

Betan was having a harder than normal time waking up. Something was compelling her to consciousness and she, for some reason, was resisting. She wasn't lazy, or sluggish. Like all of her line she didn't do well without rest, but there was no reason she should have so much trouble waking.

Betan stirred but couldn't really move. Her eyes were loathe to obey commands that they open to identify the source of the small, high pitched voice warbling unintelligibly nearby that she now realized was trying to wake her up. Strangest of all, her back hurt and she'd had to curse at Alman to make him retreat the company and....

And leave her behind.

A rush of adrenaline gave her the strength to grind her eyes open into gauze and mist. Her throat croaked, instinctively she seized her tongue against the back of her mouth and leather dragged across cracked stone. Her eyelids had the same gritty texture and her back indeed hurt a great deal.

Then a cool fluid slid into her mouth and she succeeded in swallowing. Her lips were wet with the same treatment. "First Sergeant?" she asked. She blinked and it still hurt. Gentle hands held her chin and forehead and her eyes were watered. Two ladies stood over her, one holding her head, the other moving a vial away from Betan's face. "This is going to suck." Betan muttered.

One of the woman babbled, but it wasn't babble, it was Brannan.

Betan's lips sputtered as she struggled to form the words. "I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"I was asking you to do your hostesses the courtesy of our language, as we don't speak yours. Thank you, milady." the elder of the ladies, a dark blond iron woman said. The other one, a redhead of seeming gentler cast released Betan's face and she tried to sit up. Her back spasmed and the two ladies gently pressed her flat again with good natured admonishments.

"Please, miladies, where, where am I?"

"Aw." the elder lady cooed. "My sweet does not recall?"

"The balm." the younger answered. "It has separated her waking mind from her memories."

"Of course, Zhezhen." the elder replied in a gently chiding voice. That had been known to the elder lady. "Zhenzhen" was, if Betan recalled, a term of endearment, not a name. It was hard to translate, like most little words of a language. The maiden, for Betan could now see this was a very young lady, bowed her head in acceptance of the rebuke.

"You, my sweet, are in Dalibar, some ways north from where you were found playing at revolution."

Betan became still. Was she a captive? "You are fortunate my son found you." the elder lady continued. "You were initially thought to be a mercenary and were to have been accorded rough treatment. But Yeschil mine is sharp eyed and identified you as a woman and a foreigner. You were searched and your commission as a Durannian officer was found. Thus, you were sent first to surgery and then he had you transmitted to us, who are honored to count you as a guest."

"Surgery? I was wounded?" *She parried and whipped her sword around to parry again, barely catching the Oldster's blade with the tip of hers. He was damned good. Betan backed up a step and launched a flurry of attacks, thrust to the shoulder, slash to the stomach, slash to the leg. Her opponent caught them all, but he was pressed to do so.*

He slipped in a riposte in the middle of her series that caught her on her free arm, like most noble fencers she didn't bother with an off guard. Retracting her pinked limb created enough of a break in her attack to send her reeling from a fresh assault and the uneven ground sent her into a dirt bound spiral. A slash aimed for her belly glanced off her heavy sword belt and sank into her back. She cried out in surprise and dismay. Impacting on the ground filled her with agony and when her vision cleared she was surrounded by green and gray.

“In a *sword fight*.” the elder lady said, disapproval clear in her voice. “For shame, a lady of your bearing playing with swords.” She waved at the maiden, who retreated from Betan's vision. “The surgery was skillfully done, there was no time for you to become corrupted. Someone treated you before abandoning you.”

That had been Bidal, a corporal. “My First Sergeant was loathe to leave me.” Betan said. “I was bandaged but a counterattack from your Noble Assemblages came. My First Sergeant determined to make a stand over me but I ordered him to withdraw the company.”

Alman hesitated, looking up to gauge the distance from the charging NAs and his Captain's position. “Damn you, Orno.” Betan's back flared with agony as she yelled. “Get the company back to the Army!”

“Your company? We reckoned you a subaltern!” the lady said in surprise. “You were marked as a Captain but you're so young.”

“I am a Captain, of jagers.”

“Of jagers?” the lady replied. “Oh, some Beddisaeon formation, I'm sure.” The maiden returned with a small glass. “We'll help you sit up, my sweet. But first, this will dull your pain, but not your mind.” The lady and the maiden carefully lifted Betan's shoulders, at which her lower back on the right side moaned but didn't scream. She tilted her head forward and let the maiden pour the silty contents of the glass into her mouth. Betan swallowed and the maiden held her while the lady rearranged the pillows so she could sit up. Thus settled, the Brannans moved their seats closer to her.

“It is custom in Branna for ladies to call each other by their familiar names, so I shall call you Betan. Since you have had the normal reaction to pain balm, you are at a disadvantage. Thus, I must introduce myself. I am Arminten Bello' Proloodan, I am the lady of the manor. This is a ward of my family, Cial be-Prolood. We have had the honor of observing you in your convalescence thus far.”

Wordy woman. Betan thought. “Thank you, Arminten.”

Arminten's face lit with joy as she turned to Cial. “Indeed a lady of distinction, she evidences no false modesty and adapts effortlessly.” She shifted her attention back to her patient. “I am in the deplorable state of limited hospitality. The physic has strictly forbade allowing you exercise or real food. We have plied you with broth and pap in your waking states so I implore you to tell me you are not famished.”

At the mention of food Betan's stomach reported. Not hungry, but unsatisfied. “I am tolerably full, Arminten.” The Brannans' eyes glittered.

“That is most excellent. I despaired at the physic's bidding, but why would we employ experts if not to heed their advice?” the lady passed her hand in front of her face, a gesture Betan had never seen before that she figured equated to a shrug. “But you are sufficiently healed to be awake and now your recovery will be rapid, I've no doubt. Later we will bring you soup with some contraband solids but for the time being I must be harsh and interrogate you.” Arminten's voice adopted a wicked coyishness, so Betan was

assured she wouldn't be tortured.

“Since retiring to the country to allow the present difficulties to pass, we have been most unengaged.” Arminten continued. “Your arrival occasioned practical spasms of speculation and now.” Arminten's look turned almost hungry. “You are awake.”

“My lady is cruel to take advantage of my weakness so.” Betan said, the natural rhythms of society returning easily. She only hoped that her lessons from the considerably more businesslike Durannian court wouldn't leave her vulnerable to Brannan social knives sharpened long from bored jousting.

Her captor clapped her hands and hooted a laugh. “Let it not be said that those from the Beddisae are simple.” Arminten remarked. “Very well, I will promise to be gentle and quick if you promise to henceforth restrict yourself to pleasant forms of address.”

“I will be as gracious as the treatment I receive.” Betan replied innocently.

“Hrm. I suppose that as hostess I shall have to content myself with your defensive posture.” Arminten assumed a look mixed from disapproval and injury.

“Pray ask me a question, Arminten.”

“Then we are friends again, excellent. The first question, of course is, how did you end up in our rebel army?”

“You what?” *Betan watched as her father's dropped pen splattered ink over a ledger he'd been marking.*

“I fear to answer lest my gracious hostess take offense.” Betan temporized.

“The answer has somewhat to do with politics, then?”

“*Amorelon has proven himself to be far too great a man for an idle spoiled girl, no matter the jewelry placed upon her head. Father, I need to prove myself to him now.*”

Betan cleared her throat. Cial leapt to provide her with water, which Betan sipped.

“Among other things. Thank you, Cial.” Betan paused. “Durannia has allied itself with the reformation. It was determined that a company of jagers, uh, expert shooters, would be a worthy contribution to demonstrate friendship.”

Arminten sniffed. “Friendship, between nations.” her tone indicated what she thought of that concept. “I beg your pardon for interrupting you. Pray continue, my sweet Betan.”

“Thank you, Arminten. So, my company was selected to cross the Beddisae and journey to Branna.” She finished.

Arminten and Cial looked at Betan blankly.

“Is there somewhat more you wanted to know?”

“There is a world of knowledge we desire!” Arminten replied forcefully but in good humor. “Don't play simple with me.” she mock scolded with a wagging finger.

“You only need to ask.”

“Ask the obvious?”

Betan frowned slightly.

“Are we to take this to mean that it is common in Durannia for women to participate in war?”

Betan laughed then hissed as her back protested the use of certain muscles.

“Now my lady makes fun of us.” Cial pouted.

“Please, my young friend.” Betan said. “If I am under injunction to leave off with the 'lady' nonsense, this applies equally to you. I do apologize for laughing. In the Yellow army the subject of my sex was something of an awkward topic. I'm quite unused

to discussing it.”

“And since we are not members of that party..?” Arminten prompted.

“Durannia is a state under constant threat from savages, my friends. Women frequently must needs defend settlements along with men. Since strength matters little in marksmanship, it is the best shooters, not the most masculine, that man the walls and rain death upon the enemy. I, however, am unusual in my service to the King.”

“What brought you to such service?” Arminten betrayed herself by leaning forward ever so slightly.

This must be a matter of savage speculation. Betan thought. “I must retain some air of mystery, Arminten, lest you become bored with me.”

Arminten wrung her hands. “Oh, oh, you are cruel.”

“I am a stranger in what seems to be a strange land. I must look to my own protection and curiosity is powerful armor.”

“Wantonly cruel, I must say.”

A thought occurred to Betan. She assumed a perfectly innocent mask and asked: “Have you bet on the answer, Arminten?”

“Now you insult me?” Arminten protested too much. “Cial, I must take leave of this sprite of anger lest I be overcome. Pray forgive me, Betan. I will see to your soup.” She rose and with all the injured pride of a spurned lioness swept out of the room.

Cial giggled.

“Captain, our flank is about to be exposed!” Plian shouted. Alman and Betan ran to the left, where Plian's squad was stationed. The 9YB had been hammered by the artillery of the South Bend NA and that unit's musket fire was rapidly tearing apart the Yellow remnant.

Betan looked at the wavering flags and pikes. The 2/9 was the battalion on the right causing the problem. The remainder of the brigade was unsteady from shuffling to cover gaps and it was in this distraction of the brigadier that was causing the 2/9 to waver.

“We're going to have to cover the gap, First Sergeant.”

The ladies of the area had convened in Arminten's parlor as soon as Betan was able to be moved. The physic, who had quietly declared to Betan support for the reformation, although he claimed to be too old to take part, had barred her from all but very short walks, so she was installed in a strange lopsided chair facing an eager panel of Brannan noblewomen.

“It *must* have been a strange journey.” one of the eldest, a grandam named Prela observed after an hour or so of idle chatter. The assemblage grew silent and Betan stifled a laugh. *Now my trial begins.* “A lady crossing the sea in the company of soldiers.”

“I had time already to become accustomed to them.” Betan answered. “One cannot effectively command light troops who are strangers. In any event, jagers are of a better sort than your soldiers of the line.”

Arminten had decked her out in Brannan dress for this interrogation cum introduction. It wasn't as cumbersome as she'd have imagined had she known someone would dress her in Brannan gowns. Her wound had spared her the laced bodice and petticoats that the other ladies wore, which just left a shift(?) under a long chemise under a gown of some diaphanous layers that were absurdly translucent. A long vest was worn

for modesty's sake. Filmy stockings and light shoes held on by gossamer threads completed her dress. It was light, airy, flattered her bosom and felt rather better than the stifling officer's garb she'd worn for months.

"How long were you at sea?" a younger lady, Shamir, asked.

"Forty two days." Betan answered. "Fifteen from Durannia to the Beddisae channel and twenty to the Gates, the rest, of course on the Center Sea."

"I've always loved sea voyages." Shamir said. "But I must admit that I have never been on so long a voyage."

The conversation drifted to tales of ships and particularly of sailors. *I bet that they have coordinated their questioning.* Betan mused.

"How much time did you have with your soldiers prior to sailing?" Praela asked, bringing attention back to the central matter.

Ah, she's the lead inquisitor. "Two months. Drilling and reviewing maps and what reports we had been able to gather."

"Reports?" Arminten asked. "Durannia has spies in Branna, then?"

"Hardly. Mostly news from merchants that had taken trips to the Central Lands. Some communications with certain parties of Brannans which I'm sure you will all understand I am unable to elaborate on."

"Oh, pah." Praela scoffed. "Ladies need not concern themselves with the petty desires of kings." Betan merely smiled at the coos of agreement and when she didn't reply moment conversation drifted to local rumors. Betan's mind wandered and then Arminten announced that it was time for a luncheon in the garden. Cial helped Betan rise, the pain medicine made her back only sore and stiff but these odd leaning chairs in Arminten's house were difficult to mount and dismount anyway, and accompanied her outside to where a table had been set up. They sat themselves according to rank. These chairs were upright and only the large amounts of marvelously soft padding marked them as belonging to nobility. Cial and another girl pushed Betan's chair under her so she didn't have to scoot forward like the other ladies did clumsily. Only Praela and Arminten were seated by servants.

When the ladies were all sat, the food began to issue from behind a screen erected about twenty feet away. Betan was facing it and even then if she hadn't been a light infantry officer, she might never have known it was there, being camouflaged as well as anything she'd ever seen. Children in rather plain dress were running plates and bottles to the servants who maintained a decorous plod around the table. It only took a few minutes for all of the ladies to be served and the eating to begin, but Betan took note that the grown ladies were seething under their miens of noble indifference.

It was a cold lunch, with a dish of mixed leafy vegetables and cooked fowl accompanied by a mixture of fruits in some kind of sweet sauce, light bread and a pale wine.

Betan hesitated, watching the other ladies in what she hoped was a stealthy matter.

"Is something not to your liking, Betan?" Arminten asked. "I'm afraid I know little of cooking across the Beddisae."

"Oh, quite the opposite, Arminten. I have grown quite used to army rations in the field. I'm quite overwhelmed by the service and I'm trying to recall proper table manners." Some polite laughter replied but Arminten actually seemed to blush slightly. *That's odd, I compliment her and she looks embarrassed.* Betan followed the lead of her comrades, forking small piles of leaves and pieces of fowl with the twin tined implements

and chewing excessively. The fruit mixture on its small plate was a bit sweet to her tastes, but Praela made a concerted attack on hers, devouring it with scant attention to her larger plate of the leaves and fowl. Betan sipped her wine and movement caught her eye. A child ran to a servant standing behind Praela, who whisked away the empty plate and replaced it. She pretended not to notice the transfer.

To Betan's right, where the lower ranked ladies sat, someone drained a wineglass. Betan took another bite of the leaves, salad she recalled its name, and saw the same lady reach for her empty glass, letting her hand hang for a second before withdrawing it. A moment later it was replaced with a filled one. The same thing happened across the table, nearer the higher ranked ladies. Then with a main plate on Betan's left.

She finished her fowl salad, sipped her last bit of wine and began counting. It took ten seconds for her wine to be replaced and a further seven for her food. At any of her royal father's establishments that would be been a mighty accomplishment but the Brannan noblewomen she was lunching with were more and more put out by the service and some struggled to mask it. Betan looked at Arminten, she was paying undue attention to her food and didn't participate in the chatting to the extent her guests were.

She's embarrassed! Betan realized. *Four servants clearly aren't enough to serve fifteen noblewomen to Brannan standards. That's why Puymora apologized to me the morning of the invasion, "The Army is short of stewards." He probably thought I was used to this kind of fuss.*

I wonder how many of Arminten's servants are right now marching toward Zhatano. On either side.

Betan was under orders to rest as much as possible, so she retired after luncheon for a new dose of pain medicine and a nap.

Cial was sleeping on a leaning chair when Betan woke up. *Oh, how I missed beds.* She mused. The covers were light but very warm. *Expensive, I imagine. This place reeks of conspicuous consumption.* Her bedchamber had large windows that made up most of one wall. The drapes that covered them were thin but nearly completely opaque. They would clearly block light but not keep any heat from escaping. What she had seen of the manor house gave her the impression that large windows were the rule. The small fortune regulating the temperature would be a sign of the great wealth of the Prodolans. *I bet very little of it goes to pay servants and the experts Arminten mentioned.*

Betan shifted slightly to test her back. The physic had pronounced the wound to be entirely closed and the muscles underneath mending well. No organs had been damaged in the slash, which Betan was grateful for. She had already reduced her dose of the pain medication by a quarter. Arminten had been most impressed by that.

Cial lifted her head from the rest that formed one side of her chair. "Is your back better?" she asked.

"Yes." Betan replied. "I can feel it, but it's not really hurting." She was, however, extremely weak. Sitting up without assistance was difficult, she had levered herself halfway up when Cial arrived to assist. She had not covered when she lay down, so one up she simply swung her legs out of bed. "I think I would like to see more of the estate." she announced. "But not in a vast gaggle of ladies."

Cial smiled. "I think we can avoid them." She helped Betan back into the vest and skirt she'd removed for napping, then peeked into the hallway and pronounced it quite clear. "We'll take the rear stair. It's normally used for servants, and sometimes for,

ah, other, um, things.”

“Will they be watching it?” Betan pointedly ignored Cial's sudden awkward silence as the pair of young women moved down the heavily carpeted hallway, their shoes falling silently on the deep piles.

“It's very unlikely, the stair leads directly outside.”

“Near the garden? I've heard talk of it.” Betan lied. She assumed any noble estate had some ridiculously expensive to maintain garden.

Cial paused, which was as good as a stammer. “No, not near the garden.” Cial turned down a narrow staircase, Betan followed. The steps were deep and carpeted with a very rough shag that gripped the shoes nicely. Three long flights took them to a doorway that opened to the exterior. A number of outbuildings told Betan they were in the rear of the estate. *Probably servants quarters and the middens or wherever they put waste.*

“Can we see the gardens?” Betan asked. “Or is there a maze on Fern Island?”

Cial paused again. “There are both on Fern Island. The gardens are closer. But let's make sure we stay unobserved.” Cial lead Betan towards the outbuildings, a breeze told her one was definitely some kind of indoor middens. *That's a large chimney. Maybe they burn their waste.*

Cial walked past the buildings, no servants to be seen, and they ended up near a tall berm topped with a thick hedge. They turned left and followed the berm past some gardens, herbs according to Betan's nose, and small animal pens. A few tenders could be seen working in this area, but only a handful. Betan counted that very odd.

“The gardens are this way.” Cial said. “But I thought you wanted to be unchaperoned? There are some lovely ponds on the other side of the estate.”

Betan tastes did run to bodies of water, but her instincts told her Cial was now hiding something. “Oh, I love gardens.” She beamed an idiotic smile at Cial, who returned a seemingly reluctant one. A few minutes of walking brought them to a long hedge wall. Cial paused and cocked an ear, then continued.

“This is the gardener's entrance.” A gap in the wall lead to the ceremonial gardens of Fern Island and Betan peeked into see gracefully swooping paths carving islands of riotous color. The pair stopped inside the entrance. In the bright sunlight the garden was dazzling. The paths were something that looked like red gravel but made no noise underfoot when they stepped onto it. There seemed to be no pattern as to what was planted where and Betan didn't recognize any of it, but the colors and shapes merged into a pleasing melange.

Cial looks like she was going to be ill, or cry. Or both.

Betan cast another look over the garden. She stepped closer to one of the patches of plantings. Some of the small red bits that made up the pathway were lurking among the roots. A few of the blooms were droopy and Betan could see some that looked unhealthy. She drifted down the path, Cial keeping step behind her. She saw a dead stem in another patch, and the red bits strewn throughout.

High standards, these Brannans.

“What are the paths made of?”

“Coarsely ground bark.” Cial answered.

“Bark?” Betan turned around. “Tree bark?”

“Yes. It's marvelous for the paths, it's also used in some ornamental beds.”

They grind tree bark? Betan marveled. *Too much money, these people.* “This is beautiful.” Betan said. Which it was. The minor lapses in maintenance were hardly

visible. If Cial hadn't been mooning over the condition of the garden Betan never would have noticed.

"Let's look at the maze!" Betan said. Cial forced a smile.

"But we can't get lost. The physic would be wroth with me if I let you walk too much."

It took ten minutes walking toward the front of the estate to get to the maze. Unlike the garden the maze was clearly in a state of disrepair. None of the hedges that formed the walls were squared off properly. There were some hedge sculptures that had been intricate once but now looked like they were hairbrushes matted with tangles.

Cial quickly suggested visiting the ponds and Betan readily agreed. Betan was embarrassed on Arminten's behalf.

"Hiding from me, girls?" Arminten asked.

Betan and Cial looked up at the lady of the estate. Cial made to rise but Arminten pah'd her back down and joined them.

The ponds, Cial called them *shilanr* which meant "pool garden" and Betan found hard to pronounce, were magnificent. Small canals, just wide enough to get a little boat through, linked many of them. Some were shallow lily ponds, some were knee deep and the two largest were for swimming and boating. Floating, more like, judging from the elegant rafts tied to a dock.

The trio lounged on the bank of the second largest pond, named Lianal. Betan didn't recognize the word, she figured it was a name. Probably of legend. She didn't ask.

"Have you been making reconnaissance for your rebel friends?" Arminten asked.

"You've discovered me, Lady Prodolan." Betan said. "It was a deeply laid plot to be wounded and drugged through a journey to the deep north so trained rocs could land the entire Yellow Army here at Fern Island. I've been discovered. So now I must kill both of you and draw out the magic whistle lodged in my hoo-hoo and to bring the war to the Brannan heartland."

Arminten and Cial hooted at Betan's casual vulgarity. "My." Arminten marveled. "Do all Durannian ladies speak so or did our rebels teach you such language? What would your lady mother say, young Betan?" She finished in a faux cross voice.

Betan smiled. Her mother had been the worst Ambassador General in the history of Durannia, for her grandfather had been one of the country's more bellicose kings and the last thing he'd wanted was a cool headed chief diplomat. Her parents had been an unusual match. "I think I may have learned an interesting word or sixty at her feet." Betan said. The Brannans laughed again.

"We should have a picnic out here." Arminten said.

"So you can reconvene your inquisition?" Betan asked.

"If you won't tell us what we need to know...." Arminten deadpanned. Betan hissed a laugh. "But you're intent on rationing out the secrets, so we don't lose interest in you." She looked out over Lianal. "Although you could have picked a better time to visit."

"Politics, my dear."

"Indeed."

"Cial didn't want me to see the gardens." Betan said on instinct. In her peripheral vision she could see Cial shrink and Arminten glare. "But I insisted."

"You noticed it at luncheon, too." Arminten sighed. "I imagine you were a great

commander of light troops.” She spared Cial her stink eye with another hand pass before her face and returned her attention to Lianal. “His Majesty took away a number of our servants for the war. Many of the rest fled when our foremen and managers joined the, reformation, I believe your rebel friends call it.

“It's not something we often talk about. We're encouraged to pretend it's not happening. Yet word of it has spread across the Central Lands and to the people in the world beyond the Beddisae channel. What is the name of that land?”

“We call it Ubelon.” Betan answered. “That would be, ah, New Blue Home. Well Ubedolon is New Blue Home, it's usually just called Blue Home.”

“Blue?” Cial asked. “The foliage?”

Betan laughed. “No. The master of the first ship to the continent was drunk.” Cial and Arminten laughed. “I'm quite serious. He thought it was blue and he had a violent temper, no one dared correct him. So, New Blue Home. Not that he had an old blue home.” The Brannan ladies mirth redoubled. “There are many odd tales like that, take Lebornier-” She stopped.

“Yes, Lebornier, your surname.” Arminten prompted.

On the inside, Betan was cursing herself roundly. It was true that her surname was on her commission but she didn't want to draw any attention at all to her identity.

“It means, in (language) 'The Two Borns Company' because my line came from the leadership of a group of settlers founded by two men with 'born' in their names.”

Arminten and Cial laughed again. “That would never do in Branna.” Arminten said. “The tales of the beginning of our lines are always grandiose, although, and you should cover your ears, Cial my darling to protect them from my slander (Cial didn't), most of them are pure nonsense. Noble families in Branna are born when his majesty decides they should. They end much the same way.”

“Are you from a noble family?” Cial asked Betan.

“Of course she is, Cial!” Arminten replied, a touch of indignation in her voice. “With such bearing how could she not be?”

Staged? Betan thought. *Maybe.* At that present moment Betan was stretched out on the lawn banking Lianal, her body propped up on her elbows. Arminten and Cial were sitting on their shins, legs tucked under them, skirts gathered around. *Bearing indeed,* Betan thought.

“My family is known in Durannia.” Betan replied.

“It grieves me to say it, but we should return.” Arminten said with a sigh. “My guests, troublesome as they are, are resident in the house.”

“And you want to make sure your valuables are safe.” Betan deadpanned to more laughter.

“My lord husband has decided it is time to meet you.” Arminten said.

Betan looked up from the book she was reading. Like anyone in the civilized world with a decent education she read Brannan as well as she spoke it. Arminten had a good library and Betan had taken to reading to avoid strenuous inquiries into her background.

Arminten seemed reserved, but Betan could see nothing furtive or angry behind her normal steely, level expression. Betan marked her place and set the book down. “I would be pleased to meet him.” Cial was, as always, present to help Betan up from the leaning chair. Only a slight tightness marked her wound and Arminten's masseur kept

even that at a minimum. But she was still very weak on most of her right side.

Three weeks had passed since she'd awoken at Fern Island. From the date she'd reckoned that half again as much time had passed since her wounding and capture. There were no maps to hand, however, so she had no good idea where she was.

"This way." Arminten folded Betan's arm into her own and lead her to the manor house's foyer and up the stairs that lead to the ballroom and family quarters. She had yet to meet the lord of the manor, whom Arminten spoke of with genuine fondness. He simply didn't seem very interested in the day to day operations of the manor. Betan wondered whether this predated the dearth of servants.

But that wasn't material at the moment. *Something's up. She's far too guarded.* But Betan kept her pace steady, her expression still. *All that waiting in Dorway was good for something.*

They came at last to a hallway which was spartan compared to the rest of the house, paneled in some dark wood. It debouched into a largish antechamber with two guards, no windows and walls of more of the same dark wood appointed with only a number of chairs and a few low tables of rather plainer design than in the rest of the house. The room was dominated by a double doorway eight feet tall with doors fully a yard wide with two guards in attendance. A simple plaque of shiny bronze gave his rank and name in four inch tall engraved letters.

The guards, young and in very fine uniforms of the blue and tan Betan had realized in Dorway marked the Noble Assemblages, saluted and each opened a door. This revealed a large desk with a slight, fair man of probably fifty wearing a beribboned and braided uniform of almost comic complexity. His expression showed none of that buffoonery, however. He rounded the desk as the doors closed behind Betan and Arminten. Cial had apparently been left outside.

"Your Highness." Lord Prodolan bowed. Betan bit off a curse. "You honor me with your visit."

Betan hesitated for a second, realized he probably saw it as an exercise of royal prerogative and stepped further into the office. "My lord." she said in greeting.

"Please, be seated." he invited, gesturing to a set of chairs away from the desk. One of them was clearly brought in for the occasion, one of the leaning chairs, Betan put a knee onto it and settled somewhat heavily, the best she could do with much of her back refusing to cooperate. Prodolan kissed Arminten warmly on her cheek and guided her as if dancing to another chair. Her face was softly immobile.

Prodolan took a seat with them and smiled at Betan. "We almost didn't notice. The Bedissae channel is so far away and we have been most distracted for some time, as your highness is well aware. I'm sure my wife will be wroth at your highness for not keeping this particular secret. As a military man, I of course, understand.

"Fortunately, it is most assuredly not in the interests of Branna to make great publicity of your highness' capture. The policy of the throne is to ignore the civil war. In fact, were a member of the commission here I could be in a great deal of trouble for referring to a civil war at all." Prodolan's lips turned up in a sinister smile she recognized from Goldopan. "But there isn't."

"Will my lord tell me how my lord discovered me?" Betan asked.

"Why, your highness' name, of course. Someone at court knew it. When your highness was captured, the captain of the South Bend assemblage sent word to Zhatano that an auxiliary had been taken into his custody, even though he allowed Yeschil to send

your highness to my beloved lady for convalescence.”

“Was it your son who wounded me?” Betan asked, suddenly concerned, she recalled that particular Brannan had been near torn apart by bayonets after landing his slash.

Prodolan smiled. “That young man did not survive the battle. Rather savaged by your highness' men I am told. Loyal soldiers are rare and thus valuable. No, Yeschil found you after the battle.”

Betan couldn't suppress a stir, Arminten had known nothing of the battle.

“Your highness is curious? Very well. The South Bend assemblage held the Yellow army, bandits we're supposed to call them, at the landing for two days but were obliged to withdraw when the Yellow cavalry landed. Most of our best cavalry officers went over and they received mounts from Cendral.”

“Most impressive, those mounts.” Betan said. “Brigadier Reigh mentioned them.” She stopped, wondering if they'd known Reigh.

“Ah, the good marshal.” Prodolan said breezily. “He was a blow.” he passed his hand across his face. “Nonetheless, your highness is here now and we know who your highness is. His Majesty, the bad king is the term you're familiar with, no doubt, has decided it is best were your highness to stay here for the time being while we send to your highness' royal father.”

“Ransom, my lord?”

“Not in cash, your highness. The price for your highness' timely return home is the withdrawal of Durannia's support of the rebellion.”

“My lord's efforts will be in vain, I fear. My royal father will not break faith over my capture.”

“Ah, your highness is not a man with daughters so I will forgive your highness, but I quite fear your highness is incorrect. In fact, I quite marvel that your highness was sent so far afield.”

Betan smiled. “The women of my royal mother's line are noteworthy for their fury when denied.”

Prodolan smiled. “I thank your highness again for honoring me with this visit. I can see my beloved lady is nearly dancing with anticipation of the fete she must give in your highness' honor, so I shall detain your highness no further.” Prodolan rose and offered a hand to Betan. Seeing no reason to be ungracious, she took it, and rose. Prodolan did the same for Arminten and kissed her on the cheek again. Betan was heartsick at the sight.

“Will your highness come with me?” Arminten said. Betan nodded, not trusting herself to speak and followed Arminten down the hallway.

“I am indeed wroth with your highness.” Arminten said once they'd passed the first guards.

“Must I be highness to you, Arminten?”

“I fear so, your highness.”

“Then I will be inconsolable.”

“That would sadden me, your highness, but these are the order of things. May I transmit your highness to my parlor again, my beloved lord was correct that I must plan a proper reception for your highness.”

“Of course, my lady. Thank you.”

Cial escorted Betan and installed her in that leaning chair again. Betan took up

her book, but she couldn't see the words. Her discipline had asserted itself in Prodolan's office, now the reality was crowding her mind. As long as her capture was known only to the reformation she could imagine that Pautark and (leader) would be loathe to reveal the fact to her father. That was probably self-deception but it made a cynical political sense.

But now, she was humiliated.

"Your highness?" Cial said.

"Oh, please don't." Betan whispered as she looked up. Cial was not alone, a half dozen of the guest ladies were also in the parlor, staring gently at her.

"A celebrity has arrived, ladies." the eldest of them, a twenty something maiden wife Betan didn't know well said.

Betan clenched her eyes shut to gather herself.

"We, of course, understand your highness' reticence to reveal herself." she said again.

"I just didn't want Amorelon to find out." Betan meant to say to herself.

"Amorelon?" several of the ladies said at once. "Amorelon Shelain?"

"We are fools, my ladies." Tenya, Betan recalled her name, said. "All the worlds know of Master Shelain's exploits on behalf of his beloved, including freeing the town of Betania from the bandits that had ravaged it for generations."

Betan opened her eyes, leveled a glare at Tenya. "I have heard the story, my lady."

"So your highness went adventuring yourself." Cial whispered.

"He judged himself not of sufficient worth to wed a princess. He was wrong, but no one could convince him of that, so he went off to make a name for himself." Betan said. "And did so well that I judged myself not worthy of him. And here I am."

"That is the most wonderful thing I've ever heard." Cial said.

Betan avoided the ladies as Arminten planned her fete, staying in her room much of the time. Cial stayed with her for the first few days but then even she was drafted. Betan was rather more glad to be left alone than she missed the companionship. Cial had been quite taken with the romance of Betan and Amorelon's love and lapsed into rounds of questions about the great man.

"I don't know which would be worse." Betan mused. "My father's reaction or Amorelon's. He'll likely want to come after me. That would please the reformation, to have Amorelon's band fighting on their side." She sighed and rubbed her face. "He'll probably think I'm being tortured daily, or have been given over to the soldiers' pleasure. He'll imagine the worst sort of captivity and would be shocked to know I'm treated like a guest. I'm not even guarded."

Betan turned from the window she'd been staring out of unseeing. "I'm treated like a guest. I'm not even guarded."

She rose and went to the door, listening outside. "No, fool. The carpets are too thick." She opened the door and stepped into the hallway, which was empty. She knew that she was lodged in the guest apartments, which weren't far away from the family apartments. She turned to the left, away from the servant's stairway and walked to the T at the end of the hallway. The right lead to the staircase to the foyer, so Betan turned left into a short hall that turned left again.

This hallway was long, longer than the one her door opened into. Staggered doors lined both sides. *Just like that hallway in Alvendor. Rather nicer, of course.* She started

down the hallways, straining her ears. She reached the first door which, like Alvendor, was on the right side. Pressing her ear to it, she listened. She closed her eyes and tried the handle.

It turned. The bolt clanked free and Betan jumped backwards, barely suppressing a shriek. *Breathe, girl. Breathe. You didn't panic at the Chassels or Brailot, you're not going to bloody panic trying to sneak into a room.* She'd done much worse than that back home, although not quite with such dire consequences of she were caught.

If someone's inside they know I'm out here, so.... Her arm stuttered a few times despite her bold thought but she turned the handle again and swung the door open on creaky hinges.

It was a bedroom. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. The room was dusty, hopefully the carpet would mask any footprints she made. She swept her eyes around the room. Nothing of the inhabitant could be divined from the quick glance. She walked to a wardrobe and swung it open. It was a boy's room, but a short examination revealed nothing that would fit her. There were some child's clothes, which Betan found odd, but most were too small. What looked like could fit was clearly intended for a youngster. *This son of the Prodolans was a giant.* Betan closed the wardrobe and returned to the door. She listened, heard nothing and opened the door to slip into the hall.

It was empty. She looked down the hall. Four more rooms, not counting the double doors at the end of the hallway that were obviously the lord and lady's. Betan sank against the door, her heart was pounding as hard as it ever had been in battle, or waiting for it.

“That's enough for today, I think.”

It took two days before Betan could escape attention long enough to make another trip down the hallway, just after breakfast. The ladies, resident and guest, were even more consumed by the upcoming fete, which Arminten had decreed would be held four days hence.

Betan had decided that she would no longer be on the estate when it happened.

The first room on the left was a girl's room. Lord and Lady Prodolan had no unwed daughters, so Betan imagined this was Cial's room. She quickly left. The next door, on the right, opened more smoothly than the first son's room and Betan entered, heading straight for the wardrobe. Again there were some children's clothes, *must be a Brannan keepsake thing, very strange* and again they were the only ones that would fit. Betan took a closer look at these and found some trousers that looked the right length, or close and tossed them onto the bed. Next came jackets that would either fit or be a bit too tight. That day's gown had stiffly starched shoulders so she couldn't try them on then, but she tossed them on the bed to try later. If they fit she'd take them along. Changes of clothes wouldn't hurt. In that spirit she scavenged a few shirts and was looking through the drawers of trousers again when the door opened behind her.

Betan froze for an instant, then turned and walked toward the two NA youngsters entering. “Your highness.” one of them greeted. “His lord-” Betan jabbed him in the sternum and her skirts tripped her lunge toward the other but she grabbed his legs as she fell taking them both down. He called out in surprise as he fell and writhed to get away from her. She could find no purchase on the floor with her skirts under her, so she head butted him in the groin. He shrieked and fell silent, writhing. Betan rolled away and hiked her skirts. “Not my proudest moment.” she said she tried to stand. She lurched

drunkenly to the left as her back only half cooperated. A cry was suppressed when she barked her elbow on the wall, using the collision to leverage herself upright. The first NA was almost recovered from his blow by the time Betan felt strong enough to move. She kicked that one in the chest to keep him from regaining his voice, then leaned against the door, panting and letting her left arm hang limply at her side..

“Out of shape.” she said. “Good thing you two kids aren't very big.” She looked them over, they both wore long knives and pistols on their belts. Several swings of a pistol butt and her prisoners were helpless. Taking their uniforms was too much of a risk, someone might try to pull rank on her, or ask questions about the local NA. The knife made short work of her dress and the son's clothing fit a bit more loosely than fashion demanded, but that would be good for fighting in.

“No swords, must be cadets. Just as well, those unbalanced curvy things you call swords are bloody useless anyway.” she muttered as she set to struggling into the boots she'd taken.

Then out the door, a knife in each hand. Her brother, heir to the throne, was a good knife fighter (she was the fencer of the family) and had taught her some tricks. She headed down the hall, finding an antechamber she hadn't noticed on her first foray. *Lord and Lady's bedchambers, I bet.* A pair each of blunderbusses and musketoons announced guard stations. “Probably where the lads came from.” She left the guns there and tried the handle. To her surprise, it turned and she entered. The room was large with a huge bed, several wardrobes and some cabinets, some of which were padlocked. In a wardrobe with uniforms she found a small duffel that she appropriated.

She took one more look around and found that one of the cabinets' padlock hung open. She looked and smiled at the sight of her sword hanging from her scabbard. The knives thudded to the carpeted floor so she could take it. “This is a proper sword.” She hung it around her waist and picked up the knives. “I'll have to stop and get the sheaths.” A little more poking around revealed her satchel, which felt full. She didn't take the time to inventory it.

“Okay, think, girl. Think.” she said as she stuffed the clothes into the duffel she'd found. “You've weapons. Food? No, I've money and weapons, don't need to bother with the pantry on my way out. But where the hell are you? Ah, that's a question. Okay, the office. Maps.”

The pistols she tucked into the back of her belt. The sword would give her away but it would also give her an advantage. The antechamber to Prodolan's office was enough space to tussle a bit with a sword and if his guards were armed similarly to those on his bedchamber she'd just shoot them. “Then again.” she drew the NA pistols and looked at them. They were short. Loaded, but short. On a hunch she dug into her satchel and found *her* pistols. Long, accurized, and empty. A few moments transferred powder and shot from pistols Brannan to Durannian. “That's better. Now. Come back for all this, or not?”

“Not.”

She put the long arms into the duffel, tied the sheathed knives to her belt and left the room. The hallway from the family's area to that of the office was empty, a blessed side effect of her Yellow companions' campaign. She peeked around the corner that lead to Prodolan's office and saw the guards. A grin came to her face and she set down the duffel.

Drawing and cocking her pistols she turned the corner and started walking

towards the two guards, who'd been alerted by her peek. "Good day, boys. Don't move or I'll have to shoot you. Or you'll have to shoot me, which might be worse for you."

The two NAs sighed and raised their hands. "Good lads. Into the office." She was only a few steps behind them.

Prodolan looked up from some paperwork and smiled. "Your highness, I suppose it's too late to ask for your parole."

"Quite."

"You found your kit in my chamber. I thought I'd locked that cabinet."

"I must beg my lord not to try anything brave. I'd never forgive myself for breaking Arminten's heart."

Prodolan's face hardened. "That is hardly fair, your highness."

"I do apologize and hope we can be friends after the war. For the time being ...?" She faltered. *Think girl, think.*

"For the time being, you two will turn around." she said to the guards.

"One isn't supposed to turn ones back to royalty." One of them said.

Betan tucked a pistol away and drew her sword. "It's knocks to the head, or blades to the heart. Your choice, young smart ass."

"Turn around lads, we are powerless against a bold lady." Prodolan ordered. The guards sighed again and complied. When they were down Betan turned her attention to the lord.

"I need a map."

"Your highness, I do apologize but I can't assist your escape. I am already derelict in duty not forcing you to shoot me."

"Very well, stand up, turn around."

"There are maps in that cabinet, your highness."

"Would you be good enough to fetch them for me?"

Prodolan sighed slightly and walked to a cabinet near his desk. He stood to one side and opened the door so Betan could see inside. Books, papers, a few purses.

"Thank you, my lord." She put her sword away and drew out a map, which thankfully was folded rather than rolled. It was a local map and she put it aside. A few anxious minutes brought her to a map she recognized.

"Was this mine?" she muttered.

"No, your majesty. There are standard maps used by the Branna army. The rebels appropriated a number of them."

"Ah, very good." She tucked the map into her satchel and hefted the purses. One of them was powder, the other shot, the last tinkled. She peeked, money. All three went into her satchel.

"Very well. My lord, I'm sorry." she swung the muzzle of her pistol in a circle. Prodolan sighed and turned around. "A word of advice, in exchange for your hospitality. Don't send anyone you care for after me." She clubbed him.

She took the time to bind Prodolan and his two guards, then had to stop to rest her back. A few draughts of brandy from Prodolan's sideboard helped, then she picked up her duffel before she was out the back stairs. The stables were easy to find and a groom equipped two mares for her at the point of her sword. She dropped a few coins into a pocket after she clubbed him.

"That was too easy." she thought as she rode away.

Betan bought food and drink for herself at the first inn she came to. The groom had included fodder so the horses would be fine. With a remount she could run far before needing to rest them. They were like enough to be sisters, she hoped they were well matched in performance.

She took them through their paces, trotting away from the inn, galloping for a bit on a straightaway east. Her escape had been effected just as the morning gained its fullness, in the four hour period called noontime. The days were longer here, she didn't know if it was seasonal or a function of the world in which the Central Lands resided, but she'd never quite gotten the hang of it. It hadn't mattered with the Yellow army as she was simply told the number of hours it was expected for her to arrive wherever or accomplish whatever she was told to.

"Reminds me." Betan slowed her horse, which she was already thinking of as Horse One, to a walk and swung her satchel around. Her explorations revealed that that all of its contents, less the bit of money she'd carried on her person, were accounted for. "I've more than made up for that, I believe." Her clock, however, had wound down. She wound it up and set it to the top, that would serve for now, she could set it to the correct time later. The most important thing was that her commission was there. "Keeping it all together beats filing, I bet."

After four hours she found a stream and let the horses drink while she looked over the map more closely and rested.

"Dalibar." She found it on the map. It was quite a ways north of Brailot and rather far northwest of Zhatano, where the Yellow Army had been bound. But it was near a branch of the RIVER.

"They'll expect that. But I can't outrun them on a horse. They'll just send messenger birds ahead of me. Unless Prodolan will want to recapture me himself." Betan shook her head. "Can't count on that. Expect the worst. I'd better make sure all of these guns are loaded, then." She busied herself with the two musketoons and two blunderbusses. It was a rather heavy armament for door guards, but given that Branna was having a civil war maybe it fit. They were all loaded, the blunderbusses' shot in some kind of bag that didn't budge when she knocked the barrel with her boot. "Probably sticky, and combustible. Very well." She put one of each in each of the horses' saddlebags. The cadets' (if that's what they were) pistols fit into the pockets of the jackets she'd stolen from the unidentified Prodolan son, so she put them there. Her own pistols went into their loops under her belt.

A few mouthfuls of bread and cheese and she was onto Horse Two and away. The map showed a town ahead, but no marking for official offices so hopefully there would be no one awaiting her. She'd have tried to avoid the town but every scrap of dirt hereabouts was someone's estate. That would only bring problems.

"Keep them slow, girl. Racing through town with lathered mounts would definitely arouse suspicion."

Her mounts clopped away on the hard packed road. "I wonder if this is also some over moneyed Brannan form of roadway. It looks like dirt but there's almost no dust. Doesn't quite sound like pavement." She looked down for a moment, then cursed herself as she returned her attention to the landscape. The road was well tended, not a kingsway, just a two cart track. "For market? Hard to believe. Probably for noble's carriages." It was bounded on her right by the stream she'd found, glances over a few miles confirmed it to be too regular to be anything occurring naturally. "Drainage, probably. Or maybe

for horses, it seems clear enough.” Opposite the waterway and on the left of the road was a short curb, hardly a barrier to anything. Occasional numbers Betan guessed were distance markers, steadily descending through the 400s. “Distance to the capital? Could be. Awfully damn self important of them.” Roads branched off now and then to the left and right. The land on the other side of the curbs varied wildly. Orchards, hedgerows, gardens, mazes, all changing every few miles. “Are estates of standard sizes?” Betan wondered. “I’ve got to stop talking to myself. But it would make sense if noble families are created by royal whim. Hm.”

Nothing warned of the oncoming town. The road turned and widened as it did so and there was a town there. The waterway disappeared into a culvert. The town was small and made up of large buildings. An inn, some kind of hall, and four buildings that looked like markets. “Where they send the servants shopping, probably.” Betan muttered. A few faces turned to her as she trotted through town. She’d taken a moment at the rest to get her hair out of the pile of braids and curls Arminten’s handmaid had put it into and tie it back. It wasn’t exactly manlike and she wished she’d found a civilian hat to hide under. But no one seemed very curious to see a blond trotting through town. With a remount. And several guns.

Maybe I should have taken a uniform. Betan mused as she kept moving. It would have explained the guns and extra horse. I could say I’m taking them to an officer at the front. Except I don’t know where the front is. Oh well.

She kept moving and no one challenged her as she left town. She quickly saw the reason for the market. The province here, the map said it was Teltel, opened up into vast farms. “Probably owned by the Bad King, or his favorites.” The road had widened, the waterway reappeared and there were tree stands scattered along the road that closely resembled those she’d hidden in at the first day of the Chassels. To Betan after a few hours into noontime the farms looked much like those in Dorway, on the plains or in the river valley. Rather more grains but apart from that the land was broken up into plots growing a variety of crops, with some lying fallow and orchards and vineyards scattered among them.

“Good land to hide in. Also good to flush people out in.” She slowed the horses and stood in the stirrups. “No workers to be seen.” Another look at the map showed the road she was on went east. If she was going to make for the river Jebal she could go east for what looked like four days or southeast for what appeared to be two. “Or…” she traced a path to the north. The Jebal trended southeast until it joined RIVER a few hundred miles north of Brailot. But it took a severe bend about four days north of Dalibar. It was tempting, they wouldn’t expect her to head north.

“Because the river then passes all of these points they *would* be expecting me to go. I could head south, looks like twelve days past Dalibar to the river. That would really throw them. Until I was recaptured, of course. Oh, sod it.” She stuffed the map back into her satchel, then halted the horses and dismounted. A quick probe with her sword revealed the waterway to be a pretty regular semicircle, treacherous for horses. So with Horse One staked to the roadway with a cadet’s knife (it was most definitely some kind of hard packed earth) she goaded Horse Two into leaping over it. Betan staked her, then leapt over the waterway to get Horse One over.

Horse Two was sweaty after only a few hours of riding. But Betan was also sweaty after doing very little that was strenuous. “It **is** the hottest part of the day.” She shaded her eyes. “I need a hat.”

She lead the two horses along the fringe of bare soil that faced the curb before she found a lane in the tall grasses that looked somewhat like something grown in Durannia. It was tall enough to hide the horses but not a rider. She walked them at what was a brisk pace for her, stopping occasionally to listen for people. This seemed to perturb the horses, who started making noises. Betan stopped long enough to rub their noses and feed them a few sweet yellow vegetables from the feedbags until they calmed. "I hope you two aren't expecting a nap soon." she muttered. The horses gave nothing away.

Betan drew her looker before continuing. Its enchantments could cut through shade and smoke but the grain was a bit more than it was made for. The view was very hazy beyond fifty yards or so. But it was enough to see she was as yet unaccompanied.

"Alright you bloody nags, time to move again." Betan jerked their leads slightly and they followed her. She used the looker to scout and started to see some outbuildings after a few minutes. When a voice came faintly to her she faltered for a second. She'd hoped to move unnoticed, counting on a lane across the field but it appeared there were no such things. "Probably arranged like a wheel." Cutting across the grain would mark an interloper as well as a gunshot from any elevation. There was a barn just off to the right.

"Well, fuck."

Betan started walking again. The lane ended in a small courtyard fronting a barn and a few outbuildings. A few paths lead off the courtyard, one toward a tree shaded area the other deeper into the fields.

The courtyard was empty.

Too easy? Betan asked. The path into the fields was straight and would, *Oh, never mind, here comes somebody.* Someone in plain clothes exited the barn and saw her right away. He paused, looking at her. She was dressed in rather loosely in quality clothes. He might not realize they didn't quite fit but they lacked decoration. But she had two horses. And guns. And a sword.

Authority it is. "You there, come here." she ordered, using the same tone she did with stray troops under someone else's command. He paused then briskly walked over. "Whose farm is this?"

"Lord Delsheran's, sir."

Bless my small tits. Betan thought. "Is he in residence?" she asked, then cringed inwardly. *Rather suspicious question, that.* The man paused again, she thought he gave her a slightly askance look. "He's Away." he said.

"Who are you?" *Away? That felt like a capitalized word. Oh, the war.*

"I'm Sesh, sir. I sharecrop some of Lord Delsheran's land."

"Hm." Betan muttered. *What now? I've pretty well stuck it in here. Right, only one thing turns all men's hearts, at least that I have time for.* "Come closer, Sesh." Betan said, reaching into her satchel. He visibly gulped then obeyed. Betan drew forth the coin purse she'd stolen from Prodolan and jingled it. Sesh, rather contrary to Betan's expectations, tensed. "Is there anyone at home here?"

"No, sir. All the lord's family is in the capital. Just the sharecroppers and some caretakers are here."

"Outstanding." Betan reached into the bag. "Where does that path come out?" She gestured toward the trees with her head.

"Near Katail, sir."

Betan recalled seeing that word on the map. On another road, if memory served.

Betan drew forth some coins. "I'm not here to cause any mischief, Sesh." she held them out to him. "You never saw me."

Sesh looked at them warily. "Really, sir, I don't want to get involved in--"

"You're not, just take the money and if anyone asks nothing strange happened today. Don't volunteer any information, just say that you've been going about your tasks."

Sesh sighed. "This is going to end badly for me." He took the money and walked past Betan and her horses. She shook her head and followed the path into the trees.

Katail had a clock and Betan set her watch by it. The sun was now starting to ease downward. She'd been on the run for six hours and the horses were loathe to start walking again. She convinced them to do so and looked at the map as they worked their way into a fast walk.

Katail was on a road that paralleled the one she'd been on. She'd cut about three miles south over Lord Delsheran's land. The new land was much like the one on the other road. Possibly more trees.

"Now. Do I hole up here somewhere and go cross country in the night, or what? It would be easier to evade searchers at night, but also easier to run into obstacles. Plus, you two. Would you wake up in the middle of the night?" Betan sighed and nudged Horse Two back into a trot. A few more hours down the road and she'd decide.

She'd passed a few carriages and wagons heading down the road. She rested the horses once more, walking them for a few miles after letting them drink from the little canals that followed the roads. Horse One had really been reluctant to start moving again but a whack from Betan's scabbard convinced her. Betan was starting to fade, she'd been rather sedentary at Fern Island, but overcoming disgrace was a powerful incentive. She assembled a rough, cold sandwich from what she'd bought at the inn, adding meat to her earlier meal of bread and cheese. That revived her, as did the wine she'd bought there, which was really terrible. "Saw that I was in a hurry, did they? Bastards." She stowed everything and settled onto Horse One for the ride. The farms rolled past her, grains and fruits and vegetables and vineyards and orchards, it all blurred together, apart from what might conceal an ambush of bandits or pursuers. She kept her hands close to her pistol, wishing there was a way to keep a blunderbuss close to hand without arousing suspicion. Short of explosives, nothing broke up a party leaping from the bush like a spray of shot from the yawning barrel of the clumsy but powerful weapon. But they were too long to fit into holsters, even if the tack had any. It didn't, so Betan supposed she'd gotten, *well, no it can't be a lady's tack because it's not side saddle. Whatever, don't get distracted.*

Horse One was definitely getting stubborn as dusk approached. "Alright, you bitch, we'll stop." Betan dismounted and lead the horses to an orchard. She walked them until it got dark, looking for a place to hide. No great place to do so appeared, so Betan stopped under a tree, unsaddled and staked the horses with real stakes she'd found in the saddlebags, then arranged her weapons close to hand.

Rest did not come easily. The Brannan countryside was alive. Birds flew, bugs made an orchestra of noises and lights in the distance indicated that more advanced forms of life came out after dark. Even the nags' occasional snuffles and sighs jerked her awake. She debated finishing the first bottle of terrible wine to calm her nerves, but her nerves might keep her free for another night.

The sun woke Betan and she cursed it for that. The horses were awake. Betan realized it was one of them butting her foot that had woken her. She cursed the horse, but rose. After putting their feedbags on, Betan took a musketoon and headed to the road to scout. There was someone on the edge of the road a half mile or so ahead of her. Her looker revealed a ratty looking vagabond fussing over a little cook pot. "That's reassuring. Either the lords hereabout weren't vigilant against trespassers, or it was common for travelers to stop in someone's land for rest. But probably not as far in as I am, so I shouldn't dawdle."

Betan went back to the horses. She packed and saddled the grumpy beasts before she turned out some more bread and cheese for herself. The morning was cool but hardly cold. Betan stretched after eating, even in the field she had rarely slept on the ground. Her back was stiff and the wound twinged as she limbered up.

"Are you One or Two? Bother. You're both rested and your tack is quite identical so you shall be One for today." Betan pulled up the stakes, put them away and lead the horses back to the road. After a long drink for the horses where she dumped all of her wine and refilled the bottles with water, Horse One was mounted and they were off.

"No pursuers, this is too easy."

She'd been on the road for several hours. The sun was halfway to its lingering zenith.

"Do they really need to pursue me? Notifying the guard or police or whatever they have in the towns is enough. I bet they figure I'm heading for the river."

The map showed two towns that she could reach before noontime ended. The first was a simple stop along the way, probably an inn and not much more. The second was marked to have an official. "Probably some kind of provincial hay ward but I'd better consider them notified that a captive was on the loose. I wonder how they'd describe me. Barbarian princess?" Betan giggled at that before patting her sword. "Barbarians are good with weapons, I can attest to that. Second hand, anyway. Stop talking to yourself. Not that there's anyone else to talk to. Are these roads always so bloody empty?"

Betan risked a stop in the first town. She had the money so she wanted to keep her food stores topped off.

"Good day to you, sir." the fat, short proprietor said as she entered the empty inn.

"Good day to you." She bit off replying with 'sir', innkeepers probably didn't rate the honorific in Branna.

"What can I get you? You sound like you're from away, may I suggest you try the local ale? It's wonderful stuff."

"Ah, no, thank you. I'm in a hurry. Do you sell horse feed?"

"I do, sir. Fine mounts you've got. Messenger, are you?"

Betan looked at him for a moment. "Yes. I'll take a small wheel of that cheese and a loaf of the freshest bread you've got."

"Baked this morning in Pital. Not warm from the ovens but plenty good enough." The innkeeper took down a loaf. "I only have the one size of wheel, would you like a quarter?" he asked. Betan assented and he used a cord to cut a quarter of the cheese off.

"Anything else for you? We've got cured *zachit*, very tasty." The innkeeper gestured to a lump of pale meat that didn't look appetizing. It must have showed on

Betan's face because he offered her a taste. Betan bought a half pound of it in slices. It was very good.

“Anything to slake your thirst? We've *nemal* if you're in a hurry, local to these parts, brewed off the trees you've passed on your way here.” Betan recalled low trees with a pink fruit. “A cupful revives you somewhat if you're tired, a bottle at a sitting will keep you up a week.”

That sounds promising. “How much?” The keeper quoted a small price per bottle and offered a sample. The *nemal* was bitter and smoky but Betan felt herself lift off just the small tasting cup. “Two bottles of that, then, and two pounds of feed for my horses. No, no preference, thank you.”

The keeper wrapped each of her purchases in some kind of shiny paper and Betan bought a large purse to carry it all in so the stuff wouldn't foul drawing her weapons. She brushed her hair from her face and winced. “Do you sell hats, I seem to have lost mine.”

He did.

“Any news?” Betan asked.

“Ah, about what?”

“News. Any. You know, uh, local news.”

The keeper paused. *He must think I'm asking about the war they're supposed to ignore.*

“Any troubles on the road? Noble quarrels?”

The keeper brightened visibly.

“Oh, that, sir. No, sir. No signals that the road's blocked, and second sun's a bad time for tales, most of the local quality in the capital, sir.”

“Ah, very good.” Betan decided against asking him about signals, paid him and was off, switching to Horse Two.

Pital was the second city on the road and Betan reached it toward what she reckoned was near the end of noontime. A tower presaged her arrival for an hour and some. It had a clock but its main purpose was clearly the large platform atop it. Her looker showed perches on the platform, with some large circular thing on a swivel mount. “The innkeeper's signal, perhaps?” The town was large, clearly sprawled over the road and the fields on either side were occupied. “This is where things stop getting easy. Maybe I could convince them I'm a messenger.” Betan looked over the fields, but mounted overseers canceled that plan before she made it.

“Well, girls. Here we go.” She stopped the horses and let them drink before walking them. They were starting to sweat, probably from the heat rather than exertion but if she needed them to bolt from Pital the fresher they were the better.

Thin lines of smoke showed some kind of industry in Pital. Smithies and small alchemists, likely. A working farm would do minor repairs with its own facilities but heavy work would be better done in a centralized facility. Maybe owned in common or by shares. Such arrangements were ubiquitous in Durannia. Betan mounted up again when the entrance to the town was clear to her unaided eye. She entered the town at a trot and to her dismay the first building off the road was marked by the royal crest of Branna. A rotund man in a uniform somewhat similar to the Oldster army eyeballed her as she entered. She sketched a salute to him and he nodded in return.

Something tells me that's not how it should have gone. Betan kept her pace steady, desperately trying not to look back. She turned off the main street to glance back

at the official. He was watching her and talking. *Shit.* Betan nudged the horses to go faster. She was now in the shade and a horde of children and layabouts was lounging in it. She stopped the horse, thinking of asking directions. The layabouts were dressed in grubby but serviceable clothes. Maybe they were porters or some sort of day workers. A child jumped up.

“Are you lost, sir?” it asked. It was a small, appallingly dirty child; a boy, Betan guessed. Betan nodded him forward and walked the horses away. The boy ran alongside them, babbling a steady stream of credentials of his service. They crossed another street, smaller than the main street but larger than the one they traveled. The buildings near there were free of lurkers. Betan halted and dismounted, reaching into her smaller coin purse, the one she'd liberated from the cadet she'd unmanned with her forehead.

Amorelon would be proud of that one.

She took crystal bead from the pouch and tossed it to the boy. He scowled and batted it away.

“Bloody pennies, you're a fool.” the boy said.

“Come here.” she said.

“Not unless-” Betan took a small pistol from her jacket and cocked it.

“Here. Now.”

The boy glared at her. “You wouldn't.”

Betan aimed the pistol at him. He scuttled toward her.

“Clearly I underestimated your worth.” Betan said. The boy squinted at her.

“You're, you're a *lad*-” Betan thumped him on the forehead with her free hand.

“Quiet, jackass.” she whispered harshly. “Clearly, I've doubly underestimated your worth. You're bold and more alert than anyone else I've met, or you're just doubly bold and I'm fooling no one. Still, doubly bold can be as helpful to me as bold and alert.” She reached into the pouch again, no thrones came to her fingertips. She dug into her satchel for Prodolan's purse and instantly found a throne. She held it up to the boy and his eyes goggled. *The eye must be the currency of use here.*

“This can be yours. First, how many officials in this town?”

“Kingsmen? Just four. They pretty well stay in their house at the entrance to town. There are inspectors but I don't think you care about them.”

“Indeed, no. How do they get messages? I saw the platform.”

“Birds sometimes, they're rare though. One came this morning. Some excitement there.”

“What did it say?”

The boy shrugged. “They don't talk.”

“I need to know where the kingsmen are right now. Do you have friends?”

The boy nodded.

“Very well. This-” she presented the throne, just out of his reach. He didn't grab for it. *Very bright boy.* “-will be yours if you can help me out of town.” She put it in her pocket and drew out a few eyes. “Hire help if you need. I'll wait here, I want to know where the kingsmen are. You have five minutes.”

“I'll need ten.”

“Then those eyes are all you get.”

The boy looked down at his hands, he had maybe six eyes, worth fifty or so beads. Betan drew out the throne again.

“Five minutes.” he said with a nod.

“What's your name?”

“Getell.”

“Getell, this gun is the smallest of my arms.”

“I can see, you're fit for a battle.”

“You have no idea. If you let the kingsmen tempt you with promises of rewards I'll find you after I kill them if I have to burn this town down. Delay is all I fear.”

“Take a *kingsman's* promise?” Getell spat. “You *have* underestimated me. Five minutes.” he scampered away. Betan checked the time then waited. She set herself between her horses, she'd use them for cover if the kingsmen came for her. Odds are she could defeat four policemen, especially Brannan policemen who she imagined to be corrupt and lazy. *I'm certainly armed well enough.*

Traffic on the roads she was at the intersection of continued, which she took for a good sign. Then Getell was back.

“They're all in their house.” he said.

“That was quick.” Betan eyed him suspiciously. “Did you need help?”

“*No.*” he said, clearly thinking it was a stupid question.

“How did you find out they were all in their house?”

“I looked in the windows.”

Betan glared at the scamp for a moment. “Did you think that might alert them that I'm curious about them?”

Getell shrugged. “You have no reason to fear them.”

“You'd best be right, or they'll end up with my money.”

Getell swallowed.

“Let's go.” Betan began leading the horses down the second street, which signs painted in the buildings marked as Filitel Street. She didn't recognize the word, so she assumed it was someone's name.

“This is the back of their house.” Getell said.

It was a narrow, but deep house. A door and a few windows looked onto Filitel Street, but Betan could see no one at them.

Now, what to do with these horses and the brat? Betan thought. She knew some knots to use when hitching horses but she couldn't count that the boy didn't, or that he wouldn't simply cut the leads and take the horses away. He could probably get a throne or two for each of them, especially with the tack, unless it had some kind of crest on it. Betan hadn't really looked.

She got a stake out and gestured Getell closer. He approached, squinting up at her. She grabbed his arm and dragged him to the ground, cuffing him when he screamed. “Shut it.” His hands were tied into the leads, which then tied to the stake. “Now, I'm going to take care of the kingsmen. You will wait here with the horses, and I can be assured that the horses will be here when I get back.”

“I can slip this.” he said sulkily.

“I should be very angry were you to do so.” Betan said. She cocked each other pistols in her belt, then took a blunderbuss from Horse One's saddlebag and climbed the steps of leading to the back of the kingsmen's house. The door was locked but the wood was cheap and one blow from the blunderbuss' butt sent the door flying open.

Betan charged into some kind of kitchen. She raced through it into an open room with a few desks and four blue and white uniformed men. They swung about and stared at her with shock. She fired the blunderbuss from across the room, putting shot into two

of them. The other two drew clubs she she had her pistols out and shot them.

Quick knife strokes finished the policeman. She went to the desk they'd been standing around and found a letter informing someone that the fugitive detailed in dispatch blah blah blah. She crumpled the letter and put it in her pocket.

Betan looked around the room as she reloaded her pistols. There was a staircase to the right of the direction she'd entered. She mounted it and found on the second story beds and lockers for three of the kingsmen and a door she guessed lead to the senior man's room. And another staircase. She went up it and found two more rooms and a ladder to a trap door. She listened at one and heard nothing. She listened at the other and heard rustling. She opened the door and found the station's dovecote. A grated window let in air and out bird smells.

“Do I let you go, or not?” Betan asked herself. She checked the other room and found it to be a store room and arms locker. A cabinet revealed ammunition, she took the bucket of blunderbuss cartridges, having forgotten to pick up any from the Prodolan estate. A smaller case mounted on the wall was locked but another butt stroke stove it in, sending a riot of ribbons to the floor. She picked up a few and found the names of towns written on them. “Ah, very clever, Branna. Charms, homing charms I would suppose. I should suggest that to father.” She pocketed a few for samples and went back to the dovecote. The cages weren't locked so it was a simple matter to let the birds loose where they would quickly go feral without their homing charms to guide them. Betan hoped. A flood of birds to the nearest station would be an obvious signal that something was wrong.

“Speaking of signals.” Betan went to the main room on the third floor and mounted the ladder. The circular thing was a metal mirror over a lamp. The view on the platform was unobstructed, since the town's clock was now below her. No other building in Pital was more than two stories tall.

A moment's inspection of the signal didn't reveal any easy way to disassemble it, so Betan blasted one of the mirror's swivels with her pistol. The mirror fell with a clang.

She found Filitel Street deserted and Getell straining at the knots. She emptied the bucket into the saddlebags and reloaded the blunderbuss before untying the leads. He darted out of her reach in an instant.

“Where's the next king's office?”

“Etamal, twenty miles down the road.”

Betan got her map and looked. Her path would indeed take her to Etamal, unless she could find some way to cut across country to the river.

“Getell, how well do you know the countryside?”

“Well enough. My father is a crofter on Lord Keledan's estates.”

“Where are those estates?”

“Did you, did you-” Getell looked toward the back door, which Betan had left open.

“Yes, I did. Where are those estates?”

“Five miles down the road.”

“Will five more thrones suffice to hire you as a guide across Lord Keledan's estates?”

Getell licked his lips. “You're in bad trouble.”

Betan smiled. “Not the kind of trouble you could imagine but I am very keen on getting away from here.”

“You're a, a *rebel*.”

“It's quite a bit more complicated than that, but I should think you wouldn't be getting any kind of reward for betraying me later should you agree to guide me now.”

“You keep talking about rewards.” Getell observed. “You must be a foreigner. The Bad King doesn't pay rewards.”

“This is good news. For one, you're right, I'm a foreigner. For second, five thrones, that is, six total, is the best you're going to get here.”

“I haven't seen a throne yet.”

“You've seen it, but the deal was you get me out of town and you get paid.”

“Then let's take you out of town and talk about a guide.” Getell said.

Betan shrugged. “Lead the way.”

Getell set off down Filitel Street, Betan followed with the horses. She could feel eyes following them from the buildings flanking the street, although she and the boy were the only traffic on it. *Can't be helped. Hopefully they all have the same opinion of the kingsmen as young Getell here and no one will be overly eager to send a message to Etamal.*

It only took ten minutes to reach the limit of Pital. Betan flipped Getell his throne before he could demand it and drew out Prodolan's purse.

“Now, Getell.” she dug for coins. “Five thrones.” She had them in a moment.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Betan hesitated. How much to trust this boy. If he were caught with her, some haughty NA would probably just run him through. She believed him that the Bad King didn't pay rewards, at least not to crofter's sons.

“The Yellow Army.”

“They're marching on Zhatano.”

“I was hoping the river would get me to them.”

Getell frowned and scratched his head. “I'm not sure how far that is.”

Betan pocketed the money and switched the purse for her map. She showed it to Getell. He shook his head. “Don't know the country.” Betan pointed.

“We're here.” She unfolded the map once and pointed again. “This is Zhatano. On this scale-”

“Scale?”

“Never mind, it's two days on the river to here the TRIBUTARY and Fral join. From there it's a four day journey to Zhatano.”

“But we need a boat.”

“Exactly. Where can we get a boat?”

“Not just any boat.” Getell said. “We'd need a river galley. Sailing ships are forbidden on inland rivers. Fortunately for you, most galley rowers are from debtor's prisons.” Getell smiled. “I'm sure they'd be willing to take you to the Yellow Army. I've heard they command the river from Petalal, wherever that is.”

Betan found it on the map, it was just shy of the junction of the TRIBUTARY and Fral and rather up from the landing where they'd faced the South Bend NA. “Hm, Pautark must have wanted to secure the river before-” Betan glanced at Getell, who was rapt. “Never mind.”

“You know General Pautark?” he marveled.

“I've met him. Are you with me, or not?”

“I'm with you, there's nothing for me here.”

“Then call me Betan and let's go.” Betan boosted him into the saddle and mounted behind him.

“There are private landings all up and down the river, and regular galley service.” Getell said. “The nobles use them to get to and from the capital.”

“I'd heard most nobles were away.”

“Most. It's too hot here for them in the suns. Most noblemen are away at the war, either with their regiments or their assemblages. The wives and such are hiding in the capital.”

“Hiding, or held hostage?”

Getell shrugged. “Doesn't matter. If the Bad King falls they'll go with him. I've heard tell that there have been massacres of families that have tried to flee. But the capital's well defended, the Bad King would never let the Yellow Army in without a fight.”

“The last I heard, the Bad King was at Podansir with a half filled army.”

“What?”

“We beat the first corps they sent out to test us, in the middle of Dorway.”

“*Dorway?*” Getell gasped. “You were there? That's so far away!” Betan chuckled, wondering if he had the faintest notion where her home was.

“I take it none of this news has leaked out?”

“We're not even allowed to talk about the war. The Bad King's toadies rat us to the kingsmen if we do. Travelers, merchants and teamsters, might have heard about the war, but we haven't. Who's winning?”

“When I was last with the Yellow army it was maneuvering toward Zhatano. Wait, how did you know the Yellow Army commanded part of the river if there's no news?”

“Travel reports are still sent out. They lie about what the problems are. But if the river's blocked, the river's blocked. I heard some of the porters say that nothing was moving beyond Petalal. We only knew that the Yellow army was building up when the travel reports said that the passes over the Malia had been washed out by a storm. Then kingsways into Dorway were closed for maintenance. I don't know what excuse for the river block is. So the Yellow Army is winning?”

“I don't know.”

“How did you end up way up here?”

“It's a long trip, I might tell you.”

“Here's the road to Lord Keledan's estate.”

Betan halted. “Shouldn't we try to sneak across?”

Getell shrugged. “You're the boss, but none of the workers will care.”

“What about managers or foremen?”

“Most of them joined the rebellion.”

Betan nodded, recalling the state of Fern Island. She nudged Horse One onto the little bridge crossing the canal.

“What about your father, will we see him?” Betan asked.

“Doubt it. His croft isn't near the road.”

“How old are you?”

“How old are *you?*” Getell replied.

Betan smiled. “Fair enough. I'm 19. Maybe 20, I'm not sure what the date is in

my world.”

“You're from another *world*?”

“And you thought Dorway was distant. So, you are...?”

“Ten. I'm the third son and have two sisters. The croft is small and they couldn't afford to keep that many. My older brother joined the navy.”

“I didn't ask all of that.”

“You would have, everyone does.”

“So you were turned out?”

“No, I left. I go back once in a while, when work is scarce in Pital, or when I do well and can spare something. How did *you* end up so far from home?”

“Joined the army, trying to impress someone who had done very well trying to impress me.”

“Stupid reason.” Getell said. “I mean-” he began to sputter.

“My father much agreed with you. But the women of my line can be stubborn, so he relented.”

“Turn left here, there's a path not far into this field. The Lord doesn't much like to see his workers.”

Betan followed his direction.

“Even when he's gone?”

“They don't like to get out of the habit. What will happen to you if you're caught?”

“The person I was trying to impress will find out that I was captured. And my father will have been proven right.”

“They won't kill you?”

Betan smiled. She might as well repay Getell for his forthrightness. “No, my father the king of my country, but if you start calling me 'your highness' I'll hurt you.”

“A princess!” Getell marveled once and was struck dumb for quite a while after. “Why are we riding the same horse? Do nobles in your country share mounts with their servants?”

“Are you my servant?”

Getell shrugged. “I'm a professional servant. I just change masters often.”

“Well, don't start calling me mistress, either. But we're sharing so the spare horse can rest. I trade off to keep them from blowing out.” Betan found the path and turned the horses onto it. They plodded along in silence for a while, speech exhausted again.

“What will happen when we reach the Yellow Army?” Getell asked.

“I don't know what will happen *if* we reach the Yellow Army. I imagine we're heading for the Lord's private landing?”

“Yes.”

“First I have to take control of a galley, then we'll have to get that galley to Petalal and hope the rebel navy doesn't sink us on principal. And that no Oldsters come out to get us, or shoot us up from the bank. Are there any fortifications between here and Petalal?”

Getell was silent for a moment. “I don't *think* so.”

Betan drew out her map. “No forts marked, but a few cannon and a wagon can be just as devastating to us. So, my young temporary servant, it's far too early to discuss what might happen *if* we reach the Yellow Army.”

They clopped along, Getell seemed glum. “Why do you ask?” He shrugged in

answer. Betan poked him. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you said I was clever, that you underestimated me."

Betan choked a laugh. "Are you thinking someone might need a cadet?"

"The reformation is supposed to be about opportunity!" Getell snapped.

"Wait, wait, you're right. You're right. Nothing wrong with ambitious youngsters. We'll see when we arrive. I do know General Pautark and Brig-, er, Marshall Reigh as you know him."

"Who?"

Betan smiled. "Never mind." She looked around. The estate was largely similar to the one she'd crossed the previous day. The fields were divided by lanes into patches unlike the spokes of that farm. A barn peeked over the tall grasses, voices of workers sounded over through the plants.

"How far to the landing?" Betan asked.

"Ah..." Getell looked around. "Probably half a mile."

"Likely to be guards?"

"Hard to tell. All lords have some but they might have been conscripted."

Betan drew the pistol. She dug into her satchel but she had to scoot Getell forward to bring it before her. Some cartridges came out to go into her pocket for easier access.

"Can you load guns?" she asked Getell as she did it.

"Ah-"

"Have you ever?"

"No."

Betan replaced her pistol and reached back to draw out the blunderbuss. "Damn." she stopped the horse. "Get down." Getell did so and Betan followed him. She took some blunderbuss cartridges out and put them in her other pocket. "Here." she shifted her extra clothes to a saddlebag and handed him the duffel, now filled with only ammunition.

"When I ask for a round one, give me one of these." she held up a blunderbuss cartridge, which was a bag of shot with a pouch of powder attached to it. "When I tell you I need a straight one, give me one of these." She showed him a cartridge for the musketoon. Getell nodded and threw the duffel over one shoulder. "Now take the lead." he did so and started leading the horses while Betan sorted through her satchel. It had several pockets inside it but all of her kit had been thrown into the main compartment. "Damn, I didn't get my cloak." she muttered.

"What's that?"

"Nothing important." She stuffed her pistol cartridges into their pocket, then she sorted out the odds and ends into pockets or neat piles. Her wind fetishes were there, although she wasn't sure how much good they'd be.

"Right. That's better. Back up."

"We should walk. If there's guards we don't want them seeing us on the horse."

"Ah, very good." Betan readied a musketoon. "Where is this landing?"

"To the right. We'll have to walk around the manor house."

"Are the galleys on a schedule?"

"Yes. But I don't know what the schedule is. I hope they'll have one on the landing, if not I'll have to find one."

"Very well. Where is the manor house?"

“Just ahead. This path is used to get from the fields to the road. Poor planning, really, I've used this road to steal from the gardens many times. But it might be intentional. There's a cross path just ahead, it's probably hard for you to see. We'll take that to the left, then cut between rows of talgrain. There's a screen of trees so the passengers of quality don't have to look at the working farm. After that it's open ground to the landing.”

“We can't make a closer approach?”

“Not if you want to avoid guards.” Getell looked up at her. “Do you want to avoid guards, or kill them?”

Betan reflected and Getell shuddered a bit at it. “Best to avoid them if we don't know how many there are. Do you think you can scout ahead without attracting suspicion?”

“I can scout, I don't know about being suspicious. I really think it's best to avoid guards. Don't take me for a coward, I'll tussle in Pital, but this-”

“Out of your league, I understand. And I don't think you're a coward for wanting to stay away from this kind of combat. You're right, we'll avoid any guards if possible. But I'll need you to scout.”

“That I can do.” He rubbed at his face. “It would be better if I could clean up a bit.”

Betan went into the saddlebags for a bottle of water. “I don't have any towels or anything. These pants are clean, if you don't mind.”

“I've scrubbed with worse.” He wetted down a leg.

“It might taste like really awful wine.”

“It's not horse piss?” Getell said as he started.

“Could have been. I've had better vinegar.”

It took most of the bottle to get the grime from his cheeks, forehead and neck. He used the other leg to dry his face. “How do I look?”

“Filthy around the edges, but it'll do. At first glance you're no worse looking than any other grubby boy.”

“*Grubby?*”

“Hush, servant. We're at the path.”

“You're like my bloody sister, if she were lethal.”

“I'll take that as a compliment. Give me those trousers back, they might be salvaged. No, don't throw away the bottle, never throw away something that can carry water.” She restowed everything.

“Alright. To the path, then to the left.”

A few minutes of rapid walking down the path and Getell took them into the field of talgrain. It took ten minutes to get to where the tops of the trees screening it from the river were visible. Getell halted them.

“I'll go check ahead.”

“Shout if you see the galley coming.”

“Alright.” Getell scampered away.

Betan had time to thoroughly examine the musketoon. It had a two foot long barrel that Betan wouldn't have bet any amount was enchanted a whit. It was clearly too big for the shot loaded in it so when she fired it the ball would bounce down the barrel as it traveled. It might only be a degree off, but into even shouting distance and she might as well throw the ammunition. She was counting up her pistol cartridges, those would

definitely be her best option at range, when Getell returned.

“Two guards on the landing.” he said between heaves of breathing. “I went around the... manor house... saw two on... the main entrance and two more on the rear... There might be a few more so... they can set up watches.”

“Did you see the galley?”

“It was hard to look up river.” he drew another breath. “But I didn't see it.”

“We'll need to know when it's coming. How many are there a day?”

“I don't know. It varies, there are more when the nobles are in residence.”

“So we'll have to deal with two guards at least. How far away is the manor house?”

“Not far. Fifty yards, maybe.”

“Not good. Okay, Getell, there's going to be a fight. We need to know when the next galley's coming. What's the best way to find out? Mind, we can't let anyone wander around knowing we're here if the answer is there's no galley coming today.”

Getell gulped. “I could ask someone in my family. The crofters have access to offices inside the house, one of them would have the schedule.”

“Do they know you? Could you get in?”

“Oh, you have money!” Getell exclaimed. Betan laughed at him.

“You forgot the gold in your pocket?”

“It's only half gold. But I could bribe someone to get me in.”

Betan smirked at him. “How much?”

“It's a farm. A few beads, maybe an eye.”

“You have some eyes leftover. That I gave you to hire spies against the kingsmen and you didn't use?”

“Well-”

“Go.”

Getell cursed softly and trotted away.

Betan used her looker to scan the area. Like her previous try she couldn't see very far through the talgrain. “Funny, that's what we call it at home.” she muttered to herself.

Getell didn't come back right away. Betan ate some bread and cheese while she was waiting. She was taking a pull on the water when a rustling in the walls of talgrain brought her pistol muzzle against Getell's forehead. He squeaked and fell backward. Betan grumbled and picked the bottle up.

“It's coming in forty five minutes. Damn, you're fast.”

“It's handy.” Betan wiped crumbs from her mouth and checked the time. “Are you hungry?” she asked. Getell's eyes lit up. She took her food purse from the saddlebag and handed it to him. “Do you eat regularly?”

“No.”

“Give me that, then.” She tore off a small chunk of bread and cut a piece of cheese to give to him. “Eat slowly. If you make yourself sick-”

“I know, I know.”

“I'll laugh at you while you puke.”

Betan busied herself staking the horses, each to their own as Getell tore the bread into small bites and carefully chewed it for a long time before swallowing. He still finished rather quickly and drained the bottle of the half that Betan hadn't spilled.

“How do you get that fast?” Getell asked.

Betan started at him for a second, then shrugged. “I don't know. Runs in my

family, maybe. Practice? You should see me with my sword. Take some more food.” she handed him the bag.

“Is this *zachit*?” he asked.

“Yes. You can have a little.” Betan took a look around then found Getell plying a filthy blade on the meat. “Ew! Stop that.” She drew a cadet's knife and wiped it on her sleeve. “Use this. What did you do with that knife, surgery?”

Getell shrugged and made the blade disappear before taking Betan's purloined dagger. “I haven't had *zachit* in, I can't even remember how long. I probably stole my last bite of it.” He carefully shaved a few slices that he also over chewed. “Mm, I forgot how salty it was. Is there more water?”

“No, I spilled most of it almost killing you.” she replied. Getell grimaced a smile at her and picked up the bottles.

“I'll refill them. The trees come down to the bank here so I'll be hidden from the dock.” he jogged away.

Betan stood with the horses. “Waiting again.” she said. “At least I don't have to be stoic in front of you two.” A few minutes passed. It was oddly windless in Teltel. Dorway had usually had a breeze, especially when the flying column had approached the Fral valley. The silence was complete enough that even the speaking of workers beyond the talgrain. reduced range of her looker were clear.

“They sound angry.” Betan mused. Then she cursed and ran down the lane into the trees, the angry voices growing more distinct until she burst from the trees to find two blue and tan coated men accosting Getell, who was curled into a ball on the ground. They only looked up when she drew her sword. One shrugged his musketoon off his shoulder and Betan slashed at his leg, the blade biting deeply into his meat and glancing along the bone. He collapsed and Betan spun to engage the other guard, who was drawing back the hammer of his weapon. Betan cursed as she dove into him. Her sword sank into his chest but he fired the round aloft anyway, sacrificing himself to give a warning.

Getell was wiping his knife on the coat of the guard he'd just finished. Then he picked the unfired musketoon. “We attack?” he asked.

Betan wiped her sword in the same manner as Getell while she thought. “How many guards might they have?”

“Lords frequently travel with a half company-”

“Sixty or so. He's not here, but it wouldn't be surprising for there to be a score here. Go fetch the horses. We'll need those guns and we might have to flee.”

“Here.” Getell held up his musketoon. Betan handed him one of the small cadet pistols, then he was gone.

Betan moved to where she could see the landing. The two guards were still in place, looking toward the trees. Nothing could be seen of any other guards. Betan considered the distance, then looked at her musketoon. It looked like the Brannan standard. She cocked and shouldered it, taking aim at the guards. *They're standing close together, I might be able to hit one of them.* She thought as she aimed. It only had a bead welded to the muzzle as a sight so she used the top of the barrel to line up.

She fired, her eyes snapping shut against the eruption of sparks. “Damn, girl you'd have a jager flogged for doing that.” she muttered as she dug into Getell's guard's cartridge box. “Ten rounds? Pathetic.”

She reloaded glancing up at the landing. The smoke cleared and the two guards

were still standing there. “Idiots.” She drew a pistol and aimed with its proper sights. It was long for a pistol shot, but she fired and moved away from the cloud. The guards were scrambling for cover so she must have gotten close. She tamped the ball into the charge of the musketoon and took aim again. They had dived behind the landing itself, standing on the sandy riverbank. Betan fired a shot, more to keep their heads down. They still declined to return fire. She was almost done reloading when Getell returned. “I saw four other guards. They're peeking around this end of the manor house.”

“There's not a lot of guards, then. They'd have counterattacked by now, or at least these goons would have fired back.” Betan finished loading and gave them another round.

“Get the cartridges from that one's box.” Betan said as she tore one open. Getell returned quickly with another ten cartridges. “Get the guns from the horses.” She poured the powder and stuffed the paper into the muzzle. “Damn, can you reach?”

“No.” Getell answered after he'd jumped a few times.

“Take this and watch, fire at anyone who moves. Don't expect to hit them.” they changed places and Betan quickly fetched the guns. Getell had brought up the duffel from where he'd put it down when fetching water. Betan snatched it up, noticing as she did so that he'd put down the stakes.

“Alright. When they gather they're courage, or their numbers they'll flank us.”

“They'll come around the side?”

“Right.” Betan set to reloading her pistol. “You'll stay here, stake the horses between us and the river, we don't need them getting shot.”

“What am I going to do here? Where are you going?” Getell asked as he did so.

“Why aren't they firing? Are they just cowards? Oh, you're going to shoot at anyone coming at us from the side, or from behind. I am going to attack those two.”

“*What?*”

“It's our only chance. They can just keep us pinned down forever. Get enough guards or volunteers together to pelt us with balls or come at us from the river.” She rammed ball and powder home and swiveled the rod back into its slot. “Give me a shot at them for cover on my signal. Have you ever fired a gun before?”

Getell shook his head, pale as he lifted a musketoon. “Pull this arm back, then push this end against your shoulder firmly. Hold it as tight against you as you can. Look down the barrel and line up that bead at whatever you're shooting at. Then pull the trigger. Don't expect to hit anything, these guns aren't worth a damn.”

Betan drew her pistols and moved around a tree trunk. “Hide here. If guards come at you, use the ones that bulge toward the front.”

Getell nodded, his face drawn tight. Betan removed her satchel and cocked her pistols.

“Don't forget to breathe. Shoot now.”

Betan dashed into the open as Getell fired. It was thirty yards to the landing and she was fully dressed with heavy riding boots, and her back was starting to hurt. She got halfway there before the guards even seemed to notice she was coming. Then they looked at each other in surprise. Betan was breathing hard as she got into what she thought was a good range. *This is going to be a hell of a shooting job.* She stopped and went to one knee. The guards came up and leveled their musketoons at her. *Wait.* She told herself, cringing slightly as they fired. She heard a faint whiz as a shot was almost close. Then a hangman's grin came to her face as she shot one of them in the chest. The

other one bolted and Betan lead him carefully, putting a ball into his back.

She surveyed her newly won field of battle. There wasn't a bit of good cover. *From jagers, that is. But I need to look normal when the galley arrives.* She replaced her pistols and ran back to Getell.

"That was easy." he remarked, his face relaxed a little.

"Indeed. Now we need to kill the other guards so they don't warn off the galley." She handed Getell a pistol, then retrieved a few cartridges from her satchel, pausing for a spasm from her wound to pass. "I should have got myself a belt box for these." she said as she gave Getell a cartridge. "I didn't think I'd be fighting this much. Okay, watch me." She lead him through the reloading steps, then showed him how to charge them with sparkstones. She put her pistol away, took his and checked it.

"Now do the same with that musketoons. We'll get you ready for a cadet billet yet." Betan watched him and corrected at a few points.

"Now. We're going to go after the guards hiding near the manor house. Bring the blunderbusses, leave the musketoons. And bring the duffel. Remember, reload with the round ones."

"Right. Round ones." he produced one from his jacket. "Powder in here, do I empty shot from the bag?"

"No, drop the whole thing in. Bright lad." she said as he picked up the blunderbusses. "You could be something great if you apply yourself. Let's go." They took off through between rows of talgrain., leaving the agitated horses behind. Getell stayed behind Betan and pulled on her sleeve to stop her after once they crossed the lane.

"House that way." he panted, pointing off to the left.

Betan moved through the rows, the house wasn't visible yet but a gunshot announced that her movement certainly was. The ball's passing couldn't even be heard so Betan didn't bother slowing down or varying her movement. *These Brannan musketoons were contemptible weapons. Or the Brannans are contemptible shooters.* Her back gave her more desire to stop than any enemy fire.

The eaves(?) of the house became visible. Betan halted in the rows and moved off to the right. She looked and saw Getell behind her, a blunderbuss in either hand. He was shaking slightly but his face was resolute. She nodded once and took out her looker. The house was visible through a thin film of talgrain. A guard was standing in a window overlooking the field, reloading. She couldn't see the other one.

"What I wouldn't give for a rifle right now." Betan muttered. She checked the time, twenty five or so minutes until the galley arrived.

"Do they have ways of signaling between estates?" Betan asked.

"No. Just messengers."

Betan nodded. That didn't mean much, the estates were only a few miles wide so a mounted messenger could have reinforcements here quickly. "I just hope they don't think to ride up the river and warn off the galley. Getell, there's nothing for it. We'll have to attack."

Getell nodded grimly, his face hardening even further. *I wonder if I ever looked like that.* Betan mused for a second. *Does he look at me the way I looked at Reigh? That's a damned uncomfortable thought.* She shook off her ruminations and tightened her grip on her pistol then jogged hunched over through the talgrain. No shot came and when she could see the outline of the house through the grasses she stopped and used her looker again. The guard was still in the upper window. Going from the looker to her

bare eye she found where he was, aimed and fired. Back to the looker she saw the last bit of him visible falling behind the window. She put the empty pistol away, drew her sword and other pistol and charged from the field.

It was ten yards of open ground from the field to an arrangement of benches around a small fountain. A report and smoke from her left was someone firing ineffectually, Betan didn't bother. She ran between two benches, splashed through the fountain and slammed into the stone wall of the house, hurting her shoulder a little and her back a lot.

“Ow.” she muttered.

“Did they hit you?” Getell asked.

“What? Damn, I forgot to tell you to stay behind.”

Getell grinned in spite of his clear terror. “Too late now. What about that one?”

“Sod him, we're going around the house.” Betan said before moving off. She peeked around the corner, saw no one and continued running, glancing to her right where some sheds thirty yards distant could conceal more shooters. She came to a doorway and shoved her sword into it. It met nothing so she poked nose and pistol around the corner.

Empty.

Betan reached in and closed the door, it swung silently and clunked shut. Betan went on, rounding the next corner with her sword leading, but that side of the house was empty as well.

“Stay here, I'm going to check the other side to see if that bugger is trying to round on us.”

Getell nodded and Betan was off. The door was still closed, she kept running. She came to the corner and leaned against it. A shriek and a gunshot sent her running back to Getell. Another gunshot followed, then a loud pop. She skidded around the corner in a crouch, pistol and sword out.

Getell stood in front of two inert guards, the cadet pistol she'd given him earlier clutched in his hand, smoking blunderbuss on the ground. Betan ran to him.

“Are you hurt?” No answer. “Getell-”

“No.” he came to with a jerk. “I'm, I'm not hurt.”

“Good shooting.” Betan said.

“They came right around the corner, I got that one-” Getell gestured with the pistol toward the further away of the two, who was rent from neck to groin with gaping bloody wounds. Brannan blunderbusses loaded sharps, apparently. “-and his mate shot at me, I don't know where he was aiming. I remembered the pistol and when he charged at me I pulled it out and shot him.”

The guard groaned in response, Betan strode over and ran him through.

“That should leave one more, if they work in pairs.” Betan looked around. A thud brought her around, Getell's pistol lying in the dirt. He took in a ragged, sobbing breath. Betan ran to him and roughly grabbed his shoulder. “Getell, get a hold of yourself.”

“I, I, I”

“You're overexcited, it's normal.” Betan said. “Breathe, just breathe, it'll pass.”

“Oh, my head.” he wobbled and Betan grabbed the front of his jacket.

“Stay up, stay up.”

“I'm dizzy.”

“I know. It's normal.” She'd never gone through it so badly, her line seemed

immune but she'd seen it happen to soldiers and militia after shootouts and even after close calls outside of battle. "Breathe, Getell. You did well. You just need to calm down. There's still someone out here wants to kill us. Unless he ran away, but why should we have such luck?"

But they seemed to have that kind of luck. A quick search of the area around the manor house revealed nothing and attempts to enter the house were barred by locked doors, probably the household staff.

Or one guard who didn't like his odds.

Betan and Getell retrieved the horses and went to the landing with ten minutes to spare until the arrival time. Out on the end of the landing the galley could just be seen. Betan's looker revealed it to be a shallow draft vessel, wide but short. No sail, tall gunwales. A civilian craft through and through.

"I just hope it's fast. Will they stop here on their own?" Betan asked.

"No, we have to put up that." he yawned gestured to a metal pole hinged in the middle. On the end was a large red circle. Betan lifted it up and the top dropped into a slot.

"I'm so tired!" Getell exclaimed.

"Your blood was up, now it's down. That's normal, too."

Everything was reloaded, they each had a blunderbuss to hand, Getell had both cadet pistols and one of the cadet daggers. He had spent a few moments flipping it about it what seemed to Betan a very skilled manner until she made him put it away, lest he warn off the crew.

Betan straightened her hat and jacket. Getell stood as still as he could, which was marginally fidgety.

"I'm a gentleman and you're my little helper boy. By the time they get close enough to see the dirt it'll be too late for them." She'd told him as they straightened themselves out. A raid on an outbuilding had found some soap and towels, which Getell used to clean his face and hands. His clothes were still filthy but Betan herself wasn't terribly fresh either. Betan had kept several extra towels and a small cake of soap she wrapped in a piece of tarp.

Now they waited.

When Betan could hear the splash of the oars cutting into the water she risked a glance with her looker. The prow was high and the galley was angling straight for the landing so she couldn't see into the boat.

"Do you know if these are usually guarded?"

"Not usually. These are passenger galleys, they never carry any cargo. But a passenger might have a guard, or there might be an armed noble or an officer traveling."

"We'll soon find out." Betan said. The blunderbusses were leaning against their buttocks, gaping muzzles on the planks.

Someone in the front, the galley's master Betan assumed, was calling orders to someone. Someone else, Betan didn't know the term, was calling the cadence instead of using the drum, ordering one side or the other to add or skip strokes. As it angled in Betan got a better view of the galley. It was a bit more than ten yards long with a passenger desk forward and rowers aft, behind the rowers across about ten feet of empty deck was a man with drumsticks, although Betan couldn't see a drum, and another man holding a tiller. The master (if that's what he was) stood in the front, the prow was built up around the same deck as the rest of the boat. The crew all wore a variation on the

naval uniforms Betan had seen at Brailot, but darker and with green trim. The rowers wore serapes and cowls that hid the oars and protected them from the sun. Probably kept the noble passengers from being distressed by the sight of chains or the smell of working men.

“Back oars!” the second one hollered. The galley bumped into thick mats set against the landing. Betan stepped toward the gunwales, which were at her knee level.

“Good day, sir, just er!” Getell leapt on him, smashing into his chest and punching him in the groin. Betan brought the blunderbuss around and cocked it, drawing a pistol (cocked in the belt again, how she hated doing that) with her other hand.

“Don't move!” she shouted. Getell stamped the master in the belly and lifted his own almost comically oversized blunderbuss, but his expression forestalled any laughter.

The passengers were mostly ladies, a few boys of varying age younger than sixteen and one well dressed nobleman. He stood, reaching for a sword. “I do apologize-” was all he'd gotten out when Betan shot him.

“Ladies, will you disembark?”

One elderly lady seemed disposed to argue but her comrades shuffled up the ladder mounted on one gunwale and she shrugged and joined them.

“You, how do we get horses onto this thing?” she indicated the tiller man with the muzzle of the blunderbuss.

“There should be a ramp up there to wheel down.”

“Come find it, bring your musical friend. And get that moron out of my boat!”

The bleeding nobleman was removed and the ramp muscled into position. The horses seemed used to the exercise and meekly walked down the ramp.

“Would any of you like to come along?” Betan asked the tiller man and drummer mildly. They very politely declined. “Then get out of my sight. Anyone lingering...” she waved the blunderbuss.

They rapidly fled to the manor house, where the ladies had already retired to.

Betan stood in the prow, the rowers looking at her warily.

“Fancy a trip to the Yellow Army?” she asked.

After the galley was underway, Getell pointed out that the master was still on board.

“Maybe he can tell us how to strike these chains.” Betan said.

“Ah, I'm not so sure that would be a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Some people end up in debtor's prison from bad luck, but not all. Besides, these horses and our weapons would probably retire a great deal of debt.”

“Good point. Take hold of the tiller, I'm going to wake the master.” Betan turned it over to Getell and walked past the horses, who took up the empty rear deck, and the rower's benches to the prow. The passengers rode in the front of the galley in the open, though Betan had seen a collapsed canopy stowed in the rear.

The master was perfectly alert when Betan arrived.

“Good day, sir.” she said brightly.

“Good day to you, sir.” he replied warily.

“Are you the owner of this vessel, sir?”

“No, sir. I work for the owner.”

“Very good. I now own this vessel. I suppose that's a form of piracy but sod it,

yes?"

"As you say, sir." he still lay on the deck, looking up at her without expression.

"We're bound for the Yellow Army, sir."

"I heard you, sir."

"We will, of course, rely on your expertise to arrive safely, sir. After that if you have no wish to associate with that party, I'm sure arrangements can be made. I imagine the galley will be requisitioned for the use of the Yellow Army, however."

"You're correct, I've no doubt, sir."

"Please, my good man, stand up. I'm intent on only killing you if you make me. Such as, say, running us aground."

The master sat up. "The river is dredged regularly. There are only a few hazards and they are well marked."

"For your sake, sir, I hope so. What do you know of the river as respects to the war?"

The master struggled to his feet. "I know it's blocked below Iondar, which means that the Yellow Army has control of it."

"I'd heard it was blocked at Petalal." Betan said, tapping the butt of a pistol.

"It was, that is, sir, it was said to be. Iondar is ten miles ahead of Petalal. A buffer zone, I imagine."

"Ah, yes, of course."

"You're quite in luck, sir, most of the navy has gone over. Rather recent development."

"I'm aware of that, thank you, sir. Are there any vessels not gone over?"

"I daresay it doesn't matter much to us, sir. None of the fleet's warships can navigate the TRIBUTARY. Too shallow."

"Capital, sir. How long should you think it would take us to arrive at Petalal?"

"Day after tomorrow, I should say. Sooner if you drive the rowers harder. But, sir, there's not enough food for them."

"There's not, sir?"

"No, sir. Since this is an inland vessel there's no stores of food or water on board. There are places along the river that galleys are housed overnight and food is kept there."

"Is there any food on board?"

"Just for today, sir."

"So we'll need food tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. At Kralaf."

"Hmm. And if we don't stop?"

"It takes a lot of energy to row, and they're not fed well."

"I see, I see. How much food were it to take if we stopped at an inn for a better sort of food?"

"Oh, too much, sir. Even if the inn had enough. It would cost a small fortune."

Betan produced Prodolan's purse and handed it to the master. He looked inside and eyes goggled.

"This, ah, this, sir, would likely be enough. If we could find the food."

"Very well." Betan said. She retrieved her purse and turned to look down the boat. There were two dozen rowers, paired up on their oars. They made very little noise and seemed to be making good time for not having their drummer, wherever he drummed. Betan looked at the riverbank, trying to determine their speed. She couldn't

be sure but she thought they were making slightly more than what a rider could without trying to kill his horse.

“Ah.” the master ventured. “Sir, would it be safe to assume that we will no longer be attempting to remain on schedule as regards arrivals at the landings?”

“It would, sir.” Betan said. Betan turned back to the bank and saw on the side opposite Lord Keledan's side of the river another landing with the red signal out. Getell kept the tiller steady. Betan dispatched the master to the rear of the galley to take over, with another warning about running aground.

Getell was clearly arm sore when he joined Betan in the front. Betan was watching the rowers, some of whom were showing more interest in their surroundings than others. A few heads popped up to watch the landing slide past, although their arms never slacked on the strokes. After ten minutes another landing went by, this one without the signal up. Fifteen minutes after that, a landing with a blue signal passed. More rowers took notice.

Seven signals of blue or red were passed in the first hour. Betan made no attempt to hide her observation of the rowers. By the second hour of the new management of the galley, the rowers were all looking alert, some were talking under their breath but all were still rowing. Betan thought the pace had increased a bit.

“Please, sir.” One of the rowers near the front called out.

“Keep rowing, but you may speak.” Betan answered, stepping a little closer to their benches.

“What will you do with us when we reach the Yellow Army?” he asked.

“They're still under debt bond.” Getell whispered.

“Is it common to use debtors in menial labor?” Betan asked in the same low voice.

“No.” Getell answered. “Debt bonds are legal proceedings, like lawsuits and contracts. It takes some doing to get someone bonded, fees at the Chancery and whatnot. Some particularly vengeful creditors might have it done quickly but most aren't willing to go through the effort for small debts.”

Betan noticed the speaker's eyes narrow in suspicion. She decided she had better speak sooner rather than later and hope this man was simply bold and not clever. “I am a volunteer from a foreign country that is allied to the reformation.” Betan announced. “I have no interest in Brannan business and thus have no concern as for what brought you all here. It would suit me just as well to see you all let loose after my safe arrival.” This brought smiles to the rowers faces. Betan turned away to the view ahead of the boat to discourage further questions. Getell joined her, cradling a blunderbuss and facing the rowers.

“How much do you know of the operation of these galleys?”

“Not much.”

“I imagine we'll have to rest them and feed them. Do you know if the galleys travel at night?”

“I don't know, but I doubt it.” Getell said.

“Hmm. I'll have to conference with the master again. We also need to make sure our weapons are to hand and loaded. Stay here and watch ahead.” Betan ordered before she walked to the rear. She noticed the master, she didn't know his name and really had no intention of asking, eyeing some of the weapons that Betan and Getell had left in the saddle bags before taking the galley. *He must have no confidence in his fighting skills.*

Betan mused. *He could have easily shot us both with all of these guns to use.*

“Do you travel at night?” Betan asked.

“Not usually, sir. We charge extra for it, as it's harder to see debris in the water.”

“So it's possible?”

“Yes, sir. We have a glass that can see in the dark.”

This intrigued Betan. She'd heard of such things but had never used one. “You have one aboard now?”

“Yes, sir.” The master reached into his jacket with his free hand. Betan was careful not to tense up, if he drew a weapon she'd have to move fluidly. But it wasn't a weapon, just a looker with a smoky glass. Betan took it from him and looked through it, it looked like frosted glass. “Doesn't work during the day, sir.”

“Hm. Very good.” Betan put it into her pocket. “Now, let's talk about food.”

It was seven hours to sundown. Betan, at the master's advice, rested the rowers in shifts. They ate once, a kind of meusli that made the Yellow Army's goop seem gourmet. Betan exhausted her supply of *nemal* to give the rowers an extra kick.

The map revealed two large towns downriver. The master estimated they'd come to them several hours after sundown. Plied with *nemal* the rowers increased their speed by half again. Betan wanted to moor near the town, ride in and buy provisions for the next day, then pass the town in the night. The map clearly marked a royal office in each of the towns, so they'd know about her, possibly that she was traveling on the river.

Betan and Getell ate *zachit*, bread and cheese in the prow, washing it down with river water. TRIBUTARY was possibly the cleanest river Betan had ever seen or tasted. The water might as well have been drawn from mountain springs.

“I should go into town with the master.” Getell said.

Betan concentrated on her chunk of *zachit*.

“If the fools of kingsmen in Pital knew about you, these here in, whatever it's called will also know.”

“Ladilol.” Betan said, taking a bite of cheese.

“Ladilol, right. But they won't know about me. I take the horses and the master, with these small pistols, buy provisions for the rowers and bring them back.”

Betan lifted the former wine bottle and washed down her last bite. Getell was watching her face but they were sitting on their haunches in the shade of the prow, and the sun was going down. She couldn't see him very well. He sounded earnest enough but he was a clever urchin.

“It could be dangerous.” Betan said, to stall.

Getell chuckled. “Since entering your service my sense of danger has gone off.” he said. Betan chuckled back in spite of the situation.

“If I intended on cheating you of that fat purse of yours I'd still say you can trust me.” Getell said. “It sounds like a lot of money. But, well, if the reformation wins then boys like me will have a chance to become something in Branna. And it sounds like the reformation is winning. So my best chance in the new way of things is to arrive having given good service to their lost princess.”

“You'd also tell me that if you meant on scampering off with my horses and bag of gold.” Betan observed.

“It's only half gold, but yes.” Getell said. He held her gaze steadily.

“Can you kill him in cold blood if he betrays you? The guards at Keledan's estate

were different. That was fighting. If he tips someone off and you kill him for it, that will be cold blooded.”

Getell swallowed. “I hope I can.” he said.

They held each other's eyes for a further long moment.

“Fine. I'll send you and him in.”

Betan watched Getell and the master, Betan had relented and learned his name was Freytral Afsholar, ride away. The galley was huddled on the riverbank, pulled up for the night to all appearances. The rower's chains had been loosened and blankets produced from the tiny hold. Afsholar had told Betan it wasn't unusual for galleys to overnight thusly if there were no passengers aboard, to save lodging costs on the crew. Several of the rowers supported his assertion.

Betan had retained the musketoons, her sword and pistols. If Getell got into a scrap he'd need both the blunderbusses and the cadet pistols. The tree lined path was shielded from the moon's light and Betan soon lost the pair in the dark. She took out her new night glass and held it up to her eyes. It didn't show distant objects like a looker, but it did grant Betan night vision. Getell and Afsholar were clearly visible with an unreal sharpness, standing out starkly from the background. Betan sighed and put the night glass back into her pocket before returning to the boat.

She relaxed in the master's seat in the prow, listening to the water lap against the sides of the galley. Ladilol was two miles away, marked by a faint glow. Betan took out her looker and stood to view the town. Her vision was limited to illuminated areas but she could see no signs that the river was guarded. The night glass showed the towns clearly, again with the almost freakish contract, but brought it no closer to her eyes.

Betan sighed again. The galley had no lights active. There were lanterns and flares but Betan was hoping no one noticed them sitting on the bank. The rowers were quiet. Probably not sleeping, as they'd been warned that they'd be rowing through the night once Getell and Afsholar returned, but resting. They'd rowed off the *nemal* dose in their muesli and were a bit sluggish, but more *nemal* was on Getell's shopping list so they'd get more in a bit. Afsholar had no idea how long they could be sustained on the stimulant but it was pretty strong stuff, so Betan was hopeful.

She turned around in the boat, her boots making clunking noise as she did so. *Probably shouldn't do a lot of pacing if I want to remain undiscovered.* She thought. It brought to mind her jager's movement through the Malia, adjusting to the sounds of the forest. This stretch of riverbank wasn't nearly as noisy as that forested slope, but it had a good amount of activity. Flyers, crawlers and bugs were supplemented by the various water creatures. Croaks and buzzes and caws and chatters issued from all around, but not as loudly as she'd have supposed. Perhaps there were states nearby, but she couldn't hear any human noises except a splashing along the waterside of the galley. Betan drew a pistol and pulled the trigger to prevent it clicking when she cocked it. She reached for her sword, then abandoned that action to pull out Afsholar's night glass.

A small crowd was coming over the side of the boat from the side and back. Betan turned around and sure enough, several more bodies were rising from the river over the prow. Betan swung her sword several times, splattering herself with the blood of raiders falling back into the river. She spun again when several flares lit behind her and she was facing her attackers.

She was rather outnumbered.

“Just you, then?” the accent and diction was lower class, Betan felt a Goldopan smile reach her face.

“I'm enough, I assure you.” She drew her sword and ran into them. A few drew pistols and wasted their shots into something well behind Betan, the rest fumbled for weapons, she dropped two before the clubs and long knives were out. The galley was narrow enough for her to easily keep them in front of her and their wetness meant their firepowder was soaked and wouldn't pour easily.

Two large men charged her, she effortlessly cut both of them through the legs and stomachs. Advancing, she ran another through just under the sternum, wrenching her sword out made a tearing pain in her back, but she was able to hack off an arm that missed her with a club. The other raiders backed away from her as she worked her left shoulder to gauge the damage. Her muscles protested sharply but didn't allowed her movement. So she attacked again. Three more fell without undue fuss and the remaining four or five went over the side rather than face her.

Betan crouched among her moaning victims, waiting to see if someone started shooting at her. Over the noise she could hear splashing in the river. “They must have boats alongside. Oops, shh, girl.” *They could have more guns in their boats, so they might rally. They're all barefoot so I can't count on hearing them coming.*

She did hear their heels hitting the deck when they did rally. Betan spun and fired at someone wielding a blunderbuss, but there was a second one. She cursed herself for forgetting her own extra guns as she threw herself to the side when the sparkstone flared. They were almost on top of her when the haze from her back receded and she slashed at feet, someone landed on her but she maintained herself through the explosion of pain and began kicking, her boot heels catching shins. Rolling away she began sweeping her sword in the air half blindly, glad she'd spent many an idle hour honing the edge to a madness of sharp.

She paused when she was clear of bodies, the last of the raiders was flying over the edge into the river. Betan panted heavily from both pain and exertion, but over that and the moans she could hear him swimming away. Using the side of the galley she got herself up. There was blood on her side and back, but she wasn't sure it was hers. Still, she'd clearly done something bad.

Once risen she stumbled to the prow to find the night glass and a musketoon. The raider was heading into the river, not bothering with a boat. “Should have jumped to the bank, friend.” Betan muttered before she shot him. The musketoon hit the deck after that and Betan spent a few knowingly ill-advised moments fighting down the pain from her back before finishing the wounded and letting herself collapse.

“Betan!” Someone was shaking her, which hurt a lot. Her eyes opened, it was Getell.

“Well, you came back.” She muttered. Getell's face fled from her blurry sight.

“Afsholar, no, come back here you bastard!” Shoes clunked along the deck and Getell was yelling something about a box, some kind of something box. Then the master, smelling a bit like alcohol was leaning over her, Getell stood behind him with a pistol in one hand and a flare in the other. Afsholar started prodding and poking her stomach.

“I'm all right, I'm alright.” she protested. “None of it's mine.”

“Not the case, I'm afraid.” Afsholar said.

“WHAT?” Betan tried to sit up, but the master restrained her.

"It's very small, but there's no exit wound." Afsholar said. He was wiping at her belly, Betan couldn't really feel anything wrong.

"What did they do?"

"Shot you with a sewing needle, I think. More light, boy." Getell shifted, keeping his pistol pointed at Afsholar's back.

"You'd better know what you're doing!" he growled.

"Threatening me will not steady my hands, nor clear my mind!" Afsholar said, probably drink making him bold. "If you want me to do this then leave me to it."

"Just explain what you're doing." Getell said levelly.

"He'd make a great first sergeant some day, not sure if- Am I thinking or speaking?"

"You're speaking, but please be quiet." Afsholar said. "Now listen, young man, when blood is exposed to air it goes bad, when it goes bad it grows tumors. But blood is also the best way to close a wound." Getell made a face to demonstrate he knew this but Afsholar continued, working as he spoke, pouring fluid from a flask over Betan's gunshot, then swabbing it with some poultice that stung a bit in the injury. "Wounds must be cleared of bad blood and then bound so good blood can seal them. This wound, however, is very small and can't be properly treated without surgery. All I can do now is bandage it, give blood thickeners which will likely stop the bleeding in and anticorruptions."

He took a fluff ball from a tin and stuck it over the wound before covering it with a pad. "Hold this, boy. I need to get the glue to seal it on." Getell hesitated, then put the pistol away so he could keep the flare aloft and held the pad down. Afsholar took another small tin with a screw cap, which when removed had a small brush attached to it and a moderately runny paste that he brushed around the edge of the pad's underside. He instructed Getell to apply pressure to it while he prepared another square of fabric.

"That patch is air and water tight." Betan informed Getell. "This is all very important."

"You can let go." Afsholar said. "The glue cures very quickly." He pressed the patch down over the gauze pad, which was already showing a tiny speck of red. He counted to himself for a bit, Betan's mind wandered until she felt him let go.

"Are you in pain." he asked her.

"Not from this. My back hurts. A, ah, previous injury."

Afsholar bent down again and felt around her back. Betan winced when he touched her sealed stitches.

"A **rather** recent injury. I'll take the flare, boy. Get the green, the blue and the yellow pills from the physical case. Give her one green, two blue and four yellow ones."

"What are they?" Getell asked as he looked through the box.

Afsholar held the flare down where he could see Betan's back. She twisted painfully for him.

"Pain, blood thickeners and anticorruptions. Respectively." He prodded at Betan's wound, the pain was sharp but limited. "It appears you tore your stitches. Not too bad, but this really should be rebandaged."

"It'll wait." The Prodolan's physic had changed it the day she'd fled. But between the sweat of the heat and fighting, she imagined it was rather manky.

Afsholar stood and walked away, muttering about washing his hands. Getell had retaken the flare and with sufficient light quickly found the tins with the pills Afsholar

had prescribed for Betan. She took a wine cum water bottle from him and stood.

“Afsholar, let's get the horses in, we're getting going now.” He turned to the rowers. “Take up oars. You can eat in shifts once we're moving.” The rowers came up from the floor and set about deploying the oars as Getell and Afsholar set up the plank kept aboard as a ramp and brought the horses down. Then he and Afsholar set loose a bench of rowers to dump the attacker's bodies over the side.

“Afsholar, on the tiller.” Getell ordered once the rowers were secure again.

“We'll need a lookout forward for hazards in the water.” he said as he moved to the rear.

“I can do that.” Betan said. “I should probably be sitting anyway. Help me up there, Getell.”

In a few moments the boat was pushed off the bank by a few rowers with poles and longer chains then it was moving.

“Put that flare over the side.” Betan ordered once she was in the seat in the prow. She took out the night glass and looked in the river, it couldn't really be seen. The bank was clearly visible, but merely came to a sharp end where it met the river. “That's why things are outlined so sharply.” Betan muttered. “I bet debris just jumps right out at you in the river.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Any trouble in town?”

“Afsholar felt it necessary to have a drink at the first inn we visited. He said it would be unseemly for a sailor to walk in and walk out without one. He was pretty tense so I decided to let him. I took a look at the men you killed, they're not any kind of official. I think they just wanted to steal the boat.”

“Rival galley company, maybe?” Betan wondered. The pills were already taking effect, the pain was receding and leaving a slightly cloudy head in its wake.

Getell chuckled. “Possibly.” He glanced to the rear. “Afsholar said we should be at (riverblock) tomorrow endnoon. What will we do?”

“You want to know in case I don't make it?” Betan chuckled, then grimaced. The pill was making her silly yet wasn't effective enough to allow laughter. “Should I write you a letter of recommendation for your cadetcy?”

Getell frowned and apparently decided to ignore her statement, Betan felt a little guilty over it. “Afsholar didn't know if the navy has the river blockaded or not.” Getell continued. “We think it likely there are loyalist forces somewhere along it, to keep river traffic from discovering the truth of the stop. I tried to ask around in TOWN but I didn't dare stray from Afsholar, since he had the money. Which reminds me.” He drew Prodolan's purse from his jacket, rather less full than it had been.

“Put it in my satchel, under the seat here.” Betan ordered, redirecting her attention over the prow. “And get the map out.” She saw nothing in the river so she used the glass to look at the map, which showed up perfectly but (if possible) even more flat than it did to the eyes. “I overheard someone at the Yellow Army say that the entire Brannan navy came over or was sunk. But a few commandeered river galleys would be enough to keep traffic away from an unnamed hazard.” Betan considered the map, the marks indicated cultivated land, or forests, the night glass didn't show colors very well. Either way it should be lightly populated.

“The worst possible event is the Oldster army trying to retake the river from the land. It's narrow enough here for cannon to be fired across, but if the Yellow army is

marching on Zhatano I doubt TRIBUTARY is really that important. And the river is still fairly straight, so we'll just keep a look out. If we see a blockade, we put ashore, set the rowers free and head out cross country towards Zhatano."

"With you wounded?" Getell asked.

"We'd have to." Betan said. "I can't see any other options." She heard Getell yawn as she checked the river again. "And I'm not that badly wounded." she touched her new bandage. "I don't think. When's the last time you slept?" she asked.

"More recently than you, I imagine. But neither of us can afford to rest." Getell said. "We got more *nemal*. Cleaned out two inns."

"Excellent, let's open a bottle."

Getell fetched a bottle from the bags they'd bought at TOWN and the bag of food he and Betan had eaten from at Lord Keledan's estate. Betan had a little cheese, Getell ate rather more, including a large chunk of *zachit*. "It's not like I have to worry about being thirsty." he said when Betan remarked on this. "And I can help myself to your share." This made Betan laugh painfully again and she socked Getell on the arm in revenge.

Betan kept an eye out on the river. Between the pill and the *nemal* she completely lost track of time and dawn came as a complete surprise to her.

"We're slowing." Afsholar said. Getell had shared their bottle with him so he was also peppy.

"Do we need to feed them?" Getell asked.

"YES!" several of the rowers replied. Again they ate in shifts but not the muesli that was their normal fare. Afsholar had secured broth and fowl for them and there was plenty of *nemal* to wash down the cold soup. The speed picked up appreciably once they had eaten.

Getell spelled Afsholar on the tiller so he could talk to Betan. "Hopefully we won't have to feed them again." Afsholar said. "They get normal rations twice a day but with this they should be fine. Except we have a long way to go today. This would normally be a three day journey. Even removing the stops to pick up and let off passengers we're having to go a lot faster than normal."

"But with the *nemal*?" Betan asked. Her side was hurting and she was on the verge of calling for another pain pill.

"They haven't had it in a long time, some of them might have never had it. There are teas that have a similar effect but *nemal* is a lot stronger. The amount they drank would probably be harmful if they weren't using the energy. We should make good time. They might need more around upnoon. At the worst we'll have to feed them again."

"At the worst we'll get stuck between two armed Oldster galleys." Betan muttered. "Sorry, it's starting to hurt again."

"That reminds me, I'd better check your bandage. It'll likely have to be changed, not to mention that one on your back." Afsholar leaned over to look without another word and stood up quickly, backing off a step. "You, you!" he pointed at her chest.

"I'm continually surprised at how unobservant Brannans are." Betan said, stifling a laugh. "Getell is the only one to have noticed, or at least to have noticed and said something."

"You're a *woman*!"

"I know." Betan replied. "Check the bandage, I'm not shy." Betan gingerly turned to give him a better look. Afsholar swallowed and bent over.

“It'll have to be changed. It's soaked through. Are you feeling tired?”

“Not after the *nemal*.” Betan observed.

“If the wound is corrupted, if your blood is going bad you'll feel fatigued easily and get hungry faster. The tumors will sap your energy to grow.”

“I know.” Betan said. “I'll have to take the chance. Let's get this changed.”

“It'll probably end up peeling off the scab, you should take another pill first.”

Betan nodded and Afsholar got one from the physical case. When it took full effect ten minutes later, Afsholar laid Betan down and soaked the bandage with a mild solvent before starting to peel it back. Betan hissed a few times when it tugged on her skin but it didn't hurt badly. Afsholar bent over and looked at the wound.

“It's closed.” Afsholar said. “The scab looks flat, that's good.”

“I know.” Betan said.

“I don't!” Getell asked.

“That means the blood that forms the scab isn't corrupted. But there could still be bad blood in her.” Afsholar poured more powder on the wound then bandaged it again.

“I can't debride the wound here. You'll need a steady table for that.”

“You can debride?” Betan marveled. “I'm impressed.”

“If a passenger or, more likely, a rower gets hurt, I have to care for them until we can put ashore. Sometimes longer. Hold still.” he began to apply the new bandage.

“You'd care for a rower?”

“Of course!” Afsholar sounded offended. “I'm not a *noble*.” He took more yellow pills from a vial and sat Betan up so she could take them.

“How effective are these?” Betan asked.

“Pills aren't ideal for anticorruption medicine.” Afsholar said. “They'll help.”

Betan picked up a water bottle and washed the pills down. The taste of the bad wine still infected the water. At Afsholar's bidding she turned around and leaned against the side of the boat so he could change the bandage on her back.

“This appears to be mostly healed.” Afsholar said as he glued a the patch on. “It looks like the stitches could come out, even but I'll leave that to a proper physic.”

“Alright. Thank you. Go relieve Getell. And stop calling him 'boy'.”

Getell brought up the weapons with him.

“We keep leaving these back there.” he said.

“I think Afsholar's quite cowed.”

“I hope so.” Getell murmured. He turned to look at the bloodstained deck. “Are all ladies in your land trained to this?”

Betan smiled and successfully didn't laugh. “No. At least not like this. We're colonists and the natives don't like us much so most women can shoot but it's rare for even noblewomen to be trained like this. But the women of the royal company have been for generations. One of my aunts even coordinated the defense of a frontier town for twelve days of siege.”

“Until she was relieved?” Getell marveled.

“Uh, no.” Betan admitted. “The town was overrun and everyone killed or enslaved.”

Getell's face fell. “Oh.”

“But it's not reckoned to be her fault, the defenders were outnumbered 100 to 1.”

“Similar odds here.” Getell observed.

“Ah, yes.” Betan admitted. “I never knew her, if that makes you feel better.”

“Not really.”

“Ah.”

Betan spent some time neatening her satchel, putting some cartridges for her pistol and the musketoons in her pockets, stowing the night glass and replenishing their own food supplies. Getell unsaddled the horses in an act of comedy which Betan finally had to turn away from lest she embarrassed the boy.

She watched the river ahead, using her looker on occasion to check for obstructions or blockades. The number of red signals they passed on the journey became a kind of distance marker, even though they didn't appear with any kind of regularity. Betan got to twenty when she lost count.

The sun rose and Betan lost time again. Barely restrained fatigue and the haze of the painbalm pill turned her mind into undercooked porridge unless she concentrated. Getell finally finished his labors and joined her in the prow.

“You should sleep.” he said.

“I don't think I would wake up again.” Betan said. “I think more *nemal* is in order.”

“I'll ask Afsholar how much farther we have to go.” Getell said instead, he disappeared before she could protest. And the stores were in the passenger seating area, she didn't feeling like walking.

Getell got a bottle from the stores on his way back. “Nine hours.” he pronounced. “Give or take three quarters.”

Betan looked back at Afsholar handling the tiller. *Looks rather sad.* Betan thought. *Don't blame him, I guess.*

Getell tore the wrapper from the top of the bottle and pried the capped plug loose with his knife.

“Bottoms up.” he handed it to Betan, who upended it and filled her mouth with the puckering hazy brew.

“How do they make this stuff?” Betan asked as she passed it to Getell. Her head was already clearing.

“No idea. I'd never had it until yesterday.” Getell took a drink and replaced the plug. “My eyes feel like they're made of leather.” Getell grumbled. “My hands won't stand still. I don't think I've ever been awake this long before and my body doesn't care for it.”

“Yes. If I was whole I think I'd be dancing a reel on the deck. But as it is I'm barely staying awake. I'm getting hungry again. Healing is hard work.”

“Lot of whiners aren't we?” Getell deadpanned. Betan tried to punch him after she laughed but he dodged out of range.

“I should warn you. That cadets will be expected to show more deference to their superior officers than you are to me. But,” Betan paused. This was awkward. “Not more devotion. You have served very well since we met.” Getell looked down, Betan thought he might be blushing. “I can recommend you to the highest levels of command with no hesitation or qualification.

“Thank you, Getell.”

“You still owe me the money.” Was Getell's reply, although he still wouldn't look at her.

“I know.” Betan said.

Getell busied himself in the saddlebags and Betan let time slip by her again,

watching the river. After several hours, she saw something on the river. It was a tiny speck through her looker, too small to identify. "Something ahead, Getell." Betan called.

Getell picked up his knife, Betan had barely marked the sound of him tossing its point into the deck although the regularity of it had almost lured her to sleep, and came to the prow. He used her looker.

"Small boat?" he mused.

"That would be my guess." Betan agreed. "Too soon to tell."

"How far away would you guess, oh, I'll get Afsholar." Getell said. Betan grinned at him as he picked up a blunderbuss and walked past the rowers, who grumbled at him. *Must be time to feed them again, I think Afsholar said something about upnoon this morning.*

Afsholar walked up to her. "We'll need to feed the rowers soon." he said.

"I was just thinking that."

"They've been slowing down for an hour. They'll fatigue faster with the *nemal* although the better food helps that somewhat. Much more energy in it than they're used to. The boy said something ahead?"

Betan handed her looker to him, Afsholar peered through it. "It's a rowboat. Small, probably six men tops."

"How long away is it?"

"If it keeps rowing toward us, an hour, maybe hour and a half. Two or three if it stops."

Betan checked her watch, setting the time mark, (MENTION THIS EARLIER) and received her looker from Afsholar. "It's almost over." Betan said.

Afsholar chuckled bitterly. "I somehow imagine this will linger. This boat is going to end up the property of the rebel navy. The insurance won't pay off wars aren't covered, no matter that officially there's no war on. So I'll be charged with the loss." Another bitter laugh came out. "I might end up rowing on one of these things. And that's if the reformation wins. If they lose, well. Doesn't bear thinking about really." He paused, eyes intent on the river ahead. "But I'm hardly the first life ruined in this whole mess. I'll see to the feeding." he said as he walked away. Betan shook her head at the man's resignation. *I'll have to try to help him. Not good odds that the navy will actually pay for this galley, spoils of war and all that, but Pautark or Reigh or Goldopan might see to his security after the war. If we win.*

Betan kept watching the boat. It was still rowing towards them and slowly it came into better definition. It had a small canopy, which was what had thrown her off at first sight. The canopy appeared to cover half of the boat and there were at least three figures aboard. Oars worked on either side.

"Soup." Getell said. He had two wooden bowls. Betan took one, it was warm. "I found a small warmer. Rowers probably won't like it, but too bad for them."

"You'll make a fine officer." Betan said as she took a spoon from him.

"That wasn't a compliment, was it?" Getell frowned at her. Betan declined to answer.

They ate the fowl stew with bread and cheese. They washed it down with *nemal* and water. Both of them were finding themselves increasingly thirsty which would be bad if they had to leave the river but Betan could see nothing to be done for it. Between them they drained the water bottle and refilled it to drink it half down.

"I hope we can stay on the river as long as we need the *nemal*." Getell observed

after a long guzzle of water. Betan smiled.

“I was just thinking that.”

She looked at the boat again. “Three people aboard. One rowing. They don't appear to be in uniform.”

“Pleasure row?” Getell guessed. “We're still hours from the blockage.”

“It looks awfully simple for that.” Betan played the looker at the river past the boat. The river wandered only slightly, she could see ahead for some distance although the looker was effective for only so far.

“We should be able to take out any three men.” Getell observed. “Are they all men?”

“Hm. Can't really tell, I'm working off silhouettes. If there's any ladies on that boat they're dressed somewhat plainly.”

Another half hour showed there was a woman on the boat and she was indeed dressed plainly. The boat was better appointed than Betan initially thought but it was altogether too small and not nearly ostentatious enough for Brannan nobles.

“Merchants, perhaps.” Getell said after looking.

“Perhaps.” Betan thought, recalling Lemelian. “Tradesmen maybe. This close to the war the nobles would probably be somewhere else.”

“Four or five hours to Iondar.” Getell said.

“Let's decide how we're going to handle this.”

“You stay in the prow, Afsholar stays in the stern, I hide.” Getell said simply.

“Ah. Good plan.”

“You'll, ah, you'll need to change, though.”

Betan looked down at herself. Her stolen jacket was crusty with blood and torn on the side of her wound. The shirt underneath was even worse.

“I have clothes on one of the horses.”

“Ah, yes.” Getell was blushing again.

“Don't worry, Getell, I'm not shy.” Betan couldn't help teasing him. “Get the clothes, they're identical to these.”

“Hang *that*. You need to change trousers as well. I'll set up the canopy.” Getell retreated before Betan could protest.

Afsholar had to help, setting some kind of rope loop on the tiller to hold it steady. It took ten minutes for the two of them to accomplish that task, which Afsholar said would also help to disguise the lack of passengers from the oncoming boat. The trio had without discussion settled on the opinion the boat was probably to spy on them. A relay team of horses could pace the boat and birds could definitely out speed it. If they were drawing close to the block the local Oldsters would have some way to stop traffic before the lie of the traffic reports was made clear.

Getell fetched the towels and soap they'd taken from Lord Keledan's estate as well as a change of clothes for Betan. Undressing was awkward but not painful. The bandage didn't feel squishy to her probing, so the blood thickeners had probably worked. Betan cleaned the blood from the attackers from her neck, what had soaked through her clothes would have to wait until she had time.

The shift she'd had on when she changed in the Prodolan's manor house was unsalveagable, the sheer material stiff with blood, so she didn't bother putting it back on. A shirt would serve much the same purpose, if not be as soft against her skin. The thought of caring about that after all these months, maybe even a year, made her chuckle.

She got the new trousers and old boots on with a minimum of fuss and stood carefully. "If I have to ride we might be in trouble. I'll take more damn painbalm pills if that comes about." She called Getell who picked up the discarded clothes and disappeared.

Betan took her now customary seat in the prow and took her pills from Afsholar who had left the tiller to Getell again so he could change the bandage.

"We'll be at the boat soon." he observed as he worked. "Are you getting hungry quickly?"

Betan's stomach confirmed this. "Yes. I, ah, it might be from healing."

"Possibly." Afsholar said, although the tone of his voice disagreed.

"I'll have to be bled."

"Possibly." Afsholar tied on another outer bandage and lifted her arm on the side of the wound.

"I hate being bled." Betan grumbled.

"It's not very fun." Afsholar was closely inspecting her arm, paying the most attention to her elbow.

"Looking for swollen veins?"

"Yes. But I don't see any. If there's only a little corruption you might do with a heavy course of anticorruption medicine. It spreads more slowly in the blood stream."

"That's not fun, either."

"I'd rather be bled, personally." Afsholar released her arm and dug in the physical case for more yellow pills. "Only a few more doses of these." he observed.

"Getell suggests we pretend to be the crew." Afsholar said. "There should be a drummer, though."

"Nothing to be done for it." Betan said after her second draught of water. "I have a question, where's the drum?"

Afsholar smiled. "There's not really a drum. It would disturb the passengers. The drummer beats on a panel that is connected to the benches. The rowers feel the beat in their arse."

Betan burst out in a guffaw. Afsholar bowed and returned to the rear.

Getell hunkered down just behind the prow. Betan had the musketoons. *My pistols should be more useful, but that might just be nationalism on my part.* She thought. Getell had the blunderbusses. They ensured all weapons were loaded and charged.

Then they waited.

"I hate waiting." Getell said.

"You'll get used to it in the army." Betan replied, attempting to casually examine the oncoming boat. Getell made a rude noise in response.

"Who do we have?" Getell asked.

"A lady and two gentleman. No obvious weapons. The gentlemen look a bit strained, they must be trading off on the rowing."

"Bint's probably not lifting a finger."

"*Bint?*" They used the same term in Durannia.

"Oh, you're hardly in the same category. Odds that she can fence?"

"Easy, lad."

Another rude noise was his reply.

The vessels were barely twenty yards apart. The resting gentleman raised a hand

in a weary wave. Betan replied, hoping there were no specific pleasantries to observe, but the rowboat continued past the galley in a leisurely manner. Betan tried to keep them in view without gawking and it appeared those in the boat were doing the same. But they did nothing to make her want to fill it with shot.

“That was boring.” Getell grumbled.

“Anticlimactic, I believe, is the word you want there.” Betan said.

“As you say.” Getell picked up the other blunderbuss and walked into the canopy to watch the boat pass. He returned in a moment. “They're passed. Odd.”

“They seemed to be working awfully hard for a leisurely trip along the river.”

Betan observed.

“Maybe we should put ashore and head overland.”

“It's a long trip to Zhatano. Especially hoping we run into the Yellow army and not the Oldster.”

“If they were spies, oh *damn*.” Getell's eyes bulged. Betan turned to look forward, at least a dozen boats had appeared from the tree lined riverbank several hundred yards ahead and were converging on the galley. Now that Betan's attention was drawn to them she could see tall screens like giant bird blinds being worked open.

These were longboats, each clearly loaded with uniformed men. Getell stepped up next to Betan, grimly cocking his blunderbuss.

“Here we go.” Getell muttered. He looked sidelong at Betan, then goggled as she lowered her looker, smiling.

The boats were manned by blue and yellow coated soldiers.

“Do you have any other proof of what you say?” The officer, who had neglected to introduce himself asked. He was of the Brannan navy, although his boats hauled Yellow light troops instead of marines. He'd been examining her commission for several minutes. The document had been specially prepared for the occasion, with text in both (language) and Brannan. *I'd wager he can't tell if it's authentic or not and is just trying to look important.*

“I do not, sir. I had no written orders in my person when I was captured, and my uniform was lost while I was being taken north to Dalibar.”

“Yes, Dalibar.” The officer handed her commission back to her and took her sword from an aide to look closely at it, which was clearly not a work of any smith in the Central Lands. Her pistols likewise gave her tale credence.

“I can assure you, sir, that General Pautark and Brigadier Reigh will be most happy to see me.” Betan said.

“I'll send you to the army, under guard. But if they don't know you, I'm afraid it's the spy's end for you.” he resheathed the sword and returned it to the aide. “These boats will take you ashore, transportation will be found for you.”

“I, uh, I still have some concerns here.”

“Such as?”

“The galley and its crew.”

“The galley is now property of the Brannan navy.”

“I expected that, and the crew?”

“Debtors?” the officer looked at Afsholar.

“Yes.” Betan answered.

“They can work off their debts in the navy. We pay better than these galley

companies.” This occasioned some grumbling from the rowers, there was a reason the navy paid better than civil shipping.

“And Master Afsholar?” Betan asked. “I’m afraid he will suffer for the taking of the vessel.”

The officer turned to Afsholar. “Would you accept a warrant in the navy?”

“Gah, ah, eh- YES!” Afsholar stammered.

“I cannot guarantee one will be offered, but if you are willing to accept one I will inform my superiors. Will this suffice, miss?”

“It will, sir. Thank you. I, ah, I imagine I will require some assistance to disembark.”

“The boy is with you?”

“He is my servant, yes.”

“One moment, miss.” Afsholar said. “I need to write instructions for physics.” He rooted in his jacket and the officer's aide produced a notepad and crayon for him. He scribbled for a moment. “Ah, Getell, you should take the remaining painbalm and anticorruption pills from the physical case, bandages as well. The hardware, I imagine will be wanted here.”

“Indeed, sir.” the officer said. “The horses, we have no way of taking them off here.”

“A gift to the Yellow army.” Betan pronounced. “The *army*, sir.”

“I’ll have the saddle bags sent with you, along with your weapons but under guard, miss.”

“Very good, sir. Now let's get me off this damn boat.”

The transfer was effected by a chair contraption slung from ropes. The soldiers in the boat took hold of her and helped her onto a seat on the longboat that received her. Getell clambered down a rope ladder. Their gear, less the sack with food and pills, was transferred to another longboat.

“Thank you for your service, Master Afsholar!” Betan called as the longboat was rowed away. Busy in conversation with the officer, he simply replied with a wave.

“I think this detachment has a new flagship.” Betan mused. A junior officer had been assigned to squire them. “What news of the war?” she asked him.

In the two months and some Betan had been in captivity the Yellow Army had marched slowly toward Zhatano, opposed bitterly by militia and noble assemblages.

Three major battles had been fought in that time. The first two were costly victories for the Yellow army as they were opposed by forces largely composed of NAs, proud and loathe to retreat. In both cases the Cendralese mounts of the Yellow cavalry had made the difference. Betan couldn't help but suspect that a certain unit of rifles might have helped as well.

The third battle had been fought against a composite corps of regulars, NAs and militia and had been a devastating rout for the Oldsters. After that General Pautark had ordered an operational pause for rest and reinforcement.

“Boats full of new soldiers are sailing up the Fral regularly.” the new officer, who had introduced himself as Tetelan said. “They're being folded into the existing battalions.”

“Any news of the Fourth?” Betan asked.

“Just Reigh's usual exploits.” Tetelan answered. “Off on a flying column, two

day flanking maneuvers, independent wing. Storming field fortifications. Laying waste to the Oldsters while bringing most of his boys home. Can't really tell of the old bastard is blessed or cursed."

Betan stifled a chuckle. "I'm not sure either."

From the longboat Betan and Getell were transferred to a carriage with a noble crest hastily defaced. Their weapons and saddlebags were secured in the strongbox over the rear axle.

"Messengers are being sent ahead of you." the ensign said. "You'll join the next column marching to the army. Good luck, miss."

"Thank you, sir." Betan said through the open window. It was closed by glass rather than a curtain, which Betan found most impressive. Most glass was prone to break when jostled but these were undamaged, not even scratched. The carriage was wheeled to a road where bodies of soldiers were organizing. They were armed but had the unsteadiness characteristic of green soldiers. Mounted officers and sergeants chivvied them into order on the road.

Betan's hands were shaking. She noticed that Getell's were as well.

"I think it's safe to sleep." Betan said.

"Not that we could do anything about it if it weren't."

"Not that we can sleep."

They both laughed. Betan grimaced. "I think I'll take an extra painbalm. This is a fine carriage but I doubt it's sprung well enough for me." Getell produced the vial and handed her two blue pills.

"Not many left" he said as Betan picked up a bottle of water to wash down the pill.

Within minutes of swallowing the pill a warm, comfortable fuzzy blackness descended over her and she was asleep.

Getell wasn't so fortunate.