

## CHAPTER TWO

LUCYJA was unhappy. She was often unhappy when her patron dragged them into the wilds, when the wagons had no walls around them to protect them from thieving foreigners. Over the years working with Marrakus, however, she had learnt how best to deal with her frustrations: beat the young ones. Sparring was a gift of the Gods. Cruel Gods, perhaps, though not destructive ones. An unhappy captain of a merchant's guard could take her frustrations out on the less-experienced guards, all with the excuse of improving the skills of the hired help, usually peasants, or runaway pickpockets, or stupid city brutes. Lucyja saw her role as beating sense into such people.

She *hated* it when the hired help ever beat *her*. This, of course, only served to make Lucyja even more unhappy than usual. Four of the current guards still couldn't touch her - she *had* won the Sar Danskaya fencing tourney a decade ago, after all - but the two Wicked Westmen were getting much better. Indeed, the tall one, Sorig, had become an excellent swordsman. However, the sheer *absurdity* of the broad one, Soleigh, getting hits on her with a length of tree trunk was not improving her mood. The odd defeat when the thick brute wielded that impressive longsword was one thing, but, the thug's actual preferred weapon was a large length of wood, in the name of the Light!

And the bitterest draught of all, she had to admit, she coveted that damned great stick. It was too long for her and it lacked any nuance or guile, and yet it was beautiful. It had spiralling ridges running up the polished golden wood and it was carved with red symbols. Wickeder magic, no doubt, for nothing else could explain the man hitting her with it. Yes, Soleigh was big and it was long - nearly five feet from butt to tip - so she had to be careful of his reach. Yes, it was finely made: weighted *just so* with its tapered length ending in a wonderful ribbed handle and a fine knob to hold it fast to his grip. But whatever the enchantment in it, the young lad could make it dance like a drover maiden and he stubbornly refused to take a beating. Despite being an idiot peasant herder. A *foreigner* idiot peasant herder. A foreigner idiot peasant herder who could wield a maul and had gotten a lot better at it over the past three years of sparring.

These days Lucyja only ever won the sparring bouts when she took the young man by surprise or if he didn't get angry. The key was either to win quickly, sometimes by pointing over Soleigh's shoulder and yelling "Shark!" - why the hell this always worked some two hundred leagues from the nearest sea, only the Guiding Stars could say - or sometimes by screaming "Get angry! Get angry!" which, of course, meant that Soleigh couldn't get angry. Getting inside the mind of your opponent was also a part of fighting, wasn't it?

The hows and whys were not Lucyja's concern; what *was* her concern was making sure Marrakus' goods didn't get robbed, and *that* was tricky. So, sparring occurred by the wagons. Playing cards and dice also occurred next to the wagons. Sitting about complaining, naturally, occurred next to the wagons. But getting beaten over the head by a really big tree branch named *Ogre's Soul*, was not expected to occur next to the wagons. It was *never* expected to occur. After trying the "Shark!" technique one last time in vain, which had only worked twice that day anyways, Lucyja called an end to the day's sparring. She took Soleigh by the biceps and noted that the idiot still flinched in shock at a female's touch despite knowing he wasn't exactly her type. His discomfort wasn't entirely unhelpful. She guided him down to the river's edge, the damned dog of his bouncing along beside them.

“What’s in your blood today, lad? I ain’t seen you this vexed since that skunk sprayed that dog of yours back in Polgarinyi. Very funny, by the way.”

“You didn’t have to share a tent with her afterwards,” Soleigh snapped.

“I’ve slept in tents with a few skunks in my time, you should know. Mostly guards after a pea soup dinner.” Soleigh sighed, stooped, grabbed a stone and threw it skipping across the river’s surface. The dog leapt into the river and swam off after the series of ripples. “So what’s vexing you, lad?” Lucyja asked again.

Soleigh frowned, “Nothing. I’m fine.” As he said it, Lucyja noted that Soleigh had spotted his friend Sorig, the tall one, walking along the riverbank, approaching slowly from downstream and looking out over the Coldwater into the vast taiga of the north. Before Sorig could take notice of them, Soleigh turned and stomped off. She had come to know them well and in their three years of service to Marrakus, they had never acted so out of character.

The dog arrived at where Soleigh had thrown the stone and looked about for the now-sunken plaything before eventually swimming back to shore.



AS the hot afternoon gave way to the long evening of the northlands, Lucyja washed herself and donned the dress uniform that Marrakus had given her some years before. The lovely woollen coat looked beautiful, though it was far too hot for summer weather. It was cut in the style of the House Guard uniform with epaulettes and brass buttons, but was purple rather than blue. The trousers were green and loose-fitting above the brown leather riding boots that she had polished enough to use them as a mirror. Marrakus expected her to present a fine figure at the Drover gathering, and she intended to do so.

She went in search of those damned Wicked Westmen that seemed to take up more and more space, just as the summer days got hotter and hotter. Three years ago they were nothing, now

they were nothing but bothers. They weren't inside their tent and they weren't next to the wagons, so she went down to the riverbank; she had noticed that they seemed to like water. They weren't anywhere she could see, so she went to the *jaxniat* and saw the two of them perched on stools at one of the drinking tents that the Drovers had set up under the trees to sell their *raskat*. As she approached them from behind, Lucyja heard the broad one, Soleigh, declare something. She didn't understand the Westman tongue but it was clear the man was annoyed. Sorig, the tall one, replied calmly, with one word that seemed to give Soleigh pause.

Lucyja felt no compunction in interrupting the spat, startling them with a loud, "Where in the Dark have you two been? No! Wait, don't answer, I don't care." The two lads leapt to their feet and she was glad to see they had on respectable clothes. "What I *do* care about is Marrakus. He'll want to make his appearance soon. So, be on your best behaviour. We do not, *ever*, bring shame on Marrakus, got it?" The young men nodded dutifully, though Lucyja knew they had heard this particular mantra often enough over the years. "I don't know why you two got invited anyway. But don't you think you're getting out of guard duty. You'll get a double shift tomorrow, starting early, so don't drink more than a cup of *raskat*."

They joined Marrakus at his tent, where he was negotiating the price of cured reindeer hides with a pair of Drovers. One was a short, middle-aged man with bushy eyebrows each adorned with a small golden ring. He had didn't have the long, drooping moustaches like so many Drovers wore, but rather one that blended into a dark goatee that added a touch of menace to his look that his build did not. The other was a fetching, slim woman in her mid-twenties. She had tied her hair braided into a long tress but Lucyja noticed her hair was oak brown in colour, something rare among the nomads. Despite the heat, the Drover merchant woman wore over her white blouse a short black jacket cut off at the tummy and its sleeves were embroidered with green leaves. Those decorations brought out lively green flecks in her eyes. When she spoke, Lucyja caught glimpses of irregular teeth, as though an extra one had displaced the rest. Even so, the Drover woman was alluring. Marrakus concluded his business, agreeing to purchase a horde of hides, and the woman sealed the

deal with a hand clasp and a bonus, a beautiful reindeer hide overcoat the likes of which Lucyja would covet on a blustery, sleet-filled autumn day. The Drovers caught sight of Soleigh and recoiled. The Drover man's eyes turned hard, his gaze shifting between the broad Wickeder and Marrakus, on whom the deal depended. Then the Drover woman noticed Soleigh's eye fall on the overcoat and she asked, "Would you like one also?"

"I might," Soleigh said. "How much is one worth?"

The brown-haired woman chuckled. "A large sum. The reindeer are precious and require a great deal of care. Their hides are warm, and resist rain and snow, but they are supple and light. Our craft upon them is without equal; stitching of the finest quality, buttons carved from reindeer antler and lovingly embossed with these likenesses of galloping steeds, the linings will not come apart, and the wool we use in the linings will not clump together."

Soleigh extended a hand to Marrakus, who, to Lucyja's surprise actually handed over Marrakus' new coat. The Wickeder inspected it, turning it inside out, studying the stitching of the seams and the quality of the leather. At length, the Fjordlander nodded. "It is good work."

"I am glad you recognize it as such," the woman said.

"How much will you sell another one like it for?" Soleigh asked.

"Six duc six and six," she replied immediately.

"What?" Soleigh asked.

Marrakus chuckled. "Six score ducrovny and six more, with six fennales to sweeten the deal. Drover currency, my man. Based on how the currencies are flowing here, I think Esmyralda here wants roughly eighty three gavi."

"Slightly more, my friend," said Esmyralda promptly, "for I would need to go to money changers if you paid me in your barbaric coin, and they take their share." She finished with a kind smile, however, before turning her attention back to the broad lad. "But shall we consider the offer in my currency. The number six is prophetic and I offer you the chance to buy on a lucky number."

"A lucky number for you, no doubt," Soleigh replied. "I'm done with prophesy. Five duc five and five. Five is a lucky number for me."

Lucyja guffawed as Marrakus exclaimed, “Soleigh! That is a very high offer for a man who earns his bread as a guard.”

“Six duc and five, to honour us both.” Then the Drover woman gave Soleigh a sideways glance and a waggle of the eyebrows. “I’ll sweeten the deal; if Marrakus brings you to the *axni* tonight, I’ll allow you to dance with me.”

“Done.” Soleigh proffered his hand.

Marrakus put a hand on Soleigh’s chest. “If you clasp hands, the deal is sealed.”

Soleigh nodded and said, “I am no savage.” He clasped the Drover woman’s hand, engulfing it, really, in his big paw. Lucyja’s guffaws turned into outright laughter, suddenly silenced by the sight of a bulging purse that the young man drew from beneath his shirt. Soleigh produced a Straelish gold coin and said, “Six duc and five is seventy-eight gavi, by Marrakus’ reckoning, that you did not deny, though you added a fee to your end. Let us say eighty. This here little beauty is worth fifty-five gavi, and her silver companions here will make up the difference.” He handed the coins over to the Drover.

Lucyja stood, mouth agape. Soleigh glanced over at her and said, “Wool to grain versus wool to coin to grain versus sheep to meat. One has to calculate such things.”

The woman weighed the gold coin in her hand and then shrugged. “I’ll have Boldo here test it later.” She gave her Drover companion a glance. “I can always have you killed and your corpse robbed to make up any shortfall,” she added with a different smile, a decidedly sly one.

Soleigh smiled back and replied, “Just as long as you don’t poke holes in my new coat. And mark me, I can also poke holes if you don’t send a seamstress to measure my shoulders.”

The Drover woman laughed outright. “You are right, I fear. Those shoulders might require four pelts on their own. I may have bargained too quickly. But let us hope neither of us has to rob a corpse, unless of course, we’re doing it together, robbing some unworthy fool who stood against us.”

Then they arranged a time for a seamstress to take the big Wickedder’s measurements.



LUCYJA resolved to keep a closer eye on the two young guardsmen henceforth. A man with a beautiful sword - even if he seemed to share it with a friend - was one thing ... there were any number of ways a person could come across a nice blade. However, a man who could produce a gold coin on a whim was worth keeping a close eye on. She had long thought them mere foreign paupers when Marrakus had taken them on as a favour to a friend three summers back: cheap muscle without a clue to the value of work as guards. They were both big, so she had taken to calling them the tall one and the broad one, but she was thinking that maybe they merited other names. Had they been playing her, and by extension, playing Marrakus? She considered the proofs. First, they had always lived modestly. Marrakus preferred having his finger on the pulse of commerce and kept on the move as much as the agents in his employ. The trader arranged to pass nights in *sars*, towns or villages, where he could cut deals, rather than out in the open country where he could only cut carrots for a nightly stew. The other guards always fell into the usual traps: a bath, shave and massage; a night of drink in a tavern; a girl; often enough all of those together, with dice and robbery thrown in. On a three week tour, the advance would be blown away on the wind by the third or fourth town, easy, with sullen nights spent moping about the wagons in the other towns, until mid-tour, when another advance would trigger the same blowing winds and the same sullen moping three days later. But the Wickeders volunteered for night watch more often than not, prowling around the wagons like lions. Until today she'd never seen them spend coin on anything the boss wouldn't buy as part of their tour: no extra food; no ale; no new weapons to replace their stupid axes and that fucking maul. They never dropped coin so that a boy could scrub their mail or sharpen that great bloody longsword they seemed to share.

Second, they had spent their initial tours watching and listening, the tall one picking up Polgati words and driving them into the skull of the broad one. Wicked Westmen had a bad reputation, but these two did little to maintain it. Where was the savagery? The bloodletting? Where was the arrogant bravado, the wenching, the boozing, the arson, the thieving in broad daylight? Marrakus said there was no risk of their longboats sailing up the

river, but the man, for all his good points, was credulous. Maybe they were scouts planning a raid? Yes, that was likely.

Third, as they picked up the language, their interactions with Marrakus changed. They hadn't as much as opened their mouths that first year. But they had improved and improved, especially the tall one, Sorig, evidently owing to the influence of some *fisik* back in the capital, where they stayed during winter breaks and on their regular furloughs between trading expeditions. They began engaging more with Lucyja, the other guards, and the wagon drivers. But, with Marrakus, they went beyond what the other guards dared. None of the other guards they had ever employed had ever initiated a discussion with the merchant, as these two would. To Lucyja's thinking, they displayed an indecent lack of subservience and an uncouth closeness, though Marrakus had waved away her private protestations and had instructed her to let them be. And so, nothing stopped Soleigh from frequently making irreverent quips - surprisingly funny ones given his Polgati wasn't as good as Sorig's. Meanwhile, that tall one often asked impertinent questions crafted to drive home a point rather than solicit information.

Finally, strange things occurred whenever they camped near woods. Not small copses, mind, or private hunting demesnes near *sars*, but real woods, primeval forests with wild animals. Always, the lads took the night shift and, come the dawn, they were always as refreshed and spritely as they had been the previous evening. Lucyja had tried a few times to catch them sleeping on shift but she had never managed either to emerge from her slumber or to keep from dropping off in the first place to catch them red-handed.

It was all odd and she wondered what was afoot.

As they walked from Marrakus' tent to the *axniSukovi*, music floated to their ears: a rapid, spiralling melody squeezed from a *puhator*; then a heartbeat of a pause before two *garrase* took the tune and wound it down again, the same quickness of playing, with the notes echoing the same familiar riffs and patterns, but this time with fingers not only plucking and strumming the instrument's cords, but also tapping its wooden frame, generating a new element of the song - rhythm. After the heartbeat of another pause, the strings of the *garrase* fell silent, though the players continued their accompaniment with their rhythmic

tapping. Higher-pitched strings took up the melody, this time pulled by bows from the strings of rebabs. The rebabs spiralled the tune up again until it had returned to the pause at top of the melody, when flutes brought it back down, and once there, in the heartbeat of the pause, a bank of drums filled the void with a sudden volley of rhythm. And then, after the time it would have taken to bring the tune back to its summit, the drums quieted for a pregnant pause, an intake of breath, and then the ensemble finally took the music spiralling back up in unison to the pounding of the drums and thumping of the *garrase*. After the song reached its highest pitch, the musicians brought it down again, but rather than do so in unison, each instrument played its own riff, weaving a beautiful, exotic whole from their independent efforts.

When they arrived at the *axni*, Lucyja saw it was bigger than a usual gathering. Indeed, the Sukovi were a large clan, with upwards of forty wagons ringed about an inner meadow. As they entered via a gap in the wagons, arched with bunting formed of many-coloured ribbons strung between two tall poles, they saw that the gathering was a festive one. The musicians sat in a circle in the middle around a fire pit, unused in the warm sheen of summer evening light but serving as a focus for the entire celebration. A half-dozen of their all-so-alluring women in white blouses danced spirals around the musicians, their orange, yellow, red, green, blue and brown skirts twirling high, and Lucyja had to take a deep breath at the sight of black lace underskirts. Three moustachioed men circled the musicians dancing in an opposite direction to the women, weaving in and out of the approaching whirlwinds of skirts and long chestnut or raven hair tied into swinging ponytails. Many of the Sukovi clan, and all the young children, stood in a wide, loose circle about the dancers, clapping and stamping their feet to the music. Many of the littlest ones, carried away by the dancing, mimicked it or squealed and ran circles around the ring of performers.

Then came a wide space where wizened men sat on folding chairs around small folding tables, twisting the ends of their moustaches, sipping cups of *raskat* and playing *aznat*, a game Lucyja had no idea how to play but that apparently a proxy for that great Drover pass-time: thievery. Each player had to position their seven horse-riders, small figures carved from wood, among

blue-glass beads that represented their stinking reindeer herds. Evidently the placement of the horse-riders could drive their own herds or steal those of the adversary. Clusters of younger men and older boys stood around these games - evidently men needed to study the moves, or make a pretence of doing so while chatting and drinking with friends. All so very useless, and all so very male.

The penultimate ring was that of the cooking fires, of course with grandmothers brooding over blackened cauldrons hung from metal tripods and mouthwatering vapours wafting into the evening air. And of course wives chopped vegetables and prepared meat, while girls darted to and fro fetching spices and wooden spoons, or dragging over sacks of tubers, or carrying metal plates and cutlery. *They* couldn't study *aznat* moves, could they? Course not, Lucyja thought, 'cause then the old men would never win, would they?

Finally came the ring of wagons: green, red, gold, yellow, with equally brightly coloured awnings reaching out from them a few paces towards the centre of the *axni*. Under the awnings reposed the honoured clan elders, holding court, as Lucyja thought of it. The older sages, be they men or women, reclined on banks of cushions set on richly woven rugs, listening to complaints or sharing great wisdoms to guide their supplicants through their problems. Sticks of burning incense allowed strands of spicily scented smoke to drift into the *axni*, joining the divine odours wafting from the cooking fires. Lucyja resented the Drovers but she was prepared to accept that the emotion was born from envy because she loved gatherings such as this.

She, Sorig, and Soleigh escorted their employer to Gustof's wagon on the far side of the ring, where the two men greeted each other profusely and settled onto respective piles of cushions, though not before Gustof also greeted the tall Wickeder, Sorig. Then Marrakus waved them away, saying, "Go. Enjoy yourselves. I could be nowhere safer." So they went.

Lucyja watched a couple of games of *aznat*, trying to figure out the rules. The clan knew that their *bulibara* had invited Marrakus and his guard, so she was given a cup of *raskat* and a skewer of goat and beef meat separated by chunks of potato and onion, all braised with a honied-beer glaze. It was the best thing she'd eaten in weeks and she didn't even have to pay for it. Then

she wandered over to the dancing. It appeared as though the formal dancing show had given way to a general free-for-all, as many more people were now spinning their way in revolutions around the musicians.

She studied the movements for a long while, trying to determine whether she could integrate herself. That was when she caught sight of Soleigh plodding along in the throng, being spun about by the reindeer hide merchant. As Esmyralda danced, her red skirt whirled up, revealing glimpses of honey-coloured thighs, and the oak brown hair bound in its long tress with a length of forest green cord swung back and forth hypnotically. And for all the colours, for all the hypnotic movements, it was her smile that dazzled, even if all her teeth weren't straight.

Lucyja looked around for Sorig and spotted the tall lad getting himself dragged into the swirl of dancers by the young, dark-haired, bronze-skinned beauty with fiery eyes who was Gustof's granddaughter. The tall one looked pleased and horrified in equal measure, and it was evident that the horror rose from an obviously realistic fear of revealing his dancing capabilities. And no wonder, for someone who couldn't sit a horse. Sorig was horrible, but where Soleigh plodded on good-naturedly, hamming it up and having fun, Sorig doggedly kept trying to get the steps right and getting upset at himself. The look on Siançiorny's face, how her eyes lit up when looking at the young Westman, struck Lucyja, though perhaps it was the Drover drink going to their heads or joy at the dance. She had never been a good judge of such things. She caught herself staring, and growing sad, and so she decided to get another skewer of meat.

Later in the evening, a young boy came running up to her as she watched a game of dice, tugged on her sleeve and informed her that Marrakus needed his escort. So she went in search of the Wickeders. She did a circle of the *axni* and found Soleigh sitting on a pile of cushions under an awning laughing with a group of Drover youths and with Esmyralda sitting beside him chuckling. Soleigh accepted the summons with a smile, exclaiming, "Ay! I am rescued from any more dancing. Good night all." With that, he kissed the merchant, Esmyralda, on the cheek and got to his feet, following Lucyja into the dusk. They looked and looked, and eventually found Sorig in the last place they'd expected, at Marrakus' side. Their employer was bidding his friend Gustof

goodbye. Then Lucyja guessed at the reason Sorig was already present. When she lifted her eyes behind the clan elder, she saw the old man's granddaughter. "... it need not be a long farewell, my friend," Gustof was saying. "Perhaps we could ride together tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Marrakus said, frowning. "Alas, friend, I must be on my way at first light."

"As must we. You see, your *Overlar* has invited me to drive three hundred of my horses to court so he can purchase the best. The best one I will not make him purchase, of course. That would be crass. Ah, but the rest? ... A man, a *clan*, could do well. And I shall ride with you to Sar Danskaya, my friend, if you will have me and mine for company."

"You and yours?" Marrakus asked.

"Indeed. I travel with those Sukovi who can free themselves from the herds. A *bulibara* takes a suitable escort. And then there is the matter of Siançiorny."

"Your granddaughter?"

"Yes, I am glad you remember her," Gustof said with a glance over his shoulder, "though I am not surprised you do so. She creates a remembrance, does she not? I have sworn that she will marry only a king. And for that, a king must have the chance to have a remembrance of her."

Marrakus then bowed deeply in the formal Polgati style. "I would be honoured, my friend, if you would gift me your company for the trek home."

"So be it!"



LUCYJA felt happier thereafter. Marrakus had resigned himself to buying only reindeer pelts, smelling a glut on the horse market upon hearing the Sukovi would drive three hundred south with them. Lucyja was particularly pleased, though, now that the caravan was much bigger. Indeed, it could hardly have been any bigger at all now that the principal personalities of the Sukovi went with them. One would have thought that the extra wagons

would have slowed them a lot, but to Lucyja's surprise, the Drovers could set aside their frivolous natures and they certainly knew how to get themselves organized for a convoy. A dozen of their wagons, their little covered houses, rolled along the road behind Marrakus' own three.

They drove the herds behind them so that the *bulibara* and the honoured merchant would not have to drive through clouds of dust or the odour of horse droppings. Outriders in white blouses and wide-brimmed hats sped around those beasts that darted off to explore the fields to either side of the road. The riders were of both sexes and Lucyja learnt that when driving their herds, the women set aside their skirts and donned trousers. Thus, the best way to distinguish between man and woman was to look either for a swinging ponytail beneath the hat - a woman - or a mess of shoulder length hair - a man. Her eyes naturally flitted to the ponytails.

Marrakus drove the first wagon at the head of the column with Gustof sitting on the driving bench next to him, chatting and laughing equally. Lucyja had dispatched Soleigh and three other guards to ride ahead in the van and had deployed Ifan to the left of them and Sorig to the right. For once no one formed a rearguard; she reckoned that twelve wagons, a herd of three hundred horses and outriders should prevent anyone sneaking up from behind to plunder Marrakus' goods. She herself rode her headstrong stallion between her scouts to make sure they were doing their jobs. She felt the brief contentment of a carefree ride on a sunny morning.

She discovered that a threesome of Drover outriders had joined the van ahead, inciting Marrakus' men to indiscipline, one challenging them to sprints over the wide terrain of the Coldwater basin and another, who rode while strumming a *garras*, had them all singing incomprehensible Drover songs. Lucyja had faith in their numbers and the ability of the Drovers to keep an eye out for danger while frolicking. Rather than disturb the fun, Lucyja joined in on one of the sprints, with her horse nearly edging out a fleet-footed Drover filly. Soleigh on his impressive beast - ridiculously named Oh Dear! - did manage the feat of beating a Drover rider atop a sleek stallion over a stretch of flat ground, around a tree and back again to the column. Despite his bulk, the broad one knew how to ride.

She trotted down the hillside to the left flank and found Ifan also riding with a pair of Drovers. They were watching the racing heats in the van, gambling on the outcomes, no doubt, for she saw Ifan toss a coin to one of the Drovers. Lucyja wondered if the fool would lose his advance even before the first sight of civilization. If so, Lucyja could laugh at him for the whole trip back to the capital.

She by-passed the column again, checking in on Marrakus. All seemed in order so she rode on to uphill to the right flank and found Sorig with old Gustof's beautiful, dark-skinned granddaughter. The tall one was half hanging out his saddle, grasping hold of his horse's reins with one hand while flailing about with a bow in the other. The said dark-skinned beauty was chortling at Sorig's riding. Lucyja couldn't fault her for that. As Lucyja rode up to them, the girl claimed she was giving the tall Westman a lesson on shooting targets from horseback, though she hardly got the words out for all the giggling at the tall one's antics.

Lucyja joined in the good natured ribbing, but then she turned her eyes to the attractive Drover woman. "Show us your skills."

Siançiorny arched an elegant eyebrow. "What is it you like me to show you?"

"Can you fight from horseback?"

"Why would I fight from the back of a horse? That would signify that I let an enemy get close to me." She pointed at the one lone tree on the upper slope of the hillside. "Watch."

The girl trotted her mare off half a furlong and then used her knees to guide it around, her hands busy pulling out a bow, stringing it, and slinging a quiver onto her back. Summer sunlight gave the brown mare a golden gleam along its hocks, flank, and the line of its neck. Siançiorny's amber hat complemented the mare's golden accents, while her dark ponytail contrasted with the brilliant white blouse she wore. The red leather quiver dangling from her shoulders stood out, a swath of colour against the dun-green background of the rising hillside. She gave a "whoop!" and the mare lunged forward. Lucyja took an involuntary gulp of air, fearing Siançiorny might spill off the mare's back, for the girl held no reins in her hand. And yet, both rider and mare came thundering along the slope. Siançiorny

lifted her bow and an arrow flashed out, striking the trunk of the tree from fifty paces. Another arrow struck the tree as she stormed past Thay and Lucyja at a full gallop. Siançiorny twisted around and embedded a third as the horse raced away.

When Siançiorny trotted back to them, Lucyja nodded in a lavish display of respect. “Good luck coaxing such skills from Sorig, here.” She glanced over at the young guard: his grey eyes flitted from the arrows embedded in the tree to the young Drover, and they shone with awe.

Siançiorny had a broad smile on her face, taking the edge off her reply, “Oh, he could never do such a thing. We Drovers are born in the saddle. I do not think that is so for the Sorrowsowers.”

Sorig puffed out his chest. “I can do anything I set my mind to.”

That *we have yet to see*. Keeping her thoughts to herself, she said, “Set your mind to keeping your eyes out for bandits.” Lucyja nodded again to Siançiorny and cantered back towards the convoy. She reined in her horse before she had gone far and turned it about so that she could look at the young pair again. Lucyja shook her head, seeing trouble brewing as well as the futility of trying to stop it. Then she spurred her mount back upon its way to the convoy.



SHÉ was right about Ifan. The idiot had already lost his advance for the return to Sar Danskaya by the time they reached Sar Ilksaw late that afternoon. After they had loaded up the ingots, coke, and the other trade goods that Marrakus had purchased, Lucyja ordered him to do the night watch rather than suffer his brooding in the stables. Soleigh also volunteered - for the first time in three years the two Wickeders didn't volunteer to do the job together. Lucyja guessed that the tall one, Sorig, would somehow find himself outside the walls of the city, where the Drovers had circled their wagons and set up their corral. When she checked on the night guards later, she found both Soleigh and

Ifan sulking. Only Soleigh's dog seemed in good spirits, walking around the wagons with her master.

Oh her way back inside the Victorious Inn in Sar Ilksaw that evening, a man stepped from the shadows into her way. He was short, but compact rather than small, from what she could see of him as he kept to the shadows, and he was shrouded in dark clothes. Her hand darted to the hilt of her sabre, but the man held up empty hands to the torchlight and said in the accent of a river man, "You've no need to pull a blade on me, goodwoman. I'm not so daft as to threaten the former champion of Sar Danskaya." The man stepped into the light. He was unkept and otherwise unremarkable, but he removed his dun cap and gave a shallow bow.

Lucyja kept her hand on the pommel of her sabre. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Forgive the bother, but my mistress sent me to speak to you."

"Your mistress?"

"Aye. She works for the Dark Prince."

"The Dark Prince?" The man nodded gravely. "You're from the *palace*?"

"Can't say as I've ever been near the palace, but I work for one who has. My mistress needs you to answer a few questions. Can you come with me?"

"Where?"

"Where else? The garrison. That way you'll know I am who I say I am. And you can also meet your new travelling companions."



THEY were on their way to the capital well before dawn of next day. If anything, Lucyja felt less concerned about the safety of the wagons and their cargoes than on the previous day. As the strange, grubby man had hinted the night before, the commander of Sar Ilksaw's garrison had dispatched a squadron of cavalry to

escort them, evidently acting under orders from the palace, of all places. From a security perspective, the return trip to the capital looked like it would be the easiest possible mission Lucyja had ever had to manage. That said, she now had greater cause to worry for her master.

*Has anyone odd come close to Marrakus?*

What? Odder'n a host of flighty Drovers? Odder'n a pair of Wickeders, one besotted, the other angry that the other was besotted? Odder'n the deformed Straeling who had stormed back into Marrakus' life these past few years? She could think of nothing odder than that last, but she had pledged not to judge where Marrakus loved after that same man had made it clear he'd not judge *her*. It was some comfort to realize from the direction of the questions that the inquisitor seemed to be trying to find a river man, maybe even a Strael or a charcoal maker, for he asked questions about trading across the Peregrinwater and about fire-making, nothing that indicated Marrakus, himself, was under suspicion. The man took note of Marrakus having renewed contact some three years ago with a long lost *friend* from across the great river, but Lucyja's loyalty to her patron prevented her from revealing her thoughts on the nature of *that* relationship.

*Has he done anything to attract the wrath of Straeland?*

Well, he was notorious for getting a good price, but he'd not cheated anyone as far as Lucyja was aware. He was well-connected to the Polgati Royal Family, she knew, often receiving invitations to palace events. That might bother one of the factions in Straeland. She supposed that he *was* buying up materiel he suspected would be useful if Polgati's southern neighbours were foolish enough to start a war. Those hadn't appeared to be the answers the inquisitor sought, though.

Gustof again rode with Marrakus in the lead wagon. Lucyja mounted up on her stallion and took the van herself, leading the entire caravan south into Polgati proper. The questions from the previous evening bubbled in her mind on their trek south. They had the usual Drover trouble in the first towns where they spent their nights. Lucyja suspected the Drovers were all half thieves and whole rogues, but even she couldn't credit the scandal folk raised. Someone would see a Drover on the horizon and you'd think that suddenly all his livestock, all the shiny objects in his home, and even all the buttons on his coat had been stolen from

the fuss that got raised. Fuss was an understatement. Sure, you had to keep a careful eye on the flighty buggers, but she couldn't credit all the clamour. They wasted the better part of two mornings, and a good part of Marrakus' reserve of copper coins, calming down delegations of townsfolk demanding payment for everything they had misplaced over the past half dozen years. After two such shortened days, Marrakus feigned fatigue earlier than usual on the third day's driving and ordered they camp next to the Bocheszwoot, a big forest that forced the Ilksaw - Danskaya road to curve east to skirt its eaves. Gustof swallowed his pride and agreed, knowing that everyone would be happier spending a night in the wild, avoiding trouble.

After nearly a week of being around Drovers, and sensing a unique opportunity, Lucyja obtained Marrakus' permission to lay her bedroll in a narrow nook of open ground set deep into the trees. The evening was longer than she was accustomed to because Marrakus had halted the caravan earlier than usual. After dinner, she inspected Marrakus' wagons, noted their proximity to the woods, and made sure the guards knew the watches, though it came as no surprise to anyone that the Wickeders volunteered to take the watch through the night. Lucyja suffered through the evening and its chaos of Drover revelry. She busied herself by making sure Marrakus' wagons were secure, undertaking spot-checks of the guards on the wagons, and by making sure the wagons were secure again. When the worst of the noise subsided, she made sure the wagons were secure one last time before going to her bedroll and feigning sleep.

She woke in the dark of night. There had been no moon when she had lain down her head. Now a half-moon rode high overhead, meaning it was deep into the night. She gave a start at the voices she heard and was on her feet in an instant, dagger in her hand and blanket cast aside. Like a predator, she darted through the underbrush to the edge of the forest. She slowed and crept to a place where she could remain hidden but still see out of the woods across the dozen paces or so to the wagons. Seven shapes stood out against the wagon that Marrakus liked to drive when he wasn't riding. Lucyja heard a voice she recognized, Sorig's, calm, deliberate. "I am at my work with my comrade. This lady was but talking with us."

Lucyja remarked the use of the word “lady” and smirked to herself. Thinking the confrontation might be a diversion, she scanned Marrakus’ wagons, not detecting any movement. She heard Sorig continue, “This was hardly a ‘wooing session’ ...”

“A lie!” interrupted a small, narrow-faced man, leering in the moonlight. It was hard to see him clearly in the night, but Lucyja didn’t think much of the speaker, for the small man only sported the beginnings of a black moustache. However, three of the biggest Drovers Lucyja had ever seen, fully moustached, stood behind the ferret-looking man. “A simple *chat* this deep into the night? *We* think not. We know what two of *your* sort do with our girls.” Turning his glance to Gustof’s granddaughter, he said, “You’re lucky we’re here, Sian.” Then he added something in the Drover tongue.

Helpfully the girl replied in Polgati, “It would have not, Ramarov. These are honourable men and there are fifty Sukovi within earshot. My virtue is in no danger whatsoever.”

“Their kind don’t know the meaning of honour!” Ramarov snapped, using Polgati. “They sail up here and steal away the likes of you or slit your throat once they’re done with you.” At that insult, Lucyja chuckled under her breath. She saw the tall one tense up and the broad one’s rage smoulder. The broad one’s daft dog had been wagging her tail, but she sensed the change in her master and froze, barring her teeth. Then Sorig touched Soleigh’s arm, drawing the broad man’s attention. He signalled to the wagons. Soleigh shot a last, dangerous glare at the Drover and hoisted his maul. Ramarov’s companions stepped forward, their hands going to the hilts of their curved swords. Lucyja straightened from her hiding place, expecting trouble, but Soleigh simply turned and stalked off to check the wagons muttering, “Cowards!” Lucyja was surprised that Sorig had thought to secure the wagons. She was even more surprised with Sorig’s response.

“Friends,” he said, showing the palms of his hands, empty as they were of any weapon. “I cannot gainsay you; my folk do such things. But Cairn and I do not. *We earn* our living, we don’t steal it from others. However, you cannot know and are right to be suspicious.” He turned to the girl, bowed, and said, “Thank you for your company this evening. Your kin here are but doing their duty, making sure no ill befalls you. They remind us that we

must be on our way at dawn.” He turned back to Ramarov and nodded, “I place the lady in your care and thank you for having allowed her to share her wit, her wisdom, and the spark of her blazing personality with us.”

Lucyja thought: *Oh, very nicely done.*

“Don’t mock us, Sorrowsower!” Ramarov spat back. He swung his fist at the tall one.

Things then happened quickly. Lucyja launched herself from the woods. The thin Drover’s big friends surged forward. The daft dog burst out from under a wagon and lunged at the attackers. Gustof’s granddaughter also threw herself in front of them. Sorig leaned back out of the swing of Ramarov’s fist, spun low, rebalanced, planted his foot in the Drover’s path, and the man tripped over the Wickeder’s leg. Sorig sent the man flailing on his way with an elbow to the back of the head. The girl could not screen the Westman from one of the three big Drovers and that man came in at Sorig slashing with an ugly, curved dagger. The dog slammed into the man’s abdomen, knocking the blow astray, but it still took Sorig in the left biceps. The tall one yelled in pain as he slammed a fist into his attacker’s face, catapulting the big Drover backwards.

Lucyja stomped on the thin, ferret-faced one as the man flailed on the ground. She yelled out, blasting all of the air from her lungs, “*What is this law breaking?*”

That generated a shocked pause from everyone, except the broad man bounding closer from the darkened line of wagons. Soleigh came charging, *Ogre’s Soul* in his hands, eyes bulging in rage and spittle flying from between his lips. Recognizing the danger of serious violence, Lucyja spun, threw herself in front of the Wickeder and yelled, “Get angry! Get angry! Get angry!” Lucyja saw reason return to Soleigh’s eyes and the man pulled up, though that great, stupid maul was poised on a knife edge.

Lucyja spun back to the Drovers, one of the big ones being restrained by the girl, another hefting the third to his feet with the dog prowling around them looking for any one of them to drop his guard. The thin one heaved himself to a sitting position holding a hand to the back of his head. Lucyja pointed at the thin one, then at the one heaving himself to his feet, and snarled, “This one, and this one, have just broken the *Overlar’s Law*. You may be *guests* in our country, but you are *not* beyond the reach of

our laws.” She stepped forward to the one with the bloody-bladed dagger and brandished her own. “Throw down that weapon or lose your hand!”

The man growled. “You are idiot! We fifty. You eight. We kill you. Feed meat to piks!”

Lucyja stepped forward, narrowed her eyes, and held her dagger poised to strike. She hissed, “I am not joking, boy. I am a soldier. I have trained *these* men to be warriors. Drunk peasants you stick in the back in the middle of the night is one thing, but you’ll need more than fifty backstabbers to kill *us*.” She leaned forward, bringing her face so very close to that of the Drover. “And if you did,” she growled, “where would you run? There’s garrisons all around you now. You’re deep in our land.” Then she leaned even closer and whispered, “And if you escaped, where would you find your *bullybarfa’s* so-called honour? You won’t. You’ll have stained the Sukovi honour forever. Now drop your weapon and I’ll let you walk away.”

The man dropped his weapon.

Lucyja let them go, but also let them hear her say to the girl, “Keep ’em in line and no one need hear of this.” The girl nodded. “Hold out your hand.” Gustof’s granddaughter furrowed her brow but offered up the palm of her hand. Lucyja dropped the two buttons from the big Drover’s jacket. The girl glanced up, puzzled. Lucyja smiled. “You’re not the only one capable of feats of arms.”

The dog snapped at the small one’s heels as they left, darting back when he turned to kick at her. Lucyja put a hand on Soleigh’s arm, forestalling any resumption of violence. “Good use of your brains, not killing them’n all.” She bent down, picked up the savagely curved Drover dagger and handed it to Sorig. “Get your shoulder looked at. I’ll wake another shift.”

In the morning, both of the Wickeders were alert, no matter the lack of sleep. The tall one didn’t seem to show much pain and he rode his horse no worse than usual. Lucyja would’ve thought it was down to good chainmail if she hadn’t seen all the blood the night before. Then that girl came riding up, concern on her face and a gentle query on her tongue. Sorig - maybe knowing how handsome it made him look - beamed a broad smile in return. Lucyja shook her head: that girl gazed into the tall one’s

eyes like they were jewels enchanted by the Gods. Perhaps they were at that.

But Soleigh didn't look impressed.