

The Hagenspan Chronicles

Book One



Roarke's Wisdom

The Defense of Blythecairne

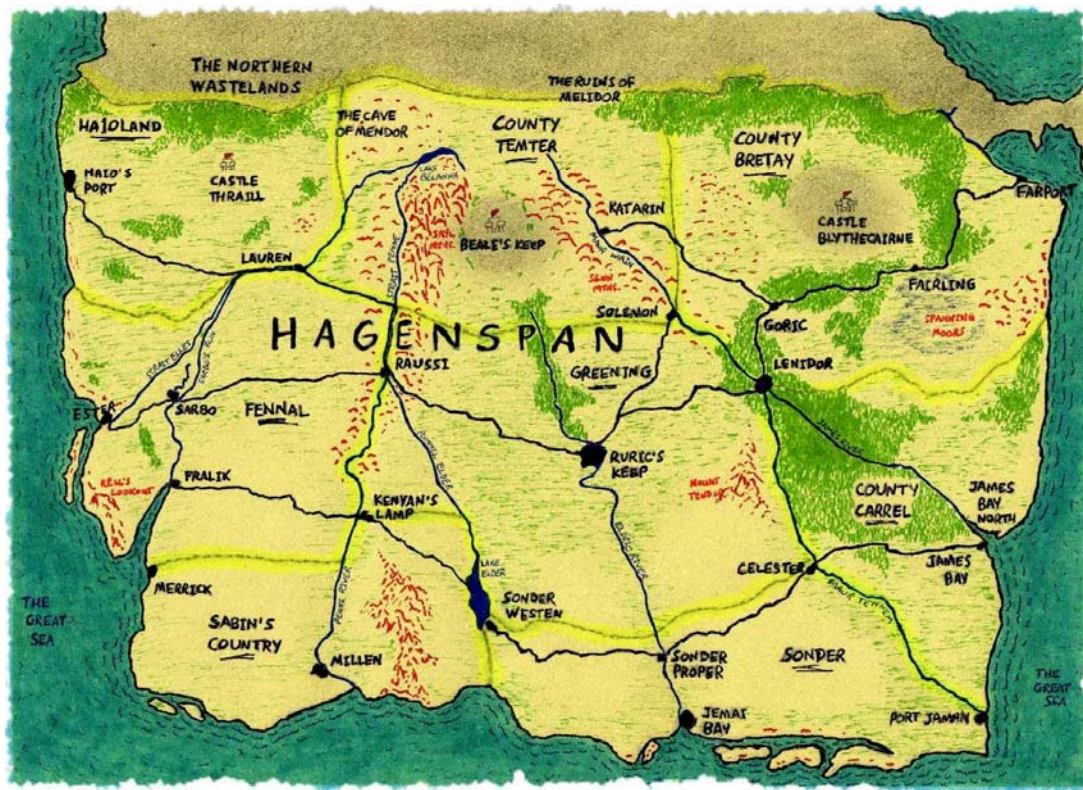
Robert W. Tompkins

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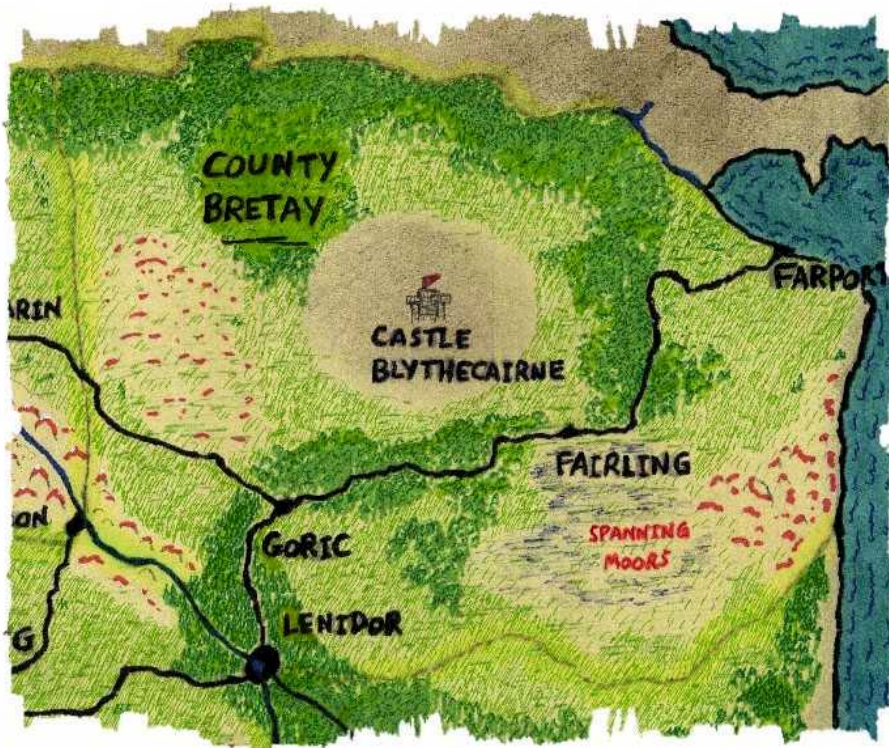
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Roarke's Wisdom

Book One: The Defense of Blythecairne

being chiefly concerned with the events which occurred in County Bretay



*To castle ruin'd did he ride
upon a stallion black as night.
Tomorrow's hope he cherished not;
his only thought to kill, and die.*

*The serpent coil'd around the throne,
malicious hate within its breast—
its only thought to kill, and kill
that which disturb'd its rest.*

*A heart of steel, a heart of flesh
did meet together in one man.
And would it quail? He bade it not—
Take Courage! cried he, Courage! Stand!*

*Then flashing blade did stab and pierce!
And roaring fury did it wake!
And every thrusting point did make
the serpent yet more fierce.*

*Then flashing teeth did snap and tear,
and hope to vanquish foe so small—
but wrathfully they found that all
they bit on was the air.*

*Then singing blade did stab and wound!
From evil heart flow'd blood uncheck'd.
From cuts in face, and breast, and neck
the beast began to swoon.*

*Then keening serpent tried to flee,
but found no place to hide its head—
for only with the dragon dead
would man have victory.*

*From castle ruin'd did he ride,
the strength of evil now undone.
Of cheering crowds none call'd his name—
triumphant—weary—sad—alone.*

Chapter One

Roarke sucked the drops of broth out of his moustache. He could have wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, but he didn't want to waste any of the soup. It was thin and a little weak, but it was hot. There were some potatoes in the broth, and every once in awhile he found some unidentifiable strips of meat. It was likely enough that it was rat, but Roarke, who was hungry, did not care.

He reached across the table and grabbed another wedge of bread. Good, the heel. Several other pairs of eyes glanced up from around the table, irritated that this silver-haired man was eating so much of the bread. Roarke dipped the heel into the soup, soaking up the broth, and then cautiously put the dripping sop into his mouth, taking care to hold his bowl under his mouth so as not to lose even a drop.

A rough-looking man with a blackened face growled to him, "Ho, Stranger. Ye eat as if ye hain't et in three day." The insinuation of a threat was evident.

Roarke lifted his eyes to meet the man's greasy glower. In the smoky gloom of this dining hall, it was difficult to ascertain the man's race, but Roarke supposed that he may have been descended from trolls at some point in his family's history. "No, friend, not three days, but it has been two."

If the troll-like man was impressed, he did not appear to be, but he said, "Why hain't ye et in two day?"

Roarke sighed. He was not used to talking, and his throat felt strained from the effort of conversation. Warily he said, "Where I have been, there was neither beast nor vegetable nor scullery." He was not intentionally evasive, but didn't feel it necessary to tell all of his business to this character either, not to mention the other diners, who were now listening with interest to the exchange.

"Why, Boof," began another patron, who was sitting to the side of Roarke (apparently Boof was the troll-man's name), "If he ain't been a-eatin' in two days, he musta been up to the old castle lands, a-lookin' for dragon gold." Here he jabbed an elbow into Roarke's arm. "How about it, Strangey? Find yeself some spoils?" The man's voice rang with a mocking tone, but it was obvious that he was interested in the answer to his query.

In fact, Roarke had indeed been to the barren and wasted lands to the northwest of this small village of farmers, tradesmen, and outcasts. Few humans ventured to those parts, because it was rumored that a dragon still lived there, in the ruined castle called Blythecairne. No one living there had actually seen the dragon in many years, but it was assumed that it still ruled the stronghold, because whenever adventurers had gone to seek the castle's treasure, they were not seen again.

Men would have called Roarke an adventurer, but it would not have been accurate. While it was true that he had experienced many adventures in his half-century of existence, he did not love sleeping on the ground, or eating bad food, or going without food at all. He did not love always being a wanderer, a stranger, viewed with suspicious eyes by the people in every village he entered. And on the rare occasions when he was able to sleep on a feather bed, with soft pillows and quilts to warm him, he did not love the fact that his arms were empty. He missed his wife.

Jostled out of his reverie by another jab with his neighbor's bony elbow, Roarke said, "Forgive me, friends. I fear I may have been dozing. What were you saying?"

"Dozin'?" the man next to him demanded indignantly. "Why, Strangey, ye ain't a-showin' us here much respect!" Again, a thinly veiled threat.

Boof spoke again, growling, "What're ye called, Stranger?"

"Men call me Roarke."

"Well, Roarke," Boof spat the name as if it were a bad taste in his mouth, "we likes t' know the business of strangers in these lands. There hain't nothin' to recommend this town except dragon gold, which none of us hain't got, and nobody else a-gets neither. On account'n the dragon."

Roarke did not speak. All eyes in the tavern were on him now, with a few muffled whispers of misgiving to be heard at the farther ends of the board where the diners sat.

"Hain't ye goin' ta answer?" Boof demanded.

"I apologize, friend. I was not aware that you had asked a question," Roarke replied gently. "May I ask a question of you?"

"Huh? What?"

"Have you a magistrate in this town? I have some business to discuss with him."

The tavern-keeper, wiping his hands on a filthy rag, said cautiously, "I serve as Third Magistrate for County Bretay. I take care'n that business in the mornin's before'n after breakin' fast."

"That's fine, then," Roarke replied. "I will be back to speak with you in the morning. In the meantime, I would like to pay my bill for dinner, and also buy a mug of beer for each of my dinner companions. I believe this will take care of it..." He reached inside his tunic and retrieved a single coin from a small pouch that hung on a rawhide strap around his neck.

Laying the coin on the board and taking one last piece of bread, he stepped out from the small crowd, gathered his pack, and left the tavern. The bony-elbowed man who had sat next to Roarke picked up the dusty coin and rubbed it between his greasy fingers until it shone, bright gold. The tavern-keeper barked, "Hey, Herold! Don't be gettin' light-fingered with my money."

Herold replied, "Looke this, Keet. This ain't jist a coin."

He tossed it to the tavern-keeper, who stared in amazement. Other curious eyes were lifted, and a voice asked, "What is it, Keet?"

Keet said, "Here, lads. Pass this around."

It was a heavy gold coin, known in those parts as a falconet, and bearing the seal of The House of Meadling, the former Lord of Blythecairne.

Chapter Two

Roarke walked past the end of the village into the growing dusk. The air was cool, almost brisk, after the smoky heat of the tavern. He adjusted his pack on his shoulders, swinging it from his right side to his left. The pack, though it had few belongings in it, had recently grown heavy with the addition of several hundred falconets—a small percentage of what still lay in the treasury of Blythecairne.

The road he walked led from the town of Fairling (where he had just eaten) to a somewhat larger burg called Goric. When he passed the last hut at the western end of village, he broke into a trot, and jogged along for over an hour, panting beneath the load of his pack. Finally he came to a pillar of stones, barely visible in the dusk, that he had constructed earlier that day. Kicking the stones over with a dusty boot, Roarke started heading due north from the road.

He pushed his way through a dry, brushy thicket for another hour, musing, half-praying, *Soon there will be rabbits living here again. And birds.* He made a clucking noise with his tongue, and in response heard a snort and a stamp, slightly off to the left. He adjusted his course, and burst through the brush into a sparsely-grassed clearing where a shining black stallion waited, barely visible against the early night sky.

"Justice!" Roarke called softly, suddenly overcome by a wash of joy at seeing his longtime friend, mingled with real fatigue, and a trace of lingering melancholy. A brief, strangled sob escaped his throat, and he buried his face against the horse's warm neck. Justice stood patiently while Roarke allowed himself to enjoy the warmth, the life, radiated by the horse. *Apart from God,* Roarke thought, *you are my only companion.*

He reached into a pocket in his overcoat, and drew out the last piece of bread taken from the tavern table. The horse sniffed at it, took it and ate. There had been nothing for Justice today except for the coarse grass of the clearing where he had been tethered, and he snorted with pleasure at the taste of the bread.

Roarke gathered the remainder of his belongings, which he had stashed in the brush of the thicket: his saddle, his sword. He had taken his pack with him into Fairling because he had thought that perhaps he might spend the night in a bed, but the arrogance of Boof and his comrades had suggested that another course might be prudent.

He affixed the saddle to Justice, arranged his pack behind it so that the weight was evenly distributed to both sides, and strapped the sword belt around his waist. Climbing into the saddle, he pointed the horse's nose to the north.

It was far past midnight when they reached the castle, which appeared as a dark shadow blotting out the stars in the black sky. Roarke dismounted, led Justice through the courtyard, and up the steps past demolished gates, entering the great hall of Lord Meadling, who had been dead now for most of three generations.

After letting his eyes adjust to the faint light provided by the moon through the open windows, Roarke found what he desired. With the tip of his sword, he tore down the remnants of a tapestry from one wall, wrapped himself in it, and lay on the floor, falling asleep almost immediately.

Chapter Three

Wakened by the gentle nudging of his horse's muzzle on the back of his head, Roarke opened his eyes, blinking away the sleep. The sunlight was streaming through the east window of the hall, and a breeze was making the threadbare curtains wave lazily where they still somehow managed to hang. Rising stiffly and disentangling himself from his tapestry covering, he murmured a brief prayer of acknowledgement to the Almighty for the gift of another day, and went outside to relieve himself.

Looking down to the surrounding knolls, and flatlands which were once apparently grainfields, Roarke imagined the lives that must have been lived there a century prior—simple, hardworking, happy, he expected—and he hoped that the land could be restored. There was something about the proximity of a dragon that had fouled the ground in every place he had ever encountered one. Roarke didn't think dragons actually breathed fire; that, he supposed, was just a legend started and perpetuated by people overcome with terror. Certainly, in the three encounters Roarke had had with dragons, they had not breathed fire. Still, there was something ... *unclean* about the lands where they prowled. Their range was small; they always stayed close to their nesting places. But the destruction they produced was absolute.

He yawned, stretched, and turned himself back to the task at hand. "They'll want proof, Justice," he said to the horse, and retrieved his sword.

He walked back around the east wall of the castle, where the dragon had staggered when it became clear that its fight was not going well. The beast had expired of its wounds trying to wedge its way into what had apparently been the castle stables, long ago, judging by the scattered bones of horses in the vicinity.

Roarke strode to the dragon's tail, which was by itself longer than Roarke was tall. He decided that a section of the end of the tail about the length of his forearm would be sufficient, and swung his sword down to hack it off.

The sword glanced sideways off the reptilian tail, flew out of Roarke's hands, and landed three feet away in the dust. Surprised, Roarke remarked aloud, "Well, I'm glad *that* didn't happen two days ago!"

He looked at the tail more closely. The pattern of scales was very closely-knit, and each scale overlapped its neighbor like an arrangement of roofing shingles, pointing in a leftward spiral. With the tip of his sword, he pried up a row of the scales, and a few of them broke off. There Roarke discovered, underneath a clear membrane, another pattern of scales, spiraling to the right. *I'm surprised I ever was able to break through this old scoundrel's hide!* Roarke thought. *Well, I prayed.*

He inspected the beast's underbelly, where the killing blows had struck home, and found that the pattern of scales on the dragon's hide was only one layer thick there. The density of the scales had made the dragon much more susceptible to a thrust with the point of a sword than a slash with the blade, a fact that Roarke had discovered after a very short time of fighting.

Realizing that he wasn't going to be able to sever the tail by merely hacking at it with his sword, he set out to prying a ring of scales off with his sword tip, then piercing the sub-membrane, and prying away another lower ring of scales. This turned out to be painfully slow work, and he was soon sweating profusely in the midday sun.

Midday! Roarke realized that he had missed his appointment with the tavern-keeper. *Ah well, I don't suppose he's going anywhere.*

Before Roarke had finished removing the end of the dragon's tail, his arms were trembling with exhaustion, and he was cursing under his breath and quickly

apologizing to God. Noticing the fiercely blazing sun high in the sky, he realized that neither he nor Justice had had anything to eat or drink today, and he felt regret that he had not cared for his mount any better than that. He was briefly tempted to try eating some of the dragon, but thought, *No.... Something that foul would surely not provide fit meat for a man.*

At last both rings of scales were dislodged from the tail, leaving only exposed muscle and bone. The weary man, on his knees, raised the grimy sword above his head with both hands, uttered a jagged cry of exhausted rage, and brought it singing down on the grisly appendage, finally separating it from the rest of the dragon. Collapsing on his hands and knees, the man cried.



The evening was cool when Roarke awoke, having fallen asleep on the ground after carrying out his labors of the morning. He felt extremely alert, refreshed. There was silence—not even the buzzing of insects—except for an occasional insistent stamping sound, heard dimly coming from within the great hall. Roarke noticed a foul smell coming from all around him, knew it to be the dragon, which had lain in the sun, in the black stain of its own blood, for almost three days now. He supposed that the same stench had attached itself by now to Roarke himself. *Time to explore a bit more of the castle.*

He took the length of tail back into the hall and wrapped it in the tapestry that had been his bedding from the night before. He stroked Justice's neck, and told the horse, "Just one more night, my friend. Tomorrow you can eat and drink as much as you can hold, and sleep on a bed of straw." The horse nickered in reply.

Roarke started foraging in the opposite direction from where he knew the castle's treasury lay; he had been there yesterday morning, and the things he could find within those walls would not help him now. What he wanted to find was the private chambers of the Lady of Blythecairne, whose name he did not know. After a couple of false starts, he found a narrow passageway leading up a flight of stairs that the dragon could not possibly have fit through, and thought he might be on the right path.

The stairs led to a wooden door that was moldering away, and the third kick from Roarke's boot broke him through to the other side. With a gasp, Roarke saw a woman sitting facing him, staring at him from the shadows, and wearing a beautiful gown of deep crimson, braided with gold. Silently commanding his heart to stop pounding in his chest, he realized with sorrow that the woman had been dead for many years, and the reason she was staring was that her eye sockets were empty. Just a skeleton, but the tiara she wore when she died had kept her hair fastened to her head, long and blonde.

"I am so sorry to disturb your slumber, my Lady." Roarke's voice trembled as he broke the silence that had lasted in this chamber for twice his lifetime. "I have come to release the House of Meadling from its captivity ... I believe I have succeeded. I do not wish to plunder your bedchamber ... but I am looking for soap."

When the Lady did not reply, Roarke assumed that she would allow him to continue his search. In an ornate dressing table he found not only some soap, but also some colored glass vials of perfume. Perhaps they would serve some purpose for him. He also found a wardrobe filled with gowns, silks and velvets. From these, he chose one, an unadorned tunic of a deep forest green, in which he carefully wrapped the perfumes. Two smaller rooms to the sides of this northeast

corner of the castle contained smaller beds, perhaps for children; Roarke took no time to explore them.

Before he left the main room to head back downstairs, he glanced longingly at the bed and wondered if he might—if he should—sleep there tonight. For the briefest of moments, he wished that the blond-haired woman would awaken, put on flesh, and reward him for freeing the castle from the affliction of the dragon, but he felt immediately ashamed, remembering his own long-dead wife. "Farewell, my Lady," he said to the bones. "I will see that no dishonor is done to your ... remains."

Since he had already slept the afternoon away, he saddled up, took his treasures, and rode through the evening back to the clearing where Justice had been tethered the day before. No food for Roarke tonight, but at least the horse could graze on the fitful grass. Roarke sat on the ground, opened his pack. He breathed in the bouquet of the soap, but reserved the vials, which would have to be broken to release their fragrances. He said his evening prayers, and lay back with his head on the pack full of falconets, staring at the stars. After a thoughtful hour had passed, he slept again.

Chapter Four

Roarke found a trickling creek across the road to Fairling, where the bright sunlight played on the ripples of water like liquid diamonds. Removing his overcoat, leather vest, a light coat of chain mail, and his tunic, he set about scrubbing his arms, torso, and head with enthusiasm, puffing and blowing in the splash of the cold water. The fragrance of the soap was pleasing to him—there was the softest breath of wildflowers evident in the aroma. Once again, Roarke thought wistfully of the Lady of the castle. *She must have been magnificent.* Chastising himself, he remembered: *A hundred years ago.*

"Well, Justice, we're a day late. Let's make a good impression, at least." From the heavy pack which contained his hoard of falconets, Roarke pulled one other prize which he had appropriated from the castle's treasury: a thin circlet of pale gold, which was set with one ruby-colored stone. Shaking the water from his silvering hair, he placed the crown upon his own head, apologizing to God in case there were any impropriety in the act.

The man, freshly washed and adorned with crown and sword, and the horse, freshly curried and shining black in the morning sun, rode for Fairling. At the last bend before they reached the village, though, they came upon a barefoot young man with tattered tunic and leggings, who called out to them, jogging toward them eagerly.

"Ho! There! Be ye Roke?" he cried, and then stopped in his tracks, with a stricken look on his face. He had been expecting a dusty traveler on foot, but what was coming into his sight now looked like ... a king! He dropped to his knees, bowing his head, mumbling, "Beggin' your forgiveness, m'Lord. I must be mistook ye for som'n else...."

"Stand, my lad. I am called Roarke. Apparently you are looking for me."

The boy stood to his feet obediently, but said nothing, and kept his gaze to the ground. A moment passed.

Not knowing whether to be amused or exasperated, Roarke said, "Well, speak, young fellow. What is your name, and whom do you seek?"

"Willum, and they said ye weren't comin' back," the boy said almost inaudibly.

Roarke got down from Justice, stood directly before the lad, and said, "Willum, *speak*. And look at me. I am simply a man, just like you."

Willum kept his head bowed, but did raise his eyes to look at Roarke. He saw the man meeting his gaze steadily, and the look in his eyes suggested nothing but kindness. The boy began, "Well, me name's Willum, as I said, yer honor, an' I be the son of Keet, who owns The Stag's Head, where ye et, a night gone past. An' they said ye weren't comin' back."

Roarke smiled gently, and lines crinkled at the edges of his gray eyes.

"No?"

"Well, yer honor, they said ye'd gone off to the dragon lands, an' stole one of the dragon's gold pieces, an' when ye went back t' steal another 'un, the dragon done fer ye. They said yer bones was roastin' with dragon fire, an' ye'd gone off t' Hell where ye belonged."

Roarke chuckled, and said, "Well, my boy, you see that it isn't quite as they described."

"No, *sir!* It ain't." Willum looked directly at Roarke now. "M'Lord, it'd be my honor, if I could lead ye an' yer horse back t' meet with me father. The magistrate. That is, if ye ain't disobligin' t' such an idea...."

"That would be fine, Willum." He clambered back onto his mount, and said, "My horse's name is Justice. Justice, meet Willum."

"Ah, ye can jes' call me Will," the lad said to the horse.

Chapter Five

"Will, my boy. If you would be so kind as to hold this parcel for me until I require it, I would be indebted to you. And if you would enter your father's tavern, and announce to him that I have arrived, you would be my friend indeed."

They had drawn up outside The Stag's Head, and Roarke handed a bundle down to the boy, who received it gratefully. The townspeople of Fairling stepped to their doorways and started to gather in little clusters, watching with curiosity. A few of the men, who had not seen Roarke before, removed their hats and tilted their heads toward the impressive-looking man, while some of the others, who had shared the board with him when he was just a dusty stranger, murmured among themselves nervously.

Willum burst through the door of the tavern, where his father was leaning idly behind the bar. It was between meal times, and too early for any real drinking to have begun. The boy said, "Keet! Roarke is here!"

An alarmed expression appeared on the magistrate's swarthy face. "Roke, ye mean." Indicating Willum's bundle, he said, "What's that ye got there?"

The boy said, "No, he calls it Roarke," ignoring the question.

"Well, it's all the same t' me. Why ain't he comin' in, then?"

"I don't know. I'm thinkin' he wants ye t' come out'n meet him."

Keet's immediate reaction would normally have been to say, "If *he's* the one come t' see *me*, then he can bloody well wait until Hell freezes over afore he gets me t' come outside for him," but he was made more cautious by his memory of the stranger at his board. Roarke had not initiated conversation with anyone, but had merely eaten voraciously. And when some local ruffians had started taunting him, wanting to take his measure, he had turned aside their challenges deftly, with soft

words. And then, to the wonder of all, he had paid for his meal—*more* than paid for it, by a wide margin—with a gold coin that was rarely seen anywhere in the realm. Most of the falconets that had been in circulation a century ago had long since been melted down and reforged into the coins of other rulers in nearby lands.

Keet thought of that falconet and quickly decided that, just this once, he would go to the door and welcome in his guest. Rubbing his hands on his trousers, he stumped over to the tavern entrance and pushed his way out, blinking, into the mid-morning light.

Before him rose a startling sight: a snorting black stallion bearing a rider with a sword that shone like a star on his thigh. "Master Roke!" he sputtered.

"Good day, Master Keet. Forgive me for this inconvenience, but please allow me to present myself. I am Sir Cedric Roarke of Lauren, Lord of Thrail, Liberator of Mendor, knighted by King Ruric, commissioned by Queen Maygret, and Slayer of Dragons. I have come to apply for the lands of Meadling, including Blythecairne and the surrounding environs."

An uneasy cheer started to rise from the townspeople, but it was quickly suppressed. Roarke heard a greasy voice say behind him, "How do we know he's what he *says* he is?" To the magistrate he said, "Master Keet, pray allow us to continue this conversation indoors."

"Yes, of course."

Roarke handed the reins of Justice to a nearby woman, and said, "Would you please care for my mount until I come back out?" The woman, fat and homely, gulped and nodded. She opened her mouth, closed it, and then nodded again.

Keet held the door for Roarke, who passed into the cool, unlit tavern. He began, "The laws of Bretay, Temter, and Haioland all provide that lands that are not held because of war, natural disaster, or unlawful acts may be claimed by

anyone who can deliver those lands and hold them. These laws are recognized and approved by the throne of Hagenspan at Ruric's Keep in Greening. Is this not so?"

"Why, yes ... sir. Might I be callin' ye Sir Cedric?"

"Please just call me Roarke. I am one of you, just like Willum, or Boof, or the woman keeping my horse."

"Well, sir, I'm not knowin' if anything else what ye've told me is the God's truth, or a lie, but I'll warrant ye one thing: Ye're *not* jest one of *us*. As ye wish, though, Roarke."

"Thank you, Keet. I have a few questions for you."

"Well an' good, Roarke—well an' good. But first, I've got a question for *you*."

"Yes, of course ... I believe I have anticipated your question, but please ask."

Keet rubbed his whiskers. "Well ... that lad outdoors, what said, 'How do we know ye're who ye says ye are?' It seems like a right question t' me."

In reply, Roarke gestured to Willum, who had been listening with dismay, in case his father should show disrespect to the knight, with whom he was growing ever more spellbound. "The package I gave you to hold, Will?"

Will stammered, "Yes, sir, m'Lord. Yes." He carried the bulky parcel, which had not left his sight since it was entrusted to him, and laid it on the large dinner board between the two men.

Roarke unwrapped the dragon's tail, and left it lying on the board, upon the tapestry which had come from Blythecairne's wall. Will murmured, "Ohhh." Keet exhaled slowly, not speaking. His eyes filled, and he whispered coarsely, "So ... 'twas true?"

Roarke did not speak immediately, but caught Keet's gaze and held it.

"Keet, are you an honest man?"

After a moment, the magistrate replied, "Well, sir, I *am* an honest man, though not as much as I'd like t' be. And I'll surely try harder in the future, m'Lord."

"How much is this tavern worth to you, Keet?"

"Oh, I like the work all right, I s'pose. Gives me someplace t' go each day."

"No, you misunderstand. If someone were to offer you money to buy The Stag's Head, how much would it cost?"

"Oh! I hain't really thought on it, sir. 'Course, it'd depend on whose currency was bein' offered. Might I be allowed to wonder why ye're askin'?"

"Well, Keet ... let's just say that I've always wanted to own a tavern. If I were to offer you falconets for this place, how many would you need?"

"From *you*, sir? Well ... in falconets, I guess ... say about fifty?"

"I would like to purchase this tavern from you for the price of one hundred falconets, and immediately change its name to The Dragon's Tail. And I would also like to hire Willum to oversee the business here. Will that be acceptable to you?"

Keet looked confounded. One hundred falconets represented more money than he had ever seen at any one time in his life, but ... "Then what would *I* do?"

Roarke allowed himself a small smile. "Master Keet, I will be needing a steward to oversee my holdings at Castle Blythecairne, if you're interested in the position. I will need you to recruit a household for me, and laborers for the fields, provided we can get green things to survive there again. Someone must travel, to Goric, perhaps as far as the city of Lenidor, to enlist the hardiest and bravest to come north and make Blythecairne a place of beauty once again."

Sensing hesitation from the tavern-keeper, Roarke said, "You needn't make a decision right now, friend. I will be in Fairling for several days—"

"Oh, *no*, m'Lord! I weren't balkin' at yer terms, nor any part of the deal! I was just a-frightened ... that, maybe ... I weren't a true enough man to handle the job."

Roarke nodded grimly. "I understand, Keet. I often feel the same way myself." He looked into the other man's eyes, and reached for his hand. "A man who knows that he is smaller than he wants to be—that's a man that I can talk to. If you'll consent to join me ... perhaps we will grow together."

Keet returned the knight's grasp with a firm grip of his beefy hand. "Master Roarke, ye have bought yeself a tavern, and hired yeself a pair of stewards. Me an' Willum'll do whate'er we can t' honor yer trust."

Chapter Six

That night, the village of Fairling held a celebration to receive the new Lord of Blythecairne. The title to the Meadling lands would not officially pass to Roarke's hands until he had successfully held the property for one year, but the death of the dragon (and the opportunity for the town to grow rich from the Meadling treasury) was certainly a cause for merrymaking.

The women of the town baked breads, and some of the men surrendered rabbits that they had trapped in the moors south of the town, which were roasted and shared. Children gathered soft apples and hard spotted pears. Encouraged by the village's show of generosity, a farmer slaughtered one of his pigs, which was roasted whole on a spit, and several chickens were also brought to the party by a widow from the east end of the village. Roarke threw open the doors to The Dragon's Tail and offered free beer to everybody. The actual dragon's tail was passed around between any of the townspeople who wished to see it, as proof that the dragon had indeed existed, and that Roarke had indeed killed it.

Roarke was compelled to recount several times his story of the battle with the dragon, which started out rather modestly, but was embellished greatly with the multiplication of beers. The townspeople were curious about who he was, and where he came from, but he did not speak of those things, and the people were content for the time to hear him tell the dragon story. There was music from the fiddle and pipes, singing, dancing. Willum brought out Keet's best tobacco, from far south in Sonder, and many pipes were filled, with aromatic smoke making a small cloud above the street in front of the tavern.

When the hour was growing late, and the men of the town were led tottering away to their homes by their wives, Keet and Willum insisted that Roarke sleep at

their house, which turned out to be a two-room hut on the other side of a muddy alley behind the tavern. "Me mother passed about three years ago," Will informed Roarke. "We usta live in a little farm house with chickens and such, jest outside o' town on th' eastern end, on th' road that leads off t' Farport. But after me mother passed, there jest didn't seem t' be much of a point t' stayin' out there no mores. So Keet made this little house fer th' two of us t' live at. Cozy, ain't it?"



While Roarke was climbing unsteadily onto the pallet that Keet offered him for his evening rest, there was activity across the alley in The Dragon's Tail. Boof, Herold, and a pair of their companions known as Treadle and Mox, had staggered drunkenly into the tavern, thinking mistakenly that they were moving with great stealth.

Herold pointed in the general direction of a shelf behind the bar, where the severed reptilian appendage had at last come to rest after being passed through the hands of the Fairling townspeople earlier that evening. "There 'tis!" he whispered loudly. "Go back 'ere an' get it, Mox."

A couple of hours earlier, after drinking liberally of Roarke's free beer, the four had held a loud conversation, leaning against a stone fence on the road leading to Farport. The stone fence actually marked the border of the land belonging to the widow who had brought the chickens to the feast, but since she was rather deaf and usually retired early, this short wall was often a gathering place for people who wanted to parley, removed from the general clatter (and other listening ears) usually found at the tavern.

"I don't like 'im," Herold had said. "The whole town's a-treatin' 'im as if 'e's some kind o' bloody *king* or whatnot. An' why? Because 'e shows 'em a few gold pieces an' given 'em some free beer."

Treadle, who was Herold's brother, offered, "That'n he brought 'em the dragon's tail. No one ever done that before."

Mox, a dwarfish black man who was remarkably ugly but somewhat more intelligent than his companions, complained, "It just don't seem fair that he comes a-dancin' in here wi' that dragon's tail, an' now he gets t' be the lord o' the whole County Bretay. For all we knows, he may've come upon the dragon already dead from old age 'r somethin', an' whacked off'n its tail an' come here to take over."

Treadle answered, "I expect he kilt the dragon, alright. He seems mighty sure of himself."

Herold said, "Well, one thing we're agreed to is, the dragon's dead, right? An' if that dragon's dead, then that dragon gold is free fer th' takin', right?" Grunts of acknowledgement. "An' the first ones there gets their pockets a-filled, an' maybe more, right?"

Boof, who had been unusually quiet up to this point, growled, "First."

"Yes, first," Herold said. Then, thinking he had misunderstood, "First what?"

Boof, who was less drunk than he appeared, said, "Hain't our *right* t' have that gold. It's dragon gold, and the magic o' th' dragon 'd still protect it. T' take that gold, we'd need th' strength o' the dragon."

The men looked at each other in the murky dark, blinking tipsily.

Mox scowled darkly, "I dunno.... There may be somethin' t' what Boof's thinkin'."

"The only one what's got th' strength o' *that* dragon 'd have t' be Roarke hisself, then," Treadle reasoned. "On account'n he's th' one what kilt it."

Herold was more interested in the gold than in the superstitious deliberations of his mates. "There ain't no strength left in that dragon whatsoever," he said, raising his voice. "If you boys'll jist go with me t' Blythecairne, *I'll* collect th' gold. I jist need some stout lads like yerselves t' help me carry th' stuff away."

Mox said, "Hang on, Herold. There may be a way...."

Boof grunted with interest, and vented a toxic belch.

Mox continued, "Boof, how'd it be if we was t' eat jest a bit o' that dragon's tail? Would that give us the strength we need t' have some o' that gold?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so.... That'd be jes' th' ticket, I do b'lieve."

And that was how the four had come to be in the darkened tavern, stealing the tail from the shelf behind the bar. Mox handed the appendage to Herold, who said, "Here, Tread'. Take a nibble."

Treadle answered, "I'd perfer not t' be the first one, if'n one o' you boys'd like t' be."

Boof grabbed the tail and bit a little section out of the center, careful not to get a scale. He stifled a gag, and a vaguely sorry expression passed across his flat face, but he said, "Mmm. Good." After swallowing loudly, he said, "Ye little fellers oughtn't t' take sech a big bite, I expect. It's a mite strong."

Mox took a knife from his leggings, and carved out three tiny morsels from next to the bone. Treadle took the smallest one—scarcely large enough to taste. The three looked at each other grimly, then put the pieces of rancid meat in their mouths, and swallowed without chewing.

Herold's stomach lurched with the urge to vomit, but he suppressed it, and whispered hoarsely, "Th' strength o' th' dragon—it's in us." Mox and Treadle hissed weakly, "Strength o' th' dragon." But Boof said loudly, "Yah!" as he raised his fists in the air and pumped them. If there had been anyone sober within a block of the tavern, the cry would have roused them, but as it was, no one stirred. The

conspirators looked at each other warily for a moment until they were satisfied no one was coming, and then withdrew from the tavern, leaving the dragon's tail upon the bar.

Chapter Seven

Roarke spent the next two days resting, eating, and getting to know some of the people in Fairling. Many of the residents of the shabby village were willing to risk their fortunes in the north toward Blythecairne, if only Roarke would give them assurances that their families would be cared for should disaster befall them.

Keet proposed that half of the willing men who were of suitable age be led to the castle lands to see how the region could be settled once again, and the other half be left behind to provide for the expedition, hunting and farming on the travelers' behalf, with each one being paid in gold falconets for his service. After a month, a rotating system of furloughs would begin, with part of the expedition returning to take the place of some of the laborers, who would in turn join the expedition to the north for six months. That way, the work would continually be refreshed with new strength and enthusiasm, and the men could look forward to being reunited with their families at least every six months. Roarke nodded with approval as he listened to Keet's plan.

Keet also suggested that a party be sent southwest to Goric, to recruit more help for the rebuilding of Blythecairne and central Bretay. "I got in me mind a man for that job. He's called Treadle, an' he's the brother o' that gent what ye set beside a few nights ago when ye first come to Fairling. He ain't sech a brawler as Herold, an' he's a pretty talker who might get ye a few choice conscripts from Goric."

Roarke said, "I'll trust your judgment, Keet. I picked a good man as my steward, and I'm confident that you'll pick a good man as my emissary." But when they sent to find Treadle, he could not be found. Nor, of course, could Herold, or

Boof, or Mox, whom Keet called "a little black turd of a man, with a personality t' match."

Will had been sitting quietly, listening to his elders' deliberations. But the thought came into his mind and struck him as true, so he spoke it: "I'll wager they went fer th' gold."

The same thought had occurred to Roarke, though he had not voiced it. Roarke did not care overly much about the disposition of the gold; he had more than enough for himself, both in falconets and also in eglons, which were the currency of Haioland—he had an entire treasury full at Castle Thrail. But he did care passionately that the gold not fall into the hands of ruffians, thieves, or worse. His desire was that the gold gently prosper all of the decent inhabitants of Bretay, not just wildly enrich a few scoundrels. And he had made a promise to the Lady of Blythecairne that her rest would not be violated.

He felt a need for haste. He would have liked to take a small company of men to pursue the four reprobates, but there were few men in Fairling who had mounts, and certainly none of them could have kept the pace of the black stallion Justice. He strode to the hut behind the bar to retrieve his sword, and then clomped down the muddy alley to the livery where Justice was stabled.

While he was outfitting his horse with saddle and bit, Will came running to the front gate of the livery. Breathlessly, he stammered, "I found their trail, Roarke."

Surprised at the boy's resourcefulness, Roarke asked, "Are you sure? Tell me how you found it."

Between gasps, Will said, "I figured they'da had t' go to the north, see? 'Cause of it bein' where the castle is. So's I started at the road to Goric, where I'd first met ye, and there weren't no tracks there. Boof has a mighty big footprint, don't ye know! So then I started walkin' along the northern edge o' the village,

until I seen where a mighty lot o' footprints went stampin' through the grass off t' the north. It has t' be them." He stopped and looked at Roarke. "Ye think, sir?"

Roarke smiled grimly. "Well done, Will. If you'll take me there, I'll head on after them."

"May I come with ye, m'Lord?"

"Not this time, Will. Stay and help your father plan for the expedition, and take care of The Dragon's Tail. I promise you, you'll see the castle before too long."

A little crestfallen, Will summoned a grin nonetheless, and said, "As ye say, m'Lord. If ye're ready, then—follow me!"

Chapter Eight

Roarke had waved goodbye to Will at the edge of the town just an hour earlier, following the easily-seen track through the patchy plain that led to the wasteland surrounding Blythecairne. Steeling himself for a long trek, since the four rogues had a two-day head start, he was surprised to find, just over a little grassy mound of earth, the corpses of two men. A little distance away, Roarke could see a third body crumpled to the earth.

He dismounted, and bent to inspect the bodies. The first was certainly Mox, judging by his size and the darkness of his flesh. Roarke used the flat of his blade to flip the little man over on his back. Mox had a hideous grimace on his sooty face, as if he had expired in a paroxysm of agony. Roarke shuddered, and sought for a prayer, but could think of none that seemed suitable.

A few paces away from Mox lay Herold, whom Roarke recognized from his first evening at the tavern. He also appeared to have been in considerable distress when he died, but he had been helped along to the next world by a wicked slash from a knife's blade, which had sliced his throat wide open. Again Roarke tried to pray: *God ...*

God....

A fly buzzed toward Herold's corpse. Roarke thought with irony that this small bit of life was drawn here to the wastelands, by the presence of stinking death.

He knelt and began to dig a shallow grave with his sword, debating questions of theology within himself as he cut into the earth. *These men were cheats and thieves. Does God want them? Would He forgive?* He continued his grim work, as sweat ran from his forehead and stung his eyes. His own failures

and transgressions haunted him dimly; he considered whether to ignore or confront them. *Lord...* He knew he was just pretending to pray, and it annoyed him to realize it. The hole was nearly big enough for the three bodies now—Mox and Herold and whoever was crumpled to the ground along farther ahead. *Almighty ... if I can believe that You have forgiven me for all the ways that I have failed to live up to what I believed in ... and I do ... I place all my hope in Your mercy, not my own strivings ... then, I can believe that You would forgive these miserable wretches, too, if You choose to.*

Straightening slowly with a groan, Roarke wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve, and contemplated the aches in his own body. After lifting his face to the sun, eyes closed, and cherishing a wisp of a breeze that played across his cheeks, Roarke took a deep breath and bent himself to the task of dragging the two carcasses to the pit he had dug.

"God, here they are—Herold and Mox. If it would please You to receive them into Your own Kingdom ... then so be it. Here they are." He nodded to himself. "Amen."

Roarke led Justice along the faint path to where the third body lay. "Sorry, boy, but I'm going to have to have you carry this poor fellow back to the others. I don't think I could drag him that far, and I don't have the strength to dig another trench."

He came to the body, figuring this must be Treadle—his prospective emissary to Goric. Treadle lay on his back, unmoving, sightlessly staring into the sky. Roarke shook his head sadly, and reached down to grasp Treadle's tunic. As he started to lift the broken man, though, a rasping sigh came wheezing out of Treadle's mouth. Startled, Roarke dropped him back on the ground with a thud, causing a little cry of pain to escape from Treadle's lips.

"I'm sorry! I didn't know you were still alive! If I had known that, I would have been here an hour ago. Forgive me, friend, for not thinking.... Here—" Roarke held a skin of water to Treadle's mouth, and let the cool liquid trickle across his lips and tongue.

Treadle moved his mouth, apparently trying to talk, but no words came forth.

"No, friend, don't talk ... just rest now."

Roarke gazed northward with a desperate look in his eyes. He had anticipated burying Treadle's body quickly, so that he could get on the trail and apprehend Boof swiftly, if the latter still lived. But he realized that he could not bring Treadle along with him, and his conscience wouldn't allow him to just leave the broken man behind. *If only I had let Will come along*, he thought. But now the only course that presented itself to his mind was that he would have to carry Treadle back to Fairling. "Damn," he said softly.

After covering Mox and Herold with earth, he led Justice back to the town, with the unconscious Treadle laid across the horse's back. It was dark when they arrived back at The Dragon's Tail, to the surprise and dismay of those assembled there, Roarke stumbling through the door under the weight of his burden. The diners and drinkers scattered from the bench, and Roarke lay Treadle's frame down upon it.

"Quick, Will, go an' fetch Minney," Keet said, meaning one of the widows of Fairling, who had some skill with healing. Looking at the weary Roarke, who was standing unsteadily to the side, he said, "M'Lord, ye cannot do any more tonight. Head ye back t' yer pallet an' sleep a bit. If there be any call for ye, I'll see that ye're roused. Go on, now." He steered Roarke by the elbow toward the back door, and Roarke complied without comment. Tomorrow would have to be soon enough to start again.

Chapter Nine

Minney mopped the injured man's brow with a rag. She was surprised that he still breathed. He was blind, and apparently paralyzed in his arms and legs. He had soiled himself during the night, and she had removed his clothing and cleaned his body. He lay naked beneath a quilt, on a bed of clean straw that she had spread on the dirt floor of her hut, where she had directed the men who carried him from the tavern to set him down. Minney had looked at his nakedness wistfully. Her husband had been dead for many years, and she often longed for the closeness of a man, but she was too old and ugly for anybody to notice any more, unless their child was ill, or their livestock needed help birthing. This one was just about useless now—but still, he breathed. Perhaps she could coax him back to rejoin the souls on this side of the divide, and he would love her for her tenderness and intelligence and usefulness, overlooking the lines on her face and the stale reek of her breath.

She smoked a pipe and hummed tunelessly to herself as she boiled some broth for the sleeping man: vegetables, no meat. If he lived, then she might see about giving him meat, but no need to make that sacrifice if he wasn't going to survive. She thought she had seen him around town from time to time, but of course he had ignored her. Of course, she might be mistaken about having seen him, too. The man lying on her floor had apparently had his nose broken; perhaps that was what had made him blind. In any case, the whole upper part of his face was swollen, black and purple. He moaned softly while he slept, and she imagined that he wanted to toss and turn, but his body was broken now, useless. She took in a deep drag of smoke, then spat in the broth, giving the man her strength. She was very strong. She expelled a loud burst of flatulence and nodded approvingly.

"Hallo?" the man whispered hoarsely. Her strength was already at work in his body, and she hadn't even fed him the broth yet. "Am I ... alive?"

"Halloo yerself, Sweetie. Do ye be feelin' anything? How can Minney be helpin' ye?" she whispered back to him.

"Where ... am I?" he croaked. Each phrase that he spoke was exhausting to him.

"Well, Dearie, ye're in Minney's house. She'll get ye some broth an' make ye all well, sure enough, in little enough time as that. But ye mustn't be wastin' yer strength on talk jest yet, but ye must be restin' a bit."

"Roarke," he gasped.

"Master Roarke ain't here jest yet, Dearie. It's still dark, an' he parbly ain't awoke yet hisself."

"Get him."

"I expects he'll be here t' see ye bye an' anon, Mister. Won't it wait until morn'?"

Tears appeared at the corners of the man's eyes. "Get him ... please."

"Hmmp!" she grouched. Wringing her hands, she said, "Well, I don't know about that," but she took off her apron, patted her hair, and headed out the door. "Jest wait there, Sweetie, an' I'll be back with Master Roarke sooner'n ye can say *Jack's a rabbit*."

The man passed back into milky blackness again.



Will shook Roarke gently. "Sir. Master Roarke. It's mornin', and Treadle's wantin' t' talk wi' ye."

"Awake, Will. I'm awake." He cleared his throat and allowed his eyes to focus slowly in the murky light coming in through the hut's east-facing window. He was tired and his muscles ached quietly from the unusual exertions of the day before. His mind drifted for just a moment until he remembered his purpose for the day, and his thought crystallized into action. Stifling a groan, he rose from the pallet and told Will, "Go on ahead back to The Dragon's Tail, and I'll be with you in just a moment."

After relieving his bladder with a great sigh, Roarke hitched up his leggings, gathered his sword and cloak, and headed to the tavern, where a small coterie of citizens was already up and waiting for him.

Roarke said, "Good morning, friends. What brings you out so early this morning?"

A handsome man, taller than Roarke, who had been tacitly elected as the spokesman for the gathering, replied, "Good morning, Captain. Meanin' no disrespect, but what are ye goin' to do about whatever it is what's goin' on here?"

Roarke met his gaze. "I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean." Roarke knew he had seen this impressive man in town on the night of the celebration, but could not recall his name. "Forgive me, but have we met, sir?"

Keet broke in, "Beggin' yer pardon, m'Lord, but this be Lirey. I been tryin' t' recruit him t' be the leader of our expedition up t' the northlands."

"Lirey. I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to talk before this." Roarke reached out and grasped the man's forearm, and the grasp was returned.

"Well, Captain, I been holdin' fort out at me own farm the past few days, talkin' with me wife and two sons about this adventure ye're askin' us to make, and decidin' whether it were worth the risk. An' that's what we all are doin' here this morn: Decidin'. Is it worth the risk? No disrespect, mind ye, but this were a fairly quiet little town before ye came into our lives. Not rich, t' be sure, but a pretty

enough place to live, an' grow, an' die. An' now, ye bring back Treadle, an' he's smashed an' busted into pieces. An' some o' the folks thinks they heared that Boof an' Mox an' Herold's dead an' buried outside o' town, but we ain't sure if that's true or not. No great loss, Mox or Boof—they weren't strictly human, by our way o' measurin'—but Herold an' Treadle are respected men in this town. An' what we're thinkin' is this: Is it worth a little bit o' gold, t' be dead an' buried outside o' town, an' havin' our loved ones cryin' their hearts out, an' cursin' the day they ever heared o' that dragon gold?"

Roarke nodded gravely. "That is a question you will each have to answer for yourselves. If you decide to stay behind in Fairling, you will do so with my blessing. And if you decide to make the trip to Blythecairne, you will do so accompanied by my prayers. As far as today is concerned, I can only tell you what I know to be true: Mox and Herold are dead, and I buried them where they fell. I don't know where Boof is. Treadle has apparently asked to speak with me, so I am going to him. Perhaps we will know more when we hear Treadle's story."

Chapter Ten

The small company of townspeople padded through the unpaved streets of Fairling until they came to the rusted gate in front of Minney's house. "Perhaps I should go in alone," Roarke began, but Lirey said, "May I go in wi' ye, Captain? Meanin' no disrespect." Roarke nodded, "Yes, I see. Yes, that would be fine."

The two men went in through Minney's door, while she fretted and fussed—her world was being invaded, and she feared that they would take away her man. She wrung her hands and pouted. Willum, noticing her distress, patted her elbow and said, "It's okay, Minney. It's Roarke," to which she mumbled, "Who is Roarke t' me?" but she was encouraged by the pat from the boy, and smiled at him.

Roarke and Lirey went in to the darkened room where Treadle lay. While they let their eyes adjust to the dimness, their nostrils were assaulted by a fetid stench that hung in the room like an olfactory curtain. Treadle had fouled his bedding, and was helpless to do anything but lie in it. Stepping forward and kneeling next to the form on the floor, Roarke laid his hand on Treadle's shoulder, saying softly, "Can you hear me?"

"Roarke...."

"Yes, it's Roarke, and I have Lirey with me."

"Forgive...."

After waiting for a moment to see if Treadle would continue, Roarke said, "Whatever you have done against me or my interests, I do freely forgive." Feeling an urgent need to hear Treadle's story and fearing that he might expire before telling it, Roarke pressed, "Can you speak, friend?"

There was no immediate answer, and Roarke suspected that it might already be too late, but then, mustering new reserves of strength, Treadle said, "What?"

"If you can do it, friend, please tell us—What has happened to you?"

Treadle's head listed toward the sound of Roarke's voice, and his sightless eyes stared right through him. "We ate ... dragon ... dragon's tail ... *awful!*"

Treadle's face contorted in revulsion. "Boof ... strength o' ... dragon."

Roarke worried that even that small burst of conversation may have exhausted Treadle, but the ruined man, after swallowing dryly, continued.

"Sick ... *God!* ... Sick.... Mox ... died ... smaller'n ... us, ate ... more.... Herold ... crazy ... yelling ... Boof ... kilt 'im.... I ran ... sick ... Boof ... crazy, strong ... punched me ... face ... laughed, left me ... fer dead ... I guess."

A moment passed, and again Roarke wondered if the man had lost consciousness.

"Boof ... ain't ... jest a man.... Crazy ... strong ... laughed.... Gone on ... fer th' gold ... I 'spect...."

Lirey asked, "Can ye hear me, Tread'? This is Lirey. Can I do anythin' fer ye?"

Treadle shook his head slightly—at least he could still move his head.

"Forgive...."

Roarke bowed his head, and prayed softly, "Almighty God, before You, and with Lirey as a witness, I declare that I release Treadle from any debt that he feels he owes to me. I forgive him, Lord, and I pray that You would forgive him, too, of any debt that he owes You. Let him know Your mercy—Your peace." He paused. "And if it would please You, God, please heal his body so that someday he might walk again. And see again. Amen."

Lirey looked with surprise at Roarke. Treadle had apparently been trying to steal the inheritance that Roarke had won by fighting with and killing the dragon, but instead of the vengeance that Treadle expected, Roarke offered him nothing but mercy. And not a niggardly, grudging mercy, either, but generous mercy, that

seemed to genuinely desire Treadle's wellbeing. Perhaps there was more to this man than just a promise of gold....

Roarke put his hand on Treadle's forehead. "Rest now, friend. Be healed, if you may. I will have need of a good man someday." He stood and left, and Lirey followed him out.

Minney saw them come out, and asked Roarke, "Can I go tend t' the man, now?"

Roarke nodded, and she went back into her dark house. Treadle was still breathing, and Roarke hadn't taken him away, and Minney was glad. She noticed the smell, and set about to washing her man.

Chapter Eleven

"Did he say anythin'?" one of the men waiting outside Minney's gate asked.

Lirey looked at Roarke, and then answered, "Yes. He told us his tale."

"What about it, then?"

Again Lirey looked at Roarke, who seemed disinclined to respond. "Well ... it seems the four of 'em ... ate a bit o' the dragon's tail. An' it made 'em sick 'n crazy, somehows. An' Boof musta went an' kilt Mox, 'n Herold, 'n jest about kilt Treadle, too. An' now Treadle thinks Boof has gone on up t' the castle t' take the gold." He felt guilty about sharing this part of the story of the men who had been his friends. "I guess it were true, that Herold an' Treadle were goin' t' steal the gold from the castle. What rightly belongs t' Roarke, here."

Some of the townspeople looked at each other grimly; some looked at the ground. "Ah, that's bad," one of them murmured.

"Will," Roarke cut in, "go to the tavern and start a fire in the fireplace."

"Yessir." Will left immediately at a trot.

"Well, Captain," Lirey said, "what's yer course now?"

Roarke looked at him sadly. "Well, first, I intend to burn that dragon's tail. God forbid that anyone else should eat from it, and their lives be ruined by its poison. Damn. If only I had thought ... if I had just known. The blood of those men is on me...."

Some of the men in the group looked at him darkly, willing to agree that whatever had happened was somehow his fault.

Lirey said, "No, m'Lord. 'Twas their own greed what caused 'em t' eat o' that foul meat. I recognize ye for an honest man and a true one. I still don't know if it's

worth the risk t' go off t' the north for the reward o' that dragon gold. But I'll warrant that ye're a man what I would follow."

"Thank you, Lirey." Roarke laid his hand on his sword and straightened his shoulders. "To finish answering your question, after I destroy that tail, I'm afraid I have to ride off to find out what's become of Boof."

Lirey nodded. "While ye're seein' t' that burnin', I believe I'll be goin' after me horse. I expect I'll be goin' along with ye, t' find Boof. It'll give me a chance t' see that northern land an' make a decision about whether it's fit to spend some o' me life on, or not."

"Well, if you.... That would be appreciated, Lirey. You are most welcome to come along with me."

By the time the company had walked the street back to The Dragon's Tail, most of the town had gathered, with the gossip of what had befallen Treadle and his companions having spread rapidly. Many of the folks who had drunk freely from Roarke's beer kegs just nights earlier now regarded him doubtfully, uneasily.

"I see that a word or two might be necessary," Roarke began, stepping onto the stoop in front of The Dragon's Tail and turning to face the crowd. "You've all probably heard by now that Herold is dead, and Mox with him. Treadle is ... ill. And Boof is missing.

"I'm very sorry for any part I played in their misfortune. Please believe that I only wanted to bring you people something *good* ... and now it has resulted in evil. For this I beg your pardon.

"But the fact remains: Blythecairne is empty, and I have claimed it. For those of you that are willing to go up and take the land for me, I will reward in whatever poor way I am allowed to show my gratitude—in gold, and prayers, and fellowship, and honest work. For those of you who wish to stay behind in

Fairling—well, that's just fine. Fairling needs to be inhabited, too, and I hope that Fairling and Blythecairne can always be fast friends."

Roarke let his eyes pass over the faces in the crowd, noting the ones that met his gaze, and the ones who looked to the ground or off into the distance. Keet had said that he was hopeful of taking almost a hundred strong men with him on the expedition to the northlands, but Roarke judged that of those one hundred, perhaps only a dozen remained committed to the cause.

Keet spoke up from the crowd, "Ye mustn't judge us too harshly, m'Lord. We're jest a mite shaken by what's happent here yest'day. An', Fairling"—here he addressed the crowd—"ye mustn't judge Sir Cedric Roarke too harshly, neither. If we keep our heads, we won't come to ruination, like them what did yest'day. May I remind ye all, for every day of our lives, we've lived with the shadow of a dragon up t' the north, and now, for good or ill, that dragon's dead. It's a new day, an' it calls fer new thoughts. Go on back t' yer homes an' yer work, an' stretch yer brains on it somewhat."

Roarke looked at Keet gratefully. The townspeople did not quickly disperse, but they did start melting away slowly, going back to their lives in knots of twos and threes, discussing among themselves this new reality that had become theirs. Some of the men who were not otherwise employed accompanied Keet and Roarke into the bar, wanting to witness the destruction of the tail.

Will had been listening through the door of the tavern, and he felt a good deal of pride in both Roarke and his father, whom he felt had acquitted himself admirably. He had a large fire roaring in the hearth, and the common room of the pub was almost uncomfortably warm.

Roarke strode over to the shelf behind the bar, grasped the reptilian appendage from its former place of honor, and carried it to the fire, tossing it in unceremoniously. Almost instantly, a chill went through the room, and a vile,

sulfuric odor emanated from the flames. The men in the bar looked at each other fearfully, wondering what dark magic might cause something cast into the fire not to burn.

Roarke shivered and said, "It's evil, isn't it? But it's not all-powerful." And indeed, after a few moments, the tail glowed brightly, the flames flaring all around it. The fat began melting, the scales dropping off, sizzling, to the bottom of the fire pit. After a quarter of an hour, all that was left was a scattering of blackened scales, charred meat, and bone. Roarke said to Will, "After that fire has completely died out, would you please take everything that remains, and bury it deep in a pit someplace outside of town. Don't tell anyone where you take it, lest someone think they might make a charm out of the bones. That's a bit of witchcraft that we must avoid."

"Yes, sir. I will."

From outside, Roarke heard the familiar snort of his stallion Justice, and turned to see Lirey come in through the tavern door. Lirey said, "Captain, I've taken the liberty of saddlin' up yer fine black horse along with mine, and I'm wonderin' if ye're ready to be goin'."

"Thank you, Lirey. Yes, let's go—unless you want to share breakfast with me first?"

"Me wife made up some biscuits an' jerky for us, if that'll suit ye. We can eat in the saddle."

"Excellent. Water?"

"Skins are hangin' on the horses."

"Of course. I look forward to your company, Lirey. Let's go, then."

The two men strode from the bar, mounted, and were quickly out of sight, with Willum gazing wistfully after them.

Chapter Twelve

"So this is where ye buried Herold?"

"Yes, and Mox."

Lirey shook his head sadly. "It seems a shame that Herold has t' share a grave wi' that little dark bastid. Mox weren't from around here, ye know. He'd come inta town once every three, four years, an' stay jest long enough t' get some o' the folk stirred up against each other'n. Then he'd be gone again, an' not show his ugly, cursed little face fer another coupla years. Some'n told me once that he had one side o' his family what was fully dwarf blood, from back in the old times. Well, he was stumpy enough, an' ugly enough, an' mean enough—I s'pose it were true."

They rode on a little further, to the place where Roarke had found Treadle. They could see, faintly ahead, the trail that Boof had left as he had continued on from that place alone. "Well, Captain, here's to it," said Lirey, nudging his horse onward.

As they rode together, they talked softly, sharing bits of their own histories. Lirey said, "I been up here before, when I was a boy. There was some of me mates and meself, an' we usta think we might jest try fer that dragon gold, back afore we got wives an' settled out. We come all the way up t' where that grass'd all died, an' there weren't nothin' but bare ground. It didn't stretch out quite so far then as it does now. Anyways, we were jest about t' try an' set our feet upon that naked ground, when we thought we heard the dragon comin'. Lookin' back acrost the years now, I don't know if it were really the dragon, or jest our own imaginations runnin' wild, but I can tell ye this: it were a sound like thunder, an' the ground jest shook under our feet. Well, it didn't take too long, an' we was back in Fairling fer

good an' t' stay—fer me anyways. A couple o' them lads ended up movin' to Goric, when Fairling got too small fer 'em. An' one of 'em, whose name was Rainey—he was a particular friend o' mine—he taken a walk up north again one time, an' that was the last he was ever heard from. I like to try an' tell meself that he went on to Farport, an' ended up sailin' aroun' the seas, an' he's safe an' happy still today. But I expect he went back fer that gold."

They rode on in silence for awhile, which was broken by Roarke. "I remember the first time I ever saw a dragon. It was about twenty-two years ago, I believe. The ground *did* thunder—you're right about that. And, my God, what a sound when it roared! Like the sound of all angry Hell being unleashed." His eyes misted over, and he saw again scenes from years ago. "I thought it was going to kill me. I was *resigned* that it was going to kill me. And I was glad enough that it should, if only I might take it along with me." He looked at Lirey. "I had abandoned myself completely to the Almighty, asking nothing except that I should rid the earth of that great evil. But somehow, when all was done, I was still alive, and my sword was stuck to the hilt, through the underside of that horrible beast's mouth, piercing up through its tongue and on into its brain. I was scarcely even bruised. And the remarkable thing is, I don't remember it at all. I have no idea how long we fought, or how I struck it, or how I managed to survive. All I can say is, it must have been God's will to guard me, and strike the beast down."

Lirey wondered to himself why Roarke would be spared, when others who were stronger, taller, younger, went off to tackle the serpents, and were never seen again. The memory of his friend Rainey, stirred again, made him sad. To Roarke he said, "Why'd ye do it? Fer the gold?"

Roarke smiled ruefully. "No, I'm afraid my motives for wanting to kill that dragon weren't even as noble as greed. I just wanted the monster dead. For revenge. For pure, holy hatred. For blind, red, screaming rage. No sense

justifying it any other way. To be sure, I understood that it was good for the world to be rid of such a loathsome creature, but that wasn't why I sought the battle with it. You see," his voice tightened, "that particular dragon had ... *killed* ... my wife."

Roarke swallowed, continued. "It was my fault, of course. We lived in a little farmhouse north of the town of Lauren, away out west in Haioland. It was known that a dragon was living in the castle called Thrail, which was considerably further to the north. Like your beast here in Bretay, no one ever knew it to travel more than a couple of miles from the castle itself. It had just violated and destroyed the lands immediately around the castle, but never went too much farther away. At least, nobody had ever known it to.

"Anyway, apparently the dragon had gotten hungry, or just bored—I don't know—but it had gone traveling southward. Perhaps it was migrating, looking for a new place to befoul. I don't know. But it came down to my little farm, and I was not there. I had gone into Lauren to try and buy a tavern; I was weary of farming, and thought I wanted to experience town life. I was so young, so foolish. My good wife—her name was Millisen—disagreed with me. She would not accompany me to Lauren."

He continued bitterly, "Of course, I couldn't buy the tavern. I didn't have enough capital, and my land wasn't worth enough to raise the money. But while I was there, I dallied with a pretty young barmaid, angry with my wife that she was right and I was wrong. So there I was, going home with less money than I'd started out with, feeling foolish because I had failed and guilty because I hadn't kept faith with my wife. And when I got home ... there was nothing.

"My house and barn were destroyed, crushed. My livestock was all slaughtered. My wife was just ... gone. And all around were the marks made by the talons and teeth of that great reptile. It wasn't quite so big as the dragon in Blythecairne, but its footprint still was bigger than five of mine.

"I lay and sobbed in my dooryard, probably for an entire day. All the guilt, all the sorrow, all the loss ... I was bereft. And when I came to myself, I was just cold inside. I decided that I must kill the beast, or die trying, or better yet both, in honor of my Millisen.

"So I took all the money I had left, and went to the smith in Lauren, and had him fashion me a sword. This one here, in fact. As you can see, I did have enough money to buy a pretty good sword. I had him forge that steel seven times, and the whole time he was hammering out the metal, I was praying, repenting, imploring the Almighty to grant me this revenge."

Roarke's story, which had been stopped up for years, continued to flow from him, a catharsis.

"The night that the smith finished my sword, I dreamed. I didn't understand it then, and I don't now, but it gave me comfort then, and it still does today." He looked at Lirey closely. "I have not told very many people about this dream.

"There was a sheep, and it was bleeding from many wounds. The wounds were inflicted on the sheep both by a serpent, and by my own sword. As I watched, the sheep changed into a roaring lion, and the serpent fled. The lion placed the sword in my hands, and told me to pursue the serpent, strike it three times, and kill it."

Lirey stared at him expressionlessly; Roarke looked away, studying the horizon. "As I said, I didn't necessarily understand it, but it did give me comfort. It was as if the Almighty was conferring favor upon me, and granting me victory against that beast which had taken my dear wife. At least, that's what I took it to mean.

"Well, to make my story brief—for I see we are drawing near Blythecairne—I followed the track of the dragon to a nearby cave where it had taken up residence, and apparently I killed it. For it was dead, and I was alive.

"When I returned a day later, I was the hero of Lauren. In short order, I was granted the lordship of the lands of Castle Thraill, and in the treasury there I found enough gold to last me a dozen lifetimes. I was ridiculously wealthy. The irony of it is still a foul taste in my mouth.

"Do you know something that haunts me still? That poor barmaid, with whom I spent one brief hour on this earth—I knew that, if I were to continue to see her, even just in a chance passing on a street, I couldn't help but hate her—through no fault of hers, of course. So I sent a messenger to her, with a small fortune in gold eglons, and asked her most politely to move far away, and live in the southern lands someplace—I know not where. But the thing that baffles me is this: for the last five years, try as I might, I cannot remember her name. I *know* that I knew her name once. And it seems somehow important to me, to recall the name of someone whose fortunes so intermingled with mine as to irrevocably change both of our lives. But it's gone. Just ... gone."

The horses and their riders came at last to the outer perimeter of the ground that had been denuded by the presence of the dragon. It was late afternoon. They rode in silence until, cresting a small knoll, they saw, cold and dead, Castle Blythecairne. They reined up, and just stared at it, the horses stamping impatiently.

"Captain!" Lirey said, "It's terrible impressive, ain't it?"

"Yes," Roarke answered. "I hope to make it, in time, a place of life and beauty, as it must have once been. As Castle Thraill is now, in fact. With some good men and women, some patience, some time ... it could be admirable."

Lirey gazed at the stone structure in the center of the castle grounds, saw that the huge wooden door had been demolished, probably decades ago, and said to Roarke in a low voice, "Ye've been in there?"

"Yes."

"The dragon?"

"Outside, around to the right as we sit now. East, that is. There are some wooden stables there, and the old serpent wedged its head into one of them when it was trying to get away from me."

"Nothin' movin' in there now, is there?" Lirey said, clearly not eager to advance.

"Probably not. Unless it's Boof." Roarke slapped the reins on Justice, and spurred him gently forward. "Coming?"

"Right behind ye, Captain," Lirey said in a pale voice.

Chapter Thirteen

Entering the courtyard of the Meadling grounds, Roarke and Lirey dismounted, and led their horses to the doorway of the great hall.

In a hushed voice, Lirey asked, "What should we do?"

Softly, Roarke said, "I expect you'll want to see the dragon presently. But first there's something I must check on. Lead the horses here into this hall, and wait with them for a moment. I'll be right back. Be on your guard, in case Boof is here someplace. He's likely not in his right mind."

Lirey nodded grimly.

Roarke found the narrow stairwell leading up to the Lady of the Castle's private residence, and ascended with his sword drawn, in case Boof should have found that chamber as well. He found the door smashed, but did not remember if that was perhaps the damage that he had done himself on his previous visit. Stepping through the splintered wood into the demolished bedroom, he realized with dejection that it was not.

The Lady of Blythecairne was no longer intact. All that was left of her was bones, scattered, broken, crushed. Her fine crimson gown was gone, her tiara gone, even her hair ... gone. Roarke sat heavily on the edge of the bed, and thought that perhaps he should weep, but found absent-mindedly that his emotions were dull, his eyes dry.

"I am sorry, my Lady ... I'm sorry. I said that I would protect your honor, and I have failed you." He paused, pensive, then continued, troubled by a reinforced sense of loss. "And I'm sorry, Millisen, that I failed you, too. If only I could hold you again, speak to you. I would tell you how sorry I was, and how I've lived these last two decades alone, loving only you, and God. And I would pledge

my love to you again, and it wouldn't be a lie." Once again he paused and thought, his eyes darting warily around at the Lady's bedchambers, but seeing in his mind the dark hallways of his own memories. *And I'm sorry to you, too, young lady,* meaning the barmaid from Lauren. He said this silently to himself, in case his wife was still listening. *I probably dishonored you with the way I treated you, sending you away with money but not with love. I'm sorry most of all that I don't remember your name. Because I should have loved you, too—and I did not.*

He thought dully that he should return to Lirey, but his legs and his arms felt drained of all strength, and his eyelids were heavy with fatigue. He closed his eyes, thinking that perhaps time might just suspend its weary march for a moment and allow him an instant of respite.

"Roarke!" he heard from a distance, startling him. His sword, which he had been still holding loosely in his right hand, clattered to the stone-tiled floor of the Lady's chamber. He realized with alarm that he had left Lirey alone and unarmed with the two horses, with Boof still unaccounted for. "Roarke!" he heard again as he gathered his blade from the floor and raced for the door, stepping on one of the Lady's bones and hearing it crack beneath his weight.

He banged his right knee painfully against the bedroom's splintered wooden door, and hobbled down the stairwell as quickly as he was able, trying to ignore the throbbing pain. At the bottom of the stairs, he stumbled and fell clumsily, once again banging his knee harshly. The point of his sword struck the stone floor of the hall, twisting the haft from his grasp and wrenching his wrist. The blade went skittering off across the floor, coming to rest at the heels of Lirey, who was facing the other direction, still holding the reins of the two horses.

Lirey did not immediately pick the sword up; he was trying to steady the horses, who were both shying away from the presence of Boof, who was blocking the doorway that led from the great hall back out to the courtyard.

Boof laughed loudly, in a voice that seemed somehow unfamiliar.

"Greetings, Roarke!" he bellowed. "You are not so graceful today!"

With the sun at his back, Boof's features were nearly invisible, but he appeared to be holding a sceptre of some kind. He stalked into the hall toward the throne of Lord Meadling, which sat on a raised dais in the center of the room. Lirey circled the horses back around to keep the greatest possible distance between himself and the huge trollish man, and as he did so, he kicked the sword over toward Roarke. Roarke stood and limped to the sword, picking it up with his left hand since his sprained wrist allowed him virtually no grip in his right, and circled around toward Lirey and the horses, until both men faced the throne. Boof leaped up the three stone steps to the velveted chair and deposited himself there with a thud and a mocking call, "Welcome to my castle! You may kneel if you wish."

With the sun to his back now, Roarke could see Boof clearly, and was surprised to note that he was very nearly naked. A nauseous feeling twisted the pit of his stomach, as he realized exactly how Boof was clothed: around his right biceps he wore the tiara of the Lady of Blythecairne, and around his neck and waist were woven strands of what could only be her long, flaxen hair. The sceptre in his hand was bone; probably the Lady's thigh.

"I see you appreciate my finery," Boof laughed. "I knew that you would."

"Boof, what've ye done?" cried Lirey.

"Who are *you*?" Boof snarled with disgust. "My business here is with Roarke."

"Why, it's Lirey! Ye know me, don't ye?"

"Be *quiet*, you ant! Before I squash you under my heel!"

Roarke interrupted grimly: "Boof, I fear that I must kill you."

This pronouncement produced a coughing, slobbering paroxysm of laughter from Boof. "*Kill* me?" he spat. "You *already* killed me—but here I am!"

"What do you mean that I already killed you?" Roarke asked. A thin tendril of understanding groped for purchase in Roarke's mind. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Who am I? Who am I?" Boof chortled. His mouth was slavering mightily, and when he breathed in, it caused him to choke on his own spittle. Coughing and spitting, he continued, "You could not pronounce my name if I told it to you, which I am not bound to do."

"Are you the dragon?"

"Ha, *ha!* The little man thinks that he sees! No, I am not the dragon, but I was—I was. Boof ate the eyes of the dragon, so now the dragon sees what Boof sees, and Boof sees what the dragon sees. And we see *you*, little Roarke!"

He spewed a great splatter of mucus to the floor. "You thought that you could kill me, but you see that I do not die so easily! How easily do *you* die, you miserable fly speck?"

Roarke stood unflinchingly, and said, "It has been given to me by the Almighty to send you back to the fire that you came from."

Boof leaped to his feet, and roared, "*Given* to you? *Given* to you? You may have been permitted to slay my brother at Thrail, and my sister at Mendor, and my own body at Blythecairne, but it has been given to *me* to carry your contemptible carcass off to Hell Fire to present to my master!"

"You," Roarke said with a confidence that he did not necessarily feel, "are a liar."

Boof threw his head back and uttered a bone-shaking scream. Roarke said to Lirey, "Pray," and Lirey replied, "I am."

Still howling, Boof jumped furiously down from the throne, and slipped on a splotch of his own spittle. His right foot flew out from underneath him, and his left ankle twisted beneath him with a crack. The back of his head whacked against one

of the arms of Meadling's chair, and his head snapped forward. Pitching face-downward onto the stone floor with a sickening thud, Boof let out a little whimper of pain and lay still, trembling.

Amazed, Roarke limped forward to the huge, stricken body.

With his sword in his left hand, he raised his arm as if to strike Boof's head off, but a muffled plea of "Mercy!" came up from beneath the troll-man's face.

"Hold, Roarke," Lirey cried. "He begs mercy!"

Boof pushed himself up from the floor and rolled over onto his back. He was bleeding profusely from his nose, and his eyes held none of the fury that had blazed from them a moment ago. "Mercy, Roarke," he panted. "What're ye doin' here? How'd I get here?" He looked genuinely confused. "Mercy ... mercy!"

Roarke paused, dubious, wrestling with his conscience, then made his decision. "Do you both agree that I am Lord of Blythecairne?"

"Well ... yes," Lirey replied.

"Yes! Yes!" Boof groveled.

"Then, as Lord of Blythecairne, I am also judge, and no appeal goes beyond me until you go to present your case before the Almighty Himself in His courts on high. Do you agree?"

"Yes, I expect so, Captain," Lirey yielded reluctantly. He took a step backward, as if to distance himself from the judgment that was forthcoming.

"Then, Boof: I hold you guiltless for defiling the bones of the Lady of this castle, since you were probably under the demonic effects of the dragon when you did so. However," Roarke said, his voice darkening, "I cannot overlook the fact that you undoubtedly killed the man Herold, from Fairling, based upon the testimony of his brother, who survived despite the fact that you certainly intended to kill him as well. Said testimony was also heard by you, Lirey—do you concur?"

Apologetically, Lirey agreed, "Well, I guess ye *did* kill Herold, Boof."

"Also," continued Roarke, "we must consider the fact that you are now currently, ah, inhabited with the spirit of the dragon, somehow. That spirit must not be allowed to endure. So, as sorry as I am to have to do it ... my judgment is that you must be sentenced to death. The sentence shall be carried out immediately. May God have mercy on your soul...."

Boof started to chuckle, and then to laugh loudly. "You should have convicted me of defiling the Lady, too, whom you regard with such fondness!"

Roarke looked at him darkly, and raised his left arm.

"I waited a hundred years to finally get at that little morsel and crush her bones! She ran up those stairs ahead of her children—she was so terrified of me—but she got to listen to her babies scream as I ate them! I still remember her shrieking and crying and begging me for mercy for her children. *Ha!* Delicious!"

Roarke's arm swung down, but his left arm was not as skillful with the sword as it could have been, and instead of cutting through Boof's neck, it glanced off his shoulder, taking a huge gouge of meat out of his shoulder and neck.

Boof roared with anger, and continued to laugh and blaspheme. "I never would have gotten to her at all if it weren't for you, Roarke! You released me from my magnificent dragon body and allowed me to enter this little troll. I finally got to see the room where she walled herself in and starved to death, insane with her pitiful grief, but paralyzed by her hilarious timidity! Thank you, Roarke! Thank you!"

Again Roarke's arm swung, on the mark this time, but not so strong as if he had been able to use his right arm. The sword cut only halfway through the tough troll-man's gnarled neck muscles, and wedged there.

Boof's eyes cleared, and he cried, "Fer th' love o' God! *Kill* me, damn ye!"

Lirey stepped forward, and begged, "Captain! May I finish the job for ye?"

Roarke stepped mutely away from the bloody scene, and began walking toward the front gate, shoulders stooped. He picked up the reins of the two horses, and led the frightened beasts outside.

Lirey dislodged the sword from Boof's neck, causing the blood to spurt like a crimson fountain. With one swipe of his strong right arm, he separated Boof's head from his shoulders, and, after a moment of horrified astonishment, sobbed. He had no particular love for Boof, but he also bore him no animosity, and he had never killed a man before.

Some time later, his sobbing abated, he walked over to a window, and wiped Roarke's sword clean upon a threadbare curtain fluttering there. He walked outside, and found Roarke sitting with his back against the castle wall, asleep, still holding the reins to the horses. Lirey laid the sword down next to Roarke, and sat beside him. He raised his sad eyes to the early evening sky, stared, and pondered. Finally, he, too, slept.

Chapter Fourteen

Lirey awoke uncomfortably to the coldness of night. The sky was black, clear; the stars were shining like jewels in the heavens, for the moon had not yet risen. He realized with a start that he was alone; he considered calling out to Roarke, but decided against it. He felt for the sword where he had laid it, found it gone, and thought how very vulnerable his position was now, if something evil were still about.

In a short time, however, he heard steps coming toward him, and knew them to be Roarke's. "Ho, Captain," he whispered. "Ye've been about?"

"I didn't want to wake you," Roarke replied. "I went to get us some blankets—it's getting chilly."

"Thank ye, Cap'. I fear that I won't be able to sleep no more, though."

"Well, we can rest, at least, without shivering. And if we can sleep a few hours more before dawn, so much the better." He draped a pair of curtains, freshly harvested from the windows of the great hall, across Lirey's lap. He was still clearly favoring his right wrist, and the chilliness of the night had caused his injured knee to stiffen uncomfortably.

"Where are the horses?" Lirey asked.

"They're tethered to a ring I found on the wall over there. I figured that was a better place for them than maybe wandering off while we slept." He rubbed his beard, yawned. "In the morning, you should probably take them down toward Fairling and let them graze, while I ... ah ... tend to Boof."

"No, Cap'. I already been thinkin' on that, an' buryin' Boof'll hafta be my job. Ye mustn't be diggin', what with havin' yer wrist all bunged up. Just let me take care'n that, an' ye take the horses on down t' feed. In fact, maybe ye should

ride on back to town an' get us some supplies, an' then come back the next mornin'. If ye could leave me some kind of a weapon fer meself, just in case."

"Hmm. Maybe we should both ride back to town, after burying Boof. I don't know. Let me think on it a bit."

"Certainly."

In the silence that followed, Lirey soon fell into a reverie about his wife Maryan, and his two boys, Davie and Peet, who were both less than five years old. He imagined his sons playing on the floor of the farmhouse, with his wife looking on, smiling. How was he ever going to tell them about what had taken place that day? He sighed deeply into the otherwise noiseless dark.

After a few more moments, the silence was broken once again, this time by the soft snoring of Roarke. Lirey thought about the conversations he had had with the silver-haired knight. So much had happened between them already; could it be that they had only just met the previous morning? Lirey shook his head in wonder. He had told Roarke that he was going on this journey to Blythecairne to help him decide whether to accept the challenge of the greater expedition. How did he feel about that now?

He tried to exercise his mind with the coolness of logic, until he realized that he was beginning to dream, and abandoned himself to sleep.



"There must be an armory here that I haven't found yet," Roarke said, as they both stood and stretched. "We should be able to outfit you with a sword and some mail—perhaps a helmet or some gauntlets if you wish. And there should probably be a shovel around here somewhere, so we don't have to dig with swords."

"P'r'aps the stables?"

Roarke slapped his thigh. "Oh, I forgot! You haven't seen the dragon yet! If you want, let's go to the stables and see if we can find a pair of shovels, and you can have a look at the beast."

"Yes," Lirey agreed. "I been curious, I must admit."

Lirey adjusted his pace to Roarke's hobble as they headed around the corner of the castle to the place where the dragon was still partially wedged into the shattered wooden framework of the stables. When he caught his first glimpse of the great serpent, though, he forgot about waiting for Roarke, and went toward it with his eyes wide and his mouth agape.

"Good God Almighty," he said. "It's bigger'n four cows!" In the morning light, the serpent shone orange-gold, and as the sun glistened across different portions of its body while Lirey approached, the colors changed to yellow, to pale green, nearly to red. "It's beautiful!" he blurted.

"Yes," Roarke said dryly, "but the stench is overpowering."

"That's truth!" Lirey walked around the dragon, skirting what remained of the tail, inspecting it cautiously from a distance, holding his sleeve over his mouth to guard his breath. "Boof named off three o' these beasts what ye've killed, if I was understandin' proper. Just how many of 'em *have* ye done away with?"

"Just those three. First, the one from Castle Thrail. Then, a few years later, a smaller one that was living in a barren cave, way up to the north of County Temter. The cave was called 'Mendor' but I don't know how it got the name; no one was living anywhere near it at the time. Lastly, this monster here." He pondered, "I wonder how Boof knew about those other two? The demon spirits of the monsters must communicate at some deeper level than you and I can...."

"I was wonderin', Cap'. After Boof fell an' smashed his face, he just kind of rolled over an' let ye kill him. Why didn't he fight no more?"

"God's my witness—I don't know. All I can think is, the devil that controlled him must not have particularly cared whether Boof lived or died. I expect the evil spirit isn't exactly dead, the way that we count it."

A shiver went down Lirey's spine, as he entertained the thought that a demon spirit was on the loose, just floating around the courtyard, looking for another host.

"Are we in danger, Captain?"

"I don't know. This is all new for me, too."

Lirey went around the backside of the beast to marvel at the spiky ridges protruding from its backbone, while Roarke inspected the damage that Boof had inflicted upon the carcass. Apparently, he had not only eaten the eyes and some more of the tail of the dragon, but also had carved into its underbelly and gorged on some of the entrails, as well as the heart and liver. Roarke thought back to Treadle's apparent disgust at his memory of eating the small bit of dragon tail, and wondered how Boof had been able to ingest so much of the meat.

Nearby, Roarke found Boof's discarded clothing, along with a long, broken knife. *Probably the one used to kill Herold. And likely what he used on the dragon's abdomen—that's probably what broke it.* He also found the missing gown from the Lady of the Castle. It looked as if Boof had sat on it while he ate the fatty bowels of the beast. *Like a picnic,* Roarke thought gallingly. The garment was covered with grease and bits of viscera, and appeared that it had been defecated upon as well. Roarke had thought that if he were to find the gown, he would bury the Lady's bones with it, since it had been her clothing of choice when she had died, but he saw now that that was impossible. He would have to go to her wardrobe and choose something appropriate to gather around what remained of her.

Lirey had reached out a tentative hand to stroke the back of the dragon, and was surprised to find that it was very smooth, pleasant to the touch. He shuddered,

desiring to maintain his revulsion toward the creature, and fearful that a sensation of pleasure from touching it might somehow make him susceptible to possession by its demon spirit.

"Lirey, could you take a look over there?" Roarke pointed. "It seems to be a shed of some kind; maybe there are tools inside."

The little shed appeared to have escaped much of the damage that the dragon had inflicted upon most of the wooden buildings of the courtyard. The stables themselves were wrecked almost beyond recognition, but they had fared better than some of the other structures. Apparently, any place that had once housed living beings—cattle, horses, men—had been ravaged by the dragon during its attack on Blythecairne, when it had gorged on anything that was a potential food source. Visible to the rear of the castle were what once must have been barns; they too were virtually destroyed. Lirey wondered about what kind of fight the defenders of the castle had put up against the beast—why had they not been able to subdue it? Why *had* Roarke been able to defeat it, all alone?

With these questions buzzing in his brain like flies, Lirey picked his way through the mess of timber and bones that the dragon had strewn around the stable yard, to the neglected corner where the rickety shed stood. After clearing a couple of stray boards away from the door, he jerked at it until, with a snap and a creak, it came open.

Apprehensive of what he might possibly find inside, Lirey swept away century-old cobwebs with a stir of his left hand, and peered in through the dusty air. He was relieved to find only a collection of various farm implements, their wooden handles dried and cracked with age. "This is it," he called out to Roarke, and grabbed two shovels and a pickaxe, causing several other tools to tumble to the floor and out through the door with a clatter.

Roarke seemed a little distracted, but said, "Good, good. If you'll go outside the castle walls, and pick out a likely-looking plot, somewhere that you don't think will be too much disturbed by future roads or farming, please start digging a grave for Boof. I must go and begin tending to the bones of the Lady of this Castle."

"What do ye know of her, Captain?"

"Little, I fear. She must have been the wife of Lord Meadling, though I have no idea what her name was, or how old she was when she died. From what Boof said, she must have died in despair, after hearing the dragon kill her children." Roarke recounted his tale of discovering her sitting in her bedchamber, feeling slightly foolish when he told about promising her that she would suffer no indignity. "There is a gilded chest in her apartment. I intend to gather her bones and place them in that chest, and lay her to rest in a place of honor. I'm not sure where the best place for that would be, yet—but I know that I need to tend to her now, anyway. Even though our start back to Fairling is being delayed."

Lirey did not consider Roarke foolish; he was impressed that the knight would regard the former mistress of Blythecairne with so much esteem. "I know her name, Cap', if ye're wantin' t' know."

Roarke looked at the younger man with interest. "Yes, please."

"She were known as Lady Ileana Meadling. Me Gran', five generations back, was good friends with her when they was just lassies. Story was, when I was growin' up, that me Gran' served as one o' Lady Ileana's handmaids after she been married to Lord Meadling, until me Gramp' up an' married her away, five generations back. Story was, after the dragon came an' spoilt Blythecairne, me Gramp' went up t' try an' take it back, but he was one of the ones what was kilt by the dragon. I expect it's so."

"Thank you, Lirey," Roarke said solemnly. He realized suddenly that, if Lirey's ancestor had been successful at trying to take back the castle from the

dragon, then he—Lirey—would be the Lord of Blythecairne now. He toyed with the idea of giving the lands to Lirey right now, reasoning that he already had Thrail, which was more than he could possibly have ever wanted. But he kept silent.

"I'll go out an' pick a proper spot for poor Boof, Cap'," Lirey said, and the two men went their separate directions.

Chapter Fifteen

Roarke knelt on the floor of the Lady's chamber, gathering her bones and laying them gently upon a soft cushion of her gowns, humming to himself a wordless song that he had composed after the death of his wife two decades ago. His spirit felt curiously light, carefree; even though this was a grim business, it was nearly concluded. The dragon was dead, Boof was dead. It seemed as if Fairling was going to be a source of a few good friends: Keet, Willum, Lirey perhaps. In fact, the great work of his life seemed nearly to be at an end; of the four dragons that he was aware of in this part of the world, three had now been dispatched. Maybe there would even be a chance to rest and enjoy the fruits of his labors for a time, before going on to meet his Creator and go wherever the next life would lead.

He had collected as many shards and pieces of bone now as he reasonably could. He tried to pick up the residue that Boof had ground practically into dust, but he finally found that he could no longer discern whether he was gathering bone-dust, or just floor-dust. So he said, "Lady Ileane, I pray that you will find this service acceptable to you, and that you will rest peacefully now." He spread a black satin gown over the pile of bones, and tucked it down into the sides of the box.

He thought that he would go down and retrieve the gold tiara from Boof's arm, and put that in the top of the chest upon the remnants of her bones, crowning her at last in her death box as it had for the last century. As he hobbled through the bottom of the stairwell toward the throne of Lord Meadling, where Boof's lifeless body still lay, he realized that he had not remembered the thigh bone that Boof had used as his makeshift sceptre—it was lying on the floor, partially obscured by

Boof's massive trunk. *Thank You for not letting me miss that one*, Roarke prayed wryly.

He observed that Boof's arm had swelled in death, to the point where the tiara was irretrievably wedged on it. It would never come off now, without removing the arm. *And what would the point be?* Roarke mused. *Enough violence has been done for that crown already.*

"And, after all," he said aloud to Boof, "you were the Lord of Blythecairne, too, for a moment. Just keep it."

He looked at Boof's huge body, bloodied and broken, lying twisted on the floor where it had fallen in its last indignity of rage. Nearby was his head, which had always seemed just a little small in proportion to his massive torso; now it seemed like a normal man's head (though ugly)—pathetic and sorry. Roarke murmured, "I'm sorry you had to come to this. God have mercy on you."

After laboriously climbing the stairwell, he knelt once again by the gold-framed coffin that contained the earthly tokens of the Lady Ileana. Placing the thighbone across the top of black satin gown, he noticed with bitter humor that it *did* look rather like a sceptre. *Not a crown do I bring you, but a sceptre instead. Still an emblem of royalty*, he thought ironically. He cast about in his mind for a moment to see if there were any fitting last words to speak over the box, and found none. "Goodbye, my Lady," he said aloud.

Closing the top of the chest, he hoisted it into his arms, and went off in search of a proper place to leave it until he could make arrangements for its entombment.



Lirey paused from his shoveling to look around at the surrounding hillocks, much as Roarke had done a week earlier. A bead of sweat trickled down from his temple and disappeared into the brown whiskers on his cheek. He had picked a spot for Boof's grave that was at the crest of a little knoll, some distance away from the castle grounds. He imagined that some small monument would be set up one day to commemorate the resting-place of the last victim of the dragon of Blythecairne.

Faintly he heard a whistling call, he thought. He turned to see if it was Roarke, but it was not; he heard the soft trill again, and discerned that it was coming from the south.

He peered off as far as his eyes could focus; he had pretty good eyesight, but there was nothing but wasteland that he could see. He could make out dimly on the horizon, miles away, the gray line of the thicket where Roarke had picketed Justice on the evening he had first come to Fairling, though Lirey did not know that fact. Mentally shrugging his shoulders, he went back again to his task. *If someone's comin', they'll have t' cover miles of open ground before they get here,* he thought. *No need t' be alarmed.*

Waist-deep in the hole he was digging, he heard the whistle again, this time from much closer, and stood up, still and silent, to watch the land for movement.

Then he saw them: darting in between the gently rolling swells of barren ground were two small gray-brown birds, almost invisible against the backdrop of gray-brown earth. Dancing a complex ballet in the air, they were wending their way gradually northward. *They won't stay long this time,* Lirey thought. *There's nothin' for 'em t' eat. Yet.* Still, he knew that Roarke would be glad that these small bearers of fragile life could pass through these lands again, unmolested.

After digging a few more minutes, Lirey heard the thud of hooves coming toward him from the castle. It was Roarke upon Justice, leading Lirey's brown horse Bonny. Roarke called out, "Did you see them? Two birds!"

Lirey leaned back, stretching his back muscles. "Aye! That's a good omen, ain't it?"

Roarke smiled broadly. Lirey had not seen him smile much in the last two days; it was a cheery sight.

"I've found the armory. It's on the farther side of the castle, directly behind the great hall." Noting the results of Lirey's toil, he said, "That hole should be deep enough—well done! Let's get you outfitted, and then we'll make a litter and bring Boof out here."

Lirey thought that maybe they should take care of Boof first, and *then* go to the armory, but Roarke seemed eager and pleased with himself, so he kept his tongue.



Roarke had found a box of tapers, and had placed several of them, lit, in sconces that hung on the stone walls of the armory. The fluttering light played eerily upon surfaces that had not seen illumination in a century. There were swords and shields, some rusted, some still gleaming dimly from under thin coatings of oil. There were suits of mail, perhaps about twenty, some made of leather or iron plates, a few made of the small metal ringlets that Roarke favored. There were several axes, maces, and other instruments of war, but not many of these. In all, the armory was poorly equipped, but it was likely enough that it had been emptied as the folk of Blythecairne had made their last futile defense against the dragon.

"Not too much here, is there?" Lirey remarked.

"No, not too much. But I found a few treasures!"

Not wanting to appear too forward, Lirey asked, "What's permitted fer me t' take, Cap'?"

"Nothing!" Roarke laughed. "You may take nothing! But may I be allowed to give you a few gifts?"

Lirey smiled. "As ye see fit ... many thanks!"

Roarke went over to where the vests of chain mail were hanging, and picked out a particularly beautiful hauberk for Lirey—with gold ringlets interspersed among the silver, forming the outline of a horse's head. The sword he chose for his companion had a couple of faint spots of rust on the blade, but it was clearly the most honorable weapon that was housed there; it had a delicate filigree engraved into part of the short blade, and a red jewel in its haft that shone like fire in the candlelight. "That rust should buff right out without too much effort," Roarke said. "And if it doesn't, you may have your choice of any other blade that you desire."

"This armor, and this sword—it musta belonged t' Lord Meadling hisself!" Lirey began. "P'r'aps ye don't—"

Roarke stopped him with a smile. "If you choose to lead my force back up here, then you will always have the most honored position in my household. Besides, if your grandfather had been able to subdue the dragon, it might be *you* in the position of giving gifts today, instead of me."

"Well, sure, Cap'. But that's true of any number o' men in Fairling. Lots of us lost distant relatives t' the dragon, a hunnerd years ago."

"In the last two decades, I have oft-times been in the position of having to make critical decisions quickly, based on just my instincts about men or situations. And I have not often been wrong," Roarke said without immodesty. "Also, you are the one Keet would have chosen to lead my men. That means much to me. If you

do choose this task, it is yours. And if you instead choose to stay at home in your farm with your wife and your boys, then please accept these tokens as my gift to you for your service to me these last two days. In either case, may the Lord Almighty grant that they are only used ceremonially, and never out of necessity."

Lirey nodded, humbled.

Roarke continued, "I still have three more gifts to give. Here are two." He held out two small suits of chain mail, delicately woven with the same horse's-head design as Lirey's. "These must have belonged to the young princes of Blythecairne. I hope that they will fit your sons agreeably."

"M'Lord—" Lirey began, dazed by Roarke's generosity.

"And you must accompany me to the chambers of the Lady Ileana for the last gift. There are still many fine gowns left in her wardrobe—please choose one that will be pleasing to your good wife. I'm certain that the Lady would approve of one of her robes being given to the distant daughter-in-law of her old friend. After that, we have two tasks left to us this morning, and then we can ride back to Fairling, and feed our poor mounts."



An hour later, Boof was in the ground, body and head, and covered with the dirt of Meadling.

Roarke asked Lirey, "Do you have any words that you would like to say?"

"No, sir, I guess not."

"Then I'll say just a bit. Would you kneel with me?"

The two men dropped to their knees in the freshly turned dirt. "Almighty God, first of all, I'd like to thank You for getting me and Lirey out of a tough spot yesterday. It could've turned out badly for us. Thank You. Secondly, we wish to

commend the man Boof to the earth today. Any offenses that he committed against us, we pardon. Receive him into Your own kingdom, and treat him in whatever manner Your compassion allows and Your justice requires. May Your wisdom and Your mercy lead us home to Fairling now, and guide us in the way that You have determined to be the right one, the best one, for us."

"I done more prayin' in the past two days than I done for a *month* before this," Lirey declared, as they rose stiffly to their feet, Roarke breathing a labored sigh as his injured knee pained him. As soon as the words had left Lirey's lips, he felt foolish, but Roarke said, "I understand completely. Before I lost my wife, my own prayers were indifferent at best. But there's something about coming face-to-face with the reality of Evil ... it makes you want to be sure about which side you belong to—do you stand for Right? Do you stand for Ill? Or are you merely a bystander, a pawn, a victim? For me, anyway, it made me want to correct the injustices I had done in my own life, and to be a defender of whatever I found that was innocent and weak in the world. After I recovered from my initial anger and despair, of course."

As they mounted their horses, Lirey asked, "Are we ready to head on back t' Fairling, then?"

"One more task," Roarke replied. "We have a dragon to burn."

"How are we goin' t' do that? He's wedged inta that stable, an' there's wood all around 'im. If we tried t' burn him where he lays, all o' th' wooden structures around 'im would all burn, too! An' there's no way we could ever move him out to open ground."

"We're just going to have to burn him where he is. We can gather the wood from the demolished stables around him, and localize the flames pretty much. If the structures burn, then so be it. They mostly had to be rebuilt anyway. At least

the stone buildings and the wall will be safe—and there's little chance of the fire spreading outside the castle grounds; there's not too much out there that will burn."

"But ... don't ye want t' keep him, t' show the folks what're comin'?"

"Lirey, he's already started to rot and decay, after lying in the sun for a week. Our noses are used to him now, but think of the way that stench first affected us." Roarke nearly gagged now, just remembering it. "But most of all, think of the terrible disaster that has befallen Treadle, Herold, Boof, Mox. As long as that evil is allowed to exist, in whatever form it retains, somebody will always be at risk. Do you want to expose your boys to that danger? Or your wife? Or Willum? Keet? Your friends? I don't need any more evidence to show to people that might be coming here; *you* are my witness. *You* are my proof. But the dragon, and the evil that it represents, must be done away with. Do you see?"

Lirey saw. "Forgive me, Captain—I weren't thinkin' clear. Ye're right. Let's do the job."

After another hour of labor, Lirey struck his flint at the base of the pyre they had constructed, and started the blaze. The two men climbed aboard their horses and pointed them toward the south, as the flames started to sizzle, licking the fat of the great reptile. When they reached the edge of the land where the sparse grasses once again grew, they turned back to look. A billowing column of black smoke rose like an angry fist where they knew the castle to be, but was pushed gently off toward the distant hills in the west by a cleansing breeze, to dissipate into nothing. Allowing the horses to graze as they walked, the two companions made their way slowly back to Fairling, not arriving until after the sun had set behind the hills.

Chapter Sixteen

Curled around the ruined throne of the stone fortress once known as Beale's Keep lay the last dragon left alive in this country inhabited by men, which lay south of the bleak region known as the Northern Wastelands. The beast was growing uncomfortable; the hunger was beginning to gnaw in her belly. Soon she would have to stir and appease the mighty craving that had been growing slowly, slowly, through all the long years of her dormancy.

Twice before in her lifetime, the mighty serpent had experienced the hunger. Alive for roughly two-and-a-half centuries since her hatching, she had first known the voracious longing when she became a fully mature adult. Until then, she had lived far to the northeast, across a narrow isthmus that connected to a much larger continent than the land where she now dwelt. She fed on deer and sheep when times were fat, and squirrels and rats when times were lean. She occasionally contended with another one of her own kind, and feasted on dragon flesh. But when *it* came—the *hunger*—nothing she had ever eaten before or experienced before would even hint at satisfying her.

Her loins smoldering, she mated with a large drake, and when their copulation was concluded, she turned and seized him by the throat, drinking in his blood as it drained into her fierce mouth. She became pregnant with four eggs, and then became *really* hungry. She bellowed with rage in the hills where she roamed, and the trees shook, and the mammals fled.

Finally, insane with frustration (if *insane* is a word that can be applied to a mind so brutish to begin with), she was driven blindly by some inner command to thunder across the isthmus to the west, ever westward, westward. She came after many weeks to a settlement of humans that was known as Melidor, and gorged for

days on the meat of men, horses, cattle, and dogs. Then at last she slept; the first long period of her dormancy. She awoke long enough to give birth to four hatchlings, but they required no attention. She watched lazily as three of them killed her weakest child, and glutted on its flesh and blood. She roused herself long enough to roar ferociously at the three, driving them off into the wilderness, then lolled back into her stupor, and did not stir herself again for some years.

From time to time over the course of the next century, she awakened, and prowled the grounds in a wide circle around the ruins of Melidor, living much as she had in her adolescence, driving off all life that she could not eat, and utterly befouling the land. She dug up the grass, uprooted trees, and stamped out any green and living thing that she noticed. She demanded little in the way of nutrition; since she had gorged on the flesh of men, she retained a malignant kind of vitality that required little sustenance. During the rare times when her life-flames did need stoking, she would widen out the circle of her defilement, eat a few deer, and then return to Melidor to sleep for months more at a time.

After a century of living this way, at a time when others of her generation were all dead from advanced age and the encroachment of developing humanity, it began to grow in her again—the hunger. There was no drake this time to satisfy her lust, so her frustrated rage was even greater than it had been the first time. Driven by her inner goad again, this time to the south, she thundered deep into the inhabited region that men called County Temter, trampling through the flatlands between two great sources of water. One of those was a lake called Belanna, which became two rivers that flowed southwest and emptied into the Great Sea. The other watercourse was a shining river called Maur Wain, which flowed southeast toward the great cities of men, Lenidor, Celester, James Bay. Of course the dragon did not know these things; it only knew the hunger.

Finally the beast had come to Beale's Keep, a peaceful settlement of humans ruled benevolently by the Lord Beale, a mirthful and generous man who had many friends in the neighboring villages: Katarin, Solemon, Lauren. But even the villages that were considered to be close neighbors were many days' travel away from the gentle farmlands of Beale's Keep; thus, when the call went out, "All aid to the Keep!" it was far too late when it was finally heard by the kindly lord's allies.

As she had many years before at Melidor, the dragon gorged on the flesh of horses, cattle, and men. No matter what sort of force attacked her with swords or arrows, she was invincible, irresistible, indomitable. And when relief finally arrived from Lauren and Katarin, she rejoiced that more men were coming to her, for they bore her no harm except that she glutted herself on them too freely. With her strength thus renewed, she soon lapsed into torpor once again. Before long, warriors stopped coming to Beale's Keep. After two generations of men had passed on to rest with their fathers, even the name of the fortress was forgotten, except in the sort of stories told by grandparents to their littlest ones.

The inner coercion that drove the dragon into its periodic rage, which was only sated by the devouring of the lives of men, was the same energy that gave the beast its unnaturally long life. It was the same force that enabled it to live and not die when attacked by throngs of villagers who were fighting for their own lives and their children's. It was the same fever that compelled the creature to destroy all other living beings in the proximity of its nest, both animal and vegetable, instead of merely hunting and coexisting. It was the same spark that gave the tiny-brained beast the ability to fight intelligently, with purpose and malice.

It was what made the creature a thing of legend, of myth, instead of merely cattle to be herded, or quarry to be hunted, or nuisance to be exterminated. They were demonic spirits from the bowels of Hell that changed lizards into monsters, snakes into serpents, dinosaurs into dragons.

Back in the dark reaches of history, very nearly to Eternity Past, foul spirits conspired against the Most High to befoul His creation and despoil His inheritance. These demons found in the huge reptiles of the ancient world willing hosts for their maleficence. But when the Almighty had grown weary of the rapacious violence committed in the earth, He consigned all of those evil spirits back to Hell, and destroyed all of their reptilian hosts—all but two. Those two, who had escaped the terrible flood of God's wrath, bred, though not abundantly. In time, there was once again a small cadre of these terrible lizards, which once more prowled the northern fringes of the lands of men.

With the passing of aeons, some of the banished foul spirits were allowed to worm their way free from the depths of the fiery dungeon where they had been held prisoner. Their hatred magnified by their long captivity, they determined to wreak vengeance upon the lives of the men that God loved. But they were cautious; they did not want to awaken the power of the Most High again, to cause the Holy One to raise His arm against them. So they attacked, and then waited; they struck, and then withdrew; they spoiled, and then slumbered.

For over a century since defiling Beale's Keep, the dragon had rested. But now she was beginning to notice the initial pangs of yowling desire burning in her loins again, in her belly. Someday, she would have to deal with it.

Chapter Seventeen

Maryan rushed into her husband's arms as he came walking through the gate into the dooryard of their little farm, leading Bonny by the reins. "I was so worried about ye, Lirey," she whimpered. "When ye didn't come back last night, or this mornin', or this afternoon...."

"There, sweetheart," he cooed, "I'm here now, an' all's well." He engulfed her in his arms, and bent to bury his face in her thick brown hair. He breathed in her good, honest, woman's smell, and rejoiced that he had in fact come home again. He kissed her tear-washed cheeks, kissed her again, and again. "I love ye dearly, me lass."

"Pap's home!" cried a shrill voice with delight. "Pappa! Pappa!" his younger brother joined in, clapping his pudgy hands. The two boys ran from the house and wrapped themselves around Lirey's legs, wedging themselves in between their father and mother.

"Boys, me boys! How I missed ye!" Lirey laughed, reaching down to caress their heads.

Davie, the elder son, shouted, "Did ye see the dragon, Pap?" and Peet sang, "Did ye? Did ye?"

"Yes, me lads, I did see the dragon, an' I'll tell ye all about it, soon enough. But first, yer old Pap needs t' get some food into his belly, afore he faints dead away!"

"Oh, Lirey! I'm sorry," Maryan said, disengaging herself from their embrace. "I've got some stew in the pot that I'll set right out for ye." She stepped back, and noticed for the first time the immaculate hauberk of gold and silver links that her husband wore. "Ohh!"

"Aye, it's rather pretty, ain't it?" Lirey smiled.

Questions flashed in the young woman's eyes, but she couldn't work out how to verbalize them. She parted her lips, exhaled prettily, and closed them again.

"Roarke gave it t' me. He's quite a feller. We got some more thinkin' t' do." He picked up Bonny's reins where he had dropped them. "Let me put the old girl into her stall, an' I'll be right in t' eat."

"I'll do it, Pap!" Davie shouted.

Lirey bent and handed the reins to his son, saying, "There ye are, little Cap'. Be sure the gate's latched, won't ye?" He hoisted his saddle-pack off the horse's back, and gave Bonny a light slap on the rump. "I'll be out after supper an' take that saddle off'n ye."

Little Peet had not released his father's leg during this time, but clung to it tightly, giggling, as Lirey walked stiff-legged back to the house, with Maryan clinging to one arm. "Oh, Lor', Lirey, I'm sure glad ye're home."



Lirey ate as if he had never tasted food before, savoring every mouthful. "God be blest, but that's good stew, darlin'."

"It ain't nothin' but what I've cooked for ye many a time before," she said, though her eyes shone with pride.

"Aye, but there ain't nothin' like bein' hungry for two days t' show a man how t' appreciate what he's been blest with." He picked up his bowl and drank the last bits of broth that drizzled slowly into his mouth, sucking them in with a slurping sound.

Maryan snapped a towel at him, laughing. "Ain't nothin' like bein' hungry for two days t' show a man how t' forget his manners, neither!"

Peet sat with his elbows on the table, his fat little hands propping up his chin. He just sat there, smiling close-mouthed at his Pappa, his black eyes glistening in the light from the fireplace. Davie was trying his best to be patient, but dearly wanted to hear his father's tale of the dragon.

Sighing contentedly, Lirey finally said, "Davie, Peet. How about if ye drag me saddle-pack over here t' the table for me? An' be right careful with it—it's heavy now."

The two boys jumped down from their bench, desperately eager to find out what surprises their Pap may have hidden for them in his pack. Sometimes when he came home from market, he would bring them each a piece of sweet sugar candy. But he'd never been to the dragon's castle before!

"Now, be ye patient jest a bit more, laddies. I have t' show ye somethin'." From the pack he withdrew the short sword, and turned it back and forth so that the light played off the engraved blade, and made the crimson jewel sparkle like a star. "Pap! Is it yours?" Davie cried.

Lirey nodded, smiling, and his wife said, "Lor', how he's honored ye!" She was a little frightened; this was something far beyond her scope of experience. She was not entirely sure just who her husband *was* anymore.

"Lord Roarke gave me a present t' give t' each of ye little bairns, too," Lirey said softly. Peet hopped up and down in a circle, clapping his hands, and Davie picked up one foot and then set it back down again, his bright eyes brimming with eagerness.

Lirey pulled out the two matching vests of mail, glittering silver and gold, and held them out for his sons. The boys hugged the treasures to themselves, squealing with joy. Davie said, "Can we put 'em on, Mam?" and Peet sang, "Mammy! Can we put 'em on, Mammy? Look, Mammy!"

Maryan, with tears streaming down her cheeks, felt as if she were caught in the grasp of something too determined for her to possibly deny. "Yes, boys, ye may."

The boys needed help shrugging into the little coats of mail, but when they were successfully dressed, they made an impressive pair. The suits Roarke had chosen for them were a little large, but that was good. *Must be the Lady Ileana's children were just a bit older than me own two lads*, Lirey mused.

"Look at me! I'm Roarke!" Davie shouted.

"Look at me! I'm Pap!" Peet cried in response.

The two boys began to wrestle, growling and laughing. Maryan held her hands clasped to her lips, unsure of what to do with the moment.

"M'Lady," Lirey said softly.

She turned her eyes to her husband.

He pulled her new gown ever so slightly out of his sack, teasing her, so that she could just see the material. "Lirey!" she said weakly, trying to be cross. He drew the gown out of the pack, and held it high so that she could see it properly. She gasped when she recognized the obvious quality of the workmanship, the richness of the fabric. It was a deep blue satin, with thin tendrils of silver and gold threadwork making simple designs of flowers which accentuated the bustline. Not only had she never owned any garment of such beauty, she had never even seen one.

With a trembling voice, she asked, "Did Master Roarke choose this gift for me?"

Smiling gently, her husband answered, "Nay, my love. I picked it meself. The color o' the blue reminded me of your lovely eyes."

She fell into his arms, weeping. "Oh, Lirey! I'd gamble that even Queen Maygret herself doesn't have such a dress!" She curled herself into a ball in his embrace, feeling his warmth and strength steady her, calm her.

"Aye, love. All in all, I guess ye'd say it's been a perty good day."

Chapter Eighteen

Roarke lay on his back, staring at the thatched roof of Keet's hut. In the flickering light cast by the fire, he could just make out the crosshatching of the straw and reeds that Keet had used to cover his little house; he counted rows of thatch while waiting for sleep to come. He listened to the sounds of crickets chirping, both outside and inside the little house.

Finally he closed his eyes, but his mind refused to rest. He was troubled by the nagging thought that he had left something undone at the castle, though he was unable to determine what that something might be. A small gusty breeze blew underneath the door, causing a chill to run down his back.

It was fast becoming autumn, and that fact also troubled Roarke. The best time to begin his proposed expedition to reclaim the lands around the castle would probably be in the spring, but Roarke was loath to leave the castle unoccupied throughout the long months of fall and winter. *Something to talk to Keet about in the morning*, he thought. *Need to know how many are still willing to go, and how many might possibly be ready now.* He listened patiently, as Keet began snoring resonantly from the other room.

He thought about Lirey. The man had impressed him with his good sense and his candor. And he had not rebelled when Roarke had overruled him on a couple of points that they could have disagreed about. Plus, he was tall and rather good-looking; Roarke did not discount those attributes when it came to picking out a leader for the trek to Blythecairne. Men were much more apt to follow someone who was impressive in those ways, and now that Lirey wore the mail and carried the sword of Meadling, it was even more likely that he would make an imposing captain.

Roarke chuckled to himself. *Captain*. He had privately enjoyed the fact that Lirey called him "Captain"—there was something familiar yet still respectful about it. And if Lirey consented to head the expedition to Blythecairne, Roarke intended to name *him* Captain of his forces—whatever they ended up being. Captain Lirey.

Roarke thought that it was unlikely that anyone from Fairling would try to usurp his authority like Boof and Herold had done. If nothing else, Treadle would be a constant reminder that it had been tried once, and failed. But still—what if word went out to, say, Goric, that the dragon was dead and the castle left untended? Any campaign launched from Goric would have greater resources in men and weapons than the Fairling expedition, plus the fact that men from Goric had no respect for the person or deeds of Roarke.

No, Roarke thought, it was better that a small defensive force spend the winter at Blythecairne, just in case.

He calculated the amount of time it took to ride to the castle—somewhat less than half a day, if the horse was fresh and willing. On foot, perhaps two or three days. A caravan with ox carts carrying supplies might take up to a week to get there. And how long would it take to provision that caravan?

The only other time Roarke had had to fill an empty castle, he had been a young man, a hero, and it had been in the bright spring of the year, when other men were feeling wanderlust and their wives were willing to let them go. Now Roarke was old, and instead of bringing deliverance, he had brought devastation to some folk in Fairling. It was nearly fall, with cold winter coming, and the young wives were wanting their men to stay at home and warm their beds at night. Roarke thought to himself, *Thraill was in springtime—Blythecairne in autumn. This is my autumn, too*. He wondered somberly how many more springs his eyes would be allowed to see. He realized that he was becoming melancholy, and it was probably because he was very, very tired.

He began to recite his prayers, and was quickly asleep.



When he woke up the next morning, Roarke was alone. He was grateful that Keet and Willum had allowed him to sleep, but a little surprised that he had not awakened when they left. Then he realized that he would have happily slept even longer, if it were not for an acute need to visit the privy.

After taking care of that bit of business, Roarke made his way across the alley and entered the back door of The Dragon's Tail, where he was greeted by the sizzling sounds and succulent smells of sausages and potatoes being fried. Expecting to see Willum or Keet at the grill, he was surprised to find a very fat, very short old woman manning the skillets. Not hearing Roarke enter due to the clatter of her cooking, she stayed turned to her work.

"G'mornin', Sir Roarke," greeted one of the townsmen already seated at the board, a slender man whom Roarke knew as Woodwright. With him was a youth that Roarke knew by sight but not by name, and two other men that he had not yet met. They nodded at the knight and offered greetings.

"Good morning, friends. Who's that behind the bar?"

"Oh, that's Sallamay," said the youngest man. "She's a wonderful cook. Ye'll be likin' her breakfast."

"Well, it smells delicious." Roarke extended his hand to the stranger nearest him. "Welcome; I am Roarke."

"No, sir, ye don't be needin' no interduction," the man replied, grasping his wrist with a woodsman's strong grip. "I be known as Yeskie. At yer service, sir."

Roarke reached toward the next man and his clasp was returned. "Greetin's, m'Lord. I be called Abey, or jest Abe fer short. Me'n Yeskie share a cabin out

t'wards Farport, an' we supply lumber fer both Farport an' Fairling. We're both more'n passin' fair with the bow. We figgered that ye may be needin' sech as we if ye're plannin' on rebuildin' Blythecairne."

"I will indeed! We will talk," Roarke said, and moved to the youth. "I'm sorry, but I've forgotten your name."

"Me dad named me Yancey Wain, on account of he was raised in Katarin, on the Maur Wain, an' he named me after the river. But mostly he jist calls me Yance." The boy smiled. "It'd be an honor if ye'd consider me fer yer trip t' the castle, too, m'Lord."

Roarke nodded solemnly. "We'll talk."

Woodwright reached his hand up to the knight, and said, "Will ye sit an' share breakfast with us, Sir Roarke? We can talk about the trip, if ye've a mind to."

"Yes, certainly. But first I'd better meet our cook, since she is apparently in my employ!"

He walked over and stepped behind the bar. "Good morning, kind mother. I am Roarke."

Sallamay threw her hands in the air and cried, "Thankee! Thankee fer this job, me Lord!" She wrapped her stout arms around him, and patted him on the back. "When Will said ye were lookin' fer a body t' mind the bar fer ye, I says t' him, 'God be prized! Me prayers is answered!' Thankee so very much, me Lord!"

"You're very welcome," Roarke said with a smile, returning her pat. "I'm sure you'll do a fine job. Breakfast smells wonderful." He was certain he'd be interested in hearing *this* story from Will.

"Jest sit yeself right back down over there, an' I'll bring it right out fer ye. Get along! An' thankee!"

Roarke rejoined the men at the board. "Where is Will this morning? Or Keet?"

"Keet went t' talk t' Lirey," Woodwright replied. "Don't know where Will is."

"Hmm," Roarke mused. "Aren't there usually more people out for breakfast than this?"

"Aye, usually."

Yance broke in, "I expect most of 'em are stayin' away this mornin', after the message what Keet passed around last night."

"Really? What message was that?"

Woodwright said, "After ye and Lirey got back safe last evenin', Keet sent word around the town that whosoever was still interested in goin' on up t' Blythecairne t' settle, we should meet here fer a free breakfast today, an' we could make plans. Well ... this is us."

Chapter Nineteen

A subtle change had come over Lirey. He still fully intended to talk with his wife and discuss whether to lead Roarke's expedition force to Blythecairne, but he realized that now, instead of weighing both arguments equally, he would be trying to convince his wife to let him go. At some point during the events of the past two days, without Lirey even recognizing when it happened, he had made his decision. He was Roarke's man.

Even while lying in bed, drifting off to sleep with the soft femininity of Maryan in his arms, he had not been able to get Blythecairne out of his mind. What was it that was enchanting him? It was not the gold, not the adventure, certainly not the danger or desolation or separation from his family. It was almost as if a sense of *destiny* were beckoning to him.

Maryan stirred, softly sighing. Lirey did not wish to wake her, but he did want to initiate this conversation before his sons were up. "Good mornin', me sweetest love," he whispered.

"Good mornin', me sweetest love," she whispered in reply.

She sat on the edge of their bed and stretched, arching her back beautifully. "Come back t' bed, Mar', if ye can," Lirey coaxed.

"All right," she said, sliding back under the quilt and snuggling against him. "Don't ye want yer breakfast?"

"No hurry. Let's let the boys sleep a bit."

They lay in silence for a few moments. "It's hard fer ye, ain't it, Li'?"

"What's that, love?"

"Tellin' me that ye want t' go on back t' the castle."

"What ... what d'ye mean?"

"Lirey!" she said, laughing, and slapping him lightly on the chest. "D'ye think that I could be yer own wife for all these years, an' not even know what ye're about?" He buried his face against her neck, and she continued, "I could tell ye were different last night, even while I was lyin' in yer arms. Ye were quieter, an' more solemn-like. Ye were somewhere else. I must tell ye, I was scared, at first ... but ye seemed so ... *noble*, so prince-like, that I knew what ye were thinkin' ye must do."

Lirey was surprised at the depth of her understanding—he had thought he was being very discreet. Softly, he asked, "May I, then?"

She didn't answer immediately. "How d'ye think that I'd be able t' live fer six months here wi' just the boys fer help? It cannot be done." She exhaled slowly. "The only way I'd let ye go is this: Ye must get Lord Roarke t' buy the farm from us, and ye must take me an' the boys along with ye."

Lirey hesitated—would Roarke even allow women to go on the initial expedition? "There ain't really a proper place up there to live at."

"Well, there *will* be, won't there?"

Lirey thought about it for a moment, and the more he did, the more the idea appealed to him as eminently reasonable. Of course, there would be difficulties attached to the plan, but there was nothing particularly easy about *any* of this endeavor. Besides, the logistical problem was really *food*, not shelter. The initial settlers at Blythecairne could easily winter at the castle itself. "I'll ask him, love."

Moments later, Keet was rapping on the front door of Lirey's house, still not knowing whether it was going to be a difficult task to persuade him to lead the campaign to Blythecairne. If Lirey would *not* go, the expedition was in peril; Keet had been met with precious little enthusiasm last night when he had spread the word about the breakfast meeting at the tavern.

"Davie, will ye see t' the door?" Lirey asked his son, who was lying with his brother on a pallet at the foot of their parents' bed.

"Yes, Pap." The boy leaped to his feet, throwing his blanket to the floor and causing his brother to voice a cry of dismay. "It's Keet!" came the shout a moment later from the doorway.

Maryan asked her husband, "Has he seen ye in yer coat of mail?" to which he replied, "I don't b'lieve so—it was rather dusky when we pulled into town last night."

"Well, put on yer best fer him, an' let him see the form of man that ye are. I'll put the kettle on."

"Yes, m'Lady," Lirey said, smiling and bowing. "Peetey, wake up an' get dressed."

Maryan left the room, calling out, "Master Keet, have ye had any tea yet this morn?"



Roarke felt a stab of panic in his chest, and quickly sought to calm himself. *Only four?* he prayed. *Almighty Lord, You can certainly accomplish Your purposes with great numbers or with small, but ... only four?* Externally, he tried to maintain his composure and engage in the small talk that was being exchanged at the table, but he found it hard to concentrate. He didn't even have much of an appetite for Sallamay's excellent breakfast, though he did manage to down two helpings each of sausage and potatoes. The other four at the table circumspectly kept the conversation away from the apparent frailty of the proposed expedition force, sensing that Roarke himself was not altogether confident.

Thankfully, Keet came bustling through the door just a moment later. Nodding to the four gathered at the table, with a "Mornin', lads! Mornin'!" he came directly to Roarke and whispered to him hoarsely.

"Good mornin', m'Lord. I've been about yer business this morn, but I have t' ask ye somethin'."

"Yes, thank you, Keet. What's your question?"

"Well, sir, am I yer steward now? That is, am I allowed t' spend from yer treasury t' supply fer the castle's needs?"

"Well, yes, I suppose you are. Within reason, of course. No, I mean—yes, you are my steward. You have my complete trust, and you may administer the castle's treasury however you see the need."

"Thank ye, m'Lord. I was hopin' that they was yer sentiments. I think ye'll be satisfied."

Keet clapped Roarke on the shoulder, stood, and addressed the four: "Gentlemen! We may be small in number right now, but I'll warrant ye'll be glad ye were the first t' answer the call!

"This is Sir Cedric Roarke," he held out his hand to Roarke, though everyone knew who he was, "an' he's got a powerful lot o' titles that follow his name. If ye choose t' follow him t' Blythecairne, ye'll be makin' him yer lord an' master, which is an awful lot t' ask of ye, but I'll wager ye'll be glad ye made the choice. I ain't knowed him but these two weeks, but he's showed me clear that there's no man in all o' Hagenspan that I'd rather bow the neck to.

"My name is Keet, an' most of ye know me." All of them did. "Sir Cedric Roarke has named me t' be steward o' Blythecairne Castle, which means that ye'll all be subject t' my authority, an' I'll be honor-bound t' see that ye're well provided for. Ye'll all answer t' me, an' I'll answer t' ye, an' also t' Lord Roarke. An' because ye're the first t' follow the call, I'll put ten gold falconets into each one o' yer hands

the moment the castle is secured, plus regular wages afterward." This was a generous offer, with the premium representing nearly a year's wages.

Keet continued, "Not only that, but I have another interduction t' make fer ye. Lirey," he called, "would ye come in now?" Lirey, who had been waiting outside the front door of the tavern, entered, resplendent in his suit of glittering chain mail, with the shining sword of Meadling strapped to his belt. "This is yer other commander. While I will be in charge o' the household an' the financials, an' Lord Roarke will be the last word over everythin' altogether, it's Lirey here what will be the captain o' the defense o' the castle an' its grounds.

"Ye first four that've come will be entitled t' wearin' suits o' mail an' carryin' blades that come from the rich history o' the treasury o' Meadling, jist like Lirey here is wearin'. His is the finest, since he's the captain. But ye'll all be outfitted fine an' proper, too—ye'll never be ashamed o' yer armor, that's t' be certain. The second comers, who didn't answer the call today, well, they'll be outfitted too, but it won't be as gloriously as ye will be. That's yer reward fer hearing the call, an' comin' whole-hearted.

"Now, fer yer responsibilities: Ye'll be required t' work from sunup t' sundown, six days o' the week. The seventh day is yers, t' rest an' play an' return thanks. Ye won't be alone—we'll be workin' right beside ye. From what I hear o' the state o' the castle an' its grounds, there'll be plenty enough o' work t' go around fer all of us. An' when that work is complete, an' the land is ready fer settlers, ye'll be given positions of honor in the household, providin' ye've acquitted yerselves well durin' this time.

"Now, don't let yer hearts quail thinkin' aboot the work, an' the fact that there's only this wee lot of us. Besides the four of ye, an' the three of us, there's the rest o' Lirey's family, which is three more, an' my son Willum, which is one right good 'un. There's also Treadle an' Minney, who are comin' t' do whate'er they may,

though t' be fair, that may not be too much. So that's thirteen in all, which ain't a wonderful number, but I expect there'll be a few more t' join us before we're ready t' leave.

"An' here's one more incentive fer ye: During the time that's left before we're ready t' take off fer the north lands, if any one of ye can convince another good man or family t' join our work, ye'll get one more falconet fer each head that ye can add t' our count, an' each one o' them will get four falconets in addition t' regular wages.

Keet took in a deep breath, and let it out. "I guess that ends me talk. Lord Roarke, d'ye have anythin' t' add?"

Roarke shook his head, and said, "No, I suppose not," though he had many questions for Keet when they could find a moment of privacy. "Your plan is very agreeable to me. Does anyone have any questions you'd like to ask either me, or Keet, or Lirey?"

Woodwright cleared his throat, looked down at the table, and said, "Not meanin' any disrespect t' any of ye, but ... we've been hearin' about all o' these falconets what are goin' t' be spread around like butter on toast, but so far all we've seen is jest that one, what Roarke—Lord Roarke—gave t' Keet on that first night he come t' town. Now Lirey surely does look splendid in his outfit, so's I'm not doubtin' any of yer words, mind ye, an' I don't mean t' be soundin' ungrateful. But what I'm wonderin' is this"—he raised his eyes to look at Roarke directly—"could we p'rhaps get a little bit of up-front money, so's we could provision ourselves fer the trip?"

Roarke nodded. "A reasonable request. For any of you who will give me your mark today, I will advance the first three falconets from the ten that Keet promised you, which you may freely spend, or keep, or give to your sweethearts, as you wish."

Since this represented more money than Yancey Wain had ever seen before in his life, he gushed, "I'll put down me mark fer ye right now!"

"Jest a minute, there, young feller," said Abey. "Me an' Yeskie are almost ready t' give ye our hands, too, but we've one issue. We've been free men fer all of our lives, an' it don't seem, somehow, *right* t' be puttin' ourselves into servitude, no matter how handsome the rewards is. If we follered ye up t' the castle, how long'd we be bound t' ye? 'Twouldn't be forever, would it?"

Roarke replied, "You may have heard that, as well as becoming the Lord of Blythecairne, I also am Lord of another country, a region known as Thrail, which is far west from here." Abe and Yeskie nodded; they had heard. "What I have done there is to hire my workers—my friends, actually—for a month at a time. If, at any time, my friends choose to leave their labors, to return to their families, or to wander for a while, or just to spend some of their fortunes, they are free to go at the end of each month. And, if they have served well, they are always welcome back.

"What I would like to propose, in light of the ten-falconet premium that Keet has promised you, is that you would work for me for one year, and then, after that, you may continue your service to me on a month-by-month basis. Is that acceptable to you?"

Yeskie and Abe looked at each other, silently communicating through their eyes, with the easy recognition fostered by years of camaraderie. They were no strangers to hard work or isolation, and the sums talked about that morning would make them richer than they had ever been. If they were free to go after only a year.... They nodded at each other, and Yeskie said, "Aye, that'll be acceptable."

Chapter Twenty

Breakfast was done, plans were expanded upon, first payments made. Abe and Yeskie, Yance, and Woodwright had all left The Dragon's Tail to spend their wages, try to recruit friends, and begin saying goodbyes.

Lirey, Keet, and Roarke sat in the tavern, smoking pipes and talking about what had been accomplished that day. "I must tell you, friends—I was rather grim this morning when I heard that Keet had sent the word out to gather, and *four men* was all the response! And one of them little more than a boy. Ah, but Keet, you have a way with a plan!"

"Thankee, m'Lord. Ye're pleased, then?"

"Yes. I am."

They puffed contentedly for a few moments, and then Keet said, "I, ah, made a purchase fer ye this mornin', afore I asked ye if I were rightly yer steward. I beg yer pardon, m'Lord, an' I hope ye're agreeable with my thinkin'."

"Keet, every decision you have made so far has been done with the utmost competence and wisdom."

"Well, thankee again." The rotund man smiled broadly through his whiskers. "I hope ye're still thinkin' that a minute from now! Fact is, ye agreed this mornin' t' pay quite a handsome price t' become the owner of a nice little farm t' the southwest of Fairling."

"I did? And who did I purchase this farm from?"

Keet nodded at Lirey, who said, "Ye've made me a wealthy man, Cap'. An' I'm grateful." He paused reflectively. "But t' be sure, we're givin' up a powerful lot t' come north with ye, to a barren land an' cold. Me lovely wife, Maryan—she wouldn't let me come without takin' her an' our little ones along. An' surely, I

couldn't have left her, without breakin' her heart. An' that would have broke *my* heart. So I pray they won't be too much of a burden on ye, m'Lord, an' I hope that they'll bring ye a speck of joy, too."

God, but these are some fine men you've given me, Roarke prayed. He vowed, "Captain Lirey, you and your family may have the choicest apartments in the castle, whatever your wife desires. Even if it's the Lady Ileane's chambers. And my blessing upon you!"

Keet joked, "An' what about *my* chambers? I should say that the wise an' generous steward o' the castle ought t' have perty good quarters hisself, wouldn't ye?"

"You can have second choice, from whatever's left after Lirey's wife picks," Roarke promised. "And before I end up sleeping in the stables myself, I'd better take the third pick!"

Before Lirey or Keet could protest that Roarke should certainly have first dibs on whatever he wanted, the door to the tavern banged open, and Willum came through, smiling.

"Lord Roarke! It's grand t' see ye again!" Will cried.

"It is? I believe I have a bone to pick with you, young man," Roarke replied with mock sternness.

Will stopped, ashen-faced, with a look of alarm crossing his brow. "M'Lord! What've I done t' offend ye? I've jest been out buyin' wagons fer ye—"

"I hired you to manage The Dragon's Tail, didn't I? And just this morning, I find that you have hired a woman, abandoned your post, and are planning to ride off on an adventure!" He stared grimly at the youth, but his conscience was piercing him—Will looked as if he were in agony, not knowing if this were a joke, or the most grievous sin he had committed in his entire life. "I find that I will need to take special measures with you, young man."

"M'Lord, I'm sorry. If ye don't like Sal', I can fire her. I—"

"Please be quiet, Willum."

"Yes, sir," he said mournfully.

"Come and kneel before me," Roarke commanded, and the boy mutely obeyed. "Lirey, would you please permit me to have use of your sword?"

Will knelt with his head down, trembling, unsure if Roarke was planning on swatting his hindquarters with the flat of the blade, or taking his head off for his impertinence.

Roarke took the sword that Lirey handed him, and gently touched both of Will's shoulders with the point of the blade. In a solemn voice, he pronounced, "Willum, son of Keet: Because you have shown great ingenuity and enthusiasm in the brief time I have known you, and because the blood of your wise father Keet courses through your veins, and because you would rather be where we are than left behind in Fairling—I appoint you my personal squire and attendant, for all the days that I shall reside at Castle Blythecairne."

Lowering the blade, he said, "I'm sorry I frightened you, my lad; I was just playing with you. You have earned my deep respect, and my humble thanks, for your eager service to me."

Will threw his arms around the knight's knees and hugged him, weeping. After a moment, Roarke looked at Keet with an embarrassed smile, and the boy's father said, "Will! Are ye well?"

"Aye, I'm sorry! It's jest that I'm quite blessedly happy, an' not jest a little bit relieved!" He stood, and wiped his cheeks with the back of his sleeve. "Lord Roarke, I will do my God's-honest best t' bring ye honor."

"I know you will, my boy. Thank you."

Chapter Twenty-One

Treadle sat on a stool outside Minney's house, leaning with his back against the wall. He turned his face toward the sun; he could tell it was bright because of the warmth on his face, but his eyes did not see. Minney was tending her little herb garden to the side of the hut, warbling a bawdy song to herself and chuckling.

He was able to move around a little bit now—just enough to trudge haltingly from his bed of straw (after Minney helped him to rise from the floor) to the chair outside the hut, and then back again. His bodily functions were still not completely within his control, particularly when he slept, so Minney had had to ask a nearby farmer for a further supply of straw, which frequently needed to be freshened. But still, he could walk again, and he was growing stronger.

During the many hours of Treadle's silent black contemplation since his tragedy, he had arrived at a conclusion: The gift of forgiveness that he had received from Roarke was his most cherished possession.

After his body had been ruined by the poison from the dragon and the pummeling he had received from Boof, so that Treadle had despaired of life itself, there was one cry that came welling up from the deepest place inside him, one need only: *Forgive!* Treadle marveled at that fact; he had not previously known of any great spiritual need within himself—but there it was.

And what Treadle had sought with bitter tears and anguish, Roarke had given. In fact, Treadle was certain that it was Roarke's prayer for him to be healed that had purchased this rapid strengthening of his broken body. Why he was still blind, he did not question—he felt that it was only what he deserved. In any case, he had vowed within himself to serve Roarke for the remainder of his days, if he should be allowed to do so.

He heard the approach of men, voices talking softly, the scuffling tread of boots in the path, the far-off barking of a dog, the autumnal whine of a thousand crickets. He was amazed at what he could hear, now that he could not see. He sensed that the men were here to see him, and he pushed himself up from the stool to stand, patiently waiting.

The rusted gate to Minney's path creaked open, and Treadle heard two men come through, leaving one waiting at the gate. Treadle held out his hand, and said in a faint voice, "This must be Lord Roarke, an' ... Master Keet, an' ... ye have left Will outside the gate."

Roarke gripped the blind man's hand, and said, "Remarkable! Treadle, this is remarkable! You can see?"

Treadle chuckled softly, "No ... not 'n the way I usta."

Keet said, "How'd ye know it was me, Tread'? An' how'd ye know about Will?"

Treadle laughed again, a wispy, wheezing sound. "There weren't but little question that Lord Roarke ... would be comin' t' see me. An' for ye, ... good Keet, I fear that ye ... have a scent that's all yer own." Keet, unabashed, erupted in a howl of laughter. "Th' last bit was ... purely guesswork. If it'd been Lirey ... or one o' th' others, they parbly ... wouldn't o' waited outside ... th' gate. So it made sense, y' see ... that it were yer boy."

"Still remarkable!" said Roarke. "I came to see you, thinking to find you still in your sickbed, with a mind to suggest that you refrain from troubling yourself about my business. And here you are, standing, talking, and reasoning like a scholar!"

"Well, I stood ... t' meet ye, but ... I'm still a mite wobbly. Would ye ... mind—"

"Please, sit down—please!" began both Roarke and Keet at once, and Treadle slumped to his stool with a sigh.

Still chuckling lightly amid little intrusions of coughing, Treadle said, "I expect ye're thinkin' ... I'm a mite simple-minded.... But I tell ye, gents ... I b'lieve my mind is sound ... it's jest that I'm ... ever so happy."

Keet, looking hopeful but concerned, said, "Well, Tread', ye've been through much."

"Aye, I know ... I hain't failin' t' appreciate ... th' trouble I caused, an' that ... me brother's dead.... But I'm seein' things ... differ'nt, now ... so t' speak."

"Would it please you to tell us about it?" Roarke asked.

"Aye, but ... it'll take a good bit o' breath ... so ye'll have t' be patient with me."

By this time, Minney had noticed the guests who were standing in front of her man—one of them was that knight, Roarke. She wanted to scold them, warn them not to wear out Treadle, who was still not well, but she was intimidated by the silver-haired man with the polite speech. So she stood at the corner of her hut, nervously wringing her hands.

Treadle proceeded, "Since ... I lost me sight, things ... ain't seemed the same kind o' important ... t' me. What does it matter ... if'n a girl is a perty young thing, or ... homely as a dead pig? ... They're both th' same t' me. What counts ... is whether she's tender an' kind" —he chuckled again—"an' it helps if she c'n cook...." He continued, "What's it matter ... if'n I have curtains made o' silk ... an' a bowl made o' gold? I c'n eat jest as good ... out of a clay pot ... an' the curtains jest keep out the sun.... What matters t' me now ... is t' sit with me face turned up t'wards th' sun ... an' t' give back as much kindness as I may ... an' t' say 'thankee' t' God fer"—his voice broke—"givin' me a little hint about ... love ... an' ... mercy. Fer that, I thank ye ... Lord Roarke."

Roarke reached out and laid a hand upon Treadle's shoulder. "Gladly given, my friend. Gladly given."

Treadle said, "M'Lord ... if ye can ... could ye tell me jest a little bit about ... yer understandin' of God? If that ain't too much t' ask of ye?"

"Nothing would please me more, but I fear that I know very little. The only education I have ever had in religion came while I was living at Castle Thraill, from a man who had traveled across the Great Sea to speak to me. His name was Barnabas, and he was considered to be an ambassador for the Almighty. Unfortunately, he had become extremely ill during the voyage, and he died after he had been in my company for only two days. But he did give me something that has proved to be precious to me beyond all of the treasure in both my castles."

From the pouch that he wore inside his tunic, he withdrew three scraps of parchment. "Here, Treadle—take these in your hands, and feel what is worth more to me than my entire fortune."

Treadle held the scraps gently, and asked in a hushed voice, "What be they, m'Lord?"

"They contain the very words of the Most High. At least that's what the man who came to me said. The writing on them is foreign to me, and I do not know how to discern what it says. But Barnabas told me what the words meant, and I have retained most of what he told me."

"Might I touch them?" Keet asked.

"Yes, of course," Roarke replied, and Treadle held the scraps out toward the sound of Keet's voice.

"Will ye tell us what they mean?"

"Perhaps just one of them, for today. For the words are full of import, and once heard, they bear meditation. May I have them, Keet?"

Keet handed the slips of paper back to Roarke, who looked for the one he wanted, and then tucked the other two back into his pouch. "Let me read the words to you the way they are written; I believe there may be power just in the hearing of the words, though I could be mistaken about that. And after I have read it to you, I will tell you what Barnabas told me it meant."

Roarke cleared his throat, and began:

"... genu Deo excelso numquid offeram ei holocaustomata et vitulos anniculos numquid placari potest Dominus in milibus arietum aut in multis milibus hircorum pinguium numquid dabo primogenitum meum pro scelere meo fructum ventris mei pro peccato animae meae indicabo tibi o homo quid sit bonum et quid Dominus quaerat a te utique facere iudicium et diligere misericordiam et sollicitum ambulare cum Deo tuo vox Domini ad civitatem clamat et salus erit ..."

"That is all that I have from that passage, and I fear that I may have pronounced much of it badly. Nevertheless, I am hoping that the Most High was pleased by our poor attempts to honor Him with the reading.

"What it means is this: *'God is not pleased with many sacrifices and noble deeds, but what pleases Him is for a man to do what is just, and to love being merciful, and to walk in humility before the Almighty.'* And those are the very things that I have striven to do, ever since I understood them."

The three men were silent for a moment, and then Keet said, "Those are right words. I'll do me best t' live by 'em, too, if ye'll help me remember 'em."

Treadle said, "Lord Roarke, I'll be guessin' ... ye think I can't do much ... but I'd be most happy if ... ye'd consider me fer yer ... service in Blythecairne."

Roarke replied, "Treadle, my friend, I do have need of your service, but not at the castle—not yet, anyway. Because of our troubles this week, we have lost much support among the people of Fairling, and Keet's excellent plan for sending half of the force north and keeping half the force here to work the fields has been compromised.

"Every able-bodied man that has offered himself to me so far will be required for the journey to the castle, leaving no one behind to provision us. But it seems"—here he smiled at Keet—"that I have purchased a farm, just this morning. I will be needing a wise, intelligent man to hire workers for my fields and draw in the harvest, so that we can supply the expeditionary force. Does that sound like something that would interest you?"

Minney blurted out from around the corner of the hut, "He oughtn't t' be exertin' hisself so hard—not yet!"

Treadle smiled and said, "Aye, Minney's right.... I only have jest ... a small bit of energy ... t' use up at any once so far."

"But you are growing stronger, yes? How would it be if you were to assume stewardship of my farm, and that I hire Minney to be *your* steward?"

"Aye, that'd be all right wi' me.... Ye'd hafta ask Minney if she were inclined...."

"Aye, that'll be right for Minney, too," came her voice from around the corner.

The three men laughed, and Roarke said, "Thank you for your service, Treadle."

Treadle reached out his hands and grasped Roarke's; he pulled Roarke's hand to his lips and kissed it. "Thank ye, m'Lord ... it'll be a joy ... t' serve ye."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The day had finally drawn to a blessed close, and the excited boys had at last fallen asleep on their pallet at the foot of the bed. Maryan lay with her head on her husband's chest, waiting until she heard her sons' breathing slow into the soft rhythms of slumber before whispering the question that she had been longing to ask all day.

"Li'," she said, "will ye please tell me the rest o' yer tale—that which ye could not tell our boys?"

He sighed.

When he had come home that afternoon, he had willingly told his sons the story about seeing the dragon—its tremendous size, its remarkable coloring. They had sat at his feet, wide-eyed, as he described the spiky ridge along its back; they emitted gasps of awe when he showed them how big the serpent's dagger-like teeth were, holding his fingers farther apart than their little hands could span. He had told them about constructing the pyre, and starting the blaze that consumed the beast's carcass, and about the angry black cloud of smoke that rose into the sky, which had been visible for miles. He did not tell them anything about Boof.

He had told about the armory, with its rows of mail and rusty weapons. He told them of the generous knight, who had been delighted to give gifts to the boys. He told them about the richness of the Lady's quarters, and the many beautiful dresses that he had had to choose between for their mother's gift. Of the Lady's bones, he said nothing.

All the while that he was sharing these stories, causing the two boys to squeal with delight and push against each other playfully, Maryan was watching him closely, her azure eyes filled with compassion. She sensed every time that he

carefully avoided some portion of his narrative, and wondered what it could be that he was—what? ashamed? afraid?—to tell his family.

Out of respect for her husband, she had waited until the boys were not listening until she asked. But because of her deep love and concern for him, she was not willing that he bear this burden by himself, whatever it was.

Sensing his hesitation, she whispered, "Ye can tell me, Li'. Even if it's anything at all."

"One part o' me wants to tell ye all of it," Lirey started. "An' then I think t' meself, 'No, it'll make her afraid. Or else lose she may respect fer ye. Or somethin'.' I don't know, love. It's a grim tale."

She raised her head from his chest, and looked him directly in the eyes, her long brown hair cascading down around his face like a veil. "Lirey, I am yer own wife. There's nothin' that ye need to fear, not when it's between ye an' me. Tell me what's on yer heart. But first, I b'lieve I will kiss ye on the mouth."

He wrapped his arms around her and drank deeply of her tenderness. "By God, ye're a treasure," he breathed.

She nestled her head back into his chest, and said with a hidden smile, "Aye, that I am. It'd be good fer ye t' remember it."

He kissed the top of her head, and said, "How shall I start?"

She said, "It's Boof, isn't it?" She had met the hulking brute once or twice and had regarded him with a mixture of disgust and dismay. She had trembled, fearing for her husband's life, when he rode off on Bonny to accompany Roarke north to the castle with almost no advance notice, and she hadn't known that Boof had been anything other than his usual surly self.

"Aye, that, and more too. But that's most of it." He went on to tell her how Boof had eaten from the dragon, and apparently been occupied by a dark, otherworldly power. He told of how Boof had threatened to kill Roarke—"an' after

he'da kilt Roarke, he surely woulda come after me, an' the horses too." He then described how Boof had leaped from the throne, slipped, and fallen, the preternatural strength seeming to depart from him.

Maryan asked quizzically, "That's it? Ye mean he just fell down an' all the fight went out of him?"

"Yes, that's jest about how it happened."

"My ... yer Lord Roarke seems t' be leadin' a protected life, hisself."

"Aye, that he is."

"So, then ... where's Boof now?"

After another moment passed, Lirey said, "He's planted on a little knoll outside o' th' castle. I buried him there."

"He's dead, then?" A mixture of relief and bewilderment assaulted her mind. "But how'd he die? He didn't just fall down an' then die, did he?"

"No ... we kilt him."

A sorrowful look came over Maryan's face, and she was thankful that her husband could not see it. "Lirey ... why? How?"

"Roarke—Lord Roarke—pronounced judgment against him, on account'n he kilt Herold an' Mox, an' because he were filled with that demon from th' dragon. He jest weren't safe no more, even if ever he was." A little shudder went through Lirey's sigh. "So then ... we executed him."

"Ye both did? I don't understand...."

"Roarke was goin' t' do it on his own, t' take his head from his shoulders. But he had hurt hisself fallin' on the stairs, an' he was unable t' complete th' job. So ... I finished it fer him."

"Oh, Lirey," she whispered. She pressed her eyes tightly shut, but that did not prevent hot tears from running down her cheeks. She held her husband closely. "I wish we could just go back t' th' way things were a couple o' weeks ago ..."

before Roarke came t' Fairling ... before...." Her thought lingered in the sad air, unspoken.

"Aye, love. But that's somethin' that we cannot do." A moment passed silently between them. "Do ye ever remember me tellin' ye about me ol' Gran's friend, the Lady Ileana Meadling, what lived at the castle?"

"Yes."

"She was there. I mean, her bones was. An' Boof had smashed 'em all t' bits, an' scattered 'em around. He'd been ever so foul t' th' Lady's memory. An' that saddened Lord Roarke somethin' awful. But still, Roarke was gonna forgive him o' that crime—it's jest that Boof was still ... possessed, or somethin'. So, y' see, love, we *had* t' do it." She didn't answer. "I'm sorry...."

"Oh, Lirey," she whispered again. "There's naught that ye did that could ever cause me t' lose my respect fer ye. Ye're a good an' noble man, an' nothin' about that has changed. It's just that ye have always been such a *gentle* man, an' now ... now ye have kilt a man." Not wishing to sadden him more, she said, "Don't worry about me, love. Tomorrow will be a fresh day, an' I'm just shocked tonight, at yer story. I love ye, with all my heart." Sensing that she had not quite said enough, she continued, "I will love ye forever, me sweetest love."

"There ain't no words for it, Maryan, for how much I love ye." He squeezed her shoulder, and said, "Let me figure out how t' tell th' boys in me own way, will ye?"

"Yes, Lirey. But not until it's needful."

"No."

They lay in silence together, until sleep came and relieved them of their concerns.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next two weeks were a frenzy of activity in Fairling. Gold changed hands freely. Goods were bought for the trip to Blythecairne, and presents were given by Roarke's Men (as they were soon known) to families that they were leaving behind, or friends that they wanted to entice into coming along.

The number of Roarke's Men was augmented slightly, with the inducement of wealth being enough to persuade several—particularly after they saw how liberally Abe and Yeskie were able to provide free rounds of ale at The Dragon's Tail. Six slightly tipsy men were added to the count by the two woodsmen, who proudly presented them to Lirey.

Lirey had considered creating four small brigades, with Woodwright, Abey, Yeskie, and Yancey Wain each maintaining authority over his own recruits, but Abe and Yeskie wished to stay together and work as a team, as they had done for virtually their entire adult lives. When the question of what to call their brigade was raised, Abey said, "Jest call it Yeskie's Brigade; he's older'n me by a year or so. The men'll know that we be sharin' the leadership—no need fer th' name t' be more'n one mouthful." So Yeskie's Brigade it became, eight men in all.

Woodwright had recruited two of his friends, and each one of them brought along another one of their own companions. So Woodwright's Brigade started out with five men. Lirey reasoned, "When more folk want t' join up with us come spring, we'll add 'em t' th' smaller brigades first, so they're all about th' same size in th' end."

Yancey's Brigade was made up entirely of young men no more than twenty years old, and they numbered ten in all. Yancey's enthusiastic recruiting effort was all the more remarkable when it was made known that seven more youths had

wanted to join, but were not given permission by their parents. Yancey considered that his fortune was made: In addition to the three gold coins that had already been given him by Roarke, he could look forward to sixteen more when they reached Blythecairne, as well as regular wages afterward! He thought that, perhaps, after he had worked for Roarke for his year, he might return to Fairling as a rich man, wearing the fine clothing promised him by Keet. Then, with the awe and respect of the townspeople, he would marry his sweetheart Melliss, and then carry her back to Blythecairne to live, where he would resume his post as the leader of his brigade and live a life of honor at the castle.



One week before the expedition was to set out for the north, a peddler named Harres came trolling up the road from Goric, astride one gray-and-white mule and leading another, behind which trailed a sturdy wooden cart with all kinds of goods aboard: cookware, tools, fabrics, dried foods, seeds. Harres, who would be nondescript but for a bright red cape that he always wore, regularly made his way from the great city of Lenidor, to Goric, to Fairling, and off to the coast at Farport, bartering his wares along the way at a modest profit. At Farport, he would exchange whatever items he had remaining for goods from across the Great Sea, and then make his way back to Fairling, to Goric, to Lenidor, where he would stock up on wares from Greening and County Carrel, and start his tour again. In this way, merchandise from inland made it to the Sea, goods from outside the country of Hagenspan made their way back to the inland cities, and culture from each place along the way was exchanged, and news was carried and spread.

When Keet was alerted that Harres had come to town, he invited the merchant to The Dragon's Tail for a meal and a tankard, which Sallamay plunked

down on the board in front of him. Harres' face twisted into a slightly suspicious smile. "What's the buzz here in town, Keet? Seems to be a hum of energy being spent around here that don't usually get done. And this food is a little better quality than you usually serve, too—no offense. What's happened? Somebody discover a mine?" he asked sardonically.

"Aye, ye might say that," Keet said with a wink. "A gold mine!"

"You don't say!" the merchant replied, thinking to himself that that story was most unlikely. "Where? Who's the lucky fellow?"

"His name's Roarke, and his gold mine's a day's travel by horse, t' the northwest o' Fairling."

Something about the name of Roarke stirred faintly in Harres' memory, but he wasn't able to place it immediately. The location, however.... "That must be Blythecairne!" he spurted.

"Aye!" laughed Keet. "An' ye're lookin' at th' new steward o' th' castle an' its lands!" Barely able to contain his conceit, he added, "I've a proposition fer ye, Harres."

Harres was already beginning to calculate: If Blythecairne were free, then the dragon must have been killed—that would explain the strange smoke he had seen off to the north of the road from Goric over a week ago. And if the self-proclaimed steward of the castle was still here in Fairling, then that meant the castle was very likely ... empty! "Ah, sure, Keet, sure. What's your proposition?"

"How much'd ye charge t' sell me ever'thin' ye have with ye this trip?"

Harres swallowed. "Everything?"

"Yep, ever'thin'. An' I mean yer pack mule an' cart, too." Keet was already thinking ahead to how handy it would be to have all of the peddler's wares at his disposal when provisioning his new household.

"Dear God, Keet—you could never afford as much as I have with me. It's probably worth three years' income at your tavern here!"

"Well, I don't have too much in th' way of silver maygrets or gold rurics," he said, mentioning the standard coins of the realm, which were named after King Ruric and Queen Maygret of Greening, "but what would ye say t' receivin' yer payment in gold falconets, from th' treasury of Meadling in Bretay?"

"Falconets! I haven't seen more than a dozen falconets in the last twenty years! You have some?"

"Ye might say." In fact, Roarke had given his entire pack full of falconets to Keet, to use for stocking the household; Keet had what amounted to a rather large fortune stashed behind the bar. He had counted the coins, since Roarke had not—856 in all.

"Would you show me one?"

"With pleasure." From a pocket in his tunic, Keet pulled one falconet, which he handed to Harres.

"Do you mind?" Harres asked, to which Keet replied, "Not at all." Harres rubbed the coin clean of grime, then placed it between his teeth and bit down. It was gold, all right. "And you have more?" "Aye," said Keet.

"Are you serious? Everything that I have, including mule and cart?"

Keet affirmed that he was indeed earnest about his proposal.

Harres did some fast calculating. "Let's see ... a falconet is probably worth about, say, twenty rurics." Keet figured that it was really worth about twenty-five, but diplomatically kept silent. Harres continued, "I know that the inventory I'm carrying is worth slightly less than 1,900 rurics, plus my gear that you need for transport. How about ... 150 falconets?"

Keet recognized that Harres' price was significantly inflated from its actual value, but he had figured that he had been willing to pay as much as two hundred

for the entire lot, so he cheerfully accepted, "150 it is! An' how about an extra ten fer ye, jest fer good will?"

Harres said incredulously, "You actually have 160 falconets that you can pay me? Here, not at the castle?"

Keet knew better than to give away the location of his treasure, so he only said, "If ye'll leave me t' go about me business fer an hour, an' then come back here, I'll have 'em fer ye."

Harres thought for a moment—this extravagant offer had come upon him completely unexpectedly. His natural suspicion caused him to consider turning the deal down, but he quickly reconsidered. There was, after all, a fair amount of merchandise on his cart that he suspected he might never be able to trade away under normal circumstances. And he could always get another mule, another wagon. But, always angling for an advantage, he said, "I'll do this deal with you on one more condition."

"What's that?"

"Any time I pass through Fairling, I get free food and drink here at The Stag's Head."

"Well ... what do ye think, Sal'? Ye're runnin' the bar, now."

Sallamay wiped her hands on her apron and came out from behind the bar, brushing a lock of graying hair off her wrinkled forehead. "Well, first of all, it ain't called The Stag's Head no mores. Now it's The Dragon's Tail."

"Of course," Keet agreed.

"Secondly ... how often would ye be comin' through Fairling, wantin' t' be fed?"

"Well, Keet, you know," said Harres, "I'm usually through town about eight or ten times a year."

Sallamay frowned in thought. "Ye ain't a drunkard, air ye? How many mugs o' beer would ye be wantin' each time ye stumbled through me door?"

Harres chuckled approvingly; hers was a mind for business nearly as shrewd as his own. "How about this? Each time I come through Fairling, you give me one supper, one breakfast, and two tankards of ale? And I absolutely promise I won't appear more than once per month."

"Well, Master Keet," Sallamay said, "It's really still in yer own hands. If ye think it be a fair trade, then I'll set him a good table whensoever he comes by. What do ye say?"

"It's a hard bargain ye drive, Harres, but I'll say 'Aye' to it. If'n ye'll drive me new mule an' cart down the street t' th' livery, ye'll find me boy Willum there preparin' fer th' journey. Ye can leave th' goods with him, an' then come on back fer yer payment."

"Done, and done," Harres replied, stretching out his hand for a shake.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The day of the journey to Blythecairne finally arrived—Roarke had been growing more and more impatient as the long days of tedious waiting passed. He had spent most of the fortnight discussing plans with Lirey and Keet, staying for the most part distant from the townsfolk, seemingly aloof of public opinion.

Three oxcarts had been constructed, and oxen had been purchased to pull them and then to serve as meat through the winter. Six more horses had been bought besides Justice and Bonny; these would be for guards to ride the perimeter of the castle lands, and for emergency travel back to Fairling. There were also five goats, one boar, two dogs, and a dozen chickens. One wagon was loaded completely with fodder for the beasts, and the other two with foodstuffs, casks of water, and supplies for the travelers. There was also Harres' mulecart, loaded with a little bit of everything, including a spindled cage that held the chickens. On the sides of the mulecart hung eight new shields that had been hastily hammered out by the town smith, and at the sides of most of Roarke's Men hung simple new straight swords that had been hurriedly fashioned the same way. Abey and Yeskie wore no blades, but carried their bows slung over their shoulders.

Noting Treadle's gradual return to health (except for his continuing blindness), the townsfolk had viewed Roarke with less skepticism than before, though they still didn't embrace him openly. But one factor that accelerated the town's expanding magnanimity toward the knight—though Roarke did not know it at the time—was that Keet had made a gift of a falconet to each household in the entire town. He had gone from door to door the week before departure, saying, "A present fer ye and yers, compliments of the Lord Roarke. May there always be

good will between us." Nearly the entire village had turned out to send off the adventurers with their blessing, with hugs, kisses, and gifts of food.

Roarke, leading Justice, walked at the head of the parade, with Keet on one side of him, and Will on the other. The townspeople gave a loud cheer as they passed, and Roarke nodded to them gratefully. Following them came Lirey and Maryan, with Davie and Peet riding atop Bonny, led by their father. After that came Yeskie's Brigade, led by the two woodsmen; they were in charge of the first oxcart. Then came Woodwright's Brigade and the second oxcart. The first half of Yancey's Brigade came next, driving the goats before them. Then came the third oxcart, followed by the second half of Yancey's Brigade, who led the six horses. At the very end of the train came Yancey himself, who led Harres' mulecart. The dogs and the pig trotted along with the parade at their own pace.

The townspeople accompanied the caravan until they came to the end of town, then bade them a loud and tearful farewell as they headed west on the road toward Goric. Roarke had determined that his troops should not go past the plot of ground where Herold and Mox were buried on this journey, so he led them due west on the Goric road, until he was directly south of Blythecairne. Then he planned to turn the convoy north off the path, to head through the brushlands, across the plain, and on northwards toward the castle.

Harres was with the people of Fairling as the crowd dispersed and went back to their normal businesses. He stared after the caravan for a bit, scratching his beard and thinking, then headed back to The Dragon's Tail for a drink.



Early in the evening of the first day's travel, the slow-moving caravan had made it to the spot on the Goric road where Roarke intended to turn north, and he

ordered them to halt for the night. They camped on the road, spilling over onto the grass on both sides of the dirt path, and dined on the gifts of food that had been given them that morning in Fairling. One of Yeskie's men pulled a fiddle out of his baggage, and played for the little boys Peet and Davie, who danced around the campfire while the rest watched, smiling, weary from the long day's walk.

On the second day, the troop pushed through the tangled brushland, which took the entire day to accomplish. Yancey's Brigade led the way, chopping and hacking at the dried thicket, dulling the edges of their new blades before the sun had reached its apex, high in the autumn sky. Since the going was so slow, Abey and Yeskie detoured back across the road to the south, and spent most of the day hunting. Finally, in early evening, the company broke through the brush into the open clearing where Roarke had tethered Justice on the day of his first foray into Fairling. They made camp, and the two woodsmen soon joined them, each with a small doe hung over his shoulders and a brace of squirrels hanging from his belt.

By the close of the third day, having made slow, patient progress across the sparse plains, the caravan camped at the edge of the vast circle of denuded land that had been spoiled by the dragon. For several of the party, this was the first time they had ever been this far away from their hometown. They camped early in the afternoon, so as to have one more day of free food for the beasts, who grazed on the fitful grass at the edge of the wasteland. Following the exhausting work of pushing through the brushy thicket the day before, this was an easy, placid day of travel by comparison. After sharing the evening meal, Roarke led prayers, and read to them from the same scrap of parchment that he had read to Treadle and Keet a fortnight earlier.

On the fourth day, they pushed the heavy ox carts onto the bare dirt of the wasteland, and covered half of the remaining distance to the castle before camping for the night. The hopeful enthusiasm shared by the company just an evening

before was replaced by a silent wariness, mirroring the bleakness of the landscape. Little Peet cried that night, longing for his own bed in the warmth of his own house.

By the end of the fifth day, however, Blythecairne was in sight, its tower rising dim and gray against the cerulean sky. Some of the youths wished to rush ahead and explore the castle before dark, but Roarke halted them. "Tomorrow, we'll all go in together. Lirey and I will lead, to make sure that no mischief is afoot. After us, if no one else objects, Yancey's Brigade may come next—"

The boys let out a whoop and waved their swords in the air.

"Hmm. Yes," Roarke mused. "Sleep well tonight, lads, for tomorrow your labors begin!"



On the morning of the sixth day, Will woke with the first faint rays of sunrise, and found Roarke already up, talking softly with Maryan, who was boiling water for tea over one of the campfires. She had grown fond of the knight during his frequent visits to their old farmhouse in the last two weeks at Fairling; she regarded him much as she would a favorite uncle. As they chatted, their breath made visible clouds in the brisk morning air.

Will stepped respectfully toward the fire, and cleared his throat. "Beggin' yer pardon, Lord Roarke, but might I have a word wi' ye?"

"Certainly."

"M'Lord, when ye said that Captain Lirey and ye were goin' t' lead the bunch of us into Blythecairne today, an' then Yancey's Brigade next ... well, I was rather hopin' that I would be included with ye an' Lirey at the front o' the brigade, if ye

didn't mind too much. After all, I *am* yer squire, ain't I? Shouldn't I always be at yer side?"

"A compelling argument, Willum, and I am convinced," Roarke said, his gray eyes crinkling with a smile. "You shall ride at my right hand, and Lirey at my left."

Will solemnly bowed his head, said, "M'Lord," and then walked calmly away to the outer perimeter of the camp to relieve his bladder out of the sight of Maryan, the only woman in the camp.

"He surely loves ye," she said to Roarke. "As do my own little ones."

"Thank you. It's a great responsibility."

"I can't imagine." She poured a cup of steaming tea for him, and another cup for Lirey, who had just come to the fire, and one for herself.

"Good mornin', love," Lirey said, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek. Nodding to Roarke, he said, "Captain."

"Captain," Roarke returned to him with a smile.

"Yancey's boys are eager t' be started," Lirey nodded toward the youths, who were putting on their swords with a clatter, no thoughts of breakfast in their heads.

"Yes, they're eager now, but I'll wager they'll be glad when this day's over, after it's been packed full of burying dragon bones and unloading ox carts."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Three days after the caravan left Fairling for the castle, Harres started the three-day journey back to Goric on his mule. He probably should have traveled out to Farport and stocked up on merchandise from across the Sea—Farport was also a three-day trip from Fairling, if he didn't stop along the way—but he was anxious to get back to Goric, where there was a particular barmaid that he was desperately interested in trying to impress. Eyela was a plump lass with flashing black eyes, red hair and freckles, and a dazzling smile with perfect white teeth—a rarity. She worked at a tavern called The Last Dog, which was located in a dismal alley two streets removed from Goric's main thoroughfare, and as far as Harres knew, she was not a doxy—also a rarity.

Harres' small fortune in gold was divided between two sacks, which he had fastened to a leather strap that hung over his shoulders, concealed beneath his red cape. By the end of the first day's travel, though, the weight of the gold was causing the strap to cut painfully into his neck and shoulders, bringing him to the point of audibly moaning with each lurching step that his donkey took. So, the next two mornings, he fixed the strap across the mule's hindquarters like saddlebags, and rode in relative comfort.

When Harres was still half a day's journey from the outskirts of Goric, he dismounted on a wooded path, and removed his cloak, so that he could once again conceal the bags of falconets. There were highwaymen based in Goric, who may not care overmuch that Harres had already paid their leader, Belder Payn, his "tax" for the privilege of using his road unmolested. Usually Harres was not bothered by the brigands, because he traded almost entirely on a barter system, goods for goods, with very little cash ever changing hands since most of the people he dealt

with were quite poor. What would highwaymen do with cloth, or flour, or a plow? But this time, Harres was carrying gold, and it was in his best interest to be as careful as ever he could.

He hoisted the heavy sacks from the mule and positioned them back upon his own still-tender shoulders, wincing, and put his cloak back on, covering them. He patted his mule on the nose, and produced the stub of a carrot from a pocket. A rabbit, startled, bounded from the woods on the southern side of the road, and crossed to the thicket on the northern side. The mule crunched noisily on the carrot, and Harres began singing a little song to him in a fine tenor voice—which was choked off abruptly when he was startled by a strong hand clapping harshly down on his shoulder.

"Ho, friend Harres!" cried the silky voice of Sinder Payn, the brother of the highwaymen's chief. "What brings you back to Goric so soon after leaving for the coast, and without your merchandise besides?"

Harres felt his heart flutter and then grow heavy within his chest, but feigned enthusiasm nonetheless. "Hallo, Sinder! I've had a bit of good fortune, so I am heading back to The Last Dog. I thought to come and see your brother and pay my respects."

"Ha, *ha!* I'm sure he will be happy to see you!" Sinder Payn was youthful, tall and fair-haired, with delicate features and a wispy blond beard, quite unlike his brother, who was broad-shouldered and darkly handsome. "Stark!" he shouted, "Come and help our friend carry his burden!"

From the woods stepped a very short, very dark, very ugly man with a wildly tangled beard that reached nearly to his waist. On his belt he wore a large hunting knife, which extended from his waist all the way down his thigh. He was Stark, whose mother's brother was the father of Mox, and he was (if possible) even more lawless than his cousin had been. Of his cousin's death he had heard nothing.

"Greetings, Stark," Harres said heartily. "But you don't need to help me with anything; as you can see, my wares are not with me."

"Born yestiddy, 'e thinks we was," Stark snorted.

Sinder laughed as well. "That's fine, Harres, fine—if you don't wish us to help you haul your heavy burden, you can tote it yourself!"

Harres was disconsolate. His mind was flooded with a dozen possibilities, none of them encouraging. A moment ago, he had been happily daydreaming, hoping to capture the attention of the lovely Eyela with his newly acquired wealth; now he just hoped that he would be allowed to keep his gold, which he had obtained with complete honesty, he reflected bitterly. Or at least, that he be allowed to keep some of his gold! Hell, he hoped that he would be allowed to keep his life!

"Don't look so miserable, old Harres. Here, let me just jump up on your donkey, and I'll let you lead me down the road to where my horse is picketed."

Sinder mounted the mule. Harres picked up the reins where they hung to the earth, and silently started trudging down the path toward Goric. Stark stumped along behind them. Soon they came to a scarcely perceptible trail on the left-hand side of the road, and Sinder commanded, "Wait here."

He slid down from the mule, and said, "Stark, go fetch us our mounts." The dwarf disappeared into the woods, and came back momentarily holding the reins of a fine-looking brown horse with a white blaze on his face, and a squat little pony, which was old and fat. "Thank you, Stark," Sinder said courteously.

"No mention," he gruffly replied.

"All right, everyone to his own mount," Sinder called, and said to Harres, "It's well that you were desirous of heading back to Goric! My brother is having a party to celebrate his betrothal tonight! I'm sure you'll wish to present him with a gift."

"But, your brother—" stammered Harres. "Isn't he already married?"

"Oh, yes," Sinder replied. "Several times that I know of."

Harres attempted to laugh, but the effort was feeble. Trying again, he said, "The lucky woman—who's she?"

"I don't think you've met her. She's a young barmaid at The Last Dog."

Harres' heart was a stone within his chest. "A plump little tomato called—" Harres did not hear Sinder speak her name; his thoughts, his vision, his fears were all whirling about in his head, and there was a sound in his ears like the crash of the waves of the Great Sea, breaking upon the shore at Farport. Oh, how he wished he had gone east to Farport ... he could have gotten on one of those great sailing ships, and headed off to the distant ports that he'd heard the blustery sea captains boasting about: Burghen, Nance, Lisper.

They rode on toward Goric. Stark and Sinder chatted occasionally, but Harres did not hear them. He was as miserable as if he were already dead, by his reckoning.

Suddenly Sinder and Stark reined up, and Harres realized that he had missed part of the conversation. Stark snapped, "Hey, there! Hold up!"

Harres halted his mule, and said, "Sorry, gentlemen. I was lost in thought."

Sinder Payn said, "You should be listening! This concerns your fortunes greatly."

Harres looked at Sinder without offering a reply.

Sinder began again. "Harres, you must know by now that Stark and I were watching from the forest when you were hiding those two sacks under your red cape." He waited for an acknowledgement, so Harres offered one, short, miserable nod. "And you must realize that Belder is going to require them of you at his celebration tonight." Harres closed his eyes, and a tear trickled down his embarrassed face.

Sinder saw, and continued. "We like you, Harres—Stark and me. We've never had any occasion for hard feelings between us, have we?" Harres, eyes still shut, shook his head. "So here's what we think. You must have those bags just jam-packed full of gold rurics, don't you?" Harres opened his eyes, looking at Sinder uncomfortably, but did not speak. "We thought so. So, here's our proposition: Belder will have to have one of those bags full of coins, no getting around that. But we don't need to tell him that there was two bags, do we? And you and me and Stark can split it all between us, fifty-fifty. I mean, in three equal shares, whatever that is."

Not even enough to start my business over again, thought Harres, *but at least enough to live on.* "Yes, I suppose that's all right. Thank you."

"Not at all," replied Sinder magnanimously. "Let's have one of those sacks right now, and share and share alike."

The three men dismounted, letting their animals graze by the side of the path. They sat in a triangle on the ground, as Harres took his heavy burden off his shoulders for the last time. Opening one of the sacks, he poured the falconets onto the earth, to the amazement of the other two.

"What in the name of hell—?" blurted Sinder.

"By th' divvil's beard!" Stark gasped. "They're falconets!"

"By god, I'll bet you have some story to tell," Sinder said breathlessly.

"Have you been to Blythecairne? Did you get the gold there?"

"No, I haven't been there. But some of the people from Fairling have been there, and they're going back."

"Fairling! What kind of army could they muster from Fairling?"

"Not much of one, to be sure." Harres decided not to tell the two about the size of the force, or about the presence of the knight Roarke, until he was sure of the best way he could use that information.

Stark broke in, "What about th' dragon?"

"No dragon there," Harres shaded the truth so as not to reveal his hand prematurely. "They don't know what happened to it."

"This is a problem for us," Sinder reasoned. "The coins, I mean. If they were just rurics, we could spend them, and no one would ever be the wiser. But what are we going to do with falconets? If we showed up in Goric with all this gold, Belder would know that we'd been holding out on him."

"Let's bury 'em," grunted Stark. "We can come back fer 'em after Belder's got his, an' started 'em circulatin'."

"That's good," said Sinder, impressed. "Put them back in the sack, Harres."

He complied mutely, until Sinder asked him, "What about the ones who went up to the castle? What's their strength?"

Harres decided to make his stand. "Since Belder is going to have my fortune ... I'll tell my story to him."

Sinder looked at him darkly for a long moment, then said stiffly, "As you wish."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The first day at Blythecairne was complete.

In the morning, Roarke had led the whole company into the courtyard to view the remains of the dragon. Most of the carcass had been burned in the blaze that he and Lirey had set, but there was still enough left to impress upon the company the massive proportions and apparent strength of the beast. Much of the skeletal structure of the dragon was still intact, and the ribs and backbone still rose into the air, twice as high as the tallest men of the group. Roarke led them in a brief prayer, and then dismissed them to their work.

As Roarke had suspected, Maryan had selected the Lady Ileana's chambers for her family's apartment. She had looked wistfully at the dresses still hanging in the Lady's wardrobe, but asked Lirey if he would please have them removed to the treasury, so that they could be distributed as Roarke saw fit in the future. Though the Lady Ileana's chambers were but three rooms in the large castle, it was still more living space than Lirey's family had enjoyed at their farmhouse. Windows looked out from the walls to the north and the east, so the morning sun would awaken them, and a breeze would be able to waft through their rooms during the hot months of the summer; fireplaces in each of the three rooms would warm them in the winter.

Keet had absolutely refused to take the second choice of quarters, so Roarke picked a stairwell that was directly across from Lirey's family's, and took what were probably the rooms of Lord Meadling—the southeast corner of the castle—though there was not much left in those rooms to be able to identify them for certain. Apparently Meadling had not spent much time in his own quarters for anything other than sleeping.

With his humility thus ensured, Keet chose for himself and Will the southwest corner apartments. The last three-room chamber, the northwest, was left empty for future disposition. For the time being, until barracks could be constructed out of the remaining lumber and disassembled oxcarts, Roarke's Men would camp out on the floor of the great hall, Yeskie's Brigade against the east wall, Woodwright's Brigade against the north, and Yancey's Brigade against the west.

The only furniture in the great hall that had not been completely destroyed by the dragon was the throne in the center of the dais. Perhaps, Roarke mused, the dragon had always known that, as Boof, he would sit upon that throne, and so had not destroyed it. Whatever the reason, there were no tables and no chairs available in the hall for dining, though a few small stools were found in one of the storerooms off the great hall, which were brought out for the most senior members of the company. Most of the men ate their evening meal squatting on their haunches, or else leaning with their backs against the stone wall of the castle.

The task of cooking that meal fell to Maryan, since all of the men were involved with other chores. She said to Lirey, though, "Ye can't be thinkin' that I'm goin' t' be cookin' three meals a day for thirty men, can ye? I'd be either cookin' or cleanin' dishes every moment of the day." He wisely realized the inequity of that arrangement, and said, "Would ye take care of one meal a day, love? Mebbe then I can get the men t' take turns with makin' th' other meals. If it's all right with Roarke." She frowned prettily, but agreed. As it turned out, Keet was more than willing to make breakfast every day until they got a permanent cook, since he had formerly been used to doing just that as the proprietor of The Stag's Head. The rest of the men were agreeable with preparing what amounted to about one meal each per month, though they warned that the cuisine would be suitable for sustenance alone.

One of the chores that Maryan took upon herself that first day was to swab the floor in front of the throne, where Boof's blood stained the stone. She shoed her sons outside while she was performing that task, anxious not to answer the boys' inevitable questions.

While Maryan was mopping and scrubbing, the boys of Yancey's Brigade were digging a pit in the courtyard right next to where the scorched skeleton of the dragon lay. After they had dug the hole deep enough so that even the curved ribs of the reptile would fit with room to spare, they disassembled what remained of the beast's bones, and threw them into the pit. One of the boys asked Roarke if they could each keep some of the dragon's scales, which were still beautiful to look at, almost mesmerizing. Roarke was tempted to acquiesce, but remembered what had happened to Mox, to Herold—he didn't know if the bits of former dragon still held some vile magic of their own, so he said, "There will be treasures and glories for all of you, but not from that beast. Please, sweep all of those scales into the pit, and cover them with the earth." As well as burying the remains of the dragon, Yancey's Brigade also took turns riding slowly around the perimeter of the castle grounds, two at a time, getting acclimated to the duties of guarding the lands.

Yeskie and Abey chose a spot in the courtyard not far from where the dragon's bones lay, and began to set up their sawyer's tools. They set their six men to work bringing them whatever lumber was salvageable, both from the courtyard and from the barns to the rear of the castle. The lumber was brought and stacked in fairly neat piles, for the two woodsmen to resurface and use for the building of the barracks. Davie and Peet helped carry some of the smaller boards, and were actually quite helpful in their small way. Whatever wood was not salvageable was thrown into other piles to be used as firewood for the kitchen and for the coming winter.

Woodwright's men were given the task of unloading the carts and stowing all of the goods in their proper places, which Keet dictated to them. This chore was actually quite time-consuming, mainly because of the addition of Harres' conglomeration of commodities. Keet and Lirey and Roarke helped with this detail, deciding between them what the appropriate rooms would be for storing weapons, tools, dry goods, and foodstuffs, and then helping the men carry the goods and arrange the rooms.

By the end of the day's work, each of the thirty laborers was weary all through. As they shared their evening meal, there was quiet talk, but it was mostly reserved and subdued. The men were content with the choice they had made, and happy with the quality of the day's work. After dinner, Keet passed out the rest of the falconets that had been promised to the first comers; many of the men turned the money back to Keet to hold for them until they had a need for it, making him the *de facto* banker for the outfit.

After supper, Roarke addressed the men briefly. "When you agreed to come to Blythecairne with me, you consented to work for me six days of the week, and I agreed to let you have the seventh to do with as you please. We've only been laboring at Blythecairne for one day, but you also traveled with me for five days, and I consider those days to have been work for you. Therefore, tomorrow is yours. There will be a short service after sunup to give thanks to God for our safe passage, and the good work that we have begun, and I will read to you from the holy words of God and explain to you such as I understand. After that, you may spend the day any way you wish. Rest, or explore, or wander, however you see fit. All I ask is that if you choose to leave the castle grounds, you would please report to me first, until we are quite sure of our safety here.

"Good men of Blythecairne, and Lady Maryan," he concluded, "thank you. Your work has been exemplary so far. Thank you."

Late in the evening, when the older men began retiring to their bedrolls, Lirey and his family started off to their corner of the castle and headed up the stairs to their rooms. Keet soon followed their lead, waking Will, who had dozed off, and leading him up to their apartment. Roarke lingered until there were only a few of the younger men left awake, finally going upstairs to his new quarters.

After sharing the camaraderie of the road for the past week, which had followed several weeks of new friendships that had been blossoming at Fairling, including sleeping each night at the hut with Willum and Keet, Roarke felt with great poignancy the fact that he was, once again, alone. Without even Justice to share the bleak darkness of Meadling's old chambers, Roarke felt the pang of isolation like a tangible ache in his chest.

"Lord Almighty," he prayed, and then sighed, not having words to continue. After a few moments, he realized that part of what was saddening him was the fact that he genuinely enjoyed the company of Lirey's wife Maryan. And that realization caused him once again to miss his own lost wife; he had been able to shut that particular ache out of his consciousness for a while, but now, there it was again. "I'm getting old, God." Reapplying himself to his prayers, he entreated, "Help me to lead these men that you've given me the best that I can, in a way that will ultimately honor You. Guard us against the forces of evil, and help us to make it through the coming winter successfully. Make us humble, and kind, and generous. May we trust in You for our protection."

He got up from his bed, which was very comfortable, and stood by the window, looking out at the moon and stars. Against the vastness of the northern sky, he felt very small.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Harres was escorted through the swinging doors of The Last Dog by the insistent grips of Stark and Sinder. Nothing else in their actions would have betrayed to any onlookers that Harres was their prisoner, but in fact, no one turned to notice their entrance.

A dozen round tables were arranged in a semicircle around a long board that had been placed in front of the bar. Behind that board sat the leader of the highwaymen, Belder Payn, and his most-recently betrothed, the lovely Eyela, whose red hair cascaded around her face in ringlets down to her shoulders. Around each one of the circular tables gathered twelve or fifteen revelers, some sitting, most standing, already deeply in their cups due to the toasting of the bride and groom that had already been going on continuously for more than two hours.

The three had arrived at the tavern in the midst of the presentation of gifts to the happy couple. As they shouldered their way into the room, a voice was saying, "—next time you pass my farm, you may have one of my choicest goats—to do with whatever you please!" At that, a boisterous guffaw rose from those still sober enough to appreciate the speaker's words, which concluded with, "To Belder! To Eyela!" The crowd repeated the toast, and mugs were lifted.

Sinder spied one of the revelers passed out near the fireplace, snoring loudly, and appropriated his still half-full mug of ale, joining the toast to his brother and draining the contents in one long draught. One of the barmaids serving the party saw, and hurriedly put fresh tankards of cold beer into the hands of Sinder, Stark, and Harres, who gratefully washed the dust of the road from his mouth. He might have gained and lost a fortune, all in a week, but at least there was still cold beer.

The next gift came from an honored guest, one who wore the red cap of a city official, who pronounced with as much pomp and bombast as he could muster, "I, Rulous, First Magistrate of County Bretay, offer to you a gift most precious—another year free from prosecution by the local authorities!" A lusty laugh erupted again from the wedding party, followed by the familiar refrain, "To Belder! To Eyela!"

Sinder Payn pushed his way through the crowd to the front of the party. Harres would not have followed him, but Stark placed his gnarled hand on the haft of his blade and gave Harres a look filled with dark significance, so they elbowed their way along behind Sinder.

When Belder Payn saw them coming toward the board where he sat, he cried, "Brother! I thought you had missed the party!"

Sinder replied, "No, but I have come. And I bring you a gift as well—one that I alone in all the world can give to you—the love of a brother!"

Belder, laughing, not drunk, stood and threw his arms around his brother in a crushing embrace. "I'm glad to see you didn't spend too much on your gift! Nevertheless," he said affectionately, "it is exactly what I would have asked for."

Sinder, raising a fresh mug into the air, cheered, "To Belder!"

As the roar of the toast died out, Belder asked, "Is that Stark I see down there? What gift do you bring to the party?"

Stark, who was prepared for this question, shouted, "I give ye two months service of my blade, at no cost to ye but bed an' board!"

"Well spoken—I accept!" Belder smiled. "To Belder!" the crowd cried.

While all of the toasting and drinking and jostling had been going on, Harres had hidden his arms beneath the folds of his red cape, worked open the mouth of the sack of falconets that he was supposed to present to Belder Payn, and started sneaking coins out of the bag, hiding them in an inner pocket of his tunic. So far,

he had managed to transfer sixteen coins from pack to pocket, leaving sixty-four to surrender to the brigand chief. He had also been rapidly chugging down mugs of ale, so as not to arouse suspicion, and now the room was beginning to swim quietly in his vision.

"Is that the end of my gifts?" Belder asked agreeably. After all, if the presents and the toasts were done, he could take his new bride to the next room, to the hastily-appointed bridal chamber, and consummate their union.

Stark looked meaningfully at Harres, but it was not necessary.

"No, Belder, one more gift!" Harres cried.

Belder said jovially, "Harres, my friend—I didn't know you were here."

Harres replied, "Arrived late, m'Lord, arrived late." He continued, "Before I present my gift, I have a question." Belder looked at him with guarded benevolence. "Is this a betrothal party, or a wedding party?"

Sinder stared at Harres in shock—he should have known that it didn't matter *what* kind of party it was—the result was the same. There would never be any formal wedding ceremony presided over by a priest, but Belder would claim Eyela as his own absolute possession anyway, until he grew tired of her—maybe in a month, maybe a year—and then pass her on in favor of someone new. Sinder himself had enjoyed several of Belder's past wives after they had been released from their service of marriage to him. But Harres also should have known that there was not *any* circumstance where it was wise to taunt or tweak Belder Payn.

Belder stared at Harres mutely, momentarily dumbfounded. Then he snapped, "It's all the same. Do you have a gift or not?"

"Yes, Belder, I have a gift, but not for you. My gift is for Eyela." The crowd's din dropped to a subdued murmur of stunned disbelief. "For you, I have a business proposition."

"This ain't the place or the night for business." Belder tried to retain his composure.

"It may be, after you see my gift." With that, Harres brought out the sack and plopped it on the table in front of Eyela. The girl, who was able to recognize the dangerous mood her prospective husband was suddenly in, wanted no part of Harres' gift, but nodded her thanks anyway, and forced a small smile.

"What is it? Gold?" Belder demanded.

"Aye, gold, and more," Harres replied. "To Eyela!" he cried. A half-hearted echo was sounded from the back of the room, where people weren't paying as much attention, and mugs were lifted, but Belder did not smile.

"Open the pack," he commanded Eyela. She worked at the drawstring but succeeded in opening the mouth of the pack only slightly.

"Here, watch out," Belder said roughly, and split the bag in two with a wicked slash from his knife, scattering falconets all across the table. There was momentarily silence, except for the clinking of the coins.

"Falconets, aren't they?" Belder asked calmly. Harres nodded.

"What's your business proposition?"

Harres was starting to experience the slight throb of a headache, and the room was still swaying dizzily. "I will give you all of the information you need in order to secure the entire treasury of Castle Blythecairne, if you will grant me just one small gift."

Belder paused, considered. "Yes?"

"That you would grant me one kiss from your bride."

The room was silent. Sinder closed his eyes in agony. The fool was going to be killed.

Belder asked Eyela, "Do you wish to kiss Harres, my bride?"

She kept her eyes cast down, and softly said, "Only at your command, my Lord."

He stared at her coldly. "Kiss him."

"My Lord?"

"*Kiss him*," he hissed.

She stood obediently, walked around to the front of the table where Harres stood, and looked at him for a moment, her black eyes steady but sorrowful. She stepped toward him, placed her hands gently on his cheeks, and touched her soft, moist lips to his. The moment lingered—it seemed to Harres that it would never end—and then it was done, gone forever into the murky recesses of the past.

"There," Belder spat. "You have your price. Now tell me the story of Blythecairne, before I kill you."

Harres, sorry that his moment was gone, but satisfied that it had at least happened, understood that his life was probably forfeit to Belder's fury. He was going to die, maybe tonight, or perhaps in a month, if Belder's whim was to make Harres accompany him to the castle. But, Harres reasoned, Belder had taken for himself the things that Harres had cherished—his fortune, his livelihood, his hope for Eyela—and these were things that did not even matter to Belder. Harres' fortune would be spent frivolously, even though there were other ways to get money, and Belder had no need anyway. Harres' livelihood was of no consequence at all to the robber. And Eyela would be used up and then discarded, even though there were probably a dozen young ladies who would be willing to pair with Belder. Harres regarded the injustice of the situation bleakly, and quickly decided that he would spend his last moments as nobly as he could, given the circumstances.

He would lie, to protect the innocent folks who had gone on to Blythecairne.

"The dragon's gone, probably dead," he said. "But everyone in Fairling is still afraid to go to the castle. Everyone except a few."

"You mean Fairling has sent people to take the castle?" interrupted Rulous, the magistrate. "Why, Blythecairne belongs to Goric just as much as it does to Fairling!"

"Quiet," Belder commanded. "Let Harres tell the tale."

"Fairling has indeed sent a small force to inhabit the castle, only five people in all. They think that they can live hidden secretly in the castle for a year and then apply to King Ruric for permanent possession, so that the castle and all its riches can fall into the hands of Fairling." Directing himself to Rulous, Harres said, "The leader of their little band is none other than your fellow magistrate, Keet." Rulous pounded his fist on a table and cursed.

Harres continued, "The other four who went to the castle are a farmer named Lirey, two woodsmen, and Keet's son. The reason I had the falconets is that Keet bought my entire cartload of merchandise to supply for them through the winter. The reason I gave my treasure to you and Eyela," he took a gamble, "is that I want a share of the much larger fortune that's still available in the treasury within the castle's walls."

Sinder recognized the lie of the last statement, but decided to let Harres play his hand. It was all right with him if Harres was able to rebuild his fortune; after all, Sinder already had a tidy sum buried for himself along the road just outside of Goric, and, as Belder's brother, he was liable to inherit much of the castle's treasure too.

Belder said, "This is good information indeed. But what service do you propose to offer me, in order to gain a share of the plunder?"

"I shall come with you to Blythecairne and serve as your messenger to the deputation from Fairling. They already know me, and perhaps I can arrange a

surrender without bloodshed. If you come with a force of only twenty men, they will certainly be so intimidated that, no matter how much they may have fortified their position, they will see that their loss is inevitable."

"The information that the castle is empty of the dragon is valuable, and the information of the enemy's strength is valuable, but I have no need of your services as my intermediary. Here," Belder flipped one coin to Harres, who stabbed at it but dropped it, "consider yourself paid in full. And be glad that I have chosen not to kill you."

Harres thought, *One coin—"paid in full." And Keet gave me ten falconets, just for good will.*

Belder raised his voice, addressing the crowd. "Tomorrow morning I ride for Blythecairne. I will be the Lord of the land by sunset, and whoever of you wishes to follow me can share in my triumph. I care not whether there be five of you or fifty, but if you wish, you may come. For now," he said, standing, "Drink and make merry. I have a bride to bed."

The crowd cheered its approval, and Belder led Eyela back through the curtains to the next room. Untying the heavy rope that held the curtains open, he let the drapes fall shut, causing the room to be lit only by the flickering light of a dozen or so candles. He took the rope down, tied a large knot in the end of it, and tossed it gently up and down in one hand, gauging its heft.

Eyela, whose back was to Belder, stood patiently at the foot of the large bed that occupied most of the room, her head down.

"Are you ready, my dear?" asked Belder Payn.

"Yes, my lord. I have been looking forward to this," she said expressionlessly.

"Let your robe down."

She complied mutely, unfastening the clasp at her neck. She shrugged her shoulders, and the robe dropped to her waist, exposing the flawless white skin of her shoulders and back.

"Lovely," breathed Belder.

He swung the heavy cord like a scourge, striking her on her right shoulder blade, and making an angry red welt rise instantly on her white skin.

She gasped in surprise and pain, shrinking away from the blow, and turning to face Belder. "My Lord!" she cried, "what have I done?"

Raising his arm to strike her again, Belder snarled, "You kissed Harres." The blow fell directly on her left eye, and she screamed in agony.

"Please, Belder, no!" she wept. "I only did what you commanded!" Because of the noise the revelers were making in the next room, though, her tearful entreaties went unheard. Again and again Belder struck the girl, back and forth across her head, her face, her ribs, her breasts, her stomach, and when she doubled over in pain, he painted stripes across her back. When she tried to cover her head, he struck her torso repeatedly until the bedclothes were spattered with blood. Finally she uncovered her head, wrapping her arms around her breasts to prevent any further blows in that area, and Belder took his fist and punched her directly in the face, breaking her cheekbone under her already-damaged left eye. She toppled backward on the bed, senseless.

Belder smiled with satisfaction; this was his best wedding day ever. He raped the unconscious Eyela, causing her to bleed again, for she was a virgin. He spat at her, and slapped her swollen face. "You kissed Harres," he whispered in her ear.

He pulled his leggings back up and fastened his belt. Tomorrow he would be the Lord of Blythecairne.

Harres, who should have made an escape when Belder had retired with the girl to the bridal chamber, was instead watching pensively when the outlaw came back out through the curtains. He wished to fill his eyes with the beauty of Eyela, even if for only one more painful moment. When he saw that Belder's tunic was speckled with blood, he asked with alarm, "Where is Eyela? Is she all right?"

Belder walked over to where the merchant stood, and said, "That one? She's probably dead." He slipped his knife from its sheath, and slid it between Harres' ribs into his heart.

The last thing that Harres saw was Belder's lips curled in a smile, saying the words, "Paid in full."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The sky was a steely gray, but it was a bright morning nonetheless. A brisk fall breeze ruffled the hair and cloaks of the men who volunteered to fetch firewood, but inside the great hall, where fires blazed in two hearths, it was warm. Most of the youths of Yancey's Brigade sat cross-legged on the floor facing the dais, and the rest of Roarke's Men stood quietly behind them. Maryan sat on one of the stools, wrapped in a heavy shawl, and her boys sat at her feet.

Facing the assemblage, with his back to the elevated throne, stood Roarke.

"Good morning, my friends. Let's start this day off by acknowledging our reliance on the strength and benevolence of the Almighty to preserve and prosper us."

He lifted his gaze upward, as if able to see right through the ceiling to the heavens. "Most High God, we acknowledge Your supremacy. You have brought us safely thus far, and we look to You to safely keep us. We have undertaken a great mission—that the land of Bretay may be free from the power of evil, and that its people may breathe the free air under the light of Your sun, and eat bread made from the grains of these fields, as You see fit to provide the increase."

Some of the men, who had not previously thought about the dignity of their mission any further than how much gold would line their own pockets, felt themselves stirred by these words. The Lord Roarke had included them in his number, and his nobility extended, at least in part, to them as well. Awakening faintly in the breasts of both young and old was a sense of calling ... of righteousness ... of honor.

Roarke continued, "May these fields be green, come the spring. May there be trees and flowers and grasses. May there be wildlife—harts and conies and

geese, so that Your people may have meat. May there be peace in this land, so that Your goodness may be celebrated, and Your majesty revered. And help us to be the sort of people that You desire us to be—merciful, kind, and humble."

He reached into his tunic and brought out the little pouch that held the fragments of parchment containing God's words. "My friends, please listen as I read the words of the Almighty to you:

"... absconditus vultus eius et despectus unde nec reputavimus eum vere languores nostros ipse tulit et dolores nostros ipse portavit et nos putavimus eum quasi leprosum et percussum a Deo et humiliatum ipse autem vulneratus est propter iniquitates nostras adtritum est propter scelera nostra disciplina pacis nostrae super eum et livore eius sanati sumus omnes nos quasi oves ..."

Roarke carefully placed the scrap back into his pouch and tucked it back inside his tunic. "Thank you for your patience with me, friends. I'm sure I pronounced those words badly, and I confess that I know what few of them mean. But what I *can* tell you is what the ambassador Barnabas—whom I spoke to you about before—told me that they mean. This is the import of the words: '*As stupidly as sheep, we have all turned to our own way, not the way of God. But God provided a sheep of His own choosing, and gave him the punishment that we deserved. Just as a sheep is silent when it is being sheared, God's sheep took the punishment assigned to us, and was cut off.*'

"It is in my heart that somehow this sheep is to be honored. Apart from that, I confess that I do not know what the words mean. But the point, to me, is this: God is willing to forgive us for the evil that we do. Coupled with that other portion of His words that I read to you a few days ago, as well as the section that

you have not yet heard, I believe that the larger meaning is this: He desires us to lead lives of humble service to God and to each other, grateful for His blessings, and always quick to forgive others. After all, if the Almighty Himself is willing to forgive us our failings ... should we not do the same, who have been wronged far less severely?"

He stood looking from man to man, meeting each of their gazes. He was pleased that most of the men held his gaze without apparent discomfort.

"Well, my friends, if any of you have anything you'd like to ask or say, this would be a good time."

One of Yeskie's men, known to Roarke only by the name of Hale, who had some skills as a smith, asked bluntly, "Me Lord? Um ... ye speak o' mercy an' forgivin'. But ye're a man o' some violence, too, if'n the stories we've heard is truthful. How d'ye square it?"

"Fair enough," Roarke replied. "You have followed me to this dangerous wilderness, and I owe you all a frank reply. I believe that mercy is our responsibility, as far as we can reasonably extend it. But there are also beings in this world which are purely, completely Evil. The dragons ... were totally, malevolently wicked. They were a force that, if left to roam unchecked, would have killed and destroyed everything around them. Look around here in the castle and its surroundings. It's barren. There's nothing. The dragon did that, and it would have done that to Fairling, too, if it had ever decided to travel there. Your wives, your children, your land, all laid to waste by a power so strong, and so ill ... that it must be destroyed before it ever had the chance to exercise its malicious intent.

"God gave me the will and the ability to kill dragons. Somehow He has protected me, when other wiser, stronger souls have failed. For that I humbly give Him thanks, and beg that I continue to find His favor.

"But I also state to you today that, if I have any choice in a situation at all, I will try to give mercy instead of demand justice. I pray that we never have the opportunity for that choice to be demanded of me."

"Sir, Lord Roarke, Sir," interrupted one of the youths from Yancey's Brigade, whose name was Spence, "I don't know if I may ask this question with the babies about—" he meant Davie and Peet, "but what about Boof? We've heard whispers, that ye ... that ye done him in."

"My friends, I should have addressed this openly with you before, and for that I beg your pardon. Lady Maryan, if you need to take the boys away, I understand." She shook her head no, but held her babies close to her knees. "I did indeed pronounce judgment against Boof, but that was done with great regret. He was no longer himself; he had been taken over by the spirit of the dragon. I don't mean just greed or selfishness, either—I mean that the evil, tormenting spirit of the dragon itself had entered his body and taken complete control of his actions. Boof was no longer safe ... he was no longer Boof."

Lirey spoke up. "It's so, lads. I seen it fer meself."

Hale spoke again. "Air any of us safe, then? If'n the dragon's spirit is jist a-wanderin' about the castle?" An uneasy murmur ran through the little gathering.

Roarke said, "Steps have been taken to ensure that we are in as little danger as possible. I believe that the only reason Boof was ... afflicted, is because he ate so much of the dragon's flesh, and that he was willing to be its ... host. The other two times I killed dragons in the past, nothing of the sort ever happened."

A high-voiced lad named Barlie asked, "Boof is dead then, for sure?"

"An interesting question. My understanding is, based on what Barnabas was able to tell me, along with what our ancestors all believed, and based on my own prayers and experience as well ... we never really die. To be sure, our *bodies* die.

But, as Lirey can tell you, that dragon's body was surely dead, but there was a spirit that lived on after the body was done away with.

"Mustn't it be the same with us? If God forgives us of the things that we've done against His laws, that must mean that there is some kind of recompense to be served *after* this life, doesn't it? For if our rewards or punishments were only to be reckoned on the basis of what we receive *here* ... then God must surely be unjust, uncaring, unloving, even cruel. And that ... cannot be."

Roarke smiled grimly. "In any case, here we are. Thank you all for listening to an old man ramble, and please feel free to ask me anything at all, whenever you desire. This has been a good start for us, I believe—don't you?" Murmurs of acknowledgement accompanied heads nodding. "Well, we've been given some things to think about. Let's enjoy the rest of the day, and refresh ourselves for tomorrow's work."

He turned away, caught himself, and turned back. "One last thing—even on our days of rest, I would like to maintain a watch around the castle grounds. Would those of you who enjoy riding please see Lirey, and spend part of your day serving us by seeing to our continued safety?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The same morning that Roarke was leading prayers for the first time in Blythecairne, Belder Payn was groggily waking from his sleep upon the blood-spattered bed in The Last Dog. He had come back to the bridal chamber late in the evening, found Eyela still unconscious but breathing, and rolled her off onto the floor. Must be she had come to her senses sometime in the night, because she wasn't there in the morning.

He stood and urinated against the side of the bed, not caring what the proprietor of The Last Dog would say. He did not intend to come back to Goric—he was going to be the Lord of Blythecairne! Stepping through the curtain into the tavern, he found men waiting at the tables, and the smells of breakfast being prepared. Rubbing his eyes against the brightness of the morning, he bellowed, "Sinder!"

"Right here," his brother said, stepping to his side.

"Do we have men willing to ride to Blythecairne?" Belder asked, stifling a yawn.

"Yes! Counting you and me, there are twenty-six. That should be able to handle the five that are holed up in the castle."

"Hmm," Belder calculated. "That's two thirteens; maybe bad luck. Either get us another man, or else tell somebody to stay home."

"Done."

Sinder walked off to consider whether to augment or diminish the two thirteens, and his place at Belder's side was taken by the magistrate, Rulous.

"Good morning, Belder," he said.

"Rulous," Belder acknowledged. "Are you going with us?"

"No, not me. Not my kind of adventure. Besides, you'll still need a contact in Goric—that's me. I hope that our good relationship in the past will make us worthy trading partners in the future."

Belder shook Rulous' hand. "Understood, and accepted." He pondered for a moment. "Do you have a man you could send with me, to give my expedition the look of authority?"

"Hmm. Yes, I do, in fact. My aide, Knaiver—do you know him?" Belder shook his head no. "He's a completely honest man, works for the local government here, but is really rather, shall we say, simple. He's completely trusting, and generous to a fault. If I send him with you and you make him your emissary to the Fairling people, they will never know that you have anything other than honest intentions for them. Which, of course, is the truth," he said, chuckling.

"Of course," Belder assented dryly.

"Let me go and fetch him for you," Rulous decided. "I'll appoint him as Goric's representative in your expedition to Blythecairne. Since his wife died, he has no family anymore; he'll probably be grateful for the appointment."

"Good," said Belder. To his brother, he said, "Sinder! Stop thinking! I have our extra man."



When Eyela had gathered her robe around her and crawled painfully from the bedchamber, through the bar and into the street, her only thought had been to get help. She could not go back to her mother; it had been her mother who had sold her to Belder Payn, in exchange for two hundred rurics—a pittance. But then, her mother was poor, and, with no husband to provide for her, had no prospects.

As the mother-in-law of the brigand chief, though, she could expect to be looked after well, at least as long as Belder took pleasure in her daughter.

Eyela was in enormous pain. She was bruised all over her body where she had been struck by the knotted rope, and she had scrapes and cuts all over, too, where the rough cord had been drawn across her flesh. The pain between her legs was excruciating, and her face was cut and bruised, too. Two of her teeth in the very front were loose; she hoped she wouldn't lose them. But worst of all, she could not see out of her left eye. Tears flowed from the eye freely, but no light entered. And perhaps even worse than that was the horrible shame that she felt, a crushing, claustrophobic guilt for something that hadn't even been her doing.

She made her way through the dark alleys of Goric to the house of the only man in the city that she absolutely knew to be honest and gentle: old Knaiver, the aide to Rulous the magistrate. After Knaiver's wife had died, Eyela had entertained the hope that he would marry her mother, but there had not been any real interest from either one of them.

Weeping quietly and stumbling over the cobblestones of the street, she came at last to Knaiver's door, and knocked, softly at first, then louder, until she was pounding with all of her remaining strength, sobbing aloud, "Help me! Please, Knaiver, help me...."

Knaiver, wakened from a sound sleep by the thudding and wailing, was so terrified that he nearly wet himself, but he gathered his wits quickly, and ran to the door. In the darkness, he was unsure what was happening, but he could tell that the voice on the other side of the door was female, young, and in great need of help, so he opened and let her in.

"Who are you, my child?" he asked, unable to see clearly.

"It's Eyela, father," she wept.

"What has happened to you, dear child? I thought this was to be your wedding night!" He wrapped her in his arms, even though it wasn't perhaps altogether appropriate for a man of his position to do so ... but let convention be damned—he *cared* for this young girl.

She didn't respond to his question, but nestled into his arms deeply, and sobbed for most of an hour. He patted her hair softly, made cooing sounds, and let her weep. What terrible thing had happened? And why wasn't her new husband able to protect her?

Finally she slept, exhausted, and the old man still sat, holding her in his frail arms, worried thoughts torturing his imagination until the dawn broke. Then he began to be able to see the girl's injuries, and his thoughts were even more tormented.



Knaiver was wakened again by the sound of knocking on his front door—he must have dozed off. The frightened girl in his arms, also awake, whispered in his ear, "Please don't tell them I'm here, father!"

"But, child—"

"Hide me, please, father—please!"

The visitor at the door knocked again. Knaiver said to Eyela, "Can you make it to my other room?" She scrambled away, and Knaiver called out, "Coming! Coming!"

He rose to his feet, his stiffened joints crying out in painful rebellion.

Opening the door, he found the magistrate, Rulous, who looked at Knaiver through narrowed eyes. "Did I hear voices?" Rulous was Knaiver's boss, even though he was the younger man; Knaiver had never had the ambition to campaign

for magistrate—he was content just to go about his work, earning barely more than enough to subsist.

"That was just me," Knaiver said. "I was saying my morning prayers."

"Hmm. Yes," Rulous sniffed, with just the faintest trace of contempt. "Are you ready for an assignment?"

"Why, yes, Rulous. I am always ready," the older man said, slightly surprised.

"This assignment may take several days, maybe a week. How soon can you be ready to ride?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Yes. You must be ready to ride this morning."

"Well, I can be ready in less than an hour, if it's necessary. What can you tell me of the purpose for this assignment?"

Rulous looked at him steadily, gauging his reactions. "You will be my deputy to Blythecairne castle. You will be accompanying Goric's choice to take the lordship of Blythecairne, Belder Payn."

Knaiver was stunned. Blythecairne? When had that land become inhabitable? Belder Payn? What about his betrothal, just last night, to Eyela? And what of Eyela? What terrible fate had befallen that poor girl, so full of fire and spunk? Knaiver did not know Belder personally, but he had heard whispers that he was not, perhaps, the most honorable man in Goric. Still, Knaiver's way was to give people the benefit of the doubt, unless they proved themselves to be untrustworthy.

"Knaiver?" Rulous said impatiently.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I was just taken aback by this assignment. I have so many questions!"

"Yes, well, most of the details will be given to you by Lord Belder. You may ask him whatever you will, and I'm sure he will give you the answers you require. Your official capacity will be to act as the liaison between Lord Belder, the rightful heir to the throne at Blythecairne, and a band of five men from Fairling, who have unlawfully occupied the castle. Your duty will be to negotiate the surrender of the castle, with as little bloodshed as possible. And when that duty is completed, you will collect a reward from Belder—Lord Belder—and bring it back to me here in Goric."

"Oh, my." Knaiver was very nearly speechless.

"So, you'll be ready to ride within the hour?"

"Oh, my. Yes, I'll be ready to ride. Oh, my."

"Good. I'll let Belder—Lord Belder—know that he has his man. There will be a horse saddled and waiting for you outside The Last Dog in an hour."

After Knaiver had said farewell to Rulous, he rested his head against the door for a moment, his hand still on the latch. "Oh, my," he whispered.

"Knaiver," Eyela's timorous voice rose from the next room, "come and talk to me."

"Oh, child," he said, "My poor dear. How can I help you now? I must leave to go with Belder Payn."

"You mustn't go with Belder," she pleaded. "He is not to be trusted."

"Eyela!" Knaiver reproved. "It's your own husband that you're talking about!"

"It's Belder that did this to me. And there are bruises on me that you cannot see."

"Oh, no," Knaiver said, his face reddening with humiliation. Thinking quickly, he said to Eyela, "I must go with them. To refuse would be completely unacceptable, and it would eventually lead them back to you, my child. I

understand that something dreadful has happened, and you must not go back to Belder. All right. While I'm gone to the castle, you may stay here and heal, if you wish. Don't show your face outside my door, until I return. Anything here that is mine, is yours. And don't fear for me, child. I will be on my guard."

She bowed her head, and covered her face with her hands, weeping quietly.

"Dark days ... dark days," Knaiver said quietly, and went about making his preparations for the journey to Blythecairne.

Chapter Thirty

Knaiver had ridden alongside either Belder Payn or his brother Sinder for most of the gloomy, overcast day. They did not stop, either to rest or for the noonday meal, and they did not speak to him, unless he asked one of them a question. Several times he had caught himself very nearly blurting out something about Eyela, but he wisely held his tongue. Sinder seemed to be a more pleasant companion than Belder, but they were both interested in their own business and paid Knaiver no more attention than was necessary.

What Knaiver was able to piece together from the fragments of information he was accorded turned out to be little more than what Rulous had already told him. Apparently there were five men of Fairling living in the castle at Blythecairne, the dragon was dead, and Belder Payn was going to oust the settlers and take over the castle for himself. Since there were two dozen men on horseback following Belder, there was little doubt of the outcome, so why did they need Knaiver?

And for that matter, how was it that Belder Payn was "Goric's choice" to be the new Lord of Blythecairne? If there had been any kind of popular acclamation for Belder, then Knaiver had not heard about it. And who would have had the authority to make an appointment of that kind? Only King Ruric, certainly, and Knaiver would most definitely have heard about *that*, too, if it had taken place.

And then there was Eyela. She had said that Belder Payn had caused her injuries—and on their wedding night, too! She had warned Knaiver that Belder was not to be trusted. He didn't know what kind of offense Eyela had committed that would have inflamed Belder's anger so ferociously ... but any man that would deal out the kind of treatment to a woman that Belder had done to Eyela.... The

thought died out as Knaiver almost shook with indignation. He had never beaten his own wife, though certainly he had the legal right to, if he had wished. He had always believed that women were creatures of special delicacy and beauty, and so had always treated his own wife as if she were a cherished treasure. His eyes misted as he remembered her, gone for a year now, but as alive in his memory as if she still warmed his bed and cooked his breakfast.

Knaiver realized that the people of Goric regarded him as something of a simpleton, a fact that quietly amused the old man. What most of them did not realize was that his gentleness and generosity were not due to any weak-mindedness on his part, but rather a conscious choice to overlook others' flaws, and extend kindness in spite of them.

He decided to try another question with Sinder. "The five from Fairling who have hidden themselves in the castle—what do we know of them?"

Sinder regarded the old gentleman with curiosity, as if he were some kind of unusual bird. He didn't know too many people who were honest, so he especially distrusted them. "You aren't thinking of betraying Belder to the enemy, are you?"

Hmm, Knaiver thought. *That's the first time I've heard of five men standing alone referred to as "the enemy."* He said to Sinder, "If I am to serve as your emissary to the castle, as well as the deputy for Magistrate Rulous, I would like to know as much as possible about the men that I am going to face."

Sinder grimaced. It was logical. "The information we have comes from Harres the merchant, who was in Fairling when the five left for the castle. According to him, they are Keet the magistrate and his son, a farmer, and two woodsmen."

Knaiver had met Keet before—a good man. "Who is in command?"

"Harres didn't say. Probably Keet, though."

Knaiver thought that that was curious. Keet didn't seem to him to be the type of man who would lead an expedition to spend a lonely winter in a frigid stone castle. A good administrator, perhaps. But an adventurer? Unlikely. Probably one of the woodsmen was the leader.

Belder had been listening, and said gruffly, "Your job, Deputy Knaiver, will be to persuade the men from Fairling to surrender their claim to the castle, and give it over to its rightful Lord—me. If you do your job well, you will save the lives of five men—a good day's work. And there could be other rewards in the deal for you, too, if your efforts please me."

"Thank you, Lord Belder," Knaiver replied courteously. The last thing he wanted to do was to offend Belder, who was starting to look more and more like a common outlaw in Knaiver's eyes. He wondered at the relationship between Belder and his own boss, Rulous. Curious.

As the day progressed, Belder's mood grew dark, and it seemed at times as if his temper would boil over. Several times cold raindrops splattered down from the heavens, mocking him, he thought. It had turned out to be farther to the castle than he had calculated, and they had probably started too late in the day to make it all the way to Blythecairne before nightfall. Because Harres had told him of his mulecart that had made the trip to Blythecairne with the supposed five men, Belder had just planned on plundering the supplies that the Fairling men had with them, and had made no provisions of his own.

Finally, in the early evening, after a day of fairly hard riding, they came to the place where the dragon had scoured the land free of vegetation. One of the men, who was riding quite closely behind Belder, said to one of his mates, "We've come wrong. We started too late in the day to take the castle, but we didn't prepare for spending a night in the out of doors. This is going to be a miserable night." He

spoke the words in an undertone, but it was still loud enough that Belder caught most of it.

The outlaw reined up his horse, turned so that he was shoulder-to-shoulder with the man who had spoken, snatched his knife from its sheath, and brandished it menacingly close to the man's throat. "Do you challenge my leadership? Maybe you'd like to spend this cold night warming yourself by the fires in Hell!"

"Careful, Belder—remember the thirteens," said Sinder placatingly.

"If I kill this one, I'll just have to kill another one to make the number good again," he snarled.

"Hey!" yelled a couple of the men, who were just starting to realize that something unhealthy was beginning to brew.

"I'm sorry, Belder," said the man with the knife at his throat through gritted teeth, his eyes narrow with impotent anger. "I didn't mean nothing by what I said."

"Lord Belder—" Knaiver began.

"Everybody quiet!" Belder snapped.

"Quiet!" Sinder echoed. "Belder, look—somebody comes on horseback."



The young man named Barlie, from Yancey's Brigade, was one who had responded to Roarke's request to patrol the castle perimeter on their day of rest. He was only just learning to ride a horse, having been too poor to own his own mount back in Fairling. But on the trip to Blythecairne, he had made a friend of one very gentle gray-and-white speckled mare; he had led her by hand most of the trip. When the caravan had stopped to make their evening camps, he had then fed her by hand as well. He now found the fact that he could actually *ride* her to be exhilarating ... breathtaking. He dared not push her at anything more than a slow

trot so far, for fear that he would lose control or fall off, but some of the other boys had promised to help him learn.

Today he had let the mare take her own pace (which was a slow walk) around the castle grounds in the leaden gray of twilight. As he rode, he patted the mare's neck gently, stroking her mane, and singing to her in a high tenor voice. He still marveled that he could turn the strong creature with just a slight tug at the reins, and was directing her on a meandering course around the grounds, as he practiced starts and stops. He occasionally let the horse wander off a ways into the plain, where she could pull at some clumps of sweet grass that grew there.

Suddenly, though, he encountered a force of maybe twenty men or more, heading north toward the castle! He was certain that, if they had been expected, Roarke would have given the young riders some advance notice. His first instinct was to turn the horse northward and ride off for safety, hoping to go unnoticed, but he quickly realized that it was too late for that.

He saw several of the men talking urgently among themselves. One, who had long black hair and seemed to be the leader, spoke something harshly to an older man, but Barlie could not make out the words. The older man turned his horse, and started at a trot toward Barlie, so the boy reined up and waited for him to approach.

"Ho, the rider," said the man. "Pray allow me to speak with you for a moment."

Barlie nodded for him to ride up.

"My name is Knaiver, and I am the deputy of First Magistrate Rulous of Goric. I come to you representing Lord Belder Payn, who is claiming the land of Blythecairne as his rightful possession." He lowered his voice, and said, "I take it you must be the son of Keet. Please do nothing rash! We know that you are only

five men, and you must be able to see that Belder's men could destroy you all, if he chooses to!"

Barlie was confused. Why did this man think he was Willum, and why did he think there were only five? He opened his mouth to comment, but something caught at him, caused him to hold his tongue. That was strange—maybe it was fear. He closed his mouth again without speaking.

Knaiver looked curiously at the boy, and then continued. "Please ride back to the castle, and tell your father we're coming. Belder will want absolute surrender, as soon as he arrives. I will try to forestall him until morning."

Again, Barlie was perplexed. His father? Apparently Knaiver could see the confusion in the boy's eyes, because he said, kindly, "Nod your head, lad. Let Belder think you're engaged in the conversation here. Good. And now ride off, and warn your people that we are coming!"

Barlie turned his mare, and surprised the horse by nudging her in the ribs with his heels. She broke into a canter, and the boy held on nervously, hoping to avoid humiliating himself in front of the small army behind him.

Knaiver headed back to the rest of the group. Belder snarled, "What was *that*? Is the boy an idiot?"

"Terribly frightened, I believe," Knaiver said softly. "He's going back to the castle now to inform them that we are coming, and to prepare them for surrender."

"Look how slowly he's riding! Perhaps the point of my blade in his horse's flank would put some fire into him."

"Please, Lord Belder," Knaiver pleaded. "He's only a boy—I don't believe he's an experienced rider."

Belder stomped around in a circle, cursed, and spat. "Might as well make camp right here for the night, and then take the castle in the morning. At least if we stay here, there'll be some grass for the horses." He stopped short of

apologizing to the men for their spartan conditions, but no one challenged him either.



Barlie arrived at last at the castle and dismounted, shoving the reins of his mare into one of the other boys' hands. He then ran directly to Captain Lirey, who was just getting ready to ascend the stairs to his family's chambers for the night.

"What is it, lad?"

"Riders, Captain! A whole army of 'em! He said he wants us t' surrender!"

Lirey looked grim. "Come wi' me t' Lord Roarke, and tell us what ye've seen."

Moments later, Roarke, Lirey, Keet, Will, Barlie, and the four brigadiers were all standing in the center of the great hall before the dais, tensely discussing this new information.

Roarke spoke. "Yancey, send one of your lads and pull in whomever you still have out in the field. We will post no guard on the far reaches tonight—only here at the castle." Yancey obeyed immediately.

"When this army comes to meet us, whether it be tonight or tomorrow morning, I will go out and meet them. For some reason, they apparently believe our strength is only five men. Perhaps that is a gift of God to us, if they have badly underestimated our resolve. So all of you shall stay hidden, until I give the command."

Lirey said, "Not ye, Cap'. Ye're too valuable t' th' folks here, t' be ridin' out t' meet an unknowed enemy all by yerself. Let me be th' one t' meet 'em."

Roarke was about to dispute that idea, when Keet interrupted. "Not ye, neither, Lirey. Ye've got those two wee bairns, and that beautiful lass that thinks ye hung the moon. I'll go."

Roarke opened his mouth, and Keet looked at him sternly. "I'll go," he repeated.

"Well," Roarke said. "As you wish, Master Keet. All right, then ... I do believe I have an idea."

Chapter Thirty-One

The steely gray morning arrived sluggishly, with an icy mist clinging to the air like a veil. Belder's men, who had slept but fitfully, were cold, hungry, irritable, and wet. Belder himself was in a foul temper, surly and mean. He stalked angrily through the camp from man to man, kicking those who were not up, and cursing them.

Knaiver saw this, and determined to leave Belder's charge just as soon as he reasonably could, provided he could escape with his life intact. It was clear to him now that Belder was nothing more than a villain—a clever, handsome villain, perhaps, but certainly not a man with an ounce of honor in him. Besides, Knaiver thought, he really *must* get back to Goric and care for poor Eyela, if he could.

Belder roused his twenty-six men, got them on their horses, and advanced them through the morning, coming within sight of the castle before midday, just as the rain stopped. "Well, at least that's a good omen," Belder grumbled. Some of his men looked at each other darkly. They weren't even impressed with the sighting of the castle; they were too miserable. Their fingers were stiff and cold, their bellies were empty, and the rain had soaked them clear through.

Sinder, ever alert for mischief, said to his brother, "Do you see any signs of activity there? There's smoke coming out of the stacks ... but I don't see anybody moving around."

Belder, eager to conclude his conquest of the castle, snapped, "Knaiver! Ride in, and see if they're ready to surrender."

Knaiver, just as eager to be leaving Belder's company, left the body of the army and rode forward, almost to the crumbled stone wall that surrounded the courtyard. Halting his horse, he called out, "Ho! The castle! May I enter?"

From the castle came a voice, saying, "Nay, but hold there. I will come an' meet ye."

Walking from the courtyard came Keet, unarmed and unarmored, but adorned in an extremely fine velvet cloak. Knaiver dismounted, so as to meet his counterpart on equal footing.

Keet spoke first. "Why, ain't ye Master Knaiver, from Goric?"

"Yes, Master Keet, I am. So you really are the leader of this band?"

"Nay, not me. I be the steward o' Castle Blythecairne. I serve the Lord Cedric Roarke, who kilt the dragon." Knaiver started in surprise—he had heard of a Roarke who killed dragons, but he thought him to be far off in the western lands somewhere. Keet looked beyond Knaiver to the small army of outlaws. "Last I knowed of ye, Knaiver, ye was keepin' a better sort o' company 'n this."

"My sincerest apologies, dear sir. I fear that I was deceived by Magistrate Rulous, and betrayed into this crew of pirates. But you and I both are in a very precarious position. As you see, Belder Payn has two dozen men of war with him; your five men can scarcely stand against them, even if you do have a dragon-slayer with you. Will you surrender peacefully, or do you choose to stand against Belder Payn?"

"Neither one. I've been charged by Lord Roarke t' offer ye a deal. This he says: In order to avoid the needless sheddin' of blood, the Lord Roarke o' Blythecairne generously offers each one o' yer men one gold falconet, an' requests that ye turn yer horses back t' where ye come from, an' leave peaceable."

"Oh, my," Knaiver said fretfully. "I hardly think—"

"That ain't all," Keet continued. "Each one o' ye must come, one at a time, an' present yerselves before the Lord Roarke t' receive yer falconet. Ye must come unarmed an' alone inta th' castle, an' kneel before th' throne o' Blythecairne."

Them's his terms. Take 'em back t' yer Belder, an' see what he says. I'll wait right here."

"Oh, Master Keet ... this will end badly. But, as you wish...."

"Go on, now," Keet said gently.

Knaiver remounted his horse, and trotted back to where the army waited pensively.

Sinder said, "Will they surrender?"

Knaiver said tremulously, "Please hold your tempers, good sirs, and let me tell you what Keet said to me." He went on to define Roarke's terms. Belder practically shook with rage as he listened to Keet's condescending stipulations—his eyes were wide and filled with fire, and he was grinding his teeth to keep himself from bellowing curses at the top of his voice. Stark the dwarf said in a low voice, "It's a trap. Unarmed an' one at a time, indeed! A trap."

Sinder said, "Aye, it's probably a trap, all right. But Belder—see if this might not work to your advantage: We'll send Knaiver in first, to bow before this Roarke, whoever he is—probably one of the woodsmen. That way, if it *is* an ambush, we would lose only Knaiver—sorry, friend, but you are the least like a fighting man among us. And if this Roarke is sincere, not only will we each come back out of the castle with a falconet in our purse, but we'll also get to scout out the inside of the castle walls, and see their strength, and gauge what manner of men these five are. It's as if Roarke himself would be paying us to see where his weakness lies!"

The last statement appealed to Belder's sense of appreciation for a good double-cross, but still he said, "Or ... we could all just ride into the castle with swords drawn, and give them due payment for their impertinence."

Knaiver quickly interjected, not loudly, but enough so that most of Belder's men could hear, "But, Lord Belder, they may be cleverly hidden and ready to

spring an attack on us. If we ride in without knowing their positions and strength, surely some of us would face injury, or death, before we overcame their defenses. Sinder's counsel is good, my Lord. After we see their strength, and take their falconets, then we can ride in and overcome them, if you wish. I will go first, at your command."

Sinder, upon hearing Knaiver's agreement with his proposal, felt that he trusted his own counsel less than he had when he had voiced it—there was something he simply didn't trust about the old deputy. But to dispute his own advice now—that he could not do, without causing unrest among the men, and angering his brother to boot. Instead, he said, "Brother, I will go first, if you wish it."

"No," Belder decided. "Knaiver will go first. And no mischief, old man."

Knaiver nodded. He had no weapons, so he dismounted and walked back to Keet. He said loudly, "Good news! Your terms have been accepted. I shall be the first." In an undertone, he continued to Keet. "Have a care. Mischief is about."

Keet replied, as they turned and walked in together, "Thought as much. Ye'll see we're not quite so ill-prepared as yer Belder thought we'd be."

They went through the demolished gate of the stone wall, and through the courtyard. Keet called out to the castle, "First one comin' in!" To Knaiver he said, "Give me jest a second t' get t' me position, an' then foller me in."

Knaiver waited a few moments, then heard a voice from within the castle, "You may enter."



Knaiver walked into the castle, and found himself in the great hall. But where he had expected to find five men inexperienced in matters of warfare, there

were instead nearly thirty, and they were all outfitted with suits of mail, helms and gauntlets of leather, and standing stiffly at attention with glittering swords drawn. They stretched out in two long straight lines facing each other, beardless youths intermingled with what looked to be seasoned men of war, standing grimly with eyes forward, studiously ignoring their guest.

At the ends of the two lines stood Keet in his scarlet cloak, and a tall, impressive man wearing a beautiful hauberk of silver and gold chain mail; these two did not face each other, but stood steadily gazing at Knaiver as he entered. They formed an honor guard flanking a raised dais, upon which rested an imposing throne of some dark-colored wood with leather and velvet appointments. But upon that throne was perhaps the most majestic sight out of the several imposing things to be seen here in the castle: it was Roarke, seated comfortably with his great sword across his knees, wearing gleaming silver mail, his ruby-encrusted coronet upon his brow. His silver-gray beard gave him the appearance of great wisdom, and his gray eyes regarded the approaching Knaiver with utter calm.

No one spoke as Knaiver walked down the aisle to present himself at the dais. His steps echoed dimly in the hall, and he felt self-conscious at the amount of noise he was making.

Dropping to one knee in front of the throne and bowing his head, Knaiver said, "Lord Roarke. I am at your service."

"Indeed?" Roarke said with a wry smile. "I would have thought otherwise. What is your name?"

"I am Knaiver, aide to First Magistrate Rulous of Goric. I am not a part of these men."

"Then you are at great risk of peril today, Master Knaiver. For I perceive that 'these men' will not leave lightly, and may be much displeased at the turn of events today."

Turning to Keet, Roarke asked, "Have you recorded Knaiver's name?" Keet nodded affirmatively, and Roarke told him, "Please give Master Knaiver his falconet."

Before Keet could do so, however, Knaiver said, "Please, no, my Lord. It was never my intent to plunder the fortune that you have rightly earned, if you have indeed killed the dragon. I have no need for a falconet—I live very simply, and am content." Knaiver swallowed. "But, if I may...."

Roarke nodded for him to continue.

"If I happen to escape the events of this day with my body and soul still connected, may I please beg that you would grant me sanctuary here at Blythecairne? Both for me, and also for another one who has been greatly wronged by the same Belder who waits outside your gates—a young maiden. Please, my Lord."

"This is an unusual request ... you have ridden against me today apparently with malice intended. Shall I grant you entrance into my household?"

"I know that I deserve it not ... but I cast myself upon your mercy."

"If I may, m'Lord," interrupted Keet, "I b'lieve Knaiver t' be a true man. If ye were t' offer him sanctuary, I'd be willin' t' lay my neck on the line fer him."

Roarke frowned. "Keet, as you know, your judgment carries a great deal of weight with me. But still, this circumstance may be more complicated than simply having Knaiver join the other fellows on the line here." Returning his attention to Knaiver, Roarke asked, "Master Knaiver. Are you an honest man?"

"Oh, my." He put his hand to his mouth and looked perplexed. "I have never had that question put to me before. I *think* I'm an honest man. I certainly want to be. There are many times that I have failed to hit the mark, so to speak, but I've generally tried to aim for it."

Roarke, satisfied with the frankness of that answer, said, "Master Knaiver, will you renounce your other loyalties and pledge yourself to be faithful to the defense of Blythecairne and her people?"

Knaiver looked at the steely gray eyes, held their gaze, and said, "I will, my Lord."

"Then, if the Almighty grants us peace tonight, and we have both survived whatever conflict awaits us, you shall have a home here. But before that, I fear that I have a daunting task for you. You must take a falconet, return to the people who brought you, and report what you have found here. Then we shall see what we shall see."

"I understand, my Lord. I will do as you command."

"Good. Then give me your hand."



The brigands were growing restless. Stark said, "He shoulda been out by now," and Belder and Sinder exchanged glowers.

But then, one of their men growled, "Here he comes."

A moment later, Knaiver had rejoined the company, and Belder demanded, "What news?"

"Lord Belder, it is not as we had heard."

"What do you mean?"

"They are not five. They have, man for man, the same count as we do."

"What—?" He suddenly realized he had been deceived by Harres, and cursed the memory of the man. His upper lip quivered as he fought to keep himself under control. "What else?"

"They are better outfitted than we, as far as their armor and weaponry is concerned. They are dry, rested, and fed. They have the castle, and we do not."

Belder hissed at Knaiver in a low voice. "You demoralize my men. If you have nothing helpful to say with your next breath, I will see that it's the last one you draw."

"To be honest," Knaiver replied steadily, "some of their number seemed to be quite young, probably untested in battle. Your men are much more seasoned than most of them appear to be."

"You have saved your neck for another moment. What happened while you were in there?"

"The man named Roarke took my name, made me promise to leave in peace, gave me a falconet, and dismissed me."

"Show me the falconet."

"Yes. Here it is." Knaiver produced the coin, which Belder took, examined, and then dropped into his own pocket, saying, "You'll get it back if your testimony is true about what's in the castle."

"There is one other thing, but I fear to anger you," Knaiver said.

"Speak," Belder barked.

"As you say. The man Roarke is no mere woodsman. He is Sir Cedric Roarke, Lord of Thrail, who has killed at least one other dragon that I know of. He is undoubtedly the reason that the Blythecairne dragon is gone."

The outlaws exchanged uneasy grimaces, and some of the men outside Belder's immediate presence grunted their discontent at this revelation. It was going to be much more difficult to take Blythecairne than Belder had led them to believe.

Sinder said to his brother, "Well, we're not getting any closer to winning the day by standing here in a circle staring at each other. Shall I go in next?"

"Watch your tongue, brother," Belder warned. "No, I can't risk you yet. Stark, you go."

"Aye."



Stark grumbled to himself as he stalked from the relative safety of the outdoors, through the castle gate, and past the silent rows of Roarke's Men. He was deeply suspicious of the soldiers, all standing mutely at attention with swords drawn. He arrived before the throne and glared upward at the calm visage of Roarke, who regarded him with stern calm.

"What is your name?" Roarke asked.

"I be called Stark," the dwarf grumbled in his deep, guttural voice.

"You favor another person that I recently met, by the name of Mox. Did you know him?"

"Aye, that be me uncle's son." Stark paused. "What d'ye mean, *did* I know him?"

"I'm sorry to be the one to give you this news, if you didn't know it," Roarke replied, wishing that he had not asked the question. "Mox is, ah ... dead."

Stark was shaken by the report of his cousin's demise, but feigned indifference. "He was always careless. I expect he didn't die o' natural causes."

"No. I'm sorry," Roarke said again.

"Do I get a piece o' gold or not?"

Roarke paused to regard the dark little man. "After you have fulfilled your part of the bargain, yes."

"What do I need t' do?"

"Bow the knee, and pledge that you will not raise your hand against Blythecairne again."

Stark grumbled huffily, but did drop to one knee and bow his head. Roarke asked him, "Do you swear that you will be true to the spirit of this gift, and turn back from warfare against Blythecairne?"

Stark had not intended to promise any such thing, but having been put on the spot in the presence of the warrior witnesses, he found the words rumbling out from beneath his beard, "Aye. I swear it."

"Well said. Will you give me your hand?"

Stark didn't expect this, but nonetheless, he extended his short, gnarled arm toward the throne, and Roarke grasped it firmly. He held Stark's wrist until the dwarf's gaze drifted upward to see Roarke's eyes steadily looking into his own. "Good," the knight said, smiling faintly. "Keet, please give our friend a falconet."



Most of the men who had ridden from Goric with Belder came and presented themselves to Roarke, though there were a few that chose not to enter Blythecairne at all. To each one that came, Roarke offered some version of the same interview: He asked their names, made certain that they looked into his eyes, made them bow the knee before the throne, caused them to swear that they would not take up arms against the castle, grasped their hands, and gave them gold. A few of the men were moved by the experience, and determined that they would do as they had sworn, but some were wastrels and simply lied to Roarke in order to get the gold.

Belder Payn finally allowed his brother Sinder to enter the castle, after everyone else who dared to make the transaction had completed their circuits. Sinder entered boldly, since nearly twenty men before him had come and gone

unmolested, many of them reporting back that Roarke seemed to be a man of honor. Still, it was a bit intimidating to walk past the silent sentries, whose patience at their chore continued unabated. Sinder regarded the men surreptitiously, since it was still in his heart to obey his brother's command to scout the weakness of the castle's defenses.

Roarke observed the man making his way to the throne with curiosity. This did not appear to be the leader of the brigands, but it was a man who seemed to bear some of the mantle of authority nonetheless. Perhaps the second in command?

Sinder was impressed in spite of himself. This event staged by Roarke had been designed to elicit the maximum response of conformity with the minimum expenditure of actual coercion. Sinder Payn had to be impressed with that economy of reason. Before Roarke had a chance to speak, Sinder greeted him. "Good day! Sir Roarke, I perceive. My name is Sinder Payn, and I am the brother of Belder Payn, who has led the force of men that you have met today."

"Welcome, Sinder Payn. You may call me your friend, if you choose." Roarke found to his mild surprise that he instinctively liked, or at least wanted to like, this tall blond man with the brash manner.

"Yes, Sir Roarke. Well, under the present circumstances, that may be a difficulty, but if things were just a bit different, I believe I would seek that very thing."

"Come before me, young man. Tell me your intent."

Sinder replied truthfully, "I have come to spy out your position for weakness, to take from you a gold coin if you will give it, and then to report back to my brother and do whatever he commands."

Roarke gazed into the younger man's eyes; Sinder did not have to be coaxed to return that gaze, but stared back at Roarke steadily. "I have made all of the rest

of your men pledge to me that they will not take up arms against my people. Will you do the same?"

"There's a lot about my character to disapprove of, I expect. But I won't lie to you, Sir Roarke—I cannot make that promise. But still, I'm honored to have met you. Perhaps if Belder chooses to return to Goric in peace, we may speak again."

"Give me your hand, Sinder Payn." Roarke reached his arm toward the outlaw, and his grasp was returned. He said softly, almost whispering, "May God Almighty forgive you of your transgressions, and grant you peace with Himself."

Turning to Keet, Roarke said, "Give Sinder five falconets, Master Keet." Keet complied without comment. Releasing his grasp of Sinder's hand, Roarke told him, "I pray that you may be able to spend this gold, young man. I will either be your strong friend, or your strong enemy—the choice is yours."

"Thank you, Sir Roarke. I appreciate your kindness and your generosity ... but my choice was made at birth. I must stand with my brother."

"I understand," Roarke smiled sadly. "Go in peace, if you may. And send your brother in to meet me."



Belder retraced the steps that most of his men had made earlier in the day, and found himself standing before the throne of Blythecairne. Roarke looked down at the outlaw from his perch on the dais, and said, "Belder Payn—welcome. We have had a rather long day, have we not? Thank God there has been no violence."

Belder replied, "Yes, God be thanked, our lives have all been spared."

Roarke asked, without ceremony, "Will you kneel before the throne here and pledge yourself to do no violence, ever, to the people of Blythecairne?"

Belder immediately dropped to one knee and said, "I do so pledge."

"Well said," Roarke said wryly, as Lirey and Keet exchanged skeptical glances. "What do you intend to do now?"

"Well, I suppose I'll be turning my men back to Goric, unless you'd like to extend the courtesy of the castle for a night or two."

Roarke extended his hand to the outlaw, deflecting the request, and said to him, "A last question, Master Belder—do you consider yourself to be an honest man?"

A flicker of anger appeared briefly behind Belder's dark eyes, and he said spiritedly, "I'll thrash the one who says I'm *not* an honest man!" He dropped Roarke's hand abruptly.

"Yes, I expected as much," Roarke remarked. "Keet, give Belder Payn a falconet, and also give him a couple of loaves of bread to feed his men on their journey back to Goric." Keet bustled off to the kitchen to fetch the bread. "I'm sorry that I cannot offer you the comforts of a hot meal and a bed tonight, Belder. Perhaps if you come again in the spring with a slightly smaller force, we shall be better prepared to accommodate you."

"Not at all, not at all," Belder said, showing his teeth in an attempt at a grin that looked suspiciously like a snarl. "I apologize for any misunderstanding that may have arisen from our visit here this morning. We were misinformed about your lordship. Certainly, you have killed the dragon, and the spoils are yours."

"Yes, well ... here is Keet with your bread." Roarke suddenly realized that he was very tired. "Next time you wish to undertake relations with Blythecairne, do not come in force. Either come by yourself, or else send Knaiver or Sinder to act as your emissary. Now, please be on your way. We have lost a day's work here at the castle because of this ... interruption."

"As you say," Belder said curtly, taking the bread from Keet and departing peevishly.

Roarke rose from his throne, and followed Belder to the castle gates, which still lay splintered and unhinged. After watching Belder cross the courtyard and leave the immediate castle grounds, thrusting the bread at Sinder and Stark, Roarke turned back and addressed his men.

"You have done magnificently today," he began. "You may think it is a small thing to turn away an enemy and not lose a single drop of blood, but I believe the Almighty has been pleased with the way we have acquitted ourselves today.

"Now, I'm sure that some of you need to relieve yourselves—I do, myself—but not everybody at once, please. I am not naive enough to think that we have seen the end of Belder Payn. Maybe he will even still attack us today, though he would be a fool to try it.

"Yeskie and Abey—I request that you two get your longbows and take up positions in the turrets at the corners of the castle walls. If Belder does return, I want him dropped to the earth before he ever gets within a sword's distance of that front gate. And drop whoever appears to be his second-in-command as well, even if it's Sinder.

"Lirey, please go and check on Maryan and the little ones, and then report back to me here."

Chapter Thirty-Two

When Belder and his men had ridden off far enough so that the castle was no longer in view, the outlaw reined up his horse and commanded the men to listen to him.

"Well, you've had a chance to look the castle over, and see the sort of men we'll be facing. A bunch of pillow-loving soft-bottoms, if I've ever seen them! Except for two or three of them, they didn't look as if they'd ever held a sword in their hands before. You've had a taste of the gold now, and seen what a peace-loving lot those old grandmothers at the castle are." He grinned wolfishly. "Shall we ride in now, and take them?"

If Belder had expected to raise a war cry from his men, he was disappointed. Many of them looked uneasily away from their leader; a few cleared their throats, or coughed.

"What's this?" Belder cried indignantly. "You're not thinking about turning back on me now, are you?"

"Beggin' yer pardon, Belder," one older man began. "Some of us been thinkin' that we'd just head back to Goric. A falconet's worth about a month's wages, ain't it? Well, a month's wages fer two rainy days' work—that's pretty good just the way it is, some of us are thinkin'. So, mebbe, we'll just be takin' our leave from ye now, an' keep our heads an' our shoulders attached."

Belder was stunned, speechless with rage. A few of the men started nudging their horses off toward Goric, and he found his voice. "Stop! *Stop!*" he croaked. They halted, and turned to hear what he had to say. "Are you cowards? Are you afraid of the dead dogs of Blythecairne? If you're afraid of anything, then you'd damned well better be afraid of *me!* If you turn back now, you'd—"

Stark broke in sharply. "Ye'd best leave off with that fool talk, Belder. Any man that'd be callin' me a coward had better reach fer his sword, an' no doubt. There's more to it than that."

"Stark! *You'd* leave me, too?"

"Ye might not understand it, Belder, but some of us here will. I gave my honest pledge t' Roarke today that I'd not take up arms against 'im, an' he took me hand, an' looked right inta me eyes. That means somethin' t' me, Belder, though ye might not count it as so awful much. But I'll say this—that's a sight more than I ever got from ye!"

Belder's hand dropped to the haft of his sword menacingly, but half a dozen other blades were drawn at the same moment and pointed toward the highwayman. One of the other men, who had also been imprinted with a newly found sense of dignity, said, "Roarke wanted to avoid bloodshed today, and I won't go against that lightly. You just let us leave what wants to leave, Belder, and we'll let stay what wants to stay."

Belder stared, wild-eyed, furious, then choked out, "Go!"

More than half of Belder's men did leave then, including Stark and also Knaiver, who was eager to make it back to his little house in Goric to see if Eyela was all right. Sinder remained with his brother, as he had told Roarke that he would do. Almost all of the men who had refused to go into the castle earlier in the day also stayed—they had received no reward for their troubles so far. A few of the men who had pledged to Roarke that they would never fight against Blythecairne stayed with Belder as well, valuing the chance of a little more gold as worth more to them than their integrity.

Belder Payn looked at the men who remained with him; counting himself and Sinder, there were eleven in all. "Here's your reward for standing with me today," he said to them. "The castle and the land, that's mine. But the gold

treasure that's there in the castle, I'll divide into two parts. The first part belongs to Sinder and me. The other half of the treasure gets divided in equal parts between the nine of you, which will probably make you the nine richest men in Goric. Plus, anything you take off the dead, you can keep, too."

He looked at them grimly. "This ain't going to be an easy fight, perhaps. They're a bunch of peace-lovers, so they may not fight at first, but they do outnumber us now, two men to one. So surprise is one of our best weapons, and the other one is boldness. They've got no gate to keep us out. So what we'll do is ride right into the castle on our horses, and deal them some fire from above. If it goes like I expect it will, we might be able to kill half of 'em before the rest even knows we're in the castle.

"Those of you what went into the castle today know what Roarke looks like. It's him we want to kill, more than anybody. Cut off the head, and the body will crumple. Any questions?"

There were none, so Belder commanded, "Then ride!"



Yeskie had climbed the twisting stairwell in the turret at the southwest corner of the castle wall, swept away ancient cobwebs with a wave of his hand, and now knelt next to the narrow slit of a window, watching southwards. His friend Abey had done the same at the southeast corner, and had notched an arrow onto his bowstring, just in case. There was a soft murmur of voices from beneath and behind the two woodsmen, as the young men of Yancey's Brigade congratulated each other for their part in the day's events. Maryan had come downstairs to begin preparations for dinner, which would be late today, since she had been sequestered in her quarters with the little boys for most of the day. Davie was puttering around

in the kitchen, helping his mother, and Peet was helping his Pap by riding through the castle on his shoulders.

Roarke had gone up to his rooms, hoping to rest, but once there, he found that he could not avoid looking out across the barren expanse to the south. He knew that Abey and Yeskie were watching, too, and trusted them to sound the alarm if necessary, but he was still uneasy about Belder Payn. After watching for a few moments and seeing nothing, he lay down upon his bed with his hands clasped behind his neck, and after staring at the ceiling for a few moments more, made the conscious decision to close his eyes. Before he had a chance to be overtaken by sleep, though, he heard Yeskie's voice—or maybe it was Abey's—call out, "Here they come!"

Roarke leaped from his bed, grabbed his sword, and hurried down the stairs. Across the hall he saw Maryan shoing her two sons back up their stairwell, and from the courtyard he heard Lirey shouting commands in a calm, confident voice.

"Yancey! Split your brigade into four groups: two on each side of the courtyard, and two on each side of the great hall. Yeskie's Brigade, you're with me! Woodwright, take your men and come with me, too! We'll form a line outside the gate. Will, you stay with Roarke, and do whatever he commands. Do you have any orders?" he asked Roarke, who had joined the men.

"No, it's good," Roarke replied shortly. He shouted to the corners, "Yeskie! Abey! Do you remember your orders?" They waved that they did, and he told Lirey and his two brigades, "Fan out in a half moon around the front gate. Will, you stand to my left—we'll stand in the gate itself. And have a care how you swing that blade, if it comes to that."

No sooner had they run out of the gate toward their places on the field than they could see the horsemen thundering their way, drawn swords waving in the air.

Belder Payn rode in the center of the eleven outlaws, at the point of a vee that fanned out behind him to the right and left. He was shouting curses, attempting to incite his men to bloodlust. Sinder rode behind him to his right flank, shouting as well. Before them they saw the thin line of defenders forming in a semicircle around the gate, small figures in the distance. Sinder thought to himself, *They're ready for us. They're not unaware.* He shouted again and held his sword high.

The mad career across the open field toward the castle gate continued. Belder and Sinder saw Roarke standing in the center of the gateway to the courtyard, with his hand raised high, and they aimed the point of the vee toward him. They saw Roarke's arm drop, as if in signal, and saw the mouths of Roarke's Men open in a shout, though they could not hear the voices. They were nearly halfway across the open field to the castle defenders, when two arrows struck Belder in the center of his chest almost simultaneously, making a sound like *thwip-thwip*. His blasphemous shout died with a gurgle in his throat. His sword, which he had been waving in a circle above his head, dropped to the ground, and Belder tilted slowly backward, his arms raising up over his head in a feeble, flailing salute. He toppled over the hindquarters of his horse, landing on his chest with such force that it pushed the arrows clear through his torso to extend into the air like a pair of bloody signposts.

Because of the vee formation of the attack, the only two who saw Belder fall were Sinder and the brigand to his immediate left. But they had scarcely enough time to register their dismay before bolts came hurtling out of the sky to demand their souls as well. The man to Sinder's left took the shaft straight through his heart and was killed instantly. Sinder was hit in the neck, the blade of the arrow slicing his jugular vein and causing blood to drench his tunic. He dropped his

blade, clapped his hand to his neck, and wheeled his horse around to head back to where his brother had fallen.

Once again, the vee formation allowed only two more men from Belder's force to see what was happening to the center of their attack. Eight men continued raging forward toward the castle defenders—though before they reached the castle, they were only six—the three outermost men from each flank.

The three on the left flank of Belder's attack struck the defenders of Yeskie's Brigade with a clash of metal blades, and they inflicted deep wounds on two of Roarke's Men. Each of the three was in turn receiving stripes of his own, across the legs, across the belly, horses screaming and rearing as poorly aimed slashes struck the beasts instead of the riders.

Of the three from the right side of Belder's attack, though, two had finally realized that their force had been cut in half just before they arrived at the battle line. They turned back, to flee from the field in the direction they had come from. A moment later, each was lying on the ground with a feathered shaft protruding from his back. The last outlaw, who had continued in to meet the line, was quickly surrounded by Woodwright's Brigade, and threw his blade to the earth without inflicting a single stripe.

"Hold! Hold!" Roarke cried out to the three on his right, who still swung their blades. "You are defeated! Your captain is lost! Hold!"

Seeing with some surprise that they were all that was left of the attack, the three threw their blades to the ground, raising their hands to the skies in surrender. One, who was trying with one hand to hold his intestines inside his wounded abdomen, slumped slowly to the side, and fell to the dust. The only one of Belder's men who was not bloodied was the one who had been surrounded by Woodwright's Brigade, and had thrown down his sword before engaging them in battle.

"Climb down from your horses," Lirey commanded the two on his right, and Woodwright made the same demand of the one his men had captured. The last three outlaws were then herded into a makeshift prison cell in the rear of the castle, a chamber which had been perhaps used for that purpose a century before as well—it was just a single room dug into the wall of the castle, with one iron-barred door for access.

"See to our wounded," Roarke said. "Is there one of us who knows any healing arts?" The two from Yeskie's Brigade who had caught the blows from Belder's swordsmen were made as comfortable as possible, as Lirey and Keet tried to stanch the flow of blood from their wounds.

"Woodwright," said Roarke, "let's you and I walk out on the field to see if any of our enemies still live."

"Me, too," said Willum, and Roarke said, "Yes, Will, you too."

As they went, he called back to his men, "Have a care, and keep your guards up. Belder had quite a few more men than this, earlier today."

Roarke was rather hoping that Sinder Payn was still alive, but didn't voice that hope to his companions. They came first to the two who had been shot in the back while trying to flee; close by them were the last two who had been felled during the abortive charge on the castle. All were dead. A few paces farther on was the man who had been struck down alongside Sinder—also dead.

"Willum, Woodwright, gather up the horses, if you will," said Roarke, and he walked on alone, sword drawn, to where Sinder Payn lay face down, draped across the corpse of his dead brother. Roarke quickly saw that his sword was unnecessary, though; no one could have lost that much blood and still been a threat to fight again.

He knelt beside Sinder, and bowed his head down close to the highwayman, whose blond hair was matted and blackened by his own blood. Roarke was

surprised to hear the faint whisper of a breath pass from Sinder's lips, and he rolled him, as gently as he could, onto his back.

"Sinder," Roarke said softly, "we did get to meet one more time, after all. I'm sorry you have met this fate, but I suppose there was no other end that could have come about." A flicker of recognition lit Sinder's eyes, as he looked one final time at the last thing he would see on this side of the great divide: the eyes of Roarke, liquid with compassion. "God have mercy on you, my boy," Roarke choked. A wispy sigh escaped Sinder's lips, and with that ethereal breath, his lamp was extinguished. "God have mercy on you, Sinder Payn."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Some of the boys of Yancey's Brigade came to drag the carcasses of the attackers of Blythecairne off toward the little knoll where Boof was buried. Lirey was directing the others where to dig the new graves, and Keet was motioning Roarke to come back to the castle.

"A sad business, Keet," Roarke said to him as he drew near.

"Aye, an' it's sadder still," Keet said darkly, wiping a line of sweat from his furrowed brow. "Th' two of our boys what got skewered by them outlaws ... they ain't goin' t' make it, m'Lord."

"Oh, no," Roarke groaned. "Take me to them."

"I'll take ye t' th' one who's worst, first," Keet said. "His name's Wilton, an' he's a single feller, who's got no one else in th' world."

"Yes, I know him," Roarke replied. "Who's the other?"

"It's our smith, Hale. He's got a daughter an' a wife, what he left behind in Fairling until the spring."

Roarke sighed heavily. "Are you sure we can't save him?"

"We can't save him, m'Lord. Mebbe if ye wanted t' try yer prayin', like ye did fer Treadle, mebbe th' Almighty God would listen t' ye again?"

"I can try. We can ask. Take me to Wilton first."

"We're there." He pointed to a pallet in a corner of the great hall, beside which Maryan knelt, inspecting the bandage on Wilton's grisly head wound. She had tried to make him comfortable, by bathing his forehead with cool water, and tucking soft blankets under and around him.

Wilton said to her, "Thankee, my dear, but ye can leave off'n yer troubles now. Lord Roarke's come, an' he'll see me through t' the other side." He smiled feebly up at the sorrowful woman, who gave way to the knight.

Roarke knelt beside him, and said, "Wilton, my friend. How can I help you? Is there any gift or message that I can give anyone in your name?"

"Nah, my Lord, there ain't none. But I been hangin' on so's I could see ye one last time afore goin' on t' the next world, like ye said about."

Keet, mindful of his duties as the castle's steward, said to him, "What d'ye want did with yer gold, Wilton?"

"Hi, Keet," Wilton replied. "I di'n't know ye was there. If it's all right wi' ye, Lord Roarke, could ye give my share o' th' gold t' the Lady Maryan?" Roarke nodded. "She done all she could t' make my last moments peaceful, an' she filled my eyes with such a beautiful sight these last few moments, an' she even shed a few tears herself for old Wilton. That's worth all of a man's treasure, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is. You'll see to it, Keet?"

"An' tell her 'thankee' fer me one last time," Wilton continued. "Ye know, Roarke, I weren't goin' t' come up here t' the castle with ye, until Yeskie got me full of yer ale back in Fairling. But think what I woulda missed, if I hadn't come! I seen the bones o' the dragon! I helped defend the castle! An' I got tended to by a lovely lass in my final moments, who shed tears over my passin'. I never woulda had adventures like that, if I'd stayed in Fairling—I'da died old an' bitter an' alone. Not only that, Roarke, but I got t' hear ye talkin' about yer God, too, an' I seen fer my own self the kind o' man that he made ye t' be. An' I say, that's a good thing. So, thankee, Lord Roarke. Ye've blest me."

"You've blessed me, Wilton. Thank you."

The wounded man closed his eyes, and smiled. "I can hear the music startin' from the other side ... would ye please pray me on through into the arms o' God, if that ain't askin' wrong?"

"Yes, Wilton, I will." He bowed his head. "Almighty Lord of heaven and earth, receive this good man into your kingdom—"

"Can't ye hear it?" Wilton asked. "God, ain't it beautiful?"

Roarke placed his hand on the face of the friend he had known all too briefly, and said, "We'll meet again, in the Lord's own land," and hot tears bled from his eyes. He didn't understand the pain in his own heart, when Wilton was so clearly at peace, but still, it seared his chest like a brand.

"Ain't it ... lovely?" Wilton asked for the last time, and with a sigh released his spirit into the next world.

From behind him, Roarke heard Maryan's soft sobbing, and the gentle sounds of Keet trying to comfort her.



A few moments later, Roarke was kneeling beside the pallet of Hale, who was crying out and cursing because of the pain of his wounds. He had actually been struck twice by the blade of one of the attackers, once in the head, which was partially deflected by his leather helmet, and once on his unprotected shoulder. Hale's left arm lay useless now but his right fist clenched and unclenched repeatedly as spasms of pain wracked his abundant frame.

"I never shoul'da come," he gasped. "Jist followin' damned gold." Beads of sweat dotted his brow, and his eyes were tormented with pain and fear.

"Hale, my friend," began Roarke, but he was cut off by the man's groans.

"Roarke, ye're a fine cut of a man, but ye ain't me friend!" Hale said. "Ye've brought me t' me death." Tears flowed from his eyes and drained into his ears, as he wailed, "An' now I'll never see me dear wife, nor me little one, never again!"

Sadness clouded Roarke's face. "I'm so sorry," he said gently. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I'm a dyin' man! What could ye do fer me?"

"May I pray with you?"

"Nay, keep yer prayers fer yerself. Jist ... jist look after me wife, so she's not left t' fend fer herself alone, will ye?"

"I'll see that she's cared for; you have my word. Is there any message I can give her for you?"

"Jist tell her that I loved her ... an' I'll miss her." A fresh spasm of agony rippled through his body. "Now, go on outa here. I'm humbled that ye're seein' me so pitiful."

Roarke laid his hand on Hale's good shoulder, and said, "Goodbye, my friend. As long as Blythecairne stands, your courage will not be forgotten."

He got up to walk away, to head up the stairs to his own rooms, to wrestle with his own thoughts. Hale called out to him, "Roarke?"

Roarke turned, and said, "What is it, my friend?"

"I'm ... I'm sorry, about what I said. Thankee fer takin' care o' me wife.... An', Roarke?"

"I'm here."

"If'n, when ye says yer prayers tonight, ye wants t' mention my name ... well, I guess that'd be all right."

"I will, Hale. I will."

The wounded man swallowed, and closed his eyes. "Goodbye, Lord Roarke."

"Goodbye, my friend." Roarke paused a moment longer, breathed. "Keet, will you come fetch me when dinner is ready?" And he slowly lifted his weary feet up the steps to his bare, solitary chamber.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The next morning, breakfast was a somber affair. Hale had died during the night, and Lirey was morose about having lost two of the men he had led in the battle. Roarke decided that the day would not be spent on work, but would be a day of mourning and memorial for Hale and for Wilton.

After breakfast, Roarke led some of the boys out to the graveyard—there wasn't any other way to describe that plot of ground now. While the little knoll had recently contained only the remains of Boof, now there were eight more freshly dug graves in two rows. And two more graves needed to be dug this morning.

Roarke took a shovel and began both of the holes himself before turning the labors over to his young charges, Tinker and Spence, Aron Millerson and Kayce. The four youths, who had all been recruited by Yancey Wain, chatted reflectively as they dug.

"I'll sure miss old Hale," Aron Millerson said. He was a blond-haired, red-faced boy who had a tendency to sweat profusely, but he was always eager to lend a hand where there was physical labor to be performed.

"Yeah, me too," said Kayce, a short, round fellow whose muscles were as hard as the stone of the castle's walls. "He was goin' t' show me the smithin' trade."

"Ye might as well still give it a try," Spence said. "His tools'll be jest sittin' there, and we're still goin' t' be needin' a smith."

Kayce paused between shovelfuls of dirt. "Aye, that's so. I'll bet one o' th' other old-timers would know enough t' get me started."

"Sure, that's right," Aron Millerson said. "But I'll still miss Hale."

Tinker, a mischievous boy with a perpetual twinkle in his brown eyes, said, "Ye know what I remember about Hale? He'd be a-workin' out in his forge, off t' the side of his farm, an' if he'd be workin' on somethin' particular heavy, he'd take two swings with his hammer, an' then he'd let out a mighty fart." Kayce chuckled. "He kept a beat so pretty that ye coulda danced to it. It was *whang! whang!* Fart. *Whang! whang!* Fart. *Whang! whang!*—" He had been performing this act complete with pantomime and sound effects, and the four boys promptly found themselves rolling on the ground in helpless paroxysms of laughter, in spite of their sorrow. Just as their laughter was starting to subside, Aron accidentally let out a fart of his own with a loud *poot*, and the boys became nearly hysterical, lying on their sides, whooping, and thumping the ground with their hands.

After a few moments, the boys' quaking laughter died down into a series of chuckling aftershocks, and they sat back-to-back, wiping tears from their cheeks—whether they were tears from laughter, or from sorrow, they could not have told.

Kayce said admiringly, "Old Hale sure could fart." The boys chuckled again for a few seconds, and Aron said, "I'll sure miss him."

Tinker said, "Ye know, old Wilton was somethin' of a jester, hisself. Ye know that feller, Galvan, of Woodwright's? I seen Wilton hidin' his blankets on 'im, on the ride up here t' Blythecairne, while Galvan was off takin' a piss. Galvan looked all around fer them blankets when he come back, accusin' everyone around o' takin' 'em, but Wilton kept a straight face the whole time. When Galvan went off t' tell Woodwright that his blankets was missin', Wilton put 'em right back where Galvan'd left 'em, folded up just as pretty as ye please. He never said a word about it, neither."

Spence chuckled lightly, and said, "Yep, that's pretty funny."

"Aye," Tinker agreed. He paused for a beat, and then said, "but not as funny as Hale."

The four boys giggled again for a couple of moments, and Aron Millerson said, "I'll miss him."

"We all will, laddie," Tinker said. "We all will."



Roarke addressed his men as they stood assembled at the little graveyard in front of the two open holes. The bodies of Wilton and Hale lay beside their respective graves, covered with two of the finest tapestries that had still been hanging on the walls of Blythecairne.

"My friends ... we're here now to pay our last respects to Wilton and Hale. Even though their time with us here at the castle was very brief, they have made an indelible mark upon our lives. They are the first to lose their lives in the defense of Blythecairne ... at least, the first this century. May they be the last, if God allows it."

The brisk autumn wind whipped at Roarke's cloak, and tousled his silvering hair. "Before I lead us in prayers, do any of you have any words you'd like to speak for your friends?"

There were a few moments of uncomfortable silence, which was broken by Vinsant, of Yeskie's Brigade, clearing his throat. "I known Wilton for a long time. He had a way o' makin' me smile." He shuffled his feet and looked down to the earth, then raised his head and looked at Roarke. "He was happy here, at the castle. He only lived here a couple o' days, but he was happy. He was changed ... like he was young again." He looked down again for a moment, then said, "I expect he's disappointed that he's dead. But he was glad that he come." After clearing his throat again, he said, "Amen."

Lirey spoke up next. "Hale ... weren't particularly happy that he come. He missed his wife Thalia, an' his daughter Melliss, somethin' awful, fer th' week that he was gone. An' now he won't never see 'em again, nor they him. It's a harsh world we be livin' in, an' these be harsh times, but ye hafta say a good word about a man what loves his wife, an' what loves his daughter. An' that was Hale."

"Amen," said several of the men.

After that, some of the others gave short testimonials regarding their two friends, simple and heartfelt. A couple of times, Spence and Tinker elbowed each other and chuckled softly, remembering their own reminiscences of the morning. After everyone that wished to speak had been allowed to have a moment, Roarke drew his pouch of God's words from his vest.

"I beg that you will pardon an old man's folly, but I can't think of any greater way to honor our friends' lives than by reading the words of the Almighty over them, to help send them on to God's own land. Here is the last fragment of writing that I have, and I offer this as a benediction to the lives of Hale and Wilton:

"... memoriam faciatis non enim doctas fabulas secuti notam fecimus vobis Domini nostri Iesuchristi virtutem et praesentiam sed speculatores facti illius magnitudinis accipiens enim a Deo Patre honorem et gloriam voce delapsa ad eum huiuscemodi a magnifica gloria hic est Filius meus dile ..."

Roarke tucked the scrap of paper back into his pouch, then tucked the pouch back into his tunic, next to his heart. "The meaning of these words, according to friend Barnabas, is this: *'Remember, after I have died, that this is not just a children's story that you have followed. But I have declared to you the one Iesuchristi who has received honor and glory from the Almighty, who spoke about him, "I am pleased with this one—my son".'*

"This is the most mysterious of all the mysteries that Barnabas spoke to me. Apparently 'Iesuchristi' is the name of the sheep who bore God's punishment, and somehow he is also known to be God's son.

"But some of the message from this reading is most poignant to us today—our day of sorrow. 'Remember, after I have died, that you didn't just follow a children's story, a fable, a myth.' Wilton and Hale, though they have died, testified to us that they found something that was true in this life to believe in. Something that was good, to follow. To be willing to sacrifice their own lives for. And now, that we have lost them into eternity, to what lies beyond this life, we remember them, and what they taught us.

"Wilton's joy speaks to us still: 'Remember, after I have died, that something is good, is praiseworthy, is able to make us laugh.' Hale's love for his family speaks to us still: 'Remember, after I have died, that something is lovely, is noble, is able to make us cry.'

"I told Hale yesterday, that as long as Blythecairne stands, his courage would not be forgotten. Now, I charge you—his friends: Do not forget him. Do not forget Wilton. Tell your children and your grandchildren about them, about their joy, their sorrow, their sacrifice. Remember them for the best that they were, and forgive them for the ways ... that they were just like us.

"Now we commit their bodies to the earth. And we pray that that part of them that lives on will be received with honor into the great kingdom of the Almighty. That, in some way, God our Father would look at Hale and at Wilton, and say ... 'I am pleased with these two—my sons.'"

Roarke nodded at four of the men that had been chosen for the task, and they stepped forward and gently lowered the bodies of their fallen comrades into the earth. The knight sighed, and prayed, "God, thank you for letting us know these fine men. Here they are, Lord, for You. Let us not forget them. And, if it pleases

You, let us meet them again one day, when we cross over the border into Your country."

Picking up a shovel, he lifted one shovelful of dirt, and sifted it gently onto Wilton's chest, then did the same for Hale. He handed the tool to Lirey, and stepped back. In turn, each of Roarke's Men added one shovelful of dirt to both graves, until they all had rendered this final act of respect to both of their comrades.

"Spence, Tinker," Roarke said, "Would you please finish filling these graves for us, while the rest of us go and spend an hour in silence. We will fast for our noonday meal today, but tonight, when we gather for supper, we shall celebrate. Keet, we have one cask full of ale, don't we? Then let's break it out tonight." Starting to walk back to the castle, he said, "Thank you all."

Spence and Tinker looked at each other guiltily, punched each other's arms, then picked up their spades and finished their job. Before long, they were chatting and laughing together again.

Willum, walking back to the castle alongside Roarke, remarked, "If Hale an' Wilton was stickin' around t' see this service before headin' off t' God's country, I'll bet they was mighty cheered by all th' fine things what got said about 'em today."

"Yes, I'll bet so," Roarke replied. He put his arm around the boy's shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "God bless you, Will."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Knaiver had ridden with the others who had parted ways with Belder until they got back to the outskirts of the city of Goric, nearly three days after they had left for the castle. On the road they had talked but little—an honorable choice was a new experience for many of them, and they weren't quite sure just what to make of it. If Belder failed in his attempt to take Blythecairne and was turned back, his anger would be fierce. If Belder failed in his attempt to take Blythecairne and was killed, well, then, there would be no more Belder, and everything about their lives in Goric would be changed. If Belder succeeded in overthrowing Roarke ... that might be the worst outcome of all. Then not only would his anger against his former mates be fierce, he would also have much more wealth and power than he had ever had before, and his capacity for making people who had disappointed him miserable was already legendary.

These thoughts pestered the minds of the sixteen men who were returning to Goric, and they tacitly decided to make themselves as invisible as possible, until their next course would be determined for them. For Knaiver, this was only problematic if he decided to stay in Goric—then there would be explaining to do to his boss, Rulous, who also had a knack for making people uncomfortable if he felt like it. But, if Roarke was victorious over Belder—which Knaiver felt he certainly *must* be—then Knaiver's plan was to sell his little house, or else just abandon it if he could not find a buyer, and then head back to Blythecairne to serve the household there—if he were allowed to. He would take Eyela to the castle with him if she wanted to go, and he would help her any other way that he could, whether she went or not.

Knaiver didn't know who owned the horse that he was riding; he supposed that, under the circumstances, it might be considered to be *his* now, purchased with the gold falconet given to him by Roarke, which had been kept by Belder Payn. A good feeding and a little rest, and maybe the beast could carry both him and Eyela back to the castle.

The other fifteen who had returned to Goric had all parted company, headed for their own homes now, so Knaiver pulled up in front of his own door, and dropped the reins through a ring on his wall. He knocked gently on the door, and then thought to himself that any onlookers might think it very strange—a single man knocking on his own door! So he pulled on the latch and stepped inside.

The house was dark; it was evening, and no candles were lit. Knaiver called out softly, "Child ... are you here?"

From the other room—Knaiver's bedroom—came the hushed reply, "I'm here, father. Are you alone?"

"Yes, quite alone." He lit a candle on his table, and pulled down a container of oats from his pantry. He was ravenously hungry, after nearly three days with nothing to eat but a crust of bread. "Do we have any water in the house?" he asked the girl, while he used the candle to light a small pile of kindling in his cooking stove.

"May I cook for you, father?"

"Why, yes, my dear, I suppose so. Are you feeling better?" He took down a small jar of honey from his shelf, dipped his finger, and happily licked it off.

"I'm feeling much better in most ways ... but ... I am still blind in my left eye. I fear that Belder has ... disfigured me."

"Here, here, let's have a look," the old gentleman said comfortingly. He took the girl's soft, freckled cheeks in his hands, tilted her chin upwards, and looked directly into her eyes. Her right eye gazed steadily back into his (though he saw in

it a sadness that he had not seen before), but her left eye was discolored, bruised, and stared off at an odd angle to the side, unresponsive, except that a steady flow of tears still drained from it. A purple-and-yellow bruise covered most of the left side of her face, and her upper lip was still slightly swollen.

Eyela saw in his face the visible pang of regret, and knew that she was no longer beautiful, at least not in the same way she had been before. She hung her head, ashamed, and whispered, "What's to become of me?"

"There, there, my dear," he breathed, "the end of your tale is not written yet. You will still have days of laughter and love before you." As she started to shake her head, he said, "Really! I promise you! You will know days of joy and singing again." He hoped with all of his heart that he was not telling a lie.

"Well ... well...." She sighed. "Sit down, kind father, while I put the kettle on. You must tell me what's happened the past three days. Was Belder able to carry out his horrid plan?"

"No, my dear, I think not. The information Belder got was false. There were not five men at Blythecairne—there were closer to thirty! And when I parted ways with Belder, his own force was down to nine men, plus his brother and himself. Also, the man leading the force at Blythecairne was no bumpkin from Fairling; he was a great nobleman from the western lands, called Sir Roarke, who is a slayer of dragons."

"Oh...." She tried to understand what this meant, and then realization dawned. "Then Harres played Belder for a fool! How clever of him ... the poor man." She wondered if she should tell Knaiver her next thought, and then chose to do so. "He would have loved me, I think."

"Oh, you poor girl ... who would *not* have loved you?" Tears ran down Knaiver's wrinkled cheeks, as pity for the young woman overcame him. Eyela, busy at the stove, did not see, but she understood, and was grateful.

"Tell me, father ... is Belder dead?"

"I confess that I don't know. He was intent on taking the castle, and his company was divided. I last saw him yesterday. He was very angry."

"I have prayed that he would die. Perhaps whatever power there is in Heaven has taken pity on me, and heard my petition."

"Perhaps ... but please, dear one ... try to remember joy. These have been dark days for you. They will not always be so."

"Won't they?" She looked at him again, her eye pointing uselessly off into the shadows. "You are kind, father ... but I am wounded." Her voice broke, her chin trembled, and the fountain of her tears threatened to flow again.

"I know, I know, little one." He held his arms out to her. "Come, let me hold you." She placed the kettle on the table, and sat in his lap, laying her head down on his shoulder. "I am much too old to take a bride again, but whatever love an old man can give, is yours, for all of your days."

"Even though I am not beautiful?" she said in a timid voice.

"Oh, Eyela, my dear ... you are as beautiful as the morning. You are as beautiful as springtime."

"Thank you, father," she said, feeling some slight tug of happiness attempting to pull away her cloak of gloom. "You are a splendid liar."

"Shush, little one ... I am a splendid truth-teller."

Chapter Thirty-Six

The morning air at Blythecairne was crisp and invigorating, and Roarke woke up feeling refreshed and happy, until he remembered what he had to do that morning.

He headed downstairs to the great hall and found Lirey and Keet already up and chatting near the castle gate. "Good morning," he greeted them, and Will came bounding up from the entrance to the kitchen, asking, "Would ye be likin' a cup o' tea this mornin', m'Lord?"

After replying affirmatively, Roarke turned his attention to his lieutenants. "Lirey, I need you to meet with the four brigade commanders and have them get their men to work. Our first needs are for the castle gate to be reconstructed and for barracks to be built. Have Yancey's boys take turns riding the perimeter; we've got some fine new horses they can take for a circuit. After you get everybody going, bring the brigadiers back to me. We have to declare our judgment this morning against the three that we spared from Belder Payn's attack."

An hour later, Roarke, Will, Lirey, Keet, and the four brigadiers met at the throne. Roarke grumbled, "I hate sitting on that thing. But I'm going to have to play the role of Lord and Judge again this morning. Ah, well." He clapped Lirey on the shoulder and said, "Good Captain, take Will and the brigadiers and bring the prisoners."

The prisoners had been treated fairly the previous day, being ignored for the most part, but having been fed two meals—same as the rest of the household.

As they were brought from their cell behind the castle, they shuffled nervously through the yard where Roarke's Men turned from their carpentry to scowl darkly at them. The prisoners glanced around to see if there was any

possibility of flight, but they were outnumbered two-to-one, and their captors held blades, while they were weaponless. Lirey marched them all the way around the castle, so that they came in through the front gateway, entering the hall from the direction that faced the throne.

Roarke sat on the throne, his circlet upon his brow, with Keet standing by his side. The prisoners were marched to their position in front of the dais. Roarke said, "Kneel," and the three did so.

A disapproving frown tugged at the corners of Roarke's mouth. He recognized one of the three from earlier, when that man had knelt before the throne and pledged to turn back from violence against Blythecairne, receiving a falconet for his lie.

"I have a great problem here. Perhaps you can help me," he began. "According to the laws of any land I can even think of, your lives are forfeit. You rode against my peaceful community, without any declaration of war. You killed two of my men. And one of you had even taken money from me earlier in the same day, and pledged peace. When you chose to commit this crime ... you forfeited any right to continue breathing the same clean air as the inhabitants of Blythecairne.

"The only reason this presents a dilemma for me is this: I wish to spare your lives. It would be very easy for me just to take your heads from your shoulders, and add your sorry carcasses to those of your companions. That would be just. But as Lord of Blythecairne, it falls to me to determine how best to temper justice with mercy.

"I cannot set you free; that would be an affront to justice. I wish not to kill you; that would be a slight to mercy. I have no desire for you to remain my prisoners, taking resources from my people that we will sorely need this winter,

and contributing nothing. The best thing that I can do, I believe, is offer you slavery.

"You will work alongside us, and eat the same food that we eat. You will share the same toils and many of the same rewards that we do. But whereas my men will be paid for their work, you will not. And when my men spend the night sleeping in their barracks, and later on, their houses, you will be escorted back to the same cell where you have already been held, and spend your nights sleeping behind a locked door.

"If you can accept these terms, then please do—choose to live. But if your sense of independence does not allow you to bear another man's yoke, then tell us now, and we will give you a shovel so that you can begin digging your own grave.

"Now, then ... what have you to say for yourselves?"

Two of the men looked at each other nervously; the one who had accepted the falconet kept his eyes to the floor. One of the prisoners cleared his throat, and said, "I accept your terms of mercy, Sir Roarke. I know I done what was wrong, and your terms is fair. May I ask you a question, though?"

"Yes. First tell me your name, then ask your question."

"I always just been called Jack." Roarke nodded for him to continue. "If I serve you decently and faithfully, without no trouble nor trying to break free ... might you grant me the possibility of parole one day?"

"A fair question. For now, I will say no. But I promise you, if you do as you say, I will revisit the question one day."

"Thank you, sir," the penitent captive acquiesced.

The man next to him, sensing that his turn was next, said sorrowfully, "Lord Roarke ... I am undone! If I was a single man, I'd accept your terms gratefully. But I have a wife and a small son waiting for me at home in Goric, and they won't

know what's become of me!" His face contorted as he struggled to contain his emotion.

Roarke's breast swelled with compassion. "What's your name, friend?"

"Nolan, m'Lord."

"I swear, Nolan, I would set you free if I could ... but justice will not allow it. What would you have me do for you?"

"If you could just send a man to Goric, and let 'em know ... that I won't be coming home," the man's voice broke, and his shoulders shook as he silently sobbed.

Roarke decided swiftly, "I will do better than that. I will send two men to Goric, and have them tell your family of your plight. And I will offer that, if your wife is agreeable, they may come here and live as part of the castle household, under the same terms as my free men. That way, you and your son will not be deprived of each other. Will that do?"

The man, unable to speak, simply nodded his head, as the grateful tears streamed down his cheeks.

Roarke's Men watched in amazement as their leader calmly balanced the demands of harsh justice with the generosity of merciful forgiveness. Even though some of their number had wanted to execute the prisoners without compassion, they could not deny that Roarke's way was better. Even gruff Yeskie, who had lost the two men in the attack from Belder, was moved with pity, and a single tear ran untended from the corner of his eye, to disappear in the tangle of his beard.

The last man to plead was the one who had broken his promise to Roarke. The knight said to him, "And now we come to you. Perhaps the most duplicitous man left alive within a day's ride of here."

"Beggin' yer pardon, m'Lord, I understand why ye think I'm the most dangerous man in Blythecairne—"

"I do not believe you are the most dangerous man in Blythecairne," Roarke interrupted him. "I called you the biggest liar in Blythecairne. *I* am the most dangerous man here."

The man gulped, and fought to find his voice again. Roarke said to him, "Your name is Gustus, isn't it?"

The man looked narrowly from side to side like a cornered beast. Roarke said, "Keet, is his name Gustus?"

"Aye, that's it."

"Gustus, because you have played false with your sworn promise, I sentence you either to a lifetime of labor at Blythecairne's command, with no possibility of pardon, or else you can go and meet your Maker today. The choice is yours." Roarke looked at him steadily, waiting for his decision.

"Well, sir, when ye puts it that way ... I guess I'll choose the labor," he said sullenly.

"Be sure that you have chosen sincerely. For you to continue to draw breath in this life, you must work heartily. You will be well fed and not abused, but neither will you be coddled. And if you attempt to escape, or if you ever raise your hand against Blythecairne again, your life will be demanded of you at once."

"All right," he said cheerlessly, "I get yer meanin'."

"Stand to your feet, all of you. Captain Lirey will escort you back to your quarters, where you will be allowed to spend the rest of this day preparing yourselves for your labors. This will be a new life for all of you, but it doesn't need to be a bitter one. Tomorrow ... you will begin.

"Woodwright, you shall be in charge of Jack. Yancey, Nolan will be with your boys. Yeskie, you and Abey will be in charge of Gustus—I needn't tell you to watch him closely.

"Gentlemen," he concluded, addressing the prisoners, "thank you for choosing life instead of death. May God grant that we have many fruitful days together."



The purple light of dawn drifted in from the front room.

Eyela whispered from the bed, "Knaiver? Are you awake?"

Knaiver had slept on a mat on the floor, next to his bed. He had actually been awake for some time, but had lain silently on the mat, not wishing to wake the girl.

"Yes, I'm awake," he said softly.

"I've been wondering ... what do you think happened to Harres?"

"I don't know. Sinder Payn mentioned to me that it was Harres who gave them the information about Blythecairne, but that's the only time he was mentioned."

"Oh.... I hope he's all right." She fell silent, and Knaiver wondered if she had fallen back asleep.

"Father, I'm confused," she said a few moments later.

"What is it?"

She raised herself up on her elbow, and looked down at him with her good eye. "If Harres had not been ... foolish ... over me, then he would not have had trouble with Belder. *I* would not have had trouble with Belder. And Belder would not have ridden off to Blythecairne, which is sure to result in disaster for at least some. And, yet, when I think of Harres ... I am not angry with him. I feel ... responsible. As if it were *my* folly that resulted in all this hardship, not his."

Knaiver, who had not heard the story of Eyela's betrothal party, said, "I'm sorry, my child, but I'm not sure I know what you're speaking of."

Eyela said, "Forgive me, father—I thought you had heard." She went on to tell him the story of Harres' gift of falconets, the exchange of the kiss, and Belder's brutality. "When I woke in the darkness of the night and slipped away, no one saw me leave. At least, I think not. And I have spoken to no one but you since that night. So I don't know if Harres escaped, or if he is in chains, or ... or worse." She sighed, and lay back down, staring at the ceiling. "Father Knaiver, could you please go and find him for me? I would like to return his gold to him, and send him on his way in peace, to start his life over again, far from Belder Payn."

"Do you *have* the gold?" Knaiver asked, surprised. He sat up on his mat.

"Yes," she said pertly, some of her old fire rekindled. "On the second night you were gone, in the darkest hour of the early morning, I stole back into The Last Dog, and found the pouch of coins still lying on that table in the center of the room. No one had dared to touch any of the gifts that had been given to Belder." She gave the bed a small, defiant punch. "But Harres gave those coins to *me*, not Belder. And if I choose to give them back to him, who will tell me no?" She pursed her lips and pouted sadly. "And perhaps ... Harres will see my shame ... but still love me anyway."

Knaiver was uncertain how to proceed. A week ago, he had known Eyela, though not well—now, he was her guardian, her champion, her confessor. What should he do? He cast about in his mind for a moment, to see if some compelling reason presented itself to deny the girl's request. Except for his own uncertainty, there was none, so he said, "I will do as you ask."

"When will you go?"

"Well, no one will be about at The Last Dog this early in the morning. That's probably the best place to start asking questions. Let's get up, and have a bite of breakfast, and then I'll be on my way."

Breakfast turned out to be biscuits and honey, with water to drink, so it didn't take terribly long to prepare and eat it, but still, Eyela could barely contain her impatience. Knaiver noticed this, and thought it was a good thing. She had been frightfully abused just days ago, but now, once again, there seemed to be the strong tonic of hope welling up in her breast.

"I'll clean up from breakfast, father," Eyela said, and Knaiver understood her meaning.

"Then I suppose I'll be on my way," he said, pushing back from the table.

After the old man had left, Eyela planned what she would say when she saw Harres again. "Master Harres," she would begin sternly. "Thank you for your gift, but I fear that it has brought me nothing but hardship." When he would begin to apologize, she would hold up her hand, and say, "Therefore, I must insist that you take back your gift of gold." He would do so with great regret. A little thrill ran up her spine when she thought of her next demand. "And the kiss, which you purchased from me with your gold—I must insist that you return that, as well." Confusion would fill his eyes, then surprise, and happiness, and he would take her in his arms, and kiss her ... she dared not conjecture what might happen after that.

While she waited for Knaiver and Harres to come back, she tried arranging her hair so that her damaged left eye was partially concealed. Perhaps, when the swelling and the bruising subsided, she might not be *too* hideously ugly.

She heard steps in the street, and then a hand on the latch. She hid in the back room, waiting until she knew who was at the door. A heavy, weary tread sounded on the stoop, as the door closed and latched. She whispered, "Father?"

"Yes, child, it's me."

"What did you find?"

He sighed mournfully. "Come, Eyela, and sit with me at the table. I fear that you still have one more sorrow to bear."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Roarke and Will, with Yeskie and Yancey, arrived at the outskirts of Fairling a fortnight after Blythecairne's defense against Belder Payn. An oxcart trailed along with them, empty except for a small chest filled with gold, which would be used to fill the wagon with fresh supplies and lumber. When their business in Fairling was concluded, Yeskie and Yancey would ride to Goric and visit the wife of Nolan the slave, while Roarke and Willum would drive the cart back to the castle.

Roarke enjoyed being back in the saddle again, astride his stallion Justice. The other three rode mounts that had been retrieved from Belder's men, which were of a slightly higher quality than the beasts driven north from Fairling. Yancey in particular was anxious about being back in Fairling, because of the bittersweet mission he was undertaking; his sweetheart Melliss was the daughter of Hale, and he had asked Roarke for the duty of delivering the information to Hale's wife Thalia that she was a widow.

Just before they reached the edge of town, Roarke drew up and said, "I'm going to stop in and pay a visit to Treadle before moving on. Will, take the wagon to the market and let the master know what we need. Yeskie, you and Yance ride on in to The Dragon's Tail, and have Sallamay prepare a good lunch for us; Will and I will join you momentarily."

Roarke rode down the little path to Lirey's old farmhouse, and was pleased to see a comfortable-looking column of smoke rising from the little chimney. Looping Justice's reins over the post at the front of the cottage, he knocked at the door, lifted the latch, and entered.

"Greetin's, friend," called Treadle, who was seated at the table, puffing on a pipe. A fat brown puppy cowered behind his feet, peeking out at Roarke suspiciously and uttering one short yap.

"Treadle! You look well," said Roarke.

"Lord Roarke! I din't recognize yer footsteps! Well, this is a fine surprise!" He reached out his hand, and Roarke took it.

"How are things going here at the farm? Have you found workers able to bring in the harvest?"

"Aye! I got a fine crop o' youngsters pullin' in th' corn an' taters. An' t' make sure they keep workin' an' don't take advantage of a poor ol' blind feller, I been havin' Minney sneak out there ever' so often an' given 'em a little scare." He chuckled happily.

"Is that where Minney is now?" Roarke seated himself at the table across from Treadle, and the little dog scurried around to keep Treadle's feet between them.

"No, she been developin' a bit of a cough, an' she was feelin' a mite poorly, so I told 'er t' go in an' rest fer a bit. But I still got good comp'ny here," he said, reaching down to caress the pup.

"Yes, I see that. What's his name?"

"Well, I've took t' callin' him Yip, on account'n—well, I guess ye c'n figger that'n out fer yerself."

Roarke laughed heartily. Treadle continued, "He likes t' bite me fingers, too; a little game he plays wi' me. Sometimes I think I shoulda called 'im Nip, 'stead o' Yip." The two men chuckled amiably, and the dog yapped a couple of times.

"And how are *you* doing, Treadle?" Roarke asked. "Are you getting stronger still?"

"Oh, yes! I could practically turn somersaults now, if'n I had any idea where the walls was!"

"Well, that's excellent," Roarke smiled. "This is good—I am very happy for you."

"An' how about ye an' the boys at the castle? Is everythin' well there?"

"Mostly, yes, yes. But a couple of weeks ago, we had some trouble. Some men from Goric thought that they could overrun the castle and plunder it. We lost two—Hale and Wilton. That's why we've come back to Fairling so soon, to see what we can do for Hale's widow."

"Oh, that's sad," Treadle said.

"Yes, and that's why I can't stay longer and chat with you. Do you think I should look in on Minney before I leave?"

"I b'lieve she'd like that," Treadle replied. "She's in that other room there," he pointed.

"I'll be back to say goodbye," Roarke said, sliding his chair back from the table with a wooden squeak.

"Take yer time."



Yeskie and Yancey seated themselves at the board, after being warmly greeted by Sallamay. There was no one else in The Dragon's Tail at the moment, it being mid-afternoon and most local men being in their fields or at their trades.

The two had never had much of a conversation before, so an awkward silence hung in the air like a shroud for a few minutes. Finally, though, Yancey said, "I'm a bit nervous ... aboot tellin' me girl's ma that Hale is dead."

Yeskie grunted, and said, "Well ye might be, youngster. Wimmern is funny creatures."

Since this represented the longest speech that Yeskie had ever made to Yancey, the boy decided to pursue the conversation.

"Did ye ever have a sweetheart o' yer own?"

Yeskie snorted, "I hain't *always* been old, ye know. Me'n Abey both, we usta have wives together."

"Really? Where are they now?"

"Both dead, long dead." He tapped the cold tobacco out of his pipe against the corner of the table. "We usta share a little lodge out in th' forest on t'wards Farport, th' four of us. Abey's wife died one winter, so we kinda shared my wife for a coupla years, an' then damn if she didn't up an' die too. An' since then, it's been me'n Abey, jist th' two."

"Oh," Yancey said, wondering how it was that they had shared one wife. He said, "Have ye ever had t' tell a woman that 'er husband was dead before?"

"Nay, but I've seen it did, a time 'r two. It's a chancey thing. Some wimmern'll scream 'n cry 'n pound their fists on ye, an' whoop 'n wail fit t' call down th' gods. Some of 'em'll jist get real quiet an' sad. I'll say one thing fer ye, boy—ye're bold. Tellin' yer perspective mother-in-law that 'er husband is dead ... that takes stones."

"I'm bold," Yancey echoed ruefully.

Will came clattering in to the tavern, calling out a greeting to Sallamay.

"Master Will!" she cried, rushing to embrace him. "Ye've growed a foot!"

"Aw, Sal', thanks," he said sheepishly. While Willum had not actually grown taller in the past month, he *had* acquired something of a new dignity—standing more erect, shoulders straighter. "How's business here at the pub?"

"Jest as fine 's fine could be!" she crooned. "Th' table's full every night, an' some o' Roarke's gold is findin' its way back here most ever' day. We've got some tasty new meat fer yer luncheons today, what I've made into a stew fer ye. An' there's squash, an' beer, an' fer a treat, I jest put some nice apple tarts in th' stove."

"That sounds grand, Sallamay," said Roarke, who had come through the door in the midst of Sal's last statement.

"Master Roarke! Let me give ye a squeeze!" she said, and did.



Thalia was humming absentmindedly to herself as she sat on the bank of the little pond that lay across the lane from the house she shared with her daughter Melliss. She had gathered vegetables all morning, and had decided that a fat fish might make a nice dinner for the two of them, so she fished while her daughter worked in the house.

The autumn sun caressed her shoulders, and she dozed, lazily daydreaming. She was a plain woman, tending slightly toward becoming stout as she approached middle age, but she was not unattractive. Her hair was blonde almost to the point of white, and her husband Hale had often said that she was as fresh as a buttercup. She thought of Hale now—how he had vacillated for days about going north to Blythecairne, before striking his hand with Yeskie in a slightly drunken pledge. The four falconets which Hale had been promised for joining the expedition had not materialized yet; apparently they were payable at the castle. But Thalia had never needed gold to make her happy; some vegetables, some flowers, a smile, a caress—they were enough for her. Yet she had not fought against her husband when he had told her that he was going to Blythecairne, only made him promise

that after his year's service was done, he would either come home to her, or else bring her north with him.

She wondered how he was doing at the castle. She knew he was probably having fun, carousing with all the men and boys there ... but she wondered if he was ever lonely for her. Lonely like she was for him.

She heard the muted tones of voices carried on the breeze to her from down the lane. *Male voices ... several of them.* Her curiosity piqued, she abandoned her fishing, rose and waded through the tall grass, stepping out into the path in front of the men. *Four men ... Yancey's one of them! ... Hale is not.* Surprised by her sudden presence blocking their path, the men's facial expressions were stricken, sorrowful—she understood instantly.

"Oh, Yancey," she cried mournfully, as the dam holding back the great flood of her tears burst. The boy stepped toward her and gathered her into his arms, where he held her as she cried. They stood there in the center of the road for many moments, the woman's sobs muffled by Yancey's tear-soaked tunic.

"Mama?" came a call from the cottage. Melliss looked around the corner of their house and saw the circle of men around her mother, and ran to them. "Mama, what's happened?"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Knaiver had been unable to convince Eyela to go back out among the people she had known all her life in Goric, to resume her former activities, to revisit her old friendships. Her heart had become a leaden weight in her breast, the report of Harres' death draining her of all emotion. Neither would she consent to leave Knaiver's little house, until the elderly man said one morning, "My child, I have sold my house, and I am going to spend the rest of my days serving Sir Cedric Roarke at Blythecairne. Nothing remains for me at Goric ... except you, little one. But I have cast my lot in with Roarke, and I have tarried here longer than I intended."

She looked at him, a fresh wound blazing out of her one good eye. If anything, her wounded eye appeared to be duller and more lifeless as the days passed, shrinking within its socket. "Father Knaiver ... where shall I go?"

"When I secured my pardon and sanctuary from the Lord Roarke, I also asked him if he would welcome you, my dear. There is a home for you at Blythecairne, if you will come with me."

"Father ... what difference does it make if it's Blythecairne or Goric? Everywhere I go, my shame will be obvious! I will be hideous ... pitiable ... ugly."

"Here," the old gentleman said, and held out a small parcel.

"What is it?" she asked, curious in spite of her bitter melancholy.

"Open, and see."

She unwrapped the parcel, and found three different opaque veils—white, black, and forest green. After a hesitant moment, she whispered, "Will they make me beautiful again?"

"My dear, they will not only make you beautiful—they will make you mysterious. They will make you enigmatic ... exotic. With your beautiful shape, and your lovely hair.... " He altered the course of his topic slightly. "And you will never have to reveal your damaged features to another person that you don't wish to. Until you are certain of their hearts, not just their passions." He looked at her fully in the face, not flinching away from her disfigurement. "Come with me to Blythecairne, dear one."

In a small voice, she replied, "I will if you want me to."



With part of the proceeds from his house, Knaiver purchased a pony for Eyela to ride, and a little cart for their meager possessions. Before they left Goric, though, Eyela felt the need to pay one last visit to her mother. She held one of her veils upon her brow, and Knaiver tied the knot for her.

They rode to the hovel where Eyela had been raised, and where her mother Marla still lived, usually alone. It was difficult for the girl to see clearly, but at least she was not afraid of her face being mocked or pitied. As they pulled up at the front yard, she murmured to Knaiver, "I was happy here, as a child."

Flinging open the door to the hut, her mother came running to the pony where her beautiful daughter sat like a princess. "Eyela!" she cried. "Where have you been? I've been crazy with worry over you!"

"Have you, Mother?" the girl replied coolly.

"Of course I have!" the woman cried. "Master Knaiver, have you been hiding her? You should be ashamed of yourself! An old man like you, dallying with my daughter—and Belder Payn's wife! You are a fool."

Knaiver's jaw dropped in shock, but he did not reply.

Eyela, aghast, said, "Mother!"

Marla continued ranting against Knaiver, though. "When we came around to visit you after your wife had passed, I *thought* you were just a little too interested in my Eyela. And she was just a child, too! You should be ashamed, you horrid man! I've a mind to tell your master Rulous, and have him throw you in the stockade."

Knaiver turned away in humiliation and disgust, and told Eyela, "Meet me at my house when you're done here, and then we'll move on."

Eyela's mother shouted down the street after him as he rode off, "We don't need you, old man! My Eyela and me, and our Belder Payn, we can take care of ourselves!"

"Mother!" Eyela was acutely embarrassed for Knaiver. "Do you even know what Belder did to me?"

"He married you, didn't he? It makes a mother proud."

"Mother, look at me." She lifted her veil, exposing her crushed cheekbone and her withered eye. Her mother gasped, and staggered backward a step, holding out a hand to catch her balance.

"God in heaven," she said. "What did you ever do to earn that?"

"*Earn* it?" She stared at the older woman in disappointment. "You *know* me. What could I have ever done to deserve something like that? What would anyone ever do to justify what ... Belder did to me?"

"Well," Marla said, recovering, "you must have done something. Belder wouldn't just slap you, unprovoked."

"*Slap* me? Mother, he whipped me, he beat me! He ... raped me. He raped me, Mother."

"Nonsense. You can't be raped by your own husband."

"Belder Payn is not my husband. I refuse him."

Real alarm showed on the older woman's face now. "But, Eyela, poppet—if you don't stay married to Belder ... what's to become of *me*?"

A cold chill ran down Eyela's spine, and she replaced the veil over her ashen face. "I will take care of you, Mother." And she withdrew the pouch of falconets from within her cloak, and tossed it at Marla's feet.

"What's this?" She knelt and found the gold coins, and fairly shrieked with delight. "Bless you, daughter! Bless you, for showing such love to your mother."

"Goodbye, Mother." She turned her pony and followed the road that Knaiver had taken.

"Goodbye, Eyela! Come again soon!"

"Goodbye, Mother," Eyela whispered to herself.

When she caught up with Knaiver, she told him, "I gave my entire sack of coins to my mother."

"That's all right, child. We will be fine."

"So you aren't angry with me?"

"Do I really need to answer that?"

She thought for a moment, and said, "No."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The first snows had fallen at Blythecairne, blanketing the surrounding hills and fields with a covering of crystalline white. As the men and women of the castle looked out from the new gate that Abey and Yeskie had masterfully constructed, they marveled at the fairylike beauty of the land. Covered with snow, it was impossible to tell that the fields had been barren—they looked as if they had been kissed by magic.

Roarke lay drowsily upon his bed with his hands folded behind his head, and reflected on the activity of the last two months. Much had happened to generate optimism for the coming springtime.

Besides the massive castle gate, which was a thing of beauty, Yeskie and Abey had presided over the construction of barracks for the men, and stables for the beasts. Since the rebuilding of the wooden structures had been their first priority after the defense of the castle, the work had been completed with remarkable speed. But even though the shelters were completed swiftly, they were built well; they would make cozy sanctuaries for the men, well protected against the stiff winter winds. Now the woodsmen were at work creating furniture for the great hall: a table, benches, cabinets, and chairs.

The fields closest to the castle had been plowed and such seeds sown as would be ready to sprout with the first faint rays of spring—winter wheat, and rye. When it was questioned whether the land would ever be fruitful again after having been ruined by the dragon for so many years, Roarke only had to point to the bounty of his lands at Castle Thrail in the west. After having lain fallow for generations, those fields had produced richer, more healthful grains and vegetables than any other of the farmlands in Haioland. Roarke figured that similar success

was certain to follow here come spring, and in fact, the first faint pale-green tips of the grain shoots had already started peeking out from the gray-brown dirt before the fairy snow had lain her soft quilt of white upon them.

Knaiver had arrived from Goric, accompanied by the enigmatic beauty Eyela. At least it was thought that she was beautiful—no one had seen her face. But her lovely form and her glorious crimson hair had most of the single men, young and old, aching to catch just a glimpse of her. Knaiver was assigned a spot with Woodwright's Brigade, though he was not required to perform much manual labor. Instead, Roarke had prevailed upon him to teach anyone who was willing to learn, the three slaves included, how to read and write and do simple arithmetic. Knaiver also assisted Keet with the administrative duties of the household, and he spent many evenings smoking and talking into the dark hours with Roarke, who found his gentle wisdom and good humor a soothing balm for his own loneliness.

Perhaps the most significant change to the castle had been the addition of four more women to the household. Besides the secretive Eyela, who spoke only occasionally to anyone besides Knaiver, there were those who grieved because of their losses from Belder's attack: Hale's widow Thalia and her daughter Melliss, and Faria, who was the wife of the slave Nolan. She brought with her a small son, named Robin. These four women and the little boy lived in the northwest chambers of the castle, which had previously been left vacant. Thalia and Melliss shared one room, Faria and her son another, and Eyela had the third room to herself, which only increased her despondency. She wished that she could share a room with Knaiver, but there was none. Knaiver could scarcely be allowed to share quarters with four women; Eyela could not move into the barracks with Woodwright's men. Perhaps when cottages and bungalows were constructed on the castle lands in the coming months, some arrangement could be made to accommodate them, but that was many weeks away at the very soonest.

The primary beneficiary of the additional women was Maryan, who was increasingly being known as "the Lady Maryan." Because she was the first woman in Blythecairne, and because she had served the men selflessly during the first weeks there, she would always hold a special place of honor among the first comers. And while she did enjoy the deference of the men, she was even more thankful that now she had company and help in the kitchen.

While the men respected the sadness of Eyela, Thalia, Melliss, and Faria, who all suffered from their own individual torments, dinner times in the castle had become a daily celebration. There were tall tales, jokes, and songs. There were sometimes recitations from the boys' daily lessons with Knaiver. After the eating was done, there were pipes to be smoked, and conversations among the men deep into the evening, while the women took care of the dishes and chatted among themselves.

The defense of the castle had also prospered. First of all, of course, there was the gate. But also, Roarke had been giving lessons in swordplay several times a week, and while there had been frequent cuts and scrapes for the Lady Maryan to tend to, Roarke's Men were also becoming skilled swordsmen. Yeskie and Abey were teaching several of the young men how to use the bow, too—it was doubtful if a force like Belder's would ever have one man left standing to reach the castle walls again, should they choose to mount an unprovoked attack.

Roarke thought ahead to the time when he would leave Blythecairne. For leave he must, either temporarily or permanently, after a year at the castle had been weathered. Then he must make his way south into the land of Greening, to Hagenspan's great city known as Ruric's Keep, home of King Ruric and Queen Maygret. Ruric's Keep was not named after this King Ruric, but rather his distant grandfather, Ruric the Conciliator, who was also a king in Hagenspan. According to the law, Roarke must appear before the monarch in person to claim the lands of

Blythecairne; he had done this once before, twenty-two years prior, and been deeded the lands surrounding Castle Thraill in Haioland. He had met the king only one other time, when Queen Maygret had commissioned him to kill the dragon at Mendor—that was years ago now.

Roarke had been grooming Keet and Lirey to assume full authority over the castle's affairs when the time came for him to depart. They weren't ready yet ... but with most of a year left before his departure, Roarke was confident that he had indeed received from God the right men for the jobs. They were eager to learn, eager to serve, and were both men of impeccable integrity. At this point, they were still men who had recently been a tavern-keeper and a farmer, but they were developing steadily into what they would become: Lords in Blythecairne.

Whether Roarke would ever come back to Blythecairne was also a matter for conjecture. It had been many months since he had left Thraill, and part of him longed to be back with his friends there. For Castle Thraill also had its Keet, its Lirey, its Willum ... and he missed them, and they missed Roarke. Starting over again at Blythecairne had made Roarke feel young again ... and it had made him feel very old. Mostly, he was keenly aware of his aloneness.

He genuinely enjoyed each day's work, and each day's play. The men who had come north to the castle with him, either through caprice or divine appointment, were men that he heartily enjoyed spending time with. But at the end of each day, he left them. He trudged up the narrow stairwell behind the newly hung curtains at the southeast corner of the great hall, and spent the long cold night alone with his wandering thoughts, and his silent God.

One of the things that exacerbated his sensation of solitude was his appreciation for the women of the castle. The Lady Maryan he counted as one of the most desirable women he had ever met. She was not the smartest, not the most beautiful, not even the kindest, but such an exquisite combination of so many very

good qualities, combined with such an obviously sincere passion for her own husband, that it made Roarke's heart ache with longing to be in her company. Not that he would ever do anything to betray his friend Lirey; he loved Lirey as much as he loved Maryan. But the realization that he could love Maryan—that he could love, again, at all—made his own isolation all the more poignant.

Then when the mysterious Eyela came to live at the castle, he was intrigued again, in a different way. She was like a spirit, ethereal, silently gliding in the shadows of the rooms, her face veiled, but every aspect of her that was revealed, admirable. He had heard her laugh once, when in an unguarded moment at the dinner table she had been delighted by a story told by Woodwright; her laughter was like music, sweet and lovely, but then she remembered her sorrow and fell silent again. He longed to heal her pain, to hold her and let her cry, to lift her veil and see. But she confided in no one but Knaiver, and Roarke was too much a gentleman to intrude upon her solitude. *What a bittersweet irony*, he thought, and nearly spoke to her of the deep things hidden in his heart, but quailed and changed his mind.

When Thalia and Faria came to the castle, he was not overly impressed with either of them at first; they were just women, which was fine. But he noticed with bemused curiosity that the more time he spent around either one of the two, the more he appreciated their good qualities, and the more pleasant he found their company. In fact, after the two women were at the castle for a month, Roarke found them both to be quite attractive, and charming companions.

Yancey's sweetheart Melliss he did not include in his ruminations. She was too young (though in fact she was the same age as Eyela), and rather silly. He was glad that Yancey liked her, and he supposed they would probably do well together, when age and maturity caught up to their enthusiasm.

Roarke did not confide any of these thoughts to anyone, though he almost broached the subject with Knaiver once. What he did was retire to his three sparsely furnished rooms, sit by the window facing to the south, gaze outward across his holdings toward the distant hills, and pray.

"Lord Almighty ... if it would please You ... my arms are empty." He sighed. "I am probably a selfish man ... I had a wife once, and she was a fine woman, too ... but God, You know my heart, my desire. My loneliness. God, You know."

Chapter Forty

Maryan said to her husband, "I worry about her, Li'. All o' the women here have shed their share o' tears since they been here, even me. But we all got over it, even Thalia an' Melliss. But Eyela never seems t' get over her sadness. Somethin' awful's been done t' that girl, Li'. An' she won't speak of it, not to none of us. I even seen her once, when we was all laughin' in the kitchen except her, an' there was tears comin' down from behind that veil, an' they was soakin' the front of her dress." She nuzzled his beard with the tip of her nose, and kissed his neck.

"I know some o' her story, Mar'. But I ain't supposed t' know it—I overheard Knaiver tellin' it t' Roarke awhile back."

"Can ye tell me?"

"It's a bad one, darlin'."

"Badder than when ye were afeared t' tell me about ye and Boof?" she asked, snuggling deeper under the bedclothes.

"A differ'nt kind o' bad."

"Well, tell me if ye can. Maybe I can help her."

Lirey kissed her forehead. "Maryan ... I'll tell ye. But ye must promise t' never let her know that people knows her secret, what she hasn't told it to herself."

"I understand." She propped herself up on her elbow and looked into her husband's face, so as to better comprehend his words—they were talking very softly for fear of waking up their boys in the next room. He looked into her eyes, smiled once, sadly, and then looked up toward the ceiling to tell his tale.

"It turns out that Eyela ... was supposed t' be married t' Belder Payn."

"No!" she exclaimed.

"Apparently it was on their weddin' night that he got the lust fer the gold. An' I guess he brutalized her somethin' fierce. Knaiver said she was a positively lovely girl—jest what ye'd expect from seein' the rest of her form. But now her face's been ruint. That's why she won't show it t' no one."

"Married t' Belder Payn? But she seems ... so *good*," Maryan wondered.

"Well, she parbly was. Is," he corrected himself. "But Belder parbly seen her, an' wanted her fer hissself, an' took her. I guess folks like Belder can appreciate somethin' that's fine an' beautiful as well as we can."

"But what about Nolan, an' Jack an' Gustus? They must know about this, don't they? I wonder why they haven't spoken of it t' anybody."

"I thought o' that. An' I got t' commend 'em fer not tellin'. Mebbe they ain't such bad folk after all. Mebbe they jest got caught up in somethin' that was bigger'n 'em, an' they got carried away."

Maryan thought for a moment. "But other girls been hurt before, an' got over it. I wonder what there is...."

"Ye didn't hear me, love. Her face's been *ruint*. Belder stove in one whole side o' her face, an' destroyed her eye. I guess one o' her eyes is blind, an' always black an' pointin' in the wrong direction, an' can't stop cryin'. That's why she never goes nowheres without wearin' a veil."

"Oh," she said, and fell silent. "It's funny," she said a moment later.

"What's that?"

"Every woman here at the castle—all of our tears was caused, somehow or another, by Belder Payn."

"Aye, that is curious. But ye've all got a safe home now." He wrapped his beautiful wife in the strong protection of his arms.



On a blustery day in late winter, the castle gate was opened to admit a couple of Roarke's Men who had been on a supply trip to Fairling—they were Breon of Woodwright's Brigade, and Huyler of Yeskie's Brigade. When they came back into the castle, stamping snow off their boots and wringing their hands in front of the fire, they asked Captain Lirey for permission to deliver a message to Roarke.

"Certainly," Lirey said to them. "Let me go an' fetch him fer ye."

Lirey climbed the stairwell to Roarke's quarters, where he had retired to take an afternoon nap; it was one of the company's days of rest. Coming to the closed door, Lirey rapped politely, and heard Roarke say, groggily, "Yes? What is it?"

"Lirey, Cap'. Can I enter?"

"Yes, of course! Is there trouble?"

Lirey opened the door and found the knight seated at the edge of his bed, his boots off and his hair tousled. "Sorry t' bother ye, Cap', but it's Breon an' Huyler—they've come back from Fairling, an' they asked t' see ye."

"No, that's all right. Let me collect myself for a moment, and I'll be right down for them."

"Right." He slid back out of the room, and trotted down the stairs to wait with the two messengers.

A few moments later, Roarke appeared at the fireplace, boots on but hair still unkempt. "Friends, you have news?"

Breon, a tall, somber man with a balding head, said, "Lord Roarke, we bring news from Treadle."

Huyler, a gray-haired man with a sizeable paunch, contributed, "Though he didn't want t' trouble ye."

Breon continued, "It's our sad duty t' tell ye ... old Minney's died."

"Oh, no ... how sad," Roarke replied, genuinely regretful. "How did it happen?"

Huyler said, "He don't know, bein' blind an' all. But he b'lieves the old girl jest died in her sleep."

"Is he all right?" Roarke asked.

"Aye, he's passin' fair. We buried Minney fer him, out behind her old house where she usta live."

"Sal's been seein' that he's eatin' enough," said Breon.

Roarke considered the situation, his brow furrowed and his steely eyes soft with concern. "He probably can't just live all alone by himself for very long, can he?"

"Well, no," said Breon. "That's what he didn't want t' trouble ye about," said Huyler.

The four men stood in silence for several seconds.

"Lord Roarke," said Lirey, forming his thought carefully, "I believe ... I have the perfect choice for someone to ... help Treadle."



Thalia and Faria sat chatting companionably on Faria's bed; they had become good friends in the months they had shared at Blythecairne, a fact that secretly amazed them both. Faria's husband Nolan was a slave in the castle ... for contributing to the murder of Thalia's husband Hale. There was certainly the tinder available there which could have caused a conflagration of bitterness between the two women, had their willingness to forgive each other not doused the sparks that could have set off that blaze. Their shared sorrow had helped them to bond, and

they had gone through the process of healing together, becoming like sisters along the way.

The Lady Maryan appeared at Faria's doorway. "Hello, Thalia, Faria."

They returned her greeting, nodding, with a soft, "M'Lady."

"May I ask ye a great favor?" After they affirmed, she said, "I need t' spend some time talkin' to Eyela. Would it be all right fer ye t' take yer conversation down t' the kitchen, or the great hall?"

"Of course," they said, gathered themselves, and departed.

Maryan tapped on the doorpost connecting to Eyela's room.

"Just a moment," the girl called.

After waiting patiently for a few seconds, Maryan called softly, "Eyela?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "I can't get my veil tied." She sounded as if she were on the verge of tears.

"Eyela, I'm coming in. Hold the veil over yer face, and I'll tie it for ye."

Eyela sat on the edge of her bed, her head bowed, her face covered. Maryan sat on the bed behind her, and tied the veil. "There," she murmured, but she did not rise. She stroked Eyela's comely red curls with her hands, then put her arms around the girl's shoulders and hugged her to herself. As Eyela began to sob, Maryan refused to let go. She held the girl closely as her slender shoulders shook. As the dam of Eyela's pent-up emotions burst, and the reservoir of her grief flooded out in torrents, she cried, she wept, she wailed—the sound of her cries was heard in the great hall, and the hearts of strong men trembled and grieved. Eyela turned within Maryan's embrace, and buried her face against the lady's breasts, curling up in a ball and crying. Maryan stroked her hair and began humming a lullaby.



Eyela awoke with a start several minutes later—she had fallen asleep, the fury of her emotions exhausted. She was still encircled by the warm comfort of Maryan's arms.

"My Lady," she said apologetically, sitting and making sure her veil was in place, "forgive me."

"Eyela, dear," Maryan replied, "forgive *me*, fer waiting so long before I came t' ye."

The young woman sat silently, not knowing what to say.

"I have somethin' o' great importance t' ask ye," Maryan began.

Still she sat, not speaking.

"The Lord Roarke has a request o' ye ... a mission, if ye will."

"What is it?" Eyela whispered.

"There's a man ... one of our comp'ny, so t' speak ... what needs a helper. An' the Lord Roarke b'lieves that ye'd be just the right person t' handle the job."

"Me?" she said, incredulous. "The Lord Roarke is very kind ... but I don't wish to be anywhere where I may be ... seen. My shame is ... too much for me to bear."

"Dear one ... will ye never let down yer guard? Will ye never ... share yer heart wi' somebody again?"

"Lady Maryan," Eyela said quietly, "may I show you what I have shown no one else in this world, save Knaiver and my mother?"

Maryan drew a slow breath. "Yes."

Eyela slowly raised her veil, and looked at Maryan steadily with her one eye, her chin trembling. Maryan held her gaze for a moment, then tears started pooling in her own blue eyes, and coursing down her flushed face. Without flinching, Maryan held out her right hand and softly caressed Eyela's crushed left cheekbone.

Eyela bent her face gratefully into the caress, closing her good eye, and lowered the veil again over her features.

After a moment passed, silent except for Maryan sniffing, Eyela said, "You see, my Lady, why I wish not to show my face."

"But Eyela ... will ye never allow a man t' know ye again?"

Her head bowed, the sad girl murmured, "What man would ever want to know ... a woman with only one eye?"

"Eyela," said Maryan, "what about a man ... who has *no* eyes?"

Chapter Forty-One

It was a bright spring morning. The livestock were basking in the white sunshine, drawing whatever warmth they could from the sun's precocious rays. Birds darted in and out of the courtyard, constant visitors now.

Davie and Peet and Robin were running through the castle laughing. Faria watched over them with a gentle smile. She had taken over much of the care for the household's energetic boys, since the Lady Maryan had recently discovered that she was with child.

About half of Roarke's Men worked in the fields, plowing and planting. Most of the rest of them labored under the direction of Yeskie and Abey, building the frameworks for the simple huts that would eventually dot the landscape, each large enough for a small family. Those whose turn it was sat in the castle learning from Knaiver, who missed Eyela somewhat, but was glad that she had found her purpose, as he had found his.

Roarke saddled Justice and rode through the castle grounds, looking over the work of his people, smiling and greeting his men by name. He remembered the day when he had nearly panicked, thinking that his expedition force to Blythecairne was only going to be four men, and breathed a prayer to the Almighty. *God, You always knew what You were going to accomplish here. Forgive me for doubting. What a wonderful start You have made!*

He looked off to the forests on the distant hills, and longed to be among them. He had felt the same stirrings in his breast every spring for as long as he could remember—a calling away, a wanderlust, a mysterious longing to return to a country where he had never been. Suddenly, he felt like a gallop. Nudging Justice's flanks with his heels and slapping the stallion's neck with his reins, he felt

the horse leap under him, and felt himself flying, gloriously, the wind in his face and the ground a blur.

Willum's head snapped up. Where was Roarke going, and why wasn't he taking Will? He was already so far across the field that, if he kept on going, there was no point in Will's trying to go back and get his own mount and follow him; he'd probably get lost for sure. Feeling a little put out, he went back to work with the carpenters he was helping.

His friend Barlie said to him, "Where's Lord Roarke goin', Will?"

"It's a secret," Willum said, and continued working.

Roarke pointed Justice toward the thicket that lined the Fairling-Goric road, visible quite a way off across the plain. He let the stallion have its head, and the two of them raced on, savoring the sheer joy of the run. As they passed the line where the dragon had once marked its boundary, Roarke was pleased to see that the prairie grass was starting to encroach northward into the serpent's old territory.

He thought that perhaps he would ride into Fairling, and see how Treadle and Eyela were getting along. There would be just time to make it to town before evening, if he kept Justice moving briskly. But when he got to Fairling, he passed by the path to Lirey's old farmhouse, and rode on instead to The Dragon's Tail.

He dismounted from the black stallion, patted the horse's muscular neck, and then entered his tavern. "Good evening, Sallamay! Do you have any cold beer?"



The talk around the dinner table in Blythecairne that evening all centered on the whereabouts of their leader. Willum had to admit that he didn't know where Roarke had gone, nor how long he intended to be away.

Keet said, "P'r'aps he's testin' us, t' see if we be ready t' take the reins o' th' castle, fer when he's gone away t' Ruric's Keep."

Lirey replied, "Aye, that seems possible. But whether that's it or not, we must continue on in th' mornin', jest as if Roarke was here. We should all go on with our regular chores, an' keep on buildin' and sowin'."

There was a general grumble of agreement, though the company was uneasy that night.

Later, when Keet and Lirey had a moment to consult together before retiring for the night, Lirey said, "It seems that he's had rather a far-away look t' his eyes lately—have ye seen it?"

Thalia, who was close to Keet's elbow, said, "I warrant that he's more lonely than either of ye two big galoots have noticed. He ain't *like* us, exactly. An' he *is* all alone, so t' speak."

Keet replied, "Aye, Thalia, p'r'aps ye're right. But I still think they may be somethin' more to it than jest wanderlust. I b'lieve he wants t' see what we'll do with his trust."

Lirey murmured, "Well, whatever it is, I wish he woulda told us first."



Roarke sat at the board in The Dragon's Tail eating his dinner with several of the townspeople, who were silently hoping that he would pick up the tab for their meal—which he did. As they sat trading the news of the town for the news of the castle, Sallamay came up and tapped Roarke on the shoulder.

"Beg yer pardon, m'Lord, but some o' th' ladies o' th' town ha' been wantin' t' have a word wi' ye, should ye ever show up in town here again. Might I go an' tell 'em that ye've arrived? If that'd suit ye, I mean."

"Do you know what they want?"

"Their husbands are gone t' th' castle wi' ye, an' they're desirous o' comin' t' live wi' them in th' north country."

"Well, I don't know that we can accommodate them yet, but I can hardly deny them the opportunity to talk with me."

"Umm ... does that mean ye'll talk to 'em, 'r not?"

Roarke laughed good-naturedly. "Go get them, Sal'. I'll mind the store for you."

After a few minutes, Sallamay returned in the company of three women. They introduced themselves to Roarke as the wives of Kuroth Maghey, Galvan, and Plotner. Roarke knew Kuroth to be one of Yeskie's men, and the other two to be from Woodwright's Brigade.

Shierra Maghey began. "Lord Roarke, Sir, we've no wish t' make trouble fer ye. But let me make our case." She spoke quickly and insistently. "Last fall, when ye were lookin' fer folk t' move t' Blythecairne with ye, at first there was about a hundred that was thinkin' o' goin'. That's almost half the town! Now ye're up there with twenty or thirty souls, which is hardly half of what ye'd wanted. An' accordin' t' the stories we hear, ye're doin' jest fine. But there's one little problem. Or maybe it ain't such a *little* problem. There ain't no women! Except fer Maryan an' Thalia, poor soul. An' Melliss, too, I s'pose, but if ye were t' ask me, that girl ain't got a maygret's worth o' work in her in two weeks' time, bless her soul. But don't say that I said so, no! It's not like me t' speak ill o' someone else.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. Well, the plain fact is, we three miss our husbands. An' we'd be willin' t' go t' the castle with ye, an' live an' work an' contribute, in whatever way ye please, if ye get my meanin'. So, we know that ye bought Lirey's farm, and Thalia's house, an' we'd like ye t' buy our three places, too, an' escort the three of us an' our young'uns back t' the castle, an' we'd be ever so grateful, an'

we'd work fer ye up there fer half wages, seein' as how our husbands is already gettin' full wages. Ain't they? An' so, ye'd own ever so much propitty in Fairling, as well as th' castle an' everything around it—" Roarke stared in amazement as the woman continued to speak, without apparently stopping for even so much as a breath. He wondered if Kuroth, a quiet man, would really even *want* her to join him at Blythecairne. "—the three of us, we been sayin' t' ourselves, the next time one o' the men from the castle is in town, why, we'll ask him what the Lord Roarke would be thinkin' about us movin' on up t' Blythecairne, an' helpin' out—we an' our little ones. That's just what we was sayin! An' who should appear before us tonight? None other than Lord Roarke hisself! An' we asks ourselves now, if that ain't the hand o' Providence workin' on our behalf, t' place the very Lord o' Blythecairne within our grasp, so t' speak, so's he could hear our petition an' grant us the benefits o' his famous mercy." She stopped. Must be she was finished.

Roarke said, "Ah ... yes. How many children would we be talking about?"

"Why, that's the lovely part, ain't it! Gayle, here"—she indicated Plotner's wife—"has got just one son, a fine boy, what wanted t' go along with yer Yancey, but his folks felt he weren't of age yet." Gayle smiled, nodded her head, and said, "His name's Gosse."

"Yes, Gosse," Shierra Maghey continued, "and Deanne over there, she has just one daughter, Pat, who's almost of marryin' age, what's a wonderful cook and keeps a spotless house, so I'm sure she'd be an asset t' yer company there at the castle, too. An' meself, why, me an' Kuroth Maghey ain't got no children yet, though we ain't so old that we can't keep tryin', now, can't we? So's it would just be the five of us, an' one of us could live with yer men, an' the rest of us can live with our husbands. So?"

Roarke tried to dissuade them. "My ladies, we have a problem. We have not yet completed any houses for individual families to live in. All of my men are living in barracks, none of them with their wives."

"Well, where's Thalia an' Melliss livin'?"

"Ah," Roarke began, feeling trapped, "they have rooms at the castle, which they share with another woman and her small son."

"Then we'll stay with *them*, until ye've built us some homes of our own. Now, ye can't dispute the logic o' *that*, can ye? Kuroth is always tellin' me t' think with me head, not with me heart, and so I been practicin'. An' doin' rather well at it, if I do say so about meself. Wouldn't ye say, girls?" The two other women nodded their heads in agreement.

"Will you let me think about it overnight, and pray?" Roarke asked, though he feared he knew what the answer would be. He wanted to leap on Justice and ride back for the safety of the castle as fast as he could.

"Sure, sure, of course ye can. We'll be ready t' leave in the mornin'."

Chapter Forty-Two

Eyela found, when she paused to reflect, that she was becoming, slowly but undeniably ... happy. It may have been because it was late spring and each morning was golden with sunshine, and the creeping vines had wound themselves around the fenceposts, and a bluebird sang every morning just outside her window. Perhaps it was that time and distance had made Belder's brutality a faint whisper of a memory, instead of a clashing cymbal in her constant awareness. Maybe it was Treadle's puppy, Yip, who greeted her with sloppy kisses every morning—in fact, every time he saw her. Perhaps it was that Treadle himself was, outside of Knaiver and Maryan, the kindest, most gentle-hearted soul she could ever remember having met. Probably it was all of those things, working in concert to remind her tender heart of the faint echo of joy.

Many days she did not even bother to wear her veil, for Treadle did not permit any of the farm workers to enter the part of the house where she stayed, and the small enclosed yard behind the house was hers to occupy as she pleased. So she planted flowers, tended a small garden of vegetables, and made meals which she shared with Treadle three times a day.

On the rare occasions when Treadle wished to sit at The Dragon's Tail and drink with his old friends, he helped her attach a veil, and she led him up the street from Lirey's old farm to the tavern, the nearly-blind girl leading the sightless man, walking slowly, arm in arm, unconcerned with anything but the sounds and smells of the village, and enjoying each other's company. At the tavern she would go behind the bar, where Sallamay allowed her to help in small ways, apart from the hungry eyes of the pub's patrons.

One time when they were thus employed, Eyela overheard one of Treadle's cronies remark to him, "That sure is a beauty ye've got there, Tread'."

She was surprised at the reaction in her own heart, though—the lilted thrill that she experienced when she heard Treadle reply, "Aye. She's th' most beautiful thing I even seen. She's precious t' me."

Treadle's friend laughed, though not cruelly. "What d'ye mean, that ye ever seed? Ye cain't see nothin', so's I thought."

"Not wi' me eyes, 'tis true. But I've other ways o' seein', now. An' she is ... lovely."

Eyela did not mention this conversation for several days, but finally, at the dinner table one evening, she did. "Treadle ... I heard you talking at The Dragon's Tail last week ... and you were talking about being able to see, in other ways, without your eyes."

Treadle's face turned crimson. "Ah, gosh ... ye heard that?"

"Yes," she said softly.

The blind man considered for a moment how much of his heart to risk on this conversation. If he dared trust his own emotions, he had to admit that he was quite smitten with the young woman who had entered his world so quietly, so shyly, just a few weeks earlier. But without being able to use his eyes, he was uncertain whether any of that feeling was reciprocated. She was silent so much of the time, and she rarely spoke of herself.

Still, he thought, *what would love be if it weren't able t' be gave away?* He determined that if Eyela wasn't worth the risk, then nothing in his life ever would be.

"What d'ye want t' know, m'lady?"

"Tell me ... how it is that you see me."

"Well," he took a deep breath, and began. "I see ye wi' me hands ... when I tie on yer veil, an' me fingers trace through yer soft, curly hair. What color is it?"

"It's red," she murmured.

"Ah, lovely," he said huskily, and continued. "An' when we're walkin' arm t' arm, I know th' touch o' yer skin ... how soft th' inside o' yer wrist is, an' how gentle yer hands. Why, I wouldn't care t' go t' th' tavern half so much as we go, ye know. It's jest fer th' joy o' walkin' wi' ye...." His face reddened again.

"Tell me more," she said, insistent.

"I see ye wi' me ears. I hear yer soft tread on th' floor, an' it's like yer every movement is a dance, so delicate it is. An' I hear ye when ye're singin' in th' garden, an' I thinks t' meself, it must be like th' song of angels. An' when I heard ye laugh, once 'r twice, I says t' meself, I'd wager God Hisself weeps in Heaven t' hear sech laughter."

She put her hand to her mouth, to stop her lips from trembling.

"An' I see ye wi' me nose, too ... I can tell when ye've put wildflowers in yer hair. An' sometimes at the table, when ye're servin' me dinner, the smell o' yer breath makes its way t' me nostrils, an' it's jest as sweet as a breeze carryin' the scent o' the lilacs."

She sighed, "You see ... very sweetly."

Treadle said, "Ye know, actually, I *have* developed a rather keen sense o' what things look like, by holdin' 'em in me hands. I can tell all the ridges an' grooves on a falconet, an' I can tell by th' calluses on a man's hands whether he's been workin' or loafin'. An' I can tell th' shape of a face, jest by placin' me hands on it. God has allowed me hands t' grow ever so gentle, an' me fingertips is quite sensitive."

"Treadle," she began, and stopped.

"What is it, me dear?"

"I'm sorry—it's foolish of me."

"It could never be ... if it comes from yer heart."

"I was just wondering ... if you would use your hands ... to see me."

His heart was pounding in his chest. "Oh, Eyela ... naught would please me more."

She took his two hands in hers, and placed his left hand upon her face. He caressed her soft cheek with the palm of his hand; the touch of his fingertips was like the brush of a feather ... like a whisper. He traced the curve of her forehead, felt the soft brush of her brow, her eyelashes, traced the line of her nose. "Ah, more lovely even than I imagined," he sighed, and then felt the velvet softness of her mouth, followed by the delicate shape of her chin, and finished with a caress of her neck. "Ye're beautiful," he breathed.

"Now this side," she said, taking his right hand and placing it upon her left cheek. As he felt the damaged side of her face—the withered socket of her eye, the crushed bone structure, the cheek moist with tears—the look on his face changed from one of rapture to one of concern. "Ah, love," he murmured, daring to use that word for the first time, "ye've been abused ... ye poor child." But then he smiled ruefully. "Eyela, I pray that ye'll forgive me this thought. But it occurs t' me that if ye'd never had t' experience that pain ... I never woulda knowed yer beauty. An' I fear I'm a selfish man, love."

She swallowed, and exhaled slowly. "You are a most generous selfish man."

"Wi' th' Almighty as me witness ... make no mistake, love, but ye're a beauty."

He said no more, but used his hands to explore the slope of her shoulders, the curves of her back and hips, the gentle swell of her belly, the fullness of her breasts. With a nearly silent moan escaping her lips, she took her own hands,

placed them upon Treadle's face, and drew him to her, kissing him upon his cheeks, his eyelids, his mouth.

"Treadle?" she asked timidly.

"Me love," he replied.

"Would you please take me to be your own wife? If that would be all right?"

"I was hopin' ye'd ask," he said.

Chapter Forty-Three

It had been five restless days since Roarke had left Blythecairne on his mysterious gallop away toward the hills. The people of the castle were uneasy, but they kept to their labors.

Even though the attack on the castle by Belder Payn had been half a year ago, the men were still wary of any riders from the south, who were coming more frequently now that the snow had melted. When Roarke's Men went out in the morning to work in the fields, they took their weapons with them, and deposited them at a location central to their work. Sentries from the company still circled the perimeter of the castle grounds, and they carried horns with them. Watch was also kept in the castle turrets, which had each been equipped with bells. Whenever the sound of a horn or a bell signified that an unknown rider was approaching, the workers in the fields would gather to their central locations, take up their arms, and wait to see whether all was safe before returning to their planting or building.

So far, the visitors to the castle had been comprised of only two groups: merchants from Goric wishing to establish trade with Blythecairne, and young men from both Goric and Fairling who wished to join the castle's company. But still, Roarke's Men kept their swords and bows handy.

On this day the men in the fields were startled to hear, almost simultaneously, the sound of a horn accompanied by the vigorous clanging of the bells from both southward-facing towers. Dropping their hoes and hammers, they sprinted to the repositories and grabbed up their weapons. No sooner had they turned to peer off to the south than they could see eight heavily laden horses bearing six riders, most of whom looked to be ... female!

As they pondered what good fortune this might be, the happy cry was raised from those farthest out in the field, coming rippling back to the castle like a wave: "It's Roarke!"

Indeed, it was the knight, accompanied by the four women of Fairling and the young recruit Gosse. As Roarke rode through the swarm of cheering men, he bore an undeniably sheepish smile on his bearded face. Shierra Maghey said, "Lor'! They sure do love ye, don't they?" But before she could say more, a cry of "Shierra!" was heard from the normally taciturn Kuroth Maghey, who swept her down from her pony and into a bruising bearhug of an embrace. Roarke saw, and thought to himself, *Well, I guess he was glad to see her after all!*

Dashing across the field came Plotner and Galvan, and their wives and children scrambled down off their mounts and ran to greet them, colliding in a tangle of hugs and kisses. Roarke's eyes welled up with gratitude as he saw the joy of the reunited families. Even though he had reservations about adding someone like Shierra Maghey to his household, he was happy for this moment. Blythecairne would have eventually had to deal with chattering busybodies anyway ... it might as well be now.



Master Keet, steward of Blythecairne, was in the kitchen sampling the dinner that would be served later in the evening, when Thalia, the widow of Hale, came to him with a complaint.

"Keet, it's only been a week since them women came an' joined us from Fairling, but we're gettin' squeezed somethin' awful in our little apartments. Faria an' Robin have their room, an' Pat's joined Melliss in her room, but Shierra, Deanne, and Gayle have all joined me in the center room, which ain't scarcely no

bigger than the other two rooms!" She placed her hand on his arm. "Keet, just a week ago, I had all that big lovely room t' meself, an' now there's *four* of us in there! An' Keet ... have ye never heard Shierra *talk*?"

"What would ye like me t' do fer ye, dear?" Keet asked Thalia. Over the course of the long winter together, the two had grown fond of each other.

"Keet, ain't there *any* place where ye can let me have a space o' me own?"

The big man's face turned bright red, and his hands began to shake. "Well, Thalia ... this brings up another issue, so t' speak." His teeth chattered as if he were standing barefoot in the snow, though it was actually rather hot in the kitchen.

"Keet, are ye quite all right?" Thalia asked with alarm.

He managed a hoarse squeak, and nodded his head.

"What is it, Keet?" the woman asked, and placed her hand on his forehead to see if he were feverish, then placed her palms on his ruddy cheeks.

"It's jest that ... it's jest that," he began, and said again, "It's jest that...." And then he gave up, and sat down on a stool next to the stove.

Thalia had never seen Keet so discomfited, but a ray of feminine understanding began to dawn, and she was very pleased. "Keet, are ye tryin' t' ask me somethin'?"

"It's jest that," he tried again weakly, "me an' Will are a-clatterin' around in our three rooms." He swallowed, wiped his face, and said pitifully, "D'ye see?"

"Master Keet ... what are ye proposin'?"

He looked back at her helplessly. At that moment, Roarke walked into the kitchen looking for Keet, and when he saw the agonized look on his friend's face, he asked, "What's happened? Keet, are you all right?"

Thalia said to him, "M'Lord ... Master Keet has just proposed marriage t' me."

"Really? That's wonderful!" Then, remembering the agonized expression on Keet's face, he asked cautiously, "What did you say?"

Thalia smiled modestly. "Ye may be the first t' offer us yer congratulations, m'Lord."

"That's wonderful!" Roarke said again, and kissed the blonde-haired woman enthusiastically on her cheek.

Keet said, with feeling, "Ha ... ah ... ah...." and passed out, toppling over onto the floor.

Roarke bent down to help his friend, but Thalia said, "Please, m'Lord ... I'll take care of him."

Chapter Forty-Four

Roarke had presided over three weddings in the summer. At Blythecairne, there had been feasting and celebration for the unions of Thalia and Keet, and then two months later, Thalia's daughter Melliss and Yancey Wain. There was also a very private affair in Fairling, attended only by Roarke, Lirey and Maryan, Knaiver, and the bride and groom, Eyela and Treadle. At each ceremony Roarke thanked God for creating joy where there had been despair, and fullness where there had been emptiness.

Keet had recovered his dignity, and ran the household flawlessly. Lirey was well respected for both his gentleness and his boldness. The four brigadiers were strong, steady men—even Yancey, who had every right to be distracted.

Maryan was not the only woman who was with child. The slave Nolan and his wife Faria were also expecting a baby. Since Nolan had shown himself to be a man worthy of trust, he had been granted private moments with his wife, and it had resulted in the conception of a child. Nolan had begged Roarke that the baby would be born free, not slave, but it had not been necessary for him to beg.

Roarke and the elders of his company had met to discuss the disposition of Nolan and his fellow slave Jack, who had also acquitted himself well during his time of bondage. It was decided that, if the two men should each complete two years of acceptable service, they would be released, and welcomed to join the free community of Blythecairne if they so chose.

Crops were growing beautifully in the fields nearest the castle, to a point about a third of the way through the land that had once been devastated by the dragon, which was as far as the workers were able to extend their planting that

season. Beyond that, the gray-brown dirt still stretched as far as a man could see in most every direction.

Several houses were constructed in the fields, comfortably apart from each other, but not too far apart. The first houses finished were granted to Kuroth and Shierra Maghey, Melliss and Yancey Wain, Plotner and Gayle, and Galvan, Deanne, and Pat. The rest of the men continued to live in barracks until their first year of service was completed, when those that had families were allowed to go home to Fairling and fetch them. For there were very few of the company who had shared that year at the castle who desired to return to their old lives in Fairling.



Roarke assembled the people of Blythecairne in the field at the front of Abey's Gate (which had become the popular name for the beautiful gate at the entrance to the castle courtyard). As the assembly gathered, he had Abey and Yeskie bring the heavy wooden throne from the dais where it had sat in the great hall, and he himself brought a chest with appointments of gold from out of the castle treasury.

The two woodsmen set the huge chair some ways away from the entrance, and Woodwright and Breon dug two holes, one on each side of the gate. Knaiver stood off to the side, with two rose bushes that had been purchased and brought up from Goric. Roarke placed the gilded chest upon the throne.

Turning to his people, Roarke addressed them. "As many of you know, when I first came to Castle Blythecairne a year ago, I happened upon the bones of Lady Ileana Meadling, and I made a pledge to honor her remains. The outlaw Boof defiled her body when he despoiled the castle, and I considered that I had failed in my pledge to the Lady's honor.

"Since that time, I have tried to think of a suitable way to pay homage to the Lady's dignity, and I have failed to come up with anything that satisfied me. We have planted outlaws and brigands in our graveyard, and it would not do to have her rest with them. I thought perhaps to entomb her within the castle walls, or bury her in the courtyard, but that also seemed unsuitable. The Lady Ileane as I imagine her was a woman of remarkable grace and delicacy, and to have her entombed in stone, or trodden underfoot by daily commerce, seemed unthinkable.

"One day as I was talking with my friend Knaiver, he was philosophizing to me about how lovely the rose plant is—the delicate fragrance, the remarkable beauty, the exquisite color. And then I determined what I should do.

"The Lady Ileane does not belong to the earth, not anymore; she is a creature more suited for the heavens. And so, we shall create a funeral pyre for her, upon the chair of her own husband, and let whatever remains of her rise up to the heavens, to be carried by the winds wherever the Spirit of God wills her to go. Whatever ashes remain will be buried in these two holes to the sides of the castle gate. There we shall plant two of the most glorious roses we were able to find, so that they will rise beside the entrance to her castle, for as long as this incarnation of Blythecairne shall endure.

"And my charge to you, good people of Blythecairne, is this: Tell your children, and your children's children, what the roses represent, and how we have striven to marry the strong defense of our castle with the delicacy and beauty of the flowers.

"The throne of Meadling, also consumed, likewise represents our undertaking here. From this day forward, no Lord of Blythecairne will sit above his fellows, but he will sit beside them, at a table, reasoning and deliberating and listening. The word of the Lord will still be the word of the Lord, but the Lord shall sit at the same level as his people, and look at them eye to eye.

"I must be leaving soon to go and report our success here in the north lands to King Ruric at Ruric's Keep, and to claim these lands for myself and for you. In my absence, Captain Lirey shall be my voice, and Master Keet shall be my right hand.

"Since I have no heir, I will also register with King Ruric my will that, upon my passing, the lands of Blythecairne shall be divided, share and share alike, between all free men laboring for the castle at that time. The castle itself, and the treasury therein, shall be maintained by the families of Lirey and Keet, as long as they have heirs fit to rule. That way, there should be a suitable balance of wealth and property that should make your families happy and prosperous for generations to come. This is the same will that I have put into effect for my western lands at Castle Thrail.

"My friends! Once again, I thank you for your service, your sacrifice, and most of all, your friendship. As Willum puts the torch to the Lady Ileane's pyre, shall we all bow the knee, and once more give thanks to God for all that He has done for us, and all that He will do for us tomorrow, and the next day."



Roarke had said his goodbyes to his people earlier in the evening, at the dinner table. There had been embraces, kisses, handshakes, and speeches. The Lady Maryan, who understood that Roarke loved her, shed many tears for him, and Lirey, who also understood, wept as well. Keet also was more than usually emotional, and got rather drunk; Thalia and Will had to carry him up the stairs to their chambers at the end of the night. Throughout the dinner, Roarke sat stoically, with a faint smile upon his face, but he felt as if he were viewing the proceedings from a distance, detached.

It was conceivable that Roarke could ride to Ruric's Keep, finish his dealings with the king, and return to Blythecairne in less than two months. It was also possible that he would never return, and that is what some of those closest to him feared.

When everyone had gone on to bed except for Roarke and Knaiver, the two men sat smoking their pipes in silent camaraderie for nearly an hour. At last Knaiver tapped the dead cinders out of his cold pipe, and said, "Lord Roarke, being in your company has been one of the great privileges of my long life."

Roarke replied honestly, "Having you in my company has been one of the great privileges of my life as well."

"Thank you, good sir," Knaiver said humbly. After a moment, he said, "Your people expect you to share breakfast with them before you depart."

"I know. Will you make my apologies for me?"

"Yes, my friend," Knaiver said, tears filling his eyes. "When next we meet, it will be in the country of your God."

Roarke felt a lump rise in his throat. "My God, and yours, my friend."

"Yes. Well." He rose and stiffly held out his hand. "Good night, Sir Cedric Roarke."

Roarke shook his hand, and watched as he shuffled off to his bed in Woodwright's barracks.

After Knaiver had gone, Roarke ascended the stairs to where his pack was filled and waiting, slung it over his shoulder, and headed out to the stables to fetch Justice.

As silently as he could, he saddled the horse, and led him through the courtyard, to the beautiful castle gate, where he startled young Barlie, who stood guard. Roarke put his finger to his lips, and smiled. Barlie, comprehending, whispered, "Goodbye, Lord Roarke."

Roarke clapped him softly on the shoulder, and then exited the gate, pausing briefly to stroke the handiwork of his woodsmen, and taking a moment to breathe in the sweet bouquet of the rosebushes. With his fingertips, he traced the letters that Abey had carved into the gate: *Do Justice. Love Mercy. Walk Humbly Before God.* Sighing deeply, he led Justice far along the path, past the houses of the families, who were all fast asleep. When he had gone some distance beyond the last cottage, he mounted the stallion, and looked southward across the barren land, its features lit by moonlight.

Turning once more to the north, he saw the shadow of Blythecairne, black against the sky, and was overcome at last by emotion. He pointed Justice southward, and rode blindly, sobbing audibly for several miles. Many minutes later, his tears spent, he drew in a deep breath, feeling cleansed, refreshed, alert. Wiping his face with the back of his sleeve, he slapped the horse's neck with his reins, and rode off toward the new day.

End of Book One

Roarke's adventures continue in

The Hagenspan Chronicles

Book Two



Roarke's Wisdom

The Courtship of Hollie

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