

STORMBIRDS

by

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Dry grass and gorse, knolls alike except for the occasional limestone outcrop, and the loneliness of a vast and widening sky: that was all the land round about; and Gerik rode with now and again a glance behind him, or toward the hills—Gerik of Palten Keep of the Dales. But Palten Keep was fallen, the Hounds of Alizon were victorious there and elsewhere, and war was the rule of the world—the Kolder-driven Hounds crossed the sea to attack the Dales, a diversion for Sulcar while the Kolder themselves beset Estcarp, and no word had come to the Dales of any success Estcarp had. There was no surety that any human men were faring well in the world, or that humankind would live beyond these years: so it seemed to Gerik. But he had heard that the south still held. His mother's kin were there, and if rumors were true, hard-beset. So he set free his aging sorrel in the high hills, took everything he owned—which was his kit, his war gear, and the bay horse that his lord had given him—and set out to

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travel light, toward the coast, where the rough land and the lack of habitations made less attraction for the invaders, and where he hoped that he might pass through the thinnest region of their lines on his way south. It was a narrow chance. But it was a narrower one to stay where he was. So he left the deep Dales for this place where, against a clouding sky, he saw white wings of gulls that promised a change of land again; himself and the horse—himself and so little left of home.

Sunel was the bay stud's name, the greatest of the horses that Palten Keep had bred in its pastures: Sunel had been his lord's own warhorse at the last—even Palten Keep's creatures had been taken from their peace; but Fortal of Palten Keep was dead . . . oh, far back on this course, not in battle, but quietly, in the high hills, for he was old and sick and his wounds had festered. "Take Sunel," Fortal had said. "Ride." "Where, my lord?" Gerik had asked, there at that last campfire he had insisted to make for his lord's comfort. "Ride," Fortal had whispered a second time; that was all, a last little gusting of breath and a diminishing of his body, that still, still sleep that Gerik had seen too much of in his years of battle and retreat, harry and retreat again. Palten Keep was ashes, and their little band of survivors had diminished and diminished again, till at last there was Fortal and young Neth and the twins and himself; till Neth took an arrow through the lungs and the twins died one at Petthys and the other at Greywold, where Fortal took his last wounds.

"Ride," Fortal had said. And meant that it was over. Palendale was lost. Fortal's war was done. There was no counsel beyond that.

What did a man do then but seek kindred, and what kindred did he have but his mother's folk? Gerik did not know them; but they were human men, and in a failing world, a warm hearth and a human voice was the most a man could hope for, till the world failed altogether. He was thirty-eight. And if there would be anything after him, except the Kolder,

he did not know. "I am sorry for you," his lord had said, while his mind was still clear. "O man, it is you I am most sorry for."

He had not understood then. Had not felt solitude till Fortald died. Now it was gorse and the dry grass and the wind among the hills. He tended the bay horse. He talked to the beast and thanked the gods there was something living and friendly to talk to and lay his hands on. He made what speed he could and moved either by night or day according to the land. And at last there were the gulls, which came to the inmost Dales only driven on great stormwinds.

"You too?" he muttered to the birds, white wings against the clouds. "Now it is us driven to the sea." But not loudly. Only for himself and Sunel.

The bay horse flicked his ears and tossed his head. Snorted then, in that way that had nothing at all to do with the gulls, not considering that sudden tensing of muscles and flattening of the ears. Gerik's heart did a little skip and quickening. He patted Sunel's neck to steady him.

"Where?" he whispered, taking in on the reins, a feather touch, and Sunel, already slowing, moved slower still, flicking his ears and angling them to this side and the other and sifting the wind with a lifting and turning of his head. A second time Sunel made that anxious little sound, and every muscle in him was tight: Gerik felt it, and freed his helm from the thong that held it at his shoulder. He took up his shield from where it hung at Sunel's side—all this without dismounting or delaying.

The fitful wind was quartering now at his back and off the hills, now across the trail, which ran as a flat, grassy track between the low knolls. It was a gray full daylight, and the occasional limestone outcrop and clump of gorse gave no great amount of cover. *Mistake*, his instincts told him now, with the clarity of hindsight: he had paid attention to the gulls and not to the clouds, not to the windshift that a few moments

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ago had come skittering along the grass. Now a cold fear ran through him, and self-reproach: *Fool*. Men died of such things as a moment's carelessness—and he had remarked only the winds aloft and not the one that had suddenly shifted to his cheek and to his back by turns.

Fool, fool, and fool. He reined Sunel aside, looking back in chagrin at the clear trail he had left in this grassland—and it would be worse if he took to the hills, where such a trail would be evident to any casual glance. Full daylight and nowhere to go to cover; and the traitor wind carrying scents one way and the other—*something* was near him.

He found a limestone outcrop to shelter him from that wind, and drew a distance up between two hills to wait a firm windshift or the breaking of the storm. The Hounds could be careless. They counted on terror and brute force, and Kolder weapons where they had them; but the men of the Dales used the land they had known from birth. That evened the odds somewhat.

Gerik waited, seeing the first spatters of cold rain on the grass and bright pockmarks kicking up in the dust that coated his armor and his gear. That would, he thought, drive the Hounds to cover if they had not pitched camp already; gods knew he had ridden through storms before this, and the chance of the enemy reading his scent or finding his trail through the grass was far less once the rain started. The storm that had almost betrayed him bid fair to shelter him and give him a chance to pass, if it lasted into dark, and by the darkening of the clouds it might.

It would—

But Sunel snorted quietly and threw his head, and Gerik scrambled up to steady the horse and to see what it was.

Hound patrol, out on the road. He patted Sunel's cheek and tugged down at the bridle, hard, urging the bay's foreleg with his knee—*Down, down, friend*—for the last few of Pal-tendale's warriors had learned a new kind of fighting, and the

last of their horses had learned tactics other than body-check and swinging sword-side in a melee. Sunel grunted and sank down, lay flat to the ground, and Gerik did the same, there in the scant cover of the gorse, the two of them spattered by raindrops and his arms desperately holding Sunel's neck. "Hush," he whispered to the horse, for canny as the beast was, that head would come up at some noise, and instinct would claim him. It was unnatural, what men asked; but reassurance helped. "Hush, hush, my lad." He held with all his strength now, patting Sunel's cheek, for the riders were near: Gerik could hear them on the trail below.

Gods, that they not come up here for a camp—for the rain was pelting harder, and there was little better shelter to be had than this rocky outcrop and this fold between the hills.

The Hounds came into view. Four of them, riding in the rain, on dark bay horses—

No. Three. The one in the middle was no man, nor bulked in armor and horsehair plumes, but slender, clad in pale yellow and white, and with hands bound, skirts kited up as she rode astride. She was bowed so he could not see her face, but she looked no more than a child, dwarfed by the dark-armored men. Gerik trembled as he stared down through the brush; Sunel strained against his arms.

"Gods," he whispered against Sunel's neck. "O gods."

Three of them. And well armed.

Coward, something else whispered, and stung his pride and his memories, the while he pressed himself the closer against the ground. Then: *Curse it to the dark*—as he felt about him with one hand for his sword and pressed on Sunel with his body to keep the horse's head down. He found his shield and thrust his arm through the straps—no hope of his bow in this cursed weather and with the wind blowing and a hostage in the midst of the enemy: he was never that good a shot.

He got the reins over Sunel's neck, his foot in one stirrup and a grip on the saddle before he hissed a signal to the horse.

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Sunel scrambled up under him, turned under the rein and headed downslope at the enemy's flank.

"Hyyyyyyaaaaaaaaaiiiii!" he yelled, as if there had been all of Palten Keep behind him, charging in amongst the Hounds as pandemonium broke out. It was not the outermost man he went for: it was *through* that defense, taking the man who thought to hold the hostage. "Get away!" he yelled at the girl, and whirled to defend himself with his shield as he heard the second rider at his back and saw the third coming.

That was when he caught sight of the rest of the patrol—a score of foot soldiers, coming up the road.

He slashed wildly, jammed his left heel into Sunel's ribs, and turned with a clash of shield on shield. Archers back there. Twenty of them. The girl had gotten aside, out of the immediate fray, her horse sidling nervously out of harm's way. A wolfshield came up in Gerik's face, old device—old enemy, this band. "Paltendale!" he yelled, perversely, so that these two would know who they had to thank; and got in one blow with all the strength of his arm before he gave Sunel both his heels and shot clear of engagement with the third rider.

"Girl!" he yelled, kiting past, and hit her horse on its rump with the flat of his sword, headed for the hills. Her horse bolted with his: it was all he could ask for. He held Sunel back a little, thrust his sword into its sheath, and made a try for the reins that were flying loose from the captive's horse, leaning from the saddle as he heard arrows whistling about them with that sound no Daleman of these times could ever forget.

The girl's horse stumbled, faltered, a shaft jutting from its hip—he saw it going, and reined back hard, grabbed a handful of cloth and hair and pulled with all he had in him as the girl left the saddle—he was going to drop her, he thought, could not haul her whole weight up one-handed.

He leaned far to the other side and made it in a rending

effort, her body across his saddle within the compass of his shield arm. She was only weight to him, was only a six-stone flurry of skirts and hair flung across him he could not tell which way—he had no time to see, for there was a wall of wolfshields forming across his path, foot soldiers and archers running up against the hillside that was his escape route unless he turned—they *wanted* him to turn, and to no good for him, he reckoned. So straight on he went, his shield covering both himself and the girl, his sword a second time drawn. "Go!" he yelled to Sunel, laid both his heels first one and then the other to the warhorse, and swerved from the clot of wolfshields that formed to bar his way. The foot soldiers surged back—he took one with his sword, took a blow on his shield, and felt Sunel trample a man and stumble his way clear.

They were running then, running free, down off the hillside and onto the road in a gathering patter of rain that stung his face and his eyes and washed blood in sheets down his hand and sword.

The girl struggled and moaned; by that he knew she was alive. But there was a pain in his side he had not felt till now, and a dizziness growing on him that had nothing and everything to do with the way his heart was hammering and his limbs were shaking in the ebb of battle strength. He was hit. He was afraid to look down to know how badly; and when he felt Sunel slowing to a bone-jarring trot and then to a limping walk, he knew that his plight might be worse than a cut in his side.

He rode a little farther. He thought that Sunel could go that far, where the steepening course of the hills beckoned to rougher and more confused land. The crack of thunder and the sheeting rain were friendly violence; the rain closed like a curtain between him and an enemy who might, he prayed, believe that no Dalesman was fool enough to attack a patrol single-handed. They had done it deep in the Dales—hit a patrol with a small force and lure it into a trap—they had taught

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the Hounds to suspect gifts from the gods and Dalesmen who acted the fools.

And if those were Lord Cervin's men, they had learned it well at Paltendale.

So Houndish suspicion defended a man who had been a true and thorough fool; so the powers of the Dales saved a lostling son and an orphan daughter.

"Are you all right?" he asked the girl, when he had cut her bonds and gotten the sword in sheath. He helped her in her struggles, gathered her up, careful of her tender skin against his bosses and buckles, and cleared sodden blond hair from a pale and half-drowned face.

"Dalesman," she murmured through chattering teeth. "Dalesman."

"Gerik," he said, "of Palten Keep." She was all of twelve. No more than thirteen at most. She was shivering in spasms that left her weak between. "Are you hurt, did they hurt you?"

A great shiver and she shut her eyes tightly.

Fool, he chided himself, and hugged her hard, her temple against his cheek, the rain beating down on them, and his own head spinning between blood loss and panic for their situation, for what he had roused and what he had done back there. "No one will hurt you," he said. "By the Lady and the Lord, no one will hurt you again. I swear it."

She clung to him then like the lost child she was. And he drew Sunel to a halt and slid back in the saddle, settling the girl with her hands on the saddlehorn before he slid down to see to the horse.

The stretch of his ribs cut like a knife, and he fell against Sunel's side with a gut-sickened loss of balance. "O my lad," he muttered, patting the great, warm shoulder, "I have made a fair muddle of it."

The bay horse hung his head and shifted his weight. From where he was, Gerik saw the cut along flank and belly, a sheet

of red on rain-drenched brown. "Fair cursed muddle of it," Gerik said, patting the warhorse's shoulder, and felt a knot of despair in his throat as he looked up at the girl. It was in sheer panic that he took up Sunel's reins and began to lead the horse.

There was so much of silence, finally—the unsteady hoof-falls of the bay horse, the whisper of wind in grass the sun had dried. It was cloudless, clear day in this rocky stream cut, and if the Hounds were near, if they moved amid such silence, then they were easy prey for them; Gerik knew as much, but flesh had its limits: he was dying and the bay horse was dying, the two of them together, which was meet enough—if the child had not been fevered, if she were not raving what time she was awake. He had had to tie her to the saddle, which awoke her worst nightmares and made her confuse him with the Hounds.

"Ride," Fortal had said. And it came to this, at last, wounded man and wounded horse and a poor waif he would leave defenseless in a world of enemies.

He had buried Fortal. He had given his lord that much. He had brought stones heavy as he could carry, and made his rest secure from predators—even from the Hounds, he suspected, straining bone and sinew and bloodying his hands with his labor—for no petty effort would topple the cairn he had raised, no idle whim disturb Fortal's rest.

But when it was done he had sat there in the dark, directionless. *Where, my lord?* And never an answer. Against the Hounds, perhaps? Take Sunel and make one grand gesture, and perish, then?

That was a young man's answer. That might have been years ago, when he had more of hope in things. But he had seen a score of such self-destructions in his soldiering, most of which he counted foolish, and none of which had stopped the Hounds or saved much at all for a time that Fortal had truly and desperately needed them.

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No, Fortal had no respect of heroes. *Ride. Choose your own way. Live.* What else would the lord of Palten Keep want of him, of the last man of his guard? Fortal had wanted a survivor, that was all. Wanted his beloved Sunel safe and wanted at least one man of Paltendale to ride out of there, no great man, no hero—only the last of his soldiers and the one who, he knew, would bury him.

But it came to this finally, this rocky streamside, in the silence, with the wind and the uncertain steps of a wounded horse, and his own blood darkening the leather of his armor from his ribs to his knee. Sometimes a jolt in his step would break the swordcut open again, and bright blood would leak out from the wadding he had put there: at such times the hills and the sky would waver and reel about him, and the rocks shimmer in his vision.

He shut his eyes from time to time as he walked, lost in the pain, and lifted his head at the jolt of a misstep on a peeling stretch of stone, a sudden catch in Sunel's pace that sent a stab of fear into his heart. "Easy, go easy," he whispered as the horse stumbled. He patted Sunel's neck. He must stop, he thought, he must rest the horse, but he had staunched the bloodflow with salve once the rain stopped; while the enemy—the Hounds—would recover themselves, would have scouts out now that the storm was over. There was no time to rest; and his head spun, he could not lift the girl, not against the pain. Still, the horse—if they pushed him too far . . . "Stand," he said, and let the reins slack, went back and stopped Sunel with his shoulder, patting the drooping neck. "Whoa, my lad, rest awhile."

Sunel shifted weight, and moved again, fretfully pushing him aside, a few more steps toward more level ground, Gerik thought, and then saw the stagger, the unsteadiness in the hindquarters. "O Lady," he murmured, lunged after the horse to stop him, but Sunel gave a tottering step, threw his head, and wandered a triple step more before his right foreleg wobbled and gave way. Bound to the saddle, the girl fought

to keep herself upright. Gerik scrambled after her as the war-horse went down kicking—he drew his knife and cut the cords that tied her, trying to disentangle him and her from Sunel's struggles to rise. There was a great deal of blood suddenly—was a horse's grunt of pain as he turned himself from the fallen child to the struggling horse. He flung his arms about Sunel's neck and tried to keep him from breaking the wound wide open. The struggles faded; and Gerik, who had not wept when he buried his comrades or his lord, leaned on Sunel's shoulder and stroked his neck and felt his heart broken like the horse's, just finally broken, not by one thing, but by many, and by the choices that he had made, that had killed the last thing he loved.

O my lord, he thought wearily. *I think that this is as far as I can go.*

Then he thought that quitting was a fool's act, that perhaps he could staunch Sunel's wound, that perhaps if he tended the horse and if the Hounds did not find them—

But Sunel began to fight again to lift his head, battering his cheek and jaw mindlessly against the rocks. Gerik swore and clasped him tight about the neck, clenching his teeth against the pain the horse's struggling sent through his side, holding him still as he could; he talked to the horse and patted him in the quiet moments, and when finally he could not deny that Sunel was dying, he gave him the only mercy he had left to give.

He sat there with blood all over him, and lifted his spattered face to meet the girl's horrified stare. "I had no choice," he said, and put the knife away. "I had no choice."

She made a strangled noise, shook her head, and edged backward on the rocks.

"Come here," he said, and swore again at the pain of reaching for her. "O gods. *Come here!*" He got to his knees and to his feet and snatched at her as she scrambled up and struck at him. He caught her, crushed her tight against him till

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the pain eased and he had his breath; then he patted her fevered cheek with a grimed and bloody hand. "There," he said, reasonably, urgently, "they are coming, do you understand? They are coming; you have to walk for yourself. I cannot carry you."

She gulped air and clenched her hands on the leather of his sleeves. Tears were running on her face. He gripped her arm for fear of her bolting in fright, and turned and started walking down the stony course, steadily as he could.

Well down from that place where he had left the horse he washed his hands and his face in the little rill of water, and wet the hem of her overskirt and washed her face for her, and straightened her hair with passes of his wet hands, and cooled her brow. But he was bleeding again, and when he investigated the wound, the wadding was soaked and wet; that sent the cold fear through him.

He said nothing about it. He said nothing when he looked back the way they had come and saw the black birds circling, plain as writing across the sky for any Alizon trackers that might be on their trail.

"Come," he said, and stood up and braced his feet wide to catch his balance. He offered his hand, was dully surprised that she took it and used it to gain her feet. She did not let it go. Their steps wandered apart and together again like two drunken soldiers, him in armor, her in her torn frock, mumbling now and again in fever, tending ahead of him at times, walking in slippers that were already in rags.

Fool, he thought then, in the long trek downland—he had his sword, his shield was banging away at his back where he had slung it, but his kit and the canteen he had left with Sunel's gear in his delirium. He had set out among enemies and with a fevered child in his care and no Lord-forsaken canteen nor any provisions or field gear—but he could not have carried its weight. The sword swung at his side and hit his legs, the belts gone askew, and the helm that made his head

ache was only one Lord-forsaken more thing to rattle if he took it off and slung it with the shield—but he had no impetus to set his gear aright, had nothing, now, but the more and less of pain, walked with his eyes shut against sunglare—sank down to his knees only where there was a rock or some lone, twisted tree to lean on to get him to his feet again.

No canteen. Stay with the stream. Stay with the water.
Keep moving.

Between one time of sanity and another, the sky turned dull. Between that time and another, the stars grew bright. He fell once, and got up again, stumbling on the rocks. He fell a second time and got to his feet with the girl shaking at him and crying. Beyond this he was only aware of a dull kind of pain, and a general downward slope, the girl holding sometimes to his arm, at last to his fingers, like a child, tugging him along as if she were the one who knew where they were going.

Then the world turned giddy and he was one time under stars and the next that he remembered waking on a rocky hillside with the sun on him and the flight of gulls above him.

It was the height above the sea. He had followed his stream and it had brought him to land's end, world's end, a coast that he had hoped for as a road to lead him south to Jorby. That was what he must do. His head seemed clearer now, after sleep. He drew a breath, lying there on his back on this vast slope of grass, with the girl curled against his side. He stirred, patted her shoulder. "Little rabbit. Wake, wake." Was it his voice, that weak sound? "We have to walk."

She lifted her head. She leaned on her hand and looked down the slope with jaw slack and wide eyes staring on the day. Then she got up and began to walk without him, with the dazed wandering steps of a dreamer.

The child managed for herself. It was harder for him. He levered himself to his feet by degrees and in pain that blinded and dizzied him, and started off again behind her, no longer

thinking which way he went until he remembered to wonder, and knew that it was the right way, the way to the sea—*Follow the gulls*, he thought. Birds betrayed him and birds guided him. The black ones and the white. Follow the stream, follow the land till it gave way to the sea, pale illusion of salt water beyond the hills.

He might have fallen once again. He could not remember. The child was with him again, holding to his fingers, tugging at him to go on, and he stood in a windy gap of the hills and saw the sea spread before him, made out in the distance a boat ashore, drying nets beside a homely house of weathered wood.

“People,” he murmured to the child. “Human men. Some fisher family.”

It was fresh water that linked them, the dwellers by the sea, the fool who had lost his provisions, the wise child who correctly followed the stream downhill despite her delirium. Water brought them both to safety, to a refuge he had never hoped for—honest folk he needed, whose help he would repay with warning—

Steps sounded on his right, where the hill sloped at his back, steps heavy and hasty in the grass-grown sand; he turned in fright as the child screamed, saw a dark man, a blade aflash in the sun, the look of the enemy—

He drew his own blade too late, the hostile sword already swinging, smashing into his arm and his wounded side. He went down, sprawled half-stunned from the pain and the jolt of the fall. The Hound came down on him with his knee in his belly. He fainted then. He knew that he was going under, and for his life, for the child's, he had no strength left to prevent the hand at his throat or the grip that pinned his sword hand.

Least of all he had planned to wake, naked beneath a blanket, within sight of twilit sea, and with a shadowy figure sitting between him and a fire. That fire glanced off the ends

and edges of a woman's dark hair, its edge-lit robes and the curve of a cheek, an arm and hand that the robes did not cover—a woman sitting by a rack of fishnets with the dimming color of the sea and the slow roll of the surf behind her.

It was a mistake, perhaps, that he stared and betrayed his waking. But it was too late to mend that. The firelight was on his face. Besides, he had been a fool too often in past days to feel much chagrin at another turn. He should be dead. He was here, and the pain was gone, leaving behind only a general lightness of the brain, a weakness in his limbs that said they would not respond to any asking.

But he thought of the child then. Of the dark man on the hill. And panic ran cold through him.

"Well," the woman said. "Awake."

He blinked for answer. To speak cost too much.

Her robes shadowed him as she leaned forward and her hand brushed his brow. Her fingers were chill, and he did not want to be touched at all, but to protest anything was far beyond his strength.

He tumbled away into dark. He thought that she was speaking to him, but he was not sure. Perhaps he was dying after all.

But he heard the sea again after a while, and waked to the stars overhead—he was sure that he waked, and that his shoulders hurt and his hands were numb, held remorselessly above his head. He was in no pain but that, and he tried to relieve it, discovering then that he was tied at wrists and ankles.

But he was wise, and smothered his panic: best to do nothing without thinking, and his mind was clear again. He remembered everything—the Hounds, the child, Sunel, the attack that had come on them. The waking and the woman. All of which came to this. Where had the Hound gone? Was there a connection, the Hound and the woman? Where was the child?

Was the woman from Alizon? One of the enemy's? Had the Hound brought him here—alive? And the child?

Or—

He held himself very still, and heard from time to time, above the roll of the sea, the night sounds of a stabled horse—on the other side of the hut, he thought. So there was a way of escape. There was a means a weakened man could outrun pursuit. His heart beat the harder then, his breathing quickened. But the girl—

He remembered her with him at the last. Remembered her screaming. He had brought her back to the Hounds.

Fool.

His eyes misted. He quieted his breathing, blinked his eyes clear, cast careful glances about him, at the sea, the beach beyond his feet, the hut that was all silver boards and shadow in the starlight. Of the woman, of the Hound if they were together, there was no sign.

The Hounds had taken this fisher hut, perhaps. Lived here. It might even be the point from which the patrols rode out; and gods knew what the woman was—dark-haired and robed in costly stuff, if plain; that had been the look of her. If she was some fisherwoman held captive, she was a delicate sort of fisherwife. No. Not of the shoreside. Not, perhaps, of the Dales at all.

She was asleep inside the hut, surely, with what company he did not know, but well guessed; and stopped at that. The masters of this place had retired for the night and had tied their prisoner hand and foot to have an untroubled rest, that was beyond doubt. That his pain was eased, except the cramping of his back and shoulders, meant something ominous if anything: that they wanted him alive and hale enough to question at some length.

But there remained the chance that a weapon might come to hand. They might be careless. The woman might stay alone with him, if the men in this place went to report to their fel-

lows: that was the greatest hope. If she was a Daleswoman she might be brave enough to help him or if she was not she might make a mistake the men would not. In womanly pity she might help the girl, and keep the men from her—if the girl was here at all, if there was a chance for her . . .

O lords.

To be meek and quiet was the best thing, in all events. To play at fear—that was no hard thing. To play the fool—well, he had had experience of that, in coming here. To speak them softly and make his first attempt at escape when he was able to put distance between him and them—that was the best course.

So he stayed very still and let the night pass, counting past the turn of the stars in snatches of sleep and longer periods of misery, till the sun seamed the horizon over the sea, and the stars faded, and there was a stir of life inside the hut.

It was the Hound who came out to him, a towering broad shadow in the half-light, who bent over him without a word, turned his face to the light, and slapped him on the cheek, at which Gerik flinched and drew in his breath. In the same silence the Hound went on to try the cords that tied his hands—freeing him; Gerik thought with a wild hope, and then reminded himself that he dared not flail out, no matter what happened, with numb hands and feet that could not bear his weight.

Wait, wait, and wait. No matter what they did with him. He had to be able to run. To find the best chance, and know it was the best.

“Hassall will see to your comfort,” the woman said out of the shadow, and he turned his head in that direction as she stepped out of the doorway, wrapping her robes about her. “He does not speak. Do not expect harm of him.”

“The child with me—the girl—” It was dangerous to mention her. Having discovered that he had some care of her, they might take worse notions into their heads.

"Leisia," the woman said. A name. The girl had given him none at all. He was dimly distressed at that, and at the woman's easy tone. "She is sleeping. Have no fear, I say."

The cords fell away. His hands fell dead beside his head as the Hound moved down to untie his feet. It was a disadvantageous position, gazing at the woman upside down, having to drag his own arms down like something dead attached to his aching shoulders, and remembering that he had not a stitch of clothing for his dignity except a borrowed blanket. But one or both of them had seen whatever they wished to see of him. He thrust an elbow under him and rolled onto it, testing how much pain there would be, and the lack of it dazed him as much as the pain might have.

There was no wound. He dragged a dead wrist down over his ribs and moved the blanket down, finding no wound at all, only the tender ridge of a scar.

Then he knew what one of them was, at least. He leaned on his quaking arm and looked up at the woman with the profoundest dread that she was by no means the weakness in this pair.

They had wondered, they of the Dales, whether Kolder lords directed the Hounds, or whether those who led the brute ranks were hirelings all.

"My name is Jevane," she said then, but he did not believe for an instant that it was her true one.

"Mine is Eslen," he said, because Eslen of Palten Keep was long buried, and beyond all harm. He felt his feet free, and moved to take the strain off the arm that was shaking perilously under him, as the Hound rose. But lying there helpless as he was, a sort of craft came back to him. "I should be dead," he said in a dull, dazed tone. "I should have died, except you found me; I owe you that." And he looked up with a worshipful gaze he might have given his lord. "I owe you that, my lady."

"So," she said quietly. "Of what hold, Dalesman?"

"Palten Keep." He leaned and fumbled after the blanket,

having discovered a little feeling in his right hand, painfully returning. So an urge of nature came on him, acutely painful in itself, and a gut sickness knotted up in his throat to add to his misery. "O lords," he murmured, beyond feigning anything after that one injudicious move; he held out an arm to the waiting Hound, for there was no one else a man could in decency appeal to. "Help me—"

"Hassall," the woman said, and withdrew into the hut, at which the Hound dragged him up naked as he was onto legs that would hardly bear him and took him out aside from the hut, beyond a hummock of sand. The Hound stood then with arms folded while his prisoner emptied all his gut. He offered no help, no blows, only a sullen patience when Gerik fell half-senseless on the sand; eventually he prodded Gerik with his foot and made a sound deep in his throat.

Gerik moved, cleaned himself with handfuls of sand as best he could, and sat there a moment with his head on his knee until the Hound prodded him again. *No wound*, Gerik thought in all that dim haze of spinning sea and sky. *No wound*. No scar where he had thought the Hound's blade had sheared his arm and side; and only a healing, angry ridge where some blade had cut his side. He had bled, o Lord and Lady, he had bled—what Wise Woman of the Dales could have brought him back and healed a killing wound?

More than Wise Woman. Witch. Witch of Estcarp.

With a Hound for company? Estcarp and Alizon was a pairing unimaginable.

Except the Kolder—

The Hound's fist clenched in his hair and pulled his head up. The other hand grasped his arm and twisted, bringing him to his feet. He walked. He made no struggle and the Hound let him go, holding him only by the elbow as he brought him back to the hut.

The woman waited by the door, cold-eyed and disinterested in his shame. Gerik clenched his jaw and thought to look up,

stare for stare, but no, that was not the game he played. He felt his face hot and kept his head bowed when she indicated a pail of water for bathing, a blanket for drying, and his own clothes lying folded on a rail above his boots.

He knelt down and did as he was told under the Hound's watchful eye. And his clothes when he took them up were clean and dry in a morning when sea-damp had made the blankets clammy.

It was that small, unexpected gift that made him look up toward the woman in curiosity. But the doorway was vacant. And in the Hound he saw only a foreign look and a bitter look, the same with which Hassall had favored him beyond the hill, and despised him—*Run*, that look said, mocking him and his nakedness with a dead cold invitation to try what he would.

So he ducked his head and quietly dressed in brown breeches and brown shirt, on which the blood was washed to a faded stain of many edges—that small domestic task the Witch had failed, when the wound itself she had mended; she was not all-powerful. In a strange sense that comforted him. And the dryness was likely only because the clothes had been drying on the hearth of the hut all night. No purposeful kindness. The Hound was the real truth of matters, and it was a fool's persistent hope that saw mercy in what Hounds did.

He edged closer to the door in what he meant to be a sickly stagger, as far as the doorframe with the intention of looking inside, one quick scan to find the child; but the Hound's hard grip closed on his shoulder and spun him about with his back to the wooden wall.

He did not resist. Did not resist when the Hound drew him with him down and away from the hut, past rails and hanging and rotting nets, down toward the sea, though his heart was beating in panic. Not today, fool, not weak, not shaking in every limb, no hope, no hope, no hope in the world.

The fisher-craft was beyond, up on blocks and braces, its

hull skeletal and stripped and with many a plank missing, next the net frames and the hanging rope. Against one of the posts that supported the frames the Hound shoved him, facing the hulk, and pressed down on his shoulder so he should sit; there Hassall bound him in a twist of net and rope.

Then the Hound went down to the boat and its blocks, and took up an adze, at which Gerik despaired, and sat sweating in fear of the Hound's intentions with it. But the Hound arranged a length of wood across a brace and applied the tool to that in businesslike and skillful strokes, sending bright curls flying.

A Hound at carpentry, blessed gods. There was no sanity in the world. A Dalesman sat tethered to a seaside net frame and a Hound of Alizon worked like a fisherman, boat-mending, while the sun rose and passed its zenith.

The Hound gave him water once at midday, bringing it down from the hut. At evening the Hound let him free at last, and led him up to the hut, from which came the smells of cooking, and from which Gerik saw the child come, her ragged yellow dress all clean, her hair combed—she stopped still in the doorway with her eyes wide and her mouth open in horror till the woman appeared behind her, and laid a hand on her shoulder, and said something Gerik could not hear.

Then he was walking free of the Hound, with no hand on him, a little distance that the girl halved, running forward to throw her arms around him and hug him for dear life.

He was shaken by such a demonstration. He looked beyond her to the woman in her fine robes, then took the girl's face between his hands. "Leisia?" he asked, that being the name the woman claimed for her. The girl blinked and stared at him, not denying the calling. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Are you, lord?" Leisia's lips quivered. Her eyes went beyond him half a breath and came back again, signifying the Hound. There was no fever. It was a wise, Dales-bred girl of

thirteen that held his hands and asked him questions with her eyes.

"Of course," he said. And did not look beyond her at the lady. "For Hounds, they are very mannerly."

"Leisia." The woman's voice.

And of a sudden the girl's fair eyes seemed to gaze through him, on something far and difficult.

"Leisia. Come."

"Leisia!" he said, for her hands slipped listlessly from his and she turned away, toward the door. "Leisia!" he shouted, forgetting all his intentions; but she did not hear. The Hound's grip descended on his shoulder and he flung his arm to free it.

So the Hound took another grip, spun him about, seized that arm and twisted it in a lock that sent a stab of pain through his side. Gerik remembered his resolution then, and prepared to go down to his knee as the Hound pressed him to do. But the Witch lingered in the door in which Leisia had vanished, and signed the Hound otherwise. The Hound let him go.

"For her safety," the woman said, "do no rash thing. Your dinner is ready."

It was a night like the other night, only he did not sleep his way into it. The Hound put him to bed, and let him wrap himself in his blanket there beside the hut before he tied his hands and feet again; and Gerik bit his lips for the misery of shoulders and back still stiff from the last such rest he had had.

But he was stronger, for all that. He counted away the last hours of the night in immobility that sent fire through his spine and shoulders with every little shift he made to relieve his discomfort; but his head was clear, his muscles had some strength in them, and the lingering twinges in his side seemed less than before—in all these things he took hope.

But in the girl's face. In the listlessness, the vacancy in the eyes that was like the fever—

Like the fever in which she had walked to come here . . . to this place . . . to the Witch . . .

He thrust that thought away. It kept returning. The Kolder, they said, had such power over minds. The Kolder turned the men of Alizon into—what they were and created the Hounds. If witchblood ran in Estcarp—was Kolder not its neighbor? Might there never have been prisoners, Witches, whose chastity might be violated, whose offspring—female—might be Witches too?

Were the Hounds alone sufficient to direct the attack on the Dales, and had Kolder no agencies this side?

Gunnora save them. Children. Children taken by the Kolder and the Hounds. Innocents who had no knowledge to fight with.

Captive of the Hounds he had found her. And taken her straight to the center of their power. They were saving him until their patrols returned, or they saved him to keep the child docile—who knew but the Kolder and the Hounds? For some reason at least they did him no harm, and for that same reason the Hound was being careful of him.

How many days until the patrol tired of hunting him in the hills and came here for their revenge?

And after that—

He lasted until morning. Until the Hound came again to take him out beyond the ridge of sand. And he limped as he moved, and moaned when the Hound took his arm. "It hurts," he said in a beaten, weary voice. "Gods curse you, it hurts. Let me be. Let me walk. Have you ever spent a night with your hands like that?"

The Hound grunted some sound. But never a word. The Hound. Hassall. Faithful as a shadow all the while, and, gods curse him, never letting his guard down either.

Gerik slipped once on the loose sand of the dune face, went to his knee with a gasp and an unfeigned moan of pain when the Hound dragged him up by the elbow. He brushed sand off and limped his way down to the house, where a breakfast was

set out beside the door. A shaggy bay pony was having its own breakfast in the pen, and Leisia was outside, standing barefoot on the bottom rail, reaching over to pat its dusty back.

Homely scene. It might have been any steading-daughter with a pony. The chances within it set Gerik's heart to pounding like a sledgehammer.

He limped his way aside to the fence, under the Hound's watchful eye. He saw the driftwood piled there, that was for their cookfire. He staggered and he leaned against it, and his hand found the stick that would serve.

He whirled on the Hound with all the strength that was in him, and the stick broke when it hit the Hound full on the side of the head.

He was half amazed when the Hound fell—merely fell, like any enemy, whatever his companion's sorcerous powers. Gerik dropped down on his haunches and searched the Hound over for a weapon, found nothing, and sprang up to seize Leisia by the wrist as she stepped down off the rail in shock. Her mouth opened. He covered it with outheld fingers and forbore to bruise her. "Hush," he said, "listen. Come with me. Quickly."

He ducked low and pulled her through the fence of twisted rails, as the shaggy horse sidled off in alarm. He scanned the lean-to shed in hope of tack and found only rope. He snatched that up and caught the pony's mane and looped the rope about its neck. "Up," he hissed, and caught Leisia by the waist, flinging her up astride with an exertion that sent a stab of pain through the scar. He gave her the two ends of the rope for reins and in feverish haste slipped the loop off the gate on the far side of the little pen, then came back and heaved himself up behind the girl belly-down on the pony's rump—got turned about and upright on the moving animal with an effort he had not used since he was a boy, and caught wildly past Leisia at the pony's mane as the pony protested

such unusual goings-on. With the other hand he took charge of the rope, Leisia between his arms, as the gate swung ajar.

He drove his heels in hard, and a second time, into the flanks. The pony jolted forward, knocked the gate wide, and at a third blow of Gerik's heels, hopped into a run and bolted, careening over the side of the dune and onto the low-lying flat—a surefooted pony, the shaggy breed the Houndish cavalry rode. Gerik shifted his weight and used his heel in that way a sword-and-shieldman's horse knew. It answered those commands more readily than it answered the rope, veering toward the hills and more solid ground, avoiding the last of the stream that made a sandy bog and vanished into beach sand, finding firmer ground on the reed-grown margin and the stony sand and the sea-grass. Free! Gerik saw the hills ahead, be they aswarm with Hounds and enemies; the pony was under them, the south coast was open, and there was the way to Jorby, with all that he had learned.

The pony dropped its hindquarters suddenly, braced its shoulders, and skidded into a halt in mid-career, scattering stones, sending the world spinning in one wild gyration. Gerik tried to keep Leisia aboard, kept his one-handed grip on the mane a heartbeat longer than the girl did in the animal's plunging spin, and lost it as the pony reared up and aside in a panic fit. The stony ground came hard, and he rolled to clear the hooves that pounded near him, gathered himself up, and spun aside in horror as the shaggy beast charged him and struck him a glancing blow with its shoulder. He shouted at it, shouted at Leisia, who rose shakily to her feet and stood as if dazed; he charged the creature, waving his arms to frighten it from her, reeled back again as he saw it turn and threaten him with bared teeth—no natural pony, nothing natural, which would not turn from his shouts or his hands. He evaded its teeth, slipped on the stones, and rolled to save himself, feeling one and a second sharp-edged hoof drive down on his leg as it trampled him.

STORMBIRDS

A whistle sounded. The horse shied back then, and shook itself, as Gerik caught his breath and raised his head to see a human shape coming over the rise. It was Hassall, alive and moving all too fast; and Gerik, lying windless and covered with sand, gasped after breath and cursed himself twice over that he had not stayed to break the man's skull.

But it was not Hassall who had stopped them and driven the horse into frenzy. It was not Hassall who kept the beast hovering over him now, stamping and blowing in fretful menace. It was the Witch who had beaten him, and the Hound who came on him now with his face all bloody and scowling was only her servant.

He heaved up to his knees and to his feet, legs braced too wide for defense, but it was all he could do to stand at all, with the breath driven out of him and one leg cut and shaking under him. "It was my doing," he said, shifting between the Hound and the stunned girl.

But Hassall stopped a little distance away and pointed the way back to the hut, that was all. Gerik looked into that sullen, bloodied face and did not object that the pony had lamed him or that he did not think he could walk ten steps. "Leisia," he said, motioning back toward the house, and Leisia shook herself as if waking from trance and came to him. "No," he said. He shook her hand off, turned his back on her, and found the strength to walk, albeit slowly, no matter the difficulty of the sand or the grating sensation in his twice-injured leg. He walked, and the Hound mounted up on the pony and rode behind him, herding him and the child home like any strayed beasts.

Gerik collapsed at the front of the hut, there on the crest of the slope. He lay down where he thought the Hound was willing that he stop, at that place he had measured with his eye and promised himself that he might reach. The Hound might ride him down, or not. He had ceased to try to fathom

Hassall's motives, and only watched through sweat-blurred eyes as the Hound rode quietly past him on the reinless horse, doing no harm. Leisia reached him, and tried to rouse him and to comfort him.

"Go away," he said.

"Leisia."

The lady had appeared in that moment, standing in the shade of the net-frames by the side of the hut. Gerik lifted his head and looked her way, and, to Leisia: "Go back to her. Understand? Go back to her for now. Only for now."

The gentle hand left his shoulder. Leisia walked away to the house. He lifted his head again and watched the whole scene, till Leisia vanished into the hut, and the Witch went after her.

Then he rolled onto his back and stared at the sky until the Hound came back and shadowed it with his dark bulk.

Gerik cursed him in a quiet, reasonable tone and rolled onto his belly to get up. He made it as far as one knee when the Hound grasped him by the collar and the arm and ungently helped him the rest of the way.

And in front of the hut Hassall let him go, and walked inside.

Gerik stood a moment out of breath and numb, then limped a few futile steps toward the support of the woodpile. The pony, back in its pen, regarded him with a dark and wary eye.

But there seemed nowhere to go, no hope in horse theft, no hope of gaining even a hundred steps down the beach before Hassall should come riding down on him a second time, to worse hurt. He thought of going down to the sea, for the salt water to ease his cuts and bruises, but the chill of the wind was already enough to bear, and the water's edge was a far walk. It was warmth he wanted, warmth of fire, warmth of comradeship, warmth of shelter—the sense that the girl's touch had brought him; only she was inside, with *them*, with

the Witch, with the Hound—gods knew what they might do to her, what purpose they had for her, and he was powerless to help her or himself.

In contempt of him, the Hound let him free. He knew now, that was it; and the Hound knew that he knew. He was as thoroughly a prisoner as he had ever been.

More so. For now he believed it himself.

He slammed his fist down on the wood, and walked to the rail and leaned his arms on it, staring at the pony.

Prisoner too. Both of them. One inside the pen because it had no understanding. One outside because he had enough to know his situation.

But the Witch who controlled the pony had her hold only on Leisia. Why stop the horse and the child and not the man who was responsible?

Could she not?

Could she not throw that net over him, and take what she wanted, more surely than any torment, if she could do that much?

Some difference in the mind of a child and the mind of a man? Or was there a limit, and was a wary adult that much harder for the Witch to manage?

If that was so—if that was so, was it possible to break the girl free, if the Witch had too much to hold?

Not if there was the Hound to hold him by brute force.

Gerik sat still, leaning his back and his head against the rails of the pen, his arm along the fence, suffering the more and less of pain in his leg, wondering were bones broken and fearing that there were—he tried to work off the boot on that leg and gritted his teeth and shoved at it with the other foot until his vision came and went. It began to come off. He made it, and afterward sat trying to work his toes in the sand, which shot lines of fire up his calf. He could not tell if they moved. He leaned his head against the rails again, mortally afraid. He had removed a great many of his choices. Too many of them.

And Hassall, he thought, owed him no little matter of personal revenge, whatever the Witch's opinion.

At length the Hound came out of the hut, and stopped there, staring for a moment, so that Gerik's muscles tensed all across his belly and down his arms and legs, though he did not stir. He did not trouble to hide that fact, or to keep apprehension from his face. If the Hound would pay him for that blow he had taken, then the Hound would do as he pleased: *Be no fool; be no fool*, Gerik told himself. *Take what comes. Stay alive.*

The Hound beckoned him. Gerik pulled the other boot off, since he could not get the one on, gathered himself up, and hobbled over till he and Hassall stood face-to-face, or near as a man his stature could with Hassall. The Hound moved; Gerik flinched; and with perfect solemnity Hassall laid a hand beside his neck, patted him gently, and seized him by the arm.

Down away from the hut the Hound dragged him, Gerik stumbling and limping along as best he could, down the slope toward the boat. There by the net frames Hassall made him sit down, but there was no rope this time. Hassall merely walked off to the boat, stripped off his shirt, and picked up the adze that was lying there beneath the blocks, setting to his day's work.

Gerik leaned his head back against the pole and breathed carefully until the pain ebbed and his heart stopped hammering and the ground steadied again under him. But he watched from slitted eyes, and saw an answer to Hassall.

Next time, he thought, watching the metal blade peel curls from the wood, *next time—I make it here . . .*

Let him put me to work.

A fisher-boat. Lord and Lady, what insane whim is this, that drives him?

Was it wrecked? Do they need it to some purpose? But the Kolder supply them ships—what need of this poor hulk?

Everything seemed mad, the lady and the Hound chiefest in their madness, himself only a passerby, snared in this place madder than all the crumbling world, in which evil fared far better than good, and the gods turned a blind eye to justice.

Blasphemy was dangerous for a dead man. He did not want to think on that either, how the Kolder were winning, and if there was any other outcome of it all he would not live to know it. As none of Palten Keep would know it.

The sun moved in the sky, the shadow traveled off the place where Gerik sat, and the sun baked him, sending little trails of sweat down his sides and raising perspiration that stung in the cuts. But that was nothing to the ache that attended the swelling, that beat in the arteries of his leg and in strained muscles and stretched skin; the heat helped, somewhat. But there was thirst. There was a misery in knees and elbows where he had hit the ground. He discovered stiffness in injuries he had not felt yet, and he dared not stir. Hassall, he thought, was waiting for an excuse.

He watched Hassall wipe his brow and then trek up the slope to the hut—as if he had no prisoner to guard. Hassall was after a drink. Gerik leaned around the pole enough to watch Hassall reach the water barrel, and leaned back again—to stare at the sharp-edged adze and the hammer left by the side of the boat.

To stare at them and think that this Hassall was not the dull brute that he had taken his kind to be, and to suspect that it was with design that Hassall had left him free with the tools there. He. Sitting here. Knowing full well that he was too lame to avail anything, knowing by that gesture that Hassall knew what he was thinking, and that Hassall enjoyed a jest at his expense.

Frustration welled up, tightening his throat, misting his eyes so that sun and sea shattered. *No hope*, a small voice said. *No hope, no hope; this will not be here when you can reach it, if ever you do walk after this—or live long enough to heal . . .*

Hassall returned down the hill. He brought a clay cup. He shadowed Gerik from the sun and sank down on his haunches to offer it. His face was dour, but there was a lightness about his eyes that Gerik had not seen before.

Gerik took the cup and drank, and gave it back. "Thank you," he said. It was self-discipline.

The Hound's lips curved. Hassall patted his shoulder, offered him a little bit of fish and bread in a frayed napkin. Gerik took it, ashamed that his hands were shaking. The shadow fell again as the Hound rose and went back to work, and Gerik broke off bits of the tasteless fish and swallowed it past the knot of anger in his throat, down onto the sickness the pain made.

There was mockery in all of it. *Be strong, my enemy. Try me.* But he ate it, and kept it down, and thought of the hut and Leisia, whether she waked or slept in the Witch's keeping, or when the rest of the Hounds would come riding in, discover him, and take exception to his attacking them on the road.

He had seen the Hounds' vengeance. That recollection did not improve his appetite.

Planks filled the sunlit gaps in the boat's hull. The Hound had a good eye. They admitted no light at all.

Hassall took him up the hill at sunset, gently held him by the arm and helped him on the bad side, for the leg was so swollen that it would hardly bear his weight, and climbing the sandy slope unaided was beyond him.

At the door the Witch met them with bowls of fish stew and a loaf of bread. Gerik sat down to eat, his legs stretched out before him, his back against the wall of the hut, and Hassall sat down cross-legged by him, putting down his food with great zest; Gerik did the best he could, and did not look at the man more than he could avoid.

But Leisia came timidly out the door and sat down by him,

her face all worried. "M'lord," she said, "Jevane says she will help you."

"Does she?" He swallowed a lump that grew suddenly too large. "I am not 'my lord.' I am not anybody's lord." Perhaps it was not well to admit that. Perhaps they confused him with someone. Perhaps it was all that had kept him alive. He took another morsel of bread and dropped it into the broth, and looked at the girl, whose face showed only concern for him. "Have you slept today?"

"Sometimes." Leisia's lips quivered. "Gerik—"

He invited whatever she would say with a tilt of his head; and winced at that use of his true name.

"I love you," she said.

That he had not expected. It went right through the armor. He moved his shoulders, gave a breath of a laugh. What else could a child say of a grown man who tried to do better for her than the world had done? Even if he failed at it. "You are a brave girl," he said. "Go on being brave."

A quick flush came to Leisia's face, a shining in her eyes. Hope. It hit him like a dull blow. "I want the lady to help you. I want . . ." Her voice died away, like the hope. "I want you to be safe."

He did laugh. It seemed a preposterous wish. "So do I." He wanted to reach out and hold her. But that betrayed too much to people who had no good intentions toward either of them. He quietly finished the bowl.

"When the boat is done," Leisia said, "we will sail away, to a place outside the war."

He set the bowl down and did not look at the Hound, whose ears seemed to work far better than his tongue. "How do you know that?"

"The lady showed me. In a dream. I can see that place."

"And will I go?"

Leisia shook her head, a small movement. Tears welled up in her eyes. "I am trying. I want you to go. Please do what

the lady says. Do everything she says. She might let you then." The tears spilled. "The lady says you are a man; you can take care of yourself. But they kill everyone. They killed m-m-my—"

He snatched at her and hugged her to him, frail, hard little body racked with weeping. He hugged her till her shudders stilled, and rocked her, and squeezed his eyes shut along a seam of tears. "There," he said, when he had gotten his throat clear. He sighed and felt her sigh, and shivered and set her back before she could sense fear in him.

Her fingers brushed his eyelashes, the skin beneath them.

"Men cry," he said.

"I know," she said.

And all the while the Hound's eyes were on them. Gerik pushed her back from him, holding her arms and then her hands. There was nothing to say. There were no promises.

He thought of one. "I will try to come," he said.

It seemed to comfort her. He smiled at her, touched her chin. "There might be shells," he said, "on the shore. I had one once. No matter how far you are from the sea, if you put your ear to it, you can hear the waves. I thought it was magic. But the Wise Women said you can hear it in any shell. Do you think you can find me one? This great lump of a Hound is not likely to oblige me."

She turned an anxious glance toward Hassall, who made no move at all, then looked at him again, searching his eyes, whether he was telling her something secret in his whimsy. Wise girl.

"Leave me with the lady," he said.

She was afraid. She wanted to say something she dared not. Perhaps it was a warning.

Go, he shaped with his lips.

She slipped her hand from his, not without a look at Hassall, who sat with his arm over his knee and an empty bowl, his second, in his hand. She got up then and walked down the slope toward the shore.

"I want to talk with the lady," Gerik said to Hassall. And when Hassall made no move toward him or toward the girl, he braced his hands against the side of the hut and the ground and levered his way to his feet. A sweat broke out on him. It might have been the food, which lay like lead in an unwilling stomach. It might have been the movement of the small bone in his leg, which grated when he turned it and sent him blind a moment, leaning his shoulders against the boards as he stood.

Hassall gestured with his empty bowl toward the door of the hut. And got up, to walk behind him.

He had thought that would be the case.

But Leisia was out of the way. He hoped on that account there might be truth. He hobbled to the doorframe and grabbed for it, and looked back down the sandy slope where Leisia was.

And was not. She walked—and simply vanished.

"*O gods!*" he cried, and stumbled in that direction, but Hassall caught him as his swollen leg failed to bear his weight. He shoved at the Hound all the same, but there was nothing on the beach but sunfire, a fading twilight. "*Gods, bring her back!*"

The Hound wrapped him in his huge arms and turned him about again, to face the doorway where the Witch stood, wrapped in her dark robes. "She is safe," Jevane said quietly. "Hush, be still."

It was Hassall's grip kept him sane, till he had caught his breath and thought to himself that if Leisia was anywhere he would not learn it except of the Witch, of Jevane herself. He took another breath and a third, and slumped against the Hound's restraining hold. So the Hound pushed him forward, and as the lady would have it, took him inside the hut, half dragging him from the door to the hearth, where a fire lent light to the shabby interior. Jevane walked slowly to that hearthside and made a sign with her fingers.

Hassall let him go, carefully, and with a grip on his collar

pulled him back against the stonework, off his balance. Gerik caught a hold on the rough stones, caught his breath again.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"As safe as I am," Jevane said. "Does that warn you, Dalesman?"

It did. He leaned his head back against the stones, his right arm still in the Hound's grip, his right leg refusing his weight. "Is she yours?" he asked. He thought that if that were the truth he would have no more reason to fight. Everything would have been a lie. Perhaps the Witch would sense as much and lie to him, for her own reasons. But he tried her honor, and his own sanity.

"No," the Witch said. "She is everything she seems. Sit down. Sit!"

The Hound let him go. He slumped toward the hearth, lost a convenient hold, and needed the Hound's help to make the last of the descent without jarring his leg. It still sent the stars flashing through his vision, and sweat stood cold on his skin. He caught his breath, resting with his head against a projecting stone and stared sidelong at the Witch, who sank down like a peasant with her arms about her knees, her fine robes in the dust and the fire lending her pale eyes a disquieting chatoyance.

So the Hound crouched down directly in front of the hearth, armored darkness in which the fire found points of metal and light.

The Witch searched among the clutter at the side of the dusty hearth, and moved several small pots in front of her. She dipped up a pannikin of water and set that among the rest, meticulous in her preparations.

"Where is she?" Gerik said, hoarse and harsh. Pretensions seemed vain now, and all on their side.

"You have lied to me," she said. "What is your name?"

"Eslen."

"A lie, Gerik of Paltendale."

Panic flowed through him. He did not move at all.

"Leisia told me," the Witch admitted the ordinary truth.

It hurt; but he had trusted his name to a child, and delivered that child to the enemy. What better did he deserve? She had betrayed him even recently, outside, without a thought. "So, well," he said, and shrugged. "That might be so. Or might not."

"Gerik," she named him assuredly. "Where do you fare?"

Again he shrugged.

"With what purpose?" she asked.

"Are you," he asked, hard-edged, "of Kolder or of Est-carp?"

"I am not of the Dales," she said. She disturbed the water with her finger, making rings. She drew her hand in a circle. He looked at her throat, amid those robes, for some Witch's jewel, but he saw none, only the silver ring on a fine-boned hand, the stone of which was colorless in the firelight and tawdry as peddler's glass.

"Where, then?" he asked. "Are you Kolder-bred?"

"You were going to your kin," was her answer, her voice soft and insistent as the sea-sound outside. "But there is no hope there. From south and from north the Hounds come. From Ulmsport and Jorby. There is no hope."

Such firm insistence was in that voice. It crept into the bones like other pain. And she could *not* have learned his intent from the child. He had never spoken it. He finally broke the spell. "Do Kolder ever tell the truth?"

"I can show you the truth," she said.

Scrying cups and witchery. He shook his head again, conscious of the Hound close to him, assurance that he would go nowhere against their will. "Or you might show me anything you choose," he said. "*That* is the truth, lady. Do not trouble yourself for petty tricks."

"You are no fool," the Witch said. Jevane. Or whatever her true name was. Then: "But I will not prevent you. You

lost your horse. You stole Hassall's. But more, you stole the child, else I had let you go. This one more time I will spend effort on you. A third time you come to grief; do not come asking me for help."

"Kindness?" He did not believe it for an instant. The Witch told him there was no hope of his kin and told him in the next breath that she meant to help him.

"Hassall will gift you with the horse. Your armor is there in the corner. That is a choice you have."

"Where is she?"

There was long silence. At last Jevane took off her ring and dropped it into the bowl of water. The surface shimmered in the firelight, and steadied, became sunset, and sea, and children playing on the shore.

"Leisia," Jevane said, and one stopped, and left the game, walking toward the eye, toward the surface. Leisia's face shimmered within the bowl, her eyes wondering, as if she listened to something far and strange.

Jevane's hand plunged within the water and destroyed the image, retrieved the ring; Gerik thrust himself up on his hands, stopped instantly as Hassall's hand met his chest.

Answers. Lord and Lady, answers. What has she done?

"Was there grief?" Jevane asked. "Were there tears? No, Dalesman. They were happy."

"What have you done to them?"

"Sheltered them. Given them refuge. Did I not say it was Leisia guided you? Else you would have seen nothing here."

"You and this Hound—"

"Hassall is no ordinary sort of Hound." Jevane returned the ring to her finger, and laid that hand on Hassall's leather-armored knee. "The Kolder fail—at times. Rarely. But they do fail. He does not speak. Perhaps I might mend that, but it would be perilous for him. And we do understand one another."

Hassall inclined his head and looked Gerik's way. The al-

mond eyes showed less of sullenness of a sudden, glittering with disturbing intelligence below that uncombed mane.

"The children—" Gerik said.

"Such ones are precious," Jevane said. "Such as could hear me, such as could come to this shore—such as are born with the gift—"

"The Wise Ones."

"Those. Would they were ten thousand. They are seventeen."

"With this . . ." Gerik moved his hand toward the Hound. "A Witch of Estcarp, with a man of Alizon—"

"A remarkable Hound, I say."

"A Kolder trick!" But it was not what he wanted to believe. He leaned there against the stone and hoped for answers. "Witch," he said in a voice not his voice. "*Kolder Witch*—" For they said that Estcarp battled for its life; Alizon had gone to the Kolder, and now it seemed that the Kolder took more than Alizon, and that more than the Hounds had sold themselves. "Where else could you match the two of you?"

"On a common border. In old quarrels. No, not Kolder, I. We have our quarrel with the Kolder, both—" There was for a moment something forbidding in Jevane's eyes. "But that is an old matter. This one involves the Dales. Do you understand? These children who have the gift, too young to wield it. Those with the Seeing, and the Healing—Leisia's kind—that boat will carry them. When the morning comes to the Dales—and it will come, Dalesman!—that boat will fare back again. No sword will come near them. Not one will perish. And they will have dreamed a dream. That is what you have seen. That is where your Leisia is, and there you cannot be."

He drew long, slow breaths. He clung with his hand to the projecting stone and felt its age-smooth heat, painful on that side. Coals chinked down in the fire. Such small things went

on, despite the shifting of all the world. It seemed strange that they should.

"You have pressed me hard," Jevane said, "you, in coming here. Best you had never come. But Hassall will have no need of the horse. That much I can give you. I can heal your hurts. Do not think *that* comes without cost to me, or danger to all we do. The seeming that shields this place is very fragile. Still, we will manage, Hassall and I. Soon we will have finished here. And you will ride where you choose. South and west, by my advice; I did not lie about Jorby."

"The enemy is in the hills," he said. Truth spilled out of him. Perhaps it was be-spelling. He was afraid and he did not trust any future for himself, but young lives might be in the balance, as she had said. "The Hounds, wolfshields, Cervin's men. I know him from the north."

There was a sound from Hassall, a feral thing that touched the nape-hairs.

"Many of them?" Jevane asked.

"There will be. You take your reports from a child—Leisia would not know. I attacked them. That delayed them. But it also means Cervin will not come down our track with any light patrol. We taugth him too well at Paltendale. But we left a dead horse behind us—carrion birds and a trail no tracker could fail—"

Hassall looked toward Jevane a long, long moment. Jevane nodded then, and opened certain of her tiny pots, and sifted herbs into the water. Often enough Gerik had seen a Wise Woman's healing, several times had that grace done him, in boyhood falls and sword-cuts and sprains in war. But she had not the homely aspect of Paltendale's Wise Woman, was forest fire to that woman's candle flame. There was a trap. Surely there was a trap. It was for him she prepared, he knew that it was by the things that she did, and the Hound sat there silent, unmoving.

"They are coming here," Gerik said again. "Have you a magic against that?"

"None to spare," she said. "Move his leg, Hassall."

Gerik edged the other direction and winced at the subtle grate of bone. "None to spare. Then give me the horse. Forbear your help. I will ride out of here."

"Do you believe me, then?"

He did. He did not. He caught a ragged breath against the throbbing in his leg and the buzzing in his skull, and shook his head. "No. But what *they* will do, I believe. Give me my armor. Give me the horse."

"And you will do great battle. You cannot sit a floor, man, small chance you can ride. Shall we leave you for them? Move him, Hassall."

He held up a hand in his defense; but Hassall put a gentle arm about him, eased him down on the hearthstones with tenderest care, and propped the leg on a folded blanket.

Jevane passed her hand over his shin and heat flowed beneath it, the whole swelling seeming fit to split the skin. She did the same with his whole body, which sent heat out from scrapes he had not reckoned. Then she drew back and dipped her fingers in the bowl, humming to herself—perhaps part of the magic, Gerik thought, perhaps high sorcery and not the sort Daleswomen knew. Or perhaps—his head spun as she worked and strange thoughts came to him—perhaps it was only idle preoccupation. He felt as if he drifted. He was lost, and heat and cold flowed through his wounds. "Hassall," Jevane's voice said from the bottom of a well, and he felt a harder, duller touch close about his leg; he suspected pain to follow and clenched his jaw and clenched his hands, wanting desperately to faint away as the Hound pulled and turned. Bone grated and snicked into place, a hot flash of pain became warmth, then cold. Lights ran fine trails through his vision, stars flashed and smelled of herbs and sulphur. He was falling. He felt all his life rushing along his veins wherever her hands hovered, this way and that, like winds. His command of his senses was threatened, his will undermined as if he stood on some crumbling cliff—no more of Gerik in the void below

his feet, no more of him than she willed, no more could return than she was willing to surrender back again.

True, true, true. He knew it in that moment, all unwilling; he knew the scope of the disaster in High Hallack, the extent of the enemy, the fall of villages and keeps and holds throughout the Dales, saw the dead and the dying, the pitiful lot of refugees overrun by the Kolder-driven Hounds—the faces of his dead, of Fortal sinking away in his arms, of his parents, his sister—torn and bloodied—his mother and his brother—

He flung himself away. Pots scattered, spilling herbs and water, and hissed into the fire; it was Hassall who snatched him from harm, and caught him and held him fast.

“It is done,” the Witch said.

The vision lingered. He saw it with his eyes open, saw it there and not there in the close dark of the hut and the night, in the shadows of her robe. He heard it in Hassall’s harsh breathing and his own, the tramp of feet and the snap of banners.

“I counsel you go tonight,” Jevane said.

“They are coming.” The presence was about them like nightmare. He recognized the pass that flickered in his vision, though he had never seen it in the dark. A man did not have the Power. He flung his arm to free himself and to shake away the illusions. Her doing. Everything he saw was lent him, was a trick, was what she wished him to see; and in his mind he saw the boat standing bare and unfinished against the starlit shore. “Curse you!”

“Provisions. A canteen. Speed will help you most. I have the Farseeing, that only. The future is a trap and the past is a web of judgments.” Sweat stood on the Witch’s brow. Her skin was white, and hectic flush stained her face like the marks of fever. “There is peril in such Seeing now. Not in their seeing us. But the veils that shield this place have no substance against a chance intrusion.”

“The Lord-forsaken boat is a wreck, a rotten hulk; for the

love of the Lady, woman, they are a day away from here at best—" The vision left him. The hut was about him with aching clarity, every imperfection, every ugliness of age and decay. "In the pass. Up there in the hills."

"You have lent me that. Yes."

"You cursed fools! Get out of here!"

She shook her head and gazed at him—Estcarp Witch, with nearly a score of young lives wrapped about her finger, with the Power to cast shapes and blast her enemies—only so they were not too many.

Power to shape truth. That too.

He swore. He tested the leg, whether it would bend. He got to his feet as Hassall did, springing up warily and between him and the seated Witch. Faithful Hound. Man of absolute loyalties.

"I am a Dalesman," Gerik said. "Curse you, ask me about horses, not boat building."

"Hassall's skill," Jevane said in a faint, faded voice. She did no more than lift her eyes to him. "Your willing hands, Dalesman. I have given you the strength. No more can I give you, but to tell you the choices."

They slept when they exhausted themselves, he and Hassall sprawled by their weapons on the sand near the blocks; they waked and worked by dimmest torchlight; for, Jevane warned them, fire and sound were both hazards to the illusion. Fire to light their work, fire to heat the pitch for caulking, and the soft sound of the mallet as Gerik worked seam after seam in the hull, the louder strokes of adze and hammer as Hassall did the exacting joining work in the fitful light.

"She did this," Gerik muttered, sure that Hassall heard him. "She meant this from the beginning." But it was unfair to harry the man about his loyalties, when the man had no voice to answer him. Tap and tap of the mallet. "We met

Cervin at Paltendale. We bled him. We bled him twice. You know him?"

There was a grunt, that much of a word. Gerik looked along the pitch-smearred hull and caught a look at Hassall's face in the torchlight. Hassall's mouth twisted and clamped in a grimace. He made a rude gesture common to both sides of the sea, and jerked his hand back toward the hills, toward the way the enemy would come.

"Not a friend of yours," Gerik said.

No. He was not.

Gerik dipped a new length of cord and applied it to the seam, cursing the heat and the stickiness of the pitch that made them both grotesque, he and the Hound streaked and crossed with black wherever cord or hull had touched them, wherever a hand had wiped sweat from face or chest or arms. The torchlight made them both demons.

"The lady will be sleeping," Gerik surmised. "Keeps the veils while she sleeps, can she?" A glance at Hassall, who betrayed nothing. "Or have we got them while she sleeps? Do you know?"

If Hassall knew, he kept that to himself.

Seam after seam, till hands were numb and the mallet slammed knuckles all too often. Gerik gnawed his lip and leaned up against the hull to work, with the tide curling up close to them.

"How in the sweet Lady's name do we get this thing to the water?" Gerik asked when that thought came to him. "Carry it on our backs? Push it, the two of us?"

A look and a two-handed shove at the hull from Hassall. Gerik spat pitch and sweat and blinked the salt that stung his eyes.

Leisia, shimmering away under the Witch's fingers. Spurt of blood from Sunel's neck, from a killing wound, from his brother's side, blood standing in puddles in a muddy and trampled field. He tapped away at the hull until he smashed

his knuckles hard enough to bend him double and send the breath out of him. He swore when it came back, then staggered over to the blanket he had borrowed from the hut and threw himself facedown on it, to nurse his hand and shut his eyes until the gulls came crying overhead and he heard the sea again.

The sea was farther now. He had never marked the differences a tide made. He remembered then, things about launching ships on an ebbing tide, riding the outbound surge.

And landwind and seawind and moons and weather. Hassall might know these things. A man who could shape a boat would know such things.

It was not a case of launching at whim. He had not understood that. He reckoned with it now, and got up and juggled the can of pitch against the coals, stirring it with a stick to take down the scum that had formed. He attended a call of nature and came back to work, not thinking about breakfast, but Jevane herself came down in a cloud of swooping gulls, bringing them mealcakes and a little wine, which tasted all the same of pitch.

Three more planks went in. They were the last. Gerik wiped sweat in the morning sun and tapped away at the caulking, while Hassall hammered away at the tiller assemblage, iron muffled in leather—little to choose, Gerik thought, whether the hammering and the lights at night were worse, or this, by full light when they knew well that the enemy was that much closer.

Of Jevane there was no sign now. Of what she did up at the house Gerik had no sure knowledge, but he imagined her at the hearthside, scarcely stirring, spying on what might be spied upon, doing things into which he had no wish to inquire. Perhaps she could do something to muddle hearing as well as seeing. Perhaps she knew very well where the enemy might be. It was maddening that the one who might know was inac-

cessible and the one who knew her mind could not tell him what he knew—only a look, a grimace, a small sound or two.

He stopped to eat a bite of the leftover cakes that they protected from the gulls beneath a pile of canvas, had a drink of tepid water, and grimaced as he surveyed his blisters.

A thump sounded overhead. He looked up and saw Hassall come overside onto the shaky scaffolding that surrounded the bow. The Hound dropped again, landing on his feet in the shadow of the boat, came and motioned impatiently at the planking that lay by the net frames.

Up the scaffolding, then, scrambling up and down with lumber on boards that quaked and bounced under the weight. They both left bloody handprints on the boards, dropped spatters of sweat on old wood and new, as they fitted the decking and pegged it down.

“Deck,” Gerik muttered. “Lord-forsaken boat needs a deck. The enemy is out there—do you have to walk around in this thing? Just make it float, for all that’s holy—does the lady want pillows and brass fittings?”

Hassall pointed at a square down in the well as if it answered the matter.

Answer it did when the Hound insisted on larger timbers braced from under that deck, timbers hauled up that same scaffolding and handled over the side and down into the well; and decking fitted with a pit matching that below, while the sun sank lower down the sky and the heat lingered.

It was the mast that arrangement would support, the footing for that great timber that lay weathering on blocks over beneath the far side of the boat. Hassall fitted various trailing ropes about the mast cap in arcane purposes of his own, lifted the heavy foot of the mast on his shoulders, and Gerik raised scaffold braces under it; Hassall climbed the scaffold and lifted again, and the structure grew more precarious still under the unwieldy weight. The mast foot reached the rim of the boat, and both of them clambered up and hauled and heaved

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and braced their backs to step it into the socket; it slammed in with a thunder that rang through the wood and off the hills, and Gerik leaned there panting, embracing their unwieldy accomplishment and blinking through sweat as Hassall caught one of the heaviest of the trailing ropes and went to the bow.

"Tent pole," Gerik muttered, gazing up at the clutter of ropes that were still to fasten. He seized one that matched the forward stay and went to the stern with it, wrapping it about the stern post as Hassall came back to see to it.

The sun was low in the west now. They heaved and tied, tautened and wrapped, stem and stern and two ropes to the sides.

But Hassall stopped at the last, lifted his face as if he had heard a distant voice, and scrambled over the side as if that voice had said something that he had no wish to hear.

"What is it?" Gerik followed him to the side and leaned over the rim, but Hassall was looking toward the hills. "Are they there? Does she see them?"

Hassall made a furious gesture to come down, turned, and ran as much as walked across the sand, where the canvas was piled. Gerik clambered down the scaffolding, dropped to the ground, and, arriving to help, found himself hauling back heavy tackle and cable that made no sense to him, except he knew it was the rigging. Hassall brought other pieces; more of climbing and balancing on the tottering scaffolding until the gut ached and the knees went to water, as Gerik transferred the heavy items aboard.

Then the great boom had to be lifted aboard, and last came the unwieldy canvas, in a struggle across the sand that brought them to their knees more than once. Then the scaffolding collapsed. Gerik threw himself clear and looked up where the roll of canvas disappeared over the side like some monstrous white snake. Hassall's head and shoulders appeared above it.

Gerik waved a hand that he was unmaimed, and fell back-

ward on the sand a moment to take his breath, drew several gasps unimpeded, and gathered himself up again to restore the scaffolding. He found himself mindlessly cursing on every breath, a kind of litany of the doomed, and glanced now and again toward the hills. He wanted to ask Hassall about saddling up the pony and bringing it around in the case they needed it; but why they might need it was too much to explain.

Instead he walked off from the work, took his sword, and cut the bindings on the nearest of the great net frames. He threw it down, dragging it and its rotten nets across the bow of the boat. Whether Hassall understood in his turn what a Dalesman was about, Gerik did not know, but he had in mind the good bow and the large supply of arrows that Hassall had brought down with his sword and his gear. He knocked down another of the frames and dragged it a little farther up and over from the last, struggling in the flutter of the rotten nets and the resistance of the sand. He took a third, and, sweating and sucking at a splinter in his palm, looked up at a whistle. The Hound clambered off the scaffolding and landed in the sand. Pointed back toward the hills.

Gerik turned. He could see nothing, yet. He strained his eyes toward that distant cut where high hills gave way to shoreside, remembering how the land lay, and how a force must come out there on that long slope.

Hassall arrived beside him and he looked back again, in the gathering twilight, seeing how the sea had moved in again, how the rollers came in and the wind blew stronger and stronger from the sea.

Lord, the tide goes out in the morning. They come too soon. Or we are a day too late.

"The lady—" He gestured up the hill.

Hassall gripped his arm, drew him back in the direction of their weapons.

"Do you know that she knows?" Gerik asked. He went be-

side the Hound, half running. "Man, do you plan on her holding them?"

The Hound said nothing, only ran ahead of him and took up his harness and his weapons.

Gerik took his own, gazing backward where the enemy must come. The light was at that treacherous time, colors fading, be it shore or hill, under a sky clear and leaden dull. He fastened buckles to the familiar tension. He felt over that split in his armor that he had not had time to mend. He saw Hassall heading back to the boat and felt a rush of panic, a sense of secrets he did not know, mundane things of the sea and the tides, sail and canvas and work he did not understand. Matters slid beyond his grasp and beyond his control.

He looked up to see the Witch descending the hill with bundles of cloth and baskets, refugee like all the thousands of his people, a power of Estcarp driven like the rest of them.

She came down to him in the twilight. Her hair was uncovered. Her robes fluttered and snapped about her in the sunset like so much smoke and night.

"There is the horse," she cried over the wind, fighting free of her hair. "There is time—there is time. Ride out of here!"

"And leave you to what?"

"There is no more shield! There has not been, since this morning! Get clear, I say, get clear."

"It is not finished!" he shouted at her. "Lord, woman, it is not finished. Can your Power weave cable and tie rope? If you have Power, use it on *them!*"

"*That is my spelling!*" she said, and thrust her hand toward the heavens, her face pale and terrible. "The weather I can hold—do you ask me the rocks and the hills and the enemy? *Get you gone! Twice and three times I give you your life. Do not waste it; we will manage with the sea!*"

"Lord-forsaken fool, woman! Tend to the enemy—they will be here before the tide floats her, even a landsman can reckon that—"

"Tend to the enemy and do *what* with the tide? I have said! There is no more shield—I cannot do one and the other—it was my strength I spent in you, that was the time I bought, you have paid your debt, man, now *ride*. Get off this shore and leave the matter to me!"

She swung her bundles beneath her arm; she shook the hair from her eyes and began to run. He stared after her, open-mouthed with what else he had meant to say, that she did not know the enemy, or the speed with which their cavalry moved—a woman, and no more apt to tactics than a fish to feathers. A woman with a damnable habit of waving a hand and having her way with one man and another.

Excepting the Kolder, who beset her kind in Estcarp. Excepting the Hounds, who, if she had the Power she vaunted, could not have harried her and her companion to this shore and cornered them and backed them to the sea.

Power enough to snare children, to lure them from across the Dales, through war and dangers the like of which Leisia knew—

"Damnable fool!" he cried at the winds, the gathering dark, at no one within reach.

And ran, taking his helm and shield as he went, for the house and the pen where the Alizon pony circled and stamped in rising disquiet at the wind.

The tack was there—that much foresight Jevane had had. The pony's gear was hanging over the rail, and Gerik slipped through and snared the pony with a rein, calmed him enough to get the blanket and saddle on his back. The pony rolled his eyes and sniffed the wind—danced and fretted when Gerik opened the gate and shot free as he came up in the stirrup and landed astride.

Rein and heel—not southward. It was the hills he aimed for. It was the downslope of the pass out of the Dales. He gave that wild shout the folk of Paltendale had given the Hounds cause to know, sent it ringing down the wind.

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It had worked once, gods knew. Once before they had delayed off his track because they suspected more than a single man. He shouted, high and clear, and rode into the wide open, far, far up on the grassy heights.

"Haaaaaiiiiiiiyyyyyyyyiiii, Cervin! Come and fight me; do you dare?"

A darkness appeared at the top of the slope, a thin rim, like the rising of some vast black sun. It grew, and grew in the halfflight, and became a line of riders from horizon to horizon. He heard them, that muttering and yelling that gave the Hounds their name. He heard the thunder of their horses above the howl of the wind.

"Haaaaaaaiiiiiiii!" he yelled, and lifted his sword to them, holding the pony tight reined.

He heard the arrows loose, saw the stain of shafts across the sky.

"Haaaaaiiii," he yelled to the pony, and wheeled and fled pell-mell down the height.

Every shaft fell short. The wind was gusting in the archers' faces. The slope lent speed to the pony in its flight—creature half wild and surefooted in the dark.

They were following. They were doing what Dalesmen had prayed the Hounds would do a score of times, and now, *now*, the blackguards turned reckless and pursued, with the wide shore in their sights and the surety that in that broad beach and that rustic fisher hut and ship, there was no peril but prey.

They were Hounds. *Some* of them would stay for plunder, no matter how poor the pickings, no matter how many others of them he could draw off behind him. Enough of them would pull off his track for easier and less suspect prey—O Lord and Lady, to sweep through the fragile defense on the beach toward the ship that lay straight before them.

He had failed his intentions. Again. Fool that he was. He was not in danger. He could veer off south and up in the hills

again and through brush and over game trails in the dark till the best of their trackers were confounded.

But there were costs of being a fool. A man who was a man knew that.

They would see him, Hassall and the lady Jevane; they would see a cursed fool out on the beach before them, and perhaps he would buy them time for the Witch to do something to save herself. And Leisia.

Leisia. And the others like her.

He had sorted the pursuers out. Houndlike, they rode without discipline. The fastest had come the farthest as they rode onto the beach, and that put the archers out of the business—their own front lines were within the arrow-fall; and chasing him had sorted them down to a handful of the foremost and the fleetest—two of whom found the bog in the gathering dark and foundered.

He did not press the pony now. He let himself be overtaken; and when he heard the hooves come thundering up, he whirled the pony about and met the rider with shield and sword, tumbled the wolfshield from the saddle in one shock of encounter as another rider came screaming in, leaning from his saddle.

Young Hound. Early mistake—against a veteran. Gerik turned and met flesh with sword's edge, and the enemy's sword went flying off in one direction, the rider and the horse in two more.

"*Hyya!*" he yelled at the pony, seeing riders coming in a closing crescent. He veered out of the arc and rode into the wind that came now as a hammering gale. The horse shied from it, threw his head, and splattered him with froth as he drove it straight on, gaining more room, more of the broad sand. He saw the boat black against the reflecting sea. He saw water closer than it had ever been, glistening under the blocks that held the boat.

"Jevane!" he shouted into the witch-wind. He saw the

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chance of their safety, if that water swirled the sand into a froth beneath the boat, if it made ground the horses would not venture. The Witch had, after all, known what she was about—and the veteran soldier had lost the dice throw. He wished them well—he with his narrowing expanse of beach between the Hounds and the sea. He expected the riders behind him. He lifted his sword to the Witch and the Hound, knowing it was, after all, victory for the Dales. "Good luck to you!" he yelled, and hauled on the reins with his shield arm, to face about then, turning the hard-breathing pony to face the charge.

The Hound bearing down on him spilled out of the saddle, and the riderless horse veered off from the wind. Another saddle emptied, of the riders oncoming.

Their own fire, he thought in disgust for them.

And heard a keen, sharp whistle down the wind at his back. Hassall!

Arrows flying *down* the wind, lent range and sorcerous accuracy. A whistle, loud and clear on a gust.

"You great fool!" he cried, and reined the pony about into the wind and the darkest end of the sky, full tilt for the boat. Great flapping monsters rolled and tumbled into his path, black shapes he recognized for the net frames, rolling in the windstorm. The pony whinnied terror and pitched, and he slashed the reins, pulled back and slid off, sending the terrified creature free in the dark, free as many another pony running loose in the night. A net fluttered at him as a frame rolled past. He cleared his shield of it and ran, dodging through the tumbling masses, letting the shield trail him in the wind.

The boat loomed ahead, moving on a surge, clear of its blocks. A light glowed along its bow, a shining beacon that snaked down to the side that turned to him as he waded and splashed into the treacherous sands. The hull bore down on

him like a dark and perilous wall, like as not to bear him under.

He thrust his sword through his belt. He grabbed one-handed after the shining rope and lost his footing as a surge carried the boat against him and boiled the sand from under his feet.

But the rope drew him above the water. He used his shield hand on it as well, desperately, as the rope, in the small jolts of a great strength pulling it, lifted him to the rail. He flung one arm over, clung as the boat heeled and rolled, and a strong hand found purchase among his belts and gear and dragged him over the rim.

He caught his balance, face-to-face with Hassall in the dark. Jevane was clinging to the rope beside him, her hair flying straight out.

"Did I not say?" she shouted at him. "You mistake your directions, Dalesman!"

"I can go back to them!" he shouted back, waving a hand toward the enemy.

The Hound's hand rested heavily on his shoulder, a massive arm flung about him, steadying him as the boat heaved and he reeled for balance. The sea was under them. The sea was rolling far up, toward the Hounds. He saw chaos in the starlight beyond their bow, heard screams and panic.

Jevane flung up her arms and an illusory fire ran along the rim of the boat, up the ropes, up the mast. The wind died into sudden hush.

Then, which touch lifted the hairs at Gerik's nape, a new wind began to breathe outward from the land, the merest whispering of a wind.

"Get the sail run up," Jevane said. "On this one we can ride."