

The Country of the Blind

Murder Most Medieval

by Doug Allyn, 1942-

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I've never much cared for my own singing. Oh, I carry a tune well enough, and my tenor won't scare hogs from a trough, but as a minstrel, I would rate my talent as slightly above adequate. Which is a pity, since I sing for my living nowadays.

As a young soldier I sang for fun, bellowing ballads with my mates on battlements or around war fires, amusing each other and showing our bravery, though I usually sang loudest when I was most afraid.

The minstrel who taught me the finer points of the singer's art had a truly fine voice, dark and rich as brown ale. Arnim O'Beck was no barracks room

balladeer—he was a Meistersinger, honored with a medallion by the Minstrel Guild at York.

An amiable charmer, Arnim could easily have won a permanent position in a noble house, but he preferred the itinerant life of the road, trading doggerel tunes in taverns for wine and the favors of women.

My friend ended dead in a cage of iron, dangling above the village gate of Grahmsby-on-Tweed with ravens picking his poor bones. I hadn't bawled since my old ma died, but I shed tears for Arnim, though I knew damned well he would have laughed to see it. In truth, he ended as we'd both known he would.

But it wasn't only for my friend that I cried. I was a soldier long years before I became a singer. Death has brushed past me many times to hack down my friends or brothers-in-arms.

I mourned them, but I never felt their passing had dimmed the light of the world. A soldier's life counts for little, even in battle. His place in the line will be filled.

But when a minstrel like Arnim dies, we lose his voice and all the songs in his memory. And in these dark times, with the Lion-heart abroad, Prince John on his throne, and the Five Kings contending in Scotland, this sorry world needs songs to remind us of ancient honor all the more.

My friend the Meistersinger knew more ballads of love and sagas of heroes than any minstrel I've ever known.

But even he was not the best singer I ever heard...

I'D BEEN WAITING OUT a gray week of Scottish drizzle, singing for sausages in a God-cursed log hovel of an alehouse at the rim of the Bewcastle wastes. If the muddy little village had a name, I never heard it nor did I inquire. I was more concerned with getting out of it alive.

The tumbledown tavern had too many customers. Clearly there was no work to be found in the few seedy wattle and daub huts of the town, yet a half dozen hard-bitten road wolves were drinking ale in the corner away from the fire. They claimed to be a crew of thatchers, but their battle scars and poorly hidden dirks revealed them for what they were: soldiers who'd lost their positions. Or deserted them. Men whose only skill was killing.

Bandits.

Ordinarily, outlaws pose no problem for me. Everyone knows singers seldom have a penny, and brigands enjoy a good song as readily as honest folk. If I culled the gallows-bait from my audiences, I'd sing to damned skimpy crowds indeed. But along the Scottish borderlands, thieves are more desperate. And as ill luck would have it, I had some money. And they knew it.

I'd earned a small purse of silver performing at a fest in the previous town. One of the border rats jostled me, purposely I think. Hearing the clink of coins, he hastily turned away. But not before I glimpsed my death in his eyes.

And so we played a game of patience, whiling away the hours, waiting for the rain to end. And with it, my life and possibly the innkeeper's. Cutthroats like this lot would leave no witness to sing them to a gallows tree.

My best hope was sleep. Theirs. And so I strummed my lute softly, murmuring every soothing lullaby I could remember. And praying they would nod off long enough to give me a running start.

And then I heard it. I was humming a wordless tune when an angel's voice joined my own in perfect harmony, singing high and clear as any Gregorian gelding.

Startled, I stopped playing, but the melody continued. For a moment I thought it was a voice from heaven calling me to my final journey. Then the innkeeper, a burly oaf with a black bush of a beard, cursed sharply and ended the song.

"Who was that singing?" I asked.

"My evil luck," he grouched. "A nun."

"A nun? In this place?"

"Well, an apprentice nun anyway, a novice or whatever they're called. There were a fire at the abbey at Lachlan Cul, twenty mile north. Most died, but one aud bitch nun stumbled here with her charge before death took her, saddling me with yon useless girl."

"She has a wonderful voice."

"It's nought to me. I've no ear for song, and my customers don't care much for hymns. She's heaven's curse on me, I swear. She's blind, no good for work, nor much inclined to it neither."

"Bring her out, I would like to hear her sing more."

"Nay," he muttered, glancing sidelong at the louts in the corner. "That's a bad lot there. I'll not risk harm coming to a nun under my roof. My luck's foul enough as 'tis."

"I'm sure you're wrong about those fellows," I said a bit louder. "I have plenty of money, and they've not troubled me. Buy them an ale, and bring the girl out to sing for us. I'll pay." I tossed a coin on the counter, snapping the thieves to full alert.

The innkeeper eyed me as though I'd grown a second head, but he snatched up the coin readily enough. Brushing aside the ratty blanket that separated his quarters from the tavern, he thrust a scrawny sparrow of a girl into the room. Sixteen or so, she was clad in a grimy peasant's shift, slender as a riding crop with a narrow face, her eyes wrapped in a gauze bandage.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Noelle," she said, turning her face to the sound of my voice. The landlord was right to worry. She was no beauty, but she'd pass for fair with the grime wiped away.

"Noelle? You're French?"

"No, the sisters told me I was born at Yuletide."

"Ah, and so you were named Noelle for Christmas, and your holiday gift was your lovely voice."

"You're the singer, aren't you?" she asked with surprising directness. She hadn't the mousy manner of a nun. "What are you called?"

"Tallifer, miss. Of Shrewsbury and York—minstrel, poet, and storyteller."

"I've been listening to you. You seem to know a great many songs."

"I've picked up a tune or two in my travels. Most aren't fit for the ears of a nun, I'm afraid. Nor is it proper for you to stay at an alehouse. There is an abbey a few days to the west. I'll escort you there if you like."

"Hold on," the innkeeper began, "I shan't let—"

"Come now, friend, the girl can't remain here, and I need a good deed to redeem my misspent life. I'll pay for the privilege." Pulling the purse from beneath my jerkin, I spilled the coins in a heap on the table. "Consider this as heaven's reward for your kindness to this poor waif. Have we a bargain?"

Stunned, the innkeeper stared at me, then hastily glanced at the crew in the corner. Their eyes were locked on the silver like hounds pointing a hare.

"There's no point in haggling," I continued. "Search me if you like, but I haven't one penny more. Come girl, we'd best be going."

"But it's still raining," the innkeeper protested, eyeing the outlaws, afraid of being left alone with them. "Surely you'll wait for better weather?"

"Nay, I've no money to pay for your hospitality now, and I wouldn't dream of imposing further. Has she any belongings?"

"Belongings? Nay, she—"

"This will do for a cloak then," I said, ripping the blanket from the doorway, draping it about her. Snatching up my lute, I paused at the door long enough for a "God bless all here," then I dragged the girl out into the drizzle. But after a few paces she pulled free of my grasp, whirling to face me, her narrow jaw thrust forward.

"Kill me here. Please."

"What?"

"If you mean to dishonor me, then kill me now where I can be buried decently. Sister Adela warned me about men like you."

"And rightly so, but I'm no one to fear. I'm old enough to be your father, girl. I was a soldier once, and I swear my oath to God I mean you no harm. Unfortunately, I can't swear the same for that lot back there. We've got to get away from here and quickly, or we'll both be dead."

"Then stop pulling me along like a puppy. I can walk. Fetch me a slender stick."

Cursing, I hastily cut an alder limb, and she used it as a cane to feel for obstructions in her path. Though she stumbled occasionally, she had no trouble maintaining my pace. Coltish legs, young and supple.

We marched steadily through the afternoon, moving north on a rutted cart track through the forest. Tiring as dusk approached, I began casting about for shelter.

"Why are we slowing?" Noelle asked.

"It'll be dark soon."

"Darkness is nothing to me. Continue on if you like."

"No need. The rain will wash out our tracks, and they may not follow us at all. If I can find a copse of cedar—"

"That way." She pointed off to our left. "There's a cedar grove over there."

She was right. Peering through the misty drizzle, I spied a stand of cedars some twenty yards off the path.

"How could you know that?"

“Scent. We’ve passed cedars several times in the last hour, though the wood around us is mostly alder, yew, and ash. Each has their own savor. Gathering osier wands for baskets was my task at the abbey. I often did it alone.”

Taking her hand, I threaded my way through the brush to a cedar copse with a soft bed of leaves beneath and heavy boughs above that kept it relatively dry. I cut a few fronds to make our beds, then used flint and steel to kindle a small fire.

Leaving Noelle to warm herself, I scouted about and found a dead ash tree with a straight limb as thick as my wrist. Twenty minutes whittling with my dirk produced a usable quarterstaff, a peasant’s pike.

Returning to the fire, I was greeted by the heavenly scent of roasting meat. Noelle was holding two thick blood sausages over the fire on the end of a stick, sizzling fat dripping into the flames.

“You came well prepared,” I observed, sliding a sausage off the spit, blowing on it til it cooled enough to chew.

“In the country of the blind, one learns to cope.”

“But surely you were well treated at the convent?”

“They were kind, but their lives were so... stifling. I was always pestering new novitiates for songs they knew and news of the outside world. Have you traveled far?”

“Too far. From London to Skye and back again many times, first as a soldier, now a singer.”

“Would you sing something for me? A song of some faraway place?”

“Is France distant enough?” Sliding my lute from its sheepskin bag, I tuned it and began the “Song of Roland,” a war ballad from the days of mighty Charlemagne. In the streets or a stronghold, I sing it lustily, but huddled near the fire as dusk settled on the wood, I sang softly. For Noelle only.

A dozen verses into the ballad, she raised her hand.

“Stop a moment, please.” And then she sang it back to me, echoing my every word, every inflection in her crystalline angel’s voice, ending the refrain at the same place I had.

“Sing on, girl. Your voice does wonders for that song.”

“I can’t. I’ve ne’er heard that tune before, and I can only memorize a dozen or so verses at a time. But at the end I’ll remember it all.”

“Truly? You can learn an entire ballad with one hearing?”

“There are no books or signposts in my country. Memory is everything. Sister Adela said Homer was blind, yet he sang ballads of ten thousand verses.”

“Homer?”

“A poet, a Greek I think.”

“I know who Homer was. I was bodyguard to the young Duke of York during his schooldays at London. I’m just surprised that nuns study Homer.”

“I’m not a nun. I was a ward of the convent, a lodger. I had my own quarters and Sister Adela to teach me and help me get about.”

“How long were you there?”

“Always,” she said simply. “My whole life.”

“But no bairns are born in convents. Where are your parents? Your home?”

“The convent was my home,” she said, with a flash of anger. “They had other guests, an idiot girl and a boy so deformed he had to be wheeled about in a

barrow. If I had parents, I know nothing of them, nor care to. In the country of the blind all men are handsome, all ladies lovely.”

“But all is in darkness?”

“Not all, I can see the changes ’tween day and night readily enough and some colors and shapes, though not clearly. I wear this ribbon to spare confusion and let my other senses compensate. That’s how I knew the cedar was near. And that someone is coming now.”

“What? Where?”

“Behind us, on the track we left.”

“I hear nothing.”

“Sight is no help in the dark. He’s on horseback, moving slowly.”

“I hadn’t counted on horses,” I said, rising, seizing my cudgel. “The louts from the inn—”

“No,” Noelle said positively. “There were no horses at that place. And I hear only one animal now.”

And then I heard it as well, the soft *tlot, tlot* of hooves on the muddy trail. Then they stopped.

Silence. Only the drip of the rain.

“Hellooo, the fire,” a voice called. “I’m a traveler, wet and in need of direction. I have food to share. May I approach?”

“Come ahead, and welcome,” I replied, moving into the shadows.

He walked in warily, leading his animal, a plowhorse from the look of it. Our visitor had much the same look. Heavily built, stooped from farm work, his face was obscured by the cowl of his rough woolen cloak. He appeared to be unarmed, though with his cloak pulled tight I couldn’t be sure. I stepped out to face him, quarterstaff in hand.

“God bless all here,” he said, glancing about. “I’m John of Menteith, a reeve for Lord Duart. No need for that stick, friend. I mean no man harm.”

“You’re far from Menteith,” I said.

“Aye,” he nodded, warming his hands at the fire, “I’m bound for the fair at Grahmsby. Hope to trade this sorry nag for a bullock and a few cups of ale. Who might you folk be?”

“Tallifer of York,” I said. “Traveling to Strathclyde with my daughter.”

“A blind girl, by chance?”

Sweeping off his cloak, he revealed a sword, a crude blade, standard issue at any barracks.

His bush of a beard split in a gap-toothed grin. “Drop the stick, fellow, or I’ll cleave you in two.”

If he expected me to wet myself or scamper off, he was disappointed. I’ve seen blades before,—I’ve even faced one or two with nought in my hand but sweat. I had a stout cudgel and Menteith had the look of a farmer, big but clumsy. I waited.

So did he. His eyes flicked from me to Noelle and back again. He licked his lips, unnerved by our stillness, gathering himself. Then with a roar, he lunged at me, swinging his blade like a field sickle.

He'd have done better with a sickle. Jabbing the cudgel butt between his shins, I sent him sprawling into the fire. He moved quickly for a big man, though. Rolling with the fall, he scrambled clear of the flames, crouching on the far side, panting.

Unable to tell what was amiss, Noelle stood frozen as Menteith began sidling around the fire toward her. I thought he meant to seize her as a shield. I was wrong. Eyes wild, he charged again, this time at Noelle!

He was almost on her, blade raised high to hack her down, when I rammed the pole hard into his gut, doubling him over. Gaspng, he staggered back, slashing at me. A mistake. Blocking a blow with one end of my staff, I swept the other around full force, catching him squarely on his bull neck just below the ear.

He stared at me a moment, surprised. Then his eyes rolled up like a hog on a hook, and he toppled backward into the fire. I stood over him, taut as a drawn bow, ready to finish him if he moved. But even the flames couldn't rouse him.

Kicking the blade out of his fist, I prodded him out of the fire with my staff.

"Tallifer? What's happened?"

"Our guest had no manners, and it worked out poorly for him. Do you have any idea who he might be?"

"I've ne'er heard his voice before. Why?"

"He seems an unlikely thief. He was armed with a yeoman's blade, but he was no soldier."

"He said he was a reeve, perhaps he spoke true. He smells of cattle."

"He fought like one, all bull, no skill. He was definitely seeking us, though. He knew you were blind though he could see neither of us clearly."

"I don't understand."

"Nor do I, yet. I'll persuade him to explain when he wakes."

But he didn't wake. As I stripped off his belt to tie his hands, his head flopped unnaturally. I checked his pupils. Dead as a goose on Saint Margaret's Day.

"God's bodkin," I said softly.

"What is it?"

"The bastard's dead. Damn me, I didn't think I hit him that hard. And damn him for an inconsiderate lout. Not only does he keep his secrets, I'll have to haul his useless carcass into the wood. We don't want him found near our camp."

After dragging his dead weight for what seemed like a mile, I used his sword to dig a shallow grave, rolled the reeve in it, and threw his blade in after him. Weapons are outlawed for common folk in Scotland and the sword surely hadn't done the reeve much good. His purse held a few shillings, fair payment for a burial.

I slept poorly, restless from the fight and the death of the reeve. As a soldier I was no hero. I fought for my life and my friends, killed when I had to but took no satisfaction in it. In battle I was always afraid. And afterward, though I survived, I knew how easily it could have been me bleeding out while my enemies divided my gear and had a drink on my luck.

The reeves death was doubly troubling, though. He was no vagrant bandit. Only a fool travels this country at night, yet he'd arrived at our camp well after dark. He must have been hunting us though I couldn't imagine why.

Had the cutthroats from the inn set him on us? Unlikely. Why hire out work they could easily do themselves?

Odder still, in the midst of the fight, he'd lunged at Noelle when she was clearly no threat. It made no sense. Unless she was the one he came for, and I was just in his way. But who would kill a blind nun?

"Tallifer? Are you awake?"

"Yes."

The fire had burned to embers, and her face was only a vague shape in the shadows. As all faces were in her world.

"I've been thinking. You can't leave me at an abbey."

"Why not?"

"Without money to pay for my lodging, they won't accept me."

"How were your expenses paid before?"

"I don't know, by a kinsman, I suppose. It was a private arrangement with the abbess and she was lost in the fire. I have an idea, though."

"Such as?"

"Take me with you," she said in a rush. "I can earn my way. I sing fairly well and you can teach me to—"

"It's out of the question. Life on the road is too hard—it's nothing for a girl."

"All roads are hard in the country of the blind. I heard you breathing heavily this afternoon, when I could have walked another day without tiring. I can carry burdens, wash clothes. I'll be your woman if you want."

"My what? Good lord, Noelle, what do you know of being a woman?"

"The novitiates seldom talked of anything else, and I know a few songs of love."

"I know songs about dragons, girl, but I can't breathe fire. And I'm much too old for you anyway."

"I wouldn't know."

"Yes, you would. Trust me on that."

"You don't want me? Am I too plain, then? Or does my blindness offend you?"

"Neither, but—"

"Then what is it? You've saved my life twice. Why did you bother if you mean to cast me off?"

"Noelle—"

"A minstrel came to the abbey once. He had a little dog who danced when he played the fife. I can't dance, but I can sing a bit. And I promise to be no more trouble than a little dog. Please, Tallifer."

"Enough!" I said, throwing up my hands. "The sun is rising and we'd best be away from here. We'll talk more of this later."

But we didn't talk. We sang instead. We took turns riding the reeve's mount, entertaining each other, with Noelle memorizing each ballad I sang, then vastly improving it with her marvelous voice.

I skirted the next few hamlets, afraid the reeve's horse might be recognized. But in the first town of any size, I found a tailor and squandered our inheritance to buy Noelle a decent traveling garment.

After the measurements, Noelle and the tailor's wife disappeared into the family quarters for a final fitting. I waited with the tailor, exchanging news of the road and the town. And then Noelle stepped out.

The dress wasn't fancy. It had no need to be. In pale blue woolsey, and with her face scrubbed and shining, my grimy foundling was transformed. And I was lost.

The tailor's wife had replaced her blindfold with a blue ribbon that matched the dress. She was a vision as lovely as the damsels of a thousand ballads. But no mirror could ever tell her so.

My throat swelled and I could not speak. Mistaking my silence for displeasure, the tailor's wife frowned.

"If the color is too dark—"

"No," I managed. "It's perfect. Wonderful. No man ever had a more lovely—daughter."

And so it seemed. Born restless, I've never had a family of my own nor much felt the lack. Yet after a few weeks with Noelle I could scarce remember life without her.

As summer faded into autumn, we worked our way southwest toward the border, singing for our supper. And prospering.

My performances have always been well received, but Noelle brought freshness and sparkle to songs I'd sung half my life, her youth and zest a sprightly contrast to my darker presence.

Audiences responded to her and she to them, basking in the applause like a blossom in the sun. The waif from the convent was fast becoming an assured young beauty. And though she never raised the subject of being more than a daughter to me again, neither was she interested in the young bloods who lingered after our performances to chat her up.

She was always courteous but never a whit more than polite as she dismissed them. When I asked why she showed no curiosity about boys, she replied that they were exactly that. Boys. For now, the music and freedom of her new life were more than enough. She'd never been happier.

Nor had I. The last large town we worked was Strathclyde, a performance in the laird's manor house for his family and kinsmen that was well received. Afterward, his steward offered us a year's position in his household as resident artists.

A month earlier I'd have leapt at the chance, but no more.

I've always felt comfortable amongst Scots. Their rough humor and love of battle songs suits both my art and my temperament, but Noelle was changing that.

As her talent and skills improved, I noted the magical effect her singing had on village folk and was certain she could charm larger, more worldly audiences south of the Roman walls just as easily. Newcastle, York, perhaps even in London itself.

For the first time in years I allowed myself to consider the future. We could become master minstrels, winning acclaim and moving in finer circles than either of us had known before.

But to reach that future, we'd have to survive the present. There are always rumors of war in the Scottish hills, but I was seeing more combatants than usual, not only Scots and their Irish cousins, but also hard-bitten mercenaries from France and Flanders.

In earlier years I would have been pleased at the chance to entertain soldiers far from home with fat purses and dim futures. Lonely troops are an amiable audience, easily pleased and generous with applause and coins.

But I had a daughter to worry about now. So after politely declining the steward's offer, we began working our way south toward the border and England. Perhaps we could even journey to my family home at Shrewsbury after long years.

Traveling was a pure pleasure now, singing through the lowlands, describing the folk and the scenery to a girl who savored every phrase like fine wine. My sole regret was that Noelle remained in her country of the blind and I could do nothing to light her way out.

But there is little difference between a lass born sightless and a fool befuddled by dreams. Though I recall those days as the happiest I've ever known, in some ways I was more blind than my newfound daughter.

THE FIRST FROSTS OF autumn found us moving steadily south and into trouble. We were entering the country of the true border lords now, nobles with holdings and kinsmen on both sides of the river Tweed and loyalties as changeable as the lowland winds. Arnim once described the Scottish border as a smudged line drawn in blood that never dries.

Perhaps someone was preparing to alter the mark once again.

As we neared the Liddesdale, traveling from one small hamlet to another, we often took to the wood to avoid troops, well mounted and heavily armed. Skirmishes between Norman knights on the Tyne or the Rede and restive Scots along the Liddel Water are common in a land where cattle raids are lauded in song. Still, with war in the air, crossing the border would be dangerous. We might be hanged as spies by one side or another.

But our luck held. As we approached Redheugh, I spotted a familiar wagon in a camp outside the town wall, a bright crimson cart with a Welsh dragon painted boldly on its sides.

After changing from our traveling garments into performing clothes, I led Noelle on our mount into a world unfamiliar to most folk, a traveling circus.

Most minstrels, especially in the north, ply their trade alone or in small family groups. But a few singers earn enough renown to gather a larger assemblage, a troupe of musicians, jugglers, and acrobats whose appearance at a town is reason enough to declare a feast day.

One such is Owyn Phyffe, Bard of Wales and the Western World as he calls himself. A small, compactly built dandy, blond-bearded and handsome as the devil's cousin, Owyn is a famed performer on both sides of the border and on the continent as well. A son and grandson of Welsh minstrels, he's a master of the craft. And well aware of it.

His camp was a hive of activity, cookfires being doused and horses hitched for travel. I found Owyn strolling about, noting every detail of the preparation without actually soiling his hands. He dressed more like a young lord than a singer, in a claret velvet doublet and breeches of fine doeskin. His muslin shirt had loose Italian sleeves. And not just for fashion.

Owyn carries a dirk up one sleeve or the other, perhaps both, and I once saw him slit a man's throat so deftly that the rogue's soul was in hell before his heart knew it was dead. Owyn dresses like a popinjay, but he's not a man to take lightly.

Our paths had crossed a number of times over the years, usually on friendly terms. Or so I hoped, because I needed him now.

He scowled theatrically as I approached leading the mount.

"God's eyes, I believe I spy Tallifer, the croaking frog of York. I can't tell which is uglier, you or that broken-down horse. Here to beg a crust of bread, I suppose."

“Not at all. In the last town, folk told me of a perky little Welsh girl who dresses like a fop and calls herself Owyn Phyffe the poet. Is she about?”

“Aye, she’s about, about to thrash you for your loud mouth,” Owyn said, grinning, seizing my arm in a grip of surprising strength for a small man. “How are you, Tallifer?”

“Not as well as you. The years have been kind to you.”

“You were always a poor liar. How goes the road?”

“We’ve been doing quite handsomely. We’ve played Orison, Stobs, and a half dozen rat-bitten hamlets between, to very good response.”

“We?”

“May I introduce my daughter, Noelle, the finest singer in this land or any other.”

“I’m sure she is,” Owyn snorted, then read the danger in my eyes and hastily amended his tone. “Because, as I said, your father is an inept liar, my dear. Honest to a fault.”

Taking her hand, he kissed it with a casual grace I could only envy, favoring her with the smile that melted hearts on two continents. If he noted her blindness, he gave no sign. Owyn is nought if not nimble-witted.

“I would gladly offer you the hospitality of my camp, Tallifer, but we’re making ready to leave.”

“I see that. Well, there’s no point in our playing yon town now. A performance by Owyn the Bard is impossible for lesser minstrels to follow.”

“Even shameless flattery is sometimes a Gospel truth,” Owyn grinned wryly. “Do we meet by chance, Tallifer, or can I be of some service to you and your... daughter?”

“We meet by God’s own grace, Welshman. Over the past weeks the roads have grown crowded with soldiers. I’m hoping we can travel with your troupe across the border. I can pay.”

“Don’t be an ass, come with us and be welcome. We’re not bound directly for the border, though. I’ve an agreement to perform in Garriston for Lord DuBoyne on All Saints Day. Do you still want to come?”

“Why shouldn’t we?”

“Because the soldiers you’ve been seeing likely belong to DuBoyne or his enemies. Whatever the trouble is, we’re wandering merrily into the heart of it, singing all the way.”

“We’re still safer traveling with you than on our own.”

“That may be,” Owyn conceded grimly. “But I wouldn’t take much comfort in it. The sooner we’re south of the Tweed, the happier I’ll be, and devil take the hindmost.”

Owyn’s company traveled steadily for the next few days, stopping only at night to rest the animals. If anything, we encountered more soldiers than before, but with wagons, we couldn’t cede the road. Troops simply marched around us.

Owyn’s fame is such that even warriors who hadn’t seen him perform greeted us cheerfully. After chatting with one grizzled guards’ captain at length, though, the Welshman’s gloom was palpable.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, goading my mount to match pace with Owyn’s. Noelle was riding on one of the wagons with Owyn’s wife, or perhaps his mistress. His

two companions looked much alike to me, small, dark women, with raven hair. Sisters perhaps? Some things you don't ask.

"Everything's wrong," Owyn said glumly. "You were a soldier once, Tallifer, have you noted anything odd about the troops we've encountered?"

"Mostly Scots, supplemented by a few mercenaries. Why?"

"I was talking about their direction."

I considered that a moment. "We haven't met any for the past few days," I said. "They've all been overtaking us."

"Exactly," Owyn sighed. "They're traveling the same way we are, and the only holding on this road is Lord DuBoyne's. But when I offered to buy the captain of that last lot an ale at the festivities, he declined. He said he wouldn't be there."

"So?"

"So there's nowhere else for him to be, you dolt, only Garriston. And if he's not bound for Garriston to celebrate..." He left the thought dangling.

"Sweet Jesus," I said softly.

"Exactly so," Owyn agreed.

"Perhaps they'll delay the bloodletting until after the holiday."

"That would be Christian of them," Owyn grunted, "though I'm told good Christian crusaders in the Holy Land disembowel children then rummage in their guts for swallowed gems."

"You're growing gloomy with age, Owyn."

"Even trees grow wiser with time. And I wouldn't worry much about old age, Tallifer. We're neither of us likely to see it."

Arriving at Garriston on the fourth day did little to lift Phyffe's spirits. It was a raw border town on a branch of the Tweed, surrounded by a high earthen wall braced with logs. Its gate was open but well guarded. Noelle was riding at the front of the train with Owyn as I trudged along beside.

"What do you think, Tallifer?" he asked, leaning on his pommel, looking over the town.

"It seems a small place to hire such a large troupe."

"So it does. The DuBoyne family steward paid us a handsome advance without a quibble, though."

"Is it a pretty town?" Noelle asked. "It feels lucky to me."

Owyn shot a quizzical glance at me, then shook his head.

"Oh, to live in the country of the blind, where every swamp's an Eden. Aye, girl, it's a fine town with gilded towers and flags on every parapet. But perhaps you'd better stay in the camp, while your father and I taste the stew we've got ourselves into."

Leaving instructions with his wives to camp upstream from Garriston near a wood, Owyn, myself, and Piers LeDoux, the leader of the Flemish jugglers, rode in together. In such a backwater, well-dressed mounted men are seen so rarely we were treated like gentry. The gate guards passed us through with a salute, saying the manor's steward could be found in the marketplace.

An old town, Garriston was probably a hamlet centuries before the Norman conquest. Houses were wattle and daub, set at haphazard angles to the mud streets. It was a market day and the air was abustle with the shouts of tinkers and

peddlers, the squeal of hogs at butchering, hammers ringing at a smithy, and, beneath it all, the thunderous grumbling of a mill wheel.

A month earlier I wouldn't have noted the noise, but after traveling with Noelle I found myself listening more, trying to savor the world as she did.

A stronghold loomed over the north end of the town. Crude, but stoutly built in the Norman style, the square blockhouse sat atop a hill with corners outset so archers could sweep its walls. And even in peaceful daylight, sentries manned its towers.

The street wound into an open-air market in the town square, with kiosks for pottery, hides, and leatherwork, an alehouse, and a crude stone chapel. Owyn spied the DuBoyne family steward, Gillespie Kenedi, looking over beeves for the feast day.

Heavysset, with a pig's narrow eyes and a face ruddy from too much food, too little labor, Kenedi wore the fur-trimmed finery of his station and its airs as well. He was trailed by a rat-faced bailiff who bobbed his head in agreement whenever his master spoke. Or farted, probably.

Kenedi talked only with Owyn, considering the Fleming and myself beneath notice. But as the haggling progressed, he kept glancing my way, as though he might know me from somewhere.

When their bargain was struck, Owyn and the steward shook hands on it, then Kenedi beckoned to me.

"You there! Where did you get that horse you're holding?"

"From a crofter north of Orniston."

"And how did the crofter come by it?"

"As I recall, he said he traded a bullock for it. Why?"

"It resembles one of our plowhorses that went missing some time ago."

"I'm sure Tallifer acquired the horse fairly," Owyn put in. "If you have a problem, it's with the man who took it from you."

"Unless you believe I'm that man," I said, facing Kenedi squarely, waiting. But he was more beef than spirit.

"Perhaps I'm mistaken," he said, glancing away. "One spavined nag looks much like another. I'll let it pass, for now." He turned and hustled off with his bailiff scurrying after.

"Nicely done," Owyn sighed. "It's always good business to antagonize one's host before getting paid. So? Did you really get the horse at Orniston?"

I didn't answer. Which was answer enough.

AS DUSK SETTLED ON our camp like a warm cloak, townsfolk and crofters from nearby farms began gathering to us. Dressed in what passed for their best, carrying candles in hollowed gourds or rutabaga hulls to light their way, they brought whatever small gifts they could afford, a flask of ale, bread or a few pickled eggs, walnuts, even a fowl or two.

Drawn by the noise, Noelle came out of the women's tent. I led her to a place near the fire as Owyn entertained the gathering throng, singing in Italian love songs to folk who barely understood English. And winning their hearts.

"What's afoot, Tallifer?" Noelle whispered. "What is all this?"

“We were hired to perform tomorrow at the DuBoyne castle for All Saints Day. But among Celtic peoples, tonight is a much older celebration called All Hallomas Eve, or Samhain, the festival of the dead.”

“The dead? But I hear laughter and the music is gay.”

“Life is so hard for borderland peasants that death isn’t much feared. For the rest of us, Samhain is for remembering those who are gone. And to celebrate that we’re not among them yet.”

“Owyn is a fine singer, isn’t he?”

“Aye, he’s very good. He’s an attractive man, too, don’t you think?”

“Owyn?” she snorted. “You must be joking. He’s a snake. His glib tongue and smooth hands put me in mind of the serpent of Eden. And you should hear what his wives say about his lovemaking.”

“You shouldn’t listen to such things.”

“What do you think women talk about when we’re alone? They asked me about you as well. About what we really are to each other. They noted we bear little resemblance.”

“What did you tell them?”

“The absolute truth, of course. That you are the only father I’ve ever known and that you never speak of my poor mother.”

“Very poetic. And ever so slightly misleading.”

“Thank you. I have a good teacher. What’s happening now?”

“Piers and the Flemish acrobats are putting on a tumbling show. It’s not so fine as they will do for the nobility, but it suits this lot. Some of the women are cracking walnuts to read the future.”

“Can they foresee it? Truly?”

“Certainly. A peasant’s future is his past, and any fool who trusts a walnut has no future at all.”

The crowd continued to swell with folk from the town, tradesmen, manor servants, even a fat priest who mingled with his flock quaffing ale as heartily as the rest. The steward too made an appearance with his rat-shadow of a bailiff, standing apart from the rest, aloof.

“Horses,” Noelle said quietly.

“What?”

“I hear horsemen coming. Many. Moving slowly.”

For a moment I thought she was mistaken, but then I saw them, moving out of the woods in a body toward our fires. A mounted troop, battle-weary from fighting by the look of them. Their horses were lathered and played out, and the men weren’t much better, slumped in their saddles, exhausted, some wounded.

Their leader was young, less than twenty, but he was no boy. Dressed in mail with a black breastplate, he sat on his horse like a centaur. His armor was spattered with blood, not his own, and a broken arrow was stuck in his saddle.

A shaggy mane of dark hair obscured his eyes, but as he scanned the camp, I doubt he missed a thing. Including Noelle. His glance lingered only a moment, but I’ve seen the look before. In battle. We’d been marked.

“God’s eyes,” Owyn said, sidling over to us. “Here’s trouble if I ever saw it.”

“Who are they?”

“Milord DuBoyne’s men. That’s his eldest son, Logan. Black Logan he’s called, both for his look and his sins.”

“What sins?”

“Cattle raiding’s a national sport in Scotland, but instead of beating or ransoming the thieves Logan hangs them, then guts them to make easy feeding for the ravens.”

“I can see why he’d be unpopular with cattle thieves, but that’s hardly cause for sackcloth and ashes.”

“He’s a hotspur, gives battle or extracts a tax from anyone found on DuBoyne lands, even neighbors. He’s killed three men in single combat and God knows how many more in frays. There’s already a ballad about him.”

“He seems a bit young for a song.”

“The legend is that after two babes were stillborn, his mother made a Christmas wish for a healthy son. Instead, the devil sent a demon child who sprang full-grown from the womb, called for his armor, and rode off to fight the Ramsays. Villagers hide their children when he passes.”

“They hide from thunder as well.” I spoke lightly, but in truth I was growing concerned. Black Logan was conferring with Kenedi, and both of them were glancing our way.

“Perhaps you’d better take Noelle...” I began. Too late. The steward was bustling toward us, looking altogether too pleased.

“I’m told this girl is with you, minstrel,” he said without preamble. “How much for her?”

“What?”

“The girl. Young DuBoyne wishes to buy her for the night. He’s willing to pay, but don’t think you can—”

And then he was on the ground, stunned, his lip split open. It happened so quickly I didn’t even realize I’d hit him.

“Damn,” Owyn said softly. “Now we’re in for it.”

Logan strode angrily to us, his hand on his sword. “What madness is this? You struck my father’s steward!”

“He asked my daughter’s price and paid a small part of it. Are you here for the rest?”

He blinked, eyeing me more in surprise than anger. “Are you offering me a challenge, commoner?”

“He asked the price, I’m simply telling you what it is. Your life. Or mine. Is that plain enough?”

It was a near thing. Young or not, he was a warrior chief with a small army at his back. I was but a cat’s whisker from death. He cocked his head, reading my eyes.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked quietly.

“I only know I’m not your man, nor do I owe that hog on the ground any fealty.”

“I’m Sir Logan DuBoyne—”

“He’s lying!” Noelle snapped, pulling free of Owyn’s grasp.

“What?” DuBoyne and I said together.

“Any DuBoyne would be noble,” she continued coldly. “At the convent they said I could tell the nobility by their scent and fine manners. You smell like a horse and

show your breeding by insulting my father who was a soldier before you were born. Yet you claim to be a knight? I think not.”

For a moment, I thought he might butcher us both. His eyes darkened, and I could see why the villagers hid their children. But the rage passed. He shook his head slowly, as if waking from a dream.

“You were convent raised, miss? Then clearly I’ve... misunderstood this situation. I apologize. I’ve fought two skirmishes today, and I’m not as young as I used to be. I meant no offense to you. But as for you,” he said, turning to me, “if you ever lay hands on a man of mine again, I’ll see your head on a pike.”

Reaching down, he hauled Kenedi to his feet. “Come on, Gillespie, let’s find some ale.”

“The bastard struck me!” Kenedi said, outraged.

“He saved your life,” DuBoyne said, leading him off. “The girl would have cut our hearts out.”

“You idiot,” Owyn said angrily, spinning me around. “You could have gotten us all killed!”

“And if she were yours? Would you have sold her?”

For a moment I thought I’d pushed him too far. But Owyn is nothing if not agile. “Sweet Jesus, Tallifer. You may not be the world’s greatest singer, but by God you’re never dull. And you, girl, you’ve enjoyed my hospitality long enough. It’s time to earn your keep. Come, sing for us. If I’m to be slaughtered defending your honor, you’d better be worth it.”

I wanted to fetch my lute to accompany her but I was afraid to risk letting her out of my sight, even for a moment. Black Logan was prowling the camp, talking with pedlars and travelers. And glancing my way from time to time.

It didn’t bode well. Most men with black reputations have earned them. His own people shied from him as if he wore a leper’s bell and I knew that if he snatched up Noelle, none but me would oppose him.

And so I watched tensely as Owyn led Noelle into the ring of firelight, introduced her, then stepped back. It was an impossible situation. Drunken revelers were bellowing jests, laughing, groping their women. A clown troupe juggling lions with their manes ablaze wouldn’t satisfy this lot.

Yet, as that slip of a girl began to sing, the crowd gradually fell silent, listening. She sang a simple French lullaby in a voice so pure and true that my heart swelled with longing, not for Noelle but for all I’d lost in my life. And would lose.

When she finished there was a long moment of stone silence, then the crowd erupted with a roar of applause and cheers. They called for more and she gave it, singing a rousing Irish war ballad I’d taught her and then a love song that would have misted the eyes of a bronze idol.

I was as transfixed as the rest, until I realized that Black Logan was standing a few paces to my left. He was eyeing Noelle like a lion at mealtime, but if her song moved him he gave no sign, not even applauding when she finished. He turned to me instead.

“I didn’t know the girl was blind.”

“What difference does it make?”

“I don’t know. But it does. I’ve asked around the camp. Folk say you truly were a soldier once. Whom did you serve?”

“I was a yeoman for the Duke of York, bodyguard to his son for a time. Later I fought for Sir Ranaulf de Picard.”

“At Aln Ford?”

“I was there, and at a hundred other scuffles you’ve never heard of.”

“Then you must know troops. Whose men did you pass on the road here? How were they armed?”

“I was a soldier once and now I’m a singer. But a spy? That I’ve never been.”

“Minstrel, you’re trying my patience at a bad time. My father’s health is failing, and his neighbors and enemies have begun raiding our stock and gouging taxes from our people. When I answer their aggression with my own they whine to Edinburgh, branding me an outlaw. My father has invited some of those same neighbors to the feast in hopes of a truce, but I know they’ve brought troops with them. Perhaps they fear treachery. Perhaps they plan it. Either way, you’d best tell me what you’ve seen.”

“Suppose we compromise, and I tell you what I didn’t see instead? We saw no heavy cavalry on the road, nor any siege engines, nor did we encounter any supply trains. The soldiers were carrying a few days’ provisions, no more.”

“Then they aren’t planning a siege—they’re escort troops only. Good. How many men did you see, and whose were they?”

“I took no count, and I don’t know the liveries of this land well enough to identify them.”

“And wouldn’t if you could?”

“They did us no harm, DuBoyne. We’ve no quarrel with them.”

“Nor with me. Yet.” The camp erupted in a roar as Noelle finished her song, with Owyn standing beside her leading the cheers.

“Your daughter sings well.”

“Yes, she does.”

He started to say something else but his voice was drowned by the throng as Owyn led Noelle back to me. DuBoyne turned and stalked off to rejoin his men.

“Tallifer, did you hear?” Noelle’s face was shining and Owyn’s grin was as broad as the Rede.

“You were in wonderful voice, Noelle, and they knew it. What was that French lullaby? I’ve never heard it before.”

“A woman sang it to me when I was small. I don’t know why it came back to me tonight. Was I foolish to sing it?”

“*Au contraire, cherie*, it was brilliant,” Owyn countered. “By singing softly, you made them quiet down to hear. You won many hearts tonight, little Noelle, including mine.”

“All of it?” she asked sweetly. “Or just the parts your wives aren’t using at the moment?”

“Get back to your tent, imp,” Owyn snorted. “I swear, if you weren’t so pretty I might believe you really are Tallifer’s child.”

“Your tongue’s as sharp as his.” Laughing, Noelle set off, but Owyn grasped my arm before I could follow.

“What did Black Logan want? More trouble?”

“He has trouble of his own.” I quickly sketched the situation DuBoyne had described.

“I’ve heard the old laird’s mind is failing,” Owyn nodded. “And vultures gather early along the borders. Do you think there will be quarreling at the feast?”

“I hope not. That boy may be young, but he’s already a seasoned fighter. I half believe that nonsense about him leaping from his mother’s womb to his saddle and riding off to fight the Ramsays.”

“He won’t have far to ride tomorrow,” Owyn sighed. “The Ramsays are among the honored guests. A baker’s dozen of them. And that captain I spoke to yesterday, the one who’s probably watching us from the hills at this moment? He was a Ramsay man.”

“Damn it, you should have warned me away from this, Owyn.”

“I tried to, remember? Besides, Noelle likes it here. Thinks the blasted place is lucky.”

“She may be right. But good luck or bad, I wonder?”

THE EVENING FEAST OF All Saints Day was a rich one, probably to atone for the carousing and devilry of the night before. It was also a display of wealth and power by the laird of Garriston, Alisdair DuBoyne. Food and drink were laid on with a will, steaming platters of venison and hare and partridge, wooden bowls of savory bean porridge spiced with leeks and garlic—mulled wine, ale, or mead, depending on the station of the guest.

The great hall, though, was great in name only, a rude barn of a room, smoky from the sconces and cooking fires, its walls draped with faded tapestries probably hung when the DuBoynes first came to this fief a generation ago.

Seated at the center of the linen-draped high table, flanked by his wife and two sons, Laird DuBoyne was even older than I’d expected, seventy or beyond, I guessed. Tall and skeletal with a scanty gray beard, it was said he’d once been a formidable warrior, but his dueling days were long past. He seemed apathetic, as though the juice of life had already bled from him and only the husk remained.

His wife was at least a generation younger. Dressed in green velvet, she was willowy as a doe, a striking woman with aquiline features and chestnut hair beneath a white silken cap. Her youngest son, Godfrey, nine or so, had her fairness and fine features, while his brother, Black Logan, with his dark beard and burning eyes, sat like a chained wolf at the table, seeing everything, equally ready for a toast or a fight.

Kenedi, the stocky steward, and his wife sat at the far end of the high table beside the chubby priest I’d seen at the Samhain fest. Father Fennan, someone had said, was a local man who’d risen from the peasantry to become both parish priest and chaplain to the DuBoynes.

Two lower tables, also decked in fine linen, extended from the corners of the high table to form a rough horseshoe shape, which was appropriate since the guests were probably more familiar with war saddles than silver forks.

Three family groups of DuBoyne’s neighbors, the Ramsays, Duarts, and Harden clans, nearly thirty of them, were seated in declining order of status. A hard-eyed crew, wary as bandits, they’d brought no women or children with them. Nor had they worn finery to honor their hosts, dressing in coarse woolens instead, clothes more suited to battle than a banquet.

Randal Ramsay was senior among them. A red-bearded descendent of Norse raiders, Ramsay conversed courteously with his host and the other guests but kept a watchful eye on Logan, an attention the younger man returned.

In England, strict protocols of station would have been observed, but along the borders the Scots and their English cousins act more like soldiers in allied armies, jests and jibes flying back and forth between high and low tables. But I noted the exchanges were surprisingly mild and politely offered, lest harmless banter explode into bloodshed.

Owyn delayed beginning the entertainment as long as he dared. Scots at table can be a damned surly audience, and the tension in DuBoyne's hall was as thick as the scent of roasting meat. Later, with full bellies and well oiled with ale, DuBoyne's guests might be more receptive.

Not so. When Piers LeDoux and his troupe of Flemish acrobats opened the performance, their energetic efforts received the barest modicum of applause.

After a juggler and a Gypsy woman who ate fire fared equally poorly, Owyn took the bull by the horns and strode to the center of the room. He stood silently for a bit, commanding attention by his presence alone. Then, instead of singing, he began to recite a faerie story of Wales and then ghostly doings in the Highlands and Ireland, delivering the tales with such verve and drama that even the bloodthirsty warriors at the low table leaned forward to hear.

It was a masterful performance. Owyn entranced the DuBoynes and their restive neighbors alike, holding them spellbound for the better part of an hour. He finished to rousing cheers and applause, the first enthusiastic response of the night.

"Match that if you can," Owyn whispered with a grin as he passed us in the doorway.

The minstrelsy is a free-spirited life, but it has protocols of its own. As Noelle and I had joined Owyn's troupe last, we were scheduled to perform last, the toughest position of all.

Ordinarily, I warmed up a crowd with a few rowdy ballads before bringing on Noelle, but after the way she won over the revelers at the Samhain, I simply introduced her and began strumming my lute, softly, softly, hoping the crowd would quiet.

Facing her unseen audience, Noelle sang the French lullaby, even more beautifully than the previous night. And with the same wondrous effect. The room fell utterly silent, every eye fixed on Noelle as she poured all the pain and longing of her blighted life and our own into that song. Angels on high couldn't have sung it one whit better. My eyes grew misty as I played the accompaniment, and I wasn't alone.

As I glanced about, reading the room, I noted Randal Ramsay's fierceness had softened, Lady DuBoyne was crying silently, while her husband... was up and moving. Laird DuBoyne was shuffling past the low table, coming toward us.

Unaware of his approach, Noelle sang on. I couldn't guess his intentions, but he seemed anguished and angry. Brushing past me, the old man seized Noelle's arm, startling her to silence.

"My dear, this is not fitting. You sing as beautifully as ever, but it's not proper for my lady wife to—"

“Let go of me!” Noelle shouted, pulling away. “Tallifer!”

“Come back to the table, milady, we’ll—”

“Milord Alisdair!” Lady DuBoyne’s voice snapped like a whip, cutting off her husband’s ramblings. He stared up at her, shocked, then turned back to Noelle, eyeing her in wonder.

“I... but you’re not my lady,” he said slowly. “I thought... Your voice sounds much like hers did. Long ago. I’m sorry. I’ve ruined your song...”

And then Black Logan was at his father’s side. Firmly disengaging his hand from Noelle’s arm, he led Laird DuBoyne from the room. But at the door, the old man stopped, turning back to stare at Noelle in confusion.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper. “Who are you?”

With surprising gentleness, Logan ushered him out, leaving us in stunned silence.

“What was all that?” Lord Ramsay said, rising. “Is our host going mad, then?”

“He had a bit too much wine, that’s all,” Lady DuBoyne said coldly. “It’s a celebration, Ramsay, and you’re falling behind. Continue the music, minstrel. Play on!”

And I did. Striking up a merry Scottish reel on my lute, I played as though the strings were on fire. To no avail. The spell of Noelle’s song was shattered, and the guests were only interested in discussing their host’s behavior with one another.

Owyn led Noelle quietly out of the hall, then after letting me twist in the wind alone for a time, he called the rest of the company back for a final song and bow before we all beat a hasty retreat to a smattering of applause.

Noelle was waiting for us in the outer hall. “Tallifer, what happened? Who was that man?”

“Our host, my lark,” Owyn said. “The man who is supposed to pay me tomorrow. Assuming he doesn’t mistake me for a tree and have me cut down.”

“Is that what happened?” I asked. “He mistook her for someone else?”

“For his lady, I believe. There’s a vague resemblance, and a man addled by age could mistake them. Still, if DuBoyne’s neighbors came to take his measure, they just saw the ghost of a man who’s still alive,, but only barely. I don’t like the feel of this a damned bit. We’re breaking camp at first light, I—”

“Good sirs, hold a moment, please.” It was the pudgy priest, red-faced and puffing as he hurried after us. “I’m Father Fennan, Mr. Phyffe, chaplain to the DuBoyne family. Milady DuBoyne would like a word. And with these other two as well, the blind girl and her father.”

“It’s late,” I said. “Noelle should—”

“It’s not that late and I want to be ten miles south of here tomorrow,” Owyn interrupted. “Lead on, Father.”

“You must be a busy man,” Noelle said, as we followed the friar. “From what I hear of Black Logan, he badly needs a priest. Or is it already too late for him?”

“It’s never too late for salvation, miss,” Father Fennan said, eyeing her curiously. “You sang in French very well. Where did you learn?”

“I know only the one song. I grew up in the convent at Lachlan Cul and must have heard it there.”

"I see," Fennan said curtly. Too curtly, I thought. Either the song or the mention of the convent seemed to trouble him. I knew the feeling. Everything about this place was worrying me.

We followed the priest down a shadowed corridor lit by guttering sconces, arriving at a windowless room at the west corner of the fortress. Vellum scrolls and ledgers filled pigeonhole racks against the walls.

"A library?" Noelle asked. "Linseed and charcoal. I love the ink scent. It smells like knowledge."

"Nay, it's a counting room," I whispered. Though such a place was normally a steward's lair, Lady DuBoyne was seated alone at his desk with a ledger open before her.

"According to Kenedi's accounts, this was the sum agreed on," she said brusquely, pushing a purse of coins toward Owyn. "Count it if you like."

"That won't be necessary, milady," Owyn said, touching his forelock. "I'm only sorry that—"

"Our business is concluded, Mr. Phyffe. Wait outside with Father Fennan, please. I want a private word with these two."

"As you say, milady." Giving a perfunctory bow, Owyn followed the priest out. Fennan swung the oaken door closed as he left.

Lady DuBoyne eyed me a moment, lips pursed, then pushed a small purse toward me. "This is for you, minstrel. And your daughter."

"I don't understand."

"It's money for travel, the farther the better. And for your silence. My husband is no longer young and has no head for wine, but he's still my husband. I will not have him ridiculed."

"I saw nothing to laugh at, milady, and Noelle saw nothing at all. You need not pay us."

"The girl is truly blind then? I thought the ribbon might be an artifice. Come closer, child. You have a beautiful voice."

"Thank you. Do you know me, lady?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Have we met? You seem... familiar to me, though I can't say why. Have you ever visited the convent at Lachlan Cul?"

"No, and I'm sure we've never met. You're very lovely. I'd remember."

"I must be mistaken, then. Forgive me, the country where I live is a land of shadows. It's confusing sometimes. But Tallifer is right, there's no need to buy our silence."

"Then consider it a payment for your song."

"The song was for any who listened, not for you alone. You needn't pay for it and you have nothing to fear from us. We'll not trouble you again."

She turned and started for the door so hastily I had to grab her arm to save her from injury. I glanced back to make our goodbyes, but Lady DuBoyne didn't notice. She was leaning forward on the desk, her face buried in her hands.

"Well?" Owyn said when we joined him in the hall. "What did she want?"

"Not much," I said. "She asked us to be discreet."

"Discretion is always wise," Father Fennan agreed. "We live in fearsome times."

“That lady has nought to fear,” Noelle said sharply. “Her son has a ballad of his own already. Tell me, Father, did Logan fight those battles or just bribe minstrels to praise his name?”

“Hardly,” the priest said, surprised. “As his confessor, I assure you the song doesn’t tell half the carnage he’s wrought, and he despises it. He once struck a guardsman unconscious for singing it.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t hang the poor devil,” Noelle snapped. “This is an unlucky town for singing, gentlemen. We’d best be away from here.”

Owyn glanced at me, arching an eyebrow. I shrugged. I had no idea why Noelle was so angry. Or why Lady DuBoyne had broken down. Women have always been an alien race to me, as fascinating as cats and no more predictable.

Noelle was right about one thing, though: Garriston was unlucky for us. The sooner we saw the back of it, the better.

Pleading the lateness of the hour, the priest led us to the chapel, which had its own exit through the town wall. He seemed uneasy, eager to have us gone.

“Good luck and Godspeed,” he called, as he strained at the heavy door. “And remember, discretion!” The armored door clanged shut like the gates of hell.

“Paid to the last penny,” Owyn said somberly, hefting his purse. “A successful engagement, I suppose. At least we finished with a profit.”

But we weren’t finished with Garriston, nor it with us. We’d scarcely retired to our tents when a commotion arose from behind the city walls. Shouting, men running. A raid? Trouble between the DuBoynes and their guests?

I was pulling on my boots when horsemen thundered into our camp followed by foot soldiers on the run, shouting for us to come out, tearing open the tents and wagons. My first thought was to reach Noelle, but I was seized as soon as I showed myself.

“Hold him! He’s one of them!” The rat-eyed bailiff who’d been with Kenedi the first day was on horseback, armed with a poniard, directing the search. Owyn stalked boldly out to demand an explanation, but the bailiff ordered him seized as well. Then they dragged Noelle out and marched the three of us back to the stronghold under guard, directly to the great hall.

The linens were gone now and the high table was occupied by the steward, Kenedi, Black Logan, his younger brother Godfrey, and the heads of the guest families, Randal Ramsay, Nicol Duart, and Ian Harden. Red-eyed, disheveled, and still half-drunk from the feast, they were in an evil mood, eyeing us like wolves “round a wounded calf.

Armed guards ringed the room and blood was in the air, real blood. A body was laid out on a trestle table in the center of the room covered by a sodden sheet, bleeding gore onto the flagstones.

“What is the meaning of this?” Owyn said coldly. “Why have we been unlawfully seized?”

“You’ve been brought to answer, Mr. Phyffe,” Randal Ramsay said coldly. “For murder.”

“Whose murder?”

“See for yourself.” The squat soldier holding Noelle thrust her forward, banging her into the corpse. She recoiled, and as he reached for her again, I pulled free and

tackled the lout from behind, slamming his face into the floor! Once, twice, and then the others were on me, dragging me off him, kicking me down.

“Enough!” Black Logan’s bark stopped the beating instantly. “This is a court, not a damned alehouse brawl!”

“What kind of court?” Owyn said coolly. “I see no townsmen here to act as a jury.”

“This isn’t a hallmote hearing for selling bad ale, Phyffe,” Ramsay said. “As the crime is against a peer of the realm, only his equals can sit as judges.”

Jerking his arm free of his guard, Owyn strode boldly to the table with the corpse. Noelle helped me to stand as Owyn drew the sheet back. His mouth narrowed, but he gave no other sign.

“Who’s been killed?” Noelle whispered to me. “Is it the steward?”

“God rest him,” Owyn said quietly, gazing at the corpse. “Father Fennan seemed a good man, but he was only a parish priest, unlettered and coarse of speech. I doubt he was of noble birth.”

“Fennan was not the only one attacked,” Ramsay said. “The laird of Garriston also lies wounded and is unlikely to—”

“He’s not dead yet,” Logan snapped. “He’s survived worse.”

“When he was younger, perhaps,” Ramsay countered, “but he’s been failing for some time. No one of sound mind would have loosed you to ravage the countryside!”

“Gentlemen, please,” Owyn interrupted. “Could you save your private quarrel for a more convenient time? My friends and I have been hauled from our beds to no good purpose I can discern. There are any number of folk here with cause to harm Laird Alisdair while we have none. If you wish us to testify, let’s get on with it.”

His sheer audacity stunned the room to silence.

“Testify?” Gillespie Kenedi sputtered. “You are charged with the crime!”

“On what basis?”

“You are the only strangers here, and you were last seen with the priest. Money was found in your tent.”

“Money paid to me by the lady of the manor for the night’s performance,” Owyn replied. “As to the priest, when last we saw him he was alive and well. He saw us out through a portal at the rear of the chapel and bolted it behind us. Once outside the walls, we could not return, and since you found me abed with my wife who will swear I never left once I’d arrived—”

“Your *wife* will swear,” Kenedi sneered.

For a moment Owyn stood silent, his eyes locked on the steward’s until Kenedi looked away. “Gentlemen, I have been falsely charged with murder. I have answered that charge with truth. I can have six free men in this room in half an hour to vouch for my word. But there is a simpler way. You have impugned my wife’s honor, Mr. Kenedi. Suppose we put the question to the test in the courtyard? With any weapons you choose.”

It was a bold move, and pure bluff. Owyn was a lover, not a fighter. Though lightning quick with a dirk, he had no real skill with weapons. But he was a master at reading audiences. The Scottish lords, tired and surly, brightened at the idea of a trial by combat. And he read Kenedi correctly as well. The steward had the arrogance of his high office, but no belly for a fight.

"No offense was intended to your wife," Kenedi muttered.

"Then you accept my word and my explanation?" Owyn pressed.

"Yours, yes. But what about the other minstrel? Who was he abed with? His daughter?"

Owyn glanced at me, warning me with his eyes to control my anger. But he wasn't the only one who could read people. Owyn was about to lie for me and I couldn't let him. Nothing but the truth could save us now.

"My daughter was with Owyn's family," I said. "I was quite alone.

"Then you could have returned," Kenedi said intently. "The gate guard has admitted he drowsed off. You could easily have passed by him to commit the crime."

"To what end? I have no quarrel with anyone here."

"You were sent by Lord Alisdair's enemies," Kenedi countered. "You arrived on a stolen horse. My bailiff can testify that the horse came from Garriston."

"No need. I accept your word that the horse came from Garriston. Was the reeve who rode it a Garriston man also?"

The question surprised him. It surprised me as well, but there was no turning back now. Murder had been done, and someone would pay for it before first light. Denials were useless. I had neither witnesses nor friends to vouchsafe my word. I had only my road-weary wits and the glimmer of an idea.

"Aye," Kenedi conceded, "the reeve was from Garriston. Why?"

"Because he attacked me in a wood on the way to Orniston. I buried him there." That woke them up.

"You admit you killed the reeve?" Kenedi said.

"In self-defense, yes."

"Why would a reeve attack you?" Black Logan asked. "Did you quarrel?"

"No, we hardly spoke. And he seemed more interested in killing Noelle than me."

"Same question: Why would he attack your daughter?"

"Much as it pains me to admit it, Noelle is not my daughter. She was a resident at the convent at Lachlan Cul until recently, when it burned."

"All was lost," Noelle put in. "A sister was taking me to her family when she died of injuries. Tallifer saved me."

"A touching tale but irrelevant," Kenedi sneered. "After killing the reeve, you likely came to Garriston for revenge."

"If I'd known the lout came from Garriston, I would hardly have ridden his horse here. Chance brought us to this place, or perhaps fate."

"An ill fate," Kenedi snorted. "You rode here on the horse of a murdered man yet claim you know nothing of the attacks on our laird and his chaplain?"

"I didn't say that. I had no part in what happened tonight, but I believe we may have caused it."

"Don't bandy words, minstrel," Randal Ramsay demanded. "What are you saying?"

"I think what happened tonight was the echo of another crime, one that occurred many years ago."

"What crime?" Logan asked.

"Before I answer, I have a question of my own." Turning to Noelle, I quietly asked her something that had troubled me. Then I turned back to the court.

“Gentlemen, I believe the explanation lies in a ballad I heard when I came to this town—”

“What nonsense is this?” Kenedi sputtered. “You stand accused of murder—”

“Let him talk,” Randal Ramsay interrupted. “His life is in the balance. But bear in mind, minstrel, if we don’t care for your tale, you’ll never tell another. Go on.”

“The song is one you all know, the *Ballad of Black Logan*, the boy warrior. Like most songs, it’s part fancy, part truth.

“For example, it speaks of his birth at Christmas. Is this true? Was he born at Yuletide?”

“What difference—?” Kenedi began.

“Aye, it’s true enough,” Nicol Duart offered. The lanky clan chief had a buzzard’s hook nose, and the same implacable eyes. “It was a damned black Christmas for this country. But the rest is a lie. Young Logan never leapt from his crib to raid Lord Randal’s lands. He were at least a year old before he turned outlaw.” The third lord, Ian Harden, guffawed. Neither Logan nor Ramsay smiled.

“Then the ballad is partly true. And the rest of it, the myth of a bairn riding off to war, is to explain a thing seen but not understood.”

“What was seen?” Logan demanded.

“Here is what I believe happened. Seventeen years ago, a young wife who’d lost two stillborn children feared she might be put aside if she didn’t deliver her lord an heir. So when she was expecting again, she arranged to obtain a male child. When her own child came, a frail girl born blind, she replaced it with the other and sent her true daughter off to a convent. At Lachlan Cul.

“The boy became a fearsome warrior. But his size at birth did not go unremarked, and a local legend sprang up to explain it. A ballad that grew with his exploits.”

“You lying dog,” Logan said coldly. “You dare insult my family by—”

“Hold, hold, young Logan,” Ramsay said, his face split by a broad grin. “Perhaps you haven’t fully grasped the implications. If the minstrel’s tale is a lie, his life is forfeit. But at least part of his story is true. And if the rest is, then you have no right to threaten anyone, nor even to a seat at this table. Any fool can see you don’t favor your father, and the girl looks so like Lady DuBoyne that her own husband mistook her earlier tonight.”

“My father is not well—”

“If he is your father.”

“By God, Ramsay, step into the courtyard, and we’ll see which of us doesn’t know his father!”

“I don’t brawl in the street with common louts, boy. We’ll hear the rest of this before I consider your offer. What of it, minstrel? Have you any proof of your tale?”

“Lady DuBoyne knows the truth of it,” I said.

“My mother is keeping vigil with her dying husband,” Logan snarled. “Anyone who dares disturb her grief for this nonsense will deal with me first.”

“I admit it’s inconsiderate to trouble the lady now, but neither is it fair to condemn me without asking the one person who knows the truth.”

“We needn’t hear any more,” Kenedi snapped. “The minstrel has admitted to killing a reeve from this town. As steward of Garriston and head of this court, I say we condemn him for that murder and dismiss the rest of this nonsense as a pack

of lies told to save himself. We can hang him straightaway unless... any of you gentlemen truly wish to dispute the birthright of Lord DuBoyne's son and heir?"

The Scottish lords exchanged glances, and I read my fate in their eyes. Death. They couldn't risk challenging Logan in his own hall with his men about. They might raise the matter another time but that would be far too late for me.

"Well, gentlemen?" Kenedi said. "Shall we put it to a vote?"

"No," Logan said, his face carved from oak, unreadable. "We've gathered to resolve the murder of a priest and assault on my... on the laird of Garriston, not the death of a reeve many miles away. If we condemn the minstrel for killing the reeve, the rest remains unresolved and I will not have any stain on my name nor any question of my rights of inheritance. But I see a way to settle this. We'll send my younger brother Godfrey to ask Lady DuBoyne the truth of the minstrel's tale. If she denies it, he stands condemned out of his own mouth. Unless any man here doubts the lady's honor?"

"The minstrel's the one who'll be dancing the hangman's hornpipe if she misleads us," Ramsay noted dryly. "He may have a misgiving or two."

I considered that a moment. "No, as it stands, only a few know the truth of what happened, and the lady is the one most likely to tell it. I agree to the test. Send the boy."

"So be it," Ramsay said, eyeing me curiously. "Duart will accompany the lad to vouch that all is done properly."

"Agreed," Logan nodded, "with one stipulation. If my mother denies Tallifer's lies, he will not hang. One of you will loan him a blade, and we'll settle our differences in the courtyard. If he kills me, you can hang him afterward."

"Or gift him with silver and a fast horse," Ramsay growled. "Duart, take the boy to speak with his mother. And listen well to her answer."

The whey-faced youth and the burly border lord exited, and I resigned myself to wait. Perhaps for the rest of my life.

The reply came sooner than I expected. A stir arose at the back of the room, which grew to an uproar. Logan bolted to his feet, his face ashen. "Help him to a chair, for godsake!"

I turned. Lord Alisdair had tottered into the hall, supported by Godfrey and Duart. He looked even more ancient than before, as though he might fade to smoke any moment. His muslin nightshirt was bloodstained, hanging loosely over a poultice.

A servant fetched him a chair and Alisdair eased painfully down, but as he looked about him, his eyes were bright and alert.

"Milord," Logan said, "you should not be here."

"Miss a trial for my own murder?" Alisdair asked, his voice barely a whisper. "Not likely. Is this the man accused of the attack?" He gestured weakly at me. "Well, sir, speak up. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Me? Nothing!" I said, dumbfounded. "You know damned well I didn't attack you!"

"I fear not. I sleep like the dead nowadays, especially after wine. Someone jammed a pillow over my face, and when I struggled against it I was stabbed. And woke in the arms of my wife. A most agreeable surprise. I expected to wake in hell."

“Sir,” Ramsay said, “perhaps your lady can better answer our questions. You should be resting.”

“I’ll be at rest soon enough, Ramsay,” DuBoyne said. “And my lady is at chapel, praying for my soul. Prematurely, I hope. I’ve survived cuts before—God willing, I’ll survive this. Nothing like a good bleeding to clear a man’s senses. And his wife’s as well. As I lay a-dying, my lady confessed to a deception long ago, a wondrous tale of a child put aside and another put in its place.”

“My God, it is true then?” Ramsay breathed. “Black Logan is not your son?”

“My family tree is no concern of yours, Ramsay, only the murder of my priest.”

“But surely they are related!”

“Perhaps, but...” DuBoyne winced, swallowing. “It is the minstrel’s life and his tale. Let him finish it. If he can.”

“As you say, lord,” I said. “The exchange of the children took place years ago. But when word came of the fire at Lachlan Cul, a reeve was sent to end the threat the girl represented. He failed. Later, when we arrived, someone realized who she was.”

“Who?” Ramsay asked.

“The priest knew, for one. As milady’s confessor, he would have heard the tale long since. But only one person stood to lose everything if the truth came out. Not the lady. Her deception was done for love of her husband, and she has borne him a second son since.”

“Only Logan stood to lose all,” Ramsay said, turning to the youth. Black Logan met his stare but made no reply.

“True, Logan had everything to lose,” I agreed, “and he’s surely capable of any slaughter necessary to protect himself or his family. But only if he knew the truth of his birth. And he didn’t.”

“How can you know that?” Ramsay countered.

“Because I’m still alive. A moment ago, the steward could have hanged me for the death of the reeve. Logan prevented it, something a guilty man would never have done.”

“Who then?” Ramsay demanded.

“Only one other person had everything to lose if the truth came out. The one who arranged the original substitution. A foundling child couldn’t come from this village, too many would know. Who can travel his lord’s lands at will to deal with peasants who might sell a babe? And later, when word of the fire came, who could send a reeve to do murder?”

Ramsay swiveled slowly in his seat, to face Kenedi.

“It’s a lie,” Kenedi breathed.

“Is it? If Lord Alisdair learned the truth he might forgive his wife, and even the foundling boy who came here through no fault of his own. But he would never forgive the man who betrayed him for money by arranging the deception. His steward.”

“But killing his lord wouldn’t save his position,” Logan said coolly. “Surely the lady would guess what happened and confess the truth.”

“Only if she knew there’d been a murder. Lord Alisdair said he woke beneath a pillow. If he’d smothered, everyone would believe he died in his sleep. But when the priest surprised him, Kenedi lashed out in desperation.”

"All lies," Kenedi said, "a tale told at bedtime. There's not one shred of proof."

"Actually, there is," I said. "When Noelle and I were first brought into this room, she asked if you'd been killed, Kenedi. Tell him why, girl."

"When the soldier pushed me against the body, I smelled linseed and charcoal. Ink," Noelle said, stepping forward. "The scent was unmistakable."

"And the priest was unlettered," I finished. "As are most of us here. Only you have the gift of literacy, Kenedi. And the smell of ink on your hands. Only you."

"It's not true."

"Do you dare say my daughter lies?" Lord Alisdair asked weakly. "If I were hale I'd kill for that alone. But as things are... Logan, see to him."

"Wait," Ramsay interjected. "If Logan is not your blood, he has no standing in this court, no right to be here at all."

"Sir," Alisdair said, rising unsteadily, "the offense was against me and mine in my own hall, so the justice will be mine as well. Gentlemen, I invited you here to celebrate All Saints Day in a spirit of fellowship. The banquet and the... entertainment are finished now. And I am very tired."

Ramsay started to object, but a glance at Logan changed his mind. We were still in DuBoyne's hall, surrounded by DuBoyne's men.

"As you wish, milord," Ramsay said, rising. "My friends and I thank you for the fest and pray for your speedy recovery. For all our sakes."

Ramsay stalked from the hall with Harden and Duart close behind, joined by their clansmen at the rear. At Logan's nod, a guardsman led the steward away.

Their departure sapped the fire from DuBoyne. Wincing, he sagged back in the chair. Logan eyed him but didn't approach.

"Where is the girl?" DuBoyne asked quietly. "The one who claims to be my daughter?"

Warily, Noelle stepped forward. DuBoyne raised his head to observe her, then nodded slowly.

"So it is true. You look very like my lady wife did once. A great, great relief."

"Relief?" Logan echoed.

"Aye, that I wasn't completely bereft of my senses last night when I mistook them. And a relief that so late in my life, my daughter has been returned to me."

"And relief that I am no son of yours?"

"That too, in a way. In truth, a part of me has always known you weren't mine, Logan. My young wife lost two sickly babes before the miraculous birth of a strapping lad the size of a yearling colt, a boy who looked not at all like me. I feared she'd taken a lover to get the son I couldn't give her. I'm relieved to be wrong.

"But if you're not my blood, you're still my creation, the son I wanted. And needed. My daughter's birthright will be worthless if our land is lost. Fiefs are bestowed in Edinburgh or London, but they can only be held by arms. Your arms, Logan. You remain lord here in all but name, and for now that is enough. I'm tired, boy. Help me to my bed. Perhaps my daughter can join us later. We have much to talk of, lost years to make up for."

As Logan led the old man out, I touched Noelle's hand.

"I must be going as well, Owyn will be breaking camp. But you needn't stay here unless you choose to. We'll find a way to—"

“No,” she said, stopping my lips with her fingertips. “I have always known I belonged somewhere and for good or ill, I’ve found that place. In the country of the blind, places are much alike, only people are different. Besides, if I go with you, I may end up as Owyn’s third wife.”

“There are worse fates. It won’t take long for that young border wolf to realize he can reclaim his inheritance by marrying the lord’s newfound daughter.”

“And is he truly such a monster?”

“No, but... why are you smiling? My God, Noelle. You’ve thought through this already, haven’t you?”

“At the convent, the young girls talked of little but love, love, love. I can never have love at first sight, but I know Logan wanted me before he knew who I was.”

“He wanted to *buy* you! And you said he smelled of horses.”

“I suspect he will always smell of horses. I like horses.”

“The poor devil,” I said, shaking my head in wonder. “He has no chance.”

“Perhaps I’m his fate. He may only own his armor now, but he has a song. And you’ve said I’m a fair singer.”

“You have the loveliest voice I’ve ever heard, Noelle, on my honor. I shall miss you greatly.”

“We’ll sing together again, whenever the wind or the road bring you to me. Perhaps one day we can sing to my children.”

“We will. I promise.”

We said our goodbyes in the great hall, and I took to the road, leaving my foundling child with strangers. And yet I did not fear for her. She grew up in a harsher land than any can imagine and flourished there. She would have no trouble coping with her new situation, of that I was certain.

And she would have Black Logan. But not because of her family or position. Love at first sight is more than a legend or a girlish fancy. It happens rarely, but it does happen.

I’d seen Logan’s face at the Samhain as he listened to Noelle’s wondrous voice. He had the look of a starving wolf at a feast, a turmoil of hunger, love, and lust.

I remember that terrible yearning all too well. I felt it for a woman once myself, long years ago.

But that is another tale...

