded the vessels from the sea and two anchors, orange with rust, rested on the wall. Limp pieces of seaweed floated like dead fish in the water.

The sun was sinking in the west, the light failing. A Sentinel loomed over the quayside, keeping its silent watch, and yards away from it, an old, weather-beaten stone pillar. It was decorated with carvings of vines, birds and geometric patterns. The upper part portrayed two figures in a boat, one held a hammer, the other a fishing line. Beneath the boat swam a great serpent.

Taverns and inns filled the quayside. Elowen and Diggory looked at the myriad of gaudy swinging signs. *The Drunken Duck. Captain's Rest. The Jolly Sailor. The Black Boar.*

'Which one do you think we should try?' said Diggory.

'I don't know. What about the Jolly Sailor?'

The boy shook his head. 'No, it looks a bit dark and dingy.'

'They *all* look dark and dingy.'

'This was *your* idea.'

'I know. Look, what about the Black Boar? It's much bigger than the others. I'd wager they'd know about Black Francis there.'

Elowen stared at the sign of the two-storeyed inn: a huge boar with its mouth twisted into a thin smile. The inn's thatched roof sloped in different angles; below ran a haphazard line of variously sized first floor windows. The low front door hung open allowing shards of smoky light to escape out onto the quayside; laughter and shouting followed. Elowen wondered if the inn had been made from

different pieces of other buildings, a stiff breeze would surely send it all crumbling to the ground. Elowen tied Ulfur to the post outside the inn.

‘Behave yourself,’ she said to the wolf.

The wolf growled and narrowed his eyes.

Ulfur not like human place but he waits here.

Elowen nodded, hoping he would not cause trouble. She looked up at the inn.

‘I suppose we had better go in,’ she said, her limbs heavy with apprehension. She hoped Diggory would go in ahead of her but he hung back.

‘Are you going in then?’ said Elowen.

‘This wasn’t my idea. You go in first. I still say we should have gone with the priest.’

‘You’re scared.’

‘I am not,’ he said but that remained the extent of his argument.

‘I’ll go in first then,’ she said.

With Diggory following close behind, Elowen came into an L-shaped room with a low timber framed ceiling. The spluttering candles bathed the room in a light the colour of urine and the heavy clouds of tobacco smoke made Elowen’s eyes water. In the corner, a healthy fire crackled and spat. As they entered, all conversations stopped and suspicious eyes studied them through the smoky haze. Around the many wonky wooden tables sat sailors, merchants and local fishermen; they leant over their tables to whisper furtively among themselves and a few laughed at the new arrivals.

Elowen blushed and cringed with every step; she hated

being noticed, looked at and talked about. She felt like a performing monkey, being jeered and laughed at by a baying crowd.

They walked up to the bar; it was lined with empty mugs and sticky with spilled beer. Elowen sensed dozens of eyes boring into her. Then at last the conversations began again.

‘Yes, love, what do you want? Hurry now.’

Elowen became aware of someone standing the other side of the bar. A short, red-faced woman glared at them with impatient eyes. With her sleeves rolled up to reveal tubby, sweaty arms, she ran a hand through her black, curly hair and used the other to tap on the bar.

‘Come on, love,’ she said in a broad northern accent. ‘I’m busy, what do you want?’

Elowen looked round at Diggory, hoping he would answer but his mouth remained firmly shut. Cursing him silently, she replied to the woman.

‘We are looking for a room for the night,’ she said.

The woman snorted. ‘A room? You barely look old enough to be travelling. Are you Nulled?’

Elowen’s stomach lurched. She hoped her hair concealed the truth. Sweat dampened her forehead and she stuttered, ‘Of course I am, Diggory is younger—’

The woman folded her arms and didn’t check further. ‘Very well. I need to ask such questions. I don’t want any trouble you see. Trouble is bad for business. So, you want a room. Have you any money?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Elowen, glad that the woman didn’t look too closely for the Null. She put the contents of her pockets onto the bar.

The woman waved her hands and pushed the coins back to Elowen. In a hushed voice she said, 'Be careful, love, do not show your wealth here. There are many around here who would be happy to relieve you of it without your knowing.'

Blushing crimson, Elowen stuffed the coins into her pocket. The voice inside her head nagged at her, '*You fool! Fool!*'

The woman boomed, 'My name is Fyna Flaysome, landlady of the Black Boar. I charge five crowns for one night's accommodation, includes supper and a bed each. All paid up front. Take it or leave it.'

'We'll take it,' said Elowen as she paid the landlady.

Flaysome clapped her hands. 'Good, and will you be taking supper at the common table or in your chamber?'

'Our chamber please,' said Elowen. She had no desire to eat in the company of strangers.

'Very well, that will cost you a crown extra.'

Inwardly groaning, Elowen passed Flaysome another coin. Dinas Hein was proving expensive.

'I'll call the servant to take you to your chamber,' said the landlady. She leant back and yelled, 'WATT! WATT! COME HERE!'

There was no reply. The landlady shook her head and cursed.

Elowen tried to take advantage of a brief pause. 'We are looking for a man. Black Francis is his name.'

Flaysome scratched her head. 'Black Francis...Black Francis...oh aye, him. Sailor. Captain of the *Husker Du*. Aye, he comes in here, from time to time.'

‘We need to meet him.’

The landlady frowned and rubbed the sore skin around her Null. ‘Friends of his, are you?’

‘No, not as such...’

Flaysome looked suspicious. ‘Well you know your own business but I’ll warn you, he has an ill-favoured look about him. I’ll ask Watt to have a look around, see if old Black Francis is about this night. If he finds him, I’ll let you know. Now, talking of that idiot of a servant, where’s he got to? Watt!’

A sullen teenage boy, not yet Nulled, emerged sheepishly from a room behind the bar.

‘There you are,’ said Flaysome, hands on her hips. ‘Ah, you’re a layabout, good-for-nowt waster. Hurry now, we got guests. Take them to the third chamber, that one is empty. Think you can manage that?’

Watt nodded and wiped his dripping nose on his sleeve. Without a word, he led Elowen and Diggory up the narrow set of stairs to their chamber.

The room was small, with creaky floorboards and a single window. There were two beds, between which stood a wooden chair. At the foot of one the beds was a plain oak chest with post feet and a hinged door. There were no cupboards but sunk into the wall beside the fireplace were four keeping-holes.

Watt kindled the fire and lit a single candle, which he placed on the mantelpiece. ‘I’ll bring supper to you presently.’

‘Thank you,’ said Elowen. ‘Could you do me another favour?’

Watt nodded but looked unenthused by the idea of doing more work.

‘We have a...dog. He’s tied up on the post outside the inn—’

‘I’ll see to him,’ said Watt as he ambled out.

Even with the fire, the room was draughty and cold, the window panes rattled like chattering teeth. Watt soon returned with supper. He brought a plate piled up with slices of ham and beef, golden clap bread, a pitcher of watery ale and two bowls of pottage. Achingly hungry, Elowen could barely eat quickly enough. Diggory sniffed the bowls warily but hunger got the better of him and he tucked in.

The food tasted plain but it was more wholesome than what they had eaten on Ictis.

Gingerly, Diggory sipped the ale. ‘Not bad I suppose,’ he announced, wiping the foam from his mouth. Once reassured he quickly downed the rest.

‘You know, I don’t like this town,’ said Elowen, briefly laying down her spoon and giving voice to her concerns.

‘Me neither, it’s an unholy place. Mind you, that Father Austwick would have helped us. He’s a good man—’

‘We talked about this.’

‘I know, but we have been wandering for so long, without grown-ups to help us. It’s not right.’

‘Yes, but think about the last time we trusted grown-ups!’ said Elowen, referring to Ictis.

Unable to argue with that, Diggory simply shrugged and continued his meal.

Not long after they had finished eating, Watt returned to pick up the empty cutlery. He paused, his face screwed up

in concentration as though dragging a memory or thought from his mind. He looked up at the ceiling. ‘You were looking for Black Francis?’

‘Yes,’ said Elowen.

‘He’s in the port tonight, though he is off voyaging tomorrow,’ said Watt, scratching his scruffy hair. ‘He should be here anon. Best come down to the common room, wait for him there. Don’t know how long he’ll be or if he’ll turn up at all. On, and that dog of yours terrified the life out of me. He’s more like a wolf.’

Elowen tried to look shocked but it was hard to suppress a giggle. Watt slammed the door behind him.

Diggory said, ‘I’m worried about this Black Francis. Sailors are rough, ungodly men. We must be careful.’

‘You don’t need to tell me that. Come on, let’s go down.’

As they made their way down the stairs, they heard the hum of conversation from the common room. Elowen did not want to go back in there but they had to meet with Black Francis so there was little choice. Hoping the other patrons would ignore them, Elowen and Diggory kept to the far side of the bar, close to where Fyna Flaysome stood, wiping up some mugs. The landlady smiled. ‘Glad you could come down. Supped well I hope?’

‘Aye, very well,’ said Diggory, emboldened by the ale he had drunk with his meal.

‘Good, I’m glad. Will you have another drink?’

Elowen said no but Diggory eagerly took another mug of ale.

‘Hey, princess, what’s your name?’

The voice came from the table nearest to them. Elowen

went cold with fear and embarrassment; an old man, with crooked eyes and pock-marked skin, smirked at her. Horrible dry warts surrounded his Null. A ‘T’ was branded on his left cheek—the sign of a convicted thief.

Elowen didn’t answer. She kept her eyes trained on the floor.

‘What’s your name, princess?’ said the man. ‘Don’t ignore me now.’

Elowen blushed furiously; she didn’t know what to do.

The old man turned around to the inn’s other patrons and said, ‘This lass is a polished turd and no mistake.’

His companions around the table roared with laughter but they were cut short by Flaysome. ‘Give over, Maguire, you old drunk! Leave her be or you’ll see a side of me you wished you hadn’t.’

The old man, Maguire, spat on the floor and muttered under his breath. He returned to his ale and the conversations with his companions.

Flaysome leant down, her elbows resting on the bar. ‘Are you all right, love?’

Elowen nodded though she felt shaken.

‘Don’t heed their babblement. It’s only the drink talking. They’ll do no harm.’

Slightly reassured, Elowen adjusted her position against the bar and waited. With Watt now serving the thirsty patrons, Flaysome disappeared into the backroom for a break. Diggory had nearly finished his mug and looked unsteady on his feet; his words became slurred and confused.

‘You’re drunk,’ said Elowen, making no attempt to hide her annoyance.

He hiccupped. ‘No I’m not. Look, how long are we going to wait for this Black Francis?’

Elowen was about to answer when she became aware of someone else standing next to her.

Maguire.

He was close enough for her to smell the ale and tobacco on his breath. In his left hand he gripped a brimming mug.

‘Now that the old witch behind the bar has gone, I want our little talk.’

‘I...I don’t want any *trouble*,’ said Elowen, looking down at the floor.

‘Trouble, who’s giving trouble? I’m just an old fisherman wanting some company. Now what’s wrong with that?’

He placed a hot, sweaty hand on her shoulder, which Elowen shrugged away.

Maguire stepped back, his face twisted in anger. ‘You’re a feisty one, princess. I ought to teach you some manners.’

‘Leave her alone,’ said Diggory.

Despite being grateful for Diggory’s help, Elowen sensed that he had made the situation much worse.

Maguire took a slow, deep intake of breath. The inn fell silent. All eyes were trained on the fisherman, the boy and the girl.

‘You’ve made an enemy of me, boy,’ said Maguire. ‘You’ll regret that.’

The fisherman swung his left arm; Diggory tried to move but the ale had dulled his senses; Maguire smacked the boy’s face with his mug and ale splashed everywhere.

Diggory fell against the bar and slipped down onto the floor. Watt looked on in horror and fled to get Flaysome.

Maguire made a fist of his right hand. 'I'm going to give you a hiding boy.'

'Stop it!' said Elowen, she grabbed hold of Maguire's arm and tried to drag him away from Diggory.

The fisherman pulled himself from her grip and backed her up against the bar.

'Now it's your turn, princess—'

A silver flash stopped him. Maguire's anger turned to fear. A gleaming dagger was being held to his throat.

'Let the girl go, Maguire or I'll slit your throat,' rumbled a deep voice.

The fisherman released Elowen. She looked at her rescuer: he was clad in a close-fitting over garment, open at the neck and short sleeved, exposing his arms which were knotted with muscles and covered with intricate tattoos, and he wore round golden earrings that caught the light from the fire.

Maguire held up both his hands, trembling in fear. His voice became shaky. 'No trouble here, mate, no trouble at all. Just a lark.'

The man lowered his dagger. 'Go before I decide to act differently.'

Maguire did not need to be told twice. He scampered out of the inn, closely followed by his companions.

When they had gone, the man sheathed his dagger and faced Elowen. His face was broad and weather-beaten, with a brown beard like a brush and dark eyes. His skin was so scarred it resembled a map and around his head was tied a piece of faded cloth. He looked forty, maybe fifty years old. 'Are you hurt?'

'No, no. I'm fine,' said Elowen.

'Your friend looks as though he needs some help.'

He leant down and pulled Diggory to his feet. The boy managed to stand unaided but he swayed like a tree in the wind. He struggled to focus and peered at the man. He said, 'Who are you?'

The man folded his arms and stared. Elowen saw much in those deep, dark eyes. Violence. Danger. Wisdom. Sadness. 'Black Francis, at your service.'

Cut and Run

Black Francis ushered the children up to their chamber. Once inside, Elowen relit the candle and waited nervously in front of the window. Diggory perched on his bed, rubbing his bruised forehead. Black Francis closed the door behind him—with growing unease, Elowen realised he blocked their only route of escape.

The stiff draught made the candle flame flicker; patches of light and shadow danced around the walls and ceiling. The sea captain folded his arms. He had an anchor tattooed on his left forearm and the letters making *HOLD FAST* individually tattooed on his knuckles.

‘So, you wish to talk,’ he said, his booming voice too big for the cramped room. ‘What is your business and how does it concern me?’

Elowen gulped before speaking, her mouth was bone dry. ‘We are looking for passage to Prevennis.’

‘There are a dozen captains in Dinas Hein who could offer you that. Why come to me?’

‘You were recommended to us,’ said Elowen who felt more nervous with every passing moment.

Black Francis casually pulled out his dagger again and

used its sharp point to pick at his fingernails. 'Recommended, eh? Who by?'

Elowen paused. A worrying thought struck her: what if this wasn't the real Black Francis, but an impostor, a spy? But she had to try, she had to risk it.

'Bucca Gwidden told us to seek you,' said Elowen.

The captain stopped picking his nails and shrugged. 'Never heard of him.'

His reply threw Elowen into confusion and Diggory fidgeted, his discomfort clear. Bucca had told them to find Black Francis, how could he not know the pixie?

'You must know him,' said Elowen.

Black Francis rolled his eyes. 'Describe him.'

When Elowen did so, the sailor laughed, a deep, chesty roar. 'A *pixie!* Are you here to waste my time with outlandish tales or do you have some token of your truth?'

'Token?' said Elowen, feeling bewildered. Under his stare, she felt like a flower withering in the sun. Then she remembered the seashell. She fumbled in the bag and when she grasped the shell, she held it up to the captain. 'This is my token.'

He stepped forward and gently took it from her. He held the shell up to the light, examining it closely. When he had finished, he grinned and passed it back to Elowen. 'I doubt you no longer. Forget my earlier words. In these dark days, a man must be wary.'

'Yes,' said Elowen, unable to hide her relief. 'You know Bucca then?'

'Of course. This shell is his token and he sends me passengers from time to time.'

‘So are you an Illuminati?’ said Elowen.

The sailor shook his head. ‘The Illuminati pay me for helping them and they pay me well. As for their cause, it means nothing to me.’

He pulled away the cloth tied around his head; he was not Nulled. He said, ‘I am a free man. A man of the sea and I take orders from no other man. I am my own master.’

Black Francis pulled up the chair and sat. He leant back with his hands behind his head, a mischievous smile played on his face. ‘Believe me, I’ve seen others like you two before. Wide-eyed and frightened. Full of hope. Full of dreams.’

Elowen felt sure the sailor was mocking them, trying to frighten them. She thought it best not to respond but Diggory took the bait. ‘What happened to them?’

Black Francis grinned and leant forward for dramatic effect. His eyes glowed with malice. ‘I never saw them again. Prevennis is a land full of danger. Prester John may not rule there but it still holds its own terrors.’

Diggory looked at the sailor, his mouth open and face white with fear.

Elowen said, ‘I will not turn—’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Diggory, looking accusingly at Black Francis. ‘Elowen, we can’t just go with this man. We know nothing about him. He might be trying to trick us. Rob us and leave us for dead.’

The boy’s words woke a dormant fear within Elowen. He had a point; they knew nothing about Black Francis. He claimed to be a friend of Bucca but what did that prove?

Black Francis rose to his feet, he loomed over them like a

giant. 'I have no time for this nonsense. I am a busy man. Do you wish for my aid or not?'

Elowen paused, they had no other choice. She replied without looking at Diggory. 'Yes, of course.'

The sailor folded his arms. 'Good. Passage to Prevennis I offer you then but of course I expect my price.'

'Price?' said Elowen. She had not expected to pay.

'Aye. I have costs after all. Fifty crowns is the price. Fifty crowns paid all in advance.'

'That's a fortune!' said Diggory, his mouth agape.

'My services do not come cheap. It's a costly business to run a ship, but of course, if you want to seek out a cheaper passage—'

'No, we will pay,' said Elowen. She dug into her pockets and picked out all the coins. She counted them slowly. 'Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty...that's all we have left.'

She passed the coins to the sailor who gathered them in his huge hands. 'Forty. Not much but it will do. You can make up the difference by working on-board. On any journey, there's always a deck to scrub and food to cook.'

Diggory looked alarmed and failed to suppress a groan. Elowen's heart sunk at the prospect of labouring on a ship, if only for a couple of days but they were in no position to barter.

'Very well, we agree,' said Elowen.

Black Francis clapped his hands, a sound that made both Elowen and Diggory flinch. 'Then it is settled. I am due to sail tomorrow; we have a shipment bound for Hammersund on the west coast of Prevennis. Have we a deal?'

‘Yes, yes,’ said Elowen, hardly able to believe that this was all happening and happening so fast.

‘Good. To delay further is risky. Your encounter with Maguire has made your position dangerous. There is a spy in this town, a spy for the Redeemers and I’ve heard it rumoured that it’s Maguire. He’d sell his soul for a couple of coins. Plenty of folk have disappeared here recently, sent to Gorefayne I doubt not. You’re the first passengers I’ve had in months. None of the others got this far. All Maguire’s work I reckon. So we must not tarry, rise early and trust no-one else here, not a single soul. Understand?’

Elowen nodded. Diggory looked at the floor.

‘Then make sure you’re at the quayside by first light and do not be late—I will not wait for you,’ said Black Francis. With that the sailor bowed and left, closing the door behind him.

Diggory looked at Elowen. He didn’t need to say anything; she knew what he was thinking so she answered his question before he spoke. ‘We haven’t got any choice. We have to go with him.’

‘I’m glad you’re so sure,’ said Diggory. ‘That’s the last you’ll see of those coins. You’re a fool giving him that money. I don’t like the look of him and that’s flat.’

His words piqued Elowen. Her anger was worsened by the sense that he spoke the truth. Rather than admit that, she fired back, ‘Scared of him are you?’

Diggory looked hurt. ‘I’m not scared, just wary. This Black Francis will cut our throats while we sleep more than likely.’

‘Listen, I’m not happy about it either,’ said Elowen. ‘But

Bucca said to trust Black Francis, so I will trust him. And he's not been Nulled.'

'It's all so wrong. I want things to be like they were before. I wish I was back in Trecadok. Back in the Orphanage.'

'I don't. I hated it there.'

'It was different for me. I was head boy,' he said. He held his sash, as though trying to prove it to himself. 'People listened to me, they respected me.'

'They were frightened of you. They hated you. You were a bully.'

'Bully? I only stuck to the rules. You have to have rules and you have to have discipline.'

'It's easy to hide behind rules. You used to make my life misery.'

Diggory sprung to his feet and jabbed a finger towards her. 'It was for your own good. You always were a nuisance. I'm not surprised you're in all this trouble.'

'Well, if I'm in trouble, you're in it with me.'

He threw her a filthy look. 'I don't have to listen to this. I don't have to listen to you. You still act like a child. I'm tired of arguing with you. I want some rest before tomorrow.'

Elowen seized on his words. 'So you agree we have to go with Black Francis?'

'Aye, but I still think you are wrong to trust him.'

They spoke no more until dawn.

Fearful of oversleeping, Elowen didn't close her eyes that night. She listened to the window panes rattle in the wind; the scurrying of mice; the slow, aching groan of timbers. A

hundred thoughts flashed through her mind. Bucca. Black Francis. Ictis. Redeemers. She barely had time to concentrate on one thing before another took its place. Finally, she settled on one thought, one thought that dominated all others.

Tomorrow, she would leave Helagan.

It sounded too incredible: to go on a *sea* voyage, to go to another country. All that had once been beyond the realms of possibility now lay in front of her.

She tried to imagine what Prevennis would be like. Tall mountains, deep snow, pine forests. And the people, what would the people be like? She had been taught that the Preven king was a wicked heretic, condemned by the Mother Church, the enemy of Prester John, his realm a fearful place full of cutthroat pirates and fierce creatures.

But there, so Tom Hickathrift said, lay the sanctuary. A place, Elowen hoped, free from fear and suffering.

They had to make it. They had to.

*

Forty crowns.

Black Francis grinned as he walked alone through the dark, grimy streets of Dinas Hein. He wandered aimlessly, smiling at his good fortune. The midnight hour approached and the town slowly settled down to slumber. A few drunks stumbled past him, refugees from the inns, their eyes glassy, legs like jelly. Sounds escaped from the crowded hovels he passed: an infant screamed for its mother; a consumptive old man coughed; lovers argued. The smell of coal smoke,

tobacco and stale alcohol laced the night air. Black Francis knew the streets of Dinas Hein were dangerous at night, footpads and thieves lurked in the dark alleys. No constables or watchmen dared to walk the streets but he forgot about the danger and his mind remained focused on one thought only.

Forty Crowns. He would have gladly accepted half of that. It normally took him two voyages to earn that much. The debt he owed to the King of the Sea Beggars grew by the day; he felt it like a noose gradually tightening around his neck. He needed to pay off his debt and quickly. He knew what would happen if he failed to do so.

He felt a sudden twinge of guilt and tried to dismiss it. The children were not his responsibility, business was business, they were travellers who wanted passage across the sea, and a dangerous passage at that. He had a ship, he had named a price, and they had agreed to pay it. There was nothing more to it.

Except there was.

They were children, just children, frightened, confused, lost in the chaos of Dinas Hein. And he had taken advantage of their naivety. He had never done that before. Bucca had sent him dozens of children in the past, all with the same bewildered look, and he had only ever charged them a token fee for passage. But he had never been so desperate before. He gripped his fists as he walked, angry with the mess he found himself in, angry with having to steal from children to save his own neck. He knew full well what would happen if he did not pay the Sea Beggars before the Summer Solstice. They would hunt him down, steal his

ship, slaughter his crew and cut his throat. But the guilt remained a nagging presence, like a mocking, gibbering demon on his shoulder.

Aloud he said, 'I'll see the children all right, I'll get them safely across the sea.' He spoke to ease his conscience. It helped only a little.

Black Francis became aware that he had wandered far from the harbour and deep into the confused maze of alleys and lanes. He needed to return to the *Husker Du* and ready the crew for the journey to come. He was trying to decide which way to go back when he heard a sound from the alley beside him, a loud burp followed by the sound of running water. Black Francis saw an old man, one hand against the wall, relieving himself. The stench of urine filled the air.

'Ahoy there, my friend,' said Black Francis. 'Can you tell me the swiftest way to the harbour?'

The man finished relieving himself and looked up, his eyes blank, his white hair entangled like a bird's nest. He grinned stupidly, his mouth a mix of teeth black rotten and white, like the keys of a piano. Then he sang an old sea shanty, one that Black Francis knew well. The man was too drunk to get any sense out of.

Black Francis let him be. He decided to trust to luck and follow his nose but he hadn't moved before he heard footsteps behind him. When he turned, he saw was the tip of a knife, an inch away from his throat.

'You are a difficult man to track down, Black Francis.'

The holder of the knife leant forward to reveal his face. Intricate tattoos coiled around his nose and eyes like a spider's web, tattoos of symbols ancient and powerful. The

dome of his hairless head caught the muted moonlight. He spoke in a brisk, nasal voice. ‘Don’t move or I’ll cut your throat.’

Black Francis did not know who the man was, but he knew *what* he was. A Sea Beggar, a pirate of the South Seas.

‘You are a long way from home, my friend,’ said Black Francis, trying to buy time. He thought about reaching for his own blade but the Sea Beggars were fierce mercenaries, and his assailant would surely cut his throat as promised.

The Sea Beggar laughed and Black Francis felt a gust of his hot, spicy breath. ‘I am no friend of yours. My name is Mouchard. Long have I sought you, at the bidding of my master.’

‘I am flattered that the King of the Sea Beggars should show so much interest in me.’

Mouchard licked his lips. ‘There are many reasons why he should. Your debts for one. Your disloyalty for another. My master grieves at the disrespect shown to him by one of his most valued servants.’

Black Francis bristled at the description. ‘I am not his servant.’

Mouchard pushed the blade so that its tip touched Black Francis’s chin. ‘You owe him money. That makes you his servant. Much faith he placed in you and you failed him. But the king is forgiving. He values you. He knows you are a man of strength, a man of cunning. Even now, despite your trespasses, he wishes to make peace with you.’

Black Francis tried to inch away from the tip of the blade. ‘I am flattered. How do I earn this...peace?’

Mouchard grinned. ‘I am surprised you need to ask. My

master demands you pay your debt. And then, return to his service for he has need of good captains.'

'The debt I shall pay in full and soon. But as to returning to his service...never. I will not be part of that trade again.'

The Sea Beggar pushed the knife a little further, it broke the skin but Black Francis made no sound, no movement. He refused to give the Sea Beggar the pleasure of his seeing his pain.

'You are in a poor position to negotiate, Black Francis. The king's mercy is not without bounds. Return to his service and he shall reward you well. Refuse and you die. There is no escape. There is no port you can hide in.'

Black Francis knew Mouchard was not bluffing, the Sea Beggars placed spies in every port across the Known World, but he could not give in so easily. His moral standards were low but not that low. He remembered the holds full of chained men, he remembered the despair in their eyes and he remembered the smell of faeces, of blood, of death. He whispered, 'I will not carry slaves again. There is no honour in that trade.'

'Honour? What honour do you have? A smuggler? A pirate? Honour! Well, there is no honour in death, Black Francis.'

The drunk in the alley soundly shouted out in his inebriated stupor. Mouchard averted his gaze, his concentration broken for no more than a second, but it was enough.

Black Francis pounced: he grabbed the Sea Beggar's arm and twisted it behind his back, the knife clattered to the ground. With his free arm the Sea Beggar swung a wild punch at Black Francis but being unbalanced, the blow

lacked power. Black Francis kicked his opponent's legs away and the Sea Beggar fell down on his back.

Black Francis knelt on Mouchard's chest, pinning him down. He unsheathed his own blade and held it to the Sea Beggar's throat. 'I think I am in a better position to negotiate now, don't you?'

Mouchard's eyes bulged. 'Be merciful. I can help you—'

Black Francis pulled the dagger across the man's throat, a shallow cut that barely cut the skin, and released him.

The Sea Beggar tenderly touched his own throat, blanching at the thin dribble of blood and barely able to believe he was still alive.

Black Francis stood over him. His blood boiled. He wanted to kill this man but knew that if he did he would regret it. He did not want to anger the King of the Sea Beggars any further. 'Tell your master that I shall pay my debt. But I am not his servant.'

Wincing, the Sea Beggar wiped his throat. 'There will be others. You cannot escape the king. Soon he—'

Black Francis swung a foot at the man's chin and knocked him out cold. 'I have heard enough from you.'

Leaving Mouchard unconscious, Black Francis hurried towards the harbour. He was running out of time. The Sea Beggars were closing in on him and he could not delay any longer.

*

At the first hint of dawn, Elowen got out of bed and roused Diggory from his deep sleep. They dressed, packed and

headed downstairs. To Elowen's surprise, Fyna Flaysome was already up and had prepared a breakfast of cold turkey pie, kippers and oysters.

'I'm sorry about Maguire last night,' said the landlady. 'It pains me to have such a man drink here but times are hard as you'll understand and it's not easy to turn away any custom, however loathsome. Anyway, to make amends I've got you some breakfast. Free of charge like.'

Elowen was touched by her kindness and thanked her several times.

Flaysome waved her hand. 'Oh, it's nowt. Eat up and enjoy.'

They did not need to be told twice and tucked in heartily.

When they had finished, Flaysome cleared the table. 'I can't say I'm happy about you travelling with Black Francis. What trouble forces you to take up with that old rogue I can't guess. Well you must know your own minds.'

Elowen studied the landlady's worried face. 'We'll be all right. And thank you for all your kindness.'

'Don't worry about that,' she said, putting a firm arm around Elowen. 'You are welcome here, anytime. Don't you forget about the Black Boar!'

'We won't!' they replied together.

Flaysome smiled. 'Good. Watt is outside with your hound. Vicious beast if you forgive me for saying it. He snapped at Watt a couple of times. Don't fret—there's no harm done.'

Much relieved, they said farewell to the landlady and went outside. Watt stood there, trembling in the cold morning air. He held the frayed rope tied around Ulfur's neck at arm's length.

The wolf sat still, his face impassive and arrogant.

Elowen said to Watt, 'I hope he hasn't been—'

The servant passed her the rope before she could finish and hurried to the door.

'Have you been frightening him, Ulfur?' said Elowen.

The wolf yawned and stretched.

Ulfur not a dog. Ulfur not happy.

'I know, but you don't have to pretend for much longer.'

This placated the wolf and he trotted next to her, nuzzling his snout into her legs. She rubbed the coarse hair of his back before patting his side. Diggory kept his distance.

It was cold for May. The morning sun painted the quay-side in pale red light and Elowen looked up at the molten sky with apprehension. The harbour was already bustling with fishermen and merchants, their shouts and curses carried on the gentle wind.

Diggory licked his lips. 'I don't feel safe waiting here. This is all a trick I warrant. That Black Francis has run off with the money.'

'He'll be here,' said Elowen, wanting to sound sure. They were close to the Sentinel—Elowen tried not to look at it. She tied Ulfur's lead around the stone pillar that stood on the quay. The wolf sat, looking miserable.

Ulfur hate rope.

'I know,' said Elowen, rubbing the fur on the top of his head. Each passing second increased her nervousness. She played with the pendant, trying to remain calm. What would they do if Black Francis didn't return? Had she misjudged him like she had misjudged the intentions of Malengin and Count Nadelek? Had she made another terrible blunder?

She worried about Maguire, if he was truly in league with the Redeemers who knew what mischief he could make?

A jackdaw hopped around, its bright button eyes scoured the ground for insects. Squabbling gulls circled above in great numbers, sharing their noisy arguments with the world. Narrow steps led down to the bobbing boats below. Elowen stood at the top step and looked down at the murky, seaweed-infested water.

Diggory gripped her arm and pointed. ‘Look, there’s Father Austwick. He’s coming this way.’

The priest was indeed hobbling towards them with his walking stick and greeted them with a broad smile. ‘My young friends, I am pleased to see you again. You are up early. Travelling again, eh?’

Somehow, Elowen guessed that the priest already knew the answer to that question. She nodded and said, ‘I’m afraid we must be going on.’

‘Of course! But I cannot allow it.’

Elowen’s blood ran cold and fear gripped her but she did not know why. The priest continued, his smile not once breaking, ‘I think it most unsafe that you leave Dinas Hein. We cannot have you leaving these shores.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Elowen.

‘Oh but I think you do, child. From what I hear, the Brotherhood of Redemption is most eager to find you.’

Elowen flashed a look at Diggory, who stood with his mouth open. A smoky fog rolled in from the sea and in seconds held the harbour in a clammy grip. All sounds became muffled; people moved like ghosts in the gloom; the gulls fell silent; the jackdaw flapped away.

‘I was asked to look for a girl, a southern girl and I believe I have found her. Give yourself up, Elowen,’ said Austwick. He held out his pale, trembling hand towards her. ‘Tis useless to flee the Redeemers. They alone can save you from the sinful path you have chosen.’

Elowen gasped. ‘*You* are the spy, not Maguire.’

‘That drunken fool?’ said the priest. ‘Oh, Maguire has his uses and he told me of your meeting with Black Francis. That, along with our fortunate encounter last night, confirmed my belief that you were the child the Redeemers sought.’

Beside Elowen, Ulfur growled, his hackles raised. With him next to her, she felt strong. She said to Austwick, ‘Go now or I’ll set Ulfur on you.’

The warm smile faded on the priest’s face. ‘Oh, Elowen, this could have been avoided. I tried to stop it ending like this because I liked you both. I am always fond of children but you leave me with no choice. I have to obey my masters.’

Through the mist, a figure on horseback emerged.

A Redeemer.

The fishermen and merchants on the quay edged away from the horse and its rider but they stopped to watch.

‘I am sorry, children,’ said Austwick. His kindly tone clashed with the bitterness of his words. ‘I can do nothing more for you. You must pay for your sin—’

He never finished his sentence. To Elowen’s amazement, Diggory took one step forward and punched the priest on the chin, sending him sprawling backwards onto the ground.

The Redeemer stopped his horse in front of Elowen and her companions. He sat as still as stone. Then he spoke, an old voice, a tired voice. 'I am Brother Marburg. Do not try to run. There is no escape.'

The Redeemer held out his arms towards the Sentinel, chanting as he did so. The air around the Sentinel shimmered as though a great fire burned inside it. Ulfur whimpered and tucked his tail between his legs.

Nursing his bruised hand, Diggory shouted to the onlookers, 'HELP US, PLEASE HELP US!'

But no-one moved. A change had come over them—they stared blankly ahead, eyes dead, faces pale, alive but no signs of life. Shadows only.

The Redeemer laughed coldly. 'Nobody will come to your aid, boy. Everyone is your enemy here.'

Elowen remembered the words of Tom Hickathrift. *Through the Null, Redeemers can guide the thoughts of the bearer, like a puppeteer controls a stringed puppet.* They were outnumbered and surrounded by enemies. What chance did they have now? It wasn't fair—to have reached this far, to have come so close to escaping Helagan and fail at the last, the very last.

Marburg dismounted slowly and when off the horse, stood hunched like an old man buckling under a great weight. His white fingers were as twisted as gnarled branches. He said to the crowd, 'Seize them. Bring the girl to me. Kill the boy and the wolf.'

Three fishermen grabbed Diggory. He screamed and wriggled hard but they easily overpowered him and tied his hands and feet with rope.

Ulfur went berserk, straining at the rope that kept him tied to the stone pillar.

Maguire burst through the crowd, charging at Elowen.

‘GET HER!’ he bellowed.

But before he reached Elowen, someone grabbed her hair and yanked her back. Eyes watering with pain, it took Elowen a moment to identify her attacker.

Fyna Flaysome.

The friendly warm red face had been replaced by a ghostly mask.

‘Stop, Fyna, it’s me,’ said Elowen but there was no hint of recognition. Instead she took a painfully firm grip of Elowen’s left arm.

Maguire closed in on her, his eyes burned with hate. She was lost.

Then Fyna’s grip loosened; she grunted and fell down with a thud.

Maguire stopped, inches away from her. His face curled up with rage but he was not looking at Elowen, only at the figure that loomed behind her.

Black Francis.

He carried a long quarterstaff and before Maguire realised what hit him, Black Francis swung the stave and struck him on the forehead, knocking him out cold.

‘Get behind me, girl, and for God’s sake set the wolf free,’ said the captain.

Groggily, Elowen obeyed. She crawled behind the sailor and untied Ulfur. The wolf charged at the fishermen who held Diggory. Black Francis joined the fray, swatting the men away like flies: each time his quarterstaff flashed, a

head cracked. Elowen untied Diggory's bonds; blood dripped from the boy's nose and mouth but he was conscious and still strong enough to stand.

The townsfolk charged again but the captain held them off. He shouted to Elowen and Diggory, 'DOWN THE STEPS!'

Elowen saw Marburg in the corner of her eye, scuttling towards her like a spider. He pulled out a knife, a thin, cruel-looking blade and in a lightning move bent down and dug it into her left thigh. He twisted the blade and snapped it, leaving a shard still embedded in her leg.

Elowen screamed in pain. The strength drained from her body and her veins became rivers of ice. She shivered and found it hard to breathe.

'You are mine now, child,' said the Redeemer. His foul breath made her feel sick.

Elowen heard a growl.

Ulfur.

The wolf leapt at her attacker. At first Elowen thought Ulfur would tear Marburg apart but to her horror he threw the wolf aside like a rag. Ulfur landed six feet away and lay badly winded.

But the Redeemer had not won yet. He stopped for a second to gloat over the stricken wolf, and by doing so did not see his new opponent: Black Francis. The sea captain swung his quarterstaff so hard his feet lifted the ground; it impacted on Marburg's chest and snapped in half—the blow sent the Redeemer flying backwards, crooked hands flying in the air.

'Down the steps!' said Black Francis.

Diggory helped Elowen down the slippery steps. She winced and groaned with effort, her leg throbbled with pain and her hearing came and went. Ulfur, still panting in pain, followed them. At the foot of the steps, bobbing in the water, was a wooden dinghy crewed by a young man and three boys not much older than Diggory. The boys did not speak but the young man, who was tall with thick black hair and swarthy skin, stood and helped them into the boat.

‘My name is Shrimp,’ he said.

Ulfur caused some worried glances but the boys said nothing.

Black Francis, now fighting with his bare fists, repelled attack after attack. He shouted, ‘CUT AND RUN, BOYS!’

Once Elowen, Diggory and Ulfur were on-board, the crew pushed the dinghy off and whistled to Black Francis. The sailor dodged a dozen grasping hands and dived into the water. In several strokes he reached the boat and hauled himself on board.

But they were not yet free.

Several attackers dived into the water after them. Others stood on the lip of the quay, throwing any missile to hand: stones, knives and bottles. But neither swimmer nor missile came close. Black Francis took over the oars and with his strength they soon pulled clear. Elowen looked round and along the harbour she saw a line of people, among them the Redeemer. Even though from a distance he was little more than a white blur, Elowen could feel his brooding anger.

They threaded a route between buoys and mooring ropes entangled with seaweed, eventually they passed the harbour wall and out into the open sea.

They had escaped.

Black Francis strained at the oars, the pace never slacking. Elowen was struck by the age of the crew, they were so young. Apart from Shrimp, there was a short, red-haired boy with freckly skin. He had a squint and a permanent grin. The other two appeared to be twins, blue eyed, tanned by the sun and salty wind.

Away from the Redeemer's withering glare, Elowen felt a little better. Her wound still burned but she found it easier to breathe—the salty wind sprayed her face, cold but invigorating. Ulfur rested against her, panting heavily, and she found his warmth comforting. Diggory sat in silence, dried blood around his nose, his arms wrapped around his legs. Black Francis surrendered the oars and embraced Shrimp. He whispered in his ear and they both laughed. The captain said to Elowen, 'Let me look at your injured leg.'

He gently peeled the torn parts of her breeches to reveal the wound. He peered down and took a deep breath.

'What is it?' said Elowen.

He exhaled gently. 'Wait until we are safely on the *Husker Du*. Then I shall attend to your wound.'

That did not reassure Elowen much. 'I was beginning to think you weren't going to come. You were late.'

'I have business of my own to attend to and I had hoped to leave this port quietly and quickly. It will be hard for me to come back to Dinas Hein now.'

'Well, thank you all the same.'

'I don't need your gratitude. I need your money and the money the Illuminati will pay me when I get you safely across to Prevennis. That's all I care about.'

Elowen stared at Black Francis, hoping to see some sign of mirth but his eyes were hard.

‘Our vessel is anchored close by,’ continued the captain. ‘We will soon be there. Now, let me introduce some of the crew.’

He laid a hand on the shoulder of Shrimp and gently, affectionately, squeezed it. Elowen noticed a glance, a look of warmth, perhaps more, between them. ‘Shrimp is my coxswain and my companion on life’s adventure. The twins are Whelk and Limpet, the carpenter and the cook. I’ll leave it to you to guess which one is which. I’m still not sure.’

The twins laughed and nodded to Elowen and Diggory.

‘The other lad is Crab; ain’t much of a talker but a better foremastman you won’t find. Ain’t that right, lad?’

Crab gave a toothy grin but said nothing.

They followed the coastline northwards. It was a rough journey; swollen waves toyed with the dinghy and its progress was slow. Black Francis took over the oars once more and they drove on.

The sun rose peacefully in the sky turning the sea aflame. Gulls glided high above them. They came to a channel between a small rocky island and a jutting headland with a grassy summit which reached far above sea level. Once through the channel, the scene in front of them opened up to a wide cove dotted with sharp rocks. A ship was anchored in the cove, a two-masted vessel with a figurehead carved to resemble a woman. Musket ball holes perforated some of the timbers: the ship had clearly seen plenty of action and cannons were mounted on the quarter deck. Black Francis said, ‘Ah, there she is. My lady. The *Husker Du*.

Come on boys, look lively there. We must set sail as soon as possible.'

When they reached the *Husker Du* a rope ladder was thrown down. Pain burned in Elowen's leg as she climbed, a pain that blocked out everything else. Ulfur was lifted on deck by a straining and wheezing Black Francis.

Despite her pain, Elowen drank in the ship's sights and sounds: the tall masts, the cobweb of rigging and the creaking timbers. She saw the rest of the crew, all boys and all going by strange names like Goby, Blenny and Eel. Black Francis and his boys readied the ship. The captain marched around barking orders that Elowen did not understand.

When the preparations were underway, Black Francis strode over to Elowen. He carried a small bag. 'Come, girl, let me see your wound again.'

He knelt and with a damp cloth wiped away the dried blood around the wound. From the bag he pulled out some bandaging and with surprising tenderness he tied it around her injured leg. 'This will have to do for now.'

'Is it infected?' said Elowen, trying not to sound too concerned.

He avoided answering her question and looked at Ulfur. 'Now in the name of God, why are you travelling with a wolf? You never mentioned that before.'

Elowen realised she had not told Black Francis about the wolf. 'He helped us escape from...it's a long story.'

'That much I guessed. Well, stories must wait for now. I'm not happy about having a wolf on-board and neither are my boys. Wolves are vicious beasts; I'd rather leave him behind to worry sheep rather than my crew.'

‘But, sir, he has to come,’ said Elowen. ‘He won’t bite anybody, I promise.’

Black Francis stared at the wolf. ‘You have some bond with this beast. Like something from the old tales it is. Very well. He can come, on condition he remains tied up in the hold for the whole journey.’

‘Of course,’ said Elowen.

‘And if he as much as growls at me or my boys...’ the sailor ran his finger across his throat. Elowen understood his meaning and gulped. ‘Now we have lingered long enough. The next time your feet touch dry land you’ll be in Prevennis.’

The captain strode off to oversee the work of his crew, bellowing out to them, ‘COME ON, SEA DOGS! WORK TO BE DONE!’

Soon they were under sail and Helagan became little more than a distant fringe of green on the horizon.

As she watched Helagan disappear, Elowen wondered if she would ever see her homeland again.

The Kraken

The *Husker Du* sailed out into the open sea. Elowen took a few unsteady steps on the deck, her arms outstretched for balance. The salty air rubbed raw against her face and the two masts towered above her, their square sails billowing in the wind. The crew were busy cleaning, repairing and tarring. Diggory had been made to help, Elowen saw him on his hands and knees scrubbing the deck, a perfect picture of misery.

Black Francis marched around the deck, encouraging, helping, criticizing, teaching. When he noticed Elowen he smiled and strode over to her. ‘How do you find life on the sea, lass?’

Still unsteady on her feet, Elowen said, ‘It may take time to get used to it.’

‘You’ll find your sea legs soon enough,’ said Black Francis. ‘What about Ulfur?’ said Elowen.

Black Francis rolled his eyes. ‘He’s in the hold. The crew would put a musket ball in his skull if they had half a chance and so would I. Don’t look so worried, he’s tied up and I have said no-one is to touch the flea-ridden beast.’

Barely reassured about the fate of her wolf companion,

Elowen turned to another concern. ‘Do you think the Redeemers will follow us?’

He rubbed his beard as he considered the question. ‘I suppose they *might* try but they won’t easily catch the *Husker Du*, that I promise you. Don’t heed the age of the crew, young they may be but good hands all. They’re orphans see. None of them were Nulled of course and I aim to keep it that way. Mind, if you forgive me for mentioning it, you being on board makes them uncomfortable.’

‘Me? What have I done?’ said Elowen.

‘Ah, you’re a *female*,’ said Black Francis as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Females are never welcome on-board a ship, bad luck sailors believe. A dangerous instrument of division and quarrel is a woman on board a ship. My crew might be young but they soon learn the lore of the sea.’

‘Daft superstitions,’ said Elowen. ‘Surely you don’t believe in them too?’

Black Francis shrugged and looked out onto the brown, choppy sea. ‘I believe in anything that keeps me alive and so far it has served me well. Aye, the sea is a fickle mistress but I couldn’t cope with any other life. Memories drown in the sea and I have many memories I’d be happy to lose. The sea never changes. It is always the same. Different moods of course, sometimes angry, sometimes calm but in itself always the same. Come to my cabin. We must talk a little more and talk in private.’

Black Francis led her down to a cramped cabin with a very low wooden beamed ceiling. A cat of nine tails hung on the wall along with canes, ropes, belts and sticks. Black

Francis noticed Elowen looking at them. 'A ship needs discipline, lass. Now, lay on the hammock and rest your legs.'

Awkwardly Elowen did so, though it took her a couple of attempts. Black Francis sat a barrel beside the hammock. 'How is your leg?'

'Sore,' said Elowen.

'Aye, I expected that,' he said. He cleared his throat and shifted his bulky weight. 'I won't lie to you, Elowen. The knife the Redeemer wounded you with was poisoned.'

'Poisoned?' said Elowen. Blood rushed to her head, she felt dizzy and nauseated.

Black Francis leant forward, his hands made a steeple on which he rested his chin. 'The wound has closed but it won't heal, at least not properly. The Redeemers use weapons made from Cold Iron and they do more than wound and kill. A piece of the Redeemer's blade, a piece of Cold Iron, broke off in your wound.'

Elowen sat up, barely able to give voice to her fear. 'Am I going...to die?'

Black Francis placed a steadying hand on the hammock. He avoided making eye contact and lowered his voice to the barest whisper. 'You need to get to the sanctuary and double quick. Cold Iron has got a life of its own. Redeemers can sense and find it.'

Elowen understood. She remembered Vortigern, she remembered how the Redeemers had hunted him down and how they had killed him.

'They are tracking you,' continued Black Francis, 'like a hound follows a fox.'

'Can they track me all the way to Prevennis?'

‘Perhaps. But we’ve got a head start. With this wind, we should soon be in Hammersund. Try to get some sleep. I’ll leave you be.’

The captain stood and trudged out of the cabin. Elowen drifted into a shallow, fitful sleep, troubled by the words of Black Francis and the images they conjured.

Elowen woke up about an hour later, a little refreshed from her sleep. Stiff from lying down, she decided to get up. The hammock swung this way and that. Elowen struggled to get out of it and nearly tipped over onto the floor. She crawled out of the hammock and stood. Her leg throbbed with the now familiar pain, but she managed to walk and made her way up the narrow wooden steps to the deck. Black Francis strode around like an emperor, barking orders. Diggory, still on his hands and knees, scrubbed the deck, his face a shade of pale green. Elowen decided to go and speak to him but a cry from the look-out in the crow’s nest stopped Elowen in her tracks.

‘AHOY, CAPTAIN. LOOK STARBOARD! KRAKEN!’

‘All stand fast,’ said Black Francis.

Elowen squinted at the choppy water; a low, V-shaped wave raced towards the ship. Before Elowen had any understanding of what was happening, the wave hit the ship with great force and lifted the starboard side out of the water. All the crew slid down the deck and Elowen’s world spun round. Her shoulder slammed against a cannon.

The ship levelled with a loud splash, an eerie silence followed.

‘What’s happening?’ said Elowen, bruised and shaken. The crew rose groggily to their feet.

‘A Kraken, a monster of the deep,’ said Black Francis as he wiped away a small line of blood from under his nose.

Kraken. Elowen recalled pictures from her chapbooks, lurid pictures of sailors being lost to the deep and of ships being swallowed whole.

‘Ahoy, it’s coming back,’ said Black Francis.

THUD.

The ship tipped again, now with its port side lifted. It bobbed in the water like a cork, at the mercy of the waves. To Elowen’s relief, the waves nudged the *Husker Du* level—the ship’s timbers creaked and groaned. Elowen’s hands found a rope and she clung on for dear life.

When the vessel settled, Black Francis called out to Shrimp. Bleeding from a shallow head wound, the coxswain stumbled towards his captain. ‘Shall I load the cannons?’

‘Nay, we’ll never hit the cursed beast with them. Ready the muskets. If it comes back we’ll fire a volley to put him off.’

‘Very good, captain,’ said Shrimp, already on his way. He quickly returned, carrying a couple of old fashioned muskets, a rusted harquebus and a pistol. Black Francis and Shrimp each took a musket, the other two weapons were passed to Whelk and Limpet. They hurried to load and ready their guns, struggling in the damp air.

Elowen crawled to the side of the ship and looked out. A hundred yards away, she saw a disturbance in the water. A huge grey tail lifted from the sea before splashing down in a foamy explosion.

The Kraken.

She could only guess at its size. It slowly circled the ship.

‘Stand ready, men,’ said Black Francis. The four gunmen stood in a line, weapons at the ready.

The Kraken changed direction and headed straight for the port side of the *Husker Du*. As it approached, the creature raised a wedge-shaped head, bony and barnacle encrusted. A huge mouth opened to expose two rows of small razor sharp teeth.

It closed in on the ship; no more than eighty yards away.

‘Present,’ said Black Francis and, alongside the other three gunmen, stepped forward.

The Kraken grew closer. Sixty yards. Fifty yards.

Black Francis yelled, ‘Fire!’

The shots ripped into the Kraken’s snout—it made a deep rumbling sound that vibrated the timbers below Elowen’s feet and swerved away from the ship. The Kraken’s tail flicked out of the water, sending a wave of foam over the deck.

Nobody dared breathe. The sea calmed. Nobody spoke.

In a voice barely above a whisper Black Francis said, ‘It has gone.’

His words relaxed all aboard and Elowen breathed out at last, bringing relief to her strained lungs.

Eyes wild, Shrimp said, ‘Have you ever seen a Kraken this far north?’

Black Francis grimaced. ‘Nay and they are seldom so aggressive. Come on, lads, patch up the ship. Hoy! Pump, men! Buckets, scrubbers and brooms. And you, Diggory lad, no time for standing around.’

The crew, and the reluctant Diggory, worked for hours. By dusk the ship was, to use Black Francis’s description,

‘copper bottomed’. Elowen presumed that meant all was well. She took an opportunity to hobble down to the dark, damp hold to check on Ulfur. The wolf chewed on a sheep bone thrown down to him by one of the crew. He looked up as Elowen entered and wagged his tail lethargically.

Ulfur not like wooden cave. The ground moves. Makes strange sounds.

Elowen knelt to stroke his back. ‘I’m sorry, Ulfur. We’ll soon be back on dry land.’

Ulfur hopes so.

‘Me too,’ said Elowen, patting the wolf gently on the head.

Later she met Diggory on deck. He looked weary and he held up his blistered hands as proof of his labours. ‘I never want to sail on a ship again. Elowen, can I say something?’

‘Of course,’ she said, knocked off-guard by his words, wondering what on earth he was going to say.

The boy took a deep breath and looked down at his feet. ‘I’m sorry, Elowen. For lots of things, for everything. The way I treated you over the years, back in Trecadok, it was wrong.’

‘That’s all in the past now,’ said Elowen. The pain of his bullying lingered, but deep down she wanted to forgive him—the petty words and squabbles of childhood were insignificant compared to what they had endured since their flight from Trecadok.

‘Well, I hope so. I’ve not been much use on this journey. I know that. I still had one foot in the Orphanage I suppose. I still wanted to be head boy, be around grown-ups, to live by rules, but I was wrong. You were right. We can’t trust

anybody who has been Nulled. After what happened with Father Austwick, I see that now. It's like the world has been turned upside down. Everything I believed in, everything I thought was *important*, has changed.'

Then without a word, the boy walked to the ship's brow, Elowen hobbled after him, worried what he had in mind. He stopped and looked down into the water. For a terrifying moment Elowen feared he was going to jump in but he slowly took off his sash, itself now little more than a limp rag, the black and white colours mixed and faded to grey.

'I won't be needing this any more,' he said.

He paused briefly before letting it fall into the water. It floated on the surface for a few seconds before slipping beneath the waves. Diggory looked at Elowen—she was surprised to see his eyes were red and damp with tears. 'I want to be your friend, Elowen. I want to help you get to this sanctuary. I won't let you down, I promise.'

Elowen found herself touched by his honesty. She knew that it was never easy to admit you are wrong.

'I shall travel with you, Elowen, whatever the danger,' said Diggory. 'I've come this far and I want to see it through. There is nothing for me in the world we have left behind. I still see the faces of the children in Trecadok. I don't want to end up like them. I'm sure of that. I won't be Nulled.'

'Me neither,' said Elowen.

'I'd best get back to my chores. The old Diggory has gone, Elowen. The head boy has gone forever.'

That night, the captain invited Elowen and Diggory to his cabin for supper. The supper was simple fare: a few potatoes, carrots, salted beef and cheese as tough as old leather,

all washed down with weak ale. The pain in Elowen's leg nagged, but she gritted her teeth, and tried to put it to the back of her mind.

When they had eaten, Black Francis burped and wiped his mouth on his bare, tattooed forearm. Crumbs clung stubbornly to his beard.

'Everything feels better after eating, don't you agree?' he said, stretching his long legs. 'I remember voyages when, by the last stretch, we had nothing but ship's biscuit to last us.'

'What's ship's biscuit?' said Elowen.

Black Francis grinned. 'Hard as stone it is. Only when the weevils had gnawed their way through a biscuit was it weakened enough to eat. A sailor's life is a hard life. A cramped cabin, salted meat, broken sleep, mouldy bread, wet clothes, want of fire. Aye, it's a tough life with few luxuries and in tough times keeping alive is all that matters. You two will have to remember that in the days to come. The road to the sanctuary is hard. I will give you some provisions, the rest you will have to find for yourself.'

'Have you ever been to the sanctuary?' said Elowen.

Black Francis shook his head. 'I have no need to go there. Nor do I wish to.'

'But you still help the Illuminati?'

Black Francis folded his arms in front of his chest. 'Only because they pay me. Now, that's enough questions, child. We must think of the journey ahead. Your accents will mark you out as strangers so keep away from people. The more you have to talk, the more you will have to explain. That damned wolf will attract fear and attention. Must he travel with you? I'll keep hold of him if you'd prefer, beast like

that might fetch a pretty price at a foreign market. Good sport he'd give.'

'He comes with me,' said Elowen.

Black Francis unfolded his arms. 'This is madness but I see your mind is made up. So be it. We have a shipment to drop off in Hammersund. From there we shall sail you north to meet with an old friend, Frodi the Hermit. He will show you the way to the sanctuary and, more importantly, pay me a little extra as reward for your safe passage. Ah, I nearly forgot...'

The captain stood and rummaged through a wooden chest. He pulled out a bundle of clothes: coats, trousers and fur boots tied with leather laces, fur mittens, and sealskin socks. They all smelt old and musty. 'I've had these for years, part of an old shipment. I've got no use for them. You might as well have them. Come now, try them on.'

When they had finished dressing, Diggory blurted out what Elowen was thinking. 'We look daft in these.'

Black Francis rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Aye but they'll serve their purpose all right. They may just keep you alive.'

*

At the instruction of Black Francis, Elowen and Diggory remained in his cabin to rest and gather strength. The time passed slowly; Elowen felt so listless—to walk around became a great effort. The cabin had a small porthole but she found she could not be bothered to look out at the waves and soaring gulls. Something was wrong. It wasn't just the

fear of what lay ahead, the pain in her leg or the unsettled feeling in her stomach caused by the ship's lurching motion. A sense of unease lurked, out of understanding, like a black cloud hovering above her. Elowen found it hard to fight the grim mood that had captured her. What chance did they have of surviving in a wild land like Prevennis? She felt lost, like a rudderless ship, hoping that the winds would be kind and blow her in the right direction.

Close to dawn, Black Francis called Elowen and Diggory up on deck. A cold wind swirled around them, carrying smells that were strange to Elowen, smells of pine resin and snow. All around them was darkness, black water and black sky. Ahead in the far distance, Elowen saw a line of twinkling lights. The captain said, 'That is Hammersund.'

As the *Husker Du* approached the town, the sun climbed, glazing red and orange light onto the sky's dark canvas. Elowen spied a few anchored trawlers and barges, the harbour wall and the tall roofs of the town beyond. Above the town lurked a huge grey palace with bleak walls, its towers framed by the grim mountains behind.

Smudges of black smoke rose from the town and the wind carried a smell of burning. Ships squatted half-sunken in the harbour, their broken masts peeking out of the water like the tips of drowned trees. Some houses were blackened, burnt-out shells.

Black Francis frowned and sniffed the air. 'There has been trouble. Look at those ships yonder. Preven Royal ships, scuttled. We do not harbour here.'

'What about the shipment?' said Shrimp. 'It carries a pretty price and we need the money.'

Black Francis let out a heavy sigh. ‘That is true but it will have to wait. We make straight for Hermitage Rock.’

His command sparked a frenzy of activity among the crew. They left the bay of Hammersund and sailed north. Shortly they came to a crescent-shaped cove with a beach of pure black sand, the product of long-forgotten volcanic eruptions, the foam and sea spray formed a creamy border at the water’s edge. Just off the beach jutted a pyramid-shaped rock island.

‘Drop anchor!’ said Black Francis.

The captain lit a brand and its flames flickered in the wind.

‘This brand is a signal,’ said Black Francis. ‘If Frodi sees this and all is safe, he will light a beacon.’

Black Francis held the brand aloft. He waited but no response came. He tried waving the brand; a fiery trail marked its progress like a comet but still no sign came from the island.

The captain swore and tossed the brand into the sea. ‘Frodi is probably drunk or asleep. We cannot delay further. Come, it is time for you to stand on dry land again. I shall take you across. Shrimp, anchor further north—Thrudheim should be safe enough. Remain there until nightfall then return for me. I wish to speak with Frodi, I want to know what happened at Hammersund.’

With Black Francis, Elowen, Diggory and a grumpy Ulfur inside, the dinghy was lowered into the water.

‘We make for the beach,’ said Black Francis. ‘We can safely leave the dinghy there. From the beach we can wade out to the island.’

The captain carried a two-edged short sword with a rounded point, a semi-circular pommel, silver clad hilt and a short straight guard. The blade was corroded but traces of an inlaid inscription were visible, recording the name of the smith who had forged it. Elowen stared at it, a sick feeling growing in her stomach. Black Francis smiled when he saw her looking at the sword. 'I'm taking this just in case.'

The water remained calm, the air icy cold. Behind them the *Husker Du* raised anchor and sailed north. Soon the dinghy's keel ground onto the beach, Elowen jumped out of the boat and her feet sank into the black sand. Steep dunes marked the upper shore. It was a short wade to the rocky island but although the water only reached waist height it was fiercely cold. Elowen struggled for breath, and her teeth chattered and her body ached. Beside her, Black Francis carried Ulfur in his strong arms, puffing and blowing with the effort; Diggory stumbled after them. Carved from shiny black rock, the island stood half-drowned in the sea. Clusters of limpets and winkles clung to the rock, and a jungle of oarweed lined the lower water mark. They climbed up onto the rock and found the entrance to a small cave, around which were tied faded cloth ribbons.

Black Francis called out the hermit's name but there was no answer. Slowly, he unsheathed his sword, his thick fingers settling on the hilt. 'Wait here.'

Black Francis ducked inside the cave. When he returned a moment later, Elowen saw the concern carved on his face. He said, 'Frodi's gone. All his possessions broken, smashed and scattered around the cave,' he sheathed his sword and rubbed his beard. 'I don't like it. I don't like it one bit.'

A cold knot formed in Elowen's stomach. 'What do you think happened?'

'I don't know, but my heart tells me it is not safe to linger here. Come, let us return to the boat and find a safe place to shelter until morning.'

He grabbed Ulfur under one arm and leapt off the island. With great strides he waded back to the beach, Elowen and Diggory struggled to follow. The tide was coming in and thick waves made the short distance hard going. With the salty spray stinging her eyes, Elowen found it hard to see. Wet and shivering, she gritted her teeth and pushed on to the beach. When she got there her whole body froze at the sight she beheld.

Five riders waited on the beach. They wore burgonet helmets, breastplates over buff coats and red sashes were tied around their midribs. All were Nulled. Their leader, a sergeant with a red face and a neat white beard, aimed his carbine. The other soldiers dismounted and drew their swords, which they pointed towards Elowen and her companions.

'We are the Kingsguard—do not move, pirate scum, you have nowhere to go,' said the sergeant as he dismounted. He spoke in the common tongue but with a heavy accent. A malicious smile grew on his lips. 'So, it is the infamous Black Francis. We thought you might try to anchor here. The old hermit told us much before the rack ripped out the last breath from him.'

Black Francis flinched. 'The rack...'

The sergeant enjoyed the effect of his words. 'Yes. The rack. The punishment all heretics deserve. Word travels fast and you have made some dangerous enemies, pirate. The

Brotherhood has put a heavy price on your head. Nothing escapes their grasp. The sea is no barrier and Prevennis is no longer a safe haven for the likes of you. This land belongs to Prester John now.'

'You're lying,' said Black Francis.

The sergeant pointed at Elowen and licked his lips. 'The girl carries an object of value, an object the Brotherhood desires greatly. I will take it now.'

'You'll have nothing,' said Black Francis. Ulfur crouched, ready to attack. Elowen held onto him, fearing he would be cut down by musket ball or sword.

'Then you must die,' said the sergeant. He moved his carbine to aim at Black Francis's forehead.

But before he could fire, Ulfur broke free of Elowen's grasp. He leapt up at the sergeant and knocked him backwards. Ulfur gored at the man's throat, the sergeant thrashed and screamed but could not shake off the wolf. His men charged to his aid, swords flashing but another stood against them.

Black Francis said, 'Now it is time to spill *your* blood.'

The first soldier charged—Black Francis swerved from his lunge and their blades met with a shrill metallic scream. Black Francis dodged and parried before plunging his blade into the gap between the man's armour and helmet. The man gave a horrible gasp as life left his body. The violence struck Elowen like a physical blow and she trembled.

Two soldiers managed to parry the blows of Black Francis, but the sailor failed to notice the other who slipped in behind him. His blade hacked at Black Francis's shoulder; the sailor grunted in pain and fell to his knees. Then with

the hilt of his sword, the soldier struck him on the back of his head. Black Francis went limp and fell face first to the ground.

Elowen recovered some of her strength. She was scared, as scared as she had been when faced with the Redeemers, but she refused to stand idle and watch Black Francis die. Even though she had no weapons she ran towards the soldiers and was surprised to find Diggory alongside her.

But the soldiers were ready for them: Diggory received a hard punch on the jaw which sent him sprawling backwards onto the sand and Elowen was quickly grabbed and her arms painfully twisted around her back. She smelt the hot breath of her captor.

‘We’ll have some fun with you later, so don’t struggle, my precious, it will only make it worse,’ he whispered in her ear. She struggled to break free from his grip, kicking his shins and knees but he was too strong and held firm. He gestured to the other men. ‘Cut the pirate’s throat and then kill that damned wolf!’

Elowen screamed and thrashed but her captor held her tighter, he took off his helmet and whispered, ‘No need to scream, my lovely. Your pirate friend will be dead in a moment.’

But it was the soldier who died first. His grip on Elowen loosened and he fell down onto his knees. The soldier made a strange noise as though all the air rushed out of his body; his cheeks puffed up and eyes bulged. He pitched forward, landing face down in the sand. An arrow was lodged in the back of his neck.

Elowen heard more whooshing sounds and the remaining

soldiers fell, also pierced with arrows, their screams cut short. Ulfur tore the last breath from the sergeant and bounded over to Elowen and stood over her protectively. Blood dripped from his jaws.

‘What’s happening?’ said Diggory, scrambling to his feet.

As if in answer several figures emerged from the black dunes. They were small, similar in stature to Bucca and wore reindeer skins and antlers—Elowen guessed they were a race of Eldar. They all carried bows and stone axes and among them was a young man, a human; he was dressed in furs and also carried a bow; his skin was deathly white and his eyes pink.

The creatures made a piercing cry and the horses bolted and galloped southwards. Elowen, Diggory and Ulfur huddled around the unconscious Black Francis. The creatures aimed their bows at them.

One of the Eldar stepped forward. He had a beard like a mass of icicles, and wore a leather belt pouch and carried a quiver made from fur and stiffened by a hazel rod knotted to the side. The creature bowed, a gesture that reminded Elowen of Bucca. He spoke, a voice more like the call of a rodent than the voice of a man. ‘Man, boy, girl and wolf. This is a strange tale to tell.’

Prevennis

With Black Francis unconscious, Elowen picked up his sword. Its weight surprised her and she struggled to hold it upright. Diggory stood beside her, holding a jagged piece of driftwood, it was a feeble weapon but at least he was there, ready to fight. Ulfur snarled, Elowen felt the anger grow hot within him; it coursed through her veins, quickened her breathing and made her heart pound.

The bearded creature spoke again. 'Tell us who you are. Be swift with your answer.'

With a growing sense of panic, Elowen said, 'Why should I tell you anything?'

Elowen regretted her sharp reply; she heard the bow strings stretch, arrows eager. The creature held up its stone axe. 'This is our land and all who come here concern us. Speak, or you will be slain.'

'What do we do?' whispered Diggory.

Elowen had no answer. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run to. If only Black Francis were conscious he could protect them. If only Bucca were with them, he would know what to do.

Bucca.

The goose feather. Elowen remembered Bucca's words. *One who carries this is entitled to the help and protection of the Eldar in times of trouble.*

The creatures whispered among themselves. The one who had spoken before said, 'I shall not warn you again.'

Elowen opened her bag and desperately rummaged for the feather. At first she couldn't find it but at last her fingers touched the feather's brittle shaft. She held it up and not a second too soon: one of the creatures loosened an arrow and, just in time, the one who had spoken jerked the bow and the arrow fell harmlessly at Elowen's feet, sending up a puff of black sand.

The creatures lowered their weapons. The bearded creature said, 'Who gave you that?'

'Bucca Gwidden,' said Elowen. 'He was our companion.'

To Elowen's surprise, the bearded creature bowed and laid his axe down on the sand. He stepped forward and gently took the feather from her.

'I am Bjorgolf, Chief of the Reindeer tribe, and the name of Bucca Gwidden is known to us,' he said. He pointed to the pale boy. 'This is Asbjorn, a man of Hammersund. The rest are my kin. Ever has the split feather been a sign used by the Eldar. By ancient law we Barbegs are bound to aid and protect the bearer of the feather for they are not lightly given as gifts. But please, your names are not yet known to me.'

'I am Elowen Aubyn. This is Diggory Bulhorn. The wolf is known to me as Ulfur. And our injured companion is Black Francis, the captain of the ship that brought us here.'

The Barbeg passed the feather back to Elowen. He leant down beside the sailor and examined his wound. He looked at Elowen with a knowing smile. ‘A sea captain and two children of men travelling from distant lands. Ah, now the tale reveals itself. You seek the sanctuary.’

Elowen jolted with surprise. ‘I...I don’t know what you mean...’

Bjorgolf nodded thoughtfully and stroked his beard. ‘You do well to hide your purpose but do not be troubled. The ones from which you flee are our enemies also. These humans captured Frodi the Hermit. Now he is dead. Alas we came too late to save him. I am guessing it was Frodi that you sought?’

Elowen nodded.

‘I thought so. The danger has not yet passed. Redeemers are abroad also. Ever they hate the Barbegs, as they hate all Eldar.’

‘We’ve met them already,’ said Elowen.

The Barbeg made a strange whistling sound. ‘Then you have done well to survive. But you are far from safe here. Many perils now stalk this land. Dark powers have seized the north. Alone you will not get far. We Barbegs have often helped those who seek the sanctuary. We can show you the way.’

His offer surprised Elowen. Although satisfied the Barbegs meant no harm, she was not about to flee into the wild with them.

‘We have to wait for our ship,’ she said. ‘It will return at nightfall.’

The Barbeg stared at her with narrowed eyes. ‘You cannot

wait that long. There will be other patrols. If you wait here you shall be caught. You must come with us, child.'

Doubt riddled Elowen. Were the Barbegs trying to trick her? She looked at Diggory—he read her intent and leant forward and whispered in her ear, 'I reckon we haven't got any choice but to trust them. Let's go with them.'

Diggory's advice surprised Elowen; it was not the advice he would have given a week, or a couple days earlier. His words made her decision a little easier, though she still felt far from sure that she had made the right choice.

'Yes, we will come with you,' she said.

'Then it is settled,' said Bjorgolf.

Ulfur seemed to have forgiven the Barbegs for their earlier hostility and trotted up to Bjorgolf. The Barbeg stroked the wolf's coat and whispered to him in the strange whistling language of his kind. 'This is a fine creature, the bond you share is a gift beyond all price. You may need his strength in the days ahead. Come, we must leave now.'

'But what about Black Francis?' said Elowen, pointing to the injured sailor.

Bjorgolf's expression hardened. 'If we carry him we shall be slowed and that may place us all in greater danger.'

Elowen understood the Barbeg's cold logic; she knew danger grew closer with every moment but she could not abandon the sailor. She knew if the enemy found Black Francis he would be killed. She took a deep breath. 'I will not leave without him.'

The other Barbegs whispered to Bjorgolf. Elowen sensed from their worried glances that they were urging him to leave the man but he waved them away. 'I see, Elowen, that

you will consider no other course of action. We shall make a litter for the man and carry him as best we can. When we camp I shall attend to him.'

Two Barbegs hurried off towards the trees, while Bjorgolf knelt and bandaged the captain's wound with a strip of fur. The Barbegs soon returned with two long branches. Using a bone needle and leather thread, Bjorgolf tied together two pieces of fur and fastened them to the two branches which he laid out parallel. With surprising ease, the Barbegs lifted Black Francis onto the litter. Elowen marvelled at their strength. Asbjorn stood back, silent and aloof, his strange pink eyes alert, alive. Elowen wondered who he was and why he was travelling with the Barbegs.

Bjorgolf wiped his brow. 'We are ready now.'

Leaving the bodies of the fallen Kingsguard, Elowen and her companions followed Bjorgolf towards the battered pine trees that lined the edge of the beach. The other four Barbegs carried Black Francis. Asbjorn hung back from the Barbegs and a couple of times he glanced at Elowen before looking away swiftly when she met his gaze.

As soon as they reached the pine trees, Elowen realised they were but the scouts of a forest that began less than two miles away and stretched to the Jorkull Mountains in the far distance, the peaks of which were lost in cloud.

Elowen stopped to drink in the view. Mountains. She could not take her eyes off them. They dwarfed the mighty fells of Gronland, their size exceeded her every expectation, defied any description, for what could words, carriers of great power and poetry, add to such miracles of creation?

Surrounded by the wonders of Prevennis, Elowen may

have briefly forgotten her wound but it soon reminded her. She winced each time her foot connected with the ground and she found it hard to keep her balance, especially when the path rose or fell steeply.

As they approached the forest, Elowen's nostrils tickled with the smell of pine resin. The densely packed trees formed a blue-green wall in front of them. Elowen saw older pines with flattish tops and bare stems as well as narrow-crowned younger trees with branches down to the ground. Bjorgolf stopped and said, 'This is the Hlithvid. A mighty forest though smaller than the Myrkvid to the north. The path through the forest is hard. It twists and turns like a river. Stay close.'

Ulfur padded past Elowen and Diggory, tail wagging in a joyful mood, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. Elowen felt his excitement, his every muscle taut, every sense sharpened, ancestral memories revived within him. Elowen heard the distant, echoing cries of unseen, unknown animals.

Following Bjorgolf's lead, they plunged into the gloom. A damp, earthy smell hung among the trees. Pine needles and cones sprinkled the forest floor; clumps of heather and cushions of golden-green moss thrived in the more open patches; juniper and bilberry shrubs snuggled between the lofty trees. From the upper branches came the delicate calls of goldcrests. A red squirrel stopped nibbling pine cones and scurried up the nearest tree as soon as it saw Ulfur. The forest's watchful stillness disturbed Diggory; at every small sound, he spun round, eyes wild.

'I don't fancy lingering here for long,' he said, as though wary of being overheard. Elowen soon lost all sense of

which direction they were travelling in but gradually found herself at ease with the forest's rhythms: the twittering songs of siskins, the odd croaks, rattles and burps of a strutting capercaillie, the dusty movements of light shards that broke through the narrow gaps in the high forest canopy, the rich scent of pine resin. For a while the mixture of senses soothed the pain in her leg but Black Francis still worried her, for he groaned and thrashed in his litter. The Barbegs spoke to him in their soft, whistling voices and for a while he was calm.

After many hours walking, the path led them to a break in the trees, a shallow scar in the land formed by a twisting, gurgling stream flanked by steep banks thick with heather. Elowen struggled to pick her way down the wet, spongy slope. She envied the nimble Barbegs—though they shouldered the burden of Black Francis, their light steps and balance ensured they found firm footholds and solid ground. The Barbegs stopped to drink from the stream and, perched awkwardly on a lichen-covered rock, Elowen did likewise. The icy water coursed through her body like a tonic, refreshing her limbs and muggy head. Ulfur leapt into the water and snapped at a minnow that swum past. The little fish was too fast and left the wolf to splash around, frustrated.

'How is it that a girl can master a wolf?'

An unfamiliar voice made Elowen jump. Asbjorn stood behind her, holding his bow.

'I did not master him,' said Elowen. 'He is my friend.'

'Your friend?' he said in a mocking tone that irritated Elowen, his refined accent struggled with the common

tongue. ‘Your country must be a strange one indeed if people there befriend forest beasts.’

Elowen grumpily turned her back on the boy. Rather than go away, he sat next to her. ‘If I have offended you, I am sorry. I have little skill with speech.’

His honesty surprised her. ‘There is no need to say sorry, Asbjorn.’

The boy smiled, which softened his features, and Elowen realised that he had a handsome face. She blushed though she didn’t know why. The boy said, ‘Most people call me Bo. Well, you have chosen a bad time to visit Prevennis. You have landed in the middle of a war.’

Elowen nodded. Wanting to be friendlier, and wishing to satisfy her natural curiosity, she asked, ‘Why are you travelling with the Barbegs?’

Bo told her his story. Elowen’s head spun at the tale—so many names and so many important people. Kings, warriors and bishops. She said, ‘Are you really a prince?’

‘Is that so hard to believe?’

Embarrassed, Elowen said, ‘No, I mean...’

Bo laughed. ‘Few consider me a prince of any note, especially now that my treacherous brother Haakon sits on the throne. Were it not for Bjorgolf I would already be sport for carrion crows.’

‘What do you plan to do? Run away?’

‘No. I shall do as the Barbegs do. We shall fight until the end, whatever that end is, but I’ll be damned if I’ll bend a knee to my brother, I am not giving him the satisfaction of that. I would rather die.’

Bjorgolf called out, ‘Asbjorn, we need your help. Come.’

Bo grinned at Elowen. 'Bjorgolf is my master now. He treats me like a Barbeg pup. It has been nice to talk to a human again. I hope we can talk again, though away from the wolf. He stares at me so.'

'He can be very protective.'

'That I can see,' said the prince. He smiled and bounded over to his Barbeg master. Elowen was unsure what to make of him; he troubled and fascinated her at the same time.

A thick mist rolled in from the mountains and the temperature dropped quickly. Bjorgolf came down the bank and looked up at the grey sky. 'Two hours until dark and still many steps lay before us. We must be moving on.'

Mist sneaked between the trunks, chasing out the light, deepening Elowen's sense of being lost. The Barbegs increased their pace, even with the heavy burden of carrying Black Francis. Ulfur easily kept up with them, his yellow eyes bright and his tail wagging. For Elowen the journey became an ordeal. Pain gnawed away at her leg and she doubted her strength would last much longer.

The path rose sharply. The muscles in Elowen's legs burned with the effort. As the company climbed further, the pine trees thinned out. They reached the hill's craggy summit; the forest stretched in all directions, a blue green sea of trees over which rolled waves of mist. The north wind thumped against her, forcing her to hold onto the nearest rock.

'This is the Arastein, the Rock of Eagles,' said Bjorgolf. 'Long ago our ancestors stood watch on this very peak, guarding the forest as we remember in our tales and songs.'

The summit was bare apart from patches of heather and slabs of rock incised with cup and ring marks similar to those Elowen had seen on stones close to Dinas Hein. Bjorgolf led them all to the mouth of a cave on the south side of the summit.

‘Here we rest tonight,’ said the Barbeg Chief.

The cave was barely five foot from ground to ceiling but it was broad and deep. The Barbegs laid Black Francis down and covered him with spare furs to keep him warm. He groaned again, awake but making no sense. Bjorgolf placed his hand on the captain’s forehead. ‘His skin burns like a fire. He has a fever.’

‘Will he...die?’ said Elowen.

Bjorgolf paused for some time before answering. ‘His injuries are grave but do not despair. Our home is but a day from here. There he may be cured.’

Elowen wasn’t sure she was happy at the prospect of going to the Barbegs’ home, however ill Black Francis was, but she said nothing.

As night fell and all outside turned to dark, Bjorgolf lit a fire which filled the cave with warmth and light. The light revealed paintings and carvings on the walls depicting hunting scenes. Reindeer, wolves and crude stick figures carrying spears and bows. The flickering light gave them all a life of their own.

‘Made by our ancestors,’ said Bjorgolf as he noticed Elowen staring at the images. ‘Made to please the spirits and bring luck.’

‘They are beautiful,’ said Elowen.

‘Truly. But whether they bring luck...it is time to eat.’

Using a pot fashioned from a carved-out tree trunk, the Barbegs made a stew of root vegetable and herbs. Pebbles rested on the fire were dropped into the stew to heat it. The smell and taste of hot food lifted Elowen's spirits; it felt good to have a full stomach for a change. From fresh pine needles, a few herbs and hot water, Bjorgolf made a steaming drink which he slowly poured into the mouth of Black Francis.

'This drink is wholesome and may cool his fever,' said the Barbeg as he held the little wooden cup from which Black Francis drank.

After they had eaten, two Barbegs played tunes on flutes carved from hollowed bone. In a low voice, Bjorgolf sung in the Barbeg tongue. Elowen had no idea what the song was about but she found herself lost in the simple music and singing. Within the music lay a sense of the land around them: the lofty trees, the mighty mountains and the air that prickled the skin like needles of ice. The song offered an insight into the world of the Barbegs, an insight that could not be achieved through pictures, or through books, or through simple speech. It could only be experienced.

When the song had finished, the Barbegs prepared for sleep. With Elowen's help, they wrapped more furs around the sailor.

'Rest is a good medicine,' said Bjorgolf. 'Fear not, child. He will live through the night. The men of the sea have tough bones and strong hearts.'

The Barbeg looked around, as though checking that they were not being listened to. 'Do you wish for a little fresh air?'

‘Well, I don’t know, I’m very tired,’ said Elowen, far from keen to leave the cave’s warmth.

‘You may feel differently outside.’

Stepping over and around their already sleeping companions, Elowen followed Bjorgolf out of the cave. She soon missed the comfort of the fire, for the wind swirled fiercely. Bjorgolf led Elowen a little further up the peak until they reached a cleft in the rock which offered some shelter from the wind.

‘Why have you brought me out here?’ said Elowen, her teeth chattering.

‘I want to talk to you. Alone.’

‘Why alone? Don’t you trust your companions?’

He gave her a hard look. ‘I have complete trust in my kin. But there are some things that are not best discussed openly. We must speak of your injury.’

‘My...my injury?’

‘You know of what I speak though you have been wise to conceal it. But I miss little. My senses are sharp. Please, show me your wound.’

Too surprised to argue, Elowen rolled up her breeches, exposing the small pale patch on her thigh where the blade had broken her skin. His face screwed up with concentration, the Barbeg touched the injury. The tips of his fingers were rough but warm. ‘This wound, was it inflicted by the Redeemers?’

Elowen nodded. ‘Is it bad?’

The Barbeg took a deep breath. ‘Yes.’

The word struck Elowen like a punch. ‘It can be healed thought? Black Francis said so. He said in the sanctuary—’

Bjorgolf cut in, "The sanctuary is three, maybe four days from here. With your wound, you will not survive the journey. Either you will die before then or the Redeemers will find you. Cold Iron calls the Redeemers, lures them as the smell of blood attracts a wolf. Even now, they sense where you are, and they will be drawn to you. You place my company in great peril."

Elowen fell silent, fighting back tears of anger and fear.

"It is not my intention to frighten you, Elowen, but you must know the truth of it. You are feeling weaker, yes? You are infected and it worsens with each passing moment. You cannot reach the sanctuary alone. Another road you must take first. You must come to the Gladsheim, the home of my tribe."

"I can't go there," said Elowen. "I need to get to the sanctuary. You said you would help us get there."

"And to that promise I am bound. The sanctuary lies in a valley beyond the Jorkull Mountains. Not far from the Gladsheim."

A flicker of hope rose within Elowen. "Then the sanctuary is close?"

"Close as the eagle flies but no road runs through the Jorkull Mountains. Ever has the sanctuary been hidden from unfriendly eyes."

His words deflated Elowen, her last flicker of hope extinguished. "A valley we can't get to. What was the use of coming this far? It has all been hopeless."

Bjorgolf smiled knowingly. "No safe paths exist through the mountains but one lies beneath them. Show you this secret path I can. By the feather you carry, I am bound to

aid you. To leave you to walk to the sanctuary alone would be a betrayal of that bond. Our witchdoctors have the skill to remove the foul thing that has been left under your skin. And your companion, the one you call Black Francis. Forget him not! Without aid he may succumb to his injuries. Come to the Gladsheim first and be healed. Then shall you be guided to the sanctuary.'

Elowen nodded. Aggressive and ill-tempered Black Francis may have been but he had helped them and she could not let him die. 'I see there is no other way but if I come to the mountain, won't I be leading the Redeemers there?'

Bjorgolf sighed. 'Yes, I place my tribe in great danger. But no other course of action seems right. Let us hope time judges me wise in this matter! For now, let us find once more the comfort of the fire, this wind chills my old bones.'

*

They left the cave at dawn, the clouds above stained crimson. As the company worked their way down the hill and towards the trees, Bjorgolf glanced up at the heavens and said, 'A blood sky is a poor omen.'

Elowen felt no better after a little sleep. A feeling of sickness grew in her stomach and she shivered not with the cold of the wind but with a biting cold that erupted from inside her, a cold that infected her every limb. Her leg throbbed and the bright morning light made her eyes sting so much that the gloom of the trees came as a relief. The noisy chorus of birds became little more than a distant buzzing in her ears.

Black Francis had barely stirred during the night and the uncomplaining Barbegs carried his litter once more. Bo walked alongside Bjorgolf, scouting the way ahead. Diggory trudged wearily beside Elowen while Ulfur flitted here and there, scattering wildlife as he did so.

The early brightness faded—predatory clouds soon moved in and within an hour heavy raindrops thumped down. The trees offered some protection but the cunning rain always found plenty of gaps through which to fall. Pain consumed Elowen: she tasted pain, smelt pain, saw pain. Her head filled with images of her injured leg. She saw it encased in ice, ringed by fire, the Cold Iron pulsing with a sick, corrupt life of its own. And beyond the pain a strange sensation grew in her mind, a sensation of being watched, not by her companions or by the creatures that lived in the forest, but by eyes burning into the back of her head, eyes from which she could not escape. She plodded on, supported by Diggory. She held onto his arm, trusting him to guide her. The world around her faded, Elowen could make out shapes and movement but no detail. Shadows melted and fused with other shadows.

By midday they broke free of the forest and in front of them rose a range of greyish brown hills, beyond which lay the Jorkull Mountains. Through the broken clouds, the bright sun peered down mockingly, offering light but no warmth. The company rested for a short while and as they sat huddled, trying to keep warm, Elowen overheard Bjorgolf and Bo discussing the path ahead. The Barbeg said, ‘It is a hard path across the hills but it is the swiftest way.’

‘To the north there is a path that leads around the hills,’

said Bo. 'From there we can reach the bridge at Franang and cross the river.'

Bjorgolf shook his head. 'It is too far. The girl and the man do not have much time. Besides, Franang is close to the Myrkvid and we have perils enough without risking the horrors that lurk there. If we cross the hills we shall come to the Salmon River as it bends south of the Gladsheim and the currents there should not prove too dangerous.'

The prince persisted. 'We'll be exposed on those hills. If there are Redeemers close, they'll see us.'

'It is dangerous but we must try. No other path will do.'

'Very well,' said Bo but he sounded far from convinced.

Bjorgolf soon roused the company and they braved the path across the hills. Elowen's breath clouded in front of her as she plodded up the stone-littered slopes. Ahead lay a valley through which snaked a glistening river, and beyond the river jagged foothills grew from the roots of the Jorkull Mountains. To the far north Elowen spied the edges of another forest, a forest seemingly bound in snow. The Myrkvid. A grey mist hung above the distant tree tops—the forest frightened her and she averted her eyes.

'The Salmon River!' said Bjorgolf. 'The last leg of the journey is upon us and on the far side of the river, no evil shall I fear. Look to the north-east, the Gladsheim.'

The Barbeg pointed to a striking three-sided mountain, much smaller than the giant peaks that lurked behind it.

Tall standing stones marked the path down to the river, each carved with a motif of an animal at its centre and bordered with faded runes. The path led down onto a grassy, wind-whipped plain peppered with heather and bilberry as

well as a few scattered silver birches. Like little white flashes, wheatears flitted around close to the ground and far above peregrine falcons circled, ever searching for prey. Ravens played on the cold air thrown down by the mountains, folding their wings and dropping at great speed before looping back upwards.

Elowen noticed little of the world around her. She shivered violently and her teeth chattered so much her jaw ached. She wrapped her furs tightly around her but to no avail; she could not even feel the warmth of Ulfur as she ran her hand along his back. Her body became like a block of ice. She wanted to give up, curl up and let sleep and death take her but somehow she found the strength and determination to keep going.

Bjorgolf urged the company on by saying, 'Once across the river it is but a few leagues to the Gladsheim.'

'How do we cross the river?'

'Simple, my young friend,' said Bjorgolf. 'We swim.'

'Swim?' said Diggory. 'I can't swim and what about Elowen and Black Francis?'

'We Barbegs know the river. We shall help you and your friends across. Water holds no fear—'

The Barbeg stopped and sniffed the air. The wind dropped to a murmur. The wheatears scattered. The ravens and peregrines swooped towards the safety of the mountains.

'Bjorgolf! To the south!' said Bo.

Seven figures on horseback. Redeemers. As they charged, their robes swished and billowed.

The pain in Elowen's leg exploded.

She fell over, crying, pulling at her leg; she wanted to cut it off. She thrashed around like a tethered wild beast but the movements were not of her making, she was a puppet at the mercy of a crazed master.

Bjorgolf and Diggory tried to control her. Elowen heard the Barbeg shouting, although his voice sounded distant, like a voice heard in a dream when close to waking.

‘We must get Elowen across the river!’ said Bjorgolf.

For Elowen, time passed in a blur. She was plunged into the river, swallowing mouthfuls of icy water. Bjorgolf’s hand gripped her, keeping her afloat as he swam. Black Francis had been strapped to his litter; it floated and the other Barbegs pushed it across as they swam. Diggory clung to the litter and, with Bo’s help, made it safely to the far bank. Ulfur needed no aid and swiftly paddled across.

When they reached the far bank, Bjorgolf dragged Elowen out of the water and she collapsed onto the springy turf, spluttering out water. Diggory sat beside Black Francis, shivering violently, while Ulfur shook his coat dry. Bjorgolf, Bo and the other Barbegs stood, dripping wet, with their bows, axes and spears at the ready. Elowen saw despair in their eyes—they were so small and so weak compared to the seven figures that waited across the river. Bjorgolf shouted to the Redeemers, ‘GO BACK. YOU SHALL NOT CROSS INTO OUR LAND!’

‘Be silent, imp,’ said one of the Redeemers. ‘Surrender the girl or die.’

If Bjorgolf was daunted by the words he did not show it. He waved his axe and said, ‘This is *our* land. If you try to cross this river you will find only death.’

The Redeemer unsheathed his sword and pointed it towards Bjorgolf. ‘Your words are empty. The river cannot protect you. We gave you a chance to save yourselves. Now, it is time for you to die.’

The Redeemers urged their steeds into the river but as the hooves of their horses touched the water, it boiled and hissed; the sky darkened; the wind found its strength and voice again; a fog grew up from the water and in seconds it enveloped the Redeemers and the horses. From the darkening sky, shards of lightning fired down at the Redeemers. Elowen heard their horses squeal in fear. Hailstones struck the river like cannonballs. Golden threads appeared from thin air; they writhed in faint coils. The fog cleared and Elowen saw that the Redeemers had been scattered, some of them unhorsed and none had crossed the river.

‘SEE HOW THEY FLEE!’ said Bjorgolf. ‘THE RIVER HAS DEFEATED THEM!’

With an effort that sent pulses of pain through her body, Elowen lifted her head high enough to see the Redeemers riding or running away. The last of her strength failed and darkness swallowed her world.

PART THREE

The Gladsheim

Elowen woke with a start. She lay on a bed of bundled furs and bracken. Ulfur lay next to her, asleep; she felt the warmth of his body and his rhythmic breathing. Her leg was bandaged, and although it was still tender, the searing pain had cooled to a dull ache. She felt for the map and her fingers touched the ivory box, hidden safely inside her pocket. The pendant rested on her chest.

Her vision remained blurred. She squinted to try to make some sense of her surroundings. She saw rough stone walls and a sloped ceiling; she was in a cave. Thick furs carpeted the ground and in the crevices in the wall were positioned candles which filled the cave with playful light. Bjorgolf sat beside her. When Elowen sat up he clapped his hands, disturbing a grumpy Ulfur in the process, and said, 'So, you are awake at last.'

Elowen, still feeling groggy, smiled weakly. 'I feel like I've been asleep for a hundred years.'

'I feared you might be! I am glad to see you awake and looking well.'

Elowen tried to make some order out of her scrambled thoughts. 'Where am I?'

‘In the caves of Gladsheim,’ said Bjorgolf, standing up.

Elowen remembered what had happened to her, she jolted at the memory. ‘But my leg...’

Bjorgolf leant forward and laid a hand on her arm. ‘The witchdoctors removed the Cold Iron last night. You need not worry now.’

‘What about the Redeemers?’ said Elowen.

‘For the time, defeated. We have escaped but more struggles await. A great danger still looms.’

Elowen struggled to absorb all that she had seen and heard. ‘I don’t understand what happened at the river. All that fog, lightning—’

‘You saw the power of this land. From the mountain peaks to their roots deep in the black soil, this land is rich with Earthsoul. Ever has it been a barrier to evil things.’

‘I saw the threads of gold.’

‘You saw them?’

Before she could consider a reply, a sudden thought struck her. ‘What about the others? Diggory? And Black Francis—’

Bjorgolf held up his hands in a gesture of reassurance. ‘Your friends are safe. No doubt you wish to see them. They have been waiting to see you.’

Bjorgolf called out and Black Francis strode into the cave; behind the sailor followed Diggory, grinning shyly. Black Francis looked weary, his skin was grey and stretched, and heavy bags lay under his eyes. He pointed to some bandaging around his shoulder. ‘You’ve caused this old sea dog some problems. I’ve had some tough passengers in my time but you...’

To Elowen's surprise, a smile warmed his face. 'Are you feeling better, lass?'

Elowen said that she did, blushing at the attention.

Bjorgolf cleared his throat. 'I leave you now to speak to your friends. In a couple of days, when you feel stronger, I will show you the Gladsheim. And there is still much for us to discuss.'

Saying no more, the Barbeg bowed and left.

Elowen looked up at Black Francis. 'What are you going to do now?'

Forgetting his injury, the sailor shrugged his shoulders, wincing as soon as he did so. 'Soon as I'm fit I'll be on my way. My boys won't have sailed south without me. They'll anchor off Hermitage Rock, at least for a week or two. I'll find them again. That ship, that crew, they're my life. Without them...' his voice trailed off, his mind far away. Then he returned to the present and straightened himself. 'In the meantime, this is as good a place as any. Good folk these Barbegs. They've given us lodgings here. Food. A place to sleep. Can't ask for much more than that, eh, Diggory lad?'

Diggory looked unsure, influenced, Elowen guessed, by the residual memories of sermons about the horrors of the tainted ones. He held up his blistered hands and moaned, 'They make me work hard. I've had to mend stone walls, cut up firewood—'

'Honest work won't hurt you,' said Black Francis. 'Besides, we owe these folk our lives and that's some debt. But for them, the worse might yet be to come. If that Bjorgolf's right, his folk are in great danger.'

'From the Redeemers?' said Elowen, alarmed by his hints.

‘Aye, but let’s not talk about that now.’

‘Say Elowen, when do you think you’ll be fit enough to carry on? To the sanctuary I mean?’ asked Diggory.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. With all that had happened, Elowen had forgotten about it. She toyed with the little ivory box. ‘I suppose we should go as soon as possible. I’m worried that it’s not safe. After all, Bjorgolf believes his tribe are in danger.’

‘All the more reason why we should get out of here as quickly as possible,’ said Diggory.

‘I think you’re right,’ said Elowen, not liking herself for what she was saying. ‘Our task is to reach the sanctuary. I have to get the map to the sanctuary. I’ll be stronger in a couple of days. Then we have to leave.’

‘Come on, boy, let her rest,’ said Black Francis.

With that they stepped out of the cave and Elowen was left with much to think about. Ulfur yawned, treating Elowen to a blast of his hot smelly breath, and settled down to sleep again, and despite her worries, Elowen soon joined him.

*

Lord Lucien sat alone in his tent, listening to the howling wind, contemplating dark thoughts. The smell of blood lingered. The Redeemers had returned from the north like whipped dogs. Lucien had slain them all in turn, they had not resisted, standing in silence as he hacked them down. The Cold Iron that sustained their bodies obeyed Lucien’s will until the end. Aided by the Barbegs and Prince Asbjorn,

the girl had escaped to the Gladsheim and the map had slipped through his fingers. The trail left by the Cold Iron had been severed. For hours Lucien had meditated, trying to connect with the girl but she eluded him. The Cold Iron must have been removed by the Barbegs; only Eldar would have the skill to achieve such a feat.

Lucien shifted in his seat. Old memories whispered to him, memories he preferred to keep imprisoned. Memories of innumerable days lost to the dark. The Ageless one his followers called him and tonight those long centuries weighed down on him.

His mood had been black since his return from the mountains of Rangbeinn. The Illuminati were not there, Olaf had lied to him. It had been a long march to Rangbeinn and now the soldiers of the Imperial Army rested their weary feet and minds on the plains of Thingvollur. Lucien knew that King Olaf had made him look a fool; beyond the grave the Preven king had struck one final victory.

Lucien regretted his haste in allowing Haakon to hang Olaf, he should have kept him alive. Lucien's mind considered complexities, *riddles*. The girl. Lord Hereward. Prince Asbjorn. The Barbegs. All had defied him unexpectedly. Were they brought together by some fate or force? Perhaps there was some pattern, some design. But whose pattern, whose design?

The girl was injured, carrying a piece of Cold Iron in her body; she should have been found and captured. The Redeemers had failed him and the girl had escaped. She had found new allies, new friends to protect her. It was a strange series of events and a troubling series of events.

Lord Hereward had chosen his carrier well. To have taken the map this far north, evading her pursuers, proved the girl had strength and courage. Did the Barbegs who harboured her know of the burden the girl carried? Lucien kept turning that question around and around in his mind. Would they know the significance of it? He had learnt long ago not to underestimate the Eldar.

Yes, his mind was clear now. He knew what must be done.

He knew now that the Gladsheim must be destroyed, the Barbegs exterminated. He had to find the girl, dead or alive, and the map she carried.

A bulky figure bundled into the tent, announcing his presence with a crude, hacking cough. King Haakon. He had returned from his brief campaign in the east of Prevennis: destroying peasant rebels and small scattered tribes of outlaws; easy victories to feed his monstrous vanity. He strode towards Lucien like the conqueror of the world. He stunk of sweat, of blood, of horses, and only at the last moment did he remember to bend his knee in respect.

'Lord Lucien, you have summoned me,' he said. Then he noticed the bodies and gasped. He looked at Lucien, his eyes full of questions his mouth dare not ask.

Lucien's hand hovered over the hilt of his sword; the dead Redeemers quickened dormant desires. Too often he left killing to others. He had forgotten the excitement, the intoxication, of taking life. A sudden urge to slay the human threatened to consume him. With effort he controlled his disgust, his hatred. The day would come, the day he could enjoy watching Haakon beg for mercy, the day he could

enjoy watching him die. Yet for now he needed him, his death had to wait. Lucien gestured for the king to stand and pointed to the slain Redeemers. 'This does not concern you.'

Although Haakon nodded, his eyes kept darting down at the corpses. When Lucien told the Preven king the story of Elowen's escape, Haakon snarled and crunched his knuckles. 'So, my brother is with her and taking refuge with those demons. The fool. Well, he can run no more. I shall lead a detachment of my Kingsguard there and—'

In an icy voice Lucien cut him short. 'No, you will need a stronger force than that. The Gladsheim will be well defended and I can afford no mistakes. It has survived assault before, although the Myrkvid host will not come to the Barbegs' aid now. I will take no risks. The Imperial Army shall be sent.'

Haakon protested but his eyes fell upon the corpses again. He closed his mouth and took a step backwards. 'When do you propose to march?'

'At first light tomorrow.'

'Very well,' said Haakon. He thrust out his chest and unsheathed his sword. He was breathing heavily and his face reddened. 'But this alone I insist upon. My brother Asbjorn, no other is to slay him. He dies by my hand alone.'

'As you wish it, your Majesty, so shall it be,' replied Lucien. He made little attempt to hide the condescension in his voice, knowing Haakon would never detect it.

Proudly, the king pulled himself to his full height. 'With your leave, Lord Lucien, I shall go now and prepare my men. I sense we march to a great victory for Prester John.'

He bowed and strode out of the tent, giving the corpses a wide berth. Lucien watched him leave. 'For your sake, King Haakon, I hope so.'

*

The next day Bjorgolf fulfilled his promise to show Elowen around the Gladshheim. The Barbeg led her down into a rounded passage carved into the limestone.

'Long vanished streams carved out this tunnel,' said Bjorgolf, his voice echoing around the walls. 'It links all our caves.'

The ground was dry, formed of sand and silt left by the waters which once flowed freely. Other Barbegs walked along the passage; they all looked at Elowen suspiciously, whistling and hooting among themselves. They gave her a wide berth, hugging close to the wall. Elowen felt self-conscious, why were they afraid of her?

'Do not be troubled for seldom do my folk see humans,' said Bjorgolf. 'You are as strange to their eyes as we are to yours.'

Still far from comfortable, Elowen said, 'How many of your folk live here?'

'Many hundreds live here but not far above two thousand. Like all Eldar, we are a dwindling folk. Many home caves lie empty and few echo to the sound of younglings.'

They reached a wider part of the passage, where there grew a grove of tall, slender stalagmites, shaped like the twisted trunks of trees, and countless straw stalactites hung down from the ceiling. The stone walls glistened with en-

crusted gems. Elowen said, 'It is like stepping inside a dream.'

'The Stone Forest,' said Bjorgolf in solemn tones. 'A wonder of the Gladsheim. Think of how many ages it took for water and stone to carve this miracle. No mortal could produce such perfection.'

They carried on down the main passage until at last Elowen felt cool, fresh air on her cheeks. Curtains of thick icicles formed a maze like barrier.

'This is the Ice Mouth, our last defence against unfriendly visitors. Only in single file can you pass through it,' said Bjorgolf as they edged slowly around the sharp icicles. Once through the opening, Elowen gasped in surprise: they were much higher up than she had imagined. A corkscrewing path, broad enough only for two men to stand side by side, led down from the opening; rocks were sprinkled along its surface, dizzy falls lay either side of it. Far above Elowen saw a golden eagle, a dark outline with long wings cutting through the air. A mountain hare, its white winter coat becoming mottled with colour, scampered for the cover of larger rocks.

The path descended to a crescent-shaped hill which grew from the foot of the Gladsheim mountain. The top of the path was marked by a stone carved into the shape of a bird, with its wings folded.

'The Raven,' said Bjorgolf as they passed the stone. 'He is the spouse of Amaka the Creator. Raven brought daylight into the world. He taught the first Barbegs how to make clothes from animal furs and how to weave nets for fishing. Come, let us follow the mountain path.'

Elowen was tired but she found the exercise invigorating. When they reached the crescent-shaped hill, Bjorgolf said, ‘This hill is known to our folk as the Dun, and it is the ancient entrance to the Gladsheim.’

The air carried a biting edge that not even the furs Elowen wore could blunt and she shivered violently. She looked out over a flat grassy plain that stretched down to the Salmon River, the only break in the plain’s smooth green surface was a circular depression five hundred yards from the Dun.

Bjorgolf said, ‘Once we made our summer homes on the plains below. For generations uncountable my folk followed the reindeer herds. Their flesh and milk were our food. Their skins, our clothing. Their antlers, our tools. Few herds now remain. In these dark days, we live always in our winter caves. Some counsel that we should retreat further into the mountains. But I disagree. I refuse to abandon the Gladsheim while I still breathe.’

Teeth chattering, Elowen pointed to the foreboding, snow-bound forest she had spied once before. ‘What is that place? It frightens me just to look at.’

Bjorgolf took a long time to answer her question. ‘It is the forest of Myrkvid. We Barbegs do not go there. It is a dark place, a place full of danger, for a curse lies upon the forest. It is the last remnant of a forest so ancient, so vast that it once covered most northern lands. Once Barbegs were welcomed by the beasts and spirits of the forest. Long ago, during the Great Wrath, the forest guardian, Ekseri, came to the aid of our tribe and drove away our foes. Then, for vengeance, a servant of Prester John slew the Heart-tree with a spear of Cold Iron.’

‘What is the Heart-tree?’ said Elowen.

‘The oldest tree in the forest, ancient beyond count. Once it was slain, the Myrkvid diminished and now it endures a permanent winter and all in the forest suffer; animal, bird and tree. The winter will last until one that is worthy and pure of heart comes to break the curse. It is foretold that as the Heart-tree was slain by human hand, it is only by a human hand that the curse be broken. Some have tried to do this.’

‘Break the curse? Why would they want to do that?’

‘Great power lies within the Myrkvid,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘It is said that the forest guardian would follow anyone who breaks the curse and *he* holds great power. Yes, some whose hearts were filled with courage or folly have ventured into the forest. None have returned. The forest devoured them. But often with humans a lust for power ruins common sense. Perhaps one day the forest will come alive again, perhaps one day spring will return to the Myrkvid. I ramble. It grows cold and it would not do for you to get a chill. Come, soon there will be a feast in the Great Cavern. Let us return to the caves.’

The Great Cavern was the largest cave Elowen had yet seen, circular in shape with walls smoothed by busy Barbeg hands. A huge stalagmite rose from the cave floor and carved into it were steps which wound up to the unseen ceiling. Torches filled the cave with jittery light.

The whole tribe gathered in the cave. Resting on bundles of fur, the Barbegs sat cross-legged around a single long stone table. Their excitable speech of whistles and hoots echoed around the walls. Infants slept securely tied into

heavily insulated wooden papooses. Elowen's attention was drawn to the huge cave painting on the far wall: she saw strange, unearthly beings, along with twisted trees and mysterious stick figures.

'The miracle of the Myrkvid they show,' said Bjorgolf when he noticed Elowen looking at the paintings. 'The arrival of the forest host and the scattering of our foes. You see the yew tree with a mighty trunk and strong, leaf-heavy branches? That is the Heart-tree of the Myrkvid. Now it is dead but one day perhaps it shall grow anew.'

He said no more on the subject and steered Elowen towards the table. 'Come, sit with me.'

Elowen was delighted to see Diggory and Black Francis waiting for her.

'You look much better,' said Diggory with a tired smile. His hands were rough and covered in bruises and small cuts, the Barbegs were clearly making him earn his keep.

'I feel much better,' she replied, trying to get comfortable while sitting cross-legged on the ground. 'How is Ulfur?'

'He's happy enough. The Barbegs bring him fresh meat every day.'

'He's behaving himself?' said Elowen.

'He's still a terrifying brute but he hasn't bitten me or anybody else, *yet*,' said Diggory.

The table was covered by wooden platters, all laden with food: fish, salted meats, fruit and nuts.

Bjorgolf stood and spoke in the Barbeg tongue. Everybody fell silent. Then he said a prayer, or at least it sounded like a prayer to Elowen. When he finished, Bjorgolf sat and the feasting began.

Bjorgolf sat beside Elowen and introduced her to the other Barbegs. They greeted her with polite nods but few words. Bjorgolf introduced his wife, Albruna Swifthand. She was tall for a Barbeg and her white fur was flecked with golden strands. Her eyes were deep set and as dark as night.

‘It is an honour to meet you, Elowen. I hope your wound is healing.’

‘I have been well looked after,’ said Elowen in the quiet, quavering voice that always came out of her mouth when embarrassed.

Albruna smiled, a smile like the weak but welcome presence of the sun on a winter morning. ‘You have come through many dangers. Few humans visit us here in these troubled times.’

Another Barbeg that Elowen had been introduced to cut into the conversation.

‘Few humans visit us here for a good reason. They are not welcome. Usurpers and murderers.’

Bjorgolf had named him as Draug. With a shorter beard and less wrinkled skin than the Chief, his eyes sparkled but he did not smile—he stared fiercely at Elowen, Diggory and Black Francis. As he ripped into a joint of meat Elowen noticed he only had one hand, his left hand a stump. ‘Suffering and misery is all humans bring to this world.’

Elowen felt Black Francis tense his body; he would not need much more provocation.

‘The customs of our tribe frown upon such rudeness, as well you know, Draug,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘Apologise to our guests who are blameless for the sins of other men.’

Draug glared at Bjorgolf and Elowen feared he was going

to attack the Chief, but he bowed and said, 'If offence I have caused, I ask your forgiveness.'

Not wanting trouble, Elowen was quick to say that there was nothing to forgive and Diggory did likewise, but Black Francis only grunted in response.

When the feast was finished, some Barbegs carried in a clay effigy of a reindeer, decorated with real antlers and fur. They danced around it, while others sung and played whistles.

'Always we give thanks for the food we have eaten,' said Albruna, shouting above the music and singing.

Diggory looked as though he would fall asleep at any moment. His eyes kept closing and he yawned constantly and several times Elowen had to nudge him in the ribs to prevent him nodding off.

The music and singing stopped. Elowen heard shouting. It was Prince Asbjorn. Dressed in furs and reindeer skin, the prince raced down the stairs that curled around the stalagmite and his voice echoed around the cave. 'Bjorgolf! The hag riders have returned!'

Bjorgolf sprung to his feet. He looked at Elowen and her friends. 'You must come with me to the watchtower. It is important you see this.'

Elowen, Diggory and Black Francis followed the Barbeg, as did Draug who lurked beside them without saying a word.

The stairs were very narrow and Elowen could only climb them crouched down, going up on all fours, and she soon fell behind the others. She tried to hurry but the fear of tumbling down into the cave below restricted her pace. The

others disappeared from view, swallowed by the darkness above.

‘Thanks for waiting,’ she said, feeling very conscious of all the Barbegs below looking up at her.

She managed to reach the top stair and came out onto a small ledge, bordered by some rough stone walls that formed crude battlements. The watchtower was high up on the mountainside and the fierce wind rocked Elowen back onto her heels and took her breath away. The others were there, all looking up at the sky. It was a clear night, with innumerable stars piercing the black heavens. She was about to ask what they were all looking at when Bjorgolf cried out, ‘THERE, TO THE NORTH!’

Elowen looked up. From the north approached a strange yellow glow, a ball of light. As it passed over the mountain, Elowen saw shapes within the glow: opaque skeletons of stags, wolves and bears raced across the sky. Pursuing them was a ghostly man riding on an eight-legged white horse, a burning brand in his hand; sparks fell from him like rain. Others followed him: men on horses with hunting spears in their hands, they blew horns and shouted wildly, and all around them ran fierce hounds with red eyes and slavering jaws.

They passed over the mountain, so close that Elowen thought that if she reached up she could touch the hooves of the ghostly horses. She watched the wraiths stream across the sky until they disappeared.

Elowen looked at Bjorgolf and the Barbeg guessed her question before she uttered a word. ‘The Wild Hunt, a portent of doom.’

‘What are they?’ said Elowen, shaking with cold and fear.

‘They are shadows of the past and perhaps of the future,’ said Bjorgolf, an explanation which left Elowen none the wiser.

Before she could ask another question, Draug cut in and hissed, ‘That is the third time they have appeared this moon. Dare we wait any longer? Doom is at hand. There can be no clearer sign. If we stay here—’

‘Now is not the time to discuss this,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘I will call a moot for tomorrow. There we shall decide how to act.’

The Moot

Elowen found it difficult to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes horrible images troubled her: the Redeemers, the skeletal beasts in the sky and the fierce riders that pursued them. Even when sleep took her, she found no comfort.

She wandered alone in a snow-bound forest. Huge trees surrounded her like the bars of a giant cage. From the darkness between the trees, eyes watched her.

Beasts came out from the darkness between the trees. Bears. Wolves. Boars.

She ran but they closed on her. She slowed. As hard as she tried, she slowed, the snow trapped her.

She cried out: I can't move. I can't move.

She jerked awake with a yell.

A tall figure stood in the room. Prince Asbjorn.

Elowen pulled the furs fully over her, leaving only her head exposed. 'What in God's name are you doing here?'

He held up his hands. 'I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you. Bjorgolf sent me. You are to come to the moot.'

'The moot? Why do they want me to go?'

Bo shrugged. 'Bjorgolf did not say. I did not ask.'

‘Well that’s *helpful*,’ said Elowen, still shaking from the fright of her waking. ‘What if I don’t want to go to a stupid moot?’

His pink eyes flickered with anger. When he spoke his voice was a little louder, a little firmer. ‘I know that you are leaving here soon and so these matters concern you little. But to refuse this invitation would insult Bjorgolf greatly.’

Elowen knew that was true and regretted her childish outburst. For all her travels, for all her experiences, she still retained the knack of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. The voice inside her head taunted her. Idiot! Idiot! She said quietly, ‘Of course I’ll come.’

When she was ready, Elowen followed Bo down the stairs and along the main passage.

‘What happens at the moot?’ she asked casually as they walked, trying to hide how intrigued she was by her unexpected invitation.

‘It is a gathering of the tribe. Moots are only called in times of great peril.’

‘And this is a time of great peril?’

‘It would appear so.’

‘Are they going to leave the Gladsheim?’

He shrugged. ‘Many would counsel that.’

‘Draug you mean?’

Bo gave a knowing smile. ‘So you have encountered *him*? Yes, Draug will oppose Bjorgolf, as he always does. They are bitter enemies and their feud goes back many years. Draug wanted to be Chief but Bjorgolf defeated him in the trials. Since then he has conspired against Bjorgolf. Many listen to Draug and heed his counsel. He will try to use this

moot to overthrow Bjorgolf. He knows the tribe is frightened and fear is a powerful weapon.'

Elowen was horrified. 'How he can think about overthrowing Bjorgolf at a time like this?'

'He lusts for power and those that lust for power lose all sense of honour and decency. Trust me, I have seen this happen.'

Elowen assumed that the moot would take place in the Great Cavern but Bo led her through the Ice Mouth. The whole tribe of Barbegs, all picked their way down the mountain pass in a long line.

'Where are we going?' she said.

Bo stopped and pointed ahead to the circular hollow in the plains. 'To the Gemothol, the tribe's ancient meeting place.'

Elowen followed Bo down the long mountain path to the Dun and across the plain. The grass looked brown and withered and the air felt stale and lethargic. Even the Salmon River no longer sparkled; its dull waters flowed slowly, wearily.

The Gemothol shelved down about fifty feet. Spaced around the circumference of the top circle were twelve diamond-shaped standing stones. The Barbegs sat in silence, waiting for the moot to begin. To Elowen's surprise, Bo led her all the way down to the lowest shelf. Diggory and Black Francis were seated there. Draug sat close by and sneered as Elowen took her place.

Bjorgolf stood at the flat bottom of the hollow known as the Circle—he cleared his throat and said aloud in the common tongue, 'I welcome you all. Seldom are moots

called and only in times of need but alas these are fearful days. By now you will have heard of the Wild Hunt's return but there are worse tidings to tell. Shortly before dawn our scouts returned. A great horde marches north along the Salmon River. They come to destroy our land and our tribe.'

Fearful whisperings rippled across the hollow.

'We must decide how to face this threat,' said Bjorgolf.

An old wizened Barbeg named Mimir, leant forward to speak. His old bones creaked like a musical instrument and his voice was as dry as tinder. 'Will not the land protect us? No foe has ever crossed the Salmon River. We are safe as long as we remain here.'

Bjorgolf shook his head sadly. 'Amongst the enemy ride Redeemers. They have brought Sentinels of Cold Iron and against such an assault the Salmon River cannot protect us. By dawn tomorrow the army will have crossed the river.'

The Barbegs descended into a hundred fragmented, frantic discussions. Whispers rose to frightened shouts and Elowen shared their fear. *By dawn tomorrow*. Could the Redeemers be that close? She thought of those terrible figures on horseback. They had nearly caught her before, would she escape again?

Draug stood and spoke above the tumult. 'The course to take is clear. We must flee this very day. Flee to the high mountain shelters, no man or Redeemer can trouble us there.'

Bjorgolf took a deep breath, as though readying himself for a long expected argument. 'To flee is no answer. The high mountains are cruel, even for Barbegs. The younglings

and old ones may not survive such a journey. Even if we were to reach the high peaks, can we be sure of our safety there? Cunning is the enemy and long is his reach. And my heart cries at the thought of forsaking the Gladsheim, the refuge our ancestors built with blood and sweat. By their blessed memory we must stay and defend the Gladsheim.'

There was a brief silence, a silence in which all present repeated Bjorgolf's words in their head to ensure that they had heard them correctly. When all present realised they had, there was an explosion of angry shouts and hoots of derision. Draug rode on the crowd's fury and pointed his stump at Bjorgolf in an accusing gesture. 'See how our Chief's wits have forsaken him at this crucial hour! How can we defend the Gladsheim? It would be a slaughter.'

Mimir spoke again. 'Chief Bjorgolf, in this matter, Draug speaks more sense than you. Madness it would be to fight this army. We cannot defeat them.'

There were many grunts and squeaks of agreement.

'The tribe has no faith in your counsel, Bjorgolf, and with good reason, for it is your lack of wisdom that is the cause of our current troubles,' said Draug. He scuttled around the circle like a rat. He stopped and held Elowen in his glance for so long that she felt embarrassed and her cheeks flushed crimson. 'It is because of your foolishness, Bjorgolf, that we tremble with fear and the land sickens. You brought this human here. Our Chief allowed this human to cross the river though she was injured with Cold Iron. She lured the Redeemers here. Drive her and her companions out of our land. If the Redeemers want her, let them have her. Why should we die for these humans?'

Everyone stood, fingers pointed at Bjorgolf. Shouting. Arguing. A smile exploded onto the face of Draug, his eyes alight with victory. Elowen clenched her hands into a fist, trying to hold in waves of anger. Then her anger turned to strength, a confidence she had never experienced before. Her heart pounded not with fear but with excitement. Elowen was used to her every decision, her every action, her every step being shadowed by doubt and fear but not this time. She had the goose feather given to her by Bucca tucked in her furs. She pulled it out, stood and strode into the middle of the circle.

She held up the feather for all to see. She felt a thousand pair of eyes on her but rather than crumble under the attention, it gave her a fresh energy, a fresh strength. She said, 'This feather was given to me by Bucca Gwidden to aid me on my journey. Under ancient Eldar law, Bjorgolf was bound to help me. Drive me and my friends out if you must, but do not blame Bjorgolf.'

'What foolishness is this?' said Draug. 'For too long has our Chief dwelt in the past. Eldar law means nothing. The ancestors can no longer aid us.'

Bjorgolf stepped forward. 'We are *nothing* if we do not respect the ancestors. We are the land and the land is us. We are all Eldar and the customs of old I respect. That is why I aided the humans and that is why we must fight.'

'How can we withstand the approaching evil?' said Mimir.

'We must look to the past,' said Bjorgolf, throwing a harsh look at Draug. 'Once before, at a time of direst need, the Myrkvid host came to our aid. We must seek their aid again.'

A chorus of gasps, groans and incredulous laughter greeted his words.

‘What game is this?’ said Draug. ‘The Myrkvid? The forest host will not aid us. The Heart-tree is dead, the forest is dead. Ekseri has not been seen for an age. None dwell there now save shadows and ghouls. This is but a jest, who could achieve such a feat?’

‘You forget the history of this tribe and that is your weakness,’ said Bjorgolf, standing only inches from his opponent. ‘Is it not told that a human only can break the curse?’

‘Yes, so it is told but what does it matter?’ said Draug. ‘Many humans have tried to break the curse, driven to madness by their lust for power. All have failed. Warriors. Kings. None have escaped the forest.’

Bjorgolf pointed at Elowen. All eyes turned to her again, her heart skipped and she tensed her whole body, wondering what he was going to say. ‘Powerfully the golden threads weave around this child and she alone can break the curse. She must go into the forest. She is our last hope.’

Elowen jolted with surprise. She stared at Bjorgolf, open mouthed. Had he lost his mind?

The Chief knelt in front of her, like a subject kneeling before a king. ‘Elowen, I will not force you to accept this quest. The path to the Myrkvid is a perilous one. If you choose to take another path, there will be no blame.’

Elowen’s head spun, the very thought of entering the Myrkvid terrified her. The earlier confidence that enflamed her withered and died like a leaf in autumn. Quietly she said to Bjorgolf, ‘I do not have the strength to do this. I want to help you, honest I do. But I will fail, I will let you down.’

Bjorgolf shook his head and smiled. 'I do not believe that. My eyes are old but they do not deceive me. I see the strength in you even if you cannot. I do not believe it was chance that led you to the Gladsheim. You are the only one who can do this.'

Elowen looked at Diggory. He shook his head and mouthed 'no'. Even Black Francis looked concerned and avoided meeting her glance. Part of her knew it was madness to think she could achieve what Bjorgolf asked of her but a strange conviction gripped her. By instinct she took hold of the pendant around her neck. She could not stand by and abandon the Barbegs to slaughter; they were only in danger because they had helped her. In that at least, Draug had spoken the truth. Bjorgolf had saved her life, and he had protected her and her friends; to run away now would be a betrayal. She did not feel brave, indeed she was frightened by the scale of her task and of the terrors that might await her, but as terrible as those fears were, she knew what she had to do.

She stood and faced the rows of Barbegs. 'I will go, if you think it will help.'

Draug was not yet beaten. He appealed to the Barbegs, 'Surely you see through this folly? We waste valuable time, time that could be used to flee from the danger that draws ever closer.'

Mimir stood slowly, wincing at the painful effort. 'This girl has offered her aid, an offer we must accept. A slim hope she offers but to my mind it is the only hope that remains.'

Bjorgolf stared at Elowen, his little brown eyes were sad

but he managed a smile. 'It shames me to ask so much of you. You would go willingly into the forest?'

'I go willingly,' said Elowen.

'Then if the moot agrees, the tribe shall remain at the Gladshiem. We shall defend our home.'

At that, all the Barbegs, with the notable exception of Draug, rose to their feet and nodded. Elowen guessed this signalled agreement with Bjorgolf's plan.

Draug glared at Bjorgolf, hatred in his eyes. 'So this is the final descent into madness. I say this, the doom of our tribe has been wrought this very day. The Gladshiem has become a nest of fools. I will not remain here to face a certain doom. Death is coming and death you all deserve. I choose exile. May the ancestors curse you!'

He stormed up the pathway, cursing loudly to himself.

When calm returned to the Gemothol, Bjorgolf said, 'The moot is in agreement. We will stay and defend our home. Elowen, we place the fate of our tribe in your hands.'

*

The surge of bravery that had sustained Elowen through the moot soon faded. When she returned to the Gladshiem doubt crept in like a returning tide. She sought out Black Francis and Diggory in the cave they shared and was shocked to find the sailor putting food and spare furs into a pack.

'You're leaving?' she said.

He avoided making eye contact. 'Aye, I must find my ship.'

‘I thought...I hoped...you would stay and help the Barbegs.’

Black Francis looked up from his packing. ‘I have debts to pay. I owe a small fortune to the Sea Beggars and if I don’t pay them by the Summer Solstice they’ll put a death warrant on my head faster than you can blink. Besides, I’ve got no desire to wait around here. As much as I hate that weasel Draug, he is right. It is madness to fight the Imperial Army and it is suicide for you to go into that accursed forest on a fool’s errand.’

‘I just want to help the Barbegs,’ said Elowen, stung by his words.

‘You won’t help them by dying,’ he said. He swung his pack over his shoulder and placed a hand on her shoulder. ‘You’re a brave lass. Don’t throw your life away. Make for the sanctuary. You’ll be safe there. Don’t get involved here; this is not your war. This is nothing to do with you.’

‘How can you say that?’ said Elowen. ‘The Barbegs saved your life.’

He rubbed the back of his neck. ‘I know. But there’s nothing I can do. I’m one man. With or without my help they’re all going to die.’

‘You’re running away. Well, you can’t run forever.’

‘I must leave now, farewell Elowen. I hope...’ He lingered by the cave entrance, as though to say something before changing his mind and slipping out.

When he had gone, Diggory said, ‘He’s right you know, about going into the forest.’

‘There is no other way,’ said Elowen, tired of arguing.

Diggory piped up with another line of persuasion. ‘What

about the map? Surely that's the most important thing, you've always said that. We've risked our lives to get it this far. We should be going to the sanctuary.'

Before Diggory could argue further Bjorgolf and Albruna entered the cave.

'Is it time to leave?' said Elowen.

She hoped he would say no but Bjorgolf nodded solemnly. 'The enemy draws closer. We cannot delay. Diggory, we need some time alone with Elowen.'

Diggory gave Elowen a worried look and left the chamber. Elowen's stomach churned and rolled, her last reserves of bravery all but spent. She tried to speak but her dry throat reduced her words to little more than a faint croak.

'I can give little counsel,' said Bjorgolf. 'But this I must say. Through the forest there is only one true path. Follow it. Do not stray from the path. Whatever perils lay on it, whatever wonders lay in sight of it, never wander from the path.'

'But what do I do?' said Elowen, her head swimming with confusion and fear. For all the talk of summoning the Wild Host she realised she no idea of actually how to do it.

'Make for the Gunnlod, the summoning stone, which lies at the forest heart. Follow the path and it will lead you there. There atop of the stone you shall find the horn of Galiena. Blow the horn and summon Ekseri, the forest guardian—it is he whom you must seek.'

'What if he doesn't come?' said Elowen, feeling increasingly unsure with each passing moment.

'When he hears the horn, he will come,' said Albruna.

Bjorgolf gently took Elowen's hands in his own and said,

‘The forest is perilous. The beasts are wild. And be wary of Ekseri. He is a being far older than we Barbegs. Terrible power he holds.’

Elowen felt her blood run cold at Bjorgolf’s description. ‘Even if I summon him, how do you know that he will help us?’

Bjorgolf took a deep breath. ‘You must convince him.’

‘How?’

‘I know not for sure, but I believe that you will find a way. Only with the Wild Host’s aid can our tribe survive. Our warriors will muster on the Dun. It forms a natural obstacle to any foe wishing to assail the Gadsheim. Our purpose is clear—we fight for time, so we must hold fast until you return with the Wild Host.’

‘What about the Illuminati? Could you not seek their help?’

‘No, they have no army,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘They cannot help us. But fear not, few are more fierce or cunning in battle than Barbegs. Do not be deceived by our size. No enemy has yet taken the Gadsheim and I do not believe it will happen now. Under Prince Asbjorn’s command we can hold the enemy for long enough.’

‘*Asbjorn* is in command?’ said Elowen, not sure if she had heard him correctly.

‘Aye, he understands the warfare of humans. His knowledge will be valuable. When you return with the Wild Host, we shall still be fighting.’

The responsibility of her task crashed down on Elowen but she knew it was too late to change her mind. She had to go through with it, hopeless or not, she had to try. Whether

or not they were wise to do so, the Barbegs depended on her. She had to try.

*

Whispers of war echoed around the Gladsheim. Barbeg warriors gathered weapons and offered prayers to the ancestors; the greybeards, the younglings and the lame sought the safety of the deeper caves.

Elowen's fingers trembled as she struggled to tie the laces on her fur boots. The Barbegs had provided additional furs to put under the coat that Black Francis had given to her. She sweated heavily in the cave but knew that later she would be thankful for the extra warmth.

When she had dressed, Bjorgolf and Albruna led her out of the caves; Elowen was pleased to see Asbjorn, Diggory and Ulfur waiting for her at the top of the mountain pass. Ulfur barked loudly and sniffed her hands like an excited puppy.

'They have asked to walk with you as far as the river,' said Bjorgolf. 'Is this to your liking?'

More than a little taken aback, Elowen nodded, tears welling in her eyes. 'Yes, of course. I would have begged them to. I wish Black Francis were here. For all his temper I've grown, well almost fond of him.'

Bjorgolf stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'A mighty man such as he could have aided us. Yet I do not condemn him. He is a free spirit and this is not his war. I bear him no ill will. He has chosen his path and now you must follow yours.'

All the way down the mountain pass, all the way across the plain, Elowen said nothing; she thought that if she spoke, her words would quickly dissolve into tears. She refused to cry, she had to act strong for the others' sake. She was no stranger to fear but she had never endured fear such as this; the problems that plagued her in Trecadok, the beatings by Cronack, the loneliness, were now insignificant. She realised what would happen to the Barbegs, to her friends, if she failed. If Elowen needed any reminding of the danger that grew close, the land around her provided it. Sick, sludgy clouds, like vomits of yellow smoke, rolled overhead; there was no daylight, only an orange glow that formed no shadows and stripped the land of colour. An even worse sight confronted them as they reached the Salmon River: dead fish floated on the surface; the water was still and topped with a foamy film.

Breaking the long silence, Bjorgolf whispered bitterly, 'This is the enemy's work. They have placed Sentinels on our borders. The Earthsoul withers. May the ancestors curse them.'

A crude stone bridge spanned the river. The company stopped before it and Bjorgolf said, 'We can come no further, Elowen. From here you are alone.'

With that he and Albruna bowed and stood aside.

'Good luck,' said Diggory. 'You'll make it back safely. I will wait here, with Ulfur.'

'No, it's much too dangerous,' said Elowen. 'You will be safer in the Gladsheim.'

'I shall wait here,' he said.

Bo said nothing but he smiled, something she had rarely

seen him do. Elowen bent down to embrace Ulfur, enjoying the last few moments of warmth and strength. 'I will return soon, I promise.'

Elowen turned away from her friends. She walked on but became aware of a familiar gentle pad, pad sound: Ulfur was following her. She bent down. 'Not this time, Ulfur. I must go alone.'

The wolf licked her face and whimpered. He watched her as she walked away, his body lowered, his tail between his legs. The pain of their parting was physical, like an arrow drawn from her flesh. Elowen kept walking and crossed the bridge, she heard Ulfur howling mournfully but could not bring herself to turn and face him; she had to keep going. As soon as she stepped onto the far bank she felt a blast of frigid air, as though she had stepped from summer straight into winter. Ahead, the snow-coated forest loomed, a wall of trees. Directly in front of her, two giant pines arched over to form a gate into the forest, beyond which Elowen could see only darkness.

Guardian of the Forest

Bo grunted as he drove another sharpened wooden stake into the soil. The muscles in his arms ached with the effort; he wiped sweat from his brow and rubbed his blistered hands. Several hours had passed since Elowen disappeared into the forest. Bo marvelled at her bravery. She fascinated him, that strange girl from distant Helagan. She was not like the girls he had known at the court of Hammersund. She did not whisper and gossip, and she did not flatter and smile sweetly to sugar-coat cruel words. He had felt sadness at their parting and wished he had spent more time with her; he doubted he would see her again. Bo did not share Bjorgolf's faith; he knew that Elowen was walking to her death. He marvelled at how bravely she accepted her fate and he hoped he would respond as well to the challenges that awaited him. He did not feel brave, fear gnawed at his stomach. Bo hoped he would prove worthy of Bjorgolf's trust and above all he tried not to think of failure.

Bo had supported Bjorgolf at the moot. He had never considered doing anything else; he owed Bjorgolf his life and Bo believed in loyalty, but in his heart, he feared for the

Barbegs. At the moot, only loyalty prevented him from speaking in Draug's favour.

He knew the Barbegs were doomed. They should have fled into the mountains. Even if Elowen achieved her miracle, even if the strange, unseen powers that lurked in the Myrkvid were unleashed, he doubted any Barbegs would survive the Imperial Army's onslaught.

Bo looked around as the Barbegs worked at the Dun's defences. As Bo had instructed, hundreds of outward-facing sharpened stakes were driven into the slopes. Many more stakes lay flat, waiting to be pushed into position.

Bo became aware of Bjorgolf standing behind him, accompanied by Albruna. The Chief carried a stone-tipped spear. He looked at the stakes and frowned. 'What are these?'

'Swine-feathers,' said Bo, testing the sharp ends with his fingertips while trying to remember the military lessons of his tutors. 'These are effective against cavalry and infantry but no defence against cannons.'

A Barbeg warrior approached them and reported, 'The scouts have returned. The enemy are camped on the west bank. They are many thousand in number and they are preparing for battle.'

Bjorgolf blanched. 'Begin the muster. We must hold the Dun. For all their strength, we can long delay the enemy reaching the caves.'

Albruna shouted and pointed across the plain. A figure dressed in flowing white robes, riding a powerful horse.

A Redeemer.

The Barbegs reached for their weapons.

The Redeemer slowed to a halt some twenty feet away from them. Bo tried to peer into the darkness beneath the hood; he saw the faintest outline of a face but nothing else. The Redeemer raised his hand and spoke; his voice cut through the sluggish air like a razor. 'I am a herald. Lower your weapons.'

Bjorgolf said, 'In our land, it is we that give commands. State your purpose else be slain.'

The Redeemer exhaled slowly. 'Word I bring from Lord Lucien and from King Haakon. Our army waits across the river. Unless you agree to our terms, this land will be laid to waste and your tribe massacred.'

Bo flashed a look at Bjorgolf. Albruna whispered in the Chief's ear but he shook his head and continued to stare at the Redeemer. 'Name your terms.'

'Surrender the girl you have in your possession. You know of whom I speak so do not feign ignorance. We also demand that you surrender the traitorous brother of King Haakon. Agree to these terms and in the name of Prester John, we shall withdraw and leave you in peace.'

Bo jerked when he realised what the Redeemer wanted. He didn't want to surrender to his brother, he knew it would mean certain death but it could save the Barbegs. Despite his fear, he wanted Bjorgolf to accept; so many lives could be saved.

'You ask for much,' said Bjorgolf.

'You have much to lose,' said the Redeemer. 'Lord Lucien only offers these terms once. If refused, you can expect no mercy. Your answer I must have.'

Bjorgolf took a step forward, his hand gripping his spear.

‘This is my answer. Tell this to your master. Tell him that this is our land. Tell him that we Barbegs do not cower under threats. Tell him that we Barbegs shall fight to the death.’

The Redeemer straightened himself in the saddle. ‘Wretched fools. Death awaits you all.’

With that, the Redeemer spun his horse around and galloped away.

The fear and tension building up inside of Bo broke through. ‘It is not my place to question you, Bjorgolf, but the Redeemer speaks the truth. Your warriors are brave but to ask them to stand up to cannon and musket—’

‘I will not surrender the Dun without a fight,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘Here we can draw them into a battle and at the last withdraw to the Ice Mouth. We fight for time only, time for Elowen to return.’

‘Why throw lives away by defending the Dun?’ said Bo. ‘We should withdraw to the Ice Mouth now.’

For the first time, Bo saw Bjorgolf lose his temper. The Barbeg thumped the end of his spear onto the ground. ‘I have heard your counsel on this subject. The tribe has given me their trust. So should you. I must attend to the weapon muster. When the horn sounds, know then that the enemy approaches.’

He pushed past Bo. Albruna followed him, head bowed, avoiding eye contact.

Bo wanted to follow them, to say sorry, but he knew it was not the right time. His cheeks flushed with shame. He had already failed Bjorgolf. He was no leader, he was no captain. He was just a boy, a child.

Trying to steel himself, he returned to digging in the swine-feathers. The Barbegs around him were struggling to drive in the sharpened stakes, they all looked tired, their faces drawn and wrinkled. Meanwhile, Bjorgolf and Albruna directed the muster. The Barbegs had gathered piles of weapons: bundles of stone-tipped arrows, hundreds of spears and sharp-edged rocks for hurling at the enemy. A thousand years ago they would have made a fierce arsenal but now against cannon and musket...

Bo stopped to take a drink of water. He looked up as a raven flapped overhead with slow wing beats as though weighed down by the thick air. Bo heard the forlorn yelp of a golden eagle, the bird itself lost in the gloom. The Jorkull Mountains stood diminished, leaning over like old men.

Then, Bo heard it. The warning horn.

The Barbeg warriors were ready to fight; they wore their battle dress of reindeer skins and antlers. They grabbed weapons and Bo organised them into three blocks, each roughly three hundred strong. One block at the front of the hill, the other two forming its flanks. They waited in silence behind the swine-feathers and gripped their spear throwers, axes and bows.

Bjorgolf approached Bo and in a solemn voice he said, 'The enemy draws nigh. Soon battle will begin. I ask forgiveness for my harsh words. My heart is troubled and I spoke rashly.'

Bo shook his head, humbled by the Barbeg's apology. 'It is I who should beg forgiveness. I trust you as I have always trusted you. I would be proud to fight by your side, if you will still have me.'

Bjorgolf gripped Bo's arm. 'In you still runs the blood of your mighty forebears, Eldar blood. It is my honour to fight alongside you. When the battle begins, it is in your wisdom and courage that I will trust.'

Bo felt pride fill his whole body, a pride he had never experienced before. For the first time in his life he belonged; he was in the right place in the right time. More than ever he wanted to help the Barbegs. On this day he would not lurk in the shadows, he would stand in the open, stand as a man and as a prince. He unsheathed his sword.

They heard the army before they saw it.

The thick air which smothered all other noises carried the sound of marching feet.

Bo's throat was so dry that just to swallow was painful—his bowels lurched and ached. He struggled to keep a firm grip on his sword; his fingers felt weak and lifeless. Was this how the great warriors like Magnus and Geirrod had felt before battle? Bo had always imagined that they waited for combat with relish, their bodies tingling with excitement. Bo wasn't excited, he was scared and an uncomfortable thought repeated in his mind.

I might soon be dead.

Bo had seen death before: corpses of plague victims left on the street, a murderer hanging from the gibbet and his uncle, grey and skeletal after the pox ripped the life from his body.

Now death faced him. It leered at him. In battle, death could take many guises: death by a fiery cannon ball, the harsh bite of a slashing sword and the thrust of a pike into the gut. Yes, death surrounded him but somehow it gave

him fresh determination, a will to fight and to resist. He managed to control his trembling body.

The sound of marching came ever closer; like waves, it rolled towards them, getting louder, then softer, then louder again. It rained but it was not the cool, life-bringing rain that usually fell in the north. Instead fat, greasy globs of moisture oozed from the sky and coated the ground in foul-smelling, rust-coloured puddles. Bo's hair became damp and sticky; the water dribbled down his face and left a gritty, dirty taste on his lips. Some swine-feathers sagged in the mushy soil.

The Barbegs whispered to themselves, praying to their ancestors, praying to Amaka. Bo thought about praying but he had never believed in God. All the holy men he had ever known had proved deceivers and traitors, but Bo wished he did believe in the Almighty. He wanted to believe someone would protect him, shield him from cannon shot and pike.

Thunder rumbled overhead, pounding onto the sickly clouds like a drum. Then the enemy emerged from the gloom and, like a giant shadow, the Imperial Army sprawled across the plain. Bo saw rank upon rank of armoured men, their pikes held aloft in a moving forest. Behind them marched regiments of musketeers, all wearing leather coats and broad-rimmed felt hats decorated with red plumes. Standard bearers walked among the infantry, holding huge flags that bellowed like the sails of mighty ships. On each flank rode cuirassiers, dragoons and Haakon's fierce light cavalry. The army was led by a long horizontal line of Redeemers and in the middle of this line rode two figures, Haakon and Lord Lucien. Bo's whole body trembled,

against such numbers and strength how could the Barbegs triumph?

Bjorgolf leant towards Bo and whispered, 'Let us pray that Elowen does not fail.'

*

Elowen passed into the Myrkvid. Ahead, a snow-bound path coiled through the pines like a white ribbon. Branches creaked and rattled, a thousand tree voices discussing the trespasser to their realm. Elowen pulled the furs tighter around her. Her nose ran constantly, mucus dribbling down onto her lips; the cold air stung her exposed cheeks, making her feel as though her skin was being peeled away. Her breath clouded in front of her as she walked. Rather than wear socks Bjorgolf had stuffed her boots with dried grass—he said it would keep her feet warmer and drier than socks. In the near silence, her crunching, grinding footsteps sounded loud enough to shake off the snow that rested on the springy pine branches.

To be alone again was strange. She stopped and looked down the path. She could run back to her friends, who would blame her? No, she had promised, she had to carry on. Biting her lip, she plodded on.

After a time the trees thinned, allowing a little light to illuminate the vegetation that struggled for life in the dark forest. A few scruffy juniper shrubs snuggled close to the trunks and poked onto the path, leafless bilberry twigs peeked through the snow. Movement among the trees caught Elowen's eye: she saw shadows that flitted here and

there, always out of clear view. Whether they belonged to man or beast Elowen could not guess, she hoped they were a figment of her imagination.

She sensed the forest reacting to her presence, watching her, deciding what to do with her. Elowen felt her chest grow tight and her breathing quickened. With each step, her sense of being in danger, of being lost, increased. Snow fell, at first gently in a delicate dusting, then heavily, with thick flakes that blew into Elowen's face and planted icy kisses on her lips. She found it hard to see where she was going and groped forward blindly.

The path narrowed. Despite her weariness, Elowen ploughed on through the drifted snow. The snowfall eased and eventually stopped. Movement caught Elowen's eye again and she saw lights between the trees; they twinkled like stars in a clear night sky. Strange shapes flitted between the trees at great speed. She heard whispers, which grew louder and louder and eventually the words became clear.

Come to us. Come to us now.

Elowen was being summoned. Unhappily she remembered the Oakmen in the Witchwood but the whispers did not sound like those tree spirits nor did they sound like the sweet, lulling words of the Lantern Men who had tried to lure her to her death in the Mengoon. Waves of warm air flowed towards her from the trees and on those waves travelled glorious smells of food and of roaring fires.

Come to us.

She wanted to leave the path...she wanted relief from the tiredness, the fear, the biting cold...

Someone was tempting her, leading her away with prom-

ises of the things she wanted most of all: light, warmth, food and rest. It could not be that easy. In her mind, she repeated the words of Bjorgolf: *do not leave the path! Do not leave the path!*

Elowen turned away from the trees and kept her eyes focused on the path. She muttered to herself repeatedly, ‘Keep going, keep going.’ The lights extinguished—the smell of food faded and the warm gushes of air replaced by frigid blasts. Whatever had been trying to lure her away had given up.

Elowen forced herself forward. She struggled to lift her feet, scrapping and scuffing on the ground. Twice she tripped over rocks that remained hidden by the carpet of snow. Then, her left foot struck against something that didn’t feel like a rock. Elowen stopped and looked down: it was a skeleton, a human skeleton, bleached by the harsh elements. Jagged cuts and grooves marked the bones, the signs of a violent death. Elowen wondered how the nameless victim died. What a bitter, lonely, hateful death it must have been. Elowen guessed the skeleton belonged to one who had undertaken the same journey as her and failed. Did the same fate await her?

As she inched forward, she came across other bones that peeked through the snow. She did not stop to look at them and stumbled on until a low deep growl halted her progress.

Ahead, guarding the way forward, stood a brown bear; its musky smell filled the air. Elowen froze at the sight of its powerful claws. Her first instinct was to run but she found, whether out of fear or some other power, that she could not move.

The bear stared at her but made no obvious sign of aggression. Words came into Elowen's mind, just as they did with Ulfur.

Have you come to break the curse?

Elowen's throat was completely dry but she forced out a squeak that sounded like, 'Yes.'

The bear rose to its full height and growled. Elowen thought it was going to attack her; she flinched, trying to ready her body for the crushing, agonising pain to come. But, the bear returned to all fours and moved to one side, leaving the path in front of her free.

Elowen hesitated. Was it safe to go forward, to go past the bear? Before she could decide, she heard branches rustling and dry twigs snapping.

From the trees came hundreds of animals, Elowen saw wolves, bears, foxes, boars, red deer, stoats, pine martens, wild cats and red squirrels. They did not fight among themselves; they formed an untidy line on the path behind Elowen. Hundreds of pairs of eyes stared at her.

More words formed in her mind.

Follow the path.

Elowen saw no other choice but to obey so she edged past the bear, its eyes followed her every step. Behind her walked the host of animals, silent except for the snow crunching beneath their paws and hooves. Elowen dared not look round in case the sight behind her proved too frightening, too overwhelming.

The path widened and soon led into a broad circular clearing, from which rose a mound crowned by a square-shaped stone. The Gunnlod. The summoning stone.

At the foot of the mound stood the withered trunk of a dead yew tree. Elowen saw that a spear had been thrust deeply into the dead bark.

The Heart-tree.

Not knowing what else to do, Elowen climbed the mound and stood next to the stone. Bones littered the mound; human bones, gnawed and broken. The animals circled the mound and waited in silence.

Elowen felt exposed, she took a step back and her fingers touched the stone; through the fur mittens she wore, her fingertips tingled at the contact. The golden threads became visible, weaving around her like snakes, brighter than she had ever seen them before and her head filled with animal sounds, many times magnified. Words came to her.

She is like the others.

She will fail. They all fail.

None are worthy.

They all die.

Elowen took her hand from the stone. She wanted to run away, but the animals blocked her path. She looked around. A huge double-handed axe lay beside the stone. On top of the stone, just as Bjorgolf had described, Elowen saw the Horn of Galiena. It was carved from bone and decorated with many symbols. With shaking hands she picked it up and tried to blow but her dry lips made only a feeble hissing sound. She licked her lips and tried again, this time the horn sounded, roaring like a dozen trumpets blowing all at once. Elowen barely believed that the tiny instrument could make such a sound.

Wind swirled around the Gunnlod, rattling the trees and

making their trunks groan and creak. From the trees emerged a figure fully fifteen feet high. Moss and bark covered his torso; his long hair resembled grey lichen. Mist lingered around his legs, rendering his feet invisible and leaves sprouted from his mouth, nostrils and from the corners of his deep set, ancient eyes. His arms and legs resembled tree trunks and his fingers were like branches.

The giant spoke in a deep, slow, earth-shaking voice. 'I am Ekseri, guardian of the forest. Who dares to summon me?'

Elowen spoke but her parched throat prevented any words from coming. She swallowed hard and tried again. 'I am Elowen Aubyn. Sent by Bjorgolf, Chief of the Reindeer tribe in time of great need.'

'Countless moons have passed across the sky since last we had dealings with the Barbegs,' said Ekseri. 'Strange that they send a human. Many others have come hither and died. Why should we not slay you?'

Elowen had the sudden sense of being trapped, of pressure building. She was at their mercy and looked again at the bones and skulls that littered the mound. *She is like the others. She will fail. They all fail.* Elowen summoned her last reserves of courage and said, 'Kill me if you wish but hear this first. A great danger approaches. A danger that threatens you all.'

Elowen spoke of the Redeemers and the army that approached from the south. From deep within herself, she found a determination to make herself heard, to fight for the Barbegs. She spoke with the voice she only used in her dreams, her real voice, with all other fears and doubts stripped away. She finished by saying, 'That is why the Bar-

begs need your help. They cannot fight and win this battle alone so I have been sent to break the curse and summon the host to march to their aid.'

Ekseri held her in a withering stare. 'Long ago we came to the Barbeg's aid, before the slaying of the Heart-tree, before the curse. Yes, the curse. If indeed it is broken then the host shall follow you but first it must be broken. A sacrifice is demanded.'

Sacrifice. The word was so unexpected that Elowen wondered if she had heard it correctly. The strength that she had found in her voice withered and the soft, meek stutter returned. 'Bjorgolf did...did not speak of a *sacrifice*.'

Ekseri said, 'To break the curse, a sacrifice is demanded—the life of the one who frees the forest.'

The blood drained from Elowen's face. 'You want to sacrifice me?'

'Such is the price. Do you still wish to break the curse and summon the Wild Host? If not, leave now and you may escape with your life.'

'But if I leave, you will not help the Barbegs?'

'That is so.'

Elowen's head thumped. In a few seconds everything had changed. Why had Bjorgolf not spoken of a sacrifice? Why had he not told her the truth? Tears formed in Elowen's eyes. She thought Bjorgolf was her friend; now she found she had been betrayed.

No, she pushed out that childish thought. Bjorgolf had saved her life and the lives of her friends. He had warned of the danger and it had been *her* decision to go into the forest. She had taken on the responsibility, she had promised to

fulfil the task given to her, whatever the cost, whatever the risk.

Elowen did not want to die, but fleeing now would only delay death, not escape it. If she ran now the Barbegs would be slaughtered along with her friends, at least with her death there was a chance the others would be saved.

‘So, have you made your decision?’ said Ekseri.

Elowen nodded, finding a strange peace now that her mind was made up. ‘Yes, I will make the sacrifice.’

The guardian laughed and climbed the mound in one long step. He towered over Elowen and picked up the axe; it looked small in his hands. He gestured for Elowen to kneel with her head rested against the stone. Elowen felt so small and helpless—an ant about to be crushed.

Ekseri laid the blade edge on the back of Elowen’s neck; she felt its cold touch on her skin. Then, it lifted from her flesh and Elowen knew she was seconds only from death. She wanted to cry out but no sound came. She closed her eyes, preparing for the pain.

Ekseri laughed. Why was he taunting her? Was her death not enough? She was jerked upright by his strong hands. He looked down at her, his brown eyes examining her face.

‘You have passed the test,’ said Ekseri.

‘Test...’ stammered Elowen, her head swimming with confusion. She rubbed her neck, hardly able to believe her head was still attached to it.

‘Only one who is worthy can free the forest from the curse and lead the host,’ said Ekseri. ‘All who have come hither before sought only power, to use the Wild Host as their army to conquer. None were prepared to give their

lives for others. They failed and they died. You have succeeded because you offered your life to save others, thus worthy and true of heart you have been proven.'

Elowen struggled to keep up. 'What does this mean? Is the curse broken?'

'Not yet. One task remains. To the Heart-tree you must now come.'

Still clutching the axe, he gestured for Elowen to come down to the dead yew. Her legs still trembling, she picked her way down the mound.

Ekseri knelt beside the dead Heart-tree, his knees cracking like breaking branches. 'Now, Elowen, the time has come. Take the axe. Cleave my head from my neck.'

Elowen jolted. 'You want me to—'

Before she could finish her question he thrust the axe into her hands; it was surprisingly light and she found she could hold it with little difficulty.

Ekseri lowered his head. 'Do it now, child. The curse must be broken.'

Still hesitant, Elowen lifted the axe and raised it above the guardian. With all her strength, she brought it down and cut through his neck. The mighty head rolled to rest beside the dead tree.

Elowen cried out and jumped back, expecting a fountain of blood but only two thick drops emerged from the headless neck, drops that looked more like sap than blood. The body and severed head withered to dust.

She had killed again and images of Malengin flashed in front of her. *Murderer. Murderer.*

But where the drops had fallen, the earth stirred and two

green shoots emerged from the ground. Both saplings grew with astonishing speed but one grew faster than the other. As it reached upwards, tender green leaves became visible and in seconds it became as tall as Elowen. The leaves parted and Elowen shrieked with fear and surprise.

A face appeared among the leaves. The face of Ekseri.

The sapling grew into the guardian: arms, legs and torso. He grew to the same height as before. Ekseri pulled his feet from the earth and stood in front of Elowen, fully formed. This time the bark that covered his body looked younger; his eyes gleamed brightly. He had shed the aging of centuries like a snake sheds its skin.

Elowen tried to find the words to articulate her shock and confusion. 'How did...'

Ekseri laughed, a sound which caused the ground beneath Elowen's feet to rumble. He said, 'You have witnessed the cycle of death and rebirth. And now see the forest's rebirth.'

He pointed down to the ground; the other sapling was growing swiftly, growing into a yew tree. A thick gnarled trunk formed with brown reddish bark; its branches were already, miraculously, heavy with needle leaves, stretched and spread to form a wide canopy.

Ekseri roared. 'Behold, the Heart-tree is reborn! The forest is reborn! The curse is broken!'

The animals greeted his words with a cacophony of calls and cries. The fog above them broke, exposing the bright blue sky above and the proud glorious sun.

Ekseri looked down to Elowen. 'Child, you have broken the curse. Your enemies are our enemies. The forest host shall follow you to war.'

The ring of animals parted, leaving a walkway free to the forest path. Still shaking Elowen walked through.

Elowen was exhausted but hope gave her strength enough to keep going. Her footsteps no longer crunched but splashed; the snow was melting. Squirrels sprang from branch to branch and birds sang joyfully from the top branches, Elowen felt life and energy pulse through the forest. Winter's grip on the forest loosened, retreating from spring's sudden advance.

As Elowen walked, Ekseri and the Wild Host followed. Several times she turned round, marvelling at the wave of creatures behind her.

She had done it, somehow she had done it. The curse was broken and the Wild Host was roused.

Elowen hoped they were not too late.

Battle of the Gladsheim

Thunder battered the heavens. Muffled by the gloom, each streak of lightning achieved no more than a split second glow among the rolling clouds. Rain turned to grey snowflakes that fell like ash.

Prince Asbjorn fought to control his fear. It was not easy; the Imperial Army stood barely four hundred yards from the slopes of the Dun. On each flank lurked squadrons of light cavalry and dragoons. The infantry formed six regiments, all bristling with pikes and muskets—Bo spotted pieces of light artillery mounted on wheels, artillery he knew could be loaded with shrapnel that fired a lethal shower at close range. Bo spied several twelve-foot-long cannons, all ready to spew out iron round shot. Artillery was often inaccurate; Bo remembered the old saying, ‘The first shot is for the devil, the second for God and only the third for the king.’ But that offered little comfort. For all the inevitable missed shots, the cannons could still pound the Barbegs without reply.

Bo clenched his fists. Many Barbegs were going to die, perhaps all of them. Bo wasn’t used to being the one in charge, the one people looked to for leadership. He tight-

ened his grip on the hilt of his sword to try to conceal the trembling in his hand. He repeated Bjorgolf's words in his mind.

Hold fast until Elowen returns.

But how long could they hold under cannon and musket fire? Bo knew the formal moves of a modern battle took time, arranging the regiments, the cannons and the cavalry. Every second the enemy wasted helped but once those terrible guns started, what hope was there? If the infantry drove into them with pikes, the Barbegs might be able to force them into bloody hand to hand fighting but the struggle would be brief. Bo did not doubt the Barbeg's bravery and tenacity, but sheer numbers and strength of arms would surely overwhelm them.

He tried to concentrate and focus his thoughts on the cannons. 'Tell the warriors to stand further apart, Bjorgolf, they are too close together.'

The Barbeg Chief looked at him quizzically.

'They will present fewer targets that way,' said Bo. 'As they stand at the moment one round shot would strike a dozen warriors. More space between bodies means more space for the round shot to pass safely through.'

Bjorgolf nodded and barked the order. The warriors shuffled to leave wider gaps between each other.

Movement along the enemy's front line caught Bo's attention. Redeemers rode up and down the ranks of pikemen and musketeers, their cold shouts slashed through the listless air: 'GOD IS OUR STRENGTH!' and 'PRESTER JOHN BE OUR GUIDE!' From behind the regiments, Bo saw a sight worse than cannons and Redeemers. A Sentinel.

With ropes pulled by horses, it was raised like a statue. The air around the Sentinel coiled and steamed, and the ground all around the Dun cracked.

The cannons roared into life. The battle had begun.

Before Bo could shout a single command, five cannon balls screamed towards the Barbegs. Three passed harmlessly through the gaps between the ranks. Another cannon ball reached vainly into the sky, whizzing over their heads.

But the final shot did not miss.

It ripped a lane through the right Barbeg flank—legs and arms were blown apart; blood sprayed the grass. His voice trembling, Bo shouted out, ‘HOLD FAST! DO NOT BREAK!’

It was as much a command to himself as to the Barbeg warriors.

For an hour the cannons pounded the Dun. The Imperial Army disappeared from view, swallowed by the smoke spewed from the hot barrels. Most shots missed, firing safely over or between the ranks, but enough hit to leave dozens of Barbegs injured or slain. And Bo knew he could do nothing but wait for the enemy to march towards them. He gripped the hilt of his sword, racked with frustration.

The flashing muzzles of the cannons stopped; the screaming of cannon-balls ceased; the bombardment was over.

Slowly the acrid smoke cleared, once again revealing the enemy. Bo wondered what the next move would be. Infantry? Perhaps, but although the cannons had shaken the Barbegs, the enemy would see that their lines were far from broken. Cavalry? As the idea entered Bo’s mind, it became a reality: Kingsguard light cavalry on the right flank moved

towards the Dun. They advanced at a full trot, three deep. The cavalry wore helmets with three-bar facial protection, and back and breastplates over buff coats; red sashes were tied around their waists.

Bo gave orders to the Barbegs. 'Keep behind the swine-feathers. Prepare your spears and bows. Fire at my command. Aim for the horses.'

Bjorgolf bristled. 'The steeds are innocent. I do not like this order.'

'I don't like it any more than you do but stone-tipped spears and arrows won't pierce armour. Our best hope is to disrupt the cavalry by injuring and scattering their horses.'

Bjorgolf nodded sadly. 'I see it must be done. May the ancestors forgive us.'

'If we survive this day, I'm sure they will,' said Bo.

The cavalry closed on the Dun; now in full gallop they swallowed yards in seconds. The ground shuddered as they approached. Bo heard the riders shout as they charged with drawn swords. 'PRESTER JOHN! PRESTER JOHN!'

Now was the time. Bo shouted, 'FIRE!'

At his command the Barbegs loosened arrows and threw spears. The air became thick with the missiles raining down on the charging cavalry. Many riders were thrown from their steeds, and trampled by the horses behind. In seconds, the cavalry descended into turmoil. Riderless horses, mad with pain and fear. A few riders reached the Dun but could not find a way through the dense thickets of swine-feathers. Thwarted by the stakes and still under a hail of arrows and spears, many horses panicked and bolted, running back into the lines that followed.

The trumpets sounded the retreat and Bo barely managed to refrain from shouting out in joy. He retained enough composure to signal for the Barbegs to cease firing; they could not afford to waste precious arrows and spears.

The remaining riders fled but any momentary joy Bo experienced soon disappeared. The brown grass had been churned up by the horses' hooves, leaving black clods of earth laying on the surface. Bodies of riders and horses littered the plain. Injured men tried to crawl back to their lines. Some still possessed the strength to make it; most gave up after a few yards and did not move again.

A silence fell over the battlefield. A pause for breath while each side considered what next to do.

Bo looked around the ranks of Barbegs. Many warriors had been lost in the barrage, perhaps a quarter of their total strength. Of those that remained, many were injured and all looked weary. Bo thought about his brother; he knew Haakon would seethe with frustration at the failure of his Kingsguard cavalry; rage flowing through his veins, he would strike back and would strike hard.

The trumpets sounded again.

This time it was neither a cavalry raid nor an artillery barrage. The infantry marched across the plain, rank after rank, towards the Dun. The enemy's drums beat ever louder, the jangle of their equipment became audible. Once again the ground beneath Bo's feet shook, as though the very earth itself groaned under the approaching army's weight. Some Barbegs readied to fire their arrows or throw their spears. Bo shouted, 'HOLD FIRE! WAIT UNTIL THEY ARE IN GOOD RANGE!'

Then, a little over fifty paces away, the infantry stopped. The musketeers drew up in two ranks, one line kneeling, the other behind standing. Pikemen, armed with sixteen-foot-long pikes, lurked behind them. Musketeer captains ordered, 'Draw out your match. Blow your match. Cock your match. Try your match. Guard your pan...'

This was it. The crucial moment. Bo knew he must act but the musketeers struck first. Bo heard a roar of, 'GIVE FIRE!' followed by an ear splitting explosion. Flames flashed along the line. Lead musket balls screeched through the air and scythed down dozens of Barbegs. A second volley followed.

For Bo, time itself stopped—he moved like one in water, slow, struggling to control his own movements. Thick smoke obscured his vision; the roar of musket fire deafened his ears.

The surviving Barbegs rallied and blindly fired arrows into the smoke. Bo's hearing returned, though everything sounded distant and muffled. The smoke cleared and, having fired their volley, the musketeers withdrew, leaving the pikemen to advance. They marched steadily to the beat of drums, only rushing when they reached the foot of the Dun.

Bo knew there was no choice left but to fight hand to hand, so he raised his sword and shouted, 'CHARGE!'

With that he ran towards the enemy and Bjorgolf and all the Barbeg warriors followed him.

The enemy levelled their pikes. The Barbegs found gaps between the ash pike-shafts and drove into the men that carried them; with their stone daggers and axes they stabbed

and slashed. Many pikemen abandoned their unwieldy pikes and fought with their short swords. One lunged at Bo, his eyes bloodshot and wild with the madness of battle. The prince parried the blow before bringing his own blade crashing down onto the man's shoulder; Bo heard flesh tearing, bones splintering. The man groaned and fell.

I've killed a man. Bo shuddered at the realisation but he had no time to dwell on the thought. Time and time again he fought vicious duels, his life depending on each stroke, each parry, each thrust. He killed man after man and the world around him became one of primal senses: the blisters on his sword hand, the warm blood splashed on his face, the cries of the men he killed and the smell of sweat, of blood, of voided faeces and urine. Killing disgusted him, it excited him, it terrified him.

The ground became sticky with Barbeg and human blood. Corpses formed a grisly carpet. Smoke weaved ghostly shapes around the struggling figures. Bjorgolf and Albruna fought side by side. Again and again, the Barbeg Chief showed his strength, fighting off men who towered over him; the bodies of his victims formed a grim circle around him. As for Albruna Swifthand, Bo witnessed how well she earned the name. On the battlefield there were none faster, she dodged every pike thrust and swerved from every sword slash.

Trumpets sounded. The pikemen swiftly withdrew from the melee. Some Barbegs cried out in triumph but Bo knew the battle was not won; the infantry were reforming to attack. Musketeers formed a rank and fired a volley up at the scattered Barbegs. The hail of musket balls littered the slope

with more corpses. The pikemen charged again and this time the Barbegs could not hold them off. Bo heard the gurgling screams of Barbeg warriors, skewered on the pikes; their lifeless bodies were trampled on by the relentless advancing infantry.

Bjorgolf, bleeding from a deep gash in his forehead, said to Bo, 'The Dun is lost. We must retreat now to the Ice Mouth.'

Bo nodded agreement. The Barbeg warriors numbered barely three hundred now and more fell with each passing moment. Bo held aloft his sword and shouted to all, 'TO THE ICE MOUTH! TO THE ICE MOUTH!'

The Barbegs fled, scrambling up the twisting mountain path. A trumpet blast stopped the pikemen's advance. They stood back and massed on the Dun, waiting for the order to advance.

Bo ran up the path, clinging to his sword with what little strength remained in his hand. Sweat dampened his body and a stitch burned into his side. He had failed. The enemy waited for now but Bo knew they would soon launch the final attack.

He reached the Ice Mouth and, weary beyond words, leant against the stone Raven. He felt light-headed and giddy. Around him some Barbegs fell to their knees, gasping for breath; others tended wounds, horrible gashes, broken bones, skin burnt by flame and musket shot. So many had died. Bo's eyes became hot with tears. He wiped his face to avoid anyone seeing him cry. He had failed and the battle was lost.

A voice brought him back to the moment. It was Bjorgolf.

Dry blood smothered his face and Albruna stood beside him, dirty with mud and blood.

‘This is our last stand. Here we must hold them, if only for a short time,’ said the Barbeg Chief.

‘What is the point of fighting on?’ said Bo. ‘We are beaten.’

Bjorgolf picked at the dry blood on his nose. ‘Beaten? We fight to win time only. Do not forget Elowen!’

Bo tried to conceal his trembling hands. ‘It is too late. Not even the Wild Host could defeat this army. I have failed you all.’

Bjorgolf shook his head. ‘The warriors trust you, as do I.’

‘I am not worthy of your trust,’ said Bo. He held up his blood-smeared sword. He picked off hair and pieces of flesh from the blade. It left his fingers stained red and black. ‘I have no stomach for war. Killing makes me sick.’

‘If you felt differently then I should not trust you,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘Take courage, friend. Hope remains. Elowen may yet return.’

Bo said to himself, ‘I wished I believed that.’

‘You must go to the caves, Albruna,’ said Bjorgolf. ‘Take all the warriors behind the Ice Mouth. The enemy will find it hard to break through.’

Albruna stiffened at the order. ‘And what becomes of you?’

‘Here I shall remain. If Bo wishes it, he may stay at my side and hold the path for as long as can be. We can give you more time to prepare the last defence of our home.’

‘I’m with you,’ said Bo. He had achieved so little, to give his life for the Barbegs was a small price to pay.

'I do not wish to leave your side,' said Albruna.

Bjorgolf placed his hands on her shoulders and rubbed his nose against hers. 'Our folk need a leader, one who can defend them to the last. None have fought braver than you. Please, do as I say.'

Albruna sighed but demurred to his request. She led the remaining warriors through the Ice Mouth and soon only Bo and Bjorgolf remained at the top of the path.

Bjorgolf pointed down to the Imperial Army. 'Are they preparing a siege?'

Bo laughed grimly. 'It is not in Haakon's nature to wait. He wants blood. He won't wait to starve us out. They'll soon be charging up the path.'

'The path is narrow. Only two astride can men walk it. It will slow them.'

'But it won't be men they send. The Redeemers will finish the job. We can expect no mercy. None can withstand them. If only—'

Bjorgolf interrupted him. 'Look to the path! The truth you speak. Here they come.'

A line of figures climbed the mountain path. Kingsguard, two hundred at least, each armed with sword and halberd. In front of them strode four Redeemers and two men Bo recognised: the first was Captain Jarngrimnir, head of the Kingsguard and beside him walked Haakon. Bo knew his brother would want to kill him; he would suffer no other man to claim the prize.

Haakon stopped barely twenty paces from them. Bo found it strange to see his brother again and gasped when he saw the Null visible in his forehead. Although the king

stood six foot tall and in full armour, Bo saw a flash of Haakon as a boy; the boy that Bo had idolised. For all the bitterness and hatred that had grown between them, Bo still felt a bond with Haakon, deeply buried though it was. But now his older brother had come to kill him.

The Redeemers lurked behind the king. Haakon stared at Bo. '*Little brother*. When I heard tidings that you had taken refuge with these godforsaken imps I believed it to be a joke.'

Bo wanted to fire back and throw insults at his brother, but he knew the danger in that. Haakon wanted to goad him, make him so angry that he would act like a child. No, he had to remain calm, so he deepened his voice and gripped his sword so as not to betray his fear with a trembling hand. 'Have you come to parley or do you beg forgiveness for murdering our father and stealing his throne?'

Haakon's body stiffened with rage. 'Parley? The king does not *parley* with traitors. If you had any wisdom you would fall at my feet and beg for mercy. You will never be a true warrior.'

'And you will never be a true king,' said Bo.

That struck a chord and Haakon's face went red, the blood within him boiled. He drew his sword, their father's sword, the sword of the Preven kings. 'I am tired of talking. I say only this. Your head will join that of our treacherous father on traitors' gate. And this nest of demons shall burn. It is time to end this. The Redeemers will slaughter the Barbeg wretches, but you, little brother, shall die at *my* hands.'

Haakon attacked, his eyes blazed with the tunnel vision of a hawk. Bo knew his brother fought as well as any man that

lived. He parried blow after blow but Haakon's strength pushed him further back. The vibration of each clash of swords sent shock waves through his whole body; it felt like the relentless pounding of a hammer.

Meanwhile, the Redeemers charged at Bjorgolf. The Barbeg fought savagely, like a wild beast cornered. He hacked and stabbed at the Redeemers but they surrounded him. Bo knew his friend was doomed but he focused on his own desperate struggle. He knew he was losing. Haakon backed him against the stone Raven; the proud head and wings loomed over him, cradling him in his final moments. He was so tired, his arms and legs felt as heavy as lead.

Haakon brought another blow crashing down; Bo parried it with his blade but the force knocked the sword from his hands and it clattered down onto the ground. Before Bo could move, Haakon punched him square in the face. His legs buckled and only the statue kept him upright. Blood oozed from his nose, everything became blurred. Through a watery curtain, he saw Bjorgolf cut down by the Redeemers. Like a streak of lightning, a blade flashed and Bo heard the Barbeg scream, a sound dislocated from reality, as though it was happening in another place, at another time.

His brother stood a couple of paces from him, breathing hard but smiling that grim, smug smile that Bo had seen so often. Haakon lifted the tip of his sword to Bo's throat. 'You are beaten little brother.'

But, as he pulled the sword back to strike, a bestial roar rocked the mountain, a roar that drowned all other sounds. The sickly swollen clouds above them broke and daylight poured through, followed by gusts of clean air. To the west,

the banks of filthy mist rolled away to reveal a great host of animals on the near shore of the river.

The curse was broken.

The Wild Host had come.

March of the Wild Host

The forest came alive. Colours, sounds, smells long imprisoned under the grip of winter now celebrated in their freedom. From every tree came the sound of birdsong; tips of green grass peeked through the melting snow; ball-shaped flowers sprinkled the bilberry bushes; drops of water fell from the branches, peppering the snow with thousands of tiny holes.

Elowen followed the path; the animals' excitement coursed through her veins and brought fresh vigour to her limbs. But fear gnawed at her and she guessed at the terror that awaited them. She had no doubt the animals were fierce but how could they survive in a battle against cannons and muskets?

Ekseri's steps shook the ground and his arms and legs creaked like a ship's timbers. When he spoke, his words shook snow off the trees. 'Winter is banished. Spring has come. It is good to feel the sun's warmth. I have missed him.'

Elowen saw the two trees whose branches formed the forest gate. As they approached it, a burning smell replaced the fresh odours of pine resin and damp earth. Ekseri

sniffed, a sound like wind rushing through a tunnel, and he said, 'The air smells corrupt and loathsome.'

Elowen passed out of the forest to emerge on the bank of the Salmon River, close to the bridge. Grey smoke flecked with fire rolled over the plains and Elowen heard the rumble of cannons, the crackle of muskets. Her eyes fell upon the army: rank upon rank of soldiers. Behind the army Elowen saw the Sentinel, like a huge dagger thrust into the ground. All was lost and it was her fault.

'We are too late. I have failed,' sobbed Elowen. In that moment she hated herself more than she had ever done before.

The Wild Host fanned out behind Elowen, they waited in silence and fear replaced excitement. Elowen noticed a familiar grey shape on the far bank. She heard a howl, a sound she would have recognised anywhere.

Ulfur.

The wolf bounded across the bridge and rushed into Elowen's arms. He licked her face and rubbed his mouth against hers, treating her to a blast of hot breath; it stank as foul as ever but to Elowen it was the sweetest aroma imaginable.

'A friend?' said Ekseri.

'Yes, a good friend,' laughed Elowen, overwhelmed by the joy of their reunion.

'ELOWEN!'

She looked up and saw Diggory running towards her. When he saw Ekseri and the Wild Host he stopped dead and his mouth opened wide with disbelief. Elowen beckoned for him to come to her. 'It is safe, I promise.'

He walked slowly towards her, his eyes never leaving Ekseri. ‘You did it, Elowen! You did it!’

She tried not smile. ‘So you waited.’

‘Aye, though Ulfur is poor company. The battle has started. What are you going to do?’

Elowen realised she didn’t know for sure but before she could consider it further a low growl from behind broke her thoughts. Wolves emerged from the forest. Elowen sensed the change in Ulfur, his muscles tensed, his blood pounded swiftly through his veins. One of the forest wolves padded forward, the alpha male, the head of the pack. It trained its malevolent eyes on Ulfur. The two wolves confronted each other, only yards apart; hot breath steamed above them. Ulfur stood tall and growled, his tail up, his ears erect. Then, the alpha wolf averted its face and lowered its body. He slinked off like a dethroned king, his ears pulled back flat on his head, tail between its legs. With the tension broken and the supremacy established, the other wolves surrounded Ulfur: some reached up to Ulfur to gently lick and nip his muzzle. Ulfur ruled the pack; he stood stiff-legged and tall, his ears erect, his tail held vertical. Tears welled in Elowen’s eyes. She saw Ulfur in his element: he was no longer the caged, half-starved beast she had found on Ictis but an animal of strength and pride.

Ekseri considered the scene in front of him before saying to Elowen, ‘The threads of gold weave strange patterns around you, child. Wolf-friend I name you, I have not seen the like of it for a long age. Now the time has come. To battle we must run.’

Elowen looked over to the Gladsheim and frowned.

‘Run? It’s a long way. Two miles at least. I don’t think I can run that far.’

‘I can bear you,’ said Ekseri with a laugh. He reached down and lifted her as easily as an adult picking up a doll. Elowen gasped as her feet left the ground.

‘Hold on tight, Wolf-friend,’ said the guardian, his voice shaking her body. That was one command Elowen had no intention of disobeying. She put her arms around his thick neck and clung on with all her strength.

‘What about me?’ said Diggory, frantically waving his hands.

‘FOLLOW AS BEST YOU CAN!’ was all Elowen could yell. Then without another word Ekseri drove forward and in a single leap he cleared the river. Elowen screamed, not with fright but with sheer joy and exhilaration. Every part of her body felt alive and for that brief moment, the grief, the anger, the terror were banished. They landed smoothly on the far bank. Ekseri stopped and sniffed the air ahead. Although she dared not loosen her grip, Elowen risked turning her head to see if the Wild Host followed them. The bears swam across the river, Elowen marvelled at their power and skill in the water. Like a general marshalling his troops, Ulfur led his pack across the bridge and the other animals followed him: boars, stags, foxes and wild cats, the Myrkvid emptied. Elowen spotted Diggory, gingerly edging his way over the bridge, keeping his distance from the wolves.

Once all were across, Ekseri flexed his great tree trunk arms and announced, ‘Now we must let our foes know that we are coming.’

'Is that wise?' said Elowen.

'For too long have we hidden; now we take our revenge on those who cursed the forest,' said Ekseri. He roared, a sound like thunder that made Elowen's ears ache.

The sky cleared, fighting back the clouds that threatened to strangle it. The sun returned, throwing down spear-like shards of light; a fresh wind swept across the plains.

If the jump across the river had been thrilling, it barely prepared Elowen for the charge across the plain. Ekseri ran and he was faster than any horse and swallowed hundreds of yards in seconds. To Elowen, the ground passed as a blur. The rushing wind swept Elowen's hair back and made her eyes water; a sound like roaring waves filled her ears. Elowen clung to his neck; her arms throbbed with the strain. She gritted her teeth and pushed her arms beyond a pain she thought she could endure. Behind she heard the thundering of the other creatures, a cacophony of cries and calls. There was no stopping now; they were only yards from the Imperial Army.

A squadron of heavily armed cuirassiers protected the army's left flank and they swiftly turned their steeds to face the new threat. With their armour glistening in the revitalised sun, they formed a line facing the oncoming Wild Host. They levelled their carbines but the sight of Ekseri and the beasts that followed proved too much for the cuirassiers' horses: they bolted and threw their armoured riders who fell heavily to the ground with a loud clatter of metal. The army's flank crumbled. The bears and wolves led the charge, followed by the wild boars and stags. Whether by teeth, claws, tusks or antlers, they tore into the enemy; but

most deadly of all was Ekseri, he used his whole body as a weapon. With swings of his arms he brushed aside a dozen men at a time and his legs crushed all beneath him. Elowen turned away from the carnage, burying her head into the guardian's neck.

But if the enemy had been surprised it was not yet beaten. Infantry formations quickly reformed; muskets loaded and prepared; a hedge of bristling steel-tipped pikes awaited the Wild Host.

Elowen looked up in time to see the musketeers fire a volley. Their fire was accurate and she saw many animals fall dead. But the Wild Host did not stop and they smashed further into the enemy lines.

With no time for further volleys, the musketeers reversed their muskets to use them as clubs. The power of the Null forced them to fight on, to fight to the death. And die at Ekseri's hands they did. The blood of his victims sprayed over Elowen, making her cheeks and hair moist and sticky. Feeling sick, she wiped her face, grimacing at the gory stains on her hands. The sounds and smells of battle overwhelmed her: ash pikestaffs splintering; wounded men screaming; beasts roaring; the ringing of steel and the smell of gunpowder.

The enemy infantry were forced back. Elowen spied the Sentinel. A faint yellow glow clung to the harsh black lines of the object. Above the horrible din of battle, Ekseri said, 'Drive them back across the river!'

But as he spoke, ghostly figures lined up in front of him. Redeemers.

*

King Haakon lowered his blade and looked at the battlefield below. The Redeemers left the fallen Bjorgolf and rushed down the path to meet the unexpected foe.

Although groggy, Bo grasped that he had to take advantage of his brother's hesitation; he lunged towards him, using his full weight and surprise to knock Haakon to the ground and fall on top of him. Haakon lost his helmet and dropped his sword and, with the breath knocked out of him, he struggled to move in his armour and floundered like an upturned beetle. His nose and lips bled from the fall.

Bo grabbed his sword and held it to Haakon's throat. A rage, a bloodlust he had never experienced took hold of his body and mind; in his fevered eyes Haakon became only an object of hatred, a beast to be slaughtered. He wanted to drive the blade into his throat...one push and Haakon would die and father would be avenged. One sword thrust and the crown would be his. King Asbjorn. King of Prevennis. He looked down at his brother. Just one push.

He hesitated. He could not kill his own flesh and blood. He could not kill him out of pure rage or lust for power.

'What are you waiting for?' said Haakon, spitting blood as he spoke.

'You are my brother. For all you have done, I cannot murder you.'

He lifted the sword from Haakon's flesh.

The king's reaction was immediate.

He swung a punch at Bo which landed flush on the prince's chin and sent him sprawling backwards. The sword slipped from Bo's hands and fell down the side of the path.

Haakon jumped onto Bo, sitting on top of him to pin him down. Bo's chest throbbed under the pressure of his brother's weight and he fought for breath.

Haakon gripped Bo's throat with both hands. 'Fool. You should have killed me when you had the chance.'

Bo tried to fight back but his punches bounced feebly off Haakon's armour. His hands scrambled on the ground, finding at first only pieces of grit and stone. Then his fingers touched metal: Haakon's sword, the sword of the Pre-ven kings. With all his remaining strength, Bo snatched the hilt.

Haakon realised too late what Bo was doing, too late to stop his own blade slashing into his face. The king grunted and a fountain of blood sprayed Bo. Haakon fell to the side, his legs still entangled with those of his brother.

Sick to his very core, Bo pushed Haakon away and rose groggily to his feet.

'THE KING HAS BEEN SLAIN!'

The voice belonged to Jarngrimnir, the captain of the Kingsguard. Under strict orders from Haakon, the Kingsguard had not interfered in the duel but now they charged towards Bo. Weary beyond description, Bo picked up Haakon's sword; he barely had the strength to stand, let alone fight but before he moved, a cry from behind stopped him.

Barbegs poured through the Ice Mouth, all the remaining warriors, led by Albruna. With their knives and axes they attacked the Kingsguard. Bo saw Jarngrimnir cut down by Albruna, her speed and agility not blunted by hours of battle. With their captain fallen and spent by the exertion of fighting in the thin air, the Kingsguards' courage broke and

they fled down the path, pursued by Albruna and the Barbegs.

Before exhaustion overwhelmed him completely, Bo knelt and rolled over the king's lifeless body. Haakon's empty eyes looked up into the blue sky, into the heavens.

Bo saw Haakon's Null on the ground—the sword had cut it from his flesh. Blood and skin still clung to the spikes which had once been forced into the skull. Bo kicked it away, sending the lump of Cold Iron over the edge of the path and down the side of the mountain.

'You are free now, brother,' he said.

With his fingertips, Bo gently closed Haakon's eyes. Then he wept, he wept for the brother he had slain and he wept for their dead father. When he could cry no more, the uncrowned king of Prevennis lay down beside his brother and waited for death to take him.

*

The Redeemers advanced in silence, their movements were synchronised, mechanical. Elowen's leg throbbed, the echo of an old wound.

'So they have come,' said Ekseri to Elowen. 'Many moons have passed since my eyes fell upon their kind.'

The Redeemers' pale swords struck like lightning—soon a thick wall of corpses lay at their feet: bears, wolves and boars. The screams of the dying beasts and the smell of blood carried on the wind. The Wild Host broke and scattered into isolated groups. Elowen saw Ulfur and his pack fighting furiously against the Redeemers, but their bravery

was no match for swords and they were forced back with many wolves slain.

The guardian said to Elowen, 'You must get off now.'

He leant down and allowed her to jump off before she fell. Diggory appeared at her side. His furs were splattered with mud and his hair was wet with sweat. 'What is going on, Elowen?'

'Run to the forest, child, there you shall be safe, for a time at least,' said Ekseri to Elowen. His eyes looked sad, his voice heavy and tired. 'The end is close. Against the dark ones, I cannot prevail.'

Elowen looked around, all seemed lost. The corpses of the Wild Host formed grim mounds around the battlefield. Then her eyes fell upon the Sentinel, standing proud but exposed, unguarded. She remembered the Sentinel in Dinas Hein and how the Redeemer had used its power. She remembered the effect it had on the people there, it had guided them, controlled them.

An idea grew in her mind.

She yelled to Ekseri and pointed to the Sentinel. 'That is where the Redeemers get their power from. We must try to destroy it. It will weaken them.'

The guardian faced Elowen. 'I cannot abandon the Myrkvid host. I am their guardian.'

'This is the only way to save them, trust me,' said Elowen.

Ekseri looked at the Sentinel and crunched his knuckles. 'Very well, I trust you.'

With Ekseri and Diggory following, Elowen scrambled over abandoned muskets, swords and broken pikes. They approached the Sentinel, feeling waves of frigid air.

‘It is evil, a stain on this land,’ said Ekseri.

He leapt at the Sentinel and pushed it with all his weight. It tipped, the shifting foundations digging up gouges of black earth.

But the Cold Iron did not give up its grip easily.

The Sentinel made a terrible grinding sound, so loud that Elowen was forced to cover her ears. The air around the Sentinel burst into fire and Elowen screamed as the flames folded around the guardian, ‘LET GO OF IT!’

Ekseri ignored the burning and attacked the slab of Cold Iron with all his strength. Further and further the Sentinel tipped, like a slowly falling tree. Elowen watched, surely one more push would be enough, one more push would see the Sentinel fall but the flames grew and the giant burned like a torch. Ekseri let go and rolled around on the ground, it was enough to extinguish the hungry flames but his bark skin smouldered. He exhaled, a sound like wind rushing through winter thickets. He held up a hand towards Elowen and in a faint voice said, ‘I have failed. I have not the strength to break it.’

Diggory grabbed Elowen’s arms and tried to pull her away. ‘Come on, we have to go.’

A gunshot rang out, Diggory jolted and let go of Elowen’s arms. He opened the fur coat he wore and held his shoulder; a patch of red widened. He stared at Elowen, his face etched with confusion. He fell to his knees. ‘Help me...’

From the fog of battle, three white shapes appeared. Two were Redeemers; one carried a drawn sword while the other held a smoking carbine. In front of them walked an even taller figure, his face hidden behind a white mask.

Lord Lucien.

Bo had described the terrible Lord of the Redeemers and Elowen had no doubt that it was him. He watched her, his whole body rigid, like a cat waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting prey. Elowen withered under his stare and backed away, falling as she did so.

‘So, it is Lord Hereward’s little messenger,’ he said in a voice full of cruelty, full of long ages of hatred. ‘Brothers, bring the girl to me.’

Elowen knew they wanted the map. After all she had been through they were going to take it off her. She wasn’t going to surrender. She had come so far through forest, moor, mountain and sea. The Redeemers had taken everything from her: they had driven her out of Trecadok and forced her to live like a vagabond, a criminal. They had tried to kill her and her friends and she refused to yield to them like a whipped dog.

Elowen knew there was no escape, Ekseri was injured and probably dying, so was Diggory, but she refused to die without a fight and with that knowledge came a strange feeling of peace. The golden threads of Earthsoul sparkled around her, more brilliant and animated than she had ever seen before. Their power flowed through her. There was no division between her body and the threads; as she moved they moved, like stringed puppets in her hands they obeyed her will. She looked at the Sentinel, around which flames still coiled. It was leaning over like a storm-battered tree and one more push would surely see it fall. All else faded from her consciousness; she no longer heard the sounds of battle, no longer smelt the blood and smoke, no longer looked

upon the Redeemers who strode towards her. She had only one desire, one focus: she wanted to destroy the Sentinel.

The golden threads pulsed. Although she was still standing, Elowen's hands felt like they were pushed into the soil; worms crawled around her fingers, in the palm of her hands stones moved and cracked. She stretched her fingers and the ground shook. Fissures around the Sentinel's base quickly widened. Frozen with confusion the Redeemers stopped their advance towards her.

The flames around the Sentinel died and, like a felled tree, it toppled forward. As it struck the ground it cracked into two pieces. The two Redeemers dived at the Sentinel, trying to stop it falling but they only achieved their own deaths as it crashed down on top of them.

The ground shuddered and groaned and Elowen was thrown down onto her stomach. An eerie silence fell over the battlefield. The Imperial Army's battle cries ceased, their drummers stopped. With the Sentinel broken, the aura of fear projected by the Redeemers faded and the Wild Host fought with fresh heart.

Elowen's head swam. Her limbs felt loose and lifeless as though her bones had melted. She tried to get up but as she did a foot crushed down on her back. Lord Lucien.

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up. She looked into the death-mask face and those eyes, empty dead eyes, always half in shadow.

'How did you do that, child?' he said. Her arm ached under the pressure of his grip. 'What sorcery dwells within you? Give me the map and your passing shall be less painful.'

With his spare hand he ripped open her furs, searching for the map. ‘Where is it, tell—’

The ground beneath Elowen’s feet rippled like a shaken cloth. Sods of earth were flung skyward, followed by an ear-splitting roar, and Lucien was blown off his feet.

Smoke and dust filled Elowen’s mouth and lungs but despite her vision spinning and being almost deafened by the blast, she managed to stand up. The smoke that swirled around her cleared. She looked out to the river and at first she thought her eyes cheated her. A ship sailed down the river, a two-mast vessel with an elaborately carved figure-head.

The *Husker Du*.

Time and time again the ship’s cannons fired, the shots lacked accuracy but they panicked the enemy’s wilting formations. Even through the smoke of battle Elowen saw a figure standing proud on the *Husker Du*’s deck. Black Francis. Elowen’s heart leapt—he had come back.

Elowen’s hearing returned: she heard the cannons rumble, she heard the screams of the dying, the baying of trumpets giving orders to formations long broken. Horses neighed with fear as they rushed wildly past. The *Husker Du*’s cannons stopped and Elowen saw the dinghy being lowered, Black Francis and his crew were joining the battle.

Elowen remembered Lord Lucien.

He lay a few feet away from her, his robes were shredded and blackened with smoke. He sat upright, his mask still intact. His left arm hung limply, burnt and smeared with blood. A sword lay at Elowen’s feet; she picked it up and held its tip to Lucien’s throat. Anger boiled with her. She

wanted to plunge the blade into his flesh. 'I know who you are. I know what you are. You deserve to die.'

'Finish me, child. Finish me if you have the courage.'

She wanted to but another feeling grew within her, a feeling that paralysed her. Not pity, but a deeper connection with the one who lay at her mercy. She thought of Malengin, of how she had felt after killing him. Could she carry another death on her conscience? She lifted the blade from his throat. 'I am not like you. I am not a murderer. I am not a monster.'

'Then you betray your weakness.'

With a sweep of his foot Lucien knocked Elowen down onto her back; the fall knocked the air out of her lungs. He stood over her, breathing hard. He picked up the sword. 'You have courage, child, but that will not save you.'

Elowen knew she stared death in the face. She only had seconds of life left so with her last reserve of strength and defiance she said, 'Kill me then. But I won't beg for mercy. I am the daughter of an Adept. She did not beg either, even after you tortured her.'

She held up the pendant to his face. Lucien froze, his voice lowered and slowed. 'You are the daughter of an *Adept*?'

'THERE SHE IS!'

The shout rose above the din of battle: it was Black Francis. The sailor and his crew charged towards her. Lucien lifted the sword, ready to strike; Elowen tensed her body, waiting for the death blow. But Lucien sheathed his blade and said, 'I will find you again, girl. I will find you.'

He turned and ran. He ran faster than any man Elowen

had ever seen. He leapt upon a riderless horse, speeding off in a cloud of dust. Black Francis knelt beside Elowen. 'Are you hurt, lass?'

Elowen couldn't speak. Sounds faded and her vision failed, the world around her became dark. She rose, lifted by the sailor's strong arms. She tried to open her eyes but the effort proved too much. She let herself be carried away.

Choosing a Path

Elowen saw a blue sky. Mountains. A sea of green grass. The taste of blood lingered in her mouth. A familiar face stared down at her.

Black Francis.

‘Am I dead?’ said Elowen.

The booming laugh of Black Francis answered her. ‘Nay, not yet! You’ve been out cold for some hours but you’re still breathing. You are made of stern stuff, lass.’

Smelly hot breath blew onto her face, following by the slobbering of a damp, gritty tongue. Ulfur.

You live. Ulfur glad.

Elowen put out a hand and felt the wolf’s warm coat. She lifted her head and the world around her came pouring in, filling in levels of detail that had been blurred before. She lay on the Dun and on the far side of the hill Elowen saw the surviving animals of the Wild Host. Black Francis leant down beside her with Ulfur. Albruna was there, her face covered with dried blood and mud. Elowen looked up at Black Francis; his face was covered in bruises of black, blue and yellow. Grazes and angry cuts nicked his arms, and his knuckles were red raw and blistered.

Memories flooded back to Elowen, unhappy memories. ‘The battle. The Redeemers—’

Black Francis held up his hands in a gesture of reassurance. ‘The battle is over. The enemy is defeated.’

‘You...you came back.’

‘Well, I am still owed a reward for getting you to Prevennis. I returned to protect my investment.’

Elowen looked at him and saw the jest in his eyes. His tightly pursed lips broke into a smile. The sailor laughed and to Elowen’s surprise hugged her tightly, a suffocating but affectionate embrace. ‘You know I thought long on what you said. You were right. I can’t run forever and the Barbegs did save my life. So once I met with my boys I decided to come back and we sailed to the estuary of the Salmon River. I feared the river might prove too shallow for the *Husker Du* but our luck held and we made it. And it seems we arrived just in time.’

‘But what about your debts to the Sea Beggars?’

That wiped the smile from his face. ‘Aye, I haven’t forgotten about that. But I’ll put my affairs in order. Don’t you worry.’

Elowen managed to sit up and she looked across the plain. Battle had washed across the plains like a huge wave, leaving piles of macabre debris. Elowen saw thousands of corpses, men and beasts, abandoned cannons and tattered flags that fluttered like old scarecrows.

‘Battle is horrible,’ said Elowen. ‘I never want to see another one. The Sentinel fell, I wanted to destroy it and it fell. I don’t understand what happened.’

Albruna smiled knowingly. ‘One day you will, child.’

Elowen did not find Albruna's enigmatic answer comforting but before she could consider it further she realised who was missing. 'Where is Diggory? And what about Bjorgolf and Prince Asbjorn?'

Black Francis and Albruna exchanged glances before the Barbeg spoke. 'Prince Asbjorn is safe. As for Diggory and Bjorgolf, they are with the witchdoctors.'

'Are they hurt?' said Elowen.

'Diggory is wounded but he will live,' said Albruna.

'And Bjorgolf?'

Albruna swallowed hard and a shadow passed over her face. 'His wounds are grave.'

'Will he...survive?' said Elowen, barely daring to ask the question for fear of the answer.

'We can only hope,' said Albruna in a low voice, a voice that struggled to withhold the emotion behind it. 'On this day many of our folk walk the narrow path between this world and the next. The price of our deliverance has been high.'

Elowen didn't know what to say. All that came out was, 'Albruna, I'm sorry.'

Albruna smiled weakly and nodded.

Black Francis stroked Elowen's hair. 'You have been marked, lass.'

'What do you mean?'

Black Francis drew out his dagger and held its blade close to Elowen's face; its surface allowed enough of a reflection for her to see that swathes of her hair had turned as white as snow. 'I don't understand—'

'You wielded great power through the Earthsoul, an act

worthy of Adepts of old,' said Albruna. 'Yet such power is not without cost. But do not be alarmed, there is no harm done. For now, we must return to the caves, can you walk, Elowen?'

'I think I can manage,' she said.

'I will help you,' said Black Francis. With his support Elowen stood but her legs felt weak.

The ground shook with heavy footsteps and Ekseri rose above the lip of the hill. His bark skin was black and blistered and his breathing sounded laboured. 'I am glad to see you standing, Elowen Wolf-friend.'

'You are hurt,' said Elowen.

'Deep are my wounds but the battle is won. Despite the losses we have endured, there is much to be thankful for.'

Albruna bowed before Ekseri. 'Old one, the tribe stands in debt to the forest. Soon the land shall be whole again. Mountain, plain, river and forest.'

'The bond between the forest and the mountain is forged anew,' said the guardian. 'We hope for better days to come. Now, to the forest I must return. Only in the forest shall I be healed. For now, farewell. Elowen, Wolf-friend, curse-breaker, ever shall you be welcome in the forest.'

With that, Ekseri led Wild Host back to the Myrkvid. Ulfur's pack left but he did not go with them. Instead he remained at Elowen's side. With his head lowered, he watched the wolves until they disappeared among the trees. Elowen sensed his pain at the separation.

With the Wild Host gone, Elowen and her friends climbed the long path to the caves. The thin air made each step an effort and without the guiding, supporting hand of

Black Francis, Elowen doubted she could have managed the journey. Ulfur plodded on alongside her, several times craning his head up to lick her hand. She sensed the tension within him; he kept looking towards the forest.

As they walked they passed corpse after corpse, some Barbeg, some human. An old Barbeg sat beside a fallen warrior, perhaps her son. She sat cross-legged, crying, wailing, rocking back and forth in her grief. The old Barbeg kept petting the corpse, trying to wipe away the blood that stained his face and chest—she cupped his face in her hands, weeping loudly.

Elowen realised how deeply the sorrow of battle ran, its cruel fingers touched many lives. From a worse fate the tribe may have escaped, but victory would still leave a bitter taste.

They reached the stone Raven; to Elowen's surprise, Prince Asbjorn sat beside it. On the ground next to him lay the body of a large man in armour. The prince stared at the corpse and did not look up. He was lost in his thoughts, lost to the world around him.

Elowen stepped towards the prince, but Black Francis held her back. 'Best leave him be. He's had a tough time. Come, we must find Diggory.'

They found him in the Great Cavern. Around the huge stalagmite lay dozens of wounded Barbeg warriors. Witch-doctors tended to them. They wore caps decorated with reindeer antlers and white paint. Elowen heard the groans and feverish shouts of the injured and dying. The smell of blood, of burnt and rotting flesh, mixed with the sweet scent of herbs.

Diggory lay on a bed of fur and bracken. His shoulder was heavily bandaged. He looked up at Black Francis, frowning as though not believing what his eyes told him.

‘You came back?’ he said. ‘But I thought...and Elowen, what has happened to your hair?’

‘You’ve got a lot of catching up to do, lad,’ said Black Francis. ‘I’ll tell you everything later.’

Wincing, Diggory tried to sit up but Elowen told him to remain still.

‘I’m glad to see you are safe,’ she said, meaning it too. They had been through so much together. He was her friend now, despite all that had passed between them before. The Orphanage belonged to another time, another place, another life. Elowen noticed a change in Diggory. He looked more like a man: stubble formed the outline of a beard and the permanent sneer that used to stain his face was now a memory only.

Diggory fidgeted and grimaced with pain. ‘I was so scared.’

Elowen nodded, understanding how he felt.

‘I didn’t do anything really,’ he said. ‘I wish I could have done more. I let you all down.’

‘That’s not true,’ said Elowen. ‘You’ve let none of us down.’

Diggory smiled and closed his eyes.

‘Let’s leave him, he needs sleep,’ said Black Francis.

Elowen nodded. She needed sleep too, her eyes stung with tiredness, but before she could leave she became aware of a young Barbeg standing behind her. ‘The Chief has asked to see you. Please, come with me.’

The whole cavern fell silent and all the Barbegs stared at Elowen. As she followed her guide, hundreds of eyes traced her every step.

*

Bo had no more tears left to cry, his eyes were dry and sore. He tried to reason with himself: he had struck in self-defence and Haakon would have killed him otherwise. He knew that was all true but it provided no comfort. His brother was dead and he had killed him.

He leant down and picked up Haakon's sword; it still carried the stain of his brother's blood. The sword had belonged to their father, and to his father before him and back and back down the long line of Preven kings. Bo did not feel like a king, only a murderer who had killed his brother.

The cold wind bit into him as he sat and he shivered violently, his teeth chattering. The Barbegs had begun to gather the many corpses strewn on the mountain path. Bo presumed they would be buried in a pit or burnt on a pyre.

He did not want his brother to suffer that fate.

He leant down and picked up Haakon's body. The Barbegs watched in puzzled silence before two of them went to help him. His brother was heavy and it took all their strength to lift and hold him.

Bo and his Barbeg helpers lifted the fallen king down the path until they reached a broader section and rested Haakon on a patch of loose gravel and rocks. The Barbegs bowed and left. Bo laid Haakon on his back and took one last look at his brother's face. He tried to see the face of

Haakon as a child, the last, fleeting time they had been close. He searched the white, blood-drained face but there was nothing. The body was an empty shell.

He covered Haakon with carefully placed rocks and soon he had built a cairn over his brother's body. It was a poor tomb but he could do no more.

Bo was disturbed by a noise from behind —a young Barbeg ran down the path towards him.

'PRINCE ASBJORN!' he shouted between heavy gasps.

Annoyed at the sudden interruption, Bo snapped, 'What is it? Speak!'

Chastised, the Barbeg answered in a low voice. 'Chief Bjorgolf wishes to see you. Time is short. You must come now.'

Feeling guilty at his unwarranted hostility towards the Barbeg, Bo nodded and said, 'Of course, I will follow you.'

Bo took one more lingering look at the cairn before picking up his father's sword and following the Barbeg towards the caves.

*

Elowen stood in Bjorgolf's chamber. The chamber was oval-shaped with a high ceiling of sparkling rocks. On a bed of thick furs lay Bjorgolf.

Elowen was shocked at his appearance: the skin on his face was withered and drained of colour, and blood-stained bandages wrapped his body. Albruna sat beside him, grasping his right hand.

On seeing Elowen, Bjorgolf forced a weak smile, the pain

visible on his face. He spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. 'Elowen. Please sit by my side.'

She did as he asked and knelt beside him. His eyes were like the embers of a dying fire. He held out his left hand—Elowen clasped his icy cold fingers.

'My body is broken. I have little time.'

'Don't say that,' said Elowen. 'You'll get better. You're strong.'

'Strong I am yes, but death is stronger. The tribe has been saved, so I am content to go to the long rest. I return to the roots of the mountain. Prince Asbjorn. Please come.'

Elowen had not heard Bo enter. She looked at him and blushed, though she wasn't sure why. Dirty from battle, he carried a long sword. He nodded towards her but said nothing.

Bjorgolf made a guttural, choking sound and winced with pain. 'I am glad you are both here, Elowen and Asbjorn. Without you the Gladsheim would have been lost. Prince Asbjorn, you have shown yourself worthy of your ancestors, worthy to be king.'

Asbjorn bowed, clearly appreciating Bjorgolf's words, but the veil of sorrow that hung over the prince did not break.

'Elowen, I must say this—destiny leads you to the sanctuary, I am sure of it,' said Bjorgolf. He coughed again, grimacing at the pain it caused in his chest. 'One last duty remains. Albruna I name as Chieftain after me. All love her and would follow her. I go now to the ancestors.'

The Barbeg's chin fell onto this chest and he breathed no more. Albruna cradled his body and sang a slow, wailing lament. Bo leant towards Elowen. His eyes were red but he

was not crying, and in a soft voice he said, 'We should leave.'

Elowen agreed and followed Bo out of the chamber and into the deserted main passage. Elowen tried not to cry. She did not want Bo to think she was just a child but she could not hold back the tears that tumbled down her cheeks. They stood, enduring a long, uncomfortable silence.

'This is a bitter end,' said Bo.

Elowen wiped away tears from her eyes and nodded. 'It is not fair that he should die.'

Bo dug the tip of his sword into the ground and leant upon it. 'My father once said that those who speak of the glory of battle have never been in one. Now I understand what he meant.'

'So, you are king now?' said Elowen.

'A king? A king without a crown. A king without a throne, without subjects, or a palace.'

'One day you will have all of those.'

'I have no wish to become king. The coming of the Wild Host shall be a tale long-remembered. It was a wonder to behold and if I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it. You made a miracle happen.'

Uncomfortable being praised, Elowen blushed.

Bo went on, 'If I am honest I had doubts about the Wild Host. There is much in this world I do not understand. Forgive me. I ramble. There will be a funeral ceremony this evening, to mark those who have been lost. Before then I must be alone for a time. For now, farewell, Elowen...you did well.'

*

That evening, Elowen, Black Francis and Bo joined the funeral ceremony. They followed the procession as it worked a slow route down the main passage. Bo walked beside Elowen, head bowed.

In a whisper, Elowen asked the prince, 'Where are we going? Are they burying the bodies?'

'They are taking them to the bottomless lake, the Ungrynde,' said Bo in a hushed voice. 'It lies in the bowels of the mountain. It is the most sacred place in the Gladsheim and the Barbegs believe it is their ancestors' dwelling place. There the fallen shall be given to the water, sending them down to the roots of the mountain.'

A line of flaming torches led them down to the brink of a subterranean lake where the whole tribe gathered. Although the water reflected the torches' fiery tongues, darkness hid the far shore, giving the impression that the lake stretched on forever. From the unseen roof, heavy drops of moisture plopped down into the water.

From the near shore, a spur of rock reached out into the lake and at the far end of the spur waited Albruna. She spoke to the tribe in a voice proud and defiant. 'Into the ancestors' arms we pass our fallen. May Amaka bless them. At every sun that rises above the peaks, with every snowflake that falls upon our beloved Gladsheim, at every infant that comes crying into the world, we remember the sacrifice of those we have lost.'

Albruna sang a slow lament, her words echoing around the cave. One by one, the bodies were carried along the length of the rock spur and gently lowered into the oily

black lake. And last of all, the body of Bjorgolf was brought to the spur and passed to Albruna. She knelt down to lower him into the water.

Elowen closed her eyes. She heard only the twinkling of water as Bjorgolf descended to his ancestors.

*

The next day, the Barbegs cleared the debris of battle from the mountain and the plains. Black Francis marshalled the operation, barking orders at the startled Barbegs. His crew remained on-board the *Husker Du*, ever watchful for fresh attacks. The dead enemy soldiers and Redeemers were burned in pyres; a sickly stench hung in the air until the strong mountain wind broke its stubborn resistance.

With great reverence, the dead animals of the Wild Host were buried close to the Dun. A large mound of earth was raised over them. Stones were half buried into the ground to form a circle around the mound; Albruna declared that it would remain a sacred place.

The scars of war remained visible on the Dun: great gouges of earth ripped up by cannonballs and stones peppered with the holes made by musket shot. But the grass grew green again and the Salmon River flowed as a silver ribbon.

Elowen saw little of her friends. Black Francis was absorbed by the clearing of the plains. Bo kept a quiet, lonely vigil in the watchtower. Ulfur disappeared for hours at an end, hunting in the Myrkvid. As for Diggory, under the witchdoctors' care he recovered from his injury but he slept most of the time. Still drained from her ordeal, Elowen

took the chance to rest. Her strength returned but with everyone so busy she found she spent many long hours alone, long hours to ponder all that had happened and to consider what lay ahead. She remained mystified by what had happened during the battle. How had she destroyed the Sentinel? She wanted to know the truth and her thoughts turned to Bjorgolf's last words to her.

The sanctuary. Destiny leads you there.

The sanctuary. Elowen took to staring at the map. She gazed for hours at the incomprehensible symbols, especially the strange tree that marked the heart of the map. She wanted to know the map's secrets. She remembered her promise to Tom Hickathrift. She felt safe at the Gladsheim but deep down, Elowen knew that she must go to the sanctuary, alone if she had to.

*

King of Prevennis.

The idea whirled around Bo's mind as he sat alone in the Gladsheim's high watchtower. He savoured the solitude. The wind whipped around the watchtower but he barely noticed its icy edge. His eyes watered and his nose dripped endlessly but he sat as still as a statue.

King of Prevennis.

Of course, following Haakon's death his mother would claim the throne but Bo knew he was the rightful heir. He feared the obligations and the responsibility that came with the crown. He was a loner. The strain of leading the Barbegs into battle had almost broken him and the thought of

having a kingdom at his mercy, a whole people dependant on him...

A shout brought him back to the moment. 'PRINCE ASBJORN! COME QUICKLY!'

Bo saw a Barbeg he knew called Fenrir. His eyes were wide and he gasped for breath.

'What is it?' said Bo.

'One of your folk from the south,' said Fenrir. 'You must come now.'

Before Bo could ask any further questions he found himself following the Barbeg down the narrow steps that wound around the stalagmite. A crowd had already gathered in the Great Cavern below. They stood around a figure lying on his back: a man, his face blackened by dirt. His pale skin was a mere veil over bone. His filthy, tattered clothes clung to his skeletal limbs and at first Bo thought the man was dead, but his leg jerked.

Albruna knelt beside the man. When Bo arrived she said, 'We found him near the river. We feared he was a survivor of the Imperial Army but he does not wear the Null. He has been asking for you.'

The man pulled himself upright, his bloodshot eyes unfocused like a new-born child. 'Is he here? Is the prince here?'

Still bewildered, Bo said, 'I am Prince Asbjorn.'

The man rubbed his eyes and stared at the prince. When the significance of Bo's words struck, the man clasped his muddy, blood-stained hands together in prayer and bowed. Bo realised how long it had been since he had been treated like royalty and he was far from sure that he missed the experience.

The man gripped Bo's arm. When he spoke his stale breath blew in Bo's face. 'Your highness, some said you were dead but we never believed it. For three days I, Fruma son of Rune, have journeyed. Our homes were destroyed by Redeemers and Haakon's thugs. We were forced into the forest. Then, rumours spread. Rumours that the true heir to the crown still lived. And rumours that he had defeated the king's army. So on behalf of my people, I left our hiding place among the trees and travelled north to seek the truth of the rumours, to seek hope.'

'The rumours are true. Haakon is slain,' said Bo. 'But if you come looking for hope I can offer you none. I too live in exile.'

'But you must help, your highness, you are our only hope,' said Fruma. 'Prevennis is not yet free. There are still men of good heart in this kingdom, men who would follow you into battle. Many have avoided the Null. I beg of you, in the name of God, come south and save us from the nightmare.'

Bo's cheeks reddened, he could listen no more. He could not meet Fruma's eyes; he did not wish to see his failure, his weakness, played out on the man's face. He tried to retain his composure.

'I am sorry, my friend. I would help you if it was within my power to do so but I stand alone. One man cannot defeat the enemy. I'll summon the witchdoctors to tend your wounds, and bring you food and water.'

'Do not abandon us, your highness,' said Fruma. 'Your people need you.'

'I...I am not your *king*,' said Bo. He wanted to shake the man, shake him until he understood. His head pounded, his

chest tightened and a taste of bile burned in his throat. He needed fresh air. He stormed up the steps, trying to ignore the cries of Fruma. Bo did not notice Albruna following him.

*

Bo gripped the watchtower's stone battlements, fighting for breath, fighting to avoid vomiting. His fingers ached to the point of numbness.

'There was no need to flee, Prince Asbjorn.'

Albruna's voice sounded above the wind and Bo jumped at her sudden arrival. Startled, he blurted out, 'I did not flee.'

He cursed himself as he spoke, his voice sounded like that of a scolded infant and gave the lie to his words.

Albruna persisted. 'It is as Fruma said. Your people need a leader, a leader worthy of their trust. Despite our victory there is still great peril and your people are still enslaved.' Albruna paused and looked out from the battlements. 'You cannot run from your duty, Asbjorn. You must free your people.'

'Free my people? What can I do? I have no army.'

'You will not fight alone in the struggles ahead,' she said, laying her hands on his arms. 'I know that you do not wish to be king but the reluctant leader often proves more worthy. Those who seek and desire power are easily corrupted by it. You cannot deny your duty, your birthright. If you reject that duty and reject the calls of your people, you condemn them to enslavement and death.'

A long silence fell between them. Finally, Albruna said, 'You alone must decide which road to take. But you cannot hide in the shadows forever. Whether you desire it or not, Asbjorn, you are king. I leave you now. Consider my words.'

With that she left him standing alone on the cliff, looking down at the darkening plains. Albruna's words struck Bo hard. She placed so much on his shoulders. He liked living with the Barbegs and was content to remain at the Gladshheim. And there was Elowen, the strange girl from distant Helagan. She lingered in his dreams and the thought of being parted from her saddened him, though Bo barely knew her.

But most of all, Bo had seen enough of battle, of killing, to last him a lifetime. Killing sickened him. He remembered the faces of the men he had slain, their cries still echoed in his ears and haunted his dreams. He doubted he had the nerve to endure another battle and he knew that if he took the path Albruna wanted him to there would surely be more battles to come. He shivered at the thought.

But he could not deny or ignore the truth in her words. His father had always stressed the duty that went with the privilege of being a prince. To stand idle at the Gladshheim would do nothing to help Prevennis. How many hundreds, thousands, suffered at the hands of Lord Lucien and the Redeemers? He could not forsake them. Albruna was right, he had always hidden away; now he knew it was the time to emerge from the shadows.

*

Five days after the battle, the first day of June, Elowen walked out through the Ice Mouth accompanied by Ulfur. Feeling the need to stretch her legs, Elowen walked down to the Dun. The faithful wolf plodded alongside her. It was nearly dusk, the sky a dozen shades of red and orange, and the biting wind cut across the Dun's summit like a blade.

Ulfur was edgy. Elowen asked, 'What is wrong?'

The wolf sat.

Ulfur must go into forest. Ulfur must return to his pack.

Elowen took a deep breath; it was the moment she had feared. She did not want him to go but she knew he must. He had been caged before on Ictis, she did not want to cage him again. Ulfur was a wild animal, he had to live as a free creature.

'Of course, I know you must go,' she said. 'You belong with your pack.'

The wolf nuzzled against her and she felt his cold, wet nose on her bare hands. *Ulfur will see you again, one day.*

Elowen hugged Ulfur, enjoying the texture and familiar musty smell of his fur. 'I hope so. Perhaps then you shall have a mate, and cubs.'

Ulfur licked her face. Elowen hugged him tightly one more time and watched him pad across the plains towards the forest. Despite the pain of their parting, Elowen was glad to see Ulfur in his element.

She sat on the hill until the oranges and reds of dusk turned to the black, star-sprinkled canopy of night. She heard footsteps crunching—Black Francis strode towards her. He carried a flaming brand, framing his bearded face in golden light.

‘I’ve been looking for you,’ he said. ‘You should be inside, Elowen. It’s getting cold and you’ll catch a nasty chill out here.’

She looked up at him, her eyes red and moist.

‘Elowen, what is the matter?’ he said.

She told him of Ulfur. ‘It’s hard being without him. He’s almost a part of me now.’

The sailor sat beside her. ‘You saved him, Elowen. Remember that. He has his freedom because of you. There’s no better gift you can give.’

Elowen nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes. ‘Where do *you* go from here?’

The sailor rubbed his arms. ‘That’s why I wanted to find you. To say farewell.’

‘You’re leaving?’ said Elowen.

‘We sail tomorrow at first light,’ said Black Francis. ‘We shall head south. I still owe the Sea Beggars a debt and I can’t keep their king waiting any longer.’

Elowen sensed the trepidation in his voice. ‘Will it be dangerous?’

Black Francis crunched his knuckles. ‘Aye, but my boys can handle it. And Prince Asbjorn is coming with us, at least for some of the way. He is trying to rally his people, those that remain loyal. He wants to claim the throne of Prevennis.’

Elowen jolted with surprise. She had presumed the prince would remain with the Barbegs. A sick feeling grew in the pit of her stomach as she realised she might not see Asbjorn again—that thought troubled her more than she had expected. ‘Will he succeed?’

‘He’s a brave lad, no doubting that,’ said Black Francis with a shrug. ‘Only time will tell. This war has only just begun.’

Elowen shivered and not with the cold. ‘Will I see you again?’

Black Francis looked at her. ‘Aye, I fancy we’ll meet again. I certainly hope so. I’ve met many folk of different kinds but out of all of them, you’re the bravest. Never seen such courage in one so young.’

They embraced, Elowen feeling more gratitude than she could ever express.

*

The next evening, Albruna called a gathering of the tribe, so Elowen and Diggory joined the Barbegs in the Great Cavern. Diggory looked well; some colour had returned to his face although his shoulder was still bandaged. After a feast, some Barbegs played whistles and flutes, while others danced and sang. Elowen tried to feel happy but the prospect of leaving the Gladsheim dominated her thoughts like a dark cloud hovering above her head. She already missed Ulfur, Black Francis and Asbjorn. She had not had a chance to say farewell to the prince; Black Francis had wanted to slip away early in the morning so the *Husker Du* had sailed before dawn.

As the night drew on, some Barbegs decorated the few bare patches on the cavern walls. Fascinated by their skill she left the table to watch them work. They painted with brushes made from animal hair and the paints themselves

were made from charcoal, earth, rocks and plants; the colours were mixed on stone palettes.

As Elowen watched, Albruna came and stood beside her.

‘The paintings show the battle,’ said the Barbeg Chief. ‘See, the Wild Host. The figures are our warriors. Soon, you and your friends will be depicted.’

Surprised, Elowen said, ‘Why?’

‘You are now forever woven into the story of our tribe.’

Elowen took a deep breath. ‘I think it is time to leave your story now. I must seek the sanctuary.’

‘I shall be sad to see you leave, but if you choose to go and find the sanctuary, I say that your decision is correct. Something has awoken within you, Elowen. As Bjorgolf said, it is your destiny to go to the sanctuary.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Elowen, still a little bewildered by talk of destiny.

‘We Barbegs shall aid you as best we can,’ said Albruna. ‘A raven shall be sent to the sanctuary to carry news of your journey, and of what you carry, to the Illuminati. Compared to the distances you have endured on your other travels, the sanctuary is not far, perhaps two days away. There is a tunnel through the mountains. We name it the Forbindelse. It will shorten your journey and prove much safer than being out in the open. It was dug long ages ago, a link between the northern Eldar and the Illuminati. It has not been used in my lifetime and the tunnel remains a secret to most of our folk. Once under the mountains you should emerge into the Vale of Bletsung. There dwell the Illuminati.’

‘Have you ever been there?’

Albruna made a strange whistling sound. ‘No. We Barbegs

have few dealings with the Illuminati. They do not trouble us so we do not trouble them.'

'Are they...friendly?'

'They hold the wisdom of the ages and have dedicated themselves to protecting this world from Prester John. You should be safe there. It is said that two masters rule the Illuminati and no tribe can have two Chieftains for long. One day, trouble shall come of it.'

Elowen did not like the sound of that. 'Who am I to trust?'

Albruna smiled. 'I deem you are wise enough to judge. Do not be troubled, Elowen. You are blessed in so many ways.'

Elowen looked down at her feet, embarrassed and blushing. 'I must thank you, Albruna, for all the kindness you and your tribe have shown me.'

'Your tribe too,' said Albruna, gently correcting her.

The Sanctuary

Elowen rose before dawn. Squinting in the spluttering light of a single candle, Elowen packed her bag, readying herself for the final stage of her journey to the sanctuary. Each item held a memory: the feather, Bucca's gift that had saved her life; clothes that carried the dust of the Mengoon; the rope she had used to tie Ulfur in Dinas Hein, still peppered with the wolf's hair.

'Are you ready?'

Elowen had been so lost in her thoughts that she had not noticed Albruna enter. Diggory stood beside the Barbeg chief, dressed in furs and looking ready for a long journey.

'What are you doing?' said Elowen.

'I'm coming with you to the sanctuary. I promised I would. I've been of little use to you or anyone else yet. I want to make up for that. Besides, we've come this far...'

He ran out of words but Elowen understood what he meant. She had not wanted to ask Diggory to come with her but knowing that she would not have to carry on alone filled her with relief.

The Gladsheim's passages and caverns were quiet. Albruna carried a flaming torch to light the way; they followed

a corkscrewing route down until they reached the arch-shaped entrance to the Forbindelse tunnel. Into the rock around the arch were carved many strange shapes of creatures half man, half beast. In between the creatures Elowen perceived marks and scrawls—a kind of writing.

Albruna passed her torch to Diggory and said to Elowen, ‘Here I must leave you. Beside the lake of Bletsung you shall find a carved stone. Wait there and you will find guidance.’

‘What guidance?’ said Elowen.

‘You will see,’ said Albruna with an enigmatic smile. ‘The time has come for us to part but I hope we shall meet again and in happier times. Ever are you welcome in the Gladshheim. No words can express our gratitude.’

‘It is we who should thank you,’ said Elowen. ‘Your tribe saved our lives. If it hadn’t been for Bjorgolf...’ Elowen stopped as she saw a flicker of pain cut across Albruna’s usually inscrutable face. ‘I am sorry about his passing. I grieve for him.’

‘I feel his loss with every breath, yet I take comfort that the tribe endures. Through the survival of our ancestors’ bloodline, Bjorgolf lives on.’

‘I am sure the tribe will be safe in your hands,’ said Elowen.

Albruna bowed. ‘I will do all within my power to protect them. Now, I must delay you no longer. I say farewell to you both. May the blessings of Amaka and the ancestors go with you.’

With that, Albruna turned and was soon lost from sight.

‘Well, I guess it’s just you and me again,’ said Diggory. ‘All

my life I have been frightened of the tainted ones...the Eldar. But everything we had been told, all the terrible stories, they were all lies. All lies.'

Elowen nodded and took a deep breath. Together they trudged forward into the darkness of the Forbindelse, grateful for the bobbing light offered by their fiery torch.

Albruna had said it would take two days to reach the far end of the tunnel. For long stretches the ceiling was so far above them it could not be seen, then it plunged down, hanging only inches above their heads. The light from the torch revealed a warren of other passages branching off from the main tunnel. Elowen saw sharply ascending stairways, passages which plunged down into darkness, entrances to chambers and rooms long abandoned. As soon as the light from the torches disappeared from any part of the tunnel, an impenetrable blackness flooded back in. Elowen shivered when she imagined what might lurk within the darkness. Albruna had told her there was nothing to fear but in the tunnel's relentless gloom that failed to reassure her.

Elowen lost all sense of time. There was no day and no night, just long, shapeless, repetitive hours of walking, punctuated by occasional breaks to eat or to catch brief, unsatisfying sleep. Elowen longed for daylight, for fresh air on her face, for trees and flowers, anything other than walking in the endless darkness.

The tunnel broadened to such a scale that it resembled the hall of a great castle with thick columns supporting the ceiling. The walls showed signs of delicate craftsmanship, of exquisitely carved symbols and devices, all shadows of a

former glory made by hands long forgotten. Diggory fell a couple of steps behind Elowen; his footsteps sounded heavy, weary thumps on the stone floor. But between the thumps she thought she heard other sounds, lighter footsteps, rodent-like footsteps. She stopped to listen and Diggory, walking head bowed, knocked into the back of her.

‘Why have you stopped? What’s wrong?’ he said, rubbing his shoulder.

‘Shhh,’ she whispered, holding her hand up. Elowen strained to listen. Silence.

‘What is it?’ said Diggory. ‘You’re making me nervous.’

‘I thought I heard footsteps,’ she said. She strained to listen but there was nothing, silence only.

Diggory puffed out his cheeks with relief. ‘There’s nothing down here except us. Albruna said nobody ever comes down here.’

Reluctantly Elowen agreed, perhaps she was imagining things. She was so tired. She had endured so many days of being afraid, of being pursued. Her legs ached and she was weary from their long walk in the dark. ‘Let’s stop for a little while, I need a rest, I need to sleep.’

They both settled down on the cold, dusty ground and in seconds Diggory fell asleep, his snores echoed around the empty space. Yet despite her every muscle aching from tiredness, Elowen found it impossible to sleep. Diggory had used a fissure in the wall to hold the torch; the dancing light from the flames threw writhing shadows around the walls, shadows that to Elowen’s weary eyes made ghostly shapes. From the high walls statues of beasts stared down, eyes

wide open as though shocked by the sudden invasion of light into their world, a world where light was a stranger.

Elowen closed her eyes and gradually sleep gained a delicate hold on her. She dreamt that a weight pushed down on her body, a weight that squeezed her neck...

Elowen woke with a scream but no sound came out. Fingers gripped her throat. A face carved in hatred glared down at her, eyes narrow with spite.

Draug.

The Barbeg sat on her stomach, pinning her to the floor. With his one hand he held her throat.

‘Much you have cost me, human,’ he said, hot spittle landing on her face. ‘I am exiled because of you. For days have I lurked in this darkness, lurked until the ancestors themselves brought you to me. I’ve been following you, waiting for my chance. Now you will die.’

Elowen tried to punch and kick the Barbeg but she had no strength left. Panic gripped her as tightly as Draug’s hand. He pushed down on her throat. Her lungs burned, she could not breathe. This was the end.

Through watery eyes, she saw a shadow rise above Draug.

Diggory.

The boy smacked Draug on the side of the head with the torch; smoke and sparks exploded, the Barbeg cried out and pitched over.

Air rushed into Elowen’s lungs. She gulped frantically, barely able to breathe quickly enough. Draug lay on his back, groaning in pain, his face scorched. Elowen smelt burning flesh. Diggory laid his foot on the Barbeg’s throat, pinning him down. ‘I’ll kill you—’

‘No, let him go,’ said Elowen, still fighting for breath.

‘He tried to murder you, he deserves to die,’ said Diggory.

Elowen shook her head. She remembered how she had felt after she killed Malengin, she said, ‘No. You don’t want his blood on your hands. You’ll be no better than he is. Let him go.’

She saw the conflict in Diggory’s face. His breathing was heavy, his jaw clenched. He looked down at the Barbeg and Elowen sensed his anger, his desire to kill Draug.

‘Let him go,’ repeated Elowen.

Diggory groaned and took his foot away from the Barbeg’s throat. Draug gasped for breath and rolled away onto his side, facing Elowen with hateful eyes. ‘Your mercy weakens me.’

Elowen pulled herself to her full height. ‘Go before we do decide to kill you.’

The Barbeg stood, his legs shaky. He took a wary step back. ‘You think you have saved the tribe but they are still doomed. You are all doomed. Remember that.’

He watched the effect of his words before he fled into a dark side passage.

Elowen rubbed her bruised neck and winced at the pain. ‘Is he gone?’

Diggory looked around. ‘Aye, I think so.’

‘I thought he was going to kill me,’ said Elowen. She looked at her friend, wanting to say so much more than came out. ‘You saved me.’

Diggory smiled. ‘No, it was you that saved me, a long time ago. Come on, I don’t trust Draug. Let’s not wait around any longer.’

Fearful of Draug, they increased their pace. Just when it seemed there would be no escape from the darkness, the way ahead glowed. The air changed and a cool breeze flowed down the tunnel. Elowen ran the last few yards. The glow became brighter and brighter until it hurt her eyes.

She burst out of the tunnel. A fresh wind tossed her hair around and smells of pine trees, of flowers, of rich earth embraced her. Gradually her eyes became accustomed to the light. They were standing on a high cliff, before them lay a deep valley flanked by snow-tipped mountains. A lake filled the valley, its mirror-like surface reflected the peaks and wooded banks. Tiny wooded islands were scattered across the water, little worlds of their own. It was morning and as a bright and cheerful a morning as Elowen could remember seeing. The colours were so rich, so vivid, like the world at the dawn of time, unsullied by the hand of man.

They picked their way down the heather-clad hillside. There was a smell of early summer on the air. As they reached level ground, a lush meadow stretched in front of them. In the bright sunshine, the spider webs draped over the dew heavy grass glistened as though encrusted with diamonds. Amongst the grass thrived countless daisies, dandelions and clusters of buttercups. Overhead, swallows sped through the air, chasing insects on the wing.

Elowen and Diggory came to the shore of the lake; a cool breeze flowed over the water. The shore was made up of pebbles and gravel with dozens of mossy rocks, some of which time had left stranded and half-submerged in the water. A standing stone stood taller than a man, leaning as

though buckling under an invisible weight. Symbols were cut into the stone, symbols depicting serpents, fish and birds, and disc and cup marks. She ran her fingers along the grooves and marks, enjoying the tingling sensation. Faint golden threads weaved circles around the stone.

‘This must be the stone Albruna talked about,’ she said, grateful for a stop, for a chance to catch her breath after the long walk. ‘I suppose there’s nothing we can do but wait here.’

Diggory swiped away an inquisitive dragonfly that buzzed around him. After a couple of near misses with the boy’s flailing hands, the insect swooped away towards the lake, a flash of incandescent blue. ‘Aye but what are we waiting for?’

Elowen shrugged, she had no idea.

As the sun reached its summit in the sky, a fog formed above the lake and swallowed the far banks. The hum of insects faded, the calls of birds stopped, leaving only an eerie silence. From the mist, a shape formed on the water. As it grew closer Elowen saw a small rowing boat and a man slowly pulling the oars, a man as strange as she could imagine. He had scruffy green hair, a long green beard and patches of his skin resembled fish scales.

Avoiding the protruding rocks, the old man brought his boat onto the shore, the keel crunching onto the pebbles. He stepped out of the boat. He stood no more than four foot tall. When he spoke, his voice sounded melodious, as gentle as the water that lapped against the rocks. ‘You seek passage across the lake?’

Elowen and Diggory looked at each other, both unsure.

Seeing no other options, Elowen nodded. The old man swept his hands towards the boat. ‘Then come on-board.’

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As graceful as a swan, the boat glided across the water. As he rowed, the old man said, ‘I carry precious few passengers these days.’

The fog lifted, once again revealing the azure sky. Bursting with curiosity, Elowen asked, ‘Sir, if it’s not rude to ask...who are you?’

The old man smiled broadly. ‘Some call me the Boatman and I’ve grown fond of the name.’

‘Are you an Illuminati?’

‘Nay, not I. But I’ll help you get to them.’

The Boatman stopped rowing, letting the boat drift. Elowen felt a slight rise of panic, her chest tightened. What was the Boatman doing? He released the oars and dipped his fingertips into the lake. As soon as he touched the water, many fish came to the surface, forming bubbles and ripples. The Boatman talked to them. ‘Now watch out, my friends! Watch out for old pike! He is always hungry!’

‘There are pike in here?’ said Elowen, nervous having heard grossly exaggerated stories of the fish in her infancy.

‘Pike? Yes, very big pike,’ replied the Boatman. ‘The old pike is my favourite. As fierce as a wolf and as cunning as a fox. Four feet long if he’s an inch.’

Elowen failed to hide her look of fear.

‘Don’t be troubled! He won’t harm you!’ chuckled the Boatman. He took his fingers from the water and rowed

again. The fish slipped beneath the surface and disappeared from view.

They soon reached the head of the lake and the Boatman allowed his vessel to run aground. Elowen and Diggory stepped out of the boat and waited on the bank. A robin hopped around, foraging for worms, seemingly oblivious to their presence. The Boatman remained in his little vessel.

‘I go no further,’ he said. ‘I have little love for dry land.’

‘But where do we go from here?’ said Elowen.

‘Follow your guide,’ said the Boatman.

‘Guide? What guide?’ said Elowen. She looked around, expecting to see another strange being but saw nothing but trees and the busy little robin.

‘Why, he stands at your very feet!’ said the Boatman.

His laughter annoyed Elowen. ‘Stop playing games with me. There’s nothing here apart from this damned bird...’

The robin looked up at her with dark eyes, its redbreast bright like a summer sun. With its wings drooped, it made a movement like a curtsy and cocked its short tail. Then, with a call of tic-tic-tic, the robin set off, circling close around them. Words, distant, faint words, formed in Elowen’s mind.

Follow. Follow.

Elowen realised the truth.

The Boatman grinned. ‘The bird is your guide. Lose him not! This land is fair but has hidden perils.’ With that, the Boatman used his oars to push his vessel into the water. ‘May you find calm and clear waters. Farewell!’

A sudden fog spread over the lake. As soon as it had swallowed the Boatman, it dispersed.

The robin circled, still singing its melodious song.

Diggory looked at Elowen. ‘You want us to follow a bird?’

Elowen couldn’t resist a smile. ‘We have done stranger things over the last few weeks.’

Diggory rubbed his shoulder and winced. ‘Aye, there’s no doubting that.’

The robin darted among the trees and led them into the forest. Branchless for two thirds of their height, they were narrowly conical in shape with vivid red bark. Elowen looked up, trying to see the top of the trees but they were hidden by the branches and leaves. She ran her hand over the spongy, fibrous bark.

Little sun penetrated the high canopy but Elowen felt the Earthsoul flowing through every living thing in the forest. Golden threads weaved around the tree trunks and they gave her fresh energy, soaking away aches and pains.

The robin stopped at the foot of a tree and hopped around, flicking its tail and chirping persistently. Elowen and Diggory both looked up; a rope ladder hung down from the hidden upper branches. Elowen felt dizzy at the thought of climbing. Diggory said, ‘Surely we haven’t got to go up there?’

‘Looks like it,’ said Elowen.

‘By God I wish there was another way, I hate heights,’ said Diggory, echoing Elowen’s own feelings.

Taking the deepest of deep breaths, Elowen reached up and climbed. She gripped each rung as though her life depended on it, which, after they were half way up the tree, it did. She heard Diggory below, puffing heavily and cursing between each breath. The robin flew around them, singing,

calling; Elowen guessed the bird was trying to encourage them.

They climbed among the leaf heavy branches until at last they reached a circular wooden platform. Her legs still trembling, Elowen crawled onto the welcome flat surface and lay on her back, trying to catch her breath, and Diggory did likewise.

When she had recovered, Elowen took the chance to have a look around. Platforms circled the tree trunks, all linked by many rope bridges and Elowen saw wood and thatch buildings, each perched like a giant bird's nest. Wind chimes and bells hung down from many branches, providing a sweet percussion to the persistent calls and songs of birds.

Diggory gripped Elowen's arm. 'It's the sanctuary. We've done it.'

They embraced, a seal on their friendship, an acknowledgment of the dangers they had survived. Elowen failed to find words to express what she felt: joy, relief and hope swelled within her. She touched the little ivory box she had carried so far. She had got the map safely to the sanctuary, just as she had promised Tom Hickathrift and Bucca.

The robin led them across a series of bridges. Elowen clung to the rope handrails and edged along slowly, and tried not to look down. Ahead, a dome-shaped building had been constructed around the largest trees. The walls were decorated with gilded motifs of trees and flowers and stars, the top of the dome was made of glass, which glistened in the sunlight.

A man waited outside the building. His face was grey and wrinkled but softened by a benign smile. A small hat

perched on his head and he wore a long gown with richly embroidered hanging sleeves.

‘Greetings, young friends,’ he said as they approached, his voice chiselled by age and pipe smoke. ‘Elowen and Diggory, you are most welcome. You have done well to reach us; you have passed through many perils. My name is Uriah, I am the Steward of the sanctuary.’

The robin reminded all of his presence with a shrill song. Uriah stretched out his arm. The bird responded and landed happily in the palm of his hand. The man laughed and said to the bird, ‘Your task is done, my friend.’

At that the robin flew away, soon disappearing from sight.

‘How did you know our names?’ said Elowen.

Uriah rubbed his hands together and smiled. ‘That is no mystery. A raven whispered in my ear.’

Elowen remembered. ‘Yes, Albruna sent a raven to the sanctuary.’

‘Remarkable birds. They have far more wisdom than humans realise. I trust you found safe passage across the lake?’

‘The Boatman helped us,’ said Diggory.

‘Then you were fortunate,’ said Uriah with a knowing smile. ‘He is guardian of the lake. To you the lake may appear calm but unseen spirits dwell beneath the surface and they have little love for humans.’

Elowen wondered if anywhere was safe.

Uriah took off his hat and gestured towards the building. ‘Please follow me. The Masters are waiting for you.’

He led Elowen and Diggory inside. They came into a lofty hall with walls covered by book-filled shelves. Countless dust particles danced in the rivers of sunlight that poured

down from the glass ceiling, smells of damp paper, of wood smoke, of tobacco hung thickly. Tables filled the hall, at which sat hundreds of people all poring over books and scrolls. Elowen saw many different races, both human and Eldar. Lost in worlds of their own, they did not notice the newcomers. Apart from the occasional echoing cough, there was total silence. Elowen looked around, open-mouthed; she thought it the most wonderful place she had ever seen.

‘This is the Hall of Wisdom,’ said Uriah.

‘There must be thousands of books here,’ she said, barely able to believe her eyes.

‘Tens of thousands,’ corrected Uriah with a smile. ‘And not just books. Hand-baked clay tablets of civilisations long lost, long forgotten. Papyrus scrolls from the ancient kingdoms of the south. Manuscripts salvaged from the monasteries dissolved during the Terror. The learning of all races rests here. Mathematics. Astronomy. History. Language. Geography. Lore from every culture in the Known World. The Illuminati seeks to preserve this learning from the barbarity of Prester John, though much knowledge has already been lost.’

Elowen said, ‘Will I be able to come here? To look at the books I mean?’

‘Indeed you will,’ said Uriah. ‘All are encouraged to seek wisdom and make discoveries in their own way. Knowledge and learning are our chief weapons against the tyranny of Prester John.’

Elowen liked the sound of that. The Hall of Wisdom was a place beyond her deepest wishes and imaginings. An end-

less supply of books. Peace. Quiet. A place to think and dream.

Uriah led them through the grid of tables and up to a wooden door on the far side of the hall. The steward cleared his throat and knocked twice on the door. Elowen heard a gruff, 'Enter,' from inside. Uriah turned the handle and ushered Elowen and Diggory inside. He did not follow and closed the door behind them.

Elowen and Diggory emerged into a rectangular room, windowless and with a low ceiling. A roaring fire provided the only light and Elowen found the room unbearably hot and stuffy. Two men sat behind the table. One eventually stood: he was a large man with long coils of oily black hair and a thick beard. He wore a red, fur-lined overcoat with puffed upper sleeves. Beside him sat a much older man with flaps of dry, liver-spot peppered skin hanging over a bony frame. He was bald apart from a few wispy patches of white hair. He squinted and spoke in a voice that reminded Elowen of crinkling dried paper. 'Please, come closer. I am Grunewald, Master of the Illuminati. To my side stands Rubens of Wapentake.'

Rubens bowed. 'Our hearts are gladdened by your arrival. Many wonders await you, many wonders, but first, Elowen, I believe you have brought us something of great importance.'

Holding the little box containing the map, Elowen walked up to the table, her footsteps clunking on the wooden floor. She passed the box to Rubens who opened it and, with trembling hands, gently pulled out the map.

'Truly it is the Map of the Known World. And the tree, it

shows the tree,' he said to Grunewald after a brief examination. Elowen did not understand what he was talking about but felt too nervous to ask questions. Rubens' eyes sparkled. 'Elowen, no words can express our gratitude. It will take many long months of study to fully understand this map but the truth shall be discovered and in time you shall be told its secrets. But for now be content to know this—by delivering the map to us you have struck a major blow against Prester John.'

With considerable effort and no small gasping, Grunewald stood. His tiny body drowned in a long black and white gown. 'Through your actions and those of your companions, the tide of evil in the north has been checked but do not be deceived. Prester John has suffered a setback but is far from defeated. He has other armies, other weapons. The final crisis draws close and it is a challenge the Illuminati must meet.'

He paused, allowing the impact of his words to sink in. The two men shared a steely glance; Elowen sensed much passed between them unsaid.

Grunewald brightened. 'I do not wish to lay burdens upon you. You look in need of rest and food. Both shall be provided. For now, regain your strength, find peace. Diggory, duties shall be found for you. Life is hard here and all must work.'

Diggory tried to look pleased at this prospect but failed miserably. He smiled but Elowen recognised the weary look in his eyes.

'And for you, Elowen, there is much to learn,' continued Grunewald. 'The Earthsoul flows through you, a great

Adept you could be. Here you shall be developed. This is a whole new world for you. I think you are going to find your stay here most eventful.’

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It was the eighth night since their arrival at the sanctuary. Elowen left the Hall of Wisdom close to midnight, her head bursting with new knowledge. She had spent hours reading books and her world widened with each page. She loved the smell of parchment, the smell of ink on her fingertips. Once outside, she tarried to look up at the stars bathed in the milky light from the glowing moon, her breath formed thin mists in the chill air.

Elowen took off the pendant and cupped it in her hands. She lovingly rubbed the smooth curves. For the first time in her life she felt free, free to do what she wanted to, free to be the person she wanted to be. At last she had found a place where she belonged. There was cruelty in the world, deceit, betrayal. She had witnessed it, felt it and suffered it. But there was goodness too: the beauty of the land, the warmth between friends and lovers. She thought about Diggory, the least likely of friends, once her enemy, once the embodiment of everything she hated, he had proven a true friend. He had helped her, he had saved her life; Elowen knew that without her friends, she would have been lost. She mourned Tom Hickathrift and Bjorgolf. She missed Ulfur, Black Francis and Bo and wished, more than anything, to see them again.

There was so much of good that needed to be protected

from the tyranny of Prester John, however terrible the danger, however overwhelming the odds. Elowen knew that the Illuminati sought to protect that goodness, to preserve the light. The Masters had yet to reveal to her the map's secrets but Elowen knew that one day she would learn the truth. And she knew that whatever plans the Illuminati had to defeat Prester John, she would have a part to play in them.

Here ends the first volume of the TREE OF LIFE saga.

The second volume, THE ORDEAL OF FIRE, recounts Elowen's search for the true meaning of the Map of the Known World, and follows the adventures of Black Francis and Prince Asbjorn as they encounter the King of the Sea Beggars.

The third volume, THE LAST DAYS, tells of the final struggle against Prester John.