

DARKNESS OVER MIRHOLD

by

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The wars between Karsten and Estcarp were over, leaving behind its orphaned, landless wreckage living on the charity of our new duke Louvain. At least the boys were being trained as men-at-arms. For dowerless maids of little beauty there was only the stifling daily round of weaving, spinning, sewing, and making ourselves useful while we waited to see how Louvain would dispose of us. At times the hope of escape made my heart beat high; but at times that same heart pounded wildly in terror of what might lay ahead. In better times, many of us would have been for the shrine of Gunnora, but now the abbeys were full of girls with no place to go, and the good Dames were refusing those who had any place at all, however drear.

I sat by the window that overlooked the garden. By straining my eyes could see beyond the walls to the world outside. I stifled a yawn before refilling my spindle.

A gasp and a squeal behind me told me our lord duke had come into the room. His housekeeper Annis, who had charge of us, bustled up to me, beaming. "Well, Derris! You'll be smiling soon enough, I'll wager. The Lord Rovagh of Mirhold by the sea has come seeking a wife, and it's you he asked for especially. Would you but put this on, and I'll dress your hair." She held out a rich turquoise

gown that had once belonged to the Duke's lady, made over by many hands before it had come to me.

My mouth gaped open like a witling's; I had the wit to close it and nod obedience. Me? For I am, as I said, landless and dowerless, small and thin, with the overly fragile features of the Old Race, who are not well liked in Karsten. "Derris is an old maid and not yet sixteen," one of the maids had said unkindly, and I have to agree it is true.

Then my heart beating in fear again started, though all maids come to this, and few have ever seen the men they wed.

Obediently I followed our duke downstairs to his hall, where a warrior stood waiting. His sturdy body seemed a forced overgrowth on bones as fine-drawn as my own, but of long standing. His clothing was simple leather and homespun, well worn and stained. His face was seamed and weatherbeaten, and scarred as if someone had most earnestly attempted to destroy it. He carried a heavy ornate sword and dagger of a style favored in my grandsire's day. His dark hair was starting to turn gray, and he looked on me with eyes as bleak as a winter sea.

"You did not say she was a child," he told the Duke abruptly.

"If she does not suit, there are other maids for you and other men for her," the Duke said with indifference, naming two. I knew neither of them, but the other man's lips grew tight and at last he said, "She suits me well, if I am agreeable to her."

I did not understand at all, but something in me liked him beyond all reason, though not yet as a woman likes a man. "My lord," I ventured.

"Rovagh of Mirhold," he answered, and looked with a question unspoken at the Duke. Seeing no satisfaction, he said, "My hold is hard beset and the way is long; let us saddle my lady's horse and pack her things and see it done."

A man of few words, this Rovagh, but those to the point.

I opened my mouth to say I had no horse, and owned nothing but what I wore at the time. Annis trod heavily on my toe and Rovagh gave me a glance of warning, so I stood silent while a bundle was fetched and an aging, but sturdy, mare brought from the stables. The Duke led us before a priest; we clasped hands; the words were quickly said. Annis threw a gray-hooded cloak around my shoulders and kissed me once for luck; I was bundled into a rickety horse litter; and we set off.

I tried not to let my new lord see me leaning out to peep through the curtains as far as I dared, but when the sun had risen high in the sky, he called a halt. "I thought you might like to rest, madam," he said, as brusquely as he had spoken to the Duke. "Or to relieve yourself." He indicated a clump of bushes, and I stifled a laugh. No courtier, this, but I found myself liking him more and more.

I returned to see his scowling at the litter. "That thing is to your dignity, madam," he addressed me with a frown, "but we can pack it if you'd rather ride."

"Gladly," I said, suiting action to words, which both pleased and surprised him. We made a simple meal and he seemed to study me briefly.

Then, with a face so dour my heart sank, he said, "I am not noble, but a wandering blank shield, baseborn. I came upon Mirhold one night seeking only shelter. It was bravely but poorly defended by a band of housefolk and farmers; after much talk we struck a bargain, my sword for their shelter. Within a week they were calling me their lord. But the hall had no lady.

"Look you," he continued directly, "many a man would take the woman he liked best to wife and be done with it. Or, if any woman there, kitchen maid or herds woman, had taken the reins in her own hands, she would have been lady there even as I am lord. There were none. Though," he added with a semblance of a smile, "a few thought themselves fit for the office once I was established, and tried to gain it through my favor." Which was not the phrase he used, but one so coarse, and yet so vivid, I could not con-

ceal my laughter. Now he must be sure I was no proper maid! Yet for all his rough words, his grammar and diction spoke of gentle rearing somewhere.

"So I rode out, hoping to gain a sensible widow—with poor eyesight," he added, so harshly it took a while to realize it was a jest, if a bitter one.

"You asked for me," I said then. "Why?"

"I could see those others serving, breeding, and keeping what other men would have considered their place. With you it seemed a waste; then I thought you might be one to rule a hold in ruins." He cleaned up every scrap of his leavings and his horse came over to nuzzle me.

I patted the great roan stallion and said carefully, "If there is anything else I should know, Lord Rovagh, best I learn it now and have time to think on the matter. How ruined?"

"Utterly. You will be expected to rebuild it," he said, and I could not tell if he jested or not! "Lads are scarce; if you wish heirs, you may need to hold your nose and ask your husband to your bed. And"—now I knew he was utterly in earnest—"I have lived by the sword all my life," he said bleakly, "and there is evil on my soul."

"Evil?" I asked, remembering how little I knew of him.

Quietly he said, "I am of the berserker kind, and if ever you see a rage coming on me, do not wait to see if foam comes from my mouth. Run for your life."

I fought terror that afternoon over and over. A ruined hall, jealous women, and a husband subject to fits of madness; almost I longed for the stifling safety of Louvain's walls. Then I would look at him and feel no more fear, but only a wish to take away the pain that lined his face. But he closed his silence in about himself and said no more.

As twilight came on and we looked for a place to stop, he said abruptly, "Are you child, or woman?"

"Woman, though still maiden," I said, trembling. I knew what marriage was about, if only from being told, and would do as I must in this, as in all things. But he seemed lost in thought, and at last said, "I doubt they taught you in

Karsten to defend yourself, but this is the Border. There is a bow and a shortsword in my pack; after supper let me begin to teach you."

So we spent the evenings at arms practice as if I were a lad, or his shield-mate, and then he spread out a bedroll and lay down on half of it without a word. But he dreamed ill dreams that night, crying out in horror and anguish. Then he stiffened, jerked a little, and fell back senseless into the furs.

I slept poorly that night, watching for fear he might have a fit of madness and lash out, or that one of the small convulsions that had raced through him might become great, but no more happened. At dawnlight when he woke he growled, "I beg your pardon, madam, I have bad dreams." A stone in the hilt of his sword glared a baleful, shifting yellow. His thumbnail picked at it as at a sore. I begged a look; somewhat amused, he handed over the weapon. The stone was carved into the distorted semblance of a human face, and I disliked it on sight. Rovagh saw my scowl and matched it, the scars turning him into a gargoyle. "Ugly," he agreed. "Madam, you would do well to get used to *ugly*. How does Manslayer feel in your hand?"

Men and their names for things! It took two hands to give it back. "An heirloom of your house?" I asked, then remembered he had called himself baseborn, though his speech and manner too often belied it.

Sheathing the sword deftly, he answered me, "It belonged to the first man I ever killed, and when we meet in Hell, I shall most assuredly ask him, for I have wondered, too." He began to roll up the furs while I packed our other belongings. Then, his voice still raw with ancient outrage, added, "There was a lord who humiliated and terrorized the houses roundabout, including my mother's. I was very proud of riding out, a wild and angry boy, to teach him a lesson. Rebellion caught like fire in wild grass, and we rode home in triumph."

He covered the ashes of the fire and stared off at the hills

that lay before us, a faint blue line on the southern horizon. "She acted as if I'd sealed my own damnation that day. Years later, a shield-mate asked if that had been my father's sword, and suddenly all was clear."

I stared dumbfounded. "You did not know," I blurted out.

He nodded and saddled his horse Blood, saying only, "We shall not ride through Falconer country, but eastward."

For myself, I was enjoying even the hard and lumpy ground on which we had slept, the plain coarse food, the unaccustomed soreness in my muscles, and the cold wind that had begun to scour my face. Like a child released from the schoolroom to run and play, I watched eagerly to see what was around the next bend in our path or behind the trees that grew in sparse clumps in this grassland. Birds flew above us in the skies, seeking their trees; small wild animals crossed our paths. Then the wind turned to rain, which soon began to pour heavily. We were drenched before we reached a grove of sheltering trees. Lightning flared all around us, and thunder crashed about our heads.

He spread his cloak to cover us both, and I did the same. Thus double-shielded, with his arm sheltering me, I felt an unaccustomed warmth. Who since I was small had held me so? At the same time I was very much aware of the man-smell of horse and leather, road grime and sweat, hints of metal and old blood and wine. It was both disturbing and reassuring; why, I could not say.

We stood there until the rain softened and the clouds grew lighter, then rode on. The moment passed, and I found myself missing it. Small birds began gossiping again, and grasslands gave way to foothills and bushes. We rode higher and higher into the mountains, pressing on hard and long, and slept that night as we did before. Then on the next day the animals, who I would expect to be weary, quickened their pace so eagerly I was not surprised when we came late that night to a hold as ruined as Rovagh had said it was.

By moonlight and hastily brought torches I could see where stout timbers braced the walls of about half the old hall, now freshly thatched. Huts and bowers lined the inner walls of the keep. The place was better defended than built; we approached it along a cliff-top path, and even before we had seen it, Lord Rovagh gave a signal which had been answered. Armed men escorted us in.

Sleepy housefolk wrapped in blankets, hair still unkempt from sleep, stumbled from hall and bower to greet us. A plump woman in a handsome homespun robe peered at us shortsightedly. Her face glowed like a candle when she saw Rovagh; my heart sank. Behind her a child cried out, "Is this to queen it over my sister?" A younger woman cuffed her into silence and minced forward, then curtsyed low. "Oh, my dear, how marvelous to have someone of gentle blood to talk to at last," she trilled. I hoped my dismay did not show in my face as Rovagh presented them all to me, including child, lover, and pretender.

Before entering the hall, we went by the stables to check on our horses. There, two men busily wiped down their lord's warhorse, while my Starshine stood in her lather. One of the men rushed up, babbling apologies. Without a word, Rovagh backhanded him into the dirt, then took the currycomb from his hand and began to groom my horse himself. Ashamed, I took the comb from him, for she was mine to do. He left, relieved, dragging the offending stableman after him. I finished and found my way back to the hall, which was empty, but for sleeping housefolk. I found a bench and sat down to wait for Rovagh and fell asleep in my turn.

Rovagh came in, woke me, and showed me to a curtained place in the back of the hall. As he pulled off his boots there, I said, "She loves you."

"Liregan?" He looked startled. "Madam, I would not put such a slight on you your first day here. I was in the barracks with the men; there is much to do. She is not one to try to upset your authority; if any others do, they are yours to deal with."

"Having seen your punishments for disobedience," I said thoughtfully.

"If you were among my men-at-arms, I'd not spare you, either, as you'll learn on the practice floor. But maids and women—this is why I needed a lady, and quickly. But your pardon for the wait untended in the hall, madam."

Tears filled my eyes. "Madam. My lady. Is it to be so all our days? Do we live apart?"

Slowly he said, "You do not desire me. And I, while I have known many women, know very little of maidens."

He was afraid! It was strange to see shyness in a man three times my age, who had seen more in any month than I had all my life, but there was no mistaking it.

"I have not had the chance," I said, determined that all should happen as it must despite my fears and ignorance and lack of desire.

He smiled as if it hurt his face, and I'll wager it did. "Close your eyes, madam, and remember—with any new skill, the first time is awkward, but ease comes with long practice, this I assure you." And with this old arms-master's advice did our married life begin.

Days were harder than nights, for I had much to learn. I did not know the customs or the people, but their disputes were brought before me. The women were working in the fields and barns long before sunup, that we might eat; the men stood guard and did the work of draft beasts. I found it senseless to send Liregan from her clotheoom to the fields while I spun and wove in idleness, and so was out there, barefooted, skirts kirtled to my knees, planting, and openly learning of the older women even as I had them call me Lady Derris. My old guardians would be shocked.

They would have been even more shocked if they had seen my mind in our rough bedchamber, for Rovagh had been true to his word. The first time, he had simply held me when the thing was done, a comfort to a frightened maiden; slowly we grew bolder, until I had at last acquired a most unmaidenly taste for what we did. But that, too,

had its darker side; as he said, he had bad dreams. He would sometimes cry out in anguish; at others, growl in a feral bloodlust that terrified me until I reasoned that it had root in memory somewhere; or he would sob like one forever damned. At times small convulsions raced through him; like his people, I learned to dismiss this as an old affliction of his, though it troubled me we had no healer to help.

One night, foam began to come from his mouth. I remembered his warning to run, but could not. He did me no harm, though, but lay there thrashing as if fighting with demons, which I already knew he did. It was dreadful to look on, but so was childbirth and so were farm accidents, and I had helped with both within a month. But how I longed for a wise woman to help me and explain such matters!

The women proved no more problem than most. Liregan, at ease in her clotheoom, deferred to me outside. Her little sister Noriel, sharp-tongued and with the eye of an appraiser, was another matter. I had the wit to see that if she had been ten years older when Rovagh came, he would have looked no farther for a lady to rule his hall. I showed her I meant her sister no harm, and dealt with her fairly; soon, she became my strong ally, with reservations.

Ranielle, the lady of gentle blood, was amazed that I did not lay idle and demand service or protect my own beauty. She was sure I was some farmer maid Rovagh had found in the fields. "Why is she not lady in my place?" I asked Rovagh idly one night. "Her great-grandmother was some sort of half-sister to the then-Lady of Mirhold, as she often tells us, and she has all the airs and graces."

"A commander must be seen as such or his men will not obey when needed. But when raiders came, she would hide in the back and scream."

How very like her! How like him, too, to judge her as a soldier first.

"Besides," he added with a snort, "no lady of her refinement could desire an uncouth wanderer reeking of the bar-

racks, with a face to frighten children. She ran screaming from my bed when I took up her ill-considered offer."

"She does not understand your affliction," I said flatly. "Neither do I, and could wish I were healer-trained."

He all but turned to stone. "The gods have punished me for deeds done in blood, and I endure it. Good night, madam."

I had seen no deeds done in blood, beyond the common. It was a lawless land; vagrants and thieves abounded. Many were only starvelings wanting a meal; those we fed and sheltered if they would work. Once, soon after I came, one of Rovagh's own men was caught stealing from our stores. He begged not to be driven away. Rovagh put him to the lash and gave him stable duty, then went around all day in a bleak and dour mood.

I could not put hungry children to the lash. I could solemnly assure them, by my oath, they would all be fed even as we were—if nobody stole their rations—and take their oaths in return, to no longer steal. Those who still did were too often those who knew all about hunger, but nothing of trust, except that it was always betrayed.

It was mine to choose who must leave, and who could stay. To one I offered a piece of wilderness land, to work as she chose and to eat of as she saw fit; what she wanted from us beyond that, she could trade for or work for. It was her son who warned us of the next band coming to our door. Soon I was making this offer more and more, until we were ringed with smallholders whose families were better sentries even than our own.

When our visitors were bandits in earnest, Rovagh would call up his men and any of the farmers roundabout who could fight, and he always beat them back with the efficiency of one who knows his trade well. I had many a wound to tend and many a fallen man—or woman—whose soul we must send to their gods.

Then I had my own deed in blood to do. I was restless one night and heard footsteps in the hall; the sound not of

someone tending to her needs, but of stealth. Silently I rose from our bed, taking in hand the boy's shortsword Rovagh had given me. There by the kitchens was Farco, the soldier Rovagh had whipped for stealing that spring. In the dim firelight it seemed to me his face had a ratlike look, and I saw him stuffing the last of the dried winter fruits into his mouth.

Instead of confronting him, I raised my voice to call our people, who tumbled from their beds to see what I beheld. Liregan put small tinder on the fire, so it blazed high enough to see clearly. The cook emptied Farco's cloak. There inside was not only a cheese and some bread, but three weapons and as much jewelry as could be found in our hungry hold. There was a great clamor as this or that piece was identified; I held no trial.

Before them all I had him stripped of his shirt and laid on the whip myself; one stroke for the children who went hungry, one for the mothers who labored to feed them, one for the women who rose by moonlight to work and laid down long after dark, one for the men wounded or killed defending this house from such as him, and one for those I should have trusted and didn't, or should not have and did. Then I stripped him of all but those things I knew he owned and drove him from our door in the middle of the night. He might go to certain death, or to prey on those weaker than himself, or to Kolder itself, for all I cared.

Then, when the matter was almost forgotten, the child of one of our refugees settled on a piece of wilderness land came racing on foot to our door. When he had caught his breath he said, "Riders. Lots of them! Mother has taken out her bow and gone hiding in the woods and said, tell you, and I have to get Da." He meant the man-at-arms his mother had married shortly after settling here, the only father he had ever known.

Quickly Rovagh gathered our men and sent a rider to muster the outlying farmers, and they rode out. And didn't come back.

By nightfall I had armed and gathered my people, in-

cluding Liregan and the cooks and little Norrie. We wet down the thatch and moved all the hay and straw into stone barns. Old Moryk, our crippled fletcher, sat in the inner hall making arrows and advising us on the tactics of his own fighting days. The farm lad Harrel handed the arrows to the defenders on the roof of the hall.

When we rebuilt the hall past the old front wall and door Rovagh had put in, we left it standing as an inner wall to give us two rooms inside. This inner wall, strong enough for an outer, would be our last line of defense now. We waited near the trapdoor leading to the roof, all but the two of us who were sentry on the roof itself.

Halfway into the night, when we were all weary of waiting, frightened, and beginning to slack off, the bandits struck with a howl like a wolf pack. Ranielle screamed. I slapped her face, hard. "If you want to be gang-raped by them, keep that up," I snapped. "If not, fight." I shoved her bow into her hands. Hunting small birds was a ladylike art that developed good aim; I left it at that. There were several dozen of the raiders, as ragged and filthy of person as any vagrant; foul-mouthed and malicious in their taunts. All but two were men; those two had a wild-eyed and mis-used look that made me shudder.

They rode around our walls screaming, tossing torches into the courtyard as if in hopes of setting the place afire, but we had forestalled them. Then they brought a heavy log to batter down the gates, which I knew they could do. Two stout cooks set out kettles of hot fat and lye that we had been saving to make soap, and kept them ready until the bandits broke in and came in range.

Then Ranielle drew back her bow and took aim at the rearmost bandit. Her long shot failed; her next did not, but found its mark. I all but groaned to see that the bandits had the discipline—or the indifference—to ignore this diversion. Ranielle kept picking them off, hitting more often than missing, as coolly as if at practice, or shooting small birds for pride in the sport.

It was not enough. As the first of the bandits came within

reach of my own bow, the gates went down, and they rode in with a wild yell of victory. The front door would be next.

The cooks handed up the kettles. My women and I took grim pride in toppling them over right where the scalding, stinking stuff would get the frontmost. We could only do that a few times before our supplies were exhausted, but my people in the kitchen were boiling water as fast as they could fill the kettles. The bandits had not reached the well yard yet.

The raiders screamed in a most satisfying manner as we scalded them, and one snarled, "Get those wenches!" Ranielle, outraged, found a loose stone of great weight on the roof and dropped it on his head with a sickening crash; he fell instantly. Now we were all shooting our arrows as rapidly as a child could hand them to us, and many of them hit their mark that night for all our fear and inexperience.

The raiders brought their huge log into place to batter down the front door of the hall while the cooks carried off Ranielle with an arrow through her thigh. Poor Ranielle, who cared so for her skin and her beauty! Then I thought of Liregan, armed with sword and spear in the inner room, too shortsighted to be of use as an archer, and of all the other artisans and servants who were forced to be warriors this day. It was heavy on my mind.

We used the last of the hot water on the raiders, and by now too few of them were left outside to be worth shooting at. I dropped my bow and took sword in hand and dropped through the trapdoor to the hall below. Somewhere in the night came the unmistakable sound of a war horn, answered by another as if two groups were closing in. I knew too much to be heartened by it; one of Rovagh's favorite bluffs was the pretense that reinforcements were on the way.

The raiders knew it, too, as they hewed their way in past our few defenders in the outer hall toward the inner. We could open the backdoor and let them batter down the front to find nothing, and their momentum might carry them outside entirely. Risky, but we had practiced this ma-

never since the day the second wall went up. Reluctantly I gave the order. Two women opened the backdoor.

Riders poured through it. I had gambled and lost. Sick at heart I picked up my sword, only to begin to dimly realize that the fighter who had come up behind me was a woman in a ragged homespun skirt. Then I heard Rovagh's voice over the din, an odd and frightening note in it. In the darkness his gargoyle stone set in Manslayer's hilt glowed an uncanny yellow.

With a roar such as I had only heard before in his dreams, he fell upon two men who were grabbing Norrie. Growling like an animal, he swung his sword with inhuman strength and severed one bandit's arm. The other let loose the child, who ran for the rear, found a kitchen cleaver, and slowly came up front again.

Some of the bandits were still looting, or trying to have their way with armed and angry women; others were in full and panicky retreat. Rovagh went after any he could see, leaving none alive. His mouth was working and foam came from it as he tore Norrie's remaining captor apart with his bare hands. His eyes glowed as yellow as his sword.

"My lord!" I cried at last, coming to my senses. "Enough! Nobody is left but fallen men and the wounded, and this one is dead already."

He turned those unseeing eyes on me and turned toward me. Stuffing my fist in my mouth, I backed away in some haste. Then Ranielle, Gunnora bless her, thrust a bucket of water into my other hand. It was snow-melt, as cold as ice. With one field-hardened arm, I swung it back and tossed it over him as if over two fighting dogs. Norrie handed me another and I gave him a second dose.

Rovagh straightened up, dazed, and shook his head as if to clear it. Norrie started crying. Rovagh put his head in his hands and sank to the floor on his knees. I think he was weeping silently. Somewhere behind us, Ranielle was screaming.

"Liregan, silence that woman," I ordered, wiping Norrie's tears and helping her out of the ruin around us. She

stared at her dead captor and whispered, "Lady Derris, what ails our lord?"

In as soft a whisper I said, "He warned me of his battle-madness; now we have seen it." I was shaking, and very, very cold. "And his rage has brought on an old sickness of his; let's get him to bed," I told the gaping housefolk around me. Swallowing my terror, I went with him.

There was no sleeping that night. I kept watch for fear he would hurt himself or, in his madness, me, for I had seen he had not known me. But the rage had left him and he slept as one dead through two sunrises before waking. He seemed very weak when he woke, and in a mood so black and dour nobody dared break it. He washed his mouth with water and ate very little, and said nothing to anybody. It was for me to see the wounded tended and the dead properly sent to their gods. He worked on clearing away the wreckage as much as he could, which was very little. Then he stood by the door staring at the stars a long time before coming in.

He sat on the edge of our bed fully clothed, his face in his hands, and then said, "Now you know."

"Yet, you saved Norrie and all of us from beasts in men's forms," I offered. He nodded, but when he had lifted his head, there was such despair on his face as I had never seen before. The gem in his swordhilt seemed to be laughing, and I shoved it away. "Damned thing!" I cried out.

"Both of us," he said more quietly, and, turning his back on me, made ready for bed. He cried out in the night that night, those sobs of hopelessness I had not understood before. Now I had some small idea where they came from, but there was nothing I could say or do. This was between himself and the shadows of evil that had haunted him before.

I went to a grove on the edge of our land that had always been a peaceful, welcoming place to me, and there took my troubled heart. "Gunnora, protector of women," I prayed with tears under my eyelids, "take this trouble from my

husband, ease his heart and by this ease mine." I stood waiting for an answer, but heard only the stern order: *Go back and be lady.*

I was doing that now!

I walked back to our hall, and there a lone rider waited. He seemed to be a slender youth, beardless, clad in mail and leather, armed with a sword suited to his size and weight. His face was pallid and his hair silver-white; his eyes were fogged gray. An ancient buried memory screamed a warning of fear and hate; yet, the lad himself seemed only haggard and driven, like so many these days.

The people named me to him; he showed no surprise at my simple clothing and sunburned face, but said, "Lady Derris, tell Lord Rovagh that Samiel of Seven Hills is here to collect a debt."

I found Rovagh in the stables. When I told him, his face turned to ashes. Yet I could swear a great and terrible relief was on it. "Send him in," he said, pulling on a shirt and washing his hands. "To the hall."

Samiel of Seven Hills seemed surprised to find a mortal man, exhaustion carved across his features, but rallied when Rovagh asked gently, "I heard they all died at Seven Hills, lad. How is it you bear the name?"

The boy's lip curled cruelly. "The treachery of one of your own men, butcher of Estcarp, who heard a wee babe crying in the rubble and saved me out alive. It was said I am of sorcerer's blood and ensorceled him to keep and care for me, but neither of us regrets it."

Rovagh closed his eyes and said, "Where is this foster father of yours now, that you came alone on such a mission?"

"I will never tell you that!" The boy shouted in a voice sharp with fear. "The quest was mine alone." But he seemed to doubt what he saw even as he spoke, and I could almost pity him.

Rovagh nodded. "Then tell your tale before Lady Derris, so that she may hear your charges."

He gaped at me as if this were clean against decency, but

then began angrily. "It was a village of Alizon, butcher, and I know your kind have no love for Alizon. But they were not warriors. They were farmers and weavers and fishers such as you have here. And *he*," the boy addressed me, "rode in with his army like a mad beast, putting everything that moved to the sword, and the torch, and the torture; and would you care to hear how my sister died?"

I could guess, but listened anyway, appalled, as Samiel spoke of rape and murder and horror beyond belief. Rovagh had risen from his seat and knelt before the lad, head raised, looking like a fallen wolf. "Vengeance is yours," he said in a husky voice, "and it is yours to take. I only ask one thing: Lady Derris had no part in this, and may be with child. Do her no ill, but vow to take care of her as I would, and all you ask is yours."

The lad gaped witlessly, and began to laugh uncontrollably. "You would have me take your daughter to wife?" he demanded, as if this were the strangest jest of all.

"Not my daughter, but my lady." Then he lowered his head in bitter, total surrender.

He would not have me without a fight, nor Rovagh's life in such a manner. Rovagh had laid down his sword; I now took it up. The yellow stone pulsed with its evil glow. In my head it hummed with an ever-increasing pitch until my head would all but burst. Then a rage I never knew possessed me as I looked into the lad's face and saw in it a hated Hound of Alizon. His kind had destroyed my land and left me orphaned, had ruined our land, had torn Karsten apart with civil war. He was here to kill all I had and all I ever loved and then take me like a prize of war or a stolen cow, and take his vengeance on me, too. I would not endure it! He was a thing of evil and I would destroy him like a venomous serpent! Growling like a wolf, I advanced upon the boy, sword in both hands, point aimed at his heart.

"Cold god of death!" Rovagh gasped, rose quickly, and spun around to take the thing from my hand. He wrenched it from me, madwoman's strength though I had, and flung

it across the room to come to rest beside the fire. A shock of cold water ran down my hair and gown and there was Norrie with the bucket. She had doused me as I had her lord several days before. And for the same cause?

“Demon sword,” the boy from Alizon said softly. “How did you come by it?”

“By parricide,” Rovagh answered with the same quiet awe. “Will you stand and fight, or take your blood-right now?”

I stepped between them. “There will be no blood shed here until we settle this matter of his sword.” They stared at me as if our old mastiff Sudden Death had issued a command. In the voice of authority Rovagh had taught me I snapped, “Am I lady of this hall, or not? Sit down, both of you, and you, Samiel, what do you know of demon swords? It is no secret that my lord has been possessed for some time—no, Rovagh, is it more shameful than massacre in cold blood? Samiel of sorcerer’s blood, can you loose whatever spell binds him?”

Samiel breathed deeply. “It is a powerful and dangerous thing, and might kill him.”

I snorted rudely. “The life you were ready to take on sight, and he was willing to lay down with such relief, is not that precious to either of you. Can you?”

Samiel nodded and took off his helmet. Long silver hair spilled out from under it. He took off his mail shirt, and a softer form appeared under his worn linen shift. No wonder he had laughed at the thought of taking me to wife! The sorceress in boys’ clothing took a blue stone from under her robe while I had Liregan clear the hall.

The wind began to blow, and thunder crashed outside the hall. The sword hummed and glowed. “If you have silk, wrap it,” Samiel said in a faraway voice. There went my wedding shift. I did so gladly, careful not to touch the hilt. She called for a flagon of rainwater, a brand from the fire, a stone from our land, and a holder for the herbs she would burn. “If this works,” she warned me, “it will not change a cruel man to a kind one.”

"Who said he was cruel, outside of his madness?" I demanded.

"The man you whipped from your door in midsummer," she said, frowning at the herbs she poured into a silver vessel.

I used a phrase I did not know the old soldier had taught me. "He was a thief and a liar and half the house caught him with his hands in our rations for the winter," I replied. "Go to it!"

Samiel raised her hands upward and approached the sword. It glowed and writhed like a snake trying to escape a bird. She laid out the elements in a square before it, then drew a circle thrice around the sword. Slowly she walked the circle three times herself. "By the earth that gives us bread; by the fire that gives us life; by the air that gives us breath; by the water that cleanses all, begone, begone, begone," she chanted, and then went into an obscure tongue I did not know.

She stared into her blue stone, which glowed and pulsed like the yellow one in Rovagh's sword. Thunder came closer and lightning flashed outside our rooftree. Rovagh came closer and closer to the sword, as if it drew him to it. His eyes were glazed over and his motions jerky, as a poorly made puppet. I saw his lips begin to work as in his madness.

Samiel stripped the silk from the sword and pressed it into his hands; then with great courage, took those hands in her own. "Be gone," she said again. A wall of blue flame shot up to encompass us. Yellow light came flooding from the swordstone in a spreading wave, and where the blue light met and matched it, both died away together. Then the blue light flared around Rovagh's head and he fell senseless to the ground, body stiffened and eyes unseeing. Samiel breathed out softly and added a pinch of another herb to her censer. It was one I had seen growing around here, though it was not common, and I noted its form and color. Streaks of lightning flashed around him and then were still. "Breathe deeply," she said quietly. "Breathe

deeply." She sat beside him until he fell into a normal sleep, which he did with amazing speed. Like sisters, Samiel and I sat beside him and watched till dawn.

"This was a spell-stone," Samiel said at breakfast. It was skimpy, for we were still hard-pressed; yet, hospitality was still ours to give. She held the stone, now dead and quiet, that Norrie had pried out of the swordhilt with her tools after the banishing. It lay on the table between us, dead and ugly.

"Someone thought it would make the sword a better weapon," she added in disgust, "the wearer a better fighter. It inflames the passions. Did you ever go berserk without it in your hand?"

"Not to my knowledge," he answered, and shook his head. "I have tried to restrain my passions always, for I know I am a man filled with hate and anger."

"Are you, even now?" Samiel asked.

"It inflames the passions," Rovagh said thoughtfully. "It may be I owe—somebody—an apology."

"Or he might not have minded having his passions inflamed, unlike you," Samiel said wisely. Then she shook her fair head. "My father—so he is in all but blood—reared me in High Hallack, and I was sealed to Gunnora as even shield-maids are in the Dales. Gunnora would have life and not death. Yet, what of my slain kindred?"

"He has had them on his conscience day and night for all these years," I told her, "and that is torment enough, if you need revenge. Would you follow the custom of our land and have him rebuild what he tore down, and serve you always, a life for a life?"

"We built anew in a new land, and prosper," Samiel said, and shook her head again. "This is a riddle beyond my understanding, and so I will leave you in this wilderness until I solve it, and will then come back."

I refilled her cup with such wine as we had. "Do that," I said gratefully, "and when you do, be welcome."

The sun broke through the clouds then and chased away

the last of the storm. Darkness lifted as she rode out, and I looked forward to a brand-new day.

Afterword

My hero, homeless warrior and doggedly loyal to his late-acquired family; bastard and parricide, with atrocities behind him and living daily in the certainty of his own damnation, is a long-time favorite among my characters. Part of him certainly comes out of Vietnam, as less tormented heroes have come from morally simpler wars. But is any war simple? The Hounds of Alizon were vicious soldiers, and their government abominable, but did they spring from a vacuum? Somewhere children are born and reared, and farmers, fishers, and families live in villages very much like those across the border. But they are of Alizon, and enemies, and here is a man quite capable of wholesale slaughter—but not of living with it.

He was bred from infancy to look to his Lady for leadership, even if she were a child and he a king's warleader. But if such a man were given a maiden bred to be an obedient wife, how would he deal with her; and how would she deal with his expectations? Especially in a war-torn land, where strong leadership is as vital as daily bread, and a house-mouse would be utterly lost. Thus, Derris.

*From those two characters came *Mirhold-by-the-Sea*, long may it prosper; *Samiel's tale* and the *Massacre of Seven Hills* is told elsewhere.*

—PATRICIA SHAW MATHEWS