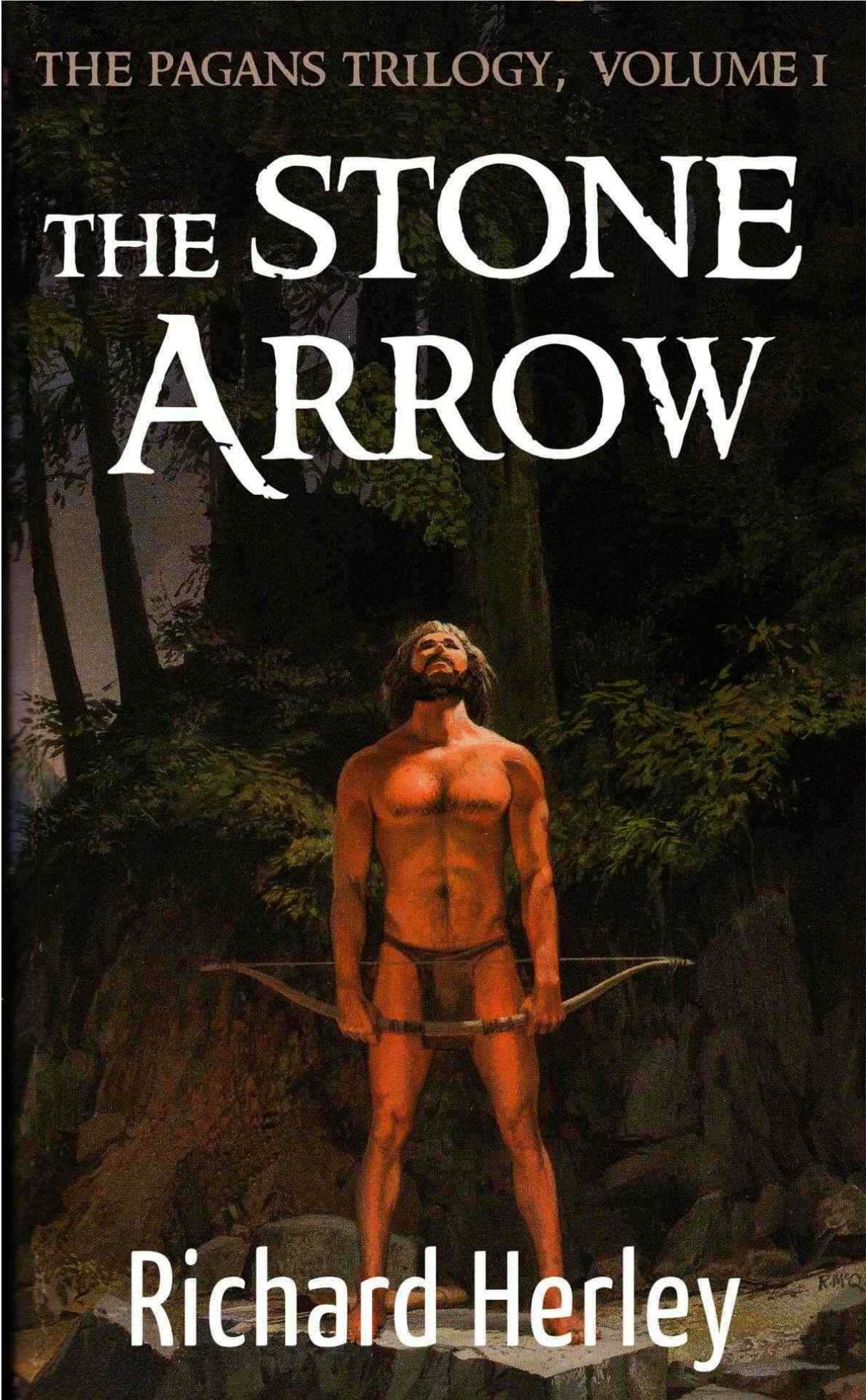


THE PAGANS TRILOGY, VOLUME I

THE STONE ARROW



Richard Herley

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Prologue

Tagart came out of the woods and stood facing the broad downhill sweep of the cereal field. The feeling of openness seemed strange and sudden after the embrace of the trees; he sniffed at the smell of the evening, almost cloudless now after the storm, a soft wind coming off the sea, bending the stunted ears of barley, fluttering the leaves of hazel and whitebeam.

A hundred yards away the labourer stood upright and leaned on the handle of his mattock. He had only just become aware of another's presence, yet Tagart had heard the man at work minutes ago from the depths of the wood, whose floor he had traversed without so much as the snap of a twig.

Tagart, or Tugart, or Tergart, was twenty-five years of age, tall and fine in the face, with dark hair and watchful brown eyes that knew the value of patience. His skin – for it was now the height of summer – was well tanned, his frame hard-muscled and long-limbed, with an economy of movement that seemed like slowness to those who had never been with him in the woods and tried to keep up.

Chance had endowed him with a keen intelligence which the teachings of his elders had turned into solid skill and a command of the necessary knowledge. Of all the young men in his tribe, it was Tagart who had been regarded as successor to the leader, Tagart who had taken the most desirable bride, Tagart whose small son would in turn one day be chief; and Tagart whom the others were

beginning to look upon with more and more respect and affection as each season passed.

But now, in the course of a single night, all that had changed. Everything changed; everything raped and defiled.

Not quite everything. Tagart was still alive. He was still alive, and behind the grief he was still himself.

It was time to begin.

'I come in friendship,' he called out, leaving the safety of the trees and starting across the field.

The labourer, a short, stumpy man, did not answer. He stood shielding his eyes against the west, his right hand taking a firmer grasp on the polished ashwood haft of his mattock.

Tagart went on. In the edge of his vision he was making a second survey of the field, making certain that he and the labourer were alone. The farmers' village, which he had studied the previous day, was a cluster of stone and timber buildings inside a wooden palisade, hidden from this field by a rise of the land. It was only a quarter of a mile away, too close, asking for trouble; but then he'd had no choice. He had been forced into the open by the shape of the forest and by the way the fields sloped. Without revealing himself there had been no way to be sure that the labourer was alone, and to have wasted such an opportunity would have been madness. So he had accepted the risk. But that did not stop the tingling between his shoulder-blades, nor an almost irresistible urge to check more overtly behind and to the sides.

He halted just beyond the swing of the mattock and forced a smile. 'The soil needs more rain than this. After the drought she drinks it like a pigeon.'

The labourer said nothing. He stood impassive, expressionless. His broad shoulders filled a stained and streaked doeskin jacket; his beaver leggings were bound by thongs; mud caked his crudely carved clogs. A talisman of some sort hung round his neck, a flat stone striped with bands of cream and maroon, held by a cord that passed through a hole drilled off-centre. Greasy brown locks showed beneath a hare's-skin cap and hung in a tangle at his neck. Years of weather had left his skin leathery and his eyes wrinkled almost shut; his was a face devoid of animation or humour, the kind of face under a low forehead that frowns blankly as the brain behind it struggles to assimilate something new. Clearly the man was low in the order of the village, sent out to the fields to do some trivial task on his own. He had been digging up stones and heaping them to one side. This was the kind of work reserved for those at the bottom of the village hierarchy.

'I have come along the coast from Valdoe,' Tagart told him, speaking more distinctly. He indicated his leather pouch. 'My master wishes an exchange of barleys.'

The labourer's eyes flicked to the pouch and back to Tagart's face.

'I see barley is your crop here on this acre.'

No reaction.

'I was told to ask for a man with no beard. A man of importance in your village. Do you know him?'

The labourer grunted. There was no meaning in it.

'Is he your head man? Will you take me to him? I want to talk trade.'

The labourer took the shading hand from his brow and changed position so that he was no longer facing the sun. He nodded at Tagart's pouch.

'Seed barley,' Tagart said, holding the pouch forward.

The offer was disregarded. 'You say you come along the coast.'

'From Valdoe.'

'From Valdoe?' For the first time he showed a sign of interest. It was as if Tagart had not already mentioned the word. 'Valdoe? From Valdoe? Are you sent by the Flint Lord?'

'By my master, one of the Trundlemen.'

'And he sent you trading barley?'

'Yes.'

The labourer's eyes narrowed even more. 'You will know the flint sellers. They will be here soon: it is time for their trade. Fallott, Bico, and the rest.'

'My trade is not in flints,' Tagart said. 'It is in seed.' More mildly he added, 'There are many at Valdoe. A mere slave cannot know them all.'

'You are enslaved?'

'Building my freedom.'

'Why go back? You are far from the Trundle. They could never catch up.'

'That is not my way,' Tagart said. 'My master trusts me and I am grateful.'

The labourer forbore from comment. He turned and took a long look to the west, across the curving line of the field, beyond the distant green scrub on the clifftops, to the golden path where the sun was coming down on the sea. The wind pushed wisps of hair at the sides of his face. Tagart heard corn buntings and skylarks, and glimpsed the

flash of a jay as it emerged from and returned to the security of the wood. He swayed slightly. Exhaustion was threatening to overtake him. His body wanted to sag to the ground. Sections of his mind were faltering. He was aware that his strength was draining away. With its loss came a fear that he might be left with too little when the moment arrived. He had stupidly eaten nothing that day, and the day before he had felt too ill to contemplate food. His guts had been emptied anyway, in the grey wet dawn with his arms and legs covered in ashes, slime and blood, the back of his throat burning and his eyes watering with each useless retch as he had crouched beside their bodies on the riverbank.

His mind drew back. He must not think of them. Not of them. Not of honour. He must think only of the immediate, the practical, what had to be accomplished in each moment. Only thus could he see it through.

Fleetingly the whole vista stretched before and behind. The end of it was unimportant, his fate a mere contingency as long as he got through the next few days intact; for all but that, he was already dead.

‘You must talk to Sturmer,’ the labourer said.

‘Sturmer? Is he your chief? A man with no beard?’

‘Sturmer does our trading.’

‘Will you take me to him?’

‘I will not. We have rules.’ He scratched his chin. ‘You say you bring seed. What of it? Our barns are full of seed.’

‘This is different. My master wants a barley for the sea wind; the Flint Lord desires new ground opened up along the coast.’

‘So you were sent to villages by the sea to trade. But why should we give our secrets to the Flint Lord? If he

wants them he must pay, as we must pay for the things his traders bring. Flints, livestock, salt – these are the things we want. Of barley we have plenty.’

‘No – this seed is different. It’s special.’ Tagart pointed to the south. ‘It comes from there, across the water. The yield is double.’

‘Double.’

‘That is what my master says, sir.’

‘Not possible.’

‘It must be possible or the Valdoe farmers would not sow it by the score of bushels.’

‘Show it to me.’

‘There is nothing to be gained by that.’

‘Show me.’

‘My master said I was only to offer it to a head man. Take me to Sturmer. I will talk with him.’

‘Show me.’ The labourer stretched out a hand. ‘Show me or be on your way.’

‘I should not do this.’

He wagged his fingers impatiently. Tagart gave him the pouch, which was tied at the neck with a drawstring. Two hands were needed to get it open.

Seeing this, the labourer tried to loosen the string while keeping a grip on his mattock-handle, picking with a fingernail at the bunched leather, which Tagart had drawn especially tight before leaving the woods. After a few fruitless moments, aware that he would make himself look foolish by asking Tagart to open the bag, the labourer released the mattock, lodging the handle in his armpit, and freed both hands for the job.

That was the instant Tagart chose to kill him.

Later, Tagart had time to wonder what had gone wrong. It may have been weariness, making him slow. He was not sure. He knew only that the man had put up a struggle that had made his end more difficult than it ought to have been.

When it was done, Tagart searched the body for personal effects. With his flint knife he cut through the cord, releasing the talisman, and slipped it into his pouch. He worked quickly, fearing that someone might come from the village and discover him. The sun had gone down. Night was coming.

A name formed on Tagart's lips. Sturmer. He said it again. Sturmer. A name to go with the beardless face, the face in the firelight.

Picking up the mattock by its blade, he thrust the haft into the ground. Beside it he arranged lines of stones taken from the pile the man had made, forming an arrow pointing in the direction of the wood. He finished it with three stones for each barb, and grasped the corpse by its armpits.

It seemed heavier than a man's body. Ideally he needed a sledge. He produced a grim smile. Ideally, he needed help for what he had to do, the help of a hundred men. Or, if not a hundred, then ten of his friends from the tribe, who were better than any hundred taken from these slab-faced peasants.

The tribe. He must not think of the tribe. Anger would only slow him down and ruin his chances. He held a duty in sacred trust. The honour of the tribe had devolved upon him and upon him alone. Nothing must be allowed to stand in his way. If he was to discharge his duty he could ill afford the luxury of rage.

But it was with a fierce renewed energy that he took up the corpse again, pulling it towards the forest.

PART ONE

1

Sturmer opened his eyes and lay listening to the blood pulsing in his ears. The chimney-hole in his roof was blind, blocked for the summer: the blackened rafters travelled up and met in gloom. There were five, like the arms of a starfish, speared by the central pillar that held up his house. From them, on pegs and hooks, hung clothes, netting, tools, pouches of flints, water-bags; seed of wheat, corn, and a dozen other crops; jars of lamp-fat and bundles of rush-pith for lighting; baskets, cooking utensils, pots suspended in nets, leatherware muzzles and straps and tackle, fire-making kits, and all the other possessions that were better kept off the ground and away from the vermin and the village animals that ranged free in all the houses.

Sturmer's was the largest and best-appointed dwelling, with three other rooms besides this, where his children slept and he kept further stores. The doorway, which was low and broad and looked out across the village compound towards the Meeting House, gave upon a small area paved with stones from the beach. Behind the doorway and a short, tunnel-like porch, which contained a small effigy of the Earth Goddess in a chalk casket, the passageway opened into a cobble-floored kitchen with a sooted hearth, above which was another chimney aperture. To the side was the room where the children slept; to the front another chamber, and beyond that the main room with the tall roof,

which from the outside appeared as a cone of weathered timber, caulked with nettle stalks and clay, in places tufted with clumps of grass and weeds. The flat part of the roof towards the front of the house was turfed, on a base of planking, and the porch was covered with skins that could be drawn across the entrance. A few small windows – simple apertures – had been left in the walls, which were made of selected and interlocked stones, the gaps and chinks filled with pebbles and the remaining cracks plastered with clay. Against the wall were piles of firewood, a wooden water-butt, and an old bench where the people in the house could sit in the evening and face the Meeting House opposite. It was here that Sturmer sat to answer informal questions and settle small disputes. He was head man of Burh village, and had been so for twelve years.

He was of medium height and build, with mild features and a hesitant manner belied by the perceptive gaze of grey-blue eyes. Sturmer kept his beard neat and favoured subdued clothing: pigskin and goatskin dyed with subtle patterns. His hair, which was dark-blond, he tied in a bun. Triple lines of blue tattoo ran the length of his right arm, flank, and leg, culminating in pentacles on his instep and the back of his hand: for he was also a priest.

He turned on his side and watched the contours of his wife's back. His eyes explored her shoulders and the tiny humps of vertebrae, the light and shade and texture of her hair, which he found girlish and endearing where it grew from her nape. He extended a forefinger and almost touched the bumps of her spine, moving his hand to compensate for her breathing.

It was no use making plans any more. The matter was out of control; the spirits had taken over. The drought showed no sign of coming to an end. Starvation, the destruction of Burh, was beginning to look inevitable.

The previous winter, Sturmer, like all the villagers, had become uneasily aware that too many dry days were following one another, and that the rain, when it did come, was light and sporadic. A single snowstorm in early spring, with a week of bitter frost, had been the only hard weather the whole winter, when usually Burh could expect heavy drifts and blizzards for days on end. And there had been no flooding from the river: sometimes the farmers had to work through the night to protect their village.

At the end of the spring and for the two months of low summer the clearings had been filled with blossom – of elder, blackthorn, whitebeam, hawthorn, cherry – to an extent which no one had ever seen before. Many plants had gone on flowering through the winter, when normally there was no colour to be seen. Even the spring birds had seemed earlier than usual and more numerous, supernaturally numerous; and the woods and grassland near the village and on the cliffs had been alive with butterflies, flying up in clouds from every bush and clump of nettles. The lilies in the river had bloomed profusely long before their time. The ditches and banks had been choked with frog-spawn. One night the villagers saw shooting stars over the sea, and Sturmer knew then that the Sky Spirit, Aih, had been disturbed.

The farmers divided their year into six seasons, each of two moons or months, beginning on the shortest day with winter, followed by spring, low summer, high summer, harvest, autumn, and winter again. It was now halfway

through high summer, when the crops should have been ripening and all was to be got ready for harvest. Normally on such a morning Sturmer would long ago have been up and in the fields with the rest of the village. But today there was no work to be done. The crops were dying. For six weeks there had been no rain at all.

That alone would have been enough, but Sturmer had other worries too.

During his tenure, the village had enjoyed an increase in prosperity and population. Apart from its thirty-three stone and timber houses, Burh now had a threshing shed, a granary, two silos and a general barn, a bakery, a bear-proof palisade, and, to Sturmer's intense pride, a long meeting house where met the village council.

The most important crop was emmer, a kind of wheat that Sturmer had substituted for the old einkorn used by his predecessor. From corn and barley and honey the villagers made ale; broomcorn millet and oats were grown partly as winter fodder for the animals – goats, cattle, and sheep. Crops like lentils, broad beans, kale and rape were grown in plots beside each house. The wealthier families owned pigs. Most kept a dog, medium-sized hounds derived from the hunting dogs such as once had been used by the savages.

Sturmer had been having trouble with the land. He disliked burning the forest and would have preferred to go on using the same fields for the village crops: he had begun to guess at the value of manure, and now regularly changed the location of the animal pens. Some of the beasts were allowed to wander more or less at freedom, grazing on the wild leaves, bringing back their goodness to the village. He had tried mulching with leaf mould from

the forest, and gathering seaweed from the shore, a mile to the south, and using that to enrich the ground. The Earth Goddess, Gauhm, needed help if she was to deliver up her best bounty.

But as the years passed it was becoming plain that the ancestors had been right. To grow good crops you must clear forest. Clear the forest, burn it, plant the ground, and move on when the goodness has gone. That was the old way. Sturmer's new way seemed to be wrong. He was sorry to find it so, because what he yearned for was stability. With a stable village, more elaborate buildings would become possible, more children, more families in one place. More people could be freed from working on the soil. Goods could be fabricated, goods for sale to other villages, and possibly, one day, Sturmer might even grow wealthy through trading, like the great Flint Lord at Valdoe.

The vision was moving further and further out of reach. Despite all Sturmer's efforts, large areas round the village, once excellent land, were useless and reverting to scrub.

Others in the Council, led by Groden, kept pressing for a return to the old order. They wanted wider forest clearance, a change of site for the village; more, not fewer, acres under cultivation. Sturmer felt it unwise to resist too strenuously. He was thirty-six – getting old. His position as leader was becoming precarious. It was only a matter of time before a younger man – and who else but Groden? – made a thrust and forced the issue, and Sturmer was not sure that Groden would not win. The younger and rasher men in the village supported him: they favoured an aggressive approach to the forest and the countryside.

This worried Sturmer in another way. As far back as memory would go, there had been a summer camp in the forest, by the river, three miles upstream from here. The savages were wanderers, hunters, in winter foraging in the marshes to the north where they were guaranteed plentiful wildfowl and game, in spring coming over the downs to the forest by the sea. In some years they came not at all; in others they stayed a few days or weeks and moved on again. This summer, the savages had been present all season.

They were seldom seen by the villagers. The odd goat or pig missed from its pen, and even tools and skins stolen from the fields, were never closely pursued. The farmers hated and feared the savages, and they feared their magic even more. Their god was Tsoaul, Spirit of the Forest. He worked evil on Gauhm: even now he was struggling to win back the fields, as he always did, working stealthily and by degrees. First he made the land infertile for crops, making its cultivation pointless. Next he sent weeds. When these were established he sent hawthorn and birch, which soon became scrub. From scrub it was an easy step to forest. Not a square yard of the village was safe from Tsoaul's work. He infested good land as well as bad; he even wanted the very roofs on the houses.

Sturmer was worried because each tree that fell brought the savages a little closer. Every clearance fire reduced the extent of forest available to them and increased the chance of trouble between savages and the village.

In other summers there had been trifling incidents. A scarecrow was burned. Excrement appeared on the Shrine at the cliffs. A pair of youths from the village went to the forest camp for a dare: both returned badly beaten and

unwilling to talk. Nets were taken from the river; a coracle was dragged downstream and left wrecked. A beacon fire, set up on the cliffs for the midsummer festival, was prematurely burned and the ashes strewn about.

But this year, in this eerie summer, the savages had been here longer, and there had been many more such incidents. Overshadowing them all was the drought.

Sturmer had gone to the Shrine, where the word of Gauhm was breathed. She told him in a dream of Tsoaul and his new onslaught. At his behest, the drought had been conjured by his followers; through incantation they had awoken Aih, Spirit of the Heavens. Tsoaul had then tried to persuade Aih to combine with him, that both might overcome Gauhm and smother the fields with trees, for trees were the voice of the wind and spread its music across the land. Aih had declined, but said that during the battle he would not intervene. That had left the Forest Spirit unaided, goaded by the savages into supernal feats; but, in time, Tsoaul would overreach himself and Gauhm would collect her victory. The villagers were not to interfere. To meddle would displease Aih, and then the rain-clouds, which were under his command, might never come again.

Sturmer had explained all this in detail, standing on the steps of the Meeting House. It had done little to help. Was he not head man? Was he not supposed to be in Gauhm's favour, her priest, her chosen one? Surely if he were a better man the spirits could be won over and persuaded to end the drought.

Sturmer feared that Groden might now feel strong enough to strike. Everything depended on the drought. If it went on much longer, Sturmer's real troubles would begin.

* * *

He rose without disturbing his wife and pushed aside the flap of leather at the doorway. His eyes adjusted painfully to the light. The sun was already hot, the sky a white glare only two hours after dawn.

The previous afternoon there had been cloud. Towards nightfall the air had become close and sultry, with thunder heard far away on the hills. It had seemed as if it must rain, but by dawn the clouds had gone and the emptiness had returned.

Everything in the village seemed dusty and old, all the life baked out of it by six weeks of total drought. Since the longest day, over a month ago, the heat had intensified so that even the nights were unbearable. Most of the villagers had taken to sleeping out of doors, on the stones by the thresholds of their houses. There was even talk of sleeping on the beach, but no one dared leave the palisade at night.

The water in Sturmer's washing-tub was warm and the colour of clay. Bits of straw floated on the surface. He bent and held his head submerged for a few seconds before straightening up, expelling spray and wiping his eyes.

It was then that he noticed a party of people coming towards him across the compound. For a moment, in spite of the sun on his body, he felt cold.

They were walking slowly, led by Hernou, Groden's woman, slender and dark, her tumble of lustrous hair drawn back and held with a wooden brooch. Once Sturmer had slept with her; she was only a few years younger than him, much older than Groden, to whom she had borne a dead baby in the winter. She and Groden lived in a house

by themselves, rather further from the Meeting House than their status and their ambition seemed to warrant.

Behind her came old men, women, some of the older children: twelve people in all. Sturmer folded his arms and stood with his body weighted on one side. He remained silent as the deputation arrived. Hernou looked up at him.

‘See what the savages have done.’

One of the men was holding out a dead dog for his inspection. Its jaws were agape, the side of the top lip folded back and glued to the gums by a frothy crust of dried saliva. Blood had caked the fur between the nostril and the eye. Otherwise there was no sign of the damage done inside the dog’s head by the hazel-shafted arrow, tipped with flint and flighted with mottled quail feathers, that slickly and with tremendous power had burst the animal’s eye and tunnelled through bone, brain and muscle to come to lodge on the inside of the lower jaw.

With the tips of three fingers Sturmer stroked the quail feathers, making the dog’s head move.

‘The arrow need not be theirs.’

‘The dog is Uli – my husband’s dog.’

Sturmer acknowledged it.

The old man carrying him said, ‘What do they seek by this?’

‘Tsoaul grows stronger every day,’ said another.

‘They attack and we do nothing, we stand helpless.’

‘Aih must let us defend the village, if nothing else.’

‘We must do what was said by Groden in the Council.’

‘No!’ Sturmer said angrily. ‘That was refused!’

‘By Gauhm?’

‘Or by Tsoaul?’

A suspicion was growing in Sturmer's mind. 'Where was Uli found?'

'On the Shrine path, by the ash tree.'

'When was he last seen?'

'Yesterday,' Hernou said. 'Yesterday night. We ate with Morfe and Deak. Groden threw him scraps.'

'And afterwards? Did you see him in the night?'

'I cannot say.'

The old man bent and placed the animal at Sturmer's feet. The head lolled on one side. Stiffness had yet to set in. 'He is newly dead,' the old man said. 'This morning, early.'

The dog had been shot either at close range, or by an extremely accurate Bowman. The arrow seemed to implicate the savages, as did the place where the animal had been found, but something jarred, something was wrong.

In all the past troubles, there had always been an explanation, however outlandish, for the things the savages had done. Sturmer might have understood had the dog been stolen, or even butchered and eaten. He might have understood had it represented a threat to them or a symbol of trespass on what they regarded as theirs. But for them to shoot an animal of any kind and leave it to be found, for them to indulge in wanton and irrational killing – that went against everything Sturmer had learned about the forest people and their attitude to life.

There was only one explanation. Now Sturmer knew why he had felt cold.

'Where is Groden?'

Zeme was thirteen years old, one of the children who by miracle had survived, her open, questioning face partly obscured by thick dark hair that fell down her back in a shine, smelling clean from her morning swim. Like her sister, Mirin, she wore her hair loose. Her eyes were almost black, with a shy glance, the eyes of her ancestors. She loved the sunshine, this summer of perfect weather: for weeks there had been no rain, days on end filled with blue sky and light; and though she did not say it in words to herself, she loved the forest and the bounty it so freely gave. The woods at this season seemed benign, smiling on the preparations for the summer feast. To Zeme it was only natural that her sister should be the centre of attention, the first woman of the new tribe, the chief's daughter, mother of his grandson: Tagart's woman.

And today was the day. Zeme had been looking for flowers since sunrise. They had made fun of her at the camp because they said she was jealous of Mirin, so before dawn she had left to find flowers for garlands which would show them how she really felt. She knew all the flowers, and which were right for each occasion. This morning she had found many appropriate kinds: clary, milfoil, vervain and a dozen others.

Her arms were full of them as she passed under the trees, returning to the camp. Her sister was in her mind, and Tagart, and the funny things he said: the way he pretended to be solemn and talked in a low voice and then he burst out laughing and he'd been joking all along. She thought about him as a brother, and the way he hunted,

with traps and spears and arrows. Tagart was the best marksman in the tribe. He had the straightest eye and the strongest arm. He could even impale a snipe as it zigzagged up from some marshy patch, or bring down a speeding teal over one of the meres at the winter camp. His bow was so strong that Zeme could only bend it an inch. And his arrows, which he made with a flint shaver, he polished with tallow and fletched with goose quills to make them run faster. Sometimes, when preparing for large quarry, Tagart used wolf's-bane poison on his arrows, but he preferred more passive methods: he said that tracking was hard work. Tagart was an expert in strategy, in waiting. He knew just where to dig the pits with spikes in the bottom, where to place the beaters and fences in a drive, how to use the long soft ropes to make booby-traps and nooses that could hoist a stag from the ground and leave it dangling. Like all the hunters, he dwelt in the mind of the prey and knew what they were going to do before they knew it themselves. Much, Zeme conceded to herself, he had learned from Cosk and the other elders, but now Tagart's word was always sought, his advice valued, his hard work and inventiveness valued for their constant part in keeping the tribe well fed and safe. Tagart had no fear of the aurochs, the wild oxen with their big horns: when they charged he merely seemed to dance round and round and they fell down dead. Nor had he any fear of the wild boars, nor the lynx, and he had no fear of the wolves, though he said it was wise to leave them alone and they would do the same for you.

The only animals to fear, Tagart said, were the bears. They were moody and unpredictable, and you were never to go near a bear or its cave, and never ever when there

were young ones inside, because that made the bears fiercer than anything in the forest, or in the marshes, or along the white seashore.

Zeme wished she could go out hunting with the men. It was unfair being a girl. Instead of hunting she had to go out with the women gathering plants. There was a lot to know. Even her mother, Sela, the chief's woman, said she was still learning and would be a pupil of the forest till the day she died.

The women went out nearly every day with their hazel and osier baskets, collecting fruits, nuts, fungi, tubers, fleshy stems – whatever was in season. They knew the plants that soothed pain and helped wounds heal. There were plants to know for dyes and perfumes and for seasonings to add to meat and drink; plants to poison arrowheads and spears and spikes; plants to keep the shelters dry, to make a soft bed, to keep insects away; plants to burn for any kind of heat and flame; plants for charcoal, or carvings, or for making toys. Sela and the others had taught Zeme how to twist lime-fibres into strings and ropes, how to peel bark, how to use plants to know where squirrels or jays had hidden their winter stores. They had shown her how to read the ground by the grasses and sedges that grew there; whether the ground was wet or unfirm; where there had been a fire, even years before; what animal or bird had fed or left its droppings there. And Zeme was learning, like the others, the plants for decoration and for favourable omens and the plants for happiness and long life.

She came to a stream she recognised, and let it lead her back to the river and her father's camp.

* * *

The tribe had been together in its present form since the early spring, when the big camp in the marshes had broken up into smaller units, the families staying together or regrouping as new marriages dictated. Before the first catkins the nomads had begun to leave, some spreading north into the great river valleys, others moving west along the hills, east towards the low coast, or, like the Owls, south to the dense forest of oak and lime which, year on year, suffered deeper inroads from the farming people.

The farmers were incomprehensible. They came from across the sea. In the west at Valdoe was the largest settlement of them Tagart had heard of, a prison filled with slaves, ruled by one man who had established an army to protect his empire along the coast and far inland. The nomads knew of Valdoe because many of them had been captured to work there; a handful had escaped and told stories at the winter camp. The tales were worse than the imagination could make. Yet the farmers were pleased to trade with Valdoe and tacitly to accept the protection it gave from the foreign raiding parties that would otherwise cross the water whenever the weather allowed.

Tagart's party was led by Cosk, which meant 'Owl', a man of forty who had led his tribe for nearly ten years. This summer the Cosks were forty-one people: nine couples with fourteen children between them, two old men and three women beyond child-bearing age, a woman whose husband had caught a fever and died, and three young men of marriageable age. Cosk and his wife, Sela, were without sons, but their eldest daughter had brought them a boy, now three years old.

His name was Balan. In twenty years, after Tagart, if he survived, he might be chief. But, before then, Tagart's time was coming.

In the years since his wedding to Mirin, his place as natural successor to Cosk had slowly been confirmed. To Tagart and Mirin had gone the honour of the summer feast, a celebration of the world, of renewal and the future. The preparations had been going on for weeks. Young deer, allowed to survive their parents in the hunt, were brought back to camp to be tethered till needed. Hares, trapped along the field edges, were kept in cages made of woven sallow. Songbirds had been snared or limed or brought down by whirling lures and stoned with slingshots. In wicker baskets in the water were frogs and newts and writhing masses of fish; and the skill of one boy, who seemed to have a gift for finding them, had brought in more than a hundred crayfish, which now crouched in baskets at the water's edge, their claws and feelers and eyes distorted by the ripples. Along the banks, racks and wrappers of leaves held edible flowers of lime, elder, knapweed, hop, and dog-rose; roots of reed-mace, rampion, parsnip, water-lily and flowering rush; stems of burdock and reed; leaves of deadnettle, plantain, sorrel, comfrey and nettle; hazelnuts and pignuts; and fruit: whitebeam, redcurrant, blackcurrant, barberry, blackberry, raspberry, strawberry, sloe, crab-apple and cranberry. There were boxes of beetles, lizards, caterpillars, shrews, voles, woodmice and moles; hedgehogs tied by thongs to stakes; slabs of honeycomb; mints, thyme, fennel and many other herbs. From the beach and estuary the women had collected dulse, kelp and bladderwrack; and shellfish in tubs of salt water: clams, cockles, winkles and scallops.

It had taken a fortnight to prepare the feast, to build the ceremonial shelter, and to find all the sacred earths and flowers and leaves for dressing the couple and the camp. Now, at mid morning, Emis and Varl were building up the fires with hornbeam logs. The clay ovens were being prepared, and into them went joints of beef, fillets of hare and venison. The heat of the fires made faces red. Across the flames, the air shimmered and made people unrecognisable, trees and branches swirl.

Those who had finished their duties were getting ready for the ceremony, with dyes and pastes and with costumes which at the close of the ritual would be consigned to flame: costumes of leather and fur striped and studded, or tasselled and plumed in all colours, especially grey and brown and white. Blue streaks and chevrons on faces and backs, applied with meadowsweet and dog's-mercury dye mixed with salmon-fat, were displayed by those sharing Tagart's blood, for he had been born into the Shoden, the waterfall people. The Owls were a tribe of the Sare, or cloud people: Mirin and her family were decorated with ash-grey and black, with black and white capes and bunches of owl quills at elbow and knee.

As chief, Cosk was dressed in a long cloak of owl feathers fixed to deerskin in rows that formed patterns in various ways: diagonals, zigzags, stippled and mottled effects which had taken much work to get right. He would carry a carved and stained ceremonial mace, black with a crest of black feathers, which tapered and continued halfway down its length. Chalk-dust had been rubbed into his hair and beard, and all his skin painted white. He now donned a beaked mask made of owl feathers, with tall plumes and a shaggy ruff that extended across his

shoulders and blended with the cloak. His feathered footwear was taloned with two toes before and two spurs behind; his oxhide shinguards, with the hair left on, had been dyed and patterned with angular streaks like those on an owl's legs; and his broad leather kirtle, white, was radially marked from the belt with lines of tawny-brown, ash, and black.

The others were dressing too, some almost as elaborately, according to their family and tribe, and one by one they were emerging in the sunshine.

* * *

Groden halted, half turned, and somewhat raised his mattock.

It was hot. Even under the green gloom of the trees the air felt stifling. Ragged sunlight was falling through the high canopy of leaves, sprinkling light on the bracken and brambles of the forest floor. A blackbird turned over litter, making a furtive rustling sound. The silence was almost complete.

The oaks here were old and massive. Great gnarled boughs turned this way and that. Here and there in the distance a tree had crashed, and in the space so formed saplings were thrusting upwards, greedy for the light. Their roots spread widely, wherever they could, worming through the soil, in places coming to the sides of a stream as it purled through the trees towards the river.

Groden listened carefully. He was twenty-two, lean and tall, with coarse, swarthy features and cold blue eyes. He shaved his face, not just from vanity, but because he wished to mark himself out. He meant to be head man one

day. Aided by Hernou, he was already a voice in the Council.

He turned and looked at the others, young men like himself: his friend Morfe, and Deak, Feno and Parn. They had covered more than two miles from the village, and had come much further into the forest than anyone ventured in summer when the savages were about.

‘Did you hear something?’ Feno said.

Groden shook his head. ‘I thought I did.’

The others were waiting, waiting for him to tell them what to do.

‘We’re too deep into the trees here, Groden,’ Parn said.

‘We should go back. If we go on much more we’ll come to their camp.’

‘Parn’s right,’ said Deak.

Morfe’s teeth showed white against his beard and the tan of his skin. ‘If you’re scared, go home to your mothers.’

‘It’s not that. You know it’s not that.’

‘Keep quiet, then.’

Groden treated Parn and Deak to a moment’s glance.

‘We’ll keep on,’ he said.

‘Your hound is dead, Groden,’ Parn said. ‘We know how you feel. But do you want our bodies added to his? We’re too close. Let’s go back.’

‘We are only five,’ Feno said. ‘If they catch us we won’t have a chance.’

Morfe said, ‘You talk like old women.’

‘Come with me or go home,’ said Groden. ‘Which is it?’

Parn and Feno and Deak looked at each other. They all knew that Sturmer would not last for ever. The question was – how important was this moment? It was impossible to tell from Groden’s face. He kept his thoughts hidden;

they came out only in actions. By then it might be too late to get back into his favour. But, just as they needed Groden, Groden needed them.

‘I’m going back,’ Feno said.

‘So am I,’ said Parn.

‘Forget this,’ Deak told Groden and Morfe. ‘For your own good. If they catch you, they’ll kill you both. Uli was only a dog.’

‘You’re afraid, then.’

‘Yes. We’re afraid.’ Feno turned to Parn and Deak. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

Morfe sneered and, as they turned and headed back towards the village, flung them a parting insult.

3

The Shrine on the cliffs had been made many years before, a dome of chalk with a central alcove holding the altar slab on which rested the figure of Gauhm, her hips broad, her breasts ample, her hair braided, her stone face inscrutable and severe. Only the priest was allowed to clean the figure or sweep the precinct, or come here freely; only he could receive and interpret.

It was late afternoon, two hours after the moment when everything had started to crumble. Below the clifftops, far below, gulls swooped across the veins of foam on the green water as it swelled and smacked around the rocks. Their cries and yelps rose up the cliff-face. The air, hot and balmy, smelling of salt and iodine, felt soft on Sturmer’s

skin as he lay staring upward into the pink realm of his lids. He could hear bees humming, a faint breeze in the parched stems of grass, the gulls against the waves below, the sibilance of pipits as they flew from chalk ledge to ledge on the cliffs. From time to time a jackdaw called.

The sun on his face was making him drowsy. He was almost asleep, lingering on the border. Strange thoughts seemed normal. He was enveloped by the sound of the bees, their transparent wings at work in the pink flowers of thrift.

He was thinking about what had been said in the Council. Reckless to go into the forest, Groden. Reckless and stupid. But they killed Uli, Sturmer. They killed my dog and I was angry. No plan, nothing clear. Just angry. Yes, we were stupid, we were wrong. But in his secret face, in the moment's flash of triumph in Groden's eye, Sturmer saw that Groden knew. He saw that Groden was not stupid. He saw but he could not fathom the words to fashion an answer to turn the others from believing.

Morfe said the same. Then they were coming out of the trees, Sturmer. Defending ourselves, only defending ourselves.

'But you killed one of them?'

'We had to.'

'Then you ran away?'

'There was nothing else we could do. If you'd been there you would have seen it.'

Groden's face; the blood on his mattock; the testimony of Parn and Feno and Deak; the circle of believers; the Meeting House closing in.

'You will bring disaster on us all!'

‘The savages will call on Tsoaul to avenge the dead man!’

Groden talking, reasoning. His hands outspread. Winning them over. ‘We must drive them out. If we don’t move quickly it is they who will attack.’

‘But we are only farmers, Groden! They are killers!’

‘We outnumber them ... if we can take them unawares ...’

In all the shouting was Sturmer’s voice.

Now it was over. Groden had killed one. Whether his story was true did not matter ... nothing mattered, not even that Gauhm had failed to appear to Sturmer as he had lain here by her shrine.

Perhaps she did not want to intervene.

He felt no expectation. Gauhm was not coming.

Sturmer opened his eyes and raised himself on one elbow, looking down at his fingers as they twiddled with a stem of grass. For a long time he gave his thoughts to his family and himself.

At last he brought his legs in to sit cross-legged, and then pushed on the outside edges of his feet, bringing himself in a single smooth motion to a standing position.

He addressed himself to the Shrine and, bowing to kiss the edge of the altar, framed a prayer before starting back.

* * *

Happiness had brought fresh radiance to Mirin’s beauty. Her hair was black, wound into plaits and held by a snood decorated with speedwell. Tagart’s head was crowned with white and pink roses. Little Balan, Tagart’s son, was standing between them, holding hands. He was only three: most of what was being said he could not understand, but

he was aware that this was a day of importance, that he himself and his mother and father were central to the tribe.

In front of them, in the sunshine by the water, Cosk was reciting the words of the summer celebration. As he neared the conclusion, Sela handed her daughter a bowl of tisane made of vervain and fenugreek. Mirin drank; Tagart drank; and, leaving Balan, they waded into the river. While the others watched, they merged with the current and let the water wash away the sacred earths from their skin, a pale cloud billowing downstream.

Smiling, Tagart took hold of Mirin's hands and looked into her eyes. Taking his time, he kissed his woman, and as they kissed they sank beneath the surface.

An exultant shout went up. It was the signal to begin the feast.

* * *

Burh that evening was quiet. There was no communal eating: everyone kept to his own hearth. In Sturmer's house the conversation was sparse. His children, three girls and a boy, sensed that it was better to say nothing. They ate their beans and oatcakes in silence.

Afterwards they were sent out to the river to clean the pots. Sturmer was alone with his wife.

'I am afraid, Tamis.'

'Do you have to go with them?'

'Yes.'

'Is there no way to stop them?'

'No.'

'I know what you should do.'

'Banish him?'

‘He is planning your end. It is only fitting that you should plan his first.’

‘He has the Council on his side.’

‘But Groden is a fool.’

‘That he is not.’

She came and sat beside him. ‘Only a fool goes into the forest in summer.’

‘A fool or a schemer.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He shot his own hound.’

‘What?’

‘Hernou knew it. I could see it in her face. Perhaps Morfe too.’

‘But why?’

‘He wants to start trouble with the savages. By blaming them he can make a start.’ He took her hand. ‘If he succeeds and brings rain I am finished.’

‘Do the others know about his hound?’

‘Would they believe it? They want rain. Groden has promised it.’ He gave a wry smile. ‘We have only his word that he and Morfe killed one of them. Do you really think they would have let those two out alive, after that?’

‘You must tell the Council.’ She squeezed his arm. ‘Tell them. You are head man.’

He snorted.

The sunset outside made everything blood-red. Pots and discarded tools threw long shadows. The river slid past the jetty, its surface in shade, dimpled by the beaks of the sand martins and swallows as they dipped in flight to drink. Swifts screamed among the barns and over the squat house roofs, chasing each other, climbing to altitudes where the sun was still hot on their wings. The coastline below

stretched east and west, a thin ribbon of beach and cliff separating the sea from the shroud of the forest, which spread, faithful to the contours of the land, almost without pause to the very limits of vision.

4

The feast fires had nearly burned out, each one a bed of embers that occasionally popped and sent a mote or a wisp of smoke into the warm night air. The dancing and singing had gone on long after dusk.

No one noticed just when clouds began to roll across the sky to blot out the moon and stars, or when the first low thunder came. For some hours now it had been rumbling intermittently. The air had become humid and close, the darkness all but complete.

The remains of the summer feast lay scattered about: dishes, baskets, trampled flowers and garlands, bits of food. For once the rule had been relaxed and the task of clearing up deferred till morning. Any scavengers within ten miles would have been scared off by the music and singing – at least, that was Cosk's theory. Only the usual guard, one man, had been posted.

Now it was three hours before dawn, and Tagart and Mirin were alone in the ceremonial shelter.

An electric blink lit up the camp, making black shadows and ice-white of all colour, invading the entrance and jabbing dazzling fragments on the leather wall. For an

instant it revealed below him the pallor of her face and the vague expanse of her hair.

He felt her hands on his shoulder-blades, pulling him back to her. 'It was only lightning,' she said.

The thunder came then, a double crash, followed by a long, ominous roll.

'The river spoke differently. I thought I heard movement.'

'Just the thunder.'

'No.'

'The thunder. Nothing more.'

Tagart strained his ears, all his senses taut. A wind was rising in the trees. It was mingling with the river currents, mingling with the intricate flow past stems and stalks; with the ripples against the muddy slope of the bank nearest the camp.

The press of Mirin's body became more insistent. The bed was filled with her smell. Her mouth melded with his. Tagart went further in the familiar exploration that had just begun, that now became more searching as he recognised the rhythm of her movements, the spread of her fingers on his back, her face against his. She spoke the syllables of his name as he kissed her eyes, her ears, her neck and throat.

Again.

She protested as he broke away.

It was unmistakable. Something in the river.

This shelter contained merely a bed. Now he wished he had heeded his intuition and left a weapon at the door.

She whispered, 'What is it?'

'Quiet.'

Tagart's mind was no longer in the shelter. It was outside, imagining the river, the banks, wondering what might be happening. He tried to remember everything as it had been at the end of the feast: the position of the fires, the debris on the ground. He pictured the low forms of the shelters and their relationship with one another and the trees.

Another peal of thunder: no lightning this time. Tagart rolled to one side, crushing scent from the honeysuckle blossoms. Mirin sat up.

'Something's in the river.'

It was too deep in the night for any of the others to be up, except Braul, who had been posted as guard. A guard did not leave his post. Camp rules were rigid on that point.

Tagart raced through his mental catalogue of animals large enough to disturb the water like that, and of animals that might be interested in the camp and its occupants: he reminded himself that there was food lying about. Wolves? Too small. Pigs? No. A bear? There was a brood den some miles south-east, with a mother and two cubs and a nursemaid female; but that was too far away. The he bear? He was probably at large somewhere in this part of the forest, though as yet the tribe had encountered no definite sign of him. Was it the lone male in the river?

Tagart crawled to the entrance. He could see the dull glow of the feast fires, and above them a faint distinction between sky and forest.

If not a bear, what? A man. Another tribe might have arrived in the region. But they would advance openly and exchange news, share a meal, not come in stealth by night. An outcast? Sometimes offenders were expelled from a

group. Such men lived as best they could, stealing when it suited them.

A bear, then, or an outcast from some other tribe.

A shape moved across the glow of the nearest fire, too quickly for Tagart to glean any information from the silhouette. He felt his ribs contract. His heart was pounding; his eyes were wide. He wondered whether to alert Braul and decided against it. Braul was certainly already aware of the newcomer's presence. To call out might lose them what small advantage they had.

At the crack of a twig some yards off to the right, Tagart jerked his head in that direction, staring hard into the darkness for some scrap of vision. None came. And then another shadow passed in front of the fire, and another, and another. A fourth, a fifth, and shadows were passing in front of all the fires. A wooden bowl was inadvertently kicked. It slithered into the ashes: licking flames leapt at once. Tagart saw a reddish glow on legs bound with fur and thongs. An instant later a sheet of lightning lit the sky and the full extent of what was happening in the camp lay revealed.

'Braul!' Tagart shouted, coming out of the shelter unarmed, at a run, naked, cursing everything that had conspired to bring this about.

As the thunder came he reached the nearest man, whose image he had glimpsed in the lightning and retained. He stabbed with straight fingers at where eyes should be. There was a squeal. Tagart gripped a handful of beard and tore it upwards and back; he brought his left arm in low, stealing balance by scooping behind the knees. As the man went down Tagart's punch missed aim and ploughed into the solar plexus. He brought his heel up and to the side and

rammed it into the screaming face. The jaw broke with a snap like an old branch.

Tagart reached down and armed himself with the man's fallen mattock, aware of something happening behind. The mattock blade hummed through the air as he spun round, legs flexed. The shock of the blade striking home numbed his hands and forearms, the impact running up the haft from the dead thump of the blade: a body in which there would be no more life brought down its ruined head and hit the ground.

On all sides Tagart was reacting to shapes and faces, lashing out with the mattock, sometimes warding off a blow with his forearm. The farmers, for that they surely were, were being hampered by the darkness and confusion. They were clumsy fighters. Frequently Tagart sensed that they had hit one of their own. He heard screaming and smelled the rush of blood, their protests and imprecations in his ears. He had been fighting now for twenty seconds. He marvelled that he had not been hit. Again and again he connected with faces, eyes, genitals, kneecaps, in a frenzy to disable or kill as many as he could before the blow that would be his end.

The feast fires flared as the disturbed embers came to life, outlining at ground level the tangle of arms and legs and waving weapons. Tagart saw the glint of saliva and a pair of terrified eyes, which closed just as the mattock-blade struck home again, a stone cleaver powered by the whole swing and thrust of his strength: in a vile spray the blade and a section of the handle broke off, spun into the air, were lost. He trod on and seized a digging-stick, a heavy staff wedged into a ring of stone for weight, which, wielded like a sledge-hammer, sent down man after man.

He became aware of a fresh attack from the side. He raised the point of the staff and hooked it into the oncomer's armpit. Tagart braced himself, hoisted, and the farmer sailed into the air.

Now the camp was coming alive. Now the men were pouring from their shelters, armed with clubs and spears. Cries of pain and surprise greeted them. Behind Tagart one of the shelters caught light, engulfed by flame from a blazing brand, casting more glow in which he could see. Other shelters were being fired, beside him, by the river, on the far edge near the forest, everywhere. The camp was burning. Tagart saw children running. He saw hair and clothes on fire, small bodies rolling over and over again in the dust.

He saw Balan. He saw Balan, falling, and over him a man with a spear. As if casually, as if by afterthought, the spear lanced down. Tagart saw his son's last moment of life. And he saw the man who had done it: a man as tall and wild as Tagart himself, a man with no beard.

Directly overhead the storm broke with a flaring crackle of lightning and an instantaneous explosion of thunder so loud that it left a ringing in Tagart's ears.

One of the tall beeches across the river had been hit and was on fire. The beardless man reappeared. He had the advantage. Just in time Tagart dodged his spear-thrust: the point buried itself in the ground. In the sudden torrent of sparkling rain Tagart fell backwards into the sedges and snatched at ankles as he went past: the man lost balance and fell. Tagart sprang, landing badly, and in an instant was on his back and the man's hands were round his neck, strangling, the thumbs pressing into his throat. Tagart was choking. The man squeezed harder, his naked face wet and

orange in the flames, his hair hanging forward and dripping rain.

Tagart brought his knee up into his adversary's groin. The beardless man let go at once but doubled his fists and smashed a blow into Tagart's face. Tagart brought his knee up again; but he rolled away, was lifting his legs, one across the other, and too late Tagart realised that his neck was between the ankles. With an emptiness in his stomach he saw the camp turn over. He came down hard in the mud and stones by the riverbank.

Tagart saw the beardless man getting up, coming for him, wiping a hand across his mouth, and for a strange moment Tagart held the icy blue eyes with his own. But from the left he glimpsed something coming towards him, too quick to see, and then his head was kicked a hundred miles sideways and he saw before him streamers of white starbursts, here and there red lights blinking, and his face was in the mud, the taste of it in his mouth. A roaring filled his brain. Long tunnels of pink hoops stretched away, descending into pink caverns where he wanted to hide. Above him the sky inverted, was sucked into a whirlpool that followed the tunnels down, leaving the blankness of a glaring white horizon, now tingeing red as from behind spots soaked through, staining, haemorrhaging, spreading, sponging up his life as the redness dripped and became a trickle, a flow, a pouring race that rushed along the tunnel walls, carrying him before it. He could no longer breathe. His lungs were clamped flat, going under, arms helpless, borne along and downwards at avalanche speed. He opened his eyes and saw only crimson. The crimson darkened and the roar grew louder, many voices in the storm, and in the emptiness beneath him Tagart knew he

was going to die. He knew he was going to die even as he struggled in the torrent like a wet insect doomed and drowning, but he was fighting, fighting to the end, swamped by the blackness and engulfed by its pressure as the roaring became louder and louder, a roaring too loud to bear.

* * *

The river had carried him a little way. He knew it could not be far, because he could hear voices, and when he looked up he could see firelight on the drooping stems and leaves of the sedges of the bank. His face was close to them. His eyes tried to focus, but would not.

He spoke to Mirin. She would not answer. He felt the rain on his body, the river lapping at his skin. He tasted the water and the slime of the bottom. Mirin was lying on a bed of flowers, the honeysuckle twined about the pale skin of her wrists and ankles, her hair spread out on a pillow of ferns.

The rain was falling steadily, less heavily than before, hissing into the fires. Tagart's hands found purchase and he tried to drag himself further out of the water and a little way up the bank.

The effort was too great. He saw men going from place to place, turning bodies over with their feet. He watched them through the stems of the sedges, moving against the glow. He saw axes and mattocks raised, moans silenced, twitching legs become still. The man with no beard was giving orders. Behind him the shelters were burning. Voices were raised in jeers and horrible laughter.

It was a long time before Tagart realised that some of the women had been spared. He saw Sela stripped naked and made to kneel.

Tagart tried to raise his head further, staring at what was happening. It pained him to keep his head up. The pain spread into his back as he watched them, along his spine and into his legs, becoming excruciating; but he forgot it as he saw Sela thrown sideways, and behind her, being brought forward, he saw Mirin. The beardless man shouted something and there was more laughter. He pushed her to the ground and then he was on top of her, thrusting at her. She lay limp as he got up and another took his place.

Tagart watched the sedges. They were orange and black, curved and weaving with one another under the impact of the rain. He could not follow the complexity of their patterns; too many raindrops were falling.

He was drifting now, away from the cries of a voice he thought he knew, away from the shouting and laughter, drifting deeper, towards the centre where he would not see them, where he would not hear them, where what they were doing to his wife would not be true.

5

Three hours after first light, two hours after crawling from the sedges, Tagart arrived at a position overlooking the village.

In keeping with a general knowledge of the terrain near the camp-site, he was familiar with its appearance, but he

lacked the detailed information that only a thorough reconnaissance could provide.

He was at the edge of the forest, looking down from the top of an escarpment that abutted the village on its east side. Rain-flattened grass clothed the slope, with oak bushes and clumps of blackthorn which would provide cover for an unseen approach. This, he had already decided, was the way he would come when he needed to get into the village. At the bottom of the escarpment, where the gradient eased, were a few anthills of varying age. Those too would provide cover. Beyond them, a patch of nettles and a thicket of briars and blackberry canes grew up against the structure of the palisade.

This was the height of two men, a fence of stout logs buttressed behind with log struts. It enclosed the whole of the village, including several hundred yards of the river. The tops of the logs had been sharpened to points. Without equipment it looked impossible to climb.

Tagart shut his eyes. His head hurt badly and the taste of vomit was still in his mouth. The back of his forearm was a mass of congealed blood: he had wound strips of soft leather from elbow to wrist. A dull pain filled his neck and left shoulder. One of his ribs felt as if it might be broken.

Somehow, they had spared him. When he had awoken he had found himself lying half in the river, half in the vegetation of the bank. They must have taken him for dead; or, more likely, missed him altogether.

He allowed his face to rest in the wet, musty grass. His clothing was drenched and heavy; the leather glistened and bubbled where it creased as he moved. He groaned and let the ground receive the weight of his body, letting gravity

take each muscle. Even though his eyes were tightly shut he could not stop seeing Zeme. They had raped her too.

Tagart jerked his head up and opened his eyes. Had he fallen asleep just then? Had any time passed? The village looked the same. The rain was keeping them indoors, driving across the compound, splashing on the house roofs. To the south-west, over the sea, were occasional strokes of lightning. The wind was driving fast paler cloud below the darker, gusting and howling and bending the trees behind him.

He pulled his tunic closer to his neck. His hair was soaked: drops of water were trickling from the tip of his nose, leaving a salty taste on his lips.

For a long time he lay studying the village. The houses seemed to have been positioned at random, relying for defence on the palisade. The single thoroughfare made an extension of the path from the shrine on the cliffs. It passed through a gate, now closed, and widened into a rough oval bordered by a huddle of most of the thirty-three dwelling-houses. Thirty-three: that meant about two hundred people.

The houses were tall, with conical roofs and narrow windows, built of timber and blocks of stone, with pavements to the front where they faced the oval. There were five larger buildings which he judged to be a barn, bakery, threshing shed, and granary; the fifth was a meeting house of the type he had seen at some of the more prosperous villages further east. Twice the height of the houses, it was long and broad, with a low-pitched roof and a wide doorway with a porch, from which a flight of plank steps led down to the compound. The walls appeared to be of timber, faced with wattle and daub. The thing was raised

from the ground by massive oak piles about chest high. Behind it flowed the river. Between the granary and the palisade were two circular pits which Tagart took to be silos.

Now and then, carried on the wind, he heard a snatch of music and chanting. It seemed to be coming from the Meeting House. He could see people inside.

The thoroughfare resumed its course between the Meeting House and the threshing shed, ran down to and crossed the river by means of a wooden bridge, built a little way downstream where presumably the bed was more suited to supporting the piers. Nearer the village, next to the Meeting House, the path ran beside the riverbank, littered with upturned coracles and piles of netting. There was a landing stage, and a larger coracle tied to it, riding the stream.

On the other side of the bridge the path left the palisade by another gate and disappeared westward into the fields. Much of the valley had been put to cultivation, almost as far as the western slope, and southwards a long way towards the sea. A strip of heath remained between the fields and the beach, and more sparsely along the mouth of the river where it widened into a small estuary with a few shingly islets. Northwards the land had been cleared for half a mile, mainly on level ground by the river, but also on the north-eastern slope, where a large barley-field had been made to catch the sun, or to escape winter floods.

The fields ended; the forest resumed. The line of trees snaked behind the barley field, south to the village and the escarpment, and then downhill, beside the river to the sea. East of the village the forest rose steeply, over the hill and towards the cliffs.

Tagart took his flint knife in hand and began crawling down the escarpment.

* * *

At the bottom he broke from cover and with a crouching gait ran the fifteen paces to the palisade. Keeping it close by his right-hand side, he set off to circle the village.

Whoever had built the palisade had been serious in his intention not to let anyone in. The tree-trunks had been fitted tightly together and shaved at the top to slanting points. The gaps had for the most part been plugged with wedges and slivers of wood, knocked home and plastered with clay. A few chinks remained. Through one of these Tagart gained a partial view of the nearest house. He pressed his face more firmly against the rough bark. Water was cascading from the roof, splashing against the stone, soaking the already waterlogged timbers.

He went on till he came to the eastern gateway. This was fitted with a heavy door. Through the slight gaps he saw that it opened outwards on three hinges and was secured by two great bars. Like the rest of the palisade, it was topped by spikes. At ground level there was a gap of a hand's width, a little more in the middle of the path where the passage of feet had worn a way; and now after some hours of rain the path was turning to mud.

The palisade continued, curving along the south side of the village, down the bank and into the river, the only concession to the water being wider spacing of the logs; on the other bank it curved to the right and ran beside the river, enclosing a strip of ground thirty feet wide. Now the palisade ran arrow-straight for a quarter of a mile, turned back into the river, crossed it, and, following the rise and

fall in the ground, looped back to the escarpment and the east gate.

Tagart put his feet into the mass of sedges and yellow cress, went down the bank, and let himself into the water. It was deep here, where the current behind the weir of logs had churned up and removed the bottom, and three steps from the bank he was treading water. The river felt warm and soothing on his body, much warmer than the rain. For a while he rested, holding on to one of the logs. From the green and white stains on the palisade it could be seen that the level, although very low, was on the rise.

He dived and the noise of the rain abruptly stopped. Underwater he could see only green. He kicked against the current and felt the bulk of the palisade, slimy with weed. For a second his fingers were where the logs entered the river bed: then he was forced to surface for air. It seemed that the gaps between the logs were the same above and below the water – the wood had rotted hardly at all. He dived again and managed to explore more of the gaps. None was more than a hand's width. After many dives he satisfied himself that there could be no access here. He pulled himself from the water and climbed the far bank.

It was not going to be so easy. He stood shivering in the shelter of the palisade. His arm was bleeding again. He held it out and saw the trickle of blood across his palm, running down his fingers.

He shook his head angrily and continued along the base of the palisade, still keeping it on his right. Through gaps he could see the river, and beyond it the silos, threshing shed, and granary. To the left of them, a little way ahead, stood the bridge and, in line with it from this angle, the Meeting House. The music had grown more distinct. At

one of the windows in the side wall he could see activity within.

A man staggered out on the porch, his hands across his face, and fell headlong down the steps. A moment later two middle-aged women, both naked, followed him from the doorway. They stooped and seemed to scold the fallen man. He was face down in the mud, not moving, scarcely even breathing. Presently the women, after discussion, shook him by the shoulders, without effect. The shorter woman went back inside and returned with a third. All three took hold of the man and carried him up the steps.

Still there was no sign of movement elsewhere in the village, no children, and no dogs.

Tagart set off again. The second gate was much like the first, with a narrow space at the bottom – too narrow to get under. He put his eye to the gap between gate and post. He could see no dogs, but something of more interest had caught his attention.

Beside the Meeting House, in a rank, had been laid the corpses from the previous night. There were twenty-six.

Then it struck him that the music inside the Meeting House might be something to do with the dead, marking their transition from this life to the next. Beyond what he had heard in stories at the winter camp, he knew little about the farmers' beliefs; but something of the sort seemed likely, for in the event it seemed their victory last night had not been without cost. Twenty-six. Tagart had not guessed it had been so many.

The Meeting House was less than a hundred yards away. He was standing at a point in the palisade almost opposite the jetty.

He continued along the base of the palisade, past the Meeting House, the barn and bakery, moving through the rain to the northern corner of the compound, where the palisade turned east and back across the river.

The water was shallower here, but still there was no gap wide enough to admit him. He came up for air again and again.

When he reached his starting-point at the bottom of the escarpment, he sank to the ground and sat with his head in his hands, overcome by grief and despair. He felt giddy and ill. The stabbing pain in his chest was worse. Blood was soaking steadily into the bandages on his arm. Every few seconds he fought back an urge to vomit.

There were three ways to get past such an obstacle as a twelve-foot palisade. Going through was out of the question: he had no tools, except a knife and his bare hands. Going over involved too great a risk of being seen, and anyway he had no means of climbing. That left going under, which meant a tunnel, and that would take too long; and even if he did manage it he might well emerge in full view of the farmers. The gates? Were they the weak point? Or the river – perhaps he should try again, search more thoroughly.

The ladder-marks: he remembered the ladder-marks.

He stood up and hurried past the east gate, heading for the river again. With his eye to the top of the palisade, he stopped three hundred yards on. Sure enough, there were the marks left by the harvesters' ladders on the spikes at the top. He found a gap and looked through it to confirm his position, moved four paces west, glanced over his shoulder and dropped to one knee. With his knife he scored out and rolled back a trapdoor in the turf.

The soil was still relatively dry. He dug with his bare hands, scooping back the earth like a dog. The palisade extended the length of his arm below ground level, no more: his earth-caked fingers found and felt the bottom of the log where the wood had been shaped by adze to a rough four-sided point. The timber, though treated by scorching, was beginning to rot: decay would anyway be more likely in this part of the palisade. Tagart dug deeper, below the points, resting from time to time to flex his fingers and rub the blood and dirt from his hands. His fingernails were clogged; his arms were aching, the left forearm crusted with earth and gore, but he was starting to uncover what he had hoped to find – a panel of sticks set vertically, which went down as far as he cared to dig.

By late morning he had reached a depth of three feet, not really enough, but it would have to serve. As it was he had displaced a surprisingly large heap of earth which would have to be disposed of when he had finished. Crouching in the hole, he thrust with his feet at the panel of sticks. It caved in at once, releasing a smell of silage. Tagart kicked again, and again, compacting the mass of stalks behind the panel, making a hollow which he enlarged with his hands, punching and pushing at the dirty yellow straw. When he had hollowed out a space twice his size he climbed out once more and, using his feet, pushed the spoil into the hollow. He had made the turf very muddy: that couldn't be helped. He hoped the rain would wash all or most of it away. He had strengthened the trapdoor with three blackthorn sticks, so that it lay flat.

With a final glance round, he climbed into the hollow and pulled the flap of turf behind him.

* * *

Sturmer abandoned the last vestiges of inhibition and gave himself entirely to the fly agaric. The fire of the fungus at the back of his throat was a flame that filled his brain and made it huge. He felt his tongue slide from the side of his mouth. A string of blackened saliva dribbled to his chest. He was no longer aware of the girl retching beside him, nor of the other people in the Meeting House. He was alone, swallowing the core of intense heat, fighting along the borders of self-control, tricking himself into ignoring the filthy taste, refusing to acknowledge nausea, making progress to the farther shore.

He reached it and in exultation he soared, borne upwards at tremendous speed: his body shrank to a point and vanished, leaving a tingling spot which glowed briefly and was gone.

He was master of the drug now, riding it, just as the others were riding it.

Occasionally someone screamed, or clawed at his face, or fell sideways to lie unconscious on the floor. Others were sitting with heads hanging between their knees, while some argued and gesticulated, uttering nonsense. A few – those who, like Sturmer, were nearing the peak – sat entranced, moaning and rocking from side to side. The women moved to and fro with bowls, waiting to collect urine from the men.

The fly agaric fungus, a toadstool with white stalk and gills and a scarlet cap, grew mainly by birch where the ground was poor. It appeared in the middle of high summer after the rains and went on till the end of harvest or into autumn. The fungus was a gift from Gauhm. It

enabled the bereaved to go part of the way towards the Far Land of the Dead. The drug was sacred, could only be gathered after special prayer, and was prepared exclusively by the priest.

The stalks were discarded and the caps left to dry in the sun, after which they were placed in the Agaric Casket, a beechwood box kept next to the altar in the Meeting House. Its lid and sides were carved with figures of visions achieved under the drug; inside, the shrivelled caps were stored in layers of close-fitting trays, one lifting from the other. The trays were replenished each year at harvest.

The mode of using the agaric achieved the greatest possible distance along the road to the Far Land. The women, who were not allowed to eat it, took most of the taste from the caps by chewing them and rolling them between the hands. The pellets so formed were then given to the men to be swallowed immediately.

Ten pellets were enough to kill. Since one of the side-effects of consumption was a raging desire to eat more, the women strictly rationed each man's supply; experienced users such as Sturmer could eat fully nine pellets. Younger men were limited to three or four.

The drug passed quickly through the system, and the urine of the men, though less potent than the pellets, was carefully saved and drunk by the women. Meanwhile the musicians played, their drums and flutes and pipes making a dirge. They would not eat the drug till later; they were sitting cross-legged by the window, heads and shoulders outlined against the gloomy noonday light.

Groden gave a frenzied, meaningless shout. Hernou was lying beside him. In a while she would be ready to drink again.

* * *

In total darkness Tagart groped upwards, his fingers feeling for the mat of sticks. Below him his feet found trouble in getting purchase. The mixture of soil and silage was yielding to his weight. He knew that if he did not keep moving he would sink to the bottom and suffocate.

His hands closed on the sticks and he pulled himself up. He dug his toes high into the hole he had made and pushed; the combined effort brought his head through the mat and into daylight. For a moment he hung there, resting, looking out across the village.

The silo through which he had burrowed, and the one next to it, had been positioned at the base of the palisade so that the haymakers could drop their loads from ladders instead of hauling them round through the east gate. The silos were largely hidden from the Meeting House by the threshing shed and granary. To the left a patch of waste ground led to the river. To the right and ahead were the walls and precincts of a single dwelling-house. Others were near by, near enough to entail a danger of being seen, but then wherever he chose to cross the palisade there would be some risk of that. In all, this was quite a good place from which to approach.

Tagart raised himself up and out, sprinted the few yards to the granary, and to the threshing shed, where he stood breathing heavily for several seconds before, in full view of the Meeting House porch, he ran with everything he had down to the river, launched from his right foot, blurred over the soggy stand of vegetation, and with scarcely a splash plunged into the water.

He reappeared upstream, a few yards nearer the Meeting House, ducked, and swam again. Under the joists of the bridge he came up and clung to the timbers, glad to be out of sight.

The water here sounded loud in the hollow space under the bridge; the ripples of his movements echoed back to him. He waded into the shallows on the village side and lay flat on the mud, resting with his eyes shut, listening to the current.

A long time passed before he felt able to emerge from the bridge, before he felt safe even to stand unaided. But at last some of his strength returned. The pain had receded from his chest, neck and shoulder. He sat up and noticed that the dizziness had almost gone.

He came out from the bridge. Now he was ready to investigate the village.

* * *

Sturmer did not know how his eyes had become focused on the water falling from the Meeting House porch. He found it fascinating. He studied the variation in the shapes of the drops as they fell, their exquisite transparency. In them he could see a condensed and distorted image of the forest on the escarpment, each branch, each tree, each leaf. On each leaf he saw the veins and lobes, the beads of water like gleaming spheres. The spheres were reflecting the forest, the sky, the spread of the village waiting below.

With slow recognition Sturmer made out the form of a dark young man in savages' skins, pausing up there where the trees began and with burning and implacable eyes looking down on the village, on him, into his very heart; to the furthest and most secret reaches of his soul.

The shimmering globe burst on the boards of the porch and Sturmer found himself searching desperately for another to take its place.

6

They had removed nearly everything of value from the camp. Fewer than a dozen coils of usable rope remained. All the furs, and all the better skins, had gone, as had all the weapons except those stored in a shelter which, part-burnt, had not been properly searched. What food had not been stolen had been spoiled and kicked into the mud. Baskets lay smashed, ovens and hearths destroyed. Tagart had managed to retrieve enough food for two or three meals, a pair of pigskin water-bags, five bows and seven arrows, a spear, a bundle of twine, some tallow, two bags of flints which he emptied into a single pouch, a deerskin, and seven goatskins. That was all.

The air felt damp and water was dripping from the trees, but no direct rain was penetrating the canopy. A green twilight made a suffusion of the wet bracken and rain-sodden foliage; the thin smell of disturbed leaf-litter rose from the ground as he made his way uphill.

Despite the pain in his chest he was travelling quickly. There was much to do. He had already been to check the bears' den, and he had been back to the camp three times so far to salvage what he could and take it south-east, about a mile east of the village, to the place where he had established his lair: an old yew tree on the slope of the hill,

among dense forest. The ground under the yew's spreading branches was dusty and, even after the storm, quite dry. By rearranging and cutting the boughs Tagart had fashioned a hiding-place in the space round the trunk. Once inside he was able to close up the screen of branches and his seclusion was complete.

The bears' den was about a mile to the north. Some weeks before, one of the best trackers in the tribe had returned with news of the spoor: he and Tagart and another had followed the tracks into a part of the forest dominated by oak. One of the larger trees had fallen, and in the root-pit the she bear had burrowed out her den. Brief – and extremely cautious – observation had revealed that cubs were either on the way or present, together with a second, smaller female, perhaps an aunt, which was acting as a nurse. As expected, the male bear was not to be seen, though a few days later crunched mussels – perhaps his leavings – were found on the beach.

The bears were still in residence. Tagart had heard cubs' cries.

He was laden with ropes as he began returning to the yew tree once more. This would be the last trip from the camp.

From time to time as he went, he stopped and stood squinting up at the trees. Once in every ten or fifteen stops he left behind a coil of rope. Frequently he changed his mind, picked up the rope, and went on. The way they would come along this path had to be most carefully anticipated. He could not afford to waste rope. Perhaps he should have taken some from the village this morning after all. Those nets by the riverbank would have been handy ... but that would have cost him his only advantage.

Yet again he wondered what they had been up to in the Meeting House. He had spied on them through a chink in the wattle: the men intoxicated and seemingly deranged; the women vomiting and drinking urine. While watching he had for a moment thought of bursting in with his knife, but the tribe's honour had not allowed it. It obliged him to kill them all.

From the Meeting House he had made his departure from the village, going out through the silo as he had come in. From there he had gone straight to the camp to begin work.

The last coil of rope was deposited; he returned to the yew tree. Dusk was coming: there might be enough time to try for some deer. At this season the calves were about eight weeks old, large enough to accompany their dams and the rest of the herd on their regular evening visits to the watering-place – some shallows a mile downstream from the camp.

Tagart approached upwind. With his best bow slung across his back he climbed into an ivy-hung oak commanding a view of the churned and muddy shore, which held a multitude of hoof-slots. Astride a big bough, he nocked an arrow and rested the lower end of the bow on his instep.

He composed himself to wait. Just as he had been taught, he disengaged his mind and managed to push away thoughts of what had happened. With his body completely relaxed, he let time drift over him, trusting his senses to alert him when the deer came.

The river gurgled and splashed. Rain was still falling. He was aware of the background of happenings on the riverbank, which taken together meant that all was normal,

all was well. A water vole came diffidently to the water and with yellow teeth gnawed at a plant stem held in its hands. The wet had made its fur spiky and dark; its eyes, as black and shiny as berries, blinked as it paused in its feeding and sniffed for danger with head moving from side to side. No untoward scent registered: the vole went on nibbling. Presently it discarded the last of the stem and slipped into the water, swimming with nose up and feet furiously paddling, its tail streaming behind. Overhanging leaves hid it for a moment. It reappeared with a length of cowbane stem in its mouth, held crosswise like a dog with a stick. The water thrashed: the cowbane bobbed to the surface, and there was a glimpse of the white belly of a pike. The ripples merged with the current; the pike languidly finned back into deeper water. The vole did not reappear.

The birds were making an end to their day. Blackbirds chuckled in the undergrowth. A chiffchaff called once from the base of an alder. A cuckoo flew low over the water, swooping, hawk-like, and came to perch, arresting its flight and swaying at the tip of one of the elder bushes lining the river.

As darkness approached, the woods grew even quieter. The elder bushes, some with a few white flowers remaining, assumed odd shapes and seemed to expand and contract under Tagart's gaze. The light was failing. Bats were busy with the insects over the river. From time to time he thought he heard the snap of their jaws. He watched them on their black wings, weaving this way and that, stopping short, going on, in concert with the rain scouring every insect from the air.

Imperceptibly, Tagart braced himself. He was fully alert again. The herd was coming.

They came forward, one by one appearing between the trees. The leading hind paused by the margin as the rest of the herd passed her by: six hinds with calves, four antlered stags, one of which was already stripping its antlers of velvet; and a hummel, a hart without antlers. The hummel was the biggest animal in the herd. Next down was one of the stags, perhaps a ten-pointer, though the light was now too bad to be sure.

The muscles of Tagart's arms began to bulge as he drew back the arrow. With his thumbnail resting on the corner of his jawbone, he made allowance for the drop and fixed his eyes on the hummel's flank. He had chosen the surest spot, just behind the foreleg where there was least chance of missing a vital organ. The light was playing tricks. The movements of the deer as they drank seemed jerky; their forms and the foliage round them had a grainy quality; Tagart readjusted his gaze and with it automatically his aim and his fingers were opening and the supple slap of the bowstring sent the point of the arrow on its intended way.

Before it had arrived he was nocking the next arrow and taking aim at the ten-point stag. He ignored the hummel, concentrating on the second shot. It flew too high, missed the animals altogether, and he lost sight of it.

The deer were scrambling to turn round and get out of the river. Tagart thought he might have missed the hummel as well, but it was struck, struggling after the others. They were leaving it behind. The hummel bellowed after them, its head oddly twisted, looking down at the mud. He had hit it in the neck. With dismay he wondered whether it could still run, whether he would need to follow

it, perhaps for miles, before weakness overcame either him or it.

The hummel was free of the mud now, still bellowing, charging dementedly forwards into an elder bush. It staggered wildly, and charged again, this time into a tree-trunk. Its hind legs gave way and writhing it collapsed to the ground.

Tagart came slithering down the oak and ran to the wounded beast. The arrow had been driven further into the neck by its fall. The eyes, showing white, stared open; its breath panted past a lolling tongue. Rich blood started to ooze from the nostrils and mouth. A moment later its breathing ceased.

He worked at speed. With his knife he opened the skin at the anus and along the back of the hind legs. Gripping the cut skin, he worked his blade beneath, severing connective tissue, and one by one allowed the hind legs to slip out to a quarter of their length, as far as their first joints, which he parted with a few skilled strokes. With another flint he cut through the rectum and behind the pizzle, and with the tail free began to roll the skin back along the body, turning the animal this way and that. The skin slipped free of the forelegs. He dragged it over the head, slit under the eyes and behind the lips, and stood clear.

Now, with the skin inside-out, he cut a strip from the head and tied it tightly round the neck, below the hole made by the point of the arrow. He turned the skin back, right side out, and went with it to the water, where he allowed a quantity to flow inside. The skin took on the greatest weight of water he could carry. He slung it over his shoulder and set off uphill.

As he laboured up the slope he decided to leave the meat where it was till morning. The bears might find it. He did not compete with bears, especially in the dark. If anything remained tomorrow he would try to get as much of it stored as he could. He did not yet know how long he would have to depend on his hiding-place at the yew tree; he needed a larder.

The darkness was almost complete when he arrived with the hummel-skin at a coil of rope he had deposited earlier in the day. Using his foot, he picked up one end of the coil. Spilling only a little water, he tied the rope to the open end of the skin, making use of the remaining bones in the hind legs, and, throwing the free end of the rope over a branch just above head height, hoisted the skin and left it dangling. He squatted and held his palm beneath the neck. It seemed to be watertight.

Tagart stood up. As he did so a new wave of giddiness came over him. He put out a hand to steady himself against the tree, eyes closed, jaw tightly clenched, but it was no good: he felt his stomach twisting inside him, being wrung out; he fell against the bark, the retching coming in agonising waves. He slid down the trunk to his knees, sick with grief and horror and exhaustion and shock. He was wet and cold, weak with uncontrollable shivering. The thought of food repelled him, but he would have to eat, and get rid of these clothes, soaked and heavy with the rain and the river. He needed comfort urgently: warmth, dry clothes, food. If he did not get them he would be unable to stop the long slide downhill and, as Cosk might have said, the forest would have him.

Tagart wiped his mouth, got up, and turned towards the yew tree. The forest could have him later.

* * *

The vigil over the corpses on the Dead Ground began at nightfall. The dust of the village square had turned to mud: the rain seemed to be settled now, falling steadily hour after hour. Twilight had come early. Dark figures, some bearing hooded lights on poles, crossed and recrossed the compound, converging on the Meeting House.

Inside was a blaze of light, brightest at the altar, where Sturmer was making ready for the prayers and the token sacrifice to Gauhm. The yellow glow filled the room to the rafters and threw shadows from beams and projections and the moving shapes of those on the floor. No one spoke. The only sounds were those of the rain and of the sputtering wicks in the lamps at the altar and in the sconces round the walls. Sturmer stood over the stone slab; the kid struggled in the crook of his arm, lay still.

The Meeting House was full. At this time yesterday there had been a hundred and ninety-six people in the village. Now there were a hundred and seventy. The injured numbered forty or fifty, some with only mild bruises, but others with serious wounds or broken limbs, which meant more deaths to come and permanent cripples among those who survived. These men, like the widows and children of the dead, would be a heavy burden on the village.

It was a harsh price to pay for rain. Groden had been discredited, for a time at least. Sturmer decided not to accuse him. There was no proof, and an accusation would lose Sturmer what little ground he had made.

He reverently placed the bowl of kid's blood on the altar-stone, spread wide his arms and raised his eyes in the chant. The others responded.

Groden's bass voice, as feeling and grief-stricken as any in the room, was among them.

7

Yew-wood made the best bows and the strongest spears. It was magic, protected by the Sun who gave everything, guarded for the hunters by the Sun's disciple, the Moon. To keep animals away the Moon had rendered the shoots and berries poisonous: thus yew trees always remained well filled and dark, a safe place to hide in overnight, as the Sun had intended. The thick branches kept out the rain; the resinous, soothing balm of the leaves lulled and refreshed; and where the shed needles fell they made a soft, dry bed.

Sleep came to Tagart eventually. He had lain awake for a long time, sometimes speaking words aloud, his face hot and puffy with weeping.

When he awoke it was still night. The forest was silent but for the rain. He sipped from one of the water-bags, raising with himself and immediately rejecting the question of food. The previous evening he had tried to eat, but had gagged and been unable to swallow anything. He felt no more able to eat now. Nevertheless, food remained his priority. He would go and see whether the hummel had been interfered with, cut whatever meat remained and bring it back to the yew where it was dry and the smell of

food would less readily escape to bring unwelcome visitors. Possibly he would go to the trouble of finding some flat stones, build a hearth and risk a smokeless fire to cook it, risk a stray wisp being seen in the village. He changed his mind. Raw meat was just as nourishing, if less palatable.

He left the yew tree to relieve himself, came back and dressed in skins which had hardly dried overnight. Dawn showed grey above the trees as he set off for the hummel.

A little while later he was back with fifty pounds of venison, sliced into strips and hung from either end of a hazel pole. The hummel had been a big animal, fat and well fed, three times Tagart's weight. He had done well to kill it. A beast like that would have supplied the tribe for two days or more. But now he had contented himself with the easy cuts and left the rest for the scavengers. One uncertainty had been resolved: he would not go hungry.

He finished tying the last strip of meat inside the yew. The rain had slackened, strengthened, and slackened again. Each renewal of gusts dislodged a noisy shower of droplets. The wind had a cold edge: he found himself shivering again as he knelt down to sort through his meagre supplies. From them he selected what he felt he would need, packed everything into his pouch and one of the goatskins, and started out.

He went first to the place where he had left the hummel's skin dangling from a branch.

He was glad it had not leaked. It hung there, grotesque, the elegant curves of the animal's chest parodied by the swell of water, its flanks and haunches tapered to a creased apex, stretched tight by the weight.

The oak to which he had fixed it was just off the farmers' path from the village to their shrine. He had chosen the spot because of a nearby lime tree, a hundred and twenty feet tall, with an unobstructed drop from one of the limbs at a height of ninety feet or so. There were many such trees at various points along the path. What made this one suitable was the way the holly bushes grew below it. Not only did they cover both sides of the path, restricting its width, but there was a particularly stout bush – almost a tree – about twenty feet from the path and directly below the limb with the unobstructed drop.

Tagart set about this bush with his knife. First he stripped the branches from the stem and cut it to waist height and, with a new blade, sharpened the tip to a point. Just below the point he cut out a notch with its upper surface parallel to the ground, so that the holly stem looked like a harpoon with a single barb. From the discarded section of the stem he cut an identical harpoon. The two barbs fitted together, slotting into each other like two hands with bent fingers interlocked. Along the back of the free harpoon he scooped a longitudinal groove, deep enough to take the radius of his rope, which later he would need to bind on with twine, pulling every turn with all his strength, for the lashing would have to support the weight of the hummel-skin filled with water.

For the moment he slipped the bundle of twine into his tunic, selected a piece of tallow, and climbed the lime tree. He edged out along the selected limb: the ground was a long way below. His tools, the skins, seemed tiny. If he fell now he would be impaled on the sharpened holly stem.

He fastened a piece of flint to one end of the twine and lowered it gently to the ground. The flint swung to and fro

interminably as he adjusted the position of the twine on the limb. After many attempts he found the point exactly above the holly stem, with the twine hanging motionless and the flint just touching the tip. He marked the place with his fingernail and let the rest of the twine drop down on the other side.

With his knife he grooved across the mark he had made, shaping and smoothing; when satisfied he rubbed the groove with tallow again and again, to smother the sticky lime sap and make a practically frictionless surface. The purpose of the twine hanging on either side of the limb was to give a lead with which to pull over the rope. He placed the twine in the groove, returned to the ground, and pulled the rope up and over.

Alone, without the aid of other hands, the next part of the operation was difficult. There was far too much water in the hummel-skin. He emptied most of it out, into two goatskins. With twine and many knots he made the hummel's hind legs fast to the free end of the rope. Cutting it free from its overnight branch, he hoisted the skin high into the lime, pulling hand-over-hand until the hind legs just reached the groove.

He had judged it quite well. The weight of the rope hanging down was a little greater than the weight of the skin; the rope didn't move as Tagart cautiously loosened his grip, and when he took his hands away altogether it merely eased somewhat, pulling the skin upwards and against the branch.

He pulled the dangling rope straight and held it against the holly stem, and to it lashed the second harpoon. This he fitted into its sister notch on the stem and temporarily bound the two together with a few turns of twine. The rest

of the rope, below the second harpoon, amounted to some ten or twelve yards. He began to lead it towards the path.

The dead-weight and its release were almost complete. He was ready to start work on the trigger.

For this he needed two lengths of springy holly, one thrust into the ground at a shallow angle, and the other – which provided the power to work the release – a small sapling stripped and bent over in a loop, its tip shaped to hook into the tip of the first length, in principle like the interlocking barbs on the two harpoons of the release. Pressure on the first length would push it down, allowing the sapling to snap back, jerking with it a length of twine attached to the second harpoon. The two harpoons would then be pulled apart, allowing the hummel-skin to fall.

Whoever had applied the pressure to the first length of holly would find the end of the rope – which Tagart was now tying into a noose with a sliding knot – closing about his ankle. The water-filled skin had ninety feet to fall, onto the holly stem, whereupon it would burst. The victim, by now hoisted some sixty or seventy feet into the air, and no longer counterbalanced by the weight of the water, would follow suit.

He had to clear two or three branches and sprigs before the trigger cable was completely unobstructed; and he had much difficulty with the trigger pedal, for the ground was so dry that it was no easy matter to drive it in. But at last he was satisfied, and went about with leaves and handfuls of earth to camouflage the noose and the rest of the mechanism. By dragging a small log onto the path he guided the future footsteps of his quarry; he guessed at the length of stride, adjusted the position of the log, stood back, made another adjustment, trying to plant the footfall

directly on the trigger pedal, in the centre of the hidden noose.

All that remained was to fill the hummel-skin with water. This he did by making trips to the river with his goatskins, climbing into the lime tree and carefully decanting the water into the larger skin. The two harpoons creaked under the weight, but the lashing held firm. Tagart undid the temporary turns of twine holding them together and, with a stick, prised the harpoons apart fraction by fraction until the notches overlapped by no more than a finger's width.

A final inspection, a check that he had left the least possible slack in the trigger cable, that everything was hidden from view, the cut wood disguised with earth, that the noose would not snag at the critical moment; and the trap was ready. Part of the drop of rope was on view, and so was the hummel-skin, if anyone cared to look up, but he hoped it would not be noticed against the drabness of the tree.

The trap had taken a long time and a great deal of effort to make. He had never attempted one on his own before. Normally there were others to lend a hand, three or four men to hoist the water-filled skin straight up to the branch and hold it there while the harpoon was lashed.

But he had done it. He had done it alone, and as he stood looking at it some of his doubts began to dissolve. If he could make one trap successfully, he could make many, and if he could make many he would be well able to achieve what he had to do.

He gathered up his belongings and started for the next tree. He had hidden the noose so well that he forcibly reminded himself where it was as he passed.

It would not do to tread on the trigger.

* * *

Tagart heard the distant clink of a mattock and stood quite still. He had just finished making a long ramp covered with brushwood, which he had left hidden at the top of the escarpment. Work had gone well during the day. The rain had stopped early in the afternoon, and now the sky was blue.

The sound came again. He had not been mistaken.

He was quite close to the fields here. The land sloped down to the field-edge, which he could glimpse in places where the trees allowed. The barley showed rich brown and yellow, lit by brilliant evening sunshine.

He changed direction, moving swiftly and silently from tree to tree, approaching the origin of the sound. His feet were noiseless: he had been trained to avoid crackling twigs and beechmast husks, rustling leaves, branches that were dead and would snap if trodden on.

He stopped to listen. The mattock clinks were coming singly, intermittently, as if one man, working none too enthusiastically on his own, were digging soil, bending, digging again.

Tagart moved to the edge of the woods and looked out across the field. The user of the mattock could not be seen from this angle. The sound originated away to the left, hidden by an elbow of trees. To come upon him Tagart would have to walk across open ground, between the forest and a shallow dip in which men might be waiting.

He was immediately on his guard. It was too easy, too neat, and much too soon after the raid for him to find a man out alone.

Had he been seen the previous day in the village? Was that it? Did the farmers now know that someone had survived? Were they trying to lure him into the open? They would surely know the futility of chasing a nomad through the forest. Their only chance of killing him, of preventing word of the massacre spreading to other tribes, would be to bring him onto open ground and surround him.

Or was he overestimating them, attributing to them powers of cunning that they did not have? They were farmers, men who lived by grubbing soil and slaughtering captive beasts; not hunters, whose living depended on foresight and strategy. Were they capable of such a plan?

He did not know. He was tired, of that he was certain, and his judgement might be wrong. Everything in him urged him to go back into the safety of the deep forest, to feed himself and recuperate, to make more preparations before letting the farmers know that not all was to be well for them. He wanted to renew his supply of arrows and flints, establish another hiding-place in case the yew were found, replenish his ropes, rig more traps, attend to more of the pitfalls the tribe had dug earlier in the season ...

But he was only one man, and men were not meant to work in the forest alone. Every hour that passed increased his chances of being injured or falling sick with no one to treat him, or of being overpowered by some animal larger and stronger than himself. And, however many preparations he made, he knew he would never be satisfied, he knew he would always need just one more trap or another dozen arrows to help reduce the insuperable odds against him.

So he turned and went back into the trees, as silent as before, moving in a curve that would emerge from the woods more or less opposite the labourer and his mattock. As he went, he slipped his knife inside his tunic and, forming a makeshift plan, tightened the drawstring at the top of his pouch.

He stood beside fluttering leaves of hazel and whitebeam. At his back was the forest, his world. Before him stretched the alien fields. And there, across the slope, was a stocky man working on his own.

Tagart stepped into the open. The man with the mattock looked up suspiciously.

Tagart set his face in a smile and went on.

‘I come in friendship,’ he said.

PART TWO

1

‘It cannot be Tsoaul,’ said Vude, a grandfather with white hair and nut-brown face and arms, one of the elders in the Council and a supporter of Sturmer. ‘It cannot be him. How can it when the savages are all dead?’ He turned his eyes again to the stone pointer, and to the mattock thrust by its haft into the ground beside it. The mattock looked like the one Gumis had taken the previous evening, and this was the place where Sturmer had told him to clear stones, but of Gumis himself there was no sign. He had not returned at nightfall, nor had he been seen at daybreak,

which had come cloudy and cool, with pearly mists above the river and the rain-soaked fields.

When it had been realised in the village that Gumis was truly missing, a search party had set out: Sturmer, Vude, Domack the Toolmender, Merth, Tamben, and several others. They had gone first to the top barley field, and had been mystified to find the stone arrow pointing towards the forest.

‘It cannot be Tsoaul,’ Vude said, for the third or fourth time, but his voice lacked conviction.

‘Look at the ground,’ said Meed, a small, swarthy man with rounded shoulders and a way of twisting his head sideways when he spoke. ‘Where is the struggle if Gumis was taken by force?’

Sturmer dropped to his haunches and minutely examined the soil near the arrow. The ground was too rough and stony to show much detail, but Meed’s suggestion seemed logical. If there had been a fight it would show. There was no sign of a fight. Hence Gumis had gone of his own free will. It did not occur to Sturmer that the traces might have been doctored by an expert hand.

‘There was no forcing done here,’ he concluded. ‘We do not know why Gumis should have left his work, but he went in peace.’ Sturmer rose and allowed his gaze to follow the direction of the arrow. ‘He left this marker to show us where he has gone.’

‘Tsoaul enticed him away!’

‘Tsoaul made the marker!’

‘That cannot be!’ cried Tamben, a man of twenty-seven, fair-haired and quiet, who had been coerced into taking

part in the raid. 'The savages are all dead. How can dead men do his will?'

'Then explain why else he should go! There is no reason for it.'

'A game. He's playing a trick to make us fearful.'

Sturmer said, 'Gumis does not play games. He has no mind for them. He is interested only in food and sleep.'

'Could he have been carried off by some animal?'

'A bear,' said Domack.

Sturmer rounded on him. 'Did a bear make this marker? Did a bear post the mattock in the ground? Did a bear drag him off and leave no tracks?'

'Then it cannot be Tsoaul,' Vude said, calmly. 'The bears are his servants, as are the savages. The savages are all dead; there are no tracks, so it wasn't a bear. So Tsoaul cannot be involved. We are worrying for nothing.'

'But Gumis is not here!'

'He has been carried away and eaten!'

'Tsoaul has acted to avenge the forest people!'

'No!' Sturmer shouted. 'Listen! Listen to me!'

'He may have been taken by traders!'

'Taken to Valdoe and enslaved!'

'Would they have left the marker?' said Meed.

'Pointing in the wrong direction, just to confuse us!'

'Let Sturmer speak!'

Sturmer rubbed his right forearm, moving his left hand up and down, something he did when nervous. He was glad that Groden was not here.

He looked from face to face. There was no choice. He would have to lie. Vude might already have guessed the truth, and one or two others, but he was counting on them to understand, to keep quiet, not to reveal to the others

that a spirit need not necessarily work by agency, need not press bears or wild men into his service; that a spirit if outraged could become substantial and work directly on the world. Vude had once told a story of his youth, of a day when Burh had been further west, when the villagers had witnessed Aih's descent from the sky like a ball of fire, like lightning in a ball no bigger than a man's head. Aih had come into the compound and some of the villagers had even tried to touch him.

'My reasoning is this,' Sturmer said. 'First, the savages are all dead. We made sure of that. Second, there are no tracks to show that Gumis struggled or was dragged away. Third, no animal could have done these things,' he added, indicating the mattock and the lines of neatly arranged stones. 'Nor,' he said, looking directly at Vude, 'could a spirit, which can act only by agency.'

Vude was about to speak, but closed his mouth and gave an enlightened nod.

Sturmer continued. 'It follows that a man made the marker, and it makes no sense to say that that man was anyone but Gumis. Traders would just have taken him. There would be no reason for them to leave a marker, and besides, we would see their tracks. If – and this is only to complete my reasoning – if Gumis was murdered by one of us in the village, the killer would not have left such clues.'

The others started to protest. Sturmer cut them short.

'I say that Gumis heard or saw something in the forest and went after it. To show us where, he left this marker, and to show us that it was not dangerous he left his weapon, the mattock, behind. Now, whatever he was following took him deeper into the trees than he had intended to go. He got lost. He is still lost. Unharmful, but

lost. That is all. We must go after him and bring him back.’
Sturmer pointed at the sky. ‘It’s cloudy. After nightfall and
in cloud there is no direction in the forest. We’ll find
Gumis somewhere walking in circles.’

Domack said, ‘Gumis is not our greatest thinker.’

The others seized on this explanation, eagerly
elaborating on Sturmer’s theory, recalling past cases of
villagers getting lost in the trees. Gumis might have seen a
wounded deer and chased it; or he might have heard a
strange bird calling and gone to find out what it was. A
dozen similar suggestions were made.

‘Whatever drew him into the forest, we’ll not find him
by standing here,’ Sturmer said. ‘We must follow the arrow
and see where it leads.’

In better humour the party set off. He called out, ‘We’ll
cut blazes on the trees to guide us back.’

Vude fell in beside him. In a low voice he said, ‘You
think it is Tsoaul.’

‘I hope I’m wrong.’

‘Will he act now, in the daytime like this?’

‘I cannot say. He might. But what else can we do? We
must find Gumis. He might just be lost as they believe.’

Vude shook his head. ‘In all his life he has never done
anything on his own account. As for following a strange
bird-call, Gumis divides birds into two kinds: those that
can be eaten, and the rest.’

‘Don’t you think I know that?’

‘It may not be Tsoaul. It may be Gauhm.’

‘What?’

‘Didn’t Groden and the others act against her wishes?
She has been belittled and denied. Twenty-eight of the

village, her people, are dead. More are dying even now. Do you think she'll be pleased?

Sturmer did not answer. Over his shoulder he told the others, 'If we've not found him by noon we'll send back for help.'

They reached the edge of the field. A broken whitebeam twig, where the trees began, showed where Gumis had entered the forest. Below it a few bramble leaves had been crushed.

'There,' said Domack.

'What is it?'

The Toolmender reached up and unhooked the talisman from a branch. He weighed it in the palm of his hand, the striped stone smooth against his skin. The talisman had been left dangling on a cord, in plain view at head height. Vude took it. 'This is his,' he said. 'It was made for him by Chal's wife. He wore it always.'

'His good-fortune stone,' Tamben said. 'I have one the same.' He brought it out of his jerkin and held it up for the others to see.

'Proof he was not taken by force,' Sturmer said. 'It's another sign to us, like the marker. I expect we'll find others. Come.'

They moved forward, filing uphill through the dense foliage of oak and hazel. Damaged undergrowth made it obvious where someone had passed the night before. A few paces on they found a shred of hare's-skin, which someone said had come from Gumis's cap. The shred of skin, like the talisman before, had been suspended from a branch and clearly was meant to be noticed.

'Make the first blaze,' Sturmer said.

They went on.

Even at this short distance from the fields it was easy to see how a man might find himself lost inside the unruly tangle of vegetation, the hazel, elder, and honeysuckle bushes pressing and twining from all sides, the brambles snagging at shins and forcing frequent detours which rapidly dulled the sense of direction. Above, huge oaks crowded together, the leaves and branches intermingled and forming a dense barrier to all but the feeblest green light. Pigeons exploded from the treetops as the men, hallooing and shouting their neighbour's name, pushed a way forward.

The ground levelled and dipped, rose again, and again began to fall. They found more shreds of his cap, hung on branches like the first. More blazes were cut; soon nobody had any sense of north or south. It seemed that they were moving away from the village, and generally downhill, but whether inland or towards the sea they could not tell. As yet they had not crossed a regular pathway, only the narrow, well defined courses of badger trails.

'Look there,' said Meed, pointing to a long tatter of doeskin hanging in the fork of a sapling.

'A piece of his jacket!'

Sturmer took down the strip of leather. 'There is nothing to fear,' he said, as the men crowded round to examine it. The strip passed from hand to hand.

Vude said, 'For Gumis to have taken off his jacket the prey must have been a stag at least.'

'Or a beautiful wood-nymph.'

'Perhaps it was her singing that lured him away.'

'Should we go on, Sturmer?' said Mastall with a wink.

'Will he thank us if we find them?'

Sturmer smiled. 'Let us see what else he has taken off.'

Presently, in several places along the way, they came across the rest of his jacket, and then his beaver leggings torn into shreds. Their good humour was evaporating fast. The ground was sloping noticeably downwards now. A sinister change was coming over the woodland. The increasing dampness of the soil was reflected by the character of the trees, younger and less massive, oak giving way to oak mixed with birch, and in the undergrowth there was less holly, less hazel, but more elder. They were being drawn into the valley, towards the river. They were being drawn towards the savages' camp.

When they found the clogs, lying casually on the ground ten yards apart, Tamben and several others wanted Sturmer to send back to the village for help.

Sturmer refused. He told them again that there was nothing to fear, that they would doubtless find Gumis a little way ahead, probably dead drunk in the undergrowth with a pot of mead stolen from the Meeting House. Privately, Sturmer could see no reason to endanger extra lives. If they were going to be attacked by a spirit, better that a few should die than many; not that he felt there was any real risk. The evil had been done the previous night.

For almost half a mile, except for the crushed vegetation and broken twigs, there was no further clue to the way Gumis had come. They arrived at a stream and crossed it.

The stream marked a more profound change in the quality of the forest. The soil here was almost black. Alders lined the stream. Beyond it the forest was mainly of birch, with thickets of willow. In places the ground seemed to have collapsed and there was standing water, stagnant pools covered by a bronzy scum over which clouds of small insects were dancing. The bird sounds were different. The

ground was strewn with rotting logs, some half in the water. Marsh gas was in the air. Sturmer, leading the way, broke through old dead branches of willow, the noise of it filling the woods.

He stopped dead.

His eyes did not move.

For a moment he forgot the men behind him, forgot his feet slowly sinking into the boggy ground. He forgot everything. There was no past or future, only the present. Only the present in which the forest was a sepia blur, a background to the place ahead, framing it, the place where a man's five-fingered hand had been speared on a stick and the stick thrust upright into the ground, in plain and intended view.

* * *

Sturmer forced aside the last of the elder bushes and at the edge of the clearing stood looking out across the savages' camp-site.

Tamben and Merth, despite his orders, had panicked and turned back, leaving only nine men to follow the trail that had been made of the organs of Gumis's body. Draped over branches or merely thrown down, the signs had come at closer and closer intervals. Everyone had known they were being drawn towards the camp; those who had not already been armed had taken up branches to use as clubs.

They had seen the smoke first, curling upwards through the trees, a single hazy plume which Sturmer could now see was coming from a cooking-fire.

With a harsh chatter three magpies, white and green-black, rose from the riverbank and on short round wings fluttered to safety. Simultaneously there was the sound of

something falling, crashing through foliage to the ground. Sturmer looked up to see, on the highest branch of a tall oak, the uncertain wavering of a slim, mottled bird of prey as it flexed and unflexed its legs, leaning forwards and backwards, as if deciding whether to leave or stay. There were others, ten or twelve: a moment later the kites opened their wide wings and with plaintive cries were sailing away over the treetops.

Sturmer turned his eyes back to the clearing. It seemed different by day, larger and more open than before. The river had risen. For most of its length through the clearing it was fringed by vegetation, except on the bank nearest the shelters, which was of bare mud leading straight into the water like a beach.

Sturmer had not seen the final devastation of the camp. Sickened, he had left when the last of the hunters had been overpowered and clubbed down. He had felt no desire to participate in Groden's plans for the surviving women. Leave no one alive, that was all he had said.

Little of the shelters remained intact: the skeletons of spars and frames, burnt to charcoal; charred leather; scorched bedding. Broken baskets and other remnants of occupation had been kicked here and there.

These things Groden had done. But he had not built the cooking-fire.

The smoke was issuing from the middle of the camp. A heap of sticks was smouldering under a spit with a joint of unidentifiable meat. The smell of it on the breeze was like pork. Around it, shoulder to shoulder, were seated thirty or forty people. Some were holding their heads erect; others were bowed to the ground. Their eyes were smudges, their cheeks sunken, their bodies mutilated and disfigured, the

colour of decay. They were sitting in a ring, at hideous feast. Around them buzzed an multitude of flies.

Domack screamed and ran past Sturmer into the open, brandishing his axe, and the others were running too, screaming and shouting, and Sturmer was among them. One of the feasters fell sideways and lay still. Sturmer raised his mattock and brought it down, opening dead flesh, hacking, slashing. The bodies rolled and yielded to every indignity, every blow, until under the blizzard of axes and clubs and mattocks the dead savages had been so mangled as to be unrecognisable.

But even before they had finished Vude was shouting, pointing into the air and across the river.

On the far bank was the beech tree that had been struck by lightning in the storm. The heat of the strike had boiled the sap, sundering the trunk from top to bottom. The foliage hung tattered, shrivelled and scorched. Many of the boughs had been peeled of bark, giving the tree an odd skewbald appearance.

From one of these boughs a curious shape dangled, like a man but then not, slowly turning in the breeze, coming to rest, turning in the other direction. It had no hands, and its chest had been opened from throat to navel and roughly cobbled back with twine. One leg was missing below the hip, and with a rush of comprehension Sturmer knew the nature of the meat on the fire.

Domack climbed into the tree and worked his flint blade through the rope. The man-thing tumbled, thumped to the ground.

It was a skin. Cleanly, expertly, he had been skinned. To give it bulk the skin had been stuffed with leaves and twigs and mud; as it struck the ground they saw something spew

from its thorax, crawling and glistening brown. Ants were crawling out. An ants' nest had been put inside him. They were boiling over the sides of his chest. They were already everywhere, all over him, his nostrils, between the lips. The skull had been left in. The features of the face, however transfigured, could be those of no one else.

It was Gumis.

2

Soon after the farmers had left, taking the remains of their comrade with them, Tagart came down from his vantage in a low branch of a durmast oak and stood surveying the mutilated bodies of his tribe.

He had ruined it. His trap had worked to perfection: the men had been open targets, so easy to get in four or five quick shots while they had been running amuck among the corpses. Five shots, five dead farmers, and he would have been down the tree and into the forest before they had had time to react. That had been his plan, but he had ruined it, and in the most simple, stupid, and infuriating way possible. He had dropped his arrows.

It had happened when the magpies woke him, for despite all his efforts he had drifted off to sleep again. On waking, he had started and knocked the quiver from the branch. It had fallen, the strap slipping away before he could grasp it. One of the farmers seemed to have heard, but his attention had been drawn away by the kites which

had dropped in to take a closer look at the camp and its occupants.

Thereafter Tagart had been forced to sit quietly, watching impotently from his tree.

Yet in a way the trap had not failed utterly. He had managed to frighten them and he had shown that he could draw them out of the village and manipulate them into situations of his own choosing. It was disappointing that the chief, the beardless man, had not been among the search-party. Not that Tagart would have killed him. Yet.

Tagart collected his arrows and left the camp behind, determined never to go back. The bodies of the tribe meant nothing to him, not even that of Balan. They were mere objects, the spirits within having departed long since. But the place itself held memories and he did not want to see it again.

* * *

The rain came and went during the afternoon, in the wake of big piles of cloud drifting along the coast from the ocean and the west. Towards evening the cloud thinned and became patchy. Occasional shafts of sunshine glanced across the treetops; smoky white vapour edged the areas of blue which slowly proceeded east.

Tagart had emerged from the yew branches to sit cross-legged on the ground, chewing a strip of venison, a water-bag at his side. He felt better for the food and for his afternoon sleep spent in the cool half-light under the yew. And he felt more settled in his mind. He was reconciled to his own death. Mirin had gone from this world and would never come back. Their life here together was over. He had

been robbed of her touch, her softness. And he had been robbed of his son, just as he had been robbed of the tribe.

He would be with them again soon.

As he ate he continued to fill his void with peaceful thought, the only way to keep himself calm. He was studiously steering his mind from the prospect of what, once he had finished this meal, he needed to embark on next.

His arm was healing, the pain in his chest less. That rib, he was sure, had not been broken after all. Strength was returning. He straightened his legs and appraised the muscles, relaxed his calves and felt them loosen completely, flexed them and they were as hard as wood. He was aware of his body, his sense of speed and balance, and he was glad, glad that he could run as fast as any.

A final strip of meat, a final draught of water; he chose three blades from his flints, hitched his pouch to his belt, and left the yew behind.

To get downwind of the bears' den he made a long detour, circling back uphill through the oak trees and the thickets of hazel. It took him a long time to cover silently the half-mile of final approach to the root-pit where the she bear had given birth to her litter.

The hearing of a bear was said to be phenomenal, second only to its sense of smell. In the tribe it was said that a bear could smell fear. If that was so, Tagart told himself as he gingerly moved branches aside, he had doubly good reason for keeping leeward of the den and its mouth.

The den was on a gradient, sloping down from west to east, and situated in a glade of ancient oaks with ground cover of holly, bramble and dog-rose. Two hundred paces from the root-pit, Tagart halted to listen yet again. He

could hear nothing of the bears. He went on, halted, went on again, until he reached the place where he had hidden before, with the others of his tribe, that day when they had kept watch on the den and its occupants. He climbed into the tree they had used, stopping when he was near the top, forty feet from the ground.

He looked down. The ground rose from the base of his tree, foreshortened from this angle, sloping up to the den, which was twenty-five or thirty feet below the level of his vision. His view of the entrance was obstructed partly by the uprooted trunk of the oak, partly by intervening vegetation; but he could see well enough to know when one of the bears came in or out.

Faintly from within came the cries of the cubs. Tagart composed himself to wait.

Bears were the masters of the forest. They hunted anywhere, indifferent to day or night. Nothing threatened them. Nothing could bring down an adult bear unless it was sick or wounded. Bears in open country were big enough, but those in the forest attained almost unbelievable size through easy living. Females of four or five hundred pounds were commonplace, and in the densest regions lived males which might reach six hundred pounds in the rich months of late summer and autumn. Yet in a run the bears belied their size, and in staying power and resistance to fatigue and pain they were superior to the aurochs which could run for days though mortally wounded.

Their only real enemy was the cold, which they detested. When winter began to bite they sought out caves and other natural hollows which afforded shelter. It was during competition for these shelters that most fatal encounters

between men and bears took place, for, though extremely daring and expert hunting parties – usually spurred by hunger – could exceptionally trap and lance a bear, men were with good reason afraid of the bears and left them severely alone. Trackers of the tribe would find and mark out the breeding sites, and from then on, during the summer's stay, entry to those parts of the forest would be forbidden. Only a madman ventured near a bear's den, and only a man who no longer wished to live went near to or made the merest or most tentative threat to anything that had the remotest connection with their breeding and their young. And inside that hollow under the oak roots were not only a litter of cubs, but two fully grown females, one a nursemaid having all the attributes of the mother except that she was smaller and even faster and would catch hold of and devour Tagart even more quickly, for her jaws were just as strong, her claws as sharp, her devotion to the cubs and her fierceness in their defence just as well developed.

He would be killed. He knew he would be killed. It was suicide to remain a moment longer. He would jump down from the tree and run. Run from the she bear, a carnivore, an omnivore, the forest's chosen one, ultimate receiver of all its bounty, its most perfect design for killing: three times his weight, a mountain of brown fur over driving muscle that could power a single lazy slash of her huge front paw to scoop out hearts and lungs and viscera, in her jaws a glistening crowd of sharp white teeth which were there for nothing but ripping flesh, stripping bones, grinding pelvises and shoulders and heads. He prepared to move, to come down from the tree and be on his way, to abandon this madness and think of some other plan.

But even before he could release his grip on the branch the mother bear came out. As she emerged from the den she rose up to her full height, and on two legs towered for a moment before dropping to all fours. She looked from side to side, and then, seeming to scent something, took on immediate purpose as she looked straight ahead, directly at him.

Tagart remained absolutely still, praying that what he had been told by the elders was true, that their lore still held. For what he knew of bears had mostly been told him by others. They had told him that a bear could not take his scent from a position such as this; that he might betray himself only by movement, and only then if the movement were pronounced, because a bear's eyes were weak and poorly suited to recognising shapes alone.

The other female came up out of the hole behind her, a smaller animal, with paler fur, her ears flat against her head. The mother turned to greet her, and then the nursemaid was leaving on the hunt, going past the roots of the fallen oak, trotting south among the holly, along the line of the hill. The outline of her rounded, brown body appeared and reappeared among the trees, merged with the vegetation, and was gone.

The mother bear irritably shook her head, as if to dislodge a fly. She seemed in no hurry to leave, if indeed she were going to: she might have been hunting during the afternoon. Again Tagart heard the mewling of the whelps. The she bear went partly back into the den and it seemed as if she meant to bring her cubs outside to play in the dusk. But she turned and came out alone, and once more reared up with crinkled nostrils. Something was worrying her.

The sun had gone behind the hill. Deep shade filled the forest. A long way off to the south a nightjar was churring, keeping to one note, changing up, changing down. It too would be hunting soon, wheeling and zigzagging over the bracken, snapping and gaping its wide bill at the moths and dor beetles as it flew.

The light was deteriorating: Tagart refocused his eyes a little to one side of the bear so that he could see better. She had dropped down again and was washing, licking her paws with a long pink tongue. He fancied he could almost hear the rough skin rasping against her fur.

The bear finished her toilet and yawned, revealing for the first time her rows of murderous white teeth.

Then, without warning, she was leaving. Tagart watched in consternation as she started downhill towards his tree. He had foreseen the possibility, but it had all been part of the risk and he had not considered it further. He was considering it now. What if she scented him or his trail? What if she scented him and climbed into the tree? If she made a little spring from the ground and her claws took purchase, and with terrifying rapidity passed branch after branch on her way up the trunk towards him, driving him higher, higher, until there was no height left and she had hold of his legs ... The wind had not changed: it was blowing steadily from the west, but inside the forest anything was possible, even with a steady west wind. The trees could take a current and break it up, scattering scent in all directions; they could even reverse it. What had been a remote and theoretical problem now took on new significance as the bear approached. He heard the crush of sticks and undergrowth, and as the distance reduced he made out her eyes, nose, the features of her head; the rolls

of fat at her neck; the curve of her claws as her in-turned feet came padding forward.

The bear was yards from his tree. If she chose to stop and look up she could not fail to see him. His bowels felt loose as he looked down. He clung to the branch, holding his breath, holding himself in, not daring even to think in case she heard.

A moment later her broad back was passing below. She trotted on, downhill through the holly and hazel, each step taking her further below Tagart's level and away from the stream of his scent. He turned and watched her go. She went under the trees, and in a matter of seconds Tagart had lost sight of the bear, of her huge haunches swaying among the undergrowth. She had gone.

Now was the time to get down, to get away. He had been wrong to refuse himself help: he would leave at once and find another tribe, and with them return in strength to the village to discharge his duty. That is what he should have done from the start; that is what Cosk would have done. Tagart had let his pride take him too far.

With almost no concession to silence he scrambled from branch to lower branch, not caring how badly he might graze his knees or scrape his arms. He paused at the last ten feet and dropped on slack knees to the ground.

It was almost dark. The nightjar had stopped singing. Tagart glanced at the fallen oak.

He found himself running uphill.

Running uphill, his hand reaching into his pouch to free his knife from its wrapping of leather. The yards were behind him: he was standing beside the roots, at the mouth of the den, by the mass of soil and stones that had been dragged up by the tree's fall. Before he could change his

mind he was stooping, scrambling down into the fetid warmth of the den, a flint blade in his hand.

The bears had tunnelled some way into the earth under the root ball. He could hear the cubs at the end of the tunnel, a few feet ahead. He could see nothing: the only light was a dim greyness from the entrance behind him. The smell of the bears, rich and gamy, was almost choking him; the high-pitched cries of the cubs filled his ears. There were two of them. His head struck the earthen roof of the tunnel and dislodged a crumble of soil. He reached down and felt warm, coarse fur. He had hold of one. It struggled half-heartedly as he lifted it by the loose skin at its neck; but then, realising that it was not a bear who held it, the cub squirmed strenuously and its cries became louder and more urgent. Tagart felt for and with his left hand clamped the jaws shut. The cub was still small, and no match for him in strength, but its milk-teeth were sharp. The other cub was alert now, snapping at his ankles. He pushed it aside, turned, and, bending double with his prize tucked under his arm, started along the tunnel to its mouth and freedom.

As he came into the open air he changed his knife from his right hand to his left, and without stopping slashed the blade across the cub's throat. The blood welled, dripped on the undergrowth and the ground. After a moment's resistance the cub went limp in his arms and it was dead.

Tagart ran as he had never run before, away from the den, away from the directions taken by mother and nursemaid, caring nothing now for wind or scent, plunging through the forest and the growing night, exultant, alive, set free. Power, triumph, intoxication possessed him as he

ran. In his arms he was carrying a few pathetic pounds of lifelessness: fat and muscle and unformed bone.

But it was more than a dead cub he was carrying. It was the means to draw out the beardless man, the means to draw him out and kill him.

3

The death of Gumis had thrown a shadow over the village. What remained of his body had been laid on the Dead Ground. Later he would be buried with those who had died in the raid, in the village barrow on the western side of the valley. The dead man had no wife and no real family in Burh, and few people he had called his friend.

For some reason she did not understand – she did not accept any feeling of guilt – Groden's wife put herself forward as the first watcher in the vigil over the body. She stationed herself beside it, close to the Meeting House, a cape over her shoulders, for the evening was cool. The sun was lingering on the hill beyond the palisade, a trembling globe of fire that bulged and became misshapen as the earth drew it down. The underbellies of the few high clouds were lit with orange; the rest of the sky was without feature, a greyish blue turning steadily to violet. Over the forest the first stars of the constellations showed as tiny points.

The sun went below the horizon, filling the west with red light. Hernou felt the breeze stir on her cheek. She clasped her arms about her knees. Across the compound,

lamps were coming on one by one. Normally such evenings saw eating outside, in groups of ten or twenty, but tonight each family was keeping to itself.

Behind her in the Meeting House she could hear men's voices. Lights were being lit in there too. From its windows a glow presently spread over the Dead Ground and the horrible, empty corpse, making Gumis a drab brown with deep folds and shadows of black. His death and its implications were keeping the inner circle of the Council late in session.

Groden was not part of the inner circle, not yet, and he had gone to Morfe's house to eat. Groden had acquitted himself well in the Council that day, Hernou told herself. How could anyone have foreseen that Tsoaul would act without agency to avenge the savages? That was the explanation given by Sturmer and Vude for what had happened to Gumis.

Knowing that Tsoaul himself was involved, no one in the village but Sturmer harboured any longer even the least resentment against Groden for the outcome of the raid. The rain had come, as Groden had promised. He could not be blamed for Tsoaul's intervention.

Vude had related a tale of his boyhood, when Aih had manifested himself in the compound like a ball of flame. The head man, Vude said, had offered a sacrifice to Gauhm and Aih had not returned. If the Earth Mother could do that, Vude reasoned, could she not do the same with Tsoaul? So during the afternoon Sturmer, the Council, and the whole village had made prayer at the small shrine in the Meeting House – no one dared ventured into the forest to attend the one on the cliffs – and three lambs and a calf had been killed and their lifeblood collected as an offering.

Hernou brought the cape further round her shoulders and shivered. With each passing minute fewer people were to be seen. The ground was losing heat. On her right she could hear the murmur of the river. Eventually the lights went out in the Meeting House and Sturmer and the others, still talking, descended the plank steps.

From the outskirts of the village came the hard, sharp barking of a fox and with it the shrilling of a blackbird flushed from its roost, somewhere near the east gate.

Vude's distinctive voice was heard. 'Till morning, then, Sturmer.'

'Till morning.'

Hernou turned to her left. Sturmer was crossing the open ground to the big house near by.

He stooped and went through the flap of leather at his doorway and for a brief and painful moment she glimpsed the picture of warmth and cosiness within.

* * *

The ramp Tagart had made the previous day was where he had left it, hidden in the undergrowth at the top of the escarpment. It was three feet wide and fifteen long, covered with brushwood fastened with slipknots so that, after use, it could be quickly dismantled and the components dispersed. The ramp had been heavy and unwieldy enough in daylight, but now it was almost unmanageable. Tagart was making so much noise dragging it down the escarpment that he was sure he would be heard in the village. He did not really care. Getting caught by the farmers would be a hundred times better than taking too long to get the ramp in place.

He tripped on an anthill, lost his footing, and fell for the third time. The ramp came down on his leg. A dog fox barked near by, and as Tagart fell he disturbed a roosting blackbird from the brier patch. He breathed a curse and struggled to his feet.

There were lights in the village and food smells on the wind. Tagart hauled the ramp over the anthills. No sound of alarm had yet come from the other side of the palisade. He got under the ramp and raised it, positioning the top against the spikes. The slope was steep – too steep. And would the brushwood stand the load? He did not think so, but there was no time to consider it. He freed the dead cub from where he had tied it, at the end of the ramp so that it had dragged along the ground, and, holding it to his chest, climbed the brushwood rungs.

His head came level with the top and he looked into the village. The lights in the Meeting House had now gone out. Lamps were flickering in several windows elsewhere, in the dwelling-houses with their conical roofs. It was too dark to see properly: he could not tell whether there were any people in the compound.

A dog started barking, probably at him. He dropped the cub over the palisade and climbed over the top, turned round and, gripping the spikes, lowered himself as far as he could before letting go and dropping the last six or seven feet to the ground. He landed well, next to the cub.

Taking it by a limp hind leg, he dragged its muzzle through the grass as he ran, half-crouching, along the line of the palisade. The houses were passing him by on the left. Still he had seen no one, but more dogs were barking and he was expecting trouble from them at any moment. He

reached the bakery, the last of the buildings before the river, and paused.

Beyond the bakery loomed the Meeting House, its walls and stilts and steps silhouetted by lights from the large dwelling-house on the far side. This house, Tagart was sure, would be that of the chief: that of Sturmer, the beardless man. His eyes glowed. She might be in there at this very moment, Sturmer's woman, the one he had seen at the ceremony. He had seen her well and marked her features as she had lain naked, drinking her husband's urine from a wooden bowl. Tagart hoped he would be able to restrain himself when the time came to take her. To kill her too soon would be a tragic waste. And he prayed he would not, tonight, come face to face with Sturmer himself.

He abandoned the cub by the bakery wall, ran to the river and slipped into the water, which flowed with sparkles of starlight on green and black and closed over his head without a sound. He dived and wriggled deep into the slime, came up for breath, dived again, feeling and then not feeling its subtle touch on his skin. Bubbles of gas wallowed up to the surface and broke about his head. He dived three times in all, ridding himself of all trace of beard and blood, masking his own odour with the sulphurous smell of river-mud. Letting the current float him, he drifted past the jetty, past the roof of the Meeting House, black and angular against the stars, and came to the timbers of the bridge.

He clung to them in the middle of the river, his hair wet and the gritty taste of mud on his lips. The water was flowing about him with small throaty sounds. His eyes were near the surface, below the rise of the banks, which were blacker than the river and sky, tall with vegetation.

Above him, the bridge made utter darkness. The space beneath it amplified the river noises and Tagart strained to listen. He wanted to hear what was happening, away from the river, on the other side of the village.

With his chin in the water, he waited.

He did not have to wait for long.

* * *

The bear came at speed down the escarpment, in her anguish paying no attention to the obstacles in her way – brambles, briars, oak bushes, tussocks, the anthills at the bottom. Without pause she scaled the ramp of brushwood and, merely noticing the eleven-foot drop on the other side of the palisade, gained entry to the village.

She had followed the scent of the he cub from the den, each drop of its sweet blood glowing like a marker in the dark. Mingled with the trail she had caught the sickly musk of human feet, and long before the circuitous route had begun nearing the village she had known that the cub had been taken by men.

The smell of them was everywhere on the inside of the palisade: their bodies, their animals, their cooking-fires and the things they ate. She found the scent of the cub at once, leading beside the palisade towards the smell of water. On her left she was aware of lights and a throng of barking dogs, and she was aware of the fire she feared, inside the houses; and as she lumbered towards the river she heard for the first time men's voices raised in alarm.

Hernou stood up as she heard the shouting. Her first reaction was disbelief. The cries of Bear made no sense. The village was bear-proof; everyone knew it. She ran from her vigil-place to the corner of the Meeting House, by the

steps, where there was a better view. The disturbance was on the far side of the village, by the palisade. Figures of men and dogs were outlined in the light of burning brands. And then she saw the running bulk of the bear as it appeared between two houses, and she knew the inconceivable had happened.

The nightmare of a bear loose in the compound, with nowhere for her to hide, nowhere safe, had come true.

Sturmer, alerted by the shouting, armed himself with a spear and came out of his doorway. Hernou turned her head as the flap raised and lowered, revealing the light inside.

‘It’s there!’ she shouted at him.

‘Get inside! Get under cover! I want no one loose!’

She was holding on to the beams of the Meeting House, numb with terror. The other men, and many of the women too, were appearing at their doorways. Sturmer did not stop to argue with Hernou. He was yelling orders, trying to organise the villagers, hoping to pin the bear inside a semi-circle backing on to the palisade, where it could be held at bay with flame and in time wounded with enough spears to kill it. But the bear had already broken through the line and was shambling towards the bakery, away from the palisade. Two villagers had been cuffed aside, another seized and worried in its jaws. The screams of the dying were lost in the confusion of shouting and yelling.

‘Force it into the river! Deak, Tamben, Domack! This way! Over here!’

Hernou did not wait to hear any more. She thought of hiding in the Meeting House, but its doorway was wide enough to admit a bear. The nearest safety was Sturmer’s house. She ran to its threshold and pushed aside the

entrance flap, scrambling through the porch into the kitchen.

Sturmer had been interrupted at his meal. In front of the hearth were wooden platters, clay spoons and bowls and cow-horn cups in wooden stands, left half full of food and drink. Hernou passed through the kitchen into the central chamber, and through that into the main room with the tall roof. Here Sturmer's wife Tamis and her four children were huddled together in a rumpled bed of fur and skins. The younger children were crying; the eldest looked up fearfully as Hernou pushed her way into the room.

'Your house was the nearest,' Hernou said. 'Sturmer told me to hide myself.'

'Have you seen it?' Tamis said. 'Where is it?'

'By the bakery.'

Tamis shut her eyes.

'They can kill it,' Hernou said. 'I know they can.'

'We must pray for our lives. The Forest Spirit has sent the bear; only Gauhm can save us.' She looked with hatred at Hernou, at her grey eyes, her hair, her smooth brown skin, the body that the men still found attractive, watching her deliberate walk as she crossed the compound. Tamis knew that Sturmer had once been hers – and she knew that Hernou wanted Sturmer back. 'You and your Groden have brought this on us. You have brought evil to this village.'

'That's not true!'

'Then how did his dog die?'

Even with lights and spears and arrows the villagers had been unable to drive the bear into the river, where it would have been hampered by the mud. Instead it had stopped by the bakery wall. At its feet they saw that it had brought a

dead cub with it. Raised up on hind legs, the bear was slashing about wildly with its forepaws. In the flickering torchlight it looked brown and shaggy against the wood of the wall.

Groden hit it with another arrow in the throat and the bear began a strange, piteous wailing. It stumbled blindly forward and lunged with a wide paw, catching Meed a blow that sent him flying. The bear checked its lunge; and lashed out again, missing Morfe by the width of a hand. He did not move. He had armed himself with a felling-axe, and in the torchlight his eyes glittered and his teeth showed between his lips.

‘The snout!’ Sturmer screamed. ‘Hit the snout!’

Morfe took no notice. He knew what to do.

He had positioned himself for just this blow. As the bear wagged its head from side to side the axe-head came sailing down, and, judged by Morfe’s mad, cold, calculating eye, the stone blade struck its muzzle and it had a muzzle no more.

The bear gave a bellowing squeal and again raised itself up, but went too far, staggered, and toppled backwards. More arrows and spears were raining into its belly and chest. Its head and shoulders hit the bakery wall and broke through the planking, splintering the wood and leaving fresh white break-marks. The villagers ran forward and thrust spears into its belly. The legs thrashed; twitched; and lay still.

It was only then that they realised a second bear, even bigger than the first, had got into the compound.

No one saw it clamber over the palisade and run along the line of scent. The mother bear was upon them from behind even as Morfe dealt the nursemaid its death-blow.

Left and right the second bear was bowling villagers out of the way with swingeing forepaws. Skulls, rib-cages, pelvises were fractured and crushed. Faces were trodden into the ground by huge hind-paws. A woman was taken up in the mother's jaws and her waist almost bitten through before she was flung aside.

Sturmer and Groden were frantically pulling arrows and spears from the carcass of the first bear as the mother turned on them, scattering weapons and lights, pawing and swiping and striking down man after man. The mother turned to her side, selected Domack's wife, ran her down and with bared jaws grabbed her shoulder; now on hind legs, now on all fours, the bear dragged her along, let her drop, reared up with a roar.

'Get back!' Sturmer screamed as he saw Tamis running across the compound. 'Get back! Get back!'

She had left the house when she had realised there were two bears to be killed, knowing that everyone would be needed, every hand. She had pleaded with Hernou, but Hernou had refused to help and had stayed behind.

Hernou could hear the screaming and shouting, the cries of the injured and dying, and for the first time began to fear that there might not be enough people left to deal with the bear. It might win. And if it won, it might in its systematic plunder of the village come here and seek her out. She thought of placing Sturmer's children at the entrance, as a decoy, so that if the bear came it would take them and not her. But what if the children served only to attract the bear to this house above all others? Surely it was better for her to wait in the entrance herself, where she could see what was happening. If the bear came, she could run into the bedchamber and escape through the

window while it forced its way into the back of the house and was delayed by the children. That would give her the best chance of making a run for the gate. And if it did not come here but went first to the other side of the village, she needed to know the best time to escape: she needed to be able to see.

‘Stay here quietly,’ Hernou told the eldest child. ‘Your mother will be back soon.’

Hernou wondered about Groden. He was fighting the bear, she supposed. There was nothing she could do to help him.

She moved aside the flap of leather into the middle chamber and crawled through it to the kitchen. Here the lamps were still flickering, casting an unsteady light, smoking and giving off the smell of burning fat; but with this smell was the smell of wet leather and mud, and before Hernou could turn and get into the bedchamber there was movement in the porch and she was looking into the eyes of a wild-haired and mud-streaked man, a man she had never seen before, not of the village, but dressed in skins like a savage. His high cheekbones and the hard line of his chin gave him under the matted tangle of his hair and beard the semblance of a demon, and Hernou knew she was looking upon the spirit of the savages in human form: she was looking upon Tsoaul. She was looking upon the Forest God, who had brought down a plague of bears on Burh and would destroy every man and woman and every thing in the village, who was coming for her now because it was she who had incited Groden and it was Groden who had planned and led the raid on the savages’ camp.

‘Make a noise and I’ll kill you.’

She could utter no sound, feebly submitting as he grasped her arm and pulled her towards the entrance. She preceded him, crawling through the porch and into the open air.

In a daze she stood up. The Forest God came behind her, and he too stood up, much taller than she, taller than any mortal. Across the village the screaming was undiminished. Hernou could see lights dancing, the rush of people as the bear changed direction, dark and formless in the night.

The stars were overhead. She felt only the wind from his fist as Tsoaul struck her. She heard a thin, high keening, and then blackness overtook her and she knew nothing more.

* * *

Tagart caught her as she fell and hefted her onto his shoulders. She was not heavy, and he ran between the houses of the village, gained the thoroughfare, and in a few moments reached the east gate. He threw down his load and wrested aside the heavy oaken bars. The shouts and cries far across the village seemed to indicate that the mother bear had been hit – he could not tell how severely. But if she had been mortally wounded and the fighting was coming to an end, there could be no more time to lose.

He swung the gate aside. No one but Sturmer's woman had seen him so far, of that he was certain. In his desire not to reveal his existence he had been almost too cautious, leaving it to the last minute before coming out of the river and crossing the compound to the head man's house, the house of Sturmer, the beardless man, where Tagart had hoped and prayed he would find the woman he had seen at

the ceremony. And indeed he had almost left it too long. He had almost missed her.

Tagart tore off her doeskin garment and dropped it by the gate. This was no time for subtlety: he had to leave something to tell the farmers that she had not merely run away, that they were to follow and try to get her back.

He slung her body round his neck and in the chilly summer night, crisp with the first hint of autumn, started for the forest and the yew tree where he had made his lair.

4

Already the summer was dying, spent and overblown. The breath of decay was blowing through the forest, on old leaf mould, on fallen wood and the dead branches of diseased trees: the rains in their wake had brought the first flush of fungi. From their underground threadworks of mycelium they groped upwards: shaggy caps, opening like feathered parasols that softened into dribbling slime; autumn morels, white and grey and rust; blushers, which stained cut-red like flesh where they were bored and nibbled by beetles; fairy clubs, tiny white antlers powdered with spores; troops of wood mushrooms, appearing as small grey-white bulbs, opening and spreading wide; stinkhorns that smelled of carrion; wood woolly-foots, yellow stainers, puffballs, earth stars, champignons, chantarelles; boleti which appeared suddenly among the grass-blades; and the edible grisettes, opening from fragile white flasks, just like the others of their tribe which were not edible: fly agaric, red

and white-spotted; the panther, a poisonous kind; and, on bad ground, the destroying angel: beautiful, a white apparition, with a slimy, shining cap, a poison so virulent that a single specimen in a basket of mushrooms was enough to bring agonising death. And there was a fourth kind, more poisonous still, growing under oak trees and beech, coming with the first summer rains, in shape and size like a small blusher, but its cap was a dull and inconspicuous olive-green. It resembled a wood mushroom, and when it was no more than a button could be mistaken for one, but never by the nomads, who knew the death cap and what it would do.

Autumn was in the air. The small birds of the forest had finished their breeding. The tits, goldcrests, nuthatches and treecreepers were coming together in groups and family parties that would swell and become roaming bands; the robins and redstarts and thrushes, tailless and moulting, skulked in the tangle near the ground; from their eyrie high in the branches of a dead tree, the young goshawks were making their first tentative flights. Cuckoos, whose calls had not been heard for weeks, were moving south, towards the sea; and the swifts, climbing on their black sickle wings with feeble screams, revelled in the banks of cloud and would soon be leaving late young to starve.

The aurochs, too, were on the move, each bull with his cows. At night their bellowings sounded far through the wooded valleys. Tagart was listening to them as he lay resting and waiting on his bed of yew-needles. Beside him was the woman, now tied at wrists and ankles. To keep her warm Tagart had covered her with skins. He would feed and water her too, to keep her alive.

She regained consciousness. He heard her breathing change and smiled to himself as she cunningly made her breaths longer as if she had not awoken at all.

‘What is your name?’

She did not reply. Tagart knew she had heard him, and he knew she had understood. They both spoke the same tongue. Although the farmers’ dialect was thick and guttural, closer to the language of their ancestors on the mainland across the water, during thirty generations of slave-raiding and intermarriage the old language of the nomads had been lost.

‘Tell me your name.’

Still she did not answer. He sensed that her eyes were open, that she was afraid. The resinous smell of yew-needles was filling the air. The woman had forgotten to regulate her breathing: it was coming more quickly now, and Tagart could almost hear the pounding of her heart.

‘Tell me your name. I shall not hurt you again.’

‘You ... you know my name.’

He frowned into the dark. The woman’s quiet, fear-laden voice came again.

‘You killed Gumis as a sign to us and you sent your servants the bears to avenge the forest people. You have chosen me because of my husband and I know I am to be sacrificed. I am Gauhm’s sacrifice to you.’

Tagart’s frown deepened. ‘Not if you tell me what I wish to know.’

‘But you are Tsoaul and know everything.’

Tsoaul? Who was Tsoaul? ‘That is true,’ he said. ‘I am Tsoaul. But if you are to be spared I must hear these things from your own lips.’

She was silent.

'You must tell me what I wish to know.'

'Yes.' She almost whispered it. 'Yes.'

'First. Why do you call me "Tsoaul"?'

'You ...' She seemed confused. 'You are the Spirit of the Forest ... that is your name.'

'I am known by many names.'

'Forgive me.'

'Next. Do all the villagers know that I, Tsoaul, have done these things?'

'Yes. They all know it. They are all afraid.'

'They know that I caused Gumis to die?'

'Yes.'

'And that I sent my servants into your village tonight?'

'They know that also.'

'Next. Tell me of the ceremony in the Meeting House.'

'I ... I do not know ...'

'No harm will come to you. Tell me about the ceremony.'

'Which one? There are many ceremonies ...'

'The morning after the rain returned. Tell me what you were doing in the Meeting House.'

She hesitated as if anxious to give the right answer, not quite sure of the question. 'We eat from the Agaric Casket to go with our dead to the Far Land.'

'To go with their souls when they die?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me what you eat.'

'A toadstool, prepared by the priest. He calls it "agaric".'

'Explain. What does it look like and where does it grow?'

'It has a white stalk and a red saddle with scales of white. He finds it in the woods.'

The nomads called it by another name, but Tagart knew it well. 'How is it prepared?'

The woman described the drying process, how the caps were placed in the casket, where the casket was kept. She told him how many caps could be eaten, and she told him the stories the men had recounted of their visions. She said that whenever the agaric was eaten the musicians played, so that the real world could be found again by its music.

'Who is your priest?'

'Sturmer.'

'Is he your husband?'

'No. My husband's name is Groden.' She bit her tongue. Had she offended her listener? Did Tsoaul know that she had once shared Sturmer's bed? Could he look into her heart and know secrets?

'What is the name of the man in your village with no beard?'

She hesitated. 'Groden.'

'And you are called by what name?'

'Hernou.'

'And is your husband head man?'

'No. Sturmer is head man. He is head man and priest too.'

'Sturmer is bearded?'

'Yes.'

'But Groden is of importance in the village?'

The coldness in the question chilled Hernou and made her afraid for Groden. But Groden was in the village and Hernou was here in the forest with Tsoaul and now she saw that she put her own life before Groden's and she answered:

'Yes.'

* * *

Drizzle came from the ocean on a warm wind, bringing back summer to the sea cliffs and the sea of endless forest. Heavy clouds rolled in the night above the trees. Cold air worked on the clouds and made them rain; the sea broke muddy and listless along the beach, lifting lines and fragments of black weed, too feeble to make a roar of the shingle drag, and where the waves slopped on the white rocks below the seven striding cliffs the water swirled ceaselessly and made no spray. At the mouth of the estuary, on a shingle spit barely emerging from the sea, black-backed gulls stood in roost and waited for first light.

Thirty wing-beats away the river debouched into the tide race: its flow was swollen with rain, winding and meandering down the valley. The valley basin was wide and flat, hemmed in by steep forest to the east and more gently rising forest to the west. In a past age the river had broken through one of its own meanders, leaving stranded an oxbow lake which had become a calm lagoon. From it rose the voices of wildfowl in the dark.

Further up the valley, lights showed from a village of houses overhung by an escarpment, and sometimes the cries of lamentation were taken with the smoke and sent by the wind among the trees.

The bodies of the bears had been dragged into the middle of the compound and set on fire. The smell of burning belched into the rain; hair and skin and meat slowly burned back from paws and grinning skulls, revealing scorched bone.

They had killed thirty people. Another twelve were dying; fifteen more had been maimed. Fewer than a

hundred uninjured people had survived, the majority of whom were women and children. Forty-three able-bodied men were left. Not many wished to respond to Groden's appeal for help. His wife had been taken: her dress had been found by the east gate.

A path led from the east gate, past the escarpment, rising south-eastwards into the forest. Tagart took it again two hours before dawn, once he had been back to dispose of the ramp. The path wound and climbed through the trees, here narrow and closely pressed by undergrowth, there open and wide and passing through woodlands of old beech where the death cap fungus grew. Over a dry gorge the path became a wooden bridge under which Tagart had hung with his flints and bow-drill, in the first hours of loneliness after he had been down to the village and watched them in the Meeting House. Concealed ropes led away into the brambles.

Other ropes lay in readiness elsewhere in the forest, other traps. Deadfalls, dug by the Cosks, had been cleared of debris and restored, the spikes made freshly sharp and coated with wolf's-bane. Weights and counterweights waited high above the ground. Snares and loops, nooses and treadles and triggers: one was now fired by a badger, which leapt clear just as the whip of ropes ripping from the ground signalled the crashing fall of a water-filled skin, straight onto a spike of sharpened holly. The hummel-skin exploded in a drenching gush; the water flooded the ground and slowly drained away. The badger caught the reek of human scent on the crumpled skin and ran off the path into the deeper forest, where soon it was unearthing snails, the incident forgotten.

* * *

Dawn appeared in the east and the inside of the yew tree became less than black, a gloom in which vagueness could be discerned. Hernou watched the features of the young man taking form, and as she watched her suspicions grew stronger. This was no spirit. Would a spirit be wounded and cut about the arms, bruised and dirty? Would a spirit have asked such questions? And would a spirit talk in the accents of a savage?

In repose, his face seemed almost gentle. In the resolute line of his jaw and his high cheekbones she saw the primeval face; in the blackness of his beard and glossy hair, and in the smooth texture of his skin, she saw the old complexion, found only in those village-dwellers whose blood was close to the native stock. She noticed his hands. They were scratched and torn, calloused and grimed: strong hands for gripping tools and weapons, for punching, for strangling.

Hernou was afraid. The savages were killers. It was the way they lived, by hunting and killing. They thought no more of blood and murder than did the farmers of soil and harvest. The harsh forest life streamlined their tribes and made them ruthless and strong, like the animals they sought for their prey. Their discipline, their life, were impossible to understand. For them to swim free in the seasons, not to have precise tasks for each week and day, but to wander the land by whim: this alone thrust the savages far beyond comprehension.

Even after all these generations, the farmers still felt themselves to be interlopers, foreigners. Their proper home lay across the sea. The only true natives were the savages.

Across his shoulders and the top of his chest she saw the form of bones and muscle, rising and falling as he slept. In the crook of an elbow she saw his sinews; his legs were relaxed, the great muscles at ease, and his feet, with their hard soles which had never known clogs, lay to the side. An old scar ran the length of his calf. At his belt was a pouch, and an empty sheath for blades. His main garment was a tunic of thick leather. The tunic was too small: it looked as if it had been made for another. Perhaps one who was now dead. Hernou thought of the things Groden had plundered from the camp. There had been several such tunics among them. The one this young man was wearing must have been overlooked, just as he himself must have been overlooked by those who Groden had said had gone round with axes, making certain.

Everything Hernou saw about him, everything she thought, hardened her conviction. This was no spirit.

He awoke with a blink, as if he had felt the touch of her eyes on his face. For a moment he said nothing, and Hernou's heart hammered even more violently. She was helpless; she could not move. Her hands were bound behind her back, and her shoulders ached. The savage had tied her at ankles and wrists and lashed the bonds to the yew trunk.

He sat up and turned to one side, away from her. 'Do you want something to eat? Water?'

When she did not reply he stopped busying himself among the provisions and looked back at her face. She nodded.

'If you wish to shit, tell me so. I do not want this place fouled.' He put a rib of venison before her. 'Now I will free your hands to eat.' He went behind the yew trunk and

untied the lashings; she rubbed each wrist in turn, soothing away the chafing and trying to bring back circulation.

‘I beg you, free my ankles.’

‘Why? Do you want to go outside?’

‘My ankles hurt.’

He considered briefly, and did as she had asked. She gratefully massaged her ankles. She was naked under the skins he had provided; the skin covering her shoulder slipped, but she did not trouble to restore it. Hernou looked surreptitiously from under her brow. He was watching.

‘Eat,’ he said.

She diffidently picked up the raw venison. It smelled rank, but out of fear she tried to tear off a piece and chew. The taste made her gag. She felt her gorge rising, and for a moment thought she would be sick. The savage was already swallowing; he caught her eye and seemed amused. He passed her a water-bag. She pulled out the wooden bung, and although the water was musty and stale she drank deeply, for her mouth was dry.

‘Rain again,’ he said, gesturing with his piece of meat at the forest outside, where water was dripping from the trees. ‘That is good. Good for me. Bad for them.’

‘What does Tsoaul mean to do?’ she said. The beating of her heart was filling her head. She was near to panic, hysteria, but she knew she had to say something or it would be too late.

‘Don’t worry. You will be safe. Do as I say and you will be safe.’

The skin covering her shoulder slipped further, revealing her breasts. She did not take her eyes from his face. The savage was watching her, no longer chewing, his eyes in

shadow. She reached down and slowly took the leather in her fingers and pulled it aside. Her hand opened and let it fall. Inch by inch, she stretched out her arm to touch his hand with her own.

Still he did not move. Rain was dripping among the foliage outside. She felt her fingertips meet the warm skin of his hand.

He gave his head a dismissive shake and drew his hand away.

His voice came then, heavy with contempt. 'Now I understand what they did to my wife.'

'I —'

'Get dressed. Tie back your hair.'

She did as she had been told; the savage tied her up again, more tightly than before, and between her wrists tied a longer piece of rope, so that she could be pulled along. He picked up three bows and from the ground collected a number of things to go into his pouch.

'It is time to leave,' he said.

5

The search party filed through the east gate, passing over the spot where Hernou's dress had been found, walking in pairs, armed with mattocks and axes and bows and spears. In front went Sturmer, beside him Ockom, a tall man dressed in dark skins. Morfe and Groden came last. As they left the protection of the palisade, those staying behind swung the gate back and dropped the bars into place.

Fifteen men had been left to defend the village, too few, against Sturmer's better judgement, but at length he had given in to Groden's persuasion. The village had lost enough people. They had to try to get Hernou back for this if no other reason. The search party, twenty-eight men, had been selected and armed and had set out at once, barely two hours after dawn.

Few of the men had not lost someone the previous night. Sturmer had been spared: his wife and children were safe, but some men had seen two or even three members of their family killed or maimed.

The path from the east gate – for surely that was the one Tsoaul had meant them to follow, just as he had laid signs to Gumis – was well known by all the villagers. They walked it regularly. It led generally south-east; after skirting the escarpment it rose by a series of swings into the forest. A thousand yards on, at the halfway point, it crossed a dry gorge by means of a cantilever bridge, built to save a long detour. The gorge walls, sheer and white where the chalk was exposed, or rubble-strewn and grown with rough brambles and shrubs, dropped to a fern-filled bottom. Beyond the gorge the path turned south, and then east, coming out by the sward-covered cliffs and the Shrine to Gauhm.

Under the trees the light was bad. The path opened out into the small clearing by the bridge. Sturmer signalled a halt.

The gorge, which at some time must have carried a stream down to the sea, was part of a long rift that gradually widened and formed the separation between two of the seven chalk cliffs, on the fifth of which stood the Shrine. The rift carried back into the forest for a mile north

of the bridge. One of Sturmer's predecessors had built the bridge, thirty feet wide, a long platform of oak logs buttressed into each side of the gorge with beams of oak and beech. Below it the gorge fell away sharply, thirty-five feet deep, its walls partly clad with the roots and twisted branches of stunted bushes. Brambles and tufts of fern grew among and across the chalk rubble at the bottom.

Sturmer turned to Ockom. 'Do you think it's safe to cross?'

The bigger man gave a fatalistic shrug, his eyes, normally humorous, now dull and flat. His brother had been mauled by the bears. Ockom was reckoned the best man in the village for fieldcraft. He knew the different animal tracks, the names of all the trees and plants that had names to know. He said, 'There has been no sign of her this far. I see none now. I think it is safe. But send Groden across first – it's his wife we're risking ourselves for.'

Sturmer addressed Groden. 'We fear an ambush. You cross first.'

Groden seemed reluctant, but ventured out across the clearing and onto the logs of the bridge, testing each step, both hands gripping the rails. He looked over his shoulder.

'Nothing!'

'Cross to the far side!'

Groden did so, jumping the last three feet to solid ground. He dropped to his knees and as best he could inspected the timbers of the bridge, stood up, and waved the others on.

They crossed singly, Sturmer going last, standing by the lip of the gorge, vigilant for unusual sounds. There were none. The file reassembled on the far side and, still watching for tracks, Sturmer and Ockom led off.

Sturmer began to wonder whether they had taken the right direction from the village. They had merely assumed that Hernou had been taken along the Shrine path.

The ground, level for a quarter of a mile, now started sloping down into a shallow dry valley. There had been no evidence of activity anywhere along the path this far: the mud was unmarked by footprints. As the search party descended into the valley, Sturmer's doubts deepened. Perhaps Tsoaul had tricked them. Were they going the wrong way? Perhaps Hernou had been taken in an entirely different direction.

He turned to Ockom. 'Do you see any tracks?'

Ockom opened his mouth to speak but then Sturmer flinched as in a rush of wind he heard a loud bang and felt a spray of blood on his face. As Ockom's two hands came up Sturmer saw the arrow where it had struck, in the sulcus of the upper lip, smashing through the front teeth and emerging at the back of his neck. And when Sturmer saw the grey flight-feathers all he could think was that these were not quail feathers, these were not like the flights on the arrow that Groden had shot into his dog Uli: these were goose quills, on a polished hazel shaft that had come from among the trees and passed a hand's breadth from Sturmer's face and turned Ockom's head into a screaming mass of flesh and pain and teeth.

The next arrow hit the line of men further back, thudding into Holmer's flanks even as Ockom, dead in his black tunic, went down.

The file broke loose. There was pandemonium. A third arrow slithered across the path and into the undergrowth. It had come from the left and a little ahead. Sturmer marked the place and shouted to the others to follow.

They plunged into the forest, branches whipping at their faces, their weapons tangling as they ran. Ahead, Sturmer could see little: tree trunks, the branches above, the bushes of holly and hazel at eye level. There were no silhouettes against the sky, no archers hiding in the trees at the place he had marked.

On his right he heard a shriek. He turned in time to see Parn and Coyler, arms upraised, disappearing into the ground. They vanished. Sturmer ran to their screams and the edge of the pit.

They had fallen on serried wooden spikes, fifteen feet below ground: Parn face-forward, so that he was partly spreadeagled, partly crushed against the earthen wall of the pit; and Coyler to one side, so that his face was upraised.

‘Help me,’ Coyler groaned, his features twisting with the realisation of what was happening to his body. ‘Help me. Help me.’

Sturmer was joined by Boonis and Morfe. ‘Get them out! The spikes are poisoned! Get them out!’

‘We’ve got no rope!’

‘The poison! You can see the poison! Get them off the spikes!’

It was too late. Coyler’s face looking upward was a mask. His hands groped uselessly. His eyes filmed. Already his legs and torso felt dead. There were faces up there in the rectangle of light. Beyond them leaves and branches, trees. Rain coming in. Beside him Parn was still squirming. Coyler shut his eyes.

All but two of the search party were standing impotently at the edge of the deadfall. Sturmer barked an order: in the brambles nearby they found a long, stout

branch. Boonis and Groden lowered it into the pit and the bodies of the dead men were brought out and laid on the ground among the briars and the wet dead leaves.

Tamben and Domack, who had run further into the woods, returned and joined the rest. They had seen and heard nothing of the mysterious bowman.

‘It is Tsoaul!’ cried Dopp. ‘He will kill us all!’

‘He will do to us what he did to Gumis!’

‘And Ockom!’

‘And Coyler and Parn!’

‘And the victims of the bears!’

Sturmer shouted angrily for silence.

‘We’ll be killed!’

‘Let’s go back to the village and get away while we can!’

‘What if Tsoaul drew us here to keep us from the village while he attacks?’

‘I’m going back!’

‘No!’ Groden screamed. ‘We must find Hernou!’

‘You bastard! She can protect herself!’ Dopp’s face was inches from Groden’s. ‘You and that slut brought this down on us all – now she must fend the best she can!’

‘What did you say?’

‘She’s a whore! If she’s dead we’re well rid of her!’

Before Sturmer could intervene, Groden punched Dopp in the face. He staggered and would have fallen into the pit had not Domack and Tamben caught him.

‘Stop this!’ Sturmer shouted. ‘We must think ahead!’

‘The village is cursed!’ said Munn. ‘I’m taking my children away! The bears came and killed their mother and sister; Tsoaul shall not have their father too!’

Several of the men seemed to be in agreement and were backing away.

‘No!’ said Sturmer.

‘Cowards!’ Morfe shouted. ‘Stay and fight!’

‘Scum!’ Groden screamed. ‘Filth! Cowardly filth!’

Sturmer shouted above all of them. ‘I am still Gauhm’s chosen one! I am her priest! Any who leave us will have their ground blackened by the Mother wherever it may be! You must fight for her if not for your own village!’

‘We’ll take our chances with Gauhm!’ Munn said. ‘She can’t mean us to go through this!’

‘He’s right!’

Morfe jumped forward with his axe. ‘Leave if you want, but you must pass me first.’

For a moment it looked as if Munn and the others would attack Morfe, but they turned away. Morfe lowered his axe.

‘Nothing can be done for these two,’ Sturmer said, gesturing at Parn and Coyler. ‘We must go back to the path.’

‘But we cannot fight Tsoaul! It is death to fight a spirit!’

‘We are defenceless against him!’

‘Back to the path.’

Sturmer did not know what to do. He considered returning to the village to fetch more men, and some of the women too. Was it wise? He did not know – but he had no other plan. A plan of sorts was better than no plan at all.

They came out on the path a few yards from Ockom’s body.

In rising terror Sturmer turned his head this way and that. He was a fool! A fool! He looked along the path, uphill and down, among the trees. Blandness: mud, rain, leaves, trunks, branches. Just woodland. Nothing else.

‘Where is he?’ Sturmer shouted. ‘Where is he? Where’s Holmer?’

Holmer, the wounded man, had disappeared.

* * *

They found his body in the brambles just beside the path. When they saw what had been done to it there was time for no more words.

They ran.

Even if they had looked, or known how to interpret it, they would have made no sense of the churn of tracks on the path towards the village. Sticky mud sucked at their feet as they ran, obliterating a set of barefoot marks. A stitch was rising in Sturmer's side. Overhead the trees made a tracery of grey and black. The faster runners – Morfe and Groden and Boonis – were fifty paces ahead, and even Munn was in front of him, getting further away. Sturmer realised he was being left behind, dragged back by his age, his years, too many years. Domack overtook him. They were on level ground again. Sturmer reached for the effort to try and keep up, the stitch twisting in his side. He saw Morfe turn a bend and become hidden, then Boonis, Groden, and the others.

Sturmer's toe caught an exposed root and he fell headlong. He struggled to his knees and to his feet, and with both hands clutching his side ran on.

He came out on the clearing by the gorge and its bridge. Immediately he saw that the others had stopped, uncertain whether to go on or turn back. On the far side of the bridge, a few yards from the edge of the gorge, stood a slim, dark-haired figure. Hernou. She had been bound at ankles and wrists; a gag tied her mouth. Otherwise, she looked unharmed.

‘It’s a trap!’ Sturmer yelled, as he saw Morfe taking the first stupid step on the bridge, on the logs above the buttressing.

‘We can’t go back!’ Morfe called out. ‘We’ve got to go on and get her safe!’

‘No! Come back!’

Morfe ignored him. He continued across the bridge. The others watched as he gained firm ground and turned to them. ‘See! It’s safe! None here but Hernou!’ He ran to her to untie her bonds. She was shaking her head furiously.

Sturmer watched in disbelief as Boonis and Tamben went next on the platform, followed by Emetch and Haukan. Groden ran from the back of the group and shouldered Dopp aside to get on the bridge. ‘She’s my wife! Let me pass!’

Just as Groden set foot on the bridge he became aware of ropes rising from the ground and tautening on the far side, heavy weights plunging in the trees. There was a jagged report, a splintering sound, and with a roar the buttressing was coming away from its joints with the platform and the logs were rising and twisting and giving way. The bridge was collapsing.

Groden leapt back. Haukan, the last across, was unable to scramble to safety and Groden saw him falling with the bridge and into the gorge. An oak beam caught Haukan with its tip and he was pulped against the rocks.

As he looked up Groden saw Hernou and the four men on the far side; and, from nowhere, from the branches of a tree, from the sky, dropped a white and scarlet creature, an apparition, a god, plumes of white feathers on its elbows and knees and head, taller than a human being, much

taller, its face hideously striped with white and scarlet. Tsoaul's teeth showed yellow as softly he hit the ground.

Emetch and Boonis were backing away. Tsoaul suddenly crouched and Groden noticed he was holding a spear, a god's spear with tufts of white feathers. He jabbed it in their direction. Emetch and Boonis turned and ran, across the clearing, to the edge of the gorge, and into space, their legs running in nothing as they fell for a few seconds, shouting as they went, and vanished into the rocks and ferns at the bottom.

Now Tsoaul turned on Tamben. He stood frozen, mute, unable to cry out or react. Tsoaul's muscled arms thrust the spear forward, powering the blue and cream scalloped blades of the tang through Tamben's jerkin and on into his breast. Tamben, incredulous, looked down to watch the spear and with it his life being twisted and withdrawn.

Only Morfe had retained his presence of mind. On its length of sweat-polished ashwood he swung the head of his felling axe and Tsoaul ducked under the hiss, lunging from below with the bloodied point of his spear, glancing off Morfe's chest; but the power and momentum of Morfe's own axe-swing took him off balance. Tsoaul looped the end of the spear forward and snagged at Morfe's heels. Morfe lost balance and fell.

Tsoaul seemed shorter, more man-like, as he dropped to one knee, a knife in his hand. In a moment he had drawn the blade across the big tendons at the back of Morfe's knees. Morfe had been hamstrung.

'Shoot at it! Shoot!' Sturmer screamed, remembering for the first time that they were armed with bows.

But before they could fit notches to their strings the apparition had melted away into the forest, leaving Hernou standing, Tamben dead, and Morfe writhing on the ground.

The bridge had been wrecked. There was no way to cross. To reach the survivors they would have to detour to the head of the gorge.

‘Stinn, Mastall!’ Sturmer shrieked at two of the men with bows. ‘Stay here! If Tsoaul returns, shoot him! The others, come with me!’

They broke into the trees on the right of the path, running uphill and to the east, keeping the gorge beside them on their left, hands up to ward off branches tearing at their faces and necks, and Sturmer, driven on now by blind dread, dread of what would happen to Tamis and his children, the village and himself, had lost count of the able men destroyed: Ockom, Gumis, Emetch, Holmer, Parn ... the victims of the raid ... Coyler, Boonis; Haukan crushed by the timber in the gorge ... the victims of the bears, Tsoaul’s bears ...

At the head of the gorge the soil was leached and poor and it was here that the briars and brambles grew in greatest profusion. Sturmer ran into the first of the stout loops of rust-coloured stems with their red and green leaves. He did not feel the brambles at his shins, but suddenly he was off balance, crashing into needles and hooks and thorns. Red appeared everywhere in spots and lines across his forearms and face. He ripped himself free and stood up. Domack was running past him, managing to avoid the thickest briars and right and left things were happening in the trees and Domack was upside-down and being hoisted from the ground at unbelievable speed. Struggling and screaming he was yanked impossibly high

into the loftiest boughs of a giant beech. A cluster of bags glimpsed coming down against the light struck a spike and white chalk-rubble spewed forth. Now Sturmer raised his eyes to see Domack seventy feet from the ground, eighty, at the height of his rise, hanging motionless, suspended in the forest ceiling: straight and vertical the rope hung to the ground.

It quivered, and Domack began to make his fall.

The ending of his screams left a vacuum. High above the ground the empty counterweights had come to lodge against the branch. They moved once or twice as the weight at the other end of the rope settled itself, and then were still.

Sturmer struggled free of the brambles. Groden, Feno, Munn and the others started walking forward, not taking their eyes from the place, the one place. The one place ahead.

‘There may be more traps!’ Sturmer said.

He had broken the silence. They passed the spike; they passed Domack’s body.

‘Here!’ Deak shouted, ten yards to Sturmer’s right. By a tall tangle of briars, between it and three hazel bushes, he had found thin branches laid side by side, covering an eight-foot square loosely disguised with litter.

Groden took a piece of wood and prodded at the covering. It gave way at once, and when they saw the spikes below they cleared the rest of the branches aside. The spikes were waiting in uneven ranks and files, their tips soaked and dark, made so by a coating of wolf’s-bane. Sturmer looked down into the pit. He thought of Parn and Coyler, of Coyler’s hands reaching up.

'Fill it in,' he wanted to say, but he remembered Hernou and why they had been running, and, grimacing, turned aside and motioned that the others should follow.

Mastall and Stinn, the men left on guard with bows, had fled. As Sturmer emerged from the trees he saw that Hernou had gone too; and Morfe, previously lying on his face, was now supine with his arms spread wide. With a cry of anguish, Groden pushed past the rest of the group and ran to his friend's corpse. He went down on one knee and lifted the dead shoulders, cradling Morfe's head against his arm. The eyes stared vacantly. There was blood on the teeth. And, round the neck, was the ragged wound where his throat had been cut.

Something in the grass caught Sturmer's eye. He stooped and rubbed the white-stained blades between his fingers, and, holding his fingertips to his nose, smelled the gritty white paste. He tried to think what the smell could be. And then it came to him.

Chalk.

* * *

Fallott grinned, despite the driving rain and the filthy grey mud. Behind him were Pode and Bico, leading the team of goats with their wicker panniers, and in the rear the boy Bewry was toiling and struggling to keep up. They were walking men, men who could cover fifty miles a day on the Flint Lord's roads that went out like the arms of a spider's web from Valdoe and penetrated far into the coastal strip and the flat country north of the downs. Bewry would have to learn to walk too if he wanted to be a trader.

Fallott turned and caught Bico's eye. They had made Bewry walk in the rear, where the mud was worst. The

seven goats, each with two panniers, were heavily laden with salt and tools: axes, arrowheads, blades of all kinds, already pressure-flaked by the Valdoe craftsmen. The weight of them made the goats' hoofs sink deeply, turning the trackway to mire.

On their right the trees opened to give a glimpse of grey-green ocean flecked with white. Fallott scanned the expanse of scrubland as if by instinct, scarcely seeming to move the eyes in his head.

'Two miles more,' Bico said over his shoulder to Bewry, who was hot-faced and near to tears.

'We may go on to Hooe,' Fallott said, naming a village twelve miles further east.

Bewry said nothing. He knew that Fallott was lying. Fallott had been told to go to Burh: he would not dare disobey. Bewry hated Fallott. He hated Pode and Bico too, and he hated the overseers and the soldiers, but most of all he hated the Flint Lord, who had taken him and his sister and murdered their parents and tribe, and whose men had told him his sister would be given to the miners if he did not behave himself on the road with Fallott's team.

Fallott drew up his sheepskin. He was a tall, hard, heavy man with watery blue eyes and lifeless brown hair tied in a topknot. The fingers and thumb of his left hand had been smashed and badly set, and under his clothes a puckered scar showed where an arrow had entered one of his lungs: the injury that had ended his days in the Flint Lord's garrison and brought him by way of the armoury to take charge of a trading team. He was a veteran of three expeditions to the foreign coast for slave-raiding. At that time he had been younger and stronger, but even today he was feared by those in his control. Bewry, a thin child with

brown hair and eyes and an open, small-featured face, was twelve years old. His sister was sixteen and had been showing reluctance to settle with the reality of her new existence; thus the boy had threatened to prove a nuisance. Putting him on Fallott's team had been deliberately done.

The ground rose into a grove of blackthorn. Fallott spoke an order and the pace of the team increased.

Soon they would be arriving in Burh.

6

After finishing the man he had hamstrung, Tagart put the woman over his shoulder and made his way north-east through ankle-deep wet leaves, uphill and towards the yew. He was covering a wide curve, avoiding a thicket of old hazel where the fallen branches lay in a tangle, festooned with lichens; such woodland was impossible to traverse in silence, at least when carrying a load. Instead he kept to more open forest where the ground cover was sparse.

On the way he collected the rope he had saved from the hummel-skin trap – the one that earlier he had found had been sprung by a badger during the night – and picked a tree suited to his purpose: an oak, squat, densely foliaged, on one of the thicker slopes, less than two hundred paces from the yew.

He dumped the woman and, taking one end of the rope, grasped a low branch and pulled himself up. He climbed into the middle of the tree, where the trunk forked into five

unequal boughs, and fed the rope over a lesser branch a little higher up.

Over the gag, the woman's eyes were regarding him fearfully. He climbed down and jumped the last few feet to the ground, then knelt beside her and tied one end of the rope between her ankles, knotting it to the ropes forming her fetter. She began to writhe desperately as without a word he hoisted her into the tree, pulling smoothly arm-over-arm on the rope, scarcely slowing as she came into contact with the great bole, slid past it and ascended to the lesser branch. She hung there, bound and gagged, head downward, in the centre of the tree. Her arms, tied behind her back, hung a little away from her body. The weight of them would become a strain that would get worse as each minute passed, within an hour a torture. Tagart did not care. He let out a little of the rope and she came to rest upside-down in the forking of the boughs. He made the rope fast and for the second time climbed up.

'I'll be back later with food and water,' he whispered. Upside-down, her eyes and face looked peculiar, as if a mouth should be across her forehead. She was making noises of protest under the gag. The skins Tagart had tied to her body hung in loose folds: with a curious delicacy he rearranged them, tucking a flap between her thighs.

He returned to the ground.

At an easy pace he trotted downhill towards the river. He was still daubed with chalk paste, parts of it dyed scarlet with blackberry juice, and he was going to bathe. That was his immediate task.

But afterwards?

He had a hostage, and she could be used in a variety of ways. He had taken an idea from the details of the

ceremony she had so foolishly described, but now his larger plan had run out and he did not know how to proceed. With some surprise he realised that he had not expected to survive this long. He had dispatched more of them than one man acting alone had any right to. The labourer; two shot in the dry valley; three in the gorge; one speared; another with his throat cut. Twenty-six killed in the raid; an unknown number killed and injured by the bears; and perhaps others in the deadfalls and the hoist-trap at the head of the gorge. Thirty-four certainly dead. The true total was probably double that.

How to proceed? So far he had applied the skills the elders had taught him, for hunting and luring and waiting. He had observed that the farmers were slow-witted and easily driven to panic. As individuals, few or even none of them were his match. That was the conclusion he had reached. He had been taught to be wary of underestimating an adversary; but also to be wary of underestimating his own powers of observation and deduction. From the things he had clearly seen, from the way they had reacted to his attacks, he felt safe in discounting any spark of resourcefulness in those who had, by virtue solely of superior numbers, murdered his wife, his child, his family, and his whole tribe.

Again he felt the tide of revulsion rising. Again he furiously forced it back. His will had not failed him yet – and it would not do so until he had prevailed. He knew he was pushing himself on, fighting himself on two fronts, refusing to acknowledge any of the new thoughts that were threatening to weaken him and make him give up. With every act of blood-price, with every man killed, he was finding it harder to maintain the rage that had spurred

him to go alone into the den of a nursing bear. He did not think he would be able to do the same thing again.

He wished he had someone to talk to. He wished he could ask Cosk what to do.

He reached the river and sank beneath the surface to rid his hair and beard of chalk. The river was swollen. He could taste fresh mud in its currents.

The rain. It had been raining for four days. Was that too long? Perhaps not. The wind was in the west, and even though the crops had been soaked the ground was still dry. Once the flame took hold the corn would burn. If he fired the fields west of the river, the flames would not be able to spread to the east bank, and the forest and he himself on that side would be safe. He imagined the western part of the palisade consumed, leaving that side of the village open. He saw the farmers showing themselves, putting out the flames, and he saw himself waiting.

He strode from the river and ran along the bank.

* * *

The fly agaric ceremony came to an end at midnight, leaving the village sorrowing for ten more men lost. Only seven of their bodies had been brought back: Sturmer had not tried to recover those in the gorge. Mourners with torches were keeping vigil over the Dead Ground.

Inside the Meeting House, the boy Bewry was lying awake and unable to sleep. His mind was alive with the sight of the corpses and with the stories he had heard of the Forest God and the disaster he had brought. One of the farmers' women was still missing, and her husband and his friends were going to search again tomorrow. They had asked Fallott to help.

‘That cannot be,’ he had said.

They had been sitting in the Meeting House, eating the food the villagers had provided. It was late morning, raining hard outside. The flints had been set out on the floor for the farmers to make their choice. Bewry was sitting by himself, leaning against the wall, a beaker of water at his knee. He was slowly getting through the gruel of lentils and beans. He could scarcely taste it: he was just grateful to be still, no longer walking. His feet were blistered and his whole body ached.

‘That cannot be,’ Fallott said. ‘We must leave at dawn tomorrow. We have other walks to make.’

‘But you are a soldier, Fallott!’ said Sturmer, the head man. ‘With your help we can get Groden’s woman back!’

‘I was a soldier. I am a soldier no longer.’

‘Then leave us Pode or Bico. They know the methods of the Flint Lord and how to fight.’

Pode and Bico looked at each other in amusement before going on with their gruel.

‘Pray to the Earth Goddess,’ Fallott said earnestly. ‘She will save you.’

‘No,’ Groden said. ‘This time we must fight. Please, leave us Pode or Bico.’

Fallott held his spoon on one side and considered his words. There were many farmers and, discounting the boy, only three in the walking team. ‘They are with me because we need three men,’ he said. ‘Most teams have more.’ He indicated Bewry. ‘He doesn’t count.’

‘Seventy-seven villagers have been killed,’ Sturmer said. ‘Another twenty lie crippled or dying in their beds. You have seen them. You have heard them. Now you must help. Were it not for Burh and villages like us Lord Brennis

would have no trade. Will he stand by and watch us all murdered? Will he do nothing to stop it?’

Bico said, with genuine curiosity, ‘Why should he?’

The one called Groden answered. ‘Because from us he grows wealthy!’

Bico shrugged. ‘Keep soldiers like he does to protect yourselves from the heathens and the demons. Feed your own barracks. Work hard. Build a fort. Look after yourselves. He has no duty towards you.’

‘That’s enough,’ Fallott said, and Bico fell silent.

Fallott turned back to Sturmer. ‘We would help if we could, with all our heart, but we cannot. Our orders are strict. If we broke them the Flint Lord would be angry.’

‘Then can you plead for us? Get him to send soldiers?’

‘It is not usual.’

‘My wife is still with Tsoaul,’ said Groden, near to despair.

‘And mine lies outside with her face bitten through,’ Stinn said, and all those who had been bereaved began to plead with Fallott.

He held up his hand. ‘You say you have seen Tsoaul himself.’

‘He came from the trees. It was Tsoaul.’

‘Then you will need many soldiers, an army.’

‘Will you ask, Fallott?’

Fallott hesitated before saying, ‘I will.’

‘It is enough,’ Sturmer said. ‘We know you, Fallott.’

Soon afterwards the fly agaric ceremony had commenced. Bewry had looked on in bewilderment and disgust.

Now the Meeting House was empty of villagers and he was lying awake. He could hear Pode snoring and Bico

mumbling in his sleep. The light from the watchers' torches were making flickering patterns on the ceiling; Fallott's body was a huddle, his sheepskin pulled up to his ear.

Bewry did not know how much time had elapsed when Fallott finally sat up and rose to his feet. He cast a glance at the nearest window.

'Two hours to first light,' he said, kicking Pode and Bico awake.

Bewry stood up himself to avoid being kicked.

'Better not piss on their Dead Ground,' Fallott told him. 'Do it by the steps.' He turned to the two men, who were grumbling. 'Bico, go and get the head man up. Pode, you make sure we get a good breakfast. We've a big walk today. Bewry, see to the goats.'

Fallott, rubbing his hands, went to the window and inspected the sky. Stars remained unblinking behind wisps of thin moving cloud. 'Rain this morning before Whitehawk,' he said, as Pode and Bico went out of the doorway and down the steps, with Bewry coming respectfully behind.

* * *

Tagart was struggling through the silo, groping for the covering of sticks. His fingers found them and he drew himself up and into the fresh windy night, pausing with his head and shoulders above ground while he checked the village.

Torches were burning by the Meeting House, and in their light he saw the mourners sitting beside what had to be bodies. The rest of the village was in darkness.

As before he heaved himself out of the silo, ran to the granary, the threshing shed, and down to the river, where he leapt from the bank and into the water. He swam underwater for three strokes, took breath, and crossed to the far bank to make his way upstream and past the bridge.

In his pouch, securely wrapped in a square of tallowed skin, were pieces of death cap he had prepared the previous day. He had guessed where to find the best crop. With meticulous care not to put his fingers to his mouth or eyes or any part of his skin that was not whole, he collected every cap he could find, numbering three hundred and six. In the valley north of the yew he gathered twigs and bents and shavings and in a three-sided oven of flat stones built a hot, smokeless fire which he buried in pebbles. On the bed of pebbles he gently heated the caps, removing each one as it shrivelled and dried. They were small, smaller than fly agaric caps would be, but they looked sun-dried and he hoped they would pass for the caps described to him by Hernou.

By nightfall he had finished. At dusk he had fed and watered Hernou – whom he had allowed to sit on the ground during the afternoon – and hung her up again in the tree for the night. He had slept then, for his normal term: the next day he would need to be fresh.

Two hours before dawn he had come down the escarpment to the village, and now he was inside the compound, wading through the shallows by the riverbank.

The Meeting House showed as an angled bulk against the compound with its scattered houses contained by the spike-topped palisade. He waded further upstream. He knew he would have to get inside the Meeting House silently, find the Agaric Casket, exchange the caps, and get

out again without alerting the mourners. That was counting on the fact that the Meeting House would be empty: otherwise he would just have to wait his chance, or even give up the idea altogether.

Making small ripples, he swam to the village-side bank, then stealthily climbed into the sedges. The rear wall of the Meeting House stood directly opposite, thirty feet away. Tagart shook the water from his limbs, squeezed his hair and beard, and one by one took off his garments and wrung them out before replacing them. He came further up the bank. The sedges rustled as he left them and darted to the Meeting House wall.

For a long time he leaned against the wattle, listening. He could hear nothing from inside. The building appeared to be empty. He edged to the corner, yet further from the seated mourners, and put his head round. Nothing. The barn and bakery were in full view, as were nine or ten houses, but it was dark and moonless and if he were observed he would be no more than a faintness against the river behind. The main danger was from the mourners' torches. The glow among the network of piles and crossbars beneath the Meeting House floor would show the movement of his legs. If he was going to be seen from the bakery side, that would be the cause.

The risk had to be taken. Pressed against the wall, he worked his way along to the first sizeable gap in the wattle, wide enough to see inside. He looked. The interior was much as he remembered it: the wooden floor, the altar, the windows and walls, the doorway at the far end through which he could glimpse more of the village.

The room was empty.

He made his way to the first window. The ledge was eight feet above the ground. He jumped and grasped the timber of the frame, hanging for a moment as he listened for a reaction. None came. Gradually he pulled himself level with the ledge and climbed over.

Tagart landed soundlessly on the smooth boards of the floor and crossed to the altar. In the uncertain light of the mourners' torches he found the casket Hernou had spoken of, a cubic beechwood box the width of his forearm, furnished with a lid that opened with a soft gasp as he swung it on its hinges.

The casket had been superbly made. It was airtight, the back, lid, front and sides carved into panels of stars, clouds, comets, mythical beasts, the deities of Earth, Forest, Sea and Sky, the sun and wind, and the fly agaric toadstool itself, growing by the gates of the road taken by the dead to paradise. Ten trays inside fitted one upon the other, each scrupulously polished and fashioned.

The top three trays were empty. Tagart removed the other seven and tipped the fly agaric caps into a heap on the floor, replacing them with the caps from his pouch. He did not have quite enough: he made up the deficiency in the bottom trays with fly agaric caps, and put the rest of the trays back into place. He shut the lid and positioned the box as he had found it and scooped up the fly agaric from the floor to pack into his pouch. A few crumbs he scattered by blowing this way and that on the floor.

There was a noise at the doorway.

Someone was coming up the steps.

Tagart could not attack, for the mourners outside were too close and he would be heard. He could not jump out of the window and run: it would take far too long to burrow

into the silo, or, if he ran to the path, too long to get the gates open. He could not fight them all. And he could not hide here in the Meeting House, for whoever was coming up the steps would already have seen him.

It was all over.

He stood up and turned and saw that it was worse than he had thought. There were two of them, at the top of the steps, men outlined in the doorway, coming inside.

It was all over. They would kill him.

The two men came further into the room. Tagart stood quite still, oddly grateful now that he knew it was coming to an end at last. He had tried to satisfy the honour of the tribe; he had given his very best and could give no more.

‘Good day to you,’ one of the men said.

Tagart croaked.

He started walking towards them.

The man on the left caught him by the arm and Tagart tensed.

‘Have you seen Fallott, friend?’

‘No,’ Tagart brought himself to say.

The two men seemed to lose interest in him. He moved past them to the door. From the corner of his eye he saw one kneel and begin tidying a pile of bedding by the wall.

Tagart hesitated in the doorway, in full and heady view of the whole village, and casually he was descending the flight of plank steps, the mourners’ torches behind him and to the right. He reached the ground without challenge and, still forcing himself to walk slowly, turned left and sauntered towards the bakery and darkness. Shortly he turned left again, strolled by the side of the Meeting House and retraced his steps to the river.

The water was his friend. It was warm and buoyant and smelled of the forest. Its broad surface curled and gurgled and carried him past the bridge, past the lights of the mourners, and to the bank beside the threshing shed.

Moments later he was in the silo and pushing open the trapdoor of turf.

Together with his quiver and bows, a small bundle lay next to the trapdoor: his bowstrings and fire-making kit. He took them all up and ran beside the palisade back to the river, which he swam with his arm high in the air holding the bundle clear, gripping the bows and quiver with it, making deep strokes with his free hand and frog-kicking at each threat that he might go under. It was not easy, and he came to the western bank a long way down from the village. A moorhen squawked as he crashed a passage through the vegetation on the bank.

Tagart gained solid ground and stood facing the fresh west wind. Ahead: the low shape of the hills. Behind: the river and the forest, the trees heavy with summer coming almost to the water. On his left: the widening mouth of the estuary. To his right: acre upon acre of flammable corn and barley.

Turning his face to the north-west, he set off across the fields.

* * *

Sturmer preceded the trading team across the bridge and opened the gate for them. Daylight was just showing above the forest; the air felt chilly and smelled damp from the river.

Most of the farmers had come to see the trading team leave.

‘Have you all you want of our wares?’ Fallott said routinely, as he let the goats pass him by.

‘We have.’ Sturmer stepped forward. ‘You’ll not forget us, Fallott?’

The larger man slapped him on the back. ‘My word is on it, Sturmer. Lord Brennis will be your saviour if I am worth anything at Valdoe.’ He glanced at Pode and Bewry, chivvying the goats through the gate and onto the road. The animals’ panniers were loaded with grain, skins, cuts of meat: mutton, goat, pork, and stringy beef from the small cattle that served the village as milk beasts. ‘We must be gone,’ Fallott said.

Sturmer stood back.

‘Come on there, Bico!’ Fallott called out. To Sturmer he said, ‘In a few days, then.’

‘In a few days.’

The gate swung shut and the flint-sellers heard the oak beams being dropped into place. Fallott quickened his step and caught up with the end of the team, where Pode was prodding the trailing goat with an elder switch.

‘Lord Brennis their saviour,’ Pode said, with a grin.

‘Did you want to be held there by force?’

‘True enough, Fallott. There was nothing else to tell them.’

‘They’re desperate.’

‘What if the Forest God comes down and kills them all?’

‘We strike Burh from our list of walks,’ Fallott said drily, and Pode chuckled as his leader moved to the front of the team. ‘Bewry, go behind.’

Resentfully Bewry dropped back. The path was still bad, very muddy, and today the team had to cover the whole distance to Valdoe by nightfall. The goats’ hoofs were

churning the track, making small, deep holes which immediately filled with water. Already Bewry was struggling to keep up, his night's rest counting for little.

On either side lay the expanse of the farmers' arable. The path led through the fields for half a mile from the village. At their edge it wound through a spinney of maple and oak. Beyond the spinney spread a gentle incline of turf kept neat by grazing. Lines of small chalk boulders marked out a large rectangle, in the middle of which rose the village burial mound, six feet high, fifty feet long, twenty wide. The farmers kept its earth free of weeds; at its base were posies of red campion and corn chamomile, laid for the newly dead. Here the trading team had seen fresh soil the previous day.

For protection and other purposes on the road, the flint-sellers went armed. Fallott kept an axe in his belt, and in his pouch ready to hand was a sling-shot and a supply of pebbles which he could propel with speed and accuracy. Also in his pouch he kept a bolas, three fist-sized stones sewn into leather coverings connected by a long, thin strap. This, when thrown at a fleeing deer, would wrap itself round the animal's legs, entangling it and bringing it down.

The team came out of the spinney.

Bico saw him first. He was walking along the top of the burial mound, dressed in skins, without shoes, a tall and powerful man moving with noticeable fluidity and grace, unarmed, his quiver of arrows and two unstrung bows leaning against the base of the mound.

He looked round suddenly, as if he had been disturbed in deep thought.

Fallott had seen him too and was already unfurling his bolas. He moved clear of Bico and began to swing the leather-covered spheres, feeding out the strap as he did so.

‘You there! Wait!’

The man leapt from the mound, scooped up his quiver and bows and started running.

The trebled thong of the bolas had begun to hum loudly as Fallott worked power and momentum into the swing: the balls blurred into a perfect circle, precisely horizontal.

Fallott was waiting.

At first the fugitive had put the mound between himself and the team, but as he climbed the slope he came out of cover and his legs were revealed. He was fifty paces away when Fallott let fly.

Unerringly the bolas snapped out of orbit and raced after the running man, whirred over the mound, and before he had taken another five steps the balls were spinning past each other and the strap was winding itself again and again round his knees. With a shout of dismay he flung his arms wide. The quiver and bows were thrown into the air; he fell heavily, sliding on his face to a halt in the dew-wet grass.

Even before he could sit up, Fallott was standing over him with his axe.

Bico joined his leader.

‘A bonus for us,’ Fallott said. ‘How much do you think he’ll fetch?’

‘A walk saved or two days with the whores for each of us,’ said Bico with enthusiasm. He cautiously circled the prostrate figure. ‘He looks well fed. Too well fed to be a farmer. Do you think he’s one of them?’

Fallott shook his head. 'I know them all by sight. This is a stranger, a nomad I think. A wild man.' He prodded Tagart with a foot. 'You. Where are you from?'

'Highdole,' Tagart answered. 'I have journeyed to see my friends at Burh.'

'Alone?' Bico said. Fallott smiled.

'And is this how you pay respect to their dead? Walking along the barrow?'

Tagart said nothing.

'Let's go back to the village, then, and see if they know your face.'

The man held Fallott's eye. 'They will tell you I am their friend. Untie my legs and we can go.'

Bico was frowning with recognition. He squatted and took hold of the man's hair, wrenching his head back to see his face. 'I know him,' he said to Fallott. 'Pode and me saw him. We saw him this morning in the Meeting House.'

'Of course,' the man said, evenly. 'I slept at Burh last night. I am the guest of Sturmer. I am here for a week to help with the harvest.'

'What is your name?' Fallott said.

He did not hesitate. 'Meker.'

'You say you come from Birdbrow.'

'Highdole.'

'What is the name of your head man?'

'Foss.'

Fallott laughed. 'A good try, my friend. You forget we are a walking team. I know them all.' His expression changed and he jerked his head at the goats. To Bico he said: 'We're wasting time. Cut a yoke from that spinney. We must be on our way.'

PART THREE

1

Tagart's wrists were tied to a stout branch laid across his shoulders, and his ankles were fettered with rope. He could walk, but no more, and if he did try to escape he would not be able to get far. For extra insurance Bico put a halter round his neck.

Their progress was slow. Fallott found the delay irksome. Tagart often stumbled and fell, only to be kicked and dragged to his feet. Before long there was no part of him that was not spattered with mud. His shoulders were burning centres of pain; all sensation had gone from his hands and forearms, and where Fallott's kicks had struck his kidneys he felt a dull, hard ache. From time to time the boy wiped his face and gave him sips of water. The boy did not speak, but seemed sorry for the captive. Tagart's mind began to work.

'Come on, Bewry!' Bico shouted.

The team followed the road up the western side of the valley, away from Burh and along the slope of the chalk hills which, half a mile to their left, became white cliffs above a shingled bay. Spectacular cloud formations were building up in the west: purple, black, dark-grey, green. Sudden showers came and went, the rain making clean streams across Tagart's skin.

They descended into a wide, flat valley filled with an expanse of reeds, broken up by wind-ruffled meres over

which flights of wildfowl made straggling chevrons. An oily path led through the reeds, between the walls of rustling stems. It came out on a rough grass marsh where the sky was reflected in ribbons of water. On the far side a broad river crawled towards the sea. A line of posts stood across its width; weed-hung rope looped from top to top. Fallott and Pode went out on the shingle by the water's edge and righted some of the punts that had been left there beyond the tide's reach.

After the crossing they turned south, in the shelter of bramble-clad cliffs of crumbling chalk, and by a steep path climbed the headland where wizened shrubs bent before the salt spray.

As the team emerged from the lee of the headland the sea wind struck them. Below, beyond the cliffs, white crests showed against green swell, in irregular patches deep blue where cloud shadows were passing. Puffins whirred overhead. Terns, delicate grey and white, patrolled offshore, plunging for sand-eels; a pair of black skuas, heavy, sinister, selected one and relentlessly chased it, twisting and turning, gaining altitude till they were high against the sky. At last the tern could take no more and disgorged the contents of its crop. The skuas dropped back, and with easy, tumbling flight caught the fish-mash as it fell.

The road along the cliffs was firm and the team made better progress. In an hour they had covered nearly four miles. Soon afterwards, some three hours after leaving Burh, Fallott ordered the first rest stop. The panniers were taken off the goats, which grazed quietly on the cliff-top turf. Fallott, Bico and Pode took out the ale and bread given

them in Burh, and at Bewry's suggestion the slave's wrists were temporarily untied from his yoke.

Tagart fell back on the grass and shut his eyes. He could hear the voices of his captors, talking as they ate. One of them laughed, the sound of it swept away on the wind. Bewry said something. There was an indifferent reply. Tagart became aware that the boy was shaking his shoulder.

'Some food,' Bewry said.

Tagart sat up and accepted the proffered bread. It was unfamiliar to him. He sniffed at it, tasted a corner, bit off a mouthful. 'These men,' he said, in a low voice. 'You do not wish to walk with them.'

'I have no choice. I am a slave. At least I am too young for the mines.' Bewry looked over his shoulder. The three were taking no notice. 'That is where they're taking you.'

Tagart nodded. 'I know.'

'What tribe are you?'

'The Cosks.'

'I am Guelen. Guel was my father's brother. We were on the beach at Lepe, by the big island. Then they came with dogs and spears. They chased us into the saltmarshes. Some of us drowned. I got stuck in the mud with my sister and my parents and some others. The soldiers killed many of us there, in the saltings. They killed my mother and father. Guel was killed too. The rest of us were killed or taken for slaves. They took me and my sister Segle. If I do not do as they wish, Segle will be put in the whores' place where the miners go.'

Tagart had heard of such things. He looked into the boy's open face. 'How old is she?'

'Sixteen.'

Tagart had never heard such despair in a child's voice.

'She is the niece of a chieftain,' Bewry said. 'And they make her serve swill to the mine slaves.'

Sixteen. Two years younger than Mirin. 'I can help you,' Tagart said. Bewry looked up. 'I will get your sister out of Valdoe if you help me to escape.'

Bewry's eyes widened.

Tagart said, 'We are hunters. Not slaves.'

'What are you whispering there?' Fallott shouted. 'Get away from him!'

The rest stop lasted five minutes more. Even as Bico came to pull Tagart to his feet, Tagart was toying with the idea of jumping over the cliff. It would be better than Valdoe. There was no real chance of escape: Fallott was a very different man from Sturmer or Groden. The only chance, if chance it was, lay perhaps with Bewry.

* * *

They did not stop at Whitehawk fort, one of the Valdoe outliers. It passed them to the north, its palisade topped by ramparts where Tagart glimpsed the movement of men. Fallott kept to the cliff road. He was forcing the pace, making up for lost time. Soon Whitehawk was far behind.

Six miles on, at the approach to Thundersbarrow fort, the road swung inland, north-west and into the hills. The chalk track climbed at a gruelling rate up the lower slopes of Thundersbarrow. Rain was blowing off the sea as they came within sight of the fortifications; Tagart felt his stomach fill with sick fear as the faces of the guards by the gate became discernible.

Fallott was recognised and the team admitted for fresh pack-animals and a meal. Tagart had never been inside a

fort before. Compared with the Trundle, this was nothing, but he stared despite himself and the yoke, marvelling at the timbers of the palisade, the earthworks, the buildings, the horn and leather armour of the soldiers.

‘More Valdoe meat?’ said one of the guards, as Fallott came through the gate.

‘Fallott has a talent for it,’ said another with a grin.

‘Serve as I did on the slave runs and you will learn it too,’ Fallott answered. He crossed the inner compound to the door of the mess room, looked round once, and went inside.

Pode and the guard exchanged glances. ‘He does not like delay,’ Pode said.

‘Or anything else.’

Pode smiled agreement. ‘Food for the boy and slave,’ he said. ‘Keep them apart.’

The team did not remain long. Less than an hour later they were on the move.

To their left, seemingly tilted towards them, spread the expanse of grey sea. The track, glaring white against dark-green scrub, dipped and rose with the land, past a small village on the hill next to Thundersbarrow where the farmers paused to gaze at the prisoner as the team went by.

The few huts of the village dwindled. Ahead and below, a mile away, wound the course of a river. At its mouth it became lost in the waters of an estuary, protected from the breakers by a long shingle-bank mottled green with seablite. Westward along the coast rolled wetland as far as the eye could see, with scattered lagoons, salt creeks, and mile upon mile of reeds, the plumes in mass making the horizon purplish-brown. The line of hills rose again from the river a mile or so inland, running away from the coast.

Parts of it were covered by forest, parts by old farmland turned to scrub; but with each mile nearer Valdoe more of the landscape was given over to cultivation.

Fallott led the team down into the valley and across a flooded field. The water came to their knees: they splashed and waded through the shallows, the grass green at their feet. Strands of hay-coloured seaweed drifted on slight currents, and under the water they could see drowned thistles and clumps of burnt ragwort.

The river was too wide and too frequently crossed to depend on punts. The Flint Lord had built landing stages on either bank and a ferry station to house the men who worked the raft. The ferry station, with stone walls and a plank floor, stood on raised ground between the river and the flooded field. Beyond it the river slopped and slapped against the logs of the raft as it rode its moorings. The sun showed behind the clouds and lit up the hills on the far side, then the flooded land at their base, the river, the ferry station; and the sunlight moved on towards Thundersbarrow.

‘More rain coming,’ Pode observed.

Fallott grunted and climbed the steps to the threshold. Before he had had a chance to knock, the door was pulled back and a tall, red-haired man appeared. Like the soldiers Tagart had seen earlier, he was wearing armour. With a nod at the other members of the walking team, he said something over his shoulder and two more men came out, both in soldiers’ clothes, with oxhide greaves and vambraces, helmets and cuirasses of thick leather, and mail made of linked ovals of deer-horn. On their feet were thick-soled boots in pattern like the fur-lined walking boots issued to the team. Their belts, studded with bone,

carried sheaths to take knives, and axes with sockets cushioned by cartilage and blades of the finest ground and polished flint.

The red-haired soldier said, 'You've found us more work, then, Fallott.'

'I would stay and talk, Gane, and even drink some of your filthy ale, but as it is we shall not be making Valdoe by nightfall.'

Gane walked along the duckboards to the landing-stage, followed by his assistants. 'Bring the beasts on first!'

While Bico and Pode helped Fallott to manhandle the seven goats, Bewry stood next to Tagart, pretending to keep guard. Tagart, weak with exhaustion, watched the farce of loading the animals on the raft, no expression on his face.

'I will help you,' Bewry said.

Tagart slowly turned.

'I will help you to escape. If you promise to free my sister, I will help.' Bewry looked at Fallott. His back was to them. 'Do you promise?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me what I must do.'

Tagart struggled to think. His mind would not respond. He could think of nothing but the raft, the goats, the drab river and the silvery light in the droplets of spray. He saw the wicker panniers filled with provender, the goats' backs, Pode striking them with his elder switch. Bico had grasped one animal by the horns and was dragging it bodily from the landing stage to the raft.

'At the next rest stop,' Bewry said, 'shall I help you then?'

'Yes. Help me then.'

‘If he lets me take off your yoke, I’ll steal a flint from the panniers and give it to you with the bread. You can cut your fetter and run.’

Tagart wearily nodded.

‘You must run hard. If they catch you, say you had the blade in your clothes. My sister is in the slaves’ quarters, by the gate. She serves in the kitchen there.’

‘Yes.’

‘You’ll want to know what she looks like.’

‘Yes.’

‘Her hair is dark-brown, to here.’ Bewry indicated the nape of his neck. ‘Her eyes are brown. She has a soft voice. She wears a deerskin tunic with a circle on the back.’

‘And her name is Segle,’ Tagart remembered.

‘Everyone knows her.’

Again Tagart nodded.

‘You promise to help her?’ Bewry insisted.

‘I promise.’

‘Fallott will beat me if he finds I helped you to escape.’

‘We will be careful.’

The last goat was aboard. Gane’s assistants went to the mooring-lines and untied them. Pode shouted to Bewry, telling him to bring the slave. Tagart preceded Bewry along the duckboards and onto the undulating deck of the raft. For a few seconds the men were busy shoving off, Gane and the two others bending poles against the bank, while Fallott, Pode and Bico drew in the mooring-lines and made sure of the goats. Bewry examined Tagart’s face anxiously, beginning to doubt whether he could be trusted.

Tagart noticed and looked into the child’s eyes. ‘I keep my word,’ he said, quietly.

* * *

The next stop came eight miles further west.

From the valley they had climbed to the ridge of the hills and followed it through scrubby woodland where the wind groaned and made dead branches squeak, and onward to the fields of the open settlement by Cissbury fort. A flock of sheep with wooden bells scattered in their path, and the shepherd with a hand to his brim acknowledged Fallott's nod. Dogs barked as the team went by. One ran out and snapped at Tagart's ankles until Pode growled and struck it with his switch. They went on, skirting Blackpatch Hill and the small flint mines at Findon, and, leaving the fields, entered a belt of forest.

The road became a leafy ride, the grass still lush under the trees despite the summer's drought. A mile into the wood the ride opened into a glade, hemmed in by piles of bracken, shaded by the quiet branches, and here, beside an old fallen oak tiered and clustered with brackets of brown fungus, Fallott decided to halt for rest.

He and Pode unpacked the last of the route-victuals while Bico went into the bracken to urinate. Fallott instructed Bewry to give food and water to the slave.

The sun had gone behind cloud; the air was grey. Early afternoon in the wood was silent, with no bird-song. Hoverflies, striped yellow and black, hung momentarily like little wasps in front of Tagart's face before darting away to investigate something else.

He was sitting alone, a little way apart, leaning against the fallen trunk. His wrists had been untied and the yoke left lying on the grass near by.

He stared at the ground. The whole of his body was a mass of tiredness. The yoke had drained all feeling from his hands and arms. As he sat there he slowly clenched and unclenched his fists until a trace of sensation returned. Where he had stumbled his feet were raw; criss-cross lines showed where brambles had torn at his legs. Bruises covered his thighs and body, bruises from being punched and kicked or from falling helpless to the ground, unable to put out his arms to shield himself. His left eye had turned puffy: he could no longer see from it. Dried blood was crusted in his beard.

Tagart looked up and into the network of leaves and light above. He was thinking of Burh, wondering how soon he would be able to get back there.

‘Take it,’ Bewry hissed. ‘Quick, before they see.’ He was pressing something cold into Tagart’s palm. ‘Take it.’

Tagart turned and came face to face with Bewry, and he remembered what they had arranged earlier. He was to cut through the fetter. Bewry was going to help him escape.

‘Take it.’

‘Yes,’ Tagart said. His fingers tried to close on the flint. It slipped from his grasp.

‘It’s on the ground,’ Bewry whispered. ‘I cannot reach it yet. Fallott will see.’

‘I’m sorry. My hands are slow. I’m tired ...’

‘Drink.’

‘Those bastards have done for me.’

Bewry had positioned himself between Fallott and Tagart so that nothing suspicious could be seen. He raised the water-bag to Tagart’s lips. From time to time Fallott glanced in their direction: Bewry and the slave had been whispering at the first rest stop and it seemed prudent to

watch them, not that there was any serious danger of trouble.

‘The flint is by your leg,’ Bewry said, as he stoppered the water and broke off a piece of bread.

‘I know.’

‘Can you reach it unseen?’

‘Even if I reach it I won’t be able to use it. I have no strength to cut my fetter.’ Tagart dropped his head again.

‘Leave it till later.’

Bewry looked over his shoulder. It was a mistake. Fallott noticed and with a frown got to his feet. ‘What are you doing there?’

‘Giving the slave his bread, master.’ As he spoke, Bewry sneaked his hand to the ground; and, changing his mind, did not palm the flint, but pushed it under Tagart’s thigh.

Bewry’s manner made Fallott narrow his eyes. ‘Show me your hands.’

Fallott’s gaze revealed no feeling as he saw the open palms. It went to Bewry’s face, to the ground, to the slave’s bent head. ‘Move aside that water-bag.’

‘I was just doing as you ordered,’ Bewry said, lifting the bag. There was nothing underneath it.

‘You. Slave. What were you whispering?’

The slave mumbled.

‘What was that?’

‘He was giving me food.’

Fallott looked round. He had an audience. Podo was watching; Bico had returned from the bracken and found himself a piece of bread.

‘I asked what you were whispering, nomad.’

‘He was giving me food. He asked if I wanted more. I said I did.’

Fallott was unconvinced, but didn't know why. He was on the point of turning away when Bewry said, far too quickly, 'The slave is exhausted, master. Leave him alone.'

'And why should I do that?'

'If he dies he'll be worth nothing to you when we get to Valdoe.' There was a tremor in Bewry's voice.

'What has he been saying to you? What do you care if he lives or dies?'

'Nothing. I care nothing.'

Fallott's frown deepened. 'You care nothing, but you conspire with him at every stop.'

'At the ferry station too,' Bico called out.

Fallott could see that the boy was terrified. He wanted to know why.

'What are you hiding there?'

'Nothing. Nothing, Fallott. I'm hiding nothing.'

With the sole of his boot Fallott thrust against Tagart's shoulder and pushed him aside.

His eyes fell on the flint.

He bent and picked it up. 'Nothing, you say. A sharp nothing from our panniers. Is this why we haul a slave across country, so you can cut him free with a knife stolen from Lord Brennis?'

'It was my idea,' Tagart said weakly. 'I made him bring it.'

For an instant Fallott studied him contemptuously before turning back to Bewry.

'No,' Bewry said, shrinking away as Fallott advanced.

'Nothing, you little heathen. Nothing, you say.'

Now Pode had risen, worried for the first time that Fallott was losing his temper.

Fallott shouted at Bewry. 'Get to your feet!'

‘It doesn’t matter, Fallott,’ Podo said. ‘Forget it. Forget it and we’ll be on our way.’

‘Get to your feet!’

The boy put his hands against the fallen tree. He could back away no further. With his eyes fixed on Fallott’s face, he seemed to shrink against the bark, as if he would melt into the wood itself.

Fallott drew back his hand.

‘No!’ Bico yelled. ‘Don’t hit him!’

* * *

The Brennis Gehans had made the beginnings of Valdoe over a hundred years before. The flint mines, discovered at first and tentatively worked by local people, lay on the southern slope of a commanding hill, its summit six hundred and seventy feet above sea level. The mines and the nearness of a natural harbour, together with the high quality of the local forest, had persuaded the first Lord Brennis that Valdoe would make a suitable base for his operations in the island country. He was not the first colonist: for eight hundred years ships had been coming from the German homelands, and most of the coastal farmers shared his ancestry, but the Gehans were something new.

On his arrival the hill had been in the possession of a group of natives, brigands who lived by raiding the villages in the region and pressing their inhabitants into labour in the mines. The brigands had built for themselves a kind of fort, levelling part of the summit.

The Gehan force swiftly overwhelmed the fort and dealt with its occupants. Slaves were seized from the surrounding countryside and the building of the Trundle

began. This was to be the heart of Valdoe, an impregnable fortress. Further levelling of the summit took place, forming a plateau of roughly oval shape, some fourteen acres in extent. A ditch nine feet deep was dug round the circumference, and inside the ditch was erected a burnt oak palisade twenty feet high, with elevated guard-towers at intervals of sixty or seventy yards. Two gates, at south-west and north-east, gave ingress and egress. A second ditch and palisade, with a single heavily fortified gate, enclosed three acres in the centre of the main enclosure, and here Brennis Gehan First (the first Gehan who ruled over the island country) established his residence and the barracks to house his personal guard.

The main barracks were built in the outer enclosure, in two sections, one by each of the gatehouses. Other buildings and structures, including dwellings for craftsmen and overseers, storehouses, animal sheds, an armoury, two brothels, reservoirs for ten thousand gallons, dewponds, hawk mews, kennels, and a prison, were set out close inside the main palisade, leaving an open space and parade ground by the inner palisade. Quarters for slaves and miners were erected outside the defences.

Meanwhile the hill itself was cleared of whatever timber remained. Strip-fields were dug on the lower slopes. Roads to Eartham in the east, Bow Hill in the west, and Apuldram Harbour in the south, were pushed through to form the basis of a road system.

Soon the investment of time and effort began to pay. A stream of trading vessels from the homelands docked at Apuldram, where a quay and worksheds were under construction. Ships from the home yards were paid for with exported flint of the best grade, manned with soldiers,

and sent on slaving sorties to the Normandy coast, for local labour could no longer supply the ambitious programmes of road-building and mining. Freemen at home, dazzled by the tales of wealth and plenty, eagerly applied to the Gehans for permission to make the sea crossing, and within five years the slopes of Valdoe Hill supported the largest single community the island country had ever seen: there were soldiers, farmers, and friendly natives too, derived from those tribes which over the years had intermixed and provided petty traders or itinerant workmen wandering from village to village and harvest to harvest. At the age of forty-two the first Lord Brennis returned home, leaving his nephew in charge.

The initial impetus did not continue. The second Lord Brennis had failed to inherit his uncle's particular talents, and the rate at which Valdoe annexed new tracts of land became slower. A policy of exterminating the native nomad stock was allowed to fall into decline, and in consequence their numbers again built up in the densely wooded region north of the downs. Domination of the coastal villages was relaxed. The secondary forts at Butser, Harting, Whitehawk and elsewhere became weaker and in some cases were abandoned altogether, as were the small mines at Findon and Cissbury and Raven Hill.

It was not until the advent of the fourth Lord Brennis that the Gehan attitude was reasserted. Now the mines were vastly extended, the secondary forts refurbished. The number of slaves was doubled, then trebled and quadrupled. Military and naval strengths were stepped up. French and Cornish raiders, who in the past had made heavy depredations among the slow-minded farmers of the coast, now met a different reception as their ships were

seized and the crews enslaved. During this period certain coastal villages, such as Burh, were becoming more settled, and the fourth Flint Lord tried a system of direct extortion rather than troubling with trade, but this was soon given up: it was easier and more productive to control the slaves at Valdoe than the scattered population along the coast. To enforce the revised discipline, tough new recruits were brought from the homelands and trained, and with their help the boundaries of the Valdoe empire began once more to expand.

Now the fourth Lord Brennis was dead. His son remained. At the age of twenty-nine, he had been in command for six years, in control of all the soldiers, the ships, the craftsmen and overseers, the slaves and miners, and in control of the Trundle, the unassailable fortress built by his ancestors on the top of Valdoe Hill.

2

The next day Tagart was put into the mines. He was given no chance to recover from his journey: on their arrival long after midnight, Fallott had informed Bewry's overseer that it was Tagart who had struck and broken the neck of the boy, and the other slaves heard the news.

The fertility of the mines – the richness and extent of their flint-seams – was influenced by Gauhm just as the fertility of her fields. Effigies of the Earth Mother in chalk, together with chalk phalli, were enshrined at the entrance to each shaft and in alcoves underground. Ladders went

down from the surface to galleries which led off from the shafts at various levels and in various directions, up to seventy feet below ground. The slaves worked by the light of oil lamps roughly hollowed from lumps of chalk. To remove flint from the rock-face, they were issued with picks made from the antlers of red deer. The point of the pick was hammered into the chalk and the flint-bearing rock levered out and broken up, the rubble being pushed back with a shovel made from a cattle shoulder-blade lashed to a handle.

The shafts and galleries, from two to six feet high, were shored up with oak planks and props. These frequently failed and collapses were common. When this happened no real attempt was made to rescue the trapped men, for they had been claimed by Gauhm and were regarded as her right, an offering, payment for the flints extracted from the soil. The dead were only slaves, easily replaced – especially if not too many had been lost. A shrine would be made at the entrance to the fallen tunnel, to remind Gauhm of the sacrifice that had been made.

Throughout the mines a system of ropes and leather bags brought the newly dug celts to the surface, where they were sorted by specialists, ready for transmission to the knappers' and blade-makers' workshops inside the Trundle. Here the raw flints, first split along lines of natural weakness to make two or more implements from each, were first shaped by simple chipping. For axes and tools of a better grade, the flints were subjected to pressure-flaking: a highly skilled technique in which the pressure of a hand-held stone, precisely applied, forced away flakes of flint to leave a sharp and durable cutting edge. The blades were then ground down by rubbing on a

slab of wetted sandstone. In this way an axe-head could be produced that was capable of felling a hundred trees before it dulled, and with which one man could clear fifty square yards of birch forest in under an hour.

* * *

Tagart did not see Segle, Bewry's sister, until work finished that night. She was serving food in the slaves' quarters, in the refectory, passing bowls of gruel from the ladlers to the man at the head of each bench. An inclined head, a pointed finger, and Tagart was brought to her attention.

Tagart was on the verge of collapse, from lack of sleep, exhaustion, and from the punishment he had received on the walk and since his arrival. During the day, in the mines, he had been kicked and shoved and deprived of his lunch-bowl. Neither had he slept, for word had quickly reached the sleeping quarters that he had been responsible for Bewry's death. Supervision there was less rigid than in the mines, and he soon learned that the overseers were prepared to ignore peccadilloes which if acted on might incite the majority of slaves to more general trouble. They had done nothing while he was being beaten up.

During the day he could barely summon the strength to move. His partner, the man allotted to work beside him in the gallery, had been compelled to push Tagart up the ladders in order to get out himself.

Together with the rest of the day-shift, some ninety men in all, they had been marched from the flint workings to the slaves' quarters, a collection of tents and canopies enclosed by a wooden cage beside the south-west gatehouse. The quarters were partitioned into a refectory and a sleeping area, the sleeping area being enclosed by an

inner cage roofed with tattered skins. The refectory, next to the kitchens, was formed by four canopies over eight long wooden tables flanked by benches. It had just been vacated by the outgoing night-shift: their dirty bowls still cluttered the tables.

Tagart's partner, Boak, was a heavily built, doleful man with black eyes, wide lips and nostrils, and an overlarge square chin showing under a sparse black beard. He was handing dirty bowls to Tagart, who in turn handed them to the next man, up the table to kitchen-slaves who took them to the ladlers. The long wooden ladles dipped again and again into the smoke-blackened clay cauldrons and emptied their steaming contents into the bowls, while other slaves, including the girl, distributed the filled bowls among the tables.

Boak said, 'That is the sister of the boy you say you did not kill.'

Tagart looked up and saw the circle on the back of her tunic, just as Bewry had described. She turned from the cauldrons with two bowls. In cast of feature she resembled her brother; but where Bewry had been ordinary, she was delicate, and even now, begrimed and oppressed by her existence, Tagart could see that in the forest, clean and free, she would be very beautiful.

'Pretty for a kitchen-slave,' Boak said. 'It won't be long before they move her to more important work.'

'Like what?'

Boak gave a cynical smile, showing yellow teeth in a world-weary face that had seen too many people degraded and destroyed.

'She is not yet ready,' Tagart said.

'Tell that to the brothel Trundleman.'

‘What is a brothel?’

Boak explained. ‘Blean has an eye on her,’ he said.

‘Who is Blean?’

‘You saw him today. In the lynx jacket. He wants her out of the kitchens. Come Crale Day he’ll have first taste. When he’s finished with her, she’ll go into the Trundle. For the soldiers. Later for us.’

With his baton the nearest overseer warned the two men to stop talking.

Tagart was seated third from the end of the table. The empty bowls were cleared. Full ones were being given out. Gradually each man was served. When Tagart’s turn came, he saw that the bowls were being brought by the girl.

She paused at the head of the table and for a moment stared at Tagart, a bowl in each hand, steam curling upwards. She gave one bowl to the first man, who passed it to the second, who passed it to Tagart. He slid it in front of Boak, whose meal it was.

Segle stood holding the second bowl, the one destined for Tagart. All eyes were turned. The overseers were watching. Everyone in the refectory knew who Tagart was, knew what Fallott had told the supervisor.

Segle drew her arm back and with all her strength threw the bowl at Tagart’s face.

The boiling gruel seared his face and neck; the bowl hit his temple. He sat motionless, gripping the edge of the table, his eyes downcast.

There was a murmur of approval from the slaves. Three of the overseers stepped forward, and it ceased.

The meal resumed in silence. Boak shared his gruel with Tagart, giving most of it away. At first Tagart protested when Boak offered him his bowl; but Boak from the corner

of his eye noticed the overseer and by a quick lowering of his head warned Tagart to be quiet.

After the gruel the kitchen-slaves came round with water and baskets of the coarse bread baked in the camp ovens. Segle came to the table once more and Tagart seized his chance. When she put down the baskets he lunged across the two men beside him and took hold of her wrist. She tried to pull away as if his touch were poison.

‘Listen to me,’ he said, as she struggled at arm’s length. ‘Your brother died for you. Before Fallott killed him I made Bewry a promise.’ Tagart noticed the overseer stepping forward, pulling out his baton. ‘I promised I would get you out.’

‘Hands off,’ the overseer said, prodding the back of Tagart’s neck. ‘In two weeks she’ll be promoted. You might be lucky eventually – if you wait your turn.’

Tagart released her. Segle drew away, nursing her wrist.

‘What were you saying to her?’ Boak whispered.

Tagart disregarded the question. ‘Why are they waiting two weeks? What happens then?’

‘In two weeks is Crale Day.’

‘What is that? A feast?’

‘The first day of Harvest. High Summer comes to an end. We get beer, some real food, and a visit to the Trundle. I told you she was too pretty for the kitchens.’

* * *

When the meal was over the miners were herded into the sleeping cage, moving in single file through the wicket while the overseers watched and counted heads. In the dim light of the oil lamps, Tagart shuffled behind Boak. He passed the overseer at the wicket.

‘Sleep well, nomad.’

Inside the cage the smell of sweat and excrement was stifling, despite the fact that it had just been sluiced down and besomed by other slaves, cleaning up after the night-shift. Tagart, knowing that he could expect a repetition of his previous night’s treatment, tried to find a position in one corner.

‘Stay with me,’ Boak urged him, stepping over those who had already staked places on the floor.

They sat down, Tagart with his back to the bars.

The enclosure was full. The overseers shut and secured the gate, and the miners were locked in till mid morning when the night-shift would return to take their place. For a while longer the glimmer of the lamps lingered on the dull leather awnings, the bars of the cage, the limbs and bodies and heads of those within, and then the overseers withdrew, taking the lamps with them.

Boak formed his words distinctly, so that all could hear.

‘Any who strikes Tagart will have to strike me too. He’s had enough.’

‘He killed Segle’s brother,’ came a voice on their left.

‘For that we have an overseer’s word. Tagart says he didn’t do it. I choose to believe him.’

‘And if we do not?’

‘Then you are insulting me and I must act accordingly.’

The others objected, but did nothing to approach. Tagart remained unharmed.

‘I am grateful to you,’ he told Boak.

‘Don’t be. Like it or not I’ve got you as a partner. If the roof falls in tomorrow I depend on you to pull me out. Whether you killed Bewry or not, I don’t care. My only interest is in a partner who is strong and well.’

‘That I understand. But for my sake I tell you again:
Fallott killed the boy. He hit him in a fit of rage and broke
his neck. Fallott can blame me because a slave’s word here
is worthless.’

‘I have only heard of this Fallott,’ Boak said. ‘You may
even be telling the truth. That’s how I came to be here
myself – a walking team caught me. They took me from
the fields while no one saw.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘A long time. Years. I cannot remember how many. Some
have been here all their lives.’

‘Do you ever think of escape?’

‘Of course.’

‘Have you tried?’

‘It’s impossible. You will learn.’

‘Has it been done?’

‘Once a man was brought back. They said he’d got away.
A nomad, like you. They made us watch what they did to
him. If you’d seen it you would not be asking these
questions.’

Tagart lowered his voice still further. ‘So you’ve given
up all hope.’

Boak did not answer at once. ‘Life is sweet,’ he said.
‘Even for a worm.’

‘Not at Valdoe.’

‘Even at Valdoe.’

‘No.’

‘You’ll find out.’

‘I would rather be dead.’

‘You are young and know nothing.’

‘I know that I must get out.’

‘Those men in armour today, did you take them for ghosts?’

‘Not ghosts. Nor are they gods. They are soldiers, that is all. Cut a soldier’s throat and he bleeds to death like anyone else.’

‘That is what the other nomad thought, the one they brought back.’

* * *

In the morning the slaves were counted out of the cage, fed, and taken downhill to the mines. The older men, or those who had found favour with the guards, were given light work such as rubble-clearing, hauling up the leather bags of flints, fetching and carrying water and food. Others were formed into details to replenish the heaps of struts and planks used for shoring and shuttering below ground. The rest of the slaves were counted down the ladders and sent into the galleries.

Tagart and Boak and two more descended the creaking ladders to one of the deep seams off a minor shaft. The first man down carried a light, a flame in a chalk lamp which served to do no more than throw confusing shadows. His partner was carrying a bundle of fifteen or twenty deer-horn picks. Boak was wearing a leather pouch with supplies of lamp fat, hammers, and a water-bag; Tagart drew down the ropes which would be used to bring out the flints.

As they went deeper the air became cooler. The chalk, brown and dirty white, came off on their clothes and knees. In some places the walls of the shaft were unstable and had been shuttered with planks. They passed the

entries to several galleries before reaching the one they had been told to work.

It was low and constricted, narrowing from the entrance, turning from side to side as it followed the flint seams. At its end, twelve feet from the shaft, there was not even room to move on hands and knees, nor was there enough room for a light, and Boak had to work blind. He levered out the chalk blocks with his pick and with his fingers, passing them back to Tagart further down the tunnel. Tagart passed them back to the third man, who broke up the blocks and pushed the rubble aside. The flints went into the leather bags, which when full were dragged out of the gallery by slaves on the surface. The fourth man went up the shaft with the bags to bring them back. While they were being filled, he fanned a panel of laminated reed-leaves stuck with glue, trying to drive fresh air into the gallery. But it had little effect. With the lamps lit, and men working in a restricted space, the air rapidly became foul. Sweat ran unceasingly into Tagart's eyes; the chalk dust clogged his nose and mouth and turned his hair and beard white. Every few minutes the men changed places so that none should have to spend too long at the end of the gallery. Boak took the brunt of Tagart's work.

The hours fell into a numb, deadening routine. The leather bags came and went. Faintly, through intervening rock, Tagart could hear other picks at work, the occasional muffled hum of men's voices. At intervals an overseer climbed down the shaft to supervise progress.

Halfway through the shift a wooden gong sounded at the top of the shaft: the signal to break for food. An old man brought them bread and bowls of boiled meat, beans and lentils. The same gong sounded at the end of the day

when the shift was over and the miners were marched up the grassy slope of the hill, past piles of timber and white rubble, to the canopies and poles of the slaves' quarters.

* * *

Bewry was dead. Segle knew that her time in the kitchens would soon be coming to an end. Luckily Blean, the mines Trundleman, had no direct authority over her, but she had seen him watching her as she worked, and now that Bewry was gone and they no longer needed to make him compliant, there could be little reason to deny Blean's request much longer.

It made no difference to her. Her honour, the tribe's honour, was finished. The end had come in that moment at Lepe when the soldiers had appeared. She remembered the look of the sea, green waves blending to grey in the strait, foam crashing on the shingle as the tribe wandered the tideline. In pairs and threes oystercatchers, black and white, flying just off the beach, piped from their red beaks and fought the wind in the troughs. Over the expanse of saltings and samphire to the west she remembered the wild cries of the curlews and godwits and the distant noise of the gullery where the Guelen had spent a week living on eggs; and she remembered the smell of the marshes, of brine and rotting weed, the air somehow making your skin more smooth, and when you licked the back of your hand it tasted of the sea. And she remembered another sound, urgent and dangerous, emerging from the roar of the surf: hounds.

The soldiers had outmanoeuvred them, coming from the east along the shoreline. Others had appeared from the

woods on the landward side. There had been nowhere to run but into the mud.

Segle emptied another bag of oats into the cauldron. Now Bewry too. She was past tears. She thought of his small body lying somewhere in the bracken and a little more of the light went from her eyes.

At first she had believed the story, that Tagart had killed him, but now she was not sure. She did not know. Boak, she had heard, had defended him last night. Did that mean anything? And what had he said to her about a promise? She could think now of nothing but the strength of his grip on her wrist. His words had escaped her. But their sound had not. In them she had recognised her own kind; and unextinguished honour.

‘More beans here!’

Segle pushed the hair from her brow and went to obey.

* * *

‘So from what you have told me,’ Tagart said, ‘there can be no escape from the cage, nor from here. That means we must wait our chance and break from the bathing party.’

It was the fifth day. Tagart and Boak were working alone in a minor gallery at the bottom of the main shaft. Tagart had recovered some of his strength. The injuries sustained on his walk were healing, his eye had opened, and regular food and sleep were bringing back tone and balance to his muscles and limbs. Work underground was arduous and unpleasant, but he was young. The output of the other slaves was well within his capacity, and he saw no reason to extend himself. For long periods when lightly supervised he and Boak would sit and rest, taking up their

picks and hammers when they heard the creak of rungs which meant an overseer was descending.

The overseer in charge of the main shaft, named Stobas, was a broad-faced man with pale blue eyes and straight black hair, shoulder-length, tied into a pigtail. Like all the overseers, he was himself a former slave who knew no existence but Valdoe.

‘He’s coming,’ Tagart said, and crawled into the end of the gallery, where he began to hammer conscientiously at the chalk.

Stobas appeared at the mouth of the gallery, swinging himself off the ladder and into the tunnel. As ever, he had brought a lamp with him; his belt carried a blackthorn truncheon fitted with a wrist-strap.

‘Work is slow here,’ he said. ‘You’re lazing.’

Boak said, ‘The seam is harder at the end, master.’

Stobas briefly examined the rock face. He scratched it with his thumbnail, wiped the chalk off with his index finger. ‘More bags or you’ll both be beaten,’ he said.

‘Yes, master,’ Boak said.

Stobas paused at the ladder. ‘Didn’t you hear the gong? End of shift. Get up top.’

At the top of the shaft, in a wide cavern, the ladders became a permanent staircase of worn and chalk-stained planking which led into a sloping tunnel with daylight at its end. Tagart and Boak emerged, squinting against the sunset.

‘Full count!’ another overseer cried out, as Stobas stood surveying the ragged ranks of slaves, three deep, thirty yards long.

‘To quarters!’

The men turned and started up the hill, guarded by the overseers and the squad of soldiers sent from the Trundle at times of shift change. Other soldiers kept watch during the day and night at each exit from the mines, armed with spear-slings and bolas.

Following a mass breakout some years before, the watch on the slaves' quarters had been reinforced. A system of head-counting at shift change, meal times, and on entering and leaving the sleeping cage reduced still further the opportunities for undetected escape. Similar vigilance attended the details formed for timber cutting, water haulage, and the like, or when, twice a month, small groups of slaves were taken down to the river to be cleaned. If a slave did manage to escape, his chances of remaining free were small. Teams of tracker dogs with their handlers could be dispatched from the Trundle within minutes.

The men of the night-shift were counted out and passed down the hill to the flint workings; Tagart and the others were counted into the refectory and in silence sat down to their meal.

Bewry's sister was there. On several occasions over the past four days Tagart had met her eye, but since the incident on the first evening they had not spoken, for he and Boak had always been seated well away from the cauldrons. But tonight, as they were the last in line, they were put at the end of the table nearest the big clay hearth. Segle moved to and fro; as Tagart watched her, he realised with a pang what he had not admitted to himself before – that she reminded him in her movements and attitudes of his wife.

'What is it, my friend?' Boak said.

Tagart shook his head.

Warily Boak kept an eye on the overseers. 'What's troubling you?'

Tagart could not tell him. He did not know how to put his feelings into words. How could he explain what his life had been; how could he describe what had been taken away? 'I do not like captivity,' he said at last.

Boak whispered. 'Then are you serious about escape? Or was that just talk?'

'You said you'd changed your mind today. If you want to come with me, I plan to break from the bathing party.'

'We'll never do it. They bring the dogs down to the river.'

The overseer passed behind them. Tagart continued handing empty bowls to the serving-slaves. Segle was two tables away, not near him. He looked at her and she half turned, and Tagart knew that she was as aware of him as he was of her.

'You've never been in a bathing party,' Boak hissed. 'I know what to expect. There must be another way.'

'How did the other man do it? The nomad?'

'No one knows.'

'Then it must be the bathing party. When are we due to go?'

'The day after tomorrow.' Boak sneaked a glance over his shoulder at the overseers. Their attention was elsewhere.

'It's too dangerous. Even if we get away, where can we go? Where can we hide?'

'In the forest. No one can catch me there. If you come with me, you will be safe too.'

Boak looked doubtful.

Tagart needed Boak. Or at least, he needed someone who knew the routine, but once on the loose Boak might prove a hindrance. 'Decide tomorrow,' Tagart said.

Boak nudged him to silence. An overseer had come to stand by the cauldrons, idly watching the ladlers at work. Now the freshly filled bowls were being given out. A grey-haired woman had been serving Tagart's table; Segle spoke a few words to her.

Deliberately Segle came over. Her presence beside Tagart was almost tangible, and even before she opened her mouth and spoke he sensed something shared, wordless, a sensation he had only known once before. But her face was hardened by determination and as she slid the bowls on the table she spilled a little of their contents and he saw that her hands were trembling.

She looked straight into his eyes. 'Did you kill my brother?'

Tagart slowly shook his head.

'Then was it Fallott?'

'Would I kill a future hunter, one of my own?'

Her expression softened and Tagart knew that he had been believed, that she now regretted her first feelings. He felt an urge to touch her hand and physically to confirm what had passed between them in looks, but she was already moving away, back to the cauldrons.

The following morning dawned windy and grey; spots of rain began to fall as Tagart and Boak stood in line and waited to be ordered underground.

Blean, the Trundleman in charge of coordinating the mines, a man of forty, fastidious and unapproachable, appeared from the Trundle and at his leisure made his way downhill. His black hair was cropped short, close to his scalp, and twice a day he scraped off his beard with a flint razor and seaweed mucilage as soap. No detail of the mines was beneath his attention. Today he had discarded his lynx jacket in favour of a sealskin cape fixed at the throat with a cherrywood clasp.

He arrived. 'Six more for the west workings,' he said. 'Take them from the main shaft.'

With jerks of his finger, Stobas indicated the six slaves who were to be reallocated. He chose carefully. If productivity in his section fell he would lose privileges, but if he gave Blean men who were obviously old or infirm he would incur disfavour. He picked one old man, a youth with scarcely a beard, two brothers who were well known as reliable workers, and then, smiling inwardly, Stobas indicated Tagart and Boak. At his command all six joined the remainder of the day-shift for the west workings.

This was an old part of the mine, nearly exhausted now, providing flints that were scarcely better than those that could be picked up off the ground anywhere along the downs. The shafts had gone as deep, the galleries as far, as the flint seams and the difficulties of ventilation allowed.

Blean was anxious to complete work there and make a start on new excavations further down the hill.

‘Have you decided?’ Tagart whispered. ‘Are you with me?’

Boak was unwilling to meet his eye. ‘The bathing party is tomorrow.’

‘What of it?’

‘Tomorrow is too soon.’

‘Not for me.’

‘We must prepare. Let’s go tomorrow just to look.’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘I must get out.’

‘Leave it another half month till the next bathing party. We can do it then.’

Tagart refused.

‘But why?’

‘Crale Day.’

Further conversation was impossible. Tagart and Boak were teamed with the old man, Maphen, and a dark, intense foreigner named Chorn, then issued with lamps and picks and a water-bag, and sent down the ladders to a wide gallery thirty feet below the surface. For much of its length its walls and roof were boarded and supported with timber. Broken picks littered the floor. Maphen set lamps in crevices and alcoves, and Chorn started work on the rock-face even before the rest of the shift had finished climbing down past the gallery mouth. Tagart and Boak exchanged glances; Boak grimaced and shook his head in mock amazement.

At a lower level men were shouting orders and responses. Boak explained that the gallery below theirs

was being closed. The six extra slaves had been needed to help reinforce the shuttering, retrieve the ropes and bags, and dismantle the ladders.

‘You still have to answer me, yes or no,’ Tagart said to Boak, shovelling rubble back. The work was beginning to make him sweat. Chorn, the foreigner, was hacking at the chalk as if he bore it a grudge. ‘You must tell me if you are coming.’

‘I know.’ Boak felt himself standing on the edge of a precipice. But, realising it, he knew he was already falling.

‘What have you decided?’

‘Let it be tomorrow.’

‘So you’re with me?’

‘Yes.’

The attempt was doomed. Boak knew it as well as he knew his own name, but he no longer cared. He had been affected by what Tagart had been saying day after day. At first he had refused to listen. He knew the boy’s words for what they were, ignorant and immature; he knew the hard reality. A slave at Valdoe could not get away. They would both be caught. But he also knew that even if they were, like the nomad who had tried it, tortured and put to death as an example, even then he would have made an attempt, a gesture, futile perhaps, but he would have been free for a few moments, no longer in bondage, no longer in the service of those who had made themselves his masters. He would have shaken them, brought a moment of uneasiness to the Lord of Valdoe, a man he had never spoken to, a man who despised him as a slave. It would be worth it for that alone.

The first gong sounded. Work in the gallery ceased. Stew was brought down the shaft in leather satchels and given

to the miners in the wooden bowls left in each gallery for the purpose.

‘Stew good,’ Chorn said. He was sitting with his back to the shuttering, picking fragments of meat from the bowl, raising his fingers to his open mouth, head tilted back.

‘Make you work faster,’ Tagart told him.

‘Ya.’ Chorn nodded. He noticed Maphen. ‘Old man,’ he said. ‘You not eat. I eat for you.’

Maphen waved his words away. He was tired. The lamps were sputtering. He shut his eyes and rested his head against the boards.

Tagart finished his stew. It left an oily taste in his mouth. ‘Pass me the water,’ he said to Chorn.

Chorn did not understand.

‘The water. Give me the water.’

‘You want water?’

As he handed Tagart the leather bag there was a low, barely perceptible vibration, a kind of distant groan, in the strutted roof above them. The boards at Maphen’s back moved. Tiny streams of dust showered down. Then, from a deeper level, a loud, dull booming rose up the shaft and was followed by a series of percussive cracks as if structural beams were breaking. Behind Tagart the boards rattled and jolted and two of the lamps tumbled from their alcoves.

‘Get out!’ Boak screamed. ‘Get out!’

But even before they could scramble to their feet the ceiling props were no longer vertical and in the moment before the last lamp went out Tagart saw broken boards collapsing and the shape of boulders and dust and slabs of chalk falling in a solid roar, burying Maphen and Chorn in ton after ton of crushing pressure, catching Boak as he

struggled towards the mouth of the gallery, and Tagart himself was being buried, struck by the fall, pounded across the shoulders and back, on his head, his legs, pinned to the floor by the intolerable weight of rock above him. He was unable to move, unable to breathe, utterly caught, his face being forced with increasing insistence downwards. A little more and he knew his cheekbones would fail. They would give way under the unbelievable weight and his skull would be pushed in from behind.

The ground had not yet stopped moving: it was still shifting, grinding, settling, filling in from above and at random the vacancy of galleries and shafts tunnelled out below.

He lost consciousness. The voices woke him.

At first he tried to fit the voices to his dreams, but they resisted, growing louder, intruding, annoying him: he wanted only to be left in peace. The voices made him frown. He was made to listen as his warm landscape dissolved and he became suspended in blackness and cold.

‘Is anyone left alive?’

‘Knock if you can hear us!’

Silence.

‘You, dig there and see how far in it reaches. There may be a pocket.’ Blean’s voice.

Tagart heard rocks being pulled aside.

Blean called out. ‘Is anyone alive in there?’

After a time someone else said, ‘It is Gauhm’s will.’

Tagart began to remember what had happened.

The voices were not far away, three feet at most. Tagart raised his head and found it free. He could move his arms also. He felt them. They were not broken. He put his fingers to his face and discovered blood.

‘She has taken them in this gallery too. Back to your places.’

The blood was in his beard. He traced it back to his nostrils and the warm ooze was slippery on his fingertips. From his nose he ran a finger along his teeth. One at the front was broken. The rest were intact. He probed them with his tongue. The taste of more blood, fresh blood. His hands were shaking.

‘How many lost in all?’

‘Seven below and four here, master.’

Pain was slicing into Tagart’s chest at each intake of breath. The bruises felt as if they extended down both his sides and into his buttocks.

‘Eleven lost in all, then.’

‘It might have been worse, master. Shall we make the shrine here?’

‘Below. Make it below. She took more there.’

A long time later Tagart realised the voices had gone away. He could make out the sound of activity at different levels, and when he heard the gong it was not long before the ladders creaked close by and he knew the day-shift men were going above ground.

There were varying weights on his lower back and legs. His feet seemed to be splayed at an odd angle and he hoped they were all right. He was trembling, shivering with the cold, yet there was sweat on his forehead. With care he began turning his back, putting more weight on his right side. Lumps of chalk rolled off him. He turned completely and found he was no longer trapped: his legs, like his body, were bruised but otherwise undamaged, and all he had to do to free himself completely was pull them from beneath the pile of rubble.

Boak's voice, feeble and hoarse, issued from the darkness behind him. 'Tagart? Tagart?'

'Boak?'

'I can't move.'

Tagart reached up and his fingertips sculptured the outlines of the crossed struts that had fallen against each other in the cave-in and spared him the full force of the final collapse. The floor of the gallery had shifted sideways and down, forming a small chamber where he and Boak were left alive.

Boak was in pain. He said, 'I'm cold.'

'Keep still.' On hands and knees, Tagart crawled towards the sound of Boak's breathing. His hands lit on the water-bag: he felt it, the leather, the bung, the strap, acknowledging what it was. 'Are you thirsty?'

Boak groaned. Tagart reached him and found his face. It felt slimy. Boak was lying on his back, breathing quickly. He coughed. Tagart felt his jaw, his nose, behind his head. Much of his scalp had been torn off. Lower down, at the nape, Tagart touched something hard, wet, and strange, gritty with dust, the place where his neck was broken and his spine exposed.

'What are you doing to my feet?'

Tagart was trembling badly. He tried to hold the water-bag to Boak's lips. A trickle came out. He retched and coughed and Tagart took the water away.

The rocks under which Boak had been buried were too heavy to shift. For the moment Tagart had been able to clear Boak's mouth and nose so that he could breathe more freely. That was all. He knew that Boak was already finished. Even if they were rescued, even if Boak were given the best treatment with comfrey and splints, he

would never survive. A broken arm might be cured, with luck; perhaps even a broken shin. But not a broken neck.

‘I’m cold,’ Boak said. ‘I’m cold. I want to be in the sunshine.’

Tagart sat rocking from side to side with eyes closed. His chest hurt. He hugged himself, trying to ease his pain.

‘Boak?’ he whispered.

No answer. Tagart held a palm under Boak’s nostrils. He was dead.

Tagart crawled to the other end of the chamber, to the place where he had heard the voices, and put his cheek to the rocks. Sounds of picks and hammers were reaching him from another level. He moved his face from side to side, listening, watching, and tried to catch a glimmer of light. There was none.

Tentatively he explored the pile of rubble in front of him, desperate not to make a sound. It was composed mainly of small fragments of chalk, distinguishable by its greasy texture, some larger chunks, and a few flints. Here and there he felt broken planks and spars, the shapes of wooden pegs and rope, the leather bindings that had burst from their brackets.

Piece by piece, he started to move the rubble behind him.

* * *

The major obstacle was a pit-prop, wedged at an angle across the blockage. Even if he could have managed it, removal of the prop would have brought down the rest of the gallery about him and summoned help – the last thing he wanted. He was forced to work round the prop. The need for silence slowed his digging still further, but the

blockage was less than four feet thick and his progress towards the other side was sure.

He had actually pierced the blockage, made a hole large enough to put his arm through and feel air, when the gong sounded and he thought he had missed his chance.

But he heard, instead of the night-shift men coming up the ladders, the descent of the meal slaves with their bags of stew.

He continued to pick at the rubble, making the hole wider, wide enough to get through, and then he put some larger lumps back to fill the gap and settled down to wait and to examine himself properly, to take stock.

He had not suffered any internal injury, of that he was fairly sure; but the bruising in his chest was very painful and spreading further, into other regions, especially down his left side. The trembling in his hands had scarcely improved. But his limbs were intact, especially his legs, for which he was glad: whether or not he had received a concussion, he could still run, and for the moment he could think.

There in the complete darkness of the collapsed gallery his thoughts ran clear and cold, uncluttered in a way he had never known before. He felt as if he could see into the future. He knew what was going to happen. It was no mistake that events had fallen in the way they had.

For him it had all been a lesson. The forest, impersonal, indifferent to him in his time of need, now promised to take him back. He saw the pattern. He saw the end, his release from the acrid loneliness that had been with him since the massacre.

He waited, as if he were waiting for deer, exploring his thoughts. The water-bottle lay at his side. Fifty miles to

Burh. He could not risk using the Valdoe roads. A forest route, then. Twenty miles a day, his usual speed, would be too much for him in his present state. Fifteen. Allow three days. Four at most. He would have to feed himself on the way. Burh in four days. Four back to Valdoe. That left two spare days before Crale Day.

It could be done. He could keep his word and get Segle out, somehow.

He gave his mind to luring the head man from the village. Among the trees, he wanted him among the trees. Easy enough.

Everything easy, falling into place ...

How to deal with Valdoe afterwards, how to bring Segle out, as he had promised her brother by the ferry station with the clouds blowing over Thundersbarrow and the spokes of sunlight across the river, giving the weight of his honour; and, because he was the one chosen to be left, the whole weight of the tribe's honour, given to a small boy struck dead later that day because he loved his sister more than his own life.

Valdoe would not be so easy, not so easy as the village, but in his delirium Tagart knew he could do it too.

* * *

At the second gong Tagart was ready. He pulled the lumps of chalk from the gap; before the first slave had started up the shaft he was squeezing through the hole and into what was left of the gallery. He lay there for a moment, overcome by the excruciating pain in his chest, forcing himself by an act of sheer will to do what he had planned next.

By the time Tagart had finished it, the painstaking task of filling in the hole, the ladders were creaking with the weight of men passing upwards. He waited his chance in the darkness near the gallery mouth and, the water-bag thrust inside his tunic, swung himself onto the ladder and joined the exodus.

A rainstorm was blowing above ground. The guards and soldiers, clad in sodden sheepskin capes, were shouting to each other above a howling wind. Tagart was the sixth or seventh miner to emerge blinking in the morning light; he turned with a comment to the man behind him.

‘Let’s hope they’ve got something better for us than the mid-shift meal.’

‘At least we get a drink with it.’ The rain was pelting the ground, sweeping across the face of the hill, obscuring and then revealing the shape of the fortress at the summit.

All the miners were filthy, grimy with chalk. Tagart’s appearance excited no interest or comment, for he had cleaned most of the blood from his face and beard. He moved forward, covertly glancing at the piles of timber newly removed from the west workings.

Tagart traded more remarks with his new-found friend, establishing himself, or so he hoped, as a member of the night-shift.

‘Quiet there!’

More men were appearing at the entrance of the other shafts. The soldiers watched and the overseers shouted orders, marshalling the slaves into a rank. The soldiers and overseers looked cold and wet. Some of them had been standing in the open all night, and would get no shelter till this shift was safely behind bars.

Tagart heard Stobas's voice issuing instructions. The rain was blowing in curtains across the workings, streaking chalk on the miners' faces, plastering hair to heads. Tagart felt his clothes increasing in weight.

The line of men was moving too fast, too far away from the pile of timber Tagart had chosen; he stooped and pretended to see something in the grass before shuffling on. The man with whom he had spoken went ahead.

'All up!' shouted the overseer from the west workings, and one by one the others reported the same.

'All up!'

'All up!'

Tagart felt a flood of gratitude. The weather was doing it for him. The weather.

They halted. From the back of the rank he glimpsed the overseers standing tall, moving their hands edge-on, counting off the slaves in threes. The first had finished his count and was frowning. He started to count again.

On either side of Tagart the slaves were looking straight ahead. One was a thin, spare man who looked like a farmer, the other a shorter man who could have been a foreigner like Chorn. Neither seemed to have noticed him particularly. Like the others, like the guards, they were keen to get the count finished and hurry back to the buildings for shelter.

The back of the rank was being observed by at least three soldiers. From the rank to the pile of wood he thought it twelve or fifteen paces, too many to cover undetected with the soldiers watching, even in this rain.

A hundred or so heavy struts made up the pile of wood, laid parallel to the line of the rank. Just beyond it lay other piles of wood and a series of chalk spoil-heaps discoloured

by topsoil, leading downhill and away from the fort. The ramparts were nearly a mile off. In this weather there was no danger of being seen from the Trundle.

‘One over!’ the first overseer shouted, and for a moment all heads turned.

It was enough. Tagart, backing gingerly at first, cleared the rank and ran to the pile of wood. He glanced behind. Everyone was listening to Stobas demanding how ninety-three could have come up when only ninety-two had gone down.

Everyone except one man, the farmer who had been standing next to Tagart.

Tagart met his eye.

The farmer smiled, glanced sideways at the soldiers, and turned back with every sign of renewed interest to watch the dispute between overseers.

‘One over!’ the second overseer shouted.

‘Check count!’ Stobas ordered. ‘Rank form into pairs!’

But Tagart had already found a place to hide in the middle of the pile. He crawled through a triangular gap, constricting his chest again, pushing with the heels of his hands on the rain-soaked timbers. The pain of working himself past the struts threatened to make him cry out. But his chest was through and he dragged himself further inside, into a space lower down. Vision fuzzed by pain, he forced himself into it and, just as the rank re-formed and the soldiers again began their supervision, his ankles and then his toes slid through the triangular entrance to his hiding-place and disappeared from view.

Tagart listened. After completion of the check count, Stobas became even more suspicious and there was talk of sending someone back to the fort to advise the Trundleman. But for the weather, and the fact that the check count had given, after all, the right total, a search might have been ordered and the dogs brought down.

Tagart drew himself further into the pile of timber. He was hungry and very tired, suffering from both shock and concussion. The pain of his bruises was growing steadily worse.

Later in the day more timber was flung on the heap and Tagart feared that he might be trapped. But at nightfall, when the shifts had long since changed and the soldiers were least expecting anything unusual, he silently extricated himself and hobbled into the darkness unobserved.

That night he made only five miles, stopping in the early hours to rest and await the morning. Any exertion made the discomfort worse. His sleep, a few minutes together, was coloured by nightmares that seemed to persist in his waking thoughts. The same dream repeated itself. Mirin was with him in some unfamiliar place, a lake in a clearing. He knew they were safe, a great distance from Valdoe. They were beside the water, drowsy in the afternoon sun. Tagart had shot a wild-cat and they were roasting it over a bed of embers. Beside the lake stood the brown stems and umbels of chervil and kex. Creamy blossoms of hemp agrimony billowed pink across the water, in line with the course left by the passage of their bodies through the weed.

They had been swimming, out through the frog-bit and into the centre of the lake, where from a deep spring the water welled limpid and cold. Mirin was naked, her hair wet and lying close, revealing the shape of her head, but as he looked into her eyes they became the sockets of a grinning skull. He ran to the water's edge and knew what he would find. She was floating just below the surface, white and swollen.

There were other dreams, some involving the girl, Segle. Once or twice he shouted himself awake and sat up, shivering and trembling. At last he got to his feet.

The strength had gone from his legs. He was finding it hard to keep moving, even from tree to tree: he had never been so tired. Full daylight was coming on. He ate a few berries, felt better for them, and in the dry leaves under the bushes discovered a hedgehog, curled up in sleep. As he had no knife or hand-axe he urinated on the animal to make it uncurl, then killed it by pinching the snout. With a broken pebble he did his best to skin it, and ate it raw. A little later he came across a wood pigeon's nest in the ivy against an oak and gulped down the contents of both eggs.

He was travelling north-east, into the dense forest behind Eartham Hill, keeping away from the coast and open ground. The sky cleared gradually and by the time he reached the first of the great rivers there was intermittent sunshine. The sun stayed with him on most of the following days, days of slow progress and weariness. He was finding it increasingly hard to think straight, to remember details. Not only were his thoughts sluggish, but his body often refused to respond properly.

The second day was the worst. After that he began to improve and was able to cover more ground.

On the third day he came across the remains of a temporary camp, vacated less than a week earlier by a tribe whose bark-cut signs he identified as the work of the Jays – people he knew. Not for the first time, he considered seeking help. But he had no time to spare. The Jays had gone north-west and might be days ahead, and he was moving east.

On the fourth night, under a gibbous moon that made the marshes silver and black, he came out of the forest and used one of the punts to cross the wide river in the reeds, the last of the great rivers in his path. And on the fifth day, at mid morning, he found himself once more in sight of Burh.

He had been absent for twelve days. Outwardly, there had been little change. From the escarpment he watched the people in the compound and on the steps of the Meeting House. Work had resumed in the fields, which now were markedly greener. After a while he made out the beardless man, Groden, working with several others, cutting hay from a field by the river. Tagart wondered if his hole in the silo, his entry and exit, had yet been discovered.

He could not find his yew-tree lair straight away. It had been concealed and camouflaged too well, and his memory deceived him: the tree was more to the north than he remembered, and it looked different in shape. But he found it with his nose. The strips of venison had putrefied. A fox had taken many of them. The rest were crawling with maggots. Tagart carried the strips away and flung them into the undergrowth.

He checked over what remained of his stores: a few flints, three bows lacking strings, an arrow, short lengths of twine and rope, two water-bags. He would need to arm

himself before going back to Valdoe. The village: they would have weapons down there; and he would have to have clothes and clogs to get inside the fort. Those too could be found in the village.

Yes, he knew the way it was all going to unfold.

He shut his eyes and covered his face. His hands were still trembling: they had not stopped, not completely, since the cave-in. He felt as if he were burning his reserves at a profligate rate, fighting alternate waves of chill and heat. Still his thoughts were not normal. There were blank spots, areas of impenetrable or hazy memory, moments of lucidity followed by a kind of delirium in which his mind raced extravagantly, inconclusively. The toll of the past weeks was catching up with him. He undid his tunic and examined himself yet again. The bruises had begun to heal.

He told himself he had been in low states in the past. He had been hurt before. This was nothing new. The bruises, the exhaustion and fever, the delirium, these were nothing new. He tried to console himself.

But alone, and in his condition, he had no defence against mistakes.

He pushed the thought aside, fastened his tunic, stood up, and went outside to find food.

Only in the evening, after he had slept, did Tagart remember that there was something else he still had to investigate.

He found the oak tree after a short search. Hernou was still hanging upside-down. The blood had drained into her head and the upper part of her body. From the contortion of her features he gleaned an idea of the circumstances of her death. In her throes the rope had been worn almost to its last fibre wherever it rubbed on bark. The gag had been

half eaten. Tagart undid it. Her face was unrecognisable. She had been dead for about eight days.

Remembering at last what he had planned to do with her, he cut the body down.

How could he have forgotten?

How could he have forgotten such a thing?

No answer came. Trying to ignore the smell and the flies, he put her over his shoulders and, gasping and struggling with the weight, set out through the undergrowth on his way to the escarpment.

* * *

Sturmer paused in his work and stood upright, pulling back his shoulder-blades and stretching his spine. Stooping no longer agreed with him so well. In his right hand he was holding a sickle, a yard of blackthorn with a steam-curved end in which were set half a dozen flint chips to form a cutting edge. With it he had been moving gradually along the river-bank, cutting down the tall bromes and meadow-grasses for winter silage, in line with thirty others. Between them they had cleared most of the river field since daybreak. Now, at mid afternoon, the women and children, and those who could no longer do full work, came behind collecting the cut grasses into sheaves ready to be bundled and dragged back to the village. The old men, supervised by Vude, were trimming the hay-sheaves to size, ready for packing in the barn.

This task would not normally have fallen to the old men, but the population of the village had been almost halved, with the worst losses among the young, those whom Burh could least afford to be without. The crippled and maimed

numbered more than twenty, and they, like the orphans and widows, would have to be fed.

Most of the surviving young men wanted to leave. They were afraid that Tsoaul had not yet finished with them. Fallott had failed to come with help, and for that Sturmer had been blamed; he had pleaded with them and begged them to wait. The forest had been quiet since the new moon. The trouble was over. Tsoaul had taken Hernou and would not be back. Why allow themselves to be driven out? Why throw away years of work for nothing? Why face the danger and hardship of founding a new village when their true home was here in Burh?

The Council's deliberations on the matter had been inconclusive. The older men said that Hernou had been taken because it was she who had been to blame for the attack on the savages. It was only right that she should be sacrificed for the common good. They said she had plotted against Tsoaul, blinding Groden and those around her with her beauty, a baneful influence. Now that that influence had gone, there would be no more risk. Even Groden had given up hope of finding her.

The younger men argued differently. The only reason, they said, that no one had been abducted since Hernou's disappearance was that no one had dared to leave the palisade, except in parties of a dozen or more, and no one at all had ventured into the trees. Tsoaul was still in the forest, waiting his chance.

Sturmer had been unable to convince them. In deference to the elders, and for that reason alone, the young men had reluctantly agreed to stay.

Now their fears had been eclipsed by the urgent need to make a harvest.

The prospect was not good. Even though there were only half as many bellies to fill, there would not be enough food to last the winter. The drought had persisted too long. The barley crop was all but ruined; the wheat down by three fourths; the millet by two; and the oats had failed completely, the panicles stunted, crumbling to dust when rubbed between the fingers. To save feed, all but a few of the animals would have to be slaughtered. Some could be sustained on the rougher silage that usually was not even harvested – including the bromes and meadow-grasses.

Sturmer returned to his cutting. The line of men was moving steadily forward, in a rhythm with the swish of sickles and the sound of the river as it went on its way to the sea. Behind them the slain grasses lay strewn across the field.

The women had not been gathering for long when Sturmer heard his name being called from the village. Vude, white-bearded, his bald head hatless, was hurrying towards him along the river path.

‘Sturmer!’

‘What is it?’

Sturmer went forward to meet the old man. They came face to face, twenty yards ahead of the line, and Vude bent and leaned on his knees, breathing with difficulty. He turned his face. ‘You must come, Sturmer. They’re in the barn. They haven’t seen it yet.’

‘Seen what?’

‘Come quickly.’

Vude led him back through the east gate. On the far side of the compound the women, on ladders leaning against the palisade, were dropping bundles of hay to the old men waiting below. Another group of old men was trimming

and shaping the sheaves, while a third carried them into the barn and packed them crosswise and lengthwise, making a solid rick.

‘This way,’ Vude said, branching left from the thoroughfare and leading Sturmer between the houses.

At the base of the palisade he stopped. ‘I came to see how much of the trimmings we could save. I took off the covers. Look.’

A tunnel had been burrowed through one of the silos. Its cover, a mat of interwoven sticks, showed holes and signs of damage.

‘The tunnel is large enough for a man,’ Sturmer said.

‘It joins up with a trapdoor in the turf on the other side. I thought you alone ought to know.’

‘So you have guessed the truth too.’

‘Not before now.’

‘I told Groden to make sure none remained alive.’

‘You should have seen to it yourself.’

‘I think it was only one.’

Vude nodded. ‘Any more and the ambush would have been different.’

‘That is how I reasoned it.’

‘Do you think he’s still up there, in the forest?’

Sturmer squinted at the escarpment. ‘There’s been no trace of him for a fortnight. He must be ill, or dead. If he’d gone for help it would have been all over for us a week ago.’

Vude agreed. The savages could signal each other, by magic, over great distances. One survivor of the massacre, if he had sought them, could have brought many to attack the village.

‘You did well to tell me first,’ Sturmer said. With his sickle he began rearranging the silo to hide the tunnel. ‘I must have your silence, Vude. If the others hear of this, the young men will prevail in the Council.’

‘But suppose the savage is still alive? Suppose he has gone for help?’

‘He hasn’t.’

‘I trust you, Sturmer. But the young men ... they’re saying you’re not what you were. Groden—’

‘Groden is disgraced,’ Sturmer said curtly, standing up.

Vude let the comment pass.

‘If you doubt me,’ Sturmer said, ‘tell the others. Tell them an army of savages is coming and Sturmer is too stupid to admit it. Tell them and kill the village yourself.’

‘All I say is that you must be careful.’

‘I shall be.’

‘Then you have my silence, head man.’

* * *

Tagart shifted sideways, throwing the woman’s body from his shoulders. She rolled a little way down the escarpment and came to rest, arms and legs at strange angles, her skin bloated and stretched, as tight as a drum. Tagart came after and shoved her with his heel. She turned over, twice, thrice, and came to rest again.

The village was in shadow; from up here the last wash of sunset could be seen. The moon, almost full, showed among the trees. Already its shine outdid the dusk: he could see silvery light on the roofs and palisade and on the forest across the valley. The evening star was burning steadily in the west. A heron flapped its way inland, like a grey wraith following the reflections and rushes of the

river, neck curled back, legs outstretched behind, still dripping the water of the estuary. Over the village it uttered a single harsh cry.

Tagart rolled the corpse down the escarpment, stopping well short of the palisade for fear of alarming the dogs.

Next he dragged the body upright and manhandled it over to an oak bush, resting it against the drought-scorched, prematurely brown leaves. It slid rustling to the ground. He hoisted it again, positioning it another way, and another, until it remained, spreadeagled, in full view.

With many pauses to catch his breath, he turned and climbed back to the forest.

5

By early afternoon the next day, Sturmer knew that to save himself and the village only one course of action remained. His private knowledge, shared only with Vude, made the decision easier to take, for it promised him the recapture of the support he had been losing throughout the day in the Council. But the courage he needed did not come easily, and in the floating unreality of the Meeting House he almost left it too long. His announcement, that he alone would go into the forest and fight Tsoaul, drew gasps of disbelief, amazement, and then admiration.

His day had begun rapidly. His bed was still warm when he heard the news, and then Deak and Feno brought the corpse into the compound and he saw it for himself. The thing laid in the dirt before him had at one time been

Hernou. It had housed her soul, long since fled. He himself had, years before, slept with it, made love to it, even once thought it might be his wife and mother his children.

Tsoaul, the young men were already saying, had finished with her and flung her back: an omen, a sign of hostility renewed. In the dawn twilight, made chill by mists from the river and the fields, Groden came at a run from his house and thrust his way among the villagers gathering round the body. He broke through to the inner circle and stood transfixed, staring at what had been his woman.

His face twisted; he took a step back. His mouth seemed to fill, and he turned away.

An abomination sprawled there. Without prayer, her soul had been driven out, forced to wait too long alone in a disembodied state. It had been lost for ever to the demons and the wilderness. She could not be given a place in the burial mound. She had become part of Tsoaul's works, like the bodies of the bears.

But they did not burn her. At Sturmer's order, with Groden's acquiescence, she was conveyed to the beach and left for the tide to carry out to the shoals, where the sea would take her away.

They returned to the Meeting House and sat in session all day. Every aspect of the omen was discussed. It meant further violence, further deaths. It meant plague and murder and terror. Tsoaul had not finished with them. There could be no mistaking his intent. In the arguing and voting the young men now held sway. Those with families wanted to pack their belongings and leave, and some of the old men were changing their minds about staying. Vude stood out against the many.

‘Where will you go? And what of those you leave behind? The old, the sick, the orphaned?’

‘They can come with us or starve!’

‘It’s all the same to us!’

‘We’ve had enough!’

‘Time to leave while we can!’

‘No!’ Vude shouted. ‘To leave is to be defeated!’

‘Easy for you to say, old man!’

‘Where were you in the fighting, old man?’

‘Listen to Vude!’ Groden said, and Sturmer for the moment could not understand what was happening.

‘Listen to him! He’s right! Where will you go? No other village can take you. You’ll have to start again. How long will it take you to build another Burh? Five years? Ten? How many will die before you can finish a new palisade? How many will the wolves come for? How many the bears? Do you think Tsoaul’s hand can’t reach wherever you go? This is our home! Our life has gone into these fields! Nothing, not even a spirit, must be allowed to drive us away!’ He turned on Sturmer. ‘This fool denies the truth! He refuses to face it! He still tries to tell us that Tsoaul has gone! Well Tsoaul threw my woman back and any man who says not is no longer fit to lead us!’ He thrust an arm towards the forest. ‘Tsoaul is up there! He’s up there but we can fight him and we can win. We can win and we can stay!’

‘I’ll fight,’ Feno said.

‘And I,’ said Deak.

‘Who else will show himself a man?’

But before anyone had a chance to reply, Sturmer rose and told the Council what he intended to do.

* * *

High above the village, well into the forest, Sturmer thought he heard something.

He listened, turning his head, holding his breath.

Random sounds of the forest at night came to him: the squeak of dead branch on dead branch, a low hiss of breeze.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted again.

By day or by night: he'd had to make the choice. He knew the savage was ill and alone, no match for a fit man. But in the forest a savage would have all the advantages of woodcraft and silence. Night among the trees held many fears, imaginary as well as real, but Sturmer had witnessed the savage's skill at shooting, Only darkness would rob him of it. To kill him, Sturmer's best hope would be to come face to face and attack with a spear; and a hope was all it could be, even though one man, sick and alone, made a very different adversary from the Spirit of the Forest. So Sturmer had chosen night. He waited and listened on the path, sick with fear.

The promise of a return triumphant, boasting that he had personally slain Tsoaul, now shrank in importance in his eyes. Again he wondered whether to go back to the village and disclose what he and Vude had found, to take a group of the better fighters with him. But then he would never be able to flush the savage out. He had to go on his own, to entice the man from cover and into a position where he could be seen and attacked. If he were to tell what he knew, his advantage over Groden would be lost: how much longer then would Sturmer be head of Burh, even if there were a Burh left to be head of? Self-

preservation, more than bravery, or any desire to spare the village, was keeping Sturmer standing there.

‘Come out! Come out! I am your friend! I mean you no harm!’

Far off to the left he heard the sound again, the rustling that had made him stop and listen before.

He put one foot off the path.

‘Show yourself!’

The branches swayed a little in the breeze. The multitudes of leaves gently moved and returned, moved again. The wind had freshened. Sturmer looked up. Behind sparse, high cloud, moving like fish-scales across the sky, he could see the disc of the moon.

‘I only want to talk! Come out! Please!’

No answer came. Sturmer moved back to the path and took a few steps along it, towards the gorge and its ruined bridge. The clearing there would be a good place to wait; he had already decided as much. The risk of traps in the clearing would be less than under the trees, for on the day of the ambush the savage himself had walked freely to and fro across the clearing and presumably would not have rigged it since.

The cloud thinned and the moon appeared more strongly, misty at its edges, casting a faint, bluish light down the length of the path.

In less time than it took an eye to blink, Sturmer glimpsed someone moving ahead, the movement of limbs; sensed rather than saw a sunken face in shadow. The hazel branches by the path had opened and swallowed the figure up. Sturmer faintly heard the scrape of leather on bark, circling him to the left, but it was as loud to him as any sound could be.

'I only want to talk!'

The savage had halted.

'Show yourself! I mean you no harm! Come out and we can talk!'

The soft crush of a foot on dry leaves reached him and, hesitantly, another. He caught the judder of bramble hooks across leather, the tiny snap of a twig. And he realised the savage was moving away, leaving him.

'Come back!'

But it was no use. He obviously suspected trickery, or else was too timid to show himself. Sturmer heard another twig break, deeper into the trees.

He looked up and down the path, not sure whether to follow. Was he himself being lured on? Was he being led into a pitfall or a hoist-trap? Or was the savage merely afraid?

The spear Sturmer was carrying bore a short shaft, so that it would be less likely to catch in undergrowth. He slid it into his belt and stepped off the path. As he put down each foot, he made a conscious effort to avoid breaking dead wood; he groped for sprigs and branches which might whip back. The woods here, hazel under oak and hornbeam, lay thickly littered with dead leaves and he could not prevent them from rustling, seeming to him to be making much more noise than his quarry.

He stopped to listen. A little way ahead he heard a slight scratching, and then it was as if the savage had stopped to listen too.

'I must talk to you! I mean you no harm! I can help you! Answer me if you hear!'

The given reply came as a loud snap of old wood. The savage was going on. Sturmer followed. They were climbing across the side of a slope.

Behind them the cloud went past the moon's face, becoming patchy, showing ribbons of clear sky with stars. When these crossed the moon its circle stood sharp and flooded the trees with light, sliced to black shadows by the leaves and branches, and Sturmer was able to see that he was being led into a hazel grove. He waited for the moon to be covered, and went on.

Something like confidence began to encourage him: he could hear the man plainly now, breaking a way forward. They were entering the grove. Rotten hazel sticks lay this way and that, some caught up in the living bushes, others on the ground, half buried in the leaves. Lichen, pale in the weak moonlight, festooned the sticks and bushes.

Sturmer took his spear from his belt as he heard his prey stumble. He quickened his step, no longer caring how much noise he made, snapping off projecting stubs, treading on dry branch after branch. He was gaining on the savage, whose progress seemed to be slowing, growing weaker, the attempt of an injured man to get away unheard.

After three paces more, Sturmer realised that the grove had fallen silent. The savage had stopped.

Gripping his spear with both hands, Sturmer warily turned from side to side. In the stillness following the crashing trail of the preceding minutes, he strained hard for a sound of movement. Frowning, he bent his head and listened. He could hear nothing. Nothing at all.

The moon sailed from the clouds and illuminated the hazels. He stared at the place where he thought the savage

might be. Perhaps the savage had fallen; perhaps he was even dying.

Sturmer opened his mouth to call out, but another thought checked him. He looked round. He had allowed himself to be drawn into the middle of the grove, a natural sounding-box strewn with dead branches and obstacles, from which, whether he chose it or not, he could not hope to extricate himself without revealing his exact whereabouts with every step he took. The savage had stopped making a noise; but had he stopped moving? Could he pass quietly where a farmer could not?

Sturmer felt oppressed by the trees, isolated, confined in a place where he had no right to be. He was a trespasser here. A hostility seemed to come at him from the forest itself, as if it somehow knew that he lived by the axe, cutting fields and clearings where green had reigned, the village an intrusion, the palisade and all the stolen timber, the trees uprooted and shorn of their branches a crime, an act of sacrilege.

Behind him, where no sound should have been, a spray of leaves rustled as if deliberately shaken. He whirled round to see the source of the noise, but cloud once more obscured the moon and the grove darkened.

He began to back away, his hands shaking and his mouth dry. He trod on a stick and broke it, turned, and with his forearm held high plunged through the grove. A forked branch snatched at his spear. He let it go, too frightened to stop.

He ran straight into the blow. Its force knocked him off his feet and flung him sideways, and he was landing hard and badly, smashing through dead wood, slithering in the carpet of leaves and rotting sticks. His fingers stretched out

and the violence of his fall drove them into the ground. Pain flared in his neck and shoulder and jaw where the club had struck him.

He looked and against the sky saw the shape of his killer with arms raised, club held high for the finishing stroke.

* * *

Tagart's eyes opened at the scream. He had been almost asleep when he had heard it, a little way off to the southwest: a man's scream, ended abruptly as if by death.

He lay there listening, wondering if he had imagined it. His condition had improved a good deal in the day and a night since putting the woman's body out on the escarpment. But he was still not right. For long periods he had lain motionless under the yew, his mind invaded by irrational plans. More than once he had determined to set fire to the village, or to build a dam and divert the river, or to lie in wait for ever if need be and shoot the farmers one by one. When the delirium receded he remembered Valdoe and Segle and he was unable to think of anything but getting back there. At dusk he had checked the village again. He knew that he must wait for the music to come from the Meeting House, the music: he kept that in his mind, centrally, and even when he could not remember why he was waiting for the music he knew that it was important and he could not make a move before it came.

At nightfall he had returned to the shelter of the yew to sleep and recover more of his strength; and then, some hours afterwards, had come the scream.

He sat up and pushed himself to his feet.

Broad white moonlight bathed the forest outside the yew tree. Tatters of cloud drifted overhead. Away from the

moon's glare a rich haze of stars filled the sky. Tagart looked up and found the constellation of the Giant, a bowman with arm outstretched and one foot crushing the head of the Snake. The third star of the Snake's tail, between the Ladle and the Bear, marked due north. Taking his bearings, he set off to the south-west, downhill, frequently breaking the run of his progress with his hand against a branch or trunk, not daring to risk a fall by going too fast.

* * *

Groden untied the end of the twine from the bush and wound it round his hand, making a neat hank which he pushed into his pouch. The ruse had worked well, just as he had intended. And now Sturmer had atoned for Hernou's death: for it had been Sturmer's fault that the bears had found a way into the village, Sturmer's fault that Morfe had been killed, Sturmer's fault that the village was dying and all the families planning to move away.

But Groden had long ago suspected him of worse than just poor leadership. His opposition to further clearance of the forest, his unwillingness to fight back at the savages who infested the trees and made spells against the village and its crops: all had added to Groden's suspicions about Sturmer's secretiveness and his pretence of introducing new methods and crops. Over the months a pattern had begun to make itself clear. In the days before the raid, while the sun had been steadily baking the fields to dust, the truth had emerged. Sturmer, for months or even years, had been in league with Tsoaul. And when, in Council that afternoon, Sturmer had offered to go into the forest and fight its spirit, Groden had known that he had to stop him

before he could make a new pact with Tsoaul and finish the village altogether.

His suspicions had been vindicated in full as he had followed Sturmer from the village and heard him calling, trying to draw his evil master from the trees. Groden's last doubt had evaporated. He had gone to the hazel grove and put into effect the plan he had made, to lure Sturmer there, and with the twine to deceive him and throw him off guard.

Now it had succeeded. He was pulling Sturmer's body through the thicket and towards the path. He did not trouble to hide the broken branch, no doubt bloodied, that he had used as a club. It would not be found. The corrupt head man had been disposed of. With his going, the canker that had rotted the village would go too. Tsoaul would once again shrink away before their axes. When Burh became strong again, with time to heal the damage Sturmer had done, Groden would tell the the people the truth. But for now such revelations could serve no purpose; they might even prove dangerous, because Sturmer had so warped their minds that they could not see. For the moment Groden decided to pretend that Sturmer had fallen in combat with Tsoaul. After the change of leadership he would take a fighting party and go deep into the forest to challenge Tsoaul. Thus the matter would be resolved. Tsoaul would be afraid to come forward: Gauhm's power was too great. With her help, and with the people of the village, Groden would work to make Burh new again.

He reached the path and put the body over his shoulders.

* * *

Tagart kept his distance, following Groden, the beardless man, down the path to the village. In the moonlight Tagart saw that he was carrying a corpse: the origin of the scream. He had not imagined it.

Tagart badly wanted to attack, to kill, but he hung back, slowing when Groden slowed, forcing himself on when Groden went faster, unsure what to do. He wished he were armed.

They were getting near the village. Tagart had left it too late, even had he wanted to make a move; but his curiosity had been aroused and it made him follow.

Groden turned off the path, to the right and through the stand of oaks that gave on to the top of the escarpment. He passed among the dark trunks and the moonlight, bearing the weight of the body easily, one of its arms swinging as he walked. Tagart left the path and in utter silence passed over the twigs and brambles.

At the edge of the escarpment Groden let himself down and onto the steepness of the slope, taking it sideways, faltering a little now. Halfway down he stopped and let the body fall from his shoulders, just as Tagart had let Hernou fall. Tagart drew back, into the shadows.

When he moved forward again the body had been leaned against an oak bush. Groden was crossing the escarpment, descending as he went, making for the east gate. At the bottom he merged with the total shadow of the palisade.

The gate opened slightly, effortlessly, as though it had been left unlocked for his return: Groden slipped into the compound. Tagart did not hear the two wooden locking

bars being eased into place, but he had seen the gate drawn shut. A moment later Groden's figure appeared on the village thoroughfare, walking towards the cluster of houses.

6

Sturmer's body lay, covered with flowers, on the Dead Ground. His common clothes had been removed and consigned to the altar flame. In their place he had been dressed in a chief's grave-robe of ermine, the hood drawn up and showing the oval of his face, with beard and eyebrows shorn. Beside him lay everything he had owned, everything that would go with him into the burial mound. His wife, Tamis, knelt grieving at his feet. Their four children, dressed like their mother in white, were standing near by. The youngest did not understand.

One by one, the villagers climbed the steps of the Meeting House. Nobody had yet challenged Groden's sudden elevation to prospective leadership of the Council. At the meeting that morning, held to discuss the finding of Sturmer's body, no other candidate had emerged. The new head man would have to be chosen tomorrow, by Council vote, or by trial and contest of wisdom if Groden were challenged; but today they mourned Sturmer. At sunset, after they had tasted the agaric and joined him on the road to the Far Land, he would be buried.

As they passed into the Meeting House they left their clothing by the steps, a mark of purification, and, naked,

crossed the floorboards to take up their positions in the circle of hierarchy.

By the altar sat Groden. On his right sat Vude, the oldest man on the Council and friend of Sturmer the priest, in whose care – until a new head man should be chosen – now rested the health and spiritual guidance of the village. Beside Vude, in their order from high to low, sat the members of the inner Council, on their right the other Council men, followed by the wealthiest of the ordinary villagers, decreasing in power and importance as the circle curved round towards the altar. On Groden's left squatted the lowliest man in the village.

The women, each holding a wooden bowl or drinking-vessel, took their places behind the men, ready for their part in the ritual.

Vude arose, his hands under the Agaric Casket. Turning towards the Dead Ground, he inclined his head and reverently slid the casket on the altar, in line with the small flame flickering there, which represented Sturmer's soul.

'We take this hour the gift,' he said, and waited for the congregation to speak the words of the response.

'The gift of the Earth Mother.'

'On eagles' wings we go with our loved one.'

'Borne in peace along the road of the dead.'

'We see the gates of the Far Land and the journey safely done.'

'We turn back.'

'And in sadness and in joy come home again.'

The musicians took up their instruments and on pipes, tamtams and flutes opened the dirge. Vude went on reciting the phrases of the Agaric Chant, and as he did so pulled back the lid of the casket and removed the trays. The

first three were empty; he put them aside and handed the caps from the fourth to the woman behind him and to his left, who passed them round the circle. The chant finished: the women put the caps on their tongues. Vude lowered himself to the floor and sat cross-legged.

When the women had finished fashioning the caps into pellets, rolling them between their palms, squashing the fungus in their mouths to take away the initial taste, the men reached behind and took the pellets with their fingers, opened their mouths wide, thrust the pellets to the backs of their throats, and swallowed.

Chal's wife came to the altar and spoke into Vude's ear. 'Something's wrong, Vude. The taste is not the same. It tastes like ... pepperwort. Usually it burns like fire and makes us sick.'

None of the women were showing any sign of nausea. Vude glanced at Groden, who opened his hands, able to offer no explanation.

'The caps must be old and weak,' Vude decided. 'How long have they been in the casket?'

'I cannot say,' Groden said. 'Did Sturmer replenish the whole casket every autumn, or just the empty trays?'

Vude did not know.

'What is it?' Feno said, from across the circle. 'The pellets aren't working.'

Others spoke up to say that the fungus tasted different, that it was having no effect.

'Then let us eat more,' Vude said, and gave out more caps, from each of the trays. He himself tasted a cap from the bottom tray. At once the fierce burning flared in his mouth, and he spat the fragment out. 'This one has not lost its power,' he said, holding it up for all to see. He turned to

the girl behind him. 'Chew this for me, child.' To the others he said, 'Taste the caps until you find those with strength.'

But although they found many caps which still seemed potent, most had lost their vigour and there were not enough good caps to make a ceremony. As Chal's wife had said, the stale caps tasted peculiar, peppery, and the men as well as the women ate several of each, hoping without success to produce some of the effects of fly agaric, even in a diminished form.

* * *

Not long afterwards they came out into the compound and, taking their clothes from the pile by the steps, returned to their dwellings to prepare for the funeral of their chief.

Across the river, in the sunshine, blue cornflowers and scarlet poppies made colour in the fields extending to the edge of the valley. Rooks flapped in the haze above the ground, pitching unhurriedly here and there in small groups to dig at the soil and turn over clods. From the estuary came a faint skirling of terns and the piping cries of the wading birds as the tide went out and the mudflats appeared. A warm sea-wind was blowing across the village, carrying before it a few husks and wisps of barley, gently knocking a loose plank on the bakery roof.

The west gate opened. Tamis and her three daughters, keeping near the palisade, stooped and picked bunches of corn chamomile, which together with red campion would make their simple wreath for Sturmer.

Tamis had decided to leave the village, with the sick who could walk, the children, and the animals. The others had been persuaded by Groden to wait, to remain behind while he challenged Tsoaul anew. And when Groden triumphed

the animals would come back, and the children, even the sick; but not Tamis. She meant to take her children to Highdole, her home village, where her mother was still alive and the children could be raised in peace and safety. In time the pain of Sturmer's death might recede. Until then she would go on in her numb state, stunned, doing what was best for her family. As was the custom, she had not taken part in the fly agaric ceremony, and she had chosen to stay outside on the Dead Ground with the body of her husband.

His funeral began just before sunset. Vude led the villagers over the bridge, through the west gate and along the narrow path through the barley field. Groden came at the rear. Six men were carrying Sturmer's body, on straps passed beneath his ermine grave-robe.

At the spinney on the far side, the path curved between the trees and Tamis looked over her shoulder for a last view of Burh. Chal and Hombeck were to escort her that evening after the funeral on the nine-mile walk to Highdole.

The procession left the spinney and halted on the close sward of the burial ground, just outside the line of chalk stones enclosing the earthen barrow where for many years the dead of the village had been interred. Tonight a chief was to join the ancestors. Part of the barrow had been freshly dug away, ready to receive him.

Vude spoke the incantation. In the long shadows of sunset, and then the darkening dusk, the corpse in its robe and the dead man's possessions were covered with earth and filled in, to begin by their decay the slow return to the place from which they had come.

Over the escarpment, the moon appeared above the trees.

* * *

Tagart stared into the space below the yew branches and tried to remember: how many days? How many days had he squandered here, waiting his chance? How many days before the Crale Festival and Segle was taken from the kitchens and put into the Trundle?

His thoughts swirled. He would need weapons and clothes from the village. And if he wore clogs and looked enough like a farmer, he could use the coast road and pass the forts unchallenged to reach Valdoe in a single day. Somehow he would locate Segle and they would be free: free to run into the marshes and reed-beds along the coast, to hide where the Valdoe dogs could never find a scent. And after that, when he had kept his promise to Bewry, they would travel north, away from the coast and the farmers, and together would go in search of the Waterfall people, his old blood-tribe, among whom his father had been born.

He sat up. Tomorrow. He must attack tomorrow. He was well enough: he had recovered much strength. The bruises were easing. He could walk, and he could run, and he tried to tell himself that his thoughts had cleared and that he was planning lucidly again for the first time in days.

But with the fever of ideas in his mind it was a long time before he closed his eyes and allowed sleep to come.

* * *

Before dawn he had settled on a scheme to finish the village. He would use fire. By appearing on the escarpment, he would draw the farmers after him, south through the

forest and down to the beach. There, in the corner of land between the estuary and the sea, he would trap them while the trees burned and the wind spread the flames east and south. At high tide there could be no escape under the cliffs, nor along the beach of the estuary, where the scrub grew close to the shore. Those who could not swim would be burned alive. Of the others, many would drown in the tide race, out by the shoals. But he would have a coracle waiting, and if any of the farmers tried to swim towards land he would chase them and club them in the water with the paddle.

This was his plan. To enact it he needed a coracle. He knew there were coracles at the village, some left outside the palisade.

The moon had set when he arrived. He skirted the village to the south and came to the river. Two coracles had been left upturned on the bank; he holed one by thrusting his heel through it, and launched the other. At once the current tugged at the painter; he walked along the bank, easing the coracle round clumps of sedge, and led it downstream into the tidal reach. Jumping over channels and runlets, or walking ankle-deep in mud, he brought the willow-and-leather craft to the edge of the estuary, where the water of the river merged rippling with the sea. Here he dragged the coracle to a narrow strip of shingle and left it hidden among low bushes.

From the shore Tagart turned back into the forest and uphill, reaching the edge of the gorge and following it past the wreckage of the bridge and thence to the path.

East of the village, a quarter of a mile behind the escarpment, he knelt and in some dried grasses nurtured the first fire. Blowing gently, he held them to thicker stems,

to brown bracken, to dead twigs broken into lengths, and then blew hard to make the flame leap. White smoke curled: the twigs burned. He put them under a cone of dry sticks, and when they had caught light he brought larger branches and heaps of bracken until the pile was burning strongly. Ash and glowing embers began falling into its heart. The encircling ground slowly grew hot. The grasses withdrew in a scorched circle, elongating on the leeward side: and suddenly the neighbouring bracken was alight.

He waited until silver rectangles appeared on the end of a charred branch, lifted it from the fire and checked that it went on burning alone. With this brand he laid a trail of fire south-east, coming after half a mile to the hazel thicket, which he fired in three places before throwing the burning brand into its centre.

For a moment he watched the shimmering further up the slope, his eyes smarting and his face grey with dust and ash. The fire had not yet taken off, even though the wind had picked up and he felt a push of heat on his face.

He lingered there, overcome by fascination for the flame, seized by a desire to see it all burning, the sky on fire, the wall of flame racing through the forest and destroying everything in its path.

All his life he had been ruled by respect for flame, scrupulously dousing camp fires, obeying the elders, never allowing it to get out of hand. But now he was watching it develop its full glory, growing and feeding, demanding and consuming, towering into the sky and across the land. In his delirium it carried for him a lesson of vitality, power, singleness of mind; and it reminded him that the village awaited him below.

* * *

Along the ridge of the forest columns of pale smoke stood in parallel shapes against the sky. They seemed to be truncated, the pillars cut off sharp where the rising sun was shining on them and making the smoke invisible.

The forest was on fire.

Vude waited no longer. No more could be done. There was no cure. As priest, doctor, he had remained till now, going from house to house, trying to make them comfortable. He had wanted to bring himself to kill them, to end their misery, but he could not.

In the early hours the first terrible herald of death cap poisoning had announced itself, arriving without warning, taking with violent abdominal cramps each of those who had tasted the peppery caps at the agaric ceremony. One by one the symptoms had visited each house, coming again and again as if the stomach were being wrenched to a hard knot and released, only to be racked more viciously than before. No one escaped, save the wounded and the crippled in their beds, the women who had been tending them, and Vude, who by chance had not eaten any of the strange caps.

Now the victims lay past vomiting, weak with watery bowels, cold sweat on their bodies. Some had crawled into the compound, trying to find moisture to slake their thirst.

Vude knew they would be like this for two days, growing weaker, until the pain abated and they were able to rest for a few hours before the cramps and the sickness returned in a torment that would make the first attacks seem mild. Disintegration of the vital organs and seizure of the limbs would lead into a period of madness and

repulsive visions, relieved at last by coma and death. Those who had eaten several caps might suffer for three days; those who had tasted only one might last for ten.

Vude hesitated by the bridge, his bundle on his back. He was the last to leave the village who could.

He saw Feno crawling from the doorway of the threshing shed, his face twisted and alien, streaks of filth in his beard and hair. Feno opened his mouth to cry out: no sound came. His lips and tongue were the colour of sand. His head fell forward and he stretched out one arm, the fingers clenching and unclenching in the dust.

Vude turned and went out by the west gate.

7

Tagart could see no movement in the village. He came further out on the escarpment and shouted again, hoarsely, sick and grey and tired. Sweat had lined the dust on his forehead and round his eyes. His clothing, crusted and dirty, bore gashes which revealed grimy skin and, below his tunic, the ugly bruises on his left side. His hair and beard were matted and tangled, and his teeth, when he drew back his lips and shouted, showed yellow and broken. But his eyes, though rimmed red and stinging from the smoke, shone clear.

‘Bastards! Bastards! Come out!’

He half ran, half jumped, crabwise, a dozen yards down the slope and shouted again.

From the compound came no response. He stumbled to the bottom of the escarpment, through the anthills, through the nettles. With his right hand fending along the rough bark of the palisade logs, he arrived at the east gate. It would not open. He struck it with his fists, shook it until the latches and hinges rattled, and turned away. With the fields on his left, he ran beside the palisade, down the bank, and into the river.

The west gate swung freely. He flung it open and entered the village.

It was deserted.

Only then did he see a man writhing on the ground, face down in the dirt by the threshing shed door; and he saw that there were others, here and there across the compound. He crossed the bridge and, with a pole taken from a stack leaning against the threshing shed, cautiously prodded at the man lying there. A bearded face, tortured and disfigured, lifted to look at him, pleading without words, begging for release.

Tagart frowned and went further into the village, unable to understand what had happened. The others in the compound were the same, women as well as men, all seemingly poisoned. It made no sense.

Inside the houses he found more victims of the poisoning. Sprawled on the floor or in reeking bedding, groaning or silent, all had the same look in their eyes, the same twisted faces. In one house, in a cramped chamber noisy with blowflies, he found, as well as a poisoned man, two women with sheepskins drawn over them. The stench of gangrene made him cover his nose and mouth. He lifted a corner of one of the sheepskins. Part of the woman's body was not there. He realised she was watching him; he

let the skin fall and staggered outside into the morning sun.

Arming himself with an axe from the porch, he went from house to house, searching for Groden.

He found him at last by an upturned water-butt, behind a house on the far side of the compound. Groden moved feebly in protest as Tagart's shadow fell across his eyes. He groaned and Tagart heard the voice again, the voice he had heard in the rainstorm by the burning shelters. He thought of Mirin and what they had done to her, what they singly and together had made her endure. And he thought of Balan, and he remembered the man who had killed him, this man with no beard.

And in glimpses and fragments Tagart began to remember Hernou's voice in the darkness of the yew, and he saw again the preparation of death cap he had made, and then he knew the nature of their poisoning and how it had come about.

He took Groden by an ankle, dragged him to open ground and left him there, the worst retribution possible.

In a nearby house Tagart found a leather backsack with an osier carrying-frame. Into it he bundled a selection of clothes to make him look like a farmer. From a kitchen he chose food for two days, to save him catching his own. Discarding his flints, he took the best he could find from the farmers' supplies and put them into the backsack, together with baling twine, a length of rope, and a grapnel made from fire-hardened blackthorn. Across the top of the pack he laid a pair of short axes with new blades. He carried the backsack into the sunshine and beside it laid a full water-bag.

Tagart crossed to the Meeting House, an unlighted torch of bundled kindling in his hand. At the far end, just as he remembered it, stood the altar. A flame was burning there, a wick held in a bowl ground from the stone and filled with oil.

8

Behind the escarpment and down to the sea the smoke made a mountain, black and white and grey. The roar of crackling and exploding branches, fanned by the wind, merged with and engulfed the crash of falling trees, their trunks and skeletons showing black among the flames. As the fire moved on to fresh forest, boiling sap whined and hissed; green leaves scorched and curled and passed through brown autumn to become traceries of veins that glowed and burned instantly to nothing. In its path the fire was leaving black ground: cleansed, purified, ready for new growth.

On the far side of the barley field, by the spinney of maple and oak, Tagart paused and looked back.

For the gangrened and dying, the wounded and the mauled, for those he had not dragged from their houses and into the open, the end would be swift. He had set fire to the village.

It was achieved. Against even his own expectations, it was achieved. Tagart had overcome all obstacles and discharged his sacred duty. He had achieved his goal, using only the forest to help him: its animals, its plants, the

weapons it provided. With these and with his own strength and singleness he had realised his ends. From within himself he had drawn on reserves that perhaps not even Cosk had possessed. And now the village was finished. He personally had destroyed it. One by one and in groups he had exterminated its inhabitants and swept away their houses and the things they had made. In a matter of months no trace of them would remain. The forest would take over; the fields would become overgrown, unrecognisable, and then indistinguishable from the virgin woodlands that had stood unchanged for centuries.

By all the lore, by the code of his tribe, Tagart had been avenged. This should have been a moment of sweet triumph.

But he felt nothing of that. He felt only bleakness, desolation, and a vast weariness that no sleep could ever assuage. His one goal had been reached. All his strivings were over. He had spent himself, he had succeeded; and been left with nothing. Those corpses lying in the compound, those people: what did he care about them? They meant nothing; they never had. What were they? Could anything about them, least of all their destruction, bring Balan back? Or Mirin? Or the joy he had known in the tribe? Tagart had failed, bitterly, completely, to achieve anything of value or importance. What had he brought on himself? Not victory, satisfaction, but vileness, misery, and three weeks of the worst privation he had ever endured.

Yet out of those three weeks one glimmer had emerged. Without it there could be nothing to relieve the emptiness of his future. It provided a chance, no more, but from chances he knew he could make much. And most of all it

provided hope. The days were too fleet to be spent with a dead spirit. There was one more promise to fulfil.

Tagart stood and watched the village.

Swirling, making the sunshine brown and the grass on the slope dark, billows of smoke and ash were drifting towards the forest, particles returning to their birthplace, from five buildings and thirty-three stone and timber houses that rippled and belched an orange blaze and one by one disintegrated, the beams falling inwards with showers and flurries of sparks. In twenty places the palisade was down or had burned away. It would not remain standing much longer.

Too heavy for its weakening supports, the roof of the Meeting House now began its collapse. The stilts and rafters and walls twisted sideways, and the whole structure fell in flames to a mass of burning wreckage on the ground.

Tagart entered the spinney. On the other side, in its enclosure of white stones, the head of the barrow showed newly dug earth. He took some in his fingers and crumbled it. At his feet he noticed a wilted wreath of campion and chamomile. He stooped and held it to his face. No hint of scent remained.

He stood up. Hitching the pack on his shoulders, he let fall the wreath and set his face towards Valdoe.

PART FOUR

1

Too quick for the human eye to follow, Blean's tercel hobby swept into the twittering flock of migrating martins and came out on the other side. As it flew it bent its head and tore a morsel from the prize that Blean saw it now held in the clutch of one foot.

The mines Trundleman was out alone, two miles from Valdoe. He could see the sombre walls of the Trundle encircling the crown of the hill across the valley. The pennons of the Flint Lord were flacking and straining at their masts above each guard tower and barrack house. Smoke from many fires was being scattered by the wind. The gates stood open to admit the traders and itinerants: preparations for the Crale had begun.

In the pasture far below, the river looped and showed dark-blue among the foliage of alders and willows. This was the last afternoon of High Summer, the eve of Harvest, and though the sun was shining brightly a chilly breeze was turning the white undersides of leaves and making the trees along the field edge sigh.

Blean whistled. On rapid, shallow wingbeats the tiny falcon climbed, hung for a moment, and with the glare of both eyes directed at its master described a low glide that terminated in a jangle of bells as its talons took purchase on the gauntlet. The martin, white feathers bloody, fell to the turf; the hobby, sleek and unruffled, opened its beak

and panted, riding Blean's wrist as he secured the jesses at its legs. He had trained the bird himself, and it was his favourite, his usual companion on these daily walks. It served no practical purpose, it caught nothing for the table, but to see it killing was to Blean a thrill incomparable to anything that the hawk mews in the Trundle could provide. Sometimes he took out one of the austringer's goshawks, for hares; in the winter perhaps a gyrfalcon for wildfowl; or perhaps an eagle to fly at deer. Most of the Trundlemen favoured peregrines, with their faultless control of wind and sky, but Blean liked his little tercel.

It was late. Blean gave his thoughts to getting back. The reports from Stobas and the other day-shift overseers still had to be heard, and there was the season's tally to complete before its presentation to Lord Brennis the following day. After that, work could be forgotten, for a time at least.

The Crale Festival, marking the beginning of Harvest, was second in the calendar only to the first day of Winter, the new year. To people whose survival depended on the abundance of their harvest, the ceremonies and sacrifices of the Crale meant everything. This was the time of adoration and prayer, litany and chant. In every village was heard a petition for Gauhm's continuing beneficence during the two crucial months of the harvest. She had allowed the wheat to grow: let her now permit it to be gathered in, before the rains of autumn beat the fields and spread the grasses flat. The Crale was also the time of renewal, when the last of the year's stocks were almost gone. What remained would be replaced by the new and would otherwise be wasted, so for once even the thrifty could afford to be prodigal, squandering all in a few days of

eating and drinking: an act of faith, a demonstration to Gauhm.

Both inside the Trundle and out, the feasting would begin at nightfall. The oxen had already been turning and sizzling for two days; scores of pigs and sheep had been slaughtered. For the soldiers and overseers there would be liquor and free access to the brothel. For the miners and field-slaves there would be extra meat and half a gallon of beer apiece, and the next afternoon a visit to their own brothel in the outer enclosure.

The older and more tractable slaves might be permitted an escorted walk through the Crale Market. Tents and awnings, now going up in the shelter of the palisade, held booths and stalls where soldiers and farmers would be tempted to make bargains with those who had come from further afield, bringing sweetmeats, pottery and imported wares, toys, beard-scrapers, talismans and periapts, wooden combs, needles, bone awls, carved and leather work, ornaments, effigies in stone and wood, miniature axe-heads of white marble or polished copper, foreign woven goods, bundles of ashwood handles for every kind of tool, ropes, twines, leather by the strip and in pelts, furs and untreated skins.

Under the south-west gatehouse, next to the slaves' quarters, the animal market had already been assembled, with pens and stalls for cattle, swine, sheep and goats. Other stalls were piled high with wildfowl and game, and animals and birds for pets: goldfinches in sad little cages, badger cubs, squirrels with their hind legs tied. Brisk interest surrounded the traders of grain and vegetable seed.

Near by stood the refreshment stalls, laden with clay dishes of blackberries, sloe and crab-apple jelly, elder and

parsnip wine in jars, and ale and bread and mead and cold meats.

‘What is this?’

Blean had paused by an open table on which curious bottles had been arranged in rows. The old woman behind it, a crone with stooped shoulders and swollen knuckles, had averted her eyes at the approach of a Trundleman and now scarcely dared look up.

‘Rosewater, master.’

‘What is it for? Perfume?’

‘Yes, master.’

Blean could have taken the bottle without payment, but the idea of the perfume amused him and his sensibility would not allow him to confiscate it. ‘Four scrapers?’ he offered.

‘Yes, master. Thank you, master.’

‘Are four enough?’

‘Yes, master.’

He dropped the flints on the table and passed through the crowds to the gate, between the walls of the south-west barrack-house. The shadows had grown perceptibly longer.

The afternoon was casting a dusty, golden light on the outer enclosure, on the craftsmen and soldiers and freemen moving to and fro among the sheds and dwellings. A hundred paces away across the parade ground, the sunlight made the burnt oak of the inner palisade look more brown than black. Here, standing just outside the ditch, facing south, had been built the Trundlemen’s quarters: long and low, a single storey divided into many rooms and suites, roofed with planks, the walls half-timbered and finished with clay and flints. Blean threaded his way among the openings which appeared for him and crossed to the main

entrance, which led through a tackle room where outdoor clothing and gear could be stored. Beyond it a long, dark passage, decorated with the heads and hides of trophies, allowed access through skin-draped doorways to the common room, refectory and, through hinged wooden doors, to the Trundlemen's various private quarters. Once inside his own suite, Blean handed the hobby and gauntlet to his attendant and went into his chamber to bathe and change.

Leaving the bottle of rosewater standing on a low shelf by his bed, Blean reappeared, freshly attired, in the sunshine. Strolling towards the mines to complete his day's business there, he first stopped off at the slaves' quarters and spoke a few words to the overseer of the kitchens.

Moments later, a hand on Segle's shoulder marked the end of her employment at the cauldrons.

That she had not been taken from the kitchens till now was to her a source of dull surprise, for when a Trundleman, especially the Trundleman in charge of the mines, made even a mild request, the request was that in name only. But Blean seemed less imperious than the others, and it was not as if a kitchen-girl alone could serve his needs or ranked high in his preference. Each of the Trundlemen already kept several women. Some had wives here at Valdoe, even families. Segle knew that Blean's interest in her would not be sustained. It was a whim, a moment's gratification.

Whatever his attitude, it was of no consequence to her. Whether she was violated in Blean's chamber or in the soldiers' brothel, she knew that what little remained to her was finally about to be taken by Valdoe, taken and ground underfoot. She tried to compose herself for the ordeal; but

as the women slaves bathed and dressed her ready for the Trundleman's presence she was filled with a blind terror and for the first time in her sixteen years fervently and truly wished herself dead.

* * *

Tagart walked through the massive framework of the gateway and found himself inside the Trundle.

Among all the elaborate plans, the devices and stratagems he had mooted on his journey from Burh, this was the only, the single possibility he had not considered, had not even thought of: that the gates would be standing open without the slightest challenge to his entry.

The whole feel of the place had changed. Soldiers and strangers alike were passing in and out as if the Trundle were not a fort at all. There were men in the guard towers; and Tagart had been given a desultory scrutiny by sentries on the road up the hill and by the gates, but since entering the boundary limits no one had spoken to him, asked him who or what he was, where he had come from, or what he was doing at Valdoe.

It had taken him over two days to make the walk. The heavy exertion of the journey had left him weaker, with constant pains in his chest, and aching feet, legs and back, but in his mind he had begun to improve, to plan more clearly. The delirious, dreamlike periods had grown shorter and less intense, and now he was almost himself again.

He had kept to the roads, making detours into the trees only to avoid the ferry stations, swimming the rivers using the inflated water-bag to help float across his pack and clothing. West of the Arun he had caught up with and, at some risk, joined the tail of a party of itinerant pedlars,

chapmen on their way to the festival. In his speech and manner he found no trouble in joining them, for chapmen were usually descended quite closely from the nomad tribes: people who retained a wandering existence, working where they could, selling what they could, hawkers and petty thieves, despised by nomads and farmers alike. In appearance, too, Tagart was not out of place among them. He prompted no undue interest. After swimming the river, he had cleaned himself up as best he could, washed his farmer's clothes, and forced his feet into the unfamiliar clogs. The chapmen, a dozen or so men with their families and flocks, had questioned him but had seemed inclined to accept that a lone traveller would prefer to walk in company.

As payment for this protection, their leader had demanded the whole contents of Tagart's pack. Tagart had tried to bargain. He told them that he too was a pedlar, that he had come from further east, and that he was searching for his family, from whom he had become separated at one of the villages where there had been only enough harvest work for himself. He said he thought they might have stopped at Valdoe or be there still; he was hoping at the least for some word of them. He could not spare his belongings: they were the tools of his trade. The leader insisted. After much argument he relented and accepted a compromise. Tagart parted with his spare clothing, most of his flints, his rope, twine, grapnel, and one of the axes.

It was extortion, but it provided a safe passage through the most dangerous part of the journey, the last few miles to the fort. Tagart fell to the rear of the line, walking beside a youth whose sullen capacity for conversation soon

became exhausted, enabling Tagart to withdraw into his own thoughts and plans.

They passed through Eartham, below its fort, and Tagart traded a few flints for hot gruel and bread at the settlement there. Keeping his adopted companions in sight, he left the shed where the gruel was being sold and sat down in the shade of a beech tree by the road.

With the silvery trunk at his back, he dipped his bread into the bowl. Above him the sky showed blue. The wind hissed in the beech-leaves; the branches swayed. The road here was wide and well trodden, an important route. It ran between an avenue of beeches, not planted, but two uneven and inconsistent rows of trees that had escaped the axe only because no one had seen any reason to cut them down. The huts and houses of the settlement, encircled by a palisade, stood on the south side of the road and backed on to a system of fields that sloped gradually downhill into a belt of woodland. Beyond this, just visible from the village, spread the coastal marshes of reeds and saltings known as the Rifés. These had their beginnings at the Adur in the east and ran for mile upon mile along the coast below the hills, below Valdoe, to Apuldram and Itchenor in the west.

Tagart finished his gruel. There were other travellers on the road, some stopping for refreshment, others going straight on, covering the last few miles to Valdoe. Most seemed to be traders of one sort or another, with bales and bundles, or animals, laden or not, on halters. He saw a few soldiers, some in armour, and here and there a group of more prosperous-looking travellers: wealthy farmers or priests from the villages. A small crowd had gathered by

the gruel shed, and by another shed where meat and fruit were on sale.

Tagart stood up. His companions were leaving.

A few hundred yards west of the palisade the avenue of beeches came to an end. To the right was the scrub-clad steepness of the hill, leading up to open ground and Eartham fort. On the left were the village fields. With Tagart again at the rear, talking to no one, the chapmen followed the road through fields and scrub as it curved first one way and then another, accommodating itself to level ground below the hills. Less than an hour from Eartham, in the late afternoon, they came within sight of the Trundle.

Tagart's main worry was a fear of being recognised. He had worked at the flint mines and might be known, but though he half consciously pulled up his jacket to cover his neck and the lower part of his jaw, he put his trust in the anonymity of a slave. His features might cause a twinge of memory; he might be half remembered; but it was unlikely. An overseer took little note of a slave's face, caring only about the number of flints he could produce in a day. And out of the mines, in farmer's clothing, among the crowds, there was still less chance of being recognised. Nonetheless, Tagart watched warily as he went, walking self-confidently as if he were a freeman and not a fugitive, with a ready rebuttal on his lips if he were to be challenged.

On the outskirts of Valdoe the group was questioned and searched for weapons. Tagart repeated his story, the one he had told the chapmen. It was accepted without demur. The soldiers opened his pack and took the remaining axe, and he was allowed to pass on.

Tagart accompanied the chapmen for most of the way up the hill. He paused at the slaves' quarters; his companions kept on, making for the tents and booths of the Fair.

* * *

'Give me one of those,' Tagart said, pointing at a leg of bustard on the stall in front of him.

'Five scrapers.'

Tagart did not know that he was expected to bargain. He reached into his pouch. His flints were almost all gone, but he was hungry. Over two hours had passed since his arrival, and he had yet to be sure where Segle was. He had loitered for as long as he thought it safe, watching the kitchens. There had been no sign of her. He saw the day-shift miners brought in for their food; he saw them led out again and into the cage for the night.

Meanwhile, round the walls and inside the Trundle, the preparations for the feast were coming to a close. Tagart could hear raised voices and music. One by one more fires were being lit. The sun set; the breeze dropped; and in the kitchens the slaves were beginning to clear the tables. Desperately he wondered whether he could risk an enquiry. He decided he could not, but he had no choice.

There was no other way to find her. He approached the edge of the kitchens, called to one of the women there, and asked for Segle.

'Who are you? What do you want with her?'

'I am her friend.'

The woman, middle-aged, with lank brown hair, stood closer to the bars and looked from side to side.

'Blean has taken her,' she said. 'The mines Trundleman.'

‘When was this?’

‘Today.’

‘Where is she now?’

She could not tell him, nor could she speak longer. The kitchen overseer had called her back to work.

From the slaves’ quarters Tagart had made his way to the stalls.

He paid for the roast leg of bustard and tore off a mouthful of the rich, dark meat. ‘Do you know anything of the Trundle?’ he said, as casually as he could, to the man behind the stall. ‘Do you know which part is which?’

They were standing near the gate. The parade ground and much of the outer enclosure were visible. A great bonfire had been torched by the knappers’ shed, in the middle of the enclosure, well away from the palisade; its flames were casting a lurid light on the crowds.

The stall-holder was a short man with fair hair, dressed in beaver and doeskin. He was a fowler, a freeman who traded with the consent of Valdoe, giving a tithe for its protection.

He said, affably enough, ‘Why should it interest you, friend?’

‘I have never been here before. I would like to know. Where is the house of Lord Brennis? Where do the soldiers sleep?’

Aware of an opportunity to impress, the stall-holder pointed out the various features: here the barracks, there the deep ditch which had taken hundreds of slaves to dig, there the inner palisade surrounding the Lord’s Enclosure, where only Lord Brennis was allowed to enter freely.

‘And the Trundlemen? Where do they sleep?’

‘See there,’ he said, indicating a low building next to the inner palisade. ‘Their quarters.’

‘Do all the Trundlemen live there?’

The stall-holder’s expression changed. ‘You seem very interested.’

Tagart made himself smile. ‘All those who know me say I am too curious.’ He finished the last of the roast meat.

‘You cook this well,’ he said.

‘My woman does it.’

Tagart dropped the bones into a butt provided for the purpose. ‘I wish you good fortune in your trade,’ he said, moving away into the semi-darkness, but the stall-holder was already attending to another customer.

In the west, behind Bow Hill, the last of the day showed as mere paleness. Smoke was rising from the bonfires and cooking fires, from torches that had been set up on the walls, from all the night fires of the temporary settlement. Tagart turned towards the Trundle. From the high ramparts came a squeal of pipes and a loud, wild, rhythmic thumping of drums that persisted through and overcame the cheering shout of the crowd. Burning brands were held to a huge heap of brushwood and timber on the southern slopes of Valdoe Hill, and the beacon fire caught light. A twinkling appeared on Bow Hill to the west, on Eartham Hill to the east, and on along the coast, one after the other, on every hilltop where there was fort or settlement loyal to Valdoe and the Gehans.

* * *

The door of the bedchamber shut with a clatter of pegs locked into place, and Segle was alone.

She looked round the room. The women slaves had conducted her here, into the Trundlemen's quarters, down a dark passage and into Blean's suite. Light in the room was coming from wooden lamps – clips holding rush-pith dipped in beeswax – standing on shelves, by the bed, on a table by the window. They were casting weird shadows and making subtly moving shapes of the curtains and wall-hangings. Under her feet she could feel soft matting. A smell pervaded the room, a smell of rosewater.

Outside, she could hear shouting and music and the noise of the feast. She stood in the middle of the room and clasped herself, and, no longer wishing to witness any part of the bedchamber or its furnishings, closed her eyes.

She opened them again and looked up. A curtain had been drawn aside: Blean came in. In the uncertain light she saw that he was wearing nothing; she forced her eyes not to drop, not to look down, to keep to his face. He came and stood behind her. She felt his fingers on her neck.

'You're trembling.'

Segle said nothing as she felt his body pressed against her own, moving her towards the bed.

2

Tagart elbowed and shoved and shouldered aside the jostling crowd of people and forced a passage across the parade ground to the door of the Trundlemen's quarters, not knowing what he was going to say or how he was going to get in. He had wasted too much time, hesitated

too long, been too cautious, too timid: nightfall had come, and with it the Crale feast had already begun.

As the pipes on the ramparts shrilled and the rhythm of the drums grew faster, Tagart pushed his way through the last of the throng and found himself in the main entrance. He was in a tackle room hung with nets and bows, ropes, outdoor clothing and gear.

A man came from the side, out of the shadows and into the lamplight. He was grey-haired, less tall than Tagart, with a doeskin jacket and leggings – an attendant of some kind.

‘Who are you? What do you want?’

Tagart looked past him and into the dark doorway that led inside, and unbidden the right words came to him. ‘I bring an urgent message from Stobas at the mines. I must see Trundleman Blean.’

‘Has there been an accident?’

‘I must see Trundleman Blean, in person. Immediately.’

‘He cannot be disturbed.’

‘Where are his quarters?’

The attendant moved to bar Tagart’s way. ‘He cannot be disturbed!’

Tagart thought of striking him, of knocking him aside, but changed his mind. There would be other attendants.

‘I would not be in your place when he discovers you’ve stopped me,’ Tagart said. ‘A year’s work is in peril. The main-shaft struts and shutters are in danger of collapse. We’re rigging jury props but even those are breaking up under the strain. We must have the master’s word. Only he knows what to do.’

The attendant seemed to waver. ‘He’s with a girl. I daren’t go in.’

‘Then let me. If he’s angry I’ll take the blame. I’ll say you tried to stop me.’

The attendant still hesitated.

‘Is that his door?’

‘No.’

‘Well, which is his?’

‘Follow the passage to the end. Be sure to knock before you enter – he’s alone with her.’

Tagart was not fully aware of moving past the attendant. He was in a dark passageway, heading down it towards a glimmer of lamps and the shape of a wooden door. His hands fumbled with catches and the door opened into a dimly lit room. Making big shadows, he crossed it and thrust aside a curtain and there before him was a bedchamber and in the corner a bed, and Blean, and Segle; her right hand was touching the floor, fingers spread wide in an agony of revulsion. Even as the man on the bed realised that something was wrong, Tagart’s doubled fists came down on the back of his neck and broke from him a low grunt: Blean’s muscles went limp and he slumped, a dead weight that Tagart rolled aside and to the floor.

In the feeble light of the rush lamps Tagart crouched and took Segle’s small, pale hand. He spoke her name. She opened her eyes.

‘I am Tagart,’ he said. ‘You will be safe now.’

She could not speak; she could not raise her head from the deep fur covering the pillows. She was watching Tagart without recognition.

Beside Tagart, Blean stirred. On the table Tagart found a roll of legging-straps. He tied Blean’s ankles and wrists and pulled them together from behind. With another strap he tied a gag into Blean’s mouth. Tagart told himself he

should kill him. He should remove from the world a man who lived by enslaving others, who had no conscience about robbing them of their life and liberty.

But Tagart could not bring himself to do it. There had been enough killing. There would be no more.

Segle sat up. He wanted to comfort her, to reassure her; but there was no time. He said, 'Where are your clothes?'

Still she was unable to understand. Tagart noticed some clothing – presumably hers – on the floor and crammed it into his pouch. Taking one of Blean's capes, he pulled it round her and helped her up, over to the window. As he ripped the kidskin curtain from its bar he glimpsed the fires and lights in the outer enclosure.

Segle would not respond to his voice. With a hand on each side of her waist, he lifted her over the ledge and let her down on the other side, then climbed through himself.

'You were killed,' she said, softly. 'They said you were killed in the mine with Boak and the others.'

'Can you walk?'

'Yes.'

Tagart guided her away from the wall of the Trundlemen's quarters and into the crowd, the bonfire somewhere on their left, its glare rising into the sky, carrying up smoke and heat with bents of straw. On the wind came the smell of roasting meat.

'Keep by me,' Tagart said, and held fast to Segle's hand as he drew her towards the south-west gate.

It could be at most only a few moments before the attendant went in and found Blean. Tagart and Segle would have to make the most of their start. He thought of taking a straight run for the forest. At night there, alone, he could not be caught. But with Segle it was different. She would

slow him down; and from her things at the Trundle the hounds would hold a scent so strong that in dry woodland there could be no escape.

Close by the wall of the barracks, they came out of the gate and into the stalls and stands of the fair. He looked over his shoulder. Life was returning to Segle's face.

'This way,' he said, taking her behind the fowler's stand, round it in a loop, under an awning where cooked venison was being sold, through a narrow gap between two tables heaped with mallard and quail and snipe, and, coming out of the fair, he led her downhill, due south, past the throng of people round the beacon fire, following the road to the mines where many people were passing back and forth. The crowds grew thinner; beyond the fires there was darkness.

With the girl's hand in his own, Tagart left the road and started across rough ground, scrambling down the slope of the settlement fields. They were trampling the crops. Huts and houses passed them in the moonlight. The slope steepened and they were among hawthorn scrub. Twice Segle slipped and fell; twice Tagart pulled her to her feet and drew her on, putting distance between them and the summit. They reached a level on the hillside and Tagart halted on an empty path, unfamiliar to him, that ran to left and right, with more scrub leading down on its farther side, towards the marshes and the sea.

He glanced uphill at the Trundle. He saw the slaves' quarters illuminated by the firelight of the beacon, and he saw the palisade and ramparts, the framework of the guard towers, black and linear against the smoke and an orange sky. He saw the loose awnings and canopies of the fair, the people and animals, the cattle in pens; he heard their

voices and the music, and above them he heard the hounds give tongue and the shouts of their handlers as the teams came straining through the south-west gate.

Even as Tagart pulled Segle across the path he heard the shouts become angry and the hounds' voices become yelps as they tangled their leashes with the stalls, tipping over tables of venison and game, their muzzles confused and over-busy with the strong scents of quail and snipe and mallard. The pack was already broken in purpose, not fifty yards from the gate, the hounds running against their collars, eager to find the trace: the handlers dragged them to, and held for them again the bedding from Segle's quarters and the bottle of rosewater given by Blean. But still the course through the stalls and crowds puzzled them and Tagart heard more yelps.

The delay gave him no heart. He knew that dogs trained to hunt human beings were of a special kind. They would not be among the stalls for long.

'You must run with me,' he told Segle. 'When I am not carrying you, do as I do. Plant your feet in mine. We're going into the Rifés.'

3

Between Valdoe and the sea lay three miles of unroaded waste: reed-marsh and lagoon, wet thicket and underwood, acre after acre where the drainage of the hills merged with the wash of surf and the sluggish leak under an unstable beach. At night it was a dangerous place, a wilderness of

water sounds, of sudden deep channels and rotten islands, and beyond them sparkled moonlight on ripples and the mace-swamps, and the open streams that twisted and turned and became choked and lost among shattered willows and decaying leaves. Where the rivers grew brackish the reed-beds began. For nearly two miles they stretched towards the coast, giving way at last within hearing of the beach, becoming a muddy creek and a line of saltings. After that, there was only shingle: pebbles, foreshore, stinking weed, breaking froth, and the open sea.

Less than a mile ahead of their pursuers, two figures waded the last of the freshwater marsh and appeared in the moonlight by the beginnings of the reeds. Tagart had used all his knowledge to slow the dogs, and Segle, who knew wet ground better than he, had guided them through the worst of the willow swamps and osier beds; but from the hounds' voices they could tell that the gap was closing quickly, perhaps too quickly, and they knew that if they misjudged and blundered in the reeds they would stand no chance. By now they were both naked, covered in mud, their limbs bleeding and torn from brambles and broken branches. For some of the way Tagart carried Segle. Times beyond count he had fallen; they had both fallen; or sunk to their thighs in ooze and struggled clear.

There were three dog-handlers. The break handler controlled the leading team and the two brace handlers came behind. They were soldiers, experienced men who had served on slaving trips, both from the Trundle and abroad. Each lived with and looked after four hounds: big, heavy animals chosen for their endurance and strength.

The dogs knew the marshes. They knew the sounds of splashing, of breaking wood, and the sound of breeze in

the reed stems. They knew the bird-cries and the smell of eels. By their breed and training they could taste scent as it lingered on the surface of the water or in the filling footprints across an oily mud-bank. A trail which had long since scattered among the spikes and fluffy heads of the reed-mace could, with a few stray molecules, be regained and held and followed with renewed baying and hauling at the leashes.

Behind the handlers came four ordinary soldiers, cursing the way of the scent, south through the scrub and towards the swamps. They had been held up for a long time among the stalls of the fair: the dogs had lost the scent completely, not once, but six or seven times. At last they had found it again, just off the road, in the barley field.

They passed the deserted boundary line and followed the trace across a scrubby heath which dipped in slow stages to the lower road from Eartham. On the other side the heath became one with a dense stand of birch and oak, mingled with elms where the trees bordered the Apuldram road.

The dogs massed here in the moonlight, their noses close to the ground. The line of scent had been drawn beside the road for a hundred paces. Halfway along it, where Segle had climbed on Tagart's back, the trace of rosewater abruptly stopped. But the hounds had already owned Tagart's personal odour: the vegetation by the road held it strongly and they followed without difficulty. The scent crossed the road, recrossed it, wandering and broken among the foul stench of the wayside hemlock, and turned back under the elms and through a broad bed of nettles that stung sensitive muzzles and eyes and flew. From the stamens of the male flowers, powdery pollen got in the

dogs' noses; the leaves and the ground smelled like dry hemp. The leading hound, a big black bitch, turned in bewilderment with her tongue held low. The scent had died. The other dogs came up. One sneezed; another whimpered. The brace teams spread through the nettle-bed, searching from side to side.

'Where's it? Where's it? Where's it?'

The handlers spoke to the dogs, and to each other.

'Where's it, girl? Where's the line?'

The black hound sniffed at a particle, a hint, her wet tongue sliding at something in the air ... roses; not roses ... rose-petals. She drew in air again, across damp membranes, but no fresh nerves fired: she had used up all the scent.

'Back it on! Back it on! Turn it!' the break handler shouted, anticipating by moments the black hound's own conclusion: that the prey had doubled back.

'Back it on! Back it on!'

They raced back to the roadside and the stink of hemlock. The hounds ran about, loose on their leads. Within moments they had regained the taste of Tagart's musk. And, ten yards on, at the place where Segle had climbed down, it was rejoined by rosewater.

The trail led due south. In full cry the hounds ran straight through the trees and after it.

They were checked by the first water of the marshes, at a stagnant ditch, a natural drain rank with willowherb and flags. To cross it in the easy wake of the scent they were awaiting the handlers' word – the dogs never went leashed where the handlers could not follow. The black bitch whined impatiently as the leading handler probed the ditch with his staff.

It was safe, waist-deep, and the dogs thrashed across. The water stank; smelly mud rose to the surface. The quarry had smeared themselves, to no avail. Their scent, barely disguised, appeared strong and sure on the other bank.

The soldiers crossed the ditch and dragged themselves clear.

They were in the marshes now. It was time to change the mode of chase. There were firm places for dogs that would not take human feet, short cuts made obvious by the wanderings of the scent.

The hounds yelped and strained in excited frenzy to be free. Fingers worked at straps and buckles, and twelve collars were unleashed.

Before them reached wet woodlands of willow and willow, with open ground among the islands of trees and fallen trunks.

Mud-spattered, swearing and sweating, the men ran behind, skirting ditches the dogs had crossed, negotiating streams the dogs had leapt. With every yard the trail grew stronger, newer, fresher. As the dogs sensed it the pack's stride lengthened and its speed increased.

Just ahead of the black bitch the leading runner squealed. In the moonlight and darkness it made a clumsy, tearing somersault and slid limp-backed into the leaves. It had run onto a broken stake, hastily angled and thrust at dog's-head height into the ground.

The pack faltered. The black bitch smelled suddenly opened dog-flesh and heard the handler's rage.

'Leave him, girl! Leave him! Go to!'

She turned and the hounds ran on, less one, the stream of rosewater growing. Together in a scramble they entered

and swam a black pool; on its far bank they trod on thorns and tasted Tagart's taint. Snarling, growling, worrying what they had found, tearing it to pieces, they dragged something free, the strongest scent yet, rammed into the space below a rotten log.

The handlers came up.

It was Blean's cape, the one that Segle had worn.

'What do you think?'

'They're slowing. They must be tired.'

'We're nearly on them now.'

The hounds whimpered and panted. Some shook fur and made spray.

'Go to! Go to! In the water! Go to!'

Another black pool; a tangle of willow branches and old trees lying drowned and quietly rotting in the water with their limbs submerged. The trace wandered at its edge, moved uncertainly, went in. The quarry, both together, had swum the pool, so recently that the trace lingered in the air as well as on the film, destroyed by the hounds as they plunged and splashed, whining with frustration: for in deep water the scent went under, below the rise of a floating trunk, where the dogs could not follow. Wet pads and claws, legs not meant for climbing, scrabbled at rotten willow bark. The dogs found no purchase and fell back, unable to climb over the obstacle, unable to swim under. The brace hounds paddled to the sides, exploring the tangle of old branches and withered leaves, looking for a way through. It was no use.

'Turn it! Turn it! Turn it!'

'Come out and turn it!'

Reluctantly, paddling, the hounds came out, while the handlers struggled to catch up and tried to find a route that

circled the maze of streams and pools, to get to the other side of the floating trunks, to search among the osiers and willows for the line of scent that somewhere had to resume its course.

* * *

Pushing the reeds down flat, using the stems and leaves to help support their weight, Segle led Tagart first in one direction and then another, pushing southward in a passage of rustling and crushing and sucking. She was carrying a makeshift pole, a willow branch two yards long. By the feel under her feet, by the changes in the rate at which the mud threatened to give in, Segle sensed her way along the seams of older and firmer ground: a skill she had been taught in the tribe, demanding speed, nerve, and experience. To stop once, to hesitate, would allow the mud to open and swallow them up.

Above the noise of their progress, Tagart tried to listen, to ascertain how long the pursuit had been delayed at the pool.

It came again, the terrifying music of the hounds. They had already crossed the pool and regained the scent.

In one hand Tagart was carrying a pole like Segle's. In the other he was carrying the bundle of his clothes – leggings and a jacket. Before entering the reeds he had taken them off. When Segle gave the word he was to drop them, leave them for the dogs to find: because once the dogs had stopped in their course to investigate, the handlers would do the same.

'Now!' Segle called out.

Tagart let the clothes fall.

In the brief freedom since leaving the fort, Segle had already recovered herself. From incredulity that Tagart had come back from the dead, and wonder that he had managed to overpower Blean, Segle had marshalled her feelings and now it was she who was guiding Tagart, using her knowledge of the reeds to help them both. And in the few words and gestures they had exchanged, he knew that he was no longer alone; his empty days were over.

Suddenly there was no support for his feet and Tagart was sliding into the mud, slime rising past his calves, his knees, his thighs, towards his waist. Somehow he had lost his grip on the pole. Instinctively he threw his arms out and tried to grab handfuls of reeds. Segle heard his shout and turned to look. Without seeming to pause, she turned her pole horizontally and allowed herself to fall, spreading her arms and legs to distribute her weight.

‘Lean back! Lean back and keep still! Struggling gets you in deeper!’

Tagart felt the mud rising over his waist. The reeds towered above him, the seed-heads pendulous and heavy, obscuring the bright circle of the moon. In the clear space overhead, the night sky was filled with stars. Before him was utter blackness; on the mud, bluish glints.

Segle, using the pole for support, crawled towards him. ‘Lean back! Lean back!’

He could hear the hounds coming closer. By the change in their voices he thought they were entering the reeds.

‘Lean back!’

Tagart tried to do as she had said. The fierce suction below was fighting him, dragging on his legs, refusing to let go. He was going down.

‘Lean back!’

Contrary to its every instinct, he forced his body to respond. He forced it to yield, offering more of itself to the mud; and as he leaned back he found his feet rising and became aware that he was no longer sinking so fast.

‘Spread your arms and pull on the reeds. Let the mud float you like water. Don’t struggle against it, let it help you.’

With agonising slowness Tagart tried to obey, to drag himself backwards and out of the mud. But now he felt his head sinking into the slime. He heard the dogs’ voices become dull and faint as it filled his ears, its coldness rising up his face. Despite himself he knew that he was near to panic; he knew that once he felt the mud closing over his nose and mouth he would thrash and flounder and be unable to stop himself from going down, on his back, with no hope of getting out.

The dogs were coming. He was trapped here, and they were coming.

He spoke, and his voice sounded strange to him; he heard the words filling his head.

‘Leave me here. I can’t move. Leave me here.’

Not a word of Segle’s reply reached him.

* * *

The soldiers splashed and waded knee-deep through the last open channel before the reeds. From the shallows each had taken a pole.

The brace handlers called their dogs in and directed them after the break team, into the corridor of reeds broken down by the prey. There was no longer any need of scent. The trackers could see where the quarry had gone.

One of the soldiers was carrying a bundle of thin rope; he took it from his shoulder and the end passed along the line, linking the men together. If one went down in the mud, the others should be able to pull him up.

‘Go to! In the reeds, girl! Go to!’

The black bitch, her feet sinking in the ooze, her tongue hungry for confirmation of the wide trace shown by mere eyesight, led the hounds into the forest of stems and along the zigzag of reed-swath made only minutes before.

* * *

Below his head, Tagart felt a gentle pressure. Segle was lifting him so that he could breathe.

His fingers found something hard and relatively unyielding, out of place in the sea of slime and reeds. It was his sallow pole. Segle had found it and put it within his grasp.

Using the support of the pole, he began to win. Slowly, he freed more and more of himself from the mud. Beside him he was aware of Segle’s help, her support, lifting first his arm, trying to raise his body, his legs; and then all at once the mud had relinquished him and he was able to move.

Segle was speaking, her words unable to penetrate his deadened hearing. He pressed his fingers to his head and cleared some of the mud from his ears. At once he heard the hounds, three hundred paces away, less, drawing nearer through the reeds, and he heard the soldiers’ shouts.

‘Try to stand on the pole. Try to stand up.’

Segle had risen to her feet, balancing on the precarious support of her own pole as it sank deeper into the mud. She extended a hand. With a slippery grip Tagart took it

and he too was rising. His feet found the pole, ankle-deep in slime.

‘Follow me!’

They had made a mess of the reeds and mud where Tagart had foundered, churning the mire into a black and watery bog. But Segle managed to pass it, and Tagart, covered in mud, placed his feet exactly where hers had been and once again was running through the reeds.

Almost as the fresh reeds opened for them, the dogs ran down the reek of Tagart’s clothes.

The break handler shouted. ‘Go to! Leave it!’

‘Go to!’

‘Leave it! Go to!’

But in their excitement few of the hounds heard. Too late he shouted again; too late the other handlers shouted. Only the black bitch had heeded and gone through. The others, growling, gnarring, were tussling with bared teeth for the jacket and leggings; and as they fought for them their feet began to sink deeper and deeper.

‘Go to! Go to, you bastards!’

‘Don’t let them stop!’

‘Go to! Go to! Go to! Go to!’

The break handler tried to change direction, to avoid the pack of dogs in his way. With his pole held high, unthinking, he faltered, stumbled, and in the softest mud at once sank to his waist. The water soaked his jacket, his chest, covered his chin. He sensed the suction beneath him, all around him. The mud was almost a living creature. And as the break handler tasted swamp he knew it wanted him.

Another of the handlers hesitated, was made to turn; his left leg slid into mud to the knee, and then the right. Behind him two of the soldiers were going down. The other

men laid their poles and spread themselves flat, as Segle had done, holding fast to the rope. One of them, desperate, threw himself on the heaving backs of the dogs. They were sinking too; as he hit them they turned and snarled and tried to bite him. But their bodies were giving him support, keeping him clear, and however many dogs suffocated it did not matter.

The break handler felt the water rising over his forehead. He screamed. They did not hear it. The scream was the last of his air, his life, a silver bubble that wriggled its way to the surface and broke. His body involuntarily prepared to make another scream, but as his chest expanded for it his lungs drew only mud.

The black bitch ran on alone, through the reeds, dipping her nose low. Her tongue touched the water and lapped the scent she had pursued all the way down from the fort. From the strength of it she knew the prey were only yards ahead, and she knew that she was gaining. She could think of nothing but the quarry. Her handler's voice had given her an order: until countermanded, it would push all else from her brain.

The scent-stream turned and moved to firmer ground, away from the softest mud. The reeds parted in front of the black bitch and her eyes dimly discerned running shapes against the moonlight and the night grey of the coastal sky. She heard them shout with fear. Power bursted to her muscles and sinews and with her feet leaving the ground she sprang, throat-high. In the instant of her flight she tasted rosewater and then the full weight of her body struck and was bringing the human down.

Her training was not to bite the quarry, not to attack unless it showed resistance. She was merely to subdue and

hold it until her masters came. But as the girl beneath her struggled and screamed, the black hound felt other hands closing below her jaw and on the back of her head and she knew she was fighting for her life.

A strength like that of no human she had ever known jerked her head upwards and back. Before her neck broke she saw white and smelled the welter of her own scents and those of the marshes and the prey. Vertebra parted from vertebra: her spinal cord tore and leaked fluid. Damaged tissues fired a blizzard of faulty impulses to her brain, fading, quickly going dark, and she received no more.

4

Segle was holding closely to Tagart, her face in his shoulder. He said, 'Are you hurt? Did it bite you?'

'No.'

In the marshes at their backs they could hear the shouts of the soldiers. The plan seemed to have worked – the hounds had come across Tagart's clothes. But whether they had been stopped or merely delayed, there was no time to waste. Other teams might be dispatched from the Trundle.

'We must keep going,' Tagart said.

He helped Segle to her feet and pushed the lifeless body of the dog aside.

She touched his arm. 'Listen.'

Away from the shouting and the soldiers, to the south, distant breakers were sounding on a sloping shore.

It could not be much further to the sea.

They went on, and now it was Tagart who led the way.

The ending of the reed-beds was signalled by the fluting cry of a curlew, disturbed from its feeding in the creek. For several seconds it had stood with head bobbing in uncertainty, alarmed by the approaching noise of rustling stems: when Tagart and Segle had come out of the reeds it had taken wing and, twenty feet over the glittering mud, passed in front of the moon. Other birds in the creek and in the saltings heard its cry and shared the alert: redshanks, whimbrels, oystercatchers, and their own distinctive voices were added to the curlew's as they too opened their bills and flew up.

'The tide's out,' Segle said.

They left shin-deep footmarks across the width of the creek and entered the saltings, among the glasswort and sea-purslane, stepping over gullies and gutters of wet mud. The glasswort gave way to seablite that scratched softly at their legs. Before them rose the slope of the beach; behind was silence and no sound of pursuit.

Their feet crunching on shingle, they climbed to the low crest of the moonlit shore: and there from west to east spread sparkling sea, the waves angled in broad sweeps and tumbling into surf, almost luminous where the foam broke and slid back into the oncoming crests.

Tagart wearily took Segle's hand and led her down to the water. Their scent could still be traced, even across the pebbles. It was time to make sure they would be followed no more.

It was time to slip into the sea, to swim beside the beach, to come out where it was safe and sleep an untroubled sleep; and afterwards, with the sun on their bodies and the

wind blowing subtly along the shore, to find food and clothing and make a start on all the questions.

The water was warm. A wave slapped at their knees. They went in further. Wordlessly they drew together. With the friendly sea swelling to their waists, they let the water wash away the mud from their skins, the filth of the marshes, clean and healing, gentle, soothing, billowing in a dark cloud, merging with the currents until all trace of it was gone.

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