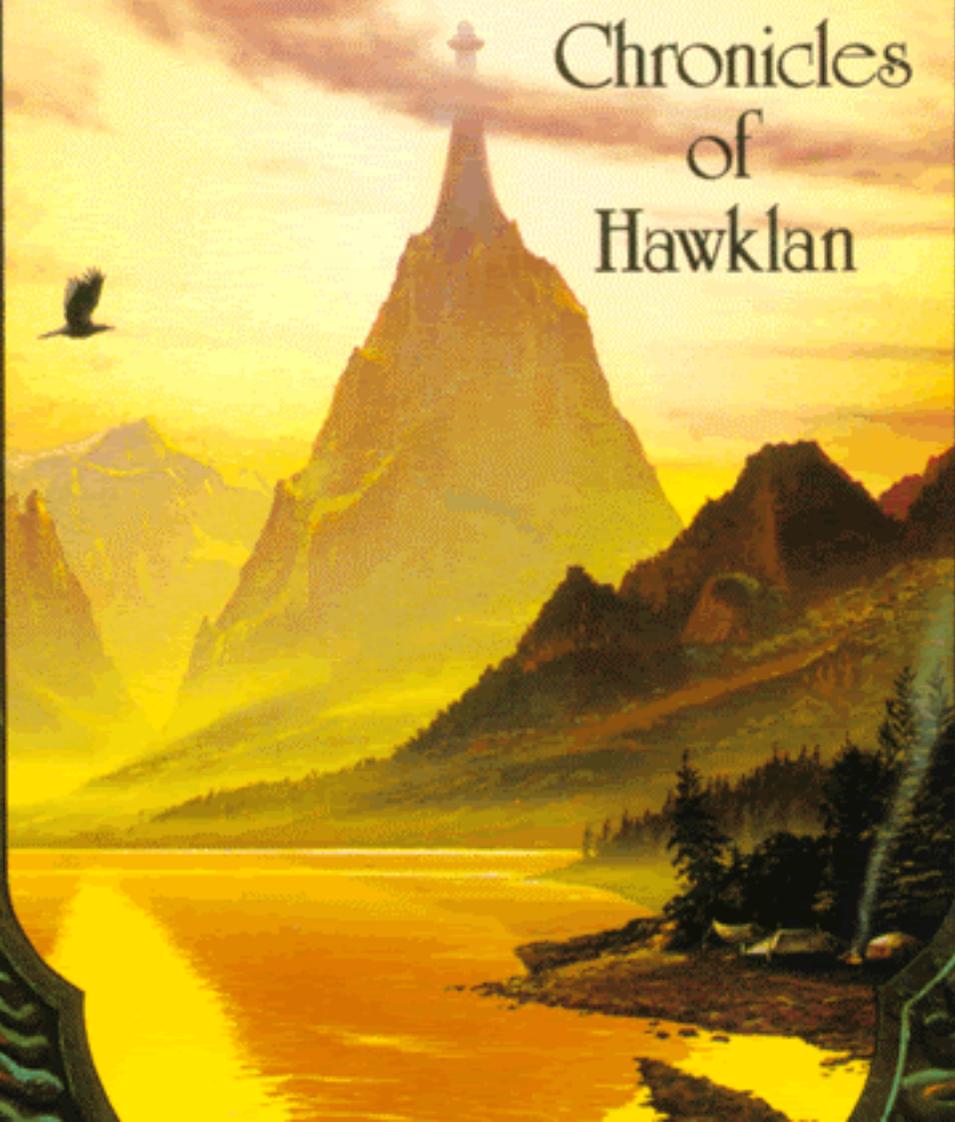


ROGER TAYLOR

THE FALL OF
FYORLUND

The
Chronicles
of
Hawklan



THE FALL OF FYORLUND

Book Two of The Chronicles of Hawklan

ROGER TAYLOR

a Mushroom eBooks sampler

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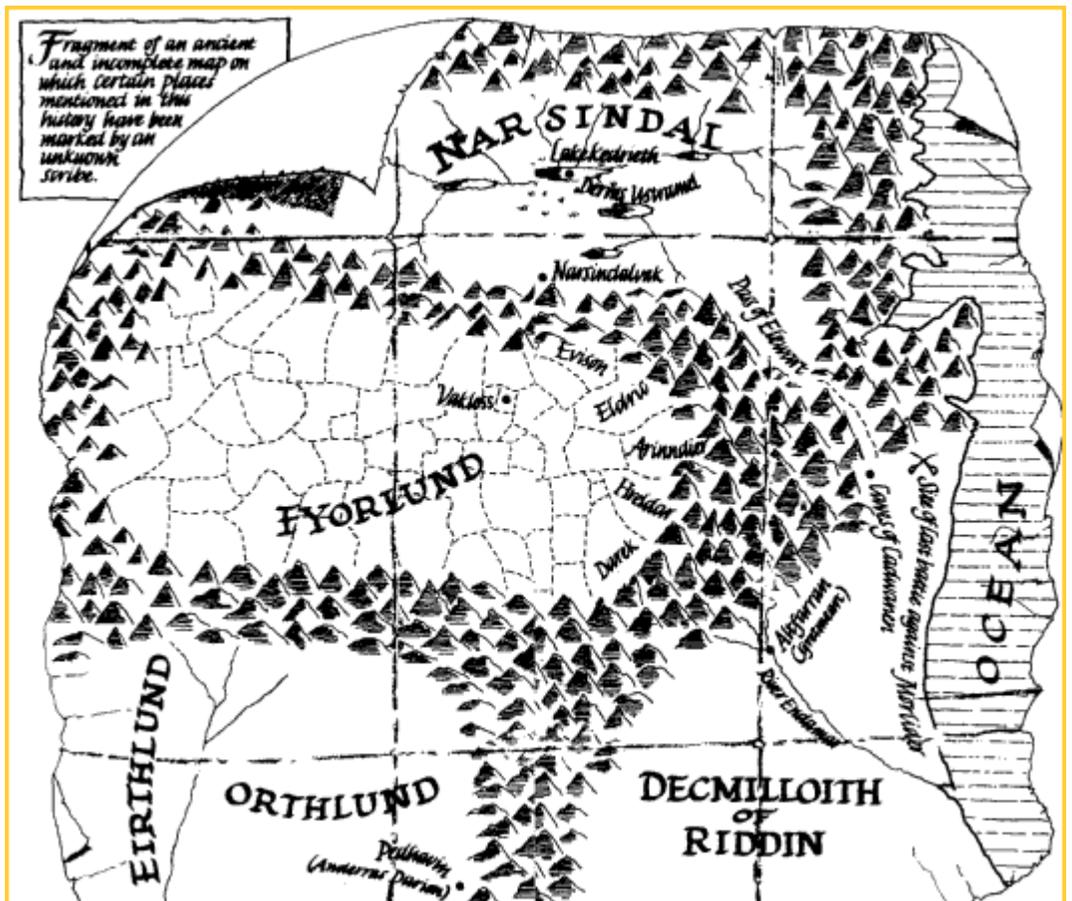
Contents

Map of Hawklan's Land	1
Prologue.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	17
Chapter 3.....	30
Chapter 4.....	47
Chapter 5.....	55
Chapter 6.....	67
Chapter 7.....	79
Chapter 8.....	87
Chapter 9.....	100
Chapter 10.....	118
Chapter 11.....	130
Chapter 12.....	137
Chapter 13.....	147
Chapter 14.....	157
Chapter 15.....	168
Chapter 16.....	178
Chapter 17.....	188

Chapter 18	195
Chapter 19	208
Chapter 20	218
Chapter 21	230
Chapter 22	241
Chapter 23	250
Chapter 24	262
Chapter 25	275
Chapter 26	289
Chapter 27	300
Chapter 28	315
Chapter 29	325
Chapter 30	338
Chapter 31	350
Chapter 32	358
Chapter 33	375
Chapter 34	391
Chapter 35	407
Chapter 36	415
Chapter 37	429
Chapter 38	443
Chapter 39	455
Chapter 40	466
Chapter 41	473
Chapter 42	492
Chapter 43	506

Chapter 44	521
Chapter 45	533
Chapter 46	550
Chapter 47	561
Chapter 48	578
Chapter 49	591
Chapter 50	600
Chapter 51	612
Chapter 52	622
Chapter 53	632
Chapter 54	641
Chapter 55	656
Chapter 56	670
Fantasy Books by Roger Taylor	678

Map of Hawklan's Land



*“The time of Hawklan is so far in the past that
it could be the distant future”*

Prologue

Frantically the valleys and peaks sped by. Gone now was even a vestige of pretence at silence and stealth as the brown bird, its ghastly yellow eyes glittering, hurtled over the mountains from Riddin to Orthlund.

Contained within was the news of Hawklan's escape from the trap at the Gretmearc. Within was the news of the destruction of that trap by a strange old man. Within rang the terrible noise of the battle that was even now being fought with that same man for control of the birds' will.

The bird faltered. The battle or the message? All effort to the message, and it would be bound utterly. All effort to the battle, and the message might still be lost.

Then its master's will reached out and touched it. The message must be delivered at whatever cost.

Unsteadily, the bird flew on, its wings a numbing vibration, until suddenly *he* was there. Tall and lank. Alien in the Orthlund sunshine. His eyes, red beacons from another age.

The bird dropped out of the sky towards him . . .

Chapter 1

Jaldaric started suddenly out of his sun-hazed drowsiness. ‘What was that?’ he said, sitting up and looking round at his friends.

In the distance, one of the horses whinnied uneasily.

There were six Fyordyn High Guard lounging away their off-duty hours in the small glade that they had chosen as a camp site when the Lord Dan-Tor had called an abrupt halt to their journeying through Orthlund.

For a moment Jaldaric thought that a muscular spasm had jerked him back from the twilight fringes of sleep as his body relaxed into the soft turf but he noticed now that all his men were looking round uncertainly, and an unfamiliar silence filled the clearing. Even the birds were silent.

He repeated his question.

The nearest man to him was Fel-Astian. Fair-haired and strongly built, he was not unlike Jaldaric, though his face was leaner and lacked the seeming innocence of Jaldaric’s.

‘There was a rumbling sound, then the ground seemed to move,’ he said cautiously, as if not believing his own words.

‘Did move,’ someone corrected, more confidently.

Fel-Astian nodded.

Then, as if signalling a release, a bird began to sing and the uneasy disorientation pervading the clearing faded. The men all began to talk at once, debating this strange phenomenon.

Jaldaric craned his head back to ease a stiffness in his neck. The brightness of the spring sky made him narrow his eyes and he noticed a small brown bird flying just above the tops of the trees. Strange, he thought. It was one of those charmless, drab creatures that the Lord Dan-Tor seemed to be able to tame and bring to his hand. Yet their flight was normally arrow-straight and almost alarmingly purposeful, while this one was bobbing and dipping from side to side, as erratically as a swallow.

A little way from the clearing, Dan-Tor stood on the rocky outcrop that he had made his private domain since he had returned from the village of Pedhavin with his unexpected order to halt and make camp. However, it was not the Lord Dan-Tor that Jaldaric or any of his men would have recognized, even allowing for the fact that his mood had been uncertain of late, and his normal commanding charm had been marred by uncharacteristic bursts of irritation.

His body was rigid and quivering, and his eyes glowed red and baleful with a gaze that no ordinary man

could have met and stayed sane. Around his feet the rock was shattered and broken as if wrenched apart from its very heart; innocent victim of his immediate response to the news he had received.

He was consumed with alternate waves of fear and rage. Hawklan had escaped the trap at the Gretmearc leaving his, Dan-Tor's, minion there demented and broken. Worse still, someone had aided Hawklan in his escape and he it was presumably who was now assailing the birds, his messengers, his eyes. Someone with knowledge of the Old Power, and no fear of using it.

Dan-Tor had been locked in tormenting internal debate ever since his decision to lure Hawklan to the Gretmearc to be bound and carried to Narsindal. Now it surged around him in a frenzy like a wind-whipped sea overwhelming a rocky shore.

Grimly he fought off the onslaught, and brought his pounding emotions under control with an icy will that belied the awesome glow in his eyes.

Whatever else had happened at the Gretmearc, Eth-riss had not been wakened. He would not be stood debating with himself in this accursed land if that had happened. He would be bound again in the darkness, to wait another eternity, another Coming. He shuddered involuntarily.

His calmer counsels told him that much could be gained from this disaster. *Must* be gained, mocked a voice within him. *Must* be gained, if you are to account to Him for your folly. He grimaced and dismissed the tormentor. *His* anger must be faced in due course, come

what may, but actions taken now could perhaps alleviate it, and such actions would not benefit from fretful worrying.

Who or what Hawklan was remained an enigma. And one that spread further mystery in its wake. The message brought to him by the failing bird was scarcely intelligible, but it was clear that Hawklan had played little or no part in his own salvation, and was now fleeing the Gretmearc. And yet his saviour, too, had fled, though by some route unseen, pitting his strength against one of the birds. The thought was comforting. You'll find the bird no easy prey, he thought, maliciously. It has strength beyond your imagining, and when it defeats you, I'll know you, and I'll find you at my leisure.

Standing like a column of rock in the Orthlund sunshine, Dan-Tor's turmoil eased gradually and the unfettered hatred faded from his eyes. Nearby, birds began to sing again. He had been right. Hawklan was a creature of some importance. True, he had not been bound, but his very presence had at once exposed and perhaps immobilized a hitherto unknown enemy capable of wielding the Old Power against Him. And now Hawklan himself was alone and presumably scurrying back to Anderras Darion like a frightened rabbit to his burrow.

Caution seeped into Dan-Tor's momentary ease. The man must still be bound and examined. But how alert was he now? To risk the Old Power again would be unforgivable folly. He sensed a presence approaching.

‘Captain,’ he said, without turning round.

Jaldaric stopped, surprised as always at the Lord’s awareness.

‘Lord, we heard rumbling and felt the ground shake. I thought perhaps there might have been a rock fall.

Dan-Tor turned and looked at Jaldaric. At the sight of the Captain’s fair hair a memory of long blond hair glinting in the sun came to him, and a device for Hawklan’s binding came to him that was truly earthbound and far from the deep powers of older times.

He smiled broadly, a white banner of welcome lighting up his creased brown face. ‘That was most thoughtful of you, Jaldaric,’ he said, stepping forward appreciatively. ‘But I was in no danger. It was a small earth tremor, nothing more. Unusual and most interesting.’

Jaldaric opened his mouth to speak, but Dan-Tor raised a hand and assumed an expression of almost fatherly concern.

‘I have to leave unexpectedly, Captain,’ he said. ‘And I’m afraid I must leave you and your men with a task as difficult and perhaps as distasteful as you’ve ever had to do.’ He looked deeply into Jaldaric’s eyes. ‘I rely on your loyalty, Captain, as does the King.’

* * * *

‘Ah, Fyordyn are you?’ Loman said, looking up from the horse he was tending. The recipient of this remark stood framed in the sunlit doorway of Loman’s workshop. He

was tall and well-built with fair curly hair and a round face which exuded a worried innocence. Loman judged him to be about twenty-four years old.

Jaldaric and his companions had ridden into Pedhavin down the River Road just after dawn, in search of a smith to re-shoe one of their horses.

‘How did you know that?’ he asked, in surprise.

Loman smiled and winked. ‘No great mystery, young man. It’s very characteristic work,’ he said, handing him the shoe. ‘Quite well made too. Your smithing’s improved in the last twenty years.’

‘Oh,’ came the reply. ‘I’m afraid all horseshoes look alike to me. I know very little about smithing.’ Then, changing the subject, ‘Have you ever been to Fyorlund?’

‘No, no,’ said Loman quickly. ‘But I’ve seen quite a lot of Fyordyn work in my time. A lot of people have passed through here over the years. Here we are.’

His last remark was spoken to the horse as he moved to the side away from the young man and started busily preparing one of its hooves. The Fyordyn work he had seen had been during the Morlider War and he did not want to become involved in relating sad old tales to sate the inevitable curiosity of this young man and his friends.

He regretted slightly his little demonstration in identifying the shoes and decided not to ask to which Lord this group were High Guards. They wore no livery, but their whole bearing told what they were as clearly as any uniform to one who had fought by the side of the High Guards. Loman paused in his work and screwed up

his face as he forced down the old memories that came to his mind vivid and clear.

The young man walked around the horse to join him. 'My name's Jaldaric,' he said, extending his hand and smiling nervously.

Loman looked up and, returning a reassuring smile, took the hand. 'Are you journeying to the south?' he asked.

Jaldaric shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'We're just spending some leave-time in Orthlund before we go back on duty. We're High Guards.'

Loman nodded understandingly and bent to his work again.

'We're due for the northern borders when we get back, and it's miserable up there at the best of times,' Jaldaric continued.

Loman was surprised to find he was relieved at this voluntary admission, and he reproached himself for harbouring suspicious, albeit unclear, thoughts. He attributed these to 'too many changes going on round here these days'.

'You must be my guests for the day then,' he said, to salve his conscience. 'And tonight you must join in our little celebration.'

Jaldaric seemed taken aback by this offer and protested that he and his friends did not wish to be a burden to the smith.

'Nonsense,' said Loman. 'We take a pride in our hospitality in Pedhavin. And, as it's unlikely that you'll come here again for a long time, if ever, you'll need

someone to show you round or you'll miss a great many interesting sights.'

In common with most of the other people of the village, Loman felt he was emerging from the dark cloud that the tinker and his tainted wares had cast over the village, and the feeling of lightness, of returning to a welcome normality, had made him quite loquacious. Jaldaric's half-hearted protestations were easily swept aside.

'I've one or two things to do up at the Castle. Join me there in an hour and I'll show you round. Well, I'll show you a little of it anyway. It's a very big place.'

The young men were amazed by the Castle and plied Loman endlessly with questions, many of which he could not answer.

'I'm a humble castellan and smith, not a warrior lord – or a builder,' he said eventually.

Jaldaric laughed. 'A child could defend a castle like this,' he said. 'It's the most incredible place I've ever seen. You can see for miles and miles, and you're completely unassailable behind walls like these – and this gate.'

They all expressed surprise that the occupant of such a castle was not a great lord, but simply a healer – and a healer who had just decided to travel on foot all the way to the Gretmearc. But Loman just laughed.

'We've no lords in Orthlund,' he said. 'We just tend our crops and practice our simple crafts.'

Jaldaric looked troubled. Loman thought he understood.

‘There’s a Great Harmony in Orthlund, Jaldaric,’ he said, ‘which most people from other lands can’t understand, even though they might sense it. No one knows why it is. Perhaps we’re a special people in some way. We accept Hawklan for what he is. Whatever he might have been once, he is beyond doubt a very special man, and a great healer.’

Jaldaric nodded vaguely.

Loman was spared further questioning by the appearance of Tirilen. Her presence took the young men’s minds well away from matters military. Loman smiled to himself as he watched his daughter’s light grace draw the satellites away from his own more solid presence. He wondered what her new-found escorts would think if they had seen her in the not-too-distant past when she would crash down the stairs three at a time, or wrestle a village youth to the ground for some slight, real or imagined.

Strangely, Jaldaric did not lead the admiring throng, but kept himself a little aloof, and Loman noticed that he frowned occasionally as if some troublesome thought kept recurring to him.

The celebration that Loman had referred to was not intended to be anything special. The need for it seemed to have been agreed by an unspoken consensus among the villagers as an attempt to dispel the remaining gloom left by the tinker. However, the presence of strangers struck the powerful chord of hospitality present in all the Orthlundyn, and turned it into a very special occasion indeed.

Jaldaric and his troop found themselves overwhelmed with food, drink, and merriment, in a bright ringing whirl of dancing and singing and laughter, the predominant feature of which seemed indeed to be Tirilen, flying through the lines of clapping hands and jiggling flutes and fiddles.

Eventually Jaldaric had to concede defeat. Flopping down next to Loman, red-faced and panting, he said, 'You dance and sing harder than we do our military exercises. I think your daughter would make an excellent training officer for our cadets.' He took a long drink. 'Not to mention some of the Guards themselves.'

Then they had to leave. In spite of all protests. Jaldaric held his ground valiantly. They had to be back in Fyorlund soon or they would be in serious trouble. They would not forget the friendship of Pedhavin and would surely return one day when time was pressing less on them. They refused all offers of hospitality for the night, saying that, leave or no, they were bound to certain ways as High Guards, and had to spend their nights in formal camp.

As Jaldaric leaned down from his horse to take Loman's hand, the light from the fire seemed to make his boyish, innocent face look briefly old and troubled and, as he rode away, he seemed ill at ease, not turning to wave as most of the others did.

* * * *

Too tired to face the long steep climb back to the Castle, Tirilen had begged a bed from Isloman. Now she

revelled in the feel of a different room with all its shapes and shadows and smells: familiar, but free of her own personality.

Pausing before a mirror, she raised her chin, pushed her head forward and carefully examined the small scar on her throat. It was noticeably less inflamed and she touched it with a cautious finger. It was healing, but only slowly. How strangely persistent it had been, like the cut on Loman's hand. Then she caught sight of her face in the mirror, incongruous, with lips pursed and chin extended. She put out her tongue and tossed her hair back with a spectacular flourish before setting about it vigorously with a delicate metal comb that her father had made for her many years earlier. It shone and sparkled, sending tiny lights about the room as she swept it repeatedly to and fro, unpicking the dance-swirled tangles.

She jiggled about on her seat and sang softly to herself as she combed her hair, her head still full of the music that had been playing all evening, and her feet still full of dancing. Impulsively she stood up and swirled round, sending her hair and skirts flying out like canopies. Then, dousing the torchlight, she went over to the window and stepped out onto the balcony.

The sky was bright with moonlight and hardly any stars could be seen. Looking up she could see the Great Gate of Anderras Darion gleaming silver, like a star fallen to earth, while looking down she could see the streets and rooftops of Pedhavin, glistening in the moonlight.

There were still a few people wandering about, talking and laughing, and she acknowledged several friendly calls with a wave. For a few minutes she stood and watched as the moonlight moved across a small carving on the edge of the balcony. The shadows within it made it look like a bud slowly opening into flower. So realistic did it seem that she had an urge to lean forward and sniff its night scent.

‘Oh! Too much dancing, girl,’ she said to herself, catching the strange thought and, spinning on her heel, she went back inside, continuing her dance across to the bed.

She lay very still for a long time, allowing warm, tired limbs to sink into the bed’s sustaining softness as she watched the moonlight’s slow march across the room.

Normally she would fall asleep immediately, but the dancing and the pleasant, strange familiarity of the room left her drifting gently in and out of sleep. Each time she opened her eyes, the shadow patterns on the ceiling had changed as the moon continued its journey through the sky. Not for the first time, she wondered why the Orthlundyn were not content simply to make beautiful carvings, but had to fill every carving and every cranny in the village with endlessly shifting shapes in which different scenes appeared with each change of moonlight or sunlight. Sometimes she felt overwhelmed by the massive history that seemed to be wrapped hidden in these carvings, even though it never made a

coherent whole. She often felt an ancestral presence reaching far behind her into a strange distant past.

Drifting back into consciousness, with half-opened eyes and a half-closed mind, she noted the shadow of a man's profile on the wall. It was vaguely familiar, but she could not identify it, and it was already looping in and out of her incipient dreams.

When she opened her eyes again, it was gone.

Instead there was a darker, much more solid shadow there, not lightened by reflected moonlight but cutting it out. It was the figure of a man, standing in the room.

Suddenly she was awake, eyes wide, at first in bewilderment and then in mounting terror as a powerful hand was clamped over her mouth, and a soft hissing voice exhorted silence.

Chapter 2

In contrast to his leisurely journey from Pedhavin, Hawklan strode away from the Gretmearc as vigorously as he dared without making his progress seem too conspicuous. His long legs carried him easily through the throngs crowding the roads near that bustling, hectic market, but he was troubled and, while he tried to use the steady rhythm of his walking to quieten his thoughts, it was of little avail.

He had journeyed to the Gretmearc seeking answers to a question he had scarcely formulated. Now he came away beset by countless questions that were all too clear. He was a healer, not a warrior and yet, almost effortlessly, he had overcome four of the men who had attacked Andawyr's tent. Then he found himself angry because he had fled, despite his flight being at Andawyr's express command. Fleeing – leaving others to do his fighting. He felt degraded, dishonoured in some way that he could not understand.

Where had these strange fighting skills come from, and from where this feeling of disloyalty at his desertion of the field? And, perhaps even worse, from where the

deeper voice within, coldly telling him that this desertion was necessary for a greater good?

Then there was Andawyr himself. The strange little man who had undoubtedly saved his life. Andawyr who had referred to him as Ethriss. ‘First among the Guardians,’ he had said. Some strange god-like creature from the mythical past. Hawklan wanted to dismiss the idea as a foolish old man’s rambling, but Andawyr had radiated a sincerity and demonstrated skills that precluded such an easy escape.

But it must surely be nonsense? For all his ignorance of his own past, Hawklan certainly did not feel he was anything other than a very frail mortal. Yet Andawyr had seen that too. ‘You may be our greatest hope,’ he had said. ‘But at the moment I’m *your* greatest hope, and you, along with everyone else, are in great danger.’ Then, ‘Great forces have already been set against you. You need protection until you can be taught to know yourself.’ And finally, ‘Watch the shadows, your days of peace are ended.’ The words were chilling. There was solace in none of them.

And, unbidden, a new awareness had grown in him, making him seek for enmity as well as friendship in strange faces, danger as well as quiet calm where trees threw the road into dappled shade, treachery as well as hospitality when they passed through some village.

But for all his sombre preoccupations, the journey down through Riddin was uneventful. There seemed to be no pursuit from the Gretmearc and neither he nor Gavor saw any of the sinister little brown birds follow-

ing them. None the less, the further they moved from the Gretmearc the easier Hawklan began to feel. It seemed that just as some compulsion had drawn him to the Gretmearc, now something was drawing him back to Anderras Darion. He longed to hear familiar voices talking of mundane matters, and to see familiar faces and surroundings, and he found himself almost elated when they turned from the road and began moving westward along the lesser roads and pathways through the grassy foothills that would lead them back into the mountains and towards Orthlund. Gavor, too, rose high and joyous into the spring sky.

The following day was windy and sunny, with white billowing clouds flying busily across a blue sky. Hawklan had been continuing a relentless pace uphill and had stopped for a brief rest and a meal. He was lying on a grassy bank at the side of the road, staring idly over the Riddin countryside spread out beneath him and half-listening to the happy babble of a family who were picnicking nearby. The sun was warm on his face and he felt very relaxed, in spite of his dark anxieties.

He had made a small truce with himself – whoever I am, or have been, and whatever I did or have yet to do, and whatever has happened or will happen to me, there is nothing to be gained in endlessly fretting over it, other than confusion and dismay. All will become clear in time . . . probably. Just watch and wait and learn.

Looking up at the moving clouds, he realized that the image of dark and distant clouds lingering persis-

tently at the edges of his mind seemed to have gone. Now, like the real ones above him, they were overhead. But they contained no spring lightness; they were dour and menacing. He knew that what he had been fearing had arrived, but he could not yet see what it was.

Suddenly he noticed that the noise of the picnicking family had stopped and he turned to see what had happened. Apparently the father of the group had called for silence and he was slowly rising to his feet and staring up into the sky intently. As he rose, he lifted two of the children to their feet and, with an extended finger, directed their gaze out across the countryside to where he himself was staring. The whole family looking in one direction, Hawklan found his own gaze drawn inexorably the same way.

At first he could see nothing unusual, then a familiar black dot came into view. Surely the group couldn't be staring at Gavor? he thought, resting his cheek on the cool sweet-smelling grass and looking at them again. Then Gavor landed clumsily and hastily by his side in a state of some considerable excitement.

'Look, Hawklan,' he said breathlessly, thrusting his beak forward, pointing in the same direction.

'Where?' said Hawklan.

'There,' replied Gavor impatiently. 'There. Where I'm pointing.'

'I can't see anything,' began Hawklan. 'Only clouds and sk—'

He broke off as his gaze, working through the moving tufts of white, fell on the cause of all the attention.

The sight dispelled his sun-warmed lethargy and drew him first into a sitting position, and then to his feet, though slowly, as if fearful of disturbing the wonder he was looking at. For a moment he felt disorientated and he glanced down briefly at Gavor. The gleaming black iridescence of his friend against the soft green grass reassured him and he looked up again at the large white cloud in the distance.

For a large white cloud is what it appeared to be, one of the great wind-borne flotilla gliding silently and gracefully overhead. Except that rising from its upper surface were rank upon rank of towers and spires, like a vast and distant echo of Anderras Darion, glinting white and silver in the sunlight.

As he stared, Hawklan saw that the surface was etched with a fine mosaic that could be smaller buildings though it was too distant for him to identify any details.

As the great shape moved, so, like any other cloud, it changed, and Hawklan saw the distant towers slowly, almost imperceptibly, rising and falling in response.

‘What is it?’ he whispered, unconsciously imitating the hushed tones of the nearby Riddinvolk.

‘Viladrien.’

Gavor spoke the word at the same time as the man in the group, and the effect, combined with the almost unbelievable sight in front of him, made Hawklan start. Before he could speak again, Gavor said, ‘One of the great Cloud Lands.’

Gavor's tone also reflected the awe of the other watchers and Hawklan himself sensed it was a time for watching and not talking.

'I must go to it,' said Gavor and, without waiting for any comment from Hawklan, he stretched his great blue-sheened wings into the breeze and rose up into the spring air.

'It's too far,' Hawklan whispered softly to himself, without understanding why he said it. 'Too far. You'll break your heart.'

As he watched Gavor go, flying straight and purposefully in the direction of the strange and stately Cloud Land, Hawklan thought he caught a faint sound floating softly in the air all around him but, as he strained to hear it, it slipped from him.

For a long, timeless moment, Hawklan and the picnicking Riddinvolk stood on the sunlit hillside in silent communion as the great shape floated by. Less captivated than the adults, the children alternated their attention between the Cloud Land and their silent parents but, sensing their mood, they remained still and quiet.

In the silence, Hawklan seemed to hear again the strange soft singing all around him but, this time, he allowed it to move over him and made no wilful attempt to listen to it. He had never heard such a noise before, nor could he understand it, but he knew it for an ancient song of praise and rejoicing, though now it was filled with a strange regretful longing. Eventually, as the Cloud Land faded into the distance and was lost

amongst its neighbours, the children began to tug tentatively at their father and ask questions. The man knelt down and put his arms around his two boys. Hawklan eavesdropped shamelessly, his own immediate sense of wonder being slowly overcome by curiosity.

‘It’s one of the Viladrien,’ the man said, almost reverently. ‘Where the Drienvolk live. The sky people. They float in the sky like the Morlider islands float in the sea.’

‘Are they bad people like the Morlider?’ asked one child anxiously.

The man smiled; rather sadly, Hawklan thought.

‘Not all the Morlider are bad,’ the man said. ‘I’ve told you that. But no, the Drienvolk are kind and friendly. They’ve never harmed anyone.’

‘Will any of them come down?’

‘I wouldn’t think so. From what my grandfather used to tell me, they don’t like being on the ground. The air’s too thick for them. They feel closed in, crushed. They need the space of the skies to be happy.’

Hawklan’s curiosity overwhelmed him totally and he walked over to the group and introduced himself. The man welcomed him. He was rubbing his neck and wriggling his shoulders.

‘I couldn’t keep my eyes off it,’ he said with a rueful smile. ‘How long have we been watching it?’

Hawklan shrugged. ‘Some experiences can’t be measured in ordinary time,’ he said enigmatically.

The man looked at him thoughtfully and then nodded a slow agreement.

‘Did you hear that noise?’ Hawklan asked.

The man shook his head. 'No, I heard nothing,' he said. 'I didn't dare to breathe for fear of disturbing the silence. Did you hear anything?' He turned to ask his wife.

'Someone was singing,' volunteered one of the children casually. 'It was all around.' She met Hawklan's green eyes squarely and openly.

'All around?' Hawklan queried.

The child opened her arms to encompass the mountains and the plains and the sky. 'All around,' she confirmed. Her father looked at her suspiciously. 'All around, Daddy, as if the mountains were singing to the Vil . . . Vil . . .' She gave up her attempt on the word, but finished her speech. 'But it was very soft, Daddy, the music.'

Hawklan intervened gently. 'There *was* a faint singing noise, I'm sure. Maybe it was the wind. Anyway it's stopped now.'

The man smiled. 'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'The appearance of a Viladrien is supposed to be associated with strange happenings. I'm well content just to have seen one. What a sight. What a thing to tell them back home.'

'They'll all have seen it,' said his wife prosaically.

The man refused to allow his spirits to be dampened. 'I don't care. I'll tell them anyway. I'll wager we had the better view up here,' he said excitedly. 'What a sight,' he repeated.

‘Indeed,’ said Hawklan. ‘Can you tell me anything about them? I’ve never heard of anything like an island in the sky. What kind of people live on them?’

The man laughed. ‘You’re Orthlundyn aren’t you?’ he said. ‘Don’t they teach you the Old Lore in Orthlund?’

Hawklan smiled and shrugged self-deprecatingly. ‘A little,’ he lied. ‘But not all of us listen as we should.’

The man laughed again. ‘Well, I can’t tell you much,’ he said. ‘Only old school tales. My great-grandfather was supposed to have met some of the Drienvolk once . . . according to my grandfather, that is. Very high in the mountains, when he was young and had got separated from his parents in the mist. Said they showed him the path. Said they were friendly but a bit strange – shy, in a way. And they floated in the air. I never really believed it, but it’s a nice family tale, and the Drienvolk are supposed to be kind and gentle.’ The man’s manner quietened a little at the mention of his grandfather, and he looked almost longingly after the departed Viladrien.

‘And you’ve never seen one before?’ offered Hawklan gently.

The man shook his head, ‘Apparently once they were supposed to be quite common, but no, I’ve never seen one until today. Nor met anyone who has. They say sometimes the odd one has been seen far out to sea, but . . .’ His voice tailed off into a shrug.

‘I wonder why one should come now?’ Hawklan mused.

The man looked at him. ‘That’s a strange question. They’re carried on the air like the Morlider Islands are

carried on the sea. They must go where the wind takes them – where Sphaeera wills.’ He almost intoned the last part softly as if repeating something he had learned many years earlier by rote.

‘Sphaeera?’ queried Hawklan.

The man looked at him and smiled knowingly. ‘It’s a quiet place isn’t it, Orthlund?’

Hawklan returned the smile and nodded.

‘Sphaeera’s our name for the Guardian of the Air,’ said the man. ‘You’ve probably got a different one. She’s actually supposed to have created the Viladrien. But why one’s come now, Ethriss only knows.’

He gave Hawklan a sideways look. ‘You’ve heard of Ethriss, I suppose?’ he asked humorously.

‘Oh yes, I’ve heard of Ethriss,’ said Hawklan, unconsciously resting his hand on his sword.

The man noted the gesture and laughed again. ‘I see you wear a black sword like Ethriss used to. Maybe it’s you who attracted the Viladrien.’

* * * *

It was nearly sunset before an exhausted Gavor returned to Hawklan. The bird sat heavily and silently on his shoulder for a long time before speaking and, when he did speak, his voice was unusually subdued.

‘It was much further away and far higher than it looked,’ he said. ‘And it was large. Very large. I didn’t really get anywhere near it at all, I’m afraid, though I thought I caught a glimpse of people flying over it.’

‘You seem to have been very impressed,’ said Hawk-
lan light-heartedly.

To his surprise, Gavor was almost angry. ‘Andawyr was right,’ he said crossly. ‘You need to study more lore. The Viladrien were Sphaera’s greatest creation. I haven’t the words to describe what I felt when that great vision floated into sight. I doubt I’ll ever be the same again. I must land on one. I *must*.’

‘I’m sorry, Gavor,’ Hawklan said softly. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

Gavor repented a little. ‘It’s not your fault, Hawklan. You understand living creatures more than anyone I’ve ever met, but you’re earthbound. You can no more understand what it feels like to be an air creature than I can understand your healing skills or what it’s like to have hands.’

* * * *

Two days later they were deep into the mountains, Hawklan still maintaining a vigorous pace, fuelled by a restless anxiety. He had the feeling that only at Anderras Darion would he be truly safe, and only there could he begin to start learning about what had happened and perhaps what was about to happen. He might refuse to fret about what had been, but he knew now that he needed knowledge and would have to search, and learn and learn. Sitting on the grass and leaning against a tree he watched the distant sky changing through reds and oranges and purples as the sun sank further below the horizon, and the deep hazy blue of the night encroached

from the east. Overhead, the odd pink cloud drifted aimlessly, while others, lower, were already turning black and grey. One or two bright points of light hung in the sky, vanguards of the night.

He had chosen a sheltered spot for the night's camp because tomorrow he would be much higher and would need to pitch his small shelter for the night. This would be his last night in the open for some days.

Although it was not late and he was not particularly comfortable, his hard pace through the day had left him pleasantly weary, and he found himself drifting into sleep, then jerking suddenly awake as his body slid into some improbable position. After the third such awakening he relinquished his viewing of the night sky and, wrapping his cloak around himself, lay down on the soft grass.

Whether it was a quality of the cloak, or whether it was some ancient instinct he was unaware of, he became just another shadow in the rising moonlight, indistinguishable from all the others, as he pulled his face under the hood.

He fell asleep almost immediately but, as the remains of the evening light faded away, he began to be plagued by restless, flitting dreams. Images of the recent past came and went arbitrarily with an insane logic all their own: a horse that could not speak to him; a squat creature that tore off his arm and turned into a group of his friends when he stabbed it; a rushing cheering crowd of horsemen galloping across the sky and a cloud that sang to him a song he understood but did not under-

stand; Dar-volci's stentorian voice roaring profanities in a dark place full of noise and gleaming blades . . . A terrible place. No! he cried out. No! But he could not awaken. He sat up, sweating, but he knew he was still asleep.

A strange expectant silence fell on his mind. Somewhere he sensed a faint, indistinct and shifting light, and a sibilant whisper reached him, like someone shouting very loudly at a great distance.

'Ssss, awaken, awaken . . . ssss . . .'

He tried to find the image of the light. He must see it. But it eluded him.

'Ssss, awaken . . .'

Then, abruptly, three figures were standing in front of him pleading, and a great chorus of sound roared in his ears.

'Awaken!'

But before he could react, they were gone, vanished, and he was truly awake, eyes staring up into the moonlit sky and his heart racing.

A noise nearby blew away the remaining memory of the dream like smoke in the wind, and drew his eyes downwards. There, not three, but two hulking figures stood before him dark against the night sky, one with a strange, sinister helm on his head.

Chapter 3

On the morning following the dance, those villagers who had to be were up at dawn as usual and away to their fields; some light-hearted, others lead-footed with reluctance. The remainder, however, were more than content to lie luxuriously abed.

It was thus a quiet Pedhavin, tranquil in the spring sunshine, that Isloman eventually woke to. For a little while he prowled casually around the house in search of Tirilen to offer her good morning but, finding her room empty and her bed in its usual state of monumental disarray, he presumed she had left quietly to avoid waking him. He smiled at the sight, reflecting that Tirilen still had some of the attributes of her more boisterous youth. He left the room with a resigned shrug and set about his day's tasks.

Some hours later, however, Loman called to see him to borrow a sharpening stone and, imperceptibly, Tirilen's absence began to dominate their conversation, an uneasy shade crying distantly but persistently for attention.

Their concern aroused, it took but a few inquiries around the village for them to learn that no one had seen her all that day. The uneasy shade became a chilling spectre, cold in the heart of each man.

Years before, the two brothers had quarrelled over the favours of the woman who was to become Tirilen's mother. When she had chosen Loman, Isloman had gone to fight against the Morlider in Riddin, taking wounds and pain with him, and leaving pain and wounds behind him. Later, at his pregnant wife's behest, an unwilling Loman had sought Isloman out on the battlefield and the horror of their personal distress had dwindled into insignificance against the horrors of the latter stages of the war. Sharing discomforts, dangers and indignities, the two brothers were reconciled, the bond reformed between them, stronger even than it had been before their quarrel.

The joy of their return after a bitter winter journey was completed by the birth of Tirilen and, in this small creature, the two brothers buried the last remnants of their animosity. Now the bond between them encompassed her also and she held them like planets round a sun. Captured, too, like a quiet mysterious comet from the distant stars, was Hawklan. Hawklan, who, within a few weeks of Tirilen's birth, had come out of the snow-clogged mountains with the raven Gavor sheltered under his cloak to open the Great Gate of Anderras Darion; the ancient Castle that had been sealed and inaccessible since times of legend. Hawklan, who asked for nothing and imposed on none but who drew all to

him with his gentle presence. Hawklan, whose quality the Orthlundyn knew was beyond their fathoming and could only be accepted like the other mysterious forces of nature.

When, three years later, Loman's wife slipped beyond even Hawklan's aid and died, tragically young, Tirilen's dominion over the three men became absolute.

Hesitantly, the two brothers pieced together the events of the day to form a picture from which Tirilen was beyond doubt missing. Becoming alternately frantic and practical, each supported the other in turn until both could look clearly, if not steadily, at the realities of what might have happened.

Tirilen was adventurous but not foolhardy and she knew the local hills and mountains well, having often walked them with both Isloman, in search of rocks, and Hawklan in search of herbs and flowers. It seemed unlikely, therefore, that she had had an accident, and the two men found their tense debate dominated by the unreasoned feeling that her disappearance was in some way associated with the visit of the tinker, though how or why was beyond them.

Under normal circumstances, in such pain, they would have turned instinctively to Hawklan for advice, but he was not there. So it came to Loman that they should go after the High Guards and seek their help. With their horses and their military discipline, they would be able to cover large areas more quickly than any party from the village, and they might even have

had news of the tinker. Surely they would not refuse such a request?

Thus, leaving groups of villagers scouring the immediate vicinity of the village, the two men took horse and rode off in the direction the Fyordyn had taken.

Neither were good horsemen but they made adequate, if uncomfortable, progress and soon located the site of the camp that the Fyordyn had used on the previous night. From there a trail of lightly damaged grasses and undergrowth showed that the Fyordyn had ridden towards the Pedhavin Road, before heading north, confirming the High Guard's statement that they were heading back to Fyorlund.

Relieved that the Fyordyn seemed to be making leisurely progress, the two brothers rode through the night as rapidly as they dared, pausing only occasionally to rest the horses and to stretch their own sore limbs.

Early in the morning, they saw the High Guards' camp in the shelter of a small copse and, turning off the road, they trotted towards it, casting long shadows on the dew-chilled grass.

A number of the Guards came forward to greet them and, as the two men dismounted, their horses were courteously taken from them and led away. However, before either could speak they found themselves quietly surrounded and held at knife and sword point. When Loman tried to move, the unequivocal intention of their captors was made quite clear.

‘Please don’t attempt to escape. We’ve orders to hold you until Jaldaric can see you,’ said one, resting the point of his long sword on Loman’s throat.

Isloman reached out gently and rested a restraining hand on his brother’s arm. Casting his eyes about significantly into the surrounding trees and bushes and at the group of men holding them, Isloman sent the obvious message to his brother.

Although it was unlikely that any of these young men had been in actual combat, they were trained soldiers and as such were not going to commit themselves to violence, where random chance could play too high a part, unless it was absolutely necessary. They had, therefore, ensured the two brothers were totally overwhelmed. Each was restrained by four sharp points, at least two of which, at any one time, were out of sight and were signalled only by the occasional gentle prod in the back. Then there were two bowmen some distance away, weapons at the ready, and clear sounds of movement in the nearby trees.

Isloman looked steadily down into the face of the man opposite him and took some satisfaction in the man’s inability to return his gaze. Loman fumed and roared, but did not move.

After a few minutes, Jaldaric came out of one of the tents. Loman smiled and opened his mouth to speak, but Jaldaric waved him to silence. When he spoke, both his manner and voice were formal. ‘I regret that it was necessary to abduct your daughter,’ he said bluntly to Loman. Both the captive brothers gaped, but found no

words. Jaldaric looked down fleetingly then, recovering himself, continued. 'It was done at the direct order of a superior and we had . . . no choice. She's unharmed and is currently being taken to Fyorlund where she'll be given every consideration. Now, unfortunately, you'll have to come as well, but you too will be given every courtesy if you behave correctly.'

Then, with a wave of his hand, he dismissed the two men to the care of their guards and turning on his heel walked quickly back to the tent he had just come from, his shoulders hunched high, showing the inner tension that he had managed to keep from his voice.

Before either man could recover sufficiently to even shout questions after the retreating figure, the surrounding sword points began shepherding them towards another tent.

'Just do as you're told and no harm will come to anyone,' said one of the High Guards. 'This tent's a bit rough, but we weren't expecting you. We'll find you something better tomorrow.'

Loman swore at him roundly, but moved as he was bidden.

Inside the bare tent, Loman spent some considerable time raging after Jaldaric and his companions, but eventually he fell silent and slumped on to the ground with his back against the tent's central pole. As the day wore on, they were given food and drink, which Isloman was just able to prevent being hurled by Loman at the head of the man who brought it. But no one spoke to

them, nor offered any answers to their questions, and the entrance to the tent was guarded all the time.

In between fits of rage and frustration, the two men tried to make some sense of their predicament, but their conjectures led them nowhere other than into more frustration. Tirilen's abduction was almost unbelievable in itself, but to learn that it had been done by High Guards of Fyorlund left the two brothers floundering hopelessly. The High Guard were the epitome of Fyorlund chivalry; their action made no sense. Eventually, however, as night came, physical and emotional fatigue took its toll and the two men fell asleep.

Isloman woke up suddenly from a fitful, dream-racked slumber. He shook his brother and gestured silence. Something seemed to be out of place. Cautiously he crawled to the entrance of the tent and peered out. The guards were not there, and there were sounds of merriment coming from one of the other tents.

He found it hard to believe that the High Guards could be so neglectful of their duty but, realizing that a similar chance was unlikely to occur again, he gestured frantically to Loman. The full implications of this lapse by the High Guards passed between the two brothers with a mere glance and, after pausing only until a cloud slid in front of the moon, they ran crouching and silent to where their horses were tethered. Fighting down a powerful urge just to mount and flee they led the horses on foot quickly and quietly out of the camp.

After several minutes, Loman stopped. ‘What are we doing?’ he said. ‘We must go back for Tirilen.’ His shocked voice was loud in the still darkness.

Spinning round as if struck, Isloman seized him and clamped a huge hand violently over his mouth.

For a moment Loman struggled, but even in the moonlight he could see the desperate plea in Isloman’s eyes, and he became still.

‘I want to go back too,’ Isloman hissed, slowly removing his hand. ‘But we don’t even know if Tirilen’s there, do we? She’s being taken to Fyorlund, Jaldaric said. And, in any case, what can we do against so many trained soldiers, even if they’re a bit the worse for drink at the moment?’

Loman glowered furiously but did not speak. Isloman nodded. ‘Yes, we could do a great deal of damage. But that’s all. We’d still end up being killed, and then what would happen to Tirilen?’ Loman turned his face away as Isloman continued. ‘We need help. We’ll have to go back to the village.’

Breathing heavily, but still without speaking, Loman clambered on to his horse and started off at a canter. Isloman glanced back at the camp briefly and then mounted up and rode after his brother. Behind the two men, the sound of carousing and laughter faded into the distance.

They rode back to Pedhavin as they had never ridden before and reached it in the middle of the morning, stiff and weary, with horses steaming and foaming.

Their noisy arrival brought out many of the villagers and it was barely a matter of minutes before they were pouring out their tale to a gathering of the High Fellows of the Guild. The predominant reaction was one of shock and disbelief. The Orthlundyn regarded the Fyordyn as an honourable people, some of the older men referring to them as the Protectors of Orthlund. This act of treachery was beyond most of them to grasp immediately and Loman and Isloman had to repeat their tale several times before any semblance of a clear decision was reached.

Ireck summarized it. 'Now you've escaped, they'll assume you'll return with help, so they'll probably make haste northwards. We'll gather such as can be spared and go after them, though I doubt we'll be able to catch them. You two must wait here for Hawklan. He should be on his way back by now. We need his guidance.'

Both Isloman and Loman bridled at this suggestion, but Ireck used the authority of their long friendship and was unequivocal.

'Every one of us around this table loves Tirilen. What's happened defies belief, but we're carvers, we must see things the way they are. You two are too heated and you've been warriors in your day. If you go, there'll be fighting.' He gave Loman a stern look. 'Look at you, Loman. You're clenching your fist even while I'm talking to you.' Loman breathed out heavily and put his hands behind his back awkwardly. Ireck continued. 'If there's fighting, then others than yourselves may be hurt, or worse. Could either of you carry that burden?'

That Jaldaric struck me as a reasonable and honest young man. If enough of us go to him peacefully they'll not be able to take us captive, and I doubt they'll fight us if we don't attack, so there's a chance we might resolve the matter by talking. Don't you agree?'

Isloman was about to argue, but surprisingly, Loman cut him short. 'You're right, Ireck, it's a good idea. Besides, Tirilen wouldn't want anyone hurt on her account. And we do need Hawklan's advice.'

He looked round at the wooden beams overhead and at the sunlight washing across the floor, then at the ceremonial stone table they were all sitting around. Unlike the rest of the village, but like the remainder of this room, the table was completely undecorated in symbolic homage to the greater carvers yet to come.

'It's a sad tale to relate around our Meeting Table, friends,' he went on. 'But I'm indebted to you, Ireck, for your sound sense. Do what you can. Isloman and I will do our best to wait patiently for Hawklan.'

'When he arrives, give him the horse I bought,' said Jareg. 'Whatever he did to it, he's cured it, and it's a fine animal.'

Loman bowed. 'Thank you, Jareg, but I doubt that Hawklan will ride it. You know what he's like.'

'He'll ride it for Tirilen, Loman,' said Jareg. 'Offer it to him. He'll need it. Times are moving too quickly for walking.'

* * * *

Almost before his mind could register the fact, Hawklan rolled away from the menacing shadows and rose quickly to his feet. As he did so he drew his sword in one singing sweep, though it felt heavy and reluctant in his hand.

In spite of his terror, part of his mind seemed to be watching him: noting with approval his rapid glance around the whole area for other attackers and commending him for the speed with which he recovered his balance when he caught his foot in his cloak as he stood up.

Taken aback by the quickness of this movement, the two figures seemed to be momentarily paralysed. Then, suddenly, to Hawklan's horror, the strange helm on the taller of the two seemed to come to life. Hawklan crouched low and waited for whatever attack might come from this apparition.

'Dear boy,' said a familiar voice, laden with both alarm and reproach. The helm flapped its great black wings. 'Fine way to greet friends.'

Hawklan straightened up and lowered his sword as the faces of Loman and Isloman became clearer in the moonlight. His immediate reaction of delight and relief was, however, stemmed by the appearance of his friends. They were grim-faced and armed.

Before Hawklan could speak, Loman stepped forward, his face fighting for control over some powerful emotion.

'Hawklan,' he said. 'Help us. Tirilen has been taken by strangers.'

It took the two men but moments to tell the tale of Tirilen's disappearance, their ill-fated encounter with the High Guards, and the decisions made by the Guild.

'We couldn't wait back in the village,' said Loman, almost sheepishly. 'You might have been gone for weeks. We had to try and find you.'

Hawklan nodded silently.

'It's a good job I heard them, dear boy,' said Gavor. 'You disappear without trace when you wear that cloak in the dark. They'd have walked straight past us.'

Even now, Hawklan was difficult to see, wrapped in his cloak and squatting on the shadow-dappled ground, as he listened to his friends' tale. He kept his body very still in an attempt to keep his mind calm, but he felt it was beginning to race out of control. The blows recently struck against him were disturbing and mysterious enough, but this strange and sinister happening seemed to dwarf everything else.

Something within him told him that he was the cause of Tirilen's abduction, and that he was being led towards some destiny beyond his seeing at the moment. Both logic and an inner resolve brought him to the same conclusion, namely that he must seek out the person, or thing, that was seeking him, and confront it, or he would be pursued endlessly and his friends would be crushed one by one in the wake of his flight.

'What shall we do?' Loman asked, after a long pause.

Hawklan pushed back the hood of his cloak from his face and gazed up into the moonlit sky. A slight signal of concern passed between the two brothers as his pale

face shone white in the moonlight. Their friend was changing perceptibly: the healer had wandered off on a strange pilgrimage seemingly transformed into a prince come down from one of Anderras Darion's carvings; now, for an instant, his face looked old and battle-weary. It was a look they had seen in the faces of some of the Muster officers in the Morlider wars. His eyes, however, showed no sign of fatigue, nor his tone.

'When you've rested, we must go straight after Ireck and his party, and hope that his counsels have prevailed,' Hawklan said quietly.

'We need no rest,' said Isloman impatiently. 'We've wasted too much time already.'

Hawklan looked at him and smiled faintly. 'The horses need rest, Isloman,' he said. 'We'll make no progress at all if we ride them into the ground, will we?'

Isloman slapped his hands on his knees in frustration. Hawklan stood up abruptly and the two brothers echoed his action. He looked at them both in turn.

'We've known one another too long and too well to vie amongst ourselves like silly children about which of us has the greatest affection for Tirilen. We must set aside our selfish pain and think of her. You two must think as you did when you fought side by side before she was born. I'll offer what observations I can.' Hawklan shook his head pensively. 'I seem to be finding many strange skills and ideas within myself these days. I fear I may not be without some experience in battle myself, though I remember none of it.'

Gavor ruffled his feathers noisily in the darkness, and for a moment the group stood in an uneasy silence.

Then, cutting through it, Hawklan said almost jauntily, 'Show me Jareg's horse. I had doubts about whether it would reach Pedhavin alive.'

'It's a fine mount,' said Isloman. 'Jareg knows his horses and he's got a real bargain there. He said it livened up considerably after you'd seen it on the way back.'

Hawklan walked across to the three horses waiting patiently by the path and laid his hand on the animal's nose. It was indeed well again.

The horse spoke to him unexpectedly. 'I am Serian, Hawklan. And your debtor. I'm whole again through your ministrations and I'm happy to see you returned from the Gretmearc uninjured, if not unchanged.'

Hawklan started. Animals rarely sought to impose themselves on others and it was unusual for one to speak unless spoken to first. However, it did not surprise him that the horse had noticed the changes in him. Certain animals seemed to possess a strange deep vision that harked back through many generations.

'Yes,' he replied. 'I'm uninjured, or nearly so.' He held up his bandaged hand. 'Thank you for the warning you gave me. I thought the giving of it would have destroyed you.'

The horse gave the equivalent of a chuckle. 'It was a powerful hand that was laid on me, without a doubt,' he said. 'Even though it was an accident.'

'Accident?' queried Hawklan.

‘Oh yes,’ said Serian. ‘I was only caught by the welt of a restraining curse they were using to disguise their monstrous snare. If they’d realized I’d recognized them I’d be in the pot by now.’

Another innocent harmed by traps set for me, thought Hawklan, but he could not forbear smiling at the horse’s remark and he patted his cheek.

‘Still, I’m a Muster horse,’ Serian continued. ‘I don’t succumb easily. Now I’m well again, will you allow me to carry you?’

Hawklan stepped back a little. On the rare occasions he had ridden, it had been he who had asked permission of the horse. ‘Thank you,’ he said uncertainly. ‘But I’ve no wish to burden another animal.’

There was a faint hint of impatience in the horse’s reply. ‘Hawklan, you’ll not catch the Fyordyn on foot, even the way you walk.’

‘There I think you’re wrong, my friend,’ said Hawklan. ‘I think I’ll catch them however slowly I travel because they wish me to catch them.’

Unexpectedly, the horse reared a little. ‘Then you’ll need me even more, won’t you?’ he said. ‘If you wish to remain free to release your Tirilen and escape.’

The horse’s powerful personality struck Hawklan almost like a physical force.

‘And besides,’ Serian continued, ‘how could you burden me? I could carry thrice your weight until you fell off from exhaustion and I’d know no strain.’ Serian bent his head forward and his voice sounded strangely in Hawklan’s ears. ‘The Sires within me know you,

Hawklan, even if I don't, and even if you don't know them. Can you question the destiny that's brought us together? I blighted by ancient and fearful enemies and in need of a healer, and you floundering in the unknown like a cork in a stream and in dire need of a mount.'

Hawklan seemed to hear the distant trumpet call he had heard when first he picked up the black sword, and the horse's voice suddenly echoed and thundered in his mind as though they stood in a great chamber.

'Generations have made me, Hawklan. Generations. It's your privilege and your duty to ride me just as it is mine to bear you. Not to do so is to diminish us both.'

Hawklan bowed his head. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't understand. We humans forget our place in the world too often. I'll ride you gladly.'

'And I'll carry you willingly and well, Hawklan,' replied the horse quietly. For a little while the two stood silent in the moonlit stillness.

When he left Serian, Hawklan went to the other horses and spent some time using his hands to ease the fatigue from them. He spoke to them a little, but they were like most animals – shy and reserved. Their very normality highlighted Serian's powerful presence, but Hawklan set aside the strangeness of the horse and of their meeting, placing it with the many other mysteries that were accumulating around him.

'Are they well?' Isloman's deep voice interrupted his reverie.

'Yes,' Hawklan replied. 'They'll be well rested by dawn. We can leave then and make good progress. Now,

let me have a look at this gashed hand of yours that I've heard so much about.'

Sheepishly, Isloman offered the injured hand. Hawklan looked at Tirilen's neat and characteristic bandaging and felt a lump come into his throat. Bending forward so that Isloman could not see his face he removed the bandage gently to reveal a livid, inflamed scar.

'It's getting better slowly,' Isloman said apologetically, but Hawklan scarcely heard him. A savage tremor passed through him as he looked at the damaged flesh and felt Isloman's inner strength fighting off its evil. He recognized the tremor as a cry for vengeance against the tinker for the damage he had wrought, made almost unbearable by the poignant touch of Tirilen's healing skill emanating from the damaged hand he was holding.

Chapter 4

Gavor turned and twisted high in the cold mountain air. Looking down, he could see the three figures moving along the winding path: Hawklan, tall, straight and relaxed, looking like part of the animal he was riding, constantly having to check himself from riding too far ahead of the others; Loman and Isloman looking anything but part of their animals, struggling awkwardly with the mounting discomfort of having been several days in the saddle, and fretting impatiently at what they saw to be their lack of speed.

Every few hours, Hawklan stopped and made them rest. Ostensibly it was for the benefit of the horses but, in fact, it was to calm and relax his friends with words and occasional massage and manipulation to ease tense and tired muscles and stiffening joints. In this way they made as good progress as such a trio could make.

Gavor straightened his wings to rest on a slow-rising air current and, with the occasional movement of his pinion feathers to keep his balance, soared smoothly around in a great circle. Then he put his head down and, tumbling over in an apparent confusion of feet and

wings, he looked again at the gift which Loman had brought for him; if gift it was. A pair of long black, glittering sharp, fighting spurs.

‘I’m not sure what they are, but they’re the same metal as the sword, Hawklan,’ Loman had said, fumbling them cautiously out of a pocket and offering them for inspection. ‘I found them near where we found the sword. I don’t know why I’ve never seen them before . . .’ He had shrugged in reluctant acceptance of yet another strange chance happening. But all of them had fallen silent when, as if by some ancient instinct, Gavor had picked the spurs up deftly in his beak and snapped one on to each leg.

‘Careful, they’re very sharp . . .’ Loman said hastily, his hand reaching out protectively. Then his eyes had opened wide in a confusion of shock and disbelief. The spurs fitted Gavor’s legs perfectly, one even having a special clip to accommodate an irregularity in his wooden leg. Instead of making him look incongruous, however, the spurs made him look formidable, just as the black sword had changed Hawklan’s appearance.

Loman had turned to Hawklan. ‘It can’t be possible,’ he said.

‘But it is,’ replied Hawklan simply. ‘And I’ve no more answers than you have.’ He fingered the pommel of the Black Sword unconsciously.

Even Gavor himself had been at a loss for words, taken aback at his own actions. Now, skimming the air currents, he discovered something else about the spurs. Instead of hindering his flight as he had expected, they

improved it. His balance, his manoeuvrability, even his speed, all seemed to be better, and he knew deep inside that few flying creatures could attack him now and depart unscathed.

‘I’ll be a fearless feathered fighter now, dear boy,’ he said, alighting on Hawklan’s shoulder. Then, thoughtfully, ‘Do you think I should take them off when I go to visit my friends, or leave them on to make a greater impression?’

Hawklan laughed. ‘How do you expect me to answer that for you, you fearless feathered lecher? Hawklan the innocent?’

Gavor nodded sagely. ‘True, true,’ he agreed. ‘I’ll have to experiment judiciously. I must admit, this recent protracted period of abstinence could well add a little freshness to the proceedings.’

‘Good,’ said Hawklan. ‘That’ll make it easier for you to school yourself to a further period of abstinence, as I doubt we’ll be stopping at the Castle for any length of time, if at all.’

‘Dear boy,’ said Gavor reproachfully. ‘I’m finding it hard enough to concentrate as it is.’

Hawklan was unsympathetic. ‘Go and roll in the snow for a while, that’ll sharpen you up,’ he said, nodding towards the more distant, higher peaks.

But it was difficult for them to maintain any spirit of light-heartedness. The reason for their haste and the probable questionable outcome of their journey weighed heavily on them all, nagging like a toothache.

As they wound their way down out of the mountains and viewed the wide fertile plains of Orthlund. Hawklan thought he could feel even the Great Harmony trembling, as if its very root notes were under assault.

As it transpired, they did not stop at the Castle at all, pausing only briefly in the village to see if any news had been received from Ireck and his party. But nothing had been heard and the village was strangely quiet. The sound of the horses' hooves and the creak and clatter of their weapons echoed starkly around the three men in the sunny, shadow-strewn streets.

Hawklan stopped and dismounted at the heap of the tinker's wares the villagers had discarded. Metal objects were turning red with rust, wood had lost its sheen, and cloths and silks were already green with decay. He wrinkled his face in distaste and shook his head sadly.

'Why couldn't we see these things for what they were?' he said.

Neither Loman nor Isloman offered an answer.

Loman dismounted and joined Hawklan. Stooping stiffly, he picked up a rusting blade and held it for a moment. He smiled faintly and looked up at his brother. 'The metal's righting itself,' he said. 'Probably the other stuff is as well. But the misuse was great. It'll take a long time.'

Isloman nodded.

Hawklan sensed the lingering aura of Tirilen's protective words, and renewed them with his own. On an impulse he drew his sword and held it over the little pile while he spoke them.

Then the three of them headed north along the Pedhavin Road.

Within half a day, they encountered Ireck's party galloping purposefully towards the village. Sweating horses and stern-faced men milled around as the two groups met, and Hawklan took his horse to Ireck's side to hear his news.

The villagers had met the Fyordyn only a little distance away from the camp where Loman and Isloman had been held. The High Guards were neither pursuing the brothers nor fleeing homewards. Jaldaric had been coldly formal and dismissed the villagers with a casual indifference verging on contempt.

'None of our business, he said. He had his orders and we'd be well advised to stick to our farming if we knew what was good for us.' Ireck's quiet voice was full of rage and frustration. He took Loman's arm. 'I'm sorry, Loman,' he said. 'I've let you down. I tried to talk to him, to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen. He wouldn't even tell us how Tirilen was.' He paused and looked upwards. 'Eventually I threatened him. Told him we'd return, with you, and armed.'

'And?' asked Hawklan.

'He laughed, Hawklan. Just looked at us and laughed.' Ireck clenched his teeth. 'I turned and rode away without any more ado. Some of the younger ones were getting too angry and there'd have been bloodshed there and then. I'm sorry, Loman,' he repeated. 'I don't know if I did the right thing or not. My head says yes,

but my stomach says no. We're going back to the village now to get the rest of the men, and arm ourselves.'

Loman shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Not until we've thought about all this a little more. You were right at the beginning and you were right when you left their camp. If violence is all we're left with, then it mustn't be in the heat of passion. That barrel's not easily plugged once tapped. For our sakes and for theirs, we must overwhelm them completely before they can act. That way there's less chance of death and injury. Hawklan?'

Hawklan nodded in agreement. He swung down slowly from Serian, and led the horse over to a nearby stream, his face thoughtful.

'You didn't see Tirilen?' he asked.

Ireck shook his head in confirmation.

'Did they give you any idea where she was?'

'No,' said Ireck.

Hawklan patted the drinking horse's neck and gazed down into the stream. Quietly, one by one, all the men dismounted and left their horses to graze and drink. The air was full of bird-song and breeze-blown seed, and an atmosphere of unreality and uncertainty seemed to spread over the group as if the spring day would not allow them to sustain their anger once they were free of the pounding urgency of the unfamiliar horse riding.

Loman took Ireck's arm and, together with Isloman, they joined Hawklan on the banks of the stream.

Eventually Hawklan spoke. 'Horsemen, soldiers such as you've described, could have outrun you easily if they'd wished. It seems strange to me that you caught

them in the first instance and then that you escaped them so easily. And now Ireck's group has found them just as easily. We must presume that they're neither running nor hiding, but waiting.'

'For what?' asked Isloman.

'Not for what, Isloman, but for whom,' replied Hawklan. 'It's me they want, or somebody wants. But who it is, or why, is beyond me. I'm driven across mountains to find an answer to some devilment I can scarcely even define, only to find more devilment and more questions. Then, when I escape that snare, a more earthbound, ordinary trap is laid for me.'

The three men looked at him silently.

'I'm being lured into something, my friends. Someone fears me, or at least fears what I might once have been. Someone evil. I'd be easier in my mind if I knew why I was so precious and why I've to be taken by stealth. But taken I have to be, there can be no doubt about that.' He slapped his hand against his leg and straightened up briskly. 'I weary of defence,' he said. 'Laying traps for me is one thing, using those I love as bait is another. We must move on to the attack and lay this villain by the heels before he does something even worse.'

In a nearby tree, Gavor flapped his wings noisily and laughed. The soft spell of the spring sunshine dispersed and the group seemed to take on a purpose again.

'Ireck,' said Hawklan forcefully, 'Go back to the village with your men. Arm yourselves and then head for the High Guards' camp. Make no effort at conceal-

ment. Look as fierce as you like, but . . .’ He raised his hand in a cautionary gesture. ‘Don’t attack them. Keep them at a safe distance, unless Gavor brings you a message expressly to the contrary.’

Ireck seemed inclined to demur.

Hawklan silenced him gently. ‘No, Ireck,’ he said. ‘Do nothing other than as I’ve said.’ He glanced up towards Gavor, who floated silently down and landed on his shoulder. ‘We four will go ahead and do what we can by stealth. If we’ve not achieved anything by the time you arrive, then perhaps your arrival will cause a diversion and give us the opportunity. And, if by some chance we’ve been hurt or captured, Gavor will at least tell you what our position is.’

Ireck still seemed inclined to argue, as did one or two others in the group, but their erstwhile healer was exuding an authority that would brook no further debate. Nodding reluctantly, Ireck mounted his horse silently and signalled to the others to follow him.

When Ireck and the villagers had ridden into the distance, Hawklan turned to Loman and Isloman, grim-faced. His forced confidence had fallen away from him.

‘Now,’ he said. ‘I’m pinning my faith in you two old soldiers knowing something, preferably a lot, about stealth. I don’t think Ireck will be able to control the younger men if anything happens to us, and I don’t want those High Guards massacring half the village.’

Chapter 5

Continuing their northward journey, Hawklan was surprised at the subtle changes he noted in his two friends. It was as if knowledge long dormant were re-awakening. He reminded himself that the two men had travelled widely and fought bitter battles shoulder to shoulder in the past, and that they could not have survived such experiences without developing traits which necessarily would not be apparent in their normal peaceful daily lives. Both sat easier in their saddles, and the anxiety that had lined and furrowed their craggy faces ever since they had met in the mountains gave way periodically to looks of a grim purposefulness that chilled Hawklan, so alien was it to his understanding of the two men.

Worse, however, was the occasional gleam of anticipation he caught in their eyes, though he himself had to admit that his concern for Tirilen was at times forgotten in unexpected moments of exhilaration as Serian carried him steadily forward through the sunlit countryside.

The rhythmic pounding of the horses' hooves, the soft spring breeze blowing in his face, the endless variety of the Orthlund countryside, with its meadows and leas, streams and rivers, forests and arbours, all combined to dispel pain and fretfulness for unmeasured and effortless miles. But to the east were the mountains; white-tipped peaks and heavy shoulders hulking against the blue sky. Their silent, timeless vigil reproached him when unexpectedly he found himself relishing the deeds that were to come.

As the day drew towards evening and the sun dipped beneath a cloud-lined horizon, the three men eased their pace to a steady walk. Gradually, and without debate, both Loman and Isloman slowed down even further, and then eventually stopped and dismounted.

'What's the matter?' asked Hawklan.

'Nothing,' said Isloman. 'But according to Ireck, we're not far from the camp now, and they'll have plenty of sentries looking out for us if your guess is right and it's you they're waiting for. We'll have to leave the road and move very carefully from now on.'

Hawklan nodded. Gavor glided silently out of the darkening sky and landed on his shoulder. Hawklan held out his hand, palm upwards, and Gavor jumped onto it. Speaking softly, as if his voice might carry to the enemy across the still evening, Hawklan said, 'While there's still a little light, go and see if you can find their camp and how many of them there are. We'll stay here and rest until you return.'

Gavor flew off without speaking.

The three men settled themselves down to wait in the shade of a nearby copse, each too preoccupied with his own thoughts to indulge in conversation.

Hawklan felt strange stirrings within him as he lay in the darkness. His stomach felt uneasy and he had difficulty in controlling his breathing, frequently having to stifle a yawn. Then he rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and a quietness came over him. Pre-battle nerves, he thought, without wondering where such a thought could have come from.

At last Gavor returned and the three men sat around him while he recounted his tale. Fifteen men altogether, seven on watch, seven doing nothing in particular, and a leader, Jaldaric presumably. And Tirilen.

Loman started. 'She's there?' he asked breathlessly.

Gavor stepped back a pace. 'Yes,' he replied. 'And she's well,' he added before Loman could ask.

Loman breathed out almost as if he had been holding his breath since his daughter's disappearance. His face wrinkled as if he were going to weep. Isloman placed an arm around his shoulders, but Loman recovered his composure almost immediately.

Hawklan nodded. 'This confirms that they're not interested in Tirilen. She could have been in Fyorlund days ago. She's just being used as bait, I'm sure. Are you sure she's all right, Gavor?'

'Certain, dear boy. She can't get away and she's not happy, but it looks as if she's being treated more like a special guest than as a prisoner.'

After some further discussion, Gavor took off again into the night, Hawklan spoke softly to Serian, and the three men disappeared into the gloaming like shadowy night predators.

A slow hour later they were at the High Guards' camp.

Gavor flew down and whispered to Hawklan. 'His perimeter guards are constantly moving.'

Isloman nodded. 'They'll have prearranged checkpoints. If we attack one, however quietly, the others will know within the minute.'

Hawklan turned to Loman enquiringly. They had been able to get quite close to the clearing where the Fyordyn had camped, but the trees and foliage that had hidden their approach also prevented their seeing all of the camp clearly. Gavor's information was timely, for without it they would surely have encountered one of the slowly strolling guards.

Loman pursed his lips. 'Shrewd young man, this Jaldaric,' he said. 'Assuming his men are up to scratch, which I imagine they will be, he could destroy a large group of disorganized villagers without even being seen in this terrain, but even so he's taken the trouble to guard his camp like a fortress.' He gave a soft bitter chuckle. 'Someone must have told him *something* about you, Hawklan.'

Hawklan winced slightly at the implications of Loman's comment. 'Indeed,' he said. 'And our second task, after rescuing Tirilen, is to find out who that someone is.'

However, the rescuing of Tirilen would be no easy matter. Even with the element of surprise, Hawklan knew that against such odds they could not fight their way in and out again. And if they were able to rescue Tirilen by stealth, there would be the problem of pursuit, bringing the soldiers down on their backs or into direct conflict with Ireck and the villagers. The matter had to be ended now, Hawklan decided. They must strike at the head of their enemy.

The two brothers took little persuading.

‘All the protection is centred on Tirilen. We must seize Jaldaric and then negotiate some kind of a peace with them.’

So close to his daughter, Loman was in a mood for cracking heads, not negotiating, but he agreed reluctantly that Hawklan’s reasoning was correct.

They skirted around the camp seeking some weakness in Jaldaric’s defences, using the breeze rustling through the swaying branches overhead and the occasional scufflings of night creatures to disguise the slight sound of their movements.

‘Ah,’ sighed Isloman eventually. ‘Shrewd he might be, Loman, but he’s got no shadow lore. Look.’ He pointed out into the clearing.

Hawklan followed his gaze, but could see nothing. Loman stared intently. Although a smith, he was, like all the Orthlundyn, no mean carver. He glanced up at the moon and then into the clearing again.

‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘You’re right. There’ll be a dark path along that edge of the clearing . . .’ He looked at the moon again. ‘In about ten minutes I’d think.’

‘And the rest of the clearing will be brightly lit,’ said Isloman. ‘Which will make it difficult for the guards to see into the shadow.’

‘I can’t see what you mean,’ said Hawklan.

‘Trust me,’ said Isloman. ‘We’ll be able to go straight to the back of Jaldaric’s tent in a few minutes. You watch.’ He hesitated.

‘What’s the matter?’ Hawklan asked.

‘The way they’re moving, we might have a guard to deal with,’ replied Isloman. ‘It’ll slow us up and might raise the alarm.’ Hawklan thought for a moment and then spoke quickly to Gavor who flew noiselessly up into the night. Minutes later there was a startled cry from the far side of the clearing as the raven descended on the head of an unsuspecting guard, ruffled his hair a little and then flew off with a great flapping of his wings. Three guards emerged silently from the shade and ran in the direction of the cry. There were more cries as Gavor repeated his trick. Then came laughter as the guards decided that it must have been a bat or an errant owl. While the laughter and noise continued, the moonlight in the clearing grew brighter and, as Isloman had predicted, one edge of the clearing disappeared into inky darkness.

‘Now,’ he hissed, and the three men ran low, swift and silent to the rear of Jaldaric’s tent. The shadow here was less deep and they had only a little time to act

before they would be seen by the guards. Hawklan raised his finger needlessly to his lips and placed his ear against the tent wall. Someone was laughing and describing what had just happened.

Hawklan drew his sword quietly and, signalling his intention to Loman and Isloman, cut a vertical slash in the tent wall with a single silent stroke. The three men burst into the tent simultaneously, Loman moving to the right, Isloman to the left and Hawklan commanding the centre.

The surprise was total. Hawklan found himself unopposed and looking across a simple trestle table at Tirilen and a fair-haired young man with a flat, round, innocent-looking face, whom he presumed was Jaldaric.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Isloman's great hand rise and fall twice rapidly, each movement being followed by a thud, indicating that one of Jaldaric's guests had been excused after-dinner conversation.

To his right he sensed the stocky, more enraged figure of Loman restraining an urge to crush together the skulls of two men he had seized by the neck. Instinctively, the two men offered no resistance to his iron-bending grip.

Hawklan was aware of these actions in an instant, but he also saw Jaldaric knock over his chair and seize Tirilen's wrist as he rose, his face showing fear and surprise, then, almost immediately, anger at his negligence.

It was Jaldaric's brief flash of self-reproach, and the look of concern for the injured men, mingled with the

alarm and relief in Tirilen's face, that made Hawklan pause.

It was a pause sufficient for Jaldaric to draw a knife and twist Tirilen's wrist expertly so that she could not move. He offered the knife to her throat and looked at the trio in front of him: two hulking villagers who had dealt with four of his men in no more time than it took him to stand up; and this terrifying man with penetrating green eyes and grim face, gaunt in the torchlight. He felt his knees quaking and hoped desperately that it did not show in his face, or sound in his voice.

'Hawklan, I presume,' he said. 'I congratulate you on your surprise, but I have the advantage, I think, and you can't hope to master my whole patrol. Lay down your arms and surrender peacefully and all this can be forgotten. We want only you. These people can return to the village.'

Hawklan answered quietly. 'And you must be Jaldaric. I'd heard the High Guards of Fyorlund were honourable men, not brigands. Not betrayers of hospitality. Kidnappers of womenfolk. What value shall I put on your word, High Guard?'

Jaldaric's jaw tightened angrily. 'Enough,' he said harshly. 'We are High Guards, and we must obey our Lord. I regret what I've had to do but you're an enemy of Fyorlund and I've been ordered to seize you in this way to avoid conflict with the local villagers and the consequent loss of life. Believe me, it's been no pleasure for me to resort to this kind of conduct. The Lady Tirilen will confirm that she's had nothing but courtesy

and honourable treatment from us while we've held her captive.'

Hawklan's green eyes searched deeply into the young man and found he was probably telling the truth. Tirilen showed no signs of ill-usage, and her eyes showed alarm rather than real fear, even though Jaldaric's knife was at her throat.

Hawklan spoke quietly. 'Jaldaric. I'm no man's enemy, let alone a country's. You've been deceived. A person who'd give you such orders would be unlikely to stop at lying, would he?'

A doubt flickered across Jaldaric's face, but he tightened his grip on Tirilen's wrist and rested his knife against her throat. 'Release my men and surrender yourself. I'm not here to debate, I'm here to ensure you're taken to Fyorlund to account for your treachery. Surrender now or this girl's blood will be on your heads.'

Hawklan's manner changed imperceptibly, but the tent seemed to fill with a terrible aura of menace. 'No, Jaldaric,' he said. 'I doubt that your loyalty to whatever oath it is you've sworn will enable you to do that. But, even so, you must realize that if you injure Tirilen, your men will die on the instant as will those outside, and nothing could protect you from Loman's wrath.'

Jaldaric glanced at the two unconscious figures sprawled at the feet of Isloman, and at the two with their heads held effortlessly against the table by Loman. He scarcely heard Hawklan's words, or noticed the look on Loman's face, but the tone of Hawklan's voice and his

unwavering green eyes chilled him to his heart. This time he could not keep the fear out of his voice.

‘So be it,’ he said hoarsely. ‘We’re High Guards. If we’ve to die then that’s . . . unfortunate. The manner of our dying is rarely ours to choose. Our orders must be obeyed. We’ve some honour left.’

Hawklan realized, to his horror, that he had driven the young man too far. Now, impulsively, Jaldaric had steeled himself to face death, and his actions would be unpredictable. Hawklan did not allow the uncertainty into his face but an eerie silence descended on the group.

Abruptly an unearthly shriek filled the tent and a black thrashing shape burst through the gash in the tent wall and made straight for Jaldaric’s face. Involuntarily he raised his knife hand to protect himself from this screaming apparition.

Isloman took one step forward, seized Jaldaric’s wrist and wrested the knife from his grip as if it had been from a child. Then he immobilized him in a great bear hug. Jaldaric was almost the same height as Isloman, but less heavy and far less powerful. He made a token effort to drive the back of his head into Isloman’s face, only to find he was suddenly unable to breathe in the huge man’s embrace.

Loman casually threw his two captives to the floor, and moved quickly to Tirilen, who had also been deposited on the floor when Jaldaric was seized by Isloman.

Hawklan let out a long breath and put his sword back in its scabbard. Other High Guards appeared in the doorway of the tent, attracted by the noise. Two rushed forward but Hawklan's hands went out like striking snakes and the two men received blows which rendered them so instantly unconscious that they fell to the floor like dropped meal sacks.

The speed and ease of this action stopped the other High Guards in their tracks. Hawklan gazed at the uncertain faces in front of him, as they slowly registered the implications of what they were looking at: their expert defences silently breached, their leader taken and six of their compatriots incapacitated with apparently contemptuous ease, Loman standing protectively in front of Tirilen, his hand on his iron-bound club. The two men Loman had held were massaging their necks and twisting their heads ruefully, but they remained on the floor, loath to make any move that might bring down further punishment on them.

Without taking his eyes off the group in the doorway, Hawklan spoke. 'Loman, explain to these young men that we need to have a little talk.'

Loman shot a baleful look at Jaldaric, then Tirilen touched his arm and his manner softened. He put his arm round her again and looked across to his brother, eyebrows raised. Isloman nodded and released Jaldaric who fell, gasping, to the ground. Then Loman spoke to the men in a language that Hawklan had never heard before.

Without exception, surprise suffused the faces of the watching men. Loman, an Orthlundyn, was speaking their Battle Language, the language that was known only to the Fyordyn High Guard. Sometime during his life this Orthlundyn had done service for, or with, the High Guard.

Jaldaric staggered painfully to his feet, his young face riven with confusion. He gestured to his men. ‘Lay down your arms,’ he said breathlessly. ‘We must talk. This has been a sorry affair from the start. We must talk.’

There was some hesitation.

Jaldaric leaned with one hand on the table while the other tenderly rubbed his ribs and stomach. ‘Do as you’re ordered,’ he shouted angrily. He waved his arm towards Loman. ‘Didn’t you hear him? It was an ill thing to kidnap a woman for whatever reason. Now we find we’ve made war on the daughter of an Orthlundyn who speaks the Battle Language. We’ve violated the hearth of one of our own. Lay down your arms *now!* We must talk.’

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