

WARHAMMER



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DEATH'S MESSENGER

SANDY MITCHELL

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

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Blood on the Reik - 01

Sandy Mitchell

(A Flandrel & Undead Scan v1.0)



This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl-Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

CHAPTER ONE

Rudi Walder hesitated before stepping out from the deep shadows beneath the canopy of overlapping branches. There was nothing overtly threatening about the forest clearing, but something didn't feel right. Instinctively he took a step backwards, melting into the contours of a nearby beech tree the way his father had taught him, standing close enough and still enough that a casual eye would miss his presence in the general panorama of broken outlines.

Not that the trick always worked: some animals could detect a hidden hunter by smell alone. Then there were the stories of lurking beastmen, goblins, and worse, which the young forester had more reason than most to believe. Everyone knew they were only biding their time before launching another raid on some luckless outpost of civilisation. Thus far Kohlstadt had been spared their depredations, but everyone in the Reikland knew better than to relax their vigilance. Complacency was the handmaiden of destruction according to Father Antrobus, the local priest of Sigmar, and although Rudi had only the sketchiest idea of what a handmaiden was his very presence in the village was a constant reminder to everyone of the threat they faced.

He strained his ears, hoping to catch again the faint echo on the wind that had warned him of something amiss. He couldn't be sure, but for a moment he thought he heard the murmuring of voices. His apprehension increased. None of the villagers would be this far inside the tree line. They confined their forays for firewood to brief, nervy incursions, preferably in large groups, and they never strayed out of sight of the perimeter and the comforting open spaces beyond. That narrowed the possibilities alarmingly.

A high, feminine laugh confirmed his worst fears. His jaw tightened. Goblins or beastmen might almost have been preferable, he thought irritably. A moment later the echoes of the laugh were joined by their source, and Rudi froze even more, willing the girl to pass on without noticing him.

Hanna Reifental entered the clearing as though she owned it, plainly unconcerned by the idea that something inimical might be lurking among the trees. In this at least the two youngsters had something in common, although Rudi would have bitterly resented anyone tactless enough to point out the fact. In his case his confidence came from a lifetime of living on the fringes of the woodland and the tutelage of his adoptive father, who for as far back as the lad could remember had passed on the lore of the forest, and who earned a reasonable living collecting the bounty on the pelts of any wolves incautious enough to stray close to the ramshackle palisade marking the nominal boundaries of Kohlstadt. Since childhood Rudi had considered the winding maze of paths between the trees a comfortable home, well-stocked with edible flora and fauna, so that even in the long intervals between wolf hunts he and Gunther Walder lived tolerably well. Better, truth to tell, than most of

their fellow villagers, who broke their backs from dawn to dusk in the unforgiving fields.

Hanna, on the other hand, was at home in the forest because she seemed to take it for granted that nothing would dare to accost her, the same way she kept the lads of the village at arm's length by the aura of vague contempt she exuded whenever one would pluck up the courage to try and engage her in conversation. This didn't stop them trying, of course. They had done so more frequently of late as she approached her seventeenth birthday, because there was no doubt about it she was quite good-looking if you liked that sort of thing, which Rudi told himself with rather too much emphasis that he most certainly didn't. True she had shoulder-length hair of a striking blonde hue, which framed her heart-shaped face quite fetchingly, and a figure her tightly-laced blouse emphasised in a vaguely distracting manner, but she was patronising, arrogant, and it was well-known around the village that you didn't want to annoy her because if you did something seriously unpleasant was likely to happen to you. Not that anything actually had, at least to anyone that Rudi had ever heard about, but no one seemed terribly keen to be the first. So for the most part she got her own way about everything without having to try too hard.

"Hello, Rudi." She waved right at him, and he felt his face flush with embarrassed resentment. She thought she was so clever. "Were you hiding?"

"No," he responded curtly, stepping forward into the patch of sunlight that filled the clearing. It felt warm on his skin; a pleasant contrast to the cool shadows beneath the trees, and the turf was springy underfoot. The faint scent of crushed clover rose from beneath his boots. "Why would I be doing that?" Even as the words left his mouth he knew they were a mistake. Hanna's wide mouth curved into a grin, her green eyes sparkling with mischief.

"How would I know? I never know why you do anything," she shrugged, not needing to articulate. "Or care."

"I thought witches knew everything." It was a reflex response, and quite the wrong one. Her eyes hardened.

"Then you thought wrong, didn't you? And I'm not... what you said."

"If you say so," he said, unsure of what to say next that wouldn't make things worse. Hanna's face flushed.

"I'm an apprentice healer. And I didn't hear you flinging accusations of witchcraft around when my mother set your dad's arm for him!"

"You're right. We were grateful." Rudi shuffled his feet, resentment at his own embarrassment rising within him. It was true they owed the Reifenstals a considerable debt of gratitude. Gunther had come off worst in a confrontation with a wild boar, and been badly hurt before he could drive it off. Fortunately the fracture had been a clean one, and he'd recovered quickly thanks to the treatment he'd received from Greta Reifenthal, Hanna's mother. The two of them lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of the village, conveniently close to the foresters' hut. They were the closest neighbours Rudi and his father had. Guiltily aware that he'd hurt her feelings, and wanting to make amends, Rudi plucked one of the rabbits he'd collected from the snares that morning from the small cluster of little mammals hanging from his belt and held it out to her. "Would you like this? For your mother."

Hanna stared at it, her face still a mask of resentment. The coney's head lolled drunkenly on its broken neck, a trickle of blood matting the fur beneath its nose. She backed off a step.

"Give it to her yourself," she said, turning away.

"Fine." Rudi wasn't sure what else he might have said then, but he was saved from having to try to leave the glade with some vestige of his dignity intact by another cheery greeting.

"Good morning, young man." Greta appeared around the curve in the forest path, and smiled at him with what appeared to be genuine warmth. She employed the same mode of address to everyone, regardless of age; she even called Grandma Ostwald "young woman" despite having less than half the nonagenarian's years on her back. Gunther said it was something to do with her healing arts, a way of putting people at their ease by seeming more worldly-wise than they were, but his friend Magnus said she was just bad at remembering names, and Rudi suspected he was right. "How's your father?"

"Fine, thank you." Relieved at having an excuse to turn his attention away from Hanna, Rudi took a few steps towards the older woman. She resembled her daughter in many ways, but her build was stockier, and there were patches of grey in her hair, which belied the vitality she otherwise exuded. "He's recovered completely now."

Which wasn't entirely true, there was a persistent rash around the scar tissue where the boar's tusk had torn the flesh, but Gunther claimed it didn't itch and his arm was as strong as it had ever been, if not more so, so there wasn't anything to worry about. Certainly nothing worth running to the healer with, like one of the effete villagers who went snivelling to Greta's cottage every time they so much as got a blister on their thumb. Rudi wasn't so sure, the discoloured skin seemed to him to be spreading slowly up the limb towards the shoulder, but he knew his father too well to waste his breath trying to change the man's mind. He'd do something about it if he saw the necessity, and until he did so he simply wouldn't listen to anything his son might have to say on the subject.

"I'm glad to hear it." Greta smiled, her open friendliness in marked contrast to Hanna's sullen demeanour. The girl was on the other side of the clearing now, carefully plucking some dimly-glimpsed plants from the grass and transferring them to the pouch hanging from her belt. "We'd all notice the difference without his bow arm to keep the wolves at bay."

Rudi flushed again, despite himself. The point was a sore one, although he couldn't really blame the healer for bringing it up. Gunther was known as an exceptional marksman, not just in Kohlstadt but for some distance around, and Rudi knew that his own ineptitude with a bow was a continual disappointment to his father. He practised assiduously, but despite Gunther's patient tutelage he was a poor shot and he knew it.

"You're thinking too much," Gunther would say, as yet another arrow missed the tree and hung mockingly from a thicket of thorn bushes. "Don't hold on the aiming point for too long. Just draw and loose." But the more he tried to relax the more tense he became, so the arrows which had been fairly close to the mark to begin with flew further and further from their target. In the end he'd given up even bothering to carry the old bow Gunther had handed down to him. He dreaded the next winter's

organised wolf hunt, when everyone in the village would set off under the nominal guidance of the local militia, and his shortcomings would be plain for all to see. Perhaps if he practised really hard over the coming months...

"Give him my regards, won't you?" Greta smiled, and tucked a stray lock of hair back behind the headscarf which failed to restrain most of it. Rudi nodded again, conscious of having missed part of the conversation while he was lost in his own thoughts, and hoping he'd managed to cover his inattention; but knowing Greta's reputation for astuteness, and aware of the faint smile quirking at the corner of her mouth, he somehow doubted it.

"I will." He became aware of the dead rabbit dangling from his hand, and held it out. "Would you like this? We've got plenty." That much was true; his complete ineptitude with a bow hadn't extended to all the skills Gunther had tried to teach him, and the snares he set generally yielded a good harvest of garrotted coney. Today he'd collected half a dozen, and they could easily spare a couple. Greta's smile stretched.

"Thank you Rudi." So she had remembered his name after all. "That's very kind of you." She held the tiny corpse up, and called to her daughter. "Look what Rudi's just given us. Wasn't that nice?"

"I suppose so. Thanks." Hanna glanced up grudgingly for a moment, then resumed her hunt for herbs with studied concentration. For some reason her mother seemed to find this amusing.

After a few more pleasantries Rudi broke away, relieved to re-enter the shelter of the trees. He strode rapidly down the familiar forest paths as fast as he could, heedless of any noise he might make which would startle the game. For some reason he found himself reliving the conversation with Hanna, imagining all the clever and scathing things he should have said at the time which would surely have put her in her place and paid her back for her rudeness with interest. Next time, he told himself, he wouldn't just stand there gawping, he'd give as good as he got. That'd show her, stuck-up little madam...

"*Dreck!*" The swearword escaped his lips unbidden, as his boot-heel sank into something squishy and foul-smelling. He slipped, all but losing his balance, and windmilled his arms for a moment before regaining his footing. From habit he glanced down at his soiled footwear, confident of being able to identify the creature whose droppings he had unceremoniously trodden in. Then the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise.

Absorbed in his angry thoughts he'd gone deeper into the woods than he'd intended. The glade he found himself in was familiar of course, but pretty much on the limits of the territory through which he and his father habitually foraged. Now it was littered with fumets like the one fouling his boots, which stank in a fashion far worse than the droppings of the creatures he was used to. They were larger, too, and the hunting lore he'd gleaned from his father suggested that they must have come from creatures the size of a man, if not greater.

Intrigued, he wiped his boot on a nearby tussock of grass and bent down to examine the befouled ground in greater detail. The droppings were scattered in sufficient number to indicate that a full pack or herd of whatever beasts had left them

had passed this way quite recently, and he looked for a patch of bare ground where their tracks might be easier to read.

There! A patch of mud, churned up by what looked like hooves, and a large area of leaf mould beneath the overhanging trees where the imprints stood out clearly. Rudi cocked his head, looking at them from several different angles. They were too large for deer, that much was certain. If anything they most resembled cattle, but that was ridiculous; who would be herding livestock this deep into the woodlands?

A deep sense of unease began to grow within him. The obvious answer would be bandits, driving stolen animals back to some hideout deep within the bowels of the wood. And outlaws weren't likely to be too happy if they discovered an interloper poking into their business.

Assuming they were human at all, of course. His scalp tingling, Rudi began to look for anything which might resemble goblin tracks. He had no idea what such things might look like, but assumed they'd be somehow similar to human prints...

A thrill of pure horror stopped his breath for a moment. Now he was thinking in terms other than human, it was obvious from the weight distribution that the hoof prints had been left by bipeds, creatures that walked like men, but weren't.

Beastmen! Less than a league from Kohlstadt! Drawing the knife at his belt with trembling hands, and aware of how pitifully inadequate it was likely to prove against the monsters his father had described, Rudi turned and ran until his lungs burned and his heart threatened to burst out of his chest.

Behind him, as he left, he was sure he could hear rustling in the undergrowth, although whether that was the creatures he feared or merely the wind in the trees he had no intention of waiting to find out.

CHAPTER TWO

“You were right, lad. Well done.” Gunther directed a nod of approval to his adopted son, then turned his attention from the tracks Rudi had found to Heinrich Littman, the sergeant of the village militia. They made a strange pair: the forester was dark and wiry, dressed in drab browns and greens, his ever-present bow and quiver of arrows slung across his back, making a striking contrast with the old soldier standing next to him.

Littman was broad in the shoulder and attired in the faded but still lovingly-tended livery of his old regiment. His white hair and eyebrows stood out starkly from the frame of the battered sallet helm he still wore whenever he was on duty. His halberd, the blade still keen despite its age and the many notches inflicted in combat with enemies of the Empire in the course of his life, rested casually against his shoulder. He had settled in Kohlstadt many years before almost by accident, just another rootless old campaigner passing through on his way to nowhere in particular, taking on the job of licking the local militia into shape for a bit of drinking money and a few nights’ board and lodging. To everyone’s surprise, including his own, he’d turned out to be extremely good at it, and Burgomeister Steiner had offered him a permanent post.

The old soldier nodded his agreement, and Rudi edged a little closer so he could overhear the conversation. Littman had fought beastmen many times, and he was eager to know what the old man might make of the tracks he’d found. His father had seen traces of the creatures before, and had even taken a shot at a solitary mutant he’d surprised in the forest while Rudi was still a child, but Littman had encountered whole warbands and lived to tell the tale. He did this frequently in the bar of the village tavern, until his wife, the erstwhile widow Eichmann who had probably influenced his decision to stay in Kohlstadt at least as much as Steiner’s purse, came in to take him home amid much ribald amusement.

“It looks like a whole warband,” the grizzled veteran confirmed. “Couple of dozen at least.”

“That’s what I’d say.” The forester nodded his agreement. The muted sunlight dappled his narrow face as he moved his head. “Scouting us out, do you think?”

“Maybe.” Littman took a couple of steps towards the boundary of the clearing, limping slightly as he favoured his left leg. The right, as everyone knew, had been laid open to the bone by an orcish blade in a place called Black Fire Pass, and never mended right. Perhaps the village was luckier than it realised having Greta Reifental living in it. Littman and Gunther’s voices attenuated as they moved, and Rudi shifted his position again, eager to eavesdrop. Now the conversation was getting really interesting...

“Mind where you’re going!” someone said, with unmistakably feigned good humour. Rudi felt a blow against his shoulder that knocked him slightly off balance.

As he took an automatic step to regain it something hard nudged against his calves and tripped him. He went down hard, just missing one of the piles of stinking dung that still littered the grass. Raucous laughter echoed around the clearing.

“What’s going on here?” Littman stomped over to investigate, and the half-dozen militiamen ranged about its perimeter went quiet at once. The sergeant’s leadership was based on the trust and affection of the men he led, but they had a healthy respect for his direct approach to enforcing discipline where necessary. That hadn’t been much in recent years, but when he first took on the job many of the men had resented being bossed about by an outsider, especially one who they thought was being paid to do nothing but sit around all day while they worked at their various trades. That had all changed the day Big Franz the blacksmith had failed to provide the new spear blades Littman had ordered on time because he had “real work to do”. The sergeant had laid him out with a single punch and the weapons had arrived the following week, and Franz had become so zealous in his part-time militia duties he was rapidly promoted to corporal, second only to the sergeant in authority.

“Nothing, sarge.” The spotty-faced youth who’d tripped him held out a hand to help Rudi to his feet. “The kid here fell over my spearshaft, that’s all.”

“Did he indeed?” Littman’s voice was noncommittal, although Rudi felt sure he knew what had really happened. Ignoring the proffered hand he clambered quickly to his feet. “Mind on the job, Katzenjammer.”

“Right you are, sarge.” Hans Katzenjammer smirked at Rudi, who felt his face flushing with anger. The Katzenjammer brothers, Hans and Fritz, were bullies and troublemakers; everyone in the village knew it. At nineteen, Hans was big and stocky enough to intimidate pretty much anyone his junior, and his younger brother, just as big but more running to fat, followed his lead in everything. Fritz was smirking too, a couple of paces away from Hans as always; a year younger and soft in the head, he thought his brother was clever, daring, and tough. He was grievously mistaken in every particular, but longed to emulate him. He’d only joined the militia because his brother had, and Littman tolerated him because he followed orders and carried heavy bundles without complaint.

“That’s sergeant or sir to you, Katzenjammer. And if you want to get out of here without a beastman skinning you alive you’d better pay a bit more attention to what’s going on around you. Understand?”

“Yes sir.” Hans paled, and looked around at the surrounding undergrowth with thinly-veiled alarm. As Littman turned away Rudi caught a wink, and understood. Of course the beastmen would be miles away by now, or his father and the old soldier would have been far more alert, but the Katzenjammers wouldn’t realise that.

The rest of the militiamen were quiet and nervy, jumping at every rustle in the bushes. None of them had ever seen a beastman, but they’d all heard the stories, and knew that in sufficient numbers they were capable of wiping an isolated village from the map as though it had never been. And even worse than the creatures’ legendary ferocity was the fact that they were the embodiment of Chaos, the great enemy of everything rational and civilised.

“Rudi.” Gunther beckoned and he went to join his father, who was staring intently at a broken twig. “What do you make of this?”

“Something big,” Rudi replied at once, an easy deduction as the damaged foliage was well above his head height. “Their leader, do you think?”

“Probably.” Gunther nodded. “I heard they tend to be bigger than the rest.”

“You heard right.” Littman limped across to join them. “The biggest, meanest one is always in charge. Like orcs.” He spat, as he always did whenever anyone mentioned the greenskins. “You can usually pick him out by his horns.”

“I thought they all had horns,” Rudi said. Littman shrugged.

“Some do, some don’t. The ones that don’t are scrawny little beggars by comparison. Even Katzenjammer could take one. Probably.” Out of the corner of his eye Rudi could see Hans Katzenjammer flushing angrily. He had overheard the remark, as he was no doubt supposed to. Rudi took a moment to savour the bully’s discomfiture. “But the bigger the horns the tougher they are, and the more scared the others are of them. Remember that, it might save your life.”

“So you can pick him out and kill him first?” Rudi asked. Littman and Gunther both laughed.

“So you can run like a halfling who’s heard there’s free cake before he gets close to you,” Gunther said. Littman nodded.

“I wouldn’t like to take one on without a few mates to back me up. Preferably a wizard as well. They can be tough to kill.” Something of the apprehension Rudi felt at that must have shown on his face, because Gunther smiled and ruffled his hair.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “They’ll be miles away by now.” Littman nodded.

“Probably checked out the village, saw how well defended we were, and moved on in search of easier pickings.”

“Then they won’t be coming back?” Rudi tried to make the question sound casual, but it came out a little too hesitant for his liking. Almost like wishful thinking.

“With any luck.” Gunther and Littman exchanged glances. “But we’d better take a few precautions. Just to be on the safe side.”

“Agreed.” Littman nodded. “Double the men on the gates, bring everyone from the outlying farms inside the village at night, that sort of thing.”

“Including us?” Gunther looked amused at the idea. “Be honest, Heinrich, can you really see me settling down in some tavern bed instead of out here?”

“It’s not really up to me, is it?” Littman said. “Although if it was I’d rather have your eyes and ears in the forest. If there were anything in the wind you’d be the one to spot it.” He shrugged. “I’ll talk to the burgomeister. In the end it’s his decision.”

Rudi listened to the exchange with a strange sense of excitement stirring in his stomach, mixed with apprehension. Truth to tell he wasn’t sure which he’d prefer, remaining in the familiar hut on the edge of the forest despite the possibility of a beastmen incursion, or scuttling into the village for safety like a scared peasant. Certainly the thought of being cooped up with the Katzenjammers and the rest of the local folk, being glanced at and whispered about when no one thought he was looking, was unappealing. But so was the thought of being done to death by beastmen. And the villagers weren’t all bad, he supposed, there were a few he liked. Littman and his father had always got on well, for instance, and there was always Magnus. Staying with him might not be so bad...

The burgomeister would make a big show of making a decision and announcing it, along with any other edicts he thought necessary, but despite being a bit of a windbag the man was no fool and would certainly listen to the counsel of Littman and Gunther.

Leaving the two adults to debate the matter he moved on, following the trail left by the leader of the beastmen. It should be safe enough, both Gunther and Littman seemed convinced the creatures were long gone, and it was certain that no one else here would have the courage or expertise to do it. He might find some other clue to their whereabouts; that should make everyone sit up and take him seriously for once. After a moment he was deep in the underbrush, wriggling through thorns and snagging twigs with the ease of a lifetime of practice, although the passage of the monstrous bulk which had passed through ahead of him had left little enough obstruction. He tried to picture Hans out here alone in the forest, following the trail of a huge and dangerous beastman, and grinned. The hulking youth would probably have wet himself by now...

He stopped abruptly. A large thorn bush barred the way, snapped and splintered barbs showing where the giant beastman had simply ploughed its way through the obstacle. He could have squirmed or hacked his way in pursuit, he supposed, but that would cut him off from the militia group, and he wasn't stupid enough for that. Besides, something he couldn't quite put a name to kept him back from the bush, a sense of unease he was at a loss to explain. It seemed tainted somehow, touched with an evil presence at odds with the peaceful forest surrounding it.

Rudi looked closer, hoping to find some reason for his presentiment. There was nothing obvious to be seen, and yet...

There. Duller eyes than his would surely have missed it, but his lifetime of practice reading the minute traces left by the creatures of the forest served him well. A patch of coarse hair, ripped from the creature's hide by the ensnaring thorns, waved gently in the breeze which rippled the leaves above his head. He leaned a little closer, fighting the wave of revulsion which rose up within him. A dark patch lay on the twig and the thorns next to the tuft of hair. Could this be the blood of the creature, carelessly shed as it pushed its way through the barrier?

Abruptly the subtle sense of dread he felt dropped away as though it had never been, to be replaced by a rising euphoria. This was surely an important discovery. Perhaps his father or Littman would be able to recognise the traces he'd found, identify the enemy they faced, and it was all due to him. Rudi Walder, the forest child, the shunned object of derision and pity. The villagers would have to respect him now, even the Katzenjammers and Hanna and all the others who mocked and despised him. He'd show them all right...

Lost in these pleasant imaginings he suddenly became aware that his hand was stretched out towards the tuft of hair, on the verge of grasping it, and about to be impaled by the reaching thorns. With a gasp of fear he snatched it back. There was no telling what foulness such a thing might carry. Better to leave it intact, where Gunther would be able to read its secrets more easily.

Heart thudding in his chest, for reasons he couldn't quite identify, Rudi hurried back to the clearing, calling for Littman and his father.

“That’s beastman fur all right,” Littman confirmed. He gazed at it narrowly from several feet away, clearly reluctant to get anywhere closer to the bush. Behind him the militiamen clustered nervously, the Katzenjammer boys elbowing their way to the fore as usual. For once the older men let them get away with it, clearly less than keen to be anywhere near such tangible evidence of the minions of Chaos. “You’ve got sharp eyes, lad.”

“Thanks,” Rudi muttered. Now that the time had come he found he wasn’t as keen to be the centre of attention as he’d thought. Some of the men were looking at him suspiciously, as though they thought he might have found the cursed thing because of some affinity he might have with it. He could almost hear their thoughts echoing in the spaces between the trees. *After all, nobody really knows where he came from...*

“It just looks like a bit of cow hide to me,” Hans muttered, loud enough to be overheard, and his brother snickered dutifully.

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” Littman snapped, and Hans coloured visibly. Rudi couldn’t help grinning at his enemy’s embarrassment, and felt the youth’s eyes on him, marking his amusement for some future act of petty vengeance. Well, let him try, Rudi thought. Littman’s complement far outweighed any fear he might have had of the bully, at least for now, and Katzenjammer had a short attention span. By the time they met again he’d no doubt be carrying an equally petty grudge against someone else.

“Can you tell what that stain is?” the sergeant asked Gunther. The forester examined the hairs and the faint discolouration of the leaves and thorns, which Rudi had noticed before. He was stooping closer than anyone else would have felt comfortable with. At length he leaned back.

“Looks like blood,” he said at last. “But it smells... wrong. Tainted.”

“Well I suppose it would,” Littman said. “They’re none too fresh close up, I can tell you.” Most of the militiamen exchanged apprehensive glances, anticipating another long story of past campaigns, but Littman was too professional to be deflected at this point. “Do you think it’s wounded?”

“No.” Gunther shook his head. “There’s not nearly enough blood for that. It just scratched itself on the thorns as it pushed through, that’s all. Probably didn’t even notice.”

“Probably not,” Littman agreed. “Their hides are thick enough.”

Rudi looked again at the stain, and the barbed twig it marked. The discolouration looked slightly bigger somehow, as though it had spread, but surely that was impossible. Despite himself he leaned forward a little. The leaves were wilted along the whole branch, he could see now, as though the blood of the beastman was toxic, poisoning the bush which had dared to wound it. He’d heard something of the sort in stories and travellers’ tales, but somehow seeing it with his own eyes made it harder to believe.

“Why not get a proper look?” someone asked, shoving him hard between the shoulder blades. With his attention on the puzzle before him he hadn’t noticed the Katzenjammer brothers moving up next to him until it was almost too late. Warned in the nick of time Rudi dropped to one knee, absorbing the impact, and swung his right shoulder down, deflecting the force of his enemy’s blow.

Taken completely by surprise Hans yelped, stumbled forwards, and sprawled into the bush himself. Loud profanity followed, indicating that the thorns were definitely as sharp as they looked.

“You pushed him!” Fritz Katzenjammer glared down at Rudi, his fists balled. For a moment the young forester flinched, anticipating a pummelling. But the podgy blond youth was abruptly jerked backwards by a hand round his collar.

“He did no such thing.” Heinrich Littman glared at the two brothers, while Hans floundered loudly from the embrace of the thorn bush, his face and arms marred by livid scratches. He grabbed the older Katzenjammer with the other hand, and jerked him to his feet. “I’ve had just about enough of your feeble-minded horseplay, Katzenjammer. If you can’t get it into your head that this is serious, I don’t want you around. Get back to the village right now. I’ll deal with the pair of you later.”

“On our own?” Hans’ cocky facade crumbled, and for a moment he looked truly frightened. Not so much at the prospect of the sergeant’s wrath, which was intimidating enough in itself, but at the sudden realisation that there was almost a league of forest between here and home. A forest which, like all the villagers, he was nervous about at the best of times, and which his imagination was now clearly filling with minions of Chaos lurking behind every bush. “Suppose the beastmen find us?”

“I should be so lucky.” Littman dropped the two brothers. “Don’t worry. We’ll hear the noise.”

Hans clearly wanted to say a great deal more, but in the end elected to salvage what dignity he could. Collecting his spear he marched off down the trail without a backward glance, his brother following in his wake as always. As they disappeared Fritz turned his head, catching Rudi’s eye just long enough to mouth a word, which looked like “Later.”

“Nice move, son.” Gunther helped Rudi to his feet with a grin and a wink, and to his surprise the young forester noticed smiles on the faces of all the men around him. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Rudi supposed he should have been more worried at the prospect of some future retaliation from the Katzenjammers, but right now, basking in his father’s approval and the apparent respect of Littman and his men, he just couldn’t bring himself to care.

CHAPTER THREE

Rudi slipped through the gate in the high wooden wall which marked the boundary of the village of Kohlstadt. Stoutly constructed of logs from the forest it looked sturdy enough, and the gate itself, twice as high as a man, seemed reassuringly solid. One half of the gate was closed already, so that the roadway was half its usual width, part of Littman's precautions he supposed. He wasn't surprised to see Big Franz and a couple of militiamen standing next to it. Normally the gate would be unattended in the hours of daylight, with a solitary watchman left to guard them at night, but these times were far from normal.

"Morning, young Walder." Franz waved a greeting, raising a ham-like hand to the pot helm he'd made for himself as a mark of his authority. A genial man, he was one of the few in the village who habitually treated him with something approaching respect. Today he smiled at the young forester. "Not been treading in any thorn bushes today?" The two men with him laughed, glancing at Rudi with unaccustomed warmth. With a sudden sinking feeling Rudi realised that the tale of his humiliation of Hans Katzenjammer had spread rapidly throughout the militia, no doubt with many embellishments the youth was sure to resent. Well, there was no point worrying about it. He could hardly avoid him more than he'd already intended to, and besides he had business to deal with.

"I'm not that clumsy," he responded and trotted away down a familiar street. The comment raised another laugh from the spear-carrying artisans.

Comfortably situated in the middle of a fertile valley, Kohlstadt had become the obvious location for the weekly market where the peasant farmers from the surrounding smallholdings came to buy and sell their surplus produce. And with the inexorable logic of trade other business had followed. Apart from Franz's smithy, the village now boasted a couple of weavers, a brewer who kept the tavern well-supplied, and a handful of other tradesmen. And if you wanted anything that couldn't be made in the vicinity, there was one man who could guarantee to get it for you. So long as the price was right...

"Rudi. There you are." Magnus von Blackenburg smiled as he opened his door in response to the young forester's hesitant knock. Even if Rudi hadn't been there many times before he would have had little trouble picking the right address out from its neighbours; only the burgomeister's mansion was able to match it in either size or opulence. "Please, come in." Magnus stood aside, gesturing a welcome, which struck highlights from the gold rings on his hands. "I'm sure you must be thirsty after all that walking."

"Yes. Thank you." The day was warm, and a drink would be welcome; but even if it were not, he would have accepted. Magnus' hospitality was legendary throughout the valley, and the viands he provided to his guests were of a quality commensurate with his wealth. He ushered Rudi through the main hall of the house,

which was panelled in dark, polished wood, towards the parlour where he habitually conducted their business. As always, when they passed along the passageway, Rudi found his gaze drawn to the glass mirror on the wall above the settle carved with a coat of arms so blackened by age as to be almost indecipherable. The looking glass was a luxury so rare that he doubted there was another in the whole of Kohlstadt, even in the burgomeister's house, and the fact that Magnus had chosen to hang it right next to his front door, where every visitor would notice it, was calculated to impress everyone with his wealth and sophistication.

Two faces gazed back at him. The older one was familiar enough, as he saw Magnus frequently in the streets as well as at his home: alert dark eyes in a sallow face, beneath lank hair of midnight black. The corners of his mouth were set in a wry smile, which could change in an instant from good humour to sardonic disdain. He had a fondness for robes of dark green and yellow, like the ones he wore now. The other reflection was less familiar, and, as always, he regarded it with mild surprise for a moment. Though he knew intellectually that it was himself, he saw his own face infrequently enough to be taken aback every time he encountered it. Of course it didn't help that at his time of life every glimpse revealed a change in his rapidly maturing body.

Despite his best intentions, as he did every time he visited the house, he couldn't help pausing for a moment to see what new alterations had appeared. The youth who stared back at him seemed older than he felt, tall, well-muscled and fit, a natural consequence he supposed of his life in the forest. A mop of straw-blond hair, unevenly cut, fell across his brow, half-concealing eyes of a misty grey which seemed to recede to hidden depths, like the forest pools he occasionally swam in on his rounds of the rabbit snares. His features were regular, although he wasn't vain enough to think of himself as handsome. The faint shadow of what would one day become a beard was beginning to be visible on his cheeks and jaw.

"You have the package?" Magnus pulled the door of the parlour to behind them, leaving it slightly ajar, and rang a small silver hand bell that stood on an intricately inlaid occasional table in one corner. Most of the space was taken up by a handful of high-backed chairs in light polished wood, their seats cushioned by small pillows of the yellow and green the merchant favoured, clustered for the most part around the wide empty fireplace. It was a comfortable room, calculated to put guests at their ease, and judging by the number of books left lying around, it was a place the merchant used to relax when he was alone as well. His library was impressive: he owned in excess of a dozen volumes, more than the rest of the village could boast combined.

"Right here," Rudi replied, reaching inside his shirt to pull it out. It was small and light, with something hard and irregular inside, wrapped in oilcloth and sealed with wax. As usual he had no idea what the contents might be, and he had no inclination to pry. He liked and admired Magnus, and simply assumed that his business dealings were so complicated he'd never have understood them anyway.

For his part Magnus seemed to trust Rudi implicitly, which the young forester felt was flattering. Few of the villagers were comfortable in his presence, and for one of the most wealthy and powerful to take him even partially into his confidence made him feel hugely important.

“Thank you.” Magnus took it without a second glance and dropped it onto the table next to the bell, which chimed gently from the vibration. “Was there anything else?”

“Oh yes. A letter.” Rudi handed that over too, and waited while Magnus scanned the contents. Unable to read himself he found the idea of being able to communicate by little marks on paper almost magical. He watched the process with a tingle of something approaching superstitious awe. “Was there a reply?”

“Nothing that can’t wait.” Magnus smiled, and folded the paper away, gesturing Rudi to a chair opposite his own. Rudi sat down. Feeling the upholstery sag under his weight was vaguely alarming, as he was used to plain wooden furniture. “It’s a long way back to Altman’s farm, and I wouldn’t want to impose on your good nature.”

Rudi felt himself flushing.

“It’s no bother,” he began, but was interrupted by a cough from the doorway. Magnus raised his eyes to the servant girl who had entered while they were talking.

“Ah. Kirstin. A little light refreshment for our young friend, if you’d be so kind.”

“Very good, sir.” Kirstin stared at Rudi just long enough to make it plain that she considered waiting on riff-raff from the forest an affront to her dignity. Then she withdrew from the room. She was a pale girl, a couple of years older than him, with a sallow complexion and a reedy, unhealthy-sounding cough, which followed her about like a persistent pet. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, almost febrile, and on his first few visits to the house Rudi had assumed she was sickening for something. Now, old enough to be a little more cynical, he suspected it had more to do with a taste for staying out in the tavern to the small hours of the morning and not being particularly choosy about which bed she woke up in the following day. Not that he had any personal experience of either, but her nocturnal habits were a perennial staple of the village gossip, along with Magnus’ inexplicable failure to rid himself of such an embarrassing servant.

Though some of the rumours drew the obvious conclusion, most folk were of the opinion that he was simply too kind-hearted to sack the girl. After all, his charitable inclinations were widely known. He gave generously to Father Antrobus, to relieve the suffering of the poor, and had taken an avuncular interest in Rudi ever since the day Gunther had brought him back to the village after finding the traumatised toddler wandering the paths of the forest almost sixteen years before. A prolonged search of the woodlands had found no trace of his parents, and in the end it had been assumed they were itinerant charcoal burners who had wandered too far into its depths and had fallen foul of the goblins or beastmen. Magnus had provided the funds for the child’s upkeep, and he still gave his adoptive father an occasional stipend to assist with additional clothing and other provisions despite it no longer being strictly necessary.

Moreover he had taken it upon himself to provide Rudi with the only paid work he’d ever had. His business dealings required the occasional dispatch of notes, letters and packages to many of the outlying farmsteads, and the almost as frequent collection of the same, and it was far easier to employ a messenger than to do the job himself. When Rudi had asked why the merchant had picked him for the task Magnus had simply laughed, and said he couldn’t think of anyone better qualified for the job. Rudi had thought it flattering at the time, but thinking about it later he could see the man’s point. Living outside the village meant that he knew the surrounding

area better than most, and his explorations around the valley had added to that knowledge, so he was certain that no one knew the terrain around Kohlstadt as well as he did. Except possibly his father. And entrusting his business to an outsider had been clever in another way too, Rudi supposed. If he had been one of the villagers he might have been tempted to gossip about the errands he ran, which could have given one of Magnus' business rivals valuable information.

Another cough announced Kirstin's return. She nudged the door open with her knee to admit a turned wooden platter containing a flagon, a couple of pewter goblets, and a plate of oatcakes fresh from the bakery together with some cheese and a quartered apple. Rudi felt his mouth begin to water.

"I hope this will do," she said, her tone managing to convey that it had better, as she had more important things to be getting on with than feeding upstart peasants. Magnus rose to take the tray, his lopsided smile betraying his amusement at her irritation.

"I'm sure it will do admirably," he said evenly, before adding, "that will be all, thank you," just quickly enough to deny her the satisfaction of flouncing out in a state of visible dissatisfaction. Despite feeling a little out of his depth, Rudi echoed the faint smile of complicity Magnus directed at him. His isolated upbringing on the fringes of the forest had left him at something of a disadvantage when it came to picking up on the unspoken undercurrents of human interaction. However, he knew enough to realise that Kirstin had meant to slight him and that Magnus had turned the tables somehow, and he relished the sense of belonging that conferred. This must be what it was like to have friends, he thought, or a whole family instead of just a father.

Magnus poured refreshing goblets of small beer for the two of them, and for a while they simply drank and ate. The merchant chatted easily as if Rudi were a proper guest and someone of consequence rather than a lowly employee. But then he was like that with everyone, surprisingly free of airs and graces considering his exalted position in the community.

"And how are things out there in the wild wood?" he asked. "Remaining quiet, I trust?" Rudi nodded, swallowing a plug of masticated oatcake in order to reply.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he confirmed. In the week and a half since his discovery in the forest neither he nor his father had come across any further traces of the beastmen, and he was beginning to hope that they never would. Burgomeister Steiner had eventually agreed, after listening to Littman and his father that the Walders could remain outside the village while the rest of the local inhabitants retreated behind the stockade at night. Needless to say the farmers and peasants were only too eager to scuttle behind the palisade as the sun went down, and the valley looked subtly sinister after dark now without the familiar pattern of lamplight, which marked the scattering of cottages and hovels.

"I'm glad to hear it." Magnus smiled warmly. "I think we all owe you both a debt of gratitude for staying out there every night in case something happens."

"Well, you know my father," Rudi shrugged. "He'd hate it in town. And we feel safe enough." The truth was that for the first couple of nights he'd lain awake almost until dawn, starting at every sound and imagining hordes of feral Chaos spawn creeping up on him with murder in their hearts. Only as the days passed did he come

to share his father's confidence. Now, he suspected, it would only be a matter of time before the local folk became blasé again and returned to their homes.

"I trust he remains in good health?" Magnus asked, after a moment of awkward silence. Rudi nodded.

"He's fine."

"I'm glad to hear it," Magnus nodded judiciously. "I never really expected that arm of his to heal, to be honest."

"Well, he says it's better than ever." Rudi evaded the topic with a subtlety that surprised him. The rash had spread to Gunther's shoulder, and looked distinctly unhealthy to him, but his father showed no sign of discomfort. If anything the affected limb seemed stronger than ever: while they were gathering firewood that morning Gunther had thrown tree branches casually onto the pile with one hand. Rudi would have been hard put to lift them with two.

"Well, that's excellent news." Magnus finished his drink, and waited politely for Rudi to drain his own goblet. The hint was easy to read, even for someone with Rudi's rudimentary social skills, and he didn't want to outstay his welcome. The young forester stood.

"Thank you for the drink. I'd best be on my way."

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of detaining you." Magnus rose smoothly to his feet, and reached into the purse at his belt. "Thank you again for your valuable assistance." He produced three copper pennies, and handed them to Rudi. "I trust this will be adequate recompense for your time."

"That's far too much," Rudi protested, fighting the impulse to take the coins. Magnus was rich, it was true, but accepting them would be taking advantage of the man. Normally he would expect a single copper for each errand he ran, and he just couldn't bring himself to take three times his usual rate. Magnus smiled warmly.

"Spoken like an honest man. But you're forgetting you brought back a letter as well. Surely it's only fair to be paid for that too?"

"Well, I suppose so," Rudi shrugged dubiously. It was logical, but he still felt as though he was being overpaid. "But I didn't have to walk any further with it."

"Fair enough," Magnus concurred. "Then let's compromise. I've a note I need to send to the burgomeister this week. If you'll wait a moment you can take it round for me now, and that should square your conscience."

Rudi nodded. That seemed reasonable. The Steiner house was just at the other end of the street, a handful of yards away. Normally Magnus wouldn't have bothered using his services for such a short trip, but while he was here he might as well run the errand and feel he was earning the extra penny honestly.

He waited while Magnus sharpened his quill and scratched a few words on a piece of paper taken from a drawer in the ornamental table. He watched in awe as the precisely formed letters made their incomprehensible patterns on the blank leaf. He wondered briefly what it might be like to be able to read them, or make such marks himself, but dismissed the thought almost at once. He had no need of such esoteric skills in the woodland, and no ambition for any other life. At length the merchant folded the paper and handed it to him, evidently seeing no need to seal it. Rudi wasn't able to decipher the note himself, and the next person to see it would be its intended recipient.

Magnus ushered him to the door, and this time Rudi almost managed to resist the temptation to glance at his reflection in the mirror. Three pennies for a morning's work! He could hardly believe his luck. So preoccupied was he with his pleasant mood he barely glanced down the street as he set off towards the Steiner house, clearly visible on the corner, its elaborately worked gargoyles and parterring proclaiming its owner's status.

He had almost reached his destination when he realised the identity of the two figures that had just turned the corner, and were now barring his way with expressions of calculated malevolence. The Katzenjammer brothers, Hans and Fritz.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Well look who it is,” Hans Katzenjammer took a step sideways to block Rudi’s path. His brother moved in to flank him as always. “You’re a bit out of your proper place, aren’t you Walder?” Fritz giggled like an imbecile, anticipating the pleasure of victimising someone smaller, weaker, and outnumbered.

“It’s a public street.” Rudi made to push past, determined not to be intimidated by them. The memory of his latest reflection was still with him, and the new awareness that he was almost as tall as the two bullies and better muscled than both lent him confidence.

“Really?” Hans tried to force a sneer onto his face, but the damage left by the thorn bush got in the way. The scratches were livid and inflamed, and thin yellow pus was weeping through a bandage tied tightly around his forehead. The effort of the facial contortion was obviously painful, and he gave it up quickly in favour of glowering as menacingly as he could. “Then maybe we’d better show a bit of civic pride and clear the rubbish off it.”

“That’s right. Clear the rubbish,” Fritz added, prodding Rudi in the chest. Out of the corner of his eye Rudi could see movement, other villagers were stopping to stare at the confrontation. No one looked inclined to intervene though, worse luck. He supposed it might be different if he had a family in the village, or friends inclined to back him up. Oh well, things were as they were, and out in the forest there was no one else to rely on. He’d just have to show them he didn’t need anyone’s help to deal with these two.

With that thought, he felt his anger rising. He’d had enough of being pestered by the pair of them, and if he was going to be forced to fight he wasn’t going to let them get the best of him. Almost without noticing he felt his fists ball.

“Should be easy enough,” he said evenly. “Even you two should be able to walk as far as the midden without falling over your own feet.” To his surprise he heard somebody snigger behind him. That was encouraging, at least one of the onlookers was on his side.

“What did you say?” Hans’ discoloured face flushed even further, anger and outrage rushing to the surface. He’d clearly been expecting Rudi to back down and slink away, enabling him to get in a few spiteful nudges and jabs. The realisation that the young forester wasn’t going to oblige, and that he might end up having to fight someone capable of defending himself was obviously rattling him. Even with his brother to back him up he might get hurt, which wasn’t part of the plan.

“You heard. Now get out of my way. I’ve a message to deliver, and I haven’t got time to waste on you.” Rudi took a step forward, raising a hand to push Hans out of the way. That was a mistake. The older Katzenjammer took a step backwards and swung a lazy punch at his head.

It took all the time in the world to connect, and Rudi had what felt like long slow minutes to duck out of the way. As his head dipped he felt Hans' fist graze the top of it, barely making contact. He stood up instantly, bringing his own fist forward sharply from the waist to connect solidly with the older boy's midriff. Hans folded over, the breath driven from his lungs with an audible gasp of astonishment and pain.

Had he been an experienced fighter Rudi would have stepped in at that point and finished the belligerent youth, but he was so astonished at the success of his initial sally that he simply stood there watching his opponent wheezing and retching. A surge of triumphant euphoria gripped him for a moment, to be rapidly replaced by confusion and disgust. This was the first time he'd ever struck someone in anger, and he wasn't sure he liked the sensation.

"Leave him alone!" Fritz bellowed, outraged at his brother's distress. A vivid burst of light and pain erupted at the side of Rudi's head as the half-wit swung his own fist. Carried away on the tide of complex emotions triggered by his apparent easy victory Rudi had momentarily forgotten his presence, a lapse for which he looked like paying dearly. Half stunned he staggered and fell to one knee, which sank into the mud of the street.

"Who do you think you are?" Hans had recovered enough breath by now to start hurling insults at least. He staggered towards Rudi, who was still trying to blink his vision clear. "Some half-savage forest brat with the nerve to attack civilised people?" He aimed a vicious kick at the fallen forester, catching him in the chest. Rudi felt a moment of searing pain as the thin flesh over his ribs bruised.

"If you're civilised then I'm an elf," a familiar feminine voice cut in, edged with habitual contempt for the object of its address. In spite of the pain he was in, Rudi groaned quietly. Of all the people who could have seen him brawling in the street, of course it had to be her...

"What?" Hans turned, clearly astonished at the intervention. Hanna Reifental gazed at him levelly, as though she'd just found him on the sole of her shoe.

"You're no more civilised than an orc," she said dismissively. "I'm sure they think two against one is about right as well."

"We can always make it two against two, girly." Hans' face had turned truly ugly by now, animated by a malice far deeper than mere petty bullying. However, if he'd expected her to quail, or run, he'd seriously underestimated her.

"Don't do me any favours," her voice dripped contempt, and lazy confidence. "You can both try your luck if you're really desperate to get hurt." For a moment, as Rudi staggered to his feet, he thought she'd gone too far, and that Hans might be so far gone as to attack her. Aching muscles twanging in protest he stumbled forwards, intending to block the bully's rush towards the girl, but it wasn't necessary. As Hans took a step in her direction his brother grabbed him by the arm to hold him back.

"No, Hans," he pleaded. "She'll put a curse on you or something." Some residue of common sense evidently remained in Hans' head, because he hesitated for a moment before shrugging his brother's hand away.

"What would be the point?" Hanna asked rhetorically. "He's cursed enough already."

“Why should I care what a witch thinks?” Hans snarled, determined to vent his rage verbally if denied the opportunity to do so with his fists. Hanna flushed dangerously.

“If that’s what you really think I am you should be a lot more careful about what you say to me,” she snapped, taking a single step forward. Fritz whimpered like a frightened puppy, his face paler than ever, and tugged at his brother’s arm with renewed insistence.

“Quite right.” Rudi pulled himself upright, determined not to let the brothers think they’d hurt him. He stood as solidly and casually as he could despite the throbbing pain in his head and the ache in his ribcage. “If you think you’re so civilised you should know how to be polite to a lady.”

“If I see one I will.” Hans was clearly torn between the impulse to continue the confrontation and the growing caution his brother’s insistence was beginning to instil in him. If Fritz had backed him up he might have had the confidence to prolong the fight, but the half-wit was clearly terrified of the girl’s reputation, so he’d have no help there.

“You wouldn’t recognise one if she stepped on you crossing the gutter,” Hanna retorted. She switched her attention to Fritz, who quailed visibly. “Take him home before he embarrasses himself even more.”

“Come on,” Fritz pulled harder on his brother’s arm, starting him moving at last. With a final venomous glare the older Katzenjammer allowed himself to be led away, clearly feeling enough face had been saved by letting his sibling be the one to urge retreat. Rudi watched them go with a sense of triumph, which even managed to displace the discomfort of his injuries for a while. He’d done it: he’d bested the Katzenjammers...

“Are you all right?” Hanna asked, breaking into his thoughts. “You took a couple of nasty hits by the look of it.”

“I’m fine,” he said, his good mood evaporating almost as rapidly as it had arrived. “Thank you,” he added belatedly. Around them the regular traffic of the street had resumed, with upwards of half a dozen villagers bustling about their business now that the impromptu entertainment was over.

“You’re welcome,” she responded, with a smile, which for once had a trace of genuine warmth in it. “I could hardly stand by and watch you get beaten to a pulp now, could I?”

“What?” Rudi felt his face flushing. He’d thought she’d been enquiring about his injuries, like a conscientious healer should, and now it turned out she had the arrogance to believe that she’d rescued him from the Katzenjammers. While a part of him acknowledged that without her intervention he would have had a much harder fight on his hands, the small voice of reason was brushed aside by a simmering tide of resentment. As if he needed the protection of some slip of a girl, particularly this one. “I could have taken them both without your interference, you know.”

“Oh, I’m sure you could.” The trace of unaccustomed warmth vanished from her smile and voice like the glimmer of sunshine on a midwinter morning, to be replaced by the familiar sneer. “You were really damaging Fritz’s fist with your face.”

“I didn’t mean...” he trailed off, not quite sure what he did mean, but aware that he was being churlish again. “I appreciate your help. Really.”

“Really?” Her voice dripped with scepticism. “Nice of you to notice. If you want a poultice for that bruising, I’m sure my mother can sort something out.” Abruptly she turned and walked away, her shoulders set. Rudi watched her go, confusion mingling with the fuzziness in his head from the blow it had taken. He couldn’t for the life of him see what she was so upset about. He shrugged, noticing for the first time that a faint sweetness still lingered in the air from the satchel of herbs she’d been carrying.

As Hanna turned the corner of the street and disappeared he thought for a moment that she was about to turn and look at him. He half-raised his arm in a farewell wave, but she walked on without a backward glance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Burgomeister Steiner was a large, florid man with the beginnings of a double chin and a taste for overly ornate waistcoats. Unlike Magnus he was a stickler for the distinctions of social rank, so there was no question of Rudi being treated like a guest in his house. The young messenger simply knocked at the elaborately carved door of the Steiner mansion, handed the note to the liveried manservant who answered it, and loitered outside in response to the peremptory request to wait until it became clear whether an answer was required. After a few moments the door creaked open again, and Rudi peeled himself away from the wall he'd been leaning on and tried to look attentive.

"So you're young Walder." To his surprise it was the burgomeister himself standing there, not the servant. Dumbstruck, Rudi nodded, unsure of the correct way to address so illustrious a person. He knew Steiner by sight of course, everyone in Kohlstadt did, but he had never been spoken to by the man before, and had never expected to be. "Do you have a moment?"

"Of course." A moment for what? Surely he wasn't supposed to enter the burgomeister's house?

Apparently not. Steiner came out to meet him, staying in the shelter of the porch. His eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun like one of the gargoyles perched on a finial above his head.

"Is there a reply?" Rudi asked after a moment, taking his best guess at the reason for the burgomeister's interest. Steiner shook his head.

"No. The note was simply to inform me that certain items I ordered from Herr von Blackenburg have now arrived." Rudi surmised that these were more fancy waistcoats. "I just wanted to meet the young man who so valiantly warned us of the peril we face."

"I didn't really do anything," Rudi said, unsure of how to respond. "And I'm not sure there is much of a peril anymore." Steiner's dark eyes glittered with an intelligence that was at odds with his indolent exterior.

"Your father and Sergeant Littman are of a similar mind. They believe the beastmen to have gone in search of easier pickings than our stoutly-defended little community." He broke off and gazed at Rudi, taking in his dishevelled appearance for the first time. "What happened to your face?"

"I got kicked by a boar," Rudi said, hardly inclined to discuss his morning's adventures with someone in authority. Steiner looked sceptical, but let it go.

"I see." He gathered his thoughts with an effort. "I wanted to ask what you thought."

"Me?" Rudi felt confused for a moment. "What more could I tell you?"

“You’d be surprised.” For a moment the trace of a smile appeared on Steiner’s face. Rudi remembered that despite appearances the burgomeister had a sharp and incisive mind. “You’re observant, and you know the forest well.”

Rudi felt his head begin to spin, and for a moment assumed it was the after-effects of Fritz’s punch. Then it hit him. The most powerful man in the village wanted his advice. For as long as the current emergency lasted, he would have the acceptance and status in the community he had always longed for. Perhaps it was that reflection which shaped his reply.

“My father and Sergeant Littman know far more about these things than me, and if they say the beastmen are gone then they probably are,” he began. “But I’ve been thinking. All the stories say they live purely for killing and plunder. If they really have moved on, why haven’t we heard about raids elsewhere in the valley?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Steiner nodded, a pleased expression on his face. “It seems to me that they’re biding their time, waiting for us to grow complacent. And unfortunately we might have to relax our precautions a little earlier than I would consider prudent.”

“Why’s that?” Rudi asked, before realising what he had done. Appalled at his own temerity for addressing the burgomeister as an equal he felt the breath constrict in his throat for a moment. Then he realised that, far from being outraged, Steiner was smiling again.

“A very astute question. I can see I was right about you.” He hesitated for a moment. “And let me answer it with a question of my own. You run a great many errands for Herr von Blackenburg, do you not?”

“Yes, I do.” Rudi nodded hesitantly, reluctant to discuss his work for Magnus with anyone else. The merchant had always said he valued his discretion. “But his business affairs...”

“Are no concern of mine,” Steiner reassured him. “But you deliver messages for him all over the valley, or so he tells me.”

“That’s right.” Rudi nodded again. Steiner continued, pursuing the point.

“So you would see more of what goes on in the district than almost anyone.”

“I suppose so.” Rudi had never considered the matter before, but it seemed a reasonable assumption. “I get about quite a bit.”

“Good.” Steiner lowered his voice a little, even though a quick glance up and down the street was enough to show that there was no one else within earshot. “And have you noticed anything unusual in the last few weeks?”

“Unusual in what way?” Rudi asked. Steiner shook his head.

“I don’t want to put any ideas in your head that aren’t there already.”

“Well then.” Rudi shrugged. “Some of the fields are looking a little sickly. The livestock too.” Several of the farms had been hit by cabbage blight in the last couple of weeks, and only yesterday the Heimdahls had been complaining that their milk cow had dried up for no apparent reason.

“Sickly.” His choice of words evidently had some resonance for the burgomeister, as he repeated it thoughtfully. “And the people?”

“Tired, I suppose. Some of them, anyway.” Rudi said.

“Sickly too, you might say?” Steiner looked intently at Rudi as he considered the question.

“You might say that,” he conceded. Steiner looked thoughtful, as though his worst fear had been confirmed. Then he came to a decision. He reached into the pouch at his belt, and produced a sealed note and a couple of coppers.

“I’d be very much obliged,” he said, “if you could take this note to Greta Reifental. As quickly as possible.” Rudi felt his mouth go dry. Of all the destinations he might have been dispatched to, the Reifental’s cottage was pretty close to the last place in the Empire he would have chosen. Particularly now. But maybe Hanna wouldn’t be there, and it did seem important.

“I’ll do it now,” he said, hoping he wouldn’t regret it.

To his thinly disguised dismay, it was indeed Hanna who opened the door of the Reifental’s cottage in answer to his reluctant knock. It wasn’t the first time he had been there of course, there was the evening he’d run to fetch Greta after his father had stumbled back to their hut bleeding from the wounds he’d sustained from his fight with the boar. But most of the time he avoided the place, so walking up to it in daylight was a strange sensation. The general shape of the building was familiar, it was not so different from a score of other cottages in the hinterland around the village despite its proximity to the forest, although some fresh details were revealed as he approached it.

The most obvious feature was the neatly tended rows of plants around the door, chosen, he supposed, for their medicinal properties as they were generally far from ornamental. Occasionally, as he passed by in the distance, he had seen Greta tending them, her habitual headscarf bright against the vegetation and the dull brown walls of her home. He had hoped to find her out of doors this time, but the garden around the house had been empty when he approached it, so with a heavy heart he had steeled himself to knock. A couple of scrawny chickens pecked hopefully in the dirt around his feet as he rapped his fist against the worn timber.

“What do you want?” Hanna asked as she opened the door. A half smile of welcome dropped from her face like a stone down a well. Then she seemed to recollect something. “Changed your mind about that poultice?”

“No, I’m fine,” Rudi began curtly, before recalling that she had tried to help him earlier, and deserved some gratitude for that. “Thank you. I have a message for your mother.” He held up the sealed note like a talisman, hoping to impress her.

“Oh.” Hanna glanced at the crest embossed into the sealing wax. Then she turned and called into the gloom behind her. “It’s a letter from Steiner.” Before Rudi could register his shock at hearing her refer to the burgomeister in such a familiar tone the girl had turned back to him. “I suppose you’d better come in.”

Rudi wasn’t sure what he expected to discover as he followed her across the threshold, but was vaguely surprised to find himself being conducted into a bright and cheerful room quite at odds with the vague idea he had of noisome potions and strange rituals.

There was a large wooden table, freshly scrubbed, which evidently did double duty for eating and preparing herbal remedies judging by the two bowls containing the residue of stew at one end, and the collection of dried herbs laid out at the other.

Yellow curtains fluttered in the breeze from the unshuttered windows, and a couple of carved wooden chairs with brightly patterned patchwork cushions stood next to the fireplace. Despite the summer warmth a blaze was roaring away in it, heating a brass cauldron suspended from a hook on a chain. Rudi felt the sweat start out on his face almost at once. Hanna and Greta, who was busily stirring some concoction inside the vessel, seemed scarcely aware of it.

“Hello, young man,” Greta greeted him cheerfully and stood, handing the spoon to her daughter as she did so, and wiped her hands on her apron. Hanna took her place beside the fire and resumed the slow agitation of the bubbling liquid. “What’s this all about?”

“I don’t know.” Rudi handed her the letter, and watched with barely concealed curiosity as she broke the seal and unfolded it. Surrounded by the accoutrements of her profession, Greta made the act of reading seem more magical than ever. Bottles and jars of substances he couldn’t identify stood on the shelves of an old wooden dresser, next to an icon of Shallya, the goddess of healing, that had been mounted in a curious frame of gently curving arcs. There were flowers in vases there too, which seemed to serve no practical purpose.

“Hmm.” Greta read on, looking thoughtful. Gradually the lines of a frown began to etch themselves on her forehead. Whatever the note contained, the news was surely not good.

“Here. Make yourself useful.” Hanna turned from the fire to face Rudi, and gestured to a large earthenware pot sitting on the table next to the herbs. A square of muslin lay beside it. “Put the cloth over the bowl for me.”

Baffled, Rudi picked up the piece of material and did as she instructed, covering the opening of the pot.

“Good. Now hold it in place.” Hanna lifted the bubbling cauldron off the hook above the fire and carried it over to the table. Wafts of sweet-smelling steam escaped the surface, pleasantly tickling the back of Rudi’s nose as she approached.

“What do I do now?” he asked, trying to mask the edge of apprehension, which was doing its best to nudge its way into his voice.

“Nothing. Just stand there and try not to get burned.” She was probably joking, he told himself, but this was Hanna after all, and it was hard to be sure. She tilted the cauldron carefully, pouring the liquid it contained into the slight depression in the middle of the cloth. For a moment Rudi thought it was going to spill. He fought down the impulse to flinch, but after a moment the fluid found the pores of the material and began to flow through it, leaving behind a residue of scum and what looked like fragments of leaf and tree bark.

“Very good,” Greta had approached the table unnoticed, as he remained intent on the delicate task. “Maybe you’ve missed your vocation.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Rudi hadn’t a clue what she was talking about.

“I suppose not,” Greta smiled at him, as though looking deeper than his outer appearance. “But you won’t be a forester all your life, you can be sure of that.”

“Why not?” The question came to his lips unbidden. Despite her friendliness Greta had strange powers, everyone knew that, and what in anyone else’s mouth would have been a simple pleasantry became charged with hidden meaning when she said it. Perhaps she was a seer as well as a healer. Perhaps he had some strange and

magnificent destiny, and only she could see it. The woman smiled again, an everyday sign of friendliness, completely devoid of any deeper significance.

“You’re a bright lad. The gods have a way of finding a use for qualities like that, but it’s up to you to take the opportunities as they come. And something tells me you’re not the kind to let them pass you by.”

“I see.” He didn’t really, but he sensed that somehow she’d paid him a compliment.

“What did old Steiner want?” Hanna asked, as the last of the liquid left the cauldron. Greta shrugged.

“He wants to talk to me. About the fever cases.”

“Oh,” Hanna shrugged too, as though the matter was of little importance. “I don’t know what else he expects. If you start cramming people together behind a wall every night, then of course you start spreading diseases.”

“Diseases?” Rudi asked. Hanna looked at him disdainfully.

“I don’t suppose you’d notice living out in the forest, but a few of the villagers are getting sick. It’s the overcrowding.”

Rudi hadn’t, but then he didn’t interact with the majority of the villagers. He cast his mind back over the events of the day, trying to remember if anyone he’d met seemed unwell. There was Kirstin, of course, but she always looked like that, and had done ever since she started working for Magnus, if not before. Then there was Hans Katzenjammer, whose injuries seemed infected, but that would be due to the thorn bush he’d stumbled into. No one else seemed particularly afflicted. That is, apart from his father, of course, but his arm seemed fine except for the rash. Besides he wouldn’t have felt comfortable betraying Gunther’s confidence by mentioning that to the healer, so he held his tongue.

“No, I hadn’t,” he said. Then another thought struck him. This must have been what the burgomeister meant when he said they might have to relax their precautions against the beastmen earlier than he would have liked. If trying to keep everyone safe had simply exposed them to another kind of danger, then the burgomeister was faced with an extremely unenviable choice. No wonder he wanted to talk to the healer as quickly as possible; after all, he’d had the letter all ready to send, and Rudi’s arrival with the note from Magnus had been an opportunity too fortuitous to ignore.

This was too much for a simple forest lad to take in all at once, he told himself. He cast around for a distraction. Hanna was lifting the cauldron away from the bowl now, and he reached out to take hold of the handle.

“Here,” he said. “Let me help...”

“Look out!” Hanna’s voice took on an unmistakable air of alarm, and for a moment he failed to understand. Then his hand closed around the metal, and a searing pain scorched across his palm.

“Sigmar’s hammer!” The heavy brass pot clattered to the floor as his arm jerked reflexively, tearing it from the girl’s grip. Tears of pain flooded his eyes, and he clenched his throbbing fist.

“Open your hand,” Greta sounded calm and reassuring, as she always did attending to an injury. Fighting against instinct he did as she instructed, and waited while she inspected the damage. She shook her head sympathetically. “It’s just a

minor burn. This should help.” She plucked one of the jars from the stockpile Rudi had noticed before, and spread some of the salve it contained across his agonised palm. It felt cool and soothing, muting the pain to a faint, barely perceptible throbbing, like the tingling of his hands on a frosty morning.

“I did try to warn you,” Hanna said, an unaccustomed tinge of defensiveness edging into her voice. She bent to pick up the cauldron, now slightly dented, and hung it on the hook over the fireplace without the faintest hint of discomfort. “I’m a bit more used to handling hot things.”

“So I see.” Rudi watched her with studied nonchalance, determined not to seem too perturbed by the incident. He felt vaguely embarrassed for making such a fuss over a simple domestic task the two women evidently thought nothing of, and brought the conversation back to business as quickly as possible to cover it. “Was there a reply to the message?”

“Just tell him I’ll come as soon as I can,” Greta said, “and not to worry. I’m sure the situation isn’t as bad as all that.”

“Right,” Hanna shrugged. “It’s not as though anybody’s died, is it?”

CHAPTER SIX

Hanna's words might almost have been a challenge to the gods, because the first fatality occurred a couple of days later. Grandma Ostwald had been the oldest inhabitant of Kohlstadt, so her passing wouldn't normally have incited much comment except for the fact that she had remained in robust good health for as long as anyone could remember. Her decline had been sharp and precipitous, accompanied by a high fever, sweating, and the eruption of boils across much of her body. By the time she expired over a dozen similar cases had been reported throughout the village, and everyone expected the toll to rise.

"It's a bad business all right," Magnus nodded sagely, his sombre expression reflecting that of the burgomeister, sitting opposite him in the parlour of the merchant's home. Rudi was in the corner of the room, keeping as quiet as he could. He was almost unable to believe that he was witnessing such momentous events from so close at hand. Greta Reifental sat beside the two men, apparently at ease despite the faint traces of lines etched on her features by exhaustion.

"That barely begins to cover it." Steiner turned to the young forester. "And you say the blight on the fields is spreading too?"

Rudi nodded. "About one farm in three looks affected now. As far out as the Altmans' place, at least."

"But no more cases of the fever?" Greta asked. Rudi nodded again. As the emergency had grown, his status as the eyes and ears of the burgomeister had grown along with it. He was still finding the novelty intoxicating.

"None outside the village that I've seen. At least so far."

"Well that's something at least." Magnus inclined his head judiciously, looking almost like a magistrate apart from the colours he habitually wore. "So long as it's contained here..."

"It'll spread throughout the village," Greta cut in. This was an old argument. She had repeatedly urged the burgomeister to rescind the edict requiring the local farmers to lodge inside the stockade at night. Magnus had just as vociferously argued the opposite, pointing out that there was still no hard evidence that the beastmen from the forest had really gone. Now the pair of them looked expectantly at Steiner, who quite clearly wished the decision could be made by someone else.

"If people are already infected, wouldn't that simply spread whatever disease this is over a wider area?" he asked. Greta's mouth tightened into a thin, unhappy line.

"So long as they remained in their homes, that wouldn't be a problem," she said. "If there were any more cases they'd be too isolated to infect anyone else. Unlike here."

"We may be getting unduly alarmed," Magnus put in smoothly. "So far we haven't had any more deaths, and it's hardly surprising that the one we have had was an old, frail woman..." Greta snorted.

“Grandma Ostwald was about as frail as an orc. She might have been old, but she was as vigorous as a woman half her age.”

“Be that as it may,” Magnus riposted, “one death hardly constitutes an epidemic. This pestilence is still a moot threat, whereas the beastmen are a clear and present one.”

“Except no one’s seen hide nor hair of them since young Rudi found their tracks in the forest.” Steiner turned to the young forester again. “And if there were traces to be found, I’m sure your father would have done so by now.”

Rudi nodded, not trusting himself to speak. If the peril was truly past, then his temporary rise in status would be over, and he would revert to being what he had always been: the forest child, the outsider. But he couldn’t contradict Gunther, who had indeed failed to find any further trace of the warband, despite repeated excursions into the forest.

Rudi had accompanied him on the last expedition, partly out of curiosity, and partly because his succession of errands for Magnus, Steiner, and now, it seemed, Greta Reifental, had deprived him of his father’s company of late. Despite the forester’s protestation that he’d never felt better the rash on his arm had spread across half his chest, and a couple of open sores had appeared that wept thin, watery fluid. Once or twice Rudi had tried broaching the subject, suggesting he ask Greta for a remedy while he was delivering one of Steiner’s notes to her cottage, but Gunther had been adamant that he didn’t want any such thing.

“I know you mean well, lad,” he’d said, “but I don’t want any more help from that quarter.” What his reasons were for such a statement Rudi couldn’t fathom, as the more he saw of Greta Reifental, the more he liked her. If it hadn’t been for Hanna’s brooding presence, that was still as icily reserved as ever, he would have almost looked forward to the errands to the cottage he had once done so much to avoid.

And so it was, the morning before the meeting in Magnus’ parlour, Rudi had rolled off his pallet as his father rose, and announced his intention of accompanying him on his rounds of the forest.

“There’s no need, lad.” Gunther looked surprised for a moment; almost as if he would rather his son remained at home. “And you’ve a lot to do for far more important folk than me.”

“There are no more important folk than you. Not as far as I’m concerned.” Rudi spoke with quiet sincerity. For a moment a flicker of an emotion he couldn’t read chased itself across the face of his adoptive father. Sensing awkwardness in Gunther’s demeanour he went on with a cheerfulness that was barely forced. “Besides, if I spend much more time in the village I’ll turn into a tradesman. You wouldn’t wish that on me, would you?”

“Taal forbid.” Gunther laughed, the uneasiness vanishing in a moment of simple bonding. “Besides, it’ll give you a chance to practise your archery. You’ve been letting it slide a bit.”

That much was true. And unfortunately the training was likely to take the edge off the pleasure Rudi would otherwise have taken in spending a warm summer day in the depths of the forest. But if that was the price he’d have to pay to keep an unobtrusive eye on his father then so be it. So he slipped the worn old quiver across

his shoulders. It was filled with shafts that might be fine enough for most bowmen, but which no longer met his father's exacting standards. He strung the bow Gunther had given him the previous summer; the string was new and freshly waxed. Like the arrows the bow had seen many years of hard use, the wood worn smooth where innumerable hands had gripped it to nock a shaft. Some archers, Rudi knew, preferred more elaborate weapons, wrapped with cord for a tighter grip, but Gunther always maintained that you needed to feel the bare wood in your hands to really know that it was an extension of your own body. He supposed his father was right, but so far this was a sensation he would have to take on trust. In his own hands the weapon felt ungainly and cumbersome.

He strapped the bracer to the inside of his left forearm with as much of an appearance of enthusiasm as he could manage. The pad of leather was supposed to let the string slide cleanly if it brushed against the limb when loosed instead of getting snagged in the sleeve of his jerkin. But truth to tell he felt safer wearing it, because his action was so uncoordinated it would actually strike his arm half the time, and would sting like nettle rash without the stout leather for protection.

They penetrated deep into the forest that day, further than Rudi had ever gone. His father was sure-footed, stepping over the small woodland streams that barred their way and insinuating himself through the underbrush as though he knew the route well. With quiet pride, Rudi matched him stride for stride, and kept pace with the older man with little effort. Occasionally he lagged behind, and Gunther would turn, grinning encouragement. He was enjoying the game, and clearly pleased with the level of woodcraft his son was displaying.

Except for one aspect. They paused for refreshment at about noon, judging by the angle of the shadows through the leaves, taking advantage of a large clearing they had found. Having lived in the forest all his life Rudi had a rough idea of where they were, despite the long, circuitous route they'd taken to get there. They'd travelled in an arc, setting out almost due west from Kohlstadt, gradually turning to the north, until now they were moving almost due east. Home lay directly to the south of them, no more than an hour or so away as the crow flew, although Gunther had made it plain that he intended to complete the circle they'd begun that morning.

"If any of those hellbeasts are moving about the village we're bound to cross their trail somewhere," he explained. Rudi nodded. That seemed reasonable. The signs they'd found before had been easy enough to spot, and the warband would have carved a swathe through the forest at least as noticeable as those.

"Unless they're camped inside the circle we've made," Rudi pointed out, and Gunther laughed.

"Smell any campfires?" he asked. Rudi shook his head. It was an obvious point, he supposed, but did the beastmen really need such things? He made a mental note to ask Sergeant Littman the next time he saw him. In the meantime his father seemed confident enough, and there was no one else in the Empire who knew these woods as well as he did, so he relaxed and tried to enjoy the day.

They made a pleasant lunch of bread and cheese; both these foodstuffs were rising in price now, so much of the local agriculture had been affected by whatever malaise was gripping the valley ever tighter. Fortunately the importance of Rudi and Gunther to the defence of the village meant that Steiner was inclined to be generous,

so they were kept well supplied. With a faint pang of guilt Rudi found himself wondering if such bounty would continue if they continued to report no signs of the enemy.

After their repast, as he'd quietly dreaded, it was time for archery practice. The clearing was a good hundred-paces across, so there was plenty of room to set up an improvised butt. Gunther pointed out a bush about thirty paces away.

"See if you can hit that, lad." The shot should have been an easy one, the range was close, and the tangle of leaves was at least a full span across. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Rudi reached across his shoulder for an arrow and nocked it. He drew the bow as he'd been taught, raising it as he anchored the string below his chin with the index and middle fingers of his right hand either side of the arrow. Feeling the tension grow in his left arm, he dropped it slightly to extend the arms of the weapon fully. The belly of the bow snuggled more tightly into his left hand, between the thumb and his fingers, and for a moment he almost understood what his father meant about it being an extension of his body.

The arrow loosed as he straightened his fingers. The bow snapped taut with a faint *whick*, and the shaft sped straight towards the target, clipping the edge of the shrub before embedding itself in the grass beyond where the crimson fletchings stood out like a strange angular flower on a rigid stalk.

"I hit it!" For a moment he couldn't quite believe it. All right, it had only caught the edge of the bush, but it hadn't missed entirely. Gunther smiled at his son's exuberance.

"Well done. Now try again." Flushed with success and buoyed with a fresh confidence, Rudi nocked another arrow and let fly. The string smacked against the bracer on his arm, deflecting the arrow to the left, and missing the bush by almost a yard. He sighed in frustration.

"Don't let it worry you. The only shot that counts is the next one. Where the last one went doesn't matter." Gunther's voice was calm and his advice sound, but Rudi was beyond hearing it. Frustration had him in its grip now, and his muscles tensed as he nocked the next arrow. "Just try to relax."

This time his over-tensed muscles jerked as he loosed the shaft. The bow jumped in his hand and the arrow disappeared altogether, vanishing through the trees with a derisive swoosh of displaced vegetation. He swore under his breath.

"There's no need for that sort of language," Gunther chided gently, as he strolled over to the other two shafts. "You'll get it in time." He plucked them both from the dirt with the effortless ease of long practice and inspected them for damage, brushing a few specks of soil from the heads. "Just take a break for a minute and try again."

"I'll get the other one." Rudi put down his bow and went to find it, grateful for the excuse to avoid his father's sympathy. It was kindly meant, he knew, but somehow it made things worse. Ducking his head with movements so practiced they didn't even register on his conscious mind he wriggled through the undergrowth surrounding the clearing. The arrow had left plenty of traces of its flight: a succession of torn leaves and broken twigs marked every tree and bush that had deflected it. The going was considerably harder for an almost fully-grown human, but Rudi persevered. Arrows were precious things, not to be thrown away lightly, and especially not as a result of his ineptitude...

His self-lacerating musings were interrupted by the realisation that the going was becoming easier, and that the undergrowth was thinning. There must be another clearing through here. Good. That would make it easier to find the errant arrow.

A faint odour tickled the membranes at the back of his nose, and he coughed. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly, but it was pungent, like the mud that appeared at the bottom of the forest pools when they dried out in exceptionally hot weather.

"Taal preserve us!" He broke through a brittle tangle of twigs, devoid of vegetation, into a grove unlike any he had ever seen before. All thoughts of retrieving his errant arrow disappeared like smoke in the wind.

It was as though the malaise that had gripped the fields around Kohlstadt had spread to the forest. The grass beneath his feet was blackened and slippery underfoot; white puffs of mould were beginning to break it down into slime. The bushes were denuded, only a few die-hard leaves clung grimly to the rotting remains of twig and branch, themselves succumbing to fungus and decay. The odour was stronger here, the unmistakable stench of putrefaction.

"Rudi? Rudi!" It was only as he heard his father calling that he realised he must have been staring in astonishment for some time. Gunther broke through the undergrowth, and stopped. His jaw dropped.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Rudi asked. His father shook his head, dazed by the sight of so much devastation.

"Never even dreamed I would." He seemed to come back to himself then, as he took Rudi by the arm. "Best we get away from here."

Rudi nodded. The whole clearing had an unmistakably unhealthy air. For a moment he felt the faint stirring of some other emotion he couldn't quite identify, hope or anticipation perhaps, but it quickly vanished. "Are you all right, lad?"

"I'm fine." Rudi dismissed the sensation briskly. Gunther looked at him curiously for a moment. Knowing it was pointless to dissemble with the man who'd raised him, Rudi added, "I just felt a bit funny for a moment. Must be the smell, I guess."

"Must be," Gunther agreed. As they made their way back through the thicket to the safe familiarity of the green, healthy forest he added, "it's not like you to be sickening for something."

Those words came back to Rudi the following day at the meeting in Magnus' parlour. If he were to mention the strange glade he'd found, now would be the perfect time. But something held him back.

Suppose Steiner thought he might have become infected with something while he stood there, surrounded by all that corruption? Or Magnus or Greta? They'd exclude him from their meetings for fear of catching whatever it was. They would find someone else to deliver their notes and report on events around the village, and he'd go back to being the outcast nonentity that everyone ignored. He should tell them, of course, but if that was the price...

He hesitated for a moment before telling himself that Steiner had only asked about traces of the beastmen. So he nodded his agreement.

"I'm sure he would. But we didn't find a trace of them." As the half-truth slithered from his lips he felt again that strange mixture of emotion that had taken him by surprise the day before. But this time there was another element, a sensation of gloating over his duplicity.

Appalled at what he'd done he resolved to speak up now, and damn the consequences. But it was too late. Steiner was standing to leave, and the meeting was at an end.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’ve a few more packages for you to deliver,” Magnus told Rudi after the door had closed behind the burgomeister. Greta stood up, brushing an errant strand of hair back behind her headscarf.

“I have as well,” she added, producing three packets of powder sealed with wax. Rudi recognised them immediately as he’d distributed several like them over the past few days to households where the fever had struck. Precisely what they contained he had no idea, as he had no desire to linger in the vicinity of the pestilence. So he handed them over to whoever answered the door and beat a hasty retreat. Each one was labelled with her spidery handwriting, although the marks meant nothing to Rudi.

“Who are they for?” he asked. Even though she knew he couldn’t read, Greta’s hand darted towards each one as she recited the names, the habit of expecting them to be read was too ingrained to override.

“Tomas Lindemann at the shoemaker’s, Marina Hoffstader in Butcher’s Alley, and Hans Katzenjammer at his mother’s house.”

So Hans was sick too. Hardly surprising, considering how he’d looked the last time Rudi had seen him, but somehow the name took him by surprise. He’d become so preoccupied with his activities over the last few days that he hadn’t given the two brothers a single thought. He felt a faint twinge of guilt at the lack of compassion he felt at the news. So he poked at it, hoping to stir up a little more feeling.

“He’s the same as the others?” The Lindemann and Hoffstader households he already knew about, he had visited them before. Twice, in the case of the Hoffstadters, as Magnus had begun to dispatch food parcels to some of the sick and to the poorest families in the village as the price of provisions had continued to rise. Greta shrugged.

“I suppose so. He refused to see me, but I don’t see what else it could be.”

“Refused to see you?” Magnus looked intrigued. He leaned forwards in his chair, and steepled his fingers. “That seems a little odd.”

The healer shrugged again. “He’s delirious, I’m told. He became quite hysterical when his mother told him she’d sent for me. It seemed better to wait until he was calmer before trying again.”

“Maybe the medicine will help,” Rudi suggested. He wanted to feel sorry for the hulking youth, he really did, but the truth was there were people he liked a great deal more who were just as ill. The death toll was now up to three out of more than a score of cases. If he had a choice he’d rather feel sorry for Marina Hoffstader, who had been so grateful for the bread and ale Magnus had sent her that she’d given him a flower from her window box in the hope that the scent would keep him safe from the contagion. Or Big Franz, whose wife and daughter were both unwell, but who stuck

doggedly to his responsibilities in the militia by day, and by night stayed up to nurse them.

“I hope so,” Greta yawned. The strain was beginning to show. She straightened her shoulders with a visible effort. “If you get the chance to see him, perhaps you could tell me what the symptoms are.”

“I’ll try,” Rudi promised, although he quailed inwardly at the thought. It would be bad enough having to see one of the disease’s victims close to, let alone if that person habitually bore him nothing but malice.

“Good.” Magnus dismissed the topic. “I’ve a couple of business letters for you to deliver as well. One to Johannes at the tavern, and one to the Altmans.”

“Business? At a time like this?” Greta’s tone was scathing. They had been thrown together during the current emergency by their positions in the community, but they had never managed to be anything more than cordial to one another. Rudi found this surprising, because he liked them both. But there was an undercurrent of animosity between them, which seemed to run a lot deeper than their differences in opinions as to how the problem should be tackled. Oh well, he told himself, it was just part of the social interaction between people that he had been unable to fathom thanks to his life in the forest. Perhaps they’d had some romantic liaison in the past that hadn’t worked out. After all, no one seemed to know quite who Hanna’s father was...

No, the thought was absurd. There was no resemblance at all between the cadaverous merchant and the healer’s daughter. Her face was too round, her features too soft...

“They’ve got enough to worry about at the moment without trying to scrape together the interest payments they owe me.” Magnus broke into his thoughts. “I’m just telling them not to bother until things settle down again.”

“You’re a very generous man,” Greta said. “I sometimes wonder where you get it from. Your grandfather, perhaps?” There was an edge to the question that Rudi missed completely, and if it meant anything to the merchant he gave no sign of it. He just smiled ruefully.

“My grandfather was a moneylender from Nuln. The only selfless act of his entire life was dying young enough to leave his fortune to my father, who lost most of it speculating on expeditions to Lustria which either sank on the way there or succumbed to the perils of the jungle upon their arrival.” He shrugged. “What I have in life I’ve made for myself, and it only seems fair to share my good fortune with others. I’ve no heirs, so I might as well do what I can with it while I have the chance. I can hardly spend it in Morr’s realm, can I?”

“I suppose not.” Something in Greta’s tone indicated that she hadn’t heard what she’d been expecting, or possibly fearing, in reply. She stood to leave. “I’ll see myself out.”

“Of course.” Magnus rose anyway, to usher her out of the room. He rang the little bell on the occasional table as he stood up. After a moment Kirstin appeared, pale as ever, her eyes a little bloodshot. She was dusting flour from her hands, and looked irritable. No doubt she had been dragged away from the kitchen in the middle of preparing a meal.

“You rang, sir?” This time she favoured Rudi with a watery smile, which disappeared almost immediately as her gaze skipped past him to her employer.

Despite himself Rudi felt a small sense of satisfaction at the change in her attitude; it mirrored his general rise in status among the small community. Now when he picked up the packages of food she prepared for him to deliver to the poor and sick she would at least attempt to be cordial. She might make some trivial remarks about the weather or the spread of the pestilence before sending him on his way to the day's destination. An older, worldlier, or more cynical lad might have attributed this at least in part to the latest changes Magnus' mirror had shown him. His journeys around the valley had toned his muscles, making him leaner and stronger, and his face had lost the last faint traces of the puffiness of youth. Almost without realising it, he had reached the cusp of adulthood.

"Yes," Magnus nodded. "Rudi is about to leave. Are the packages ready?"

"Ready and waiting, sir," she nodded, meeting Rudi's eyes almost eagerly. "If you'd follow me to the kitchen?"

He did as he was bid, pausing just long enough to pick up the letters Magnus had prepared and to slip Greta's packages of medicine into his pouch. He had memorised who each was for with the aid of the little mental tricks he used on such occasions. Greta had pointed out which was which, so he placed them in order of delivery: Marina Hofstader's first, then Tomas Lindemann, and Hans Katzenjammer last of all. He wanted to put off that meeting for as long as possible. The letters were easy to tell apart, as the one for the Altmans had a crumpled edge and the one for the tavern-keeper had a blob of wax trailing from the seal which looked a bit like a rabbit's head. He sometimes supposed it might make things a little easier if he could simply read the names on the papers, but reading looked really hard, and was probably beyond him without years of study.

Kirstin led him into the kitchen, which smelled invitingly of rabbit stew and baking pastries. Whatever her moral shortcomings, it seemed, she was an accomplished cook. She handed him a satchel, containing five parcels wrapped in waxed paper, and recited the names of the intended recipients. The contents were all identical, so there was no need to memorise anything here.

"It doesn't seem much," she said, "but I suppose those poor people will be pleased to see it."

"That they will." Rudi shrugged the strap of the satchel over his shoulder. "They always ask me to thank you for your kindness." Something approaching colour flared briefly in Kirstin's cheeks.

"They should thank Herr von Blackenburg," she said. "He provides it."

"But you prepare it," Rudi pointed out. "And very well too, judging by the smell in here."

"I do what I can, but I'm no halfling. They really know how to cook." For a moment she seemed almost animated. It was the first time Rudi had seen her enthused about anything, and for a moment he could understand why her tavern-room conquests found her so appealing. "Here. Take this." She plucked a cooling pastry from a tray and handed it to him. The crust was still warm against his fingers. For a moment her hand lingered as their fingertips brushed together, then she withdrew it abruptly. "You've got a lot of walking to do today."

"Thank you." Surprised, and a little unsure of how to respond, he tucked it into the satchel on top of the packages, and turned to the door. "I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

“I hope so.” Kirstin watched him go with a faint smile, and returned to her work.

Despite his best efforts to prolong them, the bulk of his errands passed remarkably quickly. There was an air of foreboding about the streets now. The few people abroad were hurrying about their business with lowered heads and quick, nervous footsteps, almost as if the mouths of the alleys they passed were filled with dark, menacing shadows instead of bright sunlight. The day was warm, the sun striking back from walls and fences, baking the mud and ordure which coated the streets to hardness. The air felt thick and foetid against his face. As he trotted from one address to another Rudi felt as if the village itself was feverish. The sweet scent of putrefaction tainted the air without any definite source. It was an all-pervading smell.

He was imagining things, he told himself angrily, the streets always smelled like that in the summer. But something stirred within him again, almost savouring the disgust and unease that he felt. He swallowed, his throat dry. He'd been out in the sun for too long, had sweated too much, and was getting dehydrated. He needed a drink.

Veering aside from his intended route towards the Lindemann house, he cut down an alley towards the tavern. He'd deliver Magnus' letter to Johannes the taverner now, and spend a couple of his coppers on a drink while he was there. He could certainly afford to, the number of errands he was running these days was earning him more money than he'd ever possessed in his life. In this week alone he'd made more than a shilling. It was the first silver coin he'd ever held, and if the plague would just continue for another month or so he'd be rich by the time it burned itself out.

What was he thinking? How could he possibly be so callous as to wish disease and misery on people just to make money? Repulsed by the thoughts he found festering in his head he increased his pace, as though he could leave them behind if he moved fast enough.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry, young Walder?” Engrossed in his thoughts, he had almost passed Big Franz without noticing him. And that took some doing. The village smith was muscled like an orc, and stood nearly a head taller than anyone else in Kohlstadt. Now, though, his impressive physique was sagging with exhaustion, his muscles were slack from fatigue, and the fringe of dark hair which protruded from under his pot helm was plastered to his forehead with sweat. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days. Which was probably close to the truth, Rudi reminded himself.

“I've some messages to deliver,” he replied, not wanting to get sucked into a prolonged conversation.

“I might have known.” Big Franz stood aside to let him pass unimpeded. He was leaning slightly on his spear like an old man with a walking stick. Despite himself, Rudi slowed.

“You look terrible,” he said. The militiaman shrugged.

“I feel it too. But it's hard for everyone at the moment. We're having to stand double watches now, because half the militia is sick, or too scared to leave their homes.”

Rudi nodded. “I know. I've got some medicine to deliver to Hans Katzenjammer.”

“Katzenjammer’s ill?” Big Franz looked vaguely surprised. “I didn’t know that. Haven’t seen either of them in over a week.” He didn’t sound as though he considered it much of a loss. He might have been about to say more, but a jaw-cracking yawn interrupted him. Rudi gazed at the man in consternation, all trace of his earlier callousness deserting him.

“When did you last get some sleep?” he asked.

Franz yawned again. “Yesterday morning, I think. Got a couple of hours in. Then Frieda got delirious again.” So his wife was still sick. Rudi didn’t dare ask about his daughter. If the news was good, Franz would already have told him. Come to that, if any of the fever victims had shown any signs of recovery the news would have been all over Kohlstadt within the hour. Another thought occurred to him.

“When did you last eat anything?” Creases appeared in the blacksmith’s forehead as he tried to remember. That was the only answer Rudi needed. With a faint pang of regret he fished the pastry Kirstin had given him out of the satchel, savouring the appetising aroma for the last time. “Here. I think you need this more than I do.” A faint smile appeared on Franz’s face as he realised what it was.

“Shallya bless you, lad.” Two thirds of the pastry disappeared in a couple of bites before decorum overcame hunger, and the towering militiaman held out the remaining scraps of crust in a slightly shamefaced fashion. “Are you sure you don’t want to split it?”

Rudi shook his head. “Finish it off,” he said. “You need the energy.”

“Aye. That’s right enough.” Franz chewed and swallowed the remains of the delicacy with evident relish, already looking a little restored by it. He stood straighter now, and his eye seemed keener, not so blurred with fatigue.

After a few words of farewell Rudi made his way to the tavern, where he delivered Magnus’ letter and quenched his thirst. A couple of extra coppers bought him some hardening bread and some watery broth to soften it in. Despite himself he couldn’t suppress a twinge of regret at his generosity to Big Franz. Still, this was as good as the food he’d expected to eat when he set out that morning, he reminded himself, and at least he was still healthy enough to appreciate it. He wished Franz well, and muttered a brief prayer to Shallya for his family’s recovery.

“Can I get you anything else?” Johannes asked, seeing that his meal was over. Rudi shook his head. The innkeeper was a short man with a fringe of greying hair through which his near-naked scalp emerged like a rock from a fast-flowing stream. His apron was stained with the detritus of his calling, and the sleeve of his shirt was patched at the elbow. Rudi shook his head.

“No thank you. I’ve still got plenty of stuff to deliver.”

“So I see.” Johannes cast covetous eyes at the satchel that was still bulging slightly despite the delivery of a couple of the food parcels. Usually at this time of day the tavern would be filled with artisans flocking in from the neighbouring shops for their midday meal. But it was deserted. Despite this Johannes leaned in close and lowered his voice. “You’re carrying quite a lot of food about these days.” Unsure of what he was getting at, Rudi nodded.

“There are a lot of sick people who appreciate it.”

“Quite so.” Johannes nodded too, as if they understood something implicit, which Rudi couldn’t quite see. “These are hard times all right. Stuff like that is getting pretty expensive.”

“Magnus is a wealthy man,” Rudi said, stating the obvious. “And generous with it.”

“Quite so,” Johannes said again. He licked his lips, and glanced round again, making sure that there was no one else in the bar to overhear them. “And I’m sure he wouldn’t mind spreading that generosity a little further. After all, no one knows quite how much there might be in each of those packages, do they?” He licked his lips again, waiting for Rudi to catch his meaning.

“I know,” Rudi said slowly, comprehension and outrage building almost as one. “And if you think I’m going to let you take some of it you’ve another thing coming.”

“Not take, no, of course not.” Johannes looked unconvincingly shocked at the suggestion. “Buy, perhaps? A small contribution to the temple of your choice, a few coins for you to dispose of as you see fit?”

“I’ve had enough,” Rudi said, standing slowly. The taverner cowered a little. It was only then that Rudi realised his fists were clenched. The very idea that someone would try to profit from the misery of others revolted him, and he tried to fight down the anger which coloured his face and thickened his voice. A faint mocking whisper at the back of his mind reminded him that he’d been thinking something similar not too long ago, but he ignored it. That had been idle musing, not a calculated plan to sell foodstuffs destined for the needy for personal profit.

“No offence meant,” Johannes said, rising too. And more rapidly he went on, “It was just a thought, nothing in it of course, that would be far too unethical. Purely a hypothetical conversation.”

“Good,” Rudi said, without the faintest idea of what hypothetical meant. But he recognised squirming when he saw it. Not trusting himself to speak further he shouldered the satchel and strode out into the daylight again, squinting as the sun struck his face.

Forcing his anger aside with difficulty, he tried to concentrate on the matter at hand. He still had two packets of medicine to deliver for Greta, and three packets of food. And the letter for the Altmans’ farm. He’d been heading for Tomas Lindemann’s cobbler’s shop when his thirst had diverted him, he remembered, but that was now several streets away, and a couple of his other destinations lay closer at hand.

With a sudden sinking feeling he realised that the closest address he had to visit was the Katzenjammer house. He took a deep breath. Might as well get it over with, he supposed. Hans would probably be just as reluctant to see him, as he was to see Hans, so he doubted he’d have to face the youth in person. All he had to do was deliver the medicine, and go about his business as usual.

Right then, fine. He squared his shoulders and set out for the house of his enemy, little suspecting the surprise that awaited him there.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Katzenjammer house was like any other in the street, which meant it looked subtly different from all of its neighbours, having been thrown up as quickly as possible with whatever materials had been to hand. A sturdy construction of timber and brick, its upper storey projected out over the thoroughfare in the manner typical of houses throughout the Empire to provide a modicum of shelter in inclement weather and facilitate the emptying of chamber pots.

Rudi took a deep breath and knocked briskly on the door pulling the package of medicine from his pouch ready to hand it to whoever answered it. He certainly had no intention of remaining there any longer than he had to, whatever Greta might want. After a long pause, which probably stretched out in his mind for a great deal more than it did in actual time, the latch rattled and the weathered timber creaked open.

“Thank you for coming.” It was Frau Katzenjammer. She was a small, stout woman, her hair grey, and her eyes were dark with fatigue and worry. Her voice was so quiet, and slurred with exhaustion, that Rudi had to bend his head to catch her words. He held up the packet so she could see it.

“I’ve got some medicine for Hans,” he began, but the old woman had already taken hold of his wrist and was urging him inside. She carried on speaking as she did so, almost as if his words hadn’t registered.

“He keeps asking for you. No one else. He won’t leave his room, won’t let anyone else in there.”

“Not even you?” Unwilling to break her grip by force, Rudi let himself be led into the gloomy passageway. Frau Katzenjammer nodded, stifling something rather like a sob.

“No. He says he doesn’t want anyone to see him like this, or to run the risk of catching whatever he’s got. He’d keep Fritz out too if he could, but someone has to take him his food.”

“Of course.” Rudi was surprised and touched, more than he’d have believed possible. He’d always thought of Hans as nothing more than a contemptible lout, so this display of concern for the welfare of others was an unexpected facet of his character. “Why does he want to see me?”

“He won’t say,” a new voice cut in. He turned to see Fritz standing at the bottom of the narrow stairwell. For a moment he bristled, prepared to defend himself if he had to, then relaxed. The hulking half-wit’s body language was anything but hostile. It reminded the young forester of a nervous dog approaching someone for a pat, but prepared for a kick. “Just keeps asking. How did you know?”

“Frau Reifental sent me with some medicine for him,” Rudi said, skating around the truth. Fritz became uneasier at the mention of the healer’s name, if that were

possible. “She said he wouldn’t see her when she called, and hoped I’d have better luck.”

“I hope so,” Frau Katzenjammer said, clearly distressed by the memory. “The fuss he made... it wouldn’t have been possible, you see. I tried to calm him, we both did...” Tears were visible in her eyes now, and Fritz patted his mother on the back, in an awkward gesture of sympathy.

Well, whatever he felt, Rudi was committed. He couldn’t refuse to see Hans now; the poor woman would be distraught. And who knew how Fritz would react?

“Where can I find him?” he asked. Might as well get it over with. Then he could get on and deliver the rest of his messages.

“Up here.” Fritz led the way up the staircase, his bulk filling the narrow passageway so that Rudi could see little of the landing at the top. As they reached it, Fritz pointed to a nearby door. “In there,” he said.

“Right.” Rudi took a deep breath, and pushed it open. The shutters were closed, and the room inside was dark and foetid, the hot air rank with the smell of old sweat and unemptied chamber pots. Despite himself he coughed.

“Get out!” The voice was a harsh croak, completely unlike the habitual sneering tone he was used to. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom enshrouding the small chamber he made out a dark shape lying on the narrow bed, swathed in blankets, the head wrapped in bandages. “Damn it Fritzie, how many more times...” The voice trailed off in a spasm of coughing.

“It’s Rudi Walder.” Rudi hesitated, not sure of the reaction he’d get, before continuing. “Your mother said you wanted to see me. But I can go if you prefer...”

“No!” The rasping voice took on a tone of desperation. “You’re my only hope!”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Rudi said, unsure how to respond to this. “I’ve brought some medicine...”

“That won’t help.” Hans stirred weakly. He was trying to raise himself in the bed, and Rudi took an instinctive step forward to help. Hans forestalled him with a gesture. “No. Don’t come any closer. Believe me, you don’t want to see this.”

“See what?” Rudi felt his confusion growing by the minute. “I don’t understand. How can I help?”

“Persuade her to lift it. Please.” The words were interrupted by a racking cough. “I’m sorry, all right? Just tell her. I’ll do anything...”

“Tell who?” Rudi asked, completely baffled.

“The witch. She did this!” The distorted voice rose in desperate appeal. For a moment Rudi thought he understood. So that was why Hans had refused to let Greta see him, he thought she was responsible for his condition somehow. He must be hallucinating from the fever.

“Greta wouldn’t do anything like that,” Rudi said, trying to sound reasonable. “She helps people...” He was interrupted by a harsh laugh from the bed.

“Not her. The young one. She was with you, you must have heard...”

Finally the pieces fell into place. He remembered the fight in the street, Hanna’s intervention, and Fritz hauling his brother away babbling about curses. Hans had fallen ill soon afterwards, and in his delirium he must have become obsessed with his brother’s words and come to believe that the girl had indeed put a hex on him. The

very idea was ludicrous, of course, but while Hans remained convinced of his delusion he was never going to recover. Rudi squinted at the huddle of blankets, trying to make out a discernable shape, but failed.

“I’ll talk to her,” he promised. “But I’m sure you’re wrong. You’re not the only one with the fever, you know. She can’t have cursed everybody.”

“The fever?” Hans laughed again, a harsh sound devoid of any mirth. “If that was all I had wrong with me I’d sing praises to Sigmar.” Clearly there was no convincing him, at least until he started to recover. If he ever did. No one had yet, and the best Greta had been able to manage was to stabilise a handful of cases, the rest just continued to decline. No point dwelling on that, though, so it would probably be best just to offer encouragement.

“Can I get you anything?” Rudi asked. A faint motion in the darkness might have been Hans shaking his head.

“No. Thank you. Just talk to the witch. Please.”

“I will,” Rudi assured him, and finding nothing else to say left the room as quickly as he could.

“Well?” Frau Katzenjammer was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. Her face was a mixture of hope and the expectation of disappointment. “What did he want?”

“He wants me to take a message to someone,” Rudi told her, unwilling to burden the poor woman with anything more. “Nothing really important, but it’s been preying on his mind.”

“I see.” The woman nodded, and her shoulders slumped. The disappointment she obviously felt was palpable, it filled the room. She turned to her son. “Find some money, Fritzie.”

“There’s no need for that,” Rudi said hastily. “It’s only a verbal message. I’ll be seeing them anyway. I couldn’t charge you for just helping out, it wouldn’t be right.”

“Nonsense.” Frau Katzenjammer pulled herself erect, and for a moment she displayed a dignity and a fixity of purpose that surprised him. “We Katzenjammers always pay our debts. We’ll not cheat anybody.” Realising that it would be futile to protest any further, and that to do so would only insult her, he acquiesced and took the smallest denomination from the handful of coins Fritz thrust at him. After a few more mumbled pleasantries, which no one consciously spoke or listened to, he regained the street at last.

The door swung closed behind him. On it was the fresh red paint of the crudely daubed hammer of Sigmar that marked it as a dwelling touched by the pestilence. Rudi sighed with relief. The experience hadn’t been as traumatic as he’d imagined, but it had been a great deal more surprising. He shrugged. No doubt Greta would be able to make something of it.

Now there was a thing. He wasn’t looking forward to telling her about Katzenjammers bizarre delusion. Such accusations could run out of control, he knew, and the consequences could be dire. Come to that he wasn’t looking forward to delivering Hans’ message to her daughter either. Hanna could be trying at the best of times, but to be openly accused of being the one thing she most loathed, a witch, would be bound to lead to a spectacular loss of temper. Though he quailed inwardly

at the prospect, he knew he'd have to do it. The Katzenjammers had paid him to deliver the message, and he was obligated to do so.

Oh well, there was plenty to do before that had to be faced. He still had three more food parcels and the letter for the Altmans to deliver. That at least was a prospect to look forward to: a long walk out to the farmstead, far away from the claustrophobic streets of Kohlstadt and the ever-present reeks of contagion and fear. Perhaps the clean air of the countryside would clear his head a little, and he could start to make a bit more sense of things. The thought cheered him, and there was something approaching a spring in his step as he readjusted the shoulder strap of his satchel and set out for the next destination on his itinerary.

The rest of his deliveries within the precincts of Kohlstadt took little time to complete, since he was familiar with all three of the houses Magnus had dispatched food to. One household had been an early victim of the plague, while the other two had been among the poorest in the village, and would surely have been in dire straits by now had it not been for the merchant's generosity.

Dishearteningly one of them now carried the red hammer sigil of the pestilence on its door, so it seemed to have been in vain, although the fresh supply of provender was received as gratefully as ever. Reasoning that he'd already been in the presence of a plague victim today Rudi felt there was no point in timidity. He stood his ground to hand over the package of food instead of knocking, leaving it, and scurrying away as he otherwise might have done. He was rewarded with a warm smile from the housewife who, a few weeks before, would barely have acknowledged him if she'd tripped over him in the street.

After that, with a profound sense of relief, the young forester approached the gates in the stockade around the village, which, as before, were half closed.

"Rudi, lad." Heinrich Littman was on duty. He still seemed strong and in command, despite the weary set of the shoulders of the two militiamen accompanying him. "Any news from the forest?"

"No sign of the beastmen," Rudi told him. "We both went out yesterday. I'm sure my father must have told you."

"Aye, that he did," Littman nodded slowly. "I'm beginning to think they've gone after all."

"Let's hope so," Rudi said fervently. A thought suddenly struck him, something he'd been meaning to ask the sergeant when he saw him. "Do beastmen make campfires?"

"Generally," Littman nodded. "They've got that much intelligence at least. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Rudi shrugged, relieved that his father had been right after all. "Just another sign we didn't see."

"Ah. Right," Littman nodded, as if he understood what Rudi had meant. "Seen Franz at all on your travels?"

"A few hours ago," Rudi shook his head sympathetically. "He looked about all in. Why?"

“I sent him home for some sleep. He needs it,” Littman looked grave for a moment. “But I wasn’t sure he would.”

“He’ll be fine,” Rudi said, without much conviction. Another thought occurred to him, some extra news that Littman might need to know. “Hans Katzenjammer’s sick, by the way. His brother’s looking after him. So you won’t be seeing either of them for a while, I guess.”

“No change there,” Littman shook his head. “Sigmar knows they’re useless enough at the best of times, but right now I could use even them.” He shrugged. “Still, it can’t be helped. Take care of yourself, lad.”

“I will,” Rudi said, and slipped out of the village with a sense of profound relief. As he passed through the gates into the open countryside he felt his spirits begin to lift. A faint breeze was blowing in across the fields, the scent of ripe growing things as yet untouched by the spreading corruption came sweetly to his nostrils, ruffling his hair like an affectionate hand. Out here the sun felt warm and comfortable against his skin. The rank stifling heat of Kohlstadt dropped away as if he’d stepped out of a bake house into the street.

It was a long way to the Altmans’ farmstead, he knew, but the prospect of the walk was a welcome one. He strode out along the highway, his chest swelling with the fresh clean air, feeling better than he had done all day.

CHAPTER NINE

Rudi's buoyant mood lasted for most of his journey, until he saw the smoke.

At first he paid it no mind; on his errands for Magnus he had become used to seeing threads of smoke rising from the chimneys of the cottages which stood about the valley. Some were clustered together in small hamlets of three to a dozen, others were isolated in the middle of the smallholdings which provided the residents with their livelihoods. Sometimes the scent of burning wood was accompanied by the appetising aromas of baking, cooking vegetables, or occasionally roasting meat. With a sudden shock he realised that these days the chimneys were all denuded of smoke. The farmers and their families were too busy packing all the necessary jobs into the small portion of the day they had left. Between leaving Kohlstadt in the morning and hurrying back to it before the night fell, they had no time to spend cooking. The Altmans, who had the farthest to travel, least of all.

As he looked back along the length of the valley he could see no sign of other fires. A few dispirited figures still toiled in the fields, desperately trying to save what they could before the spreading blight snatched it away from them. It was beginning to look more and more like a losing battle. From where he stood, halfway up the left-hand side of the valley on a path he knew well, he could see the dark stains spreading remorselessly across fields which should be golden with ripe grain, or green with growing vegetables. Despite himself, he caught his breath. It had been some days since he had come this far, and seen so much of the countryside laid out before him. The extent to which the blight had spread in even that short space of time was shocking.

Rudi shaded his eyes and peered into the distance. The tiny black thread, which stood out clearly against the blue summer sky like a crack in a bird's egg, was definitely rooted in the Altmans' smallholding. A tingle of unease ran down his spine. He told himself he was being foolish. No doubt the Altmans were burning rubbish, in a desperate attempt to keep their fields free of the spreading taint. Nothing short of burning would prevent an uprooted plant from passing on its corruption. Reassured by the logic of his reasoning he readjusted his satchel, now comfortably light and empty, and resumed his walk towards his destination.

But the closer he got to it, the more his sense of foreboding increased. The column of smoke grew thicker, and he began to realise that this was far too large a conflagration to be a mere bonfire. The last part of the path took him down the slope of the valley wall, behind an outcrop; just as he hoped to be able to see more, a sprawling limb of the surrounding hills obscured his view.

Down here the valley floor was in shadow, and a faint chill made him shiver. The breeze he'd found so invigorating when he left the stench of Kohlstadt behind was less pleasant now, developing a keener edge as the narrowing defile compressed and

intensified it. He picked up his pace, hoping to pass out into the warmth of the sun again before too long.

The stronger wind was bringing the scent of burning with it, and for a moment he relaxed as he identified the familiar odour of combusting wood. It was a bonfire after all. He began to chide himself for his overactive imaginings. Then he caught wind of another smell entirely, and his hackles rose. Roasting meat. Surely they hadn't had to slaughter the livestock?

He knew some of the animals had fallen ill on the farmsteads as the fields blighted, their symptoms remarkably similar to the human victims of the plague. Such a loss was catastrophic: the single sheep or pig many of the smallholders owned represented a significant proportion of their worldly wealth. Consigning them to the flames was an act of utter desperation. Clearly the travails that had hit the Altman family were serious indeed.

A faint flurry of thick grey ash, like filthy snow, began to settle around him, making him cough as his throat became raw. The wind was bringing something else too, he realised, a faint, dull roar, interspersed with pops and crackles like a hearthside on a winter's night.

At first, as the farmstead came into view, he could barely believe it. The cottage was on fire. It was burning fiercely, the thatch a dancing crown of vivid orange flames, the walls scorching and buckling from the heat that beat at his face like a physical blow. He checked his stride for a moment as he rounded the sheltering outcrop of rock.

"Herr Altman!" he called, despite the small voice within him, which was telling him there would be no one to hear. "Rudolph! Elise!" Neither the farmer nor his two children responded. "Frau Altman! Is anyone there?"

All he could hear in reply was the roar of the flames. Despite the heat he trotted forwards, hoping to find some sign of life, circling the burning house as closely as he dared.

Around the back was a field of cabbages, a few of them showing the telltale signs of blight. Most were still free of contagion, so far as he could tell, but it was hard to be sure, as the ground and the bulk of the growing crop had been heavily trampled. As he glanced down at the footprints punched into the soft earth his mouth went dry, and his heart began to hammer in his chest. There was no doubt about it: these were the same tracks as the ones he'd first seen in the forest that fateful day. The beastmen had been here. They had raided one of the isolated farmsteads, as everyone had feared.

He glanced around with sudden apprehension. The tracks were recent and there was still enough left of the burning cottage to indicate that the attack had been no more than an hour or so before. That meant that the creatures could still be in the vicinity, searching for fresh victims.

The thought terrified him. He looked around desperately for some kind of weapon, vowing he'd never leave the safety of the village without his bow again, however inept he might be with it. Short of throwing cabbage stalks at a charging assailant, which he suspected wouldn't inconvenience a beastman much, there was nothing visible that promised anything in the way of defence.

He had to get out of here and report what he'd found to Sergeant Littman and the burgomeister. They'd know what to do. He'd seen no sign of the beastmen on the path he'd taken, so that would be the safest route back to Kohlstadt, as well as the quickest. He turned to go, skirting the crackling flames as closely as he dared.

As he moved he couldn't resist gazing at the fire. It drew his eyes towards it despite his efforts to keep scanning the middle distance for any sign of a bestial marauder. Caught between distractions he neglected the placing of his feet, an oversight he was forcibly reminded of as they tangled in something. He went sprawling forwards onto an uncomfortable carpet of cabbage and soil.

Muttering imprecations at his clumsiness he rose, spitting out mud. Then he turned to look at what he'd tripped on.

"Sigmar's hammer!" He retched, bringing up the soup Johannes had sold him a few hours before. He'd found Herr Altman, or most of him at least. The farmer's left arm was missing, torn out at the root, and he'd been gutted by a blade that had been very large and cruelly serrated judging by the wound it had left. Other, lesser injuries, which would have seemed hideous enough under most circumstances, had battered and slashed the body into a state almost beyond recognition.

Almost, but not quite. The bushy moustache, for which the farmer had been famous throughout the valley, was clearly visible on the face of the corpse, battered and bloody though it was. Rudi forced himself to look closely, to be sure, but there was really little doubt. He was no stranger to death: infirmity, disease and accident reaped a rich harvest even in so quiet a backwater as Kohlstadt used to be. And he had butchered enough animals not to be squeamish at the mere sight of blood and entrails. But this was harsh, bloody and violent. It was something different, something new to him, and he felt a profound sense of shock.

As he willed himself to tear his eyes away, he noticed something else. Though the sheer amount of spilled blood had obscured them at first, he could make out a cluster of pustules on the skin of Altman's chest, where his shirt had been ripped open. So he'd had the fever too, and had tried to conceal it, no doubt desperate to keep his farm running for as long as possible. For a moment he found himself concerned for the man's family, who were undoubtedly at risk from infection, before then the realisation hit home that sickness would be the least of their worries in the unlikely event that they were still alive. In any case Greta would want to know about this. If he was right the pestilence had spread even farther than they'd suspected.

Despite his reluctance he squatted and forced himself to turn back the flap of crimson-sodden material. It felt thick and stiff from the congealing blood. He dropped it as soon as he could, and scrubbed his fingers in the soil until they felt clean. There could be no doubt: the man's chest was covered with pustules. There was something else under his shirt too, on a thin chain around his neck. Rudi felt an irrational impulse to reach out and pick it up. So strong was the feeling that his hand moved almost before he was aware of it, and he had to force himself to check the motion with a conscious effort.

It was a charm or amulet of some kind he supposed, composed of three discs linked somehow at the points of a triangle. Each was covered in intricate designs, which the spilled blood obscured. He'd never seen anything like it before, just the hammer of Sigmar which many people wore for luck or protection, and occasionally

the signs of other gods: Heinrich Littman, like many soldiers, wore the wolf's head of Ulric, and Hanna occasionally sported the dove of Shallya. Despite his curiosity, he realised that plucking it from the middle of a cluster of buboes might be a quick way to catch the pestilence, so he resolved to leave it where it was. Maybe Father Antrobus would recognise it. As he pulled his hand away he was surprised to feel a stab of disappointment, which was out of all proportion to the thwarted satisfaction of a mild curiosity.

He rose slowly, scanning his surroundings for signs of the beastmen who had caused all this. There was no sign of them, and the cottage continued to burn with undiminished vigour. As he turned away the roof collapsed with an ear-splitting crash and a flurry of sparks flew upwards like vengeful daemons.

Once he was moving he started to pick up the pace, breaking into a trot, and then a run, until he exerted a little reason and forced himself to slow down. The Altmans were beyond help now, and there was no point in exhausting himself. He might need the energy later if he had to run from the beastmen. True he hadn't actually seen one yet, but...

A new sound scratched at his attention, a low moan, like a cow in distress. He hesitated, trying to pinpoint it. Probably just the wind, he told himself, or his imagination working overtime, but he couldn't ignore it. Perhaps one of the family was still alive and terribly injured, trying to attract his attention. He listened intently, trying to filter other sounds from the pop and crackle of the burning cottage.

There it was again. He moved towards the source, slowly and cautiously, with every muscle tensed to bolt if danger threatened. A rustle came from a neighbouring field still waist-high with sagging grain, the stalks beginning to bow from the corruption eating away at them from within. If it hadn't been upwind of the conflagration it would have caught fire from drifting sparks by now. Rudi clambered over the low stone wall separating it from the cabbage field.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" There was another low moan, and the stalks a few yards away rustled. Rudi moved towards the sound, parting the stalks as he went, like a man fording a waist-deep river. Up ahead he could see a patch of clear ground, and some freshly turned earth. For a moment he wondered why anyone would have been digging in the middle of a ripening crop, then realised that Altman had probably hoped to separate the diseased grain from the rest in the vain hope of stopping the blight from spreading. Many other farmers had tried the same thing, with a conspicuous lack of success.

Without warning, and with a roar that seemed to echo in his bones, something surged up out of the grass, bearing down on him with a speed and ferocity that froze the blood in his veins. A beastman! It was larger and fouler than anything his imagination could have conjured up, covered in matted fur, its eyes blazing with bestial fury, and thick skeins of drool running from the corners of its mouth. It had horns like a goat's, and its face was elongated like one, but it walked upright like a man and smelled like a midden.

Abruptly its legs buckled, and it fell to the ground, sprawling close to his feet. Rudi leapt back, his throat constricted with terror, unsure of how the thing meant to attack him. Then he saw the blood matting the fur at its back, and the mattock

embedded deep in the thing's spine. It choked, and a spatter of dark ichor sprayed from its mouth.

Rudi began to understand what must have happened. Altman had been attacked as he was uprooting the plants, and had defended himself with the heavy agricultural tool. After losing his makeshift weapon he had fled towards the cottage, hoping to barricade it perhaps. But he had been overtaken and cut down. The other beastmen had either thought their comrade dead, or had forgotten him entirely in the ensuing orgy of slaughter, so they'd left him behind when they went.

The creature scabbled towards him, malevolent fury in its eyes. It was clearly intent on taking at least one more victim to hell with it. No human could possibly have lived for so long with a wound like that, but it was obviously weakening. Nevertheless its insatiable desire to kill was burning as strongly as ever.

"Stay back! I'm warning you!" The words burst from his lips involuntarily, and he marvelled at his audacity. He was standing his ground and threatening a formidable killing machine. But he dared not turn his back on it. Who knew what such things were capable of? If he tried to flee it might still have the strength to catch him. He glanced desperately around for a large rock he could use to smash its skull, or some other improvised weapon, but the wheat field was as devoid of such things as the cabbage patch had been.

His back scraped against the stone wall around the field. He scrambled up on it, hoping he could pry part of it loose. But the beastman had stopped moving, and was regarding him with something resembling curiosity in its eyes. For a moment it seemed almost intelligent.

"*Rashagharr kragharr rhuarrdhee?*" It looked up at him with an expression which, had it been human, might have denoted astonishment. Rudi felt his jaw drop in equal amazement. The thing was obviously trying to speak to him in whatever language the creatures used, although what it meant he had no idea. The last word had sounded almost like his name, if the abhuman larynx had been able to pronounce it, but that just had to be a coincidence.

"I don't understand," he said, still not quite able to believe that the creature possessed enough intelligence to use language at all, however debased. His hands still scabbled for a loose rock, but Altman had made his walls well, so nothing came loose. But he had no use for it. The beastman raised its head, looked him in the eyes, and expired, with a death rattle, which resonated in the pit of his stomach.

Rudi sat where he was for a while, shivering. The encounter had been unnerving enough, but there was one thing that stuck in his mind and haunted him, even more so than the word that had sounded like his name. When it looked into his eyes, just before it died, the thing had unmistakably smiled.

CHAPTER TEN

The sun was perceptibly lower on the horizon by the time Rudi returned to the burned-out farmstead, the first taint of orange in the upper air uncannily resembling the embers glowing in what remained of the cottage. Littman and the handful of militiamen he'd been able to round up stood beside the young messenger at what had once been the gate in the wall around the smallholding, shocked into silence. As they'd hurried up the road from Kohlstadt, Rudi had tried to prepare them for the scene of devastation awaiting them, but his descriptive powers had proven hopelessly inadequate to the task.

The outline of the building remained, sketched in tumbled walls and charred timber, and faint pops and spits could still be heard coming from the heap of ashes. At the sergeant's urging a couple of men began to probe the edge of the ruins, advancing cautiously, so as not to suffer severe burns. The heat emanating from the glowing embers was ferocious enough to steal the breath away.

"It's a bad business all right." The old soldier shook his head, looking weary for the first time that Rudi could recall. "But these things always are."

"You've seen attacks like this before?" Rudi asked.

Littman sighed. "More often than I can remember. But you never get used to it."

Rudi could well believe it. When he spoke of his life before he came to Kohlstadt, Littman tended to speak of campaigns and old comrades, of battles he'd been in and desperate fights against particular foes, with special emphasis on the greenskin who had almost cost him his leg. He'd never mentioned burned houses and slaughtered farmers, although in his campaigns against the abhuman enemies of the Empire he had undoubtedly come across scenes like this many times before. Now he roused himself from his bitter reflections, and donned the mantle of duty and authority once again. "You found a dead beastman in the wheat field, you say?"

"Yes. Over here." Rudi led the way in silence. He had been sparing with the truth when he'd gasped out his story back at Kohlstadt, skipping over the part where the creature had tried to speak to him. He didn't know what that had meant, and didn't want to. Littman stared at the hideous corpse, and spat on it.

"One of the puny ones. Altman must have got lucky."

"He didn't look so lucky when I found him," Rudi said, more sharply than he'd intended. The sergeant didn't take offence at the remark, he just nodded thoughtfully.

"That's the thing about luck, lad," he said. "Sooner or later it always runs out." He sighed. "Where is he?"

"Over here." Rudi clambered over the wall, not far from where he'd crossed it before, and waited while the old soldier swung his stiff leg over the obstacle. He pretended to scan the cabbage field to get his bearings, so as to spare the man's feelings. "I should warn you, he looks..." he searched for a suitable phrase, and gave up. Littman nodded grimly.

“I’ll have seen as bad before,” he said.

“Where do you think the others are?” Rudi asked, unable to stop himself.

“Dead if they’re lucky. If not...” Littman shook his head. “Just better not to think about it.” Something about the flatness of his tone warned Rudi not to pursue the subject. He was just steeling himself for the sight of Altman’s body again when one of the militiamen probing the ruins of the cottage with the tips of their spears called out urgently.

“Sergeant! Over here!” Without a word Littman veered off to join him. Rudi followed, anxious not to be left alone with only a mutilated corpse for company.

The militiaman, a thin-faced fellow who normally worked at the bakery and seemed less put out by the searing temperatures than anyone else, pointed at something round and greyish in the carpet of ash. He leaned forward to probe at it with the tip of his spear. Littman watched impassively.

“Careful, Schuller. Don’t want you toasted like one of your figgins.” The warning was more than a mere pleasantry. The waves of heat rising from the embers were enough to stir the hairs on Rudi’s arms. Schuller seemed unconcerned, however; he hoisted the object he’d found from the glowing embers on the point of his weapon as casually as if he were removing a tray of loaves from his oven.

“Thought so.” The baker didn’t seem terribly happy at having guessed correctly, and Rudi could see why. The object was a human skull, charred and made brittle by the furnace heat. As Schuller dropped the grisly find onto the scorched earth, baked to the hardness of brick by the inferno above it, it shattered like a cheap pot. “Any idea who it was?”

“One of the kids, judging by the size,” Littman spat into the embers. The goblet of spittle sizzled into steam in an instant. “Chances are we’ll find the others in there too when it cools down enough to look.”

“It’ll be a long wait for that.” Schuller cast a professional eye over the glowing embers that were still peppered with little tongues of flame. “All that ash will retain the heat. Like banking a hearth fire up at night.” He shrugged. “You’re looking at three days minimum. More likely four or five.”

“It’s all academic now anyway,” Littman shook his head. “We might as well bury Altman and go home.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Father Antrobus?” Rudi asked, shocked at the suggestion. The farmer should be taken back to the garden of Morr at least, and have the priest commend his soul to the realm of Morr. True the reverend was a Sigmarite, but the clerics of the god of death couldn’t be everywhere and a blessing from him was generally considered sufficient until one of the Morrite mendicants who passed through the village every few years could intercede with the lord of the afterlife for those who’d died in the intervening period.

“If he’s got the pestilence we should get him in the ground straight away,” Littman said, shaking his head. “It’s all one to him now anyway.” Schuller nodded in sombre agreement.

“Maybe we should chuck him in there,” he indicated the smouldering ruins of the cottage with a tilt of his head. “There’ll be enough heat trapped under the ash to burn him to cinders if we stir them up a bit.”

“Might be safer at that,” the old soldier conceded. Rudi could barely contain his disgust. The farmer was a human being, for Sigmar’s sake, he deserved better than to be incinerated like some diseased piece of livestock. “We can send the god botherers to say their piece over the ashes.”

Schuller shrugged, trying to match his sergeant’s air of world-weary pragmatism.

“It’s probably all we can do for the others in any case,” he offered. Littman nodded soberly.

“They’re beyond aught else, that’s for sure.” He was on the verge of adding some further comment that would delay the order a little longer, when his glance struck the middle distance. “Who the hell’s that?”

“Sergeant!” One of the militiamen who had been left in the road to secure the narrow gateway called a moment later, waving an arm to attract Littman’s attention. “Someone’s coming!”

Rudi trotted after the sergeant as he hurried to the gate, with surprising speed for a man of his years and with a damaged leg. There was nothing wrong with his eyes, though, the young messenger thought. Even by squinting Rudi could barely make out the distant figure advancing towards them along the highway from the distant town of Dreibruken. The sun shone almost directly into his face, and he wondered for a moment how Littman had been able to pick out the solitary rider in the surrounding glare. His respect for the old soldier rose another notch, and he resolved to listen a bit more attentively the next time he launched into one of his interminable stories.

The small knot of militiamen had reformed long before Rudi was able to make out any more detail, by which time the horseman had drawn close enough to take on a definite silhouette. By now he must surely have noticed the smoke rising from the devastated farmstead, as well as the group of spear-armed men spreading out across the road in front of him, but he neither varied his pace nor showed any inclination to change direction to avoid them. The horse came on at a steady trot, which ate the miles without unduly fatiguing it.

“Is it one of them?” a militiaman asked. It was a youth barely older than Rudi whom he recognised vaguely, but couldn’t put a name to. Littman shook his head.

“Beastmen eat horses, Stug, not ride them.” Stug seemed unconvinced.

“I heard some of them are like horses themselves, with four legs, and...”

“Maybe.” Littman’s tone was dismissive. “But I’ve never seen one. And I doubt he’d be offering rides.” The men laughed, a little nervously, glad to be able to relieve the tension.

“Good afternoon.” The rider had come within conversational distance by now, and he spoke without raising his voice. It was only later, that Rudi realised the power with which he must have projected it in order to have spoken so casually from some threescore paces away. “Have I reached a toll already?”

“No tolls this side of Kohlstadt,” Littman told him, stepping forward.

“I see.” The horseman kept moving to meet them. He had a friendly smile on his face, which wasn’t reflected in his ice-blue eyes. “Then may I ask why you’re obstructing the Emperor’s highway?” His hand hovered casually near the hilt of the sword at his belt, and it was clear to Rudi from the way Littman tensed that the two men understood one another.

He had never seen anyone like this stranger before. His clothes were dark, black or grey, and of good quality. Despite their plainness he was reminded of the garments he'd seen Magnus and Steiner wear. Unlike the dignitaries of Kohlstadt, however, they showed signs of hard wear. The only touch of colour on the man's costume was the dark blue feather tucked into the brim of his hat. What little Rudi could make out of his features seemed ordinary enough, save for the scar across his right cheek, which seemed to take on a life of its own, becoming more prominent as his jaw tensed.

"Heinrich Littman, sergeant-at-arms of the Kohlstadt militia." Littman waved at the smouldering cottage, which the stranger couldn't help but have noticed already. "Here to investigate that."

"I can assure you I'm not responsible," the stranger said, reining in his steed. It was jet black, like the night made manifest, its coat glossy with the slight sweat it had worked up on the journey from Dreibruken. Rudi knew nothing of horses, there was precious little use for them in the forest, but it seemed like a different species entirely from the farmers' nags he was used to seeing in the streets of the village and the fields surrounding it.

"I know." Littman turned away, as if already dismissing the man from his mind, although his shoulders remained set. "Best get to where you're going before the sun goes down."

"I will." The stranger swung himself down from the saddle. "I see the stories I heard about beastmen in the area were hardly exaggerated."

"There's a dead one in the field over there," Rudi told him, irritated by the stranger's manner. Littman shot him a warning glance that Rudi hardly noticed. "And a dead family too."

"A dead beastman?" The chill blue eyes locked with his, and despite himself Rudi shivered. "Show me." The man's voice was still conversational in tone, but it carried the unmistakable weight of authority. Rudi felt a flicker of resentment.

"This way." Littman pointed to the wheat field. "Rudi knows where." To his intense surprise Rudi thought he could detect an edge of nervousness in the old soldier's tone. The stranger smiled.

"Rudi, is it? You found the thing?"

"Yes. And Herr Altman's body too." There was no point in trying to hide anything the man might get just as easily from any of the militiamen. The man in black looked intrigued for a moment.

"You can show me that afterwards. Why were you here?"

"I had a letter to deliver to Herr Altman." Rudi felt his antipathy to the stranger grow. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Everything's my business, if I choose to make it so." For a moment there was a hard edge to the man's voice, but it resumed its conversational tone. "Show me the letter."

"No." Rudi glared at the stranger. "It's a private matter."

"Show the man, lad." Littman took hold of his arm. "Altman's dead now anyway. What's the difference?"

“The difference is I get paid to deliver letters. If I let just anyone read them, who’s going to trust me with their messages anymore?” Rudi snapped, but was astonished at the sergeant’s reaction. Littman’s face became pale with apprehension.

Someone started to laugh, and with an even greater shock of surprise he realised that it was the man in black.

“Well said, youngster. It’s a long time since anyone’s stood up to me over a matter of principle.” He thrust out a hand for Rudi to shake. “Luther Gerhard, chaplain militant of the temple of Sigmar.”

“You’re a priest?” Rudi asked, not quite sure he could believe his ears. The only cleric of Sigmar he’d ever met before was Father Antrobus, who was elderly and diligent in caring for his flock, and about as far removed from this self-assured man as he could imagine. Gerhard smiled again, with a hint of amusement in his eyes for the first time.

“In a manner of speaking.” Littman looked even more forlorn now, as if something he’d hoped wasn’t true had just been confirmed. But Rudi felt immediately reassured. If you couldn’t trust a priest, who could you trust? He took the proffered hand and shook it.

Abruptly he found himself swung violently around, with a dagger at his throat, and an excruciating pain running up his right arm.

“There. We’ve been properly introduced.” Gerhard’s voice was as warm and conversational as ever. “Now show me the letter, or I’ll cut your throat and take it from your corpse. Either way, I’ll read it.”

“Show him, lad. He means it.” Littman’s voice was tight with tension. “I’ve met witch hunters before. You don’t mess about with them.”

“Not twice, anyway,” Gerhard said.

“It’s in my pouch!” Rudi cried. He was not sure he believed the threats, but was not willing to find out. Besides, his arm felt as though it were being plunged into boiling water. Abruptly the pain ebbed as Gerhard released his grip, and used the now empty hand to pluck the message from the pouch on Rudi’s belt.

“Hm.” He broke the seal with the point of the dagger, which vanished up his sleeve again. He scanned the letter. “It seems the late Herr Altman had a very generous creditor.”

“Magnus is well known for his kindness,” Rudi said. “He’s told a lot of people who owe him money not to bother paying him back until they can.”

“Has he indeed?” Gerhard nodded, as if filing the information away for later, and let the letter drop to the ground. A stray gust of wind took it up and skittered it towards the smouldering ruins of the cottage, where it dropped, combusted in the heat, and rose like a brief, flaring comet. “Show me the beastman.”

Reluctantly Rudi led him over to the wheat field. The militiamen remained where they were. Only Littman followed, showing every sign of wishing he could stay behind, but not quite daring to let the man in black out of his sight.

“Are you really a witch hunter?” he asked. The reason for the sergeant’s nervousness was now all too clear. Gerhard nodded again.

“That’s what they call me. I prefer to think of myself as ‘a seeker after truth.’” His voice was as conversational as ever, as though the brief burst of violence he’d

displayed and the threat to Rudi's life had been no more than a polite exchange of pleasantries. The young forester felt a chill running up his spine. There wasn't a citizen of the Empire who hadn't heard of these ruthless seekers after heresy and mutation, and who wasn't terrified at the thought of coming to their attention. They were fanatics, people said, who thought nothing of condemning whole villages to the flames on a mere word of suspicion. On the evidence of their short acquaintance so far he could well believe it.

"It's over here." Rudi pointed out the hideous corpse as he scrambled over the wall, in almost exactly the same place as he had before. The witch hunter vaulted lightly over the stone barrier, and Rudi began to realise that despite his relaxed demeanour he was as fit and strong as anyone he'd ever met. Littman didn't follow. He was content this time to lean on the wall and crane over it. No doubt he wanted to keep as much distance between himself and Gerhard as possible.

"Hm." The witch hunter bent to examine the corpse, pulling on a pair of thin leather gloves as he did so. Rudi couldn't blame him, he wouldn't have wanted to touch the thing either. "Now that's unusual." He looked up and caught Littman's eye. "You're an old campaigner, by the look of you. Have you fought these creatures before?"

"Many times," the sergeant nodded warily, unsure of the significance of the question.

"Ever seen anything like this before?" Gerhard raised the beastman's right hand. Rudi peered at it too, uncertain what he was supposed to be looking at. It was ugly enough all right, ending in curved fingers with long, talon-like nails. There was something tattooed in the palm which he couldn't quite make out, a pattern of curving lines which looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't see why that would be of such interest to the man in black. Then Gerhard pulled back what Rudi had taken for a simple fold of skin, and his stomach lurched. If he hadn't already been sick he certainly would have been now. The creature had an extra mouth in the palm of its hand, edged with sharp, curving teeth.

"Sigmar preserve us!" Littman blanched, and made the sign of the hammer. Gerhard smiled sardonically.

"I'll take that as a no," he said.

"You'd be right." Littman recovered his composure with a visible effort. "I've seen foul enough things in the Drakwald, but never that twisted."

"I'm not surprised." Gerhard nodded. "Most beastmen follow the path of Chaos indiscriminately. This one carries the mark of a specific one of the Dark Gods, no doubt it thought itself blessed by the attention of its deity."

"I don't care what they believe. They all die if you hit them hard enough." Littman spat at the thing, landing a goblet of phlegm in its eye with remarkable accuracy. Gerhard smiled.

"Spoken like a true soldier." He turned to Rudi. "And what do you think, young man? You found the creature."

"I think I'm glad Herr Altman finished it off before I got here," Rudi said, hoping to evade too much close questioning about the circumstances in which he'd made the discovery. He had no doubt that the witch hunter was skilled at detecting lies and half-truths, and the thought of being discovered trying to deceive him made his blood

run cold. Better to evade the topic entirely. “I’ve never seen anything so hideous in my life.”

“Count yourself lucky,” Gerhard said. Then he stood up, much to Rudi’s relief. “And speaking of Herr Altman, where is our deceased soil-tiller?”

“In the next field,” Rudi replied, pointing out the direction. “The creatures must have found him over there, where he was digging, and chased him this far before they caught him. But he managed to wound this one first.”

“Wound? I thought it was dead when you found it,” Gerhard said softly. Rudi swallowed nervously.

“It obviously dragged itself to the edge of the field before it died. You can see where the grain stalks are bent.”

“Ah. I see.” The witch hunter glanced around, and nodded to himself. “You’re very observant.”

“My father’s a forester. I’ve been tracking all my life,” Rudi explained.

To his relief Littman intervened to back him up.

“And he’s very skilled at it too. He’s the one who found the first traces of the beastmen in the woods.”

“I see,” Gerhard said again. He smiled at the young woodsman, with every appearance of good humour. “I’ll talk to you about that later. Lucky I didn’t kill you back there.”

Rudi wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so just nodded in reply as though the remark had been a reasonable one.

“Whenever you’ve got the time,” he said, as levelly as he could. For a moment he thought he could see a flash of genuine amusement in the witch hunter’s eyes.

“Good.” Gerhard began walking away from the body, towards the patch of turned earth that Rudi had noticed before. “Now what do you suppose our dead friend was doing out here digging up an almost ripe crop?”

“Trying to stop the blight from spreading,” Rudi indicated the sickly plants surrounding them. “A lot of the farmers around here are doing the same, hoping to preserve at least part of the harvest.”

“I see.” Gerhard stepped out into the cleared patch of ground. “Then don’t you think he’d be clearing a strip across the whole field?”

Rudi nodded. That much was obvious, but the gist of the witch hunter’s remark escaped him for a moment. Then he realised that the patch of cleared ground was completely circular. He paced across the diameter, finding it about nine yards across. Altman had clearly been very industrious. He shrugged.

“Maybe he was planning to burn the blighted stalks,” he suggested. “Clearing space for a bonfire.” It sounded ridiculous to him even as he said it, no one in their right mind would set a fire in the middle of a field they were hoping to preserve, the risk of it spreading was far too great.

Gerhard shook his head.

“It’s nothing so innocent, I’m afraid.” His eyes were on the ground, as though searching for something. “You’re the tracker, apparently. Where’s the soil been most disturbed?” Flattered at being consulted by a man so versed in mysteries beyond his comprehension, Rudi stared at the patch of cleared soil. The mattock had turned over

all of the topsoil in the process of clearing it, but some areas had apparently been worked on more recently than others.

“It’s hard to be sure,” he said carefully. “It’s been badly trampled.” He indicated where the marks of shod and cloven feet marked the site of Altman’s last desperate battle. “But the last place he was working seems to be here.” He pointed then frowned with confusion. “The strange thing is he wasn’t digging in one place.”

“How do you mean?” the witch hunter asked, looking at the ground as though the traces Rudi could see clearly enough were completely invisible. Rudi shrugged.

“He seems to have been digging furrows. And don’t ask me why, but they’re going off in all directions.”

“Show me.” Alert interest was on Gerhard’s face now, as though something he’d only suspected so far was beginning to make sense. At a loss for any other method of demonstration, Rudi began to trace the pattern he’d discerned with his feet. At first he moved hesitantly, unsure of the best way to proceed, but as he took one step after another a strange sense of confidence grew in him. The twisting path he followed seemed to become more obvious, almost as if he knew it already, and all he had to do was relax and trust in some inner voice...

“Snap out of it!” A stinging slap smashed across his face, and he found himself looking into Gerhard’s eyes. Where had the man come from? From the ache in his jaw it seemed the blow hadn’t been the first, and he raised a feeble hand to ward off the next strike just as the witch hunter drew his hand back to hit him again.

“Sigmar’s hammer!” Rudi ducked his head to avoid the incipient blow. “What are you doing?”

“Saving your soul, probably.” Gerhard spoke with a matter-of-fact tone, which implied he was telling no more than the truth. “I was beginning to think we’d lost you entirely.”

“He’s right, lad.” Littman was standing at his shoulder, making the sign of the hammer. “You looked possessed.” A chill of dread shot through his heart.

“What by?” he asked. For a moment Gerhard looked surprised at the speed of his recovery.

“I don’t know,” he admitted at last. “But the pattern you were walking is obviously a sigil of great power. This whole field will have to be burned.”

“Will that stop it?” Littman asked, his voice trembling a little. Beastmen he could handle, but naked sorcery was another matter entirely. Gerhard shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “But it’s worth a try.” He turned back to Rudi. “Show me the farmer.”

“This way.” To his surprise Rudi found his voice almost steady. The thought that he had been touched, possibly even tainted, by the powers of Chaos was a terrifying one, but there was nothing he could do about it now. And at least the witch hunter seemed to think he was free of whatever malevolent forces he’d disturbed. He was certain of that because Gerhard hadn’t killed him, he would undoubtedly have done so without hesitation had he seen the need. That thought was hardly comforting either, so he forced himself to concentrate on the matter at hand.

“Intriguing.” Gerhard stooped to examine the mutilated corpse of the farmer as though it were nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe for him it was. “And what have we

here?" He reached out a black-gloved hand to pick up the medallion Rudi had noticed earlier.

"Be careful," Rudi said. The words slipped out unbidden. "I think he's infected."

"I don't doubt it." Gerhard snapped the narrow chain, lifting the curious tri-circular object clear of Altman's chest. It came free with a curious sucking sound, and a stench of putrefaction that Rudi wouldn't have expected from a body that fresh. "I'd be astonished if he wasn't infected, wearing this."

"What is it?" Rudi asked, curiosity overcoming his apprehension. The scar on Gerhard's face flared red.

"The mark of his heresy," he said shortly, making the sign of the hammer. "And proof, if I needed it, that the pestilence gripping your village is far from natural." As he raised the object the setting sun caught it, bringing the engraving on the circles into sharp relief.

Rudi gasped, the breath freezing in his lungs. Without the faintest idea as to how he knew, he was absolutely certain that the design on one of the circles was the one he'd walked a few moments before in the wheat field. An air of palpable malevolence hung about the artefact, and he felt both repelled and drawn towards it.

"Best destroy it," Littman counselled.

Gerhard nodded.

"I intend to," he said. He gestured at the corpse. "And burn that."

As Schuller had predicted there was more than enough residual heat under the ashes to incinerate the corpse, and greasy flames were soon running over it as the fat beneath the skin started to melt. Gerhard flung the medallion after it, as well as the gloves he'd used to handle the thing. He stared at the corpse as it burned with an expression of loathing.

"What's the matter?" Rudi ventured after a while, hoping to distract himself from his own inner turmoil. The witch hunter shook his head.

"There's no satisfaction in burning a heretic after he's dead," he said. "This one's escaped retribution." He smiled grimly, but still spoke in a conversational tone. "But I promise you, his confederates won't get away so lightly."

Despite the furnace heat, Rudi shivered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

News of the witch hunter's arrival spread through Kohlstadt like flame through a wheat field; it even eclipsed the news of the massacre at the Altmans' farm. An undercurrent of alarm rippled through the village now that everyone's worst fears had been realised, but Gerhard's presence seemed to reassure most of the local folk. The pious spoke smugly of the retribution shortly to be visited on whoever was responsible for bringing down the wrath of the gods on the little community, while the pragmatic kept their heads down and tried not to bring themselves to the witch hunter's attention.

This, Rudi knew, was likely to be extremely difficult, since Gerhard was interested in everyone and everything. Rudi's privileged position as the burgomeister's messenger kept him close to the centre of events, so he saw more of the witch hunter's investigation than he felt altogether comfortable with.

"I must apologise for my tardiness," Gerhard said, taking a seat at the head of the burgomeister's dining table. Rudi looked around the room, awed at the opulence of the furnishings, although the man in black seemed indifferent to them. Rich tapestries hung on the walls, and china of a fineness and lustre he'd never dreamed could exist was displayed on a dresser of ornately carved wood. Most of the decorations were hunting scenes, although to his practical eye the youths and maidens pursuing a slightly bored-looking stag seemed to be wearing rather too little for protection against the forest underbrush. Steiner, determined to play the good host, inclined his head slightly and refilled his guest's goblet from an exquisitely engraved silver flagon.

"To be honest I wasn't sure you'd got any of my messages," he said. The phrase seemed to remind him of Rudi's presence, and he glanced briefly in his direction before ignoring him again as strongly as possible. Since Rudi had become a vital conduit between the burgomeister, Greta and Magnus he had been admitted to the Steiner mansion on a number of occasions, but only by the rear entrance. And he was never allowed further than the plain parlour where Steiner conducted business with his social inferiors. His personal living quarters were jealously guarded, and it obviously galled him to have a peasant sitting in them. But Gerhard had demanded that Rudi accompany him that evening, and had strolled into the mansion by the front door, leaving the burgomeister with no option but to acquiesce to his presence. The witch hunter smiled sardonically.

"You were lucky," he observed, with a tilt of the head. "I happened to be concluding some business in Dreibrucken when a merchant who'd been to your village came by. You showed commendable resourcefulness."

Steiner took the compliment uneasily. Few knew he'd taken to asking passing travellers to carry letters for him, no matter which direction they'd been going in. They were to be delivered to the first witch hunter they came across. Many of the

villagers would no doubt think the cure worse than the disease, but the creeping air of decay and corruption had left him no alternative. In his own way Steiner was a pious man, but knew he was out of his depth; if the village he led had offended the gods, or, worse still, attracted the attention of the malign ones of whom no one spoke, then he needed a crusader to root out the cause and set matters right again. He shrugged.

“I knew if I sent out enough letters one of your order would respond eventually.”

“Eventually being the operative word.” Gerhard sipped at his wine, and nodded appreciatively. “We’re few and far between, and all too often heresy and malice take root beyond our notice. Fortunately, as I said, I had business nearby.”

“Successfully concluded, I trust?” Steiner asked.

Gerhard shrugged. “In a manner of speaking. The guilty were punished as they deserved, by the grace of Sigmar.”

“You burned the witches?” Steiner asked, hesitantly. Gerhard smiled grimly.

“No. Their accusers. It only seemed fair.” He looked from Rudi to Steiner, evidently enjoying their expressions of shock. The mirthless smile spread across his face again. “The accusations were lies, intended to secure an inheritance by removing the legitimate heir. Anyone who would wantonly condemn another to so agonising a death simply to satisfy their own greed deserved nothing less themselves.”

“I see.” The burgomeister nodded, clearly not sure how to respond. The witch hunters of popular gossip wouldn’t have been so careful, or slow to judgement, but were certainly as grimly efficient when it came to burning whoever they thought was guilty. “Sigmar has surely sent us the right man to get to the bottom of whatever afflicts our community.”

“I’m gratified by your confidence, Herr Steiner. Now tell me about the others you’ve been working with. This merchant, Von Blackenburg. How does he fit in?”

“Magnus?” Steiner was clearly taken aback. “He’s been one of our most prominent citizens for twenty years or more. Made a fortune here, and ploughed most of it straight back into the village.”

“A fortune?” Gerhard sounded sceptical. “Ah well, I suppose these things are relative. He’s a native of Kohlstadt?”

Steiner looked at something of a loss.

“I don’t think so. He’s been around for so long, though, he might as well be.”

“His grandfather came from Nuln,” Rudi volunteered. “And I think his father must have moved to Marienburg.”

“Marienburg?” The witch hunter looked at him speculatively. “Why do you say that?” Rudi coloured.

“It’s more of a guess, really. He just mentioned once that his father invested in voyages to Lustria. And Marienburg’s the biggest port in the world, so it would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

“A reasonable deduction,” Gerhard said, looking at Rudi with something akin to respect. “You’ve a head on your shoulders, boy. I wouldn’t waste it chasing rabbits in the woods all your life if I were you.” Rudi was reminded of Greta’s words in her cottage a couple of weeks before, and wondered again if they had been simple pleasantries or something more akin to a prophecy. Then another chill hit him; if she really did have mystical powers she would be in deadly danger from the man in

black. For a moment he dreaded the apprehension showing on his face, but to his relief Steiner was nodding thoughtfully, and had deflected the witch hunter's attention.

"He does have property in Marienburg, I believe. He travels there on business a couple of times a year, and usually stays at least a month."

"I see." Gerhard nodded. "And you say he's been using his fortune to help alleviate the suffering of the sick?"

"And the poor," Steiner said. "He's been sending food to several families who aren't yet afflicted."

"Has he?" This seemed to interest the witch hunter greatly, and he turned to Rudi. "I'll need a list of everyone you've taken food to. I'm sure Herr Steiner can find me a quill and ink so you can dictate them before we leave." He looked sharply at the young forester. "Unless you're about to surprise me again and tell me you're literate."

"No. I'm not," Rudi said, surprised by the defensive embarrassment he felt.

"Am I to infer that you suspect Magnus of dabbling in dark sorceries?" Steiner was clearly flabbergasted. Gerhard shrugged.

"Why not? He sent letters to a known member of a Chaos cult. Or have you forgotten what I told you of the Altman farm?"

"He's sent letters to practically everyone in the village!" The burgomeister was incensed. But an undercurrent of fear was evident in his bluster now. "Including me. Are you accusing me of complicity in witchcraft too?"

"Not yet." The smile returned to Gerhard's face. "But in all good conscience you can't expect me to ignore the possibility."

"But I summoned you here!" Steiner could hardly believe his own ears. "Why would I do that if I was part of some unholy cult?"

"What better way to deflect suspicion?" Gerhard asked. Steiner swallowed, outrage clogging his throat. The witch hunter tilted his head a little to convey his amusement. "Not a very strong possibility though, I'll give you that."

"I'm glad to hear it," Steiner said, rearranging his dignity as best he could.

"Good." Gerhard leaned across the table and helped himself to more wine. "I'll speak to him as soon as I can. Now..." He took a deep draught of the vintage. "What can you tell me about this healer?"

"You certainly won't find any heresy there," Steiner assured him. "Greta Reifental has been helping people all her life."

"Nevertheless," Gerhard said, "it's not unheard of for country healers to meddle with powers best left alone."

"I've never seen anything of the like," Steiner assured him. "She uses herbs and plants a good deal, and can set a bone as well as a city surgeon, but there's nothing mystical about her. Or her daughter." Abruptly Rudi remembered Hanna's apparent indifference to the heated cauldron that had seared his palm. He felt his mouth go dry. He had little enough time for her, that was true, but he wouldn't want to see her killed. Even if she truly was a witch. Which of course she wasn't. The idea was ridiculous...

“Well, time will tell.” Gerhard’s tone was even. “The innocent have nothing to fear.” He might truly have believed his own words, but Rudi wasn’t so sure. He was beginning to suspect that in the real world no one was truly innocent, and no one had nothing to fear. “Odd, though, wouldn’t you say, that with all her expertise she could do nothing to alleviate this contagion?” Steiner shrugged.

“How would I know? I’m no doctor. But she hasn’t stopped trying, I can tell you that.”

“Some of the people she’s treated have stopped getting worse,” Rudi put in, desperate to deflect the witch hunter’s suspicions. “Even if no one’s recovered, she’s been helping them at least.”

“Perhaps.” Gerhard spoke as though the matter was of little importance. “I’ll know more when I’ve spoken to her.” He turned back to Rudi. “Now, those names I asked you for...”

When the meeting had concluded Rudi found himself out in the street again. Steiner had conducted him to the kitchen door with almost indecent haste, a couple of new letters to be delivered tucked into his pouch. Gerhard had scrawled a few lines on each scrap of paper, and he hadn’t needed to be able to read them to deduce their tone or contents. Peremptory summonses to Magnus and Greta, to discuss what they knew of the crisis with him.

He trotted the handful of yards to Magnus’ house, hoping to speak to the merchant. His head was bursting with the events of the day, and he needed a sympathetic ear to discuss them with. His father would be waiting at home, true, but he doubted that Gunther’s earthy pragmatism would be able to cope with such momentous news. Magnus, on the other hand, was a man of the world, and he was sure he’d be able to offer some sound advice.

To his great disappointment, however, the merchant was not at home. The only person around was Kirstin, who took the letter. Again she let her hand linger against his for a fraction of a second before withdrawing it. Her fingers curled around the folded paper. She looked into his eyes for a moment, slightly disappointed then turned away, closing the door with an automatic exchange of pleasantries.

Feeling slightly let down, Rudi turned to go. He still had Greta’s letter to deliver, and for a moment the thought cheered him. He didn’t doubt that her robust good sense would be almost as good as asking Magnus’ advice. Then, with a sudden sinking feeling, he remembered he had another message to deliver to the cottage too. Hans Katzenjammer’s ridiculous plea to Hanna to lift the curse he’d imagined in his delirium. That wouldn’t exactly go down well at the best of times, and with a summons from a witch hunter for her mother in his pouch the prospect had suddenly become ten times worse. Nevertheless he’d been paid to deliver the message, and felt honour-bound to do so.

For a moment he was tempted to bypass the Reifental’s cottage and go straight home, but that would be a very bad idea. Gerhard would be expecting his message to be delivered as soon as possible, and everything he’d seen of the man convinced him that he would be a bad enemy to make.

There was nothing else for it, he'd just have to get it over with as quickly as he could. He turned to retrace his steps, intending to cut through the square, which the Steiner mansion overlooked. From there he would make his way to the main gate.

As he approached the square, a confused babble of sound came to his ears. Voices were raised, and the clatter of footsteps echoed on the dried mud of the street, hurrying towards the source of the disturbance. Rudi picked up his pace, curious to see what was going on.

"Let me through! I need to talk to the witch hunter!" Something about the voice was familiar, although the speaker was hidden among the knot of onlookers that was flooding into the square in response to the commotion. Rudi had noticed a few of the villagers hanging about outside Steiner's house when he'd visited that evening, their numbers swelled by the small gaggle of the curious who followed Gerhard wherever he went at a respectful distance. Having left by the rear entrance he hadn't paid them any further mind, but it was clear from the level of the noise that no one had got bored and gone home yet. Quite the contrary, there was a considerable crowd by now. Night was beginning to fall in earnest, and their faces took on a sinister hue, lit by the flickering flames of torches and the few sconces attached to the walls of the nearby houses.

"No one's seeing the witch hunter tonight." Big Franz loomed above the crowd, a couple of nervous-looking militiamen at his shoulders, barring the way to the Steiner house. He looked even more gaunt than he had that afternoon, his face slick with perspiration, and Rudi found himself wondering if the plague had claimed him at last. Whether it had or not, though, his strength was clearly undiminished, as he was holding off a struggling figure who was trying with relentless determination to force his way past. "He's got business with the burgomeister."

"You don't understand," the figure shouted. "I've got proof of witchcraft! My brother's been cursed!" Rudi felt his stomach drop. Fritz Katzenjammer, it had to be. A moment later his guess was confirmed as the hulking youth's face fell into a pool of torchlight. The crowd began to grow restive, fresh voices rising over the commotion.

"Let him speak! Let him through!" The mood was turning ugly and it wouldn't take much to spark a riot. People were frightened and angry, and now Katzenjammer had given them a focus for it. He glanced round, once, then forced his way into the crowd, hoping to get across the square and out of the village before things got out of control.

"Your brother's just sick. Like everyone else." Franz pushed the youth back with a surge of strength, clearing a little space between the militiamen and the crowd. Fritz staggered and regained his feet, raising his voice in answer. Rudi ignored the fracas as best he could, his eyes fixed on the entrance to an alleyway across the open space. Elbows buffeted him, and he was almost knocked off his feet a couple of times, but a lifetime of slipping through dense forest undergrowth allowed him to make steady progress. Just a few more yards...

"Hey! Mind where you're going!" someone said. He cannoned into something soft and yielding, and glanced down into the face of Hanna Reifental. "Oh, it's you. What's going on?" By way of a reply he seized her arm and dragged her towards the alley mouth.

“Come with me,” he said, already sure it would be too late. Explanations would have to wait...

“What do you think you’re doing?” Hanna planted her heels and glared at him, her face furious. “If you think I’m going anywhere with you...” Rudi glanced round desperately. Fortunately they were on the fringes of the crowd by now, and everyone’s attention was on the drama being enacted outside the burgomeister’s house.

“You’ve been accused of witchcraft,” he whispered in an urgent undertone. “If you don’t get out of here right now these idiots will lynch you!”

“I don’t believe it!” Hanna’s face turned pale in the flickering torchlight. “How could anyone be so...”

“My brother was cursed by Hanna Reifental!” Fritz bellowed. “She’s a witch! I heard her!”

“This is ridiculous.” Hanna put her hands on her hips, an expression of cold anger on her face now. “I’m going to give that idiot a piece of my mind...”

“Now would be a bad time,” Rudi said, dragging her into the shadows of the alleyway while her attention was distracted. She rounded on him and slapped his face. Surprised, he let go of her arm.

“If you think I’m going to let him get away with that...” Hanna began, but Rudi cut her off.

“Run now, talk later,” he said. “No one’s listening.” For the first time the full extent of the danger she was in seemed to sink in. She turned towards the square. A low murmur of anger crackled across the crowd like thunder in the distant hills. Gradually a chant began.

“Burn the witch! Burn the witch!”

“Come on.” Rudi took hold of her arm again, gently this time, and urged her into motion. This time she acquiesced, seemingly stunned by the turn of events. “We’ve got to get out of here.” They trotted down the alleyway at a fast clip, the sound growing behind them like the roar of an approaching flash flood.

“How could they believe him?” Hanna asked. She had discarded her habitual air of disdainful self-confidence like an old cloak. All of a sudden she seemed like a different person, frightened and vulnerable, and altogether more likeable. Rudi shrugged.

“They’re frightened and desperate,” he said. “In the morning they’ll come to their senses.” The gate was becoming visible now, the glow of a watch fire next to the guard post.

“Will they?” Hanna asked, looking dubious. Rudi nodded, with all the confidence he could summon up.

“I’m sure of it,” he said, wishing he could believe his own words. From what he’d seen of Gerhard it seemed likely that the witch hunter would investigate such claims thoroughly before acting on them. But he was a dangerous man without a doubt, and it was hard to know how he would react.

To his relief there was only one militiaman guarding the gate. It was Stug the youth he’d met that afternoon, so he was able to distract him for a couple of minutes

while Hanna scurried through unnoticed. The sound of raised voices could be heard even here, and Stug kept his ear cocked while they were talking.

“What’s that?” he asked. Rudi shrugged.

“Some sort of welcoming party for our witch hunter.”

“Oh,” Stug said, while the hunted witch slipped out of the gate almost in front of his nose. “Well, good luck to him, I say.” After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Rudi followed her.

Outside the stockade the night was darker, with more concealing shadows. The only light came from the stars and the sickly green glow of Morrslieb, the lesser moon. With his forester’s instincts Rudi found Hanna quickly enough. She was lurking in a patch of darkness, and he felt vaguely surprised that she’d waited for him.

“Thank you.” Her voice was low, her face a patch of paleness in the enveloping gloom. “If it hadn’t been for you...” Her voice trailed off.

“We’d better get going,” Rudi said, feeling awkward and embarrassed now that the immediate danger was past.

“Yes. Right.” Hanna pulled herself together, sounding almost like her old self for a moment. Then she paused. “Go where, exactly?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The journey to the Walders' hut on the fringes of the forest passed in silence for the most part, to Rudi's unspoken relief. He wasn't sure quite what to say to the girl in any case. Instead he listened for any sounds of pursuit, but the gates of Kohlstadt appeared to have been sealed for the night and no villagers were abroad. Apart from the lights of the village itself the only glow that didn't emanate from the sky was the faint yellow beacon leaking between the shutters of the Reifental's cottage. Rudi couldn't be sure because of the darkness, but he felt certain that Hanna glanced back at it many times on that long walk through the dark.

Concerned that the witch hunter might take Fritz's accusations seriously he'd tried to persuade the girl to wait outside while he made sure the coast was clear and hurried inside to warn Greta. But Hanna refused outright, and rather than waste time arguing he'd let her have her own way. To their surprise, the cottage had been deserted.

"We can't wait," he urged, while Hanna threw a few possessions into her satchel. "They could be right behind us."

"Then we'd hear them," Hanna pointed out, white-faced. She seized a stick of charcoal from the fireplace and scribbled something on the outside of Gerhard's note, which Rudi had left propped up on the table where Greta would be sure to see it when she returned. "And we can't just run off and leave mother to face them alone."

"She'll be all right," Rudi assured her, with as much conviction as he could manage. "People around here respect her. A lot of them owe their lives to her."

"You really think that'll make a difference when some idiot starts crying 'witch'?" Hanna asked bleakly. Rudi shrugged.

"I don't think Gerhard would be swayed too much by that," he said. "He strikes me as the kind who makes up his own mind about things."

"Let's hope so," Hanna said, allowing herself to be led outside again.

Rudi knew the way well enough, but his companion stumbled often, her eyes unused to the faint illumination of the stars. At length the faint sliver of Mannslied, the larger moon, rose low on the horizon, but at this time of the month it had waned almost to the point of invisibility. Tomorrow it would be gone entirely, leaving only its ill-favoured sibling to light the night sky. Morrslied was almost full, it was true, and would be so completely on the morrow, but the light it cast was pale and sickly. It imparted a greenish, necrotic tinge to everything it fell on, and if anything it made the darkness worse.

"Ow!" Hanna had stumbled over something in the gloom. She added a couple of words Rudi was mildly shocked to find that she knew, he slowed his own surefooted stride to a pace more comfortable for her. "How do you manage to find your way around out here at night?"

“I don’t know. I just do.” Rudi shrugged, before remembering that she couldn’t see the gesture. “How do you know where to find the herbs you need for medicines?”

“The same way, I guess.” She tripped again, almost falling this time. Then she stopped. “This is hopeless!” Frustration and anger raised her voice another octave, and Rudi heard a loud sniff in the darkness. A sudden spasm of panic seized him. Girls under stress tended to start crying, he remembered, and he couldn’t imagine how to deal with it if she burst into tears or something.

“We’re nearly there,” he said, trying to sound encouraging. “Just stick as close to me as you can.”

“You wish.” For a moment he bristled at the familiar edge of sarcasm in her voice, then he picked up how fragile it was. Well if that was how she coped with things, at least she’d be quiet about it. Then he jumped, as a small, warm hand closed itself around his palm. “Close enough?”

“Reckon it’ll do,” he said, determined to match her casual attitude. He’d never held hands with a girl before, and had never felt the urge to with this one, but it felt strangely pleasant. Hesitantly he curled his fingers around hers, keeping the pressure light. He wondered vaguely why his heartbeat had suddenly grown so loud.

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic,” she said. But this time he had an inkling of how the game was played and didn’t take offence. He swallowed hard to clear his throat before speaking.

“We’d better get going,” he said, leading the way along a familiar path towards the forest. They moved a little slower than he might normally have done, but he told himself that was only prudent. Hanna found the trail less treacherous with his support, and now that he was getting used to the sensation of her skin against his he was mildly surprised to find that he had no objection to prolonging the experience.

The hut he shared with his father came into view at last, a faint glow of candlelight leaking from the shutters. Though it had always seemed comfortable enough to him, he found himself comparing it to the cosy cottage Hanna was used to, and it suddenly seemed very small and spartan.

“Well,” he said as they stepped into the clearing, “here it is.” He had been half expecting a withering comment, but Hanna said nothing. She simply relinquished his hand as she stepped out onto the greensward surrounding the hut. Suppressing a pang of disappointment Rudi led the way past the vegetable patch to the door.

“There you are, lad.” Gunther glanced up from his fletching jig, a half-completed arrow on the rough-hewn wooden table absorbing most of his attention. “There’s stew in the pot.” An expression of wary disquiet came across his face as he noticed Hanna standing behind his son. “I’d have made more if I’d known you had company.” He stood up to vacate one of the only two chairs in the hut, then fetched a couple of bowls.

“I’m not hungry, thank you,” Hanna said. If Gunther took offence at her refusal he didn’t show it.

“Please yourself,” he said, as though her reluctance to eat was perfectly natural. Rudi shook his head.

“Me neither.” Even though he hadn’t eaten for a long time the tension in the pit of his stomach was robbing him of his appetite.

“It’ll keep.” Gunther returned the bowls to their shelf, and glanced at Hanna. “You’d better sit down. You’ll have had a long walk.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Rudi waited until his guest had taken one of the chairs before speaking. He was surprised by Hanna’s reticence. He’d expected her to be talking her head off by now, and launching into another diatribe against the villagers who had so unexpectedly turned on her, but instead she just sat and stared at the simple furnishings. “There’s a witch hunter in the village...”

“I know.” Gunther returned to the arrow he’d been working on, leaving Rudi to lean against the table between him and Hanna. “That sort of news travels fast.” He cast a curious glance at his son. “And you’ve been taking letters around for him too, I hear.”

“Just a couple.” Rudi hesitated before broaching the subject, unsure of how Hanna would take it. “That’s why Hanna’s with me. People are saying things about her, and she’s safer out here.”

“Then people are idiots.” Gunther lifted the newly fletched arrow from the table. He inspected it before spinning it like an elongated child’s top on the palm of his hand. It moved smoothly, without a trace of the minute wobble which would have indicated a small imperfection in its balance. He set it aside, sure it would fly true. “She’s no more touched by Chaos than I am.”

“Thank you.” Hanna smiled hesitantly, for the first time since entering the hut. “It’s good to know some people still believe in me.”

“Belief doesn’t come into it.” Gunther shrugged. Looking a little embarrassed, he reached for another shaft. “Some things you just know.”

The rest of the evening passed in desultory conversation. Neither Rudi nor his father were particularly garrulous by nature, and Hanna was too distracted to play cards, which was how the Walders normally passed the time when there was nothing else too pressing to be done. It came as something of a relief when the candle on the table had burned down to a stub and Gunther suggested turning in rather than lighting a fresh one.

Of course that threw up a new set of problems. There were only two pallets in the hut, and the single room was singularly ill equipped to afford Hanna the privacy her hosts felt she required. In the end Gunther hung a clothesline across one corner and draped a spare blanket from it. When Rudi had dragged his own mattress across there, Hanna disappeared behind it with muttered thanks. After a few moments of rustling, which both men did their best to ignore, everything went quiet. Gunther fetched another spare blanket from the chest.

“You’d best have mine,” he said, indicating his own pallet. Rudi shook his head.

“That wouldn’t be fair. I’ll manage.”

“Suit yourself.” Gunther handed him the blanket and settled on his mattress with ill-concealed relief. As his father unfastened his shirt Rudi could see that the rash on his chest had spread even further. He bent close, keeping his voice low in case Hanna overheard.

“That doesn’t look any better,” he said. “Maybe while Hanna’s here she could make you a poultice or something.”

“It’s fine,” Gunther said, in the tone that meant the subject was not open to discussion. “I’m fine. She doesn’t need to be bothered right now.”

“If you say so,” Rudi replied. He took the blanket, and tried to make himself as comfortable as he could, but the floor felt hard and unyielding. And every time he closed his eyes he saw the face of the beastman, or Altman’s mutilated corpse. And if it wasn’t either of those it was Gerhard, talking in perfectly reasonable tones of killing him in order to read a worthless scrap of paper, and somehow that was the worst of all.

Despite his exhaustion, sleep was a long time coming that night. And when it did his dreams were troubled by visions of nameless horrors that woke him, cold and sweating, and unable to recall what they were.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The following morning was heralded by bright sunlight streaming in through the gaps in the shutters. It picked out random patches of wall or floor with beams of silver radiance made visible by the dancing of the dust motes trapped within them. One fell on Rudi's face as he turned fitfully on the hard wooden floor. He squinted reflexively as the light hit his eyelids and stirred, roused from uneasy slumber by the involuntary movement of his facial muscles.

Once conscious he was unable to drift off to sleep again. Even if the floor had been comfortable, which it most decidedly wasn't, the faint residue of his dreams made dozing an option he'd rather avoid. After a moment he sat up, his back and shoulder muscles creaking in protest. He groaned aloud.

"Sleep well?" Hanna asked, regarding him quizzically through the steam rising from a mug in her hand. He tried to frame a reply, but it turned into a jaw-cracking yawn. After a moment he tried again.

"All right. You?" He scrambled to his feet, blessing the foresight that had impelled him to leave his britches on under the blanket. He fumbled for his shirt. The girl nodded.

"Fine, thank you." Her face belied her words: the dark patches under her eyes stood out starkly against the unfamiliar pallor of her skin. She held out another mug of hot liquid, and Rudi took it without thinking.

"What's this?" As he sipped it his head cleared a little. He couldn't determine whether it was the liquid itself or the fragrant steam that did it.

Hanna shrugged.

"It's a herbal infusion. Gives you energy. I brought it with me last night." She smiled bleakly. "I thought it might come in handy."

"You thought right." He ambled over to the cooking fire, and ladled out some of the stew left over from the previous evening. "This isn't much, but it'll help."

"Thanks." Hanna took it without much enthusiasm, and began to eat. Rudi wolfed down his own portion, his sense of wellbeing improving with every bite. By the time his bowl was empty he was sure he would be able to make Gerhard see sense with a few well-chosen words. After all, everyone knew Fritz Katzenjammer was feeble-minded. He said as much, hoping to raise Hanna's spirits, and she smiled wanly.

"If only it was as easy as that," she said.

With breakfast over, Rudi completed his toilet by washing in the bowl of cold water Gunther had brought in before going off to make his rounds of the woods. He'd left early, before either youngster was awake, but Rudi wasn't too concerned about that. His father generally up with the dawn, and after the attack on the Altmans' farm he'd want to check the area for any sign of the beastmen as quickly as possible.

“You’re going back to the village now,” Hanna said. Rudi nodded warily. He knew Hanna would want to go with him and face her accusers. He watched her pick up her satchel and sling it across her shoulder, her face set.

“I think you should stay here,” he said cautiously. “At least until I’ve spoken to Gerhard.”

“You’re probably right.” She sat down at the table again, a weary gesture which took him completely by surprise. “The mob last night didn’t seem too willing to listen to reason.” The memory still shocked her, the sight of people she’d known all her life baying for her blood like... well, Rudi couldn’t think of anything to compare it to. The villagers had seemed more like beastmen than civilised people. After a moment she lifted her head and looked directly at him. “How can people behave like that?”

“They’re frightened. They’re confused. They’re just looking for someone to blame it all on.” Rudi shrugged. “If it hadn’t been you it would have been somebody else.”

“Like my mother.” Her face seemed to pale still further. “I don’t like the thought of her facing that man alone.”

“She won’t,” Rudi promised her. “Magnus and the burgomeister will tell him how important she is, and how hard she’s been working to help people. And if they won’t, I will.”

“You’d better get going then.” For a moment the old peremptory tone was back in her voice, and Rudi felt a surge of relief mixed in with the reflexive resentment it usually roused. Then he saw her shoulders slump, and knew it for the act that it was. Moved by an impulse he couldn’t quite quantify he patted her awkwardly on the back, feeling the hard protuberances of her spine beneath his palm. He broke contact before she could react.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, with more bravado than conviction. “You’ll see.”

The streets of Kohlstadt were fuller and more agitated than Rudi had anticipated. It took him a moment to realise that most of the farmers who took refuge there overnight were still within the stockade. He couldn’t blame them after what he’d found at the Altmans’ farm. Many of them were congregated in the square in front of the Steiner house, no doubt eager for a glimpse of the witch hunter who had so suddenly arrived in their midst.

Rudi glanced surreptitiously around as he approached the burgomeister’s mansion, but to his relief there were no visible signs of the previous night’s disturbance. Presumably Big Franz and his militiamen had been able to keep a lid on things after all.

He presented himself at the kitchen entrance and was hurried along to the parlour. Voices were raised as he reached the room and he slipped inside hoping to avoid being noticed.

“Missing, you say?” Gerhard clearly didn’t believe a word of what he’d just been told, but he nodded astutely, as though it were perfectly reasonable. Greta smiled sweetly and insincerely.

“As Shallya’s my witness, I haven’t seen her at all since yesterday.” Which was perfectly true, Rudi reflected. “I’d say the same thing under a truth spell if you knew anyone able to cast it.”

“No doubt you would.” Gerhard matched the smile with a mirthless one of his own. “But that won’t be necessary. Under the circumstances it’s probably better for your daughter if she remains... lost. At least for the time being.”

“The accusation’s patently absurd,” Steiner put in. “The Katzenjammer boy’s weak in the head. Everyone in the village will tell you.”

“Except for his brother, presumably.” Rudi suppressed a shudder as Gerhard’s cold eye fell on him. He was anticipating some question about his visit to the Katzenjammer house the previous day, but the witch hunter merely nodded a barely perceptible acknowledgement of his presence.

“He’s almost as bad,” Magnus added. “A little brighter, but a troublemaker nevertheless.”

“That I will judge for myself,” Gerhard retorted.

Magnus nodded. “I’m glad to hear it. The sooner you speak to him the sooner we can forget all about this nonsense and get on with the business at hand.” A flicker of some unreadable emotion appeared in the witch hunter’s eyes.

“You seem very eager to direct the course of my investigation, Herr von Blackenburg.”

Magnus inclined his head.

“Forgive me. Your undoubted expertise in this area far outweighs any opinions I might have on the matter I’m sure.”

“But Magnus does have a point,” Steiner said, more to assert his own authority than because he agreed with it, Rudi thought. “While this accusation hangs over the poor girl her life is in peril from every passing ruffian who might stumble across her.”

“And I’m hardly going to be able to keep my mind on the job while I’m so worried about her, am I?” Greta smiled sweetly again, and the witch hunter scowled.

“Very well. If you’re so determined to waste my time, then by all means let’s deal with this trifling matter instead of trying to get to the heart of the evil that threatens you all.” He stood up, gesturing to Rudi to follow him. “I’ll send the boy back with word of what I uncover.”

Rudi hurried over to join him, but he had to stop suddenly to avoid running into him as Gerhard paused in the doorway to rake his pitiless gaze across the trio of village notables facing him.

“But be advised,” he added, with an emphasis made stronger by its normal conversational tone, “that if this turns out to be a trick to divert me from the truth, I won’t be at all forgiving.”

Steiner blanched, Magnus frowned, and Greta smiled at him again.

“The truth is what it is,” she said. Gerhard nodded soberly.

“That is indeed the case,” he said. “And all too often that’s not what we’d like it to be.” For the first time since he entered the room, Rudi saw Greta’s expression of confidence begin to slip.

“Meaning what, exactly?” she asked.

“It’s not unknown for children to dabble in the dark arts unbeknownst to their parents,” Gerhard said slowly. Now both the healer and burgomeister looked stricken, only Magnus’ expression remained neutral, masking his feelings with skills no doubt learned during his business negotiations. Satisfied that he’d made his point, Gerhard strode out of the room.

“Katzenjammer’s lying,” Rudi said, hurrying to catch up with him. “Hanna’s no witch, whatever he says.”

“She’s a friend of yours?” The witch hunter paused on the threshold of the front door. His cold eyes fixed on Rudi with an expression of patient interest. Rudi swallowed.

“Not really,” he answered, as truthfully as he could. Gerhard nodded.

“That’s good,” he said. “Then you won’t miss her if you turn out to be wrong.”

Stunned into silence, Rudi hurried along in the witch hunter’s wake, rousing himself only for as long as it took to answer terse questions about their route. A large segment of the crowd from the square followed at a discreet distance, muttering curiously among themselves. After a brief contemptuous glance Gerhard ignored them. A small group of militiamen, among them Littman and Stug, had been guarding the front door of the burgomeister’s house, no doubt to stop any further displays of zealotry like the one Fritz had indulged in the previous night. At a gesture from Gerhard they had fallen in behind him, and they now trotted a few paces to the rear, screening Rudi and the witch hunter from the crowd.

“Just down here,” Rudi said, indicating the mouth of the alley that led to the Katzenjammer’s house. It was just as unprepossessing as he remembered it from the previous day. Gerhard walked up to the ramshackle building, picking it out from its neighbours by the livid mark of pestilence on its door, and pounded on the weathered timber with his fist.

“Keep the fleas off our backs,” he said, glancing at Littman. The sergeant dispersed his men into a cordon around the front door. The crowd hovered nervously, choking the narrow street, voices raised in speculation and query. Rudi caught a glimpse of unease in the old soldier’s eyes, but he deployed his men in good order, and they at least looked intimidating enough to deter any casual interference.

After a moment Frau Katzenjammer opened the door, starting nervously from the clamour and the crowd. An expression almost like relief entered her features as she recognised Rudi.

“You’re back,” she said. “You have an answer for him?”

“Answer?” Gerhard shot a sidelong look at the young messenger. Rudi shrugged, trying his best to look casual.

“Hans had a message to deliver yesterday. I picked it up when I delivered the food.”

“I see. We’ll talk about this later.” Gerhard returned his attention to the old woman. “I’m here to see your son.”

“He’s too sick to see anyone.” The woman stood her ground, barring the way into the house. She indicated Rudi. “I’m surprised he didn’t tell you.”

“I’m referring to your other son.” Gerhard fixed her with an expression of mild enquiry. “Or has he fallen ill too?”

“I’m fine.” Fritz had appeared in the hallway behind his mother. “Who wants to know?” Gerhard aimed a wintery smile in his direction.

“Luther Gerhard. You made quite an effort to attract my attention last night.” Comprehension dawned slowly across the simpleton’s face.

“You’re the witch hunter!” He drew his mother aside with a ham-like fist, and waved them inside. Gerhard stepped across the threshold with a barely-concealed expression of distaste. Rudi followed quickly, fearful of being told to wait outside.

“You’ve been making serious allegations, Herr Katzenjammer.” Gerhard spoke as quietly as he always did, but Rudi could tell that Littman was listening intently from his post just outside the open door. Frau Katzenjammer made no move to close it. She stood next to her son with an expression of frozen shock that reminded Rudi of a rabbit faced with a predator. She clutched his arm, staring up at the simpleton in horror.

“Fritzie,” she said. “What have you done?”

“He’s accused one of the village girls of witchcraft. Are you familiar with the name of Hanna Reifental?” Gerhard said, turning to address the woman with a tone of mild courtesy. This seemed to reassure her a little, and she responded directly.

“The healer’s daughter?” She looked incredulous. “She’s a little strange, I suppose, but... witchcraft? There must be some mistake...”

“She put a curse on Hans,” Fritz insisted, with the dogged persistence of the truly stupid. “I heard it.” He pointed at Rudi. “He was there too.”

“Indeed.” Gerhard turned to look at the young forester. “And you didn’t see fit to mention this to me?”

“Because it’s nonsense,” Rudi said. “She did no such thing.”

Fritz’s face turned even uglier than usual. “I might have known you’d be in it together.”

Rudi felt a chill of horror run down his spine as Gerhard looked at him speculatively for a moment, and spoke up hastily.

“Hans and I had an argument in the street. Hanna... spoke up for me. It was just words, that’s all.”

“You’re sure?” Gerhard asked. “She didn’t make any hand gestures, or take hold of an object of some kind?” Rudi shook his head. “You saw nothing unusual at all?”

“Nothing,” Rudi said firmly.

“Sometimes words alone are enough,” Gerhard said mildly. He turned back to Fritz. “Did you recognise the language she used?”

“The language?” The hulking simpleton blinked in confusion. “Reikspiel of course.”

“Reikspiel. The common tongue.” Gerhard nodded with evident satisfaction, his voice positively dripping with sarcasm. “Clearly weighted with tremendous occult significance.” He turned back to Rudi. “Come. We’ve wasted enough time here.” He turned back to the door, and paused to bow to Frau Katzenjammer. “Your son is clearly suffering from nothing more than the pestilence afflicting so many

unfortunates in this village. My apologies for any additional distress our visit may have caused you.”

“But he’s not!” Fritz bellowed, desperately. “He’s changing! She said he was already cursed and he started changing!”

“Changing?” Gerhard snapped round to face the hulking youth. “You mean physically?”

“But he can’t...” Frau Katzenjammer looked more stunned than ever, clearly unable to comprehend the magnitude of the accusation. “He’s just sick! That’s why he won’t let anyone near him!” She turned to Rudi in desperate appeal. “You saw him yesterday! You saw!”

“Did you?” Gerhard’s eyes bored into him, and Rudi swallowed uncomfortably.

“I don’t know,” he said at last, ransacking his mind for every memory of that foetid room. “It was dark. He wouldn’t let me near the bed. I thought he was worried about passing on the infection. He sounded delirious. I thought he was raving.”

“Raving? About what?” Gerhard asked softly. Rudi tried desperately to think of some way of hedging the truth, and failed to find it.

“Hanna,” he admitted reluctantly. “That’s what the message was. He asked her to lift the curse he thought she’d put on him.” Then he rallied. “It was just the fever talking. You said yourself there was nothing in it.”

“Quite probably.” Gerhard turned to the foot of the stairs. “Nevertheless I’d like to see him.” He glanced at Fritz. “Show me.”

“Up here,” Fritz replied, bounding eagerly up the staircase. Gerhard followed, and Rudi trailed miserably in his wake. Much as he disliked Hanna in general he was beginning to feel some sympathy for her. He felt he’d let her down by admitting the contents of Hans’ message. Maybe if he stayed close enough to the witch hunter he’d be able to repair some of the damage.

“Wait!” Frau Katzenjammer held out ineffectual hands to stop them. “He’s not well, he shouldn’t be disturbed...” Her voice continued to echo up the stairwell after them.

“Who is it?” The harsh croak Rudi remembered from yesterday issued from the bedroom door as Fritz pushed it open and went inside. The smell was just as bad as Rudi remembered; Gerhard followed the simpleton inside without hesitation, and after a moment Rudi trailed after them.

“It’s me,” Fritz said. “I’ve brought someone who can help.” To Rudi’s astonishment he actually sounded pleased with himself.

“I don’t want to see anyone! I’ve told you...” The harsh voice rose in anger, the mound of bedclothes stirring agitatedly in the gloom. “Get out!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” In a moment Gerhard had crossed the room and flung the shutters open. Bright sunlight flooded the room, illuminating a scene of squalor that made Rudi gag. A howl of anguish rose from the stained blankets on the bed.

“I brought the witch hunter,” Fritz was vainly attempting to sooth his brother. “He’ll know how to break the spell, catch the witch who did this...”

“You idiot! You’ve killed us all!” Powerful hands tipped with talons threw aside the blankets, and red-rimmed eyes glared at the intruders from a face which still resembled Hans Katzenjammer. All three orbits blinked. A third eye had appeared in

the centre of his forehead, where the bandage had been, and bony ridges were beginning to form a crest along his skull. What other changes had been wrought in him Rudi had insufficient time to notice, as the thing which had once been Hans leapt from the bed with inhuman speed, and made for the window.

“Hold, mutant!” Gerhard’s voice took on an edge of pure loathing as he began to draw his sword, but he was too late. The changeling swatted him aside with the back of its hand and dived through the gap, provoking a chorus of shock and profanity from the street below, which redoubled as the Hans creature grabbed the sill and swung itself up and out of sight.

Rudi hurried across to the window and stuck his head out. Hans was on the roof of the house opposite, bounding across the gap that separated it from the next building in the row with the nonchalant ease of a peasant farmer hopping over a drainage ditch. A second later Gerhard pulled him aside.

“Sergeant! Find that thing and kill it!”

In truth the order was entirely superfluous, as Littman was experienced enough to have reacted the moment the creature appeared. He was already limping down the street as fast as he could, the rest of his militia squad keeping up with difficulty despite the sergeant’s age and old injury. The milling crowd fell into their wake with alacrity: finally they had a real agent of Chaos to vent their anger and hatred on, and few of them were willing to miss the chance. A roar went up, which reminded Rudi uncomfortably of the mob the evening before, and within seconds it seemed the street in front of the house was deserted.

“What happened?” Fritz was gazing at the window, the expression of stupefaction on his face almost comical to behold.

“What happened?” Gerhard echoed, his voice tight with anger, the scar on his cheek flaring lividly. “What happened is that you’ve been sheltering a mutant!” He took a step towards the heavy-set youth, who flinched and shuffled involuntarily backwards. “By the powers invested in me by the Holy Church of Sigmar, I charge you with heresy and consorting with the powers of Chaos!”

“But... but...” Fritz blinked rapidly for a moment, his eyes filling with tears, then turned and fled down the stairs. Gerhard picked up his hat, which had fallen off when Hans knocked him over, and straightened the feather. Rudi hovered diffidently.

“Shouldn’t we go after him?” he asked after a moment. Gerhard shrugged.

“The militia will pick him up soon enough. He’s not worth getting out of breath over.”

“And when they do?”

Gerhard looked mildly surprised. “I’ll ask him some pertinent questions. His guilt seems pretty obvious, though.” Rudi considered this. He had no reason to like Fritz Katzenjammer, quite the opposite, but he had no wish to see him suffer an agonising death.

“He’s a simpleton, don’t forget. All he wanted to do was help his brother.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Gerhard said, in a tone, which indicated that it wouldn’t make an awful lot of difference. They descended the stairs slowly, to be met by a bewildered Frau Katzenjammer and an out-of-breath Stug, who was nursing a bruised and swelling eye. The witch hunter glanced at the dishevelled militiaman. “What are you doing here?”

“The sergeant told me to stay, in case you needed any help.” He looked a little embarrassed. “I’m afraid he got past me.”

“Not for the want of trying, evidently.” Gerhard nodded affably at the liveried youth, and turned his attention to the widow, who was by now sobbing hysterically. “Please try to calm yourself, madam.”

“What happened?” she asked, blinking in bewilderment. “Where’s Hans? Why did Fritz run off like that?” Gerhard put a sympathetic arm around her shoulders.

“I’m afraid your son has indeed been touched by the Chaos powers. His brother was concealing his condition, which by strict interpretation of the law was in itself an act of heresy.”

“But... how? I had no idea...”

“Of course you didn’t. They took great pains to conceal the truth from you, knowing how much it would have hurt.” His arm jerked suddenly, and the woman spasmed, a fountain of crimson blood gushing from her throat. She gurgled, pain and surprise mingling in her eyes for a moment, and slumped to the floor. Gerhard wiped the thin dagger Rudi remembered from their encounter at the Altmans’ farm fastidiously on a fold of her dress before returning it to his sleeve. “But heresy spreads like disease, and we have to be sure.” He glanced up at Rudi as though nothing untoward had taken place. “As I’ve said before, we’ve wasted enough time here.”

Rudi fell into step behind him, not trusting himself to speak. As he passed the white-faced militiaman they exchanged shocked glances. Both regarded the man in black with fresh dread. On the threshold Gerhard paused, and looked back at Stug. “Burn this place to the ground,” he said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the time they returned to the burgomeister's mansion a thick pall of smoke was visible over the rooftops of Kohlstadt, Stug having evidently lost no time in obeying the witch hunter's instructions and Rudi couldn't blame him for that. After the casual execution of Frau Katzenjammer his own fear of the man in black, which familiarity had begun to dull, had returned with renewed force. Littman and a couple of his militiamen were back on duty outside the house, keeping back a crowd that seemed larger and more agitated than ever, and Gerhard raised a quizzical eyebrow as he drew level with the veteran sergeant.

"Back so soon?" he enquired. Littman looked him in the eye, with the expression of a man determined to deliver the bad news as quickly as possible.

"It got away," he admitted.

"Evidently." Gerhard's tone was non-committal and stung the old soldier far more than an overt rebuke would have done. The face behind the white moustache grew ruddy.

"It jumped over the wall." Despite his defensiveness a tone of awe began to creep in. "Three times the height of a man, from a standing start. There was no way we could have kept up with it. By the time we got to the gate it had vanished."

"I see. And the brother?"

"Fritz?" Littman looked confused for a moment. "What about him?"

Gerhard sighed.

"I take it no one's seen him either, then."

"No one's told us to look." He shrugged. "Isn't he still at home?"

"No." Gerhard looked mildly annoyed. "Pass the word. I want him arrested on sight for harbouring a mutant."

"A mutant?" Greta joined them on the threshold, concern and triumph mingled on her face. "Are you sure?"

"Unless he's always had three eyes, yes." Sarcasm didn't sit well with the witch hunter, Rudi thought. It betrayed his frustration, and undermined his air of confident authority. It was the first sign of weakness the man had shown, and he found it vaguely reassuring.

"Then there's no question of my daughter being responsible for his condition," Greta stated flatly, daring him to contradict her.

"Perhaps." Gerhard wasn't about to concede anything without a fight. "But something must have triggered the change. Perhaps her words were enough."

"But he was changing before then!" Rudi cut in, forgetting his own nervousness for a moment. "He had a bandage over that eye thing when Hanna and I saw him! Ask Franz the smith." He appealed to Littman. "Hans was in his militia troop. He'll tell you."

“Big Franz is dead,” Littman said dully. “Took sick last night. Went just like that.”

“He can’t be!” Rudi refused to believe it. Greta shook her head in sombre confirmation.

“I’m afraid it’s true. I’ve never seen a case come on so quickly or so severely.” She shrugged. “But then his family had it, and he was strong. Maybe he’d been fighting it off for days, and it overwhelmed him all at once.”

“Tragic, but of little help now.” Gerhard turned to Littman. “If the boy was mutating before this alleged curse was cast, you might have noticed something. The militia is your responsibility, after all.”

“He hadn’t been around much,” Littman agreed, after a moment’s thought. “I wasn’t too bothered to be honest, he wasn’t much of an asset at the best of times. I thought he was just getting over his injuries.”

“Injuries?” Gerhard seized on the word. “How did he come to be injured?”

“He fell into a thorn bush,” Littman said shortly. “When we were out chasing beastman tracks in the forest.”

“That seems remarkably careless. Why would he be so close to it?”

“We all were,” Rudi said hastily, not wanting his own part in their tussle to be drawn to the witch hunter’s attention. “There was blood on it, from one of the beastmen, and we were trying to see if...” He trailed off as an expression of sudden understanding crossed the witch hunter’s face.

“Ah,” he said. “Blood. I see.”

“See what?” Magnus had appeared in the doorway behind Greta, an expression of mild interest on his face. The healer shifted a pace or two away from him, making room for Steiner to interpose himself between them.

“Blood will carry the taint,” she said. “If he got the ichor of a beastman in an open wound...” she made the sign of the dove with great ostentation. “Even the blessing of Shallya might not be enough.”

“Well,” Magnus said with a degree of cheerfulness that was calculated to get under the witch hunter’s skin, “it seems you won’t have to execute us for wasting your time after all.”

“Not in this instance, no.” Gerhard turned back to Littman. “Get your best people together, and meet me at the main gate.”

“Yes, sir.” Littman saluted and hurried off, elbowing his way through the crowd. The man in black turned back to Rudi.

“Where’s your father?”

“Still in the forest I suppose.” Rudi shrugged. “He was already out scouting when I woke up this morning.”

“Very well.” Gerhard shrugged. “It seems we’ll have to rely on your tracking skills, at least for the time being.”

“Tracking what?” Steiner asked, blinking bewilderedly.

To Rudi’s relief the tracks left by the thing which had once been Hans Katzenjammer were easy to spot. There were deep impressions of abhuman feet driven into the soil

where its weight had descended so precipitously on the far side of the wall. He bent to examine them, and the small group around him shifted nervously.

“They seem clear enough,” he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

Littman spat. Rudi was beginning to notice he did so at any sign or mention of the Empire’s inhuman enemies. He leaned on the haft of his halberd. Rudi was shocked to see that the man was beginning to look his age now, worn down over the last few days by the pressures of duty and the immanence of the beastmen threat, but the old soldier still looked formidable enough. He took comfort in that, as the idea of facing the altered Hans was far from appealing, the memory of the talons on his hands was far too fresh for that. But Gerhard was determined to track it down, and the witch hunter was impossible to refuse. If he’d even contemplated trying, the dying gurgle of Frau Katzenjammer was still loud enough in his ears to stop any protest before it could reach his tongue. Stug was clearly of a similar mind; he hovered on the fringes of the group, as far from the man in black as he could contrive to be. Every now and again his eyes met Rudi’s and they shared a brief moment of terrified complicity.

Gerhard was as cool as ever, merely watching as Rudi considered every detail of the footprints. They were large for human feet, and small indentations in front of the toes implied that these nails too had elongated into claws. He shuddered at the picture they conjured up, and returned his mind to the business at hand.

“Which way?” Gerhard’s voice was as conversational as ever, and a casual observer might have been forgiven for thinking he was merely asking directions for a pleasant summer stroll.

Rudi pointed.

“Over there.” The prints disappeared almost at once on the hard ground, but the stalks of the grass on the common grazing land that stretched out before them were clearly bent to his practiced eye. He led the small group of armed men off with growing confidence. “Towards the forest.”

“Of course,” the witch hunter said. “Seek the unholy in the darkest of places...” It sounded like a quotation to Rudi, although he couldn’t imagine where from. His guess was confirmed a moment later as Littman completed it.

“But be not surprised to find them by the light of day.” He spat for emphasis. “Sound advice.”

“You’ve read Mossbauer?” Gerhard sounded surprised. Littman shrugged.

“I knew one of your order a few years back, when we were cleansing the Drakwald. He had a copy. I still have it at home somewhere.”

“Ah.” Gerhard nodded. “You picked it up after he was killed in battle, I suppose.” Littman shook his head.

“Won it off him at dice,” he said. “But he was good in a scrap, I’ll give him that. And it’s done me well over the years.”

“What has?” Rudi asked. He’d never have thought of the old soldier as the literary type, and the news that he had a book at home was surprising indeed.

“Mossbauer’s *Lieber Ferox*,” Gerhard said. “A tract on the need for constant vigilance against the enemies of humanity.”

“He knew what he was on about,” Littman confirmed. “I remember one time me and the lads were passing through this village, and there was something about it just didn’t seem right. Couldn’t put my finger on it, though. So there I was, tucked up in my bedroll and leafing through the book, trying to settle myself before sleeping, and I come across this passage...”

Whatever else he might have been about to say Rudi never knew, because Stug suddenly pointed and yelled.

“Over there! By the tree line!” Rudi’s eyes snapped up from the trail he’d been following, failing to spot the distant figure of the mutant for a moment. Then he realised that Hans had doubled back for some reason, and was now a considerable distance to the right of the path he’d left.

That didn’t make sense. The trail of flattened grasses he was following was running directly towards the forest, and continued in a straight line for as far as he could see. Why would Hans have turned aside before reaching the refuge of the trees? If he’d kept going he would have been well inside the woodland by now, and safe from pursuit.

“Come on!” Gerhard broke into a run. “We’ve got it now!” Rudi doubted that. The Hans creature was close to the tree line, in a spot he knew well, where the path to the village entered the woods. It was the one he usually took, and it ran past the Reifenstal’s cottage.

Of course, he told himself as he ran. The creature’s path had intersected the trail as it fled, and it had turned off onto the easier route. But why had it lingered for so long?

A vivid mental image of the beastman in Altman’s field sniffing the air rose in his mind and a shiver of apprehension ran down his spine. There was no telling what abhuman senses Katzenjammer might have developed as his body altered, and it was perfectly possible that he was able to track by scent now. And he still blamed Hanna for his condition...

But that was absurd, surely. Even if his feverish imaginings were true the creature would have followed the girl’s scent the other way, back to her home, where it was strongest...

He was jolted out of his reverie by yells and the sounds of combat. In a moment he had reached the edge of the forest and plunged into the cool shadows beneath the trees, where the familiar odours of damp earth and growing vegetation were befouled by the stench of blood. One of the militiamen was down, blocking the trail, blood spreading slowly across the front of his tunic and he had an expression of surprise on his face as he tried to rise from his knees. The rest were scattered among the trees, their spears levelled. They were far from keen on the idea of closing with their abhuman enemy.

Far from fleeing in terror from the righteous as a spawn of Chaos was supposed to do, according to Father Antrobus’ sermons, the Hans thing turned to face them. The malicious grin Rudi remembered from the times the village bully would torment a weaker child was vivid on its features, and the sense of familiarity made the sight all the more unsettling. Now that Hans had stopped cowering in the dark and been forced to come to terms with his altered body, he had clearly realised the power it contained and the opportunities that it afforded to hurt and terrorise.

“Rudi.” It stared at him in vengeful anticipation. “You haven’t got your little witch to save you now.”

“Hanna’s no witch!” For the second time in as many days Rudi felt the lack of a weapon. Once again he vowed he’d not be caught without one again if he lived through this encounter. Impelled by anger he leapt forwards without thinking, and aimed an unskilled punch at his enemy. Hans reacted too slowly, and Rudi’s fist connected solidly with the mutant’s jaw. Agonising pain lanced through his knuckles and deadened his arm, making him stumble. He’d never realised punching somebody would hurt himself too.

“Out of the way, lad!” Littman swung his halberd at the creature, which evaded it with abhuman dexterity. Rudi ducked, as much to avoid the weapon as Hans’ counterblow, and felt something snag in his shirt with the sound of ripping cloth. If he’d been an instant slower the fearsome talons would have gutted him, he had no doubt.

Hans made a harsh sound deep in his throat, which after a horrified moment Rudi recognised as laughter. He stumbled away, his eyes watering from the pain in his arm. He tripped over something warm, yielding, and foul-smelling. As he rolled to his feet he realised it was the body of another of the militiamen, his throat torn out, still spasming as the last of his life ebbed away.

“In the name of Sigmar I condemn you for heresy!” Gerhard thrust his sword at the creature as it turned to face Littman and block the swing of his halberd with its forearm. A thick bony ridge grew along here too, which impacted against the hardened wood of the weapon’s shaft with a crack like the collision of the staves the Morris dancers swung at village festivals. Overbalanced, the old soldier stumbled, his weapon turning in his hands.

“Rut Sigmar,” Hans riposted, as the witch hunter’s heavy blade slashed a red gash in his leather-like hide. The wound would have crippled a normal man, but the mutant shrugged it off, and slashed back with its talons. Gerhard leapt backwards with the grace of a dancer, rapping the rough knuckles of the mutant’s hand with the flat of his blade, and swinging it back for another strike. Next to his fluid movements the rest of the men in the clearing seemed dull and slow. Rudi couldn’t help marvelling at his skill.

“Gotcha!” Littman swung his heavy cutting blade at the mutant’s ankle. It bit deep and released a gush of foul-smelling ichor. Hans howled with rage and struck back at him, scoring deep gashes in the sergeant’s armour with his claws, and sending the old man flying across the glade. He crashed to the ground winded.

I have to help, Rudi thought, trying desperately to get to his own feet. His hand fell against something round and hard, and by reflex he picked it up, levering himself upright with it. It was only as he regained his feet that he realised it wasn’t a stick he held, but the dead militiaman’s spear. With it came a rush of confidence, and he ran forward, aiming the point at his enemy and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Leave him alone!” Stug planted himself firmly between Hans and the fallen Littman, who was beginning to stir feebly and raise himself on his arms. His voice trembled slightly, as did the point of the spear he held out towards Hans, but his body was rigid with determination. Hans laughed again.

“He’ll keep ’til I’ve gutted you.” He tried to charge forward, but stumbled, and looked down at his damaged ankle for a moment. As he did so Rudi thrust his own spear directly at the mutant’s face. The strike was a clumsy one and would have missed if Hans hadn’t dropped his head at that instant. The sharp iron point scored across his brow, clipped the orbit of his third eye, and broke against the bony crest that topped his skull. Hans roared again, and turned on Rudi like an avenging daemon.

“I’ll kill you, Walder! I’ll kill you all!”

“Not today.” Gerhard’s sword thrust went clean through the mutant’s body. Rudi expected it to drop, no one could survive such a wound, but Hans simply turned on the witch hunter. He backhanded him across the clearing as he had in the bedroom. Hans seized the hilt of the sword and pulled it out. His blood hissed as it met the air, like water on a hot stove, and Rudi felt his eyes stinging. Hans flung the weapon vengefully, spitting Stug like a hare for the roasting.

“This isn’t over, Walder.” Unbelievably the mutant was still standing, hate glaring from his three eyes. He was swaying a little from the loss of blood. It seemed to be flowing more slowly than it should, and hardening like amber as it met the air. For an instant Rudi was paralysed; he had expected the creature to charge him. He gripped the shaft of his spear tightly, but some semblance of sense seemed to take hold of Hans at last.

“Don’t just stand there!” Littman was on his feet again too, bawling at the rest of his militiamen, who were still hovering indecisively on the fringes of the battle. “Get stuck in! Or if he doesn’t get you, by Ulric’s beard I swear I will!” That did it. A small knot of nervous spearmen began to advance, hemming the mutant in. Before they could close he turned, and vanished into the undergrowth. Silence descended, broken only by harsh breathing.

“Where is it?” Gerhard rolled to his feet. Littman spat.

“Gone,” he said. The witch hunter nodded.

“And your men?”

Rudi looked at the militiaman sprawled at his feet. He vaguely recognised his face. He thought he sold vegetables in the market.

“This one’s dead,” he said. The militiaman with the blood-soaked tunic regained his feet at last, a colleague stepping in to help stem the bleeding. He looked all right, at least, and aimed a wan smile at the sergeant.

“Good as,” Littman said quietly, indicating Stug. The youth was breathing heavily, his face white. Without another word Gerhard walked over to him and knelt.

“You did well,” he said, making the sign of the hammer. “Sigmar will be proud to welcome you.”

Stug coughed, and tried to say something. After a moment he hawked up a plug of blood and expired, his face relaxing into an expression that struck Rudi as one of almost childish bewilderment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Then what happened?” Hanna asked, leaning across the rough wooden table towards him. Rudi shrugged. Normally he would have relished the fact that she was fascinated with his story instead of dismissing him out of hand as an uncouth lout, but there was still too much about the day’s events that he wanted to forget. Though he hadn’t known Stug or the vegetable merchant, whose name he still couldn’t recall, their deaths had shaken him. And Hans was still out there somewhere in the forest.

“Not much. We tried to follow his trail, but we lost it.” Gerhard had been icily polite about that, which had chilled him almost as much as the mutant’s threats of revenge. But the surviving militiamen had been all too grateful for the excuse to turn back. “We’ll try again in the morning. I’m sure my father will be able to track him.” He hoped so. It was that promise which had turned the witch hunter’s ire so they could return home. The trip back had been an unnerving one, as approaching night had begun to seep through the trees, deepening the shadows. He’d started at every sound, fearing that Hans was sneaking up on him. But such fancies were ridiculous, he knew. Even before he had changed Katzenjammer wasn’t capable of subtlety, and now he certainly wouldn’t bother sneaking around.

“Do you know where my father is?”

“No.” Hanna shook her head. “He still isn’t back.” She stood and wandered over to the cooking fire, where the stew pot still hung. Something was bubbling inside which made Rudi’s mouth flood with saliva every time he caught a sniff of it, but Hanna had looked very hard at him when he tried to investigate and he’d felt it best to sit down and leave her to her cooking without interruption. He watched as she stirred the contents, and smiled.

“Well if that smell doesn’t bring him back, nothing will.” Hanna accepted the compliment with a slight dip of her head.

“If he isn’t quick, he’ll miss out. It’s almost done.” The odour of cooking had been the first thing he noticed when he arrived home, and he still hadn’t quite got over the surprise. He might have known that she wasn’t the type to just sit around the place, but the transformation she’d managed to wreak on the tiny hut in the space of a day was little short of miraculous. Things were neatly arranged on shelves, the floor had been swept, and the cooking pot and a couple of items of furniture seemed to be a slightly different colour. It was only while he was looking at the surface of the table with some perplexity that he realised she’d cleaned it. Another couple of days and he supposed she’d have had it as neat as the Reifentals’ cottage. It was a shame that once the accusations against her had comprehensively been disproved she’d be off home again. A faint pang of regret surfaced at the thought, and he forced it away. It wasn’t as though they had much in common, after all.

“I should be getting back after we’ve eaten,” the girl said, almost as if she’d been able to read his mind. Or perhaps his musings had shown on his face somehow. He nodded reluctantly.

“I suppose,” he agreed. Then another thought occurred to him. “Perhaps you should wait until the morning, though.” He hoped he hadn’t sounded too eager, although the faint moue of amusement on her face made him suspect that he had. “Hans is still out there. You’ll be safer in daylight.”

“Maybe.” She conceded the point with a slight smile, and began to collect a couple of bowls from the dresser. “I should wait until your father gets back, anyway. I haven’t really had a chance to thank him.”

The meal passed in companionable silence for the most part. It was a new experience for the young forester, but an agreeable one. He had virtually no experience of socialising, especially not with young women, so he wouldn’t have known what to say in any case. The food tasted wonderful, and he said as much. Hanna seemed pleased, but amused at his enthusiasm.

“I just put a couple of herbs in it,” she said. “It’s nothing special.”

While they ate, and talked of nothing much, the night grew dark around them. Gunther had still not returned. Though he tried to remain calm, Rudi found himself growing increasingly anxious. His father was out at night often enough, it was true, but he always let him know beforehand. And he had not been out late since the beastmen had entered the woods.

“I should go and look for him,” Rudi said at last. Hanna shook her head dubiously.

“Where will you start?” Her words were mild, and reasonable enough, but he found them irksome all the same. They contained an echo of the antagonistic manner he still associated with her. He shrugged, not wanting to admit that he hadn’t a clue.

“I’ll think of something. Maybe he’s checking the snares.” That would be highly unlikely tonight, with only the sickly glow of Morrslieb to see by, but it sounded as though he had a plan. She nodded.

“Well you’d know. Unless he’s gone to the Blessed Grove, wherever that is.”

“The what?” Rudi thought he knew every landmark in the forest, at least for as far as anyone from the village had penetrated it, but he’d never heard of such a place. Hanna shrugged, and produced a piece of paper from a drawer in the dresser.

“Here,” she said, unfolding it. It was a crudely-sketched map, with words on it Rudi couldn’t read, but after a moment’s thought he recognised the peculiar shape towards one side as Kohlstadt, and the lines emanating from it as the roads which linked it to the rest of the world. A mark and some words were in the middle of the village, and two similar marks were also visible elsewhere on the plan. One close to the Dreibruken road, and the other in the forest. Hanna pointed to it. “There. ‘The Blessed Grove.’ Does that mean anything to you?”

A sense of foreboding seemed to settle in the pit of his stomach, displacing the pleasant afterglow of the fine meal he’d so recently enjoyed.

“Where did you get this?” he asked. Hanna indicated the dresser.

“The drawer was sticking. I found that jammed behind it when I pulled it out. Have you ever seen it before?”

“No.” He tried not to think about the conclusion he’d drawn, that the spot on the map was where he’d stumbled across the clearing full of rotting plants. But why would his father have a map locating it? He pointed to the other two marks. “What do they say?” The flash of embarrassment at having to ask her was fleeting at best. This was too important to let his pride get in the way. Hanna pointed to the mark in the middle of Kohlstadt.

“This one says ‘The Magister’.” Her finger moved to the other one. “This one just says ‘The Farm’. Not very helpful, I’m afraid. There must be dozens along the Dreibruken road.”

“It’s the Altmans’,” Rudi said, cold certainty beginning to settle in his stomach. The image of the strange patch of earth in the dead farmer’s field, so charged with Chaotic forces that he’d almost lost his mind simply by stepping onto it, rose vividly to the surface of his thoughts. Which sparked another memory. The strange, triangular amulet the farmer had worn...

His finger traced a line between the three points on the map, finding them equidistant from one another. He didn’t know why, but somehow that seemed significant too.

“What are you doing?” Hanna asked. He explained briefly, and shrugged.

“I don’t know what it means, though.”

“It must be sorcery,” Hanna said slowly. She seemed reluctant to speak, as though admitting to knowledge she shouldn’t have. “I’ve heard stories about rituals and things, collecting energy...”

“Making the people ill, and the crops fail, and the trees die.” Rudi nodded. “But what for?”

“How should I know?” Hanna asked. A trace of her old defensive truculence was beginning to emerge again. “Ask your witch hunter friend. He seems to have all the answers.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Rudi said. He indicated the map. “He’d probably burn the pair of us just for looking at this.” He’d meant the remark as a joke, but the expression on Hanna’s face made him consider the possibility seriously. He hurried on, hoping to distract her. “What I want to know is how this got into our house in the first place.”

“We’ll have to ask your father.” Hanna looked at him with a peculiar expression on her face. After a moment he recognised it as barely concealed unease. The easy trust that had grown between them since he saved her from the mob seemed to waver, as they both reflected that neither really knew the other all that well. “Perhaps he knows.”

“Perhaps.” Rudi tried to sound as though it didn’t matter. “It’s just a scrap of paper after all. It could have been there for years.”

“That’s probably it.” Hanna nodded, trying to convince herself. “It must have been there when he bought the dresser.” That seemed plausible, Rudi thought. The heavy item of furniture had been standing in the corner for as long as he could remember. But why would an old scrap of paper be so closely linked to events that were happening now? Had they been planned long ago? He dismissed the thought as fruitless. His father would explain, he was sure. If he could only find him. If something hadn’t already happened to the forester...

He forced the thought away, unable to contemplate the possibility. Gunther would be fine, he told himself fiercely, and everything would be all right again soon. He paced the tiny hut, the urge for action building within him. He couldn't just wait here while his father might be in danger, however perilous the forest might be tonight. He picked up his bow and the quiver of arrows. As he strapped the bracer to his forearm, his fingers trembled slightly.

"Be careful out there." To her credit Hanna didn't try to dissuade him, despite the apprehension she must surely have felt at the thought of being left alone again. He nodded grimly.

"I won't be long," he said.

Night had fallen in earnest now, the darkness between the trees all but absolute. As he moved deeper into the forest Rudi began to question the wisdom of what he was doing. The trees and bushes were solid chunks of blackness, practically indistinguishable from the shadows that surrounded them, and the faint necrotic glimmer of Morrslieb barely penetrated the canopy of branches. The only way he would find his father under these conditions would be if he tripped over him. But something drove him on, an impulse he could barely explain, somehow taking him through the myriad of obstacles and entanglements in his path as though they weren't even there. It was as if he could feel the branches and the scrub ahead of him so he would twist to evade them even though the darkness was too absolute to reveal anything to his sight.

As a result he made good time, moving as swiftly through the woodlands as though it were broad daylight. A small portion of his mind marvelled at this, even began to question it, but the growing sense of urgency crowded it out. It was as though he already knew where he was going, and the purpose of his journey was almost clear, if he could just manage to recall it somehow...

A new sound broke his reverie: the unmistakable sound of something big smashing its way through the undergrowth. He froze. A moment later his nostrils were assailed by a stench he remembered all too well, and as if in confirmation the harsh syllables of the language he'd heard in Altman's field echoed through the trees.

Beastmen! His scalp crawled, anticipating cries of discovery, but a nearby thicket offered concealment, and the group passed him by unheeding. There seemed to be three or four of them, moving rapidly, and as the sound of their passage receded he let out a small sigh of relief. The sense of urgency returned, stronger than ever, and he began to move again, following his original path.

Then another thought occurred to him. Perhaps the creatures were after his father! He hesitated, torn between conflicting impulses. Some deep, primal conviction told him that he had to keep moving, that somewhere ahead of him were the answers he sought, but for the first time logic began to crowd it out. He should follow the beastmen and find out what they were doing. It might be important.

He turned aside, feeling a sudden pang of frustration and anger, which surprised him with its intensity. It almost persuaded him to change his mind, but he exerted his willpower and forced it down. Whatever lay ahead could wait. The beastmen were a real and tangible foe, and he owed it to everyone in the village to find out what they were up to.

He set off slowly, following the path the creatures had taken. Now he'd turned aside he found the going more difficult. His newly acquired instinct for avoiding obstacles had apparently deserted him, as he had to stop frequently to disentangle himself from the bushes that snagged his clothing or the quiver every few yards. Nevertheless the beastmen had ploughed a clear enough trail through the underbrush to make the going relatively simple, and he made good enough time to keep them in earshot.

So good, in fact, that he almost stumbled into the clearing before realising it was there. Fortunately the sickly green light of the Chaos moon was striking down through the gap in the foliage, illuminating the whole scene brightly enough for his dark-adapted eyes to see everything in more detail than he would have believed possible.

At first his eyes were drawn to the beastmen ranged about it: There were a dozen at least, maybe more. Many were like the one he'd encountered the previous day, but lithe and uninjured. They moved with a swiftness and grace he would never have believed possible for such lumpen-looking creatures. Others were taller and more muscular, their heads crowned with imposing horns which were clearly far larger than those of the others. And in the centre of the group...

His breath stilled. Then he gasped, and for a panic-stricken moment he was sure the bestial host before him must have heard it. But their attention was fixed on the drama being enacted at the centre of the clearing.

Three figures were visible there, although one drew the eye as it was at least a couple of heads taller than the other two. A moment later Rudi realised it was considerably taller than any of the beastmen surrounding it, and its horns were by far the largest and most elaborately curved. It stalked forward, growling something in the creatures' own barbarous tongue, a sword the length of Rudi's leg casually held in its right hand.

"Any time." The response came in Reikspiel, although the voice was almost as harsh as the beastman's. "If you think you're hard enough." A chill ran down Rudi's spine. Hans Katzenjammer? Here? He slunk even deeper into the shadows.

Hans took a step towards the shaggy giant, the wounds he'd sustained at the hands of the militia a few hours before apparently already healed. Sickly green moonlight glinted from the talons on his hands as he flexed his fingers. Lazy confidence radiated from his stance.

"Peace." The third figure placed a hand on his chest to forestall him, and stepped between the two putative combatants. The voice was soft and feminine, in startling contrast to the guttural sounds of the others. From where Rudi was standing her face remained in shadow, although she too seemed to have a pair of horns. They were smaller than the others' and struck highlights from her forehead. She addressed the hulking beastman directly. "He's no bray. He's been blessed by the changer himself." The beastman responded in its own tongue, harsh gutturals echoing through the trees, and the beastwoman responded in the same language.

After another brief exchange she turned back to Hans.

"Graghgor will take you in, if he judges you worthy." Hans grinned, and flexed his talons again.

"I'll show him worthy," he said. The woman nodded.

“Try not to kill him,” she said. Hans looked almost sulky for a moment, and she patted him on the arm. “The changer has chosen you for a reason. You may have to turn against his other servants one day, for such is the nature of change, but for now you need allies.”

“Yeah, right, fine.” Hans pushed the beastwoman aside, and sprang at the towering beastman with a roar. The creature responded, shaking the trees with the volume of its challenge. It charged forwards, swinging its sword. Hans deflected it easily with the bony ridge along his forearm, and raked his talons across the beastman’s face.

A howl of rage and pain echoed through the forest, and the combat began in deadly earnest. For a moment Rudi remained rooted to the spot, unable to tear his eyes from the brutal spectacle, which held the surrounding beastmen in thrall. There was no subtlety to this duel, just animal ferocity, inhuman strength, and a lust for pain and blood that made him shudder to contemplate. He began to back away slowly, aware that this was no place to be caught.

Luck was with him, he thought, as the instinct he’d felt earlier which had guided him so unerringly seemed to have returned, and despite the darkness surrounding him he was able to move swiftly and silently away. Absently a small portion of his mind registered that he’d resumed his former course through the forest, towards whatever destination awaited him, and as the sound of that inhuman combat faded slowly into the distance he began to wonder what he would find there.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The first indication that he was approaching his destination was the sound of music echoing through the trees, and the welcoming orange glow of firelight. A bonfire had been built in the centre of a clearing up ahead, and sounds of laughter and revelry followed the light from the flickering flames as they diffused through the surrounding undergrowth. A small part of his mind urged caution. The memory of the beastmen was still strong, but the voices were unmistakably human, and he picked up his pace, eager to join them. Quite why he couldn't have said, but the impulse which had guided him here was stronger than ever.

Now that he had light to see the going was easier, and he was unsurprised to recognise his new surroundings. The trees here were drooping, their leaves turning brown, and their trunks infested with fungus and other growths. The sweet stench of rot and decay were everywhere, although somehow the odour seemed pleasant and invigorating, like the incense Father Antrobus burned in the village temple.

He reached the edge of the clearing and blinked in amazement, his eyes dazzled for a moment by the roaring flames. Masked figures capered and danced a few feet away from him, drinking wine and devouring foodstuffs which ought by rights to have turned their stomachs as though they were the finest of delicacies. The sweetmeats crawled with maggots, the fruits were putrefying, and there were other, fouler things he was grateful not to be able to identify. Curiously he felt no nausea at the sight.

Despite the masks they wore, he had little difficulty recognising many of the revellers. Kirstin danced by, almost devoid of clothing, clearly living up to her reputation with enthusiasm. Her torso was speckled with the rash of the pestilence, although it didn't seem to have weakened her. Quite the reverse, she danced and capered with preternatural energy. As he tore his eyes away from her he realised that many of the others were similarly unclad, and displayed rashes, pustules, and other signs of infection like badges of honour.

"Rudi! You found us!" His father shouldered his way through the throng, bellowing a welcome, a flagon of what looked like ale in his hand. His shirt was off, displaying the vivid discolouration of his arm and chest which had so worried Rudi. Many of the revellers were staring at it with what looked like naked envy. "I knew you would!"

"What's going on?" Rudi was babbling, he knew that, but his bewilderment was almost overpowering. "I got worried and came looking for you..."

"Drawn to this sacred spot." Magnus was there too, shrouded in a bile green cloak embroidered with patterns that echoed strongly in Rudi's mind. As he gazed at them he felt the slipping away of his sense of self that he'd experienced walking the furrows in Altman's field. The merchant laid a reassuring hand on Rudi's forearm. "All part of the destiny which was foretold. Hail the vessel!"

This last phrase was delivered in a bellow, which echoed around the clearing, to be picked up and reechoed by the dancing revellers.

“Hail the vessel! Hail the vessel!” Rudi felt his head begin to spin with the strangeness of it all. Deep down in the core of his being a tiny voice screamed at him to flee, that this was wrong, very wrong. But confusion, and the instinct which had drawn him here, held him irresolute. After all, he knew most of these people and he trusted his father and Magnus more than anyone else in the world. Surely this would all make sense soon enough.

“I don’t understand,” he said, looking from one to the other. Gunther smiled, and patted him on the shoulder.

“You will,” he promised, “and it will be more glorious than you can possibly imagine.” He took a deep draught of his ale, in which something seemed to be floating. Magnus nodded.

“Even now your grandfather’s blessing is working through your veins. Can’t you feel it?” Rudi shook his head numbly. Magnus went on, enraptured. “The heat in your blood, the ripeness in your skin...”

“I feel fine,” Rudi said. “Just confused.” Kirstin capered past again, catching his arm, and swinging him playfully around. Before he could react she kissed him full on the mouth, her tongue entangling with his. Startled, Rudi jumped and pulled away. The girl stared at him in bemused disappointment.

“He’s unblessed!” she said, in tones of complete disbelief. “His body’s not prepared!”

“What?” Magnus turned to glare at her, an expression of barely-contained anger curdling his features. “You told me he’d eaten it!”

“Well he took it!” She glared back, arguing as though they were equals rather than master and servant. “I gave it to him myself!”

“Gave me what?” Rudi asked, his confusion growing ever stronger.

“We’ll have to wait,” Gunther suggested, as though he wasn’t even there. “If we go ahead now it’ll be free!”

“We can’t wait!” Magnus retorted. “We’ve spent too much time preparing. The stars are in the right alignment. It’s tonight or never!”

“It’s too dangerous,” Gunther insisted, all trace of his previous good humour gone. “It’ll slaughter us all!”

“What will?” Rudi asked, feeling that he almost understood.

“Not if the wards hold,” Kirstin said firmly. Magnus nodded in agreement.

“They must do. The omens are right. Grandfather told us that when he blessed your arm.” He indicated Gunther’s swollen, discoloured limb. “That’s when we began to prepare the way, and it’s all gone perfectly. Even the beastmen arriving served our cause, and deflected attention away from us.”

“I suppose so.” Gunther nodded reluctantly. “What else can we do?”

“Precisely.” Magnus nodded again. “That idiot witch hunter won’t waste his time chasing mutants forever. When he’s finished with the healer he’ll turn on us, unless we finish it tonight.”

“Greta?” Rudi grabbed Magnus by the arm. “What’s this got to do with her?” Magnus shrugged.

“She suspects something, I’m sure. But I doubt she’ll be able to convince the witch hunter of anything. She’s got secrets of her own to hide.”

“Gerhard’s after her?” For all his confusion this was one thing that Rudi could understand. He took a step towards the edge of the clearing. “We have to warn her!”

“I don’t think so, lad.” Gunther took a step to bar his way. “Let the witch take care of herself, if she can. We’ve more important business here tonight.”

“What business?” Rudi asked, relieved to be finally getting some kind of explanation. Abruptly he became aware that the crowd of revellers was getting closer, hemming him in. He tried to take another step, but Kirstin draped herself around him, and someone else took hold of his upper arm. Irritated he tried to tug it free, and the grip tightened, to be joined by another, then a couple more. In a moment he would be completely immobilised...

Someone screamed, and the crush of bodies around him abruptly lessened. For a moment he struggled to identify the hissing sound which permeated the air. Then recognition hit. Arrows in flight, dozens of them, their trajectories abruptly terminated in the dull wet *thwack!* of impact against flesh. As the revellers scattered, leaving several of their number screaming on the ground, a chorus of bleats, barks and howls echoed from the surrounding woods.

“Beastmen!” Gunther screamed, hurling his ale pot at a charging mass of horns and matted hair. Heavy pewter met thick skull with an audible thud, checking the creature in its tracks, and Gunther charged forward, his diseased arm outstretched. It met the beastman’s descending cudgel and wrested it from the creature’s grasp. Gunther’s other hand punched it hard in the gut.

How he fared after that Rudi couldn’t tell, as the confused tide of combat swept them apart.

“Quickly!” Magnus bellowed, drawing a couple of daggers from under his robe and throwing one to Kirstin. “Before it’s too late!” A charging beastman grabbed the cowl of his robe and yanked him backwards; Magnus twisted, and stabbed the creature in the stomach. Kirstin turned to face Rudi, a smile on her face, and before he had time to realise what she was doing aimed a thrust at his heart.

Time seemed to slow. The sharp point of the weapon travelled towards him while his muscles refused to respond. They started working again far too sluggishly to preserve his life.

“Why...?” he began, at a complete loss to understand, then something large and agile sprang into the gap between them. A huge, talon-tipped hand enveloped the girl’s, twisting it back with a snap of bone. Kirstin screamed, more from frustration than pain.

“Little girls shouldn’t play with knives.” Hans Katzenjammer looked down at her, malicious glee sparking in his trio of eyes. Kirstin spat at him, and tried to kick him between the legs. Before she could complete the motion Hans slashed the talons of his other hand across her throat, releasing a fountain of blood. He watched her fall, spasming, and laughed. He turned to Rudi, who was rooted to the spot, his head spinning. “Still here?” he asked, conversationally. “You’re even stupider than I thought you were.”

“Stay back. I’m warning you...” Rudi fumbled for an arrow, nocking it with trembling fingers.

Hans laughed again; the firelight glinted from the razor-edged fangs that now filled his mouth. His chest was decorated with a crudely daubed sigil, drawn in something that looked suspiciously like blood. Rudi recognised it as the mark worn by the dead beastman in Altman's field. And once again he had the sense of having seen it somewhere else before, but couldn't put his finger on where.

"I just saved your life. If you want to keep it, run." Hans turned away, as though his old enemy was of no interest at all, and lunged after a fleeing cultist. The man's scream was loud, and abruptly terminated.

Rudi needed no further urging, and made for the safety of the surrounding trees. Around him all was confusion and slaughter, a cacophony of screams, bestial braying, and the stench of blood. Bodies cannoned into him, in flight or pursuit he couldn't tell which, and several times he stumbled over corpses. Once his foot caught in something that crunched under his weight; hardly daring to look down, he found his boot entangled in the wreckage of a lute.

After what seemed an eternity he made it to the refuge of the trees unmolested, and collapsed in the lee of a scraggly bush which had managed to retain enough of its foliage to afford him a measure of concealment. He gasped for breath, sucking in the rancid air, and trying to still the kettledrum beating of his heart.

His father! The thought struck him like a blow to the head. Gunther was still in the clearing, fighting for his life. He had to go back, had to help him... He turned, finding his bow still clenched in his left hand, and to his immense surprise the arrow he'd tried to nock still grasped in his right. He fitted it to the string, trying to still the trembling in his hands, and slunk towards the firelight again. The sounds of combat had diminished in volume now, most of the revellers surely dead or put to flight.

Concealing himself behind the crumbling trunk of a dead tree, he peered cautiously into the clearing. A few struggling figures were still on their feet though most of them had been run through or were battered to the ground as he watched. The churned-up ground was littered with corpses, most of them human, but there were a handful of the beastmen down too. With a mounting sense of dread Rudi scanned the bloodied revenants, searching for a face he hoped not to find...

A roar louder than the others drew his attention, and his head snapped round. The giant beastman he'd seen in the clearing was battling furiously with a man who barely reached its chest, but who was driving it back with swings of a cudgel. As Rudi watched the man raised the crude weapon to block a downward stroke of the creature's sword. Just then his face came into view, and Rudi felt a violent spasm of relief shake his body. Gunther! His father was still alive!

Trembling he drew back the bow, and stilled his breath. He tried not to think about his ineptitude with the weapon. His aim had to be true. There was no margin for error here. The muscles of his back and arms fluttered with the strain of keeping the weapon at full draw as he waited for a clear shot. But the two figures were moving so fast, their intricate dance of death so close, that there seemed no separation between them. Rudi's palms felt clammy, his breath was coming in short gasps and he fought to remain still. But the harder he tried the more the point of his arrow wavered.

"Damn!" The string slipped from his fingers, his arm jerked, and the arrow flew wide, disappearing somewhere in the dazzle of the flames. Almost at the same

moment the giant beastman howled in triumph as it hacked down at Gunther. A bright spray of arterial gore spattered the creature's matted hide.

"Sigmar, no!" Rudi might have shouted out his horror and grief, he never knew, but the bellowing of the beastmen drowned any noise he could have made. Hot tears stung his eyes for a moment, and as he wiped them clear he saw the creature stop where it was and sniff the air. Then it bawled something in the bestial tongue he'd heard the creatures employ before.

To Rudi's amazement the entire herd fell silent, and turned to look at the giant. It bellowed something else, and gestured with its vast, deformed hand. Gradually the beastmen began to slip away into the forest. Within moments all were gone, except for the giant, and the mutated form of Hans Katzenjammer. They seemed to confer for a moment, then to his horror their heads turned, and both appeared to be looking right at him.

His heart seemed to stop briefly, but then it resumed, beating in a harsh, staccato rhythm. He began to reach for another arrow, already certain that it would be futile. He hadn't been able to shoot well enough to save his father's life, and he doubted that he'd be any better at preserving his own. Then he sagged with relief. The two figures turned away, to follow the rest of the herd.

Just as he reached the tree line Hans turned back for a moment. He gazed in Rudi's direction again, and raised a hand in an ironic farewell.

So they had seen him! Then why hadn't they come after him? Come to that, why had Hans saved his life after threatening to kill him the last time they met, and why had Kirstin tried to stab him? His head buzzed with questions, as loudly and insistently as the swarm of flies which had settled eagerly on the blanket of corpses covering the rotting grass, feasting on the fluids that leaked from their burst-open flesh.

Hesitantly he took a step into the charnel house, still vividly illuminated by the roaring bonfire. Though he'd seen his father cut down with his own eyes, he couldn't just turn and leave. A faint flicker of hope remained that he had only been wounded, and might yet recover. A few faint moans echoed his thoughts, although he hardly dared turn aside from his goal to track them to their sources for fear of what he might find. After he'd found his father, he told himself, he'd look for other wounded and try to help them too.

"Father?" He knelt next to the body of the man who'd raised him, and held out a trembling hand to feel for signs of a pulse. This was the only family he'd ever known. But he knew it would be futile. Gunther was drenched in his own blood, his face a mask of it, and the torrent flowing from the gash in his neck and chest had already slowed to a trickle. The wound was terrible; it cleaved down into his torso like an axe blow through a tree stump. Rudi's breath caught in his throat, a hard knot of emptiness lodging deep beneath his breastbone. "Father!" His vision was blurring, his eyes hot.

"Rudi..." Impossibly, an eye forced itself open in the thick veneer of gore obscuring the forester's features. Hope flared for a moment before withering in the face of inescapable logic. By rights Gunther should be dead already, his soul clinging to his body only by an act of superhuman will, and it was impossible to believe he

could last any longer than a handful of heartbeats. “Listen...” Gunther’s voice trailed away.

“What?” Rudi couldn’t contain the questions. Now they were bubbling up inside him, forcing their way out. “What was happening here? Why were you...”

“Magnus. Find Magnus...”

“Everyone’s dead!” The words burst out of him like stones from a cannon. But as he turned his head, the distinctive green cape was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the merchant had survived after all... Another question slipped from his lips almost before he was aware that he was asking it. “He mentioned my grandfather. Did he know my family?” The idea was stunning, the concept so strange it was all he could do to articulate it. “Did he know where I came from?”

“Magnus knows...” Gunther spasmed, his breath escaping in a long, rattling gasp, and went limp. The single exposed eye went glassy and unfocussed. The last faint vestiges of hope in Rudi’s chest evaporated, leaving only a howling void of loss. Too numb to mourn, he stood up slowly, and scanned the scene of desolation for some sign of Magnus. The leaping flames illuminated everything vividly. Scenes of butchery were seared into his retina from wherever he looked. He stumbled through the carnage almost without volition, trying to make sense of his adoptive father’s last words. If the merchant had known who his real family was then why hadn’t he said anything before now? Perhaps it was already too late to find out, and Magnus had taken the secret to his grave.

A flash of green caught his eye, and he turned, his heart seeming to stop for a moment. Magnus’ distinctive cape lay on the ground, ripped and bloodied. For an instant he thought the body next to it was that of the merchant himself, but as he took a step or two closer he realised that it was one of the villagers whose name he didn’t know.

Before he could investigate further, his attention was caught by the unmistakable sound of movement through the underbrush. Galvanised, and dreading the return of the beastmen, he ran for the edge of the forest. As before he found the cover of a convenient bush and went to ground, sure that the bright illumination of the fire would prevent anyone seeing him in the surrounding darkness. He could just have kept going, and part of him urged him to do so, but he wanted to see who or what else was abroad in the forest tonight.

Raised voices echoed around the clearing. It was the welcome sound of Reikspiel instead of the harsh gutturals he’d half expected, a surge of relief almost sent him out into the light to greet whoever it was. But a growing sense of caution held him back.

“Ulric’s beard!” That voice at least was unmistakable, and a moment later Littman’s identity was confirmed as he emerged into the circle of firelight. Red and gold highlights glittered on the blade of his halberd, and made glowing fireflies of the spear tips of the militiamen behind him. Rudi was stunned by the sheer number of them. Every able-bodied man in the muster must have been there, leaving the village virtually defenceless. For a moment he wondered why the old soldier would have been so uncharacteristically reckless, before realising he hadn’t had a choice in the matter. “How did you know?”

“There are usually three foci in these cases.” Gerhard stepped out of the darkness, into which his sombre attire had so effortlessly blended him, and glanced about him

with disgust. “Arranged in a triangular pattern. The farm we knew about, and the outbreak of pestilence makes it almost certain that the second is somewhere in the village itself. The third had to be around here somewhere.”

“I see.” Littman clearly didn’t. He spat on the disease-ridden ground in any case. “And here are your witches.”

“They’re not witches.” Gerhard was moving from body to body, as though searching for something. He paused briefly by one of the dead beastmen, and nodded as though something had been confirmed by it. “They’re something far worse.”

“What could be worse than witches?” Schuller the baker asked, prodding the dead creature cautiously with the tip of his spear.

“Heretics,” Littman said, spitting again for emphasis. Gerhard nodded.

“These were the members of a Chaos cult, you can depend on it. Their foul sorceries blighted your village, as they prepared for some act of monstrous evil. Precisely what we may never know.”

Rudi couldn’t believe it. Like all Reiklanders he’d been shuddering at tales of Chaos for as long as he could remember. He had heard Father Antrobus warn of the insidious evil, which lurked even in the heartlands of civilisation. His father and Magnus would never be involved in such things. They were good people, both of them. Gerhard must be mistaken. Schiller shrugged.

“Lucky the beastmen found them first. Saved us a job.”

“Possibly.” Gerhard clearly knew more than he was saying. “Can you identify anyone?”

“More’s the pity.” Littman spat again. “That’s Reinhold Jungfrau, one of my night watch, may his soul rot in hell.”

“And young Perrin.” Schuller prodded a nearby body. “And his girlfriend, what’s her name...?”

“Clothilde Meyer,” someone chipped in helpfully. Schuller nodded.

“Yes, that was it. Sold apples or something.” The militiamen spread out among the bodies, calling out names in growing tones of shock and outrage. Littman was the first to find Gunther’s corpse, and beckoned the witch hunter over, his face a mask of astonishment.

“Who is it?” Gerhard was clearly good enough at reading body language to realise the sergeant had made a significant find.

“Gunther Walder.” Littman was so taken aback he forgot to spit. “Young Rudi’s father.”

“Really?” Gerhard’s tone conveyed only mild interest, but Rudi knew him better than that by now. He’d sounded just like that only moments before cutting Frau Katzenjammer’s throat. “Now that is interesting.”

“Is it?” Littman clearly wasn’t following his chain of reasoning. “I’m not sure I see...”

“If the father was involved, the son was most likely an initiate too.” Gerhard nodded thoughtfully. “And who has been at the centre of events for days, weeks even, running messages for those attempting to combat the pestilence?”

“You think he was a spy for the cultists?” Littman sounded incredulous for a moment. Then, to Rudi’s horror, he began nodding too. “It does make sense, now

you point it out. I mean, I've known the lad for years, but that goes for half the people here too, and they were clearly in whatever they were doing up to their armpits."

"Find his body. If he's not here arrest him, and bring him to me." Gerhard sounded as though he were doing no more than ordering ale in the village tavern. "I'll get the truth out of him, you can be sure of it." Rudi felt his blood run cold. He had no doubt about the methods the witch hunter was prepared to employ. "We still need to know who the magister was before we can be sure this is over."

Something about the word sounded vaguely familiar and after a moment Rudi remembered that it had been on the map Hanna had found.

"The what?" Littman asked.

"The leader, the organiser, the head of the coven." Gerhard sounded impatient. "It would almost certainly be someone of influence in the district."

"I know her." Schuller paused by Kirstin's body.

"Half the men in the village did." The militiaman with him laughed coarsely. "Young Kirstin put herself about a bit."

"Von Blackenburg's servant?" Gerhard strode over to join them, an expression of mild interest on his face. The militiaman quailed, unsure of why he'd attracted the witch hunter's attention, and left it to Schuller to answer. The baker nodded.

"That's right, sir."

"Any sign of von Blackenburg himself?"

"None that we've seen," Schuller told him. "That doesn't mean he wasn't here, of course."

"Quite." Gunther turned to Littman. "I'll be wanting a word with him too, sergeant." Littman nodded, but if he made any reply Rudi was too carried away with relief to hear it. Magnus was alive! He just had to find him. Surely a man as clever as that would have escaped the beastmen somehow, and made his way home. If he set out now he'd be able to catch up with him before word of Gerhard's arrest warrant made its way back to Kohlstadt. Come to that, the witch hunter was after both of them now, and Magnus had to be warned. He began to worm his way cautiously through the underbrush, deeper into the safety of the surrounding darkness.

"What should we do with the bodies?" Littman asked. Gerhard indicated the blazing bonfire with a tilt of his head.

"Burn them." With evident reluctance the militiamen began to lift the corpses, and heave them one by one into the flames. The air became foul with the stench of burning meat, and the flames flared with the fat from the bodies, sizzling eagerly.

"Sir," one of the militiamen called. Gerhard turned his head. "A couple of them aren't dead."

"Your point being?" Gerhard asked mildly.

The man flinched. "I thought you might want to question them first." The witch hunter strolled over, and gazed down at the feebly twitching body. After a moment he shook his head.

"Too far gone. We won't get anything useful." He shouldered the body himself and threw it into the flames with every sign of satisfaction.

Once he was far enough away for any noises he made to be masked by the crackling of the flames and the feeble, short-lived screaming, Rudi rose to his feet and began hurrying through the trees as fast as he could. If he headed straight for Kohlstadt he should be able to reach Magnus' house at least an hour before Gerhard. That would give them enough time to formulate a plan and flee. He might even have longer than that, because the chances were the witch hunter would look for him back at the hut first, and that would delay him still further...

Hanna! The thought struck him like a thunderbolt. She was still there waiting for him, and if Gerhard found her in the home of a heretic she would be as good as dead herself. Especially as she'd already been accused of witchcraft.

He changed direction and headed towards home. He wondered what on earth he could say to her that would make any sense. As he ran, he prayed to any deity who might be listening that he'd get to her in time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The girl was waiting when he got back to the hut, her satchel packed. She raised her head as Rudi burst through the door.

“Did you find him?” she asked. Her expression changed from curiosity to alarm as she read the look on his face. “Shallya’s mercy, what happened?”

“Gerhard. Coming here.” It wasn’t the most comprehensive explanation, but it was the most important point to get across. The rest could wait until he was able to come to some understanding about it himself, if he ever did. Hanna’s face paled. “You have to get out!”

“He’s still after me?” Her voice was tainted with disbelief, and barely-suppressed anger. “I thought he knew...”

“No. Me.” Rudi gasped for breath, and began to collect bits and pieces from the single-roomed house. A knife, his other shirt and breeches that were still damp and strung up in front of the fireplace, and a tinderbox and a couple of spare flints. That was it. Not much to show for sixteen years of life, but mercifully portable. He stuffed them into a bag, on top of his snares, and slung it across his shoulder. Hanna gaped at him.

“You? Why?”

“I don’t really know.” That much was true. “I found that site in the forest. My father was there...” A hard knot of emotion he lacked the insight to analyse threatened to choke him for a moment, and his voice faltered.

“You found him?” Hanna asked. Her tone suggested that she already had an inkling of the answers to her questions. “Is he with you?”

“He’s dead.” The words burst from him as though he was coughing them up. Articulating them brought out the feeling of the gaping void in the centre of his life all over again. It made no sense. Gunther had always been there: how could the world exist without him? “There were beastmen...” His words choked off, and became racking sobs as grief overwhelmed him at last. Perhaps it was the shock wearing off.

“I’m sorry.” Hanna made the sign of the dove and walked towards him, hovering with the embarrassed lack of purpose near strangers have when confronted with strong emotions. After a moment of indecision she hugged him awkwardly and patted him on the back as though his misery was an attack of the hiccoughs. “Let it out. You’ll feel better.”

“I’m fine.” Rudi pulled free after a moment and sniffed glutinously. He felt oddly embarrassed. Men didn’t do that sort of thing. “It just suddenly hit me, that’s all.”

“It’s bound to,” Hanna said, squeezing his hand, before letting go a little too quickly. She picked up her bundle of belongings and slung them over her shoulder. “But I don’t see where Gerhard comes in. Why’s he after you?”

“He was there too,” Rudi said, lifting a loose hearthstone to reveal his hoard of pennies. He tipped them into his belt pouch, and tested the weight of them: a

satisfying amount. There were more coins than he remembered. It was a testament to how busy he'd been since the pestilence started.

"Fighting the beastmen?" Hanna asked with confusion stamped on her features. Rudi scooped what food he could find into his bag on top of his other possessions, and followed Hanna to the door.

"No, afterwards." He left the door open. There was no point latching it, he never expected to return. He fought down the surge of emotion the thought provoked, and spoke rapidly, trying to take refuge in calm deliberation. "They'd already killed everyone. Hans was with them. What he's become, I mean."

"Wait a minute." Hanna took his arm again as they entered the darkness of the forest, and began following the path to Kohlstadt. "There were other people there too?"

"Yes." Rudi took a deep breath. "There was a party or something going on. Magnus and my father were there, and lots of other people. The beastmen attacked them, and left. Then Gerhard and the militia arrived."

"I see." Hanna's voice in the darkness beside him belied her words; it was still imbued with confusion. Her light grip on his upper arm tightened for a moment as she briefly lost her balance. "And while this was going on you were..."

"Hiding. In the forest." He'd become so adept at dissembling in the last few days that the half-truth slipped out without a second thought. "Just as well I was, too, or he'd have killed me on the spot."

"Why? What was he doing there?" Her voice was becoming anxious now.

"Looking for heretics. He thought he'd found them, and when he saw my father's body he ordered my arrest. If he catches me..." His voice trailed away. Hanna's grip tightened again, though it was a gesture of sympathy and understanding this time.

"I know how you feel," she said.

The woods were beginning to thin out now. Thin slivers of sickly green moonlight seeped through the trees, making the going a good deal easier for their dark-adapted eyes and they began to pick up the pace. As they cleared the tree line the whole valley spread out before them, limned in diseased-looking shadows. From habit Rudi scanned the horizon, looking for the yellow sparks of the cottages which formed a constellation of familiar landmarks, but of course there were none to be seen. Most of the people in the area were still huddled inside the village, waiting for Gerhard to tell them what to do. The only lights he could discern were the ones inside the stockade, and a single orange glow between them and it.

Greta's cottage, he thought, with a surge of relief. At least she was home. The light seemed unusually bright, though. At first he attributed this to the unusual darkness of the night.

As they drew closer to the cottage the light became brighter still, more intense than could be made by even the most efficient oil lamp. A sense of foreboding began to overwhelm him.

"Dear Shallya, no..." Hanna's voice beside him was soft, and tinged with horror. Heedless of the darkness surrounding them, and the dangers presented by the uneven ground, she broke into a run.

Rudi followed, whether from concern for her safety or simply to relieve the torrent of emotion still coursing through him, he couldn't have said. They ran in eerie silence, their footfalls thudding on the close-cropped turf, occasionally slipping in patches of sheep droppings. Despite his best efforts the girl forged ahead, and he didn't catch up with her for several minutes.

When he did so she was standing by the gate around the small herb garden. Tears were streaming down her face, illuminated by the roaring flames leaping from the thatch of the burning cottage. This was worse than the Altmans' farmstead had been. At least there the flames had begun to die down when he found it, but here the fire was still fresh, so more of the cosy home he remembered was still discernable. Not only that, the Altmans had simply been people he ran messages to, whereas Greta was someone he'd known and liked. Knew and liked, he corrected himself fiercely. There was no reason to believe she was still in there...

"Mother!" Hanna was screaming, her voice raw. "Mother, where are you?" She seemed to be performing a strange little dance, approaching the blazing cottage step by faltering step until the heat drove her back. Then she tried all over again. Rudi had no idea how she managed it. Even this far away the heat was fierce enough to evaporate the tears on her face, leaving dry, salty tracks. He had to exert all his willpower not to fall back even further. But then he remembered the incident with the cauldron, and suspected she was less sensitive to high temperatures than he was.

Hanna had an expression of grim determination on her face now. She walked forwards, muttering something under her breath. For a moment the flickering yellow flames seemed to surround her too, but that must have been a trick of the perspective as his eyes became dazzled by the blaze. She got closer to the building than she'd managed before, and stopped, apparently willing herself to go on. The fine hairs on her arms began to crisp and wither and her blonde mane shrivelled in the heat.

"Hanna, come back!" Rudi called, alarmed for her safety. Distracted she glanced back at him, then screamed, her face red. Without a thought Rudi dashed forwards, ignoring the pain, which seemed to wrap itself tighter around him with every step closer to the flames. He grabbed her arm.

"You have to get back!" He dragged her away, towards the welcome coolness of the night air. Hanna struggled against his grip.

"Let go, you half-witted ox! I can save her!"

"If she's inside she's past help." Not the most tactful thing he might have said under the circumstances, but he had to get through to her somehow. "And if she isn't, incinerating yourself isn't going to make her very happy!"

"Do you think she might be somewhere else?" Hanna asked, hope flaring in her face. Rudi nodded slowly, knowing how she must feel believing that she'd just lost her only parent. The hope might be a false one, but it was better than none.

"The last time I saw her was in Kohlstadt." Hours ago it was true, but nevertheless... "At the burgomeister's house." Hanna nodded, numbly.

"Then we'll have to find her there," she said matter-of-factly. "She needs to know what's happened." Her face twisted with anger and misery. "Those vile beastmen..."

"It may not have been them," Rudi said slowly. The light from the flames was bright enough to show tracks, which he could read as easily as the girl could read letters. He squatted to examine them. "Whoever was here wore boots."

“Gerhard.” She spat the name with loathing. Rudi nodded slowly.

“That would be my guess.” He stood up and was surprised by the red stain of dawn beginning to spread above the horizon in an uncanny echo of the firelight behind him. Hanna’s shoulders drooped.

“But why?” she asked plaintively. “What have we ever done to him?”

“You needn’t have done anything,” Rudi answered, as gently as he could. “A man like that finds his own reasons to hate and fear people. She was a healer. That was probably enough.” He hoped she hadn’t noticed his slip of the tongue, his inadvertent use of the past tense. For some reason he remembered the phrase Magnus had used, that the healer had secrets of her own, wondered what they might be. Maybe he’d tell them, when he answered the rest of his questions.

“You’re probably right.” Hanna pulled a pot of ointment out of her bag, and rubbed some on the reddened skin of her face and arms. “You’d better have some of this too.” It felt soothing, cool, and seemed to suck the discomfort out of his tingling face and hands. Despite her more intense exposure to the heat she was still less affected than he was.

“We’d better get going.” Somehow he felt he needed to distract her, to get her away from here as soon as possible. She nodded, and turned her back on the wreckage of her home with the air of someone determined not to be bowed by the weight of misfortune.

“We won’t find her by hanging around here.”

“Exactly.” Rudi fell into step beside her. Just then his boot crunched on something in the grass. He looked down.

It was the small icon of Shallya that he’d noticed on his first visit to the cottage, but something seemed different about it. After a moment’s thought he realised that the frame was missing.

A prickle of apprehension ran up his spine. Now he could picture it in his mind, he realised where he’d seen the sigil Hans Katzenjammer and the beastmen wore before. The frame had been the same shape.

He opened his mouth to ask Hanna about it, but closed it again. She had enough to deal with at the moment, and this was no time to bother her with trivia.

Despite his apprehension they were able to enter Kohlstadt without any trouble. The gates were open, a few farmers staggering out with the dawn to wrest as much as they could from their ravaged fields. Most looked drawn and haggard, too tired for conversation, and the few remarks Rudi overheard were about the momentous events of the previous day. Hans Katzenjammer’s metamorphosis, the disappearance of his brother, and the witch hunter’s burning of the family home figured largely in their talk. No one so much as glanced in the direction of the two youngsters as they slipped inside the stockade. Rudi shot a nervous glance at the watch post beside the gate, but it was deserted, and the brazier burned low.

An eerie quiet hung over the streets as they moved towards the burgomeister’s mansion, keeping to the narrowest of alleyways, and starting at every sound. But the voices they heard were all behind shutters, the everyday utterances of rising villagers. The only thing they disturbed along the way was the occasional rat.

“How do we get in?” Hanna asked, once they were outside the familiar kitchen door of the Steiner mansion. By way of reply Rudi shrugged. He knocked on it as loudly as he could. Hanna jumped. “Are you mad?”

“I don’t think so.” For some reason the question intrigued him. “But if I was, do you think I’d know?” Hanna gaped at him, unsure how to respond, but she was saved from doing so by the rattling of bolts.

“Who is it?” The servant who had greeted him on his first visit to the mansion glared resentfully through the opening gap, his livery rumpled. Recognition sparked in his eyes after a moment. “Oh. It’s you.”

“I’ve a message for the burgomeister,” Rudi lied. He was vaguely surprised by his recent aptitude for deceit. The servant yawned widely, and stood aside to admit them.

“He’s in the parlour. You know the way.” He glanced at Hanna. “Who’s this?”

“She’s with me,” Rudi said. The servant looked from one to the other, clearly drawing his own conclusions. He nodded to the girl.

“Wait here.” He slammed the door behind Rudi, cutting off Hanna’s indignant protest, then motioned him along the familiar passage. Rudi fought down a flutter of apprehension. Somehow the idea that Hanna would be with him when he faced Gerhard’s most loyal ally had made the prospect less intimidating. Well, he’d just have to do it as best he could alone. He squared his shoulders and marched into the parlour.

It was empty. He glanced round, feeling deflated. The servant shrugged.

“He’ll be back soon.” He might have said more, but a thunderous knocking on the front door made him turn his head with a sigh of exasperation. “Stay here. And if that’s your girlfriend, Sigmar help the pair of you.”

“She’s not my...” Rudi began, but the man had already gone. Rudi hovered by the parlour door. He eased it open a crack, and put his ear to it. Bolts rattled, and a lock clicked, followed by a creak of hinges.

“Steiner. Where is he?” Rudi shuddered at the familiar voice. Gerhard was back already! They must have wasted more time than they’d realised packing their belongings and contemplating the burning cottage. When the servant replied his voice was far more subdued and deferential than it had been.

“I’ll summon him at once, sir. If you’d care to wait in the parlour...” Rudi’s heart blocked his throat for a moment.

“I would not.” Gerhard raised his voice for the first time Rudi could recall. “Steiner! Get down here!”

“What? Who is that?” After a moment footsteps descended the main staircase, echoing in the hallway. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Later than you think.” Gerhard’s voice resumed its normal volume. “Last night we found evidence of a heretic cult in the forest, preparing for some hideous blasphemy.”

“Dear Sigmar!” The burgomeister sounded as though someone had just told him his waistcoat looked cheap. “They must be arrested, brought to justice...”

“They’re beyond the reach of mortal justice now,” Gerhard said with grim satisfaction. “But there may have been survivors. Anyone connected with those we identified must be brought in for questioning. I have a list.”

“Of course.” Rudi heard a rustling of paper, as the burgomeister took the document. His voice took on a tone of incredulity. “The Walder boy? Von Blackenburg? Are you serious?”

“Completely,” Gerhard assured him. “The boy’s father and Von Blackenburg’s servant were both there. The other names merit some investigation too, but the pair at the top is our most pressing concern. They’ve been involved in this affair from the beginning, and if their loyalty is questionable they could have done untold harm.”

“You could say the same about me,” Steiner said, with rather more courage than Rudi would have given him credit for. “Or Greta Reifenstal.”

“I have no evidence against you. For the moment that is sufficient. And the witch is dead.”

“Dead?” Steiner practically gasped the word. “But I thought the accusations against her daughter had been disproved.”

“They had been,” Gerhard conceded. “But when I visited her home last night I found clear evidence of sorcery.” Once again Rudi found the image of the sigil floating into his mind, accompanied by a vague feeling of revulsion. “There were signs, and certain books. If you doubt me, your own militia will bear witness.”

“Of course I don’t doubt you.” Steiner’s voice had the level tone of a man entering a state of shock. “You cut her down yourself?”

“She forced us from the house, and barred the door. We burned it down. She couldn’t have survived.” Gerhard was as matter of fact about it as if he had been commenting on the weather. “Her daughter’s name is also on the list.”

Rudi could wait no longer. He hurried to the window and sprung the latch, thankful that Steiner was vain enough to display his wealth by putting glass in the windows, and that the shutters had already been taken down for the day. He wriggled through the narrow opening, and dropped to the ground outside.

“Rudi!” Hanna beckoned to him from the corner of the house. There was an expression of relief on her face. “What happened?”

“Gerhard’s there.” This was not the time to tell her about Greta, he knew that. “I had to sneak away before he saw me.”

“Something’s going on. Look.” Following her lead he peered cautiously round the edge of the wall. The square was full of militiamen, Littman at their head. They looked tired, but full of grim determination.

“We have to leave. Now.” He took her by the hand, and tried to pull her back down the alley they’d come by.

“Why?” She looked at him challengingly, a trace of her former arrogance returning. “What did you find out?”

“He has a list of people he wants arrested. We’re both on it, and so’s Magnus.”

“What about my mother?” The question took him by surprise, his expression was all the answer she needed. Something seemed to crumple inside her. “Oh,” she said, almost inaudibly.

“We have to warn Magnus,” Rudi insisted. No matter what the danger might be in doing so, he had to see him. The questions he desperately wanted answers to crowded his mind for a moment, buzzing like flies, blotting out everything else.

“Yes. Of course.” Hanna nodded numbly. Her face had turned pure white. She seemed to be responding purely by instinct, but at least that was something. Rudi wondered for a moment how she’d be when the full truth of her mother’s death had sunk in, but he shied away from the thought. He took her by the hand, and she returned the grip, her knuckles white.

“Come on.” Ignoring the pain in his fingers, Rudi got her moving at last. If he could just keep her distracted until they found safety, he felt they’d be all right. To his relief she matched his pace, and they hurried down the street towards the merchant’s house. “This way.”

He ducked into the side passage that led to the kitchen door Kirstin had shown him out by a couple of days ago with a sensation of profound relief. They had only been in the main street for a few score paces, but his shoulder blades had itched the whole time. It would only have taken one of the assembled militiamen to glance in their direction for their lives to be over, but luck or one of the gods had been with them. Once he was sure they had remained unobserved, Rudi pounded on the back door.

“The windows are still shuttered,” Hanna said. It was true. Rudi knocked again. No sound came back to them but echoes. “He isn’t here.”

“He must be!” Rage and frustration seized him. He looked round frantically for something to force the lock with. Maybe his knife...

“Listen!” Hanna grabbed his arm before he could do anything, her eyes panicky. Running footsteps were approaching from down the street, lots of them. Someone began pounding on the front door.

“Von Blackenburg! Open in the name of Sigmar!” Gerhard’s familiar voice carried easily over the tumult even though it was no louder than usual. “Littman, take some men and cover the back.”

“We have to get out of here!” Hanna insisted, her voice rising in pitch. She tugged at his arm again. “Come on!”

For a moment Rudi resisted, the need for answers overriding every other impulse, then his sense of self-preservation kicked in. He turned and pointed out a narrow gap between a pair of adjacent buildings.

“Through here,” he said. Hanna shook her head.

“We’ll get stuck!”

“No we won’t.” He hoped they wouldn’t. But if they tried to run the approaching militiamen would see them for sure. He took a deep breath and squeezed through, the rough plaster and brickwork scraping his exposed flesh and catching at his clothing. For a panic-stricken moment he thought Hanna had been right, that they’d be immobilised, but he breathed in deeply and somehow got through; one arm stretched out before him holding his bundle of possessions, and the other behind him clutching his bow and the quiver of arrows. He breathed deeply again, weak-kneed from relief. “Nothing to it.”

“So you say.” Hanna followed, her slighter frame squeezing through a little more easily. They found themselves in the yard of a tanner’s shop, the smell of uncured

hides rising around them in a reek they could cut with a knife. No one came out to challenge them, so Rudi leant as close to the crack as he could, hoping to hear something.

“No one here, sergeant,” someone called. Rudi’s mouth went dry as he realised the narrowness of their escape. Littman had sent two groups of militiamen round the back of Magnus’ house, one from each direction, so if he hadn’t remembered this short cut from his childhood they would have been caught between them.

“Course not.” Though the old soldier was out of sight, Rudi could picture him punctuating his conversation with a gobbet of saliva. Sure enough he continued after a fractional pause. “He’s either dead or long gone.” A loud crash indicated that someone had obtained entry. Hanna tugged at his arm.

“We have to go,” she insisted.

“Yes. I know.” Too numb to refuse, and not knowing what else to do, he started running towards the village gates. Hanna kept pace with him easily, and they passed through the gap in the stockade without being challenged. The rising babble of voices behind them was attracting the interest of most of the citizens of Kohlstadt, so no one had a thought to spare for the youth and girl that scuttled along in the shadows at the edges of the streets.

After they made the open countryside they kept going, angling away from the roads and any possible pursuit, slogging across fields and grazing land until the village was no more than a tiny smudge on the horizon. Eventually their breath gave out and they stopped on the banks of a small stream, gasping. They looked back to see a thin trail of smoke rising behind them. Gerhard was consistent in his habits.

“What do we do now?” Hanna asked, cupping her hands to gulp at the cool, clear water. Rudi tried to reply, but his labouring lungs could do nothing but pant. Even if he could have formed words he was at a loss. The truth was he didn’t have the faintest idea.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By noon the last traces of Kohlstadt were well out of sight, and the fugitives settled in the shade of a grove of trees to escape the heat of the sun. For want of any better idea they'd followed the stream, so at least they'd have water to drink, but their supply of food was still far from adequate. Rudi had spread out what food he'd brought on his spare shirt the first time they stopped and been appalled at how little there was: a chunk of bread, too hard to chew without being moistened with stream water first, some cheese, which was beginning to smell a little too strong for comfort in the summer heat, some dried meat, and a couple of apples. Barely a meal for one.

Hanna had sniffed suspiciously at the dried rabbit flesh to begin with, but eventually hunger overcame her reluctance and she chewed at it with an air of grim determination.

"Where are we going?" she asked at length. Rudi shrugged. He'd never been this far from the village in his life, and he didn't have a clue what lay ahead of them.

"Marienburg," he said at last, the name of the city falling into his head as if from nowhere. Hanna stared at him as though he'd gone mad.

"How on earth do you expect to survive in Marienburg? It's full of thieves and cut-throats, everyone knows that!" Everyone in Kohlstadt believed that anyway, and perhaps they were right, but Rudi seized on the idea like a terrier with a rat.

"They can't be any worse than Gerhard," he pointed out. "And there are hundreds of people there, maybe even a thousand." For a lad whose idea of a bustling metropolis was Kohlstadt, even this woefully inadequate estimate sounded unimaginably huge. "We could hide there for weeks. Years even."

"Assuming we'd want to." Hanna wasn't about to concede the point without considering it carefully. "City people never wash, you know. The smell must be appalling."

"We'd get used to it." Rudi thought for a moment. "Maybe we could pick some flowers on the way in, to mask it a bit."

"I suppose so." Hanna regarded the cheese dubiously, then selected another piece of dried rabbit as the lesser of two evils. Feeling he'd won the debate, Rudi nodded sagely. Magnus had a house in Marienburg, he remembered. Maybe he had gone there after fleeing from the beastmen in the forest. If so, he might be able to help them and answer some of the questions which had tormented him since his father had uttered those last enigmatic words. Hanna chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "So where is Marienburg anyway?"

The question hit him like a face full of cold porridge. Somewhere to the east of Kohlstadt he supposed, as that was the direction the carts and pack mules of the merchants came from, but beyond that he didn't have the faintest idea. Despite the growling in his stomach he rewrapped the remaining food, wondering how long it

would last, and took a deep draught of the stream water to help fill him up a little. Water, at least, was limitless.

“We just have to keep following the stream,” he said, the realisation coming to him on wings of welcome relief. “It must flow into the Reik eventually.” Hanna nodded.

“Then we can follow the river downstream,” she agreed. “Maybe even hail a boat. There must be trading vessels going up and down all the time.”

Hail the vessel. The words came back to him unbidden, and he shivered. Was that what Magnus had meant? Find a boat to take him to Marienburg? He nodded, to cover his confusion.

“It’s a plan, anyway,” he said.

With nothing more to detain them they set out again, deeper into the wilderness. The constant chuckling of the water beside them was a pleasing note of comfort. The land was sparse here, the clumps of trees few and far between, and the sun felt hot and oppressive. Rudi felt exposed and uneasy, used as he was to the dim shade of the forest.

The grass had grown to shin height, as there was no cattle to keep it down. This made walking awkward, as it hid the small undulations in the ground so the pair stumbled every few steps. After a while Hanna stopped to hitch up her skirt and tuck the hem into her belt, exposing surprisingly thin calves. Rudi kept his eyes fixed on the surrounding landscape, not quite sure if it was polite to have noticed or not.

“We’ll need to find somewhere to sleep soon,” Hanna said, as the sun began sinking, lengthening their shadows before them. Rudi nodded, exhaustion fogging the inside of his head. He hadn’t slept at all the previous night, and he doubted that Hanna had either. So far they’d kept going on the energy of fear, but that would leave them soon enough. He suspected that without rest and adequate food he would collapse before very long.

“You’re right.” He narrowed his eyes, and held up a hand to shade them. A grove of trees larger than the rest was visible some way ahead, and the stream disappeared into it. “We’ll just go as far as that copse over there. Then we can make camp.”

“With what, exactly?” Hanna asked acidly, her eyes flickering between their two tiny packs. Rudi shrugged.

“With whatever we’ve got,” he replied, determined not to let fatigue and emotion drive a wedge between them. They might not have got on too well in the past, but that was changing, and they needed each other now. Hanna snorted, but said nothing more. She strode out determinedly, taking the lead.

They reached the patch of woodland as dusk was beginning to fall. Rudi was pleased to note that it was more extensive than he’d realised. As they made their way between the sheltering tree trunks he felt his spirits lift a little, and he took comfort from the familiarity of the environment.

“This’ll do,” he said, breaking through into a small clearing. Hanna looked about her with undisguised horror.

“Here?” She stared at the ground. “Where will we sleep?”

“Over there,” Rudi pointed. “That patch of moss. It’s springy. Surprisingly comfortable.” Hanna peered through the gloom, clearly unconvinced.

“It’s cold, too. I don’t suppose you picked up any blankets, did you?”

“No.” He couldn’t believe he’d left them behind. His shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry, I...”

“Had other things on your mind. I know.” Hanna dropped her satchel and collapsed on the patch of moss. “I didn’t think of it either,” she sniffed, wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. “How did this happen to us? It’s not fair!”

“I know.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say. “But we’ll get through this, I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” Hanna looked up at him, her face a pale blur in the darkness. Her eyes were deep pits of shadow, and for some reason Rudi found himself shuddering. “But you’re right. We’ll survive and grow strong. We’ve got something to live for.”

“We do?” Rudi had meant to sound affirming and supportive, but a treacherous tone of confusion had entered his voice. Hanna nodded.

“Gerhard,” she said flatly.

“I never want to see him again,” Rudi replied. He had no doubt that the witch hunter would be an implacable enemy, but the Empire was a big place, and if they just kept moving they should be able to stay ahead of him. If they made it to Marienburg they might even take a ship to another land entirely.

“I do,” Hanna said. Her voice took on a quality Rudi had never heard before. “I don’t care how long it takes, but one day, when I’m ready, I’m going to find him and kill him for what he did to my mother.”

Rudi didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. Hanna lapsed into silence too. After a long pause, during which the light faded even further, he cleared his throat.

“I’ve seen some rabbit droppings. I’m going to set a few snares before the light goes.” Hanna didn’t respond. He persisted. “If you could find some firewood that would be good.” She didn’t move or speak, so after a moment he added, “Fine then. I won’t be long,” and left the clearing.

In truth he was longer than he expected. Finding the game paths in the unfamiliar woodland took a little longer than he was used to, and his fingers, usually so dextrous, fumbled with the snares. Hardly surprising, he supposed, under the circumstances.

It was with a profound sense of relief that he returned to the clearing to find a fire crackling cheerfully in a circle of stones. Hanna was toasting the remaining bread on the point of a stick. She smiled wanly at him when he reappeared, and crouched down beside the flickering flames.

“You’ve been busy,” he said. She nodded.

“Better than brooding, don’t you think?” The hunk of bread was turning crisp now, filling the clearing with an appetising aroma. She spiked the cheese onto the stick too, and it began to bubble and melt. He nodded, his mouth flooding with saliva. “We need to split this up.”

“No problem.” Rudi reached into his pack for the knife, pushing aside his tinderbox and the unused snares to reach it. “That smells good.”

“Better make the most of it.” She divided the food as evenly as she could, and handed the weapon back to him. “There’s just dried meat and apples left now.”

The heat had softened the bread, and warmed it beneath the toasted crust, and the cheese, though strong, tasted better that way too. Even the faint taste of woodsmoke made it more appetising. Rudi supposed pretty much anything would have tasted good that night, given how empty his stomach was. The morsels disappeared in a couple of bites, taking the edge off his hunger, reducing it to a dull, nagging discomfort. After some consideration he cut one of the apples in half, and shared it with Hanna. They even devoured the core and the pips.

By this time night had fallen completely, and the clearing was in darkness. The light from the fire enclosed them in a little bubble of warm illumination. By unspoken agreement they moved closer together until their shoulders touched, to conserve their body heat. As the warmth of the food and the cosy pressure of Hanna's arm against him began to mingle with the drowsiness that comes from complete exhaustion, Rudi felt a sense of unexpected well-being suffuse his body. Abruptly Hanna yawned, and a moment later his own jaw gaped in response.

"We need to sleep," she said.

"You're right." Rudi banked up the fire to a roaring blaze, which pushed the circle of firelight out to the limits of the clearing. He looked at the remaining stock of brushwood Hanna had collected. "Do you think this will last until the morning?"

"Easily," she replied, rolling over onto the pad of moss, and pillowing her head on her satchel. Rudi wasn't so sure, but the thought of going to look for more seemed an insuperable effort. He lay down beside her, their backs touching. He had made sure his bow was next to his hand, with an arrow already nocked.

The night was long and uneasy. Unused to sleeping out of doors Hanna stirred fretfully at every sound, which would jolt Rudi awake. Then she would lapse into another light doze. Because he could identify most of the rustlings and scurrings Rudi felt no sense of threat, but the makeshift mattress grew more uncomfortable as the night wore on, so he tossed and turned uneasily for a while before drifting back into slumber. On each occasion he opened his eyes to make sure the fire was still burning, then he tried to settle again.

Once he woke at the sound of something unfamiliar; he was unable to place it. Hanna, surprisingly, was still asleep. After straining his ears to pick up the elusive sound over her snoring, he gave up. As he rested his head back on his arm it came again, a faint ululation in the distance. His skin prickled. Wolves. But they were a long way away, and surely no threat. Nevertheless he rose, and added more fuel to the fire, before he dared settle again.

They woke at dawn, stiff, and more tired if anything than they were before they slept. Rudi staggered to the stream and dunked his head in the cold water. The shock of it jerked him back to full consciousness.

"Did you sleep well?" Hanna yawned, her eyes puffy with fatigue. She sat up.

"I've had better nights," he admitted. She got to her feet, and began walking towards the edge of the clearing. "Where are you going?"

"Where do you think?" she responded tartly, disappearing behind a large bush.

"Oh. Right." Come to think of it, that seemed like a pretty good idea. He was just glancing round for a bush of his own when he caught a flash of movement in the corner of his eye. Slowly he turned, bringing whatever it was to the middle of his field of vision.

His blood turned the temperature of the stream water. Padding through the bushes was the largest wolf he'd ever seen. Come to that it was the only one he'd seen that wasn't already dead. Feeling his eyes on it, the wolf raised its head, pulling back its lips to reveal sharp white teeth. A low growl rumbled in its chest.

"Hanna!" His voice strangled in his throat. "Whatever you do, don't move!"

"What?" she called, and the wolf's head turned, its nostrils flaring. Rudi began to inch back towards the patch of moss, and the bow he'd left there. The animal turned back towards him, and he froze. Their eyes locked.

"What did you say?" Hanna called again, a tone of impatience entering her voice. She began to emerge from the undergrowth. The wolf's head snapped round again, and it began to move forward.

"For the love of Sigmar!" Rudi began to run, hoping to distract it, but the wolf had made up its mind and began loping towards Hanna. She ducked, picking up a stone, and threw it. The makeshift missile flew wide, but the brief distraction it afforded was all Rudi needed to pick up the bow. He drew it in a single fluid motion and let fly in the general direction of the charging predator. With no time to even consider aiming, and a moving target to shoot at to boot, he didn't expect to come close to it, but hoped vaguely that it might be intimidated into abandoning its attack.

To his astonishment the wolf yelped and pitched forward, tumbling like an inelegant furry acrobat to land close to Hanna's feet. She gazed at the spasming animal with horror, relief, and revulsion. His arrow had transfixed its neck and punched through the major artery. A bright spray of blood dappled the green leaves of the bushes and trees.

"Thank you." She hurried away from it, her face white with shock. "I had no idea you could shoot like that."

"Neither did I." He nocked another shaft and advanced cautiously. So that's what Gunther had tried so hard to teach him. The shot had seemed so fluid and natural, in total contrast to the ones he'd taken when he concentrated. The wolf was barely breathing now, its lifeblood all but drained, so he returned the second arrow to its quiver.

"What are you going to do?" Hanna asked, as he put the weapon down and took his knife out of his pack.

"I'm going to skin it." The animal had stopped moving altogether now and its eyes had become filmy. As he watched a final breath ripped from its body, and after one final shudder it was still. "There's a bounty on wolf pelts, remember?"

"And you're going to march up to a magistrate and say, 'I'm a fugitive wanted for heresy. By the way here's a wolf pelt can I have my five coppers please?'" Despite her tone she had a point, he supposed. He shrugged.

"Maybe we can trade it for something."

"Maybe," Hanna conceded. Her tone became a little more conciliatory. "Sorry, I'm always a bit cranky before breakfast. Even more so when an overgrown hearthrug tries to bite my face off."

"That's all right," Rudi replied, approaching the corpse. Something caught his eye, and he motioned the girl forward. "What do you make of this?"

“I don’t know.” She craned her neck to look, without getting any closer than she needed to. “It looks like something’s been tied to it.”

“That’s what I thought.” Rudi turned the creature over, finding it larger and heavier than he’d expected. It was almost as long as he was tall, so he had to exert all of his strength to move it. Something had been tied to the wolf’s back with stout cords, a long thin tubular package. “It looks like a bedroll...” He cut the cords, and unrolled a couple of blankets of no discernable colour which smelled rank and sour.

“That’s ridiculous.” Hanna stared at them incredulously. “Who on earth would tie a bedroll to a wolf?”

“Its rider,” Rudi said, vividly remembering some of Littman’s tavern tales. “A goblin.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Skinning the dead wolf took a lot longer than Rudi had anticipated. He knew what to do, but the carcass was far larger than anything he'd ever handled before. By the time he was finished he was sweating from the exertion, and his arms were caked in blood up to the elbows. He rolled the heavy pelt into the stream to get it as clean as possible, and jumped in after it.

"Hey!" Hanna flinched away from the splash, and wiped the sprinkling of water from her face. "Watch what you're doing!" She was teasing rather than reproofing though, and she watched him scrub the gore from his skin with an expression of tolerant amusement. "Do you always take a bath with your clothes on?"

"Saves time with the laundry," Rudi replied, ducking his head under the fast-flowing water. He shook his head, which forced her to retreat from the shower with another squeal of exasperation. "Besides, there's your reputation to consider."

"How very gallant." The light tone left her voice. "Although there's precious little of that left now."

"Only in Kohlstadt." Rudi gestured expansively at the landscape surrounding them. "And it's a big world. Gerhard and his lies won't travel far."

"I hope so." Hanna went back to scrubbing the blankets they'd taken from the wolf. They looked no cleaner than before, but at least the smell was less noticeable. Rudi waded out of the water, and retrieved his pack.

"I won't be a moment," he said, finding a bush to hide behind. He stripped off the sodden shirt and breeches, and exchanged them for the clean ones from his pack. He felt invigorated for the first time in days.

"That's as good as they're going to get." Hanna eyed the blankets critically, and hung them over a branch next to the fire. It had burned low during the night, but the core of embers still glowed, throwing out a fair amount of heat. Rudi hung his wet clothes next to them, and retrieved the pelt.

"You should take a swim," he suggested. "Freshen up a bit..."

"So you can get a good eyeful?" Hanna asked scornfully. "I don't think so. I saw you staring at my legs yesterday."

"I wasn't!" The unfairness of the accusation threw him completely. "I just meant..." He shrugged, at a loss for words. "Do what you like. I'm going to check the snares."

He strode off, seething, his momentary flash of contentment now a distant memory. The girl was impossible! Perhaps when they reached Marienburg they should go their separate ways. It wasn't as if they had anything in common, really, beyond their immediate predicament.

His mood improved a little when he discovered that three of the snares held rabbits; the second was still twitching. He snapped its neck before retrieving the simple trap and returning it to the pouch on his belt. The familiarity of the routine

was comforting, and by the time he returned to the makeshift campsite with the coneys hanging from their accustomed place at his side he was almost cheerful again.

“How did you do?” Hanna asked. Her hair was damp, but he refrained from any pointed comments about her bathing in his absence, mainly because he couldn’t think of any. He held out the furry corpses.

“Well enough. These will last a couple of days if we cook them first.” He began skinning them, and spilled their little cargo of entrails into the fire where they hissed and popped.

“Good.” Hanna indicated a small cloth-wrapped bundle. “I found a few edible plants too. Not exactly a banquet, but at least we won’t starve.”

The odour of cooking meat was almost a torture to Rudi’s empty stomach, but after what seemed like a lifetime the rabbits were done, and the two companions tore into them with an enthusiasm which would have drawn a sharp intake of breath around most of the dinner tables of Kohlstadt. Rudi gave up the idea of rationing for the time being; there were plenty more rabbits where these had come from and they had a lot of hard walking ahead of them. It was best to replenish as much energy as they could.

Soon their stomachs were comfortably full for the first time since fleeing the village and they still had the third rabbit left for later. They gathered their possessions together and set out along the stream again. By this time the morning was well advanced, but there seemed no point in hurrying. Rudi was acutely aware that for the first time in his life he was travelling through terrain he didn’t know, so he was determined to be cautious. After all, the wolf came from somewhere, so it was a reasonable guess that its rider would be somewhere in the vicinity too.

They reached the far border of the patch of woodland without further incident, shortly after the sun had passed its zenith and was casting shadows behind and to the left of them rather than ahead.

Rudi hesitated, looking out over what seemed like miles of open moor. The stream still hurried on beside them, disappearing into the distance, a thread of silver among the greens, browns, and occasional patches of vivid purple, white, or yellow wildflowers. Though he knew they had to go on, he felt uneasy with the unfamiliar terrain.

“It’s beautiful,” Hanna said beside him. Rudi glanced at her, surprised, and then back at the scene of desolation before them. It had a kind of grandeur, he supposed, but the open sky, speckled with a few wisps of cloud, seemed huge and threatening.

“We’d better take some firewood with us,” he said. “No telling what’s out there to burn.”

“Looks like plenty of brush and scrub,” Hanna said, but not forcefully enough to constitute a serious difference of opinion. “Might be a good idea to take a few logs with us if we can find some.”

They turned aside from the bank and moved off a little deeper into the wood, paralleling the boundary of the copse. Out here on the fringes the going was easy, and Rudi was surprised at how little brushwood was left lying on the ground.

“You’d think we’d have found more than this,” Hanna said after some time, staring at the meagre collection of sticks they’d managed to amass.

“Someone’s been here ahead of us,” Rudi said. He pointed to a booted footprint. “Picked the area clean.”

“There must have been quite a few of them,” Hanna said quietly. Rudi nodded.

“I think we’d better go.” The more he looked the more footprints he could see, milling around in confusion, until it was impossible to tell which direction they’d approached or left from. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. That meant whichever path they chose to take ran an equal risk of running into whoever had left them. Or whatever... There was something about the size and spacing of the prints that wasn’t quite right. A few moments later his suspicions were confirmed by the impression of a large canine footprint. “I think these are goblin tracks.”

“You think?” Hanna asked, a little nervously. “Don’t you know?”

“I’ve never seen any before,” Rudi replied, trying to keep his voice low. His father had spoken about goblins and their habits a few times, and Littman had been full of stories about the ones he’d battled, but try as he might he couldn’t recall much useful information. They were slightly smaller than humans on average, he remembered, but vicious and cunning. They preferred to rely on ambush or vastly superior numbers when facing a foe.

He turned to scan the undergrowth. He could see countless places to conceal himself without much difficulty. Then he calculated that the number of tracks indicated a fair-sized warband, a dozen of the creatures at least.

A stronger patch of sunlight indicated the direction of the forest’s edge, and he began to move towards it. Hanna followed. The main thing, he thought, is to get out of the trees. Goblins didn’t like direct sunlight, they preferred to lurk in the dark places, so they ought to be safe from pursuit if they got onto the open moor. They could pick up the stream once they were beyond the tree line...

“What’s that?” Hanna pointed at a strange lump lying ahead of them, dappled by the shadows of the leaves overhead. It looked like a diseased plant growth of some kind, or a rotting log, but as they moved closer Rudi got a clearer look at it and froze.

“Wait.” He held out an arm to bar her way, momentarily distracted by the sensation of something soft and yielding as she walked into it. Ignoring her faint annoyed sigh he focussed on the thing on the pathway ahead of them. The colours had fooled him for a moment but now his sight had adjusted, and he could clearly make out the shape of a head and arm sprawled out on the dirt, the dark green of the flesh blending into the mud-brown tunic and treads the thing wore. “It’s a goblin!”

“Is it dead?” Hanna asked, craning her neck to see. Rudi shrugged, and fitted an arrow into his bow. Killing the wolf had boosted his confidence with the weapon. He really ought to be able to hit a stationary target from this close.

He drew and loosed in one fluid motion, and almost against his expectation the shaft thudded home in the goblin’s torso. The body shuddered briefly from the impact then lay still, instead of spasming and shrieking like a live target would. It hadn’t been shamming then, hoping to lure them closer before launching an attack.

“I think so,” he said laconically, amused at the girl’s expression. He nocked another shaft before advancing. Even though it had genuinely been dead there could be others lurking in ambush, using the corpse as bait in a trap. With his ears straining for any tell-tale rustling in the undergrowth he crept forward until he was standing above the cadaver.

Up close it was even more hideous than he'd imagined. A large head with a flattened nose and a wide drooling mouth was attached to a scrawny body. Had it been standing, the skull would have appeared too large for the torso supporting it. Sharp teeth, more like fangs or tusks, were revealed by the drooping lips, slack now in death. With a grimace of disgust he bent to retrieve his arrow.

"And I thought its blanket smelled bad."

"What killed it?" Hanna asked, walking up to him, and looking down at it curiously. "Some kind of animal?"

"I can't see any tracks," Rudi said, his sense of foreboding returning stronger than ever. The only footprints he could see in the carpet of loam were their own, and the goblin's. Judging by the spacing, and the length of the creature's legs, it had been running when it died. He looked at the body again. There was a dark discolouration on its back and its tunic was charred. As he bent closer there was the unmistakable smell of burned flesh.

"Sorcery," Hanna said, making the sign of the dove. Rudi looked hard at her, and she flushed. "What else could it be?"

"I don't know," he admitted. He was going to regret asking this, he knew, but... "Does anything seem familiar about it?"

"What's that supposed to imply?" Hanna snapped, and he took an instinctive step backwards.

"Nothing! I just thought... Well, you can read." The thought came from nowhere, the perfect way to mollify her. "You must know a lot of things. Stuff I've never even heard about." A faint part of his mind remembered Gerhard's words about Greta. *There were certain books*. He wondered if Hanna had read them too, or had even been aware of their existence.

"I wouldn't doubt it." Her tone was still waspish, but less defensive. "There are some colleges of magic which use fire as a weapon. I imagine the effects would be something like this."

"So we might be dealing with a wizard." The thought was hardly comforting. He remembered a band of roving adventurers who had wandered through Kohlstadt a year or so before, and spent the night at the tavern. One of them had been a wizard, a thin, pale-faced young man who'd said very little, but somehow seemed more dangerous than all his heavily armed companions put together. The largest and most belligerent of the group, who'd been trying to pick a fight with Big Franz, had sat down and shut up after the young man had said a few quiet words and had seemed positively nervous for the rest of the evening.

"Maybe." The thought seemed to interest Hanna. "At least we wouldn't have much to worry about then."

"Why not?" Rudi asked, not caring how naive the question made him look. Hanna gave him a pitying glance.

"Because the only sort of wizard likely to be wandering around the back end of nowhere killing goblins would be part of a mercenary group. We'd be safe enough with them."

"Unless they heard we were wanted for heresy," Rudi pointed out mildly. Hanna flushed, turning the body over with her foot, and unnecessary vigour. "What are you doing?"

“Just seeing if there’s anything we’re missing,” Hanna said, but the dead goblin looked even more repulsive lying on its back. For the life of him Rudi couldn’t understand what she was getting at. After a moment she turned away and headed for the light at the edge of the woodland.

Rudi watched her go, nonplussed for a second. Then he hurried after her, trotting to keep up. He’d almost reached her elbow when she stopped suddenly.

“Shallya’s mercy!” There was no need to ask what had shocked her so profoundly. Ahead of them was a clearing littered with corpses like the one they’d just seen, but this time there was no doubt as to what had killed the greenskins. Raw, bloody wounds marked their corpses, where they’d been hacked, slashed, or bludgeoned to death. Some bore the unmistakable stigmata of claw or fang, others seemed to have simply been ripped apart. “What could have done something like this?”

Rudi had a terrible suspicion he knew. Sure enough, as they picked their way across that churned and bloody ground, he began to pick out the prints of cloven hooves.

“Beastmen,” he said. He glanced around, looking for some sign to confirm it, like the shaggy corpses in the glade where his father had died, but if the goblins had managed to kill any of their assailants the marauders had taken the bodies with them. So they’d probably got away with no casualties, he thought, as beastmen didn’t seem to be sentimental.

“Do you think they followed us?” Hanna asked, her face ashen. Rudi shook his head.

“Why would they?” he asked reasonably. “They’ve obviously passed through here ahead of us anyway.” Another thought occurred to him. “That’s assuming they’re the same warband.”

“Oh come on!” Hanna was scornful. “We haven’t had a beastman incursion around here in decades, and now two warbands turn up at the same time?”

“It’s possible,” Rudi said. Then he shrugged. “So long as they stay out of our way I don’t really care.”

“Come to that, neither do I.” Hanna squared her shoulders and started walking again. She picked her way fastidiously through the corpses. Rudi followed, keeping a little tension in the bowstring, ready to draw and shoot at the first sign of movement, but none came.

As they left the shelter of the trees and he felt the warmth of the sun on his face a faint sigh escaped him. It struck him how tightly his body had been wound. Hanna glanced back into the shade behind them with undisguised relief.

“I think we should get as far away from here as possible before night comes,” she said. Rudi nodded, and returned the arrow to his quiver.

“I think the stream’s that way.” They angled away from the stand of trees rather than following it back to the water, so it was some time before they had the comforting torrent of water at their side again. It was only then, as he watched a twig whirling past on the current, that Rudi realised they hadn’t remembered to pick up any firewood after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As the hours wore on Rudi grew accustomed to the new landscape, so that the sense of impending danger he'd felt at first had diminished. There seemed little danger of enemies approaching unobserved across the bleak and open moor. Hanna, on the other hand, seemed enchanted with the place. It was so different to any environment she'd ever seen before. She kept stopping to look at some plant or other with comments he didn't understand about their potential medicinal properties. A few she picked, and tucked away in her satchel for later.

One plant they could both have done without was the ubiquitous bracken, which snagged at their clothes, a constant irritation. Rudi at least had the protection of his breeches, their stout fabric chosen for its resistance to the similar hazards of the forest, but Hanna's skirt was a light summer weave and hardly any use at all in this regard. Before long her calves were covered in small scratches, which she ignored stoically. Time and again she had to pause to shake some small piece of detritus from her shoe.

Despite the discomfort she was determined to remain cheerful. She made bright remarks about the warmth of the sun and the pleasantness of the sweet-smelling breeze as though they were simply out for a summer stroll. She even picked a sprig of vivid purple heather, a colour Rudi had never imagined a plant could be, and tucked it behind her ear, where it somehow seemed to accentuate the colour of her hair.

Gradually the stream picked up its pace and widened a little, but there was still no sign of the river Rudi hoped it would lead them to. He had only the vaguest idea of what the Reik would look like. He was unable to imagine a stretch of open water so wide you could barely see the other bank, but he was pretty sure it would be hard to miss.

"Isn't east that way?" Hanna asked, shortly after noon. They'd paused to eat some of the cold rabbit, with their backs against a large moss-covered rock which had absorbed the pleasant summer heat. She gestured to their left, where the shadows had begun to lengthen.

Rudi nodded, trying to seem blasé. He'd been beginning to wonder that himself, but it had been hard to be sure with the sun almost directly overhead.

"I think so," he said, taking another bite of rabbit to try and seem calm. "The stream seems to be flowing south now."

"Perhaps we should strike across country, then," Hanna suggested. Rudi shook his head.

"We've nothing to carry any water in," he pointed out. "And the stream's bound to reach the river eventually."

"I suppose you're right," Hanna said, seeming relieved at this observation. Rudi suspected she was as reluctant to leave the security of the watercourse as he was.

Over the last couple of days it had become a familiar presence in their lives, almost the only thing they had left which gave them any sense of stability.

By nightfall it remained pointing resolutely to the south, and Rudi was beginning to think it had even turned westward a little. He pushed the thought from his mind as best he could, and began looking for a place to make camp.

In the end they'd had to settle for a hollow in the ground, which at least sheltered them from the worst of the increasingly chill wind. They managed to find enough stones before the light went to fashion a functional fire pit. Rudi collected as much of the dry scrub as he could find, piled it up carefully, and took the precious tinderbox from his pack.

He was unable to coax a spark from the flint and steel sufficient to start a flame, and his mood darkened with the lowering sky. It was dusk already, and without a fire they faced a bleak night at best. At worst they would be left at the mercy of whatever predators roamed this strange wilderness.

"Let me try," Hanna said, stretching out a hand for it. "If you're going to set some snares you'd better do it while there's still some daylight left." Rudi acquiesced grudgingly, his hurt pride eventually displaced by logic. He moved away from the makeshift camp. There was no point setting traps where the rabbits could get wind of them. At least the rabbits seemed to be abundant in this wilderness, there were plenty of signs of their presence, and so they should be able to replenish their meagre store of food.

Not that it would do them much good without a fire to cook the carcasses with, of course...

Despite his forebodings, however, he was greeted by a cheerful blaze when he returned to the makeshift camp.

"You've obviously got a knack for this sort of thing," he said, trying not to sound grudging. Hanna smiled; the first spontaneous expression of happiness he'd seen on her face since they'd fled from Kohlstadt.

"It wouldn't make any difference without your foraging skills," she said, returning the compliment.

The night passed uneventfully, despite his wariness, and the following day was almost a repeat of the previous one. The stream continued to grow in strength and volume, drawing them onwards despite its increased deviation from the direction they assumed both the river and the city they sought lay in.

"It's no bad thing," Rudi said, as they made their way through a narrow defile along the banks of a sudden display of rapids. "If anyone was trying to follow us they'd be leagues away by now."

"Good thing too," Hanna added, hopping over a small cleft in the underlying rock.

That night they found a section of broken stone wall and slept in its lee, grateful for the shelter it afforded against the wind. This time Rudi didn't even try to make a fire, he just left Hanna to it and went off to set his snares again, completely confident that she would have kindled a flame before he got back.

Morrslieb was waning now and Mannslieb growing fuller, so the night, if anything, was a little darker than it had been, but what light there was seemed purer, less corrupt. Rudi sat with his back to the wall, wondering who had shaped these

stones and what had happened to them. Something akin to the Altmans' fate, he supposed, but whatever it was, it had happened a long time ago. There were no signs that anything bigger than a fox had been here in decades. But the presence of the wall meant they were getting nearer to civilisation.

The thought was both encouraging and alarming. They might be approaching Marienburg, or some way of getting there, but civilisation meant people. And that could mean enemies.

He listened to Hanna's regular breathing, and watched the faint rise and fall of her malodorous blanket in the moonlight. He yawned. Time enough to worry about Gerhard and whoever else he might have sent after them in the morning.

The dawn woke them as it always did, and Rudi went off to check his traps. Two of them were full. He hung the little bodies on his belt as usual, conscious that he was getting into the swing of a routine. True, their diet was getting a little monotonous, but at least they were in no danger of starving and he was sure the mounting collection of rabbit pelts would be worth a copper or two when they found somewhere to trade with them.

As the sun rose he was able to see more of their immediate surroundings finding his guess about the wall they'd sheltered behind was more or less accurate. It had once marked the boundary of a field, the shape of which could still be discerned sketched in clumps of tumbled rubble. Curious he walked on, towards the far boundary, wondering if any other signs of habitation remained. Clearly this had once been a well-tended smallholding, carefully sited to take advantage of the water supply afforded by the stream.

His guess was confirmed as he reached the far edge of the old field. A few scattered carrot tops waved defiantly above the encroaching bracken, which had all but reclaimed them. He stooped to pull a few as he passed. They were stunted, misshapen things, but they were edible, and he was sure Hanna would welcome the change in their diet.

"Hanna!" he called, waving to attract her attention as a flash of blonde hair popped up above the now-distant wall. "Look at this!" He waited until she'd scrambled over it, and had started trotting towards him, before returning his attention to the ruins of the cottage he'd found.

Despite his gloomy impressions of the previous night, it was clear that it was neglect rather than violence that had killed this place. The remains of the roof thatch lay tumbled across the floor, but most of the walls were still intact. The wood of the window frames had succumbed to rot for the most part, and the door hung crooked from a single hinge, which gave way as he pushed gently at it. The slab of boards fell to the ground with a crack like a falling tree branch as it split into several sections, the wood dry and powdery within.

"Is it safe?" Hanna asked, materialising at his elbow. Her cheeks were flushed from running, and she smelled pleasantly of light perspiration and the plants she'd crushed on her journey.

"I don't know," Rudi replied, edging inside. The stonework was slick with mildew, and a couple of roof timbers lay on the ground inside. Where the floor had

been the ubiquitous bracken had seeded itself, so everything felt faintly springy underfoot.

“Is there anything here we can use?” Hanna wondered, venturing in after him. Rudi glanced around.

“I doubt it.” Other scavengers had obviously been here before them, and taken anything worth having. A few broken boards, half buried in the encroaching scrub, hinted at long-decayed shelves or furnishings, but anything they’d held was long gone. Hanna nodded, reluctantly.

“Best eat and get going, then.”

“I suppose so.” Rudi followed her outside, and took a last look around. “Do you see that?”

“See what?” She followed his pointing finger with her gaze, and shrugged. Rudi walked a few paces to confirm his guess, and nodded.

“There’s a track here. Or was, at least.” The bracken here was different; it was shorter and patchier, marking a line across the moorland he could follow quite easily. “It must lead somewhere.”

“You said that about the stream,” Hanna reminded him. Rudi nodded.

“I suppose so. But there might be a village or something that way.” He pointed. “We could trade the pelts, and ask for directions.”

“Or get arrested as heretics...” Hanna finished.

“I suppose you’re right,” Rudi conceded. “But we have to risk it some time.”

They continued debating the point over breakfast. The carrots, once washed free of soil in the stream, were sweet and crunchy, a delightful change in their diet which both companions relished. Living almost entirely on meat wasn’t the best of ideas, Hanna said, going into some detail about the various imbalances of the humours which were likely to result. Rudi wasn’t exactly sure what humours were, but he didn’t like the sound of them at all.

At length they gathered up their packs and, after pulling up all the carrots they could readily find, they set off along the stream bank again. The trail from the abandoned farm, though tempting, was too much of an unknown quantity to risk. It was better, they agreed, to stick to the watercourse, and hope that when it finally brought them close to an inhabited area it would be far enough from Kohlstadt for no one to have heard of Gerhard’s arrest warrant.

“After all,” Hanna pointed out, “this can’t be the only farmstead to have used the stream for irrigation.”

At first, as they plodded along, Rudi wondered if it was just his imagination, but after a while he was sure of it; the water was flowing faster than before.

“We must be going downhill,” Hanna said, evidently noticing the phenomenon too. Rudi nodded.

“Perhaps we’re getting nearer the river.” A thin mist of white vapour became visible over the next undulation in the moor, around which the stream curved ahead of them. Rudi broke into a trot, eager to see if he was right. Hanna watched him go with an expression of amused tolerance for a moment then hurried up too. As they began to round the hillock, Rudi became aware of a low, bass rumbling, like distant

thunder. He looked up expectantly, but the sky was the same rich blue it had been all summer, the only clouds visible faint skeins of white, like floating feathers.

“Look out!” Hanna grabbed his arm just as his foot slipped on a spray-slick rock. He fell back hard against unyielding stone, the breath driven painfully from his body.

“What did you do that for?” he snapped, rising onto a throbbing knee, and glaring at her. Hanna simply gestured behind him.

Rudi turned, and gasped, his ill temper falling away like the waters below him. The stream had vanished into a gaping hole in the ground, a dark mouth that swallowed it as though it had never been. If Hanna hadn't been so quick he would have tumbled into it, and been lost forever.

“What on earth is that?” he asked, stunned. He'd never dreamed that water could do anything like this. It soaked into the ground of course, but that was in a slow and orderly fashion. Hanna looked equally mystified.

“I've no idea,” she said. “Maybe there's a cave down there or something.”

For a moment Rudi found himself contemplating ways of climbing down the rock walls confining the torrent, and continuing to follow it. But there was no point in even thinking about it. It would be suicide to try, and even if they survived the descent there was no guarantee that the watercourse would ever surface again.

“What do we do now?” Hanna said, evidently coming to the same conclusion. Rudi shrugged.

“We'll have to go back, and try the path.” Briefly he considered the possibility of continuing across the moor in the same direction and hoping to find where the stream emerged, if it ever did. But he dismissed the idea at once. They'd get lost for certain, and there was no guarantee that they'd ever find their way back to civilisation. And Marienburg would be getting further away than ever.

“I think you're right,” Hanna agreed, but her tone was enough to tell him how little she liked the idea.

They made it back to the abandoned farmstead shortly after noon, and sat by the ashes of their campfire to eat with a curious sense of futility. Afterwards they set out along the overgrown track with a renewed sense of trepidation. Rudi knew it was foolish to feel disappointed, as though the stream had betrayed them somehow, but he resolved to heed the lesson nevertheless. From now on nothing could be relied on.

His tracking skills picked out the old path easily, and they followed it for some time without incident. It meandered across the moor, taking the line of least effort. He began to realise that it must once have been wide enough for a horse-drawn cart to negotiate. That implied that wherever they were going had a market, or access to one.

The longer they walked, the more desultory became their conversation. Their apprehension increased with every step. When they did speak it was to express some fear about where they were going, or to suggest some plan to cope with that contingency. Both of them became convinced that the track would lead to the heart of a bustling village, and that the population would instantly recognise them.

So when it came to an end at last, and the two fugitives found themselves standing on a wide road of hard-packed earth without a soul in sight, it was hard not to feel a sense of anti-climax.

“Which way do you think?” Rudi asked, glancing up and down it. It seemed to be running roughly northeast to southwest, and there was no clue as to what lay in either direction.

“That way.” Hanna looked up from a curiously shaped stone a few yards away, and gestured southwest. Rudi pointed in the other direction.

“Marienburg should be that way.”

“Well Kohlstadt definitely is.” Now he was closer to her, he could see that Hanna was pointing to letters chiselled into the stone. “See?” She indicated a line of them, which presumably spelled out the name of the village, next to an arrow pointing in the direction he’d indicated. Rudi nodded, silently appalled at his naivety. Unable to read the warning, he would have set off directly into the arms of their enemy.

“What does the other one say?” he asked, once again forcibly reminded of the advantages of literacy.

“Kallcaat,” Hanna said instantly. “No indication of how far that is, though.”

“I think I’ve heard of it.” The name sounded vaguely familiar, and after a moment he remembered Magnus mentioning it once. Something to do with a barge he was chartering. “I think there’s a wharf there.”

“I suppose we’ll find out soon enough,” Hanna said, starting to walk in the direction of the arrow. After a moment Rudi fell into step beside her. Things were definitely looking up, he thought. If Kallcaat had a wharf then they could get passage on a riverboat there, and be in Marienburg in no time. To his vague surprise he found himself smiling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After the rigours of trekking through the wilderness the sheer ease of walking along the open road left Rudi pleasantly surprised. Conscious of their status as fugitives he kept a wary eye out for other travellers, but they were to be few and far between. In the remaining hours of daylight they encountered a small party of peasants who gazed at them with wary suspicion and a taciturn nod of greeting, a cart full of dung driven by an old man who looked and smelled as though he'd been sleeping in the stuff, and a distant cloud of dust which resolved itself into a fast-moving coach drawn by a team of horses.

The coach bore down on them with frightening speed, and Rudi watched it approach almost transfixed. He'd never seen anything like it before, and the pounding of the hooves and the rattling of the wheels seemed to fill the air like thunder.

"Get out of the way!" Hanna grabbed his arm and yanked him aside, seeking refuge on the springy grass of the verge. The equipage whirled past in a blur of equine limbs, varnished wood, and brightly-liveried coachmen, leaving them choking in the cloud of displaced dust which settled slowly back to the road in its wake. Rudi watched it disappear in the direction of Kallcaat, his mouth agape.

"That must have been a nobleman," he said at last. "Maybe even the Emperor himself!" Hanna laughed.

"It was the overland coach from Marienburg to Altdorf," she said. "It said so on the side."

They walked until the sun began to drop below the horizon, staining the sky the colour of blood. Then Rudi began to look for a suitable place to camp alongside the road. They would have stood more chance of finding a refuge away from the carriageway, but by now the light was fading so fast that it was barely possible to see. He cursed himself for not thinking about it earlier. That was the trouble with roads, he supposed, they made the going so easy you lost touch with the natural world around you.

"Can you hear that?" Hanna asked, cocking her head. Rudi strained his own ears, conscious now of a vague murmur in the distance that was barely audible above the faint wind and the sound of his own blood circulating.

"I think so." He nodded, and resumed walking. No doubt they'd find out what it was soon enough.

Shortly afterwards they spotted a light ahead, the welcoming yellow glow of candles and hearth fires, and the sound had swelled to the hum of human activity. More than that, the wind was now carrying the mouth-flooding odour of roasting meat, mixed with a hint of horse dung and leather.

"We're coming to a village," Rudi said, his steps slowing. Hanna shook her head, the gesture nothing but a faint blur of pale face and blonde hair in the darkness.

“I don’t think so. There’s not enough light for that.”

“What then?” Rudi asked. The girl shrugged.

“Who cares? So long as they don’t know who we are.”

Despite their trepidation the two travellers began walking towards the glow. There was nowhere else to go in any case. Rudi found his palms beginning to sweat, and spoke a little too loudly to mask his nervousness.

“If they don’t, we might be able to trade the pelts. Make a bit of money.”

“Maybe.” Hanna’s attention was on a board fastened to a wooden pole driven into the ground at the side of the road. Just beyond it was a large building, at least as big as Steiner’s mansion. Two wings jutted from it to enclose a courtyard. Rudi found his heart hammering more loudly than ever. Whoever lived here must be rich and powerful. Perhaps it wouldn’t be wise to come to their attention at all. “There must be all sorts passing through a place like this.”

Rudi looked at the sign, which depicted a severe looking cleric of Sigmar hoisting a tankard of ale with what the artist had evidently intended to be either an expression of hearty good cheer or acute indigestion. The penny dropped.

“It’s a tavern!” Far larger than Johannes’ establishment in Kohlstadt, but he was beginning to realise that the world was a bigger place than he’d imagined, and so it was not surprising that much in it was on a correspondingly vast scale. Hanna nodded, and read the lettering under the picture out loud for him, tactful enough to pretend to be merely confirming the remark.

“The folly Friar. It must be a coaching inn.” Before he could reveal his ignorance by asking what the distinction was, she went on. “There’s a chain of them all along the main highways, where travellers can rest for the night.”

“Then that’ll do us,” Rudi said decisively. He fingered the small pouch of coins in his pack. “I’ve got money.”

“If you’re sure.” Hanna was clearly torn between caution, and the aroma of good food and the promise of a warm bed. “It’s all we’ve got remember. We shouldn’t squander it.”

“There’s plenty,” Rudi reassured her, hoping he was right. “And we’ve got the skins to sell.”

“All right.” Hanna agreed. “Let’s go in.”

They passed almost unnoticed through the courtyard. The hard-packed earth of the road gave way to cobblestones which felt hard underfoot, and sparked against the iron shoes of the horses being led about by ostlers. The coach that had passed them earlier was standing to one side, its traces empty. Flaring sconces lit the enclosed space, pushing back the darkness and intensifying it at the same time.

The main bulk of the inn lay ahead of them, the wings enclosing the courtyard turning out to be stables and storage blocks. Rudi felt his heart sinking with every step they took towards it. It was even bigger than he’d thought at first, and the babble of dozens of voices was filtering through the windows. They held the unmistakable sheen of glass, which meant that this was a prosperous establishment, so his limited supply of pennies might not go as far as he’d hoped. For a moment he was on the verge of turning away, but that would mean disappointing Hanna, and he was surprised to find that the thought of doing that was far more painful than any

alternative. Besides, he'd fought wolves and beastmen; how intimidating could a tavern full of humans be by comparison?

The answer turned out to be more than he could possibly have anticipated. As he pushed the heavy wooden door open the light and noise burst out like a physical force. He checked his progress for a moment on the threshold. Hanna nudged him in the back and he stepped forward into the tumult.

The room seemed vast, larger than any enclosed space he'd ever been in before; it was divided up by tables and booths. The place reeked of old ale and sweat. The faces of most of the customers were shadowed by the oil lamps that hung from ceiling beams and brackets in the walls, they were men for the most part, although there were some women in the room too. The majority of these appeared to be employees, bustling about with flagons of ale or platters of food, although the exceptions were a mystery to Rudi. Some were clearly customers and were part of larger groups. They were dressed like the men they accompanied, in worn breeches or travel-stained leathers, and at least two of them were carrying swords. A handful of others were dressed in a more feminine manner. They circulated around the room chatting and laughing, joining the customers for a while and then leaving with one. After a moment's thought he realised they must be there to meet friends; with the room so crowded it was no wonder they had to look around awhile before they found one.

"Can I help you?" Almost without realising it, Rudi had made his way to the bar in the corner. It was an imposing structure of polished wood, where a man in late middle age with thinning white hair and a florid expression leaned forward expectantly. Clearing his throat, Rudi nodded.

"We'd like some food. And a bed for the night."

"I bet you would." The man glanced at the two fugitives and laughed. So did several of the customers in earshot, and Rudi found himself blushing furiously.

"Each, I mean." Hanna's face hardened in a manner he remembered all too well from their infrequent encounters in Kohlstadt before fate had thrown them together, and he hurried on to forestall the incipient explosion. So far, at least, they'd managed not to draw any attention to themselves, and he desperately wanted to keep it that way. "My sister and I have travelled a long way today."

"Ah. My mistake." The landlord's tone was clearly disbelieving. "So you'll be wanting a room together then? With two beds."

"Yes." Hanna nailed the man with her eyes, and smiled sweetly. "If that's not too much trouble." Somehow her tone managed to convey that the inconvenience would be a trifle in comparison to the consequences of a refusal. He nodded, curtly.

"Dare say we can fit you in. Assuming you've got ten shillings between you." Rudi's dismayed expression was all the answer he needed. He jerked a thumb towards a door in the far corner. "You can have a mattress in the common room for five pence."

"We'll take two," Rudi said, determined not to lose any more face, and he was acutely conscious of Hanna's sensibilities. Another thought occurred to him, and he added, "we've got some pelts to sell if you know anyone who might be interested." The landlord shrugged.

“Depends what they are. Hubert might be in later on, he deals in that sort of thing. I’ll send him over to your table.”

“Thank you.” Rudi turned and spotted a vacant booth on the far side of the room. “We’ll be over there when the food’s ready.”

“Fine.” The landlord scratched his nose. “What do you want me to tell him you’ve got?”

“Rabbits mostly. And a wolf.” The landlord and his cronies laughed again, loud and raucous.

“Wolf. Yeah, right, I’ll tell him.”

“You do that.” Hanna’s lips were a thin line now. Before Rudi could stop her she hefted the bundle of pelts onto the top of the bar, and unrolled it. “And don’t forget to tell him it was a big one.”

Conversation around the bar came to an abrupt halt, although the babble of voices at the tables continued in the background. All eyes were fixed on the wolf pelt. The landlord cleared his throat.

“Yes miss. I’ll do that.” He glanced at Rudi with renewed respect. “I’ve never seen one that size before.”

“By Grungni’s beard! A greenskin mount!” A short, squat man, wider and more muscular than Rudi had ever seen peered over the bar at the skin. His face was almost hidden by luxuriant facial hair. He wore a metal helm and a chainmail shirt, and he barely came up to Hanna’s shoulder. “What became of the rider?”

“Dead.” Hanna didn’t elaborate. Rudi shrugged.

“He’d hardly have let us skin it otherwise, would he?” The dwarf bellowed with laughter and clapped Rudi on the back, making him stagger.

“By the iron of the earth, manling, you do your race credit.” He turned to the landlord. “Three more pots of that vile fluid you have the gall to call ale, and the choicest viands your miserable excuse for a kitchen can provide for my young friends here. This is a tale I must hear!” He seized the handles of the tankards in one ham-like hand, and ploughed his way back through the crowd towards a table in the middle of the room. There were other folk there, all human so far as Rudi could tell. He turned to face Hanna as he rolled the pelts up.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” To his surprise she nodded.

“Yes. If anyone’s looking out for us they’ll be expecting to see two people. If we’re part of a group we won’t be noticed.”

“Good point.” He laced the bundle together. “But we don’t know this... person.”

“Dwarf,” Hanna corrected. “I’ve read about them.”

Rudi considered this. He’d heard of the race before, of course, they’d been allies of Sigmar, but he’d never expected to meet one in the flesh. From everything Father Antrobus had said they were trustworthy enough. And they could hardly refuse so kind an invitation without drawing more attention to themselves. He shrugged, and followed their new friend back to his table.

“Sit down, sit down!” The dwarf heaved a couple of packs from the bench along one side of the table, heedless of the hard stares of his companions, and motioned them forward again. Rudi slid into it, leaving Hanna perched on the end, to find himself sitting next to a slender woman in britches and a travelling cloak. Her hair

was red, and her eyes green; she looked at him for a moment with an air of mild interest, before leaning around him to smile warmly at Hanna.

“Alwyn,” she said. “And how may I call you?”

“Hanna.” The girl looked mildly flustered for a moment, and Rudi felt he was missing something. There was no time to think about it, though, because the man opposite was looking him over with a sardonic expression, which reminded him of Magnus. His hair was black, but flecked with grey almost the same shade as his eyes. Like most of his companions he wore a well-used cloak over travelling clothes, which bore plenty of evidence of hard wear. He had a sword scabbarded at his hip, and the hilt was worn with much use.

“So,” he said at last. “Bodun says you’ve a tale to tell.” There were a couple of others at the table too, hard-eyed men who under other circumstances would have made him distinctly nervous, but somehow Rudi could tell that they would take their lead from this fellow and the dwarf. He nodded.

“So he tells me,” he said, relieved to hear friendly laughter rippling round the table.

“You can’t tell a story with empty hands,” Bodun said, handing one of the tankards he’d collected from the bar to him, and another to Hanna. Mindful of the dwarf’s scathing opinion of the brew on offer Rudi sipped cautiously at it, but found it palatable enough. Something of his confusion must have shown on his face, as the man opposite smiled.

“He’s always rude about the beer. It’s a dwarf thing.”

“I suppose it’s passable enough for a manling brew.” Bodun emptied his tankard in a couple of swallows, and belched loudly. “But once you’ve had Bugman’s...”

“You can’t stop talking about it,” one of the other men said, to the general amusement of the group. He seemed to be the youngest, being barely older than Rudi, although his eyes seemed to hold a wealth of experience. A thin straggle of hopeful beard, the same blonde hue as his hair, clung to his face, not quite hiding a ragged scar across his right cheek. Bodun snorted.

“Unlike the endless fascination of your monologues on the charms of certain young ladies...” He broke off, laughing, as the young man kicked him under the table.

“You have to admit they’re imaginative,” the other man broke in. His hair was brown, like his eyes, and his clothing was as nondescript as his features. “Uncontaminated as they are by any actual experience...” He dodged aside as the young man tried to elbow him in the ribs, and patted him condescendingly on the head. “Nice try, Bruno. Nearly got me that time.”

“Leave him alone,” Alwyn said, leaning across to ruffle the young man’s hair. “You were young once, remember?”

“Never that young,” the older man replied. Alwyn grinned, her face lit up with mirth.

“I don’t know. I seem to remember an incident with a barmaid in Nuln...”

“That was before I even met you! How could you possibly know about that?”

“Dwarfs have long memories.” She grinned at Bodun. “And a talent for tale-telling...”

“Whatever he told you, he was making it up.” Rudi couldn’t fathom what was going on. These people seemed to be quarrelling, but without any heat. It was almost as if they enjoyed needling each other.

“You’ll have to excuse my companions,” the leader said. “They were all brought up in a barn somewhere.” Bodun hurrumphed loudly. “Except for the dwarf, who we found down a hole.”

“And a very comfortable hole it was too,” Bodun put in. “Apart from the greenskins infesting it.”

“Who would have been dancing on your corpse if Conrad and I hadn’t happened to be passing,” the leader added.

“Happened to be looting the damn place you mean.” Bodun smiled widely. “Luckily there was enough to go round, so I didn’t have to kill you too.”

“Quite.” The leader grinned at Rudi, and indicated the brown-haired man. “That’s Conrad. He and I go way back. I’m Krieger, by the way, but you can call me Theo.”

“Rudi.” He stuck out a hand, which Theo shook. “That’s Hanna, my sister.” They might as well stick to the same story, he supposed. Theo nodded, as though filing the information away somewhere. His expression remained neutral.

“Alwyn’s introduced herself already, and that’s Bruno.” The young man smiled at Hanna, and nodded.

“Pleased to meet you, miss.”

“Likewise.” Hanna smiled in return. Theo continued.

“Allie tags along because for some reason she thinks Conrad’s worth looking after, and Bruno we sort of adopted.” Rudi glanced at the three of them, noting the way Alwyn and Conrad’s eyes met, and the matching rings on the third fingers of their left hands.

“Adopted?” he asked, unsure quite why the word held so much resonance for him. Perhaps Bruno was another foundling like himself. Bruno nodded.

“My family had a smallholding in the Drakwald. Beastmen attacked it, and I was the only survivor.” Darkness had entered his wide blue eyes now, like a thunderhead on a bright summer day. “I was twelve. Luckily Captain Krieger happened along, and saw them off before they finished...” He picked up his tankard and drained it. “Who wants another?” He stood abruptly.

“Everyone, lad,” Bodun said. “I’ll help you get them in.” He stood up, and accompanied the young man back to the bar.

“They were going to sacrifice him,” Alwyn said. Her voice took on an edge of loathing. “To some Chaos thing. We’ve been looking after him ever since.”

“He can look after himself well enough,” Conrad added. He leaned closer across the table. “Not a good person to get on the wrong side of. He’d kill you in a heartbeat.”

“That’s enough, Conrad,” Theo said. “We’re all friends here, aren’t we?”

“More like family,” Conrad said. He looked at Rudi and Hanna, the ruse of amiable idiocy slipping for a moment. “I remember when I was like you, just starting out in the world. I was sure I’d never need anyone else. Take my word for it, you do. And choose them carefully.”

“I’ll remember that,” Rudi said.

“Now lad,” Bodun said, dropping another tankard of ale in front of Rudi, “tell us all about how you took down the wolfboy.”

“There wasn’t much to it really,” Rudi began, sipping at the ale again. To his vague surprise he found most of it had gone already, so he accepted the refill Bruno passed him with gratitude. “We’d camped for the night in a copse on the moorland, and...”

“You came across country?” Theo looked curious. “Why not use the road?”

“It seemed more direct,” Hanna said, a little too casually. “And Rudi thought we’d have better hunting that way.”

“You’d meet fewer people too,” Conrad added thoughtfully. “Not a good idea if you ran into trouble.”

“These two look as though they can take care of themselves,” the dwarf put in. “If they saw off a greenskin scout...”

“He was dead when we found him,” Rudi explained, eager to change the subject. “Slain by sorcery, we thought.” Something told him it was best not to mention the rest of the warband. “The wolf just wandered into our camp, so I shot it.”

“He took it down with a single arrow,” Hanna put in, sensing a slight air of disappointment around the table. “While it was charging at me.”

“It charged you?” Alwyn stared at Hanna in astonishment. Hanna nodded.

“Jaws open, slobber foaming around its mouth, I swear I could see right down its throat...” The whole party around the table leaned imperceptibly forward. Rudi picked up his cue. If they wanted a dramatic story then by Sigmar he’d give them one.

“I’d been washing in the stream nearby, so I didn’t have the bow with me. I thought I wasn’t going to make it back in time, but Hanna threw a stone at it, which made it flinch. It was only a split second, but that was enough.”

“Aye.” Theo nodded. “In combat it makes all the difference.”

“I snatched up the bow, and grabbed an arrow. I knew I’d only get time for a single shot. I didn’t even have time to aim, but somehow when I drew the bow I knew just when to loose.”

“I know that feeling.” Conrad nodded and Rudi noticed a bow propped up against the table next to him. “As though the gods are telling you the shot can’t miss.”

“Exactly.” Rudi nodded. “My father was a forester, so I’ve been shooting for as long as I can remember, but I’ve never been surer of a shot in my life.”

“It took the wolf right in the throat,” Hanna said. “And it dropped like a stone. But it was moving so fast it kept rolling towards me. I thought it was going to knock me over anyway, but it stopped just in front of me. I was petrified!”

“I’m not surprised.” Bruno leaned across the table and patted her hand sympathetically. Hanna pulled it away, to his barely-concealed chagrin. Rudi was surprised to feel a surge of satisfaction at that.

“Your father’s dead then?” Theo asked. Rudi swallowed, unsure how to answer, but Hanna stepped in first.

“Mother too.” Her voice quavered a little, and Alwyn squeezed her other hand for a moment. This time Hanna seemed willing to accept the gesture. “So we thought it was time we made a fresh start.”

“I see.” Theo nodded again, evidently satisfied by this. “At least you have each other.”

“Are you going anywhere in particular?” Bruno asked, seemingly addressing Hanna directly. The girl nodded.

“Kallcaat. Then maybe Marienburg, if we can find a boat willing to take us.”

“Marienburg?” Conrad exchanged a glance with Alwyn. “You might want to think twice about that. The city can be a rough place if you don’t know it.” His wife nodded.

“Stick to the small towns for a while, that’s my advice.” She glanced at Hanna again. “If you’re determined to go to the city, head upstream instead. You’ll get a better reception in Altdorf if I’m any judge.”

“Why Altdorf?” Rudi asked, once again feeling that he was missing something. Alwyn looked as though she was about to say something else, but then she glanced around at the crowded taproom and appeared to change her mind.

“No reason,” she said. Any further questions Rudi might have had were swiftly deflected by the arrival of a young woman whose lavish décolletage seemed to capture Bruno’s attention almost as fully as the platters of food in her hands captured the rest of the party. Rudi’s stomach was growling loudly. Absently he noticed his ale tankard was empty again.

“Eat hearty, manling!” Bodun grabbed a haunch of meat from the nearest plate, and began to demonstrate. “And drink! More ale, my lovely!” The tavern girl winked at Bruno, who seemed to inflate. She slipped away to comply with the request.

“A toast!” The dwarf hoisted his tankard. “To Rudi Wolfbane!” The others laughed, but went along with it, echoing the call.

“Young Wolfbane!”

Rudi grinned widely. Whether it was from the closeness of the taproom, the unaccustomed quantity of ale he was drinking, or the richness of the food piled up in front of him he couldn’t say, but he became suffused by a sense of wellbeing stronger than any he could recall. Even Hanna was smiling at him. He hoisted the tankard Bodun had refilled from a fresh flagon delivered by the tavern girl.

“And to Krieger’s company,” he replied. “Good friends well met.” A gratifying chorus of approbation rose in response. He settled back on the bench, turning his attention to the food, and felt that a night as good as this should go on forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Rudi woke slowly. His head was pounding, and every muscle in his body creaked in protest. Something hard lay under his head, and as he lifted it, fighting the sudden surge of nausea that accompanied the motion, the skin of his cheek peeled stickily away from whatever it was.

As his eyes became focussed the rippling brown mass in front of him resolved itself into the woodgrain of the tabletop, still puddled with congealing patches of spilled ale. He blinked, yawned, and levered himself upright, surprised to find that he was still perched on the bench.

Gradually the memory of the evening began to seep its way into his forebrain, apparently carving a path through his skull with the aid of a pickaxe. His temples pounded with every beat of his heart, sending a sharp, stabbing pain through the space behind his eyes. He swallowed convulsively, just in time to quell an incipient rebellion in his stomach.

“Oh. You’re awake.” The landlord glanced up from a table nearby, a stack of plates in his hands. “I was beginning to wonder if I should just get a priest of Morr in for you. I would have done if it wasn’t for the snoring.”

“What...?” Rudi blinked gummy eyes at the man. “Where...?”

“You passed out. Not surprised the way you were sinking them last night. Your friends left at dawn, along with everyone else.”

“Passed out?” A surge of panic galvanised Rudi, and he glanced around for his belongings. How could he have been so stupid? But his pack was where he’d left it, under the table, along with his bundle of furs, the bow, and Hanna’s satchel.

After the initial rush of relief he felt vaguely ashamed of himself. The group of adventurers they’d met the previous night had been a little odd, no doubt, but they’d shown him and Hanna nothing but kindness. That reminded him, Hanna should be...

He glanced down, the barely-perceived weight in his lap turning out to be a blonde head pillowed on his thigh. She was stretched out along the bench, snoring faintly, somehow contriving to look comfortable despite the narrowness of the plank. She looked very trusting and vulnerable, completely different from the self-assured virago he was used to. A sudden rush of protectiveness left him momentarily breathless. He was also abruptly aware of a sharp and insistent pressure in his bladder, which the weight of her skull was doing nothing to alleviate. He reached down a tentative hand to brush the hair away from her face. She stirred.

“Hanna. Hanna, wake up.” For a moment he feared she was going to fall off the bench as she stretched and sat upright, but she retained her balance with an easy grace he quite envied.

“Shallya’s mercy, my head hurts.” She screwed her eyes up against the bright sunlight lancing in through the windows, and bent down to rummage in her pack.

After a moment she emerged with some dried leaves, and focussed bleary eyes on the landlord. "Can we have some boiling water please?"

"If you like." The man shrugged, and called to one of the tavern girls. "Trudi. Hot water for the big spenders." After a moment the girl ambled over with two mugs of hot water in her hands. She watched curiously as Hanna stirred the herbs into them.

"That's not weirdroot or anything, is it? Only the road wardens come by here." She shrugged. "Just so you know."

"It's for headaches," Hanna said shortly, her temper not helped by a raging hangover. The girl nodded.

"That's all right then." She ambled away, while Rudi tried to remember if she was the one Bruno had spent most of the evening making calf eyes at.

Fortunately Hanna's knowledge of herbalism proved as reliable as ever, and as he sipped the aromatic infusion Rudi felt his stomach begin to settle and the pounding behind his eyes recede to a dull ache.

"We should eat something," Hanna said. Though the notion of food in the abstract made his stomach heave again, like the stream as it dropped through the sinkhole on the moors, logic told him she was right.

"We've got bread and cold bacon," the landlord told them. Rudi soon found himself staring at a slab of pink meat and a couple of chunks of loaf. Fighting the renewed surge of nausea he chewed a hunk of bread and swallowed hastily, half expecting it to come straight back up again, but to his relief it remained where it was. Now he had something back in his stomach he was surprised to find how quickly his appetite returned, and he wolfed down the impromptu breakfast more quickly than he'd expected.

"Feeling better?" he asked Hanna, returning to the table a little slower than he'd left it after a successful search for the privy. The fresh air outside had revived him a little, and he barely staggered at all as he walked now. His stomach still seemed to roll over if he made any sudden movements, but for the most part the nausea had receded to a nagging ache, like the time he'd eaten some apples which hadn't been quite ripe. She glanced up, her face white, and nodded.

"A little." She gestured at a pitcher of well water which had appeared on the table in his absence. "You should drink. You're probably dehydrated from all that ale." Rudi didn't have a clue what she meant, but he did have a raging thirst, so he complied eagerly; the water tasted cool and refreshing, and after a second tankard he found his headache was fading a bit.

"We should get going," he said at last. Hanna lifted her head from the pillow of her arms and glared at him before nodding reluctantly.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose you're right." She yawned widely, and picked up her satchel. Seeing his last remaining customers getting to their feet the landlord wandered over.

"On your way, then?" he asked, flicking a beer-stained towel over the surface of the table. Rudi nodded, and hefted his pack.

"We've wasted enough of the morning, I think." He dug out his pouch of coins and loosened the drawstring, to the landlord's evident satisfaction. "How much do we owe you?"

“Seventeen shillings and elevenpence.” The innkeeper grinned conspiratorially. “Those dwarfs can’t half put it away, eh? However much they complain, I’ve never known one who didn’t try to drink the place dry.”

“Eighteen shillings?” Rudi couldn’t believe it. That was a fortune, more than his father earned in a year. “There must be some mistake!”

“There’s no mistake.” The friendly tone had left the landlord’s voice as abruptly as a candle flame being snuffed. “Forty-eight tankards of ale, seven platters of venison, bread, cabbage, turnips and carrots...”

“You can’t expect us to pay for the people we were with!” Hanna exploded. “We only met them last night!”

“And now they’re gone,” the landlord pointed out. “You’re still here, and the bill’s not paid. Who else is going to cover it?”

“But we can’t!” Rudi protested. “I don’t have anything like that kind of money!” He spilled his pathetic collection of coppers across the tabletop. “That’s all we’ve got, I swear!”

“If you think I’m going to settle for that, you’ve got another thing coming lad.” The innkeeper squared up to him, and Rudi became abruptly aware that despite his white hair he was compact and well muscled, probably from a lifetime of carrying beer kegs around. But he was no pushover either, he reminded himself. He’d faced foes more dangerous than most people had ever seen in their lives. He wasn’t going to be intimidated by some puffed-up tavern-keeper...

“Trouble, dad?” The voice came from near the door. Rudi turned, and his heart sank. A trio of young men stood there, the largest bearing a striking resemblance to the landlord, all of them were carrying makeshift weapons in an elaborately casual manner. The one who had spoken had a large pewter candlestick in his hand, the man behind him carried a kitchen knife, and the fellow bringing up the rear had apparently come straight from the stables judging by the pitchfork in his hands and the dung on his boots. For a moment Rudi wondered what had attracted their attention, until the serving girl slipped in through the door behind them. She must have gone for the others the moment he queried the bill. Seeing his eyes on her she smiled, and picked up a crossbow from behind the bar, cocking it with practiced precision.

“Nothing I can’t handle.” The landlord turned his attention to Rudi. “Now, about this money you owe...”

“I’m not responsible for anything more than we used,” Rudi insisted. “If the others didn’t pay what they owed you, take it up with them.”

“Right.” Hanna backed him up, her voice as hard as Rudi had ever heard it. “That’s not our problem.” She took Rudi by the arm, and urged him gently towards the door. He almost followed her, before he remembered that his bow and arrows were still under the bench. He couldn’t leave them, they were all he had left of his father.

“I’m afraid it is your problem, girly.” There was no trace of bonhomie left in the innkeeper’s voice now. “We’ve got laws around here against refusing to pay your debts.”

“Take the furs,” Rudi offered, trying hard to keep an edge of desperation from his voice. The last thing they needed was to come to the attention of the local authorities. “That’s all we’ve got of any value.”

“That won’t put much of a dent in what you owe,” the serving girl chipped in. She sighted the crossbow as though she was eager to use it. The knot of young men moved forwards to hem them in. For a moment Rudi was tempted to fight them all, an insane flush of bravado bursting into his mind from some hidden corner he couldn’t identify, but common sense overrode the impulse. Even if he could take them all on, Hanna might be injured in the scuffle.

“We can’t pay what we haven’t got!” Hanna insisted, her voice thickening with a combination of anger and frustration. “Can’t you get that through your thick skull?”

“Come on.” The landlord and his son grabbed Rudi by his upper arms, one on each side. He tried to shrug them off, but the ostler jabbed him in the stomach with the butt of his pitchfork, none too gently. Rudi doubled over, gasping for breath. “You’re not the first deadbeats we’ve had in here, and you won’t be the last. We know how to deal with the likes of you.”

“Leave him alone!” Hanna jumped on the landlord’s back, trying to wrap an arm around his neck. She gasped as the serving girl rapped her sharply on the forehead with the stock of the crossbow. Hanna fell backwards, tears in her eyes, and her face white with fury.

“Get up.” The serving girl reached down, holding the crossbow casually in one hand. Hanna squirmed away before rising on her own.

“You lay a hand on me, you overly made-up slut, and I’ll snap it off at the wrist and feed it to you!”

The men laughed.

“Got quite a mouth, that sister of yours,” the landlord said. The kitchen hand leaned down to open a trap door in the floor, behind the bar. Before he could fathom what was going on, Rudi was pitched forwards and down.

He landed none too gently on some sacks of what felt like vegetables. He staggered to his feet as an outraged squeal and a thump announced Hanna’s arrival in a similarly precipitate fashion. As she continued to swear, with a volume and proficiency which astonished him, he assumed she’d been unscathed by the fall. He looked up at the faces framing the gap in the ceiling above.

“What the hell do you think you’re playing at?” he yelled. The landlord fixed him with a steely glare.

“Road wardens’ll be coming by this afternoon. They’ll sort you out, you can bet on that.” The slab of timber dropped into its frame with a resonant thud, scattering a thin film of dust on them. It was followed a moment later by the rattle of a bolt. Hanna sneezed, and sat up.

“Are you all right?” Rudi helped her to her feet, aided by the faint shafts of light which fell through the gaps in the floorboards. The cellar was gloomy, but there was just enough illumination for him to be able to make out her silhouette in the darkness.

“What do you think?” Her tone was as waspish as ever, but he knew her well enough by now not to be fooled by it. He ventured a tentative hug before pulling away.

“That you’ve probably felt better.” He took a cautious step forward, and bumped into something. “Blast!”

“Hang on. I’ve got a bit of candle in my bag.” Hanna rummaged around in the darkness, while he tried to identify the object by touch. “Better shield your eyes.” A sudden flare of illumination made him blink. He was glad of her advice. As his vision steadied he found he was looking at a couple of old barrels. They were clearly no longer fit for storing beverages, as the wood had warped with age, but they seemed solid enough to sit on. That was something at least.

“Not very homely, is it?” He tried the experiment carefully, watching as Hanna placed the candle stub in a niche in the wall. It was lined with brick, so they could forget about digging their way out, he thought. The old wood creaked, but held his weight.

“I’ve seen better.” A livid bruise was forming on her forehead, where she’d been struck. A surge of anger coursed through his body. She must have noticed his expression, because she looked at him curiously. “What?”

“Your head. Where that girl hit you...” Hanna raised a tentative hand, touched the spot, and winced.

“Spiteful little bitch.” She took a pot of salve from her bag and rubbed it in, evidently feeling some relief. “What on earth is the matter with these people?”

“We have to get out of here,” Rudi said. The more he considered their plight, the worse it seemed. Road wardens travelled widely, patrolling the main highways. Chances were whoever the landlord turned them over to would have been close enough to Kohlstadt recently to have heard of Gerhard’s arrest warrants. They may even have spoken to the witch hunter himself. Hanna nodded.

“And fast. We’ve got to think of a plan.” She sat on the barrel beside him and lapsed into a silence of profound concentration. Rudi paced the floor, with a furrowed brow, hoping to find something among the detritus that could help them. Unfortunately this particular cellar seemed largely disused. Apart from the vegetables and the decrepit barrels, the only thing he could find was a pile of old sacks.

“Thought of anything?” he ventured after some time. Hanna nodded.

“Yes. Unfortunately it doesn’t help much.”

Rudi smiled encouragingly. “Tell me anyway.”

“I’m thinking,” Hanna said slowly, “that I should have gone to the privy while I had the chance.”

For want of anything else to do they made a thorough inventory of the contents of Hanna’s satchel, finding little there of any immediate help. Most of it was herbs or remedies of some kind, although there were a few personal items: a bright blue hair ribbon, a small sewing kit, a ceramic dove the size of Rudi’s thumbnail which she claimed to carry for luck, and something knotted up in a square of muslin which she grabbed hastily and refused to discuss beyond blushing furiously and mumbling something about it being “a woman’s thing.” Rudi didn’t have much that looked promising either, his belt pouch contained his snare lines and tinderbox, and that was about it.

“There must be something here we can use,” he said for about the thirtieth time. As the hours dragged by, they had discussed and dismissed a number of plans, all of them verging on the suicidal. They had even briefly considered setting fire to the sacks, in the hope that the staff would open the trapdoor to fight the blaze, but

concluded they'd probably suffocate from the smoke before anyone came to investigate.

"The only chance we've got is to slip the bolt somehow," Rudi said, examining the underside of the trapdoor for the umpteenth time. It was too stout to force, he'd proven that the hard way, balancing precariously on the barrels and bending his back against it until his muscles cracked.

"Let me see." Hanna scrambled up beside him, cocking her head to examine the obstacle. The shafts of light through the gaps in the planks had moved perceptibly since their incarceration, and Rudi estimated that noon had been and gone by now. From time to time footsteps echoed on the floor above their heads and the breath would catch in their throats at the thought the road wardens had arrived, but it was only ever the tavern staff going about their business. Each reprieve had only served to remind them of the urgent necessity of escape. Even if the road wardens were delayed, once the inn was full of customers and the space behind the bar was occupied they would have no chance of escaping unhindered. "Ah. That's interesting."

"What is?" Rudi craned his neck, trying to see what she had. She pointed to a thin line of shadow bisecting one of the shafts of light.

"The handle of the bolt's been left lying to one side. It must be over this crack in the planking."

"I don't see how that helps us."

"I'm not surprised." The old Hanna seemed to be making a comeback. She was being decisive and self-confident. She fished the hair ribbon out of her satchel, and poked the end through the gap between the planks. "If I can just get this over the end..."

"We can pull it back," Rudi said, realising what she was up to. Hanna nodded grimly.

"Except the ribbon's too flexible. I can't get it threaded back down the gap on the other side." She pulled it back with an irritated sigh, and rubbed absently at the grubby marks that had appeared on it.

"Try this." Rudi handed her one of his snare lines, and she nodded approvingly.

"That might do it. But just to make sure..." She took a bodkin from her sewing kit and threaded the thin cord through it, securing it in place with a small, neat knot. "Let's weight the end a little." She poked the needle through the hole until it had disappeared, and carried on paying out the snareline.

Rudi watched for some time, stilling his breath as best he could, trying not to distract her. The job was exacting and frustrating, he could tell. The needle landed repeatedly on either side of the crack without slipping back down it again. Finally, after what seemed like hours but was probably no more than a handful of minutes, Hanna gave a faint grunt of satisfaction.

"Got it!" A feeble glint of metal was visible in the candlelight, hanging freely from the end of the string. Hanna played out a little more, until she'd got enough on both sides for a comfortable handful. "Here goes nothing..."

She pulled gently on the doubled line, wobbling slightly on her precarious perch. Rudi stepped forwards in case she fell. The snare tautened then began to move. Hanna grinned in triumph.

“Got it!”

“Great!” Rudi watched the slow progress of the line of shadow, straining his ears. The bolt moved with a faint grating sound. He expected one of the tavern staff to come and investigate, but to his relief nobody seemed to be moving around above them. No doubt the everyday bustle of the inn was drowning out the noise of their escape.

“Damn!” Hanna said, emphatically. The line had reached the rim of the trapdoor, and could move no further. “I can’t move it any more than that.”

“It might be enough,” Rudi said encouragingly. If the hasp had been placed far enough along the shaft, most of it might be withdrawn by now. He held out a hand to help Hanna down from the barrels. “Let me try.”

“All right.” She jumped down to make room for him. Rudi clambered up in her place, bracing his back against the rough wood. He took a deep breath and pushed as hard as he could. Ominous creaking sounds came from the barrels beneath his feet, but he ignored them, concentrating only on the trapdoor above his head. Was that a faint tremor of movement?

“I think it’s giving.” He tried again, straining every muscle. Abruptly he found he was standing. He flailed his arms to regain his balance, as the stout wooden frame crashed into the floor behind him. He swarmed out, and reached down to grab Hanna’s hand. “Quickly!” Someone was bound to have heard a noise that loud...

“I’m right behind you!” Hanna clambered up, and they rounded the corner of the bar at a run. His bow and arrows were lying on the counter top, along with his pack, the contents of which had been strewn across the bar, evidently in a futile search for anything of value. He stuffed back what he could, and shouldered it hastily. Then he picked up the weapon. There was no sign of his purse, or the bundle of furs.

“Hey!” The serving girl poked her head around the door to the kitchen, her eyes wide with shock. “They’re getting away!” Her voice was loud and piercing. Rudi cringed. A commotion began in the courtyard outside.

“This way!” Hanna called, turning aside from the main door as the innkeeper and ostler appeared with several other men at their shoulders to block their escape. Rudi debated loosing an arrow at them to keep their heads down, but dismissed the thought at once. Knowing his luck he’d hit someone by accident, and they looked irritated enough as it was. He’d just have to hope they could outrun them all...

Abruptly one of the oil lamps exploded, sending a shower of liquid flame across the table and bench beneath it. Before he could work out what was happening a second loud report echoed around the taproom, and another lamp followed suit. The emergency saw the tavern staff begin to beat out the spreading flames. Their prey was forgotten.

“Fire!” The landlord yelled, and the room became full of shouts, smoke, and running feet, as everyone in the vicinity responded to the call.

“What’s happening?” Rudi asked, as Hanna grabbed his arm.

“Run now, talk later,” she said. Her advice was sound. He followed her as she made a beeline for the door to the kitchen.

“You can’t come in here!” The serving girl made a halfhearted attempt to block them, but she fell back squealing as Hanna punched her hard in the face with every sign of satisfaction. Rudi hurdled the supine obstacle and followed his friend round

the heavy wooden table in the centre of the room. It was covered with vegetables in the process of preparation. Some of the carrots looked very like the ones they'd found at the old farmstead, so he grabbed a handful on the way past.

"Out here!" Hanna had found a doorway, and shouldered it open. Rudi followed her outside, into bright afternoon sunshine, and stopped for a moment to get his bearings.

They were in a small courtyard to the rear of the inn, unpaved and rutted with cart tracks. This, no doubt, was where the local carters delivered food and other necessities. The commotion of their escape, and the sudden fortuitous accident with the oil lamps, had evidently interrupted a delivery of some kind. A cart was drawn up outside, and a nervous-looking horse was still in the traces, whickering faintly as it flared its nostrils. Hanna glanced at the pile of barrels beside it, and the few on the bed of the cart. She stopped running.

"Look at this." She indicated some lettering on the casks. Rudi shrugged, and she looked apologetic for a moment before continuing in an urgent undertone. "It's a delivery of fish oil for the lamps."

"Which helps us how, exactly?" Rudi asked. Surely she couldn't be intending to burn the entire building down... Hanna sighed.

"They're taking the empties away. How far do you think we're going to get on foot?"

Rudi considered this. They could try striking out across country again, but they had no landmarks to follow this time, and they could be lost for days. Worse still, by the time they got anywhere the road wardens would have spread their descriptions up and down the entire highway. What Hanna was proposing was a desperate gamble, but it seemed the best chance they had.

"Let's do it," he agreed, as he clambered up onto the back of the cart. He half expected the horse to object, but one of his carrots was enough to convince it of his good intentions, and after that it stood perfectly calmly as he hefted the lids off a couple of the barrels. Luck seemed to be on their side at last. "These are empty."

"Good." Hanna climbed up beside him, and wrinkled her nose at the smell, but she scrambled inside the cask, and crouched down. She didn't seem terribly comfortable, but there was enough room for her to tuck her knees up under her chin. She smiled wanly as Rudi put the lid back. "Not quite the way of getting us to Marienburg I'd envisaged, but I suppose it'll do."

Marienburg! Rudi hadn't considered it before, but now she mentioned it, it seemed quite obvious. Where else in the Old World would fish oil come from? It had to be landed at a seaport, after all, and the one at the mouth of the Reik was the greatest ever known.

Despite the smell he found he was smiling too, as he hunkered down in a barrel of his own and carefully pulled the lid into place above his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

For a long time, it seemed, nothing happened. Then Rudi heard voices approaching, muffled by the wood around him. He stilled his breath, which thanks to the stench permeating the barrel had been shallow enough already, anticipating a shout of discovery, but no one seemed to notice anything untoward. He strained his ears, managing to make out the occasional phrase through the walls of his refuge and the rhythmic thumping of other barrels being heaved aboard the cart.

“...be miles away by now...”

“...road wardens’ll catch up with ’em soon enough...”

“...lucky the whole place didn’t go up...”

Rudi smiled, despite the cramp knotting his left calf muscle and the choking stench of old oil. It seemed their ruse had worked, and the hunt had been called off. He shifted cautiously, easing the quiver away from his kidneys, and sighed with relief. Despite Hanna’s remark, he didn’t think they could remain where they were until the barrels were returned to Marienburg; the journey could take days. Nevertheless, wherever they were going there had to be some way of taking passage there...

His speculations were abruptly cut short by a sudden jerk of movement and a call of farewell as the cart, loaded at last, lurched into motion. Any discomfort he’d felt before was only a trifle compared to what he endured now. The barrel rattled and shook, echoing loudly with every collision against its fellows. His head reeled from the noise and the smell.

How long it lasted he couldn’t have said. Time ceased to have any meaning, passing in a blur of dimly perceived discomfort. Maybe he even dozed a little. All he knew was that the cessation of noise and motion came as abruptly as it had begun.

Groggily he tried to concentrate on what was going on around him. There were more voices, he could hear those, and the tell-tale rattle and thump of the barrels being unloaded. Thanks to the ringing in his ears, though, he couldn’t distinguish any words.

Suddenly he felt the barrel he was in being moved, and heard an angry grunt just the other side of the wood.

“Sigmar’s guts, this one’s still full!” His heart lurched. In their hurry to get away he hadn’t thought this far ahead, although it was obvious in retrospect that someone would take the casks off the cart at their destination. Discovery must surely be imminent.

“Keep your voice down!” Someone else had joined the complainer, their tone hushed. “Just get it aboard before anyone notices. We can sell it the next time we dock.”

The barrel moved again, it was dropped precipitously, and began to roll. Rudi tumbled with it, trying to ignore the nausea which threatened to convulse his abused

stomach. He hoped it would stop soon. Despite the discomfort he couldn't help feeling another surge of optimism as he mulled over the words he'd overheard. They could mean only one thing: the barrels were being loaded aboard a riverboat. Marienburg and safety seemed closer than ever now.

With a final thump the barrel came to rest and tipped, to his immense relief, upright. Rudi listened intently, but no one seemed too concerned to investigate their prize at the moment. No doubt they hoped to cast off and be well away before the carter or the innkeeper noticed their mistake. He hoped Hanna had been brought on board with similar discretion.

Footsteps came and went, echoing on wooden planking, and voices shouted incomprehensible things. For a moment Rudi thought the sensation of unsteadiness he felt was a result of the rough handling he'd endured, but it didn't seem to pass. After a while he realised what it meant. The boat was under way! Despite all the odds they'd managed to escape their pursuers again.

He kept listening, hoping that things would go quiet so he could lift the lid of the barrel and see what was going on. The thought of fresh air was tormenting him after so long inside the cramped, foetid cask. But it seemed the task of sailing a riverboat required the constant attention of its crew.

Footsteps approached again, and the barrel echoed to the impact of a sharp kick.

"Herr Busch!" The voice was crisp and bore the easy authority of someone who expects to be listened to without the necessity of raising its volume. "Why are these barrels cluttering up my deck?"

"They're still full, skipper." Despite the use of the title, the second speaker obviously considered himself a close enough friend of the first not to be constrained by too much formality. "There must have been some kind of mix-up at the Jolly Friar, because of all the fuss there." The voice left off speaking to insert a throaty chuckle. "I got the lads to load 'em as quickly as possible in case somebody noticed and wanted 'em back."

"Good idea." The wood of the barrel creaked as the skipper evidently leaned against it. "So why aren't they in the hold with the others?"

"I thought you'd be wanting to sell 'em quick, the next time we put in," his companion explained. "Better to keep 'em separated."

"Well, I would." The skipper appeared satisfied with his subordinate's explanation. "Except that whatever's in this, it's definitely not fish oil." Before Rudi could react the lid was ripped away, and two strong hands darted down to seize him under the arms. He tried to struggle, but the hours confined in such a cramped space took their immediate toll, and his arms and legs refused to obey him. Agonising cramps made his limbs tremble, and it was all he could do not to cry out as he was hauled unceremoniously upright. The barrel tipped over as his legs flailed, his bow, quiver and pack rolling out onto the deck.

"There's another one in here, cap'n." A few feet away a brawny deckhand was restraining Hanna, clearly making the most of the job. He cried out suddenly as she ducked her head and bit his forearm. He was about to strike her, when the captain raised a hand to forestall him.

"Put her down, Ansbach. She's hardly going to run away, is she? You too, Kurt." Rudi felt the grip around his arms disengage. He took a deep breath. The smell of

fresh air was intoxicating, and he wanted to savour it. He glanced round, taking in his surroundings for the first time, and his jaw dropped.

His first impression was that the world had turned blue. Late afternoon sunshine was striking the wooden deck of what he assumed must be a riverboat, but the solid planking surrounding him seemed tiny, no more than thirty or forty paces in length and less than half that wide. Overhead the sails snapped in a stiff breeze, like solid clouds, blotting out half the sky, and beyond the rail was nothing but blue water, in almost every direction he could see. Off to the left was a line of brown and green, dotted with thumb-sized trees and the occasional cottage seemingly built for folk the size of shrews. In the opposite direction was a faint smudge, which resembled a distant thunderhead, but ahead and behind was nothing but silver-tinted azure. Despite the situation, he thought he'd never seen anything so awe-inspiring in his life.

"I'm Captain Jothan Shenk, master of the *Reikmaiden*." The man in front of him waved an expansive hand, that took in the deck, a couple of hatch covers, and a large wooden structure like a small house perched in the middle of the boat. "The vessel on which you've taken passage." He was short, wiry, and dressed in a faded blue coat, which seemed to mark his authority in some way. His hair was lank and thinning, the colour of autumn moss, and his eyes darted left and right while he was speaking. At no point did they settle on Rudi's face. "Would you care to explain why, and how you intend to pay for the journey?"

"We're here by accident," Rudi said. The fresh air was reviving him even faster than one of Hanna's herbal preparations. He felt his habitual optimism returning. The man seemed reasonable enough. "We didn't know the barrels were being taken aboard a boat."

"That's right." Hanna nodded vigorously. "We didn't even know we were anywhere near a port." To her barely-concealed irritation the men around them laughed. This attracted the attention of a couple more deckhands, who stared at them curiously for a moment before resuming their duties.

"That's 'cause you're not." The man who'd hauled him out of the barrel, whose name was Kurt Busch if he'd overhead correctly, shook his head. "There's quays and landing stages all along the banks for the local traffic." That made sense, Rudi supposed. Carrying bulky items, like the lamp oil, would be ruinously expensive by road. It was far more sensible to take it upriver as close as possible to its final destination and transport it overland from where it could be unloaded most easily.

"I see." Captain Shenk nodded. "And you were in the barrels because...?" He sounded genuinely curious rather than suspicious. Rudi shrugged.

"We had a bit of trouble at the inn. We lost all our money, and they turned nasty." Shenk nodded sympathetically.

"It happens. Threatened to have you arrested, did they?"

"Yes." Hanna nodded, turning wide and guileless eyes on the captain. "We were terrified. We've never been away from our village before, and we didn't know what to do. So when the fire broke out we just ran, and hid in the first place we could find."

"Hoping to slip away after dark, no doubt." Shenk nodded. Whether he believed them or not Rudi had no idea. "So where's this village of yours then?"

“Dreibruken,” Rudi said quickly. Shenk shrugged.

“Never heard of it.”

“If we could just get to Marienburg we’ll be fine from there,” Hanna put in. Shenk and Busch laughed again.

“You’ve got some nerve, I’ll give you that.” The mate scratched his close-cropped scalp. “Passage that far doesn’t come cheap.”

“Like I said, we’ve lost all our money.” Rudi shrugged. “We did have some pelts to sell, but they were stolen too.”

“Maybe we could help you out somehow?” Hanna suggested. “There must be something we can do for you in return.”

“I know what you could do for me,” the deckhand put in. Hanna glared at him, and Shenk waved a dismissive hand.

“Still here, Ansbach? Go and find something useful to do before I get Kurt to find you a job.” The deckhand scowled, but trotted away with a final lascivious glance at the girl. Shenk smiled at her.

“I’m sorry about that. I’m afraid I don’t hire my crew for their social graces.”

“We’ve met worse,” Hanna assured him. Shenk shrugged.

“Working a riverboat’s a skilled business. If you don’t learn fast, I can’t guarantee to let you work your passage all the way to Marienburg.” He smiled then, and stuck out a hand for Rudi to shake. “But I’ll give you a day or two, and see how you get on. Even if it doesn’t work out, you’ll be halfway there at least.”

“Thank you.” Stunned at the man’s generosity, Rudi shook his hand gratefully. “We won’t let you down, I promise.”

“I’m sure you won’t. I’m generally a good judge of character.” Shenk gestured to Busch. “Herr Busch will show you the ropes, and find somewhere for you to sleep.” He turned to Hanna. “I’m afraid we don’t have much accommodation suitable for a lady, but I’m sure we can sort something out. In the meantime, perhaps you could help the cook with the evening meal?”

“I’d be happy to.” Hanna smiled too, and went off with the skipper. Rudi took a deep breath, and turned to Busch, who was regarding him a little more sardonically than his captain had.

“Where do I start?” he asked.

Despite Rudi’s forebodings the work Busch found for him seemed easy enough. It consisted mainly of carrying things, pulling on ropes when he was told to, and hauling buckets of river water up onto the deck to be emptied piecemeal with the aid of a mop. He supposed Captain Shenk must be very proud of his vessel to keep the planking so clean, and said as much to one of the crewmen who was sharing the task with him. The man laughed.

“Don’t know much about boats, do you?” His amusement seemed friendly rather than patronising, so Rudi found it hard to resent.

“Never even saw one before today,” he admitted, and the deckhand nodded slowly as though that was the most natural thing in the world.

“Well, thing about boats is they’re made of timber.”

“I’d noticed that,” Rudi said, sluicing another mopful of water across the planking. His new friend chuckled again.

“And when timber dries out unevenly, it splits. The hull can’t get dry, so when the weather’s warm...”

“You need to keep the deck wet,” Rudi finished. The man nodded.

“You catch on quick. Probably a good thing.” He leaned on the handle of his mop, and brushed a fringe of brown hair out of his eyes. He darted furtive eyes one way and the other to make sure Busch hadn’t noticed he was slacking. “It’s not a bad life if you get a taste for it. Pay’s all right, the food’s free, and you get to see a bit of the world.”

Rudi found himself considering the prospect. Keeping on the move all the time would be one way of eluding the witch hunter, and he was surprised to find how attractive the idea of seeing more of the Empire seemed. Since leaving Kohlstadt his eyes had been opened to just how big the world really was, and the more he saw of it the more eager he was to explore it properly. Then he remembered the main reason he’d resolved to head for Marienburg in the first place. All the questions he’d pushed to the back of his mind rushed forwards to fill it again, leaving him just as desperate for answers as he’d ever been. If Magnus was still alive, and could answer them, that’s where he would be. Quite how he’d manage to track the man down in such a seething metropolis was another problem entirely, but he was sure he’d work it out when they got there. After all, he’d hailed a vessel just as his friend had advised, even though it had been inadvertent...

“Getting tired already?” Busch asked, having approached quietly while he’d been lost in his own thoughts. He started guiltily, then realised the remark had been addressed to the man he was working with. “Getting our young friend here into bad habits on his first day, Pieter?”

“Not at all, Herr Busch,” Pieter lied at once. “I was explaining why it’s so important to do a proper job.”

“Course you were.” Busch nodded, not fooled for a minute, and glanced across at Rudi. “Getting the hang of it?”

“I think so.” Rudi nodded, and made a great show of swabbing the deck until the mate had gone to loom over some other crewman. Pieter shrugged.

“Don’t let him get to you. His bark’s worse than his bite.” He returned to the task with an economy of motion that came with years of practice. “Firm but fair, you might say. A lot better than some I’ve sailed with, let me tell you.”

“What about the captain?” Rudi asked. “He seems all right.”

“Yes, he does,” Pieter agreed. He seemed to hesitate for a moment before going on. “But don’t let that open-handed attitude fool you. He’ll do you a good turn right enough, but he’ll expect something back by and by.” He shrugged. “No reason why he shouldn’t, either. This boat’s all he’s got, and he’ll do whatever it takes to keep her sailing, if you get my drift.”

“I think so,” Rudi said.

By the time they’d finished the job the sun was beginning to set, turning the water around them to the colour of blood, flecked with gold. Pieter leaned on the rail as they stowed their tools, and nodded slowly.

“Now there’s a sight you can never get tired of.”

“I can see why,” Rudi agreed. He’d never seen anything so spectacular in his life. It was as though the *Reikmaiden* was floating on liquid gold. After a moment the sun dipped a little further and the waters darkened, taking on the purple hue of a fresh bruise, and the first few stars began to appear in the sky overhead.

“There you are.” Busch had come up behind them as they spoke. He clapped Rudi on the shoulder. “We’ve found a bit of space for a hammock in the forward hold. Your gear’s stowed under it.”

“Thank you.” Rudi wasn’t quite sure what a hammock was, and his first sight of the hanging strip of canvas didn’t provide much of a clue. But his bow, quiver, and pack were reassuringly close at hand, perched on a couple of the barrels. Another piece of canvas stretched across the narrow space a short distance away, with Hanna’s satchel resting in the middle of it.

“You sleep in it,” Busch explained, amused at his obvious perplexity. He demonstrated by slipping in and out of it with an ease, which could only have come from years of practice. Under his encouraging, and somewhat amused, eye, Rudi squirmed his way into the thing, finding it surprisingly comfortable, albeit prone to quivering alarmingly every time he moved. He was on the verge of verifying for himself just how easy it was to fall asleep when a metallic clanging reverberated throughout the boat.

“What’s that?” He sat up abruptly, almost falling out of the unstable contraption, and Busch laughed.

“That’s supper, lad. Time to see if your girlfriend can earn her keep as well as you.”

“She’s not my...” Rudi began, but Busch wasn’t listening, and he thought better of it anyway. Pretending to he siblings hadn’t helped at all at the coaching inn, and given Ansbach’s attitude towards Hanna perhaps it was no bad thing if the crew assumed she was spoken for. Besides, a sneaking little voice whispered from some where inside him, the idea that they might be more than just friends wasn’t that unpleasant, was it?

Supper was served in the main cabin, part of the structure on the upper deck, which appeared to accommodate the entire crew. As befitted their status Busch and Shenk had private quarters partitioned off from it, the captain’s was noticeably the larger, although given the size of the boat the actual difference in dimensions couldn’t have been more than a foot or two. The other end had also been partitioned off to form the galley, from where Hanna was dispensing plates of fish stew. Everyone ate at a long table, with benches along each side. Rudi wondered where everyone slept, until he saw the row of hooks along one wall and recognised the bundles of cloth hanging from the opposite one as rolled-up hammocks.

As he took his own plate Hanna smiled at him, and asked how he’d been getting on.

“Fine,” he said. “How about you?”

“It’s been interesting,” she said guardedly. “Cooking on a boat’s a bit of a challenge.”

“You’ve done all right.” A short, florid man he assumed was the cook nodded an acknowledgement as she spoke. Then he returned his attention to a bubbling pot behind him. “Go and sit down with the others.” Despite his attempt at politeness he seemed positively relieved when Hanna picked up her plate and went to sit next to Rudi.

“This smells great.” Rudi’s mouth watered as the steam rose in front of him, and he suddenly remembered he hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast. He picked up his spoon and was about to dig in when the captain tapped the table and the cabin fell silent. Everyone except Rudi and Hanna bowed their heads while Shenk recited a few words of grace in the name of Mannan, the patron deity of mariners.

Caught out by this Rudi hesitated for a moment. But as soon as he realised that everyone else was now devouring the food with every sign of appreciation, he took up his spoon again.

“This is excellent, my dear.” Captain Shenk smiled at Hanna from across the table. “I don’t know what you’ve done to improve things, but you’ll be welcome aboard for as long as you want to stay.”

“You can say that again, skip.” Ansbach grinned at her over an empty plate. “Good looking and a great cook. Where have you been all my life?”

“Socialising with humans,” Hanna said, raising a general laugh at his expense. Ansbach flushed crimson then joined in the laughter, with something of an effort.

“Good sense of humour too. I like that in a girl.”

“I’m sure you do,” Hanna said sweetly. “It must help enormously in getting a date.” Ansbach looked faintly baffled, sure she’d scored some kind of point but wasn’t quite clear how.

“All I did was put a few herbs in,” Hanna explained later as she and Rudi leaned on the rail together, watching the faint turbulence in the water which marked the wake of their passage. “You’d think none of them had ever tasted seasoning before.”

“Not like that, I’ll wager.” Rudi yawned, enjoying the moment of tranquillity, and the pleasure of her company. “You’re too modest about your own talents sometimes.”

“Look who’s talking,” she responded, without heat. The breeze across the water was cool and refreshing. It rippled her hair, which glimmered faintly in the darkness. Mannslieb was a thick crescent in the sky now, casting a faint silver sheen, which all but obliterated the diseased glow of its sister moon and complemented the faint blue radiance of the stars. Though far from strong the moonlight was bright enough to reveal the outline of her face, and a faint smile at the compliment she would never have allowed to surface in daylight. Rudi felt a sudden surge of affection, which took him completely by surprise. Feeling awkward and embarrassed he cleared his throat, unsure what to say next.

“I’d better get back to the galley,” Hanna said, before he could speak. She stepped away from the rail. “We need to get everything stowed away ready for the morning.”

“I could help,” Rudi offered, but she shook her head.

“Have you seen how small it is? There’s barely room for me and the cook as it is.” She hesitated on the threshold, and turned back for a moment before disappearing. “But thanks anyway.”

Left alone, Rudi paced the deck. Somehow he felt physically exhausted and wide-awake at the same time. He yawned widely, and turned back towards the hatch leading down to the hold and his hammock, then hesitated. Hanna would be turning in too, as soon as she'd finished her duties in the galley, and if he waited a little while longer he could meet her as she came out and they might continue their conversation...

And say what? he asked himself, circling the cabin. This was ridiculous. He should just go to bed and get some sleep. It looked as though he was going to have a hard day's work ahead of him tomorrow as well.

"So what do you make of our stowaways?" a voice asked out of the darkness ahead of him. About to round the corner of the cabin, Rudi froze. The speaker was Sherk, and he wasn't at all surprised to hear Busch reply.

"They're definitely hiding something," the mate said. "If their money was stolen like they say, why did they run away? Why not wait for the road wardens to sort it out? If you ask me that's who they were afraid of, not old Krause and his pot boys."

"You could be right." Sherk paused thoughtfully. "And if you are, there might be a reward out for them."

"I'll ask around tomorrow when we put in to Hauptmann's Landing," Busch said.

"Good idea. They get all the news from along the road." Sherk paused again. "I'll find something for the kids to do, to keep them distracted. If they're worth anything, bring a couple of the local watch back with you and we'll turn them in before they even know what's happening."

Rudi felt the words strike him like a bucket of ice water, sending a shiver of panic down his spine. The captain's treachery had taken him completely by surprise, and there was nothing he could see that they could do about it. Far from being a refuge, the *Reikmaiden* had turned out to be an even bigger trap than the cellar of the Jolly Friar.

His heart thudded in his chest as he backed away as quietly as he could. He had to find Hanna and warn her. Maybe between them they could work something out...

He hurried back to the galley, where the clash of pots and pans told him the job of tidying up was not yet complete. He hesitated outside the narrow door for a moment, breathing deeply, and trying to make himself seem calm. He peered round the door. Hanna was stacking dishes in a small cupboard, watched anxiously by the cook. She didn't see him at first, but the cook did. He glanced up as Rudi appeared in the doorway.

"Can I help you?" he asked. Taken by surprise, Rudi floundered for a moment.

"No thanks. Er, that is, I just wanted a quick word with Hanna."

"Can't it wait?" Hanna asked, looking up at the sound of his voice. "I'm a bit busy at the moment."

"Don't worry about it." The cook seemed positively pleased at the interruption. "You go ahead. I'll finish up. It's practically done now anyway."

"Well, if you're sure..." Hanna stepped out on to the deck with Rudi. She took in his alarmed expression in an instant. "Rudi, what's wrong?"

“We’re in trouble,” Rudi explained, and he filled her in on the conversation he’d overheard in a few crisp words. The faint frown on Hanna’s face deepened as he spoke. “We have to get out of here!”

“Easier said than done.” She looked around, taking in the shadowy deck around her. “It’s a long way to the bank. Can you swim?”

“A bit,” Rudi admitted, a little dubiously. The forest pools hadn’t been all that deep, or all that wide. Hanna nodded. “Me too. That’s something, I suppose.”

“Maybe we won’t have to.” He led her towards the stern, where the faint shape of the tillerman could be seen keeping his vigil in the darkness. A line was hitched to the rail there that trailed off into the night, terminating on a small rowing boat which followed the *Reikmaiden* like a cygnet after a swan. Pieter had pointed it out to him earlier in the day, explaining that it was used to run errands when it wasn’t worth the effort or risk of taking the vessel inshore. “If we could haul that little boat in…”

“There’s only one problem,” Hanna pointed out. “Him.” The tiller creaked, and the man leaning on it pulled it over. As he did so, his face came into the full light of the moons. It was Ansbach; he glanced in their direction and nodded a greeting. “He’d see you the minute you started pulling on the line.”

“Not if you distract him,” Rudi said. Hanna glared at him.

“What are you suggesting?”

“He likes you. Get into conversation with him or something.”

“It’s the ‘or something’ that worries me.” She paused for a moment, and then sighed. “But it’s not like we have much of a choice, is it?”

“I suppose not.” Rudi yawned, and stretched theatrically. He raised his voice a little so Ansbach could hear it. “I’m going to turn in. Coming?”

“In a while,” Hanna said, with elaborate casualness. “It’s such a nice night I’d like to make the most of it.” She waited until Rudi had moved towards the hold where they were quartered, before walking towards Ansbach. “Hello.”

“Hello there,” Ansbach grinned. She leaned on the rail. “Enjoying the moonlight?”

Rudi watched for a moment longer, until he was sure Ansbach’s attention was fully diverted. Then he hurried back to the hold for their possessions. He scooped up their packs, and the bow and the quiver, and clambered back on deck.

“Hello, young Rudi.” Shenk was standing close to the hatch cover, a pipe in his hand, the bowl glowing cherry red in the darkness. “Leaving us so soon?” He seemed vaguely surprised, but with all their worldly goods in his hands Rudi supposed there was no other conclusion he could come to.

“Hauptmann’s Landing might be a little too exciting for a couple of country kids,” he replied. Shenk nodded.

“Ah. You heard our conversation.” He shrugged. “Believe it or not, I’m sorry I turned out to be right about you.” A faint flicker of his eyes past Rudi’s shoulder gave the young messenger a fraction of a second’s warning, and he ducked just in time to avoid a blow to the back of his head. He turned, dropping the bundle of possessions as a heavy belaying pin rapped against the top of his shoulder.

Searing pain lanced down his left arm and he punched out with his right. A jolt indicated that the blow had connected. Busch staggered back, his nose spurting, the blood looking black in the moonlight.

“You little snotling-fondler!” He charged forwards again, his head lowered. Rudi felt a starburst of pain erupt between his eyes as the mate’s skull smashed into his own. He staggered back, feeling the rail behind him hemming him in.

“Find the girl!” Shenk shouted. He was answered almost immediately by Ansbach’s “Over here, skip!” Rudi blinked his eyes clear, just in time to feel a hard punch against his jaw as Busch swung his fist with clinical precision. This wasn’t like the fight he’d had with the Katzenjammers, he realised, this was real and earnest, and his opponent wouldn’t back off until one of them was incapacitated.

A surge of energy rose within him, and he blocked the next punch with his injured arm. Ignoring the sudden burst of pain, his right fist drove low into Busch’s midriff, and the mate doubled over. For a moment Rudi thought the fight was finished, but some instinct told him the man was rallying, so he kicked out, bracing himself against the rail, hoping to take his opponent in the throat. A small part of him was appalled that he was capable of such brutality, but the feeling was drowned out by a raging bloodlust that had somehow taken him over.

“Oh no you don’t!” Shenk stepped in to defend his friend. He grabbed Rudi’s foot in mid air, and twisted it. Caught off-balance Rudi staggered back towards the rail again, and found himself toppling over. He flailed his arms, trying to recover his balance.

“Hanna!” he yelled. Whether it was an appeal for aid, or to reassure himself that she was all right, he couldn’t tell. As his head turned he could see she was grappling with Ansbach, who had abandoned his station at the tiller to restrain her. For a moment he feared she’d be overwhelmed, but she brought her knee up in a sharp, short motion, and the deckhand staggered back howling in agony. As he fell he crashed against the tiller bar, knocking it hard over, and the *Reikmaiden* lurched, wallowing in the water as she abruptly lost way.

The sudden movement was enough to ruin any chance Rudi might have had of recovering his balance. The rail rolled out from beneath his back and he found himself falling, plunging into darkness. Then he hit the water, and the cold embrace of the Reik closed itself over his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Rudi surfaced, panting for air. The water was cold, bone-numbingly so, far more than the forest pools he was used to bathing in on summer afternoons. The sudden shock of it seemed to have frozen his lungs. He snatched at the air in brief, painful gasps, relieved to find that each breath seemed a little larger than the previous one, until after a moment or two he was taking in as much oxygen as usual.

“Get off me!” Hanna’s voice echoed across the water and he turned his head, picking out the dark bulk of the *Reikmaiden* drifting a few yards away. Her sails were flapping, empty of wind, and she seemed to be turning slowly under the influence of the unattended tiller, which was still hard over. Lamps shone through the gaps around the cabin doors, sketching eerie golden lines on her silhouette. Only this and her running lights marked her out from the darkness.

Hanna was clearly visible on the aft deck, where he’d left her, backed against the rail as a group of crewmen closed in. Quite how many there were he couldn’t tell, as their outlines blurred together in the surrounding gloom, but there were clearly too many for her to fight off alone. She’d evidently come to the same conclusion, because she swung a leg over the rail and jumped before he even had time to scream out a warning.

The splash of her landing echoed across the water. Rudi struck out for it, guided by the sound. A confused babble of voices provided a background to the splashing of his progress and the flailing of the girl ahead of him.

“Yullis! Get on the tiller. The rest of you get the sails sorted out!” Shenk was barking orders, apparently more concerned for the welfare of his vessel than the fate of the fugitives who’d gone overboard. The boat was drifting sluggishly now, moving further away with every second that passed. Rudi dismissed it from his mind. Even if the *Reikmaiden*’s master could be bothered turning back to look for them, by the time the boat was back under control they would have vanished completely in the gloom.

That, come to think of it, was something of a mixed blessing. Disorientated, he had only the vaguest idea of where the shore was. A loud splash off to his right grabbed his attention. One problem at a time was enough to deal with.

“Hanna?” he called.

“Rudi!” Her voice held an unmistakable tone of relief. “Over here!” Guided by intermittent shouts and the splashing of the other’s progress they came together at last. Together they trod water and glanced round for some clue as to the location of the shore.

“Over there,” Hanna insisted, pointing. “I saw a light, I’m sure of it.”

“It could just have been a reflection in the water,” Rudi said. Hanna made the familiar sound of exasperation in the back of her throat.

“Or it could have been a campfire. Look.” Rudi turned his head in the direction she indicated catching a glimpse of flickering orange for a moment. Then it vanished.

“Why would it disappear like that?”

“We’re still moving with the current. Maybe a tree or something got in the way.” Hanna was becoming quite waspish. “Do you want to keep discussing it until we drown, or head for the shore?”

“If that is the shore,” Rudi murmured. But he had no better suggestion to offer, so they struck out again in the direction she indicated.

The swim was a long and exhausting one. Several times he thought she’d been mistaken and that they were heading for the far bank, or that they were swimming along with the river itself. He kept such anxieties to himself, and concentrated on the steady rhythm of swimming. No doubt the same thoughts had occurred to Hanna too, but verbalising them would only sap both their confidences.

Time stretched agonisingly, the freezing water leeching the strength from his muscles and bones. He’d never swum so far, never dreamed it was even possible, far less that he’d ever need to do so. His clothes were sodden, a heavy burden which encumbered every kick, and threatened to drag him down. The gods alone knew how Hanna was able to manage wrapped in a skirt.

Eventually he felt something yielding under his hands as he reached down to plough through the water. Then a weed clung briefly to his fingers as they made another stroke. With a sense of exquisite relief he let his feet drift down until they touched bottom, sinking into the mud of the river bed. Cautiously he allowed them to take his weight and found he was standing upright, water cascading down his torso. The mighty Reik, largest body of water in the Empire, came no higher than his waist.

“Hanna. Hanna, we’ve made it.” Bemused by exhaustion, she ploughed on for another couple of strokes, then the meaning of his words finally penetrated. She stopped moving and forced herself upright. “You were right.”

“I’m always right,” she said, an unmistakable tone of relief in her voice robbing the remark of the arrogance he would once have been able to detect there. She swayed on her feet, exhausted, and Rudi put an arm around her waist to support her. He expected some protest or rebuke, but she accepted his help without complaint, and draped her own arm across his shoulders.

They waded ashore a few moments later, scrambling up a grassy bank with the last of their strength. Exhausted, they collapsed on an area of greensward.

Rudi lay on his stomach, shivering, every muscle in his body screaming in protest. He shuddered as though he had the ague, his wet clothes sucking the warmth from his body, but he was past caring. He drifted on the verge of sleep, more utterly exhausted than he’d ever been in his life.

“Wake up!” Hanna shook him, rolling him over onto his back. He stared up at her, his vision bleary. “If you lie here you’ll freeze to death. We have to get a fire going!”

“Fire. Right.” Rudi staggered to his feet, trying to focus on their surroundings. There was a small thicket of trees a few score paces away. He walked towards it, reeling like a drunkard. There would be wood there, and shelter from the wind.

Hanna stumbled beside him, keeping an eye out for suitable sticks. Mercifully their eyes had adjusted to the night by now, and the moonlight was sufficient to pick out what they needed, so they soon accumulated a decent sized bundle.

“Here will do.” Rudi crouched down in a small hollow surrounded by trees. It was reasonably sheltered, and would keep out most of the breeze drifting in from the direction of the river. Hanna arranged their collection of sticks, and he reached into his belt pouch for the tinderbox.

“It’s gone!” The pouch was open, no doubt as a result of his fall from the riverboat. He scrabbled through it, frantically, but it was almost completely empty. The only thing remaining was one of his snare lines, which had somehow become entangled around his belt on its way out of the pouch. “The tinderbox! It’s gone!” He stared at Hanna in horror. Without a fire they’d both be dead by morning.

“Damn,” Hanna said flatly. She stared at the little pile of sticks, which seemed to be mocking them. Rudi’s mind spun. They had to do something...

A memory stirred. He’d still had the box when she lit the candle in the cellar of the Jolly Friar. She must have one too, unless she’d been equally unlucky with the river...

“We’ll have to use yours,” he said. Hanna looked deeply unhappy.

“I haven’t got one,” she said at last. Rudi looked at her sharply. Something in her tone of voice disturbed him. She sounded wary, frightened almost. This was completely at odds with the self-confident young woman he’d thought he was getting to know.

“But you must have,” he said. “How else did you light that candle?” Something else occurred to him. “And those fires on the moor? I know I had the box at least once when you did that...”

“It’s... it’s hard to explain...” she began, then stopped. After a moment she came to a decision. She leaned towards the bundle of firewood, and stretched out a hand. Rudi felt a strange, premonitory tingle in the base of his spine, and shuddered with something other than the cold.

A spark appeared suddenly in the middle of the twigs, spreading out with a soft *whump!* of combustion. Flames grew, taking hold of the sticks, and a warm orange crackle of firelight began to suffuse the hollow. Rudi stared at her, shock and horror pounding through his body. He was trying to keep his face impassive, but it was a losing battle. Hanna looked up, her face illuminated by the flickering flames, her expression somehow both hopeful and defiant. Reading his face, her own hardened.

“You really are a witch!” The words burst out of him before he could stop them. He had to fight the impulse to back away. Hanna glared contemptuously at him.

“If you want to believe that, go right ahead. You’re no better than Gerhard.”

“At least I haven’t murdered anybody!” To his surprise, anger and hurt seemed to be edging out the shock and fear he’d felt at first.

“Meaning what?” Hanna snapped. “You think I’m a killer too?”

“No. I meant Gerhard...” Rudi almost choked, finding the right words almost impossible to articulate.

“Fine.” Hanna was in no mood to argue. “You think I’m a witch then you can just go. See how far you get before you freeze, see if I care!”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rudi demanded. “All this time... I thought we were friends!”

“Because I thought you’d react like this,” Hanna snapped. “And don’t tell me you’ve been entirely honest about what happened in the forest that night either.” The accusation took him completely by surprise, not least because it was true. His silence was all the confirmation she needed, and she turned away with a snort of disgust, tugging at the laces of her bodice. The water had hardened the knots, so it took her a moment or two of effort to get them undone. Rudi watched her step out of her skirt in dumbfounded silence.

“We have to get our clothes dry,” Hanna said, looking back at him through the flickering firelight. “You’ll do the same if you’ve got any sense; I’m not nursing you through a fever if you insist on catching cold.”

She stripped off her petticoat, the firelight flickering warmly against the curves of her body Rudi knew he was staring, but he just couldn’t help it. Hanna stared levelly back at him through the flames, as self-possessed and intimidating as she’d ever been.

“Don’t get any ideas, or I’ll toast your nads like chestnuts.” She turned away, hanging her steaming garments on a convenient bush.

With his head reeling, Rudi followed suit. He did indeed feel warmer once his sodden clothes were discarded. He huddled down close to the fire, staying on the opposite side of it to Hanna, who wrapped her arms around her shins and rested her chin on her knees. With an effort he kept his gaze focussed mostly on her face, although the temptation to let his eyes wander was almost irresistible, and what he’d already seen would be enough to keep his imagination feverishly occupied for some time to come. He wasn’t sure how serious her threat had been, but after what she’d evidently done to the oil lamps in the Jolly Friar he wasn’t keen to put her to the test.

Some time passed in awkward silence. The moisture dried on his skin, and the warmth of the flames made him feel drowsy.

“You were right,” he said at last. “I should have told you the truth about what happened in the forest. But I didn’t understand it. And I was afraid you’d... that something like this would come between us.” He looked up, hoping for a response, but her eyes were closed. Slowly she toppled sideways onto the grass, still curled into the foetal position, and began to snore quietly.

Rudi sighed, and lay down too. But sleep was a long time coming, despite his exhaustion.

When he woke squinting his eyes against the sunlight striking down out of a clear blue sky, Hanna was already awake and dressed, to his mingled relief and disappointment. She was sitting in almost exactly the same spot, on the opposite side of the fire, which by now had burned down to a small pile of gently glowing embers. He yawned and sat up, turning his back as he did so in a futile attempt to preserve his modesty, and reached for his britches. To his relief they were almost dry, just faintly damp to the touch. He scrambled into his clothes as rapidly as he could.

“Well at least we don’t smell of fish oil anymore,” he said, trying to make casual conversation, but Hanna refused to respond. She pointed to a small heap of berries on a leaf.

“I found those while you were asleep. They’re not much, but they’ll have to do.”

“Thanks.” Rudi took his share gratefully, abruptly aware that he was ravenously hungry. The handful of fruit took the edge off it, but he still felt painfully empty. To take his mind off the discomfort he worked his stiff muscles, wincing as he moved his left arm. His shoulder was marked by a livid bruise where Busch had struck him the previous night.

“This might help.” Hanna approached him, a little warily, and tucked a handful of moss in the top of his shirt. “Not as much as a proper preparation, but it’ll have to do.”

“Thank you,” Rudi replied, chafing at the stilted nature of the conversation. Something had come between them and it had eroded the casual intimacy they’d begun to share. He missed it.

“Well then.” Hanna shrugged. “What do we do now?”

“Start walking, I suppose,” Rudi said. He looked around the clearing, hoping to find some clue as to the best direction. A flash of silver caught his attention beyond the trees, marking the position of the river. He turned, so it was on his right, and pointed straight ahead. “Marienburg should be that way.”

“Good a direction as any, I guess,” Hanna conceded, and began to walk away without another word. Rudi broke into a trot to catch up with her.

“Hanna. Hanna, wait!” He took hold of her arm and she stopped, whirling to face him.

“Let go of me.” Her voice was menacing, and tight with anger. Rudi opened his hand.

“We need to talk.”

“There’s nothing to discuss.” She started walking again, and Rudi fell into step beside her.

“There’s everything to discuss. Look, I’m sorry I called you a... said what I did last night. I was shocked.”

“Evidently.” Her tone was as hard as ever, and she didn’t turn her head to look at him.

“I know you, Hanna. I know you wouldn’t do anything bad. Couldn’t. You help people. You’re kind and thoughtful, even if you try to hide it sometimes, which is why I like you so much. I believe in you, whatever idiots like Gerhard and the Katzenjammers say.” An edge of desperation was entering his voice now, he knew that, but didn’t care. “I just want to understand. So I know what... who I’m fighting to protect.”

“I can protect myself.” Despite the words, her voice had softened a little. She turned her head to look at him, and the beginnings of a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Thank you for wanting to, though.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” He ventured a faint smile of his own. “You’re a very special person.”

“You’re not exactly ten a penny yourself,” she admitted grudgingly. They walked on in silence for some time. Rudi kept thinking he ought to say something else, to ease the tension that still hung between them, but every time he opened his mouth he thought better of it. Perhaps it was better to say nothing than risk offending her again.

They'd left the trees some way behind them, and were striding across a knee-high plain of grass, before Hanna spoke again.

"What do you know about magic?" she asked abruptly. Taken by surprise, Rudi shrugged.

"Nothing, really. I've never met a... a mage before." Hanna smiled at his choice of words.

"I'm not a mage either. I just know a couple of simple spells my mother taught me."

"I see," Rudi said. Another thought occurred to him. "So what else can you do?"

"I can make light." Hanna waved a hand at the bright, sunlit landscape around them. "Not much point showing you that at the moment. And I can make myself cooler sometimes, when it's too hot."

"And that's it?" Rudi asked. Hanna nodded.

"Mostly, yes. Except, sometimes, I can feel the power getting stronger, as though it's trying to get out of me. That's scary."

"I suppose it must be." Rudi nodded slowly. "Or maybe it just means you're getting better at controlling it."

"I hadn't thought of that." Hanna looked at him, a thoughtful expression on her face. "It's really good being able to talk to someone about this you know."

"What else are friends for?" Rudi said, shrugging.

"I don't know. I've never really had one before." She looked a little crestfallen at the thought. Rudi squeezed her hand briefly, sympathetically, and was pleasantly surprised when she tightened her own grip in response.

"Neither have I. Not like you, anyway." The silence between them now was more eloquent than words could ever have been.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

They walked for most of the day through a landscape of unvarying monotony. Rudi was reminded of the moor they'd crossed before, but here, on the fertile floodplain of the Reik, the grass was lusher and the patches of tree and scrub more verdant. The ground was more waterlogged too. The grassland gave way to patches of marsh without warning, forcing them further and further away from the banks of the river. Before long it was out of sight completely, except in occasional glimpses. But there was no fear of losing their way, the sky in that direction was the paler blue of reflected water, a constant reminder of the river's presence.

Although both he and Hanna chafed impatiently every time they were forced to make another detour, Rudi felt that this might be a good thing after all. If Shenk had spread the news about them at his next port of call, any searchers would be looking for them in the wrong direction. How far downstream Hauptmann's Landing might be he had no idea, but he was pretty sure they'd come far enough inland to slip past it unobserved by now.

Another difference to the wasteland they'd traversed before was that this was an area teeming with life. He was pleased to see plenty of evidence of rabbits, but there was a plethora of other game too. The marshes were thronged with waterfowl, none of them species he recognised. On several occasions he saw the distinctive tracks of deer too. Each time this happened he felt a renewed pang of regret for his lost bow.

As it was they subsisted on the few nuts and berries Hanna recognised as edible, plucking them from bushes as they passed. But each hastily snatched mouthful only emphasised their growing hunger. Even worse was the thirst, which was becoming a permanent torment to them both, but all the water surrounding them was brackish, and to drink it was to risk delirium or worse. As the day wore on, and the sun grew steadily warmer, Rudi grew more and more tempted to risk it. A dark, insistent voice at the back of his mind urged him to quench his thirst at every stinking mud pool they passed. If it hadn't been for Hanna he might even have succumbed, but the thought of her disgust at such a display was enough to restrain him.

"It's no good." She sank to the ground, which squelched beneath her knees. "I have to rest."

"Not here." Rudi glanced around them. "It isn't safe." They were traversing an area of marshland, which at first he'd thought they'd managed to avoid altogether, only after some time had passed had he realised that it was closing in on their left as well, and the day was too far advanced to retrace their steps. Now they were forced to stick to whatever areas of firm ground they could find; they were surrounded on all sides by treacherous patches of almost liquid mud. He pointed to a low grey mound in the distance. "There's dry land over there. It's not far."

“All right.” Hanna struggled to her feet, as aware as he was of the dangers of being caught out here after dark. She took Rudi’s proffered hand as she rose, but let go of it once she was back on her feet. “I can manage.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” Rudi said, earning a strained grin in reply.

They stumbled on in the gathering twilight and the mound in the distance growing ever closer. Soon, to his relieved surprise, the going became firmer underfoot.

“I think we’re through the worst of it,” he said, and Hanna nodded.

“Just in time, too.”

The sun was beginning to set, the sky to the left of them a vivid red, as though the clouds were on fire. The world around them was beginning to fade into shades of grey. There was still enough light to make out the large patch of bushes and scrub ahead of them, and as Rudi stared at it he could make out regular lines among the tangle of undergrowth.

“It’s a ruin of some kind,” he said, surprised. At first he assumed it was another old farmstead, like the one they’d found before, but the closer they got the larger it seemed, until it loomed over them like a temple. “Why would anyone build something that size out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Because when they did, it wasn’t.” Hanna ran a hand over the old stonework, which was still remarkably smooth to the touch. The tumbled blocks around it were finely wrought, showing no tool marks at all. “This is old, really old. It must have been here for thousands of years.” Her voice was tinged with awe.

“Thousands of years?” Rudi couldn’t even imagine a period of time that long. “How can you tell?” Hanna indicated something incised into the surface, strange flowing lines, which he supposed formed words.

“I think this is elvish. They lived here long before humans, even before Sigmar’s time.”

“What does it say?” he asked, and Hanna laughed, a sound somewhere between amusement and exasperation.

“I haven’t a clue. I can only read Reikspiel, not every language under the sun.”

“Oh.” Rudi tried to hide his disappointment. He’d assumed that being able to read meant that you could read everything, but this clearly wasn’t the case. “How do you know it’s elvish then?”

“I’m making an educated guess,” Hanna said, clearly irritated by the question. “I know the elves were here in antiquity, and this place is very old. It’s not that hard to make the connection.”

“But how do you know the elves were here in the first place?” Rudi persisted. Hanna gave him one of her best withering looks.

“I read it. In a book. In Reikspiel.” She reined in her irritation with a visible effort. “I’m sorry. I’m tired and hungry, that’s all.”

“Me too,” Rudi admitted. He pulled his solitary snare line out of his pouch. “I’d better find somewhere to set this before the light goes.”

“Good idea. I’ll get some brushwood together.” Hanna wandered off to get some firewood, and Rudi went looking for a rabbit run. It took longer than he expected, and he offered up a quick prayer to Taal to provide a coney to fill the trap as he

completed the task. His stomach was beginning to knot painfully by this time, and he could only imagine how Hanna was feeling.

She was waiting for him back at the ruin, her arms full of sticks, and despite the pain in his belly Rudi forced a smile. "You've been busy."

"It passed the time," she said, with studied nonchalance. "Where do you think we should camp?" Her face looked strained in the twilight. The moons were not yet high enough to provide much illumination, but the sun was still sufficiently close beyond the horizon to cast a feeble reflected glow against the sky. Despite her best efforts, Hanna's voice was becoming slurred with fatigue.

"Perhaps we should try inside," Rudi suggested, and Hanna nodded.

"It should be safe. The walls seem pretty solid." A few moments of exploration along the stonework were enough to reveal a rectangle of solid darkness, which stood out in vivid contrast from the masonry surrounding it. Only then did Rudi realise the stones themselves were glowing softly, reflecting the feeble moonlight.

"Definitely elvish," Hanna confirmed when he pointed it out. She regarded the shadowed entrance with thinly disguised apprehension. "We won't be able to see a thing in there."

"I thought you knew a spell for that?" Rudi asked. Hanna looked worried.

"I do. But casting one makes me tired, even at the best of times. I'm not sure I've got the energy after today."

"Maybe if I go first," Rudi suggested, edging closer to the pitch-black entrance. Hanna shook her head impatiently.

"You don't know what's in there. You could fall and break your neck." She sighed, then screwed up her eyes in an expression of pained concentration. At first Rudi was afraid she'd failed, and stepped forward to support her as she swayed on her feet. But then a pale glow began to form in the air ahead of them, a flickering tongue of yellow fire like the flame of a candle, floating at about head height.

"You did it." He hugged her briefly and led her forward, both of them stumbling with fatigue so much it was hard to tell which was supporting the other. "I knew you would." He barely noticed their surroundings at first, preoccupied as he was with guiding her faltering footsteps.

When he did, he simply stopped in amazement and stared. They were in a vast chamber, seemingly a perfect circle. Overhead the ceiling rose to a dome, decorated with paintings all but obscured by time and filth, and still more murals covered the walls. Eight passageways led into the room, equidistant from each other. With a thrill of panic he realised that he couldn't remember which one they'd entered by. No matter, his reason reassured him, when the morning came they'd be able to see daylight through it, and even if they didn't the floor was covered in enough detritus for their tracks to be clearly visible. The floor appeared to be tiled, though many were cracked and broken; they had obviously once formed a mosaic of tremendous intricacy and exquisite workmanship.

"Hanna! Look!" He nudged her, and directed her lolling head to the centre of the room. She took a moment to respond, and when she did it was with a burst of wakefulness that surprised him. Dropping the bundle of firewood she staggered to the ornamental fountain right beneath the centre of the dome, and leaned against the cool marble lip of it. A channel wider than Rudi could reach ran all the way round the

structure at about waist height, collecting water that ran down the sides of the stone column in the centre. Warily she cupped her hand and sipped at it, then drank deep.

“It’s clean! Shallya be praised!” Rudi needed no further urging. He plunged his head into the cool, clear fluid, slaking his thirst and driving back his fatigue at the same time.

They both drank until they could hold no more then splashed water at each other like children, laughing hysterically with relief at their deliverance. Even the ache in their stomachs subsided a little, bloated as they were with the precious liquid. After a while they sobered up, and began to make preparations for the night.

“It looks as though someone’s been here before us,” Rudi said. Now he was feeling a little more refreshed he was exploring the chamber more methodically. He had found the remains of a campfire on the other side of the fountain. Hanna squatted down to examine it more carefully.

“Not recently,” she concluded, rubbing powdery ash between her fingers. Nevertheless it saved them the bother of constructing their own firepit from pieces of rubble, and they soon had a cheerful blaze crackling away. Rudi had been worried that Hanna was too exhausted to kindle the fire, but she’d repeated the trick he’d seen the previous night without much visible effort. The most unnerving thing was that the floating lamp had gone out before she began, so they’d been plunged into pitch darkness, but the bundle of sticks had flashed into flame almost immediately, providing light again as well as warmth.

“I can’t maintain two spells at once,” Hanna explained, illuminated now by the cosy glow of the campfire. Rudi nodded, as if he understood.

“Lucky you weren’t too tired to get the fire going, then.”

“Yes,” Hanna agreed. “I was a little worried about that.” She smiled as she said it, so Rudi wasn’t sure how seriously to take the remark. Being entirely in the dark here for the rest of the night would have been no laughing matter. It was obvious from the number of tracks in the litter on the floor that the fountain attracted a fair number of animals, and some of them could easily be dangerous.

To distract himself he wandered back to the fountain again. Now he came to look at it closely it had been sculpted to resemble a building of some kind, tall and slender. After a while he realised there was something familiar about the larger structure at its base.

“I think this is what this place used to look like,” he said. Hanna joined him.

“You’re right. We’re in the main building here.” She pointed. “The watchtower must have been right over our heads.”

“Is that what it was?” Rudi looked puzzled. “Watching for what?”

“Those, presumably.” Hanna squatted again, brushing the encrusted detritus of millennia away from the reliefs that decorated the pillar of the fountain below the rim. They depicted battle scenes, in which slender warriors with pointed ears fought hunched monstrosities. They seemed vaguely familiar to Rudi for some reason.

“They look like goblins,” he said at last. “But they’re huge.”

“Orcs,” Hanna said decisively. Rudi nodded, and stared at the grotesque creatures with vague apprehension.

“I don’t suppose there are any still around here, are there?”

“Of course not,” Hanna said, a little too vehemently. “Sigmar killed them all. The only ones left nowadays are leagues away, right on the fringes of the Empire.”

“Good,” Rudi said, somewhat reassured. He returned to the fire and settled again, trying to make himself comfortable on the stone floor. Without a bedroll, or a pack to use as a pillow, he didn’t expect to sleep much that night, but he might as well close his eyes at least...

“Rudi!” He woke with a start. Hanna’s urgent whisper was loud in his ear. She was shaking his shoulder gently. “I think something’s coming!”

“What kind of thing?” he asked, adrenaline coursing through his body. The fire had burned low, reducing the light it gave off to a feeble glow and he could barely see a thing.

“I don’t know. Listen!”

He strained his ears, hearing a skittering sound in the darkness, as though something was moving. Several things, he corrected himself, fast and stealthy. A faint squeaking was overlaid with it, modulated almost like speech, but he couldn’t imagine what sort of creature would make a sound like that.

“I think we should go,” Hanna said, an uncharacteristic edge of nervousness entering her voice.

“I think you’re right.” He glanced around the chamber, trying to remember which of the corridors they’d come in by, but he was now completely disorientated. The glow of the fire was too feeble to make out the tracks they’d left coming, so that was no help. He was pretty sure that it was one of the three facing them, on the other side of the fountain. “Can you remember which entrance we came in by?”

“No.” Hanna shook her head. “And we can’t stay here to debate it.”

“This way.” Rudi made a snap decision. By moving towards the leftmost of the three doorways he’d narrowed the choice down. It was as good a direction as any, and seemed to be directly away from the sound of the approaching creatures.

To his relief they made it to the sheltering shadows before anything arrived in the chamber.

They hesitated on the brink of the deeper darkness. Hanna took hold of Rudi’s arm, and urged him onwards, but he resisted.

“Wait a moment,” he whispered. “I want to see what they are.” A moment later shadows began creeping across the chamber behind them, and a small knot of hunched figures emerged from the opposite tunnel mouth. Rudi tried to count them, but they were huddled so close together that their silhouettes blurred and merged. They were roughly man-sized, he could tell that, but hunched and misshapen, concealed beneath hooded cloaks.

“Beastmen!” Hanna breathed. Rudi nodded, although the ones he’d seen before seemed very different. These looked more like rodents, with tails protruding from their enveloping garments that trailed behind them like fat, diseased worms. He suppressed a shudder of revulsion, and turned to leave.

Just in time too, it seemed. The creatures’ chattering speech rose in volume and intensity as they approached the fire, and a couple of them seemed to be sniffing the air. To Rudi’s horror they began to fan out, clearly looking for whoever had been camping there.

“Come on!” he whispered, taking Hanna by the arm. They hurried into the depths of the tunnel. Impenetrable darkness wrapped itself around them, leaving Rudi feeling suffocated, as though the air itself was solidifying.

“This is insane,” Hanna panted at his side. “We could be running into anything!”

“If you conjure up a light they’ll know where we are!” Rudi countered. Behind them the squeaking and chittering had increased in volume, and the sound he most dreaded, the scuttling of rodent feet, echoed in the tunnel behind them. A few of the creatures had picked the right exit from the chamber, whether by luck or some abhuman sense he couldn’t say.

Abruptly the pressure of darkness against his face eased, and he found he could see a little; the cool silvery light of Mannslieb was filtering through a crack in the ceiling. It illuminated the tumbled blocks of stone that choked the corridor ahead of them. For a moment he thought they were trapped, and he cast around desperately for a shard of rock small enough to use as a weapon.

“Thank Sigmar for that!” Hanna clambered up onto the nearest block of stone. “We can get out this way.”

She was right, Rudi realised, with a sudden flare of relief. He scrambled up beside her, then onto another block balanced precariously atop it. He reached down to help her up, then leaped for the gap in the ceiling. For a moment he thought he wasn’t going to make it, but his scrabbling fingers found purchase at last, and he swung himself up with a sudden surge of energy he hadn’t thought himself capable of.

Outside the moonlight was brighter than ever. It lit up a roof pitted with rubble, over which the remains of the dome they’d sheltered in still loomed. The watchtower must have fallen this way, and caved in the roof on this side of the building. Huge blocks of stone lay scattered beyond, some of them larger than a hayrick. They receded as far as the eye could see into the distance. There was no time to stare at the spectacle now. Gasping, he rolled over onto his stomach, and reached down into the hole.

“Grab my hands!” Hanna leaped as high as she could and snatched at his wrists. For a heart-stopping moment he thought she hadn’t been quick enough to close her grip, so he grabbed at her forearms, but she clung on grimly. His arms were dragged painfully down as he took her weight, and he felt himself tugged forwards towards the abyss. Pulling back with all his strength, and ignoring the flares of pain along his arms and back, Rudi swung her up to where she could grasp solid stone and haul herself out onto the rooftop.

They were just in time, as their chittering, skittering pursuers had reached the tumbled stone beneath them, and began to swarm up it without even seeming to slow down.

“Run!” Rudi picked up a chunk of debris and threw it at the leading creature. It squealed, and tumbled back. “I’ll hold them off!”

“Hold them off?” Hanna grabbed his arm, dragging him after her. “Who do you think you are, Konrad from the ballads?” They pelted across the rubble-strewn roof, hardly daring to look behind. But Rudi’s lucky hit with the piece of stone seemed to have bought them a little time. However dangerous these creatures might be, they were clearly more cautious than the average beastman.

“There’s no way down!” Rudi looked left and right. There was nothing but smooth, unbroken stonework below them.

Hanna shook her head. “We’ll just have to jump.”

“We’ll break our necks!” The ground below was pitted with rubble, and dappled with patches of shadow, which could have concealed anything. The drop was at least three times their height, and Rudi would have been reluctant to chance it even in broad daylight. In the dark severe injury or worse seemed inevitable.

“Not necessarily. Look.” Hanna pointed to one of the larger pieces of the tumbled watchtower. It was only a couple of yards away, and only half the height of the building they stood on. “If we can make it over there we should be able to get down to the ground.”

It was risky, but less so than waiting for their pursuers to catch up with them. A renewed cacophony of squeaking behind them made his mind up. A quick glance back was enough to confirm that the creatures were emerging from the hole in the roof, and were scuttling towards them from one patch of shadow to the next.

“Come on!” Before he could change his mind he clambered up onto the parapet and launched himself into the night. For an instant he thought he wasn’t going to make it, then hard, cracked stone slammed into his body, driving the wind from his lungs. Gasping for breath he staggered to his feet, looking around for his companion.

Hanna was still balanced on the lip of the drop, her face white in the moonlight. He waved, urging her on.

“Hurry!”

“I can’t!” Her voice was strained. “It’s too far! You’re much stronger than me, and you barely made it!”

“You’ll be fine! I’ll catch you!” Scuttling silhouettes appeared behind her, squealing excitedly. They were closing in on their prey. “For Sigmar’s sake, jump!”

For a moment he thought she’d left it too late, but just as the creatures seemed on the point of seizing her she closed her eyes and leapt convulsively. Shriill howls of disappointment rose from the warband stranded on the roof, but Rudi ignored them, his attention was riveted on the girl. She seemed to be falling more slowly than normal. The world seeming sluggish to his adrenaline-enhanced senses, as it had the morning he shot the wolf. She landed on the very lip of the block of stone, her knees flexing to absorb the impact, pushing her centre of gravity back. Her arms flailed and she began to topple backwards towards the ground below.

“It’s all right! I’ve got you!” Rudi grabbed her around the waist, and yanked her back onto solid stone. Her arms shot forward, wrapping his torso in a tight embrace. “Everything’s fine.” She clung to him for a moment, trembling with reaction, and Rudi took a couple of steps back from the edge. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Hanna took a deep breath, and let go. Despite the danger Rudi couldn’t help feeling a vague sense of disappointment.

“Better get moving,” he said. The creatures showed no inclination to follow them, but it seemed they didn’t have to. The one he assumed to be the leader lifted a narrow snout to the sky and squealed something loud and undulating. Answering squeaks echoed from elsewhere in the ruins.

“I think you’re right.”

They scrambled down the edge of the stone block without difficulty, releasing their hands and dropping the remaining yard or so to the ground. “Where to now?” asked Hanna.

“This way, I suppose.” Rudi picked a direction he estimated led directly away from the loudest cries, although the maze of tumbled stone they now found themselves in echoed so much it was hard to be sure. They ran as hard as they could, heedless of the danger of tripping or turning an ankle on the rough ground beneath their feet. The labyrinth seemed to go on forever, and Rudi could not imagine how vast the structure had been before it fell.

“Rudi! Look out!” Hanna spotted the lurking ambushers an instant before they attacked, swarming out of the darkness between several blocks of stone ahead. They ran forwards, chittering excitedly, the moonlight glittering from blades in their hands. Rudi tried to estimate their numbers, but had no time before they were on him. There were a dozen at least, he thought. Then he was borne to the ground by a rush of foul-smelling fur.

As the leading creature closed with him he got his first real glimpse of it, and shuddered in instinctive revulsion. It resembled nothing so much as a gigantic rat, its sharp incisors catching the moonlight as it charged. He aimed a punch at it, but it dodged the blow easily, ducking its head to take him in the chest. Other rat-things seized his arms and legs, throwing him down and immobilising him. He thrashed around, trying to throw them off, and turned his head desperately looking for Hanna. If he could just buy her enough time to get away...

That hope evaporated in a shrill scream of fear and revulsion, which could only have been her. Frantic to help her he redoubled his efforts, but the rodents restrained him easily. He struggled desperately, expecting to feel those wicked teeth in his throat at any moment.

Then his eardrums rattled with a *whump* of combustion, similar to that which accompanied the magical lighting of a campfire. But it was louder than he'd ever heard it, and was accompanied by shrill squeals of panic and pain. The pressure against his body eased, and with a surge of strength he hadn't known he possessed, he managed to throw off a couple of his assailants. The rest of them abruptly let go, and started to retreat, scuttling for the shadows like regular-sized rats.

“Oh no you don't!” Carried away by the rage that had welled up inside him as he struggled for his life, he seized the creature that had first attacked him by the tail, and yanked it back. Squealing, it tumbled to the ground, where it scabbled frantically for a moment in a futile effort to escape. Realising that its efforts were in vain it turned abruptly, mouth agape, and tried to bite him.

Rudi rolled aside, punching it hard in the face. It squealed again, slashing at him with its claws, which caught in the fabric of his shirt. Rudi fended it off and rolled again, gaining the upper hand and pinning it to the ground. He punched it on the snout, which cracked loudly under the impact, and the rat-thing bucked madly, its incisors clicking together inches from his face.

Realising he had to keep it from biting at all costs Rudi gripped it around the throat with both hands and raised himself up, keeping his face as far away from it as possible. The creature thrashed frantically as his whole weight bore down on its

windpipe, and a mottling of foam began to appear around its jaws. Then, with a sudden rattling gasp and a shudder, it went limp.

Panting from the exertion Rudi let it go and staggered to his feet, looking around for Hanna. She was standing a few yards away, stunned, and as he approached her she didn't look up.

"Hanna. Are you all right?"

"I don't know," she said flatly. "I did something..." Rudi became aware of the smell of charred flesh, and belatedly identified the trio of indistinct lumps on the ground in front of her as rat-thing corpses, burned almost beyond recognition by the red-tinged flames, which still flickered feebly around them.

"I didn't know your fire spell was that powerful," Rudi said.

"That's just the thing," Hanna said, her voice trembling. "It isn't. That was a different spell, one I never learned."

"You must have done," Rudi replied, looking around for more of the rat-things. He couldn't see any, but ominous scuttling noises in the ruins around them left him sure that they were still there, biding their time, waiting for others to join them. "You probably just forgot it."

"No." Hanna shook her head decisively. "It just appeared in my head, and I knew I could do it. Those creatures were all over me, and I panicked. I was sure they were going to kill me. Then suddenly I knew the... the things you need to do."

"Lucky you did," Rudi said.

"Is it?" Hanna looked on the verge of tears. "I feel like there's something inside me I can't control. I thought magic was simple, something you do just to make life a bit easier, and people like Gerhard were ignorant brutes. But now I don't even know what I am!"

"You're a pyromancer," a voice said out of the darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Rudi snapped his head round, searching for the speaker. Something about the voice, cool and feminine, sounded familiar, but it was only when he caught sight of her that he recognised Alwyn. A mixture of surprise and anger flooded through him.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Not much,” the woman replied, shrugging casually. “We heard screaming from our campsite, so I came to see what was going on. The others will be here in a few minutes.” She was sitting comfortably on top of one of the largest pieces of stonework. Her grey cape rendered her almost invisible among the shadows. How she’d got up there Rudi had no idea. “But you seem to be managing quite well on your own.”

“What do you mean I’m a pyromancer?” Hanna asked. Alwyn smiled.

“A pyromancer is a sorcerer with an affinity for fire magic...”

“I know what the word means!” Hanna snapped. Alwyn nodded.

“I’m sure you do. You seem quite powerful for a hedge wizard, by the way.”

“A what?” Rudi asked. Alwyn smiled again.

“It’s a slang term for a sorcerer who hasn’t been formally trained. A bit disparaging, but I always preferred it to witch.” She turned her head, as though listening to something. “This isn’t really the time or place to discuss it, though.”

She was right about that. Distracted by his astonishment at seeing her again and the bizarre conversation which had ensued, Rudi had almost forgotten the rat-things, but the creatures had clearly not forgotten them. Renewed scuttling and chittering in the shadows presaged another attack, and he glanced around, looking for a way out. Perhaps Alwyn could see a line of retreat from her elevated position, he thought, but when he turned back to ask her she’d vanished as abruptly as she’d appeared in the first place.

“Come on.” He took Hanna by the arm, urging her to move. “We can’t stay here. Even if you can do that fire trick now.”

“I’m not sure I can.” Her voice was soft in the darkness. “I don’t remember how I did it the first time. It just happened.”

“Then let’s hope it happens again,” Rudi said. A flash of motion in a nearby patch of shadow caught his eye. He stooped for a chunk of rubble, and was about to throw it, when Alwyn took a pace out into the moonlight and beckoned to them. Rudi and Hanna moved towards her, but by the time they reached the block of stone she’d appeared from, the woman had gone again.

“How does she do that?” Rudi asked in frustration. Hanna looked at him pityingly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Before she could explain further a shrill squeal erupted from the ruins behind them, redoubling and echoing from the stone blocks all around. It was answered by a chorus of squeaking and chittering, which made the hairs on

Rudi's scalp bristle. Then it was all but drowned out by the pattering of dozens of rodent feet, as a grey tide of humaniform vermin scuttled towards them.

"Now would be a good time to remember how you did the fire thing," Rudi said, flinging his improvised missile. It impacted on a rodent in the front rank, who faltered and fell, but the rest of the creatures just kept coming, trampling their unfortunate comrade in the process. Rudi took a step forward, placing himself protectively in front of Hanna, knowing even as he did so that it was a futile gesture.

"Out of the way!" Hanna's voice had changed, it was resonant with strength and power. Glancing back at her Rudi shuddered involuntarily. Her eyes were blank, and an uncharacteristic expression of malevolence suffused her face. A ball of fire, like the one she'd conjured to light their way earlier that evening, appeared in front of them, hissing and crackling, but this was no friendly beacon. Rudi could feel the furnace heat of it, and the flames it was composed of were a dull, hellish red.

Abruptly it shot forwards, fast as an arrow, and struck home in the centre of the onrushing horde. It exploded as it hit, enveloping one unfortunate rodent, which thrashed about squealing as it burned alive, injuring several of its fellows in the process. The charge faltered, panic began to spread from the vicinity of the burning rat like ripples from a stone tossed into a pond.

"Neat trick," Alwyn said, suddenly standing next to Rudi. She drew a sword from under her cloak, taking guard with it with fluid precision. "Ever seen this one?"

Rudi flinched, expecting some equally spectacular display of destructive power, but nothing seemed to be happening. Then his attention was drawn to a low rumbling sound somewhere in the vicinity of the main body of the rat-things. Before he could fully comprehend what was going on the ground gave way beneath them, pitching most of the creatures down a deep hole, which had appeared from nowhere. Frantic squealing followed them into the depths, although quite how deep the pit was Rudi couldn't tell. The ground solidified again before their cries were cut off by their impact with the bottom.

"That should even the odds a bit," Alwyn said, with satisfaction. She glanced at Rudi as though vaguely surprised to see him still there. "I'd take care of your sister if I were you." For a moment Rudi wondered what she was talking about, before he remembered the lie they'd told at the Jolly Friar. He looked across at Hanna, who was swaying on her feet, totally exhausted. The effort of casting the fire spell had evidently drained all the reserves she had. He hesitated, torn between concern for her and fear of the remaining rodents.

"What about the beastmen?" he asked.

"Beastmen?" Alwyn looked confused for a moment, then realised what he was talking about and grinned. "I think you can leave the rest of them to us."

There was no mistaking who she meant by that. Almost as she spoke the unmistakable *thwip* of an arrow in flight terminated abruptly in a thud and a squeal. It ended its trajectory in the throat of a rat-thing larger than most of its fellows, which seemed to be urging the panic-stricken survivors of the warband to stand and fight. That was enough: with shrill cries of terror the remaining ratmen scattered and ran, heedless now of where their flight would take them.

In most cases that wasn't far. The rest of Krieger's warband were waiting for them. They stepped out of the shadows to engage and cut them down. It seemed that

these creatures, whatever they were, relied on the weight of numbers to overwhelm an enemy, and once scattered into smaller groups they were easy prey for a competent warrior.

And competent the sell-swords certainly were. Rudi saw Bruno taking on three at once. He laughed as he skipped and danced out of the way of their clumsy sword blows, parrying and slashing until the trio of creatures all lay dead at his feet. Theo, by contrast, plied his sword with grim efficiency, all deadly precision. Rudi watched him in awe, almost unable to tell where the man ended and the weapon began. A low rumble of laughter drew his attention to Bodun the dwarf, whose battleaxe cleaved through his opponents as though chopping wood. And throughout it all Conrad stood on a block of masonry that commanded the battlefield, picking off individual rat creatures with a precision that Rudi, a bowman himself, could well appreciate.

Confident that they were safe he approached Hanna, and took her weight as she collapsed with exhaustion. She looked up at him, her face and voice normal again. Fear and wonder mingled in her eyes.

“I felt it,” she whispered. “So much power...” Then she swooned. Staggering slightly under her increased weight, Rudi lowered her gently to the ground and stood over her, determined to defend her if he had to. But it seemed there was no need. One of the creatures ran in their direction, impelled it seemed by nothing more aggressive than blind panic, but it tried to change direction abruptly as Alwyn stepped out to meet it. The effort was futile. She ran it through with an economy of motion which showed Rudi she was as experienced a fighter as the rest of them.

“How is she?” the woman asked, trotting over to check on Hanna. Rudi shrugged.

“You’re the sorcerer. You tell me.”

“Hm.” Alwyn squatted, and examined the prostrate girl for a moment. “She’ll be all right. She just needs a few hours sleep and a good meal.”

“Young Wolfsbane!” A hand like granite pounded Rudi on the back, making him stagger. “By Grungni’s beard, I never expected to see you again so soon!”

“You can add skavenslayer to that, Bodun,” Alwyn said. “I saw him throttle one with his bare hands.”

“Really?” Bruno looked at Rudi with an expression of surprised respect. “That’s pretty impressive for a tenderfoot.”

“It’s impressive for anyone,” Conrad added, exchanging a kiss with his wife. They stood together, arms around one another’s waists, exuding an easy intimacy. “Couldn’t resist doing the hole trick again, could you?”

“What can I say?” Alwyn shrugged. “It’s an old spell, but it gets the job done.”

“And buries any loot along with the victims,” Conrad added, with transparently feigned irritation. “Still, I suppose it’s flashy enough to impress a couple of youngsters...” He broke off as she elbowed him gently in the ribs.

“Heading for Marienburg the hard way, I see.” Theo joined them last of all, sheathing his sword. Rudi glared at the group of adventurers, who all seemed so full of themselves. His anger rose. In spite of his best efforts he felt his fists clench.

“You didn’t leave us a whole lot of choice about that, did you?” he snapped.

“What?” Theo glanced at the ruins surrounding them. “This is hardly the spot for a long conversation. Let’s collect your gear and get back to our camp. You can fill us in on what you’re doing here then.”

“We don’t have any gear,” Rudi said tightly. He didn’t even have a clue where his last remaining snare line was. “We’ve lost everything, thanks to you.”

“Thanks to us?” Bruno looked on the verge of accepting his challenge even if he didn’t understand it. “All you’ve got to thank us for is saving your lives.”

“At the very least,” Conrad agreed, placing a gently restraining hand on the young man’s shoulder. Alwyn nodded soberly.

“Those creatures take slaves. At least so the stories go—”

“What are they, anyway?” Rudi asked, unable to contain his curiosity despite the anger he still felt towards the group. “Beastmen of some kind?”

“No one really knows,” Theo said. “Most people don’t even believe they exist. But there’s enough who do to spread the word.”

“They’re creatures of Chaos, that’s clear enough,” Alwyn said. She indicated Hanna’s prostrate form. “I need some help to carry her.”

“I can manage,” Rudi said sharply, but Conrad laid a hand on his arm, the way he had with Bruno a moment before. Rudi began to shrug it off, but the touch was light, and somehow hard to resent.

“You’re all in, lad. Let us help her.”

“All right.” Rudi nodded reluctantly, and allowed Bruno to step in and support Hanna’s other shoulder. She roused just enough to stumble forwards on her own, clinging to the young adventurer and the sorcerer, who held her up on either side.

“Good lad.” Theo turned to Bodun and Conrad. “Can you two take care of things here?”

“Do you doubt it?” The dwarf glanced contemptuously at the body of the rat thing Alwyn had stabbed. “Though there’ll be precious little worth taking from this vermin, I’ll be bound.”

“But what there is you can always trust a dwarf to find,” Conrad added, to the general amusement of the company.

“That’s true,” Bodun agreed happily, and began to search the creature’s body.

The adventurers’ camp wasn’t far away. Nevertheless Rudi was so tired that it seemed a to take a long time to reach it. He was too exhausted to even ask questions, and it wasn’t until he was sitting in front of a cosy fire with a bowl of stew in his hands that he found his voice again.

“What were those things, anyway? You started to explain, but...”

“They’re called skaven,” Theo said as Rudi devoured the thick mixture of vegetables. “Like Alwyn says, they’re creatures of Chaos.” He shrugged. “And that’s about all anybody knows. They live underground, like the rats they resemble, and most folk will tell you they don’t exist.”

“Which doesn’t stop the councils of most cities paying a good price to anyone who’ll keep the vermin out of their sewers,” Bruno added. “So long as you know who to ask, and keep your mouth shut afterwards.”

“Which is rather beside the point at the moment,” Theo pointed out. He turned to Rudi. “So what are you doing out here on your own, and why do you think it was our fault?”

“You sneaked out of the inn and left us to pay the bill!” Rudi almost choked on his stew. Theo laughed.

“Think of it as a learning experience.”

“Is that all you can say?” Rudi snapped. “Thanks to you we were nearly arrested, lost all our possessions, and got thrown off a riverboat!”

“What were you doing on a riverboat?” Theo asked, then shrugged. “Never mind. It sounds like a long story, and I’m sure it’ll keep.” He glanced up as Conrad and the dwarf strolled into the camp, chatting happily. “Well? How did we do?”

“About as well as you’d expect.” Conrad was carrying a bundle, wrapped in cloth, which he dropped on the ground next to the campfire. It clanked metallically. “Most of their weapons were pretty crude, but there were a few pieces worth having.” He unwrapped the cloth as he spoke, revealing it to be the bloodstained remnants of one of the dead skaven’s garments.

“Hmm.” Theo turned over the collection of artefacts he’d revealed. There were a couple of swords and a handful of knives. The others clustered around to have a look. “Empire workmanship. They must have come from other travellers who weren’t as fortunate as our young friend here.”

“Throwing knives!” Bruno pounced on a couple of daggers, which looked pretty much the same as all the others to Rudi’s untutored eye. He hefted them approvingly. “Magnin’s work by the feel of them.” He tossed them in the air, spun them like a juggler, and caught them alternately by the hilt and the tip of the blade until Rudi began to fear for his fingers.

“That, and his maker’s mark there,” Conrad pointed out. Alwyn smiled.

“He’s in love. Isn’t that sweet?”

“No one’s taking anything yet,” Theo said. Everyone looked surprised, and Bruno returned the knives to the pile with a faintly sulky air. Theo gestured at Rudi and Hanna. “They’ve got nothing left. They should get the first pick of everything.”

“Fair enough,” Conrad agreed, and Alwyn nodded.

“Fine with me. They fought the skaven too, don’t forget.”

“And that’s a story worth hearing, I’ll be bound!” Bodun nodded vigorously. “Well worth a bauble or two.”

“You’re the boss.” Bruno shrugged. “What else did we get?”

“Just odds and ends.” The dwarf opened a leather pouch, spilling a mixture of coins and other small objects across the cloth. “They don’t carry much.”

“Why would they have money?” Rudi asked. Theo shrugged.

“Because it’s shiny. They’ll scavenge pretty much anything.” He indicated the scattered collection. “We’ll sort that out when it’s light, and we can see what we’re doing.” He turned back to Bodun. “You’ve got the real earners?”

“Right here.” The dwarf grinned, and produced another cloth-wrapped bundle. This was stained with blood, and Rudi found himself shrinking away from it before he knew what was in it. “There’s a couple of crowns’ worth if I’m any judge.” He

pulled it open, revealing what, for a horrified instant, Rudy supposed to be the bloody remains of a nest of giant serpents.

“You cut off their tails!” he gasped. Bodun nodded with relish.

“Of course. How else could we prove we’d killed them?”

“Like I said,” Theo explained, “there are a few officials who know about these creatures, and pay a reward for every skaven slain.”

“That’s what we do,” Bruno put in. “We’re bounty hunters.” A douche of icy water seemed to run down Rudi’s spine.

“Some of the time, anyway,” Alwyn said.

“Is that what you’re doing out here?” Rudi asked. Theo nodded.

“That’s right. We’ve got an arrest warrant with a big reward on it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Despite his apprehension Rudi slept soundly until well after dawn, wrapped in a borrowed blanket. He didn't stir until somebody shook him gently awake. To his great relief it was Hanna, who looked well-fed and refreshed. She smiled as he sat up, and handed him a bowl of oatmeal porridge, which he devoured gratefully.

"Feeling better?" he asked, and she laughed.

"I was about to ask you that," Rudi nodded.

"Much," he said, with his mouth full. He swallowed, and lowered his voice slightly. "Have they told you what they're doing out here?"

"Yes," Hanna nodded. "They're after a deserter from the Imperial Army." She looked up and smiled at Bruno, who caught her eye and smiled back. "He sounds like a nasty piece of work, but Bruno says they should catch him without too much trouble."

"You've been talking to Bruno a lot then," Rudi said, not quite sure why the idea should bother him so much. "Did he tell you why we got into trouble at the inn?" To his astonishment Hanna laughed.

"Yes. But you have to admit it is pretty funny."

"Hilarious," Rudi said flatly. But he felt relieved as well. Last night he hadn't had the nerve to ask who the adventurers were after, he was too afraid that it would be a pair of heretics from Kohlstadt. But if it was someone else entirely they should be safe enough in their company for a while. At least until they made it back to civilisation, and the others had a chance to find out about the arrest warrant with their names on it. After Shenk's double-dealing he had no doubt that they'd seize on the chance to claim the reward for them too. He lowered his voice. "I think we should carry on pretending to be brother and sister for a while. Just in case they hear the news about us from somewhere."

"All right." Hanna nodded. She collected his empty bowl and wandered over to join Bruno. After a moment or two they were laughing over some shared jest.

"Don't worry." Conrad came over to join him as he struggled to his feet. "I know what you're thinking, she'll be fine."

"Will she?" Rudi wasn't quite sure what he meant. Conrad nodded.

"He likes to pretend he's a great heartbreaker, but the closest he ever gets is a bit of flirting. Your sister's virtue's as safe as if she was still at home."

"I'm glad to hear it," Rudi said, rather more vehemently than he'd intended.

"I'm sure you are." Conrad looked at him a little strangely before going on. "Theo says its time to divide the spoils from last night. There isn't much, but you're both entitled to shares."

"Oh. Right." Relieved at the change of subject, Rudi rolled up his blanket and followed the archer.

“There you are. Good.” The mercenary captain looked up as Rudi and Conrad joined the others around the campfire. Hanna was already there, sitting between Bruno and Alwyn, and Bodun was leaning on the haft of his axe, looking down at the small pile of loot. “I was just explaining how this works to Hanna. If you fight, you get an equal share of the spoils. That’s how we’ve always done things.”

“Saves a lot of arguments,” Bodun said. “And a good thing too. I’ve seen parties like this slitting one other’s throats over claims to trinkets a tavern whore would turn her nose up at.”

“Quite,” Theo said, fixing the dwarf with a steely glare. Bodun cleared his throat and went quiet. “So, to return to business, the coinage is easy. It comes to three shillings and sevenpence ha’penny apiece.” He handed small piles of chinking silver and copper to each of them in turn, including Rudi and Hanna.

Rudi closed his hand around his share with a quiet sense of satisfaction. This more than made up for the purse full of coppers he’d lost at the Jolly Friar. He glanced across at Hanna as she accepted her due, and smiled. With over seven shillings between them, life would be a lot easier once they resumed their travels.

“The bounty on the rats’ tails will have to wait until we get somewhere we can claim it,” Theo went on.

“Assuming they last that long,” Bruno put in.

“If they start to go off we can always make stew with them,” Bodun suggested, and glanced at the faces of his companions. “What? Oh for Grungni’s sake, don’t any of you manlings have a sense of humour?”

“Not where money’s concerned,” Theo said. “Which brings us to the rest of the stuff. Normally we draw lots and take it in turns to pick something until it’s all gone. But since you two have so little to start with, we’ll kit you out first. Any objections?”

There weren’t, or if there were they went unvoiced. Theo nodded, and motioned Rudi and Hanna forwards. They glanced at the pile of weapons and other equipment.

“A tinderbox!” Rudi pounced on it. “I’ll have this.”

“Shouldn’t think you’d need one with a pyromancer in the family,” Alwyn said, and everyone laughed.

“It’s not a trick I like to demonstrate too much,” Hanna said, and the red-headed sorcerer nodded.

“I take your point.”

“You’ll need weapons,” Conrad pointed out. “This isn’t exactly a safe place to be wandering around unarmed.”

“How about this one?” Theo selected one of the swords, and handed it to Rudi. He took it awkwardly, unsure how to hold it.

“No. Like this.” Bruno corrected his grip with swift precision, and Rudi fought down a brief spasm of resentment at the youth’s interference. Somehow the blade felt right in his hand now, the way the bow had after he’d learned the trick of not trying too hard to hit the mark. “How does that feel?”

“Good,” Rudi admitted, surprised. He tried a couple of cuts with it, prompting a general shuffling backwards among the bystanders. Theo smiled.

“Don’t worry. We’ll show you how to use it before you take your own thumb off.” He handed Rudi the sheath, and after a bit of fumbling Rudi managed to put it away. “And what about you?” He turned to Hanna.

“I wouldn’t have a clue how to fight,” Hanna said.

“After what I saw last night, you shouldn’t have to.” Alwyn bent down, and selected a dagger. As she drew it from its sheath the blade caught the early morning light, shining bright, its edge and tip razor sharp. “But you can’t always rely on magic to solve your problems.”

“Rather the reverse, it seems,” Hanna said grimly.

“Quite.” Alwyn handed her the weapon. “And in my experience, no matter how subtle the wizard, six inches of steel in the kidneys does tend to cramp his style.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Hanna said, tucking the blade inside her bodice.

“I can show you some tricks with that,” Bruno offered, ignoring the good-natured chaffing of his friends. Hanna smiled.

“I’d like that. Thank you.”

“You’ll need a knife too,” Theo said, handing one to Rudi. It was a simple, utilitarian one, like the blade he’d lost on the boat, and he took it without comment. “Anything else you need?”

“Nothing I can see here,” Rudi said.

“Good.” Theo concealed a bundle of five straws in his hand, all different lengths, and turned to his companions. “You know how this works. Pick in order of size, longest straw first.” Everyone pulled one out of his fist, compared them, and cracked jokes about Alwyn getting the first turn, which was something they all pretended seemed to happen more often than pure chance would account for.

“What do you expect with a shadowmancer in the party?” Bruno asked, and Alwyn raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“I don’t hear you complaining about having second pick,” she said, and made a great show of considering the throwing knives he coveted before settling on a short sword. “This looks like it’s worth a shilling or two.”

“Or a couple of coppers for scrap.” Bruno fell on the magnins with a whoop of delight, rolling up his shirtsleeves to strap the sheaths to his forearms. He already had a knife concealed up his right sleeve, Rudi noted with some surprise. He relocated it to the top of his boot to make room for his new acquisition. Conrad noticed the direction of his gaze, and smiled.

“You don’t always want everything you’ve got to be visible,” he said quietly. “Although Bruno does tend to take it to extremes.” Intrigued, Rudi eyed the others in the party, wondering if they too carried concealed weapons. Following Bruno’s example he took another dagger himself when his next turn to pick came along. He tucked it into his own boot though it felt surprisingly uncomfortable at first, until Conrad showed him how to position it. After a short while he almost forgot it was there.

“What’s this?” Hanna asked, rooting through a jumble of small items and coming out with a leather pouch. Bodun shrugged.

“Dunno. The big ugly one had it.”

“I think you should leave it,” Rudi said, a tingle of foreboding rising in the back of his mind. His perceptions seemed subtly distorted as he looked at the thing. It reminded him of the time he’d found the thorn bush in the forest which had so changed Hans Katzenjammer, and when he walked the unseen paths in Altman’s field. Hanna looked up at him in surprise.

“I thought it was my choice.”

“It is.” Theo looked at Rudi. “That’s how we do things. With no interference from anyone else.”

“Then I’ll take it,” Hanna said, scooping up the small object. She glared at Rudi as though daring him to contradict her.

“You don’t even know what it is,” Conrad pointed out mildly. “You might want to look inside before you commit yourself.”

“No. It’s fine.” Hanna moved away from the diminished pile of loot, her prize cupped in her hand, and turned to Alwyn. “Your turn again.”

“Aren’t you going to show us what you’ve got?” Bruno asked. Hanna shrugged. She tugged open the drawstring, and a small chip of stone fell out into her hand. It was glossy and black; it seemed to suck in the sunlight that fell on it.

“Oh.” Bruno looked a little crestfallen on her behalf. “It’s just a bit of rock. Chuck it away and try again.”

“It’s fine,” Hanna said. “I think it looks pretty.”

“Well, if you’re happy,” the youth shrugged, and returned his attention to the pile of loot.

With the division of the spoils complete, the band began a second round of haggling, which Rudi gathered was equally traditional. By the time it finished he had traded a couple of trinkets he didn’t want for a desperately needed change of clothes. Bruno was about the same size and claimed to have a spare set he didn’t need. He purchased the bedroll he’d been using from Conrad for a couple of coppers. His new tinderbox fitted snugly into his pouch, and he tucked the bedroll into the shoulder straps of a pack Theo had asked him to carry.

“You’re eating our food, so you might as well carry some of it,” he’d pointed out. That only seemed fair, so he’d nodded and picked up the burden, which turned out to be light enough. He was reminded of his lost snare lines, so he scrounged a few thin cords and passed the time on the day’s march knotting some replacements. The ground seemed firmer on this side of the ruins, and they made good time. The sword he was wearing hung awkwardly from his belt and banged into his legs from time to time.

At noon they stopped for a rest and some refreshment, and Hanna wandered over to see what he was doing.

“You’ve been busy,” she said. Rudi laid the line he’d been working on to one side, and smiled at her.

“So have you.” She’d spent the morning walking beside Alwyn, conversing intently in undertones. She nodded, but to his vague disappointment didn’t sit next to him.

“We’ve had a lot to discuss.”

“About magic and stuff,” he suggested.

“Mostly stuff.” She didn’t seem inclined to talk about it, but just when he thought she was about to wander off again, she appeared to change her mind. “She’s been trying to show me how to focus the power, so I can do that fireball trick again.” A faint, troubled frown flickered across her face. “And I think I could now.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Rudi said, puzzled by her reluctance. Hanna shrugged.

“I suppose so.” But her eyes said otherwise. “The thing is, I never learned that spell in the first place. I still don’t know how I know it.” She might have said more, but she turned away in response to a shout from Bruno, who was waiting for her. Just then Rudi caught sight of a necklace she was wearing. It seemed vaguely familiar, and after a moment he recognised it as one of the items he’d traded for his new clothes. Hanna noticed the direction of his gaze, and, to his astonishment, blushed. “Nice, isn’t it? Bruno gave it to me.”

“It suits you,” he said, wondering why the idea hadn’t occurred to him first.

“That’s what he said.” Her flush deepened. “He said he thought of me the moment he saw it. Wasn’t that sweet?”

“Very,” Rudi said. Hanna looked at him oddly.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not,” Rudi said, a little too hastily. “Why should I?”

“No reason I can see,” Hanna said, sounding curiously irritated and went off to join Bruno. Rudi concentrated on knotting snares; he was determined not to look up every time a burst of laughter drifted across the meadow towards him.

“That’s tidy work,” Theo said, the instant a shadow fell across Rudi. Grateful for the distraction Rudi glanced up.

“They’re rabbit snares. My father was a forester, so I’ve been making these practically since I could walk.”

“Really?” Theo sounded genuinely interested. “So you’re a bit of a tracker then?”

“I’ve usually managed,” Rudi said, and the mercenary nodded.

“That might come in useful. When we move out, come up front with me.”

“All right.” Rudi tucked the completed snares back in his pouch. “Was there something you wanted?”

“We’ve a few minutes more before we leave,” Theo said. In a sudden blur of motion he drew his sword, and stabbed down at where Rudi sat. Without time to react consciously, Rudi rolled away, scrabbling for the hilt of his new sword as he rose to his feet. The treachery he’d been anticipating had come early, but by Taal they wouldn’t take him without a fight...

To his surprise he was greeted by a good-natured chorus of approbation, and, looking round, found Hanna and the rest of the warband watching him with polite interest.

“Not bad,” Theo said, the tip of his blade a couple of inches from where Rudi’s throat would have been if he hadn’t moved. “But if I hadn’t slowed it down I’d have had you.”

“So you say,” Rudi responded, and Theo laughed.

“You’ve got a good opinion of yourself too. Good. Never go into a fight you don’t know from the outset you’re going to win.” He shrugged. “Of course once in your life you’ll be wrong, but you’ll never get the chance to feel stupid about it afterwards, so it doesn’t really count.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Rudi said.

“Good.” Theo nodded at the hand Rudi had on the hilt of his new sword. “Another thing to remember. If you take hold of the hilt, draw. Your opponent won’t wait, so neither should you.”

“That’s right,” Bruno nodded agreement. “Nine times out of ten, the man who gets his blade out first will win.”

“And the tenth?” Rudi asked. By way of an answer the blond youth flicked his wrist, in a subtle blur of motion Rudi wasn’t able to analyse. One of his new toys appeared quivering in the trunk of a nearby tree.

“He wasn’t paying attention to where the real threat was.”

“Very graphic,” Theo said dryly. “But hardly helpful at the moment.” He turned back to Rudi. “You remember how to hold it?”

Rudi nodded, and drew the blade. It felt surprisingly light in his hand, a testament to the skill of the swordsmith who’d crafted it. He half expected one of the others to correct his grip again, but Theo seemed satisfied, and nodded an acknowledgement.

“Stand like this, with the weight on the balls of your feet.” He moved into a guard position, his own blade held up in front of him. He moved with a fluid grace Rudi thought he would never be able to emulate. He did his best to comply, and Conrad tapped his legs and feet to adjust his position slightly. “You should be able to move in any direction from there, to attack or defend as necessary.” He moved through several cuts and parries with the grace of a dancer. Something of the awe he felt must have appeared on Rudi’s face at that point; because the mercenary smiled. “Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to learn all that today.”

“I see.” Rudi didn’t really, but he felt he ought to seem confident. He wasn’t sure how well he succeeded, though, as the others still seemed to be watching with some amusement.

“Glad to hear it,” Theo said, resuming the posture he’d started out in. “Now this is a basic defence.” He moved the sword laterally across his body, and stepped sideways at the same time. He nodded to Rudi. “Now you try.”

Rudi did his best to replicate the movement. It felt awkward, the sword clumsy in his hand, and he couldn’t for the life of him see how waving it about like that would help in a fight. Theo nodded, and told him to continue, so he kept at it until the party moved off again. To his vague surprise the movement became easier as he worked at it, and the sword felt a little less clumsy by the time he’d finished.

“That was pretty amazing,” Hanna said, falling into step beside him. “You really looked as if you knew what you were doing.”

“Really?” Rudi felt a warm glow of satisfaction rise up to soothe his aching muscles.

“Actually you were moving like a ruptured duck,” Bruno chipped in, “but it’s a start.” Rudi felt his jaw clench. Hanna’s easy laughter at the remark twisted in his stomach like a dagger. He lengthened his pace, beginning to leave them behind.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Theo wants me at the front.” Behind him he heard the murmur of further conversation and a burst of feminine laughter, which blackened his mood even further.

The two of them deserved each other, he thought. Hanna had always been an arrogant little madam, and now she’d met someone as egotistical as she was. Serve them both right.

“There you are.” Theo nodded a greeting as he joined him at the front of the group. Rudi returned it, hoping his irritation didn’t show. “Anything here strike you as unusual?” Rudi scanned the ground, and the surrounding bushes, looking for some sign that anyone had passed this way before, but the only things he could see were animal tracks.

“Not really,” he said. “There’s a small herd of deer around here somewhere, maybe seven or eight of them. And I think a wild boar’s been through here, but not in the last day or so.” He pointed at the barely-visible footprints. “Looks like it’s lame in one leg.”

“So I did hit it.” Conrad nodded. “I took a shot at one the day before yesterday, but it ran off.”

“No sign of your deserter, though,” Rudi added, enjoying the expressions of surprise on the faces of the adventurers. Most of them anyway: Bruno was still chatting to Hanna, oblivious of anything else. Theo nodded.

“Keep an eye out. He was heading this way the last we heard, so he must have left some trace. Especially one someone like you can read.” He smiled, and Rudi felt his irritation easing. “Running across you last night was a real stroke of luck.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Rudi continued to practise the sword drill Theo had shown him, along with a few others that the mercenary captain had added to his repertoire. His movements became more confident and fluid, but he couldn't see much point in the exercise. He made a few half-hearted attempts to talk to Hanna, but she remained aloof, and spent most of her time either studying with Alwyn or chatting away to Bruno. What he heard of these conversations was either far too abstruse for anyone unversed in the magical to understand, or mind-numbingly inconsequential.

As a result he threw himself into his role as the company's tracker with single-minded dedication. He was cheered by the fact that this at least was a skill no one else possessed, and which most of the band appeared to value. It also kept him slightly apart from most of the group.

He ranged ahead so the subtle clues as to what had passed before them weren't disturbed by their boot prints. This, he felt, was no bad thing. His upbringing in the forest had left him solitary by nature, and being surrounded by so many people so much of the time left him a little on edge.

On the second day he picked up the trail of the boar Conrad had shot again, and pointed out the traces it had left to Theo. Kreiger considered it a moment, then motioned Conrad and Bodun over to join them.

"The lad says it's not far ahead of us," he explained, and Rudi nodded confirmation. "Go with him and see if you can finish it off."

"Lead on then, young skavenslayer." The dwarf hefted his heavy axe. "It's been some while since we had pork for dinner." Rudi tried to hide his apprehension. Wild boars were dangerous enough at the best of times, and this one was already wounded. But Bodun looked strong enough to deal with it. Besides, with any luck Conrad would be able to take it down with his bow before it got close enough for that to become necessary. He suppressed the thought of his own bow, now lost forever, with a sigh of regret. The archer nodded.

"We're right behind you." It was only as they moved off that Rudi realised both warriors were deferring to his expertise without thought or comment. He felt a flush of pride. He couldn't resist glancing round to see if Hanna had noticed and was duly impressed, but she was watching Bruno do tricks with his new knives and didn't spare him a glance. She seemed to have developed an irritating giggle, like some persistent chest infection, and this floated across to him on the breeze every time Bruno said something.

"Best get to it, then," he said, trying to sound businesslike. He led the others away from the rest stop they'd established. The trail led deep into a stand of trees, one of many dotting the landscape between the patches of marshland which still seeped out from the edge of the Reik. Boars preferred woodland environments, and he'd been half-expecting to find traces of them every time their journey had taken

them through one of the copses. As always, being surrounded by trees calmed and soothed him, the comforting sense of familiarity settled around him like a cloak.

“Any sign of it?” Bodun asked. Rudi glanced at the dwarf, convinced he was joking, until he realised that neither of his companions could see the evidence of the animal’s passage, which was so clear to him. It was rather like the way Hanna could extract meaning from the strange squiggles on a piece of paper, he supposed, so long as they were in Reikspiel.

“It went into that thicket,” he replied, and pointed. “See where the grass has been flattened there?” The dwarf stared for a long time, and shook his head.

“Not really,” he admitted. “I’m better with rocks.”

“And beer steins,” Conrad added, to Bodun’s evident amusement. He turned to Rudi. “Is it still in there?”

“It hasn’t come out the same way.” Rudi bent down, examining the ground, and found a footprint with little difficulty. The sides were still crisp and well defined, despite the softness of the loam, which meant it was fresh. “These tracks are only a few hours old.”

They moved off to the left, where the surrounding undergrowth seemed thinner and more permeable. Rudi found a way through with little difficulty. He hid his amusement at his companions’ struggles to keep up with him. As a consequence he was some way ahead when he stopped abruptly.

“Great Taal!”

“What is it?” Conrad was at his shoulder in a heartbeat, his bow drawn, looking for a target. By way of an answer Rudi indicated the butchered pig lying on the forest floor ahead of them.

“It was our boar. Someone else got to it first.” He approached the carcass warily, careful not to disturb any tracks which might surround it. But the ground was so churned up and so slick with blood there wasn’t much in the immediate vicinity he could read. After a few moments searching he came across a booted footprint, leading away, and nodded with satisfaction.

“What have you found?” Bodun called.

“We’re getting close,” Rudi said. “Assuming it was your deserter who did this, of course.” He returned to the remains of the pig. “We might have frightened him off. Most of the meat’s still on the carcass.”

“Best news I’ve had all week!” The dwarf started forward eagerly, and Rudi waved him back.

“Hold on a minute. I want to examine this first.” Despite Bodun’s grumbling, he squatted down and looked more closely at the body. “Thought so.”

“What is it?” Conrad asked, returning the arrow he’d drawn to his quiver.

“A townsman did this. Look.” Rudi beckoned his companions forward. “He hasn’t butchered it properly. Probably doesn’t know how. He’s just cut a few chunks off the haunches.”

“Not a mistake I’ll make, you can be sure,” Bodun said, drawing a knife and stepping forward eagerly.

“How was it killed?” Conrad asked. Rudi indicated a deep wound in the creature’s chest.

“With a spear, by the look of it. He must have spitted it while it was charging.”

“Military pattern,” Conrad said after a quick glance at the damage. “It’s our deserter all right.” He shook his head. “He must have some nerve to stand his ground like that.”

“Or he’s very stupid,” Bodun added, beginning to flense the carcass with a degree of enthusiasm which almost made up for his lack of expertise. Rudi sighed.

“I’ll go on a bit,” he said. “See if I can find some more tracks.” It looked as though his companions would be some time, and he found himself relishing the chance to be alone in the forest again. True there was the deserter to consider, but after facing skaven and beastmen it was hard to think of a mere human adversary as intimidating.

“I’ll come with you,” Conrad offered, and Rudi shook his head.

“No offence, but I’ll move faster and more quietly alone.”

“Fair enough.” The archer nodded, and went to help Bodun with the boar.

Leaving them to it Rudi slipped away, following the tracks he’d found before. As he’d expected they were easy to follow. Whoever had left them showed no signs of woodcraft, and he had only been out of sight of his companions for a few minutes before a faint, familiar odour tickled his nostrils. Woodsmoke. He slowed down, wondering for a moment if he should return and fetch the others, but he dismissed the thought. Better to get closer, and see the lie of the land first.

Confident in the skills of a lifetime he eased his way through the undergrowth, stepping carefully around anything that might snap or rustle to betray his presence. The smell grew stronger: it was overlaid with the odour of charring meat. Clearly the man he was stalking was no better a cook than he was a butcher. A small clearing lay ahead, and Rudi eased himself into the shadow of a tree.

His quarry was sitting next to a smoking fire, which, to Rudi’s practiced eye, had far too much green wood on it to make a satisfactory blaze. He was hunched miserably over a haunch of meat sizzling on a stick. What wasn’t burnt was almost raw.

The fellow was large and muscular, and his face was partly obscured by the rag he’d tied around his nose and mouth in an attempt to avoid the worst effects of the smoke. He was dressed in stained and muddy clothes. Every now and again he coughed, whether from the smoke which seeped inside his improvised protection or some other cause Rudi couldn’t tell.

A pack lay on the ground beside him, and a spear like the ones the militia back in Kohlstadt used to carry was stuck into the ground next to it point first. The shaft was stained with drying blood almost to the butt, and Rudi shuddered at the picture that conjured up; the maddened boar must have spitted itself on the point and just kept going, almost to the end. He glanced across at the deserter again, and sure enough a crude and bloodstained bandage had been inexpertly tied around his forearm.

He’d seen enough, Rudi told himself. He took a step back into the shelter of the trees. The fellow was clearly going to be there for some time, certainly long enough to return to Conrad and Bodun and lead them back to the clearing. He was on the point of turning away when the deserter pulled off his makeshift mask to take a cautious bite at the lump of meat. Rudi froze, his heart hammering in shock. He was

so distracted that he missed his footing, and stepped on a dried twig with a loud and echoing *Crack!*

“Who’s there?” Fritz Katzenjammer surged to his feet and grabbed the spear. He whirled round to face him.

“It’s me. Rudi.” The young forester stepped cautiously into the clearing. He moved slowly, in contrast to the whirlwind of his thoughts. Meeting his old enemy here, like this, was so unexpected he could hardly take it in. “What in the name of Sigmar are you doing here?”

“Trying to eat.” Fritz was clearly no less truculent than he had been in Kohlstadt. “Were you following me?”

“I’m not sure,” Rudi admitted, beginning to wonder if he’d made a mistake. “I’m with a group of people looking for someone, and we came across your tracks. Have you seen anyone else around here?”

“No.” Fritz held the spear at the ready, the point aimed squarely at Rudi’s heart. “And I don’t want to.”

“I can understand that.” Rudi nodded, wondering what he should do. If Fritz really was the deserter Theo and his companions were after, he couldn’t let them take him. The hulking simpleton was bound to say something to cast suspicion on Hanna and himself. “It’s no fun on the run, is it?”

“You’re a long way from Kohlstadt yourself,” Fritz said, refusing to rise to the bait. “What happened?”

“We’re in the same boat,” Rudi told him. There was no point in lying now. “Hanna and I were accused of heresy, just like you. We’re trying to keep ahead of the witch hunters too.”

“Except she is a witch,” Fritz said. “And she cursed my brother!” He made a clumsy lunge at Rudi with the point of the spear. “I might have known you’d be helping her!”

“Don’t be so stupid!” Rudi dodged the attack and drew his new sword in the vague hope that the sight of it might bring Fritz back to his senses. “She had nothing to do with what happened to Hans! It was the beastman’s blood on the thorns he fell into!”

“Then it’s your fault!” Fritz rushed at him again. “You pushed him into that bush! I’ll kill you!”

“Hans is fine!” Rudi found himself slipping easily into one of the sword drills Theo had taught him. The flat of the blade deflected the sharp head of the spear as it thrust at his guts. “I saw him in the woods a couple of days later!”

“Left him to die, did you?” Fritz brought the butt of the spear round in a strike to the side of Rudi’s head. Rudi ducked it, and stepped inside the taller lad’s reach. He kicked out at the back of his knee. Fritz howled, and dropped to the ground, slashing the weapon he held towards Rudi’s shins.

“He was fine. He was with some people who could help him.” That was a bit of a stretch, but now was hardly the time for long explanations. Rudi jumped easily over the hurtling spearshaft, marvelling at his own expertise. He’d practised diligently, it was true, but he could hardly have expected to gain this much proficiency. Once

again he found himself feeling detached from his own body, as he had that night in the woods when he was drawn to the strange celebration.

“Liar!” Fritz bellowed, trying to rise. Rudi kicked him in the face and knocked him backwards.

“Listen, you imbecile. This is important. If you say one word to the people we’re with about me and Hanna I’ll kill you. Do you understand?” A detached corner of his mind observed his own actions with horror and revulsion, which was rapidly swept aside by a savage glee in the act of violence. The tip of his sword was against Fritz’s throat now, and the urge to plunge it in and see the lad spasm and choke on his own blood was almost overwhelming. In fact it would be safer, a little voice urged. With Fritz dead no one would ever find out their secret. He drew back his hand for the killing blow...

“Hold, skavenslayer!” Bodun’s bellow echoed around the clearing, snapping him back to his senses in the nick of time. The dwarf was ploughing his way through the undergrowth by sheer brute strength; Conrad a pace or two behind. Shivering with reaction Rudi lowered the sword. “We need him alive!”

Fritz’s eyes were wide with terror as Rudi sheathed his weapon and bent to pull him to his feet. He grasped the simpleton’s injured hand and yanked him upright with a gasp of fear and pain.

“I mean it,” he said, too quietly for his approaching companions to hear. “Just one word.” He raised his voice to a normal level, and adopted a bantering tone like the one the sell-swords habitually used among themselves. “Now you tell me,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The threat seemed to have worked, for the time being at least. Despite Rudi's apprehension Fritz said nothing to his companions on the way back to the camp. He simply darted terrified glances from one to the other, which reminded Rudi uncomfortably of a rabbit in a snare.

Before leaving the clearing Conrad had picked up the youth's pack and thrown it to the young forester, who caught it absently with one hand.

"Here," the archer said. Rudi looked at him quizzically. "You beat him on your own. It's all yours."

"Thanks." Rudi responded mechanically, still trying to come to terms with the feelings the fight had stirred up in him. Now it was over he was trembling from the reaction and he felt vaguely sick. He had little enough time for Fritz, that was true, but he'd been profoundly shocked by how close he'd come to killing the hulking youth. Not trusting himself to speak he simply shouldered the burden and walked after the others. Conrad carried the spear, joking that the army would be more pleased to see it back than they would the man who'd stolen it.

To Rudi's relief Hanna wasn't around when they rejoined the others, although Bruno was hovering on the fringes of the group looking vaguely dejected. They all crowded round with congratulatory back-slappings, and Theo thrust a mug of carefully hoarded ale into his hands.

"Sounds like you earned it," he said.

"That he did," Bodun confirmed, looking up from hobbling the prisoner. "He was doing so well I thought he was going to cheat us out of our bounty!"

"That would have been unfortunate," Theo said, looking at Rudi with renewed respect, and taking in the injuries to Fritz's face. "I should have warned you the warrant's specific about bringing him in alive."

"Waste of time if you ask me," Bruno put in sulkily. "They're only going to hang him anyway." Fritz flinched, looking even more terrified than he had before. Rudi tried to ignore a pang of sympathy.

"Who cares?" Alwyn said, taking her husband's arm. "So long as the bounty's paid." She and Conrad looked as though they were planning to celebrate their success early.

"He doesn't look worth five crowns to me," Bruno persisted. "The last couple we brought in were only one apiece, and they put up a lot more of a fight."

"So," Rudi asked him, hoping to divert his attention. "Where's Hanna?"

"Out looking for herbs." Bruno shrugged. "I offered to go with her, but she said she'd be fine." She'd probably said a lot more, judging by his expression, but Rudi tried not to gloat. If the youth wanted to pay court to her he was just going to have to learn to live with her temper.

“Right. She does that.” Rudi shrugged, trying to look as unconcerned as he could. “Which way did she go?”

Bruno indicated the direction, and Rudi set out across the open grassland to find her. The trail was easy enough to follow. The undulations of the ground soon hid him from the others, and a sense of unease began to grow in him. Would Fritz really keep quiet, now he was out of sight, or would he try to bargain with the adventurers and reveal their secret? All his old forebodings about potential treachery came rushing to the fore again. After all, they’d known these people less than a week, and they’d cheated them before...

“What are you doing here?” Lost in his thoughts he’d stumbled across Hanna sooner than he’d expected. She looked up from her seat on an outcrop of sun-warmed rock and glared at him, fumbling the piece of shiny stone she’d taken from the skaven back into its bag. Rudi shrugged.

“We’ve got a problem,” he began.

Getting to talk to Fritz without the others overhearing them turned out to be less tricky than he’d anticipated. The wound the boar had left on the older lad’s arm was the perfect excuse.

“Better let my sister take a look at it,” he said, loud enough for Fritz to hear him, and hoping the simpleton would have enough wit to realise their imposture and say nothing to undermine it. Theo looked a little dubious, so he added “I’m sure you don’t want him dying from an infected cut before we can cash him in.”

“I don’t, that’s for sure,” Bodun agreed, and after a moment Theo nodded.

“Better safe than sorry. But stay with her. I don’t want her left alone with him.”

“That makes two of us,” Rudi assured him truthfully. Evening was falling now, and the campfire had been lit. He and Hanna walked into the shadows with a reassuring sense of concealment.

“What do you want?” Despite the truculence in his tone Fritz shied away from them like a frightened horse.

“Show me your arm,” Hanna said, her brisk tone somehow reassuring. Rudi squatted next to the lad, angling himself so that his back would conceal most of their conversation from the adventurers clustered around the fire. The mouth-watering odour of roasting pork drifted across on the breeze, and he fought against the distraction.

“We need to talk,” he said in an undertone.

“I’ve nothing to say to you.” Fritz extended his arm as best he could, encumbered as he was by the heavy manacles Theo had produced from his pack. He flinched as Hanna took it between her hands. Rudi suppressed an unexpected pang of jealousy.

“Then listen. If you keep your mouth shut about us, we’ll help you escape.”

“Why should I trust you?” Fritz glared at him, wincing as Hanna peeled the blood-encrusted bandage away from his arm. She glanced up.

“Because right now we’re the only chance you’ve got of escaping the noose,” she pointed out reasonably. She washed the gash with a little water from her canteen, and swabbed it clean. “I’m afraid that’s the best I can do for now. I’ve been keeping my

eye out for some woundwort, but so far no luck.” She began to retie the bandage, using a clean strip of cloth.

“That feels better.” Fritz looked surprised, and returned his attention to Rudi. “All right. But I want to know how you got here.”

“That’s a long story.” Rudi sighed, glancing back at the group around the fire. So far most of them had their attention on the roasting meat, apart from Conrad and Alwyn that was, whose attentions were firmly on one another. But Rudi did not dare risk prolonging the conversation too much. “The short version is the witch hunter accused us of heresy. We’ve been on the run ever since, and ran into these people a few days ago.”

“So why are they after you?” Hanna asked. “They said you were a deserter, but somehow that doesn’t seem right.”

“No, it’s true enough.” Fritz shrugged, the linking chain of the manacles clinking metallically. “A couple of days after leaving Kohlstadt I ran into a recruiting party at an inn on the Pottermer road. The army seemed like a good place to hide, so I enlisted.”

“So why leave?” Rudi asked. Fritz’s face seemed to pale in the distant glow of the fire.

“The witch hunter came to the camp, looking for soldiers to search the countryside. For dangerous heretics, he said.” He looked appraisingly at Rudi and Hanna. “I didn’t realise it was you, of course.” Rudi felt as though he’d been doused in the Reik again. If Gerhard was that determined to find them they had to get a lot further away from Kohlstadt than this.

“Did he say why?” Hanna asked, her voice tight. Fritz shook his head.

“I didn’t hang around to find out. The minute I recognised him I was out of there.”

“He must have recognised you too,” Hanna said. Fritz shook his head.

“He didn’t see me. I was on my way to the captain’s tent with a message when I saw him go in.”

“But they must have known who you were,” Hanna insisted. “Why else would they put such a big price on your head?” A thought occurred to Rudi.

“Fritz,” he asked carefully, already sure of the answer, “what name did you give when you enlisted?”

“Name?” The brawny youth looked confused. “Fritz Katzenjammer of course.” Rudi sighed, meeting Hanna’s expression of stunned disbelief. It seemed that life on the run had done nothing to sharpen his old enemy’s wits.

“So the moment you disappeared he realised you’d been there.” And would no doubt be waiting for the fugitive to be returned. That meant he and Hanna would have to leave too. Every day they spent with Krieger’s company would bring them closer to the man who’d destroyed their lives. And apparently he would stop at nothing until they were dead. As to how they would manage to slip away under the noses of a party of experienced warriors...

“We’ll think of something,” Rudi promised, standing to leave. As he turned away Fritz called after him.

“Wait a minute.” Rudi turned back, meeting an expression of eager enquiry. “You left Kohlstadt after I did. How’s my mother holding up?”

As the days passed, Rudi found no opportunity to keep his promise to Fritz, despite his assurances. They were within sight of the river again and were heading back upstream. Knowing that they were getting further away from Marienburg where he might get answers to the questions which continued to torment him was almost as painful as the thought that every step was bringing them closer to the witch hunter.

“We have to go tonight,” Hanna murmured, dropping into step beside him. She gestured to the left, where a grey mass rose indistinctly from the marshland between them and the water. With a start Rudi recognised the ruins where they’d fought the skaven. “Bruno says we’re only two days from the soldier’s camp.”

“That’s not good,” Rudi said, but he smiled as though she’d made some remark about the weather. He glanced at Fritz, who was stumbling along in the middle of the group, goaded by Bruno. Since they began to plan their escape he and Hanna had become closer again, and Bruno had become correspondingly more sulky, taking his bad temper out on the prisoner. A small part of Rudi relished the idea that the bully was getting a taste of his own medicine, but he was ashamed too. Fritz had suffered enough, and he ought to intervene, but doing so would draw attention to them. “How’s Fritz doing?”

“His arm’s getting better,” Hanna said, smiling and waving as Bruno glanced in their direction. She’d continued to treat him, but Bruno had insisted on accompanying her on subsequent occasions, so it hadn’t been possible to talk openly. “But as for how he’s feeling...”

Rudi sympathised. Fritz had taken the news of his mother’s death more calmly than he’d expected. He had just nodded slowly, and hugged his knees. But he knew the older boy well enough to know that he would be feeling it keenly, just as he and Hanna still felt the pain of their own losses, but unlike them he could do nothing about it except brood.

“We’ll need a good start on them,” Rudi said. Though none of the others had his tracking skills they could follow an obvious trail after a fashion, and Fritz was in no condition to move stealthily enough to conceal the traces of their passing. Hanna nodded.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve an idea...” But she was cut short as Bruno came trotting over; Theo had told him to leave the prisoner alone. No matter, he trusted her. He forced his face into a smile of greeting as the youth joined them.

“Hello,” he suppressed another pang of jealousy as Hanna took hold of the lad’s arm.

“Hello.” Bruno seemed more awkward than usual, as though he had something on his mind. He patted Hanna’s hand absently, and cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind, liebchen, I’d like a word with your brother.”

“All right.” Hanna looked a little puzzled, but detached her arm. “I’ll be with Alwyn when you’ve finished.” She wandered away, leaving Rudi to fall into step beside Bruno.

“What’s the problem?” Rudi asked, trying to mask his annoyance at the casual endearment Bruno had used with the girl.

“To be honest, it’s you.” Bruno’s voice was unwavering. He kept it low and emphatic, so none of the others would overhear. “I know what’s going on with you and Hanna, and I’m giving you fair warning, I’m not going to stand for it.”

“What?” Rudi stopped walking; momentarily paralysed with astonishment. Bruno walked on a couple of steps before stopping too. He turned to face him.

“You’re trying to get between us. You think a wandering sell-sword isn’t good enough for your precious sister, don’t you?” Bruno prodded him in the chest for emphasis. Rudi fought down the urge to strike him. Conrad’s words at the coaching inn came back to him, and for the first time he truly believed that this awkward buffoon could be dangerous. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll back off.”

“I think you’ve got the wrong end of the stick,” Rudi said, trying to sound reasonable. “Hanna makes her own decisions. Whatever’s going on between the two of you is nothing to do with me.”

“Damn right. And you’d better remember it.” All of a sudden Bruno was smiling, as though the conversation had never been anything other than affable. “See you later then.” He wandered off to look for Hanna, leaving Rudi to wonder if things could possibly get any more complicated.

CHAPTER THIRTY

That night they made camp late, just as dusk was falling. Normally they would have done so at least an hour earlier, but Theo had insisted on putting as much distance between them and the skaven stronghold as possible before resting for the night. This made sense, but Rudi suspected that he was just as eager to get close to their destination so he could turn Fritz in for the bounty.

Rudi's mind was reeling. He busied himself with the routine of settling for the night, and tried to look as casual as possible. Bruno glanced at him oddly a couple of times, but he hoped that was simply a result of their astonishing conversation earlier in the day. Boden, Conrad and Theo didn't seem to be treating him any differently, so he supposed he was concealing his feelings well enough. He stowed his new pack where he could grab it in a hurry if he needed to, and started to collect firewood from the fringes of the copse where they'd made camp.

"Here you are." He dropped a bundle of sticks in front of Hanna, grateful for the excuse to talk to her.

"Thank you." She extended a hand to the small pile of kindling she'd already prepared, and flashed it into flame. Rudi watched Fritz flinch and mutter prayers to Sigmar as he had done every time he'd seen the girl use her abilities. He still seemed more frightened of Hanna than the rest of them put together, and Rudi hoped he would be able to overcome it when they made their break.

"This idea of yours..." he began quietly then checked himself as Bruno trotted up with another bundle of wood.

"That should do," Hanna said brightly, favouring the youth with a smile. She picked up the company's stewpot and hung it over the flames. "Anyone got some water?"

"Right here, lass." Theo threw her a half-full canteen, which she emptied into the cauldron. Then she started preparing a stew with the rabbits Rudi had snared the previous night. Bodun sniffed disappointedly.

"We've still got plenty of pork," he pointed out hopefully. Hanna smiled at him.

"We've already cooked it, so it'll keep another day or two. But these coney are still fresh."

"Aye, I suppose so." The dwarf nodded reluctantly, conceding the logic.

"Besides," Rudi added, holding a freshly skinned rabbit corpse up to spill its guts into the fire, "you'll be able to afford some ale to go with it this time tomorrow."

"True." Bodun seemed a great deal happier as he considered the prospect. "That'll make it all the more sweet."

"A drink, for Sigmar's sake." Alwyn appeared from nowhere, with an abruptness Rudi was beginning to get used to. She swayed on her feet. Conrad hurried forward to support her. He glared at Theo.

"I told you it would be too much for her!"

“What’s the matter?” Rudi handed her the bottle of rough spirits he’d found in Fritz’s pack. He’d sniffed cautiously at it the first night, when he went through the contents to see what was worth keeping or bartering, but he hadn’t dared take a sip at it. Alwyn took it gratefully, and downed several swallows. Her face was pale, and her nose was bleeding.

“Too many jumps. Too fast.” She coughed, spraying a mouthful of the liquid at the fire, which flared momentarily with a bluish flame. Then she wiped the blood away with the back of her hand. “I’ll be all right.” She smiled wanly at Hanna. “That’s something you’ll learn about magic soon enough. Push it too hard and it’ll push right back.”

“I hope you think this was worth it,” Conrad snapped at Theo. The mercenary captain nodded thoughtfully.

“That depends. Did you find them?”

“Right where they said they’d be.” Alwyn took another pull at the bottle then handed it back to Rudi with obvious reluctance. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

“And?” Theo asked, apparently only partially satisfied with her answer.

“And they’ll have our money.” Alwyn paused. “There was another man there this time. The captain did all the talking again, but I’d bet my grandmother he was really in charge.”

“Who was he?” Bruno asked. The sorceress shrugged.

“No idea. But I wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of him, that’s for sure.” Rudi fought the impulse to glance across at Hanna. It had to be Gerhard.

“Thanks,” Theo said. Conrad stared at him again, his expression still hard.

“Satisfied?” he asked. Theo nodded again.

“It confirms what we thought,” he said. “There’s more to this one than meets the eye.” He glanced reflectively at Fritz.

“Who cares?” Bruno asked. “We’re getting paid, aren’t we?”

“Oh yes.” Theo nodded. “But just to make sure, I think we should double the guard on our quarry tonight. If there’s something we’re not being told...”

“Agreed,” Conrad said. His expression softened, and he led his wife solicitously over to their bedroll. Rudi felt as though he’d been punched in the stomach.

Try as he might, Rudi was unable to think of a single strategy. It would have been hard enough spicing Fritz away from under the nose of whoever would normally have been left on watch, but if two of them were going to be on guard the whole night it looked as though they were sunk. He began to entertain the idea of slipping away on his own; he was sure he could move stealthily enough to evade them in the darkness, and no doubt Hanna would be able to look after herself well enough...

He rejected the idea impatiently. He’d made a promise to her, and to Fritz, and he was honour-bound to go through with it. There must be a way, somehow...

“Here you are, it’s piping hot.” Hanna appeared in front of him with a bowl of stew. He sniffed at the appetising aroma, suddenly aware of how hungry he was. The faint scent of herbs overlaid the richer smell of the cooking meat. She lowered her voice as she bent to hand him the bowl. “Don’t eat it. Just pretend.” Before he could react she’d turned away.

Confused, Rudi did as he'd been told. The effort of stopping the spoon just short of his mouth was agonising. The others were plying their spoons with evident enthusiasm. Even Bodun, who had finished first, called for more.

"There's plenty," Hanna assured him, taking a bowl over to Alwyn. "Here. This'll make you feel better."

"Thank you." The sorceress was shivering as though she had the ague, and she took the food gratefully. "It smells great."

"You'll make someone a wonderful wife," Theo pointed out, and Bruno flushed to everyone's amusement. While they were laughing, their eyes fixed on the youth, Rudi tipped the contents of his bowl quietly onto the ground.

"I'll take some more too, if it's there," Conrad said. Hanna refilled his bowl, before going round the campfire to ensure everyone else had a second helping. Theo pretended that Bruno was getting a larger portion than the rest of them, and Bodun and Conrad joined in with accusations of favouritism. By now the youth was blushing furiously and smiling with more genuine warmth than Rudi had seen since they'd met.

"He's a growing boy," Hanna said, eliciting a roar of laughter far greater than the feeble jest deserved. He hadn't seen them like this since the night at the inn, when they'd all been drunk together.

"I'm going to sleep," Alwyn said. "I'm all in." She yawned loudly, and stretched out on the bedroll.

"Careful, sweetheart. It's catching." Conrad yawned too.

"I'll take the first watch," Theo said. "Me and Bruno..." He glanced at the youth, who was stretched out on the grass snoring quietly. "I don't know, youngsters today, no stamina. Me and Bodun then."

"Right with you, boss." The dwarf yawned. His jaw cracked like a dead branch under an incautious heel. "Just need to, you know, rest my eyes a moment..." Then he toppled over sideways.

"What the..." Theo stumbled to his feet. His hand reached for the hilt of his sword, which he'd almost drawn when his knees buckled. He sprawled face down in the dirt.

"What did you do to them?" Fritz asked, shrill with panic. He began worming his way backwards as Hanna approached him, with Theo's pack dangling from her hand.

"Nothing permanent," she said. "Just the right combination of herbs in the stew."

"She's a healer, remember?" Rudi said, masking his own surprise with a show of scorn. He began to rummage through the provisions. "Anything we can eat safely? We've got a lot of walking to do."

"Anything but the stew," Hanna confirmed, tipping the captain's possessions out on the ground, and swooping down to recover the key to Fritz's fetters. "Hold still, you idiot."

"This'll do." Rudi gathered a bagful of food together, and threw Fritz a lump of the pork. "Here, I suppose that's yours technically anyway."

"So's the pack," Fritz said, biting into the meat eagerly. The last few days he'd had to make do with whatever scraps were left after the adventurers had finished their meals... and Bodun never left much.

“Not anymore.” Rudi shouldered the pack he’d looted from the lad which was now stuffed with his new possessions. “Unless you want to fight me for it.”

“This one’s better anyway,” Fritz said, picking up Theo’s, backing down with as much bravado as he could.

“When you’ve quite finished being masculine with each other...” Hanna interrupted, the old Kohlstadt tone had edged back into her voice for the first time in days. Rudi nodded.

“You’re right, we haven’t any time to waste.” He buckled up his sword belt and was vaguely surprised at how natural it was beginning to feel. Then he turned to Fritz. “Find a weapon. Something you know how to use.”

“This’ll do fine.” The lad obeyed with surprising speed, going straight for the spear he’d stolen when he deserted. Rudi was taken aback for a moment, until he realised the simpleton had spent his entire life following the lead of his brother and probably only ever felt comfortable when someone told him what to do. No wonder he’d enlisted in the army.

“Anything else we need?” Hanna asked. Rudi cast covetous eyes at Conrad’s bow, but the memory of how keenly he’d felt the loss of his own stayed his hand.

“We’ve got enough,” he decided, and after banking up the fire enough to keep any dangerous animals at bay until the adventurers awoke, he led the way into the woods.

“Where are we going?” Fritz asked after a while. Mannslieb was almost full now, and even under the sheltering trees enough silvery moonlight filtered through the branches to make everything stand out clearly in shades of shimmering grey and deep, black shadows.

“Marienburg,” Rudi said without thinking. Hanna frowned, clearly troubled by his candour, but Fritz simply shrugged. Rudi had hoped that by taking to the woods they would make good time and also delay any pursuit, but the heavy set youth was uncomfortable beneath the trees. He constantly delayed them by stumbling into bushes and getting snagged in undergrowth that Rudi would have slipped through without thinking. At least Hanna was managing to keep up without much effort.

“How do we do that?” Fritz asked after a while. Rudi shrugged too, feeling a little nonplussed.

“Head for the river, and follow it downstream,” he said, reverting to the old plan he and Hanna had agreed on, what seemed like a lifetime ago. With hindsight, he found it hard to believe that he had been so naive about the world such a short time before. “Maybe get passage on a riverboat.”

“So long as we stay on board this time,” Hanna said, drawing a blank look from Fritz.

“There’s a clearing ahead,” Rudi said with relief, seeing the moonlight intensify. He strode ahead of the others, leaving Fritz to flounder through the entangling vegetation as best he could, and Hanna to hurry him up.

Alone for a moment, and ignoring the older lad’s muttered profanity, he stood still in the wash of moonlight, examining the glade for clues as to the best direction to take. It was obvious now that entering the woods had been a mistake, so their best

bet would be to make for open ground where Fritz and Hanna could move more quickly. Directly north would be impassable, he knew, due to the swamp they'd encountered before, and he was in no hurry to encounter the rat-things again. Fritz had told him that the soldiers hunting them, and Gerhard, were camped to the south, so even if it hadn't taken them away from Marienburg that direction was out too. But going east meant slogging through the main body of the woodland they'd entered, and that was clearly impossible if they wanted to get a decent head start on the party of sell-swords. He didn't know how soon Alwyn would be able to perform her distance-jumping trick again, but it was clear her range was limited in some way. He needed to be sure they were beyond it before the sun rose.

"That way," he decided at last. The going looked easier and the trees were less mature, so the boundary of the woodland must be close. With a prickle of unease he noted that it was more southerly than their current course, but that couldn't be helped, it wasn't as if they were going to be marching towards the soldiers for the several hours it would take to reach their camp. Once they got to the tree line they could turn east again, resuming their course to the Reik.

"You're the expert," Hanna said in a neutral tone. Rudi turned to look at her, unsure of how to respond. Things seemed different between them now, in a fashion he couldn't quite put his finger on. Before he could think how to reply, he was struck by something odd about the ground where she stood. The moonlight was reflecting from the grass in a rippling sheen of silver, pockmarking it with black irregular shadows. He bent to take a closer look.

"Can you do that thing with the light?" he asked. Hanna nodded dubiously.

"If you're sure we can't be seen..." she began.

"Just for a moment." Despite himself an edge of urgency had crept into his voice. "It could be important."

"Did you find some tracks?" Fritz asked, looming over him and blocking out part of the moonlight with his shadow. Rudi was about to tell him to move, but thought better of it, his body would conceal the light from any observers that might be around.

"I'm not sure," he said instead. "We're about to find out."

Hanna frowned. Her face took on the by now familiar expression of concentration. A phantom candle flame like the one she'd conjured up in the ruin winked into existence in the space between them. Fritz gasped and shied away.

"Douse it!" Rudi had seen enough. Alarmed at the intensity of his command, Hanna let the evanescent flame wink out. They were all left momentarily blinded by the sudden rush of darkness. Rudi blinked, letting his eyes readjust to the softer moonlight.

"Did you recognise them?" Hanna asked. In that momentary flash Rudi had seen clearly visible footprints in the soft ground. He nodded.

"Beastmen," he said.

Though he strained his ears, and kept every nerve taut for tell-tale rustlings in the undergrowth, Rudi could find no further trace of the mutants before they finally broke through the trees into open ground. As they stepped out from under the

branches he felt a flood of relief, which he was sure his companions would be sharing.

“Thank Shallya for that,” Hanna muttered under her breath, and Rudi nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“Are we safe now?” Fritz asked, his voice trembling slightly.

“I can’t see any signs of them having left the woods,” Rudi replied. It was a slim shred of safety to him, but it reassured Fritz anyway. He began to parallel the tree line, keeping close to the shadows. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Far enough away to see them coming if you’re wrong,” Hanna said, glancing over her shoulder as she moved away from the woods. Out here the moonlight was so bright it could almost have been an overcast day if it wasn’t for the lack of colours. The whole desolate landscape was limned in delicate shades of silvery grey. As she turned to watch where she was treading, her hair rippled like liquid light.

“Oh for Taal’s sake!” Rudi said, but suddenly went quiet. He realised that his instincts had betrayed him: far from being a refuge, the looming tree line could all too quickly become a deadly trap. He raised his voice a little. “Not too far. That way’s still south.”

In the end they compromised, and they skirted the wood at a distance that Rudi estimated was at least twice a bowshot, the stand of trees on their left was like a looming thundercloud against the shimmering night sky. As he’d hoped they made better time now. The moss was comfortably springy underfoot, and what vegetation grew there was sparse enough to avoid. Now their eyes had adjusted to the moonlight they were able to walk as fast as they would have by day.

“Can you hear something?” Fritz asked after a while. He had stopped to gaze out over the undulating ground. Rudi shook his head.

“Like what?” he asked. The simpleton shrugged.

“I don’t know. Just something.” A hint of their old animosity began to surface in his voice. “You’re the outdoorsman, aren’t you?”

“Quiet!” Hanna said, an expression of alarm flashing across her face. Rudi bit back the retort he’d been about to hurl, and strained his ears. A faint metallic sound drifted on the air, like coins clinking in a purse.

“I don’t quite...” he began, and Hanna hushed him with a gesture.

“Horses!” she said. Rudi almost laughed.

“Out here?” he asked. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Then the words died in his throat. Dark silhouettes began to appear over a rise in the moor, the outlines of horses and riders punched against the stars like holes in the sky. Five, ten, a dozen...

“Get down!”

For a moment he dared to hope that they’d escaped detection, but the leading rider spurred his mount into a trot. A voice floated to them on the wind.

“Verber, Gessler, go with him, see what’s out there.” Two more of the riders veered off, to follow the first.

“Make for the trees!” Rudi said. “It’s our only chance!” Horses would be useless in the tangled undergrowth, and he was sure he’d be able to evade the riders if they dismounted. With that he was up and running, heading for the safety of the wood.

“Get away from the trees, go back to the trees...” Fritz grumbled, but he started running nevertheless. Rudi looked round for Hanna, prepared to have to urge her on, but she was following him, a pace or two behind. Over her shoulder a shout went up, and the rest of the troop followed their fellows.

“Who are they?” she gasped, risking a quick look behind.

“Cavalry,” Fritz replied. “From the camp.” Rudi shot him a suspicious glance, wondering how the simpleton could be so sure. Then the moonlight caught the sheen of armour; it became dazzlingly bright. He turned away to concentrate on running as hard as he could. He ignored the pain in his chest and legs, the weight of his pack, he ignored everything except the need to get away.

For a moment he dared to think they might make it. The dark line of trees grew with every step, but the ground was shaking under his feet, and the rumble of hooves and clink of harness was loud in his ears. Abruptly the sight of the wood was cut off by the flank of a horse that had swung round ahead of him. Then there was a second, and a third.

“Halt in the name of the Emperor!” a voice shouted, “or die where you stand!”

Rudi stumbled to a halt, and gasped for breath. Fritz too was breathing in great whoops of air, only Hanna seemed in control.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said, in a voice so unlike her own that Rudi had to look to make sure her lips were moving. The confident, assertive tone had gone, to be replaced by the fluttering, squeaky intonation of some of the village girls back in Kohlstadt. “We thought you were bandits. We got lost, and...”

“How very fortunate we happened along,” a new and familiar voice cut in. Rudi shivered and his body turned to ice as he turned. “You’re certainly a long way from Kohlstadt.”

Gerhard looked down at him from the saddle of his sable horse, his face the only clearly discernable thing in the solid mass of darkness. He gestured to his men, and the horses closed around the fugitives like a solid wall of flesh.

“Take them,” he said.

Scanning, formatting and
proofing by Flandrel,
additional formatting and
proofing by Undead.

