

## War, not raids.

The King's audience chamber in Whitewall wasn't like that of a normal, lesser king who ruled only one tribe. How could it be? This was Whitewall, ancient seat of the High King, not just stone-built as opposed to the normal wood, but done so on a huge and magnificent scale. White marble reflected the light, pillars and arches soared up to the high roof where the winds swirled. There was room here for all the tribes to come together, or for the King's council to meet as a Ring - the central, inviolate, space around the great throne permitted either, with acoustics that gave projection or privacy as required. This was where, before the Lunars invaded, they had delivered their taxes and made their oaths. Where the King had convinced them that they could, and would, stand against the Bat and defeat it. Where, in that dreadful, confused time after the battle, the various lesser leaders had vied for control. Or, as today, it could be used for a much smaller though no less formal gathering, without the few present feeling lost in the space.

Londar still felt uneasy about this meeting: a simple, though formal request. The king had never refused him permission to raid the Lunar supply routes before, but things were a bit different this time. Three warbands had disappeared on raids in the last few weeks, and only a couple of days ago there had been reports that the entire warband of the Grinning Bears had been crucified - dead, wounded and prisoners all - by the roadside near where they'd attacked a convoy. He still couldn't believe it - it was as if it was brood at work, or scorpion-men, not people. Everyone knew, you ransomed raiders back to their clans, killing brutally was cause for a blood feud. There was the odd death in combat which could be resolved by paying weregeld but dozens of deliberate killings - even the Empire didn't have enough gold to pay for that.

Greeting the warriors guarding the doors, he was announced and ushered into the chamber. Unusually there were few people present, apart from servants. Less witnesses, if Broyan shamed him by refusing him permission. Was that deliberate?

When the King met his eyes, he formally announced "I, Londar Fistivisson, request permission to take those who follow me and raid those enemies of ours who follow the Red Goddess".

And to his horror, Broyan paused before answering. His eyes went to one of the few other people in the room, that Vingan Queen who'd fled from her clan and tribe when the Lunars had conquered them. In Londar's opinion his king gave her far too much attention - but he was the King, and at the moment, he was waiting for her to speak first.

"Have you worked out what happened to the Grinning Bears? Who attacked them? And how to stop it happening to you?"

How could he answer that? The Bears were incompetent. He would do better. But the Bears were Volsaxi, and there was no way he was admitting to this interfering foreigner that they might have faults. Answer her other question instead, the stupid one.

"Of course we know who attacked them", he said impatiently. "Lunars."

"Tarshites. Those men were killed with axes. And male Tarshites - the bodies weren't mutilated."

"Or Esrolians, then, in theory," Broyan pointed out.

"Maybe, but they go for a bigger axe-head and a different shape. This is just like what we used to see back in the the Far Place ten years ago, only then they were usually on our side. We'll see."

She turned her attention back to Londar. "How do you propose dealing with them?"

She'd looked at the bodies? Like that, cold, calculating? He felt sick at the thought of his tribesmen being dishonoured, their bodies displayed to someone who saw them not as a reason for grief or rage or vengeance, but just as a source of information. Women! And foreign women at that, no wonder she felt nothing for *his* people.

"What is there to propose? We've always raided the same way and I'm not going to change just because some enemy thinks to frighten me by disregarding all reasonable standards of behaviour. If the Lunars want blood feud then they can have it. We're not women, to run away from danger."

Something flickered in her eyes at that and she moved forward slightly, but Broyan motioned her back and she returned to her place by the window. So she was that easy to anger? Worth remembering for another time, a duel would sort out her ideas of being as good a fighter as a man. But her voice was calm again now, patient, as if explaining something to a small and stupid child.

"To those Lunars crucifying prisoners *is* reasonable behaviour. They're not playing cattle raids, they're fighting a war and they'll do anything they think will help them win it. The Bears got away lightly, only the warband was executed as punishment. I've seen an entire clan enslaved, right down to babes in arms, and anyone who resisted was crucified on the spot. Now, are we going to find out who did it and how? Or is the raid off now you know what the real stakes are?"

Playing cattle raids? *Playing*? Did this woman hold nothing, not even the rites of Finovan the Raider, sacred?

"Of course it's on, we're not children to be scared by tall tales of atrocities in far off lands. We've been raiding successfully since the invaders arrived, we'll show them how it's done."

"I think they already know." She shrugged. "All right. I'll come along as well, you can show me while you're at it. I want a look at this Tarshite."

Oh, no. That was the last straw. He could just imagine it – and the sort of helpers she'd want to drag along. He'd heard that one of her Storms was... no, that couldn't be true, could it? But even so: "This is a raid, not a Royal Progress," he said angrily. "The Lunars will hear us miles away if a queen and her courtiers get involved."

He'd expected resentment from her at that – the rising delight in her expression bewildered him. Broyan however seemed to understand its meaning, and her probable intentions. "*No*", he said firmly. "That is *enough*." Londar had no idea what was being forbidden – he probably didn't want to know. Then his King turned back to him with smooth courtesy. "We are sure the Queen of the Kheldon will manage with a few capable bodyguards".

He knew it, knew his King would support him. "She'll have to. I don't have time to nursemaid..."

Broyan cut him off. "That is the condition on which I will grant your request, and pray to Finovan for your success. Kallyr, and such guards as she chooses to take, goes with you."

That smug smile of triumph was wiped off her face as he added, "And Kallyr, remember that Londar commands this raid. You obey his orders."

She was going to say something, but the King interrupted: "Enough, the matter is decided" and to Londar, "Leave us".

Withdrawing, Londar was unsure whether to be delighted or appalled. The last thing he wanted was that woman in tow - but under his orders? He could just order her to stay out of the fight, she'd only be a nuisance even if she knew what she was doing. The extra guards might be useful but... no, his men could handle it. He wasn't in the slightest doubt that King Broyan's primary intention was to have Kallyr report back on how the clans were doing. Still the raid would be a success and he'd bring back sufficient booty to show everyone how raiding was done.

The witnesses gone, Broyan rounded on her.

"You goaded him into that deliberately. He'll stand no more chance than the Bears, and you know it."

"Sorry." She didn't sound it. "He annoyed me."

"It may have escaped your attention, but I don't have so many troops that I can afford to lose a warband every time someone annoys you. You really think adding you and a few of your guards will make the difference?"

"At least we're likely to spot the ambush. But no, what'll really make the difference is having an extra warband following up ready to rescue them from whatever got the Bears."

"It had better. You talked Londar into this. You make sure he and his men get out of it alive."

"His men? How about his women?"

"I wouldn't dream of suggesting they need protection, in present company," he said dryly. "Someone might tell me they can defend themselves."

She grinned back, the earlier anger evaporated. "True, someone probably would, if he had any in his band, which I rather doubt. Still, Londar will be doing just what I want, now, whinging to everyone about having to take a foreign Vingan on his famous raid."

"Yes." Broyan, of course, needed no explanation. "If their spies pick that up, that fast, then we have real problems. You think using yourself as bait is worth it?"

"It's got to be something big enough to force a reaction we can see, or we learn nothing. Yes, it's worth it." The grin was pure mischief, now. "Anyway, it'll be fun, especially if I use Natalina to do the rescue."

He sighed. "Kallyr, grow up. Londar is not worth all this."

"I wouldn't dream of suggesting a Volsaxi warband leader is worth less than my full attention, in present company. His king might feel the need to defend him."

"He should be so lucky."

"Under his orders, though? Are you serious?"

"You'll cope. You're supposedly under *my* orders, and it doesn't seem to slow you down much."

"That's different." The laughter vanished. "That's very different. There's a certain amount of trust and respect there, believe it or not. All right, I'll take Londar's orders while we're raiding, assuming I can hear them. Helmets, you know, and that thick accent. I might miss one or two."

Broyan did not manage to change her mind about her choice of rescue party: she had valid reasons that went beyond that childish desire to annoy Londar. As always - did she ever do anything without killing at least three birds with one stone? It worried him a little that he could only see two motivations here - what had he missed? But he could give their leader his own orders, and forestall what he suspected was going to happen.

"She's in one of her moods again."

"Then she had good reason to be." Natalina was never going to openly admit that Kallyr had faults, even if they both knew she privately agreed with him.

"Londar. He's a reason all right, but not a good enough one. She's going to do something stupid, probably trying to prove something that doesn't need proving. I'd like to get her back in one piece."

"Oh? I was beginning to wonder."

"I wonder myself at times. But yes - she's exasperating, but brilliant enough to be worth it. Bring her back alive, please. She'll try to delay calling you in until the last possible moment. Don't wait for her order."

Natalina nodded in reluctant agreement. Her primary loyalty was to her goddess, then to Kallyr, with Broyan running a very poor third. But he was the chosen leader here, and also, he was right. "It's anticipation, not disobedience. I'll start the counterattack when Vinga guides me."

Natalina was still surprised at how easy it was to slip in and out of what was supposedly a city under siege without being noticed by those inside or outside. Pavis, back home, was watched much more closely than this. It couldn't last: but for now, they were safely on the hillside above the ambush point, before there was enough light to reveal their movements. The main army might be sloppy, but she was placing no bets on the incompetence of this new unknown factor.

Londar would be here soon, once he'd had what he felt was his proper share of acclamation at the gate. Then the caravan. And then...? Well, that was why they were here. She looked round, checking: all experienced women, today, this was no time for learning on the job. The younger girls tended to be more fanatical in their near-worship of Kallyr - possibly, she thought cynically, because they hadn't met her - but when there was a serious question of a threat to her safety, all other priorities were dropped, and that included hurt pride. Experience was more use than enthusiasm.

It was getting lighter. Light enough to see everyone, and Harla, who had been bringing up the rear, wriggled over to join her, staying low. Hours to go yet, but you got into the habit of being careful.

"Everyone's in place: well, all of the warband. Ernaldesta's taken *him* back into the woods, he'll only get bored sitting here." Like many of the Vingans, Harla regarded Kallyr's Trickster partly as a small child to be mothered, and partly as a lethal and unpredictable weapon, best kept at a distance.

"Just as long as he's here when we need him. I don't want him with us while we have to be quiet, but once whatever this surprise is hits, using him will give us an edge."

"Shame his mother has to stay with him: Ernaldesta's perfectly capable of looking after herself in a fight, and it would be handy to have a healer up close."

Natalina laughed. "That's only half the reason she's staying back. Have you ever seen the way Kallyr reacts if she thinks Ernaldesta's in danger? She still hasn't quite caught on to the idea that her Storms are supposed to protect her, not the other way round. It's bad enough that Broyan's told her to get Londar out of this alive, I don't want her having any more distractions."

"Doesn't he trust Londar's own warband to do that?" Harla asked almost indignantly.

"Not when he's convinced them there's no danger, no. They're not the sort to expect the unexpected, he picks them for brawn, not brains, and of course they'll believe him, not her."

"Well... Maybe. Some of them are quite bright." She was almost blushing, and Natalina could guess why.

"One in particular, right? I know, I know, but what we need here is someone who can keep their head in a fight, not lose it in bed."

"Mmm. Maybe. Both is always an option." She fell silent for a moment. "You know, they won't be too impressed that Kallyr's only taking the two guards, just Sword and Shield, not the full four Storms and retinue. We know how good Insterid and Offir are, but it doesn't look right to people expecting something conventional."

"The way Londar was going on about Queens' courtiers and dragging hairdressers along, I think she decided to be tactful."

"First time this week, then." Harla frowned thoughtfully. "You know, it's odd. It isn't that long since she was more or less running Whitewall, while Broyan was still out of it from the Bat's curse. She was tactful enough then when she needed to be, why's she winding up Londar for the hell of it now?"

Natalina shrugged. "She got bored?"

Londar had been worried - but in fact she turned up with just the two guards, as promised. He'd expected trouble over where he put them in the line, but no - staying back as reserves, to watch for the unexpected, had been *her* idea, and he certainly wasn't going to argue. But that apparent meekness, from her, was making him uneasy, and his warthanes complacent. They'd decided to patronise the foreigner. She was looking for trouble they didn't believe existed - fine, they were warning her of the terrible things she might expect in their country: a land for real men, not like soft Sartar. Forgetting that she'd been living here for years... she couldn't really be swallowing those stories, could she? They'd moved on from simple exaggeration to legends, and from there to children's tales, and she was still keeping a straight face and looking properly concerned - all they could have wished for. He motioned them to silence and into their positions - can't have the warriors chattering like women at a time like this. They had a caravan to stop.

Silence, now, as they waited, listening for the sound of hooves approaching, and the creak of wheels. *She* was further back, further uphill: a better view, but too far from the road to join in the first attack. A sudden sound from up there - dammit, didn't the woman even know how to keep quiet? He turned, to see one of her guards tossing some animal off her spear towards the nearest of his men. What in the world were they doing? He took a few strides back, about to stop whatever idiocy was going on, and then saw the small furry object lying limply at his feet. A whisper floated down the slope: "Good job you warned us." It couldn't be, could it? Everyone knew drop-bears were just a story, but this.... he turned it over with his foot. Yes, just as he'd imagined it, before he was old enough to know better. He looked back up at her, unbelieving, in time to see her pointing urgently down the road. The caravan. And she'd seen it before his scouts had.

Insterid wiped the blood off her spear, and watched as Londar's men started their attack. "We're not joining in, then?"

"No, we stay clear. There's still something else to watch for."

"If you say so." Kallyr wanting to be somewhere other than the middle of a fight was odd enough to arouse Insterid's suspicions, but she certainly had no objections. "This isn't enough guards, surely? They can't have defeated the last warband with as few as this."

"No, that's why we stay clear. I'm waiting for the ambush, that's what it's got to be. Ambush the ambush - we've done it often enough. Just look at the place - if you were expecting Londar to attack at this point, where would you put your warband?"

"Over there". Insterid nodded towards the far side of the road. "He'll pick the spot he did, it's the best, and you don't want to be too close to him. So you come in on the opposite side."

"Exactly. Whoever's doing this is competent, they'll come to the same conclusion. So Natalina and her girls are up the hill behind him. Too far to be seen from this initial fight, but they can take the ambush in the rear whenever we call them."

"Why did you want Natalina, anyway? I know, being rescued by Vingans will send Londar crazy, but there must be more to it? I thought you'd have used the Kheldon warband, being rescued by foreigners would have wound him up just as much."

"Maybe... Natalina's got more flexibility. We don't know what we're going to be dealing with, here. And with the Vingans, I can just tell them to leave the novices at home. Try that with the Kheldon, we'd never hear the end of the arguments."

"Too true. We've got a lot of Vingan novices, though. Seems like they come to us not knowing one end of a spear from another, get us to train them, then go back to their own warband as soon as they're some use."

"You won't stop Natalina doing that, anyway. That's what Vinga does, and for her, the Goddess comes first."

"Is she still trying to get you to concentrate on being a Heroine of Vinga and not get distracted by this trivial business with the Lunars?"

"Or the Kheldon, or Broyan, or any other minor and irrelevant gods. Yes, Vinga is supposed to come first."

Then the seriousness dropped away, the mischievous smile was back. "You're right, though, I should stop taking in sixteen-year-olds with exaggerated ideas of their own competence and training them up. Just look at the results I get."

Insterid winced at the reminder of what she herself had been like at sixteen. On the whole, publically accusing the new Queen of the Kheldon of cowardice had either been the most stupid thing she'd ever done or the most rewarding, and she was still unsure which. A firm change of subject seemed in order.

"So when are you calling Natalina in? As soon as we see what we've got?"

"No, that wouldn't be any fun. Let's let Londar panic a bit first."

Insterid sighed. "We're here to find out about these Lunars, remember, not just to wind up Londar. And where are they, anyway? I can't see any sign of them."

"Good question, nor can I. Unless..." she stopped, listening intently. "Ah. Slight mistake." She started heading downhill, towards the main warband. "Let's go and join Londar after all."

"Why?"

"They're behind us."

And then axe-men poured out of the bushes, heading for the caravan and those attacking it. A moment to wonder, puzzled, if the distribution wasn't a bit odd, and then they were too busy with the cut and thrust of immediate survival to think beyond that. Or rather, they would have been if they had been beginners. Insterid, once she had the measure of what she was up against, let her attention widen again, checking for changes, keeping the bigger picture at the edges of her awareness. Not too much. Her job was to make sure Kallyr was defended enough that *she* could spare the time to keep track of what was going on, but a little always helped, just in case you had to take over. There was something odd here: and enough time for brief snatches of conversation.

"Is it just me, or are we very popular all of a sudden?" They were being mobbed, to put it mildly, only the trees stopping them being completely surrounded.

"Looks that way. Answers the question about their spies, anyway."

"This wasn't part of the plan, was it?"

"Sort of.... A bit too successful."

"Londar's barely being attacked, he's only got the guards to play with. Why isn't he getting in here? We'll be completely cut off in a minute."

On Kallyr's other side, Offir was silent, slaying foes with his usual deadly efficiency. Insterid preferred to simply defend, herself, but Offir's idea of defence had always been preemptive.

"He isn't going to help, is he? I hadn't counted on him being that stubborn. Or this Tarshite taking the bait quite so well."

"Bait? You planned for this to happen?"

"At sixty to three odds? Yes, of course I did, I know you two can cope with that, no problem... Offir, call in Natalina, now."

He started to raise the winds to carry his whispers, stopped. "No need."

A sudden change in the Tarshite warcries proved his point - there were cries of dismay coming from the rear ranks. And, quieter, but very recognisable, the whistle of javelins through the air. Movement in the treetops. On *their* side of the road - Natalina must have sent her entire warband aloft, used the closely packed branches over the road as a bridge. Some were dropping to the ground now, spears at the ready.

"What the hell?" Insterid could count, and she knew how many Vingans had been sent with Natalina. This was perhaps twice that number. "Where did that lot come from?"

"What lot? - oh, I see." Kallyr snatched a hasty look at the approaching rescue party. "Oh, clever boy! Nice trick!"

"Trick?" Insterid was instantly suspicious.

"Elusu's troops." A cryptic answer, but the three of them knew exactly what that meant, and the enemies surrounding

them didn't. Illusions. Illusions that Kallyr could see through with ease, but no-one else could. They were working, though - the Tarshites were reforming, presenting a shieldwall to an enemy that wasn't there. The pressure started to ease, as the warriors attacking them became less confident of the safety of their own backs. Not regular Lunar troops, more like Orlanthi themselves. The shieldwall they'd put together was irregular and mismatched even compared with that of the Vingans - hang on. Insterid took another look. "Oh, no..."

"What?"

"Check those extras." There were even more of them, now. Forming a *very* neat shield wall. Neat and regular, because...

"They're all Harla. All of them. He's only copied one original."

"Yes..." Insterid liked Harla, but one could have too much of a good thing. "If they catch on..."

And they did - one of them did. The main line was defensive, wary, facing an enemy they thought outnumbered them perhaps three to one. One man yelled an order - a harsh voice, in Tarshite that Insterid didn't understand - and charged the line. Alone. Alone, that is, until the first Harla-copy he touched melted away before his axe. Then the rest followed him, screaming curses, and the few, the very few, real Vingans retreated hastily to the trees. Morale restored, the axemen returned to their original targets, and Insterid's attention was dragged back hurriedly to staying alive, and keeping Kallyr that way, too.

"They'll never break through that lot now. What do we do? Fall back to Londar?"

"We'd have to leave the trees. He could get through to us, he's got the numbers."

"But the loot's down there."

"Yes. Hold on. Somehow. Natalina'll think of something."

Of course. But "somehow" was the tricky bit. They were giving a good account of themselves, as the number of bodies in front of Offir could attest, but more just kept coming. It should have been getting easier as the better warriors were used up, but as each opponent was injured, or even tired, another replaced him.

"We must have got through all their veterans by now. When do we get down to the beginners?"

"I don't think..." A breathless pause as Kallyr dodged two axes, gutting one of their wielders and pushing him back into the other. Insterid blocked a third, fending off her own opponents. "I don't think they've brought any beginners. They're *all* veterans."

"Like Natalina's... Are they Lunars? Or mercs?"

"Lunar magic. Not much, though."

"Dark moon."

"Even so. Not much."

Her answers were getting decidedly terse, Insterid noted. She at least was tiring: and after this long fighting heavy odds, not surprising. Insterid moved forward slightly, shielding her enough that only two of them could get at her at once. She herself would now have to hold off four, but that could be done. Keep defensive - all they had to do was hang on until Natalina broke through to them. Somehow.

That harsh voice again, calling another order. Insterid had no idea what was being said, but Kallyr yelled something back in the same language - something derisive and defiant, and Offir laughed. Insterid's latest opponent fell away - odd, she hadn't realised she'd hit him that hard. The man next to him fell back, too, and through the gap, she could see a rune-covered shield start to glow - and expand. Full head to ankle coverage. The man wielding it was growing, too. Charging straight at her, fast. Oh, *shit*. Vingans had no fear of men with huge shields, or magic intended to overbear them by sheer weight and strength - you just dodged sideways, out of their way. Or dived to the ground and took out their ankles. Except that to do either, now, would leave Kallyr unprotected. She was going to have to brace herself against the charge of a man perhaps three times her weight... and glowing with magic. Oh, *wonderful*. Spear butt against the ground, feet set, at the very least, he was going down too - and she felt her spear bite home, through his shield and into something behind, even as the ground hit her in the back and the weight of the whole world landed on her chest.

She had to get up. Had to. But she couldn't breathe. Couldn't even move, stunned, while above her the axes and feet moved in what seemed like slow motion. Three more, no, four, following up on the huge man. Treading on him, over him - over her - as if they had planned this. They had. Offir was still guarding Kallyr's right, but her shield side was open. *Get up!* Another heavy foot pinned her shoulder to the ground. Five axemen moving in, now, and Kallyr turning to face them. The first swings - parried. The second falls back, a spear-point in his thigh. The third - how had she *done* that? Using spear-point, and butt, and a shield, all at once? Ducking under the fourth... and the fifth axe comes

down. So slowly. Nearly as slowly as Insterid opening her mouth to scream a warning, with the breath she didn't have. A crunch. A heavy axe just buckles armour, it isn't stopped by it. Kallyr's shield-arm goes limp, she staggers under the force of the blow. And that harsh voice again. Above her. It's his foot on her shoulder. *Stopping her from protecting...* A frantic, desperate struggle doesn't even shift his footing. His axe swings, too, a low-level attack, designed to cripple, not to kill. You could jump over it, if you hadn't just been hammered down by a blow from above. It's impossible, now - but Kallyr was trying it anyway. The axe flashed past just under her feet - and she kept rising. *What?* Insterid looked up: further up, to where Natalina and Harla swung from the tree above them, pulling frantically. Another flight of javelins landed inches in front of her, driving back the remaining axemen. The weight on her chest lifted, and then Harla was next to her, pulling her to her feet.

Natalina would have breathed a sigh of relief if she'd had the leisure to do so. In time. Just. At least, she hoped so - "Did he get you?"

"Just the collar-bone, it'll wait." As usual, Kallyr was far more interested in the fight than in her own injuries or narrow escape.

"No, it won't." It was, as always, hard work pushing healing magic past iron armour - but then, if it hadn't been there, the damage would have been far worse, probably too bad for her to be able to heal at all. The interruptions and lack of cooperation from the patient were more of a problem, but she was used to that, too.

"Insterid's still..."

"Dealt with." A combination of lifting from below and pulling from above would get her out of there, conscious or not, and Natalina had come prepared to handle all three of them that way if need be.

"Where's Elusu?" She was craning round trying to spot everyone.

"Safe - left him back where we were. And Ernaldesta. Don't think we'll need her, but she's easy to reach if we do."

"We're going to have to..."

"All under control, but now we have to move." Here, they were outnumbered too badly, even with the tree-top advantage. "Look, you trusted me to handle this as I saw fit. I'll explain on the way."

"I did. I do." Kallyr followed her lead, using the tree-top magic that everyone allowed to come on this job was familiar with. "I only gave you one specific order, that I remember."

"Ah. That one." She'd wondered if that was going to cause trouble.

"Yes, I told you not to come in until I called you. Good job you ignored it."

That last bit of tension unknotted itself. "I take it you still want to keep Londar safe?"

"No, what I *want* is... irrelevant. Broyan said to keep him alive, yes, that's still the plan."

"Right. Everyone up, and safe? Move out." Then, as the band started to run, she turned back to Kallyr. "There's forest for a good three miles this way, then the trees meet over a deep ravine - you know the one? We'll lead him away from Londar and from our own people, then lose him. I wasn't sure how to make us better bait than the caravan, but after what I heard them say about you..?"

"Yes. Brings its own problems, but it helps now."

They'd done it before. Outrunning the men, but only just, sticking to the treetops where, lacking the Vingan skill with javelins, the enemy couldn't reach them. Slowing down just enough to jeer, to keep them following. It was effective, and it was fun, even if it was almost routine.

The trouble with routine, of course, was that it made you complacent. The ravine was still a mile distant when there was a whizz through the air, and a scream - Harla crumpled, nearly fell from the branches, caught just in time by the women alongside her.

"Get her out!" The rear guard turned, threw some of the few javelins they had left, as Harla was dragged to the nearest solid branch. A small axe was embedded in her thigh. Natalina called up the Spearwoman's healing magic automatically even as the memories and the guilt at her own forgetfulness hit her. "Tarshites and their bloody throwing axes! Damn it, I should have..."

"So should I, but we didn't. We'll have to stay further ahead, make the most of having better range." Kallyr, Natalina was relieved to see, was staying on the side of the trunk *away* from the enemy. Yes, she was their bait at the moment, but that could be taken too far, and often was. And no blame - she never did, not as long as you'd acknowledged your mistake and were fixing it. If she *could* fix it.... That axe had gone deep. Too deep.

"I can't heal this, not enough to run on. We can't carry you, not when the branches are spaced out like this. And Ernaldesta's miles back by now."

Harla looked pale but determined. "The whole idea was to lead them away from her, anyway, and Londar. You've stopped the bleeding, and there's nothing wrong with my arms. Leave me a bow."

They couldn't carry her. Not far, not far enough, and still keep out of range of those axes, and Harla knew it as well as she did. Natalina froze her emotions. Concentrate on the solution, not the problem. "How about your clan markings? This lot may not recognise them, but Tatius will."

"You know how I feel about my birth clan. If they get blamed for this, so much the better. The only kin I care about are right here."

And her kin, her spear-sisters, were about to abandon her.... "Don't let them take you alive."

"My knife's sharp. Don't worry, I don't fancy being crucified."

That was the other reason not to bring any beginners. To make a decision like that, and carry it through, took experience, and a degree of commitment that a novice might suddenly realise wasn't as great as they'd imagined. For a commander to give that sort of order was harder yet, and Natalina was grateful that Harla had spared her that. She would have done so if she had to, yes: even killed Harla herself if need be, to stop her being taken. You had to consider the safety of the whole band, you couldn't sacrifice them in a vain attempt to save one. Kallyr had taught her that, years ago, and held her while she cried herself sick, after that first time. After. That was important. Not a trace of hesitation could be allowed to show now, only respect and approval. "You'll feast in the Red-headed Lodge tonight."

"I'll do that. You get back to base in time to feast in your own hall." Natalina nodded, touched her shoulder in farewell, and led the group off. She would obey that unspoken plea. Don't let her sacrifice be wasted.

There were crowds around the gate. Someone had seen them coming. Well, obviously, and so she would hope, but this was even more chaotic than normal. A child's voice over the tumult: "Da, Da! She's alive!"

"And didn't I tell you so? Never listen to rumours, lad." Kistrad's solid competence was, as always, a contrast to the mob, and the reason he was the Gatekeeper here. "Greatly exaggerated as usual, I take it?"

"As always," Kallyr agreed. "No thanks to Londar, though. He's back safely, is he?"

Kistrad nodded. "And telling the High King what a wonderful job of raiding he did. He won't have had long – a lot of your lads followed him up there. Wanted to know how come he'd mislaid you. Seemed a bit upset."

"How unfortunate for him." Kallyr seemed in no hurry to correct the situation, but Natalina could see any number of reasons why it might be a good idea to do so.

"I thought we were supposed to be keeping him safe?"

"From the Lunars, not from his own stupidity."

"His own clan were gathering, too," Kistrad pointed out. "And their friends. I'd guess he outnumbers you perhaps three to one by now."

"Ah. That's almost an even fight, then. Perhaps...."

"Or perhaps not," Natalina interjected. "Broyan won't want rioting in the Great Hall."

"I suppose not," Kallyr agreed regretfully. "We'd better go and calm them down. Or something..."

They could hear the voices from outside the Hall. An increasingly angry mob, and Londar shouting over it. "How should I know where she is? The last I saw, she was running, and at that speed she shouldn't have had any trouble getting away."

For an instant the fury Natalina saw in Kallyr's eyes matched the roar from the crowd: and then it was hidden, and she seemed almost amused. "Oops, wrong answer. Let's rescue him again, shall we?" And she walked in through the door. Not a word was said. But the crowd parted for her automatically: and then closed in, ecstatic, as they realised who it was, and that she was back. Londar was forgotten, ignored. Natalina could see him seething in impotent fury at having lost the attention he felt was his due – and the relieved looks on the faces of his bodyguards as the Kheldon warriors who had been about to surge forwards across the open space in front of the throne pulled back. She had no idea how Kallyr did it, but it worked every time. She supposed, ruefully, that this was what it took to lead a tribe, or a kingdom, not just a warband. Londar seemed to be feeling the same way: he had lost the crowd's attention, every eye was on Kallyr. Except for Broyan's. Immune, of course. He was scanning the crowd, and she caught his eye.



Thumbs up. No more than that. You asked me to bring her back alive: I did. Over to you.

"All right, all right, that's enough. Put me down!" Kallyr was at the front of her tribesmen, now, laughing, any anger at Londar lost in their love for her and hers for them. The crowd had quietened, and Natalina started to make her own way through. Insterid and Offir had stayed with Kallyr all the way, but the Kheldon unity did not extend to an outsider from Pavis.

As she made it to the front, and the conversation became fully audible again, Broyan had taken control. "So, we already know the first part of the operation went well." He nodded to Londar. "The basic raid succeeded. On the longer-term aims, did you find out what had been happening?"

Londar looked blank – Kallyr glanced at him with the contempt barely hidden. "Yes, more or less as we expected. An extra warband, ready to ambush the ambush. They knew where and when the attack was going to be, and came in from behind. Tarshites, as we thought, hillmen from the look of them, axe and shield. All veterans, so they might be a mercenary band, but they were using some Lunar magic. About sixty of them – well, down to forty or fifty now, depending on how good their healers are."

"But they knew Londar would be there."

"Yes. That could just be because his choice of time and place was so predictable, of course. But they knew I would be there, too, they had orders on the subject. We've got a leak."

"Orders?" Londar was grabbing any chance to get some attention back. "How the hell would you know what orders they had?"

"By listening." That cold control should have worried him, in Natalina's opinion. "As they came in on the last big charge, the commander said 'remember we're to take her alive'. In Tarshite, which rather confirms their origin. Of course, you didn't notice the first charge, much less the last, you were too busy looting the half-defended caravan you'd been given as bait. A good job we managed to hold them off your backs until Natalina broke through to us, or your men would have been as dead as the Bears."

"That little bunch of bandits you were facing wiped out the Bears? Must have been all of twenty of them, though it was enough to chase off five or six times their number of your women. They probably thought that was easier than facing real warriors".

"A hundred Vingans?" Even Broyan looked surprised at that. "Are there that many in Whitewall?"

"No. We took thirty. Didn't get to bring thirty back, though."

Natalina drew in her breath – this, if she knew Kallyr, was where it was going to get nasty. But before Londar could get himself any further into trouble, there was an interruption – a skinny, filthy little man bursting from the crowd around Londar and skidding to a halt at Kallyr's feet, wrapping his arms round her ankles. Natalina sighed. Elusu. And hysterical with relief at his idol's re-appearance – she was torn between amusement, disgust, and sympathy. Kallyr was bending down to him, reassuring him, oblivious to the interrupted conversation or anything else in the room. At least today he was in his "small child" mood, not "whining teenager".

Londar, however, was not torn at all. An insult to Broyan was an opportunity for him. "Since when has an idiot stick-picker been more important than your High King?" he demanded – some of the outrage might even have been genuine.

"A child," Broyan pointed out. "A not-adult. Expecting a Vingan to think *anything* is more important than a child under their protection is an exercise in futility." He seemed almost amused, and, as always, completely in control of the situation. Nothing as trivial as this was a threat to his dignity, and he knew it.

And then Ernaldesta was there, too. Quite how she could make her unobtrusive way through a heaving crowd so easily was one of her little secrets, but that aura of reassurance she spread wherever she went must have helped. Kallyr looked up from the hysterical child/adult clinging to her feet to smile at her, ignoring the rowdy mob that surrounded them and made their conversation audible only to those close by. "You made it back all right, then, once we'd led the Tarshites away?"

"Of course. The best way all round, I felt, as long as none of you were seriously hurt." She scanned Kallyr critically, pursing her lips at the damage to her armour, but saying nothing. "In fact, we had an escort home. Londar decided we should go back with him, to be sure we were safe."

"Did he now? Nice to know he can get something right."

"Yes, he can. He protects people, when he thinks they need it. He's a good man at heart, Kallyr. Try being polite to him, for a change?"

The aura of peace was almost visible now, even the crowd around them was falling quiet. Calming Kallyr in a temper was generally near-impossible, but...

"Polite? To *him*? After *that*? But then he did try to help you... All right, since it's you. I'll be polite if he is. Good enough?"

"Fine. That's what he said, too."

"Oh, did he indeed?" Calmer now, Kallyr was thinking, not just reacting. And that could get dangerous... "You never needed protection to get home in your life, and he'd only have found you if you wanted him to. Is that why you went with him?" Ernaldesta only smiled. "And it works both ways, too - you knew how I'd react. Clever. Very clever." No sarcasm there, only genuine respect for the woman who'd briefly outwitted her. "All right, you win, I'll be good. As long as he is."

The sobbing at her feet had quietened - she reached down and disengaged Elusu slightly.

"Have you thanked the nice man for bringing you home?"

He ducked behind her shyly, hiding his face. "Nooo... He's funny."

"Oh, is he?" She looked across at Londar, a trace of laughter creeping in at the edges of her smile, then back down at Elusu. "You didn't play any tricks on him, did you?"

He shook his head emphatically. "Mummy wouldn't let me."

"Good. Tricks are only for nasty people, remember?"

"Like the bad man. He broke my shadows! They were good shadows. Did you like them?"

"They were very good shadows," she agreed. "That was a good idea."

"Scared the bad man. He was trying to hurt you."

"He was trying, yes, but you stopped him. Why did you make them all the same, though? Wasn't that boring?"

"That was Harla."

"Yes, I know it was Harla. Why were they all her?"

"I like her. She gave me sweets." He pulled something sticky out of a pouch, inspected it, then stood up, his confidence returned now the centre of his universe was back. "Would the nice man like a sweet?" The thing he proffered in Londar's direction was unidentifiable.

Stillness, that slight hesitation – how *did* you tell a child, even one in his twenties, that no, Harla would never bring him sweets again? And she hesitated too long – too much of that conversation had been audible to Londar.

"Shadows - tricks – that's your Trickster? You brought that filthy, thieving, *thing* on MY raid? Sneaking around – what was it meant to do, poison us all on the way back while the woman seduced us?"

Natalina didn't quite laugh – Ernaldesta must be at least ten years Londar's senior, but his rage was too genuine to be amusing. "Get that creature out of my sight!"

Elusu whimpered and dodged the blow aimed at him, hiding behind his mother.

And then Kallyr was between them and Londar, her hand on her sword-hilt. She didn't even raise her voice, but in the sudden breathless, horrified silence every word was audible. "You try that once more and we continue this discussion outside. I had orders to get you out of the raid alive, but nothing was said about how long you had to survive afterwards." Ernaldesta's magic might never have happened; even the pretence of politeness had gone now. "Unless, of course, you're going to avoid this fight the way you avoided the last one? I suppose I ought to thank you for making it so easy to keep you safe, it could have been quite difficult if you'd bothered to take on the real enemy. Beating up merchants and children is about your level, isn't it?"

"At least we fought! You never even had the nerve to attack the caravan, and ran from the axemen."

He was losing it, Natalina noted cynically. Kallyr hadn't bothered cleaning the blood off, nor trying to hide the dents in her armour, so suggesting that she hadn't fought at all had no chance of being believed. At least he was sticking to words, but how much longer....

"If you think luring an enemy away is safe, you try explaining that to Harla!"

"What?" Londar was taken aback by the apparent non sequitur.

"Yes, where is she? Where's Harla?" A very young man, and very interested in the answer, to interrupt his leader at

such a time – Natalina could guess who he must be.

“She’s dead.” Kallyr’s icy control was perhaps more frightening to anyone who knew her than Londar’s more open anger. “She cut it a little too fine judging how close she could lure the Tarshites. Couldn’t get away, so she stayed back to cover our retreat. By now, she’s dead.”

“Don’t be daft, woman!” Londar was back to impatience and contempt rather than fury. “They’ll ask for weregild, maybe a ransom, you pay it, she’ll be back within the week.”

“Like the Bears will be?”

That silenced him for a moment – many of those present had seen the crucified bodies.

“That was...”

“War. That’s what’s happening here, remember? War, not cattle-raids. We’re not using Barntar’s rules, or Orlanth’s, we’re not even using Humakt’s laws. Lunars don’t know those laws, much less follow them. If Harla had been taken alive, she’d have been questioned, then killed. She won’t have been – she had a knife, she knew what to do with it.”

The boy stared at her, horrified. “She killed herself? She wouldn’t!”

“Oh, yes, she would. You knew her, do you think she lacked courage? If I thought she couldn’t have done it, I’d have killed her myself before letting her be taken, but she didn’t need that. Not Harla.”

Londar’s disgust and contempt reached new heights at that. “So you’d kill your own warriors, out of fear of an imaginary threat? Or worse yet, trick them into killing themselves?”

For a moment Natalina thought Kallyr really would hit him, King’s Hall or not. “It is *not* imaginary, you...” And then that tight control was back – just. “Outside. Right now. Let’s see how imaginary you find *this*.”

Londar’s angry response was cut short as Broyan stepped in front of him, separating them. “And just what do you plan on doing when you get there?”

Kallyr’s knuckles stayed white on her sword-hilt. “Depends on how fast he runs away.”

“I am not going to permit it. This stops here.” The absolute authority in his voice left no space for disagreement. “You are going to listen to each other, without coming to blows, and swear to treat each other with the respect due an ally thereafter. If it takes Ernalda to bring that about, then so be it. Enerin, bring out your rug.”

The slight woman in the green dress who stepped forward was not familiar to Natalina, but she knew who she must be. Many said of Enerin Peace-weaver that if she could get both Tatus and Broyan on her rug at once, she could end the siege. They might even be right - certainly Kallyr’s vehement opposition to the idea had been concerned with the probable price, not with the likelihood of failure.

Kallyr stopped dead, her face a frozen mask. “I am not submitting to *that*.”

“Yes. You are.” Their eyes met for a few seconds – or an eternity. Then Kallyr turned and stepped on to the rug Enerin had laid out. A brusque gesture from Broyan, and Londar followed.

The rug was flickering slightly in Natalina’s vision, not quite in this world. Enerin must be making the most of the opportunity to show off her power: or possibly, felt that trying to get Kallyr to agree to peace would need every advantage she could get. A full ceremony would have had the four supporters on either side: here, only the two principals were involved. But then, bringing a Trickster in - no, best not. She had seen Enerin’s magically-enforced truces before, and knew what to expect. Once both sides were on that peace rug, no sound of the discussion would be heard outside it, but none of them would leave until agreement was reached.

She could see the figures on the rug moving, but as if they were far away, or in a dream. No sound. No idea of what was being said. The time it would seem to take, to outsiders, would bear no relation to how long it really lasted, she knew that, too. It still seemed like an age, though maybe that was just nerves, like in the pause before a battle. She exchanged glances with Insterid, who looked just as unhappy as she felt. They both knew that violence was impossible, on the peace rug, but even so, for Kallyr’s Shield to have to leave her unguarded in the presence of an enemy was a nerve-wracking experience.

And then it was over. The rug was just a rug, and Kallyr and Londar were shaking hands: both very controlled, and perhaps a little thoughtful. Broyan nodded to Enerin. “They swore?”

“They did – eventually.” She was looking daggers at Kallyr for some reason: Natalina did not want to know why, though she could probably guess. “In addition, Kallyr has agreed not to keep tactical matters secret from Londar on any future occasion when they may be working together, and Londar has agreed to take seriously any suggestion that Lunars may be using non-Orlanthi methods.”

It wasn't until much later that night that Natalina managed to catch up with Kallyr again in private, and deliver the news that she'd acquired in the intervening period. Which was not good, in Natalina's opinion: and while Kallyr didn't generally shoot the messenger, she had been known to throw things at them if she'd been having a bad day. It was hard to imagine a day much worse than this.

"The gossip that's going round after that isn't exactly flattering, you know. It's mainly about what a great chief Broyan is to be able to keep you under control - anyone would think they were talking about Gyffur."

"Fine." Kallyr looked completely happy with that idea, which was not what Natalina had feared. "Thinking Broyan's wonderful and thoroughly back in control of everyone and everything is exactly what they're meant to be doing."

At least the next bit was good news, or should be. "And they're saying how much better you are than Londar in a fight."

"Comparison purely as warriors? Interesting."

Not the response Natalina had been expecting, and she tried to temper the implication. "More about leading a warband, I think - well, both."

"But still only as a warband leader? Fine, they're thinking the right way."

Natalina stared at her, baffled: and then Harla's words that morning came back to her. "*It isn't that long since she was more or less running Whitewall ...*" But she wasn't, now. Now Broyan was back, taking over from a power-struggle where some had welcomed his absence to further their own ends. And Kallyr's loyalty to Broyan went back a good six years, maybe more.

"You set all that up just to make Broyan look good?"

"Broyan doesn't need any help to look good. But some people seem to need help figuring out who's High King, and who isn't, and doesn't want to be. It sounds as if they may have got it clear, now."

"Does he know that's what you were doing?"

"I doubt it - I hope not. But maybe. It's hard, getting anything past him."

"How many of your arguments with Londar were real?"

"Work it out." That totally confident smile was back - the Kallyr Natalina remembered from the old days, the one who had everything planned and knew exactly how to manipulate everyone. And then she added "And when you've worked it out, you can explain it to me."