



A
Compleat Guide
to
Slave Girl
Husbandry

An
Historical
Romance

By
Badger
Therese

A Compleat Guide to Slave Girl Husbandry: An Historical Romance
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Introduction

Various authors have been credited with this work, though it is enough labored over by myself, in terms of organization, interpretation, new translation from Avenian and other tongues, and so forth, that my name only is given (and the only one known for certain, unfortunately, all the other names at best rumors but mostly lost to posterity altogether).

Whatever its origins, it should be considered an accurate reflection of its time. Its cruelty might startle, both the casual, everyday sort practiced in medieval villages, and the formal kind ordered from on high; and its frank depictions of sex and sexuality might cause the gentler reader to blush. But the story is presented as it was handed down to us, and must be read so.

My concern here then is limited to units of measurement, for these were – to put it charitably – inconsistent in older versions of the tale, and even within single versions. Here, all units have for better or worse been standardized, to prevent confusion if not stay true to the original quantities, the latter goal uncertain anyway as some of the standards appearing in past works are not precisely known.

So, with those caveats, the measurements are as follows for our purposes:

Cubit: The length of a forearm, some eighteen inches, or 44 centimeters

Finger (in the context of time): There are 10 fingers of time in a day, as are 10 fingers on a body, a chronology used by a number of ancient cultures. The first finger of the day opens at dawn, and then come nine more, for 10 fingers where we use 24 hours. A finger thus equals two hours and 24 minutes.

Hectare: 2.47 acres

League: Three miles, or 4.83 kilometers

Take: A width of three male fingers, excluding the smallest, or all four female fingers

The rest of it – the materials, the sentiments, the plants and animals and customs, and the metaphorical peculiarities of the age – are at times guessed at, but I hope the narrative following may be enjoyed with no further explanation.

Badger Therese

New Humber on Kapp

November 15, 2018 (and further revised November 19, 2019)

Chapter I: A Battle on the Seas

The war became real to Hambeth when he could see it for himself, from the sloping edge of Camberia, the tiny mountain village that had been his home since his birth eighteen springs before.

Of course, the reports of war between Avenlou and Paxilex had been trickling in for almost five years. Traders shared their stories as they passed through, of fighting on the coast and on the water, of goods plundered, of slaves captured and sold, young and old, male and female. The emissaries of the king had their reports as well, when they came to Camberia to collect the season's taxes and to speak of the deeds of Avenlou's brave army and the treacheries of the cowards of Paxilex. And Hambeth could see the evidence of war with his own eyes, in the strange goods ripped from the fleets and caravans of Paxilex, pots of spices and honey and liquors and, rarer, the captured soldiers who did not look so cowardly, studying Camberia and its people as they were paraded through, chained and naked, on their way to be sold in the Greater Vandals.

But no, Hambeth could truly conceive of the war between Avenlou and Paxilex only when he could see it for himself, looking down from high above the shore and sea at night, where the fires blazed, moved, flickered, and bore mute, guttering testament to the killing of men by other men.

"Watch the lights," said Stotthearth, Camberia's blacksmith and Hambeth's dearest friend since they'd met a year before, during an argument over a woman's chains.

Stott pointed to the sea, his sinewy arm and thick hand barely visible in the glow of a quarter moon.

Hambeth saw a pair of distant embers, no brighter than the lesser stars, floating upon the tidal waters.

"They're nearing," he said, whispering as if he thought the ships could hear him. "And neither has seen the other."

"How do you know?" Hambeth whispered back.

"The lights still burn, hidden from each other by wave or mist or heavy spirit," he said. "As soon as one spies the other, they'll extinguish and, wind and water willing, make their way to the enemy."

“Which is our ship?” Hameth asked.

“That I cannot tell,” Stott replied. “Maybe both are. Maybe neither, but if—”

One ship went black.

“Ah,” Stott breathed, and there was almost a hunger in his voice, an eagerness that Hambeth more felt than heard. “Ah.”

It was late, the sun down for almost a finger, and Hambeth was growing both weary and uncertain, not confident these two ships would ever find each other or, if they did, would choose to fight or, if they chose to fight, that Hambeth and Stott would be able to see anything. Perhaps they weren't even ships. The lights of deep night could play tricks on the eyes. The spirits that rode with the Waxcap clans of the forest could play tricks as well, on land if not in the water, but other ghosts surely lingered by sea.

“How do you know all this?” Hambeth inquired again. Tired and doubtful as he was, he didn't want to abandon Stott at the edge of the cliff. Perhaps he could convince the smith that he was wrong, and they could withdraw together, Hambeth to his uncle's farm, Stott to retire within the walls that protected the core of Camberia.

“The traders speak of these things,” Stott replied. “If you would come to the walls more than every tenth day, you would hear of them too.”

“Early oat doesn't harvest itself,” Hambeth said. “And I speak to all the traders worth dealing with.”

“I speak to the traders in the village who sell iron and silver and gold. I didn't know they were conducting affairs by the farms.”

“Oh, you're buying gold now?” Hambeth retorted, returning jibe with jibe.

“If someone asks for gold work, I will give them a piece for the generations.”

“Traders stop on our threshold oft enough,” Hambeth asserted. “Except the slavers.”

“You don't want to talk to them anyway,” Stott said. “Only a fool would buy a captured soldier.”

“Then the Greater Vandals is a land of fools?”

“No, no,” Stott replied. “But they take no chances with men trained to kill or die. They bind them hand and foot and drop them in black pits and chain them to millwheels and they turn the wheels day and night, and if the

wheels turn, they drop food to them, and if the wheels turn not, they let them starve, or assume they already have.”

“This is what the traders say?” Hambeth said, finding so many errors in the story he preferred to dismiss all of it.

“It is,” Stott said.

“Before or after they have dined on mead?”

Stott laughed.

“And what of the women?” Hambeth asked.

“The women?” Stott replied. “The women don’t fight.”

“I’ve heard they do,” Hambeth said. “From the traders I talk to. And even if they don’t fight, they tour with the men who do.”

“Why would they tour with soldiers?”

Hambeth laughed. Did Stott truly not know the answer?

“I imagine they could turn a wheel as well as any man,” Stottheath said.

“And do other things,” Hambeth said quietly. “But if the Greater Vandals want them in—”

“Ah!” Stott exclaimed. “Watch watch watch!”

Out on the ocean, two lights blazed, bright and close, until they merged into a single point of illumination as Hambeth peered through the darkness.

“War,” Stott hissed. “War. Watch them fight, my friend.”

For a moment, the blaze grew and climbed, then it dimmed by half, blazed up again, dimmed, and Hambeth despaired of knowing the nature of the fight and longed for the vision that would enable him to see the men in mortal combat between fire and water. Or the women. Hambeth believed the woman of Paxilex fought. He couldn’t remember where he’d heard it, but the source was less important than his conviction that it must be true, because it seemed true. Or he wanted it to be true. Did Avenlou garrison its girls? There were girls in Camberia who could fight, but no one had come to their remote village from Topia, Avenlou’s capital, to conscript soldiers, male or female. Horses yes, but the people, no.

“What is happening now?” Hambeth demanded, straining his eyes to make sense of the light, reduced now to a dull red glow.

“They are all dying, or dead,” Stott said.

Hambeth made a show of searching the darkness before he looked into Stott’s face.

“I don’t see the trader who told you that,” Hambeth said.

“I don’t need a trader to tell me,” Stott retorted. “Both ships burn, so there’s nothing to buoy on, and they’re too far asea to swim home, so those who weren’t stabbed or burned or crushed have drowned.”

“They might not all already have drowned,” Hambeth said.

“No,” Stott conceded. “One or two might have found a barrel to cling to. But soon enough.”

Hambeth lost himself in imagination, wondering at the invisible horror that lay distant, of men floating in black water, knowing death was inevitable, from a lingering wound, a festering burn, or the slower miseries of callous ocean.

“The troops of Paxilex have no need for women,” Stott said, returning to an earlier point. “They have their horses.”

“This is something your sellers of gold tell you?”

“Indeed,” replied Stott. “They ride them in the day, and lay with them at night.”

“And people say we lay with our aurochs,” Hambeth noted. “Nor is that true.”

“You seem to have a great respect for the warriors of Paxilex. Perhaps you should take up arms with them.”

“I am for Avenlou by heart and blood,” Hambeth said calmly. “Even if they never ask me to fight.”

“They’ll never ask us to fight,” said Stott. “They’ll take our horses, but they don’t trust the sons of the Waxcaps.”

“We are not Waxcaps by any but the thinnest of blood,” Hambeth spat. “What Waxcap ever tamed an auroch? Or fenced a pasture? Or stood a house that didn’t fall into the weeds in its first winter?”

“What Waxcap ever shaped a plough?” added Stott. “And yet.”

Hambeth looked back into the darkness. There was nothing in the water now, nor on the shore, where campfires sometimes broke the night, or torches became a weapon for those fated to battle on dry land.

“I need rest,” Hambeth announced, rising from the field of white rock where, unknown ages ago, a narrow plaza had been laid down by the Caesars, who reigned here until the Vandals broke their rule far inland, at their capitol.

“When will you venture within the walls again?” Stott asked.

“Never,” Hambeth said, picking his way through the weeds, watching for snakes, finding the road with the moon’s aid. “You’ll tell me everything of any import that happens there, I believe.”

“Then I will stop telling you what I hear,” Stott said.

Hambeth laughed, but he hoped Stott was joking. There was too much he didn’t know, too many things of the world he remained ignorant of, and Stott’s words, as dubious as they could be, were a window into that which remained otherwise dark.

And yet, the words of Stott only fed Hambeths’ curiosities, never satisfied them. Stott was a window, perhaps, but a very small one.

He was not the only window, however, and as Hambeth fell upon the bags of aurochs hair in his uncle’s home, his mind turned to Grace. He longed to see her again, to feel her again.

Chapter II: Grace

Grace was made a widow when Hambeth was fifteen summers old. Childless, a girl of Paxilex with no family near, it seemed that she would go back to her own people when a stray aurochs horn pierced her husband’s belly, but she tarried for a year, due to weather or other reasons, and then it was too late, new and more violent hostilities breaking out between Avenlou and Paxilex, the borders closed to most travel, closed certainly to a widow who had taken up with an Avenlouan, and a husband who was descended from the Waxcaps no less.

A year after fate handed her widowhood, Grace turned up pregnant, the father clearly not her deceased. She had lain with some man of Camberia. Already a husband? Already a father? Grace would not tell, even under torture.

On the day her daughter reached one hundred days, Grace reported to the council for trial. The trial itself was a simple affair, conducted under the blue sky of early spring, the air clear, the winter rains and two snowfalls just a memory now, a soft morning breeze blowing warm from the sea.

“Will you name the father?” demanded Archenix, seated before Grace, looking into her eyes as she stood before him. His council of ten stalwarts stood above lesser seats on either side, the rest of the folk of Camberia, who were not too ill or too burdened, there to witness.

“I will not,” Grace announced, the babe in her arms, mother and daughter both eerily serene. She was a handsome woman, tall and well-formed, in the light brown skin and wearing the black hair of the Paxilex, loose upon her shoulders.

“If you name the father, he will answer for what he has done, and your child will know the loins from whence she sprang, and she will have his protection.”

“I will not,” Grace said again, and Hambeth found himself trembling, because he’d been warned what would happen next, and he didn’t wish to see it. And he wished to see it.

“Surely she doesn’t know,” sneered one of the women. Archenix glared toward the source of the voice, and Hambeth knew that whoever had spoken had placed her own flesh at risk.

“Name the father,” Archenix said. “You have been asked three times.”

“I will not.”

Archenix stood.

“Undress for the post,” he said, adding more loudly, “I take no pleasure in this.”

Grace turned, searched the crowd, her eyes locking, briefly, with Hambeth’s before she raised her chin to a girl not far from him. The girl nodded back and Grace stepped over and set her child in the girl’s arms. The girl allowed herself the tight smile of a deep but complicated pride, and Hambeth watched the two and wondered at the kinship between women that stirred even on days such as these.

Her arms free, Grace turned toward Archenix, untied her robe, opened it and allowed it to fall behind her, down her arms.

Her back was turned to Hambeth, but he studied every inch of the flesh he could see, the tops of her shoulders, the points of her elbows, the hair that swung against her shoulder blades, the ribs of her broad back. She was naked beneath her garment, no bindings for her breasts or her loins. She had dressed for torture this morning.

Hambeth believed she was going to allow her robe – black, silver-embroidered in the style of Paxilex – to fall to the hard-packed earth of the village square, but just before it slipped past her hands, she grabbed it and held it with her left above the dirt, all her form visible now – her full rump

and thick thighs and the small of her back, with the two little dents on either side of her spine that Hambeth wished at that moment to touch.

“Where shall I hang my robe, My Chief?” Grace asked in the soft, open accent common to the people born speaking Paxil, the first tongue of Paxilex.

Archenix seemed surprised by the request, but he motioned to one of his council, and the man stepped up and Grace handed her robe to him, watching him while he folded it over his arm.

She turned and Hambeth drank her in, all of her, the black triangle of her pubic hair, the slightly rounded belly of new motherhood, two full breasts tipped with the long pink nipples of a woman nursing, and finally her face, which remained expressionless as she moved to the studded wooden post that pointed up like a single fang in the middle of Camberia’s largest square.

A member of the council followed her, produced a rope from his garment and pointed to the place on the post where she was to raise her hands,

Grace looked at the man quizzically, not sure apparently if she were to hold her hands together or separately, one on either side of the post. The man drew his own hands up, placed his wrists together, and she nodded and positioned her hands as instructed and watched as her wrists were bound together, staring with a detachment that Hambeth found inexplicable.

Archenix nodded to another member of the council, and he stepped behind Grace, a whip fashioned from thick aurochs hide hanging from his belt, the whip’s end a single tooth of iron. He pulled it loose and looked at Archenix.

“Name the father,” Archenix said wearily.

“I will not,” Grace said, turning her head to speak to him around her bound arm.

The man with the whip raised it, swung it around his head and raked it across Grace’s upper back with a terrifying crack.

The bastard child, cradled just feet away from Hambeth, cried out as if the whip had struck her, but Grace barely flinched.

A red line opened up where landed the whip, parallel to the ground, from one shoulder to the other. Hambeth focused on that, watching as three trickles of blood descended from it, making straight, narrow threads, as if they yearned only for the soil of the square at Grace’s feet.

The man returned to the line of the council, handed the whip to the man beside him, and that man took his place behind Grace.

“Name the father.”

“I will not.”

CRACK!

And so it went, three more men of the council, each taking his turn, while Grace held still, her child screamed, and the lines multiplied across her back, the blood running from each raw wound, coursing together in channels across her pale flesh, the longest string of blood reaching the small of her back and curving around her buttocks to the side of her thigh.

“Name the father.”

“I will not.”

CRACK!

“Name the father.”

“I will not.”

CRACK!

It was not until the sixth of the blows landed that Grace abandoned her composure, tilting her head back to scream at the sky, her muscles tensing beneath the skin of her ribs and her legs, one foot twisting as if to grind her pain into the soil, neck straining as she issued a long, mournful howl, “AAAAAAIIIIIIEEEEEE!”

Her child echoed her mother with a child’s share of the same anguish, a high-pitched “eeee!”

But if Archenix or any of the council pitied either of them, they held it private. Hambeth had been told Grace would be asked ten times for the father’s name while she was on the post, but Grace’s torture could be extended if Archenix, at his discretion alone, chose to do so.

How many blows could a woman sustain before she died? Hambeth wondered. Or, if the whip did not kill her mortal body, how many lashes would it take before she died inside, forever afterwards looking at the world through empty eyes, her mouth moving only when necessary, her words flat, the beautiful lilt of her accent muted?

Please stop at ten, Hambeth prayed to Passoni, a goddess of whom he knew little other than that women suffering the pangs of childbirth would cry her name. Please stop at ten.

“Name the father.”

“I will not.”

CRACK!

“Who feeds you?”

Grace, whose answers until now had come instantly after each of Archenix’s identical questions, stopped briefly to ponder this new query, this gambit of Archenix’s that, Hambeth knew, was meant to catch Grace off guard, to elicit the truth while her mind, weakened by pain and humiliation, was vulnerable.

“Thimbull,” she announced after due consideration.

Even Archenix was surprised by the answer, his eyes gone wide, and a brief hush fell over the spectators until, as one, the village laughed, guffaws from the men, shrieks of delight from the women as the full import of Grace’s answer found its mark within each mind.

Thimbull, that most clumsy, most ridiculous of the gods, bore a head that was all aurochs, great horns spilling from either side of his skull, but from the neck down, his body was a hodgepodge, a man’s left arm, a woman’s right leg, a gryphon’s clawed foot, an aurochs’ hump for a back, a woman’s breasts in front, and a man’s great penis, prodigious in size and girth, always erect, as impressive as it was useless, for it would destroy any creature – aurochs, human or otherwise – it was put to.

Thimbull was not a destroyer, however. He was a romantic, plying the objects of his desires with poisonous mushrooms he mistook for stag shoulder, with drops of deer urine he mistook for honey, and with words meant to be tender that only left his would-be partners puzzled and frightened.

“My love, hear the song my genitals sing to thee,” he would declare in stories told at night when the wine flowed and children were not present. “I will fill your ears with the milk of my breasts, and my sweet melody will churn within you until the butter leaves by your nose.”

The laughter died down and Archenix and his council and the people of Camberia seemed to remember that a naked woman stood tied before them, her child wailing while she bled from seven red ribbons of gore running in a wretched skein across her back, around her buttocks, through the cleft of her rear and, Hambeth knew, wetting all between her legs.

He adjusted his tunic because his penis was screaming from between his hips now, threatening to burst forth, pressed unnoticeably against his belly by virtue of the thick belt of aurochs hide he wore low

around his hips. Was it the nakedness of Grace that brought his branch to life? Or her suffering? Or her blood? Or her scream? Or her joke, clever in its own right, all the more arousing because of the time and place where it had been spoken? Hambeth wasn't sure, knowing only that there was too much for a farm boy of seventeen to witness, too much to remember, too many things touching his mind, his heart, his aching loins.

"You are not fed by Thimbull," Archenix announced without any lingering amusement, and the council member swung the whip.

That was the eighth, Hambeth told himself. Please let it be just two more.

"Name the father."

"I will not."

CRACK!

"Name the father."

"I will not."

CRACK!

The last three blows of the whip came softer, Hambeth thought, barely opening Grace's flesh, one for a palm's width at the small of her back, the other two even less than that. Had the men gone easy because of her joke? Or because there was no reason for any of it, Grace clearly determined to hold her secret no matter how cruelly she was interrogated?

"Release her," Archenix commanded, and the last of the councilmen to wield the whip coiled it within the belt at his side and worked at her knots.

Her wrists freed, Grace's arms fell limply to her sides.

"Grace," Archenix said, dropping to his chair, chin in his palm, eyes baleful.

"Yes, my Chief?" Grace replied, back straight, eyes fixed on the ruler of Camberia, the first in order of importance of the five hundred souls who dwelt in and around the tiny village.

"You will live outside the walls," Archenix said, "coming not within them when the sun is down."

"Yes, my Chief."

"And when you step within the walls during daylight, you will be bound hand and foot."

"Bound?" Grace repeated wearily.

“Yes, Stotthearth the smith will fashion you something, at our direction. It shan’t prevent the pursuit of sober commerce, but it will reduce mischief.”

“Yes, my Chief.”

“For the sake of our village.”

“Yes, my Chief.”

“And for your sake as well.”

“Yes, my Chief.”

Archenix, who had seen more than fifty summers and was clearly in the twilight of his years, waved his hand, settling the matter.

The people dispersed, and Grace turned toward her child and strode naked to her, Hambeth unable to tear his eyes away, hoping she would not catch him staring or, worse, notice the war of passions beneath his belt. But her eyes were solely on her child and the girl who held her.

“Thank you,” Grace said, taking up her infant, raising her to her left breast, guiding her head with trembling fingers, the child immediately latching on, issuing squeaks and grunts as she filled her mouth.

“I’m sorry she cried,” the girl said. “I did my best.”

“She was hungry, I’m sure,” Grace said, and Hambeth wondered if Grace had held off feeding the child until after her ordeal, because the feel of a mouth on her nipple was restorative. Hambeth stared at the free nipple, long and pink, and wondered what Grace’s milk tasted like.

“She quieted at the end, though,” the girl said. “For the last three.”

“Yes,” Grace agreed, turning, the blood of her bare back already congealing and going dark.

A man of the council brought her robe to her and she, never removing the child from her breast, slipped into it deftly, one arm at a time while she cradled the baby with the other. Because she needed both hands free to fasten her robe, she simply clutched at it, knuckles white over her belly as she returned to modesty.

How would she wash her back? Hambeth wondered. Or would she bother? Dried blood held powers that kept the spirits at bay. Best to let it lie, even if the appearance was dreadful.

Other, more urgent questions haunted Hambeth’s mind, because questions are inescapable when a young man first falls in love. And Hambeth was in love.

At seventeen springs, the growing, raging swirl of lust and romance and loneliness that had grown within him since before the first shades of hair darkened his genitals, found their expression in a single object: Grace.

But the questions continued to swirl.

Was it natural to fall in love with a woman after seeing her whipped? Was it natural for a boy to love a woman who was at least ten summers older than he? Was it natural for a boy to love a woman he had never spoken to?

For a year after the date of Grace's torture, Hambeth pined, secretly, privately, ashamedly, the questions unanswered, unanswerable.

No, perhaps none of this was natural, he told himself. And yet, it seemed the only thing he could feel as he relived, over and over, the details from that day: Grace's quiet dignity, her one howl of pain, her decision, made ten times, followed by ten lashes, to protect the father of her girl, her stoic breastfeeding as soon as her torture had concluded.

On the day Grace spake in proud defiance, the blood running down her back, the milk streaming from her breast, and all the days after that, Hambeth could only love, and long, and pine for Grace. For Grace, for all of Grace, for all her essence, for the sound of her voice, the look of her eyes, the touch of her body.

The touch.

At first, there was love, only love, unrequited because there was no means to requite it

But on the very night that followed her torture, in the privacy of his aurochs hair bed in the home of his uncle, Hambeth thought of Grace and her body and her travails and his penis swelled and he grabbed it with both hands, squeezing the hardness with a raging desperation, caressing the tip and working the shaft and wrapping finger and thumb around the base and imagining that it was not his hands but Grace's soft chamber tightening around his manhood, and the pleasure roared in his heart and mind and built until it could no longer be denied and the juice shot toward the ceiling, toward the sky, returning to earth the way Grace's blood had sought the earth, and the drops of semen wetted his chest and his belly and the hair of his sex, and he rubbed it in so that his flesh would absorb it and he could spill it out again and again until, at last, he could deliver it to the place where it belonged, to the place beyond the dark slit that waited for him, the folds beneath the hair and between the thick, solid legs of Grace of Paxilex.

Chapter III: The History of the World

In Hambeth's simple understanding of the world, there were five distinct places. Or six if you considered history.

First, existing only as a tale handed down, there was old Avelix, the empire that ruled all the known world for hundreds of years, brought down by corruption, by overreach, by cleverness, by bored gods, by a legion of enemies – the Spannirids, the Manck, the First Dedge, but primarily by the Vandals – who inherited what was left of the ruins of empire some one hundred years before Hambeth's birth.

At its height, Avelix controlled a host of provinces – some said a dozen, some said dozens, or hundreds. Relatively late in Avelix's history, the Caesars looked east, to the long range of mountains where the wild people lived. The engineers of the Caesars carved passes and laid stone between the peaks, the Caesars named the one closest to Camberia Fifth Pass because the Caesars sometimes numbered things, and Avelix added what lay beyond the mountains to its realm.

Truly, it wasn't much to add.

Between those mountains and the sea lay a long, narrow stretch of land, a dozen or two leagues wide at the widest, running north to south, plains and rolling hills, settled here and there by peoples for whom the wilderness of tree and mountain no longer suited.

The people there were brought to heel quickly enough, or dispatched where they wouldn't acquiesce to the Caesars' yoke, and the new land became two new provinces: Paxilex to the north of Fifth Pass, Avenlou to the south, so split because the peoples there were of two kinds, northern darker skinned, of blacker hair, and southern paler, blonde and blue-eyed, each land speaking a tongue with a different mother and no words in overlap with the other.

The provincial names lasted after Avilex fell, and these were the second and third places of Hambeth's understanding, two regions that had once been united under a single potentate, but that had since gone their own ways, at first indifferent to each other, now at war.

Camberia itself was first in Hambeth's experience and the fourth of the six places in his mind. Lying nestled among the high skirts of the mountains, just south of Fifth Pass and with a wide view of the sea, it was named Camberia after the wife of a Ceasar, and it was declared a point on

the Avenlou map in the days of ancient Avelix and settled with the building of a garrison and a governor's mansion. But the occupation lasted no more than fifth winters before Avilex fell and the stone works of empire were forgotten and reclaimed, inch by inch, by that far older empire of inexorable nature.

The disappearance of the soldiers and administrators did not escape the notice of the people who haunted the nearby woods, however.

The names the forest peoples called themselves were as varied as their dialects, but Waxcaps became the first term, for all of them gathered and made food and medicines of waxcap, a rare and wondrous mushroom with both culinary and healing prowess, and when they emerged to trade with the peoples beyond the woods, waxcap was most often what they brought.

As soon as the garrison of Camberia was vacated, the nearest Waxcaps moved in from the forests, not to the moldering buildings in most cases, for those were haunted, but to the places that empire had smoothed and ploughed and planted.

So this was the history of the world, as Hambeth knew it: One hundred years before his birth, Avilex fell, its people abandoning Camberia and returning to their inland origins for a final reckoning, quickly replaced by the Waxcaps, clans here and there giving up the wilderness to pretend to empire, to ascend to the civilization they had witnessed and studied from its ragged edges, planting and harvesting and fencing in the wild aurochs as they had seen the vanished peoples of the Caesars do.

The first Waxcaps to settle in Camberia might have numbered no more than thirty souls, but domestication agreed with them, and by Hambeth's birth, the first dozen wombs and their successors had eased out Camberians by the score, decade after decade. Adding to that number were the occasional outsiders – citizens from elsewhere in Avenlou, expatriated Paxillexians brought in, like Grace, by marriage or some other accident and, strangest of all, the occasional Waxcap infant girl, left wailing for reasons unknown on a doorstep outside the walls of the town proper, taken in out of pity, raised by the village, or set aside if more convenient to do so.

The Waxcap-haunted mountain wilderness was the fifth of the six places that occupied Hambeth's mind, running like a jagged spine down the middle of the world, with ancient and vanished Avilex to its west, Avenlou and Paxillex to its east, Camberia on its high, eastern edge.

And then, the sixth place of Hambeth's conception of the world lay where Avilex had been, built over the ruins, a place new and surprising and, unintentionally, the bringer of violent disruption.

According to accepted lore, repeated for a century by the peoples of Avenlou and Paxilex, Avilex had fallen under its own weight, a demise hastened by the swords of the barbarians but inevitable regardless.

And what of her capital, her great buildings, her libraries, her palaces and fora and temples and roads?

Leveled, burned, destroyed and sown with salt, so the story went. Surely, not a single life was spared, not a single stone was left standing atop another stone under the insatiable fury of the destroyers.

Was it true? Was it false? No one dared to venture up old Fifth Pass to verify. If the forest hadn't rendered the old road impenetrable years ago, if the Waxcaps allowed passage – and they wouldn't, because it was believed there was a taste for human flesh and blood among their clans – the other end of Fifth Pass was sure to hold only ruin and waste, presided over by the Vandals and the other destroyers who crawled among the rubble, mad with rage as they hungered for fresh bodies to split.

But the tales were not all true, it seemed, and within a few springs of Hambeth's birth, new stories came to supplant the old, asserted by wild-eyed traders who wore thick boots and untended beards and spoke of a fresh nation built upon the old, of ancient palaces and temples that had not been destroyed, but that had been left standing and now housed new rulers and new gods and a strangely gentle people who wished mainly to trade but were as afraid of what lay at the east end of Fifth Pass as Hambeth's people were of the west.

The land called Avilex had a new people and a new name: The Greater Vandals, the name reminiscent of a destroying force that had been tempered by time and ease.

As Hambeth matured in body and mind, his voice deepening, his head as high as any man's and still rising, the first delegations of the Greater Vandals arrived, approaching cautiously, lured by the trappers who swore to them that Fifth Pass was still passable and the rudiments, at least, of civilization lay at its end.

The delegations never made it to obscure Camberia, bypassing its elevated remoteness in favor of direct routes to the capitals of both nations, but word of their arrival spread soon enough.

The heirs of the destroyers wanted only to trade. Not to conquer, not to spoil. They asked for timber, and dried salt fish, and aurochs hide tanned or untanned, and barley for beer, and slaves male and female, and the gold that flecked the rivers that ran from the mountains to the sea. And they paid dearly, with wine and leather boots and belts, but mostly with small metal discs they called vanders, which bore the face of their king, whom they called the Vandus, and one of which was enough to buy a man's labor for all of a day, as if a man's sweat and muscle, and all his day's dreams and curses, were equal to a shiny piece of earth the size of a woman's toenail. And yet, the coinage was accepted soon enough, and Hambeth was allowed more than once to hold one and marvel at the magic power of a thing with a face pressed into it that could compel a man to do a thing all day.

By Hambeth's tenth spring, the Greater Vandals had signed trading pacts with both the old provinces, agreeing on what would be paid in goods or vanders for every manner of supplies. The prices were posted in the cities, where those who could read did so, and passed on by word of mouth for the illiterate: 20 vanders for a pan of gold; 30 vanders for a mature aurochs; 150 vanders for a young man; 200 vanders for a young woman, or 250 for her if she were judged by an independent registrar to be beautiful and well-formed.

The capacities of the Greater Vandals to trade with her new partners was not limitless, however. A wagon of barley, hauled all the way up Fifth Pass from Paxilex, was turned away when it came in second to the same from Avenlou. A man-high stack of aurochs hide from Avenlou was judged inferior to the supple skins of Paxilex, and bought from its bitter sellers at the pact's deficient goods discount. A chain of ten pretty girls from Avenlou – orphans, thieves, debtors and the otherwise unblessed – was nailed at market beside a chain of eight comely Paxilexian females, and only half of each chain sold, the other half sent back to involuntary servitude in their native lands.

For safety, or for the perverse pleasure of walking abreast of an object of hatred, the slavers and their captives from the two lands marched back home side by side for all the length of Fifth Pass, a trip of two days. And all the members of each party – even the girls, naked, fettered and shameless – hurled ten league's worth of insults, profanities, obscenities and denunciations at their counters. Drawing from bodies of cultural

knowledge, or inventing things from whole cloth when knowledge didn't serve, the two marching cadres speculated widely on conditions in the other land, of impotence and illegitimacy among the highest classes, of mercantile greed and government thievery, and improprieties among their respective premiers that had led to every disease from gout, hangnail and uncontrollable promiscuity to the kinds of disorders that reduced the royal genitalia to vegetable-like flaccidity.

Sex with aurochs was touched upon.

So venomous, so colorful and so memorable were the cultural jibes and ripostes of that long walk of the slave girls that that they were remembered vividly (or imaginatively, it must be said) by the slavers, and subsequently reported and reenacted across both nations. In the most popular Avenlou dramatization, large portions of which were presented in Camberia, the Avenlou slave girls were impersonated by young boys in nothing but thongs, and their invective drew from both sharp-edged wit and an impressive knowledge of history, culture, religion, politics, commerce, and the ruder colloquialisms of three languages, while the Paxilex slave girls were portrayed by men of exceptional ugliness or hairiness (or both) whose scripts consisted primarily of responding to each insult by crying and gnashing their teeth, followed by animal-like grunts and unintelligible babbling.

The incident had tapped into something, or several somethings. The tale of naked slave girls, bickering over matters of national pride after they'd been turned away by the new frontier of a reborn land, struck at something deep in the psyches of both nations. Lust, cultural anxiety, and economic uncertainty were part of it. And, of course, nationalism as well. Indeed, funds were raised in each capital to buy the other nation's offending girls, for purposes of acculturation, perhaps, or for darker things. But the girls could not be found and, safe to assume, would not have been turned over if they could be found. Eventually, the funds were used to free the girls who had represented their own homelands so well. More than thirty Avenlou slave girls were emancipated before someone pointed out that no more than five Avenlou girls participated in the march.

The first acts of war – what might fairly be called commerce by other means – came soon after, and could be blamed at least in part on the march and its dramatic (and no doubt exaggerated) manifestations. State-sponsored piracy kicked things off, followed by plundering on land, the

taking of goods and people from vulnerable shoreside settlements and, finally, the raising of small, regular armies and navies, who met and fought and killed and died, whose brave men were mourned and whose deaths inspired more conscription, more enlistment, and more battles.

The Greater Vandals, dimly aware of a dispute beyond its eastern mountains, more dimly aware that the new trade pact might be the impetus, sent emissaries to inquire, but as long as the goods kept coming and no Greater Vandalian was harmed, it remained a minor matter to that nation.

While an informal truce was observed along most of Fifth Pass between the traders of the competing nations, some portions of the pass became increasingly dangerous, particularly closest to the sea, where troops prowled and ships plied close to its coastal terminus. Among the alternative routes developed to get Avenlou goods and people to the Greater Vandals was a path that ran directly through once-remote Camberia, and through its front and back gates, the opening and closing of which required the payment of fees, applicable to man, woman, beast, and all inanimates of value.

Because the fees would be waived if the passerthrough stopped to conduct meaningful trade, Camberia benefited from either kind of visitor.

The Greater Vandals possessed a particular hunger for early oat, a grain difficult to coax up and harvest, but that Hambeth's ancestors had always understood. Hambeth's uncle cleared and planted close to another hectare of it in Hambeth's fourteenth winter.

To Hambeth's dismay, that next fall and the fall after that, all the oat they brought forth was sold within Camberia proper, in the square where business was done. The goods of Hambeth's sweat and labor could easily fill a cart, he knew, and after two day's travel up Fifth Pass, find a far better price in the Greater Vandals.

He asserted as much for the first time over supper not long after Grace's ordeal, his desire growing, extending into a general restlessness, a longing for new things, for all the things of men.

"Our horses are all taken by the war, and none of our aurochs are fit for four days of cart-pulling," argued Tomhearth, Hambeth's uncle, and his guardian since he was orphaned at seven by infection.

They sat on the floor in the broad front room, facing each other over the meal, all the windows latched open to let in the cooling evening air, the sunset just turning red over the mountains.

“We could pay for a few days’ horse-borrowing, if a horse becomes available, and still earn far more,” returned Hambeth, whose eagerness to see Fifth Pass and journey to the Greater Vandals was colored, somewhat, by his expectation of profits. “A cart of oat weighs barely. A donkey could pull it. I could pull it.”

“And if the Waxcaps found you first?”

“I’ll carry Jakkhearth’s sword,” Hambeth said, looking toward the niche where his grandfather’s weapon rested. “And the Waxcaps trouble no one regardless.”

“They slew a man and wife in winter.”

“They had ventured into the woods to steal, or so I heard,” Hambeth said.

“Taking a little mushroom isn’t stealing.”

“No, but whether the Waxcap think it is or is not, I won’t stray from the Pass.”

“You shan’t take the sword,” Tomhearth said. “If you lose it for the price of an oat wagon, Jakkhearth will climb from his grave for you.”

“Both armies patrol Fifth Pass, I hear,” Hambeth said. “And the truce holds even today.”

“They walk, and pass, and walk again,” said Tomhearth, “and are not always by your side.”

“The village holds weapons. I could borrow one.”

“You’ll pay for that too,” Tomhearth said, clearly losing his patience. “A horse, a donkey, our wagon, a ram of oats, a spear, a sword. What else? In one trip to Greater Vandals, you’ll reduce me to beggards.”

“Yes, Hearthman,” Hambeth said, satisfied to let the matter rest for now. The fact his uncle was willing to argue, versus immediately dismissing the whole idea, meant more might be said later. If he could borrow a weapon, and secure something to pull with, he might yet prevail.

“Nor can I afford to lose you,” Tomhearth added gruffly. “Your father would climb from his own grave for that trespass.”

Overall, whether oats were sold here or there, war had been good for the village, for Hambeth’s uncle, for Hambeth, and at the age of seventeen summers, with all his needs of body met – food, shelter, clothing, safety, plus a little schooling of mind, in letters and words – his discomfort lingered, concerning untasted worlds and unknown things, chief among them the woman named Grace.

Chapter IV: A Walk Together

Of all the things Hambeth busied himself with in his late teen years, the tilling and planting, the trading within the town walls on his uncle's behalf, the consorting with his male friends and the girls he was expected soon to formally court, one matter took precedence in Hambeth's mind:

See Grace.

View her. Experience her. Witness her. If possible, hear her. Nothing more, and nothing less. There was naught to be said to her, no matter of mutual concern, no transaction to conduct, for she had no need of early oat or any of the other things they grew and raised, and they likely would never buy from her either, the kindling she gathered at the edge of the woods, the herbs and nuts she had a knack for finding in the darker forest, the weaving and knitting she did for women who liked delicate things and didn't mind blending their affairs of apparel with a woman of Grace's history.

It was a small assignment, seeing her, but Hambeth found it more difficult to fulfill than he'd expected. Camberia was a tiny village, the center few hectares protected with a wall of wooden palisades and the vestiges here and there of the Caesars' crumbling stone barriers, the outlying land thick with farms and pastures where it had been made flat, and beyond that, sloping mountains and the ancient forests that held the village in its haunted embrace.

Grace, for certain considerations that seemed in her favor, was allowed by her deceased husband's kin to occupy with her child a small outbuilding, no more than a hovel, really, at the edge of the familial land where she'd lived conjugally until an aurochs' sharp-tipped horn brought an end to the conjugation.

The hut, one room, with a thatched roof and walls of wooden beam and stacked stone, stood in the midst of a thicket of short trees and tall weeds, almost invisible unless one knew where to look.

Hambeth knew where to look, for it had been built not far from the road he walked to go to the village, and whenever he passed he stared across the field at it and imagined the two lives within it, one older and scarred, one younger and still unsullied.

To see her dwelling place invariably eased his heart. Still, it stands, he would reassure himself. They slept there last night, mother and child, he

would think.

He wanted more than to see her home, of course, and the gods satisfied that desire in accordance with their own whims.

How often had he caught a glimpse of her, stood beside her, heard her voice before her ordeal? He cursed himself for not remembering, for failing to treasure the gift of her presence before he'd seen her suffer. Now, as punishment for his juvenile indifference, his visions of Grace were limited to mere subsistence, coming no more than once a fortnight or two, just a small sight of her toiling about her dwelling, or walking in her black robes to or from the woods, the babe always in the crook of her arm or swaddled against her belly.

It was not until a year after Grace's ordeal, with Hambeth at eighteen springs now, and with the business of a man to tend to and trips to town every fifth or tenth day, that he received a higher dispensation.

Walking to town on a bright morning, blue-skied and warmed with ocean's breath, not unlike the day of Grace's trial, Hambeth looked toward her hovel as he always did, and his heart tumbled like boulders in a spring freshet, for he saw her approaching him across the field, bearing on her back a burden of five bags woven from coarse flax, each bulging with a different good, the tops of each clutched in her hands, her child, a half-breed with Avenian blonde hair and mother's light brown skin, resting at her front, hanging from her shoulders, bare legs out.

"I know what your business must be today," Hambeth said as she neared the road, speaking softly so she wouldn't hear the quaver in his voice. He immediately heard his words and imagined how Grace might perceive them, so he quickly added, "for you bear it on your back."

"And where do you bear your business?" she inquired, looking him all over as she fell into step beside him, her feet advancing quickly despite the load that bent her spine, and Hambeth reminded himself that the woman possessed a brave wit, as quick as her stride, and he imagined falling afoul of it, and vowed to be careful with every word.

"Here," he said, tapping his head. "Today, I trade for my uncle, for things already brought past the gates."

"Tomhearth?"

"Yes, Madamhearth," Hambeth replied, using the most respectful honorific.

“I am Grace,” she said, as if they were strangers to each other, as if Hambeth knew nothing of her, had not seen her naked and beaten, had not heard her cry out, had not stared at her home on every passing. Had she not seen his face in the crowd that terrible day? Had they not looked into each other’s eyes as she searched for one to hold her infant?

“It is the first of all my pleasures, Grace,” Hambeth said.

“And mine as well,” she replied. “And you must be Hamhearth?”

“Only Hambeth,” he said. “I’ve seen but eighteen springs.”

“You do the business of a man,” Grace asserted. “You are the size of a man. You should bear the name of a man.”

“Speak to Tomhearth,” Hambeth quipped. “But I’m in no hurry. He gives me the work of a man, and the privileges of a man. The name of a man can wait.”

“You will be Hamhearth to me then,” Grace declared.

“Very well,” Hambeth replied. “But say it not where my uncle can hear, or he’ll believe I have misled you.”

“Now, why would you mislead me?”

Hambeth pondered the bold question, and Grace herself. Grace knew of Hambeth and his uncle, but only by name, it seemed, and the two of them had chosen to pretend that Hambeth knew naught of Grace. And yet they spoke plainly to each other, familiars with no history.

Hambeth was free to speak so, because he was yet a boy, by name at least, and boys could take liberties. But what of Grace? From whence did she draw her privileges of tongue? Did the mothers of fatherless children, particularly mothers whose scandal had been written out across their backs, enjoy certain freedoms other women lacked?

Or was this simply Grace’s nature, a ready glibness she’d always possessed, that had already gotten her into trouble once?

And what of the father? Hambeth wondered to himself, not for the first time. Was he a man with a weakness for a plain-spoken girl with the soft inflections of the nation to the north?

“I would not mislead you,” Hambeth promised at last. “Nor do I believe you could be misled.”

Grace looked down and caressed the blonde head of her child. The little girl seemed, as before, to choose her own time to hold silent and to make noise. For now, she elected to listen to her mother’s words and speak not, but she stared at Hambeth curiously.

“I haven’t been misled,” she said, and she looked toward the direction of the village, but raised her eyes to the mountains that loomed beyond it.

Hambeth found himself guessing at her meaning as they turned through the last bend in the lane, clearing a line of trees, approaching the village gate.

The little door to the side of the great gate opened as they neared, and a man stepped out.

“Well met, Hambeth,” the man said. He nodded toward Grace but said nothing.

“Well met, Bitterhearth,” Hambeth replied.

Hambeth stepped back, to allow Grace through the door first, but she stopped and set down all her burden on the well-trod stones just outside the village walls.

Only then did Hambeth notice that Bitterhearth bore, along with the dagger at his hip, a set of black, iron chains in his hand, reminding Hambeth of that aspect of the judgment Archenix had rendered a year ago.

Bitterhearth stepped up to Grace and, in a ritual that seemed to come easy to both of them, he clapped her wrists first, using a small pin to fix the cuffs, then she raised her robe to reveal a pair of heavy black moccasins, and he fastened her ankles likewise.

“Where are your dealings today?” she asked Hambeth without any hint of shame or inconvenience as Bitterhearth finished his work.

“There is a wagon line going to Greater Vandals, under the hand of the Brakes of Humber,” Hambeth replied, watching as she bent over, grunted and hoisted all her burdens as one back to her shoulders before passing through the door. He followed, her steps no longer quick, her feet advancing only by the length of her chain. “More than a cartload of it is what we grew, and today we set the price.”

She looked at Hambeth, and then at the heart of Camberia, spread before them with its elm and oak, its covered well, its square and its stalls and studded post, its beam-and-rock homes and public halls and stations of commerce arranged in a semblance of rows along narrow corridors of grass and earth, a new house and a new trading hall underway to their left, the people of the town everywhere, gossiping or transacting or haggling or all three.

“May the price be rich,” Grace offered.

“May yours as well,” he replied.

“Mine are all set,” she said.

“Then you do not ever haggle?”

“I do,” she said. “But not over what I trade. Today, I haggle only with our blacksmith.”

“Stotthearth?”

“That is what some call him, yes.”

“What name do you use?”

Grace looked at Hambeth and smiled.

“By what name do you know him?” she asked.

“His given name,” Hambeth replied. “But I don’t know him well.”

Grace continued to shuffle along, minding the way, the fetters that joined her ankles sliding against the lawn here, the overtrod floor of pebble and earth there, and Hambeth found himself worrying over what would happen if her chain caught, if she tumbled to her knees with her burden above and her child beneath. Surely, the child would be spared while the bags rolled and spilled as they would.

He had his own business to attend to, but he had the liberty of time, afforded by the completion of a harvest and an early start this morning, and Hambeth found that he could not imagine removing himself from Grace’s presence, the thought impossible of diverging from her while they traded friendly words and she refrained from dismissing him.

“What business do you have with Stotthearth, then?” Hambeth asked, and his voice came firm, confident, strong. He loved Grace now all the more, for he had found her to be a woman in some ways like any other, not to be feared, a woman who could speak as well and as plainly as all women, but unlike as well, with more freedom than any other he knew.

“My chains are burred and of unsuitable bend, and he cares not,” she said, shuffling along.

Hambeth looked at Grace, not sure of her meaning until he searched for a memory that had grown dim over the last year: When Archenix had handed down Grace’s sentence of restraints within the walls of the village, he had declared that Stott would fashion the work.

Hambeth knew Stotthearth by reputation only, the son of the late village smith, an intimidating man a few years senior to Hambeth who had taken up where his aging father had left off when Hambeth was twelve springs old, pounding raw metal into the shapes useful for the purposes of

human enterprise – lanterns, bridles, chains, ploughs, weapons, shoes of horses, hinges of doors.

It had crossed Hambeth's mind more than once that Stotthearth could turn out a sword or a spear, or whatever weaponry Hambeth needed to make his way up Fifth Pass, but until now, he had refrained from approaching. Stotthearth was known for brusqueness, if not outright rudeness, when presented with a foolish request, and a request for a weapon, for which Hambeth could not pay and would most likely never need, was a foolish request indeed.

But the knowledge that Grace had business with Stott gave Hambeth courage, or a substitute for courage, and he walked beside her toward Stott's little shop in the center of the village, its location known to everyone of Camberia, but just as easy to find by any newcomer by dint of sound and smoke.

As they walked, Hambeth and Grace each acknowledged their peers, Hambeth the youth his age with a shout or a wave or mockery, Grace a man or woman here and there with a quick word or two, ignoring those who ignored her. While they walked in the same direction, they did not converse with each other, and that, Hambeth thought, was probably for the best. For all anyone knew, they were as two birds of different feathers, wings carrying them abreast as they sought similar goals, but in no other way united, one bird not deeply in love with the other, one bird not thrilling even now to find the object of all his affection for a year beside him at last, speaking easily to him.

Within a few steps of the shop of Stotthearth, Grace acknowledged Hambeth again.

“You have business with him too?”

“I do,” Hambeth replied, and with a burst of unexpected courage, he turned to look directly at her and added, “now that I've learned you do.”

How should a girl, or a woman, respond when a man expresses interest in her? Should she blush? Should she mutter something under her breath, or take offense, or reciprocate, or try to be clever?

Grace did none of these. She stopped, hands at her right shoulder, clutching bags, the loop of her chain dangling from her wrists to her breast, her child gazing elsewhere, and she looked at Hambeth with her eyes narrowed, as if appraising him, thinking about his words and their meaning, gathering information, drawing conclusions.

Her feet moved again, slowly, but her eyes stared into Hambeth's for one more step before she turned toward the noise and smoke of Stott's place of commerce. Hambeth followed, his own mind working now, trying to fathom the unfathomable nature of woman, the things they thought, the way they thought.

Chapter V: At the Smith's

The Camberian smith's shop was all wood, blackened through the years with smoke or pitch or both, with a roof of rough-hewn shingles and a shutter at the front that opened upwards, so that those in need of the services could stand beneath its shade while they rested their elbows on a counter of black planking, and spoke of metal and the shaping of metal and the price of metal.

Hambeth drew near, looking into the shop over Grace's shoulder. For the moment, the shop was silent, Stottheart's hammer stilled while he sat in the corner, studying something small in two blackened hands. Engrossed, he seemed unaware of his visitors until Grace spoke.

"Smithee, shall we parley?" she inquired, her voice sharp and bright, still accented like the voices of Paxilex, but there was a fierceness in her tone that Hambeth had not heard earlier that morning, nor when she was tied to the post a year ago.

"What will you have, woman?" Stott responded, not rising, staring up at her with annoyance. Noticing Hambeth beside her for the first time, his eyes went to the young man's and his expression changed immediately. He winked, the hint of a smile on his face. Hambeth withheld his grin, not sure what Stott meant by any of it.

"You must soften these," Grace said, and she set her bags down by her feet and leaned into his shop, elbows planted on the counter, hands gripping the chains that fastened her wrists together, her daughter's bare feet scrabbling against the black wood.

"The magic that softens iron has not made it here from the cauldrons of Paxilex," Stott asserted. "Perhaps you might send for some."

"You know of what I speak, smithee of Camberia," she said. "I have petitioned you from the day you shatt these out of whatever shatthole your work plops from, and I will not be put off again."

“It’s been but a year,” Stotthearth protested, but he was grinning again, widely now, eyes moving back and forth between Grace and Hambeth. “Such things take time, even to plop.”

“I can wait to midday, idle son of a smith,” Grace responded.

“How shall you answer if I do not?” Stott demanded.

“I may not have the magic that softens iron, but I can certainly call on the god that softens manhoods,” Grace said. “Unless he has already blessed you.”

Stotthearth laughed, a great explosion of mirth that shook his whole body, and he stood, set down the thing he held on the table before him, and moved to the counter.

“Show me what of my work troubles you,” he said, and he looked at Hambeth and smiled again. “But first, what business have you, Hamhearth?”

“Hambeth,” the lad corrected.

“Hambeth?” Stott echoed. “A head that grazes the trees has still such a name?”

“I said as much,” Grace observed.

“I am but eighteen springs,” Hambeth said. “And what is a name but air? I would rather be judged by my doings.”

“The words of a man,” Stott said, “from a man with a boy’s name.”

“Thank you, Stotthearth,” Hambeth said. “But a name comes in good time.”

“Well enough then,” Stott said. “And are you here with our lady of the soft things?”

“I have a different concern,” Hambeth said, withholding laughter for fear of offending Grace. “Please tend to her business first, mine is a fly’s breath beside it.”

Grace turned to take Hambeth in, her demeanor again hard to read, and her daughter looked at him as well, with wide blue eyes and an open mouth, before both turned back to Stotthearth and Grace raised her manacled hands to him.

“There is and has always been a burr here,” she said, pointing to the place where the cuff pressed against the small lump of bone on the outside of her right wrist. “As you well know. Do you see how it tears at me?”

Now that she was being heard, Grace spoke softly, and she bent her hand at the wrist so Stott could see her flesh. He reached out, one thick

finger coated with smoke and oil tapping at her wound and the cuff that had made it, the injury and the cause of it too small for Hambeth to make out.

“How often do you wear them?”

“Only inside the walls.”

“Yes, and how often is that?”

“Every seventh day.”

“Alright. And where else is my work not to your satisfaction?”

“There’s a pinch at my other wrist, and at both ankles, and there are three burrs down there as well.”

“A pinch?”

“Yes, where your fit is off,” she said, pointing to the offending portion of her left wrist cuff.

“I am no tailor,” Stott muttered.

“You are my tailor,” Grace replied sharply. “As Archenix prescribed.”

Stotthearth looked to the heavens, then to Hambeth, smiling but feigning the eyes of a man in despair.

“Very well,” he said, “but you must show me your ankles, be they fair or the joints of an aurochs.”

“They are as fair as they need be,” Grace countered, “and you have seen more than that besides. And if your memory were not muddled by mead and the smoke of your rabbit hutch of a furnace, you would remember what I have said before, for I have parleyed out all my grievances for a year to you with the sameness of dirt.”

“Step inside,” he said, opening the little half door beside the counter, and Grace obliged him.

“Were I wearing white,” she said, looking around his small shop with disgust, “I would be in black soon enough.”

“And what colors would your trade put on me?” Stott ventured.

“The colors of the forest,” Grace said, narrowing her eyes, “if I understand your meaning.”

Stott raised his hands to accept the answer, and he motioned to a tree stump in the corner and bade her sit.

Hambeth was content to stand outside the shop, elbows on the counter, to watch the proceedings. There must be a history here, he guessed, a year of enmity borne of Stott’s imperfect labors on Grace’s behalf, fed even unto this morning by Stott’s refusal to hear or address the woman’s

pleas. But it seemed both spoke comfortably to the other, insulting and expressing annoyance with nothing approaching the rage that could lead to blows among parties in a dispute.

Sometimes, perhaps, even love could grow and bear fruit from a soil of mutual contempt. And as Grace raised her robe to show her ankles and the chains that bound them together, with Stott kneeling before her, touching the restraints with a surprising gentleness, these two might be falling in love, Hambeth thought, with a passion every bit as sincere as his own.

And Stotthearth was truly a man, in all ways, not just by name, but also by trade and physical prowess and the ease with which he conducted himself. Near the height of Hambeth, but as thick as two Hambeth's easily, he wore his blond beard thick, his long blond hair thicker, either falling loose or wound tight around itself at the back of his head. Hambeth gazed blankly at the two before him, marveling at his ability to conjure from thin air dalliance with a woman who – fraught as her history might be, burdened as she was with a fatherless child – surely had her pick of real men, to converse with if nothing else.

I must be content to spy her, now and forever, Hambeth told himself, closing his fists in frustration. When we speak, I believe things that cannot be, and therein lies a path to distraction at best, madness at worst.

“Very well,” Stott said, “I’ll pick them up from the gate tomorrow and labor over them all week, for the sake of your comfort. The broken hinge on the Freth’s lodge door can wait. The swords that need sharpening so we are not all split by your brothers from Paxilex can wait. The harness studs can wait, all the horse stock of Camberia wandering free to trample the gardens by the walls before they find a ditch to tumble into and die.”

“What horse stock?”

“The horse stock that might one day return and must be prepared for. But I will work on your things instead in coming days, and—”

“No,” Grace replied quietly, “it will be done now, while I tarry.”

And there was no love, nor the sapling of love, nor even the small, husked seed of love, in the look Stott directed at Grace at this moment. Clearly she had pushed him over the edge now, Hambeth thought, his humor devoured by the inconvenience of a task he likely never wanted, was paid at the village’s meagerest price to complete and, after a year, could still not be shut of.

But Grace merely sat still and looked at him, one hand resting on her child's head, the other in her lap, chain taut between them, with the stillness and serenity of the women of the stone monuments left long ago in the surrounding mountains by a forgotten empire.

"I cannot free you," Stott said, the smile returning as he settled on an excuse. "Archenix ordered it."

"Tether me then. I have no intentions of leaving regardless."

"Tether you?" Stott repeated.

"As you would any dog, or your best horse, or your worst aurochs," Grace said. "It matters not. I will stay and not move until you have met your obligations."

Stott muttered something under his breath, too quietly for Hambeth to hear, but Hambeth knew it must be the worst kind of cursing, and when the man looked at him again, there was no smirk or wink, just the annoyed despair of someone having to do something long avoided that had become inescapable.

He pulled his hands away from Grace's feet, stood and reached behind his head to wind up his hair, wrapping it with a quick art that set it into a knot, then turning to a pile of detritus in the far corner. After rummaging around, he found a thin belt of hide, burned along one edge but with an iron buckle that appeared to be sound.

"Chin up," he said brusquely.

Grace looked at the ceiling and he wrapped the belt around her neck, closed the buckle, turned, rummaged a bit more and pulled out a length of chain, clamping one end to her collar with a curl of bronze, looping the other end around a peg set into the wall above her head.

Hambeth's affection for Grace, misguided as it might have been, held and burned as she turned to him and smiled victoriously. Still resting against the counter and leaning into the shop, he smiled back at the woman, marveling that she seemed to feel that being chained to the wall by her neck was cause for joy.

She returned her attention to Stott, allowing him to remove the chains that bound her wrists, and the fetters around her ankles, while her daughter looked at whatever place was busiest, her mother's hands first, then Stotthearth's hands, then her mother's feet, then Stott's body as he moved slowly to the opposite corner of the shop to toss a blackened hunk of

charcoal into his smoldering furnace, pumping the bellows and producing a blast of heat that warmed Hambeth's face.

"Oooh," cooed the child of Grace, and the woman stroked her head and wrapped her arm around the girl's hips.

For all his protestations, Stott labored with impressive speed, warming Grace's restraints until the cuffs glowed dull red, pounding them so fiercely that sparks dropped to the floor in arcing cascades, pinching them between a pair of massive tongs while he grimaced. In the final step, each cuff was plunged into a tub of clear water with a great hiss and a thick breath of steam.

When he brought the still dripping cuffs back to Grace for her approval, both demeanors were tempered, she inspecting his work respectfully, he engrossed in its completion. He wrapped her ankles first, and she nodded with satisfaction and offered her wrists and seemed equally pleased with that work, and he removed her collar and she rose.

"The bee finds her flower and returns home in more time than that took," Grace observed, leaving the shop by the half door.

"I suspect you'll be back," Stott replied.

"Yes," Grace agreed, and she bent, reached for just one of her bags and raised it to Stott's counter. "Do you fancy anise?"

"I do," he said.

Within the coarse bag Grace set on Stott's counter were a set of smaller, finer bags, weaved of drawn flax and soft wool, and she drew them out and splayed them.

"Then I present you," she said, sliding a small bag toward his hands, now blacker.

"Had I known there'd be a gift at the tail, I would have stroked the head," Stott said.

"Had you stroked the head without complaint, there would have been a thicker tail," Grace said.

Grace bent to collect the rest of her bags and turned to Hambeth.

"Farewell," she said.

"May we meet on a fairer day," Hambeth replied.

"This day was as fair as fair ever be," she said. "Don't you think?"

"It's an expression," Hambeth said. "I wish you—"

"I know its meaning," Grace interrupted, and her eyes bore into his face. "And yet."

“Very well,” Hambeth said, unable to think of any word wiser.
“Very well.”

He watched her depart, the bags against her back bouncing with each small step, daughter in front, and he wondered if he would ever have another chance to speak to her, to hear her voice, to listen to her bold words.

“And what now for you?” Stott inquired, the ready smile back on his face, Hambeth wishing not to say anything that would remove it.

Tempted at first to claim he’d changed his mind, he forced the words out haltingly.

“I seek a sword or whatever else one uses, but not to buy, only to learn the prices of today, for I—”

“Where will your fight be?”

“It might never be,” Hambeth confessed, “but there is wealth to be made up Fifth Pass, or so I have heard, if one has something sharp at the ready.”

Stotthearth returned to the pile of refuse, searched, drew something out and set it on the counter.

It looked to Hambeth like the tip of a spear, sharp and the length of his longest finger, a long rough rod extending from the base.

“Here is your point,” Stott said.

“Yes, it would serve well,” Hambeth agreed, and he gazed longingly at the gleaming silver device, as if it were a key to the thrones of the gods.

Stott slid the point across the counter. “Take it.”

Hambeth raised it, touched the tip, sharp enough to make his finger bleed if he pressed, sharp enough to bring down an aurochs, a bear, a man in thin armor, or maybe thick if one’s thrust were true.

He set it down. “I will be back for it, when I have saved enough.”

“Take it,” Stott said again.

Hambeth raised the point again, guessing he had offended Stott with his cursory inspection. He ran his finger along the edge, held it in both hands to test its strength, inspected the rough peg at its base, set it down again.

“Is it not to your liking?” Stott asked him.

“No it is all I could want. I will be back for it, should I collect enough vanders. How many would buy it?”

“It’s yours,” Stott said. “You have bought it with your words, and your patience, and for speaking like a man while you wear a boy’s name.”

Hambeth looked at Stott, startled. Was this a trick? Mockery? Revenge for the troubles Grace brought while in his company?

“I have no need of it,” Stott said, appearing altogether serious, and he picked it up and pointed to the base. “But you must find a shaft to hold it. Wood as thick as your manhood when he rules your mind, of length no greater than the distance from earth to your chin, and as straight as sunlight. Split the wood at the better end when it’s wet, let it dry, then wind it fifty times around the stem, or more than fifty times, with the unbroken thong of an aurochs’ hide.

Hambeth looked into Stotthearth’s eyes, dumbstruck.

“Show me your work,” Stott said. “I’ll give you a fortnight to fashion your tooth of Fifth Pass.”

“Stotthearth, if you are not joking, thank you. Thank you.”

“I am no more joking with you than I was with that Princess of Paxilex,” he replied, the hint of a lingering contempt in his voice. “May the edge of a man give you the name of a man.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You farm on the edge of the mountain, do you not,” Stott said, “where one may watch the sea from the plaza of the ancients?”

“I do, with my uncle.”

“I must come some night, and watch with you the water, for I am sure we will see something of war in it.”

“I have glanced once or twice and seen nothing under the moon,” Hambeth said, “but you are welcome to come bring your own eyes.”

Fortune opens her robe three times if she opens it at all, Hambeth knew, and after Grace and Stott, his dealings over a cart and more of early oat bore the third fruit of the day, the remuneration fuller than ever, reflecting the growing hunger among the Greater Vandals for the produce of Avenlou, land and labor both. And they paid him in vanders for the first time, ten coins jangling beside a point of bronze in the pocket above Hambeth’s heart, which jangled too, as if Grace were even now reaching in between his ribs to trouble him with her lilting voice and her eyes and her breasts and her hips and her sharp tongue.

If he never spoke to Grace again, allowed by the gods only to see her now and then by the hovel where she dwelt, so be it. But if she walked

beside him again, he would stay with her, converse, and drink her in, for to do otherwise would be impossible, no matter how ill-advised, how futile, how unlikely to lead to anything of consequence.

He concluded his business not just richly but in a timely way too, it being a good finger or more before dark that he gave a vander to the inn for supper, got almost all of it back in a sack with eggs, goat meat, and barley for beer, and made his way back to the village gate.

“Well met, Hamheartt,” spoke a woman’s voice, and he turned as if in fright to find Grace beside him, her empty bags tucked under her arm, her child peering out from between her breasts, her limbs still in chains.

She had mispronounced his name, so she spoke it again, correctly, saying “Hamhearth” on the second try, and he wondered if this were an artifact of Paxil, the “th” at the end of words difficult for such speakers, and harder when they were aggrieved, or merely nervous.

“Well met, Grace,” he said, and he waited just beyond the door while Grace was freed, and he fought to still his heart, and he searched for the things he should say to her and wondered if she wanted his company on the walk through late afternoon, if her bold tongue would be stilled by weariness, if she knew all of him she cared to know, but as soon as she stood beside him beyond the city walls, she spoke as if no time had passed since they’d farewelled at the smith’s.

“Were all your profits rich?” she asked him.

“Yes, just one profit, but rich enough,” he replied. “And I saw your dealings well enough to know you profited too, at least at the smith’s.”

Grace looked heavenward. “It took but a year.”

“It will not take so long, I trust, should you have to go again.”

“No,” Grace agreed. “And what was your business with him?”

“It would have been nothing, had you not pushed him loose for me,” Hambeth said.

“Say more.”

“I asked him about points, and he gave me a point.”

“Your words mean nothing to me,” Grace responded, a hint in her voice of the morning’s impatience with Stotthearth. And yet, if she called Hambeth a fool, what of it? She had called Stott a fool in one way or another for all their time together, and yet they’d parted friends, or so it seemed.

“The end of a spear,” Hambeth explained. “I told him I needed arms for Fifth Pass, and he granted me more than I could have asked.”

“You’re going through Fifth Pass?” Grace asked.

“Perhaps, if my uncle allows. Perhaps.”

“Do you wish to?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell him and take your leave.”

“He’s my master yet. He tells me.”

“Does he tell you with whom you may?”

“No,” Hambeth said, not sure of Grace’s meaning but responding in kind. “Nor with whom I mayn’t.”

She laughed. “Then you may with me?”

“Yes,” Hambeth replied, and he fell silent. They’d reached a straight, narrow stretch of the lane, a hill that grew to a mountain on the right, a drop that led to a steep valley to the left. A careless step or two and one would plummet. A careless word, and Hambeth’s heart would plummet, even if his body stayed apath. And yet, he could not help but venture, could not help but do anything he’d done today, including what he was about to do now.

“Yes, I may walk with you, and parley with you, and watch you break our smith over his own anvil, and walk again with you, and hear your voice.”

“And that is all?”

“No, but it is all so far,” Hambeth replied, and now a different part of Hambeth shook and stirred. “And it’s been more than I ever wanted, more than I ever dared dream, more —”

“You are smitten, then?” Grace asked.

“I am.”

“Since when?”

Hambeth fell silent again.

“Since you were three springs?”

“No, Gracehearth.”

“Five?”

“No.”

“Seven?”

“No, Gracehearth, seventeen springs.”

“A year ago?”

“Yes.”

“And what smote you a year ago that did not smite you when you were three or five or seven?”

“I saw you whipped,” Hambeth said.

“You saw me naked,” Grace asserted.

“I saw you brave,” Hambeth said, knowing that all the day was lost where Grace was concerned, that she wanted merely to force Hambeth to answer for his lust. She’d seen him at her torture, she knew who he was, and she deserved her bitterness, and to serve it back to Hambeth, a year colder but no less true. And yet, if this was to be their last words together, a final reckoning, Hambeth wanted her to know more of him than his mere lust.

“I saw you nurse your daughter, while your fingers trembled and your back bled,” Hambeth said, the memory so real as they walked between the quiet farms of outer Camberia that he choked on the words. “I prayed to Passoni that your—”

“The goddess of labor?”

“Her name is spoken by women in childbirth, yes.”

“I was not giving birth.”

“No.”

“Then why would you pray to Passoni?”

“Because I knew of no other god – no other god or goddess -- that would rescue a woman in . . . torture.”

“And did she answer your prayer?”

“I prayed for ten, and Archenix asked you ten questions. So, yes.”

“I wish you had prayed for nil.”

“I wish I had prayed for nil, and a blessing besides. But I knew less at the dawn of that day than I knew when the sun set.”

“You are a man, Hamhearth,” Grace said, stopping because they’d reached the field she would cross to be home.

Hambeth looked at Grace, looked at her child, asleep now below her mother’s chin, and looked back at the mother’s face.

Grace raised an eyebrow and, still facing Hambeth, took a step back, from the lane onto the thick grass of the field. Hambeth stepped forward, and she stepped back again, and she laughed, taking another backward step, watching as he followed.

Chapter VI: The Knowledge of Grace

She turned, and Hambeth knew she wanted him to trail after, and he did so, discarding, as he kicked with his boots through the weeds, all other questions, about Grace and her pain and the things that might offend her or might not, to confront a new set of practical questions, about how this would be done, how it should be done, about how precisely man and woman bring themselves together.

Hambeth's body seemed to know, however, and as he watched her body shift under her clothing, her rump bounce on the left, on the right, step by step, his manhood straightened uncomfortably under his belt, as it had a year ago, as it had often enough in the privacy of his bed while he imagined Grace and the things of Grace, until his attention made it spit at the heavens.

She slipped easily across the field, quickly now, almost running while Hambeth kept at the brisk walking clip of his long legs.

They rounded the corner of her little hut together, hidden by the trees now, passing through a door and over a threshold invisible from the lane, but which Hambeth knew Grace must have crossed many times.

Inside, her space was swept and appeared larger than he'd expected, walls of beam and stacked stone, a hard-packed dirt floor, and surprisingly fragrant, the flowers of field and forest resting fresh in a stained bowl on the floor, or pinned dry against the wall, or set in a line between the wall and the aurochs hair bed where Grace slept, or stuck with the white glue of certain weeds to the shelf where her child slept, and where Grace set her now, touching her head and her cheek before she turned to face Hambeth and untie her robe, as she had a year ago, letting it fall down her arms until she caught it with her hands and hung it on a nail beside her door.

She wasn't naked beneath her robe today, a simple strip of cloth wrapped around her breasts and tied under her left arm, her hips bound in the traditional Avenlou style, with a long strip of white cloth that was first wrapped around her waist before the excess was passed between her legs and tucked into itself just beneath the dent by which she had long ago been bound to her own mother.

She looked at Hambeth and raised an eyebrow again, and Hambeth understood that this was how she preferred to speak to him about the matter

before them now. She would raise an eyebrow, and he would do that which she seemed to expect, be it crossing a field after her, or undressing.

He set down the bag of eggs and meat and barley for beer, pulled open his belt, dropped it next to the bag, slid off his boots, unlooped his tunic and pushed down his pants, his manhood iron hard and pointing at Grace, who regarded it and smiled.

“I see that all your body shares the benefit of size,” she said.

“Yes, but I am no Thimbull,” Hambeth replied.

Grace burst out laughing, and Hambeth remembered that the name, spoken often enough in jest among Hambeth and his peers, possessed additional meaning for Grace, given her invocation of him during torture.

Was she offended? Apparently not, for she fell to her knees before Hambeth and looked at the tip of his enflamed rod, reaching up to touch the underside, his tool spasming upward with its own mind as soon as it felt her fingertips.

“A horse must be washed before he’s put in the stable,” she said, looking up at him, either to gain his permission or to gauge his reaction. He held still and said nothing while his mind and his loins roared with unstoppable things, and she opened her mouth, tongue emerging and pressing against the narrow opening there.

She started with his head, her tongue darting methodically all the way around it, then working her way along his shaft, holding his penis at the base between two fingers, licking below, along the sides, across the top, the roughness of her red tongue almost like a torture.

She looked up at him again with the beautiful eyes of a strange knowledge, and Hambeth answered her gaze, face as stiff as his member, well beyond smiling now, simply looking while he brought her into his soul with every sense, looking at her hair and her face and her shoulders and the faint lines of torture on her back, barely visible now unless one had seen it done.

She leaned back, opened her mouth wide and brought him in, between her lips, between her teeth, her tongue rippling along his rod while she used both hands to loosen the bindings around her breasts, falling naked there first, then unwrapping her hips, baring her loins while Hambeth’s breath came shallow and urgent, the seed building within him, nearing that moment when it must burst forth.

Perhaps she sensed that he was almost at completion, for she pulled away and crawled on her hands and knees to her bed, dropped down on her back and looked up at him, her eyes clouded now with the same focused madness that afflicted him.

“Know me,” she whispered, spreading her thighs, reaching down with both hands to the thick matt of hair between her legs to widen her hole for entrance, vulva grown pink and full now, lips extending beyond her black fur of modesty.

Hambeth stepped over, penis bouncing, dropped to his knees, grabbed his manhood, still wet with Grace’s spit, lowered his hips and directed his mortal spear to the opening between Grace’s fingers, stifling a cry of surprise as her wet insides welcomed him with an embrace too perfect for words, her tight, smooth chamber pulling him in, squeezing him in all the ways his hand could not.

He quickly pushed deep into her slot, holding himself above her, staring into her eyes first, pulling out and pushing back in, the deep grinding ecstasy of moving within her the answer to all the questions of a few moments ago, if not all the questions of his life since birth.

Grace opened her mouth, sighed as if in pain, closed her eyes, and Hambeth knew this must feel good to her too, so good that she couldn’t help but do it, despite the terrible risks. Her eyes remained closed as he looked down at her, watching as he pierced her over and over again, breasts rising and falling, her thick pink lips tight around his shaft, sliding inward with each thrust, stretching to cling to him with each withdrawal, a thick, clear syrup coating all the length of his member, glistening in his hair, her own fur matted flat with every press of his mound against hers.

The rest of his thoughts, about planting his seed in Grace, which might make a child, which might get her tortured again unless he stepped forward and named himself on the square nine months hence, were cast out all in one throw, for the power of Grace’s chamber could no longer be resisted, forcing him to release in wave after wave of deep, wrenching pleasure.

“Uh, uh, uh,” he said while Grace grabbed his hips and rocked against him with her middle, legs swinging back and forth toward the thatch of her roof until she groaned through her own deliverance, sighing out between clenched teeth until her relief was finished and she went limp

beneath him, still holding his softening member in her sheath but otherwise completely disengaged, now in her own world, Hambeth in his.

Hambeth lowered himself, unsure of things again now that what was obvious and undeniable had been addressed. Should he roll off and lie beside her? Stand, dress and depart?

Grace answered the question for him, pulling him down to her, joining him by mouth now as his penis slipped out of her body, kissing him with all the passion of dripping intercourse, as if he were still stuck within her.

He answered her kisses as best he could, licking her tongue when it licked his, opening his mouth as wide as she, breathing as one with her, understanding that this was another sort of love, and surely just as dear, the touching of mouths, the embrace without the union at the hips, because the two delighted in each other for reasons that transcended the delivery of seed by impalement.

“Gracehearth,” he said into her ear, his mouth working as his penis had before, of its own accord. “Gracehearth. Gracehearth.”

“Yes, Hamhearth?” she replied quietly.

“Gracehearth,” he said again, collecting his thoughts, finally speaking of the first thing that opened in his mind.

“This morning, and now, must be one thing.”

“Of what do you speak?” Grace said, grabbing Hambeth’s shoulders and raising him up.

He rolled off her, sat facing away, with his rump against her hip, and looked to the door. Twilight had turned to the first gray of night, and if he didn’t reach his uncle’s soon, there would be questions he didn’t care to answer.

“The good comes in threes,” Hambeth said, reciting an article of unquestionable faith. “I earned a rich price for our grain, that was one.” He stood, picked his tunic up off the floor and shuffled into it. “Stotthearth gave me the tip of a spear, that was two. And then, I believed that walking with you this morning was the third. So now this, what we have just done, makes four, unless all of our time together is one thing.”

He slipped first one leg, then the other, back into his pants, and he looked through the darkness at the bed where Grace’s shadow lay, she propped up on one elbow to regard him.

“The tip was not one of the three,” Grace asserted.

“How do you reckon?” Hambeth inquired, sitting down to work his feet into his boots.

“It is worthless,” she said, “for if it must be used, the gods have already failed you.”

“If I wield it well, by grace of the gods, I will live and my foe will die, be he man or beast.”

“The blessed are not given a foe to slay, and they have no need of arms.”

Hambeth stood, fastened his belt and picked up his bag, his point and the coins ringing over his heart. These were strange words, far stranger than Grace’s decision to open her glory to Hambeth’s delight. For, unexpected as it was, love was a natural thing. Not counting a free spear tip among one’s blessings was not natural at all.

“Say what you will of it,” Grace said in the darkness, “but I pray you never have leave to use it, and I wish the smith had not given it to you.”

Grace’s child stirred, made a soft “coo,” and Hambeth looked through the darkness toward her shelf, then back toward Grace.

“What if I have burdened you?” he asked, content to let wane the question of weapons and the need for them. “With your second?”

“Then I will have two to love,” she said.

“You will not be whipped for me,” Hambeth blurted, the full import of Grace’s words, and their dire implications, roaring into his mind as fiercely as his juice had spurted into Grace’s lower chamber. “I will name myself and end any trial before it begins. I will—”

Grace interrupted him with laughter.

“Hambeth,” she said. “There is more to this.”

“To what?”

“To names, and knowing names.”

“Who is it then?” Hambeth demanded.

“You saw the price I paid to not answer that question, did you not?”

“I did.”

“And you ask me now, with no post to tie me to, no whip to tear at my back?” Grace asked, laughing. “You must think that things become cheap after they have aged a year.”

“I do not,” Hambeth said, Grace’s words stinging. He had filled her with a lifetime of urgent ache, had known the sacred embrace of her sweet

walls, and yet there were still things he wouldn't learn tonight, or perhaps ever. Did she still think him a boy tonight?

"Then I take my leave with the mere knowledge of a child," he said curtly. "Whoever knows of all this has not found me worth the telling."

He turned to pick his way through the darkness to the door, surprised to feel a hand on his shoulder.

"Hamhearth, forgive me," Grace whispered. "I thought you were toying with me. I cannot say. I dare not say. It must not come from me. But ponder the question, if you will. And if you won't, that is your business."

"And the answer will be arrive as soon as ponder?" he asked. "As if there is some magic in thought?"

"It might," Grace said, and she kissed his mouth. "Let me speak thus: Other girls of Camberia without husbands have borne children of unknown legacy since my trial, and were not tied to the post."

"And?" Hambeth said.

"And that is all I shall say," Grace replied. "My daughter is about to wake full, and she'll be hungry, and you no more wish to hear her screams than you wished to hear mine."

"But your sighs," Hambeth said, overwhelmed of a sudden with the pleasure he had known this day and must now abandon. "That I could hear, again and again."

"When the moon gives enough light, steal your way through to me, and if you find my robe outside, at the corner of my dwelling, wake me. Wake me."

She kissed him again and grabbed his shoulder.

"Now, on your way," she said. "Or your uncle will ask about your time, and you'll have to send him to me to account for it."

Chapter VII: Revelations

"Hambeth," Uncle Tomhearth asked over dinner, his voice quiet, hesitant, early in Hambeth's nineteenth spring, the air still cold after sunset.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Were do you go at night?"

"Sir?" Hambeth asked, his mouth quickly going dry. He had suspected either that his uncle did not know of his nocturnal comings and

goings, or did not care if he did know. He did know, it seemed, and he did care.

“You mean, when I empty my bladder?”

“I suspect you are emptying something else,” Tomhearth said.

Hambeth had seen orphans neglected and mistreated, whether Waxcap or native born, even in the small town of Camberia, where all knew each other’s business, and he would always be grateful to his uncle for taking him in, and he would never lie to him over any matter, large or small.

But he could not speak of Grace, not because he knew of the consequences of doing so, but because such consequences were uncertain.

“I do wander at night, Uncle,” Hambeth confessed. “And I do tarry in the darkness as well. A fortnight ago, Stotthearth and I watched war, two ships that blazed on the sea, and all—”

“You and Stott have grown close.”

“We have. He gave me that point when first we met, and has shared his wisdom besides, and we’ll wander, at times.”

“Yes,” agreed Tomhearth, “but I do not believe you wander.”

“Sir?”

“I believe you go to one place, and you are gone long enough to get done the business of a man.”

“Some call me Hamhearth,” Hambeth said. “I have told them not to.”

“Oh,” Tomhearth said. “And who might that be?”

“Various. Stotthearth.”

“And what of that party to whom you go when there is moonlight enough?”

Hambeth looked down at his plate, hoping that silence would be answer enough.

“I pray you are not dallying with a wife, or the daughter of a jealous father.”

“No, Sir.”

“You are dallying then.”

Hambeth looked at Tomhearth and said nothing again.

“And should your moonlight troubles give issue, you will be a man whether or not you want to be.”

“Yes, Sir, as is just. No one will ever be tortured for me.”

“Hambeth,” Uncle Tomhearth said.

“Yes, Sir?”

“You have served me well, particularly in the last year. You get the best prices. You have made us profitable. I am almost a gentleman.”

“Thank you, Sir, and you are indeed a—”

“But should your eyes close in a trade because you are taking treats from a wench while the rest of us use our beds to sleep, I shall secure you at night, and your friend Stott will fashion your fetters himself.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth agreed.

“Now,” Tomhearth continued, “you know I have considered putting to plough another hectare.”

“Yes, Sir, surely a wisdom.”

“We cannot do it ourselves.”

“I believe we can.”

“No, even were you not slipping your bed, it would tax us both. So I am considering buying labor.”

“A slave?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll split one from the Paxilex troops they bring through?”

“No soldiers,” Uncle Tomhearth said. “I’ll not house a man who has sworn to the gods to kill us, even if his gods are other than ours.”

“They are all soldiers that pass through,” Hambeth noted.

“There is a girl or two, perhaps a few you have missed that I have seen, and there is word of more being gathered and traded. And some are fair, even if they be of Paxilex.”

“Yes, some of Paxilex are fair,” Hambeth agreed.

“Grace is fair, is she not?”

Hambeth looked at his plate, his mouth dry again, and Uncle Tomhearth chuckled.

“Archenix nor his council will care if you swell that one’s belly,” he said, “and the reasons why maybe be guessed at.”

The reasons why were still not known to Hambeth, why Grace would be tortured for the name of one father, and not for the name of Hambeth, and he’d given up speculating on the whole matter. Regardless, Grace’s blood flowed every month, all the seed he’d spilled within her over the last year not interrupting her regular nature.

“If it is Grace, the fair Widow of Paxilex,” Uncle Tomhearth said with another laugh, “then you are a man, in every way, for she has shown

no interest in fools, nor even in the foolishness of Archenix.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth replied blankly, as if agreeing with everything and nothing.

“You are a man, that is, in every way but one.”

“But one?”

“Yes, you are a man in every way save that your uncle does not want you to be a man just yet.”

“Why, Sir, if I may ask that?”

“Because I will not have you leave me yet, and take away the acumen for trade I helped build, and the letters I paid to teach you, and I—”

“I will not leave you, Sir.”

“And dally every night in the bed of your beloved, and lose the sword of Jakkhearth on Fifth Pass, and—”

“I have made that spear,” Hambeth said, gesturing toward the niche where both spear and sword rested now. “And Stott called my work good.”

“Irrelevant to the matter,” Tomhearth said. “I will not betray my brother’s memory by allowing his son on a ruinous adventure, and if it means I must bind you with the name of a child, so be it.”

Hambeth said nothing.

“And you have found a way to please yourself as a man does,” he added. “Which, by truth, I’m glad you do, for I prefer the sound of the door at night to the sound of your grunting as you squeeze your passions at the ceiling.”

“Yes, Sir.”

With the sky clear that same night, the moon round enough to light his way, Hambeth crept out of his bed, well aware now that Uncle Tomhearth knew of his departures, that he could simply announce he was taking leave, but he preferred to slip out as had been his custom the last year, rolling off his bed and pushing open the door with soft movements and little disturbance.

Grace’s robe hung where he usually found it, hanging outside in the night air at the corner of her hut, and that fact alone stirred him, made him draw in his breath while his manhood grew between his legs.

He pushed open Grace’s door, paused, waited, listening for the breath of two females.

He knew by practice that the daughter would not hear him, could hear nothing in her slumbers, but that some part of Grace was always awake, organs of perpetual vigilance behind her breasts or at her middle that told her when a man was at her door, when Hambeth was at her door.

He could see nothing, but he heard her breath snap, her bedclothes rustle, and then the touch of her hand on his arm or his shoulder. He pulled off his tunic and the pants, feet already bare, and let Grace guide him to her bed, settling there beside her, she on her back, he beside her, on his side, his hand on her belly, the edge of his palm against the hair of her glory, his long penis throbbing as with its own heart against her thigh.

“Well met, Hamhearth,” Grace whispered in the darkness

“Well met.”

“How have you fared?”

“My uncle knows.”

“Knows what?”

“Of you.”

“You told him?”

“No, the gods did. Or a neighbor.”

“Did you confirm it to him?”

“No, but neither did I deny. I will not lie to him.”

“He has not forbidden it?” Grace asked, and her hand went to Hambeth’s hip, then to his manhood, caressing the head, stroking the shaft, grasping his testicles.

“He has not,” Hambeth whispered in the darkness, breathing deeply. “He will not give me a man’s name yet, but only to maintain my services. He seemed pleased to know of you.”

“He cannot hold you forever,” Grace said. “But if he approves of me . . .”

Grace rose to her knees, pushed Hambeth down to his back and moved to the place between his thighs, as she did often enough, and he spread his legs wide and allowed her the taste of his shaft, grunting quietly as she wrapped her mouth around it and serviced the underside with her tongue.

She had learned well in a year the natures of his release, and she mouthed him only until he was thrusting up against her, tip probing the deep reaches of her throat. She released his member and clambered across him, putting her mouth above his, one hand on his shoulder, the other

between her legs, finding his penis, lifting it into position at the mouth of her passion and dropping down upon it with a quiet sigh, pulling it into her chamber while Hambeth writhed beneath her, the pleasures of her wet womanhood as profound to him this night as on the evening of their first dalliance.

“Hamhearth,” she whispered into his ear before she covered his mouth with hers.

They coupled in near silence – save for the soft breaths that came in time to the pushing of Hambeth’s shaft up Grace’s hole – until each sensed the pleasure building in the other and chose to strive as one, consulting their respective muses for the ending pleasure, Hambeth gasping as the milk pulsed from his tip, Grace groaning out as if in pain, as if the milk he poured into her sweetness burned her.

Stilled and quieted, Grace lowered her mouth to Hambeth’s ear again.

“Hamhearth,” she said again. “What of us?”

“What of us, Gracehearth?”

“Your uncle knows. Surely others might know.”

“None have spoken to me of it. And unless your belly swells, it is the business of no one.”

Grace was silent. She seemed to sense that Hambeth had more to say on that score.

“If it happens, I believe I have Tomhearth’s blessing,” Hambeth said. “And he seems certain you will not be tortured by Archenix and his council if I am the father.”

“Nevertheless,” she said, “I don’t believe it will happen.”

“How do you know?”

“I swallow pitchleaf,” she said.

“Pitchleaf?”

“In Paxilex, it is a cure for fertility,” she said.

This revelation, taking a year to come, surprised Hambeth, and hurt him.

Grace sensed his pain as quickly as he felt it.

“Do you wish me heavy again?” she asked.

“Nay, nor do I wish you to displease Firtha,” he said, invoking the name of the goddess of breeding.

“In Paxilex, we called her Mnumn, and she herself planted the first pitchleaf, and taught us its properties.”

“Why would she teach you to close your womb?”

“Our goddess makes room for the mother’s will,” Grace whispered.

“That is no mother if she eats pitchleaf.”

Grace laughed quietly into Hambeth’s ear. “She will be mother when she deems it her time.”

“How many other gods of Paxilex do you honor?”

“All of them, as honor you all the gods of Avenlou.”

“Do you hate us, Grace?” Hambeth whispered, finding the courage to voice a question that had long troubled him.

“I do not,” she said.

“Our brothers kill your brothers,” Hambeth said, adding after a pause, “and there was your trial.”

“Were there hate, I could not wrap myself around your manhood under every bright moon.”

“But you long for Paxilex.”

Grace spoke not, only breathed in slowly, and Hambeth had his answer, and another thing of many this night to trouble his mind.

“Would you eat your pitchleaf if I bore a man’s name?”

“Pitchleaf and your name are of no relation to each other. I have milk and time for but one.”

“Who is her father?”

Grace laughed. “Why does it trouble you?”

“If I trade with him, and he learns that I stir you, my dealings will —”

“Your dealings will not be touched.”

“Or perhaps he is a friend. Perhaps . . . Stotthearth.”

Grace laughed so loudly her child stirred and cooed.

“You yourself saw my dealings with that smith,” Grace said, lowering her voice. “Is that how you believe lovers mix?”

“Lovers mix in more than one way,” Hambeth observed.

“Not in that way,” Grace said. “His art brings me misery.”

“He did not choose it thus,” Hambeth said, in defense of his friend. “But I believe you. The father is not a smith.”

“The answer is easy if you consider the darkness of men’s hearts.”

“Then I am no closer to the answer.”

“Your heart is not dark.”

“Perhaps. Or I am indeed still a child.”

“No, Hamhearth, you are only innocent, and I would that you stay that way. But if you long to know, I will ask you something.”

“Ask.”

“Was I the only one whipped at trial?”

“Yes,” Hambeth said.

“No,” Grace said simply.

“I care not for riddles,” Hambeth said, and he grabbed Grace by her shoulders and set her beside him so he could rise, sitting with his knee against her thigh, remembering the mad love he felt for all of Grace, body and mind and eyes and spirit, before he’d first known her and learned the new love for the embrace of her pink chamber.

“Hamhearth,” Grace whispered in the darkness, putting her hand on his arm.

“Yes?”

“Tell me your thoughts.”

“Uncle speaks of buying labor,” Hambeth said, shifting to a subject that might be of deep interest to Grace, and might sting her as well.

“For what use?”

“To work a new hectare.”

“You will keep him busy,” Grace predicted, “while you trade in the village.”

“Uncle wants no warrior, so it would be female,” Hambeth said, listening in the dark for Grace’s reaction.

“You will keep her busy,” she said, voice even. “In ways that a man would not suffer.”

“Tomhearth said nothing of breeding her,” Hambeth said. “But be she of Paxilex, she will learn to honor the gods of Avenlou, and she will be allowed no pitchleaf.”

“But you will reward her often enough?”

“I know nothing of the management of a captive female.”

“A daughter of Paxilex will serve best if she is sometimes given the opportunity to groan.”

“Perhaps Uncle will do that work,” Hambeth offered.

“Is he a frequenter of any Camberian slot?”

“If he is, he neither speaks of it nor stumbles under the moon, that I know of.”

“He never married?”

“No. He took me in. That was burden enough.”

Grace laughed quietly at Hambeth’s choice of words.

“Then your uncle will feed her by mouth, and you will feed her between her legs.”

“Do you toy with me?”

“Nay.”

“You are not jealous?” Hambeth asked.

“I will not be jealous of a slave girl, unless you bring her here with you and stretch her hole while I listen.”

“I will feed her in our own stables, when the moon hides her face, you otherwise.”

“You seem to have worked out all the matters of her keeping,” Grace observed. “Is she already bought?”

“No, nor even conceived of. It is just as likely Uncle’s idle talk, so that he could speak of something other than you over supper.”

“Indeed,” Grace said. “But Camberia may win a royal servant grant.”

“Another thing of which I know nothing,” Hambeth said.

“No town of Avenlou may simply buy and sell souls. The king must have his say.”

“I don’t believe Loutaine will worry himself over matters of Camberia.”

“He not, directly, but his officers, yes, and they come through often enough, to ask of things.”

“What things?”

“One spoke to me.”

“One asked you of things? Did he mistake you for Archenix?”

“No, but he mistook me for a slave girl,” Grace replied. “He saw my chains and heard my voice and asked to see my brand.”

“I’m sure the words you gave back wilted his sword,” Hambeth said.

“No, a king’s emissary and a smith are not to be spoken of using the same tongue. I joined him in audience before Archenix, and it was explained.”

“When did all this happen?”

“But three days ago.”

“And he was satisfied with your personhood?”

“Yes, but with words for Archenix. Before I was waved away, I heard his counsel. They believe Camberia might be worthy of a grant.”

“To what end?”

“I know not, only that it was broached, and Archenix promised to take it to his council, and that is perhaps why your uncle’s mind turned to such things tonight.”

“So be it,” Hambeth said.

“Should there be a grant, it is not just the new captives of Paxilex that may be traded.”

“What mean you?”

“Any female of uncertain standing may be bound.”

“Then the Waxcap orphans will find their place,” Hambeth noted. “And they are all servants already, in deed if not in name. They’ll hardly take note.”

“And I,” said Grace.

“And thee?”

“And I.”

“Wherefore?” Hambeth demanded.

“I already wear iron every seventh day,” Grace said. “My child has no father. I own no land. I barely keep myself.”

“You do well,” Hambeth countered.

“The law has its own opinion.”

Chapter VIII: “The Greatest Trader in All of Avenlou!”

With ground to be broken, carts to load, trades to work through, Hambeth set aside thoughts of matters he could not feel with his hands and, for a fortnight past the night when both Tomhearth and Grace shared their matters of import, he was satisfied to drop sweat in the mid-summer sun and do the work of a farmer and think no other thoughts.

And for a fortnight, until a pirate named Aggarj made his way through Camberia with his wretched cargo, Hambeth knew relative peace.

Hambeth was in the field, at the edge by the lane that led to the gate of the village, and he sensed Aggarj before he fairly saw him, a movement between the trees where the lane bent toward the sea, a small huddle of life making its way from places unknown to a destination no one might yet imagine.

Hambeth rose from his knees, wiped his hands on his tunic, straightened to his full height and watched as the bulk closed the distance between them.

The man Hambeth came to know as Aggarj the pirate led the way, holding an iron leash that ran to the neck of the first of three bent figures.

Hambeth thought at first those behind him were children or small men, all painted black, but he blinked and his eyes resolved the scene as they drew close: three naked females, with filthy faces, bare black feet, ankles shackled together, right wrists fastened to a second chain that ran to all three, collars and a leash for each neck, and a thin rope of twisted iron wrapped above and below each girl's bare breasts, fresh red blood trickling from wherever the wire touched, spilling and drying over black blood, streams of it caked over breasts and nipples, under arms, across bellies, hips, thighs, rumps.

A rope had been tied from each female's cutting wire to the one beside her, and Hambeth imagined the undeserving pain one suffered when her neighbor stumbled or recoiled.

These were Paxilex girls, thick black hair matted against their faces and shoulders, wide hips and strong thighs and, Hambeth confirmed after looking between their hips, thick black pubic hair hiding three dark female slits. These were the first female slaves he'd seen, and they were nothing like the brave male soldiers the slavers paraded through on the way to the Greater Vandals.

The man stopped, regarded Hambeth with a speculative eye.

"Three girls, by the crown, to be sold as a lot only, here or in the Greater Vandals," he said.

Hambeth looked into each pair of eyes, expecting to find deadness, or the animal panic of people whose suffering cut them off from the days of man. But each girl was staring back at him, eyes awake and wide, so intently it almost startled him.

"Why are they bound like that?" Hambeth asked, pointing to his own chest.

“Warriors,” the man replied. “They slew one of ours before they were taken. Bitewire for the walk from the sea.”

“Girls are not warriors,” Hambeth said.

“In Paxilex, they are.”

“We cannot buy them regardless,” Hambeth said. “We have no grant.”

“Buy, and then ask for the grant. The king will oblige.”

“The king knows naught of us.”

“You don’t know then?”

“Know what?”

“There are too many slaves in Topia,” he said, and he smiled and stuck his tongue out on the left side of his mouth, in a gesture Hambeth did not like. “Such is what war wreaks. Too many in Sanceroo, too many in the Pardones, in Matrov, in Old Pursal. Everyone’s had their fill of the human spoils. The prices have fallen. Fallen! Now is the time to buy.”

He held up both hands, the girls’ chain draped over his right thumb, and began folding down his fingers one by one. “Ninety vanders instead of a hundred. Eighty vanders instead of one hundred twenty. Fifty vanders instead of two hundred. And that is why this lot is so cheap.”

“How much?” Hambeth ventured.

“Seven hundred fifty for all three,” he replied.

Sometimes, Hambeth laughed at a price because he needed to destroy the seller’s confidence. Sometimes he laughed because the price was outrageous. He issued the second sort of laughter now.

“The most comely slave girl in the Greater Vandals barely brings two fifty,” he said, slipping with ease into the quick patter he brought to any trading, even for goods for which there was no hope of purchase. “And the ragged mob at the end of that chain is as comely as three skinned badgers. You might as well have three rats by the tail.”

The man, at least twice Hambeth’s age and easily twice his girth, held up his hands in surprise, and Hambeth knew he’d won the first moments of the encounter. This man, this pirate or whatever he was, had expected an underaged country rube who might, at best, hear the price and rush to his elders with word of a grand deal on three girls. Instead, he’d encountered a shrewd trader, far older in matters of business than his face betrayed.

Hambeth wasn’t finished.

“Look at this one,” he said, stepping to the first girl on the chain. “Eye closed with a fist. How many times did you have to beat them just to keep their steps straight up the mountain?”

“That happened when they were captured, by the crown,” the man protested. “There has been no violence since. And most of the violence then was by done their hands.”

“How many more bruises does the dirt hide?” Hambeth demanded.

“Give us a watering trough and you’ll see.”

“You would bathe them where our aurochs drink?” Hambeth said, gesturing toward the barn and field where more than a dozen animals loitered. “All our beasts will be dead by sundown.”

“Bathe them, by the crown, and you’ll see what uses they might be put to,” the slaver said, tongue dangling again.

“Comfort?” Hambeth asked.

“Yes, yes.”

“Comfort?” Hambeth repeated, voice high-pitched with derision. “One would do better placing one’s member into a thatch of leaves than thrust it into the ravaged slots of this acorn stew. One might—”

“They are not ravaged,” the slaver interrupted. “By myself, nor any man.”

“How know you this?” Hambeth asked with another sincere laugh. “Did they tell you?”

“Upon closer inspection . . .” the slaver said, letting his words trail off, leaving Hambeth to ponder his meaning.

“What know you of their history at all other than that they kill?” Hambeth demanded.

“Nothing,” the man replied, smiling, as if the mystery of their pasts was another benefit. “They speak no Avenian, and I speak no Paxil. Three girls who cannot stick you with their words, who cannot ask for this and that as soon as you are abed, who cannot remember all your trespasses during every parley.”

“Do they have names?”

“Not even that,” the slaver replied, still smiling. “I asked, and they volunteered no names at all, so I gave them flower’s names.”

“Thornweed, thistle perch, and crow’s garter,” Hambeth ventured, and he looked at the females again and wondered what of his words they could hear and understand.

None, he hoped.

The pirate scowled and launched into a long diatribe that sounded almost like poetry, extolling the virtues of these three, and of the maidens of Paxilex in general, and Hambeth ignored him and gazed up at the mountains until he noticed one of the girls was staring at him, not with hate or anger or offense, but with the raised eyebrows of someone who wished to say something but could not speak. She looked down and looked back up, and he followed her eyes and saw that she was making marks in the dirt of the lane.

The slaver, oblivious to anything but the sound of his own voice, finally ran out of words, paused and looked at Hambeth: "Do you not agree, then, that they are worth every vander?"

"No, but they might be fit to lift something," Hambeth said. "Perhaps the three of them together could do the work of a single lad. And with any luck, they'll live a season and bring in a crop or two before they expire of whatever offal you've been grinding into their skin."

"Very well," said the slaver, clearly grown weary of Hambeth's performance. "There will be an auction tonight in your village, before men who can look past a little dirt, and if there is no offer, they'll go to the Greater Vandals, where there is still hunger for the delights of an unspoiled girl."

"Yes, and if you should find any unspoiled girls," Hambeth jibed, "you can put them on the chain and let these three goats free to graze in the forest."

The trader laughed and offered his hand.

"I am Agarjj," the man said.

"It is the first of all my pleasures, Agarjj. I am Hambeth."

"It is the first of all my pleasures, Hamhearth."

"Hambeth."

"Hambeth."

Agarjj tugged on the chain and the girls moved forward with another glance at Hambeth, and he looked after them, at their bare rears, filthy but well-shaped, and he did believe they might bring pleasure to the lucky men of the Greater Vandals, if they were not dead from the poisons of blood and earth and Agarjj's rot before they ever saw its monuments and palaces.

But when they were out of sight, Hambeth looked down, studied the dirt where the girl's toe had made its mark, and went in to speak to his uncle.

And by the time the sun slanted low that day, no fewer than five neighbors had spoken to Hambeth or his uncle about the auction that night, to be held after dark, hosted by a trader who seemed to think that Camberia could buy girls first and be given a grant after, and who thought that three wretched, filthy females could draw the same price as the best girls in the Greater Vandals.

And yet they gathered, fifty men at least, and Hambeth as well but no women, in Camberia's greatest hall, the place where Archenix throned himself in unfortunate weather.

"On the morrow, I take my leave, with the girls or without," Agarjj announced.

The men muttered to each other. To the last man, save one, they were there to see if any neighbor was fool enough to pitch a Greater Vandals price at three ruined girls who would likely be confiscated by the king as soon as he learned of their unaugured trade.

Hambeth stood with his arms folded at the edge of the hall, low-ceilinged and smoky with the light of a dozen thick, sputtering tapers.

The girls were little improved since Hambeth had last laid eyes on them that afternoon. Still in the same chains, hair still a matted mess, they huddled in the front corner of the building, almost invisible in the darkness, holding still to minimize the sting of the bitewire, or from sheer exhaustion, legs drawn up to their breasts, hands down at their middles, covering the parts of their naked holes not concealed by hair. Someone had tried to clean up their faces a little, but that accomplished nothing more than to show off the ravages of war, or captivity, or whatever other misfortune had befallen them. Besides the girl with the eye swollen almost shut, the second girl, the one who had written in the dirt with her toe, sported a thickened lower lip. But the third bore the most disturbing affect – not a testament to physical injury, but of something gone wrong in her mind. While her two comrades stared at the hard-packed dirt of the hall, this one looked up, smiling giddily at all in the room, with eyes focused on no one, as if the men and the walls were transparent and she spied instead the distant mountains behind them where the sprites cavorted and, by legend, aurochs danced.

Agarjj, sporting a white tunic with just a stain here and there, clasped his hands and paced nervously between the corner that held the girls and the other corner, past Archenix's chair, his agitation obvious before the unfriendly crowd.

"Seven hundred fifty vanders," he called out, in the formal start to bidding. "Girls of Greater Vandals quality, at the Greater Vandals price!"

By the end of his opening offer, he had to scream his words, so loud had the laughter grown.

No man raised his hand, made a counter offer, or spoke other than to his neighbor, and then only in the most derisive tone.

Agarjj searched the room, head swiveling, eyes searching for interest.

"By the crown, by the crown," Agarjj said, voice desperate. "Seven hundred vanders. Seven hundred vanders. The men of the Greater Vandals will weep in their wine when they find out how cheaply these three flowers of Paxilex went. Seven hundred vanders!"

The men of Camberia were already growing tired of Agarjj, and several bade noisy farewells and left the hall, slamming the door behind them. A few more turned to their friends in preparation to taking leave, laughing and wishing a good night's rest, and Agarjj scanned the room hopelessly, scowled at the girls and cried out anew.

"Three beautiful warriors! Three of the strongest females of Paxilex! Yours for a bargain, by the crown! Six hundred fifty vanders!"

Hambeth stepped away from the wall and, arms still folded, waited for Agarjj to notice him.

"Ah, Hamhearth," the man shouted. "Well met."

"Well met, Agarjj," Hambeth replied, deigning not to correct him this time. "Two hundred vanders."

The old pirate looked at Hambeth, confusion in his eyes.

"What say you, Hamhearth?"

"Two hundred vanders."

Agarjj blinked as if he'd been struck, but he quickly composed himself and, face twisted in contempt, looked first at the men gathered there, and then put his hands on his hips and leaned back to laugh at the rough ceiling beams, as one who has heard a joke of crushing hilarity. But the sound from his throat came hollow, the nerves that underlay all his actions this night shorting his breath.

The room fell silent, all eyes on Hambeth.

“Two hundred vanders,” Hambeth said again.

“Three hundred,” Agarjj said.

Where there was a hush before, now there were the low murmurs of surprise and indignation. And admiration. One of their youngest, one who still bore a child’s name, had driven a price down by more than half with a single offer. Just as remarkable, perhaps, Camberia was now within 300 vanders of owning its first three slave girls. With or without the king’s permission, this was a turn in the fortunes of Camberia. Dirty as they were, bloody and damaged as they were, caked with mud and wrapped with chain and bitewire, there was decent flesh underneath, perhaps even flesh worthy of the Greater Vandals, if enough lye could be procured to scrape clean their bodies.

“Three hundred vanders,” Agarjj repeated, “and the Greater Vandals will be robbed of the three finest females their land would ever have seen. Warrior girls, strong and lithe and well-formed, as a little cleaning will reveal soon enough. And never used, as you shall see. By the crown, never used!”

“Two hundred vanders,” Hambeth repeated, for the third time.

Agarjj looked at Hambeth, looked at the men, looked at the girls. One of the girls shifted in her chains, the clinking of metal against metal the only sound in the hall.

Agarjj drew in his breath, his mouth spread in a wide grin, his eyes squinting with bitterness.

“Sold, to Hamhearth of Camberia,” he announced, adding with a tone of mockery to hide the profound defeat of his endeavors, “the greatest trader in all of Avenlou!”

Chapter IX: The Charge of Archenix

Hambeth stood impassively, arms still crossed at his breast.

The murmuring resumed. Hambeth could hear the words of those closest to him, and wasn’t surprised by them. Two hundred vanders, albeit far cheaper than the opening price of 750, was still a large sum, particularly for three girls whose worth was impossible to gauge. Even if there was beauty there beneath the grime, of what true value was that, to anyone? And

where, by the gods, had Hambeth come by 200 vanders? He was a fine dealer, but he was by no means that rich.

Hambeth turned and looked to the back of the hall, nodding, and Tomhearth and Archenix strode between the broad shoulders and burly forearms of their fellows, reaching Agarjj and drawing out two tiny bags of wealth.

“I bear sixty-seven vanders,” Tomhearth announced.

“And I bear the balance,” announced Archenix, turning to face the throng, his voice as clear as it had been during the torture of Grace. “One hundred and thirty-three vanders, treasure of the commonwealth, for the good of the commonwealth.”

And the men who had come to be merely entertained and amused and titillated had something they had not come for, did not expect to be given this evening: civic pride. One of their own had bested a foreign trader – bested him grandly – and in the process obtained something new and strange and wonderful, even if it was useless. Three girls who might yet be of Greater Vandals quality, now in the full possession of the tiny, remote mountain village of Camberia.

“Huff!” grunted someone in the throng.

“Huff!” answered another.

“Huff!”

“Huff!”

And the ancient Camberian call of pride and victory, not unlike the sound of a rutting aurochs, rang out from near fifty throats amidst applause and the sound of callused palms applied enthusiastically to Hambeths’ back.

The celebration might have gone on all night, but Archenix raised his voice to speak.

“You claimed . . .” he said, his words drowned out at first by the continuing shouts and claps.

“You claimed . . .” Archenix said again, the room quieting, and he stared at Agarjj accusingly.

“You claimed, gentleman from afar, a value of 750 vanders for the goods offered tonight.”

“I did, Sir,” Agarjj conceded.

“And you took but two hundred vanders, did you not?”

“I did, Sir,” Agarjj agreed. “And I have made Camberia rich this day, and that is to me a reward beyond measure, and I thank you, for I—”

Archenix held up his hand, and Agarjj fell silent.

“When you speak to the traders with whom you parley,” Archenix said, turning so that his words would be clear to all in the room, “tell them to open with a fair price in Camberia. For we are not fools, and we will not be cheated.”

“No, Sir, I will tell them the same,” Agarjj promised. “Nor have you been cheated tonight. Nor did I ask the higher price for any reason but to bring pride to your fair—”

Archenix raised his hand again.

“You would be best to sleep outside the walls tonight.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“With the wolves and the Waxcap.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And now,” Archenix said with a final, dismissive wave of his hand, “give me the keys so we may resolve matters with these three bedraggled waifs.”

Agarjj reached into his tunic, drew out a wad of cloth, gave it over and exited with a final glance at Hambeth, but nary a word or even a look back at the poor girls he’d marched up from the sea in chains and wire.

Hambeth for his part studied the pirate’s face carefully, as he often did after a trade, for a man’s demeanor then was more informative than his attitude while the sale was birthing. Men let their guard down after the goods and the payment had exchanged hands, their true feelings about the matter visible. Hambeth had learned to look for mild satisfaction in the face of the other as evidence he had dealt well. Elation in his counter told him he’d been cheated, and he’d lost sleep over it enough times that he vowed he would do all in his power to prevent it. But dejection and anger in the other trader’s countenance was no victory either. A man who felt he had been severely bested might never trade with Hambeth again, which was bad, or would try to get revenge on the next deal, which was far more perilous.

How did Agarjj feel about the trade?

Hambeth found him easy to read as he tucked two bags of coins into a deep inside pocket and strode from the hall. The man was satisfied.

Not elated, not furious.

Why? What did he know about these three well-formed warrior girls that left him pleased to accept a fraction of his opening offer and, truth

be told, a fraction of what they could probably fetch in the Greater Vandals, with a little cleaning and doctoring?

There was a flaw, somewhere, in the trade. As the hall cleared out, noisily, with more rejoicing and a few more “huffs,” Hambeth turned to the girls and wondered. The flaw might lie with them, or it might lie with Agarjj, whose willingness to accept the discount reflected an error of business sense, or will, or planning.

But somewhere here was a flaw.

No trade was without risk. This Hambeth knew. Things could look one way and be another. Goods could fail by chance or under the hands of cruel or trickster gods.

The trade of this evening, however, was of particular danger.

Hambeth did not require reminding on that score, but after the hall had cleared out of all but Hambeth, the slave girls, Uncle Tomhearth and Archenix, his two elders approached to review the deal.

“Hambeth,” Tomhearth said, standing before the lad with his hand on Hambeth’s shoulder while Archenix hovered behind. “You seem to have traded well.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Hambeth said. “Perhaps I have. Perhaps.”

“You are uncertain?” Archenix challenged, stepping forward.

“No deal is ever certain, My Chief, until all that has been traded has been wisely spent or wisely used.”

Tomhearth clapped Hambeth on the shoulder, for this was a wisdom uncle had taught nephew, and nephew had spoken it well.

Archenix, however, was not impressed, and Hambeth sensed behind his impatience and suspicion a growing fear.

“Do you know of flaws of which you have not spoken?” Archenix demanded.

“No, My Chief. The girls seem healthy and well-formed, even if dirty.”

“You believe the words of that liar Agarjj?”

“No, but I believe my own eyes.”

Tomhearth stepped away and Archenix took his place before Hambeth, a slight smile taking the place of his fear.

“You were a hero tonight, for Camberia,” he said. “And still a boy no less. Perhaps you might remain a hero. But I promise you, even now, while the men of Camberia are boasting to their wives of your trade, their

wives are asking back, of what use be these? And if these goods produce us no value, or harm us in some way, or they die tomorrow of some worm they caught from Agarjj, I will be blamed for wasting the treasures we taxed from your neighbors and your betters, and I will accept my share of the blame. But your shoulders will slump beneath the weight as well.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“And if you tricked us into paying for these wenches to satisfy your own earthiness, you will find yourself sleeping with the same wolves and Waxcaps that haunt Agarjj tonight.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

Tomhearth laughed. “He’s already found a home for his earthiness,” he said.

“Whose legs do you split?” Archenix demanded.

“He is as much a man in discretion as in his other dealings,” Tomhearth noted, “and he will not say, but I believe you had her whipped last spring, and she seems no worse for it.”

Archenix peered into Hambeth’s face, inquisitive, if not surprised. “You couldn’t do better,” he said simply.

Hambeth said nothing, but his mind continued to work through the strange matter of Grace.

“And now begins your new endeavor,” Archenix said. “I’ll send for Stotthearth shortly, to work on getting these girls properly set.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“And it will fall on you to explain to the next king’s emissary how came we by three slave girls and no grant to own them. Pray Agarjj spoke the truth at least on that score.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“And if the king takes them for himself, and fines us besides, you might as well join them for the walk to Topia.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“For the nonce, they’ll be your charges at all times, overnight and otherwise, as it be probably for the best they do not sleep within the walls until we receive a grant.”

“No, My Chief.”

“Pray we do, and soon.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“Come home as you may,” Tomhearth said, “and store them in the barn at the last stall, and secure them to the limits of your reckoning.”

“I will, Sir.”

“And I will not expect you in your bed this evening.”

“No, Sir.”

“They’ll need all the company you can provide tonight,” Archenix observed. “Wakeful and sober.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“And neither will our lady of Paxilex expect you in her bed tonight.”

“No, Sir.”

With another clap on his nephew’s shoulder, Tomhearth took his leave, Archenix following, and Hambeth strode slowly to the girls, still huddled, the leash by which Agarjj had led them looped over a hook in the wall above their heads.

Hambeth unwrapped the filthy cloth that held their keys, finding five, no less: a small pin, three shaped borers, and a thicker one of heavier metal. But he would not be releasing any of them now, except possibly from the bitewire. Should he wake with the girls gone on the morrow, he would go from hero to laughingstock. Or worse. He shivered as he imagined himself tied naked to the pole before the same men who cheered him tonight, their wives and children besides, while Archenix calmly asked, over and over, “Where did you hide the slave girls, Hambeth?” and he answering over and over, “I do not know, My Chief, they were gone when I awoke!” with the whip landing each time after he spoke.

Hambeth rewrapped the keys, stuffed them into his breast pocket and stepped up to the girls, and they all stared back from the place where they huddled on the earthen floor, one with a swollen eye, one with two vacant eyes, and the third, the one who had made her marks in the dirt, looking straight at him, like an equal.

“Well met,” he said, dropping to his knees before them, hoping they might prove Agarjj a liar in this way as well and speak the tongue of Avenlou, at least passably.

But all stared back at him speechless, dark eyes and faces wiped mostly clean of dirt, torsos filthy and streaked with gore, the bitewire still drawing fresh blood here and there.

“Speak any of you Avenian?” he asked.

They continued to look, and he looked back, into their eyes, and saw that they were indeed beautiful, with dark lashes and the slanted, almond-shaped eyes of cats. Like Grace.

“I am Hambeth.”

Nothing. No response. Perhaps all three had gone mad, not just the one girl who stared at distant things.

He reached out, touching the arm of the girl who had made marks in the dirt with her toe.

She looked at him, expressionless.

“Hambeth,” he said, pointing to himself.

“Oleander,” she said.

“Oleander? Is that the name Agarjj gave you?”

She stared at him, so he touched the swollen-eyed girls’ arm and looked at her, and she looked away, to Oleander.

Oleander spoke quickly, in what Hambeth knew to be Paxil, the language of Paxilex, addressing her partners, looking into one girl’s eyes, then the other, and they spoke back to her, and Hambeth listened to their voices with a small relief. At least they could talk in some language. Even if they were discussing the best way to kill him and escape, the dirt and Agarjj’s presence had not rendered them dumb.

“Hyacinth,” the girl with the swollen eye said.

“Who struck you, Hyacinth?” Hambeth asked, knowing his words meant nothing to her. She grimaced at him – almost a smile – and he smiled back. These three girls before him were slaves, they were property, and a few days ago, they numbered themselves among Avenlou’s mortal enemies. But these were just three girls, too, frightened and tormented and weary, and Hambeth felt a deep sorrow for them and felt no need to add to their suffering. Perhaps it was Grace that made him see these three as something other than captive foes.

Hambeth turned last to the girl, with the staring eyes.

“Hambeth,” he said.

“Lilac,” she replied, and she laughed, strangely and disconcertingly.

“Oleander,” he said, looking into each girl’s eyes and repeating their names to commit them to memory, as he sometimes did with unfamiliar trading partners. “Hyacinth. Lilac.”

The girls offered a slight nod, or raised their chins as he said their names, and then all looked beyond his shoulder.

“Hambeth, you fool!” exclaimed a male voice from the door of the hall. “What have you done?”

Chapter X: Stott Brings Sustenance

Hambeth turned to find Stott storming through the building, his voice angry, his mouth in a broad grin.

“You should have attended,” Hambeth said.

“I had better things to do than ogle filthy girls.”

“Well, come look at seven hundred fifty worth of vanders.”

“You paid the asking price then?” Stott inquired mockingly.

“Yes, and a bargain it was,” Hambeth joked. “The same price as bathed girls marched all the way to the Greater Vandals.”

Stott stopped beside Hambeth, dropped his bag, which rang out with a burden of assorted metals and other things, and knelt to regard the captives.

“Paxilex, to be sure,” he said. “Smell just as bad, but they may be a little cleaner than their king.”

Hambeth laughed. “Be grateful they can’t understand you. Agarjj says they killed a man.”

“I doubt they even killed a duck,” Stott said, and he reached out and took the toe writing girl’s left hand in both of his, squeezing her wrist and forearm, bending her fingers one by one while she watched, impassively.

“These girls are no warriors,” he said, releasing her.

“Agarjj said they were,” Hambeth said, “but none of his words should be confused with truth.”

“What are you going to make of them?” Stott inquired.

“Whether or not they can kill,” Hambeth replied, “they can certainly lift and push and draw, like any other woman. Uncle Tomhearth wants one to work our next hectare.”

“The men speak of other uses,” Stott sneered.

“I’m sure they do,” Hambeth said. “What say the wives?”

“I did not poll them, but I imagine some might like occasional relief from their sires’ attentions.”

“What say the men, then?” Hambeth asked.

“Oh, they’re talking tonight,” Stott laughed. “But mostly on just the auction. They say Agarjj called you the greatest trader in all of Avenlou.”

“He did that,” Hambeth acknowledged.

“Some men agree, and some men suspect something else.”

“Tell me of the second sort.”

“They suspect you have gained soiled knowledge, and used it in a ruse.”

Hambeth laughed nervously. “Soiled knowledge?”

“You have been told things you shouldn’t have been told, and only by that favor were you able to conduct the ruse of facing down the pirate.”

“And from whom would I gain such knowledge?”

“Someone else of Paxilex.”

“Now I am in league with our enemies?”

“I didn’t say that, nor did anyone. But in league with one of that nation.”

“Who then?”

“The witch of Paxilex,” Stott said.

“I do not speak to witches, of Paxilex or anywhere else.”

“You know of whom I speak.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You don’t know the Paxilex widow they call Grace? The one you met at my shop a spring ago?”

“Yes, her name is familiar,” Hambeth said.

“It is said tonight that more than her name is familiar to you,” Stott said.

Hambeth looked back at the girls, wondering still if they understood any of this.

“So it is true,” Stott said.

“If you wish merely the confirmation of idle gossip, then it is not true,” Hambeth said. “If you want my answer as a friend . . . it is not false.”

“And you could not tell me before now?”

“You never asked,” Hambeth said.

“When do you couple?” Stott asked.

“When it is convenient for her.”

“Does she speak ill of me?”

Hambeth laughed. “She speaks ill of no one. Nor does she speak much at all.”

“Unless moans and grunts be speech,” Stott quipped. “I’m sure you two make the ruckus of two drunk aurochs.”

“Have it as you will,” Hambeth said. “That is all I shall say on the matter, and I would thank you to keep even that little to yourself.”

“Very well,” Stott said. “But I wonder what other secrets you keep from me.”

“That is the one,” Hambeth said. “Kept because you never asked, for she has not sworn me to discretion.”

“Fair enough. But you still keep a secret. How did you know to bid 200, if Grace did not learn their secret and pass it to you?”

Hambeth pointed to Oleander. “This one, who calls herself Oleander. She made marks in the dirt with her toe while Agarjj babbled and lied.”

“And what marks did she make that you could read?”

“I can read.”

“You could read all that she wrote, of the price to bid, and the way to bid, and how to face down a pirate of the seas?”

“She wrote no such thing,” Hambeth said, and he drew out one of Agarjj’s keys from the pocket over his heart, and scratched in the earth a “C” and another “C” beside it.

Hambeth watched Oleander’s face as she looked down at the marks, and she looked at him, then she looked away, over his head, and smiled almost imperceptibly.

“How knew she a farm boy would understand?” Stott asked.

“She didn’t, I don’t think. But she heard me banter with Agarjj and saw a chance. May the gods save me if she knew the words, though.”

“You spoke ill of them, did you not?”

“Quite ill. Skinned badgers. And more. But it was all in trade. All in trade.”

“So this one,” Stott said, gesturing toward Oleander. “You must think this clear. Either she was making idle marks with her foot, and you found fortune in them by accident . . . or she knew – she knew – by what price she would be freed of Agarjj’s hand and given into yours.”

“It could be either way.”

“And if it was the latter, then how came she by that knowledge?”

“I can’t declare.”

“And why would she pass it on to you? Why would she wish for sale here instead of Greater Vandals?”

“She prefers our air,” Hambeth ventured.

“It’s a shame they cannot speak our way,” Stott lamented, “if indeed they can’t.”

“They will learn our tongue by and by, and may yet share all they know and remember.”

“I suspect they already do,” Stott said, and his eye took on an evil cast. “I have a legion of tools in my shop that might teach them Avenian.”

“What mean you?”

“A girl can still lift and push and draw with four toes,” Stott said, staring into Oleander’s eyes.

If she understood him, she made no sign of it, staring back, then looking at Hambeth with another of her minor smiles.

“You cannot steal a girl’s toe for not knowing a foreign tongue,” Hambeth said.

“That would not be necessary,” Stott countered, and he reached out and took Oleander’s smallest toe between his finger and thumb. She looked down, watching with detachment, otherwise still. “Begin the pinch and ask her an Avenian question plain, and chances are she’ll learn our language before the pinch matures.”

“You jest,” Hambeth said, speaking clearly and with purpose. If the girls did indeed understand Avenian, he didn’t want them to believe he could abide such a plan. Nor did he believe Stott’s plan possessed any merit.

Stott gave the toe a twist, eyeing the girl. She flinched not at all. With all she had been through, Hambeth thought, she probably couldn’t feel it.

“It’s late,” Hambeth said. “Do whatever Archenix commissioned, and we’ll speak more of these girls and their tongues on the morrow.”

“I will not be conducting Archenix’s commission tonight,” Stott said.

“Well then why did you show?”

“Rumor is the greatest trader in all of Avenlou was here, and I wished to see him.”

“If you find him, send him to me so I can learn.”

“But no, I have business here, just not all of it at once.”

“What then tonight?”

“Measurements only, and what restraints I could assemble on the by and by.”

“They are somewhat secured, if you haven’t noticed,” Hambeth said.

“Yes, with Agarjj’s chains and wire,” Stott countered. “Surely he gave them all keys, and as soon as you sleep, they’ll release themselves and join him on Fifth Pass, and when they reach Greater Vandals, they’ll feast on 200 vanders and offer a toast to the greatest trader in all of Avenlou.”

“I see no keys in their hands,” Hambeth said curtly. Stott’s words stung, because they assumed a naïvété on his part, and because they might be true.

“Have you looked beneath their tongues?” Stott asked.

“Nay.”

“Have you probed either chamber, front or back?”

“I have not,” Hambeth replied with a growing realization of the sorts of things he might have to do with three slave girls who were, for now, his charges.

“Has anyone else taken a look at their nether wares?”

“Not that I know. Agarjj brought them here and set them down. But I’m sure they have the same parts as females everywhere.”

“I believe I know what they hide in their holes,” Stott said, looking from the girl’s eyes to their middles, front openings hidden by thick pubic hair. “A full set of keys in each breeding slot, and an army’s worth of war goods up their back chambers.”

“Yes, if the Paxilex army all be as tall as your thumb, I’m sure they are wishing they still had these girls to squat out swords and shields and chariots.”

“If you wake with a knife in your heart and three girls gone, don’t blame me.”

“So I will let you bind them,” Hambeth said. “Have at.”

Stott drew from his sack nothing of iron, instead a bag of thick cotton, so doused with grease it was almost transparent, revealing within a wheel of cheese, a broiled shank, shards of bread with the butter clinging. He reached for the bread first, broke and handed a fist each to the girls. Each touched it with their free left hands, smelled it, sampled it with their tongues, bit and chewed.

“How came you by all that?” Hambeth asked.

“Avelina and her daughters pressed it upon me by the door.”

“And you did not eat it all yourself? Has your heart turned golden?”

“I’ve already eaten,” Stott replied.

“Why should Avelina and her brood care about the hunger of these three?”

“She did, though, and her eyes were wet, and she said she would want the same for her girls should they fall into Paxilex hands.”

“Her pair will not fall into Paxilex hands unless they enlist,” Hambeth noted. “Nor even then, for they shall either be sent home or put to the rear to wrap men’s wounds.”

“Or put to the rear to wrap something else of men,” Stott muttered. “Like these three most likely, army whores who couldn’t run from battle as quickly as their brothers.”

Hambeth looked at the girls, searching for a spark of rage, the flared nostrils of fury, the bright eyes of one plotting revenge. He found nothing.

“Surely, if they know our tongue, to hear you talk is worse than losing a toe. Open your mouth again and they’ll all three plead in perfect Avenian for you to be struck mute.”

Stott withdrew the shank from its bag and offered it first to Lilac. Her distant eyes seemed able to focus on that, and she raised her right hand carefully, jangling the chain that fastened it to the other two girls, and reached for the meat while she held the bread in her lap with her left hand.

She sighed with what Hambeth took to be pleasure, and dug her teeth deeply in before she handed it to Hyacinth for a bite. Hambeth watched Hyacinth’s mouth work, every movement of her jaw closing and opening her swollen eye, and he felt immensely sorry for her, staring at her injury until he noticed she was staring back with her unmolested eye, and he looked away.

“I wonder when last Agarjj fed them?” Stott queried.

“He may never have, in order to maintain his own girthy shape,” Hambeth said. “He was an oval man.”

Hyacinth gave the shank to Oleander, and Oleander bit and gave the mostly fleshless bone back to Stott.

“Polite,” he said, “with all the manners of what passes for the upper born in Paxilex. They are not warriors, and they might yet be something

else entirely.”

“They can breathe, they can eat, they can lift and labor,” Hambeth said simply, trying with a steady voice to hide his growing fear that acquiring these girls would be, at best, tangled, and at worst, disastrous.

“Two hundred vanders is no idle sum,” Stott observed, “cheaper than the opening offer or no. How will you make it back?”

“Two hundred vanders will buy two hundred days of a healthy man’s labor, will it not?”

“Yes, so they say.”

“And I would say these girls are each half a healthy man, agreed?”

“Fair enough.”

“So, four hundred days of labor and they have paid all their price. If each girl can work well for one hundred thirty some days, all the rest of her work is of profit to Camberia.”

“Have you accounted for food, and their fetters and housing?”

“Their first day’s food came free,” Hambeth said, pointing to the greasy bag and the cheese wheel therein. In fact, he had worked out most of the math and knew it would take well over four hundred days to earn back their cost, but saw no need to delve into the fine points with Stott.

“They are due the wheel.”

Stott pulled out the cheese and a dull knife and cut small hunks of it for each girl.

“You are a stingy board,” Hambeth complained.

“If Agarjj starved them for more than a day, their bellies have all grown as small as that army waiting for its wares,” Stott said. “Give them too much and it will all come up, and you’ll have another layer of filth to wipe.”

“Leave the balance of the food with me, and I’ll have breakfast for them, and sustenance enough for their first two days in Camberia, at no cost.”

“And what will they drink?”

“Water is good enough for them, I’m sure,” Hambeth replied.

Stott reached into his satchel for a water bag.

All the girls looked at the bag, and Hambeth recognized the eyes of deep, unspoken thirst.

And yet, here again was unselfish politeness. After Lilac accepted the unstoppered bag from Stott, she took but a single swallow before she

gave it to Oleander, and Oleander did the same for Hyacinth, who handed it to Lilac again, the bag moving quickly from one to the next until it was drained dry.

“Did Agarjj not even allow them drink?” Hambeth asked.

“It is water from the stream, collected this morning,” Stott said.

“The taste is necessary, even for one already full.”

“This is your gift?” Hambeth asked.

“Yes, consider it so.”

“And what other gifts will you offer?” Hambeth asked cautiously.

How long it took these girls to recover their purchase price depended in large part on Stott’s fees.

“Archenix and I are not settled yet,” Stott said.

“Where sticks the parley?”

“There is no parley to stick. Archenix has no fathoming.”

“No fathoming?”

“None. He knows nothing of smithing.”

“What says he?”

“Make these things as you see fit, Stotthearth,” Stott said, mocking Archenix’s dry tone. “And you will be rewarded.”

“What do you see fit to make?” Hambeth asked. “Is it all contained in your bag there?”

“Nay, not nearly. There are some things here, but Archenix wishes to outfit them like the girls who serve in the palaces of Topia, and I have none of it.”

Hambeth looked at the girls, who returned his gaze with two and a half pairs of bright, alert eyes, and his stomach churned with the onset of illness.

Chapter XI: Unwinding

Hambeth was guilty, he now knew without doubt, of a grievous error. He was a trader, and today he’d been seduced by the marks of a girl’s toe to trade his best. Beyond that, he’d thought but little, and it seemed that after eighteen springs he was about to be undone.

“Stotthearth,” Hambeth said, staring into his friend’s eyes, “you see before you the greatest fool in Avenlou.”

“You have fallen quickly from the pirate’s assessment,” Stott replied.

“At this moment, if I could have failed with him, and before all of Camberia, I would have done so gladly in place of holding these three at the end of a chain.”

“What gives you pause?”

“What doesn’t give me pause?” Hambeth said. “I saw a chance to win a deal. That is all. I am no slaver, but Tomhearth and Archenix have turned me into one since supertime, and I am asea.”

Stott gestured toward the girls. “Was their husbandry not discussed before you bargained with Agarjj?”

“Briefly,” Hambeth said, “but there was little time. Uncle had said he wanted a girl to work a new hectare, so I told him I might know a winning price for three girls, and we parleyed with Archenix until our chief agreed to make up the difference for the two we did not need, and the girls were bought, and here we all sit.”

“Which one will you keep?” Stott asked, regarding the three girls in turn.

Hambeth laughed. “Even that I do not know. They seem equally well-matched.”

“Yes, all equally weak, equally slight, and equally hungry.”

“We did not buy horses.”

“Perhaps you should have.”

“There is no wisdom in a horse’s labor,” Hambeth argued.

“There will be no wisdom in the labor of these three either,” Stott countered, “until they speak a few words of Avenian.”

“They can learn Avenian. A horse cannot.”

“So after a year of tutoring, they will all be fit to work the fields of Camberia,” Stott said.

“I need something other than mockery from you.”

“I do not mock,” Stott said. “I amuse.”

“Then amuse me some other way.”

“Hambeth, you have taken a grave risk, but you are not finished yet,” Stott said in his most sober tone, reminding Hambeth of the reason for their deep friendship and their mutual admiration. Behind his bluster and his irreverence lay a man as shrewd in business as Hambeth.

“Advise me then,” Hambeth said.

“Advise yourself,” Stott said. “I am even less a slaver than you. But sound out your ideas and I may nod or shake.”

Hambeth looked at the girls, looked away, subdued his panic and thought through in order the first things that must be done.

“Very well,” Hambeth said. “Show me what you bring tonight beyond food.”

Stott reached into his satchel and pulled out a long coil of iron chain, a set of nails and a pair of heavy tongs.

“This is the best I can offer hurried,” he said. “Wrap the chain tight around each ankle, and use the tongs to bend the nail through the links.”

“So now I am become a slaver and a smith in one evening?”

“If you wish to become a slaver, you—”

“I do not wish to become a slaver.”

“The decision has been made for you, it seems. You are a slaver now, meaning you must also be smith, and provisioner, and doctor, and protector, and—”

“Very well, proceed.”

Stott picked up the tongs, the chain and a nail, moving toward Oleander on his knees.

Her eyes flickered with alarm, but she did not shrink back, and Hambeth thought she must be very brave, even if she were no warrior.

Stott wrapped the end of the chain around the girl’s ankle, put the nail through the two links, looked into Oleander’s face and took her left hand, pressing her fingers down on the nail. She understood and held it in place and, while her comrades watched, Stott picked up the tongs with both hands and set its two ends at either end of the nail, grunting as he bowed it into a tight loop that secured her but did not pinch.

“Do it again like this, five more times, when you get them to their bedding,” Stott said. “And secure each foot no more than a handwith’s apart, so even if they slip all their other chains, they’ll do no walking while you sleep.”

“I will not sleep,” Hambeth said.

“Nor do I advise it,” Stott agreed. “And on the morrow, if you and they are still alive and together, use the tongs to loosen the nails, so they may walk again.”

“I will, and we shall walk anon to you,” Hambeth promised.

“Tomorrow’s business will be with both myself and Wriheart,” Stott said, referring to the village’s most ancient carpenter, a man of great skill but dark temper, who lent his hand to but little of the new projects near the square, but offered advice when it was requested properly.

“What will Wriheart do?”

“He has promised me braces,” Stott replied.

“I know nothing of this.”

“There will be no cost,” Stott said. “I am calling in a favor.”

“But to what end a brace?”

“To hold, while I perform certain labors upon them,” Stott said. “I will not have them free for it, nor would they wish it.”

A fresh tumble of unease coursed through Hambeth’s mind, but he set it aside and held out his hand for a dozen of the smith’s rough nails.

“Some extras,” Stott explained, “should you fail with the tongs once or five times.”

“Thank you,” Hambeth said, stuffing the nails in his pocket beside the keys, looping the tongs into his belt. “Now, what advise you with regards to the bitewire?”

“It’s drawn a lot of blood,” Stott observed.

“That is not advisement.”

“What shall I say then?”

“I wish it removed,” Hambeth said. “Agarjj said they wore it because they knew war. You yourself said that was another of his lies. And I take no pleasure in tormenting girls of mere labor.”

“If that pirate’s keys work, free them,” Stott agreed, “but I suspect he gave you hairpins and knitting pegs, and the true keys lie between their legs.”

Hambeth drew out his knife first, to cut the ropes that joined each girl to the next by her wire, then reached into his breast pocket and drew out all Agarjj’s keys, selecting the borer that had been cast into the shape of a star, matching it to the bitewire screws.

The screws and their housing lay beside each girl’s left breast, and when Hambeth reached first for Oleander, she raised her arm and held still to be freed, her mouth set tight.

The key proved true, three turns of it opening the wire.

Oleander’s first moments of liberation from the cruelest of her restraints were not joyous, however. The girl did not cry out, but she bit her

lip and squeaked, eyes wide with pain, as Hambeth unwound the line from above and beneath her breasts, fresh blood oozing where the wire's pricks had burrowed.

"Perhaps you should leave the other two bound," Stott suggested.

Hambeth ignored him, turning to Lilac, who raised her arm and set her jaw. Three turns and she was freed too, the wire unwinding, she panting out what Hambeth suspected was a breathy prayer to whatever god in Paxilex eased female suffering.

Next came Hyacinth, who bore her unwrapping the most stoically, grimacing but making no noise, even as a fresh rivulet of blood ran from beneath her left breast, across older blood and dirt, to the earthen floor.

Hambeth stood, wrapped up the wire and set it beside Stott.

"I'll not be needing this," he said, "so now it belongs to you, but only if you swear never to apply it to any other girl's flesh, ever."

"I'll melt it on the morrow, except for the screws and housing," Stott said. "That is decent work. But the rest of it goes to the furnace. I'll need all the iron I can scrape together."

"What did Archenix ask of you, precisely?"

"These girls will be admirably accoutered, if our chief gets his way," Stott said. "Hobbles, hogties, tethers, leashes, harnesses, handfasts, sleep bindings, a branding iron, cart fixtures, goads."

Hambeth struggled to keep up with the list and what it all meant.

"And not just for these three," Stott added.

"What mean you?"

"Should we get a grant, we'll convert some of our own to property."

"What mean you?" Hambeth said again.

"Ask Archenix," Stott replied dismissively. "But he said if I bind these three well, and if we receive a grant from the king, there will be more to secure."

"Who?"

"He did not say."

"When?"

"He did not say."

"How many?"

"Even now, tonight, they have begun carving ten berths into the old armory."

“Ten?” Hambeth said. “For ten girls?”

“For ten slaves. He did not list their genders.”

Hambeth thought of the words of Grace, felt another wave of discomfort at his core, and returned his mind to the matter at hand.

“Shall we take our leave then?”

“Not until I have measured,” Stott said.

Stott reached behind his head, bound his hair in a knot, then pulled a length of twine from his satchel, marked with black charcoal at fractions of a cubit, and knelt before the girls. Despite his strength and the indifference of his words, he was surprisingly gentle with them, looking into each girl’s eyes as if asking permission before he took their hands in his to measure their wrists, holding their feet to wrap the twine around their ankles, then finally passing it around each neck. He wrote nothing down, but blinked slowly after each step, as if he had to close his eyes to commit the girl’s numbers to memory. Surely they knew what this was for, Hambeth thought, and yet they complied without a hint of resistance. Perhaps they had always been slaves, stolen by Agarjj a little further down the mountain from some other owner who bound them, the two hundred vanders he received for them well worth a few hours’ detour from his regular malfeasance.

Done, Stott turned to Hambeth and gave him the same clap on the back the other men of Camberia had rewarded him with that evening.

“On your way then, greatest trader of Avenlou,” he said. “And if you are still alive in the morning, and these girls are still in your possession, come as early as you may, and I will begin my commission.”

“You have not begun it yet?”

“No,” he said. “The chain and the nails and the counsel are my courtesy, something I would do for no other man.”

Hambeth, touched as he was by Stott’s generosity, still lacked answer to that most important of his questions.

“Thank you, Stotthearth, thank you,” he said. “But . . . would you guess at a price at least, so I can remove that uncertainty from my evening’s disquiet?”

“The going rate, nothing more, nothing less,” Stott said. “I will spend four days of every seven on this, and it will amount to a vander a day, plus the price of metal, so I will say five vanders for every seventh day, for as long as it takes to satisfy Archenix.”

“How long will it take to satisfy him?”

“You must speak to Archenix of that,” Stott said. “But remember, you shall have more say in it than I, and now you bring a slaver’s knowledge to the matter.”

“I am no slaver.”

“I thought we had agreed on that score. You became one when Agarjj accepted your bid.”

“So be it.”

Stott rose, picked up the bloody wire and eased it carefully into his satchel, wincing when the little burrs stung his own fingers.

“One more thing,” Stott said, measuring his words.

“Yes?”

“A discount is possible.”

“For what consideration?”

“Their service,” Stott replied, gesturing toward the girls.

“They are no warriors, as you yourself said,” Hambeth noted. “But they can probably bend a line of tin here and there.”

“They can feed the fire as well as I can,” Stott said. “They can fetch water and hold what I bend.”

Stott paused before he added a single word: “And . . .”

“And?” Hambeth inquired.

“And . . . they can hold me as well.”

“Ah,” Hambeth said, understanding now. “You would trust your member to the place between a Paxilex girl’s legs?”

“No, but my member seems to feel otherwise,” Stott said, and Hambeth – too discomfited himself by worry to lust – guessed the smith was bulging under the influence of the girls’ bare charms, dirty and ruined as they were, and he was glad his friend’s belt was wide and his tunic long. The slaves needed not to see that, and he prayed again they could not speak Avenian.

But, truly, Hambeth was not certain how to manage this question, for a friend, much less for the other men of Camberia. If the girls would not be used in that way, if they resisted and fought and held closed their legs, that would be one thing. If they would be used, however, but only to gain the mortal advantage over a male body that such intimacy afforded, Hambeth was again at dire risk. He imagined a man of Archenix’s council, slain or grievously wounded by a girl he’d sought pleasure from, and who’d

proved to be a warrior after all. Hambeth would be blamed, unless he made clear the risk to all comers. Perhaps even then. But he must warn regardless.

“It has been said that one of these has slain,” Hambeth decided he would announce to any solicitor of the carnal. “Take her at your own risk, and if you find yourself deceased by her affections, send not your wife after me.”

“And besides,” Stott added, interrupting Hambeth’s reflection, “you trust yours to one of them, and you seem no worse for wear.”

“Yes, but she never killed a man,” Hambeth said. “Not even in the imaginings of Agarjj.”

“Is her pleasure sweet?” Stott asked.

“Altogether,” Hambeth said. He paused. “How would you value that? Their nether delights?”

“What would you ask?”

Hambeth laughed. “I know naught of any of this. But tell me then. By how much would you discount your services, if you had such permissions and she yielded to you?”

“By half a day.”

“Half a vander?”

“Yes, or the same value in iron.”

“Agarjj said they were unused,” Hambeth noted.

“Do you believe him?” Stott inquired, and he seemed but slightly skeptical, Hambeth thought. Beneath the grime might lie, conceivably, innocence. There was certainly politeness there.

“I have nothing to go on,” Hambeth said. “He was a liar and a cheat, and these girls speak not a word.”

“Half a vander,” Stott repeated. “And I will value at half a vander a day’s work from each. But Archenix may want nothing more from them than to stand tethered by the gate, so all who pass in and out will see that Camberia owns more than aurochs.”

“The pride of Archenix may yet be dashed, should the king refuse to issue a grant.”

“I’ve heard grants are easy to come by now,” Stott said.

“I heard the same,” Hambeth said. “But from Agarjj.”

“If any man can do this,” Stott said, rising to his feet and picking up his satchel, “it is Hambeth.”

“Well met, Stott,” Hambeth said. “Look for me at dawn.”

“Well met,” Stott said, pushing the door to the hall closed, departing into the night.

Hambeth stood, picked up the bag with its remaining food, pulled the leash off the hook, and looked at the girls, who all stared back at him, like three huddled crows, except that they were as crows without wings, and without beaks, and with eyes that stared, and round breasts that swung when they shifted uncomfortably on their round bare bottoms.

“Rise,” Hambeth said, holding out his hand and lifting it so they would learn the word.

The girls grunted, gasped with the pain of loosening muscles, and clambered slowly, awkwardly to their feet, chains ringing out.

Holding Agarjj’s leash in his hand together with Stott’s chain for their ankles, which for now was fastened only to the single foot of Oleander, he led the girls through the hall, blowing out the remaining tapers, saving for last the one by the door, exiting with the girls behind him into the darkness of the village, already easing into slumber.

Chapter XII: Through the Gate and into Night

They walked between the buildings of Camberia and down to the gate, where a gaggle of men had gathered as they did often enough on fair nights.

“Two hundred vanders!” someone shouted, prompting laughter from the other men.

“Are you off to find that cheating pirate and get another half of your money back, Hambeth?” another asked.

“No,” Hambeth replied, not wanting to talk here, wishing he was not dragging three girls behind him. “I believe the trade was fair.”

“Have they been fed and watered?” another asked.

Hambeth stopped at the edge of the evening’s fire, built on the ground and licking the air, and he looked at the girls. They looked back at him, looked at the men, and Hambeth sensed nervousness. They had no idea what the men were saying, he assumed. They could be discussing rape, or murder, or some other cruelty, for all the girls knew.

“Avelina and her girls prepared food, and passed it through by way of Stottheath,” Hambeth replied. “They have eaten well.”

“Would they like a little mead?” asked Bitterhearth, who would be keeping the gate until dawn and probably shouldn’t be handling spirits.

“They might,” Hambeth said. “They have had water so far, and it agreed with them.”

Bitterhearth stepped up, a great clay mug in his hand, stopping just out of reach of the girls.

“Is it true they killed a man?” he asked.

“Agarjj said they did,” Hambeth replied. “But Agarjj was a liar, and I don’t see murder in their eyes.”

“I’ll stay safe either way,” Bitterhearth said, and he handed the mug to Hambeth. “You do the honors.”

“Mead,” Hambeth said to Oleander.

“Mead,” she replied.

He held out the mug to her, and she reached first with her left hand, then drew up her chained right hand, the other girls moving closer to slacken her restraint, and she cradled the vessel and raised it to her lips, tilting it back while the men guffawed.

“She’ll drain it, Bitter, and she’ll have all your mead, and you’ll have to watch the gate sober all night,” someone joked.

But Oleander, true to her ways, took a judicious sip, swallowed and smiled, prompting another round of mirth. She handed it next to Lilac, and it went from Lilac to Hyacinth, each smiling alike, Hyacinth’s swollen eye shutting as she grinned and passed the mug back to Oleander for another draught.

As they had with Stott’s water, the girls continued taking turns with the mead until it was gone, the men now in an uproar over the thirst of Paxilexian slaves and, in particular, the thirst of these three girls.

“Now we know what swelled that girl’s eye shut,” shouted a man who’d no doubt had his own share of drink this evening. “She was swilling every man’s beer she met, and one lost his patience.”

“Get these girls a tub of mead, and that will wash them clean and slake their thirst both,” another said.

“And after they bathe, we’ll sell the wash as the best liquor brewed in Paxilex.”

The men seemed eager to continue laughing at the girl’s expense until the moon had wheeled past the eastern mountain peaks, but Hambeth had heard enough, and he handed the empty mug back to Bitterhearth with

a quiet thanks and turned to look at the girls with an eyebrow raised, not wanting to pull on their chains if he didn't have to, especially not where doing so might provoke another outburst.

Oleander understood, stepping forward, the other girls following her slowly, haltingly, every step checked by their restraints.

Hambeth was almost at the gate in the wall when another question rang out, this one from an uncertain source.

“Hambeth, how much for a day's use?”

“A vander,” Hambeth blurted, starting high as he always did, not unlike Agarjj in that respect.

Hambeth expected more laughter, flavored with derision and contempt this time, but to a man, the answer seemed satisfactory, no voice rising against the amount.

“Hambeth,” another man spake.

Hambeth stopped and turned.

“Would that include any use?”

“We shall see,” Hambeth said, proceeding through the gate.

“He's treated himself to enough Paxilexian favors to know that value,” someone muttered, to more laughter, and Hambeth scowled into the darkness beyond the wall, for what he thought was known by but two this morning was known to all of Camberia tonight.

Outside the village proper, the only light came from a half-waxed moon, the only sound a subdued mix of rattling chains and the hidden mouths of the wood and field.

Clear of distraction, Hambeth was able to dedicate his mind clearly to what lay before him, and he found much worthy of fretting, as well as signs of the gods' favor.

Could the girls draw a vander a day each?

Hambeth had named that amount publicly, and none had disputed it, raising the possibility the girls' sales price might be made back in less than a season, well before the winter rains. If he could stick to that ask, and limit Stott's labors to only that which was necessary and not all that Archenix dreamed of, he might yet succeed.

But what of Grace? he asked himself, opening a new field of worry even as an older one seemed to be closing. She had seemed at peace with the acquisition of a single girl, bought to work a hectare and taken by Hambeth on nights he could not reach her. But what would a woman of

Paxilex think of her lover now, buying three chained, naked flowers from her own land, renting them out for whatever purposes his neighbors desired?

He looked back at the girls, shuffling slowly behind him, their faces plain, their minds unreadable, and he realized that a key to this new riddle, stronger than any of the iron keys that lay over his heart, slept tonight in a hovel not far from the lane.

If she would entertain him ever again – an outcome far from certain – he had a new engagement to propose to her, and their second endeavor together could be as public as their first partnership had become.

The moon was rich enough tonight to light his way to Grace's, and as he and the girls moved beyond the place where she dwelt, he looked toward the thicket with a sense of longing, for this was where he would have ventured tonight if he were not burdened. Had she hung her robe at the corner? Was she but half asleep now, waiting with a part of her slumbering mind for the sound of Hambeth's feet, Hambeth at the door, Hambeth breathing with the perpetual hungering for her front chamber's wet embrace? Or had she already heard of the evening's goings on, wiped a tear and bundled her robe into the corner, never again to be hung outside?

Amid the jangle of chains and the night sounds, Hambeth detected a new noise, barely a rustle, louder now and then, and he turned to find that the girls were speaking quietly to each other, in incomprehensible Paxil. They met his gaze and shut their mouths, and he guessed from that response that Agarjj must have forbidden talking, and knew he could as well, with a wave of his hand or a jerk of the chains. But he faced forward and kept walking, the girls resumed their whispered interchange, and he wished he could understand, for the sake of his neck as well as to know what words such girls spake, what they said to each other, what they thought of.

He paused at the edge of his uncle's farm and turned toward the girls again, and they fell silent.

He said nothing, but he pointed at the respectable home and the humble barn where, at least this night, they would be kept. The girls nodded and followed him across the field and to the barn's door, but they stopped at the entrance and began speaking with their full voices, with words that meant nothing.

Hambeth turned, puzzled, and Oleander spoke again, pointing to her middle, to the black triangle of hair that stood out against her gray,

moonlit skin.

Had the sun given its light, the girls would have seen Hambeth blush deep red, for he understood their meaning now and led them away from the barn, to the edge of a plot left fallow for the season.

Holding the ends of both chains, he stopped and looked away, listening as the girls spread their feet as wide as their hobbles allowed, dropped to their hams, and emptied three full bladders onto weed and soil, the hiss of urine competing for a time with the more distant noises of the night.

They did not stand as soon as they'd emptied, however, and Hambeth turned to find each girl stirring her left hands in the mud she'd made beneath herself, daubing it against the places where the bitewire had torn her flesh, taking the same cure common in Camberia.

Such mud must be left on for at least two fingers, or better yet overnight, and Hambeth determined at that moment that no bathing would occur before sleep. He would wash them in the morning and bring them fresh back to the village, hopefully to show to the town a new possession it could truly be proud of.

Done with their impromptu salve, the girls let Hambeth lead them into the barn, and to the last stall, where Tomhearth recommended they be stored overnight.

Hambeth felt his way through the darkness, found a flint and kindling to make a small fire for seeing.

Dropping the chains and the bag of food, trusting the girls would stay beside him, he struck off sparks three times before the pile caught and, with a little more tending and the drop of twigs, a rippling flame brought enough light to the barn that he could look up into the girl's faces, now streaked with both dirt and weariness.

He motioned them into the stall, long enough for them to lie head to toe, and wide enough to hold them sleeping side by side, and they ventured in past the flame and dropped in order, sighing with the relief of sitting as they had sighed with the relief of food and drink earlier.

Hambeth drew Stott's nails from his pocket, pulled the tongs off his belt, and crawled to Oleander's free foot, wrapping the chain around her ankle as Stott had done, positioning the nail and tapping Oleander's hand.

She held the nail in place as she had before, and Hambeth set to work with the tongs. No smith, he struggled to bend it, grunting with the

effort of putting the first bend in the iron, but thereafter finding the work easier, as if the metal saw no need of more resistance once its straightness was lost.

Lilac and Hyacinth were secured the same way, Hambeth ruining two nails but doing adequate work with the rest, and he found the chain long enough that the free end could be wrapped around a beam and secured with another nail.

Done, he stepped outside to urinate and returned to his charges, who were all on their backs now, necks chained together, ankles doubly secured, right hands bound one to the next, breath rising and falling in sleep or the ruse of sleep.

He set the tongs at the other end of the barn, extinguished the fire, and lay down before the entrance to the stall. Should the girls have keys or weapons hidden in their chambers, should they be intent on killing him and freeing themselves, and should they be so gifted with stealth they did not wake him, Hambeth knew he would not see the dawn, and he closed his eyes, content with that outcome, and soon he was as asleep as they.

Chapter XIII: Breakfast, and a Discovery

Thrice, by his count, Hambeth awoke in the night, once due to an aurochs' grunt, once because a girl tossed in her sleep and her chains rang out, and once because one of the females screamed with a dream fear.

On his fourth waking, the first beams of light had broken through the door and windows of the barn, and Hambeth looked first at his own form, saw that all his pieces were still attached and the handle of no knife emerged between his ribs or from his belly, and he turned to the girls, all three still there, all restraints still affixed, chests rising and falling with the breath of sleep, Oleander's free arm across her face, Lilac flat on her back with both arms at her hips, Hyacinth on her side, head on a spread of hay.

Hambeth almost laughed with relief, the warnings of Archenix and Stott for naught. He had survived his first night with these girls, and if he could survive one, he could survive many more, and soon the art of Stott would keep them secure, and they'd get their grant perhaps and could sleep within the village walls and Hambeth could return more or less to his common life.

Hambeth looked at them, wondering when they might wake. In this light, their forms were more visible enough, and his eyes followed their curves and lines, and he felt the heat of looking upon a nude Paxilex girl, his manhood firming up, morning a strange time for that, but all of this strange too.

He left the barn to urinate, waved at Tomhearth, who was already up and pretending to draw water at the well, but who had probably been awake there for an hour, waiting to catch a glimpse of his nephew.

Hambeth returned to the barn to start another fire, this one for breakfast and to ease the cool air.

“How slept you?” Tomhearth asked as the first sparks of the little blaze caught hold upon the earthen barn floor.

“I woke thrice,” Hambeth said, “each time returning to sleep.”

“A good omen,” Tomhearth observed, setting down a basket. “You may yet master this.”

“I did not seek it, Uncle,” Hambeth said. “I merely wanted to win in a trade with a pirate.” He gestured toward the girls. “All this is beyond my reckoning.”

“This is a trade with a long tail,” Tomhearth said. “As are all proper dealings with others’ souls.”

“Yes,” Hambeth agreed. “I am learning the same.”

Tomhearth stepped to the door of the barn and peeked in at the girls, still asleep and unstirring.

“I see you adjusted their irons but cleaned them not.”

“They made mud cures with their own water last night, for the pricks of the bitewire,” Hambeth said. “And I thought it best to let lay the salve.”

“Very well,” Tomhearth agreed, continuing to stare at the girls. Something rattled his interest, and he knelt, peering at Lilac, who had parted her legs in her sleep, the growing light exposing her female slit.

“Who ironed them there?” Tomhearth asked.

“Sir?” Hambeth inquired, following his uncle’s gaze.

Indeed, what looked to Hambeth like oddly-chosen jewelry hung at Lilac’s female opening. He leaned forward and found there not just adornment, but an array of functional links and rings, realizing with a ripping horror that her entrance had been chained shut. A pair of hoops had been passed through her inner lips, and from them two chains ran, joined,

and continued singly to a third ring set into the flesh at the lower corner of her vaginal mouth.

“You knew naught of this?” Tomhearth asked.

Hambeth felt his flesh grow hot with shame and dread. He hadn't looked. He hadn't wanted to look here, had no need to study this place on the girls' bodies, their bodies not fit for such study anyway.

“I have never seen nor heard of such a thing,” Hambeth said.

“And you did not think to inspect?”

“No, Uncle, I did not.”

“Are the other two fixed likewise?”

Hambeth, still hesitant in certain matters, forced himself to crawl into the stall, press against the wall and crouch beside Oleander, reaching out with deep misgivings toward her middle, toward the vulva hidden between a pair of tightly closed thighs.

As soon as his fingers grazed the black fur of her sex, she stirred and cried out, “Aahh!” and Hambeth drew back his hand but remained beside her.

Oleander opened her eyes, raised her free hand, tried to sit up, tried to draw up her legs as if to rise and run, but she was bound too securely to do anything but drop her head back to the earth and look at Hambeth while she panted with fear and confusion. Hambeth looked at her two neighbors, saw that they were waking and already staring at him as well, and he smiled because he didn't know what other countenance to bear.

He turned his eyes back to Oleander, and she stared up at him. She no longer seemed as frightened, merely bewildered now, and Hambeth imagined she had forgotten all the details of the previous day and had no idea where she was or who Hambeth was.

“Hambeth,” he said, looking at Oleander, then at the other girls.

Oleander's memories seemed to be restoring, and she offered him that same half-smile she had granted last night. She did not say “Oleander,” though. She merely looked.

Remembering the wordless conversation of gestures from the night before, he attempted to explain himself by pointing to his own middle, squatting with his legs spread.

“I need to see between your legs,” he said, and he reached out toward Oleander's hair but did not this time quite touch it.

She seemed to know immediately what he meant. Surely she knew this was an important matter, and was simply waiting to be asked.

She raised her knees, drawing tight her chains, spreading her thighs and rising up on her elbows to look, as if wishing to see it herself.

Hambeth studied her opening, confirmed that she bore the same rings and chains as Lilac, and stood, sidling to the other edge of the stall to inspect Hyacinth, who raised her legs with understanding, Hambeth confirming with a quick look that the sexes of all three were identically bound.

“A trick of Agarjj?” Hambeth asked Tomhearth, mystified.

“Nay, such a trick is well beyond his skill, nor worth his times besides, and it looks as if they have long worn this,” Tomhearth said. “But either way, you should have known.”

“I should have,” Hambeth conceded, warring with his shame. “But we bought them for labor, did we not? The state of their nethers is of no consequence.”

“What is a day of their service worth, in your mind?”

“I said a vander last night to some of the men at the gate,” Hambeth recalled, “and none disputed.”

“You started high,” Tomhearth said, “unless—”

“I did,” Hambeth agreed, wavering between complete despair and the recurring hope that he could even now redeem himself in his uncle’s eyes. “I trust—”

“You started high,” Tomhearth said again, “unless these girls hide in their scrawny limbs the strength of men.”

“I don’t believe they do.”

“Or we can convert them to other uses.”

“Yes, Uncle, that has come up. A half a vander for common labor, a full for the rest?”

“A vander a day, if you can free them from what their last master did. Otherwise, a vander is more than even Avenlou’s greatest trader would earn for a day’s use of any of them, or even all three together.”

“I believe Stotthearth can fix this,” Hambeth said hopefully, knowing that his friend would likely want money for that service, and unless he worked gently, they would need days to recover. Or weeks.

“You knew this all along, Nephew.”

Hambeth looked at his uncle, who was smiling and nodding, the two of them become parties to a small lie that, for now, might salvage Hambeth's standing a little longer.

"Yes, Uncle, yes," Hambeth said with a quick shock of relief. "Who would ever pay full price for a girl bearing those?"

"True."

"But Agarjj seemed to be speaking the truth on that point," Hambeth said. "He claimed they'd never been ravaged, and these bindings prove it."

"You'll see Stotthearth this morning?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Very good," Tomhearth said. "But your first business is back in the field. Take these poor girls out to empty, they look distraught."

Hambeth retrieved the tongs, freed the girls' feet after some effort while they waited patiently, if a little tensely, and he led them by the neck back into the field, looking away while they relieved themselves and spoke quietly to each other in foreign whispers that Hambeth wished again he could understand.

Hambeth brought the girls back into the barn, where Tomhearth was adding to the fire he'd started, topping it with a cooking iron and preparing to warm a meal on it. Hambeth picked up the bag of Stott's provisions, drew out bread and cheese and distributed them to the girls, who reached out with polite eagerness.

"Make them earn their keep," Tomhearth advised.

"Uncle?" Hambeth replied, unsure of his meaning.

"They know nothing of our tongue?"

"It seems."

"Feed them not until they name the food," Tomhearth said.

The girls were already devouring what Hambeth had offered, but he knelt before them, starting with Oleander, and pointed to the bread in her hand.

"Bread," he said.

"Bread," she replied, her mouth full of it.

"Cheese."

"Cheese."

The lesson continued with all three girls, who repeated the words for their breakfast – eggs, aurochs steak, water – as well as for a few other

things Hambeth and his uncle thought important – barn, earth, hand, foot, leg, arm, finger.

“I have considered enlisting Grace for parley with them,” Hambeth said.

“You would be lucky to have her put her tongue to a second use on your behalf.”

Hambeth, in no mood for bawdiness this morning, turned to his uncle.

“Shall I go to her?”

“Nay, I will summon her, while you get these girls clean as you may. She must not see her own kind kept like this.”

“Is the water in the trough fresh?” Hambeth asked.

“It will be until the first of these dips in a toe. Take them to the creekbend.”

Chapter XIV: Bathing at the Creek, and a Parley

Hambeth stood, grabbed the leash that ran to the girl’s necks and bade them rise, and they followed him out from the barn and through the field of tall grain, whispering quietly to each other as they walked, a sound Hambeth found he had begun to favor because it indicated his charges were not so miserable they could not speak, and their words did not seem to concern arranging his murder.

And these girls might be an excuse to deal with Grace in a new way. If they were not to be the undoing of a year of dalliance with her.

Grace had seemed to grant her approval of Hambeth’s mixing with a single slave girl, kept to work their fields, fed on occasion between her legs. But the particulars of the conversation, carried on in the depths of night after lovemaking, had grown dim enough in Hambeth’s mind he couldn’t be certain she was being serious.

Now Uncle was on his way to her hovel, to tell her that his nephew was bathing three naked slave girls and needed her help to obtain their most effective service.

Most likely, Tomhearth would return empty-handed, Grace’s rebuke still ringing in his ears.

They reached the water, which coursed through the mountains and to the sea, shaded here between two great stands of yew, lined with a bank

of mud and pebbles, gray and blue, sloping gently to the water.

Hambeth lead them to the little stream, their feet making small marks in the earth there.

The girls stopped at the edge of the current, each putting just their toes in, looking at each other, looking at Hambeth, and his eyes moved of their own accord down their forms to their breasts, to the hair between their legs, to their thighs, thick with the muscle of strong girls, warrior or no. He adjusted his belt and hoped they would not see that he was growing there. Or hoped they would.

Oleander moved first, shuffling deeper into the stream, stopping when the chain at her neck grew taut, looking back and urging her companions after her with her free hand. The creek ran still, clear and cool this time of year, but not bracingly cold, as it did in spring and early summer, and they followed Oleander slowly until all three were in to their thighs, Hambeth with his boots off now, standing beside them, feeling the sacred waters touch his legs, listening to the girls as their voices grew louder, their speech faster and more excited, and he guessed they knew what was expected of them and were suffering a mix of sensations, the anticipation of the water's chill and its impending restoration of their filthy skin.

Lilac was the first to drop, submerging to the top of her breasts, crying out in shock but smiling, cupping her free hand in the water, raising it to her shoulders and watching as the dirt of the long march up the mountain ran off in narrow gray rivulets.

Hyacinth and Oleander followed, Oleander the first to allow the water to cover her completely, disappearing and popping back up with a shout while her comrades laughed at her before they descended.

Bound as they were, the girls seemed to want the touch of water, talking quietly to each other, running their free hands through their hair, over their faces, across their shoulders and breasts and, Hambeth knew, between their legs, and he wondered how it felt to touch there, if the water hurt where they'd been bound, if it had hurt to have the rings passed through their flesh.

He imagined the work Stotthearth would do on their middles to free them, and he wondered why they had been bound there in the first place, and if they'd fought or allowed it, and if they'd resist being freed, and if they'd ever earn a vander a day. Last, he allowed himself to imagine being

with them, any of them, and he wondered if their vaginas would feel as warm and embracing as Grace's, if they would welcome him as she had. Grace had said a Paxilexian slave girl needed to be fed that way, but did she speak the truth, or was she toying with him? And what, after all, did she know of these three?

The fine points of the matter were lost for a time, while Hambeth struggled with the baser questions of intercourse, of the pleasures only a female could provide, and his manhood roared between his legs until he started with the sound of his name, spoken from the bank by a voice he knew well.

“Hamhearth.”

He turned to find Grace there, black-robed, her child too great now to ride between her breasts, now sharing mother's back with a flaxen satchel, a sliver of the dappling sun through the leaves falling upon Grace's cheek while she smiled, broad but indecipherable.

“Well met, Grace,” he said, returning her smile with one of his own, but not as broad, not as certain, he struggling with an ill-defined guilt

“You told me your uncle wanted but one girl,” she said. “Now you have three.”

“They were available only by the set,” Hambeth replied. “The pirate who—”

“I've heard all about your dealings,” Grace interrupted, “oh greatest trader in all of Avenlou.”

Hambeth laughed dismissively.

“This one told me the price with her toe,” he said, gesturing toward Oleander. “I know not why, but there is no glory in it.”

“And now you have three.”

“Two are the town's,” Hambeth said. “Surely you have heard that as well.”

“Which one shall you keep?” she asked, studying the girls, who rose from the water as one and settled their eyes on Grace. Hambeth watched their faces and knew they recognized kinship in her brown features.

“I know not which to keep,” Hambeth admitted. “These are girls of your land. From which would we get the best work?”

“What kind of work?” Grace asked, removing her moccasins and stepping onto the gravel of the bank.

“You know what kind,” Hambeth replied. “There is a new hectare to be cleared and tilled.”

Grace smiled wryly this time, and Hambeth knew she was thinking of other sorts of chores, and she seemed to find all of it amusing, and Hambeth was for the moment reassured.

“May I parley with them?” she asked, and she set down satchel and daughter in a single deft motion, and the girl stood on sturdy little legs in her own little black robe and looked up at her mother and then at the three wet slaves before her, taking it all in silently, with thoughts known only to herself.

“Yes,” Hambeth said, “that being the reason you were summoned, if Tomhearth did not say.”

“He did,” Grace said, and she turned to the girls and spoke quickly, unintelligibly, and after a moment of what might have been surprise or relief in their eyes, they all spoke quickly back, the foreign words of four females filling the woods, competing with the songs of the birds and the wind, their voices in a tangle that came to Hambeth like a strange, rare beauty.

They could not understand each other because all spoke at once, and the girls in the water laughed, and Hambeth looked at all their forms now, clean and fair, and found them to be both more comely than he’d expected, and more battered as well.

There were high, firm breasts and rumps, flat bellies, strong legs and sweet faces, and black hair that draped the shoulders on the sides and back but had been cut straight across, above the eyes.

And besides Hyacinth’s swollen eye and Lilac’s swollen lip, all three girls bore the marks of the bitewire, raw pricks of pain here and there above and beneath their breasts, and across their backs. Oleander’s hip had been bruised, a fist-sized black and purple mark over the bone at the front of her pelvis, and Hyacinth’s arm bore what Hambeth believed was the wrath of a sword’s edge across her left arm, just below the shoulder. It was a straight, shallow wound, and Hambeth guessed it had been inflicted not to kill or dismember, but simply to subdue.

“Bring them out, Hambeth, for a proper parley,” Grace said, and he obeyed, leaving the water with the chain in his hand while the girls followed, all fixing their attention on Grace’s daughter now, who stared with blue eyes into each face while her mother stroked her head.

Hambeth looked at Grace, but the lover who had lain at the end of dozens of moonlit journeys attended now only to the three females before her, and she raised her hand to wipe a tear, blinking quickly and, for the first time in Hambeth's memory, smiling uncertainly.

She spoke again, and for a moment, Hambeth understood clearly, for among her other words was one he knew well, "Grace."

She was answered by the names of three flowers: "Hyacinth," and "Lilac," and "Oleander." But each girl added words after her name, and Hambeth wondered if each were offering place, or father's name, or role.

Grace spoke again, and this time only Oleander answered one question, and then the next, the two filling the air with Paxil words and phrases and laughter, and Hambeth wished more than ever he could understand. Indeed, he needed to understand, for these girls were still his charges, and their words bore on their use, as well as the risks attending that use.

So in the first pause in the parley, Grace drawing in her breath to speak again, Hambeth spoke.

"The trader Agarjj said they killed a man," he said. "I wish to know if it is a full lie, like some lies he told, or a half lie, which he spake also apace."

Grace uttered a few words in Paxil and gestured toward Hambeth.

Oleander replied first, but Hyacinth and Lilac quickly added to the tale, and the girls gestured and frowned and paused, and one raised her free hand as if cutting through the air, and their voices shook more than once, and their eyes spoke of pain and terror, and all three shivered in the cool air, water drying on skin, nipples almost as long as firm as Grace's were just after her daughter's suckling, and Hambeth knew their words must be the truth, for he had learned that lies normally were told in a certain careful way, while the truth burst out like a living thing with its own heart.

The girls paused, all three breathing heavily, and Grace turned to Hambeth.

"They lived deeper inland than I, farther from water, closer to the forest and the mountains," she began, "and some of their words come strange and their order is strange too, but they seem to say they were in tents by the shore and were sleeping when the pirates came, and one man was awake and cried out through his own murder, and all woke and searched for what they could to save their skins, and another man of theirs

died, slaying one of the pillagers, and a man cut through the very wall of their tent, and they all fell silent in the darkness until he was near and they could set upon him with short knives used in cooking called *tzieps*, and they drew blood and indeed . . .”

Grace looked at the girls and spoke briefly, and Oleander replied with another few words.

“And indeed, he was a quite ruined creature at his last breath, and they have borne his blood on their own flesh from that night, but now it runs down the stream and back to the sea to find his soul, and they don’t care if it does or not.”

Hambeth nodded, looking at the girls, and they looked back with the hardness that, he guessed, one would see in any eyes that had witnessed murder of their own doing.

“Why were they in tents by the sea?” he asked.

“They trade,” Grace answered after a quick exchange. “They belonged to a trade guild journeying to the Greater Vandals.”

“Why did Agarjj sell them for two hundred vanders?” Hambeth asked.

Grace spoke, the girls answered, Grace spoke again, and back and forth went the words, leaving Hambeth to wonder why what he believed should be a simple question would require so much discussion.

Finally, Grace turned to him.

“He feared them,” she said.

“Your word for fear seems to linger on the tongue,” Hambeth said.

“More was said,” Grace acknowledged, “but that is the vein. He saw what they did to the man they slew, and he longed to be shut of them, even at a great loss.”

“How did she know he would accept two hundred vanders?”

“From Agarjj,” Grace said, after a quick parley.

“Does she speak Avenian after all?”

“No, but he wrote it out for others, and she saw.”

“Why did she want me to bid on them?”

Grace turned to the girls, they spoke lightly, they laughed, Grace nodded toward Hambeth, and she had her answer: “They said you seemed kind.”

“There are kind men in the Greater Vandals,” Hambeth countered.

“Perhaps,” Grace said, “but they know them not.”

“Will they serve us, and pause at murder?”

Grace turned to the girls for another long discourse of soft words, the girls nodding, Grace nodding back.

“It is the way of our people to obey him who holds the chain,” she said. “But they pray you are as kind as sounds your voice and looks your eyes.”

“I am not their only master,” Hambeth said.

“They understand. They say one gave them mead.”

“Bitterhearth, last night.”

“And one was gentle, and fed them, and measured them.”

“Stotthearth, whom also you know.”

“Yes, I believe his work has improved a little since he fashioned what I wear.”

“These two men offered them judicious treatment, perhaps,” Hambeth said, “but the work here is not easy, and you yourself know the cruelties of Camberia.”

“Camberia is a town like any other,” Grace observed. “And these girls say they are more suited to hard work than their appearances reveal, and they will prove themselves if given a chance.”

“Are they suited to easy work?” Hambeth asked.

“What mean you by easy work?”

Hambeth looked at Grace, wishing she might understand, preferring not to speak it out loud.

“Some brought up those other services,” he stammered at last. “By the gate. Last night. And you yourself have brought it up, in jest perhaps, but now we must reckon seriously. For a vander a day —”

“There is nothing easy about it, jest or no,” Grace interrupted, and her eyes sparked in a way he had not seen before, not even at her torture two years before, or her disputations with Stott a spring ago.

“Well, anyway, they are bound,” Hambeth ventured. “So perhaps it matters not.”

“Bound?”

“They’ve been set with rings, and chains, at their chambermouths.”

“What say you?” Grace demanded.

“See with your own eyes,” Hambeth said, gesturing toward the girls. “They allowed me inspection in the barn. All are fixed this way.”

Grace looked at the girls, spoke quickly, Oleander responded, and all three looked down at their hips. Grace stepped forward and knelt upon the bank of mud and gravel before Oleander, and the girl parted her legs to the limits of her shackles, allowing Grace to raise her fingers to the girl's thick hair and examine the folds and slit behind it.

Done with her examination, Grace stood, brushed off the knees of her gown, and looked into the woods, where the birds sang of their own things.

"I speak true then?" Hambeth inquired, ready to be told he'd been dreaming, or to learn that the chains were a Paxilexian trick of jewelry, something the girls would be able to remove by their own hands.

"You do," Grace replied. "It is something . . . something done to girls who are not ordained to dally."

"Ever?" Hambeth asked.

"Nay, only until they marry, and then they'll be freed, to husbands certain of their fidelity."

"Is this the way of Paxilex?" Hambeth asked.

"It was not done to me," Grace replied. "But it is not unheard of. For trading girls who must travel through temptations, it is sensible."

"What of it, then?" Hambeth asked, feeling as lost as ever over the questions of these new slaves, how they were to serve, what should be done.

"What of what?" Grace asked.

Hambeth looked at her with sorrow, for this time on the streambank in the woods had raised troubling new questions while it left old questions unanswered, and he longed for the simple days when his parleys with Grace followed pleasure and were of lesser consequence.

"You know of what I speak," Hambeth said, challenging Grace with his eyes. "It is that thing we touch on, and you find humor in."

Grace looked at the girls, spoke quickly.

Oleander was the first to reply, offering a nod and an answer of a few sentences.

"Lilac?" Grace said, inflecting the name in what Hambeth guessed was a question.

"Ah," she replied.

"Hyacinth?"

“Ah,” Hyacinth replied, and then she spoke more, a brief string of Paxil.

“Have Stott free them then,” Grace replied simply.

“They will serve this way?”

“They will.”

“What said Hyacinth?”

“They will,” Grace repeated, “but they pray you will be true to the kindness in your face, particularly in this matter.”

Hambeth looked at the girls, standing beside him, necks bound by a chain whose end lay in his hand, ankles fastened together, right wrists all fettered as one, and he offered the diffident smile of a man who wishes something to be so but cannot guarantee it, a smile he had sometimes given intentionally during uncertain dealings.

“Tell them I will try,” Hambeth said.

Grace spoke a few words of Paxil and the girls nodded.

“Now, what said Hyacinth?”

“She speculated,” Grace began, “that no man would want her with such an eye.”

Hambeth studied Hyacinth, and she looked back, her one eye clear and peering at him, and he felt at his breast the pain of an aurochs’ horn tip, for her and the suffering she had borne without complaint, and the suffering she might yet endure, all at the hands of his people.

“Who struck her?” he asked Grace.

“It was a foot,” Grace said after trading a few words with the girl.

“A foot?”

“The foot of the man they killed. He was—”

Oleander interrupted, speaking loudly and quickly, her eyes flashing with something like anger.

Hambeth looked to Grace.

“It was his final act on plain earth,” Grace said. “He shut one girl’s eye, for but a little while. They shut both eyes, until the mountains sing.”

“Until the mountains sing?”

“The final hour,” Grace said. “When some are made gods, and some must answer for what they have done to the gods.”

“Does her swollen eye see?” Hambeth asked.

Grace asked the question, and Hyacinth replied.

“Each eye sees as well as the other,” Grace said. “And together, they see all.”

“See all?”

“It is the way we speak in Paxilex.”

“I have learned more of Paxilex on the riverbank this day than in a year by your side,” Hambeth observed.

“We had other matters to attend to,” Grace retorted, “and you were not by my side.”

“It is a politeness,” Hambeth said, “spoken before others.”

“They cannot understand.”

“Are you certain?” Hambeth asked.

“So they have said.”

“I hope it is true,” Hambeth said, “for I spoke rudely of them, as a trader would, to Agarjj the pirate.”

“You are safe.”

“Will you attend them today, while I receive the services of our smith?”

“What services did he promise?”

“He said it would take days, or days upon days, to do all that Archenix wants. But he speaks of bracing them this morning.”

“To what end?” Grace inquired.

“I am not certain,” Hambeth lied. “Wrighthearth will do his part.”

Grace narrowed her eyes at him and Hambeth knew he could not deceive her, that the time spent together – even though it be beneath her, or on top of her, or behind her – had taught his nature to her. He drew in his breath to say his next words.

“For necessary cruelties,” he said. “Brief, and necessary. That is all I know.”

“You wish it were not so?”

“I do.”

“Are you fit for this?” she asked.

“Nay,” he acknowledged. “Nor did the gods in their wisdom choose the fittest in Camberia; they chose the greatest fool.”

“You are no fool, Hamhearth. And had you not bid on them, they’d still be wrapped in bitewire, and bleeding two days more up Fifth Pass.”

“Then I have rescued them, sure, but now I need rescue.”

“Sometimes the gods choose the best, sometimes the one with the best secreted within him, and sometimes merely the kindest.”

“I am a trader only,” Hambeth said, “and still an apprentice at that.”

“In any case, you will not be undone by their hand.”

“You are kind as well, to a boy who holds your countryfolk by the neck.”

Grace waved her hand.

“Sometimes we may choose our part, and sometimes we must play our part,” Grace said, and she gestured toward the girls. “They play their part today, because the chain you hold absolves them of choice. And you play as well, as do I, whether it seems so or not.”

“There is a wisdom in you that you hide in the dark.”

“These are common tidings in Paxilex, as is what I have brought them.”

“What did you carry down?”

“Pattern bread.”

“Pattern bread?”

“It is something we make, and I had some on hand.”

“They had a breakfast.”

“This is not food. It is to us like earth.”

“I hope you did not bake them dirt.”

“Mock not temples where you haven’t knelt.”

“Feed them,” Hambeth said, “while I practice the wisdom of silence.”

Grace stooped, picked up her bag and reached in, drawing forth a loaf of black-cruled bread the size of two fists, holding it out first to Hambeth, so he could see that its top bore an intricate pattern of overlapping hexes, before she broke it into three pieces and offered it to the girls.

The three slaves accepted the gift with what Hambeth guessed was deep reverence, drawing the bread to their noses, peering into its essence, biting and chewing slowly while they looked at Grace, gratitude in their eyes.

“Will you meet me at the smith’s?” Hambeth asked.

“I will, within a finger’s time.”

Chapter XV: The First Labors of the Smith

“Uncle,” Hambeth said, standing at the door to their home, the three girls bound beside him.

Tomhearth emerged from the storeroom, smiled at Hambeth, studied the girls.

“They have washed,” Tomhearth observed. “They seem to be daughters of men after all.”

“They are fair,” Hambeth said. “In that way at least, Agarjj did not lie.”

“Did they parley with Grace?”

“They did, nor did they withhold.”

“Have they killed?”

“Yes, one of the raiders. They used cooking knives, and they so scrambled him that Agarjj feared the walk on Fifth Pass with them.”

“Grace told you all this?”

“Yes, after she spoke to them.”

“I don’t believe it,” Tomhearth blurted.

“What? That they split the raider’s hide?”

“No, any girl can best a pirate to save her life. I don’t believe Agarjj feared them.”

“He was glad to be rid of them, all the same.”

“For some other reason than fear.”

“The chains at their holes?”

“No,” Tomhearth said. “That is a small matter. You should have known of it, but no one but I knows you didn’t, and Stotthearth will have the remedy. There is another flaw here, one we can see, or that we cannot see.”

“A truth we must wait for, and I pray it shan’t yet ruin me.”

“What plan you today?”

“I leave for dealings with Stotthearth, and Wriothearth,” Hambeth said, “and Grace as well.”

“The king’s viceroy passed while you were at the stream,” Tomhearth said, adding bitterly, “He and two lieutenants, two on horses our village gave up for the war. So you may have him to parley with as well. Avenlou’s greatest trader might speak many words this day.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And there is risk in every word, so—”

“That I know,” Hambeth said, committing the rare sin of interrupting his uncle.

“So perform as you do on your best day, with a plain tongue content to rest, while you listen always with both ears.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And bring one of these back, with a means to secure her that is more certain than bent nails,” Tomhearth added.

“Do you care which?”

“This is the one who told you the bid?” he asked, pointing at Oleander, who gazed back with her customary half smile.

“Indeed.”

“Her, then,” Tomhearth said. “Whether she be their wisest, or the one given most to mischief, she is better kept here.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth said, and he turned to Oleander and looked, briefly, all along her form. “We’ll stay her in the barn as last night?”

“Aye, and I’ll prepare her berth a little surer, but you must come home with honest tethers, so seventy-six vanders don’t slip away by the moon.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth said.

“Did you ask why she drew her bid in the earth?”

“I did,” Hambeth said. “She told Grace they preferred my kindness.”

Tomhearth laughed. “More of that which does not tally. Now the slave chooses her master.”

“I am not her master,” Hambeth said. “I am only the holder of the chain.”

“You hold a chain with three mysteries at the other end,” Tomhearth noted. “Beware.”

“Yes,” Hambeth agreed, “and for better or worse, I take my leave.”

“Trade well and parley true, Nephew.”

Hambeth nodded and turned, and the girls shuffled behind him, across the field and to the lane to town, talking together quietly, and Hambeth looked back at them without pleasure, without lust, for nothing certain lay either before or behind him.

Nor was the greeting he received at the gate any reassurance, the men there clapping his shoulders, repeating Agarjj’s mocking praise as if it

were uttered in all sincerity, and regarding the goods he pulled behind him with leering appraisal.

More smiles welcomed him in town, and he smiled back and pulled at the chain but tried to ignore its contents until he reached the little shop of Stotthearth, who was already busy with his own matters, a wreath of smoke climbing to the sky, his hammer pounding out a song of one note.

Stott set down his tools as soon as he spied the contingent at his window, wiping his hands on his apron and stepping to his counter.

“Well met,” he said to Hambeth. “You appear to be alive yet.”

“I am.”

“And you left with beasts but returned with maidens.”

“A little water helped, and time will cure their damage.”

“They are fair, injured or no,” Stott said, adjusting his belt. “What have you learned?”

“Grace parleyed with them,” Hambeth replied. “They killed a man with kitchen knives, and they made such a jumble of him that Agarjj wished only to be acquitted of them before they did him the same.”

“Indeed,” Stott said, gazing with additional respect upon the girls.

“And of the advice this one scratched into the earth with her toe, it seems they preferred to be bought here and not in the Greater Vandals.”

“Wherefore?”

“The story grows muddled,” Hambeth admitted.

“Either way, I can smith them,” Stott promised.

“I have also set some things to cart already, by the armory,” he said, and he turned to the shelf behind his anvil and held up a short chain with a pair of cuffs at the ends. “And sleeping hobble,” he said, “for the ankles. And the cuffs take two pins to open.”

“Clever work,” Hambeth said. “And while they labor?”

“I fashion it yet,” Stott replied, pointing to his anvil. “Three cuffs, for both hands and one foot, at a length that will impede quick passage but not the application of steady effort.”

“What will you finish today?”

“One of each, I pray,” Stott replied.

“That will be enough for the one I bring home, if the armory can hold the other two.”

“The berths are being made secure as we speak, Wriothearth himself directing.”

“Two will sleep there tonight?”

“I believe so.”

“Then my troubles are reduced by two-thirds,” Hambeth said, relief in his heart.

“But you must still worry over the one. Which will it be?”

Hambeth put his hand on Oleander’s shoulder. “She who told me their price, and whom Uncle chose.”

“Leave her with me and take the other two to the armory. Wriothearth expects you.”

“Will you let this one offset some of your cost today?”

“I will,” Stott said, and he looked upon her, and she gazed back. “I have labors she matches.”

“There is one thing she cannot yet do,” Hambeth said.

“What mean you?”

“The charms that put her value at a vander a day are chained shut.”

“No,” Stott said.

“All three have been fixed pleasureless,” Hambeth said, “in a way only your art can cure.”

Stott frowned, stepped out of his shop and approached the girls.

Hambeth returned his hand to Oleander’s shoulder, pressing her forward, and she seemed to understand, bending and opening her legs while Stott knelt behind her, peering at the mouth of her female chamber, raising blacked fingers to her lips to examine the rings that had been made as one with her flesh.

“This is a habit of Paxilex I am unfamiliar with,” he said.

“Can you correct it?”

“With some doing, yes,” Stott replied. “But they will not enjoy my work.”

“You will not damage them?”

“No, but no one male or female would choose that commotion among their nethers.”

“You saw their courage with the bitewire.”

“Yes, but this is a torment of another sort, and we’ll want them all braced for it. See where stands Wriothearth’s work, and perhaps we can get it done today.”

“Keep Oleander so you may fit her sure,” Hambeth said, “and I’ll take these other two on to the armory. But find us there when Oleander has

been set.”

“At your service,” Stott agreed.

“Where stand things with Archenix and your fees?” Hambeth inquired.

“He made me five vanders richer this morning.”

“Whence springs his generosity?”

“From the emissary who stood at his shoulder,” Stott said, “and spoke of an overdue grant today, if we show our mettle for it.”

“And five vanders to your pocket is mettle enough?”

“I don’t pretend to know the mind of a king’s man, but he asked me of my work, and I told him these three would not be the first I’d put in irons.”

Hambeth reached into his pocket, pulling out the keys of Agarjj the pirate, hoping they proved as true as the bitewire release.

He stepped to Oleander and she raised her chin, but he paused and looked at Stotthearth.

“I am about to free this one from her partners,” Hambeth said. “Can you keep her?”

“Leave her shackles on,” Stott advised.

“Even so,” Hambeth said, “you yourself proposed they might hold a key somewheres.”

“She can’t outrun me, even if she slips her chains, nor can she leap the walls.”

“She has wiles beyond running and leaping,” Hambeth warned, but he opened Oleander’s collar just the same, that key of Agarjj’s working true, as well as the one that freed her wrist, chains and empty cuffs dangling from the necks and the hands of the other two.

Stott put his hand on her arm, but when she turned to the other girls with tears in her eyes and a mouth opened in anguish, he stood back. Oleander embraced Hyacinth first, Lilac second, and all of them cried words in Paxil that Hambeth guessed were a final farewell, borne of misapprehensions he had no means to correct.

“Grace is due here soon,” Hambeth told Stott. “Tell her to advise this one that she will see her fellows again, probably within a finger.”

“Yes, greatest trader.”

“And bring this one there as soon as you may,” Hambeth added, scowling at Stott’s ill-timed humor, “so that her tears dry and don’t rust

your work to shavings.”

“I will make it so,” Stott agreed, leading Oleander into his shop and pointing to the tree stump, where she settled and pressed her hands to her face.

Holding a chain with two instead of three girls eased Hambeth’s mind not at all, and he made his way toward the armory full of misgivings, nodding to the townsfolk, smiling when they smiled at him, and feeling altogether like the fool at the head of a doomed retinue who fancied himself a king.

Hambeth and his girls rounded the line of dwellings to find a hum of activity at his destination, the old armory buzzing with workers and, to his dismay, leaders as well, including Archenix, three of his council, and no less than the emissary, his two lieutenants and their three horses.

In the midst of parley, Archenix paused and turned to Hambeth, the king’s men following his gaze, the latter waiting regally as he approached them in anything but regal stature, a wide-belted, wool-tunicked commoner in forcible possession of two naked slave girls.

Chapter XVI: The Crown’s Device

“Well met, Hamhearth!” Archenix cried.

“It is the first of all my pleasures, My Chief,” Hambeth replied, stopping a few paces from Archenix and bowing deeply, electing not to correct the name Archenix had used, knowing this was all theater anyway.

“Our king has sent his best to attend to his interests in Camberia today,” Archenix said, and he turned to the emissary and bowed. “Viceroy Gratta comes with royal tidings.”

Hambeth bowed to Gratta but said nothing. He knew the man by face, for Gratta had darkened the earth of Camberia often enough, several times to commandeer horses for the war until all had been taken, and at least every fortnight to collect taxes or to inquire on things or perform some other act of royal inconvenience. He was to his credit honest and diligent by most reckonings, but with all the arrogance appropriate to his station.

“Did you not buy three?” Gratta asked of Archenix. Hambeth drew in his breath to answer, but Archenix repeated the question.

“Hamhearth, did we not buy three?”

“We did, My Chief,” Hambeth replied, understanding that only Archenix would parley with Gratta. “But one tarries at the smith’s to be fitted for her chains.”

“One tarries at the smith’s,” Archenix informed Gratta, “to be fitted for restraints.”

Gratta tapped one of his lieutenants on the shoulder and pointed to Hyacinth, and the man stepped up to her and raised his hand to her lips, removing a glove and eying her expectantly. She opened her mouth and he peered inside, running his finger along her upper and lower teeth before he put two fingers above and below her swollen eye, she flinching not as he opened it to assess the health of the orb itself.

“It is inadvisable to strike a slave for anything but grave disobedience,” Gratta noted.

Hambeth blushed and bit his lip, Gratta’s veiled accusation stinging him deeply, but unanswerable by any but Archenix.

“They came to us in this state,” Archenix asserted. “There was a fight when they were acquired, and death, if their first owner is to be believed.”

“What know you of their history?” Gratta asked, his lieutenant stepping to Lilac to inspect her mouth.

“What have we learned since last night?” Archenix asked Hambeth.

“They were traders, on their way to Greater Vandals,” Hambeth said. “Or so they told, ah . . . so they told one who speaks their language. They were captured in a tent near the shore, and they killed one, but they have pledged to serve us, and obey.”

“How did they slay?” Gratta asked.

“How did they slay?” Archenix repeated.

“With kitchen implements,” Hambeth told Archenix.

“With kitch—”

“Shall our army conscript them and arm them with ladles?” Gratta inquired.

“No, Your Excellency,” Archenix replied hastily, adding after a pause, “I don’t believe they are suited for it, and our enemies might take or slay—”

“Our enemies have opened a new front,” Gratta said. “They wage now the war of cowards and scoundrels.”

“Sir?” Archenix inquired.

“But two nights ago, they breached by darkness the walls of Panthian Fields and took five daughters of the realm.”

“No!”

“Loutaine’s daughter slept among them, and only by blessing of a spectral fog for which we may thank the gods did they not find her and lay their putrescent hands upon her.”

“Then all are restored,” Archenix said.

“Nay,” Gratta replied impatiently. “They took five daughters of the realm. And they keep them, and they work unknown evil upon them, and their six forebears, who are one duke, and one duchess, who lost two, and a baron who lost one, and another baron, who likewise lost two, and then also their two respective baronesses, mourn.”

“This is the highest villainy,” Archenix agreed, and his face grew red with terror. “None are safe. If come they here to steal—”

“The daughters of Camberia are safe,” Gratta replied dismissively, “until the thieves find a taste for commoners. Or even then.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Now, today or soon, sets out the party of those who shall go to Greater Vandals, to declare that a nation so noble should do no trade with those who steal a people’s most innocent issue.”

“Indeed,” Archenix replied.

“But this may yet be a long fight, and the taking of peoples will continue, or increase, and all the places of Avenlou must do their part to hold and work these spoils, the cities as they will, and even the towns and the villages, and even the settlements and the rudest camps and most squalid enclosures, and even down to Camberia.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency,” Archenix said with a bow, “and we had anticipated the same and obtained these three for that very aim.”

“You obtained these three without a grant, because you smelled bargain,” Gratta countered, “or so goes the rumor.”

“The rumor is true,” Archenix affirmed, and he gestured nervously toward Hambeth. “This one trades, and he found a trade he could not deny, and he used his arts to persuade us all, and we joined him in this undertaking, and we beg the crown’s mercy if we acted in haste, but it was for—”

Gratta silenced Archenix with a wave and motioned to the nearest lieutenant, who stepped to his horse and drew out a heavy sheet of

parchment.

“The sanctions are set dear for those who presume to anticipate the will of the king,” Gratta noted, “before the king expresses that will.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” Archenix, said, bowing again. “We acted in belief that—”

“But it is by your great good fortune that a grant was on its way to you, even as you squabbled with pirates for your first three.”

“Yes, Your Excellency, thank you, Your Excellency.”

“Had I not seen that mother you chain like a slave, but here and not there by some whim of yours, you would be without a grant this morning, and in deep violation, and these girls would be joined to the other treasures of the crown, and your fields would lie untended.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“And your fires unstarted and your food uncooked and your dwellings thick with unswept filth.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“And your carts unpropelled.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. For we have no horses.”

“The war has a greater need, as well you know.”

“Yes, and we trust our steeds serve bravely where our foes run thick,” Archenix said, and he looked toward the three beasts who tore placidly at the grass beside the armory’s thick wall, for two of them were Camberian bred and had not, so far as any observer might conclude, ever smelled or seen war, or even witnessed an exchange of harsh words.

“All who serve the crown, man or beast, whether humbly or under a rain of spears and arrows, serve the same,” Gratta said. “The animal who does the king’s easy work frees his better for mortal encounter.”

“There was no better than our piebalds and our bouldrains,” Archenix said. “Your Excellency.”

“Very well,” Gratta agreed with another dismissive wave. “Then shall we continue our parley over horses until nightfall, or might you be willing to attend now to the matters of your king?”

“Long live the king,” Archenix intoned.

“Here then is your grant,” Gratta said, and the lieutenant stepped before Archenix and held it up, and Archenix leaned forward, squinting at the unfamiliar script of an order under crown.

“It is a draft in regent’s Avenian,” Gratta said, “but its import is plain enough, that—”

“I read it even now,” Archenix said abruptly, continuing to scan the document.

Hambeth watched while Archenix’s eyes swept back and forth quickly until, at the middle of the page, he stopped, squinted more fiercely, drew back his head as if suffering from a confusion of distance, drew near again but found no relief at either resolve, and Camberia’s proud chief looked with puzzlement to the king’s viceroy.

“The grant speaks of a device,” Archenix said, “and then I lose the weave.”

Gratta stepped up, put his finger upon the sheet and read aloud, “His Majesty the King Loutaine grants to Camberia the device of a single saltire each bar three takes at wide sinister the basement of the field one take above the lock of lower and upper of the lower by hot iron.”

“I know mostly these words,” Archenix said, “but they have been planted in an order insensible.”

“There is sense here,” Gratta said, “but its meaning may be conveyed with an ashstick if you prefer.”

“Hambeth,” Archenix said.

Hambeth turned to search the ground for remnants of a fire, noted that townsfolk had gathered behind him to witness the proceedings, or to gaze at Camberia’s newly-bathed possessions, and he raised his eyebrows for aid. No fewer than six fellow citizens scattered, three stooping beside the door of a dwelling near with the remains of a cooking fire, the quickest – a girl no more than twelve – returning with a narrow branch with a blackened tip.

Gratta motioned to a lieutenant, and the man stepped to Hambeth, took the stick and turned to Hyacinth, who looked at him with one eye wide and one swollen.

The man dropped to his haunches beside Hyacinth’s left leg, peered at her thigh and, using three extended fingers, measured along the side of her thigh, one take up from her knee joint, marking there a crude black “X.”

“An X,” Archenix observed drily, “on the left thigh, as would be put by any citizen of Camberia until overwhelmed by mead.”

“The words of the grant are exact words,” Gratta said, “written exactly, to protect your wealth. Strike falsely with the iron and you’ll have

made three new servants for Frace, where the device is three takes above the lock, or Allegian, where on the wide right lands the device, or in Forevant, where—”

“Very good, Your Excellency,” Archenix said. “So it shall be, as it has been marked, and as it seems to have been written by those who use a score of words where two would serve.”

“Such are the ways of our sovereign,” Gratta said.

“Long may he live.”

Archenix looked past Hambeth’s shoulder.

“And yonder comes the third girl, and our smith, and one who may speak for them,” he said.

Chapter XVII: The Armory, and a Cart

Hambeth turned to see Stotthearth leading Oleander in the new set of chains he had fashioned for her, both wrists and her right ankle all bound together, Grace beside them in her own restraints, child clinging to her back beside the satchels of mother’s work.

Oleander and the others traded looks of relief at a reunion they thought perhaps would never come, but they did not embrace, and then Hyacinth and Lilac took in Grace and, Hambeth guessed, her restraints, and he imagined the doings of this town must seem strange to these three newcomers.

Grace glanced briefly at Hambeth, then turned her eyes to Archenix and, stopping five paces from him, bowed to the man who had drawn her blood ten times.

“Well met,” Gracehearth,” Archenix said, and he turned to Gratta. “This is the mother born of Paxilex, whom you know.”

“Yes,” Gratta confirmed. “Ask her from where in Paxilex these girls were issued?”

“From where in Paxilex were they issued?” Archenix asked Grace.

“My Chief,” Grace replied, “they are native to Xaxilos, a ways from the sea but not quite of the mountains.”

Archenix relayed the information and Gratta, satisfied with that answer, asked another: “What traded they?”

“What traded they?”

“Silver,” Grace replied after several exchanges with the girls, their speech rising and falling as it had by the stream, a sound beautiful to Hambeth’s ears. “And a spice called *stip*, and the hard black bread of these people, for which there is a growing preference in the Greater Vandals, and —”

“Silver and the other things,” Archenix said, rolling his hand, and he looked at Gratta, but the king’s viceroy was conversing with a lieutenant and did not seem to hear the chief.

“We have received the grant,” Archenix said, turning to Stotthearth. “Which we knew we would receive. And your work may continue.”

“Yes, My Chief,” Stott replied, looking first at Archenix, and then at Hambeth, the hint of a smile on his lips.

“They sent many words from the crown,” Archenix continued, “to describe what call they a device, but you may see it plain upon the leg of the one with swollen eye.”

Stott turned to Hyacinth, finding the mark of ash.

“Simple enough, My Chief.”

“But it must be done exactly as marked, or your efforts will serve only to reward two hundred vander’s worth of female to another village.”

“I stand by all my work, My Chief.”

“How soon can you score them?”

“In no time, if Wriothearth has finished the brace.”

“You may consult him there,” Archenix said, pointing to the old armory.

“Yes, My Chief.”

“And their collars?”

“I have what I need in the shop.”

“As you say, then,” Archenix replied, and he turned to Gratta. “Is all satisfied on this matter, Your Excellency?”

“It is.”

“Carry on,” he said, waving his hand at Hambeth who, only too glad to end his audience with Archenix and Gratta, looked to Grace and Stott, and the three of them and their three girls – now enslaved by virtue of the king’s order itself – moved toward the armory.

The old Camberian armory was ancient, one of the rare structures from the days of the Caesars that had not been razed within Camberia proper. Its thick walls and small, high windows suggested to some that its

original use had been military, but it had served other purposes after the current people had settled here and restored its roof. It was a dwelling place for a time, then a stable briefly, and a shop, and most recently the place where weapons had been stored, hence its name, but with the new hostilities against Paxilex, the crown had sent enough materials and assistance to build a new, larger and better-equipped armory, and this building had fallen into disuse and disrepair, its thatch wearing through, some of its wooden ceiling beams sagging with the ravages of time.

Hambeth, pulling his two girls behind him, was the first to reach the door, and he found a bustle of activity within, four workers and Wriheart himself laboring precariously overhead, fashioning the new beams and setting in place fresh thatch, which at this moment covered half the roof and seemed likely all to be in place by day's end.

The work on the berths was nearing completion as well, ten small spaces in two rows, one atop the other, defined on all sides by thick wood bound by rope. The first five spaces rested on the stone floor, the second five above them, deep enough for man or woman to lie splayed, each just high enough for the occupant to sit. Three bore completed doors, a lattice of thick wood held together with more rope and simple rings of Stott's art. Each of the doors held fittings for a latch, as well as a thick beam, which could be set into the floor and secured to the wall above, and would dash altogether, Hambeth imagined, any hope of escape by those held there.

Hambeth, with the memory fresh of a fitful night guarding three sleeping slave girls, studied this space, its arrangement and accoutrements, for questions of its proper fitting had sat heavy on his mind since the night before.

"Hail, Hamheart," Wriheart said from the roof, and he dropped down with an ease that belied his age, and approached Hambeth as an equal.

"Well met, Wriheart," Hambeth said. "I am but Hambeth."

"So be it," Wriheart said. "Either way, we make it fast for you."

"I see."

"Roof," Wriheart said, pointing unnecessarily first above his head, and then at the building's other offerings. "Ten berths here, three ready for souls. Fire may be lit here, where the flue was set original, and

we'll next build out this space, where you can hang their bindings, tend to them, and punish."

Stott entered with Oleander, Grace behind, and he squeezed past Hambeth and the other girls to step to the other end of the tiny space, putting one thick, blackened hand on a new post that stretched from floor to roof.

"A ring here I'll have made within two days," he said, pointing to a place above his head, "and a ring here at the hips as well."

Hambeth, who understood both the necessity and the terrible nature of the fixtures, turned to the berths and wished in vain for Stottheath to speak of something else.

"Hambeth will have all he needs to correct his charges," Stott told Wriothearth. "So set firm the beam, floor to ceiling, and I'll make the rings to hold as well."

He turned and leered at Hambeth, who only scowled back, wanting this role and all its troubling burdens no more than he had the night before.

"There will be no reason to correct girls of Paxilex," Grace said, voice rising in the little space, "unless you wish to for your own purposes."

"The duty falls not to me," Stott replied.

"You seem to wish it did," she retorted.

"Is it another of your powers, oh wizardess of Paxilex, to read men's hearts?"

"There is no power in observing a thick man ogle."

"When a fair lady sees ogling where a man practices a trade," Stott retorted, "check there for vanity."

Grace scowled but said nothing more, satisfied perhaps that she had drawn Stott out for his cruelty, even if she did not cure it.

"May two sleep here tonight, Wriothearth?" Hambeth asked.

"Which two?"

"These," Hambeth replied, raising the chain that held Lilac and Hyacinth.

"Yes, when you free their wrists and necks."

"I will," Hambeth said, "but I shall leave their shackles on."

"You shouldn't have need."

"They're the shackles of Agarjj the pirate," Stott said. "No doubt they'll be able to free themselves, by hidden keys or some other artifice."

“Well, make me new chains,” Hambeth said. “But I witnessed no tools of escape when they emptied this morning.”

“’Tis all moot,” said Wriothearth, testiness in his voice. “The berths will hold.”

“When may you keep them?” Hambeth asked.

“The spaces are ready now.”

“May I store two here while we work on the third?”

“Of course.”

“And your brace is done?” Hambeth asked.

“It is, come see.”

“First we set two aside.”

Wriothearth stepped to the first two berths and opened wide the doors. “One above, one beneath.”

Hambeth freed Lilac’s neck and wrist but left her shackles on and pointed to the upper space, and she clambered in, sitting first, then sliding back, breasts bouncing, her motions quick and deft despite her restraints.

Hambeth touched Oleander’s shoulder and pointed to the lower berth, and she dropped to the floor in her new chains and entered the space, her countenance devoid of affront or disappointment, and Hambeth wondered what she thought of all this.

Wriothearth shut the doors and latched them closed with thick wooden pegs, angled and turned so that those confined could most likely not free themselves. Hambeth was pleased for the second assurance, however, watching as Wriothearth set a thick beam of wood into the floor, binding it to the wall above and so that it pressed each door and held it fast.

The girls’ faces appeared at the doors, and they looked out, at Hambeth, at Grace, at the wall of the armory, and they seemed neither sad nor pleased, simply enduring this as they had all the other things, and Hambeth felt a deep sorrow for them, and wondered how long he must do this before his heart ceased aching.

Grace set her child down and bent to address the girls, speaking in quick Paxil while they nodded.

Done speaking, she turned to Hambeth, and all who were not held there left the old armory, following Wriothearth around the structure to the work he had done behind it.

The old carpenter pointed first to a sturdy square of wooden beams that lay on the ground, fashioned to hold the slave on hand and knee, with

places to fasten wrist and ankle. A second invention rose to hip height and, Hambeth quickly perceived, would close around the neck.

“Frame and yoke,” Wriothearth said.

“Both can be moved?” Stott asked.

“Yes, with plain lifting,” came the reply, “or the cart you accoutered.”

Wriothearth pointed to a humble conveyance resting against the wall of the armory, fronted with long poles, meant for setting to harness horse or donkey, but from which a pair of open cuffs dangled by short chains.

“I would have them by my shop for today’s work,” Stott said. “Shall we test my art?”

He gestured toward Hyacinth. “She may pull it after you set her wrists by, to replace the lighter work of our missing horses.”

Hambeth stepped to the cart, drawing Hyacinth behind him, and he looked at the girl, ankles bound together, one chain dangling from her neck with two empty collars, a second chain hanging from her wrist, two open cuffs hanging loose, and then he looked at her eye, less swollen, less discolored than the night before, but still grievously injured, and he wrestled with a stinging heart again before he returned to the practical matter of fastening her in for cart work.

Hyacinth understood his will, stepped between the poles, stooping, wrapping her chained and free hands around the poles, her chains clinking against the ground before she stood and looked at Hambeth. If it offended her to be treated so, to take the place of a horse or donkey, she showed it not, simply regarding Hambeth as if awaiting his next instructions.

He closed the two cart chains around her wrists, and then removed all her other restraints – shackles, collar, the loose chains on her wrist, dropping them onto the cart.

“Shall I speak to her?” Grace asked, stepping up, daughter at her thigh.

“She seems to understand well enough,” Hambeth replied quickly, before he thought better of his answer. “No, do speak. Tell her we are taking her to the smith’s to free her chamber and . . . and to mark her for Camberia.”

Grace spoke, and the girl nodded and asked a question. Grace spoke again, and the girl flinched and swallowed, and she looked at

Hambeth now not blankly, but wide-eyed, biting her lip with worry.

Hyacinth spoke to Grace, and Grace turned to Hambeth.

“She wishes beer,” she said, “in sufficient quantities to make easier this next ordeal. Or wine. Or liquor of the wheat kernel, better yet. Or mead.”

“Some may be obtained,” Hambeth promised. “We shall see.”

Stott and Wriheart set the frame and yoke on the cart, Wright took his leave, and Hambeth motioned to the girl to walk. Her first few steps were tentative, her balance unsteady as she learned the art of drawing a wheeled burden, but by her tenth step she was pulling as well as a horse might, if not as quickly.



Image by 2Loose2Trek

“I must depart for other labors,” Grace said. “It seems you can negotiate things without me.”

“I will need your help again, Graceheart,” Hambeth said. “If you can find that drink the girl requested.”

“I will search.”

Chapter XVIII: Applying the King’s Device

Back at the smith's, Hyacinth was returned to her shackles and collar before she was freed from the cart, and she helped Hambeth bring the frame and yoke into the shop and then, nude but for her chains, Hambeth bade her wait on the tree stump in the corner while they searched for the rope they would use to bind her.

Stotthearth the smith, worker of metals, turned up enough from rags and tied bundles to secure Hyacinth to Wriothearth's frame, and he set it aside and went to work on the king's device.

Hambeth, for his part, watched from Stott's counter and wrestled with a new trouble, the one of empty time.

He should be back at his uncle's farm, helping to plant a half hectare of late wheat, helping to clear the full hectare to be tilled anew, helping his uncle set the space where Oleander would sleep tonight. Instead, he was watching other men work, talking to men with words that produced nothing, and occupying his mind on things that could not be solved through thought alone.

And then, there was what they were about to do to Hyacinth. Necessary, sanctioned by the crown, done as a matter of course in every corner of the world, but terrible. It would be brief, at least. But terrible.

Stott's efficiency in this matter was no relief. With quick hammer blows, a furnace belching fire, the hissing steam of his cooling trough, and then silence as he crouched by Hyacinth to match the progress of his work against the mark on her leg, Stotthearth's efforts moved toward their injurious destiny.

More than once, Hambeth caught the girl looking at him, beautiful even with the injured eye she earned killing a man, and he looked back, wishing he could tell her he wanted this to be over as much as did she.

Stott kept Hambeth abreast of his progress, turning now and then to show that the first of the four lengths of the device had been attached to the end of an iron rod, then the second, then the third, so that there was but one more segment to be attached before the "X" was complete, not a simple flat device but bent and requiring more art, curved to match the girls' rounded thighs, to make short and simple the marking of them as Camberian.

"Drink now," Stott said through the steam, as he plunged his finished work into the cooling trough.

Hambeth turned away from the shop, wondering who in Camberia might be willing to share with Grace calming drink to ease the pains of a

Paxilexian girl. His answer came soon enough, for he saw Grace at the corner of a dwelling down the lane, her bags depleted, a cup in her hand, her eyes turned to him, waiting.

She drew near after she saw him as quickly as her restraints would allow, daughter returned to her back, the cup in one hand, the other holding the bags at her shoulder, and Hambeth wondered if all Paxilex girls were so adept, so stolid, so calm before the snarling faces of adverse gods.

“I have found enough to numb a horse,” she said quietly.

“Where?”

“It passed through several hands,” she replied. “I am not the only one who frets over this.”

“Will your Paxil gods forgive me?”

Grace laughed, handing the cup over to Hambeth’s custody. “No god troubles themselves on this,” she said, “any more than they stir at the taking of bird to wing, or the noises of a dog. If they were so soft, they would never rest.”

“Then this is a travail for mortals alone.”

“Yes, you speak beyond your years,” Grace said, “as you sometimes do.”

She touched the edge of the vessel, a smoky dark liquid sloshing within. “Now, the cup holds three measures, not one. Give all of it to that first one, and she shall either die or force it back up, and that smith’s shop is already enough befouled.”

“As you say it, Gracehearth.”

“And the cup is Avelina’s. She or a daughter will come for it when the day’s efforts are over. Let not that man mistake it for refuse.”

“As you say,” Hambeth replied, and he made his way carefully back to the workplace of Stott, the odor of this wrecking potion strong in his nose.

“You found it already?” Stott asked.

“I did,” Hambeth replied. “Camberia is a generous village in certain matters.”

“I did not expect you so soon. Let me check my work.”

Stott pulled the iron from the water of his trough, stepped to Hyacinth and bade her rise with a motion of his hand.

She stood, body straight, chin raised, and Hambeth looked at her form, at the thick black hair she wore like a garment over her female door,

at her breasts, tipped with pink nipples that pointed upward, one toward Stott's face, the other toward the trees beyond his shop, and he reminded himself that she was Camberian property and must be treated as such.

Stott raised his work to Hyacinth's thigh, the iron matching the mark on her leg perfectly. She looked down, looked back up, looked at Hambeth, eyes impassive.

"Shall she drink now?" Hambeth asked.

"Yes."

Hambeth entered the shop, stood before Hyacinth and raised the cup to her.

She took it, smelled it, scowling at its bitter scent.

"Hyacinth," Hambeth said, pointing at the cup, wishing he had asked Grace for more fitting words. "Lilac. Oleander."

She nodded, raised the cup to her mouth, sipped carefully and grimaced at Hambeth. "Ugh," she said.

Hambeth stepped beside her to look into the cup, saw she'd barely reduced it, raised his hand to goad another draught.

She sipped again, grunted again, did both more times until Hambeth was satisfied she'd had her share.

"If she keeps it down, I'd guess it will work its fullest art in a fraction of a finger, like any good drink" Hambeth said.

"Help me set her then," Stott said, dropping the iron into the fire, motioning to the girl to fall to the frame.

Hyacinth obeyed, positioning hands and feet beside the beams, her sense of the frame's purpose and function needing no explanation.

Hambeth set the cup where she'd been sitting, freed her ankles from her shackles, removed the collar, and bound her hands with rope to the frame while Stott secured her ankles, next bringing the yoke to her, opening it, guiding her head in and setting it around her neck, clamping it tight with the latches of Wriheart's craft. Finally, with a fifth length of rope, Stott knelt beside Hyacinth's left leg, fastening her knee to the beam at the frame's side.

"Now we wait," Stott said.

"What shall you use as guide for time?"

"Watch," Stott said, kneeling before the girl.

"Hyacinth."

She looked up quickly, first at Stott, then to Hambeth.

“As sober as Archenix,” Stott said. “What did you give her?”

“I know not. Grace found it somewheres.”

Stott stepped to the cup, smelled it, took a sip.

“Hmm,” he said. “Aurochs piss and rotted apple flesh.”

“Perhaps,” Hambeth agreed. “I know not the drink’s character, beyond its foul smell.”

“Who drinks such a poison in this, or any village?”

“Someone of Grace’s acquaintance,” Hambeth said. “Or it might be the mixed contribution of several parties. She makes the rounds.”

Stott set down the cup, returned to the girl.

“Hyacinth.”

She looked up, but not as quickly.

Stott stood, leaned against the wall and spoke to Hambeth of the latest he’d heard of the war, the rumors of things, and Hambeth told what he knew, of the theft of the daughters of Avenlou nobility, and they agreed to watch the sea together again, on a moonless night when the lights of ships would be most visible. But they fell silent when Hyacinth began to sing, a simple but haunting melody that Hambeth guessed was something mothers sang to their children in Paxilex to calm them.

Stott crouched.

“Hyacinth.”

She continued to sing until she seemed to lose track of the song, repeating the same four notes several times over, each time trying to get them right and failing.

“Hyacinth.”

“Hyacinth.”

The girl looked up not at all, and Hambeth hoped she was only drunk and not taking her last breaths.

Stott wound his hair behind his head, raised the iron from the coals, both glowing red at first, but the iron losing its color quickly as Stott stepped to Hyacinth’s flank, put one hand on her rump and raised the tool.

Hambeth held his breath, so that the only sound he could hear emanating from himself, or from anywhere in the world, was his own heart, thumping so violently in his chest he thought it might crack a rib.

Something hissed, but it was not Stott’s cooling trough.

With that sound, time for Hambeth took on the thick nature of summer mud, moving slowly, if at all. The hiss seemed to last half a finger,

and then it ended and all was silent for a long time, before the frame creaked and groaned, holding the writhing form of Hyacinth before the rope around her knee snapped.

The work was done true by then, however, and Stott pulled back and Hyacinth screamed, a single, piercing cry of pain that rattled around in Hambeth's mind like hand-flung gravel, and he fought the urge to cry out with the girl.

That single wail was all Camberia suffered, her next sound quiet weeping, her body gone limp in the brace, and Hambeth looked down and saw that all her flesh glistened, sweat beading up across her back, on her legs, down her arms, on her breasts.

He knelt, forcing himself to see the work that was done because of his own trading.

The brand had left exactly the mark that the king's people, in their stilted way, had outlined: Two crossed lines of red, blistered flesh, one take above the knee.

Hyacinth was singing again, a different song, or the same song as before but sung a different way, through a throat thick from screaming and sobbing.

Stott, for his part, either did not care about the girl's suffering, or could not allow himself to care. He pulled a set of clipping tongs from his wall, crouched behind the girl and reached out, thick, black fingers examining the chain and the rings at her female slot.

Without ceremony, he raised the tongs, pulled one of the rings away from the girl's body, and bore down on it, grunting with the effort of cutting through a metal that was forged delicately but stronger than the common irons of Camberia.

The girl's song grew louder and faster and she moved her hips some, but she kept her eyes closed and did not cry out, and soon enough, her opening was freed, Stott holding up the chain for Hambeth's review that had bound her, gapped rings dangling from each chain end, before he set it on the stump beside the cup of drink.

Stott stepped to his furnace, added coal and hit the bellows, triggering a flame so hot it stung Hambeth's face. He dropped a long, narrow rod into the inferno and pulled a length of heavy aurochs hide from his shelf.

“Here,” he said simply, kneeling at Hyacinth’s neck and motioning Hambeth to join him.

“The collar will go on hot,” Stott said. “But she’s had all the burning she’s due today, so you’ll hold still the hide while I shape the metal around her.”

He wrapped the hide around Hyacinth’s neck and she stopped singing, but she was not silent, a quiet, rhythmic groan emanating from somewhere in her throat, like the windsong that emanates from somewhere among the roots of winter trees.

Hambeth held the hide in place and imagined failing at this, and he begged his nerves to be still, so terrified was he of a second scream from the girl.

He looked up and saw the faces of townsfolk, male and female, at Stott’s counter. At least a dozen had gathered there, drawn by Hyacinth’s scream, no doubt, and come to watch now because they had nothing better to do. He wished they would go away, but, needful of the light, he couldn’t ask Stott to close the window.

Stott, whose work this afternoon proceeded slowly and deliberately until yielding to a sudden burst of effort, was moving quickly again, the smith using a pair of grippers to remove the red hot rod from the coals. He brought it to Hyacinth, dropped it onto the hide and bent it around her neck quickly, expertly, crimping the ends together before the metal could cool and become unmalleable.

Hyacinth felt the heat through the aurochs skin, and she gasped and jerked, but the brace and the yoke held her and soon enough, the metal was cooling in place.

“Slide the hide out only when the iron can be touched,” Stott instructed. “And then we’ll berth her and get this done with the other two.”

“When will you make her new chain, like the one you gave to Oleander?”

“Tomorrow,” Stott replied. “For she and the other one too.”

“What you made takes two pins?” Hambeth inquired.

“It does. I can show you its operation when next we are by her.”

“Yes. And will Oleander’s fit any girl?”

“Probably. But you have Agarjj’s work in the meantime.”

“You yourself have no trust in his bindings.”

“Once collared and marked, it matters not if Agarjj wrapped them in rope of sand. Or if I did. They may go nowheres in Avenlou and stay free long.”

“You trust another village to return them to us?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. But either way, these girls will find themselves in the same fix but worse, either bundled up and returned to Avenlou’s greatest trader for a reckoning, or kept there and branded again and bound double, so they do not make their way to the next village.”

“All of this is true,” Hambeth conceded, “but if they fall by ignorance of things into a fix in different environs, I am still fixed as well.”

“Surely they know the meaning of today’s furtherance.”

“I will have Grace parley on it with them, all the same,” Hambeth said, and he breathed in deeply, for Stott’s words brought him a relief he had not anticipated. Collar and brand would serve as two long, invisible chains, forged at no further expense, joining always the girls by body and soul to Camberia no matter where they might vanish to.

“All the same,” Stott added, “I advise some form of stay.”

“Well spoken,” Hambeth said, “for you have almost talked yourself out of your commission.”

“Even now,” Stottheath replied quickly, “I ponder my arguments for a reduced project.”

“You do not want Archenix’s vanders?”

“I have others to serve who have vanders enough, and other bartering goods besides that can be put to use, coal and meat and milk and the rest, and already some used to my prompt service are not pleased by this distraction.”

Stottheath stood and moved to his furnace, shutting the door at the side where the coals glowed red, valving closed the bellows.

“Test her collar,” he said.

Hambeth put his fingers against the ring of iron at the back of Hyacinth’s neck, and at the fore, and on the sides, and found it warm all the way around, but no longer hot, and he eased the aurochs hide out from beneath it, and she moved not, staring at the floor of packed earth, breathing softly, no longer singing, the mark on her thigh blistered fierce. Hambeth thought of Grace and the blood that scored her back, and believed this was worse, because it would not heal, and was done at his bidding.

“When that drink passes through her, this will sting again,” he remarked.

Stott grunted but had nothing to add.

“Shall we release her?” Hambeth asked.

“Yes, her sisters await their turn.”

“Bring them both back as one?” Hambeth asked, giving voice to a new uncertainty. Should one girl be allowed to witness the other’s marking? If he could ask them directly, he would, but he could not, and Grace had taken her leave as soon as she’d handed over the liquor.

“I have no advice on that, slaver,” Stott said. “I am but a smith.”

Hambeth scowled, stood and stepped to the counter, the throng of townsfolk there reduced to a mere rabble with Hyacinth’s cry no longer echoing against the mountains.

“Would anyone have better rope than we find here?” he asked.

“And a share of midday food?”

He turned, not waiting for an answer, and he and Stott set upon freeing Hyacinth, opening her yoke and loosing her limbs from the frame, unraveling the rope she snapped at her knee. Each took one of her arms in theirs, and they helped her to her feet and steadied her until it seemed she could stand on her own.

Hambeth, with a hand on her shoulder, stepped before her and looked upon her face and into her eyes, the good one and the swollen, for a sense of her sobriety.

She looked back and smiled, gazing as Lilac had the night before, senselessly, for how could she with any sense smile at the man who had bound her and organized her torment?

“Hyacinth?” he inquired.

She blinked, nodded.

“Hambeth,” she replied, and she smiled again.

Chapter XIX: The Branding of Two More

Hyacinth, returned to her shackles but free of the other restraints, walked slowly but steadily between Hambeth and Stott back to the armory, limping on her branded leg while Hambeth pondered his choices.

By the time he’d reached the little building, where all the thatch was in place now above and Wrighthearth stood at the structure’s door with

two assistants, Hambeth had made up his mind. He would be free with the tidings of things where he could be, the girls would be allowed to speak one to the other, and word of today's practices would not be withheld, if Hyacinth were able to tell them.

Hambeth drew Hyacinth past the door, nodded to Wright and felt a small relief to see that Lilac and Oleander were still confined.

He brought Hyacinth before their berths and turned the girl so that her fellows could see what had been done.

Both looked at the new mark, eyes showing awareness only, and no other response.

Hyacinth looked to Wriheart first before she seemed to remember the two captives at her side, and she gazed at them and slurred a greeting and raised a hand to her collar, touching the iron there as if sensing it for the first time, a weak surprise in her eyes.

Oleander spoke, quick words that Hyacinth struggled to reply to. Lilac queried next, and Hyacinth answered slowly, and Hambeth hoped they were speaking of the ordeal only, and the drink that awaited, and the way things would be done, and they weren't working out the means of their escape, and the best way to murder Hambeth before they had taken leave of Camberia.

Oleander spoke again, and Hambeth guessed she asked now about the bindings at her middle, because Hyacinth turned, opened her legs and pulled at her mound to lift her vulva, displaying her new freedom without any hint of embarrassment.

Done with their inquiry, the girls fell silent, and Hyacinth turned to Hambeth and raised the eyebrow over her good eye, which gazed at him and then at nothing.

Hambeth, guessing that a closed space to rest in was the girl's greatest desire, turned to the third finished space and pulled open the door, and Hyacinth drew near it and peered inside.

"Shall we straw their berths, Hamheart?" Wriheart inquired.

"Eh?" Hambeth responded.

"If you would that they sleep and rest and tarry on bare wood, so be it," Wriheart explained, "but the kindness might show a return in better work, and give them a landing for their piss besides."

"Aye," Hambeth replied, blushing as yet another matter was laid before him he had failed to consider. "Yes, we shall keep them in straw at

least.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You have it at the ready?”

“Some has been brought and was set in back,” Wriothearth said, “by the good folk of Camberia.”

Done inspecting her space, Hyacinth clambered in clumsily, wincing and issuing a soft “Ahhh” of pain as she bent her shackled legs.

Hambeth left open her door, removed the beam that held the other girls and freed them, each sliding out, neither demonstrating any hesitation before what lay next for them.

Hambeth had brought slung over his shoulder the long chains for neck and wrist, but he set them down against the wall and motioned the girls to follow him out, Lilac in only Agarjj’s shackles, Oleander in the restraints Stott had fashioned for her.

The two followed him behind old armory, where straw and flax and grass had been set in an impressive mound by the kind farmers of Camberia, or the farmers’ kind wives.

Hambeth pointed to it and, as in other matters, the girls quickly understood, each stooping to gather a thick bundle within her arms, Oleander’s the smaller bundle because of her chains, shuffling back to the berths, depositing their first burdens in Hyacinth’s space, the girl laughing and distributing the small comfort as best she could around herself, as if this were the game of a child.

Hambeth, content to let his charges make their own decision in this matter, joined Stott outside the building and watched as the slaves procured a half dozen loads each, for Hyacinth and then for themselves, laying thick their bedding before they finished and left the structure.

Hambeth went inside and set the beam before Hyacinth’s door, and she looked out, still dazed. He offered her a grim smile and exited, joining Stott and the two slaves beside the building.

“Mehopes they foul judiciously,” Stott said, “or you shall be busy.”

“They are not horses,” Hambeth observed. “They’ll tend their own spaces.”

“Perhaps you can train them to a privy,” Stott ventured.

“Again, they are not beasts,” Hambeth said, “as they have already shown this morning, for they held instead of releasing in Uncle’s barn.”

After he spoke, however, Hambeth reconsidered.

“But they might not mind guidance,” he conceded, and he looked at the girls and motioned to a place beside the wall of the armory, which seemed to him as suited for the purpose as any other.

The girls understood, stepped to the space and lowered themselves, backs against the wall, emptying there a quantity that suggested they’d been waiting some time for permission.

While still they released, Stott stepped to the girls and crouched.

“Piss,” he said, adjusting his belt. “Piss.”

“Piss,” each girl replied.

Stott pointed at Hambeth. “Say to that one, ‘Piss, Hambeth,’ and perhaps he’ll be kind enough to allow it.”

The girls nodded with apparent understanding, and they rose and followed as Hambeth and Stott turned back toward the smith’s shop.

“You’ll let the one watch the other get marked?” Stott asked.

“I will,” Hambeth said. “I’ve considered it some. We’ll have both take the cup together, and work them through in order if you can move at your usual pace, for whatever it is Grace collected seems to hold its magic for awhile.”

“What’s this?” Stott muttered as they rounded the corner of his shop, and the two friends stopped in surprise, for the counter lay thick with the things Hambeth had requested, at least a dozen stretches of rope of every length and thickness, and enough sustenance to feed a small army, spread out over sacks, on plates, in bowls. There were bread, pastries, meats fresh and salted, boiled eggs, puddings, lumps of butter, sausages, carrots, figs, pears and apples, three skins of water, and a dozen auroch’s rib bones.

“Surely this is more than the generosity of Avelina and her daughters,” Hambeth mused.

“The village has decided you need assistance,” Stott observed.

“Perhaps they will come beat iron for me tomorrow.”

Stott picked up one of the bones with two thick black fingers, raised it to his eyes, set it back down.

“What think they these girls are?” he asked of no one.

Hambeth motioned to the counter and looked at Oleander and Lilac, but both simply looked back and shook their heads.

“They’re not hungry,” Hambeth said.

“No, they’re hungry,” Stott countered. “Their appetites thrive, as we’ve seen.”

“They cannot eat for distress over the matter before them?”

“I’m not sure,” Stott replied. “It is strange, and not the last strange thing from them I’m sure.”

Hambeth brought the girls into the shop and raised the cup of Grace’s gathering, wondering if they would know its purpose, if Hyacinth had been able to explain it to them.

Oleander reached out first, took a sip, scowled into the liquid and handed it to Lilac, who did likewise.

Back and forth went the cup, the girls drinking equal shares until it was gone while Stott dropped the branding iron and two metal rods into his furnace, threw on coal, pumped the bellows and warmed his shop almost beyond Hambeth’s ability to tolerate.

Hambeth looked to Oleander and pointed to the stump, and she sat, looking down at the chain that had been removed from Hyacinth’s opening. Then Hambeth looked to Lilac and pointed to the frame.

Lilac stepped to it bravely, her eyes betraying no fear, no emotion at all, and she dropped down and put her hands and feet where Hyacinth’s had been.

Stott and Hambeth looked to the rope on the counter, each selecting those lengths that seemed best for the purpose, binding Lilac’s wrists and her still-shackled ankles to the frame before Stott moved to her left leg with a fifth and sixth piece of rope and secured her by the thigh and knee.

“You won’t have a guide for this one,” Hambeth noted.

“I remember well enough,” Stott said, setting the yoke around Lilac’s neck and latching it closed. “It would be hard to fumble this.”

He knelt before the girl.

“Lilac.”

She looked up quickly, as Hyacinth had when first Stott spoke her name, so Stott and Hambeth continued their conversation of earlier, about war and the Greater Vandals and possible peace and what it was like to wander Fifth Pass, where the traders spoke of ancient ruins, of the sun setting over the city of Humber, at the top of Fifth Pass, ten leagues at least visible from there, and of the people as well, the soldiers and slaves and traders, and their carts and the beasts and people that drew them.

“Lilac.”

She looked at Hambeth before she seemed to realize the voice had come from Stott, and she looked at him and forced out a few words of

Paxil, doubly indecipherable as she struggled to make the sounds of her native tongue.

Stott moved quickly now, pulling the reddened iron from the fire, allowing it briefly to cool, then kneeling beside Lilac, resting one hand on her rump and applying the iron with the other, the hiss followed by the scream of pain, neither sound Hambeth believing he could ever grow accustomed to.

All the ropes held this time, Lilac ceased her writhing and merely breathed deeply, whimpering, and Stott crawled behind her to work at the bindings across her vulva.

More quickly than the first time, he snipped them off and turned to set them on the stump but, finding Oleander there, he handed the little chains to her. She regarded them, blinked in confusion, looked at Hambeth dazedly, and burst out laughing, her voice husky under the spell of the drink, and she bit her lip and raised one chained hand to her eyes to wipe them, and then she clapped one hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter, which came again nonetheless.

As before, the cry of a slave girl summoned the villagers, and they gathered to watch, ten perhaps, men and women.

Hambeth ignored them, glanced at Oleander and saw that she was senseless, and felt a fraction of relief.

But now had come that most precarious time. He picked up the aurochs hide and made to wrap it around Lilac's neck, but she was different from Hyacinth here. Her neck was shorter, or her shoulders were higher. Either way, the yoke at first obstructed so much of her neck that the hide would not lay right. The girls, who seemed like three of a kind when first he saw them on the road, were different indeed, and most likely not sisters.

Hambeth looked to Stott, who was pumping the bellows and turning the iron rod that was soon to become Lilac's collar.

"This one has a lesser neck, Stotthearth," Hambeth warned.

"The drink garbled her mind and speech," Stott replied, smiling at the villagers come to witness, "and shortened her length as well."

Hambeth pondered Stott's wisdom before he replied, "We can wait for her to grow back, or work within the confines."

"Confines are no trouble for me," Stott said. "Hold the skin with one hand, pull her shoulders away from the yoke with the other, and I'll have her set as before."

Hambeth held up his hands. “The magic that reduced a girl’s neck has not yet given me a third arm. Shall we wait for that?”

Stott picked up the iron rod.

“There isn’t time,” he said. “Do your best with your two natural arms. Such as they are.”

Hambeth, with the fear of missing with the hide and marring Lilac’s flesh, grabbed the girl’s right shoulder, drew her back from the yoke and wrapped the hide as best he could around her neck, squeezing it tight just as Stott arrived with the collar, lowering it to her, closing and crimping as if there were no obstacles at all.

Hambeth marveled at the smith’s skill.

Lilac responded to the warmth of the collar with a distress of small sounds, but she stayed still, and Hambeth held firm the skin until the metal cooled.

“She is done and not burned,” he announced, slipping the hide out and holding it up to Stott. “One more.”

He turned to look at Oleander, finding her slumped against the wall of the shop, her eyes half closed, but the smile lingering there still.

“That one finds humor where she should not,” Stott observed, helping Hambeth free Lilac from the yoke and frame.

“She has a strange smile always at the ready,” Hambeth agreed. “I believe mischief provokes it.”

“This is no place for mischief,” Stott said.

“She remembers an earlier prank,” Hambeth speculated, “if she remembers at all. Or her mouth was born bent like that. But certainly, if there be a new project afoot there, it lacks sober logic. Or she will prove too addled to see it through.”

“Wherefor she sports it,” Stott said, “it unnerves me.”

“Call it beauty and worry not,” Hambeth said, gesturing to the townsfolk. “She is outnumbered, and outchained.”

Hambeth and Stott helped Lilac to her feet and deposited her beside Oleander, guiding her as she dropped to the stump, bent her knees and grimaced.

Oleander looked up, smiled at Hambeth and Stott in turn, leaned forward as if wishing to rise, but fell back and laughed, so the two friends took their places at either side of her, lifted her and set her over the frame without removing her new chains. Unable to stand on her own, she

maintained her balance on all fours well enough as she was bound hand and foot, yoked, and secured at the left leg.

With no test of impairment required this time, Stott turned quickly to his furnace, warming the iron with a series of bellows presses, drawing it forth, kneeling beside Oleander and putting his hand on her rump.

Her cry of fear and pain came before the iron landed, but she fell silent at the hiss, followed only by a soft, quiet weeping, pathetic and deserving of sympathy in its own way.

Stott snipped off the chain at her female opening, set it on the stump and stepped to his furnace to retrieve the third collar.

“What length is this one’s neck at?” he asked.

“It may have gone short,” Hambeth said, applying the hide, “but it seems to have returned to its original length again, so you should have no trouble.”

“I had no trouble on the second one either,” Stott replied. “Have you grown that third arm yet?”

Hambeth looked down. “No, nor shall I need it now.”

The collar was bent around Oleander’s neck and crimped, the metal cooled, and Hambeth and Stott freed Oleander, put her back on the stump and turned to the townsfolk.

“Our gratitude to whomever these provisions supplied,” Hambeth said. “That the girls want them not is most likely the result of our doings here.”

The people shuffled, smiled, murmured acknowledgements, and Learra, eldest daughter of Avelina, stepped to the fore.

“They suffered,” she said.

“We did as the king ordered,” he said. “But that is finished now.”

“Will it continue to hurt them?”

“The pain will subside, and was softened by drink besides.”

“What will they have to do for us?”

“Whatever any girl can do,” Hambeth replied. “What of this is yours?”

“Some,” she replied simply. “We did not bring the bones.”

Hambeth nodded his thanks.

Learra, a summer younger than he, was fair the way Avenlou girls could be, blonde, with pale skin and blue eyes.

“May I take our cup back?”

“The cup?”

“Mother’s cup was used for the drink you gave them.”

“Ah,” Hambeth said, remembering Grace’s words. He bent to the stump, grabbed the cup and handed it off to Learra.

“What say you, greatest trader?” Stott said. “Shall we berth these girls now and let them rest?”

“We shall, if they will walk, or at least crawl,” Hambeth said. “I’ll not drag or cart them.”

“I shall get no work from them today in either case,” Stott lamented.

“Tomorrow, if you make first claim, you may work one all day.”

“I want more than work from them.”

“You, and others,” Hambeth said. “And I know not how to parcel that out.”

“Well,” Stott said, “let me show you how the girl’s new fetters work.”

Hambeth turned to the girls. Lilac stared at her feet, but Oleander looked up at him and seemed ready to make her way. She set her hands on the stump and pushed up, falling back on the first attempt but rising up unsteadily on the second try, pressing a hand against the wall above Lilac, swaying but not falling, like a wheat stalk in the wind.

Stott drew two small pins from his tunic and reached for Oleander’s hand, raising it and motioning to her to hold it still. While she watched, he raised the pins to the holes in her cuff.

“It is in this order,” he said. “First this pin here, and then the other, this way, and, ‘pfft,’ the cuff opens.”

The cuff opened and dropped from Oleander’s wrist, swinging loose, clinking against the chain that ran to her right foot.

“Now, you close it and open it back.”

Hambeth stepped up to Oleander, looked into her eyes. She looked back with her perpetual half-smile, then looked down as Hambeth raised the open cuff and snapped it around her wrist. He took the pins from Stott, applied them as the smith had instructed and, after a few tries, freed her and returned her to the chain.

“You do your trade proud, Stotthearth,” Hambeth said, tucking the pins into his tunic.

“And these are the shackles she’ll sleep in,” Stott said, pulling the restraints from his shelf. “The chain between is long enough for sleeping, or to stagger, or to crouch and piss, but she’ll not run in them, or even walk with much stride.”

Hambeth tucked the shackles into his pocket, looked at Oleander and pointed at Lilac.

Oleander reached down to the other girl, tapped her shoulder and said something to her, and Lilac started as if from a dream, looked up and, after a few uncertain attempts, rose slowly.

Hambeth took Oleander’s arm, Stott Lilac’s, and they led the girls out of the shop and through the throng, the people of Camberia turning to watch them as if they were witness to the procession of a king. Indeed, the new slave girls were the only ones in Camberia who bore evidence of the king’s will upon their very flesh.

“Ah,” Oleander said, stopping to look with drunken longing toward the counter.

“They’ve found their appetite at last, I believe,” Hambeth said, and he and Stott led the girls to the food, the townspeople parting for them.

The girls did not set upon the food ravenously, however. They did not set upon the food at all. Instead, Lilac, whose hands were free, stuffed a great portion of everything on the counter into two of the flaxen bags. Oleander, unable to load with her hands in restraints, seemed to be giving instructions for some of it, speaking a word now and then and prompting Lilac to grab a particular item – figs, apples, butter, meat – and place it in the bag. Or try to. Several items ended up on the counter beneath the bag, Hambeth stepping up to lodge things properly.

The girls did not seem to want any of the bones, leaving all on the counter.

Done, Lilac handed one bag to Oleander, and she held the other, the girls shuffling, each stepping more slowly with the burned left leg under the escort of Hambeth and Stott.

Chapter XX: Questions of Service

Midway back to the armory where Hyacinth waited, Hambeth arrived at an idea.

“You have seen how they eat and drink, Stottheath?”

“I have,” Stott replied. “If you asked me to use one word, I would choose ‘aplenty.’”

“Yes, but a second word would also suit. ‘As one.’”

“That is two words.”

“As one,” Hambeth repeated. “They share. They do not eat unless the other eat just then. All you put within their reach they set upon as equals.”

“Yes,” Stott agreed, “that has been their pattern.”

“And so it is still for these girls, addled as they are,” Hambeth said. “These two did not wish to dine before Hyacinth, so they sat it out. Most likely they are drooling.”

Stott looked at the girls, but they focused only on the earth before them, all their faculties consumed with walking over rough ground in chains with stinging legs while conveying parcels of sustenance.

“Watch when we reach Hyacinth. They will bring her in by equal shares, and if she be not asleep or dead, all will eat the same.”

“They will have to squeeze her supper through her door,” Stott observed.

“Wrightearth roped the slats with enough space for it,” Hambeth said. “Or I can open it as well.”

“Better to forge those doors than rely on bound timber,” Stott asserted. “These girls can scratch or claw through rope, and probably wood as well.”

“The door to the armory will lock, and Wrightearth will secure it two ways,” Hambeth said.

“And what of the roof?” Stott said. “These girls—”

“They can climb like squirrels and fly like birds, and chew with a beaver’s art as well?” Hambeth interrupted. “What magic over your eyes makes you see three such beasts?”

“You yourself said this one smiles with mischief,” Stott protested, gesturing toward Oleander. “I wager that what she lacks in tooth and claw she makes up in wiles.”

“I am not worried,” Hambeth said. “There are enough safeguards, within Camberia and beyond, to ensure we’ll get back our two hundred vandars, and then some more.”

They reached the old armory, found that the entrance was now protected with a heavy wooden door where latches had been set and beams

could be inlaid, and they entered to find Hyacinth peering from her berth, alert and, Hambeth guessed, hungry.

As he'd predicted, Oleander and Lilac both approached the confined girl, opened their sacks and spoke to her as they pulled out bread and fruit and eggs and meat and water in a skin and pushed it through the slats and into her eager hands.

They seemed to be measuring out exactly a third of everything, gifting Hyacinth with far more than she could eat for a single meal, and she cleared hay from a space at the front of her berth and set the food there, but took not a bite.

Oleander said something, her words slurred but understandable to Hyacinth, and funny, apparently. She picked up something imaginary, made as if first to gnaw upon it, then to scowl at it, and Oleander and Lilac laughed.

"They tell her of the dozen rib bones," Stott said. "And all laugh at our expense."

"We have laughed enough at theirs," Hambeth noted. "And worse besides."

"But we own them, and not the other way around," Stott argued. "Let them laugh at us today, and tomorrow they'll ignore our commands, and the day after that, they'll plot our downfall."

"They are three chained girls," Hambeth said. "They could not I warrant arrange the downfall of a patch of crows."

"They brought down a pirate, and not in a way others enjoyed gazing upon."

"If it ease your worry, I'll put in with Archenix for better doors at each berth, and see to it that all three girls sleep in your chains every night, and are confined as well, and watched."

"What think you of Oleander's new fetters?" Stott asked.

"She already seems at home in them," Hambeth replied. "Make two more sets as soon as you may."

"I'll have them tomorrow."

Lilac tapped Hambeth's shoulder, and he turned in surprise. It was the first time any girl had touched him, and he looked into her eyes, trying to read the thoughts there.

"Hambett?" she asked.

"Yes?"

She pointed to her berth, and Hambeth guessed her meaning and nodded, watching as she and Oleander set in the bags of food and crawled in after them, slowly and cautiously, careful not to touch the sites of their burns to anything, wincing with the pain of moving their legs as they clambered.

Once the girls were settled, Hambeth closed each door and latched them shut but did not bother with the beam, and all three girls began dining, talking with full mouths, and Oleander laughed, but Lilac and Hyacinth did not.

“When will you put these girls to work?” Stotthearth asked.

“I will take this one back to Uncle’s today,” Hambeth said, pointing at Oleander, “and see if she can pick up things, or move things, or feed an aurochs without tremble, or till the earth, or do anything besides laugh and smile.”

“What of the other two?”

“I cannot send them out in uncertain chains,” Hambeth said, and he looked away, at the stone wall of the old armory, for this was altogether a new thing whose operation had so far eluded him. “But even when you forge their new irons, I cannot manage three girls in two places, unless I can make my double.”

“Two Hambeths would be more Hambeths by one than Camberia should be asked to trouble itself with,” Stott said. “But, as long as there is but one of you, my notion would be to let that one work under your uncle’s watch on the morrow, then come here early and see if there are any takers for these other two and their sweat.”

“There’s sense in that.”

“Or their other wet favors.”

Hambeth looked at the three girls, eating in silence now, his mind in turmoil anew.

“How shall they be furnished?” Hambeth asked. “The randy men of Camberia shall break them all the first day, and by the second they’ll be fit for no labor at all, or anything else.”

“You think these girls so soft?”

“They told Grace they would serve that way, but surely they are unused to it, given the bindings they were in, and their promises vain. In truth, I know not whether they are soft, or hard, or bent on their next murder.”

“Perhaps you should have left chained the gates to their amusements.”

“Perhaps. Or there must be rules.”

“Which the eager men of Camberia will gladly abide.”

“The men of Camberia have wives, often enough,” Hambeth noted. “And daughters. Both of whom may temper the things they do.”

Stott merely laughed.

“Then let me think on it,” Hambeth said, scowling. “The answer might come while I turn dirt. And I am famished besides. I will take Oleander now, and see what may come, and if she escape, or kill me with a ladle overnight, perhaps that would be for the best.”

“What shall I do with the food still on my counter?” Stott asked.

“You may eat the bones yourself,” Hambeth replied. “And all the rest there too, or share it with others, man or otherwise. But let me see if Oleander wants more first, for we must go there anyway.”

“For what?”

“That cart of Wriothearth’s.”

“You’ll have her drag a cart in this state?”

“Yes, to return it to the carpenter, and to see how she pulls it both. If she is as able at it as was Hyacinth.”

Hambeth turned to Oleander’s berth and crouched to look in on her. She was sitting upright now, a piece of bread in one hand, a fig in the other, and she was chewing a third matter, possibly meat.

“Think you can make your way, Oleander?” Hambeth asked. “And pull a cart besides?”

She smiled, clear-eyed, and slowly raised the bread to her mouth, biting off a hunk and chewing it, leaving butter just under her nose.

“If she knew our word for yes, she would be saying it now,” Hambeth said, and he brushed under her nose, and she smiled and did the same, smearing the butter across her cheek.

“You have strange ideas about the way girls say yes,” Stott retorted. “But I’ll leave you to it. I have work enough before me to keep me up all night.”

“I’ll not bother you again,” Hambeth said. “Fare thee well.”

Stott grunted and exited the old armory, and Hambeth unlatched Oleander’s berth.

She looked puzzled for a moment, clambering out cautiously only when Hambeth motioned for her to do so.

Hambeth pointed to her food and she gathered it up and shoved it back into the flaxen bag, growing filthier and more grease-laden with every trip. He waited while the girls spoke their goodbyes, not weeping openly this time, but eyes brimming with tears, and Hambeth knew they must all be at least sober enough to feel the pain of saying farewell, and once again his own heart stirred. He checked the latches and stood the beams in place, Lilac and Hyacinth watching his efforts impassively, still working at their lunches.

Oleander, done with her adieus, looked at him and nodded, and he stepped out and she followed, holding the bag that would be her dinner and perhaps breakfast as well. Wrigetherth was gone now, or at least paused in his labors, but he left a beam by the door, which now bore all the fixtures to secure it, and Hambeth by that means locked the girls in fast and hoped they would be grateful for the respite from work or other cares this afternoon and night.

“This will be yours, Hambeth?” a male villager asked him as he left the armory grounds.

“Yes, she goes by Oleander,” Hambeth replied, stopping, Oleander pausing beside him.

“How did you choose her?”

“She seemed the least fit,” Hambeth lied. “Uncle Tomhearth and I won’t need much help.”

“What of the other two?”

“They rest now, in the old armory. And tomorrow early we’ll see what use Camberia can make of them.”

Several more men gathered around, eyeing Oleander, stepping to her left, remarking quietly over her brand while she stared at the ground and bit her lip.

“A vander for a day?” another man asked.

“Half a vander for regular labor,” Hambeth replied, I believe. “And then, there is another service that will cost that and that again.”

“How shall we engage—”

“I’ll know more on the morrow, seek me out a little after the sun wakes,” Hambeth said. “Now, let me get this one home and see if she can learn to farm grain and feed aurochs.”

Hambeth, preferring not to talk on matters for which he had half-formed answers, stepped as briskly as he could, Oleander with just one foot bound and matching his stride.

The smoke and sound from Stott's shop both filled the air as they reached it, the counter still laden with food and the bones as well.

"You have not supped yet, Stotthearth?" Hambeth shouted above the din.

Stott looked up from his anvil, said something while he continued to pound, and his words were lost in the noise. He did not look hungry, however.

Hambeth stepped to the counter and raised what lay there one by one, another hunk of bread first, chicken liver, eggs, vegetables, Oleander nodding for what else she wanted, shaking her head against the balance, looking from Hambeth's hand to his eyes and back to the food again.

As her bag grew to at least its original size, and the counter grew barren, Hambeth picked up one of the bones and held it up to the girl.

She smiled and nodded, taking it. Her chains not so short she couldn't reach her mouth, and she put the bone between her teeth and growled at Hambeth, studying his face before she set the bone back onto the counter.

Hambeth, not sure whether to be amused or frightened, looked to Stott, wishing his friend had seen this, but the smith was absorbed in his own matters, so Hambeth took the bag from Oleander, stepped to the wagon, put the bag there and pointed to the handles.

As Hyacinth had earlier, Oleander took her place before the cart and crouched, the chain between her wrists just long enough to allow her to reach both poles. Hambeth closed the two free cuffs around her wrists, more to see their fit than to keep her secure.

Hambeth led her back toward the armory, nodding brusquely or offering a quick answer to the villagers who queried him about the girls, their health, when they might be pressed into service, and how.

The sun was halfway between its zenith and the tops of the mountains as Hambeth at last made his way to the gate, Oleander clutching her ragged sack of food, Hambeth wanting only to finish his journey, return to Uncle's house and get done something in a field for the first time that day.

Grace was by the gate as well, just having her chains removed as Hambeth and Oleander arrived.

“Well met,” Hambeth said. “You were waiting for me?”

“Well met,” she replied, ignoring his question. “How do our three new girls fare?”

“It is the question all are asking me,” Hambeth said, passing beyond the village walls with her, Oleander behind. “And only you can ask directly.”

“May I parley?”

“Please.”

Grace and Oleander spoke together as the three walked slowly down the lane, Hambeth no longer in any hurry.

“She is grateful for the drink,” Grace said.

“She should thank you,” Hambeth said.

“And the hay.”

“She owes the townspeople for that.”

“And the food.”

“Did she mention the bones?”

Grace and Oleander spoke a few words, and Grace laughed.

“She says she growled and you were frightened.”

“Not frightened, just not sure what she meant by it.”

“She did it in jest,” Grace said.

“Then that’s how I’ll remember it. I did not expect humor from one who had suffered so.”

“Her leg stings, yes, but she was mostly senseless to the suffering.”

“She cried out,” Hambeth said, “as did all of them, either before or during.”

“I heard the first,” Grace said. “And found a place more distant after that to do my own things.”

“It drew others,” Hambeth said. “The townspeople—”

“Some in Camberia don’t mind being present when a girl suffers.”

“They are the ones who brought food.”

“It is like that in every place,” Grace said, “the same hand drawing out the sting and driving it deeper.”

“Our neighbors ask me of their service,” Hambeth said, “and I know not how to answer.”

“The price is clear enough,” she said. “I heard half a vander for a day’s lifting and pulling.”

“And you heard what a vander buys?”

“I did,” Grace said, her smile vague. “You have laid it out all very simply.”

“No, I have not, and you mock me by saying so. The first man who takes her for a vander will ruin her, he and his colleagues, and will bring her back unfit for that service ever again, or for anything else.”

“You will listen to counsel?” she asked.

“You offer counsel on this?”

“I do, and you may have it or set it aside: a half a vander buys only their labor from sunup to sundown, and those who pay a full vander get them only during the day’s last finger.”

“The vander-payers will feel cheated,” Hambeth protested.

“No, they will not,” Grace said simply.

“How old are these three?”

“Twenty-three summers,” Grace said, pointing to Oleander, “and twenty and nineteen.”

“Which is which of the other two?”

“The one with the healing eye is nineteen.”

“Have they known men?”

“They were allowed liberties outside their chambers, but not within”

“They spoke of this to you?”

“It is not an uncommon shred of discourse when a girl is told she’ll be serving a town.”

“Do they think this is terrible?”

“Being taken at night is terrible. Killing another is terrible, with a cooking knife. Being bound in stinging wire is terrible. They are a little better with you today.”

“Being put to the branding iron is terrible.”

“It is, but it is done only once. As for the rest, they will see.”

Chapter XXI: The Labors of Oleander and Hambeth

Oleander, be she bent on mischief against Hambeth or Camberia or all of Avenlou, labored with plain diligence at the end of that first day.

Wearing nothing but the chains Stott made for her, both hands bound to one foot, she learned to navigate both the farm and the instructions of Hambeth and Tomhearth well enough.

“Draw water,” Hambeth said, handing her a wooden bucket on a long rope and pointing to the well.

Oleander took the pail, raised one eyebrow and held up one finger, two fingers, three.

Hambeth understood the question and drew two C’s in the dirt, and she smiled and laughed, her breasts shaking, and he waited until the tail of her mirth to hold up five fingers and point again to the trough.

She spun on her free heel, made her way to the well and back to the barn with barely a limp and, while Hambeth stood atop the rail to look at a loose ceiling beam, she filled the trough at least as quickly as Hambeth on a slow day.

Three aurochs idled over, and she stood a few paces from Hambeth, watching warily but not in terror as they drank from the other side of the rail.

“Aurochs,” he said.

“Aurochs,” she repeated.

“Hambett?”

He looked down at the girl and she raised the pail to her mouth and made as if to drink.

“Yes,” he said, nodding and pointing to the well. “Yes.”

“Yes,” she said, and she went back to the well for a sixth bucket, pulling up the water and drinking a full draught, and Hambeth wondered about the other two, if they were even now lying parched in their berths, their bags of water empty, so thirsty they would not sleep tonight, their food useless without something to wash it down.

Tomhearth appeared, bearing a thin birch rod, its presence in his hand deeply embarrassing to Hambeth.

He seemed to intend only to point with it, however, and he stood beside Oleander, looked up at Hambeth, and aimed it toward the hectare where clearing and planting was next to be done.

“Do you trust her with a hoe?” Tomhearth inquired.

“Yes, Uncle, I’m sure I can teach her to break dirt.”

“No, I ask a different question. Do you trust that she shall not bury the hoe’s blade between your ribs when first you look elsewhere?”

“I will never be certain, the same as with any aurochs and their horns,” Hambeth replied, “but if we work her fair and keep her fed and watered, she will have no reason to murder again.”

“She knows the suffering that would rain down on her, should she confuse you with a pirate stealing into her night tent?”

“Stott burned her leg for no crime at all,” Hambeth said. “She knows that Camberia will push in the stinger as readily as pull it out.”

“All the same,” Tomhearth said, “watch her hands.”

“Then we shall both start on the new hectare, and labor till sundown?”

“You shalt. And may the both of you come back from it without further damage.”

Hambeth took the briar fork for himself, handed Oleander the hoe, and led her around the aurochs paddock to that wild hectare where Uncle had long thought to plant.

Except for three tall, narrow pines that had been allowed to flourish as a token of good fortune there, the land had been kept clear of trees, all the seedlings pulled up the last ten years while the weeds and grass and thorns grew thick.

Hambeth stood at the edge of the plot, marking in his mind the first tenth of it that he and Oleander would together turn to something that might send new crops to the sky.

Thornweed must all come up and be removed and burned before it could seed anew, and the land was riven with it. That and oak vine, rarer but snaking up here and there, would have to go. But the pilgrim grass could be slain in place, chopped and ground to make the soil richer. The same for palace bean, and graute.

Hambeth took the hoe from Oleander and stepped to a patch of palace bean, bearing down on it, hacking until it was but green fragments mixed with black soil. He handed the hoe to Oleander, pointed and watched while she swung passably, reducing her own little patch to fragments at perhaps half Hambeth’s pace.

Hambeth stepped to the first of the thornweed, dug in the fork and ripped the strangler of oat and wheat and barley alike out by its roots.

He held it out and Oleander glanced at it, and he shook off the dirt and threw it beyond the new hectare, and she nodded and returned to her labors, her swing growing in strength, her breasts and her thighs and her

rump shaking with every blow, and Hambeth averted his gaze and adjusted his belt and tried not to think about the soft place between her legs and the way it had been unchained.

And so they labored together, working at a rate that, in a score or two of days, might make the new hectare fit for planting.

Only when Hambeth's eyes strained through the lack of light did he turn to Oleander and bid her to stop, and she smiled and seemed to wish to continue.

Hambeth took her hoe and they walked first to the well, where he handed her the bucket and allowed her to draw water for both of them, she drinking first, he more and last.

Then to the house, where Tomhearth had spread out a repast of his own and Oleander's offerings, a full array of meats salted and unsalted, fruit and other produce of the earth, a hunk of bread with butter, a little mead, and all the rest. Sitting on the floor, her hands moved quickly, taking without discretion all that lay before her, filling her belly, washing it down with mead, and she smiled not just a half, but a whole smile, and Hambeth wanted to believe that this day was better than any day with Agarjj.

"Uncle, I wish to go back to the village," Hambeth said as the meal ended. "The girls there have all they need to eat, but I fear their drink grows thin, for I have failed to manage it."

Tomhearth looked at Hambeth. "And what of this one?"

"I'll loop the chain she wears around the post, and fasten her ankles together with what Stotthearth made today, which gives her the rights for nothing but a slow walk at best, and come back as soon as I may to watch over her all night."

"You'll sleep in the barn, then?"

"I will, Uncle."

"There will be no tarrying with Grace," Tomhearth declared.

"No, Sir," Hambeth agreed.

"Nor any other dalliance," Tomhearth said.

"No, none at all."

The meal complete, Hambeth did as he promised, allowing Oleander to empty her bladder in the weeds, then feeling his way through the dark, binding the girl in the last stall, where Tomhearth had lain hay at least as thick as what the girls had given themselves in the armory.

“Sleep well, Oleander,” Hambeth said, believing the girl knew the sense of his words even if she didn’t know his exact meaning. “I will be back after I give the other two drink.”

“Ah,” she said in reply, the hay rustling under her hip and shoulder.

Tomhearth had set out a skin of mead and a second of water and Hambeth took both, picking his way under the moon back to the village, where Bitterhearth was consulting with his own mead but still wise enough to grant Hambeth passage.

“What business will you do with the girls this night, Hamhearth?” the man asked.

“Only to drink them,” Hambeth said, holding out the skins as he stood beside the fire just inside the city gate.

“When will they serve to their fullest?”

“I have already seen one work full,” Hambeth answered evasively, “breaking up the land at our farm. So their labors begin in earnest already.”

Hambeth reached the armory, so still and gray-black in the moonlight one would never guess it held two souls, and he lifted off the beam and unlatched the door and opened it with a great creak and slipped in, certain the girls must no longer be asleep, nor were they.

“Hambett?”

“Hyacinth?” he asked, the darkness almost complete, just a few squares of faded yellow in the windows above. He heard the movement of bodies against hay, the quiet clink of chains around ankles.

“I’ve come with water and mead,” he said, feeling his way to the berths, drawing in his breath when he felt a girl’s hand through the slats of the first berth. He offered her the water, and she took it and he heard her drink and heard the soft rustle as she passed the remaining half of it back through the slats. Hambeth found the second berth, the hand waiting there, gave the girl her water and repeated the process with the mead.

To his relief, neither skin was completely emptied when he collected them.

“Goodnight,” he said. “Oleander is well.”

“Oleander,” said a voice, probably Lilac’s.

“Oleander is well. She worked hard today. You will work hard tomorrow. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” said Hyacinth, her voice the deeper one, although she was youngest.

“Goodnight,” said Lilac, even that simple word spoken with a thick Paxil accent.

Hambeth left the armory, secured the door and saw in his eye the two girls there, their faces and their hair as they had looked that day, their bodies and their chains and brands, and he journeyed home beneath the moon with the two empty skins and a body and mind full of lust and blood and semen.

He longed for Grace, and it was with exquisite pain that he passed the field he’d crossed on moon-bright nights like this many times over the last year. He wondered if she’d hung out her robe tonight. Or if she ever would again. Everything she did this day – the drink, the counsel, her audience with Archenix and the Viceroy – made him admire her more, and for him, admiration went invariably to his loins and became something else. Everything he had done, this day and yesterday, were not things anyone would admire.

He had made a terrible trade. The worst of his life. For a little fleeting respect from his village and a little help in the field, he had taken on a frightful new responsibility, lost a lover perhaps and gained not another.

He reached the barn, felt his way inside, briefly imagined Oleander lurking in the darkness for him, free of her chains and armed with the weeding fork, or the hoe, or wood, or merely her freed hands.

But he heard the clink of chains where he’d secured her, and he dropped to the same place he’d slept the night before, exhausted.

“Hambett?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Hyacinth and Lilac are well. They drank.”

“Yes.”

Hambeth closed his eyes.

Do faces match the dispositions of their wearers?

Hambeth could think of examples where they did, and examples where they did not. There were three beautiful wives of Camberia, two sisters and another, married to men of the council of Archenix, and one was a delight and two were shrewish scolds.

There was a plain girl who was sweet.

Learra, daughter of Avelina, was fair and sweet.

Grace, sharp-tongued and wise, was also sweet.

The three slave girls were all fair. Were they all sweet?

Hambeth went through their faces one by one. All, marked clearly as daughters of Paxilex, were yet distinct from each other. Oleander's face was the narrowest, her mouth the most suspect. If she were not a slave, her half-smiles would speak of nothing but charm, but it was not hard to find murder in the way she as a slave showed her teeth. Lilac's eyes were the most cat-like, her nose long, chin pronounced, and Hambeth decided she looked the most like a beast, like a rare feline, and he tried to imagine her head upon the body of the panthers they sometimes caught in the forest, and he had no trouble doing so.

Hyacinth's eyes were the darkest, and the most mysterious, Hambeth realized, a quality that had escaped him before now because invariably he saw the swollen eye first. But now, with only darkness before him, he could create from the undamaged half of her face all her visage plain, and he could see her as she was, and he could not fathom her thoughts, but he heard the song she hummed during her ordeal, as if she were beside him now and singing it into his ear.

From there, his thoughts went of their own accord down from faces to necks, to shoulders, to the wounds above and below their breasts, and the breasts themselves, which shook when they walked, and to their nipples, which hardened in cool water and at other times too, and to their waists and hips and the thick hair over their female openings, and his loins roared and his penis lay hard beneath his belt, and it was due only to Tomhearth's admonitions, and his evolving sense of propriety in these matters, and his exhaustion, that Hambeth did not disturb Oleander or find relief with his own hand.

Chapter XXII: In the Water and in the Field with Oleander

Hambeth awoke the next morning at the first crow, his penis still inflamed, and he wondered if it had known any rest through the night. His mind had, and he felt at least a little restored.

He could just make out Oleander's form on the hay, still as surely restrained as she'd been when he put her down, and he slipped out, urinated, crept back and saw that she was awake now, peering at him.

He released her work chain from the beam, freed her feet from her sleeping hobble and escorted her to the field. Tomhearth was nowhere to be

seen this morning, and Hambeth wanted to believe his uncle trusted nephew enough this day to take more sleep.

“Hambett?” she asked after she had emptied.

He looked at her, and she ran her hands across her arms and over her breasts and belly, and Hambeth understood that she wanted to bathe again, and he wondered if washing every day was something all the girls of Paxilex did, or if this would be a condition peculiar to Oleander until she had washed Agarjj’s stench completely off.

“Yes,” he said, and he headed to the river, Oleander behind him, and upon the bank he stood back and allowed her to enter, as she had the day before, gasping at the briskness of the water at her knees, gasping again when the water washed over her brand.

“Hambett,” she said, and there was something new in her eyes. She crouched until the water was up to her chin, and she raised one hand and motioned him to join her.

Hambeth stared back, using all his mind to fathom her meaning, and her intent.

When he unlatched his belt and dropped it in the grass, she stared back, mouth set firmly now, no half smile, just a pair of lips in a straight line. When he loosened the ties of his tunic, she watched him with the same face, nor did her expression change when he slipped off his boots, one by one, and pushed his pants earthward, his freed penis, straight and hard as a branch, nodding in approval.

And when Hambeth entered the water, Oleander stood, all her body from thighs up visible, the water running down from her shoulders, across her breasts, over her belly and through the hair at her middle, dripping from there back into the river whence it came.

She reached out her hands as far as her chains would allow, and Hambeth took them, and the two pulled themselves toward each other until their mouths met, Hambeth kissing the girl, she kissing back, pulling him down with her until the water stood at both their necks.

Hambeth felt a hand around his penis, stroking it, wrapping itself around his shaft, and finally, Oleander offered him that half smile, showing her teeth, moving her hips to his, spreading her legs, the chain that ran to her right ankle brushing Hambeth’s knee.

And then, her opening was at his tip, her pelvis tilting, hand guiding his member into her body while Hambeth’s own mouth went tight.

“Ah,” Oleander grunted, dropping down upon him, welcoming him into her sheath. “Ah. Ah. AHHH!”

Something seemed to hurt the girl, and she paused, holding still, her vagina pulsing around Hambeth’s shaft with a tightness that surprised him, his eyes wide with a pleasure of incomprehensible power, and he struggled to close his mouth and not cry out.

She put one hand on each of his shoulders, her chain in an arc against Hambeth’s breast, and she pulled herself up and dropped back down, grunting as she stared wide-eyed into Hambeth’s face.

“Ah,” she said quietly.

“Ah,” Hambeth agreed. “Yes.”

“Yes,” she echoed.

She rose and fell no more than a dozen times before Hambeth’s aching member swelled and spat, and he grunted out his pleasure while he thrust in and out and watched her face, the half smile gone and replaced by the shock of something else, perhaps the way it felt to receive a man’s pleasure, and his seed, and his furious, climaxing thrusts, for the first time.

They kissed again while he continued to grunt and push within her, his member softening but slowly, at last dropping from the mouth of her womanhood, the river washing both their parts.

Finally, she nudged him away, slowly, with her hands on his chest, and he turned and left the river and she joined him on the bank, both of them standing naked, she looking up at the sun where it broke through the leaves.

He shivered as the morning air blew and cooled and dried him, and then he dressed, certain only that he’d known Oleander, and nothing else, why she’d invited him into the river, and into her sheath, if it was lust, or passion, or some other sentiment.

Gratitude, for food and a little kindness? Or had she imposed on him a debt he must repay in some way he could not yet fathom?

He led her back from the river and to the barn, where she shared what little was still left from yesterday’s sack of food. He looked at her and she gazed back, her face set the way it usually was, as if something brought her not great humor, but a little.

Tomhearth appeared to water the aurochs, no birch rod this time, turning to Hambeth and Oleander only when that task was done.

“I knew not where you were,” he said, scowling, “and believed the worst, that she slew you and left you in the forest and took her first steps back to Paxilex.”

“She wished to bathe, Uncle,” Hambeth said.

“Was there anything else done there?” Tomhearth inquired.

“Yes, Uncle, I knew her. In the water.”

Tomhearth looked at Oleander, and she stared back, half-smiling, eyes bright.

“You did not take her at night?”

“No, Sir, for you said not to dally under the moon.”

“I did,” Tomhearth agreed, “but you set upon her flesh at the last flick of the moon’s tail, did you not?”

“I did, but it seemed to be by her an offer,” Hambeth said. “More her accord than mine.”

“Such is her demeanor that I believe you,” Tomhearth said. “Now, all day on that hectare, whether or not you have already spent yourselves.”

“Shall I check on the other two, in town?” Hambeth inquired.

“In a finger,” Tomhearth said. “You may secure her in the stall for water and rest, and then you may go.”

“Those girls wake soon, if not already,” Hambeth said in a panic, “and need relief, and water. And the town awaits their service.”

“In a finger,” Tomhearth said firmly. “I have already lost a day’s work from you. This is the girl we bought, for sixty-seven vanders under your direction, and I only hope we get half that much back from her before she expires.”

“She seems in good health.”

“Today, yes, but we don’t know what she is, other than that she is no soldier, and that her hands have known little labor.”

“She is a trader, Uncle.”

Tomhearth laughed, briefly, derisively, clearly doubtful of the story.

“Whether she be that, or something else altogether, she is no farmer, and the next hectare might kill her yet.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Have you examined her hands, Nephew?”

Hambeth looked at the girl, his eyes first turning to the places other than her hands, the places that had served his earthiness, and might yet again.

Now Tomhearth wanted him to look at other things, the parts of her body that brought forth grain, and bending his thoughts from one purpose to another was to him like bending iron, as if he needed a little Stotthearth in his mind, to work the iron of lust and desire there and turn it back to ideas of mere tilling and planting.

“They seem to be . . .” Hambeth mumbled, remembering those hands on his shoulders, in the water.

“Nephew, you have seen my rod of birch?”

“I have, Uncle.”

“If she need correction, I’ll snap it against her haunches, and she’ll remember the sting.”

“Yes, Uncle, but she obeys, and serves—”

“And were I holding it now, I’d snap it across your back.”

Hambeth looked at Tomhearth, confused.

“Uncle?”

“Look at her hands.”

Hambeth, blushing with shame and confusion, turned to Oleander, reached for her hands, holding them in his, studying her knuckles, the bend of her fingers, her nails.

“Her palms, Nephew.”

Hambeth turned her hands over, gasping at the ravages a little time in the field with a hoe had done yesterday. The wooden handle had planted a wealth of burns, smaller but just as grievous as those on her thigh. Both thumbs at the first joint were fiery red, the blister intact on one, burst on the other, a small blanket of skin clinging to the wound. Injuries the same ran along her fingers, index and middle of both hands, and a splinter lay within the thick flesh of her left smallest finger.

Hambeth immediately raised the hand to his mouth, found the end of the piercing twig with his teeth and drew it out, prompting a cry of pain or surprise from Oleander.

A small bead of blood followed the wood. Ignoring her distress, he squeezed her finger, forcing out more of her blood, second only to urine and dirt as a curative.

“She said nothing of this,” Hambeth protested, dropping Oleander’s hands, and she looked from Hambeth to Tomhearth and back to Hambeth, as if trying to understand.

“She lacks the words,” Tomhearth said, “unless you have taught her the phrasing since yesterday?”

“I have not.”

“If you had watched her eat last night, you would have known of this.”

“But, Sir,” Hambeth protested, “I did not ignore her.”

“No, you did not ignore her pink teats, and her nethers, and the hair above it all, and her round rump, while she filled her mouth with our best sustenance, and if we’d bought her for whoring and for taking men’s seed, you’d be first in your craft. But she is here to labor, and to please us with her sweat. Has that already escaped you, Nephew?”

“No, Uncle, no,” Hambeth said, his eyes stinging with tears, hoping as fervently as ever that this girl knew no Avenian. “I am young, and a fool besides.”

“You are young,” Tomhearth said, “but you are no fool. If you had not proved an age beyond your summers with your trading, and in your dealings with that Paxilex mother, I would take this one to the square this very morning and sell her to the highest bidder and be done with her, and let you work out the loss.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“But for my care and my shelter, you are an orphan,” Tomhearth said, and his voice quavered, “and I heard you cry more nights than one after my brother perished, even if you do not recall. Time dried your tears, but you were never a child again, and in all the time since, you have wanted the things of men, and you have earned them, many of them. And I’ll not stand by while a slave girl’s flesh sends you back to your diaper days.”

“Uncle, I will always be grateful, I give you all my—”

“No,” Tomhearth interrupted. “No. The time is coming where you must go. I see that now. Whether you step off the farm to make your own plot, or win this one from me enfeebled, you are becoming your own father.”

“Sir, then shall we—”

“No, you are still Hambeth,” Tomhearth said. “But your naming draws nigh, if you do not stagger into the folly of drunkards and whorers and children who wear men’s bodies.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Let us see how you do with this new thing,” Tomhearth said.
“Show me you can wring profit and not just pleasure from her body.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“As for the delights of female, you go to Grace for that,” he said.
“This one, when you tend her that way, you’ll do it by her accord, your groaning a duty, and incidental. An’ if coupling dim her spark, or cut what little strength is hers, or reduce you to babbling, I’ll chain her hole back myself.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“You two did passable work before last light,” Tomhearth said.
“Your start is late, but if you till at the same pace today, you may yet be on your way.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Give me a finger’s work, and then you may see to the other two, if the village hasn’t beaten you to it.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Hambeth said, his mind turning again to the girls locked in their berths, waiting for his rescue, before he considered the matter again of Oleander.

“This one will need her hands wrapped,” Hambeth said, eager to get his finger of work done.

“The words of a master,” Tomhearth said, and he reached into his tunic, pulled out the old pair of rough aurochs hide gloves worn sometimes for work among briars, and presented them to Hambeth. “And not of dalliance and folly.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

Hambeth presented the gloves to Oleander, and she smiled fully and slipped them on and moved her fingers within them, her small hands swimming in the skins, but better off than if her hands remained as bare as the rest of her.

Hambeth retrieved the hoe and the briar fork and walked the girl to the field and the two resumed their efforts at the rate equal to that of the previous evening, and Oleander was to him for that time his help, his assistant, and he turned his mind from other things and, when she bent before him, glanced no more than once or twice at the door of her front chamber, wet with his seed or the river still. Or wet with her own thoughts, perhaps, for he knew that the rains came to Grace’s slit in preparation for

him, before he touched or entered, and therefore must be the product of her mind, whose workings were in all cases a wondrous mystery.

And all the while they worked, Hambeth watched their shifting shadows, for the sun bore down brightly today and told him ever the time, its movement cruelly slow but not altogether stopped, and as soon as he could argue that a finger had passed and another broad swath of the hectare was ready for planting, he stepped to Oleander and touched her shoulder, and she straightened and winced with the pain that followed bending one's back in a field, and the sweat that was her most important offering rolling down her back and her front and breasts, across her forehead and down her legs.

"Back to the barn," Hambeth said, pointing.

"Back to the barn," she said in a passable version of Avenian, and she gave up the hoe and took off the gloves and looked at her hands, as did Hambeth, who found that they were no more damaged than before the day's labors had begun, and he hoped they did not sting too much, a drink to make her senseless not something he could offer now.

He could give her water, however, and they went to the well, she drinking first from the bucket she filled, he next.

He led the girl to the threshold of the home, stopped there.

"Uncle?"

Tomhearth appeared at the door to the storeroom.

"We have made her sweat," Hambeth said, "and without any protest."

"The gloves served?"

"They did, or if the hoe stung her hands, she complained not."

"She smiles by half," Tomhearth observed.

Hambeth looked at the girl.

"That is her natural face, put there to my knowledge at her weeping origins and stuck there since, beyond her will to further shape."

"You say then she would smile the same were she not a slave of the field?"

"I know not. Her nature eludes me. But she labors in the field like a man, she is all girl between her legs, and there is yet no hoe's blade between my ribs."

"Very good," Tomhearth said, smiling for the first time that day.

"Set her in the barn, with her sleeping hobbles as well, and spend no more

than a finger in the village, for there is much yet to do today.”

“Yes, Uncle Tomhearth.”

Chapter XXIII: Usurped by Durgahearth

Hambeth made his way upon the lane with his assurance mostly restored, for it was now almost two days since he'd launched this new endeavor, and he was not yet deceased or shamed, and a third of the package turned soil and delivered her richest charms beside, while the other two thirds awaited liberation from their berths and service, and to contribute to Camberia's prosperity with their own sweat, and perhaps to bring pleasure.

And perhaps, neither was Grace lost.

“Hail, Hambeth, well met,” Bitterhearth said at the gate.

“Well met,” Hambeth said, slipping through the door.

“The girls acquit themselves, I hear.”

“They suffered without complaint yesterday, yes,” Hambeth agreed.

“And today they serve, along the course you set for them.”

Hambeth stopped and looked at the gatekeeper. “They serve from their berths?”

“Oh no, they are slipped from there,” Bitterhearth said, and he smiled so broadly the lines of his aged face furrowed deep. “One began the morn by holding the smith's anvil.”

“And the other?” Hambeth demanded, struggling to keep his voice even.

“Spilling sweat in an aurochs' paddock, or at the fields, or sweeping where sweeping is needed,” Bitterhearth said, “or some other something elseways.”

Hambeth, believing Bitterhearth must be confused, but striding all the same to the smith's with the heavy steps of one deeply affronted, heard the hammer raps and smelled the fire and reached the shop and planted his elbows on the counter and looked within, finding Stotthearth at his usual place amidst the stations of his shop, and Lilac herself serving him, naked and in the new chains of Stott's fashioning, and at this moment pumping the bellows while the furnace roared.

“Stotthearth.”

Stott, deafened by combustion perhaps, did not hear his name, but Lilac looked at him and nodded.

“Stotthearth!” Hambeth spake again.

Stott looked up, grinned broadly. “Hambeth!”

Hambeth did not smile in turn.

“So you have put the girl to work, and taken her from her berth, and used her like this all day?”

“For a finger or two,” Stott replied, smile fading, brow furrowing.

“By whose orders, if not mine?”

“The orders come from a several of quarters, it seems,” Stott said, “those of the morning delivered by Durgahearth.”

“Durgahearth?” Hambeth repeated. “And you did not question his privilege where such orders were concerned?”

“He is of the council,” Stott replied, his furrows softening, his understanding of Hambeth’s discomfit on the rise perhaps.

“Durgahearth has not spoken to me of this thing,” Hambeth said. “Or of any other matter, for two season at least, and then it was only to remark on a stitch or two loose in my tunic, which I took as a taunt and not a business item.”

Stott nodded.

“Nor were his words helpful in any other way, my knowledge of loose tunic stitching already thorough.”

Stott stepped to Lilac, touched her shoulder, and she stopped her pumping and the coals dimmed immediately, and only then did Hambeth see that the sweat rolled freely across her brow and down her back, and further.

“Friend,” Stott began, and he tied back his hair and set his own elbows heavy upon the counter. “Hambeth, soon to be Hamhearth.”

“Yes?”

“Of any dealings beyond the following I know nothing: This morning, barely past the first crowing, Durgahearth came to me with the two girls and offered one or both to offset my fees for the day, and I said yes to one, for having both in here at one time would surely produce nothing good, and he told me, ‘Then pick one,’ and I picked she for no reason other than, her neck being and staying shorter, she might dodge whatever might fly hereabouts.”

“You are expecting birds this day?” Hambeth asked.

“Not birds, no,” Stott replied. “But an angry trader yes, whose anger I don’t question, although others have provoked it, and not this simple smith.”

Hambeth smiled at his friend, turning all his anger toward the one called Durgahearth now, who seemed to have taken upon himself a mandate that was not his.

“Stotthearth,” Hambeth said, drawing in his breath. “I believe this Durgahearth has drawn you into something else, which is no fault of yours, so I will see to things there instead.”

“Yes,” agreed Stott, “and you should have been brought into this, whatever it be.”

Hambeth looked at Lilac, who tarried by the bellows.

“You feed her?” Hambeth inquired.

“Yes, she still had some stuffs from yesterday.”

“You keep her watered?”

“I do,” Stott said. “I took her to the river and taught her to draw.”

“As did I at our well, with Oleander.”

“And she serves you?”

“She does, last night and this morning both, and then again today till twilight I’m sure.”

“How many ways does she serve?”

“Two ways,” Hambeth said.

“This one too.”

“Did she invite it? Mine did, at the river, or so it seemed.”

“She did,” Stott replied, nodding to the ladder that climbed to the loft. “She brought me up as soon as I’d clapped on her new chains.”

“And allowed you to take her in them?”

“Indeed. Yours as well?”

“Yes, but more serenely.”

“And still in her fetters?”

“Yes.”

“I did not craft them to be worn for that occasion, nor did I fashion them such that they would need to be removed prior to convening.”

“Your art is sound.”

“Thank you. Lilac cried out as if dying, until I let her bite upon my thumb, and she nearly drew blood.”

“Mine wept a bit as well. Or a single ‘ah’.”

“Such is the way of virgins, on their first.”

“I have not heard that.”

“It is spoken of at times. Did yours capitulate?”

“I don’t believe so. I flattened her smile, and she drew sharp her breath more than once, but I never heard that form of groan.”

“This one yielded, or so it seemed, in the second chapter of her madness, for the first was all wails. And had she not dug her heels into my back then, I might have retreated just to save myself from hanging for murder.”

“Where is the third one then, Hyacinth?” Hambeth asked, imagining troubling things.

“She is taken by Battheath, or so I hear.”

“Bootmaker, and husband to Avelina?”

“The same.”

“Wherefor?”

“They have a little plot, and things that need doing, like any other.”

“There are two able daughters there.”

“Ask Battheath or Avelina of her chores. But if you worry she be getting turned over and besides, I don’t believe Battheath would carry on so, nor get permission from the dames either way. Now, if you worry she be idle or be used redundantly, I have no knowledge that would give you peace.”

“How much did they pay for her today?”

“Perhaps half a vander, perhaps twenty, I am not privy to every deal.”

“How much do you pay?”

“I have not paid yet,” Stott replied, raising one eyebrow in the way that told Hambeth there would be no answer here, that Stott considered this a private matter between himself and Durgaheath.

“Very well, then, I take my leave,” he said, but he glanced up at the girl as he raised his elbows from the counter. “Lilac.”

The girl looked up at him.

“You are well?” he asked. “Stott split only your legs, and not your hip locks nor your whole middle region?”

Lilac looked back without question or comment, but appeared no worse for wear.

“Good. Fare thee well, Lilac. Fare thee well, Stott.”

“Fare thee well, friend,” Stott answered.

Hambeth believed he knew where Durgahearth might tarry this day, for the man tarried wide and often, half times by the lodge, or in it, half times in some other place, but as Hambeth strode away from the smith’s shop, his interest in dealing with Durgahearth waned, while waxed his desire to confirm Hyacinth’s occupation and well-being.

He nodded to the townsfolk he passed, and no fewer than six said hello to him by name, an easy three calling him Hamhearth, both occurrences rare before he traded with Agarjj.

Yes, he had thought the three slave girls all were his charges, and he had been of a mind to accept the burden, as best he could with the duties of Tomhearth calling him home. But now, without the merest politeness, this Durgahearth had usurped the role, divvying the girls out as he saw fit, one to a smith’s and one to a household packed to the roof with girls already fit to do any labor other than delight the man of the home, which most likely would not be a task set out for Hyacinth either.

So, while his boots pointed first to the place where Durgahearth might be belayed, he turned them upon his walking consideration toward the narrow lane that led to fresh boots and the daughters of Avelina, finding himself at the door well before he knew what to say.

Nevertheless, he rapped and, in due time, the door was opened by Avelina herself.

“Hello, Hamhearth,” she said, smiling.

“It is the first of all my pleasures, Avelinahearth,” Hambeth said, bowing.

“Mine as well.”

“I come to, I come because . . . because I am told you are taking service today, from one who was, who was added to the town’s treasures And I wish to, wish to ensure, that all is as . . . it should be.”

“I believe all is well. Hyacinth and my daughters both are among the ruins, gone after currants.”

“Currants, Ma’am?”

“Yes, currants.”

“Yes, Ma’am. And she is well?”

“She seems altogether, except for her leg where it was burned, which we put a little salve upon, and her eye, which heals, and won’t suffer again I pray.”

“No, her injury was done in her capturing, but already it is not so grievous as it was, and I pray for her well-being as well. And I thank you for the food on the first night, and the drink, and the next day too, the girls were grateful and set upon it.”

“Yes. And how is yours?”

“She serves well, and is not afraid to sweat beside me,” Hambeth said, adding quickly, “in the field, where we clear for planting. And she eats well and drinks well too.”

“These seem to be very good girls,” Avelina said. “Hyacinth has taken to the learning of our tongue, and taught us a few words of Paxil.”

“Then Hyacinth will gather all the day?”

“That and other things, as she is able, and can be taught.”

“Very well,” Hambeth said, and he heard the light tapping from past the door, where Batthearth labored, driving nails into someone’s new boots, or into a mending pair. “Then I shall take my leave.”

“Shall I tell Learra you called, Hamhearth?”

“You may, and we parleyed a bit yesterday as well, if she mentioned, at the smith’s over that sustenance.”

“She did, Hamhearth, and she said she found you sober, and you took your charge—”

“But I am yet only Hambeth, Ma’am.”

Avelina smiled, perhaps a little perplexed, and Hambeth bowed again and turned, and on the way back through the village, past the gate, down the lane to home, he rolled the day’s tidings over in his mind and arrived blushing at his folly, that he had believed managing two girls would be a portion of his calling, that Archenix and his council would trust the same to a lad of nineteen summers.

But where was Durghearth the night of the purchase? Where was Durghearth all the next day, when Hambeth was charged with hearing the king’s grant and learning the king’s device, burning that device into three innocent legs, seeing to it that three girls were collared and berthed and fed and properly chained?

Managing them now was easy in compare, Durghearth the tarrying beneficiary of Hambeth’s far more difficult work.

Yes, he had taken pleasure from his own slave girl, Oleander, this morn, and she was his to manage and train and labor beside, although

ownership itself was Tomhearth's claim. And he had seen Lilac, and found her well and serving.

But he had not witnessed Hyacinth, and now she was off among the ruins where Hambeth had dared go only a handful of times, and where on his last visit at fifteen summers he had witnessed a shadow, or a shadow of a shadow, of something that should not be, of the ghosts of the dead soldiers of the Caesars, or the shifting familiars of the living Waxcaps, and he did not care to return, even to see Hyacinth who, naked and chained most likely, was plucking currants beside the daughters of Avelina.

He had wanted to see Hyacinth.

Chapter XXIV: "Cxarh"

Oleander's hands healed and grew callused, her olive skin bronzed beneath the high mountain sun of summer, and she, Hambeth and Tomhearth found a pattern for their endeavors.

Hambeth, who had returned to sleeping in the home, would come to Oleander's stall at first light, wake her if she were not already alert, and free her ankles. Then she, naked except for her work chains, would either tend to the straw where she'd relieved herself overnight, or step to the fields and release there.

She and Hambeth would enjoy first repast while they talked together, he in his own tongue, she in hers.

In the field on fair days, in the barn when blustered the sky, he would speak of war and farming and the things aurochs did, and she would nod and speak of things that would forever remain a mystery, his speaking, and hers, clearing his mind of the cobwebs of sleep, and she being served the same by it, he believed.

And often enough, they understood each other, she learning his words for farming, for this was his domain: animal and plant names, the names of tools, and the names for what was done with the tools, and the names for what was done to the land and the things that sprang from it.

But it was her tongue he learned for her body, which remained her domain, even if it was the property of Tomhearth.

During the day, she taught him to say *tax*, for her leg, *buxin*, for her arm, *gahs*, for hand, *breash*, for foot, and the plurals of them, and the words for the other parts she used for common labor, and the words for their

condition, for pain, for burn, for thirst, for hunger, for blister, for splinter, for blood, for the need to defecate, although she said “piss” in Avenian when she needed to urinate, as Stotthearth had taught her.

She taught Hambeth her word for bathing, and he indulged her every second or third day, but they no longer enjoyed relations in the stream, or by the stream.

Instead, that work was done at night, as the day’s final chore. And in the darkness, he learned the other words of Paxil, for those things.

Under the sun, they would clear the new hectare, feed and water the aurochs, repair and improve the house and barn, weed the fields of grain and, as the sun settled, take their meal together with Tomhearth.

Over supper, Tomhearth and Hambeth would parley on the work done that day, what would be undertaken tomorrow and, finally, the tending of Oleander.

“Oleander,” Tomhearth said on the tenth day after her purchase, and he held out his hand with his palm facing her, and she understood, for it was a nightly question, and she raised her own hands toward him, the chain that ran to her ankles swinging over her bowl.

Tomhearth, who refused to learn Oleander’s words for anything, leaned forward, taking the girl’s hands in both of his, looking across her fingers and along her palms, nodding with satisfaction, the ritual increasingly unnecessary as her hands recovered and the flesh grew thick there. But Hambeth understood the purpose – this was Tomhearth’s way of telling the girl her welfare was of consequence to him, that she was not simply a beast of labor, and she could parley with him directly over her condition.

Oleander understood the ritual and followed it with her own. After he’d finished inspecting her hands, she would show him new injuries, and this night she turned with a half-smile and raised her left leg, knee under her chin, to show him the torn place across her kneecap.

“She stumbled against the bark of a log when we pulled in its neighbor for the next fire,” Hambeth said. “She made not a sound, but the blood ran half down her knee.”

“She salved it?”

“She had piss enough,” Hambeth said.

“She speaketh still in her way of all her harms and desires?”

“She does,” Hambeth said. “She speaketh of thirst, and hunger, and other needs, and you saw her on her first days, near weeping at dawn with the aching sinew of one unused to labor like this, and then today after midday, when she turned sideways her ankle where the old rock lay uneven, she sat out and held up a hand, as if to petition for patience, and I granted a little.”

“Which ankle?”

“The unbound one.”

Tomhearth looked toward Oleander’s left foot in the day’s dying light and confirmed that it was not swelled, and he didn’t bother with further examination, but he looked back at Hambeth.

“Wherefore were you by the old rock?”

“For a short pause in our labors,” Hambeth said, “and to show her what the Caesars had lain there, and to show her the sea.”

“What else?”

“Nothing, Uncle, nor would I dally there, where might come other eyes, nor would I even take much time there.”

“But you will dally?” Tomhearth asked. Since his anger on that first morning, he had not broached the subject of this form of tending, but Hambeth was ready to deliver a full and sober accounting.

“It’s done at night, in the barn now,” Hambeth said. “Before she is chained for sleep.”

“Every night? And over and over?”

“No, Sir. It has been but every other night, and just once, as is her will.”

“How does her will express itself?”

“She has a word that she uses, which she taught me on our second pass, eight or nine nights ago.”

Tomhearth chuckled and rolled his eyes skyward, but he returned them to Hambeth, and there was kindness there in place of the outrage that flared during their first parley on the topic.

“You have reported to your own bed at judicious times each night since we made her ours,” Tomhearth observed, “and if you slip out for a second shank, you do not wake me.”

“I do not slip out,” Hambeth said.

“And she will be demanding her time with you tonight?”

“Yes, Uncle, if the routine hold.”

“I pray she is not using that flower between her legs so she can put something between your ribs,” Tomhearth said.

“I don’t believe she wishes to do that.”

“Or close up your throat, or rap your skull beyond sense to think, or bite off some of your meat to learn if you taste better than that pirate she and the others slew.”

“I don’t believe they ate him, Uncle. Merely slew.”

“You keep her bound when you partner?”

“I do.”

“And also when she tarries in that river?”

“Yes, Uncle. Her irons have not come off since Stotthearth made and affixed them.”

“If they rust closed on her, you’ll need Stotthearth for her rescue.”

“They dry quick in the field.”

“Still, I propose you grease them outside, and within the mechanism both,” he said. “Or better yet, teach her to, with a little aurochs oil.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Now, what of Grace?” Tomhearth asked.

“The moon is deep in its least sufficient quarter,” Hambeth noted.

“And as it thickens, you will find her again?”

“I hope to, but there are uncertainties.”

“As always with female,” Tomhearth said. “Even with one you own. But more so with that one.”

“What mean you?”

“That is all,” Tomhearth said, waving his hand. “Rumors not worth repeating. Now, get this one abed, and follow her orders as you may.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

Hambeth rose, Oleander turning out beside him, and they cleared up the leavings of supper, and Hambeth grew firm under his belt, for it had been two nights since his last release, and he had as often as not pondered since then the pleasures of Oleander’s wet chamber, and the words she had taught him, and the way she grunted out until she gasped in deep capitulation, for she gave herself that reward now, during each partnering.

Without the moon and only the starlight to guide them, they crossed the thick summer grass to the barn, and just under its eaves, she stopped

and, almost invisible, she turned to face him, reached up to feel for his arm, her chains rattling as if shaken by the wind, and she whispered, “Cxarh.”

“Yes,” Hambeth replied, and he followed her and pressed his hand against the rough beams of the structure’s interior, listening as Oleander settled her form onto her straw, and he undressed and knelt, feeling for her, hands reaching first her leg, the small of her back, her rump, for she had chosen this night again to be served on hand and knee, like a beast, and his fingers moved to the mouth of her pleasure, already wet with her interest, and he shuffled until he was behind her, and she spread her knees to make room for his, bending her spine to raise her opening to him, and he touched again all along her soft slit, and he opened the lips of her flower and touched his tip to the flesh to it, eased forward slightly, savoring the way her mouth swallowed his head, warming it and bathing it in her water, drawing him forth beyond his ability to resist, her opening and then the walls beyond it stretching around his member, the strain forcing a small cry from her throat before she arrived at that place of pleasure where her hips rocked and spasmed.

Uncle Tomhearth had voiced more than once his fears of conflict and murder, of a battle between a slave girl who longed for freedom and the man charged with her keeping and use. Tomhearth was wrong only in the aim of the fight, for this was indeed war, this coupling, but its only purpose was pleasure, Oleander shaking and twisting against Hambeth’s manhood while he charged against her writhing hole again and again, two organs in furious disagreement. Only when her bucking caused his penis to drop from her sheath would she fall still, breathing out in short, sharp gasps while she waited for him to open her dripping petals and return himself to her grip, driving up her with a quick, deep thrust. And for each time their war ended in a draw, in his slipping from her body and hanging in the air beneath her thick mat of fur, there was another moment when they by mere chance found each other plain, when his thrusts and her turnings produced a perfect union, and then they cried and grunted together as two on the threshold of something between ecstasy and madness, and it took but a handful of these episodes to force them both to the final confrontation, Hambeth grabbing Oleander’s hips to keep her in place while he groaned inconsolably and pumped his cream into her depths, she finally knowing her own peace, breaking the night with rending cries but dampening her struggle otherwise,

as if in truce with Hambeth at last, the only term of accord being that she hold steady so all his issue find its way to the very altar of her temple.

Only when they had finished, after Hambeth had wrapped Oleander's work chain around the beam, hobbled her ankles together and took his leave with a final kiss against the slave girl's mouth and shoulder, did his mind turn to other things. Surprised by the fleeting nature of deep and resounding pleasure, his thoughts on this night went to Durgaearth before he'd reached his own threshold.

Had Archenix, in his wisdom alone or with all the collected wisdom of his council, concluded that Hambeth lacked the wherewithal to manage the two girls of village domain? Could they not at least have parleyed over the matter, allowing Hambeth to bow away from the burden without the silent humiliation of summary dismissal?

He lay down, Tomhearth's steady breath bringing his own breath and thoughts in line, and he turned toward better things soon enough.

Four days later, a fortnight having passed since Hambeth and his uncle gained possession of Oleander, she declined for a second night to take his pleasure, and that next day in the field, his suspicions were confirmed when a splash of blood dropped to her foot.

For the first time since they'd met, her half-smile was gone, replaced with a tightness of mouth that he sensed was shame, but she stilled not her labors against the earth and the grass growing thick within it until he touched her arm and motioned her to follow him back to the home.

"Uncle, Oleander bleeds," Hambeth announced at the threshold.

"There are rags enough in the store," Tomhearth said from the second room, "and rope enough to bind them."

Hambeth, who had already thought his way to the same solution but wanted it confirmed, took the things from the home and brought Oleander back to the field, handing her the remnants of an unstitched tunic panel and a handful of spent bags, which she first applied to the blood on her foot and upon the insides of her thighs before she pressed it against her vulva while Hambeth used three lengths of rope to secure it in place.

Chapter XXV: Ill Tidings

That same night, the moon just slivered enough to guide his footsteps, Hambeth stole out for the flesh of another.

As she had many nights before, Grace had hung her robe outside, and Hambeth felt it and in the same moment his heart dropped and rose anew, such joy did he feel as he crept through the door.

“Well met, Hamhearth,” whispered the voice from the bed, while Hambeth was just removing his belt.

“You are, Gracehearth, the first of all my pleasures,” Hambeth replied, and soon he was nude, on his knees beside her, his penis fully formed and slaving over the anticipated pleasure of Grace’s familiar sheath.

“Am I truly the first?” she whispered back.

“Yes, yes,” Hambeth whispered, pausing in his devotions, for when he reached for her middle, he found her legs closed in the darkness. He lay beside her, manhood against her hip, and he kissed her cheek, brought a hand up to her breast, the nipple quickly going firm under his attention. “You know you are, always.”

“What of your new girl?” Grace inquired.

“You yourself said one such must be fed regularly,” he said.

“How often?”

“Once, every second day or so, and never now, for she bleeds.”

“You are here because of that?”

“I am here because the moon at last smiles on our venture.”

“What have you learned from her to teach me?”

“No, I am her first, and I teach her, as you, my first, taught me.”

“Tell me of her, this way or that, whatever it be.”

“She is usually on her fours, like a beast, and she shakes so much so that when first she did, I thought she wished me out, or she was dying. Nor is it fully convenient.”

“Ah. Like a new lover.”

“Is this the way of the young girls of Paxilex?”

“It is, of myself in youth, certainly.”

“And of Avenlou girls as well?”

“I know not, for I have not consorted with any Avenian girl.”

Hambeth laughed, quietly, and Grace raised her mouth to his, kissed, felt for his member, found it firm and stroked it while she spread her legs, allowing Hambeth to climb above and, with a single deep grunt, press his flesh against her lips, which parted to welcome him and burnish with female syrup the full length of his shaft.

“How . . . have you fared?” he struggled to ask her. “I have not seen you since the day . . . we put the iron to ours and the other two.”

“Let us first find peace,” Grace said, and she bucked beneath him, but not inconveniently, their hips clapping together in immediate alliance as his organ drove within hers, departed, plumbed her again.

“She . . . taught me a word of Paxil,” Hambeth groaned. “More words, but one . . . one.”

“Speak it,” Grace groaned beneath him.

“*Cxarh.*”

“Ah,” she said, and she panted out a little laughter before she regained her rhythm. “What does it mean?”

“You know not?”

“I do. But tell me.”

“It means fuck,” Hambeth said. “Fuck. She says it when she wants her body opened, her mouth and her tunnel stretched, her insides flooded, her . . . her . . .”

Hambeth went mute under that impropriety to which all other things must yield, which sometimes arrived at his bidding but that this time forced itself upon him without introduction. Grace, surprised perhaps by his sudden devotions, redoubled her own efforts at remuneration, clearly wanting her reward while Hambeth labored and swelled within her, and her hips rocked not too much differently from those of the young girls of Paxilex, and she settled her achievement even while the last of Hambeth’s spurts of thick semen spun from his organ and into hers, the overlapping groans of the pair loud enough to inspire a quiet “aww, woo” from the girl who slept on her shelf.

For a time, Hambeth lay upon Grace, sighing and speaking not, dripping manhood hanging between her legs.

And then at last he pressed the words of earlier into her ear.

“How have you fared?”

“I am the same,” she said, “but I may not stay the same.”

“What mean you?”

“There is talk, that I have spoken of to you prior.”

“We have spoken of many things.”

“They propose setting me differently.”

“I am not by day for riddles,” Hambeth said. “By night even less.”

“I, and maybe some others, are to be made slave.”

“Still you riddle,” Hambeth protested, but he drew in his breath, this news dimly remembered, and strange in form, but not impossible in Camberia, where the peculiar raised its head now and then.

“I spake it plain.”

Hambeth sat up, stared into the darkness.

“Yes, you spoke of it, and I heard a babble, for this—”

“When have I ever babbled?”

“Never. But I find it senseless. You are free, with no mark against you. You are—”

“I am already half slave, as you have seen.”

“Less than half. Every seventh day. And though in chains, you do your own bidding.”

“Be it half or more than half, all that portion of freedom remaining to me is a steady annoyance for those holding the reins in Camberia.”

“Why? I see it not.”

“It is not set before you.”

“Who has worked this out, and how far is it worked?”

“Who else?” Grace asked. “Archenix, and his council. And worked far enough that it must be spoken of with you.”

“Durgahearth?”

“His name has been forwarded, yes.”

The fear, then the rage, then the hatred, stabbed up from Hambeth’s belly like three knives into his heart, and he closed his fists and groaned out.

“No,” he said quietly. “It will not be done.”

“Hamhearth,” Grace whispered, putting her hand on his arm. “It may, and it likely will.”

“When?”

“Soon. Before the moon wanes.”

“Whose bidding would you do?”

“The town’s. Like the two owned now. They bring a steady return already.”

“The two I bought, Lilac and Hyacinth.”

“The two bought with the city’s treasure.”

“Because of me.”

“Yes.”

Hambeth groaned again, this time deeper, with the double pang of one seeing a terrible thing before him, and learning he was its inventor.

“You will be burned,” he said.

“Yes, with that device, as were others, who endured it, all younger.”

“You could leave Camberia.”

“And go where? All the villages of Avenlou look for stray girls to keep now, with the king’s blessing.”

“You could go to Paxilex.”

“I would be called a spy, and treated worse than a slave. And even if they would have me, the trip is long alone, impossible with one in a diaper.”

“What of your daughter, then?”

“She remains mine. But I’ll not have her berthed.”

“Who shall keep her every night?”

“There are a few kind souls in Camberia, when we cannot be together.”

“Avelina and her daughters?”

“And others. Wherever she sleep, it will likely be some better hovel than this, and the old armory is better than this too, and rife with girls who speak my other tongue.”

“You agree to this because you are lonely at night? Shall I visit more often?”

Grace laughed quietly. “I agree to nothing. I accede only because there is no other choice, and I search for glad tidings, and there are some here, as in all things.”

“I will lose you,” Hambeth said, fighting tears as the full import of Grace’s words bore down upon him.

“I will lose more.”

Hambeth clenched fists and jaw, the loss of Grace – for in his mind, it was already done – like no pain since his father died, and he wept quietly with memories ancient and fresh.

“Hambett,” Grace whispered. “Hambett.”

“Auhh?” Hambeth sighed.

“You must be there.”

“What mean you?”

“You must be there, as you were for the other girls.”

“No, I cannot.”

“I will ask for you, when begins the parley in earnest to do this. And you’ll be sent for, and if you refuse, it will make sadder a day already

sad.”

“Why would you wish me there?”

“Because you are kind, and showed it with the others. And you must parley for me as well, for me and my daughter both, whom I have named.”

“Tell me what I would parley for on your behalf.”

“You know well enough,” Grace replied.

Hambeth nodded. “What name did you give your daughter?”

“Axilaine, which is a deer of legend in Paxilex.”

“You give her a Paxil name while we wage war with Paxilex?”

“I take liberties where I may.”

Two nights later, Hambeth visited Grace again, speaking of unimportant matters after grunts and the shaking. No mention was made of the dark subject at hand, and Hambeth knew that she, in her silence on the topic, was still to be taken, and he might yet be summoned to affect it.

Oleander stopped her bleeding a few days later, and she invited Hambeth’s return, choosing him every second night as before, he going to see Grace on some other nights, and he counted himself lucky in this, that his uncle owned a girl who needed such feeding. But he did not love her, and the one he loved was soon to be owned, and not by him or Uncle.

Camberia itself was suffering its own sorrows, the wagons of Greater Vandals thinning down to one every seventh day, one every fifteenth, one only by the full moon, and the goods of the village that would keep – leather, woven fabric, silver charms, boots – collected under eaves, behind doors, stacked in woodsheds and lean-tos, tied to rafters. Food and all other which would spoil could not be stored that way and was simply eaten or returned to the earth, and the vanders grew scarce.

Hambeth, busy with the farm and Oleander, did little trading in those days, and began to think of himself as a farmer only, his other skills fading and going dark like the twilight of a summer day.

But when Durgaearth himself appeared, at midday meal, a moon into their purchase of the girl, Hambeth was ready for him.

Chapter XXVI: A Parley with Durgaearth

“Well met, Tomhearth, well met, Hambeth,” Durgaearth huffed from the window, peering in at them while they supped, because he lacked

both the decorum and the sense of propriety that guides those who rap first on doors.

“Durgahearth!” Tomhearth said, standing, followed by his nephew. “It is the first of all my pleasures, come through the door.”

Oleander looked at him but remained seated, driving her teeth through the roasted, salted and seasoned belly of an aurochs.

Durgahearth did not wait for a second bidding, barging into the home, adorned by pants died yellow, with a greatcoat of indigo, and full of buttons and creases like those worn by viceroys proper and also by those pretending to be viceroys, and he bowed to Tomhearth, nodded to Hambeth, and gazed upon Oleander, who seemed content to ignore him.

“How is your girl?” he asked, and now he bowed toward her. He was a man of substantial girth, fed well by the charging of rents for fields and hovels or whatever else he did, and there was a little of Agarjj the pirate in him, and Hambeth wondered if each lie one told lay a pellet of lard against one’s form, so that the greatest liars were the greatest in size and could be found out that way during trades. But then, most traders lied, girthy or narrow, Hambeth reminded himself.

“Oleander, rise,” Hambeth said. She obeyed, standing quickly despite her chains, and she turned to the visitor, aurochs belly in her hand, and she took another bite, chewing with a half-smile.

“She is well,” Hambeth said. “We wring at least half a vander’s work from her daily, except on the seventh day, and some days closer to a vander’s worth.”

“The two of the village do a half vander’s worth of labor, and sometimes more, for such is the price that was set,” Durgahearth said, and Hambeth understood the words to be a taunt, in keeping with the nature of this man.

“Hambeth performs that chore, almost nightly,” Tomhearth said with a quick chuckle, “or whenever she demand it, and maintains another besides.”

Hambeth thanked his uncle, quietly and in his own heart, for the taunt had been countered. But Durgahearth’s words had spawned mourning as well as well as annoyance, mourning for the two he did not select, and for their fates and for their conditions in a town that could be cruel to girls, and no words by his uncle could solve that.

“She demands it?” Durgaeath said, squinting as if trying to appear doubtful, but Hambeth knew the man believed.

Hambeth knew this the way Hambeth knew many things about people, just by looking and without having to be told.

“She does,” Hambeth said.

“Who is your second, then?” Durgaeath inquired.

“Sir?” Hambeth asked, pretending not to understand. Surely all of Archenix’ council knew with whom Hambeth dallied.

“Your second girl, beyond this one,” Durgaeath clarified. “Your uncle says you maintain—”

“There is no second,” Hambeth interrupted. “There is this girl, with whom I chore, and then another who is not placed in any order and who may name herself if she is so inclined.”

Durgaeath laughed.

“Sir,” Hambeth continued, “if that be all, might she and I sup and leave you to your audience with my uncle? For we are already delayed by this extension of our repast, with more to be done outside.”

“My audience is with you, Sir,” Durgaeath said, surprise flashing through his eyes, for he had forgotten that Hambeth was a boy in name only, and his tongue and his sentiments both could settle like any man’s.

“Would you join us, Durgaeath?” Tomheath said, waving to the meal set upon the floor, and Durgaeath answered by immediately sitting and pulling from the pot of aurochs flesh a hunk that would have made half of an evening meal, and all the rest set back into their places, Oleander finished with her belly now and pulling not one or two but three figs all at one time from the fig pallet and shoving the first two into her mouth as if they were one.

“How fare the two others?” Hambeth inquired.

“They eat as well as this one, certainly,” Durgaeath replied.

“They serve faithfully and without performing any further murders, and the eye of Hyacinth heals with no—”

“Hyacinth?” Oleander blurted.

Durgaeath turned to look at the girl. “Yes, Hyacinth,” he said.

“Hyacinth, *sphex*, good,” Hambeth said, using the Paxil for the organ and pointing to his eye.

“Lilac?” she asked, pausing in mid-chew.

“Lilac is well?” Hambeth said.

“She is, she is. Both thrive.”

Hambeth nodded to Oleander and she nodded back, but her smile was gone, Hambeth saw tears in her eyes, and he knew he must bring Oleander to see her fellows, if only for half a finger every tenth day.

“What then do you need of me?” Hambeth asked.

Durgahearth looked at the food and cleared his throat.

“We wish three more,” he said.

“Three more what?” Hambeth demanded.

“Three more of the topic at hand,” Durgahearth replied.

Hambeth held up an aurochs joint. “Food, then,” he concluded.

“But you are misdirected, for there is more in the village. Certainly three of food there, by whatever measure you use.”

Durgahearth laughed.

“Three more of girls,” he said.

“Again,” Hambeth said, “there are more girls in town than here. We have but one, and she is already arranged.”

“We wish to put three more under the king’s device,” Durgahearth said with the minor inflection of one slightly exasperated.

“Has Agarjj returned with three more?” Hambeth asked. “If so, you don’t need me to pronounce the going rate.”

“Are you truly so unindoctrinated in this matter?” Durgahearth inquired. “You who set in motion the device of Camberia should be prepared—”

“The king set in motion Camberia’s device,” Hambeth said. “Tell me plain what you wish, and if I can free myself from the demands of a farm and a hungry girl, I might assent.”

Hambeth looked to Tomhearth, and his uncle gazed back with a mix of amusement, pride, and perhaps a little perplexity. Tomhearth knew more than his share of Camberian goings on, but Hambeth suspected he was not completely versed in the new turnings.

“We will be taking three of our own,” Durgahearth said, face growing red, although Hambeth’s insolence did not discourage his appetite, he reaching for salted bream even as he blushed. “Two Waxcaps orphans, whom you know briefly perhaps and who live direly, and that Grace of Paxilex, whom you certainly know too.”

“Your business is with Stotthearth, to fashion the chains and heat the iron,” Hambeth said. “May it proceed apace.”

“Grace, I know not why, demanded you sit forth to parley,” Durgahearth said.

“What parley?” Hambeth demanded. “She is all but a slave already. You, I have no doubt, could bring her the rest of the way yourself.”

“If you parley over her and assert yourself in her and the others’ taking, she will serve the first way,” Durgahearth said, face still red, mouth still working. “If we fail to invite you, or you in your profound wisdom refrain from the engagement, she will serve the second way.”

“And what are the first and second ways?” Hambeth asked.

“In the first way, she will serve peaceably, and conform to direction, and commune with the others of Paxilex so they might better understand things,” Durgahearth said. “In the second, she will not do those things, and forget also her Paxil.”

“I will parley then,” Hambeth said. “And if the parley conclude by my terms, I will assert myself in the taking. Otherwise, no.”

“What will be your terms?” Durgahearth asked, and he stopped chewing and set his elbow on the thigh of his crossed leg and looked at Hambeth as an equal for the first time, and Hambeth smiled for the first time, because the trade had begun and he had grown impatient for it.

“Grace has a daughter, Axilaine, who is young, but who at no age shall ever be berthed or bound day or night, nor shall ever be allowed to live direly, and whose upkeep shall be the problem of the town, and who shall be tended and trained and seen daily her mother, who may also tend and train and nurse her until the weaning, and tend after that too.”

Durgahearth nodded and looked at Tomhearth as witness while he repeated the terms with his own phrases. “The daughter shall not be berthed or bound ever,” he intoned, “and shall be taken care of at the expense of Camberia, to live well, to be cared for, to receive the attention of mother and village both.”

“Yes,” Hambeth said. “And more. The town shall practice discretion in certain subjects, and not make light of what these girls giveth.”

“Certain subjects?” Durgahearth repeated.

“You know my meaning,” Hambeth said. “I did not, nor do I now, enter into any of this to have them sweated over and pawed and somersaulted by our men.”

“I understand your meaning, and in fact it is already the way that I order things, which you may confirm at any juncture, directly with either

Lilac, or, or . . .”

“Hyacinth,” Hambeth said, drawing in his breath, setting down the meat in his hand. “You spoke earlier of the full vander, as if it be something they earn day after day, to feed the town’s coffers.”

“It is not,” Durgahearth said, blushing again. “It is measured out judiciously, as are all other things, more by one girl, maybe not at all by the other.”

“I shall speak to them both,” Hambeth promised. “And if I find things untoward, I am finished with this venture before I launch.”

“Yes, I welcome your scrutiny.”

“And finally,” Hambeth said. “I value my services in this at two vanders.”

“Sir, we cannot—” Durgahearth protested, as red-faced as ever.

“An even pair of coins,” Hambeth said, “which is a fraction of the value I bring, and shall be paid prior to my services, nor shall any be given back, whether I spend two days on this, or a finger, or a tenth of a finger.”

“You simply name your terms,” Durgahearth said, his face taking on the same cast of outrage as Agarjj the pirate when the pillager realized he’d been bested by a child. “And all must conform to them?”

“Yes,” Hambeth said, watching Durgahearth’s eyes to measure his real sentiments. “For I begin with the true price and leave no room beneath it.”

“You are a child,” Durgahearth said, smiling now, spreading greasy hands wide, this his last and most feeble argument.

“Forget that while we parley,” Hambeth retorted, “and feel free to remember it only back on our threshold.”

Durgahearth laughed and looked at Tomhearth, and Tomhearth grinned back with all the pride of a father.

“What do you feed this child?” Durgahearth demanded, shoving the balance of an aurochs shank into his face.

“All the usual stuffs,” Tomhearth said, pausing, adding slowly, “He became a man on the day his father died at seven summers, and I am tasked with naught but to watch him age.”

“Nay, Uncle, you have shaped me again and again and all ways,” Hambeth protested, and now he smiled a little, for the parley was finished and he would soon return to the hectare and Oleander’s foreign-tongued but

steady companionship, and he had reconciled himself to the fate of Grace, for she seemed at peace with it and it might yet benefit her.

But Durgaeath was not quite finished.

“The final term,” he said, “concerns when.”

“As soon as I be paid,” Hambeth said.

Durgaeath reached into his tunic, his fingers provoking a jangling sound before he drew out two vanders and handed them to Hambeth.

Hambeth handed one vander to his uncle.

“For the loss of our services,” Hambeth said, and he turned to Durgaeath. “And now, I must revise my terms, for we cannot begin this until the morrow, as soon as the sun rise.”

“I accept the amendment, on behalf of Archenix,” Durgaeath said.

“But I shall first ask the two other Paxilex girls of their treatment, proceeding only after I have ascertained the decency of things in their regard.”

“Very good,” Durgaeath agreed, “and you may consider your commission complete when you have brought each to Stottheath the smith, and supervised their marking with the king’s device, and their fitting with their work and wagon and other restraints.”

Hambeth swallowed as he worked through Durgaeath’s last words.

“Wagon restraints, Sir?” he inquired.

“Yes, their duties shall include drawing.”

“Drawing a wagon, and not just cart, Sir?”

“Yes,” Durgaeath said, “unless you know of other things in Camberia that require drawing.”

“What kind of wagon, Sir?”

“Wagons of substance, for the trip to the Greater Vandals, to unload the goods that collect in piles now.”

“You’ll put a girl at the head of a wagon all the way up Fifth Pass?”

“Three girls,” Durgaeath corrected. “And yes.”

“By themselves?” Hambeth inquired.

“No, no, my lad,” Durgaeath bellowed, laughing. “They’ll have a driver, of course, so that they and all their goods do not vanish.”

“Who shall make the trip with them?” Hambeth asked.

“We have no agent yet, but one who knows trading perhaps.”

Hambeth looked at Tomhearth, and Tomhearth stared into his nephew's eyes and gestured dismissively with his hand, signaling his begrudging assent.

"Thank you, Uncle," Hambeth said, then turned to Durgahearth. "I would be a driver, should you find no other, and we do have our own burdens to pack and trade there."

Durgahearth nodded and reached for bread, and Hambeth satisfied himself that the man was neither bitter nor elated over the day's trading, and he might yet agree to recommend Hambeth for the task of bringing a cart up Fifth Pass.

Hambeth looked at Oleander, who was no longer eating, and with this news, Hambeth's appetite yielded to the fever of wanderlust, and he stood and motioned to the girl to stand.

"Shall we clear this, Uncle?" Hambeth asked, his voice steady.

"No," Tomhearth replied, "let me converse a little longer with our man of the council, who does not appear to be sated. But have the girl grease her chains before you go out."

"Yes, Sir," Hambeth said, leading Oleander to the storeroom, pointing to the little jar of aurochs oil and the rag.

She dropped to the floor, legs crossed, reached for the jar and rag and did as Hambeth had taught her, soaking the rag with oil, then pressing it over each of the holes where the pins would go, first in the cuffs at each wrist, which had gone unused and unopened since they'd been closed a fortnight ago, and then at her right ankle, opened each night and morn to wrap around the beam. With a little more oil in the three hinges, she was finished, and she stood and she and Hambeth stepped past Tomhearth and Durgahearth without further discourse and went back to the fields.

"Oleander," he said at the first break in their labor.

"Ah, Hambeth?"

"Hyacinth and Lilac, tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow," she repeated, and Hambeth believed she understood, although he had not tried to teach her the names yet for the passing of time.

Chapter XXVII: Wing and Emiane

The next morning, Hambeth awoke with the sense of things that must be done that he wanted not to do, before his mind was enough restored

from sleep to pull up the details of his commission.

Thinking upon it more, he dismissed his sorrow over the task at hand and felt simply a soft misgiving. Grace had already given herself to this, he knew. But what of the Waxcap orphans? Perhaps they would better off. Perhaps Grace would be better off. And he, Hambeth, might yet get his journey to Fifth Pass, albeit as the driver of a team and not as a lone trader. How that would come to pass, however, if it ever did, was beyond his ken.

He crawled from his bed, urinated on the way to the barn, freed Oleander, fed her and brought her to the river without being asked to.

“Hyacinth and Lilac,” he announced when she rose from the water, smiling with the cold, her nipples jutting forth.

“Yes,” she said, and they continued their discourse from there, from the stream and through the farm to the lane, Oleander about unknown things, Hambeth about what lay before him this day.

“Our first stop will be at the hovel of Grace,” Hambeth said as he and Oleander neared the dwelling, “who has been my lover for four seasons and now loses what little freedom she had left, and we lose each other too.”

Hambeth crossed the field of tall grass between the lane and Grace’s home, knowing this would likely be the last time he would go this way under sun or moon.

Oleander, wary of catching her ankle chain, wrapped it around her left wrist to pull it taut and followed, her feet bare.

He knocked on the door that beneath the bright moon he always simply pushed open. He heard a stirring, the coo of a child, and he waited at the door until Grace appeared, as naked as the day she was whipped, child’s hand in hers, the daughter in her usual black smock.

Grace stepped out and embraced Oleander, and the two spoke quickly, Oleander nodding grimly.

Grace turned to Hambeth, her face without emotion.

“We may go now, Sir.”

“There is no haste in this commission,” Hambeth said. “I can wait for you to finish assembling.”

“I am all assembled.”

Hambeth stared at her, confused.

“I go stripped, or suffer a stripping by the village,” she said. “I choose the former.”

Hambeth stepped back, his eyes a-blurred, for Grace's words brought home to him the truth of things, and all the confidence of his parley with Durgahearth vanished like frightened fish in a river, those two vandars a meaningless recollection while the cup he must yet drink from stood before him.

She stepped on toward the lane, allowing him to follow, Oleander to come last, Grace holding her daughter's hand, crossing the field and plying the road with the straight back and high chin of one who would never be a slave, and Hambeth remembered all their time together and the future that may or may not be and fought to keep on his feet. Only if one knew where to look on her back could one find the faint markings of her torture now. Hambeth looked, looked away.

They arrived at the gate, Bitterhearth emerging with the same expression of surprise Hambeth had worn, before he remembered himself, retrieved her chains and bound Grace as always.

There were no greetings for any of them as they made their way to the smith, and Hambeth guessed that all knew what this passage meant, or did not and were perplexed by it. For his part, he stared at the earth, not wishing to speak to anyone or even look at the townsfolk.

Stott's shop was quiet, but the window stood open and the counter held the generosity of the village, food and a cup and, this time, no bones.

"Stotthearth," Hambeth said to his friend, who sat and pondered a shape of metal.

"Well met, Hamhearth," Stott replied. "Shall we get this completed, then?"

"No, not yet," Hambeth said. "For first I must learn if the village earns my participation."

"When will you know your course?"

"I must go to the armory and back, taking Grace only, if you can put Oleander on a tether for a time."

Stott turned toward his shelves and pulled down a length of chain.

"Oleander comes along," Grace announced.

"Gracehearth?" Hambeth said in surprise.

"We go to find the truth of things?" she queried.

"We do," he replied. "You will tell me their words."

"I can pass on their words, but only Oleander can pass on their sentiments, and both are necessary if you want all the story."

Hambeth pondered. "Very well, let us be on and get it done."

Grace shuffled away, her daughter's hand in hers, Oleander following as if Grace had already told her the way it was to be.

"Wait for us, Stotthearth," Hambeth said.

"Aye," Stott replied.

Hambeth bent over the drink set on the counter, smelling the same bitterness as before, in that quantity meant for three girls or one horse, and he turned to join the march.

Nearing the armory, Hambeth saw beside it the wheels and the bed and the tongue of a great wagon, all of a previous construction except for the settings along the tongue, the work of the village smith and the village carpenter here obvious, for where one or two horses were harnessed before, now it bore fixtures for securing three who walked on two legs, with wooden crossbeams for the placing of hands, and open cuffs dangling from short chains to ensure that those who pushed would stay at the task.

Hambeth went to the door of the armory, pushed it open.

"Hyacinth?" he called out quietly.

"Hambett?"

"Lilac?"

"Ah."

Hambeth stepped in, bent before the two occupied berths, the girls' faces peering out between the slats, the quiet jangle of their chains against their hay beds telling him that, like Oleander, they were always bound.

Grace joined him with her daughter, Oleander following, and she stepped beside Hambeth and all the girls spoke at once in Paxil, the armory lost to the sounds of a foreign tongue.

Hambeth waited until the first lull and spoke.

"How have you fared?" he asked, looking longest into the eyes of Hyacinth, her eye all but healed, her face now as he had imagined it.

Grace repeated Hambeth's question in Paxil and they answered and the words flowed and there was laughter and the animated retelling of a story by Lilac, and Hyacinth put her fingers through the slats and said something that made the other girls laugh, including Grace's daughter.

Hyacinth looked at the child and spoke a few brief words.

"Axilaine," the girl replied.

More words, and the girl named Axilaine spoke Paxil, the three slaves listening raptly and smiling and nodding, and Hambeth realized that

Grace had been teaching her that tongue and might not have taught her any Avenian at all.

“How are they being used?” Hambeth asked in the next pause, looking at Grace.

Here followed another long discourse in Paxil, all four girls speaking, Oleander with a full share of words, looking at Hambeth more than once, and he knew she must be describing their dalliances so the others could compare, and she wore the half smile as she related. Once or twice, Grace bent mockingly to cover her daughter’s ears, the other three laughing, and he longed at that moment more than ever before to know Paxil, the words they were using, the things they were saying, which were not it seemed all completely fit for a child to hear.

“They are treated well,” Grace said at last to Hambeth.

“That is all?” he said. “Treated well?”

“Yes, that is the summary. Were Camberia a village of men only, it might not be so, but half of it are women, who are wives and daughters and sisters, and they see to things, and some sorts of goings-on they will humor, and some not.”

Hambeth looked at the post at the end of the armory, running floor to ceiling, now bearing the rings waist high and overhead Stott had fashioned, to which the punished would be affixed.

“How often is that used?” he asked, pointing at it.

Grace relayed the question in Paxil, getting puzzled stares from both Lilac and Hyacinth.

Finally, Hyacinth said something, and Grace turned to Hambeth.

“All the time,” Grace said.

“They are counted disobedient so often?” Hambeth said, and he imagined Durghearth wielding a whip here at dawn and dusk and for beatings in between because it made the cruel man with Agarjj’s smile agitated to let the girls go for too long without stings.

Grace exchanged a few more words.

“No,” she said. “It holds up the ceiling all the time. That is the only use of it they know.”

Hambeth blushed and felt himself a fool and reminded himself that he must not simply decide things.

He turned to Grace.

“Then you are satisfied they are well?”

“They are well.”

“And it is Oleander’s sentiment too, that her fellows are not in terrible straits?”

“Yes.”

“And you will do this? And let me do my part?”

“I will.”

“Will you help me take the Waxcap orphan girls?”

“You are subduing both today?”

“I hope to, the chore made easier if you help.”

“I will.”

“Let me berth Oleander, for she will not aid in this,” Hambeth said.

“Yes.”

“But you may take your daughter.”

“I would like to.”

“Take your leave with them then,” he said, and all the females spoke together again in what Hambeth understood to be a Paxil farewell.

Hambeth opened the door to an empty berth and looked at Oleander, and she crawled in, and he shut it and fixed it shut and put the beam before it and all the girls said another few words, even Axilaine.

Outside the armory, Hambeth pointed to the wagon.

“You know of this, that you will be drawing some?”

“Yes,” Grace replied. “Until we get our horses back, I’m told.”

“You are at peace with that?”

“As much as at peace as with anything other,” she said. “And if that is what I must endure to see the Greater Vandals, so be it.”

“It is a march near two days up Fifth Pass, and a march two days back,” Hambeth warned.

“So be it. If I’m fed and watered, it is the same as anything else.”

“I might get to drive.”

“Do you drive as well as you trade?”

“I cannot guess. I’ve never driven.”

“All it takes is a knowledge of the fastenings, and judicious use of the whip.”

Hambeth scowled, because he believed Grace wished to provoke some word from him and he did not wish to speak that way.

“Jest not on that,” he said. “Do you know where stay the Waxcap girls?”

“In the ruins.”

“I have heard that. But where among them?”

“In the part that is still standing broadest, with the heads of angels roundabout, some up, some fallen, whom the orphans call their mothers.”

“I fear them.”

“The Waxcaps?”

“The ruins.”

“Why?”

“They are haunted.”

“They are not.”

“They are. I myself witnessed apparitions.”

“Saw them plain?”

“No, such are never seen plain.”

“Then how know you?”

“I felt it, as sure as one feels the wind that cannot be seen.”

“Did they mean you harm?”

“They harm in crossing.”

“Then they raised not weapons nor threatened fisticuffs?”

“Such are what things plain do, and this was not plain, as I have said. And I am not the only one to have seen them, and to avoid the ruins due to it.”

“Will you yield your commission then?”

“I have been given two vanders, and kept one and gave my uncle one already, so I seem to have no choice.”

“Is this why you wish us along, a naked girl in chains and one who toddles, to shield you from apparitions?”

“You mock me, as you have always done.”

“Nor shall I stop.”

“That post may yet be used for something other than holding up the armory roof.”

“Your jests,” she said, “lack the humor of mine.”

Walking with Grace, speaking to her as an equal, as he would always do, turned Hambeth’s mind from the fear of the ruins that lay outside the village walls, and the eyes of the townspeople, who watched them pass only and did not speak, the knowledge dispersed throughout of what regrettable business was afoot today, Grace already a slave and beginning her service in Hambeth’s charge, as the others had.

The wall around Camberia bore two full gates always guarded, and two more hidden, sometimes guarded, often neglected, through which one at a time might go. There was no watchman today at the passage closest to the ruins of the Caesars, and Hambeth and Grace slipped through with Axilaine, and the girl seemed taken by this turn and lay out a scattering of questions for her mother, who answered them in Paxil.

“What does she wish to know?” Hambeth asked, as they set their feet on the sharp incline that led to ancient places, a broken stair here, a sideways column there half-buried, and before them the white marble structures, ruined and still standing, of a people long gone.

“She asks of the angels,” Grace replied.

“The heads of the angels you spoke of?”

“No, she believes the two Waxcap orphans are angels, because of the heads they live among.”

“Why live they there?”

“They are not welcome in the village overnight, as all know, and they have no uncle to take them in,” Grace replied.

“But they eat,” Hambeth said, uncertain it was true.

“Passably. Some folk see to it, giving them work of one kind or another, but they are old enough now to practice more creatively.”

“Have they?”

“I know not,” Grace said. “I do not study them, they don’t invite study. They prefer to suffer unto themselves and call it living.”

“I know them barely,” Hambeth said, “but I have flipped a crust or two their way.”

“Let’s hope they remember that.”

“Do they know of this?”

“They do.”

“What say they?”

“One, the older, is of uncertain mind, the other opposed.”

“Shall I win them both?”

“The younger will follow the older.”

“They still go by Door and Rafter?” Hambeth asked.

“They do. The older and shorter is Door, the younger Rafter.”

By their great misfortune, the girls were both laid as infants on the threshold of a wifeless man who lived at the edge of the forest, and who

gave them in confusion or contempt the names of household parts before passing them on to those who cared a little more whether they lived or died.

Camberia was a hungry village in those days, weather poor and aurochs not yet fully mastered, with no one willing to take from the mouths of themselves and their kin for the abandoned children of Waxcap strangers, and the girls were fed here and there and taken in now and then, but always chased out upon first appearance of the ill temper or disquiet that in a true daughter would hardly be remarked. Since those days, two more Waxcap orphans had been deposited, seven summers back, and nine summers, while the wealth of the town grew, and both were given names of dignity and tended like true daughters. These two sought today had never found that treatment, and now were too old for it.

Hambeth and Grace climbed from the ragged outskirts of the ancient place, so ruined their original arrangement could not be inferred, to the first of the structures still standing, and Hambeth gazed into the doors and windows they passed and shuddered, for these were the places where the remnant souls of the ancients lingered.

“They live here,” Grace said, and she pointed to an overgrown hall beyond a row of carvings, three naked women on one side, two naked on the other, without heads, and beyond them winged angels, seven in all, two with heads that had held tight through the ravages of time.

The fallen heads of some of the women and angels had been retrieved from beside their pedestals, and stared from the ground on either side of a doorway, and Hambeth knew this must be the dwelling of the Waxcap girls.

“Door?” Grace called out.

Hambeth heard the clap of crockery from within the building, but no answering voice.

“Rafter?”

“Grace, give us another finger!” someone shouted from within.

“No, Hamhearth is here and needs you now.”

Rafter appeared in the doorway, dirty white gown to her knees, red hair across her shoulders, bright blue eyes as piercing as they always were, as if she were trying to see through all the souls she met, to see past them to the unfair gods that lurked behind them, that made them do as they did.

“Where is Door?”

“She rests,” Rafter replied. “Why did you let Hamhearth take your clothings?”

“He took nothing. It was my choice.”

“Will he take mine?”

“If you do not remove them, yes.”

“It was not your choice then,” Rafter retorted.

“Will you come with us?” Grace inquired quietly.

Rafter spoke not, but Door appeared, in a gown of faded green except where it was patched white, her hair not as red, her head not as high.

“Tell me why we must do this,” she said.

“It is the town’s will,” said Hambeth, “and the king’s.”

“We live here,” Door said, “outside a town where we are not allowed to sleep, under no king.”

“You venture into the town often enough, and the king’s will does not run any thinner in these places.”

“His beneficence runs thin,” Door said, “for I have never seen good from him here.”

“The town wishes to keep you, and you will join others, and Grace herself, and you will be fed well and tended, in exchange for a little work.”

“You will burn us and chain us,” Rafter said, “as I have seen.”

Hambeth stepped forward and looked back into Rafter’s piercing eyes.

“I will,” he said. “You will be burned today, once, and start to heal this night, and you will grow used to the restraints.”

“What if we come not?” Door inquired.

“You may flee into the woods, back into the embrace of the Waxcaps, or—”

“They want us not,” Rafter observed, stating the most sorrowful truth with no sorrow. “Do you not know that?”

“I do,” Hambeth said. “Or, if you stay here, others beside me will come for you, and if you appear in town, you will be subdued there.”

The girls stood shoulder to shoulder.

“Come with me now,” Hambeth said, “and you will be given new names.”

Rafter’s mouth opened, as if seeing the same apparition Hambeth had sensed four summers before, and she seemed to Hambeth to be

surprised by this offer. “Or stay, and keep your names and be taken anyways.”

“What names?” Door inquired.

“Choose them.”

“Wing,” said Rafter immediately.

“Yes,” Hambeth agreed.

“Daughter,” said Door, and she looked at the fallen heads of the angels by her feet and her eyes glistened.

“You cannot be daughter,” Hambeth said. “That name belongs to all of Camberia’s female issue.”

“*Emiane*,” Grace ventured, putting her hand upon the head of Axilaine. “It is what we say in Paxil for daughter.”

“*Emiane*,” Door said, nodding. She looked at Rafter, and the girls spoke quietly together in the way people sometimes did when Hambeth traded with two, or more than two, after his final offer.

“Shall we come naked?” Door asked.

“Yes,” Hambeth said, “or your clothes will be taken at the smith’s.”

The two Waxcap orphans stepped into their home, and Hambeth thought at first to follow them in, for they seemed to have reached the tail of the parley and they were his charges now, but Grace touched his elbow and he stopped and waited.

The girl whose name was now Wing appeared first, naked, mouth tight with embarrassment, but her hands hung by her sides and she strode to Hambeth and Grace willingly, and Hambeth knew that without Grace here, and she naked first, he would never have brought these two from their dwelling place to parley, much less subdued them.

Emiane came next, her only clothing her limbs, one arm across her bosom, one hand over her middle.

Both girls were thin, with small round breasts above ribs in sharp relief, hips jutting out on either side of flat bellies, light red hair about their sexes, thick between and around Emiane’s fingers.

Hambeth studied them, nodded, turned and led the way from the ruins, Grace behind him, the two Waxcaps last, speaking quietly to each other. No other beings seemed to be lurking this day in the ancient places, and Hambeth wondered if ancient souls were frightened by certain things the living did, and recoiled before them, as mortals recoiled before their formless opposites.

“Hambeth,” Grace whispered.

“Yes?”

“The smith must bind them both before any marking, and I will be burned first.”

Hambeth nodded, pausing at the hidden door, swallowing and returning to the village within the walls.

Chapter XXVIII: Three More Marked

When Hambeth, leading his little march of naked girls on their last day of freedom, looked at the village folk they passed, he saw more sympathy than leering, and he believed that Camberia would indeed do decent by these next three.

But his fingers trembled when he set his hands on the counter of Stotthearth the smith.

The shop was alive now, sound and smoke and heat and Stotthearth with his hair tied behind his head striking metal.

Someone had retrieved Hyacinth from the armory and she stood by the bellows and made the fire glow, and the sweat glistened on her back and across her breasts and around the thigh that had been burned, the wound red but healing and no longer blistered. Hambeth looked at her, and she looked back at him and smiled, her smile as full as always.

“Stotthearth, we have our three,” Hambeth announced.

Stott ceased his hammering, looked up, eyes upon the two Waxcap girls.

“Door,” he said, nodding. “Rafter.”

“Those are no longer their appellations,” Hambeth said. “They will answer only to Wing and Emiane.”

“And which is which?”

Hambeth put his hand on the taller girl’s shoulder. “Wing,” he said. “And Emiane.”

“Well met, Wing,” Stott said. “Well met, Emiane.”

The girls nodded, Emiane’s eyes glowing.

“How shall we proceed?” Stott asked.

“These two shall be bound first, if you’ve got chain enough, and then Grace will be first for the frame and yoke, and the iron.”

“Wing,” Stott said, and the girl answered to her new name as if it had always been hers, stepping into the smith’s shop.

Stott examined her wrists, turned to a shelf that now lay thick with the chain of his recent fashioning, and brought forth a set with three cuffs, like those Oleander wore.

Wing held up her hands and Stott closed a cuff around each wrist.

“Foot on the stump,” he said, and secured her ankle. “Do they fit?”

“Well enough,” she said, looking down as if examining a new gown.

Stott took her hands in his, turning each over, then back again.

“I’ll adjust tomorrow or the next day or week or month, as you request,” he said, looking at Grace. “I’ve some practice with that.”

She sat on the stump and Stott turned to the other girl.

“Em . . . Em . . .” he stammered.

“Emiane,” she said. “It means daughter.”

“Emiane,” he said, motioning her into his shop. She entered, facing Wing, the two girls exchanging meanings with their eyes only they understood.

Stott pulled a second set of chains from the shelf, and Emiane raised her hands as Wing had, and he applied her chains, which seemed to fit as well as the first set.

“I guessed well on these two,” he said to Hambeth, pointing Emiane to her place on the stump, “but if you see evidence of a burr or pinch, bring them back even if they speak not of it.”

“I will.”

“Some girls never complain,” Stott said, looking again at Grace, “and some cannot open their mouths without a lamentation spewing forth.”

Grace, appearing in no mood for banter, raised the cup of confusing drink and gave it to Hambeth.

“Give them a quarter of it each,”

“And you the rest?” Hambeth said, raising it to her.

“I’ll not have it.”

“You are to be burned first, you should drink first too.”

“I’ll not have it at all. It is for them only.”

Hambeth, ten summers younger than Grace, a boy by name, looked at her and drew in his breath to tell her, for the first time in their lives

together, that she was wrong and he would not rest until he'd made her right.

She raised her hands, bound together with Stott's art, anticipating Hambeth's challenge and laying it on its side.

"This is how it shall be," she said, with a smile that spoke of pain. "I'll not have it."

"I cannot bear this, please," Hambeth said. "Let me tend to Axilaine until you be sober."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Give to those two, and press me not on this or force the drink on me, or I will become Camberia's worst slave. Even if you brand a hundred girls, I will always be the worst among them."

Hambeth, face pale, stared into Grace's eyes, knew she jested not, and brought the cup into the smith's shop, waiting while Stott used a short chain to secure the girls together by their ankles.

"Emiane," Hambeth said, bending to show her the cup, "would you take a quarter of this?"

"What is it?" she asked, looking at the splintery wood of the shop wall.

"It will ease the pain of the iron, and the pain after the iron, and you will remember nothing."

Emiane lowered her nose to the cup, frowned.

"It is all poison," she observed.

"Yes," Hambeth admitted.

Emiane took it, raised it to her lips, drank a tiny sip, frowned and took more, downing each sip with three swallows and a gasp of disgust.

Hambeth offered the cup to Wing, who complained nor spoke at all, just sipped, swallowed, sipped some more, swallowed.

"You will feel tired soon," Hambeth said, and he looked back to Grace, waiting at the counter, only Axilaine's hand visible, clinging to her mother's bound hand.

Hambeth looked down at the cup. "There is plenty left."

She shook her head.

"Let me nurse this one, while the drink take hold for the others, and I will find someone to see to her while I'm in there."

She waited not for Hambeth's approval, sweeping her daughter up to her breast as if she'd done it many times in restraints, and she turned and

stepped away, the girl nursing while mother walked.

“There is madness there,” Stott said, leaning upon his counter, wiping his hands on his apron.

“Or she is sober upon sober, and it seems madness to the merely sober.”

“No, she is going to find something all the same,” Stott said, “and she’ll come back all a-stagger and flush of face.”

“I have never known her to mislead,” Hambeth said. “She is as plain as unwrought stone.”

Stott laughed quietly.

“Emiane,” he said, looking at the girls on the stump in the corner. Neither looked up.

“Emiane,” he said again, and now both gazed at him.

“Do you remember which of you is Wing, and which Emiane?”

“Emiane means daughter,” Emiane said.

“It is your name now.”

“It is,” she agreed, eyes on the wall, vacant.

“Wing.”

“Yes, smith?”

“You know your name is Wing?”

“It has always been my name.”

“They are both near the place,” Stott said. “I hope that witch of Paxilex does not tarry.”

Now Hambeth had only to wait, and in that idleness his mind wandered to what must next be done, and how things would follow from there, and he looked at the counter and saw three men and a woman come to watch the proceedings, standing a few paces away and talking among themselves, and he felt sick for everything, nor did regarding Hyacinth help at all, she busy with the bellows and taking orders from Stott, and when Grace rounded the corner of the shop, naked and chained, arms empty, nipples thick and long after the suckling just done, he could not muster a smile.

“Finish me, Hamhearth,” she said.

She walked into the shop and Hambeth followed her, the brace and the yoke waiting with the same ropes in place as had been used before.

She fell to her knees and, if she had imbibed anything beyond water, it did not seem to impair her sense of position, for she put her hands

and feet where they belonged, allowing Stott and Hambeth to bind her by wrist and ankle and then at the left knee and thigh.

Stott latched the yoke around Grace's neck, her hair falling and concealing her face, and he stood and motioned to Hyacinth, and she redoubled her efforts at the bellows, the blast of heat filling the little building.

Hambeth stood and moved to the counter, watching Stott take the iron from the furnace, glowing red hot at first, cooling but a little and, as before, the smith knelt by the girl, put hand to rump, and put iron to leg with a hiss, marking Grace now and forever by the king's device.

"AYII!" Grace screamed, leg straining against the ropes, forehead gone red where Hambeth could see it amidst her hair. "AYII! AYIYA!"

Stotthearth rose, dropped the iron back into the fire, fished among the coals for the collar rod, and pointed to the aurochs hide, on the floor beside the yoke.

"Grace," Hambeth whispered, wrapping the hide around her neck, "Grace, how fare thee?"

"I hate all the gods," she groaned back, and Hambeth watched the sweat arise upon her back and roll across her ribs.

"Gracehearth, forgive me."

"You are blameless," she said. "Shrink not and help me get the other two through."

"Is this why you suffer, then, for them?"

"Hush and hold firm the hide," she said.

Stott brought forth the iron collar, Hambeth did his duty with the hide, and with a little bending, crimping and cooling, Grace was property of Camberia.

Somewhere, from beyond the counter where the townsfolk thronged to witness, a child wailed.

"Free me," Grace said.

Hambeth and Stott unbound her and opened her yoke and Grace stood, moving slowly, clumsily in her chains, and Hambeth took her arm and she allowed him to guide her to the wall, but she waved him away when he made as if to seat her, setting shoulder against the timbers, her hands clasped over her belly, fingers trembling, face no longer red but all white, even her lips.

"Would you have the chains I made for all the others?" Stott asked.

“These I wear now took you a year to make right, Smith,” Grace replied, voice tremulous but words as biting as they ever were. “I’m sure you are too busy for a project that will take four seasons more.”

“You’ll have one ankle free, the better to walk,” Stott argued. “And I smith in haste now, my work maturing, as you have seen.”

“And you are paid for each link you forge?” Grace inquired, her voice gaining in volume, as if arguing with Stott gave her strength.

“No, by the whole piece,” Stott said. “And I have already been paid for yours, so if you refuse them, you do me a favor, and if you accept, I am inconvenienced.”

“Then I will want them,” Grace said, and she turned to the two girls in the corner, who were both gazing up. “Emiane?” she said.

“I am that,” Emiane said, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“Will you let us finish this now?”

“Finish what?”

“The thing that must be done. Will you let Hambeth take you up and set you where I was just now?”

“Hambeth? I see no child.”

Hambeth stepped to Emiane, offered his hand, and she took it with both of hers, looking with confusion at her wrists and the cuffs that bound them.

“What are these?” she asked.

No one answered her, and she did not ask again, allowing Hambeth to bring her to the frame and lower her to hand and knee, where she was tied and yoked.

Hambeth looked to Hyacinth and she looked back and pumped the bellows without being told to, the heat a small torment that, like the rest of this, Hambeth longed to quit. He frowned at her but she smiled back, and he wondered why she would not be despondent. Either she was senseless to what was being done, or she was like Grace, sober upon sober, knowing this was how things must be and could not be changed by a needless consternation.

Preferring the latter reason, Hambeth did his best to smile, and he wished he could find with her a common tongue.

“Ahhh!” Emiane cried when the brand made its mark, but her scream was not so loud or long or rending as for the three Paxilex captives,

or Grace, and Hambeth wondered if the drink had gone deeper through her slight form, or if by some magic Grace had calmed her.

She was collared, released, raised by the arms to an uncertain standing.

“This one, the elder and shorter, answers now only and forevermore to Emiane,” Hambeth said to those at the counter. “Use any other name, and you will be ignored at best.”

“Is she well?” one of the women asked.

“As well as can be expected, aided by a liquor of befuddlement.”

Emiane was put back on the stump and Wing was taken next, and Hambeth prayed she would be the last he would ever have to work this way. She issued two quick shrieks upon her marking and released a stream of urine, angling out from her vulva to the dirt between her knees, where it splashed and puddled before the earth swallowed it, and she writhed against her bonds when she felt the heat of the collar through the aurochs hide, and then it was done, she was freed and stood up.

“This one is Wing,” Hambeth said. “And only Wing. If anyone see Durgahearth, he should know this. Emiane and Wing.”

Wing was put back on the stump, where she and Emiane sat, shoulders touching, the elder tapping her bound foot against the hard-packed earth, the younger holding her hands together along the thumbs, making a pair of wings that flapped while the chain between them rang quietly.

“Will you help me berth them?” Hambeth asked Grace, who no longer leaned against the wall but stood straight and looked back at him as if fully restored.

“If you command me to, yes.”

“What will you?” Hambeth said.

“It matters not my will any further.”

Hambeth stepped to Grace, speaking so only she could hear him. “Where others see the collar and the king’s device, I will always see only Grace.”

She raised her hand to her eye and wiped a tear.

“Yes, I will berth them, after we address the sustenance.”

Hambeth looked at the counter, thick with the goods of the people, both food and drink.

“Take what you will for yourself now, carry the rest to the berths for them to find when their mouths work,” he advised, adding, “You have helped me for nothing back. May I ease some day of yours., sooner over later.”

“Drive me yourself up Fifth Pass, and we will be acquitted.”

“You elect four days in harness?”

“It may not be four days.”

“Because you race where others tarry?”

“Yes, call it that,” Grace replied, smiling. “But my daughter comes with, or you shall drag me all the way, even if it take a season up and a season back.”

“You have tricked me into an unfair trade.”

“You know her, Hamhearth. When has she ever been the minorest of trouble?”

Hambeth raised his shoulders in agreement, gestured to the food, and Grace took what she wanted and raised it to her mouth, her appetite this day competing with the hunger of the other Paxilex girls.

“Hambeth, I believe we are finished here,” Stott said.

“We are,” Hambeth said. “Shall I take Hyacinth back with the rest?”

“I am not quite done with her,” Stott said.

Hambeth looked at his friend and found he could not be sure of his meaning, and he felt a deep unease for reasons he could not ascertain.

“More pushing,” Stott said, adding quickly, “of the bellows. She is fit for little else with but one eye to see.”

Hambeth, somewhat reassured, nodded and stepped out of the shop, allowing Grace, mouth still full with her own meal, to fill a sack with at least two meals each for the Waxcap pair, and he hoped that such food would always be at the ready for them, and that it would be at least a small recompense for what they had just lost.

“Emiane, Wing,” Grace said. “Take to your feet and walk to a proper resting place.”

The girls looked up, looked at each other, stood unsteadily, bound hands against rough walls, grimacing as the drink began to wear off and the pain of the iron increased.

They made their way slowly, ponderously from the shop and followed Grace and Hambeth to the armory, where had gathered another

throng of townsfolk, including Durgahearth himself, as well as Axilaine and the girl keeping her. A second wagon stood beside the first now, waiting to be drawn, like the first its tongue fitted to be drawn not by beasts but by three females.

Axilaine ran to her mother, and Grace raised her, kissed her and set her down, wincing, and Hambeth guessed her leg hurt more than she let on.

“You seem to be naming things today, Hambeth,” Durgahearth announced as soon as he spied the lad.

“The two named themselves as part of the parley, and I judged it a minor grant for what they give,” Hambeth said, his own voice raised in announcement. “This one is Emiane now and ever, and this Wing, and they will answer to no other name, and will do the opposite of whatever is asked when one call them a wrong thing.”

“So be it,” Durgahearth said. “Emiane and Wing. Wing and Emiane. The town accepts your service.”

The girls gazed at Durgahearth but did not nod or smile, and they followed Hambeth into the armory, which now bore the faint odor of urine and sweat and food and even mead, and Hambeth saw the eyes of Oleander only at the slats, and they exchanged the smiles of two who know each other so well no words are required. He guessed that Lilac’s time had been bought for the day, and he wondered what she worked at.

All the berths had been fitted with doors now, and three more held thick hay.

“Emiane,” Hambeth said, pointing to a space, and the girl crawled in, raising her burned leg carefully. “Wing,” Hambeth said, the second female taking her place beneath the first, smiling dizzily, the drink still working with regards to thinking if not in the senses of flesh.

Grace supplied each berth with equal portions of food and drink, the girls looking briefly with puzzlement, Emiane the first to realize it was all meant for her, and she opened her mouth and pushed in a bone with meat on it and grunted like a sow and smiled at herself, embarrassed.

“How is your mark?” Hambeth asked Grace.

“It stings everywhere,” she said. “A torment like no other.”

“You refrained from drink to help these two?”

“Not just that,” Grace replied. “You saw the greeting I gave my daughter?”

“Yes.”

“That too. She will remember this day less if her mother is not a tumbling inebriate.”

“You will not be berthed now?” Hambeth asked, latching the two Waxcaps in and setting the beam.

“I am already promised for the afternoon, myself and Axilaine,” Grace said. “Tapplehearth and his wife need hands, so there I go.”

Hambeth bit his cheek. “You’ve arranged this with them?”

“I have.”

“Will you always choose your master?”

“When I may.”

“You seem content to swallow this aurochs down to the tail.”

Grace laughed, looked down, put her hand on Axilaine’s head and guided her away from her left thigh.

“I have started on the nose,” she said. “I am promised out for at least a fortnight’s worth of time. And perhaps you’ll drive me in the midst of it.”

“You will pull a wagon to Greater Vandals and back for me?” Hambeth said. “With all these other masters to choose from?”

“Harness me,” Grace said. “I will serve beside any two of the Paxilex girls.”

“Not the Waxcaps?”

“Not until they prove themselves.”

Hambeth turned to Oleander’s berth, removing the beam and releasing her but ignoring her to look back at Grace, his eyes bent in sorrow.

“I lose today our moonlight times,” he said. “I will ever—”

“Perhaps you do, perhaps you do not,” Grace said as Oleander emerged.

The two girls hugged and shared a few quick words in Paxil, Oleander smiling by half the way she always did. Grace knelt to check on the Waxcap girls and stood.

“Fare thee well, Hamheartt,” she said, leading her daughter to the door and out of it.

“Fare thee well, Gracehearth,” Hambeth replied.

Hambeth brought Oleander from the armory and into the sun of midday, saw Grace round a home on the way to her new master, an unnatural weariness settling upon him.

“Hambeth,” spoke Durgahearth, who had tarried all this time in the shade of the armory, either because tarrying was his preferred way, or he wished to have words.

“Yes, Durgahearth?”

“When go you next to the Greater Vandals?”

“I have only been never,” Hambeth replied, laughing, the question stirring him, “but I will go if Uncle give me leave, and you give me a wagon, and I may pick my team.”

“Who for your team?” Durgahearth asked.

“Grace, her daughter, and this one,” Hambeth said, motioning to Oleander. “And—”

“The daughter is but two summers old,” Durgahearth noted, “and can barely propel herself.”

“No, she will not push, and will be but a small share of the burden, as her mother insists by fair parley,” Hambeth said. “And Hyacinth will make the third of the team.”

“Very well. You’ll be departing early on the morrow?”

“I didn’t think it be so soon, Sir,” Hambeth said, struggling to calm his voice. “I must convey to Tomhearth first and set things on.” He looked at the cart. “And arrange the girls’ fittings.”

“The fittings are all but complete, by the smith and the carpenter,” Durgahearth said, “and either is free to tutor you on how the girls will be bound for drawing.”

“I’ll speak to Stotthearth next,” Hambeth said. “And then, our own produce lay in wait like all the rest, mostly behind the doors at the wall, and I would ask for some extra share of cart-lading, in that I drive and our girl push.”

“Do we parley now?” Durgahearth asked, eyes wide with an unexpected amusement.

“No, Sir, we merely talk, do we not?” Hambeth countered.

“Whether talk or parley, you will best me,” Durgahearth said.

“If the trade be not fair on both sides, I’ll not have it,” Hambeth insisted. “Have I asked for an unfair thing?”

“You want all the cart for Tomhearth’s stuffs, and then Grace must go, you say, and then her daughter too, who must be fed all the way and will not push at all, and then—”

“Axilaine is fed at the bosom,” Hambeth said.

“No, she eat both pap and else than pap now, as I have seen,” Durgahearth said, “and she be half Paxilex, and girls from there devour all set before them before they snatch at the next plate.”

“You have never seen any dame of Paxilex steal food,” Hambeth said.

“And yet vanish any food an arm or less away from any of them,” Durgahearth asserted. “It happens when I look away, and I say wherefor, and they look back and speak not and smile and chew and—”

“Learn to say wherefor in their tongue and you’ll get your answer maybe,” Hambeth interrupted. “But all I ask is a tenth of the cart for Tomhearth’s goods, a tenth by weight, and then you must lay out a breadth of salted aurochs meat and three hands of fish and ten loaves and a garden sack plus a half sack more of the garden and two empty water bags and five magnums of mead and in this way I and the team shall have what we need, and all the rest of the cart may be given to the other things that have languished unwheeled, and I’ll bring back a thick pocket of vanders and whatever else I can parley for on Camberia’s behalf.”

Durgahearth laughed and slapped Hambeth so hard on the shoulder Oleander started with a jerk that rung her chains.

“I mourn for all the Greater Vandals traders who find your cart and think they shall have what’s on it lightly,” he boomed. “You’ll ruin them and their families and call it fair.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Hambeth said. “Will you stack up all of it today?”

“I’ll see to it anon, but you must get free of your Uncle.”

“Look for me at first light tomorrow,” Hambeth said, turning to walk with Oleander back to the smith’s, “for I believe I have enough now to swing him.”

Chapter XXIX: “Hambett on Fire!”

“Stotthearth!” Hambeth said at the counter, shouting over the din of smithwork while Hyacinth tended the bellows.

Stott looked up, motioned Hyacinth to rest, and he stood and made his way to the counter.

“I’ll have you and your team set by morning,” Stott said, “if I must work all night.”

“Can you put to flesh the work at hand?” he asked, and he motioned to Oleander beside him. “Bind this one so I can see how they’re set?”

“Who for your team?” Stott asked.

“Grace, Oleander and Hyacinth,” Hambeth replied, and the girl by the bellows recognized her name and looked at Oleander and smiled and looked at Hambeth, and he stared back.

“If we can find Grace, we can try all three on the wagon now,” Stott offered.

“How much must I know?”

“Hyacinth,” Stott said, setting his tools and apron on the shelf and motioning to the girl. She rose and followed him from the shop and slipped up to Oleander, the girls exchanging a quick string of words in Paxil, continuing to talk quietly as Hambeth and Stott led them to the armory, speaking of their own things, of Fifth Pass and The Greater Vandals and what might happen there.

To Hambeth’s surprise, the ever-idle Durgahearth had overcome his nature and seen to it that a wagon groaned already under the weight of Camberian output, including in one corner a generous share of sacks full of the things Hambeth and his Uncle had grown. Even as they approached, two farmers and a weaver brought forth their goods and added them to the cargo.

“You will be back from there in three days?” the weaver asked, heaving two rolled rugs onto the load.

“Five at best,” Hambeth said. “Mark what is yours and I’ll deliver at least the common rate.”

“What is the share for transport?” the weaver asked.

“I’ll keep a tenth, the city gets a twentieth.”

“No,” said the weaver, “you take but a twentieth as well.”

“Remove your goods and wait for the next wagon from Greater Vandals,” Hambeth said. “And they’ll keep half if you’re lucky.”

The weaver’s face dissolved in panic. “I jest, I jest, Hamhearth,” he said. “Take your full share, and may you trade well.”

The weaver took his leave at a run, Hambeth smiling after him.

“I don’t expect to see Grace at all this day,” Hambeth said. “She chooses her own masters. But show me the works for Hyacinth and Oleander and I’ll set Grace the same way.”

Hambeth entered the armory, dark and cool and smelling of females.

“Are you come to free us, Hambeth?” inquired Wing. “Or Hamhearth? Or whatever people call you?”

“Hambeth,” Hambeth said, and he noticed that the food meant to be two meals was reduced to scraps lying amidst the hay. “And no, I come only to see how you fare.”

“This is a terrible downfall,” said Emiane. “Even now, we would be walking chainless picking out dinner in the woods, and our legs would not burn, and our necks would not be scraped raw by iron.”

“And your repast would be meager, and come winter you would starve again and beg in the cold, each season looking less like children and more like women to the vigilant wives of Camberia.”

Wing issued a guttural cry of despair, and Hambeth stooped before the two girls.

“Wing,” Hambeth said, voice heavy with the sympathy he indeed felt for them. “Such is the course of fate. I wish you had not been orphaned, or you had been as fortunate as I, for I found an uncle after my bereftment. But wait a time—”

“How long must we wait?” demanded Emiane. “We must tarry here all our lives?”

“You are not judged fit to work just today, because of your marks,” Hambeth said. “But shall I tell Durgahearth you seek labor for the nonce?”

The girls were silent.

“You will be let out tomorrow, you will be given honest work, you will be fed beyond all your past efforts in that regard, and soon enough, you will achieve status, even like Grace, who today chooses her masters and her work, and—”

“I will never be a whore of Paxilex,” hissed Wing, “nor shall I, or either one of us, ever be one of your concubines, you cunt-stabbing slaver!”

Hambeth put his hand down to steady himself, and he looked at Wing and hated her with all his spirit. They were distant kin, he knew, his forebears choosing generations ago to settle here and sow, the brothers of his forebears preferring the woods and gathering, but the distance between their hearts and minds and souls at this moment were as if the sea lay between them. Or as if Wing – and Emiane, for that matter – yesterday

occupied the bodies of swine, today were transformed without being notified into the bodies of full-grown girls.

He pondered his next words, his next deeds, found with the strength of the gods a course he would not regret.

“Wing,” he said, quietly. “Do you see the post there, with the rings set into it?”

Wing’s eyes, which seemed like they could light kindling, did not depart from his face, but he knew she was well aware of what lay at the end of the old armory.

“Should you speak to me again in that vein, or to anyone else free or unfree, or speak words even half so repugnant, you will cry there, and learn what you should already know.”

Wing bit her lip and slid, with the soft ring of her new chains, deeper into her berth, her raging face obscured in the darkness, only her piercing eyes glowing, as if her nature were returning to that of a beast even as Hambeth watched.

Hambeth glanced at Emiane, who seemed merely sad, not angry, and he left the armory and found Stott affixing Hyacinth to the wagon, first with the binding she always wore, opening both wrist cuffs but leaving her right ankle secured, wrapping the loose chain around the tongue and closing the cuffs upon it so that her ankle was fastened to it.

A crossbar of wood had been lashed to the tongue, set so that Hyacinth and the girl on the other side of the tongue could push against it. A third place to draw had been added to the tip of the tongue.

Two open cuffs dangled by chains from each of the crossbars. Stott pointed to the bar before Hyacinth, she put her hands to it and he closed the cuffs around her wrists. Hambeth watched her face, and she looked back, merely curious, not offended or hurt or angry or sad, her nature more suited to this than the girls still confined.

Of course, Hyacinth had known slavery for at least a fortnight, and before that, she had belonged to a group of traders, where the Waxcaps had belonged to nothing but themselves.

“Chained by one ankle to the tongue,” Stott said, pointing at Hyacinth’s restraints, “and by both wrists to the crossbar.”

“Their hands will go raw,” Hambeth warned.

Stott took Hyacinth’s hands in his own and studied them.

“She has grown nary a callus,” he observed.

“It took Oleander days and a raft of weeping blisters to make hers,” Hambeth said, nodding to the girl.

Stott motioned Oleander to step to him, and he took her hands and ran his fingers along the thick places at her palms and along her fingers and thumb.

“What work did you give her?” Stott asked.

“Breaking earth with a hoe, hacking pilgrim grass with a hoe, drawing up five buckets of water at a time for me and her and the aurochs, holding a beam in place while Uncle and I lashed it,” Hambeth said. “And more than that, on some days.”

“This one picks berries by the daughters of Avelina,” Stott grouched, “or so I’m told, and holds the leather for the shoes of the husband of Avelina, and sometimes presses the bellows of my furnace, but that is easy work too.”

Hambeth opened his mouth to speak, to ask the questions that had grown thick in his mind, about what other work Hyacinth did that produced no calluses, questions about the number of days she earned a vander for Camberia, how often she climbed the ladder from Stott’s shop to serve in his bed, if she were ever granted leave by Avelina to help in other ways than the mere making of boots. And he had other questions about Hyacinth that he could not ask, about how it felt to lay with her, about the sounds she made, if she joined with her partner on hand and knee like Oleander preferred, if she grunted and writhed and bucked and finally acquiesced the way Oleander did.

If serving her was more a chore, or a pleasure.

And then, what of Hyacinth’s beyond that? Were her parents alive or dead? Or did she know? Were they among those attacked by the pirates? How had her life been before she was captured? Was the labor endless and difficult, even if it did not torment her hands? And how did she find Camberia? Were its rude structures, its hovels and halls and hard-packed lanes, a shadow of what she had known? What of its people? Did she find them rude and coarse?

How did she find Hambeth?

In the end, Hambeth spoke not, raised no questions, merely looking at Hyacinth as if the answers lay there, and she looked back at him, her eyes soft, countenance not at all that of a girl bound naked to a wagon, to be used

for mere pulling, and the degree to which Hambeth did not know things about her troubled his mind.

But for four days, Hyacinth would serve as a third of the team, and Grace would speak for her to Hambeth, and on Hambeth's behalf to her, and by that means he might learn a little more, if Grace did not weary of conducting a parley for two others.

"A leather harness," Stott said, jolting Hambeth from his thoughts.

"Eh?" Hambeth replied.

"I and Vesthearth, or possibly his son Carbeth, may craft something for the hips of leather and chain," Stott said. "And the girls may push that way, in partnership with their hands, and wear both parts a little but neither grievously."

"How soon would you have all this done?" Hambeth inquired. "I must have them ready by tomorrow at dawn."

Stott waved dismissively. "This is a trifle. If you be ready in the morn, and Oleander be with you, and you have not worn her out with grunting, we'll have all you need to keep the girls to the cart by day, and beside you by night."

"There is more?"

"Oh yes, my friend, I've been busy," Stott said. "Sleeping hobbles like you put on Oleander, a long tether to keep them together and leashed to the cart under the moon, and something to run between their legs to hold everyone honest."

"Of what do you speak on that last item?" Hambeth inquired, but Stott ignored him.

"You see how this works with Hyacinth," Stott said. "Get rested, come back in the morning, and I'll train you on the rest of their gear."

"Very well," said Hambeth.

"How fare our Waxcaps?" Stott asked.

"Wing is peevish, but it might be the drink," Hambeth said.

"Perhaps you can calm them with promises of endless days of bellow pushing."

"I would have them pump other than bellows," Stott said.

"You have not found satisfaction with the females of Paxilex?"

"Oh, I have," Stott said. "Some. But Paxilex girls are not my first choice. And now that one, Wing, made sweet mud of my floor, and for that I owe her."

“Well, you have seen the full wares of the Waxcaps,” Hambeth said. “Perhaps you should parley on it while they’re still giddy.”

Stott nodded and smiled, entered the armory, and Hambeth turned to Oleander, to speak to her as if they understood each other.

“You’ll spend four days pushing,” he said, while she looked back at him with a half-smile. “With perhaps some rest in between. And we’ll all see things I have only been told of, palaces as high as mountains, columns that lie not half in dirt but stand upright still, and with a whole building atop, and carvings from stone of Caesars and horses and angels, with the heads still on. We’ll—”

“Hambett?”

Hambeth turned to Hyacinth. She had never spoken his name before, but he guessed she wanted to be freed from the wagon.

“Hambett,” she said again, drawing out the last syllable, working to pronounce his name properly. “Hambett. Hambeth.”

“Yes?”

“Hambeth,” she said, correctly again, and she raised one chained hand to touch her forearm just below the elbow. “Burn.”

Hambeth looked down, saw that the sleeve of his tunic had been singed of late, perhaps by a stray ember at the smith’s. It was not the only flaw in the garment, and Hambeth frowned at it, then looked up at Hyacinth, wondering why she would point this out.

Hyacinth’s chains rang out as she struck the parts of her forearms she could reach, slapping as if she were aflame, and she cried out, “Hambett on fire, Oleander. Hurry fast! Piss!”

Oleander looked at the girl held beside her, eyes wide with shock, but her half smile grew to full and she laughed as if unable not to.

Hambeth gazed from one girl to the other, trying to fathom out their meaning. Had Hyacinth just told a joke? At Hambeth’s expense? And a bawdy joke at that?

Both girls were laughing, looking at each other and back at Hambeth. Was this what passed for humor in Paxilex? Jokes about aiding with urine the sufferers of garment fires?

And yet, the humor here could not be denied, and Hambeth allowed himself to smile, to laugh at his own expense, and to marvel at these strange creatures from another land.

Over dinner that night, the meal halfway through, Oleander eating at her regular, voracious pace, Hambeth and Tomhearth dining steadily, Hambeth drew in his breath.

“Uncle,” he began.

“Yes, do as ye may,” Tomhearth blurted with a wave of his hand.

“Uncle?”

“Go,” he said. “Go to Greater Vandals. Wander all of Fifth Pass. Take the girls and—”

“You know of this?”

“Of course I do,” said Tomhearth. “I know too that you are a fool, headstrong and bold where you should shrink, but I can stop you no longer. So go. And if I ever see you again, or more than a few pieces of you stuck on someone’s spear, I’ll praise all the gods and sundry.”

“Durgahearth wishes for the cart to leave at morn, and—”

“I know all this already,” said Tomhearth. “And you will walk with three girls in harness, and a suckler who can barely tread, and if the Waxcaps don’t make of you all a meal, maybe the wolves will, or a she-bear, or the ghosts of the Caesars, or any stray brigand, or that pirate Agarjj and his ilk, or the soldiers of Paxilex, who march up and down all day to—”

“There is a truce on Fifth Pass,” Hambeth said, “and a wealth of Avenlou’s men-at-arms as well I hear, and they fight not and keep all others at peace as well, and—”

“You argue with me after I consent?” Tomhearth asked, laughing. “Is that how you parley, how you trade?”

“No sir,” Hambeth said. “I accept your grant, and I believe the parley over my journey is complete.”

“It is.”

“But now we parley over your fear, and I—”

“You cannot trade over another man’s dread!” Tomhearth boomed, laughing. “Not even the greatest trader in all of Avenlou can do such!”

Hambeth pondered his uncle’s words, considered his next utterance carefully.

“Sir,” Hambeth said, looking into his uncle’s eyes. “I will keep safe. I will take the spear I made, and the sword of Jakkhearth, and I—”

“You’ll take neither,” Tomhearth said. “You’ll be armed with your Wagon only, and your team, and that little one, and may the gods rescue me from your father’s hot ghost if anything befall you worse than dysentery.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“But mark what I say now, for I’ll not have it denied should the parts of you that cast shadows ever block the sunlight in Camberia again.”

“Yes, Uncle?”

“We are to lose Oleander,” he said, gesturing toward the girl, who noticed him pointing at her and looked back at him while continuing to gnaw on lambsflesh. “In a dream, she was gone, without a trace, all of her vanished, never to be seen by myself again, her chains and that smile and the rest, and the dream was second only to true earth, and I felt it and I know it shall pass, and nothing can be done to keep her here, so you might as well stagger like a fool with her up Fifth Pass as sit here and wait for her to turn to vapor.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Hambeth agreed, certain that the dream, in this case, was no more than a cautious man’s fancy.

That night in the barn, Oleander told him he must enter her, and he thought of Grace as Uncle’s slave girl bucked against him, hips shaking, groans pouring out through the cool air of the barn, and when she was done and gasping on hands and knees, he finished within her, pouring semen into her chamber with his own gasps of relief.

Back in his bed, he thought of Grace again, and then Oleander, and finally Hyacinth, and it was the last girl’s face he saw, and her strange joke he heard, as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter XXX: Setting the Wagon

Hambeth woke, felt a stirring within him before he remembered why, then the knowledge came full of what he must do today, and he went outside into the cool air of night to relieve himself, checked the stars and saw that, pitch black as it was above save for the crescent moon, the sun would rise within a finger.

He wished it were later, because he could not sleep anymore, but he could not wake Oleander, and if he did, he could not bring her to the village and chain her to the wagon while all the rest of Camberia and the two others of the team were still abed.

So he watched the stars wheel, pondered the perils before him along with the wonders, and waited until the first hint of light to go trouble

Oleander, whose breath started and caught in her throat while he was still feeling his way to her through the barn.

“Oleander?”

“Hambeth?”

He heard her chains rattle, and he entered her stall, touched her foot, knelt to remove her hobbles and release her ankle from the beam.

“Are you ready to push all the way up Fifth Pass?” he asked her.

“Ah.”

He returned her ankle to the cuff and stood, she rising beside him and stepping out of the barn, barely needing to touch the walls to guide herself through the blackness, as if her cat-like eyes could see.

He followed her through the door, making out the outline of her gray shape as she crouched, her urine hissing into the weeds.

As soon as she was done, she stood and strode toward the lane that led to town, and he believed that she was as eager for the trip as she, that she'd had enough of working with a hoe and wished to see something new. She was a trader, after all, far more traveled than he.

Hambeth looked toward the house, saw Tomhearth there. The man waved his hand, somberly, as if he believed he was seeing his nephew for the last time, and Hambeth waved back.

“You will be paired with Hyacinth,” Hambeth said at the next bend, “and Grace will lead, while I and Axilaine walk beside you, or I walk with the little girl in my arms, for I am certain she has not the legs for the trip. Or perhaps I will throw her upon the rest of the load, as if she be a sack of wheat or a roll of carpet, and let her be a burden for you and all others on the team.”

Oleander said her share of things on the walk to the village, her language sounding as strange and light and beautiful as ever it did, and Hambeth thought upon his Uncle's dream and wondered if it might come true, if Oleander was soon to be lost to them, taking her voice and her eyes and her half-smile with her.

And her body, which Hambeth had grown accustomed to serving and feeding.

At the gate, Bitterhearth let them through with a nod and a few words, and within the walls, Hambeth found the village awake and alive, townsfolk going about their morning bustles, greeting both himself and

Oleander by name, often enough calling him Hamhearth because they didn't know he was still a boy or didn't care.

Oleander spoke the same greeting back to everyone, a simple "Hello," and she raised her hand as far as her chains would allow, and smiled the way she always did, and Hambeth wondered what she thought.

As for his fellow Camberians, Hambeth knew the journey would bring much-needed vanders to the village, and his trades would be Camberia's answer to the taking of their horses, and it seemed all believed that Hambeth stood ready to acquit the village proudly yet another time.

He went first to the smith's, finding Stotthearth already awake and, to his surprise, Grace and Lilac there too, Lilac on the stump, Grace standing while Stott stood before her.

"Well met," Hambeth said.

"All but finished, Hamhearth," Stott said. "Grace seems to find her new irons acceptable."

Hambeth saw that Grace had been fitted with the same chains the other girls wore, wrists bound to each other and joined by a long chain to her ankle.

"How wears his work, Gracehearth?" Hambeth asked.

"Well enough," Grace replied. "His craft is a little improved."

She turned to Stott. "But do not throw out my old things, smith."

"My antique work is not so wretched, then?"

"This whole business is wretched, as well you know," Grace replied.

Stott smiled as if in agreement, stepped to his shelf and drew forth a short set of chains. Hambeth looked into Grace's eyes, and she looked back with the eyes of a lover, and he winced with pain and lowered his eyes to her leg, where the king's device festered red and furious, pink streams of water running from it.

"Step in, Hambeth," he said, "and let me show you how we'll keep these girls true to the path."

Hambeth entered the shop, bringing Oleander with him, sat her beside Lilac and wondered where tarried Hyacinth this morning.

Stott stepped behind Grace and wrapped a chain around her waist like a belt, shutting it behind by a heavy clasp. A chain dangled from the front of the belt, and Stott reached between her legs, she parting them to

allow the indignity, and he pulled the chain up and between her legs and joined the end to the clasp, which bore a simple locking mechanism.

“Wherefor, Stotthearth?” Hambeth asked.

“It is a recommended garment for slave girls on Fifth Pass,” Stott explained. “A naked girl whose holes are left unguarded is considered merchantable, and you’ll be troubled to and fro with offers for these three. The chain tells your fellow travelers they are burden girls only, and not tasked with delighting the world.”

Hambeth looked at Grace, and she looked back without any story in her eyes, and he wondered how she found this new thing, if she had already known of it, if she cared that it must be done.

“Shall it come off for pissing?”

“No,” Stott said, “Witness.”

Stott fell to his knees before Grace and motioned Hambeth to join him, and he reached up to Grace’s female opening while she stood spread-legged, still and mute, and he touched her lips as if they were simply another place on her body, like her neck or her ankle, and all Hambeth’s history of pleasure there, of pushing his manhood between these lips and into the depths of her body, groaning out his thick semen into the chamber these lips guarded, were forgotten now, rendered irrelevant by the manipulations of Stott’s thick black fingers.

“The chain runs double at her pleasure door,” he said, and Hambeth saw that, indeed, there were two strands of fine chain here, which Stott separated from each other and lay on either side of her pink slit.

“The walking will likely as not bring the chains together between her lips, but Grace will let you know when she needs her opening unimpeded, and you may spread the links for her relief.”

“She cannot do that by her own accord?” Hambeth asked, for he did not wish to perform this service for three females day after day. He was not Avenlou’s greatest trader, no, but he was a trader of some merit, and adjusting chains to enable pissing was not in his mind a suitable task.

“Their hands will be bound to the beam,” Stott said. “By short chains.”

“Can we not piss through the links, smith?” Grace asked with a tinge of annoyance upon her tongue, and Hambeth knew the question was meant not for Stott, but for Hambeth, that he had been asked for a small

thing, and his trifling over it was unbecoming of any man, much less one who had been her lover, and he felt ashamed and sick.

“Do not when you can avoid it,” Stott said. “A girl’s piss may heal wounds and ease joints, but it tears iron to red scrap, and will make a mess of your middle besides.”

“I will do this, of course,” Hambeth said, hoping Grace heard the contrition in his voice.

“It stays on for passing water,” Stott continued, “but release the middle chain altogether for the dropping of earth, and you may lay it aside as well should any wish to part their legs for you.”

Hambeth looked at Stott, and the smith looked back without smiling, without leering, and Hambeth reminded himself that his friend could be bawdy and vulgar in one moment, and simply attending to business the next, and at this moment the girls’ bodies and they ways they worked and the pleasures they gave and received were to Stott simply another matter of commerce.

“And then, hobbles and a sleeping leash,” Stott said, rising, pulling a long, anchored chain from his shelf, and three pairs of ankle cuffs, joined by short chains like the cuffs Oleander slept in. “Put them in these when they’re off the cart, then run the leash through the wide link in each hobble pair, and secure by anchor the balance of the leash around the cart wheel or axle or tongue or a tree or whatever else they can’t get to and meddle with, and sleep by them too.”

“Thank you, smith,” Hambeth said. “Is that all of it?”

“It is, in this place,” Stott said, turning back to his shelf to retrieve more restraints. “Chain up the holes of these other two and we may be on our way, for I’m told there are some waiting for us at the armory even now, and food to be had besides.”

Hambeth took the belts from Stott and turned toward the girls, bidding them rise with a gesture. Oleander stood first, turned away from him and spread her legs, and Hambeth wrapped her with the belt, pulled the chain between her legs and, with a few tries at the mechanism, fixed it right and made her chaste.

“Where is the belt of Hyacinth?” Hambeth asked as he bound Lilac’s middle.

“She will not need one,” Stott said.

“Hyacinth will not go,” Grace added.

Hambeth turned toward Grace, surprise showing in his eyes.

“She bleeds as of last night,” Grace said. “The rest of us are blank in that regard, so Lilac goes in her stead, and Hyacinth takes the place of Lilac in the orchards of Freth and his sons.”

Hambeth, as he had long learned to do, swallowed his disappointment. But this was hard news indeed, for reasons that had nothing to do with the Greater Vandals or successful trading. With great effort, and after a little more suffering alone, he turned his mind to what was good on this score, knowing the Freth sons were honorable, three married, wives severe, only one single and still answering to his elder brothers.

Still, Hambeth’s eyes must have betrayed something, because Grace turned to him as they left the shop. “The cherries ripen,” she said. “And the apples.”

The cart, already well-stocked yesterday, stood piled high with goods this morning, and a throng surrounded it and stood by Durgahearth who, in the midst of raising his finger to make a point, noticed Hambeth and his three female charges.

“Well met, Hambeth!” he shouted. “And now may we soon take our first step toward a richer village!”

“Well met, Durgahearth,” Hambeth said, wanting no chatter, wishing only to be on his way. At the end of the wagon, a small space had been left vacant for what Hambeth knew must be their travel sustenance and supplies – blankets, a wide sheet of leather should it rain, sandals, and then all he had asked for, breads and bags of mead and sacks of meat and garden fruit and empty water bags. Hambeth brought the girls there first and they set upon the feast, he taking some too, a quick repast while the merchants and craftsmen and council and wives of Camberia watched.

Four pairs of simple sandals had been set there as well, three for the females at the tail of their growing, one tiny pair for Axilaine, and Hambeth suspected that Avelina had put her husband to the task of making these.

The three slaves donned their sandals as they ate, putting a small dent in the supplies, and Hambeth believed he had estimated their needs well, great as they were, and when they were satisfied, they stepped to their places by the tongue, Hambeth putting Oleander in first, next Lilac, each girl standing without complaint as one ankle was chained to the tongue and two hands were chained to the crossbar she must push for four days.

One of the Daimouth widows appeared with Axilaine, and the girl ran to her mother, hugged her legs, asked a question in Paxil while she pointed to the brand, and Grace spoke back, then mother knelt and offered her breast to the girl, standing in bare feet upon the hard-packed earth.

“Hambeth,” said the quiet voice of Durgahearth, laying a hand on Hambeth’s shoulder.

“Sir?” Hambeth replied.

“You are driving because Grace said you must,” Durgahearth noted, stepping before Hambeth and boring into his eyes with his own easy countenance.

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth said.

“And apparently we follow the orders of slaves in this village,” Durgahearth said. “To your credit, you have no small talent in certain aspects of this enterprise. But I would have chosen another for it. There are a dozen good Camberian males fit for the trip, all men by name and deed, three or four who have made the journey or parts of it or have wandered somewhere else.”

“I will do my best,” said Hambeth, wondering if Durgahearth were on the verge of denying him the commission.

“If you do not bring back fair value, it will go badly,” he said.

“Of course.”

“And if you don’t bring back all three girls in good working order, it will go far worse.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“For each female missing, or reduced in her ability for service, you will owe the town two hundred fifty vanders.”

“Unless it be Oleander,” he said, the girl looking back when she heard her name. “With her, I will have to settle only with my uncle.”

“Yes, yes,” Durgahearth agreed, smiling warmly but nodding impatiently. “But for Grace and Lilac, the value at loss is two hundred fifty vanders.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth said, smiling in turn, as he often did at this stage in parley. “And, Sir, is it true, that the taxes on a slave are assessed on the basis of said slave’s declared value?”

“They are.”

“And then surely Viceroy Gratta has been informed of the value of each female in the town’s holding? And that the village own, with five girls

at 250 vanders each, one thousand two hundred fifty vander's worth of taxable female arms and legs?"

"The Waxcaps are worth less than that," snapped Durgahearth, smile fading.

"At what do you value them then, so I shall know my penalty should one of them go missing under my watch?" Hambeth inquired. "And so Gratta will know how to assess them during the next tax season?"

"Our parley concludes," Durgahearth said, nothing but annoyance in his voice now, "and all spoken of just now is covered by the seal of Archenix and goes no further. Just bring back the vanders or other items of equal trade, and the girls unsullied."

"As is my intent," Hambeth said, adding, "and as was my intent since you gave me the commission yesterday, for which I am exceedingly grateful, nor do I accept it with watery sentiment, nor do I require threats to change my opinion of it."

Durgahearth turned red-faced without another word, Hambeth smiling after him.

Stott and Carbeth, the son of the village's best leatherworker, and a craftsman by his own right though still a boy, moved together to the end of the cart as Durgahearth departed, Stott to set his new work on it, Carbeth with a satchel over his shoulder.

"Well met, Carbeth" Hambeth said. "Stott said yesterday he would put you to work."

"I would like to have had more time, Hamhearth," Carbeth said, swinging his satchel to the ground with the clink of chains. He reached in and pulled out a narrow strip of aurochs hide, with chains at either end, clearly of Stott's fashioning. "But this is what I make in haste to ease the girls' hands."

He stepped to Oleander and looked down at her hips.

"All the girls wear honesty chains between their legs," Stott said. "Slip the belt between chain and flesh."

Carbeth, too young most likely to have ever touched a girl below her waist, either clothed or all but bare, bit his lip, blushed and reached down to Oleander's chastity restraint, pulling it forward and slipping the chain and the leather belt through.

Done with the hardest part of his assignment, Carbeth drew the chains tight behind Oleander, and Stott stepped forward with tongs and an

open link and secured the belt in place, removable only by a smith's tools now, or blade through hide, the one garment the girls would wear all the way up and back from the Greater Vandals. Carbeth drew out a length of rope, passed it through a link above Oleander's rear, and bound the other end to a beam at the front of the wagon.

"Adjust the rope as you see fit," Carbeth said to Hambeth. "Or as the girls advise. They may want shorter or longer."

He repeated the steps with Lilac, blushing just as deeply as he slipped the belt under her honesty chain, the bottom of the aurochs hide dropping to the top of her thick pubic hair before he pulled it back and Stott fastened it on.

This time, he handed the rope to Hambeth, and Hambeth bound the girl's drawing harness to the wagon's beam.

Done with that, he turned to Grace, where Axilaine was just finishing at mother's second breast.

"Fix me and let us be on our way," Grace said, looking up at him, and Hambeth sensed that of all the things she had suffered since he'd first seen her whipped, this was the hardest. To be bound for inquisition and torture, to be chained upon every visit to the village, to be naked and burned, these were difficulties Grace had borne. But to be bound like a pulling beast to a cart while daughter stood nearby was a separate piece of misery, and Hambeth groaned inwardly and sucked in his breath when Grace stood, stepped to her place at the front of the tongue and put her hands against the bar.

"I shrink, Gracehearth," Hambeth whispered into the woman's ear as he released her wrists from her walking chain, wrapped the free length around the tongue and by that means fastened her ankle to it.

"Fulfill your commission," Grace whispered back, "and I shall not fault you."

"This is not how I wished to see Greater Vandals," he continued, closing the cuffs around each wrist.

"Each of us must pay a price," she said, "and I accept mine."

Hambeth swallowed, looked into Grace's eyes, turned to Carbeth, and the young leather crafter wrapped a hide around Grace's hips and handed Hambeth the rope while Stott crimp closed the link.

Hambeth bound Grace's drawing belt to the crossbar with rope, shortening it at her instruction.

Fully set now, Grace spoke to her daughter in Paxil, the girl replying with Paxil words that seemed to be simple questions, to which mother replied with calm words, and Hambeth guessed Grace was explaining that all mothers did things like this, and that the child should not worry, all would be well.

Grace next gestured toward Hambeth and said something, Hambeth recognizing the name Grace used for him and the Paxil for feet, and the girl nodded, stepped up to him and leaned back to peer into his eyes.

“Hamhearth,” she said. “I want shoes.”

Hambeth pulled the little sandals from the cart and handed them to the girl, and she dropped and struggled to place her feet in them, Hambeth helping her, suspecting these were the first she had ever tried to put on.

Hambeth stepped away from Axilaine, standing in her sandals, peering at them, jumping to see what they would do, and strode to the front of the cart. He looked at the three bound girls, looked at the townsfolk, looked back at his team and spoke softly, “Let us go then.”

Grace bent forward, hands on the beam, and the two behind her did the same, all three applying full muscle to the chore, the cart lurching forward, moving now, all holding, the design of cart and binding working for these first steps, the load stable.

Chapter XXXI: On the Tail of Fifth Pass

“Hambeth, one more thing,” murmured Carbeth, stepping beside him and putting his hand within the satchel.

Hambeth, walking at the rear of the wagon to watch the stay of the load, turned to the lad.

“This was by commission of Durghearth himself,” Carbeth said, and he pulled out a dark wooden handle from which dangled a dozen strips of thin aurochs hide.

“I shall not need it,” Hambeth said brusquely, moving his hand as if to knock the whip to the ground.

“If you take it not, I shan’t be paid,” Carbeth protested.

Hambeth motioned to the cart. “Toss it there, and if it get lost, so be it.”

Carbeth did so, the girls continued to push while Axilaine trotted beside her mother, the cart reaching a steady pace and the gate opened wide

for it, the townsfolk who still lingered watching it move, watching the female team push it forward, nodding to Hambeth.

To Hambeth's relief, the work of drawing seemed easy once begun, and the cart rolled along the lane that led from Camberia to Fifth Pass, with a squeak and the occasional groan of beam and timber.

Satisfied nothing would spill over, Hambeth stepped to the fore of the wagon.

"Grace, how fare thee?" Hambeth asked.

"I push, and the wagon rolls," she observed.

"And your partners?"

"The same, I believe," she replied. "When do we stop?"

"When will you stop?" Hambeth asked.

"Nay, you must tell us," Grace said, leaning forward and raising her legs as they reached their first shallow rise.

"I have been told to bring you back whole," Hambeth said. "If I work you on the first day to death by exhaustion, I am failed."

"You cannot tell when a girl is about to die?" Grace asked. "You who have heard me near death dozens of nights?"

"That was not death in the way I conceive it," Hambeth said.

"And yet, there is not a great difference in my demeanor," she said, "from when you plumb my depths with that horse between your legs, and when I break from overwork."

Hambeth looked back, saw that they had cleared the first bend beyond the village, passing now the farms of Venzin, where no one tilled this day, and he allowed his mind to tarry on the pleasures of Grace, and on the round forms of Oleander and Lilac, breasts bouncing as they grunted forward, the muscles of shoulder and thigh and calf and butt straining to convey the load, and Grace's words rang in his ears and he felt his penis swell beneath his belt and wondered if he might yet fail in this task, fail rudely, through overwhelming earthiness.

"Let us walk until we hear water by the lane," Hambeth said at last, done with his excursion of carnal mind, "for I have been told it runs where we meet Fifth Pass, less than a finger's walk at a common pace, and we all may drink there, and I'll open your chains for pissing."

Grace spoke quietly to the others in Paxil, who nodded, looked at Hambeth and seemed agreeable to his proposal.

To Hambeth's surprise, Axilaine fell in with the team, at times walking besides Grace and looking up, other times asking a question in Paxil of Oleander or Lilac, the girls smiling and replying, breath short but not reduced to pants.

For a time, no one spoke, not the team among one another, not Hambeth, not Axilaine, and the farms yielded to sighing forests.

Hambeth knew that the Waxcaps owned these lands, king's will or no, and most likely watched from their own places all the passersby, and saw these three naked girls bound to a wagon laden high, the child, and Hambeth walking with them, and wondered wherefor.

Hambeth drew up beside Grace, wishing to hear a voice other than the throat of the forest.

"You were berthed last night?"

"I was," she said. "Did you think I would sleep elsewhere?"

"You seem to make your own choices in many things," he said.

"Then I chose a berth last night," she said. "And it was adequate."

"What of Axilaine?"

"She shall make her bed with the Daimouth girls for now."

"The two sisters bereft?"

"Yes, they say the babbling of a child replaces the noise of deceased husbands."

"How much of the aurochs have you swallowed?" he asked.

"Am I not still at the nose?" Grace asked, she and her team stepping easy over thick grass here, the road running slightly downward. "And reach the end of the tail only upon the day of my death, when my slaving hours cease?"

"It will ever be hard, from this day to that?" Hambeth asked, troubled by her answer. "There will never be ease?"

"Would you take this life?" she asked.

"The ground owns me," Hambeth said, "as you know, for if I serve it not with tilling and sowing and reaping and striking weed after weed, I will suffer like any disobedient slave."

"No, you do not serve the earth," Grace said. "You parley with the earth, and you trade with the earth, and you get from the earth what you arrange by your own hands."

"Do you not parley for your work?" Hambeth asked. "Do you not choose your own masters, and did you not parley for the grant to draw the

cart, with Durgaherth and them?”

“I did,” Grace conceded. “But Durgahearth and Archenix and the rest of the council are men, and men can be kind or cruel as it suits, while the earth is always one way.”

“The earth is one way, but the sky has her whims, withholding rain or flooding, each a sort of cruelty.”

“It is not cruelty to rain too much or go dry,” Grace said. “It is something else. For there is no will in the sky calling for malaise, no hands to affect that will, no eyes to watch what is done, no mouth to order such, or to laugh.”

Hambeth and Grace walked beside each other for a time, Hambeth pondering, listening to the wind in the branches, the little voice of Axilaine raised in song, the turning of the axle and rattling of the girls’ chains.

“No,” he said at last. “I would not take your life.”

The road bent upward as he spoke the words, and all of the team gasped and pushed, step after step, sometimes with their hands, sometimes with their hips, sometimes with both, panting, and the sweat rolled down from their foreheads to their eyes and mouths and chins, and they bent so they could reach their faces with their hands and wipe around their eyes with a few quick swipes of their fingers before they returned palms to wood.

Hambeth moved to the back of the wagon, pushing against the tail while he watched the load, sweating in turn, Axilaine stepping beside him and looking up at his face.

The narrow path leveled and met with a wider road, broad and even and well-trod, and Hambeth entered it and looked up and back and marveled.

“We have reached Fifth Pass,” he announced, listening. “The going will be easier, mostly, and there is water here, just by, and I hear it.”

Hambeth took the two empty water bags from the end of the wagon and followed the sound to a deep rippling current that flowed just beyond the first line of trees, a muddy path bearing the prints of boots and bare feet and horses shod and unshod, and he crouched at the water’s edge and filled both bags and returned to the wagon, and he raised a bag of water first to Lilac’s mouth, watching her drink, then to Oleander, then Grace, all of them taking their fill. Then turned he to Axilaine, who drank a little but spilled most down her smock. When both were emptied, Hambeth filled them

again, sating Grace and her daughter, giving Oleander and Lilac each another sip, then finally drinking his own fill, pouring all the remainder back into the earth, there being no reason to haul something that was easily obtained along most of Fifth Pass.

“How fare you all?” Hambeth asked Grace. She turned to the rest of the team, they nodded, and Oleander spoke.

“Piss, Hambeth?” she asked.

He turned to Grace. “Shall you all three do it here?”

“Yes,” she replied curtly. “Spread our chains.”

Hambeth glanced at Axilaine, tending at the edge of Fifth Pass to flowers there, her back turned, and he reached between Graces’ legs, felt the lips on either side of the soft opening that had yielded so much pleasure to both of them, pressed his finger against the pair of fine chains that held that opening secure, and spread it so that one length of Stott’s work lay on either side of her vaginal mouth.

Immediately, she released, wetting the ground before her, legs spread wide to keep her feet and sandals dry, urine hissing against the soil.

Hambeth turned to Oleander next, and she parted her thighs and smiled her half smile and he put one hand on her hip and used his other to lay the chains aside her slot, pulling his hand away quickly, for her water flowed as soon as his work was done.

Finally, rounding the tongue to Lilac, whose female parts he had seen but never touched, he reached down and felt for the petals of her sex, spread her chains on either side of them, and she like the other two let loose her urine into the earth, and the girls laughed and spoke a few words of Paxil to each other as they drained their bladders, and all seemed ready to be on their way.

“Shall we go then?” Hambeth asked.

“Is not the driver simply to tell us when to push?” Grace inquired.

“A good driver speaks to his team by whatever tongue they know,” he said.

“And then command them,” Grace said. “What is it that Carbeth gave you?”

“The belts you wear,” Hambeth replied.

“No, he gave you another thing, after we first pushed.”

“How know you of it?” Hambeth inquired.

“I turned my head,” Grace admitted. “For that is not forbidden, I hope.”

“Then you know what he gave me.”

“Name it.”

“He gave me a handle with some aurochs thongs attached.”

“For what?”

Hambeth knew Grace well enough to believe this inquiry had a purpose. He did not know her well enough though, even now, to know what that purpose might be.

“It is to drive away the ghosts of the Caesars,” Hambeth said.

Grace scowled at him, but she seemed ready to accept the answer, and she leant forward and the other girls did the same, pressing on the wooden crossbars and moving the wagon.

“When will you nurse again?” Hambeth asked, watching for Axilaine, who came skipping after the wagon as soon as she saw it move.

“At midday, at supper, at dawn,” Grace replied. “But three a day, for I wean her.”

“I tried to tell Durgahearth your daughter drank from you only, as we parleyed over her attendance on the trip, and he would have none of it.”

“He has seen her eat,” Grace said, “so your lie was in vain. But she is no feaster.”

“Does your milk reduce?” he asked, and he watched Grace’s breasts bounce as she walked and pushed and believed he knew already her answer.

“It does not, and they ache every night,” she complained, “until I feed the earth with them, and it all goes to waste.”

“Feed the rest of the team with the remainder,” Hambeth suggested.

“If they will have it,” Grace agreed, and she turned her head to speak to Oleander and Lilac, and the girls grunted back what Hambeth believed to be assent.

Here and there as they walked beneath the soft blue haze of late summer, Hambeth could see through the thick grass and weed of Fifth Pass the stone laid by the Caesars long ago, square blocks of an unknown craft to make easy the pulling of loads and the stepping of hooves and feet. The way was wide here, but along each side of the road grew the forest thick and wild, and the road bent and twisted to stay level upon the knees of the mountains so that one could not see more than fifty steps ahead. And it

would take no more than two Waxcaps with their faces under the weeds to slay Hambeth and all his team too, by arrow or spear or knobby root.

The Waxcaps would have no use of the goods on this cart, however, Hambeth told himself. And should any soldiers of Avenlou, or Paxilex for that matter, come across bodies left by the peoples of the wilderness, they would venture through the bracken with swords and armor and kill whatever they found.

No, perhaps there was nothing to fear, at least in the Waxcap quarter.

“Will your little girl’s legs ever tire?” Hambeth asked, watching Axilaine trot again near her mother’s feet.

“Yes,” Grace said, “with little notice, and she’ll drop down and raise her arms, and you will need to lift her and set her on the wagon somewheres, or she will take to wailing.”

“I will do all in my power,” Hambeth promised, “except that I cannot feed her.”

Again, Hambeth thought of the naked females laboring beside him and longed for something, anything with any of them, and he was glad his belt lay heavy around his hips, for he did not wish to demonstrate his interest. He thought, despite himself, of night, when the three had been hobbled and bound along the leash chain, and if any of them would ask for service, and how such matters would be addressed.

“Hambeth, there are others on the road,” Grace spake, and the girls all talked together at that instant in rapid Paxil while Hambeth peered forward, making out the shapes of two stopped wagons and people besides.

Although Fifth Pass rose slightly here, the girls redoubled with straining back and thigh and rear, propelling the cart forward so that Hambeth had to step more quickly than his wont, and Axilaine drew up before him and raised her arms, and he bent and hoisted her.

“These are carts of Paxilex,” Grace said, whispering as though people yet one hundred paces forward could hear her words – or as though she were about to enter a temple.

“Do you fear them?” Hambeth asked.

“Nay, they be kin,” Grace replied. “And shall do us no harm.”

“Then we may simply pass and be on our way?”

“It would be unseemly to say nothing,” Grace said. “In Paxilex, we speak.”

“We do as well in Avenlou,” Hambeth said. “But let us not tarry long.”

The two carts were as laden as the one Hambeth drove, and were pulled each by one horse, which apparently the king of Paxilex did not steal from his villages for war.

The people of the Paxilex wagon had noticed the Camberian wagon at the same moment that Grace had spied them, it seemed, and by the time Hambeth and his team drew near, all of them stood warily, staring from the edge of the lane, eyes on the cart, as if they believed that to turn their backs on it would put them at risk for harm. Hambeth counted three men, a woman, and a boy of perhaps 12 or thirteen summers, the woman in a black, embroidered robe not unlike Grace’s when she used to dress, the men in dull colors, forest green and ochre, boots of brown and black.

“Hello,” Hambeth said when his wagon drew abreast, and the people there stared into his eyes. They spake nothing in return, and Hambeth wondered if he himself were at risk, and his mind wandered to what these of Paxilex thought, if it were affront only or confusion as well, for they were seeing three fair countrywomen naked but for collars and chains and belts and harnesses, laboring like beasts under the rule of a youth of Avenlou who bore a half-Paxilex girl in his arms.

Hambeth, wishing to know what he could of the minds of the Paxilexians and hoping Grace could ferret some of it out, turned to her.

“Speak as you will,” he said, and all three girls paused and stood straight, Lilac sighing longest.

Grace said something and the oldest man replied, his face grim. More words were traded back and forth, Oleander and Lilac speaking their share, all the men and the woman too answering now, and the first man to speak allowed himself a chuckle before he looked at Hambeth and scowled and spoke.

“They ask if you are cruel, Hamhearth,” Grace said.

“We are only out this morn,” Hambeth said, “with some four days urgent pushing before us, so I know not yet, but I hope not to be.”

Grace spoke to the man in Paxil, and he looked at Hambeth with what appeared to be a flicker of respect.

All spoke anew, their words a blur of sound that made all the sense of birdsong to Hambeth, and then Grace spake something that seemed to startle the people, the men wide-eyed, but the woman in particular, whose

eyes darted from the team to Hambeth and back to the girls, and then Grace spoke in Avenian again.

“They mean us no harm, and indeed wish for peace between our peoples, and invite you to trade with them when comes that time.”

Hambeth nodded to all of them in turn.

“May it be so,” he said. “Fare thee well.”

Without being told to, the girls resumed their pushing, and Axilaine squirmed until Hambeth set her down, she trotting ahead, turning to wave at the Paxilexians, resuming her way forward.

“Why stopped they?” Hambeth asked.

“A wheel was loosened,” Grace replied, “for them to repair, and they are almost done.”

“I would help them if they needed,” Hambeth replied.

“Would you let us rest so long?”

“I would,” Hambeth said, “but you are a strong team and don’t require much breathing. Can you draw another finger, to where the same river and three wide meadows wait for us, or so I am told, and then we break for midday and meal?”

“Aye,” Grace said. “Will you feed us at our posts?”

“No, you’ll each be hobbled and loosed from the wagon, so you may feed yourselves.”

“And put our chains aside our doors by our own hands,” Grace noted.

“Yes, but I shirk not from that chore,” Hambeth said. “As you saw at the first stop.”

“You did it, yes.”

Hambeth looked at Grace, wondering what else she might say, and why.

“We will each need other tending there,” she said, bending to push, eyes on her feet. “At night.”

“I cannot serve all three,” Hambeth said.

“You misapprehend your power.”

“Perhaps,” Hambeth said. “But I have never tried it so, and might fail.”

“It can be two and two, night upon night.”

“Even so,” Hambeth said, adding, “and it must be done in chains.”

“Keep us as you must. I heard Durgaeath’s threat as well as did you.”

“Did you hear my counter?”

“About the taxes and the viceroy?”

“Yes,” Hambeth said. “I win at parley with Durgaeath as soon as reddens his face, and it flushed this morn.”

“But if you lose us, he will have the last laugh,” Grace warned.

“Do you mean to be lost?” Hambeth asked.

“No,” Grace said, “for I do not wish to imperil you that way, or myself either. And where would I go, naked but for a collar, with leg marked and some chains likely still affixed and tumbling by?”

“Those folk behind us with the lame wagon would take you and hide you in a breath.”

“If I went to them, perhaps, which I would not, for who knows how they would treat me without you to attend?”

“You spoke though,” Hambeth said, “of my losing you. Wherefor?”

“They were trifling words,” Grace said impatiently. “I would rather argue only with this wagon, and not with you as well.”

Mother’s and daughter’s moods seemed to darken alike, for Axilaine stepped before Grace and, walking clumsily backwards, raised her arms and uttered a short, hopeless wail.

Grace spoke quickly and sharply in Paxil, “Hamhearth” audible in the string, and the girl despaired again but moved to the lad, who hoisted her and smiled, her own eyes answering with naught but disdain.

Chapter XXXII: Soldiers of Avenlou

Silence fell upon the team and its driver again, as the way roughened and rose. For a time, Hambeth set Axilaine on the back of the wagon, in the space reserved for food, so he could aid the girls with his own arms and legs and back. Axilaine, oblivious to the gasping labor around her, swung her legs over the edge of the wagon, nibbled at this and that, a little meat, a little bread, and cherries which reddened her lips.

It was to Hambeth’s great relief when he spied first one bright green meadow, and then a second split from it by a row of trees, and then a third split by Fifth Pass, and he took Axilaine down from the cart and carried her forward.

“Pull to there,” he said, pointing to a patch of thick green grass at the meadow’s edge, where the shade of oak and pine and elm fell thickest. “And we’ll rest and sup.”

Hambeth guessed Lilac knew of his dalliances with both Oleander and Grace. So, not wanting her to feel she was in his eyes the least of the team, he chose to favor her over the other two in matters of order, and stepped to her first with the hobbles Stott had fashioned.

As soon as he knelt by her, she clapped her legs together and he cuffed each ankle, the chain so short as to force four steps where unmoored feet required one.

He untied her harness, released her hands from the post, unwound her walking chain from the tongue and closed her wrists with it, then brought her back to the rear of the wagon to take her feed, her pace lagging with both the hobble, and the weariness worn plain on her face.

Next Oleander, then Grace were done the same, and Axilaine followed her mother to the meal, chattering, all her dourness vanished now mother herself could tend to her.

“She says you gave her cherries,” Grace said.

“She took the cherries for herself,” Hambeth said, “failing to tell me they are unallowed.”

“They are allowed,” Grace said, standing shoulder by shoulder with the two others, raising a cherry to her own mouth. “But rare.”

“A small recompense, perhaps,” Hambeth said, still troubled by Grace’s earlier lament and looking for any relief to it.

Grace looked at him, perhaps in rebuke, but her demeanor spoke surer of exhaustion.

Oleander glanced between the two of them and picked up a mead bag, opening it with her teeth and sucking until her cheeks bulged.

“That is meant for after the day’s walk,” Hambeth protested to Grace.

Grace spoke to Oleander, Oleander answered back, all the girls laughed.

“She says it feels already like nighttime,” Grace explained, “and you must not call the moon a liar.”

“Tell her I have seen her work,” Hambeth retorted, “and I know when she is spent, and when she is not, and she is not so gone she can’t tell moon from sun.”

More Paxil was spoken, and when it concluded with more laughter, Oleander gazed at Hambeth with her ever half-smile.

“She says that the mead woke her up,” Grace said, “and now she sees the sun for what it is, and is sorry but cannot give any back.”

Grace picked up the mead, brought it to her mouth, looked at Hambeth with raised eyebrows, and he scowled but did nothing to end the mutiny.

Next took Lilac the bag, drinking like her sisters of Paxilex but not looking to Hambeth, not wishing to challenge him perhaps, and he looked away in annoyance while the girls passed the bag all around until it was emptied.

“Mead furthers hunger,” Hambeth said. “You know this, correct?”

“It does,” Grace agreed.

“So if you girls eat all our provisions by this nightfall, you shall starve the rest of the trip. And if the trip last a fortnight because of thick minds and groping feet, you shall go hungry indeed.”

“You have the tool to set our pace, do you not, Hamhearth?” Grace taunted. “From Carbeth?”

Hambeth, offended by Grace’s latest jibe and himself wearied beyond expectation with a toddling one to carry, a wagon to push often enough, and three limber girls to worry him, turned back to the place where he’d left Stott’s leash, stuck on the idea he could not find water until all the girls were fixed by.

“How much more feast must chase the mead to your bellies?” he asked.

“Hambeth, we are done,” Grace said, a hint of contrition in her voice. “We drink not until ends the meal, so you may use us now to push on.”

“Nay, for you must sleep for a time,” Hambeth ventured.

“May we?” Grace asked.

“No, you may not, but now mead governs all things, even my will.”

“We are all practiced mead drinkers,” Grace said, “and drank a napping draught, and no stumbler, so set us by the cart and do your things.”

“My things,” Hambeth countered, “are to get you girls water and make you drink enough to settle your minds, and perhaps not ruin this journey on its first short leg.”

“Let us piss by the trees,” Grace said, “and we’ll split out own chains for it and leave your fingers idle, and then you can rest us for as long as it takes to summon water, and we’ll be on our way after that.”

Hambeth pulled one of the blankets from the wagon’s edge, scowling.

“And we’ll trot like the horses your king stole.”

“He’s your king too.”

“He is,” Grace agreed. “Long live he.”

Hambeth spread the blanket out by the right first wheel while the three slaves and Axilaine stepped slowly to the edge of the woods to crouch and relieve themselves. When they returned, Hambeth pointed to the blanket.

“Line you up here,” he said, “and let me see if I can set you by.”

The girls obeyed and Hambeth bent with Stott’s long iron leash in his hand, unhooking the free anchor, passing the leash through the widest link in each girl’s hobble, pulling it all the way through until the fixed anchor at the end of the leash caught, wrapping the leash’s other end around one wagon wheel and then a further wheel, affixing it there with the second anchor which, by Stott’s reckoning, the girls could not unfasten as long as they could not reach.

“You will not sleep, Hambeth?” Grace inquired, kneeling on the blanket and waving Axilaine to her breast.

“No, I must find water first,” Hambeth said. “And though I be weary, I am not drunk.”

“Will you keep Axilaine by during our rest?”

“Yea, if she sleep not.”

“She likely will, but her habits of repose change by the day.”

“I will tend to her, but I pray she not scamper while her mother sleep, for I cannot chase small things through the woods, and I’m certain she’ll not mistake my summons for yours.”

Grace pulled Axilaine’s mouth from her nipple and, holding her small head between her bound hands, she looked at the girl and spoke slowly and clearly, the girl nodding soberly and looking first at Grace, then up at Hambeth.

“I told her if she stray from you, she’ll be eaten,” Grace said, and she brought her daughter’s head in to suckle more.

“You speak the truth, I fear,” Hambeth said. He moved to the end of the wagon, seized the two water bags and strode toward the meadow’s end, where he’d been told water passed.

With one more quick glance back at the four females on the blanket, Lilac and Oleander sitting now and watching the girl nurse, Hambeth found the muddy trail that told him others had gone this way, and with a few steps he was at the water’s edge, drinking his fill while he let both bags swell.

All were still by the wagon wheel when he emerged from the wood, his fear and then relief reminding him that every journey beyond sight of the girls was a danger, and the trip as a whole was more precarious by far than any of his other undertakings. Lured by the longing to see the Greater Vandals, as he had been lured by a bargain over three slave girls, he was again forging ahead on an ill-advised gambol that could end disastrously for him. Briefly, he remembered his uncle’s warning by dream, that Oleander would not return from the road, but he cast that thought from his mind and returned to the girls, making a second trip before all the thirst was slaked and the girls lay back to slumber, Axilaine by her mother’s shoulder and sleeping quickest and soundest of all.

Hambeth sat in the grass near the wagon and rested his eyes on the sleeping forms, allowing the earthier aspects of his nature to guide his thoughts for a time, imagining feeding two female chambers, or all three, beneath the moon this night, and felt himself ready to try, the growing manhood beneath his belt eager for the test.

From there, he thought of other, less potent things – of life in the village, of Stott and the Waxcap girls, of what he would be doing now if he weren’t on Fifth Pass, of his uncle and the toil he must be about alone these days – and he felt the unexpected desire for home burning in his breast.

It was but a brief reverie, for soon bodies stirred, chains rattled, Grace sat and looked at him, yawning, and Oleander and Lilac followed. Only Axilaine stayed still, and Grace put a finger across her lips and motioned Hambeth near.

“If you would set her on the cart,” Grace whispered, “I believe she will sleep yet, and be no burden to you during that while.”

Hambeth opened up all the hobble cuffs and scooped up the sleeping form while the girls arose, Grace folding the blanket into a small bed which she laid on the wagon beside the food.

Hambeth put the girl there, she stirred and wriggled and rolled to her side, but her eyes remained closed, and he met the three slaves at the front of the wagon, secured them to it, and they pushed on at easily the same pace as the one set that morn, the mead no detriment.

The girls panted up slopes, pressed their heels into the earth where the road slipped downward, and altogether required little tending, allowing Hambeth to follow from behind, both to check the shifting load and to ensure that little Axilaine did not tumble out in her sleep.

The sun was well past zenith when they stopped again, Hambeth splitting the chains so the girls could piss, summoning water from a spring that gurgled, lowering the now wakened Axilaine so she could grab her mother's thigh.

"One more finger of travel, and we'll be ended for the day," Hambeth said, "and a good day it has been, mead notwithstanding."

"Are you learning to trust your team?" Grace inquired.

"Yes," Hambeth said, "in all ways except your jokes."

"Wherefor?"

"Jest not about that thing Carbeth gave me," Hambeth said, "it is put away where no one may see it, and it will not be used."

"You find no humor there?"

"I have seen a girl whipped," Hambeth said, raising the water to Grace's lips. "I will neither watch again nor ever do."

"I think you are too kind for this life," Grace said.

"We will know in a few days, when I return to Camberia with an empty cart, bulging pockets, and three slave girls safe and clear."

"I know you are fit to trade," Grace said. "But to trade with three girls drawing, I'm not sure."

"It is all trade, of one sort or the other," Hambeth said. "Or so I shall see it until we finish."

"So be it," Grace said.

"Now, there will be no water at our last stop, I am told," Hambeth said, "so drink more than your fill, and tell the others to do the same, and I will gather from the river again until the bags bulge, and that will have to do us until tomorrow when next we find something that flows."

Hambeth bagged water twice more, once for the girls to drink, once for keeping on the wagon, and he told the girls to push anew and the wagon

creaked forward, Axilaine skipping beside her mother as she had in the morning.

All walked in silence, the way even here, the sun at the edge of the mountain, the wheels grinding slowly, the girls' breath and the sigh of the forest making a music that that Hambeth believed he would miss when he rested back in Camberia.

"Hamhearth, attend," said Grace, tipping her head toward a great white ruin to the left, roof gone but stone walls visible beneath ivy and bush and detritus. "The Caesars built here."

"They did," Hambeth agreed.

"Do you fear it?" Grace asked.

Hambeth looked at her. The question seemed sincere, not mockery, and he answered sincerely in turn.

"I do not," he said. "You brought me to the home of the ghosts by Camberia, and I saw naught but two Waxcap girls."

Hambeth looked at Lilac and Oleander, their eyes locked on the building, mouths open, and he wondered if they'd ever seen such things in Paxilex.

"To what end was it built?" Grace inquired, her breath easy on a flat, smooth stretch of Fifth Pass.

"You know as well as I," Hambeth replied. "Housing mortals of some sort is my only guess, for living or trade or pursuit of war."

Hambeth finished with looking at the ruins in time to see a band of men well ahead on the road, marching in two lines toward them.

"And these are mortals too, I believe," Hambeth said.

"Soldiers," Grace said.

"If they be of Paxilex, we'll see how well the truce of Fifth Pass holds," Hambeth said.

"They are Avenlou troops," Grace said.

"How know you that?"

"I know the shape our men," she replied.

"Then let us stop while they pass."

The girls ceased their walking as one, Axilaine asked in Paxil for an explanation that Grace ignored, and all waited for the soldiers to close the distance.

They were some twenty in number, all young, little older than Hambeth, but for the man at the front who looked more like Tomhearth's

age and, Hambeth guessed, was their captain. They wore gray skirts down to the knee, shirts of gray wool under iron mail that must have taken a smith days to craft for each of them, helmets that covered brow and scalp and cheek, and each bore a weapon, swords on some hips, spears on the shoulders of others, hooks and daggers hanging from belts, all with bags on their shoulders, thick sandals on their feet.

The oldest man, whose helmtop bore a red crest that indicated rank to Hambeth, raised his hand as his corps drew abreast, and he looked sharply at the lad.

“Where do you go?” he demanded in the plain accent of Avenlou’s capital of Topia.

“To the Greater Vandals, Sir,” Hambeth replied.

The captain’s features softened slightly, but his interrogation continued.

“Wherefor?”

“To trade what we bear on the cart.”

“From whence?”

“Camberia.”

“Where be that?”

“Not far from Fifth Pass, in the mountains where they overlook the sea.”

“Are your wagon girls all spoils of war?” he asked, gesturing at the team.

“No, Sir, only the second and third. The first is born Paxilex, matured Avenian, but was destitute and put in chains therefore.”

“When?”

“All on the same day,” Hambeth said, and he stepped to Lilac and raised her left leg so the captain could see clearly her brand. “They were given the device described by the king since the last moon.”

“And whose is this girl?” the captain asked, pointing at Axilaine.

“It is hers, the Avenian, who goes by Grace,” Hambeth said.

“And yours?”

“No, Sir, she is issued by another.”

Satisfied with Hambeth’s answers, or too bewildered to pursue further his domestic line of questioning, the captain nodded and queried on another matter.

“What have you seen of our enemy?”

“We have seen no men of arms,” Hambeth said, “but two peaceful wagons drawn by people of Paxilex, this morn.”

“How far?” he asked.

“Two fingers’ steady walk, if they are still there,” Hambeth replied.

“Have you seen beasts of ravening, or forest people?”

“No, Sir, the way has been without event.”

The captain stared up the road.

“Sir?” Hambeth ventured. “Does the truce of Fifth Pass hold?”

“We shall not break it,” the captain replied, “but I can promise nothing of those thieves and brigands of Paxilex.”

“What else shall we encounter ahead?”

“Nothing, if you and they keep the same pace, but there are two carts full of the fruits of Avenlou before you, all come straight from the sea, as well as one wheeled Paxilex trader who believes the Greater Vandals will pay for rot and flotsam.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

The captain raised his hand to point forward, said “Huh!” and took his first step, and all the soldiers marched after him, but more than one pair of eyes wandered over the naked forms of the team, and Hambeth wondered what liberties the soldiers of Avenlou were granted on patrol, and was glad for the bindings around the girls’ hips and between their legs that saved them for labor only.

Grace bent to push, the two others following her, and Axilaine with hands up and a short cry of protest petitioned Hambeth for his arms, and he hoisted her and walked beside the girls, all in silence for a time, until Hambeth spoke.

“We will stop for the night at the top of the switchbacks,” he told Grace, “when we can see the Greater Vandals and Humber there. And I know not if we are near or far.”

“Near,” Grace said, drawing deep breaths as she and the other two struggled up a long, shallow rise.

“How know you that?”

“Your goal for the night is an easy day’s walk from Camberia?”

“Aye.”

“And have we not set a steady pace, even for a walker unencumbered?”

“I believe we have. You mead drinkers of Paxilex step the same drunk or sober.”

“We sweat from pushing,” Grace said, bending to wipe her face with one bound hand, “not with the fever of weak liquor.”

“I sweat as well,” Hambeth said, “under the burden of a load that comes with arms asquirm, and legs that kick without regard for nether places and their inhabitants.”

Grace said something in Paxil, and Axilaine said “Ah” and shifted in Hambeth’s arms.

“What said you to her?”

“I told her to stop spurring that horse between your legs, it cannot run any faster than you and mustn’t be asked to besides.”

“You said no such thing.”

“Not with those words, but I told her to mind her feet.”

Axilaine squirmed again, heel landing just aside Hambeth’s member.

“And she kicks again, and will all the way to the Greater Vandals and all the way back to Camberia.”

“Would you trade with me?”

“I have already said no, I would not,” Hambeth said. “But there are some drivers who would dangle their legs off the wagon’s edge, taking to ground only long enough to beat you faster.”

“Thus our haste,” Grace said, “for we wish not to feel the lash.”

“That must be your last and final humor on the matter of Carbeth’s thing,” Hambeth said.

“Or you will use what he made on me?”

“And you jest again, on the same topic, and I do nothing, the finest trader in all of Avenlou, and its worst driver.”

“A little humor works nothing against our steps, which you have pulled from us all day.”

“I merely stay by you while you pull from yourselves, I know not how,” Hambeth said. “How fare your hands?”

“They sting a bit, but they’ll last another day or two. I press against the harness variously, which Carbeth to his credit made well and soft.”

“You must go three more days.”

“The cart will be empty the last two, if you trade the way that earned you renown, and we can push with our tits if we have to.”

“Humor that does not mock me and the Carbeth tool,” Hambeth noted. “You jest respectfully at last.”

“I meant it not as joke.”

Axilaine squirmed to be let down, Hambeth lowered her to the stones of Fifth Pass and she skipped ahead, making the sounds of birds.

“How fare the hands of the other two?” Hambeth asked.

Grace asked the question in Paxil, was answered by panting grunts.

“They are fine,” she said.

“They groaned like sick aurochs,” Hambeth countered.

“The sound they made signifies in Paxil that all is well.”

“You speak strangely there.”

“The sound they made signifies that all the gods smile,” Grace continued, “that they enjoy good health, and wealth in coin and family, and soft comforts, and peace.”

“Does insolence speed your feet against the road?” Hambeth asked.

“It does.”

“So I must suffer it.”

Hambeth looked ahead, the narrow road opening between the trees, blue sky and a half-dropped sun there.

“We may be nearing our night’s stopping place,” he said. “So at least there’s that.”

Grace said something and the girls stepped as one harder against the way, the wagon lurching forward, Axilaine asking again to be carried, and Hambeth prayed they were indeed near done for the day.

Chapter XXXIII: Chores Above the Greater Vandals

The ruins of the Caesars lay thick here, an old roofless dwelling on one side, sideways columns on the other, rubble in flattened shapes, what they once stood for lost to the ages, and after that wide fields that had always been fields, cleared long ago, kept clear more recently perhaps, and Hambeth knew these all as signs that there would be switchbacks next, seven long cuts through the mountains, sloping ever downward to the lands and palaces and trading places of the Greater Vandals city of Humber.

They pressed on, and then, although he had been told in words what to expect, when they reached the end of the straight share of Fifth Pass and all stood at the mountain’s hip and looked, Hambeth drew in his breath and

sighed, for this was what he had wished long to see, wished since he had first been told such a place was.

He squinted against the finishing sun, bathing all below with her yellow light, and he gazed upon a land a thousand times the breadth and height and industry of Camberia, making out here and there white edifices that cast mountain-sized shadows over their neighbors, tall in their own right, and for a time he followed with his eye each wide road, paved in stone of white and gray, broad and proud, where tiny shapes moved that Hambeth knew must be souls, and wagons and horses, and people making their way at day's end to supper, and there were great squares of thick green wilderness within the city too, edged by straight roads and straight lines, there on purpose it seemed and not by inconvenience.

Through it all ran water, first two wide streams that tumbled from the mountain on either side of the switchbacks, then running blue along and under streets before uniting into one broad river that glinted and shone through the city and out of it, bearing the blinding reflection of the sun's face.

And everywhere beyond the city, in a great wide arc extending as far as eye could see, lay fields of green and brown, speckled here and there with red, yellow, blue, with white dwelling places where the farmers of the Greater Vandals lived and tilled and drew their goods from the ground beside great swathes of green that held moving shapes of brown and gray, paddocks large enough to hold all the aurochs of Camberia in each one, and there were easily three dozen such in the vista that stretched beneath Hambeth and the girls, and it was all so proud and beautiful and alive that he bit his lip so he would not weep.

The girls were not so shy, all eyes wet when Hambeth turned to regard them, a tear burrowing through the dust on Grace's cheek, which she did not bother to wipe, and they spoke quietly and reverently to each other in Paxil while Axilaine, too young to understand what lay below, yanked at a blossom at road's edge until it yielded so she could press it to her nose.

As the warm breath of the plains blew up to greet them, bearing scents of smoke and chattel and people and honey, Hambeth looked last directly beneath them, at the switchbacks that must be crossed one by one, the first two clearly visible, the rest lost among the trees of the mountain, and he counted two carts there, one from Paxilex drawn by two horses, one

of Avenlou with two souls by the tongue, both naked males in the brown skin of Paxilex.

“You will hardly push tomorrow,” Hambeth said, “for it is all a downslope, and not as far as I believed.”

“Indeed,” said Grace, “now pick a night place and free us before we all give up and hang from the tongue like girl-shaped meat.”

Hambeth smiled, as ready as any of the females to stop, and he turned back to search the fields there, the girls coming after with the wagon, and settled on a place a few paces from the road and near a stand of pine, and he pointed that way and the girls groaned through their last push of the day.

He untied the ropes from their harnesses, opened their cuffs, removed their chastity chains and returned their wrists to their walking chains, but chose not to hobble them, confident that escape, should it be tried, would be done at such a pace that he could restrain their fleeing ankles at his leisure between bites of supper.

Sure enough, the girls made not the merest hint of arranging their vanishment, staggering from the cart no more than a step or two before setting bare rumps on coarse grass, leaning back to release urine without even rising to a crouch, and Lilac laughed in either relief or exhausted madness.

Hambeth stepped to the back of the cart to check the load’s shift for the last time and to set down chains and retrieve blankets and all for the meal, returning to find Axilaine curled up in her mother’s lap.

Grace tapped the girl’s mouth, squeezed her right breast and raised the girl’s head, and child put mouth against her mother’s dusty nipple and suckled with her eyes closed.

“Do you have power enough to move to a blanket?” Hambeth asked.

“Aye,” Grace replied, barely raising her head.

Hambeth lay out a place of rest and food and drink, and Oleander and Lilac came first, crawling in their chains and sitting, staring at nothing while Grace finished nursing Axilaine.

“Did she empty you?” Hambeth asked.

“No,” Grace replied, pushing Axilaine off her lap and taking to the blanket on all fours like her partners, “she barely supped, for she fills up on the delights of the cart.”

“Do not squeeze into the grass,” Hambeth instructed, “but give the balance to your team if they’ll have it.”

“Both said yes on the road.”

“Eat then all you want, and drink as well of everything,” Hambeth said.

The girls, with their last store of energy, set slowly but thoroughly upon the Camberian produce, shanks and hams and fruits and roots and breads diminishing bite by bite in between draughts of water and mead, Hambeth taking his share of it all as well, and when they were done with the regular meal, Grace said a few words to Lilac, put her hand under her left breast, raised it and let it fall, and Lilac laughed and slid toward Grace on her elbow until her mouth was at Grace’s bosom, and she slid her legs under herself, closed her mouth over the nipple as if to eat it, pulled away to look with puzzlement at the mound, then returned her mouth to it and seemed to relearn what she no doubt practiced as a babe without knowledge, lips closed tight, jaw working, cheeks sinking with every pull, milk flowing to her belly.

Sated as she seemed to be with mother’s milk, Axilaine set upon the other food with relish, shoving meat and fruit and bread alike into her mouth, and Oleander and Grace spoke briefly and Grace laughed.

“Oleander believes Axilaine fancies herself another of the team,” Grace said to Hambeth, “and must eat like us too.”

Lilac pulled her mouth from the nipple, smiled and said what Hambeth believed to be Paxil for thanks, and Grace motioned to Oleander and raised her right breast, and Oleander crawled over to clamp her lips around the nipple, to learn and suckle as had Lilac, swallowing a dozen times before Grace was relieved of her burden and Oleander sat up with her own word of thanks.

For a time, as the sky turned from blue to pink to deep red, all sat with their own thoughts except Axilaine, who spun in the grass until she fell, stood and spun and fell again, and sang nonsense and babbled about something only she understood. After that, she played a different game, in which she sat on the blanket and touched her toes, her spine bending until she fell sideways and moved no more.

Hambeth joined the girls in staring at the limp form, waiting for it to rise again, but it did nothing but breathe.

“Get another blanket and make of it a bed like I did at midday,” Grace whispered to Hambeth, “but wedge it in between goods and wagon’s side so she won’t fall.”

Hambeth, restored somewhat by rest and food and mead, carried out the mother’s instructions, laying the girl down with nary a bump, clearing the food on the next trip, returning under the deep blue of late twilight to find Oleander on hand and knee, back arched to raise her opening to him, looking at him with weary eyes but mouth set with taut anticipation.

“Let us get this done,” Grace whispered. “Oleander wishes first service.”

“I will strive,” Hambeth said uncertainly, but his manhood sprang to life so quickly it ached, and he slipped out of his tunic, his boots, his belt and pants, and knelt behind the girl.

Putting his hand to the slave girl’s familiar slot, he parted her lips as he had often enough in her stall, edging forward on his knees, touching his tip to her organ’s mouth, working his penis into her body, her wetness telling him that her sheath had sustained itself as well as his rod through the struggles of a long day’s march.

Though he had no desire to demonstrate for the other captives there, Hambeth could not stifle a few quick grunts of pleasure as Oleander’s warm hole embraced his shaft, but soon he was thrusting soberly, with just a deep breath here and there, Oleander breathing alike, the stirrings of her middle a fraction of their usual vigor.

“I’m not sure I can spill three times,” Hambeth said through a tight-closed jaw.

“Give your first potion to Lilac,” Grace said, “for she has never dripped you.”

“Then Lilac must offer herself, for I am near to closing the transaction with this one.”

“Can you hold until Oleander ascend?”

“Your demands will yet kill me,” Hambeth lamented, but he slowed his thrusts, allowing Oleander to pick up her own rhythm, and she seemed to understand the order of things, writhed around Hambeth’s long manhood, and grunt-cried through a wrenching pleasure while Hambeth refrained with all his might.

As soon as Oleander slid off Hambeth's shaft and collapsed to the blanket, Lilac rose up like a second soldier sent to relieve the first, hands flat on the blanket, knees spread wide, back arched, and Hambeth moved over to her, penis cooling as the twilight air blew gently against the honey of Oleander's sex, and he without further ceremony spread the second girl's lips, checked her lubricant with his finger and found it copious, pushed his hips forward and, with a grunt of relief not unlike pain, drove his manhood into the dripping breach and felt for the first time the firm grip of Lilac.

"AYII!" Lilac cried, following with by a string of Paxil shouted in panic, the words unintelligible but the meaning clear, for this was the voice of a girl in mortal terror.

Hambeth immediately withdrew, penis hanging in the air, and Lilac turned back to look at him and issued another string of Paxil.

"She asks if your penis finds her chamber haunted," Grace said, "and rushes out for fear of ghosts."

"She said no such thing," Hambeth said, gasping in frustration.

"Whatever her words, she wonders why you retreated."

"Because I did not want to plumb her to death," Hambeth said.

"Did you not sense the throes of one expiring?"

"This is her way when a great horse is led into her stable," Grace said. "Shrink not from a little carnal bluster, complete your knowledge and fill her to dripping."

"Do you not fear she will wake your daughter? Or plague the girl's sleep with nightmares of murder?"

"Axilaine wakes when she chooses."

"So be it," Hambeth said, returning to the fray with a slow, steady slide into Lilac's body, her response the same as before, the full-throated cries of a girl being put to death with bluntery, but soon her screams of anguish subsided and she merely groaned like one for whom the execution was in its final phase.

Hambeth, used to her music now, and finding the comfort of her chamber a deafening reward anyhow, settled into the task with a laboring ethic, all his attention on the slipping of flesh against flesh at his and the girl's middle.

With the swelling of his manhood that always preceded the delivery of milk, however, he pushed in with enhanced prowess, faster, and deeper with each thrust, prompting another round of agony from Lilac that reached

its crescendo of reward just as he found his own answer, and the two bounced their hips and wept alike, felled together by the merciless goddess of pleasure.

Like Oleander before her, Lilac slid off Hambeth's member as soon as she was through feasting on his cream, and she fell to her side, looking up at him in the twilight darkness in serenity.

"Can you give me a taste, Hamheartt?" Grace whispered, and she rolled to lay on her back and Hambeth crawled to her, driven more by affection than by lust. She drew up her chained ankle so she could raise her bound hands up, and Hambeth dropped down on her, belly to belly, allowing her to put her wrist chain behind him, the cool links that held her hands together resting against his back.

His manhood was still firm enough to be guided through Grace's drooling front mouth, and he pushed into her while she groaned quietly, a sad sound that seemed to Hambeth to be not completely lust either, but a moan of sorrow for what had been that might never be again.

Hambeth continued writhing against Grace, but the struggles of the day and his battles with the two other slave girls had at last spent him, and his penis went soft and dropped from Grace's opening.

"May we proceed tomorrow night, Graceheart?" Hambeth inquired.

"Yes," she whispered. "Two more then."

"You should be both of the two," he said.

"Yes."

Hambeth rose, stepped to the back of the cart, found the hobbles, assured himself that Axilaine slept still, breathing in and out, and he returned to the girls, closed ankles in cuffs, passed the tether through the links, and secured it as before to the wheels, right first, then anchored at left.

He stood naked, looked at the great expanse of sky and stars above his head and went over the grass of the fields to the place where the road bent, to see Humber of the Greater Vandals at night.

Where the streets ran widest, the city lay under firelight as bright as day, bonfires in two places, the moon reflected in the river, smaller pricks of illumination in windows beside the river, in temples and the farmhouses scattered to the horizon.

He stared for a time while the stars wheeled, walked back to the wagon, penis still wet, cooling in the night air; and, to his surprise, hardening with the memories of three vaginas, each a pleasure in its own way, Grace's the dearest, for it was his first hole and it rested between the legs of the first woman he loved, and loved still, and his longing for it filled his mind as he made out the shape of the wagon and the three females beside it.

As he neared, Grace sat up.

"How did you find the Greater Vandals?" she asked. "Did they welcome you clothesless?"

"They did," Hambeth said, stepping to the blanket and dropping to his knees by the girl. "They offered me the city's key, but found I'd already brought one."

Grace laughed quietly and, with chains rattling, rose to her knees, found Hambeth's genitals, wrapped her hand around his balls and her mouth around his pulsing shaft, drawing him in, licking him, tasting him.

"I would sample you by mouth as well," Hambeth whispered, barely able to form the words.

"It can be done, chains and all," she whispered back.

"I can make you a little freer," he offered. "It you will not make good on your threat to be lost."

Grace attempted to laugh, but her voice was thick and her throat tight, her mirth more a choke, and Hambeth understood now how deep her desire was, that she had put him with the other girls first so she could take him – if he could perform – without the distraction of others waiting.

Hambeth heard the shaking of more chain and knew Oleander and Lilac were awake and watching the lovers beside them, and would continue to watch regardless what deeds were performed. He went to his tunic, still laying where he'd tossed it, found the pins to open Grace's chains, crawled back to her and freed her left hand from her work chain and her left foot from the hobble.

"You will stay, and draw tomorrow?" he inquired.

"I am still bound wrist to ankle," she said, "ankle to tether, tether to two girls and a wagon, wagon to earth."

"The wagon is not bound to the earth," he said, his own voice strained

“It cannot roll with chain through the wheels, and no one may lift it.”

Hambeth, accepting Grace’s logic and not interested in arguing against it even if he didn’t, kissed her mouth, holding her thick hair in his fingers, and the two lovers breathed together and moaned as they dropped to the blanket, mouths never parting.

“Shall we dine first on our treasures?” Hambeth asked into Grace’s ear. She answered no, but not with words, pressing close to him on her side, raising a leg and using her free hand to guide his manhood into her female slot, sighing as the hole was stretched.

“Do not surrender yet,” Grace advised. “I am only seasoning my dinner before I devour it.”

Hambeth, who rarely placed his mouth on Grace’s opening when they trysted on nights of the bright moon, wanted her taste tonight with an urgency that surprised him, so he withdrew from her chamber, rose to his knees and dropped to her middle, bending at his hips, his tongue against her thick hair while she issued another sigh and spread her legs with the rattling of the tether. As his tongue explored from her hair to the top of her folds, she seized Hambeth’s hips and pulled him over and above her, and the couple lost themselves in the pleasures of tasting the other’s mating tool while being tasted in turn, Hambeth pushing his tongue as far up Grace’s slot as nature would permit.

Hambeth could feel the burden building within, grunted and pulled away, rising to knee as if in prayer, dropping again, this time face to face, penis to vagina, her pulling harness between their bellies, and he pushed himself into her chasm, first to but the mid-point of his lance, then all the way in, his tip striking the mysterious depths of Grace’s tunnel of dalliance.

For a time, both lovers held back, rocking against each other but not seeking yet the end of time, merely delighting in the company of the other partner, but after Hambeth had dived into Grace’s pool a dozen times perhaps, or a hundred, or a thousand, he stopped, then raised his hips high above the girl before delivering a crushing blow with his middle, driving the pointed head of his throbbing sword so hard into Grace’s treasure she cried out before regaining her composure and answering him with her own violence, pelvis forced upward so quickly it nearly tossed him onto the blanket, only the union of his shaft with her vessel keeping them united.

The moment of irony came quickly after that, with no more than a handful more insertions, Hambeth bucking while his manhood thickened and convulsed through the delivery of one shot of semen, two, three, Grace screaming as if each package of seed burned her soul.

Long after the throbbing of Hambeth's manhood had subsided and the spasms at Grace's middle were stilled, the two lovers lay like that, Hambeth above, Grace below with legs spread wide, his soft penis fallen from her and dripping onto the blanket, she releasing her own stream from opening to fabric.

And then, the rest of the world returned to the field, Hambeth remembered where he was, who he was, who this woman was, and that two more lay so close he could touch either with his hand.

Grace seemed to know his mind, and spoke first.

"Close me back in, Hamhearth, and let me sleep before I die again."

Hambeth arose, knelt between her legs, looked down through the blackness at her moonlit form.

"You died before?"

"Did you not hear me?" she asked. "I told you it always brings my end."

"Durgahearth will want his money for you," Hambeth lamented, and he took Grace's free hand in his and shut the cuff around it, clambered to her feet, made fast the hobble, returned to his tunic and pants and boots and belt and found the rest of the blankets, four of heavy black wool, one of which he kept, three he tossed to the girls, their chains rattling in cacophony as they wrapped themselves against the cooling night.

"Lilac," he said into the darkness.

"Ah?"

"Oleander."

"Ah, Hambett?"

"Grace."

"Yes, Hamhearth?"

"Sleep well, for tomorrow we march and trade."

Grace translated the words for the others, all three bade Hambeth goodnight in their own ways, and Hambeth took his blanket to the other side of the wagon, to sleep beside the place where the tether finished at the wheel, and he lay down, watched the stars turn and wondered how it would

have been this night with Hyacinth in place of Lilac, if she would have risen to all fours for simple service, or if he – and she – would have gone face to face, belly to belly, in the way of he and Grace, mating with all of their bodies and minds, unable to do otherwise.

Chapter XXXIV: Trades in the Greater Vandals

Hambeth woke to the sound of birds – or one bird, in particular, that kept calling “Hamhearth, Hamhearth,” from a branch just above his head.

He opened his eyes, rolled to his back, saw in the dawn sky a single blood-red cloud, remembered where he was and decided to ignore the omen, for there was much to be done and a child of two summers who was just now peering down at him from the side of the wagon, a mostly meatless shank bone in her hand.

“Hamhearth,” she said again, and she held up the bone.

“Axilaine,” he said, rising, stumbling off to the trees to relieve himself, head light and shoulder stiff where he’d slept too long on it. Axilaine went from saying his name to making the sounds of birds, pausing only to chew.

He exited the woods, saw three black lumps where the girls lay sleeping, the tether still fast to both wheels, and he crawled to the lump he knew to be Grace, touched the black hair spilling from the end of the blanket, and the shape within shook, stretched, groaned.

“Hamheartt?” she asked, voice breaking on the second syllable.

“It is I,” he confirmed. “Will you wake?”

“If you command it, yes,” she said.

“I do,” he said, “but for your company, not your labor.”

“You’ll get both before the day is over,” she said.

“Shall I bring Axilaine to you?”

“Yes, I’m sure she starves.”

“No, she found the food.”

“Bring her anyway, my breasts ache.”

Hambeth retrieved the girl from the end of the wagon, brought her to her mother, released the tether from the wheels and, wakened by child and chain and the birds of morning, Oleander and Lilac stirred, produced their own groans of pain, rolled out of their blankets and held still while

Hambeth freed them all from the tether and allowed them into the woods to speak of unknown things and begin their day.

Eager to be on his way, he laid out food and a water bag, helped himself to all and watched the sky brighten to blue, the red cloud turn white, and the girls return slowly, stiffly, steps hobbled both by chain and the aches of early morn.

They dropped to the blanket, raised to their mouths food and water, and said naught, only Grace smiling at him briefly while she argued with Axilaine over nursing, eventually getting the girl to take both nipples long enough to ease at least that one of her mother's pains of form.

"How fare my team?" Hambeth asked.

"We can push," Grace said simply.

"Push with delight, or under duress?"

"Push as we did yesterday," Grace replied. "You did not break us."

"How are your hands, your feet, your haunches?"

"Middling."

"What need you to be better than middling?"

"To finish pushing."

"Show me your hands," Hambeth said.

Grace spread her palms out, as did Lilac and Oleander, and Hambeth found himself satisfied them that they were, albeit a little worn here and there, not so ruined they could not be used to push three more days, especially if the wagon were light on the return.

"Shall we be on, then?"

"We shall."

Hambeth released the girls from their hobbles and fastened each with the chastity restraint, and they rose and returned to their places by the tongue, Hambeth securing Grace first, by ankle, by wrists, and by the rope that fastened her harness to the beam behind her.

"Lengthen the rope, if you please," Grace said.

"This is where it was set yesterday," Hambeth said.

"I will not be pulling with my hips as I did yesterday," she said.

Grace stepped toward the beam and raised the belt of aurochs hide to her belly, showing two small bruises where the harness worried at her flesh.

"How much does it sting?"

"Not at all, until I push."

“Are the others damaged so?”

“They are.”

“Shall I leave the harness rope off altogether?”

“No, it will give relief at times,” she said.

“This is not the journey you expected,” Hambeth said, apology in his voice.

“It is,” she said. “I expected suffering, and pleasure, so the pain is no surprise, but I am with my sisters of Paxilex, and my daughter, and you beneath the sky.”

Hambeth smiled sadly and bound the other girls, securing their harness ropes only when each said “Ah” to him as he tried different lengths, and they were off, the girls grimacing against the weight of the wagon, Axilaine dancing ahead, Hambeth folding blankets and arranging the chains and what was left of the provisions while the wagon moved slowly forward.

This morning, the Greater Vandals blazed beneath them, the rising sun striking white homes, white halls and palaces and temples, the people already bustling, the horses and other beasts already laboring or traversing streets or moving through pastures, and the girls brought the wagon to the top of the first switchback and began their descent, barely touching the wood to which their wrists were chained as the cart rolled unto itself.

Within a finger, they had cleared three of the seven lengths, the way easy, the girls pausing only once to address a wagon bound for Paxilex, horse-drawn, with husband and wife and child walking beside it, the words quick and easy, none of them offended by the sight of three bound, naked females of their own land.

Hambeth found water after the fourth switchback, a rushing torrent audible from the edge of the lane that, he knew, must flow into and through the city. He gave the girls all they could drink, split their chains for pissing, and they were off again, Axilaine in his arms now, reaching the last of the switches a mere two fingers into the day, the smell of smoke, and the sounds of hammers and the occasional shout coming to them through a thick wall of trees.

“This is end of the seventh,” he said to Grace. “We have made unexpected time.”

“Will you trade some today?”

“I hope to trade all of it today, and perhaps even be gone by evening and atop the pass tonight, to where we slept last, and then onward

at first light tomorrow and make this a journey of three days, not four.”

“You have driven us hard,” Grace said.

“We have all labored together,” Hambeth said, shifting Axilaine to his hip.

The trees thinned, the way went level, and the girls drew the wagon into the clear, where before them stood a wall far more immense than the one protecting Camberia, the bottom portion of great, ragged stone that Hambeth knew must be ancient, above it here and there new cut rock, and wood here and there atop that, poles and boards lashed together with a carpenter’s art. Just before them stood a gate of riveted wood, three men there in the vestments and armor and helmets of the proud soldiers of the Greater Vandals.

Each bore both a spear in his hand and a sword at his hip, and Hambeth set down Axilaine and stepped forth, ahead of the cart, to parley.

The soldiers had no interest in talking, however, one glancing at him, looking past his shoulder to the three girls and the child, and stepping to the gate, where he said something and it yielded in good time.

Hambeth made to thank the man, or at least nod a greeting to him, but he returned to the other two, discoursing among themselves, barely noting the wagon and its team other than passing their eyes over the forms of the females at the tongue.

Within the gate, the voices and smoke and noise of a city unlike any Hambeth had ever witnessed filled his senses, for here within seemed to be a center of commerce and trade, a great hall to his left of three tall floors full of windows, raised terraces beyond it, the columns of a temple before him with a domed roof large enough to cover half of Camberia, and to his right an expanse of booths and paddocks and shops, steam rising here from a smith’s station, cattle there with broad horns gazing from behind fences, three short posts where naked girls had been bound by their wrists for sale, two from Greater Vandals, one darker than any Hambeth had ever seen, men dark and light looking into their mouths and kneeling to check what lay between their parted legs, the girls staring blankly back at those who might be their next owners.

“Avenlou?” said a man in blazing white raiment and black boots, crossing the plaza to Hambeth.

“Yes, Sir,” Hambeth replied. “Here to trade.”

“What have you?”

“Grain, Sir,” Hambeth replied quickly, “and rugs, and boots, and silver workings, and aurochs leather in sheets and forms, and—”

“Come,” the man said quickly, motioning Hambeth to follow. “We do not see enough Avenlou merchandise.”

Hambeth looked at Grace and nodded, and the team followed him and the man to a large stall at the edge of the plaza, where he and a handful of servants seemed to be presiding over trade in a dozen different industries, produce and meat and clothing and jewelry and even lumber, well-shaped timbers of oak and cedar and pine in stacks and rows laid upon the plaza’s stone foundations.

As soon as the girls stopped, the man leapt upon the wagon’s end, lifted a sack of turnips, peered inside.

“Half a vander,” he said.

“Three quarters,” Hambeth countered.

The man nodded, called one of his workers over and tossed the turnips to him with a few words in a language that meant even less to Hambeth than Paxil. The worker set the bag aside, scribbled something with a stylus onto a clay tablet, and slid the beads of an abacus.

“Three vanders,” the trader said, lifting one of the carpets of the greedy weaver.

“Both rugs for seven,” Hambeth said.

A second trader approached, shouted something up at the man on the wagon, his tone not entirely friendly, and the man above said something back, shook his head.

“Both rugs for seven and half of one,” the second trader said to Hambeth in a thick accent.

“Aye,” Hambeth said.

“Eight vanders,” the first trader shouted.

Hambeth looked at the second man, who scowled but could not better the price.

And so it went, the goods of Camberia fetching bid after bid, Hambeth nodding, countering, accepting, watching it drop or be slid off the wagon in bags and rolls and handfuls.

Side traders approached him as well, spotting a trinket here and there the first traders bypassed, pressing coins into his hand and taking what they sought.

Hambeth kept a rough tally in his head of every trade, certain by the time half the cart was emptied that he would bring back more in vanders than any expected, with even the weaver likely to get more than he'd expected, and certainly his uncle and Archenix.

Hambeth shoved coin after coin into his tunic, first into the empty pocket, then the one where he kept all the girls' keys. Vanders, half vanders, quarter vanders, small pieces of gold, larger circles of silver. While he traded, the girls stood by the tongue, watching, talking quietly among themselves, Axilaine holding her mother's leg or venturing a few steps away until some trader's shout frightened her back to the refuge of Grace.

"Will you sell your females here?" Hambeth was asked more than once.

At first he said merely no, but he turned to the fifth questioner, a Paxilian man who seemed not remotely offended by the enslavement of his own people.

"Speak you Avenian well?" Hambeth asked.

"Aye, enough," he replied.

"Tell me what you would offer," Hambeth said.

The man stepped up to Grace, faced her, and she looked back, head high, while Axilaine clung especially tight to her mother's knee.

"Open," the man said, opening his own mouth in case Grace could not understand him.

She obeyed, and he peered at her teeth, but when he raised his finger to probe her gums, she closed her mouth back.

"Ah?" he queried.

"My mouth is for food and discourse, not the fingers of coarse men," she said.

The man laughed.

"Where grows tiecle?"

"On the north side of red hemlock, where—"

"Which herb is best for gout?"

"On the north side of red hemlock, but only beneath moss so old it hangs in ribbons," Grace said, still in answer to his first question. "Gambol root."

"Which moon is best for taking spells?"

"I am no witch, and I take not."

"But do you know the answer?"

“Of course.”

“Say it then.”

“The waning crescent ascendant by Sister May.”

“Who fathered her?” the man asked, looking down at the girl, and then he pointed to Hambeth, who had drawn near. “Him?”

“No, for he was yet a boy when she was conceived.”

“Your husband?”

“I have no husband.”

“Another’s husband?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

“Then perhaps you did take,” he said. “Once, or more than once.”

Grace was silent, chin still high, looking upon the man with hard eyes.

“What advice do you give a girl who would learn man-pleasing?”

“Learn the man,” Grace replied.

The trader laughed again and looked at Hambeth. “One hundred vanders,” he said. “Or four hundred vanders with the girl thrown in.”

“Neither are for sale,” Hambeth said. “But what business would you have with the girl that you would quadruple for her?”

“Oh, no,” the man said, eyebrows raised in mock affront. “No business, other than that without her, this one would barely serve, while with her, mother would serve well and wisely.”

“Indeed,” Hambeth agreed.

The man stepped to Oleander.

“What weed do you chop back into the soil?”

Oleander half-smiled and shook her head.

“She speaks Paxil only,” Hambeth said.

The man asked another question, in Paxil, Oleander replied, and the man frowned, stared at the girl and spun on his heel, making a straight line across the plaza to its edge, vanishing into the city.

“What did she say to him?” Hambeth asked.

“We hunger,” Grace replied. “And thirst, and need our chains split, and Axilaine wishes my breast.”

“This is not what Oleander said,” Hambeth asserted, but he reached down between Grace’s legs and put the chain at either side of her soft hole, and she released upon the stone squares of the plaza.

Hambeth released Lilac next, and then Oleander, and they joined Grace in relief, and soon three drying puddles marked their place where the wagon of Camberia tarried.

The flurry of business had ebbed, just a little produce in the corners of the wagon now, a cabbage worms had found, apple with one bite removed, most likely the work of Axilaine, three pairs of heavy children's boots, popular in Camberia, that no boy in the city would require or find stylish. Even the whip Carbeth had fashioned was gone, sold for a vander.

Hambeth touched his tunic pockets, the heavy sound of metal pieces in legions there telling him he had traded well.

He pulled food and water from the wagon's end, handed a small shank to Axilaine, fed the girls by his own hand, watered them all, and then raised Axilaine to Grace's crossbar, setting her there to let her nurse from her mother.

"How well did you trade, Hamhearth?" Grace asked.

"One hundred and twenty vander's worth, give or take," Hambeth replied.

Axilaine drank deeply, Grace wincing as the girl worried at her nipples, finished with a whine and squirming, and Hambeth set her down and took one last look at the plaza of this great city of the Greater Vandals. He longed to venture deeper, to stand beside its rivers, to walk its streets and enter its temples, but he dared not with a cart to manage and vanders to bring back to Camberia.

"Shall we push homeward?" he asked.

Grace nodded, pushed the tongue to point back whence it came, Lilac and Oleander following, the cart so much lighter their pace was as if they walked unencumbered, and Hambeth went with them to the gate and through it.

But just beyond the city walls, he bade them stop and reached upon the wagon for the three pairs of boots.

"Do you have sons?" he asked of the three idling soldiers, not certain they could understand his words, but of no doubt his meaning would be clear, for he held up the boots and raised his eyebrows.

Two of the soldiers glanced at him briefly and turned back to continue their conversation, but the third showed interest, taking a boot from Hambeth, peering inside, bending it, tugging at the leather.

He held up two fingers, Hambeth held up three, and the man produced six more vanders, setting two pairs of the boots by his feet with a smile.

“Ever the trader,” Grace said, pushing with her team toward the gap in the woods that led up the mountain.

As soon as the road began to rise at the first switchback, Hambeth set Axilaine upon the wagon and pushed, he and the team moving up the foot and knee and thigh of the mountain almost as quickly as they had descended, all apparently of the same mind, to return to finish the journey with success and return to their own beds.

At the tail of the fourth switchback, he found water, split their chains, allowed them rest, needing the latter himself.

Sweat ran from the girls’ backs and breasts and faces and legs, writing thick creases into their flesh where the dust of the road had layered, and Hambeth knew their haste was at least in part for bathing, which they could not do on the way.

They passed travelers – a man on a horse, a man and woman on foot, two wagons of Paxilex, neither the stopped carts they’d seen before, however – but the girls said nothing this time, nor did Hambeth, and when they reached the top of the switches at early twilight, the girls drew the cart to the resting place of the evening prior, none with aught to say, Hambeth using the rest of his waning strength to free them from the wagon, to hobble and tether them, to bring them food and blankets and water and mead, Axilaine first and then Lilac and Oleander suckling at Grace’s breasts, none asking for service this evening, Hambeth unlikely to deliver if they did, all falling to slumber while the sky wheeled and changed her dressing from deep red to black.

Chapter XXXV: A Soldier and His Guide

Hambeth woke in darkness, a light drizzle falling from sky to his face, and he prayed it would not be a terrible day and all the team grow sick with exposure.

He rose, assured himself that his charges were present by listening to the soft breath, the girl on the wagon cooing in her sleep, the three on the ground stirring not.

Exhausted but no longer tired for sleep, he grew damp waiting for first light, but with the mountain between him and the place where sun would rise, he gave up searching for hint of the dawn light and went to the mountain's hip to look down at the city below.

Here and there, lights flickered, a guttering bonfire in the trading plaza that portended morning surely, and he went back to the wagon, loosed the tether, touched the girls each on the head, and they rose and groaned and yawned, and when they felt the drizzle Grace and Oleander uttered a variation on their word for sex, not in celebration, and which sounded to Hambeth like "sintcxarh" or "limcxarh."

"Let us push to home," Hambeth urged, feeding the girls with provisions that were all but gone, chaining them to the wagon, tying their harnesses, belting their holes while their heads hung. With groans of cart and three females, the wagon moved and the sky at last broke open to light, a grayness through which the stones and weeds of Fifth Pass could be just made out, drizzle falling steadily.

Axilaine never stirred, Hambeth watching her form bounce and roll in the near-emptied wagon bed.

"Can she make do with the last bread and cherries until we stop in a finger?" Hambeth asked.

"She can, if she ever wakes," Grace replied. "She has no use for rain."

"Nor do any of us. How fare thee and the team?"

"We long to be done," Grace said.

"Would you choose drawing again?"

Grace said nothing, and Hambeth wondered at that but left his question on the road.

Somewhere in the gloom ahead, no more than half a finger from the start of the day's journey, Hambeth heard a light chopping, which first he ascribed to the doings of animals, but soon thought might be the axing of men at trees, and then, horse's hooves.

"I hear a rider, or two perhaps," Hambeth told Grace.

Again, she said nothing, and he looked at her and saw that her chin shook. Surely not from cold.

Two black forms appeared well down the road where it ran straight, iron-shod hooves sparking against the stones the Caesars laid long ago, and

Hambeth watched them come and shivered, no colder than Grace but troubled by the sight.

Hambeth wished they would pass, and he and his team and wagon would occupy none of their interest and he would guess at their business and be done with them – traders, emissaries, soldiers, thieves? – but they did not pass. Instead, as they neared, each rider pulled hard at his horse's reins, the horses stopped, and the men looked down at the bedraggled team and their bedraggled master and the lump in the wagon where Axilaine slept still, and Hambeth's blood ran cold.

The men were Paxilian, and one by his costume was no ordinary soldier, for the armor across his breast, and the helmet that hid all but his face, were of silver, polished mostly but bedrossed heavy at the edges and in the joints. His tunic was black, his pants were black, of fabric clean and unmarked and, it seemed, marvelous enough to resist the rain. He wore a sash of gold, a cape of black with red trim and ribbons, a sword at his hip finer than any Hambeth had ever seen, boots of leather so thick and so new they were as yet uncreased. His horse, head down in the grass of the road, barely breathing, was just as well outfitted, with silver across its brow, a saddle of leather tooled meticulously, a mane braided, its tail beribboned in red, as if last ridden by a girl.

The second man, Hambeth knew in an instant, was the first one's guide, sporting a thick, wild beard and dressed for doings in the woods, black and dark green, with ancient boots in his stirrups and two daggers hooked to his belt, and a bag that might hold anything draped behind him on his ride's haunches. But it was his eyes that frightened Hambeth most, for they were very old, very gray, peering from a face otherwise young, as if what they had seen had aged them unnaturally.

Hambeth and the girls stopped, and for a time, all stared, saying nothing, the soldier gazing the way that men of authority do when looking at things to understand them, the guide looking at the girls, at Hambeth, at the woods, as if he believed trouble might come from any quarter at any moment, and he would correct as needed.

The soldier asked something in Paxil, and Lilac answered first, then Oleander, and the soldier tilted forward his head, as if bowing to them, and the conversation continued. The soldier had no questions for Grace, and she spoke not and looked at the road.

“Wherefor?” Hambeth asked her quietly but impatiently. The finest soldier he had ever seen, and a guide who looked to be used to ending life, human or otherwise, deserved perhaps a little humoring, but the wagon must be pulled, the girls got home, and those who had business with his charges should speak first to the driver.

The soldier seemed to notice Hambeth’s whisper, and stopped in mid-sentence to look at him.

Hambeth looked to Grace and opened his mouth, but when he looked into her eyes, he saw something he had never seen before, fear and sorrow and a deepness of distress rare in any face, particularly a woman with more dignity as a naked slave than a dozen wealthy wives, and he knew at that instant that Uncle Tomhearth’s dream would come true, that the red cloud omen of the previous morn spoke true as well, and he would die in the rain this day.

His mind turned first and briefly to running, and turned away from it just as quickly. If they wanted him dead, the guide would find and slay him behind any tree or through any thicket. And if the guide judged him not worth the trouble, Hambeth would return to Camberia another sort of corpse, pockets full of vanders, but all the town’s living treasure dispensed to strangers by act of cowardice.

“What is his business?” Hambeth asked Grace, voice cracking in a way it had not since he was fifteen summers old.

Grace spoke, the soldier spoke, Grace turned to Hambeth.

“He wishes to claim these two,” she said, nodding to Lilac and Oleander.

“Wherefor?” Hambeth repeated.

“They belong to others.”

“They were taken fair and paid for, and their labor is required now.”

Grace spoke the words in Paxil slowly, haltingly, her chin shaking, her wet eyes growing wetter.

The soldier looked upon Hambeth as Grace spoke, and in a moment, Hambeth knew, he would turn to his guide with a nod or a small movement of the hand, and the guide would dispatch Hambeth like a common dinner hare, and Hambeth would expire never knowing what business this man had with these girls other than that he wanted them.

And yet, Hambeth persevered, drawing on the only weapon he knew.

“Does he wish to plunder the goods of Avenlou, and break the truce of Fifth Pass?” Hambeth demanded, speaking to Grace but staring straight into the soldier’s face. “Is he merely a thief come to perform thievery?”

Grace asked the questions, and the man said a few words back, looking at Hambeth with the raised eyebrow of surprise Hambeth had seen before on the faces of men when first trading with him, for they expected a youth and met as good as any man in trading matters.

Still, the guide slew not, but spat over his horse’s head and gripped his reins in a pair of black-gloved hands, and the soldier spoke a few more words.

“No,” Grace said. “He wishes to trade.”

“Tell him he has nothing to balance my girls,” Hambeth said.

Grace spoke, the man replied.

“He says he has girls to trade.”

“I see no girls,” Hambeth said, making a show of looking toward the horses, in the woods on either side of the lane, up into the branches of the trees. Finally, he looked back at the soldier. “And I know not with whom I am trading.”

Grace spoke, the man replied at length, Grace turned to Hambeth.

“He is Axiom Askar Pantichol, Duke of Cleamtree, Regimental General of the King’s Field Companies . . .”

Grace looked at the soldier, clearly losing the thread, and he repeated part of his earlier words.

“Auxiliary Viceroy of State Affairs, Keeper of, of . . .”

Grace looked at the soldier again, and he opened his mouth to restate the next of his titles and honoraria, but Hambeth raised his hand and the man paused.

“I am Hambeth, boy of Camberia,” Hambeth said.

Grace repeated the words in Paxil.

“Farmer of a farm, trader of sundries.”

Grace changed the words to Paxil.

“Tender to fifteen aurochs, including four breeding cows, and near four hectares of good land, a fifth now breaking to hoe.”

Grace spoke the next few words of Paxil before the general raised his hand to stop her, a light smile playing on his face, like the one Oleander often wore.

Hambeth looked at the two girls bound together, expecting a half-smile on Oleander's face at least, but he found none, the drizzle beading up along their black hair, their eyes focused on the general, expressions tense, urgent. Was it fear, or hope? Or the fear that springs from hope?

"And driver of this cart and its team," Hambeth added, gesturing toward the wagon and its females.

The soldier spoke, Grace passed on his words, her voice soft but clear, the tremble gone.

"Very well, Hambeth of Camberia," Grace said on the general's behalf. "A little ways further is a cart holding five slave girls taken from Avenlou. It is drawn nearer even now, but cannot race. I ask that you push forward and meet us, and you may pick any two of the girls and give me these two, and it will be called a fair trade, and a good trade under the truce of Fifth Pass."

"I make no promises, Axiom of Cleamtree, for I must first see the girls you trade," Hambeth said.

Grace spoke Hambeth's words in Paxil, and the soldier nodded, and he and his guide wheeled round on their horses, riding away as quickly as they had come, Hambeth believing now that he would live to walk a few more steps, and would either die when they met the wagon, or die at some other time and place of the general's choosing, or at his guide's whim.

"Let us proceed," Hambeth said, and the girls pushed forward.

Hambeth, with much to think about, including the best way to prepare for death, instead pondered the weather, for the drizzle fell no longer, replaced by a fine mist, and the sky continued to open to brighter shades of gray.

While they walked, the girls spoke to each other quickly, earnestly, Grace talking most and longest, and her voice came soft and dear at times, and Hambeth saw her eyes fill with tears and could not fathom at all but believed the worst.

"Grace," Hambeth said at last, when the girls' discourse lulled. "Wherefor?"

Grace said nothing back.

"Your eyes tell I am soon to die while you watch."

Grace turned to him and, to his surprise, laughed.

"Hamhearth, what? What? Nay, nay, unless you be a fool, you will live and go on."

“Then what of your demeanor, for I have never seen such in you before?”

“It is the face I wore,” Grace said, and her next words came through a throat choked with pain, “when an aurochs slew my mate.”

“Then I am to die,” Hambeth said.

“No,” Grace said, and a tear rolled from her eye and jointed the mist on her cheek. “But we may be lost to each other. This day.”

“You arranged this then,” Hambeth said, and his mind began to work, finding keys now, like the keys of Stotthearth’s fashioning, small pieces of iron and words and truth that unlocked things – arms, legs, girls – and knowledge.

“I did.”

“By the cart of the Paxils two days back,” Hambeth said. “You told them. You spoke to them of something, and they were surprised. I saw it in them. And they were bound for the Greater Vandals, but they have not come yet. Was their wheel so broken? Or did they turn back? Did they turn back to pass on what you said? What Oleander and Lilac said? And now, and now that Axiom, that general comes, with that murderer beside him, to take them, to steal them, to—”

“To trade for them,” Grace interrupted.

“Why should one such as him come for two slave girls?” Hambeth demanded. He stepped beside Oleander, looked into her eyes. She glanced at him briefly, turned her eyes back to her bound hands, no half smile, no amusement, nothing but the face of a girl laboring under burden of a wagon.

“What are you, Oleander?” Hambeth asked. The girl looked, turned back to her work. “What be these girls?”

“They are the brood of dukes and princes, fool!” Grace hissed, gripping the crossbar before her until her wet fingers went white.

Hambeth wrestled with a roar of thoughts, the sting of his lover’s words, the shame of not knowing plain truths, the suspicion that he had been lied to by his lover over and over, and the fear her lying might not be done yet.

The girls were making good time, bouncing over the road, Axilaine not stirring, and Hambeth knew, now and for certain, that he was indeed a fool, that all was coming undone now, that his cleverness on the road before the trader Agarjj was the start of a terrible, ruinous folly. No wonder the pirate wished to be rid of these girls for a relative pittance! No wonder the

Greater Vandals trader turned on his heel after a few words with them! Only a fool – a boy who planted grain and fed aurochs – would fall for this great comedy of lies and misdirections.

Hambeth quelled his self-disgust and his misery and turned to Grace to ask, quietly, “How long have you known?”

“Since first I spoke to them at the river’s edge,” she said.

“They told you?”

“Yes, but there was no need for them to say,” Grace said. “It shows in their eyes, in their forms, in the high Paxil they have learned since they suckled. No common girl has her nethers bound. No commoner looks on things as they do.”

“And you never told me until now?” Hambeth asked, voice rising. “Did you mean to, and forgot?”

The road sloped upward, but Grace and her fellows slowed not at all, and she panted and answered not.

“Was this all ruse then,” he asked, “from the first day, on the lane, when we met, to play at me to get other things done?”

Grace gasped through her next words.

“All ruse?” she repeated. “You think . . . I hugged you beneath the moon to work this plan? . . . That I knew of the pirate Agarjj . . . coming a year before he brought three stolen girls?”

“I know not,” Hambeth said, “why you did anything. Why first you spoke to me, and were with me on that first day, or ever afterwards.”

“I wanted warmth between my legs,” Grace said. “And a kind face, and—”

“A simpleton.”

“No. No. A man with a boy’s name, without spouse and encumbrance, who brought a man’s horse. You cannot believe I groaned in your ear for ploy.”

“You never loved me,” Hambeth said.

“I loved you always, Hamhearth,” Grace said, “as dear as any woman . . . loves a boy of eighteen summers . . . when she is a woman of twenty-seven . . . with child and no husband . . . and a turn at the post.”

Hambeth kept silent.

“And you loved me dearly too,” she panted, “with the best of a boy’s love.”

“A boy’s love?” Hambeth repeated. “You saved your cruelest cut to the end, and all—”

“Any man who loves . . . must love first like a boy,” Grace interrupted, “be he eighteen or twenty-seven . . . or fifty summers old.”

Grace bent, pushing with one hand while she raised the other to her eyes.

“Only upon your next love,” she continued, drawing deep breaths between her words, “can you see what this love was. It burned hot and fast, like the iron against my leg, and it will cool like iron also.”

“I loved you like the stars,” Hambeth said.

“But you did not love me like the earth.”

“You speak in riddles at a terrible time,” Hambeth said, and his mind went to other riddles, and lies, and all the ways he had been deceived. “You offered to make of yourself and the others a team. You told me you must push to Greater Vandals. You—”

“I did” Grace admitted, pulling in air three times before she spoke again. “That is when the ruse began . . . Not before . . . The girls were taken by the pirates outside my knowledge, for I am no witch . . . I was made a slave outside my will, for the benefit of others . . . and only then did I make plans.”

“You rused me,” Hambeth said sadly. “You rused me from then till now.”

“I did,” Grace admitted, taking a deep breath and forcing out the next words in one piece. “These girls must be got home.”

Hambeth pondered the sense of her statement, but could not reconcile yet.

“These girls then,” he said, nodding toward Lilac and Oleander, who ignored him and pushed. “They knew all along you were making of me a fool.”

“You are no fool,” Grace said. “But you are a man, in many ways.”

“What mean you?”

“Before a man buries his member in a girl’s body, he is distraught,” Grace said with a half smile. “At the moments of union, he is mad. And afterwards, he sleeps.”

“You tended me with your chambers to befuddle only and work your plans?”

“Not only,” she said, and when Hambeth looked into her eyes, he saw still a smile there, but above it, eyes at the edge of pain, and he thought she must be torn over what she and all the team had done for their release.

“Did you ruse just me?” Hambeth inquired. “Did you speak honestly to others? Did you consult Archenix on your plans? Did Durgaearth approve trading with that general?”

“Of course not,” Grace replied. “None but you know anything.”

“I know nothing,” Hambeth said, distress piling upon distress, for he knew at any moment the cart and its contents and the general and his guide and more men and more weapons might show ahead. Or the general’s troops might even now be watching from the woods, waiting, ordered to dispatch the tall youth driving the cart as he passed.

“Hyacinth?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Grace replied.

“What is her rank?”

“Seventeenth.”

“Seventeenth?” Hambeth repeated.

“Yes, seventeenth in line for the throne.”

“Which throne?”

“The throne where currently sits the king of Paxilex.”

“But she is female,” Hambeth countered.

“Paxilex will subject itself to woman,” Grace said. “And if sixteen die or abdicate . . . she will be queen.”

Chapter XXXVI: Five Slave Girls of Avenlou

Hambeth swallowed, looked into the woods, thought of his dealings with Hyacinth, chaining her and binding her and watching her take the king’s device, denigrating her before Agarjj for a better trade, and he felt at this moment that if any god of Paxilex ventured this far, they must strike him down now, either by the hand of General Axiom or his guide or lightning or a tree come to life and taught the art of strangling by branch.

“Had we but known,” Hambeth said quietly.

“Had you but known,” Grace said, the way sloping downward, the pushing easier, and her voice clear now and full of contempt, “you must have told Archenix, and Archenix would have spoken to Gratta, and Gratta would have taken them as a prize to his king to be ransomed, and to

languish waiting until money were paid, and their parents who lived would be asked for all their holdings to restore their daughters, and would be broken that way.”

“Parents who lived?”

“Some the pirates slew.”

“Which?”

“Hyacinth’s father.”

“No.”

“He was, but she avenged him then, and weeps at night over it but knows peace as well.”

“Hyacinth is orphaned?”

“Her mother lives, so far as she knows. Her brother too.”

“Why tarried they by the sea, to be found by pirates, if they were trading not?” Hambeth asked.

“Hyacinth’s father owed a visit to another, did not know of the danger of settling by the sea on the trip, took his daughter, others high-born went with him to travel, and he died by his mistake.”

“And Hyacinth, instead of mourning her loss, was chained and bound in bitewire and marched up the mountain and bartered over by a common boy and given the labors of a slave,” Hambeth lamented.

“You saved them,” Grace said.

“Nay.”

“Had you not seen the marks of Oleander’s toe, the pirate would have marched them on to the Greater Vandals, and they might have been sent back home from there as nobles, or might have been carted a hundred leagues away to work farms or turn wheels or open their legs.”

“They opened their legs in Camberia,” Hambeth noted.

“They saw no other choice after their bindings were snipped off,” Grace said.

“They gave to dodge our displeasure?”

“They did not mind that, the girls who have,” Grace said, “as you may have noticed. The men there, you and the others, are not so terrible, and the wives handle things, and the girls find that offering themselves as they see fit gives them some choice in the matter.”

“Had I known that Oleander—”

“What difference makes it be she slave, common, or high-born?”

“It makes no difference,” Hambeth agreed, but this was his own opinion, shared with Grace, for he did not believe the law would agree.

“Once the gates are open to a sturdy horse,” Grace added quietly, “any girl with red blood and a soft tunnel wants him back.”

The mist was gone now, the air hanging heavy, the trees and the moss grown thick by the road here, the sky white. Hambeth heard something that was not bird or wind before him and believed his fate closed in, whatever fate that might be, and there was still much to know.

“Why do you say, then,” Hambeth said, voice cracking, “why do you say that we may be lost to each other this day?”

“Because I must go with them,” Grace replied, voice shaking. “I and Axilaine.”

“Axiom said nothing of this.”

“He was not told of it,” Grace said. “For we all three needed to parley by ourselves first, and now he will be, when we reach the cart.”

“These girls will tell him so, and he will do it?”

“They tell him what to do, yes. He is beneath them.”

“Then I lose three for two,” Hambeth said. “Or fight the trade.”

“You will get three,” Grace said. “Ask it. It is fair to.”

“Did he inquire after Hyacinth?” Hambeth asked.

“He did. We told him she was separated from us awhile back.”

“You did not tell him she tarries as a slave in Camberia?”

“I did not.”

“You lied to him then.”

“It was a part of the truth.”

“You mete out the truth to your own kin by halves?”

“Had I told him the full truth, he would be within his rights to keep you, and hold us three, and the five girls as well, until Hyacinth be returned by your own townfolk.”

“I disagree, that would break the truce.”

“It is a matter he might feel worthy of dispute, and be he adjudged on the wrong side in the end, you would still be just as taken today.”

Hambeth pondered Grace’s words, found them true and sensible.

“Who are these five, then?” he asked. “Be they all criminals and debtors and the unwanted, tossed aside in Avenlou, bought by the heap in Greater Vandals? Be they –”

Hambeth fell silent, for another notion tumbled through his mind, the memory of a scrap of words, spoken days ago, by someone, someone.

Who?

Someone.

Grace looked at him, looked back at the road, and Hambeth thought of things and made decisions, for if he lived, he might yet turn all this to something.

Ahead on the road, there was a creak of axle, a shout.

Grace looked at her hands and the beam she pushed, and she spoke quickly, urgently.

“You must say something to Brunehearth,” she said.

“I know him not,” Hambeth said.

“You know of him?”

“Yes,” Hambeth said. “Married to Sistrena, eldest daughter of Archenix, he farms –”

“Tell him Axilaine will be better tended than ever she could be in Camberia. Her mother will be free, and the girl will learn letters and numbers and high Paxil and will—”

Grace stopped in mid-speech, Hambeth looked at her and found that she was crying, mouth open in anguish, eyes closed, tears falling down her nose and her cheeks and her chin, and Hambeth understood, at last.

“Does Archenix know?” he asked quietly.

“Of course. He has known always.”

“Then why did he torture you for the name?”

“If I spoke the name at the post, Brunehearth would be justly known by all. If I kept the name close, every lash would fall on Brunehearth’s heart the same as on my back.”

“You did not say the name.”

“And so Brunehearth suffered too, alone, while my cries were heard by all, and he speaks to no one of it, for not even Sistrena knows.”

“Archenix spilled your blood only to reckon with his daughter’s husband?”

“That was his choice, yes. But he did not believe I would last ten lashes. He wanted me to speak the name before the whip ever fell.”

“And Brunehearth never revealed himself.”

“I told him he must not.”

“Wherefor?”

“It would do more harm where the harm would serve no one.”

“I will speak to Brunehearth, but hold your secret always,” Hambeth promised. “And were it within my powers, I would strangle Archenix.”

“No,” Grace said sharply. “He did what men do, cross for their daughters. His rage cools and my back has long since healed, and my daughter grows and sings like a bird.”

Hambeth paused, pondered.

“What of Hyacinth?”

“Work her as you have. She labors content.”

“She is . . .” Hambeth stammered. “No, she is in line—”

“If you speak of this knowledge, she’ll be bundled up the same day and carted to Topia and imprisoned and ogled and finally sold for a ruinous ransom and—”

“To withhold such knowledge betrays Camberia,” Hambeth said.

“What knowledge?” Grace asked. “You have been listening to the idle chatter of a slave girl, run ragged with too much pushing of wagons.”

“But what shall become of her?” Hambeth queried. “A high-born girl made slave all her days?”

“If there is ever peace, they will come for her, and the village trade then or do what they will.”

“So be it,” Hambeth said, and he looked ahead and saw with fear and leap of heart two horses and a wagon, tall with walls and roof of heavy canvas, rounding the way, a dozen Paxilian soldiers and guides on foot beside or before it, the general and his guide come trailing on their horses.

“I believe these be our last private words, Gracehearth,” he said, voice choking.

“They may be,” she agreed. “Fare thee well, and let Hyacinth know we all adore her and might meet her again, if there be peace.”

“I will.”

“You love her, do you not?”

“She is good, and fair.”

“No,” Grace whispered softly. “You do not know your heart as well as I.”

The wagon stopped a few paces ahead, the girls ceased their pushing, and Axiom rode to the fore.

Immediately, Oleander spoke, barking at the general, her words causing what Hambeth sensed was surprise on the man's part, if not consternation.

Lilac spoke next, then at last Grace, she and the general sharing words, he arguing back gently, perhaps, or acquiescing, Hambeth could not know.

"Hamhearth," Grace said. "Uncover Axilaine."

Hambeth stepped to the bed of the wagon, touched the blanket that closed round the little girl, and her head arose, eyes wide and peering, and Hambeth knew she'd long been awake and had chosen for her own reasons to stay hidden. The rain annoyed her? She'd eaten her fill at the night's middle? She wished not to drink mother's milk?

She rose to hand and knee, then to her feet, looked at her mother and at the other wagon and the men, and said something to Grace in Paxil that made the general smile.

Axiom spoke again, to Lilac, to Oleander, to Grace, and then he put forward his head, in another bow, and Hambeth guessed some matter had been resolved.

"Hambeth," Grace said. "Go to the cart and pick out your three females."

"No," Hambeth said. "Have them put out for my inspection in full light."

Grace repeated the words in Paxil and the general registered more surprise, but he spoke to his men and they obeyed, entering the cart, where followed a girl's quiet voice, the ring of chains, men's voices in Paxil, and then a second girl's voice, speaking Avenian in the plain speech of Topia, shouting, "Touch me not!"

More chains rattled and a man stepped from the wagon and held out his hand, and the first of the girls appeared, naked, with the light hair and blue eyes and the pale skin of Avenlou, iron around her neck, ankles joined by chain, wrists bound together and to the next girl, and soon came she, the second, and then the next, and two more, all ignoring the man's hand, until all five girls stood there, gazing emptily around themselves and then at Hambeth, and he found them round and right and clear-eyed and surpassingly fair, each with a fresh mark on her ribs beneath her left breast, a crescent like the moon, and he knew then who they were, and he gazed at

them and believed he would yet die today, or soon, because of what he next must do.

He stepped up to the girls as if to inspect them.

“Open your mouths,” he said, and the girls obeyed, and their eyes went hard and he believed all must hate him already.

He peered into each mouth, at strong white teeth and red tongues, and he stepped back and circled them to look at hips and breasts and haunches and rumps, at flat bellies, and the red-brown hair that bunched thick above and beside their sweet Avenlou flowers.

“Show me your hands,” Hambeth said, and he held out his own hands, palm side up, and the girls obeyed, but slowly. He reached down, touched fingers and palms, turning them to examine nails, and stepped away.

“Axiom?” Hambeth said. “General Axiom, this is what you offer?”

Grace translated the words.

“From which reeking brothel in the hinterlands did you scrape these five loose whores from?” he demanded.

Grace spoke the Paxil words, the general looked at Hambeth with confusion, the other soldiers shuffling nervously.

“You would trade all my team, who drew to the Greater Vandals and back in three days, and who chop ground with a hoe, and labor with the strength of horses and the wisdom of witches, for three soft, worn out leg spreaders?”

The general’s eyes flashed anger, or impatience, and he spoke a few words directly to Grace.

“These are no ordinary females,” Grace said. “He believes they are remarkable.”

“Remarkable, yes, for you must have searched a season for the worst of our land,” Hambeth replied. “But if you wish to invent some lie now to make a weak trade stronger, speak and let me relish the fable.”

Grace and Axiom spoke at length, his words coming sharp and clipped, hers calm, even. They finished and she turned to Hambeth.

“Take a fourth then,” she said.

“No,” Hambeth shot back. “I take all five, and if you had another cart with another fivefold, I would take those too, and still I would lose in this wretched trade.”

Grace spoke, General Axiom spat, waved his hand, spoke back to Grace and wheeled his horse around, barking an order at his soldiers.

“Release us,” Grace said. “You get your five.”

Hambeth reached shaking fingers into his tunic, drew out the pins and keys, freed Lilac first, untying the rope between her harness and the wagon, unlocking her chastity chain, her ankle cuffs, her wrist cuffs, tossing all of it into the wagon. As soon as she was let go, Lilac stepped to a soldier, motioned to the harness around her hips and he drew a sword and cut it and let it drop to the ground, and she raced past the Avenlou slave girls with a cry to the wagon, climbed in, concealing herself. Oleander, freed next, followed Lilac into the wagon as soon as her harness was cut off, the girls wailing together there, speaking Paxil so quickly Hambeth suspected even they could not understand it from each other’s mouths.

Grace, when freed, did not race as a third to the cart, however, instead taking Axilaine from the wagon, setting her on the ground, kneeling and bidding her nurse.

The girl obeyed, but she turned her head this way and that, watching all around her as she suckled.

The five girls of Avenlou were freed in turn from all but their shackles, and they moved toward Hambeth, and he knew they must hate him only a little less than they hated the troops of Paxilex.

Hambeth looked at the first three, scowled and pointed to the three positions by the tongue, and the girls looked at him in surprise, but he shrugged and they obeyed, taking their places, allowing Hambeth to chain them by the wrists. The remaining two he sent to the wagon, and he hobbled them both and put them in work chains as well.

“Tell them they may take the shackles back of the three girls who push,” Hambeth said to Grace, “but I must keep a few pairs, to bind the extras.”

She repeated the request in Paxil, a soldier stepped forward, knelt and freed the feet of the three new drawing girls of Avenlou, and Hambeth motioned for his replacement team to press onward, past the wagon and troops and the general and his guide, and Hambeth studied the face of the general and saw him neither elated nor furious, and knew this had been an acceptable trade in the man’s mind, though surely he knew not what he had given away.

“Hamheartt,” spoke a voice from the wagon as he passed it, and Hambeth looked there and saw Oleander, the half-smile on her face, an embroidered robe of finest black draping her from shoulder to ankle, and he waved and smiled.

“Fare thee well, Oleander,” he said.

“Fare the well,” she said in her thick Paxil accent.

“Fare thee well, Hamheartt,” said Lilac as she appeared beside Oleander in the same gown, a third draped over her arm, and he waved and bade her farewell and watched as together the girls stepped to Grace and waited for her to finish nursing, the sun breaking forth at that moment between the dwindling clouds to shine upon her, and Grace raised her eyes from her child to watch Hambeth go, and Hambeth looked back and smiled and his throat turned all to lump and he walked beside the wagon and its five girls of Avenlou and spake not for a long line of paces.

At last, he looked to the three pushing.

“You draw well,” he said.

“How long must we push?” the first girl asked.

“Two fingers or less,” Hambeth said. “We’ll be in Camberia by nightfall.”

“Who is Camberia?” another asked.

“It is a small town,” Hambeth said. “As soon as we leave this road, I will unbind you, for I know what you are, but I must hide my knowledge from those soldiers of Paxilex who might see and take back the trade.”

“And what think you we are?” asked one of the hobbled girls from the bed of the wagon.

“Stolen from Topia, daughters—”

“No, no, you spoke truer before,” another said abruptly. “Loose whores from the hinterlands, the worst of Avenlou.”

“I don’t believe that is true,” Hambeth said, his stomach turning in the first hints of a new doubt.

“Do you know us, then?” one asked. “Do you frequent the brothels laid by stumps in the wilderness?”

“No,” Hambeth conceded.

“Then perhaps you should not guess,” said one.

“Please absolve me of my words about that,” Hambeth begged. “I spoke only for trading—”

“Some things cannot be forgiven,” said one of the hobbled girls, and she leaned over the cart’s edge and stared into Hambeth’s eyes until he looked away.

Hambeth pondered, looked back at the girl. “You speak a strange form of Avenian for being wilderness girls.”

“It is how we folks talk on the farm.”

“You said you were of brothels.”

“A brothel,” said one. “And a farm. A brothel farm.”

The two hobbled girls looked at each other, laughed and immediately spewed forth the crudest, commonest country Avenian Hambeth had ever heard.

“Aye, Raindrop, did you hear my aurochs rut last night?”

“Yes, Mossbank, in between my own rutting. It sounded like they rutted until all their horns broke off!”

“More than that broke off!”

“And you cooked and ate all that dropped in the manure?”

“Just like always.”

The three drawing girls laughed and joined in, all of them working at a dialect and ways of farming and eating they seemed to be inventing as they spoke, borne of all the commonest characters they had ever heard, most likely, and their own imaginations besides, and they belabored the tongue and the ways until they reached the cut in the woods that led to Camberia.

“We turn here,” Hambeth said, and the girls ceased their chattering while the first three grunted to turn the cart, their pushing not nearly as quick or graceful as the team Hambeth had traded away. “And you will hear not a one in our village that speak the way you five are learning to, and—”

“We have always spaked like this,” a drawing girl said. “It’s taught in the brothels where our mothers raised us.”

“You spoke royal Avenian first.”

“We were pretending you,” said a hobbled girl. “We wished to make you like us, but it seems you cannot be impressed, so we gived up.”

Hambeth shook his head and scowled. “If you speak like that in Camberia, it may be called insolence, and dealt with.”

The girls fell silent again, the first three pulling the wagon over the rough and narrow lane now, their feet bare, the going slow.

“We are off Fifth Pass,” Hambeth observed. “Will you be freed? Will two of you in front give your places to the girls you draw, for rest?”

“Why would you free common slaves?” the girl at the front demanded in her best attempt at her new country accent. “Are you already so wearied of us you want us to escape you and make our way to wolves’ kitchens?”

Hambeth pondered her words and understood this dilemma. If these were five stolen nobles, they seemed determined to carry on a strange ruse. If they were indeed commoners, whether born of brothels or not, their crude simplicity was true. Either way, Hambeth’s return to Camberia was fraught, and he did not mind the slow pace and the quiet in which to ponder, the girls’ mouths stilled now, nothing but the familiar wind in the trees speaking, a voice he always found familiar and comforting.

As he walked by the wagon’s rear corner, he pondered more than his new troubles, however, for his eyes wandered of their own accord across the bodies of the girls, bare rears, breasts bouncing, muscled legs and rumps of the first three pushing against the earth, relaxed limbs of the hobbled girls, one seated to watch where they had been, her legs crossed, her female opening bared to him, and he looked at her treasure and the hair around it until she noticed him staring and turned with a scowl, and his heart curled up in shame.

But why would she care that he’d looked at that place if she were brothel spawn?

As he walked, Hambeth pondered his next steps, for words must be said to save him, and they must be the best words. He would speak of the general and his men, the wagon with the five, what Grace told him, the way the girls first spoke royal Avenian, then invented a dialect when he raised the question of tongue and breeding.

He would say that General Axiom had hinted of the five girls’ status.

But why didn’t Axiom say outright that they were the noble five? And why were these girls denying who they were?

It was upon those questions that Hambeth reached, with deep foreboding, the gate to Camberia, the sun of late afternoon shining bright.

Chapter XXXVII: Brandywine

“Well met, Hambeth!” cried the man at the gate, dashing inside through the side door to open it for the wagon.

“Well met, Barrishhearth,” Hambeth replied.

Only when Hambeth and the girls entered the village did Barrishhearth notice the new team.

“You left with three and returned with five,” he observed. “You’ve traded well!”

“Aye,” Hambeth agreed, wishing to say no more.

Hambeth was greeted by others, well-wishers most, but he heard murmurs as well, of surprise if not consternation, for these were not the same girls he’d left with, and they were of Avenlou. And what of the Paxil girls? The village had grown used to them. None challenged him directly, however.

“Has anyone seen Archenix?” Hambeth asked of those who spoke to him. “I must report to him.”

None had seen the chief, so Hambeth directed the team to the armory, and they stopped amidst a gathering crowd, and Hambeth released the three girls from the beams.

“Fool,” one of the hobbled girls hissed from her place on the cart, so quietly only Hambeth would hear. “Chain them all three now!”

Hambeth motioned the girls to him, retrieved the work chains and bound each with what he could find, removed the hobbles from the other two and bade them leave the wagon, and all bore their new restraints without reluctance, standing by, silent.

“Hambeth!” rang the voice of Durgahearth, making his way through the throng.

Hambeth stepped forward. “Greetings, Durgahearth, I traded all the cart in—”

“You’ve found five girls of Avenlou, it appears,” Durgahearth said.

“Yes, Sir, I traded for them, with—”

“And you’ve already berthed our three?”

“No, Sir, I traded—”

“Where then are Oleander, Lilac and Grace, two of whom are town property and borrowed for the trip? Where is the little daughter?”

“I traded them for these, Sir, for these—”

“You gave away three slave girls for these?” Durgahearth demanded, voice raised, and Hambeth knew that a new turmoil was all his

now, that things clear on the road earlier this day in the mist were now deeply muddled, decisions that seemed good two fingers ago were bad now, and he would pay. Dearly.

“They are five, Sir,” Hambeth said.

Durgahearth stepped forward, looked at the girls, who returned his gaze without shame, making no effort to cover themselves.

“They are five marked to another village,” Durgahearth said, stepping up to one girl and tracing his finger across the crescent burned beneath her breast. “And those townsfolk will come a-claiming them within a handful of days.”

“I traded fair for them.”

“No,” Durgahearth said, and he shrugged, as if what next he proposed was a simple matter. “Go retrieve the three you gave away. Or at least the village two.”

“They are back in Paxilex,” Hambeth said. “Or almost to there.”

“Then it might take you until the morrow to retrieve them, I would wager.”

“What’s this, Hambeth?” spoke the dry, reedy voice of Archenix, and he stepped past Durgahearth to stand before Hambeth’s face. “What’s this?”

“My Chief,” Hambeth said, “I believe these are the five girls Gratta spoke of, stolen from the palaces of Topia, whom I—”

“Now we hear the story!” Durgahearth bellowed, arms spread wide as he turned toward the villagers. “Our Hambeth found the five stolen. On a walk through the woods. Under a toadstool perhaps! My, what a trader is he!”

Archenix, not given to theatrics when distressed, grabbed Hambeth’s arm and hissed, “Do you know how often the five have been found, in some village or bog or some ragged shack of laying?”

“I do not, My Chief,” Hambeth admitted, for these were not rumors he had interest in or listened to.

“Many times,” Archenix said, fury in his eyes. “Once a day. Twice a day, so rich is the reward grown. And the duke and the duchess and the others come and find not their girls, and grow exceedingly distraught, and the claimants often enough are clapped in irons.”

“Sir, ask them, please,” Hambeth said, face red, heart thumping in his chest, scarce food rocking in his belly.

“Ah, Milady,” Durgahearth mocked, and he bowed deeply to the first girl, standing chained beside the wagon. “And wherefor cometh thee to the fair town of Camberia?”

“I be a simple brothel girl,” she said, “so I can’t speak back with good speech.”

“We farm and brothel,” offered another. “Is there a brothel here, Sir?”

“Or a farm?” said a third. “We can grow aurochs good.”

Durgahearth looked toward Hambeth victoriously, as if the girls’ farce of a few words settled all the questions. Could he not see through their ruse? But then, Hambeth had been fooled over and over by lying females. What else was Durgahearth to think?

Or, was Durgahearth taking more than his share of pleasure from this, for it enabled him to best Hambeth now after the boy had bested him in parley over and over? Hambeth remembered Grace’s warning at the start of the journey, and counted himself a fool for the ages.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, first grabbing, then whirling him around, and he found himself face to face with his uncle, who stared at him and spoke the worst words of all, for they were no words, his mouth simply working in silence through heartbroken rage.

“To the hall, to sort this matter,” Archenix said, putting his hand in turn on Hambeth’s shoulder to free him from his uncle’s speechless fury.

“Berth them all,” Durgahearth instructed to two men at his side, and Hambeth looked back to see the girls stepping in their chains to the armory

The walk to the hall was the longest of Hambeth’s life, far more fraught than a hundred trips to the Greater Vandals and back. A moon ago under that roof, he’d out-traded an old pirate, bought three girls and inspired the village. Now he was come to resolve something that most likely could not be resolved without suffering and ignominy.

As soon as they entered the building, Durgahearth was on it again.

“I believe he must have sold all three in the Greater Vandals,” the man said to Archenix, speaking as though Hambeth nor his uncle were present, “and no doubt he traded well for them.”

“And then, and then,” Archenix said, continuing the thread as he sat on the floor and bade the others join him, “he found those five, somewhere, and bought—”

“He found them on Fifth Pass, but he bought not,” Durgahearth ventured. “He slew their keeper. He must have, and took them.”

“Sir, I traded fair in all matters,” Hambeth protested, and he reached into his tunic and began to draw out, in small handfuls, all the vanders and half vanders and quarter vanders and pieces of gold and pieces of silver he’d traded for, setting them upon the hard dirt of the floor.

“These are the weaver’s,” he said, sliding a small stack of coins to the left. “And these for the cobbler. These for my uncle. This for the three garden bags, this for the silver, these for—”

“You earned this much from one humble cart?” Durgahearth boomed.

“They are hungry in that town for Fifth Pass trades,” Hambeth said, continuing to count out vanders and fractions and the rest, in piles and rows, voice shaking, fingers trembling as he did what he knew best. “And this for the village coffers, Sir, and we keep this, Uncle and I, and—”

Archenix snatched up all the vanders for the town, and all the vanders meant for Tomhearth and the farm.

Durgahearth laughed. “He sold the girls, and he sold all the goods too, for he is no fool. And he believes if he hands over the highest price for all the produce of Camberia, but still holds back a stack for himself, we will not suspect his ploy.”

“Somewhere,” Archenix said, “in the forest, he planted the extra vanders, to retrieve when he would.”

“It is not true,” Hambeth said. “The Avenlou girls feign the speech of brothel farm girls, for their own purposes, I know not why. They spoke royal Avenian on the road.”

Durgahearth and Archenix listened, stared, as if Hambeth’s arguments held some weight now.

“And why,” Hambeth continued, slightly encouraged, “why would a general trade them? Why would this matter—”

“A general?” Durgahearth boomed. “A general?”

“Yes, Sir, General Axiom. On Fifth Pass, with his guide and soldiers and other guides.”

“Had you invented a captain, or even a lieutenant, we might believe you,” Durgahearth said. “But a general?”

“It is all true, all of it!” Hambeth cried out. “Uncle, please!”

Hambeth turned to Tomhearth, whose face was pale now, sad only, no longer enraged.

“I tried to raise him as well I could,” the man said quietly, “after his father died. But he never . . . he learned some things well, but never . . .”

Tomhearth’s last words faded to silence, and Durgahearth put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “You did your best, Tomhearth. Some seeds can be coaxed straight forth from weak sand. Some grow bent in the blackest dirt.”

“We will berth the five girls tonight, and question them tomorrow,” Archenix said, “and if reasonable answers prove unforthcoming, we will torture each separately for the truth, and we will perhaps have them back to their village by nightfall.”

“A sound plan,” agreed Durgahearth.

Archenix nodded and fixed his gray eyes on Hambeth’s.

“I give you one last chance to set at least a part of this right.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Go get back the two of the village you sold or gave away.”

“That is impossible, My Chief.”

“Or produce their value in vanders,” Durgahearth offered. “Three hundred for each girl, six hundred for the pair.”

“You said two hundred fifty on the day I set out,” Hambeth protested.

“It is higher today,” Durgahearth said. “They are – were – good drawers of a wagon, as you yourself claim, as well as fair and comely.”

“But the taxes, Sir?” Hambeth queried.

Durgahearth laughed, booming again, clearly enjoying this in a way Hambeth found witheringly inapt. “Shall we say a thousand vanders each?” he asked. “They are gone! We need pay no more taxes on them.”

Archenix sighed, looked from Tomhearth to Hambeth.

“You will report to the village when you are summoned tomorrow, for once the torturing of the girls is done, you will be reckoned with, by the same means if necessary. And if you have stolen, and if you have killed, you will pay accordingly.”

Hambeth bit his lip and spoke not.

“Go now,” Archenix said.

“My Chief?” queried Tomhearth quietly, sadly.

“Yes?”

“May we take a girl to labor tonight and in the morning?” the uncle asked. “I have missed the work of Hambeth and our slave for three days, and now I have no vanders to show for their absence, and my farm which I have long labored over falls near to ruin.”

Archenix waved his hand, which meant yes, and Hambeth and his uncle rose to depart.

“Tell her not that she is to be tortured,” Archenix said. “For that is a village secret.”

“Yes, My Chief,” Tomhearth agreed.

“And collude not with her, Hambeth,” Durgahearth said, raising his finger as if lecturing with profound wisdom. “For if her testimony by morn favors you in ways the others’ words do not, we will know by that fact alone she speaks for you, and is that much more a liar, she and you both.”

“Yes,” Hambeth said curtly, and he and Tomhearth left the hall and went to the armory, retrieving one of the girls while the others watched, and Hambeth looked into the berths where Oleander and Lilac and, later, Grace had slept, and he felt an ache beyond compare.

Hyacinth was not here. The Waxcaps were gone too, and he wondered where they might be, and thought of Hyacinth, who had lost her father and knew of it, and now her two closest friends, which she might not know yet. He went to the wagon and grabbed a pair of sleeping hobbles.

“What is your name?” Tomhearth asked the girl as they strode away from the armory.

The girl paused a long time before she spoke, and Hambeth knew she was making up a name in her mind, and such evidence meant nothing to any but him.

“I am Brandywine,” she said at last.

“You were named for liquor?” Tomhearth inquired.

“Yes,” she said with her ridiculous country accent. “It was most popular at the brothel, so my mother named me for it, because she was most popular too.”

None greeted Hambeth or Tomhearth as they made their way to the gate, but the villagers stared at the men, and at the chained and naked Avenlou girl that walked between them, and Hambeth longed for this walk to end, this day to end, his life to end. This girl, whatever she be, would suffer for his folly. Four more girls would suffer for his folly.

They passed through the gate without any words to Bitterhearth or anyone else there, and Hambeth believed they would walk in silence all the way to the farm, and sup in silence, and work in silence tomorrow, for Tomhearth would never speak to him again. But the penalty for stealing slaves was death, so at least Tomhearth's silence might not last so long.

As soon as they were on the road beyond the village walls, however, Tomhearth spoke, voice clear and even.

"There is no brothel in Avenlou that would serve brandywine," he said.

The girl remained silent, except for the chains that rang with her steps.

"Brandywine is what they drink in the palaces of Topia," he continued. "So perhaps you should imagine a new reason for your name."

Still the girl chose silence, until they reached the farm, when all three stepped to the paddock.

"These are our aurochs," Tomhearth said. "You have farmed them?"

"Always," she said, adding quickly, "when I was not brotheling."

"What would you feed them tonight?" Tomhearth said.

"Oats," the girl said. "And apples. Just one apple."

"Carrots?" Tomhearth asked.

"Yes, many."

"Well, perhaps hay might serve better, and grass," Tomhearth said. "And not so much of the oats. Nor apples or carrots, which are I believe devoured by the horses of greatest breeding sat upon by ladies and gentlemen in parts elsewhere, also well bred, such as in the mansions and palaces of Topia."

"Our aurochs all ate apples and carrots apace," she said.

"I watched an aurochs eat a carrot once," Tomhearth said. "She died later that day."

"That is strange," Brandywine said simply.

Tomhearth chuckled, brought her into the barn, pointed to the stall where a girl named Oleander once slept, the hay still arranged to fit her sleeping form, and Hambeth bit his lip so he would not scream in despair.

"You'll pass your nights here, for as long as you're with us, and you'll work beginning tomorrow. Hambeth will rouse you at first light and

teach you to hoe if you did not learn it already, and draw water and work with your hands, and you will labor as hard as we but no harder.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, Sir.”

“I am called Tomhearth.”

“Yes, Tomhearth.”

“Hambeth, set her by the post and let us get dinner ready,”

Tomhearth said.

“Yes, Uncle,” Hambeth said, and he pointed to the post and opened the ankle chain of the girl who called herself Brandywine, and fastened her to it.

“I’ll be back to get you, soon,” Hambeth said. “And we’ll sup.”

“Yes, Hambeth.”

Hambeth, feeling so sick he could not imagine ever eating again, entered the home and found Tomhearth, who whirled around as if furious, but he put his hand on the lad’s shoulder, wincing in pain but not scowling with rage.

“I do not know what you have done, Nephew,” the man said. “But I know whatever it was, you engaged in it honestly. You may yet be proved a fool, but not a liar, nor a thief, nor a murderer.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

“And after all, this was written out in advance by the gods, and you had no power to affect any other course regardless.”

“Of what do you speak?”

“Do you not recall my dream?”

“Yes,” Hambeth said, searching his memory. “Yes, the one in which Oleander died?”

“She did not die, nor did I say she did,” Tomhearth said. “She was simply lost to us, to this farm.”

“And never seen again?”

“Nor did I say that. She vanished from my eyes, never again to be seen by me. I can speak for no other mortal, the dream a passage, not book.”

“Then perhaps there is yet hope of some kind?”

“Perhaps, but I can dream only, and that but sparingly,” Tomhearth said. “You must work your way out of this well by yourself, or drown in it, lest you bring down me and the farm and all and still not save your own neck.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“That girl, though,” Tomhearth continued. “She is a liar, and a bad one. She is not one of the missing five, but she is something.

“And she is not,” he added with a laugh, “born of a brothel farm.”

Hambeth and his uncle prepared dinner quickly, Hambeth returned to Brandywine and found her sleeping in Oleander’s hay, and he woke her and smelled urine and freed her from the beam.

“When you must piss or drop dirt, you may ask and I’ll take you to the field,” he said, leading her from the barn.

She blushed and he smiled.

“You always pissed in private at the brothel farm?” he asked.

“Let us not begin my service here with a discourse on privy things,” she said.

“You forget your country language,” Hambeth noted.

“I had to speak royal so long, to put on airs for the brothel men, and for the brothel farmers, I sometimes forget it is not my native tongue,” she said. “But if I will labor here by speaking, tell me my dialect and I shall master it and serve that way. And if you want my arms and back instead, tell me that and I will do it, and save us all the trouble of talking over things too much.”

“Very good, Lady Brandywine,” Hambeth said with a deep bow, which served only to provoke a deeper scowl from her grimy face.

The girl spoke little over dinner, reaching with bound hands for this food and that, showing a preference for meat and bread and sweet pastry, not unlike Oleander, and Hambeth remembered again how much he missed that girl, but he was able to eat a bite or two while he described for his uncle the trip to and from the Greater Vandals, the road and the ruins and the city itself, and the meeting with the general, and if Tomhearth did not believe the tale, he showed it not, for he asked many a question about Hambeth’s dealings with the man, and in particular the final parley, when Hambeth demanded not three, not four, but all five of the girls in the wagon after he inspected them and declared them unfit.

“And they are fair, are they not?” Hambeth asked, turning to Brandywine.

“They are fair, and fair spoken now and then, if they are like this one,” Tomhearth agreed. “Fair, but not ours. And when their village come

to take them back, they'll want recompense for the lost service, and other penalties on top. And I'll not pay it."

Chapter XXXVIII: Brandywine and Grattamain

That night, after dinner, after Hambeth had brought the girl who called herself Brandywine to empty herself in the field, and then to her stall to be bound and put in sleeping hobbles, he returned to his bed to lie awake, for all of the doings since morning were too much to fathom until the quiet of early night.

Now, he pondered and sighed and despaired, for he had lost much, and would lose far more.

And the five girls he thought he'd rescued were most likely to be tortured and then sent back to whatever village they'd been stolen from, unless they'd been stolen from Paxilex. But even then, even if Camberia kept them, Hambeth had no rights to deal in female flesh on his own. Brandywine would join village property, and now the new five plus the two Waxcaps and Hyacinth too would labor in their ways and lie beneath the men of Camberia for a full vander, and Hambeth and his uncle would labor too, slaveless, the new hectare left fallow again.

At best, Hambeth would be called brash and careless, rushing headlong into trades without full information, ruining more than he built.

But there was Hyacinth, Hambeth reminded himself with a small flicker of hope. Perhaps she could be persuaded, cajoled, induced to confirm that she was Paxilex nobility, in line for the throne, a girl of such consequence a general would come to retrieve others like her on Fifth Pass.

If she told her tale and none believed, however, what then? It would be just another of the fancies of Hambeth, who enjoyed a bright moment and lost his head over it, a once-trader best given only tasks that involved hoes and the passing of hay into aurochs' mouths.

But if she told her tale and was believed, so much the worse, for she would be taken that day, as Grace had warned, taken to Topia and held there while her bereft family scraped all their holdings together to win her back.

Perhaps he should run, Hambeth thought, becoming one of those men in dark cloaks who drift in and out of villages with stories of war or piracy or commerce that no one believe, and who at nightfall are asked to

leave and not come back. He might not be tortured or slapped in irons if he went that way, and it might suit Archenix and the rest if he simply went away.

But no, he would work through this. He could not leave behind Hyacinth. He could not walk the woods while the five he believed he'd rescued were being tortured for the truth.

Hambeth watched the window, shutters hinged aside, and as soon as the sky turned a little gray, he rose, went to the field, went to the barn.

“Brandywine?”

“Ahh!” the girl cried. “What? What?”

“Brandywine, it's Hambeth. It's morn, and time to work.”

“Oh,” she said, voice tinged with sorrow. “I dreamt of other things.”

Hambeth brought her forth to empty in the weeds, fed her, taught her to draw water at the well, taught her that aurochs ate hay mostly, oats sparingly, apples and carrots never, and she did not dispute the point with him, and he brought her to the field to chop with the hoe, remembering this time to give gloves, for her hands were soft and uncallused, and the two labored there still by mid-morning, the girl grunting through each hoe strike but striving beside him, when the sound of three horse's hooves sounded on the road.

Brandywine looked up, watching, and as soon as she spied the travelers, Viceroy Gratta and his two lieutenants, she dropped her hoe and raced with all the speed her chains permitted to the road, crying “Viceroy Gratta! Viceroy Gratta!”

Hambeth raced behind her, barely keeping up, crying after her to no effect, and she paused not at the side of the road, but entered the very lane as if to stop three horses with her naked form.

“Viceroy Gratta!” she screamed again, and the men noted the screaming slave girl and the horses too and swayed in their course, and the one lieutenant put out his stirrucked boot and would have landed a fierce blow against her shoulder had Hambeth not pulled her out of the path with less than a moment to spare.

“Viceroy Principia Grattamain!” the girl who called herself Brandywine screamed, “son of Tappsia Crath and Lady Dawnling Bandse, stop your horses and tend to me!”

Gratta slowed, looked again at the girl, a smirk playing across his face, and he slowed and turned his horse, and Hambeth believed he was acting for his own amusement and no other reason.

“Hello, slave girl,” he said, trotting back to her, and he looked at Hambeth and the smirk grew thicker. “Do you wish a new master?”

The lieutenants wheeled around, their horses prancing, as if they knew their riders wished to attend now to the king’s business and not to tarry beside pastures.

“No, fool,” Brandywine, said, “fix this and perhaps Duke Hurkense will forgive five years of interest on your last loan.”

Gratta’s smile faded immediately.

“You served elsewhere before you farmed here?” he asked. “You have fallen far from the manse of the Hurkenses.”

“Duke Hurkense—”

“You are not the first slave girl to be sent to the fields for peeking into her master’s business,” Gratta said to her before he cast his eyes briefly upon Hambeth. “Nor will you be the first slave girl whose loose tongue is adjudged to move under her master’s will, so that both suffer. I will speak to the managers of this town about you this morn, and when next I am in Topia, I will inquire of you to Duke Hurkense, for he—”

“Duke Hurkense is my father, you pompous pail of lard leavings!”

Gratta continued to stare at the girl, naked, bound and filthy, and his eyes showed their first doubt.

“Name yourself.”

“I am Lady Boughen Hurkensedottir, and you would remember my face, soiled as it may be, if you were not besotted halfway to corpsedom when you reeled with me at Loutaine’s 10-year jubilee by the manse of the Fieldwagers.”

The transformation of Gratta’s countenance, from contempt to uncertainty to the shame of a man who realizes he has been a fool with potentially fatal consequences, struck Hambeth as near unnatural, like the transformation of worm to butterfly.

“Milady,” Gratta said. “Milady,” he repeated, as if that alone was all he needed to say to make right what could not be righted.

“Milady,” he said one more time, and he lifted in the saddle.

“Stay on your horse,” she commanded, and he immediately obeyed. “And tell this man to free me.”

Gratta looked at his lieutenant and nodded, and the lieutenant opened his mouth to pass on the command, and Hambeth saw in both officers' faces a blanching fear at least as deep as that which twisted through the viceroy's face.

"No, Grattamain, speak to this man yourself, for he is at least your equal."

"But he is a peas—" Gratta stammered, red-faced.

"While you and your men who kick at girls were prancing about on your horses, this man Hamhearth was saving me from a Paxilex general."

Gratta looked at the girl, clearly not understanding, but he turned to Hambeth and nodded. "Free her at once."

Hambeth complied, freeing each wrist, then her ankle, leaving the chains upon the dirt, and he turned to the house and saw Tomhearth hovering by the door, watching.

"Now, Milady," Gratta said, regaining his composure somewhat, "let us dress you first, and next we'll bring this man to account for every indignity he has visited upon you, and next—"

"Did you not hear me, fool?" Boughen shouted. "He rescued me as a slave, and I did not disabuse him of the belief for my own reasons, though he and his uncle both challenged me on it, and he has visited upon me no indignities not due a slave."

"Very good, Lady Boughen," Gratta said. "Do you know how fare the other four taken? Do any of them still live?"

"Yes, all have been rescued."

"Which ones?"

"All, Grattamain."

"And where be they? Which village saved the rest?"

"This one," Boughen replied impatiently, "and this same man. And even now they wait in the village, all rescued but still pretending to slavery, and I will thank you to help me free them at once, and all of us will dress at the same time, and not me before."

"Yes, Milady," Gratta agreed, and he reached down his hand. "Climb up and ride with me."

Boughen ignored him, turned to the two lieutenants.

"Dismount," she said simply.

The man who hadn't tried to kick her dropped from his horse and led it to her, and she hopped up, slid one foot into the stirrup and swung her

other leg over the beast in a motion she had clearly performed many times.

Although, Hambeth thought, most likely never in the nude.

“Shorten my stirrups,” she said, the man quickly complying.

Set properly, she nudged her horse to the second lieutenant.

“What is your name?”

“Milady,” he said, face white.

“What is your name?” she repeated.

“I am Augurhearth, Milady, of Timburon, and I am at your service, and I beg—”

“Are you in the habit of booting naked slave girls?” she interrupted.

“I am not.”

“But you elected me for the treatment.”

“I did, for I—”

“And you didn’t bother to unstirrup your boot for it. I was not worth even that much trouble?”

“Milady, I meant no . . .” Augurhearth babbled, “for I sought . . . Milady . . .”

Boughen pulled the crop from its place on the saddle and swung it against the man’s temple, a glancing blow, but a humiliating one, for his helm of rank popped off his head and fell to the earth.

“Retrieve your hat,” she said, and she turned to Hambeth.

“Can you ride?” she asked.

“Well enough,” he replied.

“Take his saddle,” she said.

Hambeth stepped past the unhorsed lieutenant, climbed up and sat, his feet dangling beneath the stirrups, for his legs were the longest of anyone in the little band.

“Well?” Boughen demanded, looking at Augurhearth, brushing the loose dirt from his helmet and returning it to his head.

“Milady?”

“Fix his stirrups!”

The man set them quickly, and Boughen pointed her crop at him. “You are absolved,” she said, “but lay your boot never again against any girl, slave or free, nor seek to, or I shall hear of it.”

“Yes, Milady,” he replied, mouth trembling. “Thank you, Milady.”

Lady Boughen cried out and kicked her horse and the beast immediately raced off, Hambeth and Gratta behind her.

“Hambeth!” Tomhearth cried from the edge of the road as Hambeth passed, and his eyes were wet with what Hambeth judged must be tears of joy, for he understood what had just happened. “Hambeth!”

“I go to the village, Uncle!” Hambeth shouted back.

They raced along the road to the town, single file where the road was narrowest, and even though Hambeth’s rescue might yet be at hand, he turned with a pang to regard the hovel of Grace, forever emptied now of her spirit and her daughter, and he consoled himself but a little with the knowledge that she was better off, far better, and Axilaine too.

Bitterhearth, who had seen his share of strange things with regard to Hambeth’s comings and goings of late, seemed more perplexed than usual by this new sight – the viceroy on a horse, Hambeth who never rode riding a horse, and a naked girl on a horse as well, a slave by her collar, but in no chains.

“Your Excellency,” Bitterhearth said, throwing wide the gate.

“My two lieutenants will be along,” Gratta said gruffly. “By foot. Let them in.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Within the town proper, they walked, and Boughen pulled her horse close to Hambeth’s, and he did his best to stare into her eyes and not glance at her bouncing breasts or the hair below, light brown against dark brown saddle.

“We have been on an adventure,” she said, “which I would not wish on anyone.”

“Tell me,” Hambeth said.

“Maybe later, if there’s time, but first we must free the others and get all set. I will say though that we were owned by several, near one every day, a new trade every night, some by Paxilex and some by Avenlou, and none showed any honor until you happened by, and by then we had learned to trust no one we did not know.”

“The Paxilex men who stole you did not keep you?”

“They were expert at stealth, like weasels to a coop, and I shall never forget the feel of their arms around my body and their hands against my mouth,” she said. “But they were not even a fraction of the trader you are, nor were they acting so far as we know under orders from any other than their own perhaps forgivable passions for retribution, and they bound

us and talked over us at morn and lost their nerve and took a small trade for us by early eve and vanished.”

Hambeth wondered what she had suffered, if she'd been worked, if she'd been opened, but he dared not ask.

“Thus our ruse, which you inspired, to be country farming girls from a brothel.”

“Yes, you fooled me all the way.”

“We did?”

“No,” Hambeth said. “Not at all.”

“Every owner in turn was less certain of our names,” she said, looking slightly disappointed, “and we helped them not, and our titles became rumors, and we were sold and bartered and grew weary of it and we all five covenanted to be common slaves and settle somewhere and wait for our chance, which came this morn.”

“I am glad,” Hambeth said, “and had you revealed yourself to me, I would never have bound you.”

“You did well,” she said. “More than well. I thank you, Hamhearth.”

She pondered for a moment as they rode slowly through the village, townsfolk here and there glancing up, staring, but not certain what to think with the sight before them so strange. Surely, all knew by now of the allegations against him, he thought. That he should be riding a horse beside the viceroy and a naked slave made no sense at all, and none greeted him, perhaps fearful of whatever magic had created this vision.

Gratta, who never looked at the townsfolk as he passed through, rode in silence, eyes on his horse's bobbing head, and Hambeth knew the man must be pondering the best way to turn all this to his advantage.

“You spoke of retribution,” Hambeth said. “You were stolen to serve a vengeance?”

“You know not why we were taken?” she asked him.

“I do not,” Hambeth said.

“Because the bumbling pirates of Avenlou took Paxilex girls first, or so we were told. They grabbed girls from the beach, three or four, and they lost an equal number, by rumor some at the hands of the girls themselves, and now these girls stolen are scattered to the four winds, while we are near restored, thanks to you.”

Did Boughen truly not know for whom they were traded? Did she not look at the girls who drew Hambeth's cart, rescued by a general, given rich gowns of embroidered black? Hambeth decided not to say, to let her believe the three stolen Paxilex girls were still gone, vanished, none perhaps anywhere in Avenlou, certainly none tarrying in Camberia.

"You were marked," Hambeth noted, looking at Boughen's ribs, and not her breast.

She looked down, not herself troubled by the presence of her bare bosom, raising it to look at the burn in the shape of a crescent beneath it. "It was put on us in Paxilex, in a terrible village named Biskeree, and it is the worst detail of all, for it stung, and now it must sting again."

"What mean you?" Hambeth asked.

"If one does not take the king's overbrand, the first brand gives anyone rights to one."

"But you're a lady."

"It matters not. Should I be out again and it be seen, I can by law be dragged back to the village of the mark, and they must pay the finder even though I am long freed."

"Such can be done during war, to bring you back to enemies?"

"No, it cannot," Boughen conceded, "but should there be peace – and there is always talk of it – there will be slave treaties too."

"Who would look there?" Hambeth asked.

"I bathe," she said, her voice taking on a tinge of bitterness, "not always alone, and there are treacherous females who share the water who will tell their husbands and fathers, who may then come to me and bind me for the trip."

"So they take you and you go free again."

"Yes, but to be dragged to Biskeree again and again is not my choice of fates."

"The overbrand is another burn?"

"Yes, and it must be done next, to all of us."

"Where?" Hambeth asked.

"Here, as soon as Gratta's men bring the iron, and I find a one to do it."

"Is that not the office of Gratta and his men?"

"I'll not have them touch me," she said, "much less bind me."

Hambeth was silent, for her words conjured what he believed was his most shameful work with Camberia's slave girls.

"You have done this?" she asked, as though hearing his thoughts.

"I have not," Hambeth said, continuing after a long pause, "but I have helped it be done."

"You'll show me your work?"

"It was the smith who held the iron," Hambeth said.

"I shall speak to him then," she said. "Is his work true?"

"Very. He made the chains you slept in."

"Can he remove a collar?"

"He puts them on, so I believe so, yes."

"And he is kind?"

"No, not at all."

"If I approve your work, and his, you and he shall do it to me, and to any of the other four not objecting."

Hambeth swallowed and spoke not.

"Do you have a carpenter?" she asked.

"Yes, a very good one."

"His name?"

"Wrighthearth. Ask for him and he'll come, though he is very old."

Chapter XXXIX: The King's Overbrand

At the armory, Hambeth dropped from his horse, stepped inside, found the berths emptied, and prayed with all his might that Archenix was not already having the four others tortured.

He emerged, rose to his horse and prepared to bring Boughen and Gratta to the hall to see if Archenix tarried there, when he spied Durgaeath approaching, deep puzzlement in his face.

"Your Excellency," Durgaeath hailed, bowing toward Gratta.

"Where are the other four?" Gratta said immediately in reply.

"I have sent them out to work," Durgaeath replied, glancing at Hambeth, glancing at Boughen, befuddlement yielding to the first dawning of awareness.

"Bring them all back," Gratta said icily. "At once. For you are working the noblest flowers of Avenlou as slaves in your fields and shops and wherever else, may the gods help us."

“Your Excellency, you are certain of this?” Durgahearth inquired, looking at Hambeth with suspicion, as if Hambeth had such powers of trading he could deceive a viceroy.

Gratta pointed to Boughen. “This is Lady Boughen Hurkensdottir, if you did not know, and she is as familiar to me as any other noble girl whose family serves the king, and she is one of five taken, which this man, your own Ham . . . Ham . . .”

“Hambeth, Your Excellency,” Durgahearth said.

“Which your own Hamhearth rescued, in the forest from a general of the Paxilian army, and—”

“Your Excellency,” Durgahearth, and now it was clear he’d decided, despite lingering misgivings, to give in to whatever this was.

“And so he did!” he announced, as if he’d known it all along.

“And now, you may be a weak shadow to Hamhearth, if you feel up to it, and rescue them again, immediately, from whatever tasks you in your ignorance set them to.”

Durgahearth turned to run at whatever speed was his fastest pace, slow as it might be, when Boughen spoke.

“Durgahearth,” she said.

He turned, bowed.

“Yes, Milady?”

“I will thank you to bring all the girls back anon, to the smith’s, for we have business there, and bring this village’s five best gowns with you too, for which Viceroy Grattamain will pay in full.”

“Yes, Milady.”

Boughen turned to Gratta. “Viceroy,” she said.

“Yes, Milady?”

“When your lieutenants arrive, give them back their horses and have them ride to whatever village is closest that holds true copies of the king’s overbrand, for I at least shall have that done today, and some or all of the other four perhaps as well.”

“Yes, Milady.”

“Now,” Boughen said to Hambeth, “take me to your smith.”

She swung down from her saddle, tied her horse to the post by the armory. Hambeth did the same, and together they walked to Stott’s.

And still, Lady Boughen bore herself naked and unashamed, not covering her parts, speaking as they went of things about their capture and

the time since while the townsfolk they passed stared and gawked, for the news still passing lip to ear was that Hambeth had given away three prized slave girls and stolen five commoners, and pocketed or hid most of the proceeds, and faced a terrible reckoning, and now here he was with one of the stolen slaves, she walking beside him collared, nude, but unchained, as if equal to him, and he under no reckoning at all.

“Do you know of Biskeree?” she asked.

“I do not.”

“It is barely into Paxilex, very close to the border, and is thus a repository of captured Avenlou flesh, and us as well after days and nights of being bought and sold,” Boughen said. “And so it was the first and last place General Axiom looked to find females to trade for the ones you had, and there was a great commotion while he searched before dawn, for he was waking up this and that, shouting things in Paxil, and we were in kennels and heard all the noise, and then girl or woman would wail somewheres, and we all thought they were bringing us out one by one to kill us, and then he burst into our cell with a great torch and saw us five and shouted at someone, furious, for I believe he had asked for young, fair Avenlou girls when first he got to the village, and they brought out anything but, an old woman missing a finger who cooked, two weaving spinsters, some others not fair, but he settled on us as soon as he saw us, and our owner of that time protested with a mess of angry Paxil, but he cared not at all and bundled all of us up in the chains you saw, and fairly tossed us into the wagon, and no one of us knew until we stopped and you traded what would be our fate.”

“I am perhaps fortunate you did not kill me as soon as we were away from them.”

“It was discussed.”

“To kill me?”

“To kill our next owner, whoever he be, and after make our way south, chains and all, and pray we be found by someone other than rogue.”

“And yet, you did not kill me.”

“We changed our minds.”

“Why?”

“We thought you were just barely better than rogue.”

Hambeth was silent, imagining himself as the girls saw him, a ragged man in a ragged tunic calling them whores.

“We knew you were no rogue,” she said. “I jest.”

“Your last jest almost cost me my head.”

Boughen smiled.

“He suspected we were noble,” she said.

“General Axiom?”

“Yes, he sat in the wagon with us for a time, and spoke Paxil, quickly, then slower, then slower, as if he believed our apprehension of his tongue lay in the pace of his words, and we just looked upon him with wide eyes, as if we believed he meant to rape us while we knew he didn’t, for we know such men and they are all alike. But we knew, by his eyes and the way the words left his mouth, that he did not mistake us for commoners or whores and longed to know what we were, and if it had been confirmed, you would never have gotten all five of us, maybe no more than one or two in exchange for the three you gave him.”

“I called you . . . what I did . . . to disabuse him,” Hamhearth said. “For I feared he knew it.”

“It stung,” Boughen said. “But the wisdom of your parley became clearer to me with sleep. Perhaps you can be forgiven.”

The smoke and the noise emanated as always from the shop of Stotthearth the smith, and Hambeth stepped up to the window as in all times past and set his elbow on the counter.

Inside, Stott stood at his anvil with a great hammer, pounding something straight into a bend, and Hambeth saw that the bellows were operated by Wing, and her face was covered with sweat, and she stood chained and naked, and yet she seemed serene, or even happy, to Hambeth’s mind.

“Stotthearth!” Hambeth shouted.

The smith looked up when he heard his name, looked at Hambeth, offered the pained smile of one who sees a beloved friend about whom one has heard terrible things.

“Well met, Hamhearth,” he said.

Wing looked from her place at the bellows, expression indiscernible.

“I bring to you Lady Boughen Hurkenskottir, who needs some work done by our town’s best smith.”

Stott looked beyond Hambeth, to his left and right, mystified, and he set down hammer and iron and stood, walking slowly to the counter and

to Hambeth.

“My friend,” he said, offering his hand. “Hamhearth, friend, please.”

“Wherefor?” Hambeth said as he took the smith’s hand. “You look at me as if you think me mad.”

“I have heard . . . of some things,” Stott said.

“Ah,” Hambeth agreed. “They were not true.” He motioned to Boughen, who tarried beneath a tree where Stott could not see her, and he understood at that moment that Stott must believe Hambeth guilty not just of thievery, but also of the delusion in which one creates people who are not.

“Lady Boughen, come meet Stotthearth the smith,” Hambeth said, waving to the girl, and she pushed away from the tree and stepped slowly, and Hambeth felt he knew her mind as well as Stott’s, that she was afraid, for this was the place where one more cruel thing must be done to her, and this was the man who must do it.

She appeared at the counter, and Stott gazed upon her, from her eyes and her face down to her breasts and her hips, the rest of her hidden by the counter.

“Lady . . .” he stammered, clearly surprised that Hambeth was able to conjure anyone at all, much less an actual female, and exceedingly fair at that.

“Lady Boughen,” she said with a quick tilt of her head. “It is the first of all my pleasures.”

“The first of mine as well, Lady Boughen,” he said, at last remembering his manners, and bowing.

Boughen looked at Wing, idle at the bellows.

“Well met,” she said. “What be your name?”

“I am Wing,” the girl replied. “It is . . . it is the first of all my pleasures.”

“Wing,” Boughen said. “May I see your device?”

Wing frowned, pondered the request, looked at her leg.

“Where I was burned?”

“Yes. May I?”

“Yes,” Wing said, and she stepped away from the bellows and stood in the middle of the shop, and Boughen entered through the half-door.

“It’s here, Ma’am,” Wing said, pointing to the branded X on her left leg. Boughen knelt to inspect the mark.

“This is your work?” she asked, peering up at Stott.

“It is,” he replied, worry creasing his face, and Hambeth knew the smith was unconvinced this unchained slave was a lady, nor did he understand her motives in questioning his bound servant. “This one assisted me,” he added, pointing to Hambeth.

“And he may again,” she said, smiling at the lad, “if you can find no one better.”

Boughen ran her finger along the mark. “It is a neat job, and heals.”

“I cried for it, even though I be drunk, and barely could walk after,” Wing reported.

“Were you bound?”

“I was, on hand and knee by rope, and he tied me, Stott, and Hambeth tied me, and I was yoked as well.”

“How long ago?”

“Some four or five days.”

“By what timing did you press the iron, smith?” Boughen asked, still looking at the mark.

“I took it from the furnace red, touched it to flesh as soon as it cooled to black.”

“You must do the same to me, and some others, if they’ll have it,” Boughen said, and she stood and raised her breast and touched the crescent burned upon her ribs. “As soon as arrives the overbrand, and we can have a thing built.”

“Yes, Milady,” Stott said.

“And you may remove my collar this day, now, and all of ours, if you have the art?”

“Yes, I do,” Stott said, gesturing toward Hambeth, “but if I may first consult in private with he who shall assist?”

“On your way, and let me sit with my thoughts for a piece,” she said, and she moved to the stump and waved her hand and looked at her feet, and Hambeth knew she suffered the fears of all the girls who had sat there before her.

Stott stepped from the shop and moved beyond sight of the shop’s window and waved Hambeth to him with panicked urgency.

“My friend,” he whispered, his hand on Hambeth’s shoulder.
“Please do not bring me into this.”

“Into what?” Hambeth inquired.

“To remove a slave girl’s collar is like theft, and I cannot do this, dear as you are to me.”

“She is no slave girl.”

“I heard, that you . . . last night . . . you said you’d found the five?”

“I said that, indeed, for it was true.”

“Yes, Hamhearth, I want with all my heart for it to be true,” Stott whispered, gazing about himself to make sure there were no ears close by.
“But it is not. And I fear for you friend. I fear for you.”

For the first time in Hambeth’s memory, his friend’s face betrayed something other than cheer, or nonchalance, or petty annoyance, for the man’s eyes were filled with tears, and he raised one blackened hand to his cheek to wipe away the water.

“There are djinnis in those woods,” Stott whispered urgently, “and Waxcap sprites, and the ghosts of the Caesars, and they haunt all along Fifth Pass, and one has found you, friend.”

Stott squeezed Hambeth’s arm so fiercely Hambeth winced. “This is not your nature at all, these things,” he said. “Please, please, you have gone a foreign way, but you may yet be corrected. Sister Pizer has a long draught of bear’s ale she can give, and after you reel and vomit and expel what torments you, you’ll come to your senses and may yet make all this right, or most of it, or enough of it that you do not hang.”

“Spoken like the truest friend,” Hambeth said, smiling. “I would expect nothing less of you.”

Stott shook his head, looked past Hambeth’s shoulder, face falling into deep despair.

“The jig is up already, my friend, for here he comes,” he lamented.

Hambeth turned to see Archenix approaching, eyes wide with terror, and he strode to Hambeth, glanced at Stott and waved him away, and grabbed Hambeth’s arm with a bony grip at least as firm as the smith’s.

Hambeth followed him for several paces, the hand never leaving his arm, to an open space with no ears anywhere within hearing distance.

“There was never talk of torture,” Archenix hissed, eyes first boring into Hambeth’s, then scouring all the space around them, like a wild animal.
“If you say otherwise, you commit treason.”

“My Chief,” Hambeth whispered back, “I know not of what you speak.”

Archenix’s features softened only slightly.

“You have traded well,” he spake with another urgent hiss, “with the town’s knowledge and blessing and approval.”

“Of course,” Hambeth said. “Camberia and its chief guide all my steps.”

Archenix’s grip loosened.

“What Durgahearth said upon your return last evening,” he continued, voice softening another degree, “by the armory and before the townsfolk, and what I said, these were all ruses, to protect the girls, whom we knew by name to be the stolen nobles, whom we knew you had saved and rescued, but whom we protected, by practicing the ruse with them.”

“Yes, My Chief, as I already understand.”

“And you played your part well,” Archenix said, dropping his hand from Hambeth’s arm altogether, and now he was becoming the Archenix of Hambeth’s experience, confident and conniving, smiling as he ever did when smiling served his own purposes. “For you raised the prospect of their being the five stolen so we could dispute it before all, and none would suspect or report or molest until returned our viceroy to settle things.”

Hambeth nodded and smiled in turn, with admiration for how quickly Archenix and Durgahearth had created a new tale that he believed most should find plausible.

“My Chief,” Hambeth said. “You say again things I know already, but my travels addle me a bit, and I don’t mind the restating.”

“You will not betray me?” Archenix said, eyes haunted again, hand back upon Hambeth’s arm. “This is your story too?”

“It is the true story, thus the only story I can tell.”

Now Archenix smiled all the way, not like a serpent or a clever chief, but like a father, and he clapped Hambeth’s shoulder and spoke in his voice plain.

“Do you understand the reward you have earned?”

“I know it is a healthy sum.”

“It is due to you.”

“It is due to Camberia, for I used a village wagon, and I traded away two village girls along with our own, and I did the trade while on a journey for the village.”

Hambeth pondered, frowned, and considered a new thought aloud.

“But did we not save the five for the crown,” Hambeth said, “as loyal subjects thereof?”

“Rich as be the reward,” Archenix said, “it is a pittance of what Paxilex would have demanded, and trifling to the parents, and to refuse it would be an insult.”

“Very well,” Hambeth said. “Let the prize go to Camberia and be spent well, and I ask only my trader’s share, and no more.”

“Yes,” Archenix smiled, unable to say more.

“But you must restore to my uncle all that I brought back from the Greater Vandals. You must give that to him now.”

“That will be done,” Archenix said, and then his face darkened and he leaned forward and whispered, eyes shifting quickly around himself before they bored back into Hambeth’s

“Now, tell me, what did you do to that girl last night.”

“I fed her and chained her and let her sleep,” Hambeth said. “And none other, nor even proposed at all, for I knew – as did we all – that she was of high birth.”

Archenix nodded and seemed to believe.

“I cannot speak for the other four,” Hambeth continued. “For I know Durgahearth sent them out at dawn, I know not where or to whom, and I fear—”

“All went to Avelinahearth,” Archenix said. “She demanded them all this morning, with enough vanders to pay for five days, and I fear she and her husband are near broken.”

“You must reimburse her then,” Hambeth said, “for all she paid and more as reward, for she acts and has always acted from the gold in her heart, and I’m sure no harm came to the ladies there, and she has perhaps saved our village this morn.”

“Of course,” Archenix agreed. “Then we are settled on everything?”

“We are, My Chief.”

Archenix offered another broad smile, sincere and honest.

“From this day, from this moment, you are Hamhearth.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Hambeth stammered, “but Uncle must—”

Archenix waved impatiently. “I will tell him. He may hold you back no longer.”

“Yes, My Chief,” Hamhearth said, nodding, and with one more clap on Hamhearth’s shoulder, Archenix strode away and Hamhearth turned to find Stott consulting with Gratta, Durgahearth serving as intermediary, with the carpenter Wriothearth at the side and awaiting audience, while the four other girls stood by with Boughen, all still collared but in the best gowns of Camberia, brought out only for weddings and the two top feasts of the year, bright patches of color and great puffs at the sleeves and ribbons at the rear, and Hamhearth could tell from their expressions that these were things they would never wear in Topia, but they were glad to have them on regardless.

Hamhearth stepped over, and Durgahearth turned to him with a guarded smile and boomed in his familiar booming voice, “Hambeth, well met!”

Hamhearth elected not to correct the man on his name, stepping forward to accept Durgahearth’s proffered hand, and the man grasped Hamhearth’s hand in both of his, acting for all his life like he had not accused the lad of deceit and theft and murder the night before, and had not agreed at the same time that these five nobles should be tortured today.

“Well met, Durgahearth,” Hamhearth said back.

“You and our chief are at one mark?” Durgahearth inquired, and one eye twitched, for at any moment, Hamhearth might turn to the viceroy and explain all the truth of things, that Durgahearth conspired with Camberia’s chief to tie the five missing jewels of Camberia naked to a post to whip or burn or beat until the truth spilled from their groaning mouths.

“Yes, Archenix and I spoke well together,” Hamhearth said, turning toward Gratta. “You and he and Camberia have saved the five.”

Durgahearth bowed with both thanks and relief, while Gratta raised one eyebrow, for he was aware of things that did not entirely comport with the story being told this morning. Why, for example, if the chief of the village and one of its council knew what these girls were, did one of those girls have to scream at him from the edge of a field of chopped dirt for rescue, at considerable risk to her being?

But Hamhearth knew that the story told now served Gratta’s purposes as well, for the rescue was accomplished in the region he directed on the king’s behalf, and when he said that all in his realm were wise and good and committed to the welfare of the crown and its court, he might point to this story as told today, and others must nod toward his proficiency.

Next came Stott, who wrapped his friend in a bear hug that Hamhearth knew meant apology and regret, neither needed, and the smith said nothing more, but finished his business with a few more words to Durgahearth and returned to his shop.

Another hand landed on Hamhearth's shoulder, and he turned to find Tomhearth beaming upon him, all the pride that had ever been there for him. "I knew it all along, Hamhearth," he said simply, voice quavering. "And you have earned a man's name, and then some."

"You spoke to Archenix?" Hamhearth asked.

"Yes, to tell him you were a man, and he told me the same, so we set it together, and it will be posted and made all public today."

"Yes, Uncle."

Too moved perhaps to speak more on the topic, Tomhearth's mind turned back to the practical.

"We still must have help," he said, "now that Oleander is gone, and we just lost us Brandywine too."

"The village still owns three," Hamhearth said, and his mind, with all the other dealings of the day to occupy it, turned sudden and sharp to Hyacinth, who was somewhere out there, a slave still while all the other high-born were freed and clothed, and the vision of her as she must be right now, laboring in a field, or laboring just as hard under some man of Camberia, naked and chained, stung like a fire in his heart so fiercely he raised his hand to his face as if to cover it, before he thought of the next thing to say. "They might give us one to borrow, or let us have her even."

"I'll let you act on your own in that matter," Tomhearth said, "and I pray I will not lose you too soon."

"You got all yesterday's taken vanders back from Archenix?"

"I did. And all the town's share as well."

"They are pleased with how it turned out, I think," Hamhearth said.

"They are, Archenix beside himself with gratitude," Tomhearth said, and he leaned forward to add with a whisper, "for your discretion as much as anything. Now let me back to the farm, and I'll await you when all this business is done."

"Yes, Uncle."

Hamhearth watched his uncle depart, barely hearing the voices around him, a throng of unusual size by Camberian standard, but this was where the news lived this day, and all the interest.

Hamhearth glanced again at the five girls, or ladies they were now, dressed though still in the collars of slaves and the dirt and dust of laboring girls, and they stood straight and bore noble faces nobly, neither smiling nor frowning, and Boughen stepped forth now that she'd caught his eye, and Hamhearth understood that this was to be a formal moment, the false dialects and slave talk and all the duplicity of the day before but a memory this day.

“You are now Hamhearth to all?” Boughen inquired, drifting to him, the merest smile on her face.

“I am,” Hamhearth said, tilting forward as he had never done before, nor ever needed to. “I seem to have been converted today, thanks in no small part to yesterday’s dealings.”

One or two of the girls twittered, as if remembering things with a small, lingering embarrassment.

“Ladies,” Boughen said, “may I present to you Hamhearth of Camberia, who yesterday defeated a Paxilex general to rescue us all?”

All the four nobles seemed amenable to the introductions, so Hamhearth stepped forward, crossed his arms and looked down at his tunic, parting here at a seam, bearing there a hole of fire, more tears and scuffs provoked by the Greater Vandals journey, which he had not noticed until now.

“Lady Carruth Fieldwager,” Boughen said, and the girl who yesterday called herself Mossbank bowed, Hamhearth bowing back and repeating her name.

“My sister,” Boughen continued, “Lady Huminia Hurkensdottir.” Hamhearth bowed. “Lady Huminia.”

“Lady Dominia Fieldwager.”

“Lady Dominia,” he said with a bow. “I believe I stand in need of your forgiveness.”

“Of what do you speak?”

“Your words yesterday from the cart. Did you not warn that some things could not be forgiven?”

“Oh,” she said, blushing. “Yes, idle words of a frightened girl.”

“Nevertheless, I beg for absolution.”

The girl stepped up to Hamhearth and, while the others giggled nervously, she raised her hand. “Offer your cheek, you rank insulter of the realm.”

Hamhearth obeyed and she brought her hand against his face, so lightly it might appear a lover's caress to someone not versed in the dealings.

"Consider yourself absolved," she said.

"Thank you, Milady."

"Lady Mandria Coppense-Gay," Boughen said.

"It is the first of all my pleasures, Miladies," Hamhearth said with another deep bow. "And the greatest honor."

"When next you come to Topia," Boughen said, using the words that implied Hamhearth had already been, "you must precede your visit with words to the Viceroy Grattamain, and he will send a letter to ensure that you are welcomed, and feted to your station by we and our grateful antecedents."

Hamhearth nodded and tilted forward yet again, wondering if he would ever be capable of such a trip, and Boughen smiled and then glanced over his shoulder with a scowl, and he turned and saw both of Gratta's lieutenants approaching on a new pair of horses, and Hamhearth knew the steeds he and Boughen rode that morn must have been spent, and maybe more pairs on top of that, and these two new horses gasped and foamed and stumbled, so urgent was the mission.

One, the lieutenant who had not tried to kick Boughen, bore over his shoulder a thick bag of heavy white canvas with the royal crest embroidered in black on both sides, and he swung down from his horse and strode to Gratta.

"I bring the king's overbrand, Your Excellency," the lieutenant said, "from Alkermain, due back there this day."

Hamhearth leaned toward Boughen.

"Milady," he whispered, "there is a strong drink I can obtain I am sure, which we used before, that will dull your senses."

"No," she whispered back, "we may scream during the ordeal, but we shall not stagger forth after it. We have all agreed on this. And the smith Stotthearth will do the work for all five, and you will assist for all five, as we agreed also."

"The task is only the heating of iron and pressing it forward," Hamhearth said. "Stott may do all it."

"No, we must be bound," she countered, "spread fast and wide, and only you may do that, binding us again as you did before, for we found you

gentle and kind when still you believed we were the whores of a brothel farm.”

“I never believed any such.”

She smiled and leaned forward to whisper, for his ear only, “No, but your chief did, and that Durgahearth, and you almost lost your neck over it.”

Hamhearth leaned back, feigning shock.

“It was all ruse, of course, for they knew from the start.”

“I’m sure they did,” she agreed with an ironic grin. “Now get soft rope in long lengths if your town have any.”

“It does.”

“And be brave enough to bind us sure, for we will not have that smith planting his iron all over us while we writhe and twist.”

“You ask of me a terrible thing,” Hamhearth said.

“You faced down a general and his men,” she said. “This is easier and must be done.”

“I heard no screaming while I performed the normal offices of a trade.”

“You make this harder and harder with your words.”

“Forgive me, Milady,” Hamhearth said. “I will serve, but know I will feel the sting for each of you, as I did for the others.”

Boughen nodded and Hamhearth searched the crowd, quickly finding Avelina and her daughter Learra.

“Well met,” he said.

Learra bowed, and Avelina looked at Hamhearth and smiled.

“Well met, Hamhearth, I trust business is good?”

“It stirs and stutters, as always.”

“I understand you trade as bravely as ever, and indeed you found rich prices in the Greater Vandals for my husband’s shoes, even two of the three smallest he cobbled by whim.”

“And you in turn saved the village,” Hamhearth said. “For I traded merely, while you protected the four from I know not what.”

“You brought them to us in good condition, and I sought them out, as I do, and knew by the first words what they were.”

Avelina pressed forward to whisper her next words.

“Hyacinth is one too,” she said. “Like Oleander and Lilac, and I’m sure even now a general searches Fifth Pass for her.”

“Yes, she be a gracious girl,” Hamhearth said. “But were she more than common, or thought more, she might be taken elsewhere, so ‘tis best to bury all suspicion in her regard.”

Avelina looked at Hamhearth as if agreeing to conspiracy.

“She speaks of you, Hyacinth does.”

Hamhearth looked at the woman, eyebrow raised.

“She asked of you often while you journeyed. ‘Is Hambeth returned yet, Ma’am? Is Hambeth returned yet, Ma’am?’”

“She speaks Avenian now?”

“She learns apace, more words every day.”

“Does she know her two fellows are gone now, with Grace too?”

“She does, and she wept for them, with joy and sorrow both, and wishes to speak to you about things.”

“Labors she at your domicile?”

“She does not labor,” Avelina corrected. “She shares in the duties with us all.”

“Your heart redeems this town over and again.”

“My heart has its own ways. I merely follow.”

“It makes you noble, you and Learra, like any other girl I’ve met who is and pretended not to be.”

Avelina waved her hand. Learra smiled and looked at her feet.

“But she is there, at your home now?” Hamhearth inquired.

“Most days, yes, and now with my husband, and you’ll be welcomed to visit and take all the time you need.”

“You shall be given recompense for buying the time of the four nobles.”

“I do not ask for it. We gave the village back the vanders you brought us.”

“Nay, take it back, Archenix agreed, and you might yet need it for the next girls I buy or trade for.”

Avelina laughed. “Very well.”

“Now,” Hamhearth said, and he drew in his breath. “I must ask a favor.”

“Name it.”

“Long lengths of softest rope.”

“To what end?”

“These girls must be bound for the king’s overbrand.”

“You torment me.”

“I am tormented the same way, but they insist it be done, and it is indeed by law advisable, and I shall bind and Stott shall burn and they shall be on their way altogether free.”

“There is no other path?”

“I argued and was cut short by Lady Boughen herself, and if you wish to argue with her too, she stands there, but her patience in the matter already wears thin.”

Avelina grimaced, turned to her daughter and nodded, and Learra stepped away to find soft rope.

Chapter XL: Five Overbrands and a Carriage

It was agreed by lot that Huminia, elder sister of Boughen, be uncollared first, and while the other four stood to watch at the counter, townsfolk and Gratta pressing in around them, she stepped into the smith’s shop with Hamhearth beside her, Wing pumping the bellows, Stott warming up a great pair of cutting tongs.

“Where shall I be set, smith?” Huminia inquired.

Stott pointed to the stump.

“You may rest there, Milady.”

“No, where shall the work be done?”

“In this place,” Stott replied, gesturing around his shop.

“No, smith,” Huminia said impatiently, “how will you set me to do this work?”

“I will not set you, Lady,” Stott said, face gone from confusion to fear.

“Because I’m a lady?”

“Yes.”

“How would you set a slave for it then?”

“Bare and brace her,” Stott said, “and set her by yoke.”

“Why, to be cruel?”

“No, so she not be burned with a careless flinch and her garment not be burned by hot tongs.”

“And what makes you think I will be twitchless in this occupation, or gown unburnable?”

“Milady, if you would be set that way, I shall do it, and beg your forgiveness.”

“Do it,” she said, pulling her bright dress up over her hips, her shoulders, her head, completely bare underneath, “and stay at your task and do this right and worry not over anything else, forgiveness or otherwise.”

“Yes, Milady.”

Stott took the dress from her, hung it at a peg in the wall, and drew forth the brace and yoke from a place in the corner and put them where they had stood for the other girls.

Hamhearth stepped to the counter, laden now thickly with Camberia’s softest rope, dozens of lengths at least, and he pulled four strands and turned to find Huminia already on hand and knee, Stott yoking her neck, and he knelt and bound her ankles first to the brace, then her wrists, looking only at his task and not at her or the others by the counter.

Stott handed Hamhearth the same aurochs hide as had been used to apply collars, and Hamhearth slipped it between collar and flesh and pulled all her hair away and stepped back, standing beside Wing, who pumped the bellows now so fast the shop roared with heat.

As before, Stott moved quickly now, tying his hair in a great knot, pulling red hot tongs from the furnace and pinching the collar with a grunt and bulging of flesh and sinew, and Hamhearth saw that the tongs bit through but half the collar before it cooled to impotence.

Back to the furnace Stott went, back to the collar of Huminia, cutting clean through this time, and he returned tongs to fire and knelt, pulling at the gap, working apart the metal crimp at the front of the ring until it yielded and both pieces dropped to the floor with a dull ring, the hide falling after.

Immediately, Stott unyoked the girl and reached for her gown, and Hamhearth loosed her ropes.

Immodest however after days as a naked slave, Huminia first turned to her fellows and the rest of the throng and bowed, the first and painless step of her liberation complete, and two of the girls hooted, but none of the townsfolk cheered at all, for now they knew this was no naked slave girl before them but a noble girl undressed, and Hamhearth believed they were both curious and unnerved.

Boughen stepped in next, disrobed and fell to hand and knee, Hamhearth tying her and slipping in the hide, Stott yoking her, two pinches

of the tongs breaking off the ring.

And so it went through three more, Wing working the bellows while Stott and Hamhearth each fulfilled their duties, Hamhearth with enough idle time here and there to stand beside Wing and address her.

“How fare thee, Wing?” he inquired.

She looked up, face streaked with sweat and eyes round with surprise, and Hamhearth guessed she remembered what last she said to him and believed they could never speak again in civil tones.

“I am well, Sir,” she said.

“I hope my dealings with you have suited?”

“Well enough,” she said. “I and Emiane eat now, and our shelter holds a door and is not haunted.”

She looked at Stott, warming the tongs for the second bite at Mandria’s collar. “And people have been kind. Kinder to me than I ever thought possible. More than kind.”

“How fares Emiane?”

“Oh,” Wing laughed. “Oh, she loves. She loves and labors, as do —”

Hamhearth imagined that Wing’s last word would be “I,” and he wished Grace could know that the girls she helped make captive were, at least this day, thriving.

Wing raised her hand, the chains that bound wrist to wrist, both wrists to her right ankle, ringing faintly as she wiped away the water on her face, and Hamhearth suspected there was more than sweat there.

“Hamhearth,” she said, looking to him.

“Eh?”

“I’m sorry that I—”

“Think not on it,” Hamhearth said with a wave. “Far worse has been said to me that I have forgotten.”

“Truly, I thought you would have beaten me,” she said, casting her eyes toward a peg where a handle of aurochs thong dangled.

“Had you spoken to me that way without harsh drink to cloud your judgment, I would have warmed your rear,” Hamhearth replied. “And I trust Stotthearth is no less stern.”

The girl smiled and returned to her work.

Done with his part in the removal of the collars, Hamhearth left the smith’s shop to find Boughen conversing with Wrighthearth while he and

two assistants lashed together beams in a large frame. Hamhearth glanced at the structure, guessed its purpose and tamped down his misgivings, not yet resolved over this task.

From there, his eyes searched the throng, thick here and there, not just with gabbing and gawking but a little trading too, for the new vanders brought home were working their way already through the hands of the village.

And among the faces of the village Hamhearth spied that one belonging to Brunehearth, a quiet man, not given to drink or boasting, who had wed Archenix' daughter Sistrena and kept a secret few shared.

Hamhearth stepped over to him, smiled, gauged the man's sentiments and found his eyes a little guarded but curious too, and he smiled weakly in turn.

"Drunehearth," Hamhearth said quietly. "I hope we will bring a bag of your pecans on the next trip."

"Yes, Hamhearth," the man replied, offering his hand, "you traded well I hear. In all ways."

"I fell into a good option or two," Hamhearth said. "And the three I had to give up are well."

"Yes," Drunehearth said quietly. "I hear that besides."

"The daughter also," Hamhearth said. "I was told she will learn letters and numbers, most likely in some palace or other of Paxilex, where her mother will serve as a free woman."

"Who told you this?"

"Grace herself," Hamhearth replied. "And wanted me to relate the same."

"To me?"

"Yes, Sir, to you in particular."

The man eyed Hamhearth suspiciously, looked around for ears, stepped away, Hamhearth following.

"You had other dealings with her," Drunehearth whispered.

"I did," Hamhearth agreed. "She will be missed."

"Did you want anything else from me?"

Hamhearth paused, realized that the man expected a price for his silence.

"Only that you know she wept, and was happy."

Brunehearth nodded, mouth twisted with the same sorrow that wracked Grace, and stepped away, and Hamhearth suspected the man's heart would always ache over his lover. As would his own.

Hamhearth turned back to the smith's shop, saw that the great timber frame was done, that the girls were standing in a small, nervous knot beside it, Avelina among those tending to them.

A brazier had been set not far from the frame, flames licking higher as Wing fed it with wood and coal.

Stott stood outside his shop, at his counter, and when he saw Hamhearth free he motioned him over. The smith had set aside near two dozen lengths of rope, the bag with the king's overbrand beside them, and he looked at Hamhearth grimly.

"They say it must be done before witnesses, and the ladies want it all done in haste side-by-side, so we will not have the luxury of tarrying, nor of working within four walls."

"How shall we proceed?"

Stott opened the bag, drawing out a parchment first, rolled, returning it to the bag, then retrieving from it not one but two branding irons, one with a little bend in it for the back and belly, Hamhearth guessed, the other bent more, to curl around an arm or leg, both with the same design, three spokes from a center point, ending with an arrow, a circle and a diamond.

"If you would bring me one of the females, I'll know which of these to heat," he said, "and then you must hang them from the beam, all at once, and first they will stand, and then hang, and I will burn them apace while you hold."

"Stand and hang?"

"Wrighthearth will explain. Get me a lady."

Hamhearth left the shop, stepped up to Lady Boughen. "The smith needs to try something against you, and then we'll begin," he said.

She turned from the others and followed Hamhearth soberly into the shop.

"Milady, I must touch both on you and choose the best," he said, holding up the irons.

Boughen pursed her lips, looked up and pulled off her dress, going bare again.

Hamhearth hung the dress while Stott held the first of the two irons against her ribs, and she hissed as if already being marked.

“It is cold,” she said quietly.

Stott set down the first and took up the second iron, but waved it for a breath or two over the furnace before he touched it to her flesh.

“This iron fits best,” he said, “and I’ll press it like this, just once, and we’ll be done.”

“Very good, smith,” she said, turning back to Hamhearth. “And you’re ready to bind?”

“I am, Lady Boughen.”

“Send in the rest to disrobe,” she said, “and we’ll all come out together.”

Hamhearth went back to the nobles, and they looked at him with the apprehension of sheep being taken to slaughter.

“If I may be so bold,” he said, pointing to the shop, “may I ask you to undress?”

The girls went in and Stott emerged from the shop, stepping to the brazier with the chosen iron in his hand, setting it on the fire and telling Wing to drop in another piece of coal.

Hamhearth stepped to the counter, grabbed all the rope there and went to the frame, where Wriheartth awaited.

“Each girl will step upon the lower beam,” he said, “for so I’ve been instructed by one of them, and she’ll raise her arms and let you bind her wrists to the beam above.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hamhearth said.

“And then we’ll pull the beam from beneath their feet, so they hang free, and set it down lower, and you will make fast each ankle to it, at a good distance one from the other, spreading them and keeping them still.”

“Yes.”

“And then comes the brand, as quickly as our smith can work down the line, and as he moves, so shall you, holding each girl round her waist and raising her breast out of harm’s way.”

Hamhearth nodded and strove to receive the details with courage.

“Oh,” Wriheartth, “and there will be words of some kind.”

“Words?” Hamhearth said. “What words?”

“Something Gratta must say, I know not what.”

Stott turned to Wing, kneeling by the brazier. “Wing, girl, bring out the high-borns.”

The girl gazed at Stotthearth, and Hamhearth knew at that moment not just that she loved, but whom also.

Hamhearth turned to the frame and prayed for the absolution he had already been granted, looping the first of ten lengths of soft rope over the top beam, knotting it sure there, the balance dangling down, and he ignored the eyes of the villagers, who had come to watch for their own reasons, and the looks of Gratta, his lieutenants and Archenix, who tarried on one side, one lieutenant with the empty bag of the irons in his hand, Gratta holding the parchment, unrolled, he scanning it.

The girls marched forward, all naked now, completely so with their collars cut off, and some glanced at Hamhearth and some did not as they stepped up each in turn upon the lower beam, raising their arms to the ropes Hamhearth had set for them, and he bound each wrist tight, his eyes seeing nothing but hand and rope and beam and, far away, the shoulders of mountains that had always guarded Camberia beneath the blue sky.

“With the application of our sovereign’s overbrand,” Gratta announced, reading from the parchment, “all who receive it, including any here today, are cleared of servitude, and shall not be troubled over any mark beneath. So, know thee all men here as witness, that you shall attest whenever asked that the overbrand was pressed by the king’s will, under all proper authority, on this date and in this place.”

Gratta paused, then added, “in Camberia.”

Hamhearth knelt, wrapped a length of rope around each ankle but left the other end loose as Wriothearth had instructed, and Stotthearth stood by the brazier now, looking into the bright flames while he warmed up the overbrand.

Gratta read again.

“His Majesty the King Loutaine chooses as the device of the overbrand, a true copy here today and not counterfeit, as evidenced by the embroidered satchel and in other ways, three straight arms from single hub at equal turn, the first tipped by convention of a spear skyward with bearer erect, the second a round, the third a shape of four sides, with angle at top less than square, angle at basement less than square, angle right more than square, angle sinister more than square, to be set directly over the mark in question even on all sides by hot iron.”

Gratta turned to Archenix and whispered a few words.

“Smith,” Archenix called out, “are you set?”

“I am, My Chief,” Stotthearth replied.

“Binder?”

“No, My Chief,” Hamhearth replied, “not before the lower beam be lowered and set.”

Wrighthearth and an assistant immediately stepped to either end of the beam that bore the girls’ feet, pulled it from its notch and pushed it into a lower place, lashing it there, and Hamhearth, standing behind them, watched the females drop, sinew in shoulders and arms stretching, muscles of back and rump and haunches tensing, the girls sighing, gasping in distress, feet moving against air and emptiness.

“Tarry not, Hamhearth,” spake a girl’s voice from raspy throat, and Hamhearth set to work immediately, securing the loose ends of the ankle ropes to the beam below, binding feet so that each girl’s legs were spread wide, their feet turning up and down but bodies otherwise still and immobile, each girl wanting this done quick.

“My Chief, I am ready,” Hamhearth announced.

“Lady Huminia Hurkensdottir,” Gratta announced, “with permission of His Majesty Loutaine, you are put to the overbrand.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency,” replied Huminia with strained voice.

Hamhearth stepped behind her, wrapped his arm tight around her waist and reached before, gripping her breast and lifting it.

Stotthearth tied his hair behind his head, pulled the glowing iron from the brazier, watched it cool to hot, cruel black, and pressed it against the girl’s ribs.

“Ah, by the gods!” she screamed, writhing within her bonds. “Help me!”

“Lady Carruth Fieldwager,” Gratta said, following along in haste, voice tremulous before the pain of the first girl, “with permission of His Majesty Loutaine, you are put to the overbrand.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency,” she said back, voice barely audible over the sounds of Huminia’s weeping.

Hamhearth released Huminia and took Carruth by waist and breast, and the girl shook and cried out formlessly when Stotthearth pressed to her the brand, and Hamhearth wondered if, even now, somewhere in Paxilex,

Grace was suffering this way, and Oleander and Lilac, bound hand and foot, and by one leg as well, already uncollared and now to be burned and thus to be freed.

Boughen offered a simple curse against all the males and the male members of Biskeree, and Mandria uttered a plea to the goddess Alspyra, that she look down and take pity.

Dominia came last, and when Hamhearth leaned against her to take her waist and breast, he smelled fear like a thick spirit, as if her very skin were terrified and emanating the sentiment with its sweat. But she cried out not when Stott put the iron to her, merely trembled, breathed out sharply and pulled at her ropes, and if anyone other than Hamhearth noticed the stream of piss shoot from her middle and dribble down her inner left thigh, they possessed the wisdom not to remark upon it, then or ever after.

“And so it is done,” Gratta announced, “as was ordered by his Majesty Loutaine. And now, free the bearers all.”

Wrighthearth and his assistant raised the beam, the girls setting feet upon it, one weeping, one laughing inexplicably, two sharing quiet words, and Hamhearth reached down and loosed each rope in turn, releasing ankles.

“Wing, Stott, assist them from the frame,” Hamhearth asked, untying Huminia’s wrists, she half-stepping, half falling from the beam, caught by the smith and taken by the arm by the slave girl, set down in the grass, looking dazedly at the new mark beneath her breast.

Hamhearth freed each girl in order, and each was brought to sit, Avelina and Learra and others kneeling before them with mead and bread, the girls sipping a little and biting a crust or two before rising shakily, one by one, to be helped back into the shop of the smith to dress.

As they tarried in Stott’s place, a great wagon, with roof and sides full, and a door and windows, and carvings of vines and pomegranates fore and aft, was pulled in by six matched horses, summoned from the city of Abart Main, and the girls left the shop in their dresses meant for the festivals and solemnities of peasants and stepped to it, Lady Boughen and the others offering a last wave and smile to Hamhearth, Gratta beside them beaming as if this were all his doing alone, and with a shout from the driver, who sat atop in black and red and under a great hat, the wagon turned and raced from the square, from the village, through the gate, down the lane

past the farm of Tomhearth, and back to a midway town somewhere and then to Topia, which took such wagons no more than two days to reach.

Hamhearth watched them go, remembering their journey yesterday as slaves pushing a simple cart, or bound by the ankles within it, and it seemed like a year had passed since that time, and he missed them now, their faces and their shapes and their voices, even when they feigned the improbable dialect and manners of the brothel farm, and with their passing it now all seemed but a dream he was not ready to see end.

Hamhearth felt a hand on his shoulder, turned to find Archenix there.

“The reward comes in a day or two,” he said. “Ask what you will before, as loan.”

“My Chief,” Hamhearth said, heart thumping as he moved his tongue to make words he had spoken more than once in his mind that day. “I ask for the time and the labor of Hyacinth, for Uncle and I fall well behind in our projects, which come by summer thickest.”

“Would you buy her from us?”

“If the price be fair and she seem agreeable, yes, My Chief.”

“Name your fee,” Archenix said.

“We have paid already for one girl, whom I traded away for Camberia and the crown, at sixty-seven vanders,” Hamhearth said.

“Indeed, though her true value might be closer to two hundred fifty vanders.”

“Or so Agarjj the pirate and liar spoke,” Hamhearth conceded, adding quickly, “but I know she serves well.”

“She does,” Archenix agreed.

“But is untested in fields and with aurochs, for I believe she works only at the cobbling of shoes and the picking of berries and what work is performed under the shade of an orchard or by a garden.”

Archenix smiled.

“And now I parley with the greatest trader in all of Avenlou,” he said. “Go to Avelina’s and tell her of your preference, and if her family release the girl for service to you today, she shall be given back a quarter vander of her payment for this day’s labor, plus all the other payment made in advance for every girl freed and removed, and then a little extra as well, and you may take her with you now.”

“Thank you, My Chief,” Hamhearth said.

“And test her in the fields for two days at no immediate expense, and let me consult with Durghearth in the meantime and then on the third day we may parley over all with full bearance on the matter, either to keep her there or send her back to be berthed as village labor.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

Chapter XLI: Learra’s Demands

The greetings and the kind words and the claps upon the shoulder came all along the way for Hamhearth on the path to Avelina’s, and he smiled and nodded and took many a hand, but most of his mind was heavy on Hyacinth, and his heart beat and his breath came fast, so apprehensive was he, and his nerves settled not at all as he rapped on the door, Learra answering.

“Well met, Hamhearth,” she said.

“Well met, Learra,” he answered. “And I thank you for your assistance today, and all along the way.”

“Of course.”

“Your mother said I might come speak to Hyacinth about things, if she may tarry for a time with me?”

The girl smiled as if she knew of things, and opened wide the door. “I’ve tethered her in the garden, Sir, where she plants and tends.”

Hamhearth followed Learra through the house, flowers set here and there, and colored fabric by the windows to remind Hamhearth that this was a place of females, but he smelled as well at the leather of boots and shoes and soles and oil, and he paused at the door of the shop where labored Batthearth, one boot in hand.

“Hamhearth, well met,” he said. “Do you come to take Hyacinth?”

“I would not be so bold as to take without permission, Sir,” Hamhearth replied, “but if you and your wife would let the town pay you back for the balance of today, I would like to test her in our fields.”

“To buy her?” Learra asked.

“It may be, but the trial is not begun and the parley is not complete for another few days.”

“We have gone near broke putting her to work,” Batthearth laughed. “And the rest. Avelina’s generosity draws near to madness.”

“But you must take care of her,” Learra demanded, turning to Hamhearth and taking his arm. “She must not . . . you must . . .”

“She will be worked and supplied as was Oleander, and Lady Boughen for a night as well, and no ill befell the latter, while the former received at worst blisters, a sliver of wood now and then, an ankle turned.”

Learra seemed little assuaged by Hamhearth’s promise, but she pointed his way to the garden down a narrow hall, Hamhearth stepping slowly through it, back into the light and the green and the bright oranges, yellows, reds of the small space, drawing in his breath to see the form of Hyacinth, naked, turned away from him on her hands and knees, a little hillock of weeds beside her, she without chains but for the long tether that ran from her right ankle to the trunk of the thick pine at the garden’s heart.

“Hyacinth?” Hamhearth said quietly.

Hyacinth started, turned, offered a small cry and rose, standing still as if uncertain for a moment, hands at her mouth, then stepping to Hamhearth with her chain ringing behind her, and Hamhearth looked first and longest at her face, which he had seen both awake and in his dreams and found more beautiful when plain before him, and from her visage his eyes moved to her bosom, at the two heavy breasts and the two nipples there, and down to her hips and waist and the dark hair above her flower.

From there he looked again back to her eyes, and he sensed her noble bearing now without question, for he had traded two noble girls for five, he had lain with them and argued with them and labored beside them, put chains on and taken off chains, and this girl was as much a daughter of first gentry as any, in her bearing and her smiling face and in the simple way her hands now rested on her hips.

She was uncertain, however, and so was Hamhearth, about how this reunion should proceed, stepping to him until she was but a pace away and holding her place, and he guessed she had thought on him as he had on her, but there was another thing between them, she a slave and owned by the village, he now a man with a man’s name at last, a minor hero for a time, though there be nothing dependable about being a hero, he had learned. But there was also some reliable wealth falling to him soon, most likely enough to buy Hyacinth, if she would be bought, enough to buy Hyacinth and aurochs and another hectare and enough to build another room at the farm. Given such conditions, an embrace might be inappropriate. Or premature at least. And she seemed to know that as well as he.

“Well met,” he said. “I have missed you.”

“I miss you too, Hamheartt,” she said, adding quickly. “Hamhearth. Hamhearth.”

“Oleander, and Lilac, and Grace speak of their love for you.”

“They do well?”

“They are, they—”

“Who did you, did you . . . hand them to?”

“General Axiom.”

“Pantichol . . . Cleamtree?”

“Yes,” Hamhearth said. “You know him?”

“He is a . . . my father, brother . . .” she replied.

“Your uncle?”

“Uncle,” Hyacinth repeated, as if teaching herself a new word.
“Uncle.”

“Hyacinth,” Hamhearth said, his next words coming slowly,
“Oleander is gone. She worked, and helped us.”

Hyacinth nodded.

“My uncle and I need help . . . ongoing. There is more work.”

She nodded again.

“Archenix, our chief . . .”

“Archenix,” Hyacinth said, clearly familiar with the name.

“Archenix says I may . . . take you . . . to see how you do . . . to test you for . . . work in the field, at our home.”

Hyacinth seemed uncertain of all the words, but she nodded again.

“Will you go now?”

“Go?”

“With me, to our farm? To work in the field?”

“Yes,” she said, and she nodded, dark hair swinging upon her shoulders, and she pointed behind herself and smiled. “Weeds?”

“Yes, that and much more. Hoe, aurochs, tilling, planting, drawing water.”

She nodded again and Hamhearth believed she understood some of what he’d said, and he stepped in to let Batthearth and Learra know of their decision, and both went to the garden to help in the matter, but first both wrapped their arms around Hyacinth, Learra first, then Batthearth, and the gesture seemed not out of place at all to Hamhearth, for she had become beloved in this household, he knew, and now she must take her leave.

Learra entered the home, returned with chains and a length of white fabric.

“This she wears for bleeding,” she said, holding out the cloth. “She washed it yesterday when her monthly was done, in clear river water.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you’ll want her tether?” Learra said.

“Yes, if you can spare it,” Hamhearth said.

“Yes. And here are her work chains,” she said, holding out the art of Stott that fastened two wrists and an ankle. “And here are her hobbles, for when you must check her walking or sleep her, and here are what go only around her wrists, for we’ll secure her hands behind when we must leave for a time, with these, but never for long, for they are cruel.”

“Thank you,” Hamhearth said, turning to put Hyacinth in her work chains, draping the remaining restraints over his shoulder.

“And Durgahearth requires that we take a rod someone made, should we need to beat her,” Learra added, “but that has never been done, and should never be done, and it sits always by the front door, and you must take it, and perhaps you can tap aurochs with it.”

Hamhearth smiled, looked at Hyacinth, and believed she understood what was being said, or most of it, her eyes bright and earnest, the hint of a smile on her face.

Learra drew several sets of pins from her bosom, knelt to free Hyacinth’s ankle from the tether, stepped to the pine to unlock the other end of the chain, and handed all to Hamhearth.

“Thank you, Learra,” Hamhearth said with a short bow.

“You will continue to teach her our tongue,” Learra said, and her visage took on that same severe cast as her mother, and Hamhearth knew the spirit of kindness had passed into this daughter’s breast. “Not just working words, or farming words, or aurochs words, but the names of birds and flowers and the trees upon the mountains, and our gods and our story here, and all our foods, and our festivals and celebrations, and the ways we feel and count and sing.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hamhearth said, and he and Learra and Batthearth, who stood smiling upon his daughter, all knew her commands bore no force at all before the fathers of the town or any king’s law, and yet must all be followed.

“And I must see her at your farm, or you must bring her to the village and to here as well, or both, and she must be kept well always.”

“It shall be done,” Hamhearth promised. “All that and more.”

Learra looked into Hamhearth’s eyes and her face brightened, and she seemed to believe him, or at least that he was as suited as any man of Camberia to fulfill her demands, and had proven such often enough in the current season.

“Go now,” Learra blurted, hugging Hyacinth again, “before I fall to weeping and tell her you may not take her after all.”

Hamhearth laughed, his own eyes wet, and he led Hyacinth through the dwelling to the front door, taking the rod of Durgahearth’s cruel but efficient direction, and as he left the home he held it up to her. “Learra says this is for the aurochs,” he told her.

“And Hyacinth?” she asked, her smile wide, and strange to Hamhearth, for this was not a joking thing to him, with Hyacinth any more than it had been with Grace. But then, he had bound her for the king’s device, and held up the hide while the collar was bent around her neck, and these were far greater cruelties than a few swings against her rump with a wooden stick, and she would not it seemed begrudge Hamhearth or Tomhearth that remedy should they deem it needful.

As they made their way through the village and past its people – Hamhearth’s shoulder laden with restraints, Hyacinth’s rod in his hand, the girl nude and bound beside him – the greetings came even thicker, for now all was restored to people’s minds, the visit and the dealings with five high-born girls resolved to the satisfaction of all, and Hamhearth once again with a common laboring girl who barely spoke Avenian.

“What adventure will you bring to the gate tomorrow, Hamhearth?” inquired Bitterhearth as he let them through.

“All my adventures are complete, and I am glad to be done with them,” Hamhearth replied. “But if you find adventure in a load of grain now and then, or a head or two of aurochs to trade, or Uncle and I passing through for another pair of boots, you shall be entertained indeed.”

“Do you take this one for your own now?”

“Only to test,” Hamhearth said. “Archenix gave permission, so we’ll see how she does, and she might yet become ours to chop land and feed beasts.”

Bitterhearth looked at Hyacinth, and opened his mouth to speak, perhaps to make a joke about beasts who were also slave girls, and the ways they were fed, but she looked back at him, directly into his eyes, and he held his peace, for which Hamhearth was grateful.

Hamhearth made good on his promise even as they walked the lane to home, pointing out and naming mountain laurel, pace starling, range oak, thistle weed, and a tree with a clump of elk hair lodged therein. Hyacinth proved a ready student, repeating the words and pointing and asking of other things, cloud and sky and her own hands, finger and fingernail and the bend in her thumb.

When they reached the farm, they came first by food, which Tomhearth set out for both as if their servant while they sat upon the floor, hungry.

“What Avenian speak you?” Tomhearth inquired.

“Tomhearth, Sir,” Hyacinth said. “Well met.”

Tomhearth laughed. “And would you feed an aurochs a carrot?”

“I . . . cannot say, Sir,” she replied.

“Which weed do you chop into the soil, which do you pull away?”

“Hamhearth will . . . tell me,” she replied.

“And what be the name of this?” he asked, holding up a piece of Aurochs belly.

“Aurochs meat,” she said, and she seemed to believe he was offering it to her, and she reached out her bound hand, chain ringing against a bowl of beets, and took it and pushed half into her mouth.

Tomhearth laughed again. “Camberia should pay us, to take this mouth from its ownership!” he boomed.

“Perhaps they will,” Hamhearth said.

“Did you parley at all?” Tomhearth asked.

“With Archenix only,” Hamhearth said.

“What terms began the trade?”

“No firm numbers have been set forth, but I hinted at free and he leans toward two hundred fifty vanders.”

“He goes by the first offer of the pirate Agarjj?”

“To open, and it is the amount by treaty with the Greater Vandals for fair girls, of which she is one. But I believe there will be room to bargain, especially after we see what wealth makes its way back from Topia.”

“There is talk of thousands of vanders, or its value in gold, or other things.”

“I have heard that,” Hamhearth said. “And we are to see the trader’s share of a tenth, and the village share of a twentieth on top.”

Tomhearth nodded but did not smile. Hamhearth knew his uncle as a simple man, with no greed in his heart, satisfied with the small trades of a farmer, well aware that riches could bring ease and trouble both.

“Yesterday, you were called a murderer and thief and were halfway to the gallows,” the man said. “Today, you are a man of Camberia.”

“I am but a trader, Uncle, and—”

“No,” Tomhearth interrupted, “you are young in some matters, old in others, and I faint nearly from pride today. But be forewarned. If you take all this in the spirit of a young man, and it plant seeds of thick pride in your heart, you may yet fall and fail.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Now, tell me how you plan to work with this one.”

Hamhearth looked at his uncle and understood that Tomhearth was not speaking of hoeing or feeding aurochs or drawing water.

“As with Oleander,” he said, “when she invites it.”

“I don’t believe she has been known,” Tomhearth said.

Hamhearth looked at Hyacinth, wondering what of these words she could decipher, but the girl seemed interested only in food, staring at the array of it, taking cherries now.

“Who can say?” Hamhearth noted. “Unless we ask her to speak of it, with words she fathoms.”

“Don’t ask her,” Tomhearth said. “Such is not a question for a lady.”

“A lady?”

“You and I both know what she is, and we’ll not speak on it again.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And she may well go away, as the others have, when there be peace and treaties in such matters.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“So, I am told Avelinahearth took special interest in her, as did Learra her daughter, and certain things were said to anyone who bought her time, and none ever paid a full vander for her for one day’s chores.”

“You know of things I do not, Uncle,” Hamhearth said. “But Avelina did not do this for Lilac, I am certain.”

“You knew her on Fifth Pass?”

“Yes, once, and she seemed well-versed in yielding, and quite spirited.”

“I’ve heard she bucked for a man or two in the village as well.”

“I believe Avelina could afford to invest in one only, and she elected Hyacinth, her wounded eye reducing interest in her anyways, the arrangement suiting Lilac as well.”

“Perhaps.”

“What did Avelina say to you on this?”

“She was not at home, only Batthearth and Learra, and the girl told me to care well, but gave no rules other than not to use the rod that Durgahearth sends her with.”

Tomhearth laughed. “Do as you will, and as she will, but be gentle, for she may weep before she groan.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

The meal complete, Hamhearth brought Hyacinth to the aurochs, to the well, to the barn where she would sleep, teaching her the words of all thereof, she repeating them, some she knew, some not, and then went they to the field, where that morning he and Lady Boughen labored and chopped until all came to a new fix with the stopping of Gratta and his men, and still lay here the chains of Boughen where he’d dropped them, and he felt a pinch in his heart as he picked them up and gave over the hoe to Hyacinth, and the gloves for her hands, which were yet soft, and the two worked there, she chopping to her best, he pulling up choking brambles until the ebbing of sunlight, when they turned back in for supper.

“How served she?” Tomhearth inquired.

“She farmed well for a finger,” Hamhearth replied, and he looked at Hyacinth and smiled. “You ache not?”

She held up her hands, made fists and smiled at both men. “I may chop again,” she said.

“You will work as hard as us,” Tomhearth said slowly, for in this he clearly wished to be understood, “and no harder.”

“No,” demurred she, “Hamhearth weeds, I chop the mountain.”

Tomhearth laughed and winked at his nephew.

Hamhearth and she cleaned up supper and he brought her to the field to empty, then back to the stall that was hers now, and he worked at a small fire until it blazed enough to cast shadows, and he opened her ankle cuff and wrapped it around the beam, and closed her feet in the sleeping hobble, and stayed vigilant for her invitation to dally, whether it be by word or by rising to hand and knee to present her opening to him, but she merely fell to her side in the hay.

“Will I stay, Hamheartt?” she asked him. “Hamhearth?”

“Perhaps,” he replied. “We must yet see how you do on a full day. And then parley with the village.”

Hamhearth paused.

“Do you want to stay?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, suddenly rising up awkwardly in her chains, leaning forward on her haunches so the light flickered on her face, her eyes glowing in a way he had not seen before. “We to the river.”

Chapter XLII: In the Stream, and Free

Whether waking or sleeping that night, or in a place between the two, Hamhearth sought a peace that was denied him, for he could not drive from his mind the face of Grace, the voices of Lilac and Oleander, the cries and curses of the Avenlou nobles at the overbranding, the great wagon they departed in.

And then, the kindness of Avelina and Learra, the eyes of Hyacinth, her sweat and her voice and the firelight and the way she said each word of Avenian, for she was learning them, but in her own way, each spoken as if in a new tongue that only she and Hamhearth could hear and know. And he wondered how his senses would sing with the feel of this new girl, should she give permission to be taken, how it would be to kneel behind her, or lay atop her, how her chamber would answer his thrusts, how firmly she would hold him, how she would grunt with each push into her body, what she would say afterwards, be they the words of a girl now ready to work, as Oleander, or the sounds and caresses of a lover, as Grace.

Already awake, hot and aroused, he stirred when first light chased away the stars, and he arose and went outside to the field and then to the

barn, and he suspected Hyacinth slept no more than he, for he heard her chains rattle when first he eased the door open, and her lungs fill and her voice ring out, “Hamhearth?”

“Hyacinth?” he answered, entering her stall, kneeling before the dark, bound form of the high-born slave girl, all her roundness clear in the flowing light, for she was on her back, her breasts tilted toward the barn’s roof, thighs opening as she sat up, the thick black hair between her legs, and the lips beneath it, opening like a flower to a new day.

Hamhearth, his manhood roaring with unuse and the female before him, loosed her chain to free her from the post, removed her hobbles, and then, in an idea that came to him like madness, he took each hand in his, unbound her wrists and made her completely free, wearing only the collar Stott had wrapped around her neck.

He rose, took her hand and bade her rise, and he stared into the darkness at her eyes, stepped back, opened his tunic and dropped it, opened his belt, pulled off his boots and his pants, and he stood before her naked as she, and he stepped to her, his straight, urgent manhood touching her belly until she raised it between them, and they sighed together and embraced and kissed like lovers altogether.

Hamhearth stepped back when the kiss matured, her hand in his.

“You wish to go the river?” he asked her quietly.

“Yes, Hamheartt,” she replied, too nervous to correct the way she spoke his name.

Hamhearth lead her out of the barn, past the grunting aurochs, across the field and into the woods, down the little dirt path that led to the stream, and the sound there greeted them well before they reached it, for the rains had fallen heavily here and there in the mountains above in recent days, and the water was calm before them but rushed and roaring a little further on.

Hamhearth stopped at the bank, turned toward Hyacinth and kissed her again, she first with hands around his back, then holding his penis as if by habit now, to save her belly being prodded, and she opened her mouth and they kissed like that, as deeply as if they were already one, united by mouth before bringing any other elements of form to the contest.

“Come,” Hyacinth whispered, and she led Hamhearth into the water with her, uttering a small cry as it chilled her by her calves, by her thighs and hips and belly and breasts, and Hamhearth followed her,

allowing the sweet, rushing water of Camberia's edges to take him within its arms, and all the dust and dirt and sweat and sex and labor of his Greater Vandals journey washed off him and joined with the dirt on Hyacinth's skin to tumble to the sea, and they embraced there again and kissed and shivered in the water, and she took his manhood gently in her hand, but only to feel and hold it, not to push it up into herself, and she put her mouth at Hamhearth's ear and spoke again, urgently, in a hoarse whisper, "Now, Hamheartt."

And she withdrew from the water with his hand in hers, and sat upon the bank and shivered, waiting for the first breaths of summer morn to warm her, and the sun, which even now tripped between the breeze-rolling leaves, to blaze against her bare flesh.

Hamhearth, just above her, penis as firm as it had been since before he first put eyes upon her in the barn, looked down and waited, and she looked up and smiled and lay back on her elbows, opening her legs to him, welcoming him to the pink folds that hid beneath her hair.

Hamhearth dropped to the sand and gravel, put his mouth against hers again and lowered his hips, and this time, when she took his rod between her fingers, she not only caressed it, but also guided it toward her, pulled it to her opening as if the hole were a hungry mouth, and Hamhearth felt first the tip against the thick hair, and then her parting lips, then just the head inside, and he moved slowly, mindful of the hidden places within her, not wishing to provoke female cries of pain again until the girl was ready to issue them.

Hyacinth proved as brave in this matter as the girls yesterday at the overbranding, for after she'd worked the first third of his manhood into her female chamber, she frowned and, with a quick spasm of muscles, raised her hole up as she pulled him deep into her, and he felt the yielding of her door even as she cried out by his ear and spoke a string of Paxil that meant nothing to him, voice in such a volume of screaming distress birds flew in panic from the boughs overhead.

Done with the ordeal, she fell flat on the bank, reached up and pulled him down upon her, and she dropped her middle so far Hamhearth nearly lost her embrace, and then lifted it again with a groan, swallowing all of her master's shaft, and her whimpers of pain gave way to groans of great effort, then those yielded to simple grunts of pleasure, a gasp each time she

raised herself up, sliding her pink lips around Hamhearth's shaft, up to the base, down to the head, up again.

Hamhearth, for his part, moved but little, staring into Hyacinth's eyes while she laid the course of their dalliance, and her eyes focused on him as if she labored at some great thing, and then her mouth opened and her eyes went wide with confusion and she cried out, "Ah! Ah! Ah!" with another spate of birds taking to wing, and Hamhearth knew she'd reached the threshold of her own temple, and he granted himself his portion of the crossing, and she screamed and clung to him while he made a sound as if weeping while his member throbbed within her, he thrusting it now all the way in and all the way out and then back again while it spit apace into the mouth and throat of her blossom.

At last finished with the closing, they yet clung to each other, Hyacinth beneath, legs still spread wide, breathing in and out slowly, her voice breaking now and then as if in soft weeping, Hamhearth above, softening member at rest deep within her.

"Will you work this day?" Hamhearth asked her quietly, smiling in jest.

"Yes," she said, and she brought her legs up, wiped her eyes with her fingers, put her hands on his shoulders, pushed him up from her. "I chop the mountain all day."

He laughed, rose, pulled her up, and they returned first to the water to wash off Hyacinth's blood, he from his shaft, she from her vulva and thighs, and she kissed him there again, and smiled with all the mystery of Oleander, and then made their way to the barn, where he dressed and returned her to her work chains. She held out each hand to be bound without complaint, set forth her right foot for the cuff, followed Hamhearth to the fields and broke ground without stop for two fingers, when she and Hamhearth paused for midday meal, went and sat with Tomhearth, both pushing food into their mouths wearily while Uncle grinned.

"She is at least the equal of Oleander," Tomhearth asserted.

"Yes, Uncle, she tires no more quickly than I."

"That is not true," he said, nodding apologetically to Hyacinth, she smiling back, though whether she understood some or not any of the conversation remained unknown. "But she works well, and the farm will prosper by her sweat."

“We have one more day to try her after this day,” Hamhearth said, “and then we must parley with Durgahearth and Archenix.”

“Those two will want to know of things,” Tomhearth said. “Was this morning’s industry the fruits of dalliance?”

“Yes, Uncle, she made her choice by the river.”

“You were her first?”

“I believe so, and she worked through it in her own way, and twice frightened birds.”

“Very well.”

For all that day and the next, Hyacinth labored to her best, supplying with bright spirit what she lacked in experience and calluses, and for two days she kept Hamhearth busy in another way, taking him by morning as soon as her sleeping chains were off, again at night before she was set by the post, and at midday of the second day, falling to hand and knee for quick service before they returned to the fields.

And by and by, her Avenian grew, as did Hamhearth’s in her tongue, and they traded words and found humor in the learning, and uttered soft pleadings to each other in whatever speech they chose when they lay and kissed and started together, and then they finalized with cries of a joy that would slay if it did not end, and Hamhearth took Hyacinth as his love, without reservation, the binding and the calling of her a slave girl all to serve outward appearances, but the work in the fields and at the barn and the well all honest and not for show, for she was lover and helpmate too.

And Hyacinth loved too, Hamhearth believed, for she kissed when she did not lay, and she spoke ever politely to Tomhearth and praised what food he set before her, and when she said “Hamhearth,” or “Hamheartt” often enough, the sounds was like music, because of how she spoke it, and because it came from her mouth.

And on the second night, after they had made their time together and reached each their own land, but before she was chained for sleep, she rose and took his hands, and hummed a simple, sweet tune.

“Dance thou, Hamhearth?” she asked softly.

“I have not yet.”

“You must learn,” she said, and stepped lightly, and Hamhearth followed her steps as best he could, and when her song was done she kissed him.

“You will dance,” she concluded.

“If you teach me.”

On the morning of the third day, upon which there must be parley over Hyacinth, the man and his slave girl labored not far from the road, and saw another great wagon, this one straight from Topia, drawn by six horses, with two drivers atop, and bearing more ornamentation than the one that took the five noble girls home, for on this one had been carved vines of grape and branches with leaves, with mountain blaze and gilt apples. Two horses bearing troops paced before, three behind.

Hamhearth stopped to watch pass the retinue, none among it casting the first glance at the peasant in his field (although he caught a few eyes surveying the girl beside him) but he knew the wagon had come in answer to his exploits.

Next came Gratta and his two lieutenants, and Hamhearth watched them as well, wondering if all would be as it had, if they would ride through and ignore him and his girl.

He had his answer when they stopped, all the horses still this time, picking at grass at the road’s edge, and a lieutenant waved to him.

“I must speak to these,” Hamhearth said to Hyacinth, and she watched him go and returned to her work as if without concern for his dealings.

“Well met, Hamhearth,” spake Gratta himself when Hamhearth neared, stepping over the ruts of the field.

“Your Excellency,” Hamhearth said, reaching him and offering a deep bow, next turning to the two lieutenants, including the one who once almost kicked a girl who looked like a slave but was something more, and he bowed again with the words, “and men of the king.”

“A wagon makes its way to your village,” Gratta said, “and there is reward there, from parents beside themselves with joy, and from our king himself.”

Hamhearth thought he might say he’d spied the wagon, thought better of it.

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“These glad tidings are made part of the latest parley, for King Loutaine calls Paxilex generous in this matter, giving us five of our noblest flowers for three commoners, and talk of peace gains new vigor.”

“Yes, Your Excellency, an end to the war would be good news indeed.”

“There remains the matter of three girls stolen from Paxilex,” Gratta said. “There now come to us rumors that some have been found, perhaps one or two, but not all three.”

“Yes, Your Excellency, I have heard such rumors myself.”

Hamhearth watched the eyes of the men, noted that all gazed, briefly, across the field to the laboring form of Hyacinth.

“Loutaine asks all to watch for them,” Gratta continued. “And it is my opinion you in particular, who seem able to find the highest-born on forest roads, must spy where you may.”

“I shall.”

“But Loutaine must send his counterpart in Paxilex regrets on a thorough search for the missing females, for while war wages, our resources must be directed to the borders, and our best searchers must occupy themselves otherwise.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Only when peace is completed, with good trading provisions for the people of Avenlou, can missing girls, be they one or two or three, be sought after.”

“Of course.”

Gratta paused, looked across the field to Hyacinth.

“Is that one borrowed from the village,” he inquired, “or your property outright?”

“The matter is unsettled, but may go under writ today.”

“It might be best if you kept her,” Gratta said, “and kept her well, in the way that you are known to do.”

“Yes, Your Excellency, we would be pleased to own her altogether, if the trade be fair, for her service is true and dependable.”

“Even the commoners of Paxilex must be tended well,” Gratta asserted, “for the first peace when it comes may be fragile, and the treatment of each will be noted by the other side, and a small indiscretion might turn bigger things astray.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Gratta didn't bother to say farewell, just spurred his horse toward the village, his lieutenants following, and Hamhearth returned to Hyacinth and smiled at her when she raised her eyebrow.

“Today we must barter over you,” Hamhearth told her. “And I shall lie, for I must not say that you are as sun and moon to me, singing bird and rutting aurochs, for then fall we to ruin when they demand fair price.”

Hyacinth paused with her hoe and nodded, not certain of Hamhearth’s meaning perhaps.

“But not ruin in truth, if I have you,” he said, and he turned to the place on the road where he and Gratta had spoken. “And now, another favors the trade.”

“What said he?” Hyacinth inquired.

“Only that Uncle and I should buy you, and the village should sell you. But he did not name a price.”

Master and slave girl labored for another while, through that time looking up more than once to see horses, two first, then three more, then five, then ten or more, some with riders, others lead by rope, all Camberian bred, taken for the war but now being returned to their stables, their service finished though the war continue, and over that Hamhearth marveled, for it was not by any term of parley he had heard of.

“Uncle,” Hamhearth said over midday meal, “saw you the horses?”

“I saw a pair and some,” Tomhearth replied.

“I counted twenty and more, and I believe they are come back to stay.”

“The king smiles on Camberia.”

“Indeed,” Hamhearth agreed. “And seems to wish us to keep Hyacinth here.”

“Wherefor?”

“Or so said Gratta, I know not why, but perhaps because we might keep her well.”

“It remains your trade,” Tomhearth said, “and your proceeds when they come should more than cover a fair price. But I trust you will not parley as a fool.”

“I will not, Uncle,” Hamhearth promised, and he looked at Hyacinth and hoped he spoke true.

“Take no offense,” Tomhearth said, and he moved his hand toward Hyacinth, sitting naked, hands freed for the meal and just ankle fettered, and she looked back and smiled and took up another share of meat. “But one like this would make a fool of any trader, even the best in all of Avenlou.”

Hamhearth smiled and looked toward the window, the sounds of hooves ringing from before the door, and then came the voices of Archenix and Durgahearth, the latter appearing at their window to gaze at the three seated there, and their meal, and at them again.

“Well met, Tomhearth, Hamhearth,” Durgahearth said. “May we come and parley?”

Tomhearth pointed to the door, and soon Durgahearth and Archenix were seated beside them, four here now to talk and settle things while the fifth sat nude with ankle bound.

Both men inquired of Hamhearth how Hyacinth fared, and he directed their questions to her, and she nodded to both with a dignity and high-born fashion as plain to Hamhearth as the mountain upon which Camberia sat, and she spoke her best Avenian with her answer, saying, “I fare trippingly, Sirs, and learn farming and to feed Aurochs.”

Archenix nodded, satisfied with her words, and he leaned forward toward Hamhearth.

“A royal cart came to Camberia today, as did Gratta, and our horses,” he said. “Do you know of any of this?”

“I do, My Chief, for I saw some of them pass.”

“And they brought the reward in full, rich and broad, some coin, some gold, some fabric and other things, and the horses as well are called a part of it.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“The value we guess at only now, a full accounting taking days more, but it seems to be on the order of fifteen thousand and six hundred vanders.”

“Yes, My Chief,” Hamhearth said, and with a great effort comparable to lifting an aurochs full-grown upon his shoulders, he neither smiled nor frowned nor flicked his eyes, merely reached down to scoop up a little pudding.

“Do you understand what your share be?” Durgahearth inquired.

“One of ten as trader,” Hamhearth said, voice stilted to plain though his heart raced, “and one of twenty as well for the town’s share, which comes to me by Archenix’s word on the day of the noble girls’ delivery, so it would be one thousand five hundred sixty vanders plus seven hundred eighty vanders or in all two thousand three hundred vanders and forty more.”

Hamhearth picked up an apple and took of it a bite, and looked at the two men before him, adding, “for myself and Uncle.”

“Yes,” agreed Durgahearth, nodding. “That is it.”

Tomhearth sucked in his breath but remained silent, granting Hamhearth all the parley in this.

“How shall we receive?” Hamhearth inquired.

“Would you have it all brought here?” Archenix asked.

“No, only what Uncle wants,” Hamhearth replied. “Two hundred, Uncle?”

“Yes, that is enough.”

“The rest I ask be kept in the new armory under my name.”

“To what end will you put it?” Durgahearth inquired.

“I have a project or two in mind,” Hamhearth said, smiling now, “and Tomhearth has his own, I believe.”

Durgahearth took for himself the last shank, which otherwise would have made supper, and he stirred and rose, Archenix pushing up as well.

“Sirs,” Hamhearth said. “What of the girl?”

“Ah,” Durgahearth said, offering his hand to Archenix, who stood with a grimace and the creaking of knee. “Do you want her?”

“If the price be right, yes,” Hamhearth said. “She learns farming well enough, as she said, and she—”

“There is no price,” Archenix said, waving his hand, clearly not interested in any further parley with Hamhearth on this topic. “There was never a price. She’s yours, by fair trade.”

“My Chief?”

“Gratta made clear she was to go to you,” Durgahearth said, “and such was our intent all along anyway, for you gave up your first girl, and the second too.”

“It is understood,” said Archenix, “that you are as good a choice as any to tend to her, see that she is kept safe and fed responsibly, and not left to fall beneath aurochs’ hooves or asked to wrestle them by the horns.”

“Yes, My Chief.”

“She is yours if you want her,” Durgahearth said, “and a little is set aside in smith’s wages too, so he stands ready to fashion further restraints upon your order, tether or leash or fresh hobbles and the like.”

“I will speak to him,” Hamhearth promised, “for we may need more things.”

Hamhearth turned to Hyacinth.

“You are ours now, Hyacinth,” he said.

The girl smiled.

Chapter XLIII: Lady Bastelle Revealed

“Stotthearth!” Hamhearth said, leaning into the shop where the smith of Camberia practiced his art.

Stott ceased his pounding and turned from the anvil, wiping his hands on his apron.

“Well met, Wing,” Hamhearth added. The Waxcap girl, naked, shackled and pulling coal from a sack to place it into a bin by the furnace, was becoming as much a fixture of the smith’s shop as was Stotthearth himself, he thought. She looked up from her work, raising a sooty face to gaze at him briefly.

“Hamhearth!” the smith said, and he stepped to the counter. “And I see you bring your latest charge.”

“We took full ownership of her two days ago,” Hamhearth said, “and have worked her ever since. Hyacinth, show Stott your hands.”

The girl raised her hands as far as her chains would allow to display her blisters and the place in the crook of her thumb where Hamhearth had pulled out two splinters yesterday.

Stott’s eyes went from her face to her breasts to her waist, as they were wont to do, and then to her outstretched hands, and he put one black finger against the evidence of hard work.

“He is a terrible master, is he not?” he asked.

She smiled and pretended not to understand.

“Now, what seek ye?” Stott asked. “They told me I must give you anything you want, and I am already paid for it.”

“New working chains, and sleeping hobble,” Hamhearth replied, holding up the hobble. “But with a simpler machine inside.”

“What mean you?” Stott inquired.

“I tire of fiddling with keys and pins,” Hamhearth said. “Give me something I can remove with a finger or two.”

“It will not be secure,” Stott said. “If you can remove without key, so may she, or anyone.”

“I am content to take that chance,” Hamhearth said. “Can you do it?”

“You understand for what you ask?” Stott said.

“No, I am overtaken by a Waxcap sprite,” Hamhearth lamented, “and am all senseless.”

“You mock me,” Stott complained. “But if you bring her in to be tethered next to Wing, I can disrepair all the machines for you.”

Hamhearth escorted Hyacinth into the shop, where Stott chose a leash from an increasing inventory of chains and cuffs, wrapping it around the girl’s ankle while Hamhearth released her wrists and ankle from her working chain.

Stott took the restraint and the sleeping hobble from Hamhearth, set it on his table, studied the cuffs, clamped one and pried it open with a pair of tongs, and changed something within.

“Where be Emiane?” Hyacinth asked.

“The Freth orchards,” Wing replied. “You labored there some.”

“I did, pulling apples,” Hyacinth said.

“She pulls apples there and besides,” Wing reported.

“Is it you and her for the berths at night?”

“Yes, just we two. They do not bother locking us, except for the outer door, and that only to keep out the bears and wolves.”

“I have never seen bear nor wolf within the walls, unless it be deceased,” Stott observed.

“And when they die by hand of man,” Wing said, “some leave ghosts behind in men’s places, as well you know, but a good door like the one that keeps us holds those at bay too.”

For a time while Stott worked at Hyacinth’s chains, all four spoke of the ways of such beings, Hyacinth haltingly but with knowledge of the creatures of air and mist in Paxilex, and from there to new goings on, for the wealth of the village had grown in a few short days enough to make something more of itself, and there were new buildings imagined and drawn out, and indeed even the old smith’s shop was considered for other use as soon as a new place could be built, and Stott had begun the search for an apprentice, Hamhearth learned, a single smith no longer equal to the task of serving all Camberia.

“Let me show you how to work the movement now,” Stott said, and he bade Hyacinth rise and closed the chains around her.

“Hyacinth, would you look away so this all shall remain a secret for myself only and your master?”

Hyacinth looked at the ceiling beams and Stott took a cuff in his hands.

“Press here with thumb, then pinch here,” he said, the cuff clicking open. “You free her that way.”

Hamhearth tried the new locks, found them easy to open and close.

“And if it take her more than three breaths to learn their ways themselves,” Stott added, “she is a fool, and I know she is not, so blame me not if you find her gone one morning, or more likely find her in your larder eating you and Tomhearth to ruin.”

Hamhearth thanked his friend and took his leave, making next a visit to the home of Batthearth and Avelina, in fulfillment of that promise to Learra, who embraced Hyacinth and took her to the garden to tarry over work done and imagined.

Last before he returned to the farm of Tomhearth, Hamhearth and his slave girl called at Archenix’, for the chief wished to see Hyacinth regularly, and to speak to Hamhearth of membership in the corporation, which needed a trading partner, the demands of the role minor and but advisory, and yet a step Hamhearth knew toward the chief’s council.

And for a year it went that way, Hamhearth with a slave who would work bound in their fields, in irons she knew well enough how to remove, and she slept in the barn until Hamhearth had made a new place, affixed to his uncle’s house but a little apart from it, the addition serving as promise he would stay by his kin although a man now and wealthy enough to make his own way. And that is where Hyacinth spent her nights after it was built, without chain or tether or hobble, sleeping by Hamhearth’s side, they choosing together when to congress and grunt, and Hamhearth and his uncle built a privy beside at Hyacinth’s direction, something she said was common in Paxilex and which she preferred to the fields. And she taught Hamhearth the things of her youth, certain things one said in Paxil to certain parties one might meet, who might be dignified indeed, and the way one stepped and bowed for this tune and that, and the clothing one might wear, and Hamhearth at her direction had himself measured and fitted for certain fine clothing which he would not wear out, but held in reserve and donned in the home for her amusement, and Tomhearth’s, and he was all in all a devoted student to her, and devoted in every other way as well.

And Hamhearth was not the only one who showed inordinate interest in a mere slave girl, for Gratta and his men visited the farm once a moon to inquire after Hyacinth and see her, and Archenix called often enough as well, or summoned Hamhearth to the village with his property, and she would stand nude and bound before him and answer any question he asked, about her health and her duties and her treatment, to which always her answers proved satisfactory.

And sometimes, when he labored, or in the quiet of night while he listened to the soft breath of Hyacinth when she slept, he thought of Grace, and her last words to him, that he had practiced a boy's bright-burning love on her, love like the stars, which must yield to love like the earth, and he knew she spake truth.

Thrice more that year, Hamhearth went to the Greater Vandals to trade, driving two or three wagons drawn by horses, other men or boys with him to help and learn, Hyacinth kept in the village at those times, berthed at night with the Waxcap girls and worked through the days by Learra, with no payment expected for her time other than that they feed her.

And that next summer, Hamhearth's twentieth, Tomhearth breathed his last, the end coming first with a great cry in the night that summoned the pair, who did all they could into the next day, uncle shivering and speaking of strange things and his own youth and his mother and other family who had passed before, and his last words before the calm and then the stillness were "Yes, Brother, I did what I could for the boy, such as it was," and then finally, "Jakkhearth, I come."

And for three days, Hamhearth could not be consoled, and at the man's rite of deliverance, half the town there to mourn, Hamhearth spoke of being orphan, of being rescued, of learning from a man who, like the world, could be gentle or fierce depending on the call.

And three days beyond that, following a year of diminishments in hostilities and no more thieving of the high-born, word of complete peace came to Camberia, Loutaine and his counterpart agreeing with the Greater Vandals on terms of commerce that each regency declared was most favorable to their own lands, and Hamhearth celebrated and mourned alike, for he knew there must now come a reckoning.

That reckoning tarried not, but came in the form of Gratta, five days after news of peace, who appeared one morning early at the door with his

men, horses stamping upon the new flagstones there, as Hamhearth and slave girl finished their first meal.

“Your Excellency, and the king’s men,” Hamhearth said, going to the threshold and seeing not three but four horses, three bearing men, one saddled but riderless. “It is the first of all my pleasures.”

“And ours indeed,” replied Gratta.

“You come to ensure again our slave girl of Paxilex fares well?” Hamhearth said.

Gratta paused, drew in his breath and prepared to play a part for all present.

“Will you summon her?” Gratta said. “We have a more significant matter to attend to.”

Hamhearth brought Hyacinth to the door, and Gratta and his lieutenants dropped from their horses, and Gratta stepped forward and bowed to the girl, who stood before him naked and in the chains Hamhearth put her in for work in the field, for they were soon to go labor together.

“Milady,” said he.

“Yes, Your Excellency?” she inquired, eyebrow raised, for Gratta had never addressed her this way, or in any way at all, speaking to her only through Hamhearth.

“Milady,” he repeated, “it appears you have kept hidden some facts about yourself.”

“Of what fact do you speech?” she inquired, her Avenian mostly fluent, but her Paxil accent thick and, to Hamhearth’s ears, like the music of birds.

“There is a rumor,” Gratta said, drawing in his breath and speaking slowly, carefully, “a rumor only, but alleged in multiple quarters to which the highest respect is due, that you might be Lady Bastelle Plaxenov, eldest daughter of the late First Duke Tarver Plaxenov of the Graints and Powl, and his wife Mistress Sannah Axingonne Plaxenov of the Graints and Powl and also Wide Amron.”

“I am, Your Excellency,” Hyacinth replied.

Gratta bowed again.

“Now, if I may be so bold, Lady Bastelle, I have been commissioned to present a simple test.”

“Yes, Your Excellency?”

“What is your position?”

“I know not today, but when last I was taken to, eh, eh, be shown the ranks and the, the, what we called in Paxil the ‘buisen,’ which is a ladder, Sir, I was eighteen, and then was slain my father and I became seventeenth.”

“Yes, Milady. You are fifteenth now, I am told, but—”

“Who else has died, or . . . or . . . abdi . . . abdicate?”

“I know not, but you gave an acceptable answer, and I and all the court regret the loss of your father, whose death was not ordered by any in authority, but was the result of accident and misadventure.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Gratta turned to Hamhearth, who feigned but a little surprise only so that, in Gratta’s report, surprise could be registered.

“Did you, Hamhearth of Camberia, have any inkling of this allegation?”

“Your Excellency,” Hamhearth said, using words he had practiced in his mind many times, “this comes as wilting news, for never in all my dealings with her did she speak of this, and she served us true and humbly in the form you see today. And yet, I cannot dispute the report, for as you can see and have seen, she carries herself as well as any you might deal with, whether in field or court.”

“Yes,” Gratta said. “And more things must happen, but her answer to the test seems true and for now the allegations carry such weight that she must be given first treatment.”

“And what are the details of first treatment, Your Excellency?” Hamhearth inquired, and he knew his face flushed, and he stood in fear of the answer.

“She must not be bound any longer,” Gratta said. “And she must be put in garments appropriate to her station.”

Hamhearth turned to the girl and opened each wrist cuff, the restraints falling to the threshold, and he knelt to release her ankle, she standing still and watching, and when he looked up, her eyes were wet, and he knew not whether this was fear or joy or something else.

And then he stood and bowed to her.

“Lady Bastelle of Paxilex,” he said, “if that be the name you claim, then it is the name I give you from this moment on, and I pray you forgive my ignorance, and the thousand indignities you have suffered at my hands, and I ask your patience as I find you clothing suited to your station, for it

requires that you go to the village and the seamstresses and fabric people there.”

“Hamheartt of Camberia,” Lady Bastelle replied, who had been only Hyacinth for longer than a year, but who had perhaps been preparing these next words all the while herself, her voice coming with slight tremble nevertheless, “I chose this, to keep secret myself to the end of the war, because of not knowing what the truth bring, and your hands were kind, and all were, in Camberia, and I have no . . . no . . . no complaints.”

Hamhearth bowed, grateful for her words, though they did not come entirely unexpected.

“Milady,” Gratta said, “whether you hid yourself here for fear or any other reason, our sovereign Loutaine insists we make this right immediately, and even now a carriage is on its way to bring you to Topia, and we hold here this horse you must use now, to be—”

“No, Your Excellency.”

“Milady?” Gratta said.

“I must stay here, for the nonce, to work at things not done yet, aurochs who wants to eat, and requires water, and there are some things to pull up or cut for being given, or traded.”

“Milady,” Gratta protested, “you are free and done with this, and I plead you come now, for I am under orders to—”

“Grattamain,” Lady Bastelle interrupted again, “go to your way, and put the wagon somewhere else too, but the horse leave if you will, for I will be well here still with Hamhearth of Camberia, to give me clothing, and I’ll wait for a letter that you could bring, and then—”

“Milady, my orders—”

“You have orders, Sir,” Lady Bastelle said, “and I have, Sir, the . . . the . . . the balance of my life, which I must see to.”

“So I shall report,” Gratta said with another bow, “your will witnessed by all present.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“May we leave for you the horse, Milady?” Gratta asked.

“Please, for we both.”

Gratta handed the reins to Hamhearth, and the three men departed for the village, undoubtedly to tell the chief and his council there what was already known or suspected, and Hamhearth turned to the girl he’d always known as Hyacinth, and bowed again.

“Bow not,” she said, laughing, though her eyes betrayed with tears that she was not at peace.

Hamhearth rose. “Now that our audience is gone, we must speak true, and quickly,” he said. “What shall become of us?”

She wiped a tear and shook her head.

“A terrible thing lies before me, and I will not speak of it now, but let us—”

“I must dress you anon to your station, Milady, in the village, so climb—”

“And now you stand in that viceroy’s place, Hamhearth of Camberia?” she blurted. “And say me what I must and shall not do?”

Hamhearth stood speechless, heart bursting with sorrow, for she was already all but lost to him, and without her and Uncle besides, he would be as bereft as when he lost his father at seven summers.

“Nay,” she said, wiping a tear, her voice shaking with her own heartache, “be like you are, and what you always were, from when I put my eyes on you, with that pirate’s chains on me. And if you are bowing now because you know the secret, I have lost my Hambett, and my Hamhearth too.”

“I have known of you for a year, and your place on the line at seventeen, and everything but your name and title and parents,” Hamhearth said, “for Grace told me it all on the road on the day of the trade, and as long as it remained unspoken and you complained not, it would stay this way.”

Hamhearth paused, looked to the ground, where the chains still lay at the girl’s feet.

“But now the secret is said aloud and between us, and I fear . . . everything.”

“You know what to do,” Bastelle said. “I have taught you all year for the ways to be, and you know the rest. Now, tell me my next chores.”

“Hy . . . Hy . . . Bastelle,” Hamhearth stuttered. “I know not—”

“Thirsts the aurochs?”

“Yes.”

“Ripens that hectare of early oat?”

“It does,” Hamhearth agreed, and he turned his eyes to hers and ventured, “So draw water first, and then meet me in the field, and let us get

the morning's work done, if you will do it naked, and we shall go this afternoon to dress you."

"I have labored and lived disrobed all this time," she said. "For one more morning, I can do."

The two set upon their tasks as if all were the same, the girl reporting on a cow soon to birth, Hamhearth directing her in the best ways to swing a scythe, for mastery eluded her there, and all the while he knew that this was gone, or dying, and he dared not speak on it though it filled his head, and he saw another tear in Bastelle's eye and knew she mourned too.

And her words of earlier, of the terrible thing awaiting her, haunted his mind like a spirit with a tail and sharp teeth, for he knew what that terrible thing must be, and it would end with she in a wagon and he on the lane, watching as he had before after other females high-born and departing Camberia forever.

They labored all that morning, out of sight of the road, but it was no surprise to Hamhearth when Archenix and Durgahearth and two other members of the council appeared on horses, with a fifth riderless, at the edge of the field just before midday, and summoned the man to them.

Hamhearth approached, Bastelle pausing only briefly from her labors to look before she took another swing with her scythe.

"My Chief," Hamhearth said. "Councilmen."

"We wish an audience with Lady Bastelle Plaxenov," Archenix said coldly, "whom you seem still to confuse with a slave girl."

Hamhearth turned, stepped to Bastelle, and she stayed her tool when he pointed to the men.

As she approached, all dropped from their horses, and when she drew near, they bowed as one.

"Well met, Archenix, and all the men," she said.

"Milady," Archenix said, straightening to regard her with eyes of shame and horror, "we receive tidings this day of you, and this day, now, are come with horse to correct your fortunes."

"And how can you do it, My Chief?"

"Milady," Archenix said again, "you know we are a simple people, a village of peasants, but we mean no harm, and I beg—"

"My Chief, may I go back to harvest? We are nearing done, and there are some other toils."

“He cannot finish on his own?” Archenix asked, gesturing toward Hamhearth. “Does he not fathom what the viceroy, by his own report, said plain to you both this day?”

“He fathoms, Sir Chief,” she answered with a tone of mild affront, “but you should ask him by yourself and see his answer.”

“Then you understand what you are, and have not gone mad with overwork and the ways of peasantry?”

Bastelle laughed.

“I am straight good,” she said. “But may we, My Chief, keep that horse, and may it go to the barn, where Gratta put one already? And Hamheartt and I shall go to town when we can, to garment me and for other doings.”

“Yes, Milady,” he said with another bow.

“Mistress Tambia will measure and tailor, if it please her for that,” Bastelle added. “And you may tell, if it please you, tell her to set aside any . . . any . . . the word be azure, I think, azure thread, and broadcloth the same, for that is the color of my family, with heather gold for trim and sash and the green of great lily the . . . the . . . counter plate for hem and cuff.”

“As you will, Milady,” Archenix said, and looked ready to speak more, but Bastelle turned her back on him and his men and stepped a little way through the field and restored herself to her scythe, Hamhearth following, and for half a finger more they worked together, speaking only of the farm and not of anything else, and they went in to eat and then she took to the river as oft she did in summer and fall, and she bathed and laughed in the current while Hamhearth watched and felt, at this moment, a peace he did not expect.

Only then, when she found herself presentable, did she and Hamhearth take to the two horses and ride in no hurry toward the town.

“There are echoes here of past things,” Hamhearth told her as they neared the gate.

“Wherefor?” she inquired.

“Of those five nobles of Topia,” he said, “the one we held for a night, the last before you—”

“Lady Boughen.”

“Yes, Lady Boughen and I rode together like this, she naked like you, and the village knew not what to think.”

The village knew what to think this time, however, it seemed, for the gate had been thrown wide, and more than the usual number were gathered around it, tarrying with Bitterhearth or standing alone, waiting, and when the two appeared both riders were treated as nobles, not just the lady, some shouting "Well met, Hamhearth!" with a bow, and in the next breath "Lady Bastelle, welcome!" with another bow, and both nodded and smiled, she nude but for her collar and so used to being unclothed she might as well have been dressed completely, if she were to be judged by countenance alone.

First went they to the smith's, in the new shop twice the size of the old, with a greater furnace and a second room behind and larger loft above, where Stott and his apprentice Ombeth and always Wing as well labored at their own things, and Stott saw them through one of the two great windows and left the building to greet Hamhearth and the girl as each dismounted.

"You shall get no argument from me this day," Stott promised, "for I know whence you come, as does all the village."

"Yes, Stotthearth," said Bastelle. "And if you will, bind me, for you must take this thing off the same way you put it on."

Stott nodded and led the way back into the building, pulled the brace and the yoke from a small closet while Hamhearth retrieved rope from the shelf, as well as new hide thicker than that used before, and Bastelle dropped as last time and allowed Hamhearth to tie her hands and feet, Stott to yoke her by the neck, and Wing made the furnace roar with the heavy tongs laying therein.

And at that moment, as Stott waited for the tongs to glow, Hamhearth looked at the girl's leg, and the king's device upon her left thigh, and remembered as if the memory came from a nightmare, that this had been done with his aid but a summer ago, and now it must be fixed with the overbrand, and his hands shook and his stomach churned with a sort of illness as he slipped the hide under Bastelle's collar, and his hands trembled also.

"What troubles you, Hamhearth?" she asked.

"May we speak on it after this is done?"

"Is the hide not workable?"

"Nay, the hide be an improvement, it be something else with no bearing on this job."

"Very well."

With two great bites of the tongs, the collar worn more than a year cracked open, and Stott worked it at the crimp until it fell to the plank floor with a small sound.

“You are free, Lady Bastelle,” Wing observed.

“May you be so in time as well,” Bastelle answered.

“I am all but there already,” she said, gazing at Stott, “for a kind master is as good as liberty.”

If Bastelle disagreed, she said not, thanking the smith and taking to horse, she and Hamhearth going on to the tailor’s, Mistress Tambia, who had clearly been told of the colors of the House Plaxenov, shades of blue and gold and green laid out for Bastelle’s inspection, and she had a suitable first gown done that afternoon while Bastelle tarried, with a second and third promised in days, and pants and tunic and skirt for common labor, and boots presented by Avelina with a hug and bow that had been made on speculation by Battheath and fitting well enough, and Bastelle and Hamhearth made their way back to the farm, she dressed now for labor plain, with the gown in family colors laid across the horse’s hindquarters, and right beautiful.

“When we were at the smith’s,” she said on the lane beyond the gate, “something frightened you.”

“You must take the overbrand,” he said.

“Yes, and I dread it,” she admitted.

“When?”

“I will decide that,” she said, “but as long as I tarry in Camberia there is no need for it.”

“As you wish,” Hamhearth said, and they reached home and knew they must now wait for things from the hands of others.

Chapter XLIV: Two Azure Wagons

Daily from the time of her true name’s knowing visited Gratta and his men to the farm and its lady, and daily as well Archenix alone or with his council one or more, and Avelina and Learra often enough, all to check on the Lady Bastelle, and she labored in clothing and free of chains now but still she labored, to the surprise of all of them.

And on the seventh day after her family name was revealed, Gratta appeared not just to ask of things, but to hand over a letter sealed with blue

wax, which she took and shoved within her tunic.

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

“Yes, Lady Bastelle,” he said, bowing. “There will be decisions to make, so you will notify me?”

“Tomorrow,” she promised.

That night, she read the letter in trembling hands, and a great weeping, for in it her mother and brother laid out their sentiments, their love for her, and what next they expected, and she did not tell Hamhearth all in it but conveyed that mother and brother Plaxenov and some others would come in ten more days to close out matters with her, and to resolve any bondage she yet suffered, and Hamhearth nodded and knew that the girl must at last come to her senses, and leave the farm and its beasts and yields of grain and its commoner, who loved her with all his heart, for duties in another land.

And yet she labored each day like the one before, saying nothing of the visit to be, and at night she lay with him and took him most nights as she saw fit, splitting her legs above him, groaning beneath with open thighs, offering her slot to him on hand and knee, crying out with him through shaking pleasures that he did not believe he could bear to lose.

And on the day appointed, Hamhearth rose early as always, and went with Bastelle to the river to bathe, both of them, and they returned and dressed for work but waited only, and Gratta appeared too at mid-morning to notify Lady Bastelle that her family were climbing the mountain even now, with but a finger at most to go before they reached the farm. Gratta tarried with them and spoke of this and that while his men rode into the village to summon Archenix and his council and other people, and Hamhearth put on the clothes Bastelle had tailored for him, black breeches, black overcoat, white shirt with pearled ruffle, heavy brown boots too fine for wearing in any field, and a cravat in the family’s azure.

More gathered here, arriving on foot and by horse, Archenix and his men, some wives, even older children who rarely saw nobles and wished to, until there were fifteen horses and near fifty people, dignitaries and otherwise, and they lay out blankets and put food upon them, the best sustenance of the town, and wine and mead besides, and some whispered to others that they must not embarrass the village, and others whispered the same thing back, until there was a shout from down the lane, near the break in the forest, and Hamhearth’s stomach tumbled so and by that he believed

he would be sick, for he knew well that everything about Camberia would be judged this day from his manners, and he felt himself on the verge of that great failure that had come near again and again before it passed him by, and he feared this time it must land square on his shoulders.

“You must not fear,” Lady Bastelle whispered to him, standing at his shoulder in the best azure gown Camberia could muster, and it was an indeed an admirable fit by the standards of any village.

“It is the worst fear of all,” Hamhearth whispered back, the villagers close by but not pressing in, for they seemed to know the man and the girl who had been his slave and was now something altogether different must be given some room to breathe. “The worst, because I know not what may come.”

“They are of my stock,” she said. “Do you fear me?”

“No, but there is a long story for you that they lived not, shared stock or no.”

“Be brave and remember all your lessons.”

“I forget everything,” he said. “The lessons, the trading, how one farms, the names of aurochs, what they eat . . . All but your face.”

“That should be enough,” she said, taking his hand and pressing it between her fingers.

There were eight horses before the first carriage, and eight before the second, and the horses all matched, and the carriages matched as well, each in the same azure of Bastelle’s dress, and the ornamentation was in heather gold on both, with a lining in great lily green, and there were apples and grapes carved, with oak leaves in clusters, and faces of angels, one on a side on the first carriage, and two on a side of the second, and the faces reminded Hamhearth of the faces carved by the Caesars long ago.

Gratta himself directed the carriages to a stopping place over a fallow field, laying his own cloak out for Lady Plaxenov to step upon, greeting her with a deep bow, and next her son the Duke of the Wide Amron behind her, and their faces were the light brown of Bastelle’s visage, and they were fair like she, and Hamhearth found that he adored them before he could stop himself, so alike to Bastelle did they appear.

Lady Bastelle, until now firm on her feet, could keep herself no longer, and with a last squeeze of Hamhearth’s hand, she cried and ran to mother and brother, and the words of Paxil rang out across the farm where Tomhearth had labored so long before nephew took it, and now here

daughter and mother and brother embraced, kissed, and wept like, it must be said, commoners, over a reunion that might never have come but for the courage and cunning of the man who stood back and watched and wiped his eyes.

They spoke at length while the rest looked on, and some words from mother and brother seemed to sting Bastelle, and Hamhearth guessed that she was learning only now how she had moved up in rank toward the throne, that some had died who were beloved.

Finally, she turned to him and cried, “Hamhearth of Camberia!” and Hamhearth knew by prearrangement that his time had come, and he strode in mortal fear among the villagers, more than one putting a hand on arm or shoulder, and the Madam and her son the duke looked at him in surprise, for they knew only that he was a farmer, not that he was tall and broad and an honor to his Paxil finery, and at this moment might pass for a noble in any land of fair complexion.

“I fall before you as your servant, Madam Plaxenov,” Hamhearth said in tremulous but near flawless Paxil, kneeling, and he lowered his head until she put her hand on his shoulder, and he rose and bowed.

“Duke of the Wide Amron,” he said, turning to the brother and continuing in Paxil, “you are always welcome, on my land and in my home.”

The duke took Hamhearth’s hand, and mother and son looked upon him and did not disapprove, or not completely, it seemed, though they must know from the letter Bastelle had written that he was common, plain common, and not merely the girl’s protector but granted a wealth of liberties as well, to her labors and all her other glories besides.

“We must sit and enjoy the hospitality of Camberia,” Bastelle said, first in Paxil, then to Hamhearth in Avenian, pointing to the largest blanket and the one most laden, where Gratta and Archenix and Durgahearth tarried, and mother and son followed her slowly to it with stiff backs and smiles, Hamhearth last, and he looked behind himself at the second carriage, saw other nobles in their finest stepping out from it, women and footmen, and he turned to follow the members of House Plaxenov and believed he might have performed his first task with a share of aplomb, but there were other, harder tasks ahead.

All sat, and Hamhearth found himself too nervous to speak, and too unnerved to eat, so he watched and listened as Bastelle translated between

her family and Gratta and the town fathers, speaking of Camberia's history and features and the things it was proudest of, and no one spoke a word about the girl Bastelle, or her history here, or her history before she got here, because there were thick things in that vein none wished to touch on now.

Once or twice, Hamhearth noticed, Madam Plaxenov and her son the duke cast eyes toward the home Uncle built long before and Hamhearth and Bastelle improved and shared even now, and he knew though their eyes revealed it not that it must look to them beneath where their lowest servant stayed, even though it had been made better of late, it and the barn as well, with new roof, and walls reset and re-masoned, and new door and all else.

The repast was indeed Camberia's best offering, broiled aurochs and seasoned roasted goat and chicken by wing and trout upon salt, and all the goods that grew from the ground, and wine so red it was almost black, and all had their fill while they talked through Bastelle, even Hamhearth eventually, and finally Gratta excused himself, claiming a need to check with his men and their doings, and Archenix and Durgahearth rose next, and it was just the four again, the Madam and the Duke and the Lady and Hamhearth, and then came quick, rushing Paxil, the words invisible to Hamhearth but their meaning clear, for mother spoke and frowned and spoke and daughter answered quickly with sharply-spoken words, and mother's eyes filled with tears and the duke spoke harshly and gestured toward Hamhearth and the home and barn, and the daughter looked at Hamhearth and put her hand on his and said, quietly, "May you take your leave, Hamhearth, while I speak of family things?"

"Yes, Milady," Hamhearth said, and he stood and bowed to mother and son and said in his best Paxil, "It has been a pleasure," and they nodded back but admitted to no pleasure on their part, either in words or disposition.

Hamhearth searched among the souls gathered there, thought to escape to the home for a time, when a Paxilex woman on a blanket a few steps away rose and stepped to him.

"Well met, Hamhearth," she said, and he looked upon her full, seeing she was burdened at her belly with a half-formed child, but her voice sounded like something he'd heard before, and he looked into her eyes and knew at once who this was, and he drew his hands to his face before he recovered and stared and spoke all at once.

“Grace,” he whispered. “Oh, Grace, my Grace.”

She stepped closer, offered her hand, and he took it but refrained from embrace, unsure the dictates of Paxil manners in this regard, and he smiled with all the love he could muster, for he had thought often of her and her child.

“Have you been well, Grace?” he said at last.

“I have been very well,” she said, smiling broadly. “I have missed you.”

Hamhearth looked down, looked back up.

“You seem to have found another to swell you,” he said.

“This is the way you speak to a lady of Paxilex?” she asked.

“No, it is the way I speak to Grace late of Camberia.”

“I would expect nothing less of you.”

“Who is the father?”

“Is the post available?” she asked. “Perhaps I will share his name before the tenth lash.”

“It is free, I believe, but Archenix is occupied with other things, today,” he said apologetically. “How fares Axilaine?”

“She grows rich with learning,” Grace replied, pointing to a girl at least a foot taller than the one he carried to Greater Vandals and back. She was sitting on the blanket between two Paxilex noblewomen, speaking to them earnestly while they smiled, and Hamhearth stared at the three until he understood that the one in the gown of deep fuchsia, her legs tucked under her, was she he knew as Lilac, and the one beside her in forest green, squatting on her hams, was the girl he called Oleander and for a few days owned.

“I see you have brought back all my team,” he said. “Shall we leave in the morning for another try at the Greater Vandals?”

“Were I truly a lady, I would slap you, Hamhearth,” she said. “I hope Lady Bastelle does often.”

“She does not.”

“You are in love with her, then, and fell in love while she was your slave, and labored a year?” Grace inquired. “For those are the rumors, and they torment the madam and the duke through and through.”

“It is all true on its face,” Hamhearth said, “but she was never a slave, not in truth, for I knew all along and pretended to own her to save

her, for reasons you know, and she was looked after, always, by myself and others.”

Hamhearth drew in his breath and continued. “And were we not talking here, I would faint with misery, for I fear I am to lose her just now, in a parley on a blanket to which I am not privileged.”

Grace spied over his shoulder, smiled at him.

“There is no weeping just now,” she said. “They have not worn her out with argument yet. But you must agree to come to Paxilex and behave like a gentleman, and see that all are fooled.”

“I have been fooling all for years.”

“No you haven’t,” she said, “for you are true, as I said the last time we spoke, and had you not been, I never would have let you do the things, or drive me all the way up Fifth Pass and back.”

“You did not come back,” Hamhearth noted, “nor did your Paxilex sisters, and I almost lost my neck over it.”

“You got the five stolen,” Grace said. “You traded well.”

“They said they were not, though, at first, and feigned ignorance of all but the brothel farm where they declared they’d been raised and worked, and affected such terrible accents all believed I had given you three away for criminals and whores.”

Grace laughed without mercy, bending with her mouth upon her hands, before she composed herself rising, eyes wet, to speak again. “But you were saved in the end,” she said, “somehow.”

“The truth arrived, yes, but I had dark moments for a day and a night, made darker with loss of you, and Lilac, and Oleander.”

“Say hello to them,” she said, and Hamhearth stepped to the edge of the blanket and bowed and tried to imagine these females as he’d last seen them, chained to a peasant’s wagon on a trip in which each had yielded her opening to him on hand and knee, Lilac going mad when she was filled, Oleander only a little less spirited, and the girls looked like other people altogether in their gowns, and hair up and ringed like crowns, and they cooed at him and made clear they’d been awaiting audience, and each rose and, in violation altogether of Paxilex custom, he guessed, they embraced him and kissed his neck and spoke quick Paxil, with a word here and there comprehensible, including “Hamhearth” more than once.

Grace translated for the girls once the first greetings were complete, an exchange of pleasantries and small facts only, for the things they all

thought perhaps when they regarded each other were not fit for this day.

Grace glanced at the blanket where Bastelle still parleyed with her family, and she took Hamhearth's arm.

"I meant what I said earlier before all crumbled to jest," she said. "Now, Lady Bastelle looks my way, and I believe she wants you back there, and if you return and say the right words you may yet save her for you. But you must agree to go to Paxilex. Soon. For I know by better than rumor this is a condition. And be seen by those, and thus disabuse them, who believe she lives in a cave with an ogre who eats raw aurochs."

"She does," Hamhearth said.

"Not even do jest on that," Grace hissed. "She is promised to someone else, you know, and he waits yet."

"What?" Hamhearth asked, horror-struck, for this was new information indeed. "When was this decision made?"

"Years ago, and think not on it, for you are the better man, noble or no," Grace whispered, "and Bastelle knows it, and mother and brother do as well, but you must still prove yourself, or—"

"Or else what?"

"You will not lose your girl," Grace assured. "I can see that from here. But mother will disown her, brother will curse her, and it may become a matter of concern under both crowns because of who she is and what attends your coupling, with inconvenience for those around you that may yet spill onto your plate."

"Grace, I—"

"Go to her, and be all the gentleman you can summon."

Hamhearth turned, Bastelle waved him over, and he strode forth as if he were noble born and owned the land upon which all sat, the latter of course being true.

"Hamhearth," Bastelle said, looking to him as he knelt and smiled, as if this day were all routine for him, "Mother wishes to know something."

Madam Plaxenov smiled pleasantly, asked her question, and Bastelle repeated it.

"Will you come with me to Paxilex?" Bastelle asked. "And be presented?"

"If Paxilex will have me," Hamhearth replied.

Madam Plaxenov smiled, opened her mouth to ask another question, but now it was the duke's turn, and he did not smile as he spoke

his words to Bastelle.

Bastelle frowned before she passed on the words, asking, “Do you recall General Axiom?”

“Of course,” Hamhearth said, turning to the duke with his answer. “We parleyed on Fifth Pass, and reached a trade.”

The words were converted, and Bastelle’s brother the duke asked another question, sharply, Bastelle wincing as she passed it on.

“The General says you were rude, and took privileges with him, and deceived him in certain ways.”

Hamhearth drew in his breath, pondered his next words carefully. “Shall I meet General Axiom when I journey to Paxilex?” he asked.

“Yes,” Bastelle said. “Most likely.”

“Then tell him when next you see him,” Hamhearth said, looking at the duke, “that Hamhearth of Camberia delights in anticipation of our second meeting, and if he come to wage war with me, I will lose, and if he come to trade again, he might lose.”

Bastelle smiled, passed on the words, and Hamhearth watched the faces of mother and son, and they did not disappoint, for this was parley now, and he was at home with it, even if the other parties be noble, and they looked at each other as if they hadn’t heard, so Bastelle repeated the words in Paxil, and they smiled because they could not keep themselves from doing so, and the matter seemed to be settled, and expressions changed and new subjects were broached that Hamhearth could not guess at until Bastelle passed them on in Avenian.

“Hamhearth,” she said, “you must give me the overbrand.”

“When, Milady?” Hamhearth inquired, and now he blushed and grimaced, for this was no longer parley, it was a request before mother and son to make right by pain a great wrong of pain, done under the aid of himself to the girl here.

“Here,” she said. “Today.”

“The iron is got?”

“Yes, Gratta’s men keep it with their horses.”

“It must be done a certain way,” Hamhearth stammered, “by the smith’s hand, and I only—”

“I know of it,” Bastelle blurted, “and Grace is here, and the ones you called Lilac and Oleander but who are really named Lady Macer and

Lady Madde-Helm, and they know the pain and are here to help me through, and so must you help, and we'll get this over and be on our way."

"On our way?"

"Back home."

"Where is home, Lady Bastelle?"

"Here," she said. "It is the only home now. But I cannot live here or anywhere without the overbrand."

"Yes, Milady."

"You will bind me?"

"If you choose me, yes, with regret and sorrow."

"Do it then, and weep not. I need you clear for this."

"Very well," Hamhearth said. "And we are settled on the question of your fate?"

"I stay here, with you," Bastelle said, "if you will have me."

"You jest."

"But you stand by the conditions? That you bring yourself in Paxilex at my side, and—"

"I can do that."

"And not bring shame to me?"

"I may succeed at that as well."

With this first, most urgent thing seen to, the misgivings of mother and brother at least partly assuaged, and the overbranding set into motion, Lady Bastelle rose and turned to the three girls of Paxilex, for a time her sisters in bondage, and they stepped to her with a great rush of greetings and words and laughter, and she knelt to hug Axilaine, who pretended by nodding and smiling that she remembered the lady when she was a slave.

Chapter XLV: The Overbranding of Lady Bastelle

A simple frame had been raised in haste today, before the door of the new smith's shop, its top beam well above the ground and long enough only to hold a single girl, and not five, and Lady Bastelle came with Hamhearth, and her mother and brother, and Gratta and Archenix and some others of the council, and townsfolk as well, Avelina and her daughter Learra and others to watch and witness and hear.

"Will you have drink?" Hamhearth asked the girl.

“I will not have drink,” she replied, and she entered the shop and greeted Stott and Wing and removed her gown and sash and all until she was naked, and she left the shop with a small, sad smile at Hamhearth, and walked to the frame and stepped upon it.

Gratta stood as he had before, parchment in his hand while Stott warmed the iron in the brazier.

“With the application of our sovereign’s overbrand,” Gratta began, and he read continuing and Bastelle waited upon the frame, and Hamhearth looked at the mark on her left thigh, a pink wound in the shape of an X.

“Raise your arms when you’re ready, Lady Bastelle,” Hamhearth whispered, and in time she lifted her hands and he bound each wrist to the beam above, and he looked at no one, nor her mother or brother.

“So, know thee all men here as witness,” Gratta continued, “that you shall attest whenever asked that the overbrand was pressed by the king’s will, under all proper authority, on this date and in this place, and bears the same weight in Avenlou as in all other nations.”

Hamhearth put his mouth to Bastelle’s ear. “Now you must hang, Milady, and I will bind your feet.”

“Do it,” she whispered, voice barely audible.

Hamhearth pulled the beam away to lock it lower, and Bastelle dropped and sighed, hanging by her wrists, swinging to and fro until he stilled her with a hand on her back just above her rump.

He knelt, bound each ankle to the beam at such a distance that her legs were spread wide, her body completely stilled.

Gratta read the rest of his words, describing the overbrand’s device, and he turned to Archenix, and Archenix called out, “Smith, are you set?”

“I am, My Chief,” Stotthearth replied, tying his hair into a great blond knot behind his head.

“Binder?”

“Yes, My Chief,” Hamhearth replied.

“Lady Bastelle Plaxenov,” Gratta announced, “with permission of His Majesty Loutaine, you are put to the overbrand.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency,” replied Bastelle, voice surprising Hamhearth with its volume and firmness.

“Shall I hold you by your middle?” Hamhearth inquired.

“Please, Sir,” she answered.

Hamhearth wrapped his arm tight around Bastelle's waist, Stotthearth pulled the overbrand from the brazier, allowed it to cool and applied it.

Then came the same response, or similar at least, to all the other girls subjected to the same thing, which Hamhearth wished he'd never encountered once, the tensing of belly and legs, the startled cry of pain, then the scream and the shake, and then stillness and a soft weeping.

Hamhearth released her feet, raised the lower beam, and she stood on it and looked up to watch him untie her wrists.

"Fall back upon me," he said, "and be free."

She complied with another sigh, and he held her until her feet found sure footing on the hard-packed soil of the square.

"Will you sit for a time?" he asked.

"Nay," she whispered weakly, "steady me and get me to the shop to dress."

Hamhearth held her arm and she walked, each step with her left leg slowest, and she was welcomed into the shop by Wing and brought to her clothes and helped into her gown and sash, and she wiped her eyes and smiled at Hamhearth, and he felt a strange joy over her, for she was done with this thing she'd been dreading, and they could return to their home and from there make their way as fate would write it out.

Madam Plaxenov stood now in the shop by the door, casting her eyes upon the naked form of Wing before she looked again into Hamhearth's eyes, and she spoke a question in Paxil, and he saw that the mother's eyes were wet and knew she'd wept a little for her daughter, and he reached his hand to his own face and found tears there too.

"Are you always so gentle, Hamhearth?" Bastelle translated quietly.

"There is nothing gentle here, and I am sorry for that," Hamhearth replied. "But it is done."

Bastelle spoke the words back to her mother, left the shop, was greeted by Grace and the two other nobles who had been slaves, as well as Avelina and Learra, and there was more embracing and quiet talk and laughter, and amidst it all Grace took Hamhearth aside.

"Spoke you to Brunehearth?" she whispered.

"I did, to tell him you were well and Axilaine too, on the day following the day I traded you away."

"And how took he the news?"

“As you might expect, soberly and with wet eyes, like the quiet man he is,” Hamhearth recalled. “And he asked me what I wanted, for he thought to buy my silence, but I am already more than compensated.”

Grace nodded, and now she embraced him, like Grace of Camberia and not Grace the consort of nobles, and Hamhearth laughed into her ear.

“We shall meet again, in Paxilex,” he promised.

“We shall.”

“And you shall tell me the name of the second father.”

“No, I shall not.”

Grace smiled, drew back with another touch to his hand, and then there were farewells, and all the visitors left the village in their two great carriages, and Hamhearth brought home the girl he’d known as Hyacinth, for she needed rest, and there would be things to attend to in the morning, and more after that.

Epilogue: Above the Sea

“There goes one now,” Stotthearth said, pointing a thick finger into the starlit night, toward the sea where a single faint glow could just be made out.

“It goes north,” Hamhearth said after watching it awhile. “So one of ours perhaps, gone laden with goods for Paxilex.”

“I miss the war,” Stott said.

“Peace shall be easier to abide,” Hamhearth said, drawing up his legs against the stones laid long ago by the Caesars, staring from the cliff at the edge of his farm.

“It will certainly make your trip possible,” Stott observed.

“Aye.”

“When leave you?”

“Tomorrow, early.”

“Then you could have come to the dramatis tonight.”

“I don’t care to see it,” Hamhearth said coldly. “I’ve told you that.”

“I was weeping,” Stott said.

“It was that terrible?”

“No, it is the funniest thing ever I witnessed.”

Hamhearth was already weary of the topic, and so he changed it forcibly.

“Did you see what Bastelle and I shall ride in?”

“Barely, by moonlight,” Stott replied. “I saw a great carriage and four horses.”

“Six horses,” Hamhearth corrected. “And two men to drive.”

“I did not see the men.”

“They draw water or find hay or somesuch,” Hamhearth said. “While Lady Bastelle groans over the trunk, for she cannot fit all she wants to bring in it, though I take almost nothing.”

“She is to be married,” Stott said. “She cannot have enough.”

“How I wish we could have made union here,” Hamhearth lamented, “with a long afternoon, some words from Archenix, a night of drinking, and done.”

“I am not deceived, you shall love your wedding in Topia.”

“Bastelle shall love it, and she goes near mad with planning ever since came the letter from Lady Boughen. As for me, I shall endure.”

“Liar.”

“I shall tolerate the garments,” Hamhearth conceded. “But not three days of formalities.”

“And drinking.”

“That too. And then off to Paxilex for another round before priests and legions, with mother, and brother the duke, who if hostilities break out again shall kill me first.”

“They bless the union, do they not?”

“They do, or lose their daughter. They choose the thing that makes them the least ill.”

“Good. Now I must tell you of the dramatis. I near vomited from the humor.”

“You said you wept before.”

“Vomited too.”

“Friend, do you know what disaster I court over three days as the groom?” Hamhearth said. “They say Loutaine himself might attend one of the balls, and a dozen Paxilex emissaries will be at things, and some from the Greater Vandals besides who have nothing better to do.”

“Than to laugh at a Camberian farmer in silk?”

“Yes, that, and they find in our union tidings of peace well beyond proportions, with a Paxilex princess held peacefully for a year, her mate a common man who protected her after trading others, all—”

“Themes touched on, and nobly so, I might add, in the dramatis witnessed by most of the town this very day.”

“I have heard enough of it what was in it that I can say for certain nothing in it was noble.”

“You have not heard tell of it from me,” Stott protested, “your dearest friend.”

“Speak of what you saw and be done with it,” Hamhearth said.

“Yes, yes,” Stott began, shifting over the old flat paving stones of the Caesars. “Yes, well, there was this and that, some war, some kidnapping of damsels, some—”

“Played by the youth?”

“Yes, I think Spanbeth played a girl, and then Finnbeth, and that son of Beriahearth, and, eh, Limbeth, and another.”

“Wing should have played herself,” Hamhearth said.

“There was no part for Wing, she was not written in,” Stott said.

“She should have been, for she and you—”

“And then came the march with the cart up Fifth Pass, with you and the Paxilex wagon girls,” Stott said with a chuckle.

“It was not me, though.”

“He called himself Hampup.”

“Hampup?”

“Yes, and quite a giant, for Umberhearth took the role.”

“He is bald and lame in one leg and near eighty summers old.”

“Fifty summers at most. And he played you well, wore a great hat, and he—”

“Just finish telling me what you saw.”

“Now, in the play, Paxilex girls are not so good at drawing, and are rather ungainly too, so they—”

“Who portrayed them?”

“Gracken was played by—”

“Gracken?”

“That was her name, but she was truly Grace, for she was oldest, and—”

“Who played her?”

“Stackhearth.”

“No,” Hamhearth said in horror, for Stackhearth the butcher was of all the ungainly men in Camberia the least gainly, with a great round back

and hair in wide swathes all over his face.

“And another girl, one of the high-born, played by Dimbeth the ale-maker, who is quite oval as you know, and the third by Durgahearth.”

Hamhearth sighed and tried not to see the things his mind conjured of its own accord.

“And the three of them, with Hampup driving, they went in circles with a great ruined cart with naught but old shoes upon it, and they cried and stumbled, and Gracken tripped more than once over her issue, and—”

“Her issue?”

“The child.”

“Who played Axilaine?”

“She was played by a goat on a rope.”

Hamhearth put his hand on Stott’s shoulder. “Friend, you speak of deep travesty as if a joke.”

“Yes. Now, only when Hampup was beating the three would they draw right, and so he beat them all the way to the Greater Vandals, and we —”

“This is not true,” Hamhearth said, now more than wounded, now offended to the degree only a fight could cure.

“No one thinks it true,” Stott said. “It was for humor. Nor did he truly beat them, just pretended to, for it was all dramatis.”

“Who has seen this monstrosity?”

“It is played in Topia, we were told, and all the towns from here to there in one version or another, and it—”

“I am ruined,” Hamhearth said.

“His name was Hampup,” Stott said, “and all know it is invented and not a true tale.”

“The trade then was accomplished with dignity at least?”

“No,” Stott said.

“I wouldn’t think so,” Hamhearth said. “When are you and Wing to be wed?”

“When I can free her from the village, and I save and do work, and it’s a moon or two away.”

“You must wait until I’m here for the nuptials.”

“Will you ever be here again?”

“Speak not like that.”

“I hear that you might be kept, either in Topia or Paxilex.”

“I hear the same things.”

“What then becomes of your beloved farm?”

“They talk of making new walls with the wealth in the coffers, and closing it around all the parts here, and my land as well, and then I would sell, for it grows in price threefold when the wall is done.”

“And Camberia would grow fivefold.”

“At least,” Hamhearth agreed. “What becomes of Emiane?”

“She labors day – and night – with the Freth boy, and they speak of freeing her as well.”

“Camberia cannot keep slave girls, it seems.”

“No,” Stott agreed. “We are wretched at the chore.”

“It is the one ghost that truly haunts us, I believe,” Hamhearth said.

“What mean you?”

“You know the story of our name, Camberia?”

“Yes, named for a Caesar’s wife.”

“And the tale is that she was a slave before he bought and freed her.”

“It may be true,” Stott said. “Hence our curse. We buy them and chain them and then the alchemy of old spirits turns them to gold. Will you let me tell you of the trade, from the dramatis?”

“No.”

“So then, the great trader Hampup gives up the three awful girls from Paxilex for the five Avenian beauties.”

“Yes, parts of that are true.”

“But he knows not they are noble,” Stott recalled. “And so raises he his whip toward them, to beat them all, for that is all he knows to do after his time with the Paxil three.”

“It is not true,” Hamhearth said. “Not true at all.”

“And they say ‘No, Hamhearth, no, for we are—’”

“You said the hero’s name was Hampup.”

“I did. ‘No, Hampup, beat us not, for we are noble.’”

“All lies. They never claimed to nobility, and I never threatened regardless.”

“And then says Hamhearth— Hampup – and so says Hampup, ‘If you be noble, prove it,’ and they say ‘Yes, Sir, we shall recite *Angnon’s Loves*, by Bagnioloto, and so they do—’”

“Who is Bagnioloto?”

“Hampup asked the same,” Stott observed, and he slapped his friend’s back and could not speak for a time due to the ravages of mirth. But at last he continued. “So Hampup say, ‘Who be this Bagnioloto?’ and then he ask the girls, ‘Is he with us?’ and make a great show of searching for the poet, even though the girls say, over and over one way or another, ‘Sir, Bagnioloto is long dead, from the grippe or chicken bite or somesuch,’ to which we all laughed too, and some died I think and lay there still from the humor of it, and Hampup looks beneath the cart, and all about, and among us the audience, and then in the girls’ hair, and he searched until we all stopped laughing, which might have been a fortnight, and then the girls start reciting the poems, and none laughed at all for that, and I believe it was meant to be terrible, and it was, and a few females watching wept from the plain unpalatability.”

“If it were love poems,” Hamhearth ventured, “they cried from sentiment.”

“Perhaps,” Stott said. “But they saved the best for last, for you should have seen how they proved being high-born.”

“I shall let you tell it only if it is the last thing you tell.”

“Agreed. And so Hamhe—and so Hampup say, ‘Here’s how you may prove. Tell me, in your beds, do you stack the aurochs hair but one take tall, or ten takes?’ And the girls say ‘Oh, Sir, we do not stack aurochs hair at all to lie upon, only goose down,’ which causes Hampup no shortage of concern. And next he ask, ‘Does the aurochs dine with you to the left, or the right?’ and the girls all say, ‘No, Sir, he dine with us not at all,’ and Hampup falls into a gray mood. And then he ask ‘Spread you the aurochs dirt all over the field with your hat, or your cloak, or bare foot only?’ and the girls all say ‘No, sir, we spread it not at all, but hire a one to do that,’ and over their answers Hampup weeps for their madness and ignorance, and we all fall near to weeping too, but for humor and not in sorrow like him, and he knows at last they are noble, because their answers are all spoken from deep dissolution, and he recall that most high-born are completely unfit for correct pursuits, and thus he does not beat them, but only strive to teach them the proper ways with aurochs until they are all reunited with their parents, and Avelina played a mother, as did daughter Learra, and a third woman the third mother, but it all seemed proper to me, and this part was a bit tedious but I lingered to watch to the end, and some of the girls wept too watching near me with the returning of daughter to mother and

father, and there were poems and all, and Learra, saying her part as mother, her cheeks were wet as if she believed it were all true before her, and afterwards some of us demanded it be put on again, at that very moment, the whole dramatis, but I departed and come here and know not if it be done again, and the light was fading after all.”

“So it not be done twice,” Hamhearth said, “and I pray never again, and if I meet the spawner of this dramatis in my journeys, I shall see to him in certain ways.”

“They say the girls themselves, the ladies, some of those you rescued, had a hand in its writing.”

END

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