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The Forbidden Land

Book Four of *The Witches of Eileanan*

Kate Forsyth

A ROC BOOK

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for Binny and Nick—

blood-kin and soul-kin

in memory of all the imaginary worlds

we created and lived in,

and with thanks for a lifetime of

love and support.

Write on!

She can overcast the night and cloud the moon,

and make the Devil obedient to her croon.

At midnight hours over the kirkyard she raves,

Digging unchristened weans out of their graves;

Boils up their livers in a warlock's pow,

Runs widdershins about the hemlocks low;

And seven times does her prayers backwards pray.

Then, mixed with venom of black toads and snakes,

Of this unsousy pictures oft she makes

Of anyone she hates—and makes them expire

With cruel and racking pains afore a fire:

*Stuck full of pins the devilish pictures melt;
The pain by folk they represent is felt
Whilst she and her cat sit howling in her yard.*

—Allan Ramsay,

Seventeenth-century Scottish poet

THE LOOM IS STRUNG

Castle Rurach

Finn brushed away the crust of snow and sat in the embrasure of the battlement, her legs hanging out. Carefully she packed her pipe with tobacco and, shielding the sparks from the wind with her hand, lit it with her flint. With a sigh of pleasure, she drew in a lungful of sharp-scented smoke. For a long moment she held it in her lungs, then breathed it out in a long plume that was dragged away by the frosty breeze.

She inhaled again, leant back her head and puffed out a series of perfect blue smoke-rings. As far as she could see there was no sign of life, only the sharp spears of snow-laden pines crowding close about the feet of towering grey mountains. "Does anything ever happen in Rurach?" she said to the elven cat curled on her lap. "Flaming dragon balls, I'm as bored as a eunuch in a brothel!"

Goblin yawned, showing a mouthful of tiny but very sharply pointed fangs. "I canna help agreeing," Finn said. "Do ye think we should run away and join the pirates? At least then we'd see some adventure."

The cat arched its back and hissed.

"No? Ye do no' like that idea? No, o' course, ye dislike water. Ye would no' have to swim in it though. I believe the pirate ships are quite snug and there'd be fish to eat every day."

Goblin tidied up her whiskers, not deigning to reply. Finn sighed again and stared up at the sharp silhouette of the Fang. For once, it was not wreathed in clouds but cut into the sky like a sabre leopard's tooth, dominating the horizon.

When Finn had first seen the sleeping volcano, she had been troubled by an odd sense of recognition. It had woken all sorts of half-memories in her, a longing or homesickness that she had not then understood. She had then been travelling through the mountains of upper Rionnagan, on the far side of the Fang, and to her knowledge had never seen the tall, symmetrically shaped mountain before. As far as she knew, Finn had never before left the city of *Lucescere* where she had lived on the streets, picking pockets and begging for scraps of old food in order to survive.

Finn had been one of a gang of beggar children who had had to flee *Lucescere* after helping Jorge the Seer and his young acolyte Tomas the Healer escape from the cruel

seekers of the Awl, the Anti-Witchcraft League. That had been in the days when suspected witches were burnt to death. In company with the old, blind man and the little boy, Finn and her gang had taken refuge from the Awl in a hidden valley at the very foot of the Fang. There they had formed the League of the Healing Hand, a fellowship sworn to protect the two witches who, despite having such potent magical abilities, were in themselves frail and rather helpless. The League had ended up being very important in the overthrow of the Awl and the restoration of the Coven, and had earned the heartfelt gratitude of the new Righ, Lachlan MacCuinn.

Remembering, Finn thought rather wistfully that those years had been the happiest of her life. Although there was always the danger of losing a hand as a pickpocket or being captured as a rebel, there had been the close comradeship of the gang and the constant thrill of pitting one's wits against the world and winning. Although Finn was never cold or hungry anymore, she was lonely now and sullen with misery. The constraints of court life chafed her unbearably and she felt all the court ladies, including her own mother, disapproved of her greatly.

It had been five years since Finn had discovered she was not an orphan of the streets, as she had thought, but the daughter of the prionnsa of Rurach. She had been kidnapped by the Awl as a mere child of six in order to force her father to their will. She had only discovered the truth during the Samhain rebellion which had put Lachlan MacCuinn on the throne and returned the Coven to power. Her father had then brought her back to Rurach, to meet a mother she had not remembered, and to learn to be a banprionnsa. Although Finn had felt a wrench at leaving her friends, she had been eager to see her home and her mother and to enjoy a life of ease.

But although Castle Rurach was as luxurious and comfortable as she had imagined, it was also boring. Built high in the mountains, it was a long way from the crowded streets of Lucescere, with its merchants, artisans, street performers, thieves and idle nobility. A young lady of Rurach was expected to spend her time with the other ladies of the court, plying her needle in exquisite embroidery and discussing the newest way to cut a sleeve. Finn had no interest in fashion, refused to learn how to sew, and thought of her mother's retinue as a gaggle of fussy old hens.

The towering range of mountains that culminated in the crooked spire of the Fang was no longer a source of wistful longings but instead a prison wall which kept her locked away from the world with no chance of escape. If Finn had known the secret way over the mountains, she would have run away long ago, searching out her old friends in Lucescere. She did not know it, however, and so she took what pleasure she could in defying her mother and shocking the castle.

Goblin had curled up to sleep but suddenly the little cat raised her head, ears pricked forward. Finn tensed. She heard a step on the stair. She knocked out her pipe with one hand and thrust the other into her pocket, drawing out a small square of tightly folded black material. With a shake it billowed out into a cloak which she wrapped around her swiftly. Wherever the silky stuff brushed against her skin, it tingled and stung, and all the little hairs rose. She pulled the hood up to cover her face, and sat very still.

A gangly young man came out on to the battlements and stood hesitantly. Her father's piper, he was dressed in the castle livery, a black and green kilt with a white woollen shirt and black jerkin. Although he had wrapped his plaid around his thin shoulders, it was

bitterly cold out on the tower heights and he shivered and rubbed his arms.

"My lady Fionnghal?" Ashlin the Piper called. "Are ye here? Your mother desires your presence. My lady?"

Finn said nothing. Ashlin stared about with a troubled expression and called her again. When there was no response he turned and clattered back downstairs. Finn stuck out her tongue at his retreating back and shrugged off the cloak, which somehow always made her feel even colder. She huddled her furs closer around her neck and brought out her precious hoard of tobacco. "Why canna they ever leave me alone?" she said resentfully to the cat, who was still curled up on her lap. "Always following me about, spying on me, tittle-tattling. Anyone would think they had naught else to do."

She puffed on her pipe angrily, kicking her legs against the stone. "I wish my *dai-dein* would get better," she burst out in a sudden wail, then bit the stem of her pipe hard and said no more. Her father Anghus MacRuraich had been injured fighting ogres in the mountains and had lain near death for a week. Although the castle healer had told them his fever had broken and he would now recover, Finn could not help fearing he might suffer a relapse.

She was knocking out the ashes from her pipe when she suddenly felt a prickling at the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder and saw an old man step quietly out of the doorway. He was a short, stocky figure with a flowing grey beard, round pink cheeks and blue eyes twinkling between deep creases. He was her father's gillie and had served Anghus ever since the laird had been a mere lad himself. Finn did not know him very well since he rarely left her father's side and so had been absent from the castle most of the time since she had come to Rurach. His kilt was so faded it was a comfortable blur of grey and olive, and he wore his beard thrust through the wide belt that held his kilt together. A thin dagger, black as jet, was stuck through the disreputable scrap of ribbon holding up one stocking. The other stocking was tied up with twine.

"Och, there ye are, my lady," Donald said placidly. "Bonny afternoon for a smoke." Finn said nothing. He came to lean on the battlement beside her, looking up at the mountains and feeling inside his sporran for his pipe and tobacco pouch. Swiftly, without a glance downwards, he packed his pipe and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "Smells like Fair Isles smoke-weed ye've got there," he said conversationally. "True tobacco is rare these days, wha' wi' pirates and the blaygird Fairgean on the rise. Most have to smoke herbs or seaweed these days."

"Here, have some o' mine," Finn said sweetly, offering him her own leather pouch.

"Och, no need," Donald replied. "I won a pouch full from Casey Hawkeye just last night. He be the lucky one, his uncle being the harbour master at Dun Gorm and taking his taxes in tobacco. I should have enough to last me a wee while longer."

There was silence while Donald lit his pipe and drew up the flame. When the tobacco was burning merrily, he pulled the pipe from his mouth and said placidly, "The question is, lassie, where it is ye got your smokeweed."

"I do no' see what business that is o' yours." Finn's voice was honey-sweet. "And I do no' think my dear mother would approve o' ye being so familiar as to call me 'lassie'."

"Och, I have kent your mother since she was a wee bit o' a lassie herself. She'll no'

mind," he replied equably. "It's more likely that she'll be disapproving o' ye smoking a pipe, that I can promise ye."

"Oh, ye think so? If only I had kent."

"And even more o' ye stealing, lassie," he said softly.

Finn flushed and fidgeted with the tassels of her coat. She forced herself to raise her eyes and meet his gaze with a look of outrage. "Are ye accusing me o' theft?"

"Lassie, do no' be lying to me on top o' it all. I ken ye must have stolen the smokeweed from Casey Hawkeye and he kens it as well. No' that he has said aught and naught is what he will say. We do no' wish to be getting ye into any more strife than ye're already in. But I am sore ashamed o' ye, lassie. It is one thing to be picking pockets when ye're starving on the streets and do no' ken any better, but to be diddling your father's own loyal men, that is no' worthy o' ye."

Finn was silent. She held the elven cat up to her face and rubbed her hot cheek against Goblin's cool fur. Donald smoked in silence for a while, leaning on his elbows. His wrinkled brown face was peaceful.

"It does no' matter what I do, she disapproves o' everything anyway," Finn suddenly burst out. "Ye're right, she does no' approve o' me smoking or having a wee dram o' whiskey every now and again, or wanting to play curling wi' the lads . . ."

"Och, well, curling do be a right rough game now," Donald said. She threw him a look of exasperation and saw his blue eyes were twinkling. "Ye mun remember that our mam was raised in the auld ways, when lassies did no' have so much freedom and were expected to mind their manners and do wha' they were told. Your grandfather was a very strict, starched-up sort o' fellow, and proud o' his name and his clan. Your mam was never allowed to forget she was a banprionnsa and direct descendant o' Sian the Storm-Rider herself."

Finn screwed up her face and he patted her shoulder. "She's gone and worrit herself into a fret over ye, lassie. Should ye no' go down and let her ken ye're safe?"

Finn's jaw set firmly. "What has she got to worry about so? It's no' as if I'm ever allowed to do anything or go anywhere. What can I do to hurt myself? Prick myself with a needle? Stub my toe kicking my mealy-mouthed cousin in the arse?"

"Fall over the battlements?" Donald said with a slight edge to his voice. He glanced down at Finn, still sitting in the embrasure with nothing between her and the ground but three hundred feet of air. "That is no' the safest place to perch, lassie."

Finn glanced down. "Do ye no' ken they call me 'the Cat'?" she said mockingly. "A wee drop like that does no' worry me."

"It worries all o' us who care about ye though," Donald said, the edge in his voice slightly sharper.

"Are ye trying to tell me my dear mother would really care if I fell off?" Finn tried to make her voice hard and sarcastic. "She'd probably heave a big sigh o' relief to be rid o' me and another o' happiness that her precious Aindrew would then inherit the throne. Ye

canna tell me she does no' wish he was the firstborn."

"I can and I do." For the first time since Finn had met her father's gillie, there was no kindly twinkle in his eyes. "When the blaygird Awl took ye away, I thought your mam would die o' grief. Her eyes hung out o' her head wi' weeping and she was naught but a shadow o' herself all the time ye were gone. I was there when your father brought ye back to Castle Rurach. Ye canna tell me ye did no' see how full o' joy she was to have ye home!"

Finn dropped her eyes, feeling a little niggles of shame. Her mother had run across the drawbridge to greet them, her hair all unbound and her feet still shod in soft slippers. Finn had not even had a chance to dismount. Her mother had pulled her from the saddle, weeping and holding her so closely Finn had thought her ribs would break. Enveloped in a golden cloud of sweetly perfumed hair, listening to her mother's choked endearments, Finn had been filled with happiness. She had hugged her mother back as hard as she could and then felt her father's arms embracing them both as he had cried, "See, my Gwyneth, I promised ye I would find our lassie and bring her home to ye! Now we can be a family again."

But her father had spent only enough time at home to get his wife with child, before riding out to deal with the civil unrest wrenching Siantan and Rurach apart. The two countries had been joined into one with the marriage of Anghus's parents. Ostensibly his mother had been meant to rule as an equal with his father, but Duncan MacRuraich had been an autocratic man. It was his will which had directed the actions of the Double Throne and the people of Siantan had suffered as a result, causing much dissatisfaction.

Although Anghus had reluctantly agreed to dissolve the Double Throne, with Finn's cousin Brangaine Nic-Sian named as banprionnsa of Siantan, Anghus had then had to contend with the problems caused by the rising of the Fairgean. Each autumn and spring, as the migrating hordes of sea-faeries swept up and down the coast, the attacks of their warriors grew ever more vicious. Consequently, Anghus had spent only short periods of time at home in the past five years, leaving Gwyneth to struggle with her foul-mouthed, light-fingered daughter, her baby son Aindrew, and her unfailingly polite yet distant niece, Brangaine. It had not been a happy time and the initial affection between mother and daughter had cooled into misunderstanding.

"It's just I do no' feel like I belong here," Finn muttered as she allowed Donald to help her down from the wall.

"O' course ye belong here, lassie," Donald said warmly. "Are ye no' a NicRuraich? Can ye no' tell where anyone is merely by thinking o' them? The bluid o' Ruraich the Searcher runs strong in ye, as anyone could tell simply by looking at ye. Do no' be such a porridge-head!"

Finn laughed reluctantly and followed the old gillie down the tower stairs, the elven cat tucked in the crook of her arm. "If only she did no' *fuss* so," she said. "I feel like I'm being *stifled*."

"Wha' ye need is a guid day's hunting," Donald said encouragingly. "We've all been cooped up for weeks wi' the snowstorms; it's enough to make anyone cranky. A day out on the hills will make ye feel a wee bit better."

Finn's hazel eyes lit with green lights. "Och, if only I could!"

"It's a clear, frosty day," Donald said thoughtfully. "Happen we'll bag ourselves a crested pheasant which ye can have for your supper."

Finn was so pleased with this idea that she came into the great drawing room with a light step and a happy face. Her mother was sitting on a chaise lounge, her embroidery frame before her. Brangaine sat at a stool at Gwyneth's feet, a selection of silk threads spread over her skirt, while Finn's brother Aindrew leant against her knee, playing contentedly with a pile of brightly coloured toys. Unlike Finn, he had taken after his mother, sharing the same pale silken hair, fine skin and green eyes. Brangaine had also inherited the MacSian fairness, both women having long, pale hair bound into a plait that hung over their shoulders and down past their knees. The firelight played over the three corn-silk heads, bent close together, and over the blue and grey plaids that both the women wore about their shoulders.

Finn's step faltered and she scowled. The handful of middle-aged women gathered around the drawing room looked up and silence fell over the room. Gwyneth rose with a welcoming smile, holding out her hands to Finn. "Where have ye been, dearling? It's been hours and no-one has been able to find ye anywhere!"

Finn gave a clumsy bob and said, rather gruffly, "I'm sorry, mam. I did no' mean to worry ye. The sun is out for the first time in days and I just needed a breath o' fresh air ..."

"But it is after noon and ye've been gone since we broke our fast."

"I went down to the stables to see Cinders. I knew she would be restless after being cooped up for so long and thought I would take her out for a ride but Casey said none o' the grooms were free to go out with me. He would no' let me take Cinders out by myself—he bade two o' his men escort me from the mews. When I refused to go and ordered them to unhand me, he told me no' to be such a foolish bairn." Her voice rose with indignation.

"Ye ken ye must always be accompanied if ye wish to ride out," Gwyneth said with some exasperation. She took Finn's hand and drew her down to sit next to her. "I do no' make these rules to vex ye, dearling. These mountains are dangerous, ye ken that. What if ye were to be thrown and break an ankle?"

"Cinders would no' throw me! I have no' lost my seat in years."

"What if she was threatened by a woolly bear?"

"We're no' afraid o' a stupid bear!"

"Och, ye should be. Ye ken they are surly, unpredictable creatures, and certainly no' the only danger in these parts. What if a troll came down from the mountains, or a pack o' goblins?"

"I wish some would, at least then there'd be some excitement!" Finn burst out.

Gwyneth sighed in annoyance. "Finn, a pack o' marauding goblins is no' something to wish for! We may be safe here in the castle, but what about the crofters? Goblins have

no respect for life or property—they hurt for the pleasure o' it. Ye will be the NicRuraich one day; it is your duty to guard and protect your people. Wishing harm to come to them for your own childish pleasure is no way to behave."

Finn bit back rebellious words, but her eyes smouldered and her jaw was set firmly.

Gwyneth took a deep breath to contain her exasperation, then said affectionately, "Dearling, I ken ye find our life here rather tedious but indeed, peacefulness means happiness. There has been so much strife here for so long we auld ones are all rather glad to have some peace and quiet for a change. Your father is home now, thank Eà. As soon as his wounds are fully healed, he'll take ye out riding the boundaries and teach ye more about the laird's duties. Until then, ye must bide here in patience."

"Yes, mam," Finn said dutifully and let her mother kiss her cheek.

Donald had been waiting quietly just within the door. He had taken off his tam o'shanter and his shining bald dome was rosy in the firelight, fringed all round with grey curls. "I beg your pardon, my lady, but I ken how cooped up the young ones must be feeling wi' the snowstorms keeping them so much inside. I was thinking I could be taking them out for a ride and maybe beat up some pheasants for your dinner, seeing as how we are all sick o' eating mutton-and-taties."

Gwyneth smiled, looking out at the blue sky. "It does seem to have cleared up. If ye take Casey with ye and some o' the men, I do no' see any reason why Fionnghal and Brangaine should no' go out . . ."

"Excuse me, my lady, but I fear a storm is brewing," Brangaine said respectfully.

Finn stared at her with hatred. "But the sky is clear! There are no clouds ..."

"The clear sky is deceptive, I'm afraid, Fionnghal," her cousin replied sweetly. "A storm front is coming and heavy with snow. By mid-afternoon the blue sky will be gone."

"Well, in that case there be no question o' ye riding out," Gwyneth said decisively. "The storms do come very quickly here, ye ken that, Fionnghal. I do no' wish for ye to be caught out in a snowstorm." She saw the look of bitter disappointment and dislike on Finn's face and said comfortingly, "Never mind, dear-ling. The next clear day ye can ride out, I promise ye."

"It's fine today!"

"Aye, for the moment, but ye ken Brangaine has the Talent. If she says a storm is coming, ye can be sure that it is."

"She'll probably whistle up a storm just to make sure I canna go out!" Finn cried and leapt to her feet, knocking over her mother's embroidery frame. The court ladies threw up their hands and several cried aloud in condemnation. The elven cat hissed at them from Finn's shoulder. Finn turned and ran out of the room, knocking over a little gilded table on her way and smashing the heirloom jug that stood upon it. Dashing tears from her eyes, she did not stop, slamming the door shut behind her.

Distressed, her mother ran after her but although the corridor stretched both ways as far as the eye could see, there was no sign of her wayward daughter.

That afternoon a blizzard engulfed the castle in a tumult of snow and wind that had everyone huddled up in their plaids. It did not make Finn feel any better knowing that Brangaine had been right and that any expedition into the forest could well have ended in disaster. She moped around the castle, staring out the windows at the whirling snow and blaming her cousin for ruining her life. Although her mother reprimanded her gently, Finn was unable to shake a deep sense of injury and cast Brangaine many a smouldering glance.

That evening she was allowed to see Anghus for the first time, the castle healer having pronounced him strong enough to survive a visit by his tempestuous daughter. Finn's sulky expression cleared as if by magic, and she eagerly followed Donald into the prionnsa's bedroom and threw herself upon her father.

He embraced her with his one good arm, though he winced with pain, saying, "Careful, lassie, those ribs are still a wee bit tender."

She lifted herself away a little, saying urgently, "How are ye yourself, Dai? Ye look awful!"

The prionnsa smiled ruefully. "Thank ye, dearling."

She examined his face closely. He was pale and haggard, with dark shadows under his hazel eyes. The bones of his face and hands seemed more prominent, and she thought with some distress that there was more grey than chestnut now in his long, curly hair. Two white streaks were clawing down into his magnificent red beard, which flowed down over his chest.

"Are ye sure ye be feeling better?" she asked anxiously, settling herself by his side with Goblin curled up on her lap.

He nodded, smiling a little. "Much better, lassie. Though I could wish ogres did no' have such filthy personal habits. The healer says his claws were so dirty it was as if he had dipped them in poison."

"Was it exciting?" Finn asked rather wistfully. "Fighting an ogre, I mean? I wish I'd been there."

"I canna tell ye how glad I am that ye were no'," Anghus replied, all traces of humour vanishing from his face. "Finn, I was lucky to escape the ogre alive! Three o' my men were no' so lucky. Do ye think their widows and orphans do no' wish with all their hearts that that blaygird ogre had no' stayed deep in the mountains? It was no' exciting, Finn, it was tragic."

Finn nodded her head, though her mouth once again had resumed its sullen droop. Anghus looked at her carefully. "Your mam tells me ye have been most restless and unhappy," he said gently. "What is wrong, lass?"

She kicked the leg of the bedside table, turning her face away. "Och, naught."

"It does no' sound like naught," her father said, pulling her a little closer so he could see her face. She glanced at him, then away, her brown cheek colouring, her hands

pulling at the elven cat's tufted ears.

"It's just there's naught to do here," she burst out. "Dai, could I no' go to the Theurgia in the spring?"

Anghus frowned. "But ye have excellent teachers here. We have spared no expense in bringing the very best to Castle Rurach. There's a witch who trained at the Tower o' Two Moons itself, no' to mention the dancing-master, the music teacher to teach ye the lute and spinet, the scribe to teach ye how to write with a courtly hand ..."

"I ken, I ken," Finn said dispiritedly. "My hours are very well provided for."

"Then what is the problem?"

She met his gaze squarely for the first time. "I'm bored."

"Oh, Finn, everyone finds the winter very long and boring. The days are short and the weather too inclement for many excursions outside the castle walls. But what canna be changed must be endured. Ye must find something to do to keep yourself busy. Brangaine is much your age; what does she do with her time?"

"Och, bluidy Brangaine!" Finn's hazel eyes hardened. "She's naught but a stuck-up corn-dolly, content to sit and sew a fine seam and smirk at herself in a mirror."

"That doesna sound very fair, Finn," Anghus frowned. "Your mother tells me Brangaine works hard at her lessons and . . ."

"Och, for sure," Finn said bitterly. "Everything Brangaine does is perfect. She's just perfect in every way, the toad."

"Fionnghal, it troubles me to hear ye speak this way. Ye must remember that this is your home and Brangaine an honoured guest. She has had an unhappy life, poor lass, losing both her parents so young and so tragically. And she has a heavy load on her shoulders, inheriting the throne o' Siantan when she is still just a young lass, and the land in such trouble. Do ye no' think ye could try a wee bit harder to be friends with her? She is your cousin after all."

Finn said nothing, lifting Goblin so her face was hidden by the elven cat's sinuous black shape.

"Come, lassie, do no' look so cross. I tell ye what, next fine day we'll take the horses out for a whole day, just the two o' us. What do ye say?"

"If we ever have a fine day," Finn muttered, then said, with a rather unconvincing smile, "Och, aye, that would be grand, Dai."

The next fine day brought news that changed everything, however. A messenger struggled up to the drawbridge, cold, exhausted and frightened, his horse ridden close to death. The messenger's shirt was half-torn from his back, the skin scored with three deep lines caused by a Fairgean trident.

"The sea demons have come, my laird," the messenger cried, falling to his knees before the MacRuraich. "More o' them than ever, my laird. We couldna keep them back. Already we've retreated to the third loch and still they keep on coming!"

Every year, the rising of the spring tides brought a bloodthirsty horde of Fairgean swimming down the coast of Rurach in pursuit of the blue whales, who migrated south each spring to mate in the warm, shallow waters of the southern seas. Over the past ten years, the sea-dwelling faeries had been growing in strength and numbers, causing great havoc as they swam up every river and stream, killing every human and beast they could find.

Ten years of constant raids on coastal towns and villages had armed the Fairgean with swords, daggers, and spears forged with iron, rather than their traditional weapons of coral and sea jewels, and honed their fighting skills so that each year it grew increasingly difficult to drive them back into the sea. With their steel weapons, the Fairgean were able to cut through the nets strung across the river to entangle them, and were able to fight on an equal footing with the laird's soldiers.

Every year saw a flood of refugees fleeing the coast and river as the Fairgean transformed into their landscape to rampage across the rich, rolling farmlands that filled the hinterland. The spring crops were trampled, herds of goats and sheep had their throats cut, and many crofters, stubbornly staying to defend their land, were murdered. Trade between the towns and the countryside was impossible without the freedom to boat up and down the river, and so lumber sat rotting in the yards, the furriers were unable to sell their winter cache of furs, the stonemasons and metal-smiths sat idle, and shipwrights starved. Every spring and autumn, the highland towns were crowded with refugees from the lowlands and each year, fewer and fewer returned to their farms in the lowlands. For the past few years, the MacRuraich had been struggling to fend off famine and disease, for the highlands simply did not have the resources to support so many people.

The news that the Fairgean had struck again, so early in the year and with such force, made everyone anxious and afraid. Almost immediately Angus was calling for his sword and his horse, though a white-faced Gwyneth was begging him to remember how weak he still was. He only caught her to him and kissed her, telling her to be brave and to keep the castle gates locked tightly. "If they have swum as high as the third loch already, we canna be sure they will no' swim higher," he said grimly. "Start preparing for a siege, dearling, and keep those gates shut!"

The MacRuraich and his men rode out that very afternoon, leaving Castle Rurach defended by only a few scant men. Over the next few weeks Gwyneth was kept busy, sending out messengers to the nearby towns and villages and stocking up with food and weaponry. She had little time to pay any attention to Finn, who could not help feeling neglected. Her father had ridden out with no more than a ruffle of her hair and an injunction to be good, while her mother was so preoccupied days could pass with her saying no more than, "Please, no' now, Finn!"

To make matters worse, the blizzard had blown over and the weather was clear and fine. Every day the loch sparkled, the wind was fresh with the smell of sun on pine needles, and the far blue distances beckoned Finn with the promise of adventure. Not all her pleading or sulking convinced Gwyneth to allow her out of the castle walls, however. The news from the south was very bad. For the first time in four hundred years, the Fairgean had penetrated Loch Finavon, the fourth loch from the sea. Angus and his men had been driven back with terrible losses of life, and were now making one last valiant stand before retreating to the castle. Many of the Fairgean had transformed into their

land-shape, climbed the river banks and were now hiding in the forest along the river's edge. There had been a surprise attack on a village less than a day's ride away from the castle. Since no Fairgean had ever invaded so deep into the highlands, the village was not well guarded and most of its inhabitants had been slaughtered. With the Fairgean threat closing in upon the castle, Gwyneth had no intention in allowing Finn to ride out, no matter how defiant her daughter grew.

The more tense and anxious the atmosphere in the castle, the more difficult Finn found it to contain her restless energy. All the squires had gone to attend the MacRuraich and his officers so there was no-one to practice swordplay with. She had ridden her horse Cinders round the outer bailey so many times she knew every crack in the wall and every tuft of grass. Most of the potboys and stable lads had been conscripted into the army so there was no-one to play football with, and the castle guards were all too busy to spend time telling her stories or teaching her to wrestle. She practised shooting with her little crossbow until she could hit the bulls' eye more often than not, then amused herself by exploring the secret passages and spying on the servants through the peepholes cleverly concealed in the carved panelling. This proved to be such a fascinating pastime that Finn lost track of time, only realising how late it was with a little squeak of dismay when she saw a procession of lackeys carrying heavily loaded trays up the back stairs to the dining hall. Nothing was more likely to anger her mother than Finn being late for her dinner again.

Finn scrambled up the secret stairway, through the dark, labyrinthine passageways and out the hidden doorway closest to the dining hall. It had been hours since she had eaten and she was very hungry indeed.

The secret doorway was concealed within the huge fireplace that took up most of one wall of the landing. Given the warmth of the day, the fire had luckily not yet been lit so that Finn was able to scramble out without too much trouble.

Unfortunately she was just crawling out of the fireplace, the elven cat at her heels, when her cousin Brangaine came demurely down the stairs, dressed in leaf-green silk which brought out the colour of her eyes, her long blonde hair shining in the candlelight. She looked Finn up and down, then said sweetly, "Has my lady sent all the chimneysweeps out to fight the sea demons, that ye must be sweeping up the cinders yourself, Fionnghal?"

The daughter of Gwyneth's younger sister, Brangaine had been brought to Castle Rurach after being named laird of the MacSian clan. Although Gwyneth said Brangaine needed to be taught her duties and responsibilities as banprionnsa of Siantan, Finn knew her mother hoped some of Brangaine's poise and civility would rub off on her. Nineteen years old, Brangaine had been brought up in seclusion at her family's country estate by three maiden aunts who had instilled in her every rule of courtly deportment. Brangaine knew what fork to use when eating quail, when to say "your honour," the exact degree of curtsy required for every rank of society, and how to be civil to the servants without bring too familiar. Brangaine never spilled food down her clothes, or tore her skirt playing chase-and-hide with the servant lads, or was caught stealing honey cakes from the kitchen. Her hair was always smooth and shiny, her boots were always well-polished, and she always had a clean handkerchief. The very sight of her was enough to put Finn's teeth on edge.

At first Brangaine had been polite to her cousin but Finn had been uncomfortable in her newfound place in life and had been quick to take offence at what she saw as Brangaine's smirk of superiority. Brangaine's comments and suggestions had gradually become edged with mockery, though always delivered with such sweetness of demeanour that only Finn had heard the derision beneath.

At her cousin's words, Finn glanced down at herself in some dismay, only then realising how very dirty she was. Her skirt was covered in dust and ashes, and the hem was dangling where she had caught it on some nail. Her knees were black and her brown curls all in a tangle. She eyed Brangaine with dislike, saying loftily, "No' at all. I just dropped something and had some trouble finding it."

Brangaine smiled her superior smile. "Happen ye'd best brush the cobwebs out o' your hair and change your clothes afore your mother sees ye. That is, if ye have a dress that's not all torn and grubby, which I doubt."

"At least I'm no' some muffin-faced prig, scared to lift a finger in case I break a nail," Finn flashed back.

Brangaine's eyes lingered on Finn's hands, the nails all broken and black as a blacksmith's. "No, no-one could accuse ye o' that," she said coldly. "Though I'm sure we all wish ye'd wash your hands occasionally. It's disgraceful the way ye run about looking ye're the daughter o' a swineherd instead o' the MacRuraich ..."

Finn's temper snapped. With an inarticulate cry, she sprang forward, punching Brangaine in the jaw. Her cousin fell back with a shriek, falling over a little gilded table and smashing the vase of flowers that stood upon it.

At the sound of the scream and the crashing porcelain, the door to the dining hall swung open and the court ladies looked out. When they saw Brangaine sprawling amongst the flowers and the shards of broken vase, Finn standing over her with clenched fists, they cried aloud in consternation, fluttering forward with raised hands and mouths open in dismay. "Oh, my lady, how are ye yourself? Are ye hurt? Gracious alive, you be bleeding, poor lassie!" they cried.

Gwyneth came out after them, her beautiful face tense with anger. "Fionnghal, what in Ea's name have ye done?"

"I punched her in the gob," Finn replied inelegantly. "And she deserved it too, the polecat!"

"Ye did what?" Gwyneth cried. "I canna stand any more o' this wild behaviour, Fionnghal! Is this the way a lady behaves? Look at ye! Ye look like ye've been dragged through a hedge backwards. What am I to do with you?"

Finn glowered back at her, the elven cat crouched at her feet, tail lashing. Across the room Brangaine was being helped to her feet, her eyes bright with tears, her lip split and bleeding.

Brangaine pulled her lace-edged handkerchief from her reticule and daintily patted her lip, glancing down at the bright stains with consternation. She said, rather breathlessly, "Och, please do no' be too angry with Fionnghal, my lady. Indeed it was my fault; I was teasing her."

Finn flashed Brangaine a look of surprise and resentment. *That's right, make me look even worse, ye sly-faced prig*, she thought. The elven cat hissed, her tufted ears laid back along her skull.

"No matter the provocation, a lady should never lose her temper," Gwyneth said, trying to control her own. "There is no excuse for striking ye like that. Look at your mouth, ye poor wee lassie. Nan, will ye ring for some ice and a cloth? Fionnghal, I want you to apologise to your cousin at once."

"I shall no!" Finn cried passionately. "She deserved to be thumped, the slimy sneaking toad!"

"That's enough!" Gwyneth cried. "Fionnghal, ye are no' a street-bairn anymore. Such conduct is absolutely unacceptable! Ye shall stay in your room until ye have the grace to apologise to your cousin and beg forgiveness for your rude, uncivilised behaviour."

"I'd rather eat roasted rats!" Finn cried. "She does naught but needle me and sneer at me and make me look a gowk."

"Ye mistake her," Gwyneth said icily. "Brangaine is a lady born and raised, and has far too much courtesy ever to speak or act unkindly. Ye are too quick to take offence."

Finn protested passionately but Gwyneth would not listen. When her daughter still refused to go to her room, she called in the guards and bid them escort her away. Eyes flashing, Finn drew her little eating dagger but they disarmed her and marched her away with hard hands clamped around her arms. She stared back at her cousin with hostile eyes, not believing the look of guilty apology which Brangaine cast her way.

The heavy oaken door slammed shut behind her and she heard the key turn in the lock. Finn turned and pummelled it with her fists, then flung herself down on her bed, burying her hot face in her pillow. *It's no' fair*, she said to herself, reliving Brangaine's superior smile as she had called Finn a pig-girl, her contemptuous glance from Finn's cobwebbed curls to her dirty, scuffed boots.

The sting in Finn's eyes subsided as she remembered with satisfaction the moment when her fist had met Brangaine's jaw. Finn had spent much of her life fighting for survival on the streets of Lucescere. Her punch packed some power. Finn grinned, then rolled over and stared up at the ornate ceiling, *I must get out o' here afore I go stark raving mad!*

Goblin was sitting at the end of the bed, delicately washing one paw. She watched as Finn leapt to her feet and rushed over to one of the tall, narrow windows that lined the wall, then began to wash her hind leg. Finn flung open the window and leant out.

The castle was built on a high rocky crag overlooking Loch Kintyre, which lay dark and shadowy some three hundred feet below. The castle was virtually surrounded by water, with the swift, turbulent rush of the Wulfrum River curving round the base of the crag on the northern flank. The walls of the crag were as steep and straight as any sea-cliff, broken at the base by sharp rocks that glistened black with slime.

The road to the castle ran up through thick forest to the edge of a deep, shadowy ravine, carved out of the rock by a fast-running burn that tumbled its way down to the loch in a series of white rapids and waterfalls. The only way to traverse the ravine was

across the castle drawbridge, which remained closed at all times. Of all the strongholds that Finn had seen, Castle Rurach was surely the most impregnable.

Although Finn was confident of her ability to climb in and out of any tower or castle, the height of the walls and the wicked rocks below made her reluctant to brave the drop unless she really had to. She had no rope and even if she tied every curtain and sheet in her room together, they would not be long enough to help her even a quarter of the way down. Most important of all, the valley below was sunk in shadows as the sun sidled down behind the mountains. It would soon be night and Finn had no desire to attempt that descent in darkness.

Finn gave another little sigh of frustration and crossed the room to kneel down before the arched doorway and peer through the keyhole. All she could see was the bulk of the manservant set to guard her door. She wished she had something sharp to poke him with but they had not given back her little jewelled knife. If only she had allowed her mother's ladies-in-waiting to teach her how to knit! A long, sharp knitting needle thrust into his posterior would really make that block-headed, stone-faced footman yowl.

"Just ye wait," she muttered at the footman's rear end. "I hope she has ye whipped for dereliction o' duty once I'm gone. I hope she has ye sent to fight goblins in the mountains."

She kicked the door but that only served to bruise her foot. Finn cursed and began to stride along the length of her suite, staring out the tall windows at the star-pricked sky. Her skirts swished as she paced. Impatiently she swept them up in one hand so they did not hinder her steps. *I shall no' apologise to that lamb-brained, mealy-mouthed corn-dolly! There mun be some other way out o' here!*

As Finn reached the end of the room and flung herself round to pace its length again, Goblin raised her black triangular head and observed the pacing girl through slitted aquamarine eyes. The elven cat then yawned, showing a long pink tongue and put her head down again, eyes closed.

Nay, I shall no' be calm, Finn hissed. I wish my daidein was home, he'd take my part. He wouldna believe that muffin-faced prig!

She rummaged around in one of the chests in her dressing-room until at last she found a little bundle shoved right down the bottom. Wrapped up in a square of yellow-embossed blue cloth were a pair of gloves tipped with steel claws and two odd contraptions of leather and steel that were designed to be strapped on over a pair of boots. Tangled up with them was a handful of long spikes and some pulleys and rope. All this was Finn's climbing equipment, which had been made for her on the orders of Iseult of the Snows, Lachlan's wife, in the days when they had been rebels together, plotting to overthrow Maya the Ensorcellor, the fairge princess who had bewitched the former Rígh Jaspár into marriage and had ruled the land so cruelly.

Finn gave a little hiss of satisfaction as the tools clattered on to the floor, but almost immediately she bit her lip in consternation. The gloves and boot racks were now far too small. Finn had been only twelve when she had climbed the two hundred foot rampart behind Lucescere to let Lachlan and his rebel troops into the city. She was now almost seventeen and her limbs were much longer than they had been five years earlier. In addition, the rope had decayed in the damp atmosphere of the old castle and was rotten

in parts.

She sat back on her heels, and smoothed the cloth out over her knees. A rather odd-looking yellow hand was sewn clumsily on to the sky-blue cloth, with broad yellow stripes angling out from it, meant to signify rays. It was the original flag of the League of the Healing Hand and it brought a sting of tears to Finn's eyes. After a long moment, she folded it up again and thrust it into the pillowcase with the spikes and pulleys and her little hammer.

Eventually Finn's temper died and she was left feeling very low and dispirited. She sat in her chair in front of the fire, moodily jabbing the logs with the poker. The sound of a key in the door brought her flying upright but it was only her maid-in-waiting, Raina, with a tray of food. Accompanying her were two stern-faced guards. Finn stood silently, her chin up, her hands clenched before her, as Raina put the tray on the table before the fire and retreated with a mocking glance that said, more clearly than words, "Serve ye right, ye muffin-faced brat."

At first Finn decided she would not touch any of the food but after a while the smell of the mutton stew broke down her defenses and she ate hungrily, telling herself she needed to keep her strength up if she was to escape the castle. She wrapped up the bread, cheese and fruit in one of her pillowcases, and wished that she had not been so hasty in drawing her knife, since she would surely need one on her travels. Despite her isolation all afternoon, Finn had not lost her resolve to quit the home of her forebears.

The Jongleurs Come

The next morning dawned bright and clear. Finn hung out the window, smelling the wind and cursing fluently. Here it was, as still and warm as summer, and she was locked up like a criminal in her own castle!

Suddenly her eyes lit with excitement. A procession of caravans was winding up the steep road to the castle, their parrot-bright colours vivid in the sunshine.

"Jongleurs!" she cried. "Happen they'll have news o' the court!"

The little cat perched on her shoulder gave a plaintive miaow. Only then did Finn remember her incarceration and her smile faded. "Surely mam will let me out to see the jongleurs?" she said to the elven cat, who only slitted her aquamarine eyes in response. With a sinking heart, Finn watched the jongleurs' brightly painted caravans cross the drawbridge and disappear within the thick walls of the castle.

All day Finn paced her rooms, waiting for her mother to relent and send someone to let her out. When Raina brought her a tray of black bread and cheese, she begged the maid to tell her when she would be set free. Raina shrugged, lifted an eyebrow, and went away without a word, and Finn suddenly wished she had been nicer to her maid. She had thought of her maid as the frontline of her gaolers, however, and had often spied on her to gain information that she could use as leverage to stop Raina reporting her movements to her mother. Now Finn was paying for her underhand ways—and the debt was high.

She watched the guards shut her bedroom door with mingled fury, frustration and misery choking her throat. It seemed Gwyneth's determination was as great as her own.

Unable to help feeling a new sense of respect for her mother, Finn sat and toyed with her meagre rations, making and discarding one plan after another.

Without a reliable rope or climbing equipment, Finn was loath to attempt the perilous descent from her window. She was more determined than ever not to apologise for thumping Brangaine, yet she longed to escape the confines of her room and enjoy the rare entertainment the jongleurs offered. There had been six caravans in the procession, which promised a wide variety of performers. There would be music and singing, without a doubt, and juggling and acrobatics, and maybe even a performing bear, like Finn had seen in Lucescere. The jongleurs would bring news as well, which Finn was hungry to hear. She could escape her rooms by trickery but that would only make her mother angry and she would be locked up again as soon as she was found—and how could she watch the jongleurs and listen to their tales of the court and the countryside if she was being chased all over the castle? Unless, of course, they could not see her . . .

Finn whiled away the long, dreary afternoon as best she could, waiting until it was time for Raina to bring her dinner. At last the sun sank down behind the mountains and darkness fell over the rank upon rank of serried pine trees. Finn flung open the window so that the evening breeze swept into the room, sending the heavy curtains swaying and riffling the pages of her books upon the table. She knotted the rope about the post of her bed and threw it out the window, then drew out the little square of silk she always carried with her in her pocket. Finn shook it out into the long, black cloak and wrapped it about her, pulling the hood over her head. A little snap of static, a shudder of cold, ran over her. She rubbed her arms, moving her shoulders uneasily. Goblin miaowed, and she bent and picked up the little cat, sliding her into the cloak's deep pocket.

At last Finn heard the bolt sliding back and the grate of the key in the lock. She stood silently in the shadows, trying to breathe as shallowly as she could. Then the door swung open and a ray of light struck into the dark, cold room. Raina's portly form was silhouetted against the lantern flare. She stepped forward hesitantly, a tray in her hands. "My lady?" she called. When there was no response, she called again. At the note of alarm in Raina's voice the guards stepped forward, one holding up the lamp. Its flame leapt and guttered in the wind.

As Raina and the guards searched her rooms, Finn slipped silently out the door and down the corridor. A deep thrill of gratification ran through her veins. *They thought to keep Finn the Cat locked up but I've shown them now*, she thought.

As she hurried down the back staircase, Finn could hear the sound of music and laughter from the grand hall. She slipped soundlessly along one of the side passages and in through the servants' door at the back. She hid herself behind the heavy velvet curtains hanging down from the gallery and peeped out through the crack.

Down three sides of the great, vaulted room ran long tables where the men and women of the castle sat, the boards before them loaded with platters of meat and bread and roasted vegetables and jugs of ale and spiced wine.

Gwyneth sat at the high table with her niece and son and the principal gentlemen and ladies-in-waiting, while at the two long side tables sat the bard and the harper, the seneschal, the sennachie, the purse-bearer and cupbearer, and the other men and ladies-in-waiting, all sitting according to their rank and position. Behind most of the nobility stood their personal servants, all wearing their master's livery and expressions of

the utmost superciliousness. As the kitchen staff brought in the heavy trays and dumped them on a side table, the squires would all leap forward and squabble over the choicest pieces of meat or game, which they would then present to their master or mistress with bent knee.

At the tables at the far end of the room sat the highest-ranking servants. They did not usually eat in the grand hall but had been admitted so they too could watch the jongleurs. They did not eat from gilt-edged porcelain plates like those at the high tables, but used trenchers of black bread instead, piling them high with mutton and potato stew and any scraps of roast stag or pheasant or honeyed pork that the nobility scorned to eat or throw to the dogs squabbling under the tables. When the juices of the stew had soaked the bread so it was too soft to use as a plate, they ate it or threw it down to the dogs, seizing another from the wooden platter in the centre of their table.

While the crowd feasted, they were entertained by the jongleurs who performed in the centre of the room. Finn craned her neck to see, but her view was obscured by the castle cook's massive form. All she could see was a juggler's swiftly rising circle of golden balls, then a sudden whirl of colour as an acrobat somersaulted high into the rafters.

The hall was bright with firelight and candlelight so that even the lofty vaulted ceiling was clearly illuminated. Finn hesitated, then bit her lip, pulled the hood even closer about her face, and slipped out from the shelter of the curtains. Having to dodge and sidestep to avoid the hurrying servants, she made her way up the length of the hall until she could step up onto the dais where the high table was set.

Many of the tall, ornately carved chairs at the high table were empty, since Finn's father Anghus and most of his men were still absent. Finn slowly eased out one of the chairs, wincing a little as the wooden foot scraped on the floor. Waiting until everyone's attention was transfixed by the fire-eater swallowing a flaming torch, Finn slipped into the chair and sat down on the soft leather seat, leaning her elbows on the table.

She watched in delight as the fire-eater bent backwards till his long ponytail was brushing the floor, then thrust the flaming torch down his throat, closing his mouth over the blaze so his cheeks glowed red. Slowly, theatrically, he withdrew the torch, now black and smoking, then pulled himself upright, his cheeks still bulging and glowing with that weird red light. From his pursed lips curled a tendril of smoke, then he spat out a long blast of flame that scorched her face. Finn leant back instinctively, trying not to scream with the others.

The fire-eater juggled six blazing torches, swallowed them one by one, then used his fiery breath to ignite a hoop of paper. A black-eyed girl around Finn's age somersaulted through the ring of flame, then cartwheeled away down the hall as the fire-eater began to juggle daggers and swords back and forth with a young man in a sky-blue jerkin and a crimson velvet cap with a bhanais bird's feather. A cluricaun in a green satin doublet skipped in to dance a jig between them, the bells on his toes and around his neck chiming as he whirled and pranced amidst the vortex of spinning knives.

Further down the hall Finn could see two boys stalking about on high stilts, their ridiculous hats brushing against the rafters. A man with a forked beard the colour of flax was entertaining the servants' table with card tricks and a fast-paced patter of jokes, while a woman leant nearby, strumming a guitar. Other musicians wandered about,

playing fiddles or flutes, or rattling tambourines tied up with many-coloured ribbons.

The black-eyed girl was now doing a series of elegant back flips that took her right across the hall, then did a handspring that took her up into the rafters where she swung upside down like a brightly coloured arak. Then she somersaulted down, landing on the shoulders of the crimson-capped man, who had the same bright eyes as she did, black as pools of ink. She leapt down lightly and they bowed to tumultuous applause.

Wishing that she was an acrobat instead of a banprionnsa, Finn waited until everyone was watching the young jongleur, who was demonstrating her incredible flexibility. Finn then slowly reached out her hand and slid a slice of roast pheasant from the platter in front of her. Glancing about to make sure no-one was watching, she slipped it into the shelter of the cloak and shared it with the elven cat. Both of them had had nothing but prisoner's rations to eat for two days now and they were starving. Finn was glad to eat, for the comfort as well as the sustenance. Somehow the cloak of invisibility always made her feel uncomfortable, as if it were made of some prickly material rather than the silkiest of fabrics. It rubbed her up the wrong way, causing her hair to snap with static and her flesh to rise in goosebumps. It was like wrapping herself in the cold and deadness of a winter night, rather than in something to keep her warm. She was always rather glad to hide it away in her pocket once more, though she was never able to leave it in her chest of drawers or in her cupboard, always needing to have it where her fingers could brush it at a whim.

Finn was just stealing a little meat pie from the plate of the man next to her when she felt a little prickle of unease. She glanced about and saw her brother Aindrew was staring her way with an open mouth and an expression of the utmost bewilderment. She looked down and realised it must look as if the meat pie was floating through the air. With a chuckle she concealed it within her sleeve then ate it quickly, trying not to let any flakes of pastry fall out of her mouth. She was tempted to pour wine into a goblet just so he could see a jug lift and pour out a stream of red liquid all by itself. She resisted the temptation and was glad she had when she saw Brangaine was also gazing at her apparently empty chair with some amazement. A meat pie falling from the edge of a plate could be put down to natural causes; a pouring jug could not.

The next time Finn took one of the delicious meat pies she was careful to drop a fold of the cloak over it before lifting it so it too would be concealed by the magic of the garment. After a while Aindrew stopped glancing her way every few minutes, too entranced by the jongleurs to bother about a floating meat pie. Brangaine was not so easily distracted. Finn felt her gaze often and was careful not to draw any more attention to herself, invisible or not.

No-one at the castle knew about the magical cloak. Finn had guarded its secret carefully.

She had first found the cloak in the relics room at the Tower of Two Moons during the Samhain rebellion that had overthrown Maya the Ensorcellor and given Lachlan the throne. In gratitude for their help, he had allowed each of the eight members of the League of the Healing Hand to choose one treasure to have for their own. Finn had chosen an ancient hunting horn embossed with the shape of a running wolf, because the same emblem was on the medallion she wore around her neck. She had not then known that the wolf was the badge of the MacRuraich clan and that the horn had the power to

call up the ghosts of the clan's long-dead warriors. She had only discovered the horn's magic later, when she had blown the horn in a desperate call for help and had received assistance of the most unexpected kind.

The older boys had chosen swords or daggers, except for Jay the Fiddler who had taken a beautiful old viola and Parian, who had chosen a silver goblet with a crystal in the stem. Johanna the Mild had chosen a jewelled bracelet while her baby brother Connor had wanted a music box.

Chance had caused Finn to pick up the cloak as well. At the time she had told herself that since she had been the one to face all the danger in climbing the wall, she should have something more than the others. She had kept the cloak secret, without really knowing why.

Like the horn, the cloak had proved to be magical, hiding anyone who wore it under a guise of invisibility that not even the most powerful sorcerer could penetrate. Finn had used it to escape the Awl, then Lachlan had hidden himself in it while he confronted his dying brother. Later, Maya the Ensorceller had stolen the cloak to escape Lachlan's wrath. Most thought she must have the magical cloak still, for it had not been found during the clean-up after the Samhain victory. Only Finn knew that she had used her own clairvoyant talents to search for it through the maze, finding it at last under a hedge near the Pool of Two Moons where Maya and Lachlan had had their last confrontation. She had folded it up and hidden it in her pocket and told no-one, not even when Meghan had instigated a frantic search for it during the ensuing days. She had brought the cloak of invisibility back with her to Castle Rurach and used it often to escape the scrutiny of her attendants or to eavesdrop on the conversations of the servants.

Just then Finn saw her maid Raina speaking in a low voice to her mother's chief lady-in-waiting, Lady Anne Montgomery. Her fat old face was distressed. Finn tensed. She watched as Lady Anne allowed Raina to approach the high table. She curtsied respectfully, then bent down low to speak to the banprionnsa. Gwyneth's face whitened until she looked as though she might faint. She gave a few quick orders then leant back in her chair, sipping at her wine, trying to hide her distress. Raina hurried away and Finn watched as various officers were called away from the tables. They went with worried faces and Finn could not help feeling a certain satisfaction. She sat back to enjoy the show, knowing that half the castle guard would now be searching for her. Not one could possibly guess that she sat in their very midst, under the blaze of the chandelier, and only a few chairs down from her mother.

The platters of roast meats and vegetables had been taken away and now the servants were carrying in plates of honey cakes, sweetmeats and dried fruits. The jongleurs had gathered around the frail form of an old woman, who had been carried into the centre of the room on a chair all carved and painted with leaves, flowers and birds. Her hair was white, her olive-skinned face a mass of wrinkles. The hands which rested on the carved arms of her chair were bent and twisted as birds' claws. On her wizened breast hung many necklaces of amber stones, some as big as eggs, others as small as teeth.

Finn's eyes widened a little in surprise. She recognised the old woman. She was Enit Silverthroat, a great friend of the Keybearer Meghan NicCuinn. Finn had last seen her at Lucescere five years earlier, singing for the Rígh and Banrígh. It was said she could sing

birds to her hand and people to their death. It was a rare privilege indeed to hear Enit Silverthroat sing.

Softly the musicians strummed their guitars and clarsachan, the fiddler raised his bow and the cluricaun lifted his silver flute to his mouth. As music spilled melodiously across the grand hall, the loud hum of conversation died away. Then Enit began to sing and an awed silence fell upon the audience.

Although her voice quavered in places, and once cracked mid-syllable, it was so poignant with longing and sorrow, so rich in cadence and experience, so pure and melodic that involuntary tears rose in the eyes of many. Finn heard a stifled sob and saw that her mother had raised one hand to shield her eyes, and that Brangaine was bending close over her, comforting her with a gentle hand. Finn herself felt a pang of regret that she had to struggle to repress.

At last her voice trailed into silence and the crowd applauded wildly. There were tears on Enit's face and the black-eyed girl bent to kiss her withered cheek. The old woman smiled a little and lifted her crippled hand to pat the girl's smooth brown cheek. The jongleurs began to play a much-loved ballad and the young man with the crimson cap again led the singing.

"Lassie wi' the yellow coatie,

Will ye wed a moorland Jockie?

Lassie wi' the yellow coatie,

Will ye come an' live with me?

I have meal and milk in plenty,

I have kale and cakes full dainty,

I've a but and ben most gentry,

But I want a bonny wife like thee."

He was very handsome, with tousled dark curls, dusky olive checks and an impudent smile. Finn could feel his attraction herself and noticed how all the court ladies were smiling and fluttering as he wooed them with his words of love. Even Brangaine was blushing a little, somewhat to Finn's surprise. Her cousin's face was usually very pale and serene, her mouth set in a rather melancholy droop. No anger or passion ever seemed to ruffle that calm exterior. To see her responding to the amorous glances of a jongleur made Finn grin.

"Although my measure be but small,

An' little gold I have to show,

I have a heart without a flaw,
And I will give it all to thee.
Lassie wi' the yellow coatie,
Ah! Take pity on your Jockie;
Lassie wi' the yellow coatie,
Come be my love an' live wi' me."

Everyone clapped and cheered as he finished with a flourish and there were calls for more. Only Gwyneth seemed immune to his charm and Finn felt troubled as she saw how pale and unhappy her mother looked. For a moment she wanted to fling off the cloak of invisibility, reassure her mother that she was alive and well, and beg her forgiveness for being so stubborn. She fought back the urge and let herself enjoy the music.

It had been some years since she had heard such skilled musicians. In *Lucescere* her best friend had been a fiddler who had played with just the same verve and passion as this young fiddler, though without his polish and poise. They even looked rather the same, though Jay had been thin and pale and undernourished, while this young violinist was tall and brown and laughing. Dressed in a forest-green doublet and satin crimson breeches with a feather of the same colour stuck in his cap, he was playing his fiddle with immense skill and animation, so that many in the audience began to beat time with the handles of their eating knives.

Then the cook got up and began to dance a jig with the butler, showing all her petticoats and her thick, blue-veined legs. With shouts of glee, many others among the audience began to dance also, some leaping up on to the tables. The fiddler played faster and faster, and the dancers whirled round giddily. Laughing, the young juggler led a dancing procession round and round the grand hall until everyone was on their feet, everyone but Gwyneth, alone and pale in her great chair and the crippled old singer, alone and swarthy in hers. Even Finn was dancing, although she knew any misstep could cause her unmasking. The black cloak swirled around her as she spun and hopped, and one hot, sweaty body after another cannoned into her, much to their confusion. As Finn danced she thought to herself, *this fiddler's got magic in his fingers, just like Jay . . .*

A suspicion stole over her. She remembered that Jay had been apprenticed to Enit at the Tower of Two Moons, to learn what she knew about the songs of sorcery. She twirled her way towards the fiddler, who bowed and scraped in the centre of the jostling crowd as if he stood in the eye of a storm. At last she was able to come close to his side and look up into his hazel eyes. Just then his bow faltered and he looked about, saying hesitantly, "Finn?"

Jay gratefully accepted a goblet of mulled wine from one of the serving maids and stood back against the wall to watch Nina dancing. With her orange velvet skirts swirling up to reveal slim, brown legs, she spun and swayed around the room, holding the audience spellbound. Jay sipped his wine and examined the crowd closely, looking for Finn. He

had seen no sight of her, even though he could have sworn he had felt her close.

Suddenly he felt fingers tugging at his sleeve. He glanced down and saw a hand reaching out from behind the tapestry hanging down the wall. It was small and finely made, but rather grubby. He bent a little, trying to see who it was attracting his attention in such a surreptitious manner. Finn frowned at him, her finger to her lips, then beckoned him closer.

"Meet ye in the hall outside," she whispered.

Jay swallowed down his wine thoughtfully, then made his slow, unobtrusive way round to the door and out into the corridor.

Finn was waiting for him, hopping up and down on one foot in impatience. She was dressed in a beautifully made riding dress of green velvet, its divided skirt splattered with dried mud. The white frill at her throat and wrists was also rather dirty and dangled from one sleeve where she had caught it on a nail and torn the lace. Her long brown boots were scuffed and muddy.

"Ye do no' look much cleaner than ye did in the auld days," he said critically. "Though at least your clothes fit ye properly now."

"Och, dinna ye start!" Finn cried. "Who cares about clothes? We've much more important things to talk about!" She looked him over critically, then said, "Though look at ye, fine as a proud laird's bastard!" She flipped his crimson feather with one finger.

Jay pushed her hand away, colouring hotly under his tan. "I was disappointed indeed when I did no' see ye at the high table with your mam. What are ye doing skulking about behind tapestries?"

"I dinna want anyone to see me, o' course. Why else?" Suddenly she threw her arm about his shoulder, reaching up to kiss his lean cheek. "Och, Jay, it is glad indeed I am to be seeing ye! It has been so long syne I last saw ye! What are ye doing here? Did ye come to see me?"

"Aye, o' course," he replied, though his cheeks burnt even hotter. "We came here on purpose, to ask ye ... But, Finn, this is something Enit will be telling your mam about later. Ye will hear it all then. I shouldna be out here talking to ye now, we're in the middle o' a performance! They'll all be wondering where I am . . ."

"Canna they do without ye a while?" Finn cried. "I have no' seen ye for so long—can ye no' bide here wi' me a wee and tell me what ye've been doing all this time?"

"But we shall have audience wi' ye after the performance," Jay said, a little bemused. "We can talk then."

"I may no' be able to," Finn said with a theatrical groan. "I have escaped my prison to see ye—if they catch me they'll lock me up again and I may no' be able to escape again."

"Whatever can ye mean?" Jay cried, considerably startled.

Finn sighed. "I'm a prisoner in my own home," she said sadly. "Ye wonder why I must sneak around and hide behind tapestries, but if anyone saw me they'd drag me away and lock me up and put such heavy guards upon me that I'd never be free again."

"Ye canna be serious! Do ye mean ye're kept locked up in a dungeon?"

"Well, it's no' exactly a dungeon . . . but I have been locked up—and fed nothing but black bread and cheese—wi' the meanest set o' guards ye could imagine, as stiff as if they'd had pokers shoved up their arses."

"But why? What have ye done?"

"Naught! Well, no' much. I punched my cousin right in her smirking mouth, but she deserved it. The slyest, sickliest, most double-faced sow ye've ever met! Ye should've seen it, Jay. She went head over heels and smashed a vase and all the court ladies screeched like hens in a whirlwind. It was grand!"

"And they locked ye up for that?"

"Aye, is it no' unjust?"

"Well, happen banprionnsachan are no' supposed to punch each other," Jay said rather uncertainly.

"As if I care a jot for that! I've never met anyone who more deserved a good pummelling than Brangaine. They should be thanking me instead o' locking me up and trying to make me apologise. Jay, I hate it here. Naught ever happens and they want me to learn to sew seams and sit with my hands folded and listen to the hens quack . . ."

"I think it's ducks that quack, no' hens."

"Who cares? I just want to get away from here and have adventures. Can I no' go away with ye? I'd love to travel about with the jongleurs and perform and sing songs. I bet ye have adventures all the time!"

"We've had a few," Jay agreed with a smile in his voice. "But that's why we're here, Finn—to ask if we can take ye wi' us . . ."

Just then they heard the door behind them open. Music and laughter spilled out with the blaze of light. Finn looked about frantically, then opened the lid of a chest and leapt inside. Jay turned as the handsome young jongleur looked out, his guitar in his hand.

"Jay, what do ye do? Why are ye out here all alone?"

"Sorry, Dide—I'm just coming."

"Are ye no' well?"

"Nay, I be grand. I'll be along in a wee bit."

Dide nodded his head, though he looked puzzled still. He shut the door again and Jay looked round for Finn, who was peering out from the chest, which she had opened just a crack. "We'll talk again later," he whispered, and went back into the great hall.

Finn chambered out of the chest, her cheeks burning hot with excitement. Jay had come to take her away!

Anxiety suddenly chilled her. If only she had not angered her mother! Gwyneth might well forbid her to go. *Happen I'd best apologise to Brangaine now and get it over and done with*, she thought.

She walked back into the noisy hall with her heart pounding and her palms prickling with sweat, making her way through the crowd towards the high table. Her appearance caused the court to murmur in surprise, but her mother did not notice, leaning her cheek on her hand and staring without seeing into the depths of her wine glass.

Finn was struck by how wan her mother looked, with shadows under her beautiful green eyes and in the hollows of her cheeks. She knelt by her side and seized her limply hanging hand in hers, saying sincerely, "I be sorry, mam! I do no' mean to trouble ye so!"

Gwyneth started upright, knocking over her glass. "Fionnghal! How ye startled me! Where have ye been? We've been searching for ye everywhere. I was sure ye must've fallen to your death."

"Nay, I would no' fall," Finn said indignantly, then tried to soften her tone, saying, "I'm just grand, mam, as ye can see. I'm sorry to have worried ye and I'm sorry I punched Brangaine, though indeed she deserved it!"

Gwyneth was mopping up the spilt wine with her napkin. She said distractedly, "What am I to do with ye, so wild and reckless ye are?"

Finn opened her mouth to cry, "Let me go with the jongleurs," then swallowed her words. After a moment's hesitation she said meekly, "I do no' ken, mam. I'm sorry ye think me wild; I do no' mean to be. Happen it's because I'm used to having to look out for myself and being able to do whatever I want to do. I never kent I was a banprionnsa, ye must ken."

"Aye," her mother replied wearily, looking down at her stained napkin. "And I must admit ye were impetuous as a wee lassie too, always getting into mischief." She sighed and crumpled the napkin up. "Still, ye shall rule Rurach one day and ye must learn some sense. Ye canna be hitting out at anyone ye dislike, or sitting down to judgement in a torn and stained kirtle. Ye shall be lady o' the MacRuraich clan, ye ken."

Finn again had to bite back rebellious words. She bowed her head and said nothing.

Her mother said, "Well, if ye are willing to make a formal apology to your cousin and promise me to try and mind your manners in the future, I suppose ye can stay and watch the rest o' the show. It was a shame ye had to miss so much. I ken ye find Castle Rurach very dull."

Finn knew her mother was hoping she would deny this but she could not, since it was true. So she simply nodded and sat down next to her mother. They sat in silence for a long while, watching the antics of the cluricaun, who pranced about before them, turning head over heels and kicking his furry legs in a high-spirited jig.

Then Enit sang again, accompanied this time only by Jay and his viola. The candles were sinking low and shadows gathered in the corners, twisting and flowing like dancing ghosts.

"I wish, I wish, I wish in vain,
I wish I were a maid again;
A maid again I never will be,
Till apples grow on an orange tree,
Aye, till apples grow on an orange tree.
Now there's a tavern in the town
Where my love sits himself down;
He calls another lassie to his knee
And tells her the tale he once told me,
Aye, tells her the tale he once told me.
I wish, I wish my babe was born
An' smiling on yon nurse's knee;
An' I myself were dead and gone,
Wi' green, green grass growing over me,
Aye, wi' green, green grass growing over me."

The viola caught up the melancholy refrain and swept down in a cascade of low, thrilling notes. The hairs rose on Finn's arms and a little shiver ran down her spine. She glanced at her mother, wanting to share her pleasure in the beauty of the music. To her dismay she saw tears sliding down her mother's cheeks. She touched her sleeve awkwardly, saying, "What is it, mam?"

"It's naught," Gwyneth said abruptly, trying to wipe away her tears without anyone noticing. "I miss your father. I wish he were here and safe. I wish there was peace."

"Happen there will be peace soon," Finn said. "Lachlan the Winged will prevail!"

"Peace?" Gwyneth said harshly. "There has never been peace, as long as I can remember. If it is no' rebellion in the provinces it is the blaygird murdering Fairgean. There will never be peace, as long as a sea-faery still lives."

Finn was troubled. "Lachlan and Iseult will sweep them away again," she replied stoutly. "No-one can fight like they can."

"We thought there would be peace forever after Jaspar the Ensorcelled won the Battle o' the Strand. Look what happened to him, enchanted by a Fairge witch and sucked dry o' his life till he was naught but a dry husk o' a man. Ye forget I was born in Siantan, my bairn. My people have fought the Fairgean for hundreds o' years. They never

forget and they never forgive. As long as there are Fairgean in the seas, we shall never be at peace."

"Lachlan and Iseult will sweep them away again," Finn said stoutly. "He will raise the Lodestar and they'll be sucked down into a whirlpool and drowned, and we can all be comfortable again."

"Comfortable wi' the deaths' o' a thousand sea-faeries on our conscience?" a melodious voice rang out. Finn and Gwyneth looked up, startled. The hunched figure of Enit Silverthroat sat before them in her chair, supported on one side by Dide and on the other by Jay, both looking uncomfortable. The little cluricaun was pressed close against her knee, his ears swivelling anxiously, his wizened little face miserable.

"The Rígh has repealed the Decree against the Faeries, remember?" Enit said softly. "It is against the law o' the land to talk o' destroying those o' faery kind."

"Surely that does no' include the Fairgean?" Gwyneth was astonished. "Ye canna mean the Rígh does no' intend to take action against those black-bluided sea-demons? For the past ten years they have laid waste to my country, killing any living thing that fell into their slimy, webbed hands. They have caused such pain and heartbreak . . ." Her voice cracked.

"Wha' do ye think we have caused the Fairgean?"

Enit said, the quiver of absolute conviction in her voice. "The Carraigean made it a fashion to wear their scaled skins, for Ea's sake! The cliffs o' Siantan and Carraig had been their homes for thousands o' years and yet when our ancestors came here, they drove them off, causing their children to drown or freeze to death in the icy seas."

Gwyneth stood up, her face frozen into an expression of distant politeness. "I see ye canna have spent much time in my country. If ye had, ye would have seen the terrible toll the Fairgean raids have had on the Siantans."

"We have just come from Siantan," Enit replied softly, her hands trembling on the arms of her chair. "Indeed, there is much trouble there: many people homeless and going hungry. I do no' mean to sound as if I do no' understand how ye must feel. I ken your mother was killed by marauding Fairgean. All I am saying is that . . ."

"The Fairgean raped and murdered my mother and my elder sister," Gwyneth said in a cold voice. "They cut off my brother's hands and feet, and made him watch. They are the cruellest, most savage and disgusting creatures on the face o' the earth!"

"Yet did your father no' launch the most merciless o' reprisals? Did he no' have hundreds o' the sea-faeries captured and put to death in a horrible fashion?"

"They made my brother watch as they gutted my mother and threw her entrails to their blaygird sea serpents!"

"There has been much evil done on all sides," Enit replied gently. "I ken your childhood was tragic indeed and I understand why ye hate the Fairgean ..."

"Yet ye defend them!" Gwyneth's voice rang out and many in the riotous crowd heard her voice and turned to glance at her, surprised. She subdued her agitation,

gathering up her skirt and inclining her head to the old woman. "I am weary and wish to retire. I am sorry ye think me implacable in my hatred for the sea demons. All I can say is that ye obviously do no' come from near the sea. If ye had seen the years o' terror and grief that I had seen, ye would agree wi' me that the only hope for peace in this land is to wipe out the Fairgean once and for all."

Enit leant forward as if wishing to say something else.

Gwyneth held up her hand forbiddingly. "I understand ye have messages for me from the Rígh. I shall take audience with ye in the morning. Goodnight." She waited for the old woman to duck her white head in an awkward curtsy before sweeping from the room, her head with its crown of fair plaits held high.

Finn lowered her eyes, embarrassed. She had never seen her mother so impassioned. Normally Gwyneth was the most gentle and considerate of women, prone to mercy in the judgement hall and kindness to the lowliest of the castle folk. It was like seeing a lamb with two heads to hear her mother talk with such ruthlessness. She heard Jay murmur something to the old woman, then he and Dide lifted the chair and carried her away, the cluricaun following close behind, his tail dragging on the floor.

Rising to follow her mother, Finn saw her cousin standing against the wall, her blue-grey plaid held close about her, her hand clenched around the Mac-Sian badge pinned to her breast. Conscious of Finn's gaze, Brangaine bit her lip and dropped her hand, colour rising in her cheeks. For the first time Finn wondered how her cousin felt about inheriting a land in thrall to the Fairgean threat. Siantan was surrounded on three sides by the sea. Its economy relied on trade, ship-building and fishing, all of which industries had been destroyed by the rise of the Fairgean over the past ten years. Finn wondered whether Brangaine hated the Fairgean as much as Gwyneth did and wished to annihilate them too. There was no clue in her cousin's closed face. Finn stroked the soft fur of the elven cat crouched on her shoulder and went thoughtfully to bed.

The next morning dawned grey and blustery. The servants went about their work with pale faces and wincing eyes. The cook was indisposed and many of the lairds snored still in their rooms, so that the company at the breakfast table was rather thin. When Gwyneth came down from her suite, she too was pale and drawn, with reddened eyelids. Brangaine came with her, and at the sight of her cousin Finn coloured hotly and bit her lip. She came forward swiftly, though, and made her apology in a gruff voice, her cheeks burning. Brangaine brought her hand to her swollen lip self-consciously but accepted the apology with gentle thanks. Gwyneth's look of approbation was enough to drown out the little sting of resentment Brangaine's forbearance gave her and Finn gave herself over to daydreams of travelling with the jongleurs and having adventures.

At last her mother pushed aside her barely touched plate and rose to leave. Finn bounded after her, barely able to contain her excitement, the elven cat at her heels like an ink-black shadow. Brangaine followed at a more decorous pace, her downcast face as usual rather distant, her hands folded before her.

The jongleurs were already waiting in the drawing room. In their bright shabby clothes, they looked like a flock of storm-tattered exotic birds. They rose as Gwyneth and her retinue came in, bowing with a flourish of their feathered caps. A murmur rose as the court complimented their jongleurs on their performance and exclaimed at some of their tricks and songs.

"I hope ye enjoyed the show, my lady?" the fire-eater said with a grin, resplendent in a worn crimson doublet and striped hose.

"Indeed I did," Gwyneth replied politely. "It is rare that we have much entertainment at Castle Rurach these days." She sat straight-backed in her velvet-upholstered chair, her pale hair combed into a plait that hung down to her knees. The blue-grey MacSian plaid was draped around her shoulder and pinned with a large, translucent blue jewel. "I found the music particularly affecting and only wish my husband could have been here to listen to your songs as well."

"We caught up wi' the MacRuraich at Loch Finavon," the fire-eater replied, bending his black head so none but those nearest to Gwyneth could hear what he said. "I be feared there was no' much time nor mood for singing."

Her green eyes flashed up to meet his. "What news o' my husband?"

"He sends his dearest greetings, my lady, and says they have managed to hold back the Fairgean, though wi' a very high cost in men. They are sore tested, my lady. The Fairgean do no' seem to weary and attack at any time o' day and night. Again and again they have broken through the palisade across the river. The MacRuraich would be glad o' some reinforcements."

Gwyneth frowned and twisted her fingers together. "I have already sent most o' the castle guard," she murmured. "Indeed, there is barely a man o' fighting age left in the entire country. We shall have to see if we can raise some hardy lads from the refugees from the coast."

The fire-eater, a rather heavy man with a gold ring in his ear, then brought Gwyneth up to date with many happenings around Eileanan. He told of weddings, births and deaths, lovers' quarrels and reconciliations, fortunes won and gambled away, estates inherited and dowries given, shipwrecks, bankruptcies and scandals, the killing of ogres and sightings of dragons. Since news was always hard to come by, Gwyneth and her ladies listened eagerly. At last he got up to demonstrate the latest dance step from the royal court at Lucescere, whirling Lady Anne Montgomery around until she was breathless and laughing.

Under cover of the chatter and music, Enit was carried by her grandson and granddaughter to sit by Gwyneth's side. Imperious green eyes met unfathomable black ones.

"I have news from the Righ," the old woman said softly. Gwyneth nodded her back stiff. "There has been much unrest in Tirsoilleir since they lost the war," the jongleur said, with a quick glance round to ensure none were listening. "The Keybearer thinks it is time to take a hand in the weaving. They have a plan which they hope will help in the unravelling o' the Kirk's rule."

"What is that to do wi' me?" Gwyneth asked, hostility barely concealed in her voice. "As ye have heard, we have our hands full here, with the Fairgean invading the rivers and lochan, and the people rioting for grain in the highlands."

"Aye, I ken," Enit said, her expressive voice warm with sympathy. "As I said to ye last night, we have been travelling all through Siantan. We have only just come through the Sgailean Mountains into Rurach . . ."

"And what was your business in Siantan?"

"We're jongleurs, my lady. We've been travelling the country, singing the auld songs and telling tales o' the Bright Wars and the young Rígh. It seemed a guid time to remind the countryfolk o' the grand auld days, when the dragons were our allies and witches were loved. Lachlan the Winged is well aware there are many who still mistrust the Coven and who shelter Seekers o' the Awl."

Gwyneth nodded. "We have done what we can to stamp out the Seekers," she replied defensively. "There were many in Siantan, and much unrest."

"Aye, I ken. That is why we were there. The singing o' auld songs and the telling o' auld tales can sometimes do what force canna do."

Gwyneth brought the plaid closer about her neck as if she was cold. After a moment the old woman went on in a low voice: "It is always guid to hear what the countryfolk are muttering about in the corners. We are the ears and the eyes o' the Rígh and have always travelled the most dangerous roads for him."

"I have heard that it was ye who found the Rígh when he was trapped still in the shape o' a blackbird, and ye sheltered him and helped him find himself as a man again," Finn burst out, her eyes shining. "And I heard tell that ye were the true Cripple, the one who masterminded the rebellion against the Ensorc'ellor!"

Enit flashed her a look and said very softly, "And that is a true tale but no' one for the common telling, lassie."

Quenched, Finn subsided. The old woman leant forward, her amber beads clinking. "We were called back to Lucescere in early spring. It seems the Rígh has a new task for us. We are on our way back to Rionnagan now."

"So what brings ye to Castle Rurach?" Gwyneth asked warily. "Ye have lost some weeks coming this far north. Ye could have crossed the Wulfrum above Loch Finavon and headed across the Tireichan plains."

Finn held her breath, looking from her mother's pale determined face to the dark, inscrutable face of the old woman. Goblin's small, triangular head turned at exactly the same rate and angle, as if the elven cat's mind and body was fully attuned to Finn's.

"We have come because His Highness Lachlan MacCuinn has requested the help o' your daughter," Enit replied quietly.

"Fionnghal! But she is naught but a lass. What could the Rígh be wanting with her?"

"They want me to break into a castle and steal something?" Finn suggested hopefully. She sensed her mother's horror and wished she had held her tongue, particularly as Enit smiled in amusement and said, "Aye. Well, at least, *someone*."

Very coldly, Gwyneth said: "Fionnghal is heir to the MacRuraich, Enit Silverthroat, no' some common thief. It is absolutely out o' the question!"

"But mam . . ."

"That is enough, Fionnghal! Ye are only a child still and heir to the throne o' Rurach

..."

"I'm seventeen, no' some snotty-nosed bairn! Ye were near married at my age ..."

"Mind your tongue, lassie, else ye'll be sent back to your room until ye learn some manners!" Gwyneth then turned to Enit and said icily, "I am sorry, but I canna be allowing my daughter to play the part o' some sneak-thief. It is absolutely out o' the question."

"Ye canna stop me!" Finn cried, leaping to her feet, the elven cat flying from her lap and landing gracefully with a twist of her body. The chatter subsided as everyone turned to look at Finn. Colour flooded her cheeks. Her mother folded her hands and looked at Finn coldly until she was squirming with shame and embarrassment. Then deliberately Gwyneth turned back to Enit. "As ye can see, Fionnghal has much to learn about the dignity and demeanour required o' someone o' her breeding and position. If her father was to be killed in the consummation o' his duty, she would be laird o' the MacRuraich clan and banprionnsa o' Rurach. She needs to be here, to learn how to fulfill her obligations to her people."

"The prionnsachan have a sworn duty to the Rígh o' the land as well," Enit said gently, a subtle lift of her finger keeping angry words from spilling from Finn's lips. "The MacRuraich clan have sworn fealty to the MacCuinn and are obliged to answer his call. I'm afraid there is no-one else who can do what Finn can do. Her peculiar combination o' talents is rare indeed, as ye must ken."

Spots of hectic colour burned in Gwyneth's cheeks. "And what o' the Rígh's obligations to his vassals?" she replied quietly, her hands clenched together. "We sent troops to the aid o' the MacCuinn and the Mac-Foghnan in the winning back o' Arran, yet still we have received little aid in the repelling o' the Fairgean from our shores. When is the Rígh going to wipe out the sea-fairies once and for all?"

Enit's dark face was troubled. "The human population o' Eileanan needs to be united and at peace afore the Rígh can be dealing with the problem o' the Fairgean," she answered. "Ye ken we canna be fighting two wars at once."

"Yet we have been beset on all sides ever since my husband helped Lachlan the Winged to the throne," Gwyneth said bitterly. "We have had the Fairgean swarming in the seas, Seekers hiding in the villages, the uprising of Siantan against our rule and the dissolution o' the Double Throne, riots for bread in the countryside, famine and pestilence and the need to feed thousands o' refugees from the coast and rivers. When is the MacCuinn going to come to our aid?"

"His Highness has sent ye men and arms . . ."

"A scant five hundred, and all o' them hungry!"

"Indeed the Rígh kens ye have had a hard struggle the past few years. He has no' been idle, ye must ken that. There has been much to do since the Tirsoilleirean were driven from southern Eileanan. I shall tell him your concerns and ask that more relief soldiers and supplies be sent."

Gwyneth was silent, though the colour in her face had drained away, leaving her white and haggard. Enit played with her amber beads, which glowed like trapped firelight. "Your daughter has particular skills that the Rígh is in dire need o'."

"Aye, thieving and deceiving and sneaking about like that wicked cat o' hers," Gwyneth said with bitter shame in her voice. "Very well, take her. She does no' wish to be here anyway."

Gwyneth rose, clutching the plaid about her shoulders. Finn stared at her in dismay but her mother did not meet her eyes, sweeping out of the drawing room with her head held high. After a moment Brangaine rose and followed, and a murmur of speculation rose. Finn bent and picked up the cat winding about her ankles, and cuddled her under her chin, staring round at the whispering crowd with fierce, defiant eyes.

* * *

The jongleurs left the very next day.

Finn was left behind, though secret arrangements were made for her to join Enit Silverthroat's caravan a week later at the border with Tireich. Enit had insisted that none must know that Finn was to travel in the jongleurs' company. "Too many o' our Rìgh's plans have unravelled at the seams," the old jongleur had told Gwyneth. "There are enemy spies everywhere. Even the son o' one o' the Rionnagan dukes has been tried as a traitor, Eà curse his black heart. The MacCuinn has insisted that as few as possible ken your daughter has left Rurach. Tales o' the banprionnsa who can climb like a cat have travelled far and wide."

"Tales o' the banprionnsa trained as a thief," Gwyneth had said.

"We canna risk anyone wondering why the Rìgh has need o' Finn's particular talents. No-one must ken, and I mean no-one. Ye mun make up some excuse. Say ye are sending her away for safekeeping, or to punish her for her wildness. Whatever ye say, make sure it rings true. Tell no-one the truth."

"But how can I? I would no' send Fionnghal away without her maid and some men-at-arms to guard her, at the very least. What tale can I tell that would be believed?"

"Ye are better able to judge that than me," Enit had replied.

"We could pretend I'd run away," Finn piped up. "I could tie together all my blankets and hang them out the window, then leave some scraps o' cloth on a tree in the forest . . ."

Her mother had looked at her coldly. "Aye, so I would have to send out search parties to *pretend* to look for ye, when your father needs every man he can get to help him drive off the Fairgean. Do no' be foolish, Fionnghal. The idea is to draw as little attention to yourself as possible. That way the whole countryside would be buzzing with rumours and every eye on the lookout for ye."

"Tell them ye're sending me to the auld witches' tower in the mountains," Finn had suggested with a grin. "So all the ghosts will frighten the foolishness out o' me."

"That's enough, Fionnghal. Take that evil-eyed cat o' yours and go look over your history book, for I am sure ye will no' do any studying once ye've gone."

Finn had picked up Goblin, stroking her triangular head lovingly. "She doesna have evil eyes," she protested. "They're bonny!"

Gwyneth had sighed. "Please, Fionnghal, do as I bid for once."

"Aye, mam," Finn had answered meekly, too excited about her impending escape to protest. She gave a little curtsy and left the room, Goblin riding in the crook of her arm as usual.

Two days after the jongleurs had left, a foam-flecked horse galloped up the steep, winding road to the castle, bearing a messenger from the army. He carried frightening news. The MacRuraich's troops had been driven back and the Fairgean had swarmed up the river and into Loch Crossmaglen, the fifth loch from the sea. Not once since Castle Rurach had been built had the Fairgean penetrated so deep into the countryside. They were little more than a day's ride away from Loch Kintyre and the castle itself.

That night Finn was shaken awake in the dark of the night by her mother. Gwyneth's face was haggard in the light of the lantern she held in one hand. "Pack quickly, my bairn," she said, her voice shaky with repressed tears. "It is time for ye to go. Take only what is most necessary. I shall see ye downstairs."

When Finn came bounding down the stairs a few minutes later, she carried only a small bag, her crossbow and a quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder. The elven cat leapt along behind her like a living shadow.

She came to an abrupt halt at the sight of her mother standing in the great hall, little Andrew clinging close to her side. Next to her stood Brangaine in travelling clothes—a riding dress of blue serge with a long matching coat over the top and her plaid pinned round her shoulders. By her feet was a small trunk. Behind her stood Ashlin the Piper, his beloved bagpipes in the cradle of his arm, and Donald the Gillie, beaming at Finn, his unlit pipe in his hand.

"What is Brangaine doing all dressed up?" Finn cried, undisguised hostility in her voice. "Look at her, fine as a proud laird's bastard!"

"I have decided what is the best thing to do," Gwyneth replied curtly, her hands gripping each other. "I am going to send ye all to safety to your father's hunting lodge, high in the mountains."

She held up a hand to still Finn's protest. "Your father's auld nurse lives up there with her son and his wife. If the Fairgean win through to Lock Kintyre we shall be in a state o' siege. It is quite reasonable o' me to want to keep ye and my wee laddie safe. Ye shall ride out with a small number o' guards and once ye are clear o' the castle, ye and Brangaine shall leave them and make your way down through the forest to meet up with the jongleurs on the far side o' the river."

"Brangaine!" Finn cried. "Why her?"

"Your cousin has offered to accompany ye on your journey," Gwyneth said coolly. "She will be able to watch over ye and make sure ye mind your manners."

"Nay!" her daughter cried hotly. "I do no' want her! She'll ruin everything."

"If Brangaine stays, so do ye," Gwyneth replied. "I have had a message from your father, and he agrees with me that she should go to watch over ye. He has sent Ashlin and Donald back to accompany ye also. They will serve ye both and guard ye. I would

have liked to send more but your father needs every man he can to hold back the Fairgean. Besides, Enit says it is imperative that none but the most trusted ken ye travel in the Righ's service. It seems the tales of Finn the Cat-Thief have spread." Her voice was bitter.

"But Lachlan doesna want Brangaine!" Finn cried. "What use will she be on an adventure? She'd be worried about getting her hair mussed, for Ea's sake!"

Colour rose in Brangaine's cheeks. "I have the Nic-Sian Talent," she said with a tremor of anger in her voice. "A talent with weather is always o' use."

"Brangaine has offered to keep up your lessons in courtly demeanour," Gwyneth said coolly, "and make sure ye do naught to disgrace your name. It is very thoughtful o' her to offer to go when she must be made uncomfortable."

"What a dray-load o' dragon dung!" Finn cried. "She just wants to go so she can ruin it all for me . . ."

"If ye do no' like it, go to the hunting-lodge with Aindrew," her mother said tersely. "Though I ken ye will do anything to shake the dust o' Rurach from your shoes."

Finn flushed crimson. She had to press her lips together to stop angry words from spilling out. The little cat hissed and arched her back.

Suddenly Gwyneth softened. "Och, Fionnghal, have a care for yourself and come home safe to me!" she cried and pulled Finn to her. Finn stood stiffly within her mother's sweet-scented embrace until at last Gwyneth let her go.

The banprionnsa said rather shakily to Donald, "I put my wee lassie's safety in your care, Donald. I ken I can rely on ye to keep her safe."

"That ye can," he replied cheerfully. "Do no' fear for us, my lady, Eà shall shine her bright face upon us."

"I hope so," Gwyneth said, her voice thick with tears. She stood alone in the huge, shadowy hall, her plaid pulled close about her, watching as Brangaine, Aindrew and Finn followed Donald and Ashlin out into the inner bailey, where horses and men waited. Aindrew pulled back against Brangaine's hand, crying for his mother, but Finn did not look back.

Caravans

Finn sat on the step of the caravan, eating her porridge and staring out over the plains, which undulated away as far as the eye could see. The long grass swayed, waves of silvery colour rippling away as the wind swept past. The only feature in all the wide landscape was a great tree on the far horizon, its shape silhouetted against a brilliant blue sky.

It was hot. Finn wore only a thin linen shirt and a pair of shabby breeches which tied under the knee, leaving her calves and feet bare and caked with dust. Her hair was dragged back into a bunch at the back of her neck, and her sleeves were rolled up past the elbow. She could smell a tang of wood-smoke in the air but otherwise there was only

the clean, strong wind and the sharp scent of the herbs growing in the grass. Finn scraped her bowl clean and put it down with a sigh. She was happy.

The four caravans were drawn up in a semi-circle around the fire, the horses hobbled near by. Dide sat on the step of his caravan, strumming his guitar and talking to Jay and Ashlin, who were eating bannocks with honey. Brun the cluricaun was fussing around the fire, making a fresh pot of tea for Donald as he fletched his arrows. Nina was sewing up a rent in her skirt and Enit was talking with some birds that had fluttered down to perch on her knees. Despite the warmth, the old woman wore a crimson shawl wrapped close about her thin form. Lying back in the grass was Dide's father Morrell, smoking his pipe and blowing perfect smoke-rings up into the sky, where they were torn apart by the wind.

Finn groped around in the pocket of her breeches and pulled out her own pipe and pouch of tobacco. Nimbly her fingers went about their work while her eyes roamed about the camp, enjoying the colour and activity. She stuck the pipe in the corner of her mouth and tried to catch a spark from her flint, but the breeze was too strong. She wandered down to the fire to drag out a burning twig with which to light her pipe. Morrell saw her and beckoned to her lazily.

"Come amuse me, lassie, an' I'll light it for ye."

Finn sat down next to him and he conjured flame with a snap of his fingers and held it to the bowl of her pipe. Fragrant smoke billowed up and he said with a wink, "By the stink o' that, it's Fair Isles smokeweed ye're puffing on. Could ye be sparing a man a pinch o' that, by any chance? Sick to death I am o' smoking dried grass, which is all they'll sell a man in the marketplace these days."

Rather reluctantly Finn gave him a pinch of her tobacco, conscious of how thin her pouch was growing. Morrell knocked out his pipe, packed it again cheerfully, lit it with his thumb and drew back greedily. "Aye, that's the stuff!" he sighed and drew out a battered silver flask from his pocket which he unscrewed and drank from deeply. "Och, naught like a wee dram and a lungful o' smokeweed!"

He amused her by breathing out his smoke from his nostrils in two long streams like a dragon, then showed her how to send one smoke ring drifting through the centre of another, until six blue hazy hoops hung above them in ever-widening concentric circles. Finn lay back in the grass to practice, Goblin curling up on her stomach. She suddenly became aware of a long blue skirt towering over her. She shaded her eyes with her hand and peered up through the smoke. Brangaine stood over her, her face stern with disapproval. As always, she was clean and neat, her fair hair tied back in a plait, her boots shiny.

"I do no' think your mother would approve o' ye smoking a pipe," Brangaine said.

"Well, mam is no' here, is she?" Finn replied mockingly.

Her cousin's lips thinned. "Ye look like naught but a beggar lass."

"Why, thank ye, my dear," Finn replied. "That was exactly the look I was going for."

Brangaine breathed through her nose in exasperation, the sound far too genteel to be described as a snort. She turned on her well-polished heel and marched over to the fire,

where she helped Brun wash up the breakfast plates, the griddle and the porridge pot.

"Och, a braw lassie," Morrell said admiringly. "And wi' such bonny manners."

"There be too much o' the stink o' sanctity about her for my taste," Finn replied morosely.

"Aye, well, happen if ye were a laddie ye'd sing a different tune," Morrell replied with a wink, before settling down in the grass again, his cap pulled over his eyes.

Finn smoked the rest of her pipe in silence, then got up and went down to the fire, the elven cat at her heels. Not looking at Brangaine, she said to the cleric, "Is there aught I can do to help?"

"Nay, thank ye kindly," he replied in his gruff voice, looking up at her with bright brown eyes set in a furry, triangular face. His ears were exceptionally large and pricked forward with eagerness. Dressed in the rough clothes of a farm lad, he had cut a hole in the trousers for the long tail which he used rather like another hand, picking up spoons to be polished or some kindling to fling on the fire. "Bonny Brangaine has done it all."

Brangaine smiled at him.

"Is she no' the sweetest thing?" Finn showed her cousin her teeth.

Brangaine's smile faltered for a moment then she answered as sweetly, "Aren't I?"

"Indeed ye are," Brun assured her with absolutely no trace of sarcasm. Brangaine laughed and said, "Thank ye," and Finn walked away, shoving her hands in her pockets.

To her surprise Enit looked up as she passed, saying softly, "Why do ye beat each other wi' nettles, ye two? Are there no' stings enough in this world?"

Finn did not answer. The old woman stroked the head of the bird perched on her knee. "Jealousy cuts both ways, lassie."

Finn flushed scarlet. Her pace quickened, Goblin protesting, as she bounded along at her heels. Soon the camp was left behind and the strong, sweet-smelling wind was blowing through her. The heat in her cheeks subsided and with it her embarrassment and anger. She climbed up the hill to stand in the shade of the tree, Goblin leaping up her body to crouch on her shoulder. Together they looked out over the rolling plains. Far away was a thin wavering line of purple mountains, with nothing between but smooth, silver-green hills. Finn smiled and stroked the elven cat's soft fur, the last of her resentment vanishing. Indeed, Brangaine had not been nearly as bad as Finn had imagined she would be these last few weeks. Finn could almost imagine she had been trying her hardest to be conciliatory.

Despite the slow pace of the caravans, Finn had been very content these past few weeks. She spent her days riding her pony Cinders across the plains, hunting birds and coney with Donald for their evening meal, or sitting up on the driver's seat with Jay or Dide as they taught her how to drive the caravan. Every night they sat around the campfire, singing and cracking jokes and playing cards. Despite all Finn's attempts to find out more about the purpose of her journey, none of the jongleurs would tell her a thing.

"Dinna keep asking me, Finn! Ye'll be told when the time is right," Dide had

answered one evening.

"But why will ye no' tell me?" Finn had demanded. "What harm could it do to tell me now?"

"Ye never ken when a spy may be listening," Dide answered, his voice very soft. Finn stared round at the empty plains scornfully, saying, "But there's no' a soul for miles!"

"That ye can see," Dide answered. "These plains are deceiving. They look flat but really they undulate like a sea serpent's back. A whole train o' caravans could be concealed just beyond the next rise and one o' their outriders lying in the grass watching right now. The Tireichan outriders are trained to creep through these grasses without anyone seeing."

Finn stared around. "I dinna believe it! No-one could creep up on the Cat without me kenning!"

Dide grinned at her. "And what about a bird or a mouse? See that raven sitting on the roof o' my caravan? Who is to say that it is no' the familiar of some witch, listening to every word we say? Meghan o' the Beasts is no' the only witch who can talk to birds and animals."

Finn had stared at the raven uneasily and it had stared back with its round yellow-ringed eye. "But can ravens understand our language? When Isabeau talks to animals, she talks in their language." Unconsciously she lowered her voice to a whisper.

"No' always, if the animal has lived among humans for a long time. And I notice ye talk to your wee elven cat in human language and she seems to understand every word ye say."

Finn had stroked Goblin's silky head complacently, saying, "Aye, that be true."

"So will ye stop asking me questions all the time that I canna answer and that may give the game away if someone overheard?" Dide said sternly, no trace of laughter in his face or voice. "I canna tell ye how important it is that none ken o' your mission, Finn. Whoever the spy in the Righ's camp is, he or she has already cost us the lives o' many hundreds o' good men. I do no' want to add yours to them."

So Finn had given up trying to learn the purpose of her journey and thrown herself into the role of a jongleur lass with enthusiasm. Nina had begun teaching her how to walk on her hands, a skill Finn had always longed to learn, and the young banprionnsa revelled in running barefoot and having her hair in a tangle with no-one to care or reprimand her.

Sudden movement caught Finn's eye. She shaded her face with her hand, staring out at the plains. A bay horse was cantering along the shallow valley on the far side of the hill, a rider crouched low on its back. Finn watched until it swerved down the curve of the slope and out of sight. It had been a beautiful beast and the first sign of human life since they had left the last village in Rurach.

Her curiosity sparked, Finn put down the elven cat and quietly followed the curve of the hill down, Goblin silent as ever at her heels.

The horse was cropping grass at the bottom of the valley. It wore no bridle or saddle

and its luxuriant mane and tail had never been trimmed. Finn crouched in the grass and scanned the hills closely. At last she saw a slight break in the flowing ripples of grass at the crest of the bank overlooking the jongleurs' camp. Stealthily she crept along the slope, then wriggled up through the grass.

A girl was lying on the hill crest, watching the camp below. She wore dusty leather breeches and long boots, and her vigorous brown hair was tied back in a thick plait.

Finn crept up behind her, then, without warning, pinned her to the ground with one arm twisted behind her back. The girl did not shriek out, as Finn had expected, but struggled to be free. Finn had to press her face firmly into the dust, her knees clamped hard into the girl's side.

"What do ye think ye're doing, spying on us like that?" she hissed in the girl's ear. The stranger did not reply, just tried to heave Finn's weight off her back. Finn twisted her arm harder.

"I be an outrider," the girl panted. "It's my job! Get off me, ye great lump!"

"An outrider for whom?" Finn snapped.

The girl said nothing. Finn dragged her to her feet and began to force her down the slope towards the camp, keeping her arm twisted up her back. The girl moved abruptly and Finn found herself sailing over her shoulder, landing with a thump in the grass. She lay still for a second, more dazed by the unexpectedness of the manouevre than by the fall. Then she was on her feet, throwing herself at the girl. They hit the ground hard, rolling down the slope as they wrestled. Finn was surprised to find herself well-matched and exerted herself more fiercely. An elbow in her ribcage winded her and she grunted, seizing the girl around the neck and grinding her face in the ground. The girl managed to twist over and then it was Finn who was tasting dirt. Goblin leapt at the girl's face, claws raking, and she started back, swearing, so that Finn was able to wrest herself free.

Over and over they tumbled, panting and swearing. Finn threw her to the ground with a cross-buttock, then pinned her there with the girl's head locked within her elbow.

The girl gave a breathless whistle. Finn heard the thunder of hooves and then the bay was rearing over them, his black mane tossing. Finn had to spring aside to avoid being struck by the unshod hooves. In that instant the girl had rolled over and leapt on the horse's back. She gave a mocking cry, then the horse wheeled and galloped away, his tail held up proudly.

Finn swore and dusted herself off. Her shirt was torn and grass-stained, her hair was in a tangle, and she was conscious of aches and pains where she had been pummelled. "Some lassie," she said admiringly, watching as the racing horse and rider disappeared over the horizon.

She limped back down to the camp, Goblin marching before her, tail erect.

Donald was filling a bucket with water from the stream and looked up at her without his usual twinkle. "Wha' be the matter, lassie? Ye look like ye've been wrestling wi' a woolly bear!"

"Some strange lass was spying on us!" Finn said with heat. "She was watching from

yon hill. I tried to make her tell what she was doing but she got away, the bluidy bullying beast!"

Donald was frowning. "Happen we'd best tell Enit," he said. "It probably means naught but we do no' wish anyone spying on us and carrying tales about what we do."

Finn nodded. "That's what I thought."

She helped him carry the dripping bucket back to the camp and then told Enit what had happened with some excitement. The others gathered round her and she demonstrated the holds she had used and how the girl had got free of them, her audience exclaiming and laughing. Brangaine stood at the edge of the group, a slight frown of disapproval on her face.

"An outrider," Dide said. "I wonder which caravan?"

"Get your chores finished, my bairns," Enit called. "We shall be having guests soon, by the sound o' it."

"Guests?" Finn asked, rather disappointed at the old woman's placidity.

"Aye," Enit replied. "Your spy would have been an outrider for one o' the horse-caravans, wondering who it was that travelled through their lands. No' all travellers are friends, ye ken, in these troubled times. The jongleurs are always welcome, though, so we have naught to fear, although they may be annoyed at one o' their outriders being beaten up."

Finn was a little crestfallen. "How was I to ken?" she demanded. "All I saw was some strange lassie sneaking up on the camp. It could've been anyone."

"That it could," Enit agreed. She beckoned to Nina and Dide, who seized the arms of her chair and carried her back to her caravan. Dide then bent and gathered the frail form of the old woman in his arms and carried her in through the door, leaving the chair at the foot of the steps. Nina waited till Dide had emerged, then bounded up the stairs to assist her grandmother, shutting the door behind her.

Finn sighed. Seeing a little smile on Brangaine's face she scowled, shoved her fists into her pocket and slouched off to help Morrell polish the horses' tack.

"Ye could groom the horses for me, lassie," he said with a grin. "It's been a while since they've had a guid spit and polish, and we want them looking their best for the thigearns, that we do."

"What's a thigearn?" Finn asked curiously, seizing a currycomb and beginning to worry out the burrs from the brown mare's mane.

"An' ye a banprionnsa wi' your own governess," Morrell mocked. Finn scowled and said nothing. He grinned at her. "The thigearns are the horse-lairds," he said. "They tame and ride flying horses, which is something no ordinary man can do. For one thing, the flying horse is hard indeed to catch and for another thing, they do no' submit easily to a man's will. A thigearn must ride his flying horse for a year and day without ever dismounting afore the flying horse will accept him as master."

"A year and a day?" Finn's eyes rounded in amazement.

"Aye, a year and a day without ever putting foot to ground."

"How do they sleep?"

"Lightly," Morrell grinned. "As soon as an untamed flying horse feels its rider's control relax, it does its best to buck him off. When ye think the beast can fly high into the sky, this is no' something ye want to have happen to ye, men no' having wings. They say a thigearn learns to sleep for mere seconds at a time and with his legs always clamped tight."

"How do they go to the privy?" Finn demanded.

"With great difficulty," Morrell chortled. Finn laughed too and the fire-eater leant close and said, "Ye should always watch where ye put your foot near a thigearn."

"Yuk!" Finn cried and instinctively glanced at the sole of her boot. Morrell laughed out loud and tossed her a soft brush to sweep out the sweat and grime from the mare's coat. Finn caught it deftly and worked with a will, sweeping the brush down over the mare's withers.

"Are there no' any lassies who ride flying horses?" she demanded after a while.

"No' that I've ever seen," Morrell answered. "It takes much strength o' will and body to be taming a flying horse."

Finn gritted her jaw, immediately imagining herself soaring into the sky on the back of a winged horse. "I wouldna delude yourself, lassie," Morrell jeered.

"Ye never ken," Finn said loftily. "Casey Hawkeye says I'm a bonny rider considering I dinna learn to ride till I was thirteen."

"And I'm sure that ye are," Morrell replied with mock-seriousness. "The lassies in Tireich are riding afore they can walk, though, my bonny banprionnsa."

"I thought we were meant to be keeping all that a secret," Finn said rudely. "I'm naught but a jongleur now."

"No naught about it," Morrell protested. "There be no higher calling than that o' a jongleur, my proud lassie. Travelling the land, free as a bird, bringing song and laughter into people's miserable drab lives. Och, it's a grand life."

"Better fun than being a banprionnsa, that I can testify to," Finn replied rather morosely.

"Aye, I'd wager it is," he answered. "Och, well, lass, ye're a jongleur now and ye're right, we'd better no' be forgetting it. Ye never ken who may be listening."

Finn had just finished grooming Morrell's mare when a wild calvacade of riders suddenly careened over the hill, galloping down towards the camp. Neighing and tossing their manes, the horses swept round the half-circle of caravans, the riders on their backs shouting and waving their hats. They all rode without saddle or bridle, though some of the horses wore halters with one long rein. They came to a snorting, sweating halt and one of the riders called, "By my beard and the beard o' the Centaur, if it be no' the fire-eater himself. How are ye yourself, Morrell, my lad?"

"Balfour, ye auld rogue! Guid it is indeed to see ye. I be just grand, though sorry I am to be seeing ye looking so grey. Your new wife riding ye hard?"

"Och, indeed, canna ye tell by the grin on my face? I think ye're in need o' a young wife yourself, Morrell, so fat and lazy ye've grown. Look at that paunch! Too much o' the water o' life and no' enough exercise, that be your trouble."

"Och och! I get enough nagging from my mam and my daughter to be needing more from a wife. Will ye no' stand down? All this talk o' the water o' life has made me thirsty. Come share a wee dram wi' me and tell me all the news."

"Whiskey afore noon? Och and why no'?" Balfour dismounted gracefully. As soon as his foot had touched the ground, the rest of the riders sprang down. They made no attempt to bind the horses, who put their heads down and began to crop the grass contentedly. They all sat down near the fire, shouting greetings to Dide and Nina, and drinking from pewter mugs which Morrell filled up from the barrel slung to the underside of his caravan. Finn sat down with them, staring at the riders in fascination. They were all tall and brown-faced, wearing leather boots that reached above their knees and wide-brimmed hats decorated with plummy feathers. Their clothes were drab in comparison to the jongleurs, being the same dusty colour as the plains, and both men and women wore breeches, a fashion Finn heartily approved of. All had long hair tied in plaits and many of the men wore their beards split into braids or bunches.

"Where is Himself?" Morrell asked, replenishing Balfour's mug. "Ye still ride wi' the MacAhern, do ye no'?"

"O' course," Balfour replied. "He'll be here soon." He shaded his eyes with his hand, looking out to the far distance. "Here comes the rest o' the caravan. Himself will no' be too far behind. His wife is close to her birthing time and he does no' wish to fly too far from her."

Finn followed his pointing finger and saw a long procession of caravans winding their way down the slope towards them. She jumped to her feet and went to stand at the edge of the camp, staring at the procession with curious eyes. Unlike the carts of the jongleurs, these were not decorated with fancily carved wood and brightly painted pictures, but low and long with curved roofs. Painted in varying shades of pale grey-green and yellow-brown, they were almost invisible against the blowing grass. As they came closer, Finn saw with surprise that they were pulled by teams of two huge dogs.

"Look at the size o' those dogs, my lady!" Ashlin said shyly, coming up to stand by her side. "They're as big as ponies."

"Aindrew could ride on their backs," Finn replied with a little pang as she thought of her young brother. She hoped he was safe in the hunting lodge and that her father had driven away the Fairgean. She pushed the thought away from her, not liking to think of the alternative. "Ye shouldna call me that, though, Ashlin. I be just Finn now."

He nodded his head, abashed. "Aye, I be sorry, my ... I mean, Finn." He blushed, blurting out again, "I be sorry, it just sounds so . . ." He came to a stop, unable to express his feelings.

She grinned at him. "Say it over and over to yourself, ye ken, like, 'Finn, Finn, Finn.' Ye'll soon remember." She laughed at the wave of hot colour that scorched his face. "I

did no' ken ye blushed like a lassie," she teased. "Nay, nay, do no' look so mortified. I like it. I think it's sweet."

He struggled to find some answer but could think of nothing and so stood back, blushing harder than ever. Finn gave his arm a little pat. "Now I be sorry," she said. "I was only teasing." She smiled reassuringly and looked back at the caravans, giving Ashlin a chance to recover his composure.

Riding near the caravans were a number of outriders, and horses of all colours and sizes ran loose on either side. Suddenly one of the horses spread a pair of rainbow-coloured wings and soared up into the sky. Both Finn and Ashlin cried aloud in amazement and even Brangaine gave a little gasp of wonder.

It was a huge creature, as tall and powerful as a carthorse, with a thick honey-coloured coat. Its mane and tail were pale gold and very long and luxuriant, and from its noble brow sprouted two widely spreading antlers. As it flew it tucked its legs up under its body. Its feathered wings were very broad, tinted honey-yellow and crimson near its body and darkening through shades of green and violet to an iridescent blue at the wingtips. On its back a man was crouched, dwarfed by the flying horse's immense size.

Those on the ground watched in awe and envy as the magical creature frolicked through the air, folding its wings and plunging at a terrifying speed, stretching them out to soar up again. At last it came gliding down to land near the caravans, the great beat of its rainbow wings causing dust and leaves to blow about madly, stinging their eyes.

Morrell had leapt to his feet to watch, just like everyone else in the camp, and now he bowed low to the winged horse's rider. "Ye honour us, my laird," he said. "Will ye no' stand down?"

The man inclined his head and leapt lightly down, caressing the warm, honey-coloured flank before allowing Morrell to bend over his hand. "Welcome to the land o' the horse-lairds once more, Morrell the Fire-eater," he said. "Where is your sweet-voiced mother?"

As if she had heard him, the caravan door opened and Nina looked out. Dide came at her call and carried the crippled old woman down the stairs, depositing her gently on her cushioned chair. Enit had changed her skirt to one of orange velvet and in her snowy white hair she wore a jewelled comb. Nina and Dide carried the chair over to the fire, and set her down rather heavily. Enit inclined her head as far as she was able. "My laird," she said.

"Enit," he replied, with a courteous inclination of his head. "I look forward indeed to hearing ye sing once more."

"I thank ye, my laird," she answered and he came forward to bow over her hand.

"Who is he?" Finn whispered to Ashlin, who gave a little shrug.

Brangaine rolled her eyes. "Did ye no' hear them call him the MacAhern? Can ye no' see his plaid and brooch?"

"But surely the prionnsa o' Tireich would no' live in a caravan," Ashlin said, keeping

his voice low.

"Everyone in Tireich lives in a caravan," Brangaine sighed in exasperation. "There are no towns or villages here."

Ashlin and Finn made a face at each other and Finn whispered, "Ken-it-all."

The MacAhern had joined the others around the fire, accepting a swig of whiskey. The Tireichan caravans pulled up in a loose circle around the jongleurs, completely surrounding them. The drivers leapt down from the driving-seats and unharnessed the big dogs, who lay down in the shade of their caravan, panting. Short-haired, with coats of grey-brown or reddish-brown, the dogs had a ridge of hair that ran down their spines, giving them an aggressive look. Their brown eyes were mild and friendly, however, and they seemed to grin as they panted, salivating heavily. The herd of horses cropped the grass all about, with no attempt made to confine them.

Children leapt down from the backs of their ponies, while those few too old or ill to ride climbed out of the caravans. The MacAhern leapt to his feet and went forward to help down his wife, who was heavily pregnant. She was near as tall as he, with a thick brown plait that fell down to her bare feet. She was dressed in a loose yellow smock and looked more like a crofter's wife than the wife of the prionnsa of Tireich.

"Whiskey at this time o' the morning!" she exclaimed in disapproval, glancing at Morrell who was refilling a handful of mugs at the barrel.

"Och, a thirsty man can drink a wee dram at any time o' day or night," Morrell answered, bowing extravagantly without spilling a drop. "How are ye yourself, my lady? Bonny and blooming, that I can see!"

She smiled and thanked him and he offered her one of the pewter mugs. "Thank ye, but I think I'd rather share a cup o' dancey with your mother," she replied with a rather tired smile. The MacAhern helped lower her to the ground and Morrell gave her his own saddle for her to lean against.

The peaceful little camp had in an instant been transformed into a bustling village, with women shaking out straw-coloured mats from the caravan steps and asking their menfolk to fetch water for the washing. The children clustered close about Dide and Nina, asking questions and begging them to perform. Obliging Dide began to juggle with his flashing silver knives and his sister walked round the camp on her hands, much to the children's delight.

"What do ye do?" a little girl with four long plaits demanded of Finn and Ashlin. "Can ye walk on your hands?"

Questions were fired from all sides.

"Can ye eat fire?"

"Can ye put your foot behind your ear?"

"Can ye ride astride three horses?"

"I play the bagpipes," Ashlin replied diffidently. The children were impressed, for the bagpipes were rare in Tireich, and so obligingly he played a martial pibroch for them.

They clapped enthusiastically, then demanded Finn show them what she could do.

"I can climb," she said but received only blank looks, most of these children never having seen a castle wall or towering cliff. "I can steal that bracelet off your wrist without ye even realising," she said then. They jeered at her. So Finn amused them by pulling coins from their ears and pebbles from their boots, then amazed them by pulling out something that she had stolen from each of the children without them being aware of it.

Dide cartwheeled over to them, did a high twisting somersault, then began to juggle twelve golden balls in intricate wheels that spun high into the air. The children gasped in wonder. Catching and casting them up again with one hand behind him, then with his feet, then with his head and shoulders, then with the sharp tip of his dagger, Dide kept them in a continual state of amazement. At last he caught all the glittering balls, and bowed with a flourish. The children went running off to tell their mothers and Dide said, very low, "I would no' be making a spectacle o' your pickpocketing, Finn."

"Why no'?" she said with a flush. "They liked it just as much as your juggling."

He tossed up his dagger and balanced it on the tip of his nose. "Firstly," he replied, his head bent back, his voice rather muffled, "we do no' want ye drawing attention to yourself. In many o' the villages that we pass through the jongleurs are the biggest, brightest thing to happen all year. People talk about what they see. Even here in Tireich, where there are no villages, the caravans often cross each other's paths and what else is there to talk about but the jongleurs?"

He caught the dagger by its hilt, tossed it in the air and then sheathed it without again catching it in his hands. "Secondly," he said, "we jongleurs already have a reputation for thievery. It's no' a view we want to encourage."

Finn's colour darkened. "Well, what am I meant to do?" she replied rather sulkily. "Surely a jongleur lassie would have some show to put on. Will it no' be more suspicious if we do naught at all?"

Dide smiled. "True speaking indeed. We'll have to think o' some routine for ye and Brangaine and Ashlin to perform. No' pickpocketing, though, Finn."

"Oh, fine," she answered, shoving her hands in her pockets. "I only did it so they wouldna think it was odd o' me no' to have some trick like ye and Nina."

He laughed at her and she could not help but laugh back. "Happen we can set up a rope for ye to dance on," he suggested. "I saw a jongleur do that at the Summer Fair a few years back."

Finn's imagination was fired. "I wager ye I could!" she cried. Talking animatedly, she followed Dide back to the fire, where Brangaine was helping Brun to knead bread dough and Morrell was entertaining the riders with tales of the court.

Finn's voice faltered when she saw a tall, brown-haired girl sitting beside the MacAhern. She was both pleased and sorry to see the scratch marks marring the smooth brown of her cheek.

The girl scowled at her and Finn scowled back.

"So this is the lassie who caught ye unawares," the MacAhern said humorously. The girl did not answer, just frowned more heavily.

"Aye, ye mun forgive her," Morrell said easily. "This is Finn's first time in Tireich and she does no' ken much about your ways."

"Is she new to your caravan?" the prionnsa asked, eyeing Finn curiously. "Were ye no' travelling with Iven Yellowbeard and Eileen the Snake when ye last came through Tireich?"

"Aye, but they were keen to stay in Rurach and we thought we'd head to Dun Gorm for the Summer Fair, so we parted ways," Morrell replied comfortably.

"Ye'll need to make haste if ye wish to reach Dun Gorm by Midsummer's Eve," the MacAhern answered, raising his eyebrow.

"Och, we thought we'd cut through the Whitelock Mountains, save some time there."

"Hard work for your horses," the prionnsa answered with a frown.

"Aye, but they've done it afore and are sturdy wee beasties. I've heard tell Ogre Pass through Cairncross is safe enough these days now the Rígh has repaired the highway."

"Aye, he's been a busy man by all accounts," the MacAhern said and their talk veered to politics.

Finn glanced at the girl next to her once or twice, then said, rather abruptly, "I'm sorry about jumping ye. I dinna ken ye were an outrider for the MacAhern's caravan. I thought ye were spying on us."

"Why ye thought anyone would want to spy on a jongleurs' camp is beyond me," the girl answered, just as abruptly.

"Ye might have been a bandit," Finn snapped.

"True enough," she answered, her voice slightly more conciliatory. She hesitated, twisting the cup in her hand round and round, then said, rather arrogantly, "I be the Banprionnsa Madeline Maire NicAhern."

Finn opened her mouth to give her name and titles just as arrogantly, then bit her lip, saying brusquely, "I'm Finn."

"What do they call ye?"

Finn shrugged. "Just Finn," she answered after a moment, wishing she could say "Finn the Cat," as she would have liked.

"They mainly call me Madeline the Swift," the ban-prionnsa answered proudly.

"Madlin the Mad!" a boy interjected cheekily from the other side of the fire.

"Ignore him," Madeline replied loftily. "He's naught but a laddiekin. He's my brother Aiken but we mainly call him 'the babe'."

"No' for long," her mother interjected with a smile, one hand smoothing the curve of

her pregnant stomach. "It willna be long and we'll have a new babe."

Madeline did not look too happy about this. She prodded the dirt with the toe of her boot.

"Would ye like some dancey?" her mother asked, lifting a little silver pot out of the fire. It was bubbling madly, its lid jumping up and down with the steam, while a strong aroma drifted through the air.

"Some what?"

"Some dancey. It's made from the berries o' the dancing-goat bush. Much better to start the day off with than a dram o' whiskey."

"I'll have a taste," Finn said, curious as ever, and accepted a mug of a hot, bitter brew, cooled with a dash of mare's milk. As first she screwed up her face at the taste but after a few sips she grew accustomed to it. A warm glow spread through her and she felt a little buzz of energy.

"It makes ye want to dance," Madeline said. "That's why we call it dancey. They say it was first discovered when a goatherd noticed his herd leaping and dancing about after eating the berries. That's why the bush is called the dancing-goat bush."

Finn accepted another cup and was soon so restless she had to get up and move about. She and Madeline wandered around the bustling village of caravans, talking. Finn found she had little she could say about life as a jongleur, having only been one for a scant few weeks, so she avoided the subject, questioning Madeline about life on the plains instead. Madeline introduced her to the two huge grey dogs that pulled the MacAhern's caravan. Although Goblin hissed and dug her claws into Finn's shoulder at the sight of them, the massive dogs did not even bare their teeth at the tiny cat. Called *zimbaras*, the dogs were known for their placid nature as much as for their loyalty and strength, Madeline said, and lifted the lip of one to thrust her hand into its cavernous mouth. The dog only panted and slobbered on her, so that she had to wipe her hand dry on her breeches.

The afternoon was spent eating, drinking, singing and talking. Jay and Morrell played their fiddles, Brun blew upon his little flute, and Nina banged her tambourine and sang with Dide, who strummed his guitar. Balfour demonstrated amazing tricks with a rope, which Finn decided she had to learn how to do, then many of the horse-riders leapt up to dance around the fire. With the women wearing breeches like the men the reels and strathspeys looked rather odd, for Finn was used to seeing the swing of skirts. Their dancing had a fierce energy to it, however, that more than made up for its lack of grace.

When all were too breathless to dance any more they listened to Ashlin, who solemnly played a lament on his bagpipes. He was much cheered and praised, so that he flushed and grew shy and would play no more. Then Enit sang, her only accompaniment the larks high in the sky. Little shivers ran over Finn's skin and she watched how the old woman held her audience spellbound with her voice.

By now the sun was sinking and fires were being built all round the camp for the cooking of the evening meal. Kindling was rare on these grassy plans and so the fires were fed with dried horse manure, making the smoke rather pungent. The jongleurs' audience dwindled as children were called home to help prepare the dinner and the riders

went out to feed and water the herds.

Only the MacAhern and his family stayed at the jongleurs' fire, for Enit had asked them to join the jongleurs' evening meal. While they had played and sung, Donald had gone out hunting with his bow and arrow and now had a brace of coney's hanging by the step. He skinned them expertly and spitted them on long steel rods which he set up over the fire. Brun scrubbed handfuls of potatoes and carrots and Finn helped him peel them with a glow of virtue.

As the younger ones worked to get dinner ready, Morrell and Enit sat by the fire, talking in low voices to the MacAhern and his wife. Finn listened as she peeled and found they were talking seriously about the state of affairs in Eileanan. The MacAhern was most interested in all the young Rígh had been doing and asked many questions, which Enit did her best to answer.

It was soon clear to Finn that Lachlan and Iseult had paid a high price for their victory in the Bright Wars. Many concessions had been made to the lairds and merchants for their support and the young Rígh was now having to fulfill those promises. Lachlan's armed forces had been greatly depleted by the struggle to win the war and, despite the signing of the Pact of Peace, there were still many pockets of civil unrest.

Seekers of the Awl were still being sheltered in some villages, bandits infested the forests and pirates infested the seas.

However, order was slowly being restored to the countryside. Trade was once again flourishing, despite the dangers of sailing the seas. The highways had all been repaired after years of neglect so merchant caravans again travelled from highland to lowland, and from country to country. Industries in the major cities were slowly recovering their strength and the pastures had all been replanted. Of the countries sworn to the Pact of Peace, only Siantan still suffered unrest and famine, and Enit assured the MacAhern that the Rígh was taking steps to assist them.

"What o' Tirsoilleir?" the prionnsa asked. "I have heard that the Greycloaks have had hard fighting to win only a few leagues o' land."

"Och, there is no doubt the taking o' Tirsoilleir shall cost the Rígh dear but he shall prevail in the end."

Something about Morrell's voice made Finn glance at him curiously. He was smiling as good-humouredly as ever but Finn noticed Dide was frowning slightly as he carved the coney's into portions.

The MacAhern then asked for news of Isabeau the Red, the twin sister of the Banrígh, Iseult of the Snows. He had first met the red-haired apprentice-witch in the days when Maya the Ensorceller had still ruled, before Isabeau had discovered she was a banprionnsa and the direct descendant of Faodhagan the Red, one of the First Coven of Witches. Isabeau had stopped his entourage in the forest in order to return to him the Saddle of Ahearn, a sacred family relic of the MacAhern clan, thereby earning the prionnsa's undying gratitude and friendship.

"Och, I am no' the one to ask," Morrell answered with a grin. "I'd be asking Dide if ye be wanting news o' that lassie."

"Last I heard Isabeau was in Tirlathan," Dide answered rather curtly. "She spends half her time wi' her mother and father at the Towers o' Roses and Thorns and the other half wi' the tribe o' horned snow-faeries that raised the Banrígh."

"Och, aye, I met one o' them at the signing o' the Pact o' Peace a few years back. A very grim looking man with his face all scarred."

"That would've been Khan'gharad, Isabeau and Iseult's father. He was ratified as the prionnsa o' Tirlathan that day, if ye remember."

"Och, how could I forget? Such a dramatic entrance they made, flying in on the back o' a dragon!"

Dide made no reply, staring down at the coney leg held untasted in his hand.

"I always kent she was one o' the blood," the Mac-Ahern said with satisfaction. "Though she was dressed as a serving lass the first time I met her. Och, I'll never forget my surprise when I was first introduced to the Banrígh after the victory at Rhyssmadill! She was the living image o' the serving lass I'd met that day on the road."

"Except for her scars," Morrell said. "It be such a shame a bonny lass like the Banrígh let herself be slashed up like that."

"She be a Scarred Warrior," Finn said impatiently. "The scars show how cannily she can fight. They are marks o' great honour."

At her words the MacAhern turned haughtily to look her up and down, obviously offended that a dirty jongleur lass should have the temerity to interrupt their conversation.

Finn did not notice, continuing with a laugh, "I remember the first time I met Isabeau! She dinna even ken she had a twin sister! We were as muddled as hens in a whirlwind afore we managed to work it out. I was there when they met for the first time, ye ken. They might as well have been looking into a mirror, except for Beau's hand, o' course . . ."

"Another wee dram, my laird?" Dide asked, bending in front of Finn to offer the MacAhern the whisky flask, surreptitiously elbowing her as he did so. Finn fell silent and, though the MacAhern regarded her coldly for a few minutes, he accepted the whiskey and turned his attention back to Morrell, who had begun recounting a tale of Iseult's incredible prowess at hand-to-hand combat.

"What o' the Coven?" the MacAhern asked then.

"The witches have been scouting in the countryside for anyone o' Talent to join their Theurgia but indeed the Keybearer Meghan is finding it difficult. There are so few fully trained witches to help teach the younger ones and so much to do, what with the infirmary she's set up in Lucescere and the blessing o' the orchards and the fields." Enit sighed. "So much knowledge was lost with the burning o' the towers. Ye ken I speak with Meghan often. Well, it's downhearted she's been the last few months and sorry I am to see it, Meghan never having been one to lose heart."

"She is auld," the MacAhern said.

"Aye, auld indeed and showing it now," Morrell replied.

"We're all auld now, my laird," Enit replied with a sigh. With the firelight dancing over her hunched back and seamed face, she looked ancient indeed and Finn, in the midst of all her ardent youth and vitality, felt sorry for her.

The MacAhern was sunk in thought. He barely noticed when Morrell topped up his mug with whiskey or Nina offered him the platter of roast coney. "Ye may tell Meghan NicCuinn they may send acolytes to *Tur na Thigearnean* as they did in the auld days, if she so desires. Our wisdom is no' what is taught in *Tur na Gealaich dha* but it is witches' lore, nonetheless."

Enit stared at him. "Was the Tower o' Horse-lairds no' destroyed by the Ensorcellor like all the other towers, my laird?" she asked in a whisper, so Finn had to strain to hear.

The MacAhern laughed. "We o' the plains do no' feel the need to build towers and palaces o' stone," he answered mockingly. "We have few possessions and do no' want more to weigh us down and make us slow. The Ensorcellor sent soldiers against us but we hid in the grass and they could no' find us. They tried to burn us out but the Loremaster brought rain in from the sea and doused the flames. They tried to starve us out but in a battle against the coneys, the coneys will always win. They tried to ambush us but one by one we picked them off with our bows and arrows. Eventually they left. What they told the Ensorcellor I do no' ken, but as long as we kept ourselves to ourselves, she did no' bother us."

"So *Tur na Thigearnean* still stands?"

"Indeed, ye saw him dance this afternoon," the MacAhern answered, smiling. All stared at him, bewildered. He looked round at them all, saw everyone was listening, and frowned.

"Do no' fear," Enit said. "All here are loyal to the MacCuinn and the Coven."

He accepted a coney leg from the platter Nina was holding. "Ah, but are they loyal to the MacAhern?" he asked, an edge to his smile.

"If the MacAhern is loyal to his Righ," Enit replied.

The MacAhern bit into the roast meat thoughtfully, his wife and daughter watching rather warily.

"We do no' have much paper here in Tireich," he said at last, once he had finished the coney leg and tossed it down for his dog, who lay beside him. Everyone wondered at this strange divergence in the conversation but he went on, "Paper is expensive to buy and books are heavy to carry around. So we tend to learn our lore off by heart, in songs and poems and stories. All our children are taught this way. I myself can read and write and so can my children, but to most o' the bairns, words are naught but squiggles on the paper."

Enit nodded, saying, "Aye, I canna read nor write myself. We jongleurs have no need o' such things."

"Since we do no' have books, we do no' need a tower to keep them in," the MacAhern continued softly. "Our tower o' learning is a man, the Loremaster. He carries all our history and wisdom in his head and his heart. Ye ken what our motto is?" As Enit

nodded her head he said softly, "*Nunquam obliviscar.*"

Both Finn and Ashlin looked involuntarily at Brangaine and she smiled rather smugly and whispered, "It means 'I shall never forget'."

"Is this no' dangerous?" Dide asked. "Wha' if he should die?"

"We do our best to keep him safe. If it came to a choice, my people would choose his life over mine, have no doubt. He teaches what he kens to the Lore-keepers and in time, will choose one to succeed him. The best o' the Lorekeepers ken as much as he does."

"So there is no tower," Enit breathed.

"A living tower," the MacAhern answered. He pointed away across the camp to a small, dark-skinned man with a forked beard and grey hair tied in bunches that hung down to below his belt. Although he was far too far away to hear what the prionnsa said, the Loremaster lifted his head and gazed at them, then raised his hand in greeting. Finn recognised him as the man who had danced a stirring jig over crossed swords that afternoon.

"In the auld days many young acolytes used to come and travel with us and learn our ways, and we sent many o' our young to the Tower o' Ravens or the Tower o' Two Moons, wherever they wanted to go. Then the Coven grew rather arrogant and scorned our lore, which is all to do with horses and the way o' the plains. Fewer came then. I can remember only one or two strangers travelling with us in my childhood. Since then, none, no' for many years." The Mac-Ahern rubbed his forehead with his hand then glanced at Enit again. "So tell Meghan NicCuinn what I have said and if she is willing, well then, I will allow strangers to sit at the feet o' my Lorekeepers again."

She nodded and thanked him, and talk veered to other matters. Eating hungrily, Finn noticed that Brangaine glanced often over to the caravan of the Loremaster, her face very thoughtful. Finn teased her about it, saying, "Ye wish to sit at his feet, Brangaine? Ye'll be getting your dress dirty."

For once her cousin did not rise to the bait, but just looked at Finn rather sadly and walked away.

After they had all eaten, a crowd gathered again, to watch Dide juggling and Morrell swallowing swords and flaming torches. Finn caused rather a stir when Goblin came stalking out from underneath the caravan, where she had been sleeping, to leap up Finn's body to her shoulder. All knew that elven cats were among the fiercest of all animals, although tiny. It was said an elven cat could never be tamed, yet here was a mere girl with one riding on her shoulder. Many of the children wanted to pat Goblin but the elven cat hissed and arched her back and would let none near her, much to Finn's satisfaction.

It had been a long day and Finn was tired and as jittery as a hen on a hot griddle after drinking too much dancey. She took the little spade and went off into the darkness to find somewhere private where she could relieve herself before going to bed. Overhead the starry sky seemed to stretch forever, the ring of scattered fires small against that immeasurable darkness. It was cool and quiet away from the camp and Finn took her time wandering back, staring at the stars and letting her jangled nerves slowly relax.

Horses were wandering loose beyond the camp and Finn skirted them warily, then came through the low brown caravans towards the inner circle of tall, ornate, parrot-bright ones. A flicker of blue caught her eye and she glanced across to the Loremaster's cart, as low and brown as the others. He sat on the step, fondling the ears of his two big dogs, and listening to Brangaine who stood before him, talking earnestly. Finn watched for a moment, then made her silent way through the caravans until she stood hidden behind the one closest to the Loremaster's.

"... there are none left in Siantan who ken the secrets," Brangaine was saying. "Canna ye be showing me the trick o' it? I ken I could do it, if only someone could show me how!"

"Riding the storm is no' something that can be learnt in an evening," the Loremaster answered. His voice was very deep yet very gentle. "And I am no weather witch, no' like the sorcerers ye speak o'."

"Yet the MacAhern said ye brought rain . . ."

He nodded and looked up from the contemplation of his dog's head, straight across to where Finn crouched, hidden in shadows. His gaze seemed to pierce the darkness and strike straight into Finn's eyes. She flinched back. It felt like she had been struck across the face, a whiplash of mortification and shame. Brangaine had turned too and was staring where the Loremaster stared. Not wanting her cousin to know she had been spying on her, Finn turned and slipped away.

She crawled under their caravan, the cat curling against her side. She tried to sleep but the laughter and music were too loud. Spinning wheels of fire sent light darting against her closed eyelids and Finn pulled her blanket over her head, wondering why she felt like crying. Some time later she felt Brangaine creep in beside her and turned over so she would have more room. She could hear Donald's snores as he slept rolled in his plaid at the outside edge of the caravan and knew Ashlin slept on the other side, so that she and Brangaine were protected from any of the drunken revellers who staggered about outside. Finn did not feel safe, though. It was as if the Loremaster's gaze had flayed away some hard, protective covering that Finn had grown over her inner self, vulnerable as a snail's soft horns shrinking away from the light. She cuddled the elven cat up close to her cheek and let the thick fur soak up the dampness on her lashes.

In the cool grey of the morning the horse-riders packed up and went on their way, giving the jongleurs a sack of dried dancey berries and several bushels of native grain as payment for the entertainment. Within minutes there was only a few patches of flattened grass and a few charred circles to show where they had been. The jongleurs packed up camp as well, almost as efficiently as the horse-riders, and by the time the sun was up they were on their way, heading towards the purple line of mountains that rose and sank on the far horizon.

That evening Morrell set up a rope between two stakes for Finn to try walking on. Everyone's laughter at her awkward attempts only made Finn more determined and she practised until she could manage to walk the entire length of the rope without falling off.

"At the very least we can dress ye up as a jester and ye can amuse the crowds with your tomfoolery," Morrell grinned. "Ye're like a windmill, your arms flailing about like that."

"Just ye wait!" Finn cried. "I'll be dancing and cartwheeling on the rope afore ye have time to scratch yourself!"

"Ye canna cartwheel on the ground; what makes ye think ye'll learn to do it on a rope?" Brangaine said sweetly and Finn tossed her head in response, unable to think of a stinging retort.

She found some consolation for her lacerated pride after dinner, when Dide began to teach them the words of the most popular ballads. After listening to Brangaine sing no more than a few bars, Dide suggested as tactfully as he could that it might be better if she busied herself collecting coins from the audience during the performances.

"Ye be such a bonny lass, ye'll coax many a gold coin from those who'd only offer me a mere copper," he said.

"While if they heard ye sing they'd offer us naught but rotten tomatoes," Finn interjected joyously. "Och, it's a voice to beg bacon with!"

Dide rolled his eyes. "Thanks for that, Finn!"

Brangaine flushed deeply and said nothing. After a while she rose and went to watch Nina, who was doing stretching exercises beside the caravan. Finn was able to relax and enjoy the music, taking pleasure in having Jay, Ashlin and Dide all to herself. As always, Dide was full of jokes and puns and clever witticisms, his nimble brown fingers flying over the strings of his battered guitar as he sang ballad after ballad. Although her merriment was genuine, Finn could not help laughing just a little bit louder and longer than was natural, casting the occasional glance at Brangaine to make sure she was feeling properly left out. Nina was too kind a girl to allow Brangaine to mope, however. Soon the two girls were giggling themselves as Nina taught Brangaine the steps to a dance that the NicSian's three maiden aunts would never have approved of her knowing.

After they had sung and laughed themselves hoarse, Finn and Ashlin lay back to watch the fire and listen to Jay and Dide as they played for their own pleasure. Everyone drew close then, for the two friends wove a spell of enchantment with their music that caused Finn's eyes to prickle with an unidentifiable longing. Dide had put away his guitar and played a small clarsach, held on his lap as he sat on a fallen log. Jay stood, a tall, lean shadow in the night, his viola lifted to his chin, bending and swaying as he swept his bow across the strings.

When they had at last finished and all were preparing for bed, Finn said to Jay in rather a small voice, "Ye always had the magic in your fingers, Jay, but I swear ye played better tonight than I have ever heard anyone play."

"Thank ye," he said in a low, humble voice. "It is my *viola d'amore*. She has a haunting voice, does she no'? Ye ken she was made by Gwenevyre NicSeinn herself? Erit says she is one o' the great treasures o' the MacSeinn clan and never should have been given to me. But what was once given canna be taken away, and so now she is mine. I thank Eà for her every day."

He cradled the beautiful viola in his arms, running his fingers lightly over its scrolled neck, which had been carved into the shapely form of a woman, her eyes blindfolded. Finn felt a stab of jealousy, but she said with genuine feeling, "Aye, her voice is bonny indeed. But it is no' just her, Jay. It is ye. Ye truly are marvellous."

"Thank ye kindly," he replied with a trace of embarrassment in his voice. "I am lucky to have been taught by Enit, for she is truly the greatest musician I have ever kent. Even if she is naught but an auld gypsy woman, as Dillon once said." There was a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"Och, what did Scruffy ever ken except giving orders?" Finn said breezily. "I think Enit is wonderful."

For the next few days the wavering blue line of the hills stayed far in the distance, for the troupe could travel little more than twenty miles a day. There were few roads in Tireich and the horses were pulling a heavy load so needed to be rested often. Finn spent much of the days out hunting with Donald, until she grew both fast and accurate with her little crossbow and arrow, while the evenings were spent singing around the campfire and practising her tightrope walking. They were happy days for Finn, who revelled in her freedom.

Gradually the hills on the horizon grew steeper and darker, and their way grew slower as the undulating plains gave way to low foothills. They entertained another caravan of horse-riders, and had many of their stores replenished in payment. The very next morning they reached the highway and began the climb into the Whitelock Mountains.

The highway wound up, switchbacking back and forth to avoid growing too steep. There were many signs of fresh repairs and several way-stations had been built to give travellers a place to rest for the night. Here Morrell was able to wheedle payment in whiskey and bacon, much to his satisfaction.

The road was busy and they passed many merchants with convoys of wagons loaded with timber, cloth, spices, precious glassware or sacks of grain. All those heading west were eager for news of Rurach and Sian-tan and shook their heads when they heard the Fairgean had penetrated as deep as the fifth loch. Some wondered whether to turn back, but in the end pressed on, reluctant to lose their profit. The jongleurs entertained them all, and were paid with goods ranging from a hutch of live chickens to a new embossed sheath for Morrell's claymore.

For several days it rained and they walked with their heads hunched in misery and water running down their necks. The girls slept inside the caravan, trying to find space to stretch out amidst the barrels of whiskey and ale, the jars of tea and honey and dried fruit, the cases of musical instruments, the sacks of oats and flour, the carcasses of cured ham and mutton, the bunches of dried herbs and the patched costumes hanging off hooks. Finn began to think life as a banprionnsa was not so bad after all; at least she had a castle in which to shelter from the rain.

Then Cairncross Peak reared its ugly head out of the clouds. The road grew so steep they led the horses rather than make them carry the extra weight of a driver. At times the road was so narrow no-one could have walked beside the caravans without falling into the abyss that yawned on one side, its bottom hidden in mist. On the other side a great cliff rose, straight as a wall. They could not stop and so they pushed on into the darkness, everyone carrying a flaming torch, the sharp-eyed cluricaun leading the way. At last the road widened out into a plateau. They made camp hastily, eating bread and cold bacon

as they wrapped the shivering, sweating horses in their blankets and secured the caravans with rocks behind the wheels to make sure they did not roll down the cliff in the night.

During the night the rain stopped. They woke to a clear, sharp morning, the bulbous shape of Cairncross Peak looming directly above them. At one edge of the plateau was a tall stone pillar, all covered over with moss. At its apex was a tall stone pillar surmounted by a crossed circle, sacred sign of the Coven. Engraved on the body of the pillar were a long list of names under the words, "Here died many followers of the MacCuinn, Hartley the Explorer, at the Battle of Ogre Pass, in the Year 106. May Eà embrace her children."

The words had only recently been re-cut, so they were easily read. Finn gave a little shiver and looked up at the narrow pass cutting its way beneath the looming peak. "Do ye think there are any ogres left?" she asked rather anxiously.

"I heard tell the Righ's road-team had to kill a few when they were repairing the highway," Morrell said, for once nor smiling. "None o' the merchants we spoke to on the road had seen any, though, Finn, so I would no' fret."

"I've never seen an ogre," Jay said. "Are they as fearsome as the stories say?"

Dide nodded brusquely, harnessing his sturdy grey mare to his caravan. They did not stop to cook, eating hard bannocks and honey as they walked. The walls of the pass rose up all around them, cold and dark as a prison. Far above the sky was white, bleached of all warmth and colour, the cliffs black and glistening. Then the darkness faltered, and they walked out into a fair prospect, all sharp-pointed peaks and green valleys, strung with winding rivers like gleaming quicksilver. Far above a dragon flew, and Brangaine exclaimed aloud in awe and terror, having never seen a dragon before. Finn was able yet again to brag of her friendship with Isabeau and Iseult NicFaghan, who flew on dragon-back, and Dide told the story of how he had first met Isabeau and how she had changed the outcome of a dice game in an inn with a point of her finger.

Morrell laughed. "I would have lost a pretty penny if it had no' been for her, the bright bonny lass that she was."

"I had never seen a witch afore," Dide said. "I was fascinated by the idea o' someone being able to turn over a pair o' dice with naught but the power o' their own mind. I knew my granddam could sing a bird to her knee and that Da could whisper the horses but I'd grown up wi' that, it did no' seem like magic to me. It was when I met Isabeau that I began to want to do such things myself and try my hand at it, and then we were hiding my master and he taught me as much as he himself remembered."

"Which was no' much, since he was naught but a laddickin himself," Morrell said rather sarcastically.

"Do ye mean Lachlan, I mean, His Highness?" Finn asked, hazel-green eyes bright with curiosity. Dide nodded and she said, "Why do ye call him 'master'?"

"Because that's wha' he is," Dide answered serenely. "I pledged myself to his service when I was but nine years auld and swore I'd help him throw down the Ensorcellor and get back his rightful place. It took another nine years but we did it in the end."

"And now he is Righ," Brangaine said. Dide nodded. He pulled down his guitar from the caravan and sang her "Three Blackbirds," the ballad he had composed describing

Maya's ensorcellment of Lachlan and his brothers.

Enit and Nina sang the sorrowful refrain with him, pure-voiced as larks:

"O where have ye flown, my black-winged birds,

Leaving me all alone?

O where have ye flown, my black-winged brothers?

Where have ye flown, my brothers?"

Brangaine had to clear her throat and surreptitiously wipe away a tear from the corner of her eye and Dide was silent for a long time afterwards.

They saw no ogres, to everyone's relief, but the dragon flew with them for some days, keeping everyone's nerves on edge. Donald was careful to kill nothing larger than a bird or a coney for their supper and a close watch was kept over the horses, who were hobbled within the circle of caravans at night. At last they passed out of the dragon's territory and everyone relaxed.

The next day, the land gentled down into hills and the road began to run along the white, roaring rush of the Ban-Bharrach River. The sun shone dappled through fresh green leaves and birds sang on all sides, quite a few perched along the rim of Enit's caravan. Suddenly the birds clapped their wings and flew up into the branches. Finn was sitting up with Jay on the driving-seat of his caravan and saw his brown hands tighten on the reins. Dide swung back his plaid so that his daggers were in easy reach and Morrell kept his hand near his claymore. Everyone scanned the forest with keen eyes but there was no sign of any movement. After a while the birds sang again and Jay relaxed.

"Bandits," he replied in answer to Finn's question. "They rarely rob jongleurs for they ken we have naught o' any value and are prepared to fight for the little we do have. I pity a fat merchant wi' a wagon full o' grain, though; he'd no' be so lucky."

Although all were conscious of being watched several times over the next few hours, they were never challenged. The very next day they met a squad of soldiers on the road, all wearing the blue cloaks that showed them to be in the Righ's service. They were riding the roads in search of bandits and were pleased to hear the jongleurs had sensed some only a day ahead. They stopped only long enough to tell the jongleurs news of the Rígh and to hear how matters stood in Rurach and Tireich, then they trotted on down the road, their cloaks swinging.

Soon the troupe of jongleurs was driving through a great, dark forest where the trees arched high overhead. They came to a tall pair of iron gates set in a massive wall. There were guards there dressed in kilts and long blue cloaks, with claymores strapped to their backs. They opened the gates straightaway with a salute to the heart, and the troupe of jongleurs drove on into a park with green, sunlit vistas between trees whose bark was much scarred and blackened with the marks of battle.

"All this belongs to the MacBrann. He and my master are close, however, and the MacBrann lets him stay whenever he wishes. Lachlan does no' often come here, though. There are too many black memories here." Dide glanced about him with a grim mouth.

"So why is he here now?" Finn asked curiously but the jongleur shrugged and would not answer.

The trees thinned. Ashlin suddenly cried out in amazement and pointed. Ahead, tall, delicately pointed towers soared into the sky, sharp and blue as daggers.

"Rhyssmadill?" Brangaine asked rather breathlessly and Dide nodded.

The horses quickened their pace a little, responding to the unspoken excitement of the drivers. Finn leant forward, eager to see as much as she could of the blue palace, about which she had heard so much. Then she saw a bright glimmer and gripped her hands together.

"The sea? Is that the sea?" she cried.

Brangaine shrank back in sudden fear. "No' the sea?"

"Aye," Enit said, twisting round in her seat so she could see Brangaine's face. "Do ye fear the sea, lassie?"

"Who does no'?" Brangaine replied rather shakily.

Enit rattled her amber beads. "I'm sorry, my lass, but ye'll have to get over that particular dread, for we'll be spending a great deal o' time on it! We sail out o' Dun Gorm just as soon as the winds are fair."

Brangaine could only stare at the old jongleur in dismay.

Rhyssmadill

"No' quite what ye expected when ye heard we're to stay at the blue palace, hey, Brangaine?" Finn sat up in the straw, her arms wrapped around her knees, grinning at her cousin.

Brangaine looked around at the piles of straw, spread out her plaid and sat down. "Why should I have expected anything else?" she replied with a faint edge of mockery. "Most o' the jongleurs are camped out down in the city square, with barely enough room to scratch themselves. At least we've room to spread out here." And she lay back in the straw, her arms stretched above her head. "Ah, that be good," she said mendaciously. "Far softer than the stones o' the road, which is all I've slept on for more months than I can remember."

Finn gave a little snort but said nothing more, conscious that the loft was just above the main stables. She could clearly hear the gentle sighs of the horses, the clatter of buckets and the murmur of the stable-hands' voices, the distant cry of a groom as he exercised one of the mares in the yards. Enit had reminded them forcibly of the importance of maintaining their disguise as jongleurs while in the palace and Finn was determined that if anyone let the elven cat out of the bag, it was not going to be her.

Despite Enit's warning, Finn had been rather surprised that the jongleurs had been directed to the stables, having subconsciously expected to be taken straight to the royal court. Enit and Dide were, after all, Lachlan's oldest friends and most loyal supporters. Finn had felt rather indignant when they had had to unharness their horses themselves and then were shown their sleeping quarters in a dusty, straw-filled loft. Dide had guessed her thoughts and thrown her one of his flashing grins, thanking the servant who had directed them with such heartfelt gratitude that Finn was left with no illusions that this treatment was considered most generous for a troupe of travelling players.

"Are ye hungry?" Nina said, her chestnut-red head popping above the straw as she climbed up the ladder. "Dide says ye may come across to the kitchen and eat if ye'd like. The scullery maids are always happy to give us a few scraps in return for a love song."

Brangaine and Finn looked at each other, then scrambled to their feet. Apart from an overwhelming desire to see more of the fabled palace than its high grey walls, they were sick to death of rabbit and potatoes.

The kitchen was a huge, hot room lined with black pits of fireplaces where whole carcasses of sheep and deer were turned on spits. A scarred table ran the entire length of the room, crowded with servants cutting up vegetables, plucking goose feathers and pounding dough. A place was found for the troupe and they were brought a platter of meat off-cuts, some black and crunchy, others pink and bleeding. A pot of thick vegetable soup was swung off the fire and on to the table, accompanied by a basket of bread, so hard with grain the trenchers had to be soaked in the soup before they could be chewed and swallowed. Despite the simplicity of the fare, the food was delicious and Finn ate hungrily, looking about her with interest. The kitchen was as busy as an ants' nest stirred with a stick, people rushing back and forth with platters and bowls and jugs, all streaming and smelling delicious. At the far end of the kitchen a thin, scrawny-looking man was carefully creating a fantastical erection of spun toffee that Finn realised was meant to be a dragon in full flight. She watched in fascination as the dragon took shape under his skilful fingers, its wings spread.

"That is the head cook, Fergus the Cross," one of the scullery maids said, serving Finn another ladle of soup. "He is well named, the biggest crosspatch ye'd ever meet. He can cook, though, having trained under Latifa."

"But he's so skinny. I thought cooks were always fat," Finn replied, swallowing her soup hungrily.

The scullery maid laughed, her blue eyes dancing. "Latifa was; as fat as a Midwinter goose she was. No' Fergus though. Naught any o' us prepares is ever guid enough for him and he spits it out in the hearth. The Righ's own cook will be dying o' starvation if he do no' watch himself."

She moved away to top up Dide's bowl, smiling at him and tossing back her plait of honey-coloured hair flirtatiously. He smiled back, saying admiringly, "Ye grow bonnier each time I see, Elsie my sweet. Are ye planning to jump the fire tonight?"

"Only if it is ye I am jumping wi'," she said boldly.

He laughed. "Do no' tempt me, my bonny. I dinna think ye'd be liking the life o' a jongleur and indeed I'd be a bad husband to ye."

"The reward may be worth the cost," she replied, smoothing her hand down over her hip.

"Obh obh!" he laughed. "Ye have grown up, Elsie my sweet. Do ye speak so bold to all who come to eat your soup?"

She blushed. "Nay, only to ye," she answered, rather low. He pushed her away gently. "Your cross cook is glaring at me," he whispered in mock terror. "Ye had best be getting back to your work, lass, else he'll be cracking me over the head with a griddle."

"Happen I'll see ye later tonight," she said, lingering.

"Aye, we'll be playing in the palace square. Come and I'll dance a reel wi' ye."

"I'd like that," she replied, blushing.

Once the jongleurs had all eaten their fill, Dide cradled his guitar on his lap and sang them all a love ballad, his voice sweet and true and full of ardour.

"One morning in the month o' May, down by a

rolling river,

A young shepherd did wander, and there beheld

a lover.

She carelessly along did stray, a-viewing o' the

daisies stray.

She sweetly sang her roundelay, just as the tide

was flowing.

Her dress it was as white as milk and flowers

adorned her skin.

It was soft as any silk, just like a lady o' honour,

Her cheeks were red, her eyes were brown, her

hair in ringlets hanging down,

Her lovely brow without a frown, just as the tide

was flowing.

O it's there we walked and there we talked and

there we lay together;

The wee lambs did skip and play, and pleasant

was the weather,
By the rolling river we did lie, underneath a blossoming tree,
And what was done I'll never tell, just when the
tide was flowing."

He looked so handsome in his shabby crimson jerkin, with his black hair tied back in a long ponytail and a gold ring gleaming in his ear, that Finn was not surprised at the languishing looks the scullery maids cast him. He made it seem as if he sang for each one alone, so that Finn whispered to Jay, "I'd wager he'll have a few assignations later tonight, the flirt!"

"Done!" Jay whispered back. "Though ye'd be losing your bet, lassie. Dide sings to them all but he toys with none. He's no rakehell."

"I find that hard to believe," she said and then, at the quick, hot glance Jay sent her, continued, "No' that he's a rake, I ken that! I mean that he never dallies with any o' these lassies always hanging off his sleeve. They be ripe for the plucking, anyone can see that."

"Maybe so," Jay answered rather unwillingly, "but Dide is no' interested in *them*."

"No?" One of Finn's eyebrows rose. "Meaning he's interested in someone else? And who, pray tell, might that be?"

Colour rose in Jay's cheeks. He said nothing.

"No' that blonde bit teasing him afore?" Finn said in some dismay.

"Elsie?" Jay's voice was incredulous. "Ea's green blood, no! Dide canna bear her, though she's always after him, that one."

"Aye, ye can tell she's as good a maid as her mother," Finn said with enough spitefulness in her tone for Jay to look at her in troubled surprise. "I hate those giggly girls that always think they're so fine," she explained, colour rising in her cheeks.

Dide was now amusing the crowd by juggling the pots and pans back and forth with Nina, reeling off a constant stream of lively chatter and jokes as he did so. The scullery maids laughed and sighed, whispering to each other behind their hands. The lackeys and potboys were all beginning to cast black looks at Dide, and the thin, sour-faced cook was looking more cross than ever.

"That's enough!" Fergus the Cook suddenly exclaimed. "We have a feast to prepare tonight and I canna have ye idle wastrels distracting my staff with your tomfoolery. Out, out!"

Laughing, the jongleurs all fled, Dide catching up a hot pie from the table as he went.

"Och, ye've broken a few more hearts tonight, my lad," Nina teased. "What shall ye do when they all come looking for ye later?"

"Run!" Dide cried. "Brangaine, will ye hide me under your skirts if they come hunting me down?"

Brangaine flushed crimson, for she had been as riveted by the jongleur's performance as any of the other maids. "No' I!" she answered. "Ye must reap what ye sow."

"Then I be in trouble indeed," Dide answered. "That Elsie will be jumping the fire wi' me if she has to crack me over the head wi' a jug first! Promise me ye'll protect me, Finn."

They spent the next few hours preparing themselves for the night's performance. Nina shook out her purple satin skirt, sewn with knots of red and gold ribbon to cover the worst of the darns, and polished her red dancing shoes. Enit arranged her sparse white hair on top of her head, securing it with her jewelled combs. She draped her gold-thread shawl about her hunched shoulders, then began to sing scales, her voice rippling up and then down the register. Dide washed out a few gravy spots on his sky-blue doublet and combed the bhanais feather in his crimson cap, then tuned his guitar, strumming along to Enit's melodious voice. Jay lifted his bow and joined the music, the rich coloratura of his viola filling the stables with beauty. Morrell turned over his torches, checked the button on his vanishing sword, and polished his gold earring. Brun fastened bells to his hairy toes and hung them around his neck, jangling along with his usual odd collection of brightly polished keys, rings, buttons, bottle tops and one small christening spoon.

Finn and Brangaine had borrowed some of Nina's clothes as soon as they had begun joining in the jongleurs' performances. Finn was wearing an orange skirt, yellow petticoats and a blue and orange bodice, with blue and orange ribbons woven through her hair. Since her feet were larger than Nina's she went barefoot, with an anklet of bells on her right ankle. Brangaine had reluctantly allowed the jongleur lass to dress her in a green velvet gown, trimmed with gold lace and ribbons, and worn over a silk scarlet petticoat. Her fair hair was worn loose, tied here and there with red velvet ribbons. Freed from her plait, it hung down to her knees, as straight and shining as a silk curtain. Her eyes picked up the colour of the green velvet bodice, giving them the bright hue of a new spring leaf.

"Ye'll be fighting off the lads with a barge pole tonight, my bonny," Morrell said. Brangaine gave him her coldest look and turned her shoulder against him.

Finn made a little face, getting tired of always hearing how pretty and perfect Brangaine was. Seeing her expression, Ashlin leant close and said eagerly, "Ye look bonny too, my lady ... I mean, Finn."

"Thank ye, kind sir," Finn said with a sweeping curtsy. "I must admit I thought I looked rather fine. I like your outfit too: very handsome."

Ashlin had dressed rather shyly in Dide's second-best outfit, a velvet doublet of a rich orange colour with green ribbons and embroidery, and green-patterned orange hose. On his head he wore a rather absurd cap of orange velvet with a long green feather. He blushed and smiled his thanks, his long, bony hands fidgeting with the long wooden flute that Brun had whittled for him.

Donald looked him over with a satirical eye but said rather kindly, "Well, handsome is as handsome does, but ye'll do well enough, my lad. Take care o' Finn and do no' be

drinking too much o' the Midsummer ale."

"Are ye no' coming to the party?" Finn asked, noticing for the first time that Donald still wore his shabby old kilt and tam o'shanter.

He shook his head, smiling beatifically. "I be too auld," he said, "to be learning new tricks. I be happy indeed to rest my weary bones in the straw and mind all our stuff. Come the morning, I'll be fresh as a daisy while all ye young folks will be feeling mighty worn, I'll wager more than a penny."

"But do ye no' want to see all the mummery and watch the jumping o' the fire?" Finn demanded.

"I've managed to avoid the jumping o' the Midsummer fires all my life. I dare no' watch it now in case some doughty auld maid takes it into her head to jump it wi' me," the gillie replied with a twinkle in his eye. "Nay, nay, off ye go, lassie. I'll be just grand here with my pipe and the horses to keep me company. Have fun now."

Outside the stables, a late dusk was lingering, warm and still. In the inner gardens, lanterns had been strung from tree to tree, and long trestle tables were set up with cakes and sweetmeats. Crowds of people were dancing and laughing, dressed in their finest. Garlands of flowers had been hung round the neck of every statue and adorned the heads of the women so that the dance floor looked as if the garden had come alive and was waltzing. A round yellow moon hung between the dark spires of the palace, casting a bright radiance over the garden.

Jongleurs roamed through the garden, delighting the crowd with their songs and acrobatics. Some walked on stilts so it seemed they were giants. Others juggled oranges or swords, danced energetic reels over crossed swords, or built high pyramids by kneeling on each other's backs. One told wicked stories by the ale-barrel, his audience gasping with laughter.

Dide and Morrell set up a high rope for Finn. Carrying a beribboned pole to help aid her balance, Finn slowly walked across it, much to the amazement of the crowd below. She did a slow pirouette, then stood on her hands and swung her legs over her head until she stood again. Emboldened by the applause of the crowd, Finn then walked across the rope on her hands, and then did a few simple cartwheels and handsprings that sent the crowd wild. Her heart hammering with fear and excitement, Finn swung from the rope by her knees, and then her hands, dismounting with a rather wild somersault that nonetheless had the crowd cheering and clapping. As she landed on Dide's shoulders, she heard the clatter of coins on the pavement as the audience threw her a golden reward.

Dide sang a seductive love song after that, while Nina danced a slow, sensuous dance, gathering up her skirt to one side and swaying from side to side, showing off her slim, brown legs and high-heeled red shoes. Ashlin and Brun played their flutes, Morrell played his fiddle and Jay the viola, while Enit sang the lovely, wordless refrain.

Alternating music with juggling and fire-eating, acrobatics and dancing, the jongleurs had soon gathered a large crowd that was generous indeed with its coins, much to Morrell's satisfaction. "We're paid double tonight," he whispered to Finn, "for the Rígh pays for our entertainment for his guests and the guests pay for their own. Och, Midsummer's Eve is always a happy time for jongleurs!"

It was long past midnight when Dide caught Finn by the elbow and whispered in her ear. "Come, it is time for us to meet wi' my master. Follow me when I beckon and draw no attention to yourself, do ye hear me?" Finn nodded and he said, "Tell Brangaine and Ashlin to stay close on my heels." Then he was gone, strumming his guitar and calling out jokes to the crowd.

A thrill ran down Finn's spine. She had almost forgotten they were here on the Righ's secret business. As she whispered the news to Brangaine her heart was hammering, her palms growing sticky. Would they find out tonight what Enit had meant, when she had said they planned to set sail from Dun Gorm just as soon as the winds were fair? Would Finn at last find out what, or who, she was meant to steal?

They heard Dide's merry voice ringing out over the garden. They turned and saw him leaping and cavorting at the head of a long procession of dancers, spinning wheels of fire in his hands. Nina danced past, grinning at Finn, Ashlin dancing behind her, one hand grasping her waist, the other clinging to the hand of a fat, laughing matron. Then Brun cartwheeled past, his bells ringing. Finn spun, trying to keep her eyes on them all. Suddenly a large warm hand grasped hers and she was dragged into the dancing by Jay, his hazel eyes laughing down at her, his viola case strapped to his back. She laughed back and let herself be led through the gardens, in and out of yew trees and hedges, through a fountain, trying to keep her skirts out of the water, trampling over a flower bed, everyone shrieking with laughter. Then the procession danced up the steps and into the palace, Dide twirling the two flaming torches, up, down, round and round.

"There be a thorn bush in our garden,
white with flowers be our thorn bush,
and at the back o' the thorn lean a laddie
and lass,
And they're busy, busy herryin' at the cuckoo's
nest.
And it's hey the cuck and ho the cuck and hey
the cuckoo's nest,
And it's hey the cuck and ho the cuck and hey
the cuckoo's nest,
I'll give anybody a shilling and a bottle o' the
best,
If they'll rumple up the feathers o' the cuckoo's
nest," Dide sang and everyone joined in breathlessly.

The dancers wound their way into the great hall, where the court lairds and ladies danced and flirted. Lachlan and Iseult were sitting in their tall, carved chairs at the head table, black head bent close over the red. For once, Iseult had not covered her hair and her curls hung down her back like writhing snakes of fire, bound here and there with black velvet ribbons. She was as usual dressed in white but in honour of the occasion her gown was of the richest satin damask, with long bell sleeves trimmed with black velvet and black scalloping at neck and hem. She looked every inch a banrígh, cool, proud and regal.

The Rígh looked up at the sound of the singing and laughter, and a grin flashed over his dark face. He leapt to his feet and offered his hand to Iseult, who smiled and let him pull her upright. They came down the steps and onto the dance floor, the Rígh's arm close about her slim waist. Lachlan seized Nina's hand and they were swung into the procession, the Rígh's kilt swirling up as he danced. Then Lachlan joined the singing, his beautiful deep voice ringing out.

"She said: 'my lad, you're plundering;' he said it

was no' true.

But he left her with the makings o' a young

cuckoo.

And it's hey the cuck and ho the cuck and hey

the cuckoo's nest,

And it's hey the cuck and ho the cuck and hey

the cuckoo's nest."

Three times the riotous procession circled the room, knocking over tables and sending goblets of wine flying. Then Dide tossed the flaming torches high in the air, caught them with a flourish, and whirled out the door and into the palace beyond. Screaming with glee, the procession followed him, along the wide corridor, up the stairs and into the heart of the palace.

Finn ran along behind, her hand held fast by Jay, her heart pounding with excitement. The Banrígh's tall figure danced ahead of her, the red light of the torches kindling in her hair. Ahead of them many couples dropped out of the procession, throwing themselves into chairs, panting, hands to their hearts. Some withdrew into shadowy recesses to kiss and laugh. Others went in search of liquid refreshment to soothe their parched throats. Slowly the procession dwindled.

Through long galleries they danced, into the oldest part of the palace. Here the halls were narrow and of grey stone, not gleaming blue marble. Old paintings glared down

from the walls, and there were stone ravens mounted at the foot of the stairs, their beaks curved cruelly. Many more of the dancers stopped, to wander through the galleries, examining the ancient tapestries with their pictures of dark forests and ancient battles. Finn and Jay ran on, eyes fixed on the twirling torches ahead of them. There were only a few candles kindled here and it was hard to see much more than jostling bodies and laughing faces. Finn suddenly realised she could no longer see Iseult's flaming red hair and paused, trying to catch her breath, straining to see through the shadows.

Suddenly a hand reached out from behind a tapestry and caught her arm. Finn had to bite back a shriek. She was dragged unceremoniously behind the curtain, Jay close behind her. She only had time to see that the curtain concealed a deep recess with a oaken door set within, half ajar. Standing within the door was Dide. He raised his finger to his lips, made a frantic signal with his hand, then silently shut the door. To her amazement Finn felt Jay slide his arm about her waist, then he had bent his head and kissed her. The first kiss only grazed her cheek, then he had caught her mouth. For a moment Finn was frozen in surprise then instinctively she responded.

A light dazzled against her closed eyelids. A merry voice cried, "Caught ye in the act! Look at ye, the sly bairns that ye are."

Bemused, Finn opened her eyes. The pretty scullery maid Elsie was leaning in, laughing, a lamp in her hand.

"I wondered what ye two were doing, disappearing like that," she said, smiling. "But it's midsummer madness tonight; people are disappearing all over the place. Come nine months, there'll be a passel o' babes being born, that I'll warrant."

Finn blushed, opened her mouth to deny that she and Jay were lovers; closed it again, blushing even harder. Elsie laughed again, said, "How can I blame ye, when I be searching for Dide the Juggler for just such a purpose? Have ye seen him?"

"He was leading the procession," Jay said, rather huskily. "Look for the spinning torches."

"I did, but it seems he has passed them on to his father, the fire-eater," Elsie said, pouting a little. "I could have sworn he was here a moment ago."

"Well, look for him in the gardens," Jay said shortly. "Canna ye see we're all alone here—or at least, we were."

Elsie laughed and put up her hands in mock-surrender. "Obh obh! Sorry indeed I am to be interrupting ye." She withdrew her head and let the tapestry drop down again. Jay and Finn were alone in the warm darkness.

There was silence between them. Finn was very aware of how close Jay was standing to her. She drew breath to say something, anything, to break the awkwardness between them. Just then the door behind them opened a crack, a draught of cool air raising the hairs on Finn's bare arms. It smelt old and musty, as if it had lain still and undisturbed for many years. Dide stood beyond, a small flame held cupped in his hands. "Is all clear?" he whispered.

"Aye," Jay whispered back. "That bonny maid ye were flirting with came in search o' ye but we fobbed her off."

"Thank Eà," Dide replied with exaggerated relief. "Who kens what could have happened if she'd found me? I could have found myself jumping the fire wi' her and handfast for all the world to see."

Jay replied teasingly, gesturing with his hand for Finn to precede him through the tall, arched doorway. Finn moved forward stiffly, aware of a stinging humiliation. It was clear to her that Jay's kiss had been merely a diversion, to throw anyone watching off the scent. She wished she had not responded so ardently. She wished she had not responded at all.

Beyond was a hallway, that ran along inside the thick stone walls. It was dark and cramped, and smelt of mice. Ashlin and Brangaine were waiting there for them, standing very close together, looking a little unnerved from being left alone in the confined darkness. They pressed themselves against the wall so Dide could squeeze past them, bringing the flame in his palm leaping to life so shadows swayed ahead of them like a procession of dark ghosts.

The passageway brought them to a steep spiralling stairwell, each step so high it was almost like climbing a ladder. At each turn of the stair was a tall lancet window on one side, with a little landing outside a thick oaken door on the other. Each door was shrouded in a veil of filthy cobwebs, proving they had not been opened in a very long time indeed.

At length they climbed out into a small round room at the very height of the tower. Four thick candles had been lit, their flames dancing in the warm, sea-scented breeze that blew steadily through the tall, arched embrasures. In their uncertain light Finn saw Lachlan and Iseult leaning together out one of the windows, the Rígh pointing out landmarks to another young couple who stood close together in the next embrasure. Finn recognised them as Iain MacFoghnan, the prionnsa of Arran, and his wife Elfrida NicHilde, the deposed banprionnsa of Tirsoilleir. A tall, spare man with a gentle face, the MacFoghnan was dressed in the heather-purple plaid of his clan, fastened with a silver brooch forged in the shape of a flowering thistle. Elfrida NicHilde wore a charcoal grey dress cut on austere lines, with her pale blonde hair scraped back into a bun at the back of her head. She looked more like a governess than a banprionnsa.

The Righ's squire stood stiffly nearby with a tray of silver goblets and a jug of wine, a huge dog with a black-patched face lying at his feet. A few other men were grouped by another window, drinking wine and talking in undertones. As Finn and Jay came forward eagerly, the dog lifted its head and thumped its shaggy white tail but Finn had eyes only for her old comrades-in-arms, the Rígh and Banrígh.

"Iseult!" Finn cried. The Banrígh turned and held out her hands and the two embraced affectionately.

"Well met, Finn! Look how tall ye have grown!"

"So our wee cat-thief has finally arrived!" Lachlan said. "How are ye yourself, Finn?"

"Very well indeed, your Highness," Finn said rather shyly. She had not seen Lachlan since his coronation and was rather abashed to find he had grown into a kingly man, with lines of serious thought engraved on his face. He had grown heavier during his years as Righ, and carried such an aura of authority and strength that she had trouble remembering

him as the sullen, impetuous young man she had first met seven years ago. His magnificent wings were folded behind him, framing his body with their dark gloss, and he carried the Lodestar sceptre at his waist as always.

At the sight of Dide his face lit up and he reached forward and drew the young jongleur into a hard embrace. "Dide! So glad I am to see ye! It's too much time ye are spending on the road and no' enough time by my side, where ye should be. Are ye no' one o' my Yeomen, sworn to protect and serve me?"

Released from Lachlan's strong arms, Dide rubbed his ribs ruefully, pretending to gasp for breath. "Ye should be more careful, my master! Ye almost cracked a rib that time. Ye mun try and remember that most o' us are made o' frailer stuff." As Lachlan snorted in amusement, he went on, more seriously, "But do I no' serve ye well, my master, travelling the roads and listening to the tales o' the country folk and singing your praises?"

"Indeed ye do," Lachlan responded warmly.

"Each to their own road," Dide replied. "I should be getting myself into trouble if I did naught but follow your royal court around and sing love songs to silly maids. Nay, far better that I do what I have always done. Besides, what need o' me do ye have when young Dillon is always at your back, serving and protecting ye? He does a far better job, I promise ye!"

The squire smiled briefly, his hand dropping to caress the hilt of the sword that hung at his side. Both Jay and Finn gave a little cry of surprise and stared at him more closely. Only then did they recognise him, for the stocky, freckle-faced lad they had known had grown into a tall, powerfully built young man with a stern mouth and heavily hooded eyes. Only the thick thatch of light brown hair remained of the boy that had once been the general of the League of the Healing Hand.

"Scruffy!" Finn cried. "Flaming dragon balls, I would never have recognised ye!"

Dillon bowed stiffly. "My lady."

"Och, please do no' 'my lady' me!" she cried, troubled. "I be Finn, just like I always was."

He said nothing, merely inclined his head and resumed looking straight ahead. His dog Jed rose, however, and came to greet Finn with a wagging tail. She rubbed his rough head affectionately, ignoring Goblin, who arched her back and hissed from her shoulder. Jed whined a little, well remembering Goblin's wicked claws, and the elven cat narrowed her eyes and hissed again.

"It be grand indeed to see ye, Dillon," Jay said, rather shyly. "It has been a long time."

"That it has," he answered gravely, "and much has happened."

Finn drew closer to him, staring at him curiously. "We heard the news o' Jorge's death," she said awkwardly. "It must have been horrible for ye."

His frown deepened, his mouth compressing. Finn would have said something more but Lachlan claimed her attention again, gesturing sternly to Brangaine and Ashlin

hovering behind her.

"Who are these people?" he cried. "Dide? What are ye doing bringing strangers to our conference? After all our efforts to keep our meeting secret!"

Brangaine dropped into a deep, graceful curtsey. "I am Brangaine NicSian, the banprionnsa o' Siantan, your Highness. We met at the last Lammas Conference when ye ratified me lady o' the MacSian clan and ruler o' Siantan." There was a touch of hauteur in her voice.

"Aye, I remember ye now," he answered, his voice still angry. "Wha' do ye do here, o' all places?"

"She is my cousin," Finn said rather sulkily. "She insisted on coming too." She turned to Brangaine. "I told ye he would no' like it."

"But I do no' understand," Lachlan cried, appealing to Dide. "Did ye no' understand the utmost importance o' keeping Finn's presence here secret? What is she doing accompanied by her cousin? And who is he? Her brother?"

"Her piper," Dide replied with gloomy satisfaction.

Lachlan's wings flared wide in irritation. "I suppose ye will be telling me next that she brought her handmaid and her lap-dog too?"

"Nay, though she did bring her gillie and her lap-cat," Dide replied, enjoyment evident in his voice.

Lachlan's face was dark with anger, his jaw set grimly. "Explain!" he snapped.

"It is no' my fault, master," Dide replied rather defensively, though there was still a quiver of laughter in his voice. "We told Lady Gwyneth that Finn's journey mun be kept mumchance! Yet when Finn came to join us she had all these others wi' her, and said her mother would no' let her come without them. Castle Rurach was under siege from the Fairgean so we could no' send them back. Besides, the damage was done. I thought it best to bring them wi' us than have them wandering around the countryside, causing talk."

"Finn, ye surprise me," Iseult said. "I had thought ye a seasoned veteran. Did Enit no' explain to ye how important it was that none kent ye came to serve us?"

"I told my mother that ye would no' like it, but she said if Brangaine did not come, neither could I!"

"Ye mun remember Gwyneth NicSian is a lady o' the auld school," Dide said soothingly. "She could no more send her daughter off unattended wi' a pack o' dirty jongleurs than she could brush her own hair. Besides, it may no' be so bad. They say the young NicSian has the Talent and ye ken that could come in useful on the high seas!"

Lachlan stared at Brangaine intently. "Is this true?" he asked abruptly. "Ye can whistle the wind?"

Brangaine coloured hotly. "I have some Skill," she answered stiffly. "Ye must remember though that the Tower o' Storm is no more. I have no' been properly trained."

"Can ye ride the storm?"

Her colour deepened, her eyes falling. "Well, no."

Lachlan paced the floor restlessly. "Look at her," he said to Iseult. "She's as bonny a lass as ye'll ever see crowned May Queen. We canna be letting her step foot on that ship. Ye ken how superstitious sailors are, and the Tirsoilleirean sailors more than most. There'd be naught but trouble if she goes."

Finn's eyes were bright with curiosity. *Tirsoilleirean sailors?*

"And I think the piper lad should stay as well. He's skinny as a broom and has no more hair on his chin than a newborn babe."

To Finn's surprise, Ashlin came forward in a rush to kneel at Lachlan's feet. "Nay, your Highness, I mun stay with my lady!" he cried. "My laird entrusted her to my care."

Iseult looked at him curiously then bent and offered him one of her strong, white hands. He grasped it, his face distraught, and she pulled him to his feet.

"It is a dark and dangerous journey indeed that Finn sets out on," Lachlan said sternly. "She needs witches and warriors about her to protect her, no' a boy with his hands full o' bagpipes. Would ye endanger her by going?"

Ashlin was white but he stood his ground. "My laird set me to guard her and protect her," he answered unsteadily. "I swore a sacred oath."

Jay stepped forward. "He has a talent with music," he said. "Indeed, your Highness, ye should hear him play the bagpipes. He can bring a choke to your throat and a march to your step. He plays the flute as well, as prettily as I've heard. Happen we shall need every scrap o' musical talent that we can get."

Finn looked from one face to another. Matters were growing more mysterious by the minute. What good could playing the bagpipes do?

Lachlan was frowning, one hand caressing the Lodestar which glowed softly in response. Iseult laid her hand on his arm. "Such loyalty should no' go unrewarded," she said.

"The Lodestar sings his praises," Lachlan said abruptly. "Who am I to stop a man from travelling his own road? Nay, the piper may go if he so desires, though indeed, my heart misgives me. I had wanted to keep the party as small as possible."

Finn noted wryly that Brangaine made no attempt to persuade the Rígh that she should go also, despite her promise to Gwyneth. Indeed it was clear that Brangaine felt only relief that she would not have to face the many angers of the sea. Finn cast her a quick glance of contempt that caused colour to rise in Brangaine's pale cheeks.

"Wha' about Donald?" Dide said. "Donald the Gillie."

"No' the MacRuraich's gillie?" Lachlan cried. "I kent Donald a long time syne. A doughty auld man indeed and the finest longbowman I've ever seen. He can shoot out a sparrow's eye from two hundred paces. What do ye think, *leannan*? Would such an auld man draw suspicion upon the ship? It is no' usual for a ship to carry any but the

youngest and most able o' men and though I doubt no' that Donald be as brave as any o' them, we want to do naught to draw suspicion upon them."

"Your Highness, sometimes an auld sailor that has seawater in his veins instead o' bluid is made ship's cook so he can still feel the waves beneath the boards and smell the sea air, even though he is too auld and stiff to climb the ropes or haul up the sails." The speaker was a tall, stern-looking man with close-cropped grey hair under a tricorne hat and a weather-beaten face. He and his companions had been talking on the other side of the room but had drawn closer during the discussion. He gave a brief bow as he spoke, his hand held in a fist at his heart.

"Can Donald Gillie cook?" Lachlan asked with a grin.

"Very well," Finn replied with dignity, glad in her secret heart that Ashlin and Donald were to be allowed to accompany her after all. All this talk of dark and dangerous journeys was making her feel rather anxious.

"Very well, it is decided, though I do no' ken whether to laugh or sigh. Who's ever heard o' a thief with her own piper and gillie?"

"Who's ever heard o' a thief who was also a banprionnsa?" Dide quipped.

Lachlan smiled, then said, "Dide, the fleet is all set to sail in the morn. What have ye and Enit arranged to explain your disappearance after the Summer Fair?"

"We are to pretend that my grandam has taken ill," Dide replied. "All ken that she is no' strong and the crippling disease that twists all her limbs is growing more painful each year. My da will set off with the other caravans, for all ken we canna afford to lie idle for long. Nina will stay in Dun Gorm and pretend to nurse her."

"But what o' ye?" Iseult asked. "Will none notice ye are no' here either?"

Dide shrugged. "Those that travel with my da will think I stayed in Dun Gorm with Grandam, and those that stay in Dun Gorm will think I have gone with Da, all while Grandam and I are on the high seas. There are so many caravans here for the Summer Fair that no-one can be sure who has done what afterwards. All will be well."

"Very well then. Och, Dide, ye have no' met our captain yet, have ye? This is Captain Tobias o' Kirkloreli, a town no' far from Bride in Tirsoilleir. He is the one who shall see ye all safe to the Black Tower. Captain Tobias, this is my auldest and dearest friend, Dide the Juggler, the Righ's own jongleur."

"The Righ's own fool," Dide replied with a smile, bowing to the captain. "Well met, Captain."

The captain bowed back, fist to his heart, then introduced the other men briskly. "This is my first mate, Arvin the Just, and this is the navigator Alphonsus the Sure. Ye could no' get a better crew; they all ken the Skeleton Coast like the back o' their hands. If any can get us safely past Cape Wrath and through the Devil's Vortex, they can."

A thrill of fear had run down Finn's spine at the words *The Black Tower*. It now deepened into a shudder that shook her slim frame. "The Skeleton Coast?" she said in a rather high voice. "The Devil's Vortex? Flaming dragon balls, will ye no' tell me where we

are going and why afore I go stark raving mad?"

For a moment all were frozen into shocked silence. Then suddenly Lachlan's stern face broke into laughter.

"Finn, ye wildcat!" he cried. "Have ye no proper respect for your Rígh? Is that any way to be asking a question o' me? Ye should curtsy deep and beg my pardon with your eyes lowered, and say, 'I beg your forbearance, your Highness, to be so rude in interrupting but may I have the honour o' addressing a question to ye?'"

"Och, what a load o' dragon dung!" Finn giggled.

"Fionnghal!" Brangaine cried. Colour burnt in her cheeks. "Please, your Highness, forgive her, she does no' mean to . . ."

Lachlan waved a hand. "Please, no need to apologise for our wee cat-thief. We are travel companions o' auld. I well remember her colorful turn o' phrase. Indeed, it does me good to hear her. I canna tell ye how tired I get o' all the bowing and scraping and licking o' my boots. At least with Finn we ken where we are."

Brangaine bowed and stepped back, her colour still high. Finn could not help smirking at her, just a little.

"Did ye tell Finn nothing o' her task, Dide?" Iseult asked, frowning a little.

"Ye said tell no-one."

"But happen she would no' have been willing to come if she had kent," Iseult replied.

Dide nodded, his merry face unusually grim. "Aye, I ken. Happen that is why I did no' tell her."

The smirk faded from Finn's face. "So what is it ye want me to do?" she asked anxiously. "All Enit said was that ye wanted me to break into some castle and steal someone."

Lachlan's mouth quirked upwards, but he said very seriously, "That is exactly what we want ye to do, Finn. The only problem is that castle and that someone are both behind the Great Divide."

"In Tirsoilleir?" Finn's voice rose in a squeak. "Ye want us to go into the Forbidden Land?" The Rígh nodded. "Are we no' at war with Tirsoilleir?" Finn said. Again the Rígh nodded. "And we have to sail there? Even though the seas are full o' Fairgean?" The Rígh nodded for the third time. Finn took a deep breath. She felt as if her heart was being squeezed by two giant hands. For a moment she could not say a word, then she said rudely, " 'Tis no' me that is stark raving mad, but ye, your Highness!"

"At least she remembered to call me 'your Highness' this time," Lachlan said to Brangaine with a little inflection of irony. The candlelight flickered across his dark, saturnine face and his wings rustled restlessly. Finn, Ashlin and Brangaine were all staring at him with pale, frightened faces, everything they had ever heard about the Forbidden Land rushing upon them.

Tirsoilleir had held itself apart from the rest of Eileanan ever since its people had scorned to sign the First Pact of Peace and acknowledge Aedan Whitelock as their overlord and rígh. Separated from the western lands of Eileanan by a curving horseshoe of a cliff, more than three hundred feet high in places, the Forbidden Land had remained in complete isolation for more than four hundred years. It was ruled by a militant council of religious fanatics who had overthrown the MacHilde clan many years ago, rejecting all ties to the Coven or to the royal family, and enforcing their own stern patriarchal religion. Elfrida NicHilde was all that was left of that once proud clan and she had never ruled, having been born long after the overthrow of her family.

Three years earlier, the Bright Soldiers of Tirsoilleir had invaded the western lands of Eileanan in a religious crusade, determined to force all human inhabitants of the Far Islands to worship their cruel, unforgiving sun-god. Finn had heard many stories about the Bright Soldiers' brutality and bigotry. It was said their clergy whipped themselves in punishment for their sins, refused to wash, or rest in comfort, forced men to fight and pray against their will, and tortured those who refused to submit. Their grim warrior-maids cut off their left breast when they accepted the yoke of their god, and it was even said they sacrificed beasts and babies on their altars. Even though Finn had heard Elfrida NicHilde deny such tales, she knew the Bright Soldiers were ruthless in their reprisals against anyone who did not accept their faith. Had they not burnt Jorge the Seer to death, the gentlest old man Finn had ever known?

"Ye ken we have been endeavouring to win back the NicHilde's throne for her ever since we managed to drive the Bright Soldiers from our soil?" Lachlan said. As Finn nodded, he went on, "Apart from the fact that the Tirsoilleirean shall always be a threat to us while they brood on our borders, there is no doubt we are in great need o' money and men if we are to fulfill our promise to the MacSeinn and win back Carraig from the Fairgean. Once the NicHilde sits on the throne in Bride, she shall be able to fulfill her oath o' fealty to me and bring men and arms and coin to the cause. Now, ye may no' ken this, but we won many o' the Tirsoilleirean to our cause during the Bright Wars."

"Many o' my people believe the MacCuinn is the angel o' death," Elfrida explained in her soft voice. "The angel o' death is the warrior angel o' God our Father, the one that passes judgement on the sinful and wreaks vengeance for wrongdoing."

"It is because o' his wings and his bonny voice and his strange golden eyes," Iseult explained. "Apparently he looks like pictures o' this angel o' death."

"And because the beasts o' the air and the field fought at his command, and because o' the lad with the healing hands," Captain Tobias said unexpectedly. "To heal by the laying on o' hands is a miraculous gift from Our God the Father, and no' a trick o' the Archfiend to tempt us into evil-doing. It must be so, despite what the pastors and the berhtildes said."

"And many times Killian the Listener prophesied the coming o' the angel o' death, to smite down those who had twisted his Word for their own ends," Alphonsus the Sure said, his dark eyes glowing with fervour. "The General Assembly has grown cruel and greedy and gluttonous."

"Aye, the Fealde has grown hungry for power, and comes to the General Assembly dressed in cloth-o'-gold and jewels as if she were some whore and no' the hand-maiden o' God Our Father," Arvin the Just said. "Indeed, the Apostle Paul spoke truly when he

said 'Silence is a woman's best garment'."

Finn exchanged an incredulous glance with Iseult, who smiled very slightly and shook her head in warning.

"There are many among my people who feel the young NicHilde shows more proper humility, modesty and charity than the Fealde and her warrior-maids, or even the pastors," Captain Tobias said. "She came to us all when we were prisoners-o'-war and tended our hurts with her own hands and made sure we wanted for naught. She was dressed with proper sobriety and made no attempt to flaunt herself with jewels, furbelows or buttons."

Finn glanced from Elfrida's simple attire to her own vivid, heavily decorated clothing and suddenly realised why the three Tirsoilleirean men were looking at them all with such an air of cold disapproval.

"As ye can see, our three friends here feel strongly that the current administration o' the Bright Land is no' as it should be," Lachlan said with that faint inflection of irony in his voice. "And the many reports we receive from beyond the Great Divide seem to show they are no' alone in their thoughts."

"Ye have spies behind the Great Divide?" Finn asked in some amazement. "I thought strangers were killed if they set foot in Tirsoilleir."

"But ye forget, my wee cat, how many o' those who came west to fight us returned to tell the folks at home what they had seen and heard," Lachlan said, smiling. "And some o' those have changed so much in their views that they now send me any news they think may interest me, all whilst spreading the tales o' the angel with the midnight wings and flaming sword . . ."

"Who shall come and topple the cruel, corrupt elders from their gilded altars, so that the people o' the Bright Land may be free o' their terrible injustice and tyranny," Alphonsus the Sure said, his voice ringing with triumph and certainty.

"Ye hear there the words o' Killian the Listener," Captain Tobias said, his sun-hardened face creasing in a grim smile. "He is the divine prophet o' God Our Father, who was wrongly accused o' heresy and dissidence and was incarcerated in the Black Tower by the Fealde and her minions. She said it was no' the word o' God he heard but the depraved whisperings o' the Archfiend, and cut off his ears so he could hear no more."

"A prophet is no' without honour save in his own country and in his own house," Arvin the Just said in the gloomiest of tones. Elfrida and the other Tirsoilleirean nodded in solemn agreement.

"This is the man we aim to rescue," Lachlan said grimly. "Our spies tell us that the Fealde has grown afraid o' the growing ferment in the countryside and has decided it may be better to martyr this seer, rather than risk an uprising driven by the words o' his prophecy. Until now the General Assembly had thought keeping him locked away would be enough to douse the fire his words ignited. Yet since the ignominious defeat o' their invasion attempt, the Tirsoilleirean people have begun to mutter against the Fealde and the Kirk. There is much talk o' rescuing Killian the Listener and following him in a rebellion against the General Assembly's rule. This is why we wish to free him. If Killian

the Listener speaks on our behalf, happen we can win the Tirsoilleirean people to our cause. We shall be able to help Elfrida win back her throne, and Tirsoilleir will at last be free o' the tyranny o' the General Assembly."

"Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," Arvin the Just said profoundly, and his companions nodded in agreement. Finn had to stifle a giggle.

Lachlan sipped his wine, his wings relaxing. He fixed Finn with his compelling golden eyes. "That is why we need ye, Finn. Ye alone can climb into the Black Tower and let the rescue party in."

"The Black Tower?" Finn asked.

"The Black Tower is where I was born and raised," Elfrida said with a little shiver. "It is the prison where the most dangerous o' the General Assembly's enemies are kept. Traitors and heretics and the bloodiest o' murderers are sent there, and anyone that the Fealde wants to disappear. Most are executed in the square afore the Great Kirk and their heads stuck on spikes along the city walls but some disappear inside those black walls and are never seen again. No-one has ever escaped from it. My father tried when I was but a babe and died in the attempt."

"I see," Finn said. "So I'm betting no-one has ever broken in afore either."

Elfrida shook her head. "No-one in their right mind would want to!"

"Which is why ye've called in the Cat," Finn said gloomily. "Needing someone out o' their right mind."

"No-one else could do it, Finn," Iseult said. "Believe me, we have thought o' and abandoned many plans to rescue the prophet but this is the only one that has any chance o' success. If you could climb up the walls and break in without anyone seeing ..."

"Killian is the gentlest auld man ye could imagine," Elfrida said with a break in her voice. "He has already been punished horribly—tortured and maimed for daring to speak out against the Fealde. My people have a deep reverence for prophets and they have grown to hate the General Assembly. If he should still be alive and we could bring him out o' the Black Tower and set him to preaching again, well, happen it be the best chance I have o' winning back my throne."

"Can ye at least tell us if he is still alive?" Lachlan said urgently. "Please, Finn?"

"How?" Finn replied shortly. "I'd need something o' his to hold."

Elfrida slipped her hand within her pocket and pulled out a crude wooden cross to pass to Finn. The cross was hung from a leather thong, much knotted where it had been broken.

"Killian gave me this the last time we met," Elfrida said pleadingly. "Can ye tell anything from it, Finn? Is he still alive? Is he held in the Black Tower still?"

Finn held the wooden cross in her hands, shutting her eyes and concentrating. She saw a dark cell, lit only by the flickering light of two torches shoved into braziers. An emaciated old man hung on the wall, filthy rags hanging from his skeletal frame. Thrusting a long scroll of paper at him was an armour-clad soldier with close cropped grey hair,

wrapped in a long white cloak emblazoned with a red cross. "Sign!" the soldier hissed and the old man shook his head feebly.

Surprised at the light timbre of the soldier's voice, Finn looked closer and felt a shock of surprise as she saw the cloak fell unevenly over the soldier's mail-clad chest. It was a woman with only one breast.

Standing behind the berhtilde were a row of guards in full armour, wearing white cloaks with a design of a black tower upon them. There was also a small, stout man in a long black cassock, holding a jewelled cross in his hand. Against the wall was a long table covered in peculiar tools and instruments, some heating in a brazier of white-hot coals. A huge man with a shaven head was turning the tools in the coals, his bare muscular arms shining with sweat. He lifted one out and threatened the prisoner with it, and the old man covered away. As he pressed one cheek into the damp stone, Finn saw there was an ugly coil of red scars where his ear had once been.

"He's alive," Finn said rather faintly. "They torture him. They want him to sign some kind o' confession. They want him to say he is in league with the Archfiend. He refuses."

Elfrida gave a little sob and there was a hiss from the three Tirsoilleirean sailors. The captain cried, "God be my witness, I swear I shall do aught I can to save your blessed prophet from their evil machinations! May your retribution fall upon the Fealde and her minions!"

"Poor Killian," Elfrida whispered. "I do no' ken how he can still live. Nine years he has been imprisoned in that hell-hole and all that time they have tried to make him recant. They starve him, they beat him, they torture him, and still he refuses to sign a false confession. He is an auld, auld man and weak as a newborn kitten. I canna think how he has survived."

Finn went to pass back the cross but Lachlan said, "Nay, keep it, Finn. Ye'll need it. The Black Tower is built within a massive compound that has many thousands o' prisoners locked up inside it. Ye will need to find where the prophet is kept afore ye can free him and there is no doubt he will be closely guarded. Ye will need to Search him out with the cross afore ye can free him."

"The Black Tower is surrounded on all sides by a massive, strong fortress," Captain Tobias said. "Its walls are two hundred feet high and it is built on an island whose cliffs stand five hundred feet out o' the sea, sheer as glass. They tell me ye can climb that but by God's teeth! I doubt it. No-one has ever climbed it afore."

"I can climb anything," Finn boasted, though she felt a little light-headed.

"Pride goest afore destruction and a haughty spirit afore a fall," Arvin the Just said sourly.

"I have drawn maps o' the tower, as well as I can remember," Elfrida said anxiously, giving Finn a sheaf of papers. "Plus anything I can think o' that may be useful to ye, like the guards' routine and what they wear and who else may be found within the tower. Ye will go, will ye no', Finn? Indeed, they tell me there is no-one else who can possibly climb that cliff or break into the fortress without anyone kenning."

Finn slipped her hand within her pocket to caress her cloak of invisibility. "For sure,"

she answered. "Am I no' the Cat?"

Elfrida breathed a long sigh of relief. "Thank ye! Now I ken we shall overthrow the Fealde and win back my crown!"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," Alphonsus the Sure said gloomily. "Let all things be done in due order. We have first to brave the Skeleton Coast and Cape Wrath afore we need worry about the Black Tower. Let God be merciful upon us."

Finn felt a little sick. Images of cutting off ears, witch-fires, avenging angels and a coast littered with bones whirled in her head. She glanced rather wildly at Dillon, still standing ramrod-straight against the wall with the tray in his hands. "I think I need a slurp of that wine, Scruffy," she said. "Better make it several slurps!"

THE WEAVER'S SHUTTLE FLIES

Ship of Fools

The Black Sheep Inn was one of many crowded together down near the wharves. It was a narrow, dirty place, smelling of ale and tobacco smoke, and only dimly lit by whatever sunlight could pierce the years of accumulated grime on the windows. Even though it was not yet midday the common room was crammed full of people, shouting out for more ale, arguing over the toss of a pair of dice, or singing loud sea shanties.

Most of the jostling crowd were sailors, enjoying their last chance to drink an inn dry before setting sail that evening on the turn of the tide. Most were dressed in breeches tied under the knee with string, coarse shirts rolled to the elbow, and long boots, much stained with salt. Many were barefoot.

Finn and Ashlin lay on their stomachs at the head of the stairwell, looking down on the crowd below with joyous excitement. Both were dressed in the same sort of rough clothes, with their skins stained dark brown with berry juice. Goblin sat between Finn's arms, watching with the same expression of curiosity in her slanted aquamarine eyes as her mistress.

Dide appeared in the doorway of a room down the hall and whistled softly. When Finn and Ashlin looked up, he beckoned them to return to the room. It struck Finn forcibly how different Dide looked now that he was masquerading as a sailor. With the shedding of his flamboyant clothes, the jongleur had somehow shed all the impudent charm that had seemed so much of his natural personality. He now walked with the rolling gait of a man who was used to the constant movement of a ship's deck. His movements had all the economical briskness of a sailor used to cramped quarters instead of the excitable gesticulations of a jongleur used to performing to a crowd. He even spoke differently, with a rough coastal accent spiced with the oaths and expressions of a sailing man. Thoughtfully Finn thought she had much about the art of masquerade to learn from the young jongleur.

She scrambled to her feet, lifting Goblin to lie against her shoulder and casting one last, regretful glance down at the fascinating hubbub below them. Just then the door to the inn opened, a shaft of sunlight setting the smoke to swirl about. For a moment all Finn

could see was the *dazzle* of sunlight on a mass of fair hair, then she heard ribald whistles and catcalls as the sailors near the door greeted the girl stepping within.

"Och, no," Finn breathed in dismay. "What is she doing here?"

Brangaine had paused in the doorway, taken aback by the barrage of lewd suggestions. She drew her plaid more tightly around her body, even though it was sweltering hot in the crowded room, then lifted her chin and stepped in. Amongst all those rough brown men she looked like a princess in her pretty gown and slippers, her silky blonde hair hanging down to her knees in a thick, loose plait.

"Och, the lamb-brained ninny," Finn breathed. "She could no' have drawn more attention to herself if she'd tried!"

She leant over the railing. "Dinna tell me the bawdy-house has finally sent me my whore!" she slurred in an excellent imitation of a cocky young man who had had far too much to drink. "Where have ye been, my gallimaufrey? I was beginning to be afraid I'd have to raise anchor without having got to sheathe my dirk in a ripe-and-ready lassie."

Brangaine stopped in her tracks, vivid color rushing up her throat and staining her cheeks. There was general laughter and one man slid his hand inside Brangaine's arm, saying, "Let me get her loosened up for ye, laddie."

Finn came down the stairs in a rush, drawing her dagger. "Get off her, ye frog-faced lout," she cried. "I want no buttered muffin. Me mates have paid well for this fine fancy-skirt and I do no' want to share my first bite o' giblet pie with a filthy auld goat. Get your own whore!"

Ashlin leapt down in front of her, drawing his own dagger, even though his face was white. The sailor only laughed though, and let go Brangaine's arm. She drew herself away and Finn came swaggering up to her and kissed her wetly on the side of her neck, one hand rubbing her bottom. "Aye, ye be a fine braw piece o' skirt, I warrant me mates paid highly for ye!" Finn cried, drawing Brangaine towards the stairs.

"Your first time raiding the cockpit, laddie?" one sailor cried.

Finn grinned and gave a little drunken stagger. "It may be my first, Jack Tar, but I warrant it willna be my last."

To the sound of raucous laughter they disappeared up the stairs, Brangaine's arm stiff and unyielding beneath Finn's tight grip.

"How dare ye!" Brangaine hissed.

Finn just hauled Brangaine on up the stairs, saying through gritted teeth, "Have ye porridge for brains, ye great gowk? And us supposed to be naught but sailor lads!"

Dide was standing in the shadows at the top of the stairs, his black eyes snapping with anger. "What do ye mean, turning up here like this? Do ye wish to give the game away? Look at ye, in your silk gown and the NicSian plaid, by Ea's green bluid! Ye have as much wit as two fools and a madman!"

Tears started to Brangaine's eyes. "What else was I meant to do?" she asked as Dide pushed the three of them over the sill of the door and into the room, shutting the door

smartly behind them. "Ye set sail in less than an hour. I had to see ye . . ."

"Why?" Dide replied shortly. "I thought it was agreed that ye mun stay with Nina till we were long gone and no harm could be done if ye blabbed."

"I've changed my mind," Brangaine said breathlessly. "I want to go with ye."

Finn gave a snort of derision and opened her mouth to say something rude, but Dide silenced her with a gesture. "But why, Brangaine? Ye ken this is no pleasure trip we go on. It is a dangerous journey indeed. Putting aside for a moment the fact that the Fairgean rule the seas, the coast between here and Bride is no' called the Skeleton Coast for naught. It is littered with the wrecks o' the ships that have foundered on the rocks or been sunk by sea serpents, or dragged down by a whirlpool. And even if we make it to Bride in one piece, we have to break into the most impregnable prison in Eileanan and steal away the Bright Soldiers' most closely guarded prisoner. Ye will be much safer here in Dun Gorm with Nina."

Brangaine was sickly pale but she swallowed and said, "I ken all that. I still want to go."

"But why?" Although there was nothing but concerned interest in Dide's voice, he was looking at Brangaine with frowning intentness, his hand resting on his belt of daggers.

"I promised Lady Gwyneth I'd have a care for Fionnghal," Brangaine replied.

"I find myself no' altogether convinced, Lady Brangaine," Dide replied softly. "Ye admitted yourself that ye hate and fear the sea. Ye ken what will happen to us if our ship is overrun by the Fairgean, better than any o' us, having lost your own parents to them. Ye'll be as out o' place on board a ship as a eunuch in a brothel. Besides, there's no love lost between ye and Finn. So, what's the true story?"

Brangaine hesitated then blurted out, "Ye'd all think I was white-livered if I stayed behind. Finn would crow over it for years . . ."

". . . If I survive," Finn muttered but Dide motioned her to silence as Brangaine went on, stumbling a little. "She's had so many adventures and I've done naught but stay at home and mind my manners and learn to sew a straight seam—I'm sick o' always being the good one. I ken I could be o' use to ye, did ye no' say so yourself? And Nina said I'd have to stay hidden away in the inn so none kent I was there. Ye could be gone for months, she said."

"Have ye looked in the mirror lately, sweet Brangaine?" Finn said charmingly. "Ye look less like a cabin boy than any primping, pampered banprionnsa I've ever seen."

"That's enough, Finn," Donald said suddenly. "Why must ye always be biting and nipping at your cousin's heels? It is no' worthy o' ye."

Finn blushed scarlet.

"She has a point though, Brangaine," Dide said gently. "As ye can see, we have all disguised ourselves as sailors. Only my grandam has no' tried, for she canna be anything but herself. If ye were to come with us ye would have to do the same, and indeed, I do no' think ye could. Look at your soft white hands. They've never hauled rope in their life."

Look at your hair."

Brangaine bit her lip, glancing involuntarily in the mirror. She stared around at the others, all dressed in cotton breeches and shirts, their faces and necks brown as berries. Finn looked as boyish as any with her hair cut short, her arms tanned and muscular under the rolled-up shirt. For a moment Brangaine hesitated then suddenly she plunged her hand into her reticule, dragged out her sewing kit and withdrew a pair of scissors with mother-of-pearl handles. She seized her long corn-silk plait in one hand and hacked at it till it came away in her hand, leaving her hair jagged just below her ears. "The hair was easy enough to fix," she said in a high, breathless voice. "Has anyone any more o' that stuff to stain the skin?"

Finn gaped at her, unable to think of anything to say. Enit held out one trembling, blue-veined hand. "Aye, I do, lassie," she said warmly. "Donald will find it for ye. Kindle a fire for the lass, Dide. She must burn every last scrap o' that hair."

Brangaine looked at the long, corn-silk plait dangling from her hand and made an instinctive move to clutch it to her. "Ye mun burn it, lass," Enit said. "We want none here to wonder who has been cutting their hair. Apart from that, it is dangerous to leave parts o' yourself just lying around. Ye have heard Dide sing the story o' how Lachlan was cursed by a feather plucked from his wing."

"Never mind, lass, it'll grow back," Dide said sympathetically and snapped his fingers so a fire leapt to life on the empty hearth. Brangaine hesitated a moment longer, then threw her plait on to the flame. It flared up, slender threads of living light, then sank away into ashes.

"Do we have any more sailors' clothes for the lass?" Enit asked. "Donald, the berry juice is in a wee pot in my bag by the door. Brangaine, ye must rub it into every part of your body. We canna risk anyone noticing a line where the colour ends. And ye must bind your breasts. Finn, help her."

"We canna be calling her "Brangaine" any more," Dide said. "Happen we'd better just call her Bran. Like 'Finn,' it's more o' a boy's name than a girl's, and that way we have less chance o' making a mistake."

"There's no' much we can do about her soft hands," Enit said. "She will have to be the son o' a landholder that's run away to sea for the fun o' it."

"What about my hands?" Finn demanded, spreading them out. Only then did she realise how rough they were in comparison to Bran's, the nails broken, the palms calloused from riding her horse, and shooting her bow.

"Och, they'll do," Dide said with a laugh. "Come now, no time to dawdle. The tide is on the turn."

Despite herself, Finn felt a stroke of cold fear down her spine. Her eyes met her cousin's and she saw Bran had shared the same instinctive chill.

The fleet left the safety of the Berhtfane with the ebbing of the evening tide. There was a grand ceremony, with many speeches and toasts of Midsummer ale. The twenty-five ships were all decorated with flowers and anointed with goldensloe wine, and as they slipped their moorings and floated down the harbour towards the river-gates, the

fleet was blessed by the city sorceress, Oonagh the White.

Most of the twenty-five ships in the Rígh's fleet had been captured from the Tirsoilleirean navy during the Bright Wars. They had been wrecked during the battle for Dun Gorm, when the Bright Soldiers had inadvertently blown up the river-gates, causing the Berhtfane to flood to the sea. The rest were the skeleton remnants of Lachlan's father's navy, which had spent the years of Jaspar's rule quietly mouldering away in the shipwrights' yards. Quite a few of the ships had needed to be almost completely rebuilt, with a controversial Ship Tax levied by the Rígh to pay the astronomical cost. Timbers had been brought in from Rurach and Aslinn, and men who knew the sea had eagerly travelled from every corner of Eileanan for the chance of earning a living from their trade.

Nonetheless, many of the seamen were Tirsoilleirean prisoners-of-war who had sworn their allegiance to Elfrida NicHilde and through her to the Rígh. There were simply too few experienced sailors from the other countries of Eileanan, thanks to the Fairgean besieging the coast for so many years.

Ten of the ships were great galleons, each with four masts and armed with thirty cannons and a great many soldiers. Five were caravels, with two masts carrying square sails and a third carrying a triangular sail, making them quick and manoeuvrable, riding high out of the water but broad enough to stay afloat in the roughest seas. Although these too were armed with cannon, they did not have the range or firing power of the galleons' cannons, being designed more as merchant ships than warships. The remaining ten ships were carracks: strongly built, three-masted vessels designed primarily for carrying cargo. Heavily loaded with sacks of grain, seeds and potatoes, barrels of ale and whiskey, bottles of medicines, and newly forged weapons and farming implements, they were equipped with only a limited amount of armament and so relied heavily on the galleons to protect them from marauding pirates and the Fairgean.

Luckily the admiral of the fleet was not expecting to run into too much trouble from the sea-faeries. Summer was the time when the hunters and warriors of the Fairgean were mostly much further south, following in the wake of the blue whales who mated in the warm, shallow seas of the tropics. The only Fairgean in the seas around Eileanan were those younger warriors set to guard the women who bore their young on the soft sands of southern Eileanan and the Fair Isles. With such a strong fleet, the admiral was sure the young Fairgean bloods would not attempt to attack when that meant leaving the women and their young unprotected.

The drawback to sailing in high summer was, of course, the lowness of the tides. Dragged back by the gravitational force of the two moons, the summer sea was shallow indeed and many rocks and reefs that were covered in spring and autumn were exposed. Most dangerous of all were the sandbanks which changed every year as the king tide dragged them back and forth. Rocks, reefs and islands could be mapped and avoided. Most captains only knew there was a sandbank ahead when they ran aground.

The fleet made a brave sight as they slowly glided down the calm waters of the Berhtfane towards the river-gates, their brightly coloured flags snapping in the breeze. There was much cheering from the crowd gathered on the foreshores, and the sailors all sang a light-hearted sea-shanty as they hauled up the sails. Not knowing what to do to help, Finn and Bran leant on the bulwark and waved to the crowd until the first mate yelled at them to look lively and lend them a hand. "The devil finds work for idle hands to

do, so no idle hands on my watch!" he shouted. "Give them a hand raising the mizzensail, ye lazy seaslugs!"

Her fears dissolving in a great bubble of excitement, Finn ran to obey. She could hardly believe she was setting out to journey across the seas to the far end of the world, to see what no-one had seen in centuries, the forbidden city of Bride. It was as if she was the heroine of one of Dide's songs, setting out on a quest of high adventure that would save the world and bring her fame and fortune. She grinned at Dide and joined in the singing, even though she could only work out the words of the refrain:

"Tam o' Glenvale was a sailor,

Tam o' Glenvale stout and gay,

Sing fala-ralla aye-do

Sing fala-ralla aye."

The passage through the river-gates proved rather an anticlimax, for only one ship at a time could make their way through and there was much jostling for position. Captain Tobias' ship, a caravel named *Speedwell*, was one of the last to make its way down through the system of canals and locks that connected the high waters of the Berhtfane with the low waters of the sea. Since it was high summer, the sea was even lower than ever and so Finn had the peculiar experience of sailing down a narrow stretch of water, contained behind high stone walls, while sand rose high on either side, heaped with the refuse of the sea. All the ships were dragged through the canals by two teams of massive cart-horses, their coats lathered and wet.

At last the *Speedwell* slid through the last pair of gates into the firth. The sun had almost set and the water was a strange violet colour, glimmering with dusky light. Finn had little time to lean on the bulwark and watch, for the sails needed to be hoisted to catch the evening wind. With short, sharp blasts of his whistle, the bosun shouted his orders. He had been told Finn was a canny climber and so he sent her up into the rigging to help the sailors unroll the sails, warning her to keep a tight hold. Those down on the decks hauled on the ropes and one by one the white sails billowed out, catching the breeze and sending the little ship racing across the waves.

Finn clung tightly to the mainmast as the world rocked. In the last glimmer of light she could see tall rocky crags rearing up on either side, their peaks still glowing with colour. White sandbanks lifted their smooth flanks out of the bay, the water nearby a clear translucent green. In some places the water rose into odd curling ridges as different currents warred with each other over a reef, or spun into miniature whirlpools. Ahead of the *Speedwell* sailed the fleet, their sails all filled with wind as they tried to escape the dangerous waters near the seashore before the last of the light was lost.

The sudden lurch of the mast as the *Speedwell* tacked almost sent Finn crashing down to the decks. One of the sailors ordered her down, saying tersely, "The ropes be no place for a lubber, lad, no matter how canny a climber ye be. Get ye down to where

ye'll be safe."

"Why does the boat change direction so suddenly?" Finn asked, as she began to slide down the ropes.

"There be rocks and reefs hereabouts that'll tear the guts out o' her should she run aground," the young sailor said. "It be tricky sailing out o' the firth. They call this the Bay o' Deception, for she looks so smooth and bonny but beneath the surface are rocks as cruel as the teeth o' a sea serpent."

Finn slid down swiftly, unable to help a feeling of relief as her feet touched the wooden deck. Goblin was curled up on a coil of rope waiting for her. As Finn bent and picked her up, the little elven cat miaowed plaintively.

"Aye, I must admit I'm peckish myself," Finn whispered in response. "What time do ye think we eat around here?"

Goblin kneaded her neck painfully as Finn went in search of her companions. A few of the sailors smiled to see her with the black cat hanging around her neck. To Finn's relief there had been no arguments about the elven cat accompanying her, for a black cat was apparently considered lucky on board a ship, unlike Enit. The presence of the old woman on board had caused many of the sailors to scowl and mutter about bad luck, even though the captain had issued stern warnings that the old jongleur was to be treated with respect.

Finn found the others in the galley, a cramped little room deep in the bow of the ship. Donald was swathed in a big white apron, stirring a pot that bubbled away on the iron stove. The room was lined with big barrels of stores, while a small wooden table was hung by ropes from the ceiling. Crowded at the table were a number of sailors, some perched on three-legged stools or barrels, the others standing. All were waiting to be served their supper, which they would then carry down to one of the lower decks to eat, since there was no room in the galley for anyone to eat in comfort. They were all drinking from pewter mugs and Dide was telling them a tale that had them guffawing with laughter. Perched on a stool by his side, Bran was smiling too and Finn thought how different she looked with her short little pigtail and rough clothes, her brown face alight with laughter.

Jay smiled a welcome at her and moved aside so she could share his barrel, but Finn ignored him, squeezing in between Bran and Ashlin. The piper smiled a shy welcome and would have given up his stool for her if Finn had not frowned at him and shaken her head. She joined in the laughter and chatter, trying to accustom herself to the swaying of the room and the odd rocking of the table. She noticed how the seamen moved easily with the ship and tried to mimic them, although her stomach was rebelling at the smell of tobacco smoke and rum and sweaty armpits and bad breath, and the heaving of the deck beneath her feet.

"Ye look a wee pale, Finn," Donald whispered as he ladled stew on to trenchers of bread for the crew. "How are ye yourself?"

"I be just fine," she answered faintly, cautiously cradling her stomach with one hand. "Or at least, I will be, in a minute." She swallowed thickly, then as Donald passed her a tin plate laden with stew, got up hurriedly. "Fresh air," she gulped and ran from the room. She was halfway up the ladder when her stomach won out, and she was heartily sick all

over her own boots. Jay had followed her and wordlessly she let him help her up on to the deck where she crouched in the shelter of the mainmast, letting the night wind cool her. Overhead the stars seemed huge, the masts and rigging like a giant black cobweb across the moon. Finn watched the masts sway back and forth, back and forth, and tried to control her nausea.

"Ye'll be fine once ye get your sea-legs," Jay said sympathetically, smoothing her hair back from her brow with his calloused hand.

Finn jerked her head away. "Why are ye no' sick?" she demanded resentfully. "Or Bran?"

"It be no sign o' weakness to be seasick," Jay said rather sternly, letting his hand drop. "The auld tales say Lachlan the Navigator was sick every time he left harbour and he was the greatest sailor Eileanan has ever kent."

Finn's only answer was to stumble for the wooden bulwark, which she clung to, gasping, as she vomited over the side. Jay held her shoulders then helped her back to her spot near the forecastle. "Try and sleep," he said, "ye'll feel better in the morn."

"Sleep here?" Finn asked, looking about her at the bare deck.

"Aye, o' course," Jay said. "Ye did no' think ye'd have a cabin like the captain, surely? We'll all sleep here. I'll get ye a blanket."

"And some water?" Finn asked in rather a faint voice, as nausea racked her again.

"Aye, and I'll see if any o' the lads ken an antidote to seasickness. Sit still and I'll be back in a moment."

Finn leant back against the mast weakly, closing her eyes. Who had ever heard of the heroine of a quest tale to be so weak and silly as to succumb to seasickness?

She had an uncomfortable night. The wooden deck was harder than rock, the blanket she had been given was scratchy and smelt of mould, the ship rolled and heaved constantly, the spars creaked, the sails flapped, the waves crashed and roared, and the bosun's shrill pipe marked the changing of the watches every four hours. Whenever she did slip into an uneasy doze, a splash of spray would jerk her awake. At last, exhausted, she did sleep, only to be woken at dawn by the bosun's call. Her watch was on duty again.

Hot porridge with a dash of rum and a quick wash in a bucket of salty seawater helped her regain some of her spirits, though her body was stiff and her eyes gritty with salt. She and Ashlin were set to washing down the decks, much to their consternation. Her arms tired quickly and Finn took advantage of the first and second mates being below deck to lean against the bulwark and rest for awhile.

To her dismay she saw the *Speedwell* was the only ship in sight. As far as she could see there was only the sea and hundreds of rocky islands, some only large enough for a bird to perch on, some crowned with rums of walled towns. The rest of the fleet had vanished.

She whistled to Dide, who was mending a sail with a long needle. He dropped the

ram's horn filled with tallow that the sailmaker's needles were stuck in, and came to her side. "Have we got ourselves lost?" she asked anxiously.

"Nay, o' course no'," he said in a low voice, casting a quick glance around to make sure none were listening. "Ye did no' think the whole fleet was to sail to Bride, did ye? Did ye no' hear they had set course for Siantan, to take supplies to relieve the famine there?"

"Aye, but I thought . . ."

"Nay, we just slipped away from the fleet under the cover o' darkness. We are headed east now, have ye no' realised? We were sailing south-west afore."

Finn stared around and only then noticed the bow was pointed almost directly into the rising sun. She also realised that quite a few of the sailors were standing huddled in groups, muttering under their breath, and staring at the position of the sun themselves.

"What be wrong with them?" she asked.

Dide sighed. "Like ye, they are troubled that we have left the fleet and even more troubled by the fact we no longer fly the Righ's insignia, but the red cross o' the Tirsoilleirean instead."

He pointed one finger and Finn suddenly noticed the flags and pennants fluttering at the top of the masts and from the stern no longer carried the royal arms of the Clan of MacCuinn but were emblazoned with a red fitch cross. "As far as most o' the common sailors are concerned, there has been a mutiny against the crown and Captain Tobias has committed treason o' the highest order. The question is, wha' shall they do about it? We mun hope that, like most sailors, they are more concerned with their own safety than wi' the Righ's honour, for otherwise there could be trouble."

"But do they no' ken we sail in the Righ's service . . ." Finn began, only to falter to a close. "Nay, o' course they do no'," she answered herself. Looking around at the small groups of muttering sailors she felt that cold finger of fear stroke down her spine again. "What will they do?"

"Time will tell," Dide answered. "Be ready for trouble, though, Finn—and remember we are on Captain Tobias' side in case o' a fight. This ship mun make it to Bride!"

Just then the door from the officers' cabins opened and the first, second and third mates appeared, Arvin the Just in the lead. A large man with beefy shoulders, cropped grey hair and a clean-shaven, prognathous jaw, Arvin had two daggers in his belt and one in his boot, and carried a pistol in one huge hand. The other two men were similarly armed, with steely glints in their eyes. They stood with their backs to the door, the pistols pointing steadily at the group of sailors rushing towards them, the guns' weight resting on their wrists. The questions dried in the seamen's throats and they came to a halt, staring at the officers incredulously.

"I see ye all recognise our pistols," Arvin said calmly. "That be good; I was afraid ye witch-loving heretics would be as ignorant as ye are foolish. Do no' think I do no' ken how to use it and that I'd be unwilling to draw bluid, for ye'd be wrong. Needs must when the devil drives."

The sailors moved uneasily, glancing at each other and then back at the steady black eye of the pistol.

"What does all this mean, sir?" one of the sailors asked then. "Why have we left the protection o' the fleet? Why do we fly the Tirsoilleirean cross?"

"The captain has urgent business in Bride," Arvin replied curtly. There are exclamations of dismay and one sailor cried, "In Bride? Ye mean in Tirsoilleir?"

"Aye, I mean in Tirsoilleir," Arvin said roughly. "Where else would I be meaning?"

"But that be treason!"

"We canna sail to Bride—we be at war with the Bright Soldiers!"

"But what about the Fairgean? Without the warships to protect us, we shall be sunk by their blaygird sea serpents ..."

In their excitement and dismay, the sailors had all lunged forward and Arvin motioned them back with his pistol. "When ye address me, ye shall call me 'sir'," he said. "Do ye be forgetting I am your superior officer? Stand back, I say, or I shall be forced to let ye see what lead and gunpowder can do to a man!"

They stepped back smartly, even though a few were glaring belligerently, their hands surreptitiously dropping to the daggers and cutlasses they wore in their belts.

"We fly the Tirsoilleirean flag so no pirates will bother us, nor any Tirsoilleirean warships," Arvin said calmly. "As for the Fairgean, ye need no' fear them, for do we no' have the Yedda on board? Do ye think we command a ship o' fools, to set sail in the summer seas without some way o' repelling the sea demons? The Yedda shall sing the sea demons to death and we shall sail on unmolested."

"Wha' do ye do, sir?" one of the sailors said. "Did ye no' swear allegiance to the MacCuinn? Do ye have no honour, that ye break your oath as soon as ye leave the safety o' the MacCuinn's harbour?"

Arvin spat contemptuously. "Ye canna serve both God and Mammon," he answered.

There was a stirring and a muttering. Then the outspoken sailor cried, "But this be mutiny against the crown, sir! We canna be allowing ye to take the MacCuinn's ship and give it to his enemies!" He drew his cutlass with an oath and leapt for the first mate.

There was a deafening bang and a black cloud of evil-smelling smoke belched across the aftercastle. Finn cried out and shrank back against Dide who was standing stiffly, watching and listening intently. When the smoke cleared they could see the sailor had fallen back on to the deck, his cutlass fallen from his hand, blood staining his shirt. His comrades knelt around him, trying to staunch the flow of blood, one cradling his head. Arvin had staggered back against his companions with the shock of the recoil, but almost immediately recovered his balance, and was calmly reloading.

"There be no need for all this excitement," he said when the task was done and the pistol was once more pointing at the group of dismayed sailors. "We do no' want the ship, nor do we wish to turn ye landlubbers over to the General Assembly. We just need to get to Bride. I can promise ye that ye can have the ship back once our task is done.

Ye can all set sail for the safety o' the Berhtfane just as fast as ye please. We'll even let ye keep the Yedda to keep your journey home safe, if ye keep your hand to the wheel now."

The sailors all looked at each other and muttered among themselves. The injured seaman moaned and clutched at his shattered shoulder with one hand.

"Ye all have two choices," Arvin said. "Ye can accept the captain's decision to change course and work to keep us all safe on this journey, or ye can take your chances in the long boat and row for shore. I'll warn ye though that the lookout has seen a sea serpent in the distance that could mean a pod o' Fairgean swim this way."

The sailors were white and frightened. "We should never have left the safety o' the fleet!" one burst out. "We do no' have the firepower to defend ourselves against a sea serpent!"

"Especially no' if ye are afloat in the wee long boat," Arvin said with a slight lifting of his lip that could have been mistaken for a smile under different circumstances. There was a long pause and then the first mate lifted the pistol slightly. "Happen I should warn ye that all the firearms on board ship are being kept in the captain's cabin for safety. I ken none o' ye will be stupid enough to try and stage a mutiny o' your own. If ye decide to throw your lot in with us, then ye may keep your own knives in case we should be attacked by pirates or by the Fairgean. It is your decision though. What canna be cured must be endured."

Dide had prised Finn's fingers from his sleeve and had unobtrusively joined the group of sailors confronting the first mate. Cowering back against the bulwark Finn saw him whispering to the sailors and wondered what he said. The muttering went on for some time, with many evil glances at Arvin, who regarded them unwaveringly. At last there was a begrudging agreement among the seamen to take their chances at the journey to Bride. They all knew they would have little chance of survival if put afloat in the longboat.

Arvin nodded, thrusting his pistol into his wide leather belt. "Glad to have ye on board, lads," he said with another lift of his granite-hard lip. "Now, let us hoist full sail, laddies, and put as much water between the *Speedwell* and that sea serpent as we can!"

The sailors ran to obey. Finn took a deep breath, the first she had taken in what seemed like ages. It seemed the crisis had passed, at least for the moment.

She swung herself up into the rigging, determined to check the truth of the sea serpent sighting herself. Up the mainmast she climbed, past the yardarm and through the rigging, past the main topcastle halfway up, heading higher still. Refusing to look down at the deck that tilted so far below, she let her body sway with the mast until she swung her leg over the side of the topmast topcastle, a tiny wooden nest at the very apex of the topgallant mast.

There she clung, looking about her, her hand shading her eyes. For as far as she could see the sea rippled away like crumpled blue satin. All about tall crags of rock thrust up through the water, some steep and bare, others round and green with high cliffs falling down to wicked-looking rocks where the water creamed.

Far below her, the deck of the ship swung to and fro as the mast swayed. The white sails billowed below her, filled with wind. Here and there a bare-chested man hung in the

shrouds, tightening tackle or repairing rope. She was so high the blue line of the horizon seemed to curve.

"Wha' do ye think ye're doing, ye gowk!" The lookout turned with a shout of surprise. He was a skinny boy, not much older than Finn herself, and considerably smaller. He wore a large tricorne hat to shade his face from the sun and carried a spyglass which he had been holding to one eye as Finn climbed into his little crow's nest. He had lowered it at her sudden appearance and was glaring at her angrily. Despite the protection of the broad-brimmed hat, his face was burnt red from the sun, and his freckled nose was peeling.

"I wanted to have a look," Finn replied, grinning at him.

"There be no' enough room in here for a donbeag, let alone a great tall lad like ye!" he protested. "Do ye no' understand it be dangerous up here? They shouldna be allowing a raw recruit like ye to just climb on up."

"I dinna exactly ask permission," she answered. "Please, canna ye just let me have a squint through that spyglass o' yours? Then I promise I'll slide on down and leave ye in peace."

After a moment's hesitation he let her have it, only warning her not to drop it, "else the captain'll have ye keel-hauled, that I promise ye!"

Eagerly she lifted the farseeing glass to her eyes and peered through it. At first all she could see was blueness, but she lifted the spyglass and swung it until suddenly the steep cliff of an island sprang towards her, bare and rocky. The lookout showed her how to focus the spyglass and she was amazed to see a bird crouching on a shaggy nest of twigs on the side of the cliff. As she watched two white fluffy heads with gaping beaks suddenly thrust out from their mother's feathers, squawking for food.

She watched for some time, smiling, then swung the glass around slowly, amazed at how clearly she could see things many miles away. At last the lookout said gruffly, "Give me it back, porridge-head. It is no' a plaything. I'm meant to be on the watch for sea demons and the captain will have my hide for a floor mat if I miss their approach."

"They said ye'd seen a sea serpent. Couldna ye just show me that? Then I'll go, I swear."

"Och, I suppose so," he answered unwillingly and took the spyglass from her and focused it on the curving blue line of the horizon. "There it be," he cried in excitement. "Quick, look—do no' move the glass, for Ea's sake!"

Finn peered through the spyglass again and sucked in her breath in amazement. A great, sinuous creature was undulating through the waves, its glossy spotted scales shining in the sun. A vivid green in colour, it had a small graceful head crowned with spiny fins that ran down its curving neck. Spectacular flowing fins surrounded its gaping jaws and sprouted from its shoulders like wings. It swam with its head held high out of the waves, its immensely long body coiling behind, its finned tail creating a powerful wake behind it.

She ran the spyglass along its serpentine length, marvelling at the speed with which it coiled through the water. Suddenly she froze, the spyglass trained just above its soft orange and yellow wings. On the monster's neck rode a man. All she could see of him

was a bare chest, wet flowing black hair and a raised trident, but it was enough to cause her heart to slam sickeningly, her stomach to lurch.

"A Fairge be riding it!" she gasped.

The lookout seized the spyglass from her and raised it to his eye. He stared through it frowningly, then said begrudgingly, "Aye, ye be right. Ye have guid eyes. Happen ye'd better scoot and tell the captain."

Finn slid down the ropes, landed with a thump in the main topcastle, and began the long descent down to the deck with quick and easy agility. Men sat cross-legged on the wooden boards with canvas draped over their knees, repairing a long rent in the mizzen sail. She swung down on to the deck and looked about her for someone in authority to tell. She might still be a landlubber but she knew better than to try and see the captain herself.

The fourth mate was standing by the helmsman, watching the horizon for any telltale break of water that might indicate a reef ahead. Finn told him about the Fairge she had seen and saw his sunburnt face crease with concern. He cast a quick glance up at the full-bellied sails, nodded and thanked her brusquely.

With the little elven cat riding in the crook of her arm, Finn went in search of Dide. Their watch had finished and so he was not on duty anymore. She found him up in the forecabin with his grandmother, Jay and Dillon playing trictrac at their feet.

Enit's chair had been wedged right up in the bow of the ship, so that she looked rather like another figurehead with her wood-brown face all carved with deep lines of age and her twig-like knotted fingers so stiff she could barely hold a spoon anymore. Seabirds floated around her head and perched on the bulwark before her, some sitting along the back and arms of her chair so that she was surrounded by their white feathers like a living cloak. The sound of the birds' quarrelling was deafening and Finn felt no hesitation in telling the others what she had seen, sure that none could overhear their conversation.

"Will we be able to outrun the Fairgean?" Dillon asked soberly, smoothing Jed's silky black ears between his fingers. The hound looked up at him with adoring eyes, his shaggy white tail beating the wooden boards.

Dide was frowning. "No' here amongst the islands," he answered. "I be surprised already how many sails we are carrying. It be dangerous indeed to whip the ship along at this rate in such treacherous waters."

Jay and Enit were looking very troubled indeed. "Can we no' sail out to deeper waters and leave the Bay o' Deception behind?" the fiddler asked.

Dide nodded. "That is the plan soon enough. The problem is once we lose sight o' the coastline we canna use landmarks to help us navigate and must rely on the stars and the sea, a chancy business at best. The other thing is, we have a better chance o' staying hidden among the islands, since once we're on the open sea our mast and sails can be seen for many miles."

"Still, if the Fairgean have spotted us, happen we'd best change course now and head for the open sea where we have some chance o' outrunning them," Enit staid. Her voice

was heavy with dread.

"Happen ye be right," Dide answered, caressing the hilt of one of his silver daggers.

"The first mate told the sailors no' to fear the Fairgean, that the Yedda would sing them to death," Finn said. "Did he mean ye, Enit?"

Enit nodded, though her face was pinched and white. "Aye, he meant me," she answered. "Wha' do ye think I do here, an auld crippled woman like me, Finn? I am no use in fighting off pirates, like young Dillon here, or climbing into the Black Tower like ye. Do ye think the captain would ever have let me on board his ship, given how he feels about women being bad luck, if he had no' thought I'd be some use?" Her voice was bitter.

"I did no' ken ye were a Yedda." There was awe in Finn's voice. Although the sea-singers of Carraig had all died in Maya's witch-hunts long before Finn was born, she knew all about them, as any child who listened to the old tales and songs must know. The Carraigean witches had been the main line of defense against the Fairgean for centuries, for they had the power to sing the sea-faeries to death. Before they had been massacred by Maya and her Seekers, no ship had ever left harbour without a Yedda on board, no seaside town or castle had been without its sea witch, no prionnsa's retinue had been complete without a musician trained at the Tower of Sea-Singers.

"I am no Yedda," Enit replied wearily, "though I have been taught the songs o' sorcery. They would have had me, if I had been willing to submit myself to the Coven. I was never interested in being a witch, though, and I feared the power o' the songs o' sorcery. I still do."

"Yet ye've been teaching them to Jay," Finn said, staring at him with new eyes. Sudden realisation brought her gaze flying back to Enit. "And to Ashlin!"

"Aye, both the lads have talent," Enit said. "I could no' refuse to teach them what I ken, though my heart misgives me."

"But why?" Finn asked. "Toasted toads, what I would no' give to be able to sing or play like ye do! I have seen ye bring tears to the eyes o' the roughest soldiers and why, Dide can even make Arvin the Just smile with his songs, and he be the dourest man I've ever seen."

"Aye, music has the power to move," Dide replied when his mother did not, her sombre black eyes gazing out to the tumult of waves ahead. "But like all power, it can be misused and misunderstood. The songs o' sorcery are specifically designed to compel and constrain." She heard the stress of subtle power in his voice, the lilt of enchantment. "With the songs o' sorcery ye can seduce and bring to love, ye can incite war and revolution, ye can stupefy and confuse, ye can kill. No matter how much ye wish to use your powers only for good, always ye may find ye have moved a man in ways he would no' wish for or look for. We all must choose our own path."

"But surely all art is designed to move people, to make them think and feel things they have never felt and thought afore," Jay argued. It was clear this was a discussion they had had many times before, for Dide gave a little grin in response. "Did Gwenevyre NicSeinn no' say that if ye can just stretch a man's mind in a new direction, it shall never return to its old dimensions? Surely that is a good thing, to make people's minds and souls greater

than afore?"

"Aye, that it is," Dide responded warmly. "Why else do we sing and play and tell tales o' valour and gallantry and compassion, if we do no' want to move our listeners to high ideals and aspirations? It is just that granddam has seen the evil that can be done with such power ..."

"But can no' all power be turned to evil ends?" Finn asked.

"Aye," Enit cried, startling them all. "And sometimes the greatest evil can be done in the name o' good. The Yedda were honoured and celebrated for what they did, yet I have seen the sea black with the bodies o' a hundred drowned Fairgean. I have seen mere babes loosen their grip on their mother's hair and sink away below the waves, their gills closed, water filling their lungs. Do ye think I wish to use my powers in such a way? My dreams are haunted by the fear that I may have to sing the song o' death, that I may cast a spell like the Yedda used to cast. Eà save me from ever having to do so again."

There was a wrought silence, then Finn whispered, "Ye have sung the song o' death afore?"

Her contorted fingers gripping the arms of her chair, Enit slowly nodded. "Aye, I have," she answered, "and I swore I should never do so again."

All that day the *Speedwell* crept through the islands, the lead-line constantly being checked to make sure deep water still lay under her hull. In some places they had to drop most of the sails, seize oars and slowly manoeuvre their way through a narrow channel of water, surrounded by wide stretches of sand on either side. Several times they saw Fairgean basking in the sun on the sand, or sporting about in the shallow lagoons formed by the retreat of the tides. They were never close enough to see more than their black heads, though once or twice male Fairgean swam after their ship, shaking their tridents and whistling mockingly. Finn grew used to the shout of the fathoms' depth and was taught to recognise the feel of the different markers sewn along the lead-line's length so that even in the blackest night she could tell how deep the water was under the ship. No-one wanted to run aground on a sandbank when the Fairgean were there.

Close on sunset they sailed past a tall island that reared out of the lesser islands about it like a carthorse among ponies. Crowned with a tall, square tower set behind a great, crenellated rampart, its steep cliffs rose straight out of an expanse of white sand that stretched for miles in all directions. Scattered across the sand were a few ancient walls, encrusted with dried seaweed and barnacles.

"That be the Tower o' First Landing," one of the sailors told Finn and Bran as they leant over the bulwark, staring up at its stern grey height. "They say when we first came to Eileanan, the people built down on the shores of the island, not realising that the tides would sweep in and drown them all. When the autumn tides did come, it brought with it the Fairgean and those that were no' drowned were murdered. If they had no' built the tower they all might have died."

"Does anyone live there now?" Finn asked in curiosity, for the walls were stout still and the tower reared up straight and tall.

"Och, I doubt it," the sailor answered. "All the towers were torn down by the Ensorcellor, were they no'? Besides, I've heard tell it be haunted by the ghost o' Cuinn Lionheart. His grave is in there, ye ken, all covered in white heather, the only place where heather grows in all o' Eileanan. That be a flower from the Other World, ye ken. They say he carried it in his buttonhole and when they laid him down on the bank after his ship was wrecked on the rocks, it fell out o' his lapel and took root there where he lay."

"What a storm that must have been," Bran said dreamily, "to carry a ship across the entire universe. No wonder they called her Storm-Rider."

Finn made sure the sailor had stepped out of hearing before whispering crossly, "Well, your ancestor may have conjured the storm but it was mine that found Eileanan on the star-map!"

Unexpectedly, Bran smiled at her. "Aye, they all must have been amazingly powerful witches indeed," she whispered. "What a feat that First Crossing must have been! And what courage. It makes this journey seem somewhat less dangerous and foolhardy in comparison, doesn't it?"

Finn grinned. "I suppose so," she answered. "Though I still hit myself over my head sometimes, wondering what I be doing here when I could be safe in Castle Rurach."

Bran immediately sobered. "If Castle Rurach be still safe."

Finn's smile faded and her face grew troubled. "Och, I do so hope they are all safe," she whispered, stroking Goblin's silky head. "I wish . . ."

After a long pause Bran prompted her. "What?"

"Och, naught. I sure they all be fine. Come, where be the lads? I want to challenge Ashlin to another game o' trictrac. He's been winning far too many lately."

"Ye should no' say 'lads' like that," Bran reprimanded Finn as she followed her down the ladder towards the galley. "We're meant to be lads too, remember."

Finn took a breath to say something scathing, then bit the words back. "Aye, I ken. Sorry, Bran." She said the boy's name with a subtle stress.

"It's hard to remember sometimes, I ken," Bran answered with a little giggle. "Harder for me, 'cause I'm used to seeing ye looking all ragged and brown. It should be easy for ye to remember, seeing me look like *this*." She lifted the short end of her pigtail with a grimace.

"It's odd how quickly I've got used to it," Finn answered. "I find it hard to remember ye all pretty and girly."

Bran gave her a little pinch in retaliation as they came into the galley, as always crowded with the men who were not on watch. "I'll give ye all pretty and girly if ye do no' watch it," she hissed. "We'll see who punches more like a lass!"

As Finn turned a surprised face towards her, Bran chuckled and sauntered away, mimicking Finn's boyish swagger perfectly.

Under the cover of darkness that night, the *Speedwell* changed course, setting sail

for the deep uncluttered ocean beyond the hundreds of islands scattered along the coastline. When Finn was roused by the bosun's whistle the next morning, it was to find the little caravel racing along a deep swell, the coastline a mere shadowy blur along the horizon. The sun was rising red above an ocean the colour of tarnished silver, turning the sails to pink. The only sign of life was the sea birds soaring ahead of the ship, their wings stained the same colour as the sails.

With the ship under full sail, it was hard work for all the sailors that day. The bosun shouted himself hoarse with the captain's orders, the deckhands were kept busy trimming the sails as the helmsman fought to keep the ship running as close to the wind as possible. "We'll have left that blaygird sea serpent miles behind," Finn said to Dillon with great satisfaction that evening as she examined her red, sore palms, rubbed raw from hauling on ropes all day.

"I hope so," he answered without conviction. "I have no wish to be drawing blade against a sea serpent."

Finn glanced up at him in puzzlement. "Once ye would have thought this a high adventure," she said, finding it hard to speak the words. This stern-faced, broad-shouldered man was so unlike the Scruffy she had known that speaking to him was worse than making conversation with a stranger.

"Would I have?" Dillon answered, gently fingering the curiously wrought hilt of the sword he wore always at his side. "I suppose I would have, when I was a bairn, with no more sense than a newly hatched chick. I ken better now."

Finn hesitated, then said with a little burst of words, "It must have been so awful for ye, Scruffy, having Jorge captured and burnt, and having Antoinn, Artair and Parian all die like that, right in front o' ye."

He said nothing for a long time and Finn shrank back a little, sorry she had spoken. Then he said, "Ye should no' call me 'Scruffy,' Finn. Scruffy died a long time ago."

With an attempt at humour, Finn said, "O' course, ye're Dillon the Bold now, are ye no'? I keep on forgetting."

"Dillon the Bold is dead too," he answered, and his hands caressed the sword as if it were flesh. "They call me Dillon o' the Joyful Sword now."

Finn stared at him, her skin creeping. He looked up at her, a strange half-smile on his face. "This be a magical sword, did ye ken that, Finn? Do ye remember when I found her that day in the ruin o' the Tower o' Two Moons? I did no' ken then, I did no' ken that she was a magical sword." He stroked it lovingly. "She be a thirsty sword, thirsty for blood. Once ye draw her, ye canna sheathe her again until her thirst is slaked. And she will drink and drink until there is no more blood to drink, till all are dead ..."

Jed gave a little whine and crept closer, pushing his rough black-patched head against Dillon's arm. Dillon ignored him. "Her name is *Joyeuse*, Finn. *Joyeuse*, the Joyful Sword. For she takes joy only in killing."

Finn could not look away, fascinated and horrified. He was smiling, his hands stroking the sword's coiled hilt, stroking, stroking. Then he looked up at her again and she saw his eyes were bright with tears. "So ye see why I dread battle, Finn. I never

want to draw her again, though she quivers under my hand like a woman. She quivers now, scenting blood. She smells the fear o' battle."

Finn's hand crept within her pocket, where the elven cat slept curled on a small black parcel of silk. As her fingers brushed the magical cloak, her skin prickled and stung. "Happen the gifts we chose that day in the Tower o' Two Moons were no' so wisely chosen," she said.

Dillon gave a bitter laugh. "Happen no'. At least for me. Did ye no' choose the MacRuraich war-horn, that called up the ghosts o' your clan? That worked out for the best, at least, even though it's no' a horn ye'd want to be blowing every day."

Finn's fingers brushed back and forth along the silk, electricity darting up her nerves. She almost told Dillon that she still had the cloak of invisibility, that the longing to wear it sometimes almost overcame her, even though she had no need of hiding within its magical folds. She wanted to tell him how cold it made her feel, inside and out, how remote, severed from the rest of the world. If he had looked at her and smiled, or rapped out one of his orders like he used to, she would have told him. But he was stroking his sword again, that peculiar half-smile on his lips, and she said nothing.

That afternoon the sea serpent was sighted again, following their wake. Although all the sailors hung over the stern of the ship, they could see nothing and most relaxed, sure they would lose the sea serpent again. A double watch was called that night, however, the ship kept straining under a full load of sails despite the blackness of the night. In the morning all could see the sea serpent in the distance, and by noon the ship was being rocked by the great waves it threw up with the speed of its motion. Finn climbed up into the rigging again to get a better view. Even though she had seen the monster through the spyglass before, she was shocked at the size of it. It was large enough to coil around the ship three times, cracking the timbers asunder with a gentle squeeze of its coils. If it reared up out of the water it would have towered over the topgallant mast, taller by far than any tree Finn had ever seen.

By late afternoon the ship was floundering in enormous waves that broke over the bow and swept across the decks in a fury of white swirling foam. The helmsman was lashed to the wheel, and all the sailors had ropes knotted around their waists so that if they were swept overboard, they could be hauled back up to safety. All hands were on deck, fighting to keep the ship from keeling over. It was an odd experience, to have the sky so fair and blue, the breeze so warm and steady, and the ship thrown about like a leaf in a rapid. Finn was flung to her knees, unable to keep her footing on the wet deck, and only managing to keep from being thrown down into the angry sea by her terror-strong grip on the ropes. Ignoring the pain in her bleeding palms, she fought her way to the forecastle where Enit sat in her chair, drenched to the skin, her hair plastered to her skull. Dide, Jay and Ashlin had tied themselves to the foremast, all three holding their musical instruments high to avoid them being ruined by the water. Dide had his battered old guitar, all hung with ribbons, Jay had his viola with the handle carved in the shape of a blind woman, and Ashlin had his wooden flute.

Captain Tobias and the First Mate, Arvin the Just, were both up in the forecastle with them, shouting angrily at Enit. Bran clung beside Finn, her white face streaked with tears, her lip red with blood where she had bitten it.

"Sing, for God's sake, sing!" the captain cried. "Do ye wish us all to die?"

Finn could hear a strange, melodic whistling that swelled on all sides, rising up to a taunting shriek, echoing eerily all around. Then suddenly the sea serpent reared up next to the ship, its throat and belly silvery-pale, its golden-green back spotted with purple. A Fairgean warrior rode its neck, a long, wickedly sharp trident in his hand, and all about the ship more Fairgean rode astride the slimy-green shoulders of horse-eels. Finn stared about terrified, as webbed hands reached out to seize any dangling rope that should help them swarm over the railing. Many of those ropes were attached to sailors, who shouted in fear as they were dragged towards the bulwark. They drew their daggers and tried to fight off the sea-faeries, who were all armed with cruel-looking tridents.

"Sing, auld woman!" the first mate shouted. "Sing, else I'll cut your throat myself."

Enit took a deep, shuddering breath, opened her mouth and began to sing.

Pure, sweet, melodic, her voice soared over the crash of waves, the shouts and screams of the sailors, the slap of the sails and the ear-piercing whistles of the Fairgean. Crouching against the bulwark, clinging to the ropes, Finn felt a stab of pure joy. She felt rather than saw the look Dide and Jay exchanged, a look of surprise and amazed comprehension. They braced themselves against the foremast and began to play.

All over the ship sailors stopped what they were doing and turned to stare. The ship plunged on, its sails flapping wildly, no-one running to haul on the ropes or tighten the tackle. The helmsman let the wheel spin, entranced. The Fairgean paused in their climb up the ropes, turning their sleek black heads to listen. Even the sea serpent seemed to listen, swaying from side to side, while the tumult of waves slowly subsided.

Deep as the throb of the ocean, passionate as the whisper of a lover, tender as a mother's lullaby, warm as the blaze of a winter fire, the viola's contralto voice wove crimson ribbons of sound through the silver gauze of Enit's song. The fragile lilt of the flute, the warm rhythm of the guitar, Dide's strong, young voice, all gave the music depth and harmony, but it was these two voices, the haunting ethereal sound of the old woman's voice and the passionate strength of the viola's song, that cast a spell over all who heard.

Finn realised there were tears on her cheeks. She was almost overwhelmed with feelings of love and tenderness. She reached out her hand and caught Bran's, and the cousins clung to each other, sobbing and trying to speak, to explain. All over the ship men were weeping or laughing or singing, many caught up in rough embraces, or pounding each other on the back. Dillon was kneeling, both arms around his shaggy hound, tears pouring down his cheeks. The Fairgean were whistling and crooning in accompaniment, their strange alien faces alight with emotion, their slim, scaled bodies swaying in time to the music.

Hugging Bran as hard as she could, Finn rested her tear-wet face on her cousin's shoulder. Through the haze of her tears, she saw the captain and the first mate were both weeping and smiling, shaking hands as if they could not bear to let go. Enit's voice quivered with the intensity of her emotion, the music soared and swooped till it seemed the whole ship was spun in silver light. Weeping and laughing, the three musicians played as if they were possessed, and together the four wrought a spell of such power that all who listened fell to their knees, lifting up their faces in rapture. Human and Fairgean knelt together, choking with feelings too deep and powerful for words, while webbed hands met and grasped unwebbed.

At last the song quivered into silence. Enit fell forward in her chair, only the ropes keeping her from falling. Ashlin too slumped down, the flute falling from his hand, his eyes rolling back in his head. Dide dashed the tears from his face and looked triumphantly at Jay, who stood tall and proud and exultant, the viola and bow raised high.

"Ye have heard today the song o' love," Dide said, his voice still thrumming with power. "Do no' forget."

An awed silence hung over the ship and then he was answered, with shouts and whistles and bursts of song. Hats were flung up into the air, and men and Fairgean once again embraced. The sea serpent rubbed its head affectionately against the prow, coiling its golden-green length along the whole length of the ship.

One of the Fairgean strode along the deck and stood facing Dide, his hand making an elaborate obeisance as he bowed. His black hair hung down his bare back like a wet silk cloak and he wore a single black pearl on his breast. Although he had two legs like a man, his smooth, scaled skin had a sheen like that of no human, and his wrists and ankles were braceleted with flowing fins. He wore nothing but a skirt of seaweed ornately decorated with shells and twists of coral. "We . . . will . . . no' forget," he answered in halting tones. "Will ... ye ... be true?"

"We will be true," Dide answered, awe and amazement on his face.

The Fairgean saluted him, then gave a high whistle. All the Fairgean on board ran to the railing and dived over into the water, and the sea serpent sank away beneath the waves. The Fairgean with the black pearl looked back up to Dide.

"We . . . will ... be true," he repeated. Then he too dived over the bulwark, his whole body curving in a perfect, graceful arc. He plunged into the sea and surfaced again some distance away, his hand raised high.

The Black Tower

The next day dawned bright and fair. Finn leant over the rail and stared down at the Fairgean who swam along the side of the ship, whistling and crooning and cavorting through the waves for their amusement. Often they leapt high out of the water, their muscular silver tails curving gracefully beneath them, their black hair flowing liquidly behind them. The sailors threw them salted fish and the Fairgean threw fresh fish back, causing one old seaman to say, "Och, I wish they'd swim along wi' us always; it be much easier than throwing out a line in the hope o' a bite!"

By sunset most of the Fairgean had dropped behind, following the warrior with the black pearl as he rode his sea serpent back towards the islands. The *Speedwell* was alone on the open sea.

For the next twelve days the little caravel sped along the coast of Clachan, blessed with steady winds and clear skies. In all that time Enit and Ashlin lay as if dead, their breathing fast and shallow, their foreheads fevered.

"It be the sorcery sickness," Dide said, his face creased with fatigue and anxiety. "Enit be too auld for the casting o' such a spell and Ashlin too young."

"Will they get better?"

"I hope so." Dide leant his head against his hand. "I must say I feel sick and weary myself. Never have I sung such a spell."

"Nor I," Jay said, exultation still ringing through his voice though he too looked drawn and tired. "There be a deal o' power in that viola. I felt it thrumming all through me."

"We all heard it," Dide said, grasping his friend's shoulder. "And it were no' all the viola, my fiddler. Indeed your talent is bright!"

Enit woke on the twelfth day after the singing of the song of love, and Ashlin three days later. Both were thin and wasted, the old woman looking as if a breeze would snap her in two. The *Speedwell* had left the coast far behind, for they were now off the coast of Arran, a stretch treacherous with shifting sands and notorious for its resident monster, the harlequin-hydra. Many of the sailors took great delight in telling spooky tales of this *uile-bheist* to frighten the younger members of the crew. The harlequin-hydra was responsible for more shipwrecks than any other natural or magical phenomenon, they said. It was a sea snake with a thousand heads. If one was lopped off, another two would grow. It came out of nowhere, rising from the deep to strangle a ship in its rainbow-striped coils, devouring its crew and smashing the ship till nothing was left but a few stray timbers.

"Ye thought that sea serpent was a monster, but it be naught but a pussy cat compared to the harlequin-hydra," they warned.

Finn was glad they sailed far to the south of the coast of Arran.

One afternoon a few days after Ashlin had woken, Finn lay on the deck of the forecastle, playing trictrac with the young piper. It was a warm, fair day and all the sailors not on duty were resting on the decks, playing cards or dice, or sewing up their ragged clothes. Dide was strumming his guitar and amusing the sailors with a song about a sailor on shore:

"Come all ye roaring lads that delight in seaman's fare,

Come listen awhile to my song,

For when Jack comes on shore, wi' his gold and silver store,

There's none can get rid o' it so soon.

The first thing Jack demands is the fiddle in his hands,

a wee dram and a bonny lass wi' flashing eyes,

And Jack Tar's as happy as he can be,

Aye, Jack Tar's as happy as he can be, away from the rolling sea."

Dillon was eating some dried bellfruit, his spare hand playing with Jed's silky black ears, while Jay talked about musical theory with Enit, who sat in her chair throwing stale bread to the seabirds. The air all about the forecabin was white with their wings and their raucous shrieks almost drowned out Dede's merry voice.

Even Donald had left his galley to enjoy the warm sunshine, dangling a fishing line over the bulwark in the hope of catching some fish for their supper. Only Bran did not share the general air of ease and comfort, for she paced the forecabin, looking anxiously out to the horizon, a heavy line between her brows.

"Got fleas in your drawers?" Finn asked lazily, looking up from the board. "Ye're as restless as a hen on a hot griddle."

Bran flushed and shook her head. "I smell a storm coming," she answered. "It makes me feel very uneasy. I fear it be a bad one."

Ashlin looked about at the calm sea, the blue sky. He was thinner than ever, the knuckles of his hands very prominent. "Are ye sure?" he asked. "I canna see a cloud anywhere."

Bran moved her shoulders uncomfortably. "I canna explain it, I just ken a bad storm is coming."

The sailors nearby scoffed at her, but Finn flared up in her defense. "Bran be no porridge-head!" she cried. "He can always tell when a storm is coming!"

"Happen we'd best tell the captain," Enit said.

"Och, as if the captain'll listen to a laddiekin like Bran," one of the sailors mocked. "The lad's never even been to sea afore and has no more hair on his chin than a lass."

"I'll wager ye a week's rations o' grog that he will!" Finn said, scrambling to her feet.

"Done!" the sailor responded, though one of his friends said curiously, "Can the lad whistle the wind, then?"

Bran shook her head, flushing redder than ever. "I was born in Siantan though," she admitted. "Even the youngest goose-girl kens how to knot her apron string for a fine day there."

A few of the sailors nodded wisely, though the one who had taken up the bet folded his arms stubbornly as Finn and Bran made their way down to the captain's cabin. "Ye had best be careful he do no' have ye keel-hauled for brazen impudence," he called after them.

Ignoring him, Finn clambered down the ladder, Goblin slinking close by her heels. "Do ye think we ought?" Bran said, but Finn pulled her along, saying:

"If ye smell a storm, Bran, happen the captain should ken, do ye no' think so? Are ye no' the NicSian?"

"Sssshhhh!" Bran hissed but Finn only laughed, rapping boldly on the cabin door.

In answer to the shout from within, she answered respectfully, "It be Finn and Bran,

sir, sorry to be disturbing ye."

"Come along in then," he answered and Finn pushed the door open and stepped inside, dragging Bran in beside her.

Captain Tobias and the navigator Alphonsus the Sure was bending over a table piled high with maps and charts. Arvin and the second mate were playing chess at a smaller table drawn up between two comfortable leather chairs. There was a silver pitcher of wine and a tray of silver goblets on the table, and a finely woven carpet on the floor. If it had not been for the small, round windows and the swaying of the floor, it would have been easy to think they were in a room in a rich merchant's house, not on a ship.

Looking about the luxurious cabin with interest, Finn told the captain what Bran had said. The navigator frowned and Arvin the Just's grim mouth compressed until it was a mere crack in his granite-hard face, but the captain nodded and said rather shortly, "Thank ye for the tip, lads, we'll keep a close eye out, as always."

"But do ye no' think . . ." Finn began but he frowned and turned away from them. The second mate heaved himself to his feet and showed them the door.

"But sir!" Finn cried, only to have a large, firm hand push her none too gently out the door. It was shut in her indignant face and she turned to Bran and made a face.

"Och well," her cousin said philosophically. "Happen we should batten down the hatches ourselves."

They climbed back up on to the deck, to be met by much jeering and mockery from the sailors, which they did their best to ignore. "Just ye wait, ye lamb-brained louts! Ye'll be sorry!" was Finn's only comment, and this was met with much raucous laughter.

Above the full-bellied white sails the sky arched, pure and blue. Finn scowled at Bran, and climbed up into the rigging with Goblin, shading her eyes against the bright sun with her hand. She stayed up there for an hour, swaying in perfect rhythm with the wind. At last she came down and ate her ration of bread and salted herring in sulky silence, then took her watch with the others, refusing to answer their teasing.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the sky hazed over. The wind died, and the sea was the colour of beaten copper in the hot glare of the setting sun. The sails hung limp from the yardarm. Finn climbed up to the forecastle to join the others staring out at the sullen horizon, the colour of bruised plums. Far away they saw a sudden glare of lightning and then heard the low grumble of thunder.

"Them clouds look bad," one of the sailors said. "Happen we should tell the captain . . ."

"He willna thank ye," Finn said. "The captain doesna welcome advice."

"Och," the sailor replied, "who does?"

The fourth mate lifted the spyglass to his eye. Thunder came again, louder and more insistent. "The storm comes," Bran said with a certain amount of satisfaction, "and it's going to be a bad one!"

The fourth mate sent one of the deckhands running down to the captain's cabin and

eventually both the captain and the first mate came on deck. The rising wind fluttered their coat-tails. Both stared out at the ominous sky with grim expressions. The waves were high now, smashing against the side of the little ship as she rose and fell, rose and fell. Sharp orders were snapped out and Bran and Finn exchanged glances as they ran to obey. Hauling down the sails, Finn said to the sailor beside her, "Och, well, there goes your week's grog!" and he shrugged and scowled.

Thunder growled and muttered all around them and the dark, heavy sky was lit repeatedly with lightning from horizon to horizon. The sun had set into the clouds and there was only the light of the wildly swinging lanterns to illuminate their work. Torrential rain lashed the decks, hammering upon the heads of the sailors working frantically to fasten down the hatches, secure the cannons and reef the sails.

One by one the great white sails were lashed into place against the yards. Soon only the gaunt shape of the four masts and the delicate webbing of the rigging were left, silhouetted blackly against the stark whiteness of the lightning.

Suddenly one of the sails was torn asunder by the strength of the raging wind. Ropes snapped and a sail was blown away into the darkness, torn into shreds by the force of the gale. The ship keeled sideways, dragged by its weight. Great grey waves swept over the bow of the ship, racing down the deck and sweeping many sailors off their feet. Shouts of alarm rang out. The sailors struggled to regain their footing, clinging to the ropes or grasping the hands of those still on their feet. Finn watched in horror as one was swept over the railing and into the angry sea below. For a moment his screaming face filled her vision. Then he was swallowed by the waves, rearing up for her with hungry white claws. Staggering, she clung to the railing, bitter-cold spray stinging her eyes. Then Jay was beside her, his arm about her waist.

"Hang on, Finn!" he shouted above the crashing of the waves and the roar of the wind. "We do no' want to lose ye overboard too!"

She clung to his hand and he dragged her to a safer position by the main mast. The helmsman struggled to control the spinning wheel. Another wave swept over the deck, swirling as high as Finn's waist. She fell, swallowing water. Jay hauled her to her feet, coughing, her throat raw. Rain beat against them, obscuring their vision. All was grey and furious: grey sea heaving and churning, grey wind screaming in the rigging, grey rain streaming. Every now and again Finn saw the dark figure of a man stumbling and sliding across the deck, or the twisting white shape of another sail tearing loose, but otherwise all she could see was a grey maelstrom as sea and sky spun together.

The sound of cracking wood suddenly brought all heads round with a jerk. There was a moment of horrific groaning, then suddenly the mizzenmast snapped. Down it came in a tangle of rigging and torn sails, smashing into the deck. Men screamed. The ship lurched and keeled over. The sea roared over them hungrily. Finn was dragged down into stinging, roaring, spinning darkness. She was tumbled over and over, limbs flailing helplessly. Then she slammed hard into something, so hard her ears roared and her eyes were filled with fizzing stars. She breathed water, drank fire. Then her foot met something solid and she pushed against it instinctively. Her head broke clear of the water. She coughed and choked, retching up seawater. Someone seized her hand, dragged her higher. Weak and sick, Finn crawled up the sloping deck, grasped a tangle of wood and rope, clung to it.

"How are ye yourself?" Jay's voice asked anxiously in her ear. His shoulder supported her.

"Just dandy," she answered, coughing hoarsely. "What do ye reckon?"

"Ye look as sick as a half-drowned cat," Jay answered with a half-hearted grin.

Finn immediately cried, "Goblin! Och, no! My poor wee cat!"

She was answered by a pitiful little mew, and stared wildly up into the rigging. There, far over their heads, hung the tiny elven cat, bedraggled and shivering, barely visible in the swirling rain. Sobbing, Finn held out her arms and the cat leapt into them, creeping up to tremble against her neck.

"Bran, ye must do something!" Dide shouted. "Canna ye calm this wind?"

Bran shook her head. She was clinging to the main mast, her lip crimson where she had bitten it. "I do no' ken how!" she shouted.

"Ye must be able to do something!" Dide cried. "Are ye no' the NicSian?"

She sobbed aloud. "I never had anyone to teach me the proper way o' doing it! Only my auld nurse . . ."

"I thought ye said ye had the Talent," Finn said. "Ye felt the storm rising long afore we could see it."

Bran's hair was plastered against her face, her clothes wet through. "Sensing a storm coming is nothing!" she cried. "Anyone with a pinch o' weather sense could do that. Even whistling up a wind is no' that hard, but calming a storm like this is something else again!"

"Canna ye try?" Jay said desperately. "Else we'll all drown!"

Bran clung to the mast with one hand and fumbled at her waist with the other, at last managing to undo her sash. Holding one end in her left hand, she succeeded in tying a knot in the sash with her teeth.

"Thou rushing wind that art so strong,

With this knot I bind thee," she chanted.

Still the wind roared about the ship as sailors fought to bring her upright again. Bran tied another knot, chanting:

"Thou pouring rain that art so wild,

With this knot I bind thee."

With a groan, the ship slowly regained an even keel as the sailors managed to shift the ballast in her hull. The wind still screamed into her ropes, however, and the rain lashed their faces with slivers of ice. "It's no' working," Finn whispered.

Bran tied a third knot in her sash, chanting loudly:

"Thou thunder that roars so loud,

With this knot I bind thee!"

She then lifted the knotted sash to the turbulent heavens, shouting:

"I command thee, hailstones and rain, hurricane and wind, sea waves and seafoam, lightning bolt and thunder, obey this, my will! By the powers o' air and fire and earth and water, I command thee! With these knots I have bound thee!"

They all stared out into the storm. The waves still rose high on either side, turbulent and white with foam. The wind roared in the rigging.

Bran's face was screwed up with tears of disappointment. "I told ye, I canna do it!" she cried.

"I do no' think it rains so hard," Jay said after a moment.

"I canna hear any thunder," Dide said. "And look! The ship does no' roll as far."

Bran pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. "Really?"

Slowly the waves gentled and the wind dropped till the ropes no longer screamed with the strain. Slowly the mad, headlong pace of the storm-driven ship slowed. The helmsman was able once more to control the wheel, bringing the ship back under control. Although the sea all about was still wild and white, waves no longer sought to drag the little ship down. Gradually the storm blew over, and they could see stars above the ragged clouds.

"I kent it would be useful to have the NicSian along!" Dide said with a smile, clapping Bran on the back. She blushed and smiled, dropping her lashes over her eyes so that Finn had to hiss at her, "Stop acting like a silly lass, Bran, ye're meant to be a lad, remember?"

The next morning, the *Speedwell* limped to safety in the bay of a small island. They rested there for close on a week while the ship's carpenter laboured to mend the broken mast. All were glad of the chance to rest and recover, and set foot on dry land once more. Finn was amazed to feel the sand rocking under her feet, as if the island were

afloat upon the restless sea and not their storm-battered little craft.

The island had a spring of fresh water to replenish their water barrels and plenty of birds to catch and small crustaceans to gather. With nothing to do but rest and eat, Ashlin regained some of his vitality, though Enit remained frailer than ever.

Freed from her usual duties, Finn practiced her cartwheels and tightrope walking, her rope tricks and dagger throwing, and pestered the crew with questions about every aspect of the repairs. She grew more accurate than ever with her crossbow, for the birds of the island were small and quick and very nervous, and Finn was very tired of fish.

As soon as the mizzenmast was repaired, a good number of feet shorter than it had been originally, they set sail once more. They had been blown many leagues off course and Alphonsus the Sure spent a great deal of time peering through his cross-staff, and scribbling equations on paper. Having to tack against the wind, the *Speedwell* nonetheless lived up to her name, bringing them within sight of the coast of Tirsoilleir by the time the sun was setting the next day.

It was a stark, desolate landscape, the cliffs towering hundreds of feet above the rocky shore, and strange contorted rocks rising high out of the sea. Alphonsus the Sure was visibly relieved to have familiar landmarks once more to set his course by, and the wind swung round to the right quarter so that the *Speedwell* was able to sail confidently up that inhospitable coast.

"Hard to believe that on top o' those cliffs are some o' the best farming land ye could hope for," one sailor confided to Finn and Bran. He was a tall, brown young man called Tam, who had been kinder with the novices than many of the other sailors. He had taken the time to teach them all the different kinds of knots and to explain the use of the lead-line and the log-line.

"I was dragged up along here somewhere," he continued, "until I was pressed for the navy. One minute I was a farmer lad, thinking o' jumping the fire with the lass from the apple orchard, the next I found myself in the service o' the General Assembly, setting off to war against the witches."

"That must have been awful," Bran said.

"Aye, that it was, Bran," Tam said. "I cried like a babe when I woke, a day out o' Bride Harbour and a million miles from all I kent. I be content now, o' course, and do no' think o' Bessie o' the Apples any more, at least no' often."

"How do ye feel about us going back to Bride?" Finn asked, the elven cat on her shoulder cocking her head at exactly the same inquisitive angle.

Tam grinned. "Terrified, lad. And so should ye be. If any elder should see ye wi' that cat o' yours, they'd think ye a witch for certain."

Finn went white and shrank a little, the cat hissing and arching her back.

"I be no witch," she said, rather shakily.

"Och, lad, I'm no' accusing ye. If anyone is to burn, it will be that auld witch with her voice full o' sorcery, and those lads with their fiddles and pipes. In Bride, the playing o'

tools like that would be enough to see ye charged, let alone the ensorcelling o' the sea demons, marvellous as that be." There was wonder and fear in the young sailor's voice.

Finn was suddenly aware of dangers that she had not yet worried over. She exchanged a fearful glance with Bran and made some light-hearted comment that fooled the young seaman as little as it deceived herself.

Cape Wrath was the eastern-most point of Eileanan. A great jutting peninsula, it was renowned for its ferocious storms and a dangerous passage between tall, abrupt cliffs on one side and a series of towering pinnacles of rock on the other, ominously called the Teeth of God. The only way to avoid that narrow, stormy passage was to sail weeks out of the way, for all the sea here was broken up with islands and reefs that tore the water up into contrary waves, whirlpools and rips.

With all hands on deck, the helmsman steered the little caravel through that dangerous passage. Alphonsus the Sure hunched over his maps, the sand trickling through the sand-glass by his side, the bosun shouting out the length of the log-line. As the navigator shouted out his instructions, the ship gybed from side to side, narrowly missing one cruelly sharp rock after another.

At last the *Speedwell* had sailed safely through the Teeth of God. Finn had no sooner taken what felt like her first real breath in hours when she realised they now had to circumnavigate the great spinning whirlpool called the Devil's Vortex. This was the last great obstacle between the caravel and its destination, the harbour of Bride. Again all the sailors were lashed to the ship and many calculations of time and angle were taken, Alphonsus bending to peer through his cross-staff again and again.

Finn had been frightened many times during their danger-fraught journey. When she saw the great, dark whirlpool, however, its breathtaking headlong speed, the churning of the sea all about, the terrible central vortex where the ocean was spun into a mouth of sucking air, her knees just gave way beneath her. She squeezed her eyes shut and put her head on her knees.

The ship was caught and spun like a child's whirligig. Finn's stomach flipped, the ropes cutting deep into her arms and legs as the centrifugal force dragged at her body. The elven cat struggled desperately to be free, drawing blood as she dug her claws deep into Finn's forearms. Finn held on to her tightly, though, holding her securely between her body and her bent legs. Her ears were buffeted by a deafening roar as if a thousand lions sought to tear the ship to shreds. Spray lashed her body, wetting her to the skin. She clutched Goblin closer, wishing she had kissed her mother goodbye.

Much, much later, it seemed, she heard Jay's voice in her ears, and felt his arms about her shoulders. "It be grand, Finn, I promise; we are all safe; everything is grand."

Finn opened one eye and then the other. Above her the proud spread of the *Speedwell's* sails billowed white against the sky. The sea creamed under the caravel's bows. "Grand as a goat's turd stuck with buttercups," Finn said, releasing her clutch on the squirming cat. "I canna believe it."

"Alphonsus says he has navigated the Devil's Vortex five times now. That is more than any other living man," Jay said.

There was no sign on his face that he had faced the possibility of his own death, as

Finn had. Since the singing of the song of love, Jay had been haloed by an aura of grandeur and invincibility that Finn recognised and was humbled by. She was not the only one. The sailors all gave him the deference due only to an officer, and Bran had been all shy, admiring lassie, causing Finn to frown at her more than once.

Once clear of the Devil's Vortex, the caravel made quick progress up the coast, the land gradually gentling down into smooth, green hills, a tall pointed spire marking every village.

"They be the steeples o' the kirks," Tarn told Finn and Bran. "They all build them as high as they can, to give all honour to our God the Father, who dwells in the sky."

The sea rounded into a wide firth that lay blue and gentle between green headlands, each guarded by a tall lighthouse. In the mouth of the firth was a tall, peaked island, its cliffs as steep as any castle wall and more than five hundred feet high. An ugly, square fortress was built at the very pinnacle of the rock. Finn swallowed when she saw it, knowing without being told that was the prison compound frowning down upon them.

The *Speedwell* sailed past the prison into a long, wide harbour, near as well-protected as the Berhtfane. There the city of Bride nestled into a fold of the downs, tall slender spires of golden stones rising into the sunset sky. With all the towers and buildings built square, unlike the roundness of the Coven's architecture, the city had a foreign look about it that had them staring.

"Why, she be a bonny city," Ashlin said, leaning on the rail between Finn and Bran. His bony, long-fingered hands were more nervous than ever, pleating his shirt-tails together.

"Hell's bells, the city be large," Finn said, unable to help remembering the sailor's warning about witch fires. "What do we do now?"

"Lower anchor," the young sailor Tam said, "and wait for the harbourmaster to come. It'll be too soon for me."

They dropped anchor some distance from the shore and all were given a double ration of rum to celebrate their safe arrival. All were tense and jumpy, feeling the weight of uncertainty now the journey was at an end. Finn was jumpiest of them all, the sheer height of the island's cliffs reminding her what a time it had been since she had had to climb a wall.

It did not take long for the harbour officials to row out to the resting caravel. It was suggested, without much subtlety, that Enit and the others should take the opportunity to rest below decks. They agreed with alacrity, hiding in one of the storerooms until the officials had gone.

"They have ordered us to appear afore the General Assembly tomorrow, to explain how we come to be here and to assure them we are free o' any form o' heresy or witch-taint," Captain Tobias told a tense and silent little group. "Ye have one night and one night only, to do what ye came here to do. Tomorrow we flee, regardless o' your success. Trust me when I say none o' us wish to appear afore the General Assembly."

"But why do they mistrust ye?" Enit asked, her dark-skinned face as pale as it was possible to be. "Should they no' be welcoming ye wi' open arms, a captain with the

courage to flee the Righ's fleet?"

"They do no' think it is possible for us to have sailed the Skeleton Coast without witchcraft," the captain replied tersely. "And though I tried, I fear my eyes fell and my cheek whitened. I am no' used to lying."

They waited until night had fallen. Dide sat and strummed his guitar as if nothing could go wrong, but the others found it hard to endure the hours. Ashlin gnawed his knuckle raw, Bran fiddled with her short blonde pigtail, and Dillon bent his head over the shaggy white dog and said not a word, while Finn paced back and forth like a caged wolf.

At last all was dark and still. The prison loomed over the ship, more impregnable than any building Finn had ever seen. Now that she was here, the cat-thief was prey to gnawing doubts. Despite the dark, heavy presence of the magic cloak in her pocket and the warmth of the elven cat around her neck, Finn was cold and light-headed with fear. Dide had worked out every step of the operation, every variable, every trick Lady Luck could play, but still Finn could not sit still. *We have come so far*, she thought. *I could no' bear it if I was the one to fail.* . .

As soon as it was fully dark under the cover of night they took the long boat and rowed with muffled oars to a place where the cliff hung over the sea with a dark and frowning aspect. Dillon sat in the prow with his hand on his sword, while Jay and Dide worked the oars and tiller. All were dressed in black, with their faces and hands blackened with soot.

"Finn, are ye sure ye think it wise for ye to free the prophet yourself?" Dide whispered. "I'd be much happier if ye'd let us come into the Black Tower wi' ye."

"Ye with your great clumping boots and propensity to burst into song at the drop o' a hat?" As Dide protested, she went on, "Nay, believe me, it'll be much better if there's only one o' us to attract attention. I've been trained to this; ye three have no'. If I have need o' ye, I'll call ye through the golden ball ye gave me, as ye taught me."

Dide nodded reluctantly.

"Have a care for yourself, Finn," Jay said urgently, as the boat bumped against the rock.

"Och, dinna ye worry about me," Finn answered, heaving her bulging satchel on to her back and checking the rope was secured to her waist. "Though if I am no' back by dawn, make sure ye are gone from here, do ye hear me?"

Jay made an inarticulate protest and she smiled reassuringly and said, "Do no' fret, you great goose-cap. I'll be fine!"

Pulling on her climbing gloves, she looked up at the shelf of rock over their heads. Even in the darkness, she could see how it bulged out over the water, slick with spray.

"The easier slopes are all heavily guarded, but they think this side is inaccessible," Dide said. "Wha' do ye think, Finn? Can ye climb it?"

"Can a cat scratch its fleas?" Finn replied with false insouciance. "Watch and learn, my hearties!"

She reached up and thrust a long steel spike into the stone overhanging their heads, hammering it in with one quick, almost silent blow. In an instant she had belayed her rope around the spike and had hauled herself out of the boat and onto the rock, clinging as close as any spider to a leaf. She took pride in clambering out of sight in the time it would have taken one of her comrades to blink, pausing once she was over the bulge of rock to calm her galloping nerves.

Five hundred feet of steep, treacherous rock, all damp with seaspray and shrouded in the dark of a moonless night. Finn climbed slowly, carefully, taking the time to be sure her spikes were hammered in firmly and quietly. Many times her foot slipped or her hand fumbled, but each time she was able to recover her balance and cling close to the rock-face, her face pressed against the cold granite. Sometimes the elven cat climbed ahead of her, showing Finn a safer route. Sometimes she clung to Finn's shoulder, the sting of her claws keeping the girl alert and focused. Occasionally Goblin hung from her claws, mewling in distress, terrified by the steepness and inaccessibility of the cliff. Each time Finn found some crack in which to wedge a steel spike, some clump of weed to cling to, some high shelf to scramble to, dragging the elven cat behind her.

At last Finn crawled over the lip of the cliff. She lay in the darkness, panting harshly. Goblin lay beside her, trembling, her silky coat damp and filthy. Both would have happily curled together and slept, but at last Finn forced herself to her knees, and then to her feet. Above her the prison walls loomed, two hundred feet high and broken only by rows of narrow arrow slits. "Easy as pissing in bed," Finn said.

She scaled the closely fitting stones of the wall as swiftly as a carpenter climbing a ladder. The very top of the wall had been built out, however, making it impossible for Finn to climb up and over. She hung for a while, thinking, then slid down her rope until she came to the last row of arrow slits. There she belayed her rope firmly, before looping it loosely around the pin once more to allow easy release. She then crept within the embrasure, struggling to squeeze her long body through. She could not help wishing she was as skinny as she had been in the old days, when she had first been trained as a sneak-thief.

At last she fell through, her shoulders scraped raw, landing on her knees in a long, badly lit corridor. There she took the precaution of drawing out the little square of silk she carried in her pocket and shaking it out around her. At once all the hairs on her arm stood up, her skin shuddered, her nerves jolted with cold.

With an effort she shook off the lassitude and chill the cloak of invisibility always gave her, cuddling the warm little cat close to her chin. She took off the specially designed shoes and gloves she wore and stowed them away safely in her pack.

Feeling no fear, she then set off down the corridor, looking for the doorway out onto the battlements. She knew exactly where to find it, Elfrida NicHilde having drawn up a rough map of the prison that Finn had studied till she could see its shape behind the darkness of her closed lids.

A patrol of guards marched down the corridor, dressed in heavy armour and long white surcoats emblazoned with the design of a black tower. Finn simply stood against the wall until they had passed, confident they would not see her. She then went on until she reached the end of the corridor, leaning her ear against the huge, iron-bound door to listen.

She could hear the murmur of voices within and hesitated, gnawing her lip. After a while, she slowly turned the handle and eased the door open a crack. Keeping the cloak wrapped closely about her, she insinuated one arm through, then her head, then her leg. She was just sliding the rest of her body through when one of the guards said irritably, "shut the door, will ye, Justin? It be colder than a witch's tit out there!"

Finn just managed to whip her leg through before the door was slammed upon her. She stood very still against the wall, the guard that had shut the door only a few inches away from her. As he turned, his armour brushed against her but he did not notice, only shivering and beating his hands against his arms. "Brrrr!" he said. "So much for summer!"

The door to the battlements was on the other side of the guardroom. Finn waited for the soldiers to resume their game of trictrac before tiptoeing across the little room. She could not resist stealing one of the guards' pouch of tobacco on the way, for it had been some weeks since her own store had run out and Finn had been dying for a smoke. The door creaked as she opened it and the guards jumped, startled.

"Happen one o' the ghosts be walking," one said nervously. "Och, this be a bad place to work!"

As Finn slipped through she heard the other guards laugh at the nervous youngster and fought down the impulse to make an eerie wailing sound. Closing the door very gently behind her, she made her silent way across the top of the battlements. She found the point where she had climbed up, then tied her sash around the elven cat and carefully lowered her over the battlements, Goblin mewling a little in distress. Swinging rather wildly at the end of Finn's sash, she at last came to the steel spike where Finn had left the rope loosely looped. The elven cat caught the rope in her mouth and as Finn tugged her upwards, the rope jerked free and was dragged up with the elven cat.

At last Goblin was dragged safely over the battlements, spitting and hissing in rage. Finn hugged her fiercely, but the elven cat struggled free and then sat with her back to Finn, smoothing down her ruffled fur with one well-dampened paw. "Ye did well, sweetie," Finn whispered, stroking the top of her head. "Thank ye!"

Goblin only hissed in reply, her tail lashing.

Taking care to make as little noise as possible, Finn hammered in another belay hook, ran the rope through it and then let the great length of it fall. After a long wait, when she began to feel rather sick with nerves, the rope jerked under her hand and she knew one of her companions was climbing up to join her. She did not wait, knowing it would take Dide and Dillon a long time to make the climb. She jerked the rope twice to let them know she was on her way to free the prophet, then crossed silently to the inner wall of the battlements.

The prison was built in the shape of a great square, with a tower at each corner and battlements on top that ran the length of each wall. Within the square was another, smaller tower, built of black, shiny stone. So carefully had the tower been built that the cracks between the huge blocks of stone were no thicker than a hairsbreadth. Soldiers stood sentinel outside the one entrance, a massively thick iron door at the base of the tower, while more soldiers patrolled the courtyard.

Finn leant over the crenellations for a long time, scrutinising the central tower

carefully. It was here that Elfrida had lived most of her life, and here that all the most important prisoners were incarcerated. No-one had ever escaped the Black Tower before, it was said, let alone tried to break in. Finn knew it would be death for her if she was caught.

She waited for the wind to die down, then raised her crossbow, winding it on with the hook at her belt. She took careful aim and fired.

The crossbolt flew across the distance between the towers and embedded itself deep in the stone, carrying with it a length of stout rope. Finn instinctively crouched low, despite the concealment of the magical cloak. When it was clear none had heard the whine of the bolt, she screwed another hook into the wall and secured the rope tightly. She then took a deep breath and stepped out onto the rope.

The wind caught at her, causing her to sway. She regained her balance with some difficulty, her arms stretched wide. Far below her the soldiers marched in tight formation round the foot of the tower but none thought to look up. Finn resisted the temptation to look down, fixing her eyes firmly on the opposite wall. She slid one foot forward, then the other, trying not to think what would happen if she should slip. Step by slow sliding step she crossed the tightrope, her cheek curving in a grim little smile as she remembered how Dide and Morrell had alternately coaxed and goaded her into practising her rope walking until she was accomplished indeed. Finn had thought it a mere game to while away the weeks of travelling and to give her something to do when the jongleurs performed. She should have known Dide never did anything without good reason.

At last she made it to the opposite side, crawling over the battlements with her heart slamming and her palms sticky. Goblin unwound herself from Finn's neck, washing herself thoroughly while Finn rubbed her claw-scored throat ruefully. She would have given much to have lit up her pipe but dared not risk anyone noticing the flare of the flint or the smell of tobacco smoke.

She found the door to the tower but it was locked and barred on the inside. Finn sighed and pulled out her lock-picking tools. Kneeling on the ground she inserted first one, then another, then another, until at last the lock sprang free. Lifting the bar was another difficult struggle and Finn had to subdue her impatience, knowing it would only make her difficult task harder. Although the dark hours of the night were trickling away, kicking a door and swearing were not going to make the minutes pass more slowly.

At last she had the door open, and crept down the winding stairs until she had reached the corridor below. She pressed her back against the cold black stone and pulled the prophet's wooden cross from her backpack.

Finn felt him straight away, as loud as if he was blowing a trumpet. To her dismay he was deep in the bowels of the building. She had hoped he would be in the heights, close to her rope and her route to safety. She thrust the cross into her pocket and set off down the corridor at a jog. Time was running out.

Black as a living shadow, the tiny cat slunk along the dim corridor, her long tufted ears twitching back and forth, sniffing at the doors and in the corners. Suddenly she froze, one paw raised, her tail stiff. Finn bent over her. "What can ye smell, Goblin? What can ye hear?"

Mouse, she hissed and looked up at Finn with gleaming aquamarine eyes, her fangs showing white and sharp.

"No' now, sweetie! We're looking for a smelly auld man, a very smelly man if the reports be true. They say the Tirsoilleircan mystics think it a sin to wash so ye should be able to smell him a good way off!"

Goblin wrinkled her nose fastidiously.

The corridor led out into another wider hall, lined with heavily barred doors. At the end of the hall was a landing leading to a wide sweep of stairs. Finn's eyes brightened and she hurried towards it.

Suddenly she heard the sound of singing. Finn stopped mid-step, entranced. It was a woman's voice, singing a lament. Finn recognized the tune. It was a song she had heard Enit sing many times.

"I wish, I wish my babe was born

An' smiling on yon nurse's knee;

An' I myself were dead and gone,

Wi' green, green grass growing over me,

Aye, wi' green, green grass growing over me."

The song faltered and broke off. Then, very low and piteous, Finn heard the words again, spoken not sung: "Aye, wi' green, green grass growing over me."

Finn paused for a moment, irresolute, then shook her head irritably, drew the cloak more tightly about her and hurried towards the stairs.

Safe within the camouflage of the cloak of invisibility, Finn took no more than ordinary care, concentrating on haste rather than stealth. She passed many guards, some standing sentinel outside doors, others patrolling the halls with white cloaks swinging.

On the ground floor she paused in a quiet corner and held the wooden cross again, reorienting herself. It took some time, watching and listening, before she discovered the way down into the dungeons. They were locked and closely guarded so she bided her time, fidgeting with impatience, until the hourly patrol came round once more. She slipped in through the door behind them, almost treading on one soldier's heels as she hurried to make it through the door before it clanged shut again.

Down here the halls had been hacked out of living rock and the walls and floor were rough and uneven. Set all along the sides of the corridor were doors made of iron, with little barred windows set at eye height, and a flap down at floor level for food to be shoved through. Every now and again the corridor branched, but Finn showed no hesitation in choosing which way to turn. She had no need to touch the wooden cross again. She could feel where the prophet was as surely as if she were a compass and he

true north.

She followed another flight of steps down, these ones narrow, with the steps set at different heights so she had to descend with care. The stone was slimy to the touch and when she passed a torch, she saw the floor shone with puddles.

At the end of the corridor was a large iron door, with two guards sitting in front of it. One was having difficulty keeping his head from nodding forward on to his chest, jerking it back every few minutes. He yawned widely, took off his helmet to scratch his head vigorously, then jammed the helmet back on again.

"Och, I hate the graveyard shift," he grumbled. The other one made no response other than to snore, loudly and comfortably. His companion looked at him, sighed, and nudged him in the leg with his toe. "Wake up, Dominic!"

There was no response. The guard sighed again, very noisily, then took a swig from a ceramic tankard by his feet. "Why, oh why did I join the army?" he said.

Finn knelt on the ground as quietly as she could and slowly, cautiously, slid the straps of her satchel off her back, being careful to keep all parts of her body beneath the cover of the cloak. She unbuckled one of the straps, slid her hand within and groped about. There was a clink as Dide's golden ball rolled against her hammer. Immediately Finn froze.

The guard looked up rather blearily. Unable to see anything, he rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and said to his sleeping companion, "The least ye could do, Dom, is stay awake and keep me company!"

Finn's fingers closed upon a little packet of folded paper. Carefully she drew it out and unfolded it. The paper crackled and again the guard looked up, this time more sharply. Finn kept very still, as still as the elven cat crouched at her feet. He stood up and peered down the corridor, paced a little, then at last sat down again. His hand reached down, groped for his tankard of ale, brought it up to his mouth for a long swig. He sighed, wiped his mouth, and went to set the tankard back down on the ground. As his eyes pulled back in his head, the tankard fell from his nerveless fingers and broke on the ground, ale splashing out.

"Well, that sleeping powder certainly works well," Finn whispered to Goblin as she bent, unhooked the keys from the guard's belt and unlocked the door.

Finn recoiled as soon as she stepped inside. A thick miasma closed about her, so thick as to be almost palpable. Composed of mould and sweat and urine and human excrement and something darker, like terror, it caused her to choke and retch with revulsion. She muffled her nose and mouth with the cloak, and peered about.

It was black inside, black as a chimney sweep's arse. Finn wished she had thought to bring in one of the lanterns hanging outside the door. She groped her way out again, took great breaths of air that tasted sweet in comparison, then seized the lantern and stepped back inside.

Within was a small cell. Lying on a filthy pallet of straw and rags was an old man. He woke as soon as the light penetrated the cell, cowering back with a cry. Upon his papery skin were the ugly marks of torture: angry red burns, deep cuts and lacerations all

weeping with pus, old bruises in yellow and green and new ones, black as ink.

Finn tried to reassure him but it was clear he could not understand her. She knelt by his side and pressed the wooden cross into his hands. His wildly dilated eyes stared at the cross, then back at her. Suddenly his face came alive with hope and joy and he kissed the cross passionately.

Finn helped him to her feet. He was dressed in only a few damp and filthy rags, and was shivering with cold. She had come prepared for this. Finn dragged a long black robe out of her pack and indicated that he should dress in it. For some reason she did not understand he recoiled at the sight but she pressed her hands together pleadingly and reluctantly he nodded. She turned away as he stripped away the rags and dressed himself in the robe. She passed him a pair of soft shoes and he crammed his long, bony feet into them. She saw that the soles of his feet were suppurating with sores where he had been whipped again and again.

When he was ready, she slowly eased open the door and checked outside. All was quiet, the two sentries snoring away. Finn chewed her thumbnail thoughtfully. The plan had been for her to steal one of the soldier's uniforms and to pretend to be a guard escorting a pastor through the prison. Such a sight was not uncommon in the prison, apparently, since the pastors spoke rites over those close to death, and many in the prison died every day. The prophet's filthy, emaciated state would not occasion much surprise, since many of the Tirsoilleirean pastors starved themselves willfully and refused to wash the filth and lice from their bodies, considering such peculiar behaviour holy. Finn was hesitant to strip the guard, however, in case the one whose sleep was natural should wake.

After a moment she decided to take the risk, however. Indicating the prophet should wait inside the cell, she stripped the drugged guard of his armour as quietly as she could. It was impossible to avoid some clinks and clanks, however, and once or twice the other guard stirred and once half-opened his eyes, only to mutter something incomprehensible and close them again. Finn dragged the half-naked guard within the cell, dressed herself rapidly in his unpleasantly smelling chain-mail armour, then put his helmet on her head and his gauntlets on her hands. It was all very heavy and very smelly, and Finn wrinkled her nose in distaste. At last she was ready and able to lock the cell again, hanging the keys on her belt.

The prophet was very unsteady on his feet and Finn was beside herself with impatience as he shuffled along the corridor. She took his arm and tried to urge him along faster. There was no hurrying him, though, and so she stamped down her anxiety and helped him as best she could.

It was in the wee small hours of the night and all was quiet. Finn managed to avoid most of the guards and those they did pass did not pay them much attention, even though the prophet was so clearly barely able to totter. Once they reached the stairs it was easier for he was able to lean heavily on the balustrade, and she was able to push him from behind.

They were on the top floor when Finn heard again the sound of singing. She stopped in her tracks, once again entranced by the power and beauty of the voice. It sang of running along the sea-strand, the wind in her hair, the birds calling in her ears, finding shells that sang of the ocean. Some sound must have penetrated the old man's maimed

ears as well, for he lifted his grime-caked face to hers and said softly, "Be that the sea witch I hear?"

It was the first time he had spoken and Finn gaped at him in surprise. He frowned a little and said, "They may have cut off my ears but I can still hear, lad. I hear sounds, though indistinctly, and I hear with the ears o' the spirit. That is something they could never take away from me, no' till they took my life. And then I'd be with God and should hear the singing o' angels, which indeed I long to do."

He sighed. "I remember the sea witch, though. I used to be in the cell next to hers. I'd press my ruined ear against the wall and hear her as she sang. How sweetly and how sadly she would sing! Indeed, I do no' think the singing o' the angels could be as sweet, for she sang o' things I love, spring and apple trees and children playing ..."

Finn nodded and smiled. She listened to the pure, angelic voice a little longer, her mind racing. She had been present at many of the early war conferences, when the Bright Soldiers of Tirsoilleir had first attacked the free lands of Eileanan. There had been much puzzlement as to how the Bright Soldiers had managed to sail the Skeleton Coast, with the seas thick with Fairgean and the coast unknown to any living sailor, since it had been three hundred years since any merchant ships had sailed from Bride. Once Meghan had said, "If it was anyone else, I would think they must have had a Yedda to sing them to safety, but I ken the Bright Soldiers abhor all witchcraft and would never have a trained sea witch to help them."

Lachlan had replied, "Unless they captured that ship I sent to Bride five years ago. It had on board the last remaining Yedda that I had been able to find. They may have forced her to sail with them and sing the Fairgean to death. If that was so, it would also explain how the Bright Soldiers kent the way through the Bay o' Deception, for there were many canny sailors on board that ship that kent that coast like the backs o' their hands."

No Yedda had ever been found on board any of the Tirsoilleirean ships captured during the war and Finn had never heard her mentioned again. Now she remembered, however. She stood and listened, and wondered, and somewhere inside her a germ of an idea took root.

Hearing the sound of marching feet behind her she hustled the old man along the corridor and into the safety of the side hall. The patrol marched past. Once they were safely gone, Finn hurried the old prophet up the narrow flight of stairs to the battlements. They stepped out into the fresh air, both taking deep gasping breaths, relief buoying their blood.

Finn was a little dismayed to find the darkness was already fading. A few seabirds wheeled overhead, screaming plaintively. It was light enough for her to see the shape of the battlements dark against the sky. She led the old prophet across to her tightrope, still stretched between the two buildings. On the other side she could see the dark shape of Dide and Dillon as they rose from their hiding place behind the crenellations. Although she could not see their faces, their hunched stance and urgent movements told her how tense and anxious they were.

"Shut your eyes," Finn told the old man, riffling through her bulging satchel for the leather harness and then fastening it securely round his skinny body. She led him to the

wall and made him climb on top of it, clipping the strap of the harness to the tightrope. The old man opened his eyes and gave a shriek of dismay as he realised he was standing on the very edge of the battlement.

"Ssssh!" Finn hissed urgently and Goblin hissed as well, lashing her tail. "Shut your eyes and keep your mouth shut too, unless ye wish to betray us all!"

Trembling, the old man obeyed. Finn gestured to the two men on the other side and then gave the old man a vigorous push. He fell, wailing. The rope jerked and held. Hanging from the tightrope by his harness, he sailed across the distance, his bare legs kicking wildly. Dide caught him at the far end and hauled him up and over the wall.

"Go! Go!" Finn made wild gesturing motions with her hands and Dide nodded and half-dragged, half-carried the old man across the battlements to where the rope hung all the way down to the sea, past seven hundred feet of sheer rock.

Finn waited till they were busy strapping the old man to Dillon in preparation for the long descent back to the boat, then ran back to the door and down the stairs, her mind scurrying with excitement and fear. As she ran she dragged out the magical cloak and flung it around her once more. It was almost dawn and soon the prison would be stirring. If Finn was to rescue the Yedda, she would have to be quick.

The sea witch was singing no longer but Finn knew where she was incarcerated and wasted no time getting there, clanking in her borrowed armour as she ran. Goblin bounded before her, ears pricked forward. Finn reached the door, which was unguarded, knelt outside it and picked the lock with her tools. Within seconds the lock had flown open and she was able to swing open the door.

A very thin, pale, haggard woman sat on a low trestle bed, her blonde-grey hair hanging free all around her, a comb in her hand. She looked up in surprise and stared, puzzled and frightened, her hand to her sunken cheek. Finn realised she still had the hood of the cloak over her head and pushed it back. The Yedda gasped.

"Witchcraft!" she cried. "It must be. One minute there was no-one there and now, here ye are! Who are ye?"

"My name is Finn. There's no time for chitchat. I have come to rescue ye. Quickly! Ye must come with me now."

"But I ..."

Finn seized her hand and dragged her to her feet. "Quickly! The guards will patrol past soon. We must be gone. Come on!"

"But I be in my nightgown . . . just let me . . ."

"For Ea's sake, will ye no' come?"

The Yedda was dragging on her stockings but at Finn's words she looked up, her eyes glowing. "Ea! It has been long since I heard her blessed name. Aye, for Ea's sake I shall come and gladly."

She thrust her feet into shoes and caught up a plaid from where it hung over her chair. As she flung it round her, she seized a few belongings from the low table and tried

to shove them into a reticule. Finn dragged her away. "Come away!" she cried in a frenzy. "Do ye no' realise it is dawn?"

"What about the others?" the Yedda cried, suddenly dragging back against Finn's hand. "Do ye no' save them too?"

"What others?" Finn asked as she pulled the door closed behind them.

"John and Peter and Captain Banning, and auld Ballard, and Ferris ..."

"I do no' ken who they are," Finn said indifferently. "Come, let us no' tarry."

The Yedda stood firm. "They are the crew o' the *Sea-Eagle*. We have suffered much together and I canna be leaving them. Come, they are in the next rooms, it will no' take but a minute!"

"We do no' have a minute!" Finn cried in a frenzy of impatience. The Yedda pleaded with her though and so Finn flung herself to her knees before the next door down and manipulated the lock with hands shaking with fear and haste. "Goblin, keep watch!" she hissed through her teeth and the elven cat slunk away down the corridor, her aquamarine eyes narrowed.

At last the door swung open. Within was a long room, all crowded with trestle beds upon which men lay sleeping, or sat up, yawning and questioning. At one end was a barred window and through the grime Finn could see the wall opposite, just fingered with light. "The sun is up!" she cried. "Come on, come on, all o' ye!"

As the men woke, exclaiming in surprise, Finn motioned them all forward. The men quickly began to scramble into their breeches and shoes, and she waved her arms furiously. "Hurry!"

Without waiting to see if they obeyed her, Finn bent over to pick the lock of the next door along. She roused the men within with a hiss and a shake, then hurried along to the next door, her heart hammering. At last the final door was unlocked and the man within, a tall man with a weather-beaten face and an air of command, was woken by Finn's urgent hand.

The Yedda leant past her. "Captain Banning, come on; we must flee. They have come to rescue us at long last!"

The captain did not ask for an explanation, nodding and pulling on his breeches. "We do no' have time!" Finn cried, hurrying back out into the corridor. "Please, please, hurry!"

"They bring us some food in the early hours," the Yedda whispered, her hand shaking. "They will find that we have gone then. How are we to escape?"

"Follow me," Finn said as they all hurried along the corridor, boots clattering against the stone. "Canna ye walk more lightly?" Finn hissed and they tried to tiptoe, making even more noise in the process. Finn rolled her eyes.

From behind her came a squalling mew, as loud and high as the little elven cat could manage. Finn dragged one slow man out of his room with a determined heave.

"The guards come!" she cried. "Be quick! Be quiet!"

She heard the sound of marching feet and looked about her in despair. There were close on twenty men milling about in various states of undress, some wearing nothing but their shirts. The marching grew closer. Everyone froze, panic on their faces.

Stall them! She projected her urgent mind-message to the little cat, while beckoning the men forward, her other finger held against her lips. They hurried round the corner into the little side corridor. They heard a cat yowling, then laughter and a scuffle. Finn was white to her lips. "Please, Eà, keep Goblin safe," she whispered.

The yowling faded away, and after a confused moment, the marching resumed, accompanied by low voices and laughter. There was no time for them all to get out on to the battlements and in the growing light, it was too much to hope that none would notice them huddling in the antechamber.

So Finn motioned them all close to her. "Huddle in under my cloak," she whispered frantically. "Creep in as close ye can get and make sure no hands or feet stick out. Oh, blessed Eà, let the cloak stretch far enough!"

Miraculously it did. The stretch of black silk that could fold up small enough to fit inside Finn's pocket billowed out to cover twenty-four men and two women with ease. Finn did not stop to wonder how. She merely gave fervent thanks to Eà as the patrol marched straight past them, then urged the free captives up the stairs and out on to the battlements.

"Dide is going to kill me!" she mouthed, then shrugged, calling out anxiously to Goblin with her mind.

"Who is this goblin that ye call to?" the Yedda asked, causing Finn's eyes to widen in amazement. "Do ye have faery assistance?"

"Goblin is my cat," Finn explained, urging them to hurry.

"Ah, your familiar," the Yedda replied. Finn nodded, calling to Goblin again. As the Yedda went through the door Finn turned back anxiously to look behind them and saw the elven cat turn the corner and come limping up the corridor. *Hoarweasels follow . . .* the cat said, her mind-voice wincing with pain.

Are ye hurt, sweetie?

Those feral hoarweasels kicked me! the cat answered, her mind-tail lashing. *They are close behind me.*

Finn pushed the last man through the door, and scrambled through herself. As Goblin leapt up the stairs to join her, she saw a guard turn the corner. Goblin whisked through the door and Finn slammed it behind her.

"Hold this shut for me!" Finn cried. "Quick! Ye must swing across that rope to the far side! Make haste!"

As some of the men put their shoulders to the door, Finn hastily locked it with her lock-picking tools. Blows began to fall upon it from the other side. "We are discovered!" Finn cried. "Oh, Eà, make haste!"

One by one the men swung across the rope to the battlements of the opposite tower.

Dide stood there, livid with anger, but he helped them over the wall and then instructed them to start climbing down the rope. The Yedda could not swing hand over hand across the rope and so Finn ran lightly over the rope, and seized the leather harness that had been strapped to Killian the Listener. Dide tried to grab her arm, hissing angry questions at her, but she shook him off. "We are discovered!" she panted, before running back across the rope as swiftly and easily as if it were a plank over a burn. She strapped the Yedda into it and pushed her off vigorously. As she hung over the battlements she saw soldiers down below pointing up at them and shouting. Some were running into the outer fortress and Finn had no doubt they would soon be attacked from within.

Then the door splintered and broke. Soldiers in white surcoats poured out, but those men still remaining on the battlements grappled with them fiercely. Finn leapt out of the fray and hastily drew her crossbow, firing bolt after bolt at the attacking guards. They fell, screaming. Those she did not shoot down were battered into insensibility by the freed sailors, who seized the guards' swords before swinging across to the opposite battlements. Finn picked up Goblin and ran across the tightrope after them, just as more soldiers burst out on to the rampart. With a single slash of his dagger, Dide cut the rope free.

"Ye porridge-head," he snarled, seizing Finn's arm so tightly she thought he would break the bone. "Wha' are ye about?"

"They are Lachlan's men," she panted, wincing and trying to drag her arm free. "She be a Yedda. I could no' leave them."

"How are we to save them all?" he cried. "Once the soldiers get out on to the heights, all they need do is cut the rope and we shall all die!"

"We had best get down quickly then," Finn said and pushed him towards the rope still hanging over the wall. "No time for squawking, Dide, climb!"

He tried to make her go first but she shook her head. "Do not be a porridge-head, Dide! I have secured the rope just below. Once ye are past that point, I can cut the rope here free. Then they canna stop us! I can climb down without it. Do no' argue! Climb!"

Dide swore at her, swung his leg over the rampart and began to climb down the rope. Finn heard the crack of breaking wood and turned. Soldiers had broken through the door and were running towards her, brandishing swords. She looked back. Dide was swinging down the rope but he had not yet reached the point where Finn had secured the rope. She took a deep breath, turned and raised her crossbow.

One, two, three bolts slammed into the running soldiers. They fell, screaming. Finn loaded again, and wound on the crossbow as fast as she could. The bolt took the soldier in front between the eyes and he fell, right at Finn's feet. Then the others were upon her. She thrust them off with the crossbow, and Goblin leapt for them, claws raking, hissing like a snake. For a second they faltered. It was time enough for Finn to leap on to the wall, seize the rope in her hand and swing out and down. The cat leapt with her, landing on her head and digging all her claws deep into Finn's skull. Although she shrieked with pain, Finn slid down the rope as fast as she could. There was no time to hammer in any spikes so as soon as she was past the overhang, Finn simply let go of the rope, clinging with all her strength to a tiny ledge of rock where moss had crumbled away the cement. The rope slithered down past her, cut by the soldiers above who now hung over the

battlement, trying to see if she was falling. Finn hung there, all her muscles screaming, and looked down herself.

Relief flashed through her. Dide hung on the rope, just below the belay hook where Finn had fastened the rope. He looked up at her, his face white. Finn jerked her head at him urgently, mouthing, "Go! Go!"

He nodded and began to slide down once more. Below him Finn could see other men, all hanging on to the rope for dear life. She began to feel about with her feet for another ledge, her fingers white with the strain. Just as she thought she could not support her own weight any longer, she found a little crack in which to rest her foot. Letting go of all her breath in a gusty sigh of relief, Finn eased one hand down and then her other foot. Slow inch by slow, painful inch, she climbed down the wall.

The tower guards shot at them from the arrow slits but the angle was so steep and the men hanging so close to the wall, few were injured. Alarm bells rang out, causing sea birds to rise in a cacophony of white wings that did more to endanger those descending than the arrows. Since most were sailors, they were swift and nimble in their descent, however, and it did not take long before all were down in the water, clinging to the sides of the longboat. Finn fell the last ten feet, so faint with exhaustion that she could no longer manage to hold on to the rope. She hit the water with a great splash, and was dragged into the boat by Jay. She opened her eyes and looked up into his white, anxious face. "Told ye I'd be fine," she said.

"Fine as a proud laird's bastard," he answered.

She smiled, closing her eyes again.

Hell's Gate

Cannons boomed. "By the Centaur's beard, that one was close!" Dide coughed as black smoke enveloped the *Speedwell*. They leant over the rail, staring at the ships that pursued them, their yards straining under full sail. The lead ship was so close they could see the yawning black mouths of the cannons and see the men scurrying about on her deck.

"They be big, those ships," Bran said anxiously. "Will they catch us, Dide?"

"Nay, o' course no'," he reassured her. "Ye can conjure a wind to sweep them away if they come close enough."

Bran looked even more unhappy than before. The roar of the cannons sounded again and all were drenched by the lash of spray as the cannonballs missed the little caravel by a whisker.

"Why do we no' shoot back?" Finn demanded.

"Our range is no' as long as those cannons," the young sailor Tam replied. "Why waste cannonballs shooting at the waves?"

"Once we are past the Devil's Vortex we should be safe," Dide said. "They will no' dare follow us through the whirlpool."

Finn's stomach muscles clenched at the thought of facing that whirling maelstrom of water again. Somehow she had never given any thought to what would happen after they had rescued Killian the Listener. She had assumed their adventure would be over and Tirsoilleir conquered. Yet she realised now how naive that assumption had been. They still had to take Killian the Listener and the other rescued prisoners to meet Lachlan and his army at the border with Tirsoilleir. It could be months before the words of the earless prophet had ignited a fire strong enough to sweep away the Fealde and the General Assembly, and restore the monarchy. It could be years.

And in the meantime, they still had to escape the angry retribution of Tirsoilleir's ruling council, who had sent a fleet of great ships in pursuit. If the journey along the Skeleton Coast had been dangerous before, it was doubly so now, with the great galleons of Tirsoilleir chasing them with all the power and speed of their massive, billowing sails and their decks of long-range cannons. Already the *Speedwell* had suffered some damage to her hull and rigging, but with all the extra willing hands, they had been able to repair the damage quickly, without slackening their headlong speed.

The Devil's Vortex could only be crossed at high tide, when the rocks and reefs that caused the great tumult of water were almost fully submerged. The *Speedwell* had been tacking about waiting for the tide, and that was how the galleons had managed to come close enough to fire once more. The tide was running high, now, though, and the *Speedwell* changed course once more, heading straight for the treacherous stretch of water. Finn sank down, gathered Goblin in her arms, and shut her eyes determinedly. She had no desire to watch.

"Six times! Alphonsus the Sure will go down in legend!" Jay shouted after an eternity of roaring, spinning darkness. "Open your eyes, Finn; we're safe."

Finn obeyed with alacrity, scrambling up to join the others at the rail. To their dismay, the galleons had not changed course but were racing along the outskirts of the maelstrom in pursuit. As they watched, one was caught in the rip and capsized, masts and rigging smashing down into the churning water. Men leapt into the water, only to be dragged under by the rip, their despairing hands disappearing under the water.

"There must a hundred ships on the sea-bed just there," Tam said somberly, his face white under his sunburn. "It is well named, the Devil's Vortex."

Although the other galleons found it difficult to maintain control, they were not so unlucky and soon were once again bearing down upon the *Speedwell* as she tacked to and fro amidst the Teeth of God.

"We should be able to shake them now," Dide said with his usual optimism. "They may be bigger, but the *Speedwell* is quick and agile. She can turn much faster than those ponderous beasts and will be able to sail where they canna."

At first it seemed he would be proven right, for the *Speedwell* was able to sail close to the cliffs, once racing right through a tall arch of stone where part of the cliff had crumbled away. Being much deeper and wider, the galleons had to head out to the open sea to avoid the rocks. For several days they were nowhere in sight, and the sailors of the *Speedwell* were able to relax a little.

But with the rising of the sun a few days later, the sailors were horrified to find the

fleet of galleons bearing down upon them from the east. The Tirsoilleirean ships had been able to gain much time by not having constantly to tack to avoid the many rocky islands. In addition, they were better able to use the light and fitful wind because of their greater sail power. Soon they would be within firing range again. Once again all hands were called on deck, and they laboured to regain their lead.

It was no use. The billowing white sails grew larger and larger, the great hulk of the galleons looming over them. Then they saw puffs of black smoke and heard the dull roar of the cannons. Confusion reigned as part of their rigging was again torn down, smashing down upon the deck and trapping many of the sailors beneath it.

"Canna ye whistle up a wind to take us out o' here, Bran?" Finn begged.

The cannons boomed once more. They coughed as foul-smelling smoke poured over the deck, then saw with horror one of the galleons looming up close beside them. They saw the cannons being reloaded and the smile on the face of the ship's captain as he raised his hand for the order.

Bran hesitated. She wished that the Yedda they had rescued was strong enough to advise her, at the very least, but the strain of the escape had proven too much for Nellwyn. Weakened by years of deprivation and harsh treatment, the sea-witch had collapsed as soon as she had reached the deck of the *Speedwell*, and was still weak and disorientated. Besides, Bran knew that Nellwyn was no weather witch, having been trained in the use of the songs of sorcery, not in the ways of wind and water. She probably knew no more about controlling the forces of weather than Bran herself.

"Happen I could try . . ." She said at last, closing her eyes and clenching her hands into fists. Her lips moved soundlessly.

The black smoke swirled apart. They felt a freshening breeze on their cheeks. The *Speedwell's* flapping sails billowed out and they felt the boat surge forward. The galleon's cannonballs fell harmlessly into their wake.

"Ye did it!" Finn cried and hugged her cousin ecstatically. "I always kent ye could!"

"I'm glad ye did," Bran replied wryly.

"What do ye mean?"

"I was never sure myself," Bran said, dropping her eyes.

"But the MacSian clan have always been powerful weather witches. Why . . ."

"But they were all trained at the Tower o' Storms," Bran cried. "They were all taught from birth how to raise the wind and calm it. I was only two when witchcraft was outlawed on pain o' death. I was punished severely if I even talked about magic! I remember once getting into terrible trouble because I chanted a little rhyme my auld nurse had told me, and almost drowned myself calling up the wind to fill the sails o' my wee dinghy. I could no' control the wind once it came and it caused terrible damage to the crops and all the crofters' cottages, and I had to be rescued when my dinghy capsized. I never tried again, in fear o' getting into trouble again and in fear o' what I might do. I do no' even remember the rhyme ... so ye see, I really did no' ken if I could do it. I've been so afraid ye'd all be realising I dinna have any Talent . . ."

"No Talent!" Finn cried, amazed. "But ye are the NicSian!"

"Exactly," Bran answered. "Ye can see my problem."

"And ye were always going on about it, stopping me from riding out because ye said a storm was coming or . . ."

"I ken, I ken," Bran said. "No need to rub it in."

"So ye really do no' ken how . . . but ye must, ye just called up wind then!"

Bran nodded, smiling rather sheepishly. "Aye, lucky, wasna it?"

"Ye mean . . ."

"I had always thought ye needed to be taught all the right words and rituals," Bran said, "and so when we met up with the MacAhern's caravan, I begged the Loremaster to teach me. He told me witches' talents were innate powers, born into ye. He said that learning to draw upon and use such power could be taught, but that ye either had or did no' have the ability. He said if I had managed to do so as a bairn, I must have been born with the Talent and I could train myself to try and use it. He suggested that I try and learn as much about the weather as I could, listening and watching and figuring out how it works. Well, oddly enough, a boat is an ideal place to learn about such things. We are so dependent upon the wind and the tide. I have been practising calling the wind and keeping it steady ..."

"That is why the winds were so fair most o' the time!" Finn cried. "I've heard the sailors marvel it should blow so steady and always from the right quarter. Tam said having an auld witch bless the fleet with flowers and goldensloe wine works much better than one o' their parsons with his holy water . . ."

"Aye, but I was no' sure if it were truly me or if it was just coincidence. And then the storm came . . ."

"But ye bound the storm."

Bran nodded. "I canna tell ye how happy I was when that auld spell o' my nurse's actually worked. I had no' been sure afore then . . . and that could have been coincidence too, ye ken. But now I truly ken it was me! That wind came from nowhere and see how strong and steadily it blows."

She turned and gestured up at the sails. Only then did the two girls realise that the galleons were close upon either side of the ship, so close that sailors were leaning down with grappling hooks to try and catch them in their ropes. The wind that filled the *Speedwell's* sails had also filled the galleons' and brought the great ships close upon the caravel's stern.

For a second Bran stared, her mouth agape. Then she dropped her hands and swiftly untied her sash, still knotted in three places from where she had bound the storm. She ran up on to the aftercastle and leant over the railing, undoing the knots as fast as she could. Then she waved her sash at the two galleons bearing down so close upon them, shouting:

"Wind and rain and lightning, I release thee! I release thee! I release thee! Hailstones, hurricane, thunderclap, I release thee, I release thee, I release thee! By the powers o' air

and fire and earth and water, I command thee, storm, to rage!"

There was a great roar as sheet lightning suddenly leapt from the end of Bran's flapping sash, irradiating the sky with white fire that set the galleons' sails ablaze. The air stank of sulphur. Everyone cowered down, screaming in shock, all their hair standing up from the static electricity in the air. Thunderclap after thunderclap boomed out, and the wind roared. When Finn opened her eyes, her hands still clamped over her ears, she saw Bran's slim figure outlined against a great sheet of lightning, the ships' masts black and smoking behind her, her sash billowing wildly in the gale. Then it began to rain, so heavily that it seemed dusk had fallen over the Tirsoilleirean fleet while the *Speedwell* raced on through sunshine.

"God's teeth!" Arvin the Just roared. "What witchcraft is this?"

"Who cares?" Captain Tobias cried. "Look!"

They all looked back and saw the galleons tossed wildly about in the storm, their masts broken, their sails tearing free. Hailstones large as pebbles battered the decks, and they could hear cries of pain and terror that soon dwindled away as the *Speedwell* raced along, her sails full of wind, the water creaming along under her bows.

Bran swayed and crashed to the deck, the sash still clutched in her fist. Finn ran to her, kneeling beside her. Bran was unconscious, her cheek as white as the hailstones. At first Finn's trembling fingers could find no pulse but then she felt a faint, erratic flutter, and sobbed aloud in relief.

"They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind," Arvin the Just said with gloomy satisfaction.

Finn leapt to her feet. "Canna ye ever shut up, ye frog-faced lout!" she cried.

His granite-hard countenance did not even quiver. "Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice. Fools show their anger at once but the prudent ignore an insult."

"Flaming dragon balls, if I hear one more o' your bloody awful sayings I swear I'll cram them down your throat with your own balls!"

She advanced on him with her fist raised high and he folded his massive arms and looked down at her impassively. Dide caught her arm and said soothingly, "Settle down, wild cat! Ye'd only bruise your knuckles. Come, help me carry Bran downstairs for the Yedda to look at. All Tower-trained witches are taught some healing skills. I ken Nellwyn's weak still but she will ken better than anyone what to do for sorcery sickness. Never mind Arvin, he ate too many sour crabapples as a bairn!"

"All the words o' my mouth are righteous," the first mate said sternly. "There is nothing twisted or crooked in them."

"I'll give ye something twisted," Finn muttered, but allowed Dide to drag her away.

Nellwyn took one look at Bran's clammy skin, as blue as skimmed milk, and crawled out of her bunk, her plaid clutched close about her nightgown. Though she was almost overwhelmed with dizziness, the Yedda at once took command, sending Finn to fetch

boiling water and blankets and listing any number of herbs that Finn had never heard of, and was certain could not be found on board the ship. She did her best, meagre as that was, but was not allowed to linger by Bran's bedside, the Yedda sending her back above deck. All that could be seen of the storm was a single black thundercloud shaped like a fist, reaching from the sea to the heavens, the deluge of rain below it shrouding the galleons from view. Everywhere else the sun danced on the waves and sea birds circled, crying aloud mockingly.

All that afternoon and evening the wind blew steadily, even though Bran was sunk in a restless sleep like the one that had fallen upon Enit and Ashlin after the singing of the song of love. The young NicSian was gripped with fever and nightmares, tossing and turning on the bunk-bed, her skin slick with perspiration. Killian the Listener was in no better state, his blood poisoned by the infection that had sunk its claws deep into his many wounds, his temperature dangerously high.

Nellwyn the Yedda shook her head over them, wishing there was a properly trained healer with a bag of herbal tinctures to attend them. The tossing of the ship and the close, dank air below deck did not help, but she had a group of eager lads to assist her and the old sea-cook Donald had many a country remedy up his sleeve which helped greatly, rather to her surprise. Just after dawn Bran's fever dropped a little and she slept more naturally, and Finn and Ashlin and Jay were at last able to curl up and sleep on the deck.

"We come close to the border with Arran," Arvin the Just told them the following afternoon. "Only a few more days' and we shall have reached Kirkinkell Firth, no' far from the village where your winged Rígh has made base camp."

"No' just our Rígh," Dide said sternly. "Lachlan MacCuinn is your Rígh now too, remember."

Arvin the Just sighed heavily. "Aye, happen that be true," he answered. "Times are changing and we with them."

Finn was just settling down to her breakfast the next day when she heard the lookout's cry. "Sails ahoy!"

Immediately the crew were all on their feet, leaning over the bulwark and examining the horizon anxiously. Finn once again climbed to the very top of the topgallant mast to borrow the farseeing glass from the lookout boy. When she saw the ship on the horizon, her breath caught. She could clearly see marked on its white sails and flags the device of a scarlet fitch cross. It was another Tirsoilleirean galleon.

The great ship gained on them rapidly, straining under full sail. The *Speedwell's* crew leapt to haul up the mizzensail but by mid-afternoon, the galleon was close behind. There was no sign of any damage so it was clear this was a ship that had not been caught in Bran's witch-storm.

The captain ordered the helmsmen to bring the *Speedwell* about.

"If we canna outrun them, we shall need to engage," he said grimly. "We shall see if we canna slip in close and hit them low with our own cannons."

"If only Bran was awake, he could conjure another storm to sweep it away," Finn lamented, staring down at the restless figure of her cousin, entangled in sweat-dampened

sheets.

"He'd kill himself if he did," Nellwyn said tersely. "Or send himself mad. He's untrained in the art o' sorcery and has exhausted himself dangerously with this storm-raising. It will be some months afore he will have strength to even light a candle."

"I do no' think he can light a candle," Finn replied with a grin.

"He conjured lightning, he can light a candle. Ye are no' a bairn anymore, lad, do no' act like one."

The Yedda looked more haggard than ever, the bones of her faces and hands pressing up against her grey-hued skin as if seeking to break through. The nursing of Bran and Killian had obviously exhausted her badly, and her hands trembled as she set a fresh poultice upon the bruised face of the sleeping prophet. There was fire in her voice, however, and Finn was given a glimpse of the strength of character that had kept the Yedda alive through her years of cruel imprisonment.

"I'm sorry," Finn said, chastened. "I do no' mean to. It is just my way. I joke when I am most worried."

Nellwyn stared at her grimly, then suddenly the thin line of her mouth softened into a smile. "Very well then. Be off with ye and get your work done. This cabin be small enough without a great, tall lad like ye taking up all the room. Your cousin will be just fine and the auld prophet too."

Finn opened her mouth to reply, thought better of it, and went back up on deck, catching up her crossbow as she went.

The galleon was closer than ever, the round black mouths of her cannons staring at them across the stretch of water. Finn ran to join Enit, Jay, Dillon and Dide in the bow. The old jongleur was sitting in her chair as usual, her twisted fingers gripping the wood. "What can we do?" Finn asked anxiously.

"If we were close enough, I could try and sing them all to sleep," Enit replied, "but then I'd sing all our own crew to sleep as well."

"Unless they blocked up their ears," Jay suggested.

"Then they could no' hear the captain's orders," Dide objected.

Enit made an impatient gesture. "It is o' no use anyway. They will sink us long afore we get close enough to sing the song o' sleep."

"They are more likely to try and board us," Dillon said. "We shall just have to fight them off." His fingers caressed his sword-hilt lovingly.

"Why?" Dide asked. "Why no' just bombard us with their cannon until we sink?"

"They could have done that afore," Dillon answered. "All the cannon shots were aimed at disabling us, no' sinking us. I would say they want to capture us alive."

"But why?" Finn asked.

Dillon shrugged. "To make an exhibition o' us. If the folk o' Bride watched us all burn, it would be a much sharper lesson than if they were simply told we had been caught and sunk. Nay, the Fealde would wish everyone to ken we died an agonising death. They would think less lightly o' rebelling against her rule that way."

It made horrid sense. Finn swallowed, feeling sick to her stomach, and saw both Dide and Jay were pale under their tans. They all looked up at the galleon, bearing down upon them on the starboard side. Suddenly the great ship's cannons boomed. Once again the cannonballs sliced through the sails and rigging, bringing the mizzen-yard smashing down upon the deck. The *Speedwell's* crew scrambled to clear the deck of the wreckage as the helmsman swung the great wheel so that the caravel turned broad on the port quarter. She slipped up close beside the galleon, so that its high poop deck cut out their sun. Then the captain gave his terse order, and the *Speedwell's* cannons were fired for the first time.

The noise was deafening, and it was hard to breathe with thick, black clouds of smoke choking the air. Again and again the *Speedwell* fired, her cannonballs hitting the galleon just above the water line. The galleon was unable to retaliate, since her cannons had a much longer range and were set so high above the *Speedwell's* deck. Her sailors were able to leap into the caravel's rigging though, firing down upon the crew with their heavy pistols or leaping down to engage in hand-to-hand combat. For a time all was confusion, with the smoke obscuring the combatants' vision so everyone was fighting blind. The caravel's cannons kept firing away, however, and the galleon began to take in water, causing her to begin to keel over.

Dillon had drawn his sword with a wild joyous yell and as the smoke drifted away, Finn could see him fighting off four Tirsoilleirean sailors, his teeth bared in a grin. Jed fought with him, the great dog leaping up to close his heavy jaws on one swordsman's arm so that Dillon could run him through or using his substantial weight to bear another to the ground before he could attack Dillon from behind.

So ferociously did Dillon fight that Finn was frozen for a moment in a sort of awe. He had no hesitation in using his fists and feet as well as his sword and Finn recognised some of Iseult's techniques in the way he somersaulted high into the air to land behind his attackers, or jabbed one in the throat with his elbow at the same time as he kicked another in the stomach. Iseult was trained in the art of the Scarred Warrior and most adept at hand-to-hand fighting, and had evidently passed on many of her secrets to the young squire. Dillon's sword was not still for a moment, and he often tossed it from one hand to the other, taking his attackers by surprise. All his movements were as swift and graceful as if he engaged in a dance, not a fight to the death, and he laughed as he fought.

Finn had no opportunity to watch for long, for more of the enemy were swarming down the ropes to land on the forecastle where she crouched by Enit's feet. Finn shot down two in quick succession, but they came faster than she could reload. Dide was fighting by her side, however, throwing his silver daggers with quick and deadly accuracy.

"Come about!" the captain roared. The *Speedwell* turned swiftly and slid away from the galleon, causing many of the enemy clinging to her rigging to fall screaming into the water or crash down upon the deck.

With Dillon fighting like a madman at their head, the *Speedwell's* crew slowly

overcame those of the enemy still on board. The Tirsoilleirean dead and wounded alike were thrown overboard as the caravel sought to put as much distance as possible between them and the crippled galleon. "Look, she's going down!" Tam shouted, pointing over the port bulwark. "We hit her where it really hurts!"

Finn turned and stared, amazed at how quickly the galleon was keeling over with all the weight of its sails and the huge carved poop and forecastle dragging it down. Suddenly the cannons on its near side fired again.

Finn screamed as the cannonballs tore their way into the *Speedwell's* hull, causing the ship to lurch and shudder. She was thrown down, a tangle of rope falling across her back and pinning her to the deck. She fought to free herself, sick with anxiety as she heard the moans of injured men. At last she could scramble free and looked about her. Once more the *Speedwell* was listing at an unnatural angle, the deck sloping sideways. Men everywhere were trying to get to their feet, cradling their heads or shoulders. Many lay unmoving.

Finn crawled up on to the forecastle, feeling her pulse hammer in her skull as she saw Enit's chair overturned. The old jongleur lay unconscious on the deck, the carved chair broken and half-covering her limp body. Finn turned her over and saw blood seeping from a bruised cut on Enit's temple.

"Abandon ship!" came the captain's stentorian roar. "She's going down!"

The crew hurried to unlash the boats. Ashlin came staggering up the ladder, Bran's drooping body in his arms, and tenderly laid her down in the little dinghy with Donald beside her to watch over her. Enit was laid out in the long boat, with Nellwyn tending her bleeding head, then Jay came running up from below with his precious viola, which he tucked in tenderly beside Enit's unconscious body. Donald was hard at work passing up sacks of grain and vegetables which were hastily stacked into the boats, then he clambered up the ladder with his arms full of a side of mutton, his wrinkled old face unusually grim.

"Can ye swim, lassie?" he asked Finn and she shook her head.

"Och, neither can I," he answered. "Happen ye'd best try and hang on to a plank o' wood then. Take off your boots and leave your bow and arrows. They'll only weigh ye down."

"Tuck them here in the boat," Nellwyn said. "By the looks o' those rocks, ye'll be wanting your boots."

Finn nodded and did as she said, then scooped up Goblin and dropped her into the long boat too. "She doesna like water," she said to Nellwyn rather pleadingly. "She be only a wee thing; she willna take up much room."

Nellwyn nodded and went to pat the frightened little cat, who hissed and struck out with her claws. Nellwyn snatched back her hand, then cast Finn an angry, embarrassed glance. Finn said, "I'm sorry. She is still an elven cat, ye see. Ye canna tame an elven cat."

"Happen I should've reminded your mother o' that," Donald said affectionately. "Come, Finn, jump in. Hang on to the back o' the long boat and ye should have no

trouble staying afloat."

Finn smiled at him, though her face was so stiff with fear it took a real effort to move her cheek muscles. She stood on the ship's deck and stared down at the wild waves tossing about below, throwing up spray and spume. Quite a few heads were already bobbing away down there, clutching broken planks and struggling to keep their heads above water.

There was a wrenching, groaning sound and the caravel suddenly lurched sideways. Everyone shouted.

Jay seized her hand. "Come on, Finn, jump!" he urged. "Else the ship'll take ye down with her."

Finn hung on to his hand and jumped when he did. They fell down and hit the water below with a great splash that knocked the breath out of her body. Deep into the water she plunged, then she felt the drag of Jay's hand as he kicked for the surface. Finn kicked too and at last her head broke through and she was able to gasp a breath of air.

Then another wave broke over her head and she sank again, choking on water. Jay dragged her up, putting his arm under her armpit. "Kick!" he ordered.

Desperately Finn obeyed. Occasionally she saw one of the boats rising up beyond the waves, or a glimpse of the sinking *Speedwell*, but otherwise the whole universe was heaving grey water, bitter as grief and cold as death. Then Jay found a plank and heaved her on to it, and she was able to rest for a moment as he clung to its edge. She put down her head and closed her eyes, and found she was choking now on tears instead of seawater. *I wish I had said goodbye to her, she thought. My poor mam!*

They drifted for a while, too exhausted to kick any longer. "Are we coming close to the shore?" Finn whispered, her throat raw from the salt.

Jay raised his head, wiping his salt-stung eyes with his hand. "I canna see," he answered. "I canna see anything."

Finn peered through the dusk but the waves all about were too high and wild for her to see anything but their white-veined grey backs, their curling white-maned crests. She sobbed aloud and Jay shifted his hand so it rested on her back. "Do no' weep, Finn," he whispered. "There be salt enough in this water. Try and rest. The current will take us to shore, never ye fear."

Finn sniffled and wiped her nose with her hand. Every now and again she hiccuped with tears again but otherwise they were quiet, clinging to the plank, as darkness fell about them.

Suddenly they heard a high-pitched whistling and then the smack of water as some great sea-creature leapt out of the water close to hand. Finn stifled a shriek. "Are . . . are there . . . sharks in this water?"

"Are they no' sharks everywhere?" Jay replied grimly. "I do no' ken, Finn. Crawl a wee bit higher on the plank, there's a dear." His face was a smudge of white in the dark. Finn obeyed, lying on the plank with nothing but her feet in the water. Jay had all of his body in the icy-cold water, only one arm hooked over the plank as he paddled with the

other. They heard the smack of water again.

"What about ye?" she whispered anxiously. "Jay, canna ye climb up too?"

"There be no' enough room," he answered. She could hear the strain in his voice. "Come, Finn, let's kick again."

She kicked as hard as she could, straining to see through the darkness. Again and again a wave surprised her with a shock of cold, filling her eyes and her mouth with water, and sending her pulse hammering. Then suddenly she felt something brush against her bare foot. She recoiled with a shriek, falling off the plank into the water. Jay called her name anxiously.

"Something touched me!" she gasped, grabbing hold of the plank again. "Something scaly! Oh, Jay, what if it be the harlequin-hydra?"

Right in their ears, they heard the whistling sound.

Jay raised himself up on his arms so he could hear more clearly. Then suddenly a long body thrust up through the waves, shining oddly in the darkness.

Finn leapt back, flailing her arms as the water closed over her head. Then strong arms seized her and lifted her up so she could breathe. Coughing and retching, Finn kicked out and the arms tightened, twisting her away. Finn felt silky scales against her skin and saw, frighteningly, a strange flat face with tusks curving up on either side. "It's a Fairge!" she cried hoarsely.

She stopped fighting, even though she was so frightened she thought her heart would pound right through her ribcage. She fully expected the Fairge to drag her down under the water and drown her, and there was not a thing she could do about it. This was the Fairge's natural element, and Finn was the alien here. In a way it was a relief, to know the fight was over and she could relax and let the sea swallow her. Fatalistically she lay back in the Fairge's arms and waited to drown.

The sea-faery held her securely, however. She could feel the powerful motion of his tail as he swam through the waves, his arms holding her high so that she could breathe easily. The two moons were rising, casting a silvery radiance over the sea. She could see the black mass of the cliffs ahead of them, and the white break in the waves at their feet. Again her body tensed with fear but the Fairge quickened his speed and she felt the power of the wave as it caught them and sped them towards the shore. Then she was being flung up on the shore. She landed with a thump that knocked all the breath out of her body. The sea tried to drag her back, but Finn grasped at the wet, slippery rocks, ignoring the pain of her bruised and cut limbs. Frantically she dragged herself higher, feeling the tug of the water as it swirled back into the sea. At last her legs were free of the water and sobbing, she glanced back. All she could see was the flash of a silver tail as the Fairge dived back into the moonlit waves.

The Skeleton Coast was a wild, inhospitable place. The cliffs reared several hundred feet from the sea, with nothing but sharp black rocks at their base. All along the coast crags of fantastic shape rose from the waves, some near as high as the cliffs themselves. The only sign of life was the sea birds, who screeched and fought and soared all about.

As the sun rose slowly out of the sea, giving the water a strange red shimmer, the

survivors of the shipwreck slowly gathered together on the shore. With their clothes torn and stained, their eyes red-rimmed and their faces bruised, they were a pitiful sight but, as they all agreed, miraculously alive. Thanks to the Fairgean, not one of the crew or passengers of the *Speedwell* had drowned. The sea-faeries had even saved Jed, Dillon's big shaggy hound.

Dide was able to light a fire for them, despite the dampness of the driftwood, and Donald cooked up a salty stew. Nellwyn the Yedda tended the worst of the injuries, as best as she could without any medicinal supplies and still so weak herself. She was astounded by the action of the Fairgean, having thought of them as implacable enemies all her life and having always used her magic to destroy them. She had heard about the jongleurs' singing the song of love and had thought it foolish, but was now quick to admit that perhaps she and the Coven had always been wrong.

"Who would've thought they would rescue drowning men," she said as she bandaged up cuts and splinted broken limbs. "I've never heard o' such a thing!"

Once all were warmed and fed, there was much discussion about what to do next. Although they were still alive, they had little food and even less fresh water. Many among them were incapable of walking, let alone climbing the great height of the cliffs. The Bright Soldiers would be searching for them and it surely would not take them long to find the floating wreckage of the *Speedwell*. It was clear that an expedition had to set off in search of help as soon as possible.

"Could ye climb these cliffs, Finn?" Dide asked.

She nodded and shrugged. "All my climbing equipment went down with the *Speedwell*, so it would no' be easy," she answered.

"There is naught but a few farms up top," Captain Tobias said. "And they be strict, dour people. I do no' think they would offer assistance willingly, no' even to help Killian the Listener."

The old prophet was sitting hunched by the fire, his spindly arms and legs clutched close to his body. His wrinkled face turned from one person to another as they spoke but he showed no sign of comprehension on his bruised face.

"I wish I kent exactly where we were on the coast," Alphonsus the Sure said. "The last time I marked our position on the map we were only two or three days sail east o' our meeting place with the MacCuinn. We had a fair wind and so had been managing a hundred and fifty or so miles a day. No' matter how swiftly any party travelled, they would still be on foot. We are talking about three weeks at least afore they reached the rendezvous point. Then the Rígh would need to travel back to reach us and that would be another week or two, even if they whipped the horses. No' even the strongest man among us could survive that long without food and water, let alone the auld man and woman."

There was a long silence. Everyone looked at the frail old prophet and then at Enit, who had regained consciousness but looked very sick and weak, with a great dark bruise discolouring one side of her face. All knew that she was crippled with arthritis and could not walk a step unaided. They then glanced around at the injured men lying uncomfortably on the sharp rocks and at the sea which surged and swirled a scant few

paces away.

"It's low tide now," Arvin the Just said dourly. "Soon the waves will be rising again. Tide nor time tarries for none."

"Och, he's such a joy to have along; he be like the honey bee and brings us naught but sweetness and light," Finn whispered to Ashlin, who choked trying to stifle his involuntary burst of laughter. Arvin turned his granite-hard countenance upon them in disapproval and both giggled again.

"Well, happen our first task should be to find a less exposed spot in which to make camp," Dide said, casting Finn an exasperated glance. "Happen there may be a cave or grotto somewhere along here where we may get some shelter both from the elements and from anyone searching for us."

"Excuse me, sir," Tam said rather hesitantly, "but there be some caves along here somewhere, I do ken that. I do no' think we'd want to be sheltering in them though."

"Och, that's right," Captain Tobias said. "Ye were born hereabouts somewhere, were ye no', young Tam?"

"Aye, sir."

"Do ye ken where we are?"

"Well, sir, if I be no' mistaken, those two tall rocks along there, sort o' leaning against each other, they be what folks round here used to call the Two Lovers."

"So do ye ken where these caves might be?"

"Aye, sir, but truly, if the tales be true, we do no' want to go into those caves. They say they be haunted, sir."

"Ye sound like a witch-lover, lad," Arvin the Just said sternly, "talking o' haunted caves. Do ye no' ken there are no ghosts?"

"So the pastor used to say, sir," Tam replied equably, "but he also used to say all witches were evil and ugly, and indeed sir, ye canna say that about young Bran, for she be a bonny lass indeed and sweet as a nut."

His words caused Dide, Jay and Finn to start upright and Finn said indignantly, "What do ye mean by calling him a lass, Tam?"

The young sailor grinned at her. "Do ye think I be blind and foolish as a newborn pup? I been working and eating and sleeping alongsides the lot o' ye for weeks on end now. I ken a lass when I see one, lass."

Finn flushed scarlet and Dide laughed and slapped Tam across the back. "Indeed, I always kent Bran would never pass off as a lad, no' with that skin and hair."

"Och, it were the figure I was noticing," Tam said with a grin, though he coloured up nearly as red as Finn.

"What about me?" Finn demanded. "How did ye guess I was no lad?"

"Och, lassie, your figure be no' so bad either," Tam replied. "Besides, I couldna help but notice how yon other lads were always looking out for ye two, and holding your hand when ye were afeared."

"I always said letting a passel o' women on board would do us no good," Arvin the Just said gloomily. "We were doomed afore we even set sail from safe harbour. 'All wickedness be but a wee to the wickedness o' woman.'"

"Och, what is done is done," Captain Tobias said. "Is it no' said that 'a cheerful heart is good medicine but a downcast spirit dries up the bones?' Please stop with your lamenting, Arvin, and let us think how to save our lives."

"We mun find these caves, and quickly," Dide said impatiently. "Already the waves are rising and we sit here and flap our jaws. We'll worry about the ghosts when we encounter one. Tam, ye mun lead the way. Come, let's get moving."

They struggled over the rocks with litters made of broken planks, carrying those who could not walk, as the wildly tossing waves splashed their faces with spray and made the rocks beneath their feet even more slippery. Finn walked at the head of the expedition with Jay and Tam, the elven cat riding on her shoulder. As she walked she often glanced up at the towering cliffs, searching for a place where a climb to the top could be accomplished more easily. Several times they had to wade through deep rock-pools or scramble over great boulders near as large as a cottage, and once a wave caught one of the sailors and swept him off the shore. They managed to pull him to safety but all were shaken by the close call, and hurried their step.

At last they came to a narrow crack in the rock where a shallow stream of water tumbled out over slime-green rocks and down into the sea. Donald tasted the water and then, with great excitement, pronounced it fresh. They all drank eagerly, and no water had ever tasted as sweet as that brackish liquid from the heart of the rock.

"How much further to these bluidy caves?" Nellwyn asked, easing her swollen feet in the cool water.

"We be here," Tam said. "That be the entrance. They call it Auld Cloutie's Cleft."

The Yedda looked at the crack with disfavour. "The cave canna be very large. Shall we all fit in?"

"The cave be huge," Tam said. "If the tales are true, it runs for miles and miles all along the coast and under the land. Some foolhardy lads tried to explore it with ropes and lanterns. They came out at Lucifer's Leap, sixty miles north-west o' here, those o' them that survived."

The Yedda withdrew her feet, dried them on her skirt and put her stockings and shoes on again. "Well, I be no' afraid o' ghosts," she said calmly. "Ghosts are naught but a psychic memory o' some powerful emotional energy. They canna hurt ye unless ye let them and most can be banished by filling a place with laughter and goodwill. I swear if I can find a place to rest my weary bones I'll be generating enough goodwill to banish a thousand ghosts, no matter how malevolent."

Tam looked at the crack with disfavour. "Well, so long as we do no' go too far in," he said and helped one of his fellow sailors to heft up a litter.

Dide went first so he could conjure some fire to light their way. When he squeezed through the high, narrow crack, he gave a low whistle of amazement as he held up the ball of witch-light. Finn pushed her way to the front of the queue, her hazel green eyes alight with curiosity. As she clambered through, she too let out a little gasp.

The cave beyond was enormous. Dide's ball of silvery blue light was barely able to illuminate the furthest reaches. It was far larger than the great banquet room at Rhyssmadill, larger than any hall Finn had ever seen. Down its centre wound the little shallow stream, forming little pools here and there that glimmered blackly.

By the time all had clambered in, Dide had lit another fire, using dried seaweed and driftwood they had gathered along the way as kindling. They ate a sparse meal, and Donald tied hooks onto fishing lines in the hope they would be able to catch some fish off the rocks.

"And I warrant those screeching sea birds wouldna taste so bad roasted over a slow fire," he said with a grin. "Lucky I made sure my bow and arrow were tucked into the long boat."

After lunch they made further plans for an expedition to go in search of Lachlan and the Greycloaks. Now they had shelter and fresh water, everyone's hopes had risen that they might still be able to get out of the shipwreck alive. It was decided that Dide should be the leader of the expedition, with Tam as their guide. Otherwise the exploratory party would include Dillon and his dog Jed, Finn, Jay, Ashlin, and a squad of sailors. They were to take with them most of the rope, the compass, and as much food and water as they could carry. Those left behind in the big cave would be able to hunt and fish to supplement their diet but it was unlikely that those exploring the caves would be able to do so.

The afternoon was spent resting, making torches from driftwood, torn material and lamp oil, and making up packs of supplies. At last all was ready, and the party set off with much false cheer and optimism.

They followed the stream, that being as good a place to start as any. Deep into the cliffs they clambered, sometimes having to scale high rocks where the water tumbled down in a little cascade. The roof continued lofty and elevated so they had no need to bend or crawl, which made their passage easier.

They rested often but never for long, very conscious of the need to make haste. The compass was rarely out of Tam's hand and many times he paused to try and judge where they were in relation to the geography above ground. They had no way of telling the passage of time so far underground, and this only increased their anxiety. Soon it felt as if they had been clambering through the cave system for days on end and all grew impatient to breathe fresh air again and feel the sun on their skin.

The walls began to narrow dramatically, and the ceiling closed down upon them so they were climbing a steep, stony passageway, the rocks all slippery with moss. Soon they had to crawl and all were unable to resist feeling rising panic. When they were having actually to slide forward on their elbows through the icy cold stream, many began to suggest it was time to turn back.

"Are ye sure this is the way the men ye kent came?" Dide asked Tam and the young

sailor nodded, his face white under all the mud. Dide instructed the majority of the party to wait where there was room for them all to sit and he crawled on alone.

It was not long before he was calling to them all to follow and rather reluctantly they shouldered their packs and again began to creep up the low passageway. It was difficult to keep the torches dry and so they were doused, leaving only Dide's flickering blue light to see by.

They clambered out through a small damp hole into another cavern, all wet through and shivering with cold. They huddled together under their few damp blankets and at last fell into an uncomfortable sleep.

Dillon was the first to wake and he roused the others roughly. Dide summoned fire to light the torches, which had been laid out to dry on the stone. To their horror, one of the sailors, a sturdy man named Jack, could not be woken. He was dead, his flesh white and slack and cold as ice. Examining him under the fitful light of the torches, they found three dark puncture holes up near his ear.

"This happened to some o' the men I kent," Tam said rather shakily. "There be a big black bug that lives in these caves and feeds on warm blood. They say its drool stops ye from feeling pain so ye do no' even ken ye've been bitten, and if it spits at ye and it gets in your eyes, ye'll lose your sight. They call it the assassin bug."

There was much angry muttering among the men, and Dide said rather sharply, "I wish ye'd mentioned this bug afore, Tam."

"I was only a laddiekin when they tried to explore the caves," Tam said defensively. "I did no' remember till now."

"Is there anything else ye do no' remember?"

"How am I meant to ken until I do remember?" the young sailor retorted.

They divided Jack's pack up amongst the rest of the party and hurried on, unwilling to break their fast with the dead man lying there beside them. They ate later, all keeping a close eye out for bugs.

They were now in a system of small caves all connected by short passageways. Many times they could have left the stream to explore up a side passage but all were unwilling to leave their only link to the outside world, even though it meant they were not ever able to fully dry off. After several days of constantly wet feet, some of the men were finding big blisters forming on their skin where their boots chafed but they bound them up as best they could and stumbled on. Jed the dog whined miserably, his black-patched white fur stiff with mud, his tail slunk down between his legs.

They came to a tall natural archway and paused to thrust their torches in, wrinkling their noses at the odd smell. There was a sudden high shrill shrieking, a strange leathery rustling noise, then they were all plunged into darkness. A few of the men cried aloud in alarm and all leapt back. The rustling noise slowly died away and then there was silence, a heavy, humid, ominous silence. Dide lit his torch again and slowly, cautiously, peered within the chamber.

"Bats!" he cried. "Look, thousands o' them."

As he stepped forward into the chamber, the bats once again took flight, shrieking in dismay. Dide's torch was again snuffed out but he brought witch-light to life in his palm and raised his hand high. All the others could see was the blaze of roiling blue-white energy, the shadow of his arm and body, and thousands of tiny black shapes with sharply serrated, outspread wings darting all about him.

"Come in," Dide whispered, "but tread carefully. The floor is all mucky." They obeyed, tiptoeing through the pools of bat guano that covered the floor. "The stream leads upward again," Dide whispered. "Do no' fear, bats willna hurt ye. I will light the torches again once we are free o' their home."

Gingerly they clambered up the rocky stairs at the far end of the cavern. Occasionally one of them uttered a low but heartfelt curse as they put their hand in something soft and squishy.

Beyond was another sequence of small caves, also occupied by bats. They filed through them slowly and cautiously, following the stream as it tumbled down over slippery grey rocks. At last they came out into another great cavern, almost as big as the cave by the sea. All cried aloud in joy, for far above their heads they could see a circle of dark blue light that twinkled with stars. The stream poured down over the lip of the hole in thin ribbons of water that gleamed with starlight.

"I ken where we are!" Tarn cried in amazement. "This be Hell's Gate. We have come an awful long way, near sixty miles by my reckoning. Hell's Gate be up near Lucifer's Leap. They say that on certain nights o' the year the demons o' the Archfiend escape from hell through this hole and fly about the sky all night, seeking the weak and sinful to tempt them from the way o' the Lord. They say their wings blacken the moons, there be so many o' them. I remember as a lad my brother once dared me to throw stones down the hole to see if we could awaken a demon, and a whole flock o' bats came shrieking out. We dinna stop running until we reached home."

"Well, we canna do much about getting out until dawn," Dide said when he stopped laughing. "Let's grab some sleep and we'll see if our wee cat can climb out when there's some light to see."

They slept more comfortably than they had since the *Speedwell* had been sunk, despite the dampness and hardness of the stones, sure they were close to getting out of the caves at last. They would then beg, borrow or steal some horses and ride as fast as they could for Kirinkell and the Righ's army, and all would be saved.

The dawn brought a brutal end to their hopeful imaginings. They all stood and stared up at the circle of blue so far above them and raged in despair. It was clear to all of them that no-one without wings could get up to that small hole into the open air. The walls were more than a hundred feet high, sheer as glass and slick with spray. They curved in sharply to the roof, so that any climber would have to crawl twenty feet or more whilst hanging upside down from the ceiling.

"I might have been able to do it if I had my climbing equipment," Finn raged. "Why, oh, why, did I no' think to make sure it was thrown in to the boat with my other stuff?"

"How were ye meant to ken?" Dide said wearily.

"I saw the cliffs from the boat," Finn cried. "I should've kent I would have to climb at

some point. Now it's all at the bottom o' the sea, all my rope and tackle and my spikes and hammer. Och, how could I be such a porridge-head?"

"No use fraitching," Jay said, though his voice was heavy with disappointment. "Those other explorers could no' have got out this way either, yet Tam said they got out somewhere near here. There mun be some other way."

Unhappily they shouldered their packs once more and retraced their steps, groaning aloud as the soft natural light once more gave way to darkness and the close, fetid air of the caves.

They reached the cavern of the bats and made their way through another high stone archway they had not explored before, carefully piling a small pyramid of stones by its entrance so they would know where they had been.

They heard a soft rustling sound, a gentle murmur like the wind through a forest in autumn. In the flickering light of the torches they looked at each other in mingled hope and fear.

"It could just be more bats," Ashlin said.

Dide nodded. "Aye, I'd say it's just bats."

They walked on, pressing close together in their eagerness. The roof began to slope upwards and then they stepped out into yet another wide cavern, raising their torches high to try and pierce the darkness.

There was a rush of sound and motion, a black whirlwind of shadows that blew their hair into their eyes and snuffed out the torches. They huddled together as Dide tried without success to re-light the brands, each spark he conjured just sinking away into nothingness. He gave up with an impatient oath, cupping his hands and bringing witch-light springing up in his palms.

Finn screamed. Hovering all about were tall dark figures, thin as twigs, with huge batlike wings, staring down at them with great, slanted eyes that shone with a peculiar blue light. The sailors fell down on their knees with strangled cries, muttering garbled prayers, holding their crossed fingers before them in the age-old sign against evil. There was an angry murmur from the shadowy figures and they closed in, lifting their long, bent fingers as if to seize them.

Startled, Dide let the witch-light die. As darkness plunged down upon them once more, many among the little party cried aloud to their god and wept for mercy. There was the sound of swords and daggers being drawn and Dide once more conjured light, crying, "Back to back, lads!"

Alone among all the men, Dillon had not drawn his sword. He was staring at the tall, shadowy figures with joy and amazement on his face. As Dide raised his dagger to throw, Dillon cried, "Nay, nay, drop your arms! They be nyx. Do no' harm them! They be nyx!"

For a moment Dide was frozen in astonishment, then he seized the arms of the men closest to him, forcing them to lower their daggers. Dillon did the same and after a moment Finn joined them, though the men were filled with superstitious fear and horror.

"They be demons," one cried.

"The Archfiend's minions," shouted another. "Look at their black wings and evil eyes."

"Nay, nay, they be nyx," Dillon repeated. "Faeries o' the night. They are our allies; one o' their kind signed the Pact o' Peace. Ye must no' harm them."

As the men lowered their weapons, the nyx stirred and rustled, drifting away from the little group of humans. They muttered among themselves in their own strange language, then one drifted down and stood before them.

He was tall, almost twice as tall as Finn, and his leathery wings covered his body like a cloak. His black hair hung all down his back in wild elf locks, matted with leaves and twigs. His dark face was long and narrow, and dominated by his enormous slanted eyes. Although they were black as ink, his eyes shone with an unearthly blue light like those of the elven cat perched on Finn's shoulder.

"Who are you, that you know the nyx?" the faery asked. Although he spoke their language, they had trouble understanding him for he spoke in such a low, hoarse voice and with such a strong accent.

"They call me Dillon o' the Joyous Sword. I ken one o' your kind, an auld nyx they call Ceit Anna. She lives in the caves under Lucescere."

The nyx muttered together. "We had thought that there were no other nyx left living," the faery said. "It is glad news that you bring us, even though you come with flame in your hands."

"Please forgive us," Dillon said. "We mean ye no harm. We would never have brought light into your caves if we had kent ye were here. We do no' wish to destroy ye."

Again there was a murmuring like dry leaves blown in the wind. The nyx were slowly circling around them, like the smoke of candle flames, wavering and flowing all about them. The men shifted uneasily and some closed their grip tighter upon the hilts of their weapons.

"Are ye no' of human blood?" the nyx asked bitterly. "Those of your kind hate and fear those of our kind. For centuries we the nyx have been hunted, tormented, subjected to the light so that we dissolve. You come with flame in your hands and fear and hate in your hearts, we can feel it. And one among you carries an evil thing, a thing woven of the hair of dead nyx, woven in terror and loathing."

The muttering rose, the drifting, circling motion quickened, the queer slanted eyes of the nyx all shining malevolently. Finn suddenly swallowed, sliding her hand within her pocket to feel the cold silk of the magical cloak within her pocket. The eyes of the nyx followed her movement.

"Aye, you stroke that dead thing, that evil thing, you stroke it with longing," he hissed. "Do you think to slide it about you and disappear? You shall not disappear from our eyes. I warn you, black-hearted human."

Dide and Dillon were frowning in puzzlement, looking about them at the others and

shrugging in confusion. Finn stepped back and felt Jay's eyes fly to her face.

"I did no' ken it was made o' nyx hair." Her voice came out in a childish squeak. "I promise ye, I did no' ken."

The nyx laughed, a strange dry sound. They drifted closer, their great black wings extended, their long, spindly arms stretching out as if to strangle them all. The men huddled even closer together, daggers falling from nerveless fingers.

"Finn?" Dide asked.

"I swear I did no' ken," Finn repeated. She took the cloak out of her pocket, clutching it to her breast. Folded up, it was no larger than a handkerchief.

"The cloak o' invisibility!" Jay cried.

"So that is how ye hid the prisoners!" Dide cried. Finn lifted her chin defiantly. "But how? It went missing after the Samhab rebellion. Did ye take it?" Dide searched her face. "Did ye no' ken the Keybearer was anxious indeed about it? They searched for it everywhere . . ." He paused momentarily then said with a slight hardening of his voice. "Ye must've kent. They asked your *dai-dein* to locate it. He said he could feel it nearby."

"And nearby it was," Finn replied cheekily. The colour rose in her cheeks.

Dide was white with anger. "Why did ye no' tell us? So what was why ye insisted on going into the Black Tower alone. And we were sick with worry over ye! Ye could have told us."

Her eyes fell again. "I be sorry," she said contritely. "I do no' ken why I did no'. Somehow I could no' talk about it with anyone."

"It is an evil thing," the nyx said hoarsely. "It is made of dead hair, murdered hair. It was woven with dread and hatred. It wraps the wearer in darkness, coldness. It makes them care for naught."

"Aye," Finn said thoughtfully. "That is true. It makes ye cold." She gave a little shudder and suddenly held the little bundle of silk away from her.

"You must unravel it," the nyx said.

Involuntarily she clutched it to her again. "I canna."

"You must."

"I willna!"

"You must, else we shall unravel it for you. But I warn you, with its unravelling so too shall you unravel."

The nyx were now so close their dry papery skin and leathery wings were brushing against them all, causing everyone to shrink closer together. The dark-winged faeries were never still for a moment, lifting, drifting, hovering, encircling, rustling, muttering. Finn stared at them defiantly, the cloak clutched to her heart.

"If you do not unravel it yourself," the nyx whispered hoarsely, "you shall die. For it is

now your shadow."

"Your shadow, your shadow," the others whispered, their wings rustling.

"Destroy it, Finn!" Jay cried.

"Ye must destroy it," Dide echoed.

"Finn, ye must do as the nyx says!" Dillon ordered sharply.

She stared round at them with greatly dilated eyes, her breast rising and falling rapidly. Mutely she shook her head.

Then the tiny black elven cat reached down from Finn's shoulder and caught a corner of the bundle in her sharp claws. She leapt away, the material shredding with a loud tearing noise. Finn cried aloud as if she had been hurt herself. She fell to her knees, cradling the cloak against her. It had billowed out like a living shadow, and where it brushed against her, all her skin twitched and stung. The nyx bent over her, cutting her off from the others, their great wings surrounding her with darkness.

"Your shadow, your shadow," they whispered.

Finn closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and felt delicately all over the cloak with the tips of her fingers. She found the gash where Goblin's claws had caught. With a sharp cry, she inserted her fingers into the break and tore the material apart. It felt like something inside her was tearing apart, but she did not stop, tearing and tearing until the cloak was mere scraps of black silk. The nyx stepped back. As the blue witch-light fell upon the scraps, the threads began to dissolve until nothing was left but a fine black dust that swirled up in the wind of the nyx's wings and was gone.

Finn covered her face with her hands and wept.

Although she could hear the others talking above her head and the low, hoarse voices of the nyx replying, Finn could make no sense of what anyone said. She was cold, cold and lost, wandering in a strange cold land of shadows and phantoms. Suddenly she felt something warm and silky touch her hand. She recoiled. The warm, soft silk brushed her hand again, as the little elven cat crept into her lap, rubbing her head and back against Finn's wet face, licking her with a tongue as rough as sandpaper, purring lovingly. Finn gathered her warm, soft body close, drying her tears on Goblin's soft fur.

After a moment she stood up, finding it hard to meet anyone's gaze. The others bent close, however, peering into her face, asking after her anxiously.

"I be grand," she said abruptly.

"Grand as a goat's turd stuck with buttercups?" Jay asked with a grin and she tried to smile back, though she felt as thin and empty as a bellfruit seed.

"It takes much strength to unravel one's own shadow," the nyx said, bending over her and staring into her eyes with his own great, dark, slanted eyes. Finn stared back and felt something of the coldness within her ease. "The souls of those murdered nyx are now free, part of the night once more. We of the nyx thank you."

Finn nodded, cuddling Goblin close under her chin.

"We wish to thank you and return the act of kindness," the nyx said, while his companions murmured and rustled all about. "What is it that we can do for you?"

Finn raised her head. "We need to get out o' here," she said pleadingly. "I canna stand the dark anymore. We need to get out."

"We can carry you out," the nyx answered. "That is a task of no hardship. We often fly out the sky-crack to walk the night and fly the wind."

"We are in desperate need o' reaching our friends. They are somewhere to the south-west o' here, several weeks walking," Finn said. "Can ye possibly carry us so far?"

The nyx murmured together, bending close together and swaying away.

"We will carry you, unraveller of the cloak of darkness," he replied after a long time. "We are filled with joy to know that another of our kind lives and filled with joy that the souls of the murdered nyx are at last part of the night once more. We will fly the night to rejoice and you shall fly with us, unraveller."

That evening, when the sun had set and Hell's Gate was once again twinkling with stars, the nyx carried Finn up and out of the caves in an explosion of midnight-black wings, shining eyes and wild, streaming hair. The others were left staring in awe and envy, before turning to crawl back through the caves on their own mundane elbows and knees.

Below Finn the rolling hills and forests were all dark, only the occasional burn or loch reflecting back the silvery radiance of the moons. The sky however shone darkly, burning with a thousand far-distant suns. The wind was in her eyes, in her mouth, in her hair. All about was the susurration of the nyx's wings, dark and angular against the round moons, and the sound of their joyous singing. Finn flung wide her arms, unafraid, letting the night and the song pour through her, erasing the last of her grief and regret and rage. All night they flew and when the first silvery gleam of the dawn began to show above the curving line of the horizon, they circled down and down until Finn could see below them a thousand red gleams, like the scattered coals of a fire. Down, down, they flew until Finn could see it was not one scattered fire, but a thousand fires, burning amidst orderly circles and rows of tents and wagons and pickets of sleeping horses. Further down they flew, until the great burning arch of sky was no longer all their world, but a mere curve above them. Finn could hear the sounds of the sleeping camp, muffled snores and snorts and the occasional clink of metal.

"We can fly no lower," the nyx whispered in her ear. "Else we shall dissolve in the light o' those red flames. I shall weave ye a rope o' my hair and lower you down. Do you trust me?"

"With my life," Finn answered, her voice thrilling with emotion. The nyx hovered there in the darkness, his hands playing with his hair. Slowly, slowly, it spun itself into an impossibly long rope that dangled down, its end too far away to see.

"I thank ye," Finn whispered.

"We, the nyx, thank you," he answered and gave the rope into her hand. Swiftly Finn slid down it, her eyes straining up through the darkness for a last glimpse of the faeries of

the night. All she saw was darting, swirling shadows, too swift for the eye to follow. Then her foot touched the ground. The rope suddenly went limp and tumbled down about her. Finn stared up into the starry sky and suddenly saw the shape of many serrated wings against the moon, darkening its light. Then Gladrielle shone brightly once more.

To The Rescue

The soldier standing guard outside the royal pavilion suddenly tensed, bringing his spear forward defensively. Out of the shadows stepped a thin, exceedingly dirty boy, dressed in rough, tattered clothes. He stepped into the smoky light of the torches with great confidence, saying, "I need to see the Rígh!"

"Where the hell did ye spring from, haggerty-tagerty? What do ye do here?"

"I'm here to see the Rígh," the boy repeated impatiently. "It's important. Take me to see him right now!"

"Ye mun be joking! As if I'm going to take a beggar-lad to see His Highness! How did ye get here? What do ye want?"

"I do no' see that is any concern o' yours, frog-face! Take me to the Rígh now, else ye'll be exceedingly sorry."

"Is that so? It's the sergeant on duty I'll be taking ye to see and I'll wager a week's grog he'll flay the skin from your backside afore he boots ye out o' camp."

"Porridge-head," the boy replied scornfully.

The guard made a lunge for the beggar-lad who avoided his grasp nimbly, leaping over the tent-rope and disappearing again into the darkness. The guard broke into a run but tripped over the rope, falling hard on his face. When he at last untangled himself and got to his feet, there was no sign of the dirty little beggar-lad. Angrily the sentry shouted the alarm.

In the royal pavilion, Lachlan and Iseult were looking over the maps with Duncan Ironfist and Leonard the Canny, a Tirsoilleirean soldier who had surrendered to Lachlan during the Bright Wars. He had since been appointed seanalair to Elfrida NicHilde's small army, due to his undeniable fighting prowess and tactical brilliance. Lachlan and Iseult both hoped that his knowledge of the terrain and the Bright Soldiers' fighting methods would help swing the war their way.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man with grizzled brown hair cut very close to the scalp, an aquiline nose and a clean-shaven chin. His silver armour was polished to a high gleam, and he wore a long red cloak with a black gauntleted hand holding aloft a golden sword. Above the sword unrolled a ribbon with the MacHilde's motto upon it, *Bo Neart Gu Neart*, which meant "From Strength to Strength."

There could have been no greater contrast to Leonard the Canny than Lachlan's seanalair, Duncan Ironnst. Dressed in a faded blue kilt under a battered leather breastplate, Duncan's bushy black beard flowed down over his enormous barrel chest.

His square face was much weathered, with a shapeless nose, a thick knotted scar that showed white against his tan, and rather battered-looking ears. On his back he carried an enormous black claymore.

After an initial distrust and coolness, the two seana-lairs had grown to respect each other, though Duncan would always think the Tirsoilleirean a cold fish and Leonard would always think of Duncan as a very rough sort of fellow.

At the growing commotion outside, Duncan raised one thick black eyebrow and put his head outside the tent flap. "What be all the ruckus?" he demanded.

"Saw a beggar-lad sneaking around, sir; tried to catch him but he 'twas slippery as an eel and got away," the soldier reported breathlessly. "The sergeant wants to make sure he's caught and put under lock and key, sir."

"Och, well, try and keep it down, lad," Duncan replied and drew his head back through the tent-flap to report to Lachlan.

Lachlan was not interested in beggar-boys. He was tired and stiff after a hard day's riding and wanted to have the next day's progress plotted out before he went to bed. At Duncan's explanation he merely nodded and then repeated his last question to Leonard, who did his best to answer.

At last all the logistics were fully worked out and the seanalairs could pass on their orders to their officers and seek their own beds. They wished the Rígh and Banrígh good night and went out into the night, securing the tent flaps behind them. Iseult sat down on the pallet bed, undoing her boots thankfully.

"We've made quick progress so far," she said. "Only a few minor skirmishes, naught at all to bother us. Happen we've managed to take the Fealde by surprise at last."

"Och, I doubt it," Lachlan answered. "I'd wager the Fealde is preparing an ambush o' sorts. We must ride up through a narrow pass a week hence. That would be a good place for it. Or happen she's moving her army round behind us by ship, planning to attack us from the rear. My scouts say there's been a grand fleet o' galleons sailing offshore the past week or so."

He sat beside Iseult on the bed, so she could unlace the back of his breastplate. All of Lachlan's clothes and armour had to be made to accommodate his magnificent black wings, making it rather difficult for him to dress or undress without assistance. He had long ago got used to it and no longer found it humiliating to ask for help. Normally his squire would have assisted, but Lachlan had sent the boy to bed long ago and so the task fell to Iseult.

Suddenly she glanced up, her hands stilling.

"What is it?" Lachlan asked.

"I heard . . . nay, it must have been naught. A leaf scratching against the side o' the tent." She helped him take off his armour and hung it on a stand against the wall, then Lachlan unbuckled the belt from his kilt so the great length of plaid could be folded and laid ready for the morning. He yawned and stretched and lay down on the pallet, saying sleepily, "Come to bed, *leannan*."

Iseult was turning down the flame in the lantern when she suddenly heard a slight scuffle to one side. She turned swiftly, the eight-sided *reil* flying to her hand from her weapons belt which hung over a chair. Then she strode forward, reaching down one hand and dragging out a small figure from the shadows. Fiercely she held a glittering blade to the intruder's throat.

"What do ye do here?" she cried. "How dare ye sneak into the royal tent." She shook the figure roughly.

"There's no need to be so rough," the beggar-lad said plaintively. At the sound of the voice, Iseult let the *reil* drop and dragged the figure closer to the lantern. "Finn!" she cried. "By the gods! What do ye here?"

"I've come to make my report," Finn replied, still in that plaintive tone of voice. "I would've been here sooner but your block-headed guard wouldna let me in."

"How did you get in here?" Iseult demanded.

Finn grinned. "Slit the side o' the tent."

"With none seeing ye or hearing ye?" Lachlan was incredulous.

"Och, I am the Cat," Finn replied with a touch of hauteur. "They couldna hear me if I dinna wish them to."

"And ye made your way here to the very centre o' the camp with none o' the sentries sighting ye?" Incredulity was giving way to anger.

"Well, I am the best," Finn replied complacently.

"Someone will hang for this," Lachlan said ominously. "What if ye had been an assassin in the pay o' the Fealde?"

Finn was anxious. "Och, do no' be angry, Lachlan, I mean, your Highness. Indeed, they couldna have seen me. I was dropped right in the very centre o' camp and unless they'd been looking up, they couldna have seen me. Do no' be hanging anyone for it!"

"My sentries should be looking up, down and all around," Lachlan snapped.

"What do ye mean, ye were *dropped*?" Iseult asked.

"The nyx carried me here." Finn was enjoying herself. "I flew through the night with them. I wager no-one's done that afore!"

"The nyx!" Lachlan exclaimed. "What do ye mean? The nyx are all gone, all except that auld one that lives in the caves under Lucescere."

"Nay, they are no'," Finn replied. "There are more, hundreds o' them. We found them when we were trying to escape the caves."

"If this is your idea o' making a report, Fionnghal NicRuraich, ye'll never make a soldier. In the name o' the Centaur and his Beard, tell us what ye do here! Where is Dide and Enit? Are they safe? Was your mission successful? Did ye free the earless prophet?"

Finn stood straight and saluted smartly. "Finn the Cat, sir, here to make her report.

Mission successful, prophet removed from Black Tower along with a Yedda and the lost crew of the *Sea-Eagle*. However, the *Speedwell* was lost at sea due to enemy fire, crew all safe thanks to rescue operation by Fairgean, hiding in caves but very short on supplies, need to be rescued as soon as possible, sir!"

For a moment there was a flabbergasted silence and then Lachlan said rather faintly, "Thank ye, Finn, everything is perfectly clear now."

The full telling of her tale took a very long time, for Iseult and Lachlan wanted to hear every detail of her amazing journey. They were particularly astounded by the rescue of the *Speedwells* crew by the Fairgean.

"It scarce seems possible," Lachlan said wonderingly. "Who has ever heard o' a Fairge saving a drowning sailor? Usually they're the ones drowning them!"

"It was the song o' love," Finn replied with conviction. "They had to be the same ones that heard Enit sing! I tell ye, 'twas amazing, that song. It made me wish ..."

"What?"

Finn shrugged. "I canna describe it. All I ken is I felt that my heart was big enough to love the whole world and that by loving it, I could save it. We all felt the same, all o' us."

"Imagine the possibilities," Lachlan cried, his golden eyes glowing with fervour. "If we could sing the Fairgean to love and peace ..."

"Aye, all hundred thousand o' them," Iseult said drily. "Ensorcelled by a singer, a guitarist and a fiddler. That'd be a miracle indeed."

"Ashlin played too," Finn said in defense of her piper.

"And others could be taught. Ye ken *I* can sing the song o' love, *leannan*," Lachlan said with a seductive rasp in his voice.

Iseult returned his gaze steadily. "Aye, but I was receptive indeed to the hearing o' it. Ye ken even better than I that the songs o' enchantment can only cast their spell when the listener hears with their heart as well as their ears. These Fairgean, they must have wanted to hear, they must have wanted peace and friendship, for the spell to have worked so powerfully."

"It worked on me and Bran, and I certainly never wanted to be friends with her nor her with me," Finn said.

"Ye never hated your cousin, Finn, do no' tell me ye did," Lachlan cried. "The soft-hearted wee thing that ye are? Nay, ye were just like cats, hissing and showing your claws and defending your territory. Ye would've become friends without the song o' love."

"Maybe," Finn replied, her colour rising. "Though it was more than that. I dinna like anyone back then. It was the cloak o' invisibility. It made me cold and sort o' . . . detached, like I dinna care for aught at all."

So at last Finn had to confess her theft of the cloak of invisibility and how it had been unravelled in the cave of the nyx, who had then flown with her through the night to find the Rígh's army. Again Lachlan and Iseult exclaimed and asked questions and demanded explanations until Finn was swaying on her feet with exhaustion. It was then that Lachlan cried, "Enough, my wee cat! Tell us the rest in the morn. Ye look as white as whey. Get ye to bed!"

He called for his squire, a tall, sturdy boy with a mop of corn-yellow curls. His face was vaguely familiar but it was not until he spoke that Finn recognised him as Connor, who had been the youngest of the League of the Healing Hand. Last time Finn had seen him he had been a little boy of only six, whom Dillon had carried on his shoulders. Now he was twelve and dressed in the blue kilt and cloak of the Rígh's personal bodyguard, the charging stag badge worn proudly on his breast.

Finn exclaimed with surprised pleasure and embraced him, but Connor wriggled out of her grasp and stood to attention, asking formally what orders his Highness had for him.

"As ye can see, the League of the Healing Hand still serves me loyally," Lachlan said with a smile. "When Dillon set sail with ye and Dide, I temporarily promoted Connor from pageboy to squire, and indeed he serves me well."

"I canna believe how tall he has grown," Finn answered. Then she cried in excitement, "Are Johanna and Tomas here too? Oh, glory be! We'll have a grand reunion o' the League."

"Aye, Johanna is one o' our most promising healers," Iseult said. "And o' course Tomas is here; we couldna ride to war without him."

"Has he grown as tall and strong as ye?" Finn asked Connor with a grin.

Connor looked sombre. "Nay," he answered. "Tomas is still a poor wee thing, weak as a wisp. Jo says he gives all his strength to the healing and none to growing, poor laddiekin."

Finn looked troubled. "It'll be good to see him again though, and Jo too," she answered. "It has been such a long time."

Connor nodded. "Och, aye, that it has. Can I be doing aught else for ye, my laird?"

"Nay, Connor, get ye back to bed and take the Cat to hers. Every time she yawns I yawn too, and my jaw will crack with the strain soon. Finn, we'll see ye in the morning. Johanna will take good care o' ye!"

Finn nodded, yawning again and rubbing her scratchy eyes. Then she asked, rather hesitantly, "Lachlan, I mean your Highness . . . have ye any news o' Rurach?"

Lachlan and Iseult exchanged glances, then the Rígh said cheerfully, "I must admit we wondered why ye'd never asked. Finn, all is well. Your father was able to drive off the Fairgean at last, and they retreated back into the sea as we hoped. Unfortunately, most o' the ships we sent west were attacked by pirates and their cargo lost, but we sent wagonloads o' supplies and medicines to help and the last we heard the riots had stopped and they had managed to get the plague o' disease under control."

"And my mam?" Finn asked in a small voice. "Has she . . . did she . . . ask for news o' me?"

"Indeed she did," Iseult said warmly. "We were able to tell her that we'd seen ye at Midsummer and that ye were looking hale indeed. And now that we have seen ye again and ken that ye are safe, we shall send a homing pigeon to Lucescere with messages for her. They'll make sure she hears ye are safe."

Finn thanked her with a lighter feeling around her heart than she had had in months. She bowed and said goodnight, and followed Connor through the dark quiet camp to a large tent some distance away. There the young squire gave her some lukewarm stew to eat, surprisingly delicious despite its tepidity, and unrolled a thin pallet for her to sleep on, finding room for her among the many sleeping bodies who sighed and snored all round her. Finn pulled the rough woollen blanket over her head with a sigh of relief and fell at once into sleep, more comfortable than she had been in months.

When she woke it was morning. Sunlight struck through the open flaps of the tent, warming her toes. Goblin slept on her neck as usual, almost choking Finn with thick black fur. She lifted the elven cat away and repositioned her in the crook of her arm. For a while she lay still, listening to the bustle of the camp about her. She could hear heavy wagons trundling over rough ground, the neigh of horses and clink of bridles, the bleat of chickens and the occasional soft *maaa* of a goat. Men shouted and swore, and there was the occasional higher pitch of a woman's voice.

The tent was now empty. The pallets were all rolled and stacked against one wall, beside six small brown chests. Arranged neatly on top of the chests were a number of small haversacks, each with a blanket rolled up and strapped on top. Already the grass was springing up from where it had been flattened by the weight of sleeping bodies. Only Finn's pallet remained where it had been unrolled. She could not help marvelling that she had slept through everyone else's waking and packing up, and thought they must have all been very quiet and deft.

Just then a woman bent and looked through the tent flap. "Och, ye're awake at last! I was beginning to think I'd have to roll ye up in your pallet and load ye on the wagon still fast asleep," she said with a warm inflection of humour in her voice.

"Jo!" Finn cried, and leapt to her feet. "Hell's bells, look at ye! I would never have recognised ye."

"Have I changed so much?" Johanna said whimsically. "I suppose I have. It's been six years. Though ye haven't changed at all! I thought ye were meant to be a banprionnsa now, Finn? Look at ye! Ye're as filthy and ragged as ye used to be in the auld days."

"Aye, but I've been having adventures," Finn cried joyously. "Ye canna fight battles and almost drown and crawl through caves and no' get a wee bit dirty."

"Nay, I suppose ye canna," Johanna said. "But ye're going to come and wash up now, and put some decent clothes on, that I can promise ye."

"Indeed?" Finn replied, marvelling at the ring of authority in Johanna's voice. The beggar lass she had known had been a thin, anxious-faced girl afraid of everything. She was now a tall, strong-looking woman with rough, capable hands and a determined face. She looked as if she was afraid of very little.

"If ye want breakfast, ye will," Johanna answered. "No-one sits down at my campfire with hands as black as a chimney-sweep's!"

"Very well then," Finn answered meekly. She was very hungry indeed.

Rather to her dismay, Johanna's idea of a wash up included a scrubbing brush, buckets of very hot water, a great deal of soap and the removal and burning of all of Finn's clothes. Finn protested once or twice but soon found that resistance did her little good. The impression of strength Johanna had given her was not mistaken. It was not till every inch of Finn's body was pink and glowing, including her toenails, that Johanna desisted with her scrubbing and rubbing. Finn was then given clean linen drawers and a chemise, a shirt of undyed linen, a long grey coat, a pair of grey woollen breeches that tied under the knee, long knitted stockings and some sturdy brogues to wear. She dressed thankfully in the warm, clean clothes, combed out her damp curls and came out from behind the screen to present herself for Johanna's inspection.

Johanna looked her over critically then smiled and nodded in approval. "Ye'll do," she said. "Now come and eat, 'cause I havena any more time *to* be wasting on ye."

Finn grinned back and followed her over to the fire eagerly. Goblin was curled up on her pack, waiting for her, having had no desire to stay in Finn's company while so much water was being sloshed around. Finn sat down beside her and eagerly ate two big bowls of porridge loaded with nuts and dried fruit and sweetened with honey. While she ate, Johanna cooked her some bannocks on the griddle, which proved to be as light and airy as Finn had hoped.

"This is all awfully good," she said. "I do no' remember ye being a good cook, Jo."

"Isabeau the Red taught me to cook," Johanna answered. "She's one o' the best, ye ken. She taught me most o' what I ken, about herbs and healing and distilling and everything. If it was no' for her, I'd still be an orphan lass with no home and no way to support myself. I am aye grateful to her."

Finn lay back on her elbows, wishing fervently for a smoke. Her pouch of tobacco had been ruined in the shipwreck, however, and she had not had time to steal another.

Johanna stood and stretched, saying, "Are ye finished? We're behind schedule, thanks to ye, sleepyhead, so I really need to get these washed up and packed away. I need to speak to the other healers afore we ride out, and make sure they think to look out for any willow trees. We can never have enough willow-bark and the porridge-heads never see a thing if it's no' pointed out to them."

"How about I wash up and ye do what ye need to do?" Finn offered.

"That would be grand," Johanna answered with relief and bustled away.

Within ten minutes she was back. Finn tucked Goblin in her pocket, picked up her satchel and followed the healer through the camp to where a squadron of soldiers were preparing to ride out. Lachlan and Iseult were both there, the Rígh mounted on a magnificent black stallion, the Banrígh upon a tall, grey mare with a flowing white mane and tail of great silkiness. Both were wearing cuirasses of hard leather, with light leather helmets on their heads and their plaids slung about their shoulders. Upon his gauntleted wrist, Lachlan carried a snowy white gyrfalcon that regarded the world through the slits

of its leather hood. Finn recognized the beautiful hawk immediately, for Stormwing had been a gift to the Rígh from Finn's father Anghus MacRuraich.

Strapped to Lachlan's saddle was a quiver of arrows and the great longbow that had once belonged to his ancestor Owein MacCuinn. He wore his heavy claymore strapped to his back so it hung down between his wings, a short sword at his waist and a dagger in his boot. Iseult was also heavily armed, with her crossbow and quiver of arrows near to hand, and a belt heavy with weapons about her slim waist.

At the sight of Finn, Lachlan raised his hand and beckoned to her. She crossed the meadow eagerly, nodding her head to Iain and Elfrida who stood by the horses' heads, waiting to say their farewells.

"As ye can see, we are all ready to ride," the Rígh said with an affectionate smile. "I hope ye are well fed and rested, my cat, because we have a long, hard gallop ahead o' us!"

"Finn, how was Killian himself?" Elfrida asked anxiously.

"Och, he was no' grand," Finn answered. "He seems very dazed and confused. I think he sometimes did no' understand what was going on but he were so very weak he could no' protest or fight, just let us heave him about like a sack o' potatoes." She described the marks of ill-use that covered the old man's emaciated body and saw Elfrida's eyes fill with tears of pity.

"Och, that be bad news indeed," she said. "Did he understand ye had come on my behalf?"

"I be no' sure," Finn answered. "There was so little time for explaining. He recognized the cross."

"Well, that be something at least," Elfrida said with a sigh. "I wish I could be coming wi' ye."

"No, ye do no'," Iseult said coolly. "We ride hard, Elfrida. Ye ken ye will be much more comfortable travelling in your carriage at the rear o' the army, with your maids to serve ye and your bodyguard to protect ye. Ye would only slow us down if ye came."

"Aye, I suppose so," Elfrida replied unhappily. "Well, I hope ye find him in better shape and all those who helped him too." She raised her hand in farewell. "Godspeed!"

"Godspeed," Lachlan answered with a smile and a little salute.

"May Eà be with ye all," Iain said, sliding his hand within Elfrida's arm. They then both turned and walked away. It was clear from the droop of Elfrida's shoulders that Iseult's words had hurt her but the Banrígh showed no sign of remorse. As usual, her beautiful pale face was calm and rather stern.

"Aye, it is hard to believe Elfrida is the descendant o' the bright warrior-maid," Lachlan said, as if Iseult had offered some explanation for her harshness. "She was no' brought up to be warlike, though, Iseult; ye should no' expect it."

Iseult returned his gaze squarely. "I do no' expect it."

"Then why be so cold to her all the time?" he asked. "She be a sweet lass and tries hard to be friends with ye."

Iseult gave a small shrug of her shoulders. "Am I cold? I do no' mean to be. It is just she is always wringing her hands and weeping, instead o' doing what needs to be done." She paused, then said with a faint heightening of colour in her cheeks. "All ye men think her so sweet and gentle, yet she always gets what she wants without the least effort on her part. I find it exasperating."

"Aye, she is bonny," Lachlan said infuriatingly. He looked down at the avidly listening Finn with a grin. "Come, enough o' this idle chitchat. Let us make ready to ride!"

Finn grinned and followed Johanna through the rows of mounted soldiers. Apart from the Rígh and the Banrígh, there were the fifty Yeomen of the Guard, led by Duncan Ironfist upon an enormous brown gelding with shaggy white fetlocks and mane. Connor sat beside the Rígh on a pretty bay pony, carrying the Rígh's standard. Finn stared at him enviously as Johanna instructed her to climb up into a small wagon with the court sorcerer, Gwilym the Ugly, and the other healers.

"Why canna I ride too?" she asked rebelliously. "I hate bouncing around in wagons!"

"I dinna ken ye could ride," Johanna answered. "Besides, we havena any horses to spare."

"O' course I can ride," Finn replied crossly. "I can ride anything!" She thought rather longingly of her black mare Cinders, left in Nina's care in Rhyssmadill along with the other horses. "Surely someone must have a horse I could borrow? Flaming dragon balls! How can I direct Lachlan which way to go if I'm stuck in the rear eating everyone's dust?"

"Ye should call the Rígh 'His Highness'," Johanna replied austere. "Wait here, Finn. I shall speak to the cavalry-master and see if ye can borrow one o' the cavaliers' spare destriers. They shall no' be happy, I warn ye. Destriers cost a great deal o' money and are much loved by their riders. Ye had best be as good a rider as ye say!"

She went away across the field and Finn leant against the wagon, swinging her foot impatiently.

"Hello, Finn," a soft, rather plaintive voice said. "Do ye no' remember me?"

She glanced up, startled. Sitting right beside her in the wagon was a small, thin boy with pale gold wisps of hair and enormous blue eyes. His skin was so pale it was translucent, the trail of blue veins at temple and eyelid clearly visible. Deep violet shadows curved under his eyes, and the knobs of his collarbone stuck up rigidly at the base of his throat. He wore a small black gauntlet on the hand hanging limply over the side of the wagon.

"Tomas!" Finn cried. "Oh, Tomas."

To her surprise tears started to her eyes. She leant up and embraced him fiercely, blotting her tears on the soft wool of his coat. "O' course I remember ye! I just dinna see ya."

"I heard ye were here," Tomas said. "They say ye were dropped out o' the night sky by a flight o' nyx."

"I was indeed."

"I would've liked to have seen that," he answered with a sad little sigh.

"It was very late. Ye would've been asleep."

He stirred a little, lifting his hand and then letting it drop again. "I do no' sleep very well," he answered listlessly. "There are always so many sick people. I can feel their pain, even though they will no' let me touch them all. They say I must save my strength for those who need me most."

"That be good advice," Finn said briskly. "Ye canna be touching everyone, ye ken."

"I feel their pain," he answered sadly.

Again there was that unexpected rush of hot tears to Finn's eyes. She wondered what was wrong with her, that she should be so troubled so easily. It had been many months since she had felt like crying and here she was, weeping all the time like some sappy sentimental girl. She sniffed back the tears and said, even more briskly, "Well, ye should learn to block it out. Ye'll be making yourself sick if ye try and heal every silly gowk that has a sniffle or a sneeze."

"That's what Jo says."

"Well, listen to her. Jo is right."

"Och, o' course I am," Johanna said, coming up behind her. "Though I have no idea what ye're talking about. Come on, Finn, I have found a horse for ye. Ye had best take care o' him and no' hurt his mouth or score his side with spurs, else ye'll be making an enemy o' his owner. Come, his Highness is growing restless and wants to be on the road. It's long past dawn!"

Gladly Finn hurried to mount her horse, a big chestnut with a proudly curved neck named Harken. He was much taller than Cinders and, as Finn found as soon as she mounted, much stronger as well. He pranced and jibbed at the unfamiliar lightness of her weight and she had some trouble bringing him into line with the other horses. She hid her dismay however, and kicked him forward so that she was near Lachlan and Iseult, both watching her critically.

"Are ye sure ye can manage him, Finn?" Iseult said.

"O' course!"

"Very well then," the Rígh said. "Let *us* ride!"

By the end of the first day, Finn was ready to weep with exhaustion. She had never ridden so hard and for so long. The horses were given their heads at every opportunity, galloping over the long stretches of meadow and through the green dales of trees. Only when the forest grew too thick were the horses reined in, and then to an uncomfortable

jog that rattled the teeth in Finn's head and chafed her inner thighs raw.

It had taken Harken less than ten minutes to unseat Finn and she had hit the ground very hard, falling from a great height and at full speed. Goblin had been clinging to her shoulder and she leapt clear, landing nimbly on her feet and then tidying up her whiskers as a shaken and furious Finn tried to catch the gelding.

Harken was too well trained to bolt but she had to remount him without the assistance of a mounting block or a helping hand, all while clutching a protesting elven cat who was not averse to punishing Finn for the insult with her sharp little claws. Aware that the healers were all watching from the wagon, Finn scrambled up with flaming cheeks, dragged the chestnut's head around and kicked him forward, galloping in the muddy tracks of the other cavaliers who had cantered on without pause.

Soon after, the gelding swerved under a low branch and Finn had only been able to keep her seat by slipping sideways out of the saddle, gripping the stirrup leather with both hands. He threw her again half an hour later with an unexpected sidestep at full gallop, and again at midday, stopping abruptly to drink at a slow-moving brown stream. Finn was thrown over his head and into the water, much to the amusement of the cavaliers. Duncan Ironfist himself leapt down to pull her up out of the stream, saying over his shoulder, "Well, Harken has decided this is as good a place as any to stop for lunch! Let us stand down and let the horses rest a wee while."

Wet and deeply mortified, Finn waded out on to the bank, surreptitiously rubbing her bruises and refusing to meet anyone's eyes. Goblin stalked out in her wake, her black fur plastered flat to her bones, her tail dripping. She sat with her back to Finn and licked herself dry, hissing at Finn when she tried to pick her up.

No-one paid the embarrassed girl and her cat any attention, busy loosening their girths and unpacking their saddlebags. Finn could only be glad the gloomy first mate of the *Speedwell* had not been there to see her ignominious descent. Arvin the Just had told her many times that "pride goest afore destruction and a haughty spirit afore a fall," and she could not help thinking it would have given him great satisfaction to have been proved right.

Finn could have curled up under the trees and slept all afternoon, but to her consternation they stopped only long enough to eat a rough meal of cheese, bread and ale before once again riding on. Goblin made her feelings clear by jumping up into the wagon and curling up on a pile of blankets, not deigning to look at Finn when she tried to coax her back on to her shoulder. Finn was by now so stiff and sore she would gladly have joined the elven cat in the wagon but her stubborn pride would not allow her to admit defeat and so she mounted the chestnut with a wince and a curse, and clung on with gritted teeth as he once again trotted forward.

At last the sun began to sink down behind the high round hills, but to her dismay they rode on long after twilight had darkened to night, their way lighted by flaming torches. At last they made camp, but Finn was so very stiff and sore she could hardly walk. Without comment Johanna gave her a pot of salve which burnt like fire when rubbed into her bruises and aching muscles but relieved the pain enough for Finn to finally get some sleep.

The second and third days were unadulterated torture. Finn found herself heartily sorry that she had boasted of her riding prowess, since the destrier was far too strong for

her and fought her hand on the rein constantly. She was determined to show no weakness before the soldiers, however, and so used every ounce of strength in her body and will to force the horse to obey her. She was thrown several times but each time sprang back into the saddle and rode on without complaint.

By the fourth day her muscles were growing used to the hard pace and the soothing balm Johanna had given her had eased the pain of her chafing. By the fifth day, Finn felt in full command of the destrier, who had finally stopped trying to knock her off with low branches or unbalance her with a cunning sidestep at full gallop. By the sixth day, she was able to enjoy the excitement of their headlong pace and even to begin to notice the beauty of the scenery around them.

The cavaliers were riding through the downs that swept down towards the sea, ending abruptly at the edge of the high cliffs that Finn had last seen from the deck of the *Speedwell*. Streams wound down through the wide valleys, often meandering through small stretches of forest where they were able to hunt for birds or coney to supplement their diet. Here and there were lonely farmhouses, usually strongly barricaded behind high stone walls. Often they saw a farmer out working in the fields. At the sight of the squadron of soldiers, he would turn and run back to the house, shutting the gates tight against them. The cavaliers never stopped, even though all would have liked to buy some fresh food or ask for a comfortable place to sleep.

On the seventh day they fought a skirmish with a company of Bright Soldiers on patrol. Lachlan was not interested in fighting a pitched battle. The aim of their expedition was to rescue the shipwrecked crew of the *Speedwell*, not to further the war against the General Assembly. So they simply rode through the company at top speed, laying about them with their swords. The gyrfalcon Stormwing plunged down from the sky at frightening speed, killing one soldier with a single blow of its clenched talons. Gwilym the Ugly conjured an illusion of snakes that had the enemy's horses rearing in panic and then, once the Yeomen were out of sight beyond the curve of a hill, concealed their trail with magic. A few soldiers were sent off to create a false trail leading their pursuers off on a wild goose chase, and their journey continued with the same discipline as before. Finn had to admit she was impressed with the speed and calm with which everything had been accomplished. The Blue Guards were seasoned veterans indeed.

On the eighth day they drew closer to the coast so that Finn could begin looking out for any landmarks that she recognised. Everyone was conscious of anxiety, for there were so many spectacular formations of rock rising from the wild sea that all wondered how Finn would be able to tell one from another. She just laughed scornfully, however, saying, "Flaming dragon balls, have ye forgotten I be a NicRuraich? I could find them in the dark with my eyes blindfolded, my ears stuffed with wax, and my hands tied behind my back!"

That day they saw a fleet of galleons sailing up the horizon and took cover behind the rocks for an hour or so, not wishing anyone on board to see them through their far-seeing glass. At last the white sails had disappeared from view and they were able to ride on, picking their way carefully over the uneven ground.

Suddenly Finn gave a shout. "Look! The Two Lovers! That's what Tam called them. See those rocks leaning together as if embracing? That's near where we came on shore. Auld Cloutie's Cleft is hereabouts somewhere."

The shadows were growing long and the light had that effulgence that comes just before the sun sinks out of sight. Lachlan wanted to make camp in the cover of a small forest some distance away, returning in the morning so Finn could climb down the cliff and find her shipwrecked companions. Finn was determined to search them out straightaway, however.

"The cliff be no' much more than two hundred feet high, I can slide down that in minutes!" she cried. "Please, Lachlan? They'll be so anxious. Then I can get all ready to haul them up first thing in the morning and we shallna be wasting any more time."

"But the tide be coming in," Lachlan said. "What if ye canna find them in time?"

"Och, I ken exactly where they are," Finn replied. "I'll go down the cliff right above Auld Cloutie's Cleft and just swing in. I shallna need to set foot on the shore at all."

"Finn, can ye tell if all are still alive and well?" Iseult asked.

Finn hesitated. "No' really," she admitted. "I can feel a tumult o' minds but there is so much rock between us."

"I can feel pain," Tomas said miserably.

"What about the prophet?" Lachlan leant forward, frowning. "Can ye tell if he still lives?"

Finn shrugged. "I think so. I do no' have the cross anymore, I gave it back to him, so I do no' have anything o' his to touch to make sure. I think he is still alive, though his minds feels very faint."

She had dismounted as she spoke, readying her rope and pulleys in preparation for the descent. While she had slept that first night in the army camp, Lachlan's quartermaster had been preparing new climbing equipment for her. One of the army blacksmiths had forged her some stakes and a square-headed hammer like the ones that had gone down with the *Speedwell*, and she had the great length of the nyx-hair rope, which coiled up into a surprisingly small knot that she wore hanging from her belt.

Finn buttoned the elven cat up securely in her coat pocket, belayed the nyx-hair rope firmly about a rock and swiftly, nimbly, descended the cliff-face.

It was shadowy in the lee of the cliff but Finn had climbed many a cliff in full darkness and had no difficulty in finding her way down. The rope was so slippery she was able to slide down at great speed, but so silky she did not burn her hands with the friction. Every now and again she bounced off the cliff with her feet, gaining extra momentum. By the time she reached the bottom the white-crested waves were growling and snapping about the rocks. Finn swung her body round so she hung upside down over Auld Cloutie's Cleft. "Hey, Scruffy," she whispered.

There was a faint sound of movement within. "Finn?" The voice was incredulous.

"Aye. Can I come in or will ye stick me with that bloody happy sword o' yours?"

"Nay, o' course ye can come in." Dillon had stepped forward and was peering out into the darkness. "Where the blazes are ye, Finn, in the water?"

She rapped him on the top of his skull. "Up here, porridge-head."

He looked up, startled, rubbing the crown of his head. "Flaming dragon's balls!"

"Step back, ye lout, do ye want me to land on top o' ye?" As Dillon stepped back, muttering under his breath, Finn lithely swung herself down and through the cleft, landing gracefully before him.

"Good to see ye, Scruffy; how are ye yourself?" she asked.

He laughed, still rubbing the top of his head. "I'll give ye this, Finn, ye do ken how to make an entrance!"

"Thank ye kindly, I try."

"How in Ea's name did ye ken I was on guard tonight?"

"It's my business to ken such things," she replied haughtily. "I am the Cat, after all."

He grinned. "Thank Eà ye've come, Finn, we were sick with anxiety. No' to mention hunger. Have ye brought food? We've eaten naught but seaweed and barnacles for days!"

Finn nodded, shrugging her shoulders so her heavy pack bounced up and down. She looked past Dillon into the gloom of the cave, seeing dark figures huddled about a fire lit at the far end of the enormous cavern. No-one had yet noticed her arrival and she was struck by the despondent slump of their shoulders.

"Lachlan and Iseult and their men are up top," she said. "They've brought healers too, for they ken some o' the sailors were injured. How are everyone else themselves?"

Dillon looked grim. "We've lost a few, I'm afraid."

"Och, no' the prophet!" Finn was dismayed. To have Killian the Listener die when they had travelled so far and endured so much to rescue him!

"Nay, he lives still. He's a tough auld boot, for all he looks like a bundle o' sticks and rags. He's in better shape than some o' them!"

"No' Enit?" Finn cried.

"Nay, though she is very weak. She can barely lift her head from her blankets and if ye had no' come when ye did . . ."

"Well, then," Finn said, relieved. Though she was naturally sorry that some of the injured sailors had died, she could only be glad it was not Killian the Listener or the old jongleur with the silvery voice. She started to move forward once more but Dillon stopped her with a hand on his arm.

"I be real sorry, Finn, but I'm afraid your auld gillie Donald . . ."

"No' Donald?"

"Aye, Donald. He was fishing off the rocks and got swept away by a wave. Dide and I tried to save him but it all happened too quickly . . ."

Finn was numb with shock. It had never occurred to her to fear for the gillie's life, although he was near as old as Enit or Killian. She stared at Dillon, then suddenly her face crumpled and she broke into tears. Dillon put his arms about her clumsily, patting her shoulder.

"Do no' greet, Finn, do no' greet," he whispered.

Finn wiped her eyes. "I canna believe it. He was so ... so doughy." She could think of no better word than the one Donald had used so often himself.

"We have missed him badly indeed. None o' us are much o' a hand with a bow and arrow, and the fishing line went down with him. We've done our best but it's been hard."

He led her over to the fire, where she was greeted with a great commotion. The contents of Finn's haversack were received with almost as much excitement and she set about handing around food and the big flask of whiskey, her heart swelling with grief and pity. All of the castaways were very thin and pale, their clothes more ragged than ever. Most were still heavily bandaged, some with limbs tightly splinted. Enit lay in a restless doze that not all the noise could awaken her from. Bran was still weak and listless from her bout of sorcery-sickness, though her green eyes had lit with joy and relief at the sight of Finn. Ashlin could only get to his feet with an effort, a hacking cough causing him to double over with pain. His eyes, like Bran's, were fever-bright. He bowed to Finn, though, saying in a hoarse voice, "Thank Eà ye be safe, my lady! I have been in such a fret over ye."

"Do no' call me that," Finn said impatiently. "I be just Finn."

She looked round for Jay and Dide and found them waiting to embrace her. "Och, Finn, it be grand to see ye!" Jay cried, hugging her so hard she gave a little yelp. "We havena been able to help fretting about ye. When we saw ye disappearing into the sky like that, surrounded by all those strange, wild faeries . . ."

"The nyx be wonderful," Finn protested indignantly.

"I'm just glad to see ye alive and well," Jay said and embraced her again.

"Well, I'm glad to see ye too," Finn said awkwardly. "No' that ye look well. Ye look bloody awful!"

Indeed, both Dide and Jay were thin and grey, their skin moist with perspiration, their voices roughened from too much coughing.

"Some kid o' cave fever," Nellwyn the Yedda said. "We've all got it. Comes from the dampness and chill, I'd say. We havena dared show our faces outside, for the galleons have been scouring the coast for us."

Finn nodded. "Aye, we saw them. Never mind. We'll have ye out of here and into the fresh air first thing in the morning. Tomas is there and Johanna too. They'll make ye all better."

It was a difficult task, hauling all the castaways up the cliff the next dawn. Few were strong enough to even attempt to climb and so the Yeomen had to drag them up on stretchers suspended from ropes. Dillon's dog Jed howled the whole way up, struggling

feebly against the ropes that bound him. He was gaunt beneath his shaggy white fur, having lived on nothing but cave rats for weeks.

Killian the Listener was one of the first to be dragged over the lip of the cliff. The first thing he saw when he weakly lifted his head was Lachlan, bending over him with a frown of concern. The young Rìgh was all gilded by the brightness of the rising sun, his golden-topaz eyes blazing in his dark face, his magnificent black wings framing all the strength and power of his tall figure. Killian gazed up at him with reverent awe, then struggled to his knees, seizing Lachlan's strong, brown hand and kissing it.

"Indeed, ye are the angel o' the Lord!" he cried.

"Nay, I am no angel," Lachlan said gently. "I am naught but a mortal man, struggling like all men to do what is right."

"Nay," Killian said. "I have seen ye in my dreams. Ye are the messenger o' God our Father, sent to do His will."

"Happen that is true," Lachlan said, "if it is his will to try and bring peace to all the land. For indeed, that is what I intend to do, even if I must fight to the very death."

"It is always His will to bring peace," Killian said, a smile trembling on his ancient mouth. "Love, joy and peace, this is what He tells us to seek, no' this greed for power and material things, this selfish ambition, which drives the Fealde, she who they call the Whore o' Bride."

"Love, joy and peace," Lachlan said slowly. "Indeed, that is all I want. And with your help, may Eà grant we find it."

Johanna and her healers had swung into action as the first white face had appeared above the lip of the cliff. Those that had suffered serious injuries were carried across to where Tomas sat, pale and grave-faced. The little boy peeled away his black gauntlets and laid his hands upon their foreheads. From his fingers the pink glow of health flowed down over the grey countenances. Broken limbs knitted together, pus-filled wounds dried and healed over, congested lungs cleared, and bruises faded.

After the little boy had touched Enit, the old jongleur opened her eyes and smiled up at the boy, saying "Bless ye, laddie! I feel like a young lass again. I feel like I could dance a jig!"

She flexed her gnarled fingers wonderingly, then rose to her feet with the aid of an eager-faced Dide and took a few tottering steps, the first she had taken in some years. The extensive damage to her joints caused by her rheumatoid arthritis could not be repaired—Tomas could not restore what had been lost— but much of the swelling and pain had subsided, so that Enit was more comfortable than she had been for a very long time.

"Indeed, his is a marvellous talent," Dide cried. "We had thought Grandam would never walk again!"

"A miracle indeed," Killian the Listener said, watching with great interest. "Indeed, the ways o' the Lord our Father are many and wonderful."

Tomas looked up at him. "Would ye like me to touch ye too?" he asked timidly. "I cannot give ye back your ears, but happen I can heal your other wounds. I can feel your pain."

The old prophet nodded his head, his emaciated face very solemn. He bent and Tomas laid his hands upon his bony forehead. When at last he lifted his head away, the prophet stood tall and sure, his dark eyes flashing. There was no sign of the wounds of his torture.

"I heard the voices o' the angels as ye touched me," he cried. "I had feared they spoke to me no longer, so many months I have heard naught but the scrabbling o' my own dark thoughts. But now, now! I heard the trumpet call o' their commands, I hear the heavenly choir o' their rejoicing. I had feared myself forsaken but now I ken I had closed the ears o' my soul as the Fealde had closed the ears o' my body. Hallelujah! The wrath o' God shall smite these false leaders who have led the people o' my land into this dark age o' sin and deceit, where the word o' God is twisted and made foul. Let us put on the armour o' God, let us gird ourselves with truth, let us buckle on the breastplate o' righteousness! Raise high the sword o' the spirit, which is the word o' God our Father, and let us throw down these false preachers, these proud, vain, deceitful leaders!"

THE TAPESTRY IS WOVEN

The Cloven Hoof

A fire was lit in the shelter of a small grove of trees and a meal hurriedly prepared for the famished castaways. Duncan Ironfist passed around a great flask of whiskey, "to warm all their bones," as he said.

There was much talk and laughter as they ate and drank, the League of the Healing Hand together again after so many years. Many old adventures were recalled and new ones recounted, old jokes revived and fresh ones made up. The thought of those members of the old gang who had not survived the Bright Wars brought a moment of sadness, but all were too happy and relieved to be melancholy for long and soon all were laughing again. After hearing of Bran, Tam and Ashlin's role in the adventure of the Black Tower, they were declared honorary members of the League of the Healing Hand by Dillon, who was still and would always be, their general. A toast was drunk and Finn made an impromptu speech that had them all in fits of giggles.

Just then, Lachlan came and smiled down at them and they all leapt to their feet and bowed. "I just wanted to say thank ye to ye all," he said. "For the first time I feel confident that we can prevail in the Forbidden Land. I dinna ken how I can show ye my gratitude but show ye I will."

"Another pouch o' tobacco wouldna go astray," Finn said hopefully. Lachlan laughed and promised to find her some, then said seriously, "I mean it though, all o' ye. Ye have achieved the impossible once again. I do no' ken what I have done to deserve such true and loyal friends."

They had not known how to answer, all choked with pleasure. Then Finn had grinned at Lachlan and bowed with an extravagant flourish of her hand. "Always a

pleasure to serve ye, your Highness."

Lachlan laughed. "Why do I feel suspicious when ye are polite, my cat?"

"Because it happens so rarely," Brangaine said.

Lachlan smiled. "Aye, that must be it."

"I do no' ken what ye mean," Finn said, pretending to be hurt. "I am always the very soul o' courtesy."

Just then there was a cry from the lookout boy, who had been deputised to keep a close watch out while everyone else ate and relaxed. Lachlan turned and left the fire abruptly, creeping up the ridge to lie next to the sentry and look where he pointed. Finn and the rest of the league swarmed up behind him, peering over the rocks.

White as wings, the sails of a galleon billowed out in the wind.

"They sail close," Captain Tobias said in a low voice, who had taken the farseeing glass from the lookout and was holding it to one eye.

"Have they spied us?" Lachlan asked grimly.

"Impossible to tell." The captain retracted the telescope and tucked it again in the pocket of his ragged greatcoat. "I dare no' watch any longer for the sun is against us and could flash in the glass, giving us away."

"Come, we had best be moving on then," Lachlan said.

Iseult was watching the ship with keen eyes. "They are waving flags about," she said. "I can see the flash o' colour."

"Bad news," Arvin the Just said gloomily. "They are signalling to shore."

"Let us away from here," Lachlan said. "If there is a squadron o' Bright Soldiers about, I do no' wish to be meeting them!"

"Where shall we go?" Finn asked eagerly.

"If only we had a safe house in this area," Lachlan mused. "But I ken o' none within a day's ride. Leonard the Canny has already warned us that the people o' the downs be the dour, pious sort and no' likely to offer any help to heretics like us."

The young sailor Tam looked up with a flush. "I beg your pardon, your Highness, but although it be true that the down folk are pious indeed, they have no liking for the General Assembly and think them most corrupt and ungodly. We are far from the city here. We live close to the land and the ways o' our fathers and our fathers' fathers are thought good enough for us. There are many in my village who mourn the overthrow o' the MacHildes as if it happened yesterday and who cling to the auld ways, when a farmer who worked all day in the fields was no' expected to throw down his tools and attend the kirk three times a day when the harvest must be got in." He finished with some heat, his words tumbling over each other.

"Is that so?" Lachlan said thoughtfully. "I take it from all this that ye come from

hereabouts, my lad?"

Tam nodded. "Indeed I do, your Highness. Born and raised a downman."

"Then I can see ye being most useful to us, lad. If ye are willing to be so."

Under Lachlan's intense scrutiny, the colour rose in Tam's cheeks again but he made a rather clumsy bow and said, "Tam o' Kirkclanbright at your service, my laird."

"I thank ye, Tam o' Kirkclanbright, and very pleased I am to be making your acquaintance. Now, do ye think ye can find us a safe house where we can hide from those misbegotten Bright Soldiers?"

"I'll take ye to my Da's farm, Rowanglen," Tam said simply. "He be a stern man and loyal indeed to the Kirk, so do no' be expecting him to be falling at your feet, your Highness. He has a very nice sense o' right and wrong, however, and has a great respect for the prophet, so I am sure he shall take ye in when ye hears how ye rescued him and healed him."

"As long as he gives me a hot bath and some decent food, I do no' care if he spits in my face," Lachlan said with a grin. "Lead the way, Tam, my lad!"

Rowanglen was a prosperous little farm tucked in the side of the downs. It had a wide stream running through its golden fields, a pond where ducks swam, and a sturdy house with high pointed gables. A long avenue of rowan trees led up to the farm, which was protected all along the road with a high wall set with an iron gate.

They all waited at the edge of a wide swathe of forest, watching the farm. All was quiet. Grey smoke curled lazily from one of the chimneys and horses grazed in the home meadow. Enormous haystacks filled the fields, and birds hopped amongst the golden stubble. The leaves of the trees were all turning russet, yellow and brown, and here and there were rowan trees heavy with red berries. The shadows were growing longer and already it was cool under the trees.

It had been a hurried, furtive journey through the countryside. Tam had led them through torturous byways and fields, the overloaded wagon often becoming bogged down in the mud and having to be levered free by the soldiers. As far as possible they had tried to avoid being seen, but there were many people working in the fields and they were a sizable company now, with the crew of the *Sea-Eagle* and the *Speedwell* as well as the soldiers, healers, jongleurs and witches. The wagon was overcrowded with those who could not walk with ease, and many of the weary horses carried more than one passenger. All were greatly travel-stained, with most of the shipwreck survivors dressed in little more than rags. It was impossible for them not to attract a great deal of attention, or for them not to leave marks of their passage in the mud of the fields and the broken twigs of the hedgerows.

"I fear we do your family no favours," Lachlan said grimly. "If there are Bright Soldiers about, they will soon have wind o' us."

Tam looked anxious.

"Do no' fear," Iseult said. "Our army has had instructions to march this way. We shall soon have plenty o' reinforcements."

Tarn's look of anxiety only deepened and he looked out at the peaceful valley with foreboding. Across the stream was an apple orchard, golden fruit peeping out between the leaves, which half-concealed a house with a green gabled roof. The road led down through bare fields and copses of trees to a small village, smudged with smoke from its chimneys, and dominated by the grey hulk of its kirk. The square tower of the kirk was topped with a tall cone-shaped spire that soared high above the trees and roofs and was crowned with a gilded cross.

Everywhere people were working with the slow grace of those who work with the land all year long. A big wagon was being loaded with hay in one of the fields. Elsewhere, a boy was tending a herd of fat black pigs. A strong-looking woman was splitting kindling with an axe by the side of one of the crofts. By the river the sails of a mill turned slowly in the fitful breeze, and a cart laden with sacks of grain was being unloaded by three men in rough brown clothes. In the village square children were playing hopscotch or squatting in the dust, tossing sheep's knuckles. They could hear the occasional bleat of sheep, the ringing of a blacksmith's hammer, and the piping of the goat-keeper who sat amidst the herd grazing on the river-bank.

"It has been many years since we had war here in Kirkclanbright," Tam said unhappily.

Just then they heard bells ringing out the hour. Six times the bells rang, and the hidden watchers saw the workers in the field lay down their hoes and scythes, and trudge through the stubble towards the kirk.

"It be vespers," Tam explained in a whisper. "Once they are all in kirk, there shall be none to watch us pass by."

"How often must ye all go to kirk?" Finn asked, as he began to cautiously lead the party out of the shelter of the wood.

"It used to be once a day and twice on Sundays, but these days the General Assembly demands we all must attend at least three times a day and six times on Sunday. It is fine for us who live only a wee while away from the kirk but for those who live away from the villages it is difficult indeed, and has caused much bad feeling."

"Why do they make ye go so often?"

Tam shrugged. "Happen if we spend all day on our knees praying we shallna have time for anything else," he said with deep irony.

The valley now lay deserted and they were able to move out into the dusty road, moving as quietly as they were able. The evening was so still they could hear the sound of chanting from the kirk, and the murmur of the river over stones. Rowanglen's iron gate stood open and they passed through it and up the cool dusk of the avenue.

"Happen ye'd best all hide in the barn and wait for my family to come home," Tam said. Obediently they crowded within the great building, filled with shadows and smelling of dust and straw. There the exhausted horses could at last be unsaddled and rubbed down, with Tam spreading hay for them and showing the soldiers how to work the

pump. The men and women made themselves nests in the straw and lay down where they could to rest, all tired after the long day's walking. Everyone was conscious of tension. They were deep in the heart of the enemy's territory, badly equipped for any battle, and vulnerable to betrayal. Even if the Greycloaks had made excellent time, they must still be some leagues away, without any way of knowing where Lachlan and his men had taken shelter. They could only trust in Tam and his family.

Nearly an hour later they heard the sound of voices. Tam rose. His colour was high, his eyes eager. "That be my mother's voice I hear. And that's my wee sister laughing! Wait here. I shall go and explain everything. All will be well, I promise."

He hurried out of the barn into the deepening dusk, calling to his mother. They heard a babble of excitement, the bang of a door, and then silence.

It was a long, long wait. At last, though, they heard the barn door being opened and Tam came in carrying a lantern. Behind him strode a tall man with a stern, clean-shaven face and grey hair cropped very short. He was dressed in grey breeches, long boots, a rough shirt and a black coat that had seen better days. He carried himself with authority, however, looking around at the crowd of men and women with angry disdain.

"Who is this man who says he be the prophet?" he demanded.

Killian had dropped into a doze but Johanna gently woke him and helped him to his feet. He looked around with dazed eyes, settling his gaze at last on the farmer and his son. Tam lifted the lantern higher so that the light fell full upon Killian's maimed head, with the ugly scars that showed where his ears had once been.

The farmer stared for a long while and then said, in a slightly gentler tone, "Many men have lost their ears at the behest o' the Fealde, aye, and their hands and noses too. How am I to ken that ye are indeed Killian the Listener, the prophet?"

Killian peered at him uncertainly. "I am Killian, he they call the Listener."

The farmer frowned and stuck his big, red hands in his belt. He looked around at the crowd.

"And the one calling herself the NicHilde?" There was an odd note in the farmer's gruff voice, a wistful yearning imperfectly concealed behind belligerence.

Elfrida rose gracefully and came forward, her dark red plaid wrapped close around her slim body. Although her hair was tumbling out of its severe bun, stuck here and there with straw, and there was mud on her skirt, she somehow managed to project an air of quiet dignity. "I am the NicHilde."

He looked her over for a long moment. "Ye be as fair as a MacHilde," he said at last, the belligerence gone from his voice.

"That is because I am a MacHilde," she answered, no trace of anger or offence in her gentle voice. "It is a sad day when a man o' Kirkclanbright doesna recognise a MacHilde when he sees one. Have ye forgotten how this valley came to be so named? Is this no' the place where the bright warrior-maid bore her first son, thus laying the foundations o' my clan? Is your kirk no' the first kirk ever built in the Bright Land?"

"Aye, that it is," the farmer answered, rubbing at his bristly chin. "But few care to remember that these days."

"I care to remember," she answered softly.

The farmer shifted uncomfortably, glancing about him at the men and women crowded close together in the shadowy barn. "They say ye have taken up with witches and demons, though, my lady."

"Berhtilde was a witch herself and proud o' it," Elfrida answered, her colour rising. It was the first time any of them had heard her admit such a thing and Iain smiled and stepped closer to her, his arm brushing hers. "But it is an evil lie to say I have dealings with demons! Those that support and help me are all good, brave men, and as human as ye or me."

"But what o' this winged *uile-bheist* who has set himself up as Rìgh?"

Lachlan stepped forward, his feathers rustling. His brows were drawn over his golden eyes in a forbidding frown. "I am the MacCuinn."

The farmer looked him up and down, noting the MacCuinn plaid pinned with the device of the crowned stag, the long black wings springing from his back, the Lodestar thrust through his belt. He then looked round at the crowd, absorbing every detail of their muddy, ragged clothing, the horses with their heads sunk low, the old woman with her crippled hands, the youthfulness of some of the faces. Then his eyes went back to Gwilym the Ugly, leaning on his tall staff, his fingers all laden with rings. Although the sorcerer was dressed as plainly as any of them, with a long cloak of rough grey wool over breeches, the staff and rings proclaimed him as one of the Coven to those who knew the signs. The farmer clearly did.

With disgust in his voice, he said abruptly, "Ye be a witch."

"Aye, that I am," Gwilym replied in his deep, harsh voice.

"Do ye no' ken that they burn witches in these parts and those that harbour them?"

"So I believe," Gwilym answered.

"So what do ye do here, risking your life and ours?"

"I am here to serve my Rìgh," Gwilym answered.

The farmer pondered him for a moment longer, his mouth compressed with anger. "Do ye no' ken witchcraft is the working o' the Archfiend!" he suddenly hissed at Tam. "Ye defile our land by bringing these abominations here!"

"But *dai-dein!* The prophet himself has declared the Rìgh the messenger o' God! And this wee lad here, he is the one that heals wi' the laying on o' hands. I have seen it wi' my own eyes and I swear there is no evil-doing there. He is as innocent as a newborn babe."

"Auld Cloutie has many faces, no' all o' them foul," his father responded.

"As does God our Father, and no' all o' them fair," a woman suddenly said. They all

looked at the door where a short, middle-aged woman stood, regarding them all with twinkling hazel eyes just like Tam's. She was dressed very plainly in dark grey, with rough sabots on her feet and a white apron tied around her plump waist. Her hands were red and coarse, but the skin of her round face was very soft and pale, wrinkled like hands left too long in water.

"What sort o' welcome is this to give to our guests, father?" she scolded, coming forward to seize her husband by the elbow, and shaking his arm none too gently. Her head only came up to his chest but to all of their surprise, the big, grim-faced man hung his head, abashed. "Has Tam no' told ye again and again that the auld prophet has sworn that these be no workings o' the Archfiend but the servants o' our God the Father, come to put the NicHilde back on her throne? What are ye about, to call the angel o' death himself an *uile-bheist*? One would think ye had never heard the reading o' the Guid Book!"

"But mother . . ."

"No buts about it! I be ashamed o' ye, father. Have we no' heard tales o' the miraculous doings o' this dark angel? Did no' the beasts o' the field and the birds o' the air fight at his command? Did he no' show great mercy to those that had fallen, bidding the lad wi' the healing hands to help them? Have we no' all muttered against the cruel and corrupt Whore o' Bride and wish that she and her loose-lipped bootlickers would all be swallowed up by a crack in the earth?"

"Och, aye, but ..."

"Such a great gowk ye are!" the little plump woman said affectionately. "It is only in stories that the earth opens up and swallows the evil-hearted. In real life, we must do what we can to hasten things. Is it no' said that God helps those that help themselves?"

"Aye, but . . ."

"Well then! Look at the puir things, so dirty and ragged. We must bustle about and get them some hot water to wash in and something to eat, and ye, Great Tam, must go across to Jock o' the Apples and Miller Dan and to the pastor, o' course, and tell them what be towards. And rouse up Peter Goatkeeper too; he be a wily lad, and Joe the Smith, and Jack Woolly too. Oh, and happen ye should send Wee Tam across valley way and tell Dick Dickson, for if he's the last to ken he'll be stirring up trouble and better he be here under my eye."

"Very well, mother," Great Tam said obediently.

"Happen ye'd best go to Dick Dickson, Da, he might take offense if it be only me," Tam said. "I'll go and rouse up Jock o' the Apples."

His father gave a slow grin which greatly mellowed his face. "Aye, lad, and give my best to young Bessie too. She'll be aye glad to see ye!"

Colour flamed in Tarn's cheeks. He ducked his head and hurried out of the barn, leaving the lantern hanging from a hook. His father was quick to follow him, casting one last doubtful look about the barn and muttering, "Whatever be the world coming to, when we have witches and *uile-bheistean* breaking bread and tasting salt wi' us!"

"All things are possible with God," Killian suddenly said, taking them all by surprise.

"Aye, that be the truth indeed," Tarn's mother answered, nodding her round grey head. "Indeed that be the truth." She suddenly came forward in a rush to kneel at Elfrida's feet and kiss her hand. "Och, welcome home, my lady, welcome home!"

"Thank ye," Elfride said with tears in her voice.

"We've been a long time waiting for ye," the old woman said. "But I always kent ye'd come home to us."

That night the men of the district all gathered in Great Tarn's parlour to look Lachlan and Elfrida over and to listen to Killian the Listener speak. Killian had been bathed and dressed in a long white robe of homespun cloth, his wispy hair and beard combed out. Around his neck he wore his wooden cross on its knotted thong of leather. His dark eyes were tragic as he told them how the Fealde had ordered him tortured in order to force him to sign a confession saying that all he preached was dictated to him by the Archfiend and not God himself.

"But I would no', for I kent I had heard the true singing o' the angels," the prophet said and all the farmers shifted and muttered among themselves.

Then he told of his daring rescue, and how the Rìgh's people had risked everything to save him. Now his dark eyes glowed with fervour and his voice trembled with gratitude. He described how Tomas had healed him and how he had heard a chorus of heavenly singing at the first touch of his miraculous hands.

"Indeed, we are blessed, for God our father has heard our prayers and sent this winged angel to save us from the dreadful tyranny o' the corrupt General Assembly, and this young boy with the miraculous touch to heal the wounds o' our people, and He has kept our sweet young NicHilde safe from harm so that she may rule us as was always God's will, for is she no' the appointed one, the heir to the golden sword?"

Finn had been unable to bear the suspense and so she eavesdropped on the whole proceedings from outside the window, telling herself she was standing guard in case of betrayal. To her surprise it was the local pastor who proved to be Lachlan's most fervent supporter. A roly-poly man with a shiny bald head fringed all round with cherubic grey curls, he was dressed in a long black cassock with a plain wooden cross at his waist. He looked as if he thought of little more than his dinner but he proved to be of a romantic temperament. The story of Elfrida, the disinherited young ban-prionnsa fighting to free her people, stirred his imagination. He had no difficulty in believing Lachlan to be the angel of death so many prophets had foreseen, clasping his hands together at his very first sight of the Rìgh and murmuring "Night-winged and flame-eyed, the angel o' death shall smite them, for they have forgotten the word o' God!"

Dick Dickson proved to be a thin, oily man who continually rubbed his hands together as if washing them, and whose narrow dark eyes darted from one face to another. When he first came in, he had said with deep foreboding, "He who sups with the Devil should have a long spoon, Great Tarn."

"Aye, but better a dinner o' green herbs where love is than a stalled ox and hatred

within," the pastor had immediately returned.

Dick Dickson shook his head lugubriously. "The Devil can aye quote scripture for his own ends, Pastor."

Indignant colour surged up in the pastor's round cheeks. "A fool may give wise men counsel, but they rarely thank him for it," he snapped.

Patchy colour rose in Dick Dickson's narrow cheeks. He sought for a riposte but finding none, merely shook his head sadly and said no more, though his ferret eyes watched everyone's faces avidly.

Long into the night the discussion wound. The men of Kirkclanbright were by nature conservative and prudent, and reluctant to throw in their lot with pagans and heretics. Even Tarn's mother was troubled by the presence of witches in Lachlan's retinue, even though Lachlan pointed out most persuasively that witchcunning was born into all people and therefore must be seen as a gift from God.

"By Him all things were created that are in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, human and unworldly, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him, He is afore all things and in Him all things consist," Killian the Listener said, clasping his wooden cross tightly, and the pastor nodded, though his kindly face was troubled.

"And what shall happen to us if this winged pagan does win through to Bride and puts the NicHilde back on the throne and throws down the Great Kirk?" Dick Dickson said then. "We shall be made to dance naked around the kirkyard and say our prayers backwards and boil the bones o' murdered children for evil spells . . ."

Lachlan interrupted him with a great shout of laughter. "Is that what ye think the Coven does?" he cried when at last he caught his breath. "By Ea's green blood! Och, well, happen it be like the stories we always heard about how ye sacrificed babes on your altars."

There was an indignant outcry. Lachlan laughed again. "I can promise ye this, there's no boiling up children, though it is true witches often dance about naked. Never fear! The Coven would never make ye do so if ye did no' want to. We o' the Coven believe all must be free to think and worship as they please. None would be forced to pray in a kirk six times a day if they would rather be ploughing their fields, that I assure ye! We believe that living a good and compassionate life and having a care for others is a better way to worship the sacred forces o' life than kneeling in a cold, draughty building, but each to their own!"

"But is it no' true that yon witches worship the Archfiend and do his bidding?" the pastor asked anxiously.

"Witches do no' believe in the Archfiend," Lachlan said, a tinge of exasperation in his voice. "I had never heard o' your Auld Cloutie afore your soldiers came and invaded my land!"

"Ye do no' believe in the Archfiend?" The pastor was perplexed. "But do ye no' swear allegiance to him and all his evil minions, and chant the Lord's prayer backwards and hang the cross upside down on your altars and . . ."

"No, we do no'," Lachlan said shortly.

"Gracious me," the pastor said. "I always thought ye did."

The humour suddenly returned to Lachlan's face. "Nay, I'm afraid ye have as untrue a picture o' the Coven as we used to have o' ye, afore the NicHilde set us straight. Happen we shall all have to try and find the kernel o' truth amidst the chaff o' lies."

"If ye do no' believe in the Archfiend, surely that means ye canna believe in God our Father?" Dick Dickson suddenly asked. Immediately the whole room stilled, the men turning shocked eyes from him to the Rígh.

Lachlan thought carefully before replying. "No' at all," he said at last. "We believe there is a life-force that animates the universe, though we do no' divide it into black or white, good or evil, male or female, night or day. We call this life-force Eà and believe she contains all these opposites within her, or him if ye so prefer. We believe Eà is all gods and goddesses, all devils and angels."

There was a little indrawn breath of displeasure and he went on with a sudden rush of words. "Eà has had many names and faces, no' all o' them good and beautiful. We choose what aspects o' that godforce we worship. To the Coven it is the Eà o' green forests that we look to for our blessing. Most o' the folk o' Blessem see Eà as a farmer, a strong, kindly man who sows the seed and reaps the harvest. If I understand your religion correctly, ye look to the power o' the sun and the heavens as your inspiration. Some choose to see Ea's dark hideous face, the face of Gearradh, she who cuts the thread. That is their right, though it would no' be my choice. One o' the things we will do once we have overthrown the Fealde is make sure that ye all have the chance to believe as ye wish. If you choose to pray in the kirk six times a day, so be it. If ye choose to dance naked in the forest, so be it."

Many of the men were shocked by this and Finn, crouched cold and stiff outside, though Lachlan had blundered. However, when at last the group broke up and went home through the dew-silvered fields, many looked thoughtful indeed. And the next day Killian the Listener spoke in the kirk, the light shining down through the tall plain windows upon his wispy white head. Every pew in the kirk was crowded with people, and many more stood at the back, twisting their hats in their hands and listening with rapt faces. Finn listened from the front pew, and though she did not understand much of what he said, the rhythm of his words broke over her in waves, filled with the sound of trumpets.

"The time o' God's vengeance is at hand, for ye have been led astray by false words and false promises! Ye have lost your way and wander frightened in the wilderness because o' the blindness and folly o' your vain hearts. Ye have been seduced into sin, ye have been led into war and wickedness, ye have set yourselves on pedestals, thinking yourselves the judge o' God's intentions when the great workings o' our Lord the Father are invisible to our eyes and inconceivable to our hearts. Ye have allowed proud, greedy, deceitful masters to rule our land and our thoughts, you have cowered down afore their faithless commands in fear and cowardice, ye have forgotten the words o' the Lord who spoke always o' forgiveness and understanding, love and humility. Have ye forgotten that all things that creep and walk, fly and swim and slither, were made by our Lord the Father, and were good in his eyes? Och, aye, ye who call evil good and good evil, who mistake darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter, the time o' God's vengeance is at hand!"

Many in the crowd sobbed and cowered in fear; many were white-faced with trembling hands. It seemed Killian the Listener's words struck deep into their hearts. His tone softened then. He spoke for a long time about forgiveness and compassion, about sacrifice and redemption. Finn was unable to help being moved by all he said, even though her sceptical mind found many things to question in his beliefs. Elfrida wept in the front pew and her husband Iain and Ashlin were absolutely engrossed. Even Lachlan was clearly touched by all the prophet said, once applauding spontaneously. At one point Jay leant across Finn to whisper to Dide, "The prophet has magic in his voice, same as ye or Enit. He could convert a cursehag, he could." The jongleur nodded in agreement.

A new mood swept over the crowd. They wept now in repentance and shame, they lifted faces shining with new resolve. When at last the prophet ended with a resounding call to arms many shouted and threw up their hats. As Lachlan and his retinue walked out of the kirk, the last to leave, they found the people of Kirkclanbright waiting for them outside in tense silence. Elfrida stopped on the steps of the kirk, the sun shining on her fair head, facing the crowd with flushed cheeks. The people of the valley went down on their knees before her, the men holding their hats to their hearts, the women with their heads bowed low. All swore as one to give their allegiance to Elfrida NicHilde the true banprionnsa of Tirsoilleir, and through her to the MacCuinn, Rígh of all Eileanan.

So it was that when Lachlan rode out of Kirkclanbright the next day, his company was augmented by a platoon of men and women armed with axes, scythes, cleavers, pitchforks and spades. Lachlan was greatly heartened by this first sign of the power of the prophet's influence and began to hope they might have a repeat of their miraculous victory at Dun Eidean, when they had broken the siege without needing to strike a single blow.

The company was in good spirits as it marched along the road towards the downs rising ahead of them. They did not sing, as most soldiers were wont to do when on the march, and Finn heard to her amazement that the Tirsoilleirean frowned down upon music, singing and dancing, thinking them vain and frivolous. She wondered how Dide would be able to contain himself, for since she had been in his company a day had not gone by without the jongleur entertaining them all with his guitar-playing and singing.

He showed no sign of strain, however. His battered old guitar was tucked away out of sight and he was every inch the sober soldier. Again his appearance and behavior had undergone a subtle transformation. Instead of the rolling gait of a sailor, he walked with the brisk steps and upright posture of a military man. Instead of the rough oaths of a sailor, he spoke like a soldier, saying no more than was necessary and with absolutely no trace of humour. The golden earring had vanished and his dark hair was neatly tied back under the cockaded blue tam-o'-shanter of a Yeoman of the Guard. He carried a sword strapped to his back and had a slim black dagger thrust into his highly polished boots, and wore a blue kilt and cloak like all of Lachlan's general staff. He stood to attention when addressing the Rígh and saluted smartly after being given his orders. It was as if he had never lived any other life than one of the Rígh's most trusted officers. Finn was sure that if she had told any of their Tirsoilleirean companions that Dide was indeed a roving minstrel, juggler and acrobat, they would have scorned to believe her.

Tam had reluctantly bid farewell to his sweetheart Bessie once more, having being

appointed the company's guide through the downs. Although they were no longer so concerned about running into enemy squadrons, given their increased size and strength, Lachlan had decided that they should still try and keep a low profile until they had rejoined the Greycloaks. Consequently Tam had led them away from the highway, taking them along a little known route that wound across the downs and into the valley beyond, where Lachlan's scouts had located the rest of the army.

The downs were open, rolling hills, bare of any trees but covered in long grasses that waved in the breeze. Here and there great grey boulders thrust up out of the grass in uncanny formations. Tam knew the name of every cluster of stones and the stories behind them. Most had names like the Devil's Anvil, Satan's Steps, Temptation Rock or Auld Clottie's Footstep, so that Finn marvelled how much this Devil of the Tirsoilleirean religion dominated their imagination.

Their path led them to a black cleft in the rock face called the Cloven Hoof. It reminded Finn of Ogre Pass at Cairncross, for the walls of the cliffs rose up high on either side, casting the pathway into deep shadow. It was an eerie, uncanny place. The downs fell away on either side, empty of any life. Tall grey rocks rose out of the rippling grass like crooked fingers, casting sinister shadows across the path. No birds sang. No coney hopped about. No lizards baked in the sun. There was only the melancholy sigh of the wind amongst the time-weathered rocks.

Lachlan surveyed the Cloven Hoof grimly, saying, "I dislike the look o' this, my lad. Is there no other way through?"

Tam shook his head.

"Och then, happen we should hurry through afore we begin to lose the light," Iseult said. "Tell everyone to make haste and keep a close eye out, for I've never seen a likelier spot for an ambush."

"But who would ken we came this way?" Tam objected. "And if they kent, who would tell?"

Lachlan and Iseult exchanged a glance. "There are spies and traitors everywhere, Tam," the Rígh said grimly.

The young sailor swallowed, losing some of his sunburnt colour.

"Let us hope none have betrayed us, though," Lachlan said with a smile. "Our luck may still hold. Come, lead the way, lad!"

As the soldiers began to march through in single file, all keeping a cautious eye out, Lachlan beckoned to Gwilym who limped forward, leaning on his staff. "Ugly, can ye sense any hostile minds about? I have an uneasy feeling about this."

"So do I," Gwilym answered, his beetling brows drawn down upon his hooked nose. "This be an evil place, though. There has been murder done here before, and much blood shed. And ye ken as well as I do that it be difficult to sense an ambush when there already be such a crowd o' people here, all jostling with thoughts and emotions. If ye would all draw away for a while, happen I could get a clearer idea."

"Too late," Iseult said. "Already we have begun to march through and, besides, we

do no' have time for loitering. Already the sun is beginning to go down and we want to reach the Greycloaks while there is still light, if we can."

Duncan Ironfist trotted up beside them, saying with a smart salute, "Are ye ready to ride through, your Highness?"

Lachlan nodded and the captain of the Blue Guards wheeled his horse about so he rode before the Righ, his sword drawn. Dillon rode next with his hand clasped on *Joyeuse's* ornate hilt, his big shaggy dog loping along at his horse's heels. Iseult fell into place behind her husband, and Dide spurred forward his mount, the big chestnut Harlen, so that he too guarded her back. The other officers trotted close behind, surrounding Iain and a pale-faced Elfrida, all with swords drawn or bows at the ready.

Finn was at the rear of the company with Ashlin, Brangaine, Jay, Enit, Killian, Nellwyn, Tomas, Johanna and the other healers, all of them crowded into three wagons drawn by big carthorses donated by the village of Kirkclanbright. They had their own guard of twenty-five soldiers, led by one of Lachlan's officers, a young man called Sweeney. Although Finn had protested when Lachlan had insisted her horse be given to Dide, she was secretly rather glad to be travelling in the wagon with her friends instead of battling the big chestnut. It was like old times, having the League of the Healing Hand back together again, after so many years apart.

At last it came time for them to move forward into the Cloven Hoof. Jay slapped the reins on the carthorse's brown rump and clicked his tongue, and the horse strode forward, the little wagon bouncing over the ruts of the path, already greatly churned by the boots and hooves of those that had gone before.

The sunlight was blocked out and a chill fell upon them. Brangaine pulled her plaid more tightly about her, saying, "Ooh, I dinna like this place. I'll be glad when we are on the other side and safe within the army camp."

Finn nodded her agreement, cuddling Goblin up to her neck. She stared back at the narrow gash of sunlight behind them. Her heart suddenly lurched. "Look!" she cried. "Flaming dragon balls, I just saw . . ."

Jay quickly turned around. "What?"

"I do no' ken . . . movement ... a flash."

Jay stared back, then suddenly he dropped the reins to lift both hands to his mouth, giving a long resounding cry like that of a hunting horn. The sound bounced around the narrow canyon, causing horses to sidestep uneasily and men to cry aloud in alarm. Anyone who still had their weapons sheathed drew them and Lachlan launched Stormwing up into the sky, the hawk giving a long whistling cry as it flew up into the bright slit of sky.

Suddenly it shrieked a warning. In response, archers stood up all along the ridge and shot a deluge of arrows down into the ravine. Luckily Lachlan's men had had time to lift their shields or take cover behind the wagons, but the air was still rent with the sound of men and horses screaming as arrow after arrow found a target.

Then soldiers began to pour along the canyon, attacking the calvacade from the rear. They all wore heavy metal armour with long white surcoats emblazoned with a scarlet

fitche cross.

"Bright Soldiers!" Johanna screamed. She had been present at many a battle between the Greyclocks and the Bright Soldiers and knew they were in acute danger indeed. She thrust Tomas behind her and drew her dagger.

The gyrfalcon was harassing the archers with its swift, sudden descent, knocking down one after another with its clenched talons, slashing at their faces with its beak and blinding them with a flurry of white wings. One of the archers lifted his bow and aimed straight for the great white bird's breast. Just as he pulled back the string, an arrow from Lachlan's longbow struck him through the heart and he fell with a cry.

Men of the Blue Guards were attempting to swarm up the steep sides of the ravine so they could grapple with those attacking from above. Both Lachlan and Iseult flew straight up out of the ravine, as swift as any bird, and began shooting the enemy with their bows and arrows. There were so many of the Bright Soldiers, however, that even with their deadly accuracy both Lachlan and Iseult were soon out of arrows and had to land on the ridge and fight hand-to-hand.

Meanwhile, the Bright Soldiers attacking from the rear were getting ever closer to the wagons. Sweeney and his men were fighting desperately to protect the wagons' precious load but they were being overwhelmed by the sheer force of numbers. Finn had her crossbow to her shoulder and was firing bolt after bolt at the attacking soldiers, but she was hampered by the heads of her friends which kept getting in her way.

"Get down, get down, ye gowks!" she screamed.

To her horror she saw Sweeney fall, then the Bright Soldiers were reaching up their gauntleted hands for the sides of the last wagon in the calvacade. In that wagon were Johanna, Tomas, Killian and the team of healers. All it would take were a few quick strokes and all would be dead.

Finn leapt across the narrow gap between the two wagons, landing nimbly on the swingletree slung between the two carthorses harnessed to Johanna's wagon. The carthorses were all rearing and plunging in wild distress, for none were trained to battle, being only gentle farm animals more used to pulling a plough than hearing the screams of wounded men. Clinging to their harness, Finn swarmed across their backs and over the driver's seat, her dagger in her hand. Behind her, Jay was attempting to dodge the enormous flailing hooves, at last managing to dart past, attacking one of the soldiers with his narrow sword.

Johanna was slashing at the soldiers' hands with her knife but they all wore steel gauntlets and she could do no damage. One already was throwing his mail-clad leg over the side of the wagon, though the healers sought to throw him down again with all their strength. The wagon lurched forward as the carthorse tried to bolt, and the soldier fell back to the ground, screaming as the wheel of the wagon rolled over him.

Finn looked about her wildly, then glanced up. The deluge of arrows had faltered as the archers converged on Lachlan and Iseult fighting desperately further along the ravine. Quick as a thought Finn seized the coil of nyx-hair rope that she wore at her waist, knotted it to one of her crossbow bolts and fired straight up. The bolt flew up and embedded itself in a rock at the height of the cliff. She tested it swiftly, then bent and

dragged up Tomas, crouched white-faced against the floor.

"Cling to me, laddie," she cried. "Do no' let go."

With the slight weight of Tomas hanging about her neck, she swarmed up the rope. A soldier grabbed her leg. She kicked him in the face and he let go, clutching at his broken nose. Another thrust at her with his sword but she swung out of reach. It seemed to take her mere seconds to reach the top of the cliff. She crawled over, heaved Tomas off her back, and peered over the edge. Down below all was chaos. Finn lifted her crossbow and fired at the soldier about to run Jay through. The soldier crumpled back, his sword falling from his lifeless hand.

"Jay! The prophet!" she cried.

Jay cast her a wild glance but bent and picked up the old man, who was shrinking back against the headboard in bewildered fear. Jay staggered under his weight but managed to heave him over his shoulder. He then seized the rope and tried to swarm up it as Finn had done. He was no trained cat-thief, though, and frail as the old prophet was, he was still far heavier than Tomas.

As Jay struggled with the rope, a soldier cut his way through the healers and raised his sword high, about to bring it down upon the young jongleur and his burden. Suddenly a small black fury leapt for his face with sharp claws raking. The soldier screamed and clutched at his bleeding eyes, and Goblin dashed away into the shadows again.

The elven cat had bought Jay a few seconds and in that time Finn desperately began to haul on the rope, even though she knew she did not have the strength to drag both Jay and Killian up the cliff. To her surprise, the rope was as light and easy to haul as if two men did not dangle on the end of it. She looked down with her heart springing into her mouth, afraid that they had fallen down, but Jay still clung to the rope, Killian draped over his shoulder.

Nyx magic! Finn thought with a glad spring of her heart. In seconds Jay was heaving himself over the lip of the cliff, dropping Killian to the ground. The young jongleur was panting with the effort but his hazel eyes were alight with triumph. "Well done, Finn!"

"We have to save the others too, if we can," Finn cried and leant over to call, "Johanna! All o' ye! Grab the rope!"

She tossed the rope back down and Johanna seized it with one hand, ordering her healers to grab hold of it.

"Pull them up," Finn ordered. "It's a nyx rope. It's magic! It'll help ye. I'll guard them."

She raised her crossbow and shot down a soldier thrusting his sword at one of the healers, then another seeking to drag down those clinging to the rope.

Slowly at first, then more swiftly, the rope slithered up the side of the cliff, three young women clinging to it. Jay helped them over as Finn continued to harass the soldiers below with her crossbow, then tossed the rope down again for Johanna and the other two remaining healers.

The ferocity of the battle in the ravine was beginning to die down. Many of the Righ's

soldiers had managed to scale the cliffs and were fighting with those that had been concealed along the ridge. Others had run back to help protect the defenseless passengers in the wagons. Lachlan and Iseult were still fighting back to back, surrounded on all sides by a great pile of dead and wounded Bright Soldiers. The gyrfalcon fought with them, a bolt of white lightning that struck without warning from the twilight sky.

In the other wagon, Nellwyn and Enit had joined hands and raised up their enchanting voices. Sleeping soldiers were draped all round her wagon, their armoured chests rising and falling peacefully. Among the sleepers were Brangaine and Ashlin, both looking altogether too comfortable. "Think o' how we'll be able to tease them when they wake," she panted to Jay. "We're fighting to the death and they're snoring!"

"The fight's no' over yet," Jay said grimly, picking up his sword from where he had dropped it. "Finn, look out!"

Finn spun round and saw six Bright Soldiers racing to attack them, deadly intent on their faces. They had seen the white robes of the old prophet and knew they would achieve great distinction if they were the ones who managed to kill him.

The healers were not armed and Finn had used up all of her crossbow bolts. She drew her dagger with a curse, and stood shoulder to shoulder with Jay and Johanna, all of them without shields or armour and untrained in the art of war. Suddenly a slim figure somersaulted over their heads and stood before them, a glittering eight-sided star in her hand. One arm was bleeding and her red braid was unravelling wildly, but Iseult was otherwise as cool and unflustered as if she was out for an evening walk.

"So, ye attack bairns and auld men, do ye?" she asked. "Cowards!"

The six soldiers yelled in response and charged. The *reil* spun out of her hand, circling round to slice through two of the men's throats, cutting through the heavy chainmail like a knife through butter. They fell, gurgling horribly, and Iseult drew her long skewer, the only weapon she had left in her belt.

The four remaining soldiers had not even faltered, merely leaping over the fallen bodies of their comrades and thrusting their swords straight towards Iseult's heart. She spun round on one foot, knocking one down with a powerful kick to the head and disarming another with a skilful flick of her wrist. His sword spun up into the air and she caught it and engaged the other two soldiers in a flurry of thrusts and feints too fast to follow with the eye. The disarmed soldier tried to grasp her from the back, and she kicked back with her boot, striking him in the groin. He wore heavy armour though, so he hardly flinched, smashing her in the face with his gauntleted fist. She fell, and Jay lunged forward with his narrow sword, shouting in horror. He stabbed the soldier right through the visor of his helmet, and the Bright Soldier fell back, the sword embedded in his eye. The other two soldiers were upon them, though, and they had only Johanna and Finn's daggers left.

Finn tossed hers to Jay and then quickly knelt and tugged at her rope. To her amazement the knot slithered free instantly. *I canna have tied that very well*, she thought. *Lucky it did no' come undone afore!*

She spun round, her nimble fingers tying a running bowline so that the rope was tied into a loop that could be loosened and tightened at will. Then she spun the rope as she

had seen the horsemen of Tireich do and threw it at one of the soldiers. To her delight, it fell down about his shoulders and tightened with a jerk that knocked him off his feet. As he went down his flailing legs caught his comrade behind the knees and he fell too with a great huff as his breath was knocked out of him. Iseult had staggered to her feet, blood masking her face from her nose and mouth. She brought her sword to rest on the soldier's throat. "I would no' try to rise," she said conversationally and he lay still, staring up at her through the slits in his visor. "Good decision," she said, and wiped her bloody mouth with the back of her hand. Then she glanced across at Finn. "Nice rope trick," she said. "Where did ye ken to do that?"

Finn was still rather astounded at the success of her stratagem. "Saw a Tireichan spinning a rope like that and thought I'd give it a go," she answered rather breathlessly. Iseult raised one thin red brow and Finn confessed, "Nyx rope. I think it's magic."

Iseult nodded. "The gifts o' the nyx are like that, it seems. Well, quick thinking anyway, Finn! Ye're a worthy addition to the company indeed."

Finn flushed with pleasure as Dide came running up behind them, to help disarm the remaining soldiers and march them away with the other prisoners. Despite having every advantage of surprise, numbers and terrain, the Bright Soldiers had proved no match for the Blue Guards. They had suffered heavy losses indeed and, although many of Lachlan's supporters had been killed or wounded, the key players were all still alive. Tomas was able to lay his hands upon the injured and heal them, and within half an hour all were almost ready to march on again, the dead laid out on one of the wagons and the prisoners all bound and herded together in the centre.

After close questioning, one of the Bright Soldiers had let slip the name of the man who had betrayed them. To no-one's surprise it was Dick Dickson and Lachlan had sent back a messenger to the pastor of Kirkclanbright with the news, knowing the people of the valley would exact their own rough justice.

Finn and the others were all sitting on the edge of the ridge, recovering their strength after the strenuous battle and teasing Brangaine and Ashlin about having slept through it all. The sun was now very low in the sky, and the downs were all lit with a dim red light while to the east stars were already beginning to prick through the twilight.

Tomas was lying with his head on Johanna's lap, his hand over his eyes. As usual, the effort of healing so many had exhausted him and he was looking very white. Suddenly he lifted his head and said in a small voice, "Something bad is happening."

"What, dearling?"

"Something bad is happening."

Finn and Johanna exchanged worried glances. They had heard the little boy say that before.

"Where, dearling?"

Tomas raised himself on the elbow and pointed back the way they had come. "Over there."

Finn stared off into the twilight. With a sinking heart she saw a faint smudge of

smoke, almost invisible against the twilight sky. They all stared at it for a few minutes, then Finn got slowly to her feet. "Toasted toads, I'd best go tell Lachlan and Iseult."

She found the Rígh and Banrígh on the far side of the Cloven Hoof, making the final preparations before giving the order to ride out. They looked at each other in dismay at the news.

"Kirkclanbright?"

"I hope no'," Lachlan replied. In all of their mind's eye was a picture of the serene little valley with its slow river and the tall spire of its kirk soaring above the golden-brown trees. "I fear it is but a vain hope, though, *leannan*." Suddenly he smashed one hand into the palm of the other. "I should've kent, I should've suspected! Damn that Dickson and his nasty sly face."

"What should we do?" Duncan Ironfist asked, distress on his battered face. "If we can see the smoke from here it is too late to do aught but try and succour those left alive."

Lachlan nodded angrily. "We must go back. It is on our account that they incurred the displeasure o' the Bright Soldiers. We must take Tomas and the healers and see what we can do." He gave a deep sigh then straightened his shoulders once more. "The purpose o' battle is slaughter and the price o' victory is blood," he quoted. "I do no' ken why I always find it so hard to remember this."

Iseult took his face between her hands and kissed him. "Because ye are at heart a good and gentle man," she said. "And that is why I love ye."

Weary of heart and body, the company turned round and headed back the way they had come. It seemed like a very long time ago. As they came down the road into the valley of Kirkclanbright, they could see flames still leaping high all through the valley. The kirk blazed like a torch, casting rippling orange reflections across the river. Where Rowanglen had stood was a smoldering ruin.

Tam was hurrying at the head of the calvacade, and he cried aloud in pain. "No, no! Da! Mam!"

Beside him were the other folk of Kirkclanbright, who had set out so blithely that morning. Many of them cried aloud in distress. Some wept, leaning on their pitchforks.

"The Bright Soldiers may still be about," Lachlan said grimly. "Och, no, Tam! Take care!"

Tam had gone running up the avenue of rowan trees, not heeding the Righ's shout. Dide dashed after him, his sword drawn, and the others followed in close formation.

Tam's father and mother and sister were all working to douse the flames, their faces black with soot. Tam threw himself on his mother with a great sob of relief. "Ye're alive!"

"We took refuge in the woods," Great Tam said shortly. "Bessie o' the Apples came running to warn us. They saw the kirk being torched and guessed what had happened."

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," Tam wept.

"Och, lad, it is no' your fault," his mother said, setting down her buckets with a sigh. "It is the Fealde's blackhearted soldiers that set the fires, no' ye."

"The Bright Soldiers always have to burn," Lachlan said sombrely. "Ye should have seen what they did to Blessem. It was a black char-pit when they finished with it, no' a tree or head o' corn left standing."

As he spoke the Rígh was signaling to his soldiers to help put out the fire and although all had marched a long way and fought a hard battle, they set to with willing hands.

"I am so very sorry that your help to me should be so cruelly rewarded," Lachlan said.

Great Tam shrugged. "Well, we truly be at war now." He spoke stiffly, gazing at his ruined house with sombre eyes, but there was no rancour in his voice.

"Aye," Lachlan said unhappily. "I am sorry but we must ride on. There are others that must be helped too. I will leave a squad o' soldiers to guard ye and assist ye."

"Well, thank ye for that," Great Tam replied.

All night they worked to douse the flames and help the injured. The Bright Soldiers had been swift and brutal in their reprisals, but luckily many had been forewarned and had taken refuge in the forest. Only a few had lost their lives, among them the rotund little pastor, struck down while trying to save his kirk.

A patrol of Lachlan's soldiers found the Bright Soldiers camped only a few miles away, all enjoying a good night's rest after their long day's labour. The captain had not expected any trouble and so had set only one sentry who was easily overcome, allowing the patrol to capture the entire encampment without the shedding of a single drop of blood. They were taken back to Kirkclanbright and lashed in with the other prisoners, stripped of their armour and weapons, with chains about their wrists and necks.

"I hate prisoners," Lachlan said gloomily. "What am I meant to do with them?"

"Set them to work rebuilding Kirkclanbright," Iseult said.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," Killian said in agreement.

Lachlan sighed and nodded. "Very well. I shall leave a company o' soldiers here to assist and guard them, and to scour the countryside for any more o' the blaygird things. Ea's green blood, I hate Bright Soldiers!"

Just then Duncan Ironfist came riding up with a squad of Yeoman. Across his lap was slumped the figure of a man. Duncan let him fall to the ground. It was Dick Dickson. He lay in the dust, his head twisted unnaturally, his eyes closed. Blood seeped from three deep wounds in his breast.

"We found him impaled to his front door with a pitchfork," Duncan said shortly. "No way o' kenning who the pitchfork belongs to. Every house in this valley has a few."

Lachlan nodded. "Very well. Bury him with the others." He sighed and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "Well. What now?"

"Now we bide a wee and rest up," Iseult said. "Tomorrow we'll ride out once more."

He nodded, his face shadowed. She laid her hand on the back of his neck, under his curls.

"I am sick o' the stench o' death and ashes," Lachlan said. "I seem to carry it round with me, like Gearradh's cloak."

"We are at war," Iseult answered.

"Fancy that," Lachlan replied. "Who would have guessed?"

She smiled at him wearily. "Come and wash your face and hands. Ye're as black as chimney sweep's arse, as Finn would say. Happen when ye are clean ye shall no' think ye spread the stench o' death like Gearradh!"

Samhain Wishes

Autumn laid its bright mantle over the land of Tirsoilleir. Stags bellowed in the forest, and the swineherds knocked down nuts from the trees to fatten the pigs before they were slaughtered for the winter. The villages were pungent with the smell of freshly brewed ale. In the mornings mist lay heavy over the valleys, the bare crests of the downs rising like islands out of a white sea. Although the days remained warm, the nights were cool and crisp and the Greycloaks were all glad to huddle close around their campfires.

Bride, the capital city of Tirsoilleir, lay just on the other side of the bay but the Greycloaks were in no hurry to besiege the home of the Great Kirk just yet. They had won all of southern Tirsoilleir to their cause with only a few battles and minor skirmishes, and were now intent on moving at a leisurely pace across the Alainn River and through northern Tirsoilleir to approach Bride from the rear. All hoped the northern lairds would be as quick to pledge their support to Elfrida NicHilde as the southern lairds had been.

At first Lachlan had been restless and edgy, wanting to thrust towards Bride in a great rush of raw energy, hoping they would carry all before them. He was sick of the war and anxious to be at home with his wife and children, enjoying the fruits of peace. His firstborn son and heir, Donnacan, was now five and half years old while the younger children, the twins Owein and Olwynne, were only eighteen months in age. Their mother and father had been absent for a quarter of their entire life. It hurt Lachlan greatly to be missing out on this stage of their growth, when they were all wonder and delight. Although they received regular news of home, Lachlan wanted to be there with them, not hearing it all second-hand.

Iseult missed her children terribly too but it was she who had counselled patience. "Now is the time to be like snow," she told him. "Snow is gentle, snow is silent, snow is inexorable. Fight hard against snow and it will always smother you with its softness and silence. Submit to snow and it will melt away afore you."

Lachlan had been impatient with her Scarred Warrior maxims, but to his surprise Leonard the Canny and Duncan Ironfist had agreed with her.

"Aye, ye should let the rumour mill work on your behalf," Leonard said. "Already the tales o' your rescue o' the auld prophet are racing around the country like wildfire. Allow time for speculation and wondering. Let the people talk amongst themselves and, as much as possible, give them the chance to hear Killian speak so that he can sway them with his words. Allow time for the lairds to approach us and discuss terms, and weigh the matter carefully. None will throw in their lot with us quickly. They need time to consider the consequences."

"This is the one time when biding our time will be to our advantage," Duncan agreed. "The Bright Soldiers are in the superior position here. They are all trained from birth, while our soldiers were being apprenticed as fanners and blacksmiths and cobblers. They are fighting on their own terrain and have all the advantages of supplies and numbers. Let us no' waste our strength on futile charges. Let us remember the lessons we learnt during the Bright Wars. Remember the tactics that worked so well at Dun Eidean and Rhyssmadill? Let us allow the prophet to do his work, as Jorge the Seer did so well; let us use trickery and deception where we can; let us build up a fearsome reputation so that they truly believe we have the hand o' their god upon us, and see if we can win this war without striking a single blow."

"By biding our time, we shall be making the Fealde very nervous," Leonard said in satisfaction. "And that can only bode well for us."

So Lachlan repressed his homesickness and his impatience and did as they counselled. Killian the Listener preached in every village square and kirk, and the crowds that came to listen to him grew greater every week. Elfrida rode out on her white palfrey, visiting the sick and the poor with the healers, meeting with the local lairds and guildmasters, and stopping to talk to plump matrons in the marketplaces. With her sweet face and demure manner, she soon became a favourite with the countryfolk, many of whom retained a romantic longing for the old days when the MacHilde clan had ruled.

Strict discipline was maintained amongst the army. It moved slowly and inexorably, accompanied by its own supply wagons laden with sacks of grains, bales of hay and poultry in coops, and its own herds of pigs, sheep and goats. Any extra supplies that were needed were paid for by the quartermaster, a shrewd and canny man known for his excellent bargaining ability. Consequently, the dismay which the sight of the Greycloaks had once engendered was replaced by eagerness amongst the local farmers and merchants, confident that their women and possessions would be in no danger and that a fair price would be paid for their merchandise.

There were many clashes with bands of Bright Soldiers, but the Greycloaks were never persuaded into pursuing their enemies, concentrating on choosing their ground well and keeping a tight formation, making it difficult for the Tirsoilleirean army to do more than harass their edges. The closer the Greycloaks drew to the Alainn River, the more frequently the skirmishes occurred but the sheer size and weight of the Righ's army and the hilly terrain discouraged any major confrontations.

Lachlan and Iseult passed the days studying with Gwilym the Ugly, learning as much as they could about the Tirsoilleirean religion and culture, and practising their fighting skills. Dide was often to be found studying with them, although he was still reluctant to pledge himself fully to the Coven. He was fascinated by magic, however, and eager to learn more. Jay, Finn and Brangaine also joined the lessons daily, all finding to their

pleasure a natural adeptness at the use of the One Power. Gwilym the Ugly was a stern taskmaster, but an excellent teacher. He imbued them all with a love of knowledge for its own sake, so that Finn found herself borrowing books to read later and pestering him with questions about all sorts of things. Gwilym had spent the years of the Burning at the Tower of Mists, the only witches' tower where the ancient library remained intact, so he had an extraordinary breadth and depth of knowledge.

Dide and Jay also spent much of their time with Enit and Nellwyn, learning more about the use of magic through music. Ashlin often joined them there, leaving Finn and Brangaine to their own devices. They helped Johanna and the other healers gather leaves, flowers, roots, nuts, seeds and bark, and learnt how to grind them or distill their precious essences to make medicines, healing salves and pain-numbing potions. They accompanied Elfrida on her expeditions, sat in on many of the war conferences, and played many a game of trictrac or cards, Finn puffing away on her pipe. Brangaine even joined Finn in her daily fighting lessons with the other soldiers, learning how to draw a bow, wield a short sword, and repel an attacker with one quick, fluid movement.

They crossed the Alaiinn River a week after the autumn equinox, and fought their first bloody battle. Though the cost was high, the Greycloaks were eventually victorious, driving the Bright Soldiers back and securing the land all the way up to the Great Divide. Once again Lachlan wanted to press their advantage, but was counselled again to bide his time. Reluctantly he submitted to his advisors and set up camp at a strongly walled town called Kirkenny, built within the deep curve of the river so it was surrounded on three sides by water. From there they rode out in small, well-guarded expeditions, Killian preaching in the kirks, Lachlan and Elfrida meeting with the local powers, the soldiers clashing with those who still stood against them. On each occasion the Greycloaks were able to overwhelm the Tirsoilleirean army with their speed and ferocity, or unnerve them with clever tricks. The Greycloaks began to be regarded with superstitious awe, the countryfolk whispering that they were protected by God and could not be beaten.

One night, in late October, a pigeon arrived from Lucescere with letters for the Rígh and Banrígh. Lachlan had been absent from his lands for four months and had been anxious indeed for news. Eager to hear what had been happening in the rest of the country, Finn and the others clustered close around the Rígh's pavilion. As usual, they had joined Lachlan and Iseult for their evening meal, which was served on a long trestle table set with candelabra and fine tableware. Gwilym the Ugly, Elfrida, Iain, the two seanalairs Duncan and Leonard, and Lachlan's staff of officers also joined the meal every night. Dinner was usually followed by much talk and laughter, some soft-voiced performances from Nellwyn and the jongleurs, and games of chance. Tonight, however, all gathered round to hear the news.

The package had to be small by necessity, since it was carried by a pigeon, but it had been written in very small writing and contained much news of interest. The Fairgean were on the rise again, returning to their winter home after spending the summer in the southern seas. A new coast watch set up by the MacRuraich had proved most helpful in tracking their movements, however, and some defensive measures had been taken that had proved to be of use. Also from Rurach came the news that Gwyneth NicSian was once again with child. Finn was both happy and astounded by this news, whispering to Jay, "Och, well, Da must have managed to spend *some* time at home this summer!"

"Isabeau also writes that the NicThanach has finally given birth to a very healthy little

boy, which be glad news indeed," Iseult said. She was reading the letter out, being the only one able to decipher her twin sister's cramped handwriting. "They have called him Fymbar, because he be so tow-headed, then Lachlan for ye, *leannan*."

"Och, that be nice o' them," Lachlan said smiling. "Fymbar Lachlan MacThanach is a grand name!"

"She says Meghan is very happy with the progress o' the students in the Theurgia, though she willna admit it, o' course, calling them all woolly-headed slowpokes."

Lachlan grinned and made a wry comment, and Iseult went on, "Apparently she has taken on a new apprentice now Isabeau is a fully fledged witch. He's a young boy with a shadow-hound for a familiar. Fancy that! Isabeau says all the dogs in the city come to his whistle."

"That must be a sight to see!" Lachlan grinned. "What about the laddiekins, *leannan*. Does she no' write o' them?"

"Isabeau says the lads are as artful as a bagful o' elven cats. Look, Elfrida, she's enclosed a letter for ye from Neil. She says his lessons are coming along well."

Neil was Iain and Elfrida's son, only three months younger than Donncan. He had been sent to stay in the safety of Lucescere while his parents rode to war, for Donncan and he were the very best of friends. Elfrida received the roughly scrawled missive with an upwelling of tears, turning it over proudly and exclaiming at how well he was forming his letters now.

"*Leannan*, Isabeau says Olwynne is talking quite well now but that Owein hardly says a word, letting his sister do all the asking for him. We shall have to do something about that when we get home! Oh, but she says Owein has taken his first flight! Oh, Lachlan, he be only nineteen months auld. Did Donncan fly so young?"

"I canna remember, *leannan*. I do no' think so," Lachlan replied proudly. He and Iseult smiled at each other, both feeling a tightness in their throat at the thought they had missed their baby boy's first flight.

"What else does Isabeau say?" Dide asked eagerly. "Has she truly decided to stay at the Tower o' Two Moons now?"

Iseult nodded. "Aye. I told ye she sat for her Third Test o' Powers on Midsummer's Eve, the night we were all meeting clandestinely at Rhyssmadill? Well, she says here that she has already sat her First Test o' Elements and won her ring o' fire. She is wearing the ruby ring that she found at the Cursed Towers, the one that belonged to our ancestor Faodhagan the Red."

"Och, she mun be aye powerful, this sister o' yours," Nellwyn said. "To be only twenty-two and already admitted into the Coven as a fully fledged witch, and then to win her first elemental ring within only a few months!"

"Aye, the Keybearer believes she may be the strongest young witch the Coven has found since the Burning," Gwilym said. "Definitely a chance for a new sorceress there, I'd say."

Dide had been staring into the depths of his goblet, but now he raised it to his lips and tossed back the dark wine within. "Well, that would make the Key-bearer happy," he said wryly and poured himself another cup, slopping some of the wine on the white tablecloth. "Let us drink to Isabeau the Red and her ruby ring!" he cried, leaping to his feet and holding his goblet high.

"To Isabeau!" the table echoed, sipping their wine.

"And to Fymbar Lachlan MacThanach, heir to Blessem," Lachlan said, and everyone toasted the new baby enthusiastically.

"To those we've left behind," Elfrida said tearfully, clutching her little boy's letter. This toast was drunk with eagerness, many sighing and looking pensive.

"To my mam's belly!" Finn cried.

"Aye, to the expectant mother," Lachlan said and drank deeply.

"To peace," Dide said sombrely and the laughter died away, everyone at the long table nodding and repeating, "To peace," as they drank.

"Well, that be all the news," Iseult said, folding the pages away.

"How about some music, Dide?" Lachlan said.

The young jongleur looked up from his goblet. "Aye, why no'?"

Connor was sent running to fetch his guitar, and everyone refilled their glasses and sat back to enjoy his song. For once, Dide did not play some ribald song of seduction or a humorous ballad designed to set everyone laughing. He strummed his guitar softly, the candlelight flickering over his olive-skinned face, with its straight, fine nose, sensuously curved mouth, and dark eyes now brooding with shadows. Then he began to sing a very old, very plaintive tune. So very unhappy was his voice, so full of heartfelt emotion, that many of those present cleared their throats, thinking of their own loves they had left far behind. Lachlan reached out and took Iseult's hand, and Elfrida nestled her head on Iain's shoulder, the ready tears once again springing to her eyes.

"Long have we been parted, lassie my darlin',

Now we are met again, lassie, lie near me.

Near me, near me, lassie, lie near me,

Long have ye been away, lassie lie near me.

All that I have endured, lassie my darlin'

Here in your arms is cured, lassie, lie near me.

Near me, near me, lassie, lie near me,

Long have ye been away, lassie lie near me.

Say that ye'll aye be true, say ye'll n'er deceive me
And I'll love none but ye, my darlin', lassie lie near me.
Near me, near me, lassie, lie near me,
Long have ye been away, lassie lie near me.
If we were n'er to part, lassie my darlin'
My joy would be complete, lassie, lie near me.
Near me, near me, lassie, lie near me,
Long have ye been away, lassie lie near me."

His voice sighed away into silence, the last chords of the music dying away. Then the long hush was broken by uproarious applause. Dide bowed, unsmiling, and then came back to his seat.

"Och, ye are such a performer, Dide," Finn cried. "So wistful ye sounded, anyone would think ye really felt the bitter pangs o' unrequited love." She rolled her eyes, her hand to her heart.

Dide stared down at her, colour running up into his cheeks. Then abruptly he turned and walked out of the pavilion and into the dusk, his shoulders very stiff.

"Flaming dragon balls, what's up with him?" Finn asked in bewilderment.

Jay hesitated then leant forward, saying very softly, "Ye should no' tease him so, Finn."

"But what's his problem?"

Brangaine leant forward, her face soft. "He's in love, is he?"

Jay nodded. "Aye, he has loved her a very long time. He says since he first saw her, when they were but bairns."

"But why . . . Does she no' love him too?"

Jay shook his head. "I do no' think she even kens."

"But, roasted rats, that's ridiculous," Finn answered. "What's wrong with the lass? Dide's as bonny a man as I've ever seen, quick and clever and funny. And he fights like a lion and sings like a nightingale, and is the Righ's best friend. What more could she want?"

Jay cast her a quick glance, full of trouble and anger. "Love is an unaccountable thing. Like lightning, it strikes at random. Who is to say why one person loves another?" His voice was stifled with emotion and Brangaine looked at him with a little frown.

Finn did not notice, however, saying, "What a gowk that girl must be! Who is it?"

Anyone we ken?"

Jay would not answer but Brangaine said, "This evening, when Isabeau the Red was mentioned, I saw such a look in his eye, a look of such longing, I could no' help but wonder . . ."

Jay shifted uncomfortably, colour rising in his lean cheeks.

"Isabeau?" Finn cried. "But o' course. When we were at Lucescere he was always dancing with her and singing her love songs, and hanging on her shoulder. Why did I no' see it?" She gave a sigh. "Isabeau the Red. How romantic."

Brangaine was shocked, however. "But is she no' the Banrígh's own sister? No wonder he looks so unhappy. Such a union would be impossible."

"Why?" Finn demanded.

"I am sure the Rígh has planned a grand wedding for her, one o' great advantage to the throne. The Rígh would never allow his sister-in-law, a NicFaghan, to marry a mere jongleur."

Jay was silent, staring broodingly into his wine. Finn leapt immediately to Dide's defense.

"Why not? Dide is Lachlan's greatest friend, I have often heard him say so. And Isabeau is no simpering corn-dolly to be married off to some rich laird just because it would be to Lachlan's advantage! She's a powerful witch, ye heard them say so tonight. She has always gone her own way!"

"Even so, there are few enough o' the blood left to make it unwise for her to choose her own destiny," Brangaine said. "Isabeau NicFaghan has a duty to her family, just like ye and I do, Finn. We canna be marrying just anyone, or directing our lives to suit ourselves."

Colour rose in Finn's cheeks. "Flaming dragon balls, why no'?" she demanded, scrambling to her feet. "Why should we be sacrificed just because our ancestors were witches o' the First Coven? I never asked to be a banprionnsa. There's no way I'm going to let myself be married off to some fat auld hog o' a laird just because he be rich!"

With Goblin stalking after her, tail raised high, Finn strode off into the darkness, leaving Jay and Brangaine staring after her.

"Poor Finn," Brangaine said. "She does no' realise that being a banprionnsa has its duties and responsibilities as well as privileges. She will learn in time."

"Are Finn's parents like that?" Jay's voice was troubled. "Will they really try and marry her off for some kind o' political advantage?"

"O' course they will," Brangaine answered. "Och, they are kind and loving indeed, and very indulgent o' Finn's wildness. But she is heir to the throne o' Rurach. It has been a troubled decade in our part o' the world. There has been much hardship and both Siantan and Rurach have lost much o' their wealth. A good marriage will do much to mend matters, as well as setting up new trade opportunities and political treaties. The MacRuraich will be considering all possible suitors very carefully indeed."

There was a long pause, then Jay said, "And be that true o' ye too, Bran?"

"Och, o' course," she answered. "I am the NicSian. My people depend upon me. As soon as I come o' age, the management o' the country will be in my hands. I must make a good marriage. My husband must have strength and wealth enough to help me rule my country as it should be ruled. I have always kent that."

"Someone auld and powerful then," Jay said bitterly.

Brangaine smiled. "He must be young enough to breed up heirs."

"That's sickening!"

"Nay, why? It's the reality o' life as a banprionnsa. I have been brought up to it and ken the importance o' it. Finn, unfortunately, has no'. She will have to learn."

Jay said nothing but there was such a condemnatory quality to his silence that Brangaine said defensively, "She will be the NicRuraich."

The next morning Finn sought Dide out and apologised to him, and he laughed at her and said that it was him that should be saying sorry. "I was just in a bad mood, Finn. I want this war to be over and all o' us back in our rightful places."

"I do no' ken where my rightful place is," she said rather unhappily.

He stared at her. "But ye have a family and a home. Ye will return there, o' course."

"I suppose so."

"Do ye no' wish to?"

"It's no' that," she said. "It's just I really do no' want to be a banprionnsa. I wish I could do this forever."

"This?" Dide said mockingly. "Hang around waiting for the war?"

"Well, nay. But travel about and have adventures and see new places. Like ye do."

"Och, ye mean, ye wish ye could be a spy and an adventurer like me," Dide said. Although he spoke laughingly there was a bitter shade to his voice that made Finn look at him questioningly. "Be careful what ye wish for, Finn; ye just might get it."

"But, toasted toads, I'd love to get it," Finn said.

"Ye do no' ken what ye are saying, lass. Be happy with what ye have. Many girls dream o' being heir to a throne and a castle."

"Porridge-heads," she said.

Dide could not help but smile. "I mean it, Finn. Mine is a hard and dangerous life, and lonely too. I slip in and out o' people's lives, always playing a part, always ready to betray them for my master. I am his ears and his eyes in the countryside, scenting out rebellion, searching for traitors, telling the tales the Rìgh wants told. I can trust no-one but

my own family and even them I doubt sometimes, so cynical that I get. Ye do no' want that, Finn. When this is all over ye will go home and hunt in your hills and dance with the young men o' the court. And when ye are a wee bit aulder, ye will fall in love and marry and have bairns, and be happy and at peace. These are all good things, Finn; do no' be throwing them away for the lure o' adventure. It's naught but a will-o'-the-wisp that will lead ye into danger and misery, and ultimately to your death."

Dide spoke with real feeling in his voice. Finn stared at him, feeling doubt for the first time. He had given her the opportunity she had been waiting for, however, and so she said boldly, "Why do ye no' give it up then, Dide? Marry and have bairns and be happy, if that is what ye want?"

"Marriage is no' for me, Finn."

"Why no?"

Goaded, he cried, "Because I canna have the lass I want and if I canna have her, I dinna want anyone."

"But I'm sure if ye told her ... Ye could make her fall in love with ye; all the lassies are always falling in love with ye, Dide. Why do ye no' just seduce her?"

He quirked up one side of his mouth. "Och, I've tried that."

"And she dinna want ye? I never thought Isabeau was a fool!"

Immediately he stiffened, colour surging up his lean, brown cheeks. Finn quailed a little before his angry look but said, "I'm sure if ye let her ken how ye feel, Isabeau would ..."

"Isabeau is a NicFaghan and I am a nobody," Dide snapped. "What do I have to offer her: a life on the road, sleeping under a caravan and juggling oranges for a living? She has already told me such a life is no' to her taste."

"What a dray-load o' dragon dung! Ye're no' a nobody, ye're a Yeoman o' the Guard and the Righ's best friend," Finn snapped back. "I canna see why ye canna retire from being a jongleur if ye wanted to. There's plenty o' other things ye could do. And I'm sure Isabeau does no' care if ye do no' have a last name. I wouldna!"

"Well, thank ye, Finn," Dide answered sarcastically. "But there's more to it than that. Isabeau wants to be a sorceress and ye ken they do no' marry."

"But ..."

"Thank ye for your concern, Finn, but if ye dinna mind, I'd really rather no' talk about it." He resettled his sword at his waist and walked away, his shoulders under the blue cloak set very rigidly indeed. Finn sighed and pulled at Goblin's tufted ears.

To Finn's dismay, a constraint grew up between her and Dide after this conversation and, to her bewilderment, between her and Jay. Up until the night of Isabeau's letter, all had been comfortable between them, Finn having forgotten or forgiven Jay's kiss on Midsummer Eve and falling into her old habit of easy discourse with him. She thought it

might have been because Jay had told her about Dide's feelings for Isabeau, which the jongleur clearly did not like being common knowledge.

Finn took to spending much of her time with Ashlin the Piper, for he seemed to find everything she did right and appropriate and never regarded her with Brangaine's air of faint disapproval or Jay's miserable silence. He flushed with pleasure every time she stopped to speak with him and was the only one who did not lecture her for gambling at cards or puffing away on her pipe all the time.

She also spent a lot of time with Dillon, having persuaded him to give her extra lessons in fighting. The young squire was already one of the most skilled and powerful fighters in the Righ's retinue and Finn hoped he would teach her some of the Scarred Warrior tricks he had learnt from Iseult. Although Finn in many ways missed the Scruffy she had known, she found a new respect growing in her for the sombre, reserved man Dillon had become. The shadow of the cursed sword he carried had transformed him from a cocky beggarboy, quick with his fists and his tongue, to someone who was thoughtful and deliberate in his every word and action. Dillon knew that once he drew *Joyeuse* he must fight until all his opponents were dead and so he never drew her unless under great duress. When he and Finn sparred, they always use wooden practice swords, though *Joyeuse* was never far from Dillon's hand or eye.

Samhain Eve came as dark and silent-footed as Goblin the elven cat, a heavy mist lying in all the valleys and shrouding Kirkenny in a thin, cold veil. In Lucescere, the night of death was defied by the lighting of many lanterns and bonfires, the ringing of bells and the wearing of lively colours. Here in Tirsoilleir, the people locked themselves in their houses and drew their curtains. Samhain Eve was the night when ghosts walked and evil spirits were about. No Tirsoilleirean dared brave such a night.

Lachlan and his retinue had debated what to do about Samhain Eve for some time. Lachlan had no desire to alienate his new allies by flaunting his paganism but believed he must celebrate the differences between their cultures while still staying true to his heritage. Consequently, Samhain Eve was to be celebrated as it had always been in his youth. A great fire was to be lit in the great hall of Keep Kirkenny, chains of lanterns had been strung along the walls, hollowed-out turnips carved into the semblance of fearsome faces grinning with fiery eyes and mouth, and a magnificent feast was spread out on the tables. Everyone in Kirkenny, from the laird of the castle to the humblest chimneysweep, was welcome to attend the festivities but none would be condemned for staying away.

Rather to Lachlan's surprise, quite a few of the townsfolk of Kirkenny braved the mizzling weather and the ghosts to attend, some even making some effort to brighten their sombre dress with the last leaves of the year or a knot of grey ribbon. None of the Greycloaks had brought any party clothes with them, but all had managed to find some vivid article of clothing so that the great hall was filled with colour and movement. All the musicians had dug out their instruments and played in public for the first time since arriving on Tirsoilleirean soil, and squares and lines of dancers swung back and forth across the hallway. Although none of the Tirsoilleirean guests dared join in, a few seemed to enjoy the spectacle and any condemnation was politely concealed, much to Elfrida's amazement.

"I never thought I'd see music and dancing in *Tirsoilleir*," she said to Iseult, "let alone the laird o' the castle tapping his foot to it!"

"Times change," Iseult replied.

"I hope for the better," Elfrida said rather anxiously and Iseult smiled at her.

"Definitely for the better. Why do ye no' go and dance?"

"I do no' ken how," Elfrida admitted.

"Och, it be easy enough. I'm sure Iain kens how. Why do ye no' ask him to show ye?"

Elfrida hesitated. "The elders may no' like it," she said. "Word would be sure to get back to them."

The elders were the most powerful group in the community, chosen from all walks of life by the congregation to oversee the running of the kirk by the pastor. The General Assembly which ruled Tirsoilleir was composed of the most powerful elders and churchmen, and were very strict in their ideas. They frowned down upon any form of entertainment, called a pack of playing cards "the devil's prayer book," a pair of dice "the devil's bones" and a violin "the Archfiend's box." Any form of personal adornment was abhorrent to them, so that a woman could be lambasted in the kirk for tucking a daisy in her belt. Dancing was particularly loathsome to the elders, who regarded it as inherently licentious. None of the elders of the Kirkenny parish had come to the Samhain feast, all no doubt considering it a lewd and heretical event, but Iseult knew as well as Elfrida did that they would have their spies among the gathering there tonight.

"So?" Iseult said. "When ye are banprionnsa it will be your job to change things around here. Ye may as well let them ken now."

Elfrida hesitated then shook her head. "Nay, I'd better no'."

"Then I shall," Iseult said and put down her cup of spiced ale and rose to her feet. Lachlan met her glance with a smile and crossed the floor to meet her, the two of them joining in the dancing with enthusiasm.

Finn was dancing too, her green-flecked hazel eyes alight with excitement. As always, the infectious melody of Jay's fiddle was working its magic so that even some of the most disapproving locals were nodding their heads and tapping their toes in time. When the air was finished, Finn found herself right next to Jay and impulsively she cried, "Och, I love your fiddle, Jay! Ye have magic in your fingers indeed."

"Thank ye," he answered gruffly, not looking at her, and lifted his bow and swung at once into another tune. Finn's excitement ebbed away. She found herself feeling rather low and stepped out of the line to refill her cup of Samhain ale, sweet with apples, honey, whiskey and spices. She saw her elven cat Goblin curled on a cushioned chair near the fire and went to seek the comfort of her soft fur and affectionate purr.

Many of the locals looked at her askance as she lifted the elven cat to her shoulder, and Finn stuck out her tongue at one rude boy who made a less than surreptitious sign against evil.

She watched Jay from her vantage point by the fire, but not once did he glance her way or show any sign that he was aware of her regard. She was used to a current of

silent communion always running between them, a wordless connection fed by their shared sense of the ridiculous, their reverent love of music, and their knowledge of each other's minds.

Her misery at his coldness soon gave way to anger. When Dide and Nellwyn began to sing a very sweet and proper love song together, allowing Jay to lay down his viola and take a rest, she marched over to confront him, Goblin riding on her shoulder.

"Why are ye angry with me?" Finn demanded. "What have I done?"

"I'm no' angry with ye," Jay replied coolly, filling his cup with spiced ale.

"Then why are ye being so peculiar? Am I no' your friend anymore?" Anxiety replaced anger in Finn's voice.

He looked down at her then, and twisted his mouth wryly. "I'm sorry. O' course ye're still my friend. It's just . . ."

"What?"

He made a vague gesture with his hand. "I canna ... I ken it's no' your fault . . . it's just . . ."

Just then, the song came to an end and Gwilym the Ugly limped forward, his hand raised high for silence. He was dressed now in his flowing white witch's robes, with his long dark hair unbound and rings heavy on his fingers. As usual his witch's staff was as much a crutch as a symbol of his communion with the Coven, for Gwilym had lost one leg in the torture chambers of the Awl and now wore a wooden peg strapped to his thigh.

"Samhain Eve marks the turning o' the season, the beginning o' winter and the dead months," he said. "It is the night when the souls o' the dead may return if they choose, to haunt those that have done them harm or speak with those that they have loved. On Samhain Eve the doors between all worlds are open, the door between the dead and the quick, the door between the past and the future, the door between the known and the unknown. It is a fearful time, for no' all spirits o' the dead are welcome and no' all visions o' other places and times desired.

"It is a time to think o' the past and what we may have done better and o' the future, and what shape we wish for it to take. So on this night we o' the Coven encourage all to cast away the faults and failings o' the past and seek to make ourselves stronger and wiser, more courageous, more compassionate, truer to our secret self. In pursuit o' this intent, we ask that all o' ye present write down upon a piece o' paper your greatest weakness or failing and cast it into the Samhain fire, making a wish as ye do so. This is a time to be truthful with yourself, to see yourself with clear eyes as others may see ye, and to think about what is your heart's true desire."

He then relaid the fire with logs of the seven sacred woods—ash, hazel, oak, blackthorn, fir, hawthorn, and yew—and tossed upon it salt and powdered herbs so the flames leapt up in brilliant colours of violet, green and blue, sending sweet-smelling smoke out into the room.

Slowly, one by one, people took the quill and parchment offered to them, wrote

upon it after long deliberation, crossed the room to the fire and cast their Samhain wish upon it. Some did so with embarrassed laughter and coy looks at each other. Others were very serious, watching their paper devoured by flames and disintegrate into ash with intent eyes and a prayer murmured under their breath.

"Do ye remember the last time we all did this together?" Johanna said as the League of the Healing Hand gathered together to ponder their wishes. "Ye were no' there, Finn, but the rest o' us were. We had no ink so Dillon made us write it down in our own blood." She gave a little shiver at the memory, half-serious, half-mocking. "We were in the ruined witches' tower and all o' us were terrified o' the ghosts."

"Ye may have been," Dillon said. "I wasna."

"I wished I was no' such a scaredy-cat." Johanna smiled in reminiscence. "And just after I had to go out into the storm with all those ghosts and wolves howling and ring the tower bell. I thought I would die o' terror!"

"But ye did it," Connor cried proudly, and his sister smiled at him.

"Aye, I did it. Since then I havena really been scared o' anything much. I suppose that was the most terrifying thing for me, having to do that alone, yet I managed to survive it."

"Ye made me write 'tyrant' on my bit o' paper," Dillon said. "I suppose I was rather autocratic."

"Just a wee," Finn laughed. She turned to Jay, colour running up into her cheeks. "What did ye write?"

He glanced at her then away, scuffing his boot against the carpet. "I dinna remember."

"I ken ye wished for someone to teach ye to play the auld viola the way it should be played," Johanna said. "So your wish has come true too."

"I suppose so," Jay said, without any pleasure in his voice.

"What did ye wish for, Tomas?" Brangaine asked with a gentle smile.

He looked up at her with huge cerulean-blue eyes. "For peace, so that I could go home to my mam." They all fell silent, troubled. Tomas said, "So ye see, I am the only one whose wish did no' come true."

"Except Anntoin, Artair and Parian," Jay said harshly.

The celebratory mood now truly broken, everyone looked unhappy, glancing down at the bits of paper in their hands with anxious eyes.

"Well, I ken what I'm going to write," Brangaine said cheerfully. "I want to be the best laird to my people that I possibly can be, and I think that means I have to unbend a wee, and try and have more understanding for people's faults and weaknesses. I dinna want anyone calling me a muffin-faced prig again." She grinned at Finn and wrote, in her beautiful courtly hand, "muffin-faced prig" on her scrap of paper.

"Flaming dragon balls!" Finn cried. "Who would've guessed it?"

"Well, I want to be the greatest healer in the world," Johanna said. "And a great healer should always be patient and compassionate and sensitive to the feelings o' others. I found one o' the other healers crying last week because I'd called her a numbskull and a twit, and I ken they hate the way I order them around all the time. So I guess it's my turn to burn the word 'tyrant!'"

"If ye're going to write what I wished for last time, I'll take what ye wished for," Dillon said with no trace of laughter. He bent over the table, laboriously writing "scaredy-cat" in his clumsy scrawl.

"To no' be afraid anymore?" Johanna asked softly. "But why, Dillon? I do no' ken anyone more courageous than ye."

He met her eyes, his hand caressing the ornate silver hilt of his sword. "She will have blood," he answered simply. "One day it will be mine."

Johanna nodded, her eyes soft with sympathy. Together they crossed the floor and cast their wishes into the fire, watching them disappear into smoke with an intent gaze.

Without saying a word, Tomas wrote "peace" in his round, childish script and Connor quickly followed suit, with a shy smile for his friend. Together the two boys crossed the floor, both with fair hair and wide blue eyes, but one a thin, frail figure, the other much taller and sturdier, even though there was only a few months of age between them.

"What are ye going to write, Ashlin?" Brangaine asked.

He flushed, looking quickly at Finn and then away again. "Och, to no' be such a gowk all the time," he said awkwardly. "To be brave and strong so I can serve my lady well."

"Och, do no' call me 'my lady,' I'm no lady," Finn said automatically and he flushed even redder than before. He turned round so none could see what he wrote on his scrap of paper and then, with one final glance at Finn, went to the fire with Brangaine.

"What will ye wish for, Dide?" Finn said rather diffidently, hoping he would not snub her again. He glanced at her, then said softly, "I ken I should wish to lose this futile longing for what I canna have, but I shall no'. I can no'. So I shall go on wishing for what I've always wished for, and go on longing." And with great deliberation he wrote Isabeau's name upon his piece of paper and went to the fire to throw it on to the coals.

Finn felt a sting of tears in her eyes. She knuckled the edge of one eye and turned back to find Jay's eyes upon her. "What?" she said, flushing.

"Naught," he said. "Just wondering what it was ye were going to write."

"I have so many faults it'd be hard to find just one," Finn answered with a sigh. "I'd need a whole scroll o' paper."

Jay laughed. "What's your worst fault then? Write that down."

"They're all so bad, it's hard to choose. I'm impatient and loud-mouthed and always

have to stick my nose into other's people's business. I punch people who irritate me and smoke too much and drink too much and my fingers are made o' lime-twigs. I find it hard to resist filching someone's pocket when they leave their swag in such easy reach." She sighed. "Ye see my problem."

"But ye wouldna be Finn the Cat if ye were no' so curious and interested in everything, and did no' have such amazing turns o' speech. Ye ken everyone is always quoting ye."

"Aye, much to my mother's horror. Happen I should try no' to be such a filching-mort. Picking people's pockets is no' the way for a banprionnsa to behave."

"Nay, I think ye're probably right," Jay said with a laugh in his voice.

"Well, I do try but the temptation is just too much sometimes. I usually put it back again later, unless it's tobacco which really they should guard more carefully, it being so rare these days."

Again Jay could not help laughing, though he said with a great deal of sympathy in his voice, "So that's what you're going to write? No more stealing so ye can be a better banprionnsa and laird to your people?"

"I suppose so," Finn said unhappily. Jay said nothing, just looked at her inquiringly. "I ken what I'd really like to wish for," she burst out.

"What's that?"

"To go on like this," Finn said, flushing. "The League o' the Healing Hand together again, having adventures, saving auld prophets from prisons, outwitting the enemy, breaking into castles, fighting back to back. I've been so happy these last six months, happier than I've been since we helped Lachlan win his throne."

"Is that really what ye'd wish for?" There was more warmth in Jay's voice than there had been in some weeks.

Finn nodded. "I ken I should no'. I ken I have to go back to dreary auld Rurach and be a dreary auld banprionnsa, but when I think it might be years afore I see ye again, or any o' the others . . ." Her voice broke.

Colour rose in his cheeks. "Happen ye can," he cried eagerly. "There must be some way. Canna ye do what your aunt did and join the Coven? Ye canna rule if ye be a sorceress; they never let ye do both."

Finn's eyes kindled. "Happen I could do that," she said thoughtfully. "I'd like to be a sorceress. We could go to the Theurgia together; it'd be grand! We could be witches together and travel about . . . Oh, I wish I could!"

With sudden resolve she uncrumpled the paper clutched in her hand and wrote on it, "To stop being what other people want me to be. To be myself. Finn the Cat, adventuress, sorceress, thief." She showed it to Jay, who said, "Are ye sure?"

She nodded. "What about ye?"

"I canna write," he said in a stifled voice. "I canna do anything but play the fiddle."

"What a dray-load o' dragon dung," Finn said rudely. "Here, let me write it for ye. And then tomorrow I'll start teaching ye to write so that next year ye can write it for yourself." She seized his scrap of paper, smoothed it out, and wrote upon it, reading the words aloud: "Jay's wish. To stop being such a silly gowk and start being proud o' who he is, Jay the Fiddler, adventurer, sorcerer, the best fiddler in the land and the best friend anyone ever had."

They grinned at each other, then seized each other's hands and ran across to the fire, throwing in the scraps of paper with excited laughs.

"Wish with all your heart?" Jay said, colour surging into his cheeks. She nodded, crossing her fingers and closing her eyes, scrunching up her face as she wished with all her will and desire. Then they retreated back to the corner, still clutching each other's hands. "Oh, I'm so happy," Finn cried. "Though my *dai-dein* is going to be angry!"

"I think your mother will be rather relieved," Jay said. "She always kent ye were no' cut out to be the ruler o' Rurach!"

"I'll rebuild the Tower o' Searchers," Finn said, going off into a daydream. "People will come and ask me to search things out for them, magical swords, dragon's treasure, kidnapped heirs . . ."

"Lost puppies," Jay said.

She punched his arm. "I'll be able to go off on quests all the time and they'll pay me a fortune to do so! I'll restore Rurach's fortune for my *dai-dein*."

"Just try no' to steal too much o' it," Jay replied dryly. "Ye dinna want to be the first banprionnsa to lose her hand."

"I shall only steal things back for the rightful owners," Finn promised. "Ye shall have to come and help me. Ye'll play the dragon to sleep while I steal his treasure."

"I'll rescue ye when they throw ye into prison for picking someone's pocket," he replied, laughing.

"It's a deal!" she cried. "Let's shake on it."

And solemnly they shook hands, as behind them the Samhain fire sunk into ashes.

Trial By Combat

The city of Bride sprawled along the shore of the bay, hundreds of tall spires competing to see which could soar highest into the sky. Many gleamed with gilt in the pale spring sunshine, which sparkled upon the blue waters. The bay was filled with ships, most of them fighting galleons with ornately carved figureheads and a great mesh of rigging which showed black against the pale sky. The ships guarded the city from attack from the sea, allowing the Fealde to concentrate her troops on protecting the city walls. Enormously thick and high, the city walls were all topped by cruel steel spikes that curved out and down, making them almost impossible to breach. There were only four gates, each stoutly defended with immense barbicans. Each gate had to be approached via a long, enclosed tunnel, with heavy iron gates at one end and a massive iron-bound

oak door at the other. Narrow machicolations in the tunnel walls were protected by archers, so that any enemy attempting to storm the gates would be slaughtered long before they reached the inner door.

As if those defenses were not impregnable enough, Bride had been built in three concentric rings, so that it was indeed three cities, one within another. The outer city was crammed between the external walls and the first of the inner walls, a labyrinth of small, dark, cramped buildings where the poor scratched out a meagre living. The middle city was protected from their impecunious neighbours by another high wall, broken once more by four heavy gates. Within this area lived the merchants and the artisans. The further away from the inner wall one lived, the wider the streets and the bigger the houses. There were parks here and wide avenues of flowering trees and many grand mansions.

Then there was the inner city, built within the last circle of high stone walls and protected by many stout watchtowers. There soared the spires of the Great Kirk, a most magnificent building with many tall lancet windows of crystal that glittered in the sunshine and a square belfry where enormous bells tolled out the hours. Clustered about it were the mansions of the aristocracy and the highly ranked churchmen, surrounded by formal gardens and esplanades.

Beyond stretched a great park of velvety green, broken here and there by copses of ancient trees. A long avenue of flowering Starwood led the eye to the royal palace, Gerwalt, set like a jewel within its gardens and reflected within the waters of a long rectangular pool, lined with intricate knots of hedges and tall cypress trees. Built of soft grey stone, Gerwalt was both an impregnable fortress and a palace of immense elegance, with many small turrets rising up to the central tower, which was topped with a cone-shaped spire. From the flagpoles fluttered the all-too-familiar white flag with its design of a red fitch cross.

All this the Greycloaks could see from their position on top of the hills which surrounded the bay. They had set up camp outside Bride a week ago, but not all their long observation could see any way of breaking the city's defenses.

"We could besiege them for a year and no' break the stalemate," Lachlan said gloomily.

"And unless we can seize control o' the harbour, we canna prevent them from bringing in supplies anyway," Duncan Ironfist said just as gloomily. "We could sit here and twiddle our thumbs for the rest o' our lives and no' manage to break the city."

"We shall just have to make the Bright Soldiers come out and fight us here," Iseult said.

"But why would they?" Leonard the Canny said. "The Fealde kens she is safe within the city walls. She will never come out."

Lachlan strode back and forth along the ridge, scowling darkly, his wings rustling. "Canna we challenge the Fealde to single combat?" he said suddenly. "Is that no' an important ritual here, far more important than in Rionnagan or Blessem?"

"It is an important aspect o' our law," Elfrida answered in her high, sweet voice. She was sitting on the grass, her skirts spread round her, picking daisies and weaving them

into a chain. "Anyone who has been accused o' a crime can undergo trial by battle, in which their guilt or innocence is decided by a test o' arms. Clergymen, women, bairns, or those who are blind or crippled in some way can nominate a champion to fight on their behalf."

"Ye mean ye do no' have a trial in which evidence is heard and weighed, and eyewitnesses called?" Duncan Ironfist exclaimed.

"Aye, but eyewitnesses often lie and evidence can be falsified," Elfrida answered. "Trial by ordeal puts the judgement in the hands o' God."

"But surely whomever is the strongest and most skilled at arms is the one who wins?" Duncan objected.

Elfrida nodded. "Aye, that is true and since the Fealde's champion is specifically trained in single combat, it is rare indeed that a criminal escapes justice."

"But what if they are falsely accused?"

"Then God would ensure their safety," Elfrida replied with childlike naiveté.

Duncan and Iseult exchanged an incredulous glance, and the Banrígh said with spurious sweetness, "Tell Duncan about the other ways a criminal can be tried and judged."

"Well, there be ordeal by fire, where the accused must pass through flames in order to prove their innocence. Any sign o' burning is seen as proof o' guilt. Then there be the ordeal by water, where criminals are held below the water. Water is the blessed medium o' baptism, so if it receives the accused, it is a sign they be innocent but if it buoys them up, then they be guilty."

"So if they can swim, they are dragged out and executed, and if they canna swim, they drown. Neat, isn't it?" Iseult said.

This time, Elfrida heard the sarcasm in Iseult's voice and flushed vividly. "Ye may mock our judicial system but we have very little crime," she cried angrily. "No' like Lucescere where ye have to carry your purse hung inside your clothes because o' all the pickpockets."

"I did no' think to hear ye defend the Fealde," Iain said with a faint stress of reproof in his voice. "Surely ye can see such a trial is terribly flawed. Ye yourself were wrongfully imprisoned most o' your life, dear-ling, and Killian the Listener too. He was never given a fair trial, ye ken that. Did he no' suffer the ordeal by water? Would he no' have died if the crowd had no' broken through the ranks o' the soldiers and dragged him free o' the dunking-pool?"

"Being the instrument o' God's will in doing so," Elfrida replied obstinately. She stood up, the daisy chain falling unheeded from her lap.

"Happen that is so," Leonard the Canny said placatingly. "God moves in mysterious ways."

Elfrida nodded in agreement, though her face was still set in stubborn lines.

"So if we challenged the Fealde to prove her innocence by ordeal by combat, would she be required to submit?" Lachlan said impatiently. "It is in my mind that we could win Bride without having to waste our strength by trying to breach all those walls. Canna we contrive it so that the whole outcome o' the war rests upon one single battle, between the champions o' Elfrida and the Fealde?"

All stared at Lachlan, fascinated and afraid. "But what if we lost?" Iseult objected.

"We shallna lose," Elfrida said. "Right is on our side."

"We canna lose," Lachlan said. "The whole country must see the Fealde defeated. For if Elfrida is right about the significance o' trial by combat, her defeat will be seen as a clear sign from their god that her reign is over and that she has been found guilty by both the judicial system and by the kirk. Do ye understand? This must be a spectacle that all will watch, and there canna be any confusion about the outcome. The Fealde's champion must die."

"She will no' be easily defeated," Leonard said, troubled. "The Fealde's champion has never lost a trial by battle. She is a woman o' incredible strength and skill, trained in the use o' all hand weapons. I am a cavalier, used to fighting from horseback. Although I have been taught to fight hand-to-hand, as all Bright Soldiers are, I must admit to some trepidation."

"I do no' mean for ye to fight," Lachlan said. "I ken ye are a brave man and loyal indeed to your ban-prionnsa, but if this ordeal by single combat is to achieve all I want it to achieve, I must be the one to face the Fealde's champion."

Immediately there was an outcry.

"Nay, master! Ye canna risk yourself so," Dide cried.

"But *leannan*, ye ken ye were no' trained to fight from the cradle as this berhtilde would have been," Iseult objected. "I myself taught ye to fight and ye were already a grown man. I ken ye are a strong and bonny fighter now, but she would have the greater experience . . ."

"Your Highness, I am your captain; I will fight," Duncan Ironfist said, going down heavily on one knee before his Rígh.

Lachlan smiled at him affectionately. "Thank ye, my friend. I do no' doubt that ye would be a better choice, the stoutest-hearted man I have ever kent. But nay. It must be I who fights."

Dillon flung himself on his knees, gripping the intricately coiled hilt of his sword with both hands. "Please, your Highness, let me fight for ye. Ye ken *Joyeuse* has never been defeated!"

Lachlan raised him with one strong hand, then bent and pulled Duncan to his feet also. "Such loyal, true men I have to serve me," he said, his voice rather thick. "But would I send a lad to die for me, or a man who will never see forty years again? Nay, I would no'! More importantly, I do no' fight on my own behalf but on Elfrida's. Have we no' told the people o' Tirsoilleir that I am this angel o' death, come to lead her army and win back her throne for her? Do I no' proclaim myself the sword o' their god? Canna ye

see this is a true test? It is no' just the Fealde I need to convince here but every Tirsoilleirean man, woman and bairn!"

They were all silent. Iseult was white to the lips but she showed no other sign of her fear. After a long moment of stillness, she came forward and laid her hand on Lachlan's arm. "Are ye sure ye are willing to risk your life so?"

"Every time I fight in battle I risk my life! At least here there will be only one foe and I shall ken she's attacking!"

"We must plan this carefully," Leonard said. "There is no use fighting such a battle beyond the city walls. Even if ye should win, your Highness, they will just shut the gates against us and we shall have gained naught."

"Aye, it must be within the inner sanctum," Donald said. "And we must have a force with us, for they shall plan treachery, no doubt o' that."

"It must be within a public arena," Iseult said. "If the whole point is to prove Elfrida's right to rule to the people o' Bride, the people must be able to see her."

"We shall have to goad her into agreeing," Leonard said. "We must make any refusal seem like an admission o' guilt. We must give her no other course o' action but to send her champion against ye."

Lachlan nodded. "Let us sit down and write the charges against the Fealde, and let us make the wording as contemptuous and mocking as possible!"

The next day a long procession rode out of the army camp, led by Lachlan upon his high-stepping black stallion. The Rígh was dressed all in white and gold, with a gold circlet upon his black curls. He held aloft a gilded sword, blade upwards, which shone in the long rays of sunlight pouring down upon the Rígh's head. Heavy clouds, rumbling with thunder, hung over the city but where the Rígh's procession rode, all was bright.

On either side of the Rígh trotted the standard-bearers. Dillon carried a square banner of forest green, upon which the white stag of the MacCuinns leapt, a golden crown in its antlers. Connor, acting as Elfrida's squire, carried the red flag of the MacHilde clan, with its black gauntlet holding a golden sword. Behind fluttered the flags of all those that supported Elfrida, in every device and colour possible, including those of the ten prionnsachan.

Before Lachlan marched the pipers and the drummers, skirling and pounding away. They came to a halt before the main gate of Bride, and there was a loud flourish of trumpets. Then Leonard the Canny dismounted and strode forward. He was dressed in full armour, the visor of his helmet lowered, his red cloak blowing back in the wind. With great deliberation, he removed his heavy gauntlet and flung it to the ground.

"I, Leonard Adalheit, Duke of Adalric, Earl of Friduric, Baron of Burnaby, due hereby charge thee, Ulrica of Bride, self-proclaimed Fealde o' the General Assembly o' the Great Kirk, o' the following crimes, in the name o' our blessed banprionnsa and lady, Elfrida Elise NicHilde, the only daughter and heir o' Dieter Dearborn MacHilde, and direct descendant o' Berhtilde the Bright-maid, bearer o' the golden sword and founder

o' the great land o' Tirsoilleir, the Bright Land."

Then, with a great many flourishes, he read out the proclamation which Lachlan had laboured over until the wee small hours. It accused the Fealde and the elders of the General Assembly of murder, manslaughter, false arrest and imprisonment, treason, sedition, embezzlement and fraud. Leonard would have included many more, such as heresy, unorthodoxy, lewdness and licentiousness, but Lachlan wished to make this a political matter, not a religious one.

Leonard the Canny had a strong, carrying voice and Gwilym the Ugly was able to use his magic to amplify the sound so it boomed out over the city, causing birds to rise screaming in their thousands and horses to neigh and rear. The only answer was the booming of the city cannons, which failed to cause any damage to the ranks of Lachlan's supporters, who had been careful to stop well out of range.

He repeated his challenge at sunset, a pronounced sneer in his voice, and again at dawn the next day. This time there was a response, an angry refutation of the charges and counter-accusations against Elfrida and Lachlan, who was described variously as a foul demon, a heretic, blasphemer and apostate, a *uile-bheist* and monster, and a false idol. Leonard the Canny did not retire to ponder the charges but immediately and angrily threw down his gauntlet.

"In the name o' Elfrida NicHilde, banprionnsa o' Tirsoilleir, I challenge ye to prove these false and vile charges in a trial o' arms, where the judgement o' God our Father shall prove her faith and innocence beyond the faintest shadow o' a doubt. Name your champion!"

The challenge caused a flurry of surprise on the battlements. There was a long pause, during which Leonard stood straight and tall, then finally there came a response. The Fealde herself stood upon the battlements, dressed in golden armour, carrying a great golden sword caused Elfrida to cry out in anger and dismay, "That be my father's sword! How dare she!"

The Fealde had a brusque, uncultivated voice, showing her origins as a cobbler's daughter. With many coarse swear words and calls to the heavens, she accepted the challenge, crying contemptuously, "If this devilish *uile-bheist* be indeed the angel o' death and wields the sword o' God let *him* prove it so on the field o' combat, in a fight to the very death!"

"And so the trap is sprung," Lachlan said with satisfaction.

"Let us just hope that ye are no' the mouse," Iseult replied curtly.

It took a week of negotiations before the location of the ordeal by combat was agreed upon, and marshals appointed to ensure a fair fight, and weapons determined upon. The Fealde was understandably reluctant to open her gates to the Greycloaks, and it took much jeering and taunting before she agreed. Leonard the Canny tried to force her to have the battle in the public square before the Great Kirk, but the Fealde was too canny to agree to allowing a force of enemies within all three rings of Bride's walls. So at last it was agreed to hold the ordeal in the massive public arena in the center of the merchants' quarter. Here there were tiers of stone seats where hundreds of the city folk could sit and watch, as well as grandstands where the principal parties could sit and still

be well-protected from any enemy attack.

"I do no' trust that cursehag as far as I could throw an elven cat," Duncan Ironfist said. "Are ye sure this is a wise manoeuver, your Highness?"

"The Bright Soldiers are bound by a rigid code o' chivalry and honour, Ironfist, ye ken that," Lachlan replied. "Any obvious act o' treachery will be hissed upon by both the army and the common folk, I am sure o' that. It is the hidden act o' treachery I must guard against, the hidden blade in the tip o' the boot, the poison-dipped dagger, the dust thrown in the eyes."

"Ye will have a care for yourself?" Duncan said anxiously and Lachlan nodded, smacking him on his burly shoulder.

"Aye, o' course, auld friend. It is your job to guard Iseult and Elfrida, and to watch my back."

At last the day arrived, a cool spring day with the sun veiled behind grey clouds and very little breeze. It was perfect fighting weather, and Lachlan smiled at Gwilym and thanked him, for he knew the sorcerer had a talent for weather and would have arranged it so Lachlan did not have to contend with heat, flies and the sun in his eyes.

"I wish I could do more, my liege," Gwilym answered.

"Ye could give me Ea's blessing," Lachlan said grimly and Gwilym made the mark o' Eà upon his brow, murmuring, "May Eà shine her bright face upon ye this day."

Leonard the Canny had tried to persuade Lachlan to don the heavy metal armour of the Tirsoilleirean but Lachlan had refused. He was not used to the extra weight or lack of mobility, and so wore only his battered leather cuirass over a light, closely woven chain-mail shirt that had been a gift to him by the silversmiths of Dun Gorm. On his head he wore a light helmet with a broad brim and pierced visor, giving exceptional protection to his head, face, and neck. He wore his kilt, as always, his legs protected by long leather boots. On his back was strapped his heavy claymore, with a short court sword and dagger at his belt, and his little *sgian dubh*, a narrow but deadly dagger, thrust in the boot. Over it all he wore a dark green surcoat with a white stag leaping across his breast.

Lachlan was not allowed to carry the Lodestar, since that was a magical weapon, forbidden under the rules of the trial by combat. Since it was death to anyone but a MacCuinn to touch it, it had been rolled in silk and locked securely in a chest which was left back in the army camp in the care of one of the Blue Guards. If Lachlan should fall this day, it was the guard's sole responsibility to escape Tirsoilleir and take the chest back to Lachlan's five-year-old son, Donnacan MacCuinn, who would then be Rígh.

As the procession approached the gates into Bride, all felt the hairs on the back of their necks lift. Once they had passed through that long, ill-lit tunnel, there was no retreat. If the Fealde broke her surety of safety, all could be cut to pieces in minutes.

Lachlan had tried to limit his retinue to the three hundred soldiers agreed upon by the Fealde and Leonard the Canny, but Iseult had refused to stay behind and so had Elfrida, rather to Iseult's surprise.

"Ye risk your life on my behalf," Elfrida had said. "I must go."

The League of the Healing Hand had also insisted on accompanying Lachlan's retinue, though Lachlan had at first been incredulous and then angry. But as Finn said, "As if we want to miss the battle o' the century! I'd rather eat roasted rats than no' be there. Besides, if there is treachery, happen we'll be able to help."

Given how helpful the League of the Healing Hand had been in the past, Lachlan had protested no longer, though their presence only added to the heavy weight he carried. Now that it was time to face the Fealde's champion, Lachlan was conscious of a sick, cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. No sign of it showed on his face, though, which was set as pale and cold as carved marble.

As he strode through the gateway into the public arena, there was a great uproar from the stands, much hissing and cries of "demon" and "heretic". In the grandstand, Elfrida clenched her hands together, closing her eyes and muttering a prayer under her breath. Iseult sat still and proud, dressed as a Banrígh in heavy white damask all edged and scalloped with gold. Her red hair was plaited into a thick, heavy braid that hung down her shoulder, reaching past her waist. Although none there knew it, her dress had been designed to be loosened with a single tie so that, if need be, Iseult could discard her ornate gown and be ready to fight at a moment's notice.

The Fealde's champion strode out to meet Lachlan and they bowed to each other and then to the two grandstands at opposite ends of the stadium. The champion was a tall, heavy figure, clad all in silver armour, with a long white surcoat emblazoned with a scarlet fitch cross. All that could be seen of her was a pair of glacial-grey eyes, glaring from the slit of her helmet. Her armour had been forged in order to proclaim her status as a *berhtilde*, having been shaped to fit only one large breast, the left side being fashioned into a hollow. She too carried a heavy, two-handled sword, with her dagger and court sword hanging at her waist.

There was a long flourish of trumpets and then both Lachlan and the *berhtilde* each in turn swore that their case was just and their testimony true, and that they carried no weapons other than those decided upon by the marshals and no magical aids.

"Then let the ordeal by combat begin!" the Fealde declared in her coarse, angry voice. Again she wore the suit of golden armour, her face concealed behind the visor of her ornate helmet, her gauntlets resting on the hilt of the sacred golden sword.

At first the two combatants tested each other's strength and looked for their weaknesses. Claymores were heavy, double-bladed weapons, designed for hacking rather than thrusting. Since both hands were engaged, there was no opportunity to use the dagger to feint or parry. Occasionally one or the other was able to kick or elbow their opponent, but otherwise there was only the clash of sword against sword, the constant circling and rushing forward, sword swinging, the dance back out of reach, the sudden duck or roll when the enemy drew too close.

Although Lachlan was a shade taller and heavier, his upper body strongly developed as a result of his wings, it was clear the *berhtilde* was his master at the art of swordplay. She had many a tricky swing or parry stroke that came close to disarming Lachlan on a number of occasions, and she fought relentlessly, without anger or fear. Once the blade of her sword sliced along Lachlan's arm, tearing the chainmail so that blood came welling up, making the ground beneath his feet slippery. Many in the Righ's box sucked their breath in sharply but Iseult sat as still and poised as ever, her hands clasped loosely in her

lap.

The sting of the wound seemed to excite Lachlan to action. He attacked the berhtilde in a wild flurry of blows, causing her to retreat back across the stadium. Her movements here were ponderous. It was clear to all watching that her armour weighed her down, made her slow to respond to Lachlan's lithe and graceful movements. Suddenly she spun on one foot, her sword held low and close to her body. It seemed Lachlan would be sliced in half, so swift and powerful was her movement, but he spread his wings and leapt high into the air, the sword passing below his boots. Then one foot suddenly lashed out, kicking the berhtilde hard in the face. She fell with a crash of armour. Lachlan landed lightly, bringing his sword down in one quick, hard blow. It smashed into her chest, denting the concave of her left breast but not piercing it. She cried aloud in pain, but knocked Lachlan's sword away with her gauntlet, bringing her own sword up in a rather wild swipe. Lachlan leapt back, and she scrambled to her feet, one hand to her chest, her breath coming harshly.

For a long time they fought with neither regaining the upper hand. Lachlan's face could be seen to gleam with sweat behind his visor, and occasionally the berhtilde paused for breath, leaning on her sword instead of pressing the attack. There were many cries and moans from the crowd, all caught up in the drama of this fight to the death between two combatants so evenly matched in strength and skill.

Then the berhtilde seemed to decide the battle must be finished. Whether she was growing tired in her heavy armour, or whether she felt she now knew all Lachlan's weaknesses was impossible to tell, but she attacked with blow after heavy blow, forcing Lachlan ever further back. Soon the wall was pressing up behind him and he had nowhere else to go.

He glanced behind him, then suddenly set his sword in the dust and used the wall behind him as a springboard, somersaulting high into the air. This was a Scarred Warrior trick and had never been seen before by the Tirsoilleirean audience, who all cried aloud in amazement. Lachlan lifted his sword as he somersaulted high over the berhtilde's head, smashing her on the crown of her helmet with the massive hilt of his claymore. As he landed behind her, she rotated drunkenly to face him, overbalanced and fell with a clash of steel. Lachlan leapt forward and drove his sword down between the join of her breastplate and guardbrace, deep into her shoulder. She screamed and struggled to rise, but she was pinned there, the sword having passed through her body and into the ground below. With her other hand she seized the hilt of Lachlan's sword and slowly, painfully, dragged it out. Using the sword as a crutch she staggered to her feet, and stood there, facing Lachlan, leaning on his sword, her own sword held out in defense. Slowly she straightened, then turned and flung Lachlan's sword out of the arena.

"She be as strong as a horse," Duncan Ironfist hissed in amazement. "That should've ended it, that blow."

"But now Lachlan be without his sword," Finn said, gripping her hands together.

The Rígh had drawn his court sword and his dagger, both much shorter and lighter than the great broadswords. She swiped at him with her sword, and he ducked under it, came up close to her body and stabbed at her visor with his dagger. It glanced off the edge of the metal, scoring it deeply but failing to penetrate. So he bashed at her injured shoulder with the hilt of his sword and she staggered back, dropping her sword. Lachlan

kicked it aside, lunging at her with the court sword and tearing the chainmail at the join of her thigh and groin. She seized his arm and threw him over her shoulder and to the ground. Before Lachlan had a chance to regain his feet, she was stabbing down with her short sword. The Rígh rolled first one way, then the other, then came to his feet with a nimble backflip, spinning on one foot and kicking out with the other. His boot took her full in the chest, and she stumbled backwards, lost her balance and fell heavily. For a moment her arms and legs moved weakly, like an overturned beetle trying to regain its feet. In that instant, Lachlan bent and dragged her helmet free, seeing his opponent's face for the first time.

She was only young, with a square, brutish face that stared up at Lachlan without expression as he knelt upon her chest, his blade against her throat. "Do ye ask for quarter?"

The berhtilde did not reply. Her glacial-grey gaze did not waver. Lachlan leant a little on the sword. Blood ran up its edges. Still she did not speak. With a sigh Lachlan stepped back, lifting his sword. She did not hesitate, scrambling to her feet as quickly as her heavy armour would allow her and attacking him ferociously with sword and dagger.

"The chivalrous fool," Duncan Ironfist said affectionately.

The clash of steel against steel filled the arena. The short sword was a different weapon entirely than the great claymore. It was much lighter, with a sharp point made for thrusting and edges designed for parrying, rather than slashing. Because wielding it involved only one hand, the other could be used to feint and stab with the dagger, to jab or throttle or throw dust or poke at undefended eyes. In the next few, frantic minutes, both combatants took full advantage of this freedom. It was soon clear, however, that here Lachlan had the advantage. Aided by his wings, he was able to leap and sidestep nimbly. He had been trained to fight by a Scarred Warrior. Swords were not weapons used on the Spine of the World; fists and feet and elbows and the side of the hand were employed as deadly weapons, and so Lachlan had many tricks and manoeuvres the berhtilde was not familiar with. In addition, she was weary and sorely wounded. Soon it was clear she was failing. Then Lachlan suddenly lunged forward, his sword at shoulder length. Cleanly it pierced the berhtilde's unprotected throat, emerging on the far side smeared and bloody. She gave a horrible little gurgle and fell back, her weapons falling from nerveless fingers. Lachlan was dragged down by her weight, falling on one knee beside her body.

For a moment there was a stunned silence, and then the three hundred Greycloaks were on their feet, cheering. Elfrida leapt up and flew into Iain's arms, laughing and weeping. Iseult dropped her face into her hands, surprised by a rush of tears, while the League of the Healing Hand leapt about in their joy, banging each other on the back.

Suddenly Iseult started to her feet, her face all scrunched and crimson, wet with tears. "Lachlan!" she screamed.

At that moment an archer concealed in the Fealde's grandstand rose to his feet, lifting a longbow to his shoulder. Swiftly he fired, the arrow hissing down towards Lachlan's kneeling figure.

At Iseult's scream, Lachlan leapt to his feet, his closed eyes springing open. The arrow was curving down towards his breast. Everyone stood, frozen in shock and

horror. Automatically Lachlan threw up his hand and caught the arrow only a few inches from his heart. Again the archer fired. Again Lachlan caught the arrow in mid-flight, just before it plunged into his throat. There was an amazed sigh from the crowd.

"How did he do that?" Brangaine whispered.

"I do no' ken how," Iseult said, weeping again. "I have seen Meghan do it, but she be the most powerful sorceress in the land. I did no' ken Lachlan could do such a thing."

"God's hand protects him," Elfrida said.

Lachlan stood alone in the centre of the stadium, his fist holding the arrows, black anger in his face. Then deliberately he broke them over his knee and flung them away. He bent and hauled his sword free of the dead berhtilde's body then advanced, limping, upon the Fealde's grandstand.

Again the archer fired, though the crowd in the stands were hissing and booing. Lachlan spread his wings and soared high into the air, the arrow curving down and clattering uselessly on the ground. He landed gracefully before the cowering Fealde, his sword held to her throat. "Is this how ye receive God's judgement, ye treacherous bitch? Well, now shall ye suffer his retribution!"

And thus the Bright Wars were finally ended, the Forbidden Land finally conquered, in that final act of thwarted perfidy. So sensational had been the battle, so dramatic its outcome, that there was remarkably little resistance to the Greycloaks taking control of the city. Indeed, so complete had Lachlan's victory been that most truly believed him to be the angel of death he had declared himself to be. When he limped from the stadium, the people of Bride pressed close all about, touching his dusty, disarrayed feathers, his bloodstained surcoat, some weeping with joy. Elfrida was greeted as uproariously. Few disavowed her right to rule when her champion had proved her claim so triumphantly in the trial of combat. The gates of the inner city were flung open for her and she was swept towards her family's ancient stronghold on a wave of shouting, cheering Tirsoilleirean.

The euphoria did not die for several days. The hated elders of the General Assembly were all arrested and imprisoned in the Black Tower, awaiting trial. To everyone's dismay, the Fealde was not included among them. The woman in the golden armour who had watched the ordeal by combat so impassively was not the true Fealde, but only her servant. While her champion had been fighting to the death for her cause, the Fealde had been escaping from the city with as much of the royal treasury as she could carry.

Lachlan had been healed by Tomas so that he was returned to his usual strength and vigor less than an hour after the ordeal by combat. He was exhilarated by his success, his golden eyes blazing, his dark face alive with excitement. Again and again he relived the battle, describing this thrust and that feint, until at last Iseult laughingly begged him to desist. "That was one o' the longest hours o' my life and I never want to suffer such an hour again," she said.

On the afternoon of the spring equinox, when the hours of daylight finally lasted as long as the hours of the night, Elfrida Elise NicHilde was crowned ban-prionnsa of Tirsoilleir by the new Fealde of Bride, Killian the Listener. She was dressed very simply

in white, with the red MacHilde plaid flung over her shoulder and fastened at her breast with her clan badge. Over the other shoulder she wore the heavily ornamented baldric from which hung her father's golden sword, that had been carried by every MacHilde since Berhtilde the Bright Warrior-Maid herself.

She looked very young and frail with the heavy crimson and gold crown on her head, but very regal. When she drove back to the palace in an open carriage drawn by four white horses, the crowd went wild, throwing flowers and sweet cakes to her and tossing their hats high in the air.

The League of the Healing Hand were all guests of honour at the feast last night. They were given new clothes to wear and, although these were rather drab by Lucescere's standards, were much grander than the rough clothes they had been wearing for months. Brangaine was particularly happy to be dressed as a girl again, though her hair was still too short to be put up, hanging below her ears in a silken bob.

When Finn came down the stairs, dressed in a dark brown velvet gown, with the elven cat riding on her forearm, Jay bowed to her and said, "Look at ye, fine as a proud laird's bastard."

"Hey, ye're stealing my patter!" Finn protested. "Next ye'll be saying I'm grand as a goat's turd stuck with buttercups."

"Indeed ye are," he answered, offering her his arm. "Grander."

"Well, are not we the courtier tonight," she said. "I must say ye look grand too in that suit, though rather sombre. And look at the NicHilde! She's really flying the flag tonight, with a wee bit o' white lace at her neck. Are they no' a peculiar race o' people? Remember Captain Tobias and his disapproval o' our buttons?"

The feast was as subdued as their clothes, with no fire-eating or sword-swallowing, acrobatics or music to amuse them while they ate. The feast had been organised by the ladies of the court, who were clearly a long way away from daring to put away their habit of austerity. The Righ's quartermaster had rolled out some barrels of wine, however, which Lachlan's retinue all drank rather surreptitiously. Much to Finn's disgust, she and the others not yet of age were given only fruit juice to drink.

After all had eaten their fill, Elfrida began to formally receive the lairds and ladies of the court. Lachlan beckoned Dide, Finn and the others and they bowed, made their farewells and retreated to one of the magnificent antechambers, where decanters of whiskey and jugs of wine and ale had been set out for them.

"By the beard o' the Centaur, what a dreary party!" Lachlan exclaimed. "We must just hope that Elfrida has learnt something about the art o' hospitality while living in our lands, else she'll never be able to persuade any o' us to visit her again!"

Dillon poured them all wine or warm ale, and they settled themselves comfortably on couches around the fire. Although it had been a warm day, Gerwalt was a cold and draughty palace and all were glad of the fire's warmth.

"Ye'll all be glad to ken that I shall return to Lucescere a much richer man than I was when I left," Lachlan said with satisfaction. "Although the former Fealde, Eà curse her black heart, did her best to empty Elfrida's coffers, the NicHilde has still been able to pay

restitution to me for the cost o' the Bright Wars as well as a very handsome tith. This is good news indeed, for I promise ye, if I had levied any more taxes the people o' Eileanan would have risen up in rebellion once more, I be sure o' it."

They all congratulated him and he described with a great deal of enthusiasm the beautiful war galleon Elfrida had given him as part of her tith. Lachlan had decided to call it the *Royal Stag* and he was looking forward to sailing home in it very much. "I was most envious o' all your adventures on the *Speedwell*," he told Brangaine and Finn. "Brangaine, ye shall have to sail with me so we are sure to have fair winds all the way home. No more slogging along on foot for me!"

Remembering the Devil's Vortex, the attack by the sea serpent and the terror of their shipwreck, Finn could only stare at him in amazement. "Ye're stark raving mad, your Highness!" she cried. "I'd be happy if I never had to set foot on a ship again."

"Aye, but like all cats, ye dislike getting wet," Lachlan teased. He lifted his goblet for Dillon to pour him some more wine, then said, "The war is over at last! Let us drink to victory!"

They all joined in the toast enthusiastically, then Iseult said, "To celebrate our triumph, Lachlan and I have prepared a few gifts for ye all, to thank ye for all that ye have done."

"Firstly, I think," Lachlan said, "we should reward Dillon, who has been the best squire any Rígh could hope for. Indeed, I am very sorry to lose him."

"Lose me?" Dillon said anxiously. "What do ye mean, your Highness?"

"Dillon o' the Joyous Sword, will ye kneel down afore me?"

Looking rather dazed, Dillon obeyed. With a few light touches of his court sword, Lachlan knighted him and appointed him a Yeoman of the Guard, one of the Rígh's personal bodyguards. "Arise, Sir Dillon," he said.

Smiling, Iseult held out a small pile of clothing for him. There was the blue kilt and jacket that all Yeomen wore, a long blue cloak, a plaid, and a silver brooch depicting a charging stag, the badge of the Yeomen. Dillon took them, unable to speak with joy and surprise, though Jed the scruffy white dog barked enthusiastically and knocked over a goblet with his wagging tail.

"Connor, I ken ye are young to be a squire but ye did such a good job while Dillon was away in my service, the job is yours again if ye wish it," Lachlan said to the boy, who flushed crimson and cried, "Would I!"

Iseult then gave him back the livery of the Rígh's squire, which he had surrendered so reluctantly to Dillon upon his return. Connor gave a squeak of excitement and scampered away to change.

Tam was given a heavy purse of gold, to help him buy his own farm or business. He accepted it with stammered thanks and shining eyes and Iseult said teasingly, "I hope we shall soon be hearing some happy news o' ye, Tam."

"It be only three months until Midsummer's Eve— plenty o' time for ye to return to

Kirkclanbright and ask that bonny lassie from the apple orchard to be jumping the fire with ye," Lachlan said encouragingly, not having the same subtlety as his wife.

Tam blushed bright red and stammered inaudibly.

Ashlin was given a beautiful silver flute, which he clutched to his breast with trembling fingers, unable to even mutter a thank you. Brangaine was promised help and money in rebuilding Siantan, with a purse of gold in payment of the first installment. She accepted it graciously, saying, "I thank ye, your Highness. There is naught ye could have given me that would have pleased me more. I shall use it to feed my people, who have been hungry indeed these past few years."

"Ye are a good NicSian," Lachlan said. "I hope to see Siantan returned to prosperity under your benevolent rule."

"If ye are true to your promises to help drive out the Fairgean, I believe that hope will be fulfilled," she returned.

He sighed. "No' a week has gone past since we finally conquered the Forbidden Land and already she wants me to start attacking the Fairgean."

"It canna be soon enough for me," she answered.

He nodded. "Nor for any o' us, Brangaine. Let us no' talk about it now though, please? This is meant to be a joyful occasion."

"I am sorry, your Highness," she said with a graceful curtsy and retired back to her seat, her point made.

"Johanna, o' all o' the League o' the Healing Hand, ye have seen the uglier aspects o' this war," Lachlan said. "Ye have worked hard and willingly for years now, and we have watched ye grow into a good woman, with a gentle heart and hands. On this journey, ye have no' had the skill o' Meghan or Isabeau to assist ye, yet ye have shown good judgement every step o' the way. We therefore have great pleasure in telling ye that ye have been appointed head healer."

Everyone cheered and Johanna thanked him with tears in her eyes. Iseult had had a long green robe prepared for her, embroidered on the breast with a bunch of healing herbs and a mortar and pestle. Johanna slipped it over her head, then stood holding out its silken folds with wonderment in her eyes. "Are ye sure?" she said. "There are so many talented healers in our team . . . and I still have so much to learn."

"We're sure," Iseult assured her and Johanna sat back down in silence, stroking the pale green robe with reverent fingers.

Lachlan then knelt before Tomas, who sat quietly on the edge of the couch, regarding him with wide blue eyes. "Tomas, I have no words to express the thanks I feel in my heart for all that ye have done for us. So many men and women can still walk and laugh and play with their children because o' ye, myself included. I shudder to think o' the feast Gearradh would have devoured these past few years if it was no' for ye. Indeed, it was a wonderful thing for us, that ye should have such power in these two small hands o' yours. I ken ye have paid a terrible price for your magic and for that I am very sorry. I have tried and tried to think how I can repay ye, but it is impossible. All I can say is that I

hope this is the end o' it, that we can all go home to our families and be at peace now."

"I should like that," Tomas said gravely. "I miss my mam."

Lachlan nodded and rose to his feet. "I swear that ye and your family shall never want for anything as long as I and my heirs live," he said. "I shall have a special decree prepared, so that ye shall be fed and housed and clothed and shod all o' your life, and all your needs met and all your desires fulfilled. In pursuit o' that aim, I have ratified a coat o' arms and a badge for ye, so that all your heirs ever after shall be known to be descended from Tomas the Healer."

With her blue eyes bright with love and sympathy, Iseult lifted another pile of material from the table. It was a beautifully made flag, featuring a golden-rayed hand on a bright blue background, all edged with gold braid and tassels. There was also a very small surcoat and a golden badge in the same design. Finn remembered the clumsy little flag that Johanna had sewn them so many years before and marvelled that Lachlan should have remembered it.

There was also a small pile of golden medals hung from blue ribbons. Embossed upon the medals was the design of the rayed hand and the words, "League of the Healing Hand." These were passed out to all the members of the league, who pinned them to their coats with great excitement.

"Well, now we come to the last three o' ye," Lachlan said. "I must admit, I have had the most trouble thinking o' appropriate gifts for ye three. Dide, ye were the first to swear fealty to me, in those dark and terrible days when I was first transformed back into a boy after so many years trapped as a bird. I was only fifteen and ye were only nine, but in all those years ye have never once faltered in your allegiance, never once hesitated in risking everything to help me, never once failed me. How can I reward such love and loyalty?"

"Ye canna, master," Dide said steadily. "I do no' seek reward."

Lachlan nodded, bending and pulling Dide to his feet so he could embrace him warmly. "I ken. But for once I am going to ignore your wishes. Nay, do no' say anything. This reward is as much for dearest Enit as for ye." He smiled at the old jongleur, who sat huddled in her shawls by the fire. She smiled back at him affectionately.

"Now, I canna deny that Dide the Juggler has been my most useful spy. He can travel anywhere in Eileanan and be welcomed by all. He can listen to gossip as much as he likes and no-one lifts an eyebrow. He sings songs in my praise for the common folk to hear and tells tales o' my bravery and wisdom with so much conviction none thinks to disbelieve him. I must admit I would hate to lose all this and so, as long as Dide feels the itch in his feet, well, I shallna be discouraging him.

"One day, however, he may begin to be bored with the road and long for a nice cosy house with a warm fire. So I hereby bequeath to ye the lands and castle o' Caerlaverock in Rionnagan. It is a most bonny estate, Dide, overlooking Kilvarock Loch and rich too. The castle itself is only small but very pretty and the lands are fertile. There is a manager in there now, who can look after things as long as ye want him to."

Dide sat down heavily. "Ye've given me a castle?"

"Aye. Caerlaverock. Is it no' appropriate, since I am giving it to a family that sings as

beautifully as any skylark? And if ye are to have a castle, ye must have a surname, Dide, and a plaid and badge and a motto too. I thought we could figure all that out later, though the shield must feature larks in it, since that is to be your name."

"My name?"

"Aye. Dide, will ye kneel afore me?"

Dide looked across at his grandmother, who nodded, smiling. So Dide obeyed, though he looked pale and troubled.

"I name thee Laird Didier Laverock, the first earl of Caelaverock, in gratitude for the many services ye have done me."

"But I be naught but a jongleur," he protested. "Can ye just turn me into an earl like that?"

"I be the Rígh, I can do anything I like," Lachlan replied, very pleased with himself.

Dide sat down, looking rather dazed, as Lachlan turned then to Jay. "I did no' ken what to do for ye, Jay," the Rígh admitted. "I would have given ye a bonny new fiddle but ye have the viola d'amore and there is no finer instrument in all o' Eileanan."

"And I'd want no other," Jay said earnestly. "Indeed it was a kingly gift when ye gave it to me and one that was no' deserved."

"Deserved then and deserved now," Lachlan said with a grin. "I would like to do something for ye, though, Jay, if ye would tell me what ye'd like."

"I want for naught," Jay said. "I already have all I want, my viola and being taught to play it properly. That is all I have ever wanted."

Lachlan nodded. "I thought that was the case. But come, there must be something else? Gold, fine clothes?"

"I'd like to be taught to read and write," Jay said, surprising them all.

"Och, that is definitely something I can do for ye," Lachlan said when he had recovered from his astonishment. "Nellwyn says ye have a real talent, the brightest talent she has ever kent. Ye could be a Yedda if ye chose, she said, and ye will definitely need to be able to read and write if ye seek to join the Coven."

Hot colour rose in Jay's lean cheeks. "I would like that, if she truly believes I have talent," he said. "Though I willna be a Yedda. I do no' wish to use my music to murder."

Lachlan nodded slowly. "I respect that, Jay, though one's choices are no' always as easy as all that. If ye truly wish to study to be a witch, though, I can arrange for a scholarship to the Theurgia for ye. Caerlaverock is only a day's ride away from Lucescere so ye will be able to visit Enit and study music with her whenever ye want."

"Thank ye, your Highness," Jay cried, his hazel eyes very bright. "I would love that!"

Finn stared at him enviously, then looked at Lachlan with desperate hope in her eyes. So far the Rígh had understood all of their heart's desires as well as if he had read the

Samhain wishes they had all burnt on the sacred fire. Would he know hers as well?

Lachlan smiled at her. "So I hear ye want to be an adventuress, Finn?"

Her heart leapt. "Aye, your Highness."

"And happen a sorceress too, if ye have the talent?"

"Aye, your Highness."

"I do no' think your father would be happy to ken that."

"He has Aindrew," Finn pointed out, "And this new wee babe that's on its way. He doesna need me."

"But he loves ye and wants the best for ye," Iseult said gently.

"Surely the best thing for me is to be happy?" Finn said desperately, feeling tears welling up. "Indeed, your Highness, I'd rather eat roasted rats than be buried alive in that dreary auld castle! Canna I go to the Theurgia with Jay and study to be a witch? And then, whenever ye need me, I'd be right there. I could saddle up and ride out that very night, and do whatever it is ye need doing. Why, I could hunt down that curse-hag the Fealde for ye and get back Elfrida's money. Or I could find the Lost Horn of Elayna or the Ring of Serpetra. Will ye no' speak to my father on my behalf, your Highness? Please?"

Lachlan nodded. "Aye, Finn, I shall. Indeed, it would be a waste o' your talents for ye to be naught but a banprionnsa! I can see ye being very useful to me and the Coven."

"Thank ye," Finn cried.

"But if ye are to become a sorceress, ye must learn to mind your manners," Iseult said, her eyes dancing.

"Ye shall have to stop smoking that filthy pipe, and learn to speak without scorching people's ears, and most importantly, ye'll have to learn humility. No more boasting, Finn!"

"Och, what a dray-load o' dragon dung!" Finn cried. "I shall no'!"

GLOSSARY

Aedan MacCuinn: the first Rìgh, High King of Eileanan. Called Aedan Whitelock, he was directly descended from Cuinn Lionheart (see *First Coven*). In 710 he united the warring lands of Eileanan into one country, except for Tirsoilleir and Arran, which remained independent.

Aedan's Pact: Aedan MacCuinn, first Rìgh of Eileanan, drew up a Pact of Peace between all inhabitants of the island, agreeing to live in peace and not to interfere in each other's culture, but to work together for amity and prosperity. The Fairgean refused to sign and so were cast out, causing the Second Fairgean Wars.

Ahearn Horse-Laird: One of the First Coven of Witches.

Aislinna the Dreamer: One of the First Coven of Witches.

Anghus MacRuraich: the Prionnsa of Rurach and Siantan. He uses clairvoyant talents to search and find.

Arran: southeast land of Eileanan, consisting mainly of salt lakes and marshes. Ruled by the MacFoghnans, descendants of Foghnan, one of the First Coven of Witches. Independent from the rest of Eileanan.

Aslinn: deeply forested land ruled by the MacAislins, descendants of Aislinna, one of the First Coven of Witches.

autumn equinox: when the night reaches the same length as the day.

Awl: Anti-Witchcraft League, set up by Maya the Ensorcellor following the Day of Reckoning.

Ban-Bharrach River: the southernmost river of Lucescere which, together with the Muileach River, makes up the Shining Waters.

banprionnsa: princess or duchess.

banrígh: queen.

Beltane: May Day; the first day of summer.

Berhtfane: sea loch in Clachan.

Berhtilde the Bright Warrior-Maid: one of the First Coven of Witches.

berhtildes: the female warriors of Tirsoilleir, named after the country's founder (see *First Coven*). Cut off left breast to make wielding a bow easier. Say they are "married to the spear."

blaygird: evil, awful.

Blessem: The Blessed Fields. Rich farmland lying south of Rionnagan, ruled by the MacThanach clan, descendants of Tuathanach the Farmer (see *First Coven*).

Blue Guards: The Yeomen of the Guard, the Righ's own elite company of soldiers. They act as his personal bodyguard, both on the battlefield and in peacetime.

Book of Shadows, The: an ancient magical book which contains all the history and lore of the Coven.

Brangaine NicSian: the daughter of Gwyneth NicSian's sister. She is named Banprionnsa of Siantan in the Second Pact of Peace.

Bright Soldiers: name for members of the Tirsoilleirean army.

but and ben: a small crofter's cottage, usually of only two rooms.

Candlemas: the end of winter and beginning of spring.

caravel: a small fighting ship, fast and maneuverable, with a broad bow and a high, narrow poop deck. It was rigged with three or four masts, of which only the foremast carried a square sail. The other masts carry triangular lateen sails, making the caravel easier to sail in fickle winds.

carrack: strongly built, three-masted vessel, carrying two courses of square sails on the foremast and mainmast, and a lateen sail on the mizzenmast. Such ships are equipped with only a limited amount of armament and are designed primarily for carrying cargo.

Carraig: Land of the Sea-Witches, the most northern county of Eileanan. Ruled by the MacSeinn clan, descendants of Seinneadair, one of the First Coven of Witches. The MacSeinn clan has been driven out by Fairgean, and taken refuge in Rionnagan.

Celestines: race of faery creatures, renowned for empathic abilities and knowledge of stars and prophecy.

Clachan: southernmost land of Eileanan, ruled by the MacCuinn clan.

darsach: stringed instrument like a small harp.

claymore: a heavy, two-edged sword, often as tall as a man.

cluricaun: small woodland faery.

corrigan: mountain faery with the power of assuming the look of a boulder. The most powerful can cast other illusions.

craft: applications of the One Power through spells, incantations and magical objects.

Cuinn Lionheart: leader of the First Coven of Witches. His descendants are called MacCuinn.

cunning: applications of the One Power through will and desire.

cunning man: village wise man or warlock.

cursehags: wicked faery race, prone to curses and evil spells. Known for their filthy personal habits.

dai-dein: father.

Day of Betrayal: the day Jaspar turned on the witches, exiling or executing them, and burning the Witch Towers.

Deus Vult: war cry of the Bright Soldiers, meaning "God wills."

Dide: a jongleur.

dragon: large, fire-breathing flying creature with a smooth, scaly skin and claws. Named by the First Coven for a mythical creature from the Other World. Since they are unable to adjust their own body temperature, they live in the volcanic mountains, near hot springs or other sources of heat. They have a highly developed language and culture, and can see both ways along the thread of time.

dram: measure of drink.

Donncan MacCuinn: eldest son of Iseult and Lachlan. Has wings like a bird and can fly.

Dun Eidean: the capital city of Blessem.

Dun Gorm: the city surrounding Rhyssmadill.

Ea: the Great Life Spirit, mother and father of all.

Eileanan: largest island in the archipelago called the Far Islands.

Elemental Powers: the forces of air, earth, fire, water and spirit which together make up the One Power.

elven cat: small, fierce wild cat that lives in caves and hollow logs.

Enit Silverthroat: a jongleur; grandmother of Dide and Nina.

equinox: when the sun crosses the celestial equator; a time when day and night are of equal length, occurring twice a year.

fain: gladly, willingly.

Fairge; Fairgean (pl): faery creatures who need both sea and land to live, and whose magic is strange and brutal. The Fairgean were finally cast out of Eileanan in 710 by Aedan Whitelock when they refused to accept his authority. For the next four hundred and twenty years they lived on rafts, rocks jutting up out of the icy seas, and what small islands were still uninhabited. The Fairgean king swore revenge and the winning back of Eileanan's coast.

Fang, the: the highest mountain in Eileanan, an extinct volcano called the Skull of the World by the Khan'cohban.

Faodhagan the Red: One of the twin sorcerers from the First Coven of Witches. Particularly noted for working in stone; designed and built many of the Witch Towers, as well as the dragons' palace and the Great Stairway.

Feich the Raven-Winged: witch who wove a cloak of invisibility; descendant of Brann, one of the First Coven of Witches.

Firemaker, the: honorary term given to the descendants of Faodhagan (see *First Coven*) and a woman of the Khan'cohban.

First Coven of Witches: thirteen witches who fled persecution in their own land, invoking an ancient spell that folded the fabric of the universe and brought them and all their followers to Eileanan. The eleven great families of Eileanan are all descended from the First Coven, with the MacCuinn clan being the greatest of the eleven. The thirteen witches were Cuinn Lionheart, his son Owein of the Longbow, Ahearn Horse-Laird, Aislinna the Dreamer, Berhtilde the Bright Warrior-Maid, Foghnan the Thistle, Ruraich

the Searcher, Seinneadair the Singer, Sian the Storm-Rider, Tuathanach the Farmer, Brann the Raven, Faodhagan the Red and his twin sister Sorcha the Bright (now called the Murderess).

fraitching: arguing.

General Staff: the group of officers of the Yeomen of the Guard that assists the Rígh in the formulation and dissemination of his tactics and policies, transmits his orders, and oversees their execution.

Ghleanna NicSian: mother of Anghus MacRuraich, and the last Banprionnsa of Siantan. After Ghleanna married Duncan MacRuraich (Anghus's father), the thrones of Rurach and Siantan were merged into one, and Anghus inherited both. He later dissolved the Double Throne so that his niece Brangaine NicSian could inherit.

gillie: steward to a laird.

Gladrielle the Blue: the smaller of the two moons, lavender-blue in colour.

glen: valley.

gravenings: ravenous creatures that nest and swarm together, steal lambs and chickens from farmers, and have been known to steal babies and young children. Will eat anything they can carry away in their claws. Collective noun is "screech."

Great Crossing, the: when Cuinn led the First Coven to Eileanan.

Gwyneth NicSian: daughter of Ghleanna NicSian's sister, Patrice, and married to Anghus.

harlequin-hydra: a rainbow-coloured sea serpent with many heads that lives in the shallow waters near the coast of Eileanan. If one head is cut off, another two grow in its place and its spit is deadly poisonous.

harquebus: a matchlock gun with a long butt, usually fired from a tall stock.

harquebusier: soldier bearing and firing a harquebus.

horse-eel: faery creature of the sea and lochan; tricks people into mounting it and carries them away.

Isabeau the Red: apprentice to Meghan of the Beasts.

Iseult of the Snows: twin sister of Isabeau.

Ishbel the Winged: wind witch who could fly. Mother of Iseult and Isabeau.

Jaspar MacCuinn: eldest son of Parteta the Brave, former Rígh of Eileanan, often called

Jaspar the Ensorcelled. Was married to Maya the Ensorcellor.

jongleur: a travelling minstrel, juggler, conjurer.

Jorge the Seer: witch who can see the future. Was burnt to death by the Bright Soldiers.

Khan'cohbins: Children of the Gods of White. A faery race of snow-skimming nomads who live on the Spine of the World. Closely related to the Celestines, but very warlike. Khan'cohbins live in family groups called prides, which range from fifteen to fifty in number.

The Key: the sacred symbol of the Coven of Witches, a powerful talisman carried by the Keybearer, leader of the Coven.

Lachlan the Winged: Rígh of Eileanan.

Lummas: first day of autumn; harvest festival.

League of the Healing Hand, The: formed by the band of beggar children that fled Lucescere with Jorge the Seer and Tomas the Healer.

leannan: sweetheart.

lickspittle: a sycophant or toady.

Linley MacSeinn: the Prionnsa of Carraig.

loch; *lochan* (pl): lake.

loch serpent: faery creature that lives in lochan.

Lodestar: the heritage of all the MacCuinns, the Inheritance of Aedan. When they are born their hands are placed upon it and a connection made. Whoever the stone recognises is the Rígh or Banrígh of Eileanan.

Lucescere: ancient city built on an island above the Shining Waters. The traditional home of the MacCuinns and the Tower of Two Moons.

Mac: son of.

MacAhern: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Ahearn the Horse-Laird.

MacAislin: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Aislinna the Dreamer.

MacBrann: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Brann the Raven.

MacCuinn: one of the eleven great families, descendants of Cuinn Braveheart.

MacFaghan: descendants of Faodhagan, one of the eleven great families, newly

discovered.

MacFoghnan: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Foghnan the Thistle.

MacHilde: one of the eleven great families; descended from Berhtilde the Bright-Warrior Maid.

MacRuraich: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Ruraich the Searcher.

MacSeinn: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Seinneadair the Singer.

MacSian: one of the eleven great families; descendants of Sian the Storm-Rider.

MacThanach: one of the eleven great families, descendants of Tuathanach the Farmer.

Magnysson the Red: the larger of the two moons, a crimson-red in colour, commonly thought of as a symbol of war and conflict. Old tales describe him as a thwarted lover, chasing his lost love, Gladrielle, across the sky.

Maya the Ensorcellor: former Banrígh of Eileanan, wife of Jaspar.

Meghan of the Beasts: wood witch and sorceress of seven rings. She can speak to animals. Keybearer of the Coven of Witches before and after Tabithas.

Melisse NicThanach: newly crowned banprionnsa of Blessem.

Mesmerd; Mesmerdean (pl): a winged ghost or Grey One; faery creature from Arran that hypnotises its prey with its glance and then kisses away its life.

Midsummer's Eve: summer solstice; time of high magic.

mithuan: a healing liquid designed to quicken the pulse and numb pain.

moonbane: a hallucinogenic drug distilled from the moonflower plant. Grows only in the Montrose Islands, to the south-west of the Fair Isles.

Morrell the Fire-Eater: a jongleur; son of Enit Silverthroat and father of Dide and Nina.

Muileach River: the northernmost river of Lucescere, which together with the Ban-Bharrach River, make up the Shining Waters.

Murkfane: lake in the centre of Arran.

Murkmyre: largest lake in Arran, surrounds the Tower of Mists.

murkwood: a rare herb only found in Arran. Grows on trunks of trees and heals anything.

Nic: daughter of.

nyx: night spirit. Dark and mysterious, with powers of illusion and concealment.

One Power: the life-energy that is contained in all things. Witches draw upon the One Power to perform their acts of magic. The One Power contains all the elemental forces of Air, Earth, Water, Fire and Spirit, and witches are usually more powerful in one force than others.

prionnsa; prionnsachan (pl): prince, duke.

Ravenscraig: estate of the MacBrann clan. Once their hunting castle, but they moved their home there after the Berhtfane castle fell into ruin.

Ravenshaw: deeply forested land west of Rionnagan, owned by the MacBrann clan, descendants of Brann, one of the First Coven of Witches.

Red Wanderer: comet that comes by every eight years. Also called Dragon Star.

reil: eight-pointed, star-shaped weapon carried by Scarred Warriors.

Rhyllster: the main river in Rionnagan.

Rhyssmadill: the Righ's castle by the sea.

rígh; ríghrean (pl): king.

Rionnagan: together with Clachan and Blessem, the richest lands in Eileanan. Ruled by MacCuinns, descendants of Cuinn Lionheart, leader of the First Coven of Witches.

Rurach: wild mountainous land, lying between Tireich and Siantan. Ruled by MacRuraich clan, descendants of Ruraich, one of the First Coven of Witches.

Ruraich the Searcher: one of the First Coven of Witches. Known for searching and finding Talent. Located the world of Eileanan on the star-map, allowing Cuinn to set a course for the Great Crossing.

sabre leopard: savage feline with curved fangs that lives in the remote mountain areas.

sacred woods: ash, hazel, oak, blackthorn, fir, hawthorn, and yew.

Samhain: first day of winter; festival for the souls of the dead. Best time of year to see the future.

satyricorn: a race of horned faeries called the Horned Ones by most of the woodland faeries. The women often take male captives to breed with, since male satyricorn are rare.

Scarred Warrior: Khan'cohban warriors who are scarred as a mark of achievement. A warrior who receives all seven scars has achieved the highest degree of skill.

Scruffy: formerly a beggar boy in Lucescere. Also known as Dillon the Bold.

scrying: to perceive through crystal gazing or other focus. Most witches can scry if the object to be perceived is well known to them.

seanalair: general of the army.

Seinneadair the Singer: one of the First Coven of Witches, known for her ability to enchant with song.

seelie: tall, shy race of faeries known for their physical beauty and magical skills.

sennachie: genealogist of the clan chiefs house. It was his duty to keep the clan register, its records, genealogies and family history; to pronounce the addresses of ceremony at clan assemblies; to deliver the chiefs inauguration, birthday and funeral orations and to invest the new chief on succession.

Sgailean Mountains: Northwestern range of mountains dividing Siantan and Rurach. Rich in precious metals and fine marbles. Name means "Shadowy Mountains."

sgian dubh: small knife worn in boot.

shadow-hounds: very large black dogs that move and hunt as a single entity. Are highly intelligent and have very sharp senses.

Shining Waters: the great waterfall that pours over the cliff into Lucescere Loch.

Sian the Storm-Rider: one of the First Coven of Witches. A famous weather witch, renowned for whistling up hurricanes.

Siantan: north-west land of Eileanan, between Rurach and Carraig. Famous for its weather witches. Once ruled by MacSian clan, descendants of Sian, the Stormrider.

Sithiche Mountains: northernmost mountains of Rionnagan, peaking at Dragonclaw. Name means "Fairy Mountains."

skeelie: a village witch or wise woman.

Skill: a common application of magic, such as lighting a candle or dowsing for water.

solstice: either of the times when the sun is the furthest distance from the earth.

Sorcha the Red: one of the twin sorcerers from the First Coven of Witches. Also called Sorcha the Murderess, following her bloodthirsty attack on the people of the Towers of Roses and Thorns after the discovery of her brother's love affair with a Khan'cohban woman.

Spine of the World, The: a Khan'cohban term for the range of mountains that runs down the centre of Eileanan; also called Tirlethan.

Spinners: goddesses of fate. Include the spinner Sniomhar, the goddess of birth; the weaver Breabadair, goddess of life; and she who cuts the thread, Gearradh, goddess of death.

spring equinox: when the day reaches the same length as the night.

summer solstice: the time when the sun is furthest north from the equator; Midsummer's

Eve.

syne: since.

Tabithas the Wolf-Runner: Keybearer of the Coven of Witches before she disappeared from Eileanan after the Day of Betrayal. Turned into a wolf.

Talent: witches often combine their strengths in the different forces to one powerful Talent; eg, the ability to charm animals, like Meghan; the ability to fly, like Ishbel; the ability to see into the future, like Jorge.

Test of Elements: once a witch is fully accepted into the Coven at the age of twenty-four, they learn Skills in the element in which they are strongest; i.e., air, earth, fire, water or spirit. The First Test of any element wins them a ring which is worn on the right hand. If they pass the Third Test in any one element, the witch is called a sorcerer or sorceress, and wears a ring on their left hand. It is very rare for any witch to win a sorceress ring in more than one element.

Test of Powers: a witch is first tested on his or her eighth birthday, and if any magical powers are detected, he or she becomes an acolyte. On their sixteenth birthday, witches are tested again and, if they pass, permitted to become an apprentice. The Third Tests take place on their twenty-fourth birthday and, if successfully completed, the apprentice is admitted into the Coven of Witches.

Theurgia: a school for acolytes and apprentices.

thigearn: a horse-laird a rider of a flying horses.

Tireich: land of the horse-lairds—most westerly country of Eileanan, populated by nomadic tribes famous for their horses and ruled by the MacAhern clan.

Tirlethan: Land of the Twins; once ruled by Faodhagan and Sorcha, twin sorcerers. Called the Spine of the World by Khan'cohbans.

Tirsoilleir: The Bright Land, also called the Forbidden Land. North-east land of Eileanan, populated by a race of fierce warriors. Was once ruled by the Mac-Hilde clan, descended from Berhtilde, one of the First Coven of Witches. However, the Tirsoilleirean have rejected witchcraft and the ruling family in favour of militant religion. Have dreams of controlling Eileanan.

Tomas the Healer: one-time acolyte of Jorge the Seer. *Towers, the*: the Towers of the Witches. Thirteen towers built as centers of learning and witchcraft in the twelve lands of Eileanan. The Towers are:

Tur de Aisling in Aslinn (Tower of Dreams)

Tur na cheud Ruigsinn in Clachan (Tower of First Landing; Cuinn's Tower)

Tur de Ceo in Arran (Tower of Mists)

Tur na Fitheach in Ravenshaw (Tower of Ravens)

Tur na Gealaich dha in Rionnagan (Tower of Two Moons)

Tur na Rabin Beannachadh in Blessem (Tower of the Blessed Fields)

Tur na Ruraich in Rurach (Tower of Searchers)

Tur de Rosan in Snathad in Tirlathan (Towers of Roses and Thorns)

Tur na Sabaidean in Tirsoilleir (Tower of the Warriors)

Tur na Seinnadairean Mhuir in Carraig (Tower of the Sea-Singers)

Tur de Stoirmean in Siantan (Tower of Storm)

Tur na Thigeanrnan in Tireich (Tower of the Horse-Lairds)

tree-changer: woodland faery. Can shift shape from tree to humanlike creature. A half breed is called a *tree-shifter* and can sometimes look almost human.

trictrac: a form of backgammon.

Tuathanach the Farmer: One of the First Coven of Witches. (See *Blessem*).

Tuathan Loch: the loch near Caeryla, the first in the Jewels of Rionnagan.

two moons: Magnysson and Gladrielle.

uile-bheist; uile-bheistean (pl): monster.

weaverworm: a caterpillar that spins a cocoon of silk, used by the Celestines to make their gowns.

Whitelock Mountains: named for the white lock of hair all MacCuinns have.

will-o'-the-wisp: faery creature of the marshes.

winter solstice: the time when the sun is at the most southern point from the equator; Midwinter's Eve.

Wulfrum River: river that runs through Rurach.

Yedda: Sea-witches.

Yeomen of the Guard: Also known as the Blue Guards. The Righ's own personal bodyguard, responsible for his safety on journeys at home or abroad, and on the

battlefield. Within the precincts of the palace, they guard the entrances and taste the Righ's food.

zimbara: large, doglike creatures that pull the caravans of the Tireichans. Known for their faithfulness and great strength.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For those faithful travellers in the world of Eileanan who have missed Isabeau in this adventure, do not fear! Isabeau has been pursuing her own destiny while Finn, Jay, Dide and the others have been fighting sea serpents, surviving shipwrecks and helping Elfrida win back her crown. You can read all about Isabeau's adventures in the next book in the series, *The Skull of the World*.

Much of the action of *The Skull of the World* takes place at the same time as Finn's adventures, though in a very different part of the world. Isabeau has immersed herself in the life of the Khan'cohbans but she still hopes to return to Lucescere from her self-imposed exile upon the Spine of the World. First, though, she must undertake her journey of initiation to the Skull of the World, where the cruel and enigmatic Gods of White will reveal her destiny to her. On this journey she will face many dangers but, by overcoming them, will finally discover her true Talent. And when she finally does return to her own people, she will find that she is the only one who can finally face Margrit of Arran and overcome her . . .

I hope that you have enjoyed the tale of Finn the Cat, and that you look forward to once again travelling in the strange and marvellous world of Eileanan.

May Eà shine her bright face upon you!

—Kate Forsyth

KATE FORSYTH was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1966, and wanted to be a writer from the time she first learned to read. She has worked as a journalist and magazine editor, and is an internationally published poet. To help support herself while writing full-time, she works as a freelance journalist. She lives in Sydney with her best friend, who also happens to be her husband, and their young son. Ms. Forsyth also has a little black cat, and far too many books. *The Forbidden Land* is the fourth novel in *The Witches of Eileanan* series.