LEGACY OF STEEL

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by
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Legacy of Steel is a novel in the heroic fantasy genre. It is the story of a late but crucial event in the life of a Captain of the Erlegin highland border guard, Tasse van Poulder—a man with a borrowed last name.

Tasse, the illegitimate son of a deceased eastern Thane, is only a few months shy of his fortieth birthday, but neither the love of a highland woman, nor his position as a respected officer in the service of Erleg holds any joy for him. He is plagued by the events of his past.

Nineteen years ago, three days before Tasse was to be adopted by Thane Lars, his father, an invasion from the neighboring Kingdom of Naad swept across his homeland.

In that invasion, Tasse lost his country, his home, his family, and what he considered his right to the name van Poulder. Days later, in the last futile battle to turn back the invasion, Tasse lost the family sword that his
father had given him, and he nearly lost his life.

He emerged, scarred and bitter over his enforced life as a bastard, and since then Tasse has lived by the sword, a mercenary and as a soldier for nineteen years. He has hidden his past and waited for a chance to prove his name.

That chance has come.

News reaches Tasse of revolt in Naad's annexed lands, once his home, and he leaves his love behind and deserts his position as commander in the highlands to journey to the troubled land. With power there in a state of flux, he hopes to gain entry to Gallaston Castle, the place of his birth, and recover proof of his lineage, silver plates from the family crypt, inscribed with the van Poulder family tree. Tasse's is the last name recorded there.

In his quest to prove his name and to re-define his life, Tasse is forced to struggle on many levels. Yoked with repressed pride and self-doubt, Tasse races toward his past. He meets obstacles against which he must fight or falter.

When he reaches his family crypt, Tasse finds the goal of his quest denied; the plates that would prove his name are gone, stolen and melted for the silver years ago.

Crushed though he is, he must rise to the greatest challenge of his life, as he leads a ragged troop of well-armed but unseasoned peasants in a desperate strategic retreat, fleeing southward before the relentless cavalry of a sadistic Baron.

In facing this challenge, without the name he hoped
to find, and without the rank he held in the highlands, Tasse is forced to realize that the value of a name must await the appraisal of the man who bears it.

In the final conflict, Tasse fights Baron Willen Goshawk, who is armed with the sword that Tasse lost in battle, nineteen years ago. Tasse finds pride within himself, not in his name, and he re-defines himself, seeing that at least one man in the world should spell Bastard with a capital "B".

"I am Tasse van Poulder," he said, unquestionable pride swelling his voice. "I'm the Bastard son of a servant maid, but Bastards make the best swordsmen."

This single combat is naturally intense, graphic, and epic, and it ends with the villainous Baron lying in his own blood.

Tasse retrieves his long lost weapon from his fallen foe, steals his horse, and departs homeward.

Once there, Tasse van Poulder lives well-adjustedly ever after . . . for the most part, anyway.

Accepted by: Eugene Young, Chairman
As I lay asleep, a sheep ate of the ivy wreath on my brow--ate and said, "Zarathustra is no longer a scholar."

F. Nietzsche

Thus Spake Zarathustra
CHAPTER I

The rain had been inevitable for both sides. Occasionally, the oncoming storm had been heard above the din of combat, the shouts and screams of man and horse, smoothed over by low, distant rumblings.

The clash of dulled pikes on plate armor was not so deafening as it had been that morning, or even as it had been in the hot field a few hours ago. The men were tiring, and the light rainfall was muffling everything.

Tasse van Poulder stood on the top of an earth and stone dyke-wall, overlooking the carnage. Before him, a broad, white streak of lightning divided the sky, and he jumped in his armor at the deafening crack that followed.

His startled jerk sent a stab of pain through his abdomen. Movement was becoming agony to him now. The initial shock of his wounding was wearing off.

Today was to have been Tasse's twenty-first birthday, but this was no birthday.

He wouldn't have minded, except that this birthday would also have been his adoption.

But the invasion had come.

The men of Tasse's homeland, the Dukedom of Holweir, were wilting valiantly in the corn, and the Naadien invaders had somehow managed to remain aggressive all through the fighting. It was still late afternoon, but the last real daylight was already fast draining from the bloody scene, taking much of the color with it.
The storm had finally, truly arrived.
The sounds of the struggle were quickly absorbed by
the downpour, and the roar of rain on the ragged fields
drowned even the ringing of steel.

Tasse lifted the hot steel helm from his head and pulled
back the quilted hood beneath. The cold rain beat mercifully
into his black, sweat-matted hair. With the helmet off,
he could see for the first time where the arrow had pierced
his breast-plate. There were only a few splinters of the
shaft left sticking out of the clean round hole.

Most of the shaft had been broken off in the course
of Tasse's escape from the battlefield. He wasn't sure
if he had broken it off himself, or if one of the men who
attacked him had done it.

The endless riot that swam before him since the arrow
hit had really only been fifteen minutes. He was losing
blood and losing track of time.

Tasse began to know that the arrow was stuck in him
either above, or just below the floating rib on his right
side. From this precarious repose on the dyke-wall, away
from the madness of the fighting, the first shreds of rational
anxiety came to him.

I could die out here.

The idea struck the young man a little more personally
than it had at the battle's beginning. He'd known he could
be killed as he rode out of Bandale, but the sun that morning
had been hot on the road and the corn. Tasse had squinted
his dark-grey eyes at brightness, the beauty of the day.
Then he had been mounted on a good horse, and he had ridden on his light horse near the forefront of two tens of heavy cavalry. Very well mounted, he was, and wearing the first real armor he'd ever worn.

But it's not my armor, he thought bitterly.

The armor was borrowed--borrowed from a fat nobleman of Bandale. The man's generosity in lending the heavy plates was plainly tainted with his fear of wearing them into the fight himself. The armor ill-fit Tasse's strong young body, with an alarming amount of extra space inside.

It was not the armor that Tasse should have worn this day. It was not the armor he would have received from the man whose son he was . . . whose son he would have been.

If he had been adopted.

--or if the invasion had not come.

Then Tasse would not be wet and bleeding, trying to avenge a father that he almost had.

That man, that almost-father, was now dead three days. He had been Thane Lars van Poulder--the last of the van Poulder house, not rich, but respected. Not married, but the father of one black-haired boy by a servant maid twenty-one years ago.

The rain poured around Tasse now, as he thought of how his mother had been buried in the family vaults when he was too young to remember. A servant maid among all those generations of dead van Poulders. It had always been a spark of hope for Tasse that his father, Thane Lars, had put his mother with his ancestors.
Tasse had seen Thane Lars die on the walls of Gallaston Castle three days ago. Naad had come over the fields, and the town of Poulden and Gallaston had fallen in hours.

Tasse had fought, and then escaped with a few of the household men at arms.

Now, he gazed blankly down into the fray that still boiled at the heart of the cornfield. The horse he escaped Poulden on was the same one he had ridden into this battle. Though he had ridden it for years, it would have become his own, today.

Like his home and his name, the invaders from across the Vanderwal River had taken that honor as well. The horse lay dead among the mud and trodden stalks.

Tasse had been in four charges on Naadien infantry, and the mounted force had lost eight of their number. On the fifth pass, they lost Tasse.

Arrows had appeared in his horse's bare neck, and the muddy ground had come up to meet him . . . hard!

When he could get up, he had fought on foot with his oversized sword. It was a rare weapon, a hand-and-a-half sword, but Tasse had learned it well. He had killed or disabled two men; in their armor it was hard to know for sure. Then he had been nailed with the arrow. So many had bounced off, but this one hadn't. Right through the chest plate.

Since then, he had feebly fought off one assailant and slowly made his way out of the trampled corn.

He dragged the sword with him all the way. It was
a family weapon, all he now had left of his family and home.
A beautiful piece of work, and every inch a cavalryman's
weapon, it was a gift years before from the Thane, his almost-
father. Where the quillons crossed the blade, the name
van Poulder was inscribed in old Bytorian letters.

Tasse clutched it now, pressing the end of the leather
and brass scabbard into the wet earth around him to aid
him in standing. The pain in his side was worsening. The
rain was running off his bearded chin into his armor. The
chill made his muscles tense, and his wound threatened to
double him over as the throbbing continued.

He thought about being thankful that it was only one
arrow that had struck him, but the thought was swept away
by another wave of pain as he tried to take another step
away from the fighting.

Cursing the faceless archer who had pegged him, he
tried to get some purchase on the splintered shaft.

His fingers pinched at the jagged wood that protruded
from the hole in the breastplate, but only splinters came
away. The sudden jerk sent a spreading fire though Tasse's
side. He doubled over in a wash of agony, holding the weight
of the armour with his helmet braced against his knees.

When he unclenched his eyes, he could see a thin mix
of rain and his own blood running down his right leg.

Heaven has let me escape Poulden, he thought, only
to die in Bandale, a bastard in a cornfield.

A crack of thunder split the air over his bowed head,
and he felt his legs buckle involuntarily.
He fell to his hands and knees, feeling weak and vulnerable. Anyone with a knife could see him and come after him, and Tasse would be dead. His hands were pressed into the mud, and the rain was driving even harder into the back of his head.

He felt sure that fate wanted him dead.

He was on his knees for several minutes before he realized that the wound was no longer paining him so badly.

The borrowed armor had settled forward onto Tasse's back when he fell, and the arrow, still lodged in the steel of the plate, had pulled from the wound.

The young man smiled through the rain, that the extra space in the armor had actually helped him. He pressed a finger into the hole. With little effort, the dangerous end of the arrow popped loose inside the chestplate and slid harmlessly out and onto the ground.

He breathed deep, feeling some relief, and lifted himself till he knelt in mud. He could move more freely now, and, leaning on his helmet, he pushed himself to his feet at the top of the steep slope.

His ears rang as his blood rushed from his head.

It's all going down to run out my leak, he thought.

He steadied himself once more, pressing the end of his lengthy scabbarded sword into the rocky mud around him. The rain dripped off his nose and from long black hair, and he turned back to the battle below, hoping to see some sign of good fortune for Holweir.

The driving rain was bogging the last of Holweir's
cavalry in the churned cornfield.

Perhaps I was lucky to lose my horse...left-handed luck.

One by one, the Naadien footmen pulled Holweir's armed chivalry from their mud-slowed mounts. The lowground was lost, and the day with it.

Holweir's forces on the highground had been struggling for hours just to defend themselves against Naad's mounted archery and their dreaded halberdiers.

Holweir had lost the advantage of numbers. A thousand extra unseasoned farmers had not made the difference against Naad, a kingdom with a reputation for fielding its best.

Three counties along the Vanderwal River had fallen in three days; Poulden first, then Tess, and now Bandale. Naad had made a clean sweep, taking all three of Holweir's river counties.

Though the battle was not over yet, Tasse knew that he was standing on conquered ground. He would have to make better time in making his retreat. With his home captured and his family dead, there would be no one to ransom him if he were taken prisoner.

"Prison or death," he said aloud. His voice was loud in his ears. He felt a little dizzy.

He turned mechanically and faced the rolling brown river on the other side of the dyke-wall. Here surely was no escape for him. On the far side was Bissmuth, the great land-holding of the High King, but there was no bridge save a small one a few miles up-stream at the town.
The river was a tributary of the Vanderwal. Tasse watched as the angry surface was made jagged by waves of driving rain. The slope of the wall dropped sharply to the edge of the rising water. The mud in the torrent of churning currents blended peaks and valleys into a pale, opaque brown.

To Tasse's right he saw the slow curve of the wall extending west for sixty yards, where the line was broken up by a thicket of young trees and tall briars.

The going would be slower through the thicket, but it was the straightest way back to Bandale, and the surest way to avoid being captured.

Tasse looked again to the battlefield.

He quickly decided that the way his side was dissolving on the highground, there would soon be nothing for the enemy army to do but rove around the county, picking up stragglers for ransoming.

"And this armor will make me an easy mark."

He looked at the muddy helmet that he was still lugging under his arm.

"Not my armor," he breathed.

The steel pot bounced down the embankment towards the swelling water, and sank in a sputter of brown bubbles that instantly popped in the driving rain.

Tasse trudged along the crest of the dyke. The stiff armored shoes made for slow walking on the muddy ground. Thunder echoed away into the distance; a nice, low, rolling rumble above the hiss of rain on the river beside him.
The rain had camped, but the storm was starting to move off.

As he made his way with slow, limping steps, he looked to the north, watching to see if he was shadowed, and to watch the fighting continue.

The main body of Holweir's remaining infantry was standing off another charge from Naad's notorious halberdiers. The points of their eight-foot weapons were beating back Holweir's shield-line.

Poulden county's crossbowmen shot volleys into the heart of the phalanx, and the halberdiers relented, withdrawing in an orderly retreat.

Holweir would not withstand many more assaults.

Another roll of thunder echoed far away, interrupted by a second much louder crack.

When the second had subsided, Tasse was puzzled to hear the first one had not. It was a familiar kind of thunder, and to his horror, it was actually growing louder.

Tasse whirled around, nearly losing his balance, and what he saw gripped him with panic.

Five units of heavy cavalry were headed right for him along the top of the earthen wall.

A mass of dark horses and wet steel, not just coming; this was an all out charge!

The commander of Naad's forces had sent fifty of his heaviest mounts with long lances. They were ordered to skirt the lowground of the cornfield by using the wall. It was a deployment for a flank attack that the Naadien
commander hoped would result in a rout. Slamming heavy cavalry into the side of the ill-defended crossbows would rend a sizable breach. The Holweiren army would collapse.

All of this escaped the racing mind of young Tasse van Poulder. He'd been out on his first real battlefield for over eight hours in full armor, he'd been thrown by a dying horse, and he'd lost more blood then he realized. He was sure that those horses were coming for him.

He had seconds to act. He looked to the thicket and ran for his life.

He still had twenty-five yards to cover. The charging cavalry had one-hundred when he turned his back, but even armored horses could eat up that small distance in seconds. They already sounded feet away.

They're tired...the horses are tired, he prayed. He looked ahead and chose the spot in the thicket where he would dive when he got there. If he could only beat the horses there.

His legs churned under him, struggling forward over the rough puddles on top of the wall. The hooves thundered in his ears.

Laboring under the weight of the armor, looking desperately at thirty feet of rain-pelted mud between him and safety, Tasse's fears became certainty in his mind.

He wasn't going to make it.

He had often heard of dying well. His father had spoken of it. His father had done it--arrows in the chest on the walls of Gallaston.
His almost-father.
Anger flooded Tasse, thoughts of dying well melding with images of being run down from behind, like a dog in the road.

Like a bastard on a dyke-wall.
In spite of the ringing in his ears, Tasse's guess had not been wrong about the approach of the cavalry. They were upon him, lances lowered, and directed at the small of his back.

Tasse's body twisted in front of them.
His left foot entrenched itself on the rough ground, his hands clawing desperately at the grip of his great sword.

He was turning to face them when the lance struck.
Because they were so close, Tasse had none of the time he needed to draw his weapon.

Because he was so close when he whirled to attack, the lead cavalryman had no time to correct the line of his lance.

The steel-clad point glanced off Tasse's hip and struck the scabbard, tearing it from Tasse's hands. The sword went with the scabbard, and Tasse felt a sharp tug at his waist as the hip belt snapped.

For an instant, Tasse's world was filled with just the panic that he saw in the eye of the horse.

Then its armored shoulder slammed brutally into him. His body whirled.

He saw the thicket,

--then his sword spinning away into the iron-grey field.
--then the sky, the river,
--darkness.

His body bounced and rolled down the muddy embankment into the swelling river.

The armor pulled him down.
Struggling upward, fighting for the surface, the muscles in his shoulders and neck knotted with pain...

Tasse's eyes opened to the not quite pitch-colored blackness of the bed chamber. He wiped his forehead with his hand, and two cold drops ran off his fingertips, splashing on his chest. He was sitting bolt upright in bed with that sickly sensation of wet nightshirt clinging to his arms and back.

As more of Tasse's mind broke the surface of his sleep, he could almost taste the scent of river in the air around his head. He drew breath through his nostrils, but the scent was gone.

It had been years since the dream had come--six, seven--maybe longer. The dream of that first big battle had stayed with him, through the brief, inglorious years in Holweir's army, through his years as a mercenary in Erleg and Gallhad. Even these much nearer memories were already years behind him.

Years and miles had closed to nothing, and the fear had choked him again.

Tasse looked over his shoulder into the darkness beside him. Lirra was there, silently awake. He couldn't see her gaze, but he knew she was watching.

She's never seen me wake like this, he thought. My last dream of the battle was before her... before her time with me, anyway.
Tasse figured briefly and decided that the battle itself must have happened when she was little more than a girl. This young barbarian woman couldn't know what had just wakened him so harshly. She knew little of his life before he came to the highlands. He'd shared only snatches of his career as a mercenary with her.

Tasse pretended not to know that she was awake, lifting aside the heavy layers of quilts and sheep-hide and walking across the rough floor to the blackest slice of darkness that marked the top of the narrow stone stairway.

Morning came suddenly to the highlands, and the feeble outline of images in the bedroom hinted that this fugitive from sleep had at least been driven awake with good timing. He navigated down the steep half-circle of stairs to the main room of the first floor. Quickly, he felt the mild sting of cold wood smoke on his eyes.

The ancient flue in this old stone barbican was nearly clogged with this long winter's layers of soot and ash. Tasse would sweep it out himself, but the chimney emerged midway up the sheer side of the three-story tower, and in the ice of winter, he wasn't eager to break his back.

He called for a sweep in late March, as he always did, but the rocky path that served as a road into the highlands was either still snowed in, or mired in melt-off. Nobody marketing anything associated with civilized living would come to the Redgate outpost for another couple of weeks. Isolation was a price paid by anyone serving a rotation at Redgate, and Tasse knew it well. He'd been commander
here for six years.

He moved through the unseen murk to the hearth. Quietly, he peeled the sweat-heavy woolen nightshirt over his head, his long, black hair falling in damp tendrils over his shoulders and back.

He stood naked before dim orange coals from last night's fire. Even here there was no smoke to be seen coming off the embers, but in the chill of the downstairs, the warmth was welcome on his skin.

He pushed the wet forelock back with the nightshirt. It smelled of bed and Lirra, and it made the hour of the morning seem that much earlier. He draped the shirt over a chair by the hearth and peered about in the gloom for his clothes. Peering only made his eyes burn.

It was the custom of the native people of the high country and red wastes to dress before their fires. It was a custom readily adopted by Tasse when he was called to command the Redgate outpost.

Before Redgate, Tasse had been a lieutenant riding borders and trails for Erleg. After sleeping in his clothes for years, it had taken him some time to get used to dressing at all in the morning.

Now he couldn't find his clothes. He knew that Lirra would have laid them out somewhere nearby.

He stirred the coals with the poker and felt beside the firepit for a handful of dry kindling. He laid the twigs on the orangest spots of heat, and the fire sprang up.
With the yellow light spreading across the room, he quickly located his clothes, and dragged them from the armchair to the fireside to warm them. Lirra had pulled out his heavy uniform, something that he hadn't worn since early winter.

It was the usual Erlegen army captain's uniform, dark cloth, tarnished buttons, square in the shoulders, a little thread-bare in the seat, and a small rip on the left sleeve, Tasse couldn't remember from what.

He didn't think of himself as a captain. He felt like a man, stranded, who was the annual leader of a band of temporarily stranded men.

There was nothing military to do here, not really. He saw to it that the men didn't get too lax, that they were drilled regularly enough so that they wouldn't look too rusty when they went back to the real world.

Tasse pushed the garments closer to the fire, eager to warm them up so he could get into them soon. He hadn't worn the heavy uniform in so long because it just wasn't as warm as the stuff he could get from the local villagers. There was no one to impress, and there was no sense in being cold.

With that thought in mind, Tasse chose two irregular logs from the pile beside the hearth and laid them close on either side of the flames that he had going. When the logs caught, he jammed the poker up the chimney and whacked it around, hoping to improve the flow of air out of the room. This was a ritual that he had taken up in the early
springs, and sometimes it helped.

This morning, the smoke hung a little too thick to let things go without at least a futile gesture. He gave up, not sure that he hadn't made some improvement. Then he began pulling on his clothes.

Strange--, he thought, how the heat of the fire stops my sweat, while the cold of the bedroom seemed to keep the dampness on me.

It was a useless observation; Tasse never knew their portent, but he couldn't seem to avoid seeing them. This one made him feel backward for his ignorance, and he breathed uneasily. His mind was trying to bury it, but his body was still shaken by the manner of his waking.

He could never have imagined all those years ago that the memory and fear would haunt him for this long. He had been twenty-one and three days when he had first wakened after that ill-fated battle. That had been the first of hundreds of times that he'd wakened in his fevered fright.

The dreams had been worst during the first few years, when he was still trying at the court of the Duke of Holweir to gain the right to the van Poulder family arms. When he had been with the Holweirn army, the dreams had driven him over the "new border" toward his old home, and ultimately drove him to that one, nearly fatal, indiscretion. His flight from bastardhood had nearly gotten him hung for treason by his own army. Only luck and a keen eye for poorly-guarded horses had saved him from court-martial.
He had fled over the mountains, deep into Erleg, and hired in with a band of mercenaries—but the dream had followed him.

The torments in his sleep had only fallen off after years as a sword for hire, when he was offered his first commission in the regular army—the lieutenantship on Erleg's west borders.

Yes, that had been when they stopped; the good days, just riding. Though he never had been able to look at a stream the same way, the nightmare never followed him up from the river-crossed lowlands.

Now, again, at thirty-nine, he was plagued. When he had buried it in the past, he had wakened not as a frightened child, but worse—as a frightened man.

Tasse pulled the heavy sleeve over his right hand and counted the silhouettes of his fingers against the firelight. It had been almost nineteen years since the battle at Bandale.

A moment's fear had lasted him nineteen years.

While lacing up the front of his uniform, Tasse slid two fingers over the old spot where the arrow had wounded him. He could feel no trace of the old scar. It was hidden by a vertical ridge from a newer scar—a knife's memento of his mercenary days.

He heard a creaking from the boards above his head and knew that Lirra was out of bed. She would be down soon to begin quietly attending to her duties.

Tasse did not want to be asked about his strange wakening. However, he knew her ... well enough to know that well
before the breakfast was half cooked, a soft, unassuming voice would begin a round-about inquisition.

She was a woman of the Redlands, of the Wokind people; honest, proud, and worst of all in this situation—superstition:

A grimace that resembled a smile wrinkled between his black mustache and beard as he caught himself trying to formulate an escape from the inquisition. She was a barbarian wench with the ways of her kind, but she cared for more than just his house and his bed. She would be down, and she would ask, out of concern for him.

Oh, it's nothing, girl, he thought, A gut-shot bastard nearly drowned to death in a battle nineteen years ago, and I was just reliving the experience.

Another creak from above put haste in his step.

Tasse lifted a short-sword and scabbard from a hook in the wall, and made for the door. Dreams meant much to her people. He didn't want to talk about it. He'd kept the past this long.

If she pressed him later, he could tell her of some colorful monster, but for now, he was going out to tap the night-sentries off duty and then visit the stables.

He snatched a staff of gnarled, white wood from the table, and he was gone without a sound, save the door banging lightly behind him.
CHAPTER III

The dark woman sat naked at the edge of the bed, laying thick, deep brown lengths of her hair into a single slow-tapering braid. Wokind women wore their hair long, and the single braid down their back was the simplest—therefore the traditional—way to keep it free of their work. Her dexterous fingers were arrested in their weaving for an instant by the sound of the door downstairs striking its frame.

Tasse often left to make rounds before breakfast, but usually that was in summer when there was something happening in the outpost. Now, in early spring, there was nothing happening save for the men's restless cleaning and oiling of weapons whose edges had grown unearthly sharp from a long, close winter's worth of attentions.

Holding the loose chords of her unfinished braid in one hand, Lirra rose and stepped across the rough wood floor to the iron-shuttered window. Light only slipped into the room around the narrow gaps of the shutter's edges, but between the two metal plates were stuffed a vertical line of knotted rags. She pulled out two from the gap, to reveal a shallow arrow slit. She moved close to peer through.

The blue half-light of morning shone in, making the smoothness of her naturally tan skin seem almost olive. Cold air spilled in and flowed across her bare feet, as she watched the courtyard of the outpost through the narrow steel slit.
There, below her, was Tasse, tramping purposefully across the yard, his black hair and uniform putting him in sharp contrast to the frosted grey stones. As he moved away, Lirra could hear the regular chunking sound of his walking staff, swinging into his stride every fourth step.

She knew Tasse.

Like anyone whose occupation has a long blank of slow time, Tasse both dreaded the return to work, and eagerly welcomed the end of the winter's inactivity. The spring brought change, and his mood passed back and forth like a shadow between mild high spirits and dark irritability.

Lirra knew that the new season's work would cheer him briefly, but then, like a wild cat on a rope, Tasse would stretch the limits of his job, and then fall reluctantly into routine.

She had lived in the barbican with him for four years now, and every year she saw it.

Now, she watched him cross between the old bunkhouse and the stables. Then he turned the corner out of sight.

He was going to see whatever man had been set to watch the path during the night. The path stretched to the north of the outpost and vanished into the cleft that the lowland people called, "the pass."

The man on watch would probably tell Tasse what Lirra already knew— that a horn from the pass had blown.

Earlier, in the darkness of the bedroom, Lirra had watched over the troubled sleep of her lover, and then a hollow call had echoed up from between the knees of the
Redland's great stone lap. There were travelers in the pass.

The snows of the last several months were melting away with unusual speed this year, and spring was making itself felt in the highlands. The pass was open, because Muutwok, the goddess of Lirra's people, was awakening.

From the man on the night-watch, Tasse would only learn of a horn blown in the pass.

From this second-story vantage, Lirra looked out over the few low roofs and to the west. There the highlands ranged slowly up, before cutting away sharply to form a jagged horizon. The rough, craggy land, usually grey in this early season, looked otherworldly in the blue glow of the unrisen sun.

In just a few weeks, the land would tint itself from grey to pale green. Then it would go abruptly dark with the orange and brown of summer.

It was these tints of the warm months that had earned the territory the name of Redlands among the Erlegen lowlanders. Those of the native Wokind people who understood the meaning of the word, joked that the low-men saw so much green in the farm-country of their own homes, that they knew no distinction between brown and red.

The highland folk themselves kept only the names of places, villages, and landmarks. The land itself was referred to only by the name of the goddess, Muutwok.

Tasse didn't believe in her goddess. He observed no sacrifice, not even to the god of his people in the lowlands.
She had gathered that he once had followed the Baabian faith, but something had made him give it up. She had never known what, and she had never cared to ask. If Tasse wished her to know, he would say.

Lirra watched out over the Redlands for some minutes before she realized how much cold air was drafting into the room, and she had yet to dress. She stuffed the rags as best she could, but crudely, back into the arrow slit with her free hand, and then she resumed her seat on the edge of the bed, beginning her braiding once again.

She thought of how, each day, the ritual of putting back her hair would take a little longer. She remembered the old tales of old women whose hair had grown so long that they braided until sundown before their work could be started.

She finished quickly and stood, the clasped tassel of loose hair at the end of her braid caressing the swell of her buttocks. She pulled a long sweater over her head, a patterned one of grey and yellow wool, and then she chose a dark robe of greyish black from two that hung on the bedpost. On chilly mornings, like this one, she preferred Tasse's robe to her's. He was only a little taller than she, but his robe reached the floor when she wore it.

Lirra would be about her work now—the house to tend and the fire to keep. By custom of the highland people, her performance of such service obligated Tasse to another night in her bed.
Tasse was mere feet from the young sentry, trying to decide if he should pounce. Just then, his intended victim scanned the horizon left, and then, with a startled jump, became aware that his commander was right behind him.

"Good morning," the sentry said, then remembered to punctuate his greeting, "--Captain."

"Boo!" Tasse slapped the boy lightly on the shoulder to reassure the embarrassed but smiling boy. Tasse used to make a sport of sneaking up on his watchmen, but now he did it only occasionally.

"Go to bed, Jason. Redgate has safely survived another cold night in your care."

The boy happily started to comply, but then turned with remembered excitement.

"Captain, the pass," he blurted. "The horn blew this morning!"

A grin spread across Tasse's lips, as he regarded the rough-clad soldier before him. The boy's youthful freckles seemed to somehow camouflage the fact that he stood nearly a head taller than his captain.

"How long ago did you hear it?" Tasse asked.

"Maybe an hour. A little more, maybe."

"Was it Barth... do you know the sound of Captain Barth's horn?"

Jason's eyes darted quickly toward the wastes of the
Redlands, thinking, but Tasse realized that the boy wouldn't know Barth's horn when he heard it. Jason was a first-timer at the outpost.

"It was a deep horn, sir," the boy said at last, "--one long blast I heard."

"That could be him then," Tasse said with a marked calm. He really didn't expect anyone up the pass for some weeks, and if it was his old comrade, the better.

Tasse stood, looking to the north of the outpost, rubbing the broad wedge of his black beard.

To the north lay the great geological cleft in the edge of the highlands, like a god's axe-cut in the rim of the world. From it ran a stony trail that came up from the lowlands, and that trail ended under their feet where Tasse and the sentry stood.

"Go on to bed, Jason," he repeated. "We'll know by noon, whoever it is."

"Yes sir." The boy responded with a cheerfulness that sounded odd with the words he spoke. But then, ordering a night sentry to sleep was the only order that could get such a response.

Jason shouldered his weapon, a tall axe with a spike opposite the blade. The pike-point that would have extended the line of the haft had been broken during newyears, as Tasse remembered. Jason had been sparring in the cold, where his steel had proved brittle. His weapon was no longer, technically, a halberd, but he had kept it all the same. There were few enough extras around the outpost.
The boy turned and walked off along the edge of the buildings, headed for the old bunkhouse.

Tasse called after him, "You may well need that sleep--if that is Captain Barth."

Jason paused at a gap in the wall, ready to step through into the courtyard.

"He always brings something for the men," Tasse explained, lifting his fist over his face with his thumb miming a bottleneck aimed down his throat.

The tired sentry gave a smile and a nod, and vanished through the gap in the wall, no doubt eager to carry out his new mission of rest.

Tasse remained at the perimeter outside Redgate. He wasn't surprised by the young soldier's enthusiasm for sleep, or for hearing the horn. It was his first year in the military, and he had been stuck in the highlands for months. In a week or two, his rotation here would be over, and he would be off to another station, maybe near home. The sound of the horn meant an end of winter, and a promise of escape from Redgate.

The outpost was so far out on the perimeter of Erleg's defenses, that some commanders in the lowcountry rotated men here in place of some disciplinary measure. Those were rare, but rowdy when they did come. Tasse had enough regulars here, men who stayed because they didn't mind the quiet, to keep such exiles in line till the end of their rotation.

Tasse actually liked getting such men, at times, especially in winter. There was little enough entertainment here,
beyond the edge of civilization. Even in the Kingdoms and
Dukedoms of the lowlands, winter shut down commerce, hindered
tavel, and made military forays next to impossible.

The snows in the highlands were so fierce that these
facts of life went double for Tasse's outpost. The truth was
that keeping men stationed here served no real military
use, beyond "good military policy"--partly as defense against
an invasion that could never happen in the snow, but mostly
to keep the Wokind from taking over the outpost as a winter
dwelling.

Tasse usually had the stories of invasion played up
to raise the young soldiers' senses of purpose. They'd
joined for adventure and glory.

They got Redgate.

Tasse's regular men, those that stayed at the outpost
year round with him, tended to stoically lapse into a kind
of hibernation in winter. Often, odd hobbies were taken
up.

This winter's rage had been breeding rats for speed.
Captain van Poulder had even presided over one of the races
himself, though he refused Sergeant Hulther's suggestion
that he choose the mating pair, the "honor" being offered
with deference to Tasse's well-known judgment of good horses.

It was Hulther that Tasse moved to roust next. Hulther
was a fat old man, the cook and the sergeant of the stables.

When Tasse was still riding borders as a lieutenant,
he'd come to know the old story-teller who kept the horses.
Hulther had been cook here through two commanders before
Tasse, and the man remembered when the outpost still had all of its walls intact. Back then, there hadn't been any need for the extra fortification; just no one thought to do anything more constructive with the stones.

Contrary to the original design, Redgate now had four gaps, narrow and wide alike, through which anyone could enter the central yard. These four did not include the original, single entrance, the large and heavy iron portcullis framed in the archway between the two low towers of the old barbican.

Tasse kept the portcullis down for two reasons, both very unmilitary. One was that the mechanism holding it up might allow it to fall and hurt someone.

The other reason was that Tasse didn't want any unnecessary weight on the barbican's structure. One tower of the barbican was used as storage, but the other was where Tasse lived.

He had no real reason to doubt the building's soundness, in fact it was quite sturdy. Nonetheless, given the choice, which as commander he had, he slept better with the ancient gate lowered.

The other five buildings in the "fort's" broken oval were one story. There were two long, bent bunkhouses, both built on the same design facing each other, yet one was about a hundred years older than the other. There was a stables between them; then a forge and a woodshed, both built of the stones that had once filled the four gaps in the walls.

Tasse passed through one of these gaps and walked along the edge of the yard to the broad, square double-doors of
the stables. With a lift of the wooden latch, and the pushing aside of a coarse blanket, Tasse entered the dark warm building.

He immediately caught the scent of pipe-smoke, and he halted his hand as it was about to strike the end of his walking stick against the black-iron pan beside the door. By the freshness of the smoke, Tasse knew that Hulther was already awake and puffing away.

Midway across the stable's dark interior, he saw a writhing ring of thick grey smoke glide up from behind the iron stove that sat opposite the stalls.

From behind it came the familiar gravel voice. "Mornin' Captain Tasse."

Hulther leaned his chair back against the wall behind him, the back legs of the modest seat somehow supporting his bulk.

Tasse leaned his walking stick against the stove and pulled another chair around to face the man with the pipe. He could hear the wooden joints of Hulther's chair squealing in protest as he shifted his weight forward, and then back against the wall again.

"How long have you been up?" Tasse asked.

Hulther pulled the end of the cracked clay pipe from the corner of his mouth and answered thoughtfully.

"Two bowls . . . counting this one."

Tasse eased himself forward, elbows on knees.

"Young Jason tells me that he's heard a horn from the pass this morning. Over an hour ago."

"Hmmmm," Hulther intoned, puffing calmly.
"'Hmmm' what?" Tasse said impatiently.

"Oh--well, yeah. I was awake then if that's what you mean. I'm smokin' a bit slow this morning."

"So was it--"

"Yes," the old man interrupted. "It was Captain Barth's horn I heard."

"Damn you old buzzard," Tasse laughed, "if you knew what I was coming in to ask, then why didn't you just tell me to start with?"

Hulther didn't change expression. He just sucked his smoke and squeaked his chair.

"I know what you want to know. You ask every year, and every year, I know. I just let you ask, that's all."

Tasse put his hands out to the heat coming from the stove, and the stabler continued.

"I bet Barth gets as anxious to see his old riding partner as you do. You were good border riders together--always getting into things, but never bringing trouble back with you."

Tasse looked up at Hulther, wondering how recent Tasse's lieutenant days with Barth seemed to someone of his age. Maybe he remembered it like it was last month.

"Way I remember it," Tasse said, "Barth got us into trouble, and I got us out."

"Well if that's the way it was, then Barth is as good with a lie as you are with a horse, Tasse."

Tasse stood up and reached for his stick, then changed his mind and left it leaning on the hot iron.
"We can straighten that out tonight, Hulther. Make sure that the stalls are ready for tired horses, fresh hay and oats."

"Best we have," Hulther nodded.

"And later this evening, after dinner, we'll be back down to see who lies best," Tasse said with mock incredulity. "And in honor of spring, we'll put another walking stick to the torch."

Tasse turned, leaving the stick by the fire, and with a bow to Hulther, he left the stables.

There was the morning bell to ring, and the work to begin.

Work... Ha! Tasse thought. **Drill forty men so that the thirty who get to leave can see their toes as they march away.**
In a few hours it was full morning, the sun having arched better than halfway toward noon, when a thin plume of hoof-kicked snow powder and road dust rose on the wind from the great cleft in the highlands. The dust and snow were stirred by two mounted horses with two sturdy but heavily-burdened burros behind on ropes.

The two grey burros were covered with coarse black blankets against the cold, and the packs on their backs seemed precariously wide for such narrow beasts. The cargo itself was hidden on each animal's pack by wear-faded green canvas.

The horses were laboring ahead, not so much from the weight of the men on their backs as from the steep climb out of the pass. One horse was black; the other quite pale.

The much larger black horse was bred for combat, but even for a warhorse this animal, glossy black from braided mane to shaggy hoove, was obviously of uncommon worth. Astride this dark giant was a young man, fair skinned and fair featured--strong blue eyes set over a square face clean-shaven save for a narrow mustache the color of long-tarnished copper.

On his head was a light steel cap with a curtain of metal scales draping the back of his head and neck to his shoulders. Under a thick, white cloak that spread over the back of his saddle, he wore a shirt of fine metal
scale mail that matched the workmanship of those on his helm, and steel bowls cupped his shoulders. About his waist and about him on his saddle were all of the trappings of a well-armed soldier, including a small triangular buckler bearing the device of a green lizard on red.

His gaze constantly shifted from one side of the trail to the other, curious and alert.

The smaller horse was a marbled light and dark grey, the color of the very highlands rising around them. Lean and surefooted, this much older animal knew the trail to the Redgate outpost well, as did the man upon her in the quilted hood.

In striking contrast to the younger man, this man seemed nearly unarmed, save for a light longbow held across his lap with one hand. What hung from the saddle's right side laid to rest any doubt of the weapon's effectiveness—two long hares, both blooded at the throat.

The two men rode in silence, rising from the cleft of the pass into the first direct sunlight that they had been in for two days. Against the rough landscape, something regular and manmade caught the shifting gaze of the young soldier.

"Redgate?" His gloved hand gestured to his right even as he realized that he was wrong.

The hooded figure shook his head.

"No—that's the old foundation—hundreds of years old—from old Norgod."

Their horses ambled to the crest of a rise, and there
revealed just over a mile to the south was Redgate.

"There's our outpost," the hooded man said with the voice of a man coming home.

The soldier's brow furrowed as he looked back over his shoulder to the ancient foundation.

"A strong foundation to have lasted so well," the young man said, "and an excellent command of the pass."

A pause passed between the two travelers as they continued toward Redgate--then the soldier asked his question.

"Why wasn't Redgate built there--on that foundation?"

The man on the grey mount pulled back his hood, revealing waves of grey-streaked black hair with long, twisted sideburns. His down-curved mustache framed a broad, almost predatory grin.

"Blasphemy, Flanch--desecration of the Goddess."

The young man, Flanch, was confused and was about to ask more, but the other, his commanding officer, interrupted.

"People of the Redlands have their goddess . . . and she is the land."

"Yes . . . and so?"

"So . . . ?" he continued, still grinning, "you see those high crags far to the west?"

Flanch glanced and nodded, as confused as ever.

"Well those are the tits of the goddess."

Flanch scanned the topography again--the other man continued, enjoying playing the sage.

"If you travel downhill from a goddess's tits and
happen upon the pass we just came up," he gestured behind him with his thumb,"what association are you likely to make?"

The grin became contagious, spreading across the younger man's face.

"I think I understand, Sir."

"It's worse than you think if you consider the kind of architecture old Norgod is most famous for."

"Towers--?" Flanch's grin dissolved into a look of realization that was quickly replaced with a larger grin.

"You've got it, Lieutenant--the people of the highlands didn't take kindly to our ancestors building a fortified phallic and changing the gender of their religion."

"Captain Barth," Flanch exclaimed, sounding annoyed,"you're telling me tales!"

"What makes you think this is a tale," the grinning Captain asked.

"You expect me to believe that the old dynasty dismantled one of its great towers to avoid friction with barbarian rabble."

The Captain's grin adjusted slightly, becoming a smirk.

"You can believe what you like, Lieutenant, but that's not what I'm telling you. You're educated--What does history say was happening about five-hundred years ago?"

The armored lieutenant looked confused again, thinking. His Captain didn't give him time to answer.
"The old dynasty never dismantled anything--they got their civilized butts kicked by that 'barbarian rabble.'"

"You don't mean the Kreadian Invasion."

"The same. Though the people of the Redlands had nearly nothing to do with the invasion proper, they were the ones who swarmed over the old dynasty's defenses, sacked the cities, and then practically invited Kread to march through their land to invade."

Flanch looked over his shoulder again, but the old foundation was back beyond the rise, out of sight. Barth continued.

"Most of the stones that went into that tower were thrown off cliffs onto the lowlands. I've seen some of them that must have taken fifty men to carry--and I'm talking about carrying it five miles up range! There's a pretty good cliff there. Some of the bridges across the upper Yarle River include foundations made of that rubble."

Flanch looked back to his Captain. "Fascinating, Sir," he said, smiling again.

Captain Barth realized that he was waxing enthusiastic over one of his best subjects. He'd gotten the point across, so he ended the lecture.

"You'll learn more about the highlanders anyway," he said, "maybe tonight."

They were now approaching the outpost, and a crowd of men, thirty or so, were congregating outside its perimeter. Captain Barth kicked his grey horse into a trot and
handed the rope of his burro to Flanch as he rode passed.

He trotted out ahead about ten yards, grinning once again. He stood in his stirrups and yelled.

"MEN OF REDGATE! WE TRAVELERS BEG SHELTER!"

From among the throng stepped a familiar stocky form in a dark, square-shouldered uniform--his hair blew out to his right like a black flag in the highland wind. He gripped his scabbard in his left hand, and signaled halt with his right.

Barth reined his horse in, and it reluctantly stopped. Flanch pulled his great black warhorse up a few yards behind.

The dark-haired man kept his hand raised and called loudly over the wind.

"TRAVELERS--REDGATE WILL GRANT YOU SHELTER AT THE PRICE OF FIVE BARRELS OF ALE."

Barth shook his head and held up four fingers.

The other man gave a grin that mimicked Barth's.

"FOUR? VERY WELL THEN--WE'LL TAKE THOSE, AND YOU CAN SLEEP ON THE COUCH!"

Barth leaned back toward Flanch, and spoke from the side of his mouth.

"Captain van Poulder--at times he can be a bigger smart-ass than me!"

The two were cheered by the men as they rode into the courtyard. By the time they could dismount in front of the stables, one of the burros' ropes had been cut, the burro had vanished with its liquid cargo into one of the bunkhouses. Barth was hardly surprised; Redgate thirsted.
The other burro was being expertly unpacked by no less than eleven men.

"Just the barrels," Captain van Poulder barked from the center of the courtyard. "The burros and anything else on the packs are to be brought in one piece to the stables before anyone has a drop!"

Half the men grumbled, the others yelled, "Aye!"

Tasse walked up to the travelers.

"Welcome to the edge of the world, gentlemen. Come this way."

The three men adjourned to the top of one of the barbican's squat towers, and here, just twenty-five feet above the more boisterous reveling, they enjoyed the afternoon sun and two skins of sour wine that Tasse had put aside for "company." Because this part of the three-and-a-half story structure had one set of stairs running only as far as the second floor bedchamber, they had to pull chairs up through floor hatches of the third and top stories with a rope.

From this high vantage they could see over the rim of the highlands, and, beyond it through the distant haze, they could make out the lines of rivers and farms in the Kingdoms of Erleg and Yarle. The two captains soon turned their backs on the East and pulled their chairs to overlook the courtyard and the rising highlands. They lounged the afternoon away, passing the skin and telling tales;
most of them from Barth about Tasse and their years of riding border together.

Flanch stayed quiet for the most part, sipping wine and giving only the occasional nod, or mild exclamation. He did ask one or two questions, and these, Tasse thought, seemed to come from a genuine desire to learn.

Of this Tasse was glad, for Flanch would need a will to understand. He was to be the new border guard riding with Valsek this season.

It was, however, how few questions he asked--far fewer than one would expect from a new rider--that made Tasse curious. Was the new man quiet by nature or just afraid of asking something that would make him look foolish?

Tasse turned his chair sideways on the dusty clay roof and turned the course of the stories toward tales of his own early, foolish mishaps.

Flanch remained quiet, but his attention was seized. Tasse smiled as he yawned, for now he knew that the man watching him was probably a competent soldier made suddenly unsure by his strange surroundings.

There was no doubt that following his captain up from Fort Brach had been no great help. Barth, for years, had been bringing green troops up with tales of everything from cannibals to the walking dead.

He was a great liar for sport, which went strangely but appropriately with his interest in history and legend. It also explained how most of the men that Barth either led or sent to the Redlands came armed to the teeth.
Poor Flanch was no exception, and as the tales spun on he was beginning to realize it.

Tasse decided to approach the subject, telling of a messenger that Barth had sent, who came tearing into Redgate at an hour till midnight—just missing the witching hour, and who insisted upon sleeping in his mail. It was Tasse's first and only lie of the evening, but both his guests believed it, laughed, and Flanch, who had been either courageous or well-mannered enough to disarm at the door, began to look more at home.

Barth did Tasse one better in tales of paranoia, pulling his cassock aside to reveal that, though he appeared unarmed, he still wore his crown-issued vest of leather and steel-rings next to his skin.

The three of them were watching the highland sun set against the crags, when a man and boy leading a horse appeared out of the glare. They moved through the landscape's own shadow, and the men on the barbican all saw them at once.

Only Tasse knew who they were at this distance.

"Flanch," Tasse said, "would you go down the ladder to that girl in the kitchen?"

Flanch nodded sharply.

"She doesn't speak Norgodian," Tasse continued, "but if you put a hand on the table and hold up five fingers, she'll get your meaning."

Flanch paused by the ladder, confused.

"What is my meaning, sir?" he said, not wholly unaffected by the wine.
"The message is that we will be five for dinner."

Flanch nodded again and disappeared down the hatch in the roof. Tasse turned to Barth immediately.

"There comes your new boy's partner, Valsek," he said, "He must have heard your horn way out at the village this morning."

"Good, We'll be able to put your lieutenant and mine together this evening and see how they get on."

"More famously than we did our first evening, I hope."

Barth thought for a moment and then reached a hand under his hair, just behind his right ear. "That knot never did go down," he said, rubbing, "--I told you it was just a figure of speech! And you still hit me. From behind, yet!"

Tasse grinned evilly at his old partner. It was an old joke between them, and Tasse was glad that his friend had the humor to think of it as such. Tasse never did tell him why he had taken such offense at the term "bastard sword," the military slang for the hand-and-a-half sword.

Even with this man, Tasse had buried some of his past. Now he turned the subject with a make-shift axiom.

"Never trust a friend who wouldn't club you from behind, Barth."

Barth laughed, "That keeps my friends few, if I know what's good for me."

They turned toward the sun and watched the long shadows of Valsek, the boy, and the horse as they moved down toward Redgate. Tasse imagined himself at the top of Valsek's
shadow, as he had been before his promotion--roaming the wide land.

After a few minutes, Barth broke his daydreaming.

"I hope you won't mind, Tasse, but I kind of promised young Flanch an exhibition of your weapon."

"What... an exhibition?"

"You know, a sparring against that jumbo blade of yours."

Tasse slumped. "Hell, Barth! I haven't touched it. It's been in oil-cloth for at least three months."

"No doubt. Flanch says his instructors have declared such 'archaic weapons' tactically inferior." Barth grinned and watched for Tasse's response.

"Forget it old friend. I've heard it before." Tasse kicked at some lichen on the roof under his foot, then added, "His instructors said so?"

"That's right," Barth smirked.

"So what does he need me for? Didn't his all-knowing instructors simply convince him that they were right?"

"That's just it, Tasse. Here you've got a kid fresh out of the Jerris Academy, but they don't teach bas... your weapon any more. They gave him a pocket full of theory, and a slap on the back for confidence."

"So he's never fought against a hand-and-a-half sword?"

"That's right, Tasse, the Academy just told him that he could beat one easy." Barth was grinning big now. He wanted to see a show, and he thought he was going to get it.

"What's the kid's weapon?" Tasse asked cautiously,
after a long pause.

Barth answered quickly, as if he'd rehearsed it, "Longsword and buckler . . . with left hand dagger."

"Ouch! That's fast. Real fast."

"And he's good too." Barth added the remark as a goad, just for good measure.

"I'm too far out of practice," Tasse protested. "I'm not sure I can beat him without hurting him."

Barth laughed. "Maybe he'll beat you."

The two old partners grinned together as they always used to. Tasse said nothing.

"All right then," Barth said, suddenly hopping up from his chair and going to the ladder. "I'll tell our lieutenant after dinner that you and he have a date in the yard tomorrow at . . . what's a nice round figure--dawn? . . . And that you cannot guarantee his safety."

Tasse just threw his hands up in surrender, as Barth disappeared down the hole.

Tasse generally disliked single combat for sport, and avoided it where it seemed particularly pointless. It was a means by which the idle gentry lightly injured each other to justify their idleness. It was a joint tantrum between two men who mistook hurt feelings for questioned honor.

Now, with resignation, Tasse would have to put draw blade and put it down to educational sparring.

The last of the sun vanished behind the crags, and the red sky began to fade to darkness. Only the sound of the reveling below remained constant.
CHAPTER VI

At night, the other tower of the barbican was as dark as a witch's womb. This was the place where Redgate had its stores of winter food. The perishables, joints of meat, hams, and other "good stuff," were now nearly gone.

If wintering in the highlands was dull for the soldiers, they at least ate well for their little work.

As always, this spring had come leaving baskets, barrels, and bags of non-perishable supplies, largely undisturbed in favor of the meat, cheese, and any vegetables that would keep for any length of time.

The dry goods were here in stacks against the walls of the tower's first story, heaped high around the great iron windlass that raised and lowered the portcullis.

It was here, in his familiar darkness, that Tasse lay. The evening had gone off well; a good first day with the pass open.

He had introduced the lieutenants, and after a perfect pair of hares for dinner, he had sent them together to collect the men who were singing on their backs in the courtyard. He suggested that the soberest among them be designated as the night's sentry, and Barth had suggested that barrels of ale be listed among siege weaponry, judging by the damage it had done to the forty men of Redgate.

Tasse and Barth had gone across to the stables and joined Hulther for the ceremonious burning of the winter's walking stick. This year's stick had been a particularly
sturdy one, and it burned for about two hours with Tasse pushing it into the stove a little at a time.

Over the warmth of the fire, some fair pipe tobacco, and plenty of talk, Barth had come around to a topic that seized Tasse's interest, though he hid it well, he hoped. Barth talked of unrest in the river counties held by Naad, west of the Vanderwal. It came up casually during talk of happenings in the lowlands, and his descriptions of rumors, small and large, might not have been told if Barth had not known that Tasse was originally from that area.

Tasse had confided that much years ago, but little else.

Barth told of some tax, or impressment that had triggered "small, unrelated insurrections."

Like a flame, Tasse's mind had leapt at the story. Sure...they were only rumors of "small uprisings," he thought, but what else would Naad allow to be known.

Tasse had tried to discreetly press Barth for details. Confirmation was what he really wanted, but his old friend just had the scant rumors, and some speculation. Tasse had been forced to allow the conversation to wander to other things. The stick had burned, the evening passed, and the talk had broken up.

Flanch and Valsek and the strange barbarian boy were now bedded down in the stables with Hulther, and Barth was spread out before the hearth in the other tower of the barbican.

Now, to himself, Tasse found that he was dwelling on the news of uprisings--savoring it. A hope that he had
given up as dead in the haze of his past had returned, alive and well. The hope was a wayward friend to whom Tasse had always had difficulty saying no.

_Only rumors_, he assured himself, trying to stop his mind from dwelling on it. It was no use.

Atop a heap of large grain sacks, Tasse was lying in pitch blackness. He ran his hand over his right hip and squeezed lightly. It felt sound enough, but the fierce winters of this land had been reminding him of some long-forgotten accident. At least ever since he had gotten command here.

He wasn't sure what it could be in his long history of spills that brought the pain in his hip; one or all of the times that he'd been thrown by horses, the fall he had taken once from a ledge—maybe the jump he had made from a girl's window years ago.

He stared silently into the sightless blackness, running down his résumé of mishaps, thinking of how each one could have caused his pain—but he really knew which one it was, the accident he always tried to avoid in his mind.

It was the mishap at the bottom of his list, the one that was kin to his "wayward friend"—the one that had ended his dream last night, as it had ended so many other nightmares. _Bandale_.

Tasse's private darkness closed in, and he remembered the horse's eye, his sword against the sky—and he remembered dying in the water, barely having the sanity to squirm out of the oversized armor. He never knew how he got onto the
opposite bank, whether he had washed up or crawled.

Uprisings in the river counties... but they're only rumors.

Lying still among the supplies, Tasse realized that he had stopped breathing, but the image of the sword against the sky had reminded him of what he had come down into the darkness of this store-room to get.

He pushed himself up from the sacks of grain, hearing their contents crunching under his weight, and found his feet. Any stiffness in his hip would need to be worked out by activity. In the morning, Tasse knew he'd be getting a strong first dose by sparring with young Flanch. He would first have to see to his sword and chain-mail before bed.

Though it was totally dark, Tasse knew this crowded, round chamber well. He moved slowly to the large iron drum of the portcullis machinery and stretched out his hands.

With his eyes closed, his mind could better remember where things were, and there, lying across the drums, was a long cloth bundle, tightly wrapped. The surface was damp with the feel of old oil.

Tasse lifted it gently.

It was heavy with hauberk and blade, and the oiled canvas brought the bundle's weight to over forty pounds. Tasse cradled it against his chest with one arm and felt his way to the stone spiral of stairs against the opposite wall.

He crept up them to the second floor and through a narrow connecting passage that crossed within the apex of
the barbican's arch to the other tower. It was the only connecting passage between the two towers. He pulled open the door and closed it behind him in one turning step.

As he slipped through the tapestry that was the door, he saw Lirra propped up on her elbow in the dark bedroom. Her hair was down.

Tasse immediately set the bundle in the middle of the floor and began to undress.

"You were gone a long time," she said with the soothing consonants of the Wokind tongue.

Tasse spoke it well for one not born to it, but he had an accent that he had never been able to lose.

"I got sidetracked."

She rustled the quilts with her legs as she laughed, "Only you could get sidetracked in a pitch-black room."

Tasse shrugged and slipped into bed where she impatiently held the blankets aside.

It was a still night, too early in the season to be disturbed by sounds of nightbirds, but now and again, fragments of a whistled tune could be heard on the chill night's shifting air.

Pressing close under their blankets, Tasse and the highland woman were quickly oblivious to the cold room. In the silence, they coupled, and the breath of their passion condensed to dampen the stones in the wall above their bed. Sometime later, Lirra slept, and Tasse lay listening to the quiet rise and fall of her breathing.

He was drifting toward sleep himself, but the news
of the east was in his head. The "wayward friend" was knocking at his consciousness, the hope that Barth's rumors were just a beginning--that the river counties would revolt outright, bringing the chaos of battles to his old home once more.

He had wanted revenge once... for the deaths of people he once knew--a man who would have been his family. And he had wished for revenge for the other consequence of Naad's invasion, his life sentence of bastardhood.

Revenge would have been sweet, yes, but the thing that had plagued him worst had been a desire to return to his father's keep--to go to the family crypt and retrieve the silver plates that bore the family tree; proof of his right to the name van Poulder. In the crypt, engraved in silver, was the proof that he had never been able to get to.

It had taken years for this wish to bring him trouble. Those first few years after the loss of his home, the wish had been a hope, and he had taken his appeal to the court of Duke Lemast, asking for the right to bear the family arms of House van Poulder.

Because Tasse had never been recognized as an adopted son by the church, his appeal had been rejected twice before Tasse had been forced by finances to enlist in the standing army to feed himself.

And there he waited. Waited two years for a chance to come to fight for Holweir in retaking the river land.

But Holweir never tried.

Perhaps Duke Lemast was not the coward that Tasse had then thought him to be. Naad was a powerful adversary.
But as a military scout assigned to ride that new border, created by the invasion, Tasse saw daily how strongly the Naadien army could dig themselves into the land.

Towers were built, and keeps, and walls. That was when the hope had become a wish, and the nightmares had driven him to listen to his "wayward friend."

It was always hard to say no.

It was insanity to think that he could disrupt Naad long enough to steal into Poulden County and take his prize from the crypt. But he tried, and it nearly got him hung.

Tasse falsely reported a border incursion, falsely reported troop strength, and he led his commanders into a skirmish with Naad's border guard.

The last man that Tasse ever saw who knew of this dark truth was the third man that he injured while escaping his court-martial. When Tasse fled north to Erleg, he had felt no shame over what he'd done. He was young. He felt only regret that his plan hadn't worked.

The shame came later, after a few years with the mercenaries. He buried the shame when he became an officer with the regular army in Erleg. He'd come to know what such wild dreaming had done. He kept the incident secret, hidden with the knowledge of what he was. He had always regretted his illegitimacy but he had let die any hope of changing it.

At least he'd believed so.

Tasse rolled over onto his side, hoping a different position would let him get to sleep.

I was a boy then— I'm a Captain now, Tasse thought,
Old friend—I can't allow simple rumors to drag me off to another disaster.

The shift to his side seemed to help, but his sleep came more from the late hour than anything else. He had been hours on his back, thinking in the darkness. As sleep took him he thought still.

I haven't really minded being a bastard.

He slept.

And for the last time in his life—save one—Tasse van Poulder found himself in the rain, on the brim of an angry brown river, facing death.
There was something old in his trunk to wear for the sword-sparring. Tasse didn't plan on losing any blood, but there was no point in adding loss of a favorite shirt to injury.

It was just before sunrise, and, though he had slept terribly, he'd been up long enough to stretch his limbs and spread open the bundle on the floor.

The hauberk was laid out on the square of mottled brown canvas in the center of the other gear. Its links were small and fine, forming a sleeveless shirt of flexible steel mesh.

It wasn't the strongest chainmail, some men desiring thicker links, some wanting a double layer of finer ones, but this shirt had one striking advantage—it weighed only thirty pounds.

It would stop only the most weakly driven arrow, but even a strong bow is more likely to miss an agile target. It would stop a slicing blow, but could only hinder a strong thrust from a sword-point. However, the same was true of heavier mail, and Tasse preferred to be quick and not get hit, rather than suffer the broken ribs and bruises that no flexible armor could prevent.

Tasse already wore a pair of leather pants and a light, soft horse-hide jerkin that would separate the steel from his skin. Now he bent to run his arms inside the hauberk. He lifted it over his head, and with a muffled
clinking, jingling sound, it slid down his arms, over his head, and settled around his trunk.

It ended at the waist except for an inverted gable of mail that hung before his loins. This had a leather strap with a clasp at its end which Tasse pulled behind him through his legs and fastened to a large round link at the base of his spine.

Thus armed, he quickly donned a loose-fitting brown shirt which had roomy sleeves and holes in both elbows.

Tasse pulled his hair out of his hauberk and let it fall over his back.

The most striking things left on the square of oily cloth were the sword and scabbard, lying side by side. The scabbard was made of thick, dark leather with wide copper bands wrapping it at tip, and mouth, and two places in between.

Without the sword in it, this scabbard had a slight flex so it would hinder its user less in combat, and at its top and mid-points, there were thongs by which it was tightly laced to a thick, wide leather belt that crossed the body over one shoulder.

The sword itself was old. Tasse bought it used nine years ago, but it was well tended. The original blade had been forty-four inches, but, when he took over Redgate, Tasse had ordered a new one forged that was forty-five, exactly six times the length of his hand. The new blade had been used sparingly since, but it had never seen the smallest spot of rust or tarnish.
It was a smaller hand-and-a-half sword than the family weapon that he had lost at Bandale. It was two inches shorter in blade and another two shorter in grip.

This sword’s pommel was of a lighter metal, and so, had to be larger than that of the old sword, to compensate.

It counterpoised the blade beautifully just the same. In all, including the crossguard and the "spoons" on both sides of the hilt, this sword was fifty-six inches of perfectly balanced steel.

Tasse sheathed the weapon and settled the scabbard's leather belt over his arm and head, onto his right shoulder. The sword's weight rested comfortably against his back.

All that remained on the canvas were two dark leather gauntlets with bright steel rings sewn in lines down the back of each finger and thumb. Tasse snatched these up, but waited to put them on.

Lirra was beginning to move, as if she would wake. Tasse watched her for a moment, but then slipped down the stairs.

On the ground floor, Tasse saw Barth's bedroll empty in front of the fireplace. Its occupant was, no doubt, across the yard in the stables, helping his young challenger prepare to slice open his new captain.

He found the door ajar, and with a laugh, Tasse kicked it open and strode out onto the frosted ground. The sun had already cleared the rim of the land, and it shone through the iron grid of the portcullis. Squares of bright orange light shown through, casting a long checkerboard that only
just reached the front wall of the stables.

More like a chess board really, Tasse thought as he stepped onto the sunlit squares. His own shadow now stretched long among them and he turned his back on the sun to face the stable doors.

He fumbled with his left hand for the appropriate gauntlet and tugged it onto his right. He tried to imagine how he would appear from the other side of the courtyard--black against the sunrise. Perhaps impressive--maybe just small in comparison to the long captain's shadow he cast.

He pulled on the left-hand gauntlet and flexed both hands to restretch the leather in the right places.

The pair were not identical, the left one having a shorter cuff and thicker rings protecting the back of the hand.

The right one had strong rings over the joints of the thumb, none on the back of the hand, and a longer, close-fitting cuff with a cuff-strap inside the forearm. The strap was there to hold the long handle of the sword to the forearm.

Tasse only used this to strengthen his grip when he fought with his right hand alone, usually when he was on horseback, but he probably couldn't use it against Flanch. Flanch was obviously strong in the arms, and with a shorter weapon, he'd be able to force Tasse's blade aside at will unless Tasse used both hands.

He wished that the young lieutenant would hurry up
and come out. Tasse had never fought a so-called "gentleman's duel," but he had heard the term "default" used in that context.

There's a weak way to settle differences, he mused, Men angry enough to kill, resorting to armed conflict, yet if one of them shows up late, they consider the matter settled.

He kicked at the dust impatiently.

If gentlemen appreciated the honor they have...they wouldn't be so quick with swords as if it needed defending.

It was an amusing thought for someone waiting to fight for sport at the request of a gentleman's son.

Yes, Tasse had seen the arms on the shield of Flanch when he had come in yesterday, and the silver ring on his finger at dinner. He was of nobility--and money by the look of his horse.

Good, he thought, he'll be able to afford repairs to any equipment that I'm about to damage.

The stable doors swung open, Valsek came out with a laugh on his lips and the silent Wokind boy beside him.

"The slayer approacheth," he said in a casual tone.

To know Valsek was to know that these words dripped unseen sarcasm. Perhaps the range riders weren't getting along so well after all.

Lt. Flanch emerged, black boots, white pants, and silver scales on chest and head.

"My god, boy—you've even put a high shine on your buckler haven't you."
It was not a very civil comment, perhaps touched off by Valsek, whose personality Tasse sometimes found infectious, but Flanch really looked like he had just stepped out of the tapestry at the Shrine of Saint Jerris.

He was about to regret saying it, but Flanch looked at his shield, then back to Tasse, and nodded seriously.

Barth and Hulther came out together, and Tasse spoke up again.

"How are we to score this, Captain?"

Barth kept walking toward the empty ale barrel that he wanted to sit on,

"Oh-- Five touches--or the first man to yield?"

The silver soldier drew a long dagger and looked back to Tasse,

"Does that suit you sir?"

"Anything suits me, Lieutenant," Tasse nodded, "as long as we're whole enough to eat breakfast when it's ready."

He walked out of his grid of chess squares, fancying himself a short black rook against a white knight.

Flanch met him at the center of the yard, in the shadow of the barbican. Here, without the sun behind him, Tasse's black appearance shifted to reveal the old brown garments he'd worn. Hiding any embarrassment, he addressed his taller opponent.

"So my weapon is archaic—and tactically inferior?"

"My instructors at the Temple Academy in Erleg have said it," Flanch responded cautiously, unsure of Tasse's
hard expression, "I want the chance to see for myself."

"That's wise of you. You can never trust a Templar on his word alone...on matters holy or practical."

Tasse threw the last remark in to measure reaction, but Flanch gave no response. If nothing else, Flanch was not one to lose his composure over a semi-heretical statement.

"Won't you be wearing a helmet?" Flanch asked.

Tasse shook his head, "They just close me in, and my neck gets tired holding them up." Tasse smiled. "Besides, with such an archaic weapon, why try to fend off the inevitable?"

He reached over his shoulder and drew his sword up and forward with his right hand. Flanch's pale blue gaze locked onto the weapon, and Tasse could see him studying it.

"What do you think?" Tasse said as he turned the blade over. "Do you think your instructors are right about such a ponderous knife?"

Tasse expected that Flanch would rather allow the contest to decide the question, so he was surprised when Flanch gave an answer.

"Yes. I think my teachers were correct."

"Maybe so." Tasse grinned and watched the younger soldier draw his own blade.

"Remember," Tasse added, "Some of the best things in life are archaic... _defend yourself!"

Tasse raised his weapon just higher than his head with intent to strike directly with both hands--but he spun backwards and away to the right as Flanch's well-honed steel flashed
past his torso.

Flanch was as fast as Barth had bragged, and Tasse quickly guarded himself as his opponent charged past.

Flanch squared immediately and made another charging lunge, but this time, Tasse wasn't in the middle of his own attack. Flanch's longsword whistled in, but Tasse's heavier blade effortlessly turned the point aside.

The motion of Tasse's parry extended into a wide lefthand backstroke aimed at Flanch's exposed backside as he dodged past, but the buckler-clad left arm swung behind to cover.

The blow was stopped with a loud, hollow smack.

Already, Tasse was seeing that Flanch was well drilled in charging attacks, but these were better used in mounted combat. His young adversary had run past twice, while Tasse hadn't moved a step, aside from the initial dodge.

Flanch wheeled, but didn't square for another charge. Instead he moved toward Tasse in a slow, cautious fighter's crouch—sword, dagger, and shield presented and steady.

"You've just run forty feet farther than I have," Tasse announced with a grin. "Feeling tired yet?"

The only answer was another charge.

After two consecutive, identical attacks, the third took Tasse by surprise. Out came the shield, driving in an upward stroke that bashed Tasse's sword at mid-blade, knocking it wide to his right.

By reflex, Tasse threw himself backward, but Flanch came leaping by, leading with his shoulder. His longsword sliced through Tasse's shirt and skreeked loudly across
his mail-covered ribs.

In that instant, Tasse knew that Flanch had scored "first-blood," but the exchange was not over. Where his sword had been bashed away to the right, Tasse added his own strength to speed it on around--and behind.

Zipping on its augmented arc, like one spoke on a great wheel, the great sword caught up with Flanch as he dodged past on the other side of Tasse.

The blade was a blur that ripped the air and struck Flanch solidly across his left shoulder and breast as he touched down from his leap. Tasse had thought to turn the flat of his blade in the last instant, or the power of the stroke might have bitten through the steel of the lieutenant's scales.

Tasse completed his spin, planted his feet firmly, and launched himself after his reeling opponent.

Flanch regained his balance before Tasse could get onto him, and the two combatants squared off again with one touch against each.

But Tasse had yet to really attack.

"Defend yourself well," Tasse said with a voice that was impossibly calm for a man who was charging fiercely with a sword whirling before him.

Flanch didn't doubt that he meant what he said, for he could see the coming attack was not with the flat of the weapon, but with the edge.

The great sword was balanced well enough that it could be swung equally well with flat or edge forward, but flat-
forward meant that the quillons of the cruciform crossguard were harder to use for defense. Flanch had asked for an exhibition, and Tasse wasn't going to show him anything less than this weapon was capable of.

For the next minute Flanch's shield was the only piece of equipment that mattered to him. Tasse rained punishing blows down on the dodging form, trusting in the considerable skill of his silver-clad opponent to protect himself. Instead of using his weapon like a cumbersome cleaver, Tasse demonstrated speed with daring changes of grip, used to conserve the momentum of the punishing blade.

He mixed his strokes--forehand--rising backhand--two-hand forestroke--two-hand point lunge--parry--feint, overhand chop--

Flanch held his ground well under the baffling array, but got only a few gaps where he could go on the attack. He was learning what Tasse knew well, that the hand-and-a-half sword was not nearly as slow as it looked. By Tasse's handling of the weapon above the crossguard, Flanch gathered that the bottom eight inches of the blade were not sharp, allowing leverage that Flanch couldn't hope to match with his longsword.

In the hands of a novice, such handling would have already have cost the wielder several fingers, but Flanch could see that Tasse had all of his fingers, and he had been using this sword for years.

Tasse could see that Flanch was still faster with his much lighter sword, but that speed was absorbed by the greater
reach of Tasse's weapon, and the terrible damage that it threatened. After the first jaw-jarring wallop that Tasse had dealt out, Flanch's actions showed every respect and understanding of what it meant to argue with a five-pound sword.

During Tasse's rabid onslaught, he made his weapon look very impressive, pulling some of the nastier chops to avoid breaking Flanch's shield.

Unwisely, however, Tasse had also winded himself.

By now, the courtyard contained many faces—some of those who were wakened by the sound of steel had come out to watch the struggle. Their commander and the new lieutenant were putting on a good show.

Tasse pulled back to breathe, and was pleased that the young warrior did not pursue him. They ranged about the yard feinting here and there, until Flanch had the sun at his back, and Tasse was facing into it.

Tasse's respite was brief.

Flanch launched himself.

Tasse slipped to the right, getting the sun out of his eyes, and evaded the glittering soldier's sudden attack. The blade swept in, Tasse saw that it was too short to reach him, but he parried out of reflex.

It was a mistake. The strong crossguard on Flanch's weapon pushed the weak of the great sword down into the specially curved quillon of Flanch's left-hand dagger. He twisted his dagger grip, and Tasse's blade was locked in and trapped.
A murmur swept around the yard among those watching. It was a beautifully skillful trapping.

Perhaps dodging the next blow would have bought Tasse a second, but perhaps wasn't good enough--Tasse opted for the unexpected.

As Flanch swung in his next attack, Tasse leaped forward, instead of away. He released the handle of his own trapped sword and grabbed it again at mid-blade; the sharp side. Suddenly, he was boot to boot with Flanch, too close for the sweeping longsword to do any damage.

Now face to face, Tasse saw surprise and confusion on his opponent's face. Tasse took advantage.

With the leverage he now had at the center of his blade, he wrenched the tip free of the dagger, and flailed at the lieutenant as he jumped back. The handle of the hand-and-a-half sword came down hard upon Flanch's helm, beating it down over his eyes and deafening him with the loud metallic report.

Some shouts went up among the onlookers at Tasse's startling breach of convention. It was not everyday that one saw a skilled swordsman club an opponent over the head with the handle of his own sword.

Tasse stepped back, willing enough to allow Flanch a moment to recover from the ringing blow, if it meant gaining a moment to catch some much needed breath. He had been too long away from combat to be as good as he remembered being, and the idleness of Redgate had certainly been no help.
"Unexpected trouble," he panted, "calls for--unexpected solutions."

"One touch against van Poulder," Barth announced to the crowd. "Two against Lieutenant Flanch."

The lieutenant quickly resettled his light helm, and came after Tasse.

The black-haired swordsman awaited the young man's advance, standing now with his back to the sun-glaring portcullis. He was visibly calm but out of breath.

Damn me for showing off, he chided himself, I've been without sword or hauberk since the new year, and I wear myself out trying to fight like a berserker.

Flanch cautiously approached, the sunlight gleaming off his scales and shield.

Tasse waited, standing straight and strangely flat-footed. The great sword was not guarding him, but crossed his body diagonally, lying at rest with its point in the dirt.

Flanch advanced with caution. He sensed a trap in Tasse's open and relaxed stance. Tasse saw his hesitation.

"Getting some respect for the archaic, are we?"

Flanch smiled and nodded.

Then lunged.

The point of Tasse's blade rose only a few inches from the dirt, but the grip and the crossguard swept upward and across his chest.

Only a trained eye could have picked up the elegant twist that Tasse gave his weapon, smoothly catching the
oncoming thrust while bringing his blade and upper quillon to bear on either side of Flanch's sword. Continuing this swift turn of the wrist, Tasse pulled the longsword from Flanch's grasp.

It whirled over Tasse's shoulder and clattered through one of the square gaps in the iron grid of the portcullis. It dropped in the sunny dust on the other side of the great barrier.

Tasse's haggard expression faded into a broad grin, as Flanch found himself standing unarmed at the end of the captain's blade.

"Did someone drop this?" said a soft voice in a strange accent.

The shadow of a man appeared under Tasse's feet through the portcullis, and he whirled around to see a young man with a deep gold complexion, but with pure white hair. He had a black jackass on a rope behind him, and he held Flanch's longsword awkwardly by the point, between his thumb and forefinger.

His wispy forked beard of straight white hair blew sideways in a sudden breeze, and he regarded Tasse and the people beyond him in the courtyard with quiet expectation.

"Redgate?" he asked.
CHAPTER VIII

Steel was put up and gauntlets slipped off. Though it was unspoken, the stranger's arrival had brought an end to the contest. No man yielded, and no man suffered the allotted touches, but as ever, Tasse would settle short of the more honored conclusion—he had proven his weapon and was done and pleased.

Among the men who had come out to watch the dueling, the excitement quickly diffused into a general curiosity about the graceful, gold-faced stranger. His deep-blue robe dusted the ground as he led his animal into the courtyard, and a broad-brimmed hat of a more faded blue hung over his back on a braided string.

The abundant and wavy white hair, much lighter than his complexion, was the most striking thing about him, for it framed the face of a man who could surely be no more than thirty.

As exotic as his appearance was, almost equally strange was his sudden arrival, so close on the heels of the opening of the pass. Only with extreme rarity did travelers venture up before the annual word was given that the pass was negotiable. That word would remain a secret of the highlands until Captain Barth returned to Fort Brach with the news.

Coming up, and on foot as this man had, without guarantee of a safe trail could mean an arduous eight-thousand foot climb for nothing.

Tasse and Barth approached him, both with greetings.
The stranger only smiled and nodded and softly spoke in some odd tongue as he headed, without and direction, straight for the open stables. Once inside, Hulther tried to help him with putting up the jackass, but he insisted, in thickly accented Norgodian, that he could manage.

Tasse, Barth, Hulther, Valsek, and Flanch all stood around as the stranger unburdened and forked hay for his animal.

As he went about this, he explained himself as if for a theater audience. Even allowing for his accent, however, he struggled with Norgodian, sometimes pausing long with dexterous gestures form one upraised palm as he coaxed the words that he needed from his memory.

It soon became known that the stranger's name was Limas Lagrange, and that he was a traveler in the employ of some principality in the Far West. He had spent many years in the north-west extremes of Norgod, in the mountains near the coast of Keenan. Now he was returning once again to his homeland.

As he went on, Tasse realized by the cadence that he was hearing a recitation. It was a prepared speech that answered the un-asked but inevitable questions that one would pose to any strange traveler.

It ended with an apology for his "language-istic shortcoming" and a humble request to be allowed to stay a few days until his animal was sufficiently rested.

To this Tasse responded with an amused smile and an abbreviated bow of consent. It was the last easily
understood Norgodian that they heard from the man during his brief stay.

Tasse turned out of the stables into the bright yard, leaving Barth, who was always curious about far lands, to get anything more from this Lagrange that he could. The others stayed by to watch and listen.

As Tasse crossed the yard, he noticed that the barbican's iron shutters that overlooked the yard were open wide, and framed in the tall rectangle of the window was Lirra, wrapped in a sheep hide. Her hair was still down and spread over her bare shoulders.

Tasse realized that he'd caught her watching, and she smiled down as he walked to the door below the window.

There was a light in her dark green eyes, and Tasse could guess that she had rushed to the window to watch the swordplay, hastily wrapped in the bedclothes.

He could guess that she had seen every stroke of the battle with held breath, and been relieved that its conclusion had spared Tasse any injury.

Though his guesses were right, the spark in her eye was not relief, but pride in him.

She saw him return the smile, and enter the door below her. She knew that he had defended the honor of his weapon, but he claimed none for himself. In four years, she had never heard him admit to bettering anyone--his successes were always put down to good fortune, or the skill of those who had taught him.

She would not congratulate him. The smile was enough.
"Well my friends...tonight we feed upon the last of the cured haunches."

Tasse had gone back into the gloom of the storage tower to return his bundle of arms that afternoon and had returned with the large piece of beef that was now spitted before the hearth.

Another evening in the highlands had come for Barth and Flanch, and both brought the appetites of over-fed lowlanders to the dining table.

Flanch was now dressed less richly than usual. Following some comment by Valsek, he had ridden six miles over the first rise to the village, and there had bartered for clothes more suited to highland work.

For Barth it would be his last evening here for a while. His two-day return journey to Fort Brach had been planned that afternoon, and it would begin the next morning.

Behind them through the door came Valsek and then the stranger, who during the course of the day had become in various ways considerably less and more strange.

Throughout the day he had been prattling on with Barth and Valsek in the stables, while Hulther looked on from the stoveside.

Most of what Lagrange had attempted to say in Norgodian was lost to those around him, and this was doubly true of the things he muttered in his own tongue.

By afternoon, all had given up sentences in favor
of the few words they felt were essential. These were supplemented and accented with gestures and pictures drawn in the dust on the stable floor.

By this means, a map was drawn up by Lagrange. The innovation made the questions more easily answered, and the stories more easily told.

Tasse had watched them crouching in the dust all that afternoon, and now, while they all ate, he was eager to hear anything that had been exchanged.

He was already seated at the rough wooden table, lit by two stout candles burning at each end.

"Seat our guest at the other end, Valsek," Tasse said with a gesture to the stranger. He sat forward eagerly, "--let's hear what you have on this traveler."

"Thankyousur, came an unexpected response from the white-haired man. He seemed more comfortable now and he gave a short bow toward Tasse that exactly mimicked the one Tasse had given him that morning.

"Sharp witted," Tasse remarked, answering with a nod, "He certainly had fine instincts for traveling in a strange land--observant and bright."

"How did he get along in Keenan for so long without the language?" Flanch asked as he settled into his chair. There was a delay in answering as all others scooted their chairs in under them.

"Says he hired an interpreter from the great north who spoke Norgodian," Barth answered.

Valsek continued, "The interpreter left him at the
"Vanderwal River to return north."

"Do they speak his language in the great north?"

Valsek shrugged, and Barth looked puzzled toward Lagrange, who obviously was not following the questions or answers in spite of watching everyone intensely.

After a brief pause and what seemed to Tasse to be stupid smiles all around by everyone except the stranger, Barth continued.

"He showed us some drawings he was taking back with him to a place called Pelnor in the Far-West. I think he's an artist for the apothecary sciences or something."

"Because he's made these pictures of plants and animals," Valsek explained, "and he's taking it all back to where they hired him."

Barth leaned forward with an excited wink, "And you should see some of these drawings, Tasse! These people that hired him are getting duped on some of them. He's drawn animals that don't exist in these parts!"

"Unless you're well into your cups," Valsek added. "Anyway, he says he expects to arrive at Pelnor in about three months, if he keeps his rest stops short along the way."

Tasse heard all of this and watched Lagrange listen. Tasse remembered when he first came to the highlands, how he had been discussed around the fires of Wokind dwellings. He didn't know the language then, but once in a while a highlander would cup his hand beside his mouth. As if he might be offended by the comments that he couldn't
understand.

He was impressed at how well Lagrange kept his dignity at a table where he alone was mute. Tasse was somehow sure that he was a brave man to have traveled so far, and alone among people so different.

"Has he got a family?" Tasse asked suddenly.

Again, shrugs from Barth and Valsek, leaving Tasse to look at the outlander's calm expression.

Lagrange and Tasse studied each other for a second, smiling dumbly at one another.

"Tasse," Lirra called from the dark back of the room, "come help me unspit the meat."

The smile on Lagrange's face melted into surprise, and Tasse's first impression was that he hadn't realized a woman was on the outpost, much less in the room. He'd seen similar reactions from border riders from the south.

As Tasse rose to help her, he saw the smile return to the gold man's face.

"Does this Norgodien Captain speak Chinnan?!" he exclaimed in perfect highland dialect.

The outburst froze Tasse halfway out of his seat.

"Am I right, or does just the woman speak it?"

The only one in the room who did not understand every word perfectly was Flanch, who had yet to learn the language of the Wokind. The jaws of everyone else dropped.

Tasse answered, "I don't know anything called 'chinnan,' but what ever you're speaking, I understand it."

Barth and Valsek looked at each other and beat their
skulls with their palms. They had just spent the afternoon
drawing pictures in the dirt with a man who spoke their
second language better than they did.

"Well that's going to speed dinner conversation," Barth
laughed in his own accented Wokind.

Valsek extended his hand to Lagrange, saying, "Now
you can answer all of those questions that we gave up on,
and correct us on all of our wrong conclusions."

Flanch sat completely baffled by the sudden turn of
events. From his perspective, everyone had suddenly started
to speak jibberish following the outburst by the stranger.
He immediately began to complain in his own fine Norgodien,
and it was explained to him that the tables had turned.
By the time the food was brought, Valsek had been designated
as Flanch's interpreter for the evening.

Lirra was delighted by this odd turn of events. It
was the first time in a long while that she would be able
to understand the conversation of meal guests without translation
being necessary.

The rest of the evening was filled with eating, drinking,
and tale telling; mostly stories from Lagrange, who was
quite an entertainer. He had explained his knowledge of
the Wokind language, or what he called 'Chinnan', as being
a result of some requirement of his formal studies in a
city called Imrahill, located, as he had said, "near the
extreme west-north coast."

There were still problems in communication, for his
command of the language far surpassed even that of Lirra,
who had been born to it. When this problem arose, he was forced to rephrase himself in simpler terms.

To the unwilling belief of most, and the outright disbelief of Flanch, the traveler explained that the 'Wokind' language was all that was left of the original lowland tongue, in a time a thousand years before, when Norgod had been a united kingdom called Norgaade. Somehow, the language had remained unchanged among the nomads of the highlands for all of that time.

He embellished the tale already half-told, of how his interpreter had left him two weeks ago, after encountering the second burned bridge in as many days. Some northern superstition had prompted the interpreter to refuse a crossing of the Vanderwal by ferry, and he had parted company with Lagrange at its banks.

Lagrange had managed well in crossing through Bissmuth, Holweir, and Erleg with the help of friendly people.

He enchanted them all for several hours, telling of his work, researching plants and animals for a library in the far-west, and he told of that land's culture and histories to the endless fascination of Barth.

Lirra noticed that Tasse remained strangely silent as they listened to each story. She said nothing of it, and imagined that such tales made him long for his wandering days before the outpost.

Her guess was wrong.

After a long while, Flanch excused himself, growing sleepy from a long day that had started with combat, and
he was also weary of being translated to.

Valsek was equally tired of translating for him, and relaxed after he'd left.

Barth reluctantly left a little while later, announcing that he would be leaving to return to his lowland command at Fort Brach. He wanted an early start so he could beat the shadows. In the pass, the sun set just after noon, and the cold followed right behind.

"I'll make it down in a day if I'm quick and careful; in an hour if I'm not," he joked.

As soon as Barth was outside, Tasse spoke for the first time since the food had been cleared.

"I want you to bed down too, Valsek," he said in slow measured Norgodien, excluding the man from the far west. "I want us to go hunting tomorrow—to restock our fresh meat."

Valsek blinked a few times at his Captain's strange manner, but he responded enthusiastically, as Tasse expected he would. Valsek loved the hunt.

"Great idea, Captain," he said, "Sib, the Wokind boy I brought from the village; he can track a fish through water."

Tasse nodded, "If he can track a fly across a pasture, then we'll take him along."

Valsek got up to leave, and Tasse added, "Tell Hulther that I'll be down to choose the horses in the morning."

The lieutenant nodded again and left immediately.

Lirra rose quietly and started for the stairs. She
now sensed the strange shift in Tasse's mood, and by the way Tasse had sent Valsek away, she had guessed that Tasse wished to speak privately with the white-haired man.

"Don't stay too late, Tasse," she said as she climbed the first few stairs.

"I'll be up," he said softly.

When she had disappeared into the darkness of the second floor, Tasse turned back to the traveler, Limas Lagrange.

The man was surprised by the sudden seriousness reflected in Tasse's dark grey eyes. Tasse laid a hand on the table, and spoke in a voice deadly soft.

"Tell me of burned bridges across the Vanderwal."
A man who has lived with disappointment all of his life grows distrustful when he's been told exactly what he wants to hear.

So was Tasse now.

He had wanted to hear confirmation of the unrest and possible revolt in the river counties.

Lagrange was able to give him exactly that.

He told of two bridges, charred to black ruins. Both of them had once crossed into the land that the Kingdom of Naad claimed beyond the wide Vanderwal.

The first was an ancient bridge that crossed at Theodore. It was by this bridge that Naad had crossed into Holweir nineteen years before.

Now Tasse heard the traveler describe a burned out hulk so treacherous that the mallards would sooner fly over it than swim under its remaining arches.

The second bridge had been eight miles further south, close to where the great river crosses into Bissmuth, the land of High King Truax.

This had been a newer bridge, made with more wood and less stone. Lagrange detailed a twisted wreck that was still smoking when he saw it. The stonework on the far bank had been collapsed into a formless cairn.

At both sides, debris of broken and blackened timbers littered the banks, but it was the toppled stone arches that interested Tasse.
Fire alone could never have caused such damage. Such work wanted the help of destructive hands. Last night, Tasse had gotten to sleep because he was able to rationalize away Barth's rumors. Tonight he was awake. More awake than he'd felt in years.

The stranger was sleeping downstairs before the hearth. He had brought Tasse a great gift in this news. He could feel it melting the ice of Redgate--freeing his feet at last.

He smiled at the beauty of it. The insurrection that he once failed to cause as a scout for the Holweirn Dragoons had come to pass in its own time. The people of the river counties had destroyed the bridges.

Naad would now be powerless to relieve or reinforce the men it had stationed across the river.

At least, not until later in the summer, when boat and barge traffic started on the river. Unless they found another way across, the rebels had a very good chance. And so did Tasse.

Lagrange had seen it two weeks ago, from across the wide river. Tasse would not ignore it or try to rationalize it away. He would go himself, and he would finish what needed finished in his life.

The revolt is there, turning order into chaos. Borders are going to be even easier to cross than they were when I was twenty three.

Tasse's mind raced on it in the dark. It was so much
nearer than it had ever seemed before. A chance to prove his name.

In the crypts below Gallaston Castle, my ancestral home. My name is there, waiting to be found. Waiting to prove my lineage.

Images flashed through his mind, of candlelight in a musty passage. And a row of silver plaques; tarnished plates resting on a ledge above his mother's stone sarcophagus.

The generations of the van Poulders, and my name is the freshest inscription among them. I can't allow this to elude me this time.

In the hours of darkest morning, Tasse slipped from beside Lirra, for he had some things to do before he could sleep.

He went down to the coals of the fire and lit a taper. Then he returned to the bed chamber and vanished behind the tapestry, and through the door that crossed to the storage rooms of the barbican.

He formed his plan carefully, even as he made his preparations. He remembered the disaster of his young military career.

He would walk the fire alone this time. Tomorrow morning, after Barth headed out for Fort Brach, Valsek, Sib, and he would ride out from Redgate on a hunting expedition.

They would come back without him.
This is a terrible thing that I'm doing.

The sun was setting on the third day of the hunting expedition. Today, timely enough, had paid off in meat, and that meant that tonight was the night that Tasse had been anticipating.

It was just himself, Valsek, and the boy, Sib, camped in a round, man-carved pit in the living rock that was at the crest of a gentle rise.

The sunken circle, about eighteen feet in diameter and three feet deep, was all that was left of a very old Wokind dwelling. There was no telling how old it was, but Tasse had used it as a camp many times with Barth, when they were riding together.

A yak had been brought down that afternoon, and he had suggested to Valsek that this place would be a good camp, because there was light wood close by for the fire.

The young lieutenant knew the place and had readily agreed, even though it meant packing the yak six miles on a transom.

Once constructed and loaded, the travois had been quite heavy, and the going was slightly uphill. Tasse took advantage of his chance and hitched his own horse to the cargo.

He had done three special things before he set out from Redgate three mornings ago, and one of these had been to carefully select the worst horse in the outpost
for himself.

That poor beast was tethered beside the other horse for there were only two—Valsek's and Tasse's.

Sib, like most of his people, did not ride, and had spent the last three days either hanging on behind Valsek or running alongside. They guessed that he was twelve or thirteen, but he showed amazing endurance for a boy of any age.

Tasse, only this minute, had finished rubbing the horses down where they were tied at a post on the windward side of the pit. Shrewdly, he paid special care to Valsek's mount, a strong brown horse that was highland bred. Tasse had bought it himself, along with two others from an Ergadin trader a year ago.

As for his own weary mount, it looked no worse for wear after the rubdown, but Tasse knew that it was quite tired—spent by any really practical measure.

Now Tasse sat back against the side of the pit and watched his companions at work.

Valsek was doing a brilliant job of butchering the yak into manageable parcels. His hands moved about in the gore with a bone grip knife flashing out every second or so.

He was an excellent border rider because of these hunting skills, and he really enjoyed it.

He was from Ergadin to the north, the only Dukedom that Erleg had appended to its borders. Its population was nearly all Wokind, but they had organized beyond the
tribal.

If one overlooked the facts that he wore no beard, that he could read and write a little, and that he was an excellent horseman, one might take him for one of the highland people that he dwelt among in the winter. He was in no way dependent on the outpost. If anything, it was the other way around.

Sib was sitting at the edge of the pit's original fire circle, feeding the small blaze that would cook their supper. The boy was an orphan, and very quiet. Tasse hadn't known that he could speak until the second day.

Valsek had "teamed" with him in the first week of snows, and they had wintered together in the village just west of Redgate.

Tasse was glad to see that they both seemed pleased with camp. They suspected nothing of why he had gotten them here.

From here, Redgate was thirty miles nearly straight south. Valsek knew that as well as Tasse, from years of riding.

What Valsek also knew, but quite naturally wasn't thinking of, was that exactly fifteen miles due east was Bale Pass.

Bale Pass wasn't a large proper pass, like the one that Redgate overlooked. It was a steep, dangerous series of natural switchbacks and ledges that was impassible most of the year.

It was named after an old war legend, Bale Tomsen,
who had dragged himself injured down it, and later led a surprise attack up it during the old wars with Kread. In winter there was too much snow, and in summer, too little. Only in the spring could it be done, when the melting ice receded enough to form traverses across the cleavage of the cliffs.

Only then was it passable, and only by someone who knew the way down.

Tasse did.

The sun was setting now, but he would be in Bale Pass before it returned.

Deception did not suit Tasse, but when need called, he could wash his qualms down with a few swigs of stoic practicality.

That practicality reasoned that he was an unwilling bastard, and he hated it.

He hated it and had hated it—quietly—for nineteen years. For the last nine, he had hated so quietly that he scarcely heard it himself. It had been a concession for him to admit that he felt caged at Redgate.

Now the wayward friend had returned, and that friend was his hate—and his hope. The night he stayed up, speaking with Lagrange until late, Tasse had visualized those silver plaques—seen his family tree with his name inscribed.

Those memories were freshened till he could see the dark corridor lit by the candle he'd brought as a boy to his mother's tomb. The Thane, Lars van Poulder had
buried his mother among his ancestors, and he had seen
his name upon the plaque of his bloodline.

Tasse realized that his hate and hope were upon him,
and now that he knew it, they could never be buried or
forgotten again.

Yes, it was a terrible thing he was doing...and stupid.
But he had done stupid things before, haplessly, and come
through them.

The difference this time was that he knew it was
stupid, and he had resolved, three nights before, that
this stupid act must be done.

There's nothing says you can't do a stupid thing
intelligently.

The thought tasted good in Tasse's mind, and he pondered
his preparations.

The second special thing he'd done was to leave a
scroll with Hulther. By now Hulther knew most of the
story.

Valsek would get the story himself when he returned.
He would discover that his runaway Captain left him command
of the outpost.

This was the closest that Tasse could come to being
responsible with his military charge. He had puzzled
over it, and the pieces just fell into place the night
before they left.

Valsek was senior lieutenant, and Flanch could ride
the first month with one of the men who knew the territory.
If Tasse wasn't back in a month, Valsek was to report
him "missing" to Captain Barth, but if he could help it, not before.

If he couldn't get back before the month was up, he probably wasn't coming back anyway. Fate would either be with him or against him--easy or impossible.

The orders he left were explicit, but they made no mention of where he was going.

They didn't need to know that now. If he never made it back, he didn't want them to know at all.

The fact that he felt need to hide his purpose, was proof to Tasse that he had to try to finish what he tried to start on the borders of Holweir long ago.

He was gazing into the orange flames when Valsek broke his deep thoughts.

"Two even loads?"

Tasse looked up and saw that he was about to cut the hide to wrap the meat for travel.

"Better make it one big one, and we'll save the hide in one piece."

He thought about saying that they would trade the load back and forth on the way home, but he didn't want to lie outright.

The only reason he was making such bother to mislead Valsek in the first place was that Tasse knew Valsek would want to come too.

Then command of Redgate would fall to the next in rank--Flanch. That wouldn't do.

Valsek knew the people, and he had experience in
the outpost as well. Keeping up good relations with the natives was the only real use that the outpost had served in three generations.

That's all I brought to the command when they chose me, Tasse thought half humorously, I have good rapport with heathen.

Flanch, on the other hand, was a stranger to the Wokind and their ways. If there were still tribes of the Wokind feuding with the lowland outposts, as there were eighty years ago, Flanch coming out of Temple Academy would have all the qualifications he needed to run Redgate; blood tactics. But Tasse knew that Flanch couldn't yet have the instinct and the wisdom to be civil with the "uncivilized."

And he is gentry, came a sour thought which Tasse found himself reluctant to acknowledge.

Flanch was a friendly enough person and Tasse liked him, but sometimes he couldn't help feeling a human hostility toward those who lucked out—who got begot under the smiling gaze of Lord Baab Almighty and his pious deputies on earth, like Pope Benjoy II.

Tasse felt this as a flaw in his character, but he always reasoned that such flaws were expected of the illegitimate. He allowed himself some anger.

Prejudice or not, his orders had been left, and now Tasse watched Valsek, his unwitting successor, who was rolling the outpost meat supplies into a big, hairy, barrel-shaped bundle that he would have to carry home alone.

Tasse was glad to see that it was becoming night at
last. Like highland mornings, nights came quickly. It was just a wait now--for his camp mates to bed down.

At this one place in the world, the sky was really big. Tasse was on his back watching stars ride between the clouds as he ripped small bites from the last of his three strips of yak meat. Some hours had passed.

The yak had been brought down by simultaneous crossbow shots by he and Valsek, but as skinner, Valsek had eaten first.

Tasse had insisted that Sib, "fire builder," cook his meat next. The boy had given no argument, but had set about impatiently scorching his strips. He seemed to enjoy his meal, lightly charred on the outside, a bit rare in the middle, and Valsek had joked in Norgodian that years of scavenging had made tasting the food not only an unnecessary luxury, but an actual drawback in the eating process.

Tasse had agreed that tasting some Wokind food would get it into your lap and not your stomach.

He had cooked last, "as the guy who sat around and watched," but as the last person in the dinner line, Tasse had no scorching flames, but simmering coals to cook on. He took advantage of having no one waiting their turn behind him and slowly cooked his three strips to perfection.

It took him some time, holding his strips skewered parallel on two pointed sticks, and his two companions
had "anointed the earth" and bedded down in tandem.

Like father--like son, Tasse now mused as he swallowed his last bite of yak. Valsek's a good man to take that boy under his wing.

He could tell that this was not the first hunting trip for them together. The boy was good too--running ahead and finding sign of both deer and yak. He'd asked Valsek to take his pick, as if a dropping or hoofprint underfoot was as good as hams in a cellar.

The food was good, but it was uncomfortable in Tasse's tight stomach. The time had come to do what he had prepared for.

He hadn't untied the bedroll from his saddle, but now laid on the warm cloak that he knew he must now get up from and put on.

Sib snored, and Tasse was glad of it. Valsek was used to it, and that Tasse was really happy with.

Slowly, Tasse rose from the stone floor of the pit. It was easy and silent.

He peeled up his cloak and wrapped himself in it, his hands emerging from the two slits in the thick material below each shoulder. It was made on a military design for sentries in cold weather but this one was grey, of a tight-woven highland cloth.

"Good luck, my friends," Tasse whispered with frost in breath. He used the next snort from Sib to cover any sound he might make stepping out of the ruined dwelling. He made none.
He walked carefully along the bald rock at the top of the rise, trying to avoid the loose gravel that could cause a crunching foot-fall.

This bald stone ended just before the horses, but it figured. Whoever had driven the post that they were tied to couldn’t have done into solid rock.

A rasping snort came from behind him, and Tasse hopped across the gravel three quick steps to the horses.

If Valsek ever expects to keep a horse under him, he’s got to make that boy sleep on his stomach. Tasse stooped to get a good two-hand grip on the front and back of his saddle.

He froze in this position for three long heartbeats.

Sib snored again.

The saddle was gently settled on the back of Valsek’s horse.

"Mine now," Tasse whispered. He stroked the horse’s neck and shoulder as he loosely buckled the girth under its belly.

He would tighten it later for riding, but silence was important at this point.

Tasse mouthed the words of Daggor, an old mercenary friend.

"A happy horse—is a stolen horse."

He unhitched the reins from the post. The horse was silent.

"--a successfully stolen horse," Tasse corrected. He turned the animal with his right hand under its jaw
to avoid having to pull on the bit. It responded easily, and soon they were moving slow and steady, straight down the west side of the hill.

Tasse's plan was to circle back around to the east, but for now he wanted to take advantage of the sandy ground that ran away to the north-west of their camp. He had scouted it while the sun was still up, and it ran away for a good three-hundred feet.

The horse's hooves thudded lightly on the soft ground, but it was still a long, long walk. Tasse expected a yell from Valsek any second.

No yell came, and after one hair-raising moment when the horse decided to unleash its loud-splashing urine into the sandy soil, Tasse successfully navigated out of easy earshot.

Looking back up the long hill, he saw that no light came from the camp. One thin ribbon of smoke was all that gave any sign of his companions in the sunken pit.

He thought of how they would be seeing Redgate in one or two days. And how Valsek would take charge of the outpost. Valsek would probably continue to sleep in the stables in his usual bunk. Valsek was like that.

The possibility that Tasse might be wrong made him very glad of the third special thing that he did before departing on this deception.

That morning, he had unsheathed the symbol of his rank, the Captain's short-sword, and he laid its bare blade in the center of the rough wooden table in the center of the
barbican's main room.

He left it there and walked out the door.

He'd wanted to do it for some time, but until now, he never had felt that he offered Lirra anything. That morning, in accordance with Wokind custom, Tasse proposed the binding of their lives by leaving his sword on the table.

His departure was also in keeping with the highland customs. The suitor was not to be around when such a proposal is found.

Bad luck—evil spirits—they said.

To give the recipient every chance to back out—Tasse said.

It would be a while before he could return to her. She'd have all the time that a highland woman needs to make her decision. The sword's condition when he returned would give him his answer.

He hoped it would not be rusted and blunt.

He tightened the saddle girth, mounted quietly, and rode his horse slowly east, toward the edge of the Wokind world. He remembered so many endings to chapters in his life; the end of home, the end of hope, the end of pride, the end of fear.

For a long time, he thought Redgate would be the last chapter, and he'd mark that one, the end of life. He always remembered the endings.

This was the first beginning that he could remember.
In the spring, the west winds blow as they always have, driving cold highland air beyond the rim of the Redland plateau. The land falls away, dropping eight-thousand feet before leveling abruptly to form the wide and fertile countries of Norgod.

High over the towns and hamlets of these countries streams the wind of the highlands, unheard and unfelt.

Slowly, pulled by the weight of its own coldness, this chill air settles from its heights into the hollows of the land--between hills and in valleys--places where the streams run wet.

On spring nights, the damp air dampens in the bottoms, and the darkness pales. Tendrils of night mist weave and thicken into veils of fog, and unseen things move abroad in the mind--sometimes in the land as well.

As Tasse van Poulder set out for Bale Pass, he couldn't know that tonight was such a night in the distant river counties. Though it was very late, Tasse was joined in wakefulness by another soul--a restless giant lying in an uneven loft nearly two-hundred miles away.

This huge blond farmboy was Jaydar Banzaw, and it was not feuding fish-broth and corn mash alone that kept sleep from settling easily tonight.

He was running back through the talk that he'd had with Grand that evening. Jaydar had made his request, and he'd gotten the answer he wanted.
March had come in like a lamb, and the ground had softened up. That was when the new tin-bellies showed up--five heavy-mounted sheriffs in full armor plate.

Jaydar had been plowing the afternoon they rode by on the road that runs from the big river into Bandale.

That had been nearly a month ago, and now in his creeky loft, Jaydar smiled at the memory.

One of the sheriffs had seen him plowing and said, "There's a fine one." That was all he had said, and the others didn't even look as they trotted on toward town.

Jaydar found out what it meant a couple days later.

Naad was raising men and supplies then; Jaydar still didn't know for what, but it wasn't for anything on this side of the river. He would have been chosen too, if Grand had his other leg safe and sound, or if he had a brother or a male cousin.

One of the sheriffs had come back with the tax man and looked the farm over. When they were done looking at the fields, they looked Jaydar over like they were trading horses.

"Shame we can't use him," the tin-belly had said. "He's probably so well grown because he's an only boy, but orders are not to leave'em too short-handed."

Jaydar had gotten through a quarter of the plowing by the morning that the five sheriffs rode back east, two in front and three behind a column of the county's biggest and hardest--men and boys alike. Jaydar didn't know numbers, but he guessed they must have been maybe
a hundred, marching out of Bandale for the new bridge into Naad-proper.

His mother was glad that he'd been passed over, but he secretly wished he hadn't been. He knew his mother was just barking out against it because of how his dad had been killed just before he was born. That had been the battle with Naad, and Grand even said that the Banzaw men would have stayed out of it, if it wasn't happening on their land.

This was Jaydar Banzaw's eighteenth summer, and he'd never known a Bandale county that wasn't the property of the King of Naad. That King seemed as far away in Jaydar's mind as the High King himself, lord of all Norgod. He'd never been beyond Bandale, and had never known anything but the farm. Because of this, he felt some regret as he stood behind the plow and watched the column march off to broader horizons.

Since then, because March had come in like a lamb, he'd finished plowing fast, and now it was April.

He didn't know numbers, but he knew that today had been his right thumb into the new month, and tomorrow would be the pointing finger on his left.

Tomorrow he would finish planting with his cousin Lenore. She was four years older than him, but she worked slow in the fields. He would have to make her work fast, though, for tonight Grand had promised him that he could go join the fighting when the planting was finished.

It wasn't the fighting that the tin-bellies had in
their minds when they had come to collect those men from the county. That fighting was somewhere far to the east, happening without the men of Bandale county or Poulden either.

The men who had been recruited from this side of the river had been trained, and armed—and when it was time for them to march east, they had broken away and escaped back across the Vanderwal.

They had covered their rears by burning the bridges, and they had roused the people to expel their governors.

The thought was warm and exciting to him now, as he drifted toward sleep in the loft that had been his bed longer than he could remember. He dreamed of what leaving would be like, and what fighting would be like. He would be able use that long word that Grand had said, Revolutionary, and he'd be talking about himself.

He reminded himself, just before his slumber took him, that he'd have to make Lenore work hard with him tomorrow. Then he would be off to join the rebellion.
Tasse could feel the cold of the rock setting into his body through the seat of his pants.

The horse was nearby, standing stoically at the other end of a drooping rein. It puffed clouds of frozen breath, twin jets that became gray shadows to Tasse.

It was a moonless night, and for a long time now, he'd been sitting—watching these pale shadows drift down and vanish into the vaguely visible ground before the horse's front hooves. The jets came regularly, along with the sound of the horse exhaling, and the effect was almost hypnotic on Tasse's sleepy eyes.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been resting now; fifteen minutes or fifty.

The first five or so miles after he slipped away had been fast going, even in the dark. Tasse had sharp eyes and, perhaps more importantly, he knew the land.

Where someone of less experience would see meaningless shapes, Tasse could see a landscape. Part was memory, and part was reconstructed in his mind, based on other meaningless shapes that he'd seen during innumerable highland nights, over years of camp sites and trails.

When he thought he was just over a third of the distance to Bale Pass, however, the rising rim of the land had turned rough and dangerous—full of cracks and sharp rock that was impossible to ride across in the dark. This was when he had dismounted to lead the horse on up the
mazed terraces of granite.

Walking the horse among the crags for nearly three hours had gotten him aching in the legs. He had already become saddle sore from the first three days of riding the hunt, but now he was painfully reminded that this was "first mission" of the season. Every first mission meant toughening his rump after a long lay-off.

Aching thighs and feet were an unexpected bonus.

Many times, as the horse clopped along behind him, he cursed himself for having burned his staff. The creak of his right hip bothered him more and more as the sky went starless in the deadest time of morning.

When he first arrived at the brink of the pass where he now sat, he'd descended into a wide cavity in the land, like a shallow quarry about the size of Redgate's courtyard. It was a stone ditch that he couldn't see out of in any direction.

That was when the rock had presented itself—a rough low table of granite with a slight concavity that seemed tailor made for his hind-quarters. The silent suggestion could not be ignored.

The air was nearly still here, which seemed wrong to Tasse. Wind was one constant on the highlands, especially this close to the edge, and especially in the spring.

The air was still—and cold.

Tasse slipped his tongue between his dry lips and sucked some ice from his mustache. He could feel his next breath forming new crystals on his face. His limbs
ached, and his lids were heavy.

It didn't feel like spring at all--not here.

There was a bright side, Tasse knew, but he was glad that Barth wasn't here telling him about it. Tasse had listened to his friend paint rosy pictures of broken legs, until the whole wretchedness turned silly.

The thought, however, set off speculation of what his friend might say.

He had set out to cover the fifteen miles to Bale's Pass on a cloudy night of a new moon. And here he was.

Horse and man were uninjured and recently fed. Tasse's saddle held everything he would need for his enterprise; food, water, and fifty gold for bribes or supplies, whichever came first. His hand-and-a-half sword had been successfully smuggled past his companions on the hunt--blade in his bedroll, grip and crossguard stuck down among the bolts for his crossbow, and the pommel was with the hauberk, whose fine links settled easily into a false bag of horse feed.

Barth would give him this lecture; skill, experience, and what Barth seemed to like referring to as "balls." Sometimes Barth liked to lecture, just to annoy.

Tasse, however, was giving himself no pats on the back. Self congratulation was a sure way to tempt the Fates. He only wished some omen would appear to end his doubts—or at least make things look less bleak.

Not the send-off I was hoping for, he thought, a bit angry at himself that his uncertainty was still with him.

He had hoped for something encouraging, maybe even
dramatic. He would ride through Bale Pass like it was the gate to the East. He would see Erleg stretching out below him, and he would smell his destiny on the wind.

There was no wind.

*In this cold, I'm lucky for that, he thought.*

Beyond this one boon of the Fates, however, he was foot-sore in the dark, and he was falling asleep. He couldn't see a damn thing spreading out before him except the murky outlines and a jagged horizon that was thirty feet away in every direction.

His doubt melted into plain tiredness, and he chided himself for that too.

*Look on the weakness a man can come to, sitting idle in the highlands.* He heard himself waxing idiotic. As much as he hated Redgate, he realized he was leaving a life behind.

He gladly risked his position, his rank, and any commission with Erleg, but he would miss the respect of the men—something he would surely lose without rank. His appointment to command Redgate had given the loner the chance to play at being a leader, but it was the prop that carried it off, his captain's shortsword.

*Lirra.*

Suddenly, the cold rock seemed harder, and sitting on it was very very unlike the bed that was taunting and beckoning to him from behind his eyes.

He counted the clouds from the horse's breaths, trying to keep awake and escape the thoughts that were trying
to seduce him back.

One........ the grey shadows from the horse's nose were only a little paler than the surrounding night.

two........ the thoughts ebbed and flowed through his tired mind.

three....... will Lirra wait for me to return?...

four....... will she care if I don't?...

five....... it's not easy being a bastard...

six....... I've got to ride off this cliff and prove my name...

seven....... then I can say it's not easy being legitimate...

eight....... Hmmm...

The soft jets of steam were slow and regular. He didn't even feel his eyes close as he continued to count the breaths with his ears.

eleven........

twelve........

Tasse joined his horse in sleep, succumbing to the warm comfort of warm eyelids soothing eyes that burned.

When his eyes opened, Tasse knew that he hadn't just taken a long blink. Deep blue had replaced the black overhead, and light bled into the East.

He looked around at the emerging features of the "quarry" he was in. The edge of the highlands was a harsh, rocky place where nothing grew but flaky, grey moss. It looked clearer, but not much better. He'd wasted hours
His eyes settled on the horse. It still puffed occasionally, but it stood like a statue.

Tasse could tell that the beast was in deep sleep, and he just stopped himself from tugging the rein which had somehow remained in his hand during his sleep.

"That's no way to wake up," he said. His voice was quiet and dry, and he barely heard it over the wind, which had resumed its usual whipping and gusting.

He let the rein drop, and putting his hands on his knees, he stiffly cranked himself onto his feet.

A nagging pain stretched down his spine but stopped at the tailbone. He felt behind and found that his buttocks were numb. It had not been the best choice of sleeping positions.

"Some grand departure from the Baab-damn highlands." he grumbled, "my butt's asleep, my horse is asleep--"

He took a few crippled steps toward the side of the horse.

"--and I just know my water's frozen solid!"

Tasse had always felt that a good grumble was as good in a cold camp as a rallying cry was in the heat of battle. He remembered his oaths among his fellow mercenaries.

"If there's no fire and no breakfast, I might as well bitch," the words echoed above the wind. "Now if there was only someone here to offend."

He grabbed the waterskin from the saddle where it was hooked over the saddle-horn. It gurgled at the touch, and Tasse was glad his water wasn't crunchy this morning.
He turned it up for a mouthful and found it bitter. Not bad for skin water—especially from a new skin.

The horse was coming around, and Tasse slapped its shoulder a few times to make sure. Then he began a circular path, crippling around to work blood back into his rump. Sleeping body parts were always a hindrance to performance.

Once on one of his early border rides for Erleg, Tasse had awakened to hear someone trying to make off with his horse. That was when Tasse learned that a sleeping right hand will not easily draw the trigger of a crossbow.

The guy would have gotten away with it too, if there had been more foliage around. When there wasn't any to tether the horse to, Tasse had the habit of loosely tying a horse's front legs together, just above the hoof. A horse can walk with tiny steps if it wants to, but unless it's untied, it's not the speediest getaway-mount for a thief in a hurry.

Tasse would have tied the horse last night if he'd known that he was going to fall asleep.

As much as he needed the rest, it had lost him plenty of time, and he wasn't sure whether he was going to be followed by Valsek and the kid. He doubted that they could follow in the dark anyway.

—unless they guessed where I was headed.

The thought stopped Tasse in his hobbling tracks, and his gaze spun back toward the crags to the west.

Just how good was that boy? The game that they had hunted had left fresh tracks in soft ground, and they
had come upon it quickly. Tasse had no way to guess how little or how much Sib needed to track a mounted horse.

Tasse had seen Wokind hunters track successfully under impossible conditions--sometimes at night!

He ran back up to the lip of the big depression that he had "camped" in, and saw no sign of Valsek or the boy. This didn't mean much, though, because even from here he couldn't see very far.

If they really wanted to, I bet they could pop up around that big rock any second. He swore a simple oath under his breath--one word in the highland tongue.

Almost as if cued by the Fates, the horse gave fact to Tasse's oath--in abundance.

He heard a rich plop from down the slope behind him, and turned to discover the steaming mound.

"Damn!"

Now he had definitely left tracks in the pass. The sun was starting to come up, and Tasse was starting to feel like a sitting duck. It wasn't a matter of life or death, but he really would rather not be found.

He quickly hopped back down into the stone ditch and bent to lift a big, flat chunk of granite. He cantilevered it on his knees and carried it over to the evidence.

He was just about to drop it on the offending little heap, when two thought came to him.

The first was that he was about to splatter dung all over his black boots. The other he recited aloud.

"A skilled tracker knows that horse pods under hunks
of stone do not occur in nature."

He dropped the rock aside, instead and moved to the left side of the horse. Giving it a slap on the shoulder as a warning, Tasse stepped into the stirrup and eased himself up.

"And putting pods under stone won't stop a good tracker from finding them."

With a laugh, and one more apprehensive glance back to the West, he urged his horse across the ditch and through a gap leading to a wide ledge that started a long diagonal traverse at the top of the highland face. It extended two miles north, but Tasse would carefully drop down onto another "rung" in the ladder of switchbacks just after the first mile.

In a few minutes, there were only echoes coming back up, and the edge of the cliff looked as devoid of life as it ever did.
CHAPTER XIV

The highlands had been thrust up over millions of years and still grew by imperceptible inches, decade by decade.

Most of the cliffs at the edge of this vast plateau were sheer drops for the first several thousand feet. They terraced briefly but dropped off sharply again, this time ending in jagged grottoes or steep green foothills littered with chunks of fallen granite. Some of these chunks were the size of castles.

Bale Pass was a rare exception to the sheer cliffs, a miracle of nature in a shallow cleavage that split a portion of the great stone face.

Here the stone was stratified, like layered shale or limestone at water's edge. The rock, however, was the same hard, grey granite as the rest of the highlands, and these sloping ramps and ledges of shattered stone were huge--huge beyond belief.

Tasse had a good start on the day, and was making progress down this vast natural ladder. He rode occasionally, if a long, wide traverse appeared, but mostly he led his horse cautiously along uneven ledges and down treacherously steep stairways. Some of these seemed to have been scraped out of the living rock by Muutwok for her giant children.

He had been down the pass before, and back up as well--learning both times how it feels to be an ant on the face of a high brick wall. He'd been on foot on those
occasions, but he had seen how it would be possible to bring a horse down this way, if it was done slowly enough.

What Tasse didn't know was that this was the first time anyone had tried to bring a horse either up or down. The Wokind didn't ride, and the view from the lowlands strongly suggested the idea to be impossible at best.

His first mishap befell him late that afternoon.

Because the great stones were broken and rough, winter snows settled heavy and deep into the cleated steps of the pass. Here the snow clung through the winter, hardened to ice under its own weight. It filled gaps between the huge shelves of rock, and melted slowly in the shade of the cleft.

Tasse had to cross several of these ice shelves as part of the pathway down, but the steepest and widest came just before the great terrace that was the midpoint of the pass.

The horse was reluctant to step out onto the frozen white, probably because of its steepness. Tasse had to walk ahead with his hand on the bridle, slowly coaxing the animal forward.

The crystals crunched under foot and hoof, and they moved along a gentle diagonal that descended slowly across the snow-field's hundred yard width. By late summer, this snowbridge across the chasm would be melted, and the path that Tasse walked across would be an imaginary
line through empty air with bare rock waiting seventy feet below.

Tasse was angling toward a narrow rock ledge at the far side of the glacier.

It was one among many other ledges on the far side, but they were all dead ends. Tasse knew.

He'd tried a very promising-looking one on his first descent years ago, but after following it down for another thousand feet, it had ended in a steep slide of loose rock that dropped off into space. He'd had to climb back up the thousand vertical feet to try another ledge. He had been lucky enough to make the right path his second choice.

The sun was shining on the far half of the snow now, and it softened the ice to mush—deadly slick. This was where the horse began to slip.

It started slowly at first, but then the animal began to panic. Tasse turned to calm it, but slipped himself. He fell and lost hold of the reins.

The horse's hooves chopped at the slushy ice for a few desperate seconds. Tasse could only watch, knowing that if it fell, it would slide out of control down the steep ice for maybe three-hundred yards, and then fall at least a thousand feet.

He froze, amazed, as the horse caught itself, somehow managing to plant its legs under it where they would not slide.

Tasse was stunned but gratified that it didn't then bolt in panic all over again. It just stood there!
Tasse leaped up, skidded a bit, and picked his way carefully down to where the horse stood. He knew speed might be crucial, but he moved with slow deliberation to avoid setting the horse off its nerve again. In a few seconds, Tasse had unbuckled the girth-strap and lifted the saddle, pack and all, from the animal's back.

He found it to be very heavy under the circumstances, probably over sixty pounds, but Tasse could keep his head, while the horse under burden might lose its own, plus its life--

"—plus all of my equipment," Tasse spat under the weight of the saddle.

He plodded three carefully felt paces to the front of the horse, and took up the reins. He hummed in its ear to calm it, and urged it forward ever so lightly.

The horse took a step—then another—and after a long pause, a third.

The walk to the ledge took about three minutes, moving pace by pace, Tasse humming all the way, with his left hand stroking under the animal's chin.

The real effort was for Tasse, holding the heavy saddle over his right shoulder with only one hand to support it.

When they reached the relative safety of the ledge, he flopped it down with a loud grunt, and both horse and man took a long rest.

It was during this rest, sitting with his back against the rock and his legs stuck out in front of him, that
Tasse noticed the left front hoof had lost its shoe.

He was sure he would have heard it if it had dropped off before crossing the glacier.

He groaned as he pushed himself back to his feet, and carefully slipped past the horse on the narrow ledge to look back at the icebridge.

As he expected, the black, iron shoe lay back at the spot where the horse had first panicked. He quickly retrieved it, along with three nails.

It was had to account for the thrown show, since it and the nails were practically new. Tasse had seen wheelwrights using cold water to shrink the hot steel rims around the spokes of carriage wheels. It occurred to him that maybe the ice could have shrunk the nails in the same way, allowing the shoe to drop.

Whether his guess was right or wrong, this horse was through riding for the day--and perhaps longer.

He led the horse down three more switchbacks and made camp on the great terrace that jutted out midway down to the lowlands.

The sun vanished early on this east-facing cliff side. The cold wasn't far off.
CHAPTER XV

It was a warm day on the Banzaw farm, and the whole length of Jaydar's unclad form glistened with perspiration, in spite of the cool grass on his back and legs. Lenore was astride him with her sackcloth jerkin hitched up and her damp face turned toward the sky.

The cousins had taken up this ritual a few years ago, when Jaydar was fifteen and his shoulders began to broaden. It was usually summer in the tall corn that they did it, not spring, but a ditch by the river wall provided good enough cover.

Grand wouldn't venture this far from the house on one foot and a crutch, and neither his mother or aunt would have time to come looking for them this late in the afternoon. He and Lenore never talked about what might happen if they were caught "ridin" as she called it.

He didn't really worry about it though--he just laid back and enjoyed it. It was awfully relaxing, and he knew nothing could come of it, since they were related.

Jaydar had already climaxed, but he didn't let on, keeping his body tense under her. He looked up at her tight expression, eyes closed and lips parted, as she rocked and swayed over his hips.

She finished soon, something he liked to watch, though he wasn't sure why. It was just one of those things.

She stiffened, shook, gasped, and fell sideways into
the grass beside him.

Jaydar guessed that she had learned this stuff from Oscil Whent, her old suitor, but he had married someone else a few years ago, and now the Banzaws didn't have dealings with the Whents.

Jaydar rolled onto his side, sweeping his wet yellow tresses from his eyes, and watched Lenore push the hem of her jerkin back down around her knees. Then she propped up on her elbow and traced a finger under his sack.

"Your going to take care of these when you go fight, Jayd."

Her finger tickled him, and he gave a short laugh. They'd finished the planting today, and this had been her last chance for a send-off.

"Yeah--I'll keep m'package out of harm's way," he said, sitting up and reaching for his coarse brown breeches.

She got up and started back away from the river wall toward the house. He pulled his clothes on and watched from the grass where he sat, admiring the roundness of her rump. He'd never really noticed it until he saw the tax man looking at her in town.

The tax man was dead now, killed by the returning "militia" who started the revolt, but Jaydar guessed he'd learned something from him.

"Jayd, boy, I've got something to send you off with," Grand said with a certain amount of ceremony.
Jaydar's heart leapt at the words, since he had already been given everything he needed. He only dared hope that he knew what his grandfather was speaking of.

"Come through to the barn, son." The stooped old man snatched up his crutch and hopped past the hearth to the wide doorway that connected the living room to the barn. The dwelling was of stone, small with a rough thatched roof, two thirds of which covered stalls and pens for animals.

Jaydar followed two steps behind, a respectful distance in such cramped quarters. The sheep fled the jabbing tip of Grand's crutch as he chased them out from in front of the corn crib.

Then Jaydar smiled with joy, certain that his guess was right. He knew that he was about to receive the skeleton in the family closet and Grand's prize possession!

The old man sat down on the dirt floor, and stuck his leg out in front of him. He settled himself till he felt comfortable, and smiled up at his grandson with strong, straight teeth that nearly matched the whiteness of his thick hair and beard.

"Jayd. Even your mother wants me to do this," Grand said slowly, making the suspense unbearable.

Jaydar looked back into the living room, but his mother, aunt, and cousin had gone, probably into the yard to scrub the soup pot. The sound of Grand's nails scratching at the bottom board of the crib turned his head back around quickly.
He knew of the hiding place—the false boards at
the base of the corn crib, and he loved the beauty of
the wonderful thing that had been stowed there since before
he was born.

Ownership of a weapon was something reserved for
soldiers and town officials. Wrongful possession of one
meant prison; or worse.

Grand slipped his hand into the gap underneath, but
withdrew it with a disgusted choking sound, shaking a
thick shroud of dusty cobwebs from his fingertips. A
long grey spider dropped in his lap, and the old man slapped
at it even as he realized it was already long dead.

He dusted his fingers off on his pants some more,
and smiled back up at Jaydar.

"Haven't been into this since last fall," he muttered,
a bit embarrassed.

He slipped his hand under again, quickly this time,
and caught hold of the cross bound in knotted rags.

"I've kept this near twenty years, Jayd. Never been
found when the tax man come looking at our corn, or to
choose a pig—" Jaydar watched as Grand hoisted himself
grunting to his foot by the edge of the crib. "--and
I've kept it every season. You know the story."

Indeed Jaydar did, from many nights of bedtime tales
before the dimming coals. Now he stood speechless, looming
tall and broad over his grandfather.

The old man balanced on his one leg and carefully
unwound the stiff rags, musty and smelling of the bacon
lard they'd been soaked in. The brown, leathery hands moved deftly, stripping the covering from the pretty steel beneath. It began to glitter gold in the dim light from the sputtering oil lamp on the wall.

"You sure you want me to take it, Grand," the boy said excitedly. "I can use the pitchfork real good, and I haven't ever used a sword before."

The last of the rags dropped to the hay-strewn floor, and Grand held the long weapon out to the son of his son.

"Take it--Hold it, Jayd."

The boy obeyed, holding out his hands and gripping the lovely thing--lightly--with fingers and thumbs on blade and grip.

"It's a big sword!" Grand said with clenched fist before bright smile. "And it was a big man who used it!"

Jaydar looked up from trying his hand more firmly on the grip, "You saw the man?"

"No--I just found it after the fight--" the old man said uncertainly, "--but it's big ain't it?"

Jaydar smiled, hearing the old man's wisdom and weighing the sword in his hand.

"--and it'll be a big man who uses it again," Grand said, beaming pride.

Jaydar Banzaw slipped away into the darkness later that night. He had all of his food rolled up in his blanket, tied over his shoulder in a swag. A leaking second-hand
waterskin bumped his hip, sometimes catching on the thick handle of his carving knife. The sword he carried in his hands, switching it from one to the other as each got tired.

After a few hours, he wished the old leather sheath for the weapon had been saved. Grand told him that the leather had rotted with mold years ago, but Jayd could almost remember what it looked like.

He continued his jaunt north-westward, crossing pastures and fields and the occasional brook. He made ten miles by first light--just across into Poulden County.
CHAPTER XVI

All the previous day, including when he was on the deadly glacier with his horse, Tasse had a phrase running through his head.

The die is cast.

It was something that he'd heard years ago from Thane Lars, his father, and from many other people and places since.

The phrase fascinated Tasse this morning as he sat cross-legged on his bedroll, carefully reassembling his hand-and-a-half sword. He twisted the knob of the pommel down on its screw-threads, tightening the long blade, spooned crossguard, and grip until they were a single solid weapon.

He held it up to the rising sun and looked down its length with one dark blue eye. It was sharp as a razor and straight as an arrow.

"--and temper forged to stay that way," he hummed.

Again he thought of the revelation that had come to him as he was eating last night.

Two meanings, he thought, then corrected himself. One meaning—two interpretations.

The phrase "the die is cast" was always used in a clear context; a situation in which a particular future approached and could not be averted.

It had been in this correct context that Tasse had always used it, but last night he saw for the first time
how he had misinterpreted the word "die."

A die was a mold used in casting metals. Whether for making axe heads or knife blades, when such a mold was made, cast in plaster or ceramic, the quality of form inside the die would determine the shape of the tools that came from it. After the die was cast, nothing else could alter the shape of the metal that you poured into it.

This meaning struck Tasse for the first time last night.

For him the die had always been the singular of "dice", and the casting was not pouring of plaster but throwing of dotted cubes in gambling--dice.

Sure, he knew that most gambling games required two dice--he'd learned most of the games there were by watching the servants in the lower floors of Gallaston Castle when he was a boy. But such old sayings were just that--old. He always figured that it must be a corruption of the original saying "the dice are cast" or it was based on some archaic game using only one die.

Tasse flexed his wrist, whipping the sword two quick whistling strokes through the air in front of him. He was pleased not to hear any creaking or popping from the weapon's four parts. That would show that one was moving against another, and he would have to tighten the pommel more. He didn't like to strain the metal with too much tightening.

He wasn't sure which interpretation of "the die is
cast" that he preferred. The one that had struck him last night was one of finality. What would be would be, and what Tasse did, good or bad, could not change it for better or worse.

If the die was cast for better, it was a comforting thought, but there was no telling that until it happened.

And what if the die in question had been cast long ago. What if this journey was just another axe head from the same die of which the rest of his past had been forged. Once a bastard, always a bastard.

For now, Tasse liked his own interpretation better, for with the dice was the element of luck; not fate. Luck could change.

When dice are cast, even a scurvy roll of two and one would beat snake eyes. The other interpretation's absolute nature of either-or, good or bad, meant that a gambler had to get twin sixes to win--boxcars or bust.

Tasse rose quickly and broke his simple camp. He saddled his horse which was still one shoe short, and hung the reassembled sword in its scabbard, over the saddle's pommel on the left side.

He'd have to re-shoe the horse soon. He couldn't afford the lost time walking it. There was a cave at the base of the great highland face that Tasse would reach today, and there he knew Erleg always kept a sentry.

He would shoe his horse there if he could. If not, he'd trade or steal for another.

As he led the horse along the highland's midway escarpment,
a new thought spawned in his mind, as they so often did.

I wonder what the hell a "boxcar" is?

Officially, the place was called "The Bale Pass Guard Post", but none who got assigned there ever called it that. Max and Val were no different—they were nearly done with their two week detachment at "the crevice."

It had been Val who heard the hoofs echoing early in the afternoon, but Max assured him that it was only imagination.

Tasse emerged from behind a big leaning slab of rock two hours later, and the two sentries had run out across the narrow stream to meet him. The men were friendly enough, probably thrilled to have something break the monotony that Val quickly described as, "dull, dull, living hell, dull."

Tasse wore no emblem or piece of uniform that could betray him as a member of the Erlegin military, though he was wearing the worn black knee-boots that were crown issued, and his crossbow was Bismuthian made.

He was pleased that neither of the two had ever been stationed at Redgate, for he wanted to deal with strangers.

He introduced himself as Curt Lane, an alias that an old mercenary friend had always used at late night taverns. The pair of sentries bought it and welcomed him to their shallow cave.

Tasse had stopped here the first time he came down,
and nothing had changed in the years that had passed. The roof, a natural rock overhang, was still black from the rising smoke of the central fire, and the light still streamed through the many small gaps in the rough stone walls that were built up to seal off the front of the overhang.

There was a pen just to the left of the entrance, on the downhill side, and there Tasse casually unsaddled and put up his horse. One other horse was in the pen, a handsome brown and white horse that was slightly larger than Tasse's.

He eyed it briefly as he slung his saddle over the horizontal rail of the pen's gate, and then he went to the fire with Max and Val, his scruffy hosts, to enjoy some hot broth and to tell of his successful descent of the ancient pass.

The two guards, both in their mid-twenties Tasse guessed, eagerly listened to what it was like on the trail, and when he learned that neither of them had ever been more than a few hundred feet up it, he threw in all sorts of exaggerated perils just to see what they would swallow.

It was after Val interjected that he was sure he'd seen an eagle with a wing-span "almost that big," that Tasse figured it was time to bring up the subject of the horseshoe.

"You boys have a couple horseshoe nails lying around," he asked. It was a good-natured tone, but interrupted Val's animated prevarication.
Both of them looked blankly in tandem, as if they didn't understand the question, but then Max, whom Tasse guessed was the slightly older and smarter of the two, rubbed his bristly chin and answered.

"Huh?"

"Do you have any nails," Tasse repeated, pulling the loose horseshoe from his breast pocket to show them. "My horse threw this one on the slope."

"Got a hammer," Max said, "but no nails."

"That's right." Val added, "We just have the one horse, and that's to ride to Brach if anything needs to be reported. You know; advance scouts. That's where the smithy is--"

Tasse half ignored Val's fast, loud, and elaborate explanation. The blacksmith works at Brach were well known to Tasse. He'd shod horses there many times. He guessed that Max was a man of few words because his partner's jaw would burst if it wasn't flapping on some subject.

It was the few words from Max that worked Tasse's mind now, as he looked past both men to the tall horse beside his own.

The smith was only twenty miles away, yes--but that was Fort Brach, where half the people knew him.

Barth would be there by now anyway, so getting his horse shod was out of the question.

"That's alright, Gents," Tasse smiled, interrupting Val again. "I guess I'll walk him down to Brach this evening."
"That might be hard in the dark," Val said, poking a slender log into the fire. "If you get started now, you might--"

"Let the man rest, Val," Max cut him off, and seemed to enjoy it. He turned to Tasse.

"Just relax, stay the night if you want," he said.
Thanks--But I've never had any problem in the dark," Tasse said, "I'll press on in an hour or two."

Max nodded his approval, and Val went out to crouch with some dirty stockings beside the icy stream. It was only late afternoon now, but only the most distant sunlight was visible here in the shadow of the highlands.

"I'll put a pot on for some beef-jerky soup," Max said, swinging a brown stained sack from behind a wooden barrel.

"Sounds good," Tasse said.

"Only to a starving man with his tongue cut out."
Tasse grinned, "Well if it's that bad, then I won't be imposing if I help you get rid of it when it's done."

"I'd consider it a favor," Max laughed.
Tasse flashed a sly smile up at the younger man.

"You may be sorry."

"So may you, once you've tasted it."

Tasse pulled his hunting knife out from the sheath on his hip and started whittling on a branch of dogwood that he found atop the firewood heap.

Max dropped the eight or so strips of dried meat into the pot with the broth that they'd already been slurping.
Val came stalking back up from the stream, wringing out his stockings, and starting a history of a fishing hole near his home.

Every horse has a history, a tale of its ancestors and what blood they'd been bred to.

These were the histories that made the wealthy bid, that made a horse expensive, and that earned a horse the right to breed with other fine horses.

Tasse had often missed out on these histories during his mercenary days. They were generally told by the owner to a prospective buyer. In those years, Tasse rarely met the owner.

Tasse stole most of the best mounts he rode.

He had never suffered much for not hearing these little stories of races and gifts to Dukes and Kings. Such information guaranteed only the contents of testicles, not the performance of the horse.

Tasse had his own way of appraising a mount. Each horse had its own history, not a genealogy, but a resumé—not made up of mares and studs, but of muscle and hoof, teeth and coat.

His eyes were like biographers to any horse that he had a minute to examine. Tasse had all of an hour and a half to draw his conclusions this time.

While evening crept on and the soup boiled quietly, he watched the horses and whittled the smooth white stick
of dogwood into a cylinder about as long and thick as his second finger. Then he put up his knife and helped lift the small iron cauldron from the fire.

Val and Max started scooping the steaming liquid into deep wooden bowls. They did it carefully, because it had gotten quite dark in the little cave.

Tasse got up and walked toward the pen.

"I guess our mounts want a bit of supper too," he said as he stepped into the wide stall.

He slipped the bit and bridle from his horse's head and put on the feed-bag, all in two quick motions. He glanced over his shoulder nervously, and there was Val, looking at him.

"Would you put a bag on our's while you're about it?" the young sentry asked through a mouthful of chewed jerky.

"I was going to anyway." Tasse waited for Val to look back to his bowl, before pulling his next slight of hand--Max had his back turned, facing the fire.

Tasse slipped the bit that he'd just taken from his own horse, into the feed-bag. With one motion, he slipped the metal snaffle into the other horse's mouth even as he pulled the bag of oats over its muzzle.

With night coming on, and the smoky fire hazing the air in the enclosed overhang, Tasse guessed visibility was bad enough to leave the reins tucked under a strap of the bridle. He glanced again, back at the fire and saw that Max and Val had not seen him all but ready their
horse for riding.

He rubbed the tall brown and white stallion over its withers for a moment, the spot where he would shortly place his own saddle.

Then he returned to the fire to eat.

Val was telling some impossibly complex parable still with his mouth full.

"--so, anyway--the old hermit came out with the three buckets of water, and the penitent whores each took one--"

Tasse wanted to eat rapidly, but the smoky broth burned his lips. It didn't seem to bother Max and Val, but then he realized that they weren't trying to eat in a hurry.

He decided to fish the jerky out of his bowl and let the rubbery meat cool between his fingers.

Both sentries dug in for another round, which relieved Tasse--he wouldn't have to race them to the bottom of his bowl. The soup was pretty terrible, from an un-scrubbed pot, no doubt, but he was about to steal a horse and ride over vaguely known ground in the dark. He would need the meal.

Max saw their guest turn up the bottom of his bowl, drinking the last of his broth.

"Want some more?" He leaned forward, reaching for the ladle.

The dark visitor pushed his long black hair back over his shoulder and started to shuffle to his feet.
"I'm not sure yet," he said, "I'm going out to anoint the earth."

"We usually do that along the base of the cliff," Val volunteered, "on the downhill."

The dark visitor walked away from the fire toward the entrance, and Val then continued with his adventurous parable of the three penitent whores. Max sipped at his soup, and watched the fire.

They never heard the saddle go on, or the buckling of the girth.

Val heard the feed-bag drop to the ground in the pen, but he didn't look. It was just noise from the horses, and he was just coming up on the best part of his story.

Then there was the creaking of leather, and the snapping of reins, followed by the resonant sound of urgent hooves on the stone floor of the overhang.

The two Erlegen sentries looked around just quick enough to see the hind half of their horse vanish through the high opening with the dark stranger floating weightless in the saddle.

Max almost got what would have been a clean shot at the thief, but his heavy windlass-drawn crossbow refused to shoot its quarrel.

He found out why as the stranger and their horse vanished into the twilight—the nut that held and released the bowstring was jammed with a slender cylinder of white dogwood.
Tasse didn't slow down until it was fully dark. It was the darkness that ended his ride and again placed him before the horse to lead it.

He had ridden it hard, wanting to put as much distance as he could between himself and his unwilling benefactors. He'd also wanted to see what the new mount was capable of.

So far he had discovered that it wasn't ideal for trail riding, unlike the one he'd just left, but it was strong and fairly fast.

It was not overly intelligent.

Tasse found this out when twilight had set in, and the horse had made a series of missteps; a pair of potholes and some loose stone that a smarter horse would have avoided without needing to be told by its rider.

It was an annoying discovery for Tasse, who had gotten used to riding the bright and sure-footed Ergadin mounts.

Advantages, on the other hand, were that such a horse could be trusted to do as it was told, responding to the reins and the rider's shifting weight, without being distracted by its own will or any danger around it.

This horse was practically born for light cavalry combat. It would run itself to death if Tasse told it to, and would charge an infantry's leveled pikes with only the slightest doubt and no hesitation.

Tasse guessed that, in the short term, the dumb but
obedient horse was the better mount, provided the ground wasn't too tricky. In the long run, he really preferred a horse that knew what was good for it. Such animals were more like trusting allies than faithful slaves, and to a horseman, what was good for the horse was usually good for the rider.

It was quiet and dark where Tasse was now. He lead his mount north-east through tall grass in an unkempt orchard. He was headed toward Kilrush.

There was a grassy wagon track that ran from Fort Brach to Kilrush about an hour to his right, but Tasse wasn't planning to head far enough east to hit that—not yet.

Roads probably meant travelers, even this late at night, and if they were traveling south, that meant they would have news for the fort of anyone they might have passed on the way.

One thing Tasse would have to concede right now was that he was easily described. He was a short, dark man with straight, raven-black hair, long over his shoulders and back. He was riding a handsomely marbled brown and white horse, with an oversized cruciform weapon and black scabbard hanging from the saddle.

It was an easy description to remember—a child could do it.

He guessed that in another three hours, either Max or Val would come staggering into the fort with news of a thief—someone named Curt Lane.
Tasse smiled at the thought, and hoped that it would be Val who would report to Barth. With any luck, the spastic sentry would blow the event all out of proportion just enough to prevent his Captain from noticing a striking similarity between the culprit's description and his friend van Poulder.

Being short had its advantage, in this case, for men tended to add inches in their minds, even feet, to the height of those who had put something over on them.

Tasse knew he was short first, and everything else second to whoever saw him. That's how he nearly lost out on getting his lieutenant's commission after the battle in Durgen. The Captain who had recounted Tasse's success against six fully armored riders, had given his superiors a description of a warrior of six and a half feet. When Tasse was summoned to the General's tent the next day, they didn't believe this five-five mercenary was the same man.

It was the gold and silver rings from three of the renegade knights that convinced them, and Tasse became a lieutenant instead of a mercenary.

Tasse pulled an apple off the last tree in the orchard as he approached a low stone wall.

It occurred to him that he had been riding a stolen horse that day in Durgen as well, and those six noble outlaws were the last bodies that he ever looted. With those rings he had bartered for the hand-and-a-half sword, and financed his light hauberk.
He also had the dream every night for a month after the battle.

_How old was I then?_ He counted back the years as he kicked over the un-mortared stones of the wall that blocked his way. It was too dark to jump the horse over it.

_The treason at Durgen was almost--nine--years ago._

A section of rocks toppled noisily, thudding and rolling down a short embankment. The slope made him glad that he hadn't tried to jump it in the dark. The unexpected drop of an extra four feet would have meant disaster for both man and mount.

_--and I was thirty-one,_ Tasse concluded as he led the horse through the gap into another orchard. _Same age as Lirra is now--I think._

Over the next several hours, Tasse wrecked small sections of three more walls and two rail fences. A thin sliver of moon rode higher and higher through the trees to the east, and Tasse decided that when it cleared the tops of the trees, he would stop for the rest of the night.

When he began a long, gradual downhill run, he was forced to reconsider. The trees got taller and thicker around him, and the moon vanished among the leaves.

A quarter of an hour later he stopped at the edge of a narrow river. At its edges, it gurgled over and under large rounded rocks, but twenty feet out it swirled very slowly. That showed it was deep.

_In the dark, Tasse couldn't guess how deep._
He sighed through his teeth and looked up and down the river. It didn't look any narrower or wider either way, looking an even forty feet. It occurred to him that he couldn't tell which way it was flowing.

"Well horse---" Tasse paused, stepping back and leaning with one arm across the saddle, "--this is camp."

He knotted the reins over the horn and let the horse drink its fill.

Hauling down the saddle, he flopped it over a rock beside the first flattish spot he found away from the water's edge. He didn't have a guess of what time it was, but it felt late.

He unstrung the bedroll from the saddle-pack, dropped it where he planned to sleep, and then walked back to pull the horse's nose out of the river. He strapped on the feed-bag and tethered it to a low-slung maple branch.

Two raw potatoes passed for his own supper, and Tasse decided to snub the waterskin in favor of a drink from the stream.

With his hands on two round stones, one of them sticking up a foot out into the water, he held his face just above the surface for several long drinks.

It was fresh and cold, and then the horse shuffled its hooves on the ground behind him.

Tasse threw himself away from the water, his arms thrusting savagely.

His right hand crossed his body in a forgotten reflex, searching for a sword-grip that wasn't there.
He closed his eyes tightly, and the wash of panic left him.

"Damn!" He rubbed his temples and turned from the river.

It was flashback paranoia; the dyke-wall and the muddy river again.

It had happened before--Death flashing up at him from dark waters. It always seemed to remind him that it was not quite forever since he had worn a sword at his left hip.

He returned to his saddle and lifted his sword and scabbard from the horn. The bedroll spread easily over the thick moss where he was very ready to sleep.

"Someday it will be forever," he said in a shallow whisper.

With the pommel toward his feet, he laid the sword beside him at arm's length so the crossguard was even with his shoulder. He lay on his back, and reached for it once with his left arm.

It would be there if he needed it fast.

The moss was soft and Tasse slept quickly.

In spite of his precautions, he awoke to find himself a prisoner.
CHAPTER XVIII

The idea to open his eyes and brave the bright morning sun to see what had snapped that twig, was jarred from Tasse's mind by a sudden spasm of pain in his left side.

He gave up trying to breathe and reached for his sword instead.

What he grabbed didn't feel like his sword, and when he opened his eyes, he saw that his hand was on the toe of a muddy, brown boot. It was on top of his sword-grip, and it exactly matched another boot that was already swinging forward to kick him again.

A pain just like the first one spread out from the center of his stomach. He bared his teeth wide in a breathless gasp and grabbed at the swinging boot to stop it from kicking again.

It seemed to work.

"Y' see, Cecil," said a rough voice over him, "that be Max's horse, but this ain't Ma-Aauugh!"

The words were cut off as Tasse launched himself upward. The kicks to the stomach had taken some strength from his arms and legs, but not all, and the man with the boots had just paid for his mistake as the crown of Tasse's head solidly rammed his assailant's crotch.

Tasse rolled sideways, gained his feet, and flashed the hunting knife from its sheath on his right thigh. As he whirled up, off balance, he saw another man about six paces away, but Tasse dealt with one thing at a time.
It was a fat man who had kicked him, now doubled over in his own struggle for breath, and he feebly clutched a heavy crossbow to his gut.

Tasse sucked one choked breath and then slashed out with the knife.

The razored blade zipped through the fat man's bow-string, and the tensed steel arms of the weapon whipped uselessly forward with a loud metallic twung.

Disarmed, the fat man hurled himself clumsily backward, eyes bulging with pain and fear of the dark man with the knife.

Tasse's sword was no longer pinned by the muddy boot, and, dropping his knife, he lunged for it.

He spun on one knee, grabbing up and drawing the long blade in one instant, and turned to face the second man.

Then Tasse saw his mistake. As he rose into the fighter's crouch, sword flashing vertical and threatening, he saw the second man, still six paces away with spanned crossbow ready, and the head and shoulders of a third just behind the horse's withers. This man also gazed sharply and calmly down the stock of a strong steel crossbow.

Things had happened fast during these first fifteen seconds of his morning, but the sight of weapons leveled at him gave him pause. The men were soldiers--common ones if they knew Max; they knew his horse. Common soldiers were often armed, but not trained, bad shots perhaps.

Tasse stood frozen, darting a quick glance at his
own unspanned and unloaded crossbow. It hung on his saddle, a step and a jump away, and his saddle was still slung across the large rock--big enough to take cover behind for a few seconds.

He looked back to the nearest one, a narrow man with a bald head and mustache. He was smiling.

"Forget it, thief," he commanded, the smile turning crooked.

Tasse still held his sword up, statue-like. He noticed the fat one, leaning against a tree, breathing through bared teeth, and glaring at him through long strands of greasy brown hair. The one behind the horse came out, stepping under the horse's chin, but the crossbow still aimed calmly.

"Drop the sword," the bald one said. "NOW!"

Tasse managed the first real breath since being kicked and responded, "okay."

He stepped back, bent for his scabbard, and re-sheathed his sword. He laid it carefully on the bedroll and moved back to sit astride his saddle on the mossy rock.

The three men moved in, crossbows trained with care. They weren't going to give him another chance to lash out.

The small river ran north, and a few hundred yards downstream Tasse was marched across a squat wooden bridge to a grassy wagon road that ran along the stream's east
bank. Tasse knew the road, but he hadn't guessed last night just how close he was to it.

As his captors prodded him onto the road, he noticed a small, rusty iron marker huddled in the tall dewy grass. It said, KILRUSH - 5 MILES, but Tasse knew it was a lie.

Within the kingdom of Erleg, mile markers were obelisks of cut stone, not welded iron. He knew the man who had made it, a blacksmith and stabler of Kilrush who rode out eight miles to drop off this piece of his handiwork. Travelers, believing themselves to be that much closer were more likely to come on into town.

This, incidentally, left their animals a little more tired, a little more hungry, and he happened to be the first friendly stabler on the way into the town—clean stalls but expensive oats.

Tasse prepared himself for a long, uncomfortable hike.

Surprisingly, the sergeant was Cecil, the youngest among them; red-haired in his early twenties. He was the one who was either clever enough or cowardly enough to stand, or hide, behind the horse. He was now on the horse, a short distance ahead looking quite comfortable on Tasse's saddle.

Tasse trudged along with his wrists bound painfully behind his back. The other two followed behind him, though he couldn't be sure how far. It was information he needed if he was to turn the tables or make a break for it.
He tried to look once, but the bald one kicked him hard in the back of the leg.

"Turn around and walk!"

"Love your work, don't you," Tasse said, sarcastically.

"Yeah. Now don't make me enjoy it any more or we'll have to drag you to jail."

"Mathew," the mounted sergeant interrupted, "Don't abuse the prisoner too much. According to the law, he only probably stole this horse."

"Yeah, Matt," the fat one chuckled. "This goat-sucking bugger might be a free man in a couple o'weeks."

The only response from Mathew that Tasse heard was a low grumble that ended in "...sonovabitch."

It clouded over around noon, and Tasse guessed that they were making good time. This didn't make him feel good, though. He'd been marched places for horse theft before. He'd been captured three times to be exact, and one of those had been privately owned.

The difference between private and military horses is the punishment you can get. If a rich man stole a privately owned horse, he could be fined the value of the horse. A poor man could expect indentured slavery at best. Tasse had seen plenty of one-handed men who weren't that lucky.

It was far smarter to steal from the military, especially for Tasse. Though he had been captured three times, he had escaped the last two times and only ever went to trial for the first one. That had been military.
The penalty was impressment into military service. He was tried and convicted under a false name, and he had vanished back to his mercenary outfit right after his enlistment.

After another mile, it began to drizzle on Tasse and his three captors. It was a good sign.

He was pretty sure the cord he was tied with was leather; if it got wet enough, it would stretch.

It would have to stretch quite a bit, Tasse knew, if he was to have any hope of slipping loose. The bonds were brutally tight, compliments of the fat one with the heavy boots. Tasse guessed this was a little vengeance for his bruised testicles.

Though the cord was painful, Tasse really didn't blame him. He wondered if coming along more peacefully might have ultimately made escape easier. Probably not.

He took a deep breath and strained his shoulders forward. He felt it tighten on his wrists--painful, but he was almost sure he felt it stretching just a bit. He kept his tension slow and constant, hoping to avoid the attention of the two walking companions.

Over the miles that followed, the bindings bit into his wrists. His left hand had gone clammy at first from lack of blood. He could imagine his fingertips swollen and purple, giving him away.

They didn't though, and now his whole left hand was completely numb up to the wrist. The right one just hurt.
He eased his shoulders back and twisted his arms slowly.

There was some slack—just a little where there had been less than none before.

He let some blood run into his hands and then began again.

Three quarters of an hour passed along the soggy road. As they crested a small rise, a wide, shallow valley sloped gently before them—one that Tasse thought he knew. The road led down to a bridge.

When they were within eight-hundred yards of it, he realized where he was.

It was the last crossing before Kilrush, a low triple-arched stone bridge. About fifteen paces wide and twice as long, it crossed over a narrow, fast-moving stream, nameless as far as Tasse knew.

Here was an opportunity.

*If I can get my hands free, he thought, then this is the place.*

Tasse van Poulder had no intention of going to trial again—even if he had the time. He'd been bound to the scrutiny of justice once already, and that had taken two weeks.

He had somewhere else to be, and soon! He knew what any mercenary would, that spring rebellions were often swiftly put down.

Tasse strained at his bonds as the yards before the bridge vanished with horrifying speed.
A mild panic swelled in him. Oddly, it was a familiar, back-alleyway panic--the kind he'd had in shadows beside cheap taverns on cold autumn nights--hopping from leg to leg with drunken fingers fumbling at a gordian knot at the front of his breeches.

He strained harder and chided himself for such a half-witted association. There was more at stake than a wet leg.

"Stop that squirming, dung dog!" The fat one's rough voice matched the fierce shove between the shoulder-blades from something blunt and hard.

"I'm just trying to work some blood into my arms," he snapped impatiently. He hoped that acting indignant might justify his struggling, so that he might continue.

"Your fingers don't need any blood!"

Once again the bellow was accompanied by a hard blow to the center of Tasse's back from a crossbow stirrup.

**Crossbow stirrup?** Tasse thought.

He felt the sudden, shameful realization that the fat one had been holding Tasse's own crossbow on him all the way. The heavy steel bow that Tasse had ruined that morning had been spanned by an iron cranquin, and so had a heavy iron spike at its front in place of a stirrup.

If he'd been struck by that bow, there would have been blood, but he grimaced all the same at the thought that it was his own.

It was a sign of his long years in the highlands.
Among the Wokind it was taboo to be harmed with one's own weapon.

He slogged ahead, wondering how far back Mathew was and wondering how careful he could afford to be with the cords around his wrists. He really only had a couple of minutes before his last chance at breaking away. There was only a hundred yards left till the bridge.

The grass at the bottom of this knoll was tall and dense and very dark green. It benefited for its being close to the stream, but Tasse could see that it would not hide a man—not in daylight, even dim grey daylight as this was.

"Hey fat," Tasse said quiet and calm. The large man behind him ignored the epithet and responded. "Huh? What is it now?"

"I just wanted you to know something—since it's certain I'm going to trial." Tasse paused. "It's about my crossbow."

"Yeah? Well, I'm keeping it. It's a weenie little sucker, but--"

Tasse interrupted, "It's not about that—you can have it. I just don't want your blood on my hands when I'm standing in front of the justice."

"Precious chance o'that, shorty," the fat man laughed, but with a trace of discomfort, Tasse hoped. "It's the safety catch underneath—and the poison needle."

He spoke it smoothly and quietly and let the big
man chew on it. Some crossbows, really good ones, had safety catches. Though it was crafted in Bissmuth, Tasse's didn't, but with sixty feet left to the bridge, Tasse's mention of poison needles would discourage the new owner from aggressively pursuing that information until, hopefully, it was too late. He wanted at least two of them where he could see them when the time came.

"Hey. Okay--I'm listenin'. What needle?"

An evil grin that no one saw flashed across Tasse's lips and was gone. "On that one, there's two ways to switch the safety off; you can push the lever forward or sideways."

The fat man now walked alongside his prisoner, looking puzzled and nervous and attentive.

"Most work forward," he continued, "but if you do it that way, a spring inside the stock will drive the poisoned barb into your hand when you shoot."

Tasse stepped onto the bridge, and tried to slip his hands loose.

Still too tight! He couldn't believe it. His escape was passing away under his feet because a stubborn strip of leather refused to stretch any more.

The heavy man held his weapon out in front of him at arm's length, turning it over in search of the mechanism.

"You would be dead in two days," Tasse said with a strained voice. The fat man looked at him suspiciously.

"Just thought I'd warn you," Tasse said, this time through grit teeth. In spite of his last efforts, the
cord that bound him wasn't going to stretch any more.

That's why it broke.

The sound of the snapping leather and the captive's free-swinging arms came as a surprise to the men on foot, Tasse included. There followed a timeless instant in which everything was clear, as if surprise had formed a lens in the air around them that sharpened things.

Later, Tasse would realize that time had not stopped, the moment had been a long one--he and the two soldiers hadn't even stopped walking. He could still hear the steady hoof-steps, at least seven before anything happened.

Tasse mastered his surprise first. The "poisoned" crossbow was still at arm's length in front of the fat soldier, balanced carefully on his two upturned hands.

Like a snake striking, Tasse took it. He whirled away, running diagonally up the gentle arch and across toward the left side of the bridge. His rain-soaked hair whipped behind him in a thrash of black tendrils. He half turned on the run to mirror the bow that Mathew had already leveled at him.

Both shot.

Tasse didn't wait to see the course of his bolt, but completed his half-turn and ran on towards the crest of the low bridge. Mathew's bolt struck near but just past him on the low curb wall at the side of the bridge. It sprayed his face and left arm with sharp flecks of shattering sandstone. The splintered bolt skittered across the muddy cobbles in front of him as he ran on.
For a second, his eyes met Cecil's in the rain, the young sergeant just turning in saddle to learn the cause of the sounds of scuffle. He turned, reaching for his own heavy bow on the saddle.

I won't be here, he thought, when he turns around again.

He sprang, cat-footed, onto the wide top of the curb wall. He stopped in two steps and turned downstream. It was about twelve feet down to the rushing grey water.

He pitched forward and heard the shouting water echo above some yelling behind him. It wasn't far to fall, and, instead of coming up to meet him, the water seemed to spread out beyond his peripheral vision. The grey torrent was all he could see. It was horrible, as it seemed to open for him, and then everything went black.

A few hours later, he realized that he had never really jumped at all.
"I don't think anyone is coming."

The two young men in the thicket with Jaydar silently nodded their agreement but continued to look blankly out at the empty road. From their slightly elevated position they could see the road for nearly a half mile one way but, as it curved around behind them, less than fifty yards the other. All three were soaked and miserable, but nobody moved beyond a shiver.

The rain was falling heavier and colder now, as afternoon faded still greyer. Jaydar had spent the last hour letting a trio of wishes take turns in his head. He wished that the tin-bellies would come. He wished that he had brought a warmer blanket to sit under. And he wished that the masters who had built the road had made it a little straighter so he could see the derelict barn and camp.

He was eager enough for an ambush, but it would be reassuring to see the rebel gang that was to blind-side the enemy when the alarm was given.

Every time he wished the road straight, he remembered why the bend had been chosen in the first place.

"We wait for them at the turn in the road," Wiskoff had explained, "and the knights and lords and what not'll be ignorant of their coming dooms."

Wiskoff had stressed the big words as educated people do, showing off Jaydar guessed. He'd heard the word "ignorant" before, lots of times, but not knowing what
it meant, he was pleased that he got the idea anyway.

None of the three thicket-bound scouts knew it, perhaps for lack of contrast, but it was already evening. There would certainly not be another ambush—not today.

Jaydar hadn't seen the first one; that one had been two days ago, when he was still home.

He wished that he could have come just a little sooner, to see what he had heard 'described a hundred different, beautiful ways in the last two days. The rush, the bloodfire of battle, the fear of the fleeing soldiers, and the death of the courageous.

Jaydar had missed that and the division of money and arms. He would have killed many if he had been there, and maybe he would have captured a horse alive, to ride instead of eat.

His companions in the thicket, Pol and Rod, hadn't seen it either. They were brothers that joined up this morning.

Jaydar was quietly proud that Wiskoff had put them under his care on the ambush lookout. It was an honor to be given such an important job; the forefront of the ambush, and the first to see the enemy.

He watched the far-off slot in the forest where the road emerged, coming east from Tess. A thin mist was threading up from there as the rain got colder. It wasn't thick enough yet to hide an army, so Jaydar guessed they could spare someone from their force of three for a few minutes.
"Pol," he said seriously, "Go to camp and ask Commander what we should do, come in or stay." Jaydar paused while Pol eagerly gained his muddy feet. "Tell him that I don't think they're coming, but if we're to stay put, ask for some cow to bring back."

"Will there be cow then?" The skinny boy tugged the few strands of black fuzz on his chin, and Jaydar lifted the cowbell that he'd held by the clapper all afternoon.

"There's cow enough since last night. We killed one on the slope above the barn." He smiled and pointed with the bell. "A fat one--haven't you seen the fire-smoke?"

Both brothers craned their necks looking south-east, then Pol grinned through broken teeth and scrambled over the log they crouched behind and hopped down to the road.

"Be sure an' come back to tell us one way or other," Rod called after him. His brother stepped out of a rain-filled mud hole and nodded.

"Right back, Mr. Jaydar." He turned and scrambled out of the road, frantically, as if a king's vanguard were going to rumble down on him any moment.

When Jaydar saw him safely on the other side, he looked far off again at the empty slot in the woods, then he studied the cowbell in his left hand. Commander Wiskoff had wanted to give him a horn to blow, but their small army wouldn't have a horn until they finished hollowing out the ones from the cow so that they would catch the
breath and moan like proper horns should. Until then, the cow's bell would have to do.

He pulled the soaked blanket tighter around him and watched the raindrops splash and divide on his sword's bare blade. He liked watching the larger droplets glide down its shiny, fluted spine, running into smaller ones, gathering them and picking up speed. He liked how they got big and heavy and rushed down the blade, leaving tiny droplets behind again.

He didn't know why the drops swallowed each other—he didn't know why he liked it. It was just one of those things.

They splashed off the hilt and vanished into the ground.

He watched many of them splash, one after another, and then he looked up to see Pol waving on the other side of the road.

"Commander says to come eat!"

Rod vaulted the log as fast as he heard it, and Jaydar rose to follow. He grabbed up the sword and saw the water fly from the blade in an arc of crystal pearls.

He paused just the instant that it took to watch them scatter in the rain and vanish into the wet ground.

The attack came the next morning while Jaydar was oiling his sword.

Spending all the previous day in the rain with a
naked blade hadn't worried him until one of the older men in the troop mentioned the danger of creeping brown rust. The thought horrified him--his relic and heirloom mottled and dull like so many of the other steel weapons he'd seen since he joined.

The few steel weapons that there were had been taken from the castle at Poulden weeks ago, on the third day of the rebellion. Now, among the common hands that held them, few knew or cared the simple craft of oiling and honing.

When he first came among the rebels, he'd been nervous that one of them would want his sword for their own. Some did, its size and brilliance attracting a few of the largest men with offers to swap, but he didn't let them. His own size enabled him to protect his sword from his comrades, but he feared he might be powerless now to protect it from rust.

He had dried the sword as best he could, and after eating a small chunk of the dwindling roast cow, he took the blade to bed with him. All night long, his sleep was troubled, wondering where he could get oil to protect the gift of his grandfather. When he awoke, the problem had solved itself.

The circles of grease that had floated on his gravy the night before had cooled, hardening into soft white discs of lard that dotted the surface of the liquid in the rough wooden bowl. He easily picked these out and wiped them into a small swatch of brown rag.
It had stopped raining sometime in the night, but after harvesting his grease and drinking what remained of the cold gravy, he walked out to find the ground not much drier. Every place he thought he might sit was as wet as the thicket had been.

Finally he crouched down with his back to the side of the barn and laid his long weapon across his knees. He cupped the small grease bundle in his left hand and dipped into it with one finger, carefully smearing some on the honed steel. It dulled the gleam at first.

Others of the rebel troop were up, widely scattered around the barn and along the green pasture. Standing, sitting, wringing out wet clothes, these were the men who had the misfortune of having to sleep in the rain.

The barn was a huge one by Jaydar's standards, not at all like the stone-walled hovel that was part of his home, but still it held only space for eighty or so to lie tightly spaced, and that was only a third of their number.

For those that had bedded in the pasture, wakening was an escape from the obvious discomfort of soaked clothes, and blankets if they had any. Jaydar knew, for he'd slept outdoors their first night out of Poulden. He'd only gotten a spot in the barn last night because he'd been on watch in the rain for so long.

It was almost sunny now, so he tried to forget the discomfort of the day before and the discomfort of the others around him—the morning would be nearly idyllic
if he could.

There were birds singing their various songs or whatever noises they had in place of songs, and as Jaydar rubbed the slippery paste up the length of his sword, he listened, a bit disappointed that none of the songs were strange to him. He'd heard stories of different birds and animals in different lands; birds called eagles that were like hawks but bigger and they didn't dwell on the arms of gentry. He'd also heard of storks and gulls and griffons and two-headed geese that honked in harmony and mocking birds that imitated the songs of others.

He saw and heard none of them. There was just the song of the birds he'd always heard echoing above the clunking of a distant bell on the breezeless landside.

He bent over his sword again, the shine coming through the smeared grease as it was spread thinner and thinner. He smiled and looked up at the day again. More men were up now. In fact, they were running.

Most were running toward him but some were running away, and out of his confusion Jaydar realized that the clunking bell was growing less distant and more urgent.

He leaped to his feet and turned to watch the edge of the copse of trees and scrub that hid the barn from only the very nearest segment of road. He waited for the night's sentry to round that edge, eyes wide, legs pumping, blanket trailing, and the bell calling out its warning from a white-knuckled grip.

But the night's sentry never rounded the edge, and
as the men around him either stampeded away toward the
trees at the back of the field, or rallied toward the
barn, the bell stopped in Jaydar's ears, and he heard
the sound he had heard all his life, hooves on the road.

Men were pouring out of the barn, some with axes
raised to strike enemies who were not yet visible. Jaydar
saw Pol jump out, blinded by brightness and confused
by the whirl of men around him. Jaydar started to call
to him, but then the dark line of the copse grew. Dark
horses and dark steel, two abreast, extended out for
fifty unhurried yards. A voice called, as if it were
very far away, a signal--and all the horses turned together
toward the barn.

Many men around the barn were shouting, maybe all
of them, but above them Wiskoff called for them to form
up.

Jaydar didn't know what "form up" meant, but as he
saw the wide line of heavy-mounted enemy move toward
them, no longer a column two abreast but a wall two deep,
he realized that the silent cowbell still echoed in his
ears.

With that echo, a fever in his head told him that
if the tin bellies had come the day before, it would
have been him who never rounded the edge of the copse.

He lifted his sword and waded through the knots of
frightened men, and he was one of them. Then Grand's
stories, tales of the battle before Jaydar was born,
filled his head--and this looked easy by comparison.
He broke free of the crowd of men who were tangled before the barn, and an inarticulate scream filled his throat.

But it did not come out inarticulate. It was the battle cry that his father had used, as Grand had told him many times.

Over two-hundred rebels heard him loud and clear, "FOR HOLWEIR!" and they saw him charge out across the narrowing pasture between them and just under fifty of Baron Goshawk's heavy cavalry.

They heard Jaydar above the orders of commander Wiskoff, and they saw the two new boys, Rod and Pol, and a few other men leap out. The word seemed given and more men, and knots of men charged screaming from among their number, like formless strands being gathered from the whirling spindle into an unruly cord of yarn.

The battle was a mockery of military tactics, but those who remembered it longest would not remember it as such.
CHAPTER XX

To be honest, the injuries among the rebels were numerous, but the deaths were so few that they were swallowed up by the victorious revelry. In this hour, their heroes far outnumbered the unfortunate.

The men were whooping and flailing their arms and weapons over their heads, and bashing their shields together. Quite a few of them were on the road, celebrating but keeping watch at the same time.

Victory had not been total. The enemy had escaped back down the road they had come by, but a savage bite had been taken out of their number. They galloped away beyond hearing and then beyond the sight of the keenest eyes, and then the common footmen rejoiced all the more, running from body to body, and body to carcass.

Barely twenty minutes had passed from the first ringing of the cowbell, and it was now picked from a dead man's hand and rattled in triumph.

Of course the real reason for their victory escaped all of them, even those who might have been old enough to remember seeing a real infantry fail. This had not been an ambush, but a skirmish, and while many had seen one, very few had seen the other.

Even their commander, who had been at the burning and the fighting as far up-river as Tess only weeks ago, even he didn't see why the cavalry didn't slice through them like a hot knife. Wiskoff was too upset at his
failure to control his men to realize that the battle had been won, not by their mad, swarming charge, but by the previous day's weather.

The fierce, fifteen-minute engagement had happened entirely on unplowed bottom-land with hills rising on two sides. Here was a pasture with a purpose, relegated to cattle's grazing by the man who had farmed here. In a drier country, such natural irrigation would have been a blessing, but here there had never been crops that could survive their own waterlogged roots.

The field looked green enough from the road, but the hooves of fifty heavily armored and heavily mounted horses discovered the underlying softness. The animals bogged, some reared, and the formation frayed. Then the rebel's haphazard attack arrived.

The results were the lifeless bodies of eighteen soldiers and ten horses lying on wet grass and thick, greenish mud. Scattered thinly amid the carnage were seven dead rebels, killed in various ways, just as dead as the enemy but not as thoroughly looted.

Four men, Jaydar among them, were the proud new owners of the four horses that survived capture. Two of these men knew how to ride, and quickly mastered their beasts away from the confusion of the battle. Jaydar humbly and respectfully gave Wiskoff his animal, a broad-chested, shaggy-hoofed mare, after making the sad discovery that riding a warhorse is not the same or as easy as guiding a plowhorse.
Wiskoff managed to martial his force after another third of an hour was spent looting the dead and tending the wounded. He put two men on one of the captured mounts and sent them back to the town of Poulden. They were to tell those inside Gallaston that ten mounts worth of meat were here and left it up to them as to how it could best be retrieved.

Food was important now, for the governing Baron had scoured the land with his troops for the contents of every crib, pen, and pasture.

Incidentally, the ten dead warhorses would be retrieved late that night. The meat would be loaded onto wagons that needed pulling by men; the steed that carried Wiskoff's messengers having been butchered by a hungry mob as they entered town.

By that late hour, Wiskoff had moved his men and the three horses another eight miles west along the river road. Pursuit of the Baron's cavalry was risky at best, but the rebellion had to overtake the enemy before the rebels were overtaken by starvation.

"Besides," he told his men in an inspiring speech, "we have them on the run, haven't we!"

Jaydar went along happily, anxious to do as well in the next battle as he'd done that afternoon. He had a shield now, though he hadn't yet discovered that it would greatly hinder his use of the great sword. He was strong enough to use it one-handed, but then it was dangerously wide and slow.
He would learn this shortly. The thirty-two enemy survivors of today's struggle were joined up and waiting beside their Baron and the other fifty of his best heavy cavalry.
"Yes sir, we got him." Cecil paused, wanting something to add, "He put up a fight."

"A fight! How many did you lose?"

"Lose, sir?"

"How many men. My soldiers tell me he's a slayer and a half."

Barth tried to keep from laughing at the seriousness of his own voice. The young sergeant responded as expected, with a measured mix of subordinate cap-doffing and military pride.

"We took him with only minor injuries, sir."

"Excellent," Barth said, half amused and half glad that Tasse wasn't in any more trouble than horse thievery.

He couldn't begin to guess why Tasse was here, but he was sure it was him. Val's description of the culprit matched well enough, except for the part about the thief being a six-foot vampire. The clincher had been the slip-shod horse; it was the best one from Redgate's stables.

"The horse he stole was a fast one, I bought it myself."

"Yes sir."

"Yet the animals I see in your stables here are not nearly a match for it."

Barth tilted his chair back against the wall and spat at a bucket in the center of the sergeant's room.

"How did you run him down?"

Cecil looked confused, and then embarrassed, for
an instant.

"We weren't mounted--I mean, we were on foot, Sir."

"So a hand-full of you on foot managed to bring this shrewd horseman to earth?"

The surprise in Barth's voice was genuine, but the admiration was fake: He was curious about how van Poulder had been taken. Barth had seen the best, and no one alive was more elusive on horseback.

"Actually, sir--our capture was the rogue's own sheer foolishness," Cecil said reluctantly.

"Come boy, don't make me pull teeth."

"We came on him in his sleep."

It was as he had suspected, and he was pleased not to be disillusioned. Van Poulder had not been out-maneuvered by this pin-head sergeant, and yet, Barth still had something he could rib Tasse about later. He couldn't stifle the smile.

"And he still managed to deal out 'minor' injuries?"

The sergeant, whose pride had been waning steadily since the outset of the interview, shrugged and grasped at the only straw left to him.

"As you said, sir--he is a slayer."

At this, Barth smiled, not in fun or sarcasm, but with a pride for his friend.

"Show me this knave, sergeant."
CHAPTER XXII

Tasse had heard the familiar voice from the adjoining room where the bunks were, so he was not unprepared when Barth stooped under the low archway and stepped into the mildly squalid jailing area. He was the only prisoner at the moment.

He crossed his fingers over his lips as soon as Barth looked his way, and Barth responded with a nod of understanding and a grin, obscenely wide, that flashed and vanished as he turned to the young sergeant who followed closely.

"That will be all, sergeant," Barth said, "I'll interrogate the villain myself, while you take your men out for some exercise."

"Yes Sir," he said uncertainly.

Barth stood listening while Cecil cleared the bunk-room, then he sat down on the stool opposite the row of bars forming the front of the two low-roofed cells. Not to be outdone, in spite of being locked in the first cell, Tasse lounged in feigned comfort on the hard wooden cot.

"I figured you'd be along. I've been here three days."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Barth smirked. "The messenger took his time yesterday."

"When did you leave out?"

"Just before last sundown."

They both paused, looking at each other through the
bars. Tasse knew what Barth was going to ask. It was the obvious question.

"So, Tasse . . . tell me the story."

The story. Tasse sighed, wondering where the best starting point would be.

"One of your pass sentries has been taking what I imagine are unauthorized trips to Kilrush while he's supposed to be guarding at Bale," Tasse began innocently. "And these creatures attacked me in my sleep when they recognized the horse."

"I've heard about the 'ambush' of the sleeping horse thief. Now tell me about the somewhat allegorical adventures of the wandering soldier."

Tasse said nothing.

"I get the feeling you're up to something, Tasse."

Barth laughed just as Tasse had seen a thousand times, joking yet coming to the heart of the matter without any little side trips.

"Would you believe a holiday?"

"Nope." Barth was still smiling, and Tasse was glad. He wanted to get out of this without telling him why he had come. That was something he wouldn't tell anyone.

"Actually, if I believed that you enjoyed the inside of jails--maybe I'd believe you were just getting away from it all," Barth mused. "Come on Tasse--I know that you don't need me to get you out of here. You drop one name, a highland Captain that we both know so well, and you're sprung--and you know damn well that you really didn't need to steal
horse either."

"Well I did steal the horse, and I won't tell them who I am."

There was suddenly an edge in Tasse's voice and Barth realized that he was prying the lid of a locked box.

"I knew it was you as soon as I heard from my sentries. I knew before I came up here." Barth paused, looking back into the bunk-room, a bit of paranoia. "So which is it? Are you crazy, or is there a really good reason that you haven't ordered your own release on the grounds that you outrank them?"

"I don't outrank them--not right now. I left my ceremonial cleaver with Lirra."

"You what?"

He laughed openly at Barth's response.

"You heard me."

"So what are you doing here--come to buy the ring, or are you a fugitive from the marriage bed?"

Tasse rose to stand against the bars. It felt more comfortable talking between them then through them.

"Neither," he said. "I've got something to do, something I have to do. I won't tell you more except that it's outside of this cell."

Barth sobered, but not totally. He never got completely serious. Somehow, that was why Tasse always felt that he could count on him.

"But you won't tell who you are. What can I do? I can't get the charge dropped, because I've already
reported the thing stolen."

Tasse bit his lower lip and pushed the hair back from his face. He hadn't counted on that, and he turned briefly to face the back wall of the cell. He thought a moment and turned again.

"Spring me."

Barth was scratching a spider-bite on his arm, but he stopped in mid-scratch.

"Are you crazy? Is this secret thing of yours that important?"

He thought about it a moment and felt the creeping aura of stupidity surround the fear of his nightmares. Then he thought of the silver in the crypts at Gallaston, his name below the name of Thane Lors. He wanted his family back. He wanted his name.

He looked at his friend, and knew he could never explain how much he wanted it. The aura of stupidity would rise up before his eyes, and he would have no visions that could dispel it.

"Spring me," Tasse repeated. It was his final word if Barth would help him.

Barth rolled his eyes and let out a gasp of exasperation.

"Damn it, Tasse. I better not get boxed on this one."

Tasse waited for Barth to grin. When he did, Tasse started the planning.

"Don't worry; I'll handle all the risk. Here's what I've got in mind."
That afternoon, Captain Barth gave a prisoner a detailed description of the room beyond the jail, and told him where his weapons were hung.

That evening, Captain Barth picked one pocket. One thing from that pocket he slipped through some bars; the rest he spent on liquor.

That night, Captain Barth took a friend's saddle out of a room marked "CONFISCATED," and put it on the best horse in the stables.

That part of the day was fun compared to the waiting.
Some speculation suggests that, had Baron Goshawk stayed in Poulden, instead of crossing the Vanderwal with his consignment of men, the uprising would have spilled his blood and succeeded in a matter of days. More likely, his presence in Poulden might have prevented the fall or prolonged the siege of Gallaston.

Some claim that his presence would have brought the revolt to an abrupt end, but these historians have been wantonly swayed by the almost certainly mythical campaigns in the Great North that have since been impossibly attributed to Goshawk.

Regardless of any of these speculative contentions, Willen Goshawk was able to bring his heavy cavalry back across the Vanderwal before the bridge at Tess was burned, and his presence at key events during the insurrection of 802 is inarguably pivotal.

Whether conflicting histories paint him an undying legend of the battlefield, or an iron-fisted bungler of government (for failing to deliver his thousand men for the invasion of Gisborne), he did escape the ire of King Vegas I.

Excerpt from The Chronicles of Chaos
The collected journals of the exile Tibia
That afternoon, Willen Goshawk was feeling better. His mood had lasted two days, and he knew that the men around him, his lieutenants and retainers, had been on edge most of that time.

That was good really. Half of them were taking the rebellion entirely too easily, so they deserved to feel nervous about something.

The other half were mainly servants, and Willen didn't really care whether they were nervous or not, though the food was cooked the quicker and horses tended the better when they were.

After nearly a month "in-the-field" his skin, his face in particular, was tanning for the first time in years. His new color made his mane of darkish blond hair seem more fair around the hard lines of his face.

Since the first real fighting had begun a few weeks ago, he had even let his whiskers grow, which he hadn't done since he was twenty-six or so. He didn't care to shave by the sorry reflection of a polished chest-plate, and though there were mirrors enough at Tess, he knew that when the bridge there had burned, there would be at least several forays into the uprisen countryside. In the field or not, he trusted no one to shave him, and rather than go through the scratch and annoyance of starting a new beard for each foray, he decided to let it grow unchecked until the rebellion was quelled.

With any luck, he'd be clean shaved in a matter of days.
He crouched on the hill at the limit of the wood, and gazed down across the bowl of a wide meadow that was crossed by the rutted, green road. He especially watched the spot of wood opposite, where the road emerged. That was where they would be coming.

He squinted again, blurring the countless spears of grass into soft green contours, and then tried to see the ground below him as if for the first time. It was an exercise he had that helped ensure that his strategy overlooked nothing.

Now, as with the first time, and with the certainty of all the other times since, he saw that it was a perfect place. Open and shut.

"Nothing like shooting fish in a bucket to brighten up my afternoon."

His whisper stirred a ragged spider-web that he hadn't noticed, though he'd been peering between those two young limbs for a long time.

Now the loose strands of the web wavered before his green eyes, and he marveled at how the tiny hunter clung to the remains of the tenuous wreck. Even with the thin web in tatters, the spider waited patiently; maybe for night to fall, its time for rebuilding; or perhaps it was waiting for the remaining threads to ensnare a hapless struggling meal.

He admired the creature, its symmetry, its cunning--and then he gently pressed the glowing ash of his cigarette into the web.

There was the instant of attempted retreat, and then the tiny _sizzle-pop_ of its abdomen that seemed to cue the rest of
the web to curl away gracefully from the red-hot brand.

Willen teased the remaining lines with his cigarette before returning it to his hard lips to draw a murky breath. The ash glowed orange, and he pondered where the body of the spider had gone when it died. He carefully tasted the long, slow drag before flicking away the killing ash.

"What shall I inherit by this passing."

The thought danced greedily for an instant, and he held the smoke deep in his broad chest for some time before veiling the air before his eyes with grey.

He continued to study the high-grassed bowl of meadow below him.

It would soon be littered with death. He hoped, anyway.

Nothing moved on the meadow, though his gaze picked up the occasional breeze stirring shallow waves on the slope. Some birds sang as they ever did, not having, Willen supposed, anything better to do.

It was a credit to his men and their mounts that it was so quiet. There were twenty-five of them out of sight beyond a shallow brook, just a bowshot north of the road. Another twenty-five lurked behind a bald rise just as far to the south-east. Both groups had two orders only; to stay silently where they were, and to come out hard, looking for blood, when the horn sounded.

He didn't ordinarily spring on his enemy from cover. Not ordinarily. It was not a sporting method of engagement, and some considered it dishonorable.

Willen had only used it twice in real battle, years ago
of course, but both these times he had been hopelessly outnumbered.

"Honor be damned, the glory had gone to the valiant few
who had attacked the many," he said aloud to himself; a habit
that no one had ever dared mention to him. "--and I won, of
course."

He settled back on his haunches and continued to study
and wait.

Today's adversaries had greater numbers, the last report
boasting of three-hundred rebels, but that was not the factor
that decided him on a surprise engagement.

He tried to maintain a certain amount of compassion in
his decisions, and so he would not waste any more fine horses
than necessary in putting down these mud-tillers. This was
not real battle but pest control.

These people did not warrant the considerations of honorable
engagement, and this rabble of peasantry would be crushed by
the most expedient means.

Besides, it was already an undeserved honor that they were
receiving, to be allowed to fight his own shock troops.

"And this time there will be no mucking about in cow field!"
As he spoke, he rose and turned, shouting through his teeth
at the men and horses behind him.

"--or tattered berserk farmers either--or any of those
other lame excuses!"

The men closest behind him cringed some at his anger.
They were further up the hill in the woods--the reserves. There
were thirty-one of them, as quiet as the two wings of twenty-
five that lurked in the meadow below, probably even quieter
for their being so close to the Baron.

They weren't designated as the reserves because Goshawk had any particular need of reserves. They were reserves because they were the survivors of the disaster of two days ago. As reserves, they were here to watch in shame as the fifty men below demonstrated how it should have been done in the first place.

These nervous men saw the familiar shadow of the past two days pass across their Baron's face, and many of the thirty-one bowed their heads, painfully reminded that there had been thirty-TWO survivors when they first came back, and that one of their number had been promoted to replace Lieutenant Walden, who fled naked and bleeding into the forest right after his report.

Willen's expression softened until he actually smiled, an expression that was quite becoming on him, though few were looking at the moment. He turned back to his crouch at the cleft of the young tree.

He was waiting for the return of the last servant he had kept after sending the rest of the "dead wood" and the extra horses back to Tess this morning.

This small man, Sebastian, was not just another mouth to feed in the field. He was so useful and shrewd, in fact, that Willen sometimes suspected that he might be over-stepping his bounds by calling the man a servant.

Willen didn't worry over this suspicion. Though he had found evidence that Sebastian was practicing dark and forbidden arts in Gallaston Castle, he continued to consider this cunning
thief of the great north to be his personal spy.

He watched the meadow for another half-hour and saw nothing. Then his eye caught the ungodly bright red of the small northman's hair. He was climbing the slope to the left, and Willen knew that he must have somehow circled around the meadow through the rough hills to the south.

He stood and waited for him, preferring to look down as the spy approached to report.

"How far?" The question was short and sharp, but it was the only one that really mattered.

Sebastian smiled as if amused. "You mean you can't hear them?" He skipped deftly through a tangle of briars and stood before the towering form of the Baron.

Willen merely smirked at the spy's sarcasm. "That close. Really." He was surprised, but he tried to keep the edge of anticipation from his voice.

"The dirt-eating vermin should be in the center of the clearing in fifteen minutes," Sebastian said cheerfully, "if they don't stop to tie their shoes."

"Not that they would know how," Willen added flatly. "Good. That's good."

"Waldon was lying too. There are only about two-hundred of them, armed with rusty swords and pitchforks-- only a few spears and halberds, and most of them are short."

"Too short to defend against a long lance?"

The small man nodded, an odd mixture of amusement and contempt on his face. Willen didn't notice that he was mimicking his own expression.
"Good. That's very good."

Sebastian spit on the ground between his feet and added, "They do have three of your horses."

Willen didn't like his tone, a smearing kind of tone that the spy used often at his own peril. He answered all the same. "Fine. Then I'll have them back shortly."

Sebastian nodded and said nothing.

After a pause, Willen asked, "How are they organized?"

"Not. Unless two single files up each side of the road is organized."

"I've seen worse do plenty of damage."

"Yeah. So have I," Sebastian spoke with that singular air that made Willen feel he was being condescended to. He didn't doubt that this little red-haired man had seen many many things, but he had the disconcerting habit of keeping them hidden until he could talk down to someone about them.

In spite of the annoyance, Willen liked Sebastian. Perhaps it was refreshing to keep someone competent around.

"If your estimate is correct, then you have time for a smoke."

Sebastian looked down at the trees beyond the meadow, head cocked as if he were listening for something that Willen knew he couldn't possibly hear. Then he turned back and nodded.

"Yeah. I'll have one. If you'll waste a match lighting it."

Willen decided that he kept Sebastian around because the man's lips had never touched ass in his life. That was refreshing, but he was not so amusing at the moment.
"There are some embers left from last night," Willen said, pulling a long brown cigarette from the black leather at his waist, "--up at the top."

Sebastian rolled the slender bundle between his thumb and fingers and then jammed the end in the corner of his grin.

"My pony up there too?"

"Yes, and that damn cat is in a sack. You'll want to be out of the way anyway, if the fighting is as close as you say."

"If," he chuckled quietly. "As you wish, Baron."

He turned and started up through woods between the clusters of men and horses. Willen didn't look after him, deciding to look back out over the sunny field instead, but he did catch a snatch, here and there in the quiet, of the small man's amused mumbling.

Sebastian had been absent for only a few minutes when he spotted two--and then three tiny figures at the edge of the far wood.

Advance scouts, he thought. Let them see the harmless pasture that I've prepared for them.

Jaydar knew now what it meant to scout.

He remembered hearing the cowbell stop ringing before the fighting had even begun. No one saw him die, though all who saw his body in the road knew how he had died. Jaydar had wondered what his name was.

Wiskoff had assured him that the guy who got killed had messed up, and that Jaydar and his men were good scouts. Jaydar
had accepted the praise, and the job too.

He had been walking ahead of the rest, with Rod and Pol beside him for almost two days now. It was different, though, now that he knew of the danger.

For the last two or three miles, the woods had been menacing them from both sides, closing in tight around them. Jaydar had taken to moving through the woods on one side, watching for danger, and Rod had covered the woods on the other side.

Pol stayed on the road, careful not to move ahead of either of his often unseen companions.

So far, they hadn't found the horsemens, their camp, or anything like a sign, other than hoof prints in the road leading both ways. They looked nervously behind every briar.

It was because of this prolonged claustrophobia that he decided to rest and relax at this spot they had come to. The land around the road opened up into a nice big field. The grass was high, but even a lamb couldn't begin to hide here—unless it was lying down, maybe.

"Pol," Jaydar called, "hike back till you find the rest and tell them we're waiting at a field."

"Me?" Pol stammered and his brother rolled his eyes as he ripped his way free of a thorny vine.

"Pol, damn it! You can go back to the commander by yerself."

"But what if we missed them between here and there?"

Jaydar answered cleverly, "Then they would have killed us then, as we passed them, instead of waiting for us to send you back."

Pol nodded his agreement, as much to convince himself as
"Alright. I'll go." He turned on his ragged shoe, his loose sole flapping, and trudged back up the road.

Jaydar and Rod wasted no time in shrugging off their loads and laying down in the grass at either side of the road. Rod had a shiny steel cap from one of the dead at the barn, and Jaydar now carried a small shield on his left arm.

Consequently, his right arm was a little sore and tired from holding the sword all the time. He wished that he had found a scabbard that was big enough to hold his blade, but there were none that came close among the spoils.

It was heart-stopping suspense, seeing the three scouts come up the road to the lip of the bowl--and then stop.

Willen got a firm grip on his horn, though he knew he would not be signaling yet. They were prey on the edge of his trap, but there were more coming and he wanted them.

He relaxed some when the two men laid in the grass. He knew that they wouldn't be enjoying themselves this way if they suspected anything.

The rest of the rebel force arrived just as Sebastian had suggested--strung out in two long rows, horses first, pikes second, and the rest was miscellaneous.

"Come on--come," he beckoned in a whisper. "Out of the trees children."

To his disgust, he saw what he took to be their leader raise his hand to order a rest. The scouts hopped up from the
grass and started hustling across the field.

"Yes. Of course. The scouts must get ahead of you before you press on."

It was a detail that he hadn't considered. Of course they didn't know that they wouldn't be going any further. He was glad to see the scouts running, for that suggested that they had only the duration of a short rest in which to get ahead.

The trees closed in again on the other side of the sunny field. Jaydar and Rod trotted along the road for a little, but stopped to let Pol catch up.

Pol was lagging again, but this time he had a good excuse. He hadn't gotten to rest while he was fading back to the others, and now he was on the move again.

The three scouts walked together until Rod, who judged distance well, figured that they were about four-hundred yards ahead of the rest.

"That's a quarter of a mile," he told Jaydar, but Jayd didn't know what a quarter was so he just smiled and nodded.

That was when they heard the long, sharp moan of a horn come from high on the wooded hill on their left side.

Pol jumped at the sound and promptly dived for cover at the side of the road. Jaydar stood in the road with Rod, who just looked confused. Neither of them moved for several seconds, and then Jaydar heard the sounds of men yelling and a rumble of hooves from behind them.

He turned and started running back down the road. Back
toward the terrible sounds.

It was beautiful. Willen had scarcely taken the horn from his lips when chaos erupted on the field.

The first twenty-five came swinging around the rise and moved arrow-straight toward the broad line of the rabble's left flank. The other wing burst from their cover and leapt the brook, becoming the second of twin hammers, about to ring mercilessly on two sides of a glass anvil.

Willen leapt from his cover as well, and watched eagerly in the tall grass that flourished beyond the tree-line.

Among the rebels, the fearful and the wise ran. Their flight was not back the direction they had come, but in whatever direction that fit the label, away.

Scattering in every direction made it harder to contain them and destroy them, but it didn't matter.

Over half of them had managed to clot at the center of the field after the first sweep of his cavalry. He could see that they had been drilled, somewhat, to offer a treacherous front to charging horses, but only to defend in one direction. Right now, they were having difficulty deciding which way to point their piteously short pikes and pole-axes.

"If someone yelled 'hedgehog', they'd think it was a furry little animal." He laughed out loud as the two wings dived into the rebels from two directions.

Very quickly, the three captured horses were useless to the enemy. One bucked out of control across the pasture
with a bleeding man clinging to the harness for dear life. The other two were trotting away from the battle with saddles empty. Willen watched two of his riders come alongside and take the stray horses under control.

The rebel formation, or rather, the clot, held together for two more sweeps. Then, like a storm cloud that could no longer hold itself aloft, it burst apart, and all of the men ran who were able. Once again, in every direction.

At this, Willen turned to face the thirty-one reserves behind him.

"I give you your chance! Go clean up those men!"

He raised the horn to his lips again, and blew a short blast.

The thirty-one thundered past him on both sides, and swept down the slope to round up the fleeing peasants.

Aside from the shield and the new sense of danger about scouting, Jaydar had gotten one other thing from the conflict at the barn—what it was like to kill in battle. As he came running back onto the wide sunny pasture, he began to feel his memory refreshed.

This time he wasn't the first to draw blood. There was plenty of blood all over the field, and there was plenty more being spilled with every step he took. Men were running in every direction, some toward him and some away, just as it had been at the barn, but this time the mounted enemy was chasing down individuals in panic and groups of men who fled in a common direction by chance.
Jaydar stopped and looked back up the road. He thought that Rod had been running with him, but Rod was nowhere to be seen. He knew that Pol was still cowering in the brush beside the road, if he hadn't fled outright.

Suddenly he heard hooves coming close, and he turned in time to see a man with a dark face and clenched teeth swooping in with a curved sword swinging around in his right hand.

Jaydar barely raised the sword in his own hand in time to ward off the blow, and the two blades rang, intersecting just below Jaydar's eye level.

The rider turned quickly, and Jaydar was sure that he was going to charge at him again. Then a larger commotion caught the man's eye, and he reined around and rode off after a man on a bucking horse. Jaydar recognized Wiskoff as the man in the saddle, and then the horse barreled in among the trees, out of sight on the far side of the pasture.

He moved further into the battlefield and came on an armored man on foot whose back was turned as he stood over two of Jaydar's fallen comrades.

Jaydar raised his sword and tried to find something to say. All he managed was,

"Excuse me, sir."

The man whirled, sword raised, and Jaydar hit him.

The man was knocked sideways by the blow, but the armor, heavier than most on the field, had held up.

For Jaydar, it was battle again. At first it was nervousness, like taking the head off a chicken for the first time, yet
it was different in a terrible but exciting way.

The man lunged at Jaydar, but his armor slowed him enough that Jaydar simply jumped back and swung the sword around again.

He hit again, but with no great force. The new shield that he wore on his left arm was making two-handed use of the sword next to impossible. The man lunged again, and Jaydar retreated two more times before he managed to shake the small buckler from his arm.

Then he dodged around and brought the sword down in a powerful and sudden attack that surprised the warrior. There was a strong parry, but the steel of the armored man's blade broke like fine pottery before the stroke.

The man was dead, cloven through the left shoulder, when Jaydar opened his eyes. There was surprisingly little blood on his own well-greased blade, and the man fell back onto the bodies of his two dead comrades, and then the blood poured from the wound onto them.

The second part of battle was on him now—not like killing chickens at all, but foggy and different—like swimming under water. He turned, looked down at the buckler that he'd shaken off, and then ran off across the field, looking for someone else to fight.

He found just that several times, over the next quarter-hour.

Naturally, Willen Goshawk couldn't stand on the hillside
and watch. Not after the reserves had been sent to redeem themselves. There was glory being won all over the field by desperate rebels who were either standing their ground or fighting their way from the field.

"We can't have glory among the unworthy," he said, almost with resignation, "Bad for business."

Willen ran up into the woods and caught the reins of his own horse. It was a jet-black hunter that contrasted with his own white shirt and cape. He wore the white over his armor to keep the sun off, and he rode the lighter quicker horse so he could out-race his men's formations and give them new orders if needed.

Once in the saddle, he spurred the mount, and it lurched powerfully down the hill and out of the woods.

He killed a man as soon as he entered the bowl of the field. It had been a lone beggar fleeing for his life and not looking where he was going. It was a slicing blow, so the head didn't quite come off.

Willen noted with pleasure that the stroke had left his blade clean of even the tiniest hint of blood, and he spurred his horse on in search of further quarry. The second and third victims of his swath across the pasture lost their heads cleanly, though the third forced him first to take an arm seven inches below the wrist.

When he reached the far side of the pasture, he immediately picked out his next target. It was a tall, powerful figure finishing off one of his own men. His man's poultrons were cloven through and the blood was running freely.
He raced his horse at the scene, watching as the tall fair peasant hacked the soldier's leg and then finished with a blow to the chest.

**Just as if he were working at the wood pile, he mused.**

His sabre was poised, his wrist ready to snap forward, but just before he arrived, the young rebel straightened over the body of the dying soldier and raised a uniquely large blade, drenched in blood.

Willen's steel was tempered well, so he swung at the edge as he passed, and his victim struck at the same time.

There was a loud clash, and then he was past. He reined around and smiled at the sight of the young man turning quickly to face him.

Then Willen saw that the top eight inches of his own sabre were gone. He looked at it for a moment in surprise, and then to the weapon that had done it, unharmed beneath all of the gore. He threw down his ruined sabre in disgust and pulled his longsword.

The young rebel just looked at him, and then began to walk toward him.

"Throw down your sword, boy!"

The word "boy" was stressed, a gesture to discourage resistance, but Willen also liked to rile such rabble when he could.

The young man stood his ground, holding the large sword steady in two bloody hands.

"Stand down from your horse and fight, sir."

The young man spoke without anger, but Willen was struck
by the demanding tone in his voice. It echoed of a formal challenge.

Could this be some knight, he wondered. Some son of gentry perhaps, who had fallen in with the peasants?

"Who are you?" Willen left the "boy" off this time.

"Jaydar Banzaw!"

"Banzaw? ... Of the Gallhad Banzaws?"

Willen had fought Banzaws at tournament—a fierce family of strong arms—but the mark of that stubborn clan was the war axe—not the great sword that this man held.

"Gallhad, sir?"

The boy looked confused, and Willen lost his patience and his temper. Even his horse was growing restless under him, standing in one spot of grass with the battle ending all around.

"Where are you from, boy!"

"I come from Bandale, sir," the boy said. "My family has farmed there for nine generations."

"A farmer."

Willen relaxed and re-sheathed his longsword. He leaned back in the saddle and reached behind him, somewhat amused. He hadn't noticed any of the pride in the young man's voice.

After whetting his appetite for single combat, that brief spark when Willen thought he might have found something worthy of a fight, this one turned out to be just another commoner.

The crossbow was already spanned, and it took him only a moment to draw a thick, iron-tipped quarrel and settle
it into the straight groove in front of the taught string.

Willen savored the look of confusion on the idiot's face—then he shot him in the center of the chest.

It didn't hurt the way Jaydar imagined it might. In fact, as he was falling, he was sure that the quarrel had missed him, that he had been knocked out of the way in time by a stone thrown by some benevolent bystander.

He hit the ground fairly hard, but he only felt the spears of grass around his face and neck, and he looked around the sky, which was in front of him now, seeking the man on the black horse who had been going to shoot him.

"Where is he?" His lips moved but no sound came out. "I'll fight him. Grand will be proud."

While he was looking around, he found the shaft and fletching of the bolt sticking up from the place where the stone had hit him. He stared at the shaft for a few moments, and saw the blood soaking in a widening circle around its base, a red, puckered hole in his shirt. Suddenly he realized that it hurt to breathe.

He moaned but it turned into a gurgling sound as he rolled over onto his side. There was something shiny beside his face, and after a spasm of pain, and a struggle to see with both eyes, he managed to focus with one. He was lying on top of his sword.

The last thing he saw was a drop of his blood splashing on the steel, and then others joining it to form rivers
on the fluted blade. He watched it as he had watched the 

rain in the thicket, but it was prettier now. He didn't 

know why, though.

His sight faded to grey and he heard the birds singing 
louder than the sounds of fighting around him.

He heard a footstep in the grass near his face, and 
then something moved under him. He died before he could 

wonder what it was.

Willen stood over the fallen boy and turned the great 
sword over and over in his hands. It was an archaic piece, 
but beautiful. Beautiful and well tended.

"This is probably the single finest piece of steel 
on the whole field," he announced triumphantly. "A pleasant 

bonus for a day's work."
CHAPTER XXIV

Tasse rested in the dark, waiting and watching the square of moonlight grow rectangular and spread along the floor beyond the bars. He had the key under him on the bedroll, so it would not get so sweaty in his hand.

He had decided what he was going to do, a simple plan really, but one used what one had. Tasse had a key, and he had surprise.

When the moonlight passed the framed bars that made the door to his cell, he guessed it was time. He felt for the key and picked up his bowl and crept to the door.

The key fit easily and turned with a loud clack. He removed the key quietly and placed it in his breast-pocket.

Then he began the clamor.

"I WANT TO SEE THAT CAPTAIN!"

Tasse began raking his bowl, really a chiseled out shingle, against the bars, making all the noise that he could.

"I want the Captain!" Tasse yelled again. "Captain Barth!"

There were only a few likely results of the racket he was making; someone would go to get Barth, which would even the odds to four to one, or someone would come in to persuade him to shut up, which would give him a victim he could fight separate from the others. If he won,
that would even the odds to four to one as well.

"Let me see the Captain!"

If he was really lucky, someone would go for Barth and someone would come to shut him up—but he doubted it.

"Let me see the Captain!"

Tasse took another deep breath to shout again, but someone came unevenly but fast through the low archway, hands busy at something as he came. The long grid of moonlight from the end window leaped up the man's legs as he moved swiftly, and when the light crossed the jailer's chest he saw the hands were strangely dark.

"I want to see that Captain!" Tasse held his voice as loud as before.

Another step and the moonlight slithered up to the man's head, and Tasse saw a face frozen in anger—hatred and something else.

The moon flashed off a steel ring and Tasse knew the dark hands wore his own gauntlets, and mixed with the hatred on the jailer's face was a smile beneath a crooked mustache.

Mathew slashed through the bars without a word.

It was a savage blow that glanced off Tasse's cheek. The rings on the third finger opened the skin below his right eye, and the blood welled instantly in a crescent on his cheekbone.

Tasse hadn't counted on the attack from Mathew, but it made what came next that much easier.
At least he'll deserve what he gets, Tasse thought.

It was as it had to be if Barth could grant him only one gamble at escape. He would have to make it quick and ugly.

Mathew didn't pull his arm back through the bars as quickly as it had come, and ignoring the pain of the blow, Tasse seized the arm above and below the elbow. There was a sharp gasp as Mathew realized that he was no longer the cat with his paw through the bars of the birdcage. Tasse immediately laid his shoulder into the unlocked cell door, and the bars swung around, Mathew turning helplessly with them.

A second gasp, a stifled cry of pain came from Mathew's throat as he was forcefully pinioned between the outside of the cell and the door.

The pain of the cut under Tasse's eye vaguely registered now, and Tasse thought to dislocate the arm that he held between the bars. Somehow, mercy prevailed over revenge.

He caught Mathew's jaw with a hard left, an uppercut between the bars. A grunt followed that suggested consciousness.

Tasse hit him again, and Mathew was quiet. He took his weight from the door, allowing Mathew to slump harmlessly to the ground, and wondered how best to handle the other guards as they responded to their comrade's pain.

Seconds passed, and all that came through the low archway were shreds of calm conversation from the dark room beyond.

They didn't hear.
A muffled laugh from one of the men made it clear. All they had heard were blows and pain. They assumed the blows were all Mathew's and the pain was all his. He had time, just a little.

The gauntlets on Mathew's hands were Tasse's. He took them. The dagger at his waist was not, but Tasse took that too.

He palmed the blade and moved carefully along the passage, under the low arch and into the dark room beyond. As he took the first step, it struck him that he had never seen this room except the one section of wall visible from his cell.

Next time I'm jailed, I'll try to stay awake for it, he thought.

When he was ten feet into the room, the conversation stopped. Tasse tensed even more.

He thought that their eyes were adjusted to this blackness, and they would all fall on him now while he was still blind.

"Sounds like you solved the prisoner's problem, Math." It was the fat one's voice, certainly amused.

Tasse thought about trying to answer, trying to imitate the man they thought he was, but that would be a stupid risk. They would hear and they would know. He said nothing and followed the picture in his head that he'd painted from Barth's words.

In the center of the back wall, hanging vertical. It was like moving in the blackness of Redgate's second
tower, but now his surroundings were strange, and he was surrounded by enemies.

He moved straight to the wall and reached out, touching it sooner than he expected. His right hand struck something that clattered and dragged on the stones where it hung. He stopped it with the same hand and realized it was a crossbow.

"What're you doin'," another voice said from a bunk near him.

He didn't answer, but lifted the bow from its hook and felt hurriedly to his right. His hand stuck two more objects immediately, both were swords, and they swung and dragged noisily as well.

By then, there could be no doubt that the figure among the other guards was fumbling among the weapons, suspicions had to be forming, but by now, hopefully, it was too late.

Of the two swords set swinging by Tasse's groping, one moved more slowly than the other, a longer heavier pendulum scraping the wall. His hand returned to the sound, and this time his hand knew the feel of his own scabbard.

One more man ventured a question, "Mathew?"

A groan from the direction of the holding cells came as the only response, and this time it sounded painfully like Mathew.

Tasse was moving quickly across the room, slinging the leather of the scabbard over his head and right shoulder.
He aimed straight between the dim light of two plugged arrow-holes and reached the door just as the first feet were slapping on the floor.

"That ain't Math--get him!"

"I'll go for help," Tasse shouted. It was a hopless gesture, but it was worth a try. He found the door-handle, stumbled, and the next instant he was outside, running for the stables.

He heard shouting behind him, but to his amazement, no one came out the door. He didn't wait to watch.

He entered the stables at a full run. The stable boy had been asleep, but awakened as Tasse flew by. Tasse ignored him.

Many of the stalls were empty, but he quickly found the horse with his saddle on it.

"Who's there?" the sleepy boy called as Tasse flung open the stall.

"Captain Barth," he called back, "There's a prisoner escaping!"

He checked the girth just to make sure, and leapt into the saddle. He was sure it was his the second he settled onto it.

The horse responded quickly under him, and Tasse dared a canter inside the stable. When he got to the end of the stalls, he shifted the reins to the right, heard the boy shout at the realization that he was not Barth, and then the horse turned, deftly and sharp, out into the night.
He navigated past two armed but startled men, Mathew's bunkmates. He got a full gallop from the horse as fast as he asked for it, and he took the road south, away from Kilrush.

There was a pursuit, including Barth, who came for fun and lagged every chance he could, but Tasse never even heard them.

He turned due east at the bridge and headed off across the countryside.
CHAPTER XXV

Night riding again. It was Tasse's trade once, before some unseen hand pressed a hot seal against an equally unseen parchment, inventing Captain van Poulder--a title of rank hitched before a borrowed last name.

In this way he was sentenced to Redgate, and time had done its work on the paper captain; dulling his sight, slowing his reflexes, and making that oneness of rider and mount that much harder to reach.

Or so he had thought.

For the last three days, he had been kicking himself over and over for getting caught, for getting cold-cocked at the bridge, and he knew it was all because he was less than he had been, after years of stagnation.

Now, tonight, none of these thoughts held sway. This was a much brighter night, and this was a much finer horse, and, as he raced across the land, he had growing suspicion that he hadn't lost so much after all.

It was always a darker night in the lowlands--even a dark night in the highlands was brighter. On a highland night, the thin, cold air always meant easy travel by starlight. Here the clouds were thick and the air was heavy, masking out the stars.

Tasse was thankful that tonight had a moon, though even that light was being strained through trees and soaked up by the grass.

In spite of this shadowed country, Tasse was moving
surely and swiftly.

Here, he was the darkest shadow, and his mount was a pale ghost that neither stumbled nor faltered nor hesitated to answer its rider's bidding with speed.

He continued on the course that he'd taken after leaving the road—due east, keeping the moon-shadow ahead of him.

When the half-moon sank behind him, he found a country lane to the south and followed it at a quieter pace. He didn't rest until the sky ahead of him glowed with the promise of dawn.

When there was enough light to see by, Tasse looked for a place to take some sleep; a place where he would not be so likely to wake with a boot in his gut. He found a wooded hill rising like an island from where three fields came together, one wheat, one corn, and a pasture.

A clear pond was in the back corner of the pasture, so Tasse approached the island of trees from that direction.

The horse would drink before Tasse slept.

He wanted to hop down from the saddle, but he knew the sudden shock to the soles of his feet would feel like needles behind his ankles. He stepped down carefully, but still he felt a twinge shoot up his right leg.

While the horse was drinking, Tasse got the odd sensation that something was out of place. He tried to see what it was, but he felt it eluding him.

He bent at the pond's edge and dipped his hand full of water to splash his face. There was still a crust of dried blood on his cheek and beard from the cut under his
eye. He hoped that he'd given Cecil at least as good as he got, but by the feel of the wound under his right eye, he could tell there would be a good scar. There was nothing to do now but clean up.

The water was cold on his hands and face, and as it dripped from his nose and lips and beard, he saw the rippled reflection of the horse beside him, drinking. Then he saw what he'd been missing.

It was the horse.

When planning the escape yesterday afternoon, Barth had said that he would choose a good horse and put Tasse's pack and saddle on it.

Now, after riding all night without noticing, Tasse was shocked to discover that his friend had chosen one of the finest highland-bred horses either of them had ever seen.

It was the thirteen-year-old mottled grey mare; Barth's own.

His sleep was not disturbed by boots to the chest, but during the second hour after noon, the rollicking of young squirrels dislodged a small limb from the lush canopy of sycamore.

Almost as quickly as the wood struck ground, Tasse was sitting up, a spanned and loaded crossbow snatched up and braced to his shoulder.

It was the response he should have had four mornings
ago, and though he felt foolish now, for jerking awake so violently over a falling stick, he was also glad to see that his old reflexes could be relied upon.

He took the bolt from the groove and hooked the cranquin over the string to slowly relax the bow's tension.

Keeping a crossbow spanned and ready to shoot at all times was more than just occasionally dangerous to its owner; it could warp the bow, causing it to lose its spring.

This bow, the one he'd lifted from the wall in the dark last night, was not his old light one, but even this stronger, heavier bow could have its range or accuracy fouled by misuse.

Tasse left the hook of the cranquin over the string just in case he needed to re-crank the weapon in a hurry.

The sun was just passed its zenith, only a few clouds dotting the breezy sky, as he got to his feet and walked around the crest of his wooded hill. The land all around the hill was much flatter, rising gently here and there.

The reason for the abrupt piece of topography where Tasse was hiding was evident in the many exposed ridges of sandstone that surfaced between the trees around him—too rocky to plow, the trees had never been cleared.

The field to the north of him, the pasture, was no longer empty as it had been that morning, but was scattered with many sheep. He looked off beyond them for some landmark that might grant him a guess at how far he had come in the night.

The lane, running east-west, was well drained, lightly
rutted, but otherwise unremarkable.

To the south it was different.

Right along the line that ran between the corn and wheat fields, he could see knobby hills building up like stairs from the rolling farm country, getting higher by short measures as they pushed south.

These hills, billowing with dark-green tree-tops, marked a series of hurdles for Erleg's southern border; a border that ran more or less from round peak to round peak from the southwest to northeast.

These hills ran up at steep angles on the sides but crested softly enough that, with patience, one could travel over or along them on foot or hoof. They connected, in links of ridges and saddles, to form a slow but secretive high-road to the south, more or less parallel to the course of the great Vanderwal, further east.

And after the first three or four saddles south, I'll be in Holweir, Tasse thought, remembering how he first came over them to Erleg after escaping court martial.

--and a half dozen valleys to the east--home.

Seeing the rising hills from this angle, he knew that he had come at least forty miles since breaking away from Kilrush, and as the moon had drifted down, he had drifted further south and closer to the border than he had thought.

Tasse could take his time this afternoon. He would feed the horse and rub it down before leaving this wooded enclave, and he could make camp beyond the first saddle by sundown.
It would be a short day's travel, maybe twenty miles or so, but once in the hills of Holweir, the sun would dictate the hours of travel.

No more night riding. Not until the gentler slopes of Poulden itself.

Home—

He repressed the thought of how inappropriate the word was for where he was going. The reflection of silver flashed in the dark of his mind, and he turned to feed and ready the highland horse for travel.
The day was just as beautiful on the far side of those deeply stacked dark-green hills. Willen Goshawk was sitting cross-legged in the center of a large four-rope hammock that was lashed between four thick trees.

He was patiently waiting for his men to re-erect his pavilion in the spot where it had stood that morning, at the top of the wooded hill.

He had enjoyed the open meadow and sun of the skirmish field so much that he had ordered his camp moved into its open green expanse, but though the bodies of the dead peasants had been burned to prevent plague, the smell of blood and death lingered in the tall grass.

He had ordered everything moved back up the hill only two hours ago, but his men, sweating quietly, were nearly done.

Willen watched their progress, looking up occasionally from the loose sheaf of yellowish papers and drying ink in his lap. He was nearly finished "requisitioning" men from the nearby border and from Tess.

Though yesterday's losses in men and mounts had been nothing compared to the casualties he'd inflicted, he had lost more than he thought he should have. He wanted to fill the gaps in a force of cavalry that had been short-handed to begin with.

He had five orders, each to be taken by riders in the next half-hour to Tess and the various towers and forts
that were nearest by. He just wanted a few from here and there, not enough to weaken his back or leave the borders open to Holweir, or worse, to Erleg.

He just wanted enough to change the seventy-three that he had, into the nice, round one-hundred that he wanted.

Willen liked symmetry.

"The riders are ready, Baron." It was Sebastian, sneaking up on him again. "Are the writs done?"

"Dry enough I suppose," Goshawk said, taking up the sheaf and rustling it back and forth as if to fan himself before extending the papers absently toward the small red-haired man.

Sebastian took the papers and looked at the script on the first one.

"You misspelled 'immediately'."

Willen looked up and smiled unpleasantly.

"Are you going to give them to my couriers or proof them?"

Sebastian bowed stoically. "The couriers, I suppose."

He turned neatly and walked away, crunching dead wood under his feet as he went.

Willen fingered the small knife that he'd been paring his quill with and briefly considered the square of the small man's back as an attractive target. It certainly wasn't the first time he had toyed with the idea, but this time, like before, he gave a short, silent laugh and put the knife away.

In a day, maybe two, he would have his full complement
of cavalry, and Sebastian would be more useful than ever before. Willen had played it smart at the outset of the rebellion, ordering his forces to pull back and strip every scrap of food from the land.

The people, however, had not starved fast enough, and though the borders remained relatively secure, the waiting was making him nervous.

He was not going back to Tess. He was going to drive east and retake his stronghold at Poulden.

"Time to go home."

He looked up from his reverie in time to see the last rope being tied off, and he rose with his new sword to go and relax for the rest of the afternoon in his pavilion.

The sound of his riders heading out in different directions echoed among the hills.
CHAPTER XXVII

Just as he had expected, Tasse ascended above the rolling farmlands of Erleg on the previous day, and though the forests on the steep hills had closed quickly behind him, the sun had stayed long enough for him to find a flat ridge to camp on.

The next morning, Tasse rode off that flat ridge after freshly oiling his sword and his hauberk as well. The hauberk had escaped detection in the feed-bag on his saddle, and he was pleased that it hadn't fallen into the hands of one of the greedy servants of the law in Kilrush.

Now, for the first time since the swordplay with Flanch, Tasse wore the shirt of chain over the horsehide jerkin and under the loose, dark-grey shirt with the buttons just left of center. He would be on hostile ground at any moment, if he wasn't already.

He had been threading his way between and along ridges all day long, pushing southward and occasionally dipping down to his left and across the steep and narrow valleys to gain the next ridge to the east.

The mountains were as densely wooded as Tasse remembered them, with tangles of undergrowth that only a deer could leap, and places where large trees lay fallen across the path. Some were only half-fallen, their long-dead limbs gripping at the living trees around them, fighting the pull of the earth while moss feasted on their rotting trunks.

These were particularly bad to encounter, because they
were usually too low for a horse to pass under and too high to jump. Already Tasse had been forced to backtrack a half-dozen times in order to move on.

The day seemed to stretch on forever, up and down embankment and treacherously steep washes of loose sandstone. It was the most strenuous and convoluted country that Tasse had ever known, but he was patient, and the gift, the highland horse that Barth had ridden for years and refused to name, was holding up beautifully.

It was getting late in the afternoon when Tasse began to notice some rough familiarity beginning to creep into the close land around him. There was a ridge that was grown over with fern and briar and some small trees, but Tasse recognized it as an old path that he had used when he was riding the borders for the dragoons, during those short years after the invasion.

He had been bold and often foolish then, and now he couldn't be sure that the trail he was recognizing was on the Holweir side of the border, or beyond.

Putting the chain-shirt on that morning had been smart. It had given him time to grow accustomed to the extra weight.

Halfway down from the vaguely familiar ridge, Tasse saw the five men on horseback at the bottom. He reined the horse to a quick stop on the slope.

They were all dressed the same, in a uniform that was all too familiar. Tasse suddenly had a good idea of which
side of the border he was on.

"Damn," Tasse whispered.

"Come on down, mister," came a call from the among the Naadien border guards.

The voice was young but mature, and Tasse heard it echo off the far side of the wooded valley as he looked back up the steep wash he was on.

Turning a horse around on such a steep scattering of loose rock would be tricky at best, and a diagonal sprint down and across the vine-tangled face of the hill could be suicide for horse and man alike.

"Come on," came another shout from below, "Things won't go so pleasant if we have to come get you!"

Tasse considered the ambiguity of the threat from the bottom of the hill,

Unpleasant for whom? he thought, and with that he shifted his weight in the saddle and pulled the reins tightly to the left.

The horse seemed to know exactly what was being asked of it, and it stepped backward, pivoted left, and quickly strove back up the embankment with Tasse clinging close, belly down in the saddle.

When he gained the ridge, Tasse looked back down and saw that the five had split up. Three were coming hard up the dry wash, and the other two were waiting in the valley, perhaps as a safety in case he doubled back down into the valley.

Tasse didn't wait to watch the three that were coming
up the hill. He spurred the horse to a hard gallop along the ridge, running southeast as fast as he dared go in the unfamiliar woodlands.

A broad gap in the trees, the sight of a forest fire in years passed, opened to his left during the first half-mile of the chase. The idea flashed through Tasse's mind to use the gap to drop back down to the valley, but the undergrowth was twice as thick and tangled here, because no trees blocked the sun. He shot a glance over his shoulder and saw that the ridge-line pursuit was moving fast and confident.

They're faster than me, he thought, --on their home ground.

In four cycles of his horse's galloping hooves, the gap in the trees was gone, and Tasse decided to lead his pursuers off the beaten path. If the men who chased him knew the trail better, then he would flee along an unexpected path--a path where the highland mount would be clearly superior.

The animal track presented itself.

Tasse suggested it with the reins.

The horse acquiesced; man and horse vanishing together in the blink of an eye.

Some thorny limbs scratched at Tasse's face and arms, but he stayed in the saddle and gave free rein to the horse till they were nearly to the bottom.

He reached behind for the crossbow as soon as he broke from the trees.

The two Naadien riders who stayed below had shadowed
the chase, and were nearly upon him as quickly as he emerged.

Grass ran either side of a creek, and the flat of the valley was no wider than forty or fifty yards. Tasse made for the creek, angling away from the two riders, who swung in about seven lengths behind.

Tasse had to let the reins free while he slotted a bolt into the groove on top of the heavy spanned crossbow. He pressed his right knee into the shoulder of his mount, and it altered course to the left as he turned to shoot.

It had been four years since Tasse had killed. He had led his men against a band of renegade mercenaries who were setting fire to the local Wokind village. He had slain three by blade, and he shot their leader in the throat as he fled.

It had been with crossbow at a full gallop; at once an impressive and an ugly killing.

Now, Tasse risked hitting his nearest enemy's horse and aimed just below the man's chest-plate.

The crossbow bucked in his hands, and the three-quarter inch shaft struck squarely and solidly in the man's right hip.

The wounded man began to shriek with every stride of his horse, and Tasse knew the bolt had hit bone.

The man reined his horse in and quickly fell behind, as Tasse faced forward and grabbed the reins just in time to leap the creek.

The other pursuer was close, and Tasse knew to expect a shaft in his own back any moment. He charged toward the
woods for two seconds--then reined sharp to the right.

The large dark horse shot past him with its rider looking bewildered over the same shoulder that his crossbow was braced against.

Just as Tasse had hoped, the pursuer had also dropped his reins in order to take his shot.

Tasse quickly swooped in behind him, his own light horse being much quicker than the other man's. He caught up in seconds and drew his great sword from its scabbard, which hung from the saddle's pommel.

The man still didn't have his reins, nor did his saddle or armor allow him to turn for a bowshot behind. He darted a glance back at Tasse's huge weapon, raised high.

Then he panicked.

He spurred his horse hard, threw his crossbow away, and made a desperate grab for his reins. He veered away hard to the left just as Tasse brought the flat of his sword down across the horse's rump.

The impact gave a flat report, like a fly-swatter stinging wet leather. The horse ran bucking, heedless of its master's attempts to control it.

The other three horses had come onto the narrow valley in the meantime, but Tasse never saw or heard them.

He vanished into the trees and up the hill.

The pursuit chased as far as the first ridge, but from there, the only sign was the faint echo of hooves. It was impossible to tell whether it came from the north or south.
Two hours later, a tracker from the nearest border tower arrived, but failed to find any tracks in either direction. The treacherous terrain meant that east was out of the question.

It was good to know where he was. Such knowledge sped travel, and now, after only two hours ride from his encounter with the border guard, Tasse was miles to the east.

He was not out of the woods, but now he was well within the old bounds of Poulden County.

This was the first time in two days that Tasse knew more or less exactly where he was. Two days ago, he'd known his location all too well, as he sat in the squalid cell at Kilrush.

This was different. He knew that the old river road, the grass track that he'd learned to ride on as a boy, was only three or four miles away, and his returning knowledge of the terrain hinted that he might be able to descend into the wide river valley just ahead of the sinking sun.

The thought spurred him on. He was close. So close.

Tasse took time to water the horse at a small creek just below the last ridge before the river valley. The horse drank greedily, as Tasse looked around him in the fading sun.

He imagined that this might well be a spot where he had been once, maybe exploring with the children of other servants.
"No," he whispered. "Too far up the road."

His voice sounded quiet in the brush and among the trees. He finished filling his waterskin just up-stream from the horse, and stood to hitch it to his saddle-pack.

"I'll be mid-evening getting into Poulden even on horseback, and that's if I don't get throat-cut, captured, or crocked before I get there."

The words rang familiar on his dry lips. He realized that he had inadvertently quoted his old friend Daggor. The mercenary's rough eloquence had stayed with Tasse for years.

Tasse wasn't sure that the skull-pulping businessman wasn't still around, somewhere. Getting past the border patrol that afternoon had taken him back, bringing memories of many different times.

Now, as he mounted once again to climb the last ridge, it occurred to him that, today he had forgotten how old he was. It had been a good day, and he performed as well as he ever had.

Perhaps it's just the rich air of the lowlands, but I do feel good.

He crested the steep ridge and caught sight of the last, dark-yellow rays of the setting sun on the tops of trees in the valley before him. It was more beautiful than he'd hoped for. In fact, he had hoped that nineteen years of Naadien governing would have tattered the land, darkened it somehow.

It was beautiful.
Tasse looked at it for a few minute, the trees, the fields, and the green road running through it all. Then he urged the horse down the slope of the last really steep hill of the day's journey.

The sun was down before he reached the long pasture at the foot of the woody hill. Their was a large, dark barn at one end, maybe thirty yards from the road.

He thought about going on toward Poulden, but the moon wasn't due up for some time, and Tasse had no way of knowing how the revolt had been going, or what could be camped or fortified along the road.

He rode across the spongy ground of the field toward the barn.

*I'll shelter here for the night, and...*

The thought was cut from his mind, as his nostrils filled with the rich stench of death.

A gentle night breeze sifted the odor of decaying flesh from between the boards of the barn, and as Tasse rode around to the front of the towering, black structure, he could see, through the opened double-doors, the vague outlines of several bodies. Tasse couldn't count them in the darkness, but there were many.

He would not shelter here, nor would he press on. He dismounted and led the horse back up the hill he had come down.

He camped on the ridge and slept fitfully above the battle-site; one that had gone stale for five days.
"They'll be coming."

The man's voice was worn and shaky.

"They'll be coming, just like we went for them...after we chased them off at the barn."

Berald Wiskoff had been a carpenter before the revolt, and a good one at that. In a week, he would lose his right arm to gangrene, but now he was resting on a cot in Gallaston Castle, his wounds neatly and cleanly bandaged. It had been a hard road back from the meadow where his men had been scattered and slaughtered.

Pale Richard and Bress, two others of the revolt's original instigators, were with him in the lamp-lit chamber. Richard was a powerfully built man, with face and hair both the color of candle wax. Bress was his seeming opposite; wiry, intense, and dark haired, so his recent neglect of the razor showed.

They sat grimly on wooden chairs, quietly eager for the details of the battle that had occurred just seventeen miles up the road. It was Pale Richard, the older of the two sitting men, who spoke.

"How many are they, Berald?"

He leaned forward and said with a hush, "Some of the men you brought back with you said there were hundreds. Do we dig in, or run."

"Less than a hundred," Wiskoff said quickly, shaking his head almost as if trembling, so that the long ends of
his graying mustache and beard quivered.

"...but they'll come anyway. He knows we're not the four-thousand we were three weeks ago."

Wiskoff broke off and stared at the ceiling, a tired look of lament on his face. In the three weeks since they had burned the last bridge and were narrowly beaten back from Tess, the numbers had dwindled.

At first, men had left to find food and never came back. Then many began to filter away as the days wore on, and Baron Goshawk sat on his supplies behind the walls of Tess.

Now, after this defeat, Wiskoff had only brought back forty or so of his two-hundred. There were other survivors, but they hadn't stayed with him after the battle. He had only managed to keep the forty together after killing the last captured horse, the one he had escaped the battlefield on. Even then, he had to promise them more when they got to Poulden.

There was no more food to be had when they got to Poulden. The four-hundred men and the other people of the hamlet had absorbed the rest of the horse meat that was left from the fight at the barn.

The pale man reeled in Wiskoff's exhausted, wandering mind.

"But...do we run or fight?"

Wiskoff's eyes closed tightly. "Fight... No. I don't know! Maybe they're here already."

He covered his eyes with his left forearm, obviously
fatigued, possible even delirious.

"--If only we had all of those men who went back to Bandale. Oh God, let me sleep."

Pale Richard sat back and rubbed his face, absently tracing a deep scar that furrowed his chin and continued on his breast. He looked over at Bress, but his dark eyes betrayed nothing but his usual almost feral alertness.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" Bress said.

Richard shrugged and stood up.

"He is tired. We'll let him rest."

"And what will we do in the meantime?"

Richard motioned for Bress to follow, wanting to take the conversation away from their exhausted comrad. Out in the wide dark corridor, Richard spoke.

"Old Berald seems determined that Goshawk is coming. If he's right, I think we should be prepared to fight, and prepared to run, too."

"I could go down the road and try to roust some more men from Bandale."

"Ah, but we've cried wolf so often. Will they come?"

There was bitterness in Pale Richard's sarcasm which Bress understood. In a handful of days, they had nearly won a revolt, but then it stalled. Now it threatened to fall apart altogether.

"..They still think that Holweir is coming over the mountains to rescue us."

There was a short silence before Bress replied.

"They still might, you know."
"They might at that. You go down the road then, see what you can scrape up for 'the cause'. I'll have the men set an ambush, day and night, a half-mile up the road and see what we catch."

Bress smiled for the first time in hours, encouraged by Richard's renewed decisiveness, if nothing else.

"The bridges are burned, Richard. We'll have them in the end."

Richard nodded. "Let's hope."

An hour later, Bress set out with two trusted dogs, heading for Bandale and its surrounding farms.

Richard ordered the ambush set up that same night, just short of a half-mile up the road.

The men he stationed there were lying in wait when Tasse arrived the next day.
CHAPTER XXIX

Tasse had taken a late start that morning. By custom, the waging of war was usually a daylight activity in Norgod, and he wanted any fighting that might lie between his camp and Poulden, to be well underway when and if he happened upon it.

When Tasse was a mercenary, he had seen a battle in Gallhad in which a young family in an ox-drawn wagon had accidentally wandered out across the battleground just as the advance was sounded.

He didn't want to wind up like that.

Even after his late start, leaving out at mid-morning, Tasse traveled cautiously, circumspect at every turn and every straightaway. As a result, his progress was slow, and it wasn't until just after noon that he rode into the ambush.

Of course the spot was perfect; where the hedges ran shaggily up to the very edges of the road. A perfect place for an ambush. Hundreds could hide there, without a hint of their presence.

Tasse missed this detail at first, swept away by a cascade of memories. They were brought on by the scent of honeysuckle, and the first glimpse of his home hamlet in nearly two decades.

He had last seen Poulden from the other side. It was
over his shoulder at a hard gallop. There were others with him, all well mounted, fleeing before Naad's pursuit. He couldn't remember how many fled from how many, but by then Thane Lars was dead. Poulden had fallen.

"Get him!"

The signal was followed by a chorus of rough, guttural cries, and the bushes rustled fiercely on both sides, spilling shabbily dressed but heavily armed men onto the short ground that edged the road.

There were twenty of them, in an instant.

Tasse spurred the horse, and his hand darted for the grip of his sword. As quickly as the horse could bound forward, there were men in front, grabbing the bridle, grabbing the reins, grabbing Tasse by the legs.

Tasse drew. The sword flashed from its sheath just in front of his left knee. He raised his sword, the horse reared, and Tasse fought to keep the saddle under him. Then he brought the weapon down at the men who pressed in on the right.

Some cringed back from the blow, but a heavy shield on a burly arm swept up and stopped the blow with a resounding crash.

The shock rung up Tasse's arm, and again he fought for balance in the saddle.

Suddenly, the men pulled the bridle hard, and the head of a halberd came from behind up under Tasse's right arm. The hook caught him across the stomach.

He squirmed to the left, but too late. The point of
the hook caught in the links of his chain shirt, and he was pulled backward from the saddle.

He hit the ground flat on his back. Pain shot through him, and all the air left his lungs.

This was madness. Death swarmed around him, and dressed as they were, Tasse knew that he was being attacked by the men of his old home. With madness came adrenaline.

He still gripped the sword in his right hand, but on his back, it was useless. It seemed to Tasse that the attackers were slow in closing in. In truth, some were hampered by the struggling horse.

Tasse rolled onto hands and knees and found his feet where he crouched.

He found himself facing seven identical halberds, all leveled and aimed at his face. Tasse glared at the quavering points and the faces behind them. They didn't move in to finish him off.

Tasse guessed that they were willing enough to take a prisoner, but having so recently escaped that condition, Tasse wasn't buying.

It was a split second decision, a foolish one perhaps, but with an audible grunt, Tasse pressed himself up against the thirty pounds of his hauberk and launched himself sideways, away from the leveled halberds towards more open ground.

A tall man with a shortsword appeared from around the horse's rump. Both men were surprised, but Tasse drove his elbow into the man's stomach, sending him flying backwards. He doubled with pain as he fell.
Tasse was outside the envelope of men before anyone else could move to stop him.

He turned immediately to face the armed throng, retreating backwards to watch his back. He could see how many there were now; about twenty-five with a variety of weapons.

There were halberds, swords, about eight pikes, but he was quickly relieved that no one had a bow or crossbows. Tasse was no fan of being shot in the middle of the road.

A half-dozen of the men still wrestled with the reins of the excited horse, but the rest were turned toward Tasse. Some just stood, but others were coming after him.

Tasse didn't like the odds.

"What do you want!" Tasse said through his teeth, half in anger and half from pain.

One of the men with a halberd answered.

"You're our prisoner. Come peacefully."

"Prisoner?"

Tasse leveled his sword at waist-height, both hands holding it in a relaxed grip that would seem casual to the inexperienced eye.

"--I think I might take some convincing on that point. Is there any reason that you wanted me in particular?"

"Shut up!"

The man spat, and stepped forward, about four paces ahead of the phalanx that was spreading behind him. He was a heavy man, but with a chest as broad as his stomach, and arms like hairy hams.

Tasse continued to back away, but he kept his sword
leveled. He waited for the men to rush him.

"Is this the welcome Poulden has for weary travelers?"

Tasse realized that he didn't look too weary, being mounted and armed as he was, but an appeal to the community was certainly worth a try at this point.

The big man held his pole-axe out in front of his barrel chest with both hands, walking even faster toward Tasse.

"I an't from Poulden——and I don't greet the baron's spies with a handshake."

Tasse relaxed.

Running was out of the question, and after all these years, he was damned if he was returning to Poulden as a prisoner! He was going to have to negotiate a new alternative.

He took one more step backward, and then sprang towards the hostile spokesman.

The man responded with surprising speed. He pivoted on light feet and swung the axe end of the halberd in a deadly stroke.

Tasse shifted left and bent backwards. The hand-and-a-half sword blurred up from his waist to meet the stroke.

There was no sound of splintering, just the clean bite of steel on the axe's two-inch oaken haft. The heavy steel head flew past Tasse and tumbled heavily some distance down the road.

The big man readied to backswing at the darkhaired man who blurred in front of him, but——

"Everyone stay back!" Tasse shouted.

The big man was suddenly frozen at the touch of cold
steel. So quickly after the sudden violence, the razored edge of Tasse's sword had alighted like a mosquito against his neck.

"Careful—careful," Tasse whispered evenly to the man on the edge of his blade. Then to the rest he shouted.

"I only hesitate to spill this life in the road because I believe I am among enemies of the baron!"

A murmur rose among the agitated men around Tasse.

"I'll be happy to come into town as a fellow enemy of Naad, but not as a prisoner." He directed the last part toward the man in front of him, who was regaining his composure in spite of the blade at his neck. Once again it was he who answered.

"I would agree...but I fear self-interest shadows my judgement.

Tasse warily took a step back and lifted the sword from the man's neck.

"I'd put up my sword, but the scabbard is on my saddle." Tasse smiled uneasily.

The big man touched his neck, but felt no mark. Only sweat. He raised his fist and turned to the men around him.

"I say the dark man comes with us!" Then, turning to Tasse, he said, "as a well-watched guest for now."

"Agreed."

With the horse led ahead of him, and five nervous men around him, Tasse walked back to the old hamlet of Poulden.

He still hadn't told them who he was, or why he had
He saw the well at town's middle, and the stables, and the drink house opposite it, and the old stone temple, all unchanged since he left them. Though there were many changed or completely new buildings surrounding these old places, it still felt like Tasse's Poulden.

As he moved deeper into town, he looked up past the temple to the block-square silhouette of Gallaston. It was a better part of a mile from the town, squatting against the horizon atop its treeless slope, but this afternoon, through the eyes of Tasse who had waited so long and come so far to see it, the castle seemed close enough to touch.

Though he was eager to enter the old stronghold where he was born and his family died, the five men around him, his "friendly guards" guided him toward the drink house. For now, Tasse did not resist.

Once inside, he saw a number of faces that he recognized; some that he thought he could put names to, but he didn't. He was disappointed, but at the same time relieved, that none of these faces looked at him with any recognition.

He didn't want to account for either emotion at the moment. He drank the beer that was put in front of him.
CHAPTER XXX

Perhaps the Naadien border guards were growing edgy while waiting for the revolt to be quelled. They were like sitting, but well armed ducks, fearing the revolt would finally become too tempting an engraved invitation to invasion by Holweir.

The border towers were meant to resist, not to stop, an invasion. With the bridges burned, there would be no relief. Perhaps the promise of fighting starving peasants was more appealing than being crushed by an impending attack by a real army.

When the Baron sent out his riders, asking for men who knew the art of fighting on horseback, men came. Many and quickly; a good deal more than Goshawk had asked for.

Willen Goshawk sent few of the excess men back to their posts. He accepted enough to make three wings of fifty, and a personal reserve of twenty five made up of his best.

The assignments of Captains had been made that morning. He sent Sebastian out shortly after.

The force left the meadow for Poulden at noon, and Goshawk ordered an easy pace, one that would keep the horses fresh for the next morning's slaughter.

Some called it unsporting, but Willen had always wanted to attack at false dawn.
CHAPTER XXXI

The beer was by no means the best, clearly the dregs of the small town's supplies, but it was at least as fine as the skrog that Tasse had grown accustomed to after years in the highlands.

The afternoon was a particularly warm one for a day this early in the spring. It was mid-April, and the men at the drink house seemed to Tasse like men stranded by rising water.

They were balanced on the edge of summer, waiting, worrying, wondering where the rebellion would leave them when the growing season really got underway.

Though Tasse was eager to get to what lay beneath Gallaston, the day's heat and his own admitted weariness made him easily persuaded to sit and drink with the idle men. As he sat at a high stool with the people of his past home, he began to realize how much he deserved a rest.

He daubed the condensation from the grey metal tankard before him and counted back the days since he left the warmth of Lirra under the blankets to come on this quest.

It seemed like well over a month, he'd come so far and overcome so much. But as he retraced his steps in his mind, he saw that it was only twelve days. In spite of the three days lost in the Kilrush jail, he had made good time.

He hoped that his withdrawal from the troubled country would be as swift. Of course, the silver plates from the
crypt would slow him, particularly in the hills.

The afternoon waned, and Tasse sat and drank with his five guard/companions and the other people. He slowly came to know the present situation of their revolt, though it took some time. They seemed to avoid touching on the present as if it were a hot rock.

He got plenty of stories about the much more encouraging and exciting past weeks.

The Baron had pledged one-thousand men to King Vegas of Naad for some war on a place that they had only heard of, but had never seen. One-hundred of those were Goshawk's own cavalry, but the rest were men and boys taken from their homes and farms at the beginning of the planting season.

The men were taken across the Vanderwal and trained and armed, but just before they were to be marched off to the fight, they broke free and fled back across the river, burning the bridges at Poulden and Bandale counties.

Tasse observed that they never really explained how Gallaston Castle was taken, but, by what they did say, Tasse guessed that it must have been a surprise attack or an inside conspiracy with servants. Tasse remembered well that the castle gate was fiercely armed and very strong.

There had been fighting for Tass, but that had finally failed for the inner town's walls. Goshawk and his cavalry had gotten back across the river at the bridge there, just before that bridge joined the other two in flames.

The picture that Tasse's companions grudgingly came around to painting was one of slow starvation and recent
disasters on the battlefield.

Tasse told of seeing the dead men in the barn up the road. One of the guards, a very talkative one named Dilock, described the fight that had happened there; how the strategy of a leader named Wiskoff had beaten the armored riders back, only to be defeated himself a few days later.

"Then what?" Tasse asked, interested in the give and take of this particular revolt. Sandwiched as the land was, between the river and the mountains, the struggle of this revolt had been isolated from forces that might have resolved it in mere days. Naad was cut off by the river, and Holweir was cut off by the hills and discouraged, no doubt, by Naad's reputation.

"We're still waiting to see 'then what'," Dilock said. "That's the freshest news we have."

Another of the guards spoke up, "Wiskoff came in just yesterday, late."

Dilock looked annoyed, as if he'd been interrupted, and then he continued.

"He brought a two-score of his men home with 'im, but some of them has died in the night. And there's others still healing."

"Including Wiskoff himself," the bartender added, pouring more beer from a tarnished pitcher.

"Where are your wounded now?" Tasse asked.

Dilock answered quickly, defending his center-stage in the conversation.

"They're up at the hold. . . Gallaston, you know. They're
supposed to be healing as fast as they can, and we're still either waiting to fight the Baron when he comes, or still waiting to run for it when he comes."

One of the other guards, well into his cups looked up and chuckled, "That's why your horse is still standin' on its own legs, steada ours."

Tasse stared at the man coldly, and then at the others. He didn't know what was meant, but he guessed enough to know he didn't like the sound of it.

Tasse set his tankard on the bar and looked calmly at Dilock.

"What does he mean?"
The young revolutionary appeared uncomfortable for the first time. "It--it's not anything to be taking serious."

"What does he mean," Tasse pressed.

"Just that as we're fixing to retreat, Pale Richard ordered us not to harm any more animals that could be used to haul supplies--or wounded even."

"Any more animals?"

Dilock nodded and shrugged.

"And if this order hadn't been given?"

Dilock was even more uncomfortable, but then he answered without apology, "Folks have to eat."

Tasse pushed his tankard toward the bartender and hopped down from his high stool. He was no stranger to the eating of horse flesh. In fact, he'd eaten it himself on occasions when he was dining with the Wokind. The Wokind word for horse meant "moose without horns," and the animals they
found unguarded they treated accordingly.

But this was an excellent horse. Tasse needed it.

"Dilock," Tasse spoke in a friendly voice that was made false by the audible calmness that overlaid it, "--come with me. We are going to go check on my mount. Then you'll come with me to Gallaston. If a fight is as close as you say it is, then I've got business there."
The horse was fine, though it hadn't been tended all afternoon. Since Tasse had arrived, the animal had been in a stall, unwatered, unfed—nothing.

Tasse would have been annoyed at this, but he was glad to find it whole and healthy. If the rebels were so desperate for food that they were eating war-horses, then orders from someone at the castle was no guarantee of his mount's safety.

Dilock was visibly relieved as well, and he set about to bring water from the well while Tasse made ready a feed bag from the supplies on his own saddle.

Dilock came bustling back in with a sloshing bucket.

"Will you be going to see Pale Richard...ah, sir?"

Tasse noticed the hesitation and wondered if he should give his real name. The name, van Poulder, might still carry some clout among the people, since the old Thane had been so well liked, but then again, in a revolt against the so-called "ruling class", such a tie might work against him.

"Lane... Curt Lane," he lied casually, "and yes, I'll see this Pale Richard if he's not too busy. You'll take me to him?"

Tasse had no real wish to see their leader, but it would get him into the stronghold without too much difficulty.

"Yeah, I'll take you," Dilock said.

Tasse nodded and sat on a small locker. He risked making the younger man nervous by pulling out the sword
slung on his back and beginning to hone it with a thick scrap of saddle leather.

Dilock seemed only a little nervous at first, but watched quietly from the other side of a stall.

"You're a great slayer, aren't you," he said, when the horse had reached the bottom on its first bucket of water.

Tasse weighed the question briefly, and gave the answer he hoped would help him the most. He decided to tell the truth.

"No. I'm nobody, just a guy with a big knife and his best friend's horse."

Dilock knew that the stranger was lying, but he didn't press him. He took the empty bucket and went for more water.

It was well dark when Tasse was satisfied with his blade, honed, oiled, and re-sheathed at his back. By then, the horse had put away water and oats and some fairly fresh hay, and Dilock had gotten back some of his talkativeness. He had tended the horse well, and told Tasse of his participation in an ambush that happened a week ago.

Tasse paid only partial attention, deep in his own thoughts and anticipation.

He had waited so long for this night. He had risked his life so many times in his youth, driven on by hope of this chance. He had risked it again in coming for the plaques now. At last he would have proof that his name was not
stolen.

He rose suddenly and interrupted Dilock in mid-sentence:

"Come. It's time we got to the castle."

"Yes sir," the man said, making Tasse suddenly wonder if some token of his rank might yet be clinging unnoticed among his clothes.

There were none.

Tasse untied the horse and led it out. It was saddled, but Tasse didn't intend to ride.

"The three of us will walk up the hill."

Dilock nodded, and blew out the lamp which lit the stable. They moved out into the night.

As Tasse moved up the gentle slope toward the home of his dead family, the moon rose before him, waxing still, toward imperfect roundness, and masked with thin drifts of cloud.

He would emerge as the legitimate son of Thane Lars van Poulder.

"The stables are around the right side, between the wall and the house," the sentry said uncertainly. "There's a gate. I think it's open."

Tasse knew very well where the stables were, but he allowed himself to be directed.

"Thank you. Dilock, go find out if your leader can see me while I go put up my mount."

Dilock nodded and was gone.
Gallaston seemed much as it had, though there was quite a bit that had been repaired. The portcullis had obviously been remade since it had been destroyed in the invasion. The pit before the gate had been broadened, and the short-bridge had been lengthened.

Other things in the open courtyard seemed different, but Tasse couldn't make them out in the dark. He moved beside the horse into the cleft between the house and the high wall and found the old iron gate swung wide.

He remembered riding through with other men of the household, going to fight the invaders as they swarmed over the land to the north-east. Enemy numbers had been so great, the defense of Poulden had been a disaster from the outset.

He saw his father killed on the walls.

Tasse stopped in the dark and looked up at the dark wall to his right. He couldn't see the squat line of battlements from here, but he knew that he was at the spot.

If Thane Lars van Poulder survived the arrows, then he died here, where Tasse stood. It was a thirty foot wall, and the cobbles were hard.

Tasse didn't take the horse any further, letting it stand where it was. The side door that accessed the stable yard from the main house was inset under an outsized stone archway, and Tasse moved quietly to it.

As he expected, it was bolted from inside. He delved into his pocket and pulled out a thin string of rawhide and a small, round steel ring, about an inch and a half in diameter.
As a boy, Tasse had fallen asleep in the stables many times, and he had wakened to find the doors bolted for the night. He had foiled this door's bolt a hundred times.

He looped a knot through the steel ring and leaned his hip into the door. He forced a narrow crack between the door and its frame, and he slipped the ring into it at a level that was even with his knees.

When he lifted his weight from the door, the ring was inside, and he held the string. As he pulled the cord upward, the ring moved inside, sliding along the narrow seam between door and frame, riding up under the stout wooden bolt, and lifting it up.

Tasse pressed his toe against the bottom of the door, and it swung open easily. He was on the first floor for only twenty heartbeats, time enough to snatch a lighted torch from its rest on the wall.

And disappear down a narrow, little-used stair.
CHAPTER XXXIII

Sebastian's bright red hair didn't need to be covered in the darkness, so he had turned his hood back to listen.

As soon as he had seen the unkempt hedges come so shaggy and close to the road, he had suspected an ambush.

As soon as darkness fell, he crept through the grass with infinite patience, until he was close enough to actually hear bored men talking in their hiding.

From where he lay, in the grass, mere yards from the hedge, Sebastian heard the day’s gossip, a lone horseman had ridden in and drawn blade against the previous shift.

From the number of voices he heard, and the direction and spread he heard them in, Sebastian estimated twenty, maybe thirty men at most, unless some of them weren't breathing.

His guess had paid off. He had found an ambush just where a bright child would lay one. Their numbers were a pittance, and without the element of surprise, they would merely be a well-hidden human offering.

He expected the moon to rise in the next half-hour. He slowly began his withdrawal, moving slowly and slowly back, raising less sound than a centipede on soft earth.

This "ambush" was a half-mile out from town.

A half-mile further out, Goshawk was waiting with his forces marshaled around him; waiting for his spy to report.

Sebastian could hear them from here.
CHAPTER XXXIV

Under Gallaston Castle there were a few close passages, most leading to low-ceilinged rooms with questionably-sound arches to enter them by.

This had been storage. Stout iron hooks from the ceilings had held hams and beeves and sack upon sack of grain and greens above the cool, damp floor, beyond the reach of rats.

Tasse observed that the hooks were empty now. One of the men in the drinking house had explained Naad's policy of enforced export.

Tasse had played here sometimes, running up and down the passages with the other children of the servants, gripping the stumps of tapers in his hands while searching for some buried treasure.

There was one corridor that was wider than the others, that led toward the back of the castle's foundation. Tasse had often held his breath while passing the turn to this passage, yet he had gone down it many times on dares.

Now, he made the turn into that passage without hesitation. He didn't want to give himself any pause to think of his childhood imaginings.

This passage was the home of fear.

Ever since he was twenty-two or three, and the plaques had occurred to him as proof of his name, Tasse had remembered the family crypt only in that gleam of candle-light in the polished plate. It was the vivid moment in his childhood when he had seen his own name inscribed below his father's.
Since then, he had only imagined repeating that moment, the light, the gleam, and then reaching out to take the beautiful silver.

Not till now did he remember that he had not been alone when he had seen the plates the first time. A trusted friend, much older, had come and stood near behind him.

Tasse had forgotten to recall all of the other times he had been down this passage, and he'd forgotten the fear that the dark door had always held for him.

Here it was. The passage was unchanged, even from Tasse's earliest memories of playing in the cellars. There was little enough to the passage, it really couldn't be changed.

He moved, step in front of step, down toward the door at its end. He caught himself imagining how it would look when he got close enough for his torch to light it.

The thing about the door that Tasse had really found frightening came not from the dark-studded oak, but from the long ornate rod of brass that served as a bolt.

Tasse never knew, nor was he ever told what macabre tradition was served by bolting the door to the crypt from this side. Terrible dreams had always followed his ponderings as a child.

He had always wanted an explanation that would end his dreams; nightmares of dry fists pounding oak and the metallic grating sounds of brass bending in the door's stone frame.

Now, the door became visible in outline, black against
the darkening grey of the passage's painted walls. Tasse held his torch high as he moved closer, down the slightly sloping passage.

He wished he had arrived earlier at Poulden—or later.

Though he knew that this deep under the castle it was always darker than midnight, he wished it could be day somewhere while he made this visit.

As he stepped resolutely to within five paces of the looming black door, his torch flickered.

A draft? Here? he thought.

The fact that air moving this deep was unlikely, made Tasse all the more uneasy. The draft had dimmed his light, but it returned directly.

The light spread before him, and terror gripped him.

The brass rod was still in place, stuck through the metal rings, but the door was ajar, and the brass was twisted and bent!

Tasse's skin crawled as his childhood horrors suddenly came to life in the wavering shadows. The door had been forced, yet drawing the bolt from this side would have been easy.

It had to have been forced from the other side.

He took several breaths in the close air of the passage, and was just about to take another step toward the door when he saw the dark-grey fingers move across the hand's-breath of blackness where the door was ajar.

Tasse's blood froze as, for an instant, they hung there, moving beyond any trick of the torchlight.
His lips curled back from his teeth and his heart sounded in his chest. He wanted to run, but somehow he held his ground.

He stood, not breathing, for several seconds, torn between disbelief and maddening belief... but then the draft returned and undead fingers whipped and tangled, until Tasse realized that they were only cobwebs.

He drew his sword, just in case, and kicked the great oaken door open.

It skreeked wide and banged, echoing loudly as it hit the stone wall within.

He stood at the entrance of the crypt for some moments, glaring into the darkness, barely making out details with his torch held aloft.

"I'm ten strides from my destiny," he whispered.
He found two surprises inside.

There were many many surprises in the ancient crypt, but he only stayed for two.

He might have learned where the draft was coming from and, at the same time, understood at last the reason that the door of the crypt was barred from the side of the living.

He would have been surprised to learn that the crypt was a much longer shaft than he ever guessed, and that it emerged by a hidden door eighty yards beyond the north-east wall of Gallaston Castle. It was a secret escape path that had been provided for by the ancient castle's architect, over five-hundred years before.

Tasse had never been told, but some of the servants had known. And that knowledge had been used during the second day of the revolt, with hundreds of mad rebels swarming past the generations and generations of dead, forcing the door open from the side of endless rest, and storming the castle from below.

He might have been surprised to discover other things as well, for instance, that only half of those buried in the family crypt were of his family, and that the first of his family to be entombed here was named Poulter, born a peasant chicken farmer who gained the castle by waxing opportunistic in a revolt that was much like the one happening now.

He might have been surprised to learn that his mother
was a woman from the Redlands, born and raised to the ways of the Wokind.

But Tasse only stayed for two surprises.

Tasse was surprised to find that the Naadien who had captured Gallaston years ago had laid Lars van Poulder to rest in a fine stone casket in the ancient crypt.

And—Tasse was surprised to find that the silver plates, that bore his lineage and his hopes, had been stolen.

They had been taken, melted for the silver years ago.
CHAPTER XXXVI

Tasse emerged from the castle as the bastard he'd always been.

The torch he had taken down with him had been well oiled and stoutly wrapped. It had lasted nearly two hours, and he sat on the dusty floor of the crypt until it sputtered out in the drafty corridor.

He stayed, sitting with his back against his mother's stone sarcophagus, and looked at the identical stone box that held his father. He continued to stare, long after the low yellow flame went blue and vanished with a whispered ripping sound.

Fear was gone. He sat for hours. Perhaps he dozed, but he couldn't be sure.

Some time in the night, he had gotten up with pain nagging in his buttocks and hip. It was the same pain that he had felt after waking on the cold rock at the brink of the highlands.

He thought again of the beginnings and endings of chapters in his life.

It took some time, but he made his way blindly from the crypt. He remembered no difficulty, no wrong turns; just darkness.

He came up into the hallway where he got his torch. The other torches were long-cold, though their smoke still hung in the air.

He lifted the bolt on the side entrance, and left the
castle by the same way he'd come in. The bolt fell home with a muffled wooden thud, and Tasse stood facing the comforting bright darkness of early morning. A blown mist dampened his face, and the freshness of it made him smile.

He emerged the bastard he had always been.

Sitting heavily on the recessed archway's thick stone step, Tasse let his boots scuff out onto the wet cobbles of the stable yard. His back rested comfortably against the door, and he quietly began to laugh.

It was all beginning to sink in, and he suddenly remembered the parable, or was it a drinking song, that told of the boy who was born average.

I'm that boy, he thought. Lars van Poulder's only child. the finest bastard he ever sired.

The wet mist continued to fall, coming gently as darkness faded into first light. Tasse sat and wondered where he would go from here.

His first thought was of Lirra. He felt a strong desire to return, not necessarily to Redgate, but to her. She had been with him faithfully and lovingly for years.

Only now, getting away from the grey monotony of the outpost, Tasse realized that he would never have lasted so long in the job, or done nearly so well without her.

He thought of the short-sword that he'd left on the rough-hewn table, his marriage proposal. It was a captain's sword, from a man who had never considered himself a captain. Tasse had only really accepted promotion to distance himself from what he was.
Looking back, his whole life seemed to have been made up of dodges and escapes from what he was—running from what he became when his father died.

Maybe Lars van Poulder had signed the letters of adoption, but didn't live to send them. He had made his intentions no secret in preparing Tasse to join the family, but in the end, the Duke and Bishop of Holweir had never received the documents.

No secrets of his intentions, Tasse mused.

He saw an image of himself fleeing through his own life. The irony struck him, how with each chapter in his life he had fled his past, yet that flight had brought him back to it.

The absence of a seal on some papers had no more made him a bastard, than the presence of a seal on some papers had made him a captain.

Tasse hadn't ever really been a captain in his own mind because he fled into it.

Tasse had become a bastard in his own mind because he fled into it.

I've run away as far as I can, and I'm back where I started.

He slowly stood up in the arched doorway and calmly noted that his horse had either wandered off, or it had been taken.

"I'll do no more running," he whispered to himself.

The peace was broken by a strong, deep note from a horn. It sounded as if it had been blown maybe a mile away,
and it echoed around and across the countryside.

Another followed, cut suddenly short.

The shouts from the walls and the front court hinted that the horn was some kind of signal... or alarm.

"--of course, I may have to reserve the right to retreat."
CHAPTER XXXVII

Normally, heavy infantry could defend against heavy cavalry where light infantry would be eaten alive.

Willen Goshawk estimated that the rebels holding the town of Poulden were armed like heavy infantry--piques, halberds, a few ambitious enough to wear chain mail or partial plate--but he didn't give them credit for the discipline or leadership that would justify much caution in attacking them. In honor of the ambush, he made some special preparations anyway.

If it was an open field, as it had been a few days ago at the meadow, he would have simply charged, broken, and routed them. But this was no open country, and Willen was certainly not given to stupid risks.

He brought his force down to within fifty yards of the "ambush" and stopped.

The hedge was quiet.

From where they stood, just beyond the jaws of the trap, Willen ordered his men to rain crossbow shots into the hedge, concentrating shots, fifty at a time, into the places in the hedge that Sebastian had suggested.

Much to Willen's pleasure, the hedge erupted with sound; shouts, screams, moans, and then the rustling and snapping of twigs and branches as men forced their way out back of the hedge.

The front phalanx of crossbows had destroyed the ambush without seeing any of the men they were killing. He let them get off three more flights before stopping them.
"Ride carefully in the dark," Willen shouted, "and strike all the harder when you find them! It will be light soon... We'll have them if we hurry!"

His white-sleeved hand waved them forward in the early morning glow. His men and horses lurched together into a canter, and then a gallop. They were a tight and eager swarm, moving hard and loud on the road. They watched sharp for any fleeing survivors of the enemy ambush.

The first blast on the horn came then, a brave rebel alerting the town to the attack.

The first men through the gap in the hedge found him an easy target.

His second blast of alarm was cut short as a sweeping blow from an iron-tipped lance simultaneously crushed the horn and his lower jaw.

The rest of Baron Goshawk's troops thundered over the body, charging hard for the small town that was now awakening in alarm.

In a way, the attack on Poulden was a victory for Goshawk. It's always a victory when a town falls.

This one was taken with little opposition, though there were some small pockets of resistance that fought with almost mad ferocity. These small knots of eights and fifteens, with lances and axes, did plenty of damage to the mounted troops where the alleys narrowed. Man and horse went down; the attacks were indiscriminate.
These rebels were bottled up in their alleys and cut to pieces by crossbow, or trampled to death in the wider main road through town.

The wild and disorganized bands slowed the attack down, which displeased Goshawk. Since the alarm had been raised, it became a race against time to bring his forces to bear on the castle. He wanted to allow as little time as possible for the rebels to ready the fortifications of Gallaston against his coming attack.

As it was, the light in the sky was already seeping down onto the land when the Baron led his three fifty-man formations, thundering up the hill toward the old keep.

When he drew within range of the deadly ballistas that were mounted on the walls, Goshawk realized that something was very strange. There was no death pouring down on his force. No five-foot quarrels, not even a single arrow. A little closer, things became even more strange.

The bridge was down.

The portcullis was raised.

Goshawk couldn't understand why entering the castle would be so easy, but then, as they stormed across the bridge, it all made sense.

Gallaston Castle was empty. . . and a raging fire was already sweeping through its first floor.
CHAPTER XXXVIII

After the night in the crypt, Tasse would have liked to have a day of reflection and rest. His lifelong ambition of escaping bastardhood had come to less than nothing in the twinkling of an eye. As much as his illegitimacy had bothered him over the years, he imagined that he would at least be depressed; maybe even crushed at finding his condition irrevocable. It didn't seem to matter.

He wasn't depressed, and he got no rest. There was no time for either. He found his horse shortly after the horn had blown in the dim of false dawn. It was with Dilock in the stables. Tasse quickly understood that Poulden was being invaded by the Naadien Baron, the second such invasion in his life. Tasse leapt into the efforts that were going on around him.

Within fifteen minutes, the grey-white highland horse was hitched crudely to a narrow, spoke-wheeled cart, and Tasse was driving out over the drawbridge with Dilock beside him and six injured men as cargo.

There were other wounded who could walk, but they were to go with their strange-looking leader, Richard, and the rest of the men. The castle was inadequately supplied for resisting a siege, and to be trapped there would be death for any who were captured.

Tasse heard the plan once--there was time for little more. It was a simple plan, therefore, a good one. Richard
would lead his men north-west, away from Gallaston, and then double back to cross the river road above the town. From there they would run south-east through the wooded hills beyond Poulden.

This pivoting run for the hills would elude the main force of the Baron's cavalry, and Tasse knew well that no sane commander would send cavalry into the dark hills beyond Poulden; especially in search of four-hundred well armed infantrymen.

Tasse, and Dilock, and the cartload of injured men escaped in the opposite direction. The horse drew them swiftly over the rough ground till they were beyond the sight of Gallaston, and beyond the din of the town at the bottom of the hill. There was a rough-cut path through the scrub and trees at the east side of the castle's cleared field of command, and the cart bumped and creaked alarmingly along it until they were into a wide pasture.

From there, Tasse angled gradually down toward the river road, surprising Dilock twice by knowing just where a gap in the hedgerow could be found.

Not coincidentally, their escape from Gallaston Castle was the same that Tasse and the other mounted men of his household had taken, more than nineteen years ago.

Then, he and his horse had taken the hedges in daring jumps that heavy war-horses couldn't match. Now he was forced to use the gaps that he remembered from his childhood.

The horse was tired from the weight of the cart and men by the time they reached the road, but Tasse could not
allow a rest this close to the falling town. They were still only a short mile away, and the cavalry could be sent to scour the road at any time.

Luckily, the old road was easier going for the horse, and faster going for the cart.

By the time the enemy had discovered the flames swirling up from every arrow-slit and window of the old keep, Tasse and the horse-drawn fugitives were two miles away.

He was sure that they would be pursued, but the afternoon wore on, and there was no sign of it.

There was an abortive effort to fight the fire that was gutting the five-hundred year old castle of Gallaston, but after that, it was allowed to rage.

Willen Goshawk raged quietly. The town had fallen, but the rebellion had escaped.

He wished again, as he wished often in the last month, that this uprising had come a bit later in the year. By mid-summer there would be boats from down river, and barges from up river. Until then, Naad had no way across the Vanderwal River to reinforce him. Though he'd taken more land back under his control, he was now spread more thinly than ever, and the revolt was retreating further into its own strength.

Everything was picked clean in Poulden; any weapons there might have been were white hot in the castle by now, and any food was either non-existent or buried by stubborn farmers. He knew well enough that those who had caches
of food would as soon tell where they were as cut their own throats. One was as good as the other, and starvation was known to be much slower and more agonizing.

He sent Sebastian to find out which direction the rebels had escaped to, and the diminutive spy got results within the half-hour. Neither trail was more than two hours old when he reported.

He told Willen of the three-hundred-plus men who had circled around the town and vanished into the hills. He also told of a heavily laden, horse-drawn cart that had trundled off to the south-east.

The cart sounded like supplies to Willen. He sent troops after both.

He sent fifty after the rebels, and ten after the cart. He sent Sebastian with the fifty.

That left seventy-seven healthy men, and seventy-two horses to guard over the town. Willen spent the remainder of the day in the dismal amusement of watching the castle burn.

The next morning, he got some good news--and some bad news.

The good news was that the rebel force had been located, and that they were moving slowly through the woodlands at a pace that couldn't hope to compete with mounted men.

The bad news was that only twenty-nine of the fifty made it back to Poulden to report.
Just when they had thought they were going to overtake the rebels at the crest of a steep hill, the mounted fifty found themselves flanked on both right and left. The trees and the steepness of the slope had made maneuvering difficult, and they were quickly hemmed in.

The rest had been pure disaster.

Sebastian had not returned with the rest of the force, perhaps not caring to share the vicinity of the Baron when he heard the news. He had sent the rest on, saying that he would continue to shadow the rebels alone.

Willen kept his temper after a fashion. He needed every man he had, so he merely relieved the captain of the fifty from his command, and sent him alone down the river road. The lone ex-captain's orders were simple; to find out what had become of the ten riders that Goshawk sent to capture the supply cart.

Willen had expected them back by last night at the latest.

The lone ex-captain didn't have far to go to fulfill his mission.

He met the riders three miles down the road.

One man rode with a dead comrade slung behind. Another rode double with a living passenger.

The party of ten was two horses short; not killed this time, but stolen.

The dead man had been on watch. No one heard him die.
Only one had awakened in time to see anything; blood next to the fire, the hind-quarters of the two best horses vanishing into the trees, and a split second flash of long, dark hair flying in the moonlight.

That afternoon, Goshawk rode out of Poulden with an even hundred mounted troops. He left nine horses, fifteen soldiers, and ten wounded to keep the town secure against any threat.

He was going to be in Bandale--waiting--when the rebels came down out of the hills.
CHAPTER XXXIX

Tasse just considered it good luck. When Dilock admonished him, Tasse did go so far as to admit that it wouldn't have happened by itself.

"Anyone could have done it, though," he insisted.

Yesterday afternoon, the escape in the cart had gotten more and more on his nerves. Maybe it was having such a fast horse tied down and tiring before such a heavy cart, but he came to feel downright paranoid about pursuit.

In retrospect, he felt he must have spent as much time looking over his shoulder as he did watching the road. When a long, rolling series of bald hills presented themselves to the right of the road, he took the opportunity to leave the road without losing too much speed.

The green hills ran south, parallel to the old grassway, and Tasse had a commanding view of it for a fair distance below him.

The ten riders had come along in the late afternoon, about an hour later.

They didn't see the horse or cart slip down over the ridge, out of sight.

The rest, Tasse insisted, was simple. He slowed some, and shadowed the riders on the road until the sun got low. They camped at sundown.

The cart did likewise, on the far side of the crest.

Just after midnight, Tasse and the riders' watchman surprised each other. Tasse had thought the man had fallen
asleep.

The watchman had heard something. He might have lived long enough to know what hit him.

...and Tasse was gone.

When the sun came up this morning, there were two brown warhorses to take over the pulling duties. Both were bigger, stronger, and generally better suited to harness pulling than Tasse's light horse was, but since there was only harness enough to hitch up one of them, Dilock chose one for the cart, and Tasse rode the other, leading his own mount behind.

They left the road and traveled due south across country, and with the fresh animals, they made good time.

In spite of a clouding over, and later light rain, spirits were better among the wounded men on the cart. Instead of danger and discomfort, there was now only discomfort.

There had been only a few words from any of them all during the previous day, but now there was talk among them, and the old one who had been introduced as Wiskoff inquired about who Tasse was.

Tasse lied again, using the borrowed alias. "Curt Lane, sir," he said.

For a moment, some spark of recognition came across Wiskoff's face. For a second, Tasse thought he had been caught lying, though he knew that it could only be the wildest coincidence if old barroom pseudonym was known to this rebel leader.

Directly, the look of recognition faded in the man's eyes, then he asked, "You don't have dealings with snakes
and lizards do you?"

The question didn't seem to make sense. Tasse thought that perhaps Wiskoff was feverish.

He just shook his head, smiled, and rode on past the cart. In a few minutes he resolved that he would have to stop using any but his own name. After all, the name had been invented by a man he hadn't seen in years, and that man had used the name only when he expected to make mischief. Who knew what trouble Tasse could get into by using the name.

For the time being, and in the present company, Tasse continued to answer to "Curt."

Later on that afternoon, Tasse's party of wounded crossed a stubble that had once been a hedge and arrived at a handsome farm near the southern boundary of Bandale County.

They were greeted with hospitality by the family who lived there, and the men on the cart were taken in out of the drizzling weather immediately. Tasse insisted on taking the animals back to the barn himself, considering the hungry landscape's casual attitude about equine stew.

He was pleasantly surprised to see six pigs in the broad pen at the back of the barn, and chickens as well.

He felt confident that the horses had little to fear here, and he set about to dry them and feed them, and then he went back out into the wet, grey afternoon.

As he crossed toward the farmhouse, he noticed a small river rushing past, back over his shoulder, a hundred yards below the white-painted barn.
He'd never been to this farm before, but he knew the river too well. It was a tributary of the Vanderwal, but it was the color, the smooth light brown that gave it away to Tasse. He knew exactly where he was.

About three miles down-stream was the town of Bandale and a modest wooden bridge. And three more miles beyond that was a corn field, and the site of a better forgotten battle.

--and a dyke-wall.

Just six miles from where Tasse now stood lay the birthplace of his nightmare. He waited for a chill up his spine, but it didn't come, he was so cold and wet already.

As he glared through the rain at the stripe of brown water that seemed to churn across the land, he thought of the country he could see beyond it. It was Bissmuth, the private lands of High King Truax.

Now, after fleeing this far south from the Naadien Baron's troops, Tasse's best hope of a safe return home lay in crossing into that country, where free travelers were free to travel. If he headed west from this side of the tributary, Tasse was sure he would risk capture by Naadien border troops, and beyond that was Holweir, a land he knew well, but where he was well known and not fondly remembered.

He would cross at the small bridge in the town as soon as he could--but later. The weather had settled in cold and grey over the countryside.

Not good for traveling, he thought.

He hid from his real reason; that he couldn't cross
that river in the rain. In the past, he had gotten flashes
of fear from crystal clear ponds—he knew that he couldn't
possibly lead a mount over the swirling brown jaws of his
secret demon.

In the morning, maybe.

He pushed the soaked hair off his neck and went into
the warmth of the farmhouse.

There was another wet person standing at the wide hearth,
one that had not come to the farm with Tasse and Dilock.
He was a tall, dark young man, out of breath, and speaking
agitatedly. Everyone was listening to him, as Tasse entered.

"... They've come clean past Poulden now! They're
attacking here, and we thought we were just to be reserves
marching out tomorrow!"

Dilock started to answer back, but Wiskoff interrupted.

"Slow down, boy. You say the Baron's men are in the
town?"

"In Bandale, yes!" the young man panted.

"And they're attacking who?"

"They strike at anyone who shows themselves in the
streets. A few of us slipped away. We're raising the
... the countryside, the people."

"And how many do they have, and how many men do you
expect to find outside of town?"

"We were more than four-hundred," the young man blurted,
rallied up yesterday. They would have been ready to leave
out tomorrow, ready to—-to help fight for Poulden, but they
aren't at Poulden—-they're here—-they've come here."
"All right, all right," Wiskoff said, trying to calm the panicking boy.

Tasse stepped forward. "Where were your people going to muster?"

It was some minutes before he got an answer. The young runner from town had begun to cough and choke for breath. By the time Tasse got his information, he had sent Dilock out to saddle up two of the horses. Raising an infantry was no job for men on foot, not this late in the afternoon.
CHAPTER XL

Willen was pleased to see that the townsmen were keeping their heads down so well. It had been a hard, miserable ride from Poulden to Bandale, and he surely didn't want to deal with any foolishness now.

He guessed that the moving herd of rebels that he'd flushed from Gallaston Castle would be approaching this town by about sundown, tired, wet, and hungry. They would be expecting their traitorous sister village to greet them with open arms.

Willen Goshawk would greet them with open jaws.

"They can hide," he laughed, "but they can't run. How stupid of them to think that they would escape my horses."

Goshawk was sitting at a table in the larger of the town's two taverns. He had his captains with him, but he had forbidden them to drink. The rest of the hundred were either patrolling the roads around the town, or they were holed up against the rain in one shop or another.

Goshawk had ordered that no man was to stray from his mount more than ten yards, and he sent a captain every quarter of an hour to check for compliance.

Everything was good. He would finish off this revolt today. He'd slaughter all night if he had too. He wanted it finished, and he would do it without help.

"I won't have it said that anyone bailed me out," he mumbled to himself. It was one of the few times that he showed any self-consciousness about talking to himself.
He was a bit worried by the rumor the tavern keeper had told of; a rumor that King Myral of Naad was getting permission from the court of the High King to move a force of one-thousand across the Vanderwal at Axford, and then that force would come back north to "secure" the river counties.

Of course, it was only a rumor, picked up by a tavern owner from some bilge merchant in Bissmuth. All the same, it was good that Willen had been sharp enough to come south to finish this now, once and for all.

Time passed, a couple of hours, and the unseen sun dimmed behind the wet, grey shroud that hung over the town.

Then one by one, the men he'd set to watch the ways into town had reported movement.

"Gentlemen," Willen said, rising from his table and pulling on his cloak, "..the lambs have arrived. Mount your men and dress your lines."

His men saluted and turned to his orders. As they filed out into the rain, he quietly sang a line from song out of season.

"What fun it is to ride and sing
a slaying song tonight."

Under his cloak, he adjusted the weight of the great sword that he had obtained at the fight in the meadow. He'd found a scabbard for it among his men, and it hung now from his left hip. It pleased him that his stature kept the end from dragging the ground as he walked. He followed his last captain out, and mounted his black charger.
CHAPTER XLI

The people were mustering. Dramatically, they had chosen the highground east of the town—the last position held by Holweirn troops in that last battle of the invasion. Tasse stood by in the gathering gloom of twilight, and watched the ranks swell.

Over the past few hours, Tasse had come to understand that none of the Baron's soldiers were expecting anyone to be mounted besides themselves.

Twice, while riding with Dilock to raise the people around Bandale to arms, they had come quite loudly upon heavily-mounted men wearing metal scale or chest-plates with the crest of Naad across them.

Both times, it had been a pair of men, and both times the men had responded to the approaching horses as if they expected no threat. One man even waved.

Tasse saw their Naadien military crests and dealt with them accordingly.

The first fell by the sword. Tasse saw no reason to allow the man a chance to draw his own weapon—this was life or death, and as a bastard there had never been a field of honor for Tasse, only fields of battle.

The second man blundered in trying to escape and unhorsed himself in a grove of trees, breaking his neck.

The third, Tasse shot out of his saddle with the crossbow, while the man's partner was waving to them.

Tasse let that man live. He wasn't sure if the guy
hadn't really recognized him; maybe a former comrade from when Tasse was a mercenary.

That man had wheeled his horse and charged away toward the town.

The riderless horses were collected, and Dilock lifted a light crossbow for himself, as well as a small steel cap with scale-mail draped behind.

He asked Tasse why he didn't get a helm also, and Tasse told him.

"Armor off a dead man is bad luck."

"But horses from a dead man aren't?" Dilock laughed.

"Horses have their own luck," Tasse had said.

Dilock kept the helm anyway, and Tasse was glad of that. Bad luck or not, it could save the young rebel's life.

They had ridden with the captured horses to the next farm, and then the next, offering mounts to anyone who was willing to fight and could prove he could ride.

This last hour had been some hard and hectic riding, but now the people were turning out. Some had been dismayed by a rumor that some long-expected thousand Naadien troops had crossed the Vanderwal in Bissmuth, and had arrived in Bandale, but luckily, the runners from the town had assured the throng that there were only a few hundred. What excited them most was that the Baron himself was among them. For that, it seemed, people had turned out.

The excited boy that Wiskoff had questioned at the farm had told of over four-hundred who were willing to march
to fight for Poulden, but tonight's call was to defend their own homes. Tasse couldn't tell how many, but their numbers were far greater than that.

Most of the weapons were crude, but it would soon be night, and the fighting would happen in the dark over land they knew well. The coming struggle looked promising.

Tasse rode among them, standing in the stirrups with his sword held aloft. The dark man on the white horse quickly got their attention as the light failed.

"People of Bandale!" he called, "The Baron's soldiers are fierce and strong--but this is your land!"

A hearty cheer went up among the assembled men, and he smiled, amused that he had borrowed the line from a rallying speech he had heard years ago. That battle had ended in disaster. He continued.

"The Baron has been foolish not to attack us in daylight! His men don't know the land--but you do."

There was another cheer, stronger this time.

Good, he thought. Raw troops are one thing, but if I can make a mob out of them, then we've got something.

"The Baron's men are mounted, it's true--but their speed will be useless if they don't know where they are! YOU will know where THEY are by the rumble of their hooves!"

This cheer was the right pitch, he thought. It was time to cut them loose.

"Swarm over your land! Hunt the sound of their hooves! Pull them down! And spill their blood!"

He waved his great sword over his head, and spurred
the horse towards the town. The shout went up behind him, and he hoped that it would be a short fight. High spirits could turn tides, but they were also fleeting.

Ahead he heard horns blown. A charge.

Goshawk had guessed that the Poulden rabble would come toward Bandale in a single straggling body, a concentrated target that would be easy to locate.

Now, with the troops assembled, he reviewed his scouts again, and realized that reports of movement had been seen on nearly every side of town. This was no column of men coming in, it was a mustering of the peasants. One sentinel even claimed to have been attacked by light cavalry.

He sent his scouts out again in the failing light to try to find their main body. Once located, he could reach out and crush it.

His scouts left and were gone for a quarter of an hour. The light finally dimmed to full-fledged night. Willen Goshawk ordered a shop to be torched for light.

As his order was carried out, he caught wind of a cry of many voices--somewhere to the north-east, on the road that ran to the Vanderwal. It was what he was looking for, and he made his plan.

He divided his forces into four groups. Two were primarily mounted crossbows, and two were lance and spear.

He sent twenty-five of the crossbowmen at a slow canter down the road toward the sounds of the reveling. He ordered
a charge blown as they rode out, more for effect than anything else. As he knew where the peasants were, so his plan was helped by them knowing where he was.

This group was bait for the rabble, and their orders were to move quietly until they saw the enemy, shoot at their front lines, and then retreat just fast enough to keep slightly ahead of them, all the way back into town.

The second group of crossbowmen he set up on the river side of town square, in a position to shoot at the rebel left flank as soon as they were led into town.

The two lance and spear units, Willen ordered out of town, one on the north side where the river road comes into Bandale, and one a little farther east, in a position to sweep in after the rebels and attack them from behind as they came into town.

At Willen's signal, two blasts of his horn, the four mounted maniples would corral the enemy in town square, blocking them in and attacking them from four directions. Then they would cut them up.

The burning shop lit the town beautifully, and to the northeast, he could hear the sound of rabble growing nearer.

"Rabbits for the trap," he said cheerfully. He still sat astride the black charger, though he had yet to ride anywhere.

The burning of the shop lit the town well enough, but Tasse saw what Goshawk hadn't thought of; the silhouettes
of twenty-five riders approaching on the road.

He thought to take a shot in the dark, but decided instead to ride back to the men behind him and alert them.

"Riders on the road. Get off the road and keep moving on both sides," he spoke quietly but urgently, "Hit them when they're between you. Get off the road—"

Tasse rode back through the crowd, repeating his message, and parting the force into two wings. Before he could instruct the last troops in the column, he could hear the first of them attacking the riders behind him.

He heard innumerable bow-strings, shouts, groans, and then the unmistakable clash of weapons, the screams of horses, and then of men.

Then he heard the sounds of a dozen horses escaping back up the road, and shouts from their riders. He could see their black outlines riding away in the background, but in the foreground he saw the silhouettes of rebels by the score, clubbing the fallen, the dying, and the dead.

The procession continued, spirits even higher now that they had met their first opposition and won. The pace was quicker now, the men louder in their oaths.

The town grew closer and the burning shop grew brighter and brighter.

And now Willen could see that, in spite of the losses from the first group of crossbowmen, the trap was going to work. He'd lost nearly an eighth of his number, but
that was no more than a spider losing a leg.

He could see his quarry now, coming from the east in the light of the burning shop. They were a jumble of rebels, a crowd, a throng, running up the road as if desperate to be the first to die.

He was just raising the horn to his lips, savoring the mouthpiece as if it dripped warm brandy, and then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a frenzy of bright red.

At first it made him think that someone across the square had been bowshot, but when he looked, he saw Sebastian. That wry smile was on his face, and he was jerking his thumb over his shoulder to the north.

"Three-hundred-eighty-six rebels about two-hundred yards behind me, BARON!" the small northman yelled from across the main street. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, and with a yellow cat under his arm, Sebastian turned and went into the nearest ale-house.

Willen was left with the horn in his hand, and the decision of whether to signal the closing of his trap or not. Spring the trap now, and that trap could be surrounded by the second force of rebels who were just now coming down from the woods. If he didn't blow the horn at all, he wasn't sure what would happen.

He didn't blow the horn.

Within a minute, every street around the town's square was swept with combat.
CHAPTER XLII

At first it was impossible to tell which side was getting the better of the other, but Tasse knew not to try and judge a conflict by the first minutes. The best armed of the people went first into town, first with their pikes and swords raised, and then thrusting and swinging.

He was behind the front line, near the middle of the body of blood-hungry farmers, but he could see Naadien soldiers dismounting to meet the charge on foot at the end of the block.

Every man in the square, soldier and peasant alike, was lit on one side by the orange glow of the flaming shop. Crossbow volleys hissed into the tide of onrushing villagers, and many at the front went down. Their numbers quickly closed the gaps in the line, and the distance narrowed between them and the enemy.

Suddenly the Naadien crossbows were useless. The fighting was hand to hand.

Wisely, Tasse didn't ride far into town. He managed to rein aside, out of the surging river of men around and behind him. He found a calm spot to pull up and watched the battle from an alleyway.

If it had been open field fighting, he would have attacked at the head of the forces, as he had done so many times in his past, but he was a cavalryman, and these narrow streets, literally brimming over with hundreds of hostile men, were no place for a lone rider.
As it was, Tasse could see that at least half of the rebel force would never get a chance to draw blood--there simply wasn't enough of the enemy to go around.

Looking around him, Tasse saw that this didn't abate the shouting and cheering of the men still far from the fighting front. They were waving and shaking their mattocks and hoes and skinning knives.

Tasse imagined how each would pass on distorted accounts of this night, telling the legend to their grandchildren.

When the sun rises tomorrow, half of them will be telling of heroism in the front lines, Tasse thought as he looked back up at the fighting in the square. Only the dead and wounded will have proof.

"It's better to be a liar," he whispered.

New movement appeared in the square, as two dozen cavalrymen and at least that many riderless horses were driven like cattle into the center of the fight. They came from the north side of town, and to Tasse's surprise, the form of Pale Richard appeared around the corner, chasing after them with an aggressive line of pike and poleaxemen at his side.

The rebels from Poulden and those from Bandale had the Naadien soldiers enveloped and collapsing. Tasse realized that the fight was nearly over.

The alleyway beside him led down back-streets toward the river, and with crossbow in hand, Tasse reined into its shadows.

Considering that things were already burning in the town, and that the population had fear of troops from the
south, Tasse didn't want to bet that the bridge would last through the night.

It had been long since he'd last been in Bandale, but he picked quickly through the backways and emerged onto a rain-washed cobblestone street with the river beyond. Immediately, Tasse spotted the bridge to his right, about fifty yards upstream. Its strutted black outline was caught in the orange light from the flaming square.

Tasse made hard for it.

He quickly realized that the bridge wasn't empty. There was a man standing on the first planks with a black horse behind him, tied to the railing.

It was a big man, with wet blond hair and a white cloak. The imperfect light revealed the last detail of the scene to Tasse only a second too late. The crossbow seemed to appear in the man's hands as he turned toward Tasse and leveled it to his shoulder.

Willen had killed thirteen wretched farmers in the fighting in the square, but then he'd moved back to the bridge. He didn't want his soldiers trying to escape across it.

It was bad enough that this revolt had forced him to put his shock troops against peasants, but by God he wasn't going to let his men run from peasants.

He had already shot five deserters from their saddles when the sixth one came charging out of the darkness—only
this was no soldier of his. It was no armored man on a
warhorse, but a stocky dark man on a grey country-bred mount.

As he shot, Willen knew that his aim was off, but it didn't matter. The horse died with a bolt-shaft through it's throat. No great loss. Another damn plowhorse, he thought. As its collapsing legs broke on the street, Willen watched the rider catapult over the neck and strike the cobblestones out of control. The horse quickly came to rest, stone dead.

The rider stirred immediately, pressing himself up with one hand, and groping under the grey cloak, as if holding broken ribs.

"Well you certainly can take a spill, can't you," Willen boomed over the sound of the fighting up the street. He wasted no time as he began to re-span his bow. Willen was strong enough to pull the light bowstring back by hand. He turned for a second to pull a fresh bolt from the leather quiver on his saddle. He turned back to see the dark man standing, his grey cloak thrown back. He grinned hatefully down the length of a battered heavy crossbow.

"Kind of stupid aren't you," the dark man panted, "You kill a man's horse and turn your back?"

Willen kept his temper in check. His own bow was ready to kill if he could get a safe chance to aim.

"Who are you?" Willen snarled.

The dark man answered coldly, "Tasse van Poulder."

Goshawk looked surprised. "Van Poulder... Of the van Poulders formerly of Gallaston Castle?"
Tasse was a bit surprised by the question, so he answered with one.

"Who wants to know?"

"Willen Goshawk," the big man replied, "Governor of the land that you're standing on.

"I am the bastard son of servants, and I'll be sure to wipe my feet as I leave."

Tasse steadied the crossbow and shot.

He'd seen by Goshawk's movements that he was wearing a chestplate, and though Tasse's weapon could pierce armor at this close range, he aimed for the throat.

The man anticipated Tasse's shot, and in that shard of time, he jerked his own bow up to shoot.

The iron-tipped bolt from Tasse's heavy crossbow struck the large man's lighter bow, splintering into the stock, cracking the nut, and snapping its bowstring. Thus deflected, the bolt grazed past the Baron's face, cutting his cheek with the fletching.

"JERRIS' BLOOD!" Willen shouted in surprise and pain.

His crossbow fell from his hands in pieces.

Tasse started to re-span his bow, but he knew the crankquin would take more time than he had.

The big man grabbed at the scabbard at his waist, and Tasse dropped his crossbow on the wet street.

It had come to swordplay, and Tasse was now very glad it had stopped raining. He had hoped to simply dismount at the bridge and slip away in the dark, but now it seemed only a matter of time before some fleeing soldiers came
charging down on him to defend their Baron. Tasse had to beat him quickly if he was to beat him at all.

The men drew their swords at once, and both were surprised at the other's blade.

Goshawk had studied a half-dozen weapons to mastery in his teens, but since then, he had only seen bastard-swords hanging on the walls of armories.

Now he'd carried one for less than a week, and he was facing a man in single combat who was identically armed.

Tasse's shock was more profound. His enemy held the sword—his sword—the one that he hadn't held for nineteen years, but that he'd seen whirling away from him on a thousand nights since.

"It's a pity to dirty a Baron's sword with the blood of a bastard," Goshawk spat.

"Not to worry," Tasse rejoined, "Your blade will stay clean if you don't bleed on it."

They rushed at each other, and their steel clanged loudly in the wide street.

Tasse's parry had an upward angle against the stroke from the taller Goshawk. He circled two steps right, and feinted a blow at the Baron from the left.

Tasse got the reaction he was looking for, a dropping of the hands, and he reversed the motion of his blade, back right and straight in toward the chest.

The sound of tearing cloth was barely audible over the high-pitched scrape of sharp steel against plate.

Tasse cursed himself silently. The attack had been
forceful, but he'd wasted it on the strong armored chest.

Tasse threw himself away from the slashing counterstroke. A hair slower would have cost Tasse the use of his right arm.

Goshawk pursued him, dealing three powerful attacks that Tasse was only just able to deflect. Goshawk was strong, using the heavy blade one-handed as often as two.

Tasse pulled up, countered with an ineffective chop at Goshawk's right knee, and then both men circled slowly, waiting for the next pass.

"You're not bad," the man in white hissed as he shifted to the right in a strong aggressive stance.

"Tasse didn't answer. He just watched the opposite blade and the shifting weight of the man beyond it. In spite of Goshawk's strength, Tasse felt he could exploit any attack, so long as he saw it an instant before it came.

Moments ticked by, and both circled and waited. Tasse heard hooves in the street behind him... growing nearer.

Goshawk smiled. Then attacked.

Which Tasse expected.

The point of his old weapon flashed in the hands of his enemy, then darted in at his right side.

With a graceful turn of the wrist, Tasse trapped the attacking point between the strong of his blade and his quillon. The leverage was not enough to disarm Goshawk, so he attacked in another way. He pushed Goshawk's blade aside and kicked him hard in the stomach.

As the Baron wrenched his blade free and staggered
away, Tasse heard the hooves behind him speed up. He turned to see a lance coming at him.

He leaped in the horse's path, away from Goshawk, and batted the lance aside with his sword. With his left hand, he pulled the bit loose from the horse's jaw, and whacked the rump of the passing beast with the flat of his sword. The horse bolted off down the street, its rider powerless to stop it, his reins useless.

With the interloper gone, Tasse and Goshawk faced off again. Tasse wanted it finished quickly.

"Sorry about the boot to the gut, Baron," Tasse smirked, "but that's what you get if you fight with a bastard."

Goshawk growled and lunged, a fearful overhead stroke tearing the air down towards Tasse's face.

The force was great, but Tasse wasn't foolish enough to meet the blow. With a lightning smooth parry, he turned it aside, and continuing the motion, he opened a nine-inch sluice in the Baron's left thigh. Feeling the moment was still his, he brought another stroke in, bashing under the ribs, and painfully denting Goshawk's plate armor.

Goshawk countered fast, but Tasse dodged --then dodged the backstroke as well.

"Not much of a fight is it?" Tasse said. "Why don't you beg for mercy now, and save yourself the embarrassment of trying to finish me off."

Goshawk's leg was running with blood, and his face — still bled from the bowshot. Still, he didn't look weak, or tired—just angry. Even for Tasse, it was a fearful
sight.

Goshawk raised his sword and came for the smaller man.

Tasse backed away three steps, then launched himself at his assailant.

Strength was with Goshawk, but Tasse got there first. He beat aside the descending blade and cut the Baron's left arm as he ran past.

Willen Goshawk never got to turn around. Instead, he staggered forward from the force of the slicing blow to his left buttock.

Goshawk hopped around painfully, bringing a wide and deadly stroke with him, but there was no one there.

Then behind him, Willen heard a whisper, "This is for my horse."

Tasse delivered a swift overhead blow, cutting through the white cloak and splitting the armor between the Baron's shoulder-blades.

The sword fell with a clang, and the lifeless body followed.

Tasse drew one breath before stooping to wipe his sword on the tail of the fallen man's cloak.

So this was a Baron, he mused.

He sheathed his own sword, and bent to lift the other. It was slightly under the Baron's body, but Tasse pulled it up.

He turned the weapon under his eyes, and the old inscription in Bytorian letters gleamed gold from the firelight in the square.
His last name was spelled out on the crossguard, just as he remembered it. He'd come to this land for silver, but he would take home steel.

He wrapped the blade in his own cloak and tied it to the saddle of the black horse.

He was across the river before he could remember the fear he'd been anticipating. He turned west and rode.

It felt good to be going home.
SYNOPSIS

Even in the dim light of early morning, the Redlands were an endless sea of the rich brown from the common grasses and flowering scrub. Islands of grey granite could be seen thrusting above the rolling wastes, especially here, so close to the brink.

No horn sounded in the early hours to herald the lone traveler who had made his camp in the pass the night before.

Had someone been looking just a half-hour before sun-up, they would have seen a vertical grey streak, topped with black, emerge from the great cleft in the land that marked the head of the pass; the loins of the goddess Muutwok.

Normally, someone would have been watching, even this early, but this morning the night sentries slept on their dusty blankets. The ground out in front of the outpost had proven too tempting, and they had bedded down.

The grey and black streak grew and broadened, slowly coming to resemble a man.

The sentries hadn't come to Redgate with the best of recommendations. Their captain at Fort Brach had sentenced them to a tour of duty in the highlands, after a seven-foot vampire had attacked them. They had fought desperately, but as the nemesis fled, it had stolen the horse from their guard station. Their captain hadn't believed them.

As minutes passed, the grey form grew ever nearer, his cloak dusting his knees in time to his slow gait. Over his right shoulder, the handles of two great swords were
visible. His hair was darker than night, and his rough face was plainly framed below by matching beard and mustache.

Of course Tasse saw the two men asleep at their posts, where a stranger might overlook them. The most comfortable spots for neglecting that sentry post hadn't changed in the years that he'd been in and around the outpost.

He approached as quietly as he could; to surprise them if he knew them, or just to sneak past if he didn't.

Tasse’s shoulders ached. Some of it was from sleeping on rocks, but mostly from wearing his hauberk and swords all the way up the pass.

He was foot-sore as well. He'd given the black charger to Barth, and accepted no horse in trade. It was the least he could do after the gift-horse that Barth had given him the night of his escape from Kilrush.

While he was stopped at Fort Brach, his old friend told him that no whisper had been heard from Redgate about their absent captain. Valsek had kept his secret well, even though the month Tasse had given himself was nearly over.

Casually, yet with the stealth of a panther, Tasse walked up on the sleeping sentries.

One was sleeping face down, but the other Tass recognized. It was Val, from "the crevice" at the bottom of Bale pass. The other, with his tangle of dark hair, and his hand on the stock of a crossbow, had to be Max.
He let them sleep, and passed on into the outpost that he knew so well.

The courtyard was quiet, but he caught the scent of pipe-smoke as he passed the stables. He paused near the doorway and heard a low, quiet conversation. Tasse couldn't make out the words, but the voices were those of Hulther and Valsek. He didn't disturb them, but looked across the yard to the barbican.

Nearly a month before, he had left a marriage proposal on the table in the barbican. Now he was at once eager and apprehensive to learn the woman's reply.

If he found the blade was honed, he was married.

If he found it blunt and tarnished—

He tried not to think about it, as he crossed the courtyard to the heavy door of the barbican.

Some say that Wokind women have premonitions, but Tasse never held any belief in it. All the same, just as he was about to try the door, it opened.

The bluish light of early morning shone on Lirra, lighting her dark green eyes. Her hair was unbraided, and she wore a dark robe of off-black wool.

Tasse recognized the robe as his own, as she stepped back to let him in.

She closed the door quickly behind him, and Tasse tried in vain to see anything that might be on the table in the darkness. All he could make out were shapes and shadows. To his surprise, Lirra went immediately to the stairs and moved silently up them.
"Come to bed, Tasse," was all she said.

It was the first time that he'd heard the highland tongue in a long time, and it was particularly sweet from her voice. She disappeared on the stairs into the bedroom above.

Tasse still didn't know anything about his marital status, and the suspense was infuriating. He understood with a smile; she was getting back at him for the suspense he had caused her. He had been gone a long time.

He made for the fireplace, kicking at the night's coals and groping for more wood. He got the fire going with surprising speed, and then he went to the table.

There it was, lying out of its scabbard.

At first glance, he could see the edge. He didn't need to test it, and it was well that he didn't. A touch of the blade would have cut his thumb badly.

The blade was honed to razor sharpness.

"Tasse?" Lirra called.

"Coming."

He quickly sheathed the short-sword and hung it on its peg at the rounded side wall.

Not the blade I should have proposed with.

He slipped the two great swords from his shoulder, and drew the plainer of the two. It was the one that he'd had when he left Redgate. It was the one that he'd come to the highlands with in the beginning.

With it lightly balanced in his right hand, Tasse laid
the great blade gently on the table where the short-sword had been.

He hung the family blade in its scabbard, on a peg near the fire. There would be little use for it for a long time.

Tasse mused that, perhaps someday, there would be a child who could lift it. A child who would require instruction from a master in the art of wielding a bastard sword.

With a faint smile, Tasse turned to climb the familiar narrow stair.

He went happily to join his wife.