

## THE WOOD BOY

BY RAYMOND E. FEIST

The Duke looked up.

Borric, Duke of Crydee and second-in-command of the Armies of the West, acknowledged the captain at the door of his command tent. 'Your Grace, if you have a minute and could come outside?'

Borric stood up, envying his old friend Brucal, who was now probably sitting before a warm fire somewhere in LaMut while he wrote long letters of complaint to the Prince of Krondor about supplies.

The war was leaving its second winter and a stable front had been established, with Borric's headquarters camp located ten miles behind the lines. The Duke was a seasoned campaigner, having fought against goblins and the Brotherhood of the Dark Path - the dark elves - since boyhood, and every bone in his body told him this was going to be a long war.

The Duke donned his heavy cloak, and wrapped his scarf around him. He exited his tent and a strange tableau greeted him.

In the distance, a group of figures could barely be seen as they approached the camp. Through the swirling snow Borric could see them slowly take shape. Grey figures against the dull white, surrounded by a haze of snowflakes, they approached at a steady rate. Finally, the figures resolved themselves into a patrol escorting someone.

The soldiers marched slowly, for the figure they surrounded was pulling a heavy sled, plodding along at a steady pace despite what appeared a heavy burden. As they came close, Borric could see it was a peasant boy who laboured to haul the sled to the camp. He moved with steady purpose, coming at last to stand before the commander of the King's Armies of the West.

Borric looked at the lad, who had obviously been through an ordeal. He was bareheaded, his blond hair encrusted with ice crystals. About his neck and face he wore a heavy scarf wrapped several times around. He wore a heavy jacket and trousers, and thick sturdy boots. His simple wool coat was stained dark with blood.

He had been pulling a sled, laden with odd cargo. A large sack had been secured with ropes atop the sled, and over that two bodies had been lashed down. A dead man stared up at the sky with empty eyes, his lashes sparkling with frozen tears. He had been a fighter, from the look of him, and he wore leather armour. His scabbard hung empty at his side and his left glove was missing. Beside him lay a girl, under blankets, so that it appeared she was sleeping. She had been a pretty girl in life, but in death her features were almost porcelain, near perfection in their pale whiteness.

'Who are you, boy?'

The boy said, 'I am the Wood Boy.' His voice was faint and his eyes were vacant, as if he stared inward, though they were fixed on Borric,

'What did you say?' asked the Duke.

The boy seemed to gather his wits. 'Sir, my name is Dirk. I am the servant of Lord Paul of White Hill. It's the estate on the other side of the Kakisaw Valley.' He pointed to the west, Three days' walk from here. I carry firewood.'

Borric nodded. 'I know the estate. I've visited Lord Paul many times over the years. That's thirty-five miles from here, and twenty behind enemy lines.' Pointing to the sled, he asked, 'What is this?'

Weary, the boy said, 'It is my master's treasure. She is his daughter. The man is a murderer. He was once my friend.'

'You'd better come inside and tell me your story,' said Borric. He motioned for two soldiers to take the ropes that the boy used as a harness to pull the sled out of the way, and indicated that another man should help the exhausted youth.

The Duke led the boy inside and let him know it was permissible to sit. He

signalled for an orderly to get the boy a cup of hot tea and something to eat, and as the soldier hurried to obey, Borric said, 'Why don't you start from the beginning, Dirk?'

Spring brought the Tsurani. They had been reported in the Grey Tower Mountains the year before, bringing dire warnings of invasion from both the Kingdom rulers on the other side of the mountains and some of the more important merchants and nobles in the other Free Cities. But the tales that accompanied the warning, of fierce warriors appearing out of nowhere by some magic means, had been met with scepticism and disbelief. And the fighting seemed distant, up in the mountains between Borric of Crydee's soldiers, the dwarves, and the invaders.

Until the first warning by the Rangers of Natal - who had quickly ridden on to warn others - followed a day later by a column of short men in their brightly-coloured armour who appeared on the road approaching the estate at White Hill.

Lord Paul had ordered his bodyguards to stand ready, but to offer no resistance unless provoked. Dirk and the rest of the household stood behind the Lord of White Hill and his armed guards.

Dirk glanced at his master and saw he stood alone, his daughter still in the house. Dirk wondered what extra protection the master thought that afforded his young daughter.

Dirk found the master's pose admirable. The stories of Tsurani fierceness had trickled down from the early fighting, and the Free Cities would be wholly dependent upon the Kingdom for defence. Areas like White Hill and the other estates around Walinor were simply on their own. Yet despite no hope of successful resistance, Lord Paul stood motionless, without any sign of fear, in his formal robe, the scarlet one with the ermine collar. No hereditary title had been conferred on any citizen since the Empire of Great Kesh had abandoned its northern colonies a century before, yet those families with ancient titles used them with pride. Like other nobles in the Free Cities, he held in disdain other men's claims on title while treasuring his own.

As the invaders calmly marched into view, it was obvious that any resistance would have been quickly crushed. Paul had a personal bodyguard and a score of hired mercenaries who acted as wagon guards and protection against roving bandits. But they were a poor band of hired cut-throats next to the highly-disciplined command that marched across the estate. The Tsurani wore bright orange and black armour, looking like lacquered hide or wood, nothing remotely like the metal armour worn by the officers of the Natal Defence Force.

Paul repeated the order that no resistance was to be mounted and when the Tsurani commander presented himself, Paul offered something that resembled a formal salute. Then, with the aid of a man in a black robe, the leader of the invaders gave his demands. The property of White Hill, as well as the surrounding countryside, was now under Tsurani rule, specifically an entity named Minwanabi. Dirk wondered if that was a person or a place, like a Kingdom Duchy. But he was too frightened to imagine voicing the question.

The leader of this group of Tsurani - all short, tough-looking veteran soldiers - could be differentiated from his men only by a slightly more ornate helm, graced with what Dirk took to be some creature's hair. The black fall reached the officer's shoulders.

Dirk tried to guess what the role of the black-robed man might be; the officer seemed extremely polite and deferential to him as he translated the officer's words for him.

The officer was called Chapka, and his rank was Hit Leader or Strike Leader, Dirk wasn't sure which.

He shouted orders and the black robe said, 'Only the noble of this house may bear arms, and his personal man.' Dirk took that to mean a bodyguard. That would be Hamish. 'All others put weapons here.'

The estate guards looked at Lord Paul, who nodded. They stepped forward and

put their weapons in a pile, slowly, and then when they were done, they stepped back. 'Any other weapons?' asked the man in black.

One of the guards looked at his companions, then came forward and took a small blade from his boot, throwing it in the pile. He stepped back into line.

The officer shouted an order. A dozen Tsurani soldiers ran forward, each searching the now unarmed guards. One Tsurani stood, holding up a knife he had found in a guard's boot, and the officer indicated the man be brought forward. He spoke rapidly to the man in black, who said, This man disobeyed. He hid a weapon. He will be punished.'

Lord Paul slowly said, 'What shall you do with him?'

'The sword is too honourable a death for a disobedient slave. He will be hanged.'

The man turned pale. 'It was just a small one; I forgot I had it!'

The man was struck hard from behind and collapsed. Dirk watched in dread fascination as two other Tsurani soldiers dragged the guard - a man Dirk hardly knew, named Jackson - to the entrance to the barn. A hoist hung over the small door to the hayloft - there was one at each end of the barn - from which a long rope dangled. The unconscious man had the rope tied around his neck and was hoisted quickly up. He never regained consciousness, though his body twitched twice before it went still.

Dirk had seen dead men before; the town of Walinor where he grew up had known a few raids by bandits and the Brotherhood of the Dark Path, and once he had stumbled across a drunk who had frozen to death in the gutter outside an inn. But this hanging made his stomach twist, and he knew it was as much from fear over his own safety as from any revulsion over Jackson's death. The black-robed man said, 'Any slave with weapon - we hang.'

Then the officer shouted an order, and Tsurani warriors ran off in all directions, a half-dozen into the master's house, others into the outbuildings, and still others to the springhouse, the bam, and the root cellar. Efficient to a degree that astonished Dirk, the Tsurani returned in short order and started reporting. Dirk couldn't understand them, but from the rapidity of the exchanges, he was certain they were listing what they found for their officer.

Others returned from the barn and kitchen carrying dozens of commonplace items. The officer, with the aid of the black-robed man, began interrogating Lord Paul about the nature of various common household items. As the master of the estate explained the use of such common tools as a leather punch or iron skillet, the Tsurani officer indicated one of two piles, one on a large canvas tarp. When two of the same items were displayed, one instantly went into one pile, while the other might join it or be separated.

Old William, the gardener and groundskeeper, said, 'Look at that,' as two Tsurani soldiers picked up the tarp, securing the larger of the two piles, and carried it off.

'What is it?' whispered Dirk, barely loud enough for the old man to hear.

'They're queer for metal,' softly said the old man with a knowing nod. 'Look at their armour and weapons.'

Dirk did so, and then it struck him. Nowhere on any Tsurani could a glint of sunlight on metal be seen. Their armour and weapons all appeared to be hide or wood cleverly fashioned and lacquered, but there were no buckles, blades, or fasteners of metal in evidence. From their cross-gartered sandals to the tops of their large flared helmets, the Tsurani appeared devoid of any metal artefacts.

'What's it mean?' whispered Dirk.

'I don't know, but I'm sure we'll find out,' said the old man.

The Tsurani continued their investigation of Lord Paul's household until almost sundown; then the household servants were ordered to gather their personal belongings and move them into the barn or kitchen, as the Tsurani would be occupying the servants' quarters. In a move that puzzled Dirk, the Tsurani officer stayed in the same building with his men, leaving Paul and his daughter alone in the big house.

It was but the first of many things that would puzzle Dirk over the coming year.

Alex lay curled up, his face a mask of pain while Hamish shouted, 'Don't get up!'

The Tsurani soldier who had struck the young man in the stomach stood over him, his hand a scant inch from the hilt of his sword. Alex groaned and again Hamish shouted to the young man to remain still.

Dirk stood near the entrance to the barn while those servants nearby stood anxiously watching, expecting the worst at any moment. The Tsurani had revealed themselves as strict but fair masters in the two months since arriving at White Hill, but there was occasionally some breach of etiquette or honour that took the residents of White Hill by surprise, often with bloody consequences. An old farmer by the name of Samuel had got drunk on fermented corncob squeeze a month earlier and had struck out at a Tsurani who had ordered him back into his home. Samuel had been beaten senseless and hanged as his wife and children looked on in horror.

Alex continued to groan but did as he was bid by Hamish until the Tsurani soldier seemed satisfied he wasn't going to move. The soldier said something in his alien language, spat in contempt upon the workman, turned, and walked away.

Hamish hesitated a moment, then he and Dirk hurried over to help Alex to his feet. 'What happened?' asked Dirk.

'I don't know,' said Alex. 'I just looked at the man.'

'It's how you looked at him,' said Hamish. 'You smirked at him. If you'd looked at me that way, I'd have done the same.' The burly old soldier inspected Alex. 'I had my fill of smirking boys in the army and knocked down a few in my time before I retired. Show these murderers some respect, lad, or they'll hang you just because they can and it's a slow day for amusements.' Rubbing his side, Alex said, 'I won't do that again, you can bet.'

'See that you don't,' said Hamish. The old soldier motioned for Drogen, his senior guard, to come over. 'Pass the word that the bastards seem touchy. Must have something to do with the war. Just make sure the lads know to keep polite and do whatever they're told.'

Drogen nodded and ran off. Hamish turned to inspect Alex again, then said, 'Get off with you. You'll live.'

Dirk helped Alex for a few steps. Then the man's legs seemed to steady and Dirk let go of his arm. They don't seem to take kindly to any sort of greeting,' said Dirk.

'I think keeping your eyes down or some such is what they want.'

Dirk said nothing. He was scared most of the time when he was around the Tsurani and didn't look at them for that reason. That was probably a wise choice, he judged.

'Can you take the wood?' asked Alex.

'Sure,' said Dirk before he realized that he was being asked to carry wood to the Tsurani quarters. Dirk picked up the fallen bundle and wrestled with it a moment before getting the unwieldy load under control. He moved to the door of the outbuilding and hesitated, then rolled the wood back on his chest and reached out to pull the latch rope.

The door opened slightly and Dirk pushed it open with his foot. He entered, blinking a moment to get his eyes used to the darkness inside.

A half-dozen Tsurani warriors sat on their beds, speaking in quiet conversation as they tended their arms and armour. Upon seeing the serving boy enter, they fell silent. Dirk went to the woodbox next to the fireplace situated in the centre of the rear wall and deposited his load there.

The Tsurani watched him with impassive expressions. He quickly left the room. Closing the door behind him, he could hardly believe that just weeks before the bed in the farthest comer had been his own. He and the other workers had been turned out to the barn, except for the house staff who now slept on the floor in Lord Paul's kitchen.

There was little need for wood save for cooking, as the warm nights of summer made sleeping fires unnecessary. The Tsurani used their fires primarily for cooking their alien food, filling the area nearby with strange yet intriguing aromas.

Dirk paused a moment and glanced around, taking in the images of White Hill; familiar, yet cast in alien shadow by the invaders. Mikia and Torren, a young couple engaged the week before at the Midsummer's festival, were approaching the milking shed, hand in hand, and the invaders could be invisible for all the distraction they provided the young lovers.

From the kitchen voices and the clatter of pots heralded the advent of the noon meal. Dirk realized he was hungry. Still, he needed to carry firewood to the other buildings before breaking to eat, and he decided the sooner started, the sooner done. As he turned to the woodshed, he caught a glimpse of a soldier in black and orange moving towards the barn. He idly wondered if the time would come when the invaders would be driven from White Hill. It seemed unlikely, for there was no news of the war, and the Tsurani were settling in at White Hill as if they were never leaving.

Reaching the woodshed, Dirk opened the door and saw Alex in the back of the shed cutting more wood. The still-bruised man said, 'You can carry, lad. I'll cut.'

Dirk nodded and went in the shed, to get another armful of firewood. He sighed. As youngest boy in service, the worst jobs fell to him, and this would just be another task added to his burden, one which would not free him from any other.

Before coming to White Hill, Dirk had been nothing, the youngest son of a stonecutter who had two sons already to apprentice. His father had cut the stone for Lord Paul's home, and had used that slight acquaintanceship to gain Dirk a position in Paul's household.

With that position was the promise that eventually he would have sort of rank on the estate, perhaps a groundsman, a kennel master, or a herdsman. Or he might gain a farm to work, with a portion of his crops going to his landlord, even eventually earning the rank of Franklin, one who owned his own lands free of service to any lord. He had even dared to imagine meeting a girl and marrying, raising sons and daughters of his own. And perhaps, despite the Tsurani, he still might.

Reminding himself he had much to be thankful for, he lifted the next load of wood destined for the fireplaces of the invaders.

Fall brought a quick change in the weather, with sunny but cool days and cold nights. Apples were harvested and the juice presses were busy. The Tsurani found the juice a wonderful delicacy and commanded a large quantity for themselves. A portion was put aside for fermenting and the air around the kitchen was spicy with the smell of warm pies.

Dirk had got used to hauling wood to the Tsurani, and now was the one designated to keep all the woodboxes on the property filled, while Alex still did most of the chopping. Everyone began calling him 'Wood Boy', rather than his name.

Dirk also worked the woodpile, and the constant labour was broadening his shoulders and putting muscle on him by the week. He could now lift as much as the older boys and some of the men.

He found that as the nights cooled his workload increased, for now he had to help plan for the coming winter. The sheep pens were repaired. The herd needed to be kept close, as starving predators would come down from the mountain to hunt. The cattle would be brought down from the higher meadows as well.

Fences needed repairing and the root cellar and springhouse needed stocking. The winters in the foothills of Yabon came quickly and the snow was often deep after the first fall, lasting until the thaw of spring.

Dirk worked hard and enjoyed those infrequent moments he could steal to relax, joke with the older boys and young men, and talk to Litia, an old woman who had once been in charge of the poultry and lambs. She was kind to the

awkward boy and told him things that helped him understand the world that seemed to be changing around him by the day.

Dirk now was faced with the realization that life's choices were down to a precious few. Before the Tsurani's arrival, he had stood a chance of learning to be a herdsman or farmer, and perhaps meeting a girl and starting a family on the edge of Lord Paul's estates, having land and a share of the harvest. Or he might save the tiny sum allotted him over and above his keep and someday attempt to start a trade of his own; he knew the rudiments of cutting stone and perhaps might pay a mason to apprentice him.

But now he feared he was doomed to be a servant until death took him. There was no payment of wages above his keep; the Tsurani had taken all of Lord Paul's wealth - though it was rumoured he had two parts in three safely hidden from the Tsurani. Even if the rumour was true, he wasn't about to risk hanging to pay a lowly servant boy his back wages.

And there were no girls his own age on the estates, save Lord Paul's daughter.

The Midwinter's festival was supposed to be the time to meet the girls from town or the nearby estates, but the Tsurani had forbidden such travel for the Midsummer's festival, and Dirk doubted they would change their mind for the winter festival. Lord Paul's household had celebrated Banapis on Midsummer's Day by themselves, with little enthusiasm, because of the poor food and drink, and the isolation.

At least, thought Dirk, Midwinter's Day was likely to be a little livelier, as there was a good supply of fermenting applejack laid in. Then, remembering how morose his father could get when drinking, Dirk wondered if that was a good thing. Hamish had been known to drink himself into a dark and blind rage in the depths of winter.

Putting aside his own misery, he attacked the tasks the day put before him and was judged a hardworking if unremarkable boy by those of the household. The festival was a pale shadow of its former self. Traditionally the towns turned out, with those living on the neighbouring estates coming in for the parties. A townsman would be selected to play the part of Old Man Winter, who would come into town on a sled pulled by wolves - usually a motley collection of dogs pressed into playing the part, often with comic results. He would pass out sweets to the children, and the adults would exchange small gifts and tokens. Then everyone would eat too much food and many would drink too much wine and ale.

And many young couples would be married.

This year the Tsurani had forbidden travel, and Dirk stood at the edge of a small crowd in the barnyard watching Mikia and Torren getting married under the watchful eyes of Lord Paul and his daughter. The Tsurani had let Dirk travel to the shrine of Dala and return with a priest of that order, so that the wedding could be conducted.

The couple looked happy despite the frigid surroundings, made slightly more bearable by the large bonfire Dirk and the others had built earlier in the day. It roared and warmed whichever side was facing it, but otherwise it was a cold and bitter day for a wedding, with low grey skies and a constant wind off the mountains.

The meal was the best that could be managed under the circumstances, and Dirk had his first encounter with too much to drink, consuming far too much applejack and discovering that his stomach would inform him of its limits before any of his friends would. The other boys stood around in amusement as Dirk leaned against the wall behind the barn, sick beyond belief, his head swimming and his pulse pounding in his temples as his stomach tried to throw up drink no longer there.

He had somehow managed to find his way back to the loft in which he now slept. Because he was the youngest boy in the household, he got the worst pallet, next to the hay door, which meant a draughty, frigid night's rest. He passed out and risked freezing to death without the other boys' warmth nearby.

Late that night, he stirred as a shout from outside rang through the silent

darkness. Dirk stirred as did the other boys, and Hemmy said, 'What's that?'

Dirk pushed open the hay door. In the moonlight a drunken figure stood waving a sword with his right hand, while holding a jug of applejack with the left. He shouted words that the boys couldn't understand, but Hemmy said, 'He's fighting some old battle, for sure.'

Suddenly Alex said, 'The Tsurani! If Hamish wakes them with all that shouting, they'll kill him. We've got to get him to shut up.'

'You want to go and try to talk to him while he's waving that sword around,' said Hemmy, 'you go ahead. I'll take my chances up here. I've seen him drunk before. Puts him in a dangerous dark temper, it does.'

'We've got to do something,' said Dirk.

'What?' asked Hemmy.

'I don't know,' admitted Dirk,

Then two Tsurani ran into view and stopped when they saw the drunken old soldier in the moonlight, his breath forming clouds of steam in the frigid night air.

'You stinkin' bastards!' shouted Hamish. 'You come on and I'll show you how to use a sword.'

The two Tsurani slowly drew weapons, and one spoke to the other. The second man nodded and stepped back, putting his sword away. He turned and ran off.

'They're going to get some help,' whispered Dirk, afraid to be overheard by the Tsurani.

'Maybe they'll just make him put up his sword and go to bed,' said Hemmy.

'Maybe,' echoed Dirk.

Then a half-dozen Tsurani, led by the officer, came into view. The officer shouted at Hamish, who grinned like a grizzly wolf in the stark white moonlight. 'Come and sing to me, you sons of dogs!' shouted the drunken old man.

The Tsurani officer seemed more irritated by the display than anything else, and said something briefly to the men. He turned and walked off without a glance back.

'Maybe they're going to let him alone,' said Hemmy.

Suddenly an arrow sped through the darkness and struck old Hamish in the chest. He looked down in disbelief and sank to his knees. Then he fell off to the right, still holding his sword and jug of applejack.

'Gods!' whispered Dirk.

The Tsurani turned as one and walked away, leaving the dead bodyguard lying in the moonlight, a black figure against the white snow.

'What do we do?' whispered Dirk to the older boys.

'Nothing,' said Alex. 'Until the Tsurani tell us to get out tomorrow and bury him, we do nothing.'

'But it's not right,' said Dirk, fighting back tears of frustration and fear.

'Nothing is right these days,' said Hemmy, reaching out to shut the hay door.

Dirk lay in the loft, huddled against a cold far more bitter than winter's night.

'Let me help you with that,' said Drogen, as Dirk tried to close the kitchen door with a kick. The wind outside howled and this had been Dirk's fifth trip to the woodbox.

Dirk said, 'Shut the door, please.'

The new bodyguard to Lord Paul did as Dirk asked, and Dirk said, 'Thanks. I've got to get this to the great hall.' He hurried with the heavy bundle of wood and made his way through the big house. He entered the great hall, where Lord Paul ate dinner with his daughter Anika.

Dirk was very deliberate in arranging the new firewood, as it gave him a moment to watch Anika from beside the fireplace. She was a year younger than Dirk. Fifteen last Midsummer's Day, she was perfection embodied to the young kitchen boy. She had delicate features, a small bow of a mouth, wide-set blue

eyes, and hair of pale gold. Her skin held a faint touch of the sun in summer and was flawless pink in winter. Her figure was ripening, yet not voluptuous like the kitchen women, still possessing a grace when she moved that set Dirk's heart to beating.

Dirk knew she didn't even know his name, but he dreamed of somehow earning rank and fame someday, and winning her love. Her image filled his mind every waking moment of the day.

'Is something wrong. Wood Boy?' asked Lord Paul.

'No, sir!' said the boyf standing up and striking his head on the mantel The girl covered her mouth as she laughed, and he blushed furiously. 'I was just putting the wood away. I'm done, sir.'

Then get back to the kitchen, lad,' said the Lord of the house.

Lord Paul was an Elector of the City. Before the Tsurani had come, Lord Paul had voted on every important matter confronting Walinor and had once been the delegate from the city to the General Council of Electors for the Free Cities of Natal. He was by any measure one of the wealthiest men in the city. He had ships plying the Bitter Sea and farms and holdings throughout the west, as well as investments in both the Kingdom of the Isles and the Empire of Great Kesh.

And Dirk was now hopelessly in love with his daughter.

It didn't matter she didn't know his name, or even notice he was there, he just couldn't stop thinking of her. For the last two weeks, since Hamish's death, he had found his mind turning constantly to thoughts of Anika. Her smile, how she moved, the tilt of her chin when she was listening to something her father was saying.

She wore only the finest clothing and her hair was always put up with combs of fine bone or shell from the Bitter Sea, or left down with ringlets that softly framed her face. She was always polite, even to the servants, and had the sweetest voice Dirk had ever heard.

When he was back in the kitchen, Jenna the old stout cook said, 'Getting a peek at the girl, were we?'

Drogen laughed and Dirk blushed. His infatuation with Lord Paul's daughter was a well-known source of amusement in the kitchen. Dirk prayed Jenna said nothing to any of the other boys, for if it became obvious to the boys in the barn, Dirk's already miserable existence would become even blacker than it presently was.

'She's a pretty girl,' said Drogen with a smile at Dirk. 'Most men would look more than once.'

Dirk liked Drogen. He had been just one of Lord Paul's men-at-arms until Hamish had been killed for disturbing the Tsurani on Midwinter's Night. Since then he had become a fixture in the main house and Dirk had found several chances to talk to him. Unlike Hamish, who had been given to bouts of ill-humour, Drogen was a quiet fellow, saying little unless answering a direct question. Easy-going, he was reputed to be one of the best men with a sword in the Free Cities, and he had an open and friendly manner. He was handsome in a dark fashion, and Dirk had heard gossip that more than one of the serving women had snuck off with him on a thin pretext, and there were several tavern girls in the city who waited for his next visit. Dirk thought the man a nice enough fellow, though Jenna often had acid comments on Drogen's inability to think of much besides women.

Dirk stood and said, 'I have to get more wood over to the Tsurani.' He left the warm kitchen and, back out in the cold, wished he hadn't. He hurried to the woodpile.

Dirk picked up a large pile of wood and moved to the first of the three buildings. He pushed open the door and found the Tsurani as he always did. Quietly they rested between patrols or other duties which might take as many as half the garrison away for days, even weeks at a time. Occasionally they would return carrying their wounded. When resting they slept in their bunks, tended their odd, black and orange armour, and talked quietly. Some played what appeared to be a gambling game of some sort involving sticks and rocks,



and others played what looked to be chess.

Most were off on some mission for their master, leaving less than a dozen in residence at White Hill. They looked on impassively as he filled the woodbox. He left and serviced the other two woodboxes. When he was finished, he sighed audibly in relief. No matter how many times being the Wood Boy forced him to enter the buildings occupied by the Tsurani, having witnessed their capacity for ruthless murder brought Dirk to the edge of blind panic when he encountered them alone. When he knew he had done with them for another night, he felt as if he was entering a safe place for some hours to come.

Done with his outside chores for the night, he returned to the kitchen and ate his meagre supper, a watery stew and coarse bread. The very best of the foodstuffs not taken by the invaders was served to Lord Paul and his daughter. He had overheard Anika complain about the food, only to hear her father reply it wasn't too bad, all things considered. Dirk thought by the standards he was used to, it was a feast. Drogen and the other workers in the house got the pick of leftovers and there was never anything for a mere Wood Boy.

Dirk returned to the barn and ignored the moaning that came from under a blanket in the first stall. Mikia and Torren seemed unconcerned their privacy was non-existent. Still, Dirk reasoned, they were dairy people, a herdsman and milkmaid, and he found farm people far more earthy and unconcerned with modesty than townspeople.

Litia sat in the corner of the next stall, her slight form shivering under a blanket as she sat on the dirt floor, huddled close to the warmth of a small fire. Dirk waved and she returned a toothless smile. He went over and said, 'How are you?'

'Well enough,' she said, and her voice was barely more than a whisper.

Dirk was concerned the old woman might not last the winter, given the scant food and warmth, but others in the household seemed indifferent. You got old, then you died, they always said.

'What gossip?' asked the old woman. She lived for tidbits of news or rumours. Dirk always kept his ears open for something to enliven the old woman's evening.

'Nothing new, sorry to say,' he replied.

With a wide, gummy grin, the old woman said, 'And has the master's daughter favoured you with a glance yet, my young buck?'

Dirk felt his face flush and he said, 'I don't know what you mean, Litia.'

'Yes you do,' she chided him playfully. 'It's all right, lad. She's the only girl your age here and it wouldn't be natural if you didn't feel a tug towards her. If those heathens who took our beds relent and let us visit with neighbours in the spring, the first young farm lass you meet will get your mind off my lord's wicked child.'

'Wicked child?' said Dirk. 'What do you mean?'

Litia said, 'Nothing, sweet boy. She's a wilful gir! who always gets what she wants, is all. What you need is a good strong lass, a farm girl with broad hips who can bear you sons who will take care of you in your old age.'

The bitterness in Litia's words was not lost on Dirk, even if he was young. He knew her only son had died years before in a drowning accident and that she had no one left to care for her. Dirk said, 'I'll try to get you another blanket from the house tomorrow.'

'Don't get yourself into trouble on my account,' said the woman, but her expression showed she appreciated the offer.

Dirk left her and climbed the ladder to the loft, where the young men slept. He was the youngest up there, for the boys younger than he stayed with their family, Alex, Hans, and Leonard were already resting. Hemmy and Petir would be up shortly. Dirk wished for another blanket himself, but knew that he would have to depend upon the ones allotted to him. At least one side of him would be warm at a time, as he would huddle next to Hemmy, the next older boy. He would turn a few times in the night to ward off the freezing air.

And spring was but two months away. Hemmy and Petir climbed up and took their places in the loft, and Dirk snuggled down as best he could in his

blankets and went to sleep.

\* \* \*

It was an odd sound, and Dirk couldn't quite make sense of it as he came awake in the dark. Then it registered: someone had cried out. It had been a muffled sound, but it had been a cry. Dirk listened for a moment, but the sound wasn't repeated. He tried to go back to sleep.

Just as he was drowsy again, he heard a creak and the sound of someone moving in the barn. A dull thud and a strange gurgling noise made him lift himself up on his right elbow, listening in the dark. He strained to hear something, but he couldn't make out the sounds. Assuming it was Mikia and Torren again, he rolled over and tried to go back to sleep.

Again he was almost dozing when he realized something was wrong. As he turned over, he saw something moving rapidly towards him in the gloom, a large dark shape. He sat up, reflexively pulling away from what was coming towards him.

Two things happened at once. Someone slashed at him, a blade cutting into the fabric of his coat below his collarbone, and he struck the hay door with his back. He choked out an inarticulate cry, unable to speak for the terror which overwhelmed him. Then another body slammed into him with a strangled cry and he felt the door latch behind him give.

Never too sturdy, the latch parted as the weight of two bodies struck it, and with a muffled cry, Dirk fell out of the hay door, down to the snow-covered ground below. He landed with a thud that drove the breath out of him.

Then the other body landed on him, and Dirk was knocked senseless.

He awoke as the sky was lightening. He was freezing and barely able to breathe. His left eye seemed glued shut and something on top of him held him firmly to the ground.

Dirk tried to move, and discovered that Hemmy lay atop him. 'Hey, get off!' he said, but his voice was weak and strangled. A burning pain below his throat caused him to gasp when he moved.

His legs were numb from the cold, and he lay in a hole in the snow. He wiggled his bottom and managed to work his way upright and realized Hemmy was dead. The older boy's face was white, and his throat was cut. Terror galvanized Dirk and he lifted the corpse enough to get out from beneath him, forcing numb legs to do his bidding.

He pulled himself out of the snow and his muscles screamed at being forced to move. He climbed out of the hole and saw he was drenched in blood, Hemmy's blood.

'What happened?' he whispered.

As he staggered towards the barn, he saw the morning sun was still an hour from cresting the eastern horizon. His legs became wobbly and he leaned against the barn, looking up to see the rear hay door still opened. He paused a moment to get control over his frozen, stiff legs, walked around to the front, and looked at the large doors thrown open to the cold. He glanced down at the snow before the door and saw no unusual number of footprints. But off to the south side of the entrance, where snow remained uncleared, he saw a single set of footprints and the parallel impression left by a sled's runners. Someone had pulled the large sled out of the barn. The depth of the runner tracks in the snow told him it was heavily loaded. The horses were long gone, having been eaten by the Tsurani the winter before, so whoever had moved the sled was pulling it.

Dirk went inside the barn and saw Mikia and Torren lying in each other's arms, their throats cut. Old Litia also lay dead in her own blood, her eyes open wide. Everywhere he looked, he saw death.

Who did this? Dirk wondered in panicked confusion. Had the Tsurani who occupied Lord Paul's estate gone mad and killed everyone? But if they had,

there would have been footprints in abundance outside in the snow, and there was none. Most of them were gone on some mission or another, leaving only a few in the outbuildings this week. Then Dirk's thoughts turned to the manor house. 'Anika!' he said in a hoarse whisper.

He hurried through the pre-dawn gloom to the kitchen and found the door open. He stared in mute horror at the carnage in the room. Everyone who slept in the kitchen was as dead as those in the barn. He hurried upstairs and, without knocking, entered Anika's room. Her bed lay empty. He peered under it, afraid she might have crawled under it to die. Then he realized there was no blood in the room—He got up and ran to her father's room, and pushed open the door. Lord Paul lay in a sea of blood on his bed. Dirk didn't need to see if he lived. Beside the bed a secret door was opened, a door painted to look like a section of the wall. Dirk looked through the door into the small hiding-place and realized here had been where his master had kept his wealth. The invaders had demanded every gold, silver, and copper coin held by those living in the occupied region, yet it was well documented they had no concept of wealth on this planet. The servants had speculated that Lord Paul had turned over only one part in three of his wealth and the rest had remained hidden. Perhaps they had found he had hidden wealth and this was their way of punishing everyone. If the Tsurani had gone on a rampage . . .

'No,' he said softly to himself. The Tsurani hanged those without honour. The blade was for honourable foes. Whoever did the killing had moved with stealth, as if afraid to raise an alarm and be overwhelmed, and had cautiously killed all the servants one at a time. The killer had been armed ...  
Drogen!

Only Drogen and the Lord of the House, of all those who weren't Tsurani, were permitted arms. Dirk closed the secret door, too stunned to appreciate how clever it was. Once closed, it appeared indistinguishable from the wall.

He hurried down to the large dining hall and saw over the fireplace the two swords hung there, heirlooms of Lord Paul's family. He considered taking one down, then remembered that should the Tsurani find him with a sword in his possession, he would be hanged without any opportunity to explain.

He returned to the kitchen and took a large boning knife from the butcher's block next to the stove. That was something he had handled many times before and the familiarity of the handle was reassuring to Dirk.

He had to do something about finding Anika, but he didn't know what. Drogen must have taken her with the gold. He ran back to the barn to see if anyone else might have survived. Within minutes he knew only he and Anika survived. And the Tsurani, of course.

Panic struck Dirk. He knew that if one of them stuck his head outside one of the huts he would be hanged for carrying a kitchen knife, no matter what the reason.

He put the knife in his tunic, and climbed into the loft. He went to the canvas bag that served as his closet, holding his few belongings. He removed his only coat, and saw a long cut below the collar. Drogen had lashed out at him first, because he had awakened. He must have thought Dirk's throat cut. Then he had killed Hemmy, pushing him atop Dirk, causing them to fall through the hay door. Only the darkness and the fall had saved Dirk's life, he knew. Had he not fallen out of the barn, Drogen would certainly have ensured the boy was dead.

Dirk put on his extra shirt for warmth, ignoring the sticky blood soaked into his undershirt and the shirt he already wore. Wearing the extra layers of clothing might be the difference between life and death. He considered pulling a tunic off one of the other boys, but he couldn't bring himself to touch the bodies of his dead friends.

He again donned his coat and took his only pair of gloves from the bag, along with a large woollen scarf Litia had knitted for him the year before. He put them on and checked the bag for his other belongings: there was nothing

else there he could imagine would help him.

He hurried down the ladder. The only thing he could think of doing was following the murderer. He was terrified of waking the Tsurani, and not certain they would care about the murder of people they obviously felt were inferior to themselves. They might blame Dirk and hang him, he feared.

Drogen. He had to find Drogen and rescue Anika and get the gold back for her. The boy knew that without gold the girl would be at the mercy of the townspeople. She would be forced to depend on the generosity of relatives or friends. But he was terrified enough he couldn't move. He stood in the barn aisle, rooted with indecision.

After a time he heard a shout from across the compound. The Tsurani were up and one had seen something. A confusion of voices sounded from outside, and Dirk knew they would be in the bam in moments.

He hid himself in the darkest corner of the stall most removed from the door, and lay shivering in fear and cold as men came into the barn, speaking rapidly in their odd language. Two walked past where Dirk lay, one casting a quick glance in his direction. He must have simply assumed Dirk was another dead boy, for he said nothing to his companion, who climbed the ladder to the hayloft. After a moment, he shouted down, and the other responded. He heard the man return down the ladder and the two of them left the barn. Dirk waited until it grew quiet again, then got out of the straw. He hurried to the door and peered out. From his vantage point he saw one Tsurani instructing others to search the area.

Uncertain of what to do next, Dirk waited. A Tsurani he knew to be of some rank came out and pointed to the tracks in the snow. There was some sort of debate, and the man who had sent the others searching seemed to be indicating that someone should follow the murderer.

Then the leader spoke in commanding tones and the other man bowed slightly and turned away. Dirk realized no one was going to follow Drogen. He was going to get away with killing more than two dozen people and kidnapping Anika and taking all of Lord Paul's gold. The Tsurani soldier in charge seemed content to leave this matter to his own officer, when the bulk of the command returned from their mission.

Dirk knew if anyone was to save Anika, it would have to be him. Dirk slipped out of the barn, and around the side and when he was certain no one was nearby, he slipped down the hill behind the barn and made his way into the woods. He hurried along through the birch and pines until he found the sled tracks. He turned to follow them.

Dirk slogged his way through the snow, his breath a white cloud before him. His feet were numb and he felt weak and hungry, but he was determined to overtake Drogen. The landscape was white and green -the boughs of pines and firs peering out from mantles of snow. A stand of bare trees stood a short distance away, and Dirk knew he had left the boundary of Lord Paul's estate.

The murderer was making good time, despite having to pull the heavy sled. He knew that he gained on Drogen each time he had to pull the sled up a hill but each time he went down the next slope, Drogen probably trained some of that time back.

Dirk stopped to rest a moment. His best chance of finding the murderer, he knew, was to catch him at night. Dirk glanced around. He had no idea how much time had passed; a good part of the day, he realized, but he couldn't tell from the grey sky where the sun was and when darkness would arrive.

A rabbit poked his head above a nearby ridge and sniffed. Dirk wished he had some sort of weapon, or the time to rig a snare, for a rabbit cooked over an open fire would be welcome, but he knew such wishes would go ungranted. He continued on.

It began to snow as darkness came, and it came quickly. Dirk's plan of following through the night vanished along with the sled tracks. Dirk tried to follow the tracks, but there was no light. It was the blackest night he could remember, and he was terrified.

He found a small clump of trees overhung by a large pine bower thick with snow that acted like a roof, and he crawled in for the meagre shelter it provided. He built up a low snow wall around him, having been taught as a boy it would shelter him from the wind. He dozed but didn't sleep. A soft sound woke him. He heard it again. He poked his head out from under the pine bower and saw that snow had fallen from a branch in a large clump.

He crawled out and looked for tracks. There were places where the snow had fallen lightly, and he could barely see the tracks, but they were there, and they pointed the way.

Dirk began again to hunt down the murderer.

At sundown he saw the light of the fire, high on a ridge to the east. Drogen was making his way towards the city of Natal. It was free of the Tsurani invaders. Once there, Drogen could make his way to Ylith and from there to anywhere in the world: the Kingdom, Kesh, or the Island Empire of Queg. How Drogen was going to cross the frontier, Dirk didn't know, but he assumed the man had a plan. Maybe he just counted on the Tsurani holding tight to their campfires and not having too many men in the field in the dead of winter. From what he had heard, there had been almost no fighting between them and the Free Cities and Kingdom forces since the first heavy snow of winter.

Dirk slogged his way towards the fire.

He finally reached a place where he could get a glimpse of the site. Slowly approaching as quietly as he could, Dirk saw a single man resting on the sled, warming his hands at the fire. Drogen must have thought himself free of pursuit, for he had taken no pains to hide his whereabouts. At his feet, Anika lay in a bundle of furs. Dirk had aired them out every fall after fetching them out of storage, so he knew the girl was well protected from the cold. She appeared to be asleep - probably exhausted from terror, Dirk thought.

Dirk stopped, again rooted by fear. He had no idea how to proceed. He made up and discarded a dozen plans to attack the murderer. He couldn't imagine how to attack a trained warrior, one who was paid to fight.

Dirk stood freezing his feet, watching the fire grow dimmer. Drogen ate, and still Dirk remained motionless. Cold, exposure, hunger and fear were on the verge of reducing him to tears.

Then Drogen threw more wood on the fire and wrapped a blanket around himself. He lay down on the ground between the sled and Anika, who moved, but didn't awake. He was going to sleep!

Dirk knew that he could only rescue Anika and regain Lord Paul's gold by sneaking up on Drogen and killing him as he slept. Dirk had no compunction about the act; Drogen had killed everyone Dirk had known since leaving his family to work at the master's estate, in their sleep, and he deserved no more than they got. Dirk just feared he wouldn't be up to the task, or would inadvertently wake up the killer.

Dirk moved his legs, trying to regain circulation in the freezing night, and eventually he judged it safe to approach the camp. Stiff legs and an inability to catch his breath drove Dirk to a heart-pounding frenzy. He found his hands shaking so badly he could barely manage to get the heavy knife out from within his jacket.

The familiar handle was suddenly an alien thing that resisted fitting comfortably in his palm. He crept forward and tried not to let panic overwhelm him.

He stopped on the other side of the sled, uncertain which way to approach. He decided that he'd approach Drogen's head.

Dirk held the knife high, and crept around the sled, slowly, moving as carefully as he could so as not to make noise. When he was just a few feet away, Drogen moved, shifting the blanket around his shoulders. He snuggled down behind Anika, who didn't move.

Fear overwhelmed Dirk. He knew if he didn't move now, he would never move. He struck down hard with the knife and felt the point dig into the murderer's shoulder.

Drogen shouted in pain and convulsed, almost pulling the knife out of Dirk's hand. Dirk yanked it back, and struck out again as Drogen tried to rise. The point again dug deep into his shoulder, and he howled in pain.

Anika awoke with a scream and kicked off the furs, then leaped to her feet, spinning around and trying to understand what was happening. Dirk pulled the blade out and was ready for a third strike, but Drogen charged, driving his shoulder into Dirk, knocking him aside.

The boy rolled on the ground and found Drogen sitting atop his chest, his hand poised to deliver a blow. 'You!' he said as he saw the boy's face in the dim light of the dying fire. Drogen hesitated.

Dirk lashed out with his knife and struck Drogen in the face, cutting deeply. Drogen reared back, his hand to his cheek as he cried out in pain. Dirk acted without thought. He pushed hard with his knife, driving it deep into Drogen, just under his ribcage.

Drogen loomed above Dirk in the dim light, his eyes wide in silent astonishment. His left hand dropped from where it had momentarily touched his cheek. With his right hand he grabbed Dirk's tunic, as if he was going to pull him upright to ask him something. Then he slowly toppled backward. He didn't release his grip on Dirk's coat and he pulled the boy upright, then forward.

Dirk's legs were pinned under Drogen, and he was forced to bend forward.

Dirk frantically pried the dying man's fingers from his coat. He fell back and the pain in his side was a searing agony. He saw the blade of the knife protruding from Drogen's coat and his head swam. Using his elbows, he pulled himself back and got his legs free of Drogen's weight. Dimly he was aware of a sobbing voice saying, 'No.'

Dirk was in a fog as he reached down and pulled out the knife from Drogen's body. He turned as a girl's voice again said, 'No! You killed him!' screamed Anika as she rushed towards Dirk. The disoriented boy stood uncertain of what was occurring. He tried to focus his eyes as his head swam from pain. 'I -' he began, but the girl seemed to fly at him.

'You killed him!' she screamed again as she fell upon him. He stepped back, his heel striking Drogen's body and he fell, the girl suddenly atop him. She landed heavily upon Dirk, her eyes wide in shock. She pushed herself up and looked down between them.

Dirk followed her gaze and saw the knife was still in his hand. Anika had impaled herself upon the blade. Confusion beset her features and she gazed at his face and at last said, softly, 'The Wood Boy?'

She fell atop Dirk. He moved her aside, but held her in his arms, and he sank to the snow, holding her. She looked up at the sky, eyes glassy, and he gently closed them.

Then Dirk felt a hot stabbing pain in his side and bile rose in his throat as he realized that somehow he had been cut. He touched the wound and hot pain shot through his body, and his eyes seemed unwilling to focus. He knew that he couldn't move with the blade there, and reached up to grip the handle again. Mustering all the resolve he could, he pulled the knife from his side, and screamed at the agony of it- After a moment, the pain subsided and was replaced by a throbbing torment, but one which didn't make him feel as if he was going to die. He slowly stood, and turned to confront the girl. Then he passed out.

Borric said, 'She helped him kill her father and the rest?'

'I don't think so, sir.' Sadly Dirk said, 'I think Drogen tricked her, convinced her to elope with him to gain the secret of where her father's gold was. She was an innocent girl and he was a rake known to have wooed many women. If he killed everyone without awakening her, then bundled her up in those furs and carried her straight to the sled, she wouldn't see. Once away from the Free Cities, she might never have known.' He looked as if he was about to cry, but held his tone steady as he said, 'She fell upon me in a fright, and without knowing what had occurred at home. Else she wouldn't have been so frantic over Drogen's death, I'm certain. Her death was an accident,

but it was all my fault.'

'There was no fault in you, lad. It was, as you say, an accident.' After a moment, Borric nodded. 'Yes, it's better to think of it that way. Lad, why did you come here?'

T didn't know what else to do. I thought if Drogen planned on coming this way, I would, too. I knew the Tsurani would take my master's gold and hang me as likely as not ... it was all I could think of.'

'You did well,' said Borric softly.

Dirk put the cup down and said, 'That was good. Thank you, sir.' He moved and winced.

'You're hurt?'

T bound the wounds as best I could, sir.'

Borric called for an orderly and instructed him to take the boy to the healer's tent and have the wound treated.

After Dirk had left, the captain said, 'That was quite a story, Your Grace.' Borric agreed. 'The boy has special courage.'

'Did the girl know?' asked the Captain.

'Of course she knew,' said Borric. T knew Paul of White Hill; I've done enough business with him through my agent in Bordon, Talbot Kilrarie. I've been to his home, and he's been to Crydee.

'And I knew the daughter,' Borric sighed, as if what he thought tired him. 'She's the same age as my Carline. And they're as different as two children could be. Anika was born scheming.' Borric sighed again. 'I have no doubt she planned this, though we'll never know if she anticipated all the murders; she may have only suggested to the bodyguard they steal the gold and flee. With her father behind Tsurani lines and all that gold in her possession, she could have cut quite a social figure for herself back in Kronдор or even in Rillanon. She easily could have disposed of the bodyguard - he clearly couldn't admit to anyone his part in this, could he? And if word of the killings reached us, we would assume the Tsurani murdered the household on some pretext.' Borric was silent. Then he said, 'In my bones I know the girl was the one behind all this. .. but we'll never know for certain, will we?' 'No, Your Grace,' agreed the captain. 'What of the bodies?'

'Bury them. We have no means to return the girl to her family in Walinor.'

The captain said, 'I'll detail men to the digging. It'll take a while to dig through the frozen ground.' He then asked, 'And the gold?'

Borric said, 'It's confiscated. The Tsurani would have taken it anyway, and we've an army to feed. Send it under guard to Brucal in LaMut.' He paused a moment, then said, 'Send the boy, too. I'll pen a note to Brucal asking the boy be found some service there at headquarters. He's a resourceful lad and as he said, he has nowhere else to go.'

'Very well, Your Grace.'

As the captain turned to go, Borric said, 'And Captain?'

'Yes, Your Grace?'

'Keep what I said to yourself. The boy doesn't need to know.'

'As you wish, Your Grace,' said the captain as he departed.

Borric sat forward and tried to return his attention to the business at hand, but he found his mind returning to the boy's story. He tried to imagine what Dirk had felt, alone, armed only with the kitchen knife and afraid. He had been a trained warrior for most of his life, but he remembered what it was to be uncertain. He recognized the boy's act for what it had been, an unusual and rare act of heroism. The image of a lovestruck, frightened boy trudging through the snow at night to confront a murderer and rescue a damsel lingered with the duke, and he decided it was best that the boy be left with that one shred of illusion about the girl. He had earned that much, at least.